



View of the town of Julfa circa 1887

Julfa

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Iran's introduction to the 17th century international scene was relatively smooth, calculated, and well executed. As a new competitive economic power in the region, Iran's Shah Abbas I the Great (1587-1629) masterminded the Safavid dynasty's bold strategy, challenging both the Ottomans and the Mughuls. Abbas's reforms weakened Ottoman desire to invade Iran, strengthened Iranian industry and agriculture and, most importantly, ushered in an era of tolerance and mutual understanding among the Muslim population of Isfahan and the Christian communities of Iran.

Looking back on Iran's long history, Shah Abbas's strategy makes good sense. As early as the Parthian era, when the city of Urfa became the center of the Christian faith, Iranian monarchs had placed a considerable amount of political weight on their treatment of individuals and groups that did not share their religious ideology. Armenia, for instance, remained a bone of contention between Iran and Rome until the rise of Islam. At that time, Armenians were treated royally whenever they chose to cooperate and quite the reverse when they chose to uphold the interests of their coreligionists. Shah Abbas, in a way, adopted the same tested strategy. He treated the Armenians harshly when they were likely to fall into Ottoman hands but quite royally when they proved to be useful in furthering his plans.



Shah Abbas I the Great
1587-1629

Early in his reign, Shah Abbas moved Iran's capital and seat of government from vulnerable Tabriz to the security of Isfahan, an already existing city well-known as a commercial center on the Silk Road. Then, encouraged by Iran's increasing economic, military, and political relations with the west (read the Papacy and Spain), he transferred the entire Armenian population of Jolfa, Azerbaijan, to the town of New Julfa on the

south bank of the Zayandeh-Rud, a little upstream from Isfahan. Before long, Armenians living outside Iran as well as Christian missionaries, traders, and industrialists flooded the recent addition to Isfahan, making Julfa a showcase for Safavid achievements in economic, social, and religious spheres as well as an example of tolerance and understanding among diverse ethnic and religious groups in the region.

Shah Abbas also moved the entire Armenian inhabitants of Van, Kars, Alashkert, Manezkert, and eight other towns and villages that had come under Persian jurisdiction to Isfahan; some of these new arrivals settled in a cluster of villages nearly 90 miles west of Isfahan. This new community, about which little information is available, has lived in and around Namagerd, Daran, and Ashgerd in the Feirdan region for the past four hundred years. The total population uprooted in the autumn of 1603 consisted of some 25,000 families or, by some accounts, 30,000 individuals.

Shah Abbas's plan for the new Armenian population of the region, for which Isfahan served as the capital, was motivated by several factors.



Armenian shop in Julfa circa 1887

First, the Armenians are a hardy people usually engaged in agriculture and industry, both of which were in short supply in Iran of the early Safavids. By empowering Armenians to engage in industry in Julfa and agriculture in the towns and villages adjacent to the capital, Shah Abbas thought, he could raise the output of Iran's economy a considerable degree.

Secondly, Iran of his time was a major producer of raw silk. By introducing better carpets and a new Iranian textile to the international market, the Armenian weavers could not only compete with, but outdo the Ottomans and the Mughuls in the ever-growing silk trade. Thirdly, Shah Abbas intended to move Iran out of the Middle Ages and into the 17th century. In this, the cooperation of the western powers of the time was a must. Christian Armenians, an enterprising people, could easily blend with the Christian West, especially with those involved in the Indian silk trade, and establish a foothold for the rest of the country. Finally, Shah Abbas was seeking a way by which he could decrease the fanaticism that permeated Safavid society. He intended to usher in an era of tolerance and mutual understanding among the people of different religions and national backgrounds. The city of Julfa across the Zayandeh-Rud with shops carrying Armenian names written out in both Persian and Armenian could not but inspire tolerance, especially when the goods they carried added zest to the Isfahanis otherwise austere Muslim existence.



Stones from Uch Kalisa used in the building of Georg Church

Shah Abbas was aware that the achievement of these goals was not easy, especially when the Armenians had been uprooted and moved to a distant land by force. He, therefore, made a number of concessions including the transfer of his own properties on the southern shore of Zayandeh-Rud to the care of the Armenians to build Julfa, an exclusively Armenian city; Muslims were not allowed to reside in Julfa.

Furthermore, Muslims who violated the rights of Armenians were severely punished. In addition, the Armenian residents of Julfa were given privileges that, over centuries, had been denied other minorities like the Jews and the Zoroastrians. Each Armenian family was given a plot of land as well as necessary funds and means to engage in industry, agriculture or trade. Armenians in general were allowed to sell and buy property, especially land; choose their own community leaders; hold religious ceremonies according to their own Christian rites; and wear clothes in the manner of the Iranians. Their chiefs were allowed to put gold-studded saddles on their horses. Some Armenians had palaces that rivaled the best villas constructed in Isfahan proper. The Shah himself often visited these Armenian houses and discussed social and commercial affairs with their residents.

Shah Abbas's theory that Armenians would be able to relate to the west and create beneficial international relations, especially commercial ties with India, paid off. Before long, silk trade between Iran and India became a monopoly of a major Armenian family of Julfa. It also became a bone of contention between the Armenians of Julfa and the Muslim Isfahanis who found themselves increasingly ignored by the court. This latter development, it should be added, is the precursor to a series of events that culminated in the downfall of the Julfa community.

Shah Abbas was fully aware of the international dynamics that had facilitated the entrance of the Armenians to the silk trade. In order to register this understanding as well as underscore his nation's support of foreign trade, he ordered the construction of a major Armenian church in Julfa. The church was to be built by Iranian architects with the supervision of Armenian managers.



Georg Church entrance: detail

The exterior of the church was to comply with Muslim architectural decor while the interior satisfied the requirements of Christian worship. For the foundation of the church, Safavid builders transported thirteen large pieces of stone that had originally been used in

the building of the Uch Kelisa in Yerevan, Armenia. After the destruction of Uch Kelisa and the removal of the remains of the saints buried there to other Christian places of worship, the stones were moved to Julfa to be used in the foundation of the new Georg Church.

Altogether, during the reign of the Safavid monarchs, especially Shah Abbas, fourteen churches were built in Julfa. The oldest church was called the Church of Holy Jacob or Hakup the building of which was completed in 1607. The interior of Georg Church, donated by Shah Abbas I to the Armenians of Julfa, is very austere. A single painting adorns the altar. The entrance of Georg Church (completed in AD 1719) is adorned with a large tile painting depicting Mary and Jesus as well as several others in attendance.

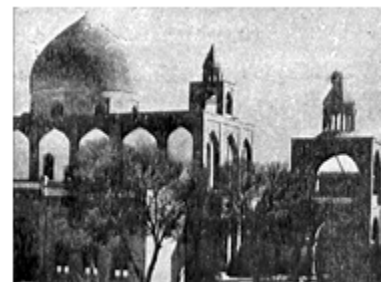


All Saviour's Cathedral: interior

In time, profit from the silk trade, carpet and textile weaving, production of alcoholic beverages, and agriculture combined to make some Armenians as rich as the most affluent princes of Isfahan. The Armenians' ambition, too, reached new heights. Between 1661 and 1666, the Georg Church was expanded to include a number of halls adorned with gold and silver chandeliers and valuable paintings. Funds for the expansion were contributed by Mahdesi (cf., haji) Avdich who renamed the church as the Church of Mary.. Avdich's contributions were later on enhanced by another wealthy silk merchant of Julfa, Khwaja Georg Aqa, who imported two paintings for the church from Venice. The paintings, completed in 1613, were installed in 1841.

Adjacent to the Church of Mary is the Baidkham Church built over twenty years by the order of Khwajah Petros Vali Jani, a wealthy Armenian merchant. The interior decor of the church includes a number of wall paintings depicting the life of Jesus Christ. The church's architecture and golden dome are among its most attractive features

The most memorable church in Julfa, the one that comes to mind upon mentioning the name of the city, is the Amenaperkich or the Church of the Saviour. Also referred to as Vank, the church was constructed between 1655 and 1664--during the reign of Shah Abbas II--by funds contributed by the Armenian population of Julfa. The exterior of Vank Church recalls the brick architecture of the Jami' Mosque built by the Saljuqs across the river; the interior is adorned by paintings heavily influenced by Italian artists. The amount of gold used by Iranian



Exterior view of Vank Church and its free-standing belfry

artists in the interior decoration of this church surpasses the gold used in all the other churches combined.



Free-standing belfry

The free-standing belfry of the Vank Church is built directly opposite from the main entrance of the church. The complex funded by Huhanjan Jamalians, during the reign of Shah Sultan Hussein, carries a number of inscriptions as well as serves as the resting place of several well-known Armenians of Julfa.

Finally, the Vank museum was built adjacent, although slightly to the north of the church in 1905. The museum has a number of halls filled with artifacts related to the relatively long history of the Armenians in Julfa. It also includes a number of more recent paintings contributed by Armenian merchants who have visited Europe and brought gifts for the church.

The museum's library carries some 700 manuscripts and 1,000 printed books in Armenian. The most ancient of these books belongs to the 10th century. The library also holds a copy of the first book printed by Armenians in Isfahan and a copy of the history of Julfa written in 1881 by Haratun Darhouhanian.

The most attractive part of the museum is a collection of firmans (orders) issued by Safavid successors of Shah Abbas regarding Armenian affairs. Relics from the plaster and gold decorations of the Haft Dast and A'ine Khaneh--two major Safavid buildings on the Zayandeh-Rud now extinct--are also kept in this museum.



Armenian manuscript at the Vank Church museum



The Armenian graveyard is located to the south of Julfa at the foot of the Sufah Mountain. A number of Europeans who died in Isfahan after the settlement of Julfa are also buried in this graveyard. The tomb of Cygit Rodolff, German watchmaker put to death by the order of Shah Safi, receives the most attention.

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