

Author: Brexton O'Donnell
Faculty Mentor: Professor Nabil Al-Tikriti
School: University of Mary Washington

Rise of the Safavids: From Mystics to Shahs

At the close of the fifteenth century, the Safavid Order, rallying around a thirteen-year old leader, burst onto the historical landscape by crushing the Shirvanshah and the Aqqyunlu dynasties on the battlefield and removing them from power. The Aqqyunlu, a Turkic nomadic confederation, had ruled in the region of Eastern Anatolia since the late fourteenth century, adding Persia and other territories to the empire in the mid-fifteenth century, and just thirty years previously had mounted a major challenge to the formidable Ottoman Empire. The Shirvanshah dynasty had ruled in Azerbaijan since the ninth century. Both dynasties had smashed and brutally suppressed previous Safavid uprisings, with the latest having occurred and been put down in 1488, just twelve years prior to the rise of Shah Isma'il.ⁱ

Against these powerful dynasties was pitted a small Sufi order that had begun as a traditional contemplative order of dervishes in the fourteenth century. How did this peaceable order of mystics first evolve into a force of radical Shi'i Islam, to an order of paramilitary ghazi warriors fighting on the fringes of the Aqqyunlu Empire against Christians, and finally to the ruling dynasty and predecessor of modern-day Iran? How did the Safavids then found an enduring dynasty, the first independent and stable dynasty in the region since the Sassanid Empire, that would last for two centuries and rapidly convert Sunni Iran to Twelver Shi'ism, the religious doctrine it still follows today? This paper will seek to answer these questions by tracing the historical development and evolution of the Safavids since their foundation as a Sufi order in the fourteenth century into the early years of the dynasty in the sixteenth century. While a number of factors enabled the Safavid order's historical rise and evolution, two primary factors emerge in explaining the rise of the Safavids; first, the conversion of the Qizilbash tribes, explaining the Safavid shift to militant Shi'ism, and second, the forcible conversion of Iran to messianic Twelver Shi'ism, enabling them to form a stable polity in the region.

The story of the Safavids begins with Shaykh Safi-al-Din (d.1334), their founding figure. The basic details of the story are quite similar to the origin stories of other Sufi brotherhoods from this time period. During the mid-thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries, the regions of Anatolia and Iran were wracked by chaos and various disruptions following the Mongols' destruction of the Seljuq Turks, and in the power vacuum that resulted, Sufi brotherhoods led by mystic dervishes (often holy men from Asia who moved west in the face of the Mongol advance), provided a much needed source of stability in many regions.ⁱⁱ

The Safavid order, originally known as the Safaviyya, was founded in 1301 by the mystic Safi-al-Din in Ardabil, a city in northwest Iran. The Safaviyya under Safi-al-Din were a peaceable, contemplative order, whose elite devotees listened to music, danced, and sang mystic poetry at private gatherings to achieve states of ecstasy. The exchange of gifts between the devotees began to spread the influence of the Safavids, particularly into the Ardabil bazaar.ⁱⁱⁱ Following the death

of Safi-al-Din in 1334, his descendants continued to inherit his position as the leaders of the order. A shrine to the Safavid founder was built in Ardabil, which became a prosperous pilgrim city due to the shrine's presence, solidifying Safavid influence within the region.

The order's first major steps down the road of becoming an order of radical Shi'i ghazi warriors who were devoted to a messianic Twelver Shi'ism did not take place until about a century later, under the leadership of Shaykh Junayd (d.1460). Junayd was the first leader of the Safavids to espouse explicit Shi'i beliefs, such as a particular reverence for the fourth caliph, Ali.^{iv} A turn towards Shi'ism in and of itself should perhaps not be viewed as surprising. Ardabil was under the rule of the Shi'i Qaraqyunlu dynasty at the time, and the city was located near the frontier of Islam in the area, the type of border region where holy war and extreme religious sects flourished. The order's radicalization towards a missionary, militant, and messianic movement arose as a consequence of their increasing political entanglement with the dynasties in the region. When Junayd assumed leadership of the Safavid order, he became involved in a leadership dispute with his uncle, Shaykh Ja'far. The Qaraqyunlu leader Jahanshah chose to back Ja'far, exiling Junayd and his followers.^v

This split in the Safavid order led to an abrupt radicalization. Exiled from the urban comforts of his hometown in Ardabil in 1448, Junayd eventually made his way to the rival Aqqyunlu confederation and married the sister of Aqqyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan in 1456. The gap between his exile and his marriage alliance with the Aqqyunlu seems to have been the genesis of Junayd's rebuilt Safavid order. While undoubtedly the Safavids retained the local power they'd obtained in Ardabil and many of their connections, Junayd focused his missionary conversion efforts on the Turkmen tribes of Azerbaijan and eastern Anatolia in the period of his exile from Ardabil.^{vi} There was a particularly high concentration of tribal groups from Central Asia in this region that had migrated there as a result of displacement caused by the Mongol invasion.^{vii} In turning to these rural nomadic tribes for converts and support, Junayd was not exactly breaking new ground. Shifts in political and religious affiliation to radical groups were not at all new for the tribes themselves. They were recent converts to Islam who were quite willing to adopt a fanatical devotion to Islam and fight as holy warriors, though often maintaining elements of many of their central Asian shamanistic traditions.

These early Qizilbash groups, consisting primarily of Turkic tribal confederations hailing mainly from Azerbaijan and northwest Iran, were not only remarkably quick to adopt the Safavid brand of Shi'i Islam however, they also stuck with it. Their tribal practices seem to have already been compatible with Islamic traditions to some extent. A tradition of tribal gathering for a sort of communal prayer had already been easily adapted into a form of futuwwa ritual gathering by some of the tribal groups in the region by the thirteenth century.^{viii} The initiation ritual for entering the futuwwa was first adopted to include Shi'i styled praises to Ali as Muhammad's successor, and later appears to have become the basis for the *djem* ritual of the Qizilbash.^{ix} It seems that even before pledging loyalty to the Safavids, tribal groups in the Eastern Anatolia/Azerbaijan region were receptive to Shi'ism's emphasis on Ali as the successor to Muhammad.

These future Qizilbash tribes were also susceptible to Safavid millenarian and messianic claims,

not because of any inherent gullibility as sometimes suggested, but general political and religious trends within the region during the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries.^x Messianic and millenarian movements were common in this time period, also making an appearance in messianic views and claims about the Ottoman Sultans Selim I and Suleyman I in the sixteenth century, both men contemporaries of Shah Isma'il. The Turkmen tribes in central and eastern Anatolia, under pressure from the conquests and centralizing tendencies of Mehmed the Conqueror and his successors, plus the constant clan warfare amongst and between the Aqquyunlu and Qaraqyunlu confederations, were highly receptive to a revolutionary ideology with promises of the messiah's coming, viewing Junayd and later his successors as essentially being that messiah.^{xi} Junayd was often spoken of as the incarnation of God on earth by his followers, and his grandson Isma'il inspired an even more fanatical devotion with his explicit claim to being a Mahdi, even to the point where the Qizilbash were willing to engage in ritual cannibalism as a sign of devotion to him.^{xii} The relative speed with which Junayd Safavi recruited this large and highly devoted following is explained to a great extent by the non-tribal elements he recruited, specifically other mystic *shaykhs* and dervishes, who already had tribal networks of their own, and sometimes more urban followings as well.^{xiii}

By changing the Safavid support base to primarily large nomadic tribal elements, Junayd initiated two primary long-term effects on the Safavid Order. He laid the groundwork for the network of Qizilbash tribes his grandson would later use to forge an empire, and by absorbing these groups, who were fervent and militant in their devotions, with tendencies towards messianism, he radicalized the Safavid order as a whole into a highly militant movement.

In keeping with the fanatical, messianic devotion with which his new Qizilbash followers viewed him, it should come as no surprise that the claims of the Safavi family to *sayyid* status as descendants of the seventh imam of Twelver Shi'ism first date from Junayd's time.^{xiv} These messianic claims, backed by real charisma and leadership qualities, would be an ever-present element of Safavid leadership from Junayd to his grandson Isma'il, who took it even further.^{xv} The period in general saw an upsurge in Shi'i messianic claims that borrowed heavily from Sufism; two other important Shi'i religious figures (Musha'sha' and Nurbaksh) who died in the 1460s had similar messianic aspirations.^{xvi}

In the period leading up to the beginning of the sixteenth century, Sufi orders provided a fertile breeding ground for radical messianic Shi'ism. By accepting the possibility of direct contact with God, Sufism allowed for the claims to personal messiah status made by certain Shi'i leaders, as contrasted to the Sunni *ulama* or the more spiritual dervish orders.^{xvii} Junayd and the activities of his Safavids fit into the broader context of the Middle East at the time, in which Shi'i leaders with messianic aspirations made use of Sufism, the dominant way of understanding Islam on the fringe of the Middle East and West Asia, as an outlet to preach their religion and gain converts. The essential transformation of the Safavids under Junayd was that he added worldly sovereignty as well as spiritual to the order's primary goals.^{xviii}

What made Junayd stand out was his success more than any uniqueness to his methods. Whatever ambitions he had when he assumed leadership of the Safavids were clearly heightened during his exile while he gathered the future Qizilbash tribes to the Safavid standard, and his

alliance with Uzun Hasan, leader of the Aqqyunlu, brought those ambitions closer to fruition. While a nominally Sunni leader, Hasan made frequent alliance with Sufi leaders, was a determined opponent of Junayd's enemy Jahanshah, and sought to cast himself as a ghazi warrior waging holy warfare on the Christian powers in the region, an agenda on which Junayd was already leading his Turkmen converts by waging ghazi warfare against the Christians of Trebizond.^{xxix} By making his Safavids into a military ally of the Aqqyunlu and marrying into the dynasty, Junayd effected the transformation of the order into an independent religious movement with its own regional base of military support, and serious military/political aspirations in Iran and Azerbaijan.

Junayd Safavi was killed in 1460 while fighting against the Shirvanshah, the Sunni Muslim rulers of much of modern Azerbaijan.^{xxx} The Safavid leadership was inherited by Junayd's young son, Haydar, who would continue down the militant course laid out by his father. Following Uzun Hasan's conquest of Azerbaijan, the Safavids under Haydar once again became based out of their former headquarters at Ardabil, though Haydar retained the following of militant Turkmen tribes that his father had gathered to the Safavid standard.^{xxxi} Shaykh Haydar's power in the region received a further boost after the death of the Aqqyunlu's leader Uzun Hasan, in 1477. While Uzun Hasan had been friendly to Sufi movements such as the Safavids, and his successor was not, the power vacuum left by his death created an opportunity for the Safavids.

After Uzun Hasan's death, he was eventually succeeded by his twelve-year old son, Ya'qub. Unsurprisingly, Ya'qub was a much less absolute ruler. Where in Uzun Hasan's reign the Safavids had acted in concert or at least with the effective consent of Uzun Hasan, in Ya'qub's reign, under Haydar's leadership, the Safavids assert themselves as an effectively independent movement, formally organizing the Qizilbash bands for the first time, waging ghazi warfare, and seeking to convert others by force and extend their own power. By the end of Haydar's time, the Safavids were effectively an independent paramilitary movement that occasionally worked with the Aqqyunlu throne when it suited their ends, mainly in waging warfare against Christians.^{xxxii} Eventually, a Safavid attack on the Shirvanshah, who were vassals of the Aqqyunlu, forced Ya'qub to send an army to crush Haydar's Safavids. Haydar was killed and beheaded, and the Safavids suppressed though not destroyed. Haydar was survived by his three young sons, who were imprisoned by the Aqqyunlu.^{xxxiii}

Here, the story of the Aqqyunlu's disintegration also became the story of the Safavid rise. After Ya'qub's sudden death in 1490, the Aqqyunlu empire quickly fell apart into civil war. The sons of Haydar, Ali, Ibrahim, and Isma'il, were released by one of the contenders in the civil war to enlist Safavid support in his campaigns against his rivals.^{xxxiv} Eventually this particular contender, Rustam, put down the Safavids as a potential threat to him, killing the eldest brother, Ali, in battle, and exiling the younger two brothers. The middle brother Ibrahim's position and eventual fate after Ali's death is somewhat unclear, but he apparently died by 1497/1498. Isma'il seems to effectively assumed the complete leadership of the Safavid order after that time, guided by his tutors and advisors at his refuge in Gilan (northwestern Iran), as he was only ten or eleven at the time.

In 1499, the young Isma'il and his advisors emerged from hiding in Gilan, and after summoning a

large force of Isma'il's Qizilbash followers to meet them at Erzincan, launched a whirlwind campaign through the divided and weakened realms of the Aqqyunlu, starting by crushing the old enemies of the family, the Shirvanshah.^{xxv} Two years after the beginning of this campaign, in 1501, Isma'il entered the city of Tabriz, the Aqqyunlu capital, in triumph. Over the next seven years, Isma'il and his followers consolidated Safavid control over the Aqqyunlu lands, repeatedly defeating the forces of the various Aqqyunlu splinter factions in the process.^{xxvi} In 1508-1510, Isma'il's Safavids also fought the Uzbeks for control of former Timurid territories in Iran, and emerged victorious.^{xxvii}

How did a disparate collection of fanatical Qizilbash tribes led by a thirteen-year old at the start of the campaign succeed in toppling and creating an empire? Isma'il was undoubtedly charismatic and an effective leader in many ways, but it is hardly credible that a thirteen year old was entirely responsible for the military success enjoyed by the Safavid uprising that began in 1499. Instead, Isma'il seems to have been guided by a number of senior commanders who survived from the days of his father Haydar's campaigns through Azerbaijan and Georgia.^{xxviii} Isma'il had wished to emerge from hiding and assail the Aqqyunlu at some point previous to the time he did so, but was convinced not to do so by his advisors.

Later, Isma'il did emerge from hiding and launch his campaign, and while there are a number of stories revolving around what prompted him to do so, the deciding factor was most likely that his veteran commanders, observing the disintegration of the Aqqyunlu territories, decided the timing was right. Even after Isma'il's march towards glory began, the behavior of the relatively small force initially at his command appeared to reflect the caution of older and more experienced hands, seeking to avoid dangerous engagements, rather than the ambition and lust for revenge of a teenage spiritual and political figure.^{xxix}

After initial success, more former Safavid *ghazi* warriors, also veterans of previous Safavid campaigns and rebellions, poured in to join Isma'il, giving him a veteran core force of *ghazis* to work with as he moved to meet with his Qizilbash followers near Eriznican. As opposed to his predecessors, Isma'il generally did not expose himself to risk by personally directing soldiers in battle during this time period, nor did the Safavids often risk large portions of their army in pitched battles unless they had a clear advantage.^{xxx} While no doubt reflective of his youth and inexperience, it also suggests that the Haydari veterans in functional command of the army had perhaps learned the lesson of the deaths of Junayd, Haydar, and Ali on the battlefield, and the importance of keeping their charismatic leader alive as a central rallying point. The fact that Isma'il at this point was effectively the last of the Safavid dynasty was likely also taken into account.

A much larger question looms over the matter of the actual military conquest of the Shirvanshah, Aqqyunlu, and Timurid domains than how it was achieved. Conquerors had temporarily taken control of the region before, with the Aqqyunlu themselves as the most recent and important example. In some ways, Isma'il, the grandson of Uzun Hasan, could be seen as the natural successor to the Aqqyunlu rulers who came before him. He emerged from the Aqqyunlu Civil War victorious due to a number of reasons, chief among them his following of Qizilbash tribes, giving him the most universal (and devoted) following of any of the contenders for power in the

period of Aqqyunlu disintegration. But a conqueror at the head of a confederation of nomadic Turkmen tribes was nothing new in the region. The Aqqyunlu and the Qaraqyunlu had similar roots. What made the Safavids able to unify the region and forge it into a stable polity that remained under the control of an independent Safavid dynasty for over two centuries?

A key difference between the Safavids and their predecessors was the manner in which they derived and structured power in their new Persian state, namely basing it around Twelver Shi'ism. Their predecessors in the region, the Qaraqyunlu, Aqqyunlu, and Timurids, were nomadic powers who exercised power in an essentially nomadic way, from clan-based power structures. This made centralization and effective exercise of state power problematic, particularly for the Safavids' direct predecessors the Aqqyunlu.^{xxxii} The founders of a nomadic dynasty, such as Chinghis Khan for the Mongols, Timur i-Lenk for the Timurids, and Uzun Hasan for the later period of the Aqqyunlu, would often be vigorous and charismatic leaders who were effectively absolute rulers. However, due to the appanage system of the Mongols and their successors in West Asia and the Middle East, wherein all family members of the dynasty were equally legitimate as successors, succession would usually result in civil warfare and the fragmentation of the empire established by the dynasty's founder.

The Safavid Empire, while it was initially created primarily through the usage of an army of Qizilbash Turkmen tribal confederations, was fundamentally based around a different conception of power. As opposed to the primacy of clan in an inherently nomadic system, in the Safavid structure of power, all authority came from the Shah, the living embodiment of the Shadow of God.^{xxxiii} Twelver Shi'ism, particularly with its view of the Hidden Imam, or Mahdi, a prophesied savior of Islam who has been concealed by God until the time comes for him to emerge and change the world into a perfect society, worked particularly well for the Safavids in establishing a state ideology revolving around the divine authority of the Shah, as Isma'il claimed to be the Mahdi himself.

The invocation of divine authority to justify absolute power was not a radical departure for the Qizilbash nomads themselves, who were already devoted followers of the Safavid messianic doctrine. The divine right of kings to absolute rulership was nothing new to Persia itself either, though it had not been seen in such a highly realized form since ancient times.^{xxxiii} The radical Shi'i Islamic ideology expressed by the Safavids allowed them to overcome the inherent contradictions and problems of attempting to establish a centralized authority with a largely nomadic following over a vast area with many sedentary populations. When one also remembers that while the Safavids employed a nomadic following, the origins and headquarters of the order were in the ancient city of Ardabil, perhaps it is not so surprising that the Safavid dynasty was the one to finally neutralize the influence of nomadic clans in the administration of an empire won by those same clans.

The first thing that Shah Isma'il did after conquering Tabriz in 1501 was to proclaim Twelver Shi'ism the official religion of his new empire, disavowing Sunnism, requiring Muslims in Isma'il's realm to publicly renounce their previous religion by ritually cursing the first three caliphs, and adding Shi'ite elements to prayer.^{xxxiv} At the time of Isma'il's conquest of Tabriz, his future domain, the former territory of the Shirvanshah, Aqqyunlu, and Timurids, was largely

populated by nominal Sunni Muslims. A century later, Safavid Iran would have a sizable majority of Shi'i Muslims, a trend that remains true to the present day. The motivations for the Safavids to undertake this policy were clear enough; aside from the radical nature of the Safavid Order by this time easily lending itself to forcible conversion, creating a unified state and removing the danger of Sunnis as enemies within that state was a kigucal step. But how then did the Safavids actually achieve such a rapid conversion of their vast empire?

Part of the answer lies in the importation of additional Shi'i scholars from elsewhere in the Islamic world.^{xxxv} In particular, an influx of Shi'i scholars from the region of Jabal Amil, moving away from an intolerant Sunni Ottoman Empire, (modern south Lebanon) is often credited with playing a major role in the establishment of the new Shi'i religious order in Safavid Iran.^{xxxvi} The exact details, nature, and significance of this migration have been disputed, with some scholars arguing that its significance and size has been overstated, and that there was in fact Shi'i scholarly opposition to the Safavid version of Shi'ism.^{xxxvii} What is clear is that while there was indeed Ottoman repression of Shi'ism, and some Shi'i scholars from Lebanon did go to Iran early on in the Safavid dynasty's reign, there was not a constant rate of migration during the reigns of Shah Is'mail and his successor.^{xxxviii} Those scholars who did come did receive important and influential positions in the religious hierarchy which should not be underestimated, and these Amilis doubtlessly played an important role in spreading Shi'i learning, but there was no general exodus of Shi'ites from the Middle East into early Safavid Iran that can account for the mass Iranian conversion to Twelver Shi'ism.

But what then did account for the conversion of Iran? The answer is a combination of two factors, re-education and repression. Through a combination of both, by the time of the seventeenth century, just one century after Shah Isma'il, the clear majority of Iran's Sunni population had become Shi'i.^{xxxix} The effort expended by the Safavid state in their determination to convert Iran completely to Shi'ism was impressive. The aforementioned Amili scholars played an important role in the religious re-education of Iran's populace, occupying a variety of positions created for the purpose of spreading Shi'ism amongst Iran's population.

The Safavids did not stop at offering positive encouragement to convert from Sunnism however. When Shah Isma'il announced the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran, he also inaugurated the outlawing and brutal repression of Sunnism in Iran. That the Safavids should persecute the majority sect that they considered to be false Islam is hardly surprising, especially when viewed as an effort to solidify their power base in Iran against the Sunni Ottomans to the west. What is more startling is that the Safavids extended their purges to many Sufi sects, rather ironically considering their own origins. Shi'ism and Sufism had long been associated, with many Sufi sects being strongly influenced by Shi'i ideas and often effectively becoming Shi'ites themselves.^{xl}

Up until the Safavids seized power in Iran, Sufism and Shi'ism had generally been closely related, especially in the post-Mongol invasion period from the thirteenth to fifteenth century, with the Safavids themselves as well as the Ottoman Bektashis the prime examples. Despite being founded by a movement that started as a typical Sufi order, by the seventeenth century anti-Sufi polemics were common in Safavid literature.^{xli}

In part, this was no doubt because the same esoteric tendencies that allowed radical proto-Shi'ism to flourish in Sufi orders during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also allowed for ideas not sanctioned in the eyes of Twelver Shi'ites. For decades after the Safavid conquest of Iran, with varying degrees of intensity, the Safavids virulently persecuted Sufi orders, especially ones such as the Naqshbandis that were particularly associated with Sunnism in some way.^{xliii} Other orders such as the Khalvatis, the Ismai'iliyya, the Dhahabiyya, and the Nurbakshis were also brutally suppressed.^{xliiii} While the Khalvatis were another group easily connected to Sunnism, the same did not hold true for every Sufi sect; the Nurbakshi were decidedly Shi'i in their affiliation and claimed spiritual descent from Ali.

The specific example of the Nurbakshiyya order is perhaps indicative of the less ideological reason behind the Safavid persecution of Sufis; the order was savagely put down for good in 1537 by Tahmasp, Isma'il's successor, not due to ideology but because their leader had overstepped in arming his followers and building fortresses around the base of his power in central Iran. Their leader, Amir Qavam al-Din, was executed for behaving like a king rather than a dervish.^{xliiv} The rulers of the Safavid dynasty were quite conscious of their own origins as militant Sufis who built up an armed following strong enough to topple an empire. Both ideological and worldly concerns drove Safavid suppression of Sufi orders within their empire. While brutal, the Safavids achieved their aims with harsh suppression of Sunnis and Sufis alike. In just a few generations, they transformed Iran into a unified Shi'i state from the chaos that followed the collapse of the Aqqyunlu empire.

As opposed to the disintegration of the Mongol Il-khanid in the fourteenth century, this time no power vacuum was left to be filled by Sufi orders. Instead, the Safavids successfully established a central authority based around a unifying messianic religious ideology, and in doing so laid the foundation for an Iranian polity that has continued to the present day.

In summation then, many factors played a role in the rise of the Safavids and their evolution from an order of Sufi mystics in Ardabil to a revolutionary theocratic empire, but two particular stages in the process deserve to be singled out. The first is Shaykh Jonayd's conversion of the nomadic tribes that would make up the Qizilbash. These fanatical followers of the Safavid doctrine would be the essential tool that Jonayd's grandson would wield in creating the Safavid empire. The conversion of the Qizilbash also effectively marked Jonayd's successful transformation of the Safavids from their mystic roots to a radical movement with its own paramilitary force and aims of worldly power. The second factor in the rise of the Safavids worth singling out was the harsh but effective conversion of Iran to Twelver Shi'ism by Shah Isma'il. The Safavids emerged victorious in the struggle following the Aqqyunlu collapse in large part thanks to the nomadic Qizilbash, but they succeeded in creating a lasting empire because they implemented a radical absolutist state ideology that successfully transcended the limitations of a system in which power was derived from nomadic clans, and created the foundation of an empire which would endure for over two centuries.

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