

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SELJUQ CULTURAL HISTORY – Religion

The Great Seljuqs

Although all early sources of Seljuq history agree that Seljuq was the first of his tribe to become a Muslim, they are silent on the subject of Seljuq and his people's religious beliefs before his conversion to Islam. The only clue that might offer some insight on this topic is the names given to Seljuq's sons prior to his conversion – Mikail, Israil, Musa and Yunus and/or Yusuf. The first three names are found in all sources, while in some sources Yunus or Yusuf is given as the name of Seljuq's fourth son, and in one source Yunus and Yusuf are listed as Seljuq's fourth and fifth sons.

The first three names in particular have attracted scholars' attention since they could be Muslim, Christian or Jewish names. Those who argue that these are Muslim names have pointed out that in Iran, the first converts to Islam there tended to pick religiously ambiguous names that could be Muslim, Christian or Jewish, and only later did distinctively Muslim names become popular.

Other scholars have argued that the names of Seljuq's sons are evidence of Jewish Khazar influence. This argument is based on the information in some early sources that indicate that there was prolonged contact between the Khazars and the Seljuqs, and that, even if the Seljuqs did not convert to Judaism as the Khazars had, Seljuq chose names for his sons that reflected the Khazars' prestige.

Finally, there have been some scholars who believe that the names given to Seljuq's sons are the result of Nestorian Christian influence. They cite the widespread presence of Nestorian Christians in Central Asia and the accounts of Turkic groups who reportedly converted to Christianity, and argue that the early Seljuqs could have been among them. In addition, a review of the naming practices of late 9th – early 10th century Muslims, Jews and Christians in Central Asia has indicated that names of Seljuq's three sons most closely matches Christian naming practices in the region at that time. Nonetheless, each of these three views has its merits, and the issue the Seljuq's pre-Islamic religious beliefs remains an open question.

The Seljuqs became part of the Islamic world at the dawn of the 11th century, a century that was critical in shaping the interpretations of Islam that shape the faith today. Sunni Islam was beginning to achieve a distinctive identity that clearly distinguished it from the Shi'ism of the Fatimids in Egypt and the Ismailis in Iran and Syria. The three major Sunni schools of religious law (مذهب *madhhab*, pl. مذاهب *madhāhib*), the Maliki, Shafa'i and Hanafi, were joined by a fourth, the Hanbali. Finally, this century saw the appearance of the *madrasa*, centers of Muslim learning that first appeared in Central Asia but soon spread across the Islamic world.

This intense intellectual and theological upheaval was reflected in the society of the eastern Islamic world in particular, where factionalism (often Sunni – Shi'i, but not exclusively) and heated theological debates were characteristic. While genuine religious differences fueled some of the widespread strife, politics and power were often the real motives behind it.

The Seljuqs' attitudes and actions in regard to religion appear to reflect the complexities of this period. Although the Seljuqs have often be portrayed as the defenders of Sunnism in general, and the Hanafi *madhhab* in particular, a closer examination of the historical sources presents a very different picture. Instead of being the fanatic defenders of Sunni Islam and the Hanafi school, the Seljuqs are seen as rulers who were generally quite tolerant of other Sunni *madhāhib*, and awarded positions of power and influence to talented people regardless of their *madhhab*. In addition, there are also indications in some sources that the Seljuqs were occasionally suspected of having Shi'i sympathies.

Finally, there are a few passages in some sources indicating that some pre-Islamic beliefs and practices continued to exist among the Türkmen, and that the outward Muslim identity of both the Türkmen and the Seljuqs was sometimes rather thin. However, neither of these would be surprising in a people who had only recently converted to Islam.

The Seljuqs of Rum

While there are many similarities in the characteristics and place of religion among the Seljuqs of Rum and the Great Seljuqs, the context of the larger society over which the Seljuqs ruled was very different. The Great Seljuqs came to power in lands that presented a very diverse and contentious religious landscape, but were also predominantly Muslim. The Seljuqs of Rum, on the other hand, ruled over newly-conquered lands that still had large non-Muslim populations, primarily Greek and Armenian Christians.

Like the Great Seljuqs, the Seljuqs of Rum were avowedly Sunni and adherents of the Hanafi *madhhab*, and the institutions of Sunni Islam of that period were brought to Anatolia with them. While in the early period, converted churches or modest structures were mostly likely used as mosques, as Islam expanded larger mosques began to be constructed in the mid 12th century. The center of religious learning particularly associated with the Great Seljuqs, the *madrassa*, made its appearance in Anatolia later, around the end of the 12th century.

Alongside the more public Islam of the mosque, the *madrassa*, and the religious scholars, the *ulama* (علماء), Islamic mysticism, Sufism, also made its appearance and flourished in Anatolia under the Seljuqs. Whatever strands of Sufism expressed in Persian coming from Iran and Khorasan that may have made their way to Anatolia in the 12th century were overshadowed in the 13th century by perhaps the most famous Sufi of all, Jalal al-Din Rumi (جلال الدين رومی) who taught and established his Sufi order, or *tariqa* (طريقة), the Mevlevi, in the Seljuq capital of Konya. Born in Balkh in 1207, Jalal al-Din's father, Baha al-Din Walad, also a noted scholar and mystic, left Balkh around 1215. After a long journey that passed through Nishapur, Baghdad, Mecca, Damascus, Malatya, Erzincan, and finally settled in Karaman in 1222. In 1228, at the insistence of the Seljuq sultan Ala' ad-Din Kayqobad I, Baha al-Din Walad took his family to Konya. Jalal al-Din would spend almost the rest of his life working, teaching and writing in Konya until his death in 1273.

While Rumi wrote almost entirely in Persian, another famous Sufi teacher who spent some time in the Sultanate of Rum, Ibn Arabi (ابن عربي), was one of the most influential representatives of Arab Sufism and wrote exclusively in Arabic. Originally, from al-Andalus, Ibn Arabi travelled to the lands of Rum three times. His first visit was to Malatya in 1205, and the second was a journey to Sivas and Konya (where he met Kay Kavus I) in 1215. Ibn Arabi's final visit to the Seljuq state was an extended stay in Malatya between 1216-1218. Through his visits and the teaching of his followers Ibn Arabi gained students in Rum, the most famous of whom was Sadr al-Din Qunawi (صدر الدين قونوي, Sadreddin Konevi), an important and respected theologian.

While teachers such as Jalal al-Din Rumi and Ibn Arabi appealed to the inhabitants of towns and cities in Anatolia, people who had had more contact with and a greater appreciation of Islamic culture expressed in Persian and Arabic, such figures had little appeal to the Türkmén whose songs and poetry were entirely Turkish and did not understand Persian or Arabic. Although little information on the Türkmén's understanding and practice of Islam in Anatolia has come down to the present, dervishes, referred to as *baba* ("father"), appear to have influential religious figures among the Türkmén tribes. What the *babas* taught is unknown, but on at least one occasion a *baba* and his followers became the spark that ignited an uprising against the Seljuq state. Baba Ishaq, from Kafarsud in southeastern Anatolia, began teaching among the Türkmén around the year 1233. By 1240 he and his followers had created general unrest and rebellion in the region between Amasya, Malatya and Maraş. Although Baba Ishaq and many of his followers were killed in 1240, it would take until 1243 until the revolt was entirely crushed.

The 13th century also witnessed the development of new religious movements in Anatolia, and the spread of existing movements from other Islamic lands. One new movement was the Bektashi order, named after the man whose teachings inspired the movement, Haji Bektash Veli, who came to Anatolia from Khorasan in the 13th century. Among the groups that came to Anatolia in the latter part of the 13th century were the Rifa'iyya from Egypt and the Qalandariyya from Central Asia. While the teachings of Jalal al-Din Rumi and Ibn Arabi gained general acceptance from the major Sunni *madhhabs*, the teachings and practices of the Bektashis, Rifa'iyya and Qalandariyya were generally regarded as being heterodox and outside the limits of Sunni belief and practice.

Readings

Cahen, Claude. *The Formation of Turkey: The Seljukid Sultanate of Rūm: Eleventh to Fourteenth Century*. Harlow, 2001.

Peacock, A.C.S. *Early Seljūq History: A new interpretation*. London, 2010.

Discussion Questions

1. What challenges did the Seljuqs of Rum face in establishing a Muslim society in their territory?
2. How did the religious life of the urban sector and the Türkmen differ in the Sultanate of Rum?