

Medieval Persia *1040–1797*

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Persia in the Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century was not a happy period for Persia. After the fall of the degenerate Şafawid regime, no man or group succeeded in restoring real stability over the whole country for many decades. Nādir Shāh did indeed restore political unity and even, for the last time to date, extended Persia's borders. But unity under Nādir was probably in some respects as undesirable as anarchy. Much of the country enjoyed a time of reasonably benevolent government at the hands of Karīm Khān Zand, but not until the accession of Āghā Muḥammad Khān Qājār, towards the end of the century, were both unity and stability, of a sort, recovered. This did not mean that the period was entirely sterile: in particular, there were important developments within Shī'ī Islam in Persia which were to have their effect down to the present day.

THE CAREER OF NĀDIR SHĀH

The Ghilzai Afghans who, as it were by chance, had overthrown the Şafawid empire in 1134–5/1722 did not retain control of Persia for very long. In fact, they did not control a good deal of the country at all. They did have possession of the person of the last fully fledged Şafawid shāh, Sulṭān Ḥusayn; and he had indeed acknowledged, albeit under duress, Maḥmūd Ghilzai as his successor. The Afghans had also seized a number of other Şafawid princes when they took Işfahān. These were imprisoned together with the former shāh, who was for the moment well treated. But later Maḥmūd killed many of the princes, some of them with his own hands; and in the following year (1139/1726) his successor had Sulṭān Ḥusayn executed.

The last, however, had not been heard of the Şafawids, though no

representative of that house was ever again to recover real power. The dynasty had reigned over Persia for the quite unusually long period of two and a quarter centuries. It was difficult for Persians to accustom themselves to the idea that the rule of the descendants of Shāh Ismā'il and Shāh 'Abbās was no more. Despite the decay and degeneracy of the last decades of Ṣafawid rule, the prestige of the dynasty which had not only proved so long-lasting but had been responsible for the introduction of the now firmly established state religion did not evaporate overnight. For some time to come, many of those who were struggling for power in Persia claimed to be acting on behalf of the "rightful" Ṣafawid claimant, and kept tame Ṣafawids at their courts for purposes of display and to lend legitimacy to their ambitions.

Soon after the fall of Iṣfahān a Ṣafawid prince declared himself shāh in the north of the country, which the Afghans had not succeeded in occupying. Other external enemies of Persia had not missed their chance: Russian forces had marched into the north-west of the country, and the Ottomans had seized much of the west, reaching as far as the region of Hamadān and Kirmānshāh.

Maḥmūd Ghilzai was murdered in 1137/1725 and was succeeded as shāh of the parts of Persia under Afghan rule, an area centred on Iṣfahān, by his nephew Ashraf. But Ashraf's power was precarious, for he failed to hold the Ghilzai home base of Qandahār, where a son of Maḥmūd was able to seize the throne. In 1142/1729 Ashraf was overthrown by Nādir Khān Afshār, and in 1142–3/1730 the second and last Afghan shāh, too, was murdered. The short-lived period of Ghilzai government, or misgovernment, in Persia was at an end.

Nādir Khān, who now moved into prominence, was a member of one of the great Qizilbash tribes, the Afshār. An able general, he assembled an army in the north of Persia and after rallying to the support of the Ṣafawid claimant in the north, Ṭahmāsp II, he overthrew his principal rival, Faṭḥ 'Alī Khān of the Qājār Qizilbash tribe. He adopted the name Ṭahmāsp-qulī, the slave of Ṭahmāsp. Nādir's was a singularly unservile form of slavery, but he did acknowledge Ṭahmāsp II as shāh, at least in name, until 1145/1732, and thereafter for the next four years he recognized Ṭahmāsp's infant son, who was called 'Abbās III.

But by 1148/1736 Nādir evidently felt that his own position had been established so firmly that he no longer needed to hide behind a nominal Ṣafawid shāh. He therefore held an assembly, called by the Mongol term *quriltai*, at Mūghān in Āzarbāyjān. The notables present at the *quriltai* – military commanders, officials, 'ulamā' – did what was expected of them and declared Nādir the first shāh of the Afshār

dynasty. He had already embarked on what was to prove a spectacular career of military conquest.

He had turned his attention first to the Ottomans. In 1142–3/1730 he reconquered western and northern Persia from them, as far as Tabriz. In 1145/1732–3 he besieged Baghdad – without success, but the threat was enough to persuade the Ottomans to agree to return to the Perso-Ottoman frontier as it had been in 1049/1639. This agreement was not immediately ratified by the government in Constantinople, but it was finally accepted after there had been further fighting in the north in 1148–9/1736. There was no clash with the Russians, who were still in occupation of parts of north Persia. They withdrew when it became clear that the areas they had held would not be taken by the Ottomans but would fall to Nādir, who seemed to them to be less of a threat.

Next Nādir marched against the Afghans. Initially his aim was the recovery of Qandahār for the Persian crown, but when this was achieved (1150/1738) he went on to take Ghazna, Kābul and Peshawar. These advances pointed him in the direction of the legendary riches of India. There the Mughal Empire was past its peak, and Nādir was able to take Lahore, then marching on to meet and defeat the Mughal forces at Karnāl (1151/1739). He seized and sacked Delhi, the Mughal capital, and marched home with a prodigious quantity of loot, including the famous Peacock Throne of the Mughal emperors. He made no attempt to remain and rule India: this was simply a plundering expedition on a massive scale, like Temür's in 801/1398.

In 1153/1740 Nādir attacked that traditional enemy of the shāhs of Persia, the Özbegs of Transoxania. He took the cities of Bukhārā and Khīva, leaving the Khān of Bukhārā as a subject ruler. But the lands up to the Oxus River he annexed to Persia. Lastly, Nādir's troops occupied 'Umān between 1149/1736 and 1157/1744. The result of the conquests was to move the centre of gravity of the Persian empire substantially to the east, where Nādir resettled considerable numbers of tribespeople from western Persia. He decided, therefore, to transfer the capital to Mashhad, in Khurāsān. The new capital also had the advantage for Nādir that it was conveniently close to his favourite refuge, the formidable mountain fortress known as Kalāt-i Nādirī.

Despite the fact that the capital was now situated in a city whose greatest pride – indeed, whose reason for existence – was the presence of the tomb of the eighth Shī'ī *imām*, Riḍā, Nādir Shāh made a last attempt to move Persia away from state-sponsored Twelver Shī'ism. What he tried to have accepted was a little more subtle than a mere abandonment of Shī'ism in favour of Sunnism: the approach he favoured was that of integrating Shī'ism into Sunnism as a fifth *madhhab* (school of law) to

add to the four Sunnī schools. It would be called Ja'farī, after the generally respected sixth Shī'ī *imām*, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. This involved, at the very least, the abandonment on the part of the Shī'īs of some of their practices which were most offensive to the Sunnīs, notably *sabb* and *rafā* (vilification of the first three caliphs and the denial of their legitimacy).

Nādir's scheme was exceedingly ill-received in Persia, and no one in the Sunnī world would have anything to do with it except, temporarily, the religious authorities in Iraq, who under duress during Nādir's invasion agreed to accept the Twelvers as a fifth *madhhab*. Ultimately the plan came to nothing, and it is not easy to say with certainty what Nādir's motives in trying to half-reverse the Ṣafawid religious settlement may have been. Nādir himself, as a member of a leading Qizilbash tribe, was from as Shī'ī a background as anyone. It has been suggested that he was attempting to reduce the religious prestige of the Ṣafawid dynasty which he had displaced; or that he felt the "legitimation" of Persian Shī'ism to be a necessary preliminary to a general conquest and unification of the Muslim world under his leadership. There is also the consideration that many of Nādir's soldiers, especially the Afghans, were Sunnīs; it may perhaps have been thought politic to conciliate them in this way.

Nādir Shāh had succeeded in welding together an impressive and highly successful army of Shī'ī Persians and Sunnī Afghans. There can be no dispute about the very high degree of competence he possessed as a military leader. But in no other respect is it possible to find much that is positive to say about him. He showed little if any concern for the general welfare of the country or his subjects. He made enormous demands for taxation on a land much of which was devastated, imposing the death penalty on those who failed to pay. He concentrated all power in his own hands, in this way accentuating a decline in the efficiency of the traditional Persian bureaucracy.

In Nādir's later years, revolts began to break out against his oppressive rule. He became gradually less sane and more cruel. Towards the end, even his own tribesmen felt that he was too dangerous a man to be near. A group of Qizilbash murdered him in 1160/1747. There was now nothing to keep his army together. One of the Afghan leaders, Aḥmad Khān, left Persia and returned home, where he founded the Durrānī empire: he has some claim to be regarded as the founder of modern Afghanistan. Nādir's family proved unable to maintain the Afshār dynasty as rulers of Persia; but one of them, the blind Shāh Rukh, did manage to keep hold of the capital, Mashhad, and of the province of Khurāsān, for nearly fifty years.

KARĪM KHĀN ZAND

The principal leader to emerge in Persia from the chaos that followed the murder of Nādir Shāh had served in Nādir's army, though he had not been one of his generals. This was Karīm Khān, a member of the Zand tribe, a minor pastoral people who lived near the town of Malāyir, in the foothills of the Zagros mountains of western Persia. The Zands were an Iranian people, and their decades of dominance were one of the few periods, between the arrival of the Saljūqs and the twentieth century, during which effective political power was exercised by a dynasty that can be regarded as in some sense ethnically "Persian".

Initially the Zands were allied with a more important group of western Persian pastoralists, the Bakhtiyārī. Karīm Khān and 'Alī Mardān Khān Bakhtiyārī acted as regents for a nominal Ṣafawid ruler, Ismā'īl III. But the alliance did not endure. 'Alī Mardān was killed in 1167/1754, and in the years following Karīm Khān eliminated several other contenders for power in the region. The most important of these were Āzād Khān, an Afghan who had seized Āzarbāyjān, and Muḥammad Ḥasan Khān Qājār. The latter was the father of Āghā Muḥammad Khān, the first shāh of the Qājār dynasty which at the end of the century was to displace both the Zands and the rule of the Afshārs in Khurāsān. It has been argued, with some plausibility, that it would have been better in the long run for Persia had Muḥammad Ḥasan been able to establish a Qājār dynasty in mid-century. The country might then have been spared much anarchy and suffering as well, perhaps, as the appalling cruelties of Āghā Muḥammad. But this is speculation, not history.

What is not speculation is the fact that Karīm Khān did provide much of Persia with, a no doubt, welcome interlude, lasting for a quarter of a century, of reasonably just government. Karīm Khān has always had the reputation of having been Persia's "good" ruler, and though the competition for that title is not, perhaps, impossibly strong, such a favourable view does on the whole seem to be justified. There was, though, a time in the early 1760s when, for whatever reason, Karīm was almost as dangerous to be near as Nādir Shāh in his last days. It has been suggested that this was the result of illness, and it may be so: in any case, this behaviour on Karīm's part was certainly an uncharacteristic aberration.

Karīm Khān made Shīrāz, in the south of the country, his capital, and there he built extensively. Surviving buildings of importance include his mosque (the Masjid-i Wakīl) and bazaar (the Bāzār-i Wakīl). The architecture of the dynasty has its admirers, and it is certainly

pleasant enough in its way. As the names of the buildings indicate, Karīm did not take the title of shāh. He was content to be called *wakīl*, deputy or representative, theoretically of a Ṣafawid shāh: he maintained Ismāʿīl III as nominal ruler.

He did, however, change the form of his title from 1179/1765. Previously he had been *wakīl al-dawla*; thereafter he was *wakīl al-raʿāyā*. Since *dawla* means, among other things, "the dynasty", and *raʿāyā* "the subjects", it has been argued that Karīm came to regard himself as "a representative of the people rather than a delegate of the government".¹ This may have an anachronistically democratic ring about it, but it is possible that Karīm was indeed making some kind of bid for popular support.

The rule of Karīm Khān saw the re-establishment of Twelver Shīʿism after the failure of Nādir Shāh's curious experiment. This was appropriately symbolized by the naming of the twelve quarters of Shīrāz after the twelve Shīʿī *imāms*. Such patronage on the part of the secular power was no doubt welcome, though the Shīʿī establishment was not dependent on and associated with the ruling house as it had been in Ṣafawid times. Karīm Khān made no claim to descent from the *imāms*, nor had his family been responsible for the imposition of Shīʿism in Persia.

After his success in the struggle for power in Persia, Karīm Khān did not indulge overmuch in military ventures. His government was a thrifty one which tried to live within its means, and unnecessary warfare could be an expensive luxury. Indeed, he waged no campaigns outside his own territory except for an attack on southern Iraq in 1188-90/1775-6, which resulted in the siege and capture of the port of Baṣra. There seem to have been at least two motives for this unusual action on Karīm's part: worries over Persian access to the great Shīʿī shrines in Ottoman Iraq, and a wish if possible to divert trade away from Baṣra and towards ports in Persian hands.

Karīm Khān Zand's achievement, we may say, was modest but solid and worthwhile. He can most clearly be criticized over his failure to make clear and adequate provision for the succession. The other Zand princes were far from possessing Karīm's qualities as either man or ruler, and his death in 1193/1779 was followed by a further period of anarchy. Out of the turmoil of the next fifteen years the hegemony of the Qājārs emerged. Their leader, the able but brutal Āghā Muḥammad Khān, had the last Zand ruler, Luṭf ʿAlī Khān, tortured and killed in 1209/1794. In 1210/1796 he dealt similarly with Shāh Rukh, the Afshār ruler of Khurāsān. In the following year he himself was assassinated by two of his own servants, presumably to general relief. With the

accession of his nephew Fath 'Alī Shāh, the Qājār dynasty had established itself in Persia.

If there is a dividing line between the “medieval” and the “modern” history of Persia, the most plausible point at which to place it is at the beginning of the Qājār dynasty. Some have seen the Šafawids as the founders of modern Persia, partly because of the great changes they did indeed bring about, especially the definition of the country's borders and the imposition of Shī'ism as the official form of Islam. But it may be suspected that Western historians have been too easily beguiled by a mere date: Shāh Ismā'il became ruler in 907/1501, and this coincides all too conveniently with the period conventionally seen as the beginning of modern European history. Yet there is no break in Persian history at this point to parallel the changes in European development symbolized by the Renaissance and the Reformation. Western categories and Western periodization cannot simply be transferred wholesale to the lands of Islam. There, the really momentous changes in society, associated as they were with “modernization” and the overwhelming impact of the West, came in the nineteenth century. That is when the modern history of Persia and the Middle East began. The period covered by this book – what might justly be called the history of medieval Persia – does, in its own terms, have a real unity and coherence.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

Politically, the eighteenth century in Persia may have been a time of chaos, only partly alleviated by the period of Karīm Khān Zand's rule in Shīrāz. But for Twelver Shī'ī Islam, the official religion of Persia since the time of Shāh Ismā'il I, it was a time in which important foundations were laid and controversies decided. There were three developments of particular significance.

First, the century saw an increasing dissociation of Shī'ism from state control. Under the Šafawids, with their close involvement in Shī'ism, the faith had been in some sense almost a department of state, even though individual men of religion, such as Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, had become increasingly influential during the latter years of the dynasty. Its fall was followed by the rule of the Sunnī Afghans and the quasi-Sunnī Nādir Shāh. The close link with the state was broken, and despite the benevolent attitude of Karīm Khān towards Shī'ism, it was not subsequently to be repaired.

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When the Qājārs became shāhs of Persia at the end of the century, making no claims to descent from the *imāms*, Shī'ism had learned to do without the state, to manage its affairs independently of the government. In these circumstances the basic Shī'ī suspicion of the legitimacy of secular government in the absence of the Twelfth Imām was able to come nearer the surface. Such a view had on occasion been propounded during the Ṣafawid period but had never been dominant, at least publicly. But under the Qājārs, relations between Shī'ism and the Persian state were to suffer from many more tensions than they had under the Ṣafawids. This is not to say that the radical practical conclusions about the legitimacy of secular government that were drawn by some in the later twentieth century had any place in the eighteenth or nineteenth. There was a context of accommodation and compromise over the political realities which was recognized by both sides. Neither was anxious for a fight to the death. But the potential for serious conflict between "church" and "state" was there.

The second development of importance arose out of a controversy within Shī'ism over what the precise character of the faith ought to be. The struggle was fought out mainly in the great Shī'ī shrine cities in Iraq, rather than inside Persia; and it is perhaps worth pointing out how useful the Shī'ī '*ulamā*' subsequently found the fact that several of their most holy shrines, and therefore many of their most senior representatives, were situated in an area beyond the political control of the shāhs of Persia.

The two parties to the controversy were known as Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs, and the argument was essentially over the question of whether or not it was legitimate for the '*ulamā*' to exercise *ijtihād*, independent judgement. The Akhbārīs maintained that there could be no *ijtihād* in the absence of the Twelfth Imām. They considered that until his return his followers should confine themselves to the study and application of *ḥadīth*, the Traditions of the Prophet and also, in Shī'ī usage, of the *imāms*; hence the name by which they were known, for *akhbār* is another term for "Tradition". Such Traditions were stories of the Prophet's or the *imāms*' lives and actions, their authenticity warranted by a chain (*isnād*) of individuals leading back through time to an actual witness of the real or alleged incident. The Traditions were used, and in many cases fabricated, in order to lend authority to legal or doctrinal rulings. The Akhbārī view – not wholly dissimilar in its Shī'ī context from the orthodox Sunnī position – was, then, arguing for the authority of precedent over the risks involved in innovation on the part of an '*ālim*', however learned in the sacred law he might be. It was a conservative theological and legal position, the acceptance

of which would have limited the role and potential power of the 'ulamā'.

The Uṣūlīs held that the use of *ijtihād* was legitimate, indeed obligatory. In their view, a faithful Shī'ī should choose for himself an 'ālim who was recognized by his peers as fit to exercise *ijtihād* (and hence was known as a *mujtahid*), and should obey his rulings and follow his example in matters of the law. Although the standing of a *mujtahid* was dependent on the profundity of his learning – that is, of the legal knowledge of the past – it came to be the Uṣūlī belief that a ruling of a living *mujtahid* should always be preferred to a ruling derived from one who was dead. The acceptance of their position hence allowed scope for considerable innovation, and opened the door to the acquisition of greater influence on the part of the 'ulamā'. The possibility was also allowed for that there might be one or more *mujtahids* whose learning and authority would be so considerable that their rulings would take precedence over those of all of their contemporaries. Such men were given the title *Marja' al-taqlīd* ("source of imitation").

The Akhbārīs were the dominant party during the first half of the eighteenth century, but thereafter the Uṣūlīs took the lead, especially under the leadership of the long-lived *mujtahid* Bihbihānī (1705–1803). Although the Akhbārī view was not totally suppressed, Uṣūlī Shī'ism became the established form of the faith in Persia during the Qājār period and after.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the eighteenth century saw the increasing popularity of *ta'zīya*, passion plays concerned particularly with the battle of Karbalā (61/680), where the third Shī'ī *imām* Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī and grandson of the Prophet, was martyred at the hands of the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd. The *ta'zīya* was distrusted by the 'ulamā', for it was of popular origin and out of their control; but it was never successfully suppressed, and at moments of conflict between Shī'ism and the state it could serve as an eloquent paradigm, with a shāh who was seen as an oppressor, or whose actions were represented as anti-Islamic, on occasion being cast in the role of Yazīd.

Thus it was that the eighteenth century, a period whose political history was for the most part dismal and anarchic even by the exacting standards of the Persian past, was in other respects of great creative significance. The permanent importance of the changes within Shī'ism which took place hardly needs further emphasis. A knowledge of what happened in the eighteenth century, as well as in the earlier centuries of Islamic Persia, is an essential prerequisite for anyone who wishes to understand the evolution of Persia during our own day. That is not the

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only, or even necessarily the best, reason for studying the history of Persia; but it is a valid consideration.

NOTE

1. J. R. Perry, *Karim Khan Zand: a History of Iran, 1747-1779*, Chicago and London 1979, 216.