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ISFAHAN X. MONUMENTS (1) A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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Isfahan's monuments developed during three major periods in the Islamic era: first, the early medieval period under the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate and Buyid patronage; second, under the Saljuqs; and, finally, under Shah ʿAbbās I and his successors.

THE ʿABBĀSID AND BUYID PERIODS

The architectural history of the city of Isfahan as it developed in the Islamic period from the merger of the towns of Yahudiya and Jay (*šahrestān*), its development into a prosperous trading center under the ʿAbbasids (750-1258), and its role as the princely residence of the Buyid Dynasty (932-1055) can only be archeologically inferred from the continuous occupation of the site of the city's major congregational mosque (Masjed-e Jomʿa) and its nearby *meydān* or urban square (Golombek, pp. 19-20). Buyid patronage had fostered renewed interest in building up Isfahan: a fortification wall with twelve gates enclosed the central hub of the city surrounding the old (caliphal period) Masjed-e Jomʿa and the nearby marketplace. The addition of a citadel, Ṭabarrak fortress,

on the southwestern corner of the Buyid walled city may also be attributed to this period. With the exception of a single, elaborately carved doorway that had belonged to the Jurjir Mosque and was built during the vizierate of Ṣāḥeb Esmāʿil b. ʿAbbād in the second half of the 10th century, the pre- and Buyid constructions in Isfahan are known only through the literary evidence left by medieval travelers and geographers (Ebn Rosta, pp. 160-63; Moqaddasi, pp. 386-90; Māfarokhi, pp. 84-86, tr., p. 63; *Ḥodud al-ʿālam*, ed. Sotuda, p. 140; Honarfar, pp. 40-44). Nevertheless, shadow traces of the old Buyid walls, the inner city arteries and neighborhood subdivisions continued to define the old quarters of Isfahan into modern times. Many of the extant monuments of Isfahan, however, date to two periods in history when the city served as the capital of the ruling dynasties of the Great Saljuqs (1040-1194) and the Safavids (1501-1722).

FROM THE SALJUQS THROUGH THE EARLY SAFAVIDS

After Ṭoḡrel Beg's designation of Isfahan in 1051 as the center of his kingdom, the city acquired several major monuments marking the dynasty's political and cultural ambitions. Among the most renowned aspects of the Great Saljuq patronage in Isfahan were garden residences along the Zāyandarud River, long lost, with their open pavilions, their landscaping and water elements evoking ancient Persian *čahārbāḡ* (q.v.) type. Masjed-e Jomʿa, the Friday or Great Mosque of Isfahan, a royal residence and administrative building, the Neẓāmiya Madrasa and bazaars were clustered around or near a *meydān* that served as the principal urban square of Isfahan under the Saljuqs. The footprint of this public square is still preserved in the Old Square (Meydān-e Kohna, so called since the Safavid addition of a new one), while the Great Mosque remains largely intact in its essential Saljuq outlines and silhouettes and indeed its function, albeit made secondary to the Safavid Royal Mosque for the Friday congregational prayer. Other trace evidence of Saljuq architectural patronage may be found in the site of extinct mosques and sanctuaries still marked with minarets (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 194-204). For example, the imposingly high and elegantly brick-sheathed minaret of Masjed-e ʿAli, an 11th- or 12th-century minaret with an early 16th-century Safavid mosque, most likely locates a hallowed spot, an older mosque perhaps, in the vicinity of the Old Square (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 195-98).

According to the Persian poet-traveler Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow (pp. 126-28) and other medieval observers, Isfahan acquired world renown as amongst the most prosperous and populous of its time during the reign of the Saljuq Malekšāh (r.

1072-92), under whose tutelage his grand viziers Neẓām-al-Molk Abu ʿAli Ḥasan of Ṭus and Tāj-al-Molk Abu'l-Ḡanāʾem Pārsi took turns to outdo one another in the grandeur of their architectural patronage. The city walls and gates were refurbished and neighborhood amenities increased as the city's population grew and prospered around the urban hub of the square and the Masjed-e Jomʿa. The Great Mosque of Isfahan was entirely rebuilt to replace the old Arab hypostyle (a pairing of an open courtyard and a covered sanctuary that was roofed with equidistantly-placed pillar supports) with a newly developed Persian mosque plan in which a four-*ayvān* courtyard formed the central focus of the mosque and the sanctuary was marked with a large domed prayer niche (*meḥrāb*) chamber and vaulted bays. Neẓām-al-Molk, the statesman and author of the *Siar al-moluk*/*Siāsat-nāma*, the famed manual of princely conduct, initiated the development of some of these key architectural interventions in Isfahan (Grabar, pp. 31-32).

Of this magnificent medieval city, only its Friday Mosque (Masjed-e Jomʿa), a few minarets, and partial ruins have survived. This meager architectural evidence of pre-Safavid Isfahan, so shockingly at odds with the descriptions of the city by Muslim travelers and historians, must be attributed to the devastating impact of successive invasions of Isfahan. Despite vigorous resistance that forced the Mongol hordes to attack the city repeatedly between 1228 and 1240-41, Isfahan fell to the Mongols and its inhabitants were massacred, reputedly because of the betrayal by the Shafeʿite Sunnis, who hoped to gain favor from and ascendancy under the Mongols over their rival Hanafite branch (Rašid-al-Din, *Jāmeʿ al-tawāriḵ*, quoted by Šafaqi, p. 280). Again, the 1387 siege of Isfahan under Timur's personal direction ended in the slaughter of some 70,000 denizens of the city (Šāmi, I, pp. 104-5; Ḥāfeẓ-e Abru, II, pp. 666-67). Toward the end of the reign of Jahānšāh, the Qara Qoyunlu (r. 1438-68), 50,000 people of Isfahan were massacred in retaliation for the city's disobedience (Venetian travelers, quoted in Šafaqi, p. 283). In all three instances, the slaughter of the people was accompanied with severe damage or destruction of the physical structures of the city along with the devastation of the nearby agricultural lands.

Until the founding of the Safavid dynasty, successive overlords of Isfahan left behind relatively little architectural works, albeit symbolically significant for they stamped political suzerainty. An example of such politically charged markings is the famed carved-stucco prayer niche (*meḥrāb*) commissioned in the name of the Mongol Il-khan Öljeitü/Uljāytu (r. 1304-16) by Moḥammad Sāvi

(i.e., Ḵᵛāja Saʿd-al-Din Moḥammad Mostawfi Sāvaji) in 1310 (Honarfar, pp. 115-21; Blair, 1998, pp. 69-70). The prayer niche is placed in a brick vaulted prayer hall behind the western *ayvān* of Friday Mosque and is accompanied with an intricately inlaid and decorated wooden *menbar* (pulpit from which sermons are delivered) that is undated but is clearly the oldest, most significant *menbar* in the whole mosque. The prayer niche is rightly famous for its extraordinarily complex decorative program of alternating and concentric registers of epigraphic and vegetal motifs that are carved with such crispness and ingenuity to impart the illusion of layering of visually exciting bands of decoration in considerable depth. Its fame as the *mehrāb* of Öljeitü, however, is misguided for the recognition of patronage for this magnificent addition to the revered Great Mosque of Isfahan should rightfully belong, as defined by the inscription, to Moḥammad Mostawfi Sāvaji. As one of the grand viziers and principal courtiers (*sāḥeb-e divān*) of the Il-khanid Ḡāzān Khan and Öljeitü, he followed, with this prayer niche, the well-established Saljuq tradition of architectural patronage by the grandees of the empire.

Notwithstanding the architecturally important Pir Bakrān Tomb (dated 1302-12) in a village of the same name some 30 km outside the city, the other monument of this period in Isfahan, particularly notable because of its great local popularity, is the Menār Jonbān (moving minaret; Honarfar, 1965, pp. 279-82). The structure was built over a tombstone of Il-khanid date and is decorated with tile work that is dateable to this same period. Whatever the shape of the original building, its surviving *ayvān* façade consists of two thin minarets (of the Persian *goldasta* style) that flank the corners of the façade and are famous for their ability to vibrate whenever one minaret is shaken. Similar local patronage produced a number of other tombs (Emāmzada Jaʿfar and Bābā Qāsem) and small mosques and *madrasa*s. Of the latter, the Bābā Qāsem Madrasa is better known as the Madrasa-ye Emāmiya, whence has come the famous tiled *mehrāb* now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Honarfar, pp. 300-314).

The 15th-century monuments of the Turkmen and Timurid successor states are even more limited in number and remain largely understudied. The most noteworthy is the so-called Darb-e Emām, a shrine over the burial place of two locally venerated descendents of Shiʿite Imams (hence its designation as an emāmzāda; Honarfar, 1965, pp. 341-52). Dating to 1453 and the reign of Jahānšāh, the Qara Qoyunlu, it is the main portal of this monument that is of particular significance, because its intricate mosaic-like tiled patterns are so

intense in their blue colors and so fine in their workmanship that they have been compared with the masterpiece of Turkmen-era tile work at the Blue Mosque in Tabriz of this same period (Blair and Bloom, pp. 52-53). The so-called Tālār-e Teymuri, a building located within the royal precinct known as Bāḡ-e Naqš-e Jahān and now occupied by the natural history museum of Isfahan, may have been initiated by Timur, although there is no persuasive evidence of either archeological or textual nature that would support the attribution besides the name by which the building has been known since the 19th century (Honarfar, pp. 327-28; Mehrābādi, pp. 386-89).

The paucity of monumental building in Isfahan continued into the first century of Safavid rule as well. While Tabriz and then Qazvin served as the capital until the end of the 16th century, Isfahan remained vital as one of the major urban centers especially for the promulgation of Twelver Shiʿism, the declared state religion of the Safavids (Jaʿfariān, pp. 305-39). Shah Esmāʿil I (1501-24, q.v.), reportedly visited the city several times in the first decade of the 16th century when he had stayed at the Bāḡ-e Naqš-e Jahān, the then extra-urban royal garden precinct that dated from at least the Timurid period, but he did not commission any constructions (Allāh-Detā Możṭar, facs. ed., p. 184; Quiring-Zoche, pp. 60-67).

Instead, and not unlike earlier examples of significant sub-imperial patronage, the two principal buildings of the 16th century, the Mausoleum of Hārun-e Welāyat (Plate I [1]) and the Masjed-e ʿAli, issued from the investment of two high-ranking members of the new ruling elite (Hillenbrand, pp. 761-65; Babaie, 2003, pp. 32-36). Durmiš Khan Šāmlu, the governor of Isfahan, sponsored the construction of Hārun-e Welāyat, which an inscription dates its completion to 918/1512. After the death of Durmiš Khan, Mirzā Kamāl-al-Din Šāh-Ḥosayn assumed the regency of Isfahan and built the adjacent Masjed-e ʿAli in 1522 (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 360-79; Mehrābādi, pp. 712-17).

In addition to the shared threads of patronage, these buildings also display in their emphasis on the decoration of the principal façade a compelling aspect of Safavid architectural style. In both cases, but especially in that of the mausoleum, the façade carries the weight of the iconographic import. At the Hārun-e Welāyat, for example, the epigraphic program mentions a tradition, according to which the prophet drew conceptual parallels between the biblical Aaron, presumably commemorated in this shrine, and Imam ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb, saying that ʿAli to him was as Aaron had been to Moses (Honarfar, 1965, p. 261; Babaie, 2003, pp. 33-34). It furthermore anchors the multifarious epigraphic

content on an equally complex visual composition in which highly accomplished mosaic-tiled floral, vegetal, geometric and bird-of-paradise motifs enunciate an intensely partisan Shiʿite message. This is all well in keeping with the Safavid zeal, especially in this early phase of its dynastic dominion for promoting Twelver Shiʿism as the state religion. In their strategic location on the southern flank of the Saljuq urban center, the mausoleum-mosque duo of Hārun-e Welāyat and Masjed-e ʿAli also demonstrate the Safavid resoluteness in weaving its own imperial beginnings into the fabric of the medieval city.

ISFAHAN: THE CAPITAL OF SHAH ʿABBĀS I

In contrast to the slow pace of construction during the intervening centuries between the Saljuqs and the Safavids, the transition of the capital from Qazvin to Isfahan late in the 16th century propelled the city once again onto the world stage. This most significant phase in the urban history of Isfahan began in 1590-91, when Shah ʿAbbās the Great ordered a series of building campaigns in anticipation of the official transfer of the capital in 1598 (McChesney, pp. 114-15). These works included the refurbishment of the old bazaars and the Meydān-e Kohna. What is more, the shah and his advisors embarked on a radical re-conceptualization of the city as the imperial capital of a reconfigured Safavid household.

Shah ʿAbbās had inherited a considerably weakened foundation of authority after decades of ineffectual rule and civil war amongst the Turkmen Qezelbāš chiefs, whose scrambling for power through alliances forged with Safavid princes and princesses had plagued Persia since the death of Shah Ṭahmāsb (1524-76). Centralization and absolutism, both state-building projects initiated by Shah Esmāʿil and Shah Ṭahmāsb, were revived and reformed by Shah ʿAbbās and found expression in the built environment of the new capital of Isfahan. In this late 16th-early 17th-century period, imperial enterprise shifted emphasis increasingly away from the mystical (Sufi) tendencies of Qezelbāš adherents of Shiʿite Islam and in favor of *šariʿa*-based normative practices of Twelver Shiʿism, spearheaded by the shah and his patronized clerical class, the ulema (Babayan, 2003, pp. 349-402). Concurrently, the reconfiguration of the royal household led to the replacement for the most part of the Qezelbāš companions with a new elite composed mostly of converted Circassian, Armenian, and Georgian military and administrative slaves (*ḡolām*) who owed their positions and their loyalty solely to the shah (Babaie, Babayan, Baghdiantz-McCabe and Farhad, pp. 6-9; Babayan, 2004, pp. 20-48).

Seventeenth-century Isfahan was built to facilitate the workings of, and represent the constituent parts of, this new imperial composition of economic, political, religious, and social convergences.

The master plan of Shah ʿAbbās took shape outside the medieval walled city to its southwest. A new public square, Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān, and a promenade, the Čahārbāḡ (q.v.), formed the armature of the Safavid capital city. Construction of this massive urban project, unprecedented in the concurrence of its extraordinary scale and its integrated planning, took several decades.

The first installment focused on the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān, when in 1590-91 the square was formalized as an urban space by virtue of leveling its surface area and containing it within a rectangular perimeter “wall” of a one-story row of shops. A two-story monumental gateway on the western side of the Meydān constituted the ceremonial marking of the threshold between the public urban space and the royal precinct of the Bāḡ-e Naqš-e Jahān, the royal garden retreat of Isfahan in use since at least the Timurid period (15th cent.). This building was expanded within the next decade into the gateway of ʿĀli Qāpu palace (q.v.). The companion to this politico-ceremonial building was the Qayṣariya bazaar (royal marketplace) at the northern side of the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān. Together they monumentalized this first phase of construction and facilitated the political and especially economic linkage between the vibrant old commercial hub of Isfahan, the Meydān-e Kohna, and its aspirant rival (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 395-401; idem, 1975).

The next major building campaign began in 1596 with the construction of the Čahārbāḡ promenade on the western flank of the royal precinct of Bāḡ-e Naqš-e Jahān. The avenue, some two kilometers long, connected the palace precinct, the Meydān and Darvāza Dawlat, one of the major city gates to the north, over the Allāhverdi Khan Bridge to a suburban royal retreat, the Hazār Jarib, on the foot of the Ṣoffa Mountain south of the city. Along the way, and developed over the next decade or so, royal gardens and gateway pavilions that were open to public for strolls and picnics lined the avenue on its north side of the river, while mansions and residential quarters for the new elite of Safavid society were developed on the south side of the avenue and the city. The Armenian suburb of New Julfa, begun after 1603-04 to house the forcibly resettled merchant families of Julfa, and the ʿAbbāsābād planned neighborhood (begun in 1611) for the displaced merchants of Tabriz are amongst the most notable of the new urban developments in Isfahan (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 479-93).

Anchored on these earlier building works was the 1602 campaign during which the functionality of the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān was enhanced with the addition of a second row of shops and a second-story of rooms above, thus shrinking the area of the Meydān but formalizing and adding more shops and a covered walkway in between the rows (Galdieri, 1970). The palace gateway was raised by another two stories at this point to become not only the seat of the judiciary and the special guards, but also the most accessible of the ceremonial palaces of the royal precinct.

Two other monumental features of the Meydān, the Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh royal chapel-mosque and the Masjed-e Šāh (originally called Masjed-e Jadid-e ʿAbbāsi), reaffirmed the interconnectedness in Safavid imperial discourse of politics and economics on the one hand and Twelver Shiʿism as the state religion on the other. Begun with the other constructions of 1602, the chapel-mosque of Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh stood across from the ʿĀli Qāpu (q.v.) on the eastern side of the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān and served to represent the personal piety of the shah and the royal household. Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh was amongst the most noted religious scholars of the time who had been invited from Jabal ʿĀmel in southern Lebanon to Safavid Persia to assist with the (re)composition and teaching of normative *šariʿa*-based Twelver Shiʿism (Honarfar, 1965, pp. 401-15, 425-64; Mehrābādi, pp. 659-710; Abisaab, pp. 81 ff.). To further tie together the bonds of legitimacy, Shah ʿAbbās had married Shaikh Loṭf-Allah's daughter. The positioning of the mosque in the vicinity of the Shaikh's *madrasa*, where he promulgated the teachings of "true" religion, its placement across from the palace gateway where the imperial household resided—to which the Shaikh also belonged through familial ties, and whence justice was dispensed—together these visual-spatial strategies represented the prismatic Safavid claim to legitimacy and authority.

Masjed-e Šāh on the south side of the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān formed the climactic conclusion of the major building works under Shah ʿAbbās's patronage. It also completed the monumental articulation of the square as the public space of encounter and exchange—the urban life of the first imperial capital of Twelver Shiʿism. This was the first congregational mosque in a major city to have been built by the Safavid monarchs (Babaie, 2003, pp. 44-46). The first century of Safavid rule had been mired in doctrinal debates over the legitimacy of Friday prayer during the absence of the Hidden Imam (the Mahdi, believed to have been in occultation since 941, and whose return is awaited by the Shiʿites; see Stewart, 1996, pp. 81-103; Abisaab, pp. 20-24).

Fiercely opposed theological views had delayed the conclusion of this debate and exposed the Safavids to Sunni, especially Ottoman, accusations of apostasy and illegitimacy. It was the verdict of such authorities of religious law as Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh and Shaikh Bahāʾ-al-Din ʿĀmeli (Shaikh Bahāʾi, himself responsible for having drawn the royal *waqf* or endowment deed for the entire Meydān and closely connected with the urban projects of Isfahan), who had helped resolve this politico-religious dilemma and had paved the way for Shah ʿAbbās to usher in the new order. Thus the construction of the first Safavid Friday mosque at the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān represented afresh the legitimacy of the imperial authority of the Safavids.

The Safavid urban scheme of Isfahan is so methodically integrated in its spatial, architectural, functional and iconographic aspects that it discredits the oft-repeated scholarly assumption of its parts having emerged piecemeal because of different building dates. Instead, the urban plan represents the vision of a new order, one that articulates a Twelver Shiʿite conceptualization of kingship and merges the royal glory (*farr*, q.v.) of ancient Persian kings with the aura of legitimacy predicated upon loyalty to the family of the Prophet Moḥammad. The implementation of the visual-spatial aspects of this vision depended on the involvement of more than Shah ʿAbbās, brilliantly imaginative a strategist that he might have been. It was indeed the engagement of the politically empowered *nouveaux riches* of the realm, the new *ḡolām* (slave) elite in particular, that oversaw the realization of the grand plan (Babaie, 2004, pp. 80-113).

These men served as proxy-patrons on behalf of the shahs and funded, supervised and built much of the principal components of the new capital city as well as the infrastructure of the empire at large. For example, Allāhverdi Khan (q.v.), the *sepahsālār* or commander-in-chief of the armies of Shah ʿAbbās, took charge of the construction of his namesake bridge between 1602 and 1607. The bridge spanned the Zāyandarud River and connected the two stretches of the Čahārbāḡ. The fact that such an integral part of the Čahārbāḡ promenade urban project was entrusted to one of the converted Georgian slave grandees bespeaks of the significance of the *ḡolām*s in the reconfigured Safavid household. Other court and government dignitaries, many of whom were indeed of *ḡolām* background, were granted land and ordered to build garden mansions along the Čahārbāḡ. Moḥebb-ʿAli Beg Lala, the tutor of the *ḡolām*s and the “supervisor of the royal buildings in Isfahan” was responsible for a substantial share of the works and funding of the Masjed-e Šāh. He was

also in charge of the design and construction of the housing project of the ʿAbbāsābād residential quarter (Honarfar, 1965, p. 429; Mehrābādi, p. 666).

As in earlier centuries of its life, the Isfahan of Shah ʿAbbās witnessed the convergence and coalescence of personal and imperial agendas and interests. This is of course to be expected given the corporate nature of urban development and architecture. Yet, it is the scale and persistence of the coordinated and singular vision of a Shiʿite imperial capital that distinguishes the early 17th-century urban development of Isfahan. The Meydān ensemble, with its cross-axial enunciations of religion, politics, and commerce transformed an old idea for the urban center of activity into an icon of absolutist imperial power. Together with the Čahārbāḡ promenade and the planned residential quarters of the elite, the urban project of Shah ʿAbbās transformed the medieval city of Isfahan into a true capital city, among the most populous and prosperous cities in the 17th century, where the multifarious strands of the early-modern enterprise of absolutism and centralization was made visually and spatially palpable and compelling.

So profoundly effective was this initial framework that subsequent constructions either took cues from its urbanization principles or anchored new and expanded urban functions onto the original layout of Safavid Isfahan. The palace precinct, the vast garden zone of the 16th century, developed into a true abode of felicity (*dawlat-ḵāna*). Shah ʿAbbās II (r. 1642-66), Shah Ṣafi I (r. 1629-42) and Shah Solaymān (r. 1666-94) expanded the functional capacity of the royal precinct with the addition of ceremonial palaces for specific functions. New urban developments on the southwestern side of the city were linked up with new suburban palaces along the Zāyandarud River through the magnificent Ḵᵛāju Bridge and its namesake avenue of Čahārbāḡ-e Ḵᵛāju. Smaller mosques and *madrasa*s, many founded by royal women or such powerful officials as the grand vizier Sāru Taqi (d. 1642), dotted both the old and new neighborhoods of Isfahan. An exceptionally large mosque, Masjed-e Ḥakim, was built by the court Physician of Shah ʿAbbās II, while the bazaars were enhanced with the additions of caravansaries and *čahār su* intersections of bazaar arteries and other public amenities. Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722), the last of the Safavid kings, constructed a complex of *madrasa*-bazaar-caravansary of considerable urban and architectural interest. His proclivities toward extreme religiosity and his abandonment of the reins of authority to the powerful clerical class went hand in hand with his complete retreat into the bosom of the harem, speaking both figuratively and literally.

Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn presided over a capital city in which the influence and power of the clergy was matched only by that of the eunuch *ḡolām* elite of the harem.

The baroque magnificence of the Solṭāni Madrasa of Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn stands as a testimony to the ways in which the city had shifted gear in the one hundred years since its emergance as the capital of the Safavids. The siege of Isfahan in 1722 by the Afghan invaders, the massacre of its denizens, the pillaging of the city's wealth, and the wholesale destruction of the Safavid symbols of authority, including its buildings, archives of bureaucracy, and structure of polity bracket the end of Isfahan as capital city with tragedy as profound as its beginning was brilliant. The subsequent history of architecture and urbanization in Isfahan pales compared to its Safavid past.

Plate II (1). Aerial view 1 of Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān.

Plate III (1). Aerial view 2 of Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān.

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