

Scott Redford: A New Approach to the Permeability of Political Symbolism in Rum Seljuk Turkey

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As his work transcends what is seen as iconography, from a strictly art history perspective, the choice of Scott Redford for portrayal in this rubric may seem surprising. However, regarding the applicability of iconographical approaches to the wider domain of cultural studies, precisely his adaptation of art history methods, which integrate disparate source material in a quest for meaning, sparked the interest of this issue of META.

For most scholars in the field of Islamic history, researching premodern times normally involves reading narrative sources, that is, chronicles. Despite the so-called “documentary turn” taking place in Mamluk and Ottoman Syria,

scholars of the Middle East lack the vast array of archival material that is available to their colleagues working on Medieval Europe. Thus, taking into account other types of material generally neglected by historians might be useful (more in the tradition of archaeologists and art historians who do include material culture in general). This article discusses Scott Redford’s approach to combining written sources, epigraphy, and archaeological findings of the Seljuks of Rum in 13th century Anatolia in order to gain more insight into the iconography of power in a remote Islamic past.

Key Words

Seljuks of Rum, 13th century, Symbolism

Multiple Symbolism in Islamic Times

If a traveller comes to Konya in Central Anatolia, Turkey, he will most probably take his time to see some of the historical buildings located in the city center that date back to the Seljuks of Rum in the 13th century. Apart from the tomb of the famous dervish poet, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1273), especially the İnce Minareli Medrese with its double-head eagle stone reliefs (Illustration 1) and the Karatay Medresesi showing tiles with different mythical beings (Illustration 2) might attract the visitor’s attention (the stone reliefs and tiles on display there are not part of the buildings themselves which function as museums). Most of the depicted elements, which are apparently not part of an Islamic set of symbols, go back to the reign of sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I (r. 1220-37), under whom the Seljuks of Rum reached their peak of power and cultural prosperity. The dynasty, the Anatolian branch of the premodern Turkish Seljuk rulers and closely related to the Great Seljuks of Iran, Mesopotamia, and Central Asia, held power in Anatolia from roughly 1081-1308. After a period of consolidating their power in the 12th century, ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I managed to conquer several cities held by the Byzantines, crusaders, Turkish petty kings, and emirs. For historians today, one of the



Fig. 1: Professor Redford in Sinop. Courtesy of Scott Redford.

most important historical sources for gaining insights into his reign is Ibn Bibi's chronicle *al-Avāmir al-'alā'iyya fī-l-umūr al-'alā'iyya*, a dynastical history written in Persian. It roughly covers a period of one hundred years (ca. 1190-1290) and primarily covers the political events that occurred during that time (Yazıcı). By this, we know that 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubad I seized cities

like Sinop or the fortress of Kalonoros, today Alanya, a city which he named after himself ('Alā'iyya, which later became Alanya). In keeping with that tradition, he began a massive construction program to build or strengthen the city walls of Konya, Sivas, and other places. At the end of his reign, the Seljuks of Rum had become one of the major powers throughout the Middle East. A fact that remained largely unknown before Scott Redford's studies is that by pursuing his building program, 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubad I wanted to express his political claim as supreme ruler by linking himself to the ancient Roman and Iranian past. In this regard, following Scott Redford's approach of combining the archaeological evidence of the time with contemporary epigraphical and written sources, might give us invaluable insights into the worldview of a premodern Islamic dynasty.

What Walls Can Tell Us

Since the early 1990s, Scott Redford, Nasser D. Khalili Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology at SOAS, London since 2013, has been working extensively on findings from various archaeological sites in Central Anatolia that date back to the period of 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubad I.¹ The methodological approach he applies is that both textual and epigraphical evi-

dence is useful and necessary in order to gain a deeper understanding of the political legitimization under the Seljuks of Rum in the 13th century. This concept is, although not totally uncommon, still only used by a limited number of historians. Notable exceptions for the Rum Seljuk period are current scholars like Richard McClary and Patricia Blessing (both Islamic art historians), and the historian Andrew Peacock, who incorporate material culture and building inscriptions in addition to research based on historical texts.² Instead of neglecting one side, taking both fields of research together might be the key to making sense of the sultan's symbolic program in Central Anatolia around 1220-30. Thus, in addition to the analysis of written historical sources, Redford has done extensive research on the construction program undertaken by 'Ala' al-Din Kayqubad I at places like Alanya, Sinop, and Konya. In all of these towns, the sultan ordered a reinforcement of the city walls that originated in Roman times. These walls were not simply considered strongholds against enemies due to their shape and height, but also because of the supernatural power ascribed to them. As Ibn Bibi says in his chronicle, at the time of the siege of Kalonoros (Alanya), the sultan ordered his men to exclusively use marble projectiles as he considered marble the



Fig. 2: Stone relief in the Ince Minareli Medrese, Konya. Courtesy of the author.

only stone that could fly as high as the walls and break their talismanic power (Ibn Bibi, *Mukhtasar* 99). After the siege, when the city was his, ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I had his stone masons make marble plaques bearing the sultan’s name and title. Due to the combined power of the talismanic quality attributed to the antique marble walls and the sultan’s name, “the walls would have been doubly protected and ennobled” (Redford, “Seljuks” 150). Similar plaques were found in the city of Sinop, conquered by ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I’s father ‘Izz al-Din Kaykavus I (r. 1211-20), and subsequently reinforced by both father and son, who drew on their emirs to finance the fortification of the city walls. According to Redford, marble was used for sultanic inscriptions solely, whereas emirs and architects used

other sorts of stone. On the section of the wall they were in charge of, each emir placed his own plaque with his name and title (in Arabic and Greek), this time not for apotropaic reasons, but “as a specific mark of authority and its purveyor, ceremony” (Redford, “Seljuks” 153). Furthermore, near the citadel entrance, there is another plaque which belongs to the reign of the sultan’s father. It bears a text - not in Arabic, as one might have supposed as it was the official language of inscriptions under the Seljuks, but rather in Persian -, praising ‘Izz al-Din Kaykavus I as the conqueror who took Sinop “with the sword of Khusraw, victor over the enemies of Kaykavus”. Both of these are famous figures from the *Shāhnāma*, the Persian *Book of Kings* of Firdawsi (d. ca. 1020) based on pre-Islamic Iranian traditions. Walls, not just at that time, had more importance than mere defense, but were also full of symbolic meaning.

Political Symbolism in Seljuk Times

Allusions to the Iranian tradition of heroism and kingship played a crucial role in the self-understanding of the Seljuk dynasty. This is clearly shown by the names of the sultans: ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I had, like his father ‘Izz al-Din Kaykavus I, his son Ghiyath al-Din Kaykhusraw II and his grandson ‘Izz al-Din Kaykavus II both an



Fig. 3: Glazed tile in the Karatay Medresesi, Konya. Courtesy of the author.

Arabic *laqab* or regnal name and a pre-Islamic Iranian name that was derived from the *Book of Kings*. Ibn Bibi states that the sultans took pleasure in reading the *Siyāsatnāma* or *Book of Government*, a mirror for princes by Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092), the Persian vizier of the Great Seljuks (Ibn Bibi, *al-Avāmir* 228). The British historian of Seljuk times Andrew Peacock concludes that “the reign of ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I saw the growth of the taste for Persianate culture that had been gradually developing in Anatolia since the late 12th century”. This appreciation of the Persian culture particularly found expression on the walls of Konya where, according to Ibn Bibi, inscriptions existed that contained citations from the *Book of Kings* and wisdom literature, the Koran, and the

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Prophetic tradition (Ibn Bibi, *Mukhtasar* 104-105). This brings us back to the historical sites of Konya today.

A Comprehensive Approach

Apart from the account on the reconstructed walls of Konya under sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I given by the Seljuk historian Ibn Bibi, more details are revealed by travelers’ accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries. Their travelogues tell us that apart from spolia, there had been “many original thirteenth-century Seljuq figural reliefs, including angels, lions, a sphinx, a double-headed eagle, a dragon, fish, and a relief showing two chain-mail-clad footsoldiers grasping broadswords” (Redford, “Seljuks” 153). Compared to other city wall structures of that time, Redford comes to the conclusion that “no other city walls match those of Konya for their literary and iconographic complexity” (Redford, “Century” 221). In addition to the literary sources, parts of the former city wall of Konya are still in existence today, bearing the royal imagery of double-headed angels already mentioned, and the inscriptions *al-sultān* and *al-sultānī*, meaning that the building or wall belonged to the sultanic domain.

Another site built under the same sultan is the Kubadabad palace at the Beyşehir Lake which contained many tiles with

eagles as well as the *al-sultān* inscriptions. Most of these are on display in the Karatay Medresesi in the centre of Konya. In combining textual sources like contemporary chronicles, and later descriptions found in travelogues, as well as epigraphical and existing archaeological evidence, Redford aims to gain a better understanding of the political representation used by the sultan and his self-understanding. In regard to the imagery program of symbolic power applied by sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I, Redford supposes the aspect of *istiqbāl* (official welcoming) of guests (besides ceremonies of triumph and largess) as a reason for the special decoration of the walls (Redford, “Seljuks” 154). The depiction of a world of myth and legend found on these walls – eagles, lions, dragons, the direct allusion to figures from the *Book of Kings*, the usage of spolia with talismanic quality – all these elements may lead to the assumption that the Seljuk sultans (at least ‘Ala’ al-Din Kayqubad I and his father ‘Izz al-Din Kaykavus I) placed themselves in a mythic context in order to make sense of traditions as different as the pre-Islamic antiquity of Anatolia, elements from the Persian past (e.g. the *Book of Kings*), and the Islamic tradition of the Prophet and the Koran. Many elements coming from these traditions were carved into stone and thereby inserted into “a visual universe”

(Redford, “Seljuks” 154), which heavily expanded the field of symbolic reference of the Seljuk rulers. This process came to an end when the Seljuks were replaced by other Turkish dynasties, who drew less on Iranian myths than on Anatolian Turkish epics. When taking into account Redford’s approach of applying different fields of research to shed light on the permeability of the Rum Seljuk political iconography, standing in front of the double-headed eagles and mythical creatures found on Seljuk tiles in the Karatay Medresesi, and the stone reliefs in the İnce Minareli Medrese in Konya reveals fascinating new gateways for understanding the past.

Notes

¹ His newest book on Seljuk inscriptions in Sinop is *Legends of Authority* (2015). See the list of publications on the SOAS university website <https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff92807.php>.

² See, for example, Andrew C.S. Peacock's book *The Great Seljuk Empire*, Edinburgh UP, 2015.

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