

A Catalogue of Known Gardens in Safavid Iran

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The custom of Iranian kings to move from cool to warm places depending on the seasons, hunting along the way as well as the need to have different residences in different provinces for political reasons has led to the creation of a network of gardens in all the provinces and along the main communication roads. These gardens can be divided in three main types.

1. An urban type defined as *dawlatkhāna* (literally house of government) that were royal complexes consisting of a fabric of courtyards and gardens that contained the residence for the king and his family (*haram*), buildings used for official audiences (*divān khāna*), or the private audiences of the king (*khalvat khāna*), offices (*daftar khāna*), and services. The latter, called *buyūtāt*, consisted of baths (*hammām*), stables (*tavīla*), storage (*sufra khāna*), kitchens (*matbakh*), workshops (*kār khāna*), library (*kitāb khāna*), etc.. These formed a garden city, *bāghistān*, that could vary in size depending on the relevance of the urban centre close to which they were created. A *maydān* constituted the vestibule to the royal complex where public facilities such as mosques, water cisterns, and bazaars were provided. Examples of these royal complexes are well-known in the three Safavid capitals Tabriz, Qazvin, and Isfahan, and in

smaller cities such as Khuy, Shiraz, Kashan, Mashhad, Farhabad, Ashraf, and Sari.

2. A suburban pleasure garden type defined as *bāgh-i shāh* (royal garden), *bāgh-i takht* (throne garden) or *chahār bāgh* that were great gardens placed in suburban areas used for the private pleasure of the king and his family. Examples of this type are the *bāgh-i hizār jarīb* in Isfahan, *bāgh-i shāh* in Shiraz and *bāgh-i shāh* at Fin near Kashan. A promenade lined with trees and watered by water channels called *khīyābān* usually connected the suburban gardens to the urban centre.
3. A type of garden created in hunting resorts by adding small pavilions or water basins to a natural landscape in the woods or on natural fountains.

The nature of the documents that attest the presence of these gardens vary from news in the local chronicles and histories of the period that mention the existence, creation or events that took place in the garden; to poems that highlight their aesthetic and ethic values; to miniatures that depict parts of the garden; to descriptions by foreign travellers at times completed by views, sketches or plans; and to traces of the gardens found in aerial photos or plans of the cities. The catalogue here presented regards those royal complexes or gardens of which I have

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found graphical documents.

The history of the Safavid kings passes through their gardens. The Safavid dynasty was founded in 1501 by Ismail, the grandson of Uzun Hasan Aq Qoyunlu who ruled Tabriz from 1466 to 1478 and belonged to the Turcoman population of Ardabil. His partisans were Turcoman tribesmen, militant followers of the Sufi order, called also *qizilbāsh* or “red headed,” for the red hat (*tāj*) given to them by Ismail’s father, Haydar. The Safavids descended from the great Sufi Shaykh Safiaddin (died 735 A.H.), who belonged to the *shāfi‘ī* sect of Sunni Muslims. Nevertheless, they used the Shiite militants to gain political power against the Sunni Turkomans. Under the leadership of Sultan Haydar, this trend became manifest and their organization as militia became more effective with their distinctive hat (Haqiqat 1998, 3:1250–51). It is no surprise that once Ismail conquered Tabriz, he established Shiism as the religion of all his subjects, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of the Tajiks professed the orthodox Sunni religion of the Khalifs of Bagdad, the Seljuks, and the Turko-Mongols of Samarkand, Sultaniyya, Herat and Tabriz.

The rise of Ismail (1501-1526) against the Aq Qoyunlu kings of Tabriz is reported in a chronicle of the Safavids, from which we learn that on the day he was crowned as king coins were struck, proclamation read, and the prince played polo (*chawgān*) in the *maydān* of Tabriz (Shukrī 1984, 45). The Ottoman painter Matrakçı depicts this *maydān* in a miniature representing the city. It had been built by Uzun Hasan Aq Qoyunlu in the suburb north of the Mahan River. The *maydān* was the vestibule of a royal garden, in which stood the octagonal Hasht Bihisht palace that became part of Ismail’s possessions. The first years of his reign passed in conquering different provinces and expanding his dominion from Baghdad to Khorasan. But after he was defeated at the battle of Chalduran near Tabriz in 1514, Shah Esmail retreated at Khuy to lead a life of royal

pleasures, hunting drinking wine and feasting, until his death in 1524. Here he created a garden. In *Tarikh-e Soltani* it is reported that Shah Esmail in the seventh year of his reign spent the winter in the *qeshlaq* of Khoy and Urumi and built at the tomb of Imamzada Sahl Ali a splendid dome and building, “*gunbad-i ‘ālī va ‘imārat*” and at a source of water, building, basin, great garden and gardens, “*imārat, hawz, chahārbāgh va bāghāt*”. Ismail’s garden is described by a Venetian merchant in 1507. His account focuses on the turrets made of antlers of deer, hunted by Shah Ismail, that were erected in the *maydān* in front of the royal house to display the king’s skill as a warrior. These turrets can be identified in a miniature by Matrakçı. The royal residence consisted in a great garden with quarters for men and women, disposed around two magnificent courtyards (Romano 1980, 3:442). A later drawing by Pascal Coste shows a similar layout for the gardens at Khuy.

Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576) who succeeded Ismail, decided to transfer his capital from Tabriz to Qazvin, in 1544, after the attack of the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman. Here he engaged in a large urban development program, the greatest part of which concerned the gardens for the residence of his court. It developed into a garden city, *bāghistān*, that became famous as Sa‘adatābād. It was built to the north of the existing city to which it was linked through a *khīyābān*. and two *maydāns*. After completion of the garden city in 1557, Shah Tahmasp moved from the old palace established by Shah Ismail to the new palace. The court poet and historian, ‘Abdī Bayk Navīdī Shīrazī (1515–1580), was ordered to write an encomium of the royal garden complex in verse. He composed a poetic compendium called “Garden of Eden” (*jannat-i ‘adan*) finished in 1558/9. It contained five long poems, four of which were about the palaces, gardens, flowers, and fruits of *sa‘adat* garden and one focused mostly on the paintings in the royal loggias (Ishraqi 1988, 4:2183–2200). These poems are a particularly interesting source for the

comprehension of the aesthetic values in the Safavid period.

A troubled period followed the death of Shah Tahmasp in 1576. Shah Esma'il II (1576–1577) and Shah Mohammad (1577–1587), ruling in succession had too short a lapse of time to create gardens. It ended when the majority of emirs sided with the sixteen-year-old 'Abbās Mīrzā, who aided by his tutor, marched to Qazvin among public manifestations in his favor in 1587. Once enthroned in the Chihil Sutūn (forty-columned) palace in the Sa'ādat garden, Shah Abbas ordered his slaves to use their scimitars to behead the emirs who had been compromised in the past, or constituted a threat to the authority of his tutor. The twenty-two heads were then exposed on spears, in *maydān-i Sa'ādat*. It marked, in the memory of the emirs, the first day of his reign (Bellan 1932, 20). The Sa'ādat garden was the core of these dramatic events and the *maydān* at the door of this garden was the best place to represent his might to whoever still had plots in mind.

Then Shah Abbas engaged in many years of battles to reunify Iran and restore the lost regions to his authority. The year 1597 saw the definitive pacification of the Mazandaran and Gilan regions and the return of a time for benevolence. Shah Abbas then created royal gardens in Sari, Rasht, Farahabad, and Ashraf. The latter hunting resorts were colonized with the people deported from Georgia. In each of them, the royal complex was composed of a contiguous fabric of gardens (*bāghistān*), accessed through a *maydān*, wherein certain public facilities such as cisterns, schools, mosques and bazaars were provided. He used to stay in Ashraf, a city considered as his second capital, for long periods and at times received guests and ambassadors in his gardens. These royal garden cities illustrate how the Shah used gardens to improve an existing city or create a new one to colonize the land.

The king's historian Iskandar Munshi reports

that Shah Abbas erected three lofty pillared porches (*tālār*) at Miyānkāl, a hunting resort on the Caspian Sea, where he would display his power by inviting emirs and guests to take part in a hunting ritual (Munshi 1956, 3:945). These *tālārs*, together with great water basins, were typical garden structures that transformed wild nature into a royal garden of pleasure. Mulla Jalal, another historian of Shah Abbas, tells how the king, during a hunt at Lanjān, chanced upon a piece of land full of water and water birds. There he ordered houses with loggias (*ayvāns*) to be built, and on a side of the water they created a small hut made of bamboo where he could hide and wait for the birds. The water piece was made into a rectangular pond with a bridge, in such a manner that when removed, no one could enter. Lilies, pot marigolds, violets and wild carnations were planted on the banks of the pond. Oat was sown all around so that the place was always green. Plane trees surrounded by a moat bordered with bamboo prevented animals from entering and rendered the whole place into a landscape garden. A poem indicates its name "pleasure corner of the shah" (*gūsha-yi 'aysh-i shāh*) and date of creation (1017 A.H./1608) (Mulla Jalal 1366 SH /1987, 353–54). We thus learn how a mere change in the landscape, without enclosing walls, but through introduction of a moat allowed the royal gaze to enjoy wild nature from a protected *ayvān*. In the Safavid context, wild nature, or rather undefiled nature, simply was God's creation epitomized by paradise, *bihisht*, and its numerous passing evocations in the Quran. Architectural and decorative elements, such as the water basin or the *khiyābān*, were part of the garden. They did not preclude a sense of being in undefiled nature, but rather revealed the role of the king dominating the whole world created as the shadow of God.

In 1590 Shah Abbas, following in the steps of his father in Qazvin, ordered the construction of a royal bazaar (*qaysariyya*) in Isfahan. The bazaar development was substantial and considered superior

to its model in Tabriz. According to his historian Naṭanzī, “the *maydān* was leveled for Polo and horse racing, river sand was spread on it, and it became a colored reflector of the forms of the heavenly bodies” (McChesney 1988, 106). At that time, the *maydān* had a single level arcade and the shops opened directly towards it. The Ali Qapu gate on the western side of the *maydān*, gave access to the pre-existing Naqsh-i Jahan garden. In 1601–1602, further improvements were carried out in the *maydān* to make it more attractive to merchants and customers. Plane trees and willows were planted and surrounded by a stream, making it into a promenade and resting place for everyone. A two-tiered bazaar with spacious shops and a lofty roof was built around the *maydān*. Della Valle says that the *maydān* provided better shade in Isfahan than in Qazvin. The shade, a garden feature, was provided by the two tiers of arcades surrounding it. The bazaar folk had to move there from the former commercial religious and social heart of the city, the old *maydān* that was related to the Jāmi‘ Mosque and bazaars and had been established under the Seljuks. The construction of the mosques Shaykh Lutfullāh (finished 1603) and Shah (started 1612) completed the *maydān*, making it into the new center of Isfahan. At the same stroke, these improvements of the *maydān* brought the largest commercial and religious city activities under the gaze of the Shah, enabled him to collect taxes from the new bazaar, and provided an audience for the rituals he staged on the *maydān* in front of his palatial gate, Ali Qapu.

Isfahan followed the model of Qazvin urban design. A garden city (*bāghistān*) was created south of the old city center. A large *khīyābān* was built in 1596 to connect the entrance at Dawlat gate near Shah Abbas’s urban residence *dawlatkhāna* to his great suburban garden known as the *chahārbāgh-i hizār jarīb* that stood south of the Zayande River. A canal dug from the river irrigated the garden and ran through the *khīyābān* that constituted the main

axis of the new garden city (Valle 1972, 30). The Georgian Allāhvirdī Khan was commissioned to build a monumental bridge finished in 1602, that connected the two portions of the promenade. The part on the side of the city was called *chahārbāgh-i pāīn* (low) and the one across the river was called *chahārbāgh-i bālā* (high).

A drawing by Kaempfer showing gardens along the *khīyābān* leading to the royal suburban garden bears the names of the high dignitaries, revealing the creation of a residential neighborhood for the Turkic aristocracy located within easy reach of the city. The new addition was not only separate but also in competition with the old center, where powerful families controlling real estate and commerce continued to live (McChesney 1988, 118). A comparison between the architectural features of this promenade and that of Qazvin gives an idea of the change in scale, reflecting Shah’s display of power. A grand perspective with strong theatrical effect was conveyed by the elaborate design of water led through variously shaped basins and waterfalls. These were flanked by steps and four rows of trees. At regular distances, the entrance buildings (*‘imārat-i sardar or dargāh*) of the gardens, with their ornate painted loggias, overlooked the promenade. One of these structures, admired by all European travelers to the Safavid Isfahan, survives in a 1888–1890 picture by Ernst Höltzer. The historian Junabadi refers to the promenade, with its water basins and resting places for drinking wine or coffee and smoking opium, as a worldly paradise for the people (McChesney 1988, 114). A drawing by Pascal Coste, in 1840, clearly shows the water basins and other features of the promenade designed as an elongated garden.

After the death of Shah ‘Abbas in 1629, his successors, Shah Safi I and Shah ‘Abbas II lived unlike him a rather sedentary life creating multiple palaces and gardens in Isfahan, which attracted European tradesmen and adventurers like a magnet. Safi I (1629–1642) built the *tālār-i tavīla*, in the urban

precincts, wherein the nawruz feast of the year 1637 was celebrated and since then provided room for great receptions inside the palace precincts. He also built the *āyina khāna* palace in the suburban garden *sā'adat* also called new *hizār jarīb* (see table 15) on the southern bank of the Zayanda River. Here too a great *tālār* was combined with a masonry building, following the model of the palace built in the *hizār jarīb* garden, established by Shah 'Abbas the great, who was credited as "the inventor of the columned porch, *tālār*, in building 'imārat" (Astarabadī 1985, 134). The *tālār* of *āyina khāna* allowed the inclusion of the view of the river in the garden.

During the reign of Shah 'Abbas II (1642–1666), under the supervision of Sārū Taqī and probably thanks to his conception, a great *tālār* was added to the Ali Qapu building (Shamlū, Add. 7656:49b). It provided not only a more spacious lookout for the king, who could watch the rituals performed in the *maydān*, in the company of dignitaries, clergy and guests, but also a magnificent framework in which to be seen under a gilded *tālār*. Shah Abbas II added *tālārs* to the *chihil sutūn* and *khalvatkhāna* palaces in the royal precincts (Hunarfar 1972). He was the last Safavid king who enhanced the city with other theatrical devices related to gardens. A new *khīyābān* linked, through the Hasan Bayk bridge the palace precincts to the royal pleasance known as New Hizar Jarib. Here the king added the *namak-dān* pavilion and the *haftdast* palace for his harem.

Tavernier compares this *khīyābān* to the one created by Shah Abbas the great, remarking that although wider, it lacked such important garden and architectural features as the water channel in the middle and the beautiful gate buildings of the flanking gardens. The works carried out in 1650 transformed the bridge-dam into a monumental theatre on water. the reception of the new Hizar Jarib garden and its annexed bridge and *khīyābān* in the poem (written in 1124 A.H.) by Shaykh Ramzi, the admirer (*maddāh*) of Shah 'Abbas II, reveals a shift of attention toward the pleasures of royal life (Ramzi, 1344 SH/1965).

After Abbas II died in 1667, decline set in again when Shah Sulayman (Safi II), who ruled from 1667 to 1694, took power. His successor Shah Sultan Husayn (1694–1722) was the last Safavid king who added another great suburban garden called Farahabad to the south west of the river although his sons were nominally kings under the effective reign of Nadir Shah Afshar. It was as Brignoli writes the architectural outcome of a dynastic fold on itself that started after 'Abbās I, a fold which undermined the base of royal power, preparing the ground for the Afghan crisis and the collapse of the Safavids. The royal garden, which under the first Safavids had been a political proclamation, found itself reduced in Farahābād to no more than the shadow theater of a court, playing for itself the comedy of power and its destruction meant the fall of the Safavid dynasty.