



JOURNAL OF THE IRAN SOCIETY

Editor : Antony Wynn

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(as of the AGM held on 16th June 2009)

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OBJECTS

The objects for which the Society is established are to promote learning and advance education in the subject of Iran, its peoples and culture (but so that in no event should the Society take a position on, or take any part in, contemporary politics) and particularly to advance education through the study of the language, literature, art, 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.

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Following the success of our inaugural exhibition of Contemporary Iranian Art, the gallery will continue a programme of group and solo shows by several leading artists, including Behrouz Rae, Fereydoun Ave, Reza Derakshani and Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar.



Image: Sadegh Tiraftkan Endless Series No 5, 2009

If you would like more information about the works available or to receive an invitation to our forthcoming exhibitions of Iranian or Indian art, please contact Barby Chhohan: Tel: 44(0) 20 7493 7939 Email: bchhohan@osbornesamuel.com

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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

There have been many changes to the Council of the Society in the last year. Our president, chairman and treasurer have all, sadly, decided to retire. Lord Temple-Morris had been president for fourteen years, Alick Gray had been honorary treasurer for twenty-one years and Hugh Arbuthnott had been chairman for two years. We are grateful to all of them for the contributions that, each in their own way, they have made to the society. We are delighted that Sir Richard Dalton, lately HM Ambassador to Tehran, has agreed to become our president and that Robert Mackenzie has agreed to take over as honorary treasurer. Marjon Esfandiari has kindly agreed to take on the mantle of honorary secretary.

Four travel grants were awarded this year. We were pleased by the response from the universities to the offer of grants this year and were particularly impressed by the quality of applicants from Exeter University's thriving department of Middle Eastern studies. Because of recent events in Tehran most of the recipients decided to postpone their travels until the situation has calmed down.

It is with sadness that we record the deaths of the following members of the society: Peter Avery of Cambridge University; Peter Willey, the author of two books on the Castles of the Assassins; Ian Bowler, pipeline builder and poet; Hajji Mohammed Ali Barkhordar, erstwhile chairman of the Bank of Iran and the Middle East.

The recession has led some of our corporate members to discontinue their subscriptions, which went towards the travel grants. This is a general trend, which has affected many societies such as ours. We are very grateful to those companies that have remained loyal to us.

We were greatly privileged to have been offered a private viewing of the Shah Abbas exhibition at the British Museum this year, with a guided tour by its curator, Dr Sheila Canby, who gave us the benefit of her great erudition.

Finally I would like to record my thanks to Janet Rady, our honorary lecture secretary, who continues to provide us with a rich and varied programme of lectures and events and has been responsible for the improvement of our website, which is worth a look for information on the lectures, the society's history and for past articles of the journal. Some of the lectures have been recorded and can be replayed from the site.

Antony Wynn

IRAJ: THE POET OF LOVE AND HUMOUR

Lecture given by Dr Homa Katouzian on 18th February 2009

Iraj Mirza Jalal al-Mamalek, popularly known as Iraj, the name and title which he himself preferred, was the son of Gholam Hossein Mirza, son of Malek Iraj Mirza, who was a son of Fath Ali Shah Qajar. Fath Ali Shah was a poet of note himself, with a published *divan*. Both his son Malek Iraj Mirza and many of his other numerous sons and grandsons, including the important and influential E'tezad al-Saltaneh, Minister of Science under Naser al-Din Shah, were private or professional poets. Iraj's own father was a professional poet, who had been given the title of Sadr al-Sho'ara [The Supreme of the Poets]. Another grandson of Fath Ali Shah, son of Mohammad Qoli Mirza Molk Ara, was a professional poet and entitled Shams al-Sho'ara [Sun of the Poets] from whom descended the Qajar families of Shams and Shams-e Molk Ara. Apart from Iraj, two other descendants of Fath Ali Shah became famous poets: Abol Hasan Mirza, Sheikh al-Ra'is and Mohammad Hashem Mirza (Sheikh al-Rais II). Both of the latter poets were contemporaries of Iraj. Iraj was also a personal friend of Hashem Mirza. In an *ekhvaniyeh*¹ or poetical fraternity, he says, addressing Aref: 'Ask Shahzadeh Hashem Mirza / Why he does not get in touch; / If being a [Majlis] deputy changes one's mood / Then being a deputy is no good.'

But among all these Qajar family poets, including the two Sheikh al-Raises, Iraj stands out as one of the most able and eloquent Persian poets of all time. He did not write much. The whole of his poetry is no more than 4000 couplets, but everything he has written is of the highest quality and deserves to be preserved in the annals of Persian poetry. Iraj belonged to a generation of poets who, although not modernists, modernised neo-classical poetry within the existing classical structures. They were not modernists, but they were modern. They chose forms which were the most appropriate to the expression of contemporary themes and ideas and they employed wholly new metaphors, puns, asides, allusions, imageries and other figures of speech and literary devices. Reading the poems that they wrote after the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06, it would be impossible for anyone familiar with classical and neo-classical Persian poetry to mistake them for such, in spite of the fact that they retained the basic neo-classical structures. There were, of course, many other poets, such as Ebrat-e Naini, Adib-e Pishavari and Vahid-

¹ *Ekhvan* = brothers in Arabic

e Dastgerdi, who remained almost completely faithful to the classics both in form and substance, whose works did not survive beyond their own time.

Iraj more or less shared this kind of modernity with Bahar, Dehkhoda, Eshqi, Aref and Lahuti, at least three of whom were his friends and collocutors. Bahar was seldom humorous, wrote only a few lampoons and his satire was normally subtle. Many of Dehkhoda's limited poems are more like poetical jokes. Most of the nationalist poetry of Eshqi and Aref are either laments for the backwardness of contemporary Iran or offensive *hajv* and lampoons against the political establishment and foreign powers. But even, to a certain extent, Adib al-Mamalek Farahani's poetry of the period reflects the new mood of politics and humour in Persian literature, for example, his humorous *qasideh*² beginning: 'God bless the late Hajji Mirza Aqasi's soul / And grant the public, instead, the political parties all / Progress, Justice, Revolution and Reaction / Democrats, Radicals and Lovers of Cash / Making ministers of infants and deputies of the gaga ...'

The two most outstanding of the poets of the period were Iraj and the Poet Laureate Bahar. It would be difficult and somewhat futile to try and determine which of the two was better. Bahar is better known, probably because he lived longer and wrote much more in more poetical forms and on many more subjects. He was also a politician and a scholar. He was a master of the *qasideh* in particular and the last of the great poets to write in the Khorasani style. In his elegy on the death of Iraj he wrote: 'Truly, Sa'di of Shiraz has died...'

In many ways Iraj's poetry was different from Bahar's, particularly the poems of the Constitutional period, which make up the most enduring part of his works. In fact, Iraj's political career may be divided neatly between the period before the Constitutional Revolution when he was thirty-four and the period after it until he died prematurely in 1924 at the age of fifty-two. In the first part of his career, Iraj was a traditional court poet writing mainly panegyrics for princes and notables and poems in glorification of the Prophet Mohammad and the Shia imams and martyrs. He has a *qasideh* in praise of Imam Ali in the form of reporting a conversation, which is as good as any that has been written on the subject before or since. It is in thirty couplets and begins: 'I said, This sad heart of mine is bound by your love / She said, Pity the heart which is bound by anyone's love.'

The most remarkable art of the whole of Iraj's poetry, both traditional and modern, is the clarity and fluency of the poem, the art of the *sahl o motane*, the easy and impossible, unsurpassed since Sa'di, who perfected it in both his poetry and his prose. This is the art of writing so clearly and

² Long elegy or ode.

concisely that that it would not be possible to condense it any further. It looks easy because of the clarity, fluency and ready comprehensibility of the piece, but very difficult, or virtually impossible, precisely because of the great economy in the use of words. No one since Sa'di has perfected this art as much as Iraj.

It was from the dawn of the Constitutional Revolution that Iraj's poetry became modern as well as humorous. Modern Persian humour begins with the Constitutional Revolution; the new press, prose and poetry combined politics with humour.

Revolutions normally escalate in tone as well as aspiration and violence. The Constitutional Revolution led to hope, despair and discharge of emotions lasting for almost a quarter of a century. A good deal of fashionable prose and poetry was political or social and was humorous and often violent in tone.

Of the poets who continued, indeed advanced, the writing of harsh political poetry in the period of post-revolutionary conflict and chaos, the most active were Aref-e Qazvini, Mirzadeh-ye Eshqi and Farrokhi Yazdi. Much of the humorous effect of their political lampoons is due to the coarseness of the language, although Eshqi's poetry is considerably more mature than the other two and he might have made a major poet had he not fallen victim to political assassination at the age of thirty-one. The young Abolqasem Lahuti was also a fiery poet, but very seldom used coarse language.

Iraj did occasionally raise social and political problems in his poetry, but he was not a political poet in the style of the others. He wrote only two political lampoons, one in 1907 against Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri³ and another in 1907 against Qavam al-Saltaneh, when the latter had put down the revolt of Colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan Pesyan, a personal friend of Iraj and the highly popular head of the gendarmerie of Khorasan. At one stage of the conflict between Sheikh Fazlollah and the constitutionalists, the sheikh took *bast* [asylum] against the Majlis in the shrine of Hazrat-e Abdolazim. Iraj wrote a light and humorous *qasideh* attacking the sheikh and defending the Majlis: 'The Hojjat al-Islam will beat you quick / He will beat your head with a donkey stick.'

Despite its frequently coarse, even obscene, language, Iraj's masterpiece is his *Arefnameh*. In 1920, when he was a civil servant in the department of finance at Mashhad, his old and close friend Aref paid a visit to that city and, despite Iraj's expectation that he would stay with him, was the guest of Colonel Pesyan. Not only that, he did not even go to see Iraj and added insult to injury by organising a concert in which he himself sang and vehemently attacked the Qajars. It is clear from much of Iraj's poetry, including his short lampoons

³ A prominent opponent of the constitutionalists.

about Ahmad Shah, that he did not have much family or clan prejudice, but in the circumstances he took Aref's attack on the Qajars personally: 'I heard that in the Bagh-e Melli theatre / You showed how stupid you are by nature...'

That is how the *Arefnameh* or Aref Saga, came about. It is a long poem and not just an attack on Aref, although Aref is somehow throughout. There are parts of it, not least where he attacks the *hejab*, which cannot be repeated in polite society even though, like the rest of the poem, they are hilariously funny as well as poetry at its best.⁴

A very interesting aspect of the *Arefnameh* is its *ekhvaniyat* or fraternities. *Ekhvaniyat* are a category or genre of classical Persian poetry where the poet writes to or about his friends. Often the addressee, or others who are mentioned in the fraternity, were themselves poets or men of letters. In fact, much of the *Arefnameh* consists of such *ekhvaniyat* either addressed to Aref or about their friends. For example, Aref had been wearing a traditional headdress like a little turban, which they used to call a *mowlavi*, but he had decided to become more fashionable and replace it with a hat. Iraj makes fun of this and says that it is too late for the likes of him and Aref to become young and good-looking by such devices. Iraj's direct addresses to Aref in the poem continue and although the tone is usually one of complaint and criticism, both friendly and unfriendly remarks follow one after the other: 'You, Aref, were really like a donkey / The time that you stayed aloof from me...'

Iraj goes on to write the fullest and most authentic 'fraternity' of the whole poem. Addressing Aref, he asks after their friends in Tehran, nearly all of them literati and intellectuals. The list includes Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, the future encyclopaedist, the poet laureate Bahar, the scholar Yusef E'tesam al-Molk, the poet, critic and tea merchant Ahmad Kamali. He ends by advising Aref to change his little *mowlavi* turban for a big white one and to become a *rowzeh-khan*, a preacher who is paid to address congregations on the life and sufferings of the Shii imams and martyrs, but who could also speak on social or even political topics. Making fun of Aref who, like himself, was very intolerant of clerics, he tells him to put on a big turban, mount the pulpit and speak in high praise of ministers and deputies so that, instead of being persecuted for his political views, he would earn a good living. 'If you want to get into good business / And luck to be with you always, / Add two yards to your turban / And become a worthy preacher...'

In another *Ekhvaniyat*, Iraj writes to the Saba brothers, the sons of Kamal al-Saltaneh, who was a descendant of the poet laureate to Fath Ali Shah. He begins by addressing Abdol Hossein, making fun of his migraines

⁴ The text, with an English foreword, can be found on <http://www.iranian.com/Arts/Sept98/Ira-jMirza/index.html>

and saying that he could be cured if only his father, a doctor, was not so lazy and goes on to poke fun at Abol Hasan for his baldness, telling him ironically that bald men are very important, that some of the prophets were bald and that the Germans were winning the war against the Russians because they had many bald soldiers.

In his later writing, Aref wrote lighter poems in the *masnavi* form. One of the themes that he is noted for is the subject of *hejab*, which at that time covered the faces and hands of women. 'Covering the hands and face, without a doubt / Is not what the Holy Qoran talked about.' The story in the *Arefnameh* against the *hejab*, although brilliant, is too explicit for repetition here. Briefly, the narrator says that, as a young man, he had invited a woman into his home on a bogus pretext and has then asked her to take off her *hejab*, for which she rebuked him. Changing his tactic, the young man then makes physical passes at the woman, who responds positively. They end up on the floor together, but she insists on holding on to her *hejab* to cover her face, while happy to reveal everything else. The poem concludes with the thought that ignorant women wearing the veil are far less capable of defending their honour than liberated women.

There is much more to Iraj's poetry than can be discussed here. He has a charming *masnavi* written on his gravestone in the grounds of the tomb of Zahir al-Dowleh, above Darband in Shemiran: 'Buried here is the love of the world / A world of love is hidden in this abode.'

SHAH ABBAS THE GREAT: TRACING HIS 1000 KM WALK FROM ISFAHAN TO MASHHAD

Illustrated lecture given to the Society on 21st April 2009 by Caroline Mawer, recipient of the Society's Travel Grant in 2008.

Just in time to coincide with the British Museum exhibition about Shah Abbas the Great, the Iran Society 2008 Travel Grant has allowed me to finish tracing the route of the Shah's famous 1000 km walk from Isfahan to Mashhad. This report will describe my November 2008 trip to Iran – as well as telling some tales from my earlier 'pilot' visit and exploring a little of what I am now learning about Iranian water systems and supplies, especially in Safavid times.

I was tantalised by Professor Charles Melville's 1996 paper on Shah Abbas's 1000 km walk⁵. Melville's paper sets the walk in the context of other famous kingly walks and also explores the several visits Shah Abbas made to Mashhad during his reign. The various potential rationales for these trips include linkages with military campaigns, Shah Abbas's well-documented personal piety and his own historical links with Mashhad. There was also a need to restore Safavid ideological legitimacy after the disastrous reigns of the two previous Shahs and the possible profaning of the tomb of Shah Tahmasp by the Uzbeks. For the ever-practical Shah Abbas, promoting *ziyaret* (religious pilgrimage) to Mashhad could not only bolster the town and its commerce, but also reduce the flow of gold out of Iran with the annual Meccan *hajj*⁶. Specifically for the 1601 walk, a vow (*nazr*)⁷ was reportedly taken by the Shah, although the details of this are not altogether clear.

Professor Melville helpfully summarises and critiques the two best known contemporary accounts of the walk (by Iskander Beg and Munajjim Yazdi). These offer quite different ideas of the duration of the walk (28 and 66 days respectively). Melville also introduces a recently discovered account, probably by a Mirza Muhammad Salih Munshi. This, whilst not being without its own problems, adds some support to Yazdi's version of events. As Yazdi was apparently charged with measuring how far the Shah walked, using a rope (*tanab*) as a measuring device, he might well be expected to be more accurate

⁵ C Melville, Shah Abbas and the Pilgrimage to Mashhad, Pembroke Papers 4 (1996) 191-229.

⁶ There are various traditions about one *ziyaret* to Mashhad being worth more than seven – or even one thousand – Meccan *hajjs*.

⁷ Melville says that this may be "more nearly a votive offering". Melville 1996 p198

in his rendering of events than the potentially eulogistic version of Iskander Munshi. Professor Melville grapples manfully with various contemporary European descriptions of Iranian journeys and the British War Office Quarter-Inch maps, to present summary tables of the Great Shah's likely itinerary. These he declared to be the most definite conclusion he could reach "short of retracing the route on the ground, which is at present impractical"⁸.

A retracing of the walk sounded much more 'practical' than some of my previous trips to Iran!⁹ However, I realised immediately that no-one could even attempt to walk the 1000km until the Shah's stopping places were definitively found.

I planned to record the stopping places both photographically and using GPS. Some of the locations are obvious – the plane tree at Natanz and the *ribat* (fort) at Ahuan, for example. Others seemed findable – Kashan and Damghan are well known, though it is perhaps less clear exactly where Shah Abbas may have stayed within each of the towns. Yazdi had named other halts which Professor Melville could not find on the maps, 'Birka by caravanserai of Khwaja Qasim' and 'Imamzadeh' are two examples – although Melville usually suggested possible options. I also realised that the place names in Melville's paper were written in English: as well as being 400 years old, there might be difficulties with the pronunciation and so understanding – not only because written Persian has fewer vowels than English, but also because of what I already knew of the significant regional differences in Persian accents, especially in rural areas.

With all this in mind, I had to set some criteria for a stopping place as being 'found'. It seemed clear that Shah Abbas must have always needed shelter and, above all, water on his journeying. I also felt that – especially as he was walking to a religious shrine – he was likely to have visited important mosques in places that he came to. I therefore determined that if it wasn't clear from the names of Yazdi's stopping places,¹⁰ I would seek out caravanserais, water supplies and the Friday mosques at any location I was labelling as a stopping place. I needed to focus on positions or buildings that were known or thought to be from the time of Shah Abbas or before, whilst realising that this would be complicated by the tendency to label all Iranian caravanserais as 'Shah Abbasi' and also by the extensive building programme during the reign of the Great Shah (edifices might truly be 'Abbasi', but be constructed after the 1601 walk).

⁸ Melville 1996 p200

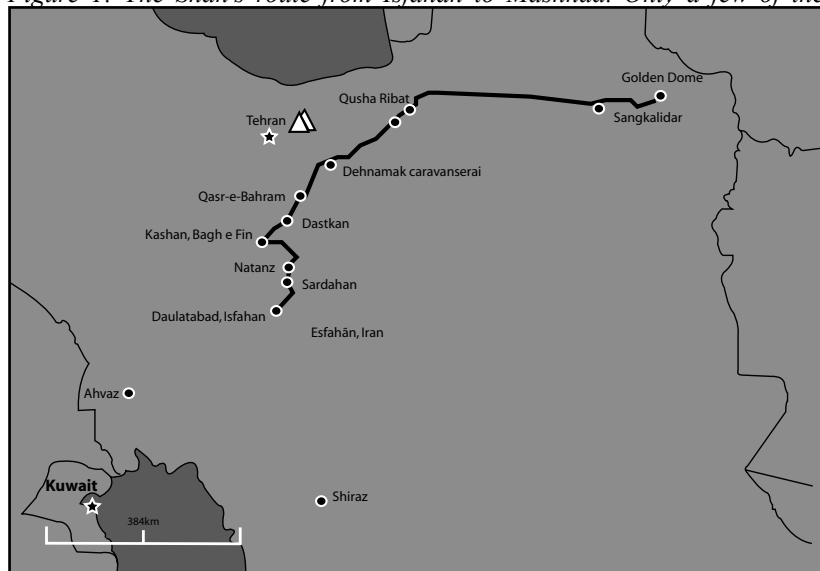
⁹ Many thanks to the Iran Society for contributing to the funding of my 2008 photographic exhibitions at the Brunei Gallery, related to my walking of the Bakhtiari Kuch.

¹⁰ e.g. a specific bridge, fort, and the plane tree, still extant in Natanz.

This report is ostensibly about the Iran Society sponsored trip in November 2008 but, as intimated above, I think it is necessary to first briefly describe here the ‘pilot’ I carried out in March. For practical reasons, this concentrated on the second half of the Shah’s trip.

As shown in Figure 1 below, Abbas first walked northwards from Isfahan to Kashan. Partly because this route was so well-travelled – and therefore had so many paths – Melville describes this part of the journey as the most difficult to determine definitively exactly where the Shah went. After Kashan, Abbas went north-eastwards over the salt desert towards Dehnamak (just east of Garmsar). Melville cites contemporary reports of the “horrors of the salt waste” in this area, and also discusses the post-walk building of a causeway along this part of the route to help travellers along their way. After leaving the desert, the Shah then turned eastwards along the “well-worn” road to Mashhad.

Figure 1: The Shah’s route from Isfahan to Mashhad. Only a few of the



stopping places are shown, for clarity.

I duly started in Isfahan, where the very friendly and well-informed staff of the *Miras-e Farangi* (official cultural service) showed me the Daulatabad location of Masjid Tuqtchi – now a busy roundabout – and told me that if the

Shah had been there, he must also have visited what was now a public park, the Park of the Birds. This was where travellers entering and leaving Safavid Isfahan had bathed, rested and changed their clothes as necessary. I suddenly felt very close to Safavid life – the Shah washed here! I was also aware of the continuities (and discontinuities) that are always a part of Iranian life – Isfahanis still enjoy this place, even if it is now open to all and not just the elite.

More importantly, I also found out that I needed a special desert permit for the second section of the trip, from just past Kashan to Dehnamak, and that this permit was only obtainable in Tehran. So I travelled back up to Tehran, where the *Noruz* (Iranian New Year) holidays meant that the necessary stamp was locked in an office, with the keyholder only expected back after his vacation.

I therefore set off towards Mashhad, hoping to be able to then travel down through Khorasan via Torbat Heydarieh and Nain back to Isfahan, to where my elusive permit might hopefully be faxed. This also allowed me to start with the easiest-to-find part of the journey, as the Shah's stopping places were all on or near the main road to Mashhad. I don't have space here for my serious falling out with my first driver or my brushes with the police (understandably not expecting a lone foreign woman to be out interrogating villagers – they always ended by being as enormously hospitable as all Iranians always are). Suffice it to say that I learnt that Yazdi's distances were a huge help; that old men often knew vast amounts about their local area (if I waited, usually around 45 minutes, for us to start to agree on pronunciations); and that random taxi-drivers would get obsessively interested in my quest and the history, about which I often knew much more than they did.

Most importantly of all, though, I found that tracing the journey as I was, a stage at a time, made me look at the country and the countryside in a completely different way. Instead of hurtling as fast as possible, enclosed in a plane or train or coach or speeding car between Tehran and Mashhad like most Iranian city dwellers, I was experiencing a whole different land and quite different ways of life. I was starting – just starting – to better understand the world of Safavid travel in Iran.

I also became obsessed with water. The Shah's party must have needed it – in the fierce desert winds around Dehnamak, and in the knee high thorn bushes in the loose sandy soils around Ahuan. There were some gorgeous little streams and other water sources – for example right next to the caravanserai at Mehr (with mulberries growing wild alongside the water), and just in front of the *ribat* (fort) at Sangkalidar. Here a little girl persuaded me to climb with her right over – yes, over! – the crumbling two-storey building to get to the

front entrance. We could have simply walked around – but I didn’t know that when I started climbing – and this has to be one of the more memorable ways to visit a building! All too often, however, the same sad water story was told to me: a long time ago, villagers would say, we had a spring, then there was a *qanat* (traditional underground canal system), but now the *qanat* doesn’t work, and we have *poomp* (an electric pump). What, I agonized silently, is going to happen when the pump dries up?

By the time I got near to Mashhad, I knew how to find the stopping places. I could spot the useful old men at fifty metres, and avoid the garrulous timewasters. The last of my stream of taxi-drivers, himself an ‘Abbas’, didn’t want to leave my side. He was the one I had to thank for finding Sakhdar when night was falling and I was getting very tired indeed. This was the last of the Shah’s recorded halts as he cut north-east across the Alborz Mountains to Mashhad. But I knew my driver’s wife was worrying – after all, Agha Abbas had left Sabsevar two days previously on what was supposed to be a 20km job. So I paid him off, and set off to revisit my old Timurid haunts on the way back round to Isfahan.

At Torbat Heydarieh, I bumped into the *rais* (head) of *Miras-e Farangi* for Mashhad. I told him about my work on the *cuerda seca* tiles from the Timurid *madrese* in Khargird and he wanted to meet me again – but in Mashhad, and in a few days time. Although this was going to put my whole schedule out, I thought it was too good an opportunity to miss – and so agreed. I resolved to use the time to follow Shah Abbas some more. Little did I know quite how much I was about to do and see!

Although I hadn’t walked to Mashhad, I knew that Shah Abbas hadn’t walked either, on his several visits before the 1000km pilgrimage. In 1588, he probably rode into the town, but in 1598, 1599 and 1600 the Shah had dismounted from his horse to walk from the place where the golden dome of Imam Reza came into sight. Now, of course, the golden dome was only visible from close within the busy metropolis of Mashhad, but I resolved anyway to walk a small *ziyaret* (a pilgrimage) of my own, in emulation of Shah Abbas and also out of respect for Imam Reza. I found out that Teppe Salaam (literally the ‘hill of greeting’) was one of the places where pilgrims to Mashhad traditionally dismounted to walk as they saw the golden dome, so decided to walk the 20km from there up to the shrine complex. I’m a keen walker, but this was the first time I have ever walked any distance along a motorway. In truth, I cannot recommend it as a pleasant day out – but I certainly felt a sense of, albeit hot and grimy, achievement when I at last reached the shrine and donned my *chador*.

I have visited the shrine several times, and usually try to slip in without

exciting interest. Now I was too tired to avoid attention, and found myself whisked off to the official ‘Office for Lady Foreigners’. This was not anywhere near as dull as I confess I had feared. I longed for a drink – of water, of anything – but all the lady guides wanted to engage with me (simultaneously!) in what ended as two hours of intense theological debate. They exclaimed at my initially stated disbelief in Paradise after Resurrection. This, they told me gravely, was not one of the fundamental beliefs that many people usually had a problem with. They were thoughtful and thought provoking. They were very earnest, and all completely delightful. I was proud to meet them, and they ran backwards and forwards getting the literature that they hoped would most appropriately dispel my evident spiritual doubts. Eventually they gave me some orange squash and insisted on lots of photo-taking. They invited me back the next day for some of the special Holy Food of Imam Reza – the family I was staying with were unashamedly envious of this when I got home – and took me off to hear the amazing trumpet and kettledrum salute to the setting sun from the *Naqareh Khaneh* (Drum Tower), a small pavilion over the entrance portal to the old court of the shrine built in the time of Shah Abbas. They also advised me that President Ahmadinejad was coming the very next day to speak in Mashhad. I had read so much about the salutes and kingly goings-on when Shah Abbas entered a town, that all this seemed completely appropriate. Since the Iran Society is avowedly non-political, I won’t comment here on what it was like to hear Ahmadinejad speaking – whilst listening from within a huge and very enthusiastic crowd in one of the holiest spots in Iran.

After all that excitement, I had run out of time to get back to Isfahan and try again for a desert permit. I had had a great *Noruz*, but this trip had to come to an end.

In November 2008, however, and supported by my Iran Society Travel Grant, I was back to complete my mission. I had chosen November as this was the time of year that Shah Abbas had himself walked – I wanted to try to walk more (preferably not along motorways this time!), and was keen to know how amenable the winter climate and day length might be. I also planned to try out the rope-measurement technique used by Yazdi, and find out both how easy it was, and how accurate it might be. My biggest practical problem, I knew, was the desert permit: I wouldn’t be able to use standard taxis for this section of the journey, and needed to find both a suitable vehicle and a driver with desert experience. I also wanted to find out more about water, and perhaps even go down a *qanat* myself.

With all this in mind, I set off to Isfahan. My first priority was the *tanab* (rope) for measurement. How long should it actually be¹¹? Did anyone know anything about the measurement technique? Who could I get to help out with the actual rope-handling? The Isfahan *Miras Farangii* staff, as ever, were ready to help out with my queries and recommended one of the Islamic Azad (Khorasan) University lecturers, Khanom Doctor Ghassemi Sichani, as currently responsible for teaching modern architectural measurement techniques. She in turn suggested a master builder, Agha Mohandes Montazer, as having the most extensive relevant historic knowledge.

Meeting Agha Mohandes Montazer was an enormous privilege. This is the man who is currently responsible for the renovation of the old Julfa houses. Especially for an architectural historian, there can be no better person to walk round New Julfa with. He knocks anywhere and everywhere and is welcomed in. He showed me some of his works-in-progress, and his most favourite completed masterpieces. We'll just, he would say, nip in here and I'll show you the earliest known use of mirror-pieces in Safavid architecture – these are deliciously sparing, so much more lovely to my eyes than the Qajar versions. Then we trotted discreetly around a university classroom, even though it was actually in use, to view a very special *muqarnas* before popping into another house to gaze upon a superbly restored stucco fireplace hood, with a whole galaxy of tiny stars dancing across its curves. A newly refurbished wooden window screen was simultaneously huge and ethereally lacy, and we stopped while Agha Mohandes Montazer stood back and directed the workers hanging off the building, as they carefully put it in place. I told him I was interested in water supply systems, so he showed me the traditional wells in Isfahani attics – reaching down to the town's long-established water system, and situated high up in houses to get enough water pressure for the courtyard fountains.

Then we got down to my real business with the *tanab*. Agha Mohandes Montazer explained how Iranian measurement units (*zira*) are based on the standard dimensions of bricks, how rooms (and so buildings) are worked out in terms of bricks and domes, and how traditional rope can only be made as long as the longest buildings (twenty domes in a row, so around 100m). He described the two different sorts of rope – strong for men being lowered down wells and into *qanats*, less strong for everything else. He decided that Shah Abbas' *tanab* would have been nearer to 50m than the 40m Professor Melville had suggested. We headed off together to where he thought the best quality not-very-expensive rope was to be found, and got the shop assistant to

¹¹ Professor Melville discusses various possible interpretations of this. See ref 38, Melville. 1996 p222

measure all the decent rope he had available, tying several lengths together to get as near as possible to our desired length, and carefully marking measuring points near the ends of the rope as well as recording exactly how long the new *tanab* was.

I had already been out trying to find some of the stopping places just north of Isfahan. Professor Melville had not been able to find the *ribat* of Qazi Ahmad in any source or contemporary itinerary, and suggested that it might equate to Dombi. On the ground, however, things were much more straightforward and even the youngest of the traffic policemen knew that the village of Bagherabad was also called Qazi Ahmad. A derelict mud-brick corner was most definitively shown to me as the only remnant of the oldest building in the village, but just next to that was an old mud-brick *ribat*. Since Siroux had documented both a caravanserai and an impressive barracks in nearby Dombi,¹² I dropped in there too. The derelict caravanserai was easy to find, the barracks less so – until I showed an old shepherd Siroux’s technical layout plan. He immediately – and very impressively, I thought, especially when I found out that the man was completely illiterate, and the building was in a state of considerable disrepair – recognised this and climbed into my taxi to show me the way.

Back in Isfahan, I had also been putting together a measuring team to help me with the rope handling. According to Iskander Munshi, a team of six men had been supervised by the court astrologer to measure each day’s journey. I could only fit three into a taxi (along with me and the driver) and determined that this would have to do. On the appointed morning, two of the planned team were unaccountably replaced – and the father of one of the female students helping out also turned up. I argued that surely he was not needed. Luckily, I failed in my representations – since Agha Baktashian turned out to be easily the most sensible member of the Rope Team (myself included!).

We set out for Sardahan. Siroux describes this as *un nom toujours fameux*, as one of the rare places actually indicated on early maps – and as giving the impression of an Italian palace somehow transplanted to Iran, with the extravagant theatrical effects even extending into the stables.¹³ The Team tried to get into my methodology of finding stopping places – initially brushing me aside to ask young men (who, as usual, knew very little), then taking part of my advice and asking old women (who were quite definite, but wrong), and eventually deigning to ask me exactly who I thought might be

¹² M Siroux, *Anciennes voies et monuments routiers de la région d’Ispahan*, 1940 IFAO Tome LXXXII pp107-109, and p147

¹³ Siroux 1940 pp167-170

able to help. I pointed out an old man squatting by a courtyard house door, and they descended on him. He vehemently denied any useful knowledge and I just as vehemently insisted that he did know, we just had to be patient and try different pronunciations. I think now that the Team may have interpreted my suggestion as an insinuation that the poor man was somehow purposely withholding information. They immediately started haranguing the old fellow. They were all much taller than him, even if he hadn't been bent over with age, and closely surrounded him. I began to fear for him. I even wondered if I could see the tiniest glint of fear in his own eyes! Just as I was thinking I needed to call my ravening horde of interrogators off, he said: "Do you mean 'Sardahan'? Of course I know where that is!" And the Team and their unfortunate victim all exclaimed triumphantly, and the man's tiny wife relaxed mightily and tried to sell us their home-grown saffron. The whole Team were tremendously excited by their victory, while I felt pleased that I had shared the finding process with them – but determined not to let them loose on any more innocent passers-by!

In sight of Sardahan, I asked the driver to stop at a handy (and usefully immobile) road sign. I'd deputed Agha Baktashian to take the lead with the front of our *tanab*, walking towards the ruin while his daughter, Mahdie, was to wait until her father signalled that the rope was taut, when she could move forward. Khanom Doktor, as the only one of us with any certificated measuring expertise, was put in charge of the GPS, and stayed at each rope-front-place, until Khanom Mahdie caught up.



Khanom Mahdie catching up

I ran around, supervising, helping with the GPS and taking photographs. After some very minor teething difficulties, this system was surprisingly easy, and could be done at normal walking speed.

After we had arrived at the caravanserai, I asked Agha Baktashian to lead off up round some nearby small hills. Professor Melville had discussed how some of the apparent measurement anomalies that he had identified in Yazdi's account might be due to Shah Abbas and his rope team having to follow the undulations of hills, and not always being able to walk in a straight line. I wanted to check this out. Agha Baktashian had taken my initial request to walk straight towards the distant caravanserai impressively literally, and I now tried to get him to relax his regime.

'Imagine', I suggested as he made to walk in a straight line over a cliff-edge, 'that you're walking with Shah Abbas. You wouldn't lead the Shah this way, would you?' He regarded me scornfully. 'Shah Abbas', he said gravely, 'wouldn't be messing about walking in circles around these hills, now would he?'

This was difficult to argue with. By now, his daughter had her chador tied round her waist, and Khanom Doktor was puffing wearily up the splendid hills with her trousers tucked dustily into her boots, so I decided to call it a day, and we all made, measuring as we went of course, for our initial road sign. There, our picnic was waiting – including some scrumptiously ripe persimmons from Khanom Doktor's garden.

Tired but happy, the team dropped me in Natanz, and themselves headed back for Isfahan. Many of you will have been to Natanz, so I don't need to describe here the stunning 10th-14th century shrine of Shaykh Abd' al-Samad. From the point of view of Shah Abbas's walk, the important thing is the ancient plane tree immediately facing the shrine, as this is where the Shah reportedly camped. I spent some time in Natanz and its surrounds: visiting the Safavid caravanserai, with its conspicuous stone water control system; and managing, eventually, to get a trip down a *qanat*.

I was also introduced to the immensely impressive desert culture of nearby Badroud. Here, I learnt about the ancient Pahlavi-related language of Baadi. This is still used on the desert edge from here round to Semnan and I wondered if it was going to be another complicating factor in my search for the named stopping places. I also marvelled at the desert navigation of the splendidly knowledgeable ex-mayor of Badroud. He even managed to drive across unmarked desert in the dark with the car lights on: whilst this meant we avoided dunes and ditches, there was no chance of seeing the stars that Shah Abbas's group must have used to guide their way.



After the initial section, we entered a narrower section, supported with traditionally-shaped hoops. This muqanni (qanat worker) is 20cm shorter than me so you can see it was a tight squeeze!

After Natanz, Shah Abbas's next stop was the caravanserai of Khwaju Qasim, which Melville could not be sure about, but suggested might be near the village of Dehabad. That was therefore my first port of call, and I was pleased to not only admire the most enormous field of solar panels I'd ever seen (powering the local *hamam*) but also to meet a man who suggested that maybe I meant Hajji Qasem – whose name was associated with at least one of the two *ribats* in the village.

Even more excitingly, he was himself a Qasem, as were twenty of the families in the village. We naturally needed to share tea and *gaz* (one of the most delicious Isfahani sweets) after this discovery, and as he

and his wife showed me photos of their twin boys, I exclaimed that they



The ribat at Dehabad. Agha Qasim is standing at left.

had blue eyes. “And I”, he said, though he was traditionally reserved, and had not looked me in the face at all whilst we were talking, “have eyes the same colour (hazel) as you”. He was right, and told me that all the Qasems have light eyes. So maybe I’d found not only the place and the family, but even the eye colour of a man from 400 years ago! Agha Qasem is not Hajji, but was, he told me, a Mashti¹⁴ and proud of it.

After Dehabad, my driver (a gentlemanly retired coach driver from Badroud) and I quickly found the likely *imamzadeh* stopping place (out of more than 40 in the surrounding region) and then made it into Kashan. I don’t think Agha Ghassempour often came into the city, as he was both intimidated by and lost in the traffic. We had to hoot at (and stop for) any Badroudi he recognised, but we eventually met up with the man who had faithfully sworn that he had a permit, desert driving experience and a suitable vehicle. None of these three assertions was in any way true, and as this was the fourth ‘driver’ who had tried to ‘help’ me in this particular way, my patience was sorely tried. I agreed, however, to finish the day by knocking three more stops off my list, working my way up to the boundary of the permit area.

I therefore headed off with my new ‘driver’, in yet another trusty Peykan, towards the desert area. Khosh Ab (literally, ‘good water’) turned out

¹⁴ A Mashti is someone who has visited Mashhad.

to be a dip in the ground where watermelons still grow in season, as the water table is so high, while Dastkan is a trough, with a bucket-well of supersweet water, surrounded by the crusty white beginnings of the *Daryache-ye Namak* (literally, ‘salt lake’).

Just before Dastkan, however, is Maranjab. This impressive desert castle was almost certainly built in the reign of Shah Abbas, although after his walk. As it was a Friday, it was packed with day trippers from Tehran and other cities, trying their luck with the area’s camels and enjoying the inevitable picnics. There I made contact with a proper desert driver, with a proper desert vehicle. Now, we agreed, I just needed a permit. He told me that this would take him a week or two to sort out, whereupon I declared I was going that very night to Tehran to get the permit for myself. Back to Kashan we went, with just enough time in hand before the coach for a quick, but very exclusive, late-night wander around the sublime *Bagh-e Fin* (Fin Gardens).

In Tehran, Mehri, always my hostess-with-the-mostest, has known me for many years and wasn’t at all surprised to see my clothes and me somewhat the worse for wear for scrabbling around underground in a *qanat* or two. She was, however, more concerned with the desert idea – reasoning that if it was dangerous enough to require a special permit, perhaps I shouldn’t be going. I, of course, brushed these concerns aside, and set off to find the right person in the Department of the Environment.

In no other country than Iran could the bureaucrats in a central government Ministry insist, partway through our lengthy negotiations, on giving me a full (and delicious) kebab lunch. After this, we all eventually agreed that I could not only have a permit, but that they would introduce me to a much better driver/guide than I’d managed to find for myself. Meeting up with Agha Reza was a huge stroke of luck – he lectures on ancient caravan routes, and has an intimate knowledge of the deserts of Iran alongside a great interest in history.

The next day, we started back down the road to Kashan, stopping off for an idyllic breakfast at a tea-house perched in the traditional manner over a very cute stream. Whilst the man frying our super-fresh eggs was asking Reza if it was alright to offer me some fresh roses, I started to get the idea that this part of my trip was going to involve much less ‘roughing it’ than I had expected!

We skipped through Kashan – stopping off for me to have an unexpected but very welcome dip in the Spring of Solomon, the 2000+ year old stream that waters the Fin Gardens – and made for the desert area. Agha Reza and I had been swapping facts and ideas about Shah Abbas and ancient water systems – and he wanted to show me Nushabad, a small town near Kashan

which has an amazing four storey underground ‘water city’. After this, I had my first taste of Reza’s completely delicious camp-cooking. Never before have I eaten so well when camping! Never, to be honest, had I thought that an Iranian man might be such an excellent cook! Never have I ever travelled with such a completely stocked store of fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts, meat and everything that I might ever imagine wanting to eat! Not the slightest sign of ‘roughing it’, either physical or intellectual!

As dusk fell, we passed Dastkan, and I at last got out of the vehicle and started walking. Reza had brought along a colleague of his, a superfit if diminutive ski instructor, so two of us could walk and the other drive the vehicle. I was keen to see how easy it might be to walk across the forbidding salt desert area, listed in Yazdi’s reckonings as including the longest section (11 farsakhs or 66km) of the walk. Somewhat to my surprise, it was immensely easy. The salt crust was firm, and as dusk fell and the whole of the Milky Way came out to light the track, it was difficult to imagine a better place to be. Eventually I was coaxed into halting, we devoured another huge and scrumptious meal, and tumbled into our tents (with the treat for me of a



The Salt Lake



Sefid Ab caravanserai – with the remnants of the overground water supply system.

home-made hot water bottle to fend off the nocturnal desert cold).

The next few days included more walking, more delicious ‘picnics’ Reza-style, scheduled check-ins to the wardens of the game reserve we were

now in, a trip to the two caravanserais at Sefid Ab (with small overground water canals from nearby springs), a wander round the oyster (yes, we must somehow be on an ancient sea floor!) fossil beds of the area, and what must be the most beautiful hills in the world. These are a smaller, concentrated version of all the gorgeous multi-coloured mountains of Iran. With all the game animals in the vicinity, I could immediately understand why Shah Abbas would want to build a hunting lodge in the area. As Yazdi does not include any of the three Safavid buildings in the environs (each around 5km apart) within his list of stopping places, it seems likely that they were not yet built when Shah Abbas did his 1601 walk. I mused that the Shah might perhaps have decided on their construction as he walked through the wonders of the surrounding area.

Of course, I took the opportunity of visiting the architectural remains, in their various states of preservation. There's Ain-ol-Rashid (the caravanserai for commoners), Qasr-e-Bahram (called Abbasabad/Siahkuh in the literature – this is where the Shah is supposed to have stayed with his entourage, and where I slept) and the *Haramserai* (quarters for the Shah's wives and children). Each has – or had – an impressive water system: Qasr-e-Bahram and the *Haramserai* are served by a small overground canal, similar to that at Sefid Ab but running over 10km from the nearby hills, while Ain-ol-Rashid even has underground water pipes. In the evening, the game rangers based at Qasr-e-Bahram told me about their work. As well as all the animals I had myself seen (various gazelle, lots of jackals, and a large and very purposeful snake), there are still some of the very rare Asiatic Cheetah in the area. These are the animals seen in Safavid book paintings perched, ready to make a kill, on the backs of hunters' horses and it was exciting to hear that the rangers had seen pawprints of three juveniles in this last year.

All too soon, I had to leave. Northwest of the desert 'castle' complex is 40km of salty mud. This is crossed by the remnants of the *Rah e Sang Farsh* – the 'stone carpet' causeway that Shah Abbas ordered constructed sometime after his 1601 walk, to help travellers along their way. Luckily for us, there had not been enough rain to make the mud really muddy, but I was still impressed by the labour and skill which had traversed such a large area of boggy mire with a paved road lasting over 400 years. The mud is criss-crossed by rivers which, leaching salt from the ground they pass through, are edged with white crusts and we quickly found the remains of the bridge where Yazdi recorded that the Shah had passed by.

As the Sang Farsh came to an end, we looked for the spring which was Abbas's first stopping place out of the *kavir* ('salt desert') area. Local agriculturalists pointed us at the now-dry site of *Shah-i Cheshme* (the 'Shah's

spring'), whilst themselves using pumped irrigation to (successfully, if perhaps temporarily) reclaim the salty local soil.



*The entry into
Qasr-e-Bahram
caravanserai – this was
shut behind us at night.*

Dehnamak, the first stopping place I had found on my *Noruz* trip to Mashhad, was now almost on the horizon, and there was only one more stopping place to find before then. This involved some heated discussion – Reza said the Shah would have gone to the nearby town of Garmsar, I pointed out that this was out of his way and that the Shah wasn't a man to back-track. Eventually we got more used to local (Turkic) pronunciations and place-names and agreed that an elderly man's suggestion of a local village – now uninhabited, with the drying up of the local *qanat* – might well be just what we were looking for. We'd done it!

Back in UK, I've plotted all my GPS readings of 'stopping places' on Google Earth, and checked my distances against Yazdi (report being drafted). I've submitted a proposal to a Paris conference on caravanserais. I've spoken to two groups of students and will be talking at the British Museum about the trip. I'm actively investigating other architectural and historical reports of the desert buildings, in the context of the Safavid 'Royal Way' from Isfahan to Farahbad. Now I'm looking for a publisher. Many, many thanks to The Iran

Society for their support with my November trip.



The 10km overground 'canal' leading to Qasr-e-Bahram.



The author on the Rah-e-Sang-Farsh: the stone causeway crossing the salt mud.

More images from the lecture can be seen on the website version of this article.

ZOROASTER AND THE GIFTS OF THE MAGI

Lecture given to the Society by Paul Kriwaczek on 19th November 2008

History, it is often said, is written by the victors. However, there have been at least two great exceptions to that general rule. The first exception is the case of the insignificant little Hebrew kingdoms, cowering on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, who were overwhelmed by the great powers of their day. First the northern kingdom of Israel was crushed by the armed forces of Assyria, led initially by Emperor Shalmanaser V and then when he unexpectedly died, by Sargon II. That defeat took place in around 720 BCE. And then the southern kingdom of Judah was wiped off the map by the Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 BCE.

By the normal logic of history, nothing more should have been heard of this tiny, obscure nation with its peculiar sacerdotal legal code and its idiosyncratic religious beliefs. Instead of which, as we all know, it was Assyria and Babylon that disappeared without trace under the Mesopotamian sands. That matters should have turned out so unexpectedly was largely – some might say entirely – the responsibility of the second great exception to the old adage: the ancient Persians. And a rather more religious man than I am might even propose that it was God’s reward to the Persians for their just and generous treatment of the ancient Hebrews, that when their own turn came, the Persians would be the other defeated nation to buck the general trend, and go on to make an indelible mark on the world, after being – to use Imam Khomeini’s phrase recently popularised by President Ahmedinejad – “*az safheh-ye ruzgar mahv shavad*”, “erased from the pages of history”.

Alexander of Macedon beat the Persian Achaemenid ruler Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela near Mosul in northern Iraq in 331 BC, and took over his empire. A Greek writer, Diodorus of Sicily, later assembled a description from eye-witness accounts:

Alexander flung a javelin at Darius and missed him, but struck the driver standing behind him and knocked him to the ground. A shout went up at this from the Persians around Darius, and those at a greater distance thought that the king had fallen. They were the first to take flight, and they were followed by those next to them, and steadily, little by little, the solid ranks of Darius’ guard disintegrated.

Some thousand years later in the year 641AD, the second great catastrophe happened, when greater Iran, including Iraq, Afghanistan and much of Central Asia was annexed into the Arab Muslim Empire, after the Arab cavalry of Al-Nu'man ibn Muqarrin al-Muzani defeated the Sassanian emperor Yazdegerd III at the Battle of Nahavand. So important was it to them, that the Arabs called this the Victory of Victories: *Fath al-Fotuh*.

In both cases, the winners lost their hold soon enough. Alexander died eight years after his victory and his empire immediately fell apart. The hegemony of the Damascus Arabs lasted rather longer – 109 years – until in 750 the Ummayyad Caliph Marwan II lost a Battle on the banks of the Great Zab River, also in Iraq, against the forces of Abu Muslim, the descendent of a freed Persian slave, and half a millennium of Abbasid rule began under Abu 'l-□Abbas as-Saffah.

In neither case could Humpty Dumpty be put together again, and Iranian tradition restored. Both in 331 BCE and in the year 641 of the Christian era, Iranian tradition, Iranian culture, and particularly the Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, would seem, on the surface, to have been eliminated.

But actually, in both cases, something very different and unexpected happened. What I like to call The Gifts of the Magi, by which I don't mean Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, but instead a subtle complex of Zoroastrian beliefs, myths, values and ethics, achieved an extraordinary, if quite unrecognised victory.

If you look up ancient Iran in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, or Wikipedia, or any other halfway reliable source, you will probably read that some time around the beginning of the first pre-Christian millennium, two closely related Iranian peoples, the Medes and the Persians, came south from the Central Asian grasslands, through the gap in the mountains where Iran borders Afghanistan today, and where a proposed gas pipeline will soon run from Turkmenistan to the Persian Gulf. They mixed with the indigenous population and began to take over the plateau that occupies most of Iran.

Before their arrival in the Iranian world, the Medes and Persians had been nomadic herders on the steppe lands, very close, in way of life, religion and language, to their cousins the Indo-Aryans of Northern India.

But unlike the Indo-Aryans, the Persians had experienced a religious upheaval. Some time, probably not many centuries before 1,000 BCE, a prophet had appeared among them called Zarathushtra, Zoroaster in Greek. He reformed their traditional pagan polytheism into a new religion, the first of its kind ever seen in history.

In Zoroaster's teaching there was one supreme god, the uncreated creator Ahura Mazda, Lord Wisdom. At the same time, the world was seen through

dualist eyes: as a battleground between two opposing forces: Vohuh Mana, Truth, the spirit of all that is good, light and creative, and Angra Mainyu, the Lie, the spirit of everything bad, false, dark and destructive.

In addition, at some point in their history, Zarathushtra's disciples came to believe that after death, humans are brought to judgement. They came to believe in Heaven with its angels and Hell with its torments.

They came to believe that time was neither cyclical nor eternal but that the world would one day come to an end, after a great final battle between the forces of good and evil, when Vohu Mana, the spirit of truth, would triumph, and a Messiah figure, the Saoshyant, born of Zarathushtra's miraculously preserved seed, would preside over the resurrection of the dead and an eternity of righteousness and immortality.

When they arrived on the Iranian plateau, the Medes and Persians found that there was already a state, an advanced civilisation, on its western fringes and adjoining lowlands. It spoke, and wrote, a language that some think was related to the Dravidian languages that today are mostly found in southern India – Tamil, Malayalam and so on. The Mesopotamians called this civilisation Elam. The Medes and Persians called it Hujiya, from which is descended today's name for the area: Khuzestan.

The Elamites taught the newcomers the arts of statecraft. Elamite remained an official language long after the Medes replaced them as masters of Iran, and established a Median Kingdom in 728 BCE.

A hundred and fifty years, or four Median kings, later, in 550 BCE, a Persian Prince called Kurush, who had married the daughter of the Median ruler, rebelled against his overlord and established a new, Persian controlled, Empire. We know him as Cyrus, Cyrus II, by-named 'The Great'. After eleven years he conquered Babylon and made himself master of most of the middle east. Eighteen years later, Cyrus was killed in battle and buried at his capital Pasagard.

Cyrus's son now took the throne. He died after eight years. There was a period of political turmoil, with numerous uprisings, until Daryavaush, Darius — Cyrus's second cousin, took control. It was this Achaemenid dynasty of Cyrus and Darius that would last more than two hundred years, until conquered by Alexander of Macedon in 331 BCE.

Now one of the notable things about that potted history is that, except for the story of Darius and his fight for the throne – famously reported by Darius himself on a cliff face at Behistun – it derives entirely from accounts by foreigners, Greeks and Babylonians. Hardly any archaeological evidence at all has ever been uncovered to support it. What's more, there are no documents, because the Medes and Persians had no way of writing their

language, until Darius ordered a system to be specially devised for putting up royal inscriptions, like the one at Behistun.

The other very notable thing is that in those foreign accounts there is never any reference to the religion of the Medes and the Persians. We tend to take it for granted that Cyrus and his successors were Zoroastrians. But no foreign source ever directly mentioned the faith of the Achaemenid rulers. We do find the Farohar (Faravahar), sculpted on many Achaemenid monuments. Modern Zoroastrians see it as the key symbol of their faith but in ancient times the image was just as commonplace among the pagan Assyrians and Babylonians.

God's name, Ahura Mazda, is copiously invoked on inscriptions too (in that specially devised writing system). But invoking Ahura Mazda as God doesn't necessarily imply acceptance of Zarathushtra's teachings. And not a single reference to Zarathushtra himself has ever been found.

What's more, the Achaemenid emperors seem to have been extremely liberal in their religious affiliations. Take the famous baked clay object known as the Cyrus Cylinder, for instance. It's a propaganda document, sometimes bizarrely miscalled the "First Declaration of Human Rights" – a copy sits in a glass case in the United Nations building in New York, translated into all the official UN languages. It was discovered in the ruins of E-sagila, the Temple of the god Marduk in Babylon. On it, Cyrus the Great declares his victory over the Babylonian ruler, and his good intentions towards his new subjects. He claims to be a worshipper of the Babylonian god:

At my deeds Marduk, the great Lord, rejoiced, and to me, Cyrus, the king who worships him, and to Cambyses, my son, the offspring of my loins, and to all my troops, he graciously gave his blessing, and we in good spirit glorify his high divinity.

At the same time, the Hebrews, whom he allowed to return from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem, regarded him as the chosen one of their Hebrew God. In the biblical book of Isaiah, God says:

Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have holden,
to subdue the nations before him.

In that expression "to his anointed", "*Le-moshikho*" in Hebrew, Cyrus is the very first person in the Bible to be given the title Messiah, *Moshiakh*. God then says:

Behold my servant whom I uphold;
mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth;
I have put my spirit upon him:
he shall bring forth judgement upon the nations.

A little later, Kambujiya, Cambyses, Cyrus's son, restored a temple at Saïs in Egypt, and left the following words in an inscription:

I testify in every good way my reverence for the great, exalted, holy goddess
Neith, the great mother, and for all the great gods in Saïs.

Herodotus tells us that "the Persians have no images of the Gods, no temples nor altars, and consider their use a sign of folly," but Berossus, a Babylonian priest who lived after Alexander's conquest, claims that in later reigns:

They [that is, the Persians] began to worship statues in human form, this practice having been introduced by Artaxerxes son of Darius... who was first to set up statues of Aphrodite Anaitis, at Babylon, Susa, Ecbatana, Persepolis, Bactria, Damascus and Sardis. He gave to those communities the duty of worshipping the statues.

So the idea that the Achaemenid Persian monarchs were, and had always been, Zoroastrians, is hard to support with any concrete evidence at all. And yet it is an almost inescapable conclusion. There are just too many hints, winks and nudges. Like the fact that five Achaemenid emperors took as an official throne name Artaxerxes, in Old Persian *Artakshshyarka*. *Khshyarka*, Xerxes, means ruler. And Artakshshyarka is the Zoroastrian principle of righteousness – cognate with the vedic Sanskrit *Rta*. Modern Zoroastrians call it *Asha*. So Artakshshyarka means truthful or righteous ruler. It is clearly a Zoroastrian name. Indeed most of the names of public officials that have been found in palace records, are Zoroastrian. What's more, the Greeks called Artaxerxes II by the name Mnemon. It seems to mean The Memory Man, but actually it's just a Greek rendering of the emperor's full throne name: Artaxerxes *Vohu Manah*, the Zoroastrian spirit of goodness, truth, light and creation, modern Persian *Bahman*.

Then there is the intriguing fact that at some time during the Achaemenid era, an official calendar was devised in which the days of the month were named after the Yazatas, hypostases or personifications of the positive concepts of Zoroastrianism. They have been compared to the angels of Christianity.

In addition, the bible's Book of Isaiah contains, quite close to the passage

quoted earlier, two lines that can only have been intended as a rebuttal of the Zoroastrian dualistic belief in two warring powers *Vohu Manah* and *Angra Mainyu*. God tells Isaiah:

I am the Lord, and there is *none else*.

I form the light, *and* create darkness: I make peace, *and* create evil: I the Lord do *all* these things.

But perhaps the most powerful all of these faint indications that Zoroastrianism must have been the religion of the ancient Persian empire, is one that hinges on the extraordinary treatment by history of the Prophet Zarathushtra himself.

He is unique among religious innovators. And not because of what he taught. Nor because of the great antiquity of his teachings. There are, after all, other traditions, just as old, if not even older. Nor is Zarathushtra unique because his words are still venerated today. Many other religions revere a great founding figure.

And yet there is a great difference between the way history has treated these other prophets and the way the founder of Zoroastrianism is seen. None of the others is truly honoured or respected, nor are their teachings much valued, outside the religions they started.

Yet about Zarathushtra and the faith that he taught, no other religion or culture seems to have had a bad word to say. And that goes right back to ancient times. Even the sworn enemies of the Persians, the Greeks, treated Zarathushtra with great respect. What's more, they recognised his importance. The earliest we know of, Xanthus of Lydia, who lived in the fifth century BCE, when the Persian Achaemenid empire was at its height, recognised him as the greatest religious legislator of ancient times.

Xanthus's contemporary, the Greek historian Herodotus, the school of the philosopher Plato in the fourth century BCE, Plato's great disciple the philosopher Aristotle, his student Aroxenus, and many others too, all regarded Zoroaster as one of the foremost teachers in history of ethics and indeed of civilisation.

This view was then passed on to the Romans after they took over the Greek world. Apuleius, author of the Roman comic novel "The Golden Ass", who lived in the second century of the Christian era, referred, quite in passing, to Zarathushtra, in a speech in a court case. He was praising the educational system of the Persian royal household:

Those whom they call royal tutors take over the education of the child when he has reached the age of fourteen years. These are the select four of the Persians deemed to be the best in their generation, one the most wise, one the most just, one the most balanced, and one the most manly. One teaches the Magian wisdom of Zoroaster, the son of Oromazus [i.e. Ahura Mazda]: this is the service of the gods. He also teaches the ways of royalty.

When Christianity appeared on the scene, the positive treatment of Zoroastrianism continued. The story of the birth of baby Jesus already incorporates the three Magi, who were the first to recognise his divinity. Matthew's gospel in the New Testament just calls them Wise Men From The East, but a full identification appears in the so-called 'Gospel of the Holy Childhood', a Greek text which dates from the end of the second century:

When the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem, a town of Judea, in the reign of King Herod, wise men came from the land of the East, according to the prediction of Zoroaster.

Admittedly the early Church fathers, who competed with Zoroastrianism for souls in the first few centuries of the Christian era, were largely hostile, but that antagonism soon faded. By the Middle Ages, Peter Comestor, chancellor of Cathedral of Notre Dame of Paris, in his book, *Historia Scholastica*, felt able to include Zarathushtra among the "men of superior stature, geniuses endowed with profound and mysterious wisdom...who have been the guides and teachers of humanity, and together stand as the common ancestors of civilization".

And when the great Renaissance painter Raphael was commissioned by Pope Julius II in 1509 to paint a fresco for the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, today called "The School of Athens", he included Zoroaster among the great minds of antiquity.

Even as late as the European Enlightenment in the 1700s, the philosopher Voltaire included Zoroaster among those who had transmitted God's natural law to the human world.

And Mozart's character Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, although billed as a wise Priest of Isis and Osiris, is actually a minimally disguised version of Zarathushtra. In the opera he represents the European Enlightenment's core values. It is interesting to note that as primary an Enlightenment document as the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution was ratified in the very same year as the *Magic Flute* premiered – 1791. Mozart's Zorastro, Zarathushtra redux, represents the leading beliefs of the age.

The strange thing is that none of these really knew a thing about the

Prophet Zarathushtra at all. They didn't really know what he had taught, where he had lived, or even when he had lived.

Xanthus of Lydia just said "a long *time* ago"; the School of Plato thought "5000 years before the Trojan War", that means around 6,200 BCE – and, bizarrely, some of Plato's followers claimed that their teacher and Zarathushtra were in touch, spiritually, across that abyss of time.

Other Greek writers placed him as a contemporary of the legendary Babylonian Queen Semiramis. Since she may well be a dim Greek recollection of a real Assyrian Queen called Samuramat, that would place Zarathushtra around 800 BCE.

In the time of Alexander of Macedon, the philosopher Aristoxenus, a devotee of the School of Pythagoras, claimed that the great philosopher himself had travelled east to meet and consult with Zarathushtra.

They never really met of course, though it is very possible, even likely, that Pythagoras, who was also a mystic, a pacifist, a vegetarian, and a communist, did know and consult with Zoroastrians. By the time of Apuleius in the second Christian century, this meeting had become the conventional wisdom. Apuleius himself wrote:

They say that Pythagoras had the Persian Magi for teachers – and especially Zoroaster.

So in the ancient world, as in later Europe, Zarathushtra received a very good press, was seen as possessing both great wisdom and perfect saintliness, even though both he and his teachings actually remained completely unknown. How could this happen?

It seems to me that the only possible explanation is that there was something about the Persians that immensely impressed outside observers. Something about the way they spoke, the way they thought, the way they behaved; following the Zoroastrian life code of *Pendar-e-nik*, *Goftar-e-nik*, *Kerdar-e-nik*: Good thoughts, good words, Good deeds.

In spite of the Persian Wars, in spite of Xerxes burning the Athens acropolis, in spite of famous battles like Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea, there was something that made Greeks and Romans say: "whoever this Zoroaster was, that so inspired these people, he must have been the very paragon of prophets, his teachings the very epitome of ethics."

We don't know what that something was. No Greek writer ever recorded it. And Zoroastrians themselves never seem to have made any overt attempt to propagate their beliefs and values to the outside world. It is my contention that the job was done for them when, in 331 BCE, Alexander of Macedon

conquered the Persian Empire.

Now I am well aware that according to Zoroastrian tradition, Alexander totally destroyed the Persian religion and the Persian culture. He burned the books which contained Zarathushtra's teachings, and he killed the priests who were the repositories of Zoroastrian knowledge. Thus a whole history was lost. It says in the Book of *Arda Wiraz* or *Viraf*, probably composed in the third Christian century:

The accursed Alexander came to the country of Iran with severe cruelty and war and devastation; he slew the ruler of Iran and destroyed the metropolis and empire, and made them desolate. And all the Avesta and the commentaries, written upon prepared cow-skins, and with gold ink, deposited in the archives in Istakhar Papakan, were burned up. And he killed several high priests, and judges and priests, and the masters of the Magians, and the upholders of the religion, and the competent and wise of the country of Iran.

Well, that was how later Persians remembered Alexander's conquest, perhaps five hundred years after the event. But I'm afraid to say it doesn't really match up to what actually seems to have happened.

To start with, Alexander didn't slay Darius III. He was murdered by a Persian aristocrat called Bessus. And Alexander executed Bessus for committing that crime. Then, there was no Avesta written in gold ink on cow-skin – because there was no way to write the Avestan language until very much later.

The first Avestan script we know of is called Din Dabireh. It seems to have been adapted from Middle Persian, Pahlavi, an Aramaic-derived script, some time after the year 200 CE, probably as part of the New Persian, Sassanian, Empire's efforts to reconstruct the faith. Before that, the sacred texts were passed from generation to generation only by word of mouth.

As for the killing, well, no doubt priests were killed, though how many is a hard question to answer. And this might indeed have threatened the oral transmission of the sacred texts.

But, as far as the great and the good of the Achaemenid empire are concerned, we know that wherever he could, and when he thought they would be loyal to him, Alexander promoted Persians to be Satraps, or governors, of the divisions of his new empire. And, by their names, we can be pretty sure that they were Zoroastrians. Mithrenes, for example, (in modern Persian, that would be *Mehran*), who was appointed governor of Armenia.

Then there was Atropates (Old Persian $\square tarep \square ta$, meaning Keeper of the Sacred Fire, the name of one of Zarathushtra's sons). He was put in charge of the important province of Media, and made such a success of it that part

of modern Iran, and also an independent country, is still called by his name – changed a bit over time to Azerbaijan.

Why would he appoint defeated Persians as governors? Because they had the expertise to do the job. They knew how to run the place. And a colonial ruler wants his colony to run well – and provide lots of tax money. That’s what colonies are for; you don’t destroy them; you milk them. At least in the areas with Zoroastrians in charge, we can be reasonably sure that there would have been no great persecution of their co-religionists.

But when I write “run the place”, that doesn’t at all mean that nothing changed. After 331 Iran was to be organised very differently from before.

The entire social structure, with its roots going back to heroic times, with its caste divisions between Warriors, Priests, artisans and farmers, with its different ranks: *dahyupatish*, the sovereign; *zantupatish*, provincial ruler, *vispatish*, tribe or clan chief; *nmanopatish*, householder; and at the bottom *tunvant*, the freeman. All that was swept away.

And so was the highly developed human and economic infrastructure: the tax system that supported the palace bureaucracy, the pen-pushers and the bean-counters, the state-funded priesthood and fire temples, the world-famous postal service, the *Barid*, with its relays of messengers travelling the Royal Road, with its regularly spaced staging posts and Dak bungalows – the ultimate inspiration, via Herodotus’s description carved over the doorway of the New York City Post Office, for Mr Stork, deliverer of baby elephants in Walt Disney’s 1941 animated film Dumbo.

Through the snow and sleet and hail...
 through the blizzard, through the gale...
 through the wind and through the rain...
 over mountain, over plain...
 through the blinding lightning flash...
 and the mighty thunder crash...
 ever faithful, ever true...
 nothing stops him.
 He’ll get through.

In place of all this came Hellenism, a heady brew of Greek, Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Persian influences. Hellenist society was something entirely new: new customs, new ideas, new technology, and a new international language, Greek.

New Hellenist cities sprang up everywhere, with new kinds of public buildings: temples, basilicas, gymnasiums, with a bewilderingly cosmopolitan population: Persians, Indians, Greeks, Egyptians and Jews lived cheek by

jowl with Babylonians, Assyrians, Armenians, Scythians and more. And with entirely new classes of people, with no equivalent in the old order: entrepreneurs, adventurers, mercenaries, unattached thinkers and writers, free-lance priests, religious revolutionaries.

It is tempting to compare that situation with the takeover of India by the British Raj. As in the Raj, a relatively tiny number of armed colonists controlled a huge population, demonstrating that the new Greek masters relied on a majority who were happy enough to accommodate themselves to the situation. Not that there weren't violent uprisings against the new Hellenist masters; there were. But the universal failure of the nationalist rebellions demonstrates that a sufficient majority of the common people felt happy enough as Greek colonials, and had no desire to return to the old, formal, deeply conservative, straight-jacketed society of Achaemenid rule.

Like in the Raj, nobody was forced at sword-point to acquire the language of the colonial masters. Millions did so of their own accord because it represented modernity, development, sophistication. And long after real Greeks had disappeared from the east, local native rulers were still decorating their coins with the word "Philhellene" (meaning Greek-lover) after their names – in increasingly corrupt, and in fact ultimately completely illegible, Greek lettering.

Unlike the British Raj, Alexander's empire didn't even last ten years. Immediately after Alexander's death, what followed was nearly half a century of warfare over the succession, until the Hellenist world, divided into several parts, settled down to a brief hundred years of uneasy political truce. Thereafter the western areas were conquered by the Romans, and the eastern areas by the Parthians, another previously nomadic Iranian nation. Yet in spite of the changes in political mastership Hellenistic culture survived – indeed survived magnificently – in the end transforming itself into Byzantine civilisation. You could say that it lasted, one way or another, until 1453, when Mehmed the Conqueror finally took Constantinople into the Ottoman empire. That's nearly 1800 years!

Back in the third century BCE, it looked, on the face of it, as if in this new situation, the ancient religion and philosophy of the Persians had completely lost out to the new thinking imported by the Greeks. But that is precisely what did not happen.

Instead what Hellenism provided was a great liberation, a dissolving of the borders that divided minds from each other. And as the religions and philosophies, previously corralled into their separate nationalities were let loose, the greater movement of ideas proved to be not from west to east, but from east to west. Persia was never really Hellenised, the east was never

really westernised. Rather it was the west that was Zoroastrianised.

And the channel through which was transmitted to the west what I call the Gifts of the Magi – as mentioned earlier, the complex of Zoroastrian beliefs, myths, values and ethics – that channel was the nation with whom the Persians already had close and largely friendly associations since Cyrus's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE: the Hebrews from Judea – the Jews.

Before they were exiled to Babylon, it's quite clear from the Bible that the populations of the two kingdoms of the Holy Land, Israel and Judah, worshipped the Hebrew God in many different ways. There was no single authorised belief system called Judaism. Where religions grow slowly by tradition out of the people and out of the soil, as it were, there never is. Just as there is still no single authoritative version of Hinduism in India. In the ancient Holy Land, some worshipped the Hebrew God along with others from the surrounding cultures; some worshipped Him together with his wife *Asherah*; some believed that, though other gods may exist, only He ought to be worshipped. The great German thinker Max Müller called that Henotheism. It seems that only a very few thought that there was really only one God anyway.

Then in 722 BCE the northern kingdom of Israel was smashed by the Assyrians. A hundred and thirty-six years later the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians. The temple was burned and the ruling class was deported to Babylon.

After Cyrus conquered Babylon and the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem, with the Persian Emperor's blessing and his note of permission, their religion was very different. Now only one God was recognised and only one authorised form of the religion. And nobody who had not been in exile in Babylon and who had not been freed by Cyrus, was considered part of it. When the Jerusalem temple was to be rebuilt and the common people, who had escaped deportation to Babylon, came and asked to help, they were told to "push off!". Or, to put it in more biblical language:

But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chiefs of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build it ... as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

The leaders of this re-established community were senior members of the Persian court: the reformers Ezra and Nehemiah. It was through their work that the orthodox Hebrew religion, Judaism as we know it today, would be for all time defined. Because Ezra, known as "the scribe" was almost certainly

the editor, or redactor, who assembled the Hebrew bible.

The argument is persuasive that Persian monotheism, the recognition of Ahura Mazda as the sole creator of the universe, helped the few Judeans who believed in one God alone, to win out over the many. And to turn Judaism for the first time into a truly monotheistic faith. At the same time, the development of the institution of synagogue worship as an alternative to, or even replacement for, the Jerusalem temple with its primitive daily animal sacrifices, probably owed much to Persian Zoroastrian example. As Herodotus wrote, they had no temples or altars and “considered their use a sign of folly.”

One, final, detail shows the influence of Hebrew contact with the Persians during the Babylonian exile. Before being expelled from Judea, the Hebrews had used a script, paleo-Hebrew, derived from the Phoenician. On their return from exile, they abandoned that script and adopted the Aramaic alphabet, as used by the Persian government. Indeed it was eventually ruled that sacred Hebrew texts were not valid if they were composed in the old script, but only in the new. And the script of the Persian Imperial chancellery, so-called Persian Imperial Aramaic, is the very same script that is still used today, 2,500 years later, in modern Israeli Hebrew.

In 331 BCE, for the Jews too, Alexander’s conquest threw everything back into the melting pot. Orthodoxy couldn’t hold. Sects proliferated. And in this new, multicultural, situation, many ideas from the core beliefs of Zoroastrianism, but totally absent from Jewish belief up till then, began to make their mark. The notion of life after death, of heaven and hell, of the resurrection of the body, begin for the first time to appear in Jewish religious texts composed in the Hellenistic age.

Indeed, the Zoroastrian belief that souls are to be judged after death, and then sent either to heaven or to hell, though totally absent from the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, became such an integral part of the Jewish religion that by the end of the second century it had become dogma. It says in the Mishnah, the earliest authoritative compilation of Jewish rabbinic law:

Of the dead while all Israelites have a share in the world to come, it is withheld from those who deny the resurrection.

Of course these ideas didn’t win out without a battle. The traditional priesthood and the aristocracy who ran the Jerusalem temple, called Sadducees, fought bitterly against them, pointing out that they had no basis in the Torah. They denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, they refused to accept the immortality of the soul, they rejected the existence of

angels and ministering spirits – Jewish versions of the Zoroastrian Yazatas.

On the other hand the Pharisees, the Sadducees' opponents, took to the new ideas with enthusiasm. So much so that a folk-etymology, a false derivation, of the name Pharisees quickly became current, deriving the name Pharisees from Farsis or Persians.

Inevitably, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in the year 70 was the end of the temple aristocracy and the Sadducees. The Pharisees won out, and their successors the rabbis led the way to the Judaism we still have today, in which the Zoroastrian elements still remain firmly entrenched.

And one of the most important of those elements was the idea that time and the universe will one day come to an end. For the first time we read of a Messiah, not as an earthly ruler like Cyrus, but as a sacred figure, like Zarathushtra's *Saoshiyant*, who will appear on earth to bring salvation to humanity at the end of time.

As always before, these changes were never openly associated with Zoroastrianism. Once again subtle hints and delicate inferences are all we have to indicate the Zoroastrian origin of the new theologies.

For instance, one of the texts which outlines the end of the world and the coming of the Messiah, though undoubtedly written by a Jewish author, is called the Oracle of Hystaspes, Greek for the Persian name *Vishtaspa*. Perhaps it was intended to imply the ruler of that name who was Zarathushtra's first convert. In those days, Persian provenance, it seems, was a guarantee of truth.

Other texts borrow what is clearly Zoroastrian terminology. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, parchments discovered in caves around the Dead Sea, which date from about 200 BCE onwards, the prophecies foretell a great War of the Sons Of Light Against the Sons Of Darkness, language surely inspired by Zoroastrian dualist thought. The sectarians' great adversary in Jerusalem against which many of the documents thunder, is called The Liar, or the Purveyor of the Lie. The sect whose texts these were, held property in common (this has been a continuous theme in early Zoroastrianism), they believed in named angels, equivalent to the Yazatas, they adopted a solar, sun-based, calendar, like the Persian, rather than the traditional lunar, moon-based calendar of the Jews.

And the connection between the Persians and the Jews is actually most clear in the last-written prophetic book in the Hebrew Bible. The Book of Daniel was composed, scholars believe, in the mid-second century BCE or shortly thereafter. The Prophet's visions are set in the Palace at Susa, the late Achaemenid capital:

And I saw in a vision; and it came to pass, when I saw, that I was at Shushan in the palace, which is in the province of Elam.

The book's language includes many words actually borrowed from Persian, and there are many details in the visions that reflect almost identical points in Zoroastrian texts of the same period. You can still visit what is supposed to be Daniel's tomb at Shush in Iran. It is regarded as sacred to Islam too.

Now please don't think I am claiming that anybody ever said: "Ah, we see that Zoroastrians believe in such and such, let's start believing in that too". Religion doesn't work that way. What actually happens is much more subtle: believers find equivalents among their own doctrines, and develop and expand them to reflect the inspiration from outside.

And anyway it must be said that the Jews themselves didn't make all that much of these ideas. Although angels, the devil, the afterlife, the last judgement, the Messiah, the end of time, are all officially part of orthodox Jewish doctrine, these notions are very underemphasized in actual Jewish belief. The synagogue prayers hardly refer to them, the rituals and celebrations don't invoke them, Jewish children aren't taught them.

Where the Zoroastrian contribution to Semitic religion really does take absolute centre stage, is in the Jewish heresy that was to become Christianity. In fact much of what really distinguishes early Christianity from its parent religion is the great emphasis the followers of Jesus placed on just those elements among their beliefs, which had been inspired by Persian Zoroastrian motifs: angels, the devil, the afterlife, resurrection, the last judgement, the Messiah, and the End of Time, which Jesus taught was now at hand:

Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come into power.

Let me quickly assure devout Christians that I am not claiming that Christianity is all second-hand Zoroastrianism. But what does seem clear is if those Zoroastrian convictions, learned from the Persians, had not been so widespread throughout the population, Jesus's message would not have fallen upon such eager and receptive ears and spread so fast.

In any case early Christianity soon left its Zoroastrian – and Jewish – ideas far behind, transforming the faith into something very different: to see Jesus' death on the cross as a form of redemption for humanity as a whole, to believe it offers Christians salvation from original sin – that was entirely original.

Nonetheless, because it was Christianity that, by-and-large, has inspired the ethics, the values, the moral philosophy, of the modern west, and therefore in the light of today's globalisation, the whole earth, we should recognise the hugely important role that Zoroastrianism played in that process. Western Christian culture is often said to have been erected on the foundations of Hellenism and Judaism. To those we must unquestionably add Zoroastrianism too.

So history is not always written by the victors. Alexander of Macedon's destruction of the Persian empire is labelled an utter catastrophe in Iranian tradition. I think we should rather see it as the event that made it possible for Zoroastrian ideas and ideals, the Gifts of the Magi, to permeate the west.

As for Iran itself, I will never forget something that happened towards the end of my journey. We were leaving Persepolis, talking about the terrible day when, according to Diodorus of Sicily, the tart Thaïs prompted Alexander's party to burn down the Persian ceremonial capital. We were walking down the monumental staircase, accompanied by the self-appointed guide who had been dogging our footsteps all day. "Alexander wanted to make the whole world Greek," he told us. "But as you see: we are still here. Iran is still here, free and independent. And what is Macedonia? Just a former Yugoslav republic."

ZIEGLER'S MAN IN PERSIA

Condensed from the private memoirs of W.L. Flinn

W.L. Flinn, son of one of the Manchester partners of Ziegler's, travelled in Iran over a period of forty years for the firm. Ziegler's was a Manchester cotton textile company which exported its manufactured cotton piece goods to Iran paid for them with carpets woven for it around Sultanabad [modern Arak]. Flinn left a private memoir of his travels to The Iran Society, of which he was a member, with about sixty photographs. Much of the memoir is a self-indulgent 'traveller's tale', but there are many nuggets within that give a flavour of the times. He wrote disappointingly little about the carpets themselves.

Flinn first went to Iran in 1903, aged 22, travelling by the traditional route of steamer to Batoumi, train to Tiflis and Yerevan, then post carriage to Julfa and Tabriz. Ziegler's had been established in Trebizond since 1856. Later it opened an agency in Tabriz, taking over the Swiss firm of Dinner, Hanhart & Co. At its height, Ziegler had other branches in Tehran, Sultanabad, Yazd, Isfahan, Shiraz and Bushire. Their business was the export of Manchester cotton and woollen piece goods. In about 1876 they established a carpet business at Sultanabad to pay for the imports. Sultanabad was then a town of some 10,000 inhabitants, at the centre of a large district about 80 miles square, with a number of carpet weaving villages within it. They bought a large plot of waste ground outside the town and built several dwelling houses, offices and stores, a dye house and stables and laid out gardens, all surrounded by a sixteen-foot wall. The place was known as Qal'eh-ye Ziegler, or the Ziegler Fort. At the start, there were only forty or so looms in the town itself; most of the weaving was done in the surrounding villages. Within ten years there were about 1200 looms in the town and other European firms began to appear, of which only J.C.P. Hotz & Son of Holland and, much later, PETAG¹⁵ of Germany were of any importance. Most of Ziegler's weavers worked in the villages.

In 1893 the British consul at Isfahan came to Sultanabad for an extended visit. He was impressed by what he saw. 'With no assistance from the government and without any concessions, but simply by honest hard work in the face of many difficulties and much opposition from the local merchants and dealers, bit by bit the Ziegler business built up so that we have nothing like it in Persia. In no town of Persia have I seen such evidence, not of wealth quite, but of well-being. The people are comfortably dressed and look

¹⁵ Persische Teppich Aktiengesellschaft.

confident and happy. They all live on carpet weaving; its good effects are evident in the whole community.'

In 1902 a correspondent of the *Morning Post* spent some time in Sultanabad. He poured scorn on Lord Curzon's comment in his book *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892) that the Europeans were responsible for the lack of originality in contemporary Persian carpets and for the use of aniline dyes. He pointed out that Curzon had not in fact visited Sultanabad and that the Ziegler dyehouse used no aniline at all. As for originality of design, he wrote, the Ziegler Ferahan for years was renowned for its fast colours, typically Persian design and hard wearing quality. In the early days, Ziegler's often refused to accept customers' orders if the designs were not sufficiently Persian. Their largest commission was a copy of the Ardebil carpet, made for an American client.

Flinn was given a rude introduction to the carpet business. Never having ridden a horse for more than two hours at a time, he was taken on a 45-mile ride from Tabriz to Heriz, over a very rough road in winter, to tour the villages and inspect the carpets on loom. After his apprenticeship in Tabriz he set off for Tehran with four horses, one for himself, one for the baggage, one for his servant and one for the *chapar-shagerd*, or post-boy, who would have to bring all the horses back from Tehran on his own.

Ziegler's had little trade in Tehran, but it was the financial hub of the country. The British-owned Imperial Bank of Persia was the only issuer of bank notes, but these were cashable only in the towns where they were issued. They were not current in country districts, where coin was required. Ziegler's had to send caravan loads of silver *krans* to Sultanabad to finance the carpet purchases.

Their biggest delivery of coin was to finance the Russo-Afghan Boundary Commission of 1885, for which Ziegler's delivered a huge sum in cash to Mashhad. The coin had been collected all over Iran and carried several hundred miles by mule and camel. Each caravan had a European staff member as escort. One particularly urgent delivery of several hundred thousand pounds' worth was carried by post horses almost non-stop from Tehran, 560 miles away, in less than six days.

From Tehran Flinn took a post carriage to Isfahan, the principle distribution centre for Ziegler's Manchester goods in Iran. The Ziegler house was at the southern end of the Chahar Bagh avenue, close to the Allahverdi Khan bridge. Being a son of one of the partners, Flinn had to call on the leading local merchants. The senior one invited all the others to his caravansaray, where they took tea as they were introduced to Flinn.

The governor of Isfahan at this time was Zill-i Sultan, the eldest son of

Nasser ud-Din Shah, who was considered illegitimate in that his mother was not of royal Qajar blood. He was friendly to the British. Of equal influence was a senior cleric, Agha Najafi. Such was the power of the clerics that they could often issue *fatwas* boycotting European goods. This happened so frequently that Ziegler's private telegraph code had a whole page of abbreviations to cover this side of their business.

Commodities in the bazaar were sold at a fixed base price – say, 5d a yard for cotton cloth – but at varying discounts or credits related to time. A price could be quoted at 5d at 14 months or 5d at 18 months, a month being equivalent to 1%. If the merchant elected to pay cash, which they hardly ever did, he got a discount of 8% to 12%. Merchants were given credit according to their standing, varying from £2,000 to £7,000, on which they paid 6% per annum. This suited the merchants well, because no bank would advance them money at anywhere near that rate. All accounts had to be cleared at the Persian New Year on 21st March.

The Ziegler establishment at Sultanabad lay a short way south of the town at the entrance to the valley of a small river, dry in summer. At the head of the valley rose the Sefid Khaneh mountain, 10,000ft high, which often had snow on it in summer. Across the salt lake the ground rose again to the Tafresh mountain range. Some 35 miles to the west the plain was bounded by the limestone cliffs of the Kuh-e Wafs mountain. Although there were no permanent streams in the plain, there was plenty of underground water near the mountains to irrigate the scores of villages by means of *qanats*, or underground channels linked by wells.

At the time of Flinn's visit, the local manager, Theodor Strauss, was due to start on a tour of Hamadan, Senneh and Kermanshah to buy wool. Strauss, who had spent fifteen years in Iran and liked to travel in leisurely fashion, exploring the by-ways, took Flinn with him. Since some of the country was unsafe, they took seven mounted and armed servants, two carriages and eight mules to carry the tents. Camping was safer than staying in villages full of robbers.

Flinn spent days at a time riding from village to village to inspect the work on the looms. One village that he visited had just been raided by a number of robbers from a nearby village, who had lifted a number of their sheep and left the weavers destitute. Flinn and his escort went to the offending village and drove off 400 of their sheep to Sultanabad. The villagers were then given the choice of settling their quarrel then and there, or having the case referred to the authorities. Knowing the rapaciousness of government officials, they settled.

On another occasion the village authorities, at the instigation of an

aggrieved competitor, announced that any weaver delivering a carpet to Ziegler's would be fined ten *tomans* (£2 at the time). The village belonged to a son of Zill-i Sultan, who told him to stop such nonsense.

In 1907, when the country was quite lawless in the throes of the Constitutional movement, Flinn had to take the law into his own hands. He used his armed escort to bring in defaulting village weavers, or even local Ziegler agents who had used the wool given out to them to weave carpets for local dealers, and keep them in the Ziegler 'Fort' until they settled their accounts. Sometimes these rogues found the food they were given was so good that they were happy to stay in detention, but the threat of handing them to the local authorities soon put them straight.

Such was the prestige of Ziegler's that the premises were declared a British vice-consulate and the successive managers became honorary vice-consuls for many years afterwards. An extraordinary position arose out of this arrangement for, until 1911 or 1912, the manager was a German. The German Legation made the same arrangement for PETAG's branch in Sultanabad, whose first manager was an Englishman. In 1914, when war broke out, both Ziegler's and PETAG's managers were English, which was the end of the German vice-consulate.

At the outbreak of war in Tabriz, the Ziegler's manager was a German. Herr Wolfinger, a most conscientious man, tidied up his books and offered his resignation but, before anything could be arranged, the Russians invaded Iran and took Wolfinger and his family away to be interned as enemy aliens in Russia. The British authorities persuaded their Russian allies to release the Wolfingers, on condition that they went to Tehran, away from the front, and that Ziegler's would not give him further employment. Ziegler's took over his house in Tabriz, for which they agreed to pay him a fair rent after the war, and sent an English manager to take his place in Tabriz. Shortly afterwards, the Russians retreated and the Turks occupied Tabriz. The German consul then put his seals on the Ziegler property, to protect it from their Turkish allies. Later, when the Germans reached Sultanabad and occupied the Ziegler Fort, Wolfinger was able to prevent them from damaging the property and persuaded them to release the English staff. After the war he came back as manager of PETAG, a competitor of Ziegler's, but much respected by them.

When Flinn first went to Iran, oil had not been discovered there. By 1921, on his fourth visit, Ziegler's had been distributing petrol all over the country in four-gallon tins for some time, until the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co took over the distribution themselves. William d'Arcy, who discovered oil in Iran in 1906, had invited Ziegler's to take a share in his early explorations, but they had turned his proposal down as impractical!

Ziegler's demise in Iran came about under Reza Shah's government in 1934. Sterling and the dollar had gone off the gold standard. This had depreciated the value of the large stocks they held in Iran, which could be replaced at a lower cost in Iranian currency. The Iranian government then passed a law requiring exporters to sell it all the foreign currency they earned at the artificial official rate of exchange, which made it impossible for them – and for most of the other foreign carpet companies – to continue in business.

Although now out of the carpet business, Ziegler's continued to export cotton goods to Iran. By 1937 cotton imports to Iran were handled by the *Sherkat-e Qomash* or Soci  t   des Cotonnades, a government monopoly, which sent Herr Franz Gold, an Austrian, to Manchester to negotiate a large purchase. Gold was a conscientious and scrupulous banker who had assisted in the establishment of the Bank Melli. He admitted to knowing nothing about cotton. He told Flinn that Ziegler's were highly regarded in Iran and asked him to advise him on his purchases. Flinn arranged for him to buy goods to the value of some £215,000 from some forty companies, including his own, which received a good share of the business. When Gold got back to Tehran he was, predictably, accused of taking bribes from the suppliers. This painfully correct man was later exonerated by a commission of inquiry, but his contract with the Iranian government was not renewed as 'his face did not fit'.

Ziegler's was again called for by the Iranian government on the occasion of the marriage of the Crown Prince Mohammed Reza to Princess Fawziah of Egypt. They had realised that, with the shortage in Tehran of fashionable materials, shoes, dresses and shirts, the Tehran officials and society figures would look very dowdy against the fashionable Egyptian figures who would be attending. The Ministry of Finance was instructed to remedy the situation urgently. An urgent telegram was put through to Flinn on a Saturday evening by telephone from London with an enormous order for silk and rayon dress material, ladies' underclothing and shoes, gloves, shirts, collars, ties, ornaments and clasps, including a score of model dresses for copying, to be sent by air. They had ten days to assemble the rest of the order, which was sent by the Orient Express to the Iranian border for onward forwarding by truck. Two men and a secretary worked for nine days to assemble more than sixty packing cases, which met the Orient Express just in time.

Flinn made one more trip to Iran. In 1943 he was seconded to the British Public Relations Bureau to counter German propaganda in Iran, touring towns and villages all over western Iran with a mobile cinema. He covered some 1500 miles showing a film of the Tehran Conference, a film called

'King & Country' about the activities of the King and Queen in wartime, and films of Allied troops in action. A favourite was an allegorical film depicting a tank (Churchill) defeating the machinations of a serpent (Hitler) and a frog (Mussolini). Although he was delighted to be back in Iran, he was heartily sick of the films by the time he had finished.



The Ziegler house, Sultanabad (Arak)



Agha Najafi and colleagues, Isfahan 1905



A weaver taking wool home, Sultanabad 1905



Leonard Flinn leaving Shiraz, 1921

PERSIAN STRAWBERRIES

A tale by Ian Bowler

My mother-in-law lives in the country at Shahrud, about half way between Tehran and Mashhad. Part of our family estates consists of two adjacent gardens on the edge of the town. They are surrounded by high mud walls and filled with a helter-skelter of apricot trees, poplars, roses, grapes and goodness knows what else. One of these gardens is known as *Bagh-e Sar-Cheshmeh*, ‘The Head of the Waters’ because it is there that the underground water coming from the mountains to the north is divided and directed to a thirsty multitude of farmers further down the plain. Here my mother-in-law lives in a small house furnished exactly like a smart apartment on the Avenue Foch. There is another bigger house in the garden, which is used only for guests. It is white stone, colonnaded and is also furnished sumptuously in the French manner.

These old Persian gardens are quite unlike anything anywhere else. But this is hardly surprising. There aren’t many people who would even try to make a garden in a climate with less than four inches of rain a year, burning hot summers and winters that are near freezing and worse from November to March. The Head of the Waters is particularly beautiful not only because of its architecture but also because of the trees, two or three of which are immensely ancient planes in which a pair of *shahin* falcons nest every year, and because of the loving care bestowed upon it by the Khanom, as my mother-in-law is known.

Three or four different sorts of grapes grow profusely; there are raspberries in plenty, roses galore, onions, asparagus, herbs, greenery, alyssum, creepers, lots of fruit trees and tall poplars overshadowing everything. Here, beside the house, on little mounds around which the irrigation water floods, is a big patch of strawberries. This does not sound very remarkable, except that it is the probably the only patch of strawberries within two hundred miles in any direction. What is more, due to some undiscovered botanical secret, or perhaps it is love, they fruit furiously from the end of March until the snow comes in early December.

The Khanom is a remarkable woman. She has lived in such widely disparate places as Tehran, Paris, Buenos Aires and Washington – and this before the jet aeroplane began to shrivel up the world – but she has retained an eighteenth-century attitude to fundamentals. She is what the French would call *une grande dame*. Her personal maid is called *Zan-e Ahmad*, the Wife of Ahmad, who is the head gardener. Country people all call their women

this way and it is considered disrespectful, if not downright familiar, to call them by their first names after they become matrons. Zan-e Ahmad is not only intensely loyal, but she also has a sense of fun which bursts out at every opportunity. She needs it, with six children and the lazy Ahmad to cope with, not to mention her many relatives, all rather envious of her privileged position with the Khanom.

About twenty miles from the garden is an army depot and there once resided in military splendour no less an officer than a divisional general. This august personage had of course been presented to the Khanom and they had subsequently met on many occasions. Once he came to dine with an escort of jeeps and guards and had two sentries posted to march up and down outside the dining room windows. My sister-in-law, unable to hear herself speak above the noise of the jackboots, sent them to the kitchen to be fed, much to their delight, if not the general's. At the return invitation she said she would accept only if she could take her own two sentinels, a pair of pointers, one of which would bite anyone or anything.

The general conceived a liking, amounting to mania, for the Khanom's strawberries. When eating one, he would carefully remove the stalk and place the berry reverently on his outstretched tongue like a convert taking his first communion, then swallow rapidly and stretch out his hand for another one.

One morning the Khanom returned from inspecting some sugar beet planted some distance away to find the general's adjutant in the garden, in deep conversation with Zan-e Ahmad, whose eyes belied her respectful attitude and tone of voice. He was splendid. He bore a full captain's stars and was immaculately dressed, beribboned and adorned with freshly laundered lanyards, shining leather boots and glittering spurs. After the polite exchange of ritual enquiries and compliments demanded by the charming conventions of the Persian language, the Khanom, who could give Henry Kissinger a lesson in diplomacy, politely waited for the adjutant to make known the object of his call. Finally, he said. "*Qorban*, [Your Sacrifice], we have a grave problem. In our hospital there lies a man about to die of a strange disease, the name of which I cannot remember; anyway it is unimportant. Our doctors, after superhuman efforts, have said that only one thing can save our brother-in-arms, one thing, that only you, Khanom, can bestow: in a word, the juice and fruit of fresh strawberries is the only medicine that will save him. Khanom, we are at your mercy!

This was moving and dramatic indeed, a plea to turn the stoniest gardener's heart, though somewhat spoiled by Zan-e Ahmad who, before the excellent captain had finished delivering his speech, had embarked on a barely concealed belly laugh that finally erupted into uncontrollable guffaws,

which even the frowns of the Khanom could not dispers. Khanom herself, though inwardly in a state of giggles, replied that, desolate and sympathetic though she was, unhappily there was not a strawberry in the garden, since that morning they had been picked and sent to Tehran for a national horticultural exhibition, but she would be happy for the captain to take any that he could find. The thought of all this military splendour dibbling and dabbling in the strawberry beds sent Zan-e Ahmad into another fit of belly shakes and the captain, like the good tactician that he was, having no wish to turn a defeat into a rout, saluted and took his leave.

Several days later, when the burgeoning plants had borne forth more fruit, the general himself telephoned. It appeared that he had been summoned to Tehran to confer with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and that this brightest of stars in the military firmament, like himself, was addicted to strawberries, particularly the variety grown at the Head of the Waters. Could the Khanom please help? The Khanom could and did. The general went off to Tehran with a box or two and shortly afterwards was promoted and left us. Zan-e Ahmad said that it was the first time she had heard of promotion coming through a box of fruit. The Khanom said that she had always admired the army men for their devotion, but had never had much affection for them, but that now she had quite begun to like them.

Ian Bowler died last May. An exceptional engineer, he lived in Iran for many years and was responsible for the construction of IGAT1, the gas pipeline from Ahvaz to Astara, on the border with the Soviet Union. This pipeline, 42" in diameter, was the biggest pipeline of its day and was laid over the Zagros mountains, parts of it at 9,000 feet, far above the height at which it had previously been thought practicable to transport gas. Bowler was also a poet, classical guitarist, expert cook, falconer and sailor. He was married to Hamideh Azodi, whose family owned estates near Shahrud.

FARIDEH'S GARDEN

Christopher de Bellaigue

One morning in April I was behind the wheel of my battered Nissan Patrol, stuck in traffic in Niavaran Street, in north Tehran. The air was stifling and the cars, backed up for a mile at least, emitted a rumble so deep and ageless, it could have been rising from the earth beneath us. Through their darkened windows I could make out the drivers of the more expensive cars, Land Cruisers and BMWs and other imported beauties, speaking into their mobile phones, adjusting the climate control, occasionally bringing a fist down on the steering wheel. Those of us driving older models sat with our windows open, an elbow out. Our throats were hot and dry from the exhaust fumes, our ears bent by dozens of pulsing, competing music systems.

On we crept, losing a car every so often to the parking lot of a roadside apartment building. According to the directions I had been given, I would have to turn left a little further on. Anticipating my turn, I tried drifting into the left hand lane but was prevented by a Peugeot 206 whose driver, a young man who had made his hair into a dense, black lawn, lowered his window and drawled in my direction, 'Trash!'

I was furious, furious at the 206 and at myself for staring, speechless, unable to think of a response. Then my eye was caught by a tall apartment block that tapered near the top. This must be the landmark I had been told about. The 206 advanced and I sneaked in behind him and started turning the wheel. Through his back window I saw 206 raise his thumb, the most obscene gesture an Iranian hand can make. I completed my turn, passed my landmark, turned left again and came to a steel door. I got out and waited for my rage to subside. Then I rang the bell and the catch opened.

Pulling the door shut behind me, I was conscious that I was less than a hundred yards from the traffic, but a great distance had opened between us. Before me was a big, overgrown garden that fell in gentle, thickly shaded terraces to a large, well-proportioned house built over two storeys in the agreeably unpretentious style of the early twentieth century. I followed the short avenue which led to the house, flanked by a slope covered in ivy and butterfly violets in flower. A big dog started to bark somewhere and I carried on walking, past the house and into the southern part of the garden. In front of me, plucking pink roses and storing them in the hem of her shirt, which she had gathered with her left hand, petite but sturdy, her dark hair boyishly cut, stood a woman in late middle age. She patted the petals in her hem as if they were sentient, receptive to caresses. 'These are my loved ones,' she said. Her

name was Farideh Rahnama.

We had been introduced by a mutual friend. The friend, aware of my interest in gardens, had told me of a cosmopolitan gardener, a musicologist and piano teacher who had spent many years in Europe and now lived in one of Tehran's few remaining privately-owned garden properties, in Shemiran, in the far north of the city. Having spent the past seven years occupying various flats in Tehran, a byword for chaotic development, I had started to feel strongly drawn to an earlier time when Tehran – especially here, in Shemiran – was a place not of glass and concrete, but of gardens inside mud walls. Behind this longing lay another longing, for the culture inside the walls, a compassionate life-bestowing culture that is celebrated by the poets, where acts of nature paraphrase human experiences – love, union, separation, death – and the old world, in the words of Hafez of Shiraz, 'will find youth anew.'

Now, in the sitting room of the well-proportioned house, Farideh Rahnama listened to me and agreed that, yes, I might come and visit her from time to time. But there was something about her manner – distant, a little impatient – that suggested a woman who bored easily. I could envisage a time, after one or two visits, when Farideh would tire of my conversation and the permission she had granted as a favour to our mutual friend would be quietly rescinded.

I was thinking about this as she walked me to the iron door. I asked idly how many gardeners she employed and she replied, 'None. All the gardeners I engage seem to be depressed. The last one wanted to cut down a perfectly healthy plane tree. Naturally, I got rid of him.'

'So you look after all this yourself?' I was astounded.

'What would you like me to do? Find me a gardener. I've given up trying.'

Thus began my association with Farideh's garden. A dozen times over the spring and early summer, I drew up at the steel door. Gradually, between taking up unruly violets and sawing branches off a precarious oriental plane, weeding and mowing the grass, I came to know this garden, from the fig, apricot and pomegranate trees at its northern end to the ornamental section with its lawn and planes and solitary, spiky yucca and, of course, those pink roses whose scent and hue are at their most intense shortly before dawn, the hour at which the women of Kashan, their province of origin, venture out to pick them for rosewater while their husbands slumber on.

Beyond this part of the garden, lower still, there was another section, full of tall weeds and partly enclosed by a rusting fence. 'This was where my father had his tennis court,' said Farideh, and she summoned me to the house for lunch.

I took off my muddy boots, entered a glass-fronted hall that served as a greenhouse, and followed Farideh down a long corridor that ran the length of the building. As I walked, I happened to glance into an open doorway and caught sight of an elderly man, wearing pyjamas, being helped to his feet by another, younger man. I learned that the elderly man was called Dr Shahidi and that he was the father of a second woman living in the house, Farideh's friend and support over the past eighteen years, Shokoufeh Shahidi. The younger man was Dr Shahidi's nurse, Mr Kasraian. Mr Kasraian joined Farideh and myself in the kitchen for meatballs and rice served by the housekeeper. During the few lulls in an animated conversation, I keened my ear for sounds of the city: of traffic, cranes and curses. There were none.

After lunch, drinking tea in Farideh's sitting room, with its two pianos and worn tribal rugs and books in French on Mozart, Bach, Bartok and Stravinsky, I found myself wanting to believe that things here had always been this way. The room had an air of longevity and repose, as if the petals drying on a table and the framed photographs of the sky with bits of incidental landscape, the work of Farideh's late brother Fereydun, a poet and filmmaker, had taken form where first conceived, and that no one had seen fit to move them. Looking around this room, with its casually strewn books in Old Persian, an ancient language that Farideh, a keen student of pre-Islamic Iran, has learned, and another pile of papers related to Fereydun, whose French poems she has spent the past three decades editing and translating into Persian, I felt as though I was gazing at the backdrop to a portrait of a person of exquisite leisure and awareness, the sort of person that doesn't really exist any more.

The subject of this portrait put her feet up on the sofa and related her experiences in Paris in May, 1968, when she had participated in the seizure of the School of Fine Arts and the production of a renowned series of anarchist posters there. Then she described a recent trip she had made to Jiroft, in south-eastern Iran, where archaeologists have unearthed evidence for an immensely old Iranian civilisation. At length she grew tired and asked me to stop asking questions. We sat in silence, a silence disturbed only by Shokoufeh Shahidi, who had returned from work and was speaking in a low voice to her father in the room across the corridor.

According to the deed that Farideh Rahnama has in her possession, her father, Zeyn al-Abedin Rahnama, bought his garden property in 1931, from the heirs of one Haj Mulla Ali Kani. By the standards of the day, the plot was not very big, 5,300 square metres, but the house would be a useful place for Rahnama, a thirty-seven year old parliamentary deputy and newspaper editor, to receive allies and contributors. Rahnama's newspaper, *Iran*, was supportive of Shah Reza Pahlavi, who had toppled and supplanted the previous, Qajar

dynasty, five years before. He planned to use his garden in the summer, when Tehran was unpleasantly hot. For the remainder of the year, he and his family would stay in the city, close to the political action.

In the nineteenth century, Shemiran, an old name for the foothills of the Alborz Mountains where they abut Tehran, had become a popular summer retreat for the royal family, prominent Iranians and European diplomats. Coming north in the spring, the elite were shadowed by fruit pickers and labourers who pitched tents along streams that cut through the villages with their mud houses and tumbling fields of corn. Nasser al-Din Shah, the longest-serving Qajar monarch, would break his journey northwards at several royal gardens before arriving at his palace at the far eastern end of what is now Niavaran Street. Where the court went, the courtiers and hangers-on followed.

With some exceptions, the gardens that were built in Shemiran did not have the formal rigidity of the classical Persian garden in its desert setting, divided into sections by water channels and rows of shade-giving date palms and Shiraz cypresses. This model, which dates back at least to the sixth century BC, and which continued to be refined well into the Islamic era, established the Persian garden as a simulacrum of heavenly paradise, an inspiration for carpet weavers and tile makers, and a setting for the 'un-leaved' devotions of Sufi poets such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, rending his clothes in religious ecstasy 'as a rose sheds its petals'. In Shemiran, with its harsh winters, the cypresses and date palms made way for hardier trees: poplars, oriental planes, walnuts. As much orchard as garden, built on verdant hillsides running with water, these enclosures were known for their sensual rewards. Behind the walls there was music, feasting and, in the case of Nasser al-Din and his huge harem, much amorous carousing.

In her travelogue, *Persian Pictures*, which she wrote in 1892, the British empire-builder Gertrude Bell remembered stealing into a deserted garden, owned by Nasser al-Din's exiled eldest son, and picnicking there. 'The night,' she wrote, 'had brought tall yellow evening primroses into flower, and their delicious smell mixed with that of the jessamine, which covered the decaying walls. The light of our lanterns shone on the smooth tree trunks, between the leaves glimmered a waning moon, and behind us the mountain-sides lay in sheets of light.' In another chapter Bell was struck by the contrast between the garden of a certain 'King of the Merchants' and the city, just eight miles distant. 'Down there in the town how the sun blazed! The air was a haze of heat and dust, and a perspiring humanity toiled...in the garden of the King of the Merchants all day long cool winds blew from the gates of the hills, all day long the refreshing water rippled and sparkled, all day long the white lilies at

our feet lay like a reflection of the snow-capped mountains above us.'

Bell's descriptions could easily apply to Shemiran in the 1930s. Although Tehran was expanding, and road communications had improved, the area was criss-crossed by the same 'dark winding paths' and 'tiny precious streams' that the Englishwoman had noted. Few cars were seen; the rich came north by carriage, the poor by donkey. Wolves roamed around Tajrish, a shrine and market district one mile west of Rahnama's house. Shemiran's gardens continued to receive water through underground channels called *qanats*, an Iranian engineering innovation whose prototype dates back some three thousand years. The Rahnamas shared a *qanat* with a number of neighbours; the garden received water several days a week at designated hours.

Rahnama had been born into a clerical family of Iranian origin in the Shia shrine city of Najaf, in what would later become Iraq, but he was a progressive according to the standards of the time. He eschewed the clerical robes that his seminary education entitled him to wear, and most of the friends he received at his summer house off Niavaran Street, politicians, poets and journalists, were supporters, like him, of Reza Shah's pro-secular, westernising reforms. Even the design of the house, with its outward facing windows and no inner courtyard, illustrated changing attitudes, since it did not permit the old practice of segregating the sexes. Although a devout Muslim, Rahnama's wife Zakieh often met her husband's male visitors and even joined them at lunch, a liberty that would have been unthinkable a generation before.

Four years after he bought his new house, Rahnama fell victim to Reza Shah's authoritarianism. In 1935, he was jailed for writing critically of the monarch. On his release, fearing re-arrest, he drove to the Iraqi border with his family – including newly-born Farideh, his fifth and last child – and on to Beirut; thus began seven years of exile, and a fruitful engagement with the French language and culture. Then, in 1941, the British and Russians invaded Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate. He was replaced by his son, Muhammad-Reza, and the Rahnamas came home. Back in favour, Zeyn al-Abedin Rahnama was made deputy prime minister. (He would later serve as Iran's envoy in Paris and Beirut). Every year, in the spring, the Rahnamas would decamp from Tehran to the hills of Shemiran.

The descriptions that Farideh gives of the summers she spent in Shemiran in the early 1940s are a threnody to a lost world. She remembers the family sleeping under mosquito nets on the first-floor veranda that wound its way around the house, and being woken at dawn by the warble of nightingales and the cawing of crows and parakeets. There were clandestine cherry-stealing expeditions to neighbouring gardens, and the thrill of executing a wild somersault on a swing that had been suspended over a water tank in front of

the house. Mischievous, obdurate, Farideh would hide from her parents in a field of wheat between the property and Niavaran Street. Once, when she was laid low with bronchitis, her mother sent for opium from Tajrish and rubbed her poor chest with the golden sticks, which had a warming, soothing effect.

On Rahnama's instructions, the steel door into the alley was kept open in daylight hours. On a busy day, he received a stream of people in his office on the ground floor, some of them important dignitaries, and there might be a dozen people at lunch. On Fridays, the Muslim day of rest, Zakieh's female friends would gather in her suite on the first floor and weep into their tea as a singer of laments narrated the tragic lives of the Shia Imams.

Listening to Farideh's memories, it is clear that, of her three brothers and one sister, she gave Fereyduh the lion's share of her love and admiration. He was the youngest of the boys, artistic and incorrigibly naughty. The elder two, Hamid and Majid, would both go into public service, rising to ministerial rank. But it is Fereyduh, rather than they, who is alive, a contending presence, in Farideh's house today.

Farideh recalls Fereyduh, aged about fourteen, churning up a vegetable patch with his bicycle and being chased by the gardener, Ghorban Ali, and several of his sons. Around the garden they raced, scaling trees and leaping across box hedges, and the enterprising Fereyduh kept his pursuers at bay until at last they had cornered him and he was obliged to leap into the water tank in front of the house. 'He was wearing big heavy boots that soon filled with water, and he was exhausted. Ghorban Ali and the others had gathered around the pool and were wetting sticks to beat him with. Finally, his strength failed him and he came to the side and they dragged him out and gave him a beating I'll never forget.'

After studying in Paris, Fereyduh came back to Shemiran in 1950. (Farideh, five years his junior, returned in the same year from her French high school, where she had become an accomplished pianist and locked her maths teacher in a cupboard). Establishing himself in his father's house, Fereyduh became a magnet for the avant-garde, attracted by his precocious knowledge of two cultures, Iranian and French, and his apparent ability to inhabit both simultaneously. According to Ahmad Shamlu, one of Iran's most renowned twentieth century poets, Fereyduh was a 'dictionary in which, through him, we reached everything we sought'. His house 'became our refuge of hope and our school of instruction.'

In his several anthologies of poems in French, and the two feature films that he made in Persian, Fereyduh Rahnama sifted through Iran's historic and mythological baggage, finding tools for his exploration of identity and time. In 1966, he wrote of a generational 'estrangement' and a 'thread of culture'

that had been severed, of a feeling of 'hanging in the air.' In an essay he lamented 'the destruction of a grandfather's house that had atmosphere and flair...coloured glass and a mood that was captivating and full of whispers... bricks took its place, and lifelessness its surroundings.'

When Fereyduh died in 1975, Farideh was living in Switzerland with her Iranian husband, but Rahnama wanted her at his side, so they moved into one of two modern houses at the northern end of the Shemiran property. (The second was occupied by Farideh's sister Azar). Farideh started building two archives, one of Fereyduh's chaotically disorganised papers, and a second of music that she had recorded in the villages of western Iran. She observed, rapt, as opposition to the Shah mounted, but this was not the secular anarchism of May '68. When the Shah fled at the beginning of 1979, it was a man of God, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who took his place.

Shemiran emptied. Fearing arrest or worse, those families that had prospered under the monarchy fled abroad. Some managed to sell up before leaving. The properties of many others were seized by the revolutionaries. Over the next few months, the detentions and executions came in waves. The United States embassy was seized and the advantage passed to religious radicals in Iran's internal power struggle. Then, in September 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, and the Iran-Iraq War began.

Rahnama did not move abroad, but he and his family were regarded with suspicion, and he was briefly detained. Hamid Rahnama, a former Information Minister, made the mistake of returning to Iran from France; he was jailed and his possessions confiscated. Farideh, too, was arrested. She was questioned about her alleged left-wing sympathies and released a few days later.

Newly divorced, living in one of the houses at the top of the garden, Farideh occupied herself teaching the piano, translating Fereyduh's poems and visiting Hamid in jail. Tehran was subjected to intermittent bombing and missile attacks. Hearing the siren, Farideh would guide her parents, tottering and unsteady, to a makeshift shelter on the ground floor, while the windows rattled and anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky.

In 1988, exhausted and demoralised, Iran sued for peace. The following year, Farideh buried her father. (Her mother had died in 1986). Hamid was out of jail and had returned to France, where Azar and Majid were also living. The Rahnama property wore a ragged, neglected air. The upstairs ceilings sagged from the weight of pigeon droppings in the roof and the ground floor suffered from damp. The swimming pool was full of brackish water and the tennis court had gone to seed. The rest of Tehran, however, was showing signs of life. The capital was about to transform itself.

Tehran's population of seven million was growing by around 100,000 a

year. Under-funded and inefficient, the municipality could not accommodate the extra people, but the new mayor, Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, believed that, given the right conditions, the private sector would do the job. Karbaschi set about creating these conditions, opening up big areas for development and issuing building permits – in return for steep fees. The value of land that had been earmarked for development soared and Iranians started investing heavily in property.

The building boom affected all parts of the city, but Shemiran, affluent and fashionable, offered the highest returns and attracted the tallest, flashiest designs. From the US and Europe, thousands of expatriate Iranians engaged lawyers to recover at least a portion of their confiscated land, which they then sold. The boom stuttered in 1999, when Karbaschi was jailed for corruption, but soon picked up again, fuelled by Iran's strong oil revenues. Thanks to a series of new freeways, Shemiran and downtown Tehran were no longer two distinct places; they were part of the same city, separated, when the traffic was light, by a ten-minute drive.

Sometime in the 1990s, as the iron balls swung and mud walls were obliterated, as the chainsaws screamed and steel skeletons rose into the sky, Farideh Rahnama decided to resist what many of her friends believed was the inevitable. She dismissed silver-tongued developers who knocked at the door, men offering her millions of dollars and a glass-walled penthouse if only she would sell. She successfully disputed the state's contention that the old house had been inherited by her brother, the late Information Minister Hamid Rahnama, and, consequently, that it now belonged to the government. To her surviving siblings – expatriates and therefore keener to sell – Farideh vowed to block all attempts to divide up the property. If there was to be a sale, she insisted, the property would be sold as whole, to some person or institution that would cherish it. In 2004, at her instigation, the Cultural Heritage Organisation awarded the Rahnama house and garden protected status.

At the end of May I noticed a yellow crane swinging above the adjacent plot. Once, this had been a field of wheat. Then, before the revolution, it had been someone's garden, with a low red-brick house in the middle, a house that had, to judge from its dilapidated appearance, long been abandoned. On my last visit to the Rahnama property I had seen men behind the walls, affluent men, some of them holding notebooks. Now: this crane.

Farideh was in a state of excitement. The previous night, the Alsatian guard dog had destroyed her vegetable garden while pursuing a neighbour's cat. She showed me the damage. Then one of her students arrived and, to the strains of the Goldberg Variations, I got to work, weeding around an old

black mulberry tree. Farideh's class ended and her student, a smiling young woman, let herself out of the iron door.

At lunch, Farideh extolled the virtues of ladybirds, a favourite subject. Then, describing a gathering that she had organised, a few days before, on Fereydu'n's birthday, she fell abruptly silent, transfixed by something happening outside the window. Suddenly, she shouted, 'That crane is over my garden!' She sped out of the door. Shokoufeh Shahidi called after her, 'Your headscarf! Don't forget your headscarf!' We watched as Farideh raced up to the northern wall but then the trees obscured her. A couple of minutes later, the arm of the crane swung slowly back.

After lunch, I strolled with Mr Kasraian. The yucca had flowered, bell-like flowers on a fleshy, exclamatory stalk. We came down to the lower section, where Rahnama's tennis court had been, and I asked Mr Kasraian if he liked coming to this garden. Mr Kasraian spoke highly of Dr Shahidi and then he said, 'one's soul feels refreshed in this place.' We stood in silence and I realised that, over the past few weeks, I had invented excuses to come here, breaking without profit into my working day for the pleasure of getting dirty and talking to Farideh.

Walking up to the house, we passed the window of Dr Shahidi, whom I had never met, only glimpsed. He happened to be standing at the window, and his eyes met mine. He greeted me through the glass, gravely, in the Iranian manner, raising his hand to his chest and bowing slightly.

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CARPET COLLECTING IN IRAN, 1873-1883

ROBERT MURDOCH SMITH AND THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

from an article by Professor Leonard Helfgott

The foundation of the Persian arts and crafts collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum¹⁶ is well documented. In 1873 the museum engaged Robert Murdoch Smith of the British-owned Persian telegraph service to start purchasing Iranian artefacts for its collection. Murdoch Smith collected for both the V&A and for the British Museum for over ten years, during which he established contacts with merchants in the major cities of Iran, with the exception of Tabriz, with members of the *ulema* in Tehran and the provinces, with highly placed bureaucrats at court, with Naser ud-Din Shah and with several permanent European residents of Iran engaged in art collection.

Murdoch Smith's activities not only reflected the growing European interest in Iranian arts, crafts and antiquities, they also helped stimulate, even create, a demand for these items, which in turn acted as a catalyst for the development of particular crafts, most notably carpet knotting, for the export market. The records of Murdoch Smith's art collecting contain information about the status of contemporary Iranian crafts, including carpet production, merchant networks, the Qajar bureaucracy and the transactions between Britons and Iranians dealing in art in the late 19th century.

In May 1873 the directors of the V&A authorised Murdoch Smith to begin collecting Iranian objects for the museum. He was to spend no more than £100 monthly, subject to the approval of the India Office. For each purchase report he was to receive ten guineas. He found that the museum already owned some woodwork, mainly Shirazi mosaic (*khatam*) and several carved pearwood spoons from Abadeh, two musical instruments, one article of weaponry, one felt carpet, two pieces of jewellery and a collection of earthenware. It had no books or manuscripts.

Murdoch Smith was a Scottish-born engineer who had become the director of the Persian telegraph department in 1865, after working for less than two years in Iran. He had also worked as an archaeologist in Greece. While supervising the operations of the telegraph, he travelled throughout Iran and observed not only what was available on the market, but the processes of production and the uses to which arts and crafts items were put. He urged the museum to begin purchasing items immediately, before Iran became open to foreign dealers. He also wrote that 'pseudo-oriental articles of European origin' would soon take the place of traditional Persian craft, perhaps having in mind the undercutting of the Kerman shawl industry by the Paisleys of

¹⁶ Then known as The South Kensington Museum.

Scotland.

What he did not foresee was the shift of artisans, particularly women, from traditional textile industries to the hand-knotted carpet industry, a development that was undertaken not long after his arrival by Iranian, British and German firms. By 1900 the hand-knotted carpet had become Iran's largest export item to the west.

Murdoch Smith arrived in Tehran in September of 1873. By November he had already bought over eighty articles, primarily old faience, some carved metalwork and a suit of armour. He drew the necessary £55 on Baron Julius de Reuter and promised to accompany the goods to Bushire, 'whence they can be shipped direct to London via the Suez Canal, avoiding the numerous transshipments and long land journeys by the Caspian and the Black Sea'.

Throughout 1874 Murdoch Smith concentrated on textiles. Virtually all of his purchases were embroideries of one kind or another, including items that he labelled as carpets. From Isfahan came an embroidered *sarandaz* [head piece] carpet 9' x 3', a fifty-year old prayer carpet and a painted fan. From Kerman he sent a pair of embroidered red table shawls; from Yazd a pair of embroidered curtains; from Kashan a blue silk embroidered coat and a carpet from Kurdistan.

The high quality of the items he purchased can be seen in the V&A today, where many of them still remain. They suggest that Murdoch Smith drew on a sophisticated knowledge of Iranian arts and crafts and used great care in his selection. By 1874 competition from the Austrian Legation and from Baron Reuter's agent was making it harder to get his suppliers to hold goods for long enough for him to get approval from London. The previous year's World Fair in Vienna had exhibited a number of Caucasian and Persian carpets, which had stimulated a demand for them in Europe that had exploded into a boom by 1880.

In early 1875 Murdoch Smith made his first purchase of Islamic religious objects, two ceramic tiles which he described as seven hundred years old and embellished with raised Kufic inscriptions. They had been taken from a mosque in Qom and both Murdoch Smith and the *ulema* who sold them were aware that this could cause problems. The tiles were smuggled into Tehran and purchased secretly for fear that word of their imminent departure from Iran would reach the public. Murdoch Smith advised the museum to buy any more tiles taken from mosques as quickly as possible because 'the attention of the Mollas has already been drawn to their disappearance and it is not improbable that the government may soon take stringent measures for the protection of old religious buildings'.

By November he had bought for £50 what he described as the 'complete

tombstone of Imamzadeh Husayn, great-grandson of Ali'. The tombstone was composed of three large tiles which together were over six feet tall and two feet wide. The stone was removed from the shrine, hidden underground and then smuggled into Tehran. Ceramics which would complete the monument were hidden near Tehran and awaited purchase. Murdoch Smith complained that 'because of the people's religious prejudice' they did not want these items sold. He had difficulty finding any Iranian able to read the inscriptions who could be trusted to keep the secret of the tiles to himself.

Murdoch Smith acted to protect his purchases by seeking the aid of Iranian court officials. In the autumn of 1875 the prime minister Sepah Salar A'zam issued an order exempting the ancient tiles and other items (a total of six crates of artefacts) from any interference by the government during their periods of storage and movement from Tehran to Bushire. He ordered that the crates not be opened and exempted them from all taxes and duties normally collected by local governors and customs officials. Murdoch Smith confided to his employers at the museum that 'without such an order I hardly know how I could have got the semi-sacred contents of the cases out of the country in safety'.

By September 1876 the *ulema* were able to press the government into issuing an edict making each shrine *mutawali* [guardian] responsible for the security of the shrine under his protection, which suggests that Murdoch Smith was not alone in the business. Despite the avowed opposition by the *ulema*, some mullas were willing to strip shrines of their valuables and sell them to the highest bidder, often Murdoch Smith, who usually operated through the intermediary of a Frenchman converted to Islam named Jules Richard, who had lived in Iran since 1844.

When the museum asked Murdoch Smith to obtain photographs or drawings of important mosques, he replied that the buildings were closed to Europeans, who were also forbidden to make images of them. With great difficulty he acquired a series of photographs taken by 'the Shah's Mussulman photographer during his pilgrimages to Mashhad and Kerbela.' The photographer was almost certainly Agha Reza, Iqbal al-Saltaneh, the official court photographer of the 1870s and 1880s. The photographs were acquired through the intercession of another court official, Mokhber al-Dowleh, whom Murdoch Smith rewarded with presents worth £12.

In early 1875 Murdoch Smith purchased a large collection of 17th-century Persian faience, many pieces of Chinese pottery from the Shah Abbas period and a number of brocades and embroideries from Jules Richard for at least £1,300, a figure far exceeding the museum's budget. The collection travelled by mule train (5 tomans per mule) for forty-five days from Tehran to Bushire.

The caravan was inspected at each halt by British telegraph officials, who wired news of its progress to Murdoch Smith.

Jules Richard had settled in Tehran in 1844 at the age of twenty-eight, became perhaps the earliest photographer in Iran and took pictures of the Crown Prince (Naser al-Din) and his sister in Tabriz. He taught French and English at the Dar al-Funun (the first school with a secular curriculum in Iran), served as caretaker of the British Mission during the Anglo-Afghan crisis of 1856-57, worked as interpreter for Naser al-Din Shah during his first visit to Europe in 1873 and seems to have been a significant presence within the small European community of Tehran for almost fifty years until his death in 1891. He became a Muslim in 1857, perhaps to circumvent a threatened scandal, and became known as Reza Khan Richard, or Richard Khan or Mirza Reza.

The first exhibition of Murdoch Smith's purchases of Persian arts and crafts was held in 1876. The catalogue listed Yazd, Kerman and Isfahan as centres of textile production, primarily brocades and embroideries; Rasht and Kashan produced woven silk; Ferahan, Sanandaj, Mashhad, Kerman and the Turcoman region were listed as centres of carpet production, although Murdoch Smith mentioned that the industry was spreading rapidly throughout the country; Kashan and the area around Nain were the centres of ceramic production; Kashan was the centre of engraved copper work; Isfahan dominated the production of armour, engraved steel and brass, as well as painting; Shiraz housed the jewellery, wood mosaic and enamelling crafts; wood carving was centred in Abadeh; felt, the predominant floor covering in use in 19th-century Iran, was produced in Yazd and Isfahan.

By mid 1876 Naser al-Din Shah had begun to develop an interest in his country's contemporary crafts and antiques. He was probably inspired by his trip to Europe, where he visited public museums, and by the increased demand for these items from foreign buyers in Iran, as well as by the invitation to Iran to participate in the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878. The Shah issued a notice in the government gazette that he was 'ready to purchase any ancient art treasures which may be brought to Tehran'. Murdoch Smith welcomed this call, thinking that it would bring more objects out into the open. He remarked that the owners would prefer to sell to him or to Richard than to government officials, who might omit to make the proper payment.

At the suggestion of Murdoch Smith and Richard, with support from the Shah, a number of ministers made gifts to the museum. These included two textiles of a type not yet in the collection: a modern silk brocade made in Isfahan and a silk Kashan carpet donated by the Shah's brother-in-law, Yahya Khan. Some 'rude earthenware vases' recently excavated near Damghan

were presented by I'tizad al-Dowleh, the minister for science, and a large bowl made in Shiraz around 1835 in imitation of Chinese porcelain was donated by another government minister. The Shah ordered Amin al-Molk to organise a gift to the museum. Murdoch Smith persuaded him to limit it to textiles, to emphasise the best of Iran's crafts and to encourage trade. After months of dickering over the nature of the gift, it was delivered in 1877 and included fourteen piled carpets from Ferahan, Kurdistan, Mashhad and Qaen, and twenty-six Kerman shawls.

In 1883 the museum asked Murdoch Smith to resume buying carpets, not just for South Kensington, but also for museums and art schools in Dublin and Edinburgh. He replied that increasing competition from new buyers had caused prices to rise threefold, remarking that 'the Dutch king had had to pay £200 for a carpet'. Jules Richard and Sidney Churchill, a telegraph clerk in Tehran who had good bazaar connections and was adept at uncovering old books, rugs and other antiquities, went to work.

Murdoch Smith had seen a number of old carpets hidden under modern rugs in the Armenian church of New Julfa, Isfahan. One of the priests told him that the carpets were as old as the church itself, dating back to about 1600, and Murdoch Smith commented that, as they were not attached to the floor, perhaps they could be purchased for the museum as unconsecrated property, but he was not successful.

His next load of carpets included a number of fragments of very old and fine carpets bought from the *rofugars* [carpet repairers] of Tehran, some of them possibly Safavid. Not only had prices escalated during his ten year period of collecting, but muleteers' wages had risen from five to eight tomans a load to Bushire.

In addition to old carpets, Murdoch Smith was offered an entire ceramic *mihrab* [pulpit] from a shrine at Natanz, in the possession of a Dutch merchant in Isfahan, Mr Collignow, who volunteered no information as to how or when the piece had been removed. He considered the purchase a 'dangerous undertaking', but gained the right of first refusal for £90. The museum directors thought it desirable and Murdoch Smith bought it.

Robert Murdoch Smith's collecting activities in Iran ended in 1884. To show their appreciation for their help, the museum arranged for a number of replicas of well known western art works to be sent to Naser al-Din Shah and a number of his ministers. Murdoch Smith remained in Iran until the end of 1887, working with the telegraph and lobbying to expand British trade in Iran. One result of his efforts was that the Shah and influential courtiers began to look at their own crafts with more interest, while enterprising Tabrizi merchants fanned out into the provinces looking for carpets to sell on the

European market. A carpet boom began in the 1880s and continued for nearly a hundred years.

Professor Helfgott, who teaches in the Department of History, Western Washington University, has kindly given his consent to the adaptation of his article for this journal. The complete article is from his book *Ties That Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet*, Smithsonian Press 1994, 1996.

Letters from Tabriz: The Russian Suppression of the Iranian Constitutional Movement, E.G. Browne (edited by Hasan Javadi), Mage Publishing (USA) 2008 ISBN 1-933823-25-6 \$35

Just as news was recently pouring out of Iran by email and the web, during the Constitutional crisis of 1911-12 in Tabriz news was being sent to England by a series of letters addressed to E.G. Browne, Professor of Persian at Cambridge, who was sympathetic to the constitutionalist cause and tried to rally support for it through the Persia Committee in London. Hasan Javadi has edited the translated letters and added the sets of photographs later sent out by a Mr Turner of Tabriz to produce this still horrific document of the atrocities committed by the Russians and their supporters in Tabriz at this time, the memory of which has faded from Iranian memory. Javadi's useful introduction puts the letters into context.

In 1906 Muzaffar ed-Din Shah, after mass protests in the streets of Tehran against the arbitrary rule of the Qajar kingdom, during which some 12,000 people had taken refuge in the garden of the British Legation, had conceded a constitution. He died almost immediately afterwards, whereupon his son Muhammad Ali Shah had rescinded the constitution. Russia took his side, while Britain found itself as the de facto supporter of the reformers. In the following year, in order to form an alliance against Germany, the British and Russians agreed not to compete against each other in Persia and signed a convention by which they divided the country into two spheres of influence, with the Russians in the north and the British in the south-east. The constitutionalists succeeded in forcing the abdication and exile to Russia of Muhammad Ali and appointed a regent. The Russians, however, quite contrary to the agreement with the British and with the undertaking to maintain the independence of Persia, continued to support Muhammad Ali and backed his return to the north of Persia with a military force.

Tabriz was by now virtually a Russian city, with a large Russian garrison. The Russian consul ran the city as if it were a Russian colony and the Persian governor-general Shoja' ul-Dowleh, a creature of the Russians and a monster of savage disposition. Between them they set about repressing the constitutionalists.

The constitutionalists were led by Seyid Muhammad Taqizadeh, the deputy for Tabriz and a friend of Browne and of Major Stokes, the attaché at the British Legation, who saw him as an enlightened and progressive man, to be encouraged. His letters, with other letters from Tabriz, form the subject of this book. They describe the unbelievable atrocities committed by

the Russians and their local allies in Tabriz in 1912. The photographs show the undignified hanging of the Siqat ul-Islam, a highly respected cleric, the quartering of a constitutionalist and the hanging like a street butcher's sheep from a ladder against a wall of another. There are many similar photographs. Shuja' ul-Dowleh, the ruthless perpetrator of all this, looks like a kindly old gentleman in his photograph.

Browne's support for the Constitutionalists met with opposition from Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, who was far more concerned with preserving good relations with Russia for the sake of the alliance against Germany. It was said of Browne by his opponents that, however great an expert he might have been on Persian literature, he had only spent a year in Persia and that therefore he did not 'understand'. *The Times* called him a 'dreamer and sentimentalist'.

In the elections of October 1913 Shuja' ud-Dowleh, while pretending to comply with the instructions from Tehran to conduct a proper vote, persuaded some mullas to send a telegram from Tehran to declare that Tabriz did not wish to participate. For good measure, he hanged another pair of Constitutionalists. This behaviour only stopped in 1914 with the outbreak of war, when the Russians and Turks fought over Tabriz. Some of the Constitutionalists who had fled to Constantinople returned with the Ottomans to fight against the Russians.

This collection of letters and photographs is a reminder of the savage turn that Iranian politics could take a hundred years ago, when Russia was determined to keep northern Iran as its own satrapy, whatever its treaty undertakings might have been.

Antony Wynn

Shah Abbas: The ruthless king who became an Iranian

legend. David Blow, London: I.B. Tauris, 2009, Paperback 274 pp., illustrations. £14.99

This timely biography of the Safavid ruler, Shah Abbas ‘the Great’ was produced to coincide with the exhibition on “Shah Abbas: the Remaking of Iran” in the British Museum during the first half of this year, which provided a chance not only to celebrate the achievements of this complex and gifted sovereign, but also to reassess his reign in the wider context of Iranian history in the last four centuries. In addition to the splendid exhibition catalogue prepared by Sheila Canby, the British Museum hosted a conference devoted to Abbas, and a debate sponsored by the *Guardian* newspaper, to examine his legacy in modern-day Iran.

David Blow’s book is the first biography in English devoted to Shah Abbas, itself rather surprising, considering the enormous interest in his life and times and the steady flow of academic articles and monographs in recent decades on the Safavids and the critical period of Abbas’s reign, which accounts for the clear contrasts between the first and second Safavid centuries. Until recently, the only work with which David Blow’s book might be compared is the ageing account by Lucien-Louis Bellan (*Chah Abbas I: Sa vie, son histoire*, Paris 1932); since then another work in French has been published by Yves Bomati & Houchang Nahavandi (*Shah Abbas: Empereur de Perse 1587-1629*, Paris, 1998), not seen by this reviewer.

Shah Abbas ‘the Ruthless King’ thus fills a gap and is able to draw on a wealth of fresh material on the Safavid monarch. As the author mentions, the book is aimed at the general reader, but this does not mean that it somehow lacks academic merit. In fact the author, an historian and a Persianist with a long experience of Iran, has drawn on primary sources as well as secondary works (including Persian studies), and particularly on the rich evidence of contemporary European travel literature, to produce a thorough, thoughtful and reliable account of the Shah, and a judicious assessment of his reign. The European narratives – mainly of the various embassies that came and went throughout the period – add valuable observations on Abbas and on Safavid society that cannot be found in the Persian histories, as is well known, but it might have been appropriate to comment on the nature of these works and the extent to which they can be taken at face value (p. x). The mainstay of the narrative is, naturally, the famous chronicle by Iskandar Beg Monshi, as it was for Bellan, who did not, however, enjoy the benefit of Roger Savory’s English version; Savory’s assessment of Iskandar Beg’s history might also have been referred to, in which he refutes the negative judgment of E.G.

Browne that it is “dull and arduous reading”. It is true, as Blow mentions (p. ix) that Iskandar Beg “attempts to understand the causes of events and why people acted as they did” and in this respect stands out from his peers; nevertheless, that does not mean that his record of events is either complete or impartial and it is important to recall the constraints under which any court historian was working. As it happens, there are a couple of other detailed chronicles of his reign, by Fazli Beg Khuzani Isfahani (*Afdal al-tawarikh*) and Mirza Beg Junabadi (*Rawdat al-Safawiyya*), which will eventually permit a fresh assessment of the period. At present, they have not been fully studied and absorbed into the secondary literature, and it is not yet clear how the information they contain will affect the overall picture, so excellently drawn together in David Blow’s account.

The author divides the book into two, the first thirteen chapters giving a detailed narrative of Abbas’s life and reign, followed by six chapters (fourteen to nineteen) treating different aspects in more detail: the personality of the Shah and his quality as a king; the court; his religious policies; the development of Isfahan; his economic policy; and Shah Abbas and the arts. The work ends with a quick survey of the Safavid period after Abbas’s death, and the Conclusions, which balance his achievements in bringing peace, stability and prosperity to Iran, against the negative aspects of his personality and actions: his cruelty, paranoia about the succession, and the reforms that brought short-term gains for longer-term problems, although had another ruler of Abbas’s ability been governing Iran at the end of the eighteenth century, perhaps these problems would not have seemed so acute.

This is a very readable account; its main strength is perhaps the coverage of Iran’s relations with the European powers, which can really be said to have been initiated in his reign; we can see from the outset the disillusionment and frustration felt on the Iranian side from dealing with the foreigners whose own policies were determined by events closer to home and for whom the Persian connection was of very secondary importance. That may be less so nowadays, but the mutual dissatisfaction experienced over a long period has left a legacy that is difficult to break down.

Overall, this is an excellent book that admirably achieves what it set out to do. There are one or two surprising omissions from the select reading list, such as Kathryn Babayan’s *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs* (2002); Stephen Blake’s *Half the World: The Social Architecture of Safavid Isfahan* (1999), and the special issue of *Iranian Studies* (vol. 7, 1974) devoted to “Studies on Isfahan”; as well as a couple of typographical errors: A.H. Morton’s 1993 article is called “The *Chub-i tariq*..” not *Club-i tariq* (though the *chub* is a sort of club!), and Robert Skelton’s article on Ghiyath al-Din ‘Ali Naqshband

is in *Persian Painting from the Mongols to the Qajars*, edited by Robert Hillenbrand (London, 2000). These are very minor blemishes on an attractive and handsomely illustrated volume that will be useful to specialists and students for many years to come.

Charles Melville

***Persia in Peckham: Recipes from Persepolis*; Sally Butcher,
Prospect Books 2007, Pb ISBN 978-1903018-51-4 £17.99**

Sally Butcher was a university dropout. With her Iranian husband she runs *Persepolis*, a shop in Peckham that combines the function of corner grocery shop, bookshop, music shop and local drop-in centre. From her in-laws Sally learned to cook Persian food in London. Shortlisted for the André Simon Book Awards 2007 and named Sunday Times Cookbook of the Year, her book is fun and it works. I have tried and failed with many other books on Persian cookery to produce anything that I could put in front of the dog, let alone other people, but this one is idiot-proof. All the traditional dishes are in there, together with some variations that Sally has created. Persian cookery is not about variation; it is about perfection. Her in-laws will therefore disapprove of her free spirit.

More than a cookbook, this is also excellent bedside reading, larded as it is with anecdotes and observations about Persian poetry, legend, cinema and history. A recipe for cinnamon ice cream with *gaz* is followed by instructions for stocking the larder for the late arrival of unexpected guests – essential for Iranian families – and the famous story of Mulla Nasruddin and the ‘soup of the soup’. On a more serious note, there is an astute aside on the nature of Persian mourning. Bereaved neighbours sometimes come to Sally’s shop and buy a box of dates or *halva* and leave it on the counter for other customers to help themselves, in memory of the departed.

All the classic, formal dishes are in here, but what is perfect for the summer are the outdoor dishes, with all sorts of kebabs for barbecues and an endless variety of *kookoo* omelettes for picnics. If you are bored of office lunches, there are plenty of things in here to make and take to work with you.

Persian foods are still classified according to their properties along Greek lines by Avicenna. In brief, all foodstuffs are either ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ and a balance has to be maintained between them. An excellent little chapter at the end goes into the properties of traditional Persian infusions and sherbets, many of which are very effective cures for minor ailments, as well as making very pleasant drinks in themselves.

Iranian dinner parties are a nightmare for the hosts. If twenty guests are invited, eighty may turn up, or just two. The food will be examined and criticised by the women, who will automatically find fault with the rice and comment to each other about the lack of perfection of everything else, while heaping extravagant compliments on the hostess to her face. Standards are impossibly high and never met. However, if you are English and want to try cooking a Persian meal, this is the book to use. You could even try it on

your Iranian friends, who might look at you as at a dog walking on its hind legs. In their view, you can't do it well, but they will be amazed that you do it at all.

***Isfahan: Pearl of Persia*, Wilfrid Blunt, Pallas Athene (Publishers) Ltd 2009. Sewn Pbk 206pp. Numerous b/w illustrations, 35pp colour. ISBN 978 1 873249 44 0. £12.49 incl. p&p to Iran Society members from the publishers: afw@pallasathene.co.uk (First published 1966)**



Wilfrid Blunt was the brother of the infamous Soviet agent, Anthony Blunt. He was art master at Eton. I met Wilfrid in Isfahan in the autumn of 1964 when he was researching his book on the city. I had recently arrived there and was breakfasting one morning in the Iran-Tour hotel when a large figure lumbered over to my table and introduced himself with an unforgettable conversational gambit: “Were you by any chance at Eton?” As it happened, I wasn’t. Despite that, we quickly became friends and a number of the photographs in the book that was published two years later were taken by Wilfrid with my camera.

Having declared my interest, I can only unreservedly welcome the re-issue of *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia*. It is well-informed, engagingly written and beautifully illustrated and is generally considered to be one of the most appealing books on Persia for the general reader. It covers in lively fashion the history, art and architecture of Isfahan from ancient times to the mid-20th century. The main emphasis is inevitably on Safavid Isfahan and, above all, on the major redevelopment of Isfahan undertaken by Shah Abbas I, after he



made it his capital in 1598. Blunt was thoroughly familiar with the accounts of contemporary European travellers to Safavid Persia and had devoted an earlier book to one of the most important travellers during the reign of Shah Abbas I, the Italian, Pietro Della Valle (*Pietro's Pilgrimage*, 1953). He makes good use of these sources to paint a colourful picture of Shah Abbas and his successors, of life at the court and in Isfahan in general.

In his aesthetic judgements, Blunt sometimes takes issue with Robert Byron. He finds that the Ali Qapu, which Byron memorably mocked as “that brick boot-box”, “takes its place agreeably enough in the backcloth of the Maidan” and that “the interior is enchanting, if rather whimsical”. He is also more appreciative of the tile work of the Royal Mosque. Noting that it covers every square inch of the interior of the great court, he admits that it “lacks the richness of mosaic faience”, but says “it has a softness of tone, a texture, that is almost powdery and which has its own particular charm”. On the other hand, he is unable to share Byron’s ecstatic reaction to the interior of the Shaikh Lutfullah Mosque, finding it “strangely enervating”: “There comes upon the spectator”, he writes, “a feeling of claustrophobia, of being sunk in some blue ocean lit only by moonlight filtered through deep waters. It is with something of a sense of release that he emerges into the sunshine and the fresh air of the Maidan.”

Blunt also wrote a travel book entitled *Persian Spring* (1957), but *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia* is the finest of his three books on the country.

***Pea Boy and other stories from Iran*; Elizabeth Laird, illustrated by Shirin Adl, Frances Lincoln Children's Books 2009, Hardback ISBN 978-1- 84507-912-3 £14.99**

This beautifully illustrated book contains seven tales adapted from various, sources including Persian Tales by D.L.R. and E. Lorimer. Lorimer was the British consul at Kerman during the Great War and his wife was an avid collector of stories. Other tales come from Anne Sinclair Mehdevi's collection and from Jaroslav Tichy and Alan Feinstein.

Laird's writing is fresh and unsentimental. Stories of impossible fantasy are related in a quiet, matter of fact manner that turns the improbable and fanciful into perfectly reasonable logic, at least in the mind of a child. Nothing could be more reasonable than that a mouse should construct a ladder out of a chewed carrot to save his wife, a cockroach with ideas far above her proper station in life, from drowning – and nothing more logical than that fate should drown the mouse, poorly rewarded for his good deed, in a boiling mess of vegetable soup. No nonsense here about living happily ever after – the cockroach reverts to her proper place in life.

Inspired by the Shahnameh story of Bahram, the tale of Kayvan the Brave is well known. Kayvan is a weaver boy, who accidentally kills two mice with his shuttle. This fortuitous accident leads him to believe himself to be an invincible hero, until he is conscripted into the army and put, terrified, on a war horse, which bolts with him lashed to the saddle, unable to escape, straight at the enemy. His cries persuade the enemy that he is leading a vast army, and they flee, for which Kayvan is rewarded with all manner of fine things and made commander of the army. Having seen quite enough of war, he keeps the country at peace.

Underneath all these tales lies a moral and, for those inclined, a series of many further layers of meaning. They are written for children of all ages. Christmas is coming and here is a present with a pleasant Persian flavour

