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Achaemenid Bureaucratic Practices and the Safavid Falsification of their Early History*

Introduction

Once nomadic tribes rise to power and establish control over an empire, by necessity, they have to rely on the bureaucratic practices of their predecessors, as well as their scribes and functionaries. Thus, despite the multitude of nomadic conquests of Asian empires and the frequent upheavals in the power structures of these territories, in form and substance, bureaucratic practices proved to be resilient to change, and provided a lasting continuity.

A recent hoard of documents from Bactria best exemplifies this continuity. It reveals how bureaucratic procedures followed by the Achaemenids—who themselves had made use of Mesopotamian and Elamite scribes and scripts—lingered on in Central Asia up to the Mongol times. Of particular interest is the procedure to include a verbatim quotation from petitioners in the edicts issued in response to their petitions. While Persian *farmāns* do not display such a feature, a *farmān* of the Il-Khān Abu-Said (r. 1317-35) written with Uyghur characters, follows that practice. As a result, it reveals another Safavid manipulation of the biography of their ancestor, Shaykh Safi-od-din-e Ardabili (1252-1334): that, contrary to official Safavid accounts, Safi-od-din did not inherit the mantle of his mentor, Shaykh Zāhed-e Gilāni (1218-1301), and the person who did inherit it was the latter's son, Shaykh Jamāl-od-din `Ali.

The hoard

A hoard of Achaemenid bureaucratic instruments and documents that appeared on the London art market in the 1990's is now part of the Khalili collections, and about to be published by Shaul Shaked. The latter made a preliminary presentation of his findings at the Collège de France. The hoard was from Bactria and datable to the end of the Achaemenid era, and essentially contained two types of instruments: incised (and inscribed) wooden sticks, and draft copies of official correspondence (mostly on leather).

Wooden sticks

The wooden sticks were used as transaction instruments (fig. 1), say for instance in the transfer of horses from A to B. The quantities involved in the transactions were incised on a round wooden stick that was then cut in half, with each half carrying a part

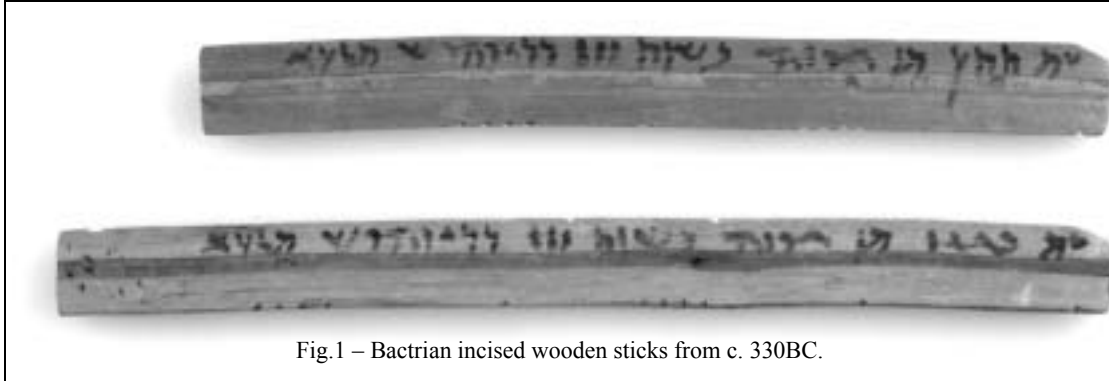


Fig.1 – Bactrian incised wooden sticks from c. 330BC.

of the incisions. Additional information was written, in Aramaic, on the flat surface of the stick halves. They were afterward remitted to the parties representing the two sides of the transactions. Matching incisions provided a verification instrument for each party to the transaction.

What is most extraordinary is the fact that in a Chinese account of 1237, the *Hei-Ta shih-lüeh* [*Sketch of the Affairs of the Black Ta* (i.e., Mongols)], the Mongols are described to follow the same practice, fifteen centuries after the Achaemenids:

“T’ing once investigated it, the Ta (Tatar=Mongol) people originally had no writing. However, there are three kinds which they now use. As that which circulates in the country proper of the Ta (Tatar) people, they only use small sticks three or four *ts’un* long . They incise them (at) the four corners. Moreover, if they dispatch ten horses, then they incise ten incisions. In general they only incise their number...”¹

Another text from the same period, relates that the Mongol’s immediate predecessors, the (white) Khitāns (of the Liao dynasty) and the Jurchens (of the Chin dynasty) also used the same wooden instruments for their transactions:

“Sometimes they break [pieces of] wood as tallies. On the surface they incise a number of strokes. Each receives his half. When it happens that they dispatch an army, they use the coincidence of the wooden tallies as evidence”.²

Edicts

An interesting legalistic feature of some the Bactrian documents studied by Shaked is the incorporation of a verbatim quotation from a petitioner (or an investigator) into an edict, explaining the causes of the action. The edict was thus based on a representation, and in effect, its validity became pegged to the veracity of said representation. If the latter proved to be wrong, the edict was no longer enforceable. At a time when communications between a ruler and his subordinates took several days,

weeks or even months, this legalistic feature provided a hedge against the misrepresentations of subordinates, as well as changing situations.

Unfortunately, this tradition seems to have been lost in Persian *farmāns*. Perhaps, the vanity of the Persian scribes left no room for the incorporation of another person's text into their ornate writings. However, in Mongol *farmāns*—which kept a more straightforward style—the tradition remained. A point in case is a Uyghur *farmān* of the Il-Khān Abu-Sa'id kept in the Tehran Archeological Museum, and first alluded to by P. Pelliot in 1936, and painstakingly pieced together and translated by F.W. Cleaves in 1953.³ After quoting the petitioner's representations, the secretariat of Abu-Sa'id prefaces the validity of the actions to be taken with a conditional stipulation “if it be true” (see the appendix). Clearly, the enforcers of the decree had to first ascertain that the petitioner did not misrepresent the facts before taking any action. As a result, the edict contains two types of historical information, one pertaining to the petitioner's complaint and the other, the general practice of the Mongol secretariat.

The Abu-Sa'id edict

Cleaves certainly achieved a major *tour de force* in providing a meaningful translation for a dilapidated document which transcribed many Persian names and bureaucratic expressions, pronounced in a Turkic way, and written in the imprecise Uyghur script. Yet, as Minorsky—who first commented on Cleaves' work—surmised: “more precision is to be expected from a repeated examination of the original, and, still more, from a careful study of the Muslim background, that lay beyond Professor Cleaves's immediate task”.⁴ Thus, in light of the historical information available for that period, I have tried to correct certain parts of Cleaves' translation, and have offered a full new version in the appendix (here below).

The most important character mentioned in the decree is one read by Cleaves as “*šiy šayid* Ibrayim”, which he interpreted as Shaykh Shahid Ebrāhim. But Minorsky not only correctly identified said Ebrāhim as Shaykh Zāhed Ebrāhim, but also explained that two other names mentioned therein, i.e., Jamāl-od-din `Ali and Shams-od-din Muhammad, pertained to his two sons. He then concluded that the document seemed “to underline and complete the picture of the struggles” for Shaykh Zāhed's succession and that the rise of Shaykh Safi-od-din was “a complicated affair and provoked the opposition and intervention of the Mongol rulers”.⁵ He failed however, to expand his conclusion to full extent, and to acknowledge the fact that the document undermined the much publicized Safavid claim: that the eponym of their dynasty had inherited the mantle of Shaykh Zāhed. To better understand this, a brief historical background is necessary.

The Shaykh Zāhed succession myth

The early history of the Safavids is based on the c.1350 *Safvat-os-safā* written by one Tavakkoli b. Esmā'il-e Bazzāz. Since later on, the Safavids became Shi'ites and claimed to be the descendants of the Seventh Imam Al-Musā al-Kāzem, the *Safvat* had to be revised accordingly. Thus, by order of Shāh Tahmāsb (r. 1524-76) all sections contradicting these claims were modified, and Safi-od-din's genealogy was extended to the Seventh Imam.⁶ But not all falsifications occurred in Tahmāsb's time. Because the *Safvat* was written half a century after the death of Shaykh Zāhed, and was composed as

an ode to the glory of Safi-od-din, it already contained several myths at inception, the most interesting of which is the story of Shaykh Zāhed's succession.

The young Safi-od-din seeking enlightenment joins the congregation of the celebrated Shakh Zāhed in Gilān, and soon becomes a trusted disciple, to the extent that the Shaykh gives him his daughter in marriage. The favoritism displayed by the Shaykh toward the young disciple alarms many followers who fear that he might appoint Safi instead of his eldest son Jamāl-od-din `Ali as successor. In order to calm the unrests, the Shaykh proceeds with a demonstrative experiment. He asks his followers where Safi is. They answer: he is praying in his *khalvat* (his abode of peace) by the sea, some six kilometers away. He then asks where is Jamāl-od-din. They answer: he is praying in his own *khalvat* next door. He then calls them both by their names. Soon after, Safi rushes in and the Shaykh asks him why he had come. He answers: I heard your summon O Shaykh. Meanwhile, there was no response from Jamāl-od-din. The Shaykh then turns to his followers and tells them: such is the closeness of Safi to us that he can hear us miles away and such is the aloofness of my son that he cannot even hear us next door; it is god's will that Safi acts in unison with us and I cannot disobey it. At this point, the Shaykh's disciples exclaim their agreement for the succession to go to Safi. The latter is then appointed as successor, but moves to Ardabil where Shaykh Zāhed reportedly visits him on one occasion.⁷ The *Safvat*'s account is subsequently repeated with minor modifications in the *Habib-os-siyar*, written during the reign of Shāh Esmā'il I (r. 1501-24).⁸

A good thing about Persian historiographers is that whenever they falsify an account, they leave enough clues for a keen observer to read between the lines and guess what really happened. The case of Shaykh Zāhed's succession is no exception. Indeed, there are at least four pointers to that effect:

1. The text clearly states that there were strong objections to Safi-od-din's appointment and that a majority of Saykh Zāhed's followers favored his son.
2. The very epithet Jamāl-od-din (the splendor of the religion) of the Shaykh's son indicates that he was well respected in the religious hierarchy. In addition, the *Safvat* mentions that he was of mature age (*sefid-rish*, lit. white beard), and the *Habib* adds the epithet "Shaykh" before his name. Clearly, a mature son of a *shaykh*, who is himself called a *shaykh*, has a better chance to become the successor of his father than a new comer.
3. Such was the authority of Shaykh Zāhed that if he really wanted Safi to be his successor, he did not have to justify it before his disciples. One statement to that effect would have sufficed. The elaborate, and implausible, scheme that the *Safvat* has invented is in itself a sign of truth alteration.
4. Most importantly, if Safi was really appointed as successor, he would have remained in Gilān with the Shaykh. His departure to Ardabil is indicative of the fact that he was driven out of Gilān and had to set up shop elsewhere.

While the above strongly suggests that the succession account of Shaykh Zāhed is wrong, it is only the decree of Abu-Sa`id that gives a clear indication as to whom really succeeded him.

Inheriting the “throne” of Shaykh Zāhed

The edict contains a verbatim complaint from a certain Shaykh Badr-od-din Abu-Mohammad Mahmud who represents that: as per a (previous) edict, he was supposed to sit *in lieu of his father*, Shaykh Jamāl-od-din, on the *sajjāda* of Shaykh Zāhed Ebrāhim, but was prevented by Shams-od-din (see below). Two important points need to be emphasized in this respect.

The first is the significance of the term *sajjāda* (prayer rug). It pertains to the more militant dervish orders, with a hierarchical structure inherited from Mithraic societies. The head of these societies sat on a throne covered with the skin of the sacrificial bull, and early post-Islamic orders such as the Khorramdiniyeh followed the same practice.⁹ Even today, the skin that some dervishes carry is called *pust-takht* (lit. skin-throne). Moreover, a treatise from the Khāksāriyeh order clearly equates the *sajjāda* with a throne (*takht*).¹⁰ The *sajjāda* is thus the Islamic version of the throne of a Mithraic/dervish congregation, and therefore, Cleaves was right in assuming that: “in a Dervish order [it] has the function which a throne has in a kingdom”.¹¹

The second point is that Badr-od-din’s petition unequivocally states that the “throne” of Shaykh Zāhed was first inherited by Jamāl-od-din `Ali (who is qualified as a *shaykh*), and that a succession problem only arose *after* his demise. There is no mention that the latter needed a Mongol decree to succeed his father. Given the high esteem in which Ghāzān (r. 1295-1304) kept Shaykh Zāhed, the Il-Khān would have certainly backed his elder son over any other pretender, at the time of his death in 1301. Twenty years later, Ghāzān was no longer alive, and the Safavid splinter-group had probably become more powerful than the Zāhediyeh itself. One can see that Badr-od-din’s petition, as well as the text of the decree, is more concerned with the endowments than the actual leadership of a Sufi order. Since Shams-od-din was from a second marriage, and full brother of Safi-od-din’s wife, Bibi Fātema, he was probably acting with the backing of his brother-in-law (who was also his father-in-law), to wrestle the succession—and the riches that came with it—from the hands of his own nephew, Badr-od-din. Because this edict and others that stipulated tax exemptions for the properties of various Sufi orders ended up at the Ardabil shrine, one can surmise that the Safavids eventually succeeded in absorbing all rival orders’ properties.¹²

Finally, if this decree, which clearly undermines the claimed prominence of Safi-od-din in the Zāhediyeh hierarchy, has survived it is only due to the fact that it was written in Uyghur and that later Safavid propagandists could not read nor understand it.

The reference to Amir Chupān

Among the usual string of protective clauses against tax collectors and rapacious Mongol officials, there appears in this decree a word-combination read as *aban choban* by Cleaves, about which Minorsky suggested that it referred “to some restraints on the activity of shepherds”.¹³ In this context however, the word *choban* does not mean “shepherd” but refers to the powerful commander in chief and regent, Amir Chobān (d. 1327), and the Nāz Khātuni fiasco that he had unleashed.

Amir Chupān had claimed to be heir to all properties of Nāz Khātun, the daughter of the ruler of Kordestān captured by Chupān’s father. In dispute with their landlords,

wicked farmers would claim that their land had once belonged to Nāz Khātun; other profiteers produced forged titles in her name, and Amir Chupān was more than eager to appropriate the contested properties for himself. According to the *Habib-os-siyar*, the vizier Rashid-od-din Fazlollāh first tried to dissuade Amir Chupān from land-grabbing but could not prevail. The fiasco reached such a proportion that most farmers stopped cultivating their lands. Finally, upon the intervention of Rashid-od-din's successor, Tāj-od-din `Ali-shāh (d. 1324),¹⁴ Chupān was given some crown-lands so that he would forgo his unbounded inheritance claims.¹⁵

The sentence mentioning his name therefore (underlined in the appendix), was meant to protect the Zāhediyeh endowments from Amir Chupān's inheritance claim. As the settlement of his claims must have occurred soon after the demise of Rashid-od-din (d. 1319), it makes sense that this decree which is dated 720AH/1320, would also provide protection against false Nāz Khātuni claims.

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Appendix

Text of the Uyghur *farmān* of Abu-Sa`id

WORD OF US (*ÜGE MANU*), BUSA`ID BAHĀDOR KHĀN

To the centurions [of] Gilān, Dashtāvand, Goshtāsfī, Arrān, Mughān, and all of our other appointees therewith, the *maleks*,¹⁶ the *nāyeb*s, the *motesarref*s, and the scribes, to the *qāzis*, the *shaykhs*, and . . . ,
to the elders, the *raïss*, the *kiyās* (?),¹⁷
to the numerous people of the land (*ra`iyat*):

This Shaykh Badr-od-din Abu-Mohammad Mahmud,¹⁸ having given prayers, when coming, has submitted a complaint to Us, saying:

“Although by Edict (*yarliq*), in the place of my father, the Shaykh Jamāl-od-din, I [was meant to] sit on the *sajjāda* of Shaykh Zāhed Ebrāhim and supervise the [implementation] of the *vaqf* documents (*kāq haz-e vaqf-ud*), my elder [clansman],¹⁹ Shams-od-din Mohammad, not letting me approach, took our Edicts and Writs, and caused the ruin of the endowments (*vaqf-ud*)”.

(It is our) Saying:

If it be true, that, he (Shams-od-din) acted on his own and thus illegally,²⁰ now, he must appropriately return and give back whatever Edicts and Writs he took, and that which he misappropriated from the Terms of the Endowments (*shart-e vaqf*), whatever it may have been. Let the Shaykh Badr-od-din Abu-Mohammad Mahmud, as before, sit on the *sajjāda*, and after he shall have put in order the endowments, let him spend the revenues according to the Terms of the Endowment.

Whosoever it may be, let him not interfere in between by his deeds, let him not attack and quarrel. Let the Followers (*morids*), the *shaykhs*, and the people who are there, act according to his word and not violate his word. Let them not misappropriate, without his permission, even one *man* (*mengü*)²¹ or one bushel (*paymāneh*) of grain.

Let the Mongolian troops, the envoys, the bands of those who hunt with falcons, and of those who hunt with cheetahs, and others who pass through, whosoever they may be, not use violence. Let them not obtain their needs by robbing and expropriating. Let them (only) be allowed to eat grains and cereals, inasmuch as it is stipulated for the *sofreh* (free meals) in the [*vaqf*] document to be given in a befitting manner. Let them not request in great quantity provisions, loans, relay animals, contributions, service, and the usage of plaques. Let them not, by invoking Amir Chupān, take anything whatsoever.

If the people of these lands (*ra`iyyat*), who within the last thirty years, have not yet entered into a register that enumerates them as people of another area, let them return and repossess. If any have illegally misappropriated their properties, let them, adjudicating them in a befitting manner, return and give [them back] according to the *shari`at*, including its revenues. If anyone have constructed living quarters in the properties by force, let them make a decision according to the *shari`at*. Let them leave in the same state as they are now, the villages of Kenleche, Sedel, and Aradi, which the Malek Ahmad gave to him. Let Sāilmish, Shams-od-din, Mir Hosayn, Isen-buqā (?),²² `Amid-od-din, Mohammad, and Rostam, without letting violence be done to him by anyone, causing his affairs, whatever they may be, to succeed in a befitting manner, protect him excellently.

We have sent Mohammad Anukain (?), to say: “After having been thus warned by Us, the people who shall violate this Edict, let them be held punishable; let them die”.

We have been pleased to grant to him a golden plaque and an Edict with a vermilion seal which he may keep in his possession.

Our Writ. Was written on the eighth *kaghuchid* of the middle moon of autumn, the monkey year, in the year seven hundred and twenty, at the station of Soltāniyya.

RECTO

It's correct (*ūjig*). Ükechin, Dowlat-shāh, Dameshq-khājeh, Tāj-od-din `Ali-shāh.

An Edict in which it is said: “Let his son administer the Endowment Document (*kāghaz*) of Shaykh Zāhed”. Piruz has written this.

* I am indebted to Shaul Shaked for his handouts at his lectures of the 14th and 21st May 2003 at the Collège de France, and to Nasser D. Khalili for providing me an image of his Bactrian wooden sticks.

¹ F.W. Cleaves, "A Chancery Practice of the Mongols in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 14 (Cambridge, 1951), p. 501.

² Cleaves, "Chancery Practices", p. 504, quoting the *Chien-yen i-lai ch'ao-yeh tsa-chi*.

³ Soudavar, "The Mongol Legacy"; F.W. Cleaves, "The Mongol Documents in the Musée de Téhéran" in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 16 (1953), pp. 27-33; P. Pelliot, "Les documents mongols du Musée de Téhéran" in *Āthār-e Iran* 1 (Paris, 1936), pp. 37-44.

⁴ V. Minorsky, "A Mongol Decree of 720/1321 to the Family of Shaykh Zahid" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16/3 (London, 1954), pp. 515-27.

⁵ Minorsky, "Mongol Decree", p. 521. Strangely, Minorsky commented that the epithet *shahid* (martyr) for Shaykh Zāhed was unwarranted and perhaps meant "the late", but did not suggest that throughout the document, *šayid* was in fact a corrupted transcription of Zāhed.

⁶ A. Kasravi, *Maghālāt-e Kasravi* (Newport Beach, CA, n.d.), pp. 218-53; M. Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Safavids* (Wiesbaden, 1972), pp. 46-51.

⁷ Tavakkoli b. Esmā'il-e Bazzāz, *Safvat-os-safā*, ms. 53 of the Art and History Trust collection, dated 1623.

⁸ Ghiyās-od-din b. Homām (known as) Khādamir, *Habib-os-siyar*, ed. M. Dabir-Siyāqi, (Tehran, 1353), vol. IV, p.416.

⁹ H. Pirouzdjou, *Mithraïsme et émancipation, anthropologie sociale et culturelle des mouvements populaires en Iran: au VIIIe, IXe et du XIVE au début du XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1997), p. 221.

¹⁰ *Fotovvat-nāmeḥ-hā va rasāel-e khāksāriyeh*, ed. M. Afshari, (Tehran, 1382), p. 179.

¹¹ Cleaves, "Documents Mongols", 67.

¹² See for instance A. Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Courts*, (New York, 1992), pp. 34-35.

¹³ Minorsky, "Mongol Decree", 517.

¹⁴ Tāj-od-din `Ali-shāh is one of the signatories on the back of the present decree (see below).

¹⁵ Khādamir, *Habib-os-siyar*, vol. III, pp. 207-208; also Soudavar, A., "Forgeries; Introduction" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* X, pp. 90-91.

¹⁶ Mongol military commanders were referred to as *malek*; see A. Soudavar, "In Defense of Rashid-od-din and his Letters" in *Studia Iranica* 32 (2003), pp. 96-97.

¹⁷ Cleaves, "Mongol Documents", p. 28: *keyenüves*; it may refer to the *kiyās* who were hereditary rulers of certain regions of Gilān.

¹⁸ Cleaves, "Mongol Documents", p. 28: Abul Maqmad Maqmd. Because of his *konyeh* (Abu-Mohammad), Badr-od-din may have had a son named Mohammad.

¹⁹ The original term is written as *āqā inu* that Cleaves translated as "elder brother." Minorsky however, surmised that since a son of Shaykh Zāhed was already named Shams-od-din Mohammad, it would have been odd to have a nephew and uncle both bear the same name and epithet (*laqab*), and perhaps the scribed miswrote *abāqā* (paternal uncle) as *āqā*; Minorsky, "Mongol Decree", p. 520. However, even though, the original meaning of *āqā* is elder brother (similar to *ini* which meant younger brother), it was also used as a general term referring to an elder clansman, best exemplified in the expression of *āqā va ini* used in Persian literature, meaning simply the "young and old" of the clan.

²⁰ Cleaves, "Mongol Documents", p. 30: "on his own volition, has he thus acted illegally"

²¹ The *man* is a measure of weight that varied according to time and place. Today the *man* of Tabriz is approximately equivalent to 3 kilos.

²² Cleaves, "Mongol Documents", p. 32: *Ishbau-a*