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# EARLY YEARS OF SHAH ISMAIL IN THE FIRST OF HIS ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLES

**IT** is well known that Shah Ismail Safavi was one of the most famous characters of both historical works and dastans, i.e. oral folk poems and stories, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the official palace chronicles, there were a number of folk tales about the life of Shah Ismail I. Created towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they were also briefly studied by researchers. Among them, at least three illustrated texts are mentioned in the first place: two of them are Bijan's "Jahan-gusha-yi Khagan Sahib-giran" (London, British Library, 1690s and a scattered copy ≈ 1688), and a closely related manuscript from the Rza Abbasi Museum in Tehran, 1688-90. There are also other illustrated stories about Shah Ismail and the Safavids in general, two of which are part of a collection of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. However, we are interested in a little-known manuscript created by an eyewitness to the events in the life of Shah Ismail before he was proclaimed the first Safavid ruler in Tabriz in 1501.

"Futuhat-i Shahi" ("Shah's victories") was written by Sadr ad-Din Soltan Ibrahim al-Amini. "Futuhat-i Shahi" is a description of campaigns of Shah Ismail I, which was written before 918 AH (1513-1514). A complete list of this work is stored in the fund of Oriental manuscripts of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan. It was identified and described by Tajik orientalist A. M. Mirzoyev, who had also established the author of the historical work "Shahanshah-nama" (1, p. 5-6.)

The work of Ibrahim Amini was well known to his contemporaries and was often referred to by historiographers as the main source on the history of the military campaigns of Shah Ismail I. This account is replete with factual material, in particular, about Ismail's military actions against Farrukh Yasar in Shirvan, his battle with Alvand Aq-Qoyunlu, as well as heads other feudal areas. Although the author was not an eyewitness to these events, their description is nevertheless of great interest because it is based on the stories of

eyewitnesses and participants in these campaigns, the Qizilbash military leaders who were Shah Ismail's closest associates.

There are very important aspects of this composition, which sets it apart from similar works. In order to acquaint Amini with information about the beginning of his career, the Shah introduced him to a number of old emirs who still retained the memory of his father, Sheikh Heidar. Thus, the events of the early years of Shah Ismail (before his conquest of Tabriz in 1501) are narrated exclusively from the point of view of these movement leaders. And this is extremely interesting. According to researchers, the formation of the Safavid state was not a spontaneous and uncontrollable phe-

*Opening of the book with a miniature "Fortress siege"*



nomenon, an explosion of apocalyptic energy, but a deeply thought out and planned, carefully implemented campaign managed by wise old military leaders who kept the young shah under strict control.

Scientists were aware of the important role played by the emirs from young Ismail's surroundings. Roger Savory noted that the core of this group was primarily responsible for the success of this movement and guarded the young Shah in exile. They maintained a constant high degree of readiness. What is extremely important to us about "Futuhat" is that it gives us a broader perspective on the events in which they played a key role (5, p. 238).

Subsequent chroniclers had difficulty with this issue (the narrative episode) and did their best to downplay the veterans of Heidar in order to emphasize his role.

It has already been mentioned that before 1499, after spending several years in exile in the Caspian region in order to hide from the Aq-Qoyunlu clan's campaign against his family members, Ismail finally decided to leave Gilan in order to find access to the political arena. The time was right. Aq-Qoyunlu were in a state of internal strife, and Ismail decided to take advantage of this to return to his homeland.

In the spring, the leaders of the group decided to launch a campaign in anticipation of great deeds. The purpose of that step was by no means an exercise or physical training, but a demonstration of the leadership qualities of young Ismail to the entire Safavid society. According to Amini, during the hunt, Ismail's falcon always hit partridges and pheasants, hile his dogs obediently chased the onagers. Whilst the eagle pursued other animals like a shadow, Ismail's quick arrow, like a needle, deprived the animals of the light in their eyes, and "his merciless sword, longing for battle, rushed into the valley of death and left tigers and lions dead."

It is common knowledge that a hawk, a vulture and an eagle

symbolize royal power, and by killing smaller birds, Ismail's hunting birds seem to increase his desire to defeat his opponents.

Meanwhile, rumors of Ismail's ascension spread more and more, and many poor people joined him. They are described as longtime loyal supporters who joined the ghazi, especially when they became convinced of its viability. His army had now turned into a fully mobile military camp, and it should not be confused with a wild nomadic tribe.

The advisers of his father, Sheikh Heidar, offered him to perform a symbolic heroic act. Ismail was informed that a ferocious bear lives on a nearby mountain and not a single traveler dares to set foot there. Ismail immediately orders to go hunting for the bear and personally gallops to meet him. As the animal emerges from the cave, Ismail shoots it twice and mortally wounds it. The victim, hit by the shots, drags his bleeding body back into the cave.

Ismail then announces that since their future cannot be rationally known, he will retire for the night to await

the spirit of the undefiled. When the dawn breaks, Ismail emerges and appears before the emirs. The young shah coming out to the people emits a radiance like the sun, and the emirs prostrate before him. The chronicle indicates that this was followed by the siege and the miraculous conquest of Firuzkuh, which was the place where Ismail's father allegedly found his end, and the young shah certainly intended to exact revenge.

In fact, as modern historians noted based on an analysis of other sources, this is far from real events. It is known that the Firuzkuh fortress is located not far from Tehran, that is, it is very far from the route of Ismail's first campaign (the Shirvan campaign). The theory

that Ismail's father died here also does not stand up to criticism, because all the chronicles indicate that Sheikh Heidar died and was buried during a campaign against Shirvan, but not near Tehran.

According to Futuhat, the Shirvan campaign was thought out and prepared with great expect-



**Miniature "Ismail kills a bear"**

tations for the future. They managed to seize money, enemy lands and, most importantly, a lot of weapons. Upon return, everything was divided among the people of Ismail, who were no longer unarmed. But as modern historians note, this part of the chronicle does not correspond to reality either, because it is well known that Ismail's troops in the Shirvan campaign were by no means unarmed. They surpassed the army of the Shirvanshah in both weapons and combat experience, and were only inferior in numbers. In addition, it is difficult to imagine that Ismail would have started a campaign with an unarmed army, would have stormed Baku and the Gulustan fortress and would have won a victory at Jabani without arms.

Amini's "Futuhāt-i Shahi", mentioned above, is decorated with eight miniatures and many voids for illustration. The miniatures include those that were later used for folk tales such as, for example, "Ismail kills a bear", "The siege of Firuzkuh", "Ismail asks Imam Ali for advice and learns about a secret passage to the fortress", "Ismail's lion hunt", etc.

The vast majority of illustrations found in such historical chronicles describe such iconic themes as hunting, battles and sieges, throne scenes and palace festivities with seated rulers, and these scenes can be used for any historical date and in relation to any historical personality. The fundamental compositional

*Opening of the book with a miniature "Ismail's lion hunt"*



Ismail persisted in his decision to march on Shamakhi. The first decisive victory was the start of a series of Shah's victories, i.e. Futuhāt-i Shahi – as the name of the work suggests. This scene is a well-established pattern in the genre of battles, fights with cutting the enemy in two in the saddle, hunting, royal feasts, etc.

schemes are preserved. In particular, the army still moves from right to left, pushing the enemy back, while one of the riders always rushes forward in the saddle, lying on a horse. Finally, the banners, breaking through the upper frame, go beyond it at the top, and also flutter.

*Opening of the book with a miniature “Fortress siege”*



Remarkably, there were no other illustrated works during the reign of Shah Abbas the First, and this is despite his military successes and, undoubtedly, high reputation. It is also obvious that Abbas never achieved the status of an epic folk hero that Shah Ismail deserved in later times.

This having been said, in addition to a sober calculation, it is possible to observe Ismail's charismatic qualities of a leader in the distribution of wealth. After the end of the battle of Shamakhi, the young sheikh ordered to decorate the meadow. Then he sat down on the throne and looked at all the spoils of war collected in heaps. He looked contemptuously at all these treasures and generously bestowed them on the emirs and the highest military class according to their rank and merit in battle. The remainder was distributed among the common warriors, and at the end of the feast

*Opening of the book with a miniature “Siege of Firuzkuh”*



everyone retired for a few hours to rest with their vast possessions. By that time, the Safavid movement had turned into a strong and well-armed army, and this gave them the opportunity to undertake a bigger task – the city of Tabriz, the capital of the weakened kingdom of Aq-Qoyunlu.

Two emirs were entrusted with the task of besieging and capturing Baku. The plan succeeded and the population of the city asked for mercy. It became known that Baku was keeping the royal treasury of the Shirvanshahs. The old emirs brought money to Ismail. According to Amini's account, no-one in the Safavid army had seen such a huge treasure before, and yet Ismail rejected it and distributed it to the army.

Indeed, Ismail was the most generous commander for his soldiers and for the hungry poor during a period of political upheaval.

If we analyze the above text, we will see that this description of events does not correspond to the real course

of events either. Neither is it accurate from the standpoint of geographical location of objects and paths. According to this chronicle, only after the capture of Baku and the treasury of the Shirvanshahs did Ismail advance to the Gulustan fortress and defeat the Shirvanshah. In fact, after crossing the Kura, the path inevitably led to Shamakhi, then the fortress of Gulustan, and only then far to the east, to Baku. In addition, it is hard to imagine that the Shirvanshah would sit and wait for the enemy to capture Baku and its treasury and then come for him personally. In addition, Ismail's campaign against Gulustan looks illogical: why did he need a mountain fortress if he had already taken the treasury? The real picture, which is reflected in dozens of manuscripts of the era, shows that Ismail caught the Shirvanshah by surprise and defeated him, captured Shamakhi but did not find the treasury there. He found out that the son of the Shirvanshah had gone to Baku and assumed that one part of the treasury was there and the other was in the traditional residence in the Gulustan fortress. Therefore, he struck at both Baku (sending the emirs and then approaching it himself) and the Gulustan fortress (he began the siege, then went to Baku, leaving part of the troops for the siege) at the same time.

Nevertheless, the inconsistency of the facts with the real chronology of events does not detract from the merits of the chronicle under consideration from the point of view of the study of miniatures.

Then Ismail went to conquer the Gulustan fortress.

And this was the time for the main standoff with the enemy. While Ismail was rapidly advancing towards Nakhchivan, Alvand slowly retreated to the south, towards the Sharur steppe. Then, according to Amini, Ismail ordered the commanders to fully arm themselves in anticipation of jihad, while putting on the Safavid crown. Then he came out of the tent, radiant like the morning sun, and mounted his horse. The numerous army of the enemy led the Safavid army into confusion and prompted Ismail to rush to the Aq-Qoyunlu army personally. This was his first direct participation in the battle.

This fact of the chronicle also does not correspond to the information of other chronicles, according to mod-

### Miniature "After the capture of Shamakhi"



ern historians. The latter indicate that Ismail did not actually stand aside, but also participated in the battle with the Shirvanshah near Jabani and in the siege of Baku and Gulustan. In addition, it is known that Ismail did not "sit on a structure" (see below) in the battle against Alvand, but took part in it, which was, according to researchers, one of the reasons for the victories of the Safavid army. The direct participation of the leader in the battle increased moral readiness of his warriors for self-sacrifice and victory.

According to the chronicle, during the battle, Ismail sat on a small structure created for him, while great emirs began to load countless treasures stored in the Aq-Qoyunlu camp on camels. And again, Ismail generously left nothing for himself and distributed everything

*Opening of the book with a miniature “The victorious procession of Ismail at the head of the army”*



among the ghazis. Wasting no time, Ismail moved to Tabriz on the same day, where, according to Amini, the townspeople warmly welcomed him and took him to the Shah's garden "Hasht Behisht" ("Eight paradises").

Futuhat shows that there was no movement ready to rush into battle at the call of the Shah before. Rather, the viability of the movement and faith in a new leader arose after a series of successful campaigns organized by the associates of Sheikh Heidar (2, p.9)

Thus, most of the work was done up to the key moment of the conquest of Tabriz in 1501.

By itself, the figure of Shah Ismail, combining his unusually dynamic charisma and military prowess, was, of course, worthy of a heroic dastan. The details and episodes of his amazing life formed a bizarre and wonderful core of legends about him, his ancestors who opened the way for him, his heroic followers of the Qizilbash, his victories over the Aq-Qoyunlu Turkomans, Uzbeks, Ottomans and Sunnis of various persuasions.

Michel Membre described the reading of the epic about Shah Ismail in public squares, in coffee houses

and talked about their immense popularity. Perhaps representatives of the late Qizilbash nobility were customers. ❀

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