Charles Melville (ed.)
Safavid Persia in the Age of Empires

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The present collection is already the tenth volume in the series *The Idea of Iran*. It is the result of two symposia held in 2018 and 2019 as part of the Soudavar Memorial Foundation funded series of scholarly gatherings on the history of Iran. This series, which commenced with volumes on the Birth of the Persian Empire, the Parthians, and the Sasanid Era, is emblematic of a nationalist stance within modern Iranian historiography.

The volume stands in the tradition of the renowned Safavid Roundtables as the editor, Charles Melville, explicitly points out in his preface. These took place in Paris (1989), Cambridge (1993), Edinburgh (1998) and Bamberg (2003) and initiated a wide interest in Safavid studies and the establishment of a distinct research field. The present volume continues this tradition and is a yardstick on what we actually have in the field of Safavid Studies in the 2020s. It might be rewarding to read and evaluate this collection in comparison with another monumental volume on the Safavids, edited by Rudi Matthee under the title *The Safavid World* that came out in the Routledge Worlds-Series in 2022 and offers a supplementary outlook and focus.

Continental European scholars have shaped, and to a certain degree dominated, Safavid studies for quite some time; the shift towards an Anglo-American perspective in the present volume is noticeable. Unfortunately, no scholar from Iranian academia is represented in this collection. Another trend one can observe is the inclusion of a large number of articles on literature, art and architecture – thus decisively widening the scope of a historical *Idea of Iran*.

The volume contains altogether 18 chapters with no immediately apparent order or subdivision; many papers are relatively compact and display the current research focus of their respective authors. As mentioned before, the overall theme of the series and the symposia behind it is the *Idea of Iran* which the editor defines not so much as a question of Safavid identity or perspectives from the outside, but as an exploration of what the Iranians' own view of Iran might have been during the long Safavid period. The authors take up this theme differently: some courteously pass over it; some dutifully pay their respects in adding the occasional nod or inserting a reference, only a few fully engage with it.

Ali Anooshahr makes an interesting start and reminds us of the rather accidental origins of the Safavid state building project with Shah Esmaʿil and his followers who regarded themselves primarily as successors to the Aq Qoyunlu domain. Any idea of Iran was still far-fetched and the idea of a Shiʿite Iran perhaps even more remote. Gregory Aldous follows in this line and marks Shah Tahmasp's move to Qazvin as "transitioning from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary one." Furthermore, he links this move to a new phase in Safavid historiography and discusses the traditional dynastic periodization scheme with regard to the Safavids. A third article to focus on political transformations is the contribution by Colin Mitchell. Providing a fascinating sketch of the career of Hatem Beg Ordubadi, grand vizier to Shah 'Abbas (1591-1610), Mitchell manages to provide agency to this versatile politician. He raises the question whether it was the scholar-bureaucrat notable elites who actually created a Safavid *Idea of Iran*.

Rudi Matthee is perhaps the only contributor who wholeheartedly engages with the theme of the series, the *Idea of Iran* and Safavid identity, drawing connections to earlier volumes. He probes various concepts, such as the territorial notion of *Iran-Zamin* and concrete notions of Iranicity or *Iraniyat*, and finds it exemplified in a 17th century geographical compendium, the *Mokhtasar-e Mofid*. Still, according to his conclusion, Iranian identity remained "culturally grounded" during the Safavid period.

Urban planning is the topic of Sussan Babaie's comprehensive sketch of Safavid cities and their architecture. The premeditated building programmes of urban centres is new to the Safavid period and suggests a conscious proliferation of modern urban habits. The article stands somewhat isolated and one would have appreciated at least one other contribution on architecture and urban space. The same is true for Willem Floor's contribution on commercial relations between Safavid Iran and Portugal, England and the Netherlands. Another chapter on economic history would have balanced the dominance of intellectual and cultural approaches to the *Idea of Iran*.

Our perception of the Safavids is shaped to a large degree by European representations, often in the form of encyclopaedic travelogues. Aurélie

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Salesse-Chabrier traces political representations, related to the Safavid monarchy, both literary and pictorial in her finely crafted article. Not only Europeans were travelling, as Maryam Ala Amjadi shows in her discussion of Persian travel literature from the Safavid period. In comparison, their numbers are few and most narrate the pilgrimage to Mecca, but the travel accounts show an awareness of Iran, "often intertwined with notions of Shiʿi-ness" Likewise, European or Western representations are not limited to the pre-modern period, as Andrew Newman demonstrates in his literature review on evaluations of and judgements on the famous Shiʿi scholar and theologian Mohammad Baqer al-Majlesi (d. 1699) in relation to the Safavid decline paradigm. Majlesi also surfaces shortly in the opening paragraphs of Sajjad Rizvi's contribution on Safavid philosophy, but of course, Molla Sadra immediately takes centre-stage. Rizvi provides us with a detailed, yet very readable and comprehensive overview on philosophy in the Safavid period.

Ferenc Csirkés reminds us of the turkophone background of the Qezelbash in his dedicated discussion of a treatise of religious polemics, the Story of Yohanna by Gharibi, written in Turkish. This reminder is extremely valuable, especially against the background of a perception of the Safavids as the centre of a largely persophone landscape. Benedek Péri also treats aspects of Turkish-Persian language and literature contacts in his discussion of Ottoman receptions of Persian poetry in the sixteenth century. The look from outside and the extension of the Persian "world of letters" was also beneficial for travelling poets in the Safavid period, especially those finding a (sometimes temporary) home in India. Sunil Sharma proposes an expanded reading of the realm of Safavid Persian letters, including India and moving beyond a narrow geographic fixation.

In a return to political history, the contributions by Roy S. Fischel, George Sanikidze and Florian Schwarz address Safavid self-reflections and outside images of Iran. Fischel introduces the Deccan Sultanates, as prime examples for the necessity to dissolve binaries, such as Shiʿi-Sunni or Safavid-Mughal. Sanikidze offers a very dense account of Safavid-Georgian relations from the early 16th to early 18th centuries. Interesting is his conclusion of the divergent perceptions on these interactions: the Georgian *Idea of Iran* did not necessarily match the Safavid expectations. The excellent contribution by Schwarz on Safavids and Ozbeks features a two-partite approach. On a first level, he challenges the notion that "Ozbek affairs" did not matter to the Safavids (they did) and offers a superb and concise overview on what is hidden behind the summary designation of Ozbeks in the sixteenth century. On a second level, he discusses the four original wall paintings in the Chehel Sotun palace and proposes very convincingly that one of them depicts Emam Qoli b. Din Mohammad (and not his brother Nadr Mohammad Khan) with Shah 'Abbas II. He concludes that the Idea of Safavid Iran was very much in need of images of the 'Ozbeks'.

Two art historical contributions close the volume. Sheila Canby reminds us that through the most talented painters of the Safavid period "the Iranian landscape with its flowers, grasses and trees remained central to the idea of Iran and its people." The difficult and challenging question whether contacts with Europe, in particular with Western material culture, changed the Iranian self-perspective, is raised by Negar Habibi in her discussion of occidentalist paintings from the period of Shah Soleyman. Her association of the *Sarkar-e navvab* with the inner circle of the court, in particular the queen mother, is an interesting suggestion to explain the popularity of these paintings.

This excellent volume is full of discoveries. Some contributions are specialized pieces of original research; some are summaries of already published work examined in a new light, and quite a few offer superb introductions and surveys. One thing is certain; the field of Safavid studies is thriving.

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