



SAFAVID Rebirth of a Persian Empire

IRAN

ANDREW J NEWMAN

I.B. TAURIS

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Preface and Acknowledgements

I have been interested in Safavid Iran since 1977 when, as a first-year graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, searching for a PhD topic, I read Laurence Lockhart's 1958 description of the well-known Twelver Shi'i scholar Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (d. 1699) as 'an extremely bigoted *mujtahid*', 'a rigid and fanatical formalist', an opponent of all philosophical inquiry and a persecutor of Jews and Armenians. Echoing the decades' old judgement of E. G. Browne (d. 1926), Lockhart stated that Majlisi's influence was such as to render Safavid Iran unable to respond to the attacks which culminated in the fall of the capital of Isfahan to the Afghans in 1722. Although alone the 1982–3 Beirut edition of *Bihar al-Anwar*, Majlisi's massive, Arabic-language collection of the *hadiths* of the twelve imams, runs to some 110 volumes, Lockhart's source for such sweeping characterisations was a single, rather short, essay of Majlisi composed in Persian.¹

My 1980 oral examinations, the passing of which allowed me to commence my dissertation research, were partly predicated on a proposal to examine Majlisi's life and works. In the process of that research I discovered a dearth of secondary-source works on Twelver Shi'ism and the 1986 PhD became, instead, an examination of developments in Shi'i jurisprudence from the disappearance of the twelfth Imam in 873–4 to the years immediately following the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the realm's official faith following the 1501 capture of Tabriz by the first Safavid shah, Ismail. Several subsequent articles on Shi'ism in the Safavid period did not immediately relate to Majlisi. When I returned to Majlisi, while preparing a paper for the Third International Round Table on Safavid Persia, which I convened in 1998 in Edinburgh, I discovered that although Western scholars had yet to commence any systematic examination of his many, mostly Arabic-language, works the aforementioned sweeping characterisations of the man and his legacy had, in fact, assumed the status of 'received wisdom' in the field.

In 2000, in the aftermath of sending in the proofs for my first book, on Twelver doctrine and practice in the late ninth and early tenth centuries,² I.B.Tauris asked me to write a new general history of the

Safavid period. Given the logarithmic expansion in the scholarly interest in the period since the Iranian revolution, as discussed below, this was a daunting challenge for someone whose research interests in the period had to date involved research into apparently arcane aspects of Shi'i religious discourse.

In attempting to rise to this challenge I owe much to the comments, criticisms and assistance of such well-respected figures in Iranian and Safavid history as Iraj Afshar, Sussan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Stephen Blake, Sheila Canby, Ehsan Eshraqi, Willem Floor, Gene Garthwaite, Edmund Herzig, Robert Hillenbrand, Rasul Jafariyan, Paul Luft, Rudi Matthee, Sandy Morton, Sholeh Quinn, Mansur Sefatgol and Maria Szuppe. These, along with many others, may well not recognise their own contributions to, and in any case are to be absolved of responsibility for any aspect of, the present volume, let alone my failure to adhere to the original deadline for its submission. The latter has been met only with the utmost patience and forbearance of I.B.Tauris's Publisher and Managing Editor Mr Iradj Bagherzade, my patient editor Dr Lester Crook and his assistant Ms Clare Dubois.

I would also like to thank Dr Ian Revie, Head of the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Edinburgh for his help in securing the support of the School's Research Fund to assist with the reproduction of the dustjacket.

I must also thank my wife and, especially, my daughter, to whom this volume is dedicated, for their constant patience and encouragement over the last four-plus years.

Upon my graduation from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in 1974, having never been West of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, let alone outside the US, with the encouragement of Dartmouth Professor Gene Garthwaite I journeyed to, and spent two years in Iran. There, teaching English and travelling throughout the country, I became acquainted with something of Persian language, culture and history. As many travellers in 'the East', my sojourn was also an occasion for introspection and, when I commenced my graduate studies in California in 1977, with the encouragement of Afaf Marsot, Peter Gran, Amin Banani and Nikki Keddie and such colleagues as Yahya Sadowski, Fred Lawson, Ken Cuno, Halah Fattah and others, I became as interested in the study of the history of Iran and the region as a whole as in the memorisation of legions of names and dates.

In the years since and, especially, in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, the Safavid period has taken on meanings for Iranians different to those it has in the West. The present volume is directed primarily to the Western-language audience, including the growing number of specialists in the various sub-disciplines of Safavid Studies and those in other branches of Middle Eastern Studies but also, and in particular, the non-specialist interested in Iran and the region generally. Hence any 'scientific' effort to reconcile the all-too many efforts to transliterate Arabic

and Persian words into English by recourse to a complicated system of diacritical marks is eschewed in favour of somewhat idiosyncratic system of transliteration based loosely on that used in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES). Dates also are generally given only in their 'AD' version, except for occasional dates of publication; where this makes for flagrant inaccuracy, two Christian years may be given as, for example, in AD 873–4, corresponding to the Hijri 260, the year of the disappearance of the twelfth Shi'i Imam. Moreover, while footnotes do refer to Persian and Arabic sources, care is also taken to refer to available translations of primary sources as well as secondary works by specialists available in English and other Western languages. The bibliographical convention of omitting names of publishers is followed throughout.

Edinburgh
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Map Iran in the Safavid Period



Introduction

When the Great Prince [Abbas I] ceased to live Persia ceased to prosper.¹

Jean Chardin

(French Huguenot resident in Iran in the 1660s and 1670s)

More than two thousand years ago Cyrus the Great (558–530 BC) established the ancient Persian Achaemenian empire. A few turbulent years later he was followed by Darius the Great (522–486) and his son Xerxes (486–465), but the empire eventually fell to Alexander (330–323). At the height of its 220-year history (550–330) the Achaemenian empire stretched from modern-day Libya in the West to the Indus and Central Asia in the East, featured a well-developed administrative bureaucracy, used political marriages with, and parcelled out grants of land and/or titles to, key military and administrative figures to bind their interests to those of the ruling house, employed non-Persians in the administration of the realm, and portrayed the sitting ruler as simultaneously the apex of the different political traditions of all of the region's various peoples – including the Medes, Babylonians, Jews, Lydians and Egyptians. Indeed the well-known inscription at Bisitun (520–519) proclaiming the accession of Darius to the throne was written in three languages of the empire's people – Akkadian/Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian – and the famous reliefs at Persepolis (commenced *c.* 515) which depict processions of subject peoples bearing gifts and thus acknowledging Darius' rule further attest to the vastness and complex makeup of the Achaemenian empire and his rulership, as representative of the paramount Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda, as 'king of kings' over, and thus transcending, them all.

Since that time, situated between the Eastern Mediterranean, the Levant and Asia Minor on the West, Asia and the Indian subcontinent on the East and Russia and the Persian Gulf on the North and South, Iran and what is distinct about the peoples of the Iranian plateau have been the mediated product of the interaction of its peoples' own traditions with the historical, spiritual and cultural traditions of peoples of

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the many other regions, near and far, who have passed through and settled there.

The Safavid period, conventionally dated from Ismail's capture of Tabriz in 1501 to the fall of Isfahan to the Afghans in 1722, stands between Iran's medieval and modern history. The present work offers an understanding of the history of Iran under the Safavids, the longest-ruling dynasty in Iran's history since its conquest by Muslim armies in the 640s, which differs from that generally accepted to date.

The conventional wisdom

Roger Savory's is the first, and the last, general history of Safavid Iran. It appeared more than two decades ago, in 1980,² the year after the flight from Iran of the last Pahlavi ruler, Muhammad Riza, the year of the latter's death and the return to Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) after nearly two decades of exile abroad, and in the midst of the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran which had commenced in November 1979.

Savory's volume summarised the Western understanding of the period to that date, an understanding which was mainly the product of work by both himself and such earlier scholars as Browne, V. Minorsky (d. 1966) and Lockhart (d. 1975).³

To that time Western-language discussions of the Safavid period usually had commenced with mention of the Ardabil-based Safavid Sufi order as an urban, quietist, contemplative spiritual movement established by the eponymous Shaykh Safi al-Din (d. 1334), whose followers were, in fact, mainly Sunnis. In c. 1447, owing to an influx of levies from a number of Turkish tribes, the order is said to have embraced a new militant, messianic religio-political discourse. Its leaders were viewed as divine and a distinctive red twelve-pleated hat (*taj*) was adopted to signal veneration of the Twelve Shi'i Imams – from which headgear the Qizilbash (Turkish, 'red-headed') confederation of member tribes derived its name. The shift also signalled the start of an offensive military strategy. In 1501 Safi al-Din's descendant Ismail led Qizilbash forces in the capture of Tabriz and went on to seize control of a territory roughly contiguous with the boundaries of modern-day Iran. Ismail also established Twelver Shi'ism as his realm's official faith, in distinction to the Sunnism of the Ottomans to the West and the Uzbeks to the Northeast. Ismail was also said to have invited large numbers of Shi'i clerics resident in Arabic-speaking lands to Iran to assist in the promulgation of the faith's doctrines and practices throughout the realm and to have encouraged the view of himself both as a direct descendant of the Shi'i Imams and the new faith's chief defender. In 1514 Ottoman forces inflicted a crushing defeat on the Safavids at Chaldiran after which Ismail, his own confidence shattered, is said to have withdrawn into himself. He died in 1524.

At Ismail's death and the accession of his nine-year-old son Tahmasp,

what is portrayed as the inherent unruliness of the Qizilbash tribal levies boiled to the surface to cause a decade of civil war which left Safavid territory vulnerable to a series of Ottoman and Uzbek invasions. Tahmasp finally asserted his authority over the tribes, signed a peace treaty with the Ottomans, checked Uzbek incursions and relocated the capital from Tabriz to Qazvin. At Tahmasp's death in 1576 the unrestrained nature of the tribal forces resurfaced and resulted in further intra-Qizilbash strife and loss of territory to foreign invasions.

Abbas I (reg. 1588–1629), Tahmasp's grandson, is said to have checked Qizilbash influence both by opposing their military might with that of large numbers of Georgian and other Caucasian converts and by driving underground the very millenarianism which had driven the tribal levies' earlier conquests. Abbas retook territory seized by the Ottomans and Uzbeks, moved the capital to Isfahan, embellished that city with monumental architectural undertakings of a secular and non-secular nature, patronised poets, artists and philosophers and promoted contacts with Europe.

If Abbas' reign fostered military, political and economic stability, it is also said to have set in motion certain forces which his much less able successors were unable to manage. Friction obtained between Abbas' newly created non-Qizilbash military corps and the traditional tribal elite. In addition, to meet their own, increasingly extravagant expenses successive courts expanded *khassa* lands (lands under direct control of the central court) at the expense of *mamalik* lands (lands under provincial administration) and degraded the level of the realm's military preparedness. Indeed, having been born and reared in the haram and, hence, understood as easily swayed by the influence of such powerful, intriguing parties at court as the haram women and palace eunuchs, Abbas' successors are generally portrayed as more interested in debauchery or in religion than in the affairs of state. Sultan Husayn, the last Safavid shah, is portrayed as so attentive to the goodwill of courtiers and clerics – the latter including Majlisi – and so busy with ostentatious building projects that the state was unable to mount any credible response either to burgeoning internal socio-economic and political crises or to bold raids by the Afghans from the East. Following one such incursion, the Afghan capture of Isfahan in 1722 is understood as signalling the dynasty's end.⁴

The appearance of a field

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution both the number of Western scholars whose primary research interests lay in this period of Iran's history and those for whom the period is one of many areas of interest began an exponential increase and Western 'Safavid Studies', as a separate and distinct field of scholarly endeavour, may be said to have come into existence.

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The reasons for this growth in interest are not the subject of the present volume, but the number of post-Revolution international conferences on various aspects of the period clearly attest to it. The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the organisation of three, successively larger, international Round Tables, in 1988, 1993 and 1998, all held in Europe, at which scholars addressed issues in Safavid society and culture.⁵ 1998 also witnessed two other scholarly gatherings on the period⁶ and more recent symposia only portend continued expansion.⁷

In Iran, incidentally, the field has followed a similar course of expansion. Of the older generation of scholars such figures as Nasrallah Falsafi (d. 1981) and M. T. Danish-pazhuh (d. 1996), Abd al-Husayn Navai, whose compilations of key documents from the period are mostly out of print, M. I. Bastani-Parizi, Iraj Afshar, Ehsan Eshraqi, Ahmad Munzavi and Husayn Mirjafari are especially noteworthy. Collectively these scholars have already forgotten more than most others might hope to know. For at least a decade after 1978, engulfed by revolution and war, there was some question that Iran could produce a new generation of scholars to succeed, though not replace, such giants. The subsequent appearance of such figures as Rasul Jafariyan and Mansur Sefatgol should easily set minds to rest.⁸

Indeed, despite the turmoil of the period the 1980s also witnessed the commencement of the (re)publication in Iran of key Persian- and Arabic-language primary materials both by established religious and cultural organisations and a host of new ones together with the organisation of exhibitions and other research activities. The latter include, for example, an exhibition centre devoted to the painter Riza Abbasi (d. 1635) opened in Tehran in 1993, a centre for the study of the work of the philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) opened in Tehran in the early 1990s, a 1999 international conference on Mulla Sadra, a conference on Majlisi in Isfahan in 2000 – itself the occasion of the publication of several works on his life and the republication of a number of Majlisi's writings – and a conference on 'Isfahan and the Safavids' organised at the University of Isfahan in February 2002. As an indication of the growth of domestic interest in the period, some 140 abstracts were submitted for the latter. More recently February 2004 witnessed a conference on Surab Tanukabuni (d. 1712) at the University of Isfahan in February 2004, and 'The Safavids and the Course of Iranian History' was organised at the University of Tabriz in October 2004. A conference on the career and contributions of Sultan Muhammad, the early Safavid-period artist, is set for Tabriz in May 2005.

The legacy of growth

As a result of this recent activity scholars and lay persons interested in Safavid Iran today have at their disposal an intimidating array of primary and secondary sources, composed in a myriad of languages, not

available to earlier researchers. Some two dozen Persian-language ‘court’ chronicles produced over the period are now available, most in published form (see Appendix II). These and such other Persian-language sources as, for example, court/diplomatic correspondence and religious endowment (*vaqf*) documents vie for attention with the accounts of contemporary Western travellers and residents in to Iran, written variously in English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian and Polish. There are also the records of contemporary Western commercial and political interests, composed in Dutch, English, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish, and a substantial body of Armenian-language material. Although Safavid-period religious figures composed some of their works, especially those of a ‘popular’ nature, in Persian, most Shi‘i clerics of the day, whether resident in Iran or abroad, composed their scholarly works in Arabic. The contemporary biographical dictionaries of the period’s clerics, nearly all of which are now available in published form, were produced in both languages. Given the interaction between the Ottomans and the Safavids, there are also Turkish-language political/military, commercial and religious sources, for the most part still stunningly under-utilised. Important ‘non-textual’ sources include, for example, buildings, monument inscriptions, coins, pottery, carpets, paintings, metalwork and manuscript and single-page illustrations.

The post-Revolution growth in scholarly interest in the period, in both the West and Iran, together with the growth of available source materials has in fact encouraged the appearance of sub-disciplines within the field. Where before 1978 study of the period focused mainly on the period’s political history, the field’s scholarly output now includes studies on the Safavid economy and military, on the political relations between Safavid Iran and its neighbours as well as of Safavid socio-cultural history. The latter, construed broadly, encompasses research on the family and women, tribal life and customs, religious life and discourse, religious minorities, science and medicine, art and architecture, painting, metalwork, ceramics, carpets, history-writing and court-sponsored and popular literary expression. If several of these sub-disciplines are at present somewhat sparsely populated others are sufficiently well-developed as to have generated a series of lively internal ‘debates’.

Despite the recent enormous growth in scholars and sources and notwithstanding the efforts of the Round Tables’ organisers to encourage discussions between scholars of the field’s different sub-disciplines, Safavid studies nevertheless remains bifurcated between studies of the socio-economic and political realms and those of the cultural: the contributions of the one group of scholars still generally do not figure in the analyses, and often not even the footnotes and bibliographies, of the other.

More importantly, regardless of their specific areas of research, most authors continue to subscribe to the conventional understanding of

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the period which is outlined above and whose origins date, at least, to the early years of the last century. Thus, for example, the political boundaries of the period are still accepted as demarcated by the twin politico-military events of Tabriz' capture and Isfahan's fall. Implicitly identifying the geographical boundaries of the modern Iranian state as 'normal', scholars project these back to the Safavid period and label variations therein over the period as 'territorial gain' or 'loss'. Indeed, in reference to the Safavids the continued use of the term 'state' itself, connoting, for example, fixed, internationally recognised borders, a common language and a monopoly at the centre of the use of force, is itself particularly problematic. In fact, to take but one example, Qizilbash tribal elements and the early shahs especially were more comfortable in dialects of Turkish, native Iranians (Tajiks) spoke Persian and the primary language of the established faith was Arabic.

Perhaps most strikingly, post-1980 works on particular aspects of Safavid history – socio-economic, political or 'cultural' – continue to refer to the period in terms of the inherent and continuous conflict between Qizilbash and Tajik, of the repeated, largely vain, efforts of various shahs to curb the political/military and spiritual influence of Qizilbash leaders and levies and, particularly beginning in the seventeenth century, the growing imbalance between *khassa* and *mamalik* lands, the rise of a 'shadow' government based in the haram, the growing intolerance of Safavid Shi'ism and the presence of 'strong' or 'weak' rulers. The second Safavid century in particular continues to be portrayed as having begun with a burst of cultural and intellectual achievement, in an atmosphere of military, political, and economic stability – ascribed solely to the presence of Abbas I, a 'strong' ruler – only to end in the darkness of fanatical religious orthodoxy amid military, political, and economic chaos and 'weak' leadership at the centre. Whatever their specific sub-discipline, scholars of the period continue to take as given the inevitable decline and fall of the Safavid 'state', as represented by the 1722 Afghan capture of Isfahan.⁹

Preoccupation with the Safavid 'fall' and, especially, dating the onset of Safavid 'decline' ever earlier in the period, is reinforced by recourse to the critiques of the Safavid system on offer in both Persian-language historical chronicles and a variety of Western-language sources.

However, of the Persian-language sources on which Western writers have relied to explain the 'decline' of the 'state', especially during the reigns of Shah Sulayman (reg. 1666/68–94) and Sultan Husayn (reg. 1694–1722), most were composed well after the 1722 capture of Isfahan¹⁰ and the varied agendas of their authors have yet to be acknowledged and explored as Quinn has done with earlier court chronicles.¹¹

Western scholars of the period have also relied heavily on the accounts of various Western residents in, and travellers to, Iran over the period. Absent from these Western-language studies is any critical discussion of

the information and ‘analyses’ on offer therein even though, as the few examples to be cited herein suggest, the authors of these accounts frequently contradict each other on trends, events, facts and figures, present as historical ‘fact’ information gathered well after the occurrence of the events in question, or in such detail – about life and politics at court, for example, including life in and the influence of the haram – as to beg credulity, and write from vantage points or possess political, religious and/or commercial agendas which render their contributions less than ‘objective’.¹² Similarly, the recent focus on Western economic data for the period, if long overdue, has, nevertheless facilitated according a key, if not determinist, role in Safavid ‘decline’ to such purely economic trends and events as the movement of specie and the trade in silk on a par with that which gripped Ottoman Studies from the late 1970s as it explored the roots of Ottoman ‘decline’ under the influence of I. Wallerstein’s 1974 *The Modern World System* and the subsequent emergence of ‘world system theory’.¹³

If Ottoman studies, which for so long laboured under the burden of ‘decline studies’, has begun to move on,¹⁴ the suggestion that the end of Safavid dynasty was the inevitable result of an increasingly dysfunctional society’s inability to respond to an increasingly severe series of internal and external challenges remains well accepted. Indeed, within the larger Western-language field of Middle Eastern Studies general histories of the region reproduce the paradigm without reference to secondary, let alone primary, sources.¹⁵

An alternative synthesis

A study of the period which simply ‘updated’ Savory’s volume by adding the detail available in, and references to, all of the many primary and secondary sources on the period which have appeared since 1980 would only reinforce, in overlong form, the teleological framework of analysis which continues to dominate the West’s study of the period. On the other hand, a study whose primary goal was to challenge individual aspects of the conventional approach to the period or render a ‘verdict’ on one or more of the ‘debates’ within the field’s many sub-disciplines risks both being arcane and overly negative, particularly for the non-specialist reader for whom the present work is at least partly intended.

Taking the lead from the avowed goals of the several Round Tables to date, here the Safavid story is told, first, by adopting a multi-disciplinary approach to address trends and events in and across the socio-economic, political and ‘cultural’ realms and, secondly, by rejecting the conventional preoccupation with Safavid ‘decline’ to ask, instead, why the Safavids endured as long as they did. Indeed, if the 1501–1722 dates are accepted, the Safavid was the longest-lasting of Islamic Iran’s various polities, outlasting such of its Western contemporaries as the Tudors, the

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Stewarts and the Republic in England or, in France, the Valois and their successors the Bourbons.¹⁶

Dispensing also with the term ‘state’, given the problems therewith cited above, such terms as ‘project’, ‘polity’ and ‘realm’ appear frequently herein in relation to the Safavid enterprise. These are intended to underline the manner in which from the very first different, and potentially mutually conflicting, interests and agendas were intertwined with each other and with the fortunes of the Safavid house, itself embodied in, and led by, the shah. The distinctly heterogeneous ‘discourse’ of the shah – that discourse itself comprising both statements and actions – reflected and thereby legitimised the individual discourses of each of the polity’s constituent elements and facilitated both the recognition and incorporation of ‘new’ constituencies into the project, even as extant ‘members’ retained prominence therein, and the transcendence and thus the subordination of each.¹⁷ The Safavid story is the story of the growth of its composite constituencies: where from well prior to the capture of Tabriz throughout most of the sixteenth century allied Turk political-military and Tajik administrative interests dominated the project’s political centre, Sultan Husayn commanded the recognition of an array of foreign commercial, political and religious interests as well as Turk and non-Turk tribal, Tajik, and *ghulam* military, political and administrative and other court elements, and indigenous Muslim, Christian and foreign artisanal and commercial-political classes.

Over the period fealty to the person of the sitting shah bespoke acceptance of both the presence of others of the realm’s constituencies and the hierarchical manner of their arrangement around his mediating and transcendent headship which obtained over his reign and the resulting broader project itself, even if the occasionally incompatible interests of some of these constituencies caused intermittent outbreak of internal discord.

Only disloyalty to the authority and legitimate rule of the sitting shah constituted treason, not only to himself and to the Safavid house but also, and more importantly, to the very configuration of constituencies whose precise ordering around the head of the house underlay the rule of the shah in question. Those who put forth such challenges therefore paid the ultimate price. Indeed loyalty was as valued as competence if not more so; loyal incompetents, generally, were only replaced. If they suffered worse, the consequence of their transgressions were seldom visited upon their progeny. Otherwise, considerable political autonomy at the central and provincial level was the norm and individual discourse, especially of the broadly construed ‘cultural’ nature – artistic and religious, for example – however discordant, was tolerated. Indeed, as will be seen, the centre frequently strove to identify simultaneously with the more contradictory of those of the realm’s independent discourses which did not overtly challenge its authority and thus rise above, and transcend, the *mêlée*.

As to the above-mentioned outbreaks of internal discord, in the first Safavid century especially the death of the sitting ruler, which removed the single individual around whose inclusive and transcendent discourse the realm's constituencies had achieved an arrangement, was most often the cause thereof. Indeed, perhaps the greatest challenges to the polity came with the deaths of Ismail and Tahmasp, the consequent breakdown of the precise configuration of the realm's constituencies, especially among and between the Qizilbash tribes, and a consequent political and military disorder which encouraged the Ottoman and/or Uzbek incursions. In these two instances especially, the support of the core Turk–Tajik alliance for the overall project remained solid, however. In fact over the longer term this alliance oversaw and acquiesced both in changes in the core constituencies over the period to endow an ever larger number of elements with an interest in the Safavid project and in the steady institutionalisation of the realm's political processes which underlay increasingly peaceful successions over the period. Such developments, in the context of the economic benefits accruing to the realm with the 1555 Amasya treaty with the Ottomans and, especially, the nearly century-long peace with the Ottomans which commenced in 1639, underpinned the increasing domestic political stability which marked the second Safavid century.

A myriad of discourses, one ruler to unite them

The inclusivity at the heart of the longevity of the Safavid project was hardly unknown in Islamic history. In the early ninth century, for example, the Abbasid caliphs included in their personal retinues scholars of different religious backgrounds including, famously, non-Muslim medical practitioners, and sponsored the translation into Arabic of a myriad of non-Arabic philosophical and scientific texts.

Given its status as a geographical cross-roads, pre-Islamic and, in the Islamic period, pre-Safavid Iran had its own history of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and inclusivity. Most recently, in the aftermath of both the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century and those of Timur (d. 1405) both sets of 'foreign' rulers adopted Islam as the dominant spiritual discourse and sponsored various projects which attested to their regard for the faith. Cognisant of the region's historical religious diversity, they also patronised discussions between spokesmen for the various indigenous religious traditions, thereby acknowledging the legitimacy of each and their own transcendent authority over all.¹⁸ These rulers also employed skilled members of the native Iranian Tajik class to administer their empire and adopted, and patronised, the latter's distinctive cultural discourse, especially the 'traditional' Tajik literary arts and crafts.

The Qaraqyunlu and Aqqyunlu tribal entities which succeeded the Timurids on the region's political scene pursued a similarly inclusive 'project': Islam was their religion, their tribal military levies were Turks,

their administrators were Tajiks and their cultural discourse was Persian. Such inclusivity was especially a feature of the reign of Uzun Hasan (d. 1478), ruler of the Aqquyunlu (White Sheep) tribal confederation who, in the face of opposition from the Ottomans, Mamluks and the Qaraqyunlu (Black Sheep) Turkish tribal confederacy, held sway over a territory stretching from the Euphrates in the West to Kirman in the East and from Transcaucasia in the North to the Persian Gulf in the South. In the tradition of both Timur and the Qaraqyunlu ruler Jahan Shah (d. 1467), during whose thirty-year reign the Qaraqyunlu had amassed considerable territory, Uzun Hasan's spiritual discourse paid homage to urban and rural, and especially tribal, spiritual discourse, even while it underlined his own claims to 'universal leadership' over them all. Uzun Hasan patronised religious structures, encouraged religious endowments and students, including Tajik sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), and patronised the arts and sciences. He also claimed his victories were foretold in the Qur'an and was even hailed by the theologian and philosopher Jalal al-Din Davani (d. 1503) as 'the envoy of the ninth [i.e. fifteenth] century' – in reference to the Prophet's statement that in every century Allah would send someone to 'renew' the faith – an upholder of secular justice and Islamic law, 'the shadow (*zill*) of Allah, the caliph of Allah and the deputy (*naib*) of the Prophet' and 'holy warrior (*ghazi*) in the path of Allah'. The great Persian Sunni Naqshbandi Sufi poet Jami (d. 1492), invoking an earlier religio-political legitimacy associated with holy war and raids on the infidel, described Uzun Hasan, known to have worn darvish dress at public audiences, as 'Sultan of the *ghazis*'. In mosque inscriptions Uzun Hasan was also described as 'the just sultan' and 'the just Imam', terms which in Twelver Shi'i discourse could be construed as identifying Uzun Hasan as the returned twelfth Imam himself. Uzun Hasan even also paid homage to the Mongol legacy.¹⁹

Uzun Hasan's 'universalist' discourse was advanced in the midst of the various discourses of a mass of both quietist and militantly pantheistic, messianic and egalitarian Sufi orders and other spiritual movements whose polemics often exhibited a distinctly Shi'i, anti-establishment tinge and all of which were swirling throughout the region, especially in the aftermath of the political fragmentation following Timur's death.²⁰ In the context of continued Qaraqyunlu politico-military setbacks, such discourse facilitated the re-alignment of both Qaraqyunlu member tribes and Tajik administrators under his leadership.²¹

In his struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of Turk and Tajik Uzun Hasan undertook also to identify with such discourse as was espoused by various of these Sufi orders. Among these the Safavids, based at Ardabil, were deemed of sufficient importance to merit two marriage alliances. In c. 1456–9, Uzun Hasan married his sister to the order's leader Junayd (d. 1460), a direct descendant of its founder Shaykh Safi al-Din. He also supported Junayd's claim to rule the order over that of an uncle

who enjoyed Qaraqyunlu support. In c. 1471–2, Uzun Hasan married his daughter, herself the daughter of the last Christian emperor of Trabzond and thus of noble Greek descent, to Junayd's twelve- or thirteen-year-old son, and leader of the order, Haydar (d. 1488); the later, by the previous marriage, was already Uzun Hasan's nephew. Haydar's three sons from this marriage included his third son Ismail, born in 1487.²²

Ismail's grandfather and father led an order which, based on its growing association with a number of the region's Turkish tribes, was indeed both propounding a more radical, messianic discourse and undertaking a pro-active military strategy. Indeed both men were killed in battle: Junayd fighting Shirvanshah associates of Jahan Shah Qaraqyunlu, and Haydar also against the Shirvanshah, as Uzun Hasan's sons' and grandsons' struggle for succession in the aftermath of his death so fractured the Aqqyunlu polity as to pave the way for the rise of the Safavids. At Haydar's death Ismail was hidden by supporters first at Ardabil and then for some years in Lahijan under the protection the local governor Mirza Ali Karkiya, a Zaydi Shi'ite whose sayyid family had ruled the area since the late 1360s.

Thus was Ismail by birth descended on both sides from princely families of differing faiths, by upbringing associated with well-established Tajik sayyid practitioners of a distinct body of Shi'i doctrine and practice and, at his father's death, the spirituo-political leader (*shaykh, pir, qutb, murshid-i kamil*) of a Sufi-style movement comprised of the region's Turkish tribal levies, some with Aqqyunlu associations, whose spirituality was informed by similarly Shi'i-tinged radical messianism circulating in the region of what is now Northern Syria and Iraq, Eastern Turkey and Northwestern Iran. Unsurprisingly, Ismail's own words and actions – his 'discourse' – reflected each of his own several personalities, each aspect of which – Christian and Shi'i Muslim, Tajik and Turk – was recognised and thereby legitimised and subordinated.

In 1499, as rival Aqqyunlu princes and their tribal supporters continued their internecine fighting, Ismail and his supporters left Lahijan for Syria and Asia Minor where, near Irzinjan, he was met by more followers. In 1500, near Shamakhi, Ismail met in battle and defeated elements of the same Shirvanshah who had killed his grandfather and father. In 1501, a century after the death of Timur, having defeated a rump Aqqyunlu contingent at Shurur, near Nakhchivan, Ismail entered Tabriz, the capital of the Ilkhanids, Jahan Shah Qaraqyunlu and his own grandfather the Aqqyunlu Uzun Hasan. In 1503 Ismail defeated another Aqqyunlu force near Hamadan and secured control over Central and Southern Iran. Mazandaran and Gorgan, along the Caspian Sea, fell as did Yazd. Diyar Bakr, Uzun Hasan's homeland where his son-in-law and Ismail's father Haydar had spent his formative years, was also taken. Baghdad fell in 1508. Shirvan and Khurasan fell, the latter after a decisive battle at Marv in December of 1510 with the Uzbeks who

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had taken the area in 1507 after the death of the last Timurid, Husayn Bayqara, in 1506. Several days later Ismail entered Herat and soon thereafter the rest of Khurasan also came under Safavid control.

Between the capture of Tabriz and Herat, that is, in less than a decade, Safavid forces secured territories previously ruled by eight different rulers.²³

1

Laying the Foundations Ismail I (1488–1524)

Ismail as Turk and Tajik

Haydar's son Ismail, to whom fell the leadership of the Safavid Sufi order at his father's death in battle in 1488, was but fourteen at the capture of Tabriz.

Although a contemporary, overt opponent of the Safavids linked both Ismail's grandfather Junayd and his father Haydar with overtly extremist spiritual polemics,¹ Ismail's own *divan* of poetry reveals rather a distinctly heterogeneous, multi-confessional messianic dimension as lying at the heart of his spiritual discourse.

Using the pen-name 'The Sinner (*Khatai*)', in one poem Ismail wrote of himself,

- 1 Today I have come to the world as a Master. Know truly that I am Haydar's son.
- 2 I am Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, and Zohak. I am Zal's son (Rustam) and Alexander.
- 3 The mystery of Anal-Haqq [lit. 'I am The Truth'] is hidden in this my heart. I am the Absolute Truth [or 'Allah'] and what I say is Truth.
- 4 I belong to the religion of the 'Adherent of the Vali [Ali]' and on the Shah's path I am a guide to every one who says: 'I am a Muslim.'
- 5 My sign is the 'Crown of Happiness'. I am the signet-ring on Sulayman's finger.
- 6 Muhammad is made of light, Ali of Mystery. I am a pearl in the sea of Absolute Reality.
- 7 I am Khatai, the Shah's slave full of shortcomings. At thy gate I am the smallest and the last [servant].

Elsewhere he wrote:

- 1 My name is Shah Ismail. I am God's mystery. I am the leader of all these *ghazis*.
- 2 My mother is Fatima, my father is Ali; and I am the *Pir* of the Twelve Imams.

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- 3 I have recovered my father's blood from Yazid. Be sure that I am of Haydarian essence.
- 4 I am the living Khidr and Jesus, son of Mary. I am the Alexander of [my] contemporaries.

In still other poems Ismail, using terms which echoed those circulating in the discourses of the various militant, mystical and messianic movements abroad in the region at the time, addressed his followers as *ghazi*, Sufi, and 'brother (*akhi*)' and, employing mystical terminology, 'men of recognition (*ahl-i iqrar*)' and 'men of truth (*ahl-i haqq*)' – the latter being the name of a contemporary movement linked to the Biktashis – as well as *qizilbash*, after his followers' distinctive twelve-pleated *taj* which denoted the same veneration for the Imams found in the discourses of other contemporary messianic discourses and was said to have been adopted during Haydar's time.²

The manner of Ismail's identification with Twelver Shi'ism, proclaimed as the new realm's faith at Tabriz' capture in 1501, added further dimensions to this messianic discourse. He and his immediate retinue were in fact relatively unacquainted with the intricacies of Twelver Shi'i doctrines and practices.³ However, his long-term residence in Zaydi Shi'i Lahijan endowed Ismail with some familiarity with Shi'i discourse, for example, awareness that references to himself as 'the perfect, the just Imam (*al-imam al-adil al-kamil*)' or 'the just sultan (*al-sultan al-adil*)' would allude both to his status as secular successor to his grandfather Uzun Hasan, to whom similar terms had been applied, but also, in Twelver tradition, to himself as the now-returned twelfth Imam.⁴

The Safavids also advanced claims to their status as sayyids. Such claims, if not also further substantiating Ismail's identification with the Hidden Imam himself, also put the Safavids on a par with the sayyid founders of such other of the region's contemporary millenarian movements as the Hurufis, the Kubravis, the Nimatallahis and the Mushasha.⁵

Contemporary 'popular' tales also identified Ismail as Abu Muslim, the leader of the Khurasan-based Arab armies which defeated the Umayyads in 765 to establish the pro-Shi'i Abbasid state and who was believed to have gone into hiding to return to establish justice in this world.⁶

Taken together, the discourse surrounding Ismail in this period projected both his abject status – 'the Sinner' – in relation to and as the transcendent embodiment of the spirituo-cultural traditions of the region's key discourses. The young shah was thus simultaneously one with the chief figures of the Tajik Persian cultural legacy – Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, Rustam, Alexander; of Shi'ism – Khidr, Ali and Ali's 'adherent', the twelve Imams and their *pir*, the now returned Hidden Imam, if not also Allah himself; of key figures in the Christian religious and historical tradition;⁷ and the *pir* of the region's numerous messianic, egalitarian Sufi movements – *ghazi*, *akhi*, Abu Muslim. Ismail, being 'the

universal-simultaneous ruler who is both transcendent and dominant', stood at once as both the servant of, and the paramount figure above, all. He spoke to, embodied and thus surpassed each of these traditions as each existed on both the urban scene and among the region's rural and especially tribal elements likely in more commingled, than distinct, forms.⁸

In the midst of continued post-Uzun Hasan intra-Aqqyunlu clashes such complex discourse certainly facilitated the realignment of Aqqyunlu tribal contingents with Ismail, all the more so as the *divan* was composed in a Turkish dialect peculiar to the region comprising parts of modern-day northeastern Iraq, northwestern Iran, Eastern Turkey and the Southern Caucasus from whence these elements were drawn and similar discourses flourished.⁹

Turk and Tajik at the heart of the realm

Ismail's heterodox spiritual discourse, especially appealing to both Turk and Tajik, was matched by practical recognition of the importance of these two key constituencies to the life of the emerging Safavid polity, further facilitating the moves of elements of each from the Aqqyunlu to Ismail and the Safavid 'camp' and intertwining their fortunes with, and thus furthering their acceptance of and loyalty to, each other, Ismail and the Safavid enterprise itself.

At the political-military heart of the Safavid project in this period stood the various Turkish tribes of the Qizilbash confederation, the loyalty of whose chiefs and levies guaranteed Ismail's early military victories. Marriage alliances between the Safavid house, even before Tabriz, and grants of territory later allocated to, the Ustajlu and Shamlu tribes – the latter with Aqqyunlu connections – attest to the pre-eminence of these two within the confederation over these years. Leading members of both married sisters of Ismail, for example.¹⁰ Like the Shamlu, the Mawsillu had been an important member of the Aqqyunlu confederation but elements thereof had paid fealty to Ismail after the capture of Diyar Bakr from another Mawsillu chief. In a testament of their importance to the polity, and certainly to encourage further loyalty, Ismail himself twice married into the tribe; a Mawsillu was the mother of Tahmasp, Ismail's oldest son, and a key figure at her son's court.¹¹ A prominent figure of the Qaramanlu, another former Aqqyunlu confederate, married one of Ismail's sisters and, sometime before 1510, a Kurdish chieftain married yet another sister.¹² The presence of tribal chiefs from the Dhul-Qadr and Afshar, both also former associates of the Aqqyunlu, and of Talish and Rumlu chiefs in secondary posts affirms the relative importance of these tribes in the Qizilbash confederation.¹³

Given their prominence it is not surprising that later Safavid chroniclers identified these tribes – and some of the above-mentioned individuals in particular – as among Ismail's companions when he departed Lahijan in