Iranian Studies (2025), 1–21
doi:10.1017/irn.2025.1

Association for Iranian Studies
انجمن ایران‌پژوهی

ARTICLE

Shah ʻAbbās I: The Myth, the Monarch, and the Man

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This is a revised and expanded version of the keynote speech I delivered on August 21, 2023 at the University of Leiden on the occasion of the eleventh conference of the European Society of Iranian Studies.

(Received 09 December 2024; accepted 03 January 2025)

Abstract

This essay considers the "great" status of Shah ʻAbbās I, the most consequential Safavid ruler, by comparing European descriptions to his portrayal in the Persian-language sources. While both depict him as energetic, resolute, and unadorned in attire and demeanor, European sources present him primarily as an empire builder while Persian-language works focus on his role as a warrior on horseback, fighting external enemies and putting down domestic revolts. Neither accounts ignore the violence that came with absolute power, but while Europeans viewed such violence as an unfortunate byproduct of power, Persian chronicles celebrate ʻAbbās as a *ghāzi* warrior, merciless in his efforts to root out heretics and unbelievers. The surviving image of the shah as a "great" ruler was first reported by European visitors and is primarily a composite of the way they depicted him – as a Renaissance prince and determined empire builder who remained close to his subjects and their concerns.

Keywords: Iran; Safavids; Shah ʻAbbas I; kingship

> But this king (whom wee call barbarous, though from his example wee may learne many great and good things) knowing that the true care of a Prince must bee euer the publique good; and the capablenesse of his ruling, would bee iugded by his true Iustice, and elections of his Ministers, and distribution of his fauour upon the worthiest (which also should make worthy use of it).
>
> – Anthony Sherley, *Travels into Persia*, 70.

> The King's disposition is noted by his apparel which he wears that day; for that day which he weareth black, he is commonly melancholy and civil; if he wear white or green, yellow or any other light color, he is commonly merry; but when he weareth red, then all the court is afraid of him, for he will be sure to kill somebody that day: I have oft-times noted it.
>
> – Manwaring, "True Discourse," 221.

Introduction

Shah ʿAbbās I, the fifth ruler of the Safavid dynasty, hardly needs introducing. Ruling Iran for four decades, from 1588, the year he ascended the throne, until his death in January 1629, he was the most successful and consequential Safavid sovereign. Indeed, ʿAbbās is universally seen as one of the greatest monarchs in Iranian history, so much so that he is often called the "great," *kabir* (Ar.) or *bozorg* (P.), an honor otherwise only reserved for Cyrus I, the first Achaemenid king, and, more controversially, for Rezā Shāh, the modernizing founder of the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty.

Justice springing from a concern for the public good, the above quote by English adventurer-cum-diplomat Anthony Sherley suggests, was the hallmark of ʿAbbās's reign. Sherley, who became personally acquainted with the shah during the five months he spent in Iran in 1598–99, further characterized him as "wise, valiant, liberall, temperate, mercifull." Yet Sherley qualified this encomium by insisting that the Safavid monarch ruled "through general love and awfull terror."[1] John Cartwright, an English preacher who visited Iran a decade after Sherley, similarly noted that ʿAbbās had come to power amid the "shedding of much blood." Yet, Cartwright concluded, at present the shah was:

> exceedingly beloved and honoured by his subjects, in so much that when they will confirme any thing by solemne oaths they will sweare by the head of *Abas* the king, and when they wish well to any man, they visually say, King *Abas* grant thee thy desire.[2]

John Malcolm, the first British ambassador to Iran, who visited the country in 1800 and authored what could be called the first modern history of Iran, concurred. Shah ʿAbbās, Malcolm argued, occupied the same place in Iran as the caliph "Hâroon-oor Rasheed did in the stories of the Arabians."[3] ʿAbbās, Malcolm insisted, though at times cruel and violent, had generally pursued the welfare and improvement of his kingdom; he had perfectly succeeded in accomplishing this goal, and the long peace Iran enjoyed must "be chiefly ascribed to the wisdom of his measures."[4] Modern scholars have echoed this verdict, turning ʿAbbas into a magnanimous and tolerant monarch, successful in creating a centralized state worthy of the name "empire."[5]

To get to the origins and constituent elements of this complex image, we first need to situate ʿAbbās in the religious and political context of his time, as the unique representative of a unique dynasty in the early modern Muslim world. Unlike their regional peers, the Ottomans and Mughals, the Safavids were not tribal in origin and did not claim Turkic Chengissid ancestry or the boast entailing genealogy built on a warrior ethos, with succession being open to all male members of the clan. Instead, the Safavids originated as a Sufi order and, in keeping with the messianic doctrine of the Twelver Shiʿism they propagated, were seen as the representatives of its imams, heralding the return of the last one, the Mahdi. As such, the Safavid shah claimed divine ordination and thus supra-natural status,

[1] Sherley, *Travels into Persia*, 29–30.

[2] Cartwright, *Preachers Travels*, 735.

[3] Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, 135. The history in question is Malcolm, *History of Persia*.

[4] Malcolm *History of Persia*, 1: 552.

[5] Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*, 95–103, set the tone for the mostly celebratory image of ʿAbbās as empire builder in anglophone scholarship. Newman, *Safavid Iran*, the latest synthetic overview of the dynasty, disguises Safavid empire-building by studiously substituting the term "state" with the vague term "project," which is never defined. Unsurprisingly, empire-building, with an emphasis on art and architecture, prevails in the work of modern art historians as well. See, for instance, Babaie, *Isfahan and Its Palaces*; the various contributions in Canby, *Shah ʿAbbas*; Rizvi, *Safavid Dynastic Shrine*; Revault, *Ispahan*; and Emami, *Isfahan*. Quinn, *Shah ʿAbbas*, sees ʿAbbās primarily as a reformer. The most balanced portrayal of ʿAbbās, presenting him as a "ruthless king who became an Iranian legend," is Blow, *Shah Abbas*.

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and his followers revered him as a perfect spiritual master, *ensān-e kāmel.* Beginning with Italians visiting Iran during the reign of Esmā'il (r. 1501–24), the founder and first ruler of the Safavid state, Europeans recognized the mystique of a shah venerated as a God-like figure. Shah Esmā'il's Qezelbāsh soldiers, these Europeans claimed, were willing to die for their master, to the point of throwing themselves into battle without armor.[6]

This exalted status had several important consequences. Since the shah was not just providentially guided but also an embodiment of the divine, he was thought to possess a sacred body with thaumaturgical powers. The sick reportedly invoked the name of Shah Tahmāsb, Esmā'il's successor (r. 1524–76), more than that of God; people would reverentially kiss the doors of his palace; the shah's touch was believed to cure fever; and a home containing a piece of cloth or shoes belonging to him counted as blessed.[7] Since the shah's prerogatives resembled those of the divine, he also operated on a supra-legal level, beyond good and evil.[8] The divine aura and nature of kingship mandated full and unconditional obedience on the part of subjects, while the same qualities and characteristics dictated that he remain distant, aloof from the people, operating at a remove from the human fray.[9]

However, the position of the Safavid shah involved a paradox. He was divinely ordained but also acted as a warrior on horseback and the head of the Safavid Sufi order, both of which were premised on closeness and accessibility. His absolutist, inviolable status was also ill matched with the age-old Near Eastern theory of proper governance, in which justice played a key role. The king represented the unity of the realm; he had a heavenly mandate, which included power over life and death but also an obligation to foster the wellbeing of his subjects by being just.

Shah 'Abbās inherited this complex, paradoxical status, adding his own charismatic persona. As we shall see, he was no less revered by his people than his forebears, but his reign was also a phase in a process of diminishing messianism. Under Shah Esmā'il's successors, the shah became less dependent on the tribal Qezelbāsh and the Sufi element of the Safavid doctrine lost some prominence and potency. Esmā'il's defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Chalderan in 1514 also put the shah's divine aura in serious doubt. As the expectation of the Parousia remained unfulfilled, the focus on messianism gave way to the mundane need to govern an increasingly complex state.[10] Shah Tahmāsb, in the words of Colin Mitchell, still enjoyed a "certain degree of propinquity to the divine."[11] This propinquity and the underpinning sacrality of kingship endured under 'Abbās and, indeed, until the very end of the dynasty. The Safavid shah continued to operate in his own, ethereal sphere; he could neither be judged nor condemned for any of his acts, including openly disregarding Ramadan, public wine drinking, or engaging in gratuitous violence.[12] Yet with 'Abbās, one sees a shift in propinquity from the divine to the terrestrial level. 'Abbās was revered by his people on account of his superhuman status, but his real popularity seems to have stemmed from his accessibility to commoners in ways unthinkable to Ottoman and Mughal rulers.

This essay probes the complex nature of Shah 'Abbās's appeal and lasting popularity. It consists of three parts, which move from the abstract to the concrete, from the "myth" to the "monarch" to the "man," and from the charismatic aura to the private person via institutionalized kingship. Part one traces the origins and trajectory of 'Abbās's image as a "great" ruler, divinely guided to act justly and judiciously. Part two discusses the shah as a visionary empire builder, arguing that this part of his legacy is largely the product of European eyewitness testimony. This section pays special attention to the way the sources

[6] Angolello, "Short Narrative," 115.
[7] Alessandri, "Relazione," 178.
[8] Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 77.
[9] Ibid., 123; Āram, *Andisheh-ye tārikh-negari*, 260–1.
[10] Aubin, "La politique religieuse," 239; Stickel, *Zwischen Chiliasmus und Staatsräson*, 186ff.
[11] Mitchell, *Practice of Politics*, 214. For these questions, see Eberhart, *Osmanische Polemik*, 177.
[12] Sanson, *Estat de Perse*, 16–17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reconcile a shah personifying justice with a ruler treating his opponents and, occasionally, his dependents with arbitrary violence. The third part examines ʿAbbās the individual by weighing private interests and inclinations against public imperatives and objectives. The study ends with some final thoughts, arguing that the beloved ruler is the one who intuits his people's hopes, fears, and needs, and that for a leader to be remembered affectionately, recollections of his presumed benevolence must far outweigh the memory of his violent behavior. ʿAbbās, we must conclude, was such a ruler. To make the case, the accounts of contemporary Western eyewitnesses are compared and contrasted with the writings of Safavid chroniclers to see where they converge and where they differ, all while keeping in mind that, whereas the first were not beholden to the conventions of the Persian-language court chronicles, which mandated praise regardless of performance, their impressions were colored by the friendly reception they received from a monarch who seemed far more engaging than his European peers. The latter, on the other hand, writing in the orbit of the shah, may have had greater access to power but were also constrained by the limitations of the literary genre they practiced.

I. The myth: Shah ʿAbbās the "Great"

The European assessment

Rather than just being a matter of retroactively applied gloss, with origins hard to verify in the absence of eyewitness reports, the image of ʿAbbās as a "great" ruler goes back to contemporary European visitors and their encounters with him during audiences and drinking sessions. His exalted status comes through in a description by Augustinian missionary and Portuguese envoy António de Gouvea. Accompanying the shah as the royal cavalcade entered Kashan in late 1602, de Gouvea witnessed a frenzied welcoming scene, with women thumping their chests while imploring God to shorten their lives so as to lengthen his and people releasing doves and other birds from cages at the shah's passing in a symbolic gesture signifying the freedom he had given them. De Gouvea even noticed scaffolds holding calves, their feet tied as if ready to be sacrificed, which, he was told, represented the people's willingness to give their own lives for the king.[13]

Several other foreign observers testify to ʿAbbās's extraordinary aura. Enjoying the shah's hospitality and seduced by his apparent affection for Christianity, they portray him as a resolute and energetic monarch, possessed of a magnetic personality, as curious as he was tolerant. Virtually all Europeans who met ʿAbbās were impressed by his bonhomie, his willingness to engage in debate with foreigners over wine, pressing them for information about their countries, all while following a seemingly secular, pragmatic approach to statecraft and international diplomacy. Already during his lifetime, ʿAbbās became legendary for his approachability. Giacomo Fava, a Venetian merchant who spent almost a week in the company of the shah in 1599, was only the first foreigner to describe the relaxed conviviality that became a hallmark of the shah's public presence.[14] This included organizing public festivals illuminated by thousands of lights and enlivened by fireworks, as well as horseback tournaments and polo games held on Isfahan's central square, the Meydān-e Shāh.[15]

What struck men used to the ostentatiousness of early modern European court life above all was the modesty of the shah's attire and comportment. When de Gouvea first met ʿAbbās in Mashhad in 1602, he had to be told who the shah was amidst all the men sitting cross-legged on a carpet, dressed simply. Indeed, de Gouvea claims, the shah, to show that his grandeur did not depend on rich attire, would often insist that his entourage dress more

[13] De Gouvea, *Relaçam*, 59.

[14] Brunelli, "Sei giorni con lo Shāh."

[15] Sherley, *Travels into Persia*, 70; Parry, "New and Large Discourse," 119; Pinçon, "Relation," 161; Manwaring, "True Discourse," 212ff.

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magnificently than him.[16] The Spanish Discalced Carmelite Father Juan Tadeo di San Elisio, who became one of ʻAbbās's confidants while serving as his translator, was one among various eyewitnesses to note how the shah would go around town, dressed in simple shirt and pants, listening and talking to ordinary folk.[17] His weekly audiences, when his subjects could submit petitions expressing grievances and requesting favors, drew their attention well.[18]

This positive impression was clearly influenced by the rights and privileges ʻAbbās granted to his European guests: commercial benefits for the English and Dutch East India Companies (EIC and VOC), and permission for various missionary orders, beginning with the Augustinians, to establish and operate missions.[19] The law-and-order regime he established in his realm contributed to the good press the shah received as well. Early travelers and envoys introduced a cliché with their praise for the safety of Iran's roads, claiming that no thieves were to be found in the entire country.[20] A final factor in their sympathetic portrayal was their widespread conviction that ʻAbbās was favorably inclined toward Christianity, with some claiming that he was but one step away from converting.[21] This presumed christophilia became something of a leitmotiv in the eagerness with which especially visitors from Catholic countries pursued relations with Iran.

Building on these contemporary descriptions, later European visitors further cemented ʻAbbās's reputation. Within a few years after the shah's death, his reign was already fondly remembered as a golden age of good governance. This image, brought into sharp relief by the bloody purge of real and suspected rivals undertaken by his grandson and successor, Shāh Safi (r. 1629–42), acquired even greater luster as subsequent rulers, men of lesser stature, lost their grip on effective power and allowed palace eunuchs, harem women, and doctrinaire clerical forces to put their mark on state policy.

The first retrospective assessment of ʻAbbās along these lines is from the hand of Jan Smidt, a Dutch envoy to the Safavid court who learned of the shah's death just weeks after, while traveling between Bandar ʻAbbas and Isfahan. Comparing ʻAbbās to his contemporary, Henry IV of France (r. 1589–1610), a monarch known as a "good king," Smidt portrays the late shah as a wise ruler who had been respected by all of the country's grandees for lifting his fractious country out of poverty and divisiveness.[22] Adam Olearius, the secretary of the mission that, in 1637, visited Isfahan on behalf of the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, called ʻAbbās a "friend of the Christians" and lauded his generosity, kindness to the poor, and way of promoting justice in his realm.[23] Writing about a decade later, the German soldier-adventurer Jürgen Andersen may have been the first to use the term *busurck, bozorg*, for ʻAbbās.[24] John Fryer, an English physician who visited the Safavid state half a century after the shah's death, claimed that ʻAbbās's name was "invoked when any commendable or famous action was performed; saying 'Shaw Abas', 'Well done'."[25] The well-known French Huguenot merchant-traveler Jean Chardin, the most informative and insightful outside observer of 17th-century Iran, gave a final verdict on ʻAbbās and his reign, stating that the shah had found an impoverished and dilapidated country and built it up. After him,

[16] De Gouvea, *Relaçam*, 44.

[17] [Chick], *Chronicle*, 285.

[18] Sherley, *Travels into Persia*, 230.

[19] Foster, *English Factories*, 272–3.

[20] De Gouvea, *Relaçam*, 44; Orta Rebelo, *Un voyageur portugais*, 103. This was the result of a law, going back to Mongol times, that made the district governor of a district in which crime occurred responsible for punishment and restitution.

[21] Sherley, *Travels into Persia*, 44. Sherley attributed this to the shah having taken a Christian wife, the daughter of Simon Khan, a Georgian princess.

[22] Dunlop, *Bronnen*, 731–2; Smidt, "Reisverhaal."

[23] Olearius, *Vermehrte Newe Beschreibung*, 647–8.

[24] Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 150. Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 1: 645, had already called ʻAbbās "great," but he just used the Italian terms "grande" and "gran re."

[25] Fryer, *New Account*, 2: 245. Also see De la Maze, "De Chamakie," fol. 6/363v.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decline set in or, in Chardin's memorable words: "When this great prince ceased to live, Persia ceased to exist" ("Quand ce grand prince cessa de vivre, la Perse cessa d'exister").[26]

By end of the 17th century, 'Abbās's image had soared to the point of becoming mythologized. Seven decades after his death, the Italian traveler Gemelli-Careri reported that 'Abbās's exploits were still being narrated in Isfahan's coffeehouses.[27] In the same period, the French botanist Pitton de Tournefort called the shah "le plus grand roy de Perse" ("the greatest king of Persia").[28] A few decades later, the Polish Jesuit Judasz Tadeusz Krusiński praised Shah 'Abbās as a successful ruler for staying above the fray of factionalism by engaging in divide-and-rule tactics.[29] The trope of clemency shown and justice administered to lowly strangers during chance encounters was firmly in place as well at this point.[30] In sum, the stage for Malcolm's verdict was set early on. 'Abbās's reputation has indeed endured, to the point where a book on the Safavids appeared as recently as 2023 under the telling title *L'âge d'or de la Perse*, in which Shah 'Abbās's reign figures as the epitome of a golden age in Iranian history.[31]

The Iranian assessment

The entirely different perspective from which they wrote notwithstanding, the temporary Persian-language sources confirm the European portrayal by presenting the shah as a heavenly sent vicegerent with thaumaturgical powers. Court astrologer Monajjem-Yazdi, the author of a popularizing account of the shah's reign, recounts how the construction of a fortress near Astarabad (modern Gorgan) in 1006/1598–99 was held up by heavy rains until 'Abbās successfully implored the heavens for sunshine.[32] Yazdi also refers to a five-year-old, paralyzed boy who managed to get up and walk after his mother brought him to a royal audience and the shah touched his legs and ordered the boy to move.[33] Eskandar Beg Monshi, the preeminent chronicler of 'Abbās's reign, links the shah to the divine in *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā-ye 'Abbāsi* and lists the shah's virtues in his discourses, *maqālāt*, appendices. Among these, Monshi mentions piety, wisdom, and judiciousness, all connected to 'Abbās's divinely ordained fortune, which enabled him to survive the violence that marked his early youth and be successful as a ruler. His pursuit of justice and concern for the welfare of his people are also among the qualities Eskandar Monshi listed. The author's eighth discourse focuses on the shah's simplicity and aversion to ceremoniousness. The final one recounts his victories in battle.[34]

The subsequent Persian-language literature also echoes the European assessment of 'Abbās as a king close to his people and averse to ostentation. Mohammad Tāher Nasrabādi, writing in the 1670s, confirms reports by Western observers by referring to 'Abbās's habit of frequenting Isfahan's coffeehouses and mingling with the clientele.[35] Mohammad Sabzavāri and Seyyed Fendereski, both late-Safavid religious officials, praise the simplicity of 'Abbās's attire in their treatises, viewing this as an emblem of a halcyon time before waste and conspicuous consumption began sapping the vitality of Safavid society.[36] The Armenian

[26] Chardin, *Voyages*, 3: 291. Chardin was not the only or even the first foreigner to express the view that Iran had declined after 'Abbās. For a similar opinion, expressed by Johann Rudolf Schmid zum Schwarzenhorn, Austrian resident in Istanbul between 1629–1643, see Meienberger, *Johann Rudolf Schmid*, 260.

[27] Gemelli-Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2: 153.

[28] Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d'un voyage*, 3: 252.

[29] Krusinski, *History of the Late Revolutions*, 1: 40–41.

[30] Zakaria of K'anak'er, *Chronicle*, 33–49; Bell of Antermony, *Travels*, 1: 113–14.

[31] Bomati, *L'âge d'or de la Perse*.

[32] Monajjem Yazdi, *Tārikh-e 'Abbāsi*, 279.

[33] Ibid., 482.

[34] Monshi, *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā*, 1094–1116, trans. *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 515–44.

[35] Nasrabādi, *Tazkereh-ye Nasrabādi*, 1: 343.

[36] Sabzavāri, *Rowzat al-anvār-e 'Abbāsi*, 471; Fendereski, *Tohfat al-'ālam*, 86–7, 96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chronicler Zak'aria of K'anak'er, writing in the late 17th century, offers anecdotes showing that 'Abbās's common touch, including his habit of dressing simply, had already become part of popular lore at the time.[37]

This image of Shah 'Abbās in no small measure contributed to the Safavids' enduring mystique, following their fall to a small group of Afghan insurgents in 1722. The legend of a divinely sanctioned dynasty persisted throughout the ensuing turmoil, and for decades to come various ephemeral tribal rulers invoked the Safavid name to claim legitimacy.[38] In the nostalgia about the dynasty that came to prevail, 'Abbās's reign was the fulcrum. Mir 'Abd al-Latif Khān Shushtari, a late-18th-century man of letters who served as the first Qajar representative in India, praised 'Abbās's concern for commoners, *ra'iyyat-parvari*, and pursuit of justice, *mo'ādelat-gostari*.[39] Early Qajar chronicles, faced with the task of justifying the advent of a dynasty without any religious credentials, lauded the Safavids –especially Shah 'Abbās and his reign – as the touchstone for the justice, order, and stability that the Qajars were presumably in the process of restoring.[40]

Shah 'Abbās's mythologized image has indeed resonated in Iran to this day. Popular stories in which he plays the role of magnanimous ruler have continued to circulate into modern times.[41] To many ordinary people, Shah 'Abbās has become the architect of Safavid Iran, credited with the construction of many buildings that, in reality, date to the reign of his successors.[42] In Pahlavi historiography, he came to be portrayed as the first ruler to unify Iran since the 7th-century Arab invasion, which brought an end to the last "real" Iranian dynasty, the Sasanians. To many, Shah 'Abbās also counts as the last sovereign to oversee a proudly independent, prospering country before it became a plaything of imperialist powers: Russia, Britain and, later, the United States. Even the Islamic Republic, otherwise allergic to kingship, has failed to dispel the image of the golden age of the Safavids epitomized by Shah 'Abbās and visualized in the beauty of Isfahan, as designed by him – his ultimate *lieu de mémoire*. Indeed, the authors of various publications coming out of Iran, in their emphatic proclaiming of his "greatness" in their titles, seem keen to push back on any negative connotation attached to his name.[43]

The modern world, in sum, has come to see 'Abbās as a wise and forward-looking monarch, a ruler who met the three requirements of a successful empire builder as formulated two millennia ago by Pliny the Younger: being a conqueror, being a benefactor, and either sponsoring new buildings or restoring old ones.[44] 'Abbās appears to us moderns less as a warrior on horseback than as a ruler determined to organize and reform his realm with the aim of turning it into an empire. That image, however, derives above all from how he is portrayed in the contemporary Western sources.

II. The monarch: Shah 'Abbās as empire builder

Military matters vs. urban design

Operating within the patronage system that sustained them, the Safavid court chroniclers wrote with one ultimate purpose: to legitimize Safavid rule. Recording the activities of the

[37] Zak'aria of K'anak'er, *Chronicle*, 27, 36.

[38] Perry, "Last Safavids."

[39] Shushtari, *Tohfat al-'ālam*, 270.

[40] Ashraf, "Safavid Nostalgia"; Ashraf, *Making and Remaking Empire*, 47, 78, 296.

[41] Hanif, *Hoviyyat-e melli*.

[42] Roemer, *Persien auf dem Weg*, 310, fn 189.

[43] Semnani, *Shāh 'Abbās-e kabir*; Akbari Mehrabān, *Shāh 'Abbās-e kabir*; Fazlollāhi, "Mardi barā-ye hameh-ye fosul." The editor of the Safavid chronicle *Qesas al-khāqāni*, published in 1371/1992 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, added "bozorg" to the name 'Abbās in various places in the text. See Shamlu, *Qesas al-khāqāni*, 131, 186.

[44] Beard, *Emperor of Rome*, 42.

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ruler and his entourage in annalistic and often rather formulaic fashion, they extoll the shah's virtues and successes. Yet, in keeping with a shortage of comprehensive strategic thinking in premodern states, planned empire-building hardly figured in this.[45] Indeed, the chroniclers pay remarkably little attention to the shah's economic and administrative policies, including the eye-catching redesign of Isfahan, as part of a visionary project.[46] They praise 'Abbās's justice and judiciousness, viewing these qualities as integral to the divine mandate of kingship. Their real focus, however, is on the shah's military exploits, in the form of his many campaigns directed against the Ottomans, Uzbeks, Mughals, or internal rebels. Like Turko-Mongol rulers before him, 'Abbās appears mainly concerned with what the Safavid chroniclers considered integral to statecraft, *molk-giri* or *keshvar-setāni*, grabbing land, and military matters dominate in the accounts.[47] They occasionally even refer to the shah as a world conqueror, *jahān-gir*, in the tradition of Chengiss Khan via Timur Lang.[48] A retrospective, nostalgic portrayal of 'Abbās along these lines is found in the versified ode to him written in the early 18th century by Sayyed Ahmad Hoseyni Khalifeh.[49] This work, significantly titled *Fotuhāt-e gitisetān, Conquests of the conqueror of the world*, exemplifies a genre of late-Safavid "imitative writing" celebrating the military successes of a by-gone era.[50] The author creates a link between 'Abbās and Iran's pre-Islamic royal tradition by attributing to him Jamshid, Fereydun, and Alexander-like features. Heavily borrowing from Eskandar Beg Monshi and Monajjem-Yazdi, Hoseyni Khalifeh presents 'Abbās as a warrior-king, a ruler on horseback engaged in the kind of conquests, *fotuhāt*, that in the pacific ambience of the sedentary Soltān Hoseyn, the last Safavid monarch (r. 1694-1722), were but a distant memory.[51]

If the greatest achievement for which 'Abbās is mainly celebrated today – unifying and building a strong Iran – is largely absent from the Persian-language sources as an analytical topic of discourse, it takes center stage in the foreign accounts. Inasmuch as European visitors tended to spend most of their time in Isfahan, far from the many campaigns waged by the shah, they report sparingly on military matters, battles, and sieges, and what they do report is subordinate to their focus on urban development and state building.

The story they tell has become the sequential, teleological narrative presented by modern scholarship, which centers on the shah's selection of the centrally located city of Isfahan as Iran's new – and first real – capital. Isfahan's newly designed and embellished center provided the Safavid state with a vibrant commercial and political nexus. Funding for the project came from an increase in crown land holdings, the expansion of foreign trade (represented by the resettlement of a large number of Armenians to a newly built suburb of Isfahan, where they were offered commercial rights and privileges), the building of numerous caravanserais, improved road security, and the creation of an outlet to the Persian Gulf by way of a new port, Bandar 'Abbas. All this helped to shape an image of Shāh 'Abbās the "great" as the equivalent of an (idealized) European Renaissance prince – a judicious and visionary ruler who remained in touch with his subjects as he built a great empire.

[45] For this, see *Ibid.*, 312.

[46] This does not mean that the Persian-language chronicles provide no information about Shah 'Abbās's urban development; just that these activities were not at the heart of their concerns. McChesney, "Four Sources," brings the (scattered) information on this topic from the chronicles together.

[47] For the concept of grabbing land, in reference to Sultan Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, see Dale, *Garden of Eight Paradises*, 153, 292, 297, 349.

[48] As noted, the Safavids were different from the Ottoman and Mughals in basing their legitimacy on their presumed descendance from the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musā Kāzem (765–99). But in their competition with rivals, the Safavids also sought to establish a connection to Timur. See Quinn, "Notes on Timurid Legitimacy"; and Genç, "16. Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında," 94.

[49] Ḥusayni Khalīfah, *Versified History*, intro, 10, si-o seh. Sayyed Ahmad Hoseyni Khalifeh was a descendant of a clerical family that included Ahmad Bāqer Hoseyni, who served as *sadr* at the court of Shah Soltān Hoseyn.

[50] For more on this, see Quinn and Melville, "Safavid Historiography," 248–50.

[51] Ḥusayni Khalīfah, *Versified History*, intro, 15, panjah.

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No one did more to portray ʻAbbās in this manner than Pietro Della Valle, a Roman nobleman who, living in Isfahan between 1617–1619, knew the shah personally. In an account that is sympathetic to the point of being apologetic, Della Valle emphasizes ʻAbbās's astute leadership qualities, curiosity, judiciousness in choosing his counselors, keenness to forestall sedition by appointing shadow officials, and efforts to prevent his army from being a nuisance to the people. Della Valle called ʻAbbās not just a king but a father, teacher, and benefactor to his people. As Joan-Pau Rubiés has pointed out, Della Valle portrayed the positive aspects of ʻAbbās's character – his common touch, his accessibility, his aversion to luxury – in sharp contrast to the typical traits of the emerging absolutist rulers of Europe at the time – aloof, secluded, surrounded by controlling courtiers – with the pious and passive Philip III of Spain as his specific target.[52]

Violence, the other component of "greatness"

The European accounts

What about the downside of it all, the violence that inevitably attaches to the absolutist monarch and seems so utterly at variance with modern, Enlightenment-informed notions of justice? Malcolm and the eyewitness observers before him were not oblivious to the sanguinary beginnings of ʻAbbās's reign. Little familiar with the tradition of fratricide and filicide among Muslim rulers at the time, these observers were shocked by the violence the shah committed against his own offspring: the killing of his oldest son, Mohammad Bāqer Mirzā, in 1615, and, twelve years later, the blinding of his remaining son, Emām-qoli Mirzā.[53] But whether they hailed from the Iberian Peninsula with its infamous Inquisition or from the blood-soaked fields of Central Europe, stalked by murderous mercenaries, these observers were fully familiar with public executions. They also understood the rationale behind such spectacles: a fear of conspiracies, the kind of paranoia that prompted the shah rarely to sleep in the same bed.[54] In their view, Iran, with its harsh and unforgiving environment inhabited by people of "innate bad instincts" who did not fear ordinary death, made royal cruelty inevitable as a deterrent.[55]

These same observers also hardly overlooked the unpleasant aspects of the shah's character and behavior. Anthony Sherley was not the only one to point to "awfull terror" as an element in ʻAbbās's governing style. Indeed, examples of grotesque violence abound in the European accounts. Della Valle mentions evisceration, the extraction of livers, blinding, the cutting of hands, feet, and genitalia, and people being thrown to the dogs.[56] An Augustinian missionary luridly claims that the shah had 1,400 women in his harem, and that, when he took Tabriz in 1603, he reserved 362 virgins from the local population for himself, all of whom he deflowered in a span of four months.[57] There are many more tales like this, some involving cheating bakers flung into their own ovens and butchers suspended from their meat hooks for tampering with scales and weights.[58] Emblematic of ʻAbbās's cruelty in Christian circles was the story of the Georgian Queen Ketevan, who, held hostage by

[52] See Rubiés, "Political Rationality," 368.

[53] For the killing of Mohammad Bāqer Mirzā, see Eskandar Beg Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā-ye ʻAbbāsi*, 881, 883, trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 1096, 1099; Roe, *Embassy*, 113; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, 52; and Zakaria of K'anak'er, *Chronicle*, 54–55. The best modern narration is found in Nahavandi and Bomati, *Shah Abbas*, 235–41. For the blinding of Khodābanda Mirzā, see Dunlop, *Bronnen*, 219, 224, Visnich, Isfahan to Heren XVII, 18 Nov. 1627; and Visnich, Isfahan to Batavia, 13 Feb. 1628.

[54] Dunlop, *Bronnen*, 732; Smidt, "Reisverhaal."

[55] Pinçon, "Relation," 160; Gouvea, *Relaçam*, 44–5; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, 84.

[56] Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, 50.

[57] Alonso, "Due lettere riguardanti," 160, letter P. Diego di Sant'Anna, 7 Dec. 1607.

[58] Stodart, *Journal*, 51; Olearius, *Vermehrte Newe Beschreibung*, 648.

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the shah, was tortured to death in 1624, ostensibly for refusing to renounce her Christian faith but, in reality, in vengeful response to the rebelliousness of her son, King Teymuraz of Kartli.[59]

Some observers experienced first-hand how clemency might turn to terror in an instant, reporting on it in almost cinematic fashion. Abel Pinçon, a French adventurer who traveled in the company of Sherley, witnessed how 'Abbās personally killed some of his own soldiers at the mission's welcoming ceremony for not behaving properly. George Manwaring, a fellow participant in the Sherley mission, also tells the story of the shah punishing someone accused of sexual harassment, having the man castrated, his lips, nose, and ears sliced off, and finally all his teeth broken with a flint.[60] Such scenes were common, Pinçon claimed. 'Abbās would cut off his subjects' heads "for the lightest offence, have them stoned, quartered, flayed alive, given alive to the dogs or the tigers, or to the forty man-eaters that he always has by him."[61] This last point refers to a documented form of ritualistic cannibalism, a practice in place since the reign of Shah Esmā'il, who employed a terrifying squad of men known as "live eaters," *zendeh-khurān*. Acting at the shah's command, they would tear the objects of his wrath apart, beginning with noses and ears, devouring the victims while they were still alive, organ by organ.[62]

European visitors recorded various other instances of performative royal violence. One is Georg Tectander of Saxony, who initially served as secretary to the embassy sent to Iran by Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary, in 1603, and eventually, following the death of the head of the mission, István Kakas of Zalánkemény, as the head of the delegation. Tectander relates how, during the mission's official audience in Tabriz, a Turkish prisoner in chains was brought in and made to kneel before the shah. 'Abbās was handed two swords. He seized one, got up, and beheaded the poor fellow with one single stroke. Tectander, realizing the letters he carried possibly contained compromising information about the peace the Austrians had agreed with the Ottomans, feared he might be next. Instead, the shah resumed his seat, smiled, and told Tectander that this was how the Christians (Europeans) should treat the Ottomans.[63]

The Persian-language accounts

The Persian-language sources also do not shrink from mentioning violence. Their focus is just different from that of the European observers, and they are more reticent of certain aspects of this violence. The chroniclers rarely mention executions resulting from a shah exploding in anger and determined to set an example during public gatherings, nor do they refer to 'Abbās's sexual escapades. They do, however, fully inform us about the ruthless elimination of enemies – rivals and competitors, domestic and external – reminding their readers that the shah kicked off his reign by blinding two of his brothers, Tahmāsb Mirzā and Abu Tāleb Mirzā, and killing those who had rebelled against his father, Mohammad Khodābandeh (*r.* 1578–87).[64] The chroniclers also report on the mayhem accompanying

[59] Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, 50–1; Gulbenkian, "Relation véritable."

[60] Pinçon, "Relation," 159–60; Manwaring, "True Discourse," 213–14. Manwaring adds that a bystander who had done nothing to prevent the sexual advances had three of his fingers cut. Pinçon, who claims that the shah performed these acts personally, omits both this part and the reference to castration.

[61] Pinçon, "Relation," 160.

[62] Jonābādi, *Rowzat al-Safaviyeh*, 241, 724; [Chick], *Chronicle*, 159; Del Niño Jesús, *A Persia*, 125–6; and Bashir, "Shah Isma'il and the Qizilbash," 248–50. Del Niño Jesús claims that the man-eaters and dogs were always present at royal audiences, ready to spring into action once the shah issued a death sentence, as well as a tiger used for the same purpose.

[63] Tectander, *Iter Persicum*, 90–1. Shah Tahmāsb, too, is said to have killed people with his own hands in order to instill fear among his subjects. See Tenreiro, *Itinerario*, 117.

[64] Don Juan of Persia, *Don Juan of Persia*, 210–11.

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the fall and execution of ʻAbbās's erstwhile tutor and kingmaker, Morshed-qoli Khān, albeit without dwelling on the number of casualties.

In keeping with their focus on armed conflict, the Persian chroniclers are especially prolific in their coverage of the systemic and structural violence that comes with war. The region's Sunnis and Christians bore the brunt of this. When his army descended on rebellious Semnan in 1599–1600, ʻAbbās is said to have fed the noses and ears of the town's Sunni *ʻolamā* to the people; and upon seizing Abivard four years later, he allowed the Qezelbāsh to put many of its Sunni inhabitants to the sword and take the rest into slavery.[65] In 1610, ʻAbbās mounted a punitive expedition against the Kurdish Mokri tribe on account of their perceived disloyalty. The men were slaughtered while the women and children were taken away in captivity.[66] After seizing Baghdad from the Ottomans in early 1624, the shah organized a mass killing among the city's Sunni population, had their children and women carried off into slavery, and destroyed many buildings and sites.[67]

The people of the Caucasus had their share of suffering, as is reflected in the violence inflicted on the region's mostly Christian population during ʻAbbās's reign. The devastation resulting from his campaign against Ganja in 1603 was such that it prompted the 17th-century Armenian chronicler Arakʻel of Tabriz to call ʻAbbās a "snake from the underworld."[68] The expedition culminated in 1604–5 in the wholesale deportation of thousands of Armenians from the southern Caucasus to Isfahan, where they were accommodated in the newly built suburb of New Jolfa. Typically described in modern scholarship as a brilliant aspect of ʻAbbās's visionary policies, this forced relocation was also a moment of horror and misery for the people in question, who were brutally removed from their homeland at the cost of thousands of lives.[69]

The Georgians fared little better. In Georgia, Hirotake Maeda submits, "'Abbās is remembered as the most notorious 'foreign' emperor, a tyrant who brutally massacred thousands of Georgians and enslaved even larger numbers for deportation to Iran."[70] This series of events is on full, even proud, display in the indigenous sources. Eskandar Beg Monshi speaks of more than 100,000 people killed and over 30,000 women and boys taken captive and enslaved during the punitive campaign the shah undertook against the Georgians in 1616.[71] A missionary eyewitness reporting from Gori in 1629 notes the bleakness of it all. He calls the previous decade one of utter misery for the region, with no house left standing and most churches destroyed.[72]

Nor were the peripheral Sunnis and Christians of the Caucasus the only victims of ʻAbbās's violence. Other personalities, regions, and religions suffered as well. In 1590, two of his rivals and competitors, Bektāsh Khān and Yaʻqub Khān, were finished off in the most gruesome manner, the latter roasted alive while the shah's retainers partied one level up in the same building.[73] Four years later, the shah turned against the Noqtavis, a gnostic movement of 14th-century origin, killing many, including their charismatic leader, Darvish Khosrow, who was put backwards on a donkey and paraded around the Qazvin bazaar amidst jeering, rock-throwing crowds, to be executed the following day by having his throat tied

[65] Falsafī, *Zendegānī-ye Shāh ʻAbbās*, 896.

[66] Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā*, 811–15, trans. *History of Shah ʻAbbas*, 1015–19. Pārsādust, *Shāh ʻAbbās-e avval*, 263–4, calls the unprovoked massacre of the Mokri one of the most barbaric acts in (Iranian) history.

[67] Niewöhner-Eberhart, "Machtpolitische Aspekte," 121.

[68] Arakʻel of Tabriz, *History of Arakʻel of Tabriz*, 26.

[69] Ibid., 27, 29, 36ff., 50ff.; Herzig, "Deportation of the Armenians."

[70] Maeda, "Against All Odds," 131.

[71] *Qur'an*, 9:5, trans. Droge, 113; Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā*, 898–901, trans. *History of Shah ʻAbbas*, 1114–16; Ḥusaynī Khalīfah, *Versified History*, 550–1; Bushev, *Istoriia posol'stvo*, 132.

[72] Alonso, "Documentacion inedita," 138–9, letter from Gori, 28 March 1629.

[73] Matthee, "Loyalty, Betrayal and Retribution."

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"to the saddle of a camel and dragged around the city."[74] The conquest of Gilan later that same year entailed the massacre of the inhabitants of the town of Lashta Nesha.[75]

How do the chroniclers account for such extreme violence? In truth, they employ the term *qatl-e 'āmm* (massacre) rather casually and nonchalantly for the mass killings they describe.[76] In the case of the wars against Sunni "heretics" and Christian targets, the violence is on full, even proud, display in their accounts. Eskandar Beg Monshi, for instance, offers vivid descriptions of 'Abbās's campaigns against the Kurds, Noqtavis, and Georgians, presenting him as an enthusiastic *ghāzi*, a warrior for the faith, fired up in a fury against non-believers, through reference to the Qur'anic injunction to "kill the infidels wherever you find them" (*aqtalu al-mushrikin haythu wajadtumuhum*).[77] Hoseyni Khalifeh, too, frequently refers to 'Abbas as a *ghāzi*.[78]

In other instances, there is much embellishment, obfuscation, and omission. Eskandar Beg Monshi and Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani present 'Abbās's march toward Baghdad in 1623 as primarily motivated by an ardent desire to visit Iraq's Shi'i shrines. The former even lends the shah's recovery of the city a humanitarian twist, claiming that, in the aftermath, he saved the city's population from starvation.[79] Together with a third chronicler, Mirzā Beyg Jonābadi, they draw attention to the efforts made to restore Iraq's Shi'i shrines following the conquest.[80] All three omit to mention the fact that, like Esma'il before him, the shah had the tombs of Abu Hanifa, the revered founder of the Sunni Hanafi *madhhab*, and the famous Hanbali theologian 'Abd al-Qāder Ghilāni destroyed after removing all the gold and silver ornaments from their shrines. Nor do these chroniclers tell us that 'Abbās turned the city's Sunni madrasas into stables and, after separately registering the city's Sunni and Shi'i inhabitants, had many of the former killed, expelled from the city, or sold into slavery.[81]

Ultimately, the indigenous sources justify such brutality by presenting the shah as simultaneously possessing ineffable power and as the executor of pragmatic necessity. In the hands of the chroniclers, the shah is a pre-ordained, God-sent ruler with supernatural powers and privileges. He is as unaccountable as he is unpredictable.[82] But he also comes off as a warlord operating in a brutal and unforgiving environment in which only the fittest survive. People might reverentially kiss the doors of his palace and consider water he touched to be a cure against fever. Yet Shah 'Abbās, like his forebear Shah Esmā'il, remained first and foremost the chieftain of a warrior band, moved to act by a raw and ruthless will to power. This secular ambition involves clemency and magnanimity as required by circumstance, but it also includes a variety of darker urges, among them suspicion, jealousy, and resentment erupting as volcanic wrath, and justifies opportunistic, cruel behavior such as deceit and betrayal, revenge and retribution in the form of severe punishment, even brutal murder – all passions that are proffered as natural and integral to statecraft. Eskandar Beg Monshi turns royal violence and the fear it instills among subjects into an indispensable ingredient of good statecraft by listing despotic behavior and an inclination to deal swiftly and severely with wrongdoers explicitly as a divine mystery, *hekmat-e elāhi*, and thus one of the shah's

[74] Monshi, *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā*, 474, trans. *History of Shah 'Abbas*, 649; Afushteh'i-Natanzi, *Nboastqavāt al-āsār*, 523–4; Fazli Beg Khuzani, *Chronicle*, 144–5.

[75] Mar'ashi, *Tārikh-e Gilān*, 171; Monajjem Yazdi, *Tārikh-e 'Abbāsi*, 229.

[76] Monajjem Yazdi, *Tārikh-e 'Abbāsi*, 229; Ḥusaynī Khalīfah, *Versified History*, 550.

[77] *Qur'an*, 9:5, trans. Droge, 113; Monshi, *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā*, 898. For earlier references, see Trausch, "*Ghazā* and *Ghazā* Terminology."

[78] Ḥusaynī Khalīfah, *Versified History*, 2.

[79] Monshi, *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā*, 1004; trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 1226; Khuzani Isfahani, *Chronicle*, 866; Ḥusaynī Khalīfah, *Versified History*, 655–7.

[80] Monshi, *Tārikh-e 'ālam-ārā*, 1004; trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 1226; Khuzani Isfahani, *Chronicle*, 866; Jonābādi, *Rowzat al-Safaviyyeh*, 888.

[81] Nâ'îmâ, *Târih-i Nâ'îmâ*, 2:404–5, Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte*, 3: 23.

[82] Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 125.

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virtues, as well as necessary for the proper mobilization of military forces needed for the survival of the state.[83] Monshi thus presents ʻAbbās's blinding of his own son, Emām-qoli Mirzā, as an example of a king who puts the welfare of his people and interests of the state above his personal concerns, justifying the act by referring to the son's foolish, arrogant behavior.[84]

Proper statecraft was thus a matter of reward and retribution, with loyalty – or rather fealty and unquestioned fidelity – to the king as the linchpin. Loyalty was rewarded with royal munificence, such as in 1615–16, when ʻAbbās is said to have given away his entire income for the month of Ramadan.[85] Loyalty was paramount but also fragile, because it was instrumental. Disloyalty equaled treason and treason was punishable by death, exemplary, violent death, instilling deterrence through terror. In the chronicles, *tanbih* and *ʻebrat* are the terms used for punishment as a warning to other ambitious men, which is why the severed heads of the executed were typically paraded around on pikes.[86]

III. The man: interests and objectives

How do we reconcile all these contractionary elements? How do we make sense of a ruler who might engage in great acts of generosity but who was also wont to dispatch his enemies by cutting them in half or by consigning them to the flames? What was ʻAbbās all about, beyond being the hyperactive and impulsive person that we tend to associate with larger-than-life rulers (and modern neurological disorders)? How do we get to the man behind the monarch beyond concluding that he was a creature of his time, shaped by its norms and standards?

One way of doing so is by examining ʻAbbās's private interests and inclinations, to see how they related to public objectives and imperatives. ʻAbbās was what the French call a *roi amant*, an amorous king, as well as a *roi batisseur*, a king who leaves an architectural legacy. He was also a *roi chasseur*, a hunting king, as were nearly all premodern and early modern monarchs. Yet he appears to us above all as a *roi causeur*, a conversationalist king, a ruler who liked to engage with his fellow human beings, a people person, as the modern expression goes. With that gregariousness came curiosity, a willingness to sound out others, and a lack of dogmatism in matters of religion. All these traits are abundantly evidenced in the sources, as is the shah's aversion to decorum. ʻAbbās loved to sit and talk with ordinary people and Christian visitors from abroad. He famously entertained foreign diplomats, merchants, and missionaries, joking as he peppered them with questions about their countries and customs. He was not afraid to break the rules set by his own faith and tradition. Whereas Iranian kings traditionally were not to be seen ingesting food, ʻAbbās routinely attended the public banquets he organized.[87] He also openly consumed wine in considerable quantity.[88] His devotion to Twelver Shiʻism – as shown in his public display of piety, from endowing the ancestral Safavid shrine of Ardabil to his famous pilgrimage on foot to Mashhad in 1601 – was mostly performative.[89]

Tolerance or, rather, toleration, has become a byword for ʻAbbas's dealings with others as well, as seen most conspicuously in the protection he offered Iran's religious minorities

[83] Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā*, 1105, trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 525. Fear as an ingredient of power never disappeared. In an interview he gave in 2016, Donald Trump stated that "Real power is… fear." See Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, "Bob Woodward's new book reveals a 'nervous breakdown' of Trump's presidency," *Washington Post*, 4 September 2018.

[84] Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā*, 1065, trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 1288.

[85] Monshi, *Tārikh-e ʻālam-ārā*, 895, trans. *History of Shah Abbas*, 1111.

[86] Monajjem Yazdi, *Tārikh-e ʻAbbāsi*, 155, 176, 191–2, 245–6.

[87] Caiozzo, *Le roi glorieux*, 166.

[88] For this, see Matthee, *Angels Tapping*, 138–9.

[89] Melville, "Shah ʻAbbas and the Pilgrimage"; Mawer, "Shah ʻAbbas and the Pilgrimage."

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against members of the dominant faith. VOC official Wollebrand Geleynssen de Jongh, writing some fifteen years after ʻAbbās's passing, mentions the Christian presence in Isfahan, the three catholic churches in the capital, and the missionary posts, all of which ʻAbbās had tolerated. But the common people, the Dutchman adds, were not so fond of Christians. If it were not for Shah ʻAbbās's welcoming policy, none would have been able to enter the country without risking their lives, as happened before his reign, when a passing Christian might have been pelted with rocks.[90]

Not just Christians benefited from such royal protection. With respect to Iran's Zoroastrians, Geleynssen de Jongh's observations also appear apposite. The violence against the Zoroastrians of Kerman, including the looting of their fire temple, which is said to have followed the news of ʻAbbās's death, sounds like the resurgence of long-repressed popular sentiment about this minority community.[91]

Such toleration clearly did not have the connotation of modern tolerance; it was not a principled virtue or an ethical imperative. As seen, it certainly did not extend to Sunni Muslims. The shah's pro-Christian feelings, too, were contingent and conditional. Some skeptics among the resident missionaries doubted ʻAbbās's sincerity, arguing that his friendliness was all feigned, that he was "at heart a Mohammedan," a ruler who only cared about Christians inasmuch as he could rally them as allies against the Ottomans.[92] While we will never know what was in ʻAbbās's heart, his interest in Christianity – its stories, iconography, and paraphernalia – appears to have been genuine.[93] Yet this fascination was ultimately subordinated to political motives and objectives. The best evidence for this is the dramatic change in the shah's approach to the Christians of his realm after 1612, when he recovered Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Shirvan, lands he previously lost, by signing the Treaty of Istanbul with the Ottomans. Freed from the need to seek an anti-Ottoman alliance with Christian nations, ʻAbbās now began to focus on the Persian Gulf trade route. As his relations with the Portuguese, his main competitors in this area, soured, the position of Iran's Christians markedly deteriorated – except for the New Jolfans, who continued to serve his commercial and geopolitical needs.[94] ʻAbbās's secular approach to statecraft, exemplified by his habit of either ignoring his own clerics or putting them in their place, as well as the ease with which he flouted the Shiʻi rules of ritual purity by consorting with non-believers, similarly suggests that power was his ultimate goal and rationale.

How, then, do we characterize ʻAbbās, who clearly possessed both the skills enabling the absolutist ruler to attain and retain power – lies, fraudulence, and ruthlessness – and those required to unite and rule a country, involving administrative competence and diplomatic acumen?[95] If we follow the 16th-century Scottish scholar George Buchanan in his opinion that "A king rules over willing subjects; a tyrant over unwilling ones," we must conclude that Shah ʻAbbās was a king rather than a tyrant.[96] But if we follow an older distinction, between the despot and the tyrant, made by Aristotle, matters look different. The despot is the single ruler who governs with absolute power at his disposal but who does so under the law and in accord with his subjects, with results ranging from terror to benevolence. Under tyranny, by contrast, neither law nor consensus exists. The tyrant rules just to satisfy his

[90] DNA, Coll. Gel. De Jongh 28, "Corte verclaringe," fols. 6–7. Throwing rocks at Christians is also recorded at the turn of the 18th century. See de Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*, 434.

[91] Ghereghlou, "On the Margins," 63.

[92] [Chick], *Chronicle*, 164–5; Della Valle, *Delle conditioni*, 52–3. Gabriel de Chinon four decades later used the term "Machiavellian" for the shah's policies. See de Chinon, *Relations nouvelles*, 134.

[93] See Matthee, "Safavid Iran."

[94] Rubiés, "Political Rationality," 335–53. The report, written by the ambassador's secretary, Saulisante, appears in Rubiés, "Relacion de la Embaxada."

[95] Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 84–5.

[96] Ibid., 1.

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own private interests without any concern for his subjects.[97] Shāh ʿAbbās accordingly was clearly a despot, but not, or at least not consistently, a tyrant.

Final thoughts: water over fire

Shah ʿAbbās remains the pivotal ruler of the Safavid dynasty, on par with his regional peers, Akbar of Mughal India (*r.* 1556–1605) and Süleyman the Lawgiver (*r.* 1520–66), both of whom are also often called "great," although neither matches ʿAbbās's combination of charismatic authority, worldly success, and ordinariness.[98] ʿAbbās retains his status as the epitome of the dynasty, the ruler who, in the popular mind, unified Iran, established law and order, and provided stability and prosperity to his realm – all of which was lost under his weak, passive, and *fainéant* successors. This view, however, says little about the limitations of his rule, the challenges he left for his successors, and the ways in which his policies contributed to future instability. Similarly, ʿAbbās as the hero who revived Iran's grandeur while holding the imperialists at bay is little more than an anachronistic construct of modern Iranian nationalism. It might be more historically accurate to say that ʿAbbās was the ideal king according to the time-honored Middle Eastern adage that a ruler must be magnanimous as well as severe, strike fear in the hearts of his subjects if necessary and show clemency whenever appropriate; a sovereign who, in the immortal words of Ferdowsi, holds fire in one hand, water in the other (*beh yek dast ātesh, beh yek dast āb*).

Ātesh, violence, was unmistakably part of ʿAbbās's way of governing. Fear of violence, Pinçon insisted, is what drove his subjects to bow their heads to the earth as if viewing some divinity as soon as they saw him.[99] As Chardin put it, Iranians expected their rulers to be violent.[100] But *ātesh* could never be the prevailing, let alone the sole, element of effective statecraft. The modern world has shown us that violence, or at least the threat of violence, instead of diminishing the popularity of the authoritarian, may enhance it. Yet "awful terror," to use Sherley's term, begets awe and terror, not love. Awe may be part of the mystique and charisma of the despot, but it can never produce the affection that makes his rule secure and lasting.

What ingratiated ʿAbbās to his own people, what, in Sherley's words, made him "exceedingly beloved and honoured by his subjects," is that he lived up to the expectations of the age-old Middle Eastern cycle of justice, which includes the idea of the state as a family and the shah as its father, a shepherd protecting his flock. As de Gouvea put it, ʿAbbās was as beloved by the "little" people as he was feared by the grandees in his orbit.[101] He thus managed to combine what Machiavelli thought so difficult to achieve for a ruler, to be loved and feared at once, without being forced to choose between the two.[102] By all accounts, ʿAbbās did work for his subjects, including the non-Muslims among them. All of it may have been more pragmatic than principled in motivation, but it did have real benefits for the people involved, contributing to society's overall security and prosperity.

Like the Castilian ruler Pedro I (r. 1350–69), variously called cruel or just, and several formidable early modern Russian rulers, Shah ʿAbbās was at once "great" and "terrible."[103]

[97] Turchetti, "Despotism and Tyranny," 160, 162.

[98] For the place of Akbar in Mughal historiography, see Sood, "Political Sociology," 1290. For Süleyman's shifting reputation among Ottoman historiographers, see Fleischer, "The Lawgiver as Messiah"; and Woodhead, "Perspectives on Süleyman."

[99] Pinçon, "Relation," 161.

[100] Chardin, *Voyages*, 5: 219.

[101] de Gouvea, *Relaçam*, 44.

[102] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 57, who famously said of rulers that "it is desirable to be both loved and feared; but it is difficult to achieve both and, and if one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved."

[103] Schrad, *Vodka Politics*, 39.

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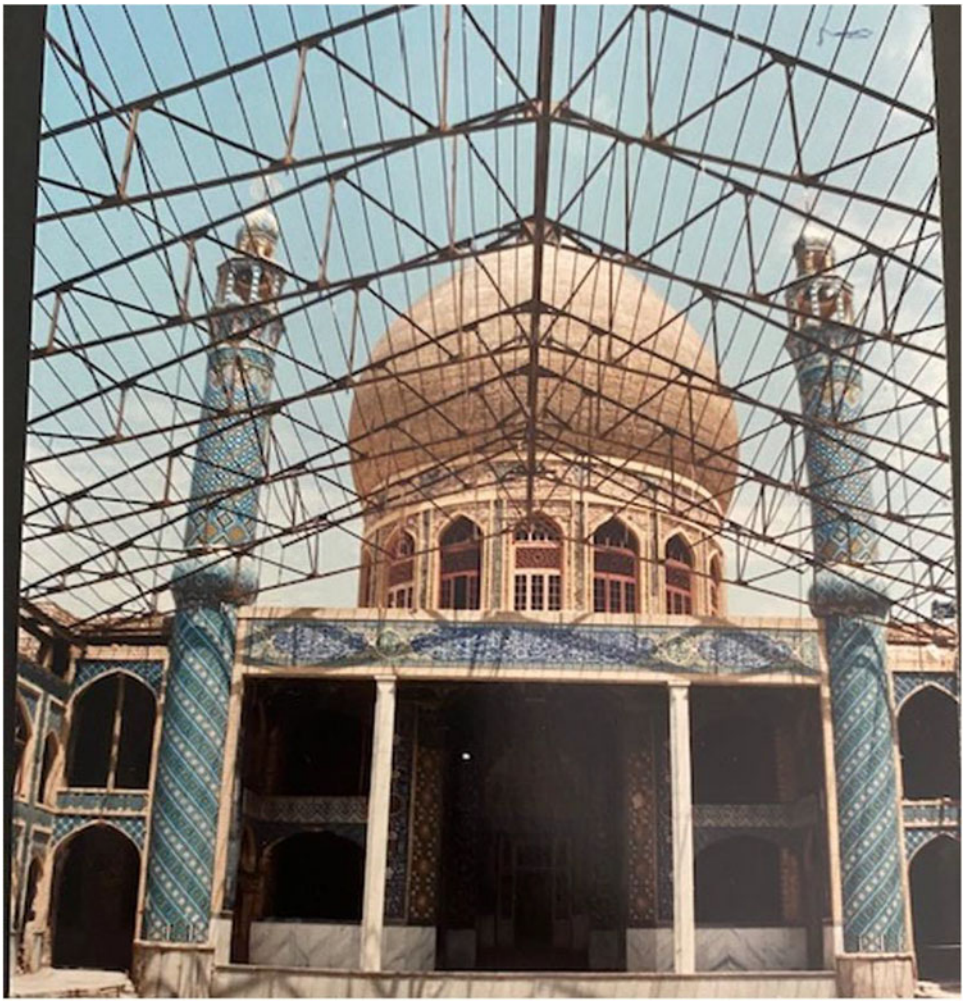

Figure 1. Emāmzādeh-ye Habib ebn-e Musā (Kāzem), Kashan ©Matthee 1995.

In his enduring magic, however, the terrible part is irrelevant, for it flows from that rare combination of a sovereign who holds an unruly realm together without losing the connection to his people; a monarch who leads his troops into war but also organizes public spectacles illuminated by fireworks; a stern and, at times, distant father as well as gregarious friend of homespun manner; hugely competent as well as amiable. How could a ruler, "of nature courteous, and affable, easy to be seen and spoken withal," a king accessible and convivial, who moves among his own people in plain attire, not be popular? Even in death 'Abbās remains a man of the people, averse to ostentation. We must bow our heads to see Napoleon's tomb when we enter the Dôme des Invalides, the center of a grand complex of buildings situated in the heart of Paris. To visit Shah 'Abbās's grave, by contrast, you must go to the provincial city of Kashan, where you will find his simple tomb in an unprepossessing shrine tucked away along a side street (Figures. 1 and 2).[104]

In the end, of course, it does not really matter what we academics think or say. The record of all rulers of 'Abbās's stature tends to gain in luster with time. It is hard not to be dazzled

[104] The Emāmzādeh-ye Habib ebn-e Musā (Kāzem), the burial place of Habib, son of the seventh Imam.

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Figure 2. Tomb of Shah ʻAbbās, Kashan ©Matthee 1995.

by the splendor of past imperial courts, especially when their physical reminders are still around. Countless warlords, from Alexander the "Great" and Chengiss Khan to Nader Shah and Napoleon, over time have been mythologized, even canonized, with the unspeakable violence and human misery left in their wake airbrushed out, relegated to oblivion. Visitors to the *meydān* in Isfahan today want to remember a Shah ʻAbbās who entertained his guests with fireworks or personally played polo on this magnificent square, not be reminded of the hapless victims of his wrath being thrown to the dogs, their corpses left to rot for days on end. So just as there are no trigger warnings found at the many sites dedicated to Napoleon in Paris, from the Place Vendôme and the Invalides to the Arc de Triomphe, none are encountered upon entering Isfahan's Meydān-e Shāh. The enduring mystique attached to rulers of the caliber of Shah ʻAbbās and Napoleon is upheld by a populace hungry for past role models and little affected by the critical writings of pettifogging modern scholars. As a character in Lion Feuchtwanger *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, a novel about a 20th-century society inexorably sliding into tyranny, says: "The only thing that counts is the name, the fame. Who Caesar was, is not interesting; what lives is the myth of Caesar."[105]

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[105] Feuchtwanger, *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 64.

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Cite this article: Matthee, R. "Shah ʻAbbās I: The Myth, the Monarch, and the Man." *Iranian Studies* (2025): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.1