



The Safavid Empire

Pre-Modern Era

1450-1750

The Shi'a Challenge of the Safavids

- Main Idea:
 - In the first years of the 16th century, the Safavids founded a dynasty that conquered what is now **IRAN**. Restoring Persia as a major center of **political power** and **cultural creativity**, they also established one of the strongest and most enduring centers of Shi'ism within the Islamic world.

Comparing the Gunpowder Empires

- Ottomans
 - Turkic nomadic group
 - Highly militant group
 - Sunnis
- Safavids
 - Turkic nomadic group
 - Highly militant group
 - Shi'a

Therefore:

These two groups would be in conflict with one another despite both groups Islamic ideologies.

Background on Safavids

- Founded by Sufi mystics and religious preachers near the Caspian Sea (Think Tehran, Iran)
- After centuries of warfare, Ismail (a surviving Sufi commander) captured the city of Tabriz and was proclaimed the shah, or emperor.
- In the next 10 years, Ismail's followers conquered much of Persia and drove out the Safavid's enemies.

The Battle of Chaldiran

- Safavid expansion into NW Persia created conflict with Ottomans.
- One of the most fateful battles in Islamic History- Chaldiran
 - More than dynastic clash – ideological
 - Battle demonstrated importance of gunpowder:
 - Cavalry (Safavids) versus cannon (Ottomans)
 - Devastating defeat for Safavids
 - Ottomans could not follow up w/ crushing blow to Safavids, but dreams of territorial expansion were finished.

Life under the Shahs

- Like the Ottomans, the Persian Safavids created a bureaucracy to supply the government.
- Practice of recruiting slave armies from Russia:
 - Much like Janissaries, some of these boys rose to positions of power and prestige w/in the government.

State and Religion

- Padishah(s) – King of Kings
 - Opulent palace life
 - Claimed to be descendants of Shi'a imams (or successors of Ali)
- Religious scholars – Mullahs
 - Teachers, but sponsored by state
 - Paid by state – had to mention the Safavid ruler every Friday.
- Pressure others to convert – but showed tolerance (not to Sunnis)

Artistic Splendor -

- Isfahan- city and seat of power for Safavids built by Shah Abbas.
 - Half million people in its 25 mile circumference.
 - Colleges, markets, government buildings, gardens, public baths, rest houses.
 - Great Mosques – demonstrate glory of Empire
 - Originally there existed a Jewish quarter, but later in Shah Abbas's rule Jews were forced to convert to Islam or leave city.

Women in Safavid Empire

- Originally it is believed that women were:
 - Subordinate to men
 - Lost legal and hereditary rights
 - Even women of nomadic background lost their independence when they settled in towns or conquered areas.
 - Especially women/wives of the elite were subject to strict laws and codes:
 - Seclusion in the household
 - Veiling when out in public

Women in Safavid Empire:

- Recent evidence suggests otherwise:
 - There was a struggle against these restrictions
 - Some women openly refused to wear face covers while in public
 - Women donned bright clothing in defiance
 - @ court women played an important political role (indirectly) and were often deeply involved in political conspiracies
 - Women were active in trade & moneylending
 - Women could often provoke provisions in Islamic law to protect their rights and even divorce if conditions in marriage had become intolerable.

Rapid fall of Safavid Empire

- Abas became paranoid of his sons
 - Killed all of his kids and successors
 - His weak grandson was chosen (cause he could be controlled)
- Princes
 - Locked away from public and became poor in their leadership ability
 - Poor government couldn't fight outside invaders.
- Ottomans, Mughals, Afghani tribes besieged Isfahan – fell Oct 1722 (80,000 inhabitant killed of starvation & disease)
- Area became a battleground for generations to come...