

# The Idea of Iran: The Safavid Era

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Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre  
SOAS University of London

## The Idea of Iran: The Safavid Era

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the establishment of the new Safavid regime in Iran, heir not only to the succession of leadership of the Safavid sufi order, but also to the Aq Qoyunlu dispensation of western Iran and more remotely to the Timurid Empire in the East. Along with reuniting the Persian lands under one rule, the Safavids initiated the radical transformation of the religious landscape by introducing Imami Shi'ism as the official state faith and in this, as in other ways, laying the foundations of Iran's modern identity. While sometimes viewed as a period of decline from the highpoints of classical Persian literature and the visual arts of preceding centuries, the Safavid era was nevertheless a period of great literary and artistic activity in the realms of both secular and theological endeavour. In addition, with the establishment of comparable polities across western, southern and central Asia at broadly the same time, interactions with Ottoman, Mughal and Uzbek neighbours ensured fruitful interactions with other Muslim states also making the transition for the medieval to the modern world. Finally, European encounters with these worlds provide rich new layers of information and evidence of material and intellectual transmission.

What does the Idea of Iran mean at this period? Can we discern the ways that contemporaries viewed their traditions and their environment (natural or built); what was the view of outsiders, and how does modern scholarship define the distinctive aspects of the period? These are some of the questions we hope to explore in the symposium dedicated to this rich and highly productive period that took Iran to the eve of modernity.

9.30-9.50                    **Registration**

9.50-10.00                **Introduction**

10.00-10.45              ***Historiographical perceptions of the transmission from Timurid to Safavid Iran***  
*Ali Anooshahr, University of California, Davis*

The Persian chronicle *Futuhāt-i Shāhi* by Amini Haravi is one of the earliest chronicles produced for the Safavids, commissioned by Shah Isma'īl himself and written with information volunteered by older veterans of the initial battles of the Shah. In this text, the areas conquered early on by Shah Isma'īl are not identified as Iran, but as traditional geographical regions (Iraq, Khurasan, Shirvan, Fars, etc.). Nor is there a strong concern with the establishment of twelver Shi'ism. Rather, the rhetoric and conceptualization of holy war against Christians in the Caucasus or the Balkans (where many of his recruits seem to have fought) was now turned inwards, within the *dar al-Islām*, in order to justify and sublimate the fighting. Even then, holy war was not intended to bring about the actual apocalypse. Rather, the Shah's warriors expected to see paradisaical rewards after each battle: the fulfilment of libidinal drives for wealth, power and sex. In short, at least the commanders leading Shah Isma'īl's soldiers were totally alien to the abstraction, idealization, fetishization and mythification of territory which is essential for modern nationalists' views of place. Their goal was rather to create heaven on earth for themselves forcefully wherever they could.

**Ali Anooshahr** is a Professor of History at the University of California, Davis. He is a scholar of "comparative Islamic empires" with a focus on historiography, history of memory, and cultural history of Persianate societies in the early modern period. He is the author of two books: *The Ghazi Sultans and the Frontiers of Islam* (Routledge, 2009), and *Turkestan and the Rise of Eurasian Empires* (Oxford, 2018), and articles published in *Iranian Studies*, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, *Journal of Early Modern History*, and the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*.

10.45-11.30                ***The Qazvin period and the idea of the Safavids***  
*Gregory Aldous, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg*

Historians have long regarded the Safavids as inaugurating an enormous change in Iranian history. They credit them with re-establishing Iran as a distinct political and cultural entity after centuries of Arab and Turkic rule, and they note that it was the Safavids who made Iran the Shi'i country it is today. But the great changes that Iran underwent did not begin immediately when Isma'īl I initiated the dynasty in 1501. The early decades of the Safavid period bear more resemblance to what came before than to what the Safavids later became. The Safavid period as we typically think of it first took shape during Tahmasp's reign rather than during the reign of Isma'īl I. This paper proposes an alternative periodization of late medieval Iran, with the boundary between the post-Mongol Turkic period and the "classical" Safavid period occurring in the middle of the sixteenth century rather than in 1501.

**Gregory Aldous** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, where he teaches courses on Middle Eastern and world history. He holds a PhD in medieval Middle Eastern history from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an MS in Urban Planning from Florida State University. His PhD thesis was on the relationship between Shah Tahmasp and the Qizilbash at the beginning of Tahmasp's reign. His main research interests are the political history and urban history of the early Safavid period.

11.30-12.15

***Popular religiosity and vernacular Turkic: A Qizilbash catechism from Safavid Iran***  
Ferenc Csirkés, Sabanci University

The paper discusses a short polemical treatise written in Turkic entitled *Hikayat-i Yuhanna* against the background of confessionalization in Safavid Iran in the middle of the sixteenth century. The author is one Gharibi-yi Menteşe, who hailed from Ottoman lands and was the son of a Safavid agent in the region of Menteşe in today's south-west Turkey. Claiming to have initially been affiliated with the Mevlevi order through Şahidi Dede (d. 957/1557), the well-known lexicographer, and with the Halvetis and Gülşenis through İbrahim Gülşeni (d. 940/1534), Gharibi later wound up in the service of Shah İsmâ'il (r. 1501-1524) and Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576). He dedicated the collection of his works to the latter, which survives in a unique manuscript copied in 998/1590 and is preserved today at the Majlis Library in Tehran. Gharibi's work is the story of a Jew who converts to Islam and would like to decide on which denomination to follow. He interviews four religious scholars, each of whom represents one of the main Sunni legal schools; however, after finding them contradictory and their religious views outrageous, Yuhanna decides to convert to Twelver Shi'ism. The story was wellknown at the time in Persian and Arabic versions, the latter having dubiously been attributed to the prominent Shi'i scholar, Abu'l-Futuh al-Razi (d. after 552/1157). After comparing Gharibi's treatise with these other elaborations of the story, I will argue that the work illustrates the multilingual nature of Safavid cultural policies and their effort to reach out to their Turkophone followers; on the other hand, it seems that such works were also part of the efforts of the Safavid court to counter with a didactic and more legally coherent discourse different messianic, apocalyptic, and therefore socially and politically potent, narratives that were circulating at the time.

**Ferenc Csirkés** received his PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago and is currently an Assistant Professor of History at Sabanci University in Istanbul. Prior to that, he worked at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest and the University of Tübingen in Germany. Straddling literary, intellectual, and cultural history on the one hand and Persian and Turkish on the other, his research focuses on the interrelation of the politics of language, confessionalization and state building in the larger Turko-Persian world during the late medieval and early modern periods. He has two current book projects, one being the history of Turkic literary culture in Safavid Iran and the other one the intellectual biography of Sadiqi Beg, a major painter and *litterateur* of the period.

12.15-1.15

**Lunch**

1.15-2.00

***The bureaucratic career of Hatim Beg Urdubadi***  
Colin Mitchell, Dalhousie University

This paper will discuss the orientation and policies of the Safavid state at the turn of the seventeenth century through the biographical lens of I'timad al-Daulat, also known as Hatim Beg Urdubadi. I'timad al-Daulat was the most senior bureaucrat and chancery official in Shah 'Abbas' administration for most of the 1590s and early 1600s until his death in 1611. However, until now, there has been scant discussion of this fascinating individual and his role in regard to Shah 'Abbas' programme of imperial centralization, tax reform, amelioration of bureaucratic and chancery standards, and overall promotion of Twelver Shi'ism as a state doctrine. As a direct descendant of the famous thirteenth-century polymath, Khvaja Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, I'timad al-Daulat boasted an impeccable pedigree as a Shi'i scholar-bureaucrat and indeed he and his family negotiated a position of considerable importance during a crucial juncture as Safavid Iran began to emerge on the world stage.

**Colin Mitchell** is an Associate Professor of History at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada. He completed his PhD in 2002 at the University of Toronto and held a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in Persian Studies at Cornell University in 2002-2003. In addition to various articles on the Safavid Empire, he has published *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, religion, and rhetoric* (I.B. Tauris, 2009), which is an in-depth analysis of the Safavid chancery during the sixteenth century and its production of diplomatic texts which borrowed and adapted from a panoply of traditions

(history, poetry, law, exegesis, philosophy, mysticism). He also edited a *festschrift* on behalf of the noted Safavid historian Roger Savory, entitled *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran: Empire and society* (Routledge, 2011).

2.00-2.45 ***The Idea of Iran in the Safavid period: Dynastic pre-eminence and urban pride***  
Rudi Matthee, University of Delaware

This paper interrogates the assumption that explicit references to *Iran-zamin* and *Iran-shahr* become the main ingredient of a budding national identity in the Safavid period. Iran as a territorial concept is not well articulated in the Persian-language sources of the Safavid period. Sixteenth-century court chronicles rarely employ the term Iran. Throughout the period, the idea of Iran was expressed rather in a preoccupation with the ruling dynasty, loyalty centring on the shah and his entourage, not on the land. After the reign of Shah 'Abbas I, territory, in combination with dynasty and faith, came to confer a new identity on the governing class. The urban-based Twelver Shi'i population become the spokesmen of the reformulated collective identity; their focus increasingly concentrates on territory as a form of loyalty: not just Iran as a paradisiacal land that extends from the Oxus to the Euphrates, but the civilized centre of the world dominated by Tajiks—in contrast to nomads, Turks, Kurds, Afghans and Uzbeks. This composite elite identity proved strong enough to survive the severe fragmentation and dislocation of the country following the fall of the Safavids in the early eighteenth century.

**Rudi Matthee**, John and Dorothy Munroe Distinguished Professor of Middle Eastern History at the University of Delaware, works on the political and socio-economic history of early modern Iran and its connections with the wider world. He is the author of four prize-winning scholarly books, most recently *The Monetary History of Iran* (2013, co-authored), and the co-editor of another four books, most recently *Russians and Iran: diplomacy and power in the Qajar era and beyond* (2018). He is the former president of the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies (2002-5 and 2008-11), and currently serves as the President of the Persian Heritage Foundation. He is also co-editor of *Der Islam* and a consulting editor for the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

2.45-3.15 ***Universal harmony (sulh-i kull) and political theology in Safavid Iran***  
Daniel J. Sheffield, Princeton University

Though usually discussed as the signature political ethic of the Mughal emperor Akbar, the idea that a sovereign should maintain the members of the body politic in a kind of universal harmony (*sulh-i kull*) with one another was widely discussed in Safavid Iran. This paper examines articulations of political theology based upon a theory of macrocosm wherein practices relating to the human body, the body politic, and the celestial bodies were understood as closely interrelated. For some, toleration and active engagement with diverse religious communities were seen to promote social harmony just as vegetarianism produced a harmony of bodily humours and theurgical practices promoted the harmony of the heavenly spheres. By examining texts on ethics, the writings of the followers of Azar Kayvan, and the correspondence between the courts of Shah 'Abbas and Akbar, we trace the ways in which the notion of *sulh-i kull* became a site of contention for establishing royal legitimacy in the early modern Persian world.

**Daniel J. Sheffield** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, where he teaches the religious, intellectual, and social history of the medieval and early modern Persian-speaking world. He is a specialist in exchanges between Safavid Iran and Mughal India, and in particular, the history of Zoroastrian communities during this period. He has recently completed his first book manuscript entitled *Cosmopolitan Zarathustras: Religion, Translation, and Prophethood in Iran and South Asia*. He is currently pursuing research on a second book project, tentatively entitled *On Translation and Toleration: The free thinkers of Safavid Iran and Mughal India*.

3.15-3.45 **Tea break**

3.45-4.30 ***Practising philosophy, imagining Iran in the Safavid period***  
Sajjad Rizvi, University of Exeter

Intellectuals in the Safavid period were self-consciously aware of living in a time of renaissance, of a classical revival of ancient wisdoms and heritage, be they from the early Shi'i tradition, from Hellenic Neoplatonism, or from ancient Iranian wisdom. The major thinkers of the so-called 'School of Isfahan' drew upon the wisdom of the Iranian sages, and historians of philosophy as a universal endeavour located Iran within a certain trajectory of the transmission of philosophical learning and

the art of living as a prophetic inheritance. In this paper, two sets of works will be considered: the philosophical texts of Mulla Sadra that evoked the learning of the *fahlawiyun* (as his commentator Sabzavari would also in the Qajar period), and the histories of philosophy such as the Beloved of the Hearts of Qutb al-Din Ashkivari that placed Iran and the ancient Iranian sages in a particular stage in the transmission of learning. But to remark on the imagining of Iran as a space that was not contiguous with the Safavid realms, it is worth looking at works produced in Mughal India by Abu'l-Fazl and Maqsd 'Ali Tabrizi at the court of Akbar, in which Iran was an arcadia of philosophers as well as the source of much cultural exchange. This will lead us to consider what sort of space for philosophy Iran was in these texts between the Safavid and Mughal contexts.

**Sajjad Rizvi** is Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History and Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at the University of Exeter. A specialist on Safavid-Mughal philosophy, he is the author of *Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics* (Routledge, 2009), and is currently writing a monograph on philosophy in eighteenth-century Iran and North India.

4.30-5.15      ***Safavids and Shi'ism in the age of sectarianism***  
Andrew J. Newman, University of Edinburgh

Modern Iran – with its defined borders, the pre-eminence of the Persian language and the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism – has its roots in the Safavid period. The highly sectarianized atmosphere gripping the region since 1979 but, especially, since the 2003 Iraq invasion and the 2011 Syrian civil war, has highlighted Safavid association with the faith: in his denunciation of Shi'ism, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi referred to the 'Safavid Rafida'. In these same years Western-language Safavid Studies expanded into a myriad of sub-disciplines and Shi'i Studies has emerged in the West as an independent field of study. These two strands seldom interact let alone offer any 'joined-up' vision of the period in response to the sectarian discourse. The written texts produced by the literate few, particularly religious works, can reveal insights into the lives of Safavid 'subalterns', the majority population in any time and place. Focus on the latter can offer a complex, more inclusive understanding of both society and the faith with which to challenge broader, simpler, understandings.

**Andrew Newman** is Personal Chair of Islamic Studies and Persian at the University of Edinburgh. He holds a BA in History from Dartmouth College and an MA and PhD in Islamic Studies from UCLA. He came to Edinburgh in 1996 from the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine and Green College, Oxford, where he was researching topics in the history of Islamic medicine. Newman has published on early Twelver Shi'ism and Shi'i history and thought and on Shi'ism in Safavid Iran. His most recent monograph is *Twelver Shiism, Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632 to 1722* (Edinburgh, 2013). He is the founder/moderator of *Shi'i News and Resources*.

5.15-6.00      ***From Khazaneh to audience: Reception and perception of European artworks at the court of Shah Sulaiman***  
Negar Habibi, University of Geneva

The so-called *Farangi Sazi* paintings are one of the remarkable outcomes of Euro-Safavid mercantile and diplomatic exchanges. These paintings provide a window onto the perception of the West by the Iranians during the second half of the seventeenth century, through the use of European subject matter and techniques in Persian art. However, we know little of the artistic interactions between the Persian and European artists. Written sources do provide, nevertheless, some material about the reception of European artefacts at the Persian court. The documents detail the places where these foreign *objet d'art* were held and preserved. We will seek to discuss the Royal Treasury, as well as the *Jebakhaneh* which stored European artefacts in the period between the reigns of Shah 'Abbas II (1642-66) and Shah Sulaiman (1666-94). We will explore the way the Iranian artists perceived the European works and addressed a new audience with their own paintings.

**Negar Habibi** is an art historian and lecturer in Islamic Art History at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. Her research focuses principally on paintings from early modern Iran. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, her academic work centres on the artists' career and life, the authenticity of their signature, gender issues and artistic patronage. She has published several articles on the art and artists of late seventeenth-century in Iran, and her book titled *'Ali Qoli Jebādār et l'occidentalisme safavide: une étude sur les peintures dites farangi sāzi, leurs milieux et commanditaires sous Shah Soleimān* (1666-94) was recently published by Brill.

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## A Symposium

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Saturday 27 October 2018  
Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre  
SOAS University of London  
Russel Square  
London WC1H 0XG

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### Convened by:

Sarah Stewart, SOAS University of London and  
Charles Melville, University of Cambridge

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### Organised by:

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