

Introduction

In Sha‘ban 429/May 1038, the eastern Iranian city of Nishapur, one of the great cultural and economic centres of the Islamic world, opened its gates to new Turkish rulers. The Ghuzz, as the Nishapuris called them, consisted of ‘two or three hundred horsemen, a banner, two beasts of burden, and with the whole group having a generally ragged and battered aspect’.¹ When, later, their leader, Tughril, made an appearance in the city, he was no more prepossessing than his followers, who

looted the inhabitants. It said that when [Tughril] saw an almond pastry [*lawzinj*] he ate it, saying, ‘These are good noodles [*tutmāj*], but lack garlic.’² The Ghuzz saw camphor, and, thinking it was salt, said, ‘This salt is bitter.’ Many other such things are related of them.³

These Ghuzz were also known as the Türkmén, or sometimes, the Seljuks (Arabic *al-saljuqiyya*), after Tughril’s ancestor, Seljuk, who had converted to Islam and died at the beginning of the eleventh century in Jand, a remote outpost of the Islamic world situated in the northwest of modern Kazakhstan, in the great Eurasian steppe that was the Turks’ homeland. Recent converts to Islam, in large part nomadic tent-dwellers, the Seljuks seemed like barbarians to the settled population of the Iranian world. However, by 431/1040, they had seized not just Nishapur, but also all of the vast surrounding province of Khurasan – historically comprising most of modern eastern Iran,

¹ Bayhaqi, *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, ed. Khalil Khatib Rahbar (Tehran, 1376), 883; translation from C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran, 994–1040* (Edinburgh, 1963), 255. For Nishapur and Khurasan on the eve of the Seljuk invasions, see Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, esp. 145–61.

² Read *tutmāj* not *qutmāj* as in the text (but as per the ms variants listed in the critical apparatus). On *tutmāj*, a classic Turkish noodle dish in which garlic is an essential ingredient, see Paul D. Buell, ‘The Mongol Empire and Turkicization: the Evidence of Food and Foodways’, in Reuven Amitai-Preiss and David Morgan (eds), *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* (Leiden, 1999), 211, 216.

³ Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil fi l-Ta’rikh*, ed. C. Tornberg (Beirut, 1965–7), IX, 483.

Turkmenistan and northern Afghanistan⁴ – one of the foremost commercial, cultural and intellectual centres of the Islamic world, the birthplace of the New Persian literary language,⁵ and home to rich traditions of Arabic literature and Islamic scholarship. The Seljuk takeover of Khurasan laid the foundations for an empire that would sweep away the established political order in the central lands of the Islamic world, and would endure for more than a century.

There had been Turks in the Middle East before the Seljuks. Where the Islamic world adjoined the Eurasian steppe, on the borders of Iran and the Muslim-ruled lands of Central Asia (Khurasan and Transoxiana, the latter comprising roughly modern Uzbekistan), nomadic Turks were familiar. Stereotypes of their uncouthness were deeply entrenched in Arabic literature even before the first Seljuk incursions.⁶ The Turks were most famous, however, as military slaves, in which capacity they had been employed since the ninth century by the ‘Abbasid caliphs who ruled most of the Middle East. Occasionally, these slave soldiers, such as the Tulunids in Egypt (245/858–292/905), had even established their own polities. Indeed, the Ghaznavid state that controlled Khurasan at the time of the Seljuk conquests was itself of Turkish slave origin.

The Seljuks were different. As propaganda produced for their court boasted, they were free, not slaves.⁷ Unlike the earlier military slaves, they came accompanied by their families and their livestock, and their advance consisted of great nomadic migrations which permanently transformed the demography of the parts of the Middle East where they settled. With the coming of the Seljuks, Iran, Anatolia, northern Syria and parts of southern Caucasia all started to acquire the Turkish populations that exist there to this day, although they were reinforced by subsequent waves of migration, especially in the thirteenth century.

⁴ There is also a modern Iranian province of Khurasan, which represents only a fraction of the area meant historically by the term.

⁵ This was the version of Persian, written in the Arabic script, that first came into regular use as a literary and administrative language in tenth-century Khurasan, and is essentially the same language that is in use in modern Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan today.

⁶ Richard N. Frye and Aydın M. Sayılı, ‘The Turks in the Middle East before the Saljuqs’, *JAOS*, 63/iii (1953), 194–207; Yehoshua Frenkel, ‘The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Medieval Arabic Writing’, in Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (eds), *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, 2005), 201–41. In general on the medieval Turkish peoples, see Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden, 1992).

⁷ Ibn Hassul, *Kitab Tafdil al-atrak ‘ala sa’ir al-ajnad*, ed. Abbas Azzavi as ‘Ibni Hassulün Türkler hakkında bir eser’, *Belleten*, 4 (1940) (Arabic text as separately paginated *ilave*).

The Seljuk conquests marked the beginning of a millennium of domination of the Middle East by peoples of steppe or Turkish origin, among them the Mongols in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, their contemporaries the Mamluks of Syria and Egypt, and later the Timurids and the Ottomans. Even dynasties which were not themselves ethnically Turkish, such as the Ayyubids and the Safavids, often relied on a Turkish soldiery, and were profoundly influenced by Turkish culture – so much so that they were sometimes perceived by outsiders to be Turkish themselves. The Kurdish Ayyubids, for example, were sometimes known as the ‘Ghuzz’.⁸

Despite their regular depiction as barbarians, something all too often reflected in the secondary literature as much as the primary sources,⁹ the Turks in fact possessed their own sophisticated political traditions derived from the heritage of the steppe. Turkish empires had existed in Central Asia since the sixth century, and the Seljuks themselves seem to have originated from the ruins of the last great non-Muslim Turkish empire, the Khazar state which dominated southern Russia and the north Caucasus between the eighth and tenth centuries.¹⁰ The Ghaznavids (366/977–582/1186), the most important Turkish Muslim dynasty to date, embarrassed by their servile origins, had sought to legitimise themselves by emulating the practices of established Islamic states like the ‘Abbasids, and to participate in the prestigious Perso-Islamic culture of Khurasan by claiming illustrious Iranian descent.¹¹ In contrast, the Seljuks vaunted their origins through their alien Turkish names, and introduced new political symbols and practices which originated on the steppe, such as the *tughbrā*, the stylised bow and arrow that symbolised possession of authority, or the *atabeg*, the military guardian of a prince. Such customs were also adopted by later dynasties: the *tughbrā* remained in use until the end of Ottoman period (see pp. 126–8, 320 below), and the Seljuks were succeeded

⁸ Cf. Ibn Hatim, *Kitab al-Simt al-Ghali al-Thaman fi Akhbar al-Muluk min al-Ghuzz bi'l-Yaman*, ed. G. R. Smith as *The Ayyūbids and Early Rasūlids in the Yemen (567-694/1173–1295)* (Cambridge, 1974), I, 15: *awwal man malaka al-Yaman min al-ghuzz Banū Ayyūb* – ‘the first of the Ghuzz to rule Yemen were the Ayyubids’.

⁹ See, for example, the influential comments of Barthold, whose study of pre-Mongol Central Asia remains an essential work of scholarship: ‘The Saljuqids could not assimilate themselves completely to the Sāmānids and the Ghaznavids, because up to the end they remained strangers to all culture . . . An illiterate sovereign certainly could not follow the intricate bureaucratic administration of his extensive possessions, and this duty lay exclusively with the wazir’ (W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1928), 308).

¹⁰ For an introduction to the Khazars, see D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, 1954), and see further the discussion and references in Chapter 1, p. 24.

¹¹ See C. E. Bosworth, ‘The Heritage of Rulership in Early Islamic Iran and the Search for Dynastic Connections with the Past’, *Iran*, (1973), 61–2.



Map I.1 The Middle East in the eleventh to twelfth centuries: settlements and geography



in the west by a plethora of dynasties that called themselves *atabegs*. The steppe political heritage first introduced into the Islamic world by the Seljuks would exert an important influence on the ideology and institutions of later empires.¹²

The Great Seljuk Empire

The scale of the state the Seljuks founded dwarfed any earlier Muslim Turkish polity – indeed, in terms of area, it was second only to the ‘Abbasid caliphate at its height and was considerably larger than any of the other contemporary Muslim empires such as the Fatimids in Egypt or the Almoravids in Morocco and Spain. By the late eleventh century, the lands that recognised Seljuk suzerainty stretched from Palestine in the west to as far as Kashghar in what is now China in the east. Even the somewhat reduced empire of the mid-twelfth century still reached from Iraq to Samarqand in Central Asia, and, according to the calculation of one contemporary traveller, took four months to cross.¹³

These lands, comprising most of the heartland of mediaeval Islamic civilisation, were bound together by the dominance of Islam and its culture, by the common political heritage of the ‘Abbasid caliphate (128/750–637/1258) to which all were nominally subject, and by historic road networks that were traversed by scholars, pilgrims and merchants. They were populated by a massively diverse range of religious, linguistic and ethnic groups: there were nomads and sedentaries, Arabs, a plethora of different ethnically Iranian groups, not to speak of the various Georgian, Armenian, Greek and Syriac-speaking Christians, as well as Jews, Zoroastrians and other smaller remnants of pre-Islamic religions. Although an exact equivalent for the word ‘empire’ does not exist in pre-modern Arabic or Persian, and the Seljuk polity was called simply a *dawla* (dynasty), *saltāna* (sultanate) or *mulk* (kingdom), the modern term seems entirely appropriate for a state that encompassed without doubt greater diversity than any of its contemporaries in the Islamic world. It also serves to distinguish the subject of this book, the Great Seljuk Empire, from the smaller Seljuk polities that arose on its peripheries (discussed further below).

The Great Seljuks dominated the Middle East and Islamic Central Asia between c. 431/1040 and 552/1157. For most of its history, the empire was divided into a western and eastern half, and it lacked a single capital city or political centre. In the east, the main seat of Seljuk rule was Merv, in modern Turkmenistan. In the west, several different cities between which the sultans moved seasonally served as capitals: Rayy near modern Tehran, Isfahan,

¹² See, for example, Joseph Fletcher, ‘The Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition in the Ottoman Empire’, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 3–4 (1979–80), 236–51; and pp. 318–20 below.

¹³ Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Asher (New York, 2010), 109.

Baghdad and, later, Hamadhan. These western territories were known as the Sultanate of Iraq. Iraq here is meant in its mediaeval sense, and thus comprises western Iran (historic 'Iraq al-'Ajam, Persian Iraq, also known as the Jibal) as well as 'Iraq al-Arab (Arab Iraq), corresponding to the central and southern parts of the modern state of Iraq (the north of which, along with parts of southeastern Turkey and northeastern Syria, was known as the Jazira – the 'island' between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers).

From 511/1118, the Seljuk sultans of Iraq recognised the suzerainty of the Great Seljuk ruler Sanjar, based in Khurasan, who was known by the title of *al-sultān al-a'zam*, 'the Greatest Sultan'. The sultans of Iraq are sometimes referred to as the 'Lesser Seljuks'. The Sultanate of Iraq survived the Great Seljuk collapse in 1152–7, only finally disappearing in 1194. These later Seljuks of Iraq claimed to be inheritors of the Great Seljuk Empire, but their state was, in reality, very different. The largely powerless sultans remained in office to give legitimacy to the actual rulers, the Ildegüzid dynasty, who had originated as slave soldiers in the Seljuks' service. The complex history of the Iraq sultanate between 552/1157 and 590/1194 is treated only briefly here, as it is properly a separate subject.

The term Seljuk without further qualification is thus here used to describe the Great Seljuk Empire, just as it is in the primary sources. Other branches of the Seljuk family also controlled territories on the peripheries of the empire, which are only treated tangentially here. Kirman in southern Iran (and Oman too) was between *c.* 440/1048 and 582/1186 ruled by its own Seljuk dynasty, the descendants of Tughri's nephew Qavurt b. Chaghri. Their relationship with their cousins, the Great Seljuk rulers, was often tense, especially in the eleventh century. There were also the Seljuks of Syria (471/1076–511/1117), descended from Chaghri's grandson Tutush, who were themselves divided into two rival branches, one based at Aleppo in the north and one at Damascus. The most important of these offshoots of the family were the descendants of Seljuk's great-grandson Sulayman, who ruled Anatolia from *c.* 483/1081 to 707/1308. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries the Anatolian Seljuks became one of the leading powers of the eastern Mediterranean. Any one of these dynasties deserves a monograph in its own right; the Seljuks of Anatolia, in particular, ruled a previously Christian land and their history relies on entirely different sources and presents quite distinct problems from the Great Seljuks.¹⁴

¹⁴ A useful introduction covering all the various Seljuk dynasties with bibliography is C. E. Bosworth, 'Saldjuks', *EF*. See also on the Anatolian dynasty A. C. S. Peacock, 'Saljuqs. III. Anatolia', *EIr*, and A. C. S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yıldız (eds), *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East* (London, 2013).

The Great Seljuk Empire also encompassed many other vassal rulers, ranging from Bedouin Arab chiefs in Iraq like the Mazyadids and ‘Uqaylids, to dynasties like the Bawandids on the Caspian coast of Iran who could trace their roots back to pre-Islamic times. Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who visited the Seljuk lands in the mid-twelfth century, stated that no fewer than forty-five kings were subject to the sultan’s authority.¹⁵ One might quibble with the exact number, but the general picture is fair. Surrounded on all sides by Seljuk territories was, from the late eleventh century, the state of the Ismailis in the Alburz mountains of northern Iran, in Quhistan in eastern Iran, and in parts of Syria, which did not recognise Seljuk suzerainty. No effort is made to deal with these numerous states except insofar as they are relevant for understanding Seljuk history.

The Seljuks were not interested in enforcing conformity to the practices or ideals of an imperial centre. The empire did not even have a uniform currency: although sultans certainly did strike coins in their own names, individual areas used whatever type of coinage precedent, convenience and local circumstances dictated: Byzantine coins in Syria, Fatimid ones in Baghdad, the old Nishapuri dinar in Khurasan, and so on.¹⁶ Vassals could often rule their territories in their traditional ways provided they recognised the Seljuk sultans’ suzerainty, remitted tribute and performed obligations of military service. To people in the Seljuk world, above all the Seljuk sultans themselves, political authority, indeed the political viability of the empire itself, was expressed not through institutions, but through personal ties of loyalty and obligation between patrons and their vassals.¹⁷ The impact of Seljuk rule thus varied greatly from place to place. Some areas perhaps rarely saw a Turk, while others were fought over repeatedly by rival contenders for the sultanate and their Türkmen, Bedouin and Kurdish allies. It is only through detailed, regional studies that we can understand the fluctuating impact of Seljuk rule in different locations, and these should be a priority for future scholarship.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 109. On the date of Benjamin’s visit, see further p. 275, n. 126 below.

¹⁶ Stefan Heidemann, *Die Renaissance der Städte in Nordsyrien und Nordmesopotamien: Städtische Entwicklung und wirtschaftliche Bedingungen in ar-Raqqa und Harran von der Zeit der beduinischer Vorherrschaft bis zu den Seldschuken* (Leiden, 2002), 387.

¹⁷ For a study of these concepts in a slightly earlier Buyid period, which in general holds true for the Seljuks, see Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (London, [1981] 2001).

¹⁸ The recent studies of David Durand-Guédy on Isfahan, Vanessa van Renterghem on Baghdad, Stefan Heidemann on the Jazira and Jean-Michel Mouton on Damascus represent a welcome start in this direction. Khurasan has received rather less attention, although the works of Richard Bulliet and Jürgen Paul should be noted.

Such a vast realm could not be run without the contribution of subject peoples, and Persian-speakers from Khurasan played an especially important role in the administration of the empire in the eleventh century. They were deployed in western Iran, Iraq and Syria as well as Khurasan, making the Seljuk Empire in some respects as much a Khurasani empire as a Turkish one. In culture and art, as much as political traditions, the Seljuk period saw the spread of Khurasani traditions to the west of their realms. As a result, the period is characterised by a fusion of Turkish, Persian and Islamic influences, and later dynasties, the twelfth- and thirteenth-century successor states to the Seljuks such as the Syrian Zangids and Ayyubids, sought to appropriate this Seljuk legacy for themselves. Thus, while recognising the diversity of the Seljuk lands, there is also a need for an empire-wide perspective. It is that perspective that the present study seeks to present.

Modern Scholarship on the Seljuks and the Scope of this Book

The eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed profound social and religious change throughout the Middle East, beyond the Seljuk lands as well as within them. More and more Christians and Jews were converting to Islam, giving the region a much more markedly Muslim character. The quintessential Muslim institution of learning, the madrasa, first became widespread in this period, while Sufism also gained a much wider popularity and acceptability. By the end of the twelfth century, the Islamic world looked not just more Muslim, but more Muslim in a way that is familiar today. Indeed, one scholar has written that, ‘Many Saljuq institutions lasted in their outward forms (though the terminology was in some cases changed) until the twentieth century; and without a knowledge of these, and an attempt to trace them back to earlier times, we cannot fully comprehend the questions that began to agitate Iran in the nineteenth century and the solutions sought to them.’¹⁹ While many of these developments are undoubtedly the culmination of longer processes, some seem to have been spread or facilitated by Seljuk rule and its import of Khurasani practices to the central Islamic lands of Iraq and Syria.

Despite the indubitable significance of the period, our understanding of it remains very limited owing to the comparative absence of research on the Seljuks. Although there are a number of monographs treating individual aspects of Seljuk history, no book-length scholarly study of the dynasty has previously appeared in any western language.²⁰ The most comprehensive works

¹⁹ A. K. S. Lambton, ‘The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire’, in J. A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. V: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), 203.

²⁰ The contribution by Aziz Basan, *The Great Seljuqs: A History* (London, 2010), despite its

on Seljuk political and dynastic history to date are those by twentieth-century Turkish scholars, particularly Kafesoğlu, Köymen, Sevim and Merçil, whose principal relevant publications are listed in the bibliography and are referred to selectively in the notes. These contributions have not yet been superseded in detail (nor is that the aim of the current book), but they are dated by their nationalistic assumptions of the Turks' unique genius for state foundation.²¹ Moreover, they tend to favour a narrative of rulers and battles over analysis. The Soviet scholar S. G. Agadzhanov's study of the Seljuk state in Central Asia is also valuable for a more general understanding of the dynasty.²² In the west, we are indebted to Anne Lambton's pioneering studies of Seljuk administration, George Makdisi's work on religion, and Claude Cahen's research on political history and historiography. Their work has been continued by the major contributions of Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand. Despite the seminal importance of these works, it must be said that Seljuk studies (especially of political history – art history fared rather better) have been relatively neglected outside Turkey, perhaps because comparatively few scholars command all the necessary research languages – Arabic and Persian for the primary sources, Turkish for the secondary literature. Although recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the Seljuks,²³ many basic questions remain unresolved.

Given this absence of research on many areas, this book does not purport to offer a synthetic overview of the consensus of scholarship, as there is both too little scholarship and, in what there is, too little consensus. Rather, it is an attempt to offer a personal interpretation of the empire's

promising title, largely consists of a summary of older Turkish scholarship on the dynasty. See the review by Jürgen Paul in *Eurasian Studies*, 9 (2011), 268–71.

²¹ See Martin Strohmeier, *Seldschukische Geschichte und türkische Geschichtswissenschaft: die Seldschuken im Urteil moderner türkischer Historiker* (Berlin, 1984). An impression of Turkish scholarship and its highly politicised nature can also be gained from Gary Leiser (ed. and trans.), *A History of the Seljuks: İbrahim Kafesoğlu's Interpretation and the Resulting Controversy* (Carbondale, 1988). A useful recent addition to this scholarship is Osman G. Özgüdenli, *Selçuklular, vol. I: Büyük Selçuklu Devleti Tarihi (1040–1157)* (Istanbul, 2013), the first of a projected three-volume series which appeared while the current work was in the final stages of preparation. While adopting the same narrative, chronological approach as earlier Turkish scholars, Özgüdenli's work is particularly useful for being based on a very wide range of modern Iranian and Turkish scholarship, as well as western works.

²² S. G. Agadshyanow, *Der Staat der Seldschukiden und Mittelasien im 11.–12. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1994). See further the review by Carole Hillenbrand, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd Series, 2 (1996), 255–7.

²³ A sampling of this recent scholarship may be found in the valuable collection edited by Christian Lange and Songül Mecit, *The Seljuks: Politics, Society and Culture* (Edinburgh, 2011).

history, which it is hoped will go some way to filling this lacuna in scholarship as well as acting as a stimulus to future research. We commence with two chapters that offer a narrative political history of the Seljuk state from its origins to its collapse in 1194. Although much of this ground has already been covered by Edmund Bosworth in a magisterial survey which will doubtless remain the standard work on the political history of the Iranian world for the foreseeable future, the approach here differs in two respects.²⁴ First, Seljuk history frequently forces us to look beyond even the greater Iranian world of Iran, Iraq and Central Asia, into Syria, the Jazira and Anatolia. Secondly, Bosworth was unable to use Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī's chronicle, which was published in the same year as his survey. This text (discussed further below) is especially important for the detailed information it gives on the activities of the nomadic Turks, especially in Syria and Iraq, between 1055 and 1092, which it is vital to consider in any account of this formative period of the Seljuk Empire. For the subject of the second chapter, the period between 1092 and 1194, our picture has changed less dramatically, but our sources are now supplemented by the relatively recently published chronicles of Nishapuri and Qummi, and a small but important body of secondary literature. I have not sought to detail every revolt, or every contortion of the phenomenally complex political history of the twelfth century. For these readers should still refer to Bosworth, or the Turkish literature mentioned above. Rather, my aim has been to give the reader an impression of the overarching trends in Seljuk political history, their causes and their consequences.

The subsequent six chapters deal with topics that are key to understanding the Seljuk Empire and its development. A particular theme we will seek to investigate is the role of Turks, nomads and steppe culture and their interaction with the empire's Perso-Islamic traditions, which have often been privileged by previous scholarship. As Lambton put it, '[the Seljuks'] Muslim upbringing prepared them for a rapid acceptance of the Muslim world and the [latter's] imperial ['Abbasid] tradition in its broad outlines. But the usages of the steppe and the nature of the armed forces of the Seljuks necessarily modified the imperial structure somewhat.'²⁵ The nature and extent of this modification has rarely been investigated, however, owing to the problematic nature of our sources (on which more below).

²⁴ C. E. Bosworth, 'The Political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000–1217)' in J. A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. V: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), 1–202.

²⁵ Ann K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History* (Albany, NY, 1988), 11.

Chapter 3 examines Seljuk political concepts, such as sovereignty, succession and legitimacy, considering the dual legacy of the steppe and the Perso-Islamic tradition. In this context we also look at the thorny question of the Seljuk relationship with the ‘Abbasid Caliphs who played a crucial role both in providing legitimacy for the Seljuks in the broader Islamic world, but who also were constantly striving to assert their own authority at the Seljuks’ expense. Central to any understanding of Seljuk political and cultural life is the royal court, the *dargāh*, which forms the subject of Chapter 4. In Chapters 5 and 6 we consider the other two main groups who ran the empire: the predominantly Persian bureaucrats and the largely Turkish military; Chapter 7 considers the role of religion in the empire; whereas most surveys concentrate exclusively on Islam, here we attempt to give due weight to the important role of Jewish and Christian communities as well. The final chapter seeks to offer an overview of the economic and social organisation of the empire.

The Seljuk Empire and the way it functioned changed considerably over its one and a half centuries of existence, but it is only very occasionally that the evidence allows us to understand how and why it did. Scholars have sometimes taken the reign of Malikshah (r. 464/1072–485/92) as more broadly representative of a classical age of the Seljuk Empire.²⁶ However, Malikshah’s reign was in many ways quite anomalous, and in any event one should be wary of extrapolating broader trends from limited evidence. We really cannot say at the moment, for instance, to what extent the military forces at the disposal of Sultan Sanjar in the middle of the twelfth century differed in organisation or financing from those of Malikshah. We therefore cannot begin to discuss whether there might have been any relationship between any putative differences and Sanjar’s poor battlefield performance (at least in his later reign) as opposed to Malikshah’s success. In practice, it is not possible to avoid some generalisations about ‘Seljuk’ practices in a work of this size; but these should be read with a health warning that they must be nuanced by future research that we must hope will tease out the similarities and differences of Seljuk rule across the empire.

The Sources for the History of the Great Seljuks

Any attempt to study the Seljuk Empire as a whole soon comes up against a major obstacle in the extreme unevenness of our evidence. As for most of the mediaeval Islamic world, few archival documents have come down to us.

²⁶ The essay of Lambton, ‘The Internal Structure of the Saljuq Empire’, is a good example of this tendency.

Our main sources are therefore the Arabic and Persian chronicles without which it would be impossible to piece together the barest narrative of Seljuk history.²⁷ They confront us with the problems which will be familiar to students of mediaeval Islamic history. The chronicles are primarily literary artefacts, intended to promote a certain version of the past for a variety of purposes, such as the author's (or his patron's) political or moralistic agenda, or his factional loyalties. The chronicles are generally written much later than the events they describe; and they concentrate almost exclusively on the elites of the court – sultans, amirs and bureaucrats. A problem peculiar to the Seljuk case is that the chronicles tend to concentrate on the west of the Seljuk realm; despite its undoubted importance, events in Khurasan are covered much more scantily. Furthermore, the chronological coverage is patchy: the period between 485/1092 and 511/1118 (from the death of Sultan Malikshah to the accession of Mahmud) is particularly poorly documented, even in the west.

Perhaps most seriously of all, Seljuk history was written not by the conquerors, but by the conquered. We have only fleeting glimpses of the Seljuks' own view of themselves and their past: most of our sources were composed by authors writing in Persian and Arabic who lived in the great urban centres of the eastern Islamic world. As the quotation that opens this chapter suggests, many regarded the Seljuks with undisguised contempt as an alien and barbaric force. Even mediaeval historians and poets who are sympathetic to the dynasty tended to propagandise on its behalf by using terms of reference that might have been persuasive to an audience in the settled lands of Islam, but do not necessarily reflect what the Seljuks themselves found important. As a result, such sources tend to underestimate the role of nomads and Turkish culture in the empire, or even at times to whitewash it out entirely.

The principal exception is a lost work called the *Maliknama* (*Book of the King*), which seems to have, at least in part, relied on oral Turkish sources and to have presented something of the Seljuks' own view of their origins. Although Arabic and Persian versions of the *Maliknama* were widely used by historians of the thirteenth century, it has been preserved most extensively in the fifteenth-century version by Timurid historian Mirkhwand's great general history, the

²⁷ For surveys of Seljuk historical writing, see Claude Cahen, 'The Historiography of the Seljuqid Period', in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (eds), *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 59–78; Julie Scott Mesiami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh, 1999), 141–280; Carole Hillenbrand, 'Some Reflections on Seljuq Historiography', in Antony Eastmond (ed.), *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2000), 73–88; A. C. S. Peacock, 'Court Historiography of the Seljuq Empire in Iran and Iraq: Reflections on Content, Authorship and Language', *Iranian Studies*, 47 (2014), 327–45.

Rawdat al-Safa, rewritten to suit the literary tastes of the day. In any event, the *Maliknama* is of use only for the earliest period of Seljuk history; from the mid-eleventh century onwards, all our sources are written by outsiders.²⁸

None of our extant chronicles was composed within the Great Seljuk Empire. Except for the very early period, up to c. 431/1040, when we have the valuable evidence of the contemporary Ghaznavid bureaucrats Bayhaqi and Gardizi, plus the *Maliknama*, the earliest surviving chronicles date to the late twelfth century. Earlier chronicles were certainly written, as we know from later references and citations. An attempt has been made, for instance, to reconstruct an early twelfth-century history, the *Unwan al-Siyar* by al-Hamadhani, on the basis of quotations in the Mamluk author al-ʿAyni.²⁹ Fragments of this work are also preserved along with quotations from other early sources in the thirteenth-century history of Aleppo, the *Bughyat al-Talab* by Ibn al-ʿAdim.³⁰

Two of the surviving works were composed in the Jibal, under the nominal rule of the Seljuk sultans of Iraq. The brief Persian *Saljuqnama* of Zahir al-Din Nishapuri was written around 1177 for the Seljuk prince (and future sultan) Tughril III (d. 590/1194), to inspire him with examples of ideal rulership taken from the behaviour of his ancestors. Although the original text has only recently been published,³¹ Nishapuri's *Saljuqnama* served as the source of many later Persian works dealing with the Seljuks, of which the most famous is the *Rahat al-Sudur* written by another member of Tughril III's circle, Rawandi, but completed and dedicated after his death to the Anatolian

²⁸ Claude Cahen, 'Le Maliknameh et l'histoire des origines seljukides', *Oriens* 2/i (1949), 31–65 (English translation, 'The Malik-nama and the History of Seljuqid Origins', in C. Edmund Bosworth (ed.), *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World, vol. 9: The Turks in the Early Islamic World* (London: Ashgate, 2007)); also on this source, A. C. S. Peacock, *Early Seljuq History: A New Interpretation* (London, 2010), 8–9, 27–32, 38–41, 43–6.

²⁹ Abu l-Hasan Muhammad b. Abi l-Fadl 'Abd al-Malik al-Hamadhani, *Qit'a Ta'rikhiyya min kitab 'Unwan al-Siyar fi Mahasin Ahl al-Badw wa l-Hadar, aw al-Ma'arif al-Muta'akhhkhiba, wa bi-Dhaylibi Shadharat min kitab Umara' al-Hajj*, ed. Shayi 'Abd al-Hadi al-Hajiri (Tunis, 2008).

³⁰ See C. Edmund Bosworth, 'Towards a Biography of Nizām al-Mulk: Three Sources from Ibn al-ʿAdīm', in Geoffrey Khan (ed.), *Semitic Studies in Honour of Edward Ullendorff* (Leiden, 2005), 299–308.

³¹ Zahir al-Din Nishapuri, *Saljuqnama*, ed. A. H. Morton (Cambridge, 2004). Other later chronicles which draw on Nishapuri are Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tawarikh* and Yazdi's *al-Urada fi l-Hikaya al-Saljuqiyya* (both fourteenth century). On the embellishments of these later authors, see Alexander H. Morton, 'Qashani and Rashid al-Din on the Seljuqs of Iran', in Yasir Suleiman (ed.), *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand* (Edinburgh, 2010), 166–177. In this work, Nishapuri and Rawandi have generally been used in preference to later, embellished derivatives.

Seljuk sultan Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw I (d. 608/1211). The second Jibali work, also in Persian, is *Dhayl-i Nafthāt al-Masdur* by the bureaucrat Najm al-Din Qummi, also during the lifetime of Tughril III. It focuses on the bureaucrats of the Sultanate of Iraq from the 1130s onwards; although it has been known to scholarship since the 1970s, it has been generally neglected, perhaps because of the general lack of scholarly interest in the period it covers.³²

Roughly contemporary is perhaps the single most important Seljuk chronicle, the Arabic *Nusrat al-Fatra* by the famous bureaucrat ‘Imad al-Din al-Isfahani, Saladin’s secretary. Composed in Syria, it covers the whole sweep of Seljuk history, but again with special reference to the activities of the bureaucratic class of which Isfahani was a member (see p. 205). Despite its importance, the *Nusrat al-Fatra* has not yet been published in its entirety and is wrongly thought by many scholars to have been lost.³³ Instead, it has been generally known through a thirteenth-century abridgement by Bundari, the *Zubdat al-Nusra*, which is cited here according to the 1889 edition by Houtsma, as the complete text remains inaccessible to most, and largely unanalysed.³⁴

Two further important sources originate in Baghdad. The first, *al-Muntazam fi ‘l-Ta’rikh* by the Hanbali scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200), contains much valuable information, some of it first-hand, about politics and sometimes daily life in a city which every Seljuk ruler sought to possess. Events beyond Baghdad rarely feature except where they affect the city, but Ibn al-Jawzi’s grandson, Sibṭ b. al-Jawzi (d. 654/1256), produced a history known as the *Mir’at al-Zaman* which is much broader in scope. For our purposes, Sibṭ b. al-Jawzi’s work – which remains inadequately published³⁵ – is

³² On this work, see K. A. Luther, ‘A New Source for the History of the Iraq Seljuqs: The *Tarikh al-Vuzara’*’, *Der Islam*, 45 (1969), 117–28; Stephen Fairbanks, ‘The *Tarikh al-Vuzara’*: A History of the Saljuq Bureaucracy’, PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1977.

³³ The unique manuscript is preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, MS arabe 2145. For the differences between the manuscript and the published abridged text, see David Durand-Guédy, ‘Un fragment inédit de la chronique des Salgūqides de ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Isfahānī: le chapitre sur Tāğ al-Mulk’, *Annales Islamologiques*, 39 (2005), 205–22.

³⁴ Bundari, *Zubdat al-Nusra*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma as *Histoire des Seljoucides de l’Irāq par Bondārī d’après Imād al-dīn al-Kātib al-Isfahānī* (Leiden, 1889) (*Recueil de textes relatifs à l’histoire des Seljoucides*, II).

³⁵ The parts dealing with the reigns of Tughril, Alp Arslan and Malikshah were published by Ali Sevim as *Mir’ātü’z-Zeman fi Tarihi’l-‘Ayan* (Ankara, 1968); Sevim subsequently produced a new edition of the same sections in *Belgeler: Türk Tarih Kurumu Dergisi*, 14/xviii (1989–1992), 1–260, but the lack of an index makes this rather hard to use. For this reason, the 1968 edition has been preferred here. Later parts of the chronicle were published by ‘Ali Ghamidi.

exceptionally valuable because he drew on a now lost eleventh-century history by a Baghdadi resident, Ghars al-Ni‘ma, which offers an eyewitness view of the Seljuk conquests, and contains particularly valuable information about the Türkmen in Iraq and Syria not preserved in other sources.

Otherwise, we are reliant on thirteenth-century sources, without which it would be impossible to construct any meaningful history of the Seljuks. The most important are a mid-thirteenth-century monograph on the Seljuks, Husayni’s *Akhbar al-Dawla al-Saljuqiyya*, which shares a common source with Isfahani, but does contain some independent information, especially for the later twelfth century; and Ibn al-Athir’s (d. 630/1233) *al-Kamil fi ‘l-Ta’rikh*, a universal history which draws extensively on now lost sources for the Seljuks. Although Ibn al-Athir’s work seems a model of dispassionate annalistic historiography, it needs to be treated with care, as the author was sympathetic to the Zangid dynasty of Mosul which his father had served. The dynastic founder, ‘Imad al-Din Zangi (d. 546/1146), had been a senior Seljuk amir (commander). This personal connection doubtless influenced Ibn al-Athir’s positive portrayal of Zangi and his role in the Seljuk state in the early twelfth century.

Some thirteenth-century Persian works should also be mentioned: Juzjani (writing in Delhi in c. 658/1260) is helpful mainly for the collapse of the Seljuk Empire in the east and Seljuk relations with the Ghurid and Qarakhitay states, while his contemporary Juwayni (writing in Mongol-occupied Baghdad) is good on the Seljuks’ relations with their vassals the Khwarazmshahs and the Ismailis of northeastern Iran. We also have, from the late eleventh century and especially the twelfth century, a developing tradition of local historiography in Persian – works devoted to an individual city or province, reflections of a local patriotism. Local histories of Fars, Isfahan, Herat, Sistan and the town of Bayhaq (Sabzawar) in Khurasan shed light on aspects of Seljuk rule.³⁶ In the west, Arabic histories of Aleppo by Ibn al-‘Adim, of Mayyafariqin (modern Silvan in southeastern Turkey) by

All editions fail to represent the substantial differences between the extant manuscripts. A new edition of the work by Kamil al-Juburi et al. (Beirut, 2013) came to my attention too late to be used here.

³⁶ Ibn al-Balkhi, *Farsnama*, ed. G. Le Strange and R. A. Nicolson as *The Fārsnāma of Ibnu’l-Balkhī* (Cambridge, [1921] 1962); ‘Abd al-Rahman Fami Harawi, *Tarikh-i Harat*, facsimile edition prepared by Muḥammad Husayn Mir Husayni and Muhammad Rida Abuni Mahrizi (Tehran, 1387); *Tarikh-i Sistan*, ed. Muhammad Taqī Bahar (Tehran 1381); Ibn Funduq, *Tarikh-i Bayhaq*, ed. Ahmad Bahmanyar (Tehran, n.d.). Mafarrukhi’s *Kitab Mahasin Isfahan*, ed. ‘Arif Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ghani (Damascus, 2010) contains limited but valuable information on Isfahan. For a discussion with further references. see David Durand-Guédy, *Iranian Elites and Turkish Rulers: A History of Isfahān in the Saljūq Period* (London, 2010).

Ibn Azraq al-Fariqi, and of Damascus by Ibn al-Qalanisi are valuable for understanding the Seljuk impact on Syria and the Jazira.

Apart from chronicles, a number of collections of Seljuk archival documents have survived, of which by far the most important for our purposes is the *‘Atabat al-Kataba*, originating from the chancery of the Great Seljuk sultan Sanjar (r. 511/1118–552/1157), which offers an insight into the functioning of Seljuk government in twelfth-century Khurasan.³⁷ Diplomas of appointment to various positions such as governor, tax collector or qadi comprise the bulk of this collection. Such documents, written in the elaborate prose known as *inshā’*, were preserved largely as practical manuals of style for bureaucrats to emulate. As a result, they often lack information of crucial importance to the historian, such as the date and even the name of their addressee. Closely related to the *‘Atabat al-Kataba*, but including additional documents from Sanjar’s chancery, is the largely unpublished St Petersburg *inshā’* collection.³⁸ A third collection, *al-Muhktarat min al-Rasa’il*, comes from Isfahan, but most of the documents are from the second half of the twelfth century and thus falls slightly outside the focus of this book, although it is of interest for the later Seljuks and the Ildegüzids.³⁹

³⁷ ‘Ali b. Ahmad Muntakhab al-Din Badi’ Atabak al-Juwayni, *‘Atabat al-Kataba: majmu‘a-yi murasalat-i diwan-i sultan Sanjar*, ed. Muhammad Qazwini and ‘Abbas Iqbal Ashtiyani (Tehran, [1329] 1389).

³⁸ A number of the St Petersburg documents were published by V. V. Bartol’d, *Turkestan v Epokhu Mongolskogo Nashestiya. Chast’ I: Teksty* (St Petersburg, 1898); some also appeared in German translation by Heribert Horst, *Die Staatsverwaltung der Grosselgügen und Hörazmšāhs (1038–1231)* (Wiesbaden, 1964). The most detailed examination of the St Petersburg documents and their relationship to the *‘Atabat al-Kataba* is Mehmed Altay Köymen, ‘Selçuklu devri kaynaklarına dâir araştırmalar. I. Büyük Selçuklu İmparatorluğu devrine ait müñşeat mecmuaları’. This was slated to be published in the *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 8 (1951), 539–648, but never actually appeared. An offprint is held in the Türk Tarih Kurumu in Ankara.

³⁹ *Al-Mukhtarat min al-Rasa’il*, ed. Ghulamrida Tahir and Iraj Afshar (Tehran, 1378). Some of these documents have been studied by Durand-Guédy in *Iranian Elites and Turkish Rulers*, 8–10, 230–255. See also David Durand-Guédy, ‘Diplomatic Practice in Saljuq Iran: A Preliminary Study based on Nine Letters about Saladin’s Campaign in Mesopotamia’, *Oriente Moderno*, 89/ii (2008), 271–96 and David Durand-Guédy, ‘The Türkmen–Saljuq Relationship in Twelfth-century Iran: New Elements based on a Contrastive Analysis of Three inšā’ Documents’, *Eurasian Studies* (special issue, *Nomads in the Political Field*, eds Johann Büssow, David Durand-Guédy and Jürgen Paul), 9 (2011), 11–66. For information on other collections of Seljuq documents, see Horst, *Staatsverwaltung*, 7–12. Note, too, the *inshā’* collection of the Seljuk *mustaufi* of Baylaqan in the Caucasus around 1100, although many documents are literary rather than archival: Mas‘ud b. Namdar, *Sbornik Rasskazov, Pisem i Stikhov*, ed. V. M. Beylis (Moscow 1970), and the discussion in Vladimir Minorsky and Claude Cahen, ‘Le recueil transcaucasien de Mas‘ud b. Nâmdâr (debut du

The coverage offered by these collections is quite limited, and none survive from the eleventh century.

Despite the lack of surviving chronicles and documents from the Seljuk realm, there was a rich tradition of literary production in both Arabic and Persian. Indeed, poems written in praise of rulers, viziers and other senior figures in the Seljuk state comprise in some periods the main extant contemporary evidence. However, their use by historians has to date been quite limited, as their references to historical events are usually very vague.⁴⁰ Poetry rarely supplements our factual knowledge from the chronicles. It is more valuable for the impression it provides of court life, the great festivals and ceremonies that were celebrated there, and for giving a certain ‘atmosphere’ to the period. There are also normative sources, like the two ‘mirrors for princes’ of the late eleventh century, Nizam al-Mulk’s *Siyasatnama* (on which see further below pp. 66–7) and the *Qabusnama* of a Seljuk vassal prince, the Ziyarid ruler Kayka’us b. Iskandar. In both instances they are more useful for understanding the ideal than the reality.

There are many other literary sources which contain tangential information about aspects of politics, religion and culture under the Seljuks, including those written by Jewish and Christian authors. My aim here has been simply to give an impression of the principal sources on which our knowledge of the period is based. Inevitably, these concentrate heavily on rulers, wars and battles, and have little to say about everyday life. It is very difficult for the historian to escape this bias, particularly when the main alternative source for social and economic history, archaeology, is extremely undeveloped in most of the lands of the Seljuk Empire (the sophisticated work ongoing at Merv is an exception). The problem is compounded by the fact that comparatively little material evidence in the form of artefacts has survived from most of the Seljuk lands, especially from the period up to the middle of the twelfth century which is our focus here. Only architectural monuments provide us with any significant corpus of reasonably securely dated material.

Where possible, I make use of this material evidence. However, despite the limitations of the written sources, they contain a vast trove of information the potential of which has not yet begun to be realised. So far, the chronicles

VIe/XIIe siècle), *Journal Asiatique*, 237 (1949), 93–142. Further on Seljuk documents, see the bibliography in Özgüdenli, *Selçuklular*, 309–10.

⁴⁰ See G. E. Tetley, *The Ghaznavid and Seljuk Turks: Poetry as a Source of History* (London, 2009); poetry has also been used extensively by Abbas Iqbal for the study of Seljuk bureaucrats: *Wizarat dar ‘ahd-i salatin-i buzurg-i Saljuqi az tarikh-i tashkil-i silsila ta marg-i Sultan Sanjar 432–552* (Tehran, 1338).

have largely been used as mines of dates and data, but they deserve to be read much more critically and carefully. Indeed, the fact that our principal source, Isfahani's *Nusrat al-Fatra*, has been published only in a bowdlerised abridgement rather than the critical edition that a major work by one of the masters of classical Arabic prose deserves, and has in fact wrongly long been regarded as lost by many scholars in the field, suggests the extent of the work remaining to be done.