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Al-Masāq
Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean

ISSN: 0950-3110 (Print) 1473-348X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/calm20

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Christian Mauder

To cite this article: Christian Mauder (2026) The Religious Cultures of Premodern Islamicate Courts in Transregional Perspective: Topic, Concepts, Questions and Findings, Al-Masāq, 38:2, 159-171, DOI: 10.1080/09503110.2026.2672119

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2026.2672119

Published online: 30 May 2026.

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AL-MASĀQ
2026, VOL. 38, NO. 2, 159–171
https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2026.2672119

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INTRODUCTION

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The Religious Cultures of Premodern Islamicate Courts in Transregional Perspective: Topic, Concepts, Questions and Findings

Christian Mauder

Department of History and Cultural Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Topic

Rulers' courts were the most important arenas of governmental decision making and political performance in most premodern societies. Nevertheless, scholars have only recently begun to fully appreciate the significance of courts in Islamicate history, and while the number of monographs and collective publications on Islamicate courts as centres of political, cultural and intellectual activity has been growing steadily, if slowly, over the past 15 years, important areas of Islamicate court life are still underexamined.[1] This applies especially to the topic of religion at Islamicate courts, which has been largely neglected even by scholarship acknowledging the significance of courts for our understanding of the premodern Islamicate world. This has resulted in a situation where the role of courts in the complex historical relationship between political power and religious authority in Islamicate societies remains poorly understood.

CONTACT Christian Mauder christian.mauder@fu-berlin.de Freie Universität Berlin, Fabeckstraße 23-25, 14195 Berlin, Germany

[1]Recent important publications on Islamicate courts include Blain Auer, *In the Mirror of Persian Kings: The Origins of Perso-Islamic Courts and Empires in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Alexander Daniel Beihammer, Staurula Konstantinu and Maria G. Parani (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Elsa Cardoso, *The Door of the Caliph: Concepts of the Court in the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus* (London: Routledge, 2023); Samuel England, *Medieval Empires and the Culture of Competition: Literary Duels at Islamic and Christian Courts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Emma Jane Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); *Court Cultures in the Muslim World*, eds. Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung (London: Routledge, 2011); *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, eds. Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert and Jenny Rahel Oesterle (Leiden: Brill, 2013); *Biographies of Rulers in the Premodern Islamicate World*, eds. Eirik Hovden, Christian Mauder and Ekaterina Pukhovaia (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2027); Georg Leube, *Relational Iconography: Representational Culture at the Qaraquyunlu and Aqquyunlu Courts (853/1449 CE to 907/1501 CE)* (Leiden: Brill, 2023); Eduardo Manzano Moreno, *The Court of the Caliphate of al-Andalus: Four Years in Umayyad Córdoba* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); Christian Mauder, *In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Magdalena Moorthy Kloss, *Unfree Lives: Slaves at the Najahid and Rasulid Courts of Yemen (11th to 15th Centuries CE)* (Leiden: Brill, 2024); Erez Naaman, *Literature and the Islamic Court: Cultural Life Under al-Ṣāḥib Ibn ʿAbbād* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2016); *The Ceremonial of Audience: Transcultural Approaches*, eds. Eva Orthmann and Anna Kollatz (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019); *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*, eds. A.C.S. Peacock and Sara Nur Yıldız (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); *In the Presence of Power: Court and Performance in the Pre-Modern Middle East*, eds. Maurice A. Pomerantz and Evelyn Birge Vitz (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Maaike van Berkel, Hugh Kennedy, Letizia Osti and Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Gowaart van den Bossche, *Literary Spectacles of Sultanship: Historiography, the Chancery, and Social Practice in Late Medieval Egypt* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2023).

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There are at least three ways to explain this noteworthy scholarly neglect of Islamicate religious court culture. First, until recently, scholars of European history have also shown limited interest in the religious dimensions of life at European courts.[2] As researchers working on courts in other parts of the world have often taken over the priorities of their Europeanist colleagues, this lack of attention for religious court culture in Europe has had repercussions for the study of religion at courts in the Islamicate world as well. Second, scholars concerned about the risk of overemphasising the religious character of Islamicate societies and thereby reproducing Orientalist stereotypes about the "Oriental other" have consciously foregrounded analytical categories other than "religion" and "Islam", as explained in Emma Flatt's contribution to this issue. Third, and most important in the present context, once widespread assumptions about a dichotomy between the political power of Muslim rulers on the one hand and the religious authority of scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) on the other have largely precluded research on religion at Islamicate courts. These assumptions led to the erroneous view that, especially in later periods of premodern Islamicate history, rulers and their courts played only marginal roles in the religious life of the Muslim community. Concomitantly, it has often been denied that religion could have had a shaping influence on Islamicate court cultures. In a publication that engages critically with this point of view, Jenny Rahel Oesterle summarises it as follows: "[I]n the space of the courts, religion did not play a decisive role that regulated forms of coexistence, research, debate, and exchange".[3]

In an attempt to problematise this understanding of religion as irrelevant to the study of Islamicate courts, the workshop "The Religious Cultures of Premodern Islamicate Courts in Transregional Perspective" brought together specialists on courts in various periods and regions of premodern Islamicate history at the University of Bergen in March 2023. As the proceedings of the workshop in the present special issue show, the religious cultures of Islamicate courts were far from uniform across time and space, thus precluding any overly simplifying and far-reaching generalisations. At the same time, the following articles demonstrate that religion could and did matter at Islamicate courts, be it in the form of religiously significant objects and practices, as religious learning and normativity, as a source of vocabulary in legitimating idioms, or as a constituent of occult knowledge that brought about a "marriage of … Science and Religion", as Matthew Melvin-Koushki phrases it in his contribution to this issue.

Concepts, Questions and Findings

"Court" and "religion" as the two key concepts that frame this special issue are notoriously difficult to define, especially when applied to non-Western societies. Building

[2]But note recent publications such as *The Shroud at Court: History, Usages, Places and Images of a Dynastic Relic*, ed. Paolo Cozzo, Andrea Merlotti and Andrea Nicolotti (Leiden: Brill, 2019); *Religious Plurality at Princely Courts: Dynasty, Politics, and Confession in Central Europe, ca. 1555–1860*, eds. Benjamin Marschke, Daniel Riches, Alexander Schunka and Sara Smart (New York: Berghahn, 2024); *Religion, Macht, Politik: Hofgeistlichkeit im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1800)*, eds. Matthias Meinhard, Ulrike Gleixner, Martin H. Jung and Siegrid Westphal (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014); *Sakralisierungen des Herrschers an europäischen Höfen: Bau – Bild – Ritual – Musik (1648–1740)*, eds. Herbert Karner, Eva-Bettina Krems, Jens Niebaum and Werner Telesko (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2019).

[3]Jenny Rahel Oesterle, "Missionaries as Cultural Brokers at the Fatimid Court in Cairo", in *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, eds. Marc von der Höh, Nikolas Jaspert and Jenny R. Oesterle (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink und Ferdinand Schönigh, 2013), pp. 63–72, here 63.

on recent work on the definition and conceptualisation of courts in the Islamicate world,[4] this special issue embraces a consciously wide and abstract understanding of rulers' courts and defines them as social spaces characterised by the presence of rulers – or as Carole Hillenbrand put it in a publication on Seljuq court culture, the "court … could be found wherever the sultan happened to be".[5] Social relations at courts are typically dominated by the person of the ruler and the competition of access to them. Processes of patronage, rivalry, and the exchange of economic, cultural and social capital often had a shaping influence on those present at court, as the following articles also illustrate.

The understanding of "religion" that lies at the basis of this special issue is equally broad and takes inspiration from the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, known among other things for his work on religious and political authority in Islamicate societies.[6] Geertz famously wrote about "Religion as a Cultural System" and suggested the following definition:

> Without further ado, then, a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[7]

This definition seems particularly useful for understanding the often amorphous and changing role of religion at premodern Islamicate courts, as it (1) foregrounds the importance of symbols in religious contexts, such as Qurʾānic notions or objects referring to higher levels of meaning, and (2) highlights the power that these symbols can have over human behaviour in general, including the actions of rulers and courtly elites. Geertz's understanding of religion moreover (3) shows that as cultural systems, religions provide comprehensive conceptual frameworks that allow human beings to make sense of their lives and the world around them, including the structure of human society and the natural order of the cosmos, and they also provide them with means to change this world, for example in the form of political actions or occult practices. Moreover, the observation that (4) the conceptions grounded in religions as cultural systems are often endowed with high levels of factuality is particularly important when we approach, for example, religious norms of behaviour or occult forms of knowledge from the perspective of twenty-first-century worldviews that are often deeply infused with unacknowledged secularism and scientism. Finally, as several of the following contributions argue, (5) the reality and sincerity of the religious motivations of many powerholders at premodern Islamicate courts is beyond doubt.

In applying these concepts to their respective cases, the contributors to this special issue were asked to address in their articles one or several of the following nine questions that had been distributed ahead of time. For the purposes of the present

[4]E.g. Mauder, *Salon*, esp. 14–63; Christian Mauder, "The Production and Transmission of Knowledge in Islamicate Courts of the Middle and Early Modern Periods", *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 11/1 (2023): 1–23.

[5]Carole Hillenbrand, "Aspects of the Court of the Great Seljuqs", *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society and Culture*, eds. Christian Lange and Songul Mecit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 22–38, here 23.

[6]E.g. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz and Lawrence Rosen, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[7]Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System", in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz (London: Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 87–125, here 90.

introduction, these questions also offer a convenient framework to summarise some of the most important findings of the discussions about religious cultures of premodern Islamicate courts that unfolded at the above-mentioned workshop and are continued in the following articles. In many cases, these discussions did not result in straightforward answers to the pre-distributed questions, but rather led to the formulation of more nuanced and precise questions that might be of use to future studies of religion at Islamicate courts.

(1) What role did religion play in the exercise, representation and legitimation of political rule?

The notion that religion mattered in political contexts and played an important role in legitimating discourses is almost a commonplace in the study of premodern Islamicate societies. Nevertheless, the following articles underline the need to study the complex interplay between religion and politics at court in specific times and places to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of this multifaceted relationship in different contexts. Matthew L. Keegan's study "The Sovereignty of the Scholar-Sultan: An ʾAyyūbid Prince's Defence of Abū Ḥanīfa" shows how religious learning provided the Ayyūbid ruler al-Malik al-Muʿaẓẓam (d. 1227) with the ability to renegotiate historical memories of the Muslim community. This in turn allowed al-Muʿaẓẓam to lay claim to the status of a "scholar-sultan" and establish what Keegan calls an "idiom of sovereignty" that challenged traditional differentiations between the authority wielded by the *ʿulamāʾ* and the power of military rulers of the middle period. In contrast, Daniella Talmon-Heller's article "Courts and Qurʾāns: 'Uthmānī' Codices from the Caliph's Residence in Medina to the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul" argues that the mere possession of religiously significant objects like Qurʾān manuscripts that were seen as connected to the second caliph, ʿUthmān, gave rulers control over powerful symbols of political legitimacy. Thus, in the case of such relics, rulers did not need to laboriously internalise religiously significant cultural capital, they could simply buy or apprehend it. However, these relics could also change hands and then become potent means of opposition against rulers, thus challenging rather than buttressing royal authority. Another way in which rulers could use religious knowledge to buttress their rule is explored by Delia Cortese in her article "The Soft Power of Inter-Religious Learning: Transregional Exchanges at the Fifth/Eleventh-Century Fāṭimid Court", which shows how the Fāṭimid imam-caliphs of Cairo employed the patronage of Shiʿī learning to project their claims for supremacy into geographical areas on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean where their actual political and military control was often indirect and unstable.

While a perspective that foregrounds the relationship between religion and the exercise, representation and legitimation of political rule thus provides an analytical lens that facilitates a deeper understanding of important aspects of courtly culture and power dynamics, it also invites questions about whether and to what degree our decidedly modern and Western concepts provide appropriate analytical categories to study premodern Islamicate societies. There can be no doubt that people at Islamicate courts thought and wrote about, engaged and partook in what we today call "religion" and "politics". Moreover, they had at their disposal concepts such as *dīn*, *dawla* and *siyāsa*, whose

semantic fields to a certain degree intersected with our modern categories.[8] Nevertheless, in many of the cases examined in this issue, "religion" and "politics" do not appear as neatly confined or clearly separated fields of human endeavour, but as overlapping aspects of what it meant to live and work at a premodern Islamicate court. Many of the people studied in the following articles sought success in this world and the next, and they did so in part through the same means.

(2) Who participated in the religious culture of Islamicate courts, and who were its intended and unintended recipients?

If courts are understood, as described above, as social spaces centred on rulers, and if we accept that what we today call "religion" was an important aspect of Islamicate court culture, then it cannot surprise us that rulers figure particularly prominently in the available sources on religious court culture. Among other things, this is a result of the fact that typically, Islamicate rulers wanted to appear as pious and, at times, religiously learned, especially vis-à-vis other holders of power and authority. The above-mentioned Ayyūbid prince al-Muʿaẓẓam, studied by Keegan, is a case in point. By writing a scholarly work in defence of the jurist Abū Ḥanīfa and participating in socially recognised processes of knowledge transmission, al-Muʿaẓẓam demonstrated his learning and piety to the *ʿulamāʾ* in general and his fellow Ḥanafīs in particular. In contrast, as shown by Emma J. Flatt in her article "Summoning the Yogini: Female Deities, Land and Sovereignty in ʿĀdil Shāhī Bijapur", Sultan ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh of Bijapur (r. 1558–1579) targeted with his writerly activities a rather narrow circle of members of the courtly elite with whom he shared his insights into the spiritual forces of the cosmos and their manipulation. This knowledge was as powerful as it was dangerous if it ended up in the wrong hands, and ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh thus made deliberate decisions about how much he could disclose to whom. Both al-Muʿaẓẓam and ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh thereby present, *mutatis mutandis*, cases of rulers who used the written word to project an aura of authorial expertise and expert authority, albeit to different audiences.

In other cases, political and learned elites below the level of the ruler shaped or contributed to the religious life of their respective courts. The Shīʿī scholar Muḥammad al-Karājikī (d. 1057), whose career Cortese traces in her article, used the cultural and social capital he had obtained at the Fāṭimid court of Cairo to make a living in greater Syria, thereby establishing interconnections and parallels between the religious life in the Egyptian capital and the outskirts of the Fāṭimid sphere of influence. About a century later, Usāma ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) was active in courts of the same region and gained the wealth of social and political experience that he relied on towards the end of his life when he was composing his writings, analysed by Niall Christie in his contribution "Usāma ibn Munqidh (d. 584/1188) and the Importance of Muslim Court Life". To Usāma, proper religious behaviour was a mainstay of the Muslim courtier's

[8]On these multifaceted concepts, see e.g. Jo van Steenbergen, "Appearances of Dawla and Political Order in Late Medieval Syro-Egypt: The State, Social Theory, and the Political History of the Cairo Sultanate (Thirteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)", in *History and Society during the Mamluk Period (1250–1517): Studies of the Annemarie Schimmel Institute for Advanced Studies* II, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2016), pp. 51–85; Rushain Abbasi, "Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*" *Studia Islamica* 116 (2021): 1–106; Rushain Abbasi, "Did Premodern Muslims Distinguish the Religious and Secular? The *Dīn-Dunyā* Binary in Medieval Islamic Thought", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31/2 (2020): 185–225.

comportment and should be displayed towards all members of court and society, from the caliph to the poor. Other members of courtly elites seem to have been more interested in using their expertise to impress their royal benefactors, as was the case with ʿAlī Ṣāfī (d. 1533), who provided his Qizilbash warlord-patron with an easy-to-use handbook of courtly and military magic. In his contribution "The Occult Court: ʿAlī Ṣāfī's (d. 1533) *Boon for the Khan* (1522) as Timurid-Safavid Manual of Boozing and Battling Magic and Marker of Early Modernity", Matthew Melvin-Koushki makes this short work available in English, thus providing access to a text that, despite its clear dedication to a specific courtly patron, later on gained popularity also in non-courtly circles.

Through the example of the famous jurist, historian and Qurʾān commentator Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Ulrika Mårtensson shows in her study "Al-Ṭabarī's *Madhhab Jarīrī* and Ascetic Legacies at the ʿAbbāsid Court" how a scholar who consciously stayed aloof from the court and its material temptations nevertheless exerted considerable influence on the outlook and behaviour of high-ranking courtiers through his scholarship and writings. Mårtensson's article thus reminds us that one did not have to be at court to shape its religious culture, but that there were also other channels of interaction and influence.

While these examples provide impressive illustrations of how much we can find out about courtly religious culture by examining some of its key participants, they also underline that historians working primarily with written sources focus almost by default on those figures who either left written records or feature prominently in such texts. Future studies of Islamicate court culture in general and the religious culture at courts in particular thus face the question of how to study those people whom the available sources do not privilege – people who did not write about themselves, who did not possess enough cultural, social or economic capital to be of note, or who had the wrong gender to appear in the often decidedly male-focused sources that court historians tend to rely on. A stronger focus on non-textual sources and courtly material culture seems a promising way forward to overcome at least some of these difficulties.

(3) What were the roles of religious specialists at Islamicate courts?

Religious specialists appear in the following case studies primarily as producers and transmitters of knowledge, with some types of learning being evidently more relevant in courtly contexts than others. Keegan, Cortese and Mårtensson study texts from the discipline of Islamic law, which was obviously of interest to courtly elites responsible for the administration of justice in Islamicate societies. Knowledge about the human past was another topic that religious specialists at Islamicate courts foregrounded, as exemplified again in the studies of Keegan, Cortese and Mårtensson, but also in Usāma ibn Munqidh's works about his life experiences that form the basis of Christie's study. Usāma's case also underlines with particular clarity that by sharing knowledge about the past, specialists producing texts that circulated at court sought to instruct those in power. The didactic function of religious history is especially evident in the case of al-Ṭabarī, who, as Mårtensson explores, reached back into pre-Islamic times to convey lessons about moral and godly governance to courtly audiences. Occult knowledge is highlighted in Flatt's and Melvin-Koushki's contributions as another form of cultural capital that experts shared at Islamicate courts for obvious reasons, given that it

constituted a powerful source of control over the animate and inanimate world alike that rulers could use for social, therapeutic, military and other purposes.

However, premodern religious specialists in courtly environments were not only concerned with the transmission and application of knowledge. Daniella Talmon-Heller's study of ʿUthmānī Qurʾāns at Islamicate courts is an important reminder that religious specialists at courts were also busy engaging in religious practices such as Qurʾān recitation, processions and communal prayers, or caring for, displaying and managing access to objects bearing religious significance. Talmon-Heller's article thus sheds light on activities that we can assume formed the backbone of religious life at many Islamicate courts, but that historical sources and modern researchers alike are wont to take for granted and therefore rarely focus on. Future research on the everyday religious life at Islamicate courts would thus be particularly welcome.

A further noteworthy role of religious specialists in Islamicate courts is addressed in Christie's article: that of serving as a cautionary tale. Christie discusses how Usāma ibn Munqidh's texts employ Christian figures such as the Knights Templar or icon makers to teach his fellow Muslims through negative examples how not to behave. This finding reminds us that Muslim religious specialists were not the only ones operating at or in the vicinity of Islamicate courts, thus underlining the need to study the significance of religious differences in this social space (see the following two questions).

(4) How did rulers and religious specialists engage in practices of courtly patronage?

Patronage, here understood as an at least partially informal social relationship of exchange between a powerful person or group and a less powerful person or group in which the powerful party provides the less powerful one with various forms of capital and protection in exchange for service and assistance,[9] has long been identified as a mainstay in Islamicate courtly social structures. It is thus not surprising that patronage is almost omnipresent in the following pages, primarily in the form of rulers providing access to economic capital to learned specialists in exchange for religious and political service. Noteworthy, however, is the finding that religious difference does not appear to have constituted a hindrance for the establishment and maintenance of patronage relations, even as far as religiously significant forms of service were concerned. While Keegan shows that in the Ayyūbid period, a ruler's decision about which Sunni law school he wanted to support mattered considerably for the kind of patronage relations he could establish, Cortese's article depicts the Fāṭimid court as a decidedly diverse patronage market. Cortese's main protagonist, Muḥammad al-Karājikī, benefited significantly from the patronage of the Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimids, despite the fact that he was a Twelver Shīʿī himself. This patronage granted among other things access to the Fāṭimids' famed *dār al-ʿilm* and its manuscript holdings that featured texts by authors of various religious affiliations, including Christians. Al-Karājikī also engaged in religious debates with Sunnis there, indicating that access to the *dār al-ʿilm* and the orbit of Fāṭimid patronage more generally was also available to non-Shīʿīs. Similarly, Melvin-Koushki's study shows how interest in occult knowledge and the powers it could provide prompted a Naqshbandī Sufi such as ʿAlī Ṣafī to produce a work based exclusively on Sunni sources for a

[9]Ronald G. Asch, *Der Hof Karls I. von England: Politik, Provinz, und Patronage, 1625–1640* (Köln: Böhlau 1993), pp. 289–93.

patron from the ranks of the Qizilbash who formed literally the vanguard of the Safawid Shīʿī millennial project in the early sixteenth century. By rearranging Sunni material for his Shīʿī patron in what Melvin-Koushki calls a "thoroughly imamophile framework", ʿAlī Ṣafī contributed to a "seamless Timurid-Safavid Sunni-Shiʿi continuum". In like manner, Usāma ibn Munqidh moved with such ease between the Sunni and Shīʿī courts of his time that his own religious affiliations remain a matter of debate among scholars today, as Christie mentions in his study. Flatt's article goes one step further in illustrating the inter-religious potential of Islamicate courtly patronage when she discusses how the Muslim ʿĀdil Shāhī sultans of the Deccan rendered material support to religious institutions and specialists that we would today categorise as "Hindu", socialised with non-Muslim ascetics, and requested their help in spiritual and medical matters. These examples suggest that future investigations of religious patronage at Islamicate courts should approach their case studies from a decidedly broad perspective and abstain from reifying dichotomies between Sunnis and Shīʿīs or Muslims and non-Muslims.

(5) What role did religious differences play in Islamicate court cultures?

The preceding reflections have already referred to aspects of the complex and multi-faceted picture that emerges through the study of religious differences in Islamicate court cultures. While a writer like Usāma ibn Munqidh in the Crusader period could present the Christian use of icons as a shocking form of infidel behaviour, the same author also entertained friendly relations with individual members of Christian courtly elites. Keegan's article describes how in Ayyūbid times, affiliation to the ruler's Sunni law school was an important criterion for securing his support, whereas at the Islamicate courts studied by Cortese and Flatt, caliphs and sultans deliberately provided patronage to members of other religious groups. This can be understood as a strategy designed to deal with the religious diversity that was constitutive of most premodern Islamicate polities and ensure that those parts of the population who practised a form of religion distinct from that of their rulers could still see themselves as part of the political community headed by them.

Especially in the area of occult knowledge, courts apparently played a central role in integrating non-Islamic elements into an Islamic framework and making concepts and figures of various backgrounds commensurable. This is perhaps best exemplified by Flatt's investigation of how ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh presents in his occult textual production the divine female beings known as Yoginis in Tantric Hinduism and Shaktism as spiritual entities (*rūḥānī*s), thus integrating them into an Islamic understanding of the order of existence. It is particularly noteworthy that the interpretative step of situating the Yoginis in an Islamic understanding of the world receives next to no attention: what is at stake are the occult powers that the Yoginis can provide to ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh's courtly audience and their connection to the territory (*zamīn*) ruled by the sultan, not their ontological status. Yet this does not mean that the local, Deccani background of the Yoginis would be glossed over – quite the opposite, as Flatt demonstrates in her analysis of the depictions of the *rūḥānī*s in ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh's work, based as they are on local Hindu iconographical traditions. A similar impetus to establish commensurabilities between the Islamic and the non-Islamic is also apparent in Melvin-Koushki's study, which demonstrates how pagan Pythagorean-Platonic cosmology formed the backbone of the

Timurid-Safavid occult courtly culture that provided Muslim rulers with the means they needed to excel socially and militarily. Courts thus appear as social spaces in which religious differences were not ignored, but treated in a way that produced compatibility and commensurability between them in an effort to harness the cosmological resources that different systems of symbols could offer to those in power. Yet the role of courts as centres of establishing commensurabilities was not limited to the realm of the occult. Mårtensson's discussions of al-Ṭabarī's use of information about ancient Jewish, Persian and Christian societies reminds us that also in the area of historical knowledge, non- and pre-Islamic precedents for just and God-fearing rule were useful to Islamicate audiences and provided role models and visions of good governance that transcended religious differences. How exactly commensurability between the Islamic and the non-Islamic was established, managed, or contested at court appears as a promising area of future research, also beyond the fields of occult and historical knowledge.

(6) How was religion interconnected with courtly notions of *adab*?

The people who lived, ruled and wrote at Islamicate courts led complex lives and were faced with multiple and not always congruent social and cultural expectations. Yet as Christie argues in his analysis of Usāma ibn Munqidh's views on the proper behaviour of members of the courtly elite, it would be unfounded to assume that there was necessarily a conflict between religious normative orders as exemplified, for example, by the Islamic legal system and non-religious standards of behaviour such as the one denoted by the courtly notion of *adab*. To Usāma at least, there was no apparent clash between religious and *adab*-based expectations. Both sets of behavioural norms had to be followed by Muslim courtiers and were presented as largely inseparable in his writings. For example, hunting and Qurʾān recitation, two actions that to Usāma symbolised proper courtly and religious behaviour, were best practised not in competition with each other, but rather together in a display of proper comportment. This was the case for Usāma's father, who appeared in his son's works as a role model of proper courtly conduct. Similarly, Mårtensson's discussion of al-Ṭabarī's views on the role of asceticism in court politics and administration underlines that for this ʿAbbāsid-era thinker, *adab* and religion were very closely interconnected, among other things through the notion of a Covenant between God and humankind. Religion and courtly ethics, if properly understood, rested on the same basis, as al-Ṭabarī also sought to convey through his own conduct, which combined intense religious scholarship with ethical sincerity and ascetic practice. Whether other courtly authors advanced similar or different conceptualisations of the relationship between religion and *adab* presents itself as a particularly rich area for future research, given that references to the notion of *adab* abound in Islamicate courtly literature.

(7) Which bodily and other practices formed part of the religious cultures of Islamicate courts?

Modern text-based scholarship on premodern Islamicate religious culture has a tendency to pay special attention to those systems of religious knowledge and intellectual engagement with the divine that are documented in much detail in the preserved

sources. However, we must not forget that bodily practices – for example, the recitation or copying of the Qurʾān, the performance of prayers, the giving of alms, or the staging of processions, to name just a few of the practices discussed in the following articles – represented important aspects of the religious life of premodern Muslims, also and especially at courts. The careful use and manipulation of space thereby appear as key features of religious practices at court. As Talmon-Heller's article demonstrates, relevant spaces were not limited to the residences of rulers, but could also include neighbouring mosques, which together with palaces served as "two theatres of royal display".[10] This observation can act as a reminder that courts as social spaces were not limited to rulers' palaces and great halls, but were as mobile as the rulers themselves, who often used buildings commonly categorised as religious for practices and performances of profound political significance. In light of these observations about the spatially dynamic character of courts, it is unfortunate that research about itinerant rulership in the Islamicate world is still in its infancy, despite the obviously high levels of spatial mobility among premodern Islamicate rulers.[11] If future research about Islamicate itinerant rulers takes the religious dimension of court life into account, it could significantly advance our understanding of two important aspects of Islamicate court culture at the same time.

Social gatherings denoted by the term *majlis* (pl. *majālis*)[12] appear in several of the following articles as another particularly important venue of religious practices at court. Rulers could convene such gatherings to oversee debates of religiously significant topics, as discussed in Mårtensson's article, or they could actively participate in such meetings themselves, as Keegan's work on al-Muʿaẓẓam illustrates. In those instances where rulers were understood as sources of supreme religious insight, as was the case with the Fāṭimid imams studied by Cortese, their *majlis* became a space of salvational significance for the attendees, who by obtaining access to the ruler and his knowledge secured their status among a select elite of politico-religious followers. These examples, different as they are, thus call our attention to the fact that the holding of *majālis* was a key mechanism through which rulers could grant or withhold access to their courts to groups such as religious specialists and seekers, thereby also controlling who was to benefit from their royal presence. The significance of the concession or denial of access also appears prominently in Talmon-Heller's study of the handling of Qurʾān relics as significant religious objects at Islamicate courts. In the future, studies of religious practices at courts should thus pay close attention not only to the venues in which these practices took place but also to the question of who was permitted to enter these venues and on what conditions.

[10]Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "The Institutionalisation of ʿAbbāsid Ceremonial", in *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, ed. John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 351–70, here 355. Also cited in Daniella Talmon-Heller's article in this issue.

[11]Note on this topic the contributions dealing with Islamicate cases in *Le gouvernement en déplacement: Pouvoir et mobilité de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, eds. Sylvain Destephen, Josiane Barbier and François Chausson (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019).

[12]For a detailed discussion of this term in an Islamicate courtly contexts, see Mauder, *Salon*, esp. 63–72.

(8) In what ways were the religious cultures of Islamicate courts shaped by and connected to the production of objects of material culture?

Material objects played highly significant roles in the religious cultures of Islamicate courts, be it in the form of the architectural environment, as just discussed, or in the form of smaller, portable objects. Control of and ownership over both types of material object could serve as an important token of political power and legitimacy, as is most clearly demonstrated in Talmon-Heller's study of the role of "'Uthmānī" Qurʾān codices in courtly spaces. Taken together, the following studies suggest that the material dimensions of court cultures of premodern Islamicate courts could be remarkably "bookish". As shown in several of the following studies, courts functioned as centres for the production, storage and use of manuscripts, be it in the context of major courtly book collections such as the Fāṭimid *dār al-ʿilm* examined by Cortese or individual practices of manuscript production as investigated by Christie with regard to Usāma's father's habit of copying the Qurʾān as a form of personal religious exercise. Special copies of the Qurʾān could even serve as relics and inalienable possessions at court, as analysed in depth by Talmon-Heller. One could thus argue that Qurʾān manuscripts were courtly objects *par excellence*, but manuscripts of occult works also emerge as particularly closely connected to courtly collections, authors and patrons, as becomes clear from the cases described by Melvin-Koushki and Flatt.

The book-dominated picture of Islamicate courtly material culture that emerges from the contributions to this special issue has several implications for future research. First, it suggests that codicological methods deserve special attention in the future development of Islamicate court studies, also and especially as these methods provide opportunities to look beyond the written word of the textual sources on which historians have so far focused their attention and to open direct insights into the material culture of premodern Islamicate courts. Second, the question of what exactly constitutes a courtly object in Islamicate contexts can be addressed in particular detail in the case of manuscripts. Was every manuscript that ended up at court "courtly", or should we reserve this designation for items that had originally been intended for courtly use? What about manuscripts that were produced by members of courtly elites or even rulers? Do such objects bear a specific courtly quality that sets them apart from other objects, and if so, how can this quality be measured? Does the category of the "courtly object" hold analytical value at all, or does it not rather risk drawing attention away from the complex life cycles of objects that originated from, ended up in, or passed through courts?

It is also worth investigating how much biases of research and source survival impact the image of Islamicate courts as centres of book culture. Do we perceive courts as particularly "bookish" because books had a better chance of surviving until the present in special repositories such as libraries and archives compared to other potentially more perishable or reusable items such as textiles or wooden luxury items? Or are we as historians who work primarily with texts simply biased towards books and tend to ascribe to them greater significance than other types of material object? Focused interdisciplinary work that brings court historians together with codicologists, art historians and other specialists seems particularly urgent to the matter of addressing these questions and preparing the ground for a more holistic understanding of the material culture of premodern Islamicate courts.

(9) Was there something specifically courtly about the religious cultures of Islamicate courts?

While a thorough comparison of the religious activities of people at court with those of their non-courtly contemporaries would greatly exceed the scope of the studies brought together in this issue, three themes emerge from the following articles that invite future investigation into specifically courtly aspects of Islamicate religious cultures.

First and somewhat paradoxically, ascetism appears to have formed an important aspect of the religious life at some courts, despite the obvious connection between courts and elite practices of conspicuous consumption and valuable objects of material culture. Especially Mårtensson's, but also Christie's and Keegan's articles draw our attention to rulers and other people at court who, rather than displaying the wealth at their disposal, embraced at least outwardly an ascetic lifestyle that encompassed fasting, nightly Qurʾān recitation, and mingling with members of the lower strata of society. According to Mårtensson's study, al-Ṭabarī actively propagated such an ascetic lifestyle to members of the courtly elite through references to pre- and early Islamic role models, including the second caliph, ʿUmar. For al-Ṭabarī¸ this call to asceticism was a promising way to ensure that all members of society, including peasants, were treated in a way that ensured the common good. Ascetism – albeit a mild and highly privileged ascetism that was compatible with the status and the power of courtly elites – thus appears to have constituted for some people at Islamicate courts a meaningful solution to the problem of how to combine their exalted social status with the demands of a God-fearing life and just rule.

This last observation suggests that, second, religious life at court was closely intertwined with questions of effective governance and proper administration. The administrators al-Ṭabarī was in touch with seem to have shared a worldview according to which bad governance was against God's will and led to conflicts within the Islamic community, as the historian illustrated through references to rebellions and civil wars. To avoid such negative outcomes, administrators had to conduct their offices in a way that met the ethical standards that religious scholars such as al-Ṭabarī discussed in their works. As Cortese shows, other religious scholars, including Muḥammad al-Karājikī, played important roles in extending government control beyond the territories directly controlled by the administrators at a given court. The studies by Flatt and Melvin-Koushki illustrate the value of occult knowledge for the successful exertion of political power, also and especially by military means.

Third, religious knowledge and practices at court explicitly addressed issues of the control over and the manipulation of land. The writings of al-Ṭabarī, studied by Mårtensson, and those of ʿAlī ʿĀdil Shāh, analysed by Flatt, underline the heightened attention that people at court paid to land as the most central resource for which premodern rulers competed. In both cases, religious knowledge – either in the form of historical precedent or of occult expertise – is intimately tied to the issue of how rulers can and should make best use of the territory under their sway. This was a topic that was evidently of direct interest only to those who were in positions of power over landed property, and it thus appears as a particularly promising object for further inquiries into specifically courtly aspects of religious thought and practice.

Like the preceding discussions, these observations about aspects of religious culture that might be categorised as particularly "courtly" are not meant to serve as final

results, but rather as stepping stones towards more thorough scholarly analyses. Together with the following articles, however, they illustrate the rich potential of the topic of religion at court for a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in premodern Islamicate societies.

Acknowledgments

The organisation of the workshop on which this special issue is based was made possible by the Momentum Career Development Program of the University of Bergen and the Metzler Grant of the University of Bergen, whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks go to the workshop participants who contributed to the discussions during our meeting in Bergen but did not submit a paper for publication, including Anne K. Bang, Elsa Cardoso, Eirik Hovden, Ian D. Morris, Derin Terzioğlu and Knut S. Vikør. Moreover, I would like to thank Esther-Miriam Wagner, Ingrid Austveg Evans and the anonymous reviewers for their help in preparing this special issue for publication.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).