



## **Sufis, Shahs, and Shi‘is: Shrines of the Safavids, 1500-1650 CE**

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### **Abstract**

The lecture focuses on the dynasty which established Shi‘ism as the state religion of Iran. From 1501 CE, when the first Safavid Shah, Isma‘il, came to power, the Shi‘i shrines of Iran attained a high level of importance in the rise and political consolidation of the Safavids. The architectural alterations and charitable donations made by the Safavid Shahs both reflect intentional changes in use and initiate stylistic developments in Iranian art, sometimes inadvertently.

The Shrine of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq at Ardabil in Azarbaijan province was founded by the leader of a mystical, or Sufi, order who died in 1334 CE. Following his death, his tomb and his teachings attracted numerous followers. An ever-expanding complex of buildings was constructed to serve these devotees. In addition to buildings to house and feed pilgrims, the shrine included rooms for prayer, storage and cooking. To express their devotion to Shaykh Safi, his followers donated land, livestock and precious manuscripts and other objects to the shrine. If anything, this charitable impulse intensified once the heirs to Shaykh Safi became the Shahs of Iran.

Although Shah Isma‘il I made Tabriz his capital, Ardabil retained its importance as his dynastic shrine and the centre at which his followers rallied before defeating their Aqqoyunlu Turkman enemies. In his lifetime, he constructed the *Dar al-Hadith* for recitation and discussion of the Traditions of the Prophet and Imam ‘Ali. His tall, narrow tomb was squeezed into a space next to that of Shaykh Safi and furnished with a magnificent inlaid wooden sarcophagus to cover his grave.

During the long reign of Shah Isma‘il’s successor, Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-76 CE), the Ardabil Shrine continued to receive royal attention. Shah Tahmasp made one of the few architectural commissions of his reign at the shrine, a large domed chamber called the *Jannat Sara*. The

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function of the building is unclear, but it is the most likely site for the famous pair of carpets, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which are dated 1539-40 CE, the same date as the *Jannat Sara*.

Turning to the Shrine of the Shi‘i Ithna‘ashari Imam Riza at Mashhad in northeast Iran, we encounter a shrine with a very different history from that of Ardabil. In 818 CE, ‘Ali ibn Musa al-Riza, the eighth Shi‘i Ithna‘ashari Imam, died suddenly in a village near the present-day city of Mashhad. Believed to have been poisoned and thus martyred at the behest of the ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Ma‘mun, Imam Riza is the only Shi‘i Ithna‘ashari Imam buried in Iran. Around his tomb grew a shrine and the city which surrounds it. From at least as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, generous endowments supported and enriched the shrine.

After the fall of the Timurid Dynasty in 1506 CE, control of Khurasan seesawed back and forth between the Uzbeks and the Safavids. Repeated Uzbek raids on Mashhad resulted in the need for repairs to the fabric of the shrine. In 1534 CE, Shah Tahmasp erected a minaret covered with gold and paid for the dome over the tomb of Imam Riza to be covered with sheets of gold. In addition to the gilded bricks on the dome of the Imam’s tomb, Shah Tahmasp commissioned a cover for the tomb with 166 gold inscription bands with Qur’anic verses and the date 1550-51 CE.

In 1590 CE, three years after the accession of Shah ‘Abbas I, the Uzbeks inflicted a particularly damaging raid on the Shrine of Imam Riza. In addition to killing all the shrine attendants, they looted all the gold and silver items, carpets, jewel-studded lamps, copies of the Holy Qur’an and Chinese porcelains. Since his reign followed a decade of civil war and economic depression, Shah ‘Abbas was not immediately prepared to secure Mashhad and Khurasan province against the Uzbeks. First, he put into play a social transformation aimed at suppressing the rebellious elements of Iranian society. Instead of appointing the leaders of the so-called Qizilbash tribes to the highest military positions, he began to build up a corps of slaves comprised of young men taken prisoner in the Caucasus and converted to Islam. Loyal only to the Shah, these figures helped Shah ‘Abbas restore order in Iran and regain territory lost to the Ottomans and Uzbeks.

Other perceived threats to Safavid stability were certain *dervish* groups, particularly the Nuqtawis, who believed that they should inherit the Iranian throne in 1593 CE. This led to their extermination by Shah ‘Abbas, but in no way expunged *dervishes* from the Safavid landscape. In fact, paintings and drawings of *dervishes* proliferated in the 1590’s, suggesting that they were a common sight. With regard to Sufi orders, Shah ‘Abbas’ main aim appears to have been to end excessive and inappropriate activities associated with dervishes, such as drinking alcohol, in favour of a more normative approach to Islam.

Following the defeat of the Uzbeks in 1598 CE, Shah ‘Abbas retook Mashhad. In 1601 CE, he performed a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Riza on foot from Isfahan. By 1608 CE, he had made a major *waqf* donation, or endowment, to the Shrine of Shaykh Safi at Ardabil and the Shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhad. To the Ardabil Shrine, he contributed 1,162 pieces of Chinese porcelain, jade and carnelian vessels, and Persian manuscripts of history, poetry and other subjects. He ordered the conversion of a large domed chamber into a *chini-khaneh* or china

house in which the porcelains were stored in decorative niches and the books on shelves below them. This room would have been accessible to the *dervishes* visiting the shrine. Not only is it likely that the shrine visitors used the porcelains but also they may have helped stimulate a burst of production of blue and white pottery in Iran in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Other refurbishments to the shrine emphasise the exclusive access of Shah ‘Abbas to the tomb of Shaykh Safi and the dynastic chain of the Safavids stretching back to Imam ‘Ali. While Shah ‘Abbas donated his copies of the Holy Qur’an and scientific texts to the Mashhad shrine, he also ordered the re-gilding of the dome and minaret in 1606-7 CE with new inscriptions by the director of his library, ‘Ali Riza ‘Abbasi.

At Ardabil and Mashhad, the gifts of Shah ‘Abbas represented objects of rarity and great value in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, his refurbishments at Ardabil mark a stylistic departure from the dense floral arabesques of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. While Shah ‘Abbas may have wished to broadcast his piety and generosity through his gifts, he may also have believed that these items embodied the taste of his ancestors, not his own. Through his religious, social and artistic policies, Shah ‘Abbas broke with the patterns of the first Safavid century while expressing his devotion to his ancestor, Shaykh Safi, and Imam Riza through his generous gifts.