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Hushang the Dragon-slayer: Fire and Firearms in Safavid Art and Diplomacy

This paper suggests the interpretation of the images woven on Safavid precious textiles in their historical context. The thesis is that the mythical and literary subject of the discovery of fire by Shah Hushang was used by the Safavids in their negotiations concerning the supply of the firearms to Iran. The images of Hushang slaying the dragon on the silks of the third quarter of the sixteenth century reflect different stages of this diplomatic mission and the objects sewn out of these textiles served as meaningful presents to the interested parties.

This article is a part of a study focused on the figurative images woven on Safavid silks, a phenomenon developed in Iranian court art in the middle of the sixteenth century that lasted for about another hundred years. The hypothesis of a deliberate choice of subjects for such textiles was advanced by their first researchers in the late nineteenth century. Probably these images were created to express ideas, which related to the functions of such textiles and the objects made of them. The choice of episodes rare in miniature painting and the change of themes in the course of time, suggest the existence of a message contained in the images and their relation to contemporary events.

While no written document of the Safavid era mentions woven images on silks, the only way to verify the proposed hypothesis is to study every subject on textiles and to suggest its possible interpretation in its historical context. If arguments ‘for’ are convincing, the hypothesis proposed more than a century ago may finally be approved. The article of Mary McWilliams about the prisoner imagery on Safavid lampases¹ is the starting point on this journey of verification.²

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¹A figured weave in which a pattern, created by a supplementary warp and weft is added to a foundation weave. The Safavid lampases are distinguished by the satin foundation and pattern woven in twill.

²M. A. McWilliams, “Prisoner Imagery in Safavid Textiles,” *The Textile Museum Journal*, 26 (1987): 5–23.

Figure 1. *Khil'at* sewn of lampas. Iran, third quarter of the sixteenth century



Source: Moscow Armory Chamber, Inv. 25668.

The present article is focused on the image reproduced in some Safavid silks: the depiction of a dragon-slayer, corresponding to an episode in the *Shahnama*. The study of this imagery can reveal not only the nuances of meaning implied in textiles, but also particular details of the interpretation of the *Shahnama* during the Safavid period.

There are two textiles under consideration here—the lampas (Figure 1),³ and the velvet (Figure 2),⁴ with woven images of a hero raising a huge rock above a

³*Khil'at* (robe of honor) in the Moscow Armory Chamber, Inv. 25668.

⁴At least eight fragments of this velvet are preserved in different collections. Most of them are scalloped medallions formerly being parts of a tent decoration: Washington Textile Museum, no. 3.123, 3.315, 3.309; Cleveland Museum of Art, no. 1948.205; Metropolitan Museum, no. 27.51.1; Gulbenkian Foundation, GML 1505; Benaki Museum; Keir Collection.

Figure 2. Velvet. Iran, third quarter of the sixteenth century



Source: Washington Textile Museum, no. 3.123.

dragon. Both textiles are distinguished by their exquisite technique. The great similarity in the style of images suggests that the cartoons for both of them were made by the same artist. On the basis of stylistic analysis it has been possible to attribute the authorship of original drawings to the famous Safavid court artist Siyavush Beg Gurji.⁵ The proportions of the figures and the costumes of the personages woven on textiles closely relate to Safavid miniature paintings of the late 1550s–early 1570s, suggesting the drawings used for the textiles date back to the third quarter of the sixteenth century. The role of leading Safavid artists in the production of figurative silks is widely discussed among textile specialists.⁶ The author of the present article made a special study of this subject.⁷ Omitting my argumentation, I repeat the main thesis. The production of the best samples of Safavid figurative silks needed the participation of two specialists: a *naqqash*, i.e. a painter preparing a cartoon, and *naqshband*, such as the famous master Ghiyath

⁵Detailed comparison of these and some other textile designs with drawings of Siyavush Beg Gurji see G. V. Lassikova, “Naqshband and Naqqāsh—Two Creators of One Design. Painters in the Safavid Weaving Workshops,” *Scientific Bulletin of the State Museum of Oriental Art*, XXVI (Moscow, 2006), 76–82 [in Russian]. For Siyavush Beg, see Anthony Welch, *Artists for the Shah. Late Sixteenth-Century Painting at the Imperial Court of Iran* (New Haven and London, 1976), 17–40.

⁶See P. Ackerman, “Textiles of the Islamic Periods. History,” in *Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (London and New York, 1938–39), 3: 2069–2162; Jon Thompson, “Early Safavid Carpets and Textiles,” in *Hunt for Paradise. Court Arts of Safavid Iran 1501–1576*, ed. by Jon Thompson and Sheila R. Canby (Milan, 2003), esp. 275–292.

⁷Lassikova, “Naqshband and Naqqāsh,” 67–92.

al-Din ‘Ali of Yazd.⁸ They should work in close collaboration to arrange a pattern unit⁹ in such a manner that all protruding elements of the image, not limited by a rectangular frame as was the tradition of manuscript illustrations, would correspond precisely to the interstices of the neighboring unit.¹⁰

Until recently, both textiles were always published with a misinterpretation of the subject. Following the attribution of Friedrich Martin, art historians considered the subject to be Iskandar’s fight with a dragon, corresponding to an episode from *Shahnama*.¹¹ In 1987 Inna Vishnevskaja mentioned the discrepancy between these images and the Iskandar story.¹² In the same year M. A. McWilliams wrote concerning the velvet’s design: “Persian epic poetry, however, features several warriors who battle dragons. None is recorded as having dispatched his dragon with a large boulder, and no details have yet been discovered that clinch this identification.”¹³ In fact, however, there is one subject in classical Persian literature that corresponds closely to these textile images: this is the event described in the opening chapters of the *Shahnama* and preceding the establishment of the *jashn-i sada* ritual by Shah Hushang.¹⁴

Traveling in the mountains with a group of courtiers, Shah Hushang saw a terrible black serpent. He reacted immediately by throwing a stone. The serpent jumped back and the stone smashed against the rock, producing a spark: thus fire was discovered. Hushang declared this fire divine and ordered the people to worship it.¹⁵

⁸See P. Ackerman “A Biography of Ghiyath the Weaver,” *Bulletin of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology*, 7 (December 1934): 9–12; Robert Skelton, “Ghiyath al-Din ‘Ali-ye Naqshband and an Episode in the Life of Sadiqi Beg,” in *Persian Painting from the Mongols to the Qajars. Studies in Honour of Basil W. Robinson*, ed. by Robert Hillenbrand (London, 2000), 249–263. This notes the specific connection between Ghiyath al-Din and the celebrated Safavid artist, Sadiqi Beg.

⁹An image repeated in a particular order (i.e. rapport scheme) to form the pattern of the textile.

¹⁰Then the pattern unit was squared off for a technical pattern, and the *nagshband* began the most complicated part of his work—the mathematical calculation to set a drawloom. The *nagshband* determined the color variations of the pattern, a scale of images and a rapport scheme using different types of symmetry and shifts.

¹¹Friedrich R. Martin, *Figurale Persische Stoffe aus dem Zeitraum 1550–1650* (Stockholm, 1899), 13.

¹²I. I. Vishnevskaja, “Historical and Artistic Significance of Iranian Textiles from the Moscow Armory Chamber” (Ph.D. diss., Moscow State University of Arts and Industries by S. G. Stroganov, 1987), 56, note 1 [in Russian].

¹³*Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16th–19th Centuries*, ed. by Carol Bier (Washington DC, 1987), 199.

¹⁴M. Boyce, “Iranian Festivals,” in *Cambridge History of Iran. The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), 3(2): 800–801; see further, E. E. Bertels, “The Feast of Jashn-i Sada in Persian and Tajik Poetry,” in *History of Iranian Literature and Culture* (Selected works) (Moscow 1988): 302–313 [in Russian].

¹⁵Firdausi, *Shahnama*, ed. E. E. Bertels et al. (Moscow, 1960), 1: 33–34.

The Lampas Imagery

All the main elements of the narrative are depicted in the design of the lampas from the Moscow Armory Chamber: in the rocky landscape a man raising a piece of rock above his head confronts a fire-spitting serpent with flaming eyes. Furthermore, a significant position on the textile is occupied by the Simurgh—the huge bird sitting on a tree, whose pose and open beak express hostility towards the dragon. This bird is not mentioned in this *Shahnama* episode.

Combat between supernatural creatures with a strong Chinese flavor, like dragons and Simurghs, have been common images in Muslim art since the Mongol period.¹⁶ In textiles this motif was especially popular. There are a number of Safavid carpets with such images and numerous representations in miniature painting, where combat between the Simurgh and the Dragon is usually depicted in gold on a colored background of cloth, or as a polychrome design on a golden ground.¹⁷ Most of these figurative textiles are horse covers, canopies or caftans worn by the great kings.

The origin of the motif is Chinese, but in Iran the Chinese image of struggle between dragon and phoenix was re-semantized. The Chinese phoenix became the personification of the Simurgh—the Divine bird of Iranian pre-Islamic tradition. The motif in general acquired the ethical meaning of the struggle between good and evil. The dragon is the dark hostile matter, the embodiment of evil and sin. In the Islamic world, the Simurgh became a Sufi metaphor for the Universal Essence.¹⁸ Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi used this mythological bird as a metaphor of the Actual Intellect permeating with Its light through the whole of Creation.¹⁹ Beyond the fact that the two form a traditional opposition, the inclusion of this image in the illustration of the discovery of fire may be further explained by the relation between Simurgh and the idea of Divine Light, symbolized also by the fire of the *sada* ritual.

It is noticeable that in Safavid art the motif of combat between Simurgh and Dragon is usually isolated from images of other subjects. The best example is provided by the carpets of the sixteenth century,²⁰ in which the main field is filled with

¹⁶ See A. E. Bertels, *Artistic Imagery in the Art of Iran of the IX–XV Centuries* (Moscow 1997), 154–289 [in Russian].

¹⁷ See, for example, miniatures from Ibrahim Mirza's manuscript of the *Haft Aurang* of 1556–64, Freer Gallery, no. 46.12, fols. 52r, 64v, 231r. The only extant example of such a Safavid lampas of the third quarter of the sixteenth century is exhibited in the Qom Astaneh Museum, no. 1506. For an earlier example of a painting of this subject, see the *Shahnama* of Ibrahim Sultan, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, ms. Ouseley Add. 176, fol. 7r (c. 1425).

¹⁸ The most famous and explicit Sufi literary image of the Simurgh was created by ‘Attar in his *Mantiq al-Tair*. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, the dual nature of the Simurgh in the *Shahnama*, where in the seven labors of Isfandiyar the Simurgh is a negative force (fifth khwan).

¹⁹ H. Ziai, “The Illuminationist Tradition,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. by S. H. Nasr (London and New York, 2001), 1: 481.

²⁰ See below.

hunting scenes, while the combat of fantastic creatures is placed in medallions or on the border. However, on the lampas analyzed a unique situation is seen: a man is situated in the center of the struggle between these cosmic powers. Placed just in the middle between good and evil, the hero takes a decisive step from the rock, related to the low nature of serpent, to the tree of the Divine bird. The hero is dressed in the costume contemporary to the time of the lampas production. His headgear, which is a kind of Sufi *taj* distinguishing members of the Safavi order, points to a high ranked person in the Safavid hierarchy: such headgear could be worn only by Safavid *amirs* or by the shah himself. Besides this specific historic detail, the textile repeat excellently represents the particular features of a mythical time: color variations and hidden boundaries between repeat units make the viewer doubt if he is seeing depictions of the same episode. It seems that the situation is repeated time and again; good and evil being reincarnated in a new appearance permanently requiring the intervention of a hero. The infinity of this struggle is emphasized by the choice of the moment depicted: the hero has not yet won, the dragon has not disappeared and the feast has not yet started.

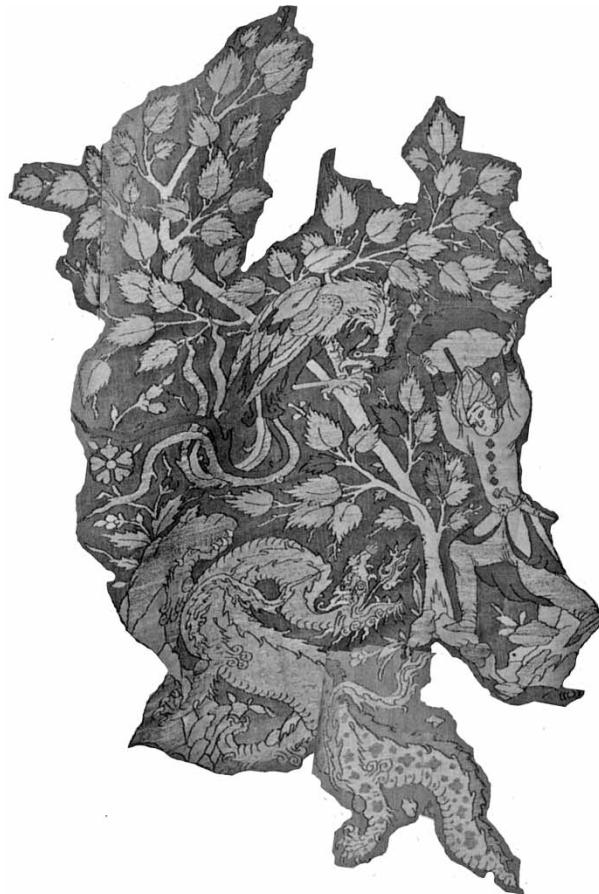
The same idea is represented by the composition of the pattern unit (Figure 3). The jutting points of the main figures (man's foot, bird's back, dragon's leg and tail), joined by conventional straight lines, form an unsteady figure resembling a rhomboid, reposing on an angle. This single fulcrum of the whole composition is the tip of the dragon's tail. Such a compositional arrangement demonstrates the instability of the situation: at any moment the balance of forces may be destroyed and the situation change in favor of one or the other side.

Parallel straight lines inclining in the diagonal direction are repeated inside the pattern unit. They correspond to the male figure, the trunk of the tree and the body of the dragon. However, this upward development of the composition is interrupted by several parallel arcs trending downward, as if every line were forced by some power to curve backwards. The arcs accent the most significant elements of the subject: the steepest curves correspond to the back of the Simurgh and the neck of the dragon. Parallel to them are the huge boulder raised up by Hushang and the hanging rock, which the serpent is scrambling up. This geometrical design creates the dynamic image of confronting powers.

The Velvet

The same story is represented in a different manner on the velvet (Figure 4). All the figures are approximately one-third smaller than on the lampas. The repeat layout is the same, but the composition of the pattern unit differs significantly. It is more similar to the rectangular proportions of a miniature. The pattern unit is tighter, with minor juts on all edges. The distribution of the “centers of gravity” in the composition creates a general sense of natural harmony. In the velvet design there are repeated parallel straight lines running in the diagonal direction similar to those on the lampas and with the same angle. However, in

Figure 3. Lampas pattern unit. Reconstruction



this case the slanting lines go upward unimpeded. On the contrary, several horizontal lines corresponding to the middle lines of the dragon's and bird's bodies form the base for the upward development. Other repeated parallels are slightly rounded vertical arcs, most of which coincide with the growth lines of the tree and shrub branches, the center of the hero's torso, the neck and tail of the dragon. We should note that the main elements accented by arcs in the lampas design are not emphasized on the velvet. The subject appears to be dissolved into the general picture of natural growth.

The key motif of Firdausi's narrative, the rocky landscape, is not represented on the velvet. The scene is located on a golden ground among blossoming trees and flowers. The dragon crawls up a tree with two large birds sitting on the branches. These birds on the branches of two interlacing trees are a metaphor of love.

Figure 4. Velvet pattern unit. Reconstruction



At the same time, the birds depicted on this velvet represent another visual type of the Simurgh, different from the Chinese phoenix and correlating to Iranian folk images.²¹ The visual motif of a dragon creeping up on a couple of birds or a Simurgh's nest is widely spread in the marginal decoration and on the lacquer bindings of Safavid manuscripts. This motif recalls the story known from folktales spread throughout Iran, the Caucasus, Asia Minor and Central Asia. A prince-errant (the names vary) reached a distant land or subterranean kingdom, where every year a dragon appeared from a lake, crawled up a tree and ate the nestlings of the Simurgh (or a large eagle in some versions); the hero killed the dragon, saved the nestlings and received help from the Simurgh in return. In Persian literature this story, undoubtedly going back to the ancient Indo-Iranian myth, appears in the romance "Gul-u Sinaubar" of the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries.²² Can the hero depicted on the velvet be identified not with Shah Hushang, but with the character of the fairy tale mentioned above?

²¹ Sharif M. Shukurov, *Art and Mystery* (Moscow, 1999), 178 [in Russian].

²² Hossein G. Korogly, *Shahsenem and Garyp, Kasym-oglan and other Turkmen Folk Stories* (Moscow, 1991), 12 [in Russian].

The use of the stone argues against such an identification. In the majority of versions of the topic collected by J. E. Berezkin, the hero kills a serpent with a sword—rarely with arrows.²³ Only in one Uzbek tale does a youth defeat the dragon by striking its forehead with a stone.²⁴ The velvet in question seems to represent a mixture of the two stories: one from the *Shahnama* and one from the fairy tale. The feat of Hushang depicted on the lampas as an act of cosmic significance appears to be translated to the context of the fairy tale on the velvet.

Hushang and the Dragon in Miniature Painting

A study of the images of Hushang's exploit in Persian miniature painting gives a surprising result: only one illustration from the pre-Safavid period is currently known.²⁵ It is from the Baghdad school of the early fourteenth century. Hushang is placed in the center of the horizontal composition. His empty hand stretched forward and his body following the arm suggests the pose of a man who has just thrown a stone. In the left side of the painting a middle-sized stone is depicted near the fire. The dragon creeps away. The right side of the composition is occupied by the image of the shah's retinue, consisting of two men dressed in animal skins.

Three other miniatures are known to have survived from the Safavid period. The earlier one is in a manuscript dated 1523 on a page bearing the title "Hushang's extraction of fire from a rock" (below the picture).²⁷ The center and foreground of the composition are assigned to the depiction of a group of people camping in the mountains. In the background there is a semi-nude figure raising a boulder above his head. The main (implied) action, the confrontation with the dragon, is not visible as it is hidden behind the rocks. The subject can be identified only according to the general location of the miniature near the relevant passage of the *Shahnama*, but it is clearly peripheral to the main scene of the painting.

The second painting is in a manuscript dated 1617 in the Walters Art Museum.²⁸ The scene shows Hushang and his party seated outside a pavilion in the countryside, when a dragon suddenly appears over a ridge of rock and approaches the startled Shah, who at this moment is still kneeling on the ground. In the painting, he takes no offensive action against the dragon.

²³J. E. Berezkin "Thematic Classification and Allocation of Folk and Mythical Topics by Areas. Digital database," <http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/berezkin>.

²⁴Mikhail I. Shaverdin, ed., *Uzbek Folk Tales* (Tashkent, 1972), 2: 59–64 [in Russian].

²⁵With reference to the *Shahnama* Project database, <http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/>

²⁶Chester Beatty Library, Per 104, f. 6 v, from the "First Small *Shahnama*."

²⁷Gulistan Museum, Tehran, ms. 2245, p. 13. This is entered in the *Shahnama* database as "Hushang enthroned."

²⁸Ms. W. 602, f. 13v. Thanks to Will Noel for kindly making an image of this picture available at short notice [ed.].

The third miniature depicting the same subject can be identified in a *Shahnama* manuscript copied in Isfahan in 1640.²⁹ Hushang rides at the head of his army. A big snake appears from behind a rock in front of the king, who lifts his right arm holding a stone.

It is noticeable that none of the paintings are similar to the design made by Siyavush Beg Gurji. Only in the Gulistan miniature of the first quarter of the sixteenth century does the hero raise a large rock above his head in the same manner as on both textiles. So we may suggest a particular interpretation of the subject in images of the sixteenth century, more precisely in the images made in the Safavid royal workshops of that time.

Earlier and later images demonstrate the usual interpretation of the scene described by Firdausi: a man threw a stone at a large snake, which caused the discovery of fire (these images better correspond to the usual size of a natural flint). In the sixteenth century, however, the same event was represented as an exploit which required great strength from the Shah. This is emphasized by the huge dimensions of the stone. Similar large rocks were usually depicted in illustrations of another episode from the *Shahnama*, when Akvan Div raised above his head a piece of earth and rock with Rustam sleeping on it, or, in a different context, the scene of Rustam kicking aside the rock thrown by Bahman son of Isfandiyar. So in the sixteenth century the scene of fire discovery was transformed into a battle, while the fire itself was not depicted. The stone therefore seems to have been regarded as the main feature of the story.

For this reason it is not surprising that modern art historians could not identify the subject of the textile designs. It looks as though the illustrations are intentionally abstracted from the text. Instead of a predictably naturalistic interpretation of this episode, the early Safavid artists treated it from a symbolic point of view for those spectators who were well acquainted with the subject and were used to reading the language of visual metaphors.

These metaphors saturated the text with new connotations. The patterns of both textiles reveal the same confrontation between cosmic essences, the good and the evil, personified by the Simurgh and the Dragon. However, on the lampas we find the fire, which can be understood as divine, coming from the monster's mouth, released as it were by Hushang. On the velvet there is no fire at all, but the whole scene is illuminated with the glittering gold background, with reference to the divine origin of the fire. The ancient archetype of the king as dragon-slayer, the lord of fire illuminated with the light of divine *farr*, has been identified in both images.³⁰

²⁹Christie's auction, sale no. 7571 (8 April 2008), lot 208, f. 5. This miniature is not mentioned in any of the existing indexes of *Shahnama* illustrations.

³⁰Sh. M. Shukurov considers the *sada* ritual to be of special importance in the whole *Shahnama* epic. The poem was intended as the poetic realization of the ancient royal rite and the respective myth of the struggle between the king and dragon. This original episode became an archetype for all following events of the epic history. Every subsequent hero reconstructs the feat of Shah Hushang and triumphs over the reincarnated world evil. See Sharif M. Shukurov, *Art of Medieval*

It remains unclear why Siyavush Beg chose such a rarely depicted episode for his work. If he aimed to portray the king as dragon-slayer, as the conqueror of the powers of evil, he could have chosen one of the more popular examples of the subject with a well-developed iconography and composition. According to the database of the Shahnama Project, the most popular illustrations of a king fighting the dragons are of Shah Gushtasb killing a dragon in Rum (108 illustrations) and Bahram Gur, who killed dragons on two separate occasions (each over 50 illustrations). The exploit of Iskandar was less commonly illustrated (23 illustrations).³¹ However, the use of the rock confirms that it is Hushang who is depicted on the textiles.

If we agree that the choice of the subject could be determined by the artist, we might try to find some hints on it in his biography. The main feature which distinguished Siyavush Beg from other Safavid artists of his time was his Georgian origin. He was brought to Iran in his childhood from one of the Tahmasb's Georgian campaigns (most likely in 1544). What if he knew about a similar story in his native lore, familiar to him from his childhood? In Georgian folklore there is a story about a tremendous bird called Paskudji, whose nest was rescued from a serpent by a hero.³² However, a stone was never used as a weapon against the dragon, either in the above-mentioned fairy tale or in other stories of the Georgian folk and court literature.

The stone used by the hero may indicate the absence of a weapon, in an allusion to the proverb that appeared in the Safavid period. After 918/1512–13, when the famous poet Kamal al-Din Shir 'Ali Bina'i Haravi died as a martyr, feebleness before an armed enemy was expressed in the phrase: "[I have only] this stone and the roof of Karshi." The story behind the proverb is recounted in the *Sharafnama*:

On the day that the murderous *qizilbash* army occupied the town of Karshi, Maulana Bina'i gathered many stones, went onto a high roof and began to throw stones at the crowd of his persecutors. When only the last stone remained, one *qizilbash* villain threatened Maulana with a lance. In his complete

Iran: Formation of the Visual Principles (Moscow, 1989), 67–69 [in Russian]. At the same time, being originally a Zoroastrian rite, *jashn-i sada* was reinterpreted by Muslims exclusively as a royal holiday. The semantic accent was moved from the worship of divine fire to the myth about the king's exploit. See Sh. M. Shukurov, *Firdowsi Shahnama and the Early Illustrative Tradition* (Moscow, 1983), 60 [in Russian]. However it is believed that the tradition of *sada* was interrupted in Iran under the Mongols. The same research asserts that the sense of Hushang's exploit had been lost before the tradition of *Shahnama* illustration was formed in the early fourteenth century.

³¹See also the famous trials of both Rustam and Isfandiyar confronting and killing a dragon (106 and 102 illustrations respectively).

³²See J. E. Berezkin "Thematic Classification." The correspondence between mythical birds the Paskudji and the Simurgh is discussed in K. V. Trever, *Senmurv-Paskudj. The Dog-bird* (Leningrad, 1937) [in Russian].

perturbation Maulana threw the stone at him and declaimed the following verse:

*I ask the Lord of heavens for help,
This stone and the roof of Karshi.*

The last line of this verse became a proverb in Mawarannahr, Khurasan and Iraq.³³

Maybe it was the Safavids who chose this subject for their textiles? It is worth mentioning that apart from the Small *Shahnama* painting of c. 1300, no aspect of Hushang's career had ever been illustrated before the sixteenth century except his defeat of the Black Div, which occurred during the reign of Kayumars, Hushang's grandfather. This situation changed in the 1520s. We know two important miniatures from the Tabriz *kitabkhana* dating from this time.

One of them has already been discussed in this paper. The other is from the famous Shah Tahmasb *Shahnama*, depicting the feast of *sada*.³⁴ Remarkably, both miniatures were produced about 1524, i.e. the date of Shah Tahmasb's accession to the throne.³⁵

According to Mais Nazarli, the artists working in the Safavid royal atelier reflected the events of contemporary court life in the illustrations of their manuscripts, establishing circumstantial connections between the Safavid rulers and the great monarchs of antiquity.³⁶ The Safavids symbolically restarted Iranian history, and Isma'il I metaphorically associated himself with the legendary first human king, Kayumars.³⁷

The analogy between Hushang and Tahmasb I is obvious from their lineage: both of them were second kings in their dynasties. However, we do not know about any manuscripts from the beginning of Tahmasb's reign in which a dragon was depicted. Apparently, the first time in the history of Safavid art this story was depicted in full was in the textiles produced in the last decades of Tahmasb's reign. It seems likely that a very special event occurred that could be associated with this picture. The next time this episode appeared in manuscript illustrations was in the first half of the seventeenth century, and obviously with no influence from Siyavush Beg's works.

³³ Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, *Sharafnama*, Russian trans. E. I. Vasilieva (Moscow, 1976), 2: 160.

³⁴ Metropolitan Museum, New York, no. 1970.301.2.

³⁵ According to the colophon, copying the *Shahnama* in the Gulistan Museum was finished on 1 April 1523. However, the work on illustrations was presumably accomplished after the completion of the text. Considering the large number of miniatures (108) this work should not have been ended by the spring of 1524, when young Tahmasb I ascended the throne (although it is true that the earliest pictures in the manuscript might have been finished by then).

³⁶ Mais J. Nazarli, *The Two Worlds of Middle Eastern Book Illuminations: The Problems of Pragmatical Interpretation of Safavi Painting* (Moscow, 2006) [in Russian].

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

The Function of the Textiles

The lampas. Let us try to analyze these objects in the context of their functions. The *khil'at* from the Moscow Armory Chamber is a ceremonial robe brought to Moscow as a diplomatic gift for the Russian tsar from the Safavid Shah. The archival documents recording the arrival of this garment in the Moscow royal treasury have not survived. It is, however, very likely that the gift was made by Shah Tahmasb I, with whom the image of Hushang in the lampas design has been associated. It is known that diplomatic gifts were usually chosen with special care so that not only their material value would be considered but also their symbolic meaning for the mission.

Khil'ats worn by the shah were of special status. The gift of such a robe signified the endowing of the *baraka* of the shah. A Safavid monarch dressed in this robe was symbolically included in the roll of ancient Iranian kings fighting for good against evil. The act of presenting such a garment to another sovereign, in this case Ivan IV ('The Terrible', 1530–84), meant the recognition of Russia's monarch to be a legitimate king and dragon/evil slayer.³⁸

The history of Russian–Iranian diplomatic relations before 1586 is not sufficiently studied. The patchy information available indicates that the exchange of the embassies between Russia and Iran already happened under Isma'il I and Tahmasb I.³⁹ The main point of those negotiations was a military alliance against Turkey and the supply of Russian firearms to Iran. A record of particular importance coincides with the date to which the textile of the robe has been attributed.

Information on the Persian embassy to Moscow of 1568 is given by Semen Maltsev, a Russian diplomat imprisoned in Turkey:

The Qizilbash Shah sent his ambassadors to our Tsar with a plea: "Troops of the Turkish Sultan are trying to pass by Astrakhan to make war with me. Your Majesty, could you help us with your powerful hand?" And our Tsar sent to Iran his ambassador Olexey Khoznikov and with him 100 cannons and 500 guns.⁴⁰

In those times this was very substantial military help for both countries. To obtain it Shah Tahmasb needed persuasive arguments. In such cases ambassadorial gifts played an important role in medieval diplomacy. If we suppose this robe

³⁸For a detailed analysis of the ceremony of presenting luxurious garments termed *khil'at*, see S. Gordon, "Ibn Battuta and a Region of Robing," in *Robes of Honour. Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India* (Oxford, 2003), 1–30.

³⁹Petr P. Bushev, *History of Embassies and Diplomatic Relations between Russian and Iranian States in 1586–1612 (from Russian archives)* (Moscow, 1976), 36–47 [in Russian]. See also briefly, Rudi Matthee, "Suspicion, Fear, and Admiration: Pre-Nineteenth-Century Iranian Views of the English and the Russians," in *Iran and the Surrounding World. Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Nikkie R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle and London, 2002), 129–130.

⁴⁰Semen Maltsev, "Campaign of Turks and Tatars against Astrakhan in 1569," *Historical Notes*, 22 (Moscow, 1947), 157–58 [in Russian].

to be brought to Ivan the Terrible by this very embassy, an explanation of the strange choice of subject may be suggested. In the historical context, the battle between Hushang and the Dragon could be understood as the war of Tahmasb I against the Turks. By sending this gift Tahmasb proposed that the Russian tsar share the mission of defender of the world from the eternal and mutual enemy, the evil—the Turks. The intensity of the moment depicted, the situation of equilibrium between good and evil, when the outcome of the battle is not evident, induced the potential ally to take quick decisions. At the same time, the rock used by Hushang alluded to a lack of weapons in the Iranian army. Thus the robe of honor represented an appeal for military help, not derogating the suppliant's dignity, but on the contrary exalting Tahmasb's political ambitions to the level of "cosmic" acts.

The velvet: relationships with 'hunting' compositions. In the velvet design, the semantic accents are obviously different. Hushang aiming a stone at the dragon is placed outside the conflict. He plays a role of external arbitrator in the natural world, in which a raptorial monster threatens beautiful birds. The whole composition indicates that the triumph of the man is predetermined. Meanwhile his costume has no details revealing his royal status. The hero is depersonalized and the event represented manifests the universal human essence in contradiction to aggressive matter.

Many scholars have remarked the stylistic and technologic identity of this velvet with another one bearing the depiction of a hunting scene (Figure 5).⁴¹ Most probably both textiles were woven in the same workshop after cartoons by Siyavush Beg Gurji. Besides the substantial difference between sizes of the repeating units, the images have the same scale. The unity is traced also in the costumes of the personages depicted on both velvets. Moreover, these two velvets once decorated the same tent, gained as a war prize by the Polish Prince Sanguszko from the possessions of the Turkish Grand Vizier defeated at the siege of Vienna at 1683. Although the velvets are shaped for a Turkish, not an Iranian tent,⁴² what if these textiles originally belonged to the same set? It must be remembered that on the carpets contemporary with them, hunting scenes were usually placed next to the scenes of combat between the Simurgh and the Dragon.

The pattern unit of the "hunting" velvet covers the whole width of the fabric. Considering the dimensions of the pattern unit (58 x 67 cm), the density of

⁴¹ Ackerman, "Textiles of the Islamic Periods," 2090–91. Ten fragments of this velvet are preserved in different collections. One of them is round detail from a tent roof—Boston Museum of Fine Arts, no. 28.13, others are scalloped medallions formerly parts of a tent decoration: Washington Textile Museum, no. 3.317, 3.310, 3.222, 3.214; Metropolitan Museum, New York, no. 1972.189; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, no. L. 2100.P.5.56-1, M.56.5; Worcester Art Museum; Yale University Art Gallery.

⁴² For the structural difference between Turkish and Iranian tents see D. Walker, "Safavid Hunting Carpets and Textiles," in *Furusiyha*, ed. by D. Alexander (Riyadh, 1996), 1: 196–203.

Figure 5. Detail of a tent decoration. Velvet. Iran, third quarter of the sixteenth century



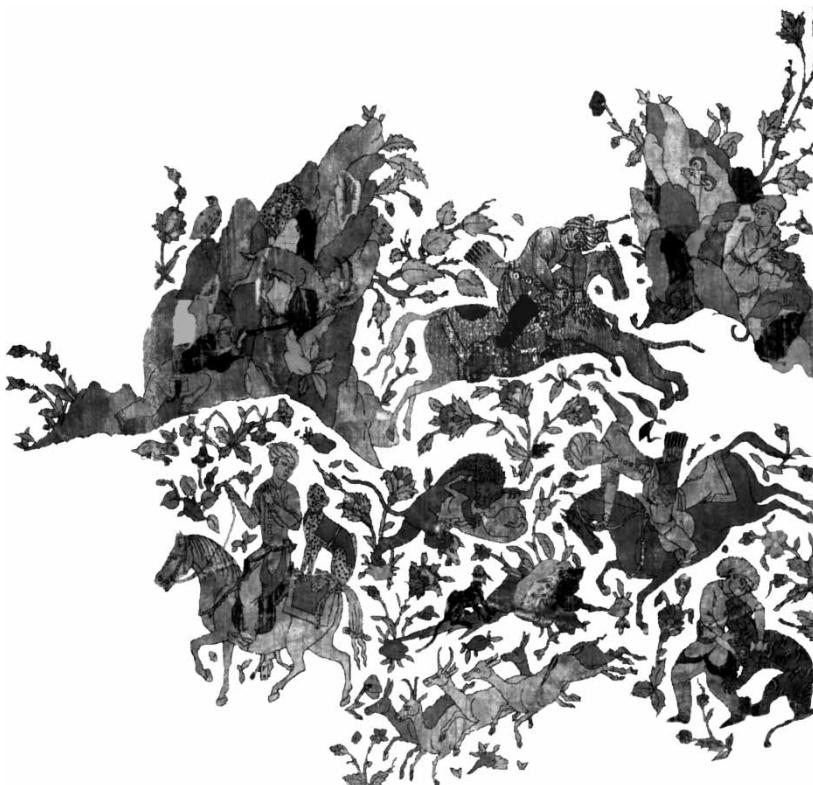
Source: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, no. 28.13.

the composition and its richness in tiny details, this velvet represents the most exquisite workmanship of all known Safavid textiles. The calculation of this pattern demanded of a *naghshband* the highest skill, not met in any other textile fabric of the time. The extant object, sewn without regard to the pattern, produces the impression of a chaotic placement of motifs. But the construction of the pattern (Figure 6)⁴³ shows an integral scene of hunting flanked by two rocky massifs. On the open field between the rocks a rider with a bow follows a group of gazelles. One gazelle is seized by a lion. A second lion attacks another mounted hunter, who defends himself with a dagger. A third rider is placed in the foreground, moving away from the field of action. He is the keeper of a hunting cheetah. Another personage in the foreground wrestles with a tiger. This youth also uses a dagger to protect himself. In the mountains, a hunter with a greyhound makes an ambush, while the sixth person stands motionless with his gun at the ready.

The main action corresponds to a subject popular in Persian poetry: hunters preying upon gazelles suddenly face lions, attracted by the same prey. The

⁴³See also M. Sonday, "Pattern and Weaves: Safavid Lampas and Velvet," in *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart*, 57–83, fig. 4.

Figure 6. Velvet pattern unit. Reconstruction



subject demonstrates the inconstancy of fortune: a self-confident hunter next moment may turn into prey himself. In all depicted episodes the theme of the unpredictable danger is repeated and every time represented in a new aspect. The foolish ibex looks straight into the gun, while above him the snow leopard is waiting for a chance. The scared gazelle escaping from a hunter falls into the clutches of a lion. The careless partridge strolls over the stones and does not notice the puma watching it. The beater is attacked from behind by a tiger. In the same rocks the hunter with a greyhound, the fox and argali hide themselves from one another. The fox watches for the hare sitting near the hunter armed with a gun. It seems that the wild animals personify human vices, leading to death. Meanwhile a numerical regularity may be traced in the composition. The number of predators (three attacking and three in ambush—snow leopard, bear and fox) is equal to the number of gazelles. Six hunters (three riders and three unmounted) use three kinds of hunting animals (cheetah, puma and dog) and three kinds of weapons (arrows, dagger and gun). So these six different methods of hunting are proportional to the number of people and wild animals.

Such hunts with leopards and cheetahs and a large number of participants were the shah's privilege in Iran. Each hunter in this scene plays his own role. In the mountain ambush the marksman and the master of hounds are hidden. The cheetah is held behind the saddle of a special servant. This figure, going away at the heat of the action, breaks the ordinary logic of the subject. This image must have a metaphorical sense. We can agree with the interpretation of M. Barry, who explained the images of wild beasts on leashes as personifications of the lower passions of human nature (*nafs*), quelled by a man.⁴⁴ The hunter having his prey killed and attached to the saddle (the head and legs of a dead gazelle are seen beneath the horse's belly) is not in love with the chase. He calmly rides away, in contrast to the two other mounted hunters depicted on the velvet. The costumes of these two hunters reflect their higher social rank in comparison with other figures. But only one of them—the rider attacked by the lion and defending himself with a dagger—is distinguished by the special Safavid headgear, the main token in the Safavid hierarchy in the sixteenth century. This man wears the richest costume: the full-length robe with a belt of metallic plaques. By these details the lord, i.e. the master of the hunt, is identified.

Single combat between the king and the lion is an ancient topic in Iranian culture, representing the kings of both worlds, mankind and nature, as hostile to each other. The best examples of such images are the reliefs on the walls of Achaemenid palaces. Having a ritual significance, the lion hunt was a special prerogative of ancient kings of Iran. In Muslim times, victory in combat with a lion was considered as an heroic feat. Only two characters in the *Shahnama* accomplished such a feat—Isfandiyar and Shah Bahram Gur. Bahram Gur during his hunts fought several times with not one but with a couple of lions. Moreover, to gain the kingship he was obliged to defeat two lions guarding the throne of Yazdagird. Khusrau Parviz in the poem of Nizami killed a lion with a punch, when the animal attacked his camp during the shah's feast with Shirin. All these episodes served as historical models of ideal behavior for Iranian rulers in later times.

It is therefore interesting to note that Safavid chroniclers record a single combat of the founder of the Safavid state with a fierce lion. In 1508, after the capture of Baghdad:

His Majesty heard of a forest, wherein there dwelt a lion, which did much mischief, and had stopped the road in those parts. And his lion-hearted officers begged that they might be sent against this evil beast. But His Majesty would not let them go, but himself approached the beast, and with a single arrow he laid him low on the ground of destruction.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bebzad of Herat (1465–1535)* (Paris, 2004), 280, 301.

⁴⁵ Hasan Beg Rumlu, *Absan al-Tawarikh*, ed. by ‘A. Nava’i (Tehran, 1357/1979), 137–138; trans. by C. N. Seddon, *A Chronicle of the Early Safawis being the Absanu’t Tawārikh of Hasan-i Rumlu* (Baroda, 1934), 2: 47. A more florid account of the same deed is given by a contemporary

Although the life of Isma'il I abounded in great deeds, this event became one of the twenty most important episodes selected for illustration in the manuscript of the so-called “Anonymous history of Shah Ismail” in the middle of seventeenth century.⁴⁶

Lion hunts are popular scenes in miniature paintings. However, the image on the textile is distinguished by the weapon used in the fight. The killing of a lion with one or more arrows, as Shah Isma'il did, was considered an heroic exploit. Situations in which a hero cut a lion in two with a sword were depicted as the manifestation of exceptional strength. Heroes killed lions in many miniatures in this manner. In the *Shabnamā*, in the battle for the Iranian throne, Bahram Gur fought against lions with his ox-headed mace—the ritual weapon of Iranian kings handed down from their prehistoric predecessor Faridun. But a dagger as a weapon against a lion is found neither in Persian poetry nor in miniatures that precede the “hunting” velvet. So the lord of the hunt here cannot be specifically identified with any literary or historical hero.

Again we find a situation in which Siyavush Beg Gurji apparently introduced a new image into a traditional theme of Iranian art. Perhaps he based this on events that occurred at the Safavid court. Safavid chroniclers and historians paid attention to minor details concerning the royal hunt. If a similar situation took place involving the shah, prince or other courtier, it should have been recorded not only by the court historians, but also by poets, because such an exploit could very effectively support a portrait of the ideal monarch. However, except for the hunting feat of Shah Isma'il, other significant events related to wild lions are not found in Safavid history.

Meanwhile the velvet image of single combat with a lion is identical to images on several Safavid silk carpets. One of these carpets, unique in its size and composition,⁴⁷ dates back to the 1530s and was obviously made by order of Shah Tahmasb I.⁴⁸ In the main field there is a hunting scene, in which more than 140 human figures are depicted. One of the riders, the youth fighting against a lion, almost exactly matches the image woven on the velvet. However, on the carpet this person is not distinguished among the other hunters, because all of them wear *qizilbash* headgear and rich costumes. Another carpet with an identical but coarser image is considered to have been created under the influence of the first one.⁴⁹ Some other images on the velvet also have their prototypes in silk carpets. The same image of the lion slaying a gazelle is found on the silk

source, following an equally symbolic visit by Isma'il to the ruins of Ctesiphon; see Ibrahim Amini Haravi, *Futubat-i Amini*, ed. by Muhammad-Riza Nasiri (Tehran, 1383/2004), 306–308.

⁴⁶The British library, Or. 3248, f. 145. See also Eleanor Sims, “A Dispersed Late Safavid Copy of the *Tarīkh-i Jahāngushā-yi Khāqān Sāhibqirān*,” in *Safavid Art and Architecture*, ed. by Sheila R. Canby (London, 2002), fig. 10.3 (color pl. IV).

⁴⁷Vienna, Museum of Applied Arts, no. 8336/1922. See *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1191, 1192.

⁴⁸Walker, “Safavid Hunting Carpets and Textiles.”

⁴⁹Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, no. 66.293; see Thompson, “Early Safavid Carpets,” 286, fig. 12.12.

“animal” carpet, on which fights between real and fantastic beasts are depicted.⁵⁰ The stylistic relationship between carpets and velvets is often claimed by scholars. However this velvet is the only example of such literal coincidences in design. Meanwhile all the carpets in question belong to one group ascribed by stylistic evidence to the Kashan workshops of the 1530s–50s. So the carpets are not contemporaneous with the velvet. They were woven some decades earlier, and Siyavush Beg used the existing cartoons prepared by another painter or painters.

Bearing in mind the artistic mastery of Siyavush Beg, it is impossible to accept this fact simply as a sign of his dependence and lack of originality. We may suggest that it was a deliberate competition with masterpieces of carpet weaving. In collaboration with the *nagshband* he created a design similar to the carpets in the quantity and variety of images, but more precise in the drawing of minor details. Such a competition could take place only if the carpets and the velvet were designed for similar functions. The fine velvet with metallic threads would hardly be used on the floor. But we may suggest that the textile was created for the wall decoration of a luxurious tent, where the floor was obligatorily covered with carpets.⁵¹ The velvet should be equal in showiness to a neighboring carpet.

Using the images from earlier carpets, Siyavush Beg constructed a new semantic structure. An ordinary figure from the Vienna carpet turned into the main hero on the velvet. The artist used the group of the lion and gazelle in the same manner. What was the meaning enclosed in these two visual quotations? The lion was considered to be a very dangerous enemy against all kinds of weapons existing at that time. The victory in such combat of the man armed only with a dagger seemed incredible and needed the assistance of a supernatural force. Evidently the odds in such combat are not in man’s favor. He should die like a gazelle in the jaws of the lion. The death of the ordinary hunter depicted on both carpets shows the inconstancy of earthly fortune and emphasizes the greatness of the feats of the other participants in this hunt. However, it is hardly to be imagined that Siyavush Beg heightened the status of the figure with the sole purpose of intensifying the dramatic tension of the scene. The Safavid warrior on the velvet should slay the lion. For this purpose Siyavush introduced an original figure into his composition: the lion is doomed to death, because there is a hunter hidden behind the rock and his gun is aimed at the lion.

⁵⁰Gulbenkian Foundation, T. 100; see Thompson, “Early Safavid Carpets,” 292 and fig. 12.17.

⁵¹In the Inventory of the Russian tsar’s treasury there is a detailed description of such a tent (but of a later time) decorated in the interior with brocaded velvets with woven figural designs. In 1627 Shah ‘Abbas I sent it to Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich. See P. I. Savvaitinov, “Description of Ancient Tsars’ Utensils, Robes, Arms, Armors, Horse Harnesses and Saddles Extracted from Manuscripts of the Archive of the Moscow Armory Chamber; with Explanatory Index,” *Notes of the Imperial Archeological Society*, 11 (St Petersburg, 1865), 335–336 [in Russian].

Thus the images of the dragon-slayer and the hunt appear to be related not only in their style, but also in theme. Both subjects represent a battle between a poorly-armed man and an extremely strong beast. The whole structure of the velvet composition with the image of Hushang manifests the mystical predetermination of the outcome in the man's favor. The ancient deed provided the model for the events of the hunt. This mystical argument supported the real reason for the victory represented by the hidden marksman. So the image of Hushang's exploit looks like the extension of the "hunting" design, in a similar manner to the traditional medallion of a carpet with the depiction of a combat between Simurgh and Dragon. Such carpet medallions imparted the significance of the eternal struggle for perfection to the hunt as a kind of aristocratic entertainment.

It is known that curtains constituting the interiors of Safavid tents were sewn from velvets and had a similar composition to carpets: the upper corners were demarcated from a main field and decorated with textiles of another design.⁵² Probably the designs of both velvets were created specially to be combined in such decoration. In this case it may explain why Shah Hushang does not wear a Safavid *taj* on the velvet: it could confuse a spectator and distract his attention from the main hero of the hunt. Hushang became the metaphor of the universal essence of the Perfect Man. This literary model points to the macrocosmic sense of events, while the hunters accompanying the lord of the hunt represent events on the microcosmic level—various gradations of suppressing the passions of the human soul. The grounds of the velvets reflect the difference between the depicted levels of Existence: the scene of Hushang's exploit is placed on a golden ground, the hunt on a silver one.

The differences between the interpretations of Hushang's exploit on the lampas and the velvet can be understood in connection with the "hunting" velvet. The dramatic tension represented in the lampas design is absent from the velvet, because the needed firearms had already been received. The image of the hunter with a gun demonstrated that at the time Iran had been armed against the strong enemy and the victory should be won.

Firearms in the Safavid Army

The firearm was a rarity in Iran in the sixteenth century.⁵³ The most disastrous defeat in Safavid history at the battle of Chaldiran occurred in 1514 and was caused by the lack of guns and cannons in the Safavid forces. The first Safavids faced an acute shortage of firearms. Lacking their own firearms industry, they could acquire guns and cannons only from Europe, the way to which was blocked by Ottoman Turkey—the enemy of Iran. The Turks would never

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³See the remarks in Rudi Matthee, "Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran," in *Safavid Persia. The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. by Charles Melville, Pembroke Persian Papers, 4 (1996), esp. 391–393.

permit a transfer of military supplies to Iran. It is true that single examples of guns were brought to the Safavid court by the Europeans, but for substantial supplies it was necessary to be in direct contact with a provider. Iran had such a direct contact to the South with the Portuguese, who occupied Hormuz, and to the North with Russia, which had extended its borders to the Caspian Sea by the second half of the sixteenth century.

Safavid historians have said nothing about firearms received from “unbelievers” by Shah Isma‘il I or Tahmasb I. However, foreign observers witnessed that after the defeat at Chaldiran, Isma‘il managed to receive help from both neighbors.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the problem of weapons still remained during the reign of Tahmasb. He was forced again to appeal to his neighbors for help. According to the Carmelite chronicles, in 1548 the Portuguese supported the Safavid army with twenty canons and ten thousand soldiers.⁵⁵ Interestingly, the earliest Safavid image of a gun found by Walker is contemporaneous to that event. The image is introduced into the scene of royal hunting in the frontispiece of the *Silsilat al-Dhabab* manuscript copied in 1549.⁵⁶

The situation of firearms in the Safavid army changed decisively in about 1570. It is sufficient to compare two European accounts. The agent of the English Moscovie Company, Jeffrey Ducket, who visited the Safavid court in 1570, wrote:

The Shaugh, or King of Persia, is nothing in strength and power comparable unto the Turke; for although he hath a great dominion, yet is it nothing to be compared with the Turkes; neither hath hee any great ordinance, or gunnes, or harquebusses.⁵⁷

However in the following year 1571, the Venetian envoy Vincentio d’Alessandro witnessed that the Safavid army was armed with swords, lances and harquebuses,

which all the soldiers can use; their arms also are superior and better tempered than those of any other nation. The barrels of the arquebuses are generally six spans long, and carry a ball a little less than three ounces in weight. They [*qizil-bash*] use them with such facility, that it does not hinder them drawing their

⁵⁴See Yakub M. Mahmudov, *Relations of Aq Qoyunlu and Safavid States with Countries of Western Europe (Second Half of the Fifteenth–Beginning of the Seventeenth Century)* (Baku, 1991), 149 [in Russian]; Bushev, *History of Embassies*, 36.

⁵⁵*Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1939), 1: 29.

⁵⁶Russian National Library, Dorn 434, f. 1v. See Walker, “Safavid Hunting Carpets.”

⁵⁷“Further observations concerning the state of Persia, taken in the foresaid fifth voyage into those partes, and written by Master Jaffrey Ducket, one of the Agents employed in the same,” *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and other Englishmen* (London, 1886), 2: 434–435.

bows nor handling their swords, keeping the latter hung at their saddle-bows till occasion requires them. The arquebus then is put away behind the back, so that one weapon does not impede the use of another.⁵⁸

Probably such sudden progress was enabled by the supply of firearms from Russia mentioned in the report by Semen Maltsev already quoted. The same information is confirmed by the short account of the Polish diplomat Andrey Taranowski, who represented Poland at the Turkish court. Taranowski mentioned that in 1569 Ivan the Terrible sent the envoy Dolmet Karpovich to Tahmasb I. This envoy was followed by an embassy with gifts: 30 canons of various calibers and 4,000 muskets with 500 “good riflemen,” whose mission was to teach the Safavid soldiers the skill of shooting. If the Shah liked the canons and riflemen, the Russian tsar promised to sell to Iran all kind of firearms, which he would be able to obtain from Western Europe. Shah Tahmasb was very satisfied with the embassy and gifts and said that “if he would obtain such help in the future he should be able himself to unsaddle his horse in Constantinople.”⁵⁹

The numbers recorded by Andrey Taranowski differ from the information provided by Semen Maltsev. The question must be raised whether both these accounts are generally trustworthy. By telling of the approach of a large Russian army and the possible aggression of the Iranians now armed with guns and canons, the Russian diplomat aimed to intimidate the Turks, who were besieging Astrakhan, so the information about the firearms sent to Iran could be false. Taranowski had not visited Iran, but referred to Semen Maltsev as a trustworthy source of information about Russian–Iranian relations. However, the embassy of A. Khoznikov to Iran did exist, because his credentials given on 14 May 1569 were registered in the List of Titles of the Moscow Ambassadorial Office.⁶⁰ Most probably the same embassy was mentioned by the French attaché in Constantinople, who informed Charles IX in a letter of 14 March 1569: “They [the Turks] received the news that the Moscovites had sent an embassy to the king of Persia with three or four hundred horsemen.”⁶¹

Conclusions

The production of the velvets coincided with the sudden growth in the quantity of firearms in Iran around 1570. Although there is no direct evidence that the

⁵⁸ Vincentio d’Alessandri, “Narrative of the Most Noble Vincento d’Alessandri,” in *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia* (New York, 1873), 227.

⁵⁹ Andrey Taranowski, “Krótkie wypisanie drogi z Polski do Konstantynopola, a z tamąd za do Astrachania zamku moskiewskiego,” in *Podróże i poselstwa polskie do Turcji*, ed. by I. Kraszewski (Krakow, 1860), 62–63 [in Polish].

⁶⁰ Nikolay M. Karamzin, *History of Russian State*, III (St Petersburg, 1845), 9: 52, note 256 [in Russian].

⁶¹ E. Charrière, *Négociations de la France dans le Levant* (Paris, 1853), 3: 58.

velvets were related to the supply of firearms mentioned, a tent with such a decoration may have proclaimed the acquisition of firearms from Russia and symbolically finalized the story of the embassy, which began with the *khil'at* sewn of lampas with a similar pattern.

It is likely that the velvets did not find their way to Turkey purely randomly. Shah Tahmasb aimed every effort to keep the peace made in Amasya at 1555. For this purpose Iranian embassies with gifts were regularly dispatched to Turkey. The main mission of such embassies was to confirm the conditions of the peace treaty. Probably the luxurious tent made of velvets was sent to the Ottoman court to display the military power of Safavids. By informing his dangerous neighbor about the firearms in the Iranian arsenal, Shah Tahmasb hoped to restrain him from invading Iran. For example, the tent could have been sent to Turkey with the embassy of 1575, caused by the death of Selim II and accession of Murad III. Among the gifts given by the Sultan in response were also tents and precious textiles.⁶²

We may suggest that the textiles with depictions of Hushang's exploit against the dragon became closely associated with the diplomatic success of Shah Tahmasb and the supply of western firearms to Iran. Souvenirs of these events still existed in the early seventeenth century, when 'Abbas I dispatched the embassy of Robert Sherley to Europe with a similar mission. This Englishman was known for his ideas of re-equipping the Iranian army and organizing the production of firearms and gunpowder in Iran with the help of European masters invited to the country.⁶³ One should not think it is by chance that on the canvas of an unknown English painter the ambassador is portrayed wearing a *khil'at* with the image of Hushang's exploit identical to the design of the velvet discussed here.⁶⁴ On the companion portrait the wife of Robert Sherley—Teresa—is represented holding a pistol. These portraits show the play of meanings between East and West. Robert, the Englishman wearing the oriental costume, and his wife, the Circassian woman in the European dress, represent the same message. He uses parables and allusions, traditional for Iranian culture, enclosed in the pattern of his ritual costume, while she “translates” them into the language of the Europeans. So the veiled message implied in the image of Hushang is embodied in the real pistol held by Teresa. The *khil'at* of 'Abbas's ambassador provides evidence that the illustrations of this *Shahnama* episode became an integral part of the diplomatic arguments inherited by Shah 'Abbas I from his ancestors.

⁶²Rumlu, trans. Seddon, *A Chronicle of the Early Safawis*, 2: 206.

⁶³Edward D. Ross, *Sir Anthony Sherley and his Persian Adventure* (London, 1933); Sheila R. Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: the Remaking of Iran* (London, 2009), 58.

⁶⁴Canby, *Shah 'Abbas*, 56–57, cat. 15–16 (Trustees of Berkeley Will Trust); see also p. 59, cat. 18.

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