

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Battle of Chaldiran

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The Turkish kingdoms of the Kara Kuyunlu and Aq Kuyunlu did not last. One of the reasons for this transience was that their rulers did not establish enduring political and administrative structures to sustain their empires. The Safavids were successful while the Kuyunlus failed because they built a legacy of lasting political and administrative structures. Their imprint on the political, social, cultural, administrative and religious life of Persia was so profound that it lasts to this day. Indeed, the Safavids had a major impact on the history and culture of Central and West Asia as well as India and Pakistan.

By any measure, Shah Ismail I (1487-1524) was a brilliant man. He was also a ruthless man. Ascending the throne of Tabriz in 1501 at the young age of fourteen, he set out to consolidate the former empire of the Aq Kuyunlu under his flag. In the uncertain times following the collapse of the Kuyunlu kingdoms, people needed a new sponsor for protection. Constant warfare had exhausted the population and some believed in the coming of the Mahdi or the resurrection of the hidden Imam. Ismail built on the groundwork laid by his grandfather, Shaykh Junaid. Junaid had traveled throughout Turkey, Persia and Syria, attracting followers, and converting the Turks to his religious order. Through his tireless struggle, the Safaviyya became a major political religious movement in West Asia. As news of Ismail's military successes spread, many of the Turkish tribes gravitated to him. Followers of the Safaviyya movement flocked to Tabriz to join his forces. A rapid expansion of his territories followed.

It is impossible to discuss the achievements of Ismail without at the same time considering his religious leanings because they determine to a large extent the subsequent relations between the emerging Safavid Empire and the Ottomans. Shah Ismail was an ardent champion of the Ithna Ashari *Fiqh*. The core of his guards wore a red cap with twelve perforations in it signifying their allegiance to the twelve Imams. These were called the Qazilbash. Ismail was at once the temporal and spiritual leader of the Safaviyya movement, combining in his person the dual roles of the qutub (pole), *sadr* (religious head) and Sultan. His word was the law, and his followers venerated him as an invincible Shaykh in the lineage of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r). Ismail was also heir to the legacy of his maternal grandfather, Sultan Uzun Hassan; he therefore considered the vast Aq Kuyunlu Empire that was once ruled by Uzun Hassan rightfully his by birth.

As soon as he entered Tabriz, Ismail declared the Ithna Ashari to be the official *Fiqh*. At the time, most inhabitants of Tabriz followed the Shafi'i *Fiqh*. Ismail was ruthless in forcing his religious views on the population. Many of the Shafi'i ulema were punished, banished or worse. Such forceful introduction of Shi'a views was repeated in later years when Shah Ismail captured, Herat and Khorasan. Whether this

was done because of the youthful zeal of the king or because the Shi'a tenets provided him a distinctive political religious umbrella, it is impossible to tell. Some of the views held by Ismail were extreme, and contrary to Ithna Ashari beliefs as well. For instance, in his earlier years, Ismail I, as evidenced by the poetry he wrote, considered himself the shadow of God on earth, invincible in war. He even placed the name of Ali ibn Abu Talib (r) before the name of the Prophet. Muslims who follow the Ithna Ashari Fiqh do not accept such views.

The Turks played a crucial role in the early history of the Safavids. Most of Ismail's army was from the Turkish ranks. Prominent Turkish tribes who joined Ismail's armies included the Turkmen, the Qajar, the Afshar, the Shamblu and the Ustajlu. When Ismail captured Tabriz from the Aq Kuyunlu, he appointed a Turk, Shamsuddin Kukunji, as his vizier. Kukunji had served in a similar capacity with the Aq Kuyunlus. The political and administrative structure of the Aq Kuyunlus was taken over and consolidated under the Safavids, thus providing a measure of continuity in the government. To provide the Persians a stake in the empire, they were given a dominant share of civilian posts.

It was Ismail's genius that in his person the Turkish and Persian elements were fused to give birth to the unique Safavid culture. Following the capture of Tabriz, Ismail moved quickly to consolidate his hold on the territories once ruled by Uzun Hassan. Advancing westward towards Anatolia, he captured Diyarbakr. He then turned his attention to Iraq, capturing Baghdad in the year 1508. Meanwhile, a strong foe had emerged in Uzbekistan in the person of Muhammed Shaibani Khan. Shaibani had captured Herat and had extended his conquests to Khorasan, which was considered by the Safavids to be theirs.

Conflict between the expanding empires of the Safavids and the Uzbeks was inevitable. The two armies met at the Battle of Merv in 1510. Shaibani Khan fell on the battlefield. The Uzbeks were defeated, not vanquished. They regrouped under Ubaidullah Khan and continued their struggle. The victorious Shah Ismail added Herat to his empire and appointed his governor to that province.

It is in this melee, involving the Uzbeks and the Safavids that we first hear of an enterprising young man, Zaheeruddin Babur, the founder of the Moghul dynasty in India. Shaibani's death did not contain the resilient Uzbeks. His successor Ubaidullah returned with a fury to re-occupy Khorasan in 1512. Babur, who was at the time a young prince of thirty-two, had his own claims to the territories of Farghana which had been taken from his father by Shaibani Khan. In the Battle of Khuzduvan in 1512 between the Safavids and the Uzbeks over the control of Khorasan, Babur fought on the side of the Safavids against Ubaidullah. Nonetheless, Ubaidullah won this battle.

Shah Ismail was not reconciled to the loss of Khorasan. The following year, when the Uzbeks got embroiled in a civil war, the Safavids reclaimed the province without a fight. Khorasan remained a Safavid province thereafter. Thus, in the course of twelve years, between 1500 and 1512, Ismail had conquered all the lands extending from Khorasan to the Euphrates and from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. He was no doubt aided in this effort by the unquestioned loyalty of his followers, and the fervent religious zeal of the Safaviyya order. His personal assets included a dynamic personality and he was fearless in combat.

Shah Ismail's legacy was to give Persia social, political and administrative stability, and to bestow upon a land ravaged by centuries of Mongol and Tatar invasions, an enduring religious cohesion and a distinct national consciousness. The present boundaries of Iran roughly correspond to those ruled by Shah Ismail, minus the territories of Iraq and eastern Anatolia which were lost to the Ottomans, and parts of

Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia which were lost to Russia in later centuries. Southern Afghanistan was contested between the Safavids and the Moghuls but became a part of an independent Afghanistan in the 19th century.

The large migration of Safaviyya followers from Anatolia to Tabriz caused an alarm in Istanbul. The Ottomans, initially well disposed towards the Sufis, became suspicious of them after an attempt on the life of Sultan Bayazid II by a wandering dervish in 1492. When Ismail captured Tabriz in 1501 and made it his capital, the migration of Turkish followers of the Safaviyya order accelerated. The movement was so widespread that entire border districts were depopulated. In 1502, the Ottomans cracked down. Anyone suspected of being a sympathizer of the Safaviyya order or a Qazilbash was apprehended and deported to Thrace in northern Greece. Ismail's incursions into the Ottoman province worsened the situation. But the real confrontation between the Safavids and the Ottomans started in 1511 when Sultan Bayazid II fell ill and rumors spread that he was close to his death. The Qazilbash in western Anatolia, who had felt persecuted by the Ottomans, sensed an opportunity to get even, and rebelled. Under their leader Shah Quli, who had declared himself to be the Mahdi, they went on a rampage, indulging in widespread killings and looting.

In Islamic history, as we have seen in the Murabitun revolution in the Maghrib, social disaffections have often been expressed in religious terms. The uprising of Shah Quli was not a religious war, much less a Shi'a-Sunni confrontation. Rather, it was an expression of the festering disaffection of some Turkoman tribes due to lack of opportunity in the Ottoman Empire, which had now become a political establishment. By contrast, the rapid expansion of the Safavids was a call to ambitious young men, and restless tribes, to try their luck at adventure and advancement. So potent and organized was this rebellion that the governor of the province fled before the rebels. An initial detachment of Ottoman troops under Prince Qorqud was defeated. Bayazid II finally sent his grand vizier Khadim Ali Pasha to crush the rebellion. In a pitched battle at Sivas in 1511, the rebels were routed. Both Shah Quli and Khadim Ali Pasha fell on the battlefield. However, many of the Qazilbash escaped across the Ottoman-Safavid border. Some were apprehended by Shah Ismail and punished for their excesses, but most of them found a home in the Safavid armies.

The porous border between Anatolia and Azerbaijan brought the first military confrontation between the Ottomans and the Safavids. Faced with an uprising in the east, the Ottoman Porte in Istanbul forced Sultan Bayazid II to abdicate in favor of his son Salim (1512). This young monarch had witnessed first hand the zeal of the Qazilbash while he was governor of Trebizond, a district adjoining Azerbaijan. Salim knew that a military clash with the Safavids could not be postponed. He advanced towards Azerbaijan at the head of the disciplined *janissars*. Shah Ismail and Sultan Salim I met at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. The Ottomans enjoyed a distinct advantage in artillery and guns and the contest was a disaster for the Safavids. So complete was the rout, that in their haste to retreat, Shah Ismail's favorite wife was left behind in the battlefield and fell into Ottoman hands.

The Battle of Chaldiran was a defining moment in Islamic history and a benchmark for relations between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. It was the only time that the Safavids fought the Ottoman armies head-on, and it ensured that eastern Anatolia-and for a while parts of Azerbaijan-would be ruled from Istanbul. The city of Tabriz was exposed to Ottoman conquests, and the Safavids thought it prudent to shift their capital east to Isfahan. During subsequent incursions by the Ottomans, the Safavids chose to retreat, allowing the handicaps of distance, geography and terrain to arrest Ottoman advances. The Battle of Chaldiran shattered Shah Ismail's spirit. Gone was his conviction that he was invincible in battle. He did not take part in any further military engagements, delegating the fighting to his generals.

Shah Ismail, the leader of a Sufi order, rose to become the father of one of the most important dynasties in Islamic history, and the founder of a brilliant Islamic culture, which at its zenith combined the best traditions of Persia with those of the Turks, the Uzbeks and the Afghans. Shah Ismail died in 1525.

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