

Some Remarks on Wine Consumption as a Political Factor under the Safavids

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The subject of alcohol consumption under the Safavids has already been dealt with in an authoritative way.¹ The present article aims rather at offering some remarks on the impact of drinking on the dynasty and the court (and, as a consequence, on the political life of the state), in the hope of further opening this already existing window on the social and cultural history of Persia and, perhaps, showing new avenues for comparative research.²

The Safavid dynasty, in its phase of effective rule over Persia, lasted from 1501 to 1722 and included nine rulers. Of them, three (Šāh Esmā‘il I, 1501–1524; Šāh Šafī, 1629–1642; Šāh ‘Abbās II, 1642–1666) died as alcoholics³ in their 30s; one, Šāh Soleymān (1666–1694), died in his 40s (certainly not a ripe old age, even by the standards of the time⁴) and was a serious drinker; two (Šāh Esmā‘il II, 1576–1577; Šāh Solţān Ḥoseyn, 1694–1722) were mur-

¹ Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 17–96.

² Cf. for instances the articles by Stefanie Brinkmann (in particular, on the ruler’s motivations to drink) and Morris Rossabi (in particular, on the ability of some Yuan emperors to reconcile their leadership duties as rulers with the ceremonial necessity to drink alcohol as opposed to the inability of others to do the same; on the role played by personal setbacks, as in the case of Qubilay Khan, in increasing a given individual’s addition to alcohol; on the vicious circle made up by the structural weakness of a given state and the alcohol-fuelled inability of its ruler to cope with it) in this volume.

³ The death of these three rulers was caused or at least hastened by their excessive drinking. One should bear in mind that the negative effects of alcohol on health (of the Safavid rulers as well as of many others in Persia) were compounded by the use of opium and, occasionally, of alcoholic beverages stronger than grape wine: cf. Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp. 48, 52 (on the prevalence of wine), 97–116 (on opium). In the present article, the term “wine” will be used with the meaning of “grape wine”. As for the term “alcoholic”, it will be used in the rather loose and popular sense of someone unable to stop drinking and to some extent affected by it in his everyday life and activities, without any claim at attaining clinical or psychiatric accuracy.

⁴ Given the high infant mortality rate, the average life expectancy in Safavid Persia was probably 35–40 years (Willem Floor, personal communication, 9 May 2011).

dered, but both were strong drinkers too; only three (Šāh Ṭahmāsp I, 1524–1576; Šāh Solṭān Moḥammad Xodābande, 1578–1587; Šāh ‘Abbās I, 1587–1629) reached a relatively advanced age, Šāh Ṭahmāsp I after repenting (*towbe*) twice in the course of his life.

The founder of the dynasty, Šāh Esmā‘il I, is known as a strong drinker, and in his lifetime he clearly took pride in it. He died of excessive wine consumption a few weeks before turning 37: the sources tell us that, in his last days, he did not eat anymore but only drank.⁵ But why did the Shah drink? What was the motivation of such an extreme and eventually lethal way of drinking? Šāh Esmā‘il I was not just the “Commander in Chief” of the Safavid armed forces but was, quite literally, Persia’s “first warrior”. In war as well as in peace he was supposed to lead from the front, not from the rear and, in Persia as in many other societies, the two activities most befitting a ruler were the *razm* (the war, for obvious reasons) and the *bazm* (the banquet, in which the Shah displayed not only his wealth and lavishness but also, in a certain way, his physical prowess – through his enormous eating and drinking). A great scholar like Jean Aubin wrote that “Du *bazm* iranien au *toy* turco-mongol, le style du banquet est le même: on y boit avec cérémonial et jusqu’à l’ivresse [...] malgré les similitudes, il n’est pas évident que le banquet qīzīlbaş ne soit, à travers le cérémonial timouride, hérité que de l’usage impérial mongol.”⁶

In the libations of the early Safavids the French scholar also saw a possible influence of Iranian heterodox Sufism⁷ as well as “l’ubris barbarica de l’asocial et de l’Elu”.⁸ Matthee agrees with him, when he writes that “the prodigious consumption of alcohol among the elite in Safavid times harkens back to multiple traditions”, that is, those of pre-Islamic Iran, of the Central Asian and Eurasian steppe, of extremist Sufism and of Christian Georgia and Armenia: “all four traditions mixed ritualized and ceremonial drinking with recreational drinking”.⁹ Eventually, however, Aubin had to admit that in the

⁵ Jean Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré”, *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien*, 5 (1988): p. 52.

⁶ Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré”, p. 50.

⁷ Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré”, p. 50.

⁸ Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré”, p. 56.

⁹ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp. 66 and 67. John R. Perry, “Cultural currents in the Turco-Persian world of Safavid and post-Safavid times”, in *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran*, ed. Colin P. Mitchell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 87–88, stresses only the Inner Asian roots of Safavid Royal drinking.

case of Šāh Esmā‘il’s drinking (just as in the case of his passion for hunting) it was impossible to separate the element due to ritual from the element due to personal habit or inclination.¹⁰ The Shah was 36 years old when he died.

From this point of view, it is interesting to read what a French traveller, Jean de Thévenot, has to tell us about Šāh ‘Abbās II: according to him, the Shah “is not well pleased when anyone refuses the Wine which he presents to them”.¹¹ How should we interpret this rather cryptic statement? Was it the whim of a drunkard? The royal disappointment at somebody spoiling the fun of a good drink?¹² Was it simply the consequence of the fact that in Iran, then as now, openly rejecting an offer of food or an invitation is considered impolite (even more so, one would assume, if it comes from the Shah)? Or was it a sign that wine retained at least a part of its symbolic meaning? That the latter might be the case is perhaps suggested by a passage of the *‘Abbāsnāme*, where Vaḥid Qazvini states that Šāh ‘Abbās II started to drink “in order to remove the doubts from the hearts of the men of little faith”¹³, that is, of those who did not believe he could rule properly on account of his young age. Of course, this could be an *ad hoc* explanation worked out by a loyal subject, keen to preserve his master’s good name. On the other hand, one should not forget the ceremonial importance of the *bazm*. Likewise, one should not forget the general importance of the offering of wine as a sign of hospitality in many cultures and, typically, in Georgia and the rest of Transcaucasia, a region from which many members of seventeenth-century Safavid court society hailed. Be it as it may, Qazvini’s explanation tallies well with Matthee’s notion that wine started to lose its place in the public ceremonial of the Safavid court only with the reign of Šāh Soleymān, the son of Šāh ‘Abbās II.¹⁴ Matthee does not fail to underscore the role possibly played by the Georgians in making wine-drinking popular at court. To this remark, one may add that the predecessors of the Safavids, the Āq Qoyunlus (as well as of course the Turkoman tribes that backed both dynasties) lived in and

¹⁰ Aubin, “L’avènement des Safavides reconsidéré”, p. 48. Cf. also Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, p. 68.

¹¹ *The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant In Three Parts* (London: H. Clark, 1687), part 2, p. 100 (reprint: Frankfurt am Main, 1995, vol. II).

¹² This possibility was suggested by Willem Floor during the conference.

¹³ Moḥammad Ṭāher Vaḥid Qazvini, *‘Abbāsnāme*, ed. Ebrāhīm Dehgān (Arāk: Ketābforuši-e Dāudi, 1329), p. 131.

¹⁴ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp. 62–65.

ruled over a region where the Christians still represented a very strong element of the local population.¹⁵

As for the *razm*, it is interesting to observe that alcoholic consumption in itself did not necessarily hamper military activity. As far as the three alcoholics of the dynasty are concerned, Šāh Esmā‘il I had a distinguished career as successful military leader, until 1514, when he was defeated by the Ottomans at Čālderān. On the eve of the battle, the Shah famously got drunk together with his commanders¹⁶, but of course it was not intoxication that caused the defeat. After the battle, the Shah withdrew somewhat from state affairs, although there are hints that, by the time of his death, he may have been preparing a *revanche*.¹⁷ Šāh Šafi has always had a bad press (with the exception, of course, of his court chroniclers and, more interesting, of some missionary sources), his reign having been marked by territorial losses and bloody purges of potential pretenders to his throne. However, on the only occasion in which he personally led his troops (siege of Erevan, 1635–36) he seems to have displayed considerable courage, and he died when he was preparing a military campaign to retake Qandahār from the Mughals.¹⁸ Šāh

¹⁵ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, p. 43. On the relationship between the Āq Qoyunlus and their Christian subjects, cf. John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire. Revised and expanded edition* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), pp. 57, 106; Andrew Palmer, “John Bar Šayallāh and the Syrian Orthodox community under Aqquyunlu rule in the late fifteenth century”, in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*, ed. Martin Tamcke (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2007), pp. 187–205. M. Kuršanskis, “Autour de la dernière princesse de Trébizonde: Théodora, fille de Jean IV et épouse d’Uzun Hasan”, *Archeion Pontou*, 34 (1977–1978): n. 1 p. 78 lists six Komnenos princesses from Trebizond (in addition to Uzun Hasan’s wife) who married Turkoman “princes” and rejects the historical reality of two more such unions. Cf. also Rustam Shukurov, “Christian Elements in the Identity of the Anatolian Turkmens (12th–13th Centuries)”, in *Cristianità d’Occidente e Cristianità d’Oriente (secoli VI–XI)*, 2 vols. (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2004), vol. I, pp. 707–759 and Şevket Küçüküseyin, *Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung im Prozess kultureller Transformation. Anatolische Quellen über Muslime, Christen und Türken (13.–15. Jahrhundert)*, (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011).

¹⁶ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp. 49–50.

¹⁷ Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, *Les Ottomans, les Safavides et leurs voisins* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1987), pp. 128–186.

¹⁸ On the Safavid siege of Erevan, cf. Giorgio Rota, *La vita e i tempi di Rostam Khan* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), pp. 194–206, and

‘Abbās II started well, with a victorious military campaign that led to the conquest of the fortress of Qandahār. However, later he slowly sank into alcohol. While he may have introduced some innovations in the military field¹⁹, he clearly devoted a considerable amount of time and attention also to bizarre activities such as the training of lions and tigers for hunting – his success in this field being duly hailed by Vaḥid Qazvini as a great achievement, never attained before by any other ruler.²⁰

The four rulers who followed Šāh Esmā‘il I went down into history for different reasons but not only or mostly as great drinkers and much the less as alcoholics, although they consumed alcoholic beverages. Šāh Ṭahmāsp I renounced his former way of life and quit drinking, dying at age 62. Šāh Esmā‘il II, whose “reputation lay more in the prodigious use of opiates than in alcohol abuse”²¹, died after a short and bloody reign, either poisoned or killed by an opium overdose. The meek and pious Šāh Solṭān Moḥammad Xodābande was deposed after a very troubled reign by his son, the future Šāh ‘Abbās I: he also drank, but his ability to rule effectively was very likely undermined less by his drinking than by his very poor eyesight. Šāh ‘Abbās I is the most famous member of the dynasty and certainly a very successful ruler by many standards. He was also a strong drinker but not dependent on alcohol, or, at least, he was not incapacitated in his functions as political and military leader by his alcohol consumption. Why? The easiest answer (not necessarily a wrong one) is of course that he simply could take his drink better than most of his predecessors and successors. He may have had stronger self-control and stronger will power, which he may have forged first during the years of political and dynastic turmoil preceding his own accession to the throne, and then when his authority was still shaky and he himself

n. 493 p. 206 on the other Persian sources about the episode. On the death of Šāh Šafi while preparing a campaign against Qandahār, cf. *ibidem*, pp. 250–257.

¹⁹ Vaḥid Qazvini, *‘Abbāsnāme*, pp. 186 (creation of an Ottoman-style *tabur*), 236 (introduction of flags of different colours for each of the great *amirs*). Šāh ‘Abbās II introduced also a new piece of garment, the *qabā-ye čapkan*, for the Qezelbāš (perhaps as a sort of uniform?): cf. Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfi, *Zobdato ‘t-tavārix*, ed. Behruz Gudarzi (Tehran: Bonyād-e mowqufāt-e Doktor Maḥmud Afšār Yazdi, 1375), p. 112.

²⁰ See for instance Vaḥid Qazvini, *‘Abbāsnāme*, pp. 153–156, 199, 268–269, 281 (on the lions), 263, 268, 281 (on the tigers). On Šāh ‘Abbās II killing a tame lion with a punch on the head in the successful attempt to impress a Mughal ambassador, cf. Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfi, *Zobdato ‘t-tavārix*, p. 111.

²¹ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, p. 50.

was under the tutelage of powerful military chiefs. Šāh ‘Abbās I was a pragmatic strategist and politician, a quality he showed probably best in his relations with Christian Europe, where he made the most of his supposed leaning towards the Christian religion. Analogously, he may have been able to indulge his personal taste for wine and to fulfil his ceremonial role in relation to drinking, without allowing it to get in the way of his duties as a ruler. However, two anecdotes reported by Pietro della Valle are quite interesting. The first relates a meeting between the Italian traveller and Šāh ‘Abbās I. Della Valle abstained almost completely from alcoholic beverages, and he mostly drank to please his hosts or to favour procreation.²² On that particular occasion the Shah drank rather moderately, and he encouraged della Valle to drink more saying that “even if he got inebriated a bit, it did not matter”.²³ We observe here a clear difference between the behaviour of Šāh ‘Abbās I and that of his grand-grandson Šāh ‘Abbās II as illustrated by Thévenot (see *supra*). As for the different drinking habits of the various Safavid rulers, Rudi Matthee rightly warns that “extrapolating from the limited and scattered examples the sources yield about each individual ruler to detect a long-term trend is fraught with risk. A great deal of variation existed from ruler to ruler and, depending on personal predilections and circumstances, even within the reigns of individual shahs.”²⁴

Nonetheless, in the sympathetic attitude of the ruler towards the inebriation or intoxication of a courtier or guest we can perhaps see a difference with the European drinking habits of the time, and one that may deserve to be investigated further in a comparative perspective, considering that, as far as another traditional pursuit of the Eurasian ruler like hunting is concerned,

²² Cf. for instance *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle*, 2 vols. (Brighton: G. Gancia, 1843), vol. I, pp. 92–93, 575–578 (about procreation), 632 (della Valle receives 20 *bātmāns* of wine from the Royal pantry over about one month for his servants alone, since he is known not to drink), 642. The *mann* was the most widespread traditional unit of weight in Persia before the introduction of the metric system, and its value could differ wildly from place to place, in the Qājār period as well as in previous times. In the 19th century, the *mann* of Tabriz, also known as *bātmān*, weighed 2.9 kg., whereas the *mann-e šāh*, also very common, weighed 5.9 kg: cf. Willem Floor, “Weights and Measures in Qajar Iran”, *Studia Iranica*, 37 (2008): pp. 93–101 (in particular, pp. 93–94, 97).

²³ *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle*, vol. I, p. 669; cf. also pp. 653–654.

²⁴ Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, p. 68.

analogies and parallels between Safavid Persia and Western Europe were still strong in the early seventeenth century.²⁵

In the case of simple courtiers, the immoderate consumption of alcohol may not have had political consequences but it could have devastating effects on the drinkers themselves. In his second anecdote, della Valle tells the story of an ordinary alcoholic, Moḥammad Ṭāher Beyg. When the Shah, who “loved him very much”, ordered not to provide him anymore with alcoholic beverages, he committed suicide.²⁶ This episode and, above all, its fatal outcome remind us that occasionally Safavid sources mention altered psychological states that they call *mālexuliyā*, *xabt-e damāḡ* or *sowdā*: often, maybe even usually, they result in suicide²⁷ or rebellion against the ruler. Their causes are seldom specified, but one wonders if one of them might have been excessive alcoholic consumption. The “exceeding *sowdā*” of an eighteenth-century Safavid commander prevented his officers from talking to him during a military campaign against the Afghans in 1717, with catastrophic results.²⁸ A military setback possibly (partly at least) related to alcoholism is the defection of the governor of Erevan, Ṭahmāspqoli Xān Qājār, to the Ottomans in 1635: the Venetian *Bailo* at the Ottoman Porte wrote that “drinking” (together with a taste for building) had been the reason why Ṭahmāspqoli Xān had surrendered the fortress to Murad IV (1623–1640), whose boon companion he later became.²⁹ Unrelated to *mālexuliyā* and in-

²⁵ Giorgio Rota, “Caccia e regalità nella Persia safavide e in Europa occidentale: alcune osservazioni preliminari”, in *Scritti in onore di Giovanni M. D’Erme*, ed. Michele Bernardini and Natalia L. Tornesello, 2 vols. (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, 2005), vol. II, pp. 943–974. The standard work on this topic is now Thomas T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): although it does not devote enormous attention to the Safavids, it would provide the necessary historical context and an excellent starting point for any study of the Royal hunt in the Safavid period.

²⁶ *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle*, vol. I, pp. 626–627.

²⁷ This was for instance the case of Qazzāq Xān Čarkas, who committed suicide in 1639 because of his extremely disturbed state of mind (*ḡolvā-ye sowdā va šureš-e damāḡ*): cf. Moḥammad Ma‘šum b. Xwājegi Eṣfahāni, *Xolāṣato’s-siyar*, ed. Iraj Afšār (Tehran: ‘Elmi, 1368), p. 276; Mirzā Moḥammad Yusof Vāleh, *Xold-e barin*, in Eskandar Beyg Torkmān Monši - Moḥammad Yusof Movarrex, *Zeyl-e tārix-e ‘ālamārā-ye ‘abbāsi*, ed. Soheyli Xwānsāri (Tehran: Eslāmiye, 1317), pp. 234, 289, 294.

²⁸ Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfi, *Zobdato’t-tavārix*, p. 122.

²⁹ Archivio di Stato, Venice (hereafter: ASV), *Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli*, filza 119, no. 63, fol. 115a (Alvise Contarini, Vigne di Pera, 8 May 1638): cf. also

stead rather farcical were the circumstances of the death of Šāhverdi Xān Lor (1641), who injured himself while, in a drunken stupor, he tried to kill a sheep with a stroke of his sword and later died of his wound.³⁰ In any case, the mention by the sources of such events reminds us of the importance of the human factor in history, a rule to which Safavid history is clearly no exception.

The sixth Safavid ruler, Šāh Šafi, was also heavily addicted to wine. He died at the age of 32, and the sources make it clear that he died of excessive alcohol consumption: towards the end of his life the measures adopted by the court physicians to preserve his health became useless and, since he did not quit drinking, the conclusion was foregone.³¹ Since his reign was relatively well covered by Persian court chronicles, we can see what negative political impact alcohol could have on the “career” of a ruler, if it was not kept properly in check. His reign coincided with the last phase of the long Safavid-Ottoman conflict, and the campaigns of the years 1630–38 might be seen as a prolonged fight between drunkards, since Murad IV was also an alcoholic, who died at age 29. Unlike Šāh Šafi he was a great soldier, although his poor health prevented him from continuing the war after the conquest of Baġdād in 1638, and he ruled his empire with an iron fist, putting a temporary end to anarchy and indiscipline in the Ottoman state. Šāh Šafi does not seem to have been eager to take the field against the Ottomans in person (with the important exception of the siege of Erevan, mentioned above), but the main reason for this attitude may have been, rather than alcoholism itself, the fact that the ruler had been raised in the harem, where he had been poorly educated for his future role. Indeed, one might even claim that an important role in preserving the peace between the two empires after the treaty of 1639 was the practice to keep the royal princes, both Ottoman and Safavid, in the harem, where they grew up with little or no contact with the rest of the world and where drinking was one of the favourite pastimes.

Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, pp. 182–185. For more on Tahmāspqoli Xān, cf. *idem*, “The Death of Tahmāspqoli Xān Qājār According to a Contemporary Ragusan Source (How to Become a Renegade, 2)”, in *Iran und iranisch geprägte Kulturen. Studien zum 65. Geburtstag von Bert G. Fragner*, ed. Markus Ritter, Ralph Kauz and Birgitt Hoffmann (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2008), pp. 54–63.

³⁰ Moḥammad Yusof Vāleh, *Xold-e barin*, pp. 251–252.

³¹ Moḥammad Yusof Vāleh, *Xold-e barin*, pp. 254–256; Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, pp. 255–257, n. 689 p. 255.

Another landmark of Šāh Šafī's reign is more directly related to alcoholic consumption. In 1632, he had all his male relatives blinded or executed in a series of successive purges that also involved a large number of courtiers and military officers. While the reasons for these executions and blindings are not yet entirely clear³², one chronicler connects them to an illness of the Shah, caused either by "excessive drinking or heat".³³ Šāh Šafī wiped out all the potential competitors or (in case of his demise) heirs to the throne before ensuring the survival of the dynasty through the siring of a son (the future Šāh 'Abbās II was born in December 1632 or January 1633³⁴). Interestingly, something similar was done by Murad IV who, despite having no sons, put three brothers to death as well as – probably – his mad uncle, the former sultan Mustafa I, sparing only his brother İbrahim (who later ascended to the throne and proved to be rather unfit for his role).³⁵ Poor health conditions (caused, partly at least, by excessive alcohol consumption) were one of the factors that made both rulers feel uneasy about their throne, and one wonders if the same alcohol consumption may have somehow contributed towards impairing their judgement and pushed them to imperil the survival of the dynasty itself, as it would later momentarily contribute towards impairing the judgement of Karim Xān Zand (1750–1779) and cause an outburst of violence otherwise very unusual for him.³⁶ At a certain point, the fears about the state of the health of Šāh Šafī must have spread beyond the limits of the court, and in the late winter of 1642 the Shah had to make a public entrance in Eşfahān despite his poor conditions, clearly in order to dispel rumours about his death: yet these rumours were not entirely unfounded, since he passed away a few months later, on 12 May.³⁷

³² Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, pp. 128–136 (for a narration of the events), n. 292 p. 132 (for a brief critical assessment of the events and of the relevant literature).

³³ Mir Moḥammad Ḥoseyn al-Ḥoseyni Tafreši, ms. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek N.F. 50 (Flügel 281), fols. 66–70; cf. also Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, n. 292 pp. 132–133.

³⁴ Cf. *infra*, n. 40.

³⁵ Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream* (London: John Murray, 2005), p. 223. On Murad IV likely ordering the murder of Mustafa I, cf. ASV, *Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli*, filza 120, no. 131, fol. 120a and no. 134, fol. 154a (Alvise Contarini, Galata, 9 April and 30 April 1639).

³⁶ John R. Perry, *Karim Khan Zand* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 102–103, 292. Perry suggested the behaviour of Nāder Šāh Afšār (1736–1747) as a possible precedent to Karim Xān's.

³⁷ Moḥammad Yusof Vāleh, *Xold-e barin*, p. 254. Cf. also Moḥammad Ma'šum Eşfahāni, *Xolāšato's-siyar*, pp. 294–295; Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, n. 689 p. 255. The Venetian *Bailo*

Also remarkable is the negative portrayal of Šāh Šafi by contemporaneous and later European writers, although he certainly was not inherently “worse” than his predecessor and successor who, unlike him, were both usually highly praised in Europe.³⁸ An important role in his “dark legend” is played by his notorious love for wine, which in turn is of course one of the staple components of the stereotype of the Oriental despot, together with unbridled and arbitrary cruelty, sexual excesses and addiction to opium – all elements allegedly present³⁹ in the life of this Safavid ruler.

His son and successor Šāh ‘Abbās II has been already mentioned above. He died when he was a few months shy of turning 33, and here again alcohol played an important role. His son and successor Šāh Soleymān ruled over Persia during a mostly peaceful period, when the country was not threatened by major external enemies but only by the activities of unruly minorities or aggressive neighbours that were, or could be construed as, mere local rebellions or pillaging raids. This situation allowed the Shah to spend very long periods in the harem, where he presumably drank a lot. When he died he was at most 48 years old, and perhaps a bit younger.⁴⁰ He was also famous for his drunken rages.⁴¹ A positive side effect of his aloofness from state business was however his wise choice of an able Grand Vizier, Šeyx-‘Ali Xān

reported the rumours, circulating in Constantinople immediately after the death of Murad IV and the accession of the still childless İbrahim, about the possible extinction of the Ottoman dynasty and its replacement by either the Khans of the Crimea or “the sons of the Sultanas”: cf. ASV, *Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli*, filza 120, no. 174, fol. 758a (Alvise Contarini, Vigne di Pera, 19 February 1639 *more veneto* [=1640]).

³⁸ Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, n. 69 p. 41; *idem*, “Three Little-Known Persian Sources of the Seventeenth Century”, *Iranian Studies*, 31 (1998): pp. 164–169.

³⁹ Šāh Šafi indeed ordered (or was induced to order) the above-mentioned executions and blindings, but he did not do so out of pure whim, as some European observers of the time may have assumed owing to their lack of more precise information.

⁴⁰ He was 48 according to Krusinski, who quoted Jean Chardin: cf. *The History of the Late Revolutions of Persia: Taken from the Memoirs of Father Krusinski*, 2 vols. (London: J. Osborne, 1740) (reprint: New York, Arno Press, 1973), vol. I, pp. 53, 58. Šāh Soleymān was the eldest son of Šāh ‘Abbās II, who was born at the end of December 1632 or in mid-January 1633: cf. Rota, *La vita e i tempi*, n. 322 p. 143. According to Vaḥid Qazvini, *‘Abbās-nāme*, p. 92, Šāh Soleymān was born shortly before the beginning of his father’s campaign against Qandahār (1648–49).

⁴¹ Most of Mostowfi’s very short description of the reign of Šāh Soleymān, written less than 45 years after the death of the Shah, deals with the fear he used to strike into his most prominent courtiers: cf. Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfi, *Zobdato ‘t-tavārix*, pp. 113–114. Cf. also Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, pp. 57–60, 64, 91.

Zangane, who effectively ran the country when the Shah was secluded in his private apartments despite occasional clashes and a period of disgrace that led to his temporary ouster from power. The two (a Shah who did not want to take an active role in the ruling of the state and a Grand Vizier who wielded enormous power but was not the ultimate source and holder of full political authority) developed an interesting love-hate relationship⁴²: one can only speculate on how the relationship between a weak ruler and a strong Grand Vizier could have developed over time and whether it could have affected the structure and nature of the Safavid state in a profound and lasting way (perhaps leading to the rise to power of a new Royal house after a series of *rois-fainéants* controlled by powerful prime ministers), had the dynasty not been overthrown by the invading Afghans in 1722.

The last of the Great Safavids (as opposed to the rather powerless figures who mounted on or were raised to the throne after 1722) was Šāh Solṭān Ḥoseyn, an interesting mixture of deep devotion to religion and deep devotion to wine. His reign came to an abrupt and violent end, so we are not in the condition to say what long-run effects wine would have had on his health and, indirectly, on his kingdom. Certainly he was not a strong or effective ruler, and this was perfectly clear to the contemporaneous observers. We will quote the opinions of only two of them, chosen among the least-known. An Austrian traveller to Persia, Ferdinand Amadeus von Harrach (who travelled in Persia around the year 1700 and, as an aristocrat and a professional soldier, was well acquainted with both the social duties of high rank and the reality of war) tersely stated that “celui qui regne, etant (*sic*) trop adonné au vin, si une guerre survenoit à la Nation, il pourroit courrir risque de sa couronne”.⁴³ The Ottoman ambassador, Dürri Ahmed Efendi, who left Persia in 1721 (that is, virtually on the eve of the Afghan siege of Eşfahān), claimed that “the ruler and his circle had lost the will to maintain themselves

⁴² A relationship very well described in Rudi Matthee, “Administrative Stability and Change in Late 17th-Century Iran: The Case of Shaykh ‘Ali Khan Zanganah (1669–1689)”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 26 (1994): pp. 77–98.

⁴³ Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, *Handschriften, Weiß* 706/30, fol. 31b. He also reported an anecdote according to which the *sepahsālār* Rostam Xān Saak’adze “the Younger” openly called the Shah “a drunkard” (*sot*) and told him that he was unfit to rule: cf. *ibidem*, fol. 32b.

in power” and found the court living in denial of the problems afflicting the Safavid state.⁴⁴

As for Šāh Ṭahmāsp II (1722–1732), the son and successor of Šāh Solṭān Ḥoseyn, as soon as he reached Qazvin after fleeing from Eṣfahān under siege he gave himself to feasting and wine⁴⁵: partly (we may assume) in order to forget his sorrow plight, partly seemingly as a necessary component of the “trappings of his imaginary Royal power” (*asbāb-e salṭanat-e xiyāli*), and partly simply because of what the chronicler calls the Fate’s irrevocable decision that the history of the Safavid dynasty should end with him⁴⁶: a statement that may allude to the addiction to alcohol contracted by the Royal princes in the harem, which made them poor rulers in peacetime and totally unfit leaders at a time of crisis such as the years after 1722, *ipso facto* depriving the Safavid dynasty of its legitimacy. And indeed the history of the rule of the Safavid dynasty over Persia effectively ends with Šāh Ṭahmāsp II, since his son Šāh ‘Abbās III (1732–1736) was still an infant when he was raised to the throne by Persia’s strongman, the future Nāder Šāh.⁴⁷

This is not to say that the fall of the Safavid state was mainly (much the less alone) caused by excessive alcohol consumption on the part of its rulers. It was rather a vicious circle, in which the rulers became increasingly unable to cope with serious problems that did not have their origin in their drinking habits but were nonetheless sapping the solidity of the state and that, not being dealt with adequately, could not but become more serious and eventu-

⁴⁴ Suraiya Faroqhi, “An Ottoman ambassador in Iran: Dürri Ahmed Efendi and the collapse of the Safavid Empire in 1720–21”, in *eadem*, *Another Mirror for Princes* (Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 2008), pp. 175 (with the quotation), 176, 185 (revised English translation of an article originally appeared in *Wahrnehmung des Fremden, Differenzenerfahrungen von Diplomaten in Europa [1500–1648]*, ed. Michael Rohrschneider and Arno Strohmeyer, Münster 2007, pp. 375–398).

⁴⁵ Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfī, *Zobdato ‘t-tavārix*, pp. 140–141.

⁴⁶ Quotation from Moḥammad Moḥsen Mostowfī, *Zobdato ‘t-tavārix*, p. 140: the *asbāb-e salṭanat-e xiyāli* included clearly the Royal feasting. Moḥammad Moḥsen contrasts the profligacy of Šāh Ṭahmāsp II and his “disloyal *amirs*” with the commitment of Ṭahmāspqoli Xān Afšār to the cause of Persia’s freedom from Afghan domination: cf. *ibidem*, pp. 155, 157–158 (which of course should not lead the reader into believing that Ṭahmāspqoli Xān/Nāder Šāh actually abstained from alcoholic beverages).

⁴⁷ The Safavids who were crowned after 1736 were, as stated above, mere figureheads deprived of any real power and usually enjoyed only short-lived “reigns”: likewise deprived of real authority but at least very long was the troubled rule of Šāhroḡ Šāh Afšār (1749–1796), a Safavid on his maternal side, over Xorāsān.

ally fatal. Certainly, the fact that, during the last 56 years of the Safavid history, Persia did not have a strong ruler (or, at least, one who was interested in active ruling) at the helm in an age where everything revolved around the ruler himself, did not do any good to the country.

