

# The Sword of Persia



1. *Son of the Sword.*

This is the sword traditionally believed to have been carried by Nader Shah on his campaigns. It is now in Tehran. It was inscribed and embellished in the reign of Fath Ali Shah 50 or more years later. The scabbard is encrusted with diamonds. Nader used the imagery of the sword to describe himself on a number of occasions.

(Photo courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum.)

# The Sword of Persia

Nader Shah

From Tribal Warrior  
to Conquering Tyrant

*Michael Axworthy*

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

## *To my father*

Published in 2006 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and in Canada distributed by  
Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St Martin's Press  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN 10: 1 85043 706 8  
ISBN 13: 978 1 85043 706 2

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset in Palatino Linotype  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow

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# Acknowledgements

In writing this book I have benefited from the generous help and advice of a large number of people. Chief among these were Chris and Homa Rundle, Nargess Majd, Christos Nifadopoulos and Leo Drollas, without whose translations of source material and patient re-examination of individual points and queries the finished result would have been much inferior. Peter Avery was an encouragement and inspiration, as well as a great help on a number of specific points, and translations. Chris Rundle also read through the manuscript, as did Sandy Morton, Charles Melville, Willem Floor, Ali Ansari and Jill Bowden; and their comments and suggestions much improved the book (though they were not always accepted), as did those of Andrew Newman, who looked at parts of the manuscript at an early stage. Willem Floor allowed me sight of some of his unpublished research, which proved very important for the book. Paul Luft, along with Ali Ansari and Anoush Ehteshami, was instrumental in securing me a Research Fellowship from Durham University for the purposes of this project, and was helpful and encouraging in a variety of other ways. Ali Ansari was a stimulus and a guide at the very beginning of my interest in Nader Shah, without whom none of this would have happened.

Many others also gave me guidance, encouragement and support, whether in suggesting new lines of research or analysis, answering specific queries, or by helping me find material that was proving

difficult. These included Ernie Tucker, John Appleby, Kathryn Babayan, John Gurney, Mansur Sefatgol, Heidi Hofstetter (especially), Aaron Dunne, Hannah Carter, John Carter, Sergei Tourkin, Adrian Steele, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Michele Bernardini, Jennifer Scarce, Ian Heath, Stephen Blake, Robert Hillenbrand, Bernard O’Kane, Ian Maddock, Poppy Hampson, Bella Pringle, and Iona Molesworth-St. Aubyn. I am also grateful to my sister, Helen Axworthy, for her help with the maps and for her support generally.

Inez Lynne, Gosia Lawik, Edith Gray and the other staff of the London Library were generous and tolerant beyond normal limits in finding and lending books, equalled only in helpfulness by the staff of the Cambridge University Library, especially Claire Welford and the others in the Rare Books room, and Les Goodey.

I must also thank Iradj Bagherzade for giving me the chance to write this book in the first place, Kate Sherratt and Clare Dubois at I.B.Tauris, and my wife Sally, who happily translated one crucial Russian text for me, and without whose forbearance and support the book would never have been finished.

# Note on Transliteration

Transliteration is always an awkward problem, and it is not possible to be fully consistent without producing text that will sometimes look odd. My starting point was Nader's name itself. I chose not to use the traditional transliteration (Nadir), because to modern Iranians that would read like the pronunciation of an Arabic speaker, and it seemed a mistake to present an important figure in Iranian history in a way that Iranians themselves would find alien.

From that flowed the decision generally to use a transliteration that leaned toward modern Iranian pronunciation, without diacritical marks that would distract and confuse most readers that were not philologists. But there are inconsistencies, notably over the transliteration of names and terms that have had a life of their own in western writing: Isfahan, Fatima, mullah for example. Other, less justifiable inconsistencies, of which there may be some, are in all cases my fault rather than errors by those who advised me on the manuscript in its different stages of completion.



**PERSIA**  
AND THE SURROUNDING  
REGION IN THE TIME OF  
NADER SHAH



*In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful!*

*Those who possess understanding and are endowed with wisdom, know that when the times are full of troubles and confusion, when fortune favours the desires of the unjust, the supreme ruler of the universe, the arbiter of all things, brings forth an appointed one to fulfil the outpouring of his eternal mercy...*

*Mirza Mahdi Astarabadi, Jahangosha-ye Naderi*

# Preface

*Shab-e tarik o bim-e mowj o gerdabi chenin ha'el  
koja danand hal-e ma saboksaran-e sahelha*

*(In the dark night, with the fear of the waves, and the dreadful  
whirlpool  
How can they know our plight, the happy people of the shores?)*

Hafez

The story of Nader Shah follows a tragic curve – from obscure beginnings to ruthless intrigue, military success, splendour and riches; to error, terror, frustration, ferocious cruelty, mental derangement and death – in an historical time and place wholly unknown to most western readers. Starting in the first quarter of the eighteenth century as an obscure warlord of even more obscure origins, he liberated Persia from occupation by the Afghans, ejected the Ottoman Turks, manoeuvred the Russians out of the country, invaded Ottoman territory, defeated the Ottomans there, made himself Shah, attacked the Afghans in their homelands and reconquered them, then invaded India and conquered Delhi, broke into Central Asia and pacified the Turkmen and Uzbeks, before returning to the West and waging victorious war against the Ottomans again. In the early 1740s the army Nader had created was probably the single most powerful military force in the world, and his officer cadre produced leaders who later went on to found independent states in Afghanistan and Georgia. But after Delhi he began to fall apart. He fell ill, lapsed into obsessive avarice, rage, and cruelty, and in the end was murdered by his own officers.

Without Nader Shah, Iran (then known in the West as Persia) would have suffered the same fate that befell Poland in the eighteenth century – partial or complete partition between her neighbours: the Afghans, the Russians and the Ottoman Turks.<sup>1</sup> As Nader rose to power, this

partition was already well advanced. With Persia swallowed up, power relations between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan and India would have been very different in the following decades and centuries.

Nader Shah's conquest of Delhi alerted the British East India Company to the weakness of the Moghul State in India, and the possibility of expanding Company operations there, on a grand and profitable scale, with the connivance of provincial Indian rulers. Without Nader Shah, eventual British rule would have come later and in a different form, perhaps never at all – with important global effects.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Nader's life is a roaring tale, but aside from the compelling interest of the story, these considerations alone make it strange that Nader Shah is not a more familiar historical figure outside Iran.\* Why should this be so? From a British perspective at least, a partial explanation seems to lie in the long shadow of Victorian historiography.<sup>3</sup> Even where we reject or revise Victorian models, we often still work to the Victorian agenda. Items not put on that agenda then may still escape attention today.

The crude Victorian view<sup>4</sup> of Persia and the Orient generally was that they were incorrigibly passive, decadent and corrupt – ripe for colonisation and improvement from outside. A vigorous, ruthlessly efficient ruler like Nader did not fit into that picture, so he was sidelined.<sup>†</sup> His military successes in India might have appeared to detract from the glory of Clive and the other colonisers, and could have brought some to question the supposedly inherent superiority of western arms – all important to the myth of Empire. So he was regarded as little more than a blip in the history of India.<sup>5</sup>

\* The last book on Nader Shah in English was Laurence Lockhart's study *Nadir Shah* of 1938, still invaluable, along with his later work *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty*, for the generous range and detail of primary source material he presented (see Bibliography for further comment). Since then studies by Arunova and Reza Sha'bani, and especially Peter Avery's account in the *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7, and a series of important articles by Ernest Tucker, have taken the subject further.

† By contrast, in the eighteenth century Nader was a relatively familiar figure in the West, through a variety of reports and reporters who took a variety of positive and not-so-positive views of him. Even before his conquest of Delhi there were frequent items about him in the press of the time, and afterwards there was a flurry of books in all the main European languages (see Chapter 8, note 1).

In missing out on the Victorian period of historical writing, Nader's reputation missed an opportunity. Since Stalin and Hitler, Europeans have no longer looked at what used to be called the Great Men of History with the simple admiration of our nineteenth-century ancestors.\* But we cannot ignore them. It is a problem. We are repelled by their indifference to human suffering, but we cannot resist some admiration for the energy, the furious intelligence, and the sheer success of men like Alexander and Napoleon. And if we resist seduction by them, we may still be fascinated by the way in which those qualities, if we can allow them to be such, in many cases finally tore apart the Great Men themselves from the inside. The brutal events of Nader's reign, particularly towards the end, when he became a tyrannical monster, might try the strongest stomach. But harsh times breed hard men, and it would be a mistake to judge him by the standards of happier times or places, which none of his contemporaries would have recognised. As a fairer historian wrote of his assumption of power, Nader 'seized the sceptre which his valour had saved, and which a weaker hand could not have wielded'.<sup>6</sup>

Rousseau once wrote that to understand a book properly, it was necessary at the beginning of one's reading to suspend criticism, until one had fully grasped the argument. One could then, at the end, form a proper judgement. In writing about this extraordinary man, I have tried to follow something like that method.

New source material is still emerging on the history of Persia in the eighteenth century. Willem Floor, Mansur Sefatgol and Ernest Tucker in particular are revealing important new information and exploring its significance, in ways which will expand our understanding of events and take it in new directions. The mass of material from the records of the Dutch East India Company,<sup>†</sup> translated and published in recent years by Willem Floor, is of huge importance. Basile Vatatzes' history, once thought to be lost, some of which I have examined and exploited for this book for the first time, is a significant source worthy of more extensive examination.<sup>7</sup> Exploration of unpublished material in Russian archives could shift interpretation of Nader's relations with Russia and events in the Caucasus, in particular. When it comes to interpretation, my feeling

\* Stalin read about Nader Shah and admired him, calling him a Teacher (along with Ivan the Terrible). Robert Service has shown there is an unpleasant chain of admiration between the tyrants of history. Saddam Hussein apparently had a large library of books about Stalin.

† Vereenigte Oostindische Compagnie (VOC).

is that warfare outside Europe in this period is still only imperfectly understood, and stands in need of more detailed examination, of the kind taken forward by Jos Gommans. The date of Nader's birth and the details of his early life are still uncertain and in need of further study. There must also be more material awaiting exploration in the former Ottoman archives. Unlike some other periods of history, where scholars have ploughed and reploughed the same material ever more inventively, there is scope in the history of eighteenth-century Persia (and the region more widely) for a lot of genuinely original work.

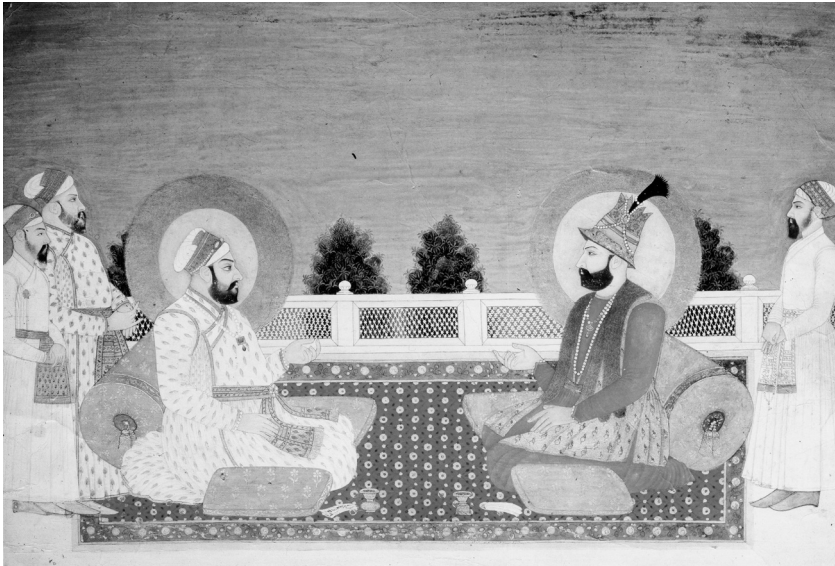
In reading the source material to establish what actually happened through the course of Nader's life, I have been as painstaking and discriminating as possible. But in addition to the material that reflects directly on the facts, there are many anecdotes and stories in the sources of more or less doubtful provenance, which it is unlikely will ever be corroborated, that nonetheless have something to contribute. Even where they are little more than fables, they show something about what contemporaries and near-contemporaries thought about Nader and his times. It would have been possible to write a dry narrative that excluded such doubtful stuff, but my preference has been rather to include it, sometimes with a warning, and allow the reader to make his or her own judgement. Every historical account has its angle, and I have been careful to look critically at what the sources have to say, but I have also been wary of overinterpreting the motivations of eighteenth-century authors. This period in Persian history is pre-colonial, and many of the attitudes and constructs that dominate our approach to the Middle East today (for better or worse) are quite anachronistic and inappropriate. My preference has been to look for the elements of value in even the dubious sources, rather than dismiss them out of hand as biased, partisan or anecdotal.

If Nader Shah had consolidated his military successes, and had passed on a strong state and army to his sons, his vigorous dynasty might not only have preserved Iran's territorial integrity, but could also have generated internal administrative and economic development, in a comparable way to that in which military competition between states stimulated long-term development in Europe in the same period.<sup>8</sup> More widely, it is quite conceivable that a resurgent, dynamic Persia, expanding into the vacuum left by relatively weak Moghul and Ottoman powers, under a dynasty that sought (as Nader did) to overcome the schism between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, could have averted the relative decline of the Islamic world vis-à-vis the West that has become a focus

for debate and controversy recently.<sup>9</sup> As well as explaining how these things could have happened, this book explains why, for better or worse, they did not.

In the first years of the twenty-first century Kandahar, Kabul, Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk have come to prominence again, underlining (as if it were necessary) the importance of this region and an understanding of its history. Iran is central – conceptually and geographically central – to that region today just as it was in Nader Shah’s time. If this narrative does something more widely to stimulate interest in him, and in Iranian history, it will have been useful. It does not try to encompass every last item of new research relevant to the life of Nader Shah that has appeared since Laurence Lockhart’s biography of 1938, though it does incorporate most of the new material and takes a fresh look at the interpretation of events; presenting new analysis at a number of important points. It is intended rather as a narrative history to bring Nader’s story to a new audience. The life of Nader Shah and the history of Iran belong to us all, just as the life of Henry VIII does, or the history of Rome under the Claudian emperors. Nader Shah’s story is as gripping, and as shocking, as that of Macbeth, or Richard III. It is another story that can enrich and enlarge our understanding.

It is necessary, in commenting on Nader’s relevance to the modern world, to make one obvious point. Those who fear Iran as a threat today might be tempted to present this book as evidence that Iran was traditionally an aggressive power, always a threat to her neighbours. That would be entirely incorrect. Nader stands out in Iranian history precisely because the norm before and after his time was so different. Nader was exceptional, in degree and in kind. Others might point to the bloody cruelties described in the book and suggest that they are somehow unique to or characteristic of Iran, or Islam, or the Middle East, or to Oriental despotism, or whatever. That too would be an error. The ways that human beings commit atrocities, like the way they paint paintings or cook food, may differ from culture to culture, and show distinctive characteristics in each. But the propensity to cruelty is, unfortunately, more or less universal. If there is a message in this book, it should rather be about the fragility of the traditions, institutions and values that human beings have, in various times and places, established to shield themselves against such cruelty: and the importance of cherishing and protecting them.



*2. View from the East.*

Nader Shah in polite conversation with the Moghul emperor, Mohammad Shah, by a Moghul court artist. This is probably the most accurate portrait of Nader. The figure behind him may have been intended to represent Sa'adat Khan. The halo-like nimbus behind Nader's head (a convention in Moghul painting denoting royalty) is slightly larger, and Nader sits slightly higher than Mohammad Shah, to show who is boss.

(Photo12)

# PROLOGUE

## Zenith

*We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms  
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.  
View but his picture in this tragic glass  
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.*

Marlowe

Nader Shah led the Persian army into Delhi on 20 March 1739. Persian soldiers lined either side of Nader's route from the Shalimar gardens outside the city to the great red sandstone fortress-palace of Shah Jahan, but the citizens stayed indoors. Nader was accompanied by 20,000 horsemen, and a hundred captured elephants led the procession, each bearing several veteran musketeers.\* Arriving at the palace, Nader dismounted from his grey charger and entered on foot. The huge guns of the fortress fired in salute, a tremendous noise such that the city 'seemed about to collapse in on itself'.<sup>1</sup>

Ten years earlier, in the spring of 1729, Persia<sup>2</sup> had been in a desperate state, overwhelmed and humiliated. The capital, Isfahan, had been occupied by Afghan invaders for six years, and Turks and Russians had been in possession of most of the northern and western provinces. In a decade, in one of the most remarkable changes of fortune in modern history, Nader had defeated all his enemies and made Persia the dominant power from the mountains of the Caucasus to the river Yamuna. Since the beginning of their march from Isfahan two years

\* *Jazayerchis* – foot soldiers armed with the heavy calibre *jazayer* or *jezzail* musket.

and four months earlier, Nader and his men had covered more than 1,750 miles, and had conquered most of what is now Afghanistan along the way. In 1739 he was at the prime of his life, and seemed set fair to equal if not surpass the achievements of Timur (Tamerlane), who had ridden into Delhi as a conqueror 340 years earlier. Although many of his innovations pointed to the future rather than harking backward, Nader's thoughts often turned on Timur's example. Like Timur, he had already decided to plunder the wealth of Delhi rather than attempt to annex the Empire of India.

Delhi at that date was one of the great capitals of the world. It was resplendent with monuments from all periods of its history, but particularly from the time of Shah Jahan a century earlier. The city was commonly known as Shahjahanabad, and had a population of around 400,000.<sup>3</sup> Of the three great empires of the Muslim world, the Ottoman, the Persian and the Moghul, the Moghul had been the richest and the most magnificent, and Delhi was the pride of its opulence.

As Nader arrived at the palace the Moghul Emperor, Mohammad Shah, received him with elaborate ceremony and pressed expensive presents on him. Mohammad Shah had been allowed back to the city with an escort of Persian cavalry the day before, so that he could make arrangements to welcome the conqueror with the necessary pomp. After his defeat at the battle of Karnal on 24 February, and the scattering of the imperial Moghul army that followed, Mohammad Shah had no choice. This first meeting in Delhi would have been in the sumptuous Hall of Special Audience,\* the most elegant of the magnificent rooms constructed by Shah Jahan. The outside of the building was of white marble slung with red cloth awnings to keep off the sun. The columns, walls and ceilings inside were covered with richly decorated gold and silver leaf (which the Persians later stripped away and melted down). Mohammad Shah had spread rich carpets and cloth of gold on the floor, and had installed precious furniture of all kinds.<sup>4</sup> The building's centrepiece was the extravagant Peacock Throne. This was less like a chair than a kind of raised dais, about six feet long by four feet wide. It stood on four feet of gold, and every surface was studded with jewels, some of which were very large. Some of the pearls were the size of pigeon's eggs. The canopy over the throne was supported by twelve columns. It was covered on the inside with diamonds and pearls, and more pearls dangled from the fringe. The canopy bore a peacock of

\* The *Dowlat Khane-ye khas* (or *Divan-e khas*).

gold, whose multicoloured plumage was fashioned from sapphires and other precious stones. The huge Kuh-e Nur diamond was mounted at the front of the throne, surrounded by rubies and emeralds.<sup>5</sup> High on the walls of the room was repeated an inscription in Persian: 'If there be a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.'

The reception was designed to show that, as host, Mohammad Shah still held some status, but it was as if a son had been visited by his father. Nader confirmed that Mohammad Shah would continue to reign in India, with the friendship and support of the Persian monarch, because both came of the same Turcoman stock. The Emperor bowed low in gratitude, as well he might – he had been fortunate to keep his life, but now he was to keep his crown as well. In return, Mohammad Shah offered Nader all the imperial treasures – the gold, the heaps of uncut gemstones, and of course the peacock throne itself – all the enormous wealth accumulated over two centuries of Moghul rule in India. Nader demurred. Mohammad Shah insisted. Nader refused. Mohammad Shah offered again. Eventually, Nader accepted. The conquered Emperor was forced in a mocking theatre to persuade his enemy to accept his most priceless possessions.<sup>6</sup>

Another significant incident marked the reception. The intrigues of Sa'adat Khan, the governor of Awadh (Oudh), and the Emperor's other senior nobles, including the Nezam ol-Molk (the regent or viceroy of the Deccan) had done much to weaken the Moghul State prior to the Persian invasion. Sa'adat Khan's rashness had led directly to the disastrous Moghul defeat at the battle of Karnal on 24 February, and his own capture. Since his capture he had tried to win Nader's favour by acting as his adviser, blatantly abandoning his allegiance to Mohammad Shah. He had already been appointed to collect the tribute that was to be taken from the citizens of Delhi, and rode with Nader into the city. At the palace, Sa'adat Khan asked for a private audience, but Nader, showing contempt for his ingratiating behaviour, replied harshly, demanding why he had not begun collecting the tribute. Sa'adat Khan took this hard.<sup>7</sup> It seems that his sense of honour (already bruised after Karnal, and further from the impression that Nader favoured his rival, the Nezam ol-Molk) was humiliated to the extent that he despaired, took poison, and died. Nader and his personal staff took over Shah Jahan's own apartments in the fortress: Mohammad Shah moved into the women's quarters.<sup>8</sup>

With Persian troops firmly established in the city, the Friday prayers were read in the mosques in Nader's name as sovereign. Coins were

struck for him with a Persian inscription, which read: 'The Prince of the Princes of the earth is Nader, King of Kings, Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction.\* The last formula (*sahebqeran*) at least in theory signified a ruler whose birth had been marked by an astrologically favourable conjunction of the planets, but Nader probably valued it more as one of the titles always associated with Timur.<sup>9</sup> While in Delhi, Nader was addressed as *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) – the traditional honorific of the Moghul emperors. Whatever his ultimate intentions, and the ambiguity of Mohammad Shah's position, Nader made it clear from the start of his time in Delhi that he was Emperor.

Despite the defeat at Karnal and the triumphal entry of the Persians, the inhabitants of Delhi were not overawed by their conquerors at first. The people of the bazaar laughed at the *Qezelbash* soldiers,<sup>†</sup> who were mostly simple men from the villages and hills of Persia.<sup>10</sup> Nader ordered his *nasaqchis* (who served as the army's military police) that anyone injuring any of the citizens should have their nose or ears cut off, or be beaten to death.<sup>11</sup> He was determined to avoid, with characteristically tough discipline, any outbreaks of lawlessness among his soldiers. Nader knew that, three and a half centuries before, Timur's troops had run out of control in the city, looting, killing and burning for several days. Confident in their collective strength and security, the Persian soldiers walked through the city in small groups at their leisure.

Only a small proportion of the Moghul army had been defeated at Karnal, and Nader's dominant position in Delhi had been achieved since then as much by his cunning manipulation of Mohammad Shah and the Moghul great nobles, and by implied threat, as by the direct use of force. The remains of the Moghul army had melted away, and the Moghul leaders had been slowly manoeuvred into giving Nader what he wanted. His task had been made easier by the common Turcoman/Persian culture that the Moghuls and the invaders shared. The Moghul dynasty was originally Turkic or Turco-Mongol, descended directly from Timur himself, and for two centuries had enjoyed a refined Persian court culture. To emphasise their common origin Nader insisted that he and Mohammad Shah should speak together in the Turkic language of the peoples of Central Asia.

\* 'Hast Soltan bar salatin-e-Jahan / Shah-e-Shahan Nader-e sahebqeran'.

† At this time *Qezelbash* was a generic term for Persian soldiers. Literally it means 'red hats'.

The divisions at the Moghul court between factions among the nobles had weakened the Moghul State, making Nader's task easier. Many of the great Moghul nobles were adventurers who had come to India from lands to the north; another factor that had limited their loyalty to the Moghul dynasty.<sup>12</sup> The Nezam ol-Molk's family came from Samarkand, Sa'adat Khan from Khorasan in north-eastern Persia. The Moghul court was rarefied and artificial by comparison with the pragmatic, ruthless character of Nader's circle. The contrast was to become more apparent as the Persians' sojourn in Delhi went on. The Moghul nobles had a delicate sense of honour, for which Nader had only contempt. He disdained the sophistication of the Moghul court. On one occasion he asked how many women the Moghul vizier had in his harem. The vizier replied that he had 850. Nader derisively said he would add 150 female captives to their number, so that the vizier would be entitled to the military rank of a Min-Bashi (Commander of a Thousand).<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless the common Persian-Turkic culture they shared meant that many of the great nobles probably would have felt more at home with the Persian invaders than with their Indian subjects. This explains the odd, uneasy intimacy between the Moghul nobles and the Persians in the events that followed. It made it easier for Nader to manipulate the Moghul court into docile acquiescence. Though ruthless when necessary, it was always his policy to overcome resistance by subterfuge before resorting to naked force. Securely established in the great palace of Shah Jahan, he felt confident. But events may overturn the complacency of even the subtlest princes.

The city of Delhi, beyond the courtiers in the red stone and marble Palace of Shah Jahan, was not so easily mollified. By the afternoon of 21 March it would have been common knowledge that the city and everybody in it were going to have to pay a large tribute. Many of the ordinary soldiers that died at Karnal and after had come from Delhi, and others from the defeated army had found refuge there. Most of the population were fearful and passive, but some were angry, and felt betrayed by their leaders. There were young men in the bazaar who were up for trouble of any kind. They collected together in bands, ready for exploitation by a few rash nobles who thought instability could save their fortunes, or who were simply out for revenge.<sup>14</sup>

The Persian New Year festival (*Nowruz*) fell on 21 March, and as usual Nader gave a party for his officers, and gave them ceremonial coats of honour (*khal'ats*). He had timed his arrival in the city so that they could celebrate *Nowruz* there. But that evening rumours began

to circulate that Nader had been shot by one of Mohammad Shah's female Qalmaq harem guards, or that he had been poisoned, or imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> There had been trouble in the afternoon at the granaries in the Paharganj district of the city. Some Persian troops had gone there to fix corn prices. Some of the corn merchants, unhappy at the low price stipulated, called together a crowd towards the evening. This angry mob killed the soldiers at the granaries, then fanned out through the neighbouring parts of the city, attacking all the Persians they found. The Persian soldiers were walking about in ones and twos in the streets and markets and the Indians, rushing suddenly upon them, killed them before they knew what was happening.<sup>16</sup>

In the palace, Nader's servants hesitated to wake him to tell him about the rioting. Eventually 'trembling and shaking with fear' they did, but he did not believe them. Nader said 'some villain from my camp has falsely accused the men of Hindostan of this crime, so that they can kill them and plunder their property.'<sup>17</sup> Nader sent out a court attendant to find out the truth, then another. Both in succession were killed by the mob within a few yards of the palace gates. He then sent a thousand of his veterans to restore order, but warned them not to shoot anyone not directly involved in the rioting. These men followed his orders, but the rioters were not cowed, and began to fire muskets and shoot arrows at the Persians.<sup>18</sup>

It became plain that a thousand men were not enough, and that the unrest was not going to be put down by half-measures. Shots were fired and stones and other missiles thrown throughout the night. The Persians were pent up in the palace and a few other defensible buildings. On the morning of 22 March, Nader mounted his horse and rode from the palace to the Rowshan-od-Dowla mosque.\* As he arrived there with his men about him, some people threw stones from balconies and windows around the mosque, and a shot was fired, killing an officer beside him.<sup>19</sup> He had already made up his mind, but this final insult may have added fury to Nader's frustration. He went to the roof of the mosque and stood by the golden domes, looking out over the houses, shops and roofs of the Chandni Chowk district. He ordered that no-one should be left alive in any part where any of his soldiers had been killed, and then drew his sword as a signal that the massacre should begin. Three thousand veterans were given the grim task. With drawn sword, Nader 'remained there in a deep and silent gloom that none

\* Today known as the Sunehri or golden mosque.

dared to disturb'.<sup>20</sup> He had made every effort to avoid the massacre that the troops of his hero, Timur, had committed in Delhi. But events had forced his hand. His dark eyes looked out over the roofs of the city as the smoke and screams spread on all sides.<sup>21</sup>

The killing began at nine in the morning. The Persians broke into houses and shops, slaughtering all they came across in the specified areas. Here and there was some opposition, but in most places the people were cut down without resistance. In Paharganj men suspected of having caused the tumult were arrested, carried off and beheaded on the banks of the Yamuna (Jumna). But the bands of young bazaaris and others who had been the cause of the disturbance disappeared, and the Persians' retribution fell on minor nobles, householders, artisans and respectable heads of families. The soldiery looted and set fire to the houses as they went, and some people (mainly women and children) died in the fires rather than emerge onto the streets. Fear of rape and dishonour drove some to desperation; men killed their wives and families before committing suicide themselves, and women threw themselves into wells to escape the Persians.<sup>22</sup>

Two young nobles in particular seem to have helped to spread the rumours and to have encouraged the riots that had led to the massacre – Seyyed Niaz Khan and Shah Nawaz Khan. The former had shut some Persian soldiers that had been sent to protect his house in a room and burned them alive. The two then raided the stables where Nader's captured elephants were kept, killed the mahouts and carried off the animals to a fort outside the city. But after some resistance in the fort they were captured by Persian troops, brought to Nader with several hundred of their followers, and executed.<sup>23</sup>

To the female prisoners Nader was more merciful. Several thousand prisoners were brought before Nader, most of them women, many of whom had been raped. Nader ordered them to be taken back to their homes, 'where they retired in circumstances of the deepest distress'.<sup>24</sup>

The massacre went on through the morning. Thousands of houses and shops were set on fire, burning the living and the dead. The plunder of rich clothes, jewels and other goods taken by the Persian soldiers was enormous.<sup>25</sup> The destruction fell mainly on tradespeople in the bazaars and the jewellers' quarter. The sun reached its zenith and it continued. Heaps of bodies piled up in the streets, and the gutters ran with blood. Finally Mohammad Shah sent the Nezam ol-Molk<sup>26</sup> to plead for the killing to stop. According to one of the Nezam's hangers-on, he found Nader eating sweets. The Nezam apparently offered his own life to

stop the killing, and boldly asked Nader whether he did not fear that God would make the building fall on his head, to avenge the innocent victims of the massacre.\* At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, after six hours of slaughter, Nader issued the order 'Let their lives be spared,' which was proclaimed through the streets by the *kotwal*<sup>†</sup> and a squad of Persian *nasaqchis*.<sup>27</sup> Even Indian contemporaries were impressed that the tight discipline of the Persian army checked the soldiers' lust for plunder and blood so promptly:

The Qizilbash soldiers were so much in submission and under such discipline and fear of their prince, that on hearing the sound of the word 'peace' they withdrew their hands from the massacre and refrained from further plunder and robbery. And this is the most wonderful thing in the world, that bloodthirsty and savage soldiers, who had heads of families and wealthy citizens in their power, at one word became submissive and obedient and withdrew their hands from slaughter and rapine.<sup>28</sup>

Estimates of the numbers killed vary widely. But Nader had set limits to the slaughter by confining it to specific quarters of the city, by halting it after six hours, and by using only a relatively small proportion of the troops available to him. It is likely that the contemporary estimate of the *kotwal*, that 20–30,000 had died, was reasonably accurate.<sup>29</sup> The number of Persians killed in the initial rioting is also uncertain, but it may have been as low as a few hundred.<sup>30</sup> The bodies were deliberately left where they fell for some days. 'For a long time the streets remained strewn with corpses as the walks of a garden with dead flowers and leaves.'<sup>31</sup> In Nader's terms the savage work was a success – there was no further trouble from the citizens of Delhi. When the stench of the unburied bodies began to become overpowering, they were disposed of in various ways – some dragged away to the river, others burned in heaps using the debris from the destroyed buildings.<sup>32</sup>

One motive for Nader's restraint in holding back from the killing, and then for limiting it, was that he wanted the best part of the wealth of the city to flow into his own hands, not to be looted by his men and

\* One suspects that the Nezam's real words were rather more cautious than they were reported (Lockhart 1926 p. 238: cf also Père Saignes, p. 255).

† The chief Moghul official of the city, responsible for law and order.

dissipated. He now set about the main business of his stay in Delhi – collecting the tribute. He put guards on all the gates of the city, allowing anyone to come in, but no-one to leave.

The possessions of the great nobles that had died at Karnal or since were seized first, soon after the massacre ended. Soldiers were sent to outlying cities and territories to collect the wealth of the nobles outside the capital. The surviving nobles were then assessed, and demands made upon them individually. Since at this time these *grande*es were semi-independent princes, ruling great tracts of territory by virtue of their court offices but treating them effectively as their private property, the assessments were high. It seems the *Nezam ol-Molk* was allowed to prevaricate, claiming that his son, who was administering his territories in the Deccan in his absence and controlled all his wealth, was refusing to obey him.<sup>33</sup> Others were more harshly treated – modern tax collectors would no doubt love to apply similar encouragements. *Mohammad Shah's vizier*:

endeavoured to elude the payment of the large contribution demanded of him; Nader therefore caused him to be exposed openly to the sun, which is reckoned a punishment contumelious as well as painful, and in that country dangerous to the health. At length, he extorted from him a whole *crore* of rupees,\* besides a great value in precious stones and elephants<sup>34</sup>

The representative at court of the governor of Bengal, when told that province was assessed for seven *crore*, joked that a sum so large would need a string of wagons from Bengal to Delhi to carry it. For his sense of humour he was severely beaten, and was so devastated by the treatment he poisoned himself and his family.<sup>35</sup>

On the strength of the amounts collected so far, and in expectation of what was to come, on 27 March Nader sent a decree to be proclaimed in Persia that all his dominions were exempted from taxes for three years, 'to lighten the weight that oppressed them'. At the same time he settled his soldiers' arrears, paid them a year in advance, and gave them a bounty worth six months' pay in addition.<sup>36</sup>

\* In India a *crore* was 100 *lakhs*, or 10 million rupees, equivalent to £1.25 million sterling at that time – so 7 *crore* would have been worth around £8.75 million sterling. A *crore* in Persia was 500,000 rather than 10 million, but in this book I use the term in the Indian sense.

At last the overall assessment for the ordinary citizens of Delhi was fixed at two crore,<sup>37</sup> and several of the chief Moghul nobles were ordered to collect it. For this purpose the city was divided into five parts, and a thousand Persian cavalry were assigned to help in case force were required. The taking of the money caused great distress, and many people found ways to flee the city.<sup>38</sup>

The total amount Nader took from Delhi, including the 'gifts' or contributions (jewels as well as cash) from Mohammad Shah and the great nobles, the money levied from the populace, the money and valuables taken from the imperial treasury and the goods confiscated (furniture, textiles, cannon and other weapons) was enormous.

A number of authoritative contemporary sources concur on a total of 70 crore (the equivalent of £87.5 million sterling at that time or perhaps £90 billion today) – some saying that Nader's soldiers took away an additional ten crore.<sup>39</sup> A large element in this sum consisted of the value of the jewels (perhaps as much as 34 crore), whether mounted on objects, cut or uncut; there were thousands of them. Given the difficulty of valuing gems, then as now, it is perhaps rather nugatory to debate the precise value of the haul. When assessing the worth of such a huge quantity of such precious things, standards of value themselves begin to shiver and crumble.

Most prominent among the treasures were the Peacock throne and the Kuh-e Nur diamond. The throne was later broken up, the Kuh-e Nur did not stay in Persia, and some of the other treasures were dispersed or lost after Nader's death, but the crown jewels still on display today in Tehran consist for the most part of the riches removed by Nader Shah from India in 1739. They include the Darya-ye Nur ('Sea of Light') diamond – probably the largest pink diamond in the world.\* In the nineteenth century, Shahs of Persia amused themselves by devising novel settings for the gems, including jewelled swords, daggers, aigrettes, shields, thrones, cups and even a globe – but whole dishes of large emeralds, diamonds, pearls and rubies remain unmounted (and many uncut) to this day.

Delhi was devastated. In addition to the mass killing, looting and burning, the economy had collapsed, trade was at a standstill, prices for foodstuffs were at famine levels, and the value of other goods, particularly luxury goods, had fallen drastically – making it difficult, sometimes impossible, for people to put together the cash demanded of

\* Estimated at a huge 175–195 carats.

them. Many families found that they had not only lost their money, but that they were ruined altogether; and committed suicide.<sup>40</sup>

While the money was being collected, Nader had his son Nasrollah married to a Moghul princess: a great-granddaughter of the Emperor Aurangzeb, and Mohammad Shah's niece. Mohammad Shah presented the bridegroom with a coat of honour, a necklace of pearls, a *jique*,\* a dagger set with pearls and an elephant with trappings of gold. He and Nader also made lavish gifts of money and jewels to the couple, and there were fireworks along the banks of the river Yamuna.<sup>41</sup> According to protocol, before the wedding, court officials had to investigate the ancestry of the bridegroom and establish it back for seven generations. When Nader Shah heard this, he said:

Tell them that he is the son of Nader Shah, the son of the sword, the grandson of the sword; and so on, till they have a descent of seventy instead of seven generations.<sup>42</sup>

On the night of the wedding (6 April) some Qezelbash troops broke Nader's anti-Shi'a decrees and sang part of a mourning lament for the Shi'a martyr Hosein, as was traditional in the mourning month of Moharram, which was about to begin. Aside from the breach of his instructions on religion, Nader was irritated by the soldiers' disrespect for his son's wedding, and used the incident for a demonstration of his harsh discipline. He had the soldiers arrested and executed outside one of the city gates, leaving their bodies exposed there for a month as a warning to others.<sup>43</sup>

With the tribute collected and the marriage concluded, Nader could relax. He was now undisputed master of Delhi and its wealth. His prestige was at an unparalleled high – no Shah of Persia had enjoyed such military success for a thousand years or more. It now remained only to settle arrangements for the future rule of the Moghul territories, and withdraw. There is no indication that he ever wavered from his early decision to plunder Delhi and leave. If he ever did consider a permanent annexation of the Moghul Empire, it was perhaps at this moment that it would have looked most attractive.<sup>44</sup> Mohammad Shah must have been nervous. But Delhi was a long way from the seat of

\* The aigrette or hat-ornament denoting royalty: traditionally a bunch of black heron feathers worn by the Shah on the right of his turban. Lesser royalty wore the *jique* on the left.

Nader's power in Khorasan, in the north-east of Persia, and the Nowruz massacre would not have made an auspicious start to Persian rule. His reign was still young – he had become Shah definitively only three years before. There had been many revolts against his rule, and there were to be more. He was aware that despite his great military prestige, many Persians in their hearts regarded his rule as illegitimate, and still hoped for a restoration of the old Safavid dynasty. Nader could not afford to stay away from Persia for the length of time necessary to secure the Moghul territories. But the settlement he imposed before his departure left open his options for further intervention in India, should that prove necessary or attractive.

This settlement was promulgated at a grand *darbar* on 12 May, attended by Mohammad Shah and all the great Moghul nobles. Nader made several presents to the Moghul Emperor, including jewelled swords and other costly items. But the most significant was the *jique*, which he placed on Mohammad Shah's head himself, to show that he was once again endowed with full sovereignty. Mohammad Shah thanked Nader for his generosity, according to which he once again 'found himself to be one of the monarchs of the world', and in return begged him to accept all the Moghul lands west of the Indus, from Tibet and Kashmir to the sea.<sup>45</sup> This was of course, a carefully prepared deal, another of the planned pieces of political theatre spiked with ironic humour that were characteristic of Nader's career. As at the reception on Nader's arrival in Delhi, Mohammad Shah was forced into the appearance of making a free gift. The terms of the formal document ceding this territory, which we may take to have been directly dictated by Nader, referred again to the two monarchs' shared Turcoman origin. It genuflected to the memory of the earlier Asiatic conquerors Timur and Genghis Khan in its mention of the family of Gurkan.\* In the document, Mohammad Shah said of Nader:

And out of the Greatness of his Soul, and abundant  
humanity, in regard to the illustrious Family of Gourgan,

\* 'Gurkan' (or 'Güregen') had been a title used by Timur, signifying 'son in law'. Timur had married a woman descended directly from Genghis Khan, and styled himself figuratively as Genghis' son in law to benefit from the Central Asian tribes' reverence for Genghis' memory. The Moghul dynasty descended in turn from Timur, via Babur, the Central Asian adventurer and founder of the Moghul dynasty who conquered northern India in the early sixteenth century.

and the Honour of the Original Tree of Turkan, [he] was graciously pleased to restore to me the Crown and Gem of Hindostan.<sup>46</sup>

To round off, Nader gave Mohammad Shah some advice on how to rule his empire. He told him to confiscate the lands the Moghul nobles enjoyed by right of their tenure of offices, and to pay them instead with ready cash from the imperial treasury. The advice gave an insight into Nader's own military thinking. He told Mohammad Shah that he should retain a paid, standing army of 60,000 horsemen, and should know the names and families of all the officers down to the lowest level. When occasion arose, he should nominate officers for particular tasks, and give them command of a sufficient number of men; but when the task was accomplished, command should be terminated and the soldiers returned to the main body. None should remain in command for too long.<sup>47</sup>

Nader warned Mohammad Shah not to trust the Nezam ol-Molk and said that if any of the nobles rebelled, he could quickly send an army or if necessary return himself – ‘upon all events don't reckon me far off.’ Prince Erekle of Georgia, who accompanied Nader to Delhi, reported that Nader sternly warned the nobles to be faithful to Mohammad Shah, because if not, no matter where Nader was, within six months he would fall on them and massacre them all.<sup>48</sup>

The character of the settlement was paternal. Mohammad Shah was re-established, but almost as Nader's satellite; and the possibility of a further expedition to India was made explicit. One chronicle says that Nader immediately afterwards contemptuously told some of his own trusted nobles that Mohammad Shah was not competent to rule. So why did Nader reinstate him? Re-establishing this feeble Emperor (particularly with over-mighty subjects like the Nezam ol-Molk still active) was to keep the Moghul State weak and give himself the opportunity to intervene again if he pleased. Had Nader prospered and reigned longer after he left India, it is likely that he would have returned there, to annex what in 1739 he merely looted.<sup>49</sup>

Before his departure, Nader gathered a variety of useful artisans (particularly builders, masons, carpenters and stone carvers) to accompany him on his return journey, with the intention that they would beautify the building projects he planned at the new Kandahar (Naderabad), at Kalat in Khorasan, and elsewhere. Nader paid these men expenses for their journey and retained them on the basis that they

would work for him for three years, after which they would be free either to continue in his service or to return. But many of them defected earlier, even before the Persian army reached Lahore.

Among the other useful people Nader found in Delhi, he took away the chief court physician, Alavi Khan, to cure him of an illness that apparently first appeared before he came to India; a dropsy or oedema (an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the body tissues). Alavi Khan was to be a significant figure in coming years, alleviating for a time the physical and mental distress that marred the latter part of Nader's reign, and which seemed to bring on the cruellest of his excesses.<sup>50</sup>

Nader forbade in the strongest terms that any women be taken away from Delhi except of their own free will. He went to some lengths to ensure his wishes were respected, showing the same concern he displayed for the women taken captive by his soldiers after the massacre. When the army halted at the Shalimar gardens after leaving Delhi, an order was proclaimed around the camp that any captives, male or female, should forthwith be returned to the city; and that anyone that disobeyed would forfeit both his life and estate. Most of these captives were women. Even wives lawfully married in Delhi and slaves bought and sold with written proof could only remain with the army if it was clear that they did so freely. Almost all the wives and women removed from Delhi returned at this point. Even a few whose husbands 'by the mildest Means and Intreaties' persuaded them to stay, were ordered back to the city by Nader a few days later.<sup>51</sup>

One might look for motives other than gentle humanity for Nader's treatment of these women; for example that he did not want his army over-encumbered with camp-followers, or that he did not want them to become a conduit for a flow of information between India and Persia.<sup>52</sup> But the Persian army was accompanied by large numbers of women and other non-combatants in any case; there is little evidence elsewhere that Nader tried to constrain their numbers as a matter of policy, and the Indian women would not have made much difference to the total. Similarly, there were plenty of other channels for intelligence between India and Persia – not least the craftsmen Nader himself was bringing away. It is possible that he did not want the influence of these women, with their knowledge of the ways of the Moghul court, to turn his men soft. Nader's behaviour in Delhi was ruthless but, against that savage background, his treatment of the women of Delhi showed some compassion. There were other instances when he intervened to show mercy to women that fell into the hands of his troops, and

some contemporaries noted this as a characteristic. But perhaps his compassion was just a kind of impatience with the consequences of his actions.<sup>53</sup>

One contemporary account<sup>54</sup> tells a story from immediately before Nader's departure, saying that once all the questions of property and territory had been resolved, the Persian officers relaxed, sent for dancers and gave themselves up to pleasure. The renowned songstress Nur Bai sang the following verse to Nader and his captains:

What have you left of my heart  
That you should come again  
Pass the cup, clap hands and dance  
You came not to the house of pleasure to say your prayers

Nader was delighted with Nur Bai's singing, and with her beauty. He ordered his servants to give her 4,000 rupees, and said he would take her with him away from Delhi. But on hearing what the Shah intended, the singer fell sick: 'her heart died within her.' Whether real or pretended, her illness succeeded in frustrating Nader's intentions. It would be generous to think that, realising her reluctance, he forbore to take her away by force – considering the policy he was imposing on his men and officers at the same time. One of the Indian nobles apparently asked Nur Bai what would have been her feelings, had Nader Shah succeeded in consummating his desire. It seems she replied something like:

I should feel as if my body itself<sup>55</sup> had been guilty of a  
massacre.

A huge baggage train of horses, mules and camels was prepared,\* and Nader marched out of Delhi with his army on 16 May 1739. An eyewitness recalled that Nader had on his head a red cap with a white Kashmir shawl wound around it as a turban, and a jewelled jiqe. He looked young, was strongly built and held himself very erect. His beard and moustache were dyed black. He rode through the streets holding his head high and looking straight before him, and when the people acclaimed him, he flung rupees to them with both hands.<sup>56</sup>

\* It took as many as 30,000 camels and 24,000 mules to carry the treasure (AAN p. 739; Floor 1998, p. 308n).



3. *A party of Turkmen slavers with their captives.*

In this case the captives are Turkmen from another tribe. This is a nineteenth-century engraving, but with bows rather than muskets the raiders would have looked little different a century earlier. Note the riding style (still to be seen in Central Asia and the Caucasus), hand on hip, firm seat in the trot, redolent of ruthless arrogance.

(Cambridge University Library)

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Fall of the Safavid Dynasty

*Unhappy Persia, that in former age  
Hast been the seat of mighty conquerors  
That in their prowess and their policies  
Have triumphed over Afric and the bounds  
Of Europe, where the sun dares scarce appear  
For freezing meteors and congealed cold,  
Now to be ruled and governed by a man  
At whose birthday Cynthia with Saturn joined,  
And Jove, the Sun, and Mercury denied  
To shed their influence in his fickle brain!  
Now Turks and Tartars shake their swords at thee,  
Meaning to mangle all thy provinces.*

Marlowe

The future conqueror of Delhi was born in a wild and dangerous region on the north-eastern frontier of Persia: the northern part of the province of Khorasan, far from the splendour of royal courts and palaces. There is some uncertainty about when Nader was born, but the likeliest date is 6 August 1698.<sup>1</sup> His father was of lowly but respectable status, a herdsman of the Afshar tribe; said also to have been a camel driver and a maker of sheepskin coats. His name was Emam Qoli. In comparison with many of the great nobles among whom he later moved, Nader's birth was obscure; but in the local context of northern Khorasan his father may have had some status among the Afshars as a village headman.<sup>2</sup> Nader's official historian, making no attempt to elevate his birth, wrote of his origins that 'the sword takes its merit from the natural strength of its temper, not from the mine from which its iron was taken.'<sup>3</sup>