Charles Melville, ed. Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society

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Book Reviews


Upon reading this book, I was reminded that I am totally incapable of knowledge for its own sake. Belonging to the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC), whatever I read must have some sort of relevance for understanding world history. Safavid Persia is a book for a group of scholars I had no idea existed: specialists in one dynasty in Iran's long history—the 16th and 17th century Safavids.

This topic could be addressed in such a way that it could be interesting—for example, in a comparative study of the three great Muslim empires of the 16th century—the Persian Safavids, the Ottoman Turks, and the Moghul Indians. In such a study, one could inquire why such glittering societies in the 16th century could become backwaters as the Europeans were becoming world powers. In Iran's case, could it be that the state enforcement of the Shia sect of Islam that seemed like such a good idea politically became a very bad idea intellectually and socially? Iran slid rapidly into obscurity because of this choice, and never came up for air until its 20th century Pahlavi shahs disengaged religion from national development.

This volume, unfortunately, does not look at large issues. Instead, it is a collection of papers given at an important Safavid conference that are models of depth rather than breadth. An examination of the content of these papers will make their focus clear:

"The Historiography of Safavid Prefaces," by Sholeh A. Quinn. This paper examines the prefaces to historical chronicles during the time of the Safavids. The author considers these as understudied sections, and he traces their historiography into three categories: a religious prologue; information about the author; and information about the work. They are not, in my opinion, understudied.

"The Early Years of Shah Ismail in the Afzal al-tavarikh and Elsewhere," by A. H. Morton. This is not a biography of this founder of the dynasty, but just examines one small part of his life from sources other than Safavid that have been found.

"The Iconography of the Shah-Nama-yi Shahi," by Robert Hillenbrand. This work explores a manuscript long since broken up for its art. The author admits that there is not much fact, but there is only speculation as to who did what in the 257 unsigned paintings. The only
speculation I found of interest was that although the author Firdausi seems to have written this work as a tribute to Iran's national identity with little reference to Islam, the Safavids, who were Shiite fanatics, overlooked this and supported artists who illustrated this national treasure.

"Kinship Ties between the Safavids and the Qizilbash Amirs in Late Sixteenth-Century Iran: A Case Study of the Political Career of Members of the Sharaf al-Din Oghli Tekelu Family," by Maria Szuppe. There was no way that I could find myself caring about marriage alliances with key members of the royal family with a particular tribe of Turkoman origin.

"Le Dar al Saltana de Qazvin, deuxieme capitale des Safavides," by Ehsan Echraqi. This paper, which is in French, discussed the move of the Safavids from Tabriz in western Iran to Qazvin, which became their capital briefly in 1557. This small town remained the capital for a brief time until the Safavids relocated to Isfahan in the center of Iran which they made into one of the great cities of the world. One can still see even today how magnificent Isfahan is. I could not see why one would care about Qazvin as a capital.

"Sufis, Dervishes and Mullas: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran," by Kathryn Babayan. The opening paragraph of this paper leaped out at me because it was like *deja vu*. In 1695, an edict written by six prominent clerics and signed by the Shah was broadcast throughout the country that the *Sharia* (Islamic law) was to be enforced to the letter. In Esfahan, 6,000 bottles of fine Georgian and Shirazi wines from court cellars were publicly smashed.

In all social gatherings, music and dance were forbidden and coffee houses were closed down. Prostitution, gambling, backgammon, chess, opium, and "colourful herbs" were banned. Islamic garb was to be enforced. Women, those matrices of modesty and purity in Islam, were also targeted. The Shah decreed that contrary to past practice, women should not linger in the streets and bazaars without the chaperonage of their husbands or male legal guardians. The author makes no note of the similarity of this period with today's Islamicist movements throughout the world. I do make note, however, that the Shah who signed this edict was the last of his dynasty. After him came the deluge.

"Shi'ī Rituals and Power: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," by Jean Calmard. Of interest here is something one might suspect: that the Safavid enforcement
of the Shiite sect on Iranians who were largely Sunni caused much dislocation. People who could fled—some to the Ottoman Turkish lands and others to Afghanistan, India, and Central Asia. For those who could not get away, however, the Shi'a cause became entrenched through the clever use of the drama called Taziye that reenacted the martyrdom of the grandsons of the Prophet Mohammad, Hossein and Hassan. This week-long celebration became very elaborate under the Safavids and continued to be the major entertainment offered to Shiites until the Pahlavis put an end to them in the 20th century. The only remnant was the ritual parade of penitents who drew blood, beat themselves with chains and cut themselves with knives, in their demonstration of pious mourning. This is powerful religious theater and can whip up mobs to a fever pitch of passion. Shahs have always known that there is a potential for danger here, but have poured money into these rituals and tried to bend them to their power goals.

"Shah Abbas and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad," by Charles Melville. This detailed paper traces the many pilgrimages on foot by Shah Abbas from his capital in Isfahan to Mashhad in the easternmost comer of Iran where there is a Shiite shrine. Even the detailed tables showing where and when the Shah made these pilgrimages could not maintain my interest. But one could speculate that perhaps the Mashhad pilgrimages were the Shah's attempt to lure Iranians away from pilgrimages to Arabian Mecca.

The rest of this anthology is equally detailed. This is obviously a book of value only to people who share an interest in this specific period of Iranian history.

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