

Safavid Art and Architecture

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Safavid caravanserais

Wolfram Kleiss

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the dynasty of the Safavids united Iran under Shah Ismā'īl I (1501–24) and Shah Ṭahmāsp I (1524–76). With Shah 'Abbās I (1587–1629) Safavid Persia reached its political and economic culmination, but it was a relatively short zenith. Under the regime of his successor, Ṣafī I, the gradual decline began and brought, a hundred years later in 1722, the fall of the Safavid imperium under Shah Ḥusayn, with the conquest of Isfahan by the Afghans.

As a result of Shah 'Abbās the Great's conquests of Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala in 1623, the occupation of Georgia and, mainly, the taking over of the Portuguese sea-fortress of Hurmuz in 1622, the main roads in all parts of Persia up to Uzbekistan, but especially in the centre of the Safavid kingdom, were completed and partly paved, and caravanserais and bridges were erected.

Safavid Persia was, as it is today, a very important connecting link in intercontinental traffic. The so-called 'silk-road' crossed the country with at least one route and therefore Shah 'Abbās – for economic and military reasons – ordered a dense net of roads with numerous caravanserais. In the seventeenth century these buildings were made known in Europe by embassies and travellers like Adam Olearius¹ and Engelbert Kaempfer.²

The Safavids mostly completed already existing – sometimes prehistoric – routes, for instance the middle, short trail between Tehran and Qum with the caravanserais Ṣadrābād and Hauz-e Sulṭān.³ This route was used from the time of the building of the fortified city of Tehran under Shah Ṭahmāsp and superseded the former connection between Varamin and Qum with the caravanserais of Daihr and Kaj. After the formation of the salt-lake north of Qum in the nineteenth century, the Safavid road had to be given up and a new tract of road had

to be built, with the caravanserais of Alīābād and Manzarīya.

The direct caravan route between Isfahan and the Safavid summer residences at the shore of the Caspian Sea is a new connection built by Shah 'Abbās, with caravan buildings and the paved dam-road, the 'Rāh Sang Farsh' across the muddy Dasht-i Kavīr, the salt-desert.⁴

This road leads to Farahabad and the other Safavid castles at the Caspian Sea. In Farahabad extant ruins of the castle and the royal mosque are preserved. 'Ain-i Rashīd is a caravanserai, obviously unfinished because it sank into the muddy ground during the building process, near the castle and caravanserai of 'Abbāsābād/Sīāhkūh.⁵

At the Safavid highroad between Semnan and Damghan, near the pass of Ahuan, the old Seljuq *ribaṭ* Anīshirvānī was replaced by the Safavid caravanserai Ahuan, which is located opposite to the old *ribaṭ*. This corresponds to the Persian practice not to reuse and rebuild older buildings, but to construct a new one at the site of the older one.⁶ In western Iran, in Bisutun, on the road between Ramadan and Kirmanshah, an older building of Shah 'Abbās I was replaced by a bigger Safavid caravanserai in 1681–5, according to a building inscription from the time of Shah Sulaymān Ṣafavī.⁷

In the great caravanserai of Daihr, a Seljuq fortress south of Varamin, the architecture around the courtyard and the inner parts of the complex were renewed during the Safavid period. But this is a rare exception in the history of Iranian architecture.⁸ The normal and most widespread form of the Persian caravanserai is the courtyard-caravanserai, with four *ivāns* open to the courtyard, with stables on the backside of the building and with an accentuated portal at the entrance (see plan A). In their architecture these portals are the imitation of an

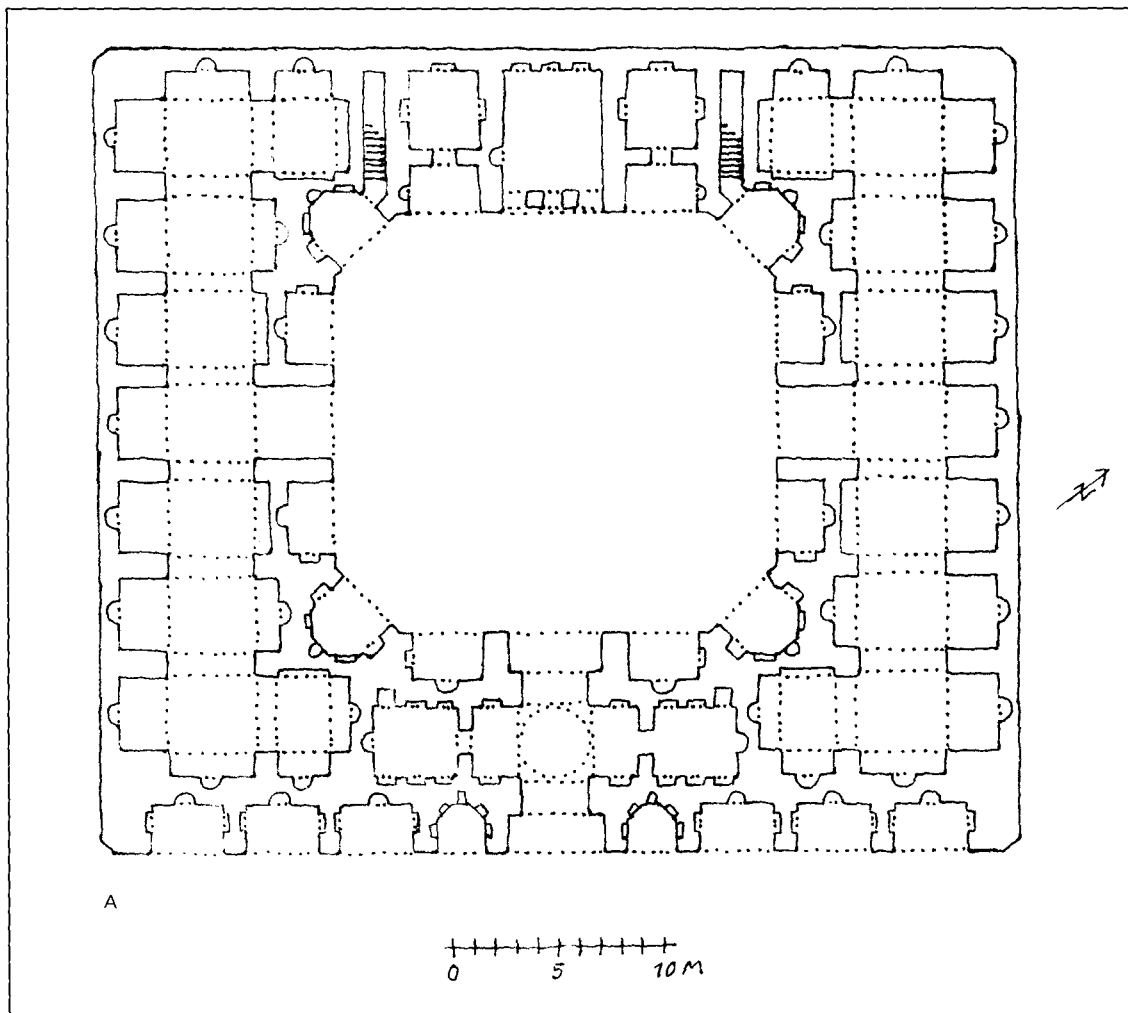
antique Roman triumphal arch and of Parthian arches. This motif was developing through the Sasanian and Islamic times in the Iranian cultural milieu and was used on *ivān*-architecture of mosques, madrasas and caravanserais.

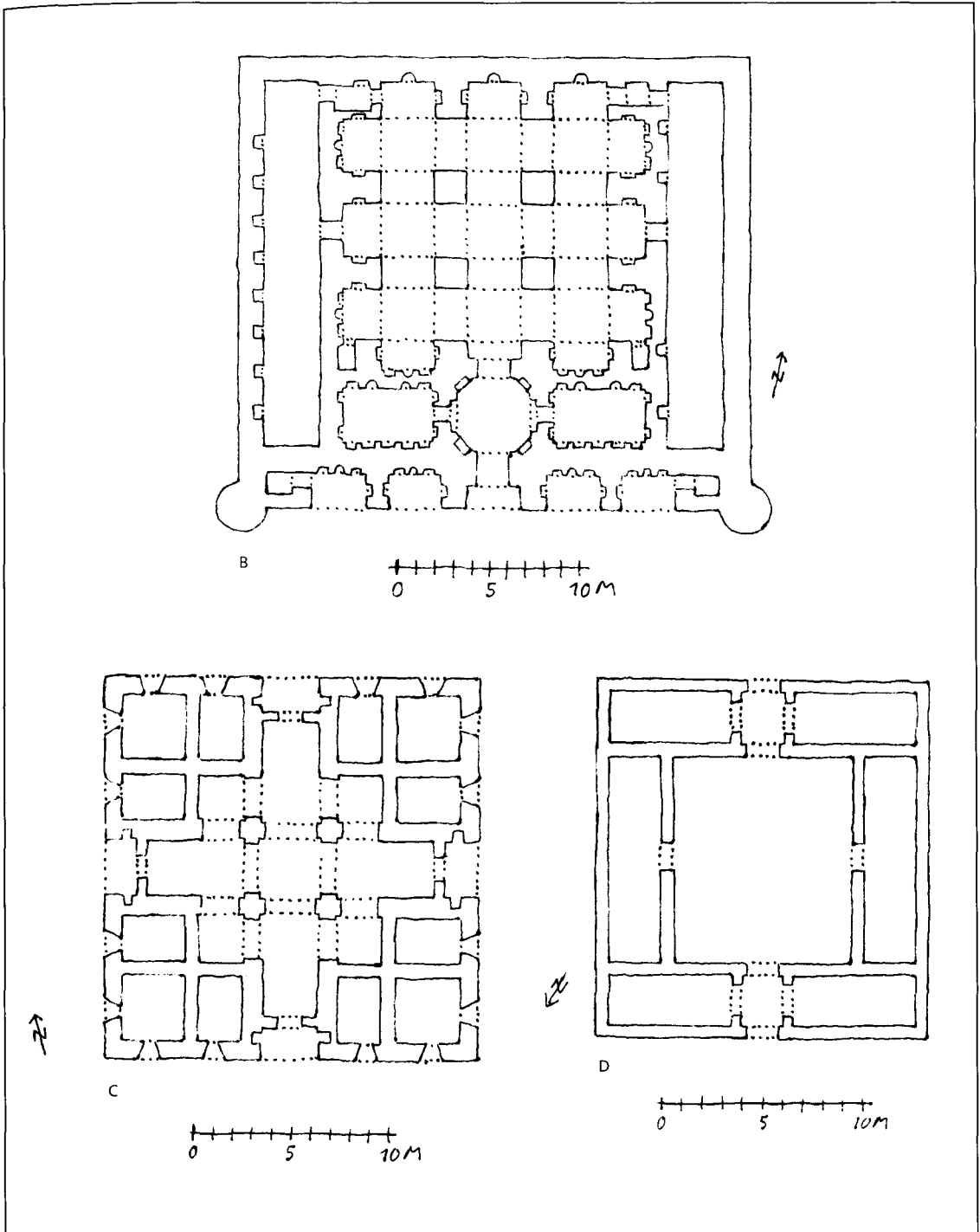
The type of mountain caravanserai (see plan B) completely covered by vaults and domes is located on passes but also in desert districts in Khurasan and Asia. These buildings give protection against avalanches and sudden cold. A good example of this building type is Gaduk, near Firuzkuh; it is the biggest of its type in Iran.⁹ Gaduk is a Safavid building. Rabaṭ Chanbar Qarbal on the old route from Gurgan to Mashhad is a completely covered cara-

vanserai built in Qajar times, but in the building tradition of Safavid architecture.¹⁰

Smaller caravan buildings, completely covered by vaultings in two naves, like Bastak in the Lar valley, north of Tehran at the mountain-crossing road to the Caspian Sea, have slightly raised niches for the caravan personnel. The extent of such buildings depended on the volume of the traffic on this tract of road.¹¹

The type of pavilion caravanserai (see plan C) of Safavid times is limited to the Persian Gulf region, on the roads from Bandar 'Abbās to Sirjan, to Lar and to Bandar Lengeh. This pavilion type, always combined with a neighbouring cistern (*ābānbar*), is





Ground plans of Safavid caravanserais.

open to all sides, so that the cooling winds can reach all parts of the building. Fortifications were not necessary in then peaceful Persia. Such an example is Mukh Ahmad, west of Bandar 'Abbas and its new harbour (fig. 5.1 on colour plate 11).

Besides the simple outer square plan with an inscribed cross with four rooms in the corners of the building, larger cruciform groundplans were developed in Junguin (fig 5.2). Additionally, oblong buildings, as in Tang-e Dokan (fig 5.3), with accentuated vertical domed central sections of the cross-plan, had been developed. The square building type was enlarged to a groundplan of several rooms, as in Taki Khāna on the road from Bandar 'Abbas to Lar, and to difficult constructions of columned halls with rooms at the four corners, which proved unable to withstand earthquakes, like the caravanserai Hasham on the Persian Gulf coast between Bandar 'Abbas and Bandar Lengeh.¹²

Building material in the mountainous regions and at the coast of the Persian Gulf was rubblestone with mortar. The inner and outer walls and the stalactites of the central domes were plastered with mortar, as still can be seen in the caravanserai Junguin, on the road from Bandar 'Abbas to Lar. Along caravan routes with less traffic in the Gulf region, small buildings with only one room or small-scale courtyard-caravanserais (see plan D), for instance Senaket near Bastak, were erected at lesser distances, between 5 and 10 km, whereas the normal distance between bigger caravanserais in the desert regions is 35 to 40 km. Sometimes this type of caravanserai has two opposite entrances and six stables around the courtyard.

Octagonal courtyard-caravanserais are rare in Iran, and only half a dozen buildings are known. The arrangement of rooms and stables in octagonal caravan buildings is similar to the square courtyard-caravanserai. Rooms for the travellers open with small entrance-rooms or niches to the courtyard and behind the living-rooms are the stables, with entrances direct from the courtyard. Such an example was drawn by Engelbert Kaempfer in the seventeenth century; it is the Aminabad, still preserved south of Isfahan (fig 5.4).

A very unusual form is that of the round caravanserai, with as many as twelve or sixteen sides to the courtyard, like the Safavid example of Zayn al-Dīn on the road from Yazd to Kirman,¹³ and

Zizeh, south of Kashan.¹⁴ These two buildings represent the high point of Safavid architecture and construction.

An example of Safavid town-caravanserais and one of the last buildings of the Safavid period is the caravanserai of the complex of Madrasa Madār-i Shāh, built, together with a bazaar-road, in Isfahan between 1706 and 1714. This building, with only a few changes in its structure, is today the well-known Hotel 'Abbāsī.¹⁵ Such a function would be a good solution for some other important caravanserai ruins in Iran.

Safavid caravanserais usually have no fortification towers at the corners and between them, because there was no need for security measures in peaceful Persia during the Safavid rule. Nevertheless, some of the bigger caravanserais of Safavid times – especially royal foundations – have such towers, not for fortification, but to show royal dignity. In Daihr the fortress-like outer front was preserved and only the inner architecture around the courtyard was built up in the Safavid manner. The caravanserai of Daihr has a bath-complex, an isolated small courtyard, rooms for high officials and a prayer-room.

Stone was used as a building material in mountainous regions, as in Tang-e Zanjan between Shiraz and Firuzabad,¹⁶ and mud-brick and, more often, baked-brick was used in the desert regions of Central Iran. In Safavid times baked bricks measured 21–21.5 cm, as in the inner parts of the caravanserai of Daihr. Bricks were mostly baked beside the building and were made of local material; only the wood had to be brought to the building place for burning. Cisterns were sometimes situated in the middle of the courtyard, sometimes under the building itself, but mostly outside, in front of the caravanserai. Sometimes the front of the cistern staircase had a richly shaped facade, as in Mehr on the Khurasan road west of Sabzivar (fig 5.5).¹⁷

The stables of Safavid caravanserais, for example, at Jaukand (fig 5.6) between Ardistan and Na'in, are mostly wide, vaulted, well proportioned halls with skylights in the vaults and with slightly raised niches on the sides for the personnel of the caravans. These niches had chimneys for warmth and for preparing meals. Large caravanserais, such as Mayar on the road from Isfahan to Shiraz,¹⁸ sometimes have vaulted streets on both sides of the

entrance with shops for food and other caravan necessities.

Caravanserais completely built in stone, like the Seljuq caravanserais in Anatolia, do not exist in Iran. But in Safavid and Qajar times rubble-stone walls were faced with thin stone plates, as can be seen in the partly preserved caravanserai at Miankotal, on the pass-road from Shiraz to Kazarun and Bushihr. Stones, cut in a special form, were put into small niches to fasten the caravan animals, and are still preserved in Kirmanshahan, between Yazd and Kirman.

The technique of vaulting with baked bricks in Safavid times was highly developed and the decorative forms of the vaults are based purely on the static and construction principles of the building, for instance in Miandasht on the Khurasan road between Shahrud and Sabzivar,¹⁹ and also in Gaz, north of Isfahan.²⁰ Here the vaulting of the entrance portal recalls Safavid *ivān*-vaultings in Isfahan. Stalactites made from stucco in small niches or in large portal-vaultings were constructed in the Timurid tradition and do not have a structural function. They are often fastened by wooden beams and wire to the underlying vaulting, in a similar way to baroque stucco constructions in Europe.

In Iran, from ancient times until the Qajar era, buildings were constructed without foundations dug into the earth and without any protection against rising damp. This practice resulted in salt infiltration to the inner parts of the walls, which destroyed the mortar and sometimes the bricks, and led to the gradual ruin and collapse of the buildings, as is visible in the lower parts of the walls at Daihr.

During the Safavid period caravan roads were completed in sections as necessary, mainly in passes and on muddy ground. These roads were repaired and completed in Qajar times, until modern traffic required modern constructions. The paved and stepped road on the pass between Shiraz and Kazarun (Gardaneh-ye Pir-e Zan and Gardaneh-ye Dukhtar) is well known. There are also paved roads in muddy terrain near Mokh Ahmad, west of Bandar 'Abbas in the direction of Lar, and the famous paved dam-road through the Dasht-i Kavir (Rāh Sang Farsh) between 'Abbāsābād/Siāhkūh and Garmsar, a part of the 'royal road' between Isfahan and Farahabad near the Caspian Sea.

Some important bridges crossing the main rivers

of Iran have rooms for travellers built into the bridge, beside the main arches, as for example in the Pul-e Anbī,²¹ crossing the Shahrud on the caravan-road between Qazvin and Langarud at the Caspian shore, and the southern bridge of the Rāh Sang Farsh,²² not far from 'Abbāsābād/Siāhkūh. In the piers of the bridge of Khayrabad at Khuzistan,²³ on the road from Shiraz to Ahvaz, are rooms which are above even extreme high water and which can be reached by staircases.

The architecture and construction systems of Safavid times continued in Qajar times in the nineteenth century. The construction of caravanserais ends with the development of modern automotive traffic. During Safavid times a great number of excellent examples of caravanserais were built in Iran, some of which are well preserved, but the majority today are in hopelessly bad condition.

NOTES

- 1 Olearius 1656/1971.
- 2 Kaempfer/Hinz 1728/1940.
- 3 Kleiss 1997, Abb. 3.
- 4 Kleiss 1997, 12, Abb. 8.
- 5 Kleiss 1997, 79 f.
- 6 Kleiss 1997, 12, Abb. 7.
- 7 Kleiss 1996, 83 f.
- 8 Kleiss 1996, 136 f.
- 9 Kleiss 1996, 114 f.
- 10 Kleiss in print.
- 11 Kleiss 1996, 108 f.
- 12 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 345.
- 13 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 177.
- 14 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 72.
- 15 Wurfel 1974, 166 f.
- 16 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 217.
- 17 Cistern is not yet published (fig. 5.5).
- 18 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 129.
- 19 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 398.
- 20 Kleiss/Kiani 1995, 112.
- 21 Kleiss 1985, 205 f.
- 22 Kleiss 1986, 318 f.
- 23 Kleiss 1995/96, 358 f.