

The Royal Residence of 'Abbâsâbâd In Mâzanderân

The "Pleasure Corner" Of Shâh 'Abbas I

Jean-Dominique Brignoli
PhD in Art History and
Archeology, University of
Provence, France.
jdobrignoli@gmail.com

Abstract | Among Shâh 'Abbâs I's palaces in Mâzanderân, the 'Abbâsâbâd estate is outstanding by its original features: it linked an informal garden, the elements of which are loosely assembled around an artificial lake to a formal space, on higher grounds, with a geometrical outlay, more common in the art of Persian gardens. The coexistence of these juxtaposed parts and the close relation of the residence with the surrounding forest, the lack of outside walls customary in Persian gardens, hint at an original relation of some Safavid gardens with the natural landscape i.e. a will to "reproduce" or "preserve" nature in its wilder aspects, with the intent, not of building a great Royal garden, but rather, a simple hunting residence: a gusheh-ye 'eysh-e shâh, a "pleasure corner for the king".

Keywords | Abbâsâbâd garden, Safavid gardens, Persian garden, Formal garden, Informal garden.

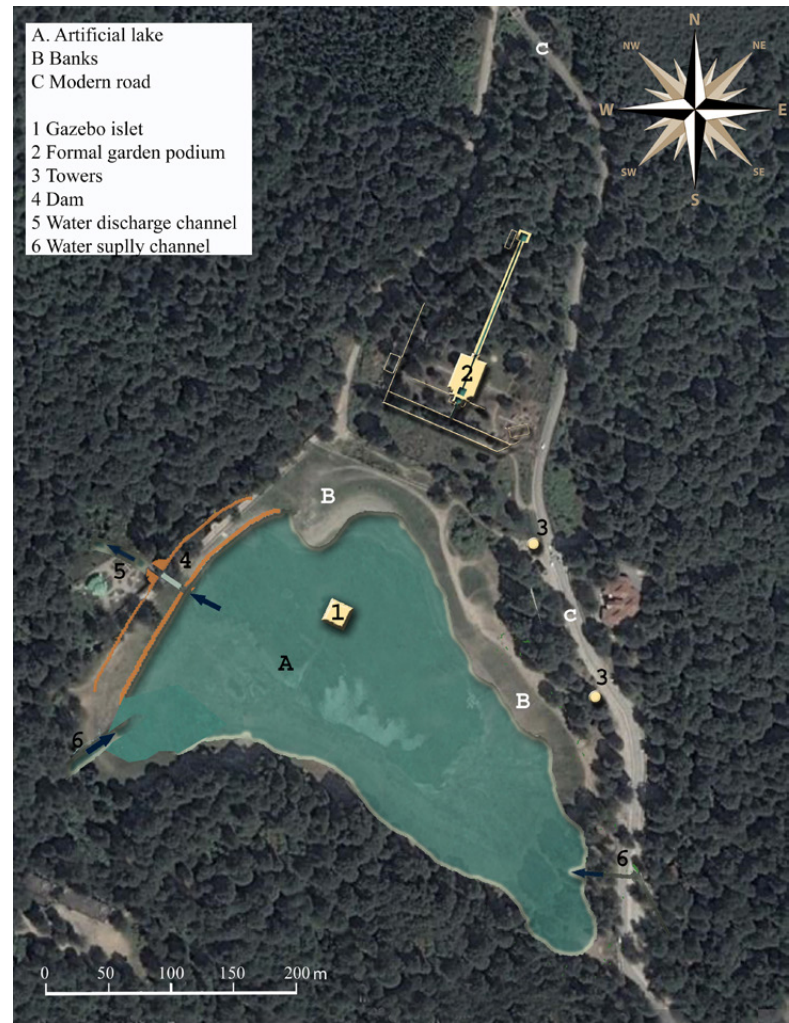
Introduction | Although Shâh 'Abbâs I (1587-1629/995-1038 H.) moved the royal seat to Isfahan, circa 1590-1597/998-1006 H., it was not his sole residence. Other royal residences in Mâzanderân hosted the sovereign for longer periods than the capital. Indeed, after his last winter in Isfahan in 1609/1017 H. (Eskandar Monshi, 1915: 776-781) 'Abbâs only stayed there for five short periods (Idem: 861-862, 886-887, 948-950, 957-958, 1012-1013) over the last 17 years of his life. He spent most of his remaining years in Mâzanderân, until his death in Farahâbâd on 21 January 1629 Jumâdi al-Awwal 26 1038 H. The work on the Royal residences in Mâzanderân began in 1611-1612/1020-1021 H. (Idem: 849-851, 855-856). 'Abbâs I's interest for Mâzanderân can be understood in many ways. Pietro Della Valle mentions the Shah's sentimental attachment to his mother's birthplace (Della Valle, 1684: 240). But more practical reasons might have prevailed; the region is still a resort appreciated by Iranians. Lodged between the Caspian Sea to the north and the Alborz mountains to the south, Mâzanderân benefits from this particular position in Iran. Humidity from the Caspian yields regular rainfall. This climate favoured large forests along the Alborz foothills and the emergence of a rich agriculture in the coastal plains. In 'Abbâs's time, the region was known to be rich in game (Idem: 260, 377; Herbert, 1663: 274). These reasons were foremost in the king's choice.

There is, however, a fundamental opposition between these different residences in Mâzanderân. While the better known palaces of Farahâbâd (Eskandar Monshi, 1915: 945; Della Valle, 1684: 239-250; Alemi, 1994: 205-210) and Ashraf (Eskandar Monshi, 1915: 855-856; Della Valle, 1684: 293-294, 297-299, 313, 349-352; Alemi, 1994: 205-210; Porter, 1996: 117-138) had been developed with an urban project (Brignoli, 2009: 618-683) 'Abbâsâbâd was only designed to be a summer and hunting residence, not far from an urban center, but isolated in the forest.

The 'Abbâsâbâd Lake: informal part

'Abbâsâbâd is located some 8 to 9 km from Ashraf-Behshahr in a wooded region at an altitude of 400 m. Designed like a hunting lodge, it has a very loose plan quite unusual in the Safavid palatial architecture (Idem: 687-693).

Today the main access to 'Abbâsâbâd is a road winding through the forest from Altappeh located in the plain. If this road follows the ancient safavid road, we can imagine that at the time, access to the residence was already gained through its northeastern corner. From there, we travel along the backbone and main motive of the palace: its artificial lake. This lake is a meltwater reservoir contained by a brick wall (20 m wide at its base, 7 m at the top, 10 m long and 10 m high), forming a dam, in the northwest, and by which the overflow is evacuated, irrigating the towns of Altappeh and Saru, in the plain. The lake, with a capacity of 600,000 m³, is triangular with a circumference of approximately 1200 m. The two channels that feed the lake get their water from two springs respectively 3.5



Pic 3: Source of water supply of garden in Golconda citadel.
Photo: Ali Akbar Husain.

km to the southeast, and 2 km to the south-west, Sarcheshmeh and Quricheshmeh. A system of underground ceramic pipes (tanbusheh) – discovered in 2003-2007 during excavations under the supervision of Abdolvahab Moosavi Nasab (WHC, 2011: 202-206) – supplied a reservoir 300 m to the southeast of the lake, in what seems to have been a first small formal garden on an artificial terrace of 46 m x 72 m (Idem: 202).

In the middle of the lake (slightly off-centered to the northeast) there is a square brick islet where a wooden gazebo once stood (Pic. 1). This islet was only accessible by boat or – such as in Barfurush, another Mâzanderâni residence (Brignoli, 2009: 686-687) or, later, in 1704-1722, in Farahâbâd of Isfahan under Shâh Hoseyn (Brignoli, 2007) – by a wooden bridge, of which some pillars still remain to the north (WHC, 2011: 209). There is nothing left of the gazebo but a small pool and a nozzle supplied by a piping from the southwest tank. The islet (approximately 14m x 18m) has on either side, two rectangular frames each housing an arc opening on half submerged iwân see-through. It seems that the islet, apart from its function of pleasure, also had a system of valves and pipes in the piers



Pic 2: Pavilions on hills overlooking gardens.
Photo: Ali Akbar Husain.

which could be used to divert a portion of the overflow at the times of high water and evacuate it some 200m below the dam (Idem: 210-211).

Thomas Herbert, who saw the palace in 1627, and said it was one of the finest of the Shah, focuses essentially on the site's qualities; its waters and baths, its views and its forests full of game (Herbert, 1663: 274). His description, however, does not mention any building worthy of description – except for the decorative paintings which are barely mentioned – no doubt, because of unobtrusive buildings.

Nevertheless, the site also has two towers on the northeast bank. These brick towers, 7m diameter, 10m high for one and 14m high for the other, have no windows and their doors were sealed in 1988-1989. Inside, a spiral staircase gives access to the top, and a pool. Indeed, a pipeline supplies water to the pool. Like in a number of Safavid gardens, these towers are not elements of defense and surveillance, but conceal usual functions². In

'Abbâsâbâd, the towers appear to have mainly played the role of discharge tanks in order, first to relieve the pressure in the pipes of the site by a system of valves and secondly, for the north tower, to serve as a water tower to maintain pressure in the garden fountains (WHC, 2011: 213-214). The total absence of remains or foundations seems to exclude the possibility that there was an enclosure connecting the towers.

However, even though these towers did not play a defensive role, their shape reveals an interesting fossilization of a very ancient dissuasive structure and very anciently petrified, in 8th century under the Umayyad dynasty (Pic. 2). So, here, the palace area was not surrounded by walls, as is usually the case, but it would have been only "psychologically" separated from the forest by the presence of these towers, visual incarnations of entrance to the Royal area. But this particular layout might also reflect an intimate relationship between the site and the surrounding nature, as discussed below.

The 'Abbâsâbâd terraces: formal part

To this relatively informal and "picturesque" part of the palace, is added a more formal part. Indeed, near the northeast corner of the lake, two rubble walls support the soil of a hill on which some structures take place. A 160 sqm brick building, at the northern end, is situated outside the terrace and 5 meters lower (Pic. 3). It is in a poor condition but still has small rooms, a high ground floor raised by brick pillars, a pool, tile pipes embedded in the masonry and the beginning of a vaulting. The high ground floor seems to be the trace of a hypocaust. These were indeed the baths mentioned by Herbert, composed of a cloakroom (sarbineh), an access corridor (miandar), a hot room (garmkhâneh) and rooms for boilers equipped with flue and water pipes (Idem: 207).

On the terraced grounds at the southern end, a larger ruined building shows an aspect which does not allow its identification. In the center of the terraced grounds a channel which forms the central motif of this part of the palace runs along a large southwest/northeast axis. In the southwest, facing the lake islet, a rubble work large podium supports two basins. These basins are clearly not interconnected by a channel. This lack of visible link between them is interesting, because from these basins the two major and opposite directions of the major axis are exposed. One is directed towards the lake, to the southwest, and the other turns its back to the lake and runs northeast (Pic. 4).

The first direction points to the extremity of the palace overlooking the lake (Pic. 5). One of the pools, the smaller one, which is on an advanced part of the podium, is connected to a little brick cascade flanked on either side by brick stairways. Water fell into a stone basin, at the foot of the podium, and then continued by a short canal to the retaining stone wall where it abruptly ended in another small basin. Facing the islet, this direction provided an ideal "point of view" of the lake and surrounding forests. Herringbone brick paved



Pic 3: Source of water supply of garden in Golconda citadel.
Photo: Ali Akbar Husain.

rooms with brick pillars were seated on either side of the little cascade at the foot of the podium. They must have been open loggia, to enjoy the view.

The second direction, facing away from the lake, points through the interior of the terraced grounds. Indeed the second basin of the podium, the largest one, feeds water into a stone channel running northeast. The channel runs across the podium and exits down a little cascade surrounded by two four step staircases. The water fell into a small basin where we can still see a square fountain mouth. The channel stops there for a moment, but the axis continues along a wide alley. A few meters further, a new drop is marked by a stone staircase which takes up the whole width of the path. At the foot of the staircase, there remains the trace of an intertwined polygonal brick and rubble pavement. Still further, the path drops again with two side ramps framing a new small pool. At this pond, the channel reappears and continues northeast turning into a brick channel. It carries on for a long distance, and finishes in a large and deep brick basin, closing the perspective (Pic. 6). On the northwest side of that basin, a long, low rubbled podium bears the remains of a ruined building. The location of this building leads us to imagine that it had a close connection with the basin. This whole northeast perspective is shaded by trees. Although quite young, such plantations may have existed at the time of the palace. A garden, certainly of formal type, with flowerbeds and regular plantations, modeled according to the gardens of Ashraf or Bâgh-e Fin in Kâshân, most likely existed on both sides of the channel.

The *gusheh-ye 'eysh-e shâh* ; the "pleasure corner of the shah"

The existence of these ruins, showing a residence with a "formal" layout alongside the "informal" garden, which is to say, the lake, is very interesting. Indeed, situated too far

from the great royal roads, the residence could not be used as kingship seat for long periods. As opposed to the Palaces of Farahâbâd and Ashraf, 'Abbâsâbâd was probably not intended to accommodate the Shah for any time longer than a hunt. This relationship to hunting and "bucolic" activities was probably the key to the particular organization of the site. The lake, nestled in lush forests, with its relaxing gazebo islet, was a privileged setting for contact with nature. As Mahvash Alemi noted, the relationship that the Safavid Shah gardens had with nature is probably much stronger than thought until now (Alemi, 2007: 119-125).

A passage of Jalâl al-Din, a historian of Shâh 'Abbâs, mentions a hunt near Lanjan (Isfahan province) during which the king, wandering along a lake landscape, ordered the building of loggias (*iwân*) and a small bamboo lodge on the brink of a pond to shoot waterbirds (Jalâl al-Din Munajjim Yazdi, 1987: 353-354). A park referred to as *gusheh-ye 'eysh-e shâh*, literally "the pleasure corner of the shâh" was created in 1608/1017 H. The pond was converted into a rectangular pool with a bascule bridge so that the hut could be isolated. The banks were embellished with lilies, marigolds, violets, common carnations and oat so that the surroundings remained ever green. Plane trees were also planted. Finally a moat lined with bamboo was built to prevent wild animals from entering. But this royal "corner" is a plot of nature landscaped and planted; only separated from the surrounding country by a moat. This almost immediate contact with the wilderness is very different from what we usually imagine about Persian gardens. There follows the idea that a natural site could be simply developed, and that the buildings could be of a monumental kind such as the *iwân* but also a more humble kind made of light materials such as bamboo huts. In addition, and this is a crucial point, no wall was built to delineate space. A moat was enough to mark the boundary of the royal "corner". This simple moat seems like



Pic 6: Shower Pavilion at Kumatgi, Bijapur.
Photo: Antonio Martinelli.

an echo of the 'Abbāsābād towers that were sufficient to visually mark the royal space. The absence of a wall here would be an indication of a will not to break the relationship with the forest. 'Abbāsābād presents the characteristics of a gusheh-ye 'eysh-e shāh offering a partially recreated nature, but leaving a large part to its wilderness. However, the existence of the formal part of the palace seems to bring a counterpoint to this "nature". Indeed, aligned on the southwest/northeast axis, facing the landscape of the site, stands this terraced ground, a podium bearing cascades and pools and various living quarters. The very rigid axis of the two channels (southwest and northeast) is opposed to the irregular shape of the lake. Significantly, one of the two channels forms a perspective, or rather a lake point of view, and the other channel turns its back to it and develops its own perspective on the sloping grounds. This disposition is

Conclusion | Thus, 'Abbāsābād gives us a glimpse into a little-known aspect of the art of the Safavid gardens: very close to the formal gardens of the large residences, natural or semi-natural areas could be rearranged to create a gusheh-ye 'eysh-e shāh. The creation of the artificial lake in 'Abbāsābād nevertheless also clearly shows the limits of this "wilderness"; it was particularly a search for picturesque and an idea of nature such as shown in the paintings in books, that is to say,



Pic 6: Shower Pavilion at Kumatgi, Bijapur.
Photo: Antonio Martinelli.

certainly the result of an erudite and mannerist reflection on the organization of royal space. In itself all the formal part of the palace opposes its rigorous geometry to the picturesque, whimsical, opening of the lake onto natural landscape. Furthermore, this formal part features two axes which are perhaps two ways of seeing it: one, almost a balcony, opening onto nature – or an imitation of that nature – and the other onto a formal garden. This opposition, which may be found again later in Farahābād Palace in Isfahan under the reign of Shāh Hoseyn (Brignoli, 2007: 139-155), is probably as much a will of confrontation than a will of juxtaposition. To a lakeside fantasy we add a rigorous plan; to the whimsicality of apparent natural disorder, we oppose a formal palace.

Hence, this taste for the picturesque of the Safavids was probably much stronger and much more conscious than we think. It should be noted that with the exception of the possible presence of a masoned podium, a straight channel and a geometrical pool, the Persian paintings of gardens found in books, with their scattered trees, rock gardens and streams meandering between plants, are generally similar to representations of wild nature³. In this regard, the paintings of Mājnun in the desert, iconic images of wandering in the wilderness, are representative of this trend in that they show little differences with representations of gardens⁴. In paintings, gardens seem to favor this confusion which could be an echo of the ambiguity of some real gardens. 'Abbāsābād suggests that this ambiguity was in no way the result of chance, but juxtaposed and knowingly sought alternatives.

not of nature itself, but a benevolent reflection upon it.

This example, adding to a few others, such as the gardens of Bārfurush or those of Farahābād under Shāh Hoseyn, suggests that, far from conforming to the sole model of the four part geometrical garden, the Safavid gardens offered a profusion of forms with multiple variations, the different concepts of which are just beginning to be understood.



Pic 6: Shower Pavilion at Kumatgi, Bijapur.
Photo: Antonio Martinelli.

Endnotes

1. گوشه عیش شاه
2. Frequently dovecots, on the perimeter walls of the gardens, as can be seen again in Isfahan, sole vestige of the Hezâr-Jârib palace built by 'Abbâs I (Brignoli, 531-528 :2009).
3. For instance, in the Khamseh of Shâh Tahmâsp, kept in the British Library, The Khosrow portrait drawn by Shapur and showed at Shirin (Or.2265, fol. 48v), attributed in the margin to Mirzâ Ali (1539-1524)

; or, in the Shâhnâmeh of Shâh Tahmâsp, Haftvâd daughter spins cotton thanks to worm coming out of an apple (inv. 199), signed Dust Mohammad, kept in Agah Khan Trust for Culture.

4. For instance, in the Moraqqa'-e Golshan awarded 'Abd od-Samad (dated march 1551 21): Mâjnun in desert, fol. 158, kept in the Golestân Palace Library of Tehran.

Reference List

- Alemi, M. (1994). *I giardini reali di Ashraf e Farahâbâd. In Il giardino islamico, Architettura, natura, paesaggio*. Edited by Petruccioli, A. Milan: Mondadori Electa.
- Alemi, M. (2007). Princely Safavid Gardens: Stage for Rituals of Imperial Display and Political legitimacy. In *Middle East Garden Traditions: Unity and Diversity*. Edited by Conan, M. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Brignoli, J.D. (2007). The Royal Gardens of Farahâbâd and the Fall of Shâh Soltân Hoseyn Revisited. In *Middle East Garden Traditions: Unity and Diversity*. Edited by Conan, M. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Brignoli, J.D. (2009). *Les palais royaux safavides (1501-1722) : architecture et pouvoir*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Aix-en-Provence: Université Aix-Marseille I.
- Della Valle, P. (1684). *Les fameux voyages de Pietro Della Valle, gentilhomme romain, surnommé l'illustre voyageur, avec un dénom-*

brement très exact des choses les plus curieuses, et les plus remarquables qu'il a vécues dans la Turquie, l'Egypte, la Palestine, la Perse, et les Indes Orientales, et que les auteurs qui en ont ci-devant écrit, n'ont jamais observées. Vol. 2. Paris: Chez la veuve Gervais Chusier.

- Eskandar Beyg Monshi (1915). *Târikh-e 'Âlam-âra-ye 'Abbâsi*, edited by Afshâr, I., Vol. 2. Tehran.
- Herbert, T. (1663). *Relation du voyage de Perse et des Indes orientales*. Translated from English by De Wicquefort, A. Paris: Chez Jean Du Puis.
- Jalâl al-Din Munajjim Yazdi (1987). *Târikh-e 'Abbâsi*. Tehran : Vahid publication.
- Porter, Y. (1996). Les Jardins d'Ashraf Vus Par Henry Viollet. In *Res Orientales VIII: Sites et Monuments Disparus D'après Les Témoignages de Voyageurs*. Edited by Gyselen, R. Bures-sur-Yvette: Peeters Press.
- WHC (World Heritage Convention). (2011). *The Persian Garden*. Registration Form for UNESCO's World Heritage List.