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The Safavids Between Pen and Sword

The rule of the Safavids (1501-1722) is often perceived as a kind of watershed period in the history of Iran, as the transitional link between medieval and modern Iran and the beginning of the modern history of Iran (Matthee, 2008). The empire created by the Safavids is seen as the forerunner of the nation-state of Iran as it is known today. Religion has been a significant factor in this perception: as soon as the first Safavid shah Isma'īl came to power, he proclaimed Twelver-Shi'i Islam as the official religion of his realm. Ever since, and more specifically since the revolution of 1979, Iran is seen as the very embodiment of Shi'i Muslim rule. The geographical contours of modern Iran began also to manifest themselves during the period of the Safavids. It is thus not without reason to take Safavid rule as a starting point for modern history of Iran.

However, by concentrating on the importance of Safavid rule for the emergence of Iran as a modern nation-state, the focus is removed from the commonalities the Safavids shared with their predecessors in the region. How are the Safavids to be placed in the Turco-Mongolian and Islamo-Persian patterns of power and culture found in the empires that ruled the Middle East and Central Asia before their arrival on the scene? In recent years, a number of scholars, in particular Maria Subtelny and Charles Melville, have pointed to various aspects of Turco-Mongolian continuity in Safavid times, and they have demonstrated the abundance of Chinggisid and post-Chinggisid institutions and practices adopted from the Safavids' predecessors, the Timurids and the Aq Qoyunlu, in the administration of the Safavid empire (Melville, 2006; Subtelny, 2011).

The Safavids' legitimacy (and with it their empire) was built on the traditions from their recent past, but with the power they gained they built an empire that was in some respects reminiscent of the great Persian empire of the Sasanians (third–seventh century) that existed before the Muslim Arab armies incorporated the lands of this empire into the Islamic caliphate. The Safavids united a large area, including present-day Iran, under a single political power for more than two centuries. Though the Mongol Ilkhans had in fact done the same in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century, reintroducing the term Iran for their dominions, it was only from Safavid dynastic rule onwards that Iran remained more or less

continuously in existence as a recognizable unit (Matthee, 2010: 241-245; for a map, see Roolvink, 1957: 26).

This paper deals with the Safavid rise to power and the subsequent consolidation and continuation of their power. It examines, on the basis of contemporary Persian historiography, aspects of Turco-Mongolian legacy, such as the role of a council that may be compared to the phenomenon of the nomadic warband (Gommans, 2018). It also offers a preliminary investigation into the applicability of Ibn Khaldun's views on the case of the Safavids. The fourteenth century historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun is one of the most well-known theoreticians on the nature of successful rulership. In his *Muqaddimah* he presents a model describing the cyclical pattern of the rise, decline and ultimate fall of nomadic rulers and empires (Ibn Khaldūn, 1967), which may contribute to a better understanding of the Safavids and their empire. After all, as emphasized by Charles Melville, the emergence of the Safavids can only be fully understood and explained through the historical context of nomadic conquest and post-nomadic empires in the area, even though the Safavids themselves were not nomadic conquerors (Melville, 1998: 473).

The Rise of the *Safaviyya Sufi* order

In 1501, the first Safavid king Isma'īl, not yet fifteen years old, proclaimed in the city of Tabriz, the former capital of the Mongol Ilkhans, that Twelver Shi'i Islam was to be the religion of his new empire. How did Isma'īl arrive at this proclamation and what did it entail? And what was the role of nomads in this remarkable feat?

Isma'īl's ancestor was Shaykh Safi al-Din (1252-1334), the founder of a Sufi order in the city of Ardabil, in Azerbaijan, a province in the north-west of present-day Iran. This Sufi order, named after him and known as the *Safaviyya*, was one of many mystic brotherhoods that emerged and flourished around 1300 in the Islamic world. In 1258, after more than five centuries of nominal rule over the eastern Islamic world, the Abbasid caliphate had fallen by the hands of a nomadic conqueror, Chinggis Qan's grandson Hülegü, as part of the Mongol invasions in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

The great attraction and popularity of Sufi orders in the thirteenth century are often explained as resulting from the uncertainties caused by the Mongol invasions that had shaken the Islamic world in its very foundations. Never before had the *dar al-islam* ('abode of Islam') suffered such a brutal incursion and when Baghdad and the caliphate fell to Hülegü in 1258, the *dar al-harb* ('abode of war') had arrived at the centre of Islamic civilisation. In many cities, Sufi brotherhoods such as the *Safaviyya* functioned as places of spiritual refuge and grew in size and importance, now that there was no longer a religious leader with universal claims in power in Baghdad.

Ardabil was a town on the crossroads of the east-west and north-south trade routes to and from Anatolia and the Caucasus. Safi al-Din was esteemed among the merchants of the town and when he died, they had a mausoleum built around his dwellings (Rizvi, 2010). In due course, Safi al-Din's mausoleum in Ardabil became a site of pilgrimage. Safi al-Din's followers continued to honour him and saw his descendants as their new spiritual leaders. Over the years, the alliance between the merchants and artisans of the town and the leaders and members of the Safaviyya Sufi order grew stronger: trade and religion went hand in hand. The order also gradually began to play a political role in Ardabil and in the region surrounding the city (Babayan, 2009: 3-5).

Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu

After the death of the emperor Timur (Tamerlane) in 1405 and the subsequent disintegration of the Timurid Empire, the area in which the Safaviyya was active became entangled in the rivalries of two new, competing dynasties, the Aq Qoyunlu and the Qara Qoyunlu. These dynasties were Turkmen confederations of the White Sheep (Aq Qoyunlu) and the Black Sheep (Qara Qoyunlu). They had formed part of the waves of migration of Turks from Central Asia southwards in the preceding centuries. From the tenth century onwards, Turks had formed semi-independent sultanates in the realm of the Abbasid Caliphate, and in the centuries to follow, new waves of migration continued to bring Turks into the Middle East and West Asia. Turks, and later Mongols, stood at the basis of sometimes huge dynastic empires in the Islamic world, combining a Turco-Mongolian military background and ethos with a Perso-Islamic administrative system. The Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu are to be seen in this context.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu dominated Armenia, Anatolia, Syria, western Iran and parts of Iraq, first under their overlords and predecessors, the Timurids in Herat, but later on as independent rulers (Woods, 1976). The undisputed leader of the Aq Qoyunlu was Uzun Hasan, who ruled from c. 1450 to his death in 1478. He brought an end to his rivals' rulership, the Qara Qoyunlu, and acquired their territories in western Iran, setting up his capital in Tabriz in 1469. Uzun Hasan was a powerful monarch who saw himself as a true *ghazi*, a warrior for Islam, especially Sunni Islam. Uzun Hasan's realm was home to numerous Sufi orders, many of whom harbored strong sympathies for the Shi'a. Uzun Hasan was on good terms with the leaders of the Sufi orders, including those with Shi'i inclinations. The marriage of Uzun Hasan's sister Khadija Begum in 1456 to the Safavid Sufi shaykh Junayd, the grandfather of Isma'il, indicates the status of the Safavid family and Safavid order in the area in the 1450s. The marriage was also a union between Uzun Hasan and Junayd against the Qara Qoyunlu ruler and rival Jahanshah (Khwandamir, 1994: 561).

The emergence of a *Sufi militia*

Between 1448 and his marriage in 1456, Junayd gathered around him many devout followers from amongst the Turkmen population of Anatolia, most of whom cherished beliefs that are often characterized as extremist Shi'i (Babayan, 2009: 3-5; Khwandamir, 1994: 561).¹ These Turkmen followers, who formed Junayd's personal army, are in the sources referred to as *Sufis*. Under their influence, the Safaviyya changed its colour, and more than a century after the death of their founder Safi al-Din, the originally Sunni Sufi order began to grow towards the Shi'a. Though much remains obscure about the exact nature of the beliefs of the Turkmen tribes who followed Junayd, it seems that they paired a strong veneration for 'Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad) and his family (*ahl al-bayt*) to a firm belief in the imminent arrival of the *mahdi*, the Shi'i Imam who would return as a saviour at the end of time. Contributing to their zeal was a strong affection for the Shi'i martyr Husayn, the second son of 'Ali and Fatima (daughter of the Prophet Muhammad), who was brutally slaughtered near Kerbela in Iraq in the year 680. Husayn and those who accompanied him became martyrs in the eyes of all Shi'is, who have commemorated this event – known as 'Ashura – ever since and who have for centuries called for vengeance (Haider, 2014: 66-81).

Junayd coupled his own mission with these feelings of revenge that were strongly felt by the Turkmen tribes. He promised to restore the world order in the name of the Shi'i Imam and to avenge the deaths of the martyrs of Kerbela. With these ideas, Junayd started his mission in Anatolia and soon became the charismatic leader of a now militant Sufi order with a Shi'i persuasion. His largely Turkmen following worshipped him and identified him with the *mahdi* himself. They even saw in him an incarnation of God, as the anti-Safavid historian Khunji confirms in an often-quoted remark: 'The fools of Rum, who are a crowd of error and a host of devilish imagination [...] openly called Shaykh Junayd *ilah* and his son *ibnu Allah*' (Mitchell, 2009: 21). However, this religious dimension was instrumental in the growing power of the Safavid dynasty, in line with Ibn

1 The period following the Mongol conquests of Western Asia is perceived as a time of instability and chaos in many regions of present-day Iran, Iraq, Syria and Anatolia. Alongside various Sufi orders, messianic movements also flourished, to the detriment of more formalized, institutional forms of religious authority. The messianic movements focused on the imminent appearance of a new messiah, the *mahdi*, a saviour who would restore order in the world. In these messianic movements, as well as in a growing number of Sufi orders, the veneration for 'Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, played a central role. Some movements worshipped 'Ali as a divine being, a practice that is labelled as 'extreme' from the viewpoint of 'mainstream' Islam, both in its Shi'i and Sunni forms. It is true that 'Ali has a central position in the Shi'a – after all, Shi'a stands for *Shi'at 'Ali*, the Party of 'Ali, but according to most Shi'is, 'Ali must not be seen as an incarnation of God. Those who hold such and similar beliefs have been labelled as *ghulat*, 'exaggerators' or 'extremists', by more moderate Shi'is and by Sunni opponents from the seventh and eighth century onwards. During the days of Junayd and Uzun Hasan, in the second half of the fifteenth century, elements of this extremist Shi'a thrived amongst certain groups in Anatolia, Syria and Western Iran.

Khaldun's observation: 'Dynasties of wide power and large royal authority have their origin in religion based either on prophethood or on truthful propaganda' (Ibn Khaldûn, 1967: 125-126).

Junayd died fighting during one of his campaigns in the Caucasus in 1460; according to the chronicle *Habib al-Siyar* he was captured and executed by the Shirvanshah, a local ruler from the Caucasus (Khwandamir, 1994: 561). His son Haydar, also a nephew of Uzun Hasan, continued Junayd's mission and further strengthened the ties with the Aq Qoyunlu by marrying Uzun Hasan's daughter Halima. Halima's mother had been a Christian princess from Trebizond. The death of Uzun Hasan in 1478 heralded the end of Aq Qoyunlu supremacy in the realm. Haydar now stood at the head of a large following of Turkmen warriors, members of various tribes who were prepared to fight for Haydar and who became known as Qizilbash ('redheads'). The military support of these Qizilbash would enable Haydar's son, Isma'il, to create the Safavid empire a few decades later. The chronicler Khwandamir describes Haydar in his *Habib al-Siyar* in the following manner:

Sultan-Haydar, the eldest of Sultan-Junayd's sons and the nephew of Amir Hasan Beg [Uzun Hasan], was worthy of both prayer carpet and throne. On his head Sultan-Haydar used to wear a scarlet red hat with twelve folds, and everyone who joined him as a disciple was given similar headgear. He always encouraged those who were engaged in holy war, and with those holy warriors and Sufis, who because of the red hat became known as *qizilbash* ("redhead"), which name is still applied today to the adherents to the family, he raised the banner of battle with the infidels. And through the strength of his arm and his sharp sword he exterminated tyranny and oppression and turned the surface of the earth red with the blood of polytheists (Khwandamir, 1994: 561).

This passage from Khwandamir's chronicle, composed between 1521-1524, shows that Haydar, like his father, was seen as someone who could claim worldly power, as a king ('the throne') alongside spiritual power, as a Sufi shaykh ('the prayer carpet'). The distribution of what became known as the *taj-i haydari*, the 'Haydari crown', symbolizes the creation of a group of disciples, all warriors for the faith. They were united and bound together by a higher purpose, and that purpose overruled to a certain extent, also visibly, their tribal allegiances, at least temporarily. This higher purpose is described here as the holy war: in the passage above, Haydar is first and foremost presented as a *ghazi*-leader.

In 1488, a year after his third son Isma'il was born, Haydar, like his father Junayd, fell on the battlefield fighting the Shirvanshah, who had also been his father's enemy. At this point in time, the Aq Qoyunlu family was entangled in a succession struggle. Among a growing number of the Aq Qoyunlu the Safavids were now seen as a threat – also because by now, they were blood relations who had no small claim to power. To prevent Haydar's sons from making a bid for power, the Aq Qoyunlu had them imprisoned in the region of Fars, in the

south-west of Iran. They were freed five years later, in 1492, by a supportive prince of the Aq Qoyunlu family, Rustam Aq Qoyunlu.

The three sons of Haydar, Sultan 'Ali, Ibrahim and Isma'il, went back to Ardabil, the headquarters of the Safaviyya Sufi order. There many Qizilbash began to gather around the Safavid family, to the dismay of Rustam Aq Qoyunlu, who now turned against them. After their eldest brother, Sultan 'Ali, was killed by this Rustam Aq Qoyunlu, the surviving brothers Ibrahim and Isma'il sought refuge in the shrine of their forefathers in Ardabil, but they were constantly pursued by the hostile Aq Qoyunlu (Morton, 1996: 35; Savory, 1980: 21). In 1493, the brothers had to leave Ardabil again. Their Qizilbash supporters brought them to the court of Kar Kiya Mirza 'Ali, the independent ruler of Lahijan in the Caspian province of Gilan (Aubin, 1988: 5). Kar Kiya was a member of a dynasty with a Zaydi-Shi'i background that had ruled Lahijan and the surrounding region for more than a century. Isma'il remained in Lahijan until 1499 and was tutored at the court of Kar Kiya Mirza 'Ali.

The small band of Qizilbash emirs who had brought the brothers into safety were devoted to the Safavid cause and served as protectors and advisers of the young brothers (Khwandamir, 1994: 567). They were known as the *ahl-i ikhtisas*, a small elite corps (said to be seven) that was to play an important role throughout Isma'il's subsequent rise to power and the establishment of the Safavid Empire (Khwandamir, 1994: 570; Savory, 1980: 22).

From *shaykh* to *shah*: Isma'il's rise to power and the role of the Qizilbash

In the winter of 1499-1500 Isma'il and his followers planned to return to Ardabil. The Safavids' enemy Rustam Aq Qoyunlu had passed away, and the circumstances seemed favourable. Moreover, Isma'il had received notice of the death of his brother Ibrahim, who had returned to Ardabil a few years earlier (Morton, 1996: 35-41). Isma'il was next in line to become the new shaykh of the order in Ardabil. But before that, he was to embark on a series of conquests, as foretold in a dream he had just before his departure from Lahijan (Morton, 1996: 36-39).

When Isma'il reached Ardabil in the spring of 1500, he was about thirteen years old. His Qizilbash advisers, the *ahl-i ikhtisas*, were probably the driving and scheming force behind his campaigns (Roemer, 1986: 335; Anooshahr, 2015). Their experience prevented rash and risky attacks that may have ruined the Safavid cause again: lessons had been learnt from the downfall of both Junayd and Haydar, Isma'il's father and grandfather, who had fallen fighting the Shirvanshah in 1460 and 1488. The Qizilbash emirs also took care of building an image of Isma'il as an invincible ruler, by pushing him to the foreground in actions with a potential symbolic value, such as the slaying of a bear in a cave (Anooshahr, 2015: 255). In chronicles dealing with the Safavids, notably in the ones from the early sixteenth century, such as the *Futuhat-i Shahi* and the *Habib al-Siyar*, these Qizilbash emirs,

coming from the Qaramanlu, Shamlu, Rumlu and other tribes, have a prominent place as part of the military aristocracy, also because marriage alliances firmly connected them to the Safavid family (Newman, 2006: 15; Szuppe, 1996: 79). Anooshahr refers to them as 'Haydari veterans', in reference to their experience and their close ties also to the father of Isma'il (Anooshahr, 2015).

Can these *ahl-i ikhtisas*, the loyal Qizilbash emirs who were ultimately instrumental in establishing the Safavid empire, be understood as a nomadic warband, that is 'a group of loyal nomadic warriors that follow their leader in the construction of an empire' (Gommans, 2018: 252) or as perhaps rather as a kind of *keshig* – 'a conscript-based elite made up of the personal followers and guardsmen of the war-leader' (Gommans, 2018: 269)? Either way, can we regard this group of emirs and the way they operated as connected to a larger Turco-Mongolian, nomadic phenomenon and hence, as part of the Turco-Mongolian legacy that played a role in the establishment of the Safavid Empire? This would be too simple a conclusion.

Firstly, though the Qizilbash emirs were Isma'il's elite of personal followers and guardsmen, he himself only later became their war-leader: it was through their efforts and support that he himself could become a war-leader. And secondly, while the Qizilbash emirs had a nomadic Turkmen background, Isma'il could boast multiple identities, including a Aq Qoyunlu Turkmen one. And Isma'il's rise to power is specifically and firmly connected with these multiple identities, in combination with a strong apocalyptic message, as expressed in his Turkic poetry (Newman, 2006: 13-15; Gallagher, 2018: 361-397):

My name is Shah Isma'il. I am God's mystery. I am the leader of all these ghazis.

My mother is Fatima, my father is 'Ali, and I am the Pir of the Twelve Imams. I have recovered my father's blood from Yazid. Be sure that I am of Haydarian essence.

I am the living Khizr and Jesus, son of Mary. I am the Alexander of [my] contemporaries.

The names mentioned here leave no doubt about the background of Isma'il and his credibility as the (symbolic) leader of all warriors for the faith (*ghazis*): he is the direct descendant of 'Ali and hence the returned Imam of the Shi'a, and the one who has taken revenge on Yazid, the hated Umayyad caliph who was responsible for the tragedy at Kerbala in 680. 'Haydar' both refers to the name of his father and to 'Ali, who is often named Haydar, meaning 'lion'. Isma'il also identifies himself with the prophets Khizr and Jesus, who both can be connected to restoring life; while Jesus in connection to Mary refers to the royal Christian roots of Isma'il's mother. Alexander the Great symbolizes military prowess; and in the Persian tradition he is considered to be the son of a Persian king, who also has a prophetic dimension. Ismail additionally made use of the pre-Islamic Persian royal tradition:

I am Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, and Zohak [Zahhak]. I am Zal's son [Rustam] and Alexander. (Newman, 2006: 13)

These names are all references to pre-Islamic kings and heroes of Iran, whose stories are immortalized in the Book of Kings or *Shahnama*, an epic poem of fifty thousand verses composed by the poet Firdausi and completed in the year 1010 in Khorasan. In particular for Turco-Mongolian rulers, keen on association with the ancient Iranian kingship tradition, the *Shahnama* served as a symbol of power and a means of propaganda. The Mongol Ilkhans and the Timurids commissioned precious illustrated manuscripts of this epic, which in turn enhanced its symbolic value in the following centuries (Brend – Melville, 2010: 12–14). When Isma'il became king, he too commissioned the production of a royal *Shahnama* manuscript for his son Tahmasp. The manuscript took ten years to complete (1525–1535) and was unparalleled in richness. Though now dispersed, it is celebrated as one of the most famous *Shahnama* manuscript copies, known as the *Shahnama-yi Shah Tahmasp* (Welch, 1972).

Isma'il's apocalyptic propaganda, which echoes in his poetry, resulted in the recruitment of thousands of followers (called 'Sufis') on the road from Lahijan to Ardabil (Rumlu, 1934: 18). Strengthened by these troops, one of the first victories of Isma'il in December 1500 was the defeat of the Shirvanshah, whose ancestors had killed his father and grandfather. In true Turco-Mongol fashion the skulls of the fallen supporters of the Shirvanshah were piled up in pyramids. This was not only revenge for the two former Safavid *shaykhs* but also a symbolic act of revenge for the martyr of Shi'i Islam, Husayn, as was explicitly pointed out by storytellers and chroniclers alike (Mitchell, 2009: 23). The booty acquired through this and other expeditions resulted in growing financial means for Isma'il, who is said to have selflessly distributed all booty amongst his soldiers (Anooshahr, 2015: 260).

Isma'il crowned in Tabriz

When the last remnants of Aq Qoyunlu power were crushed in 1501, Isma'il marched to Tabriz to be crowned. Hasan Rumlu's *Ahsan al-Tawarikh* (completed in 1578) reports that he was 'received by the Sayyids and the chief men' and that he 'commanded that the names of the twelve Imams should be read in the *khuṭba* (Friday prayer)' (Rumlu, 1934: 26). Emphasizing the rejection of Sunni Islam in favour of Shi'i Islam, Rumlu also writes that 'it was commanded that Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Usman, should be cursed in the bazars, on pain of death to him who refused' (Rumlu, 1934: 26–27; Mitchell, 2009: 24, 47). Mention of such a forceful imposition of the Twelver Shi'a appears to be absent from one of the earliest chronicles on the Safavids, the *Futuhāt-i Shahi*, which was composed between 1519–1531 (Anooshahr, 2015: 260; Quinn, 2000, 15–18). However, in the *Habib al-Siyar*, composed roughly around the same time as the *Futuhāt-i Shahi* (between 1521–1524), we find references to violence against those who do not follow the

new religious practices (Khwandamir, 1994: 576; compare Bockholt, 2020 on the variant versions):

And since the shah's entire concern was the propagation of the Imami sect [Twelver Shi'ism] and strengthening of the Prophet's law, at the beginning of his coronation a regal decree was issued that all preachers in the realm of Azerbaijan pronounce the *khutba* [sermon] in the name of the Twelve Imams, that the leaders of prayer in all places abrogate all despicable, heretical practices and that the muezzins of all mosques and places of worship would add to the cry for prayer the words, 'And I profess that Ali is the Friend of God' (Khwandamir, 1994: 576).

The chronicler Rumlu, writing decades later in 1578, notes that 'the Ja'fari faith and of the rules of the Twelver Imams' [i.e. Twelver Shi'ism] was not known by men then, due to a lack of books on the matter. The lack of knowledge was repaired, so he continues, over the years by steadfast religious teaching (Rumlu, 1934: 27). Rumlu's account, specifically his allusions to the poor knowledge on Shi'ism, may be seen as a reflection of later interpretations and ideas on the imposition and spread of Twelver-Shi'ism during the early Safavids that were by the time of Rumlu no longer acceptable. Equally unacceptable were by this time the main propagators of Twelver-Shi'ism: the Qizilbash, as we shall see further on.

Apparently, what Rumlu defines as 'lack of knowledge' was not such an issue at the initial stages of Safavid rule. Isma'il's claims to both religious and royal authority were strongly supported by his powerful Qizilbash disciples. Isma'il's step to announce Twelver Shi'ism as the religion of his territory is fully in line with the developments of the Safaviyya Sufi order in the preceding decades (Savory, 1998: 628-636). His religious authority rested on his being the spiritual leader of the Safaviyya Sufi order (*murshid-i kamil*), and on the Safavid claim of being descendants of the seventh Shi'i Imam, Musa al-Kazim. His Aq Qoyunlu ancestry and his upbringing at the court in Lahijan were important factors in Isma'il's claim to royalty, as expressed also in his poetry.

Two important elements of Ibn Khaldun's model of the rise and fall of dynasties, briefly referred to above, were now met with: lineage (*nasab*) and religious devotion, which form important ingredients to achieve '*asabiyya*, or group cohesion: a major condition for the creation and maintenance of an empire and an important keyword in the work of Ibn Khaldun. Religious devotion fuelled the military prowess of the Qizilbash. Isma'il's authority was uncontested and the road to victory lay open. In the ensuing years, from 1501 until 1514, Isma'il conquered large territories in Anatolia, Syria, Iraq and the Caucasus, and eastwards in Khorasan and Transoxiana. He fought successfully against the weakened Timurids and the emerging Uzbeks as well as against the remainder of the Aq Qoyunlu.

The rule over the territories he acquired was organized through his old network of Qizilbash commanders. Those who had supported and protected him since he had to flee to Lahijan – amongst whom the *ahl-i ikhtisas* – became his main agents. They were given positions as provincial governors and as generals of

the army, and formed the military aristocracy of the Safavid empire. The sons of Ismaʿil were sent to the provinces to be tutored by the Qizilbash governors. The Qizilbash held a firm grip on political matters via this practice, as well as through the marriages between the Safavid family and the Qizilbash.

Gradually, however, the elevated position of the Qizilbash came to be seen by the shah as problematic, also because the bureaucracy and the religious establishment of the growing Safavid realm was mostly the responsibility of another group, the Tajiks or Persians/Iranians. They had a non-Turkic, urban and sedentary background. Certain families had a long history of being administrators for the dynasties preceding the Safavids, amongst whom the Aq Qoyunlu and the Timurids (Mitchell, 2009: 48). They were the ‘men of the pen’, and as such contrasted with the ‘men of the sword’, the non-Persian, often originally nomadic Turks, the Qizilbash without whose military prowess the Safavids could not have obtained power. However, in order to consolidate and organise rule of the conquered territories, Ismaʿil was in dire need of experienced ‘men of the pen’ (Savory, 1986: 359).

Managing the complex interplay between Turk and Tajik (*turk-u tajik*) became a constant worry for Ismaʿil and his successors; both were indispensable pillars of the empire and both represented substantial groups in the territories under Safavid rule. For the Qizilbash emirs, the ‘men of the sword’, tribal affiliation continued to be important and the members of the different tribes and clans often were each other’s enemies (Minorsky, 1943: 16-17). The most prominent tribes were the Shamlu, Ustajlu, Takallu, Rumlu and Zuʿl-Qadar, all of whom had originally migrated from Syria and Anatolia (Matthee, 2008). The leaders of these tribes, and also of the Afshar, Mawsilu and Qaramanlu, obtained governorships after successful conquests. One of many examples is the Qizilbash officer ‘Ali Beg Rumlu, known as Div Sultan, who was appointed governor of Balkh after several expeditions in Khorasan. One of these was the Battle of Marv in 1510, in which Muhammad Shibani Khan Uzbek was defeated (Savory, 1995: 431). Much later, he became the influential guardian of Ismaʿil’s youthful successor Tahmasp.

Imperial organisation

Initially, the Qizilbash emirs, the ‘men of the sword’, held supreme power, in line with Ibn Khaldun’s observations on the supremacy of the sword in the beginning of a dynasty (Ibn Khaldûn, 1967: 213). They were appointed in high offices, such as the post of *amir al-ʿumara*, the commander of the military forces, and later in the new post *vakil-i nafs-i nafs-i humayun*, the vicegerent of the shah and head of the *divan-i aʿla*, the royal court and the central government (Lambton, 1965: 332-336). The *vakil* represented Ismaʿil both in his spiritual capacity (*murshid-i kamil*) as well as in his royal capacity (*padshah*).

The creation of the office of the *vakil* reflects the efforts of Ismaʿil to incorporate elements of the organisation of the Safavid Sufi order into the administration

of his nascent empire (Savory, 1986: 357). In the Sufi organisation (which continued to exist), a disciple (*murid*) with the title *khalifat al-khulafa* was the direct representative of the *murshid-i kamil* (Savory, 1965: 497-498). The newly created office of *vakil* had that same function. The *vakil* superseded both the *amir al-umara*, a Qizilbash, and the *vazir*, minister and head of the bureaucracy: at that time a Tajik office.

Another important office that had existed in a different form, also under the Timurids and Aq Qoyunlu, was that of the *sadr*, the head of the religious institution. This post was always occupied by Tajiks, many of whom were *sayyids*, descendants of the Prophet (Mitchell, 2009: 106-108). The main task of the *sadr* was to take care of doctrinal uniformity in the Safavid realm, even though the person in this office often had no demonstrable Twelver Shi'i links: the first *sadr* was Isma'il's religious teacher from Lahijan and probably a Zaydi Shi'i (Savory, 1986: 358; Newman, 2006: 1). The *sadr* was frequently also involved in military affairs, in the same way as the *amir al-umara* was involved in state affairs. It appears that in many cases there was no question of a clear demarcation of the military and the civil in the imperial offices (Savory, 1986: 358; Savory, 1960: 93). It is also clear that from an early stage onwards, Isma'il struggled with the dynamics of balancing Turk and Tajik power at the court.

An office that already existed under Isma'il, but that became increasingly important later in the Safavid period, was the office of *qurchibashi*, the commander of the *qurchis*, the royal bodyguard or royal household troops (Haneda, 1984: 41-64; Savory, 1986: 361). The term *qurchi* dates back from the Mongol period: the *keshig* or imperial guard of Chinggis Qan included a thousand *qurchis*. The term stood for archer, but has a much wider connotation in Safavid times (Haneda, 1984: 43; Haneda, 1987: 145). *Qurchis* were recruited from amongst the Qizilbash tribes. They were organised in groups of hundred men, in principle from the same tribe; each of these groups was led by a *yuzbashi* (centurion).

Masashi Haneda stresses the importance of the *qurchis* as the only personal corps of the Safavid shahs (Haneda, 1986: 503-506). Iskandar Beg Munshi, the chronicler of the later king Shah 'Abbas, highly praises the *qurchis* as an elite corps in his *Tarikh-i Alamara-yi 'Abbasi*: 'The valor and bravery of the *qurcis* was so renowned that one hundred men of the household troops were a match for a thousand men drawn from other categories of soldiers' (Munshi, 1978: 228). *Qurchis* are dealt with in Munshi's chapter on the 'Men of the Sword' during Shah Tahmasp's time. This chapter is entitled: 'Emirs of note, both sultans and khans, who were serving either at court or in the provinces' (Munshi, 1978: 222). In this chapter the names of Qizilbash officers of the time of Shah Tahmasp are presented, arranged by tribe. The Qizilbash emirs could, as the title of the chapter indicates, obtain the rank of *khan* and *sultan*, and they could serve in the vicinity of the Shah, at the court, or in the provinces (*mamalik*) as governors or as tutors and guardians to the young Safavid princes who were appointed governors of provinces.

The chapter that follows, on the 'men of the pen', is entitled: 'Eminent Seyyeds, honored divines, viziers and men of the pen generally, and eloquent poets' (Munshi, 1978: 229). This chapter is much longer and also contains information on physicians, treasurers, calligraphers and accountants. Munshi himself was known by his function as 'secretary' (*munshi*), but his name was Iskandar Beg Turkman. This name indicates that his background was Turkmen, something he had in common with the chronicler Hasan Rumlu. Thus, the 'men of the pen' and 'men of the sword' categories did not necessarily run along 'ethnic' lines (Roemer, 1986: 345; Trausch, 2008, 13-15, 21-25).

The end of Safavid infallibility and the succession of Isma'il by his son Tahmasp

The Qizilbash emirs continued to play a prominent role in Isma'il's victories, which brought land, but no peace. The Uzbeks in the east and in particular the Ottomans in the west remained a constant threat for the Safavids. The Ottomans, staunch defenders of Sunni Islam, were keen to halt the influence of the Shi'i Qizilbash and their Safavid propaganda in Anatolia. Their army was much larger and more technologically advanced than the Safavid army, which consisted mostly of cavalry forces. This proved to be disastrous in 1514 during the Battle of Chaldiran in northwestern Azerbaijan, where the Ottoman sultan Salim (r. 1512-1520) crushed Isma'il's army and briefly took hold of the Safavid capital Tabriz. More importantly, this defeat dealt a severe blow to Isma'il's image as an invincible ruler of messianic proportions and he lost much of his credibility (McCaffrey, 1990: 656-658). Iskandar Beg Munshi, writing from the perspective of a century later, reframes this defeat for the Safavid dynasty as a blessing in disguise:

Without doubt, God, in His most excellent wisdom, had decreed that Shah Esmā'il should suffer a reverse at the battle of Čalderān, for had he been victorious in this battle too, there would have been a danger that the belief and faith of the unsophisticated *qezelbāš* in the authority of the shah would have reached such heights that their feet might have strayed from the straight path of religious faith and belief, and they might have fallen into serious error (Munshi, 1978: 71-72).

This quote demonstrates that Iskandar Beg Munshi stood not so favourable towards the Qizilbash, a reflection of the changed position of the Qizilbash during the time of his own patron, the later Safavid Shah 'Abbas (r. 1581-1629), the great-grandson of Isma'il. This process had started already in the time of Isma'il.

After Isma'il's defeat at the Battle of Chaldiran, his relationship with the Qizilbash deteriorated and Isma'il began to lean more and more on the Tajik constituency (Savory, 1986: 360), and less on the Qizilbash. A pragmatic explanation of this new policy may be that in the post-conquest period, in the interest

of matters of financial management and state-building, the Tajik element became increasingly prominent. However, in spite of shifting positions and continuous tensions, the Turk-Tajik alliance stood firm and remained the foundation of the Safavid Empire until the death of Isma'il in 1524.

Isma'il was succeeded by his first son Tahmasp, who was at the time ten years old and who would rule the Safavid Empire for more than fifty years (1524-1576). He had spent most of his childhood as a nominal governor of the province of Khorasan in the illustrious city of Herat, witnessing the power struggle of his Qizilbash tutor from the Mawsilu clan and his Tajik tutor from Herat. A few years before Isma'il died, Tahmasp was brought back to Tabriz and a new tutor was appointed, the above-mentioned Div Sultan from the Rumlu tribe. Div Sultan promoted himself to vicegerent of the young king and in effect ruled the empire. This was not condoned by the other Qizilbash emirs, and they rose against him; meanwhile, Uzbek attacks in Khorasan added to the chaos. Alliances between Qizilbash amirs were made and broken, and different factions continued to fight each other. It was not until 1533 that Tahmasp gained control (Mitchell, 2009b). In this period, but also in the years after, the Ottomans tried to make use of the strife within the Safavid house by incursions into Safavid territory. They were backed up by rebelling Qizilbash tribes who were dissatisfied with the Safavid shah.

Tahmasp therefore sought to curb the influence of the Qizilbash. Raiding expeditions in the Caucasus resulted in the acquisition of large groups of Christian slaves including women and children. They became servants of the royal household or the administration and converted to Islam. These slaves, mainly Georgians and Circassians, but also Armenians, became a third major group (next to the Qizilbash and Tajik administrators) in the Safavid household, known as *ghulams*, in full *ghulaman-i khassa-yi sharifa*, or royal household slaves. Unlike the Qizilbash, the *ghulams* were free from the burden of kinship ties and clan loyalty, which suited Tahmasp very well (Matthee, 2012: 29-30). Caucasian women became part of the royal harem, from where they at times exerted much influence on state affairs. An example is the Circassian-Safavid princess Pari Khan Khanum, daughter of Tahmasp, who acted as kingmaker for the two kings who succeeded Tahmasp, the ruthless Isma'il II (r. 1576-1578) and the nearly blind Sultan-Muhammad Khudabanda (r. 1578-1587) (Manz – Haneda, 2012: 816-819). Thus under Tahmasp more groups became involved in the Safavid enterprise. At court, Tahmasp now managed not only *Turk-u Tajik*, in other words, the Qizilbash 'men of the sword' and the Persian bureaucrats ('men of the pen'), but also the Caucasian *ghulams*, an emerging class of military slaves, who often also had administrative duties.

During Tahmasp's reign, Shi'i *'ulama* or clergymen, 'men of the pen', also gradually became more influential. Many clergymen came from Mazandaran near the Caspian Sea. Moreover, a number of Arab clergymen came to the Safavid empire (Mitchell, 2009: 107-108). First among them was 'Ali Karaki (1464-1533), a theologian from Baalbek brought to the Safavid court by Isma'il in 1510. Other

theologians from the Arab world followed his example. They came mainly from Jabal 'Amil in southern Lebanon, to serve the Safavid Empire, also because their homeland, now under Sunni Ottoman rule, did not provide them with the same opportunities. They were placed in high religious offices and propagated the tenets and practices of Twelver Shi'ism amongst the people, in line with the new direction the Safavids had taken (Newman, 1993: 66-112).

Tahmasp promoted the spread of formal Twelver Shi'ism and he himself is known to have gone through periods of repentance for his formerly luxurious lifestyle. Assumptions that Tahmasp as a consequence rejected the Qizilbash devotional practices are probably unfounded (Mitchell, 2009b). However, Tahmasp's decision to move the court from Tabriz to Qazvin (1557) can be seen in light of his efforts to further distance himself from the Safavid's Qizilbash connections in the north-west (Mitchell, 2009: 104). The reason often mentioned for moving to Qazvin is that Tabriz as a capital was too close to the Ottoman empire, but since the Ottomans and the Safavids had signed the Amasya peace treaty in 1555, for the time being the western frontiers were quiet.

The long reign of Tahmasp was a period of the flourishing of the arts, in particular the arts of the book. As part of his imperial ambitions, and in line with the Turco-Mongolian rulers preceding the Safavids, Tahmasp embraced Persian urban culture and many artists and writers who were formerly employed by the Timurids now found a place at the court of Tahmasp, but also at the smaller courts of his sons and relatives. The memoirs of Tahmasp demonstrate his love for both Persian and Turkish poetry (Horn, 1891; Newman, 2006: 34-35). Poets, painters, calligraphers, as well as historiographers benefited from Tahmasp's patronage, especially in the period before 1555.

Consolidation: Shah 'Abbas the Great and his successors

Though Tahmasp initiated the introduction of *ghulams* at the Safavid court, it was his grandson 'Abbas (r. 1588-1629) who institutionalized the *ghulam* system, by appointing *ghulams* rather than Qizilbash as governors and by creating a new standing army composed of *ghulams* (Maeda, 2012: 471-489). 'Abbas had become shah against all odds: in his youth he had barely escaped the killing spree of his uncle Isma'il II, who had killed many of his uncles and cousins. 'Abbas's father, Sultan-Muhammad Khudabanda was hampered by poor eyesight. He was a weak ruler, dominated by rivalling Qizilbash factions. Under pressure of Shamlu and Ustajlu Qizilbash, he transferred the crown to 'Abbas in 1588.

Murshid-quli Khan Ustajlu had managed to bring 'Abbas from Herat to Qazvin and to secure enough support to crown him. He was richly rewarded and became 'Abbas' *vakil*, and thus for a short time the most powerful official of the empire. However, it appears that 'Abbas only used Murshid-quli Khan Ustajlu to make an end to the state of chaos in the empire; as Kathryn Babayan puts it, he 'assassinated the very man who had utilized him as a pawn in pursuit of

personal power within the context of Safavi-Qizilbash tribal politics' (Babayan, 2002: 359). 'Abbas was supported in this by Allahvirdi Khan, a Georgian *ghulam* who afterwards quickly rose to power. 'Abbas appointed him as *qullar-aqasi*, or commander of the *ghulam* regiments, a new function that was to become increasingly important in the following years. In 1595-1596 he also became governor of the important province of Fars; this was the first time that a *ghulam* was on an equal footing with the Qizilbash emirs, who had previously been privileged with prestigious governorships and tutorships.

Allahvirdi Khan's rise to power inaugurated a new stage in Safavid administration (Savory, 1985: 891-892). Provinces such as Fars that were previously appanages (*mamalik*) of Qizilbash emirs now returned to the direct rule of the Shah and became part of the crown lands (*khassa*). This meant more income for the crown, since the financial affairs of the *mamalik* had been controlled by Qizilbash emirs, who spent the revenues on their Qizilbash soldiers, in service of the Safavid empire, but often in their own interests. With more crown lands, 'Abbas could finance his new army of *ghulams* while he effectively brought an end to the previously supreme power of the Qizilbash. In his *Persia in Crisis*, Rudi Matthee stresses that the Safavids never sought to destroy the Qizilbash and replace them with *ghulams*, but that they 'sought to balance old forces with new ones, all with the aim of enhancing central control' (Matthee, 2012: 39-40).

In the long run, these measures did the empire no good: the practice of sending young princes to Qizilbash governors ceased, and all the princes were raised in the harem, prey to the plotting and scheming of rivals of a different kind; moreover, in the harem the princes were not trained as warriors in the same way as they were under Qizilbash tutelage. Moreover, it appeared that in the end, an army based on *ghulam* soldiers could not compare to a Qizilbash army (Savory, 1982, 71-75). However, this was not yet an issue under 'Abbas.

Under his rule, the Safavid Empire reached its zenith and 'Abbas became known as Shah 'Abbas the Great. He was generally praised as a just and wise king, under whose rule trade with foreign powers flourished (Matthee, 2012b: 31-47). He was also a great patron of the arts, in particular architecture. In this respect, the ancient city of Isfahan stands out and is firmly connected to his name. Isfahan became the new capital in 1597-1598 and its importance as an imperial capital increased over the years, also under 'Abbas's successors. 'Abbas commissioned the erection of a large number of monumental buildings in Isfahan and gave orders for the layout of a new royal square (*Maydan-i naqsh-i jahan*). The building of the first congregational mosque, known as the *Masjid-i shah*, was begun in 1611, marking a new phase in the institutional development of Twelver Shi'ism in the Safavid Empire (Babaie, 2010: 157). He also relocated a large number of Armenian silk merchants from Julfa in Armenia, to a newly built quarter in Isfahan, known as New Julfa. However, as Haneda and Matthee emphasise, the capital of the Safavid empire 'really was where the ruler happened to be', and 'Abbas stayed in Isfahan for no more two months a year on average (Haneda – Matthee, 2006: 650-657; Melville, 1993: 195-224). This was also true for 'Abbas's successors Safi

(1629-1642) and 'Abbas II (1642-1666), but the last two Safavid shahs, Sulayman (1666-1694) and Sultan Husayn (1694-1722), hardly moved around and spent most of their time in Isfahan (compare Ibn Khaldûn, 1967: 141-142).

In the Safavid Empire under 'Abbas's reign a growing prominence of Muharram ceremonies, commemorating the unjust killing of Husayn in 680, can be witnessed from the reports of European travellers. There were lively Muharram ceremonies, especially in Isfahan, where the new square was well-suited for processions and plays (Calmard, 1996: 154-155). Another element of what Charles Melville described as 'his public policy, arising from a complex interplay of personal, dynastic, economic and political considerations' were 'Abbas's pilgrimages to the shrine of the Imam Riza, the eighth Imam of the Twelver Shi'a in Mashhad, which contributed to the development of Mashhad as a major pilgrimage city (Melville, 2009: 192). 'Abbas likewise respected his Safaviyya Sufi ancestry: he visited Ardabil and remained the *murshid-i kamil* of the Safavid Sufi order. However, he was merciless towards Sufis who dared to question his authority. 'Abbas, in sum, successfully managed state administration, diplomacy and trade, matters of religion and his public image as an approachable ruler (Matthee, 2012: 198-199).

Facing gradual decline, and a possible survival of the 'war council'

The Safavid Empire existed for almost a hundred years after the death of its greatest shah 'Abbas, though the period of conquest and territorial expansion had come to an end. 'Abbas had been so afraid of conspiracies by his own offspring and family that he had many of them blinded or murdered. Consequently, when he died in 1629, there was no son who was able to succeed him. Because of the policy introduced by 'Abbas to keep princes at the harem rather than sending them away for training, his grandson Safi proved ill-prepared to run an empire, although according to Matthee he could still be characterised as being 'of the old warrior type' (Matthee, 2008). Ascending the throne at the age of eighteen, he was supported by a number of able statesmen, who represented the various groups in the empire. In the end, Safi had most of these men murdered, just as he did with most of his family (Matthee, 2012: 36-39).

Safi's reign is marked by a loss of territory: the 1639 Safavid-Ottoman peace treaty of Zuhab (Qasr-i Shirin) made an end to all Safavid claims on Baghdad and the Shi'i shrine cities in Iraq (Matthee, 2012: 118-121). However, the treaty resulted in peace with the Ottomans, and the Safavid Empire during Safi's reign and that of his successor 'Abbas II (1642-1666) continued to flourish although less exuberantly than under 'Abbas. In spite of the fact that 'Abbas II is known for his religious tolerance, during his reign the influence of the clergy became more prominent, resulting in persecution and pressure on non-Muslims, so-called extremist Shi'is and certain Sufi groups (Matthee, 2012: 184-185). Already under 'Abbas II (1642-1666) economic conditions began to deteriorate and this trend

continued during the reign of the last two Safavid kings, Sulayman (1666-1694; until 1668 known as Safi II) and Sultan Husayn (1694-1722), in alignment with Ibn Khaldun's paradigm of decline by 'excessive sedentary culture' (Ibn Khaldūn, 1967: 286). In the words of Rudi Mathee:

In early Safavid times the court had been small and ambulant, reflecting the shah's status as the approachable head of a mobile military band engaged in perpetual campaigning, a leader who, if he was not exactly a *primus inter pares*, operated as a warlord who had to be responsible to the expectations of his men. By the late seventeenth century, a very different ruler presided over the Safavid state. Turned sedentary, the shah now seemed adrift amid an immobile, multi-layered and faction-ridden court run by eunuchs and women (Mathee, 2012: 198).

The sedentarization of the shahs, an important symptom of decline in Ibn Khaldun's imperial outlook, is just one aspect that can be connected to the fall of the Safavid Empire in the eighteenth century.

Some final notes, and a brief discussion of two late court manuals

The Safavid imperial project had started at the end of the fifteenth century with the campaigns of the zealous ruler Isma'il, who had a strong claim on religious and royal lineage and was, crucially, supported by an extremely mobile, spirited and ideology-driven war-band with strong nomadic roots (compare Ibn Khaldun, 1967: 126-127). The emerging empire was successfully managed by an often troubled combination of 'men of the sword', and an increasingly important administrative class, the 'men of the pen', who in many ways embody a continuation between the Safavids and their predecessors, the Timurids and the Aq Qoyunlu, both originally nomadic conquerors. Though framed in terms of dichotomy, such as 'Turk and Tajik', 'Qizilbash and Persian', 'Men of the sword and men of the pen', 'nomad versus sedentary', it appears that it would be rather an oversimplification to strictly classify the people who ran the machinery of the Safavid Empire into one of these categories; moreover, a new, 'mixed' category, that of the *ghulams*, quite soon entered the Safavid scene. The Twelver Shi'i clergy, partly 'imported' from the Arab world, gained increasing prominence and gradually became a fourth group, at the expense of the Qizilbash nobility, who held important positions in the Sufi religious organization, that formed previously the backbone of Safavid power.

The Turco-Mongolian legacy remained visible in the way the state administration was organized, in particular also in its terminology (Melville, 2006: 155-157). In the court manuals written at the end of the Safavid period, such as the *Tadhkirat al-Muluk*, we find that the strings of the empire were pulled 'of old' by an advisory council, known as *janqi* and referred to in translation and in secondary

sources as a 'royal council', 'secret royal council', 'supreme council of amirs' or 'war council'. The *janqi* was responsible for matters of war and for matters of succession (Musavi – Baba'i, 2011: 146-147). This council had seven members, though in some assemblies three or four more officials took part. Four of them were prominent emirs, the principal officials at the court and the 'pillars of the victorious state' (*arkan-i dawlat-i qahira*), coming from the ranks of the amirs residing at the court (*dawlatkhana*). These four were the *qurchi-bashi* (commander of the *qurchis* or royal guard), the *qullar-aqasi* (commander of the regiments of qollar, i.e. *ghulams*, slaves), the *ishik-aqasi-bashi* (chief royal mace-bearer) and the *tufangchi-aqasi* (commander of the regiments of musketeers). These same four officials had been instrumental in managing the empire upon the accession of 'Abbas's successor Safi (Roemer, 1986: 281). The other three members were the *vazir-i a'zam* (the grand-vizier), the *divanbegi* (chief justiciar) and the *vaqi'a-navis* (chief secretary) (Minorsky, 1943: 44).

Interestingly, the word *janqi* in the late court manuals brings us straight back to Mongol rule. *Janqi* appears to be a Mongolian word meaning 'a knot', pointing to a possible Mongol or Timurid origin of the institution (Minorsky, 1943: 113; Bosworth, 1995: 432-438). In another eighteenth-century manual of Safavid administration, written by Mirza 'Ali Naqi Nasiri, we also find a description of the *janqi*, or 'war council', consisting of seven members, largely identical to the officials listed in the *Tadhkirat al-Muluk* (Mirza Naqi Nasiri, 2008: 29). The description of how some of the court emirs were also members of the war council runs as follows:

According to the regulations there were seven war council {*janqi*} emirs. One, the grand vizier; two, the commander of the royal household troops; three, the commander-in-chief; four, the commander of the royal slaves; five, the chief royal mace-bearer of the *divan*; six, the commander of the royal musketeers; seven, the secretary of the royal council. The rule is that when His Majesty has given orders [concerning] a special issue that the emirs have to form the war council. These seven emirs have to sit in the guard-house {*kishik-khana*: i.e. the house of the *keshig*} of the grand vizier or in the room of the chamberlain or in whatever place where they have been summoned. [Its] environs and surroundings are declared out-of-bounds and prohibited to outsiders and it is not allowed that anyone be in those areas. After this has been taken care of, they all form a circle. These emirs together deliberate the matter that His Majesty has commanded and on behalf of the emirs of the war council the secretary of the royal council writes the memorandum [summarizing] that which all of them have reflected upon and have thought wisest (Mirza Naqi Nasiri, 2008: 44-45).

A few important points arise from the descriptions in the anonymous *Tadhkirat al-Muluk* and Nasiri's manual. They show the make-up and the proceedings of the *janqi*, an important institution of the upper echelons of the empire, that is however not often explicitly mentioned in historiography – though it is in these

manuals. The *keshig* comes back in the references to the place where the *janqi* held its meetings, namely the guard-house or *kishik-khana*. Both terms directly refer to the prominence of the Turco-Mongolian – nomadic – legacy in the Safavid Empire. These two terms also confirm the importance of a small group of advisors, whether in the shape of a mobile and informal group of Qizilbash, reminiscent of a war-band, as in the beginning of the Safavid enterprise, or in the shape of a small court council with close ties to the harem, as in the later Safavid period. Whether the currency of these terms by the end of the Safavid period can be viewed as more than a terminological legacy, demonstrating the partially nomadic roots of the Safavids, remains doubtful. In any case, the survival of ‘nomadic’ terminology did not help to keep the Safavids in power. Exactly in line with Ibn Khaldun’s model, the Safavids lost their ground when they stopped moving around, giving others a chance to move in.

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