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# CHINESE PORCELAINS FROM THE ARDEBIL SHRINE

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*By*

JOHN ALEXANDER POPE



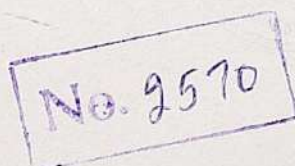
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*To*  
ANNEMARIE



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## THE ILLUSTRATIONS

In addition to the 268 negatives taken by Elizabeth S. Ettinghausen, and further acknowledged in the preface, credit is due the following for photographs of porcelains in the Ardebil Collection:

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, TEHRAN:

Pl. 40, no. 29.35; Pl. 55, no. 29.455; Pl. 69, nos. 29.472, 29.459; Pl. 79, nos. 29.515, 29.520; Pl. 80, no. 29.364 (base); Pl. 82, no. 29.140; Pl. 88, no. 29.387 (inside); Pl. 89, nos. 29.314, 29.265; Pl. 90, no. 29.150; Pl. 91, nos. 29.147, 29.148; Pl. 94, no. 29.207; Pl. 96, nos. 29.481, 29.367; Pl. 97, no. 29.445; Pl. 114, no. 29.772 \*; Pl. 116, nos. 29.769\*, 29.761; Pl. 117, nos. 29.763, 29.764\*; Pl. 118, no. 29.758 (1 \*); Pl. 119, no. 29.747 (base).

### RICHARD ETTINGHAUSEN:

Pl. 40, no. 29.62; Pl. 44, no. 29.310 (base); Pl. 70, nos. 29.437, 29.353; Pl. 78, no. 29.132; Pl. 80, no. 29.364 (3 views); Pl. 81, no. 29.262; Pl. 86, no. 29.456; Pl. 87, no. 29.377; Pl. 90, no. 29.279; Pl. 108, no. 29.444; Pl. 109, no. 29.473; Pl. 113, no. 29.718; Pl. 120, the cat; Pl. 125, no. 29.655; Pl. 129, no. 29.648 (base).

### RICHARD N. FRYE:

Pl. 77, no. 29.346.

### JOHN A. POPE:

Pl. 6, marks A-I and K; Pl. 48, no. 29.333 (black and white print made from a color transparency); Pl. 54, Isfahan; Pl. 74, Isfahan (2 views); Pl. 99, nos. 29.423, 29.424; Pl. 109, no. 29.484.

Objects not in the Ardebil Collection are credited in the respective descriptions except for the following, which were photographed at the Freer Gallery of Art:

Pl. 110, duplicate of 29.678; Pl. 131, Fostāt shards; Pl. 137, Seljuk bronze, dish with *ch'i-lin*, late fifteenth-century shard; Pl. 138, albarello.

All sketches are by the author.

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\* These prints made by the Archaeological Museum were kindly lent for publication here by the Oriental Ceramic Society, London.



# NUMERICAL LIST OF THE ARDEBIL PORCELAINS ILLUSTRATED IN THIS VOLUME

| <i>Object</i> | <i>Plate</i> | <i>Object</i> | <i>Plate</i> | <i>Object</i> | <i>Plate</i> | <i>Object</i> | <i>Plate</i> | <i>Object</i> | <i>Plate</i> |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| 29.1          | 30           | 29.132        | 78           | 29.332        | 47           | 29.413        | 51           | 29.520        | 79           |
| 29.3          | 31           | 29.136        | 72           | 29.333        | 48           | 29.415        | 56           | 29.522        | 26           |
| 29.6          | 31           | 29.137        | 71           | 29.334        | 48           | 29.419        | 51           | 29.523        | 26           |
| 29.21         | 31           | 29.139        | 72           | 29.335        | 49           | 29.420        | 56           | 29.617        | 121          |
| 29.33         | 31           | 29.140        | 82           | 29.336        | 49           | 29.423        | 99           | 29.619        | 121          |
| 29.35         | 40           | 29.142        | 73           | 29.338        | 49           | 29.424        | 99           | 29.621        | 122          |
| 29.37         | 45           | 29.143        | 57           | 29.340        | 49           | 29.427        | 54           | 29.624        | 124          |
| 29.38         | 7            | 29.147        | 91           | 29.341        | 60           | 29.428        | 54           | 29.626        | 123          |
| 29.39         | 12           | 29.148        | 91           | 29.342        | 61           | 29.430        | 54           | 29.630        | 123          |
| 29.40         | 8            | 29.149        | 59           | 29.343        | 62           | 29.433        | 98           | 29.631        | 123          |
| 29.41         | 8            | 29.150        | 90           | 29.344        | 64           | 29.434        | 98           | 29.646        | 125          |
| 29.42         | 9-10         | 29.154        | 102          | 29.345        | 63           | 29.435        | 98           | 29.647        | 126          |
| 29.43         | 10-11        | 29.164        | 103          | 29.346        | 77           | 29.436        | 98           | 29.648        | 129          |
| 29.44         | 18           | 29.171        | 104          | 29.347        | 67           | 29.437        | 70           | 29.649        | 127          |
| 29.45         | 16           | 29.172        | 100          | 29.348        | 66           | 29.439        | 55           | 29.650        | 130          |
| 29.46         | 17           | 29.174        | 104          | 29.349        | 65           | 29.442        | 69           | 29.651        | 128          |
| 29.47         | 15           | 29.175        | 104          | 29.353        | 70           | 29.444        | 108          | 29.652        | 129          |
| 29.48         | 21           | 29.178        | 104          | 29.355        | 83-84        | 29.445        | 97           | 29.654        | 130          |
| 29.49         | 19-20        | 29.203        | 101          | 29.362        | 83-84        | 29.447        | 53           | 29.655        | 125          |
| 29.52         | 38           | 29.205        | 93           | 29.364        | 80           | 29.448        | 53           | 29.657        | 115          |
| 29.55         | 37           | 29.207        | 94           | 29.367        | 96           | 29.451        | 74           | 29.678        | 110          |
| 29.58         | 38           | 29.208        | 94           | 29.369        | 85           | 29.455        | 55           | 29.679        | 112          |
| 29.60         | 39           | 29.231        | 92           | 29.371        | 87           | 29.456        | 86           | 29.687        | 110          |
| 29.61         | 40           | 29.233        | 92           | 29.375        | 65           | 29.458        | 55           | 29.694        | 111          |
| 29.62         | 40           | 29.239        | 92           | 29.376        | 95           | 29.459        | 69           | 29.697        | 112          |
| 29.63         | 41           | 29.242        | 92           | 29.377        | 87           | 29.464        | 97           | 29.702        | 113          |
| 29.64         | 32           | 29.262        | 81           | 29.378        | 64           | 29.465        | 97           | 29.714        | 114          |
| 29.65         | 32           | 29.264        | 100          | 29.380        | 106          | 29.466        | 97           | 29.716        | 113          |
| 29.68         | 32           | 29.265        | 89           | 29.382        | 108          | 29.467        | 109          | 29.717        | 113          |
| 29.75         | 33           | 29.271        | 29           | 29.386        | 108          | 29.468        | 109          | 29.718        | 113          |
| 29.83         | 33           | 29.272        | 29           | 29.387        | 88           | 29.470        | 53           | 29.722        | 115          |
| 29.88         | 34           | 29.274        | 29           | 29.388        | 107          | 29.471        | 53           | 29.747        | 119          |
| 29.92         | 34           | 29.277        | 58           | 29.389        | 107          | 29.472        | 69           | 29.758        | 118          |
| 29.98         | 34           | 29.279        | 90           | 29.390        | 107          | 29.473        | 109          | 29.759        | 118          |
| 29.101        | 35           | 29.283        | 108          | 29.392        | 105          | 29.475        | 28           | 29.761        | 116          |
| 29.106        | 35           | 29.284        | 108          | 29.393        | 106          | 29.476        | 28           | 29.763        | 117          |
| 29.109        | 35           | 29.310        | 42, 44       | 29.394        | 105          | 29.477        | 86           | 29.764        | 117          |
| 29.113        | 36           | 29.311        | 43-44        | 29.397        | 89           | 29.479        | 52           | 29.769        | 116          |
| 29.117        | 36           | 29.312        | 42, 44       | 29.399        | 68           | 29.480        | 27           | 29.772        | 114          |
| 29.119        | 36           | 29.313        | 75-76        | 29.401        | 95           | 29.481        | 96           | 29.773        | 115          |
| 29.120        | 13           | 29.314        | 89           | 29.402        | 86           | 29.483        | 55           | 29.774        | 114          |
| 29.121        | 13           | 29.319        | 23           | 29.403        | 50           | 29.484        | 109          |               |              |
| 29.122        | 14           | 29.320        | 24           | 29.406        | 25           | 29.485        | 55           | Unnumbered    |              |
| 29.123        | 22           | 29.321        | 47           | 29.407        | 25           | 29.495        | 52           | cat           | 120          |
| 29.127        | 21           | 29.326        | 47           | 29.408        | 25           | 29.496        | 56           |               |              |
| 29.128        | 22           | 29.327        | 46           | 29.409        | 51           | 29.510        | 27           | Isfahan:      |              |
| 29.129        | 22           | 29.328        | 46           | 29.411        | 51           | 29.512        | 79           | Mei-p'ing     | 26           |
| 29.131        | 78           | 29.330        | 47           | 29.412        | 25           | 29.515        | 79           | Ewer          | 54           |
|               |              |               |              |               |              |               |              | Dish          | 74           |



## PREFACE

"I have no intention to pre-engage the reader's approbation . . . by a studied preface; and think it sufficient to declare, that nothing will be found here, but what I have seen with my own eyes, and have examined with the utmost attention and care. I shall not enlarge on the errors [of earlier writers] lest I should be taxed with an inclination to recommend myself at their expense, and to set off this account . . . by decrying those of others. Persons of judgement and taste will know what to determine concerning us, by comparing our several performances. . . . I may likewise declare, that I have been altogether industrious to afford the public, and especially persons of taste, as much satisfaction as is consistent with my small abilities. To which I may add that I have made it an indispensable law to myself, not to deviate in any respect from the truth, merely to give an ornamental air to this work, in which there are no facts but what are related with the strictest veracity. It, however, is well known that when an author presents a book to the public, he exposes himself to the censure of such as take pleasure in depreciating whatever is above their capabilities."

Thus in part did Cornelis de Bruyn preface the monumental account of his journey to the Near East which appeared in English in 1737.<sup>1</sup> In his own picturesque way he has said much that is in the mind of any author whose book is an account of things seen; and to his engaging generalities need be added only a few paragraphs outlining the circumstances more immediately concerned with the conception and birth of the present volume.

As for explanation, those happy souls who find absorbing interest in the history of man and his works will need none. For them it is enough to know that over three centuries ago a great collection of Chinese porcelains, part of which remains intact today, was assembled on the shores of the Caspian Sea some 4,000 miles from where it was made. That very fact raised questions that not only stimulated the broader historical curiosities of all who knew it, but which seized upon the imaginations of a whole group of scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs on three continents who had long devoted themselves to the problems of reconstructing Chinese ceramic history. The scanty notes and the handful of unsatisfactory photographs that had appeared since the turn of the century served only to make the questions more urgent, for none of them were prompted by anything but the most casual interest on the part of visitors to Iran with other ends in view. No one, it seemed, who had any interest in Chinese porcelain ever went to the Near East, and the rumors that found their way back were varied and contradictory. It was a fabulous treasure, said one, innumerable magnificent pieces remaining in a perfect state of preservation; or, contrariwise, it was

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<sup>1</sup> *Travels into Muscovy, Persia, and part of the East Indies* . . . , 2 vols., London 1737.



a handful of late Ming export wares, mediocre to poor in quality, limited in scope, and most of it badly damaged. While the latter view seemed to prevail, no one really knew; and, worst of all, the questions remained unanswered. Why was it there? How did it get there? And even more urgent, what did it consist of? What sort of Chinese porcelains reached Iran in the Safavid Dynasty? Did it all come at once, or over a long period of time? How was it documented? What could it add to the knowledge of ceramic history? The tantalizing bits of news that reached us not only failed to answer these questions but seemed to make them all the more demanding. After 50 years and more of uncertainty, it was time to find out.

And so it was that on an auspicious day in the midsummer month of 1950 I found myself face to face at last with the legendary porcelain collection of Shāh 'Abbās. Here amid the disorganized mass of unwashed dishes lay possible answers to some of those questions. At a glance it was clear that they would be numbered in the hundreds, that there were both superb and ordinary pieces, that they represented some two and a half centuries of production in China, and that many of them were in perfect condition. But this was not enough, and it was even more apparent that the task of making a full study in the limited time at hand was enormous. Far-reaching decisions had to be made before the scope of the material could be fully grasped, for there was little chance that once the precious month had run out it would be possible to see the collection again; and it was all too evident that the work done then and there would be fundamental; it would form the basis of all future study no matter how many years might intervene between the first-hand examination of the porcelains themselves and any publication that might result.<sup>1a</sup>

Order was of the first importance. Before all else, the collection had to be washed and sorted. Once clean, pieces of similar shapes were placed in separate groups, numbered to provide some basis for reference, and then, within each group, arranged as far as possible by period and by type of design. With the almost purely physical labor of this first step completed, the question was how to proceed from there. Time did not permit the leisurely contemplation that might have been desirable, nor did it allow the making of complete written descriptions and photographs of every piece. On the assumption that photographs could somehow be obtained later, and that verbal descriptions, to be of any service, had to be made by him who was to use them, the decision was made in their favor. Every piece was measured and described; and the record thus embodied in a thick and well-worn notebook formed the basis of all later work. From it lists of photographs were ordered, and on it are based the descriptions in this book. Final details included the sketching of certain structural features, the copying and recording of various marks, and the taking of a small selection of special photographs. Then the time was up.

<sup>1a</sup> *Letter from the Near East*, HJAS, 13(1950): 558-564, is my preliminary report on this survey of the collection.



A year later an excellent set of almost 300 photographs came into being, thanks to the kind help that will be duly acknowledged below; and the intervening years have been spent in seeing and handling as much Ming porcelain as I could find, in the search for documents relating to the various phases of the history of the collection, and in conversations on all manner of related problems with scholars and connoisseurs on both sides of the Atlantic. Great as was the satisfaction of spending a month handling the Ardebil porcelains, these years of study have been by far the most rewarding part of the project, and it would have been the greatest pleasure to let them go on indefinitely. But the line had to be drawn somewhere; the book had to be written.

By no means all the questions are answered, and many vexing problems remain to be solved. As it stands, this volume deals with three aspects of the subject: (a) the place of the Ardebil Shrine in Safavid history, the dedication of the porcelains by Shāh 'Abbās the Great, the routes by which they may have reached Iran, and the later history of the sanctuary as recorded by European visitors; (b) comments on certain fundamental problems relating to the study of Ming porcelain by way of establishing the frame of mind in which I have approached the main part of the work; (c) the description and analysis of the collection as it illustrates the chronological development of the manufacture and decoration of Chinese porcelain from about 1350 to 1610.

For that purpose the Ardebil Collection provides a body of material not rivaled elsewhere in one place. The fact that it has a documented terminal date in A.D. 1611 means that there need be no worry about weeding out post-Ming wares; and the second fact that about three-quarters of the 800 odd pieces are blue-and-white provides an opportunity to concentrate on the essential qualities of form and decoration without distraction by other factors involved in the consideration of enamel colors and monochrome glazes. It is on those basic matters that I have dwelt; and in so doing, in looking intently for a long period of time at hundreds of pieces of porcelain manufactured at various times throughout two and a half centuries, one cannot help but sense the existence of a large-scale pattern of development in which most of them are bound to find their places. But simple as this sounds, it is by no means cut and dried. Copying is one of the most deeply rooted traditions of Chinese art, and this, added to the fact that several classes and qualities of porcelains must have been manufactured at the same time and in various places, means that anachronisms and geographical confusions abound. So in spite of the great over-all evolutionary pattern into which most of the pieces seem to fall, it is dangerous to be dogmatic about any individual piece. It has been my purpose to try to communicate to the reader the larger outlines of this pattern in terms of the pieces preserved at Ardebil; and for those that elude precise classification, I have tried to suggest the most likely possibilities.

Much remains to be said; many historical, sinological, and stylistic problems call for further investigation; but, fully aware of the shortcomings and lacunae in the present text, I bring it reluctantly to an end. The rare opportunity of having been the first



to study an unknown collection of this importance and scope imposes the responsibility of publishing, and this I now do. In making the acknowledgments that follow, I wish to record my gratitude for the generous good will and valuable counsel of many colleagues who have contributed immeasurably to whatever merit this book may have; the imperfections are my own.

It is hard to determine when and where this project really began. The study of Chinese art has been my principal preoccupation for over 20 years, and for perhaps three-quarters of that time ceramics in general and Ming porcelains in particular have been of primary interest; so in a sense my work on the Ardebil Collection began long before I had the opportunity of visiting Iran. To enumerate all those who have been helpful in that long period would be impossible; and except for the mention of the two men who first opened my eyes to the beauty and absorbing interest of Ming porcelain, R. L. Hobson and George Eumorfopoulos, my acknowledgments are confined to those friends whose help has in one way or another intimately affected this volume.

In Tehran the work was carried on with the blessing of André Godard, then director of the Service of Antiquities of the Government of Iran, and the friendly cooperation of the late Dr. Mehdi Bahrani, director of the Archaeological Museum of Tehran where the collection is housed. Thanks are also due Dr. K. M. Mostafavi for his continuing help, and Miss Barsin and all those members of the staff who gave so generously of their time and effort. Our hosts in Tehran, Mr. and Mrs. Charlemagne Edward Wells, not only gave us the freedom of their comfortable house but did everything to make our visit pleasant; and in his official capacity as public affairs officer of the United States Embassy, Mr. Wells was helpful in many ways.

Lacking training and linguistic competence in the Near Eastern field I am particularly grateful for the friendly cooperation of many scholars who have them. V. Minor-sky, A. J. Arberry, and R. Levy of Cambridge University, D. S. Rice and R. M. Savory of London University, K. H. Menges of Columbia University, and G. C. Miles of the American Numismatic Society have been most helpful with epigraphic problems. Thanks are also due R. N. Frye of Harvard University, J. Aubin of the Institute Franco-Iranien in Tehran, Dr. Myron Bement Smith, chairman of the Committee for Islamic Culture and director of its Islamic Archives, for help of various kinds; and for the extended loan of her unpublished thesis which provided valuable references, I am indebted to Harriet Harrison Merry.

The finest collections of Chinese porcelain in the Western world and the keenest connoisseurship are concentrated in London; and I am deeply grateful to the private collectors and museum officials of that city for friendly cooperation of many kinds. For giving me frequent and complete access to their private collections or those of which they are custodians and for many valuable suggestions and criticisms my warm thanks are due Mrs. Alfred Clark, Mrs. Walter Sedgwick, Mrs. C. G. Seligmann, John Ayers, Sir Percival and Lady David, Professor E. D. Edwards, Sir Harry Garner, Basil



Gray, Soame Jenyns, Arthur Lane, and W. W. Winkworth. Elsewhere in Europe, I have benefited from the kind help of Daisy Lion-Goldschmidt, André Leth, Bo Gyllensvärd, and Jean-Pierre Dubosc.

Many American colleagues have been helpful, but none more so than Arthur W. Hummel, retired chief of the Division of Orientalia in the Library of Congress, whose wisdom and knowledge have placed in the hands of American scholars the greatest Chinese library outside of China. He and his associates in the Chinese Section have been models of patience and cooperation in finding and placing at my disposal the treasures of that incomparable collection. I also wish particularly to thank my old friend and fellow student Francis Woodman Cleaves of Harvard who has been most generous in sharing his unsurpassed knowledge of Mongolian and Chinese and has supplied me with much valuable information. Dr. Li Hui-lin, now of the Morris Arboretum, has continued to be most helpful on botanical questions; Dr. Herbert Friedmann and Herbert G. Deignan of the United States National Museum have identified many of the birds; and Dr. William M. Mann, director of the National Zoological Park, pointed out the several varieties of deer used in the decoration of blue-and-white. The eagle eyes of Paul H. Oehser and Ruth B. MacManus of the Editorial and Publications Division of the Smithsonian Institution have saved me from many an embarrassing slip. Further individual acknowledgments for help on special problems will be found in the pertinent notes to the text.

In the Freer Gallery of Art nearly everyone has contributed in one way or another to the production of this book. The director, Archibald G. Wenley, has been interested from the outset, has sponsored all the necessary travel, and has made welcome suggestions; Dr. Richard Ettinghausen took a number of additional photographs on his latest trip to Tehran and provided help on the Iranian phases of the work; and Harold P. Stern called attention to a number of useful Japanese references. The photographic prints were made by Burns A. Stubbs and Raymond A. Schwartz, and Bertha M. Usilton has helped with the bibliography and prepared the index. The many versions of the manuscript have been typed and kept in order successively by Jean H. Copley and Emily F. Boone who have been helpful in many ways.

No one has made a more important contribution to the final appearance and usefulness of this volume than has Elizabeth S. Ettinghausen, who took most of the photographs. Working from lists, she made 268 negatives in Tehran under conditions that were something less than ideal, and I wish to record here my full appreciation of her effort, her interest in the project, and her skill as a photographer.

From the beginning, when she wrote the original notes and kept them in order during the hectic days in the blistering heat of Tehran and Isfahan, to the end, when she read the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions as to its form and content, my wife has given constant help and support.



## CHRONOLOGICAL DATA

The dynasties, rulers, and reign names listed below are those of particular interest to this study.

### CHINA

SUNG 960-1279

YÜAN 1260-1367

(Nineteen years elapsed between Khubilai's election as Khan and the extinction of the last Sung pretender. The only Yüan reign period mentioned here is Chih-cheng, 1341-1367.)

MING 1368-1644

(Normally each new emperor continued to use the old reign name until the end of the calendar year in which he came to the throne. Thus the dates of actual tenure are not identical with the dates of the reign periods. For the Ming Dynasty both sets of dates are given below.)

| Emperors           | Years and Moons  | Reign Names | Years     |
|--------------------|------------------|-------------|-----------|
| T'ai-tsu           | 1368(1)-1398(5)  | Hung-wu     | 1368-1398 |
| Huei-ti            | 1398(5)-1402(6)  | Chien-wen   | 1399-1402 |
| Ch'eng-tsu         | 1402(6)-1424(7)  | Yung-lo     | 1403-1424 |
| Jen-tsung          | 1424(8)          | Hung-hsi    | 1425      |
| Hsuan-tsung        | 1425(6)-1435(1)  | Hsüan-te    | 1426-1435 |
| Ying-tsung         | 1435(1)-1449(8)  | Cheng-t'ung | 1436-1449 |
| T'ai-tsung         | 1449(8)-1457(2)  | Ching-t'ai  | 1450-1457 |
| Ying-tsung (again) | 1457(2)-1464(1)  | T'ien-shun  | 1458-1464 |
| Hsien-tsung        | 1464(1)-1487(8)  | Ch'eng-hua  | 1465-1487 |
| Hsiao-tsung        | 1487(9)-1505(5)  | Hung-chih   | 1488-1505 |
| Wu-tsung           | 1505(6)-1521(3)  | Cheng-te    | 1506-1521 |
| Shih-tsung         | 1521(4)-1566(12) | Chia-ching  | 1522-1566 |
| Mu-tsung           | 1566(12)-1572(5) | Lung-ch'ing | 1567-1572 |
| Shen-tsung         | 1572(6)-1620(7)  | Wan-li      | 1573-1620 |
| Kuang-tsung        | 1620(8)-1620(9)  | T'ai-ch'ang | 1620      |
| Hsi-tsung          | 1620(9)-1627(8)  | T'ien-ch'i  | 1621-1627 |
| Chuang-lieh-ti     | 1627(8)-1644(3)  | Ch'ung-chen | 1628-1644 |

CH'ING 1644-1912

| Reign Names | Years     | Reign Names | Years     |
|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| Shun-chih   | 1644-1661 | Tao-kuang   | 1821-1850 |
| K'ang-hsi   | 1662-1722 | Hsien-feng  | 1851-1861 |
| Yung-cheng  | 1723-1735 | Tung-chih   | 1862-1874 |
| Ch'ien-lung | 1736-1796 | Kuang-hsü   | 1875-1908 |
| Chia-ch'ing | 1797-1820 | Hsüan-t'ung | 1909-1911 |

### IRAN

The principal events related in this account of the Ardebil Collection took place when Iran was controlled by the Timurids (1369-1500) and during the first half of the Safavid Dynasty which reigned from 1501-1736. The genealogy of the Safavid rulers through Shāh 'Abbās I is sketched in the first chapter.



## PART I—INTRODUCTION



## HISTORY

### ARDEBIL AND THE RISE OF THE SAFAVID DYNASTY

Some 30 miles west of the Caspian Sea not far from the Russian border the town of Ardebil stands on a plateau almost 5,000 feet high where, since ancient times, it has prospered by virtue of its commanding position at the crossing of two major avenues of trade: the road from Tabriz to the Caspian and that from Astrakhan to the great cities of central Iran. Although its origin is involved in legendary events of great antiquity, its actual founding is credited by tradition to the Sasanian emperor Fīrūz in the fifth century of our era; and by Umayyad times it was the capital of Azerbaijan Province. Through the centuries its fortunes rose and fell; it was more than once destroyed and rebuilt, and after it was laid waste by the Mongols about 1220 it rose again, more beautiful than ever, to await the event that was to bring it lasting fame and incidentally make it the home of the porcelain collection which is the subject of this book.

This was the birth of the man who was to become the ancestor of the Safavid kings of Iran, the Sheikh Ishāq Safī ed-Dīn, the Sūfī saint who claimed descent from Mūsā Kāzīm, the seventh Imām, and through him from 'Alī and the Prophet himself. Although the genealogy is obscure,<sup>2</sup> there is ample evidence that Sheikh Safī, as he is known for short, was a man of extraordinary sanctity and great personal influence in his own time. Most of his life was spent in religious pursuits; and for 25 years he sat at the feet of the Sheikh Zāhid of Gīlān, whose daughter Bībī Fātima he married and whom he succeeded as head of an order of Sūfis whose courage and self-sacrificing devotion to the Safavid cause were to become proverbial. On Safī's death in 1334 at the age of 85 the title of Sheikh passed to his second son, Sadr ed-Dīn, who headed the Order for 59 years and was himself credited with many miracles. During his long life he directed the compilation of a vast monograph, the source of all our information about his saintly father; he built the latter's tomb at Ardebil, thus in effect establishing the spiritual core of the Shrine; and at the end of his life, like his father before him, he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. His son Khwāja 'Alī, who inherited the title in 1392, took, perhaps unwittingly at the time, the second important step toward establishing the future power of the Safavids. Having won the good will of Timūr by a display of his physical prowess, he persuaded the great conqueror to release a group of

<sup>2</sup> Browne, *A literary history of Persia*, vol. 4, pp. 31-35. Chapters 1-3 of this volume provide a useful short account of the Safavid Dynasty and its background; unless otherwise noted the details of this historical sketch and the quoted passages are taken from that source.



Turkish prisoners captured at Dyār Bakr; and the grateful devotion of these "Turkish Sūfīs" as they were known passed undiminished from generation to generation and placed a fanatically loyal following at the disposal of the Safavids for the next three centuries. But this is to anticipate; and it was only under Juneid, the grandson of Khwāja 'Alī, that the family showed its first signs of temporal ambition when he ingratiated himself with Ūzūn Hasan, the celebrated leader of the "White Sheep" Dynasty (Aq-qoyūnlū) of the Turkomāns, and received the hand of his sister in marriage. This alliance led only to disaster, for it so alarmed the neighboring princes that they united against Juneid, and he was killed in battle after only nine years of Sheikhood. Heidar his son, who became Sheikh in 1456, continued the friendship with Ūzūn Hasan and married his daughter Martha, whose Muslim name was Halīma, granddaughter on the distaff side of a member of the noble Greek family of the Comneni, Kalo Ioannes, the last Christian emperor of Trebizond; and his principal contributions to the cause were first his further organization of the "Turkish Sūfīs" mentioned above, particularly his decision that they should be distinguished by wearing scarlet caps, which quickly gave them the nickname *Qizilbāsh* (Redheads) as they were henceforth known in history, an epithet of pride among themselves but a term of violent abuse in the mouths of their enemies; and second the fact that he was the father of Ismā'il.

Orphaned at the age of one and hidden from his father's enemies during childhood, this remarkable boy emerged from seclusion at the age of 13 with seven Sūfī followers to rally the seven loyal Turkish tribes that composed the *Qizilbāsh*, march through a series of military victories in the northwest, and make a triumphal entry into Tabriz, where he was crowned Shāh of Iran in his fifteenth year (1501–1502). First to bear that title since the death of the last Sasanian ruler in 652, Shāh Ismā'il lost no time in consolidating his territory, and in the next decade he brought under his control such widely separated places as Baghdad, Dyār Bakr, and Herāt. Behind the young Shāh's meteoric success in restoring Iran to the physical size it enjoyed in the days of its ancient greatness lay not only extraordinary personal qualities of leadership and charm, which are repeatedly stressed in contemporary accounts by his own countrymen as well as by visiting Europeans (who must have been hard put to it to reconcile them with his sometimes savage cruelty), but also a fanatical and single-minded devotion to the propagation of the Shī'a doctrine. Finding at their head a gifted military leader who was at the same time directly descended from an Imām, the Shī'as were united as never before in their determination to destroy their enemies the hated Sunnīs wherever they might be. The very battle cry of the Safavids proclaimed their faith, "God! God! and 'Alī is the Friend of God!" and when Ismā'il assumed the crown he resolved that "the Shī'a faith should become not merely the State religion but the only tolerated creed." To the realistic doubts of the Shī'a divines who knew they were still vastly outnumbered, the Shāh replied, "I am committed to this action; God and the Immaculate Imāms are with me and I fear no one; by God's help, if the people utter one word of



protest, I will draw the sword and leave not one of them alive." To further impress his views on his people he instituted the public cursing of the first three Caliphs of the Sunnīs, Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān, with the added refinement that all who heard should respond on pain of death, "May it be more, not less!" Thus strengthening the irreconcilable animosity of Shī'a against Sunnī, Ismā'il established the background against which the history of the newly founded Safavid Dynasty was to unfold, for Iran lay in the middle with fanatical and powerful Sunnī forces on either side: the Ottoman Turks to the west and the Uzbeks of Transoxiana to the northeast. It was the former, under the leadership of Sultān Selīm the Grim, who inflicted upon Ismā'il his only major military defeat at the great battle of Chāldirān in August 1514, a Turkish victory which led to the occupation of Tabriz and thus played its part in the formation of the Ottoman collection of Chinese porcelains at Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> But this was only a temporary setback; Ismā'il recaptured Tabriz within a matter of weeks, and Selīm, beset by domestic troubles and preoccupied with the conquest of Egypt, Syria, and Arabia, did not threaten again. When Shāh Ismā'il died at the age of 38 (23 May 1524), he bequeathed to his successors the greatest Iranian nation since the rise of Islam, beset by formidable enemies on both sides and defended by an army which made up in fanaticism what it lacked in military genius and equipment.

#### SHĀH 'ABBĀS THE GREAT AND THE SHRINE OF SHEIKH SAFĪ

Thus established, the Safavids enjoyed another century of greatness, and we need dwell but briefly on the historical scene. Shāh Tahmāsp, son of Ismā'il, continued the wars with his traditional enemies all through his 52-year reign on a pattern set by them rather than by himself. His Ottoman adversary, Süleymān the Magnificent ("The Grand Turk"), to free his eastern flank from pressure that he might concentrate on his principal objective, the conquest of the Holy Roman Empire, incited the Uzbeks to harass the Persians in Khorasan; and the European powers at the same time encouraged the Shāh to continue the attack on his Turkish frontier in the hope of diminishing the Sultān's threat along the Danube. In this complex game Tahmāsp more than held his own; but ground was lost by his two sons Shāh Ismā'il II, a blood-thirsty and debauched character who died of his excesses after 18 months on the throne, and Shāh Mohammad Khodā-bandeh who abdicated after 10 years of indecision in favor of his son 'Abbās.

It was October 1587 when this second son of Mohammad Khodā-bandeh, the first having been murdered by a barber and the two younger having been deprived of their eyesight and imprisoned in the Castle of Alamūt by 'Abbās himself, ascended the throne as Shāh 'Abbās to begin a 42-year reign in which he was to raise Iran "to the

<sup>3</sup> Pope, *Fourteenth-century blue-and-white*, p. 12.



highest degree of power, prosperity and splendour ever attained by her in modern times." The international situation remained the same, and by skillful handling of his adversaries in the beginning Shāh 'Abbās paved the way for ultimate victories on both fronts and was then free to turn to the philanthropic activities for which he won his lasting fame. Toward the end of the sixteenth century he moved his capital to Isfahan, which he made one of the beautiful cities of the world; he restored the Shrine of the Imām Rezā and rebuilt Mashhad, which had suffered destruction at the hands of the Uzbeks, and also improved and beautified the cities of Qazvīn, Kāshān, Astarābād, Tabriz, and Hamadān. But the benefaction that concerns us here was that bestowed on the ancestral home of the dynasty, the town of Ardebil where our brief historical sketch began with the birth of the Sheikh Safī more than three centuries earlier.

It was in Ardebil, as we have already seen, that Sadr ed-Dīn about the middle of the fourteenth century had built a tomb for his saintly father and thus brought into being the Shrine which was to increase in size through the years as the Holy Order grew in strength and influence until it became a dynasty; and Shāh 'Abbās the Great was responsible for certain major improvements and additions. Unfortunately there seems to have been little effort to draw upon contemporary texts as aids to the reconstruction of the history of the Shrine; and most of what we know today rests upon Sarre's study of the site as he found it at the beginning of this century.<sup>4</sup> He describes the whole as "a complex of various building entities, grouped around a court, which were intended as tombs, mosque, library, porcelain collection, rooms for domestic purposes and dwelling purposes for the *mollās* and for pilgrims, the poor, and for fugitives"; his plan is reproduced on plate 2. Entering the main gate from the *meidan*, the visitor moved southeast passing through a large formal garden a hundred yards long on the longer side and entered the small forecourt through silver-mounted doors. At the left of this in ancient times lay the kitchen from which the hospitality of the Shrine was dispensed. Beyond, through a second silver door, was the great forecourt; and entering this the visitor stood facing the long wall of the prayer hall with the dome of the Holy of Holies, the tomb of the Sheikh Safī, rising at its southwestern end; to the left in the short end of the court opened the *eivan* that is the vestibule to the mosque. Adjoining the far side of the prayer hall and forming the eastern end of the Shrine as a whole was the *Chīnī-khāneh* (China house) which housed the great porcelain collection.

Historically, the mosque came first and was already almost a hundred years old when Sadr ed-Dīn built the tomb of the Sheikh Safī. Shāh Ismā'īl seems to have erected his own tomb, perhaps between 1510 and 1520; and it was Tahmāsp who brought together the individual structures and created a unified complex around the great forecourt on the basic plan that remains today. The reconstruction undertaken

<sup>4</sup> Sarre, *Denkmäler persischer Baukunst*, 1901 (plates) and 1910 (text). The details given here are taken from that work unless otherwise noted.



by Shāh 'Abbās included the kitchens, the enlargement of the mosque, additional dwellings for the clergy and for fugitives, and also, presumably, the building of the *Chīnī-khāneh*, although the possibility remains that the outer shell may be earlier and that his contribution was limited to the magnificent interior designed to receive his gift.

The domed, thick-walled structure shows a square exterior with blunted corners and a half-round buttress in the middle of each side (pl. 3). But the interior is curious in that the square under the dome has been rotated 45° so that each corner points to the middle of an outer wall, and the great niches which open from the sides fill the corners of the exterior square. Most remarkable of all is the interior revetment of this great chamber, which measures some 32 feet on each side of the inner square with niches over 14 feet wide and 12 feet deep (pl. 4). Around the bottom of the walls is an 8-foot dado of colored tiles decorated with elaborate patterns including vases, flowers, and scrolling tendrils; and above this, covering the entire area up to the base of the cupola, is a paneling of wood in which have been cut hundreds of niches of various shapes to serve as receptacles for the porcelains. The entire woodwork and the vaulting of the dome are painted in blue and gold. Thus did Shāh 'Abbās prepare a setting which he considered to be in keeping with the magnificence of his gift of Chinese porcelain; thus did he enhance his own merit by dedicating his choicest possessions to the memory of his saintly ancestor, the founder of his house, the Sheikh Safī ed-Dīn.

This was not an isolated gesture but part of a large-scale philanthropic program, and it will be of interest to note briefly the circumstances in which it was carried out. In 1607 Shāh 'Abbās returned to Isfahan after four years of campaigning, and having rewarded those who helped him reestablish the frontiers of his empire by gifts of robes of honor, promotions in the hierarchy of *Begs*, *Sultāns*, and *Khāns*, by political appointments and grants of fiefs, he set up a series of endowments in the names of the Fourteen Innocents: the Prophet, his daughter Fātima, and the 12 Imāms. His personal fortune at that time consisted of lands and the slaves that went with them to the value of 100,000 *tomāns*, which brought him a net income of 7,000 *tomāns* a year, in addition to stores surrounding the *Meidān-e-Shāh* at Isfahan and a considerable number of bathhouses which he had had built. All this went into the foundation (*vaqf*) which was divided into 14 parts beginning with the largest share in the name of the Prophet and prorated in descending order of spiritual importance to the twelfth Imām. The income of these trusts, the management of which was reserved to the Shāh and his successors, was to be used particularly to help the indigent, the honest, the scholars, doctors of religious law, theological students, and devotees, and in general to be spent in the interest of religion and the state. At the same time that he made this disposition of his lands for purposes of the general good, Shāh 'Abbās made special bequests of his personal property also in the form of *vaqfs* to be used in the same way. It was thus



that he gave to the Shrine of Mashhad his Arabic books on religious science, and to the Ardebil Shrine his Persian books of history and poetry and his porcelain dishes. He also got rid of all his jewels, his gold and silver vessels, his studs of stallions and mares of all breeds, his camels, his flocks, in a word all he possessed; and it then passed from his hands into those of the Shi'ite community and more particularly of the Tajik people who became the true beneficiaries. It was the first time in the history of Iran that a sovereign performed a deed so broadly humanitarian in scope; and Shāh 'Abbās was to be repaid a hundredfold all through his reign by the eager and selfless devotion of the *mollās* and the people who adored him as they did a divinity.<sup>5</sup>

### THE DEDICATION OF THE PORCELAINS

By great good fortune the account of the benefaction which interests us most has been preserved in the writings of a man who may well have been present at the time, Jalāl ed-Dīn Mohammad Munajjim Yazdī, chief astronomer (*munajjim*) at the court of Shāh 'Abbās. His book, *Ta'rikh-e-'Abbāsī*, a year-by-year record of the history of Iran, from the death of Shāh Tahmāsp in 1576 through the twenty-fifth year of the reign of 'Abbās, survives today in several manuscript copies, among them three in the British Museum and one in the Bodleian Library, all dating from the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Near the end of the book Mollā Jalāl, as he calls himself, describes the events that took place in the summer of 1611 as the Shāh journeyed to Ardebil and relates the small miracles that occurred in the Shrine itself before the *vaqf* was established; his narrative has the flavor of an eyewitness account. In translation the passage runs: <sup>7</sup> "On the 18th of this month (28 August 1611) he ('Abbās) marched forth from the pasturelands of Sultāniyeh and encamped on the outskirts of Zinjān, where a stud of horses was brought to him. From amongst these he gave 41 mares and 100 horses to deserving people and to learned men: 400 horses were bestowed upon the *qurchī* and *ghulāmān*: and a stud comprising 600 horses, mares, and stallion foals was granted to Mohammad Beg Shams ed-Dīn. On the 21st of the month he crossed Mount Bardlīs, whose upward slopes told of the highest level of the dun-coloured heavens, and whose lower slopes gave hint of the treasure of Qārūn. And toward the

<sup>5</sup> Bellan, *Chah 'Abbas I*, pp. 170–171. This book is undocumented, and it is impossible to trace any given statement to its source; but the passage which is partly translated and partly paraphrased here probably gives a reasonably good general view of the establishment of *vaqfs* at this time.

<sup>6</sup> Storey, *Persian literature*, vol. 2, no. 384. Two of the British Museum copies, Add. 27.241 and Or. 3549, are catalogued by Rieu, I: 184, and Supp. 57; the third one, Or. 7465 (1), is not in Rieu. There must be other copies in Iran which were consulted by Bahrami and Aubin.

<sup>7</sup> Roger M. Savory, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, very generously took the time to make this translation from B. M. Add. 27.241, fol. 339–342, and while he wishes it to be considered very tentative pending further study, he has been kind enough to consent to its publication here.



end of Jumādā II <sup>8</sup> he entered the precincts of the 'pole-star of the gnostics', Shāh Safī, and after visiting the shrine he went toward the kitchens, and when he went toward a cauldron the lid of a nearby saucepan lifted itself about nine inches and crashed down on the saucepan with such a noise that those who were in the kitchen. . . . The 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās) placed his head upon the ground and returned thanks. When . . . the lid as before became separated from the saucepan, and returned of its own volition, much to the astonishment of those present. The 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās) gave 12 *tomāns* to the cooks, and they made four mortars of silver. But it is well known that an Arab brought this saucepan from Mecca in 921/1515, and bequeathed it to the shrine, and later, because of certain statements unbecoming to Sūfīs, he turned away from the shrine and went to the home of the 'Uthmānlū. After awhile he regretted his action, and returning he slew a sacrificial sheep and put it in the cauldron. When it came to the boil, all the pieces of meat fell out, and this occurrence increased the faith of the Sūfīs in the reign of Shāh Ismā'il II. And he ('Abbās) gave orders that the door of the shrine be enlarged and be made of gold, and that the tomb of Rostam Mīrzā, the son of the late Shāh Ismā'il, should be leveled so that it should not get in the way of the door opening: he further ordered that a peripheral wall should be constructed of silver, and that the dias before the inner sanctuary should be enlarged, and that a door should be constructed in the centre leading into the inner sanctuary. And for two years no drums were beaten at the shrine except his. After the happening of this miracle, the royal decree ordained that they should restore . . . it to its former condition, and this was a source of great joy to the men and women of Ardebil. And when the prince who is the 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās) set out to perform the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Shāh whose place is paradise (Safī), the lower door which is outside the inner sanctuary was closed. When the auspicious hand reached the door of the *sharbat-khāneh* of the 'pole-star of gnostics' (Safī), he placed his hand on the lock, and the door opened at once. And when he reached the *sharbat-khāneh*, which the 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās) had endowed—the spiritual reward for this act he placed to the credit of his mother in heaven—a crowd which had heard the news of these spiritual activities began to arrive in large groups, and when the 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' put his hand upon the lock, the lock parted, and this act increased the faith of the people. And a very fine china-store was created. And the articles of china, etc., which the noble and holy slave, the prince who is the 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās), bestowed to the holy and illustrious shrine of the 'pole-star of the gnostics' (Safī), and for which Maulānā Mohammad Hosein Hakkāk-e-Khorāsānī (the paragon of his age) engraved the *vaqf-nāme*, and which were transferred to the china-store, are as tabulated on the following page.

<sup>8</sup> This month fell between 11 August and 8 September.



|                                                                      |     |                                                                                                |                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Langarī</i> : large, medium, and small . . . . .                  | 270 | <i>Sabū</i> : (tall jars with single handle) . . . . .                                         | 5              |
| <i>Bādiyeh</i> : (wine cups) . . . . .                               | 45  | <i>Martabān</i> . . . . .                                                                      | 32             |
| <i>Sahn</i> , etc. . . . .                                           | 60  | <i>Markāb</i> . . . . .                                                                        | 36             |
| <i>Sahncheh</i> . . . . .                                            | 61  | <i>Sabī'</i> . . . . .                                                                         | 2              |
| <i>Shāh kāseh</i> : (large bowls), large, medium,<br>small . . . . . | 170 | <i>Kafcheh</i> . . . . .                                                                       | 3              |
| <i>Na'lbakī</i> : (saucers) . . . . .                                | 206 | <i>Huqqeh</i> : large and small . . . . .                                                      | 6              |
| <i>Piyāleh</i> : (small bowls) . . . . .                             | 95  | <i>Marhamdāni</i> . . . . .                                                                    | 1              |
| <i>Āftābeh</i> : (ewers) large and small . . . . .                   | 14  | <i>Kāvdūsh</i> . . . . .                                                                       | 1              |
| <i>Tabak-e sorkh</i> : (red trays) . . . . .                         | 23  | <i>Namakdān</i> : (saltcellar) . . . . .                                                       | 1              |
| <i>Qarābeh</i> : (double-handled pitchers),<br>large . . . . .       | 5   | <i>Finjān</i> : (cup) . . . . .                                                                | 1              |
| <i>Sarāhi</i> : (long-necked jars) . . . . .                         | 9   | <i>Piyāleh</i> , <i>huqqeh</i> , etc. . . . .                                                  | 84             |
| <i>Tabak</i> . . . . .                                               | 4   | <i>Zurūf</i> : (vessels) of Yamanite carnelian<br>(or agate)— <i>pasha</i> , etc. <i>yashb</i> |                |
| <i>Qadah</i> : (wine bowls) . . . . .                                | 19  | <i>Kashkūl</i> : (beggar's bowls) . . . . .                                                    | 3              |
| <i>Kūzeh</i> : (earthenware jugs) . . . . .                          | 1   | <i>Piyāleh-ye-yashb</i> . . . . .                                                              | 4              |
|                                                                      |     | <i>Yamani</i> carnelian ' <i>an Kashkūl</i> . . . . .                                          | 1 <sup>9</sup> |

"At this time too Turāb Khān, the son of Sheikh Shāh Beg, was killed by Valī Sheikh Beg, because his father Sheikh Shāh Beg had been instrumental in having Sultān Hasan Khān, who had taken sanctuary in the Shrine, dragged forth and killed. . . . The 'dog of the threshold of 'Alī' ('Abbās) overlooked this crime . . . so that it might be a warning to others . . . , and the people of Nau Dīhī in Tālīsh. . . . Since he killed a *Sayyid* of Abhar, he took sanctuary in the shrine of the 'pole-star of the gnostics' (Safī). At the royal command Farīdūn Khān marched against a group of the Kūklan tribe, and killed 500 men of that tribe, and forwarded all the articles he seized for the royal consideration. And on the first day of Rajab (9 September 1611) he ('Abbās) gave 14,000 *tomāns* for the gold and silver of the doors and windows of the shrine and the kitchens, and the work was commenced. It was decided to make the doors and the windows of the inner sanctuary of gold, and the windows in front of the sanctuary of silver. And he stayed for 15 days in Ardebil, making careful enquiries into the condition of poor and infirm. And he decided to repair the school of the Shāh Jannat-Makānī (Safī), which had been destroyed (or had fallen into disrepair)."

Thus did Shāh 'Abbās make his gift to the Shrine. The itemized list of Jalāl ed-Dīn totals 1,162 pieces,<sup>10</sup> but in spite of the detailed form of the account the nature of the Persian terminology makes it difficult to identify any of the pieces which remain today. Some of the terms are translated above, and they give only a rather general

<sup>9</sup> The original text of this list is reproduced on plate 5.

<sup>10</sup> Bahramī, TOCS, 25 (1949–1950): 14–15, gives 1,221 including six pieces of jade and agate. This must be accounted for by the discrepancies between the figures preserved in various surviving versions of the text. There seems to be no reference to the manuscripts mentioned by later visitors to the Shrine (pp. 13–16), or to the carpets which Bahramī told me were also included in the gift (HJAS, 13: 559n.).



idea of what may have been intended in the seventeenth century. Some of them may be examined a little further. *Langarī* means a large tub, basin, or laver; and in view of the number of this type recorded, it seems likely that the reference is to the large dishes. The suggestion that *bādiyeh* means wine cups is tantalizing; does it imply that originally there were stem cups although none remain today? <sup>11</sup> *Sahn* is a large tray, plate or dish, or a wide basin; but it is hard to say how they distinguished these from *langarī*. *Shāh kāseh*, large bowls, and *piyāleh*, small bowls, are probably identifiable among the whole range of vessels of that type. Ewers, *āftābeh*, are also easy to point out, and a dozen of the original 14 survive; but again it is not easy to tell what they had in mind in listing five *sabū* which may mean the same. *Tabak-e sorkh*, red trays, seems insoluble at the moment; had there been any Ming lacquer it is unlikely that they would have included it among porcelains. *Martabān* is a well-known Near Eastern term for celadon,<sup>12</sup> but it is curious that more of these remain today than were noted in the original list. *Kafcheh* means spoon, ladle or skimmer and is very puzzling. *Huqqeh* is the word usually written hookah in English where it means a water pipe or narghile, and this probably refers to the vessels of that type described here as *kēndī* <sup>13</sup>; but the Persian word can also be used to describe vessels of several other types and uses. *Kāvdūsh* (or rather *gāvdūsh*) is described as a vessel with a wide top and narrow bottom for milking, a milk container, or a churn, and the one listed must be 29.481 (pl. 96). The last four entries refer to the jade or other hardstone vessels in the collection.

Because of its very general nature, this list throws little light on what the Safavids thought of these treasures. While they seem to have had no interest in the decoration, the fact that they felt it important to dedicate these wares to the ancestral shrine and to include an inventory in the record of the dedication indicates the high regard in which porcelain was held. Although it is well known that large shipments were reaching Europe in the early years of the seventeenth century,<sup>13a</sup> there is still no accurate information on the quantities that went to Iran; but abundant or scarce, cheap or expensive, it was, above all, porcelain, a material that combined beauty and practicality to an unheard-of degree, and a material they could not make. For these qualities alone it commanded admiration and respect.

### THREE CENTURIES OF RUMOR

For the period of almost 300 years between the dedication of the porcelains to the ancestral Shrine in 1611 and the publication of Sarre's text in 1910, the fullest sources of information at our disposal are the journals of European travelers who

<sup>11</sup> Cf. p. 63 below.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pope, *Fourteenth-century blue-and-white*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Nos. 29.445, 464, 465, 466, 472; plates 69, 97, and pp. 116–117, 132–133.

<sup>13a</sup> See p. 136 below, and T. Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company*, Leiden, 1954, pp. 21–24.



visited Ardebil and recorded their observations. In these sporadic and uneven accounts we can trace the varying fortunes of the Shrine and the porcelain collection down to our own times. As will be seen from the selected quotations which follow, the tone and scope of the reports vary greatly with the personal tastes and interests of the several observers; some did not mention the *Chīnī-khāneh* at all, while others marveled at it, but when taken all together the journals provide a full and often lively picture of the activities of a major national shrine and the part it played in Persian life particularly in the seventeenth century.

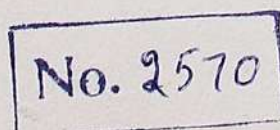
To cite the writings of all these travelers in full, even insofar as they touch on Ardebil alone, would extend this section beyond reasonable bounds, and the passages that have been chosen are limited for the most part to those that speak of the porcelain collection. On the other hand, one or two are of such general interest in throwing light on the function of the Shrine or on its condition, or on the attitude of Christian Europeans toward Muslim Persians in the early days of their contact, that they seem worthy of inclusion. For these reasons and because he was the first of a long series of hardy spirits to make the difficult journey, it is appropriate to begin with the words of Anthony Jenkinson, who traveled to Persia by way of Russia on behalf of the Right Worshipfull Societie of Merchants Adventurers, bearing credentials from Queen Elizabeth I, for the purpose of establishing commercial relations.<sup>14</sup> Arriving in the reign of Shāh Tahmāsp some 49 years before the benefactions of Shāh 'Abbās were bestowed on the Shrine, he wrote, ". . . the 16. day of October [1562] we arrived at a citie called *Ordowill* [Ardebil], where we were lodged in a hospitall builded with faire stone, and erected by this Sophie's<sup>15</sup> father named Ismael, only for the succor and lodging of strangers and other travellers, wherein all men have victuals and feeding for man and horse, for 3. dayes, and no longer. This foresayed late prince Ismael, lieth buried in a faire *Meskit* [= *Masjid* = Mosque], with a sumptuous sepulchre in the same, which he caused to be made in his lifetime."<sup>16</sup> Here the Shrine is revealed in its function as travelers rest house, but in spite of the hospitality thus afforded to strangers we feel the bitter underlying hatred of Christian for Muslim in a short passage soon after where Jenkinson describes the Persians as "esteeming all to be infidels and Pagans which doe not believe as they doe, in their false filthie prophets *Mahomet* and *Murtezallie*."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> It was Jenkinson who brought back the great Ardebil carpet dated 1540 in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

<sup>15</sup> To contemporary Europeans the Safavid Shāh was The Great Sophie or Sophi. Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 21, says it derives from the fact that the Shāh was not only temporal ruler but also spiritual leader (Sheikh) of the Sūfis and hence the Great Sūfī or Sophi; he doubts if it can be considered a corruption of the dynastic name *Safavī*. Ross, *Sir Anthony Sherley*, p. 92n., however, clings to the latter explanation.

<sup>16</sup> Jenkinson, *Early voyages and travels to Russia and Persia*, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 145.





Jenkinson's countrymen, the famous Sherley brothers who reached Persia in 1598 and served Shāh 'Abbās in various capacities, seem not to have visited Ardebil; and the next to do so was the Italian Pietro della Valle, who stopped there about 1619. He described the Shrine but declined to enter the tomb of the Sheikh and only relates the impression he gained from his traveling companion, the remarkable Madame Maani. Soon thereafter, however, comes the most complete of the seventeenth-century accounts and the first to mention the porcelain collection. It is that written by Adam Olearius who served as secretary to the ambassadors sent by Frederick, Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Moscovy and the King of Persia, and arrived in Ardebil in 1637. Describing it as "one of the most ancient and most celebrious cities of all the Kingdome, not only by reason of the residence which several Kings of *Persia* made there, but also particularly upon this accompt, that *Shich-Sefi*, Author of their Sect, liv'd and dy'd there," he goes on to discuss the climate and the products of the region. Coming to the Shrine, he begins with the approach including this interesting passage, "Leaving the Maydan you come into the Bazar . . . three covered streets all beset with shops . . . several caravanserais . . . for the convenience of foreign merchants as *Turks*, *Tartars*, *Indians*, etc. We saw there also two Chineses, who had brought ther, to be sold, Porcelane, and several things of *Lacque*." Then he describes the Prayer-Hall and the Sepulchre and continues thus, "Having taken notice of all that was to be seen in that place, we were conducted through the same Gallery, towards the right hand, into another spacious apartment, which was arched all about and Gilt; where we could not but admire the manner of its building, which being as large as a fair Church, was nevertheless sustained by the strength of the Roof, and without Pillars. This Hall is called *Tzenetsera* [= *Chīnī-serai* = *Chīnī-khāneh*], and serves for a Library." At this point he gives an account of the books in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, bound and covered with gold and silver plates, and some with colored illustrations, and continues, "In the Neeches of the Vault, there were above three or four hundred vessels of Porcelane; some, so large, as that they contain'd above 40. quarts of Liquor."<sup>18</sup> These are only used at the entertainments, which are brought from the Sepulchre, to the King and other great Lords, who pass that way: for the holiness of that place permits not that they should make use of any Gold or Silver. Nay, it is reported of *Shich-Sefi*, that he, out of an excessive humility, made use only of Wooden Dishes."<sup>19</sup> Olearius was also immensely impressed by the wealth of the Shrine which he describes thus, "The foundations of several Kings, its vast Revenues, and the Presents which are daily made thereto, do so augment the Wealth of it, that some conceive, its Treasure amounts to many Millions of Gold, and that, in case of necessity, this Mesar [= *Mazar* = Shrine, place of pilgrimage] might raise and maintain a very

<sup>18</sup> The largest vessels in the surviving collection are the *kuan* vases like 29.520 (pl. 79). A similar piece in the Freer Gallery of Art (45.35) holds 79 quarts by actual measure.

<sup>19</sup> Olearius, *The voyages and travells of the ambassadors* . . . , p. 179.



powerful Army, and that it would furnish more ready Money than the King could himself.”<sup>20</sup>

Some 40 years after Olearius, the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Tavernier saw the Shrine but made no reference to the porcelain<sup>21</sup>; and thereafter we are left with a gap of more than a century until Jaubert in 1805–1806 described the tombs of Sheikh Safī, Heidar, and Ismā’il as “placés sous dômes peu élevés et tombant en ruines.”<sup>22</sup> It was James Morier, creator of the immortal *Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, who, on his second journey to Iran, was next to mention the porcelains in these brief terms: “From the tombs we were led to a saloon of large dimensions, painted and ornamented in a beautiful style, and upon the floor of which were placed a great variety of Chinese bowls, vases, etc. besides several curious wrought cups of jade and agate, that did not appear to be of Mohamedan workmanship. A collection of manuscript books, the gift of Shah Abbas, were here preserved, in two large closets inserted in the wall, and which we were permitted to inspect. The books were in excellent preservation, and consisted of the best Persian works, some of which were beautifully written and highly illuminated. Most of them were stamped with the seal of Shah Abbas; and on the blank page at the beginning of each, it was inscribed, that they were left for the use of those who would read them on the spot, but that a curse would fall upon whomsoever should take them from it.” Among the books he described two of special interest, “a koran, six hundred years old, made of the thick silky paper of Khatai, so large and heavy that two men could scarcely lift it; and a book in the Cuffick character, containing several chapters of the koran, as we were assured, written by the hand of Ali, seven years after the hejra.”<sup>23</sup> This is the first reference to the jade vessels mentioned in the list of Jalāl ed-Dīn, and the first time the porcelains were described as being on the floor, a circumstance explained less than a decade later by the next visitor to record what he saw.

James B. Fraser entered Ardebil on 9 July 1821 and found it in a poor state. “I took every opportunity to examine the town of Ardebeel,” he wrote, “though it does not contain many objects capable of arresting the traveller’s attention”; and he described it as built on the remains of a famous city and now not equal to a third the size of Shiraz having no more than five or six hundred families. Of the *Chīnī-khāneh* he wrote, “A large octagonal apartment, covered by the principal dome, has obtained the name of zerfkhanah or china-ware-room, because all the dishes used in the feasts which Shah Ismael gave to his daily guests, were preserved here in niches formed for the purpose in the wall. This apartment had been very richly adorned, and the niches

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> Tavernier, *Les six voyages* . . . , pp. 54–55.

<sup>22</sup> Jaubert, *Voyage en Arménie et en Perse* . . . , p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Morier, *A second journey through Persia* . . . , pp. 255–256. Morier visited the Shrine on 19 October 1812.



which occupy the walls on all sides, and in various figures, produce an effect resembling that of a magnificent fretwork. But the china-ware no longer fills them; in one of the earthquakes to which this district is liable, so many of them were thrown down and destroyed, that the whole were taken from their cells and placed upon the floor, where they now stand covered with dust. There are also in the chamber, as I understood, some valuable books, in like manner going to decay."<sup>24</sup> Fraser also added an interesting observation on the finances of the Shrine at his time when he said it had no fixed revenues as had those at Mashhad and Qum but was dependent on the donations of pilgrims and pious Shi'as; and he assumed this was why foreigners like himself were allowed to visit every part of it. He was told there that the Qajars "are more apt to take from than give to an establishment of any kind," an observation that helps more than a little to explain the sorry state of the monument under that dynasty.

In 1826 Lt. (later Sir) James Alexander, late H. M.'s 13th light dragoons, and then attached to the suite of Col. Macdonald Kinnier, K.L.S., Envoy Extraordinary to the Court of Tehran, passed through Ardebil. On 28 August of that year he wrote, "We proceeded to visit the tomb of Shaikh Suffee and his illustrious descendant, Shah Ismail. Their remains repose under lofty domes; four swords surmounting the apex of that of the latter. The ark over the grave of the saint is fenced off by a silver grating. The rooms are highly ornamented. In one is a large collection of china (amongst which I observed some beautiful agate cups and dishes), and a library of splendidly bound and valuable books, one of which is remarkable for its weight. All of them had been presented by Shah Abbas the Great, as offerings at the tombs of his ancestors."<sup>25</sup> Alexander was the last traveler to see the books, for in 1828 the Russians, who were already stirring up trouble in the neighborhood and some of whom he met, sacked Ardebil and carried off the library, as is recorded by the few travelers who remain to be quoted.

Colonel Montieth wrote in 1832, "The fine library was sent to Russia when the place surrendered to Count Soukhtaline, and the tomb has been much damaged, at least in outward appearance, by earthquakes."<sup>26</sup> And in 1845 there appeared the least flattering of all descriptions of the Shrine by W. R. Holmes who wrote, "The exterior presents three or four domes, but is neither striking nor picturesque"; but he again noticed the porcelains, and spoke of "the large domed chamber, containing the china which belonged to Shah Ismael, or, as some say, to the Sheik, consisting principally of large dishes, vases, drinking cups and flagons, spread out on the floor; the numerous recesses in the walls originally intended for their reception, being left empty. The walls and niches were beautifully gilt and painted."<sup>27</sup> It is he who tells us that the

<sup>24</sup> Fraser, *Travels and adventures* . . . , p. 296.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander, *Travels from India to England* . . . , p. 189.

<sup>26</sup> JRGS, 3 (1832):27.

<sup>27</sup> Holmes, *Sketches on the shores of the Caspian* . . . , p. 38.



books taken by the Russians were 160 in number, all that were found there, but that "there were others in the possession of various inhabitants of Ardebeel, which thus escaped the hands of the plunderers, and have since been restored to the library."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the last account before that of Sarre was written in 1875 by Lt. Baron Max von Thielmann, secretary of the Imperial German Embassy at St. Petersburg, and is remarkable in at least two respects. The Baron wrote, "The celebrated library of Sheikh Sefi no longer exists; after the capture of the town it was sent to St. Petersburg by Paskiewitsch and incorporated into the Imperial Library. The mausoleum of Sheikh Sefi possesses a treasure quite unrivalled. This is a collection of old Chinese and Persian porcelain, offerings from Persian rulers, displayed over the floor of the vaulted hall, which from its unique character is perhaps of incalculable value. These offerings, amongst which are huge dishes and bowls, are so numerous that, in order to find accommodation for them in the hall, they have been piled up one above the other in small heaps. Even if the total amount of these pieces be estimated at 2,000, that figure would, perhaps, still be below the margin. Owing to want of care a great many of them have unfortunately been cracked or otherwise injured, and each individual piece lies buried beneath an inch of dust. It would have been a great gain to the world at large, and to art in particular, if Paskiewitsch had equally sent this collection to St. Petersburg."<sup>29</sup> It seems likely that the noble author, who was the only traveler to sense the importance of what he saw, did so because he was familiar with some of the great porcelain collections which existed in Germany in his time; and apparently his enthusiasm got the better of his judgment when it came to making an estimate of the number of pieces.

A quarter of a century after Thielmann, the Shrine was visited for the first time by a man who was trained to evaluate what he saw and to study it and record his findings in terms which placed it in proper historical perspective. With Sarre, the period of rumor came to an end. His description of the separate units that made up the elaborate architectural complex is the most complete one on record and must form the basis of any future study; and his publication includes photographs of the porcelains on the floor of the *Chīnī-khāneh* as well as comments on the scope and nature of the collection. The passage runs thus, "The porcelain vessels which were originally placed in the niches now stand upon the ground, approximately 500 in number. They are blue-and-white Chinese Ming porcelains in a number of forms. Above all there appear among them large-barrelled vases almost a metre high; besides these there are plates, bowls, pitchers; the latter are also frequently in pure Persian form. Among the blue-and-white porcelains are some few vessels decorated in variegated enamel colors, and further a number of jade works (cups and incense burners in the form of animal figures and flowers) and finally a splendid gold-enamelled glass lamp. The great part of these

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Thielmann, *Journey in the Caucasus* . . . , vol. 2, pp. 33-34.



vessels is well preserved.”<sup>30</sup> Some 20 years later, writing a popular article in connection with certain objects lent to the Exhibition of Persian Art held at Burlington House in 1930–1931, he again described the Ardebil Shrine and with it the *Chīnī-khāneh*; while some of it repeats what he had written before, there are differences which are worth noting, and to make the record as nearly complete as possible, this new description of the room and the porcelains is quoted in full: “The interior consists of a square-domed chamber with four niches. Below is a tile covered base, then a corbel with flat concave fluting, which leads to a most unusual wall decoration consisting of pierced woodwork forming variously shaped niches, which served to contain pieces of Chinese porcelain and follow the shapes of these vessels exactly. The general effect at first sight is that of a very artistically arranged collector’s cabinet or museum, and may be compared to a European porcelain cabinet of the eighteenth century. Though they now stand on the floor, the original position of the porcelain vessels in the corresponding niches leaves no doubt about the artistic intention—the delight in the precious Chinese porcelain vessels—which must have determined the design; on the other hand, the vessels also served purely practical purposes, and were used for meals at court and on festive occasions such as the reception of foreign ambassadors. This is no doubt the largest collection to find its way out of the country in early times, apart from the collection in the Serail at Constantinople. Perhaps, as suggested by Mr. A. [sic] L. Hobson, this Chinese porcelain was sent to Ardebil as a personal present from the Chinese Emperor Wan-li (1573–1619), who is known to have sent similar presents to the Mogul Emperor of India. Most of the vessels belong to the cobalt-blue underglaze painted Ming porcelain of the sixteenth to seventeenth century.”<sup>31</sup>

Three points in this passage are worthy of comment. As a glance at Plate 4 will show, the many intricate niches with which the walls are covered by no means “follow the shapes of these vessels exactly”; some of them approximate the porcelain shapes, and others may be cut in generally appropriate proportions; none are precise imitations of any of the pieces in the collection. As to Hobson’s suggestion that the porcelains came to Ardebil as the gift of the Wan-li emperor, all the evidence that has come to light since that article was written, including the fact that porcelains were included in the Turkish booty removed from Tabriz as early as 1514, points to the fact that Chinese porcelains must have been known and used in Iran for generations by the time Shāh ‘Abbās made his gift; and no doubt this collection was in the process of formation over a period of many years. It is difficult to credit the suggestion that it all came at one time. And finally it is curious to note that none of the early observers from Olearius to Sarre seems to have noticed the dedicatory inscription of Shāh ‘Abbās which appears on most of the pieces.

<sup>30</sup> Sarre, *Denkmäler*, vol. 2, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Sarre, *The Holy Shrine of Ardebil*.