



ZAYNAB BEGUM

ZAYNAB BEGUM (d. Qazvin, 9 Šafar 1050/31 May 1640), the fourth daughter of Shah **Ṭahmāsp** (r. 1524-76) and one of the most influential princesses in **Safavid** Iran.

Zaynab Begum was born from a Georgian princess called Ḥuri. Her guardian (*lala*), Šāh-qoli Beg, came from the Šāmlu and had the rank of *qurči-e šamšir* or commander of the cavalry under Shah Ṭahmāsp (Astrābādi, p. 56). Zaynab Begum's date of birth is unknown. Under Shah **Esmā'il II** (r. 1576-78), she was married off to 'Ali-qoli Khan Šāmlu, a grandson of Durmiš Khan. This union appears to have been brokered shortly before 26 Ramažān 985/7 December 1577, the day 'Ali-qoli Khan Šāmlu arrived in **Herat** as the new governor-general of Khorasan (Monajjem Yazdi, p. 37; Szuppe, p. 221, n. 46). Yet their marriage was never consummated, and Zaynab Begum continued to live in the royal harem in Qazvin (Eskandar Beg Torkamān, pp. 135, 212; Astrābādi, p. 56; Szuppe, p. 216). According to a 17th-century chronicler, by the end of the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp, Zaynab Begum had been designated a fiancée of the **Hidden Imam** and lived the life of a spinster in Qazvin (Kuzāni, fol. 274r). She played a towering role during the tenure of her nephew, Prince Ḥamza Mirzā's as heir-apparent. It is reported that Zaynab Begum was in charge of the royal harem in Qazvin during the civil war that engulfed Safavid Iran late in the 1580s (Eskandar Beg Torkamān, p. 336). Zaynab Begum was among the key supporters of Prince 'Abbās Mirzā (later **Shah 'Abbās**) in Qazvin during the wars of succession that broke out during the closing years of the reign of Moḥammad Ḳodābanda (1578-88; Eskandar Beg Torkamān, pp. 372, 405).



Mirzā Loṭf-Allāh Širāzi, the first bureaucrat who served as grand vizier under Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1588-1629), was a close ally of Zaynab Begum and, since the assassination of Prince Ḥamza Mirzā on 22 Du’l-Ḥejja 994/4 December 1586, had attended her service as vizier (Ḥosayni Qomi, pp. 889, 1074; Kuzāni, 2015, p. 745). It is reported that, during the early years of the reign of Shah ‘Abbās, Zaynab Begum acted as his foster mother (Della Valle, II, p. 10). She remained close to Shah ‘Abbās for much of the first two decades of his reign, acting as one of key counselors of the Safavid monarch. In 1617, the Italian traveler [Pietro della Valle](#) had seen her in [Isfahan](#) leading the harem during one of Shah ‘Abbās’s excursions (Della Valle, II, p. 11; Szuppe, p. 246). Zaynab Begum oversaw the upbringing of Shah ‘Abbās’ sons in the royal harem, and there is evidence to suggest that she wielded such an influence with the Safavid monarch that local governors and military chiefs asked her to intervene on their behalf with Shah ‘Abbās (Kuzāni, 2015, pp. 209, 278).

Under Shah ‘Abbās, Zaynab Begum was closely involved in the administrative affairs of the *kāṣṣa* (crown) sector of the Safavid bureaucracy. In 1001/1592-93, she was made the *kāṣṣa* governor of [Kashan](#). At that time, two bureaucrats acted as her deputies in Kashan (Kuzāni, 2015, pp. 120, 294, 465-66). Zaynab Begum held this post up until 1022/1613-14, the year in which she was disgraced, stripped of all her posts, and banished to Qazvin (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 623; Waḥid Eṣfahāni, p. 241). She is reported to have owned one of the affluent villages of Taft in the southern outskirts of Yazd (Mofid Bāfqi, p. 701). For much of the reign of Shah ‘Abbās, Zaynab Begum had been allowed to collect the poll tax imposed on the Zoroastrian community of Yazd for herself. It was this cash source that in 1010/1601-02 enabled her to build at least one public [caravanserai](#) along the route from Isfahan to Kashan (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 300). A year later in 1011/1602-03, Zaynab Begum was promoted to keeper of the seal used for all royal decrees (*mohrdār-e šaraf nafād*; Kuzāni, 2015, p. 326). In 1020/1611-12, Zaynab Begum was in charge of a royal banquet thrown on the occasion of the arrival of the Uzbek ruler of Urganj, Wali-Moḥammad Khan, who had fled to Iran after the outbreak of civil war in Chorazmia (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 580).

In 1022/1613-14, Shah ‘Abbās expelled Zaynab Begum from the harem and ordered her to take up residence in Qazvin, where she was to live under house arrest (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 623; Waḥid Eṣfahāni, p. 241). This happened amid the violent elimination of several high-ranking bureaucrats and military chiefs attending the Safavid court in Isfahan. Fażli Beg Kuzāni claims that it was as a



result of machinations by the acting religious leader (*mojtahed*) at the court of Shah ‘Abbās, Mir Moḥammad-Bāqer *Dāmād*, that the Safavid monarch decided to banish Zaynab Begum to Qazvin (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 624). Zaynab Begum’s banishment from the royal court seems to have been lifted about four years later. As mentioned above, Pietro della Valle had seen her in Isfahan in 1617 in the company of the royal harem. In the spring of 1036/1627, Shah ‘Abbās pardoned Zaynab Begum and reinstated her as head of the royal harem in Faraḥābād and Isfahan (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 954). Zaynab Begum is reported to have been in daily contact with court physicians during Shah ‘Abbās’ terminal illness, supervising the Safavid monarch’s treatment in Faraḥābād on the coast of the Caspian Sea in Mazandaran (Kuzāni, 2015, p. 967). Upon Shah ‘Abbās’s death on the morning of 24 Jomādā I 1038/19 January 1629, Zaynab Begum oversaw the transfer of his remains from Mazandaran to Kashan as well as the safe passage of the royal harem from Faraḥābād to Isfahan via Firuzkuh and Kashan (Kuzāni, 2015, pp. 972, 975).

It was during the initial years of the reign of Shah Ṣafi I (1629-42) that Zaynab Begum reached the apogee of her power. According to a 17th-century court chronicler, she played a crucial role in convincing Shah ‘Abbās in his deathbed to make his grandson, Sām Mirzā’s (later Shah Ṣafi), heir-apparent in the early days of Jomādā I 1038/January 1629. Prior to leaving Faraḥābād, Zaynab Begum is reported to have managed to convene and supervise an assembly of military chiefs and high-ranking bureaucrats, thus obtaining their official agreement for Sām Mirzā’s impending ascent to the throne in Isfahan, which occurred on the night of Monday, 4 Jomādā II 1038/29 January 1629 (Moḥammad-Ma’ṣum Eṣfahāni, pp. 33-37). During the early months of the reign of Shah Ṣafi, Zaynab Begum took care of the administrative affairs of the country on a daily basis. Later in the same year, she accompanied Shah Ṣafi during his military campaign against the Ottomans, and on 15 Ṣawwāl 1039/28 May 1630 led the royal harem to *Golpāyḡān* ahead of the battle of Marivān (Moḥammad-Ma’ṣum Eṣfahāni, pp. 43, 83-84).

On 23 Rajab 1041/12 February 1632, in the heat of the killing of more than fifteen Safavid princes and their parents in Isfahan, Shah Ṣafi expelled Zaynab Begum from the royal harem, ordering her to move to Qazvin (Moḥammad-Ma’um Eṣfahāni, p. 126; Waḥid Eṣfahāni, p. 241). She died on 9 Ṣafar 1050/31 May 1640 (Astrābādi, p. 259; Moḥammad-Ma’um Eṣfahāni, p. 291; Wāla Eṣfahāni, p. 310). According to a chronogram composed on the occasion of Zaynab Begum’s death, she spent the last days of her life in Isfahan. Her



remains were buried in the Imam ‘Ali al-Rezā’s shrine in Mashhad. She is praised in a number of contemporary narrative sources as a mainstay of political moderation and wisdom in Safavid court politics (Moḥammad-Ma‘um Eṣfahāni, p. 291; Anonymous, pp. 58-59).

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