



The Iran Society

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INTRODUCTION

This has been another busy year for the Society, with a number of well-attended supplementary activities to our usual lecture programme. The Council hopes to build on this over the coming year. In pursuit of the Society's charitable objects, we are attempting to reach a wider audience than the Society's present membership. In particular, we are planning a public lecture in memory of Sir Denis Wright, our former president and chairman, who contributed so much to the Society. David Blow, a Council member, is editing a compendium of travellers' tales on Iran over the ages, which is due to be published by Eland Books next year, and we will continue to arrange tutored visits to UK exhibitions and events connected with Iran.

Meanwhile, our Journal continues to go from strength to strength, and we all owe a debt of gratitude to the editor, Antony Wynn, and to Alan Ashmole, who arranges the printing.

I am retiring as chairman in October. This is in many ways a sad moment for me, but I am delighted that Hugh Arbuthnott has been elected to succeed me as chairman. As a Persian speaker, who was twice posted to the British Embassy in Tehran and was British Ambassador in three countries, he brings a depth of experience and wisdom which will, I am sure, be of great benefit to the Society.

MICHAEL NOEL-CLARKE

TA'ZIYEH IN IRAN

LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 27 APRIL 2005 BY CORNELIE FERGUSON, TRAVEL SCHOLAR 2004

Ta'ziyeh literally means 'mourning' and is the name given to the ceremonies that mark the death of the Shiite Imam Hossein. It is also the name given to the only theatre nourished anywhere in the Islamic world, born in Iran out of these mourning ceremonies.

The revolution of 1979 halted the progress of most western scholarship on Iranian culture, including ta'ziyeh. Japanese, Chinese and African theatre are growing fields for comparative literary and dramatic study in British universities, while ta'ziyeh, an important source for any one interested in comparative theatre, remains relatively unknown.

The history of Kerbala

Hossein is the third Imam of Shiite Islam, who was killed with 72 of his followers in the desert of Kerbala in AD 682. Hossein's father, Imam Ali was the nephew and son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad, and in Shiite belief, his rightful successor. But when Prophet Mohammad died, his succession was disputed and three of his companions, Abu Bakr, Omar and Uthman, were the first three to inherit the Caliphate, the leadership of Islam. Ali finally became the fourth caliph but was later deposed and then assassinated by Muawiyyah, who succeeded him to the caliphate. Shiah-i Ali – the followers of Ali, refused to accept the legitimacy of Muawiyyah and insisted that only the Prophet's family were the rightful guardians of Islam. Ali's older son Imam Hassan retired from the power struggle, but his younger son Hossein was determined to reclaim the caliphate for the family of the Prophet, and marched against Yazid, Muawiyyah's son and successor who by then was living in Damascus. Hossein and his companions were ambushed and sat parched in the desert of Kerbala without food and water for ten days. On the tenth day they finally joined battle with a mass of Umayyad troops led by Yazid's commander Shemr. Hossein and all his men were killed and then beheaded. Hossein was reputedly the last to die, cradling his infant son, whose neck had been pierced by an arrow.

The historian Abu Reyhan al Biruni (973-1048) describes how 'the camp was torched and the bodies were trampled by the hoofs of the horses; nobody in the history of the human kind has seen such atrocities'. The heads of the dead were taken to Yazid's court in Damascus along with their womenfolk. Today Hossein's body is buried in Kerbala, in Iraq, the Shiite world's foremost shrine.

The earliest known Muharram ceremonies

About 300 years later, in 936 AD Sultan Muizz ul-Dawla of the Buyid dynasty ordered his people in Baghdad to go into mourning to mark the anniversary of the death of Imam Hossein. The order was a public expression of his opposition to the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate. The historian Ibn Athir describes the event: 'for the first ten days of Muharram all the bazaars of Baghdad were to be closed, people were to wear coarse black clothes and women were to disarray their hair, blacken their faces and tear their clothes, walk in the city, and beat their heads.'

The martyrdom of Hossein is to the Shi'ites what the Crucifixion of Christ is to the Christians: the seminal event of the faith, and there are marked similarities between Muharram processions and those of Semana Santa in Spain. Processions, self flagellation, dramatic recitations of the

story and spectacular passion plays that recreate the events are a well of powerful symbols from a collective Shiite memory created over the last 1400 years. Early Shiites viewed Hossein's death as a redemptive act, and that believed that Hossein would act as an intercessor at the Day of Judgement. The performance of Muharram ceremonies was believed to lead one to salvation. The sixth Shiite Imam, Imam Sadeq, states: 'the sigh of the sorrowful for the wrong done us is an act of worship,' and 'anyone who remembers us, or, if we are mentioned in his presence, and a tear as small as the wing of a gnat falls from his eye, God would forgive all his sins.' Imam Hossein is quoted as saying 'I am the martyr of tears, no man of faith remembers me but that he weeps.'

Muharram today

Shiites in Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, India and Iran commemorate Hossein's death and the battle of Kerbala every year with a month of mourning. This year I travelled to Shush, in Khuzestan, the Iranian province bordering Iraq, for Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram. We were taken in by an Arab family for lunch who served up a feast while their satellite television beamed in images from Kerbala. Under Saddam Hossein's regime, Muharram was banned, and in 2004 Kerbala was bombed, so this was the first year the Shiites had the opportunity to mourn the death of Imam Hossein freely. Thousands of black clad barefoot Iraqis filled the streets, crowds speckled with bright red and green flags emblazoned with the names of Hossein and his followers in a scene whose details were not dissimilar similar to those described over 1000 years ago by Ibn Athir. The camera focussed in on streams of young men running through the streets beating their heads and shouting 'Hossein Hossein Hossein'. For me the scene seemed to be a powerful mix of jubilation and sorrow, a mix of the excitement at a symbolic mass occasion, mixed with the sadness inherent in the event, an emotion I've felt repeated on a smaller scale in Iran.

Every night for the first ten days of Muharram throughout the Shi'ite world people gather in houses and mosques to hear the story of Kerbala recounted and to pray and weep together. Processions of barefoot men in black make their way to buildings called Hosseinieh in town centres beating their chests to the rhythm of a dirge blasted out on mobile speakers. Others beat their chests in a hypnotic rhythm (sineh zani) or pummel their backs with chain bundles (zanjir zadan) to the beat of drums. Young boys carry battle flags of Hossein and his followers before the group. Cauldrons of food steam on street corners, stirred by barefoot men in black shirts [. Strong men carry huge metal standards called Alams, adorned with feathers and folkloric symbols, which they twirl periodically for the crowd.

Many public centres present reconstructions of scenes from the battle, severed styrofoam heads meticulously recreated with fake blood, baby bundles of Hossein's son complete with arrows, plastic washing-up gloves covered in gore. The government cloaks the country in black banners, the name of Hossein dripping blood. Every night hours of ceremonies in mosques and halls in which men weep and sob to the songs of Kerbala, are broadcast on national television.

These activities reach their frenzied peak on Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, which commemorates the battle itself. Millions pour out onto the streets and every district has its own way of marking the day, whether with caravans of horses and camels, or historical full scale reconstructions where participants soaked in goat's blood, sometimes on horses, fight out the historic scenes of Kerbala.

The birth of ta'ziyeh theatre

In 637 the Arabs under the leadership of Umar overwhelmed the Persian Sassanids and Iran became a Muslim country. It was not until Shah Ismail, however, whose Safavid dynasty began in

1501, that Shiism became the national religion. Shah Ismail's ulama, under Mohammad Baqir Majlisi, promoted the mourning rituals in honour of Hossein. The rites became a major Iranian institution, and with Iran sandwiched between the Sunni Ottoman and Uzbek empires, commemoration became a patriotic as well as religious act.

In Safavid Iran, the ta'ziyeh drama itself gradually developed out of recitations of the Kerbala story, called Rowzeh Khani. The stories were taken from a book called Rowzatu'l Shuhada or the Garden of the Martyrs, written in Persian and widely circulated among Shiites during Safavid times. In the middle of the 18th century, these recitations and Muharram processions fused and a new dramatic form was born, ta'ziyeh khani or simply ta'ziyeh. From the beginning the antagonists (the villains, Shemr, Yazid etc always dressed in red) recited their parts, while the heroes in green – Imam Hossein etc sang theirs. One of the most important elements of the ta'ziyeh, although beyond the scope of this examination, is its music and poetry, and many of the ta'ziyeh plays incorporate verses from the great Iranian poets Hafez or Rumi.

The theme of veneration of heroes also has a long history in Persian culture and story of Imam Hossein finds parallels in pre-Islamic legends such as the death of Siyavush and the Mesopotamian ritual of Adonis-Tammuz. The drama ta'ziyeh is an excellent illustration of the concept that the roots of drama are in funeral songs and commemoration of dead heroes.

In the 19th century ta'ziyeh was embraced by the monarchy, and reached its peak. Nasser al-Din Shah, who ruled Persia from 1848-96, built Takiyeh Dowlat, or Royal Arena in Tehran, modelled on his impressions of the great opera houses of Europe and Russia.

Ta'ziyeh was a communal event, and each individual gave according to his means - donating crystal, lamps, mirrors, china, tapestries to decorate the tekieh, the temporary theatres. Women provided refreshments and the children of the aristocracy would serve water, in memory of the Kerbala martyrs' thirst.

Elements of the drama

Today ta'ziyeh is performed daily during Muharram and recreates selected scenes from the story of Imam Hossein. Audiences gather at crossroads and in tented parking lots, sometimes in specifically constructed tekieh or theatres, to watch ta'ziyeh and weep together at particular moments of pathos. There are hundreds of different ta'ziyeh plays and each one re-enacts an episode – tiny details from the days in the desert. Some are very central; for example the story of Abul Fazl – a close companion of Hossein who goes to fetch water and is dismembered on his return – to the more obscure, like the story of the Christian girl who reached Kerbala after the battle and, coming upon the scene of carnage, was so entranced by the vision of bravery that she converted to Islam. The choice of ta'ziyeh has narrowed considerably since the 19th century and the more outlandish ta'ziyehs – including one about Alexander the Great in Kerbala – are rarely performed these days.

Over the years ta'ziyeh has made a strong impression on travellers and foreign directors including Peter Brook and Jerry Grotowski. This is how Peter Brook describes a ta'ziyeh he saw in the 70s while rehearsing his epic Orghast, performed at Persepolis in 1971:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of four hundred villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing – although they all knew perfectly well the end of the story – as they saw Hossein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies and then being

martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre became a truth – there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history 1,300 years ago, actually became a reality in that moment.

While the choice of plays for the nightly programs differs from place to place, the Ashura ta'ziyeh always culminates in the death of Imam Hossein himself. The preceding nights the plays are usually two or three hours long, but on Ashura the ta'ziyeh often begins at 7a.m. and goes on until early afternoon. Sections of the audience will weep at different points – the women in particular sob when Imam Hossein bids his womenfolk goodbye. The women are played by men in veils and it may be ironic that in today's Islamic Republic, where men and women are kept strictly at arms length in public media, it is only in ta'ziyeh that you find true depictions of male-female relations – because both actors are men. But when it comes to the gory death of Imam Hossein's baby child Ali Askar, I find myself surrounded by rocking figures, their chadors pulled over their eyes while across the room tough men sob until tears stream down their stubbly chins.

Some tekies are intimate, with the audience traditionally squashed into a square around a circular main stage, but in many places ta'ziyeh has broken out of these boundaries into football fields, or scrub land and the reconstruction is on a major scale. Ta'ziyeh has unabashedly ridden the technological wave, and in the smallest village, it will be sung on radio microphones, and boomed out on loud speakers with copious echo.

This is a video clip from this year in Shush. The quality is not excellent, but it seemed more interesting than a film I made, since it was edited by the Shush ta'ziyeh khun or the singers themselves. It was interesting to explore which dimensions they emphasised. It stops just short of depicting the death of Imam Hossein himself, but has plenty of gore to go around. It was thrust into my hand by the Shemr in the video, who you'll see beheading and beating his victims (in real life he's the local bank manager.)

In this theatre there is no separation between actors and audience – it is a communal recreation of Kerbala from a collective memory. You saw there the women in tears – I was interested to see the filmmakers did not show the weeping men of Shush. The intensity of the audience's weeping bears no relation to the quality of the performance and there is none of the fragile dramatic intensity of western theatre. Those sobbing women were on hour five in the theatre and were still rapt. In ta'ziyeh the producer walks on stage, hands around tea to the actors and photographers and cameramen get right into the action – because its power has nothing to do with any suspension of disbelief. Ta'ziyeh is an activator of communal identity and sorrow, and the Shiite cosmic conception of good and evil built around Imam Hossein and his enemies, and for this reason there are no 'great actors' excelling at a particular role in ta'ziyeh. You can have been a good Imam Hossein, and have had a glorious voice but there is no definitive ta'ziyeh performance. Likewise no ta'ziyeh play bears the name of the playwright, however innovative or beautiful.

Ta'ziyeh has extraordinary dynamic flexibility and there are no barriers of time and space. Different moments of history have been incorporated into the narrative; for example, Napoleon Bonaparte can appear on the stage along with Hussein. The text is not fixed and episodes from other plays can be interpolated in another to suit the actors or the weather. At a recent congress of ta'ziyeh in Tehran, a singer carefully demonstrated for me the different sword waving techniques to indicate impromptu cuts, jumps and programme changes to the rest of the players.

Costumes carry influences from every period of Iranian history. The protagonists are usually dressed in the chain mail and helmets of pre-Islamic Iranian warriors. The villains wear

sunglasses, sometimes drink Coca-cola, and often wear glorious clashes of red, gold and pink Chinese textiles.

Distancing

One element of ta'ziyeh is a forerunner of the Brechtian device of *Verfremdung* - alienation or 'faseleh gozari' in Persian. Brecht's actors were asked to 'demonstrate' the characters, and not become them. His techniques helped the actors remind the audience that what they see is only a theatrical presentation of what is supposed to be real. From the start ta'ziyeh has used many similar techniques but with different objectives.

Often at the beginning of a ta'ziyeh play an actor will introduce the cast: this is Ahmad the electrician, or Ramin the taxi driver, not Abul Fazl and Hossein, and this is Mahmoudieh village, not Kerbala. The character who plays Shemr, the killer of Imam Hossein, will often begin the final scene with the assertion:

'You people that have gathered here!

Be aware that none of these people are Imam Hossein

Or the martyrs of Kerbala

Nor am I Shemr.

And this place is not Kerbala!

The only purpose of this gathering is to mourn and to honour the martyrs of the Kerbala.'

More often than not, the actor playing Shemr will weep and sob audibly into the microphone while killing Imam Hossein, and enemy commanders will approach Hossein to kiss his hand before joining battle.

This distancing serves two purposes – one is that the actor himself is a Shi'ite and a follower of Imam Hossein. The second is to protect himself from the audience. There are a few recorded occasions from the 19th century when the audience in their fury mobbed and killed Shemr. Many Shemrs have told me of people throwing rocks at them, or hitting them in the heat of the ta'ziyeh, only to thank them later for arousing such passion. Despite all the effort to keep some distance between the actors and the Imam, in the minds of the audience the gap can narrow to nothing. Shush women still scoop up the dust from under the feet of the actor playing Hossein and dilute it in water as a remedy for illness and new-born babies are taken to his house to be blessed.

These distancing techniques have their roots partly in the conflict between a dramatic form that arouses intense emotion in the audience – as the lines between actor and Imam blur - and Islamic precepts that find the whole concept of imitation and drama deeply uncomfortable.

Peter Chelkowski, the leading ta'ziyeh expert in the English speaking world, suggests that the majority of religious authorities consider it sacrilegious for mortal men to portray any holy personage. Ta'ziyeh has never been actively supported by the clerics, though during the Qajar era, when ta'ziyeh was at its peak, they did issue a fatwa declaring it free and lawful, upheld by a famous judgement of Mirza Abul-Qasem Qomi. But although it was necessary for the clerics to pronounce upon ta'ziyeh while it was the darling of the court and a major national event, in the

last century there has been a general edging away. In this last section I want to look at how Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution adopted Hossein and the emotions of Muharram. While they elevated the 'Kerbala paradigm' directly into public discourse, they did not embrace its old vehicles. Ta'ziyeh had been dealt a blow by the Pahlavis who considered it backward, but it was not resurrected by the Islamic Republic. The funding and attention it is slowly receiving is part of a general liberalisation of arts begun under President Khatami and is not a nod to its religious nature.

Revolutionary Hossein

The collective memory of Muharram was tapped into and politicised by Khomeini and became one of the most powerful tools for the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. As early as 1963 when he delivered his sermon at the Madreseh Fayziyyeh in Qom, Khomeini drew analogies between the martyrdom of Hossein and the plight of the Iranian people.

Once he had activated the hatred for the Sunni caliph Yazid, he only had to equate him with the Shah and the Americans to arouse the people against them. During the revolution itself the Muharram procession tradition became a political weapon and the 40-day rhythm of mourning became the rhythm of mass opposition to the Shah. Muharram slogans were mixed with political oaths and protestors wore symbolic white shrouds indicating their readiness to die, to martyr themselves for Khomeini/Hossein against the Shah/Yazid's army. There are countless articles and books on the role of the Kerbala paradigm in the ideology of the Islamic Republic – I will only look at a couple of examples.

The other day I was at a lecture in which the speaker was describing the Tehran bomb attack on 22nd June 1981, in which the Mujaheddin-e Khalq blew up the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party. The lecturer said with emphasis, 'more than 72 people were killed that day' which struck me as a peculiar phrase. In fact about 78-9 people were killed but from the first moment after the explosion, in speeches and newspapers, the figure was given as 'more than 72', 72 of course being the number killed in Kerbala.

In the Spring referendum of 1979, in which voters were asked to cast ballots for or against the Islamic Republic, the ta'ziyeh colours of red and green played a significant role. The pro-Islamic Republic cards were green and those against were red. Similarly coloured ballots were used in the autumn of 1979 during the voting for the Islamic constitution which resulted - according to official reports – in an overwhelming victory for the greens. Simply through lighting upon a colour, the Islamic Republic could ally itself with Hossein, and its opponents with his killers. The poster urging the people to vote for the Islamic Republic was the hand of a martyr sticking out of the grave holding up a green card and underneath was written 'People – do not forget the martyrs for Islam.' Throughout the revolution and the early years of the war, Hossein and Kerbala became the paradigms for political action. In 1980 Khomeini in an open letter to Pope John Paul II said, 'Let me announce there that we are neither afraid of military interference nor are we afraid of economic siege, since we are Shiites and as Shiites we welcome any opportunity for sacrificing our blood.' This use of Hossein as a model for activism was a reversal of the passive role marked out for those who followed him from the Safavids onwards. But since the story of Kerbala is not a doctrine, but an event, it stood complete reinterpretation without losing any of its emotional force.

The imagery of martyrdom, Kerbala and Hossein was central to the war effort against Iraq and to the mobilisation of men and boys willing to walk over mine fields, bandannas of Hossein about their heads.

Ashura is still a major event. In a country with so little public life, it has become almost a festival in many of the major cities – while the religious intensity of the ritual observance is most powerful in rural areas. In up-town Tehran men slip on their smartest shirts and show off the muscles honed in gyms to assembled crowds of girls who would never normally be allowed to gather unchaperoned in public. Telephone numbers are passed, furtive glances exchanged as the groups of men pass by. In Shush, there was something of the mediaeval jousting competitions in the rows of chador-covered women on the west bank of the arena who sat watching the 30 or 40 young riders tearing past on their Arab horses, urging on their beasts with half an eye to see what impression they were making on the ladies to their right.

The Islamic Republic, however, has never been very comfortable with the theatrical form, or the ritualistic elements of the Muharram observances. *Ghame zadan* – the practice of hitting yourself with a sword over your head was banned in Iran though it continues in certain areas, and flagellation is quietly discouraged. A sculptor friend was refused permission to install an antique *alam* in an oil company foyer on the grounds that the government was trying to discourage ‘that type of thing.’ For many religious authorities it has always been sacrilegious for moral men to portray a holy personage and there has been a slightly ambivalent approach to the form. Next year the first ten days of Ashura will fall on 22 Bahman, the anniversary of the victory of the revolution and the birth of the Islamic Republic. This will be the perfect opportunity to examine the extent to which the Islamic Republic has both championed Hossein and ignored many of *ta’ziyeh*’s oldest ritualistic and popular elements.

As its prominence continues to wane at home, *ta’ziyeh* garners more international attention, particularly in the United States where research is spearheaded by Peter Chelkowski. *Ta’ziyeh* is an Islamic anomaly, an Iranian peculiarity, and a deeply powerful theatrical form rich in strong elements of western theatre history – from catharsis to *Verfremdung* – but with unique elements that make it a fascinating object of study for those interested in martyrdom, Shiism, Iranian identity, or theatre in general. This week at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Abbas Kiarostami’s *ta’ziyeh* video installation is, in my opinion, one of the only successful stagings of the form outside Iran, because, unlike many previous events, it includes the Iranian audience. It is a beautiful evocation of the relation between actor and audience and the power of *ta’ziyeh* in rural Iran. I highly recommend it.

I would like to thank the Iran Society, and Mr Michael Noel-Clarke and Mrs Janet Rady for all their support and encouragement during my studies in Iran.

ALBORZ RETROSPECTIVE
LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 17 NOVEMBER 2005
BY J.G.R. HARDING

Great mountains have always inspired awe and reverence and Iran's 600 mile long Alborz Range is no exception. Zoroastrian cosmology placed it pivotally in the Hara Beresaiti the universal range encircling the earth that was subsequently incorporated into Islamic geography as *Kaf*, the Camel's Hump. Linked intrinsically with creation myths, ancient ritual, demi-gods, demons and the sacred bird Simurgh, the Alborz of Zendian tradition was at once the barrier all souls must cross to reach paradise and the stage on which the Shahnameh's heroes Zal, Kai Kaus and Fereydoun lived out their epics.

My three visits to the Alborz in 1956, 1970 and 2001 remain precious mountain memories and the first in 1956, as a member of the six man Cambridge North Persian Expedition, influenced the course of my life. The 1950s marked a high water mark for the undergraduate expeditions of a post National Service generation who took work less seriously than play. The Alborz was chosen as an area then little known to mountaineers, yet within the scope of a relatively inexperienced party. Its instigator and leader Bill Norton persuaded the eminent Persian scholar Lawrence Lockhart and Sir Clairmont Skrine to be our sponsors. Having escorted Reza Shah Pahlavi into Mauritian exile in 1941, Skrine might not have been universally popular, yet he subsequently served HMG in Iran for another six years. To us he was a font of information, introduction and advice – particularly to remain clean shaven and to bring dark suits.

The Expedition's aim, after driving to Iran overland, was to explore the massifs of Takht-i Suleiman 60 miles North West of Tehran and Orim Niswa 200 miles to the East. A year's worth of canvassing and preparation raised £1,600 (at least £20,000 today) thanks to generous support from the Mount Everest Foundation, the Royal Geographical Society, Cambridge colleges, the British Museum of Natural History and other bodies. Ninety five commercial firms donated free or cut price equipment, while BP and Purfina supplied free petrol for much of the trip. On 21 June 1956 a Mansion House reception signalled the start of a 4,000 mile overland journey in two ex-US Army Jeeps painted Cambridge Blue with trailers carrying a ton of food and equipment plus fourteen jerry cans for fuel. For the next three weeks we struggled to meet petrol pick-up deadlines over appallingly corrugated roads when the din made conversation impossible. Brushes with EOKA in Greece, confrontations with giant spiders and centipedes in Anatolia, two military arrests in Turkey, persistent radiator overheating (we'd been sold the wrong type), mechanical failures and four trailer overturns (which broke towing hooks, smashed stoves and collecting boxes and punctured a giant tin of honey) left a final tally of 35 punctures, 16 new tyres and an overdraft which took a year to pay off.

Reaching Tehran battered and exhausted, HE Sir Roger Stevens's invitation to camp in the British Embassy's Persian garden at Gulhak was paradise enow. Many kind people including Sir Roger and Lady Stevens, Miss Palmer Smith and Mr J.B. Ventham head of BP Iran entertained us after we had presented ourselves to a formidable colonel, the chairman of the Mountaineering Federation of Iran. The colonel supported our Takht-i Suleiman objective but dismissed Orim Niswa as a mole hill. To keep an eye on us the dashing Captain Akbar Ghaffari, ex-Chasseurs Alpins, was attached as liaison officer. The climax of a hectic week of re-provisioning was a royal palace reception at which Prince Gholam Reza presented medals to commemorate the visit of this first British mountaineering expedition to Iran.

Alam Kuh (4,826m) rather than Takht-i Suleiman (4,619m) is the apex of a compact group of genuinely Alpine peaks whose name commemorates King Solomon's enticement of the Queen of Sheba to share his summit bivouac or perish from hypothermia. Although we had studied the area's climbing history from the annals of both the 1936 German and 1954 French expeditions, the Embassy's First Secretary scoffed at our report that it even spawned four glaciers. At the end of the 19th century, one Colonel Stewart¹ had got within three miles of Solomon's Throne. In 1931 Freya Stark saw it from the Salambar Pass and between 1932 and 1934 Douglas Busk, then at the Tehran embassy, approached from the South to make the second European ascent of Alam Kuh, but found his way barred to Takht-i Suleiman by a four-mile stretch of impassable precipice. Not until 1936 did Dr Hans Bobek's Austrian/German expedition make the first European ascents of Solomon's Throne and later produce what is still the best map of the area.



The Alborz is a range of contrasts. Its northern slopes ring the Caspian like a green necklace whereas the southern slopes rise from the plateau in a wall of stark parallel ridges. After climbing 5,000 feet to the watershed through the bleak ravines and parched gorges of the Tehran-Chalus road, we emerged from the mile long Kandevan Tunnel to a world of lush forest, mist and rain. Our roadhead was the isolated village of Rudbarek in the Kalardasht, home to Kajavand Kurds transplanted from the Zagros at the end of the 18th century by the Qajar Dynasty's founder Agha Mohamed Khan to pacify the locals. Here, in a setting of wood cabins and hay ricks on stilts reminiscent of 19th century Switzerland, men logged timber down the Sardab Rud; unveiled women dressed like exotic birds in tribal costume and everyone jumped when the headman ordered up a ten mule caravan and a dozen chickens for the slaughter.

An extended three day approach march by the ancient trans-Alborz trading route first followed the Sardab Rud through majestic stands of oak, ash, walnut, beech, elm and hornbeam in a forest still sheltering the Hyrcanean tiger once familiar to Roman arenas but today tragically extinct. Leaving the Caspian mists behind, we trekked up the stark Khurramdasht to emerge from the Tang-i Gali gorge into the Hazarchal, the Place of a Thousand Hollows. Here at over 4,000m, in an enchanting upland basin encircled by snow peaks, we pitched our base camp at the foot of a small glacier. The Austrian Theodor Kotschy had done the same over a hundred years before in 1843, intent on climbing Solomon's Throne. But approaching from the south, he failed to realise that the massive whale back face of Alam Kuh confronting him was actually the higher peak so carried on northwards only to be rebuffed by blizzards and disaffected muleteers. Alam Kuh was subsequently climbed from Hazarchal by the German brothers Bornmüller during their six month botanical exploration of the Alborz in 1902.

Our 17 days around Solomon's Throne were enlivened by visits from inquisitive bears, sightings of ibex and lammergeirs and, thanks to Keith McDougall's marksmanship, mouflon steak for supper. The sun always shone from a brilliant blue sky but in truth Hazarchal's mountaineering

was disappointing even though we climbed the principal peaks and put up new routes on friable ridges. To extend our scope, the two naturalists and muleteer Safar botanized in remote neighbouring valleys and supped with nomadic tribes while the climbing party established an uncomfortable bivouac on the north-west glacier, having double carried to a high col and thence descended the vertiginous scree slopes that the colonel had dismissed as impossible. From here we spent four days exploring the massif's northern flank dominated by Alam Kuh's tremendous 800m north wall then overlooking the two mile long Sarchal Glacier now shrunk to a vestige. I celebrated my 22nd birthday on Solomon's Throne but the reputation of Alam Kuh's North Buttress, likened by its first ascensionist Steinauer in 1936 to the 'Grandes Jurasses' an Alpine extreme, daunted us. Climbing apart, McDougall shot a film while others made a sketch map, painted, photographed, collected zoological and botanical specimens for the British Museum and Norton recorded birds for the journal 'Ibis'.

We left Hazarchal reluctantly as melting snows gave way to fields of flowers and shepherds armed with arquebuses brought their flocks up from the valleys. A Caspian interlude, blocked roads and an unscheduled return to Tehran disrupted the revised climbing programme suggested by the colonel to explore the '*unclimbed and glaciated*' mountains of Shemshak. Without Captain Ghaffari's muleteer know-how we had to settle for a one mule caravan and a week's camping in the remotest reaches of the Lar Valley amongst its burnished hills and the black tented Shahsavans whose ferocious guard dogs tempered tribal hospitality. Several abortive reconnaissance probes in search of the colonel's coy snow ranges confirmed that none existed so painting, botanizing and insights into nomadic life filled most of the days. The onset of the Shahsavans autumn migration to the plains south of Tehran with the men driving vast flocks of sheep and goats and their haughty, unveiled women riding be-tasselled camels astride colourful *gilims*, set our minds to the prospect of our own 4,000 mile homeward run.



But not before a last shy at Demavand, the crown of Iran and at 5,670m the highest mountain between the Atlantic and the Hindu Kush. Traditionally inaccessible to mortals and the abode of genii, demons, spirits and the tyrannical monster Zahak whose foul breath still reeks sulphurous fumes, the mediaeval geographer Yakut nonetheless recorded ascents by the men of Tabaristan long before the British diplomat Taylor Thompson climbed this dormant volcano in 1837. Bad weather can turn the normal route's long, hard slog into a serious undertaking but in this we were lucky and our time of just under 21 hours up and down from Rehnah must rank as one of the faster ones.

Fourteen years elapsed before I next visited Iran in December 1970 en route to England from Australia. Winter snow and cloudless skies had transformed the dun Southern ridges of summer into a white wonderland. Determined to revisit the scenes of youth, I drove to Rudbarez with my

hosts Anthony and Sarah to find Iranian mountaineering now well established. Our faithful muleteer Safar was now the Chief Guide and after spending a night in the bosom of his family in a smart new refuge, the four of us took a nostalgic walk up the Sardab Rud in perfect weather. Solomon's snows never looking more beautiful than on that day and I vowed that sometime I would return.

Forty-five years on from that first Cambridge expedition I fulfilled a dream when my wife, three friends and I hitched our star to the Tehran travel firm of Caravan Sahra for a three week holiday. Iran might have changed in some respects but not its mountains nor the spirit of its people. We flew from Tehran to Ardabil and from there set a course for Kuh-i Sabalan, at 4,711m the third summit of Iran. Like Demavand and Ararat, Sabalan is an ancient volcano but unlike them takes the form of a multi-faceted massif. Men say that Zoroaster composed the *Avesta* on its summit and that Sheikh Safi ud-Din, founder of the Safavid dynasty, studied Sufism at its base where no less than eight prophets and imams are buried. To Sir Roger Stevens it was '*the most haunting mountain of all the mountains of Iran*' and to our mountain guide Parviz, who had climbed Demavand 52 times and was about to make this his 25th of Sabalan, his favourite.

Peering en route into the depths of the Shiven Bareh gorge, haunt of bear, wolf and golden eagle, we climbed past the grazing grounds of an Azeri speaking branch of the Shahsaven who summer on the slopes of Sabalan and winter on the Moghan Steppe. A sleepless night on the icy concrete floor of the snow filled Hosseini refuge was prelude to a breathless ascent to Sabalan's frozen crater lake through thunder and snow flurries. From here the Victorian General Monteith claimed to have seen Demavand 270 miles away, but those were less polluted times and our reward was to savour the genius of the place.

Ever since reading Freya Stark's *Valleys of the Assassins* I had wanted to repeat her 1931 Alborz crossing from Qazvin to the Caspian via the Alamut Valley. And so it was that after scaling the ruined Eagles' Nest on the Rock of Alamut and mourning the Mongol Hulagu's wanton destruction of Hasan-i Sabah's priceless library, we picnicked off cherries and yoghurt in a walnut grove at its foot and then drove on to Garmerud. From here, four camps saw us across the range passing the village of Pichuban, habitable only in high summer with its grandstand view of the snow streaked Shah Alborz; on and over the Salambar Pass and its ruined caravanserai and thence down the Ser Hizar Valley by a dizzying path, jostled by a ragged caravan of mules, donkeys, gaily dressed ladies bowed down with bundles and men with children on their shoulders making their way up to the summer villages. As I stopped to photograph the graceful pyramid of Takht-i Sulaiman and the jutting prow of Alam Kuh framed at the valley's head by converging ridges of virgin forest, memories of yesteryear flooded back. There was one last glimpse of Solomon's snows from the pass above Kalardasht on the road back to Tehran and then, like dissolving dreams, they were gone for ever.

1. For many years consul in the Turkoman and Caspian country of Iran [*Ed*].

ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION IN IRAN

LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 13 DECEMBER 2005 BY BEN CUDDON: IRAN SOCIETY TRAVEL SCHOLAR 2005

During my visit I was only able to see a very small sample of Iran's architectural heritage and only scratch the surface of what is happening in the world of conservation. Therefore, rather than go into great detail, my aim here is to present an overview of this field and to outline some of the key issues in the discussion.

Conservation is not just about preservation; it is also about giving buildings new definition as part of an ongoing process of interpreting and reinterpreting the past. It has no final, terminal solutions; just as each generation must reinterpret history according to its own needs, our physical surroundings must go through the same process of continual reinterpretation and redefinition.

Iran has a long tradition of conservation. There is not space here to go into the details of this history and relatively little is known about it anyway. What I aim to do in this article is outline the situation in the country as it stands today.

The body that has overall responsibility for the protection of cultural heritage is the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation (the *Sazman-e Miras-e Farhangi-e Keshvar*). The organisation in its current form dates back to 1985 when a new law for the conservation of cultural heritage was approved. However, its genealogy can be traced right back to the Qajar era when the very first institutions active in this field emerged. The first significant legislation over the protection of cultural heritage came in 1930 when a law was passed concerning the preservation of national antiquities before the end of the Zand dynasty (1794). Over subsequent decades state authority over the protection of cultural heritage slowly expanded and the department of the government responsible for conservation has been through a series of incarnations.

ICHO has its central office in Tehran but each province also has its own regional office dealing with conservation. Whilst ICHO is the organisation that has overall responsibility for this field, there are numerous other actors involved in conservation work around the country. Foreign conservation teams have been very active in Iran, particularly over the last century. Italian restorers have carried out work on the mausoleum at Soltaniyyeh for example and a Japanese team was responsible for restoration work at the Some'e-ye Bayazid Bastami complex near Shahrud. In addition to this there are also many people involved in conservation work every day right across the country, who may not be working under the banner of any particular organisation. It may be an individual restoring a private home or community work for the protection of a building or monument. There is a great deal of this kind of local, 'bottom-up' conservation work that may not be under the jurisdiction of an official conservation body.

Iran has one of the richest architectural heritages of any region in the world and right across the country there are buildings that are being protected. These range from grand monuments such as mosques, tombs or caravanserais to whole urban areas. In such areas the buildings may not have the same aesthetic or monumental value as a grander structure, but they nevertheless constitute a rich and valuable historic fabric.

There are many things that are posing a threat to the architectural heritage of Iran. Firstly there is a certain amount of casual neglect of the past, which may result partly from the fact that some

people, particularly the young, equate their history and heritage with a past that is irrational and backward, something that needs to be rejected in order for the country to embrace a modern, 'progressive' way of life. But it is important not to overstate this point. I encountered many young people who were interested in protecting their heritage. In Torbat-e Jam for example I spoke with a group of young boys who said they were very interested in the heritage of their country but wished that they could have more opportunities to visit interesting historical sites as part of their schooling. So of course it would be wrong to think that people in Iran simply have a casual disregard for their history.

Of greater significance is that fact that for many people their everyday need for domestic security is far more important than protecting architectural heritage. Iran has a very young population; 70% of its people are under the age of thirty. The primary concern for most of these young people is finding a place to live and starting a family. Throughout the country one can see new housing developments that are being undertaken at the expense of old buildings. This problem is compounded by the fact that a large number of Iran's historic buildings have been constructed of brick. Bricks are readily re-usable and can easily be taken from one building and used to construct another. Often buildings are not just being destroyed to make way for new housing, but are being dismantled and their materials re-used. Although legislation has been passed to prevent people doing this I heard lots of stories of the lengths to which people go to get their hands on materials; one way is to flood a building and then simply wait for it to fall down.

But perhaps the biggest threat to buildings in Iran has come from the changing nature of Iranian society. Major shifts in lifestyle that have taken place over the last 100 years have jeopardised the future of many buildings. The principal problem is that many of the families who lived in the old urban areas have moved out because they are no longer desirable places to live. As a result, throughout Iran, and in cities across the Middle East, the old town centres are in a very poor condition.

There are several reasons for this demographic shift. The most important is that old urban centres have streets too narrow for cars and people want the convenience of driving right up to their houses. The houses themselves can also be inconvenient to live in; they are difficult to heat during the winter and may have limited and unreliable electricity supply. There may also be problems with the local facilities such as limited rubbish disposal and fewer shops and general amenities and services. The overall result of these accumulated issues is that the wealthy people who used to inhabit old urban centres have opted instead to live in more comfortable houses towards the edge of the towns and cities. And it is not just the houses that are being left empty and vulnerable. There is a whole network of public facilities that serve these old areas, and many of them are now becoming obsolete and their buildings abandoned; madrasas, for example, along with parts of the bazaar and also hammams. Once people start to move out the whole urban fabric begins to degenerate.

The deterioration of old town centres is taking place all over Iran. For example four years ago in Semnan a main road was built right through the centre of the town to ease traffic flow, a project undertaken at the expense of many old buildings. The centre of Shiraz has suffered particularly badly. Here, the houses in the old city centre are still owned by the wealthy families who lived there. However, the new residents who have moved into the houses are predominantly refugees from Afghanistan, which means that they are very poor and don't have the money to pay for their upkeep and aren't particularly interested in their upkeep anyway because they have little historic or emotional attachment to these buildings. But these are just isolated examples. I consistently saw this phenomenon in all the towns I visited across the country including Damghan, Shahrud,

Isfahan and Kashan and it is one of the biggest problems the *Miras* faces in its work. The one exception to this was Yazd which in contrast to other city centres I saw, seems to have remained in relatively good condition.

In the light of these factors, I want now to look at some of the conservation strategies that are being employed. Turning to the urban areas first, over the last two decades there have been many schemes to regenerate old historic town centres. These schemes have been very successful in protecting threatened buildings. One of the most effective methods has been to adapt buildings for a new use; retaining the structure but breathing new life into the building by giving it a new purpose. In Isfahan I was kindly shown around by a firm of architects, who inhabit the old British consulate in Jolfa and who have beautifully restored the interior of the building. This is a particularly fine example (and won an award from UNESCO), but there is a lot of highly innovative re-use taking place across the country. In Zanjan I visited a Safavid caravanserai which now houses a restaurant. In Yazd I visited several old houses that have been converted into hotels and other buildings that have been converted into schools, offices and art centres. It was in Yazd that I saw undoubtedly the most interesting example of creative re-use: a 400 year-old water cistern that had been converted into a gymnasium!

Many of these projects have been carried out by private individuals or enterprises. They reflect a trend in recent years where ICHO has been trying to move away from taking sole responsibility for all conservation work and has instead encouraged private sector involvement in conservation projects. ICHO has recognised that effective conservation of urban areas must involve the participation of as many people as possible and is striving for a more 'bottom up' approach to its work. Across the country in its various regional offices it is trying to foster more private sector involvement in conservation. In Yazd for example ICHO has worked very hard to build strong links between itself and various private projects. Now, instead of acting as a policeman for conservation, ICHO acts more as a facilitator to other people who want to carry out conservation work, offering technical advice, financial support and overseeing work that is being undertaken. It has moved away from taking sole responsibility to a position of supervision and coordination.

Away from the urban areas, and turning to individual monuments, the problems we have to consider are rather different. Obviously here private sector conservation is unlikely. Often these buildings are in isolated areas, now completely detached from the human societies that once gave them life. They remain as wonderful monuments to past civilisation, but it may not be clear what exactly should be done with them. One of the most striking examples I saw of this problem was in Khorasan. Just south of Taybad there is a beautiful madrasa in a village called Khargird. It is one of the finest examples of its type. Sadly it now stands empty and abandoned. Some restoration work has been undertaken on the exterior, but no overall strategy has been developed for what to do with it.

However, in other cases planned programmes of work have been undertaken. As with buildings in urban areas, one approach is to adapt them for a new purpose. Between Shahrud and Sabzevar for example, the Miandasht caravanserai complex consists of a mixture of Safavid and Qajar buildings. The caravanserai once would have been an important stopping point for merchants and traders on the Silk Road, but the establishment has been abandoned for many years. It is now being converted into a tourist complex by ICHO and will include a hotel, leisure and cultural centre. It will obviously be used to accommodate pilgrims making the journey to and from Mashhad.

Another option with great monuments is to try to display them as they were originally intended to be enjoyed. I saw many buildings where extensive restoration work has been undertaken with a view to opening them up for more public access and restoring them to their original glory. Two particularly interesting examples are the Robat-e Sharaf caravanserai, two hours north-east of Mashhad, and the mausoleum of the Mongol Sultan Uljaitu at Soltaniyyeh near Zanjan. Robat-e Sharaf was constructed in the twelfth century and then became abandoned. Until recently it was a complete ruin but in the last few years it has been thoroughly restored. When I visited there was still much work planned but it has certainly been transformed from its ruined condition. Just down the road from Robat-e Sharaf is Robat-e Mahi, another fine caravanserai. It currently lies buried under earth but it will also be excavated and restored in the future.

A similar approach has been adopted with the mausoleum at Soltaniyyeh. This building was left to decay from roughly the 17th century and until the 1960s stood largely untouched and surrounded by small village dwellings. In 1969 restoration work was begun by an Italian team. Restoration has continued up until today, with ICHO in charge of the project and Soltaniyyeh being placed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in April 2005. As with Robat-e Sharaf, extensive work has been undertaken both on the interior of the building and the roof. The site around the mausoleum has been cleared, fenced off and gardens are being planted .

Finally, some mention must be made of the most prominent conservation project in Iran of recent years; the citadel at Bam. I did not have time to visit Bam but of course this is a conservation project that has attracted a lot of international attention since 2003 and raises many important questions about reconstruction of damaged monuments. At a conference in London last November the Bam conservation project director gave a presentation about the work that was going on. It is such an extensive site that they are still in the process of documenting and assessing and as yet no clear plan has been laid out. But it was acknowledged that wholesale reconstruction of the citadel and surroundings buildings, though advocated by some, might not be desirable. The earthquake was a terrible and tragic event, but it is nevertheless an important part of Bam's history. Whilst reconstruction would make the site more presentable, to wipe out any evidence of what happened in 2003 would be to hide an important chapter in its history.

Let us now round up this overview with some concluding remarks and consider some future developments.

Firstly, in the future there will no doubt be more involvement from international bodies such as UNESCO and Iran will add to the list of six sites already on the world heritage list. There may also be more funding made available for conservation projects. When I asked people about the main problems they encountered in conservation work the recurring response I got was a lack of money. But it is important to remember that money does not simply resolve matters by itself. Skilled expertise and personnel are just as crucial.

In terms of the conservation of old town centres, much can be learnt by looking at other parts of the world. Throughout the Middle East, and indeed in other places around the world, the deterioration of old town centres is a real problem that is being dealt with in enterprising and innovative ways. There is a great deal of cross-cultural debate and flow of ideas about different approaches to conservation and this will surely result in new and successful schemes in the future.

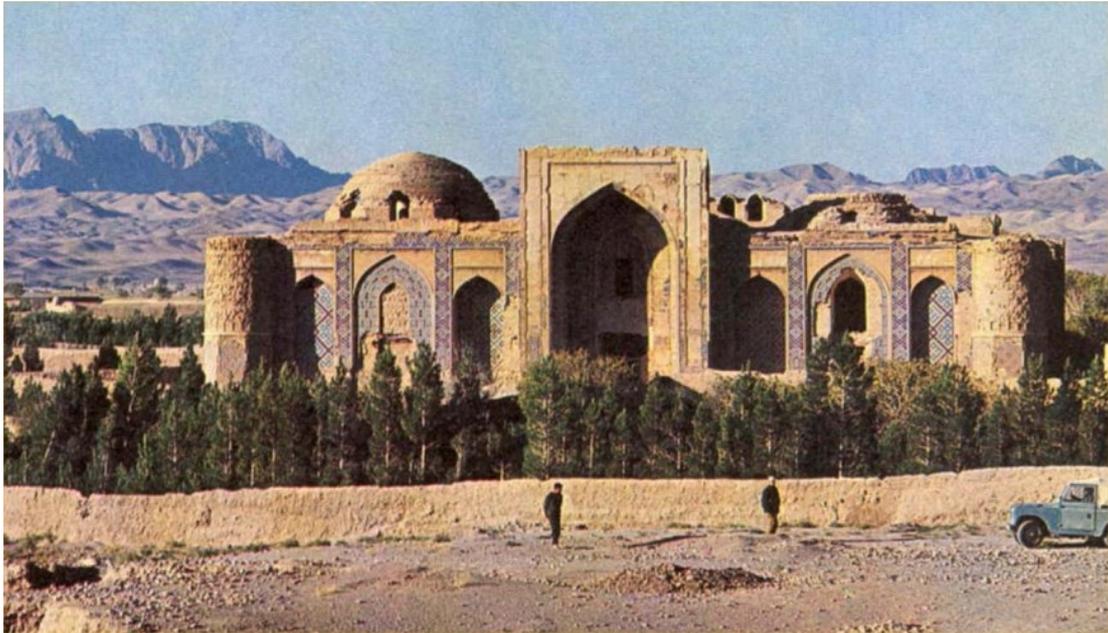
Perhaps the most successful schemes will be those which mobilise people from below. As described earlier, these have resulted in some of the most successful conservation work in the country. These could be further strengthened with more outside support. In Semnan I spoke to a

man who wanted to set up a ‘Society for the Protection of Old Semnan’ and he wondered if there were people in Britain who would be interested in supporting such a scheme. Such projects of course are difficult because they require money and skilled personnel but in the future perhaps such ideas may come to fruition.

To conclude, I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs Farzam of the ICHO and to all of her colleagues, who made themselves available to enable me to pursue my project, whose success is owed entirely to their very generous assistance and warm hospitality.



Inside Khargid



The madrasah of Khargird



Rubat-e sharaf caravanserai - before restoration



Rubat-e sharaf caravanserai - after restoration



Soltaniyyah before



Soltaniyyah after

SADEQ HEDAYAT AS A SCHOLAR
LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 27 APRIL 2006
BY DR SHADAB VAJDI

Sadeq Hedayat is primarily known as a writer and most critics have written or talked about him in that capacity. To many people outside literary circles, he is simply the author of “The Blind Owl”. He is also known for his pessimism and his Kafkaesque approach to what he finds wrong with human society. He certainly was a prominent writer. But there was another side to him. He was also a noteworthy scholar in his own right. His research on the Pahlavi language and his translations of works from Pahlavi into modern Persian need not be overshadowed by his authorship. He has also carried out research on Persian folklore and on some works of classical Persian literature. I feel we owe it to Hedayat to evaluate and appreciate him as a scholar as well as a writer.

Whenever I think about Hedayat’s research in various fields and whenever I visualise his love of pre-Islamic languages and literature of Iran and his close attention to Iranian folklore and the works of Omar Khayyam, I begin to wonder why and how a person of such vast and numerous interests in various fields, coupled with perseverance and accuracy of research, could, at the same time, suffer from philosophical despair to the extent of being pushed to suicide. One might point out that Khayyam, too, had the same type of mentality. He was primarily an astronomer and a mathematician but, in his poetic capacity, he was bitter and pessimistic towards human destiny. It should be noted, however, that Omar Khayyam’s philosophical pessimism led him to Epicureanism. He advocated appreciation of the short life and enjoyment of the passing moment whereas Hedayat pushed himself into a dead-end. When I go through Hedayat’s research as a scholar, my attention is again drawn to the contradictory aspects of his character and I ask myself how a scholarly mind can suffer from depression. Perhaps I can answer this question by a poem from Hafez of Shiraz: ‘My life is a puzzle that can only be deciphered by magic and by fables.’ [*Vojud-e man mo’ammaist, Hafez / ke tahqiqash fosun ast o fasane.*]

Let us now go through Sadeq Hedayat’s research as a scholar and begin by his work on the legend of Vis and Ramin. This research appeared in the form of a detailed essay in the literary periodical *Payam-e Nou*, printed in Tehran in 1945. Hedayat pays attention to various aspects of the legend. It is a love story adapted by Fakhreddin Gorgani in the 12th century. The original text, dating from pre-Islamic times, was in Pahlavi and Gorgani put his Modern Persian adaptation into verse. The story deals with mutual love between Vis, daughter of Shahroo, and Ramin, the younger brother of Shah Mo’bad [or, literally, King Priest]. There are obstacles in the way, such as the fact that Vis is engaged to her own brother Viru. More importantly, the king himself marries Vis. After many episodes, Shah Mo’bad meets an accident and dies. Vis and Ramin, free from obstacles, attain their wish and live together. Eventually, Vis dies and Ramin retires to a fire temple for the rest of his life. Hedayat praises Fakhreddin Gorgani for his skill in the way he includes hymns, riddles and colloquial expressions in his adaptation of Vis and Ramin and says that Gorgani has, to some extent, altered the original story and has, moreover, used expressions of his own time. Hedayat also refers to the language used by Gorgani and gives a classification of words, which must have been old, or nearly obsolete, at Gorgani’s time. He talks about information used by Gorgani in his adaptation: information such as Zoroastrian traditions, belief in the mode of creation of time and space and the division of the world into seven regions, reference to the folklore such as belief in astrology and in auspicious stars and those of bad omen, respect for light and fire and greeting a lamp or a light. Hedayat also classifies those verses of Vis and Ramin in which Persian expressions and proverbs have been used.

Another dimension to Sadeq Hedayat's work as a scholar is his valuable research into the extinct Pahlavi language. In his younger days, he had studied Pahlavi in Bombay under scholars of Pahlavi among the Parsee community. In particular, he benefited from the teachings of a scholar called Bahram-e Goor Anklesaria. Altogether, Hedayat translated seven Pahlavi books or texts into modern Persian. They are: *Zand-e Vahman Yasn*, a Zoroastrian religious text in simple language, which gives an account of how the events of the world appear in Zoroaster's dream; *Karname-ye Ardeshir-e Babakan*; four chapters of *Gozaresh-e Goman Shekan*; *Gojaste Abaalish*; *Shahrestanha-ye Iranshahr* or the provinces of Sassanian Iran; *Yadegar-e Jamasb* or the legacy of Jamasb and the advent of Shah Bahram-e Varjavand.

Karname-ye Ardeshir-e Babakan is an account of the reign of the first Sassanian king. The text mixes facts with fables. *Gojaste Abaalish* (or Abaalish the renegade) is an account of a debate between Abaale and a Zoroastrian clergyman called Azar Faranbagh, the son of Farrokhzad, in the presence of Ma'moon, the Abbasid caliph of the 9th century A.D. This is one of the prominent Pahlavi texts written in post-Sassanian times. It is interesting to note that 150 years after the Arab conquest and the end of the Sassanian empire, Pahlavi was still understood and used in a debate at the court of an Abbasid caliph. In his translation of *Gojaste Abaalish* into modern Persian, Hedayat has made some use of the English translation of the text provided by Anklesaria. The translation into English had been done by another Parsee scholar named Hoomi-Chacha.

Gozaresh-e Gomaan-Shekan is another post-Sassanian Pahlavi text whose author was Mardaan-Farrokh, son of Urmozd-daad. The work apparently dates from mid-ninth century AD. The book comprises sixteen chapters in some of which Mardaan-Farrokh gives answers to questions posed by Mehryaar, son of Mehmaad of Esfahan. Hedayat has translated chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16 of this book. Here, I should mention that the entirety of the sixteen chapters of *Gozaresh-e Goman-Shekan* was translated into Persian by the Pahlavi scholar Mrs. Parvin Shakiba and published in the United States in 2001. Hedayat's translation of chapters 13 to 16 was printed in Tehran in 1943. In Chapter 13, Mardaan-Farrokh criticises the Old Testament. For example, he gives the opinion that the divine curse on Adam is unjust as it affects all human beings and not just the culprit. In connection with Chapter 14, the author gives the opinion that it is wrong to portray God as angry and vengeful as anger and vindictiveness are not compatible with divine compassion and forgiveness. In Chapter 15, he criticises Christianity. Among other things, he refers to a particular belief attributed to Christians, i.e. to the belief that Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she was going to be made pregnant by a clean breeze (this may be a variant of the Holy Spirit). Mardaan Farrokh maintains that as no one but Mary herself saw Angel Gabriel, it could not be ascertained whether she had told the truth. In Chapter 16, Manichaeism is severely attacked and, among other things, Mardaan-Farrokh argues that as Mani believes that Ahriman [the Devil] is the creator of the material world, it follows that procreation and agriculture would help Ahriman and must therefore be avoided, which is absurd. The question arises whether Hedayat was in agreement with the author's criticism of these religions, since he translated only these four chapters.

Yaadegaar-e Jaamaasb [the legacy of Jaamaasb] is a book in which King Goshtaasb poses questions to the sage Jaamaasb on various religious and geographical matters and Jaamaasb answers the king's questions. Hedayat has translated chapters 16 and 17 of this book into modern Persian. These two chapters deal with Zoroaster's prophecy on the future of Iran.

The Advent of Shah-Bahraam-e Varjavand was a short translation, which appeared in the literary periodical *Sokhan* in 1925. *Aamadan-e Shah Bahram-e Varjavand*, to give it its original title, had been written after the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th Century A.D. It had rhyme and rhythm. It

related the story of the advent of Shah Bahram and the revival of Zoroastrianism. Among other things, the text refers to the destruction of fire temples by Arabs.

Shahrestaanhaa-ye Iranshahr [the Provinces of Iran] is an essay about how a number of cities were built by Iranian kings and princes. The identity of the author is not known. The author has given the names of cities and their creators in some sort of an alphabetical order. It appears that the author made some use of the texts that once belonged to Daqiqi and Ferdowsi in the tenth century A.D. and added to the information found in those texts. Hedayat added detailed footnotes on the meanings of words, the location of cities and the identity of their creators.

One aspect of Hedayat's interest in Pahlavi was his general interest in the history of ancient Iran. Another aspect was his preoccupation with the Modern Persian script, which is based on the Arabic script and whether it was desirable to change it into a more phonetic system based on the Latin script. He wrote a detailed essay spanning two issues of the periodical *Sokhan* in 1945. In this essay, he went into the details of the Pahlavi script and the question of adopting a phonetic alphabet. The essay was written at a time when the debate on the desirability of changing the Persian alphabet was at one of its periodical peaks. What we read in Hedayat's essay shows his vast knowledge and his detailed studies. He is, however, in my humble opinion, slightly misguided in some of his arguments. For instance, he gives one or two examples of how a defective system of writing such as Arabic has, in his words, corrupted Persian words, that is to say, has led to changes in how they are pronounced. But the truth of the matter is that changes in pronunciation do not necessarily depend on how words are written. In the course of time, they occur anyway.

Another field of Hedayat's scholarly interest was folklore. He drew up an overall plan for research into local folklore in any region. In this comprehensive scheme, he showed how someone researching folklore should investigate all aspects of people's lives: from financial matters and means of livelihood to their languages, dialects, beliefs, religions, sects, arts, crafts, traditions and customs. With his knowledge of people's mentality, especially in villages and remote regions, he shows how it is possible to persuade people to talk by creating an informal atmosphere and adopting a sincere, natural attitude. At the end of the essay depicting his plan, Hedayat refers to the defects of the Persian alphabet when it has to be used for recording regional or local languages and dialects. For this purpose, he recommends a special alphabet, which had been created for this purpose by Dr. Khanlari and Roger Lescaux. This particular alphabet has letters, or combinations of letters, for representing all vowels and consonants that can be found in almost the totality of Persian dialects. One aspect of Hedayat's interest in folklore is his compilation of a collection of songs for children, lullabies and popular songs of various regions. He also describes a number of children's games that are accompanied by singing and chanting.

Let us look at some other aspects of Hedayat's love for all matters to do with the Persian language. Here I would like to mention his scholarly essay on a work of lexicography that had been compiled in the 11th century. I am referring to *Loghat-e Fors-e Assadi* or Assadi's book of Persian words. Assadi was an 11th century poet whose main work of poetry was a volume under the title of *Garshasb-Naame*. Hedayat's essay appeared in the periodical *Moosiqi* [Music] in 1940. His essay deals with the etymology of Persian words. It should be noted that *Loghat-e Fors-e Assadi* is the oldest existing dictionary of Persian words. It derives its words from poems and mentions the name of many hitherto unknown poets. The first time that the work appeared in print was in 1879. In that year, Powel Horn had it printed and published in Germany. The basis of this publication was a manuscript acquired from the Vatican's library. In 1940, the Iranian scholar Abbas Eqbal Ashtiani had it printed and published in Iran. The order of words in *Loghat-e Fors-e*

Assadi is based on their final letters instead of their initial ones. In his essay, Hedayat uses the Pahlavi roots of many words in order to show that, in his opinion, Assadi has provided either incorrect or incomplete explanations. For instance, he asserts that the word Serkes is a variation of Serkesh or Serkis who was a famous player of musical instruments during the Sassanian rule and not, as Assadi asserts, the name for a chanting bird. He also points out that the word Neev means good and not a brave man which is the meaning given by Assadi. In his appraisal of *Loghat-e Fors-e Assadi*, Hedayat asserts that works of poetry used by Assadi as the basis of his work are not quite correct or authentic. In Hedayat's opinion, many of the poems had been distorted before reaching Assadi. Some of the distortions had been caused by the replacement of original words by more difficult ones, probably to show the erudition of the scribe. Some other distortions had been brought about by the replacement of original words by words used in local dialects, possibly for improving the rhyme or the rhythm or simply by way of regional chauvinism. Hedayat even says that Persian and Pahlavi words that have been recorded with their correct meanings in *Loghat-e Fors-e Assadi* are so rare that their presence can be considered purely accidental. Nevertheless, having criticised the work, he still believes that *Loghat-e Fors-e Assadi* is a prominent and useful work in the field of Persian lexicography and etymology.

One of the earliest writings of Sadeq Hedayat is an introduction he wrote in 1924 for the Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam. This shows his fascination with Khayyam since he was very young. The introduction shows that despite his youth and relative immaturity, Hedayat was already familiar with books published in the West on Persian literature. For example, he quotes Professor Edward Browne on the account given about Khayyam in *Chahar Maqaale* [Four Essays] of Nezami Arouzi, who was Khayyam's contemporary. The introduction, on the other hand, is an indication of Hedayat's knowledge of classical Persian sources. He criticises some of the accounts given in such classical works. For examples, he refers to the prevalent and popular assertion that Khayyam, Hassan Sabbah, leader of the Ismailite Assassins and Khaje Nezam-ol-Molk, the Grand Vizir of Malek Shah, the Seljuk king, had been school-mates. Hedayat refutes this popular assertion by referring to the dates of births of the three. Hedayat also mentions the numerous printed collections of Khayyam's Rubaiyyat published in Iran, India and Turkey as well as manuscripts. He concludes that the most authentic collection of Khayyam's Rubaiyyat is a manuscript in Oxford's Bodleian Library. This manuscript dates from the 15th century and gives only 185 of the Rubaiyyat. Hedayat also refers to translations of the Rubaiyyat produced up to that time. At the end of the article, Hedayat refers to various works of research on Khayyam's philosophy and the differences of opinion among scholars on this matter. For example, he quotes Nicholas, the French Consul in Rasht, who was the first translator of Khayyam's Rubaiyyat into French. Nicholas considers Khayyam to be a Sufi (or mystic) whereas Edward Fitzgerald, the first translator of Khayyam's work into English, refers to Khayyam as a naturalist. Hedayat asserts that Khayyam's philosophy is at odds with both beliefs. Hedayat points out that the fact that words and expressions used by Sufis can also be found in Khayyam's works is no indication of his Sufism, as there is no similarity between his thinking and that of the Sufis. Hedayat does not provide further explanation on this matter. However, it can be clearly understood that what he means is that although the Sufis were at odds with the religious establishment, they did believe in resurrection and in man's return to God whereas Khayyam, in a number of his poems, betrays his doubts about life after death. For example, Khayyam asks: 'Where are we from and where are we going to?' On Khayyam's supposed belief in nature, Hedayat gives examples to show that Khayyam believed in the existence of a metaphysical force incomprehensible to human thinking. This was at odds with believing in the supremacy of nature. On the other hand, it appears that Hedayat wished to protect the legacy of Khayyam from religious fanatics. For instance, while conceding that there was profound similarity between the thoughts of Khayyam and Voltaire, he asserts that the latter was against religion while the former simply mocked those who were too much entangled in the subsidiary and non-essential aspects of religion.

After his Introduction of the Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam, Hedayat published his Book of Khayyam's Melodies. The Rubaiyyat in the first book, i.e. the Introduction, appear in alphabetical order whereas in the second book, the Melodies, they are classified from the standpoint of philosophical thinking. The preface on the former is more detailed than the one on the latter. It should be noted that Hedayat's research on Khayyam was fuelled by his profound interest in and affection for the great poet, philosopher and mathematician. He felt that there was much in common between Khayyam and himself. This has been noticed even by foreign scholars. Pasteur Valery Rado, a member of the French Academy, wrote a detailed essay on this point in the periodical *Hommes et Monde* under the title, Hedayat, a Writer in Despair. A translation of this article appeared in the Persian periodical *Sokhan* in 1954. Pasteur Valery Rado writes: 'Although Khayyam and Hedayat are separated by a thousand years, Hedayat reflects the thoughts of the other great Iranian thinker who was, like Hedayat himself, in despair. Both talk to us about the misery of human life. However, the rose gardens and flowerbeds of Omar Khayyam lose their sleepy beauty in Hedayat's works, the chanting nightingale of the former is transformed into the Blind Owl of the latter and Khayyam's sweet-scented rose becomes Hedayat's scentless lily.' Both Khayyam and Hedayat believed in destiny. Khayyam says: 'From the beginning, we were given what we had to be given / our worries and our endeavours are futile.' And Hedayat writes in his Blind Owl: 'No, I can't escape from my destiny' and in the same work: 'Everyone's destiny is inscribed on his forehead.' Both Khayyam and Hedayat believe that the world cannot be relied upon or considered to be stable. In one of Khayyam's famous poems, we read: 'Behold Bahram who hunted and captured wild asses all his life and see how he was eventually captured by the wild asses.' It should be noted that here, Khayyam uses a pun and plays with the Persian word "goor" which means a tomb as well as a wild ass. We encounter a similar thought in Hedayat's preface to the Melodies of Khayyam: 'The disappointed beauties who are now lying under dark soil will undergo disintegration and their particles will continue a miserable life within the bodies of plants and other beings. Do all of these not warn us, in a silent language, of the instability and fragility of everything on earth?'

To conclude, I have to say that I have by no means exhausted the topic of Sadeq Hedayat's scholarly research. He has, for instance, written many critical appraisals of books and films in various periodicals. A survey of the entirety of Hedayat's works can shed further light on his vision and his thinking. For this, more time and further investigation are needed.

PASCAL COSTE AND EUGENE FLANDIN

LECTURE GIVEN TO THE SOCIETY ON 22 JUNE 2006 BY MRS CAROLINE WILLIAMS, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF CAIRO

Pascal Coste, an architect from Marseilles, wrote his autobiography in 1878 at the age of 90. In it there is a riveting account of a voyage he took to Persia with the artist Eugène Flandin which lasted for more than two years in the early 1840's. The results were several grand art folios on the ancient and modern monuments of Persia. However, it is only recently – 1987 for Coste, and 1995 for Flandin – that their work has received scholarly and popular attention, and then only in France. In the English speaking world their work is almost unknown.

Voyage to Persia and Mesopotamia

In April 1839, Husein-Khan, bearing rich presents, had arrived in Paris. He had been sent by Mohamed Shah, the Qajar king of Persia, to congratulate Louis-Philippe on his accession to the French throne. For the French court the Shah's overture was an opportunity to revive the contacts with Persia initiated unsuccessfully earlier in the century by Napoleon, and thus promote France's own political and economic interests vis-a-vis Russia, established in the northeast part of the country, and Great Britain in the south and west. An embassy was designated. It was headed by the Comte de Sercey, former Secretary and Chargé d'Affaires in Petersburg, and included a distinguished entourage of professionals with mandates to study various aspects of the country and its regional relations. Among the members were an architect (Coste) and an artist (Flandin) with specific instructions from the Beaux Arts Academy of the French Institute to document the monuments of Persia's ancient civilizations.

Both Coste and Flandin had worked previously in Muslim countries. Coste had spent almost ten years, from 1817 to 1827 as an engineer and architect for Muhammad Ali, the Pasha of Egypt. His book, *Architecture Arabe ou monuments du Kaire mesurés et dessinés de 1818 à 1826* had been published in 1837 to great praise. Flandin, meanwhile, had documented the French army's 1836 campaign in Algeria. His *La prise de Constantine* was exhibited in the Salon of 1837, and King Louis-Philippe bought his *Assaut de Constantine* in 1838 for his palace at Neuilly.

The trip to Persia took two years and three months, from October 30, 1839, when the delegation set sail from Toulon, to February 4, 1842, when Coste and Flandin landed once more on French soil. Three main segments divide these 27 months. The first, the official embassy to the court of Muhammad Shah, started from Trebizond and ended at Isfahan, and lasted six months. In the second stage Coste and Flandin fulfilled their archaeological mission. This nine month period, between June 1840 to March 1841, included a trip north and west to Hamadan, Kirmanshah and Sarpol-i Zohab; and then one south to Fars, the heartland of ancient Persia. Finally there was the long return trip home which took almost eleven months: from Isfahan to Tabriz, around Lake Urumiyah and across the Zagros Mountains to Baghdad and on to Beyrut and the Mediterranean.

The results were published in 1851 as *Monuments Anciens du Perse* in three parts. This included Flandin's two volume account of the trip, *Voyage en Perse* with a large map; a folio volume of 250 plates engraved from the original drawings by Coste and Flandin of the Achaemenid and Sassanian monuments, each accompanied by a descriptive text, and finally a grand folio volume of 100 lithographic plates by Flandin of picturesque views of contemporary Persia. In 1867, Coste published his own drawings of contemporary Persian sites as *Monuments Modernes du Perse*. It is from the illustrations of these tomes that I have made the slides for this talk.

In his autobiography *Mémoires d'un Artiste: Notes et Souvenirs de Voyages (1817-1877)* Coste devoted 340 pages or one third of the total work to his Persian adventure. It was written 27 years after the trip as part of the larger story of his active life. Eugène Flandin's two volume account,

Voyage en Perse, published in 1851, is 1010 pages. At the start of the trip Flandin was 30 years old, 22 years younger than Coste. The books follow the same itinerary but differ in the personal focus. Of the two, Flandin is the livelier writer, and he supplies background and detail that Coste's more concise account compacts. Coste concentrates on the main events of the trip; Flandin's curiosity extends to the whole country: the Qajar dynasty, the Persian army, Persia's relations with Russia and Britain, the Persian character, costumes and customs, Shi'ism; urban, rural and tribal arrangements. Both men pride themselves on their unflagging energy and courage. Flandin, feisty and sometimes arrogant and patronizing towards those who cross him, also derives great pleasure and insight from the company of several blood princes, "embodiments of the grace and politeness of refined Persian aristocrats." Several leitmotifs animate both accounts: Russian-British politics vis-à-vis Persia, the deteriorating infrastructure of the country, the hazards of the trip, and relations with the locals.

From Trebizond to Isfahan

This part of the trip was with the official delegation to Isfahan and the embassy's reception with the Shah. They begin the trip in winter over miles of mountainous terrain. The miseries of geography and climate alternate with the pomp and circumstance with which the French are welcomed by the Persians. The official mission ends, the group disbands. The results are disappointing. No new treaty was concluded. May 31, 1840: "We said our good-byes to the delegation. We felt it hard; we had shared the privations of the voyage; now we were alone."

The first trip north: Hamadan, Kermanshah, Sarpol-i Zohab.

Coste and Flandin remain in Persia to complete their assignment to record the ancient monuments of Persia for the Beaux Arts Academy of the French Institute. In this endeavor they are not pioneers. The Academy had given them a precise list based on the notations of previous voyagers. The novelty in their assignment was that it was undertaken by professionals, and was to be as "exact and precise" as possible.

They record the ancient reliefs at Bisutun, Taq-i Rustam, and Sarpoul-i Zohab. The trip from June 1 to August 5 took ten weeks and, as calculated by Flandin, 207 hours in the saddle.

The trip south: Excursion to Fars

The second excursion, to Fars, takes about six months, or according to Flandin 307 hours in the saddle (EF, II, 522). They leave Isfahan September 27, 1840, and return February 26, 1841. The main destinations are Pasargadae, Persepolis and its surrounding monuments, Shapur, Firuzabad, Darabgird.

From Isfahan to Bandar-Bushir they followed a well-travelled commercial artery of Persia, but inland to Darabgird their route is unmapped. There are many pages about the adventure of this kind of travel.

The Return Journey

On March 10, 1841 they leave Isfahan, and "the domes and minarets of a hundred colors". The trip home takes just over 11 months. They go north via Kashan, Qum, Teheran, Tabriz. Their objective was Constantinople where funds awaited them with the French Ambassador. However, because of famine and plague, they "go via Baghdad, a longer route, but the only one open to us". This enables them to visit the Sassanian vault at Ctesiphon. From Baghdad they travel to Mosul, to Diyarbekir, to Aleppo, to Latakia, to Tripoli, to Beirut, where they embark and sail home via Cyprus, Rhodes, Smyrna, Istanbul again, Athens and Malta. On February 4, 1842 "I (Coste) disembarked at Marseille, very happy to have returned from these far distant travels".

Flandin describes the re-entry with more panache. "After two and a half years of journeys, of researches, of exhaustions and dangers, the two voyagers returned to France loaded with booty,

bending under the weight of cartons still covered with the dust of the desert” (EF, I, 13) which they submitted to the Academie de Beaux Arts.

Politically and economically the 1840 French Embassy to Persia did not result in the gains that were expected of it. But its archaeological component, thanks to Pascal Coste and Eugène Flandin, in their guises as great adventurers, serious archaeologists and engaging writers, was a cultural triumph.

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ABUL GHASSEM KHAN GHARAGOZLOU, NASSER UL-MOLK THE FIRST PERSIAN AT OXFORD

*Adapted from the preface by Dr Fereydown Ala to a recently published translation of
The Merchant of Venice by Nasser ul-Molk (with contributions from Dr John Gurney
of the Oriental Institute, Oxford and Anna Sander, Balliol archivist).*

Abul Ghassem Khan Gharagozlou was born in 1856 in Sheverin, a small village near Hamadan, in north-west Iran, into a landowning family that had been originally settled in the region by Tamerlane. As a child he showed a precocious thirst for knowledge and in his early youth he studied all that was taught in those days: philosophy, Arabic, mathematics, grammar, Islamic jurisprudence and a little French and English, much to the alarm of his step-mother, who worried that he was becoming too much of a scholar. To avoid being caught reading he had to get up at night and stuff cotton wool in the gaps around the door before lighting his lamp, so that it could not be seen down the passage. When he was old enough he went to Tehran to be taught by two of the foremost professors of the day: the philosopher Mirza Jelveh and Mirza Seyyed Mohammad Ali Qaeni, the prominent mathematician.

Abul Ghassem Khan's father died relatively young, leaving him to be brought up by his grandfather Mahmoud Khan, Nasser ul-Molk. He noticed his grandson's scholastic ability and zeal and in 1878 requested Nasser ud-Din Shah, who was about to embark on his first journey to Europe, to permit him to travel with the party in order to learn English, so that in the future he could translate the foreign newspapers for him. Members of the official class were forbidden to travel to Europe without the express permission of the Shah, who feared that young men going to Europe would bring back subversive ideas. Even though a number of young Persians were sent to study in Europe as a matter of government policy, throughout his life the Shah never fully trusted them. Nevertheless, since Mahmoud Khan was one of his most trusted ministers, the Shah allowed his grandson to join the royal suite.

Abul Ghassem Khan was 22 when he reached England, and therefore much too old to go to boarding school. He was entrusted instead to a tutor who, in return for £1 a day, gave him a sparsely furnished room with board, lodging and tuition. His grandfather had given Abul Ghassem Khan an allowance of £300 a year, which left him £65 short and condemned him to living a very frugal life. In order to pass his entrance examination to Oxford he had to master English, Greek, Latin and all the branches of mathematics. This left him no time to depart from his austere existence. By working sixteen hours a day, he managed to pass his entrance examinations within nine months, still in pocket, and he went up to Oxford in 1879. What was remarkable about this was that until 1871 university entrance had been restricted to members of the Church of England. If this limitation had not been lifted, Abul Ghassem Khan would not have been accepted by any university, any more than a Catholic or a Jew would have been.

Abul Ghassem Khan saw his acceptance by Balliol, then at the height of its fame under Jowett, as the opportunity of a lifetime and he made the most of it. He occupied two rooms on the western corner of the Quad, overlooking the Broad, and he seems to have immediately attracted the Master's attention. He was the first specimen of a Persian to have been an undergraduate at Oxford and, whether it was because of his keen intellect or his personal charm, Jowett took him under his wing. Rather than take an Honours degree, which would have confined him to one subject, Abul Ghassem Khan decided to take up as many subjects as he could manage. The reason for this was simple. In the East, knowledge was considered to be comprehensive and indivisible. A person pretending to knowledge had to know Arabic, exegesis, jurisprudence, prosody,

philosophy, logic, mathematics, medicine, cosmology and music. If he were asked to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies, he could not say that he had studied only political economy, for he would not have been taken seriously, even in the field that he did profess to know.

Abul Ghassem Khan did his best to embrace *Literae Humaniores*, as well as law, political economy, history, mathematics and science. In the spirit of the Eastern student or *talabeh*, no task was too arduous for him, no hours too long, no subject too abstruse, no language too difficult. To Abul Ghassem Khan, whose Arabic was on a par with that of the best classical scholars, Greek and Latin were not dead languages, or merely an exercise for the mind, but languages to be read and enjoyed just as much as any other literature. Not only did he devote himself to perfecting his English, but he dedicated himself so thoroughly to Greek and Latin that, forty years after he had left Balliol, he was still able to translate Plato or Thucydides as easily as he could read Shakespeare, Virgil or Tacitus.

Jowett had obviously taken a liking to Abul Ghassem Khan, for he often invited him to his Sunday evening suppers in the Master's Lodge. There he met Swinburne, Tennyson, Oscar Wilde and many of the statesmen and writers of the day. Those with whom he kept a lifelong friendship were Cecil Spring-Rice,¹ Edward Grey² and most particularly George Curzon

Abul Ghassem Khan's nickname Abul Curs'im Can was a wry tribute by his fellow undergraduates to his academic achievements, intellectual qualities and great mental stamina; they said of him: "There's nothing Abul, curse 'im, can't". He is mentioned in the *Balliol Rhymes*:

I am Abul Cassem Can
In my grave sweet way I scan
Western life. My thoughts would fill a
Book if written out. Bismillah.

Abul Ghassem Khan left Balliol in 1882. When he went to take his final leave of Jowett, who could often be very distant, cutting and sarcastic, he was amazed to be given a valedictory kiss, together with the prescient admonition that although he had been taught many new things at Oxford, he was now returning home to Persia, and must remember that not everything he had learned in England could be put into practice at home – that when in Rome, he would have to do as the Romans did. In the following year, after a short spell at the *Ecole des Sciences Politiques* in Paris, he returned to Iran.

His grandfather Mahmoud Khan Nasser ul-Molk was Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time and Abul Ghassem Khan was appointed under-secretary to the ministry. One of his duties was to attend at Court to translate *The Times* for the Shah at lunch time. When Mahmoud Khan died in 1887, the Shah bestowed his title upon Abul Ghassem Khan, also nominating him chief of the Gharagozlou tribe.

In 1889, Nasser ud-din Shah undertook his third and last journey to Europe. Abul Ghassem Khan, now Nasser ul-Molk, accompanied him as interpreter. Queen Victoria, whose government was anxious to encourage the Shah to resist Russian blandishments, conferred the Order of the Garter on him, an honour that he had long craved. At the same time she made Nasser ul-Molk an honorary KCMG. During this journey he returned to Balliol to visit Jowett for the last time. The Shah was so pleased with his reception by Queen Victoria that he awarded Nasser ul-Molk a

sword of honour after their return and used him to convey private messages to foreign representatives, but he never trusted him enough to give him a Ministry.

Although working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nasser ul-Molk was given only one overseas mission. This came in 1897, after the assassination of Nasser ud-Din Shah, to announce the accession of his son Mozaffar ed-Din Shah to the Courts of London and Europe. On this occasion he visited Queen Victoria at Balmoral and was promoted to honorary GCMG.

From 1897-1898 Nasser ul-Molk served as Minister of Finance under the prime minister Amin ud-Dowleh and introduced important reforms to the Customs administration. In 1900, he accompanied Mozaffar ed-Din Shah on his first journey to Europe. After their return the new prime minister Amin us-Sultan, who had been his friend in their youth, turned against him, no doubt due to envy of his close relationship to Amin ud-Dowleh, and persuaded the pliant Shah to exile him from Court and make him Governor of Kurdistan, where he spent the next four years in futile and barren isolation, living in daily fear of being poisoned. In early 1905 he was recalled to Tehran by Amin ud-Dowleh, who had succeeded Amin us-Sultan, and was soon appointed Minister of Finance. During this tenure, he established Persia's first budget designed on modern lines.

In 1906 growing public unrest forced the Shah to grant the country a Constitution. A few days after signing it in January 1907 the old and decrepit Shah died and was succeeded by his son Muhammad Ali, who opposed the Constitution, but had to temporise for a while. Knowing that Nasser ul-Molk favoured the Constitution and enjoyed the support of the Majles [parliament], he obliged him to accept the post of prime minister in late October. In June 1908 the Shah instructed him to order the Russian Cossack artillery to bombard the Majles building. Nasser ul-Molk reminded the Shah that he had taken an oath to do nothing against the interests of the Crown, which such an act would be. The Shah told him to obey or go to hell. Nasser ul-Molk replied that, under the circumstances, he would prefer the latter, and abruptly left. There was much rioting after the bombardment and on 14th December the entire cabinet resigned. The next day Nasser ul-Molk was summoned to Court and placed under arrest. It was intimated that he might be put to death for his defiance.

Nasser ul-Molk's carriage was then sent away, with the suggestion that it would not be needed any more. His devoted coachman went straight to the British Legation to report the situation to George Churchill, the Oriental Secretary. Churchill was out partridge shooting at the time. The desperate coachman insisted on seeing Mrs Churchill, who assured him that she would tell her husband the news as soon as he returned. Nasser ul-Molk was confined at the Golestan Palace until well after dark. He was offered coffee – probably poisoned, as was the royal custom – which he was able to refuse. A threatening message was then brought to him from the Shah. He replied that the Shah could do with him whatever he wished, but that he begged His Majesty to spare him any indignities. By nightfall Churchill had arrived at the Palace, still dressed in his shooting clothes, and requested an immediate audience with the Shah. He informed him that Nasser ul-Molk was a member of one of the highest orders of English chivalry and could not be treated in this arbitrary manner. The Shah reflected on this and sent one of his courtiers, Amir Bahador Jang, to the room where Nasser ul-Molk was detained, to tell him that His Majesty had been gracious enough to grant him leave to go to Europe. He returned to his family, to their great relief. Not waiting for the Shah to change his mind, he left immediately afterwards for the Caspian coast, where the family had a property. At dawn the next day he took a ship for Baku and thence to Europe.

After the bombardment of the Majles there were uprisings against the Shah in many parts of the country. He was forced to leave Iran and abdicate in favour of his son Ahmad, who was only a boy. Nasser ul-Molk, who was well known for his integrity and impartiality, was put forward by popular acclaim as Regent. Understandably reluctant to return to Iran and resume political activity, he suggested that Azod ul-Molk, of the senior branch of the Qajar tribe, be appointed instead. Azod ul-Molk died soon after however, and the Majles again pressed Nasser ul-Molk to accept the Regency. In 1910, after much heart-searching, he returned to take up the post but, after organising the coronation of Ahmad Shah in 1914, he finally abandoned active political life and departed for Europe once more with his family. He returned to Tehran only once, shortly before his death in December 1927.

However, he did see Balliol once more in the spring of 1924, when he took his son Hossein-Ali³ to see A.L. Smith, who had taught him history and had since become Master of the college. Smith told the young man that he remembered his father as a most outstanding pupil, and that the lecturer on political economy had told him that his Persian undergraduate had mastered all the subjects he had to teach, so that he had nothing more to teach him. The only new development that Hossein-Ali, who was in his first year at Balliol at the time, could show his father was the new baths. Nasser ul-Molk recalled how in his day his scout, every morning, used to fill his copper tub with cold water and how, on the chilliest winter days, he so disliked standing in the ice-cold water that he clouded the water with soap to make the scout believe he had taken his bath. On that last visit, as he walked across the Quad he said he would like nothing better than to be given one of the rooms in College, so that he could continue to live there quietly and continue his studies

His retirement was by no means spent in idleness. In the course of a wide-ranging conversation with a number of close friends in London one evening, the discussion touched on Shakespeare. One of those present held that to translate him into Persian was an impossible task; that the genius of the two languages and the underlying cultures of the two countries were simply too different. Nasser ul-Molk disagreed and, to prove his point, he began by translating a few lines from Othello, a play which he chose entirely at random. This light-hearted literary conversation led Nasser ul-Molk to translate the entire play, followed a few years later by his translation of The Merchant of Venice, which was expertly bound and illustrated with little water-colour vignettes by his daughter, Fatemeh Ala, and is now being published in Tehran for the first time. While the language employed over a thousand years ago by the Persian poets Roudaki or Ferdowsi has remained entirely current and accessible to present-day readers in Iran, English has evolved and changed radically in the last 450 years and the large number of classical or biblical allusions used by Shakespeare compound the difficulties of the translator. Only an exceptionally profound mastery of Persian, as well as of the complex nuances of Shakespearean language, could have produced the clarity and beauty of Nasser ul-Molk's prose. The sheer elegance, freshness and simplicity of his translations into Persian mark them as ageless belles-lettres in their own right.

1. Later Minister at the British Legation in Tehran

2. Later Foreign Secretary

3..He was the first Civil ADC to the last Shah of Iran early in his reign, and was very close to him at that time, but gradually fell out with him later. His brother-in-law Hossein Ala was a distinguished diplomat and served as Minister of Court to the last Shah. He survived an assassination attempt in 1957 and was instrumental in dissuading the Shah from doing away with Khomeini after his arrest in 1963 for being behind the rioting in opposition to land reforms. He was the first patron of the Iran Society, 1935-37.

BOOK REVIEW

EAGLE'S NEST : ISMAILI CASTLES IN IRN AND SYRIA

Peter Willey, I B Tauris. ISBN 1 85043 464 6

Reviewed by David Blow

Peter Willey is the acknowledged authority on the castles of the Assassins – that extremist Shiite organisation which spread terror through much of the Middle East several centuries ago with its tactic of targeted assassinations. In this, his latest book on the subject, he describes in fascinating detail many of the principal Assassin strongholds, mainly in Iran and Syria, but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ruins of which he has visited and revisited over many years. He argues forcefully that these castles were much more sophisticated than anything built by the Normans or the Crusaders. Most of them, he says, were larger and better planned; they had extensive fortifications in depth and elaborate storage systems for food and water, which, combined with their usual location in remote mountainous terrain, made them difficult to attack with any success. Peter Willey believes that it could have taken the Mongols many years to reduce the castles in the Alburz mountains in Iran, had these not been simply surrendered in 1256 by the Assassin Imam, Rukn al-Din Khurshah, who had the misfortune to be in one of the few castles that were vulnerable to the Mongol siege engines. It also seems to be the case, however, that by this time the Assassins had lost something of their will to carry on the struggle; the castles in Syria were fairly easily conquered a few years later by the Mamluk Sultan, Baybars.

The more important Assassin castles also possessed one thing that was not a particular feature of European castles, and that was a great library. The Assassins were part of the Shiite Ismaili movement, which set great store by learning and gave the world its first university, Al-Azhar, after it achieved power and established the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. The Ismaili movement offered its adherents a process of initiation into a body of philosophical and esoteric teachings which, at the highest level, promised to reveal all the secrets of the universe. It also spread its message through missionaries whose training involved a thorough study of all branches of knowledge so that they could more than hold their own in any debate. All this was maintained by the Assassins, whose castle libraries enabled polymaths like the great Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201-1274) to pursue their interests in the natural sciences as much as in philosophy and theology. It is a tragedy that these libraries were lost and almost all their books consigned to the flames when the Assassin castles fell into the hands of the Mongols.

Peter Willey somewhat plays down the actual assassinations and insists that they were essentially defensive in purpose. It is true that they were not indiscriminate; the victims were generally people who held some position in the Sunni establishment, both religious and political, and who were declared enemies of the Ismailis. It is also true that the number of assassinations was not huge. According to Bernard Lewis, one of the principal authorities on the Assassins, just under fifty were carried out during the thirty-five years that the founder of the organisation, Hasan-i Sabbah, was in charge (1090-1125); the numbers diminished under his successors. But they were deliberately spectacular and clearly designed to spread terror. In this they succeeded, but hardly to the advantage of the Ismaili community in Iran, which suffered the most appalling periodic massacres in retaliation, when frenzied Sunni mobs turned on them with the encouragement or connivance of the authorities. This makes it hard to see the assassinations as a purely defensive strategy. The aim of the organisation, at least during its most active early period, was surely what it had been for the Ismaili caliphate of the Fatimids, which was to undermine and ultimately bring

about the collapse of the Sunni order and its replacement by a new Ismaili dispensation. The attack was two-pronged, using terror to discourage opposition to the movement and intensive missionary work to win converts. In this, the Assassins were, in their minds, merely fulfilling the divine purpose, or hastening its fulfilment, so it mattered little to begin with how heavily the odds were stacked against them. However failure did eventually force a reassessment of the situation. Today's Ismaili movement, led by the Agha Khan, is in direct descent from the Assassins and is as peaceable a religious movement as it would be possible to find.

Peter Willey's book is strongly to be recommended to anyone interested in one of the most fascinating historical episodes, or, better still, ready to put on their walking boots for a tour of the main Assassin strongholds in Iran, which are set amidst the dramatic scenery of the Alburz Mountains overlooking the Caspian Sea.

BOOK REVIEW

MIRRORS OF THE UNSEEN - JOURNEYS IN IRAN

Jason Elliott, Picador 2006 ISBN 0-330-48656-X

Reviewed by Antony Wynn

Anyone travelling to Iran these days is immediately asked, "Is it safe to go there?" This book serves a useful purpose in demonstrating to people who have not been to Iran that Iranians are more than hospitable to visitors. The reader will be astonished by the generosity of the author's many hosts, who gave up a lot of their time to entertain him, guide him and take him to places that he would not have found by himself. The spontaneous helpfulness of these people is inspiring.

Elliott made several trips to Iran and went to the usual places: Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Persepolis and Yazd. He also went off-piste to Kurdistan, Firuzabad and the Turkoman country. His journeyings alternate between the haut-monde in Tehran and the most squalid of cheap hotels in the provinces, which he had an unhappy knack of ending up in. Much is made of the depredations of Tehrani taxi drivers charging him £1 more than the going rate. Traveller beware!

Between trips the author wrote up his thoughts on the background of Iran. One chapter takes us at a canter from a history of the ancient glories of Iran through to the Islamic revolution. Another explains at length the nature and theory of Persian art and poetry. Elliott studied Persian poetry at university. His university education, as he tells the story against himself, failed to instil into him the difference between *eshtebah* [mistake] and *ezdevaj* [marriage], which led to some misunderstandings with his interlocutors. There is an interesting chapter on the geometry of the layout of the main square in Isfahan. He is also good on the *zurkhaneh*.

There is an old saying that travellers who have been in Iran for three days think that they know all about it, while those who have been there for three years realise that they understand nothing at all. Elliott admits that some of what he first found to be extraordinary faded after a while into a blur of normality and led to writer's block.

Elliott met many interesting people and penetrated to plenty of unseen corners. However, it appears that what he has decided to mirror to his readers may be less than what he has seen and that the soup has been watered. It would be interesting to know what he did not tell us.

BOOK REVIEW

GENERAL MAPS OF PERSIA 1477-1925

Cyrus Alai, Brill 2006 ISBN 90 04 14759 4

A digest of reviews compiled by Antony Wynn

Dr Alai gave the Iran Society a fascinating lecture in 2003 on the ancient maps of Persia. His fifteen years of research have now borne fruit in the shape of this sumptuous book. Containing two hundred illustrations, the book is divided into two sections: 14 groups of Ptolemaic¹ maps, then sections dealing with maps of Persia from Italy, the Low Countries, France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, America, Iran, Turkey, Spain and Portugal. This arrangement shows how each country viewed Persia over the ages.

The helpful preface and introduction give the broad historical background to mapping in the classical world and during the classical Islamic period. Following the Ptolemaic maps, the Italians and Dutch provide some of the earliest works. The French are not far behind, due to intense French interest in Persia in the 1600s. By far the largest selection is British, followed by the German. It was difficult for Dr Alai to obtain access to Russian maps in Russia, but he was able to find Russian maps in western European collections. It seems that there were few Russian maps of the whole of Iran; most of them showed just the provinces bordering on Russia.

Tony Campbell, former head of the Map Library in the British Library, has written in the foreword to this book: "Sometimes it is only when a book is written that the need for it becomes apparent." His successor, Peter Barber, has stated: "The book is most informative and clearly set out and looks lovely too – it seems destined for the scholar's library, the collector's bookshelf and the amateur's coffee table: a very rare achievement."

The book is expensive, but it is a treasure. Future volumes will cover historical maps of Persia, town and district maps, maps of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf and other thematic maps. We look forward to seeing them.

1. Ptolemaic maps depict Persia during a period of fragmentation (AD51-122) in the Parthian empire, partly coinciding with Ptolemy's life, of interest to those who argue that at least some of the maps attributed to Ptolemy were passed down largely unchanged from his hand or at least his time.