



Guiding the Ruler: Insights into Islamic Mirrors for Princes and Concepts of Governance

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: Islamic ideas on rulership and governance are disseminated through various textual traditions, among which the *mirrors for princes* genre holds a prominent place. These texts, serving as manuals for rulers and future leaders, encapsulate a blend of ethical, spiritual, and practical guidance. However, there is a lack of clarity regarding the nature of this genre, particularly its integration of religious and political dimensions, as well as its significance in shaping Islamic thought on governance.

Research Purposes: This study aims to explore the historical and cultural development of the *mirrors for princes* genre, analyze its content to uncover insights into Islamic rulership, and challenge the notion that this genre is quasi-secular by highlighting its intrinsic connection to Islamic principles.

Research Methods: The research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources within the *mirrors for princes* tradition. Historical analysis and textual interpretation are utilized to examine the themes, structures, and intended purposes of these works across different Islamic contexts.

Results and Discussion: The study reveals that *mirrors for princes* are deeply embedded in Islamic ethical and political thought, offering rulers guidance that intertwines religious obligations with administrative responsibilities. These texts emphasize the ruler's role as a moral and spiritual guide, as well as a political leader. The research demonstrates the diversity of traditions that contributed to the genre and highlights its adaptability across time and regions in the Islamic world.

Research Implications and Contributions: This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic political and ethical thought, emphasizing the *mirrors for princes* genre as a vital source of historical insights into governance. It challenges secular interpretations by illustrating the genre's rootedness in Islamic values and its role in shaping the ideals of rulership. The findings provide a foundation for further research into the interplay between religion and politics in Islamic history and offer valuable perspectives for comparative studies in governance and leadership.

Keywords: Islamic governance, mirrors for princes, rulership, political thought, Islamic ethics, leadership manuals, religion and politics, historical analysis, Islamic literature.

INTRODUCTION

The study of political history, often referred to as the "history of politics" or "political history," has been a central focus in understanding governance and authority across civilizations. However, when addressing the Islamic world in pre-modern times, can we accurately apply the concept of the "political" as understood in contemporary terms? This article builds upon the assumption that the concept of the political as a differentiated subsystem of society is distinctly modern (Lohlker, 2024). Therefore, rather than exploring "political" ideas, this study focuses on ideas of rulership as reflected in Islamic mirrors for princes literature. These texts offer rich insights into the history of Islamic concepts of governance and authority.

Given that the texts examined were specifically composed for rulers, this study abandons the transhistorical category of the "political" in favor of the historically contingent concept of rulership and its transformations over time. Al-Azmeh (2013) critiques certain modern interpretations of Islamic political thought for lacking historical contextualization. In response, this research aims to provide a nuanced reading of these sources, situating them within their specific historical and cultural frameworks. By doing so, it offers an alternative perspective that moves beyond anachronistic applications of contemporary political concepts.

The novelty of this study lies in its methodological approach, which combines a close reading of primary sources with an analytical framework informed by Bourdieu's (2000; 2020) concept of "field" and Deleuze's idea of the "fold." This interdisciplinary perspective allows for a deeper exploration of how ideas of rulership were articulated, contested, and transformed within Islamic intellectual traditions. By analyzing the mirrors for princes literature through this lens, this study not only highlights the historical specificity of these texts but also contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic ideas on rulership and governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Genre of Islamic Mirrors for Princes

The genre of Islamic Mirrors for Princes (Abbés 2023) can be described as a corpus of writings aimed at guiding the exercise of rulership in Islamic contexts. These mirrors for princes were authored by various individuals from the circles surrounding rulers:

1. As direct advice,
2. As general considerations on how rulership should be shaped,
3. By rulers themselves, and in rare cases,
4. For future rulers, when a prince was addressed.

If the masculine form is used here, it is intentional, as the sources refer to male rulers.

This genre had already attracted Westgerm scholarly interest in the early 20th century CE (Richter 1932; Busse 1968; Marlow 2009). In German-speaking research literature, the studies of G. Richter and H. Busse are notable. However, the view that these writings were merely vehicles for propagating Islamic-Persian ideas of state (Busse 1977: 54) can hardly be upheld.

As al-Azmeh formulated, the focus is rather on how the adopted traditions from emerging Muslim thought, the Persian-speaking world, and occasional Greek elements were combined. Even traces of Indian wisdom literature (Marlow 2013) are observed (Al-Azmeh 1997: 84).

Ardjomand criticized the Orientalist image of Islamic thought on rulership, which privileged a marginal corpus of texts to deduce an ideal of rulership, against which the historical realities of rulership in the Islamic world were deemed un-Islamic (Ardjomand 2013). This can be clearly seen in the contracts of Muslim rulers, which present a different picture than the scholarly treatises on such contracts that were taken by older research as normative descriptions of contractual practice (Lohlker 2006).

Here, the practical and pragmatic philosophy of actual rulers becomes visible. This allows the epistemological field of rulership understanding at royal courts to be recognized, which is by no means one-dimensional. An example of this understanding of rulership can be found in writings intended to educate future rulers or advise reigning ones, a literary genre known as Mirrors for Princes, which was globally widespread.

In the literature of Mirrors for Princes, we find texts that can be classified as treatises, presenting the fundamental rules and relationships of rulership. There are also practical examples drawn from the relative temporal and geographical proximity of the authors (Marlow 2023). These can take the form of letters to specific addressees or more general writings. Besides letters, we also encounter literary fiction, such as dialogues between a wise man and a ruler. The field even extends into the realm of *belles-lettres* (Leder 1999).

Between Secularity and Religiosity

"The pragmatic orientation, present and sometimes dominant in numerous works, deserves attention. The authors' discussions of proper politics and the purposeful handling of people, considering their various functions and social contexts, reveal much about how the social fabric was perceived. [...] Rulership must prove itself through mastery of a set of rules, which includes not only violence but also the art of binding people through the provision of material and symbolic goods." (Leder 1999: 39)

This section focuses on the role of pragmatic thought in the textual genre of Mirrors for Princes. Thomas Bauer noted something similar in his influential work on the culture of ambiguity:

"A [...] discourse on rulership, ultimately manifest in numerous advisory texts for rulers ('Mirrors for Princes'), encompasses a spectrum of texts ranging from more religiously bound admonitions to works that display a completely areligious, utilitarian—if not Machiavellian—attitude. No mediating instance seems to have existed between these discourses. The social domain of rulership thus appears to exemplify an extreme case in which the individual (in this case, the ruler) was entirely free to choose from these divergent discourses." (Bauer 2011: 44).

Even treatises that might be classified as more secular, such as the *Siyāsat-nāme*, inherently contain a religious component, which justifies their classification as Islamic. In this context, ethics and religion are closely intertwined with the welfare of the state and the ruler. While the primary focus of such texts lies in ensuring the effective functioning of rulership, rather than strictly adhering to religiously defined standards (cf. Walbridge 1992), the underlying premise is that the Sultan is divinely chosen (Nagel 1981: 94). For instance, Nagel highlights the work of the Andalusian author al-Turtūshī (d. 1126 CE) as an example of a princely mirror that leans more towards religious contexts, particularly in circumstances necessitating the stabilization of rule (Nagel 1981: 93sq.). These texts, written in response to complex political realities, also reflect the authors' recognition of competition for influence among various power factions.

The *Siyāsat-nāme*, commissioned on behalf of the Seljuq Sultan, exemplifies this dual focus. It seeks to provide guidance for the Sultan, emphasizing the practical necessities of effective governance, especially in moments where the stabilization of rulership is imperative. This underscores the genre's broader objective: offering rulers actionable advice to maintain their dominion while ensuring their legitimacy, framed within an Islamic ethical and religious backdrop. Other works, such as *Madinat al-Fadila* (al-Fārābī 1906; al-Fārābī 2009; Wain 2012; Rudolph 2022) or *Fusul Muntaza'a* (al-Fārābī 1405) by Al-Farabi (cf. Netton 1999; Butterworth 2001), rooted in the more philosophical tradition, follow the modified Platonic concept of the philosopher-king:

"In Islamic and Jewish thought, [...] the philosopher-king became the legislator-prophet who, as far as humanly possible, imitated divine virtues and placed this mimesis in the service of the human community, over which he ruled justly." (Campagna 2010: 174)

The *Akhlāq-e Nāsiri* by Nāsir al-Dīn al-Tūsī (d. 1274 CE) (al-Tūsī 21008; cf. Walbrige 1992: 354sq.), emerge from the ethical tradition (Ayubi 2019) like the *Akhlāq-e Davāni* (Davāni 1391) by Jalāl al-Dīn Davāni (d. 1502 CE) with his focus on the importance of love for ethics (Melvin-Kouchki 2019), as does the *Durrat al-Taj* by Qutb al-Dīn Shirāzi (d. 1311 CE), with its stronger emphasis on the religious tradition (cf. Walbridge 1992), demonstrate other priorities. They focus on virtue as the prerequisite for the ideal community. Less focused on virtue as a prerequisite is the Islamic genre of mirrors for princes that will be discussed now.

Siyāsat-nāme

The *Siyāsat-nāme* (see above), or "Book of Governance," serves as an example of a distinct genre reflecting on rulership and providing advice on governance matters. It is embedded in religious contexts, as seen in the preface:

"[The book was written] so that we may reflect upon and henceforth execute spiritual and worldly matters appropriately, manage each affair properly, and prevent the undesirable. Since

the mighty and exalted God has entrusted the world to us and granted full blessings [...] it is impermissible that anything in our kingdom henceforth be deficient [...]" (Schabinger 1987: 158)

Proper governance is therefore defined as aligning divine mandate with the ruler's secular actions, perceived as fulfilling this mandate. Practical aspects of governance are emphasized, avoiding a binary between secularism and religion. Al-Azmeh aptly noted the prominent role of the *'ulamā'* as guarantors of the community of believers during the *Siyāsat-nāme's* time, placing the religious community as a backdrop to *Mirrors for Princes* (Al-Azmeh 1997: 182).

The *Siyāsat-nāme* also dedicates sections to figures within the ruler's circle, such as companions (*nadīmān*) and confidants (*naẓdīkān*). It advises:

The ruler cannot do without worthy companions with whom he interacts openly and informally. However, excessive association with grandees and military commanders can harm the ruler's dignity, as their boldness may increase over time. It is generally advised that the ruler should avoid appointing those already holding office as companions, and vice versa, as companions, given their informal relationship with the ruler, might act arbitrarily and inconvenience others. Companions provide numerous benefits to the ruler. They offer company and serve as bodyguards, being present day and night. In times of danger—may God protect us!—they are willing to sacrifice themselves for the ruler. Additionally, they allow the ruler to discuss countless matters more freely than with officials. Acting as scouts, companions inform the ruler about the affairs of princes and speak openly about both good and bad matters, regardless of their state of sobriety or inebriation. (Schabinger 1987: 290–291)

Here, the tension between secularity and religiosity is less critical — aside from potential concerns about inebriation — than the balanced distribution of power within the ruler's court. The grandees and commanders are kept at a distance, while the ruler's inner circle of companions is granted freedom of speech as a tool to balance out the interests at the court. This pragmatic balancing of power ensures stable governance, understood as expressing divine will. It reflects a practical secularity rooted in religious context.

The aversion to women in the *Siyāsat-nāme* can be explained by the significant roles women, referred to as "the veiled ones," played in the Seljuk Empire's power structure. Women in Persian- and Arabic-speaking societies, influenced by Turkic traditions, often demonstrated considerable independence in their actions. A notable example from this era and source is Terken Khatun, the wife of Sultan Malikshāh II, whose influential role is documented in works such as D. Duturaeva's (2022: 71sq.) *Qarakhanid Roads to China*. The author of the *Siyāsat-nāme* perceived her influence as a threat to his own as vizier, contrasting her actions — based on the counsel of her entourage — with his informed and rational decision-making. This critique is religiously linked to the figure of Adam as the origin of this "problem," (Schabinger 1987: 418-419)

On the Fold

How can we theoretically resolve the tension between the predominantly secular content and the religious framework? This contrast can be dissolved in baroque form. With Deleuze (1993: 3), we might say:

"The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East. Greek. Roman, Romanesque, Gothic. Classical folds. Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity. fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity."

By interpreting the contrast between religion and secularity as a series of infinite folds, these apparent opposites can be understood as two sides of the same fold. The religious aspect is an inseparable component of the pragmatic and secular, just as the latter is inseparable from the former. Depending on the author's perspective, one aspect comes to the fore while the other recedes, determined by its function in the discourse on governance. In the *Mirrors for Princes*, the functional emphasis is often on governance and pragmatic application—though not always.

Let us follow these folds in the genre of *Mirrors for Princes*! By examining both well-known and lesser-known works in this genre, we aim to deepen our understanding of Islamic ideas about governance and their associated philosophies, reflecting these ideas within the mirrors themselves, with historical context implied. If I may be permitted a wordplay: let us turn to an explicitly Iranian fold once again!

Qābūs-nāme

The *Qābūs-nāme*, also known under other names such as *Nasībat-nāme*, is one of the most significant Persian prose works of the 11th century (Kaikā'us 1312). Written by the Ziyarid prince Kaikā'us b. Eskandar b. Qābūs b. Vošmgir (d. ca. 1087 CE) as advice for his son, it occupies a unique position within the genre discussed here. The author traces his family's lineage to the Sassanid rulers. Across 44 chapters, it paints a comprehensive picture of Persian society at the time from the ruler's perspective.

The explicitly religious component appears in the opening chapters, which address the knowledge of God, the foundations of faith, and particularly the prophets, "from Adam to our Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace," whose roles are described in detail (Kaikā'us 1312: 9). Subsequently, respect for the bloodline (*nasab*) and especially the father and mother is mentioned as a guarantee that the world will last forever (Kaikā'us 1312: 16).

Following this foundation of the world and society, the subsequent chapters cover a wide range of topics: purchasing horses, medicine, astrology, sports such as chess or polo, dealing with friends and enemies, and more.

Notably, the final chapter on magnanimity (*javānmardī*) focuses significantly on Sufis (*sūfijān*), the ascetics (*fūqarā'*) of *tasawwuf* (Kaikā'us 1312: 181), whom the author regards positively. Despite its secular considerations, the religious side of the fold is ever-present throughout the text.

The text contains anecdotes and wisdom from Iranian history as well as from figures attributed to Aristotle (cf. Abbés 2023). The *Qābūs-nāme* can thus be described as an amalgam of Persian tradition and Islamic practice. Comparing it to other *Mirrors for Princes*, such as the *Sijāsāt-nāme* or works by al-Ghazālī, reveals its distinct character as a father's counsel to his son, touching on topics ranging from courtship to the recommendation to marry exogamously ((Kaikā'us 1312: 93-94).

Nasīhat al-Mulūk of Pseudo-al-Māwardī

Al-Māwardī (d. 1058 CE) is renowned for his juridical work on Islamic law on government (Al-Mawardī 1996; al-'Azma 2000) (*The Ordinances of Government*), which lies outside the scope of the genre discussed here. However, a *Mirror for Princes* attributed to him, *Nasībat al-Mulūk*, fits well within our investigation (al-Māwardī 1983). Written under Samanid rule, it primarily addresses aspects of governance. This work demonstrates a clear religious sensitivity (Marlow 2016).

al-Asad wa'l-ghawāss

This anonymous *Mirror for Princes*, estimated to have been written in 530 AH (ca. 1135 CE), belongs stylistically to the genre of the fable collection *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (Ibn al-Muqaffa' 2004).

Its ethical character is evident in the advice given to rulers, such as the promised reward (*mujāzāt*) in the afterlife (Anonymous 2012: 185sq.). While faith is not central, it forms a natural backdrop to the narrative.

Several „kings of Persia“ (*ba'd al-mulūk al-furs*) (Anonymous 2012: 190) are mentioned and, thus, situate the text close to the persophone tradition a fold we have to follow.

Nasīhat al-Mulūk by al-Ghazālī

The renowned work *Nasībat al-Mulūk (Advice for Kings)*, authored by Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 AD), occupies a significant place in Islamic thought, bridging the Persophone and Arabophone parts of the Islamic world. Its influence extended to the Ottoman Empire, making it a notable fusion of these traditions (cf. for his theology Griffel 2009). Written during a period of internal strife in the Seljuk Empire, this work addresses both theological and practical aspects of rulership (al-Ghazālī 1938; al-Ghazālī 1971).

At the core of *Nasihat al-Mulūk* is the conviction that all rulership stems from faith (*īmān*) (al-Ghazālī 1938: 8). This principle is clearly articulated in the introductory section, which elaborates on the Ash'arite doctrine of faith (al-Ghazālī 1971: 6sq.). The introduction emphasizes that:

“God is above the ruler and holds him accountable for all deeds. The ruler therefore does not own his rule; he is primarily responsible to God, not to man. He is obliged to keep the faith and believe what is true.” (Leder 1999: 33)

In this framework, the ruler is portrayed as the *na'ib* (representative) of God on Earth. However, *Nasihat al-Mulūk* does not limit itself to theological considerations; it also delves into practical aspects of rulership. For instance, it identifies social groups as potential sources of discord (*fitne*) (al-Ghazālī 1938: 128) and critiques the influence of women at the court, attributing it to the "nature" (*tabi'at*) of women, which is described as causing “evil in both worlds” (al-Ghazālī 1938: 159). This perspective is reminiscent of ideas presented in the *Siyāsat-nāme*.

Over time, *Nasihat al-Mulūk* has been widely cited, often in its Arabic translation from the original Persian, as well as in Ottoman translations and adaptations (e.g., Jordan 2015, 64). Upon closer examination, the text reveals two distinct parts. The first part is derived from al-Ghazālī's Persian work *Kimīyā-ye Sa'adat*, which is a condensed version of his seminal work. In this section, the Islamic foundation of rulership is particularly emphasized, portraying Islamic scholars as advisors to the king and presenting rulership as deeply rooted in Islamic principles.

The second part, however, likely does not originate from al-Ghazālī himself. This section shifts away from the concept of divine deputyship and introduces the idea of rulership as a gift derived from the Sassanian notion of "divine glory" (*farr-e izādī*) (Aigle 2023). This dual framework reflects rulership as both charismatic—bestowed by divine favor—and traditionalistic—rooted in the Iranian tradition. To borrow Weberian terminology (Weber 1985: 124sq.), the rational type of authority is evident in the foundation of rulership in Islamic law presented in the first part, while the second part incorporates the Sassanian concept of divine legitimacy.

Thus, *Nasihat al-Mulūk* consists of a Ghazalian section and a pseudo-Ghazalian section, each offering distinct perspectives on rulership. These differences highlight the text's dual nature, with the former emphasizing Islamic principles and the latter incorporating pre-Islamic Iranian traditions.

***Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk* by Sa' dī**

Mosleh b. 'Abdallāh Shīrāzī Sa' dī (d. 1291 or 1292 CE) is undoubtedly one of the most significant poets of Iran (Kātouziān 2006). Among his works is also counted a "Counsel for Kings," *Nasihat al-Mulūk* (cf. Shomali/Boroujerdi 2013: 59sq.). This work is mistakenly interpreted by its translators as an expression of secularist pragmatism in governance, citing as evidence the absence of Islamic legal terminology (Shomali/Boroujerdi 2013: 46). This represents a retroactive projection that considers governance as Islamic only if codified in Islamic legal language. However, this perspective fails to recognize that mirrors for princes can also be formulated in other Islamic forms.

Sa' dī fundamentally assumes a mutual dependency between rulers and subjects. The ruler's duty is to fulfill his obligations to the subjects, to act as a capable shepherd (Shomali/Boroujerdi 2013: 52-53). However, interpreting this as secular realism overlooks the Islamic embedding when the ruler is reminded of his duty. While mutual interests in security and prosperity are emphasized, they are linked to spiritual rewards and potential punishment on the Day of Resurrection (Shomali/Boroujerdi 2013: 55).

Thus, one side of the fold represents a pragmatic admonition to the ruler for righteous conduct, while the other side reflects the positive outcomes of righteous and negative consequences of unrighteous behavior. This fold can be functionally unfolded further, leading to Egypt during the Mamluk era.

Al-Burhān fī fadl al-sultān

The lesser-known author of this work, Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. Tūghān al-Muhammādī al-Ashrafī al-Hanafī (d. 1470 CE), also wrote a work on *siyāsa al-shar'īya* (al-Muhammādī 2012: 16-17). Thus, a fold from the literary field of *ādāb as-sultānīya* extends to this field of *siyāsa al-shar'īya*.

Another fold leads us to al-Andalus and the Maghreb. This moves us somewhat away from the influence of Persian-influenced Islamic thought and allows for a generalizable position.

Kitāb al-Ishāra ilā ahabb al-imāra

The author of this work (al-Hadrami 2011; al-Hadramī 2012) is Abū Bakr b. Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Hadramī al-Qairawānī (d. 1095 CE), known as al-Imām al-Hadramī or al-Shaykh al-Imām al-Hadramī (Ould Sheikh/Saison 1987). He is considered one of the founders of Islamic scholarship in the Almoravid territories of the Sahara (El Hamel 1999: 68), with a focus on *fiqh* but also extending to literary interests (Ould Sheikh/Saison 1987: 52-54).

The *Ishāra* spans from an introduction about knowledge, insight (*naẓar*), and other prerequisites for righteous conduct to the core genre of mirrors for princes: the qualities of seeking advice (*istishāra*) and the advisor (*mustashār*). The latter includes connections to Islamic thought, citing the fourth caliph ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib: “He who seeks admiration through his opinions (*ra’i*) goes astray; he who seeks gain through his intellect (*‘aql*) errs.” (al-Hadramī 2012: 69) This highlights the selfless nature of giving advice, compared to the work of a physician (al-Hadramī 2012: 70).

The advisor is addressed regarding his faith: “Know, O advisor, you are sought as a companion for your intellect and manly virtue. You are trusted for your faith (*dīn*) and loyalty (*amāna*).” (al-Hadramī 2012: 75) The religiously shaped personal quality is connected with a seemingly non-religious aspect.

The text continues with explanations of righteous, balanced living, including dietary habits for rulers. It then details the characteristics of the ruler’s entourage and their interaction with the ruler’s close companions. A short chapter is dedicated to the army (*jund*). These chapters primarily reference the sages (*bukamā*) and custom (*‘āda*).

Central to the discussion of rulership is the chapter on the classes of rulers (*salāṭīn*) and their modes of conduct (*sīra*) as outlined in *al-Hadramī* (2012: 75). The foremost attribute of a ruler is justice (*‘adl*), which is emphasized as the foundation of effective governance. The text states, “When justice speaks in the house of rulership, its inhabitants will delight in power (*‘izz*) and the flourishing of the structure [of rulership]” (*al-Hadramī* 2012: 31). This principle is further elaborated through a metaphor attributed to Pseudo-Aristotle, a 10th-century Arabic text on statecraft also known in Latin as *Secretum Secretorum* (Manzalaoui 1974; Forster 2006): “The world is a garden (*bustān*), its enclosure the rulership [of the righteous dynasty] (*daula*)” (*al-Hadramī* 2012: 31). This imagery highlights the idea that rulership acts as a protective framework fostering order and prosperity within the “garden” of the world.

The practice of rulership is given immense significance in the text (*al-Hadramī* 2012: 136), emphasizing that governance must align with the ruler’s faith (*dīn*). The directive, “Act [in the exercise of rulership] according to your faith” (*al-Hadramī* 2012: 134), underscores the importance of moral and religious integrity in governance. Failure to govern in accordance with faith is attributed to the influence of Satan (*al-Hadramī* 2012: 134), highlighting the moral and spiritual stakes of leadership. This perspective integrates justice, faith, and ethical practice as essential components of effective and righteous rulership.

A series of chapters follow on practical aspects of governance. Is this strong emphasis on pragmatic aspects of rulership to be interpreted as quasi-secular or utilitarian? The casual references to religious aspects suggest a natural integration of a religious dimension into governance as the ethical foundation for justice. Whether this configuration represents a specifically western Islamic perspective on governance, possibly influenced by a Berber heritage, cannot be resolved here but seems plausible given the Almoravid context.

In the analytical perspective chosen, we can observe that the pragmatic side of rulership is clearly visible, but the religious side of the fold remains an indispensable support for the entire fold of thought on governance. Turning back eastward, we can trace another fold from the Syrian region.

Al-‘Iqd al-farīd li’l-malik as-Sa’īd

This work receives little attention in the literature on Islamic mirrors for princes. It offers insights into the development of the genre beyond the well-known works. The author, Abū Sālim Muhammad ibn Talha al-‘Adawī al-Nasībī (died 1254 CE), served, among other roles, as vizier to the Artuqid ruler al-Malik al-Sa’īd, to whom the work was dedicated, in Mardin (Brockelmann 2017: 871).

Al-'Iqd al-farīd (al-Nasībī 1889) discusses the responsibilities of rulers and the ethics associated with them. The common chapters on the personal ethics of rulers are present, with justice being a central theme. Administrative offices and their duties are described, with significant focus on the military administration (*jaysb*) and an even greater emphasis on taxation and revenue systems. The distinction between Arab, Turkish, and Kurdish tribes in the section on tribal classification (*qabā'il*) highlights the ethnic composition of the region under discussion (al-Nasībī 1889: 156-157).

The text is deeply rooted in Islamic references, with moral tales (*hikāyāt*) explicitly contextualized within Islam. The frequent references to Iranian wisdom traditions found in other works are largely absent here.

A long section is devoted to Shari'a and proper conduct (*diyānāt*) (al-Nasībī 1889: 164 (and sqq.)). There is also an extended discussion of practical legal-religious questions (al-Nasībī 1889: 186-192), underscoring the Islamic framework. This reveals a unique aspect of the mirror-for-princes genre: a distinct strand characterized by a focus on Islamic knowledge while emphasizing the religious dimension of governance.

Tāj as-salātīn

The final section takes us into the seldom-explored Southeast Asian region of the Islamic world, which is often neglected in accounts of the history of Islamic thought. The *Tāj as-salātīn* ("Crown of the Sultans") emerged around 1603 CE in Aceh, located at the northwestern tip of Sumatra. At that time, Aceh was an influential Muslim kingdom in the Indian Ocean, seeking to connect with the broader Islamic world and incorporating ideas of governance from Persian traditions. The *Tāj as-salātīn* draws on earlier Persian works such as the *Siyāsat-nāme* and *Nasihat al-mulūk*, showing linguistic similarities to Persian texts. Whether the *Tāj* is a translation from a Persian original or was written in Malay is unclear.

The work is organized into sections on self-awareness, knowledge of God, the nature of the world, and death, followed by chapters on the dignity of kings, justice, tyranny, and the duties of various court offices. The longest chapter discusses the upbringing of children, generosity, kindness, the conditions of royal power, physiognomy, and relationships between rulers and subjects. At first glance, these themes align with other mirrors-for-princes. However, the *Tāj's* historical context as an expression of a society and culture in transition is revealed when compared to pre-Islamic mirrors-for-princes from the region. These earlier works emphasized submission to often arbitrary power, disregarded justice, glorified the leisure and pleasures of the elite, and disdained labor — characteristics described as feudalistic.

The *Tāj* counters this with an emphasis on responsibility, bringing elites under royal control through a responsible ethos. To understand this seemingly timeless text, we must read it in its historical context. A mirror-for-princes, rooted in religious beliefs, can also challenge established positions (Alatas 2018a; Alatas 2018b; Westensteyn 2017).

Ottoman Mirrors for Princes

Ethical advisors for rulers can be – following Sariyannis (2019: 67sqq.; cf. Yilmaz 2018; Fodor 1986) – traced back in the Ottoman Empire to before the conquest of Istanbul. For example, the *Qābūs-nāme* (see above) was translated into Ottoman Turkish multiple times as early as the 14th century CE (Fodor 1986: 220). This integration of Persian-speaking traditions can be seen with works such as al-Ghazālī's *Nasihat al-mulūk* (see above) and the *Akhlāq-e Nāsiri* by Nasir al-dīn Ṭūsī in the early and relatively unknown *Kitāb Mir'at'ül-mülūk* by Ahmed b. Hüsameddin Amasi, dedicated to Sultan Mehmed I (r. 1413–1421 CE) in 1406 CE. This marks the beginning of the tradition of incorporating Arabic and Persian ideas on governance into the Ottoman Empire. *Mir'at'ül-mülūk* discusses ethics according to Ṭūsī in its first part and, in the second, focuses on the duties of the Sultan, the vizier, and the council of the wise, following the example of Sassanid kings and al-Ġazālī (Sariyannis 2019; Yilmaz 2018: 24-26).

The historian Ṭürsün Beg (born in the mid-1420s CE) essentially followed Amasi with a particular focus on Ṭūsī (without his elaborate ethical system), emphasizing the ruler's mildness and the necessity of just actions. Idris b. Hüsameddin Bitlisi (d. 1520 CE), slightly younger, was part of the internationally oriented intellectual bureaucracy of the Ottoman Empire during this time, introducing Persian ethical

and governance doctrines into the Ottoman empire (Sariyannis 2019: 71). For Bitlisi, Muslim rulers were the manifestation of divine power and knowledge (Sariyannis 2019: 76). Despite its orientation, the religious aspect of Ottoman governance was highly present.

This phase of development in Ottoman governance thought later evolved into fully developed doctrines of rulership, which cannot be discussed here.

Kutadgu Bilig

A Turkic *Mirror for Princes* from 11th-century Central Asia must also be addressed. Its model is said to be the Persian *Shāhnāme* (Cf. Askari 2016), attributed with the same function — namely, to establish the Turkish heritage of wisdom thinking within the Islamic context. It arose during the transitional period of Turkish migration into Central and Southwest Asia (Lohlker 2023; Dankoff 2009; Dankoff 1983).

This wisdom tradition is named *bilig*; the title of the poetic work can be roughly translated as “Wisdom leading to the glory and success of the ruler.” It was written for the Qarakhanid rulers, described by Dankoff as a realm continuing Inner Asian traditions of tribal aristocracy and just governance (Dankoff 2009: 133). The work can therefore be read as an attempt to formulate conditions for stable governance during a time of transformation.

For our purposes, we will focus on the basic structure of the work. It is carried by four characters: (1) King Kün Toğdı, representing the principle of justice; (2) Vizier Ay Toldı, representing the principle of success; (3) the Wise Ogdülmiş, representing the principle of wisdom; and (4) the Ascetic Odğurmuş, representing the principle of engagement with ultimate matters, touching on Sufi themes (Dankoff 2009: 133sq.).

This reveals a structure in which the ruler implements justice, led to success by the vizier, advised by the wise guardian of tradition, and strengthened by the newly adopted Islamic knowledge, rooted in Sufism.

Significantly, this work also marks the entry of a Turkic-speaking tradition into Islamic *Mirror for Princes* literature. Turning to the wider Central Asian and Persophonic region we have to look at the post-Mongolian and Timurid period (Subtelny 2007).

Timurid Period

The region influenced by this intellectual “fold” extends from Egypt through the Ottoman Empire, Timurid Central Asia, and Moghul South Asia. In the post-Mongolian period, a new configuration of rulership ideas emerged, blending traditional notions with innovative perspectives. This period saw the incorporation of astrological frameworks into the legitimation of authority, as demonstrated in texts like the following passage:

“The manifestation of [the Lord of Conjunction’s glorious rule] first dawned from the horizon of conquest and victory, inaugurating an era of abundant joy and celebration in which the tongue of laudation does indite:

What a dream whose interpretation is you!

What a verse whose exegesis is you!

Yea, the splendor of his auspicious brow shone forth like the sun. For the instant the sun enters the heaven that is the throne of sovereignty over the seven climes, the world is illumined: the significance of his auspicious rise like the bright and revealing dawn itself, quickly banishing the night that is the disorder of the world, is thus that the ascent of his fortune is the dawning of a day gladder than the New Year festival itself.

The verification (*tabhīq*) of this statement is as follows: Establishing the bases of rule and erecting the walls of caliphate, the blessed being of that holy eminence – Lord of Conjunction, Emperor in History (*ākhir al-zamān*) – stands as the firm and unshakable foundation of the fortune of his glorious house; his horoscope must therefore reflect the extreme firmness of that foundation.” (Melvin-Koushki 2019, 65)

This excerpt illustrates how astrological symbolism and cosmic alignment were utilized to affirm the ruler's divine mandate and historical significance. The "Lord of Conjunction" reflects a celestial justification for the ruler's authority, connecting governance with cosmic order and divine favor. This approach highlights the fusion of spiritual, cosmic, and temporal dimensions in legitimizing rule during this transformative era.

CONCLUSION

The *Mirrors for Princes* can indeed be defined as a distinct genre of literature on governance within Islamic thought. Emerging from the interplay of various traditions, this genre reflects a fusion of Arab, Persian, and Greek ideas with Turkish and other influences, creating a unique intellectual framework. Each work in this tradition blends these elements in distinct ways, necessitating a deeper, individual analysis beyond the scope of this discussion. Methodologically, this genre aligns with Weber's conceptualization of authority, where all three types of authority—rational, traditional, and charismatic—are intertwined. Rational authority is grounded in Sharia-based legal governance, traditional authority draws from established Iranian, Turkish, or other cultural practices, and charismatic authority manifests in the ruler's endowment with "divine glory" (*farr-e izzādi*), a concept rooted in the Iranian tradition.

What makes the *Mirrors for Princes* a distinctly Islamic phenomenon is not the explicit framing of governance through Islamic doctrines but rather the presence of Islam as an unchallenged, underlying framework. Islam serves as a backdrop that frames and, at times, dominates considerations of governance practices. Philosophically, this genre can be understood as a reflection of belief in the world, where practical governance is intertwined with ethical and spiritual dimensions. From a contemporary perspective, the study of this genre challenges narrow interpretations of Islamic rulership, such as the oversimplified focus on the caliphate, by showcasing the diversity and depth of governance ideas throughout Islamic history.

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