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Title

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Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 6(1)

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/H361046135

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Constructing Safavid Iran: Space, Pastoralism, Power, and Identity in Safavid Iran 930-1077/1524-1666

By T.R. Salsman

Introduction

Walking through the streets of Isfahan today, the traditional Persian saying, “Eṣfahān nesf-e jahān ast”—Isfahan is half the world—would feel less like hyperbole with every step.¹ The city sports beautiful gardens, elegant architecture, and a bustling social landscape. Moreover, Isfahan did not just pop into existence fully formed. It represented the product of centuries of labor, politics, social invention and interaction, and struggle— the simple phrase, “Isfahan is half the world” succinctly encapsulates the power space can have. A city such as Isfahan can bring together the cultural, social, and political power of a country, pull people into contact with each other and manufacture differences of identity, and even exert power on a global scale. However, it is not enough to look at the city itself. Instead, we must broaden our view outward to the society that made Isfahan seem like half the world. When we do so, we are met with a seeming contradiction. Many of Isfahan’s most notable features were constructed under the patronage of the Safavid dynasty (907-1148/1501-1736)², yet the Safavids themselves were rooted in the pastoralist Turko-Mongol cultural tradition. In order to understand the pastoralist element in Safavid architecture, we must engage with the scholarly literature on the entwined constructions of space, identity, and power.

¹ I will largely be following the transliteration systems used by Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam*, except as follows: In Persian I mark the short vowels as a, e, and o, the long vowels as ā, ī, and u, and the diphthongs as au and ei. Final ۰ marking a kasre is written as eh. Final ۱ is always written simply as i when it stands for a final vowel. Silent ۲ is written as w. The Arabic definite article is always written as al- even when it would be elided in part or wholly. In the few Arabic names presented, my only diversions from Hodgson are that macron is used instead of circumflex to mark long vowels (except in the case of the dagger alif) and that the ۳ is marked as ä.

² Dates will be provided in the format (AH/CE).

There has been a great deal of scholarship on urban planning and the power of cities from a sedentary perspective. City planners, such as Daniel Burnham, theorists such as Arthur Wright and Paul Wheatley, and historians such as William Cronon and David Torres-Rouff have collectively advanced the idea that a city can be read as a source.³ Specifically, theorists have argued that cities can be used to understand the complex negotiations of power and identity at work within and between societies. However, far less has been written about the construction of space in less sedentary societies. A city such as Isfahan might be seen as half the world, but the reality is that it was produced within a greater social and cultural context, specifically that of the Safavid dynasty in Iran, in which Isfahan did not always play a central role. The goal of this paper is to examine space and power in Safavid Iran more broadly, tracing continuity and change from their pastoralist origins to their more sedentary later period. To that end, I will be focusing on and comparing two case studies: the reign of early Safavid Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 930-984/1524-1576), and that of the late Safavid Shāh ‘Abbās II (r. 1052-1077/1642-1666). I will demonstrate that as the Safavids became more sedentary, they began to build architectural spaces with different purposes, develop new modes of inhabiting space and using it to define social distinctions, and capitalize on new sedentary economies. Nonetheless, through all of these developments the Safavids still maintained elements of their pastoralist culture, which influenced their new sedentary institutions.

³ Daniel Burnham, *Plan of Chicago*, (Chicago, IL: Commercial Club of Chicago, 1908).; Arthur F. Wright, “The cosmology of the Chinese city,” *The City in Late Imperial China*, G. William Skinner, ed. (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 1977) 32-73.; Paul Wheatley, “The ancient Chinese city as a cosmological symbol,” *Ekistics* 29 (1975): 147-158.; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1991).; David Torres-Rouff, *Before L.A.: Race, Space, and Municipal Power in Los Angeles 1781-1894* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

Historical Background

Before I can begin discussing space, it is necessary to first provide a basic overview of Safavid history as background. While the Safavid state was founded in 907/1501, their origins must be traced further back to the dynastic founder Sheikh Şafi al-Din Ardabili (650-735/ 1252–1334). Sheikh Şafi was a Sufi, a follower of the Islamic mystical tradition in which a total ecstatic experience of God is sought through special techniques, such as meditation, recitation, and music.⁴ Beyond that, his religious views seem to have been largely in line with mainstream Sunni thought, meaning that he saw the caliphs (successors to the Prophet) and specifically the four companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Umayyad dynasty (40-132/661-750), and the ‘Abbāsid dynasty (132-656/750-1258), as the rightful successors to the Prophet’s role as leader of the Muslim community.⁵

Over time, his descendants became more radical, espousing a kind of religious practice known as *gholuw* (literally exaggeration). Gholuw takes the Sufi search for oneness with God to an exaggerated degree that involves ascribing divinity to entities other than God, such as oneself. At the same time, the Şafaviyyeh order became increasingly militant and pastoralist. The Şafaviyyeh sheikhs became leaders of a devoted group of Turkic pastoralist raiders, or *ghāzis*, who came to be known as the *Qezelbāsh* (literally the red-heads, referring to their red hats).⁶ Finally, they began transitioning away from the Sunnism of Sheikh Şafi and towards Shi‘ism, which holds that the familial descendants of Muḥammad through his son in law ‘Alī are the rightful successors to the leadership of the Muslim community and not the caliphs.

⁴ Douglas Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011) 140-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶ Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires*, 141.

Eventually, in 1501, Sheikh Şafī's descendant, Esmā'il (r. 907-930/1501-1524) declared himself Shāh of a new Iranian dynasty and began converting his overwhelmingly Sunni subjects to orthodox Twelve-Imām Shi'ism.⁷ While Shāh Esmā'il was the founder of the Safavid dynasty, it was his successor Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 930-984/1524-1576) who was truly responsible for corralling a pastoralist army into a centralised territorial state and converting Iran's people and institutions to orthodox Shi'ism. Nonetheless, the society that Ṭahmāsb ruled remained thoroughly nomadic despite his best efforts,⁸ and what progress he was able to make was undermined when his successors, Esmā'il II (984-985/1576-1577) and Moḥammad Khodābandeh (985-996/1577-1588), proved too weak to control their own Qezelbāsh subjects, presiding over a period of civil war and military defeat at the hands of the neighboring Ottomans and Özbeks.⁹

Then, in 1588 Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-1629) ascended to the throne, successfully undermining the power of the pastoralist Qezelbāsh and creating a stable, centralized, absolute monarchy.¹⁰ While 'Abbās I remained semi-pastoralist himself, his fear of treachery led him to enact policies that would drive his successors to become even more sedentary. Raised according to the new sedentary court established by 'Abbās I's policies, the later Safavid Shāhs, Şafī (1038-1052/1629-1642), 'Abbās II (r. 1052-1077/1642-1666), Soleimān (1077-1105/1666-1694), and Ḥosein (1105-1134/1694-1722), became increasingly more sedentary and reclusive, until the eventual overthrow of the Safavids by the conqueror Nāder Shāh.¹¹ The exception to the general pattern is 'Abbās II. He is regarded as the most notable of

⁷ Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 251.

⁸ Streusand, *Gunpowder Empires*, 146.

⁹ Ibid, 149-50.

¹⁰ Dale, *Muslim Empires*, 92-3.

¹¹ Rudi Matthee, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) 241.

the Safavid rulers to have come after ‘Abbās I, having contributed significantly to Safavid architecture, as well as having reconquered Qandahār from the Mughals.

Theoretical Conventions

While this paper is primarily historical, it also rests on certain theoretical conventions, which must be explained. Naturally, the most important theoretical convention is spatial constructivism. According to this convention, space is a social construct. Discrete places do not exist objectively in the world. Rather, communities define the boundaries between spaces by assigning different uses and meanings to them. Along the lines of Stuart Hall’s work on representations and significance, these meanings often have implications for power, providing or denying access to resources, bringing people into contact with each other or dividing them, and physically instantiating the organization and norms of the society that creates them.¹² As such, space is hotly contested, with different interest groups and individuals vying for a construction of space that suits their needs and interests.

An important concept tied to space is the distinction between hard and soft architecture. While we generally think of architecture in terms of permanent structures, it is important to recognize that movable and impermanent constructions, such as tents, are also architectural. These temporary constructions are considered soft architectural spaces, and in less sedentary societies they can be just as, if not more, important fixed architectural spaces. However, this is not to say that hard and soft architecture describe a simple dichotomy. In fact, there is a whole spectrum of harder and softer architectures, such as areas permanently reserved for soft architectural structures and seemingly hard architectural structures designed to be assembled and disassembled quickly.

¹² Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).; see also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 7.

The next set of major conventions is pastoralism, nomadism, and sedentarianism. I will be using all three of these terms to refer not merely to behavior, but also to the social systems that govern it. I consider any society in which seasonal migration is politically, infrastructurally, or culturally normative to be nomadic, and nomadic societies based on raising livestock to be pastoralist. I will also be using the term semi-pastoralist and semi-nomadic to refer to societies that exhibit significant features of both sedentary and nomadic lifestyles, and occasionally to refer to sedentary societies that still maintain a strong historical identity with a past nomadic lifestyle.

Finally, in this paper I will be engaging with discourses on race, gender, and intersectionality. Race and gender are not categories that arise from biological features, but are instead socially constructed when societies assign meanings to the differences between people, thus creating social categories that in turn affect the lives of the people who inhabit them. Additionally, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has argued, social categories do not operate on an individual basis. Rather, different dimensions of a person's social identity, such as race and gender, can interact to produce results that neither category accounts for on its own.¹³ To this end, terms such as "racegender" can be used to discuss species of power relations and social categorization that arise from an intersection of identities, rather than being tied to a single identity.

I find it necessary to defend my use of the word race, which is not a term endemic to Safavid society. Many different groups, distinguished by religion, culture, historical place of origin, language, and phenotype lived together and interacted with each other in Safavid society. In an attempt to describe these differences, and the differences in power and lifestyle that they

¹³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299.

conveyed, I have examined many possible terms. Perhaps most salient in Safavid society was the distinction between religious groups, and a vague notion of ethnicity based on linguistic, cultural, and geographical identities that can arguably be traced back at least as far as the *Shāhnāme* in the Persian tradition. However, neither of these terms is adequate when we consider that royal slaves who converted to Islam and adapted to Persian culture still experienced differences of meaning and power tied to their heritage. More damning still, in some cases, phenotype was the distinguishing feature to which meanings were assigned. While ethnicity and religion are constructed identities, and are therefore flexible, I have found that in some cases they are too specific and restrictive to permit analysis necessary for the development of the field. Race— an erratic, vague, and often contradictory construct— is the only social construct that I have found to be adequately flexible to suit this analysis, and while I have attempted to use more specific terms wherever possible, I will be using race when it is useful and necessary.

Literature Review

There has been very little scholarship on space, power, and identity in Safavid history, with the exception of Sussan Babaie's work on Safavid palaces and the architecture of conviviality, which ties Safavid architecture to Shi'i norms and practices¹⁴ and Ann Lambton's work on land tenure, which provides an exhaustive overview of historical Persian systems of land management, ownership, and taxation.¹⁵ Despite the lack of Safavid spatial history, there has been significantly more scholarship on related topics. The Ottomans have been somewhat more studied, and scholarship such as Leslie Pierce's analysis of space and gender in the Ottoman context will provide necessary theory. Within the literature on the Safavids, there has

¹⁴ Sussan Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces: Statecraft and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Ann K.S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

also been a wealth of research on architecture, cultural practices, and ethnic identity, all of which are important parts of spatial history. Finally, the field of spatial history has been thoroughly developed in other historical contexts, including research on both sedentary societies and, to a lesser degree, pastoralist societies. Perhaps most notably Pekka Hämäläinen, whose work has significantly advanced the idea that pastoralist nations can be considered through the lens of empire.¹⁶ My research will build on and complicate spatial history by focusing on a society in transition from a pastoralist culture to a sedentary one.

Primary Source Overview

The central primary sources for this paper will be the spaces themselves. Spaces can be read as texts; they are constructed with a purpose, and their design, location, and use reveal just as much about the societies and individuals that produce them as chronicles do. Many of the buildings, neighborhoods, and cities I will be discussing still exist, and have been well documented. Unfortunately, travelling to Iran exceeds the resources of this project, and I will therefore be relying on archival materials.

I will also be making use of conventional written sources, which contain a wealth of information on the description of spaces, their use, and the politics of their creation. *The Tārikh-e 'Ālamarā-ye 'Abbāsi*, the court chronicle of Shāh 'Abbās I, is an invaluable source for the history of Shāh Ṭahmāsb, as are the accounts of his reign in the Mughal chronicles, the *Akbār-nāme* and the *Homayunnāme*. For descriptions of Qezelbāsh culture during the time of Shāh Ṭahmāsb, I will be using the traveller's account of Michele Membré. Unfortunately, few chronicles exist from the late Safavid period, and those that do, have not been published in translation. As a result, I will be relying on travellers' accounts.

¹⁶ Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

The Lived Experience of Space

Now that I have presented a picture of what space looked like under the Safavids, the next step is to examine how space was inhabited. Architecture and urban planning is the most tangible form of space. It can be seen and touched, and its construction is immediately evident. However, space is more than just physical structures. It is also the meanings we attach to spaces and the manner in which we use them, and those meanings and uses have to change significantly when a society transitions from a pastoralist way of life to a sedentary one. Sedentary societies live in one place, and so the spaces they construct are designed to facilitate long-term residence and agriculture. In the case of rulers, the same principle extends to the infrastructure of government, such as palaces and bureaucratic spaces. The situation is entirely different for pastoralists. Pastoralists do not live in any one place for an extended period of time, so we would generally expect them not to construct stationary spaces, which they would then have to abandon. However, the reality is just the opposite. Some pastoralists do build cities and assign a great deal of importance to them. The difference is in the kinds of meaning that is assigned to them.

The Safavids exemplify these differences, and through their transformation from pastoralist to sedentary ways of life, we can also trace changes in how spaces were interpreted, creating new paradigms of political, racial, and gendered power. The Safavids had always had a relationship with cities, especially Ardabil, since it was from there that their dynastic founder, Sheikh Şafi al-Din Ardabili, led his Sufi order. Although his descendants became increasingly mobile under the influence of their pastoralist Turkmen followers, the Qezelbāsh, the Safavid dynastic shrine at Ardabil remained significant. According to the official Safavid court history, the *Tārikh-e 'Ālāmārā-ye 'Abbāsi*, Ardabil was hotly contested by the Şafaviyyeh order and their

rivals.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the Safavid dynasty's center had shifted away from the city of Ardabil and towards the camps of the Qezelbāsh. By the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb, this situation had become largely untenable, with the mobility of the Qezelbāsh becoming an impediment to centralized, effective rule of the still burgeoning Safavid state.¹⁸ While Shāh Ṭahmāsb—an effective ruler in many regards who presided over an impressive fifty year reign—did attempt to solidify his empire and bring the Qezelbāsh under his control, his centralising program did not succeed in the long term. As a consequence, the architecture and culture of his reign was predominantly pastoralist. The Safavids did not succeed in controlling their pastoralist supporters and establishing a centralized, sedentary capital until the reign of Shāh 'Abbās I following a major civil war.¹⁹ 'Abbās I's political reforms would go on to shape not just the politics of his successors, but their cultural norms and lifeways as well. By the time of the reign of Shāh 'Abbās II, Safavid spatial meaning had shifted significantly, moving away from the purely symbolic and historical spaces of Shāh Ṭahmāsb's reign to a lived-in space that defined new power relations in Safavid politics, race, and gender.

Royal Spaces and the Symbolic City

When comparing the use of spaces under the early Safavid Shāh Ṭahmāsb and his distant descendant Shāh 'Abbās II, the most obvious difference is the residence of the shāh. Whereas Shāh Ṭahmāsb was constantly on the move, making camp near a variety of cities, 'Abbās II spent most of his reign in Isfahan. As a result, the significance of cities under the two rulers proved quite different, though they maintained a common thread of Turko-Mongol cultural values. As will be seen in the contrast between Shāh Ṭahmāsb's use of the city of Ardabil and 'Abbās' use

¹⁷ Savory, Trans. *The History of Shah Abbas*, 29-33.

¹⁸ Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (New York, Ny: Basic Books, 2008) 134.

¹⁹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam Volume 3*, 38-39.

of Isfahan, although the symbolic power of space remained consistent, new infrastructures of power and realities of inhabitation emerged in the later Safavid period.

Under Shāh Ṭahmāsb, Ardabil proved useful as a symbol of Safavid dynastic history, and as a tool for Ṭahmāsb to enhance his political power. Ṭahmāsb's use of Ardabil to humiliate and dominate his political rival Homāyun is a prime example. In the sixteenth century, faced with political upheaval, the Mughal emperor Homāyun fled India and sought refuge with Shāh Ṭahmāsb in Iran. The Mughals and Safavids were rival empires, and Ṭahmāsb took full advantage of the opportunity to show the world his power by bringing Homāyun on a humiliating journey to the dynastic shrine at Ardabil. Eskandar Beg Monshi, the court chronicler for Shāh 'Abbās I, describes the event with typical courtly Persianate historiographical understatement, writing,

Since Homāyūn had expressed the desire to visit Tabriz, and to circumambulate the tomb of Shaikh Ṣafi, he obtained permission from the Shah and set off... From Tabriz, Homāyūn traveled to Ardabil to visit the tombs of the ancestors of the Safavids. There the Šeykāvand *seyyeds* offered him their services and escorted him for several stages on his return journey.²⁰

To hear Eskandar Beg describe it, Homāyun went of his own volition, but this is actually part of the humiliation. Not only were the Mughals fierce political rivals to the Safavids, they were also orthodox Sunni Muslims. The Safavid dynastic shrine was a monument to the religious side of the Safavid dynasty, which was steeped in Shi'ī, Sufī, and Gholuw traditions, all of which directly conflicted with Homāyun's traditions. By presenting the trip to Ardabil as Homāyun's idea, Eskandar Beg advances the argument that Homāyun accepted both Shi'ism and Safavid superiority, while at the same time painting Ṭahmāsb as a gracious host, kindly permitting Homāyun to visit sacred Safavid space. Notably, Homāyun's journey to Ardabil is absent from

²⁰ Savory, *The History of Shah Abbas*, 165-166.

the otherwise exhaustive Mughal account of Abu al-Faḥl.²¹ As innocent as it may seem to us, the Mughals recognized it as the political display of power it actually was, and so, in order to present the event in the least embarrassing way possible, they omitted that particular piece. This kind of political showmanship displays the use that a pastoralist state like the Safavid dynasty had for cities. They had little use for Ardabil as a place to inhabit, but it served a vital role as a symbol of the Safavid dynasty, which could be used to promote Safavid legitimacy and belittle their rivals.

In ‘Abbās II’s time, the Safavids were still using space to exercise political power. One of the most striking examples of this is the wide variety of palaces used by the later Safavids. For instance, the Maydān-e Naqsh-e Jahān, a royal city square built by Shāh ‘Abbās I, opens onto two major mosques (one public, the other historically reserved for royal use), the grand bazaar, and the royal palace.²² Religion, economy, and political power were all brought together in that single space. However, this symbolic unity of powerful institutions underwent a further development under Shāh ‘Abbās II. It seems like a small detail, but the *tālār* (columned porch) and façade that ‘Abbās II added to the ‘Āli Qāpu palace inscribed the space with new meaning.

As Sussan Babaie writes:

Like the Qaysariyye and the portals of the two mosques, the original entranceway of the Ali Qapu receded from the bazaar façade of the Maydan and created a transitional entry space. The addition of the *talar* and its substructure projected the building into the space of the Maydan... the *talar* thrust forth, as if on a tray, the spectacle of royal feasts and receptions.²³

What had been a space of relative balance and unity, asserting that the Safavids were the representatives of Shi’i piety and good commerce, was radically transformed into a space of state

²¹ Henry Beveridge, Trans. *The Akbarnāma of Abu’l Fazl* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1907).

²² Sussan Babaie and Talinn Grigor, *Persian Kingship and Architecture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015) 186-187.

²³ Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces*, 183-184.

ritual and a symbol of royal power over and against the other elements of Safavid society. Just as Ṭahmāsb had used the dynastic shrine at Ardabil to assert his power over foreign political rivals through conspicuous, spatially-mediated performance, ‘Abbās II carried out a remarkably similar maneuver against his rivals within the Safavid state.

However, ‘Abbās II also found other uses for the palace. All Safavid princes, following the reign of Shāh ‘Abbās I, were confined to the palace in order to ensure that succession plots would not destroy the royal family.²⁴ As such, the later Safavids were far more prone to spending large periods of time in the secluded family space of the harem.²⁵ This is already a significant change. Although the Safavids did find ways to maintain some semblance of a harem outside of the palace, there is only so much privacy that can be had when a large company is riding together on horseback. Moreover, the transition to a life in the palace drove further developments in private space. For instance, in order to facilitate his heavy social drinking, a practice caught in limbo between the encouragement of the Turko-Mongol tradition and the disapproval of normative orthodox Shi‘i strictures, Shāh ‘Abbās II had several spaces specifically set aside for drinking. These areas, called caves, were described by European traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier as:

A square space with a little pond filled with water in the middle. Tapestries covered the floor and at the four corners of the pond there were four large wine bottles each containing some twenty pints or more. Between these large bottles were ranged a number of smaller ones, each containing four or five pints, with whites and clarets alternating. Around the cave there were niches at several levels, with a bottle in each niche. Natural light entered the cave through several windows, with sunlight on the wine having a brilliant effect.²⁶

²⁴ Streusand, *Gunpowder Empires*, 153.; Cf. Rudi Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) 54-55.

Caves were meant not for public spectacle like the *tālār* of the ‘Āli Qāpu palace, but for the private enjoyment of the Shāh and his companions. That is to say, they were a lived-in space, not merely a symbolic one like Shāh Ṭahmāsb’s Ardabil. Moreover, caves indicate a development in spatial meanings. Drinking was a major component of Turko-Mongol culture, as seen in Clavijo’s account of the court of Amir Timur, but as Safavid culture became more sedentary, orthodox Shi‘i ‘olemā’ began to criticize drinking, pushing it towards the private sphere.²⁷ Adding to the significance of public-private spatial meanings attached to drinking, there is actually precedent for private drinking spaces as a compromise between piety and the expected excesses of kingship in the Persian literary genre of ‘mirrors for princes,’ (books dedicated to advise for rulers and courtiers). *The Qābusnāmeḥ*, an eleventh century mirrors for princes book, admonishes, “Never drink wine in the open or in an orchard; but if you do then return within doors before reaching intoxication... for what is proper within your own dwelling is intolerable under the open sky.”²⁸ While it is not known whether ‘Abbās II was familiar with this particular work, it is clear that drinking took on public-private spatial meanings within an Islamicate Persian context.

Both Shāh Ṭahmāsb and Shāh ‘Abbās used space for political showmanship, however, they did so in distinctive ways. Shāh Ṭahmāsb presided over a largely pastoralist society, and as a result he used sites such as the Safavid dynastic shrine at Ardabil as distant political symbols to be interacted with only when it proved politically useful. By contrast, Shāh ‘Abbās was sedentary, and so had to inhabit the spaces of his symbolic power in his daily life. As a result, he had to carefully balance his public and private behaviors in order to present himself in the most

²⁷ Roxburgh, “Ruy González de Clavijo’s Narrative.”; Rudi Matthee, *Persia in Crisis*, 16.

²⁸ Kay Kāvus, *A Mirror for Princes: The Qabus Nama*, Trans. Reuben Levy, (New York, NY.: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1951), 59.

favorable light possible, developing new spatial meanings that simply would not be feasible under a soft architectural paradigm.

Race and Gender

The public-private spatial division interacted with more than just royal drinking habits. It also became a profound shaper of ideas about gender, race, and ethnicity. One of the best-known (and most badly misrepresented) images of Islamicate gender construction in the west is the partitioning of gendered space into the public/male and the private/female domains, most explicitly rendered in the harem, a female space inaccessible to most men. However, the gendering of space is neither ubiquitous to all Islamicate societies, nor consistent in its character across societies that do it. In Safavid society, gendered space evolved significantly with the transition from pastoralism to sedentarianism, becoming much more fixed and comprehensive.

Gendered public-private spatial constructions did exist to some degree even in the pastoralist early Safavid period, yet it was a necessarily porous institution. The account of Homāyun's exile in Iran from the *Tārikh-e 'Ālāmārā-ye 'Abbāsi* contains a long list of gifts given to Homāyun for his convenience and as a sign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb's kingly magnificence. Among the gifts, Eskandar Beg lists "numerous tents suitable for harem and audience pavilions."²⁹ Further, the account of the Mughal princess Golbadan Begum (929-1012/1523-1603) describes the same event from a female perspective, writing:

One day Princess Sultanum invited Hamida Banu Begim to a party. The shah said to his sister, "Since you are giving a party, go out of town and make a celebration." Tents and pavilions were pitched in a nice polo field some two leagues out of town, and canopies and arches were also set up. In Khurasan and those parts they make enclosed spaces [for the women], but they do not close them from the back. His Majesty the emperor used to set up an enclosure all around in the Indian manner. The shah's men had set up pavilions, court tents, parasols, and arches and surrounded them all with colorful fences of reeds.³⁰

²⁹ Savory, *The History of Shah Abbas*, 164.

³⁰ Thackston, Trans, *The Memoirs of Humāyun*, 48-49.

Fortunately the cultural differences between Safavid and Mughal tent-building customs inspired Golbadan to wax descriptive of something she might otherwise have taken for granted, and we can see that both societies went to considerable lengths to ensure that, even while living a mobile lifestyle in soft architectural spaces, the sanctity of private female space was respected. However, there were limits to the practical observation of gendered spatial divisions. Even from Golbadan Begum's account, we can see that the Safavids were already less strict about the spatial division than the mughals, because their harem tents were not fully enclosed. Looking beyond her account, things dissolve even more. From 946-949/1539-1542 Michele Membré, a Venetian diplomat, travelled through Safavid Iran on a mission to make contact with Shāh Ṭahmāsb. Along the way, he wrote detailed observations of the Qezelbāsh and their way of life. On the one hand, he recounts of a Qezelbāsh wedding, "they all dance, in twos, threes and fours, men in one room and women in another, for the men do not go with the women."³¹ This accords with what Eskandar Beg and Golbadan Begum tell us. However, he also describes pastoralist women travelling, saying that they, "pass on fine horses; and they ride like men and dress like men except that on their heads they do not wear caps, but white kerchiefs," a description he later repeats with the addition that Qezelbāsh women keep all their husbands' money.³² Crucially, rather than transforming public space into private space through veiling, the distinction is almost entirely done away with. Only the most token of acknowledgements, a white kerchief, is made. The reason for this is obvious. Riding any appreciable distance in a chādor is simply not feasible.

³¹ A.H. Morton, Trans. *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)* (Warminster: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1999) 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 25, 31.

The gendered meanings of public space had to be renegotiated in order to fit into the lifestyle of the Qezelbāsh.

Naturally, the later Safavids faced no such compromises. Without the need to travel vast distances, there was no longer any impediment to a more comprehensive gendered division of space. Unfortunately, few of the existing sources that would illuminate the issues of Safavid gender have been translated or made accessible. However, proceeding with caution, we can make some reasonable conjectures based on the extensive literature on the Ottoman harem. Leslie Pierce explains in her study of space and gender in the Ottoman imperial harem that, while the harem was a private family space, women both exercised power beyond private space and negotiated sophisticated, hierarchical power structures within private space.³³ Moreover, she urges us to reorient our conception of the directionality of power. Specifically, she writes that:

More prevalent in the Ottomans' self-description is the dichotomy of inner and outer, the interior and the exterior. Two sets of words, one Turkish and one Persian, were commonly used to describe this division: iç/içeri in Turkish and enderun in Persian for the inner or interior, and correspondingly, dış/dışarı (or taşra) and birun for the outer or exterior... power relationships in Islamic society are represented by spatial division more horizontal than vertical... instead of moving up, one moves in toward greater authority. The provinces of the empire were referred to as "taşra"—that which lay outside Istanbul, the charismatic center. In government, "iç/içeri" referred to wherever the sultan was.³⁴

Assuming the later Safavid imperial harem was similar—and the use of the Persian enderun and birun certainly suggests a common conception—we can begin to understand gendered late Safavid space as not only more rigid in its demarcation of gendered space, but also correspondingly rigid in its orientation of power along the lines of that demarcation. In fact, just as Membré tells us that Qezelbāsh men loved their wives very much because the women controlled the purse strings,

³³ Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

so too Pierce tells us that, “As property owners and litigants in property, inheritance, divorce, and other kinds of legal suits, women—or at least women of means—had access to economic and social power.”³⁵ In all likelihood, elite Safavid women took full advantage of the transition from the more permeable spatial divisions of the earlier period to the rigidly defined divisions of the later period in order to advance their social, political, and economic power.

In fact, some evidence from the Safavid historiography corroborates this likelihood. In her chapter “The ‘Jewels of Wonder’: Learned Safavid Ladies and Princess Politicians in the Provinces of Early Safavid Iran,” historian Maria Szuppe reveals that “since the beginning of the Safavid period, the art of reading and writing... was common among the women of the court, who used it for personal correspondence as well as for diplomatic activities.”³⁶ Though Szuppe laments the paucity of sources on later Safavid women, she does find evidence of a prominent female poet in the court of Shāh Solaymān (1057-1105/1648-1694), and a woman who practiced medicine in the court of Shāh Ṣafī (1020-1052/1611-1642), which suggests that elite women continued to be well educated in the later Safavid court.³⁷ If women were being educated in literacy and trained to write diplomatic correspondence, and they maintained a high standard of education in later Safavid society, then it is highly likely that they continued in such a role. If we make the questionable assumption that Pierce’s analysis applies to the Safavid royal harem, then the role of female Safavid diplomats may have become a heavily institutionalized organization, possibly on the order of a fully fledged government bureaucracy. In fact, if we read the historical omissions alongside the inclusions, the limits placed on female power practically confirm the

³⁵ Pierce, *The Imperial Harem*, 8.

³⁶ Maria Szuppe, “The ‘Jewels of Wonder’: Learned Safavid Ladies and Princess Politicians in the Provinces of Early Safavid Iran,” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) 329.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 330.

existence of organized female power in later Safavid Iran. Kathryn Babayan describes in her chapter, “The ‘‘Aqa’id al-Nisā’ ’: A Glimpse at Şafavid Women in Local Işfahāni Culture,” that Safavid princesses were blinded to remove them from the succession, circumventing the tradition that all Safavid royalty could, in theory, claim the throne.³⁸ The blinding of the princesses suggests that they were seen as real political threats in the Safavid court, which would have been extremely unlikely unless they were capable diplomats and politicians with the institutional backing to wield real power. The only reasonable conclusion is that Safavid princesses had access to that kind of power. Spatially, we can conclude that the increased power of the public/private and male/female spatial meaning systems did not limit the power of Safavid women, and may even have enhanced it.

While the public/private meaning system had fairly obvious implications for Safavid gender, it also shaped Safavid notions of ethnicity, race, and religion. Starting in the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb, but not successfully carried out until the reign of ‘Abbās I, the Safavids attempted to break the power of the Qezelbāsh leaders by removing the Qezelbāsh from their central position in the military. The replacements were a corps called the gholāms. Gholām can be roughly translated into English as “slave,” but the institution bears little resemblance to the chattel slavery and serfdom that have characterised slavery in Western Europe and the Americas. While Gholāms were considered slaves, they were an important part of the royal household, and could advance to incredibly powerful positions within that framework, wielding a great deal of political power. Because the gholāms were drawn from beyond the Persianate world, their power acquired racial, and especially racegendered, meanings. In *The Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of*

³⁸ Kathryn Babayan, “The ‘‘Aqa’id al-Nisā’ ’: A Glimpse at Şafavid Women in Local Işfahāni Culture” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) 352.

Safavid Iran, Sussan Babaie argues that gholām eunuchs “represented a third gender,” which made them the ideal people to permeate the discrete gendered spaces of the court.³⁹ Moreover, Babaie adds a racial dimension, writing that “black eunuchs, who were considered even more repulsive, were retained specifically for harem service.”⁴⁰ The lack of social standing that race, gender, and enslavement conferred on gholāms actually provided them with intimate access to the private side of the royal court and the shāh’s family, as well as a hierarchical institution which they could climb to acquire direct power in addition to indirect influence. That power would have been unimaginable without the development and practical application of the public/private spatial meaning system—a system only made feasible by the new sedentary lifestyle of the Safavids.

Importantly, gholāms were not simply able to achieve power because they were fortunate enough to live in a time of changing spatial organizations. In fact, it was just the reverse, with gholāms driving the spatial transformation. As Sholeh Quinn explains in her book *Shah ‘Abbas: The King who Refashioned Iran*, the gholāms were introduced with the intention of breaking the power of the Qezelbāsh.⁴¹ The racial and ethnic privilege of the Turkic Qezelbāsh, and the lack thereof experienced by Georgians, Circassians, and Africans, made the gholāms the ideal people to disempower the Qezelbāsh. The change in the racial power dynamic brought with it the necessity of accommodating the sedentary gholāms. A court composed largely of non-pastoralists cannot function according to the norms of a pastoralist-dominated court. As a result, the gholāms helped to transform the court into a more sedentary institution, which in turn provided them with more opportunities for power in a wider variety of roles. Taking advantage

³⁹ Sussan Babaie, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004) 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sholeh A. Quinn, *Shah ‘Abbas: The King who Refashioned Iran* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015)

of those roles, they continued to manufacture and advance a niche of racegendered power, to the point where slaves could even play a major role in determining the succession. This is precisely what happened when Shāh Ṣafi was elevated to the throne by an influential gholām, called the tutor of the slaves.⁴² While the relationship between race and gender and the relationship between gender and space certainly helped to create new racial meanings that were spatially driven and experienced, it must also be remembered that race was directly related to space, and that gholāms actively negotiated racial and spatial meanings in order to advance their power.

The transition from soft architectural space to hard architectural space created new racial and gendered meanings and developed the identities of racegendered groups within Safavid Iran. As a result, new spatial meanings could be assigned to those divisions and new norms could be created. These norms were not neutral, and proved to be a contested set of cultural ideas with the potential to grant considerable power to individuals and interest groups who could successfully manipulate and navigate them. Important among those interest groups are the racial and gendered groups who inhabited the private spaces of the court, who used the new hard architectural paradigm to become powerful gatekeepers and advisors to the court. Spatial norms, in tandem with racial and gendered meanings, developed new identities and power relations within Safavid society.

Conclusion

Space is not just the physical structures we inhabit. It is also the manner in which we inhabit those structures and the meanings we assign to those patterns of habitation. In the early Safavid period, spatial meanings imbued with power did exist; spaces could be used to create or undermine political legitimacy, and even in a paradigm of soft architectural space, some

⁴² Babaie, *Slaves of the Shah*, 38.

semblance of public/private spatial distinctions could be maintained. However, under the later Safavids, new power relations and new meanings had to develop. The newfound ability to create permanent private space enabled the shāh to engage in new forms of political and personal activities, took the gendered meanings of public and private space to new heights and developing institutional power for women and eunuchs, and even created a new set of racial meanings in which gholāms could leverage to gain incredible power.

Without a spatial lens, we cannot see the full complexity of the legitimacy, authority, and identity at the center of Safavid Iran's drastic transformation between the early and late periods. Although the field is rapidly developing much-needed research on power, ethnicity, and gender, it is in space where those abstract identities and roles exhibited their most striking effects. To examine identity without examining space is to ignore the ways in which identity actually shaped—and continues to shape—lived experience. Analogously, just as space mediated the interactions between people of various identities, space is also the center of interaction between dimensions of identity. While it is possible to examine the intersection of identities without space, space is the underlying factor that brings them together. Any analysis that neglects space cannot fully account for the complexities of intersectional identity and power.

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