

Bhoja and the Image of Kingship in Medieval India

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As the subject of numerous stories and legends in nearly every Indian language, the eleventh-century Paramāra monarch Bhoja is today known as one of the greatest kings of medieval India. With well over 30 works ascribed to him, king Bhoja is surely one of the most celebrated royal writers and patrons coming down to us from India's past. While it is clear that the historical figure of Bhoja was a man of exceptional literary talent who drew to his court an impressive array of savants and poets, it is notable that during his own lifetime his reputation was confined to Malwa. It is only in subsequent centuries that Bhoja's 'larger than life' profile seems to have been made. This paper is part of a larger research project which seeks to understand this process of 'historical mythologization'. Why, for example, given the propensity for 'distant' and legendary kings like Vatsarāja, should a recent king like Bhoja suddenly become such an important figure in the Sanskrit literary tradition's image of itself? Was this connected to a new form of historicity? Does it represent a departure from the Sanskrit literary tradition's biographical and life-historical norms? Finally, the research will attempt to disaggregate elements of the now composite myth of king Bhoja by isolating narrative strands in specific textual and contextual moments to ask how and why Bhoja's image changed over time. What new values might the Bhoja cycle have embodied in each of its 'lives' and what relation did these in turn have to the changing literary and political landscape of medieval India.