



EPIGRAPHY IV. SAFAVID AND LATER INSCRIPTIONS

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iv. Safavid and later inscriptions

The principal characteristic of epigraphy in Persia after the advent of the Safavids (907/1501) is the emphasis on Persian poetry and pious Shi'ite texts with an iconographic potency and deliberate frequency hitherto unknown. Arabic remained the language of koranic and Hadith quotations while Persian became increasingly prominent through its use for historical and poetic inscriptions in both architecture and decorative arts. Cursive scripts, especially *tolṭ* and *nasta'liq* (see CALLIGRAPHY) supplanted the earlier Kufic and its variants in all but the essentially decorative repeat patterns in secondary positions.

Monumental inscriptions. There are no systematically recorded or analyzed collections of inscriptions for this period, nor are there any comprehensive architectural surveys as there are for the Il-Khanid and Timurid periods. The essential source for Safavid inscriptions is Honarfar's work on Isfahan, the city whose buildings provide the substance of Safavid monumental inscriptions in general. Apart from Isfahan, major Safavid, Zand and Qajar inscriptions survive in buildings in Ardabīl, Kermān, Qom, Mašhad, Shiraz, Yazd, and Tehran as well as in the Māzandarān region. Persian surveys on these cities



and the provinces in general, published in monographs by Anjoman-e ātār-e mellī (q.v.), document the relevant inscriptions. Foundation and commemorative inscriptions, royal decrees (*farmān*), and endowment (*waqf*) texts constitute the largest official epigraphic evidence; tombstones, once documented systematically, will enhance our understanding of the popular trends in the epigraphy of this period.

Aside from recording the historical circumstances of the construction—patron’s name, builder, calligrapher, date—foundation inscriptions tend to include proclamations that delineate the main theological and political orientation of the Safavid state, above all Twelver Shi’ism, declared by Shah Esmā’īl I (907-30/1501-24, q.v.) as the state religion.

Several trends in the epigraphy of this period are already present in the earliest example of a full epigraphic program on a major Safavid building, namely the mausoleum of Hārūn-e welāyat in Isfahan (Plate V), built during the reign of Esmā’īl I in 918/1513 (Honarfar, *Eṣfahān*, pp. 360-69). The Arabic foundation inscription, written in *tolṭ* and placed over the tomb entrance, includes appropriately enough a Hadith mentioning Aaron (Hārūn) and states Esmā’īl’s claim of descent from ‘Alī. Esmā’īl’s reign as a caliphate and his role as “the friend of God” (*wālī lewā’ al-welāya*) and as a warrior in the cause of God (*al-ḡāzī al-mojāhed fī sabīl Allāh*) have been interpreted as deliberate affronts to the Sunni Ottoman usurpation of such titles (Hillenbrand, 1986, p. 762; Honarfar, *Eṣfahān*, p. 361). Moreover, the concepts of *welāya* and *kelāfa* were essential for the legitimization of the rule of the Safavid shahs especially in constructing genealogical links to the Imams in early Safavid historiography (Quinn, pp. 76-90). Above this inscription are tile panels with blessings on the *čahārdah ma’šūm* (q.v.) reinforcing the Shi’ite theme of the epigraphic ensemble, and a common epigraphic feature of the majority of religious buildings of this later period.

Less esoteric than the epigraphic program at Hārūn-e welāyat is the political propaganda routinely included in later inscriptions. For a brief period the phrase “in the caliphate of . . .” (*dar zamān-e kelāfat-e; fī ayyām kelāfa*) continued to be included, albeit infrequently, in some inscriptions added in Ṭahmāsb’s time (930-84/1524-76) to buildings as prominent as the Masjed-e Jom’a of Isfahan or as small as the Du’l-faqār mosque in the *bāzār* of Isfahan (Honarfar, *Eṣfahān*, pp. 92, 384).

Equally pointed in message is the expression of Shi’ite sentiment in earlier



Safavid inscriptions. During the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsb, an elaborately worded Arabic inscription on the northern *ayvān* of the old courtyard at the shrine of Fāṭema Ma'šūma in Qom declares Ṭahmāsb, among other honorifics, “the successor to the pure and infallible Imams” (Modarresī Ṭabāṭabā'ī, I, p. 76). Shah 'Abbās I's oft-repeated personal devotion to 'Alī is expressed in the clearest terms on the portal inscription at the small mosque known as Masjed-e sofračī in Isfahan, where he is called the “loyal slave (@*golām be-eklāsá*) of the Commander of the Faithful 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb” (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 475).

Some of the tenor of the message was preserved in the 17th century. Thus the phrase “the propagator of the faith of the infallible Imams” (*morawwej maḏhab al-a'emma al-ma'šūmīn*), or “the twelve Imams” (*morawwej maḏhab al-a'emma al-aṭnā 'ašar*), became standard in foundation inscriptions of many religious buildings. The first variant of the phrase is embedded in an elaborate Arabic inscription dated 1012/1603 at the entrance to the mosque of Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh in Isfahan (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 402) while the second version is found on an inscription also from the reign of Shah 'Abbās I at the shrine of Shaikh Ṣafī-al-Dīn in Ardabīl (Dībāj, p. 64). The formulaic expression of Shi'ite devotion was preserved even as Persian increasingly replaced Arabic in foundation inscriptions. At the *madrassa* of Āqā Kāfūr in Isfahan Shah 'Abbās II (1052-77/1642-66) is described in Persian as the “propagator of the rightful faith of their holiness the infallible Imams” (*morawwej-e maḏhab-e beḥaqq-e ḥazarāt-e a'emma-ye ma'šūmīn*; Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 606).

Shi'ite iconography also provided fertile grounds for a thematic and visual unity in the epigraphic system of the later period. The most common passage to be found is the Prophet's saying: “I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate” (*ana madīnat al-'elm wa 'Alī bābohā*). Isolated in a cartouche or fitted within a larger text, the iconographic subtlety of the saying is made evident by its placement above the entrance portals and on the doors of religious buildings.

In the earliest prominent example of its use in the Hārūn-e welāyat, “'Alī [is] the gate” may also be a eulogy of Shah Esmā'īl who, in some of his own verses, had compared himself to the first Shi'ite Imam (Hillenbrand, p. 763; Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 368; Babayan, p. 36). Such esoteric meanings found greater currency in decorative arts, as discussed below, than in monumental epigraphy, which quickly tended towards a more conventional use of the passage in a wide range of buildings from the prominent entrance portal of Shah 'Abbās I's congregational Masjed-e Shah in Isfahan to a late Qajar



addition to the shrine of Fāṭema Maʿšūma at Qom to the small neighborhood Raḥīm Kān mosque in Isfahan from the reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96; Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 430, 797; Modarresī Ṭabāṭabāʾī, I, p. 108).

Persian poetry as appropriated in Safavid and later epigraphy epitomizes this taste for an intricately layered iconography in which the functional and the literary elements are thematically unified. Cisterns, ablution basins, and doors offer some of the most sophisticated examples of the Safavid predilection for such iconographic constructs. At a cistern built in 1055/1645 by the Safavid vizier Sārū Taqī at the eastern corner of the courtyard of the *madrasa* of Dār-al-šefā in Qom, two quatrains in Persian are placed above the entrance to the subterranean water tank (Modarresī Ṭabāṭabāʾī, II, pp. 140-41). The first two verses dedicate the cistern to the memory of Imam Ḥosayn b. ʿAlī, who was martyred in the desert of Karbalā still thirsting for water. The Shiʿite sentiment of the theme is further heightened by the curse on Yazīd, the Omayyad caliph responsible for the martyrdom of Ḥosayn and his followers, and the curse on Yazīd’s tomb included as the chronogram in the quatrain.

Persian poems on a pair of silver doors ordered by Shah Ṣafī I in 1046/1636 for Masjed-e Šāh compare the Isfahan mosque with Masjid-al-Ḥarām in Mecca adding eulogies of Ṣafī as the great sovereign of the age, who shall for his angel-like nature effortlessly attain entry into Mecca through these doors (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 433-34; Allen, p. 130). The metaphor of the door as the gate opening Kaʿba onto Isfahan (*šod dar-e Kaʿba dar Šefāhān bāz*) makes up the chronogram in the last hemistich.

The great currency of Persian poetry in later epigraphy can be documented in a wide range of buildings from the beginning of the 16th century through the end of the Qajar period. The earliest manifestations of this trend are often limited to a few verses; either giving some historical information as, for instance, the names of the patron and the architect (e.g., Hārūn-e welāyat; Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 361) or evoking an image appropriate to the context as in the case of the Hadīth about Imam ʿAlī being the gate to the city of knowledge on the door of Masjed-e Duʿl-faqār in Isfahan (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 384), or even more ornately executed on the silver facings of the doors to the Madrasa-ye čahār-bāg (Allen, pp. 130-32).

Although Persian verses were increasingly included in Timurid buildings, it was in the Safavid period when inscriptions of Persian poetry became an



essential component of the architectural setting. In that capacity, poetry is employed to decorate, to describe, and to communicate the meaning of the architecture. Verses attributed to Ḥāfeẓ, written in *nasta'liq* and enclosed in cartouches, celebrate the peaceful pleasures of life in a late 16th century mansion in Nā'in (Gropp and Najmabadi, pp. 194-95). They are also made to convey the theme of the painted scenes on the walls above even though the depicted stories derive from the works of other poets (e.g., Neẓāmī Ganjavī) rather than Ḥāfeẓ. According to Qāzī Aḥmad (ed. Minorsky, p. 143), *@gazals* by Ḥāfeẓ and Ḥosām-al-Dīn Maddāḥ adorned the *ayvān* and the portals of the Čehel Sotūn in Qazvīn.

It is, in fact, rare to find classical poetry in monumental epigraphy. More common is poetry composed specifically for a building. Characteristically, these poems lavish praise on the royal patron, on the Prophet and the Imams, and they describe the circumstances of founding, the component parts of the building, and its meaning. At the palace of Čehel Sotūn (q.v.) in Isfahan, thirty couplets report the event of a fire in 1118/1706 and the subsequent repairs of the building on the order of Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 572-74). Eulogies for the king are followed by a series of metaphorical and direct references to precise parts of the building that were repaired and embellished at the time of the inscription. The contemporary inscriptions at Madrasa-ye čahār bāḡ in Isfahan contain an unusually large number of panegyrics interspersed with metaphoric references to the architecture composed in fanciful Persian verse (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 685-722).

The significance of Persian poetry in monumental epigraphic programs, on the rise since the Timurids, reaches its zenith in the Qajar period. The Qajar additions and repairs to famous shrines such as the shrine of Fāṭema Ma'šūma in Qom occasioned an impressive outpouring of versified Persian inscriptions (Modarresī Ṭabāṭabā'ī, I, pp. 48-111). Not only is there an overwhelming quantitative presence but poetry is made visually more prominent and legible. Previously, poetry tended to be contained either in panels often, by necessity, set in flat side walls of *ayvāns*, or was written in a continuous band. Qajar designers opted instead for superposed pairs of cartouches each containing a verse (Hillenbrand, 1983, p. 358). This visually propitious organization of paired, ornately framed distichs is best exemplified on the entrance portals of two Qajar mosques: the exquisite Rokn-al-Molk mosque in Isfahan (Plate VI; Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 805-21), and the mosque of Āqā Bozorg in Kāšān (Narāqī, pp. 254-62; Hillenbrand, 1983, fig. 8).



Note should also be made of a rare and curious stone tablet with twenty four couplets composed in Turkish and installed at the inner face of the mountainside that formed a natural fortification at Kalāt-e Nāderī, the stronghold briefly occupied by Nāder Shah (Kosravi, pp. 55-58). The poem lavishes praise on the Creator, the Prophet, the Imams, and above all on Nāder Shah (r. 1148-60/1736-47) but seems to have been left unfinished like the only major building at this site.

Other important categories of inscriptions in Persian are royal decrees and endowment texts. Both are found in large numbers in religious buildings: Ṭahmāsb's decree imposing bans on theologically unlawful activities in the city of Ardabīl placed prominently at the main entrance into the shrine of Shaikh Ṣafī-al-Dīn (Dībāj, pp. 68-69); decrees issued by 'Abbās I, Faṭḥ-'Alīšāh Qājār and Nāšer-al-Dīn Shah Qājār concerning tax and tariff exemptions installed in the Masjed-e Šāh in Isfahan (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 444-46, 458-60); and decrees in verse issued by Shah Ṭahmāsb, Shah 'Abbās I, etc. in Masjed-e Meydān in Kāšān (Narāqī, pp. 211-34). Tombstones also form an important category of epigraphic evidence but any characterization of the period's funerary inscriptions will require a larger and more systematically organized data than is currently available.

From the Safavid period onwards, inscriptions in Persian, prose or poetry, are almost invariably written in *nasta'liq* in contradistinction to the overwhelming preference for *tolṭ* for Arabic texts, be they foundation inscriptions, koranic passages, or, rarely, a poem in Arabic as in Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh mosque (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, p. 415). In buildings, inscriptions in *tolṭ* were often written in two rows, the upper one woven through the elongated ends of the letters below. *Nasta'liq*, on the other hand, was inscribed within ample space to enhance its cursive elegance. If the inscription was in tile, it was most often in white against a dark-blue ground.

Some of the greatest masters of calligraphy were employed to design the monumental inscriptions of the major buildings of this period. 'Alī-Rezā 'Abbāsī, 'Abd-al-Bāqī Tabrīzī (qq.v.), Moḥammad-Rezā Emāmī (Plate VII), Moḥammad-Šāleḥ, and 'Abd-al-Raḥīm Jazāyerī are among the most frequently encountered names in Safavid buildings.

A survey of Safavid epigraphy is incomplete without at least a brief mention of Armenian inscriptions still extant in the churches of New Julfa in Isfahan (Honarfar, *Esfahān*, pp. 505-21; Carswell, pp. 32, 62). The inscriptions may be



carved in stone or painted, mostly framed in square tablets. They contain the name of the patron, the date of the foundation, repairs, or additions. A distinct feature of the Armenian epigraphic texts is the inclusion of the names of other family members, male and female, and invocations for blessings on the patron and his clan.

Inscriptions on objects. Epigraphy in the decorative arts of this period is largely confined to metalwork and textiles. With the exception of Melikian-Chirvani's systematic studies on metalwork, most other epigraphic evidence for objects in this period is scattered and must be extracted from entries in museum and exhibition catalogues.

In metalwork, as in monumental inscriptions, the conspicuous presence of Persian poetry and Shi'ite invocations marks the principal change in taste from the earlier period when koranic and Hadith quotations, maxims, and prayers all in Arabic were favored. Arabic is still the preferred language for dates and signatures as well as a new category of prayers in which God's blessings are called upon the *čahārdah ma'šūm* or the imams. There is also an Arabic poem which invites the believers to place their faith in Imam 'Alī's *welāya* and his power to deliver them from distress. Both these invocations appear first in a brass inkwell dated 919/1513 (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 19, 282-83), notable for being exactly contemporary with the Shi'ite inscriptions at Hārūn-e welāyat.

Shi'ite militancy of the early Safavid phrase, however, did not supplant the Persian predilection for mystical poetry, a legacy of an earlier age, which became the quintessential Safavid epigraphic text in metalwork (Melikian-Chirvani, 1974, p. 544). Mysticism (*erfān*, q.v.) and the cult of Imam 'Alī were effortlessly wedded together in poems that graced metal objects ranging from wine bowls to dervish's bowls (*kaškūl*). Sufi-inspired poetry by contemporary authors, such as Ahlī Toršīzī and 'Abd-Allāh Hātefī (for examples see, Melikian-Chirvani, 1974, pp. 556-57; idem, 1982, p. 331) appear with the same frequency as mystical verses by the classical poets such as Ḥāfez, Sa'dī, and Jāmī.

Poems often make references to the function of the object on which they appear. Metaphoric evocations of mystical concepts, as for example the moth consumed by the burning candle, as the inscription on candlesticks and torch-stands, or the reflection of the beloved for mirrors, are not new. The novelty of the Safavid epigraphy in portable arts lies in the complex layering of meanings and mental images. On a bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum, for



example, a poem with mystical and 'Alī worship implications (from a *sāqī-nāma* by Moḥammad Šūfī Māzandarānī) asks the cupbearer, by invoking 'Alī (Sāqī-e Kawṭar), to pour a cup of wine (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 329-30).

Inscriptions in textiles offer equally complex iconographic constructions. Religious verses and especially Shi'ite invocations in a variety of cursive scripts decorate tomb cloths. The verses tend to be contained within cartouches and written in *moṭannā* style, that is, each verse is matched symmetrically on the other side of a central dividing line with its own mirror image (for an example see Welch, 1979, pp. 150-51). The repetition of such invocations, possible in textiles as an integral aspect of weaving itself, implies ritual incantations particularly appropriate for tomb cloths.

With textiles there is an additional element of literary refinement which derives from the fact that Persian poetry borrows heavily from the terminology of the textile industry (Clinton, pp. 7-11). An eloquent convention in Persian poetry, for instance, is the comparison between the composing of a poem and the weaving of robes. In Safavid textiles, the choice of the poetry woven as inscription into textiles suggests a remarkable literary and iconographic unity. A love poem woven into a figural textile observes the extraordinary beauty of the fabric as though its threads were spun from the soul and likens the beauty of the beloved in body and soul to that of the textile (Plate VIII; Bier, pp. 184-85). Thus the epigraphic message succeeds in conveying multiple layers of meaning in a single stroke: it celebrates mystical and temporal love as well as the visually beautiful and technically accomplished textile itself. In this case, images of lovers and hunters further enhances the potency of the epigraphic elements of composition, in turn, written in the elegant *nasta'liq*, the script commonly found in these textiles.

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Plate V. Isfahan. Hārūn-e welāyat. Tomb entrance. Photograph courtesy of S. Babaie.

Plate VI. Isfahan. Rokn-al-Molk Mosque. Entrance portal. Photograph courtesy of S. Babaie.

Plate VII. Isfahan. Masjed-e Ḥakīm. Meḥrab. Inscription signed by Moḥammad-Rezā Emāmī. Photograph courtesy of S. Babaie.

Plate VIII. Double cloth. 16th century. The Textile Museum, Washington, D. C. Photograph courtesy of the Textile Museum.