

The Safavid Empire

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Conquest and ongoing cultural interaction also fueled the development of another empire known as the Safavids. The Safavids were named after their founder Safi al-Din, who died in 1334. Although the Safavids are of Iranian origin, they claimed they were descended from the prophet Muhammad. In the 15th century, the Safavids aligned themselves with the Shiite branch of Islam. The Shiites regard Ali and his descendants as the legitimate successors to Muhammad and reject the first three caliphs.

The Shiite Safavids were persecuted on religious grounds by the Sunni Ottoman Muslims. This treatment was a departure from the Sunni's traditional religious tolerance. To protect themselves from powerful enemies, the Safavids concentrated on building a strong military.

1. Who were the Safavids?
2. Why were they in a conflict with the Ottomans?

Safavid Military and Shah Isma'il

The Safavid military became a force to be reckoned with. They wore red headgear with 12 folds, and became known as the "redheads." In 1499, the leader of the redheads was a 14-year-old named Isma'il. Despite his youth, he was a brilliant warrior. Within two years he had seized most of what is now Iran. To celebrate his achievement, he took the ancient Persian title of shah or king. He also established Shi'a Islam as the state religion.

Despite the reverence of his people, Isma'il was religious tyrant. Any person who did not convert to Shi'ism was put to death. Isma'il destroyed the Sunni population of Baghdad in his confrontation with the Ottomans. Their leader, Selim the Grim, later ordered the execution of all Shi'a in the Ottoman Empire. Their final face-off was at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The Ottomans destroyed the Safavid army. The battle established the border between the two empires, which remains the border between Turkey and Iran today.

Isma'il's son Tahmasp took up the struggle. He expanded the Safavid Empire up to the Caucasus Mountains northeast of Turkey and brought Christians under Safavid rule. In adding the territory to the empire, Tahmasp laid the groundwork for the golden age of the Safavid Empire.

1. Who was Isma'il? What were his characteristics?
2. What was the reason the Safavids and the Ottomans fought?

The Safavid Golden Age

The golden age took place under Shah Abbas or Abbas the Great. He took the throne in 1587. During his reign he helped create a Safavid culture that drew from the best of the Ottoman, Persian and Arab worlds. Shah Abbas reformed both the military and civilian aspects of life. He created two new armies that would be loyal to him alone. One of these was an army of Persians. The other was a force like the Ottoman janissaries, which Abbas recruited from the Christian north. He equipped both of these armies with modern artillery. Abbas also reformed his government. He punished corruption severely and promoted only officials who proved their competence and loyalty.

Shah Abbas established relations with Europe. As a result, industry and art flourished. He also brought Chinese artisans into the empire. This collaboration gave rise to gorgeous artwork. These decorations beautified the many mosques, palaces, and marketplaces of Abbas's rebuilt capital city of Isfahan. The most important result of western influence on the Safavids may have been the demand for Persian carpets. This demand helped change Persian carpet weaving from a local craft to a national industry.

1. Who was Shah Abbas?
2. What were some of his reforms?
3. What were some examples of cultural diffusion under Abbas?

The Dynasty Declines

Shah Abbas made the same mistake the Ottoman monarch Suleiman made; he killed or blinded his ablest sons. Abbas was succeeded by his incompetent grandson, Safi. This pampered young prince led the Safavids down the same road of decline that the Ottomans had taken, only more quickly. By 1722, tribal armies from Afghanistan were taking over eastern portions of the Safavid realm. Ottoman forces were attacking from the west. Historians say that these attacks marked the downfall of the Safavid Empire.

In 1736 however, a ruler from a Sunni family—Nadir Shah Afshar—took command. He conquered all the way to India and created a new Persian Empire. But Nadir Shah was a cruel man as well as an inspired military leader. One of his own troops assassinated him. With Nadir Shah's death in 1747, his empire also fell apart.

The legacy of the Safavid was strictly cultural. In this culture the worldly and artistic features of Persian civilization mingled with the religious elements of Shi'ism. The Safavids also borrowed many ways from their enemies like the Ottomans. They based their government on the Ottoman model, welcomed foreigners into the empire, and created a slave army similar to the janissaries. At the same time the Safavids flourished, cultural blending and conquest led to the growth of a new empire in India.

1. What caused the decline of the Safavid Empire?
2. What was their legacy?

Father Paul Simon: Report to Pope Paul V

Father Paul Simon was a missionary sent to explore the empire of the Safavids. On his journey he spent six months in Persia getting to understand the great Shah Abbas I. In his letter to Pope Paul V, he discusses all he sees about the Great Shah.

On Personality

The Shah...is sturdy and healthy, accustomed to much exercise and toil: many times he goes about on foot, and recently he had been forty days on pilgrimage, which he made on foot the whole time. He has extraordinary strength, and with his scimitar (curved steel sword) can cut a man in two and a sheep with its wool on at a single blow...

In his food he is frugal, as also in his dress, and this is to set an example to his subjects, so in public he little else than rice...His usual dress is of linen, and very plain: similarly the nobles and others in his realm follow suit, whereas formally they would usually dress in jewels and extravagant clothes. Now, if he sees anyone who is overdressed, they are punished...

On Military

“He is very valiant and has a great liking for warfare and weapons of war, which he has constantly in his hands: we have been eye-witnesses to this because, whenever we were with him, he was adjusting scimitars, testing new guns, etc.: and to make him a present that will give him pleasure is to give him some good pieces of arms. This is the great experience which he has obtained of warfare over so many years, that he makes it in person and from the first it has made him a fine soldier and very skilled, and his men so dexterous that they are little behind our men in Europe. He has introduced into his militia the use of guns and muskets, in which the army is well practiced. Therefore it that his realm has been so much extended on all sides...

His militia is divided into three groups: Georgians who were mounted on horseback...groups of renegade Christian slaves made up of all races, and another group of soldiers that are kept on call the whole year. These men are well trained and make the Safavids army extremely dangerous...

1. According to Father Simon, what is Shah Abbas the Great like?
2. How does he set an example? Why?
3. How does the Father describe the Safavid military?
4. How can Father Simon’s observations be used to analyze the Safavids?