

Introduction

The Idea of the Just Ruler in Persianate Art and Material Culture

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Abstract

Iranian kings, or those who reigned in lands under Persian linguistic and cultural domination, followed the idea of a Just Ruler: a pious king who looked after his subjects' divinity and spirituality in parallel to their earthly lives and needs. The Just Ruler extended righteousness and peace among his people while patronizing the construction of palaces, gardens, and new towns. The idea of a Just Ruler may be found in Sassanid monumental rock reliefs and written texts and then enriched and elaborated upon in the Islamic era by philosophers, poets, authors, and artists.

This issue of *Manazir Journal* focuses on how art and architecture served the representation of the Just Ruler in Persianate societies from Central Asia to Eastern Anatolia from the 14th to the 19th centuries. Illustrated books, architecture, and photography show how different kings and rulers referred to the Persian ideas of the Just Ruler by patronizing new constructions, richly illuminated books, and in the modern era, employing mediums such as photography and lithography for nationalizing the king's image.

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This issue of *Manazir Journal* investigates the idea of kingship in the Islamic Persianate world from the 14th to the 19th centuries and examines how it was culturally constructed and artistically represented. Persianate world refers to the regions under the cultural and linguistic influence of Persian, the language spoken on the Iranian plateau.¹ These lands stretched from Eastern Anatolia to Central Asia, passing through today's Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The idea of a Just Ruler in the Persianate world dates back to pre-Islamic Iran under dynasties such as the Achaemenid (559-330 B.C.) and Sassanids (224-651 A.D.) from which remain until today monumental architectural constructions or rock reliefs that project the idea of royal ideology. After the Muslim-Arab takeover in the 7th century, Muslim philosophers and authors enriched several of these ideas. From the 10th century onwards, Muslim dynasties such as Samanids (819-999) or Ghaznavids (977-1186) started ruling over the large lands of Khurasan and Transoxiana, while the Abbasid Caliphates (750-1258) controlled—at least nominally—the major parts of the Islamic world from Baghdad and Samarra in today's Iraq. The Samanid dynasty, nevertheless, traced their descent from pre-Islamic Iranian kings. Thus, not only did they seek to rebuild and revive the kingdom based on pre-Islamic Iranian beliefs, but they also revived the Persian language by patronizing poets and historians who recited, wrote, and translated historical and Qur'anic texts into Persian.² The new Persian language was written with the Perso-Arabic alphabet around the 8th-9th century and quickly became the main language of several monarchies and dynasties and the complementary *lingua franca* of the Muslim conquerors alongside Arabic during its spread throughout the Eastern Iranian world. From roughly the 10th century, Persian also became a language of learning and politics in Central and South Asia (Auer), eventually replacing Arabic as the primary medium for the expression of Sufism (Arjomand, "Persianate Islam").

Persian thus played an essential role in transmitting new religious and spiritual ideas highly tinted by Sufism and served as a vehicle for pre-Islamic political ideas and ideals, primarily based on the Sassanid's political legacy.

Persian literature and poetry were among the most effective means of reshaping and reviving the Just Ruler idea. Mythical kings appeared in the histories and epics of Ferdowsi's 11th-century *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) and Nizami's 12th-century *Khamsa* (Quintet). Their physical attributes, manners, and behaviours served as immortal models for the kings and emirs or sultans (Melville, 12-13). Patronizing the richly decorated copies of *Shahnama* became the hallmark of the true king until the 17th century in Iran, Turkey, India, and Central Asia.³

1. To read more on the Iranian plateau and the dynasties that ruled it, see Daryaei.

2. One may note Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari's (d. 923) *Great Commentary* of the Qur'an, or the Persian translation of his *History of Prophets and Kings*, as the most significant works translated into Persian. Abu Mansur Daqiqi (d. 976 or 980) was among a circle of four poets whom the Samanids commissioned to put into prose the ancient *Shahnama* (Book of Kings). It paved the way for the later versifications of the *Shahnama* by Ferdowsi.

3. For a brief art historical survey of *Shahnama's* illustrated copies, see Habibi, *Shahnameh* 15-19.

Persian scholarly texts also passed on the pre-Islamic idea of kingship; written by viziers and scholars, such as Nizam al-Mulk (1018-1092), or Najm al-Din Razi (1177-1256), to name but a few, these texts describe both kingly manners and the codes of rule. The idea of Persian kingship eventually shaped the identity and legitimacy of Muslim rulers in the lands under the cultural domination of the Persian language (Arjomand; Lambton; Tor).

This issue aims to demonstrate the continuity and vitality of the Idea of a just ruler in the Persianate world. However, we may not permanently analyze the dominant rhetoric or hegemonical discourses in one particular period. Instead, by analyzing the architectural and artistic productions in the Persianate societies over six centuries, we examine the shaping and reshaping, fluidity and flexibility of such an Idea. A topic that rarely appears in Persianate art historical studies.

Undeniably, Tamerlane (r. 1370-1405) or Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) are among the rulers whose kingships have almost always been scrutinized alongside their architectural achievements and constructions (on Tamerlane, see Lentz and Lowry; on Shah 'Abbas, see Canby). Indeed, studies and surveys on Persianate art history often focus on one specific dynasty or ruler and their artistic achievements; the Idea of the Just Ruler and its implication in artistic patronage is not discussed as much. *The Idea of Iran* series, for instance, supported by the Soudavar Memorial Foundation, examines the rise and fall of different dynasties in Iranian lands from the *Birth of the Persian Empire* (Curtis and Stewart), also known as the Achaemenid Empire, in 550 B.C. to *The Contest for Rule in Eighteenth-Century Iran* (Melville). Each volume gives a detailed account of historical, societal and artistic achievements under the rule of a specific dynasty.⁴ The priority is not, however, specifically given to the Idea of the Just Ruler, but instead on how different kings and emirs dealt with the Idea of Iran. The main interest of these series is how the Persian language, arts, religions and society have been reshaped, employed and developed under the new dynastical ideologies and identities.

One of the most recent studies in which the idea of kingship is examined through architectural constructions in pre-Islamic, early-Islamic, pre-modern and modern Iran is *Persian Kingship and Architecture: Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis* (Babaie and Grigor). However, the focus is only on architecture, mainly from pre-Islamic eras, and how it influenced Iranian architecture.

This issue of *Manazir Journal* hopes to offer another reading of the history of Persianate art and architecture; we note how the kings and princes, as the ultimate art patrons, used architectural monuments and artistic productions to place themselves—as the legitimate kings—in the long historical lineage of Just Rulers in Iranian lands. Thus, the volume offers a comprehensive and chronological outlook on several rulers from different dynasties by focusing on some of their artistic or architectural highlights; by reading and analyzing them, the authors present a new reading of rulers' perceptions of the Just Ruler, and not merely their dynastical identities.

Azadeh Latifkar's article, "The Reinvention of *Padishah-i Islam* in the Visual Representations of Ghazan Khan" (published both in Persian and English), first gives a general review of the Iranian heritage of the Just Ruler at the end of the 13th and early 14th centuries. The Persian bureaucrats

4. The series *The Idea of Iran* were published from 2005 to 2022 by I. B. Tauris including *The Age of Parthians* (vol. 2); *The Sasanian Era* (vol. 3); *The Rise of Islam* (vol. 4); *Early Islamic Iran* (vol. 5); *The Age of the Seljuqs* (vol. 6); *The Coming of the Mongols* (vol. 7); *Iran After the Mongols* (vol. 8); *The Timurid Century* (vol. 9); and *Safavid Persian in the Age of Empires* (vol. 10).

and viziers of the Ilkhanid dynasty (1256-1335) had effectively revived the Persian idea of kingship by the end of the 13th century for the benefit of their Mongolian masters. It is precisely in this period that Ghazan Khan (1271-1304), the sixth Ilkhanid ruler and the first to convert to Islam, employed the Perso-Islamic heritage to make and propagate his image as the *Padishah-i Islam* (King of Islam). He justifies himself both as king of *Iranshahr* (Iranian lands) and the legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad. Latifkar then analyzes the illustrated manuscripts produced under the reign of Ghazan Khan and examines the idea of *Padishah-i Islam* reflected in art production.

The Ilkhanid dynasty was the Iranian branch of the Mongolian empire founded by Chinggis Khan; the conversion of Ghazan Khan led to a collective conversion to Islam of many Ilkhanid nobles, and *Yasa*, the Chinggisid laws, were replaced by Islamic ones. However, the Chinggisid descendants remained an essential element for the legitimacy of the new rulers' reigning over Iranian lands and beyond.⁵ Tamerlane, the founder of the Timurid dynasty (1370-1507) ruling over Central Asia and Iran some 150 years after the Mongol invasion, declared himself as being a descendant of Chinggis Khan (through marriage to Chinggisid princesses). He then developed a new idea of kingship, a combination of Islamic, Iranian, and Mongolian ideas and ideals. Elena Paskelava shows in her article, "Samarqand's Congregational Mosque of Bibi Khanum as a Representation of Timurid Legitimacy and Rulership," how this iconic Timurid monument, built in part by Tamerlane himself and his grand-son Ulugh Beg, paralleled the Ilkhanid monuments, not only in their functions or beauty but additionally as a means to highlight the Timurid idea of kingship in the territories beyond central Iranian land.

Our inquiry into the embodiment of the Persian idea of the Just Ruler in art and material culture follows its historical survey in the Safavid era (1501-1733). The Safavids are considered the first Persian dynasty ruling in Iranian lands since the Arab-Muslim conquest in the 7th century. The Safavid idea of kingship, their art, and their material culture have been the subject of numerous studies, making them, perhaps, one of the most investigated subjects in the field of Iranian Studies. Isfahan, the third capital from 1590 to 1733, has often been the object of insightful research, as numerous monuments erected under Shah 'Abbas the Great and his descendants still remain, more or less, intact (Babayan; Babaie; Emami). However, the first two kings' (Shah Isma'il and Shah Tahmasp) courtly artistic productions deserve further examination in order to shed light on yet unexplored aspects. Amir Mazyar, in his article "Art as an Image of the Shah; Art, Rhetoric, and Power in Shah Tahmasp's Letter to Sultan Selim II," delves into the very long letter sent to the new Ottoman Sultan Selim II that was written by the scribes of Shah Tahmasp's court (1524-1576). By assuming that historical texts serve as a vehicle for several revelations about artistic productions, Mazyar interprets Shah Tahmasp's letter as a mirror of the ideal king's divine image, true kingly manners, the profile of his kingdom and the factual meaning of a Just Ruler.

According to pre-Islamic texts, to rule over *Iranshahr*, a king must have been granted the "royal divine glory" (*farr*). The ancient Persian kings' divine charisma was made transitive and spread throughout the realm of Iran, making it prosperous and luminous (Soudavar, "Farr(ah)" and *The Aura of Kings*). The physical and artistic manifestation of this divine glory is the subject of Negar Habibi and Shervin Farrdinejad's contribution. Their article, "The Sacred King in the Shah Tahmasp

5. The Uzbek Sheybanids, for example, were Chinggisid descendants, ruling over western Central Asia from 1428 to 1599.

Shahnama: The Tree as a Generative Idea of the ‘Idea of Kingship’,” traces the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian concept of royal divine glory through its visual translations within the *Shahnama-yi Shahi* in the 16th century. Reviewing the *longue durée* idea of Iranian kingship perceived within the Safavid royal ideology in the reigns of the first two monarchs, Shah Isma‘il (r. 1501-1524) and Shah Tahmasp, they analyze nine paintings of the most luxurious copy of *Shahnama* to point out how the artists showed a Just Ruler’s divine glory and dignity.

Despite being successful in international commerce and making Iran one of the grand “gunpowder” empires in early-modern Islamicate world, the Safavids were removed from the world map by the Afghan invasion in the early 18th century. The Afghans, in turn, were overthrown by Nadir Shah Afshar (r. 1736-1747), one of the Safavid’s commanders-in-chief, who declared himself a new king and founder of the Afsharid dynasty (1736-1749). Mélisande Bizzoire gives a new account of these tumultuous moments, whose art production has only recently received adequate attention (Bizzoire; O’Brien; Motaghedi). In “De la poudre aux yeux : les stratégies artistiques de légitimation des souverains d’Iran (1722-1750),” Bizzoire examines the monuments erected by Ashraf and Mahmud Afghan, and notably by Nadir Shah in Isfahan, Qazvin, and Mashhad to examine how they justify these rulers’ ambiguous legitimacy in space and time, reaffirming their rightness as the Just Rulers in the lands previously governed by the Safavids.

The Qajar era (1789-1925) is also among the periods for which scholars have only recently shown interest (Diba and Ekhtiar; Roxburgh and McWilliams; Fellingner and Gibson); several unknown societal aspects and artistic materials from this period are still to be discovered. Two articles in this issue shed light on two different aspects of this period. In his article “Reflection of Identity in the Mirror of the Narrative Images: Reproduction of the Idea of the Just Rule in the Portraits of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar,” Ali Boozari examines some of the illustrations of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the last monumental illustrated book in the Persian bookmaking tradition, where he explores the idea of the Just Ruler manifested in the portraits of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (1848-1896). Boozari’s article develops an interpretation of these paintings based on territorial conflicts and the idea of the Iranian kingdom and kingship in the middle of the 19th century.

Our survey of the Qajar period continues with “Visualizing Kingship in a Time of Change: Lens-Based Royal Portraiture during Late Qajar Rule” by Mira Xenia Schwerda, which gives a fresh account of the royal imagery, especially during the reigns of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah (r. 1907-1909) and Ahmad Shah (r. 1909-1925). Reviewing Iran’s hybrid social and political adjustments and developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Schwerda analyzes royal photographic portraiture both printed and painted, produced during this period in order to understand how new technologies and ideologies reshaped the image of the king and kingship in Iran.

Finally, Hamidreza Ghelichkhani’s essay in Persian is a study of calligraphy in the Persianate world. In “The Idea of the Just Ruler and the Art Patron in Persianate Calligraphy: The Colophons Made by Ja‘far Baysonqori and Muhammad Hussein Katib al-Sultan Shirazi,” Ghelichkhani explores two golden ages of Persian calligraphy, that of the Timurids and Qajars, in order to give an account of how the Just Ruler as an art patron was perceived and praised by the noblest masters of calligraphy. Furthermore, it addresses the way royal patronage persisted as an integral part of the characteristics of a Just Ruler during several centuries. His article also gives a detailed report on both calligraphers’ careers.

Our issue intends to provide a comprehensive image of the artistic and architectural expression of the Persian idea of kingship and the Just Ruler across six centuries. The authors give a vivid account of the *longue durée* Persian pre-Islamic ideals through consecutive dynasties in Islamic Persianate world. Their contributions offer new perspectives on how, at times, the return to these ideas was more palpable and tangible and how, at other times, Shiism and other spiritual schools, the visibility of a ruler, new technologies or imported ideas, completed or reshaped ancestral ideas. We are particularly delighted that we could include four articles by Iranian scholars currently living and working in Iran, Azadeh Latifkar, Hamidreza Ghelichkhani, Amir Mazyar and Ali Boozari.⁶ Their essays may serve as a *vitrine* to newly discovered materials, historical documents, and the state of scholarly research in Iran. Two of the articles are in Persian (Ghelichkhani, Latifkar), and Latifkar's text is accompanied by its English translation.⁷

We may add eventually that this issue focused only on the male rulers. Nevertheless, women as queen mothers, princesses and regents played significant roles in Persianate societies as developed by De Nicola, Matthee, Szuppe and Habibi, to name but a few. Indeed, scholars have started to pay more attention, and rightfully so, to the role of women in art historical and societal issues. We hope that these subjects will receive more attention in academic journals concerned with the study of art and material cultures of the Islamicate world.

6. We are most grateful to our Iranian colleagues who endeavored tirelessly, despite numerous internet blockages and a tumultuous climate in the universities from September 2022 onwards, to review and re-send their materials.

7. For Arabic, Persian, and Turkic source material, written in the Arabic script, we have used the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) transliteration system in the English articles.

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Negar Habibi is an art historian and lecturer of the arts of Islam at the University of Geneva. She is the author of *'Ali Qoli Jebādār et l'occidentalisme safavide: une étude sur les peintures dites farangi sāzi, leurs milieux et commanditaires sous Shāh Soleimān* (Brill 2018) and several articles on painting productions, women patronage, and Iranian society in 17th-century Isfahan. Habibi's current project, financed by the Soudavar Memorial Foundation (SMF) and the subject of her second monograph, consists of studying the Jean Pozzi Islamic and Persian collections shared between several European museums. Habibi is also an SMF alumnus for a lectureship on the art and architecture of the Three Gunpowder Empires at the University of Geneva in 2019-2021.