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PHILOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS (2020) 1–22

Philological | Encounters

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# A Padshah like Manu: Political Advice for Akbar in the Persian *Mahābhārata*

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## Abstract

In the late sixteenth century, the Mughal Emperor Akbar sponsored the translation of more than one dozen Sanskrit texts into Persian, chief among them the *Mahābhārata*. The epic was retitled the *Razmnāma* (Book of War) in Persian and rapidly became a seminal work of Mughal imperial culture. Within the *Razmnāma*, the Mughal translators devoted particular attention to sections on political advice. They rendered book twelve (out of eighteen books), the *Śānti Parvan* (Book of Peace), into Persian at disproportionate length to the rest of the text and singled out parts of this section to adorn with quotations of Persian poetry. Book twelve also underwent significant transformations in terms of its content as Mughal thinkers reframed the *Mahābhārata*'s views on ethics and sovereignty in light of their own imperial interests. I analyze this section of the *Razmnāma* in comparison to the original Sanskrit epic and argue that the Mughal translators reformulated parts of the *Mahābhārata*'s political advice in both style and substance in order to speak directly to Emperor Akbar. The type of advice that emerged offers substantial insight into the political values that Mughal elites sought to cultivate through translating a Sanskrit work on kingship.

## Keywords

translation – Persian – Sanskrit – Mughal – Mahabharata – Akbar

It is no secret that of the 100,000 shlokas (*ślokas*) in the [*Mahābhārata*], 24,000 concern the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, which is a model for the wise on warnings and examples, battle and carnage.

The rest concerns advice, guidance, stories, and descriptions of war and feasting.

– ABŪ AL-FAẒL, preface to the *Razmnāma*<sup>1</sup>



Mughal elites translated the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* into Persian in the late sixteenth century because, like so many Indian elites before them, they understood the epic as a political work. As kings steeped in Islamic culture, the Mughal rulers inherited an abundant tradition of advice literature written in Arabic and Persian to which they also turned for royal guidance. Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) was well read in the classic Islamic “mirrors for princes”, but he did not sponsor new works in this vein.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Akbar turned to other sources, chief among them Sanskrit texts, in order to probe key ethical and moral questions pertaining to his rule over India. The *Mahābhārata* was an obvious focal point for this project since rulers across the subcontinent had long esteemed the epic as a politically relevant work and, particularly during the second millennium of the Common Era, prized the text as “a transcendently authoritative moral discourse.”<sup>3</sup> Mughal elites likewise conceptualized

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- 1 Abū al-FaẒl, “Muqaddamah,” in *Mahabharata: The Oldest and Longest Sanskrit Epic. Translated by Mir Ghayasuddin Ali Qazvini Known As Naqib Khan (D. 1023 AH) [Razmnāma]*, 4 vols, ed. S. M. Reza Jalali Naini and N. S. Shukla (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Tahuri, 1979–1981), 1:40–41. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted; I use diacritics for the names of historical figures (except kings) and texts. I forgo diacritics for epic characters in order to maintain consistency across linguistic traditions.
  - 2 Many classical Islamic “mirror for princes” works were popular in Mughal India, such as Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s *Akhlāq-i Naṣīrī* (Nasirean Ethics) and Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī’s *Jalalean Ethics* (Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 50–51). Akbar’s court often produced new manuscripts of older texts. But, as Sajida Alvi has noted, Akbar did not sponsor the composition of fresh advice works; Sajida Alvi, introduction to *Advice on the Art of Governance: Mau’izah-i Jahāngīrī of Muḥammad Bāqir Najm-Sānī, an Indo-Islamic Mirror for Princes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 9–10. Akbar occasionally sought out political advice in other, non-Islamic traditions, such as in Western thought. For example, the *Ādāb al-Saltānat* of Jerome Xavier survives today in two known manuscript copies. Adel Sidarus, “A Western Mirror for Princes for an Eastern Potentate: The *Ādāb al-Saltānat* by Jerome Xavier SJ for the Mogul Emperor,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 63.1–2 (2011): 73–98.
  - 3 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 224; see chap. 6 on the *Mahābhārata*.

the *Mahābhārata* as a book fundamentally about kingship. They engaged in a process of active translation, particularly in certain sections of the text, whereby they transformed the epic into an imperially potent treatise on being an Indo-Persian sovereign.

Akbar's court embarked on rendering the *Mahābhārata* into Persian prose in 1582 and took several years to finish the text, which was titled the *Razmnāma* (Book of War). Dozens of people participated in the multi-year translation process, and it is often impossible to distinguish the contributions of certain individuals or even groups.<sup>4</sup> But we can gain some clarity by understanding that the translation of the epic took place at several levels, including verbal, textual, and visual components.<sup>5</sup> Together a diverse group of Mughal translators, Brahmin Sanskrit intellectuals, court artists, scribes, and, on occasion, even Akbar himself produced a dynamic Persian work.

The text of the *Razmnāma* was the result of multiple hands and a collaborative translation method. The Mughal translators did not know Sanskrit and so relied on a group of at least five Brahmins to verbally render the Sanskrit epic into Hindi, their shared language.<sup>6</sup> A group of several Mughal translators wrote down the Persian text over the course of several years and included all eighteen books of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa* appendix, primarily

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- 4 Largely due to the lack of precise information on the contributions made by specific individuals, I refer occasionally in this article to “the Mughals,” by which I primarily mean the Mughal elites, scribes, translators, and artists who were involved at various stages in the translation process. While “the Mughals” is a vague formulation, often frustratingly so, it reflects the reality that we often do not know who made certain translation decisions.
- 5 For more details on the textual and visual translation processes that produced the *Razmnāma*, see, Qamar Adamjee and Audrey Truschke, “Reimagining the ‘Idol Temple of Hindustan’: Textual and Visual Translation of Sanskrit Texts in Mughal India,” in *Pearls on a String: Artists, Patrons, and Poets at the Great Islamic Courts*, ed. Amy Landau (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2015), 141–65; Audrey Truschke, “The Mughal *Book of War*: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 31.2 (2011): 506–20; Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 101–33.
- 6 Several sources attest to this collaborative method. E.g., see Naqib Khān's colophon to the *Razmnāma* translated in Najaf Haider, “Translating Texts and Straddling Worlds: Intercultural Communication in Mughal India,” in *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray*, ed. Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 120–21. Also see Badā'ūnī's comments in his *Muntakhab al-Tavārikh*, ed. Captain W. N. Lees and Munshi Ahmad Ali (Calcutta: College Press, 1865), 2:320. Additionally, an illustration to a dispersed *Razmnāma* manuscript produced c. 1598–99 shows the collaboration of Mughal translators and Brahmin informants (Free Library of Philadelphia, Lewis m18). The use of Hindi to verbally transmit the text is mentioned in Naqib Khān's colophon and confirmed by the linguistic forms of transliterated Sanskrit words in the *Razmnāma*.

based on the Devanagari version of the Sanskrit epic.<sup>7</sup> While the translation frequently diverges from the Sanskrit original and abridges select sections, Mughal thinkers overall rendered the *Mahābhārata* notably accurately.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a nineteenth-century reader of the *Razmnāma* had little trouble pairing the Sanskrit and Persian versions of the epic and wrote the corresponding Sanskrit verses in the margins intermittently throughout the initial part of the first book, the *Ādi Parvan* (Book of Beginnings).<sup>9</sup> After the translation was concluded in the mid to late 1580s, Abū al-Faẓl, Akbar's vizier and a leading architect of the imperial image, penned a preface to the *Razmnāma*.

In addition to textual translation, illustrations helped to transform the *Mahābhārata* into an Indo-Persian work. The *Razmnāma* was illuminated at imperial or subimperial levels at least five times in the three decades following its completion.<sup>10</sup> These illustrations enlivened the Indian epic for its new Persianate readers, sometimes going beyond the confines of the text. The illustrations come into my discussion here for the insights they provide into Mughal understandings of this complex work and into the ongoing process of translating this epic for a new audience.

The *Mahābhārata* was one of roughly one dozen Sanskrit works that Akbar's court attempted to render into Persian, and yet it was a special translation in many respects. The *Razmnāma* is by far the longest work to be produced by Akbar's translators. It absorbed more resources—in terms of money, time, talent, and people—than any prior or subsequent translation project based at Akbar's court.<sup>11</sup> Akbari elites returned to the *Razmnāma* several times to

7 Seventeen books of the *Razmnāma* are based on the Devanagari version of the *Mahābhārata*. The fourteenth book, the *Aśvamedha Parvan*, is drawn from the *Jaiminīyāśvamedha* (Truschke, "The Mughal Book of War," 508–9). The Persian *Harivaṃśa* has not been printed and its source Sanskrit text(s) remains undetermined.

8 A few notable abridgements include the truncation of the majority of the *Bhagavadgītā* in book 6 and an extended discussion of pilgrimage sites in book 9. On the omission of the *Bhagavadgītā*, see, e.g., Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 116–18; Roderic Vassie, "Persian Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā in the Mughal Period: With Special Reference to the Sufi Version of 'Abd al-Rahmān Chishtī'" (PhD Diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1988).

9 *Razmnāma*, ms. Srinagar Oriental Research Library Persian 188, fol. 11b–30b.

10 At least five imperial and subimperial illuminated *Razmnāmas* survive that were produced between the 1580s and the 1610s: (1) Emperor Akbar's copy (held in the Jaipur royal collection), (2) c. 1598–99 *Razmnāma* (dispersed, except for the last five books that are ms. British Library Persian Oriental 12,076), (3) dispersed c. 1600 manuscript, (4) copy completed in 1605 (held by the Birla family in Calcutta), and (5) c. 1616–17 *Razmnāma* for 'Abd al-Rahīm Khān-i Khānān (dispersed).

11 More generally, on Mughal translation activities, see Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, with Special Reference to*

produce new illustrated copies and, once, to rewrite the first two books.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, abundant evidence survives that Mughal ruling elites, including the royal family, engaged with the *Razmnāma*, which places this work at the center of imperial court life. For example, Badā'ūnī, one of the translators, narrates a story in his history of the period that features Akbar hearing the *Razmnāma* read out and even challenging the accuracy of part of the translation.<sup>13</sup> Twenty years later, in 1602, Akbar wrote a letter to one of his sons, Murad, in which he purported to be sending the young man the Persian *Mahābhārat* for educational purposes.<sup>14</sup>

The unique treatment afforded to the *Mahābhārata* helps us to begin to make sense of how this translation project operated at Akbar's court as a focal point for courtly energy and a vehicle for imperial expression. The translation constituted and expressed Mughal ambitions in terms of formulating an imperial identity, specifically by envisioning Akbar as part of a robust tradition of Indian kingship going back to the likes of Manu, a legendary, early Indian king. In terms of fleshing out how the *Razmnāma* furthered Mughal needs and was envisioned in an imperial context, the devil is in the details. Accordingly, I turn in the remainder of this essay to the text of the *Razmnāma*, often read against Sanskrit versions of the *Mahābhārata*, in order to recover some major elements of the Akbari vision of kingship as articulated in a key text from his reign.

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*Abu'l Fazl, 1556–1605* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975), 203–22. A few years after completing the text of the *Razmnāma*, Akbar's translators tackled Valmiki's *Rāmāyana*; the translation, the Akbari *Rāmāyan*, approached but did not match the *Razmnāma* in terms of length and court resources. On the Akbari *Rāmāyan*, see, e.g., Asok Kumar Das, "Akbar's Imperial Ramayana: A Mughal Persian Manuscript," in *The Legend of Rama: Artistic Visions*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Bombay: Marg, 1994), 73–84; Asok Kumar Das, "An Introductory Note on the Emperor Akbar's Ramayana and Its Miniatures," in *Facets of Indian Art: A Symposium Held at the Victoria and Albert Museum on 26, 27, 28 April and 1 May 1982*, ed. Skelton et al. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), 94–104; Asok Kumar Das, "Notes on the Emperor Akbar's Manuscript of the Persian Ramayana," in *Asian Variations in Ramayana: Papers Presented at the International Seminar on "Variations in Ramayana in Asia: Their Cultural, Social, and Anthropological Significance," New Delhi, January 1981*, ed. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983), 144–53; John Seyller, *Workshop and Patron in Mughal India: The Freer Rāmāyana and Other Illustrated Manuscripts of 'Abd al-Raḥīm* (Washington, D.C.: Artibus Asiae, 1999).

- 12 On Fayzī's rewriting of the *Razmnāma*'s first two *parvans*, see Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 133–37.
- 13 *Muntakhab al-Tavārikh*, 2:399. For the problematic poetry quotation, see *Razmnāma*, 1:478.
- 14 Akbar's letter to Murad is found in an earlier draft of Abū al-Fazl's *Akbarnāma* (ms. British Library, Persian Add. 27,247, fols. 403a–403b). Also see I. A. Khan's translation in Shireen Moosvi, ed. and trans. *Episodes in the Life of Akbar: Contemporary Records and Reminiscences* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), 94.

### A Counsellor like Bhishma: History and Advice

The Mughal court recognized the *Mahābhārata* as a historical treatise, which was often perceived as a royal genre within the Islamic world. In both Arabic and Persian, histories had long been valued for recalling the deeds and misdeeds of earlier men in order to provide guidance for present and future sovereigns. As Abū al-Faḍl put it in his preface to the *Razmnāma*:

Likewise, the minds of most people, particularly great kings, yearn to listen to histories (*tavārikh*). All-encompassing, divine wisdom has made the science of history, which offers examples to the wise, dear to their hearts so that having taken advice from past events and counted it advantageous for the present, they pass their cherished time in things pleasing to God. Thus, rulers need above all others to listen to the tales of their predecessors.<sup>15</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* indeed narrates key events across several generations of Indian rulers. According to Mughal political philosophy, these royal events ought to inspire and guide current kings, such as Akbar. Akbar and his court also turned to non-Indian histories for appropriate royal role models and sage advice, and several scholars have highlighted ongoing Mughal engagements with Timurid, Mongol, and Persian models of sovereignty.<sup>16</sup> But one particular challenge faced by the early Mughal kings was how to be rulers of India, and for that imperial project the *Mahābhārata*, read as a work of reported history, proved useful.

Within the vast Indian epic, however, the Mughals were not convinced that all sections proffered equally compelling kingly counsel and highlighted certain

15 Abū al-Faḍl, "Muqaddamah," 19–20. Also see the translation of this passage in Carl Ernst, "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies* 36.2 (2003): 182; for another analysis of Abū al-Faḍl's preface, see Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History*, 212–14.

16 E.g., Munis D. Faruqui, "The Forgotten Prince: Mirza Hakim and the Formation of the Mughal Empire in India," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48.4 (2005): 487–523; Richard C. Foltz, *Mughal India and Central Asia* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Corinne Lefèvre, "In the Name of the Fathers: Mughal Genealogical Strategies from Bābur to Shāh Jahān," *Religions of South Asia* 5.1/2 (2011): 409–42; A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Muzaffar Alam's work often engages with how Mughal elites negotiated and even mixed Indian and Central Asian norms, ideas, and lineages; e.g., *Languages of Political Islam*; "The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs and the Formation of the Akbari Dispensation," *Modern Asian Studies* 43.1 (2009): 135–74.

segments as uniquely meritorious in this regard. The Mughal translators used several methods to single out Bhishma's advice to Yudhishtira in books twelve and thirteen as the crux of the epic's commendable political commentary. In the story, after the Great War had ended, the patriarch Bhishma instructed King Yudhishtira on successfully governing his hard-won kingdom. Bhishma's wisdom, contained in the *Śānti Parvan* (Book of Peace) and *Anuśāsana Parvan* (Book of Instruction), constitutes an important, early, Indian attempt to sketch out a philosophy of sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> The Mughals signalled their devotion to this particular section of the epic in several ways. First, the translators rendered Bhishma's guidance in disproportionate length to the rest of the text so that the two books constitute more than forty percent of the *Razmnāma*, as opposed to just under twenty-five percent of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, key Mughal thinkers openly acclaimed Bhishma's words as more truthful than the *Mahābhārata* as a whole. Abū al-Faḍl characterized the uneven landscape of the epic thus in his history of the period: "In [the *Mahābhārat*], although they have written many outlandish tales (*farāvān dīv-afsāna*) and imaginative stories (*basā khayālī dāstān*), there are nonetheless many pleasing instructions and a beneficial record of abundant experiences."<sup>19</sup> In his preface to the *Razmnāma*, Abū al-Faḍl clarifies that while readers must critically read most of the story and reject certain outrageous parts, Bhishma's advice is exempt from such strict scrutiny:

A person of sound judgment does not rely on the falseness of different ideas [regarding the multiple stories of creation in the *Mahābhārat*]. There is a part that the wise will examine and throw out of circulation. There is part that the intellect will not be able to understand. And there is a portion of it that the wise will agree to accept or consent to after much study and a penetrating glance. This strange division is not specific to

17 Several scholars have considered the *Mahābhārata*'s political commentary in the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* against literary and political backdrops relevant during the text's early composition. E.g., see James Fitzgerald, introduction to *The Mahābhārata: The Book of Peace, Part One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). However, more pertinent for my purposes is that kings often commissioned copies of the *Mahābhārata*, both of the entire epic and of book 12 in particular (Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 231–32). More broadly I participate here in a much-needed intervention, called for by Adam Bowles, to focus on "didactic" material in the *Mahābhārata*. *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

18 On the length of the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* in the Sanskrit epic, see Fitzgerald, introduction to *Book of Peace*, 82.

19 Abū al-Faḍl, *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, ed. H. Blochmann (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1867–77), 1:517.

this chapter, but rather all chapters include many designs of this book of rarities. The exception is the advice, guidance, and manners for inner and outer rulership narrated by wise (*ḥakīm*) Bhishma that are generally approved by intellectuals and liked by the wise.<sup>20</sup>

Precisely because they deemed Bhishma's advice as germane to Akbar's rule, Mughal elites treated this section with a more energetic process of translation than is evident in much of the *Razmnāma*. Ronit Ricci has discussed the inverse relationship that premodern translators often conceptualized between fidelity and authority. She points out that twelfth-century Latin renderings of Islamic texts were scrupulously faithful because they were designed to discredit Islam. In contrast, for later South and Southeast Asian adaptations of the same materials, "distancing from the source in the form of creativity and poetic freedom was part of a powerful array of tools used to accredit earlier sources and present them as legitimate."<sup>21</sup> Following such logic, Mughal translators actively cut, rewrote, and expanded Bhishma's advice. Here I focus on the first section of Bhishma's dialogue with Yudhishtira, devoted to kingly ethics (*rājadharmā*), in order to recover some of the major imperial motivations and techniques in metamorphosing this crucial political section of the *Mahābhārata*. Mughal writers avidly reworked much of the conversation and even adorned many of the episodes with quotations of poetry borrowed from the great masters of Persian literature.<sup>22</sup> Through this vigorous set of approaches, the Mughals communicated their deep investment in Bhishma's counsel and produced a work that was grounded in India's classical tradition of royal commentary but spoke to pertinent concerns within the late sixteenth-century Mughal polity.

### Frame Problems: an Inappropriate Advisor and a Reluctant King

The Mughals began their rewriting of the *Śānti Parvan* by using both the text and images in order to alter the frame story for Bhishma's lengthy discourse. In the Sanskrit epic, Bhishma spoke to Yudhishtira from his deathbed of arrows,

20 Abū al-Faḍl, "Muqaddamah," 20–21.

21 Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 65.

22 The majority of the *Razmnāma* is in prose, but the translators occasionally quote verses from Persian poets, a phenomenon that I have proposed was designed to lend the newly translated epic legitimacy in terms recognizable within the Perso-Arabic tradition and also culturally translated the narrative (Truschke, "Mughal Book of War," 516–19).

where he had been lying since being mortally wounded on the tenth day of combat. The *Razmnāma* initially maintains this part of the story. The Persian text explicitly discusses Bhishma lying prone and pierced at the battlefield of Kurukshetra as he embarked on his final dialogue, and several illustrated manuscripts vividly depict this dismal state.<sup>23</sup> However, in some manuscripts, further illustrations of the dialogue spin a different tale as Bhishma is sometimes shown sitting upright and conversing with Yudhishtira in a courtly setting.<sup>24</sup> For example, one image from a circa 1598 *Razmnāma* manuscript portrays the two men in a Mughal-like court, wearing Islamic-style dress and, for Bhishma, a turban.<sup>25</sup> In real life, Mughal kings accepted political guidance from Indian figures outside of an imperial context. For example, both Akbar and Jahangir visited an Indian ascetic known in Persian sources as Jadrup, and paintings survive that depict both kings meeting the sage in humble dwellings.<sup>26</sup> However, Mughal elites seemed to find Bhishma's near-death state incongruous with his elaborate, insightful counsel. Thus, they used some illustrations of the story to transplant the kingly advisor into a familiar court environment, even though this conflicted with the text of the *Razmnāma*.

While Mughal elites may have been mildly discomfited by Bhishma's prone position during his detailed instruction, they more strongly objected to Yudhishtira's inclination towards renunciation and acted decisively to overhaul this part of the tale. In Sanskrit, Bhishma's advice is preceded by an elaborate discussion about whether Yudhishtira will accept the burden of kingship or disavow all earthly possessions to live as an ascetic.<sup>27</sup> At the repeated urgings of his brothers and elders, Yudhishtira finally agreed to

23 The text mentions Bhishma's position a few times (e.g., *Razmnāma*, 317 and 318). For illustrations of Bhishma on the bed of arrows speaking with Yudhishtira, see, e.g., *Razmnāma* images c. 1598 (Victoria and Albert Museum, CIRC.242–1922), c. 1598 (British Museum, 1930,0716,0.1), 1605 (Birla *Razmnāma*, fol. 419b), and c. 1760 (British Library, ms. Persian Additional 5640, #XXIX).

24 E.g., the c. 1598–99 *Razmnāma* illustrations, listed in John Seyller, "Model and Copy: The Illustration of Three *Razmnāma* Manuscripts," *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1985): 59–60.

25 Ashmolean Museum 1978.2589; <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA1978.2589>.

26 An image of Akbar meeting with Jadrup, dated to circa 1625–30, is in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, 1937.20. An image of Jahangir conversing with Jadrup is in the Musée des Arts asiatiques—Guimet of Paris, Acc. 7171. For scholarship on Jadrup, see, e.g., Rajeev Kinra, "Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility: The Global Historical Legacy of Mughal Ṣulḥ-i Kull," *Medieval History Journal* 16.2 (2013): 265–69; Shireen Moosvi, "The Mughal Encounter with Vedanta: Recovering the Biography of 'Jadrup,'" *Social Scientist* 30.7/8 (2002): 13–23.

27 *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited [Mahābhārata]*, ed. V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, P. L. Vaidya, et al. 19 vols (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1966), 12.6–38.

rule, but only after he voiced some of the harshest denunciations of kingship and its intimate companion, war, found in the entire epic. In contrast, the parallel Persian discussion condenses more than thirty Sanskrit chapters to a mere two pages because Yudhishtira only briefly demurred. He was then quickly convinced by Arjuna's arguments that "there is no worship (*ibādat*) equivalent to the justice of *pādshāhs*, and one hour of a *pādshāh's* justice is worth a thousand years of worship."<sup>28</sup> Here Yudhishtira's momentary hesitation merely provided an additional opportunity to laud kingly rule, as opposed to its place in the Sanskrit text as an excoriating meditation on the dire consequences of worldly power.

The Persian *Śānti Parvan* also shores up the portrait of Yudhishtira as a strong ruler with unimpeachable martial credentials in other ways. For example, the Mughal translators skim over the opening of the Sanskrit *Śānti Parvan* where Yudhishtira, a deeply reluctant victor, mourned the newly dead.<sup>29</sup> Instead the Persian *Śānti Parvan* commences with the Pandavas debating and boasting among themselves about who had ensured success in the recently concluded battle. To settle the question, they asked the head of Barbarik, which had been positioned in a tree overlooking the Kurukshetra battlefield for the entire conflict.<sup>30</sup> The *Razmnāma* explains that before the battle began Barbarik had approached Krishna and promised to win the impending war with only three arrows. Krishna, knowing that the Pandavas would be victorious in any case, realized the Barbarik would wreak unthinkable destruction on the world. To avoid this catastrophe, Krishna asked Barbarik to grant him one wish and then requested his head, which he positioned above Kurukshetra during the war. After the battle, at the Pandavas' request, Barbarik's still-living head reprised key combat moments, including Krishna's all-destroying *cakra* and the slaying of the elephant-mounted Bhagadatta. Barbarik's saga is not found in the Sanskrit textual tradition but is common in folk tellings of the Great War.<sup>31</sup> This episode thus constitutes a moment when Mughal collaborative translation practices allowed for oral tales to enter the Persian *Mahābhārata*. Crucially, in its narrative context, this section reframes the entire *Śānti Parvan* with a celebratory view of war.

Even after Yudhishtira ascended the throne and began hearing Bhishma's wisdom, the king nonetheless periodically revisited his desire to forsake the crown and dwell in the forest. The Persian translators generally narrated

28 *Razmnāma*, 3:12.

29 *Mahābhārata*, 12.1.

30 Also, see the discussion of this episode in Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 122.

31 Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadī Among Rajputs, Muslims, and Dalits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 414–38.

Yudhishtira's moments of doubt, but they often reformulated the content of his objections. For example, midway through the Sanskrit section on *rājadharmā*, Yudhishtira fell into despair about the vices of ruling once again and proclaimed, "I do not seek the pleasures of kingship, nor do I desire to rule. I agreed to rule for the sake of *dharma*, but no *dharma* is found in [kingship]!"<sup>32</sup> In Persian, however, Yudhishtira's protest struck a different chord. Trembling he said, "From your discourse, it has become clear that the road of sovereignty and rulership is thinner than a strand of hair and sharper than a sword. Its risks are far greater than perceived, and from this fear the hair on my body is standing on end."<sup>33</sup> Whereas, in Sanskrit, Yudhishtira wanted to avoid altogether the dirty business of rulership, in Persian, he merely recognized the grave difficulty of being an effective sovereign. The Persian text also changes the nature of *dharma* in the passage, transforming it from a set of ethics potentially in conflict with sovereignty to coterminous with good rulership. In other words, the Mughal translators underscored Yudhishtira's wish to govern well rather than not at all.

Elsewhere in the *rājadharmā* section, the Mughal translators admitted the merit of people, including monarchs, being detached from the world, although they often recast such disinterest in a Persianate framework. For example, this section of the *Mahābhārata* tells the story of the sage Tanu (Skinny), a Brahmin who was once chastised for soliciting a king for wealth and thereafter took up asceticism in order to purge himself of desires. In the Sanskrit epic, this story exposes some of the major fault lines in relations between Brahmins and Kshatriyas.<sup>34</sup> However, the Persian translation instead enunciates the moral that material pleasures cannot bring true joy. The Mughal translators even added a concluding section where Bhishma exhorted Yudhishtira to repudiate covetousness and longing.<sup>35</sup> The Persian Bhishma then quoted from two poets, the second of which is Ḥāfiz, who wrote:

If you gain knowledge of the light of austerities, Hafiz,  
Then you can relinquish life, like a laughing candle.  
But so long as you desire the beloved's lips and the cup of wine  
Do not covet that other thing!<sup>36</sup>

32 *Mahābhārata*, 12.76.15.

33 *Razmnāma*, 3:62.

34 Fitzgerald, introduction to the *Book of Peace*, 101–3.

35 *Razmnāma*, 3:112. In Sanskrit, Bhishma concludes this tale by more briefly entreating Yudhishtira and referring back to the larger story at this point about Rishabha (*Mahābhārata*, 12.126.50–52).

36 *Razmnāma*, 3:112.

Such verses and their familiar aesthetics were designed to resonate with Mughal readers, who were familiar with the classical Persian tradition and would have recognized such poetic quotations. Moreover, some measure of dissociation from the world accorded well with the Akbari vision of kingship, which emphasized not being overtaken by enjoyments and remaining devoted to political power.<sup>37</sup>

### Ruling as an Indian Padshah

For the Mughals, the major value of the *rājadharma* section of the *Śānti Parvan* lay in its insights regarding Indian kingship. The Mughal ruling family claimed a Timurid-Mongol heritage and often grounded their authority claims in Central Asian, Persianate, and Islamic idioms. However, they were also Indian kings, and scholars have yet to recognise the great lengths to which the Mughal rulers went, particularly from Akbar onward, to formulate a distinctively Indian imperial identity. In the *Śānti Parvan*, the Mughal kings sought precedents and models for an Indian *pādshāh*, a Persian term that typically refers to an Islamicate ruler but which the translators applied in the *Razmnāma* to any subcontinental sovereign. For example, one of Bhishma's subjects was the origins of kingship and the first Indian rulers.<sup>38</sup> Throughout this section, the Persian text uses the term *pādshāh*, which opens up the possibility of linking Akbar with the early monarchs of the subcontinent in one long line of Indian kings.<sup>39</sup> After laying this foundation, Bhishma offered a series of prescriptions, analyses, and anecdotes about sovereignty, often in response to queries from Yudhishtira. In their treatment of this discourse, the translators employed several tactics in order to infuse Sanskrit-based ideas into Indo-Persian thought.

The Persian Bhishma presented Indian kingship as a sacred enterprise, sanctioned by both Hindu and Islamic gods. The *Razmnāma* repeatedly refers to a monotheistic Islamic deity, who sometimes replaces individual Hindu gods but more commonly appears alongside them. I have argued elsewhere that Mughal thinkers introduced Allah, both using that term and others,

37 For example, the sayings of Akbar collected by Abū al-Faḍl at the conclusion of his *Ā'in-i Akbarī* repeatedly express a desire to hold worldly pleasures at arm's length (2:227–44).

38 *Razmnāma*, 3:32–33 and *Mahābhārata*, 12.59.

39 Early modern readers understood this section of the *Śānti Parvan* as providing a list of kings. For example, Nilakaṅṭha numbered the early rulers in his commentary on the epic. *The Mahābhārata with the commentary of Nilakaṅṭha*, ed. K. Ramachandra (Poona: Chitrashala Press, 1929–33) 12:103 (comm on book 12, chapter 59).

into the *Mahābhārata* in order to acculturate the epic for a predominantly Muslim audience (rather than to further any specific theological agenda).<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, they strove towards some notion of textual faithfulness and so produced a mottled religious backdrop that features both Hindu and Islamic deities, often interacting in interesting ways. For example, in the *Śānti Parvan* discussion on kingship's origins, the Persian text maintains the Sanskrit framework that Hindu gods gave this royal institution to mankind. However, the translators also added the oversight of the Islamic God (*khudā*) to whom Vishnu prayed and whose court Brahmins and other holy men visited.<sup>41</sup> Other, slightly later translations of Sanskrit texts into Persian sometimes produced more detailed accounts of how Hindu and Islamic deities could coexist. For example, as Muzaffar Alam has pointed out, the Sufi thinker 'Abd al-Raḥman Chishtī (d. 1683) considered the ontological status of Hindu gods in relation to the Islamic tradition in his seventeenth-century *Mir'āt al-Makhlūqāt* (Mirror of Creation).<sup>42</sup> The creators of the *Razmnāma* took a more mixed, less theological, approach, however.

At certain moments, the *Razmnāma*'s practical tactic of accommodating both Hindu and Islamic religious views results in bizarre imagery. For instance, in the story of Prithu, one of the first Indian kings, the Persian translators substituted Allah (called by various names in the passage, including *haqq* and *khudāvand*) for Vishnu during a moment where the god/God has a lotus emerge from his forehead from which all good things in the world emanate.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the Islamic God is imagined as a corporeal being, complete with a flower blooming out of his head. Despite such moments of extraordinary hybrid imagery, however, the overarching presence of the Islamic Deity was crucial for making Bhishma's advice pertinent within the Akbari dispensation.

For Islamicate rulers, kings were sanctioned by God, and Mughal texts explore a notably wide variety of ways of framing Akbar's divine status. Many Persianate court histories stayed within well-trodden Perso-Islamic norms, referring to Akbar as the "shadow of God" (*ẓill-i allāh* or *ẓill-i khudā*) and

40 Truschke, "Mughal Book of War," 512–15.

41 *Razmnāma*, 3:32 and 3:33.

42 Muzaffar Alam, "Strategy and Imagination in a Mughal Sufi Story of Creation," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49.2 (2012): 151–95.

43 *Razmnāma*, 3:37; *Mahābhārata*, 12.59.133. The story of King Prithu was generally popular with the Mughals. His tale is illustrated in the imperial copy of the *Razmnāma* (Thomas Holbein Hendley, *Memorials of the Jeypore Exhibition 1883* [London: Griggs, 1884], 4:27), and a Sanskrit text from the early seventeenth century compares Jahangir to Prithu (*Jahāṅgīracarita* of Rudrakavi, ms. Oriental Institute of Baroda, Vadodara, No. 5761, fol. 72a).

emphasizing that Akbar shone with God's own light (*farr-i izzadi*). At times, however, Mughal thinkers also explored Hindu-inspired modes of expressing divine sovereignty. For example, Badā'ūnī, an unofficial and critical historian of the period, attests with bristling dismay: "Cheating imposter Brahmins ... told [Akbar] repeatedly that he had descended to earth, like Ram, Krishan, and other infidel rulers who, although lords of the world, had taken on human form to act on earth."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Sanskrit texts dedicated to Akbar praise him as an avatar of Vishnu, and there are also traces of such ideas in the Mughal translations of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Akbar never abandoned Islamic idioms as a bedrock for his sovereign identity, especially in Persian-medium court texts. Accordingly, invoking a monotheistic God, even alongside polytheistic counterparts, helped the *Razmnāma* conform to the basic expectations of Mughal elites, a group dominated by Muslims, and thus enabled the work to operate as an effective Persianate political text.

Akbar's translators also adapted Bhishma's advice to speak to the deep Mughal concern with how to deal effectively with a wide array of social, ethnic, and religious communities. The Mughals had faced this challenge from the beginning of their time in India, and Akbar aggressively integrated new groups into the imperial administration and court life. The *Śānti Parvan* contains several discussions of specific groups that the Persianate translators judged relevant to Akbar's diverse kingdom. In some cases, the translators updated the named communities, such as when Bhishma spoke about the battle strategies of men from different regions. To his catalogue of people from Sindh and Gandhara, the translators added Deccanis and, notably, Sikhs, a relatively new religious community in Mughal India primarily based in the Punjab.<sup>46</sup>

Of all the groups that Bhishma discussed in the Sanskrit epic, he devoted the most attention by far to Brahmins and Kshatriyas. More often than not, the Mughal translators omitted extended discussions of Kshatriyas, particularly their role as rulers of the subcontinent, or adjusted such conversations to be meditations on *pādshāhs*.<sup>47</sup> But the subject of Brahmins, particularly as kingly advisors, was highly pertinent to Mughal rule on several fronts. Indo-Muslim kings had long contended with the recurring and controversial issue of how to properly treat non-Muslims subjects, especially Hindus. While most had advocated working with Hindus, albeit to varying degrees, some hardline think-

44 *Muntakhab al-Tavārikh*, 2:326.

45 E.g., Kṛṣṇadāsa, *Pārasīprakāśa*, ed. V. B. Bhattacharya (Varanasi: Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya, 1965), 1, vv. 2–4.

46 *Mahābhārata*, 12.102.3–4; *Razmnāma*, 3:86.

47 For an example of the latter, see *Razmnāma*, 3:60 (corresponding with *Mahābhārata*, 12.74).

ers, such as the fourteenth-century Indo-Islamic historian Baranī, advocated that Hindus be denied positions of influence in an Islamic administration and even persecuted.<sup>48</sup> However, the Mughals took another, long established Islamic view that as Muslim kings they were duty-bound to protect people of all religions. Beginning under Akbar, the Mughal administration incorporated significant numbers of Hindus.<sup>49</sup> Akbar also hired Brahmins fluent in Indian musical traditions and Sanskrit scholarly traditions to adorn his court. Additionally, Akbar relied on Brahmin advisors, particularly at the time of the *Razmnāma* translation. Most notably, Birbal had been a prominent figure in the inner royal circle for two decades when the *Razmnāma* project was begun. Given these trends, Akbar's court had a vested interest in thinking through the role of Brahmin counsellors. In part, Mughal elites pursued this concern through the Islamic tradition and often considered Brahmins to be monotheists.<sup>50</sup> In the *Razmnāma*, the Mughals found a detailed, sophisticated set of resources for considering how Brahmin advice might benefit the Mughal Empire.

In their rendition of the *Śānti Parvan*, the Persianate translators frequently formulated the role of Brahmins vis-à-vis kings in ways suitable to the Mughal court. They often excluded aspects of Brahmanical history that were largely irrelevant within a Mughal political worldview, such as an early disappearance of the Vedas from earth.<sup>51</sup> In many cases, however, they actually sharpened Bhishma's contention that good kings need Brahmin mentors. For example, at one point in the Sanskrit text, Yudhishtira asked, "What sort of Brahmin is fit and proper to be appointed in the deliberation of what kings ought to do and ought not to do—tell me that Pitamaha!"<sup>52</sup> The Persian Yudhishtira posed a similar query, "What sort of Purohit, a Purohit being a Brahmin in the language of the Indians who is head of council and advice to a Padshah, should a Raja appoint?"<sup>53</sup> In both texts, Bhishma responded by detailing the genesis

48 Alvi, introduction to *Advice on the Art of Governance*, 5. As Carl Ernst notes, Baranī's Muslim patrons regularly ignored his intolerant ideas regarding Hindus. Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 47.

49 Iqtidar Alam Khan, "The Nobility Under Akbar and the Development of His Religious Policy, 1560–80," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1968): 29–36.

50 Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 176–77; Truschke, "Mughal Book of War," 512–15.

51 *Razmnāma*, 3:32; *Mahābhārata*, 12.59. In other works, such as Abū al-Fazl's *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, the Mughals evinced sustained interest in Brahmanical history and philosophical traditions.

52 This question comes at the beginning of *Mahābhārata*, 12.73, given as variant reading \*178 in the critical edition (347).

53 *Razmnāma*, 3:59.

of Brahmins and the other castes. But only in the *Razmnāma* does Bhishma explicitly state, “Because a Brahmin is the head of all [the other varnas], therefore it is essential that nobody other than a Brahmin be chosen as a Vazir and counsellor (*nadīm*).”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to giving advice, Bhishma also narrated the stories of several early Indian kings in the *Śānti Parvan*, and the Mughal translators often extensively rewrote these tales. Two examples, namely the sagas of Mandhatr and Manu, provide keen insight into how the translators adapted the stories of Indian monarchs to reflect Akbar’s royal values and even King Akbar himself. In the story of Mandhatr, an ancient ruler once approached Vishnu to ask about *dharma*, and Vishnu appeared to him in the form of Indra. Unaware of the god’s true identity, Mandhatr requested to see Vishnu. “Indra” replied that nobody could see Vishnu, “not even I.”<sup>55</sup> In Sanskrit, “Indra” offered to grant any other wish of the king, and Mandhatr humbly entreated:

Certainly I will not see the first god (*ādideva*), lord. Having bowed my head and having abandoned pleasures I desire *dharma* and wish to go to the forest on the straight path frequented by people. From the vast, immeasurable *dharma* of a Kshatriya, the worlds are gained and my own fame established. I do not know how to enact that *dharma*, the oldest in the world, which flows from the first god.<sup>56</sup>

In Persian, “Indra” promised no alternative wish, but Mandhatr pressed on regardless:

I also know that nobody can see Vishnu. But I have increased kingship (*pādshāhī*) in this world and brought the entire earth under control. Everyone in the world rests because of the security of my justice and equity. Now I desire to go to that world where all just, important, lofty kings have gone.<sup>57</sup>

The Mughal translators transformed Mandhatr from a humble renunciant into Sanskrit to a proud monarch in Persian. They also dropped the language of *dharma* as a potential obstacle to the practice of earthly power. Following these divergent turns, the Sanskrit text next recounts the establishment of

54 *Razmnāma*, 3:59.

55 *Mahābhārata*, 12.64; *Razmnāma*, 3:42.

56 *Mahābhārata*, 12.64.18–19.

57 *Razmnāma*, 3:42.

*dharma* in the world, whereas the Persian dwells on the virtues of a *pādshāh*. An illustration of this episode from a late sixteenth-century *Razmnāma* depicts Mandhatr in a curiously Indo-Islamic looking court and with some of the accoutrements of a Mughal king.<sup>58</sup>

Directly after Mandhatr's narrative, the Mughal translators revised the tale of Manu to directly invoke Akbar. This episode contains the only named reference to Akbar thus identified in the *Razmnāma* and exhibits a dynamic fusion of Sanskrit and Mughal worlds. The *Razmnāma* translates Manu's story with its own Perso-Islamic slant, which ends thus:

Raja [Manu] showed compassion and mercy to the entire world and spoke to everyone with visible joy. Day by day, his majesty and pomp increased, and many years passed on earth in his rule and good fortune. Because of his virtuous conduct, God Exalted granted him a long, generous life. It is hoped, according to the magnificence of God, Praised and Exalted, that the shadow of the justice and compassion of his most exalted majesty, King Akbar—under whose justice, compassion, and grace all people in the world rest—would be perpetual and ever-lasting so long as the world exists.<sup>59</sup>

Here the translators drew upon an earlier teaching in Manu's story that "the first responsibility of subjects is to pray for their king" and applied it directly to their own political situation.<sup>60</sup> They furthermore put Manu and Akbar in close proximity, which cast Akbar as a just, praiseworthy Indian monarch. The passage concludes with verses quoted from Sa'dī:

O God! This king, a friend to those in need,  
in whose shadow lies the refuge of the world,  
may you grant him long life on this earth.  
May you enliven his heart through obedience to God.  
So long as there is day and night, may the king be on the throne,  
and may prosperity reach the zenith of the sky.<sup>61</sup>

58 This illustrated folio is held in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Acc. No. 1978.2592.

59 *Razmnāma*, 3:45.

60 *Razmnāma*, 3:44.

61 *Razmnāma*, 3:45. The first four lines are from Sa'dī's *Būstān* (18, lines 4–5). I am unclear about the origin of the last two lines.

The voice that articulated these good wishes remains tantalizingly ambiguous. The speaker is either Bhishma, who addressed Akbar across the reaches of time, or the Mughal translators, who stepped outside of the epic's narrative framework to laud their patron. Either way, temporal and narrative boundaries were broken to celebrate Akbar's eminent kingship and his connection with one of India's foundational rulers.<sup>62</sup>

### Conclusion: Translation and History in the Persian Mahābhārata

The *Śānti Parvan* section on kingly ethics demonstrates how the Mughals remolded the *Mahābhārata*'s political guidance to speak to their current imperial concerns. In many ways, the Mughal translators strove to accurately render Bhishma's advice into Persian and reproduced the general course of his dialogue. Yet they dynamically edited parts of his instruction that conflicted with their own kingly precepts or did not speak to Akbar's imperial concerns by changing the stories, altering the relevant vocabulary, and shifting ethical emphases. I have referred to this process as "active translation," and in this regard, it is important that the Mughals recognized their project as a direct translation (*tarjuma* in Persian). In the premodern world, many cultures engaged in loose translation efforts, often diverging so far from the original text(s) that identifying the source work(s) today proves impossible. As Rebecca Gould has pointed out, many translation movements in premodern and early modern Asia lacked clear methodologies and even vocabularies for describing their efforts.<sup>63</sup> The Mughals pursued similarly free approaches to translating numerous works, including those that had been previously incorporated into Persian such as the *Pañcatantra*. But the *Mahābhārata* was a different sort of text in Mughal eyes. The *Mahābhārata*, particularly Bhishma's advice therein, was a work about Indian kings and for Indian kings that was not previously known in any detail within the Perso-Islamic tradition. This promising but unfamiliar epic demanded a creative transcreation to become an effective Mughal political treatise that—alongside more conventional Islamic advice literature—provided royal models and imperial advice for Emperor Akbar and other Mughal readers.

In addition to its long association with kings on the subcontinent, the perception of the *Mahābhārata* as a historical text is critical to grasping its potency for the Mughals. Akbar was deeply interested in histories throughout

62 Much of this paragraph also appears in Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 123–25.

63 Rebecca Gould, "Inimitability versus Translatability: The Structure of Literary Meaning in Arabo-Persian Poetics," *The Translator* 19.1 (2013): 85.

his reign, especially those that recounted his imperial deeds and Timurid lineage. For example, he commissioned no less than seven historical works on the reigns of himself and his father, Humayun, and also ordered the translation of his grandfather Babur's memoirs from Turkish into Persian. But while Akbar had a rich family history in many respects, Mughal roots on the subcontinent were shallow. Akbar's interest in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly its sections on kingly advice, is best understood against the backdrop of the Mughal need for their own Indian story. This need existed alongside the Mughal desire to place themselves within numerous other traditions, such as claiming their Timurid-Mongol heritage, and yet it perhaps holds greater explanatory promise for understanding the transformation of the Mughals into what they indisputably became: an Indian dynasty.

In addition to the arguments provided above, largely drawn from the *Razmnāma* itself, there is one further indication worth mentioning that Bhishma's advice as rendered in books twelve and thirteen of the *Razmnāma* was widely understood as especially relevant to Mughal imperial ambitions and identity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Hindus read the Persian *Mahābhārata* produced in Akbar's court. This was not the original intended audience for the *Razmnāma*, but, by this point in history, Persian was a more accessible language for many Indians than Sanskrit. Manuscripts of the *Razmnāma* that date from the 1700s and 1800s, many of them written by and read by Hindus, frequently cut the majority of the Persian translation of the *Śānti Parvan*. This editing suggests that later readers did not find Bhishma's advice useful in a world no longer dominated by Mughal authority. In other words, they agreed with the imperial understanding of Bhishma's advice as squarely aimed at a Mughal readership.

The *Mahābhārata* provided the Mughals with a narrative that could be coopted into an Islamic vision of history as providing direction for the future as much as recording the past, but the content of the epic offered exceptional possibilities. By reimagining their kingship through the *Mahābhārata*, the Mughal kings could move beyond comparing themselves to prior kings well-known in the Perso-Islamic tradition, such as Alexander the Great, Anushiravan, and Timur. In the *Razmnāma*, Mughal elites found the resources to project a history for themselves that went back thousands of years on the subcontinent and reflected particularities of the Indian cultural environment. They declined to adopt such notions wholesale and instead dynamically transformed the *Mahābhārata*'s ideas about kingship into something that was Indian, Persianate, and Mughal at the same time. In the hands of Akbar's skilled translators and Brahmin informants, Bhishma's political instruction to Yudhishtira became pertinent and felicitous for Emperor Akbar.

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