



‘ĀLĪ QĀPŪ



Figure 1. General View of Ali Qapu Palace, Real Photo Postcard, 1930s, Unknown publisher (Personal Collection of Amirali Ardekanian)



‘ĀLĪ QĀPŪ (literally “lofty gateway”), a five-storied building overlooking the Maydān-e Šāh of Isfahan from the west (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The name refers to the vaulted passageway at its center leading to the area once occupied by the Safavid palace. Flanking that passageway are two stories of smaller rooms. Surmounting it is an open portico, or *tālār*, with a roof supported by eighteen wooden columns. Behind the gateway and its portico lies a square building with three principal levels, a vaulted passageway connected to that of the gateway, a reception chamber on the level of the *tālār*, and finally a more intimate series of rooms with complex *moqarnas* vaults. Both the vaulted passage and the central reception chamber are flanked by two stories of smaller rooms, thus creating a five-storied structure. The organization of the building suggests its general function. The lower passageway served as a gateway to the Safavid palaces west of the *maydān*, while the upper levels were used for royal receptions and entertainments. Pietro della Valle has written of official receptions held in the chambers of the five-storied square building. Chevalier de Chardin gives a vivid description of an entertainment he witnessed on 16 July 1672 from a seat on the *tālār*; the ruler and his guests were served refreshments and treated to a display of marksmanship, polo, and wild animal combats in the *maydān* below. He speaks of a fountain on the *tālār* itself.

Less clear than its intended function is the history of the ‘Ālī Qāpū and its relation to the development of Isfahan. Jabīrī’s claim (reported by Honarfar) that it replaces an earlier palace is impossible to substantiate. The place where the present *maydān* and palace are located was already known in the 9th/15th century as the Bāg-e Naqš-e Jahān but its history before the Safavid period is obscure. From the time of Shah Esmā‘īl onward, however, the area had both a *maydān* and an adjacent palace. Both were visited by this monarch in 910/1505. In 915/1509 he ordered the *maydān* enlarged to better accommodate horseracing, polo playing, and target practice. Later in 984/1576 Esmā‘īl II stayed in the *dawlat-kāna* of Naqš-e Jahān.

Several phases of Shah ‘Abbās’s alterations to the *maydān* have been recently documented. Initially he followed the precedents of his ancestors in using the *maydān* for games and displays of skill, while he resided in the nearby *dawlat-kāna*. The *maydān* was covered with river sand in 999/1590-91 and its perimeter wall strengthened and decorated with paintings in 1003/1595. During a visit in 1002/1593 Shah ‘Abbās walked from the *dawlat-kāna* across the *maydān* and climbed to the roof of a *madrassa* in order to watch a display



of skill by his infantry. The designation of Isfahan as his capital in 1005/1596-97 led to further changes in the *maydān*. Seeking to make it the center of a new commercial district in 1011/1602-03 or 1012/1603-04 he ordered the construction of shops along the inner face of its perimeter wall. Two stories of chambers were erected, the lower level serving as shops, the upper as apartments.

Recent restorations of the ‘Alī Qāpū have revealed that it was built in several stages. First erected appears to have been the central five-storied building with its vaulted passage and upper reception chamber. No traces of an earlier building were discovered within it, but a mud-brick wall found between its western face and the eastern foundation of the *tālār* may be the remnant of an earlier *maydān* wall. It is probable that the square building did not exist in 1002/1593 when Shah ‘Abbās climbed to the roof of the *madrassa*. The square building’s construction may have followed the designation of Isfahan as the capital when the need for an official reception site would have been more pressing. It is probable that only the central square building dates from the reign of Shah ‘Abbās I. In 1617 Pietro della Valle wrote a detailed description of the reception palace’s interior making no mention of the *tālār*; he stressed the many small rooms opening off of larger ones and the narrow stairway he climbed to see them. This accords well with the plan of the square building. Also revealing is Thomas Herbert’s description based on his 1628 visit: “The King’s Pallace . . . conjoynes the west side of the Mydan, possessing a large quantity backwards but juts not to the street further than the other buildings, nor to the street side gives any magnifick front or state. . . .” He further describes the building as “tarrassed above and garnisht with a Pharoe, overtopping many Mosques, and excellent for view and breathing.” This description would fit a stage when the square building was flush with the *maydān* wall and its roof was used as a terrace. According to Honarfar, literary and historical evidence dates the erection of the *tālār* to 1053/1643-44 during the reign of ‘Abbās II. Its substructure contains a passageway in alignment with the shops around the inner wall of the *maydān* so that it could be contemporary with them. The Italian restorers noticed, however, that the masonry of the substructure resembled that of an enclosed stairway added to the south side of the square building to provide access to the *tālār*. It thus seems likely that both the *tālār* and its substructure date from 1643-44. Probably added at this time was the cistern erected along the northern face of the square building to provide water for the fountain of the *tālār*.



It is uncertain when the name ‘Ālī Qāpū was first used. In his list of buildings erected by ‘Abbās I, Eskandar Beg Monšī lists the *dargāh-e panj ṭabaqa* without any distinguishing epithet. Della Valle calls it the “King’s palace,” as does Herbert who also describes it as “the King’s doore” and “the King’s house.” Chardin, resident in Isfahan during 1666-67 and 1672-77, gives a more florid description: “That Magnificent Pile, which they call Hali Kapi or Haly’s Gate, or by another interpretation the High Gate.” It is possible that the term ‘Ālī Qāpū gained currency only after the 1053/1643-44 addition of gateway and *tālār*.

Recent restorations have brought to light wall paintings which accord well with the descriptions left by Herbert and Della Valle of a colorful ensemble with much gold including some paintings of men and women. Della Valle is most explicit about their arrangement, noting that many are drinking and some wear European hats.

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