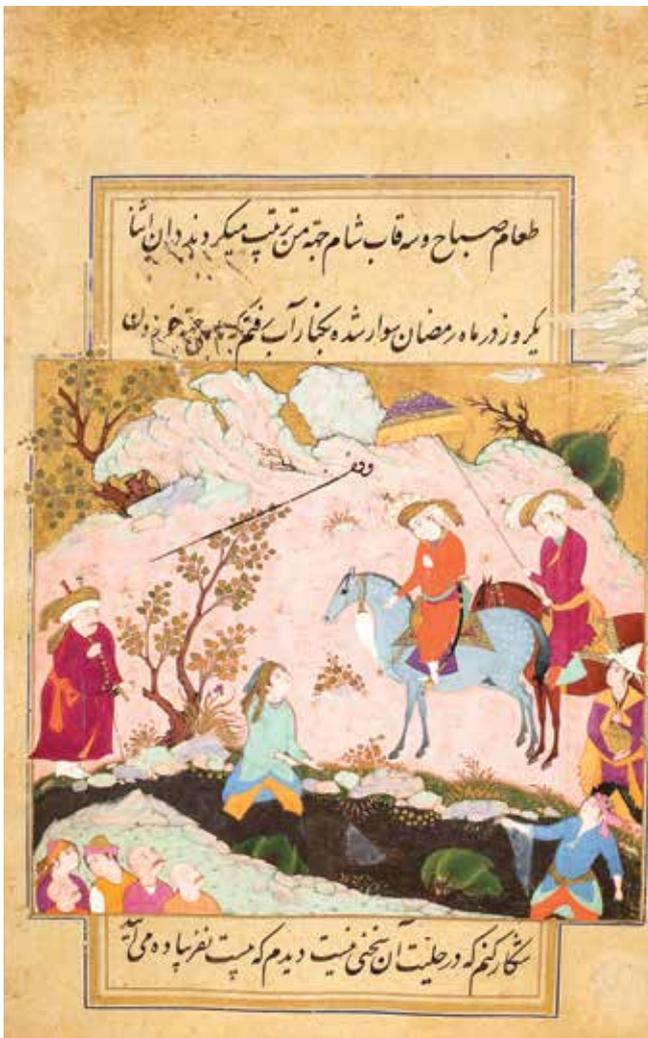


# EARLY HISTORY OF THE SAFAVIDS: TABRIZ, 1502-1548



*“Shah Tahmasib fishing”*

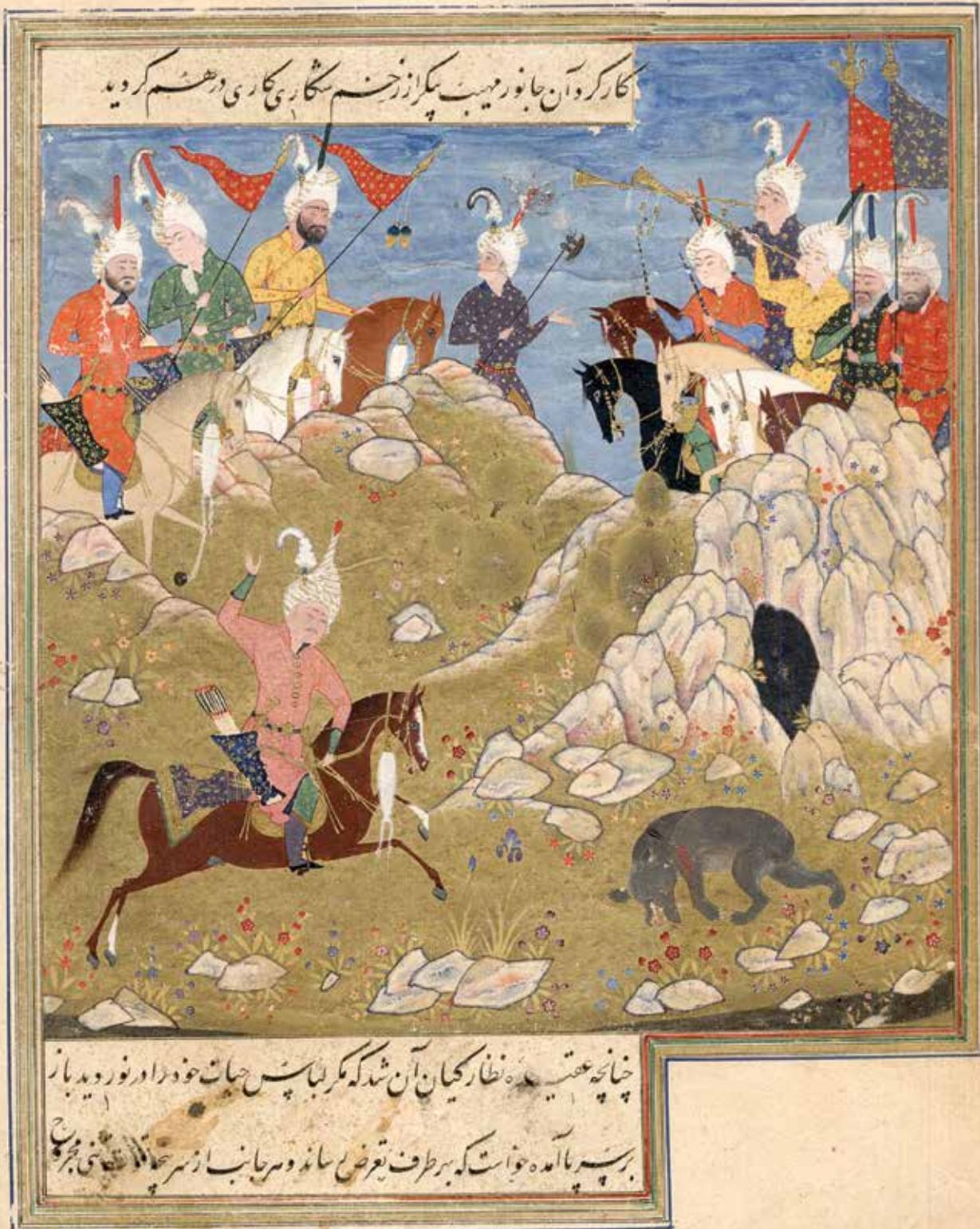
The main strands of miniature painting, like in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, existed in Tabriz in 1500, the capital of South Azerbaijan, which now belonged to the Safavids and had become a metropolitan city and the center of the enormous Safavid Empire. These main strands include the rich and fantastic Turkoman court style in Tabriz and the academic style of Herat.

The Safavid state was created by the Azerbaijani feudal elite, primarily by the Azerbaijani tribal nobility – emirs in order to serve their class interests. Therefore, it is the Azerbaijani nobility that became the dominant force in the newly formed state the main function of which was to strengthen and expand the power of Qizilbash emirs over their own tribesmen and the population of the regions they had conquered.

The battle theme in the Safavid period developed within the framework of the work of the Shah’s library in Tabriz, Qazvin and Isfahan. For us, of particular interest is the richly illuminated manuscript: the biography of Shah Ismail “Alam-arai Shah Ismail Safavi” of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (London, British Library, Or 3248). The manuscript of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century contains one diptych and 19 miniatures authored by artist Muin Musavvir.

Perhaps the most interesting episode of the manuscript is illustrated by the miniature “The Battle of Chaldiran”: in the midst of the battle Shah Ismail rushes

*"Ismāil Kills a Wild Bear"*





*“Shah Ismail celebrates the rite of twelve imams”*

At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a major political revolution was in the air, and the dynamic young Shah Ismail Safavi had already embarked on his victorious course, culminating in his coronation in Tabriz in 1502 — the first monarch to rule over a united empire.

Shah Ismail’s activity can still be felt. This red-headed strong man, “amiable as a girl but more powerful than any of his courtiers”, according to a contemporary traveler, brings to mind another conqueror, Babur, who also combined military prowess, buoyant optimism, guilt-free ruthlessness, and a love of literature, art, and music. (9, p.5)

The miniature “Shah Ismail Kills the Wild Bear” from the same manuscript of Alam-arai Shah Ismail Safavi (London, British Library. Or 3248, f.53.) narrates the story of another exploit by young Ismail. The date of this event is 906/1500. The text describes an event that occurred in the summer of 906 H/1500. Shah Ismail came to a place with a meadow that looked like heaven, where he planned to remain for a while. But this location was a mountain with a cave where a very large bear lived. Since this animal attacked people and hindered their passage, Ismail decided to rid the mountain of the menace. Together with a group of his courtiers he approached the mountain, occupied the area and surrounded the cave. Upon hearing the commotion created by the army, the bear stuck its head out of the cave. When the bear saw all these people, he became frightened and ran towards Ismail. Although Ismail was only thirteen years of age, he stepped forward, drew his bow and killed the bear.

The swift policy of Shah Ismail and propaganda in Anatolia created a great deal of anxiety in Istanbul’s military circles. Parts of the army believed that only Prince Selim, the youngest son of Bayezid II, could save the state from this crisis, although Bayezid intended to leave the throne to his eldest son Ahmad. Prince Selim, who advocated a more resolute attitude towards the Safavids, ascended the throne in 1512. (5)

In April 1514, Sultan Selim I left Istanbul at the head of a large army after having obtained a fatwa from several well-known Sunnite clerics of that time, supporting the legitimacy of the military campaign against Shah Ismail. The Ottoman army suffered from a shortage of supplies and severe climatic conditions in the unfriendly terrain. Selim, however, decided to march on, using severe measures to keep discipline among soldiers dissatisfied by the prolonged campaign.

into the thick of the enemy army, strikes at the enemy, and finally, cuts off the barrel of a gun with a sword (it is known that he despised firearms as not befitting a man). Sultan Selim, learning about his feat, asks him to send him the sword. But he cannot repeat it. He rebukes the Shah, saying that he changed the weapon to which Shah Ismail replied: “The saber is the same, but the hand is not!” One of the most spectacular ones, it depicts a group of warriors crowned in the top half by the figure of Shah Ismail on horseback striking the barrel of a gun.

Ismail entered Tabriz immediately after the Battle of Sharur, which took place in early 907 hijrah (mid-1501). Chroniclers indicate that Ismail spent the winter of 907 hijrah (late 1501 - early 1502) in Tabriz. On this basis, one could argue that the Qizilbash took Tabriz in the fall of the same year 1501. Immediately after the Sharur victory, Ismail solemnly entered Tabriz and was crowned for the Shah’s throne. (4, p. 205.)

“Shah Tahmasib receiving Turkish ambassadors”





*Dptych "Court of Qazi Jahan". Right half*

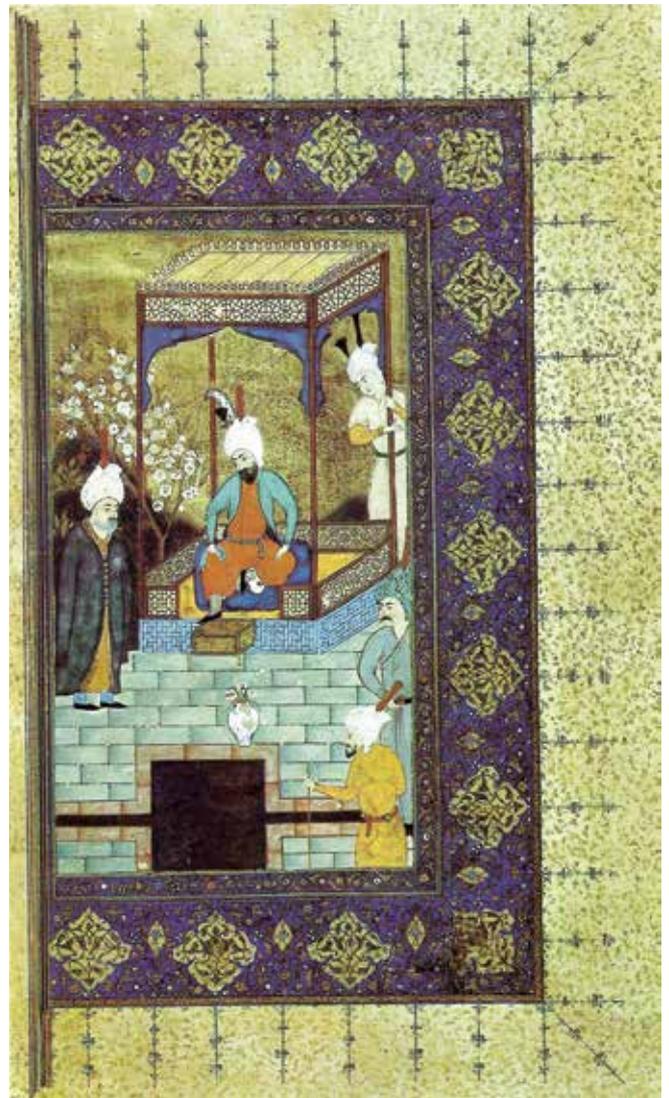
Ultimately, the Ottoman and Safavid armies came face to face on the Chaldiran field on 3 August 1514. The ensuing battle ended with the complete victory of the Ottoman army, because of its numerical superiority, innovative military tactics, and especially extensive use of firearms. Shah Ismail, who had fought courageously, lost many of his close followers and commanders, though he managed to escape wounded from the battlefield. Selim then marched unopposed towards the Safavid capital, Tabriz, which he entered on 6 September. The Safavid camp, along with precious possessions belonging to the shah, was seized and many artisans from Tabriz were deported to Istanbul. (9)

Ismail died in 1524 and was succeeded by his ten-year-old son Tahmasib (1524-76). Conflicts with the Uzbaks and the Ottomans resumed soon after. A decisive Safavid victory in 1528 over the Uzbaks in Jam stabilized the eastern frontier, but on the western front Salim's son, Suleyman (1520-66), pursued his father's goal of annihilating the Safavid state. In three successive campaigns, however, Tahmasib drove the Ottomans back. The treaty of Amasiye (Amasya), concluded in 1555, finally brought an end to hostilities. (9)

Tahmasib's long reign and conservative policies transformed tribal Qizilbash power into a full-fledged empire.

After his defeat at Chaldiran in 1514, Shah Ismail resorted to other traditional manifestations of kingship to buttress the legitimacy of his rule, including the establishment in Tabriz of a royal library-workshop for the production of illustrated manuscripts. Although his turbulent early years did not allow for the kind of training in calligraphy or painting that some Teymurid and Aq-Qoyunlu princes received, Ismail must have witnessed the patronage of other rulers, for whom the profusely illustrated *Shahnameh* and *Khamseh* manuscripts were prepared. Ismail, however, did take a keen interest in the proper education of his sons, and according to the chronicler Budaq-e Qazvini, when the young Tahmasib displayed a talent "for illustration, painting, and calligraphy, painters were brought from distant places, including master Behzad who came from Herat." Budaq also noted that the painter Soltan-Mohammad "had already opened the royal library-atelier (*kitabkhana*) and Shah Tahmasib . . . was already his pupil."

"It should be noted that the Turkic Qizilbash ruling elite, which the young shah inherited from his father,



was not going to let the power out of their hands, and so pretty soon after Tahmasib ascended the throne, his mentor Qazi Jahan was removed from the capital. Only ten years later, did the matured Shah gain strength and return Qazi Jahan to the court, making him a vizier. It is possible that the manuscript designed for this statesman was simply not completed due to his fall from grace, and the three incomplete miniatures were made after his return to the political arena.

Work on the manuscript could have started in Ismail's lifetime.

We can find the confirmation of the last assumption in the double miniature at the beginning of the manuscript. Its plot is usually defined as "An Audience with the Ruler". These miniatures often depict a real living ruler, but the middle-aged man sitting under the awning cannot be Tahmasib. With his features (highly raised and



*“Caricature of Karpuz Soltan”. Artist Shah Tahmasib. Album of Barham Mirza. Tabriz, 1540s. Topkapi*

arched eyebrows, bushy beard and mustache, a turban with a plume and brush) he is more like a semi-historical semi-legendary hero Iskander, to whom Tabriz artists often likened Ismail I for various reasons. It is more likely that Shah Ismail is depicted on the throne, and the boy standing behind the throne is Prince Tahmasib. Before the throne, it is quite possible, we see Qazi Jahan to whom Ismail entrusts his son and to whom Tahmasib dedicated his work. The plot of this miniature is identified as “the Court of Qazi Jahan” (Kerimov, 1980, ill. 23-24), taking into account the scene on the left side of the diptych. It seems to us that the diptych really shows a trial, but not that of Qazi Jahan but that of Shah Ismail, which took place in reality and reflected any real political events. (2, p.70).

The real character in the court of Shah Tahmasib is also interesting.

Shah Tahmasib’s youthful sense of humor survived military invasions .....and the occasion when, at the age of thirteen, he was compelled to execute an enemy with a bow and arrow. The survival is demonstrated by one of the most human and appealing documents of his reign, a candid glimpse of the royal household staff, signed by the shah himself and inscribed by him to his favorite (and only uterine) brother, Bahram Mirza. The

miniature occupies a position of honor — the opening page, folio 1 verso — of the album, assembled by Dust Muhammad. The names of the staff are inscribed at the top of the painting and include such affectionate appellations as Karpuz (“Melon”) Sultan for the jolly fellow in the lower row with the appropriately shaped belly. A drawing by the shah of this same retainer, apparently a comical royal butler, is on the next page of the same album, signed with the same formula (“The Refuge of the World”) we find in the shah’s copy of Arifi’s Guy u Chawgan. (10, p. 61-62)

The broad scope of cultural activities under the Safavids is remarkable in itself, but even more surprising and unprecedented in its scope is the interest of the Shah and his family in arts, which had not only a strategic, but also a personal nature. All these elite patrons were great connoisseurs of calligraphy and painting, but only two of them - Shah Tahmasib and Bahram Mirza took a brush and created a number of paintings, some of which are in the album of Bahram Mirza. Contemporary and further written sources repeatedly mention these crowned painters of royal descent. One of the Safavid court historians Hasan bey Rumlu describes Shah Tahmasib as “someone who keenly loves painting”, while Iskandar bay Munshi says that Shah Tahmasib studied painting from Ustad Sultan Muhammad, and that “Aga Mirak Isfahani, an honorable sa’id and outstanding painter, became a personal friend of the Shah and his companion in conversations.

In this world of the largest empires of the East penetrated with high culture and a common heritage for all, the Safavids psychologically stood on the background of military force and political impacts far above their neighbors.

Of the three neighbors the Ottomans were the most powerful ones. The Shaybanids tried many times to capture Khorasan, but in general, they posed no serious military threat. The Mughals also failed to convince the Safavids to abandon their religious beliefs.

It is curious that the same situation faced the son and heir of Shah Ismail, Tahmasib (1524-76), and here the situation repeated itself again. The balance of power in military terms remained the same, but now Tahmasib had a cultural advantage, and he made maximum use of it. In this way, he attracted the admiration and envy of his neighbors. (10)

Again, the art of caricature became a formidable

*“The battle of Chaldiran”*

weapon for the Safavids. One of the best examples of political satire in Tabriz in the 1530s was a caricature of Ubeydullah Khan. (It is attributed to Aqa Mirak, Tabriz, ca. 1535)

The fur-trimmed headgear and overall dress of this figure, probably an Ozbak, are typical of Transoxiana, but the paraphernalia of a ruler are also present. The three feathers in the hat, richly decorated quiver, and elegant sword are signs of high rank; the lance is an emblem of power, and his seat is a golden royal throne. An unusual feature and clue to the prince's identity is the musical instrument he holds, most probably a ghichak. The Sheybanid Ubeydullah Khan, ruler of Bukhara from 1512 to 1540, was praised by Mohammad-Haydar Dughlat for his skills in calligraphy and music.

Stylistically the drawing can be dated to the 1530s. At this time, Ubeydullah Khan, a Sunni ruler with dynastic claims on Khorasan, saw his duty as delivering the province's people from the “heretical” Safavids. After several attempts, he captured Herat in 1535 but evacuated the city by 1537 when news of Shah Tahmasib's troops marching toward Mashhad reached him.

Aqa Mirak's purpose in drawing a portrait of Ubeydullah Khan is not clear. One might only speculate that the inclusion of the wine gourd and ghichak was meant to degrade Ubeydullah, who, as an orthodox ruler, considered himself a champion of the “true” Muslim faith. Consumption of alcohol is prohibited by Islam, and religious classes have often contended that the excitement caused by music is incompatible with Islamic law. (8, p.180) 🌱

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