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THE SAFAVIDS (1501-1722)

The advent of the Safavids constitutes one of the major turning points in Persian history, and this for two reasons: one was the enforcement of the Shiʿite branch of Islam on the country, the other was the unification of the country under a single rule, which has continued as such to the present day. The first helped the second and gave the country a distinctive character and identity against the Sunnite Ottomans in the west and the Sunnite Shaybanids in the northeast, and made it possible for Persia to withstand repeated Ottoman invasions. It is also a fact that the establishment of Shiʿism as the state religion in Persia caused a serious break in the confessional continuity of the Islamic world, and, among other consequences, created a barrier between Central Asia and the rest of the Islamic lands, helping its relative cultural barrenness from the 16th century until modern times.

The origins of the Safavids are clouded in obscurity. They may have been of Kurdish origin (see R. Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 1980, p. 2; R. Matthee, “Safavid Dynasty” at *iranica.com*), but for all practical purposes they were Turkish-speaking and Turkified. Their eponymous ancestor, Ṣafi-al-Din (1252-1334), was a disciple of Shaikh Zāhed of Gilān, a Sunnite Sufi *pir* or

spiritual leader. Ṣafi-al-Din succeeded his *pir* and settled in Ardabil in eastern Azarbaijan, and founded the SafavidOrder. He was buried there, and his tomb and the citybecame a place of pilgrimage for his devotees. In the course of time and under the leadership of Ṣafi-al-Din's descendents, the order became a militant Shiʿite one, with *ḡolāt* or extremist features, receiving support from Turkish and Turkmen tribes in Azarbaijan and eastern Anatolia, such as the Šāmlu, Ostājlu, Takallu, Ḏu'l-Qadr, Qājār, and Afšār tribes, who had strong devotional ties to the heads of the Order.

In the mid-15th century, Jonayd, the head of the Order, developed political ambitions, married Uzun Ḥasan's sister, and embarked on holy wars in the Caucasus, during which he was killed in 1455. Esmāʿil, a grandson of Jonayd, assumed the leadership of the Order at the age of thirteen, after his father Ḥeydar was killed. He was a brave, charismatic youth, whose mother Marta was a daughter of Uzun Ḥasan from a Byzantine wife. He was practically worshiped by his tribal followers, who were called Qezelbāš on account of their red headgear. After invading Shirvān (Širvān) and killing its ruler to avenge the death of his father, he embarked on a career of war and conquest. Driving the Qara Qoyunlu from Azarbaijan, he entered Tabriz in 1501, ascended the throne, ordered coins to be minted in his name, and proclaimed Twelver Shiʿism as the state religion, ordering conversion of the Sunnites on the pain of death. Within ten years he made himself the master of all of Persia, showing extraordinary daring and bravery in battle. His decisive victory over the Uzbeks who had occupied most of Khorasan was an important event and barred the possibility of a large-scale Uzbek invasion of the Middle East and India. The Safavids continued to have problems with Uzbek raids into Khorasan, but on the whole they were able to keep them off.

Shah Esmāʿil was regarded as invincible by his followers until he had to face the Ottoman Sultan Selim I, a powerful monarch who resented the Shiʿite propaganda among his eastern Anatolian subjects and the expansion of the Safavid power. The Ottoman army invaded Azarbaijan; Shah Esmāʿil faced it with half as many men as the Ottoman army at the battle of Čālderān (q.v.; 1514). Shah Esmāʾil and the Qezelbāš showed extraordinary courage, but the superior number of Ottoman soldiers and their use of firearms and cannons, the use of which Shah Esmāʿil and the Qezelbāš considered unmanly and somewhat cowardly (Savory, p. 43), decided the outcome. Defeated, Shah Esmāʿil had to cede the Kurdish areas as far as Diārbakr, but the Ottomans, who briefly occupied Azarbaijan, could not linger there owing to the severe

winter in Tabriz and their army's insistence onreturning at once to Anatolia. Although the Safavids lost some territory to the Ottomans, it was the psychological effect of the disaster that counted most. In a spirit ofdespair and melancholy, Shah Esmāʿil went into mourning, wore black, and gave himself up to drinking. He never again led his army in battle, dying in 1524 after 23 years of rule.

During his reign a problem that was later to become a perennial issue for the Safavid state made its first appearance. Shah Esmāʾil had been beholden to the Qezelbāš on account of their devotion to him and their having been instrumental in safeguarding his life when he was hiding in Gilān in his early youth, as well as because of their power base in their respective tribes. But, as his rule was consolidated, he became aware of the necessity of reining in the power of the Qezelbāš and becoming independent of them. The state needed the services of Persian administrators and bureaucrats, "men of the pen," following the longstanding tradition that had prevailed during the reign of Turkish, Mongol, and Tatar rulers. On the other hand the Qezelbāš, "men of the sword," looked down on the Tajiks, that is, the Persians, and did not easily tolerate working under them. The state needed both, all the more so as the appointment of the Tajiks to high offices could serve as a check on the insatiable claims of the Qezelbāš to office. After the defeat at Čālderān, Shah Esmāʿil appointed Mirzā Šāh-Ḥosayn of Isfahan, a Tajik, as the head of the bureaucracy. Šāh-Ḥosayn's power increased to the point that he was able to dislodge the all-powerful Durmiš Khan Šāmlu and send him away from the court to the governorship of Herat (Savory, p. 48). The fact that Mirzā Šāh-Ḥosayn was assassinated in April 1523 by a group of Qezelbāš points to the endemic discord and conflict between the Qezelbāš and the Persians—a situation which continued under Shah Tahmasb (Ṭahmāsb) and even later in the Safavid period in spite of severe measures that Shah Abbas I (ʿAbbās) took to centralize power in the Shah's hands and diminish the power of the Qezelbāš.

Shah Esmāʿil was succeeded in 1524 by his ten-year old elder son Tahmasb (1524-76). Before he came of age, the rival Qezelbāš chiefs vied with each other for the control of the king, a situation that was repeated whenever the king was a minor or a weakling. At seventeen Tahmasb began to take the reins of power in his own hands and to show his mettle. He was not brilliant at either administration or in military campaigns, yet he did not lack moral and physical courage. Furthermore, after a period of indulgence in wine and the

pleasures of the harem, he turned pious and parsimonious, observing all the Shiʿite rites and enforcing them as far as possible on his entourage and subjects. He managed in the course of his 52 years of reign to hold the Safavid domain together, defending it against continuous threats and invasions by the Ottomans from the west and the Uzbeks from the northeast. It was in fact Tahmasb's reign that consolidated the Safavid rule, defined Persian borders, and spread Shiʿism in Iran. He also managed to maintain a delicate balance between the Qezelbāš and the Tajiks.

It was also under Shah Tahmasb that the longstanding friendship and peaceful relationship between the Safavid shahs and Mughal emperors of India began. Homāyun (q.v.), the son and successor of the founder of theMughal dynasty, Bābor (q.v), took refuge in Persia when his position at home became insecure, and he was received with honor by Shah Tahmasb, even though the offer of military assistance to him for regaining his throne was made conditional on conversion to Shiʿism. Homāyun agreed, but reverted to Sunnism when he felt secure again in his realm. However, amicable relations between the two dynasties continued in spite of occasional conflicts over the possession of Qandahar at the border of the two empires.

After Tahmasb's death a period of political disorder marked by rivalry among the Qezelbāš factions and among some ambitious women of the harem followed. Esmāʿil II, who had been imprisoned by his suspicious father, Tahmasb, was chosen by the Qezelbāš as his successor. He proved a cruel and bloodthirsty king with a warped personality, killing and blinding so many Safavid princes during his reign of less than a year that few with Safavid blood in them remained unharmed. This set a pattern for the bloody behavior of some subsequent shahs, notably Shah Ṣafi, who succeeded Shah Abbas I. Esmāiʿil II was succeeded by Moḥammad Ḵodābanda, a weak, indecisive, and pious shah. In 1585, Moršedqoli Khan of the Ustājlu tribe defeated ʿAliqoli Khan of the Šāmlu tribe, the original guardian of the heir apparent, the future Shah Abbas I, and took control of the young crown prince. Abbas was about eighteen years old when, with the help of his new guardian, he entered the capital Qazvin, removed his impotent father from the throne, andascended it himself in 1588 as Shah Abbas I (r. 1588-1629, q.v.).

At the time, the country was in a state of chaos. TheOttomans had occupied the Persian provinces bordering on their territory, and the Uzbeks reigned supreme in Khorasan and had laid siege to Herat. The Qezelbāš factionalism and inter-tribal conflicts were at their height. The feud between the Turks and

the Tajiks had intensified owing to the murder of the vizier Mirzā Salmān, a Persian who had reached the pinnacle of power with the support of Queen Mahd-e ʿOliyā, the shah's mother, and had distinguished himself not only in administration, but also as a military leader. The very existence of the Safavid state hung in the balance.

Shah Abbas, with his intelligent pragmatism and decisiveness, showed that he was the man that the state needed at this crucial juncture. The first item on his agenda was to curb the power of the unruly Qezelbāš chiefs, to whose ambition and arrogance he had been a witness from childhood. He realized, however, that he could not lightly dispense with their service as they still formed the backbone of the army, even though they no longer believed the Safavid kings to be semi-divine and did not accord them the same worshipful reverence that they accorded to the early Safavid kings as their *moršed* or spiritual leader and as the *ensān-e kāmel* or the "Perfect Man." They still considered themselves *šāhseven* "lovers of the shah," and their dynamic loyalty towards the Safavid kings had by no means died out. Moreover, while Shah Abbas could not dispense with the administrative efficiency of the Persians, he could not rely on their martial skills. As a solution, therefore, he decided to rely on what Savory calls "the third force" (p. 78).

Shah Tahmasb in the course of his invasion of the Caucasus had captured a number of Georgians, Armenians, and Circassians, whom he had brought to Persia and employed in the army, in the harem, and in the administration. Of Tahmasb's nine sons who did not die before adolescence, seven were the sons of Georgian and Circassian mothers (Savory, p. 68). These Caucasian captives were called *gholam* (*ḡolām*), i.e., [the shah's] slave, and they owed allegiance only to the shah. Shah Abbas seized upon the idea of forming army regiments consisting of these gholams, whose ranks he replenished in the course of his campaigns in the Caucasus. A large community of Armenians was transported to Isfahan, and a city was built for them near the capital (New Jolfā). Many of these gholams rose to high ranks owing to their intelligence and capability, and some became governors and army leaders. His bodyguards were exclusively drawn from the rank of the gholams. He also drew on Persians as part of the standing army. This and a number of other measures, notably the reduction of the number of Qezel-bāš provincial governors and the bestowing of high ranks on a fairly large number of Caucasians, helped to reduce the power of the Qezelbāš and concentrate it in the hands of the shah. In the process the power of the vizier and the bureaucracy in general increased, and

the Safavids became more assimilated to Persian traditions and culture.

After setting his house in order and reorganizing the army and the administration, it was time for the shah to deal with the state's external enemies. In the course of a number of engagements, first in the northeast against the Uzbeks, and then in the west against the Ottomans, to whom he had ceded at the beginning of his reign Azarbaijan, Lorestān, Kurdistan, and a number of Caucasian provinces in order to gain peace, the shah was able, through his skillful leadership, to secure victory over both enemies in the east and west and restore the Safavid state to its original borders. He also managed to oust the Portuguese from the Persian Gulf and its shores. The Portuguese had established their presence there in 1507, and later, following a treaty with Esmāʿil I, the strategically and commercially important island of Hormuz (q.v.) had become a protectorate of Portugal. Soon the Portuguese strengthened their position by building fortifications on the coastal strip of the Persian Gulf and controlling the trade in the area. Shah Abbas, regarding this as an intrusion on Persian soil, eventually managed, with some naval help from the British East India Company, to drive out the Portuguese. He ordered their fortifications to be destroyed, establishing Persian suzerainty in the Persian Gulf and in Bahrain.

Some of the European powers were eager to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with the Safavids and secure their alliance against the Ottoman Turks. Ambassadors were exchanged and friendly negotiations took place, but effective political alliances did not materialize.

Shah Abbas's secular tendencies, which resulted in the reduction of the power of the *ṣadr* who headed the religious establishment, his particular attention to economic policy, his encouragement of trade, his facilitating the activities of the Armenian and other merchants from different countries, his increasing of the silk production, a precious commodity which brought considerable sums from Ottoman and European buyers, his building of roads and a large number of well-structured and roomy *rabāt*s or inns to accommodate traveling caravans, his receiving foreign trade missions, his entering into commercial pacts with some of the European states, and particularly the security and peace that he was able to establish in his realm, all made the country prosper. He took two English brothers Sir Anthony and Sir Robert Sherley, who visited Persia in 1598 as heads of a trade mission, into hisemployment and with their help and their expertise improved the firearms of the army, but he used the brothers mainly as envoys to European courts in the hope of establishing some

alliance with them against their common enemy, the Ottomans.

He made Isfahan his capital, enlarged it, and embellished it with a very large piazza surrounded by a number of monuments, some of which, like the Shah and the Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh mosques are among the masterpieces of Persian architecture. He lent support to the arts; beautiful color tiles were made, and calligraphers and painters found patrons both in the person of the shah and some of the state dignitaries and rich merchants. Influence ofEuropean works of art began to appear in Persian paintings. The arts and architecture of his period are considered to represent the zenith of Safavid art.

Shah Abbas was both an able general and a capable statesman. He dressed simply and observed religious rites. In 1601 he made a pilgrimage on foot from Isfahan to the shrine of ʿAli al-Reżā, the eighth Shiʿite Imam, in Mashad. While relaxing some of the religious exigencies, he was well aware of his position as the “Perfect Man” and the reverence owed him as the head of the Safavid Order. In spite of enjoying a reputation as a popular monarch, he was capable of considerable cruelty and vindictiveness: he ordered the killing of his eldest son and blinded two others whom he suspected of being embroiled in a plot to overthrow him. He died in 1629 in Māzandarān after 42 years of an eventful reign. Shah Abbas’s reign represents the apex of Safavid power. His fame spread far and wide. The Persians regard him as the greatest shah of the Islamic period, and legends about him abound.

After Shah Abbas, signs of decline began to appear in the Safavid state. Shah Ṣafi (1629-42), a grandson of Shah Abbas, and his successor, is noted for murdering or blinding a great many of his relatives for fear of plots against him. His successor Abbas II (r. 1642-66) was, on the contrary, an altogether just, peace-loving, andcapable monarch. Shah Solayman (r. 1666-94) who followed him was, however, an unworthy successor, who preferred the company of women in the harem to theaffairs of the state, but the weakness of Persia’s neighbors afforded the country relative peace and tranquility. It was in his reign that the famous traveler Jean Chardin (q.v.), who has left a most valuable description of the Safavid state and the country, came to Persia. It was also in this period that a delegation was sent to Thailand, where an influential Persian minority lived (see PERSIAN PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA at *iranica.com*). His successor Solṭān-Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722) was a shy, weak, and superstitious shah, who spent most of his time in the harem and was greatly influenced in conducting the affairs of the state by the mullahs. He presided over the downfall of the Safavid state, partly as a result of his

misguided policies in Afghanistan that incited the people of that country to revolt, and partly by the inevitable aging of the dynasty and its concomitant decay.

SUCCESSORS OF THE SAFAVIDS

The Afghan intermezzo. The Pashtuns of Afghanistan had remained Sunnite. The Safavid rule over Qandahar, the center of the Pashtuns, was somewhat precarious and occasionally challenged by the Mughals of India such as by Shah Jahān (r. 1628-58). Gorgin Khan (Giorgi XI), the Georgian governor of Qandahar under Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn, treated the people of Qandahar with severity. Mir Ways, the head of Ḡilzāy tribe, rebelled, killed Gorgin, declared himself independent, and, with some encouragement from the Mughal emperor Awrangzeb (r. 1658-1707) and religious rulings of the Sunnite clergy, incited the Afghans to wage war against Persia. His son Maḥmud invaded Persia, defeated the Safavid army at several junctures, laid siege to Isfahan, and entered the starved and diseased city on 25 October 1722 andascended the Persian throne.

For fourteen years Maḥmud and then his son Ašraf were the rulers of Persia, even though their rule was never totally secure; nor did they manage to establish a firm grip on the administration of the country. Realizing the weakness of the Persian situation, the Ottomans captured the western provinces of Persia following a treaty with Ašraf. The Russians took possession of the Caspian provinces, and the Abdālis, an Afghan tribe, occupied Herat. In the meantime, Tahmasb II (r. 1722-32), an ineffective son of Solṭān-Ḥosayn, called himself Shah in Qazvin and tried to garner help against the Afghans. He was eventually able to receive aid from Nader (Nāder) Qoli (later Nader Shah), the chief of the Afšār tribe and an able military commander from Khorasan.

The Afsharids (1736-95). The Afšār were a Turkmen tribe that during the Mongol conquest was transferred to Azarbaijan, but Shah Esmāʿil I resettled them in northern Khorasan. Nader distinguished himself by defeating Malek Maḥmud of Sistān, a descendant of the Saffarids, who had raided Khorasan. When Tahmasb II solicited his aid in order to oust the Afghans, Nader agreed and in a series of battles defeated Ašraf, who, fleeing from him, was killed in Baluchistan. Thus the Afghan presence in Persia came to an end. Then, strengthening his forces, Nader negotiated with the Russians the return of all the Persian provinces that they had occupied. After achieving this goal he turned his attention to the Ottomans, and after some initial reverses he was

able to defeat them and regain the lost provinces in the north and west. Then he cleared Khorasan of the Afghan Abdālis and re-established Persian rule in Herat. Feeling victorious and confident, he had himself proclaimed shah in 1736 in a grand gathering of the state dignitaries, army commanders, and tribal chiefs, thus bringing Safavid rule to a final and definite end.

Nader Shah's attachment to Shiʿism was lukewarm, and he was anxious to come to an understanding with the Ottomans in religious matters and remove the underlying causes of enmity between Persia and its powerful neighbor. He conceived of a more ecumenical form of Shiʿism that he called Jaʿfari Shiʿism after the sixth Shiʿite Imam and in a conciliatory gesture proposed a plan to theOttomans, according to which he would induce Persia to abandon its anti-Sunnite attitude and the public cursing of the first three caliphs, provided that the Ottomans agreed to recognize Jaʿfari Shiʿism along the four traditional schools of Sunnite Islam as a fifth school, and that during the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was under thesuzerainty of the Ottomans, the Shiʿites would be treated on an equal footing with Sunnite Muslims, and that the two countries would exchange prisoners and would mutually renounce the sale of Ottoman and Persian captives as slaves. The Ottomans did not show much enthusiasm for the proposal and were particularly reluctant to consider Shiʿism as one of the legitimate schools of Islam and insisted that the Ottoman sultans be accepted ascaliphs. As a result Nader Shah's efforts in this respect did not bear fruit.

In 1738, to replenish his treasury that had borne the burden of his continual wars, he invaded India and brought the Mughal Moḥammad Shah to his knees, forcing him to cede the provinces north and west of the Indus. Hedemanded an enormous tribute, and after the bloody massacre of the inhabitants of Delhi, which he ordered when two of his soldiers were killed by an Indian mob, he returned to Khorasan. In Kalāt in the northeast of Khorasan he had a fort built in which he stored his booty from India, including the famous Koh-e Nur diamond (q.v. at *iranica.com*) and the Taḵt-e Ṭāvus throne. Anattempt on his life, in which he came to believe that his son and heir apparent, Reżā-qoli Mirzā, was involved, caused him to order his blinding. Soon afterwards his character began to deteriorate; he became vengeful and cruel, quick to find faults and order atrocious punishments. Further engagements with the Ottoman army and the campaign in Dāḡestān exacerbated his meanness, his terrible temper, his erratic judgement as well as his exactions. He was murdered in 1747 by a group of Afšār and Qajar men who had learned that he

was intent on destroying them.

Nader Shah saved Persia from disintegration through his military prowess and intelligent generalship. One cannot but admire his attempt at a durable conciliation with the Ottomans or his efforts to provide Persia with ships on the Caspian and the Persian Gulf, but his cruelty and his intolerable exigencies toward the end of his life spoiled the memory of his glorious conquests. With no capable successor to hold his empire, the Afsharid realm quickly disintegrated. His grandson Šāhroḵ (r. 1748-95), who had been blinded, held Khorasan for nearly half a century as a puppet of military commanders until Āqā Moḥammad Khan, the founder of the Qajar dynasty, terminated the last traces of the Afsharids.

The Zand Dynasty (1750-94). The Zand were a Lor tribe that lived in the vicinity of Malāyer in western Persia. In the struggles that followed the death of Nader Shah between his heirs and the contending chiefs of the Qajar and Zand tribes, the leader of the latter, Karim Khan, succeeded in bringing the country under his control by defeating his rivals. For 29 years he ruled with justice and made the comfort of his subjects the aim of his reign; he did not even call himself shah, but only the Deputy of the People (*Wakil al-raʿāyā*). With the exception of some very local dynasties, the Zands were the only Iranian dynasty that had come to power since the Buyids in the 10th century. Their rule, however, was short. After Karim Khan, claimants to his succession quarreled and were eventually defeated and discarded by Aqa (Āḡā) Moḥammad Khan, who had earlier been a hostage in the custody of the kindly Karim Khan and who after his death rose to the leadership of the Qajar tribe.

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