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The Lords of Ardabīl

The town of Ardabīl, situated in eastern Āzarbāyjān in north-western Iran, lies at an altitude of some 1,524 metres on a plateau surrounded by mountains; the highest of these, Mt Savalān (4,810 metres), an extinct volcano from which snow rarely departs completely, even in summer, rears its massive bulk 20 miles west of the town.

For a short time during the tenth century, Ardabīl had been the chief city of the province of Āzarbāyjān, but it had soon been superseded by the city of Tabrīz, 130 miles to the west. Tabrīz rapidly established itself as an important station on one of the world's great trade routes from the Far East and Central Asia, and as the hub of a network of highroads leading to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean ports, to Anatolia and Constantinople, and north through the Caucasus to the Ukraine, the Crimea and eastern Europe. The supremacy of Tabrīz was assured when Ardabīl was sacked and left in ruins by the Mongols in 1220, while Tabrīz escaped a similar fate the following year by payment of a large indemnity to its conquerors. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Ardabīl was no more than a small provincial town, lying slightly off the beaten track, as it still does today.

At first sight, therefore, Ardabīl seemed an unlikely choice as the nerve-centre of a revolutionary movement. Yet its relative remoteness and unimportance constituted advantages for the leaders of this movement, who wanted as little as possible to attract the curiosity and almost certain hostility of the authorities at Tabrīz. At the back of Ardabīl, too, lay the impenetrable mountains, forests and swamps of Gīlān, and the proximity of this refuge was to save the movement from extinction at the end of the fifteenth century.

Such considerations, however, were presumably far from the

mind of the first member of the Safavid family of whom we have historical knowledge, a certain Fīrūzshāh “of the golden hat” (*zarrīnkulāh*), whom we find established as a wealthy landowner in the Ardabīl region sometime during the eleventh century. The origins of the Safavid family are still enveloped in obscurity. Hinz has talked about an alleged migration of Fīrūzshāh to Āzarbāyjān from the Yemen, and has taken this to be an indication of the Arab origin of the family. Ayalon has claimed that the Safavids were Turks. Kasravī, after a careful examination of the evidence, came to the conclusion that the Safavids were indigenous inhabitants of Iran, and of pure Aryan (i.e., Iranian) stock; yet they spoke Āzarī, the form of Turkish which was the native language of Āzarbāyjān. The only point at issue for Kasravī was whether the Safavid family had been for long resident in Āzarbāyjān, or had migrated from Kurdistān. More recently, Togan re-examined the evidence, and suggested that the ancestors of the Safavids may have accompanied the Kurdish Ravidid prince Mamlān b. Vah-sūdān when the latter conquered the regions of Ardabīl, Arrān, Muqān and Dār-Būm in 1025.

Why is there such confusion about the origins of this important dynasty, which reasserted Iranian identity and established an independent Iranian state after eight and a half centuries of rule by foreign dynasties? The reason is that the Safavids, having been brought to power by the dynamic force of a certain ideology, deliberately set out to obliterate any evidence of their own origins which would weaken the thrust of this ideology and call in question the premises on which it was based. In order to understand how and why the Safavids falsified the evidence of their origins, one must first be clear about the nature of the Safavid *da'va* (propaganda, or ideological appeal), and about the bases on which the power of the Safavid shahs rested.

The power of the Safavid shahs had three distinct bases: first, the theory of the divine right of the Persian kings, based on the possession by the king of the “kingly glory” (*hvarnah*; *khvarenah*; *farr*). This ancient, pre-Islamic theory was reinvested with all its former splendour and reappeared in the Islamic garb of the concept of the ruler as the “Shadow of God upon earth” (*ẓill allāh fi'l-arḑi*); second, the claim of the Safavid shahs to be the representatives on earth of the Mahdī, the 12th and last Imām of the Ithnā ‘Asharī Shī‘īs, who went into occultation in A.D. 873/4

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and whose return to earth will herald the Day of Judgement; third, the position of the Safavid shahs as the *murshid-i kāmil* or perfect spiritual director, of the Ṣūfī Order known as the Ṣafaviyya.

Before these points are discussed in detail, reference should be made to what may be called the “official” version of the early history of the Safavid family. The earliest extant genealogy of the Safavid house (*dūdman*) is that contained in the *Ṣafvat al-Ṣafā* of Ibn Bazzāz, written about 1357/8, less than twenty-five years after the death of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Abu’l-Faṭḥ Ishāq Ardabīlī (1252–1334), who founded the Ṣafaviyya Order and set the Safavid house on the path to future greatness. The *Ṣafvat al-Ṣafā* is primarily hagiography, and must therefore be used with caution, but is of vital importance both because of its early date and because its account, as subsequently amended, became the “official” version followed by all later histories up to and including the genealogical work entitled *Silsilat al-Nasab-i Ṣafaviyya*; the latter was a late Safavid work written during the reign of Shāh Sulaymān (1666–94) by a descendant of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn’s spiritual director Shaykh Zāhid-i Gīlānī.

The purpose of the “official” Safavid genealogy was to establish the descent of the Safavid house from the 7th Shī‘ī Imām, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, and through him to ‘Alī himself, the 1st Shī‘ī Imām; but even in the “official” Safavid genealogy, there are inconsistencies and variations in the number of links in the genealogical chain. There is little dispute about the five links in immediate descent from the Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim, and only minor inconsistencies in the chain between Fīrūzshāh Zarrīnkulāh and Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn. It is the middle portion of the genealogy, consisting of eight links in the “official version”, on which the greatest doubt has been cast; of these eight persons, four are unspecified Muḥammads.

Following the “official” version of early Safavid history, it appears that Fīrūzshāh was appointed Governor of the province of Ardabīl and its dependencies by a son of Ibrāhīm b. Adham; this son is described as “King of Iran”. Ibrāhīm b. Adham was an eighth-century ascetic whose life has been much embellished by legend. There is no historical basis for the belief that he was a prince of Balkh who renounced worldly pomp in favour of a life of abstinence. We are further told that Fīrūzshāh converted

to Islam the inhabitants of Āzarbāyjān and Muqān, who were infidels (*kāfir*). Both of these statements are patently false. Ibrāhīm b. Adham died in A.D. 777, so no son of his could possibly have been alive in the eleventh century, and the inhabitants of Muqān and Arrān had embraced Islam during the seventh and eighth centuries. Fīrūzshāh was a man of wealth and authority, and owned much property and livestock; indeed, his animals were so numerous that he selected for his residence a place called Rāngīn, on the edge of the forests of Gīlān, where the pasturage was excellent. Fīrūzshāh became noted for the nobility of his character, the excellence of his manners, the felicity of his conversation and the generosity of his behaviour. He was said to be a *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet), and, as a result of his abundant piety and zealous religious observance, the people of the region became his disciples (*murīd*). After his death, his son 'Ivaż moved to Isfaranjān, a village in the Ardabīl district. On the other hand, a "non-establishment" source states that Fīrūzshāh was the first member of the Safavid house to come to Ardabīl; this statement is not necessarily incompatible with the "official" account, for "Ardabīl" may mean "the Ardabīl district".

The son of 'Ivaż, Muḥammad Ḥāfīz, disappeared at the age of seven, and the customary rites of mourning were performed for him. After seven years had elapsed, Muḥammad suddenly reappeared, wearing a jujube (reddish-brown) coloured robe, and with a white turban wound around the ordinary hat of the period. Round his neck was hung a copy of the Qur'ān. In answer to questions about his absence, he replied that he had been carried off by *jinn*, who had taught him the Qur'ān and instructed him in the obligatory sciences, such as the precepts and laws of God. From then onwards, Muḥammad Ḥāfīz lived a life of perfect piety and scrupulous religious observance. Two new, predictive elements have been introduced into the "official" account at this point: the supernatural element (the abduction by *jinn*); and the repetition of the socio-religiously significant number "7".

Muḥammad's son, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Rashīd, lived an uneventful life as a small landowner (*dihqān*) and agriculturalist at the village of Kalkhūrān near Ardabīl. According to the *Silsilat al-Nasab*, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's son, Quṭb al-Dīn Abu'l-Bāqī Aḥmad, was living at Kalkhūrān at the time of the Georgian invasion of Iran and capture of Ardabīl in 1203/4. During the sack of Ardabīl, Quṭb

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al-Dīn took refuge with his infant son Amīn al-Dīn Jibrā'īl¹ in a cellar, with one of his followers on guard above. The guard, attacked by a marauding Georgian, succeeded in overcoming him, but the sound of the struggle brought further Georgians to the spot. Before they arrived, the guard pulled a large grain-bin over the entrance to the cellar. The Georgians killed the guard and left. The cellar was too cramped for the number of people, mainly women and children, concealed in it, and Quṭb al-Dīn was forced to seek another hiding-place. Before he found one, he was caught by the Georgians, and left for dead with a severe wound in his neck. He was later recovered from a pile of corpses of other victims by a band of ruffians out for loot, and taken back to the cellar to be nursed by his relatives. Quṭb al-Dīn was still alive in 1252/3, when Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn was born. Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, recounting the story of these events in later days, used to say that, when Quṭb al-Dīn lifted him up on his shoulder, he could put four fingers into the gash left by the sword wound.

Amīn al-Dīn Jibrā'īl, like his forefathers, combined the successful practice of agriculture with the holy life. He did not mix at all with the common people, but was always silent and at his devotions. He chose as his spiritual director Mawlānā Imām al-Rabbānī Khvāja Kamāl al-Dīn 'Arabshāh. He married Dawlatī, the daughter of 'Umar Bārūqī, who bore him Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn in 1252/3; six years later, Amīn al-Dīn Jibrā'īl died.

With the birth of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, the history of the Safavid family enters a new and decisive phase. According to the traditional hagiographical accounts, signs of future greatness were stamped upon his brow from infancy. He did not mix with other boys, but spent his time in prayer and fasting until God removed the veil from his heart. He experienced visions, seeing angels in the form of birds which in turn assumed human shape and conversed with him. Sometimes the *awṭād* and *abdāl*² would approach him and comfort him with the assurance that he would reach the state of gnosis and become the focus for the hopes of the world.

When he was about twenty years of age, Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn sought a spiritual director among the recluses of Ardabīl, but none could meet his needs. A certain Shaykh Najīb al-Dīn Buzghūsh at Shīrāz was recommended to him, and Ṣafī al-Dīn journeyed to that city only to find that Shaykh Najīb al-Dīn had died before

his arrival. Ṣafī al-Dīn remained at Shīrāz for some time. Many dervishes gathered round him and conversed with him, and he continued to ask advice from the local shaykhs regarding a possible spiritual director. Eventually, he was advised that no one in the world could analyse his mystical state and interpret his visions except Shaykh Zāhid-i Gīlānī. After a protracted search, during which he experienced visions in which Shaykh Zāhid was present, and after suffering illness and hardship, Ṣafī al-Dīn succeeded in finding the latter at a village on the shores of the Caspian Sea. He reached Shaykh Zāhid's residence during Ramazān and, although it was Shaykh Zāhid's custom not to receive visitors during the month of fast, Ṣafī al-Dīn was at once summoned into his presence. Unlike other spiritual directors whom he had visited, Shaykh Zāhid did not turn away his face, but gazed steadily upon him, and Ṣafī al-Dīn knew that he had reached the goal of his aspirations. At once, he made the formal act termed *tawba*, that is, repentance of his sins and renunciation of the worldly life. Ṣafī al-Dīn remained in Shaykh Zāhid's private quarters until the end of Ramazān. He was granted yet another audience with the Shaykh during Ramazān, because Ṣafī al-Dīn was in doubt as to whether his mystical states and visions were inspired by God or by Satan. Shaykh Zāhid resolved his doubts and answered his questions, and affirmed his exalted spiritual status; there was but one veil between Ṣafī al-Dīn and God, he declared, and that veil had now been removed.

When Ṣafī al-Dīn reached Gīlān in 1276/7, he was twenty-five years of age, and Shaykh Zāhid was sixty. He followed Shaykh Zāhid's spiritual guidance for twenty-five years, until the death of the latter in 1301. As Shaykh Zāhid grew older, he became more and more dependent on Ṣafī al-Dīn who, when the Shaykh's eyesight failed him, used to sit at his side, describe visitors to him and conduct interviews for him. At some point during this period, the close bonds between the two men were further cemented by a reciprocal marriage alliance: Ṣafī al-Dīn married Shaykh Zāhid's daughter, Bībī Fāṭīma, and gave his own daughter in marriage to Shaykh Zāhid's son, Ḥājjī Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad. Ṣafī al-Dīn had three sons by Bībī Fāṭīma: Muḥyī al-Dīn, who died in 1323/4, Ṣadr al-Milla va'l-Dīn Mūsā and Abū Sa'īd.

1. The dervish Naṣr ibn Sukharā'ī

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Some of Shaykh Zāhid's disciples grew jealous of Ṣafī al-Dīn's favoured position and of his influence with the Shaykh, who expressed his affection and esteem for Ṣafī al-Dīn in the most forthright terms: "Ṣafī's hand," he said, "is my hand; whoever is a convert of his is mine also; whoever is a convert of mine but not of his, is wanted neither by me nor by him. I am Ṣafī and Ṣafī is I." The Ardabīlīs present flung themselves into a joyful dance³ at these words, and shouted ecstatically. Zāhid nodded and said, "You are indeed right to rejoice, because today is your day."⁴

Equally unequivocal was Shaykh Zāhid's designation of Ṣafī al-Dīn to succeed him as head of the Zāhidiyya Order. When Shaykh Zāhid saw that Ṣafī al-Dīn was competent to give spiritual guidance, he granted him a prayer-mat and authority to teach. Ṣafī al-Dīn protested his inadequacy for the task; his only goal, he said, was the threshold of Zāhid. Zāhid replied:

Ṣafī, God has shown you to the people, and His command is that you obey His call. . . I have broken the polo-stick of all your adversaries, and cast the ball before you. Strike it where you will; the field is yours. I have been able to live the life of a recluse, but you cannot. Wherever you are bidden, you must go, to make converts and give instruction. It is God who has given you this task.⁵

Although this passage may have been written with the advantage of hindsight, nevertheless it is a fact that, with the assumption by Shaykh Ṣafī of the leadership of the Zāhidiyya Order, henceforth named the Ṣafaviyya Order after him, there commenced the period of active proselytism which transformed what had been a Ṣūfī Order of purely local significance into a religious movement whose influence was felt throughout Iran, Syria and Asia Minor.

Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn's succession was resented by some members of Shaykh Zāhid's family. One of Ṣafī's principal opponents was Jamāl al-Dīn 'Alī, Shaykh Zāhid's son by his first wife, who had assumed that he would succeed his father. Designation by the incumbent shaykh, and not a father-son relationship, was the important criterion in determining the succession, and so the supporters of Shaykh Ṣafī were on firm ground. Ironically, after Ṣafī became leader of the Order, the father-son relationship not only assumed paramount importance in deciding who the next leader should be, but was tacitly assumed to be the only possible basis for selecting him. Ṣafī al-Dīn's determination to keep the

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leadership of the Ṣafaviyya Order in his family makes it clear that, from an early stage, he intended to use the Order as a stepping-stone to political power.

Every year, Shaykh Ṣafī visited the tomb of his spiritual director, Shaykh Zāhid, and took costly gifts for his children and the attendants of the shrine. Ḥājji Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, Zāhid's son and Ṣafī's son-in-law, was the object of Ṣafī's especial favour. At the time of his marriage to Ṣafī's daughter, Ṣafī had made over to him estates and other property, and year by year he increased his gifts to Ḥājji Shams al-Dīn and paid off any debts incurred by him. Shaykh Ṣafī rejected a suggestion by his wife that he make over two-thirds of his estates to his son-in-law, but he did agree to pass on to the latter income accruing from his own property. However, Shaykh Ṣafī's beneficence did not extend to the descendants of Jamāl al-Dīn 'Alī, who had challenged him for the leadership of the Zāhidiyya Order. Shaykh Ṣafī appears to have been party to the usurpation by his son-in-law of the revenue from certain *vaqfs* (lands held in mortmain) which rightfully belonged to Jamāl al-Dīn's son, Badr al-Dīn, because a decree of the Mongol Īlkhān Abū Sa'īd dated 1320 ordered the restoration of this revenue to Badr al-Dīn. On the other hand, Shaykh Ṣafī was ready to do battle with the Mongol authorities in defence of Ḥājji Shams al-Dīn's descendants if their rights were infringed, as for instance when a Mongol *amīr* attempted to convert some of their private estates (*milk*) into tribal pasture (*yurt*), or when boundary disputes arose.

Toward the end of his life, Shaykh Ṣafī made a will in favour of his second son, Ṣadr al-Dīn Mūsā, appointing him his successor and vicegerent, charging him with the administration of the votive offerings, effects and private estates belonging to the Order and making him responsible for the continuance, as far as was possible, of the practice of providing sustenance for the poor at God's gate. Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn died on 12 September 1334. Ṣadr al-Dīn Mūsā had been born in 1304/5, and was therefore thirty years old when he succeeded his father as leader of the Ṣafaviyya Order. Since his elder brother had predeceased Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, and his three younger brothers died soon after their father, and left no issue, Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn acquired any *vaqf* property and lands which they possessed, and so became not only the spiritual heir but the sole material heir of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn.

Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn's long term of office (1334–91) was marked

by an important development: the sacred enclosure of the Safavid family at Ardabīl was begun and completed in ten years under his direction. The tomb of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn is antedated by the *ḥaram-khāna*, which was built between 1324 and 1334,⁶ but many of the ancillary buildings, including rooms for private meditation, the *dār al-ḥuffāz*, or room housing the Qurʾān-reciters, the *chīnī-khāna*, or room later used to house Shāh ʿAbbās I's gift of porcelain to the shrine, but whose original function is unknown, were added by Ṣadr al-Dīn Mūsā; after the establishment of the Safavid dynasty, further buildings were added by Shāh Ismāʿīl I and Shāh Ṭahmāsp, and Shāh ʿAbbās I embellished and restored many parts of the shrine. At the same time, Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn continued his father's efforts to spread the Safavid religious propaganda, and many of the Ilkhanid *amīrs* and Mongol nobility became disciples of the Shaykhs of Ardabīl. Already during the lifetime of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, Rashīd al-Dīn, the great *vazīr* of the Īlkhāns Ghāzān Khān and Ōljeitū, had demonstrated great veneration for the Safavid Shaykh, and among the Mongol *amīrs* who counted themselves as his disciples was the powerful Amīr Chūbān. Several sources record versions of a conversation which is alleged to have taken place between Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn and Amīr Chūbān. Asked by the Amīr whether the king's soldiers or his own disciples were the more numerous, the Shaykh is said to have replied that his disciples were twice as numerous; another version of his reply alleges that in Iran alone for every soldier there were a hundred Ṣūfīs. To this the Amīr is said to have replied:

You speak truly, for I have travelled from the Oxus to the frontiers of Egypt, and from the shores of Hurmūz to Bāb al-Abvāb [Darband], which are the furthest limits of this kingdom, and I have seen the disciples of the Shaykh embellished and adorned with the ornaments and garb of the Shaykh, and they have spread the sound of the *zīkr*⁷ to those parts.⁸

Regular contact was maintained between Ardabīl and these Safavid proselytes, and the basic organisation of the Ṣafaviyya Order was established by Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn. The Safavid propaganda network already extended to eastern Anatolia and Syria, and many recruits were made among the pastoral Turcoman tribes inhabiting those regions. Members of these tribes later constituted the élite of the Safavid fighting forces, and it is