

# **History Lab:**

## **Did the Safavid Empire establish an Age of Gunpowder, Age of Islam or Age of Trade in Central Asia?**

Prepared by Brian Desmond  
for the Central Asia in World  
History NEH Summer Institute  
The Ohio State University,  
July 11-29, 2016

# **Homework Reading**

## **The Muslim Gunpowder Empires of Central Asia: Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid**

**Directions: Use the reading below to identify attributes that stabilized each "gunpowder civilization". Make sure to consider social, economic, political, and/or military attributes.**

The Mongol invasions of the 13th and 14th centuries destroyed the Muslim unity of the Abbasids and the power of many regional dynasties. Three new Muslim dynasties arose to bring a new flowering to Islamic civilization. The greatest, the Ottoman Empire, reached its peak in the 17th century; to the east the Safavids ruled in Persia and Afghanistan, and the Mughals ruled much of India. Together the three empires possessed great military and political power; they also produced an artistic and cultural renaissance within Islam. All three dynasties originated from Turkic nomadic cultures; each possessed religious fervor and zeal for conversion. They built empires through military conquest based upon the effective use of firearms. Each was ruled by an absolute monarch and drew revenues from taxation of agrarian populations. There were differences. The Mughals ruled mostly non-Muslim peoples, the Safavids mostly Muslims, and the Ottomans a mixture of Muslims and Christians. The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims; the others were Sunni.

### **The Ottomans**

The Turkic peoples entered Anatolia after the Mongols defeated the Seljuks of eastern Anatolia in the mid- 13th century. After a period of turmoil a tribe led by Osman secured dominance establishing the Ottomans. Under Mehmed II they captured Constantinople in 1453 and ended the Byzantine Empire. They spread into Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and even temporarily laid siege to the city of Vienna in Austria. Their navy dominated the eastern Mediterranean.

Military leaders had a dominant role in the Ottoman state, a society geared to war and expansion. The Turkic horsemen became a warrior aristocracy supported by control of conquered land and peasants. When their power shrank before that of an expanding central bureaucracy, they built up regional power bases. From mid- 15th century imperial armies were dominated by Janissary infantry divisions composed of conscripted youths from conquered lands. Their control of artillery and firearms gave them great power.

Ottoman rulers survived challenges to their authority by playing off the competing factions within their state. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish merchants were important. The latter two were "peoples of the book" who often were satisfied with the sound administration of their Muslim rulers. A large bureaucracy headed by a vizier had great power in the state. Early rulers and their sons participated in the administration. Unfortunately, there were no rules for dynastic secession, which led to heated struggles for the position of the Sultan and often the execution of rivals.

The imperial capital at Constantinople combined the disparate cultures under Ottoman rule. The new rulers restored the city after 1453; the church of Hagia Sophia became one of Islam's grandest mosques. Adding to the city's splendor, Suleyman the Magnificent built the great Suleymaniye mosque in the 16th century. Constantinople became the commercial center dealing in products from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Many urban inhabitants belonged to merchant and artisan classes. The government closely regulated both activities. Handicrafts were encouraged. Imperial workshops produced numerous products, and public works employed many artisans. By the 17th century the Turkish language became the preferred vehicle for literature and the government. The Ottomans left a significant artistic legacy in poetry, ceramics, carpet manufacturing, and architecture. Women were subordinate to fathers and husbands and had few outlets, especially among the elite, for expression outside of the household.

### **The Safavids**

The Safavids were Shi'a Muslims from a family of Sufi preachers and mystics. In the early 14th century under Sail al-Din they fought to purify and spread Islam among Turkic peoples. After long struggles with the Ag Qoyunlu, a Sunni Turkoman tribal confederation, in 1501 Ismâ'il seized Tabriz (In modern day Iran) and was proclaimed shah. His followers conquered most of Persia and fought against the Ottomans who defeated them at the important battle of Chaldiran in 1514 due to their more advanced military. The loss meant that Shi'ism was blocked from further westward advance.

Shah Isma'il pursued a policy of forced conversion of the Sunni Muslims. His persecution of Sunni Muslims was ruthless forcing conversion on the Sunni population or having them accept death. Religious teachers received state support, and teaching in mosque schools were supervised by religious officials. The population of the empire

gradually converted to Shi'a Islam, which developed into an integral part of Iranian identity which was important for unity especially when threatened by attacks from Sunni enemies like the Ottomans. When the power of the dynasty declined, religious leaders became more independent, but they continued to serve its rulers.

Like the Ottoman Empire, they encouraged the growth of handicraft production and Imperial workshops produced numerous products. Women endured the social disadvantages common to Islamic regimes while the mask and veil became formalized for them.

### **The Mughals**

Turkic invaders, led by Babur, invaded India in 1526 after being driven from Afghanistan by the Uzbeks. Babur's forces, using military tactics, technology and a strong cavalry, crushed the Muslim Lodi dynasty and defeated a Hindu confederation by 1527. The first Mughal ruler, Babur, was a talented warrior who also possessed a taste for art and music. Since he was a poor administrator, his sudden death in 1530 brought invasion from surrounding enemies. After a period of chaos, Babur's grandson Akbar was able to succeed to the throne and became a ruler with outstanding military and administrative talent. His armies consolidated Mughal conquests in north and central India. Akbar advanced a policy of reconciliation with his Hindu subjects; he encouraged intermarriage, abolished onerous taxes, and respected Hindu religious customs. Hindus rose to high ranks in the administration. Akbar invented a new faith, Din-I Ilahi or Divine Faith, which incorporated components of various religions to unify his subjects and ultimately made himself God's representative on Earth. The Hindu and Muslim warrior aristocracy were granted land and labor for their loyalty. Socially, he regulated the consumption of alcohol, strove to improve the position of women and encouraged widow remarriage and discouraged child marriages.

The 17th century rulers Jahangir and Shah Jahan continued the policy of tolerance toward Hindus along with most other elements of Akbar's administration. Both preferred the good life over military adventures. They were important patrons of the arts; they expanded painting workshops for miniatures and built great architectural works, including Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal, often blending the best in Persian and Hindu traditions.

Jahangir and Shah Jehan left the details of daily administration to subordinates, thus allowing their wives to win influence. Nur Jahan, Jahangir's wife, dominated the empire for a time through her faction. Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Shah Jahan also amassed power. While the life of court women improved, the position of women elsewhere in society declined. Child marriage grew more popular, widow remarriage died out, and seclusion for both Muslim and Hindus increased. Sati, the former Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on a funeral pyre, spread among the upper classes.

# Handout

## The Safavid Empire: Age of Gunpowder, Age of Islam or Age of Trade?

A military revolution took place in Europe, India and the Middle East during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. This revolution led to advancements in military firepower especially a newly formed infantry, fortifications of cities and large standing armies. Society was impacted by greater taxation and expenditures. These changes were also reflected by more powerful rulers and states, longer wars with higher casualty rates and transformed cities. Because of the military revolution, many historians have classified the Safavid Empire as a gunpowder empire in the age of gunpowder. Is that accurate?

R. Matthee, "Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran," in C. Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia*, London, 1996, pp. 389-416.

Directions: Use the following worksheet to 1) annotate the subtext and context of your source, 2) record the information/text from your source, and 3) determine if the Safavid Empire was primarily a Gunpowder, Islamic or Trade Empire.		
Source	Notes	Age of _____
<b>Source 1:</b> Report of Father Simon to Pope Clement VIII, 1604		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>
<b>Source 2:</b> Portrait of Naqd 'Ali Beg's, 1626		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>
<b>Source 3:</b> Report of Father Simon to Pope Clement VIII, 1605		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>
<b>Source 4:</b> Eskandar Beg, Chief Secretary during the Reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629)		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>
<b>Source 5:</b> Sir John Malcolm, British ambassador to the Shahs Safi and Abbas II, mid-1600s		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>
<b>Source 6:</b> Sir Thomas Herbert, who accompanied the English Embassy to Iran at the end of Shah Abbas's reign, 1627-1629		<b>Gunpowder</b> <b>Islam</b> <b>Trade</b>

<b>Source 7:</b> John Bell, Scottish merchant in Persia during the reign of Shah Soltan Hossein, 1694-1722		<b>Gunpowder Islam Trade</b>
<b>Source 8:</b> Map of The Safavid Empire (1500-1722)		<b>Gunpowder Islam Trade</b>
<b>Source 9:</b> Father Judasz Krusinski, Polish Jesuit diplomat from Papacy to Safavid Court, 1707-1722		<b>Gunpowder Islam Trade</b>

**Assessment:**

Because of the military revolution, many historians have classified the Safavid Empire as a gunpowder empire in the age of gunpowder.

a) Identify TWO specific pieces of evidence that support the contention and explain how each piece supports the contention.

B Identify ONE specific piece of evidence that undermines the contention and explain how it undermines the contention.

# **Resources**



## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

### Source 1: Report of Father Simon to Pope Clement VIII, 1604

Subtext: 'Abbas I ('Abbas the Great) became the shah, or king, of the Safavid Empire in 1588. His 41-year reign marked a golden age of Persian culture. In order to strengthen his army, 'Abbas sought out European weapons and technology. To this end, he invited Western visitors to his capital Isfahan, even allowing Christian missionaries to come and preach. In the following selection, Father Simon, a Carmelite missionary, reports on the customs of the Safavids and on the rule of Shah 'Abbas. The Habsburgs, a royal family who occupied the throne of the Holy Roman Empire at the time, were interested in an alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans.

The country which I saw is sparsely inhabited, for the most part all flat, with little water and much uncultivated land; while that which is cultivated has a great abundance of all sorts of produce, such as we have in Italy, and cheap. For less than a real<sup>(1)</sup> seven pounds of white bread could be had in Isfahan,<sup>(2)</sup> and at the time there was a scarcity. . . . There is an abundance of wine, rice, grapes, melons and other fruit—all the year round fresh can be seen—of meat and oxen sufficiently so. The Persians do not eat the flesh of cows and calves, but mutton to a vast extent and horseflesh, which is the most esteemed and by the nobles. The climate is very temperate: last winter there was little cold. In Isfahan, where I was, no snow fell, except for a little at the end of February. The heat of the summer is not great: and on account of the clemency of the climate all sleep in the open on the roofs, and those who are sick similarly. The Persians have few doctors, yet there are many old men among them. Their garb is a long garment, different from that of the Turks: they tie shawls round their waists, and almost all of them go clothed in cotton stuffs of various colours in imitation of the king. Their chief food is rice with meat, and they do not use such variety, nor dainties as in these countries [of Europe]: and they are frugal and satisfied with little food. At their banquets they display great sumptuousness, both in the great quantity of viands, as in the preparation and serving of them: Allah Viridi Khan, captain-general of the king of Persia, in a banquet he gave to certain Kurdish ambassadors, put on the table 3,000 dishes all of gold with lids of the same, as I was informed by some Turks who were present. Almost all of them drink wine: they sit and eat on the ground on rich carpets. The houses are of stone, remarkable inside for the great amount of stucco work ornamenting the ceilings and the walls: so they do not employ tapestries. On the street side they have no windows, so that their women should not be seen: and thus the streets are not attractive, nor is the city fine....

Excerpt from *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, Volume 1, edited by H. G. Chick (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939), pp. 155–161, 248–255.

1. real: a Persian coin

2. Isfahan: capital of the Persian empire

## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

Source 2: Portrait of Naqd 'Ali Beg's, 1626

Subtext: This oil painting is a massive portrait of Naqd 'Ali Beg. It was commissioned by the English East India Company in 1626 and painted by Richard Greenbury (fl.1616-1651). In that year, Naqd 'Ali Beg came to London as the envoy of Shah 'Abbas of Persia (r.1587-1629), to meet the British monarch, King Charles I (r.1625-1649). Even though Naqd 'Ali Beg's embassy was a complete disaster, the East India Company gave him this expensive gift.



<http://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2013/06/stitched-up-with-silk-naqd-%CA%BBali-begs-journey-to-london-in-1626.html>

## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

### Source 3: Report of Father Simon to Pope Clement VIII, 1605

Subtext: 'Abbas I ('Abbas the Great) became the shah, or king, of the Safavid Empire in 1588. His 41-year reign marked a golden age of Persian culture. In order to strengthen his army, 'Abbas sought out European weapons and technology. To this end, he invited Western visitors to his capital Isfahan, even allowing Christian missionaries to come and preach. In the following selection, Father Simon, a Carmelite missionary, reports on the customs of the Safavids and on the rule of Shah 'Abbas. The Habsburgs, a royal family who occupied the throne of the Holy Roman Empire at the time, were interested in an alliance with the Safavids against the Ottomans.

“He is very valiant and has a great liking for warfare and weapons of war, which he has constantly in his hands: we have been eye-witnesses of this because, whenever we were with him, he was adjusting his [swords], testing his [muskets], etc: . . . This is the great experience, which he has obtained of warfare over so many years, that he makes it in person and from the first has made him a fine soldier and very skilled, and his men so dexterous that they are little behind our men in Europe. He has introduced into his militia the use of and esteem for [muskets], in which they are very practiced. Therefore it is that his realm has been so much extended on all sides. . . . All the above mentioned soldiers, who will total some 100,000, receive pay for the whole year. “

Excerpt from *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, Volume 1, edited by H. G. Chick (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1939), pp. 155–161, 248–255.

### Source 4: Eskandar Beg, Chief Secretary during the Reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629)

Subtext: Eskandar Beg was the chief secretary and advisor to Abbas I, shah of Safavid Empire (Persia), 1587 – 1629. His history had official approval and was based on his own observations and interviews with officials, soldiers, merchants, and travelers for the work.

The welfare of his people was always a prime concern of the Shah, and he was at pains to see that the people enjoyed peace and security, and that oppression by officialdom, the major cause of anxiety on the part of the common man, was totally stamped out in his kingdom. Substantial reductions were made in the taxes due . . . first, the tax on flocks in Iraq, amounting to nearly fifteen thousand Iraqi toman, was remitted to the people of that province, and the population of Iraq, which is the flourishing heart of Iran and the seat of government, by this gift was preferred above the other provinces. Second, all divan levies were waived for all Shi'ites throughout the empire during the month of Ramadan. The total revenues for one month, which according to the computation of the divan officials amounted to some twenty thousand toman, were given to the people as alms. The object was that they should be free from demands for taxes during this blessed month, which is a time to be devoted to the service and worship of God.

Excerpt from Monshi, Eskander Beg, *History of Shah Abbas the Great* 2 volumes. Translated by Roger M. Savory. Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1978

## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

**Source 5:** Sir John Malcolm, British ambassador to the Shahs Safi and Abbas II, His Memoirs, mid-1600s

Subtext: Sir John Malcolm, commenting in his memoirs about the harem and pleasures, common to later Muslim monarchs of the Safavid Court.

“A monarch, who was never permitted to leave this prison [the harem] till he ascended the throne, was likely to be effeminate and inefficient. It was hardly possible that he could resist the intoxication of absolute power. The unlimited indulgences of his passions seemed almost the certain consequence of his former debaucheries, and his entire lack of experience. . . . The love of wine, in which this prince often indulged to excess, was the cause of all the evils of his reign. It was in his moments of intoxication alone that he was capricious, cruel, and unjust; . . . To the public officers of government he was severe, but to the poor mild and lenient.”

Excerpt from Wilfred Blunt, *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia*, photographs by Wim Swaan (New York: Stein and Day, Publishers, 1966), 124 and 127.

**Source 6:** Sir Thomas Herbert, who accompanied the English Embassy to Iran at the end of Shah Abbas’s reign, 1627-1629

Subtext: Sir Thomas Herbert, accompanied the English Embassy to Iran at the end of Shah Abbas’s reign, 1627-1629. The purpose of the embassy was to establish formal trade and diplomatic relations with Persia, but unofficially it was also undertaken to exonerate the adventurer Sir Robert Sherley, who would be accompanying the mission, from charges that had been made against him by Naqd-‘Ali Beg, Abbas’s ambassador to England. The Persian envoy had claimed that Sir Robert was not an official representative of the Shah or of England, and that he was moreover an impostor and charlatan who deserved punishment, not commendation. This passage is from a book he wrote about his extensive travels.

In peace they are not always idle, solacing their active bodies in sundry sorts of warlike exercises. They dance not, except as Pyrrhus taught the Epirots: but love to hunt and chase the stag, the antelope, gazal, tiger, bore, goat, hare, fox, jackal, wolfe and the like: in which pastimes they express singular courage and dexterity. They also know well how to use the bow, dart, scimitar, gun and javelin. Their arquebus is longer than ours, but thinner: they use that very well, but detest the trouble of cannon and such pieces as require carriage.

Excerpt from Sir Thomas Herbert, *Some Years Travels into Divers Parts of Africa and Asia the Great*, (London, Scot Publisher, 1677), 243

## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

**Source 7:** John Bell, Scottish merchant in Persia during the reign of Shah Soltan Hossein, 1694-1722

Subtext: John Bell, 1691 – 1780, was a Scottish merchant who produced a book that was published in 1763 about his extensive travels through Asia in which he would visit the Safavid capital of Isfahan, 1715-1718.

“The streets of Tauris are narrow and irregular. The houses are built of bricks made of mud, mixed with chopped straw, and dried in the sun; the governor’s palace, indeed, and a few more houses, are built of stone, and make a good appearance. The roofs are generally flat, and covered with a terrace. The walls are white-washed on the inside, and look very white and clean. The floors of every house are spread with carpets, or mats, according to the circumstances of the inhabitants. The peoples of distinction have great halls of audience in their outer courts, arched with square bricks, which are plastered and painted with flowers; this is done at a small expense, and makes a very fine show.

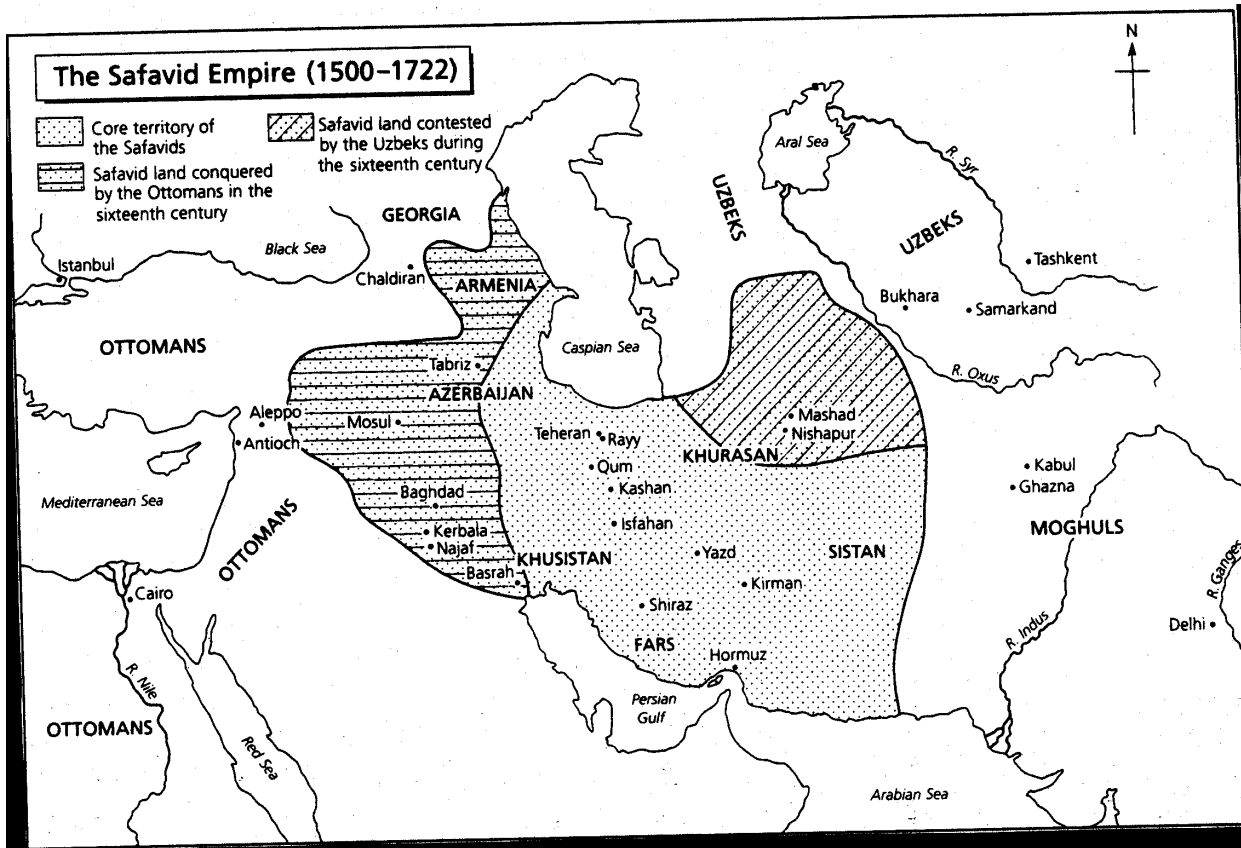
There are several well-built mosques, with stately minarets, or pillars, which the moulla ascends to call the people to prayers; also a high building for the music that plays evening and morning, as mentioned at Shamachy. There are also some large caravansereries; so that no stranger can be at a loss for lodging at a small expense. The city is quite open, having no castle or fortification to defend it. Indeed one would imagine the desert mountains, scarcity of mountains, and other obstructions, would be a sufficient defense against all invasions: the fury of the Turks, however, in their wars with Persia, surmounted all these obstacles.

Excerpt from John Bell, Bell’s travels from St. Petersburg in Russia to Extensive Parts of Asia, (Glasgow, 1763), 79

## The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?

### Source 8: Map of The Safavid Empire (1500-1722)

The Safavid Empire has its origin in the Sufi order (a mystical sect within Islam) and was established in the Azerbaijan region. Its founding was associated with Sheikh Safi al-Din (1252-1334). By 1500, they adopted an affiliation with Shi'ism and undertook to spread their faith by militant means. Thus, Shi'ite Islam became the state religion of what evolved into the Safavid Empire, making the empire technically a theocracy.



<http://www.ghazali.org/site/maps.htm>

## **The Historical Question: Was the Safavid Empire an Age of Gunpowder, Islam or Trade?**

**Source 9:** Father Judasz Krusinski, Polish Jesuit diplomat from Papacy to Safavid Court, 1707-1722

Subtext: Father Judasz Krusinski, 1675-1756, is the best known of thirty Polish Jesuits active in Iran who resided in Persia between 1707 and 1728 and again in the 1740s, and who served the crown as court translator and acted as intermediary between the Papacy and the Safavid court until after 1722. In this passage from a book of his travels, he describes the Afghan efforts to subdue several small towns in the neighborhood of Isfahan during their invasion of 1721.

It has been observed already in our Description of the Afghans, that as terrible as they are in the Day of Battel, and in the open Country, they are nothing so in Sieges, which they don't understand. They are not capable of subjecting to the Method of the Europeans, who gain their Ground Inch by Inch, as soon as they see no Way of carrying a Place by Assault; for after having made an Attempt on it, if they are repuls'd with Loss, they presently give over the Enterprise as impracticable.

Excerpt from Judasz Krusinski, *The History of the Late Revolutions of Persia*, (London, Pemberton publisher, 1733)  
13