



AFŻAL-AL-MOLK KERMĀNI, ĞOLĀM-ĤOSAYN

AFŻAL-AL-MOLK KERMĀNI, ĞOLĀM-ĤOSAYN (b. Tehran, 20 Moħarram 1279/23 July 1862; d. Tehran, 23 Moħarram 1348/1 July 1929), a prominent Iranian historian, bureaucrat, and poet of the late Qajar period. A renowned polymath and accomplished writer, he is best known for his work *Afżal al-tawāriķ* chronicling the first half of Możaffar-al-Dīn Shah's reign (r. 1896-1907), a local history and geography of Qom, and numerous travelogues detailing conditions in Qajar provincial communities.

Life and career. As Afżdal-al-Molk notes frequently in his writings, he was a direct descendant of [Karim Khan Zand](#) (r. 1750-79) through his paternal line (see, for instance, Afżal al-Molk, 1989, p. 125). His father, Mehdi Khan Širāzi Zandi, was a member of the prominent Zand family of Shiraz, but had fled to Tehran after a dispute with the provincial governor Ĥosayn Khan Neżām-al-Dawla. In Tehran, Mehdi Khan entered the service of the Qajar government through the intercession of Emām-qoli Mirzā 'Emād-al-Dawla and married the daughter of Āqā Sayyed Ĥosayn Kāšāni. There are some significant gaps in Afżal-al-Molk's early biography, as he is exceedingly brief in relating his personal circumstances. We do not even know the name of his mother. We can assume from his ascription (*nesba*) "Kermāni," that he was raised and educated in Kerman. However, neither Aħmad-'Ali Khan Waziri's history and geography of Kerman, nor two updated and corrected versions of the text from the early 20th century, each of which attempts a comprehensive



overview of the local elites, make any mention of Afżal-al-Molk or his family.

His family's wealth and their connections to the Qajar bureaucracy and Zand family in Tehran and Shiraz were sufficient to afford him opportunities and access in his early life. Afżal-al-Molk was highly educated and became a renowned polymath, excelling in a wide range of fields including composition, accounting, jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and history (Afżal-al-Molk, 2010, p. 17). He took a special interest in Arabic and became an accomplished poet and translator of Arabic texts. In 1884, at age 22, he made a trip to [Karbala](#) to advance in his study of Arabic and to connect with learned men and poets in the city. He wrote an account of his travels and experiences in Karbala in his *Safar-nāma-ye Karbalā*. This was the first of several travel writings he produced over his career.

He received the title Afżal-al-Molk during his long period of service to the Qajar kingdom. For fourteen years, he served as an official translator for the royal court and member of the *Dār al-ta'lif*, translating political correspondence and news reports from Arabic into Persian. These primarily involved materials related to the Qajars' important and delicate political relationships with the Ottoman Empire and Egypt (Afżal-al-Molk, 2010, p. 16). During this time, he worked closely with Moĥammad-Ĥasan Khan [E'temād-al-Şaltana](#), the court historian and minister of press and publications (*wazir-e enṭebā'āt*), who had a significant influence on his life and career (Afżal-al-Molk, 1989, p. 2). Afżal-al-Molk sporadically held other posts in Nāşer-al-Din Shah's administration. He served in the governance and tax administration of various rural and tribal communities, as a financial officer in Khorasan, and in 1887 to direct the finances of Qom, Sāva, and Zarand. He was then appointed *nadim-bāşi* (chief attendant) in 1889, served several years in Khorasan under Moĥammad-Taqi Mirzā Rokn-al-Dawla, and was present for a brief time in Sabzavār. He wrote a brief account of an official trip to Isfahan in 1890-91 (Afżal-al-Molk, 2001). From there, he was appointed to Qom, during which time he composed a local history and geography of the area, published later as *Tārik wa joġrāfiā-ye Qom* (Afżal-al-Molk, 1977).

Nāşer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96) was assassinated in 1896. The installation of a new sovereign, Możaffar-al-Din Shah, brought a significant change of circumstances to Afżal-al-Molk's career. Możaffar-al-Din Shah issued a royal command (*farmān*) appointing Afżal-al-Molk his official registrar of events and court historian. He also received the official title of Mostawfi Divān (Afżal-al-Molk, 1982, p. 25). Afżal-al-Molk penned the official account of the



coronation and early history of Moẓaffar-al-Din's ascension to power and then, as court historian, he compiled the *Afzal al-tawāriḳ*, a five volume chronicle history of the reign of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah from 1896 to 1900 (Afzal-al-Molk, 1982).

In 1902 he took a prolonged trip to Khorasan and from there crossed the Kavir-e Lut to Kerman. In the beginning of the travel account, *Safar-nāma-ye Ḳorāsān wa Kermān*, he notes that although he was no longer present in Tehran, nor responsible for maintaining an official court history, he maintained the title of Mostawfi Divān and was conducting this trip in an official capacity for the Qajar court (Afzal-al-Molk, 1989, p. 11). Later, he was present in Māzandāran during the [Constitutional Revolution](#) (1906-11) and wrote an account of developments there. This is notable as one of a handful of accounts of provincial developments at this important moment in Iran's history (Afzal-al-Molk, 1995).

Works. Afzal-al-Molk was an especially gifted observer and writer with a breadth of historical and geographical knowledge reflected in his works. His education and literary accomplishments come through clearly in his travelogues and histories, which are written in clear, simple prose without pretense or excessive embellishment. Moḥammad-Rezā Qaṣābiān notes at least nineteen known works and translations penned by Afzal-al-Molk, including travel writings, a court chronicle, a local history of Qom, Arabic poetry, and various translations of foreign works into Persian (Qaṣābiān). His historical and *safar-nāma* writings in particular offer a lucid view of affairs of the late 19th- and early 20th-century Iran, both in centers of power and in the court's delicate relations with elites in the empire's "guarded domains" (*mamālek-e maḥrusa*).

Afzal-al-Molk's best known work is his *Afzal-al-tawāriḳ*, an official court history of Qajar Iran between 1896 and 1900. He wrote this work as an official court historian under Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah, a position he received shortly after the assassination of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah. The text is divided into five volumes, each covering one *hejri* year. Based on his extensive travels and knowledge of Iranian history, geography, and culture, he gives a broad perspective on developments beyond the usual concerns at court over international affairs, administrative appointments, and military matters. The court chronicle tradition of maintaining an official court record of events was fading in the closing decade of the 19th century with the advent of print journalism. *Afzal al-tawāriḳ* is thus a transitional text in a rapidly changing



genre. This text includes wide-ranging and lengthy discussions of historical and political context on current issues affecting Iran and the Qajar state. For instance, in pressing claims to Khuzestan and ‘Erāq-e ‘Ajam, he delves into a lengthy discourse on Iran’s historical geography (pp. 299-304), and elsewhere criticizes inaccuracies in the court’s geographical compendium, namely, *Mer’āt al-boldān* by E’temād-al-Salṭana. He also comments critically on the political advances and commercial treaties pushed by the Russian and British Empires and the Qajars’ inability to check their growing influence (p. 155). He was especially disturbed by the painful debt accumulated by the central government. Reflecting on the staggering loans accumulated by the Qajars, he comments that “now I seek the comfort of a little contentment, and my life has mostly passed, but in this age the fortune of Iranians will not be a good one.” He retains a little optimism, recalling at length a long history of Iranian resilience (pp. 395-98).

Afzal-al-Molk’s travel writings are of particular interest to the social, political, and economic history of late Qajar Iran. His *Żafar-nāma-ye ‘azodi* recounts his travels in Khorasan in 1884-85, with particular emphasis on conditions in Mashhad. He traveled to Isfahan in 1890, and wrote a detailed study of rural conditions, craft production, and political developments throughout the province and its capital city. The most detailed of these travel works is his local history and geography of Qom, *Tāriḵ wa joġrāfiā-ye Qom*. This work appears to be closely connected to the genre of local geographical writings produced at the request of the Qajar court in the closing decades of the 19th century, although this text, along with Nāder Mirzā’s local history of Tabriz, are notable for having been written by a Qajar appointee rather than a member of the local elite (Gustafson, pp. 819-22). This must speak to the high esteem in which he was held by the Qajar court. In his second *safar-nāma* of Khorasan, he combined his trip with a visit to Kerman. Notably, he takes the long route through the Kavīr-e Lut, describing the borderlands in great detail and making suggestions about building Qajar infrastructure there, perhaps a railway. His Māzandāran travelogue, written during the Constitutional Revolution, gives significant details on the political situation in the provinces during this important period in Iran’s modern history. He frequently engaged locals in political discussions and religious concerns. His writings reveal an ambivalence towards the revolution, echoing British and Russian criticisms of the disorder and uncertainty it had caused, as well as widening the rift he saw between prominent elements of the ulema and the Qajar government (Afzal-al-Molk, 1995, p. 65).



Although he is remembered also as an accomplished poet, his works in this area have not been published or received significant attention by scholars. A collection of his poetry and other writings is registered in the Mālek Library (Afzal-al-Molk, n. d.). Among his translations, in addition to numerous governmental records prepared from Arabic sources, is an edited translation of Sir [Percy Sykes' *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*](#), prepared in collaboration with Naṣr-Allāh Khan Širāzi. Ironically, Sykes' original text includes large sections of material on Iranian history drawn from Persian language sources and local interlocutors, translated into English in summary without citation, and then retranslated back into Persian.

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