include jihad, holy war against the infidel. While the Safavid notion of jihad may have sprung from the desire to proselytize, the political reality of assembling an army of zealously committed holy warriors presented a threat to the dominant powers in Shirvan, Azerbaijan and eastern Anatolia, namely the Shirvanshahs, the Aqquyunlu Turkmans and the Ottomans respectively. Thus the successive deaths of the Safavid shaykh Junayd, Haydar and 'Ali in the second half of the fifteenth century at the hands of the Shirvanshahs and Aqquyunlu Turkmans politicized the order and fuelled a desire for revenge.

Born at Ardabil on 25 Rajab 892/17 July 1487, Isma'il Safavi entered a world of growing tension between his paternal line, the shaykhs of Ardabil, and his maternal side, the Aqquyunlu Turkman sultans. The powerful Aqquyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan had sanctioned the marriage of his daughter Halima Beg, known as 'Alam Shah Begum, to Haydar, leader of the Safavids. However, the death of Uzun Hasan in 882/1478 and the accession of his sons Khalil and then Ya'qub Beg led to a change of climate in the relations between the two houses. Ya'qub did not trust Haydar, whose charisma had attracted a large following of Turkmans from eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan. These men adopted a specific form of headdress which Haydar claimed he learned in a dream by 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and successor.’ Called a tāj-i Haydari, this consisted of a red cap with a tall baton around which the turban was wound with twelve folds, one for each of the twelve Shiite imams. Because of the red colour of the tāj, the Turkman followers of Haydar were called Qizilbash, or ‘red heads’. Whether or not the dream of ‘Ali and wearing the tāj-i Haydari indicate that Haydar himself was Shiite, the choice of a specific headdress differentiated the Qizilbash from other Turkmans and expressed their allegiance to the Ardabil order rather than to Ya'qub Beg. This loyalty was manifested in its loyalty and through a turban type and spiritual identity but also through arms. The Qizilbash formed the basis of an army Haydar raised to fight the Christians of Georgia, as his father Junayd had done before him. However, just as Junayd had succumbed to the Shirvanshahs in 864/1460 as he tried to cross their territory to Georgia, Haydar was killed at the behest of Ya’qub Beg, who had become uneasy about his strong following.

In an attempt to limit the influence of Haydar’s family, Ya’qub Beg had his three sons, 'Ali, Ibrahim and Isma’il, arrested and taken to Istakhr near Shiraz, where they were imprisoned. Thus, in Rabi’i II 894/March 1489 at the age of twenty-one months Isma’il was relocated to a site over 1,500 km from his place of birth. During the four and a half years that the boys spent in prison, Ya’qub Beg died and rivalries between the Aqquyunlu princes flared into civil war. This situation worked in favour of the Safavid prisoners who were freed in 898/1495. However, having drawn the Safavids and their army of supporters into his power struggle, the Turkman prince Rustam then turned on Isma’il’s older brother, ‘Ali, and had him executed. Despite his tender age, all of seven years, Isma’il was chosen to succeed ‘Ali as the spiritual leader of the order of Ardabil.

Having lost three successive shaykhs to the Aqquyunlu sultans and Shirvanshahs, the Turkman followers of the order were determined to protect Isma’il at almost any cost. Although in 899/1494 the Aqquyunlu Turkmans plundered Ardabil in search of Isma’il, his supporters hid him, first in the house of a qādi (judge), then with a sequence of women. Eventually he was taken to join his supporters who were sheltering in the mountains near Ardabil, but the continuing search conducted by the Turkmans required him to move on to Rasht, at times eluding his captors by hiding in the vaults of mosques. Finally Mirza ‘Ali Karkiya, governor of Lahijan on the Caspian Sea and a Shiite ally of the shaykhs of Ardabil, offered to protect Isma’il and his Sufi followers.

If his imprisonment and flight from the Aqquyunlu assassins impressed upon Isma’il the seriousness of the threats to himself and the Ardabil order, his five-year stay in Lahijan in 899–905/1494–9 provided the environment in which he could receive a well-rounded education. Mirza ‘Ali appointed Maulana Shams al-Din Lahijji to teach him how to read and recite the Qur’an. Isma’il apparently excelled in and mastered Persian and Arabic. In addition, he spoke and wrote Azari Turkish, as his poetry under the pen-name Khata‘i attests. While some of Isma’il’s time was taken up with meeting his followers from Anatolia and Azerbaijan, he also took pleasure in hunting and fishing in the hills and streams of Gilan. This idyll would have been impossible without the vigilance and guile of Mirza ‘Ali, who repeatedly had to deny to the Aqquyunlu that he was harbouring Isma’il. At one point Mirza ‘Ali
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at he was harbouring Isma’il. At one point Mizra ‘Ali
reportedly dreamed that ‘Ali had instructed him to place Isma’il in
a basket and lift it up so that he could swear that Isma’il was not in
the land of Gilan. Either the gullibility of the Turkmans or, more
likely, their increasing political disarray kept them from finding
the young shaykh.
By 905/1499 Isma’il, now aged twelve, was ready to emerge
from Gilan. Travelling by way of Ardabil, he wintered in Talish,
staying in the villages around Astara on the Caspian. Meanwhile,
word was spreading among the Sufis of the main Turkman tribes of
Anatolia, Azerbaijan and Syria that their murshid-i kamil and
pu’idushah (spiritual and temporal leader) would be ready to meet
them in Erzijan. There in late summer 906/1500 Isma’il and 7,000
supporters congregated and the transformation of the Safavids from
religious order to political entity took shape as plans to avenge the
deaths of Junayd, Haydar and ‘Ali were formulated. First, Isma’il
and his army marched on the Shirvanshah city of Shamakha
and killed Farrukhbarsu, son of the prince who had murdered Junayd.
Next the Safavids took Baku. At this point they might have chosen
to proceed to Georgia, reviving the holy war begun by Junayd
and continued by Haydar. Instead they turned toward Tabriz, capital of
the Aqqoyunlu, in the knowledge that the Aqqoyunlu army was
advancing north. When the Aqqoyunlu and the Safavids met at
Sharur north of Tabriz in late summer 907/1501, the Safavids
triumphed over the Aqqoyunlu sultan, Alvand. Now in control of
Azerbaijan, Isma’il was crowned at Tabriz, coins were issued in his
name and the khutba, the declaration of the reigning monarch’s
name at Friday prayers, was read in the name of the twelve imams.
The Safavid conquest of Iran and the imposition of Shi’ism as the
state religion had commenced.
The account of Shah Isma’il’s childhood and emergence as spiritual
and temporal leader of the Safavids incorporates certain key
events for the early history of the Safavid state. Equally, one may
look to these years for clues to the formation of Isma’il’s taste and
thus the early stages of Safavid art and architecture. Whether
imprisoned by or in flight from the Aqqoyunlu Turkmans, Isma’il
would have travelled more than most princes of his day. The
embraced Shiism? While many specialists believe that aspects of Shiism were acceptable to the shaykhs of Ardabil without their renouncing Sunnism, Isma‘īl’s fervent acceptance of the Shiite way cannot be denied. Possibly his five-year stay at the court of ‘Ali Mirza Karkiya, a Shiite himself, was the deciding factor in Isma‘īl’s system of beliefs. Certainly his formal education at the Gilan court by Shams al-Din Labījī could have provided an intellectual framework within which to embrace Shiism. Furthermore, the extreme Sufi following who rallied to Isma‘īl’s cause when he emerged from Gilan would have incorporated a number of Shiite beliefs in their religion, which was more folk than orthodox Islam. While the impact of Shiism on early Safavid art cannot be pinpointed, objects begin to bear the names of the Shiite imams and some of the intensity found in the religious poetry of Shah Isma‘īl is reflected in the paintings of the Tabriz master Sultan Muhammad. Thus the connection between the early Safavid system of beliefs and the art of the period is more a matter of mood than of literal illustration of Shiite hagiography.

Like the monuments, domestic buildings and tents that Isma‘īl could have observed before his accession, so the manuscripts he studied at ‘Ali Mirza Karkiya’s court and those he may have read for enjoyment would have furnished a standard against which others could be compared. In addition, utilitarian objects from bowls to ewers, clothes to carpets, and bowcases to spears all would have comprised Isma‘īl’s visual environment. While not all such objects can be assigned to a precise date and place so that we can be certain of his familiarity with them, some standing monuments, illustrated manuscripts and dated objects of the late fifteenth century help to define the types of manmade edifices and objects to which Isma‘īl might have been exposed.

Although at least ten structures are extant today at the Ardabil shrine and many more would have stood in its heyday in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only a handful of significant buildings and numerous graves were clustered at the site in the late fifteenth century. Soon after the death of Shaykh Safi, founder of the Ardabil order, in 734/1334, a room in his khangah (dervish lodge), where his followers met, was designated as the place in which he should be buried. By 745/1344 a domed tomb tower [fig. 3] had been constructed over the body of Shaykh Safi by his son,
shiasm? While many specialists believe that aspects of Islam acceptable to the shaykhs of Ardabil without their Sunnism, Isma’il’s fervent acceptance of the Shi’ite way was denied. Possibly his five-year stay at the court of ‘Ali iya, a Shi’ite himself, was the deciding factor in Isma’il’s views. Certainly his formal education at the Gilan court of 1-Din Lahiji could have provided an intellectual frame-n with which to embrace Shiism. Furthermore, the extreme view that rallied to Isma’il’s cause when he emerged from the harem incorporated a number of Shi’ite beliefs in their high regard for orthodox Islam. While the harem on early Safavid art cannot be pinpointed, objects in the halls of the house and some of the objects in the religious poetry of Shah Isma’il is reflected in the rules of the Tabriz master Sultan Muhammad. Thus the buildings between the early Safavid system of beliefs and the art of Isma’il’s visual environment. Not all such things be assigned to a precise date and place so that we can be familiar with them, some standing monuments, manuscripts and dated objects of the late fifteenth century to define the types of man-made edifices and objects to see them. All ten structures are extant today at the Ardabil, many more would have stood in its heyday in the thirteenth century, only a handful of significant graves were clustered at the site in the late thirteenth century. Soon after the death of Shaykh Sadiq, founder of the order, in 754/1354, a room in his khanah (dervish house) was designated as the place where the body of Shaykh Sadiq’s tomb would be buried. By 745/1344 a domed tomb tower [fig. 5] was constructed over the body of Shaykh Sadiq by his son, Shaykh Sadr al-Din Musa. Although it has undergone refurbishment, the present building with its glazed brick decoration is substantially original. To the east was the Gunbad-i Haram (Haram-khaneh), where Shaykh Sadiq’s wife, who was the daughter of his spiritual master, and other women were buried. This had originally been erected between 724/1324 and 755/1354 during Shaykh Sadiq’s lifetime as a tomb for his eldest son, who predeceased him, and is most likely the earliest extant building in the shrine. The hall that leads up to Shaykh Sadiq’s tomb was constructed on the site of a zaviyeh (meeting room for the faithful), which was demolished after the death of the Shaykh. Called the Dar al-Huffaz, the hall functioned as a room for continuous recitation of the Qur’an. Lake Sadiq’s tomb, this building was constructed by his son, Shaykh Sadr al-Din Musa, during his time as shaykh of the Safavid order at Ardabil (755/1354–794 or 795/1391 or 1592). While the building has undergone interior and external alterations and renovations, its basic shape and relationship to Shaykh Sadiq’s tomb, as they exist today, would have been close to those of the late fifteenth century when Isma’il sheltered in the shrine. However, only the tilework on the exterior wall can be attributed to the fourteenth century (restored in the twentieth century), while the interior decoration stems from the period of Shah ‘Abbas I (995/1587–1039/1629).

Another building revamped by Shah ‘Abbas, the Chini-khana, also originated in the fourteenth century; it has been identified as the ‘Dome of the Princes’ by Morton. Later altered to accommodate Shah ‘Abbas’ collection of Chinese porcelain, the chamber, its dome and perhaps its crypt might have been familiar sights to Isma’il. In addition to the standing buildings erected by Shaykh Sadr al-Din Musa in the fourteenth century, a large domed Chihlekh Khaen with glazed brick decoration once stood to the west of Shaykh Sadiq’s tomb, but has been ruined for at least a century. Golombek and Wibun have suggested that it functioned as a gathering place for dervish ceremonies. Additions to the shrine in the third quarter of the fifteenth century include a large rectangular courtyard, and possibly the suite of rooms surrounding it, leading up to the Chihlekh Khaen from the north-west. The Ardabil shrine is highly distinctive. Not only did it include the domed tomb towers of Shaykh Sadiq, his son and other family members, but also buildings such as the Dar al-Huffaz and the Chiliekh Khaen which would have accommodated the followers of the Safavid order. The large courtyard to the west of the complex would have been useful when the numbers of people at the shrine exceeded the space available inside the shrine buildings. The decoration, consisting of glazed brick hazzat and geometric ornament, and epigraphic and arabesque panels in mosaic faience in portals and around windows, relates to monuments of the mid and late fourteenth century in Kirman and Samarkhand, but the narrow proportions of the entrance to the Dar al-Huffaz recall the Muzaffariad architecture of Yazd of the 1540s. Although the possession of the dome at the fort in Iskandar may have had an impression on Isma’il from his four-year incarceration there, he may not have been inclined to recreate in Azerbaijan the type of buildings to which he was exposed in Persia. One can only speculate on the domestic and public architecture that would have stood in Lahijan at the time of Isma’il. Traditionally, because of the extensive forests of Gilan, houses were built of wood with verandas. However, the palace of Sultan ‘Ali Mirza would probably have been constructed of stone or brick as it would have served a defensive purpose as well as housing the local potentate and his staff. Assuming the Lahijan governor’s palace was basically similar to that of the Shirvanshahs in Baku, to the north, it would have included a multi-room building of two storeys in which the governor and his family resided; a building devoted to administration, possibly with a jail; a mosque and mausoleum and perhaps a madrasa; and a hamam (bath), all surrounded by walls. The so-called ‘Ross Anonymous’ states that Mirza ‘Ali set apart a dwelling opposite the College of Kai Afridin for Isma’il, but it is not certain whether this was inside or outside the palace precinct. However, it would seem likely that both the college (madrasa) and Isma’il’s quarters were well within the palace walls and safe from the Turkman authorities.

In such a palace Isma’il could have become familiar with the warren of rooms in the private, residential part of the complex as well as the madrasa, where he may have received his lessons from Shams al-Din Lahiji, and the mosque where he would have worshipped. Just as at Baku, towering iwan (niches) with tiled and stone-carved spandrels and muqarnas pendentives would have
marked the entrances to different buildings and the sides of the courtyard of the madrasa. Otherwise, the decoration of surfaces may have been simpler than those at the Ardabil shrine.

Examination of interior scenes from a Shahnameh (Book of Kings) manuscript produced for Sultan 'Ali Mirza in 1493-4 and known as the 'Big Head' Shahnameh, may shed some light on the actual appearance of his palace interiors. Many decorative features are evident in the painting of 'Gis brings Gurgin before Kay Khusrav' [fig. 4] which may have been found in the palace in Lahijan.

The main event takes place within an iran, designated by a span-drel covered with an animated floral arabesque on a rich blue ground. Unlike the tiled dado at the back of the chamber or the brick and tiled entrance, there are no lines to indicate that the span-drel is made up of tiles. While such a span-drel could have been painted and gessoed, it is also possible that the artist omitted the lines that denote tiles to avoid detracting from the design. Behind Kay Khusrav's gilded throne with its bird finial, the dado walls of the niche consist of cobalt blue hexagonal tiles with ornamental gold dots, bordered by narrow strips of green and gold and a wider band of gold. These gold sections may have been gessoed and gilded, as one finds in some early Timurid buildings. The upper section of the wall consists of plain white plaster with a row of painted blue knots around the edges. Behind the throne and to the right is a prominently displayed door, most likely of wood painted pink. Above this door and the door at the right are two rectangular windows, the round glass panes of which have tarnished to black. Likewise, the large orb suspended in the centre of the room must have originally shimmered as one would expect of a silver or glass lamp. A sumptuous carpet with a pattern of repeating stars and crosses and a red border with a pseudo-Kufic inscription completely covers the floor of the interior. The exterior walls of the palace are revetted with turquoise-glazed bricks and a dado of cobalt blue and black hexagonal tiles.

Upon his entry into Tabriz in 907/1501, Isma'il could not have failed to be impressed by the Blue Mosque (Masjid-i Muzaffariyyah), built in 870/1465, and the monumental early fourteenth-century Masjid-i Jami' of 'Ali Shah. Although today only the qibla wall and parts of the two flanking walls that would have formed the sides of a vaulted iran remain, in the fourteenth century the Masjid-i Jami
had a madrasa and a zaviyeh. The vault itself apparently partly collapsed not long after its construction. Before the vault was a large courtyard with marble paving, watercourses, fruit trees, flowers, tiled arcades and walls, and a central pool with a fountain. This consisted of a square platform with four lions spouting water into the pool; in the centre at a higher level rose an octagonal fountain with two jets. Although historical descriptions of the decoration of the mosque are not overly precise, they appear to indicate that the building was revetted in part with lustreware tiles and with glazed tiles on the exterior facades. Wilber has suggested that ‘the interior wall surfaces were coated with white plaster but [it is] more probable that they were hung with woven materials’. Even if the tile decoration was intact in 907/1501, it seems unlikely that textile hangings still covered the interior walls, if they ever had.

The sheer size of the Masjid-i Jami’ is exceptional, but the opulent decoration of the Blue Mosque may have had a greater influence on Isma’il’s taste and thus on early Safavid architecture than the earlier building. Moreover, although the organization and function of rooms in the palace at Isfahan would have differed greatly from those of the Blue Mosque, the decorative vocabulary of the two complexes may have been similar, with artisans at the provincial palace borrowing ideas from the Turkman capital.

Although much ravaged by earthquakes, the Blue Mosque still boasts glorious tile and brickwork decoration [fig. 5]. The visitor in 1500 would have first been struck by the towering portal with its muqarnas semi-dome completely covered in mosaic finish. Floral and arabesque ornament in turquoise, yellow and white provide a rhythmic counterpoint for the slightly raised inscription that forms a frame for the opening of the portal. Traces of tile and unglazed baked brick decoration on the exterior suggest that the whole building was originally covered with decoration. Possibly Isma’il would have noted the unusual plan of the building, with a large central domed chamber and a smaller domed sanctuary on the same axis as the entrance. Certainly the hexagonal dark blue tiles of the central dome chamber are found in manuscript illustrations of the late fifteenth century [see fig. 4]. Moreover, in the smaller dome chamber the purplish blue tiles have gold decoration applied just as in the paintings. The smaller chamber, thought to be a mausoleum for Jahan Shah, has greenish marble slabs resembling alabaster with a continuous Qur’anic inscription running around its periphery at dado level and in the mihrab, an expensive alternative to tiling. Perhaps more influential than the range of decorative techniques was the precision and finesse of the epigraphic, geometric and vegetal patterns which adorn the building. The marriage of ebullience and refinement found at the Blue Mosque was never again replicated. Yet its spirit informed early sixteenth-century royal Safavid architectural decoration as well as the arts of the book.

Other spectacular buildings in Tabriz to which Isma’il became heir, such as Uzun Hasan’s Hasht Behisht garden palace, have

5 Niche on left flanking wall of entrance portal, Blue Mosque (Masjid-i Muzaffariyeh), Tabriz, 870/1465. The rich and varied decoration of this Qaraqoyunlu Turkman monument includes intricate tile mosaic with monumental inscriptions in squared Kufic and curvilinear thuluth scripts.
6 'Rustam before Kay Khusrau under the Jewelled Tree', from the 'Big Head' Shahnameh, Gilan, Iran, 896/1495–6, opaque watercolour and ink on paper, text and illustration 25 x 15.4 cm, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, S1986.139. When Kay Khusrau met with Rustam to discuss the rescue of Bizhan, he was enthroned under a tree with a silver trunk, golden leaves, flowers of jewels and real fruit.
disappeared. Yet some of the types of portable objects that he would have used before becoming shah can be deduced from a handful of dated or datable pieces of metalwork and ceramics and illustrations of objects in manuscripts.

Two illustrated manuscripts stand out as highly significant documents for the study of the type of books to which Isma'il might have been exposed before his accession. The *Shahnameh* dedicated to Sultan 'Ali Mirza Karkiya in 899/1493-4, the year that Isma'il arrived at Lahijan, includes over 500 illustrations in a range of Turkman painting styles from the folksy 'Big Head' genre to the more restrained Turkman Court Style. It is possible that as many as four artists joined the scribe, Salik ibn Sa'id, in producing this manuscript. Unlike the late Timurid workshop at Herat, where artists strove for stylistic uniformity, the illustrations to the Lahijan *Shahnameh* fall into distinct stylistic groups. At one extreme are the paintings of figures with disproportionately large heads and teeth that poke out between closed lips. At the other are paintings that reveal a greater debt to Timurid painting as filtered by the Turkman Commercial Style of Shiraz. The figures in these works are numerous and small in scale [fig. 6]. The level of complexity of ornament and composition is far greater than in the Big Head group. Also, here one finds the typical Turkman treatment of vegetation, with lush clumps of grass and low-growing plants rendered with yellowish green leaves. The illustrations forming an intermediate group in which the figures are neither exceptionally large nor small may be the work of another individual or of two artists working together. Although Isma'il may have found the toothy big-headed figures amusing, the sophistication, precision and intense colour of the smaller-scale illustrations are the stylistic traits that survived in Safavid painting from the time of his reign.

Like the Blue Mosque and the Masjid-i Jami' of 'Ali Shah, the contents of the royal library of the Turkmans became Isma'il's when he took Tabriz in 907/1501. We will never know the extent of the library holdings, as Ottoman invasions, royal gift giving, the shift of the Safavid capital to Qazvin and natural disasters have all but erased the historical record. However, some of the finest Turkman manuscripts and albums are kept intact in Istanbul and shed light on the leading artists of the late fifteenth century at Tabriz and their productions. Of these, the *Khamsah* (Five Tales) of

Nizami bears a colophon dated 886/1481, but was begun for the mid-fifteenth-century Timurid prince Baha' b. Baysungur (d. 861/1457) and continued at the behest of the Aqquyunlu Turkman Khalil Sultan for his father, Uzun Hassan. When he died in 885/1478, his brother Ya'qub Beg, who is mentioned in the colophon, had illustrations added by the two leading court painters, Shaykhi and Darvish Muhammad. Yet more paintings were added when the manuscript came into the hands of Shah Isma'il. The result is that eleven illustrations were completed before 1501 and eleven more were added about 1505.

The artists of the first group of illustrations have combined a plethora of detail drawn on a minute scale with almost dreamlike sequences of colour to create compositions in which architecture and landscape are organically interconnected. People and animals populate but do not dominate the compositions. In these works, far more than in most of the Big Head *Shahnameh* pages, the viewer is aware of the natural setting. Likewise, because of the precision of drawing, we can discover much about the types of material objects employed in Tabriz in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. While the artists responsible for these illustrations were in every way the match of the painters working in Herat at the Timurid court of Sultan Husayn Bayqara in the same period, the mood of the two courts could not be more distant. Where Herat painters present a rational, almost geometric, and somewhat cool world view, the Turkman artists mitigate geometry with motion, the cool with the hot, and incorporate different climates and even times of day in the same composition. Certainly these paintings would have been to the Turkman royal taste, but did they express a different approach to the world from that of the Timurids? While the Timurids were threatened on the east by the Uzbeks and hemmed in on the west by the Turkmans, at the end of the fifteenth century Sultan Husayn Bayqara presided over a brilliant court where poetry and art flourished. By contrast, until the death of Ya'qub Beg the Turkmans were interested in expanding their territory and control in Anatolia and Iran. The unity of this vision did not extend to the arts; rather, in painting different styles coexisted even in the same manuscript. In the decorative arts, artisans borrowed from the dominant workshops of the day to produce metal and ceramic objects that are subtly distinct from those of other domains.
Recent studies of the archaeological remains and petrography of fifteenth-century ceramics have begun to isolate workshops in different parts of Iran. According to Golombiek, Mason and Bailey, the important pottery-making centres of Nishapur and Mashhad were joined in the late fifteenth century by Tabriz, probably as a result of potters emigrating from Khurasan. The blue and white wares made at Tabriz derive from Chinese blue and white porcelains (fig. 7), but blue and white wares produced at Nishapur may have been the immediate inspiration for their designs rather than the Chinese wares themselves. Given the great wealth of the Turkman rulers, actual Chinese porcelains and vessels of precious and base metals would have been preferred over Persian stonepaste wares at court. Yet a market for Persian blue and white wares would have existed at other levels of society, as the range in quality from fine to crude wares attributed to Tabriz attests.

The differential between the taste and buying power of the Turkman court at Tabriz, on the one hand, and of satellite courts such as that at Lahijan, on the other, is suggested by comparing the vessels depicted in the Turkman Khamsheh of Nizami and the ‘Big Head’ Shahnameh. In ‘Bahram Gur and the Moorish Princess in the Yellow Pavilion’ in the Khamsheh of Nizami (fig. 8), Bahram Gur reclines in a pavilion with two bulbous golden bottles at his side, one of which sits on a golden platter. Decorated, respectively, with lobes and facets, these bottles would have most likely been gold, as brass was not suitable for vessels containing wine or drinking water unless it was tinned. Nearby a girl waters a flower with a golden ewer and in the foreground another girl kneels beside a stream with a small hemispherical gold cup in her hand. Except for the tiles in the niche, nowhere is a ceramic object to be seen. By contrast, the painting of ‘Kay Khusraw and Kay Kaus’ from the ‘Big Head’ Shahnameh (fig. 9) features an array of ceramic bottles, dishes and a ewer and three small golden wine bowls held by a servant boy and two attendants. It is possible that both Persian and Chinese ceramics are depicted here. The cobalt blue and lustre pieces would definitely be Persian and the pale blue ones with dark blue decoration are probably Persian imitations of Chinese wares, but the blue and white pieces could well be Chinese porcelains as their shapes and decoration relate fairly closely to Chinese prototypes, albeit of about 1455.

From the accounts of travellers who visited the court of Uzun Hasun one can deduce that both metal and porcelain vessels were used for serving food, or for containing other items such as jewels, and were considered appropriate as ambassadorial gifts. Josafa Barbaro, who visited Tabriz in 1574, described the presentation of gifts from an Indian ambassador to Uzun Hasun: ‘every one of them wi|th a little dishe of sylvre full of such pretious stones as I shall declare unto yow hereafter. After them came certain wi|th vessells and dishes of porcellana.’ Ambrogi Contarini, recounting banquets with the king in the same year, noted that four hundred people regularly sat at the king’s entertainments. ‘The food is brought to them in vessels of copper, and consists sometimes of rice, sometimes of corn, with a little meat ....’

Whereas the blue and white wares which now can be attributed to Tabriz reveal the strong influence of China by way of Khurasan, very little metalwork can safely be assigned to Turkman Tabriz. On the basis of an inlaid brass candlestand inscribed with the name of Uzun Hasun, Allan has identified a group of metal objects of various shapes that appear to have been made within the Turkman cultural orbit. In addition, it is possible that the so-called ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ group of metalwork was produced in Azerbaijan or the Diyar Bakr–Kurdistan region, but it may have been primarily for export to Europe. What is evident in both
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groups of metal wares is the awareness of eastern Iranian metalwork from Herat as well as Mamluk and Ottoman styles and techniques of metalwork. While the intricate arabesque that fills the spaces between geometric, epigraphic and other larger design elements on the ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ wares [fig. 10] recalls the small-scale, complex ornament of metal objects made in late fifteenth-century Herat, the incorporation of generously executed lotus flowers and bold thuluth script on a tinned copper plate of 902/1496–7 relates to the decoration of some Mamluk metal wares of the fourteenth century. Although the lack of metal objects with historical inscriptions impedes the identification of a school of Turkman metalwork in the late fifteenth century, the few pieces that can be assigned to Turkman patronage point to a group of objects related to both Herati and Mamluk metal wares but subtly distinct from both major schools. In some cases design elements recall those of thirteenth-century inlaid metal works of Mosul, now under Turkman control, which might lead one to wonder if some families of metalworkers had either remained in Mosul or returned there at some point in the fifteenth century.

Modern knowledge of other Turkman portable objects, such as textiles and carpets, relies almost entirely on manuscript illustrations. The figures in the royal Turkman Khamsheh wear either plain coloured long robes and coats or garments made of cloth with repeating gold patterns. Sometimes special decoration on the shoulders or a band of ornament at the waist or knee is evident. Some coats, such as that of the princess, are lined with fur. In the ‘Big Head’ Shahnaneh some servants wear garments of plain cloth while the robes of nobles and kings and even pageboys have repeating gold decoration in bands or all-over designs as well as cloud collars, which had been in vogue throughout the fifteenth century. Although there is no reason to doubt that the textiles depicted in paintings reflect the actual textiles of the period, very few fragments are extant which can be attributed to late fifteenth-century Iran with confidence. Furthermore, since some pieces thought to be fifteenth-century have come out of Tibet, they have been attributed to Transoxiana rather than Azerbaijan or even Khurasan. Even if the fifteenth-century textiles known today were woven in eastern Iran or beyond, it is possible that the raw silk came from the Caspian region, a major silk production area.

9 ‘Kay Khusrav and Kay Kaus’, from the ‘Big Head’ Shahnaneh of Firdausi, Gilan, Iran, 899/1495–4, opaque watercolour and ink on paper, text and illustration 25.9 x 19.6 cm, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, S1986.172. The future shah Kay Khusrav kneels on the right telling his grandfather, Kay Kaus, and assembled courtiers about his adventures, while a young boy serves them wine.
Woods has pointed out that the Turkman ruler Ya'qub Beg was determined to maintain the economic health of his realm which depended in large part on the Caspian–Mediterranean silk trade. Gilan, controlled by the Karkiya dynasty, paid the Aqqoyunlu ruler 7,200 kg of silk annually, 'worth more than 1.2 million akces on the Bursa silk market in addition to nearly 300,000 akces in transit dues paid at Erzincan'. The fact that the Aqqoyunlu often had difficulty collecting this tribute is probably more a result of resentment and desire to keep their own profits on the part of the silk producers than of an inability to produce the required quantities of silk. Moreover, even if silk from Gilan was sold raw, it must be assumed that the knowledge and appreciation of high-quality silk would have been extensive in Gilan and that its wealthier inhabitants would have possessed silken goods that were as luxurious as those available in Tabriz.

The reference to Bursa, until 857/1455, capital of Ottoman Turkey, is of interest not only because of the fine velvets and other textiles produced there but because the carpets that appear in the 'Big Head' Shahnameh appear to be of Turkish rather than Persian manufacture. With their repeating star and cross patterns in the field and borders of pseudo-Kufic, the carpets in the painting 'Giw Brigs Gurgin before Kay Khusrav' [see fig. 4] resemble in a general way the 'Holbein type I' carpets represented in Italian paintings of the 1490s and in some extant examples. In the late fifteenth century, as in the Safavid period, trade was maintained with the Ottomans even in times of political strife. Moreover, Ya'qub Beg was determined to remain neutral in his relations with the Ottomans on the one hand and the Mamluks on the other, presumably as much for economic as for political reasons. Even in the 1490s, during the civil disturbances between rival Aqqoyunlu princes, trade with Bursa most likely continued relatively undisturbed; thus local potenatias such as Sultan 'Ali Mirza of Lahijan could buy fine carpets from Turkey as easily as his merchants could sell silk to the Turks.

Although it is impossible to reconstruct the rooms in which Shah Isma'il was reared and those that he entered upon taking Tabriz, the remains of buildings, paintings, ceramics, metal wares and textiles all contribute to a partial knowledge of his environment. As Shah he united Iran, but even before his accession artistic ideas travelled to Tabriz, Ardabil and Lahijan from the Timurid east, the Ottoman west and the Mamluk south, not to mention regions such as Fars province that were controlled by the Turkmans. As one would expect, the visual sources of the magnificent manuscripts, textiles, carpets and other products of the early Safavids must be sought in Turkman Iran and its neighbouring states. The miracle of Safavid art lies in the transformation of these latent ideas into new and stunning forms.

10 'Veneto-Saracenic' jug, north-western Iran, late 15th–early 16th century, brass with silver inlay, h. 18.5 cm, diam. of rim 9 cm, British Museum, OA 78.12.50.729, Henderson Bequest. Although the group of metal wares from which this comes may have been made primarily for export to Venice, the intricate interlaced decoration and medallions are typical Islamic motifs.
Like a Burning Sun

Shah Isma‘il I

1501–1524

For the die of Heaven’s choice has been cast in your name, and before long you will come out of Gilan like a burning sun, and with your sword sweep unbelief from the face of the earth.¹

The political reconfiguration of Iran that occurred as a result of Shah Isma‘il’s military successes up to 920/1514 dominates the pages of historical texts and foreigners’ accounts, leaving less space for descriptions of his taste and way of life than one finds for either his Turkman predecessors or his Safavid successors. None the less, even reports of his battles sometimes shed light on booty taken and gifts bestowed. Textual accounts of buildings constructed or improved by Shah Isma‘il are also terse, although foundation and renovation inscriptions on the buildings themselves augment the written evidence. A handful of portable objects and, of course, coins are inscribed with Shah Isma‘il’s name and a respectable number of manuscripts are dated within the year of his reign, 907–50/1501–24. Buildings, manuscripts and objects commissioned by high-ranking Safavid officials reflect the taste of the times even if they do not bear the direct imprimatur of the shah. Although Isma‘il did not forcibly resettle artisans to the capital at Tabriz from the regions that he conquered, the combination of regional artistic styles that began during his reign and continued under Shah Tahmasp stems from the movement of people and ideas made possible by a new political order.

Isma‘il’s conquests entailed more than appropriating territory and winning the fealty, willing or unwilling, of populations. Each major battle won and city taken added armaments, horses and the furniture of war (tents, saddles, cooking equipment, etc.) as well as fortresses, palaces, jewels, money and gold vessels, precious silks, whole libraries and whatever other items of value the provincial princes of the day possessed. Even before Isma‘il’s victory at the Battle of Shurur in 1501, he had taken Shirvan and ‘all of the treasure of the Shirvanshah fell into his hands’.² While the cultural inheritance of Shirvan would have resembled that of Gilan and Azerbaijan, there are few clues to what novelties the Shirvanshah treasury would have contained³ and whether they might have caught Isma‘il’s fancy or inspired his artisans.

By comparison to his foray in Shirvan, Isma‘il’s triumph at Tabriz in the summer of 907/1501 after defeating the Apqeyunlu leader, Alvand, bore the trappings of a self-conscious change of regime, if not yet empire. The beginning of the Safavid state and

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