

PASAI AND CONSTANTINOPE Hybrid Legitimacies and Multiple Identities in the 15th Century Muslim Societies

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Abstract

This article provides an alternative historical explanation that challenges the monolithic portrayal of premodern Muslim polities. Prevailing narratives often emphasize Islam as the sole dominant identity, relegating Southeast Asia to the 'periphery' of the Islamic world and reducing the Ottoman governance to purely Islamic ideals. This article reconsiders how Muslim polities in the fifteenth century forged legitimacy through strategies that were neither monolithic nor exclusively Islamic. Focusing on the Sultanate of Pasai in Sumatra and the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople, it demonstrates how rulers embedded themselves in multiple traditions, Islamic, Indic, indigenous, and Greco-Roman Christian, at once. Through textual analysis of primary texts, Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, Tarīh-i Ebū'l Fath, Tārīh-i Beyān-ı Binā-yı Ayasofya-yı Kebīr, and History of Mehmed the Conqueror, this study demonstrates that both Pasai and the Ottomans integrated hybrid traditions to construct their sovereignty. Highlighting these multilayered repertoires adopts a polycentric rather than center-periphery framework, one in which Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean emerge as dynamic, interconnected sites of Muslim statecraft. [Artikel ini menawarkan sebuah penjelasan historis alternatif yang ingin menantang gambaran monolitik tentang kerajaan muslim pramodern. Narasi



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yang dominan selama ini masih cenderung menekankan Islam sebagai identitas tunggal yang mendominasi, sehingga menempatkan Asia Tenggara sebagai “pinggiran dunia Islam” dan mereduksi identitas Kekaisaran Utsmani hanya menjadi sekadar Islam semata. Artikel ini meninjau kembali bagaimana Kerajaan Muslim pada abad kelima belas membangun legitimasi melalui strategi yang tidak bersifat monolitik maupun eksklusif Islami. Dengan studi kasus Kesultanan Pasai di Sumatra dan Kekaisaran Utsmani di Konstantinopel, artikel ini menunjukkan bagaimana para penguasa menggabungkan berbagai tradisi sekaligus, Islam, lokal, Indic, dan Greko-Romawi Kristen. Melalui analisis beberapa teks primer seperti Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, Tarih-i Ebü'l Fath, Târih-i Beyân-ı Binâ-yı Ayasofya-yı Kebîr, dan History of Mehmed the Conqueror, kajian ini memperlihatkan bahwa baik Pasai maupun Usmani mengintegrasikan tradisi-tradisi hibrida untuk membangun legitimasi dan kedaulatannya. Untuk menjelaskan khaẓānah yang berlapis ini, artikel ini mengadopsi kerangka polisentris dari pada model pusat-pinggiran, di mana Asia Tenggara dan Mediterania muncul sebagai pusat-pusat dinamis yang saling terhubung dalam praktik Kerajaan Muslim.]

Keywords: hybrid legitimacies, multiple identities, polycentric approach, Sultanate of Pasai, Ottoman Empire.

A. Introduction

Conventional scholarship on Muslim polities in Southeast Asia and the Middle East has been narrated primarily through the lens of Islamic identity. Within this narrative, Southeast Asia merely appears as a peripheral zone within the wider Islamicate world, while the Ottoman empire is often reduced to an embodiment of Islam itself. Such depictions overlook the historical complexity of the Muslim polities, especially during the premodern era. A growing number of historians have also shown that both Southeast Asian and Ottoman actors engaged with Islam alongside other idioms of political, genealogical and even cosmological legitimacy.¹ Following these arguments, this study examines how the

¹ Michael F. Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011); Tony Day, “Polycentric Cosmopolitans: Writing World Literature in Indonesia and Vietnam, 1920s to 1950s and Beyond”, in *Comintern Aesthetics*, ed. by Amelia M. Glaser and Steven S. Lee (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), pp. 199-223; Marc David Baer, *The Ottomans: Khans, Caesars and Caliphs* (New York: Basic Books, 2021); R. Michael Feener

Southeast Asian Sultanate of Pasai² and Eastern Mediterranean the Ottoman Empire constructed sovereignty not merely through singular Islamic claims, but through layered and hybrid repertoires.³

This article, therefore, situates the Sultanate of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire as case studies for examining how premodern Muslim Polities achieved resilience not through religious exclusivity but through forms of hybrid legitimacy. These two cases, one from a Southeast Asian sultanate and the other from an Eastern Mediterranean empire, highlight both shared strategies and local particularities. Pasai integrated aspects of indigenous, Islamic and other regional traditions, creating inclusive frameworks that spoke to a wide range of people. Similarly, the Ottomans' integration of Byzantine and Greco-Roman traditions into imperial practice, also exemplifies how diverse repertoires could be fused. For both Muslim polities, hybridity produced heterogeneous yet cohesive form of sovereignty that resist the commonly held monolithic model of 'the Muslim world'.⁴

Contrary to the rigid view of religious identity, this article highlights historical models of hybrid legitimacy that integrated multiple traditions and religious influences. These cases, therefore, provide an alternative historical explanation to the clash of civilizations and center-periphery models by repositioning Pasai and Constantinople as dynamic nodes within a polycentric Islamicate world.

et al., "Islamisation and the Formation of Vernacular Muslim Material Culture in 15th-Century Northern Sumatra", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 49, no. 143 (2021), pp. 1–41; Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019); A. Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern, eds., *Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), p. 408; Cemil Aydin, "Regions and Empires in the Political History of the Long Nineteenth Century", in *An Emerging Modern World*, ed. by Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

² Sultanate of Pasai is also known as Samudra-Pasai and Pasé

³ For discussion on similar argument on Muslim polities distant from the Arabo-centric authorities, such as Persia, see Mimi Hanaoka, *Authority and Identity in Medieval Islamic Historiography: Persian Histories from the Peripheries*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 8, 17–8

⁴ For further discussion of 'Muslim World', see Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2025 M/1447 H

B. Hybrid Legitimacies of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire in Global Muslim Historiography

Over the past three decades, historiography on the Sultanate of Pasai has largely been framed through an Islamization paradigm, emphasizing its role as the first Islamic polity in the Malay-Indonesian world. Foundational works, such as those by Alfian, focus on Islam's role in Pasai's political culture but risk overlooking the persistence of pre-Islamic Indic traditions. Alfian further suggests Pasai's connections with other Islamic polities like the Ayyubids, solely based on the names of Pasai rulers, Malik al-Zahir and Malik Zainal.⁵ Certainly, Alfian's work is foundational; thus, we do not reject his thesis entirely. His interpretation, however, tends to understate Pasai's engagement with pre-Islamic Indic traditions, particularly those of Indic (Hindu-Buddhist) and indigenous origin, which continued to influence the Pasai's political cultures. Much of the subsequent historiography has likely followed a similar framework, often prioritizing Islam's role while usually overlooking the persistent role of earlier cultural practice.⁶

These Islam-centric scholars on Pasai were responding to earlier studies that privileged Indic over Islamic influences in the Malay-Indonesian world. J. C. van Leur, for instance, famously asserted in the mid-twentieth century that Islam brought little societal innovation to Indonesia.⁷ In a similar vein, Hall's initial work implies that, following Hurgronje and Winstedt,⁸ the Pasai ruler's conversion to Islam had little "real impact upon local social structure or belief", predominantly Hindu-Buddhist.⁹ However, in his later writings, Hall presented a more balanced

⁵ Teuku Ibrahim Alfian, *Kontribusi Samudra Pasai terhadap Studi Islam Awal di Asia Tenggara* (Yogyakarta: Cenninets Press, 2005).

⁶ See for instance Abd Rahman Hamid, "Jalur Rempah Dan Islamisasi Nusantara: Jaringan Samudera Pasai Abad XIII – XVI", *Jurnal Masyarakat dan Budaya*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2021), pp. 269-82.

⁷ J. C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague, Bandung: W. van Hoeve, 1955), p. 7.

⁸ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, vol. 1, trans. by A. W. S. O'sullivan (London: Luzac & Co., 1906); Richard Winstedt, *Shaman, Saiva, and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic* (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1925).

⁹ Kenneth R. Hall, "The Coming of Islam to the Archipelago: A Re-Assessment", in *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History, and Ethnography*, ed. by Karl L. Hutterer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), p. 226.

and nuanced view of hybrid traditions in the Sultanate of Pasai.¹⁰

Challenging such a notion, the Malay scholar Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas questions the extent of Hinduism's influence on the Malay-Indonesian world. Instead of being deeply ingrained in society, Al-Attas describes Hinduism as merely a "superstructure" maintained by those in power. The influence of Hinduism was more about political legitimacy than genuine cultural integration.¹¹ Al-Attas challenges the term "syncretism" in favor of "parallelism". He believes that the fusion of Islamic and Hindu traditions, implied in syncretism, did not occur; thus, parallelism showcasing similar practices coexisting without unification.¹² In other words, Attas minimizes Hinduism's cultural significance, suggesting that it primarily served as a form of political legitimacy rather than a deep cultural synthesis.

This article does not intend to entirely reject the notions of the previous scholars who emphasize either Indic traditions over Islam or, conversely, Islam over Hinduism. Instead, it builds on these debates, proposing a model acknowledging Islamic, Indic and indigenous contributions to Pasai's political culture. This model aligns more with recent scholarship and has depicted a more nuanced view between Islam and Indic. Feener, Lambourn and Meij, through analysis of Pasai gravestones *plang-pleng*, demonstrate that features such as lotus and trefoils motifs, which may have been inspired by Buddhist iconography, coexists in the gravestones. Thus, this finding indicates an active process of hybridization among multiple traditions and identities, rather than a passive process of Islamization. In other words, these studies reveal that Indic cultural influence permeated beyond the elite sphere and became integrated into the local vernacular culture.¹³

¹⁰ Kenneth R. Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100–1500* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, inc, 2011), p. 9.

¹¹ Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969), p. 2.

¹² Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement*, p. 4.

¹³ R. Michael Feener et al., "Islamisation and the Formation of Vernacular Muslim Material Culture", pp. 1–41; Elizabeth Lambourn, "From Cambay to Samudera-Pasai and Gresik—the Export of Gujarati Grave Memorials to Sumatra and Java in the Fifteenth Century C.E.", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 31, no. 90 (2003), pp. 221–84; Elizabeth Lambourn, "The Formation of the Batu Aceh Tradition in Fifteenth-Century Samudera-Pasai", *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 32, no. 93 (2004), pp. 211–48; Dick van der Meij, "Les Monuments funéraires et l'histoire du Sultanat de Pasai à Sumatra", *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2025 M/1447 H

Furthermore, Ottoman historiography also reflects similar tensions. The Islam-centric historical narrative often depicts Ottoman sultans like Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-1481) as ideal rulers who, owing to his religious zeal, successfully conquered Constantinople. Consequently, Muslims have tended to understand this triumph merely as the defeat of the Christian Byzantine empire and the affirmation of Islam's superiority. However, an increasing number of historians of the Ottoman Empire have critiqued this view, revealing a more complex interplay of traditions. They suggest that emphasizing only Mehmed II's Muslim identity is insufficient to explain his pragmatic and multifaceted approach. Rather than being merely a Muslim conqueror, Raby aptly describes Mehmed as a "Sultan of Paradox". He aspired to become a universal ruler; thus, after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, he synthesized Islamic and Greco-Roman traditions. Such hybrid forms of legitimacy were the crux of his project to build a cosmopolitan empire that transcended religious boundaries and integrated diverse cultural elements.¹⁴

These comparative case studies of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire exemplify a global trend in the Muslim governance models that favor flexibility and adaptability over rigidity and homogenization. Both Pasai and the Ottoman Empire illustrate how Muslim polities drew on multiple traditions to construct hybrid forms of legitimacy, producing inclusive and resilient statecraft. Furthermore, this article moves away from the conventional center-periphery model that casts the Middle East as the center and Southeast Asia as the periphery. Instead, Pasai and the Ottoman empire are situated within a polycentric Islamic world, where multiple centers of power coexisted and interacted within a dynamic web of relationship. This framing highlights Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean as creative centers in their own right, rather than

Studia Islamika, vol. 17, no. 1 (2010), pp. 183-93.

¹⁴ See Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium", in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, ed. by Robert Mark and Ahmet Ş Çakmak (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 195-225; Gülru Necipoğlu, "Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople", *Muqarnas Online* vol. 29, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1-81; Ipek Yosmaoglu, "History, Memory, and the Hagia Sophia Controversy", *Journal of Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2021), pp. 235-42; Giancarlo Casale, "Mehmed the Conqueror between *Sulb-i Kull* and *Prisca Theologia*", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2022), pp. 840-69; Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Julian Raby, "Mehmed the Conqueror's Greek Scriptorium", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 37 (1983), pp. 15-34.

peripheral recipients of Middle Eastern influence.¹⁵

This interpretation differs from Al-Attas's view on Pasai, which regards Arab influence as paramount, while local adaptation is seen as secondary or even subordinate to the spiritual authority of Middle Eastern Islam. In this respect, Pasai served as a key recipient of established Islamic values rather than as an independent center of cultural reinterpretation.¹⁶ In contrast, this study proposes that Pasai, while influenced by Arab missionaries, actively participated in a broader Islamicate network. Rather than adopting a fixed Islamic identity, Pasai selectively integrated various Islamic, Indic, and local influences to create a distinctive cultural and religious framework. Similarly to the Ottoman sultans such as Mehmed the Conqueror, Islamicate tradition served as a prominent source of legitimacy. Yet, Greco-Byzantine-Christian traditions were equally significant. This reinterpretation not only repositions Pasai within its own regional context but also provides a comparative lens for understanding other Muslim polities, most notably the Ottoman Empire. Both cases reveal that legitimacy was rarely derived from a single source but instead emerged through layered strategies drawing from multiple traditions.

Hybrid legitimacy helps explain how Muslim monarchs constructed their legitimacy in diverse and cosmopolitan contexts. By comparing Pasai with the Ottoman Empire, this study highlights practices across different geographies and the dynamic interplay of multiple traditions. Moreover, this article adopts a polycentric Islamicate world framework, which better explains how both polities functioned as creative centers in their own right. This framework emphasizes the reciprocal and interwoven relationships among premodern Muslim polities and broadens our understanding of Muslim governance as inherently adaptive and heterogeneous. In doing so, this section sets the stage for examining how such hybrid and polycentric strategies were embedded in specific texts, rituals, and symbols.

C. The Global Network of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire

The Sultanate of Samudra-Pasai and the Ottoman Empire were pivotal Muslim powers situated in distinct regions. Pasai lay on the

¹⁵ Klemens Kaps and Andrea Komlosy, "Centers and Peripheries Revisited: Polycentric Connections or Entangled Hierarchies?", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* vol. 36, no. 3–4 (2013), pp. 237–64.

¹⁶ Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit UTM Press, 2011); Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory*.

northern coast of Sumatra, adjacent to the Straits of Melaka, a crucial chokepoint in the global maritime trade routes of the period. This strategic position made Pasai a maritime sultanate in Southeast Asia. Its power was deeply rooted in the Indian Ocean trade network, flourishing as a vital nexus connecting South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia.

While Pasai thrived as a maritime hub in Southeast Asia, the Ottoman Empire emerged as a land-based power in Anatolia (modern-day Türkiye). The Ottomans expanded primarily through territorial conquest and by asserting control over vital overland trade routes that connected Europe, Asia, and Africa, including the Silk Road and Mediterranean networks. Despite their geographical differences, both polities exemplified the dynamic interplay of local and global influences.

Additionally, although there is no evidence of a direct formal connection between Pasai and the Ottoman Empire, this does not imply an absence of interaction. Peacock's recent study reveals how the connectivity of the Malay world, including Pasai, with the Middle East exemplified a polycentric model of authority. In this case, Melaka served as a regional outpost and an active participant within a broader network of Muslim polities. Persian and Arabic sources from the 15th century indicate that Melaka, like Pasai, was a meeting ground for merchants from Cairo, Mecca, and the Arabian Gulf *en route* to China. Such influx of traders, scholars, and religious figures helped cultivate a distinctive Islamicate identity in Southeast Asia, one that thrived autonomously yet remained aligned with other centers across the Indian Ocean, without a singular hierarchical center.¹⁷ This model of governance enabled both Pasai and the Ottomans to position themselves as dynamic Muslim authorities.

1. *Pasai: Maritime Nexus and the Vision of a Sultanate*

The Sultanate of Pasai's strategic geopolitical location on the northern coast of Sumatra occupies a critical juncture in the history of maritime trade and political development in Southeast Asia during the late 13th to the 15th centuries. Pasai served as a convenient transitory maritime stopover for traders sailing from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean to China. Its strategic position at the intersection of a fragmented trade network shaped Pasai's outlook. Pasai aimed to become a maritime powerhouse by attracting merchants from the Islamicate world, including South Asia and China. This ambition then

¹⁷ A.C.S. Peacock, "Melaka in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish Sources", *Indonesia and the Malay World* vol. 52, no. 153 (2024), pp. 155–78.

led Pasai to leverage existing trade networks and incorporate diverse sources of legitimacy.

How did the Sultanate of Pasai achieve international recognition, exchange, and networks when its origins, according to *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* (HRP),¹⁸ trace back to the interior Sumatra? The likely explanation is that Pasai tapped into the existing networks established by the Srivijaya Empire. Before Pasai rose as a Malay Muslim powerhouse in the Malay Peninsula, Srivijaya had already dominated the region. At its height from the 7th to the 11th centuries, Srivijaya was a powerful maritime empire that controlled trade in the Straits of Malacca. As a thalassocracy, Srivijaya relied on naval power and trade, extending its influence over coastal and inland Sumatra through a loose federation of trading ports. Through this system, member ports gained autonomy and military protection in exchange for pledging allegiance and providing tribute to Srivijaya's central authority.¹⁹ Moreover, Srivijaya's extensive control of the maritime trade routes in the Straits of Malacca, connecting India, China, and the rest of Southeast Asia, was essential to its dominance, granting immense wealth and political leverage over neighboring states and vassals. Acting as an intermediary through its tributary system, Srivijaya facilitated trade between its vassal states and traders from the Indian Ocean and South China Sea networks.²⁰

As Pasai gradually emerged as a powerful state, the power of Srivijaya had already waned. Pasai, which then incorporated Srivijaya's network and received an influx of wealth from trade, began asserting political control over the region and integrated itself into international communities beyond the larger Islamic world. A case in point was Pasai's relationship with the Chinese Ming Dynasty. The *Ming Shi Lu* indicates that Sultan Zainal Abidin's establishment of this tribute relationship enhanced Pasai's legitimacy and regional prominence. For instance, when Siam sought to confiscate Pasai's royal seal, a symbol of sovereignty, the Ming Dynasty intervened and compelled Siam to return

¹⁸ There are at least two versions of *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* that survive today. We chose A. H. Hill's version; see Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1960).

¹⁹ Kenneth R. Hall, "State and Statecraft in Early Srivijaya", in *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origins of Southeast Asian Statecraft*, ed. by Kenneth R. Hall and John K. Whitmore (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1976), pp. 63–5.

²⁰ Kenneth R. Hall, "Maritime Trade and Societal Transitions in the Western Indonesian Archipelago: Samudra-Pasai at the Dawn of the European Age (c. 1200-1500)", *Asian Review of World Histories* vol. 5, no. 1 (2017), p. 32.

it. This act of diplomatic protection underscored Pasai's elevated status as a recognized power within the regional hierarchy. The alliance also provided Pasai with access to China's vast markets, enabling the Sultanate to secure lucrative trade agreements and bolster its economy. In return, Pasai's stability enabled the Ming Dynasty to influence vital maritime trade routes, ensuring safe passage for Chinese fleets and allowing China to control and profit from regional trade.²¹ This strategic alliance exemplifies how Pasai skillfully incorporated external partnerships into its governance framework. By leveraging its geopolitical positions, Pasai enhanced both its domestic authority and international standing. By participating in the tribute system, Pasai reinforced its legitimacy among neighboring polities and positioned itself as a key intermediary in the broader Indian Ocean trade network.

Pasai's international connections extended to South Asia, particularly through its interactions with Gujarati merchants. Elizabeth Lambourn and Feneer's study reveals that gravestones in the Gujarati style, a fusion of Islamic calligraphy and Indic-inspired motifs, were imported to Pasai during the 15th century. This underscores the profound economic and cultural ties, together with the integration and fusion of artistic traditions between these regions, fostering a vibrant multicultural society.²² The HRP also traces interactions between Pasai and the *Ma'bari* region, possibly modern Coromandel Coast or Malabar. These connections facilitated Pasai's commerce, along with cultural and religious exchange, including the spread of Islam to the region.²³ When Ibn Battuta visited Pasai in 1345, he noted that the Pasai court shared many similarities with those of South Asia.²⁴ Additionally, the members of the Pasai aristocracy held Indian-derived titles such as *bulubalang*, *penghulu*, *pendikar*, *panglima*, and *penggawa*, among others. These connections contributed to a more effective flow of commercial commodities to and from Pasai's port within the broader Muslim international trading networks.²⁵ In addition to its international network, Pasai, as acknowledged in the HRP, also maintained strong alliances with upstream local powers in Sumatra. These alliances

²¹ Geoff Wade, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 78, no. 1 (2005), pp. 47–50.

²² Lambourn, "The Formation of the Batu Aceh Tradition"; Feener et al., "Islamisation and the Formation of Vernacular Muslim Material Culture".

²³ Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai*; Hall, "The Coming of Islam to the Archipelago".

²⁴ Ibn Battūṭah, *The Travels of Ibnu Battutah*, ed. by Tim Mackintosh-Smith (London: Picador, 2002).

²⁵ Hall, "The Coming of Islam to the Archipelago," p. 226.

were pivotal in protecting Pasai against Thai forces.²⁶

The political, economic, and cultural currents from local and international networks made Pasai a melting pot of cultures, ideas, legacies, and identities. The Sultanate of Samudra-Pasai emerged as an energetic, vibrant, and prominent maritime power by combining Srivijaya's tributary history, China's diplomatic connections, and South Asian Islamic norms. Pasai's multicultural and religious identities, together with its global trading network, made it a key player in the region's economic and political development. Under such circumstances, the Pasai rulers articulated an inclusive vision to assert their legitimacy.

2. *The Ottoman Empire as A Land-based Power*

The Ottoman Empire's geopolitical position shaped its complex identity as a predominantly land-based power. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the empire absorbed influences from Byzantine, Islamic, Persian, and Mongol traditions, thereby creating a distinct imperial identity. Unlike the maritime Sultanate of Pasai, the Ottomans expanded primarily through territorial conquest, consolidating control over key overland trade routes such as the Silk Road and Mediterranean networks. These routes, in turn, contributed to the empire's economic prosperity and exposed it to diverse cultural influences, which were skillfully integrated into its administrative framework. The Ottomans demonstrated remarkable adaptability in governing a vast and multicultural population through systems like the *timar* and *millet* and concepts like the *ghazi* ethos.

For the Ottoman Empire, the *timar* system was more than merely a method of land distribution in exchange for military service. It also demonstrated the Ottomans' ability to adapt foreign governance models to suit their own administrative needs. Rather than imposing entirely new structures, the Ottomans strategically integrated existing ones.²⁷ The *millet* system was another effective mechanism the Ottoman Empire employed to grant diverse religious communities, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, a high degree of autonomy in managing their own affairs. Each community was permitted to follow its distinct religious laws and practices, particularly in personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and

²⁶ Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai*, p. 129; Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia*, p. 305.

²⁷ Collin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300 - 1650, the Structure of Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 193–94.

inheritance, largely free from Ottoman interference.²⁸ Like the *timar* and *millet* systems, *ghazî* was also a defining yet fluid Ottoman concept. Osman I (c. 1258-1323/4), the founder of the Ottoman Empire, embodied the *ghazî* ethos through pragmatic alliances with both Muslim and Christian lords, a legacy his son continued through his marriage to Theodora, the daughter of a Byzantine noble.²⁹

The Ottoman's remarkable adaptability enabled the empire to govern its vast and diverse population effectively. Such ability was even more prominent after Mehmed II's victory in 1453. The conquest, as Kafadar argues, marked a significant transformation of the empire's political visions. Ottoman sultans evolved from mere *ghazî* princes to universal emperors seeking to revive the grandeur image of the Roman empire under Ottoman sovereignty.³⁰ As a new emperor connecting the East and the West, the Ottomans maintained strong commercial and diplomatic ties with European powers such as Venice and France, while also navigating complex political and military relations with Persia and the Mamluks. These interactions were not only about asserting military dominance but also about establishing trade partnerships and facilitating the exchange of cultural and intellectual ideas. For instance, Ottoman contact with Renaissance Italy profoundly influenced the empire's art and architecture, resulting in a unique synthesis of Eastern and Western powers.³¹

Similar to the Sultanate of Pasai, it is inaccurate to solely emphasize the Ottoman's Muslim identity, especially when analyzing its interactions with neighboring powers and communities such as the Byzantine Empire, the Safavid Persian Empire, the Mamluk Sultanate, Venice, the Italian city-states, Hungary and the Habsburgs, as well as the maritime powers of the Indian Ocean.³² The Ottoman's pragmatic approach to governance,

²⁸ Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 216–17; Halil Inalcik, "The Policy of Mehmed II toward the Greek Population of Istanbul and the Byzantine Buildings of the City", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 23/24 (1969), p. 247.

²⁹ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two World: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), p. 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.148.

³¹ Baer, *The Ottomans*, pp. 240–42.

³² For a more comprehensive analysis of the Ottoman's relationship with international power, see Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*; Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in The Late Ottoman State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain (1877-1924)* (Leiden; New York; Köln: Brill, 1997); Dariusz Kolodziejczyk, "Khan, Caliph, Tsar and Imperator: The Multiple Identities of the Ottoman Sultan", in

exemplified by concepts such as the *timar*, *millet*, and *ghazi*, allowed them to effectively govern vast and diverse territories.

D. Constructing Multiple Identities and Hybrid Legitimacies

As discussed above, in both the Sultanate of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire, the construction of hybrid legitimacies, rooted in multiple identities, cultures, and sources of legitimacy, was fundamental to their respective political strategies, economic systems, and cultural influence. For Pasai, its strategic location enabled its rulers to adopt and adapt a confluence of Srivijaya's tributary system, Islamic influences from South Asia, and its local traditions and legitimacies. For the Ottomans, positioned at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it was equally logical to incorporate elements and traditions from Byzantine, Islamic, Persian, and Mongol heritages to reinforce their imperial identity and govern a vast and diverse population.

This section examines how the Sultanate of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire constructed hybrid legitimacies by merging diverse cultural, religious, and political traditions. Through a close reading of primary texts, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai* (HRP), *Târib-i Beyân-ı Binâ-yı Ayasofya-yı Kebîr*, *Tarih-i Ebül-Feth*, and *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, it highlights their adaptive strategies of governance. The discussion begins with Pasai, where local genealogies and chronicles, such as the HRP, reveal how rulers anchored their legitimacy in indigenous traditions while simultaneously engaging with broader Islamicate idioms.

It is salient to note that despite being a literary text, the HRP also functions as a valuable historical source. Naquib al-Attas have argued that the HRP encodes symbolic genealogies, Islamization narratives and political ideals that reflects the worldview of Pasai's royal court, rather than constituting mere fiction.³³ More recent scholarship likewise acknowledges that when read alongside Chinese records, tombstone, and Arabic reports, the HRP provides indispensable insight into early Malay Muslim statecraft.³⁴ The fourteenth-century Malay HRP, therefore, reveals the Sultanate of Pasai's efforts to merge Islamic and Indic traditions.

Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History, ed. by Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 175–93.

³³ Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*.

³⁴ Syaidina Sapta Wilandra, "Al-Attas and Hikayat Raja Pasai: A Source of Malay-Islamic Historiography", *Tsaqafah*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2023), p. 488.

Similarly, fifteenth-century Ottoman texts document Mehmed II's symbolic transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, demonstrating a synthesis of Greco-Roman and Islamic Influence. Together, these sources illuminate the adaptive strategies both polities employed to legitimize their rule across multireligious and multiethnic societies.

1. *Miraculous Genealogy: Putri Betong, Meurah Gajah, and Meurah Silu*

A significant aspect of HRP relevant to our discussion is the genealogical story of Pasai's first ruler, Meurah Silu. The HRP recounts the miraculous discovery of Meurah Silu's parents, Putri Betong and Meurah Gajah, by two brothers, Raja Muhammad and Raja Ahmad. The story illustrates that Raja Muhammad discovered Putri Betong after carefully slicing a bamboo tree in a jungle. Meanwhile, Raja Ahmad found the boy, Meurah Gajah, sitting atop a huge elephant in a river during an unsuccessful animal hunting expedition. The discovery of the boy was extraordinary as it was mediated by a *ghaib* (spiritual or unseen) old man and took place on a Friday, Islam's sacred day, while the boy was bathing in a river with his elephant. The two brothers later arranged the marriage between Putri Betong and Meurah Gajah, from whom two sons were born: Meurah Silu and Meurah Hasum.³⁵ Later in the HRP, Meurah Silu emerges as the central protagonist of the narrative.

The miraculous discovery of Meurah Silu's parent was far more than a simple tale. It is imbued with rich symbolic meanings rooted in Sumatran traditions of kingship and cosmology. Within these traditions, motifs such as bamboo births, water purification, and animal potency framed legitimacy in relation to the landscape and the natural order. Notably, this narrative also resonates with broader regional motifs found across South and East Asia. These symbols affirm Sumatran cosmologies by portraying Meurah Silu's rule as divinely ordained and intertwined with both natural and supernatural forces, while simultaneously situating Pasai within wider cross-cultural networks.

Before the coming of Islam, Sumatran rulers often traced their lineage to sacred natural elements, trees, stones, animals, mountains, and water, symbolizing a divine connection between rulers and the natural world.³⁶ In this context, the story of Meurah Gajah riding a large elephant

³⁵ Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai*, pp. 46–9.

³⁶ Barbara Watson Andaya, "Rivers, Oceans, and Spirits: Water Cosmologies, Gender, and Religious Change in Southeast Asia", *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* vol. 4, no. 2 (2016), pp. 239–63; Hall, "State and Statecraft".

and bathing was intended to position Meurah Gajah, Meurah Silu's father, as a mediator between the physical world and spiritual forces. By describing him seated on an elephant, a powerful animal associated with military might, masculine prowess, and spiritual authority³⁷, the HRP emphasizes his alignment with these potent forces. The river in which Meurah Gajah bathes represents purification and life-giving qualities, reinforcing the idea that his rule would bring prosperity and protection to his people.

These idiom, miraculous birth from bamboo, water purification, and animal potency, were characteristic of Sumatran genealogies of rule, grounding legitimacy in the landscape and natural order. Comparable motifs can also be found in other traditions, such as the Hindu tale of Tárávaloka in the Sanskrit text *Kathāsaritsāgara* and the Japanese *Takekōri Monogatari*.³⁸ In Pasai, however, these symbols were localized within a distinctly Sumatran framework. Putri Betung's miraculous emergence from a bamboo tree inscribed Meurah Silu's lineage with endurance and regenerative power-qualities crucial to Kingship.

The HRP presents a genealogy of power anchored in Sumatran cosmologies, animist symbolism, sacred animals, and natural forces, that was later enriched through Indic and Islamicate repertoires. As Azfar Moin shows in his study of Mughal kingship, Muslim rulers in South Asia often grounded their sovereignty in miraculous and saintly authority, drawing on idioms of sacred kingship.³⁹ In Pasai, similar idioms resonated with these wider patterns but assumed a distinctly local form. For Meurah Silu, the story reinforced indigenous Sumatran traditions of legitimacy, while simultaneously situating his rule within broader transregional cosmologies that connected Pasai to the wider Islamicate and Indic worlds.

The blending of Sumatran animist and Indic elements in the HRP

³⁷ Jane Buckingham, "Symbolism and Power: Elephants and Gendered Authority in the Mughal World", in *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence: Rethinking Human–Elephant Relations in South Asia*, ed. by Piers Locke and Jane Buckingham (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), chaps. 2–3.

³⁸ Alexander Wain, "The Conversion of the Kingdom of Pasai, Indonesia", in *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age: A Sourcebook*, 1st edition, ed. by Nimrod Hurvitz et al. (California: University of California Press, 2020); Bhatta Somadeva, *Katha Sarit Sagara or Ocean of Streams of Story*, vol. 2, trans. by C.H. Tawney (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas, 1884).

³⁹ A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

reflects the region's history as a hub of diverse beliefs. Indic influences are evident in the use of elephants as royal symbols and in the concept of sacred kingship, where the ruler's authority is both political and divine. For Meurah Silu, the story enabled him to bridge indigenous Sumatran traditions with Indic influences, presenting him as a divinely chosen leader whose power was rooted in the fusion of ancestral spirits and natural elements.

2. *Islamic Legitimacy: Sheikh Mekkah, Raja Ma'bari, and Prophet Muhammad*

The *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* also incorporates Islamicate elements to consolidate Pasai's Islamic legitimacy. The HRP narrates the conversion process of Meurah Silu into the Muslim Sultan, Malik al-Saleh, through the indirect intercession by Prophet Muhammad. The story begins with a hadith foretelling the rise of Islam in Pasai, which prompts Sheikh Ismail from Mecca and Raja Muhammad from Ma'bari (Coromandel) to bring royal regalia and officially convert Meurah Silu. Reinforcing the hadith further, the Prophet's appearance in Meurah Silu's dream is woven into the same narrative. In the dream, Prophet Muhammad names him Sultan Malik al-Saleh and empowers him to recite the *shabada*. Upon awakening, Meurah Silu is miraculously circumcised and gains the ability to read the Quran.⁴⁰

The symbolic connection to Prophet Muhammad was crucial in legitimizing Meurah Silu's rule, presenting him as divinely favored. Although modern scholars regard the hadith as fabricated, it served important political and cultural purposes by strengthening Meurah Silu's Islamic legitimacy. This connection to the Prophet positioned Meurah Silu as a saint-like figure embodying *Insān Kāmil* (the Perfect Man),⁴¹ thereby asserting that the Pasai Sultan's legitimacy derived not merely from human lineage but directly from God and the Prophet. Moreover, the fact that this story was added after the miraculous genealogy anchored Meurah Silu's legitimacy in indigenous notions of divine kingship as well as Indic and Islamic traditions. In doing so, the HRP facilitated a seamless transition to Islam without significantly disrupting pre-existing political traditions. It also established Pasai as a rising Muslim power integrated into the Indian Ocean network. In other words, Meurah Silu's

⁴⁰ Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai*, p. 55.

⁴¹ Khairudin Aljunied, *Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 52.

conversion represented both a spiritual transformation and an alignment with broader commercial and scholarly networks essential to its survival, much like Srivijaya's earlier adaptation of Indic traditions.

In addition to the direct link with the Prophet, the insertion of Sheikh Ismail's arrival from Mecca and Raja Muhammad, whom the HRP describes as the grandson of Abu Bakr, further reinforced Pasai's legitimacy. Sheikh Ismail's public coronation of Meurah Silu with regalia from Mecca symbolized the Sultan's connection to Islamic authority, particularly when he bestowed upon him the title *Shah 'Alam Zillullahi fi'l 'Alam* (Shadow of God on Earth), signifying divine right.⁴² The arrival of Raja Muhammad of Ma'bari (Coromandel) reflects the historical reality of Islamic influence transmitted through these trading routes. Raja Muhammad's presence symbolizes not only a religious connection but also the economic and political ties between Pasai and the wider Islamicate world, particularly South India. Moreover, the mention that Abu Bakr was the grandfather of Raja Muhammad, the Ma'bari king, directly elevated the status of Meurah Silu. It made Meurah Silu's reign appear divinely ordained and inextricably linked to one of the most significant temporal and spiritual figures (the caliph) of the earliest days of Islam. In short, by embedding Pasai's rulers within this prestigious lineage, the HRP strengthened and legitimized Pasai's claim to authority, not only locally but also on an international scale.

Pasai's hybridization of local, Indic, and Islamic symbols served both religious and pragmatic purposes. It reinforced social order and political stability, and by invoking the title "*Shadow of God on Earth*", the Pasai sultans aligned their statecraft with that of the Abbasid and Umayyad caliphs, who likewise used such titles to project both religious authority and political power.⁴³ Having examined Pasai's hybrid repertoire, the analysis now turns to the Ottoman Empire, where Mehmed II similarly drew upon diverse traditions (Byzantine, Greco-Roman, and Islamic) to consolidate his sovereignty.

⁴² Hill, *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai*, pp. 117–20.

⁴³ For the case of the Abbasid Empire, see Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the Abbasid Empire* (UK: I. B. Tauris & Co.Ltd., 2009); Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Disenchanting the Caliphate: The Secular Discipline of Power in Abbasid Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023)

3. *Converting Hagia Sophia: Hybridizing Byzantine and the Ottoman Legacies*

After conquering Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II's first act was to convert the grand Hagia Sophia church into a mosque. His ancestor, Bayezid I, had aspired to do the same fifty years earlier, recognizing Hagia Sophia's profound significance to the Roman Empire. Thus, transforming Hagia Sophia into a mosque underscored its symbolic importance in elevating the Sultan's prestige.

The act of conversion, however, also had personal significance for Mehmed II. Tursun Beğ, an Ottoman official historian, recorded Mehmed's deep admiration for Hagia Sophia, describing it as a paradise on earth. He marveled at its Christian imagery, such as the Virgin Mary and Christ *Pantocrator*, and praised its mosaics and marble decorations as works of extraordinary precision. After contemplating the Hagia Sophia's beauty, Tursun Beğ even claimed that Mehmed II desired to ascend to its domed surface, like *rūhu'llah*⁴⁴ *tabaka-i çârmîn-i âsümâna* (the spirit of God ascending to the fourth layer of the heavens).⁴⁵

Upon its conversion into an Ottoman imperial mosque, Mehmed II left most Christian mosaics visible; their covering only began under Sultan Ahmed I in the seventeenth century. This suggests that, notwithstanding a few dissenting opinions, Muslims praying in Hagia Sophia were not disturbed by its Christian iconography.⁴⁶ Instead, Islamic calligraphy were added throughout the interior to complement the existing decoration, including a Quranic verse (Āl 'Imrān [3]: 37) about the Virgin Mary inscribed on the *mihrab* beneath her mosaic image.⁴⁷

Another contemporary Ottoman work was Şemşeddin Karamanî's *Tarih-i Beyan-i Bina-yı Ayasofya-yı Kebir*, which further illustrates the hybridization of Christian and Muslim legacies. Karamanî's text was

⁴⁴ Ruhullah was a common epithet referring to Prophet Isa or Jesus used by Muslim monarchs. The Sultan of Aceh, for instance, in the mid-nineteenth century, used the word in his diplomatic letter to the King of French, Louis Phillips, probably to highlight their shared religious heritage as one Abrahamic religion. For a copy of King Louis Phillips's letter to the Sultan of Aceh, see D E.S. de Klerck, *De Atjeh-Oorlog in Opdracht van de Regeering met Gebruikmaking van Officieele Bescheiden Samengesteld Door*, vol. 1 (s- Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1912), pp. 435–36

⁴⁵ Tursun Beğ, *Fetih Babası Fatih'in Tarihi (Târih-i Ebü'l-Feth)*, 1st edition, ed. by A. Mertol Tulum (Istanbul: Cemiyati Yayınları, 1977), p. 64.

⁴⁶ Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument", p. 213; Yosmaoglu, "History, Memory, and the Hagia Sophia Controversy", p. 238.

⁴⁷ Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument", p. 219.

originally written in Greek, which he translated and adapted into Persian under Mehmed II's commission. Notably, he avoided portraying Emperor Justinian in a negative light, instead emphasizing continuity between Byzantine and Ottoman traditions.⁴⁸ One prominent strategy in Karamanî's work was placing symbolic Muslim figures in dialogue with Byzantine-Christian figures within the history of Hagia Sophia. He traced the origin of Hagia Sophia to Prophet Adam, thereby situating its construction within an ancient, sacred timeframe.⁴⁹ The second key figure was Hızır (Khidr), who appeared in a vision to Emperor Justinian I (referred to as Üstüyanuş in the text) to guide the completion of Hagia Sophia's construction. When questioned, Hızır reassures Justinian by saying, "*I am Hızır, the eternal. The Lord of all creation has commanded me to oversee the restoration and needs of this place of worship.*"⁵⁰ Karamanî's bolder attempt to construct hybrid legitimacy appears at the end of the narrative, where he inserts the Prophet Muhammad into the story. He asserts that on the night of the Prophet's birth, He asserts that on the night of the Prophet's birth, "*that night...the half of Hagia Sophia's dome facing the altar also collapsed.*"⁵¹ Karamanî does not elaborate further on the Prophet's connection to the Hagia Sophia. However, other Ottoman accounts advanced the notion that its subsequent reconstruction was made possible through miraculous intervention and divine blessing from the Prophet, alongside a unique mortar composed of sand from Mecca, the Zamzam holy water from the Ka'ba, and the Prophet's saliva.⁵² By introducing Adam, Hızır, and the Prophet Muhammad into the story, Mehmed II could claim Hagia Sophia as part of a shared spiritual continuum that both Christians and Muslims could revere. Through such acts, Mehmed consecrated Hagia Sophia's transition and further enhanced his image as a sacred king, divinely sanctioned to inherit and transform the Byzantine

⁴⁸ Conversely, modern Turkish popular culture depicts Byzantium and Emperor Justinian I as symbols of autocracy, corruption, and moral decay, serving as a foil to Islamic Ottoman identity. For this discussion, see Koray Durak, "The Popular Perception of Byzantium in Contemporary Turkish Culture", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2023), pp. 123–39.

⁴⁹ Şemşeddin Karamanî and Yusuf bin Musa El-Balikesrî, *Ayasofya Risâleleri*, 1st edition, ed. by Okuyucu Cihan and Belkıs Uluoğlu (Istanbul: Ketebe Yay, 2022), p. 87.

⁵⁰ Karamanî and El-Balikesrî, *Ayasofya Risâleleri*, p. 135.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–99.

⁵² Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument", p. 200; Stefanos Yerasimos, *Konstantiniye ve Ayasofya Efsaneleri: Türk Metinlerinde*, trans. by Şirin Tekeli (Istanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık A. Ş., 1993), pp. 37–8.

Empire and its Christian heritage in alignment with Islamic prophecy and destiny.

4. *Universal Rule: Sultan Fetih, Pâdişâh-ı cihân, Alexander the Great*

Following the conquest of Constantinople, several Ottoman scholars, both official and independent, bestowed new titles to Mehmed II, such as Sultan *Ebü'l-Feth* (The Conqueror) and *Padişah-ı Cihan* (King of the World), and likened him to legendary rulers like İskender-i Zül-karnaeyn (Alexander the Great). Each title reflected his image as a Muslim conqueror and a ruler who sought to unite Islamicate and Byzantine-Christian legacies.

The title of *Feth* or *Fatih* (The Conqueror) sought to affirm Mehmed II's role as the prophesied Muslim leader destined to bring Constantinople under Muslim rule. This title carried profound religious significance, as it linked Mehmed II directly to the Prophet's hadith foretelling the success of Constantinople's conquest. In his book *Tarih-i Ebü'l-Feth* (History of the Conqueror), Tursun Beğ asserted that the "miracle of the Prophet Muhammad" aided Mehmed II during the conquest. Mehmed's victory, Tursun continued, made him 'Shah of the world (*şah-ı alem*) ... the master (*malik*) of both the worldly (*dünyeye*) and spiritual realms (*ubraya*).⁵³ Thus, these titles affirmed Mehmed's religious legitimacy and portrayed him as a divinely chosen ruler, an image deeply embedded in Islamicate tradition.

Another distinguished historian was Kritovoulos, an independent Greek historian who lived under the reign of Sultan Mehmed II. He documented the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and other territories. In his *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, Kritovoulos dedicated the work 'to the Supreme Emperor, King of Kings, Mehmed, the victor, the winner of trophies, the triumphant, the invincible, Lord of land and sea, by the will of God...'.⁵⁴ Through such description, Kritovoulos emphasized Mehmed II's portrayal as a divinely sanctioned ruler possessing supreme authority over both land and sea. These titles echoed those of Roman emperors, such as Constantine (r. 306 – 337 CE) and Hannibal (d. 183-181 BCE), figures whose noble deeds were reportedly read to Mehmed daily.⁵⁵ In other words, Kritovoulos positioned

⁵³ Tursun Beğ, *Fatih Babası Fatih'in Tarihi*, p. 205.

⁵⁴ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. by Charles T. Biggs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 3.

⁵⁵ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire*, 1st ed. (UK: Wiley, 2014), pp. 108, 151; Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial 134

Mehmed II as the legitimate heir to Roman power and heritage. These titles underscored the symbolic link between the Ottoman sultan and Byzantine emperors, extending Mehmed II's legitimacy beyond his Ottoman subjects. As Cemal Kafadar argues, the conquest and the titles associated with Mehmed II marked was a decisive step toward consolidating imperial authority, signifying his evolution from a *gazi* (warrior) prince to a centralizing state-builder.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the conquest of Constantinople did not suffice for Mehmed II. He viewed the victory as a foundation for further imperial expansion. As Kritovoulos notes, Mehmed II sought to consolidate his control over territories in both Europe and Asia, aiming to secure his rule over a vast dominion and to realize his aspiration for universal sovereignty.⁵⁷ Tursun Beğ likewise articulated such a vision, calling Mehmed II *Padişah-ı Cihan* (King of the World) to encapsulate his ambition for universal rule.⁵⁸ In elaborating this grand vision, both Kritovoulos and Tursun Beğ aligned Mehmed II with legendary world conquerors such as Iskender-i Zül-karnaeyn. For Kritovoulos, Mehmed II was comparable to 'the Alexanders and Pompeys and Caesars and kings and generals of their sort.'⁵⁹ For Tursun Beğ, however, his Sultan Ebü'l Feth achieved even greater feats. Describing Mehmed II's second campaign to Albania, Tursun emphasized the immense physical and symbolic challenges of subduing the region. Despite these obstacles, he still praised Mehmed II's unparalleled military prowess, comparable to that of Alexander the Great.⁶⁰

Through titles such as *Sultan Ebü'l-Feth* (The Conqueror), *Padişah-ı Cihan* (King of the World), and *İskender-i Zül-karnaeyn* (Alexander the Great), Mehmed II projected himself as a ruler embodying both religious and secular authority. This combination of titles marked a significant transformation of the Ottoman *gazi* tradition, elevating the ruler from a mere frontier warrior to a world-embracing emperor, a second Constantine, as Kafadar notes.⁶¹ Together, these titles reveal Mehmed II's ambition to unite diverse traditions under his sovereignty, crafting hybrid

Monument", p. 198.

⁵⁶ Kafadar, *Between Two World*, p. 148.

⁵⁷ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ Tursun Beğ, *Fetih Babası Fatih'in Tarihi*, p. 64.

⁵⁹ Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Tursun Beğ, *Fetih Babası Fatih'in Tarihi*, pp. 142, 144.

⁶¹ Kafadar, *Between Two World*, p. 152; Yerasimos, *Konstantiniye ve Ayasofya Efsaneleri*,

imperial identities that transcended cultural and religious boundaries.

E. Concluding Remarks

Taken together, the cases of Pasai and the Ottoman Empire demonstrate how premodern Muslim polities operated within a polycentric Islamicate world, resisting reduction to a single center or identity. Through this comparative study, we highlight how both Muslim rulers drew upon layered traditions to construct hybrid forms legitimacy that challenge modern assumptions of exclusivity. From this perspective, Pasai and the Ottomans emerge not as derivative peripheries but as rulers who wove indigenous, Indic, Greco-Roman, and Islamicate elements into their frameworks to foster acceptance within culturally diverse traditions.

This comparative perspective also allows us to see that Pasai and the Ottoman Empire were not self-contained or unitary entities but dynamic centers of influence within the wider Islamicate space. Despite their distinct imperial characters, they shared parallel strategies in asserting legitimacy. Both the Ottomans and Pasai hybridized their legitimacies through the blending of diverse traditions and identities that transcended today's rigid boundaries Muslim versus non-Muslim. Mehmed II's conversion of Constantinople's sacred spaces, particularly the Hagia Sophia, exemplifies how sacred geography was redefined to articulate a new hybrid legitimacy. In a similar way, the Sultanate of Pasai adopted adaptive models that incorporated Indic, Islamicate, and other diverse cultural elements, producing a resilient framework of rule that derived its strength from layered repertoires.

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