"This is imaginative and innovative scholarship that jumps over the walls between religious studies, art, history, and cultural criticism. The case studies of images are wide-ranging, from temple lootings in medieval wars and representations of Indo-Muslim iconoclasm, to colonial renderings, modern commodifications, and revisions on the part of contemporary India's religious right. Davis walks the reader through great historical periods pointing out everywhere the situated practices by which the meanings of images are constantly being remade."

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Journal of Asian Studies
Images Overthrown

At the onset of the eleventh century Mahommed, the Turkic ruler of Ghasna in present-day Afghanistan, launched a series of military campaigns into the Indian subcontinent. He conquered and incorporated the fertile Punjab into the Ghaznavid state and made Lahore his provincial capital. Then he mounted raids eastward into the Gangetic plain as far as Kanyakubja, and later southward into Gujarat. Mahommed was an observant Sunni Muslim and the Ghaznavid polity was an Islamic state. Though this was not the first encounter of an Islamic ruler with India, the campaigns of Mahommed in many ways set the stage for later Turkic and Central Asian Muslim warriors who would seek to establish new regimes in South Asia.

At that time, the worship of temple images, believed to be animated by powerful immanent divinities, was the central public religious cult of India. Indeed, the Indian landscape that confronted the Ghaznavids was covered with myriad temples, each filled with what must have seemed an astonishing and bewildering host of divine images. For Muslims, who worshiped a god they considered unique, absolute, transcendent, and exclusive, these Hindu practices appeared as “idolatry” and “polytheism” (shirk), anathema to the True Faith. Moreover, as Muslim warriors correctly surmised, the Indian temple cult was closely tied to the political order, with kings and ruling groups sponsoring and participating ostentatiously in the building and grand festivities of royal temples and images. So it was important for Muslim conquerors not only to denounce Hindu images for theological reasons, but also to act against them as a statement of conquest. Muslim chronicles of the medieval period repeatedly portray the destruction of politically significant images and temples, coupled with the establishment of mosques, as a conversion, a transformation of the land of the heathens into the land of Islam.

Confronted by these acts of conquest against religious images associated with the existing political order, it was equally important for Indian elites to reassert the longevity and miraculous capacities of images apparently destroyed. As physical instantiation of the Highest God or Goddess, temple images were manifestations of an Absolute that was by theological definition eternal and all-powerful. Any public demonstration by Muslim conquerors of the seeming inability of divinity to resist human attack required a rejoinder, a reassertion of the power of images. Throughout this period, Hindu chieftains and rulers repeatedly reconsecrated important Hindu temples as statements of political autonomy. So it was that certain divine images and the temples housing them took on enhanced political roles in late medieval India. Images often became crucial indices of political control among the contending warrior elites affiliated with Muslim and Hindu forms of religiosity.

Not surprisingly, both cultures developed narratives around the disputes over the status and power of religious icons. In this chapter and the next I examine these stories of Islamic iconoclasm and Hindu recovery. This chapter focuses primarily on the conquest of the Śiva Somnāth temple in Gujarat by the Ghaznavid ruler Mahommed in 1026 and on the Indo-Muslim literature that grew up around this event. The next chapter will explore the narratives of Vīśṇu Raṅganātha at Srī Rangam in Tamilnadu, particularly the traditions concerning the displacements and restorations of its images during the fourteenth-century invasions of southern India by the Delhi Sultanate.

Medieval Epic and Counter-epic

The new social and political situation of late medieval India brought about by the entry into the subcontinent of new warrior elites affiliated with Islam was reflected in new literary productions. In his ground-breaking 1963 essay, Aziz Ahmad identified two paired genres characteristic of the late medieval period: Islamic “epics of conquest,” written mainly in Persian and addressed to a Muslim audience, and Hindu “epics of resistance,” composed in Hindi and other Indian vernaculars and speaking primarily to a Hindu audience.

Indo-Muslim epics of conquest, Ahmad observes, grew out of the panegyrics written in the Ghaznavid court during the eleventh century, which celebrated the Indian campaigns of Mahommed. The genre later developed in the works of Amir Khusrav Dhillawī and Fakhru al-Dīn ‘Īsāmī, and continued up through the time of Muhammad Jan Qudsī, who composed his epic of conquest during the reign of Shāh Jahan in the seventeenth century. These works stress the destiny of Turkish warriors to subjugate India, celebrate their victories over Hindu opponents, and glorify the India that was brought into being through Islamic rule. In his ‘Ashīrā, Amir Khusrav proclaims, “Happy Hindustan, the splendour of Religion, where the (Muslim holy) Law finds perfect honour and security.... The strong men of Hind have been trodden under foot and are ready to pay tribute. Islam is triumphant and idolatry is subdued.” Yet as Ahmad indicates, these literary works are not simply martial panegyrics. They often interweave elements of romantic
court epic (hazmīya) within the fabric of the war epic (razmīya). Most common is the theme of romance across religious boundary. The Muslim hero falls in love with a Hindu princess, “asserting the conqueror’s right not only to live but to be loved” (471). The Indo-Muslim epic of conquest concerns itself with military victory, but also with social acceptance in the new homeland.

Hindu epics of resistance, says Ahmad, focus on the chivalry and heroism of Rajput warriors in their defiant and most often doomed struggles to resist Turkish domination. These epics center around historical figures like Prthvíšṭa, the Chānḍālaṇa ruler of the late twelfth century who fought the Ghurids, and Rājā Hāmmir Dev, the king of Ranthambhor who bravely resisted Allāl al-Dīn Khaliḳ’s attacks in the late thirteenth century. Yet they also embellish the historical deeds of these individual heroes with “an accumulated arena of heroic resistance spreading over several centuries” (473). Like the Indo-Muslim epics, these Hindu counterepics celebrate battlefield heroes, and they also explore the problematics of cultural boundaries in a society composed of competing elites through the metonym of sexual crossing. Here the Hindu women are often called upon to display their own powers of resistance in rejecting the Other. Rather than give in to the demands of Muslim authors, Rajput heroines bravely enter the fire of martyrdom to preserve their unalloyed purity.

Ahmad portrays the paired epic types as growing out of “two mutually exclusive religious, cultural and historical attitudes, ... confronting the other in aggressive hostility.” In many respects, though, they are quite similar. Most of the authors of both genres write as court literati addressing ruling patrons; most give retrospective accounts that celebrate the acts of past heroes and urge their own patrons to follow these illustrious predecessors. Both types of epic praise vigorous royal action to uphold conservative, religiously based values and social orders. Although Ahmad characterizes the two epic genres as literary growths that developed largely in ignorance of one another, the framework of conflictual events upon which they center and the language of symbolic action they describe were certainly shared.

Together, these two bodies of literature conduct a vigorous debate over the status and power of Hindu religious images and temples. As the Hindu cult of divine images and the proliferation of temples posed a challenge for Turkish warriors adopting an Islamic frame of values, Muslim epics of conquest portray their destruction as a necessary feature and symbol of conquest. Ahmad quotes Amir Khusraw’s comment on the Khaliḳ conquest of the Deccan as an example of the “irresistible bravado of iconoclasm”: “There were many capitals of the devas (meaning Hindu gods or demons) where Satanism had prospered from the earliest times, and where far from the pale of Islam, the Devil in the course of ages had hatched his eggs and made his worship compulsory on the followers of the idols; but now with a sincere motive the Emperor removed these symbols of infidelity ... to dispel the contamination of false belief from those places through the muezzin’s call and the establishment of prayers.” Islamic epics depict the destruction of idols and the replacement of temples with mosques as unmistakable signs of purification, as a primary symbolic representation of the conversion of Indian lands into the world of Islam.

Hindu epics of resistance and other literary works of the period not only describe the heroic defense of temples, but also the recovery and reappearance of images. Hindu images are not passive victims in this literature. With foresight of impending invasions, divine images go into exile. They move to less vulnerable temples. They hide in forests or in underground beds and await their chance to return. Sometimes images thought to have been destroyed miraculously reincarnate themselves and are rediscovered by cows or in the dreams of holy men. When danger has passed they ceremoniously emerge from retreat and reenter their temples to be reconstituted. The return of the image is often coupled with the declaration of autonomy by a new local Hindu ruler. In response to Islamic denunciations, Hindu texts reaffirm the powers of divinities instantiated within images, assert an essential connection between images and their places, and reiterate the value of devotion and worship directed toward temple images.

Because of the retrospective, hyperbolic, and rhetorical character of these epic genres, Ahmad properly cautions his readers not to view them as transparent factual accounts. They make sense “as a historical attitude rather than as history,” writes Ahmad. Reading them as history is a serious error in which many colonial and nationalist historians have indulged. Yet even with “historical attitude” we must be cautious. We cannot take the worlds depicted in the epics of conquest and resistance as representatives of medieval “Islamic” or “Hindu” attitudes as if these were monolithic entities. Islamic epics and Hindu counterepics present the views of elite courtiers who defend conservative ideologies within settings of religious plurality and debate, and seek to persuade royal audiences to adopt vigorous military programs of conquest and resistance, respectively.

The Main Characters

Within conventional Indo-Muslim literature, there was a paradigmatic moment in the encounter with Indian religious images: Mahmūd’s successful raid on the Somānāṭha temple in Gujarat in 1026, where he destroyed the famous Ṣiva linga. There is no question that this event did take place, in one form or another. An archaeological excavation led by B. K. Thapar in 1950 revealed the foundations of the tenth-century temple buried
beneath two later structures. Thapar found evidence of deliberate breakage on the entrance steps, the pavilion floor, and the foundation stone where the Śiva linga had once rested, and also observed charred spots indicating an intense firing of the former shrine. Excavators unearthed a plethora of hacked-up tenth-century Śiva images (Thapar 1951: 105-33; Dhaky and Shastri 1974: 13; Figure 14).

However, although later historians have often confidently recounted the destruction of Somanātha based on Muslim accounts, the details of the event itself prove to be intractable. Rather than offering another attempt at historiographical reconstruction, I want to look at the ways later Muslim narratives reimagined and retold Mahūmid’s encounter with the linga of Somanātha as an archetypal encounter of Islam with Hindu idolatry. These accounts, built upon the famous event, reinforced the status of Mahūmid as an archetypal Islamic warrior bringing new lands into the Islamic fold. More significantly, they acted as a theological and political rhetoric, constituting and affirming an orthodox Sunni Muslim community of response toward Hindu images by dramatizing and subverting the miraculous claims made on their behalf by their worshipers.

**Somanātha as the World Center of Idolatry**

Muslim narratives dramatized the confrontation of Mahūmid and Somanātha, first of all, by elevating Somanātha to be the cultic center of Hinduism. In the eleventh century, the Somanātha temple was a fairly large temple of a regional power. It stood at an old pilgrimage site on the Saurashtra coast of present-day Gujarat, one of hundreds of such sites in the subcontinent. Originally the place was known as Prabhāsa, and older texts such as the Mahābhārata describe it as the place where Soma, the Moon God, periodically recovers from King Dakṣa’s curse by bathing each new-moon night. (I will return to this story in Chapter Six.) Later the Śivas evidently appropriated the site, and subsequent versions of the local myth require the Moon to worship Śiva as his lord in order to recover his brilliance. Hence the place and the form of Śiva worshiped there became Somanātha, Śiva as “Lord of the Moon.”

In around 950 C.E. the Solanki ruler of Anahilapataka, Mūlarāja, defeated the ruler of Junagadh and brought the Saurashtra peninsula within Solanki dominion. Not long after, most likely between the years 960 and 973, Mūlarāja constructed a large and ornate royal temple to the god Śiva Somanātha at Prabhāsa. Mūlarāja was a devout worshiper of Śiva; at the same time he undoubtedly wished to signal Solanki control over the area through his conspicuous act of devotion. Medieval purāṇas and pilgrimage compilations
such as Lakṣmīdhara’s Kṛṣṇakalpataru (Tirthankaṇḍā, ch. 19) do not single out Somanātha for special treatment, as they do more important places of pilgrimage. There is no evidence that Indians of the early eleventh century recognized Somanātha as anything more than an important regional holy site, sacred to Śiva and promoted by the new Solanki overlords as a sign of their dominion over Saurashtra (Dhaky and Shastri 1974: 16-17).

When confronting the polycentric Indian political and religious order, however, Muslim chroniclers wished and needed to identify a center, the Indian equivalent of Mecca or the caliphal Baghdad. They chose to promote Somanātha to this preeminent position in their own accounts, and turned Mahmūd’s victory over Somanātha into a synecdoche for the conquest of India.

Muslim accounts claimed that Hindus considered Somanātha to be the “lord of all idols,” the central site of the Hindu cult of images. According to the belief of the Hindus, reported Ibn al-Athir, “all the other idols in India held the position of attendants and deputies of Somānātha” (Elliot and Dowson 1867: 2.472), and Abū Sa‘īd Gardī in observed, “the city is to the Hindus as Mecca is to the Muslims” (Parekh 1954: 292). Starting from Mahmūd’s own letter of conquest to the caliph in Baghdad, Muslim observers took delight in relating the size of the temple, its grandeur, and the arrangements necessary to maintain its liturgy: “the wakīj settled on it consisted in ten thousand considerable villages of those countries, and its treasury was filled with all kinds of riches. It was served by one thousand braminis; three hundred youths and five hundred females sang and danced at its gate, and each individual of those classes received a fixed sum out of the wakīj settled on the idol” (de Slane 1868: 3.332). Al-Biruni, who may have accompanied Mahmūd on the expedition, added in his Ta‘rikh al-Hind that jugas of water were brought daily from the Ganges and baskets of flowers from Kashmir to adorn the idol (Sachau 1864: 2.104).

With equal vigor they reported the various religious beliefs they were told about Somanātha. “According to the Hindoos,” reported the letter of victory, “this idol giveth life, inflicts death, worketh what it willeth, and decideth what it pleaseth... They believe in transmigration, and pretend that the souls, on quitting the bodies here, assemble near this idol, and are born again in whatever bodies it pleaseth. They believe also that the ebb and flow of the sea are the signs by which that element adores it” (de Slane 1868: 3.332). Moreover, they claimed, the temple was supported by fifty-six pillars, each of which bore the name of a different king of India as donor. Just as water and flowers arrived daily from throughout the subcontinent to support the deity, so all the rulers of India paid homage to it. In Muslim accounts, Somanātha was not only the preeminent religious image in India, but also its political center.

Some Muslim narratives portrayed India as the original home of all idolatry. Briefly, the Islamic euhemerist tradition, retold in Ibn al-Kalbī’s Kitāb al-Aswām, held that Adam, after leaving Paradise, descended onto an Indian mountain, and the children of Seth later came to worship his deceased body. One of Cain’s sons subsequently carved an idol so that they too would have an object of worship. He was the first human to make a graven image. Later, during the deluge, the idols were washed from the Indian mountain to various parts, and some came ashore on the Arabian coast. This genealogy of idolatry decided the worship of images as deriving from the veneration of a human corpse and the subsequent forgetfulness of its vortories. By taking the battle against idols to its very source in India, Mahmūd’s victory became a symbolic defeat of polytheism itself.

Where did the Somanātha idol come from? Muslim chroniclers dutifully reported some of the strange claims made by Hindus. One account held that there were thirty rings found in the idol’s ears, each of which was said to represent one thousand years of worship (de Slane 1868: 3.332). Such estimations reflected the Hindu belief in the eternity of the world, an erroneous postulation from the Muslim perspective. Other observers sought to locate the image more credibly within finite Islamic history. Somanātha (or Somnāta as they called it), they claimed, was in fact Manāt, an idol worshiped near Mecca before Muhammad’s time. Muhammad had dispatched Allī to destroy Manāt in A.H. 8, but the idol’s votaries, according to these accounts, had secretly transported it to the Gujarati coast, where the inhabitants came to worship it as So-manāta. Allī failed in his mission, and the Arab idol took on a new role among a new group of heathens.

This identification of Somanātha with the pre-Islamic idol of Mecca led the fourteenth-century poet ‘Īsāmī to portray Somanātha as the last remaining idol in the world. Muhammad, of course, was the exemplary destroyer of idols, and the paradigmatic moment was the Prophet’s destruction of the idols of the Ka‘ba in Mecca. As Ibn al-Kalbī describes it, “When, on the day he conquered Mecca, the apostle of God appeared before the Ka‘bah, he found the idols arrayed around it. Thenceupon he started to pierce their eyes with the point of his arrow saying, ‘Truth is come and falsehood is vanished. Verily, falsehood is a thing that vanishes.’ He then ordered that they be knocked down, after which they were taken out and burned” (París 1952: 27). But even after the Prophet Muhammad had destroyed all the idols of the Arab peninsula, ‘Īsāmī reported, he felt anxious since one escaped idol still existed in Gujarat. “By the power of Faith,” he prayed, “I have removed all the idols from the face of the earth. No idol has remained in the world except Manāt [Somanātha], which has become the deity of the territory of Gujarat.” How could he destroy it? The divine messenger Gabriel quickly brought Muhammad a prophecy that a king by the name of Mahmūd would
one day destroy that last vestige of idolatry. The Prophet was reassured, and
prayed, "O Lord, give him the key to the world." (Busaid 1967: 92–93).

Faced with an exotic Sa'ida cult centered on an upright, cylindrical stone,
Muslim chroniclers anthropomorphized the object (larges like Somanatha do
not have ears with thirty rings in them) and identified it with an idol already
familiar from their own past. What might have appeared radically different
and incomprehensible turned out to be, in the retelling, something known
historically. Not only did this domesticate Somanath within the Muslim
scheme of things, it also linked Mahmud’s expedition against it with the
Prophet himself. As the court poet Hakim桑adi had put it, “The K’aba and
Somanath both were made clean like the sky by Mahmud and Muhammad.
While Muhammad threw out the idols from the K’aba, Mahmud did the
same at Somanath through war” (Busaid 1967: 93). By destroying Somanath,
Mahmud not only reenacted Muhammad’s destruction of the Ka’ba idols,
but also carried out the Prophet’s direct order, left incomplete by ‘Ali, to
destroy Manis and thereby completed Muhammad’s mission to remove all
idols in the world.

Mahmud as Exemplary Islamic Warrior

At the same time as it expanded the eminence of Somanath, Musul-
mum literature was reconstructing the image of Mahmud himself.9

When Mahmud succeeded his father as ruler of the kingdom of Ghasna,
the caliph of Baghdad sent him a robe of honor, a valuable jewel, and a new
title, “Right Hand of the Empire and Guardian of the Religion.” Shortly
thereafter Mahmud undertook the first of seventeen campaigns into Indian
territories. The initial expeditions gradually extended Ghaznavid sovereignty
over the Punjab and into the upper Gangetic plain. By 1018 Mahmud was
able to march on Kanauj, which was still the political center of northern
India, even though the once-imperial Gaurjara-Pratihara dynasty ruling there
had become weakened over the previous several decades. Mahmud took the
city in a single day. He launched two more campaigns into the Doab, but
both times an army led by the Candellas of Khajuraho evidently prevented
the Ghaznavids from further conquests. Frustrated in his onward advance,
Mahmud next turned his attention south, toward Gujarat and the temple of
Somanatha. He defeated the Solaki ruler Bhanmada and sacked the temple in
1026. This was the last major campaign Mahmud undertook into India.

As the ruler of an expanding empire, Mahmud gained great renown in the
Islamic world of his own time (Bosworth 1966: 85–88). He regularly dis-
patched proclamations of his victories to Baghdad, and his claims of Islamic
conquest in India—the first major increase in the boundaries of Islam in over
seven centuries—served as compensation for the losses of Mediterranean ter-

rity to the expanding Byzantine empire. After Mahmud’s victory at Soma-
natha, the caliph conferred on him the honorary title, "Refuge of the State
and of Islam." Mahmud surrounded himself with great literary figures, sev-
eral of whom, like Abu’l-Kasim Hasan USunur, specialized in royal pane-
gyric. Eminent as he became during his own lifetime, Mahmud’s reputation
as an exemplary orthodox Sunni ruler became still greater in the centuries
after his death.

Already in several eleventh-century Persian “mirrors for princes,” which
taught statecraft through anecdote and story, Mahmud was set forth as a
ruler upon whom the princely audiences should model themselves. Kai
K’aus related several stories involving Mahmud in his Qadisnam, and
Nizam al-Mulk’s Siyajatnam reported many more (Levy 1951; Darke
1960). Anecdotes originally told of other rulers were now ascribed to Mahmud,
who was presented as powerful, impartial, just, and pious. For the Seljus of
this period, threatened by Jamiilism and radical Shi’ism, the Ghaznavid de-
fense of Sunni orthodoxy made Mahmud a particularly appropriate hero.

A more complex picture of Mahmud emerged in the work of Farid al-Din
‘Attar, the twelfth-century mystical poet.10 ‘Attar both condemned and
praised Mahmud: he criticized Mahmud’s pride and despotism, while cele-
brating him as the destroyer of Indian idols. In this latter respect, ‘Attar
restated, Mahmud was like the Prophet himself. If Mahmud was a para-
digm for others, it was because he followed the example of the greatest
human paradigm. ‘Attar also wrote of Mahmud’s romantic relationship with
his young lover and slave, Ayas. This love affair between sultan and caval-
mate, which became the focus of an extensive poetic elaboration, added a
human and mystical dimension to Mahmud’s otherwise rigorous literary
personality.11

In mid-fourteenth-century India, two important Indo-Muslim works by
Diyal-Din Barani and Fakhir al-Din Ijlani advanced Mahmud more than ever
as “the archetype of the perfect Muslim hero, a model for imitation by
succeeding generations of Muslims” (P. Hardy 1960: 107). During this period,
Tarik Ernst has argued, Mongol invasions of the central Islamic regions
and the destruction of Baghdad led the Turkish Sultanate of Delhi to view India
as a bastion of Islam. Within this embattled ideological setting, Indian Musul-
mim elites began to ascribe a religious identity to the subject population of
pagan “Hindus” within their own dominion, as a frightening threat (Ernst
1992: 24–25). Mahmud was offered as exemplary champion against these
threats.

Barani served as aristocratic courtier to Muhammad bin Tughluk for
twenty-seven years and then found himself imprisoned at age sixty-nine,
when Firdaw Shah became the new sultan of Delhi in 1351. In poverty and
exile, Barani wrote several bitter works of history and political advice. He
called himself a “well-wisher of the sultan’s court,” and evidently hoped to
regain the sultan’s favor. In his Fatiha-i Jahannda (1538), Barani made Mahmud the mouthpiece for his own cranky political philosophy, even though (as translator Mohammad Habib comments) the historical Mahmud “would probably have repudiated it from A to Z” (iiii). Mahmud set forth Barani’s view that the Islamic ruler in India must above all else seek to establish “Truth at the center” through vigorous efforts to overthrow infidelity and polytheism. “Sons of Mahmud and kings of Islam!” Barani advises in the voice of Mahmud, “You should with all your royal determination apply yourself to uprooting and disgracing infidels, polytheists, and men of bad dogmas and bad religions… You should consider the enemies of God and His Faith to be your enemies and you should risk your power and authority in overthrowing them, so that you may win the approval of God and the Prophet Mohammad and of all prophets and saints” (Habib and Khan 1961: 47). Barani considered contemporary Islamic rulers in India far too lenient toward Hindu practitioners, and placed Mahmud in the anachronistic position of criticizing future Muslim rulers of India. In Barani’s account, Mahmud observed that “the desire for overthrowing infidels and knocking down idolators and polytheists does not fill the hearts of the Muslim kings of India” (48). Such a desire, by contrast, had formerly filled the heart of Mahmud, or at least the literary construct of Mahmud.

Meanwhile in the Bahmani court of the Deccan, Isami composed the first literary epic of Muslim India, the Pañch-Pallavi or Shaikh Nama-i Hind. Isami advanced Mahmud as the exemplary hero of his epic and the first conqueror of India.

Even if any king before him [Mahmud] marched on Hindustan he retreated after raiding this beautiful land and made peace…. No one set his heart on settling in this meadow; none captured even a fortress, nor won a siege. No one demolished the idol-house of Somnath and none made the blood of enemies flow like the Euphrates…. No one uprooted the Hindu power and none demolished the old idol-houses. But his troops overran the country in such a manner that the Hindu power was destroyed completely. (Husain 1967: 66)

For Isami, destruction of “idol-houses” was a significant part of Islamic conquest in India, and Somanatha was preeminent among Hindu temples. Isami also stressed that Mahmud should serve as a model for action in the present. (I will return to Isami’s agenda within his own political situation in Chapter Six.) As with Barani, Isami used the example of Mahmud to chastise later Indo-Muslim rulers for their failures to carry out his rigorous policies. At the same time, both authors augmented Mahmud’s retrospective status.

Isami’s epic set an important precedent. Two centuries later, the Mughal court official and historian Nizam al-Din Ahmad established a new genre, the Indo-Muslim history, by leaving aside the universal history of worldwide Islam in order to concentrate on the Muslim conquest of India. The teleological frame of the new history was a narrative of gradual, progressive subjugation of India that led up to the Mughal suzerainty. “Now that all the Provinces and Divisions of Hindustan have been conquered by the world-opening sword of His Majesty,” began Nizam al-Din writing at the height of Akbar’s reign, a historical account of how this had come to pass seemed a worthy endeavor (De 1913: iv). Like Isami, Nizam al-Din (as well as other Indo-Muslim historians who followed him, such as al-Badauni and Firuzi) located the starting point for this conquest with the Ghaznavids and particularly with Mahmud, making him progenitor of Muslim rule in the subcontinent.

In his full Indo-Muslim portrait, Mahmud appeared as a commander of great determination, leading many campaigns to extend the bounds of Islam and to accumulate great wealth. Occasionally he was reproached for avarice and made an illustration for the vanity of wealth. He was portrayed as a spokesman for conservative and orthodox Islamic values, and in this vein he was proclaimed as the preeminent breaker of idols. It was his iconoclasm that linked him closely with the Prophet, as in Muhammad’s dream about the last idol on earth. The extraordinary demise of various Hindu idols came to be associated with him as well. Minhaji Siraj reported that on the night of Mahmud’s birth, “the idol temple of Wahab or Bhishan… on the bank of the river Sind, split asunder” (Ranking 1889: 76). Expansion, avance, orthodox iconoclasm, prophetic dreams, and birth miracles—all pointed to Mahmud’s victorious encounter with Somanatha as the culmination and essence of his career.

The Confrontation of Mahmud and Somanatha

Why did Mahmud march on Somanatha? Modern historians have most often portrayed the campaign as predatory. Lured by reports of the fabulous wealth of the Somanatha temple, Mahmud seized the opportunity to make a great economic gain. However, medieval Muslim chronicles ascribed to him a different motive. Ibn al-Athir reported that Mahmud, after his many victorious campaigns into the Gangetic plain, learned that the undaunted Hindu devotees of Somanatha were making a boast. The only reason Mahmud had been able to destroy the other idols of north India, the Hindus bragged, was because Somanatha had been displeased with them. Mahmud was understandably uncomfortable at being cast as the unwriting instrument of a Hindu god’s design and set out on his final great campaign into India to assert Islamic supremacy over even this presumptuous deity. Besides, he reflected, perhaps destruction of this idol would help delude
Hindus turn to Islam. When he reached Somanātha, Ibn al-Aṯīr goes on, Hindus continued to taunt Mahmūd: Somanātha had lured him there to destroy the Muslims, to avenge the destruction of the north Indian images (Elliot and Dowson 1867: 2:469–70).

**Somanātha’s Supposed Powers**

Audacious claims made by Hindus on behalf of the Somanātha image constituted the first part of the central peristrophe of Muslim accounts. Such assertions of an idol’s power were acknowledged only to be overthrown, when, revealed by Mahmūd’s superior force to be groundless. Indo-Muslim anecdotes thereby turned Hindu claims around on the claimants, by satirically illustrating their foolish attribution of animate powers to inanimate objects.

Several accounts narrated apparent miracles performed by the Somanātha idol. In some accounts Somanātha flew—that is, he floated in the air without visible support. “It [Somanātha] was held,” reported the geographer Zakariyya al-Kazwinī, “in the highest honour among the Hindus, and whoever beheld it floating in the air was struck with amazement, whether he was a Musulman or an infidel.” Upon reaching the temple, however, Mahmūd was skeptical. After investigations, he discovered that an ingenious builder had fabricated the idol of iron and the canopy above it of lodestone. His attendants removed some stones from the canopy and the idol swerved to one side. When more were taken away, the image fell powerless to the ground. What first appeared as a marvelous feat by the idol was revealed, through the expanded perspective provided by Mahmūd’s action, to be merely a mechanical contrivance.

The thirteenth-century Sufi poet and traveler Sāʾdī related a similar anecdote of Somanātha (though not involving Mahmūd), in which he observed the image miraculously raising its two hands (Figure 15). Presently he was able to explore behind the scenes, and discovered the truth: “One night, I closed fast the door of the temple and, searching, discovered a screen of jewels and gold that went from the top of the throne to the bottom. Behind this screen the Brahmin high priest was devoutly engaged with the end of a rope. Then did I become known to me that when the rope was pulled the idol of necessity raised its arm” (Edwards 1911: 109). It was human deception, Sāʾdī revealed, that empowered the idol. Hindu priests carried out the fraud.

The Sufi poet, however, was a more subtle narrator than most chroniclers, and concluded his anecdote by turning the marionette image back upon himself. “Whenever I supplicate at the shrine of the Knower of Secrets,” Sāʾdī reflected, “the Indian priest comes into my recollection. It shows...
dust on the pride of mine eyes. I know that I raise my hand, but not by virtue of mine own strength. Men of sanctity stretch not out their hands themselves; the Fates invisibly pull the strings.” After revealing the inanition of the supposedly miraculous Hindu idol, Sa’di shifted the image into a metaphor for his own powerlessness in the grip of greater forces.

Mahmūd’s own letter of victory to the caliph also sardonically considered the dynamics of Hindu belief in Somānātha’s powers. “If it feel inclined,” he reported of the idol, “it cureth every malady, and it sometimes happened, to their eternal misery, that sick pilgrims, on visiting it, were cured by the goodness of the air and by exercise; this increased their delusion, and crowds come to it on foot and on horseback from distant countries; if they obtain not the healing of their maladies, they attribute it to their sins, and say: ‘He that does not serve him faithfully, merits not from him an answer’” (De Slane 1868: 3.332). Here Hindu worshipers deceive themselves by assigning supernatural causes to natural effects and by explaining away divine failures as the result of their own moral shortcomings. As with more visible miracles, Mahmūd’s explanation of Somānātha’s supposed fears of healing naturalized the Hindu claims within and for a Muslim world of values, where divinity does not enter into objects and some idols do not effect cures.

In The Formation of Islamic Art, Oleg Grabar argues that Muslim “iconophobia” was not an essential feature of Islam, but developed within the specific historical situation of its cultural and religious encounter with an image-saturated eastern Christianity in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Reacting to the seductive threat posed by the wealth of visual imagery in Christian churches like the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, Muslims “immediately interpreted this potential magical power of images as a deception, as an evil” (1987: 95). The later Indo-Muslim accounts revealing Somānātha’s deceptions reiterated this response in the new and even more icon-filled environment of Hindu India.

Islamic Miracles and Others

It is worth reminding ourselves here that these Muslim observers were not simply pre-modern rationalists, seeking to explain all superstitious beliefs through duplicity, mechanical causality, and psychological credulity. Many were deeply interested in the marvels of creation, and viewed India as possessing an overabundance of the miraculous. As the Persian mariner Buzurg ibn Shahriyar had put it, introducing his tenth-century collection of Indian “miracles”: “God—blessed is His name and great His praise—having created marvels in ten parts, attributed nine of them to the eastern quarter and only one to the other three quarters of the earth, the west, north, and south; after which He attributed to China and India eight parts, and only one to the remainder of the east” (Sauvaget 1954: 190). This unequal world distribution of marvels explained why the Arab sailors working the eastern trade routes to China and India brought back so many extraordinary anecdotes. Along with various sorts of zoological and botanical wonders, Buzurg also reported such marvels as the giant bird who carried seven shipwrecked sailors to safety and the women of Kanyakubja who broke area nuts with their lips. He included as well strange Indian customs like the ritual suicide practiced by the inhabitants of northern Lanka before their Lord, a large black statue (193).

Within Islamic ontology, extraordinary objects and events were manifestations of Allāh’s creative omnipotence. Allāh had created the world and set it along its normal course. However, in the predictable routine of every day there was the danger that humans might forget about Allāh’s overarching mastery. Precisely by breaking with the ordinary course of things (‘ādā), marvels served as signs (ṣayyīl) that pointed to their unique Creator (Wensinck 1979: 224–25).

Likewise, Islamic authors generally recognized the possibility of miracles performed by human beings. Anecdotes collected in the hadith described in detail the marvels practiced by the Prophet Muhammad. The great Islamic philosopher ’Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn viewed extraordinary human acts as signs by which Allāh singles out those he has chosen for special roles (Rosenthal 1958: 1.188–92). There were two main types. The prophetic miracle (ma’nī ‘ījāza) was a public and rhetorical event. An opponent’s challenge initiated it. The man of faith in response produced a marvel, which served to demonstrate the sincerity of the actor as well as the impotence of the opponent to reproduce any such result. Within the framework of a contest of faith, the prophetic miracle was intended to produce conviction in the audience of witnesses. By contrast, the interior miracle or wonder (karāma) was not a sign of prophetic mission, but rather a private sign of grace bestowed upon friends of God. Muslim authors ascribed both types to the agency of Allāh, and viewed them as expressions of Allāh’s power to transgress the normal order of things in order to realize His own purposes.

Considering the status of Mahmūd in many texts of eastern Islam, it is no wonder that extraordinary occurrences clustered around him. As Minhāj-i Sirāj put it, “The Almighty has endowed him with great power of performing many miraculous and wondrous acts, such as He has not bestowed since upon any other sovereign” (Raverty 1881: 83). From Mahmūd’s own prophetic dream foretelling Mahmūd’s mission and the marvelous events on the night of his birth, Mahmūd appeared singled out to play an extraordinary role. Iṣārī relied that once, while Mahmūd was participating in Friday prayers, his ahibition became invalid. Momentarily perplexed by the dilemma, Mahmūd was saved when a miraculous stream of water appeared before him and enabled him to repurify himself (Husain 1967: 111–12). On
another occasion, according to 'Aṭṭār, Mahmūd was given a cow by an old woman and made it give unceasing milk, symbolic of bounteous divine power (Bosworth 1966: 90).

Of course, many recognized Mahmūd’s greatest miracle to be his defeat of Somanāthā.

When the potent sovereign made the expedition to Somanāthā,
He made the working of miracles his occupation.
He stalked the Chess of dominion with a thousand kings;
Each king he checkmated, in a separate game.

[ft. Raverty 1881: 82]

So celebrated ‘Umārī, a poet of Mahmūd’s court. In contrast with other, more private miracles, this was a public act in a contest of faith. Beginning with the challenge posed by Hindū claims, Mahmūd’s destruction of the idol followed the structure of a prophetical miracle: it illustrated the sincerity of Mahmūd’s actions and the ability of his Hindu opponents, both human and divine, to counteract them.

The world presented in Islamic chronicles and epics, then, was not a de-mystified one. Marvels might well break through the usual course of things, pointing to Allāh’s ever-present creative potency. This world required, however, that one carefully evaluate claims of a miraculous nature. It was necessary to distinguish clearly between true miracles, such as acts of Allāh, and those false wonders that resulted from human acts of sorcery, magic, and deceit. Otherwise, warned Ibn Khaldūn, proof could become doubt, guidance become misguidance, and truth untruth; the world itself could be turned upside down (Rosenthal 1958: 1.190). As for marvelous claims made on behalf of Hindu idols, these needed to be repudiated even more forcefully. Not only might realities become absurdities, but any admission of idol power would encroach on the terrain of special activity exclusive to Allāh.

The Breaking of Somanāthā

The most famous anecdote of Mahmūd at Somanāthā involved the priests’ attempt to ransom their idol. The twelfth-century mystic poet Panīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār first narrated this tale in his Manākī al-Tayr. It was repeated in the authoritative account of Firdawsī, and then in the West by Edward Gibbon, James Mill, and many others up to the present.13 When Mahmūd had fought his way into the sanctuary and was about to destroy the idol, goes the story, the temple brahmans offered him vast wealth if he would spare their god. Overawed by the offer, Mahmūd’s advisers counseled him to accept. They argued that destroying one idol would not do away with idolatry al-

together, while so much money distributed among true believers would be a very meritorious act. Mahmūd steadfastly refused their advice. He wished posterity to remember him not as a “seller of idols” but as a “breaker of idols.” He proceeded to aim a powerful swing of his mace at the belly of the idol, and it burst open. Out came a jackpot of diamonds, rubies, and pearls, even greater in value than what the brahmans had offered.

Apocryphal though it was, this incident earned its historiographical longevity by serving as a dramatic and personalized epitome of the confrontation at Somanāthā.14 Once again, Indian images were not what they pretended to be; what first appeared as an object of great religious value to the brahmans turned out to be merely a hiding place for treasure of a more material character. The episode identified the brahmans as the chief charlatans, just as they usually were in the accounts of counterfeit miracles—a suitable motif for a Muslim orthodoxy that disdained priesthood.

Most important, it provided the theme for the issue of Mahmūd’s motivation, answering a question historians have long since debated. Were his campaigns primarily concerned with plunder and economic gain, or did he attach real importance to the iconoclastic policy prescribed as proper to an Islamic warrior faced with the objects of polytheism?15 Refusing to view the Somanāthā icon as a commodity reducible solely to an economic value, Mahmūd insisted that it was primarily a Hindū religious object, and his first duty as a Muslim was to destroy it. The story then rewarded his righteousness with wealth, just as Allāh bestowed his mercy on those who acted as his servants.

Ghaznavid Looting

Whatever his actual motivations, Mahmūd and the Ghaznavids surely did realize great economic gains through their Indian campaigns. The Sunnī Ghaznavids, much like the Salta Colas, considered looting defeated opponents and their capitals as a legitimate and productive part of war. And, like the Colas, they too could cite authoritative precedents in their own cultural tradition for such appropriations. As the Qur’ān put it (in the sûra entitled “Victory”), “God was pleased with the believers... and rewarded them with an expeditious victory and the many spoils they were to take” (48.18-19; Ali 1964: 440-41). Allāh revealed this verse to Muhammad at the battle of Badr in A.D. 624, after which the Prophet received divine legislation on the proper distribution of wartime spoils: “Know that one-fifth of what you acquire as booty [of war] is for God and His Apostle, and for relatives and orphans, the poor and wayfarers, if you truly believe in God and what and orphans, and the poor and wayfarers, if you truly believe in God and what
reserved for divine and charitable recipients, the remaining four-fifths was left to the warriors.

On this basis, legal scholars in the eighth and ninth centuries developed general principles by which the acquisition of spoils (ghanima) from non-Muslims by force was classified as "original acquisition," taking possession of things in the state of nature, rather than as theft, since the ownership previously exercised by those opponents had been "alienated as a punishment for persistence in disbelief by all those who refused to adopt Islam (or submit to Islamic rule) and resorted to fighting with the Muslims" (Khadduri 1955: 118–19). But other conditions were also necessary. The warriors must have received the initial permission of the imām formalizing their battle as jihad, "surviving in the way of Allāh." Second, one must secure the victory before any discussion or consideration of the spoils could be entertained, for alienation of property rights took place only at the moment of victory. As a practical matter, too, premature looting could easily distract warriors from the battle at hand.

As with the dharmaśāstras, Muslim legalists concerned themselves primarily with the most contentious question, distributing the loot. All of the confiscated property, they assumed, should be collected in a single pot from which shares could then be disbursed. Following the divine edict of Badr, a share of one-fifth clearly belonged to the state, to redistribute for religious and charitable purposes, but various legal schools proposed differing ways of subdividing that portion, based on differing interpretations of the Qur’ānic passage. The remaining four-fifths by general agreement went to those warriors who had directly participated in the battle, in accord with Muhammad’s statement (reported by Caliph Umar) that "the spoil belongs to those who witnessed the battle" (Khadduri 1955: 119). Here too, though, legal authors heatedly disputed the subdivision. What about reinforcements on their way to the front when the battle was won? What about those warriors who could not take part due to illness? What proportion should be given to cavalrymen, and what to foot soldiers? What about those who employed other animals—mules or camels, or elephants in the Indian campaigns—in battle? Such matters preoccupied the learned jurists and those directly affected by their rulings, but they need not detain us here.

The Ghaznavids followed the general procedures of the Hanafi legal school in distributing the loot they acquired during their Indian campaigns. After a victorious expedition, the appropriated property would be transported from India back to the capital, where the head of the Military Department would have it valued and distributed. "The sultan took a fifth from the slaves, animals and general booty, reserving to himself within this fifth all precious metals, arms and elephants; and he had a right of first pick, safiya, from other choice articles," observes the historian C. E. Bosworth. "The remaining four-fifths went to the troops in proportion to their ranks, and with cavalrymen getting two shares to the infantrymen’s one" (Bosworth 1965: 126). The sultan would use his portion of the loot to make gifts to his favorites in the court, to decorate his palaces, and to make pious donations to religious institutions. As al-‘Utbi relates, "When the Sultan returned from Hind in victory and light, with abundant wealth and no scanty amount of gems, and so many slaves that the drinking-places and streets of Ghazna were too narrow for them, and the cattle and victuals of the country sufficed not for them, . . . the Sultan began to feel an earnest desire to expend the plunder of those princes upon some liberal work of piety and lasting benefit" (Reynolds 1858: 462–63). So with the great revenue from his 1018 campaign against Mathura and Kanyakubja, Mahmūd was able to build in Ghazna a magnificent mosque, the "Bride of Heaven," meant to challenge the great mosque of Damascus. Gilding it was the bullion of melted Hindu icons: "They spared not the purest gold in their painting and gilding, nay they employed lumps of gold, and they crushed the body-like idols and corporeal images, and fastened them into the doors and walls" (Reynolds 1858: 464–65).

The Relocation of Somnātha

Generally, early Islamic chronicles showed little interest in the past identities of Hindu images that the Ghaznavid warriors captured and destroyed. However, the objects clearly did hold interest and value for their constituent elements. Here is a typical accounting, from the contemporary chronicle of al-‘Utbi.

And amongst the mass of idols [of Mathura] there were five idols made of pure gold, of the height of five cubits in the air; and of this collection of idols there were especially two, on one of which a jacinth was arranged, such a one that if the Sultan had seen it exposed in the Bazaar, he would have considered as underpriced at fifty thousand dinars, and would have bought it with great eagerness. And upon the other idol there was a sapphire [hysanath] of one solid piece of azure water, of the value of four hundredweights of fine miskals each, and from the two feet of an idol they obtained the weight of 400,400 miskals of gold. And the idols of silver were a hundred times more, so that it occupied those who estimated their standard weight a long time in weighing them.

The gold, silver, and jewels that often constituted or covered Indian images were valuable materials and could be redeployed, as Mahmūd did, to decorate his palace and gild the great mosque of Ghazna. Chroniclers carefully
recorded the weight and value of the raw materials obtained from Indian shrines. Images of stone, less valuable and less convertible than gold and silver, were most often simply knocked over, defaced, and left behind.

Stanley Fish observes that certain interpretive strategies are designed to make all texts one. He cites as his example Augustine's directives in On Christian Doctrine for reading the scriptures and the world itself as all pointing to God's love for us and our responsibility to love our fellow creatures (1980: 170). Islamic chronicles similarly reduced the complex world of Indian images, with their varied iconographic forms and complicated mythological backgrounds, to a single interpretive criterion. All were classified under the general rubric of "idols," and the various identities the Hindus might have assigned them were presented as the results of ignorance and delusion. As idols they were valuable only for their constituent elements, since in Islamic ontology, that was all they in fact were.

Somanātha, however, appears as a partial exception to this homogenizing perspective. This idol received special treatment in accord with his special status as the "lord of all idols." The contemporary observer al-Biruni explained, "He [Mahmūd] ordered the upper part to be broken and the remainder to be transported to his residence with all its coverings and trappings of gold, jewels, and embroidered garments. Part of it has been thrown in the hippodrome of the town together with the Cakrasvāmin the idol of bronze that had been brought from Tanesvar [Śhāṁśvīvara]. Another part of the idol from Somnath lies before the door of the mosque in Ghazni" (Sachau 1964: 2.103). The other idol Mahmūd singled out for public humiliation was a large bronze image of Viṣṇu Cakrasvāmin taken to be the palladium of Śhāṁśvīvara city. Mahmūd had already brought back the Viṣṇu image to Ghazna and uncannervously thrown it down in the hippodrome, where part of Somanātha later joined it (Sachau 1964: 1.107). Firishta also compared Śhāṁśvīvara city to Mecca, and he recounted how there as in Somanātha the image's devotees unsuccessfully attempted to ransom the idol (Briggs 1966: 29-30).

Later writers such as Badauni stated more explicitly that, placed at the entrance of the Īsmī Maqṣīd, the broken idol of Somanātha was to be "trod under foot" by the faithful (Ranking 1989: 28). Lying at the base of the Bide of Heaven mosque, the Śaiva icon from Somanātha in its new situation echoed the Hindu trope by which defeated enemies were subordinated into door guardians, but in a rather more humiliating mode. And in Ghazna as in Gangakondacoilapuram, the new audience was encouraged to interact with the appropriated object. Far from offering worship to the looted deity as a subordinate member of a hierarchized pantheon, however, the faithful of Ghazna could tread on the idol of another religious community with their bare feet as they went to prayer, repudiating the polytheism it represented and reenacting as they did Mahmūd's own victory at Somanātha.

Another contemporary of Mahmūd, Abu'l-Hasan Farrukhī Siṣṭānī, claimed that the sultan uprooted the idol "with the intention of restoring it to Mecca" (Parekh 1954: 294). Putting several earlier versions together into a synthetic account, Minhāj-i Sirāj narrated that Mahmūd broke the idol and dispatched the pieces to four destinations: "He led an army to Nahrwālāh of Gujarāt, and brought away Manā, the idol, from Somnath, and had it broken into four parts, one of which was cast before the entrance of the great masjid at Ghazni, the second before the gateway of the Sultan’s palace, and the third and fourth were sent to Makkah and Madinah respectively" (Raverry 1881: 1.82). This expanded list of final destinations for the remains of Somanātha represented Mahmūd’s subordination of the Hindu deity as simultaneously religious and political, by placing it at both mosque and palace gateways. At the same time it reaffirmed Mahmūd’s own recognition of the religious center of the Islamic world, Mecca and Medina in the Arabian peninsula.

Some later accounts turned the motif of incorporation in a different and more insidious direction. According to Īsmī, Mahmūd had the idol ground into lime, and then served betel leaves spread with the lime paste to the unsuspecting temple brahmins. When the brahmin then asked for the return of their idol, as part of an earlier agreement, Mahmūd laughed and replied that he had already given it back to them. "You misguided people! The idol which you are demanding of me and for which you are raising such a clamour has been already consumed by you along with your betel-leaf. Give up the vain hope now, for henceforth your temple is your own stomach which you should worship instead of the idol" (Fussāin 1967: 87-88). The deceit enables Mahmūd to honor his word while avoiding any charge of selling or ransomng idols. Here the precedent for Mahmūd’s action perhaps comes from the Biblical narrative of Moses (Exodus 32.20), who in his fury at the Israelites’ idolatry had the golden calf melted and forced its worshipers to eat it. "Īsmī had lived for twenty-five years in the Deccan and knew Hindu liturgical practice. He may have also meant this anecdote as a sarcastic play on the distribution and ingestion of pāsāda, the leftover food of an Indian image’s meal. Besides rewarding enemies of the faith with a rather indigestible meal, such stories reminded their audience of the simple material nature, lime paste, of the Hindu deity."10

Reappearances Miraculous and Otherwise

Even reduced to paste, though, Hindu images had a way of reappearing. Hindu religious literature of the medieval period was filled with stories of "buried" or "hidden" or "long-lost" images, whose locations were revealed in the dreams of holy men or by the devoted behavior of cows.
Disinterred, the images were then returned to their temples to be reconstituted, in a show of divine resurrection and Hindu autonomy.

These miraculous reappearances, too, invited Islamic satire. After Mahmūd’s destruction of the Somanāṭha idol, ʿĪṣāmī relaced, a brahmī temple priest secretely buried a stone idol just like the destroyed one in the forest. Then, using barley as bait, he trained a calf to go every day to the spot where it was buried. When the calf was reliably habituated, the brahmī announced to the local population that Somanāṭha had appeared to him in a dream, and advised him that a certain calf would lead the townspeople to the idol’s burial place. The calf did as it had been trained. The townspeople uncovered the new Somanāṭha, proclaimed it as the destroyed idol wondrously risen again, held a great festival, and restored the idol to worship (Husain 1967: 88–90). Playing upon the most common motifs of the Hindu narratives of recovery, the Muslim narrator subverts the apparent miracle worked on a credulous Hindu public once again, by allowing his audience to see at the same time the priestly trickery producing the marvelous effect.

The Somanāṭha linga did reappear, but not precisely in the way ʿĪṣāmī described. According to the prevailing theology of Pāṇḍapa Sāivism, Śiva himself was not affected by destruction of one of his iconic “supports,” and he would gracefully return to inhabit a new, ritually prepared Somanāṭha linga if it were provided. The temple was rebuilt by the local Solanki ruler Bāhmā not long after Mahmūd’s withdrawal from Gujarat, and then rebuilt again much more impressively by the Solanki emperor Kumārapāla in the mid-twelfth century.

According to the foundation inscription of Kumārapāla’s new Somanāṭha, it was Śiva himself who ordered the reconstruction. Observing that, with the passage of Kali-yuga, his Somanāṭha temple had been knocked down, Śiva commanded his devoted bull-mount Nandī to incarnate himself as a human in order to carry out the necessary renovations. Nandī took birth in a brahmī family in the holy city of Varanasi. Named Bhāva Bhṛhaspati, he soon became famous throughout northern India for his intellect and austerities. He traveled around northern India, visiting and teaching in pilgrimage centers and royal courts. Eventually the Solanki emperor Jayasimha and his successor Kumārapāla invited Bhāva Bhṛhaspati to their court and made him chief priest.

Śiva then reminded the preceptor of his true identity and the reason for his earthly incarnation. Bhāva Bhṛhaspati examined the decaying temple and persuaded Kumārapāla to sponsor the rebuilding of Somanāṭha temple, under his own supervision. “King Soma, the Moon, built Somanāṭha’s temple in gold,” says the epigraph, “Kṣapa, whose bravery equals that of the demon Rāvaṇu, then made it of silver. Lord Bāhmādeva built the ‘jewel peak’ temple with huge beautiful stones. And when in time that had become worn out, the majestic Kumārapāla, best of all kings, built the temple for Bhāva Bhṛhaspati’s overlord, Śiva, repository for all virtues, and named it ‘Meru,’ the World Mountain” (P. Peterson 1895: 186–93). The new temple, far more than a simple restoration, was an imperial-scale temple (as the denomination Meru suggests), consonant with the expanded dominion of the Solanki regime under Jayasimha and Kumārapāla. By the mid-twelfth century, the Solanki had become the predominant power of western India, and Śiva’s desire to have his Somanāṭha temple rebuilt coincided with Kumārapāla’s wish to give form to his imperial status.

The Hindu narrative of reconstruction acknowledged the deterioration of the temple, but only in a depersonalized and dehistoricized form, as the consequence of evil times rather than human action. It went on, though, to reassert Śiva’s eternal authority, transcending the deterioration or destruction of any of his earthly habitations, and his continuing interest in the site of Somanāṭha. As in ʿĪṣāmī’s satirical view, the restitution of the Somanāṭha temple resulted from human effort, but in the Hindu inscription the narrator let his audience understand that the human agent Bhāva Bhṛhaspati was acting as the incarnation of Śiva’s divine bull and as the appointed agent of Śiva himself. We will consider other medieval Hindu narratives of recovery and restoration of images in the next chapter.

Yet Kali-yuga was still in force, and the new Somanāṭha temple and its icon did not survive unscathed. Due to the exemplary fame of Mahmūd’s victory throughout the world of Islam and the diligence of the Solanki rulers in rebuilding the temple, Somanāṭha subsequently became a primary site of regional contention, a marker of political control over the Gujarat area. According to Islamic epics of conquest like Amir Khusraw’s poetic celebration of the fourteenth-century campaigns of ʿAla al-Dīn Khalji, the Khwāzī’īnul Fatḥī (Habib 1931), and Hindu epics of resistance such as the Kānḥadade Prabhādē Kṛṣṇādeva’s Padmanāthā (Bhatnagar 1991), recounting the revolt against ʿAla al-Dīn’s rule led by a Chauhāna chiefman of Jalore, center on acts of desecration and resurrection of the Somanāṭha icon. The subsequent history of the Somanāṭha site and the literary recounts of that history form a complex topic in itself. I will return to these later developments in Chapter Six.

**Conclusion: The Implicit Antonym**

At the time of Mahmūd’s conquests in northern India, Hindu worshippers of Śiva believed that Śiva, a divinity simultaneously transcendent and immanent, would enter into fabricated objects like Śiva lingas and images, and that such animated icons could act powerfully as direct instantiations of Śiva’s presence in the human world. In accord with their own theological premises, Muslim invaders set out to reconsecrate the world of Hindu icons...
at times through physical actions directed against idols and more commonly through discourse about them.

Over time, Islamic authors created a narrative tradition concerning the paradigmatic encounter between a Muslim conqueror and a Hindu idol, a collective "epic of iconoclasm," to adapt Ahmad's term. Not only did these accounts present Mahmūd as an exemplary Muslim leader of miraculous powers and as the forefather of the Islamic conquest of India, but they also articulated and reinforced an orthodox Islamic response toward Hindu religious images. Focusing on the icon they took to be the preeminent Hindu idol, Somanātha, the epic of iconoclasm portrayed it as anthropomorphic, fabricated, material, temporal, inanimate, powerless, and deceitful. Any Hindu claims that such an idol could act miraculously were subjected to satire and subversion. Like the interpretive strategies Fish identifies as intended to make all texts one, these narratives sought to collapse all Hindu religious images into a single interpretive category, and to define a proper mode of Islamic response toward them.

In such characterizations, there lurked always an implicit antonym. Just as the miracles attributed to Mahmūd pointed directly to the God acting through him, so the Islamic depictions of the hapless Hindu deity Somanātha were meant to lead their audiences to reflect on the God who was the complete opposite, Allāh. As his very name indicated, Allāh was the unitary and unique One. He was eternal, supremely animate, self-originating, and absolutely true. As sole Creator, He alone was responsible for both the normal order of things and for those miracles that occasionally break with normalcy. He was theologically defined as radically nonanthropomorphic, immaterial, unrepresentable. Surely he would never enter into material objects fabricated by humans. No other deity could be allowed to disturb his all-encompassing divinity.