



# JOURNAL OF THE IRAN SOCIETY

Editor : Antony Wynn

VOL. 2 NO. 6

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
OFFICERS AND COUNCIL OF THE SOCIETY	ii
CORPORATE MEMBERS	iii
OBJECTS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY	iv
CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION	v
BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND THE WORD	1
DENIS WRIGHT AND THE ENGLISH IN PERSIA	7
THE CENTENARY OF IRANIAN OIL	17
EXPLORING THE GEOMETRIC ART OF IRAN	24
NASIR AL-DIN SHAH AND HIS FOOLS	37
BRITISH CONSULATES IN IRAN	49
INAUGURAL LECTURE 1936	65
BOOK REVIEW :THE BECKONING EAST	68

2 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PJ

Telephone : 020 7235 5122 Fax : 020 7259 6771

Web Site : [www.iransociety.org](http://www.iransociety.org) Email : [iransoc@rsaa.org.uk](mailto:iransoc@rsaa.org.uk)

Reg Charity No 248678

## OFFICERS AND COUNCIL 2007

*Patron*

H.E. THE AMBASSADOR OF  
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

*President*

LORD TEMPLE-MORRIS

*Vice-Presidents*

SIR MARTIN BERTHOUD K.C.V.O., C.M.G.  
MR M. NOËL-CLARKE  
MR B. GOLSHAIAAN

*Chairman*

MR H. ARBUTHNOTT C.M.G.

*Hon. Secretary*

MR R. M. MACKENZIE

*Hon. Treasurer*

MR A. GRAY

*Hon. Lecture Secretary*

MRS J. RADY

*Members of Council*

Dr F. A. Ala  
Dr M-A. Ala  
Mr S. Ala  
Mr D. Blow  
Ms M. Esfandiary  
Mr R. Fattorini  
Dr T. Fitzherbert  
Mr M. Sargent  
Mr A. Tahbaz  
Mr A. Wynn

# THE IRAN SOCIETY

## CORPORATE MEMBERS

Balli Group plc

BG Group

BP plc

HSBC Bank plc

HSBC Private Bank (UK) Ltd

Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art

Shell International

Standard Chartered Bank plc

# THE IRAN SOCIETY

## OBJECTS

To promote learning and advance education in the subject of Iran, its peoples and culture (but that in no event shall contemporary politics form any part of the Society's activities) and particularly to advance education through the study of language, literature, arts, history, religions, antiquities, usages, institutions and customs of Iran.

## ACTIVITIES

In fulfilment of these objects, the Society, which is registered in Great Britain as a charity, shall, among other things:

Hold meetings and establish, promote, organise, finance and encourage the study, writing, production and distribution of books, periodicals, monographs and publications,

Do all such other lawful and charitable things as shall further the attainment of the objects of the Society or any of them.

The full text of the Rules of the Society may be inspected in the Society's offices.

Those wishing to apply for membership can do so through the Society's website, or by writing to the Hon. Secretary for an application form. Students are encouraged to join.

## JOURNAL

The aim of the Journal is to reproduce edited versions of some of the lectures given over the year, to review books of interest to members and to publish short articles of general interest. The editor welcomes contributions and suggestions. The journal is financed by a benefaction from the Kathleen Palmer-Smith Publication Fund.

## CHAIRMANS INTRODUCTION

I took over as Chairman from Michael Noël-Clarke towards the end of last year. Michael had been Chairman for ten years. His enthusiasm and his concern to ensure that the Society should be constantly seeking to achieve its charitable objectives resulted in many new initiatives. This Journal was one of them. The travel grants to help young people go to Iran to study or undertake research is another. The Society was fortunate to benefit from his talents for so long.

As has been customary, the Journal is made up mainly of the texts of lectures delivered to the Society over the past year, covering a wide range of subjects. Besides these lectures, our Editor, Antony Wynn, has included the text of the lecture on Hafez given by the Aga Khan at the dinner inaugurating the Iran Society in 1936. What the Aga Khan said about the universal relevance of Hafez and of Iranian culture in general is as true today as it was then.

We cannot reproduce in the Journal the special events which also form an important part of the Society's activities. I mention two of them in particular, both of them concerts of Iranian music, the first at our Christmas party in December last year given by Saba and the second, in May this year, held in honour of Professor Khorram in co-operation with The British-Iranian Chamber of Commerce and Danlesco. We are greatly in debt to our Lecture Secretary, Janet Rady, not only for organising the lectures but also for her work on the special events and on the Society's new website [www.iransociety.org](http://www.iransociety.org). We are looking forward to another rewarding programme for 2007-8. It is planned to include Tom Holland (Persian Fire), Robert Skelton (Persian and Indian Miniatures), Bill and Sandra Main (Omar Khayyam) and Janet Dagtoglu (a trip to Iran).

I hope you will find this year's Journal both interesting and enjoyable.

**Hugh Arbuthnott**



# BETWEEN THE IMAGE AND THE WORD

## A CALLIGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION OF TEN POEMS OF HAFEZ

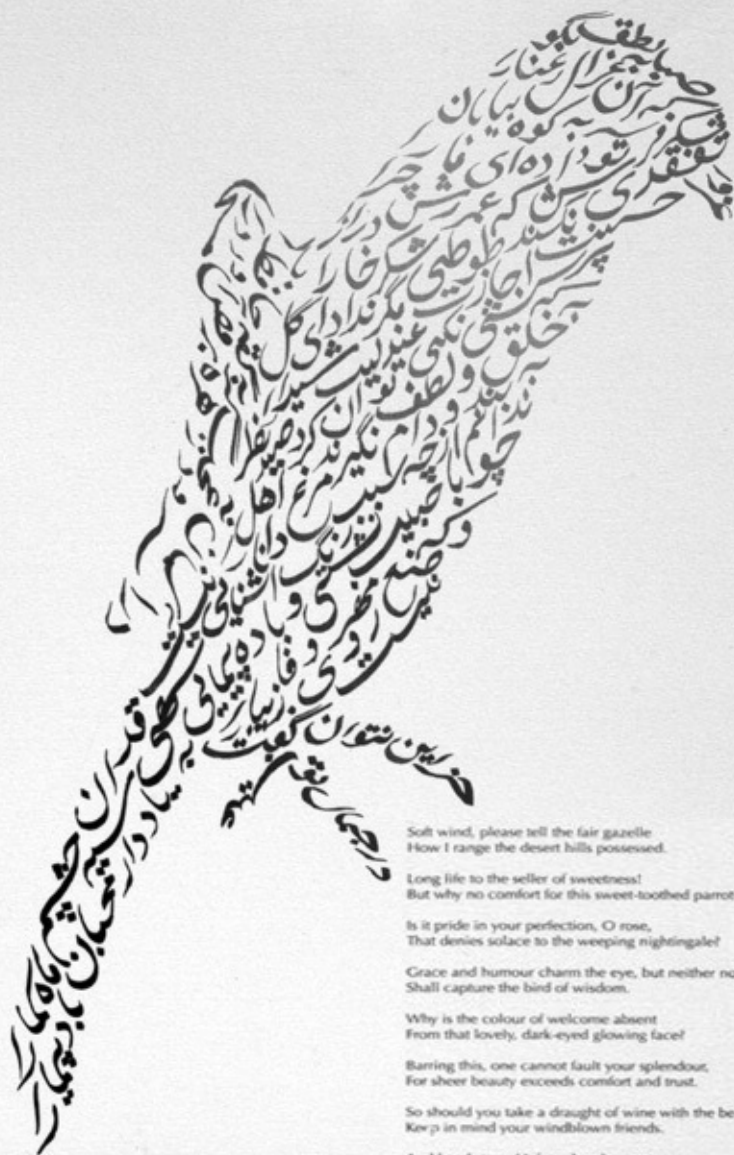
Illustrated lecture given to the Society on 29th November 2006  
by JILA PEACOCK

The poet Shams ud-Din Mohammad-e Shirazi, better known as Hafez, was born in Shiraz in about 1320, only fifty years after the devastating invasion of Persia by the Mongols under Chengiz Khan's grandson, Hulagu, and died in the same city some seventy years later, making him a contemporary with Chaucer and Dante. Unlike these writers however, you can find a copy of the poems of Hafez, as cherished as the Koran, in every Iranian household.

Hafez lived through a very unsettled time in Persian history, especially for a court poet whose livelihood depended on the patronage of a fluctuating series of chieftains and princes engaged in the constant internal wars of that period. All we have of his life's work goes back to an edition of his poems made shortly after his death by his friend and student Mohammad Golandam. This book, the 'Divan', or collection, is a compilation in alphabetical order of the opening lines, of 573 poems, 495 of which are in the 'Ghazal' form. In Persian literature the ghazal is almost synonymous with Hafez, since he made it the perfect instrument for his expression. His poems range in length from five to sixteen monorhyming couplets. There are no titles to the poems and there is no punctuation.

On first reading, the poems have no obvious beginning middle or end, although Hafez always addresses himself by name in the last line of each poem, admonishing or praising himself in the third person as though encouraging a student. But despite this lack of formal unity, each couplet appears to embody a whole idea, not necessarily linearly linked to the following one, but sometimes alternating, like a piece of music, giving a circular form to the poem as a whole.

But what are these enigmatic poems about? To begin with, like Shakespeare, they can be interpreted on many levels simultaneously, the most obvious being songs in celebration of love and wine, which may be



Soft wind, please tell the fair gazelle:  
How I range the desert hills possessed.

Long life to the seller of sweetness!  
But why no comfort for this sweet-toothed parrot?

Is it pride in your perfection, O rose,  
That denies solace to the weeping nightingale?

Grace and humour charm the eye, but neither noose nor net  
Shall capture the bird of wisdom.

Why is the colour of welcome absent  
From that lovely, dark-eyed glowing face?

Barring this, one cannot fault your splendour,  
For sheer beauty exceeds comfort and trust.

So should you take a draught of wine with the beloved,  
Keep in mind your windblown friends.

And heed starry Hafez when he says:  
"The song of Venus enraptures Christ to dance".



صبا به لطف بگو آن غزال رعنا را	که سر به کوه و بیابان تو داده‌ای ما را
شکرفروش که عمرش دراز باد چرا	تفقدی نکند طوطی شرخا را
غرور حسنت اجازت مگر نداد ای گل	که پرسشی نکنی عندلیب شیدا را
به خلق و لطف توان کرد صید اهل نظر	به بند و دام نگیرند مرغ دانا را
ندانم از چه سبب رنگ آشنایی نیست	سهی قدان سیه چشم ماه سیما را
چو با حبیب نشینی و باده پیمایی	به یاد دار محبان بادپیما را
جز این قدر نتوان گفت در جمال تو	که وضع مهر و وفا نیست روی زیبا را

عیب

در آسمان نه عجب گر به گفته حافظ  
سرود زهره به رقص آورد مسیحا را

why early translators such as Richardson, in 1774, compared Hafez to the classical Greek bacchanalian poet Anacreon. But Hafez's position was first and foremost as a court poet, so the poems also work on the level of a panegyric or eulogy to a patron; or again, as subtle nationalist, propaganda for Persian, as opposed to Arabic, culture.

However, it is to their mystical, spiritual, interpretation that many later writers were drawn. In Iran, Hafez is referred to as *lisan-ul ghayb* meaning 'the tongue of the hidden', and *tarjoman-ul asrar* or 'the interpreter of secrets', which gives us some idea of the esoteric nature of these texts, even to Iranians, who sometimes consult his book for direction in their lives, as if he were a personal mentor. In her incisive preface to a collection of 43 of her translations from the Divan published in 1897, Gertrude Bell wrote: 'In Hafez's experience, pleasure and religion were the two most important incentives to human action; he ignored neither the one nor the other.'

There is no doubt that Hafez was a deeply religious man. The name *Hafez* is given to those who know the whole Qur'an by heart. But what were the nature of his beliefs? He was certainly a Moslem and probably a Sunni, since that was the state religion of Persia up until the sixteenth century, but although he mentions Jesus, Joseph and Moses frequently, as symbols of various aspects of the Divine, the name of Mohammad and his followers never appear in any of his poems.

Was Hafez a Sufi?...Sufism is difficult to define but is usually referred to as the mystical component of Islam and many in the West have been attracted to Persian poetry, in particular the works of Rumi, in search of Sufi wisdom. Its essential doctrine is that everything emanates from divine love, and that by following the Path or the Way of spiritual intoxication, the soul is released from the prison of the material world, to arrive at unity with the Godhead.

There is an accepted code of Sufi symbolism which is easily recognized in all the work of these poets; in Hafez in particular, the pantheistic notion of Nature as the mirror of God is very strong. The rose and the cypress are symbols of divine perfection, the face of the moon and the sun, Solomon and Sheba, are translated as the male and female aspect of that perfection. The nightingale is the weeping soul, in ecstasy or despair; the

talking parrot is the poet craving divine attention. The ‘friend’ or ‘beloved’ or ‘seller of sweetness’, exemplify Godhead, from whom the Sufi soul has been separated and longs for reunion.

Hafez was a Sufi in the broadest sense, in that he exhibited a powerful disdain for the vanities of this world and it is undeniable that the symbolic subtexts in his poems sing from the Sufi hymn sheet, yet he constantly rails against the Sufi orders and exposes the hypocrisy of the religious zealots and, as far as we know, he never belonged to any distinct sect.

The concept of mystic love in Christian writing, which has influenced so much of our poetry, comes from the Bible, and in particular, the symbolic imagery of the Song of Songs. Knowledge of a very similar set of symbolic concepts from Arab Sufism entered the Western poetic consciousness by way of St John of the Cross and Ramon Lull in the sixteenth century, from the writings of the Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Arabi, and this may be the reason why we find the imagery in these poems so familiar and appealing.

But Hafez was writing two hundred years earlier and, whatever the origins of his mystical images, they had already become an integral part of the language of the Persian poets, thanks to such literary predecessors as the poets Sana’i, Attar, and most importantly, Rumi. This language was not a fixed code but worked as a metaphor, for example ‘drinking wine’ represents the quest for self knowledge’, or a ‘caged bird’ reflects the concept of the soul imprisoned within the earthly body. Hafez extended this use of allegory onto a different, shifting, transmutable plane, where meaning seems to metamorphose with each new reading of the poem, rendering it almost infinitely open to interpretation. ‘Wine’ for him is not only a sensual intoxicant, but can symbolize esoteric knowledge and at the same time imply spiritual intoxication, a loosening of the self in search of the universal, truer self. It is this quality that makes Hafez so difficult to translate, for in the very act of trying to pin down the meaning, the poem loses its mystical fluidity.

In Persian poetry, the beauty and the meaning of the perfect poem is enhanced by calligraphy, or ‘beautiful writing’. In artistic terms, calligraphers try to sculpt an added dimension of meaning to the words, using the language of image. This is what I have set out to achieve by making calligraphic designs from ten poems from the Divan using a *nast’aliq* script. This elegant, pared down and beautifully legible style

of writing was first formulated in Shiraz in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and lends itself perfectly to copying love lyrics and mystical or romantic epics, and has rightfully been called 'the bride among calligraphic styles'.

I decided to choose to illustrate poems in which Hafez used animals as poetic metaphors to put over whole ideas and concepts that words alone fail to describe. Parrot, Peacock, Horse, Hoopoe, Butterfly, Fish, Deer, Lion, Falcon and Nightingale are the results.

*Jila Peacock is an Iranian-born painter and printmaker who lives and works in Glasgow. Her book Ten Poems from Hafez is published by Sylph Editions. [www.sylpheditions.com](http://www.sylpheditions.com)*

## DENIS WRIGHT AND THE ENGLISH IN PERSIA

Lecture given to the Society on 18th January 2007

by SARAH SEARIGHT

Preparing a talk to the Iran Society on Denis Wright gave me the enormous pleasure of once again sitting metaphorically at the feet of this most generous of scholars. I first knew Denis through my father Rodney Searight who worked with Denis in the 1950s when both were negotiating with the Iranians over the Abadan crises, Denis on behalf of the Foreign Office, my father representing Shell. Both had a highly developed sense of humour which stood them in good stead. Then in the 1970s – both of them ‘retired’ – Denis was researching his *English in Persia* (which he always said was inspired by my very inferior *British in the Middle East* published in 1969), while my father was developing his collection of watercolours, drawings, prints & books by mainly nineteenth century European visitors to the Middle East (now in the V&A). After my father died I often used to visit Duck Bottom where that fount of knowledge always had something up his sleeve for the dilettante.

To look again at Denis’s books, and skim through the huge collection of his papers now in the Bodleian is like breathing again that aura of scholarship. The collection consists of fifteen box files of thoughts and letters, two ‘bankers’ boxes’ of diaries, two slide cases and three volumes of ‘memoirs’. ‘The diary which I kept throughout my time in Iran makes dull reading,’ Denis confessed; ‘it rarely reflects my feelings and gives away no secrets. Partly this is because I am a fairly even-tempered, unemotional person, but more so because I assumed that one or other of our servants might have been suborned (though I do not think they were) by SAVAK or some unfriendly power and I had no wish to keep the diary under lock and key.’ They are typically restrained and modest. I like to compare Denis (quoting from his *Persians amongst the English*) with Mirza Abul Hasan Shirazi, the first official Iranian envoy to England in 1809: ‘His manners are truly captivating, graceful and as engaging as can be conceived, whilst, at the same time, they are such as ever to command respect, and remind even his very intimates that he is the representative of a great monarch.’

My talk focused on Denis' publications, which were often about people I also knew and enjoyed – the British in Iran as I like to call them, the English amongst the Persians, as he called them. Much of Denis' working life was taken up with trade – starting with Constanza and watching goods in transit for Germany, then Trabzon (where he had time to delve into the consular archives and follow trade developments on that great but difficult trade road between Europe and Iran, Trabzon-Tabriz), Chicago, Mussadeq, finally as ambassador developing British trade with Iran. Hence his interest in others who also had had trade as their main preoccupation. Travel was another great interest– Denis and Iona were after all the best travelled diplomatic couple in Iran; they knew the country Denis' characters were trudging round.

From 1953-55 Denis was in Iran negotiating for the resumption of diplomatic relations, broken off at the time of Dr Mussadeq's nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. 'It was an exciting assignment,' Denis noted, 'and, as it proved, a rewarding one since both the British and Persian peoples, like estranged lovers, knew they could not really live without the other.' The negotiations gave Denis a real admiration for the men who initially discovered and developed the oil – William d'Arcy, 'who risked all but persevered', and G.B. Reynolds: Denis quotes Arnold Wilson as writing of Reynolds: 'a great man, who inspires real respect in Englishmen and real affection in Persians and Arabs; he also has remarkable gifts of organisation and management' (who does that remind us of?).

And then in April 1963 the Wrights returned to Iran 'Nothing is quite the same,' writes Denis; there were new buildings, new airport and roads, piped water. A bloodless revolution earlier same year had resulted in land reform and votes for women. There were Friday rides with. Asadullah Alam, Farsi lessons and of course more travel.. In a lecture he gave to the RSAA in June 1991 on '10 years in Iran: some highlights' (reproduced in the collection of essays published by the Iran Society) Denis described the regime as a 'comparatively benevolent' dictatorship but nevertheless 'stifling of virtually every form of independent political entity.' There was also a deep distrust of the British: 'Nowhere in the world is British cleverness so widely exaggerated as in Iran.' However, he also recognised that by comparison with later events these were golden years in Iran; he and Iona were free to travel, there were no security problems, the political

climate was relaxed. Iona wrote of ‘a life full of contrasts’. ‘It might happen that one evening we attended a glittering reception in one of the palaces in Tehran, & on the next were deep in the countryside, having exchanged the ambassadorial Rolls for a couple of mules, & having our meal, not off gold plate & under crystal chandeliers, but on a cloth laid out on the mud floor of a peasant’s hut.’

Some of the travelling was obligatory but no less interesting: oilmen and their wives in Khuzistan; missionaries in Isfahan, Shiraz, Kurdistan; engineers in Kashan, Yazd, Kirman ‘most evocative of Persian cities’; Their travels gave Denis the insight into the earlier travellers that he later wrote about so well - James Morier, John Malcolm, James Baillie Fraser, Henry Rawlinson, Henry Layard, Isabella Bird, just a few of his cast of many. In Mazanderan – on horseback again, camping for six days - one is reminded of Fraser and Fraser also in what he called Persian Kurdistan (Denis wrote a long piece on Fraser in the new DNB). And intrepid but very uncomfortable Mrs Bishop alias Bird in 1891. Wherever they went they collected gravestones & memorials, building up a picture of the precariousness of life in Qajar Iran and subsequently commemorated in several issues of *Iran*. Such travels led Denis to providing lengthy captions for *Persia* (with Jan Morris and Roger Wood, published in 1969) and eventually to *The English in Persia*.

So we come to 1971: ‘I’ve done my last day’s work at the office and I can’t help feeling I’ll miss the hurly-burly of the last few years, and the Persian sun and sky, & the riding & walking & the bazaar & the Jewish antique dealers in the Khiaban Firdawsi. Still it’s no good sighing and retirement looks like being exciting too. Thank goodness we’ve got Haddenham.’ Which they had found and bought the previous year.

At Duck Bottom, their home in Haddenham, there were regular presents of pistachios and halva. A luscious Qajar princess ruled the hall. Their beautiful Iranian ceramics were in the dining room and passage, collected on bazaar hunts in Tehran and elsewhere. Students of all ages & nationalities flocked to the shrine, including me. Various part-time directorships augmented the Foreign Office pension; he was chair of your society for three years and president of BIPS for nine fighting a hard battle with the British Academy to survive. He also raised money for BIPS to build its own building in the embassy’s Gulhak grounds.

And in 1973 'I decided to try my hand at a book about Britain's many-sided activities in nineteenth century Persia,' he writes, 'with a view to providing some sort of a clue to the love-hate feelings of so many Persians about us.' The remarkable *English amongst the Persians* was the result. In 1985 he published *Persians amongst the English* which he described as a much more difficult task. Both books have been translated into Farsi. My talk concentrated on the former, a remarkable achievement in a mere 185 pages, concise like the ideal diplomatic message. The setting is nineteenth century Qajar Iran but around that one has always to keep an eye out for Denis Wright in mid-twentieth century Iran.

It is easy to forget nowadays how remote Iran was by comparison, say, with the Levant or Egypt. Of course many Europeans came, including many travellers, but they needed on the whole to be much tougher than travellers further west. Brigands and disease took their toll, even loneliness for the doctors, missionaries, telegraph engineers who occur in Denis' account. There are all sorts of ramifications to the relationship, as one sees from the chapter headings: The British interest in Persia; diplomats; formalities and frictions; wars and warriors; consuls, khans and communities; the world of business; missionaries and doctors; electric telegraph and other innovations; frontier makers. I see him all the time casting a gently critical eye over the events he describes and their connection with the Iran he knew so well.

For instance, on British interest in Iran at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he quotes John Malcolm: 'the English have an obvious and great interest in maintaining and improving the strength of Persia as a barrier to India.' Protocol and ambassadorial presentation was a major preoccupation: on his first visit Malcolm had a 500-strong retinue, as well as 1,200 Persian muleteers to carry the lavish assortment of gifts, all making quite the wrong impression on the Persians 'whose expectations of largesse', writes Denis, 'were a frequent cause of embarrassment for future British envoys.' 'Today the punctilious insistence on form and ceremony, the expensive gifts and the hard cash may seem incongruous,' – that is Denis writing in the 1970s – but Malcolm insisted it was crucial to outwitting the French: 'in all Asiatic Courts but particularly one constituted like that of Persia, it is necessary for an Envoy of a foreign Nation to assume a style that shall appear magnificent to the court to which he is despatched not only with a view of supporting the honour and dignity of the Country he represents, but in



order that he may have a chance of accomplishing his mission' Malcolm's lavish gifts included a large diamond, jewelled watches, air guns and 'electrifying machines' But no cash.

A chapter headed *Formalities & Frictions* is full of the problems faced by new ambassadors making such a mark. Who calls first, who dismounts and where, caused particular ill feeling. Gore Ouseley (a real stickler for form) in 1811 was escorted to the palace by 'sepoy dragoons, having their swords drawn, the royal standard of England flying, and trumpets sounding.' Persians were also often insulting, keeping envoys waiting for months on end before they could present their credentials. It worked both ways: Curzon in his 1903 viceregal progress round the Persian Gulf refused to land at Bushire because the Shah's representative would not agree to make the first call.

Denis was none too keen on pushing arms sales himself but well describes those involved in similar ventures in the nineteenth century, made all the more imperative in the eyes of governments in India and in England by Russia's relentless push eastwards into Central Asia. Initially the focus of British interest was Tabriz, where in due course the British set up a training mission for Crown Prince Abbas Mirza's army as well as an arsenal & foundry. Some members of military missions showed extraordinary stamina: Captain Benjamin Shee (commanding the Tabriz mission briefly in 1830) climbed Iran's second highest mountain (Sabalan) and in 1832 marched from Tabriz to Yazd and Kirman (1,000 miles), then via Isfahan, Kashan, to Mashhad, then back to Tabriz by March 1833.. Some 4,000 miles in all, 'through towns & villages where civil war, plague & famine were rampant'. Or Henry Rawlinson who had to quell a mutiny among the Kurds he was training and subsequently, in 1836, took his men across Iran from Bakhtiari tribes in the southwest to the Shah at Astarabad in northeast. Khurasan. It was Rawlinson who went on to be posted to Baghdad where he built himself a small summer house jutting out over the Tigris cooled by a constant stream of Tigris water, where he settled down to decipher the Bihistun trilingual inscriptions. Later he returned to Bihistun accompanied by 'an entourage of muscular attendants & small wiry boys' one of whom he suspended from a cradle to copy out an inscription. Denis and I always had a soft spot for Rawlinson and his fanatical pursuit of this linguistic conundrum, so much more interesting than the Rosetta stone.

In Denis' time there was only one consul – in Tehran; when he visited Mashhad in 1954 he wrote that he saw no reason for the consulate there to continue as part of the defence of India – 'irrelevant and expensive,' he noted. Russian agents were well established by the 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchai but not until 1841 was a commercial treaty signed that allowed Britain to set up consuls in Tehran and Tabriz and for Iran to have consuls in London and Bombay. From 1858 and the Treaty of Paris Britain was allowed 'general-consuls, consuls, vice consuls & consular agents' anywhere. Trade was often a principal motive but consulates were also listening posts for any Russian skulduggery. This was certainly the case with the Mashhad consulate, ideal 'for obtaining Secret Agents without attracting special attention .. The Persians for all their faults make on the whole better secret service agents than the Afghans or the natives of India' according to officials in India quoted by Denis.

A chapter headed *Uncrowned King of the Persian Gulf* describes the focal point of British interest - the Political Resident based in Bushire, a proconsular figure appointed from London but virtually independent of the Foreign Office and with no serious challenge to his authority in the Qajar period. He had a wide range of responsibilities: trade, shipping, the Indo-European Telegraph amongst them. His life style was legendary, the Residency filled with 'well-trained Indian servants whose quiet ways & spotless white clothes seem miraculous after inefficient Persians in frock coats.' 'Everything is run on Indian lines' was one quote of Denis'; even the drinking water came from Karachi.

One of Denis' most warm-hearted chapters is on *Missionaries and Doctors*, partly because some were still around during the 1960s and visiting them was very much part of his travels. A favourite was the Rev Henry Martyn. Recommended to Gore Ouseley by John Malcolm: he 'assured me, and begged I would mention it to you, that he had no thought of preaching to the Persians, or to entering into theological controversies. I have not hesitated to tell him that I thought you would require that he should act with great caution, and not allow his zeal to run away with him.' To some extent it did and he was soon engaged in fierce theological argument with the *ulema* of Shiraz. During his year there he wrote and distributed tracts in explanation and defence of Christianity, to which the *ulema* replied with tracts of their own. Yet, unlike some of the missionaries who were to follow later, Denis writes: 'Martyn seems by his humility and patience to have won the affection of those with whom

he argued.’ After the year he wanted to present a copy of his translation of the New Testament to the Shah but court mullahs forestalled him and he had to leave.

Denis has an excellent chapter on that extraordinary institution, *The Indo-European Telegraph*. From very early in the nineteenth century problems arose over communications between Britain and burgeoning possessions in India. Steam helped a bit (see my own book on *Steaming East*) but the electric telegraph was obviously as spectacularly faster as the technology some of us are having to cope with today. Crises such as the Crimean War, the Anglo-Persian War, the Indian Mutiny highlighted the lamentable slowness of communications between London and India. An 1862 agreement with Iran ‘enabled the British to get a foot in a door which they soon pushed wide open.’ The stoical Murdoch Smith, in charge of one of five stretches, summed up the situation thus: ‘The situation was altogether false & unsatisfactory,. A line of 1250 miles, through an extremely difficult & troublesome country, had, by hook or crook, to be made with Persian materials at Persian expense, by a handful of foreigners whom every man in the kingdom, from the Shah downwards, then regarded as pestilent interlopers. Looking back with the knowledge of subsequent experience, the writer is astounded at the cool impudence of the whole undertaking. The marvel is that our throats were not promptly cut by patriotic brigands.’ Murdoch Smith strikes me as one of the most interesting as well as poignant of Denis’ characters: he and his wife had nine children, four died in infancy, then his wife and her mother. He decided to send the remaining five back to England; three more died of diphtheria on successive days in Kashan. Later in the 1860s he developed a splendid collection of Persian art, much of which is now on display in the new Jameel Islamic gallery in the V&A.

As for the telegraph stations, George Curzon wrote: ‘it is among the most agreeable incidents of Persian travel to come, at intervals of 60 or more miles along the principal routes, upon a telegraph station occupied by an English official, who dispenses a generous hospitality, and as a rule is excellently informed about the country in which he has lived and worked so long. I entertain the most friendly recollections of evenings, lightened by the intercourse and rendered comfortable by the attentions of these gentlemen, upon whose amiability travellers, it is to be feared, have sometimes been disposed to presume.’

So we come to those who Denis qualified as *Travellers* - 'birds of passage' as he called some of them. Certainly in the context of Denis' own life and travels in Iran, it is fascinating to look at those who went before him in different parts of the country – Luristan, Azerbaijan, the ancient sites of Persepolis, Pasargadae, Naqsh-e Rostam and so on. Denis' list is impressive; I have focused on just a few who travelled on their own account

Sir Robert Ker Porter for instance, artist and writer, travelling entirely on his own account in 1818-19: he enters Iran in the north-west, heads for Tabriz where he is entertained to a feast. As the Persians keep their heads covered at meals 'we Englishmen were obliged, therefore, to dine in our cocked-hats & feathers, where they were no small impediments to our approach to the trays; we found this extremity of politeness much the most troublesome of the two [problems]' - the other being taking one's shoes off indoors. He has two cautions for fellow travellers: wear your own costume, and never trust to the protection of a single companion. In Tehran, Fath Ali Shah's entrance was heralded by the 'appalling roar of two huge elephants, trained to the express purpose of giving this note of the especial movements of the Great King ... He was one blaze of jewels, which literally dazzled the sight on first looking at him.'

Ker Porter has magnificent detailed descriptions of Pasargadae, Naqsh-e Rostam, Persepolis, which he reckoned had been badly described hitherto, illustrated with copious drawings of processions and bas reliefs. Later, Kurdistan is 'a picturesque country and peoples, hardly explored'; Ker Porter was particularly interested in tracing the march of Xenophon, as was Denis from his listening post in Trabzon: 'No one can sufficiently appreciate the invincible courage of Xenophon., nor the heroic following of his soldiers, who has not witnessed the terrific passes of Kurdistan.'

And there is Henry Layard in Iran in 1840.. The frontispiece to Vol 1 of his *Early Adventures* shows him in Bakhtiari costume, looking every inch the brigand; also in Vol 2 with his servant outside their tent. At least Denis and Iona were spared the rigours of Layard's travels among Bakhtiari tribes; Layard discovered there was no limit to the number of times he and his companion could be robbed, right down to their last garment, despite having decided at the outset that they were going to travel as unostentatiously as possible. Layard lived with the Bakhtiaris for several months, sharing their hardships and dangers and

accompanying the great Bakhtiari leader Mehmet Taki Khan, when he and his family were driven out of their mountains in mid-winter by the governor of Isfahan. Often, like all European travellers, he played the role of physician: 'as soon as it became known that I was Frank, and as all Franks were believed to be cunning physicians, I was visited by men and women asking for medicine.' He particularly noted their love of poetry: one evening the Bakhtiari leader recited from Nizami's loves of Khusrau and Shirin, everyone following with deep-drawn sighs, violent gesticulations and cries of approval.

Comparing Layard with Curzon, as Denis pointed out, lay a generation of imperial commitment (Denis wrote a long entry on Curzon in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*). In Iran in 1889 for just over three months, the thirty-year old Curzon had already been on the Russian Trans-Caspian Railway and had very strong feelings about the Russian menace. In Iran he covered an immense amount of country, on horseback which must have been agony because he had a chronic bad back.. He returned to London, buried himself in a London suburb and set to writing his massive 1,300 page *Persia and the Persian Question*. A critic later wrote that 'Mr Curzon. seems to be under the impression that he has discovered Persia and that, having discovered it, he now in some mysterious way owns it.' But Denis appreciated the end to the second volume: 'I hope I have shown [Iran] to be a country that should excite the liveliest sympathies of Englishmen; with whose Government our own Government should be on terms of intimate alliance.' How appropriate to so much of Denis's life.

Finally I come to an almost exact contemporary of Curzon's (they even met steaming up the Tigris to Baghdad), the intrepid Mrs Bishop alias Isabella Bird. She was very long-suffering: she lost most of her notes – as bad as a computer breakdown – as she describes in her two-volume *Journeys in Persia & Kurdistan* – a part of the world more than once visited by the Wrights – 'a faithful record of facts and impressions, but necessarily written in haste at the conclusion of fatiguing marches, and often in circumstances of great discomfort and difficulty ... Unfortunately I was robbed of nearly the whole of these, partly in Persia, partly in Turkey.' In fact the robbers took almost everything: 'my cork helmet, boots, gloves, sun umbrella, stockings, scant stock of under clothing, all my brushes, towels soap, scissors, needles, thread, thimbles,

strong combination knife ... etc AND my one mug!' Oh dear. The account was intended as a 'popular contribution to the sum of knowledge of a country and people with which we are likely to be brought into closer relations.'

Denis of course spent much of his career, including in 'retirement', trying to ensure that the closer relations survived the swings and roundabouts of Iranian-British relations. He relished the challenge to the end: 'I have had a fuller and happier life than I ever anticipated when I started to earn my living.' How lucky for all of us and how rewarding it has been to explore that life again.

## THE CENTENARY OF IRANIAN OIL: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Illustrated lecture given to the Society on 22nd February 2007  
by DR MOHAMMAD ALI ALA

The quest for oil in Iran dates from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the granting of a concession in 1872 covering much of the country to Baron Julius de Reuter, founder of the Reuters New Agency. It is an absorbing tale of adventure, endurance, tenacity and pioneering spirit shown by a handful of men motivated by high ambition and great vision. It is also an epic story of monumental risk taking and spectacular rewards.

Drilling for oil was first attempted in 1884 and over the next nine years four wells were completed in southern Iran. They failed to establish commercial production and drilling operations came to an end in 1893.

Exploration activity was resumed in 1902, following the award of a concession in 1901 to William Knox Darcy, a British financier. After a



*Darcy's first well at Chiah Surkh, 1902*  
(BP archives)

difficult seven-year exploration campaign, oil was struck in the early hours of 26 May 1908 at Maidan-e Naftun, which in later years achieved world fame as the Masjed-e Soleyman (MIS) oil field. Since then, more than 110 oil and gas discoveries have been made in Iran's onshore and offshore (Persian Gulf) areas. Currently, Iran holds 11% and 16% respectively of the total global reserves of oil and gas.

The story of oil has always been an emotive and politically charged issue in Iran. As the country's economic life blood, it has been the focus of great national interest and debate for over a century. Certainly, that fateful spring morning in 1908 marked a milestone in Iran's 20<sup>th</sup> century history; it ushered in a new era – an era not only of prosperity, but also of social and political upheaval and turmoil that has not yet ended.



*Day of destiny - oil gushes out of the Masjed-e Soleyman discovery well, 26 May 1908*

*(BP archives)*





## MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF THE OIL INDUSTRY OF IRAN

1872 Conclusion of an agreement between Nasser ed-Din Shah and Baron Julius de Reuter, founder of the Reuters New Agency. A wide ranging agreement, its terms included an oil concession, the first to be granted in the Middle East, as well as the construction of railways, irrigation systems, creation of post and telegraph services, banks, industrial plants and the administration of the southern ports. Domestic protests and Russian pressure led to the cancellation of the agreement without implementation of any of its terms.

Drilling of the first exploration well 40 km SW of Kazerun (Daliki) by Hotz & Co, a Dutch trading firm based in Bushehr. The operation failed to establish production.

1889 Granting of a second but much more limited oil concession to Reuter, including the establishment of a bank. The latter was duly formed as the Persian Bank Mining Rights Corporation.



*Abadan administrative building, 1930s*  
(BP archives)

- 1892-93      Drilling of three exploration wells by the Persian Bank Mining Rights Corporation – two at Daliki and one on Qeshm Island, none of which was successful.
  
- 1901          Granting of a 60-year concession to William Knox Darcy (the '*Darcy Concession*'), a British financier, who had made a fortune in the Australian 'gold rush' in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
  
- 1908          After seven bitter years and many disappointments, commercial oil was discovered at Masjed-e Suleyman (MIS), a tribute to the perseverance, dedication and tenacity of G B Reynolds, Darcy's manager of operations in Iran. For 20 years after its discovery, MIS was the largest known oil field in the world.
  
- 1909          Formation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC)
  
- 1910          Construction of the Abadan refinery. With a capacity of 600,000 b/d, Abadan was the world's largest refinery until its destruction in the early days of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.
  
- 1911          Churchill becomes First Lord of the Admiralty and, encouraged by Admiral Fisher, decides to convert the Royal Navy to an oil burning fleet.
  
- 1912          Beginning of refining operations at Abadan.
  
- 1914          British government acquires 51% of APOC, which is awarded an exclusive contract to supply the British navy.
  
- 1920s        Rise in public discontent with the terms of the Darcy Concession.
  
- 1932          Unilateral revocation of the Darcy Concession by Iran, instigated by Reza Shah.
  
- 1933          Negotiations in Tehran, conducted personally by APOC chairman, Lord Cadman, and his deputy, Sir William Fraser.

The Iranian negotiating team was composed of Taghizadeh, Finance Minister, Foroughi, Foreign Minister, Davar, Minister of Justice and Ala, President of Bank Melli. The negotiations were difficult and inconclusive since the Iranian team lacked the necessary authority due to Reza Shah's autocratic rule and decision making style. In a final session chaired by Reza Shah (at Cadman's suggestion), Cadman increased the pressure by tabling a new and unexpected demand: extension of the concession period by 75 years to 2008. Taken by surprise and off guard, Reza Shah agreed to an extension of 60 years in exchange for a reduction of the company's concession area from 500,000 to 100,000 square miles. The name of the enterprise was also changed to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

- 1941 Occupation of Iran by the Allies and deposition of Reza Shah.
- Mid-Late 1940s Rise of the nationalist movement in Iran and protests against the terms of the 1933 concession.
- 1948 Attempts at revising the 1933 concession, resulting in the Gass-Golshaian or the Supplemental Agreement. Formation of the Iran Oil Company (IOC) to explore for oil outside the AIOC concession area. The Supplemental Agreement fails to gain ratification by the Majles.
- 1950 50/50 profit sharing agreement between ARAMCO and Saudi Arabia. APOC resists pressures to offer Iran the same deal. Razmara becomes prime minister and attempts to revive the Supplemental Agreement.
- 1951 Assassination of Razmara and accession of Dr Mossadegh to the premiership. Nationalisation of the AIOC and the formation of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). NIOC takes over the operations of the AIOC, which refuses to accept nationalisation; start of the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute. The UK government refers the case to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice (World Court) at the Hague.

- 1952           Judgement at the World Court: by a majority of nine to five, the Court's panel of fourteen judges upholds Iran's contention that the Court has 'has no jurisdiction to deal with the case'. The dissenters were from the US, Canada, France, Chile and Brazil. The British judge, Sir Arnold McNair, made history by voting against Britain, since he felt that 'the British case was weak'.
- 1953           Fall of Mossadegh's National Front government following a *coup d'état* organised by the CIA and MI6
- 1954           Formation of the '*Consortium*', a grouping of 17 Western oil companies to take over the operations of the AIOC on the basis of a 50/50 profit sharing principle. Amalgamation of the NIOC and IOC.
- 1955-56       First discoveries of significant oil and gas deposits outside SW Iran by the NIOC at Alborz (oil) and Sarajeh (gas), about 120km south of Tehran.
- 1957           Conclusion of a 75/25 profit sharing agreement with ENI, breaking the treasured 50/50 arrangements.
- 1960           Formation of OPEC. An Iranian is selected as the organisation's first Secretary General in deference to Iran's leading role among the producing nations to gain control of their oil industry.
- Mid-1960s     Extension of exploration activities into the Iranian sector of the Persian Gulf, resulting in many discoveries here.
- 1968           Discovery of substantial gas deposits in NE Iran.
- 1971           Tehran Agreement, establishing a minimum government take of 55% and raising the price of oil by 35c per barrel with a commitment to further annual increases. End of the fifty-fifty profit sharing principle.
- 1973           Termination of the *Consortium Agreement* and its replacement by a service contract between Iran and the

*Consortium* members through the formation of the Oil Service Company of Iran (OSCO). The Yom Kippur War and the imposition of an oil boycott by the Arab exporters on the western countries friendly to Israel.

- 1974 The ‘first oil shock’: Led by the Shah, the OPEC producers quadruple the price of oil and Iranian production peaks at 6 m b/d.
- 1979 The Islamic revolution. The NIOC is re-organised into the Ministry of Petroleum and takes over the operations of OSCO.
- 1998 Opening the upstream sector of Iran’s oil and gas industry to foreign participation. The industry emerges from a 20-year isolation period.
- 2001 Organisation of the NIOC into four main departments: Directorate of Exploration; Directorate of Production, Onshore; Directorate of Production, Offshore and Directorate of International Affairs.
- 2004 –2007 NIOC holds two licensing rounds, offering foreign oil companies exploration, production and field development projects to boost Iran’s oil and gas output.



*Oil from the Alborz discovery well formed a lake next to the drill site (NIOC archives)*



## **PATTERN, COGNITION AND CONTEMPLATION: EXPLORING THE GEOMETRIC ART OF IRAN**

Illustrated lecture given to the Society on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2007  
by RICHARD HENRY  
*Sessional Lecturer, World Arts and Artefacts:  
Birkbeck, University of London*



*Vaulted roof of bazaar, 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kashan*

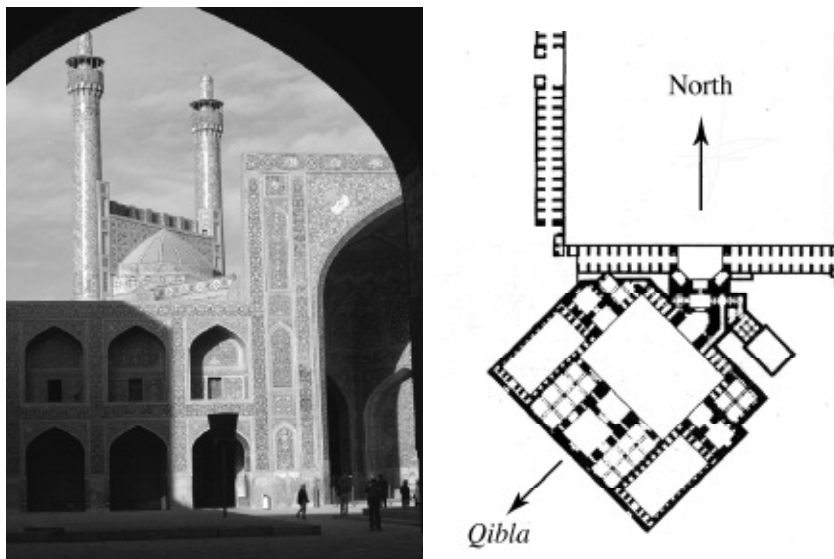
In the autumn of 2006, with the support of the Iran Society, I travelled to Iran to research material for a new course that I had been invited to develop for the British Museum's World Arts and Artefacts programme. The World Arts and Artefacts programme is a joint venture between

Birkbeck and the British Museum and the course was to be a practical one, focusing specifically on geometric design within the Persian tradition<sup>1</sup>. Whilst I have travelled widely throughout the Middle East and my own work, as a painter, printmaker and tile mosaicist, draws considerable inspiration from the extraordinary tradition of Persian geometric art, I had never been to Iran. For this reason I was very keen to visit the country and to study the patterns in both their cultural and architectural context. I was in the country for four weeks, visiting Isfahan, Shiraz, Kerman, Mahan, Yazd and Kashan, and was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet and interview a number Iranian academics, as well as local craftsmen.

It was through an interest in spiritual philosophy and Pythagorean thought in particular that I was first drawn to the study of Islamic art. For many years I have been struck by what can only be described as the numinous quality of Islamic patterns and the sense of sublime tranquility that one experiences in Islamic buildings. I have often wondered whether there is a connection between the presence of geometry and the nurturing of a contemplative state. A closely related question is whether there is a symbolic dimension to the articulation of architectural space. Such thoughts were on my mind when I first arrived in Isfahan. At the time I was reading Henry Corbin's "The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism", a book about the spiritual symbolism of orientation in both space and time. "Orientation", Corbin writes, "is a primary phenomenon of our presence in the world. A human presence has the property of spatialising the world around it" (Corbin 1971, p. 1). Corbin is not merely concerned with our material orientation to the four cardinal dimensions, but rather "the way in which man inwardly experiences the 'vertical' dimension of his own presence" (Ibid, p. 2). This relates to a common theme within Iranian Sufi literature: the "Quest for the Orient". This quest is not, it should be emphasised, for an orient that is located on our geographical maps. It is rather, "the supersensory, mystical Orient, the place of the Origin and of the Return, object of the eternal quest ... the heavenly pole" (Ibid, p. 2).

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term Persian to denote the much larger landmass of Greater Iran encompassing Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.



*View of North-east elevation of central courtyard in Shah mosque, Isfahan, with Northerly facing entrance to main square offset in background. Alongside is a plan of the mosque and the square.*

The contrast between a heavenly orientation and a more earthly one is most clearly realised in the city plan of Isfahan, where the main square (Naqsh-e Jahan) is orientated according to the cardinal directions and the Shah mosque at the southern end of the square has its main axis offset according to *qibla* (direction of Mecca). As Titus Burckhardt observes, this shift marks “the transition from the outward to the inward world, a swift re-orientation of the soul.” (Burckhardt 1976, p. 171)

It is worth comparing this symbolic orientation with that of the Christian church, where the central axis is aligned towards the rising sun at the Spring equinox (the symbol of the risen Christ). Whereas the axes of all oriented churches run in parallel, the axes of all mosques and the direction of prayer converge on a single geographical point of the Ka’ba in Mecca. It is only when a gathering of the faithful bow down in common prayer in close proximity around the Ka’ba that this convergence becomes most strikingly apparent. It is important to remember that Ka’ba actually means cube, and the cube is linked to the



very idea of the centre, its six faces integrating the four cardinal directions, with the zenith and the nadir, that is, the ontological axis linking Heaven, Earth and underworld. The Ka'ba does not entirely correspond to this scheme, as its four corners more closely correspond the cardinal directions, but this does not detract from a primordial symbolism which predates Islam. According Burckhardt, the 'axial' character of the Ka'ba is affirmed according to a well known Muslim legend in which the 'ancient house', first built by Adam, was destroyed by flood and then re-built by Abraham and is situated at the base of an axis which traverses the heavens (Burckhardt 1976, p.4). The rite of circumambulation (*tawaf*) is seen to reproduce the rotation of the heavens around this polar axis, which, in terms of geometric symbolism, could be seen as the archetypal reconciliation of heavenly circle with earthly square.

As I collected visual samples of the many different symmetries employed in the decorative schemes of the buildings in Isfahan, I was very aware of the variety of 'sunwheel' (swastika) motifs, most usually with both a clockwise and an anti-clockwise turn, or 'spin'. This motif occurs across a range of cultures. Far from being an exclusively Eastern symbol, the motif is found both in the Far East and Far West, existing amongst indigenous American tribes as recently as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is often said to symbolise the rotation of the four elements or seasons around a motionless centre. In Isfahan, I was told that it is essentially a Shi'a symbol, an example of *pili* – a design in which the name of Ali is encrypted, rotated and reflected. The great Sufi scholar and metaphysician Rene Guenon offers a more esoteric reading of the design in which it is said to represent the "sign of the Pole" (Guenon 2004, p. 55), the motionless heavenly axis around which the Earth, represented by a cross, revolves, the trailing arms signifying the direction of rotation, or 'spin'. This direction is, of course, reversed depending upon whether one is considering the North or the South pole, and both directions of spin are very often represented together in the buildings of Iran.

Aside from wishing to uncover something of the symbolic dimension of the geometric motifs, it was also essential for me to study the practical aspects of designing and building with this visual language. Through my



Examples of 'pole star' patterns (left to right). Moareq tile work, Molla Ismael mosque, Yazd; Painted ceiling, Ali Qapu ('Gate of Ali') palace, Isfahan; Cut-stone work, Jameh Mosque, Isfahan.

contacts at the University of Isfahan, I was very fortunate to have a number of meetings arranged for me with craftsmen and artisans in the area of Isfahan. The first two images below are from a *moaraq* (tile mosaic) craft workshop. In this technique each individual piece is cut from a ready glazed ceramic tile to a precise shape with a sort of 'double beaked' hammer. The numbered pieces are then assembled, jigsaw fashion, face down on the floor, before plaster is poured onto the back of the mosaic to create one solid piece. This can then be dispatched and carefully installed on-site. It is a mark of the precision of work achieved by these craftsman that fine pieces of detailed biomorphic design can be assembled seamlessly, leaving no mortar line. I have visited similar workshops in Morocco, where the same procedure is used for creating *zillij* work. In Morocco, the tasks are performed by children and the general set-up is rather more hierarchical. A child might, for example, spend a couple of years simply marking out tiles, before later moving up to the more skilled task of precise cutting. The double-beaked hammer is, however, exactly the same. The design of this tool dates back at least at least to the Roman era and is used to cut the marble *tesserae* of traditional Roman mosaic. It can still be purchased in Italy.

In the countryside outside of Isfahan, I visited the busy workshop of a Mr Oshaghi, a master craftsman and practitioner of *gereh-chini*, a traditional woodwork technique involving the assembly of small wooden pieces into elaborate geometric designs. He showed me his studio and was happy for me to document how he would set about constructing a



*First two images are from a Moareq workshop in Isfahan. The last is an example of Safavid moareq from the Jameh mosque, Isfahan.*

traditional pattern. Mr Oshaghi had learnt his skills from his father and he was gradually passing them on to his sons (now grown men), who were always with him within the studio. I was interested to learn the similarities and differences between how he and I would go about developing a geometric design. The image below shows Mr Oshaghi demonstrating the construction of a pattern involving 10-fold symmetry. He did not work with a leaded compass, as I would myself, but would start by incising a circle into paper with a pair of dividers. The paper had previously been left out in the sun to go brittle and lightly browned, so that the dividers would score a faintly legible line when marking it. This would then be worked over freehand with a pencil. Mr Oshaghi began with the creation of a *shamsa*, literally ‘little sun’. In the case of 10-fold symmetry this would take the form of a decagram, or 10 pointed star. The decagram is progressively broken down in order to find the classical elements of 10-fold symmetry. The pattern is then developed through intelligent extension of parallels forming a network of lines, at the intersections of which the design emerges.

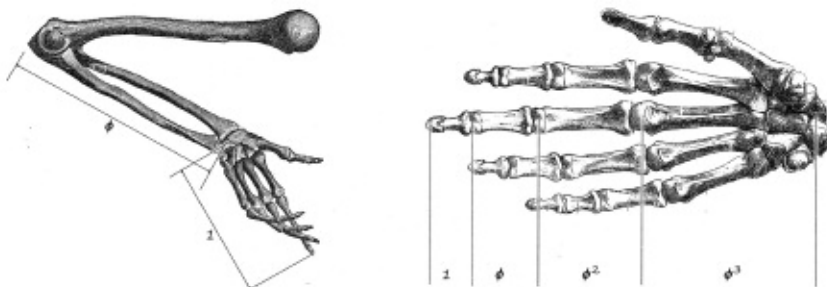
This technique of using compass and unmarked straight edge is essentially the one that I use myself and is common throughout the Islamic world. Mr Oshaghi also showed me some rather more innovative work involving 7-fold symmetry. He was, however, rather more reticent about revealing the method underlying these more original designs. This was perfectly natural. I would have felt the same about revealing my professional secrets to a stranger.



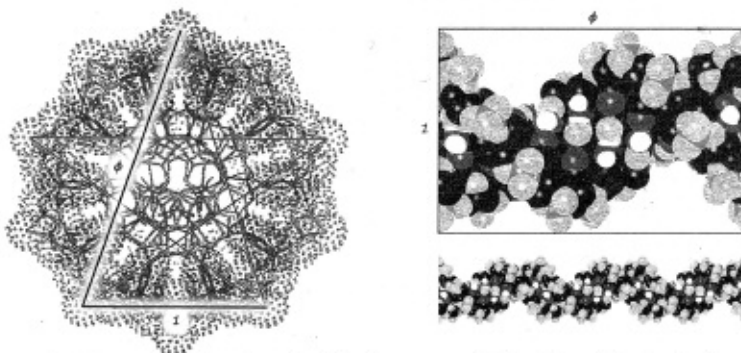
*Mr. Oshaghi demonstrates a pattern employing 10-fold symmetry in his workshop.*

The image to the right above shows a very important stage in the drawing. The diamond shape is a very particular rhombus with some key proportions. The ratio of its edge length to its overall height is 1 to the Golden Section. The Golden Section, also known as *phi* (after the Greek sculptor *Phidias*, who used it in the design in the Parthenon) is commonly represented by the symbol  $\Phi$  and is an irrational number. Its approximate value is 1.61803..., the number of decimal places is unending. A pocket calculator will offer you an approximation if you enter the values  $(\sqrt{5}+1)/2$ . The Greeks, who had neither calculators nor decimals, called such numbers “unutterables”. These mysterious values could be determined geometrically with great precision (through drawing), and the proportional ratios derived from them, were used by the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks to proportion their architectural spaces and to generate harmonious designs (Ghyka 1977, Olsen 2006). Within the Islamic tradition such proportions underlie the designs of all architectural spaces and geometric patterning (see Issam El-Said & Ayse Parman 1976). There are, however, different regional emphases. In the Magrib and Andalucia, there is a preference for patterns based on the proportional ratios related to  $\sqrt{2}$  and  $\sqrt{2} + 1$ . These are used in the facades of the Alhambra in Granada, the plan of the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez and the proliferation of patterns with 8, 16 and 32 petal rosettes throughout Morocco. In the Umayyad mosque in Damascus there are many patterns deploying 3 symmetry. In Iran the preference is for patterns based on the Golden Section and the 5 and 10-fold symmetries derived from it.

So what is it about using these particular ratios that leads to harmonious designs? One characteristic of using these proportions within patterns is that the same elements of the design recur at different scales. Mathematicians often describe this as the principle of ‘self-similarity’, an essential characteristic of fractals. ‘Self-similarity’ is the key to understanding the peculiar resonance between these proportions and patterns in the natural world. In animals, the most permanent bodily tissues, such as bones, teeth, horns and shells all develop through growth by accretion, where smaller elements are related to larger elements by the same proportion. The Golden Section, often rendered by the formulation ‘the smaller to the larger is as the larger to the whole’, is very much the signature of living forms. It underlies the proportioning of bones in the human body, as well as the structuring of the DNA spiral.



*The primary bending places from fingertip to elbow relate to their neighbors by the golden section, here 1.618, found in pentagrams and the water molecule.*



*A DNA cross-section shows the 10-steps-per-spiral nature of the molecule; a single twist of DNA fits a golden-section rectangle.*

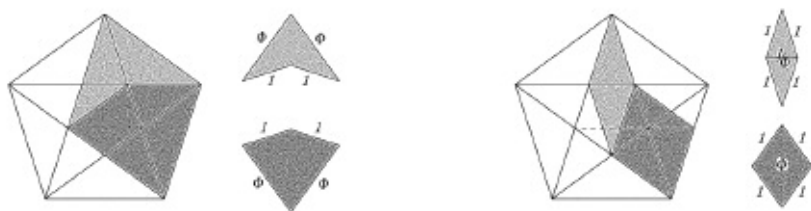


*Taj-Al-Mulk North Dome, Jameh mosque, Isfahan, built 1088.*

The image immediately above shows how the pentagram, or five pointed star, contains the *phi* proportions within its structure. An elaboration of this motif appears on the inside of the 11<sup>th</sup> century north dome of the Jameh mosque in Isfahan. Why should it be there?

This Seljuk work is the earliest example of decoration on the cavity of a domed surface. The ribbing and the dome were constructed together, so the full geometric scheme must first have been thought out and worked through during the design process, most likely starting from a two dimensional drawing, which was then projected into 3 dimensional space. It is part of Isfahani folklore that Omar Khayyam was the designer behind this innovative work and Alpay Ozdural from the Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus, argues persuasively that there may well be some substance to this (Ozdural 1998). Ozdural's analysis of surveys of the dome suggests that this part of the building was constructed with an extraordinary accuracy, even by modern standards let alone those of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, pointing to the presence of the poet and brilliantly skilled mathematician overseeing the design and build.

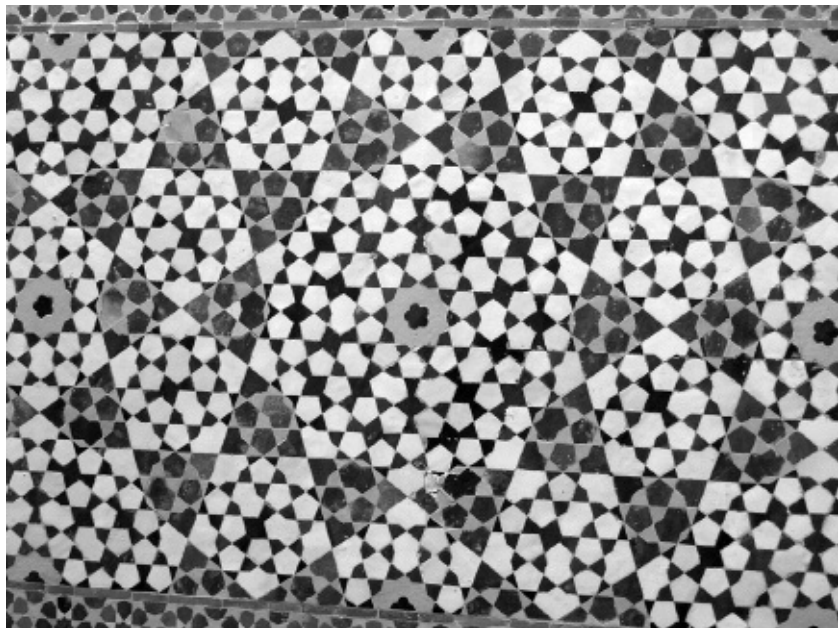
A more recent study by the structural engineer Mehrdad Hejazi at the University of Isfahan indicates how the curvature of the dome is optimized for maximum strength, a significant virtue in a land subject to earthquakes, and is based upon the golden section (Hejazi 2005). Hejazi believes that the designer chose to use the pentagram motif for the ribbing as a way of encrypting the underlying design principle within the visible decoration of the structure itself.



*From Scott Olsen's Golden Section, Wooden Books 2006*

The figures above shows how the pentagon containing the pentagram can be broken down to create a range of tiles. All of these are based around the *phi* proportion and, together with a closely related family of shapes derived from the decagram ('shamsa'), can be tessellated to fill the plane seamlessly and create symmetrical ('periodic') tilings. A knowledge of this principle dates back at least to 11<sup>th</sup> Century Iran, and it became the basis for the development of a sophisticated range of designs employed throughout Iran and across the Muslim world. Interestingly, there appears to have been little or no understanding outside of the Islamic world of how to create tilings using 5-fold symmetry until Kepler's work in the 17th century, a fact which is conspicuously absent from most histories of art and mathematics.

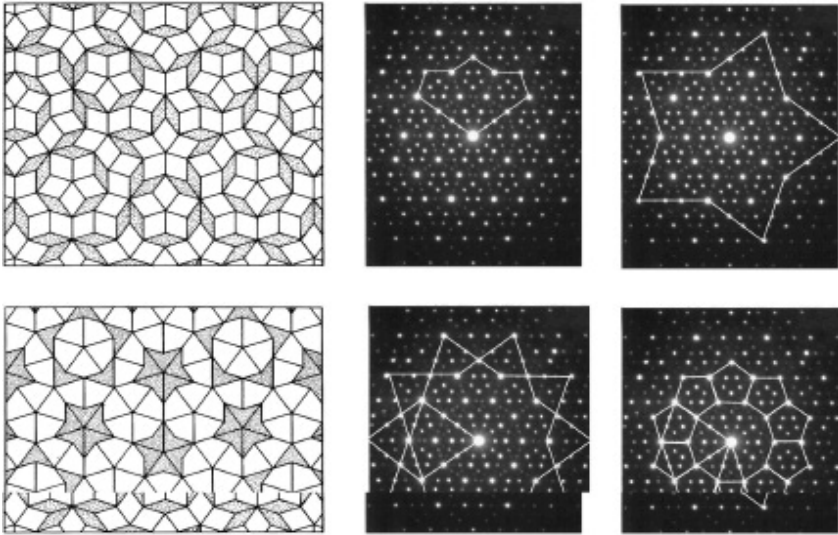
Many of the 5-fold patterns in Iran show an incredible virtuosity of design combined with extraordinary spatial reasoning and vision. The pattern below from the *Vakil* mosque in Shiraz employs a 'substitution' principle in which self-similar shapes are recursively broken down into proportionately smaller copies of themselves. Known as *gereh*, or 'knot' patterns, such designs seem to evoke a harmonic resonance between macrocosm and microcosm and have a strong meditative power.



*Vakil (Regent's) mosque, Shiraz (Qajar period)*

In the 1970's the Oxford mathematician Roger Penrose discovered that by using a subset of tiles generated from the same principles as the pattern above and assembling them according to a pre-defined set of 'matching rules', it was possible to create *non-periodic* tilings of the plane, that is, patterns with only local symmetry, which can be extended indefinitely without repetition. These patterns also have a close connection to quasi-crystals, a new type of metallic alloy discovered in the 1980's, which has revolutionised the field of crystallography (Senechal 1995). Below, to the left, are two examples of Penrose tilings. To their right are images of a quasi-crystal with classical Islamic geometric motifs superimposed. If you look carefully, all these shapes can be found in the Shiraz pattern above.





Two 'Penrose' tilings Analyses of quasi-crystal diffraction R Henry 2007

It has recently become a matter of some controversy as to what extent the early Muslims knew of the possibility of using their tiles to create *non-periodic* patterns. The Harvard physicist Peter Lu, through studying the 12-15<sup>th</sup> century patterns of Iran and Central Asia, has recently published a paper arguing that in a number of key areas the understanding of geometry in medieval Iran anticipated Western science by at least 500 years (Lu & Steinhardt, 2007). Some mathematicians that I have spoken to have been swift to dismiss Lu's findings. A key problem seems to be whether or not the designer/craftsmen of the time, and the mathematicians who possibly collaborated with them, were aware of Penrose's matching rules. If they were not, then any early examples of apparently *non-periodic* tilings may well have been achieved through accident rather than design.

There is, however, another possibility. Seyyed Hossein Nasr suggests that the patterns do not arise from an analysis of matter in the manner of modern physics, but actually have their origin in subtle states. He writes, "they are the results of visions of the archetypal world by seers and contemplatives who then taught the craftsmen to draw them on the

surfaces of tiles or alabaster...these patterns serve as a key for understanding the material with which the architect deals while unravelling also the structure of the cosmos before the eyes of the beholder” (Nasr 1987). From this perspective, the true function of the patterns may be to make us more sensitive to the subtle harmonies within the natural world and remind us, ultimately, of the Hermetic principle that ‘that which is lowest symbolises that which is highest’.

## References

- Moff Betts *The Human Body*, Wooden Books 2004  
 Titus Burckhardt *Art of Islam - Language and Meaning*, World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976  
 Henry Corbin *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Omega, 1971  
 Issam El-Said & Ayse Parman *Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art*, World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976  
 Matila Ghyka *The Geometry of Art and Life*, Dover 1977  
 Rene Guenon *The Symbolism of the Cross*, Sophia Perennis, 2004  
 Mehrdad Hejazi *Geometry in Nature and Persian Architecture*, Building and Environment 40, 2005  
 Peter J. Lu & Paul J. Steinhardt *Decagonal and Quasi-Crystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture*, Science 315 (1106), Feb 2007  
 Seyyed Hossein Nasr *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Golgonooza, 1987  
 Scott Olsen *Golden Section*, Wooden Books 2006  
 Alpaz Ozdural *A Mathematical Sonata for Architecture: Omar Khayyam and the Friday Mosque of Isfahan*, *Technology and Culture* 39.4, 1998  
 M. Senechal, *Quasicrystals and Geometry*, Cambridge University Press, 1995

## **THE JESTER AND THE SHADOW OF GOD: NASIR AL-DIN SHAH AND HIS FOOLS**

Lecture given to the Society on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2007

by PROFESSOR VANESSA MARTIN

*Royal Holloway College, University of London*

Nasir al-Din Shah was fond of the company of jesters, and there were several of different characters at his court. The witticism of one in particular, Karim Shire'i, have even passed into the Persian language. The purpose of this talk is to explore the role of the jesters at the Shah's court; their relationship with the Shah himself, and with powerful courtiers and with the public at large. To begin with, however, I will look briefly at the role of the jester in general, my objective being to establish what purpose the position of jester was intended to fulfil. I will then look in detail at Nasir al-Din Shah's jesters, and at the significance of their humour.

The purpose of the jester in most societies, European, Islamic and Asian, was to remind the king that he was human, so that he remained in touch with his people and with the country's problems. The jester had to fulfil this function in such a way that he was protected from the Shah's wrath. The more isolated the ruler becomes, the more remote he is from the means of ascertaining unpalatable truths, and from the channels by which such truths may reach him, until he arrives at such a point that he may no longer be in touch with reality. This problem is exacerbated by the frequent desire to please and the deference of the courtiers, who have a tendency to tell the ruler what he wants to hear. It has long been understood that one of the most effective means whereby the truth may be conveyed to the king is through representing it as folly. This is at once a means by which it can be heard, and one whereby the king may be made to understand, without losing prestige for failing to observe it in the first place.

Allied to this view is another of the divine fool, found in both Christianity and Islam, derived from the idea that the witless are close to God, and that they act as a touchstone in informing the king of the truth. In Europe some fools were called 'naturals', and possessed of an

imbecility that enabled them to perceive the truth. Others, more usually, feigned imbecility to convey unwelcome meaning to their listeners.

Successful jesters rose from the people, reaching the level of the court through their ability. They were outside the social hierarchy and gained their identity from their connection with their one master, the ruler. They represented an individual whom the king could trust and depend on, and whose special function meant, on the one hand, that favours could be bestowed on him without causing jealousy. On the other, the jester's peculiar wit and ability also meant that he did not have hoards of relations seeking places and favours. In addition, the jester had no other source of income comparable to that he derived from the king, and was thus dependent on the king for his means and status. As a result, he could be uniquely trusted. At the same time jester's task was potentially dangerous, and he had to perform a delicate balancing act in being forthright without undermining the king's authority and prestige. Both jester and king had to realise that if he, the jester, were not assertive in lampooning the king, he was not fulfilling his function, and if the king did not accept his barbs, he was in danger of losing his grasp on reality.

In addition, in the often stifling and tedious culture of the absolutist court, with its hierarchy, ceremonies and strict etiquette, there was need for diversion and laughter, and some outlet for the forces of chaos, and these were represented by the fool. Once again, however, the fool had a difficult balance to strike in that he had to be sure not to go so far as to seriously undermine the authority of king and court. Nevertheless, part of his duty was to discompose the powerful, and remind them of the vulnerability of their position, particularly if they acquired wider unpopularity.

Scholars have demonstrated the universality of the role of the fool over time and place. Otto observes that the jester is 'a universal character, more or less interchangeable, regardless of the time and culture in which he happens to cavort'. The jester also goes back a long way, to early China, to ninth century Byzantium, and to Harun al-Rashid. Jesters are said to have existed in the Sasanian period in Iran and appear in the *Haft Paikar* of Nizami. They had a role in the Ghaznavid court, the Persian word for fool *dalqak* possibly deriving from the name of a well-known jester to Sultan Mahmud, whose name was Talhak. Chardin observed



*Hajji Kerbela'i*

jesters entertaining in a square in Tabriz, which included groups of entertainers. 'Ubaid Zakani is said to have been annoyed at the Shah Abu Ishaq preferring the company of his jester to receiving Zakani's treatise on rhetoric. Finally, there is the well-known fool, Mulla Nasredin, whose witticisms go back many centuries, and stories of whose truth telling jests include remonstrating over excessive punishments with Tamerlane, and over the nature of truth with another king.

A further point universally common to jesters is that they were accustomed both to

performing as individuals and as part of groups of entertainers. These entertainers might include dwarfs, possibly the earliest example of one such c2300 B.C. in Egypt. A jester might have other talents as, for example, an actor, a musician or a juggler. Indeed they learnt their trade as part of the world of entertainment of the ordinary people, at their social gatherings, festivals and ceremonies. At the same time they acquired the ability to understand human behaviour and to garner the currents of popular opinion, both in taste and preference, and in discontent. As they rose in the court, these skills at once assisted their survival and enabled them to act as a bridge between the elite and the common view.

Nasir al-Din Shah had four prominent jesters who found favour with him, Habib Divana, Karim Shire'i, Hajji Karbala'i, and Ismail Bazzaz. A fifth well-known jester, Shaikh Shaipur, was primarily attached to Amin al-Sultan, but was occasionally associated with the court. There were a few others who performed in the houses of the notables, and are briefly mentioned in the sources of the period, such as Shaikh Issa, Mahdi Khan Kashi, Shaqal al-Daula and Shaikh Kurna. There is no clear indication as to when any of the



*Karim Shire'i and Abbas Gondeh*

favoured jesters began performing at court nor as to when their time ended, but Habib Divana was active from 1881-1887, Karim Shire'i from 1882-1895, Hajji Karbala'i from 1882-1890, Isma'il Bazzaz from 1883-1890 and Shaikh Shaipur 1892-1896.

Each of the main jesters had a distinctive character, but of all the jesters of Nasir al-Din Shah, Karim Shire'i enjoyed the greatest posthumous fame, a whole body of humour being attributed to him. He is believed to have come from Isfahan or Yazd. His title, Shire'i, is said to derive from one of three possible sources: firstly, the sweetness of his buffoonery; secondly, he may have started life as a syrup seller; and thirdly, his face was the colour of those who use *shireh* (residue of opium), although he

personally did not do so. Whatever his origins, it is clear he lost them in creating his identity as a jester. Having come to the attention of the Shah, he was appointed deputy in charge of the drum-house (*naqarakhana*). In this way he had responsibility over lower level non-government entertainers of the second and third level. Karim Shire'i, who seems to have had a notable ability to extract money from those with whom he came into contact, and levied a charge on them in return for giving them permission to work. He engaged in a variety of entertainments and was full of character, brave, straightforward and forthright, and able to stand up to powerful courtiers. He was a shrewd observer of human behaviour, a characteristic which aided both his rise to success and his enduring popularity. In particular, he trained himself to gather information and to grasp the mentality of powerful courtiers. He was known for his remarkable sharp witticisms, delivered in such a way as not to cause lasting offence.

Isma'il Bazzaz was the second most prominent jester of the period, after Karim Shire'i, and also a character. He was originally a draper who used to act the buffoon at the gatherings of his friends. Gradually he came to the fore and performed at notable entertainments. Finally, whilst still keeping up his draper's business, he became the leader of a group of entertainers, and came to the attention of the Shah. His talents were several, especially mimicry, but also bawdy jokes, and performing with his own group of musicians, and he was thus something of a showman.

Habib Divana could treat courtiers with studied insolence, of which they complained in vain, referring to him as a madman. The Shah, however, was fond of him and expressed concern when he fell ill. He sometimes gave the jester food from his own plate, illustrating the identification of the jester with the ruler. His origins are not known.

Hajji Karbala'i came from Dezful in Khuzestan, and spoke with the accent of that place. He had an unprepossessing appearance, was rude in manner and inclined to be dressed in torn clothes. He was as much a favourite of Amin al-Sultan as of the Shah. His style was to play on the silly simpleton side of the jester's character. He appears also to have been exceptionally ribald.

Shaikh Shaipur was seemingly the youngest of these jesters and had an unusual persona, suggestive of a mullah, or in the words of I'timad al-Saltana, *akhund dalqak*. His real name was Shaikh Husain and he was tall

and stout, and acquired his nickname through having a voice like a trumpet. His father was an official of the Shrine of Shah ‘Abd al-‘Azim, and wanted to give him a good education. Shaikh Husain was a clever student, but by his own account he was inclined to shamelessness and buffoonery, and therefore he became a jester. He was primarily a favourite of the Sadr-i A’zam, Amin al-Sultan. He is generally held to have been amiable, not materialistic, at ease with all social classes and kind to the poor and unfortunate. He died in 1295 sh./1916-17 at the age of about fifty.

It may be noted that, whilst the origins of Karim Shire’i, Habib Divana, and Hajji Karbali are unknown, Shaikh Shapur and Isma’il Bazzaz came from a pious middle class background. Indeed, at the end of his life, Isma’il Bazzaz repented of his time as a jester. He went to Mecca and built an endowed mosque, and the street in which he lived was named after him. In fact it was common elsewhere for jesters to come from a variety of backgrounds, though not the elite. In other words they rose through inclination, talent and skill, rather than through personal connection or any other form of privilege, and this to some extent made them egalitarian, a valuable quality for their trade.

The primary role of the jester is to save the shah from the folly and weaknesses of pride, both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of his people. Thus in a small and specific but significant way the jester has authority that derives ultimately from the role of the shah as the Shadow of God, but also from the perceived need of the kingdom to have a wise ruler. In the incidents recounted of the relationship between Nasir al-Din Shah and his jesters, their duty in this respect is evident. A second significant duty was to prick the *amour propre* of powerful courtiers and to cast aspersions upon their prestige. However, the manner in which they delivered their message was often ribald, even obscene. The very bawdiness was a way to make that message palatable. Accounts of jesters appear in the recollections of courtiers and officials which, by their very nature, were expected to observe a certain decorum. So the details of the jests are usually omitted.

This is particularly so of the principal source, the diary of the Shah’s Minister of Publications, the writer and scholar, I’timad al-Saltana, who also appears to have belonged on the more prudish side of court opinion. He refers constantly with disgust to the lewdness and foulness of the



jesters' humour. It is thus difficult for the historian to ascertain how far all this lewdness was merely meant to entertain and how far it also contained subtle deflationary barbs. I'timad al-Saltana did not like jesters, and they evidently also bored him.

Just occasionally an example appears in the sources of just how obscenity was used to remind the Shah that he was human. Mukhbir al-Saltana recounts how one day the Shah was in such a state of wrath that he was out of control. At that moment Karim Shire'i appeared and pointed to a thermometer on the wall and asked what it was for. When the Shah answered that it was to find out the level of heat and cold, the jester responded that there was no need for a special object for this task, it could be perfectly well ascertained through the balls, which are gathered up in cold weather and hang loose in hot. This obscene reference made the Shah laugh and his ill-temper was deflated.

In recounting this incident Mukhbir al-Saltana raises a significant and very unusual point. He states that the jester was able to speak to the Shah in such a manner because his status had the designation of being immune from punishment (*simat-i tarkhani*). The expression demonstrates the formalisation of the status of Karim Shire'i at the court. At the same time it accorded him protection (though not cast-iron) for the necessary rudeness of his task. But perhaps above all it was a reminder of the connection of the jester with the divine authority of the king.

Another example of a jester reminding the Shah that he was human, and further, the way in which Shah and jester could tease each other on this point, concerns Shaikh Shaipur. He was said to have been performing for Nasir al-Din Shah, when the Shah ordered that as, a robe of honour (*khala'i*), a donkey's saddle be brought for him and put on him. For a while he behaved like a donkey, then calmly he began to clean the saddle, and at the same time said to himself repeatedly, 'It is the *tanpush-i mubarak* (the Blessed Tanpush, meaning Shah's clothing).'

There are a few examples of the jesters of being perceived as too provocative and incurring the wrath of either the Shah or a powerful personage. The Shah protected his jesters from the latter. Once, Isma'il Bazzaz offended Count de Montfort, the Chief of Police of Tehran, through his mimicry of him. When the Count heard, he ordered the *darugah* of Tehran to harass him. The *darugah* had him arrested and beaten. He himself, however, was later severely punished by order of the

Shah. For the Shah to punish a jester himself was almost unheard of. 'Ain al-Saltana recounts hearing one day from Amin al-Sultan that he had seen Shaikh Shaipur, who had been physically struck by the Shah in Jajrud, an event 'Ain al-Saltana considered unprecedented. It would seem that the Shah could find Shaikh Shaipur too provocative. Once, as the Shah was entering an assembly, Shaikh Shaipur, who was there, announced, 'His Highness the cow has arrived. Pay homage to him' The Shah immediately ordered that he be strangled, and he was seized for execution. However, at the intercession of Amin al-Sultan, the Shah forgave him, and this time he escaped a punishment much worse than a blow.

Jesters as a whole have rarely had any influence on policy, and that was certainly true of the jesters of Nasir al-Din Shah. However, they evidently did perform the function of intimating to the Shah that one or other of his policies was unpopular, and this was most particularly true of costly matters. This no doubt represented not only criticism at court, but public perception of the Shah's decisions. A notable example occurred when Habib Divana complained outright about the Shah's third journey to Europe (which was very expensive), and criticised the government for failing to do anything about the darkness of the alleys at night, the disrepair of the water channels, and the poor state of the mosques. The jester's words clearly alerted the Shah to serious discontent, for the next day orders were received that the water channels should be repaired and the alleys lit (albeit with lamps taken from the people themselves).

One of the primary functions of the jesters at the court of Nasir al-Din Shah was to control powerful courtiers and notables. They acted as a means of informing the Shah of the manoeuvres of his courtiers, particularly behind his back: as a means of undermining pretence; and of criticism of those courtiers. It was the policy of the Shah to use Karim Shire'i to rectify the conduct of his courtiers and to remind them of their failings. In other words, he was an instrument of control of powerful notables. Karim Shire'i was particularly effective as the remarks he made, and his sarcastic wit could deflate courtiers without causing them outright offence. The Shah's courtiers, therefore, gave him bribes so as to be immune from his shafts of humour. This practice gave rise to the expression *khar-i Karim ra na'l kardan* (to put a shoe on Karim's

donkey). It passed into common usage as an expression meaning to pay a bribe.

An example of how Karim Shire'i used his wit comes in a story of him putting Sulaiman Khan Afshar Sahib Ikhtiar in his place. Sahib Ikhtiar was chief of the Afshar tribe and a particularly haughty courtier. He had newly acquired his title. The incident in question involved Karim's donkey. It may be said that this courtier had ignored Karim Shire'i. The story, which is well-known, recounts that Karim had a donkey which he rode frequently. On one journey Karim reached a stream, but the donkey would not cross it. Karim dismounted and tried by all possible means to persuade the donkey to move, but it refused. In the meantime the Shah came along, talking to Sahib Ikhtiar. Karim gestured to his donkey, and said in a loud voice, 'Mr Donkey (Aqa Ulagh), I have hit you but you would not cross this stream; I have begged you, but in vain. I can do nothing more. If you pass, you are Sahib Ikhtiar (the title meant Master of Rule), and if you do not pass, you are also Sahib Ikhtiar [*meaning one who can do what he likes*]. (*Rad mishi sahib ikhtiari, rad ham nimishi, sahib ikhtiari*).

As mentioned, it was not the way of Nasir al-Din Shah's jesters to instigate political manoeuvres, but the Shah could use them for such a purpose. In one reported example, some of the courtiers, with the Shah's evident acceptance, encouraged Karim-i Shire'i to establish an Anjuman-i Farmushkhana, in imitation of one set up by the reformer, Mirza Malkum Khan, to which many of the notables had belonged. This latter was a pseudo-masonic lodge, influenced by the ideas of Europe, where Malkum Khan had first been drawn to the social and political possibilities of Freemasonry. At the same time, he played upon a current fascination with the mysteries of freemasonry to attract a following. Nasir al-Din Shah was initially favourably inclined to the new organisation, having been persuaded by Malkum Khan that it would serve to secure the loyalty of Iran's notables. He possibly also thought that it would advance scientific knowledge, in which he was much interested. However, he gradually came to realise that freemasonry was also linked to republicanism through the French Revolution. Therefore, on 12<sup>th</sup> Rabi' I 1278/17<sup>th</sup> September 1861 the *faramushkhana* was closed down and all mention of it absolutely forbidden (see governmental declaration forbidding the word *faramushkhana*. *Ruznama-yi Daulat-i 'Illiya*). It had

evidently become apparent to the Shah that Malkum Khan had obfuscated his real intentions over the *faramushkhana*, namely that it was intended to form a close circle of influential people, who would disseminate Malkum Khan's ideas on political, social and economic reform on European lines. The result would have been rationalisation of the bureaucracy and the legal system in such a way as to limit the Shah's power.

The purpose of Karim Shire'i's *faramushkhana* was to mock and impugn freemasonry, and discourage the notables from following it. It consisted of a series of rooms each connected to the other, and all dimly lit. Anyone seeking acceptance as a member in the *faramushkhana*, was sent through these rooms until he arrived at the last room where the light was even dimmer than in the others. There different shameful and lewd objects had been placed or hung. There were also several different tablets bearing obscene and embarrassing inscriptions comprised of witty and sarcastic remarks. The effect of these obscenities was that the visitor himself would be compromised if he went out and talked about them. The desperate visitor emerged from these rooms stunned and stupefied with shame. However much his friends and acquaintance questioned him on what he had seen, he would say nothing by way of reply. The result was that they thought he had forgotten what he had seen on exit. This subject encouraged people to go and visit the *faramushkhana* and find out for themselves, with the effect that the *faramushkhana* acquired a reputation exactly the opposite of what Malkum Khan had intended. This story, if true, indicates the way the jester could serve the political interests of conservatism, given that Malkum Khan had used his *faramushkhana* to further the cause of reform.

On an occasion when the Shah was bestowing gifts on his courtiers, Isma'il Bazzaz asked why a robe of honour was given to every dog and cat, and nothing to him, so the Shah gave him a shawl. Finally, stories exist of the jesters taunting the *'ulama*. For example, Shaikh Shaipur is said to have gone to a gathering at the house of Na'ib al-Saltana where a group of the *'ulama* were present and said, 'If I had known that this gathering was so higgledy-piggledy (*khar tu-yi khar*), I would not have come.'

The Shah's jesters also performed outside the court, most notably Isma'il Bazzaz who was multi-talented. Indeed, one of the Shah's many

diversions was to go to the theatre in the Dar al-Fonun to see the act of Isma'il Bazzaz. On one occasion at the Takiyya Daulat, after the performance of the *ta'ziyya* was finished, Isma'il Bazzaz was accompanied by about two hundred other mimics and musicians (*'amala-yi tarab*). They were dressed in various types of clothes, European and Persian, and acted in a way I'timad al-Saltana considered obscene. 'In such a way the place of the *ta'ziyya* became worse than a common showhouse', he wrote, glumly.

Karim Shire'i apparently performed *baqal bazi dar huzur* before Nasir al-Din Shah, and there exists a text which is said to be from one of his plays. *Baqal bazi* plays were performed by popular entertainers at festivals, such as Nouruz, in front of the shah. They were based on the unworthy behaviour of the powerful, especially officials of the state, which they satirised. They illustrate the connection of the jester with the common people, whose complaints they reflected. The performances were intended to amuse the shah, but also to bring to his attention popular grievances against officialdom, and even against specific officials who might be present, who, it was hoped, would thus be shamed into regretting their conduct and stopping their misbehaviour. It was also hoped that the shah would reprimand them. Mirza Husain Khan Tahvildar, the author of the *Jughrafiyya-yi Isfahan*, dated 1294/1877, explains how and why *baqal bazi* was invented, and shows its benefits and effects on urban politics. He mentions a *baqal bazi* performance for Nasir al-Din Shah when he was on a visit to Isfahan to put down a riot, commenting on its political role.

Briefly, the *baqal bazi* attributed to Karim Shire'i is in four sections and was purportedly performed by Karim Shire'i and other players on the occasion of the Shah's birthday at the Gulistan Palace. The Shah is present over seeing the preparations while stroking his moustache, surrounded by an estimated 200,000 candles. Karim Shire'i and his fellow actors arrive, oddly dressed. Karim begins, saying, 'Oh God, send me a customer who is legitimately born (*hallalzada*). A humorous discussion produces the complaint that: 'Everything in this country is in disorder. At night they empty the houses and by day the shops. Think what they would do if there were no police stations.'

The characters take to a bowl of arak, 'for life is short. Think of what happened to poor Hajji Beig when he died, and left 80,000 tomans. Did

it go to his family? Of course not. The officials of the state found pretexts to take it all, even the 10,000 tomans for his funeral arrangements.'

Thus the *baqal bazi* provides oblique, satirical criticism of the ruling elite, of the rapacity of the state officials (some of whom are named in the text) and of the sufferings of the poor. In this way the performers who entertain the shah also warn him of the shortcomings of his government, and of the popular discontent which they provoke.

Most intriguingly, jesters performed in the *andaruns* of both the notables and the Shah himself. A lesser known jester named Mahdi Khan Kashi was put in a blindfold and taken into the Shah's *andarun*, where he performed in front of all the members of the harem. There was much merriment, and, in the eyes of the ever censorious I'timad al-Saltana, the Shah was left without prestige. Nasir al-Din Shah himself, however, had no such shame and records in his diary that on two occasions that he had Hajji Karbala'i brought to the *andarun*, which generated much mirth.

Of all the jesters of Nasir al-Din Shah the one who achieved the most lasting fame was Karim Shire'i. He rose from humble beginnings, learning his skills through entertaining the ordinary people, and it would seem that he never lost the ability to speak to this milieu. What seems to have characterised his humour in the eyes of the people, and is reflected in the body of stories that built up round him, is the ability to chastise the powerful, whether in jest or financially. In the last days of absolutism, with foreign powers relentlessly pressurising the country in every way, and inflation rampant, there was much to criticise in the government.

In conclusion, what may be said about Nasir al-Din Shah and his fools? Firstly, it is clear that the Shah understood well the role of the fool, both with regard to the rectification of his own character, and to the control of his courtiers. Uniquely, as far as I know, a jester at his court, and possibly jesters at earlier Iranian courts, was protected by a formal designation of being exempt from punishment, which shows how seriously the role was taken.

## BRITISH CONSULATES IN IRAN:

### THEIR RISE AND FALL

Illustrated lecture given to the Society on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2007

by HUGH ARBUTHNOTT C.M.G.

The origin of this talk lies in the couple of chapters on Iran I have contributed to a book<sup>1</sup> on British Missions around the Gulf which is due to appear some time this year. Inevitably, I owe a great debt to Denis Wright for his English among the Persians. Among many other works, I have drawn on Antony Wynn's book *Persia in the Great Game*. I have also tried to find all I could in the files of the PRO and the Old India Office Library but I have to say there are some places which I know had consulates, but about which I have found little or nothing on the files.

The British factories set up in the Gulf by the East India Company (EIC) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represented the oldest permanent British presence in Persia, rather than any diplomatic mission. But they were the forerunners of permanent diplomatic establishments and at various times the factors were regarded, or regarded themselves, as official representatives of the English crown. The chaotic state of Persia in the eighteenth century caused by the weakness and disappearance of the Safavid dynasty and the Afghan and Turkish invasions hurt the EIC's trade so that the Isfahan factory [trading post] closed. The French sacked the factory at Bandar Abbas in 1759. After some moving about, in 1773 the headquarters of the EIC settled in Bushire, which from then on became the principal British centre, both commercial and political, in the Persian Gulf. It later became the official command post for the British government in the Gulf, the political residency as it came to be known, and later still, the British consulate.

So you might be led to think that Bushire was the oldest consulate in Persia, but in fact it wasn't. Most of the consulates were not generally set up until the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the

---

<sup>1</sup> *British Embassies Around the Gulf, 1600-2000: Iran, Iraq, Oman and Kuwait*; Global Oriental, Authors: Hugh Arbuthnott, Terence Clark & Richard Muir, ISBN: 978-1-905246-58-8  
Price: £55.00 272pp + 16pp plates

twentieth. While they were responsible for the tasks that fell to consulates elsewhere, some were set up for primarily political and military, and others for commercial, reasons. In both cases, throughout much of the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth, the consulates were part of the British effort to defend India from a Russian invasion, obtain as large a share of the Persian market as possible for British goods in the Russian-dominated north of Persia, while keeping the Russians away from the south where the British almost had a monopoly of the trade. For Lord Curzon, writing in the 1890s, the Persian trade was as important for Britain as the defence of India. Indeed, it was part of the defence of India because India's exports to Persia helped strengthen the Indian economy.

The Russians were the first to obtain the right, by the Treaty of Turkomanchai in 1828, to appoint consuls and commercial agents wherever they wanted. This became an important issue for the British because they thought that, if the Persians succeeded in getting Herat back, as they tried to do more than once, the Russians would have had the right to appoint consular officials there, with all that that would mean for India, in particular the ability to influence, and intrigue with, the Afghans. It was one of the considerations that made the British oppose the first attempt to occupy Herat, made in 1837 by Mohammed Shah.

By 1841, after a number of setbacks resulting even then because the Persians were afraid their country would be divided up between Russia and Britain, the British had obtained the right to appoint consuls or commercial agents in Tehran and in Tabriz, in the north-west of the country. The Persians also agreed to allow the resident to continue to stay in Bushire. In Tabriz there was a building owned or rented by the British mission in Tehran from quite early in the nineteenth century. It was the custom of the Qajar Shahs from 1805 onwards to send the *vali 'ahd* (the crown prince and heir apparent) as governor of Azerbaijan, the Persian province of which Tabriz is the capital. The head of the British mission in Tehran frequently visited Tabriz and stayed there for relatively long periods in order to be close to the *vali 'ahd*. This was not the only reason that Tabriz was important for the British. It was also because of its position close to the Russian and Turkish frontiers. The Russians were a continual threat to the province. It was the Russian occupation of Tabriz in 1827 that led to the Treaty of Turkomanchai and for the following 150 years the Russians brought pressure on the Persian government whenever



they could, by putting troops into Azerbaijan and threatening Tehran. The last occasion was during the Second World War when the Soviet army was occupying Azerbaijan, which then declared itself an 'independent republic'. Albert Wratislaw, who was appointed consul general in Tabriz in 1903, wrote that 'Much of the work of the Consulate arose from the rivalry between Great Britain and Russia in Persia. Whatever move the one Power made, the other did its best to counter. The British and Russian Legations in Tehran watched one another's doings with extreme jealousy, and the Consuls throughout the country imitated their leaders ...'

Another reason for the importance of Tabriz, according to Wratislaw, was that it was the summer resort of the legation in Tehran 'which, in days of greater independence and leisure, had been wont to migrate there bodily in order to escape the heat of the capital.' This was before the Legation's summer residence at Gulhak, in the north of Tehran, was established.

The Treaty of Paris of 1857, which ended the Anglo-Persian war over Herat, among other things provided for the establishment of consulates by both countries on the basis of most favoured nation treatment: each side had the same rights that any third country had been given. This put Britain on equal terms with Russia. The first new British consulate following the Treaty opened in 1857 at Resht, a port and the capital of Gilan Province, almost on the south western corner of the Caspian sea. The river and sea route down the Volga and across the Caspian to the north west of Persia had been used by the early English travellers, and was one of the routes by which the Russians traded with Persia and sent in troops. From 1879 to 1883, there was also a consulate at Astarabad (now Gorgan) on the south-east coast of the Caspian, perhaps the shortest life of any of the consular posts in Persia.

Resht was therefore always a sensitive post, but would have been even more so if the Russians had indeed planned, in the mid-1890s, as Curzon thought they had, to invade India and incorporate into Russia the northern Persian provinces of Gilan and Mazanderan. Even if the Russians had no such intention<sup>2</sup>, Resht was thought to be important for British interests for a considerable time, including because, as a British official noted in 1922, 'in normal times, all travellers to the north of Persia passed through Resht'. Kuchek Khan's Jangalis, during their revolt, burnt down the Resht consulate in 1919 with all its contents. It was rebuilt, but by 1932,

---

<sup>2</sup> see Firouz Kazemzadeh: *Britain and Russia in Persia 1864-1914* Yale 1968

the post of vice consul (presumably it had been down-graded) was vacant, and although the commercial and general reporting done by a 'munshi', a locally engaged secretary or 'native agent' was considered valuable by the head of mission in Tehran, in 1935 the consulate was closed down completely and the building sold in 1936. It was reopened at some stage, presumably during World War II, to help with getting supplies to Russia and perhaps as a listening post.

Khorasan, Persia's north-eastern province, borders Russia and Afghanistan and was much more important to the interests of the British and, more particularly, the Indian governments. Its capital is at Meshed, a place of pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam Reza. The Russians were allowed to set up a consulate general here in 1889. Having given in to the Russians, the Persians could not refuse the British permission to appoint a consul general, who rather cleverly managed to get there first and so became doyen of the local diplomatic corps of two diplomats.

The principal duty of the Russian and British representatives was to spy on one another. The British also used Meshed as a base from which to spy on Russian activities in Central Asia and the Russians looked for opportunities to further their ambitions along the frontier with Afghanistan and beyond. Meshed was a key piece in the Great Game. This political rivalry was matched by commercial rivalry throughout Khorasan, where the Russians had the built-in advantage of being almost next door. When Curzon visited Meshed around 1890, the bazaars of Khorasan seemed to be loaded with Russian goods. While there was a British trade – cottons, cutlery – and a British Indian trade – tea, minerals, indigo – worth defending and, according to Curzon, worth expanding, Britain's primary interest lay in ensuring the Russians did not conquer Khorasan, assumed to be their target both for its own sake and as a stepping stone towards India and the Gulf.

Curzon thought the consul general lived in quite unsuitable premises, presumably because the first consul-general had had to make do with what he could find quickly in his effort to get there first. On his return to London, Curzon successfully argued for a better consulate, so a self-contained compound entirely surrounded by a mud-brick wall was completed in 1893. In it were not only the consulate office but also houses for the consul-general, the vice-consul and other staff, the lines and stables of the consular Indian cavalry escort, known as the *sowars*,

and a spacious garden. Its size varied over the years but at its largest it was probably twelve acres, almost as large as the legation compound in Tehran.

The British staff at the turn of the century consisted of a consul general, a vice- consul, a surgeon, and a military attaché. It was into this set-up that Sir Percy Sykes, one of Meshed's best known consuls general, moved with his family in 1905 across the desert from Kerman where he had also been consul. He stayed in Meshed until 1913, and was there in 1912 when the Russians, on the pretext that the lives of their subjects were in danger, bombarded the shrine of the Imam Reza. Sykes afterwards had photographs taken of the dome of the shrine with the shell marks in it clearly visible. This did nothing to help the reputation of the Russians, but didn't help Britain either because of its alliance with Russia through the Anglo-Russian Convention, even if Sykes himself was popular in Meshed. Between the wars, Meshed's importance gradually declined, although Clarmont Skrine was made consul in 1942, with the task of ensuring that supplies went through to Russia from India. The difficulties of this route were soon recognised and it was abandoned. During his short stay in Meshed, Skrine was particularly struck by the fertility of the consulate garden where '... almost any flower, fruit, berry or vegetable that will grow in France or southern England flourishes if skilfully tended and irrigated'. But, he wrote, the gardens, although large, were not all. Beyond the tennis courts (note the plural), were still the escort lines, where the *sowars* used to live.

The need to play the Great Game had consequences for the British position all along the frontier between Persia and Afghanistan and, further south, between Persia and what was then India. Subordinate to the consulate general at Meshed was for a time a consulate at Torbat-e Heidari, opened in 1903 but which no longer existed in 1921, according to Denis Wright's list of the 18 consulates then in existence. There was another at Birjand, (the chief town of Qa'en province) south of Torbat-e-Heidari, which opened in 1909 and was still going in 1921. In 1909, the vice consul was an official from the European Indian Telegraph department, who combined his two jobs and became later also the manager of the Birjand branch of the Imperial Bank of Persia. Further south still, Percy Sykes, at that time consul in Kerman, was ordered in 1898 to open a consulate in Nosratabad (now Zabol) in Sistan, a strategic

point on the way to India where the Russians also opened a consulate in the same year. When Frederick O'Connor arrived as consul in 1909, he found that he had a staff of 137 but these included "eighty Indian Cavalry, a score or so of local levies....and various minor retainers". The Indian cavalry were presumably part of the contingent of *sowars* brought in from India in 1904 as a riposte to a large increase in the number of Russian Cossacks. This state of affairs did not last long because O'Connor was ordered to cut down the expenses of the consulate by 50% shortly after his arrival. A photograph from 1910 shows a staff of only 25, including eight *sowars* with their lances.

The consulate at Duzdab (now Zahedan), was by 1929 a temporary establishment sanctioned from year to year, and it does not appear in Denis Wright's 1921 list. The building was put up during the First World War but a Ministry of Works memo of 1949 records that it was not 'taken over' until 1922-25, which may explain why it is not on the Wright list.

The Kerman consulate, founded in 1894 by Sykes, was another of the establishments maintained in south and east Persia jointly by the Foreign Office and the Government of India. It was housed in the Bagh-e Zirif, which Skrine, vice-consul there in 1916, thought was unusual for a bagh [garden] because there was more than one house in it. Sykes described the area as 'the pleasaunce of Kerman', situated about a mile outside the city walls and consisting of several gardens, covering perhaps half a square mile. It seems to have followed the usual pattern of British consulates in Persia and, besides houses for the staff, included stabling for horses and quarters for the *sowars*. Skrine found the consul's residence charming, with its colonnaded loggia, arched portico and French windows giving on to an almost English lawn. For him, it was 'a pleasant mixture of Persia and the West; lawns and flower-beds alternated with rose-plots and vine-pergolas, willows wept over grass-lined water channels, trees of apricot and peach and nectarine shaded rectangular plots of lucerne and vegetables'. He referred to it, when describing a visit he made there in 1944, as 'Percy Sykes's charming consular residence'.

A vice consulate was opened at Bandar Abbas in 1900 as a centre from which to obtain intelligence about gunrunning in the Gulf, always a problem and one which at this time affected relations with the French whose consul in Muscat was involved in the trade. A consulate was constructed in 1903. It cannot have been a much sought-after post.

Clarmont Skrine described it as being in 1916 a not very attractive town ‘... scantily supplied with brackish water, riddled with malaria, dysentery, typhoid and other sub-tropical diseases, without shade trees, gardens or any other amenity, Bandar Abbas contested with Muscat and Ahvaz the honour of being the hottest, unhealthiest and least-sought-after post on the cadre of the Foreign and Political Department of the Government of India’.

There was also, from 1910 to 1920, a consulate at Bandar Lengeh on the Gulf coast, replacing a residency agent, whose precise status the legation said they had ‘more than once been at a loss to explain to the Persian Minister of Foreign Affairs’. One can understand the problem. Subordinate to the residency at Bushire, the agent at Bandar Lengeh had much more to do with the Gulf and its affairs than with Persia, and was thus to the Persians another example of Britain as a state within a state. The legation’s argument was that the Germans were active in Bandar Lengeh; Russia was not the only foreign country the British wanted to keep out of the Gulf.

On the Gulf coast, however, right up to the Shatt-al-Arab, the most important post was of course Bushire, the headquarters of the EIC in the Gulf and the home of the Resident who oversaw all the company’s other posts in the rest of the Gulf. As Britain imposed its peace on the area, ridding the Gulf of pirates and making treaties with the Arab sheikhs on the southern coast (the Trucial States), and as the political and military role of the EIC was taken over by the British government, so the Resident’s role changed from being mainly commercial to mainly political, representing the government rather than the company. This was not the British (or, as it was later known, the Imperial) government but the Indian government; the resident, who was appointed by the Indian government, took his orders from Calcutta rather than from Whitehall. A British official of the Indian Telegraph Company, visiting in 1875, wrote that:

Bushire, although Persian, is under the entire control of the British Resident – the native governor would not think of acting contrary to the wishes of the English Sahib. The internal, as well as foreign affairs come under the notice of

Colonel Ross [resident from 1872-91]... In fact, Southern Persia might be said to be indirectly under British rule...

Later on, the resident had a double role. The *Persian Gulf Gazetteer* of 1908 records that the then resident was also consul general for the Persian province of Fars (and who therefore came under the minister in Tehran and ultimately London), and that he had two assistants from the Indian Political Service and a vice-consul from the Levant Consular Service. The resident and consul general was then Percy Cox who held the post from 1904-13 and from 1915-18. The property was extensive and included two residences, one in town for winter and the other in Sabzabad for the summer – when the resident, that is, was not on holiday in Shiraz. Sabzabad was Bushire's equivalent of Gulhak in Tehran. A predecessor of Percy Cox, Captain Felix Jones, had been given the site as a summer camp by the Persian government in the 1850s and a building had been put up there which was added to over the years. According to his biographer, Philip Graves, Cox thought it a most comfortable and convenient house although the road to it 'was atrocious, a mud stream in the winter rains, a squalor of dust and deep ruts in the hot season'.

The Government of India's relationship with the British Government over Iran had been difficult since the Malcolm/Harford Jones affair in 1808 and responsibility for the Mission in Tehran later on for a time fluctuated between India and Britain. In 1858, following the Indian Mutiny, the EIC's powers were transferred to the British crown. From November 1858, responsibility for the legation in Tehran was with the India Office in London but moved back again to the Foreign Office in December 1859. The dividing lines of responsibilities still often overlapped, which made for cumbersome arrangements when the bulk of the eastern consulates were set up in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example, the consul general at Meshed was a member of the Indian Political Service and nominated by the Government of India. He received communications on Indian subjects direct from the Indian government and his reports were sent to the Indian government who sent copies to the British government. However, his nomination was subject to the agreement of the minister in Tehran and he was known as 'His Majesty's Consul-General, Meshed'. His letter of appointment and King's

Commission were issued by the Foreign Office. He was subordinate to the British legation in Tehran and took his instructions from the Foreign Office via Tehran.

Clarmont Skrine, then vice-consul in Kerman, wrote in 1916:

The work at Kerman was complicated by being under dual, if not triple, control. As a Consulate in a foreign country we were under the Tehran Legation; but as representatives of the Government of India we were also controlled by Delhi and Simla, either direct or through their Chief Political Officer in the Gulf region, Sir Percy Cox, whose headquarters, until the fall of Baghdad, were at Basra. We also corresponded direct in S.P.R. [South Persia Rifles] matters with Shiraz.

There was, particularly in the period leading up to the First World War, considerable tension between the policies of the British and Indian governments. In 1907, Arnold Wilson, then an officer in the Indian Army, visited Tehran and stayed with a friend at the British legation, Walter Smart, a vice consul. Wilson wrote of Smart:

His attitude and that of the Minister, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, towards the Government of India and its officers in Persia was critical, almost hostile. The Minister was accredited to the Central Government and had little sympathy with those who felt to strengthen it was to increase the influence of Russia, which, then as almost always, was predominant in Tehran ... We in India wanted a strong and independent nation on our western border, and on the shore of the Persian Gulf but preferred a highly decentralised regime independent of Russia to a centralised regime under the thumb of Petersburg.

British government policy also emphasised the importance of its relations with Russia after the 1907 Convention and the need to have a strong and united Persia as a defence against Russian (or any other foreign) domination of the whole country. The policy of the Indian

government, on the other hand, and that of its agent, the political resident in Bushire, was to persuade those who exercised power locally in the south of the country to look to the Indian government and Britain rather than to Tehran. A prime example of this policy was in relation to Sheikh Khaz'al of Mohammareh (now Khorramshahr), the ruler of the Persian province of Arabistan in the south-west of Persia, which borders the Shatt-al-Arab and Karun river. The Indian Government, through the Residency, tried to tie Khaz'al as closely as possible to Britain by assuring him of their support for him against encroachment on his rights as ruler by the central government or anyone else. The embassy in Tehran and the Foreign Office in London, while recognising the importance to Britain and India of Arabistan strategically, commercially and for the oil fields and refinery at Abadan, wished to do nothing which would undermine Persian sovereignty over a part of its territory. Much effort was put into trying to square this circle.

The differences between the Indian and British governments led to some very unwieldy administrative arrangements, quite apart from the political problems. One in particular was the system of sharing costs between the two governments where, as you can imagine, each side was anxious not to be done down by the other. Another problem was that the so-to-speak "Indian" consulates in the eastern provinces were on a much larger scale than those of the Foreign Office in the western provinces and elsewhere in the Near East. It cannot have helped relations between the two when there were huge differences of costs. According to Denis Wright, Meshed, which was financed and staffed by the Indian government, cost £8,600 to run in 1899, while Tabriz, a Foreign Office post, cost only £920.

The system also doubled (at least) the complication of obtaining authorisation for expenditure because each government had to agree on it in advance and therefore there were constant problems over financing consulate buildings, including quarters for the *sowars*, and stables for their horses. One example of the problems was when vice consul Macann in Zahedan (as Reza Shah had renamed Duzdab) wanted authority to build housing for the staff (16 people besides himself). He first had to write to Clarmont Skrine, then consul in Zabol (previously Sistan) and Macann's immediate chief, which he did in April 1927. Skrine forwarded the request to the Foreign and Political Department at the Indian



government's summer residence at Simla in May. But it was not until 31 August 1927 that Simla forwarded it to the India Office. There is no trace on the file about what happened after that but, since by the end of August the request had not even reached the Foreign Office or the Office of Works, it was unlikely that Macann had his buildings that year, if he got them at all. Nor could all the consulates have the benefit of a visit from a Lord Curzon to ginger up London, as Meshed did.

Ahwaz was another example. It was set up as a vice-consulate in 1904. Its importance lay first in its position as a commercial centre and later because it was close to the oil operations of the AIOC. It came under the supervision of the consul general/political resident in Bushire, whose deputy wrote to the India Office in London in 1920, supporting a request from the vice-consul in Ahvaz for a new building because of Ahwaz's importance to Britain, and because the vice consulate staff were the worst housed Europeans in the whole town. The wretched consul's house collapsed altogether in 1930, ten years after the first request for a new building was made, while the matter was still being churned around by the consul himself; the political resident and consul general at Bushire; the embassy in Tehran; and the Indian government; and, in London, the Foreign Office, the India Office and the Ministry of Works. When the file ended in 1932, there were still no new buildings, and the consular offices and residences were still being rented.

Moving north, Isfahan and Shiraz had each been the capital for a time and had been important trade centres from the sixteenth century where the British and other Europeans had established factories at various times. Both cities are the centres of tribal areas. Around Isfahan are the Bakhtiari, whose area stretches down to near Ahwaz; and around Shiraz are the Qashqais. The tribes were important to British interests for both political and commercial reasons. They were almost totally outside the control of the Persian government until the time of Reza Shah (and occasionally afterwards) and an important reason, therefore, for its ineffectiveness and instability. If the tribes were not friendly towards the British, then the harm they might do to the trade routes or to other commercial interests, like the oil, had at least to be minimised. Much of the oil, too, was found on Bakhtiari tribal lands, so the AIOC had to reach agreements with them.

The consulate at Shiraz was built between 1900 and 1903 by the Indian

government and one of their officers occupied the post in 1903. In order to try to bring some order into the province of Fars, the British provided funds for the administration of the province. There was a Persian Governor-General, a Belgian Head of the Finances, Swedish officers for the gendarmerie and an American and a Frenchman running the Army – the whole financed by the British Government through the medium of the British Consul, who was expected to see that the funds were properly spent. The consuls were therefore powerful figures who negotiated with tribal leaders, had oversight of the administration and had an important say, through the Legation in Tehran, in the appointment of governors general. For this reason, the Germans made every effort to neutralise them during the First World War. They also had the less important but still essential job until 1936 of accommodating the political residents from Bushire when they came in summer for their annual ‘recess’ in order to escape from the heat of the Gulf.

Isfahan, capital of the country for much longer than Shiraz, had no consul until 1891. Because of its position as what was expected to be the main centre for trade along the Karun river, the main motive for opening it was commercial rather than political. The first building was rented but in 1896, a building was bought. In 1932, the ambassador in Tehran, Reginald Hoare, thought that there was not enough work in Isfahan for a consul general or even a consul. In 1934, a decision was taken to close the consulate and the building was eventually sold in 1938. It was reopened again during the Second World War, when Charles Gault, the consul, helped Fitzroy Maclean with his famous kidnapping in Isfahan of General Zahedi, the Persian army commander in southern Persia, who was putting at risk the Allies’ supply route to Russia because of his grain hoarding, German sympathies, and intrigues with the tribes.

There were also at one time or another consulates at Khorramshahr (the refinery, trade), Kermanshah, Hamadan, Sultanabad (now Arak), Qazvin, Qasr-e Shirin and Yazd but it would be tedious to describe each and every one and in any case the files I found were incomplete. I will, however, say a word about Hamadan as an example of the decline in importance of the consulates outside Tehran between the wars. It had been opened in 1912 for commercial reasons; it was then the largest centre of British trade in Iran, taking £700,000 of imports, mostly Manchester cottons, in a year. But it did not last for long. It closed in 1932, reopened in 1941

because of the British occupation of Iran, but was closed again in 1947.

The decline in the importance of Hamadan in 1932 is explained in a letter from an FO official to the Office of Works in 1932, saying the FO had changed its mind about Hamadan. Some reasons were peculiar to Hamadan, but the FO listed others which applied everywhere. First were the changes which had taken place in Iran since the late 1920s when a site had been acquired on which to build a consulate. Many of these changes were due to the arrival of Reza Shah on the throne in 1926. There had been greatly increased centralisation, resulting from the consolidation of the central government for almost the first time in Persian history; the disappointment of hopes that Russian trade could be prevented from gaining a serious footing outside Azerbaijan; the reduced fear of Bolshevik political influence thanks to the stability of the Persian government; the abolition of the capitulations, which had greatly increased the work of consuls; and the decrease in the number of foreigners, and especially British, living in Iran.

In 1921, as we have seen, there had been eighteen consulates in Persia, excluding consular agents, outside Tehran. By 1947, however, there were only nine consulates<sup>1</sup> remaining in Iran, some of which had been closed before World War II but had reopened because of it. Their future was in question because of the claims of India and Pakistan to some of the properties following Indian independence and partition. There had been no progress in negotiations between Britain, India and Pakistan when, on Saturday 12 January 1952, the head of chancery in the embassy in Tehran was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 8.30 p.m. to receive a Note. The Note cited the grievances the Iranian government had against the British. Interference by consular officials threatened the independence of the country. India and Pakistan were now responsible for their own subjects and the number of British subjects in Iran did not justify British consulates. In any case, there was a lack of reciprocity because there was no Iranian consular representation in Britain. All British consulates in Iran had, therefore, to be closed by 21 January and this would be announced publicly at 8 a.m. the following day, Sunday.

The British Government, through the Embassy in Tehran, disputed the Iranian Government's charges of interference and their right to close the consulates, especially at such short notice. None of this had any effect but in response to British requests for chapter and verse to back up their

accusations of interference, the Iranian Government sent a Note dated 20 January 1952, with which was enclosed copies of documents which it claimed showed evidence of British interference in 1914, 1918, 1944 and 1951. It rejected the British argument that Iran was bound by the 1857 Treaty of Paris because it was 'imposed on the Persian Government and people'. The Note also referred to 'intrigues and plots against the Government in the provinces and particularly among the tribes in Persia'.

The embassy's Note in reply to this, dated 19 March, was a long time coming and in the meantime the consulates had closed on the due date. The Note said that the British government rebutted the Iranian accusations of interference, argued that the earlier episodes related to matters of a long time before, and completely rejected the charges of interference in 1951. They therefore held to the view that the closure of the consulates was a breach of Article IX of the 1857 Treaty ['by which Her Majesty's Government have the right to maintain consular representatives wherever other foreign governments do so']. The Note also argued that, in the period of the First World War, the British government's actions were, *inter alia*, 'directed towards securing the independence and well-being of Iran'. In short, the British argument was that, far from encroaching on Iran's independence, Britain was securing it against Russia. This may well have appeared disingenuous to the Iranians, given that the British occupied the whole of the south of Iran during the war, but it had been, as we have seen, a consistent British claim.

There was a shorter gap before the Iranian riposte in a Note of 7 April 1952, with which they enclosed a copy of a letter from Herman Norman [British Minister at Tehran] to the Persian Prime Minister of 2 November 1920 suggesting someone for the post of acting foreign minister; another from Norman of 12 November 1920 to the prime minister wondering why Sardar-e Mo'azzam was being passed over for a government job; and one dated 29 November to the Prime Minister referring to the 400,000 *tomans* paid to some influential Persian personalities to help persuade them to present the Anglo-Persian treaty to the Majles in 1919. There was a copy of a letter from Colonel Haig of 29 November 1920 to the Prime Minister proposing Amin ol-Molk as government commissioner for the Imperial Bank in the place of the actual incumbent. There were also copies of other letters from British officials in the

Legation in Tehran in late 1920 and early 1921 and of one letter from the consul general in Kerman, Major David Lorimer, of April 1917, all of which the Iranian Note claimed showed evidence of British interference in Iranian internal affairs. The Iranian government might have quoted other examples. In one of his regular reports in 1942 from Isfahan, the consul, the same Charles Gault, wrote:

On May 23rd the two men whose arrest I had demanded were finally taken into custody ... On May 27th a further seven persons were warned by the police for indulging in undesirable activities. The police made it clear they were acting at the instigation of the British Consulate ... at my request, the Governor General arranged for the transfer of the Head of the Municipality, an incompetent official suspected of German sympathies. These moves made a considerable impression locally...

No doubt they did. But it would be interesting also to compare this with reports from the Russian consuls in the areas they occupied.

The Foreign Office considered how to reply to this Note but there is no trace of a reply on the file. It seems likely that there was none in the light of a letter dated 19 April from Archibald Ross in the Foreign Office to Middleton, then chargé d'affaires, warning him that Woodward and Butler were about to publish the next volume of the official *Documents on British Foreign Policy* covering the years 1919 to 1939. In it, wrote Ross, there were 'two telegrams from Sir Percy Cox to Lord Curzon about the 400,000 *tomans* which, together with an illuminating footnote by the Editors stating that these were for "propaganda and secret purposes", will make Mr Norman's indiscretion of 29 November 1920 look like 10 cents'. Ross told Middleton that officials would be recommending to Ministers that the public position of the Foreign Office should be that the policy represented by the abortive treaty of 1919 was the best for Persia in the circumstances 'although Sir P. Cox's despatches reveal him as over-enthusiastic and autocratic'.

The closure of the consulates provides a clear illustration of resentment

against British interference in Iran over many years and was, of course, a preliminary to the breach of diplomatic relations between Iran and Britain and the closure of the Embassy. I have always found it interesting that Britain should come in for so much resentment considering that this country never claimed as its territory a single piece of Iran while the Russians “partly by open war and partly by furtive nibbling”, as Curzon put it, occupied and kept, until 1992 or so when they became independent, large chunks of Persian territory in the Caucasus.

None of the consulates except Khorramshahr, (and Tehran) was ever reopened although in Meshed and Shiraz, the buildings were used by the British Council up to the Revolution of 1978/9. With hindsight, the closure of the consulates, although damaging to Britain’s prestige, was a blessing in disguise. Britain no longer was interested in Iran because of India. Business was being centred in Tehran as political centralisation increased. The political importance of the provinces and of the tribes continued to diminish. Britain’s financial position continued to deteriorate and the Foreign Office had started a long process of retrenchment. The closure of the consulates by *force majeure* made the problem easier because the decisions to be taken were on which should be reopened rather than on which should be closed. As it was, final decisions about the future of the posts after the return of the shah and the resumption of full relations with Iran were not taken until 1957 (although the consulate at Khorramshahr was open again by 1955), not only because the wheels of bureaucracy move slowly but also because the whole question was still complicated by the claims of the governments of India and Pakistan.

The consulates were once the symbol of British influence outside the capital. The few buildings that survive are now the only signs of their existence, about which one imagines few Iranians now know or care.

# HAFEZ AND THE PLACE OF IRANIAN CULTURE IN THE WORLD TODAY

## INAUGURAL LECTURE BEFORE THE IRAN SOCIETY

9<sup>th</sup> November, 1936

BY SIR SULTAN MUHAMMAD SHAH AGA KHAN

I must thank His Excellency the Iranian Minister<sup>3</sup>, Lord Lamington and the members of the Society for having done me the honour of inviting me tonight to bring before you the importance to the whole world of those spiritual forces that the ancient land of Iran has cherished in her modern history. Before I go further I want to define clearly what I mean by “spiritual forces” – I do not use this term in any question-begging sense. I do not wish to limit it merely to religious or such ideas, or to give it any otherworldly interpretation, but I do mean anything that deals with man’s life of the spirit here and now on this earth and in this life. Whatever may or may not be the soul’s future, there is one impregnable central fact in existence: that here and now, in this world, we have a soul which has a life of its own in its appreciation of truth, beauty, harmony and good against evil. Has modern Iran greatly contributed to the perfectioning of the soul of man thus understood? Modern Iran I define as the ancient race of that high plateau, influenced by the faith of Islam and the imaginative poetry and declamation of Arabia, welded into one by a process of slow intermarriage and movement of many races from north, west, east and south. What has this Iran done for the satisfaction of man’s highest aspirations?

Whatever the cause, after Islam had for three or four centuries taken deep root in Iran the genius of the race blossomed out, and for all the centuries right down to our own times that garden, in spite of the terrible visitations that so often submerged it, has never ceased to bring forth roses of rare fragrance.

Anwari, Nizami, Mawlana Rumi, Saadi, Qa‘ani and a host of others – names that will be well known to Oriental scholars, but which will perhaps convey little to the general public here – each in his own way gave a message to mankind. But the fundamental point of each message

---

<sup>3</sup> H.E. Hossein Ala

if carefully studied is that man's greatest of all treasures, the greatest of all his possessions, was the inherent, ineffaceable, everlasting nobility of his own soul. In it there was for ever a spark of true divinity which could conquer all the antagonistic and debasing elements in nature. And let me once more stress that this faith in the soul of man expressed in a great variety of ways – in prose and verse, in art and architecture – was not simply a religious or mystic faith but an all-embracing and immediate contact with a fact which, in every human being, is the central fact of existence.

Then came Hafez, by far the greatest singer of the soul of man. In him we can find all the strivings, all the sorrow, all the victories and joys, all the hopes and disappointments of each and every one of us. In him we find contact, direct and immediate, with the outer universe interpreted as an infinite reality of matter, as a mirror of an eternal spirit, or indeed (as Spinoza later said) an absolute existence of which matter and spirit alike are but two of infinite modes and facets. It is not for nothing that his "Divan" has become, throughout the East, the supreme *fal-nameh* (book of divination) of millions and millions far beyond the confines of Iran. In perplexity and sorrow, whatever the cause, whatever the standard of intellect or emotion, men throughout the Near East and India turn to Hafez – from the Ganges to the Nile, from the Caspian to the Bay of Bengal – for comfort and solace. Incredible as it may seem to us, even in his lifetime his influence had reached Bengal, Central Asia, Kashmir, Arabia and Egypt.

Any attempt at translation of Hafez has always led to immense disappointment. The explanation is simple; he was not merely the Hafez of the Qur'an, but well acquainted with the whole field of philosophy, history, poetry and literature, with the highest thought then known to his countrymen. In each verse, with the intense concentration of thought and wisdom so singularly his own, he has produced in amazing variety facets of truth and beauty, of meaning and wisdom. I have myself tried my hand at seeing in how many ways, and with how many totally different meanings, verses of his could be translated into either English or French. I think it is no figure of speech to say that far too many versions and explanations of each word could be given, and that each verse could be interpreted according to the intelligence that one wished to reach.



This, perhaps, will explain why Hafez has always been (as no other great poet can claim to be) the national poet, the national hero, of Iran. Pushkin, Goethe and Shakespeare in the West; Al Mutannabi, Abu Nawas and Firdawsi in the East – all of them great, indeed supreme, kings in the realm of poetry – could never reach their humblest subjects. The uncultured peasants of the West, or the equally humble intelligences of the East, could never absorb their full meaning or beauty. Hafez is different. Not only in his own Persia but in India, in Afghanistan, in Central Asia and even amongst Turkish and Arabic-speaking peoples, the moment his verses are understood you will always find an interpretation of most of them that could appeal to the humblest as well as the highest of intelligences. No wonder the muleteers call him their friend and companion! No wonder the cobbler and the water-carrier find in him - as do the keenest intellects of Asia - solace and satisfaction!

One of the greatest living Hindu statesmen, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, once told me that in all difficult moments of his life he turns to Hafez. I think there is no one of Iranian race alive today who has not at some time or other - in difficulty, sorrow and misery, or in joy and triumph - turned to his national hero for comfort or further elation. Incredible as it may sound to English ears, it is a fact that there is hardly a Muslim bourgeois family in the whole of India in whose home a copy of Hafez's "Divan" is not found. I think, too, that we can be fairly certain that the book is as popular in Afghanistan and Central Asia and over a great part of what I may call Western Muslim countries as it is in India.

Soon after the death of Hafez the worst periods of political and social anarchy, of invasion and disruption, broke up the high civilisation already reached in Iran. Bismarck and other statesmen and historians have said that Germany as the battle-ground of Europe could never bring about - except at a terrible sacrifice - the peace, civilisation and unity characteristic of England and France. Persia was the battleground of Asia. But the genius of Hafez was never submerged. Whenever peace came, in howsoever limited a form, the eternal tree bore fruit. Hafez taught the appreciation of beauty, love, gentleness and kindness; the value of all human beings; the constant glory and splendour and joy of the universe in which we live; the wonder of communion with nature. These undying, eternal truths were so immortally impressed by him on his countrymen

that whenever opportunity arose in any period of peace the striving after them and the expression of those eternal values became, in Iran at least, a motive force and power.

Critics of Iranian civilisation and culture have said that after Hafez the light was not only dimmed but burned out. Nothing could be more false and unjust. No doubt Hafez was the supreme genius of his race, and in that sense if we try to measure his successors by his standard we will find an immediate and sudden decline. But that surely is not the right way to search for his influence. Did the Persian race after him strive for expression in art and literature, in poetry and prose - for the wealth and splendour inherent in the human soul? I have no hesitation in saying "yes". Take the art of the Safavi period - poor in literature, but so rich in architecture and in textiles, in beautiful metal and glass work, in its lovely brocades and carpets. Can we deny that there is here immense search for expression of the highest aspirations of man's soul?

Whenever Iran had any breathing space from war and invasion and misery, in one form or another a national character has formed and, by the spiritual influences of its poetry, immediately turned towards the expression of appreciation and enjoyment of the eternal light within us.

But is this immense wealth of Iran to remain only a treasure of the Islamic East and its fringe in India? Is Europe, is America, is the West so rich in the joys of the spirit, in its immediate satisfaction with life, that it can afford to close its doors to what Iran has to offer in the highest spiritual satisfaction to mankind? In these days of intensive nationalism - nationalism of a kind that wishes to turn even art, beauty and goodness into national possessions - is this immense lesson of Iran to be forgotten? Iran in its language, in its culture, in its highest soul expression, has taken to its bosom and freely accepted the contributions of Greece and India, the immense stream from Islam, Arabia and the Turkish race. It has assimilated the best of each in order better to express its yearning after truth and beauty. Is this fundamental influence not to be brought into the service of the highest culture of the West?

In the economic field we find today the ideal of one great source of wealth, the earth, to be enjoyed by humanity as a whole through free trade and competition, looked upon almost as an expression worthy only of a lunatic asylum. Peace, and the League of Nations co-operating to conquer disease, malnutrition and the vast waste areas of the world; to

raise the poor and humble irrespective of race and religion to the standard of the highest; to feed the famine-stricken and the starving; a competition for construction between various races and countries – all this would today, as a practical suggestion, be considered only worthy of idiots and half-wits. The work of destruction has a totally different standard of appreciation applied to it. Yet, truly understood, and from the lowest material point of view, what good could come from efforts to conquer the waste areas of the world by co-operation, to bring about a standard of living in China and India that would enable people there to buy some of the luxuries of life from Europe and America, to apply the tropical lands that are impossible for European and American settlement for the benefit of the millions of the brown and yellow races and thus open up new and vast markets for the white races for healthy exchange and welcome competition. All these things would lead through prosperity to spiritual awakening and artistic creation. Such work today is not in the realm of practical politics.

Surely now there is room for us to turn to the spirit of Hafez's teaching. For if ever there was a time when we needed the universality of Hafez as a guiding light it is today when there are forces that threaten the roots of humanity. Class and race competition threaten to submerge the highest joy of life and living – namely, the search for, and conquest of, true beauty and goodness which, could we but know it, are ever within our grasp.

In that spirit I appeal to the intellectual classes in this country to come and join up with the Iran Society, to help forward similar associations, to study and understand Islamic, Hindu and Far Eastern philosophy, culture, literature and art. Thus the spiritual and emotional inheritance of Great Britain, Europe and America (North and South) should not be merely derived from Greece and Judaism, but from the world as a whole, for I am certain that Asiatic culture in its widest sense can bring as much to man's common heritage as either Greece or Palestine.

## THE BECKONING EAST

### A JOURNEY THROUGH TURKEY AND PERSIA IN 1962

by Mary Burkett and Genette Malet de Carteret<sup>4</sup>

ISBN 0 9528356 6 5, privately published, lavishly illustrated: £16.00. Apply to The New Bookshop, 42-44 Main Street, Cockermouth, Cumbria CA13. Tel:01900 822062

1962 is not so long ago, but it now seems a bygone age of innocence. The first photograph in this delightful book shows two handsome young ladies dressed in sensible shoes and sweaters atop a Landrover in Cumbria, about to set off on an Adventure. Many of their friends thought that the idea of two girls driving alone to Persia for six months was mad and dangerous. They advised them to take a firearm. But these two were serious adventurers, who read up everything they could about Turkey and Iran before setting off. This was before the trail of hippies began to head East in search of inhaled enlightenment.

Passing Plovdiv, Istanbul, Ankara, Trabzon and Ararat, they reached Tabriz. The son of the local Landrover agent invited them to stay a night with his family: this was but the first manifestation of spontaneous Iranian hospitality. On to Qazvin, for the first stretch of asphalt since Ankara. At the British Institute of Persian Studies in Tehran they met Lawrence Lockhart, who inspired them to visit an Assassins' castle at Gerd Kuh, not visited by any Europeans. Quite on their own, they found the Valley of the Assassins and explored it thoroughly, offering Kendal Mint Cake to shepherds with large dogs barring their path. The notes that they made were later very useful to Peter Willey when he went to study the Assassins' castles in more detail.

On they went, via Damghan, to Gonbad-e Kavous in the Turkmen country, where Mary Burkett made her first acquaintance with feltwork for yurts and floor coverings, on which she subsequently became an expert. Unconcerned by regulations, they headed for the Soviet border, to see how far they could get. The road they followed took them instead to a fishing village on the Caspian shore. The local border police took a poor view of their presence, but the young ladies charmed their way out of trouble and were offered lunch.

Back in Gonbad, they joined an archaeological dig and rented a house, making more friends in the town. For the Muharram holiday they went to Mashhad but prudently kept away from the processions. At the end of the dig they took off for the mountains of Mazanderan in search of Seljuk tomb towers, where they learned to distinguish between the various shades of Persian *ta'arof*, between the polite offers of hospitality that are not meant to be accepted – and the genuinely meant offers.

Off again to Isfahan, Shiraz and Persepolis, all atmospherically described. And, of course, they meet people in their homes, and describe them as well. This is an intimate travel book. Then down to visit a massive irrigation project in Khuzestan, with a visit to Tchoga Zanbil and a village of carpet weavers. On they go to Kermanshah, where they stay with a delightful Kurdish family and go to look at the Sassanian rock carvings. And home they go through Turkey, via Lake Van and the Mediterranean.

This book is a freshly written reminder of what it was in those days to travel untrammelled, while taking an educated look at a very foreign country, and to be welcomed by simple people who were as yet unjaded by the presence of Europeans. For the welcome that these two young ladies received in Iran and Turkey started them off on a long lasting affection – and a serious interest in – the two countries that they visited. Almost every page has an illustration, many in colour. The book is a treasure that should be given to gap year students to inspire them to do something more than sit on the beach in Phuket.

*Antony Wynn*