

The Idea of Iran: Iran in Transition to a New World Order



Saturday 28 November 2020

The sixteenth programme in *The Idea of Iran* annual series is dedicated to the transition from the Safavid to the Qajar period.

What does the Idea of Iran mean at this time? 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 complex and difficult period from which Iran emerged with a curtailed presence in the new world order.

Programme

Saturday 28 November 2020

- 11:45-12:00 Welcome by Sarah Stewart (SOAS University of London) and Charles Melville (University of Cambridge)
- 12:00-2:00 **Panel 1**
Chair: Narguess Farzad (SOAS University of London)
Assef Ashraf (University of Cambridge)
Firuzha Abdullaeva (University of Cambridge)
Kevin Gledhill (Yale University)
- 2:00-2:30 Break
- 2:30-4.30 **Panel 2**
Chair: Sarah Stewart (SOAS University of London)
Ernest Tucker (US Naval Academy)
Janet O'Brien (The Courtauld Institute of Art)
Kianoosh Motaghedi (artist and Islamic art researcher)
- 4:30-5:00 Break
- 5:00-7:00 **Panel 3**
Chair: Charles Melville (University of Cambridge)
Fatema Soudavar Farmanfarmaian (Souvadar Memorial Foundation)
Sajjad Nejatie (University of Toronto)
John Perry (University of Chicago)
- 7:00-7:15 Closing Remarks

12:00-2:00

Panel 1

Safavid Nostalgia in Early Qajar Historiography

Assef Ashraf, University of Cambridge

This paper focuses on a handful of early Qajar chronicles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and explores how the Safavids were portrayed and remembered in those texts. A theme that emerges is nostalgia for the Safavids and their rule. In drawing attention to this theme, the paper shows how Qajar legitimacy partly relied on linking Qajar history back to Safavid history, while simultaneously demonstrating that, despite the political upheavals of the post-Safavid era, imperial ideologies persisted through the course of the eighteenth century. The paper ultimately makes a case for highlighting continuities in the eighteenth century, rather than viewing the era as a series of dynastic interludes.

Assef Ashraf is University Lecturer in the Eastern Islamic Lands and Persian-Speaking World at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Pembroke College. His research has been published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, and the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. He has co-edited a volume entitled *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* and is currently writing a book on the formation of Qajar Iran.

Russo-Persian Cultural Diplomacy in the Early Qajar Period

Firuzza Abdullaeva, University of Cambridge

The paper will give a brief survey of Russo-Persian diplomacy and diplomatic gift exchange and its mutual impact on the cultural life of both countries, which was deep, vast and diverse. The focus will be on the early Qajar period, when the relationship between the two countries was the most intense after the losses of the Persian northern territories. By this time Persia's political and cultural relationships with Russia became inevitably much closer than with Britain, due to the long common border and the interactions and rivalries in the Caucasus, which had persisted for centuries. Russia post-Peter and Catherine was both imperial and exceptionally cosmopolitan and perceived by the Persian political and cultural elite as yet another European state, which marked a dramatic change of perception from the 'barbarians of the north' to progressive enlighteners – the example they preferred to follow.

Firuzza Abdullaeva graduated from Saint Petersburg University, where she completed her PhD and taught at the Iranian Department. As Associate Professor she left St Petersburg for Oxford to teach Persian literature and become a Fellow of Wadham College, where she was also Curator of the Ferdowsi Library. In 2010 she moved to Cambridge as the IHF Research Fellow at Pembroke College, where she is currently Director of Research of the Cambridge Shahnama Centre. Her research includes Persian literature and book art, Russian cultural Orientalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Russo-Persian diplomacy of the early Qajar period.

Iranian Statehood and the Safavid Legacy: Views from the Caspian Sea, 1732–1785

Kevin Gledhill, Yale University

This paper will address notions of Iran as a territorial unit and the significance of the Safavid past in diplomatic relations across the Caspian in the post-Safavid eighteenth century. Merchant intermediaries facilitated contacts between northern Iranian khans and the Russian consulate at Enzeli. These encounters were structured by the terms of the Rasht and Ganja Treaties. The paper will focus on the salience of Safavid and Iranian identities in Russo-Iranian encounters. The advantageous terms of commercial treaties and a desire for a single legitimizing sovereign partner in Iran structured Russian approaches to the region. For emerging claimants to power within the former Safavid lands, such as Fath-'Ali Khan of Qoba and Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, Safavid succession and the treaties could be invoked either to draw closer to the consulate or to challenge its supposed territorial ambitions. The khans leveraged financial and strategic advantages of their relations with Russia against rivals.

Kevin Gledhill is a Graduate Alumni Fellow and Instructor in the History Department at Yale University and has previously taught at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He received his Ph.D. from Yale in May of 2020 after completing his dissertation, "The Caspian State: Regional Autonomy, International Trade, and the Rise of Qajar Iran, 1722–1797." His work focuses on the history of Iran, southern Russia, and the South Caucasus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arguing for the Caspian Sea as a unit of historical analysis.

2:30–3:00 Break

2:30-4:30 Panel 2

Nader Shah's Idea of Iran

Ernest Tucker, US Naval Academy

Nader Shah's reign had a definite impact on ideas of Iran in the early modern period, however fleeting his tenure as a ruler. He departed quite radically from concepts of Iran developed under the Safavids, who had fused traditions and tropes from a pre-Islamic past with the Turkman nomadic heritage, all against the backdrop of an evolving Twelver Shi'i Iranian religious identity. Nader's meteoric rise from obscurity allowed him to reimagine Iran on his own in a novel way. His 'idea of Iran' was the 'invented tradition' of a Timurid-style 'world empire' with Iran at its centre. Other rulers would become subsidiary 'shahs' under Nader's aegis as 'shahanshah': a trope harking back both to pre-Islamic Persian traditions as well as reflecting aspects of the Turko-Mongol tradition of steppe governance. This reinvention of an 'idea of Iran', even if itself transitory, had enduring legacies.

Ernest Tucker has taught in the history department at the U.S. Naval Academy since 1990, receiving the rank of full professor there in 2006. Tucker received his Ph.D. in Middle Eastern history from the University of Chicago and spent time in the late 1980s and in 2005–2006 living and doing research in Istanbul, Turkey as a Fulbright Scholar. He has published three books on Iran and the Ottoman Empire, his articles have appeared in a wide variety of scholarly journals, dictionaries and encyclopedias, and he has consulted for a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Dismembering the Corporate: The Single Portraits of Nadir Shah and The Changing Body Politic in Post-Safavid Iran

Janet O'Brien, The Courtauld Institute of Art

The image of Nadir Shah and his world-conquering rhetoric are captured in diverse representations that include the earliest corpus of identifiable portraits of an Iranian ruler, and yet, they have never been studied collectively as a phenomenon that heralded the emergence of royal portraiture and paved the way for its flourishing in the Zand and Qajar periods. Single portraits of kings were virtually absent in Safavid Iran despite the popularity of portraiture, and kingship was represented as a dynastic institution. This paper highlights the key findings of a larger investigation into why the representation of Persian kingship demerged from the corporate body of the Safavid court and re-emerged as a single, corporeal body of the shah during this transformative period and crucially, how that visual breakup was linked to contrasting notions of the body politic between the polity-centred kingship of the Safavids and Nadir's self-reliant and self-referential authority.

Janet O'Brien is a final-year PhD candidate at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, and a recipient of the Soudavar Memorial Foundation Grant. She is the current Smithsonian Institution Predoctoral Fellow at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington DC. She previously served in

curatorial positions at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and she is a contributing author of *Bestowing Beauty: Masterpieces from Persian Lands, Selections from the Hossein Afshar Collection* (2020).

From Chehel-Sotun to Golestan Palace: The Evolution of Royal Wall Painting during Fath-'Ali Shah's Reign

Kianoosh Motaghedi, Artist and Islamic Art researcher

Wall painting stood among the prominent art media for displaying royal themes in the Qajar era. Qajar wall painting could be regarded as the transmission of a pre-existing tradition during the Safavid era, manifested in hunting, feasting and battle scenes, especially at the Chehel-Sotun Palace, Isfahan. This time-honoured tradition persisted into the following eras, continuing the narrative function of displaying the ruler's authority. Through displaying his portrait, court and accoutrements in the Golestan Palace, Fath-'Ali Shah Qajar sought to establish his power and monarchy. Fath-'Ali Shah's Royal Reception mural at his former residence in Qom is the last monumental example to follow such a tradition in the history of Persian and Qajar art. In this presentation the mentioned wall painting is to be examined in detail and in terms of history, politics and symbolic representational art.

Kianoosh Motaghedi is an artist and Islamic art historian. He has published a number of books and articles in the fields of Persian ceramics, calligraphy and Qajar arts. In both 2017 and 2018 he received fellowships from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication for his independent research. He has travelled extensively across the Middle East, Central Asia, India and Europe, and has knowledge of Persian, Arabic and English.

4:30-5:00 Break

5:00-7:00 Panel 3

Fraying at the Edges: Iran and the Khanates of Central Asia

Fatema Soudavar Farmanfarmaian, Soudavar Memorial Foundation

It may have been an inevitability that Turkic tribes should eventually take over much of Central Asia in the wake of Chinggis and Timur, yet the surviving prestige of Persianate culture was such that those very same tribes were motivated more by the prestigious leadership of a bi-cultural Turko-Persian imperial entity than by separatist inclinations. The Idea of Iran lived on for a while longer under 'foreign' dynasties that, as in the past, claimed to be its staunch upholders. That was certainly the case with the largest Turkic tribe, the Afshars who, with Nader Shah, mounted the throne after the fall of the Safavids. That was also the case with the first Qajar ruler, Agha Mohammad Khan, whose ancestral base of Marv was considered by him and by his clan as integral to Iran; he was equally committed to preserving Transcaucasia where the Qajar branch of the Qizilbash had been invested by the Safavids with the governorships of Ganja and Qarabagh. Their intentions were sincere, their methods brutal and their opponents determined to carve their own fiefdoms out of the falling empire by appropriating patches of distorted history. Sic transit Gloria mundi.

Fatema Soudavar Farmanfarmaian, born in Tehran in 1940, is a trustee of the Soudavar Memorial Foundation and an independent historian who has written essays for academic journals and multi-authored books on a variety of subjects, primarily dealing with nineteenth-century Iran, and edited and partly authored two books in Persian. She has had privileged access to a trove of private and public archives, mainly in Iran but also in Russia, that shed light on little known episodes of this period's history.

Proto-Nationalism in Early Modern Iran and Afghanistan

Sajjad Nejatie, University of Toronto

The interconnected histories of Iran and Afghanistan are often blurred by nationalist-inspired discourses that tend to emphasize the distinctiveness of both countries. Although the entanglement of colonial Russia and Britain in the politics of the Persianate world in the nineteenth century helped cement the political boundary dividing Iran and Afghanistan, the fissure may also be traced to proto-nationalist sentiments formulated in the eighteenth century when Iranian and Afghan regimes dueled for the fate of post-Safavid Khurasan. While both polities developed similar sources of legitimacy, they also asserted competing territorial prerogatives: namely, the irredentist Qajar claim that the Afghan-occupied lands of Khurasan (now known as Afghanistan) formed part of a 'Greater Iran', in contrast to the Durrani claim that Khurasan represented the ancestral homeland of the Durrani Afghans. This paper considers the lasting consequences of this territorial dispute on the idea and political reality of Iran and Afghanistan as nation states heading into modern times.

Sajjad Nejatie is presently a Sessional Lecturer at the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. He specializes in, and has

published several articles on, the history, historiography, and culture of early modern Iran and Afghanistan. He is currently preparing for publication his first book manuscript, provisionally titled *The Pearl of Pearls: A History of the Abdali-Durrani Confederacy from its Origins to the Reign of Ahmad Shah Durr-i Durrani, circa 1550–1772*.

Sir William Jones and the Migration of the Idea of Iran to India

John Perry, University of Chicago

Since the tenth century northern India, targeted by Turco-Iranian Muslim invaders and tolerant of refugees, had become increasingly Persianized in literature and administration. The successors of Shah 'Abbas Safavi (d. 1629) failed to maintain the Persian Empire at its zenith: religious unrest and neglect of the economy and army provoked invasions and internal strife for almost two centuries.

Sufis, poets and scholars swelled the flow of immigrants to India. The land of Iran was no longer viable; the idea of Iran was to be 'outsourced' for several generations to this hospitable new home. Liberal scholars among British EIC personnel here, notably Orientalist Sir William Jones, found common ground with the Bengali intelligentsia and Iranian immigrants in the 1770s-90s; as author of the first modern Persian grammar, and pioneer of comparative linguistics, he is an emblem of this pivotal period in the place of both Persia and India vis-à-vis Britain and the modern West.

John Perry is Professor of Persian Emeritus at the University of Chicago. His monographs include *Karim Khan Zand, A History of Iran 1747-1779* (1979) and *Form and Meaning in Persian Vocabulary: The Arabic Feminine Ending* (1991). He is currently contributing editor of *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, and in 2019 received a Lifetime Achievement award from the American Association of Teachers of Persian. His current research is focused on the history of the Persian language, and in particular the mechanisms of the incorporation of Arabic vocabulary into Persian and its dissemination into other languages of the region.

7:00-7:15 Closing Remarks

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A Symposium

Saturday 28 November 2020

Convened by:

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

Organised by:

Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS University of London
The Department of Religions and Philosophies, SOAS University of
London
Shahnama Centre for Persian Studies, Pembroke College, University of
Cambridge

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