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Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini: From Commoner to Vizier in the Era of the Early Seljuk Sultans

(518–527 AH / 1124–1142 CE)

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ABSTRACT

Al-Darkazini was not only a local official but also a powerful vizier during the reign of the early Seljuk sultans (518-527 AH / 1124-1142 CE). The research deals with a very turbulent time in history when changes in politics were highly unstable and the advancement of a vizier largely depended on financial and commercial activities. Ministerial positions at that time were rewards that could be obtained by those who were willing to make the most substantial financial offers thus revealing the prevailing economic and political situations. The study traces the path of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini's career and how he utilized the political upheavals to ascend his way. It takes an analytical stance which includes the use of historical sources like literary texts and other contemporary historical documents to understand his political intrigues and his rise to the position of the vizier. The findings demonstrate that Al-Darkazini was very skillful in political intrigue and he schemed in great detail to achieve his goals. He figured out a way to secure the money for his post from the sultanate's own treasury, thus, depending on the intricate nature of his relationship with Sultan Sanjar. This work reveals how important his courage and eagerness were for his power consolidation and how those occurrences regulated the politics of power of that time. Last but not least, this investigation is a vehicle for advancing the proposition of turning to such historical figures as social and political change agents and opening the doors into their methods of exploiting the openings in complex situations. The story of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini which is very difficult in nature, can be taken as one of the factors that influenced the Seljuk politics to be dominated by monetary power and personal relationships to have a deep impact. He exemplifies political survival and the ability to succeed in a harsh environment.

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1. Introduction

The Seljuk Empire was at its peak during Sultan Malik Shah's rule, and its extension was unlike any other time in history and this was largely due to the extraordinary and tireless efforts of his vizier Nizam al-Mulk al-Tusi, who was outstanding in administration and politics [1]. Because of their impulsive nature and hardly ever showing their administrative talents, the Seljuk sultans were dependent on the viziers for the conduct of government affairs and since the sultans themselves were engaged in wars and their personal matters, they had low knowledge of government and politics [2].

A power struggle emerged immediately after Malik Shah succeeded to the throne from his father, Alp Arslan. He shaped Nizam al-Mulk's identity as a power behind the throne and through that alliance he managed to be awarded with the highest privileges of office that were granted by the sultanate. Huge conflicts resulted from these powers between the vizier and the sultan as the adversaries of Nizam al-Mulk were accusing him of extravagance in the servants and the schools that he was founding in Baghdad [3].

The beginning of the hostile relations between the vizier and the sultan should be looked into a plot made by the sultan's wife's vizier, Taj al-Din al-Qawmi, whose end was Nizam al-Mulk's assassination in the year 485 AH (1091 CE) [4]. As a result, the Seljuk dynasty became a never-ending scene of political discord, which was a direct consequence of power struggles among brothers and sons. Besides that, the other Islamic states were being beaten over and over again by the Crusaders. The Abbasid Caliphate was a very fragile one, which caused its relationship with the Seljuks to deteriorate, as well as its status among others, because of the Crusader persecutions of the Muslim territories [5].

Under such circumstances, Sultan Muhammad ibn Malikshah's rule was also characterized by political crises which were mainly manifesting in such ways as alliances, intrigues, wars, and assassinations. They were so preoccupied with these struggles that they paid no heed to the perils looming over them until the time when his brother Barqiya was killed and thus his power was consolidated and his fortune and influence increased [6]. Muhammad Sultan managed to live on the throne for the period of 12 years and 6 months and when he died in 511 AH, he bequeathed the throne to his son Mahmud, a boy of only 14 years, along with a huge fortune and a well-equipped army [7].

Given all this, one can draw a general picture of the Islamic East during that period which was a time of political decline and fragmentation internally. The study of the history of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini, who not only came from a poor background but also achieved to become a significant minister in the Seljuk government, by the research team serves as a point to begin understanding the effects of the political and social conditions prevailing upon the rise of individuals in society and to delineate the political aspects of the Seljuk era, thus making a contribution to the research gap concerning the period of history [8]. The research, therefore, seeks to delve into the life of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini and to see how he used the surrounding political and economic events to climb the ladder of power and reach the ministerial position and thus it gives the full account of the intricate relations between individuals and the authority in the context of the Seljuks.

2. Theoretical Study

2.1. Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini

Qawam al-Din Abu al-Qasim Nasir ibn Ali Al-Darkazini, the Alama educated man from near Hamadan, is one of the most influential figures in Seljuk history. Al-Darkazini was born in a little village named Ansabaz and he was from a peasant background as he traced his family origins to the largest village in the district. At the same time, traditional historical sources hardly provide any

information about the vizier's upbringing and just state that he was a peasant from Ansabaz, then as a child, he moved to Isfahan and there he mastered his speech, courage, and political savvy.

Al-Darkazani's name is found in histories of the Seljuks, to the biographies of the viziers and other high officials, and the accounts of private figures. The first time he is mentioned is as one of the members of the retinue of Kamal al-Mulk al-Samirmi who was the vizier of Kahir Khatun, the wife of Sultan Muhammad ibn Malikshah ibn Alp Arslan. Nevertheless, there are no details about this early work of his in these circles [9].

Subsequently, Al-Darkazini was recognized as the vizier (secretary) of prince Ali ibn Umar, or Ali Bar, who was the closest assistant of Sultan Muhammad ibn Malikshah. A very good example of how the system worked is the case when the high-ranking officials met and Prince Ali Bar was their "ear" which means the Sultan spoke to his vizier, who in turn communicated the orders to other officials and gave them the instructions; so he thus became the final decision-maker. Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini started as a scribe in the office of Prince Ali Bar and he managed to work his way up to the inner circles of the Sultanate where he had a great say in political matters [10].

One can say that Al-Darkazini was very powerful in Sultan Muhammad ibn Malikshah's era. When the Sultan was on the verge of dying and his situation was getting worse, the only person allowed to see the Sultan was Prince Ali Bar. Muhammad had made a promise to give 200,000 dinars out of the treasury to the poor people but it was Prince Ali Bar who reminded him of it. So, the Sultan wrote his command ordering his assistant to carry out this task. This money was the root of Al-Darkazini's fortune and he became full of power and influence at the royal court thanks to the funds. Al-Darkazini started to accumulate a great fortune through buying slaves and servants, and in this respect, he was second only to Nizam al-Mulk al-Tusi, the powerful Minister of Sultans Alp Arslan and Malik Shah [11].

Al-Darkazini did not hesitate to demand the army support the next king (Mahmud), follow him and help him in the execution of his duties, at the time that Sultan Mehmed's health was at its lowest. Even after being warned, Al-Darkazini and Amir Ali Bar managed to convince the Sultan that the cause of his sickness was sorcery committed by his wife (Khatun), upon which he took drastic steps such as blinding and imprisoning her and eventually gave the order for her execution with the help of the sultan's seal. The incidents that were tightly woven together with Sultan Mehmed's demise in 511 AH, thus, became the main reasons behind Al-Darkazini's rising to the top of the power pyramid of that period.

The study of the life of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini turns out to be an eye-opening experience on how the court politics and the personal dramas of the Seljuk's not only changed the events but also increased the economic and social dynamics our understanding that became the main factors in people's lives during the historical period in question [12].

2.2. Al-Dakruni's beginnings in politics

Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini's involvement in politics was a major factor in the development of the political events of the Seljuk era. He rose to prominence during the reign of Sultan Mahmud, who became king under his father's direct supervision and in a short time of only fourteen years made himself a king of great wealth, armies, and power. Taking advantage of his relation to Prince Ali Bar and the fact that Sultan Mahmud was a little boy, Al-Darkazini managed to convince the prince that all the officials must be his deputies and that the sultan should be his only servant.

Al-Darkazini convinced Prince Ali Bar to let the sultan's army be used against his uncle, Sultan Sanjar, who was the ruler of large areas from Khorasan to Iraq, and from Ghazni to Khwarazm and Turkey. This was done by using the reason of preserving the stability and security of the state. The result of this inducement was that Sultan Mahmud moved against his uncle with hostile steps. Al-Darkazini came up with a clever idea of surrounding Sultan Mahmud from the rear of his uncle's

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lines, thus, maybe, catching him in the trap of two rival powers. This plan was formulated in Baghdad in 512 AH (1117 CE), the then Seljuk Empire's capital [13].

Prince Ali Bar was the person closest to the Sultan out of whom he took most of his decisions. He utilized this closeness for persuading the Sultan to get rid of his rival, the vizier Abu Mansur, son of the vizier Abu Shaja, who had been appointed before Sultan Mahmud's death. Prince Ali Bar fully understood the necessity of having a strong and influential vizier to be the support of Sultan Mahmud, thus, the way was paved for Al-Darkazini plots.

Even though Al-Darkazini plan was intricate, it did not take long for it to be unmasked when Sultan Mahmud's forces were defeated by his uncle Sanjar's army. The conspiracies that were concocted in Baghdad brought about the disclosure of the plots of Prince Ali Bar and Al-Darkazini to Sultan Sanjar. Matters got even more tangled when Sultan Mahmud's mother decided to inform about these conspiracies, and imploring Sanjar to rescue her son from those who were his fate controllers [14].

As the conspirators, the following persons not only incited the clash between Sultan Mahmud and his uncle Sanjar, thus leading to the latter's victory, but also they deepened the quarrel with the Abbasid Caliph and managed to reinstate Dabis ibn Sadaka in his old estates from where he had been driven out by the authorities of Sultan Muhammad, thus intensifying the political tensions further.

Not stopping at stirring internal conflicts, the Darqani also planned to weaken the areas that were the Sultans' support. Under the ruse of army preparation, he took over the state revenues, tearing off gold, silver, jewels, and other valuables from the state God's chest, thus, the Sultanate's treasury was made empty. When Sultan Mahmud asked about the wealth his father had created, he was totally surprised to find out that there was a huge difference between the past and the present [15].

Even if the Darqani's were involved in such corrupt practices, they did not come close to satisfying their ambitions. They were always on the lookout for any opportunity to further their influence and they were ready to resort to tactics such as infighting and assassinations among the princes and the commanders for that purpose. Among the most harmful actions was the decision to lift the siege at the Ismaili fortress of Alamut. Al-Darkazini mounted the campaign to lift the siege at the Ismaili after the emir had almost taken the fortress due to it being old and lengthy.

Additionally, he misused the young slaves who were under the care of eunuchs and with the help of them, he created networks of corruption, and this way the Sultanate's political life influence capability gradually eroded. The return of Sultan Sanjar to Khorasan increased the pressure on Sultan Mahmud, and also the vizier Kamal al-Mulk gained more power. Kamal al-Mulk started convincing the Sultan of the necessity of dismissing not only Emir Ali Bar but also the Al-Darkazini.

As the situations became more precarious and the dangers more imminent, Al-Darkazini understood that he needed to rearrange his position, and he also surely needed support if he wanted to keep his power. This moment was very significant in Seljuk history as it showed how the political power was shifting among different players who were coming together, and it also revealed how the Al-Darkazini's role was increasingly becoming more important in influencing the political developments during the great changes of Sultan Mahmud's reign [16].

2.3. The Ministry of Al-Darkazini for Sultan Mahmud bin Malik Shah

After the cruel confusions of terror spread in Shirvan by the faction of the vizier Shams al-Mulk that brought to his death, Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini bypassed the way and came over to Khorasan to tell his protest to the Sultan Sanjar. The move of Al-Darkazini clearly shows his realization of the

awful results that could have arisen from the villains of a mischief-making vizier and how the entire sultanate could have been shaken by their unruly behavior [17].

Al-Darkazini didn't stop his work even after coming back, he sent a letter to the sultan saying that Shams al-Mulk must be arrested and taken to Sultan Sanjar. In "Diwan al-Isti'fa," Abu Nasr Ahmad ibn Hamid, proposed that Sultan Mahmud should have the vizier killed rather than taking him to Sultan Sanjar as he was the least trustworthy. Therefore, shams al-Mulk was executed in the Balkans in 517 AH and the situation was getting worse day by day [18].

Sultan Mahmud after the death of Shams al-Mulk was going to make Abu Nasr Ahmad ibn Hamid his successor but he refused the offer and recommended his friend Al-Darkazini instead as a candidate. He told his friend Abu al-Qasim al-Ansari's to come over when he will be handing power to him. Soon after, Al-Darkazini was making it clear to everyone that he was the one without whom things could not go as he said, "The one who can manage affairs and assume responsibility has arrived. If I am not the one, then he should be the vizier."

Al-Darkazini had taken over the vizierate from Sultan Mahmud at the end of 518 AH. Most of the sultans, emirs, and military leaders were preoccupied with the fight against the Crusaders in the Levant during the first few months of his tenure. Even the Abbasid Caliphate did not take advantage of the situation of the Seljuk Sultanate to assert its independence [19].

The crises resulting from the external wars surrounded the Seljuks after they had absorbed these violent times and were waiting for Al-Darkazini to undertake the demanding political and administrative tasks of his office. Therefore, he had to make very important decisions to save the state from its enemy, overthrow him both from inside and outside. Accordingly, the time when al-Al-Darkazini could have enjoyed peace was gone; instead, his position would have required political astuteness and the ability to solve problems by this skill to be able to have power and a thorough understanding of the complicated power struggle in the region.

Al-Darkazini cemented his role as one of the main political figures among the Seljuks through his adeptness at employing these tactics while he never failed to strive for a balance between meeting the public's needs and filling his own pockets, which were the prominent features of history at that time [20].

3. Al-Darkazini’s Strategy and Ministry

3.1. The Era of Political Assassinations

Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini, the vizier, began to orchestrate the elimination of the Sultan's closest circle of people in the Sultanate. The very first person to be removed was Abu Sa'd Muhammad ibn Nasr ibn Mansur al-Harawi, a scholar who was closely with the sultans, and was killed by the Ismailis in Hamadan on Al-Darkazini's order after he was summoned by Sultan Sanjar. A similar fate befell Prince Iqnasqar al-Barsaqi who was managing the overpowering the Ismailis. Al-Darkazini tried to get Sultan Mahmud to dismiss him and when the sultan refused, he was shot in the Mosul mosque by a bullet that was intended for him by Al-Darkazini's people [21].

Additionally, the vizier Mu'tamad al-Din Mukhtasar al-Mulk Abu Nasr Ahmad ibn al-Fadl ibn Mahmud was very much loved by the people of Iraq and he grew tired of the people's complaints against Al-Darkazini. Al-Darkazini in reaction to these reports sent a secret servant of his, who was dressed as a horseman, to assassinate the vizier in 520 AH while in disguise.

After witnessing the minister's destructive deeds, Ahmad ibn Hamid, known as al-Shafi’ Al-Darkazini, became so terrified that he would be the next victim that he requested a leave to go for a pilgrimage. When he came back, he resigned his post but kept the office of the Sultan's counselor. Being anxious that Al-Darkazini might be a danger to him, he gave the minister's details to Sultan Mahmud which resulted in the arrest of al-Darkan and Anu Shirvan’s appointment in his place. Anu

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Shirvan understood that there was a chance of Al-Darkazini returning, thus he treated him with kindness at his place and permitted the people to come and see him and call him "my master," as a means of proving that he, not Al-Darkazini, was more worthy of the vacancy [22].

The period of Anu Shirvan's office was only a year in 520 AH and the political atmosphere there was changing rapidly. Sultan Sanjar met Sultan Mahmud in Khorasan in 522 AH and by his command, Al-Darkazini was released from prison. His following move was to assign him as a minister at the court of his daughter who later became Sultan Mahmud's wife. After the Sultan and his wife had arrived in Baghdad, Al-Darkazini returned to his office to continue his work as the second vizier under Sultan Mahmud in 523 AH. In the final days of Sultan Mahmud's rule, the Sultanate found itself embroiled in a deep political crisis. Looking for chances in the disorder, Al-Darkazini fabricated the story that Sultan Sanjar was planning to inherit his late daughters and that he had sent a messenger for the collection. Al-Darkazini also suggested the Sultan to let Sanjar's messenger, al-Aziz, go and if he wished, to give him good treatment [23].

However, Al-Darkazini's killing spree was far from over. By the order of al-Darkan, the vizier, Ahmad ibn Hamid, was suffocated in his prison cell in Tikrit and together with him, Prince Shirkar and his son, Umar, were killed, almost a week before the death of Sultan Mahmud. He died of an illness in 525 AH or 526 AH, according to some sources.

The series of assassinations are an indication of the nature of the fights that took place in politics at that time. Al-Darkazini's actions provoked a rift between the parties that led to the escalation of the tension level of the Seljuk Sultanate and the same time, these internal conflicts resulted in the vulnerability to the power vacuums and the rise of political instability. That particular piece of history, in fact, is only a glimpse of the background of the internal struggle which had a profound influence on the fate of the state [24].

3.2. Al-Darkazini's Ministry under Sultan Mahmud ibn Malik Shah

After Sultan Mahmud's death, Sultan Sancar, the Karakhanids, and the Karakhanids jointly decided to get rid of his brother, Abu Talib Tughril ibn Muhammad ibn Malikshah, the commander of the victorious Shirkar-tab, etc., who was killed by the Karakhanids. At first, Tughril resigned the sultanate, but Al-Darkazini, in cooperation with Aksangar al-Ahmadi Daoud, Sultan Mahmud's son, made a new agreement with him until Sultan Sanjar's coming. A year after Sultan Mahmud's death, Sultan Tughril went back at Sultan Sanjar's invitation.

During this time, the mapper Al-Darkazini sent envoys with presents to Sultan Tughril. Sultan Sanjar openly welcomed Tughril's power over the sultanate. But Sultan Mas'ud, the brother of Sultan Tughril, always longing for the throne, incited a fight with his brother. Sultan Mas'ud was defeated by Sultan Sanjar, the promoter of Tughril, in 526 AH [25].

Tughril, after taking the throne in Baghdad, named Al-Darkazini his vizier. But Al-Darkazini tricked Sultan Tughril into thinking that he was Sultan Sanjar's vizier and that he had been delegated to calm things in Baghdad. Soon after, the lost Sultan Mas'ud was back for a fight with Tughril. They confronted each other at Hamadan where Tughril was soundly beaten and had to escape from city to city with constant defeats. At the same time, Al-Darkazini was transferring his money to Rayy, thereby he was loyal to Sultan Sanjar [26].

When Sultan Tughril was in bad health, he asked Al-Darkazini with disbelief, "Where are the soldiers? Where are your forces? Where are the promises and guarantees that you gave me?" Al-Darkazini replied after a moment of thought, "Don't be uneasy or fearful. I have set up with the help of a few assassins the elimination of your adversaries and I am very hopeful that they will reign and suppress them and scatter their groups swiftly." Nevertheless, the Sultan, seeing through Al-Darkazini's treacherous and dishonest nature, became extremely angry with him and commanded that he be killed. He died in 527 AH.

Some poems that have been revived speak of the vizier Al-Darkazini, including one by Ibn al-Talmas, the state scribe, which was narrated by al-Mahdi al-Din Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn al-Khidr al-Halabi on the authority of his father. It includes the lines:

"They said so-and-so has become a vizier

I said, 'No, he has not become a vizier

By God, if I had the power over him

I would make him herd cattle!'"

In other verses, he says:

"People said they saw him

Departed from his youth

Who is his equal?

I said, 'The one who is first in line is last!'"

The first couplet of the poems unmasks the complicated fact of Al-Darkazini being a vizier, disclosing his great aversion by the public and realizing their fear of the declining situation under his administration. These poems are not only the poet's oratorical skills. They also form an essential point for the nature of politics and ways of Al-Darkazini. Ultimately, his life is ended as a warning to many, revealing the dimensions of power and the results of personal ambition in the Seljuk era [27].

4. Results and Discussion

The personality of Minister Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini is one of the mysterious characters in the history of the Seljuk Sultanate, as the extant historical records are silent on his role as a minister. In fact, a handful of sources only mention him and the dispute over his name is an indication that his persona is even more intricate than presumed. At times he was called Al-Darkazini Abu Al-Qasim, at some point as Abu Al-Qasim Al-Ansari, or Ali bin Nasser Al-Ansari which hints that he might have had different social and geographical origins. These issues can be resolved in the sense that he was tied with the village of Al-Darkazini which is the largest in the Al-Alam district and that he declined to admit his Ansabi origin as that village was populated by peasants only.

By his skill and brain, Al-Darkazini eventually made it to the post of vizier and got the most powerful person of his time, Sultan Sanjar, on his side in many scenarios that would have resulted in his death. Al-Darkazini turned into the closest collaborator of Sultan Sanjar in the affairs outside Khorasan, a loyal follower of his instructions and an implementer of all his demands without any opposition.

Subsequently, Al-Darkazini formed a pact of the most powerful princes with the leader Prince Ali Bar who was initially the Tank of Sultan Mehmed and later the Tank of Sultan Mahmoud. They were doing a lot of things that brought them advantages without caring for the harm done to the Sultanate. They held secret talks against ministers to replace them and kill them while at the same time plotting against Anushtikin (Sherkar), the commander who was given the task of fighting the Ismailis. Moreover, they misappropriated money from the treasury for their fun and luxury. Besides that, they urged a large number of people to rebel against the Sultan, Prince Debis bin Sadaqa being one of them. In addition to this, they were in the conspiracy of inciting Sultan Masoud, the brother of Sultan Mahmoud, to revolt. They did all these things with the ultimate intention of arranging the proper environment for the realization of their plans.

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Al-Darkazini tactics caused the Seljuk state's history to decline and its heritage to lose scholars and significant people besides the state becoming poorer and its wealth being depleted which in turn led to the unstable times at the end of Sultan Mahmoud's reign. Despite the fact that the Minister of Al-Darkazini was both removed and brought back, Sultan Mahmud was as powerless as Sultan Tughrul before Al-Darkazini influence. When aspiring to take over power, Sultan Masoud was on the verge of attacking, in a state of despair, Sultan Tughrul sought minister Al-Darkazini's advice regarding the armies and steps necessary to foil Masoud's army. However, besides he killed Al-Darkazini and thus freed himself from his constraints, Sultan Tughrul also passed away in the year of Al-Darkazini's death.

The conduct of Al-Darkazini unveils that not only was Sultan Sanjar cognizant of it but he was also pleased with and consenting to it which is one more reason for the mystery of his character especially in the case of his relationship with Sultan Sanjar. Al-Darkazini performing a plethora of intricate maneuvers to get what he wanted, was probably the same way that Sultan Sanjar may have profited from Al-Darkazini's presence. This paper goes that far that Al-Darkazini was the main influencer of political and social events occurring in the Seljuk period and that gives the scholars an opportunity to draw lessons from this complicated past. The character's concealed facets and its considerable influence on the course of events during that period necessitate further investigation and evaluation.

5. Conclusion

The study of the life of Abu al-Qasim Al-Darkazini and his transformation from a commoner to a minister in the era of the early Seljuks is an essential part of reconstructed history, which has a deep insight into the political and social facets and the phenomena of the period. This research is a pivotal moment in the history of the Seljuk Sultanate and exposes how Al-Darkazini took advantage of the political and economic situations to ascend the treetop of power despite the difficulties and disputes he encountered.

This research is essential since it reveals, in detail, the modalities of power and how influential political figures such as Al-Darkazini can change the state's course and events. The actions of Al-Darkazini demonstrated how individuals from modest origins could leave such powerful stories that shape the course of history, thus revealing the nature and sources of power at that time. Besides, the research gives a lot of information about the interaction between the personal and political spheres, which opens new academic discussions regarding the complicated relations of leaders and followers. It also emphasizes the flimsiness of Al-Darkazini and his actions, which resulted in the death of many scholars and other significant figures, mirroring the institutional and psychological lapses of that time period.

Ultimately, the research is an invaluable academic asset to historical literature as it offers new perspectives for understanding the historical and political intricacies around the Seljuk Sultanate. This piece of work is a call for more studies and research to deepen the understanding of the Islamic governments' history and their relations that ultimately leads to the consciousness of the region's history and its influence on the present.

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