

Biography of Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad Gīlānī

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I am presently engaged in writing a biography of a Muslim scholar called “Ḥakīm al-Mulk” Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad Gīlānī (1585-1662) who served in different professional sites within Safavid Iran, Mughal India, and Qutbshāhī Hyderabad during the 17th century. Studying nature, the human body, and the cosmos, Gīlānī’s writings, like those of his peers, evidence a *mentalité* common among Shi‘i Muslim elites of the era that has been widely misunderstood. They contended that medicine, natural philosophy, astrology, and related natural sciences were sacred in accordance with bodies of statements (*akhbār*) that they also commented upon transmitted from the Twelve Shi‘i Imams who lived during the first three centuries of Islam.

As a naturalist, a religious scholar, and a statesman, his work and thought defy easy classification. His writings challenge traditional historical scholarship on the evolution of Shi‘i Islam during this era for favoring currents of thought that were at once part of a mystical/gnostic vein, yet which were congruent with inhabiting a quintessentially political life at the same time. Recovering his biography will seek to draw more attention to the transnational scholarly network uniting distant regions of the Persian-speaking Muslim east that have previously been studied in isolation according to nationalist logics. Writing this biography will also draw attention to the copious “homeless” manuscript sources that remain unstudied, composed by ‘Iranian-born’ authors that were produced in South Asia now held in libraries and archives across the region, which have been neglected for not fitting easily into the national histories of either Iran or India.

I hope to use the sessions of the summer school in Beirut to think through specific questions relating to data, the creation of the biography itself, and the implications of producing such a biography for diverse audiences. Despite access to hundreds of pages of Gīlānī’s autograph manuscripts, the first thirty years of his life remain entirely opaque. “Data” about this era must be sourced from extant knowledge about his contemporaries, his teachers, and known peers in late Kārkiyā Gilan and Safavid Isfahan. Approaching these parallel sources allow me to produce a composite sketch about the type of education that he likely had, and his own marginal comments on his later writings describing lessons that he attended in Safavid academies give some indication that he was not a cultural or intellectual outlier. In this regard, I hope to draw from other studies on Persian manuscript anthologies—*unicums*, existing in single copies—that map cultural knowledge and expression from this era and document to the best extent possible our knowledge of collective experiences.

Working from an eclectic array of manuscript sources—including treatises in medicine, theology, occult sciences, syntax, and other genres—challenge me as an author to produce a biography that can positively illuminate dynamics of concern important not only within a subfield like Islamic history, but within a broader community of humanists. How does the local precarity of a foreign-born administrator make a distant homeland appear not so distant, but all together palpable, accessible, and valuable? What significance does this experience hold for other stories of personal loss, mobility, and striving for refuge in a fleeting world? What are the politics of narrating a life full of spatial and epistemic mobility? Is there a voice of early-modern life and memory escaping the methods that I choose to employ to capture them? These are some of the questions that I look forward to addressing at the Moving Biography Summer School.

Short Biography: Hunter Bandy is a postdoctoral researcher at the École Pratique des Hautes Études-section des sciences religieuses-Université PSL, in Paris, France. His research project, “The Intellectual and Cultural History of Shi‘i Islamic Scholarship among the émigré Iranian community among the Deccan Sultanates, 1500-1700,” is funded by the Paris Region Fellowship Programme, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions program. He completed his PhD in Islamic Studies at Duke University (2019). His research relies upon the recovery and analysis of unique Persian and Arabic manuscripts, which he has researched at archives in India, Iran, Europe, and North America. His research has been supported by a Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fellowship; a Fulbright-Hays Grant; a Julian Price Fellowship; an Evan Frankel Fellowship; the Foreign Language and Area Studies Program; the American Institute of Indian Studies; the American Institute of Iranian Studies; the American Academy of Religion; and other agencies.