

An Esoteric Interpretation of a Safavid Tile Arch

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Toward the end of the nineteenth century, many of the Safavid palaces and gardens of Isfahan were already in disrepair and were being demolished.¹ Their splendid gold and lapis lazuli paintings vanished, but their ceramic revetments were often salvaged and sold on the art market. Among these treasures was a group of arch spandrels, composed of *cuerda seca* ² tiles, with a span of just under four meters.

¹On Safavid palaces, see Sussan Babaie, *Isfahan and Its Palaces: Statecraft, Shi'ism, and the Architecture of Conviviality in Modern Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Jean-Dominique Brignoli, "Les palais royaux safavides (1501-1722) : architecture et pouvoir" (PhD diss., Université de Provence Aix-Marseille I, 2009); Farshid Emami, "All the City's Courtesans: A Now-Lost Safavid Pavilion and Its Figural Tile Panels," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 54 (2019): 62–86.

²The *cuerda seca* (dry cord) technique, as it evolved in Iran and Central Asia from the fourteenth century on, required several stages. A tile was covered with a white opaque glaze and fired. Then, the outlines of the scene were painted on using a black oily substance. Colored glazes were applied, but areas intended to remain white (mostly faces) were not painted. After another firing, the faces and other details were brushed in, allowing for very fine detail, before another firing.

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This technique, which required several firings, produced lively scenes in glowing colors. Some of the arch friezes survived almost intact and were sold by the Armenian collector Hagop Kevorkian, beginning around 1912. Several of these arches appeared in the sale of the Kevorkian collection in the 1970s. The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) acquired two nearly complete arches and enough tiles from two others to reconstruct them. Over the past few years, the task of finding all the other arches from this group, whether complete or fragmentary, has been taken up by Dr. Robert B. Mason and me.³ These are dispersed among public and private collections, and single tiles often come up at auction. To date, we have identified some thirty-six scenes that would have come from the same building, presumably a royal palace. We have presented elsewhere the stylistic evidence for the dating of this arcade to ca. 1685–90, late in the reign of Shah Sulayman.⁴ Below, I will discuss the argument for assigning the arcade to the Talar-i Tavileh, built earlier but continuing in use through the Qajar period and probably refurbished in the late seventeenth century.

The scenes depicted fall into three categories: stories from Persian classical literature or folktales, secular life in Safavid Isfahan, and celebrations of or allusions to Muslim religious festivals. In the first category are several dragon-slaying scenes inspired by, but not identifiable as, stories from the *Shahnamah* (Figure 1). Other panels recall the romances of Nizami and Jami.⁵ The ROM's panel showing a

³L. Golombek and R. B. Mason, "The Garden of the Pavilion of the Stables," *Orientations*, no.2 (2019): 124–33.

⁴Golombek and Mason, "Garden of the Pavilion." See also R. Mason, "Safavid Tile Project I: The Technology," *Royal Ontario Museum Blog*, 26 June 2018, www.rom.on.ca/en/blog/safavid-tile-project-i-the-technology; R. Mason, "Safavid Tile Project II: Rebuilding the Friezes," *Royal Ontario Museum Blog*, 26 June 2018, www.rom.on.ca/en/blog/safavid-tile-project-ii-rebuilding-the-friezes; L. Golombek, "Safavid Tile Arch Project III: The Arches of the Stables," *Royal Ontario Museum Blog*, 28 February 2019, www.rom.on.ca/en/blog/safavid-tile-arch-project-iii-the-palace-of-the-stables; L. Golombek, "Safavid Tile Project IV: The Artists behind the Arches," *Royal Ontario Museum Blog*, 24 June 2019, www.rom.on.ca/en/blog/safavid-tile-project-iv-the-artist-behind-the-arches.

⁵Layla and Majnun (probably from Jami's *Haft Awrang*), panel in Linden Museum, Stuttgart (I. Luschet-Schmeiser, "Neue Fünde zur safavidischen figuralen Kachelkunst," *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 11 (1978): 187–204); Yusuf and Zulaykha (based on Jami, *Haft Awrang*; dispersed tiles), to be discussed in a forthcoming publication.

princely gathering in the countryside (Figure 2) reflects contemporary Safavid aristocratic life, but may also include allusions to folktales (note the snake peering out of the shirt of the boy in the tree).

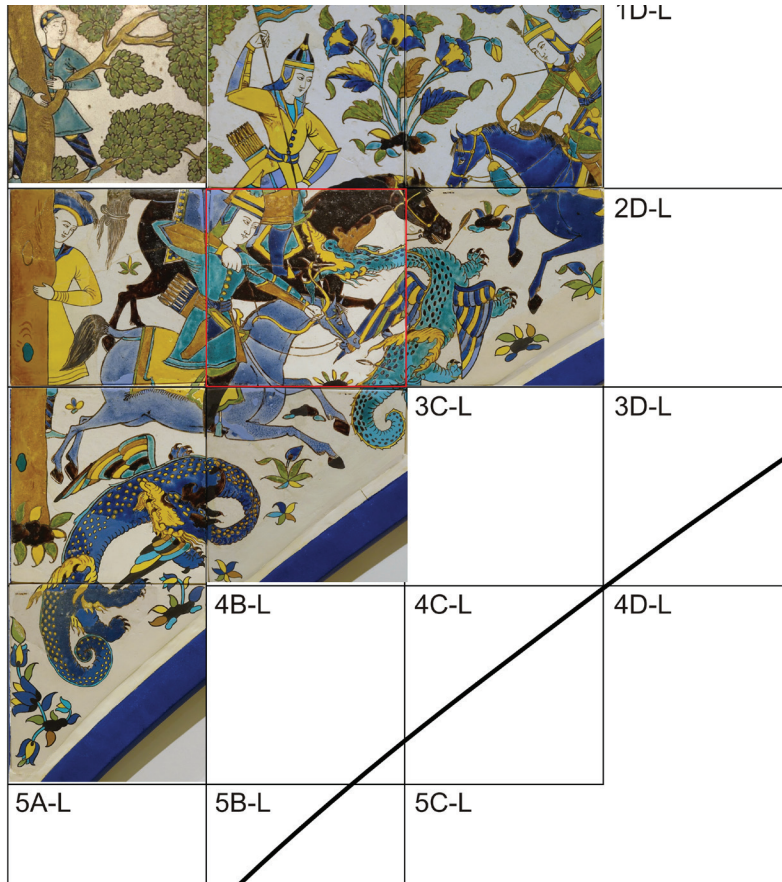


Figure 1. Horsemen fighting dragons, *cuerda seca* tile arch, Isfahan, Iran, ca. 1685–90. Royal Ontario Museum (976.298.123). With template by R. B. Mason.



Figure 2. Picnic and hunting, *cuerva seca* tile arch, Isfahan, Iran, ca. 1685–90. Royal Ontario Museum (976.298.6–47). Photograph Brian Boyle.

This study focuses on a frieze that I believe belongs in the third category: religious festivals (Figure 3).⁶ It came to the ROM in 1976 nearly complete. Its meaning was unclear because a cluster of four critical tiles was missing (1C, 1D, 2C, 2D). Mason has suggested that these four tiles showed the unmounted horse led by a groom. He has reconstructed the panel to the extent that it is possible, and this has allowed me

⁶This group was the subject of a paper, “Points of Vision: Reception of a Late Safavid Tiled Arcade,” delivered at the biennial meeting of the Historians of Islamic Art and Archaeology, University of Michigan, 17 April 2021 (forthcoming in *Regime Change: Essays on Islamic Art from HIAA 2021*, ed. Christiane Gruber [Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press]).

to begin inquiring into its meaning. For readers unfamiliar with our method of reconstructing these panels, a few words of explanation may be helpful. In the reconstruction, you will see figures that appear to be made up of disparate parts, some of which do not precisely line up. This is because we may digitally use a tile from the opposite spandrel and “flip” it to change its orientation when the required tile is missing. Because the spandrels are antithetical and the same cartoon was used for both, this method works quite well. Alternatively, we may use a tile from the same position that came from the panel’s “twin.” One of the remarkable things about the Safavid tile arcade is that it was produced in duplicate. This duplication or “twinning” of each frieze is a significant phenomenon in suggesting an architectural setting for the arcade, which I will argue below. For the panel under discussion, we know that there was a “twin” because the ROM owns two right-facing groom tiles. They could not have both belonged to a single arch panel, as this figure could have come only from a left spandrel (1E-L and 2E-L). Thus, there must have been two left spandrels, belonging to two different arch panels bearing the same scene. Both panels had a green ground; however, one of the grooms has a yellow robe while the other is shown in blue. The original scheme of this panel has thus been reconstructed from tiles belonging to all four spandrels—that is, both the left and right halves of the pair of arches. In all four spandrels, the same central tiles are missing that make up what must have been the horse that the groom is leading. Thus, one of the men (the one in the middle) was wearing a yellow robe in one spandrel and a blue robe in the other. We have combined the two in the reconstruction.

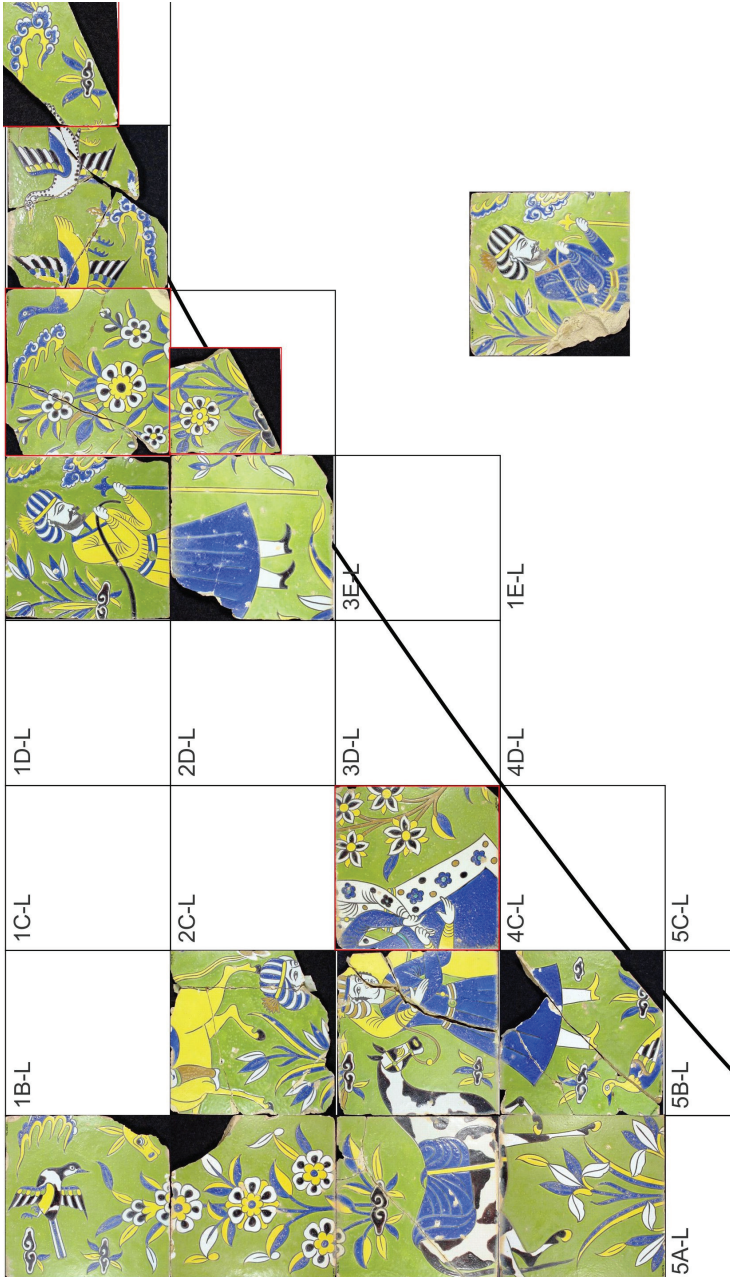


Figure 3. Three men embracing (Sacrifice of Ishmael?), *averda seer* tile arch, Isfahan, Iran, ca. 1690. Royal Ontario Museum (976.298.59-62, 976.298.70-86). Reconstruction by R. B. Mason.

This man stands in the middle of the group, with a taller man on our right, wearing a floral robe, and a shorter one on our left. The head of the taller man would have appeared on one of the missing tiles above. Both of the smaller figures touch the right hand of this tall man. Our attention is drawn to the man in the middle. He has his arm around the shoulder of the shortest man, and he also holds on to the rein of a horse. There are altogether three mounts: this horse, a mule on which a person (likely, a groom) is riding, and the presumably unmounted horse of the missing tiles that is being led by a groom. It is reasonable to associate the three mounts with the three men in the embrace. Without further information, this composition suggests that these three persons rode out to the countryside, dismounted, and are now demonstrating their closeness to one another for some reason yet to be discovered. Unlike the other scenes of the Safavid tile arcade, which tend to be very active, this scene appears tranquil, even spiritual.

A number of clues suggest the event commemorated here. One clue can be found in the relative heights of the three figures. The central one, who stands behind, is the tallest. As noted above, his head would have appeared on the tiles bearing the horse image. The other two figures are smaller, but the middle one is the taller of the two. This triad could easily be a father and two sons. If so, what story or event might be portrayed here?

One of the most famous stories about a father and two sons in Muslim tradition is that of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac (Ibrahim, Isma'īl, and Ishaq). In the Bible, it is clearly Isaac that is taken to be sacrificed.⁷ In the Qu'ran, the call to Abraham is mentioned, but the son is not named.⁸ This caused confusion early on because several verses later in the Qu'ran speak of the birth of Isaac.⁹ By the eighth century, this sequencing of events led to the understanding that the aborted sacrifice took place before Isaac's birth, and it was Ishmael that was the intended sacrifice. In the fourteenth century, a compromise was proposed, suggesting

⁷Genesis 22.

⁸Qur'an 38:101–7.

⁹Qur'an 38:110–13.

that both sons were bound. Behind this could be the Biblical narrative's statement that two "young men" accompany Abraham and Isaac. They are instructed to remain with the animals until Abraham returns from making the sacrifice. In the Aggadic literature (Jewish rabbinic exegesis) dating back to the first century AD, these two persons are identified as Ishmael and Eliezer.¹⁰ How this version of the story may have penetrated Shi'ite lore I do not know, but I can suggest that this arch panel represents the compromise situation. Taking this argument a step further, the "older" boy (whom I identify as Ishmael), shown in the middle, draws attention as he is the most active of the three figures. It is he that embraces the younger son (Isaac). The panel originally showed three mounts: the horse held by the "older boy," a small donkey with rider above the three men, and the missing horse led by the groom. The groom's large size suggests that he is not a mere servant but someone of singular importance. He may be the second "youth" that accompanied Abraham, who, according to the Jewish tradition cited above, was his most trusted servant, Eliezer. The lost horse would also have been quite prominent, covering four tiles and placed toward the center of the arch. Might it have been laden with wood for the fire? If this is, in fact, the famous Sacrifice of Ishmael (*dhabih*), why might it appear on the arcade walls of the Safavid palace garden?

The inclusion of the story of the sacrifice could have been understood on several levels. First, it is the event commemorated by the great festival Aid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice), celebrated throughout the Islamic world. But there are meanings attached to this story and to Abraham that were particularly significant to the Safavid shahs. One clue is the positioning of the hands. It suggests some sort of ceremony, an initiation, perhaps, like that by which a disciple/apprentice is accepted by his master.¹¹ The ceremony is described in detail by Va'iz

¹⁰Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. 1909. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), I:278–79.

¹¹Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 234: "The novice's putting his hand into the sheikh's hand so that the *baraka* (blessing) is properly transmitted"; Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 214, citing

al-Kashifi (Herat, d. 1504/05) in his book *Futuvvat-nama*.¹² Such ceremonies took place, usually in public, and involved other complex rituals that are not alluded to here.¹³ This ritual was considered a reenactment of several events important to Shi‘ite Islam, such as Ghadir Khumm, where Muhammad confirmed ‘Ali as his successor¹⁴ or the Covenant believed to have been sworn between Abraham and ‘Ali.¹⁵ As Babayan explains: “Every relationship that tied members of the order together in the path of learning the arts and initiation into the secrets of the craft was placed within three cycles of time—cosmic time, prophetic time, and the Islamic present.”¹⁶ Thus, two religious festivals are alluded to in this frieze—Aid al-Adha and Ghadir Khumm (on the eighteenth of Dhu l-Hijja in Shi‘ite regions).

Although the event portrayed on the panel may follow the story of Abraham and his two sons, the tile panel also contains an allusion to ‘Ali. The “older” son holds the rein of a dappled horse, which is given unusual prominence. I suggest that this horse is meant to be seen, on a mystical level, as ‘Ali’s mount, Duldul, who was given to him by the Prophet.¹⁷ In the stories that appear in the *Khāvarān-nāmā* by Ibn Husam (1426–27), ‘Ali undertakes many heroic feats, while his horse, always shown as “dappled,” displays a heroism of his own. This versified epic, modeled on the *Shahnamah*, was very popular, and the earliest surviving manuscript (1450) is lavishly illustrated.¹⁸ Images of ‘Ali and his sons, especially Husayn, whose martyrdom is commemorated on the tenth of Muharram, were used by preachers

Kashifi: “Then the master craftsman takes his left hand and places it on the right shoulder of the disciple and sends blessings (*salavāt*) to Muhammad and his family. Such physical contact is a form of transmission of charisma (*barakat*) from master to disciple.”

¹²Literally, “chivalry,” but actually a treatise on ethical codes of behavior, which became the guide for Persian guilds. See Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, ch. 7.

¹³Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 204–17.

¹⁴Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 214.

¹⁵Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 167.

¹⁶Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 167.

¹⁷My thanks to Julia Rubanovich and Raya Shani for this information.

¹⁸R. Shani, “The *Shahnama* Legacy in a Late 15th-Century Illustrated Copy of Ibn Husam’s *Khavarān-nama*, the Gulistan Palace Library, Tehran, Ms. 5750,” in *Shahnama Studies, III: The Reception of the Shahnama*, ed. G. van den Berg and C. Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 216–65.

to evoke a sense of mourning at this sacred time.¹⁹ While the primary meaning of the tile panel may be the Sacrifice by Abraham, it could also serve to evoke one or another of the related themes involving ‘Ali. In chivalric lore, the spirit of ‘Ali drives all behavior. Like the placement of the hands discussed above, the allusion to ‘Ali through the depiction of a dappled horse pays homage to spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa*). This nod to the chivalric tradition might even ask viewers to see the triad as ‘Ali and his own two sons, Hasan and Husayn, “layering” them on top of the Biblical characters. But this might not be the last layer.

Just as ‘Ali inherits the perfection of his spiritual father, Abraham, so the founder of the Shi‘ite dynasty, Isma‘il, saw himself as the son or heir of ‘Ali.²⁰ Claiming descent from ‘Ali, he could also go back further and claim relationship with his namesake Isma‘il, son of Abraham. As Babayan notes, Shah Isma‘il “fused the dual meaning of the title *shah* current in the political and religious cultures of the central and eastern lands of Islamdom. The roles of king and holy man converge in Isma‘il.”²¹ Through the image of Isma‘il, his own descendant Shah Sulayman, the presumed patron of the Safavid tile arcade, sought elevation. The last “layer” is the lens through which these figures can be seen as Shah Sulayman, depicted with his two sons, Sultan Husayn (b. 1668) and Abbas Mirza (b. 1671). If the tiles date to 1685–90, the boys would have been not much older than seventeen and fourteen, the difference in ages in the tile painting being matched by the differentiation of the boys’ sizes.²² Perhaps Shah Sulayman, like Shah Isma‘il, saw himself as “shah” in both senses of the word, political and religious. This identification with Shah Isma‘il may also explain why the Safavid tile arcade includes what we have identified (through comparison with contemporary manuscripts) with one of the founder’s battle scenes.²³ In that scene, the hero, presumably Shah Isma‘il, rides

¹⁹Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 220.

²⁰Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, xxxi.

²¹Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, xxviii.

²²The presence of a mustache on the “younger” son in the right spandrel should not be considered indicative of anything, as the painter of the arcade panels intentionally varied the color of costume and the facial hair so that the two spandrels would not be perfectly symmetrical.

²³See Golombek, “Safavid Tile Project IV.” This panel is in the Hearst Castle Museum, San Simeon, CA.

a dappled horse, thus alluding again to ‘Ali’s mount. To the extent that these illustrations were known to the aristocracy of Isfahan, they would have recognized the scene as a battle from early Safavid history. However, they may also have picked up the reference to ‘Alid history through the dappled horse and seen this as the Battle of Karbala, where ‘Ali’s son, Husayn, was martyred. If so, this is yet another reference to a religious festival, the Ashura, the most important festival of the Shi‘ite calendar.

It is not out of the question that all three triads alluded to in the ROM frieze are linked through Shi‘ite history. ‘Ali shares with Abraham his status as the perfect man. Isma‘il, the founder of the Safavid state, was seen as carrying this heritage forward. Shah Sulayman was heir to this tradition, and he is shown here passing it on to his own two sons.

What are the implications for the meaning of the Safavid tile arcade? This panel would have served as a reminder of the Aid al-Adha, the festival commemorating Abraham’s sacrifice, and would have linked the reigning shah with Abraham as well as ‘Ali and Shah Isma‘il. It belongs to a series of calendrical themes that appeared in this arcade. There are at least five other panels that allude to religious festivals, including the Ten Days of Muharram and the birthday of the prophet Isaiah (Shaya), celebrated at the shrine of Imamzadeh Isma‘il.²⁴ The presence of these calendrical themes suggests that there might be a link between the setting and the celebration of the respective festivals. According to Babayan, under Shah ‘Abbas II religious festivities that had once taken place in a public setting were moved into the private royal precincts. For this purpose, the palace containing the Talar-i Tavileh was chosen as the “arena for staging rituals and feasting commemorating ‘Ali’s investiture (Ghadir Khumm) or processional mourning of Husayn.”²⁵ The guilds, for whom spiritual chivalry was so focal, were involved. They came to the Talar-i Tavileh each night during the Ten Days of Muharram to reenact the drama of Karbala.²⁶

²⁴See n6.

²⁵Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 230.

²⁶Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 229.

The allusions evoked by the arcade's imagery support placing the tile arcade within the precincts of the Talar-i Tavileh, to which I now turn.

The palace, built ca. 1636, stood behind the 'Ali Qapu. The Talar-i Tavileh took its name, Pavilion of the Stables, from the use of the site prior to the building of the palace there (*tavileh* = stables). The palace consisted of a long garden tract with a channel of water and fountains, culminating in the splendid pavilion with its extensive open porch (*talar*). It was a major venue for royal entertainments, according to the reports of European visitors, as discussed at length by H. Luschet and W. Floor.²⁷ In addition to the relevance of its pictorial content to the function of this palace, the arcade would have fit architecturally within this complex. The arches bearing the tile panels would have stretched along the walls of the garden up to and beyond the pavilion. The fact that almost every unique scene of the arcade had a "twin," executed in a different color scheme but using the very same cartoon to create the composition, has led us to the conclusion that the arches ran along both sides of the garden wall, with the twins situated opposite each other. The garden of the Talar-i Tavileh, as shown in the plan of E. Kaempfer (1685) (Figure 4), could have accommodated up to sixty such arches on each side.²⁸ Further supporting this hypothesis is the information that accompanied the sale of the tiles from the Kevorkian collection in 1976 and 1977—namely, that the tiles came "from the Royal Stables of Isfahan."²⁹ This wording suggests that the Iranian dealer who gathered these tiles, presumably as the building was being demolished, knew the original name of the site as "*tavileh*," meaning "stables." Thus, the frieze alluding to Aid al-Adha would likely have once stood among the images relating to religious festivals in the garden of the Talar-i Tavileh.

²⁷Heinz Luschet, "Der königliche Marstall in Isfahan in Engelbert Kaempfer's 'Planographia des Palastbezirkes 1712,'" *Iran* 17 (1979): 71–80; Willem Floor, "The Talar-i Tavila or Hall of Stables," *Muqarnas* 19 (2002): 149–63.

²⁸As calculated by R. B. Mason (publication forthcoming).

²⁹Luschet, "Der königliche Marstall," 78. In 1976, when the tiles arrived at the ROM, there was a note saying that the tiles came "from the Royal Stables of Isfahan"—that is, the Talar-i Tavileh (Pavilion of the Stables).

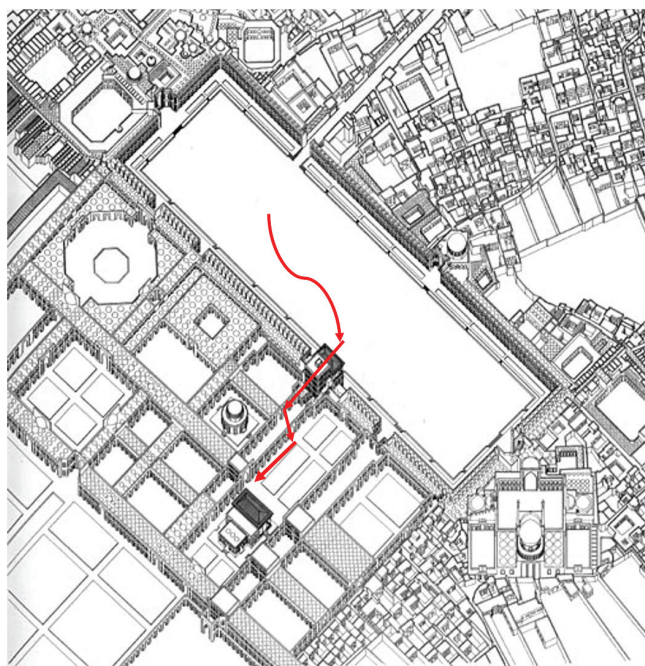


Figure 4. Reconstruction by Klaus Herdig of the Royal Maydan and the Safavid palace precincts, Isfahan, Iran, based on “Planographia” of E. Kaempfer (drawn in 1685). Red line shows entrance from the Maydan through the ‘Ali Qapu into the Talar-i Tavileh. The pavilion itself lies just left of the bottom arrow.

We have dated the arcade on stylistic grounds to 1685–90.³⁰ This time frame corresponds to an important moment in the life of Shah Sulayman. It was at this juncture that he turned away from behaviors scorned or forbidden by Islam. He banned wine, and according to foreign visitors, the dancing girls and female musicians were absent from the shah’s entertainments.³¹ The addition of the tile arcade to the

³⁰The dating is based on the late works of Mu’in Musavvir (see Golombek, “Safavid Tile Project IV”).

³¹E. Kaempfer, *Amenitatum Exoticarum, Fasciculi V, Variae Relationes, Observationes & Descriptiones Rerum Persicarum* (Lemgo, Germany: Typis & impnsis Henrici Wilhemi Meyeri, 1712), 180, 183 (cited by Rudi Mathee, “Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid Iran,” in *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, ed. R. Mathee and Beth Baron [Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2000], 121–50, reference on p. 146). As Kaempfer’s drawing records the state of the building in 1685, it does not show arcading along the garden walls, which we believe occurred several years later.

Talar-i Tavileh, the very stage where religious festivals took place, announced the Shah's "repentance." Applying a new facade to the courtyard of the Talar-i Tavileh was a way to mark this change. We view this arcade as a late-in-life refurbishing by Shah Sulayman of the Talar-i Tavileh intended to synchronize with the great festivities taking place there.