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QOROQ

QOROQ, the Mongol term *qorq* or *qoroq* (also *q ūroq,* or *qor ūq*), refers to that which is restricted, ritually forbidden, taboo. In practice, this denoted royal burial sites, forbidden ground, off-limits to outsiders and guarded by detachments of soldiers, *qoroqčis*, as well as kingly preserves, such as or royal hunting grounds, parks, or enclosed meadows where only royal horses were allowed to graze (Doerfer, III, pp. 344-45; Barthold and Rogers, pp. 204-05). Its meaning thus resembles the European *forestem silvam*, the outside woods, which in the Middle Ages came to mean an "extensive tree-covered district, set aside for royal hunting and under the protection of the king" ("Forest").

The concept is originally a Central Asian one. The pre-Chinggisid Turkic peoples already knew a *qorïğ*, an "enclosed area," often protected by a wall, reserved for the ruler, for the purpose of pasturing herds, engaging in hunting, or stocking royal accouterments (Golden, pp. 45-46). Among the 12th-century Qarakhanids (see ILAK-KHANIDS), too, the *ğuruq* was an integral part of the royal space (Karev, pp. 129, 136). According to Gerhard Doerfer (q.v.), in pre-Mongol sources the word only occurs once, namely in Naršaḵi's account of Šams al-Molk Nāṣer Khan, who ruled at Bukhara from 1068 to 1080 (Doerfer, III, p. 41).

It remains unclear how the meaning of the term and the practice evolved in the subsequent period, connecting the Mongols to the Safavids via the Timurids. In the Timurid sources, the term *qoroq* occurs infrequently, mostly, as it had done in earlier times, to denote geographical spaces involving burial sites and hunting preserves (references to the occurrence of the term in this

period in Matthee, pp. 114-15).

In later times, *qoroq* seems to have lost its direct connection to royal burial sites. Yet it retained its original meaning of something—food, drink, or pastimes—that is taboo, embargoed, declared off-limits to anyone but the ruler—and thus closely resembles the meaning of the Arabic-Islamic term *ḥarām* (Thévenot, pp. 337-38; Naṣiri, pp. 30-33; Fendereski, p. 82).

The available sources suggest that in the course of the 16th century, the term *qoroq* evolved from denoting a sacred, secluded space to a specific sacred and secluded space involving the ruler's inner court, otherwise known as the *ḥarem* (q.v.). It is difficult to say with any precision how and at what time this transition occurred. As late as the Timurid period, the women of the royal court, in keeping with Turkic steppe customs, were not secluded and played a prominent role in public affairs. Some of this visibility is still apparent in the early Safavid period, most famously in the observation that the women of Shah Esmāʿil I (r. 1501-24, q.v.) and Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-76, q.v.) rode horses, at times unveiled, and even participated in battles (Zeno, p. 13; Smith, pp. 49, 75, 85-6; Membré, p. 31; D'Allesandri, p. 217).

Under the Safavids, the meaning of *qoroq* as a restricted hunting ground or an embargo on food or activities continued (Ḵuzāni Eṣfahāni, p. 125; Ḵᵛājagi Eṣfahāni, p. 39). Yet it mainly and increasingly came to be denote restrictions on female appearance in public, consonant with the progressive retreat of women from public life as part of a growing sedentarization of the royal court (O'Kane, p. 256). The Persian-language sources, presumably deeming the topic inappropriate, unfortunately offer little information about the process.

One spectacular and seemingly paradoxical manifestation of this process was Shah ʿAbbās I's (q.v.; r. 1588-1629) decision to reserve the Meydān (see ISFAHAN x. Monuments [1] A Historical Survey) and, at times, other parts of Isfahan for female entertainment on special occasions. Jalāl-al-Din Monajjem is the first to record the practice for 1016/1607. Eunuchs put in charge of the organization made sure that only women could enter the area. Since all vendors had to be female as well, shop owners had female relatives staff their shops. A year later, the shah institutionalized this ladies-only policy by issuing an ordinance that allowed women to go out and entertain themselves once a week, making the famous Čahārbāḡ (q.v.) Avenue and its extension, the Si-o-seh Pol (see ISFAHAN x, Monuments [5] Bridges) over the Zāyanda Rud, available only to female visitors each Wednesday (Monajjem, pp. 331 and 361).

Various foreign observers confirm the practice and add details for the year 1619 when, returning from a campaign, the shah ordered women-only festivities on the Meydān. The Spanish envoy García De Silva y Figueroa (q.v.) claims that more than 3,000 women were allowed in. Pietro Della Valle (q.v.), who based his story on information provided by his Armenian-Iranian wife, who herself took part in the festivities, says that, upon entering the free zone, women took off their veils and started enjoying themselves with music and dance, the scene illuminated by the light of the lanterns and candles refracted in a sea of glittering mirror fragments set into the walls and porticoes of the buildings surrounding the square. Many Iranian cities were the scene of similar events (Silva y Figueroa, II, pp. 526-27; Della Valle, *Viaggi*, II, pp. 7-10; idem, *Delle conditioni*, pp. 49, 107-08; Herbert, p. 74; Bushev, pp. 212-13).

Over time, the custom of granting women their own temporary public sphere in such an organized fashion fell into abeyance. After the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I, *qoroq* more and more came to stand for the protected excursions of the shah and his female retinue.

In its simplest manifestation, this type of *qoroq* was invoked when a woman of rank decided to go to town, which usually occurred late at night. Whenever this happened, her guardians, the *qoroqčis*, would ride ahead of the female suite at a distance of 100 paces, followed by a posse shouting *qoroq*, *qoroq*, at which signal everyone would scurry away, struck with fear (Chardin, VI, 32-34).

A more elaborate and logistically complex form of *qoroq* was the embargo that was declared whenever the shah went out riding with all or part of his female retinue. *Qoroq* in those circumstances entailed a ban for all males above the age of six to be in the vicinity of the route taken by the royal suite. The day prior to this event, several *qoroqčis* would ride through the streets announcing the outing with trumpets and kettledrums. Following this proclamation, the prospective route was closed off with a fence covered with cotton cloth. On the day itself, about two hours before the event, the *qoroqčis* would reappear and clear the streets. By this time, only women, girls, and eunuch slaves were supposed to be in the homes within the target zone. Any male person caught during their second visit would risk being executed on the spot. Total silence would next descend on the embargoed area. The shah then appeared, riding at the head of the royal suite. His women followed, on horses or mules, veiled, the bridle of each horse held by a black eunuch. Surrounding the troupe rode mounted white eunuchs, armed with long batons. The rear of the suite was

composed of mounted guards, *yasaqčis*. If the royal women traveled without the shah accompanying them, they would be carried in cacolets, so-called *kajāvas*, hanging on the side of camels (Della Valle, *Viaggi*, I, 694-95; William Bell et al., 15 Oct. 1624, and 9 Jan. 1625, Ispahan, in Sainsbury, p. 163; for later references, see Matthee, 2019).

Qoroq was particularly popular under the last three Safavid rulers, Shah ʿAbbās II (q.v.; r. 1642-66), Shah Solaymān I (q.v.; r. 1666-94), and Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn (q.v.; r. 1694-1722). This was a natural function of the fact that all three spent their early years in the royal harem, where they had little or no exposure to the outside world. Once enthroned, they took advantage of their new-found freedom to go out riding, often with their wives and concubines. Shah ʿAbbās II is said to have organized some forty outings under *qoroq* between October 1664 and March 1665 (Thévenot, p. 337). Shah Solaymān continued this tradition. He reportedly engaged in sixty-two excursions involving *qoroq* in the first five months of his reign, averaging one every two and a half days. Most of these took place in New Julfa (q.v.), Isfahan's Armenian quarter, but some took the royal women to the various parks and villages outside the city (Chardin, IX, p. 552).

Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn was very fond of *qoroq* as well. The royal harem having grown tremendously by this time, the movement of the royal cavalcade naturally became a major undertaking. One source records how, in December 1694, the shah went on his first hunting outing in the vicinity of Isfahan with a suite consisting of more than 6,000 horses (Gaudereau, p. 69).

No doubt the costliest and most elaborate *qoroq* of all time was the pilgrimage the same ruler undertook to the shrine of Imam Reżā (q.v, see ʿALI AL-REŻĀ) in Mashhad in 1706. The shah set out with all his women and a retinue of some 60,000 people. During the four months that the royal suite resided in Mashhad, *qoroq* was maintained (NA, VOC 1747, Backer, Isfahan to Casteleyn, Gamron, 6 Oct. 1706, fol. 279; Krusiński, I, p. 127; Mostowfi, p. 116).

Qoroq continued following the fall of Isfahan to the Afghans in October 1722 and persisted far into the 19th century. Nāder Shah (r. 1736-47, q.v.) declared *qoroq* whenever he left his army camp (Floor, p. 91). During Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's reign, the royal women were ordinarily not allowed to enter the outer reaches of the royal palace, but occasionally the shah would release all male attendants and allow the women onto the premises under *qoroq* (Polak, I, p. 235). Every month, the court would organize an outing for the shah and his

women to visit the gardens of the Golestān Palace (see ARG) with musical entertainment (Tafażżoli, pp. 47, 161).

But change was coming. In the summer of 1286/1869, a royal edict was issued that amended the rules for the members of foreign legations in Iran. Henceforth, males were no longer obliged to leave town for the duration of a royal outing with female company. They now had to turn their backs until the royal cortège had passed. Yet foreign legations were still supposed to keep their doors shut. This caused their representatives to lodge a protest, as a result of which it was announced that, while members of the foreign community were held to maintain an appropriate attitude for the duration of the *qoroq*, they no longer had to keep their doors closed (AE, Corr. Pol., Perse 35, De Bonmères, Tajrish to Paris, 22 Sept. 1869, fols. 78v-80).

These were the waning days of *qoroq*. By the 1890s, males were just expected to turn to the wall when the royal cortège passed (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, p. 339; Curzon, I, 404). The shah also would still declare *qoroq* a few nights every month, so as to allow the women of his court to stroll around and amuse themselves in the palace gardens, free from male gaze (Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 22). It is rather ironic, finally, that Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's assassination on 1 May 1896 might have been prevented if *qoroq* had been in place at the shrine of Shah ʿAbd-al-ʿAzim (see ʿABD-AL-ʿAẒIM AL-ḤASANI) on that day (Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 104; Amin al-Dowla, pp. 207-08,104; Dowlatābādi, I, pp. 144-45).

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