



ARTICLE

**Pilgrimage, performance, and peripatetic kingship:
Akbar's journeys to Ajmer and the formation of the
Mughal Empire**

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Abstract

Between 1562 and 1579, the third Mughal emperor Akbar undertook 17 pilgrimages to the Sufi shrine of Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer in western India. This article analyses them as a form of peripatetic kingship. It studies specific actions of the emperor in and around Ajmer to show how they articulated a specific understanding of monarchy, one that derived legitimacy from the spiritual authority of Sufi masters and sacred sites. It then shows how the strategic location of the town of Ajmer allowed the young emperor to use it as a base for military expansion and political consolidation in western and central India. It also discusses how the journeys allowed Akbar to carry out vital facets of imperial governance, like exploring the realms, forging alliances with local chieftains, and creating public infrastructure. They also served as a public site for the performance of kingship and sovereignty. The final portion of the article explains how a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualisation and performance of Mughal kingship—whereby the ideal of monarchy as a product of Sufi charisma and Islamic piety made way for more universalist and millenarian ideals—brought a sudden end to the pilgrimages after 1579.

Keywords: Pilgrimage; empire-building; Mughal Empire; early modern; Akbar; Sufism; Islam; peripatetic kingship; performance; South Asia

On 14 January 1562, the third Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605) set off westward from the imperial city of Agra on a hunting expedition. It eventually took him to Ajmer. In this town in western India Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (d. 1236), one of the earliest and most revered Sufi saints of South Asia, lies buried. Originally from Khurasan, Muinuddin had arrived in western India around the time of the Ghurid invasions at the close of the twelfth century. Since his death, his shrine in Ajmer had emerged as a major site of pilgrimage among Muslims as well as Hindus. By the fourteenth century, it had started attracting important sultans and Sufis, who undertook difficult overland journeys to offer prayers to the Sufi master.¹ During his trip to Ajmer, the Mughal emperor visited the *dargāh*, offered his prayers to the Sufi, and distributed alms and

¹ Simon Digby, 'The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India', in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750*, (ed.) Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 234–262, see pp. 251–257; Simon Digby, 'Early Pilgrimages to the Graves of Mu'in al-din Sijzi and other Indian Chishti Shaykhs', in *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad*, (eds) Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (Delhi, 1983), pp. 95–100.

CORRIGENDUM

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553

Ekber Fah (050689)

Babürtüler (020051)

YAYINLANMIS VE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

26 Ekim 2023