Wood Barry
The Adventures of Shāh Esmāʿīl. A Seventeenth-Century Persian Popular Romance

Leiden, Brill (Studies on Performing Arts & Literature of the Islamicate World, 8)
2018, xxiv, 486 p.
ISBN : 9789004383531

At some point in the 17th century, coffeehouses in Esfahan and other major Iranian cities became known venues to hear professional storytellers (*naqqālān*). Here, popular stories from well-known epics poems like the *Shāh nāmeh* were recited, but other oral epics grew in popularity as well. One in particular was based on the exploits of the Safavid dynastic founder, Shah Esmāʿīl (r. 1501-24), and in this regard, Barry Wood's publication of *The Adventures of Shāh Esmāʾīl* (as part of Brill's relatively new series "Studies on Performing Arts & Literature of the Islamicate World") will be well received. As Wood discusses in his Preface, these coffeehouse narrations became so popular as to make their way into various noble courts where, ultimately, they were recorded and preserved in manuscripts. Wood has spent much of his career locating and analyzing these epics – broadly referred to as "Anonymous Histories of Shah Esmāʿīl" – and we come to learn that there are 12 surviving versions, dating from 1679 to 1825; two of these were published separately in 1971 by Asghar Montazer Saheb and Yad Allah Shokri. There are innumerable variances among these in terms of vocabulary, terminology, and specific stories, but Wood is confident that there was a core textual source of the "Anonymous Histories" at some point. What is presented here is not a critical edition/translation in that Wood works exclusively with Saheb's published edition, titled as the *ʿĀlam-ārā-ye Shāh Esmāʿīl*. To be sure, the scope and diversity of textual variances would be unwieldy for a critical edition, especially given the murky provenance of this text and its development over the next 150 years.

As the translator notes, this is a text that moves freely between historical fact and apocryphal legend. As would be consistent with the performative style of the original coffeehouse *naqqāl*s, we are treated to innumerable frame narratives, flowery dialogues, emotional demagoguery, inner thoughts, and conspiratorial asides to the reader/listener involving a sweeping cast of kings, sultans, military advisors, tribal chiefs, courtiers, Sufis, religious judges, and various common-folk. Indeed, there are a number of these in this text which speak to the popular and pedestrian audiences of the original performances of the "Anonymous Histories": epic melees, sensational battles, public executions, punishments of avaricious administrators and cruel governors, miraculous interventions by imams and saints, to name a few.

After an initial section on the immediate ancestors of Shah Esmāʿīl, the main narrative is organized around

a. Esmaʾil's defeat of the Aq Qoyunlu and their allies;

b. the collapse of the Timurids at the hands of Mohammad Shibani Khan and Esmāʿīl's corresponding campaigns against the Uzbeks in the East;

c. Esmaʾil's war against the Ottomans, principally Selim the Grim; and

d. the shah's later years following his defeat at Chalderan.

What is interesting about this text is its combination of a relatively accurate historical framework – i.e. the narrative of wars, battles, invasions – with a collection of smaller fictional sub-plots, conversations, dialogues, miraculous encounters, and dream narratives. A few bears mentioning here. For instance, we encounter in Chapter 13 (in the section on the Aq Qoyunlu) a classic frame narrative which describes how Shah Esmāʿīl's wife, Tajlu Begum, was forced along with her retinue to seek shelter from a storm in a small village (named Ranan), where she gave birth to Esmāʿīl's eldest, Tahmasp. The queen is hosted and seen to by a local Shiʿi notable, Raʾis Yusof who in turn seeks out the shah's camp and delivers news of this auspicious event. Consequently, Esmāʿīl's court descends upon this humble village, where Raʾis Yusof organizes a kingly reception and banquet to celebrate both the shah's arrival and the birth of this son. It is during this banquet that Raʾis Yusof steps forward as a *naqqāl* himself and proceeds to narrate the detailed story of another local Shiʿi notable named Raʾis Barakeh who had suffered grievously some years earlier at the hands of the evil Aq Qoyunlu. The stories of Husain Kiya Chulavi and Mohammad Karrah, both of whom rebelled against the Safavids in 1504-05 and were eventually tortured and caged for their transgressions, are embellished here for popular consumption; bleeding and dying, Husain Chulavi was "turned over to the crows" while Karrah had honey smeared all over his body so that bees could sting him endlessly. Interestingly, the *ʿĀlam-ārā-ye Shāh Esmāʿīl* presents the villainous Muhammad Karrah, and not Shah Esmāʿīl, as the architect of violence against the Neʾmatullahi Sufis of Yazd.

Particularly fascinating is the tragic telling of the fall of the Timurids. Here, Soltan-Hosayn Bayqara is presented as the wise, kingly king whose kingdom suffers on account of the schemes of the ambitious prince Badiʿ al-Zaman and the machinations of the

BCAI 35 (2021) Wood Barry: The Adventures of Shāh Esmāʿīl. A Seventeenth-Century Persian Popular Romance, recensé par Colin Mitchell
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

evil minister, Mir ʿAli Shir Navaʾi. The main narrative device here appears to be the exchange and reading of formal letters between the Safavids, the Timurids, and the newly-arrived Uzbeks. Not surprisingly, Mohammad Shibani Khan (styled in the text as Shahi Mohammad Khan) fills the role of imperial villain and thus his death merits an epic re-imagining in the "Anonymous History". Surrounded by Qizilbash soldiers at the Battle of Marv, Shibani Khan and his horse were sinking in quick sand ("only his head and his horse's ears were showing", p. 277) but the Safavid shah ordered that the Uzbek be lassoed and pulled out, only to be executed and dismembered moments later. While many of these stories shared plot devices and metaphors from the literary canon, there is no doubt that the *naqqālān* relished particularly in comparing Esmaʾil's treatment of the rebellious local ruler of Mazandaran (Aqa Rostam) with Ferdawsi's narrative of Rostam the Hero's subordination of the kingdom of Mazandaran in the *Shāh nāmeh*. The storytellers deftly intertwined Safavid-ʿAlid imagery and symbolism with references to Rostam's epic heeling of the King of Mazandaran and his demon underlings. In this way, Esmāʿīl's lieutenant (Mirza Mohammad Talesh) was given the armor of Esmaʾil's father and the royal sword of the defeated Hasan Aq Qoyunlu so that "he stood before the Shah like the Rostam of legend" (p. 283). Meanwhile, the ruler of Mazandaran, Aqa Rostam, "was busying himself with observing the sea and drinking wine" with his officers, named Alvand Div and Shamsoddin Div; in particular, the Mazandaran noble boasted "if Kay Kavus and Rostam were to come to Mazandaran in my own time, you know what [this Rostam] would do to the Rostam of Sistan," and in this way he continued "quaffing goblets of wine with the divs of Mazandaran."

The fourth section, on Safavid-Ottoman relations, underscores the notion that the Safavids in Anatolia were pre-eminently popular as a Sufi Order. This stands slightly apart from the previous section which, among other things, celebrated the Safavids as the familial caretakers for a new, resplendent Twelver Shiʿism, especially after the conquest of Mashhad and the Astan-e Qods complex dedicated to the 8th Imam. In the Ottoman section, then, prince Ahmad (son of Sultan Bayazid II) based in Amasya was "one of the Sufis of the lineage of Shaikh Safi al-Din Eshaq" (p. 376). After Selim rebelled and ousted Bayazid from the Ottoman throne, his nephew Morad (son of the aforementioned Ahmad) sought refuge in Safavid Iran, and was eventually crowned in Esfahan "with the jeweled crown of Jonayd as a dyed in the wool Sufi" (p. 380). Of course, the Battle of Chalderan is the central event for this section, and its telling here rebels in the numerous challenges, personal melees, and general chaos of a major battle. Interestingly, there is no reference whatsoever to Esmaʾil's famous post-Chalderan depression – as one might have expected in such a romantic re-imagination – and we are left wondering to what extent this characterization might have been a later attribution by scholars like Nasrullah Falsafi and Roger Savory. Likewise, the demise of Sultan Selim – falling suddenly off a mountain while hunting in eastern Anatolia – is obviously not true; however, the Safavid audience would have relished this particular *deus ex machina* and fall from grace since the Ottoman sultan had – moments earlier – announced his plans to travel to Ardabil and destroy the tomb of Shaikh Safi al-Din.

In summation, this text provides some valuable insights into popular romance and how narratives were re-imagined and embellished in the seventeenth century. In this way, there are some delicious details, such as the use of particular animals like lions and dogs as divines and spiritual agents. There has been in recent years increased interest among historians, such as Sholeh Quinn, in finessing our understanding of Safavid historiography and how official and court histories chose to present the shift of the Safavids from Sufi *tariqah* to Perso-Islamic *dawlat*. This text will help with such endeavors immeasurably, while our appreciation for seventeenth-century modes and motifs of story-telling and the diversity of oral epic literature in Iran is now widened and further nuanced.

Colin Mitchell
Dalhousie University (Halifax, Canada)

BCAI 35 (2021) Wood Barry: The Adventures of Shāh Esmāʿīl. A Seventeenth-Century Persian Popular Romance, recensé par Colin Mitchell
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net