Published: December 15, 1993
Last Updated: August 19, 2013

COURTS AND COURTIERS VI. IN THE SAFAVID PERIOD

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vi. In the Safavid period

The organization of the court and its administration. Some ninety years ago W. W. Barthold made his classic statement on the subject of the political organization of the eastern Muslim world: "Throughout the whole system of the Eastern Muslim political organization there runs like a red thread the division of all the organs of administration into two main categories, the *dargāh* (palace) and *dīvān* (chancery)" (*Turkestan* [2], p. 227; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 24-25).

Although Barthold was describing the situation before the beginning of the 13th century, his statement is still valid for the Safavid period, as the whole Safavid administrative system was divided vertically between the *ḵāṣṣa* (crown) and the *ʿamma* or *mamālek* (state) branches. At the same time the Safavid administrative system was initially divided horizontally between the two "founding nations" of the Safavid state, the Turks and the Persians (Savory, 1986, pp. 352-53; the term used to designate the Persians was Tājīks; cf. Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 159, 215, 287, tr. Savory, I, pp. 251, 320, 419). In addition, it was divided functionally between the "men of the sword" and the "men of the pen." In popular perception, these categories corresponded to the

division between Turk and Persian, but in practice the correlation was never as neat and tidy as conventional stereotyping would suggest. From the time of Shah Ṭahmāsb (930-84/1534-76) onward members of the *qezelbāš* (mainly Turkish) tribes began to receive special training that equipped them to function as "men of the pen" (on the progressive blurring of the line between "men of the sword" and "men of the pen," see Savory, 1987, XVI, pp. 170-76; for examples of "men of the pen" functioning as "men of the sword," see Savory, 1987, IV, pp. 95-97, VI, pp. 124-27).

The composition of the personnel resident at the Safavid court reflected these basic divisions. First in importance were the members of the council of amirs (*dīvān*, later *jānqī*; Savory, 1986, pp. 353ff.; for *jānqī*, see Doerfer, *Elemente* I, pp. 280-82; cf. Lambton, p. 334). The council of amirs was chaired by the shah or, in his absence, by the *wakīl-e nafs-e nafīs-e homāyūn* or by the grand vizier (Savory, 1986, pp. 353-54). The amirs of high rank (*ʿālījāh*) in the Safavid state fell into one of two broad classes: amirs of the marches (*omarāʾ-ye sarḥadd*), who did not reside at court, and amirs of the court (*omarāʾ-ye dawlat-ḵāna*), who did (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky. pp. 43ff., 112ff.). The names of the offices and the associated titles held by the amirs of the court varied as the Safavid state evolved. To the author of the *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, completed about 1138/1726, the composition of the council of amirs seemed not to have changed "since early times" (p. 44). He enumerated seven persons who constituted the *jānqī*: the *qūṛčī-bāšī* (commander in chief of the army) the *qūllar-āqāsī* (commander of the *qezelbāš* cavalry); the *īšīk-āqāsī-bāšī* (grand marshal); the *tofanġčī-āqāsī* (commander of the musketeers); the grand vizier; the *dīvānbegī*; and the *wāqeʿa-nevīs* (or *majles-nevīs*; recorder of the king's audience). The first four on the list were known as "pillars of the state" (*arkān-e dawlat*; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, p. 44). However, the office of *īšīk-aqāsī-bāšī* was first recorded in 985/1577-78 (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 136, tr., I, p. 220; cf. I, pp. 198, 206, tr., pp. 293, 306; Savory, "Īshīk-Āḳāšī"; and that of *qūllar-āqāsī* (commander of the *ḡolām* regiment) was created by ʿAbbās I (996-1038/1588-1629; Eskandar Beg, II, p. 1106; tr. Savory, I, p. 527). Toward the end of the Safavid era Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn (r. 1105-35/1694-1722) is said to have admitted to some meetings of the *jānqī* three other officials: the *nāẓer* (superintendent of the royal workshops); the *mostawfī al-mamālek* (controller general); and the *amīr-šekār-bāšī* (chief huntsman; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, p. 44). Cornelius Le Brun, who was in Persia in 1115/1703-04, provided a list of officers who "have a right and title to sit in the royal palace." Only the shah actually sat at council meetings; the courtiers remained

standing. Le Brun's list tallies with the extended list of court officers under Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn, with two exceptions: Le Brun added the *amīr-āk̲ʷor-bāšī* (superintendent of the royal stables; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 52, 120) and the *mostawfī-e k̲āṣṣa* (accountant of the royal household; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 25, 123). He also commented, curiously, that "the principal of those who lay no claim to that particular privilege" [i.e., of sitting in the royal palace] is the *īšīk-āqāsī-bāšī*, whom he correctly called the "grand master of the court" (pp. 288-89). Jean Baptiste Tavernier (Paris, I, pp. 583ff.) made no distinction between those officers who had the right to reside at court and those who were simply officials of the royal household, nor did Raphaël Du Mans, who otherwise provided much useful information on the Safavid administrative system.

In the formative period of the Safavid state, before the accession of ʿAbbās I, however, other officials held the rank of *rokn-e dawla* and were therefore presumably privy to the councils of state; they included the *wakīl* (vicegerent), the *amīr al-omarāʾ* (not infrequently the same officer held both positions), and the *tofanġčī-āqāsī* (see Savory, 1987, IV, pp. 91-105, V, pp. 65-85). With the introduction of significant numbers of Armenians, Georgians, and Circassians into Persia from the time of Shah Ṭahmāsb onward, the ethnic mix of Safavid society underwent a radical change. This change was reflected in appointments to the principal offices of state and consequently in the list of *ʿālījāh* amiss in attendance at court. For example, the position of *amīr al-omarāʾ* is not found among the list of *qezelbāš* amirs who held office under Shah ʿAbbās I (Eskandar Beg, II, pp. 1084ff.; tr. Savory, II, pp. 1309ff.), and the *qūllar-āqāsī* became a member of the *jānqī*, as also, probably, did another *ḡolām* officer, the *tofanġčī-āqāsī*.

In addition to the amirs of the court and other officials who had the "right and title to sit in the royal palace" (Le Brun, p. 289), there were vast numbers of officials who were responsible for the administration of the royal household, the royal treasury, and the harem. Many of these officials were customarily present at the shah's public audiences (*dīvān-e ʿāmm*). They fell into one of two broad categories: *moqarrab al-k̲āqān* and *moqarrab al-ḥażrat*; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 56ff.). All officials of the internal palace administration were *moqarrab al-k̲āqān*s, and many of them, especially those employed in the harem administration, were eunuchs (*k̲ʷāja-sarā*). Before the reign of ʿAbbās I only black eunuchs were employed, but from then on both black and white eunuchs were employed (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp.

56ff.). *Moqarrab al-ḵāqān*s who were not eunuchs included the royal physician (*ḥakīm-bāšī*), the royal astrologer (*monajjem-bāšī*), officials of the royal mint (*moʾayyer al-mamālek*), and the keepers of various seals (*mohrdār*), the *dīvānbegī*, the *wāqeʿa-nevīs*, the state secretary (*monšeʾ al-mamālek*), and the head of the royal treasury (*ṣāḥeb-jamʿ-e ḵezāna-ye ʿāmera*; *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 50, 52, 56-63, 65; Savory, 1986, p. 355). The category *moqarrab al-ḥażrat* comprised all those officials whose duties lay at the entrance to or outside the harem and the shah's private quarters. They included the *īšīk-āqāsī-bāšī*; the superintendent of the royal workshops (*nāẓer-a boyūtāt-e ḵāṣṣa-ye šarīfa*); innumerable doorkeepers (*qāpūčī*), ushers (*īšīk-āqāsī-e majles*), and gentlemen-in-waiting (*yasāvolān-e ṣoḥbat*, called by Chardin "huissiers d'honneur"), often recruited from among the sons of the noblest amirs (see *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, p. 133); and the like.

Revenues and expenditures of the royal treasury. The vizier, who was the head of the royal secretariat (*daftar-ḵāna-ye homāyūn*), had ultimate responsibility for the entire financial administration of the Safavid state, both its *mamālek* and its *ḵāṣṣa* branches. He "authorized assignments on the revenue, grants, pensions and immunities of many different kinds; the payment of troops, and the keeping of muster-rolls and other military records; and the keeping of the archives" (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 44-46, 114-16; Savory, 1986, p. 354). The actual preparation of the budget and the assessment and collection of taxes were the responsibility of the *mostawfī al-mamālek*. As the *ḵāṣṣa* branch of the administration expanded, particularly from the time of ʿAbbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) onward, the office of comptroller of finance (*estīfā-ye mamālek*), like the office of *ṣadr*, was divided into a *mamālek* and a *ḵāṣṣa* section; but in practice the *mostawfī al-mamālek* seems to have carried more weight than the *mostawfī al-ḵāṣṣa* (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 54-55, 122-25; Savory, 1986, p. 354).

The expenditures of the court and the royal household came under the immediate supervision of the *nāẓer-e boyūtāt-e ḵāṣṣa-ye šarīfa*. There were thirty-three workshops according to the author of the *Taḏkerat al-molūk* (tr. Minorsky, p. 30; according to Chardin, III, p. 381, there were thirty-two); each was headed by a manager (*ṣāḥeb jamʿ*), who held the status of *moqarrab al-ḥażrat*, except for the head of the royal treasury, who was called *moqarrab al-ḵāqān* (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, pp. 63-69). At the beginning of the year an estimate of expenses for the royal household for six months was submitted to the vizier of the workshops (*wazīr-e boyūtāt*), who after making it

known to the superintendent (*nāẓer*) of the workshops would send a report, signed also by the controller, to the grand vizier (*eʿtemād-al-dawla*) and request that the head of the treasury be instructed to pay the estimated sums to the heads (*ṣāḥeb jamʿs*) of departments against receipts. The workmen's salaries and vacations were subject to approval by the *nāẓer*, who also managed the royal stables and the arsenal (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 48ff.). The *nāẓer*'s involvement in the affairs of the royal household made him a very powerful official; during the reign of ʿAbbās II (1052-77/1642-66) a particularly influential *nāẓer* encroached on the prerogatives of the grand vizier (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, p. 119).

On the basis of the revenue statistics contained in the *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, *ḵāṣṣa* revenue amounted to 176,900 tomans, or about 22.5 percent of the total revenue of the Safavid state (tr. Minorsky, pp. 174-75). These figures do not tell the whole story, however, for a significant amount of revenue went directly to the royal treasury. It is probable that the revenue of the provinces, which was under direct *ḵāṣṣa* administration, was collected by the shah's agents and remitted to the royal treasury without being recorded in the books of the *mostawfī al-mamālek* (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, p. 176). For this reason, it is impossible to determine accurately the total amount of *ḵāṣṣa* revenue. In 1633 the Dutchman Jan De Laet estimated it at 357,000 tomans, that is, more than 50 percent of the total *dīvān* revenue of 608,600 tomans given in the *Taḏkerat al-molūk* (ed. Minorsky, p. 179). There is no doubt that large sums in specie, as well as in jewelry, precious stuffs, and so on, were hoarded in the royal treasury. The parsimony of Shah Ṭahmāsb is well known (Savory, 1980, p. 57). The Kurdish chief Šaraf Khan Bedlīsī was commissioned by Shah Esmāʿīl II in 984/1576 to make an inventory of the royal treasury as he had inherited it from Ṭahmāsb. Šaraf Khan commented that no ruler of Persia since Mongol times had amassed such a quantity of cash, precious stuffs, jewelry, and the like (Savory, 1980, pp. 184-85). Foreigners were not admitted into the royal treasury, but Chardin claimed to have seen in one room alone some 3,000 bags, each containing 50 tomans (V, pp. 430-33; cf. *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, tr. Minorsky, p. 184 n. 2). If Chardin was correct, one room in the treasury contained a sum of money almost as large as the percentage of the total *dīvān* revenue taken by the king and equivalent to almost half the much larger estimate of the total *ḵāṣṣa* revenue given by De Laet. No wonder Engelbert Kaempfer, who was in Persia from 1684 to 1688, gave up in despair when he tried to estimate the *ḵāṣṣa* revenue (quoted in *Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, p. 184).

The ruler's daily schedule. The most specific surviving description of a typical day in the life of the shah is contained in Sir John Malcolm's *The History of Persia* (II, pp. 307-08). Malcolm was, of course, describing the Qajar court of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah in the early 19th century (see vii, below), but available information about the daily routine of the Safavid shahs suggests that little had changed since their rule. Indeed, an official of the court of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah told Malcolm that "his majesty desires to follow in all points the usages of the Seffavean kings" (Malcolm, 1861, p. 208). The royal day began "at an early hour," when the principal ministers and secretaries attended the shah, made reports on what had occurred, and received his commands. This private audience (*bār-e ḵāṣṣ*) was followed by a public levée (*bār-e ʿāmm*) lasting about an hour and a half. The levée was attended by the princes, the ministers, and the officers of the court: "[A]ll affairs which are wished to be made public, are transacted; rewards are given, punishments commandeḍ . . . ." Afterward the shah retired to the council chamber, where he spent a further hour or two with his "personal favorites" and his ministers. After this fatiguing morning the shah withdrew to his private apartments for lunch and a nap. He reappeared for an evening levée, which was "less public than the morning one." Altogether, according to Malcolm, the shah was available to the public for six or seven hours a day, "during which he is not only seen by, but accessible to, a great number of persons of all ranks." When the shah was in camp, away from the capital, he followed the same routine. The arrival at court of foreign ambassadors was deemed to warrant a special levée and occasions "when the king ought to appear in all his grandeur" (Malcolm, 1829, II, p. 400). It is no wonder that Malcolm concluded, "In no country has the monarch more personal duties than in Persia: the mode of performing them appears to have differed very little from the most ancient times to the present day" (1829, II, pp. 307-08).

Court ceremonial. Both Persian sources and the accounts of European visitors agree on the magnificence of the spectacle at the Safavid court. "Nothing," commented Malcolm (1829, II, p. 400), "can exceed the splendour of the Persian Court on extraordinary occasions." As the Safavid rulers always treated the arrival of a foreign embassy as an "extraordinary occasion," ambassadors were in a better position than most to observe and comment upon the scene. Most foreign visitors also emphasized the strictness of court protocol. The ambassador would present himself at one of the interior gates of the palace and would be taken to a small apartment, where he would be met by one of the principal officers of state, who conducted him into the audience

hall (Malcolm, 1829, II, pp. 400-01). Once inside the audience hall, ambassadors were generally struck by the "rigid attention paid to ceremony. Looks, words, the motions of the body, are all regulated by the strictest forms. When the king is seated in public, his sons, ministers, and courtiers, stand erect, with their hands crossed, and in the exact place belonging to the rank" (Malcolm, 1829, II, p. 399). When Sir Dodmore Cotton, ambassador from Charles I of England, was received in audience by ʿAbbās I, one of the gentlemen in his suite was impressed by the silence and immobility of the courtiers, the ranks of "tacite meerzaes, chawns, sultans and beglerbegs" (Thomas Herbert, quoted in Malcolm, I, p. 364 n. b).

Once stationed in the audience hall, the ambassador would present his credentials to the *īšīk-aqāsī-bāšī*, who would hand them to the vizier for translation (Ḵāleqī-Moṭlaq, p. 60). Adam Olearius (p. 709) recorded that, when the Holstein embassy was granted an audience in 1084/1673, the vizier took charge of these letters. The *wāqeʿa-nevīs* then informed the ambassador that the shah would have the letters translated and would subsequently grant him and his companions a second audience to settle their affairs. At the same time, the ambassador would present to the shah the gifts that he had brought. Protocol dictated that the shah should not "make any public show of pleasure at the gifts presented to him" (Malcolm, 1829, II, p. 400; for a more detailed account of the protocol governing royal audiences, see bār). The formalities concluded with a banquet in honor of the visitors; the meal was customarily served on dishes of gold, and wine was passed in golden goblets (for a vivid description of such a banquet, see *Chronicle* I, pp. 488ff.). A diplomatic incident, involving the resident of Muscovy, shows how strictly protocol was observed at the Safavid court. In 1698 the resident, contrary to protocol, refused to hand over his letters of credence to the vizier, and insisted on placing them in the shah's own hands. He was placed under house arrest and ultimately given his congé. This incident placed the archbishop of Ankara, who reached the Safavid court in May 1699, in a quandary. Not wishing publicly to depart from the precedent set by the resident of Muscovy, he conceived the strategem of requesting the bishop of Isfahan to take his letters of credence to the house of the vizier. This device "so pleased the court" that Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn immediately granted the archbishop an "extraordinary reception" at ʿAlī Qāpū, one of his palace buildings. At the conclusion of the banquet the *mehmāndār-bāšī* (master of ceremonies), with two captains of the guard, escorted the archbishop and his suite home, and "all the drums and pipes began to play" as they crossed the Meydān-e Šāh. The following day the

archbishop was invited to another lavish reception, and the palace was illuminated, “an honor never paid save to guests who are kings or of royal blood” (*Chronicle* I, pp. 488ff.)

The *mehmāndār-bāšī* (*Taḏkerat al-molūk*, ed. Minorsky, p. 110 n. 2) was responsible for providing lodgings for foreign guests and affording them hospitality while they were in the capital, but it was a member of his staff (*mehmāndār*) who actually met them when they reached the Persian border and escorted them all the way to the capital. During that time the shah provide *per diem* expenses and horses, and similar provision during their stay were based on the court’s assessment of their status; as the Carmelites recorded (*Chronicle* I, p. 490), visitors were not necessarily treated with the same honor and courtesy when they left the country as they had been when they entered it. Hospitality accorded to foreign dignitaries was not granted out of pure altruism. An important part of the job of the *mehmāndār-bāšī* was to discover the real, as opposed to the stated, reason why these foreigners had come to Persia. Persians were loath to believe that a desire to travel was a legitimate motive for visiting their country (Stevens, p. 448). Such thinking probably underlay the rule that foreign ambassadors were not to leave their lodgings in the capital until after their first official audience with the shah (*Chronicle* I, p. 437 n. 3). Chardin commented that “Persians believe that every stranger is a spy if he is not a merchant or a handicraftsman” (Stevens, p. 448), but the Safavid court possibly received more than its fair share of European charlatans and impostors (Stevens, p. 447).

Location of the Safavid courts. European visitors have written disparagingly of the two main surviving Safavid palaces in Isfahan: the ʿAlī Qāpū and the Čehel Sotūn. Apart from the fact that both buildings have suffered at human hands, as well as from the ravages of time, the disappointment of Western observers probably reflects the fact that Safavid palaces were relatively informal and of modest scale, in comparison, for example, with the grandiose palaces of the Mughal emperors. Furthermore, neither building was the official residence of the shah and his court. Both were used mainly for official audiences, receptions of foreign dignitaries, and the like (Savory, 1980, pp. 166-67).

Little remains in Qazvīn as a memorial of the fifty years (955-1006/1548-98) during which that city was the Safavid capital (see Hillenbrand). Equally, at Tabrīz, which was the first Safavid capital (907-55/1501-48); a series of devastating earthquakes (the worst occurring in 1139/1727 and 1194/1780) left few early monuments standing (Curzon, *Persian Question* I, p. 518; Minorsky,

p. 538; Dībāj and Kārang, pp. 12ff.). Under Shah ʿAbbās I the winter palace complexes that he established at Ašraf (1021/1612-13; see behšahr) and at Faraḥābād (1020-21/1611-12) in Māzandarān, assumed an importance almost as great as that of the capital, Isfahan. The entire court moved to one of these palaces during the winter months, and foreign envoys who desired an audience with the shah had to visit him there (Savory, 1980, pp. 96-100; cf. Savory, "Ashraf"; idem, "Faraḥābād").

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