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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE SAFAVID STATE: POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND MILITARY AGENCY DURING THE FORMATIVE PERIOD (1501–1576)

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Abstract

This article examines the social, political, and military standing of Qizilbash-Turkmen women during the formative decades of the Safavid state (1501–1736), with particular attention to the reigns of Shah Ismail I (r. 1501–1524) and his successor Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1524–1576). Drawing on a comparative reading of Safavid court chronicles (*Alam-ara-yi Safavi*, *Khulasat al-Tawarikh*, *Jawahir al-Akhbar*) alongside the observations of European travelers and diplomats — Michele Membré, Caterino Zeno, and the Carmelite missionary Pietro della Valle's circle — the study reconstructs the political biography of Tacli Begüm, principal consort of Shah Ismail I, from her documented presence at the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) through her influential role after Ismail's death and her eventual banishment under Tahmasp. The inquiry situates this trajectory within the wider Turkic-Turkmen "alp kadın" (heroic woman) archetype attested in Oghuz epic literature and within the complementary gender cosmology of Alevi-Bektashi belief, arguing that female political and military visibility in the early Safavid polity was not incidental but structurally embedded in Qizilbash-Turkmen culture. The article further shows that Tahmasp's religious reorientation toward juristic Twelver Shiism, propelled by the arrival of Arab Shia scholars from Jabal

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Amil, initiated a systemic contraction of women's public agency that only partially eased under Shah Abbas I (r. 1588–1629). The findings contribute to Safavid historiography, gender and Islamic studies, and Central Asian cultural history.

Keywords: Safavid state; Qizilbash-Turkmen; Taclı Begüm; alp kadın (heroic woman); Shah Ismail I; Shah Tahmasp I; Battle of Chaldiran; Alevi-Bektashi tradition; gender and statecraft.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

The political and social participation of women in the pre-modern Islamic world has traditionally been examined through a lens of confinement and marginalization. While this framework accurately describes many later Islamicate polities, it obscures the considerable historical variation that existed within the broader Turkic-Turkmen cultural sphere, where a distinct "heroic woman" (alp kadın) tradition coexisted with, and at times operated independently of, normative Islamic gender prescriptions (Kafesoğlu, 1998, p. 270). The Safavid state (1501–1736), founded by Shah Ismail I as both a political dynasty and the institutional continuation of the Safaviyya Sufi order, offers a particularly instructive case: a state built by Qizilbash-Turkmen tribal confederations whose cultural repertoire included the alp kadın archetype, yet one that within little more than a generation moved toward the seclusion of elite women characteristic of later Perso-Islamic court society.

The significance of this inquiry is threefold. First, the Safavid state occupied a pivotal position in the historical geopolitics of Central Asia, the Near East, and the Caucasus; a full understanding of its early social structure requires dedicated attention to the position of women, a dimension that remains underexplored in existing scholarship. Second, a comparative reading of the same historical reality

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through differing observational lenses — indigenous Persian-language chronicles, Italian and Latin travel accounts, and modern secondary literature — opens new methodological possibilities not only for historical scholarship but also for cultural studies and gender studies. Third, establishing the complementary and fraternal role of women within Turkic-Turkman cultural heritage on a documented scholarly basis contributes directly to ongoing academic discussions of geopolitical and cultural identity in Central Asia, a contribution that carries particular relevance as Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region show renewed scholarly interest in the shared Turkic cultural inheritance.

1.2 Literature Review

The existing scholarship relevant to this study can be grouped into three broad categories. The first comprises primary Safavid-era chronicles produced from within the court milieu: the anonymous *Alam-ara-yi Safavi* (Anonim, 1972), Qadi Ahmad Qumi's *Khulasat al-Tawarikh* (Kadı Ahmed Münşî Kumî, 2005), and Budak Munshi Qazvini's *Jawahir al-Akhbar* (Budak Münşi Kazvinî, 2009). These works record Taclı Begüm's direct involvement in matters of state, her diplomatic authority, and her role in determining the fate of court amirs.

The second category consists of European travel and diplomatic accounts. Michele Membré's *Se Sefernâme* (Membré, 2015), based on his 1538 observations in Tabriz, provides rare testimony on the economic independence, horsemanship, and public mobility of Qizilbash women. Caterino Zeno's *Sefernâmeha-yı Venizyan der İran* (Zeno, 1971) explicitly likens Qizilbash women to the Amazons of classical legend, a comparison that reveals as much about the European observer's frame of reference as about the women themselves. The third category is modern secondary scholarship. Fariba Zarinehbafe-Shahr's "Economic Activities of Safavid Women in the Shrine City of Ardabil" (Zarinehbafe-shahr, 1998) documents the economic power of Safavid-era women through archival evidence. Tekleli and Aliyeva (2014) and Gündüz (2009) offer

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focused biographical studies of Taclı Begüm. However, this body of literature has concentrated disproportionately on the unresolved question of whether Taclı Begüm was captured at Chaldiran, leaving her post-Ismail political role comparatively unexamined as a unified subject. Moreover, no existing study systematically situates the status of Safavid women within the Alevi-Bektashi belief system as an integrated dimension of Safavid state formation. This article addresses both gaps.

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

The central question guiding this study is why women occupied such a prominent position during the founding period of the Safavid state, and through what mechanisms this position was subsequently eroded. Rather than attributing this transformation to a single cause, the article traces the interaction of cultural, religious, and political factors across the reigns of Shah Ismail I and Shah Tahmasp I. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) situate the political and military visibility of Qizilbash-Turkmen women within the broader Turkic "alp kadın" tradition and Alevi-Bektashi cosmology; (2) reconstruct, through a comparative reading of chronicles and European travel accounts, the political career of Taclı Begüm as the principal case study of female agency in the early Safavid state; and (3) analyze the religious and institutional mechanisms — chiefly the incorporation of Arab Twelver Shia jurists into the Safavid court — that produced the subsequent contraction of women's public role under Shah Tahmasp I.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, comparative-historical methodology grounded in critical source analysis. Three categories of material were examined: (a) indigenous Safavid chronicles composed in Persian (Alam-ara-yi Safavi, Khulasat al-Tawarikh, Jawahir al-Akhbar); (b) contemporaneous European travel, diplomatic, and missionary accounts composed in Italian and Latin, principally those of Michele Membré, Caterino Zeno, and Carmelite mission

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reports from early seventeenth-century Isfahan; and (c) modern secondary scholarship in Turkish, English, and Persian.

Each source was evaluated critically with reference to the social position of its author, the presumed intent behind its composition, and the historical moment of its writing, following the standard historiographical distinction between "event" and "representation." Because indigenous chronicles were produced within or close to the court and often served a legitimizing function, while European accounts reflect the interpretive frameworks — including the classical trope of the Amazon warrior — through which outside observers processed unfamiliar gender norms, neither source type was treated as transparently descriptive. Claims were instead accepted as historically probable only where corroborated across source types or where internally consistent with the broader pattern documented in Turkic epic and legal-customary material (the Oghuz *töre*).

Taçlı Begüm was treated not merely as an individual historical actor but as a case study illuminating the wider Turkmen and Alevi-Bektashi cultural pattern. To this end, the analysis draws typological parallels with the *alp kadın* figures of the Oghuz epic corpus — including Kanikey in *Manas*, Ay Chürök in *Semetey*, Saljan Khatun in the *Book of Dede Korkut*, and Banu Chichek in the tale of *Bamsi Beyrek* — as well as with the Göktürk inscriptions and Oghuz customary law (*töre*). The chronological transformation of the female image from the reign of Shah Ismail I to that of Shah Tahmasp I was then examined as a systemic process linked to doctrinal engineering, the political ascent of Arab-Shia clergy, and the weakening of the Qizilbash-Turkmen aristocracy, rather than as an incidental or accidental development.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The *alp kadın* archetype in Turkic epic and customary tradition

Turkic modes of thought, consistent with the broader rhythm of communal life, found expression in a social order in which women and men jointly governed the

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household and the polity through mutual counsel (kengash). Woman and man were positioned as complementary foundations of a single social order in Turkic society; accordingly, women's performance of actions conventionally coded as masculine should be understood not as an exception but as a natural extension of Turkic social organization. Unlike the Western heroic archetype, the Turkic hero (alp) typically descends from a noble lineage: his father must be a khan, and his mother a khan's daughter, so that the hero is born under exceptional circumstances as the offspring of two royal lines.

This same principle of noble common descent, which anchored the alp figure's legitimacy in Turkic mythological consciousness, simultaneously created space for the emergence of the alp kadın (heroic woman) archetype — a female figure positioned beside the hero as counselor, sentinel against danger, and reader of enemy stratagems. In the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, Kanikey dons armor and arms herself to ride to *Manas*'s rescue on the steed *Akkula* (İnan, 1992, p. 43). In the epic *Semetey*, Ay Chürök, widow of *Semetey*, fights his enemies and sacrifices herself in defense of their son *Seytek* (Umay, 1998, pp. 52–61). In the tale of "Kan Turali" from the *Book of Dede Korkut*, Saljan Khatun — though initially a captive of different origin — becomes, through marriage to the Turkic alp *Kan Turali*, a Turkic alp kadın in her own right, attacking an enemy raiding party to defend her sleeping husband without any trace of fear (Ergin, 2004, p. 194). In "Bamsi Beyrek," Banu Chichek is tested by her betrothed through archery, horse racing, and wrestling (Ergin, 2004, p. 123). The Uyghur epic of *Nozugum*, whose husband and three-year-old son were killed and who was subsequently exiled, depicts a heroine who wages a prolonged struggle to defend her honor before being executed by Qing authorities (Özkan, 1992, pp. 297–304). In the Turkmen redaction of the *Köroğlu* cycle, Harmandali defeats *Köroğlu* himself in a verbal contest and subsequently proves his equal in physical combat (Şahin, 2011, p. 556). In the Kyrgyz epic of *Kız Daryka*, the heroine vows to marry only the man who can defeat her in wrestling; even Hazrat Ali, dispatched with the Prophet's

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blessing after a six-month journey, requires days of contest before finally prevailing (Balıkçı, 2016, p. 43).

The prominence of ruling consorts in matters of state was likewise a recurring feature of Turkic statecraft. The Göktürk inscriptions record that Elbilge Khatun was sent by Heaven together with İltirış Kağan so that the nation would not perish (Turan, 2009, p. 311). Under Oghuz customary law (töre), khan and khatun, bey and begüm held equal rank and standing: the khatun sat opposite the khan at table, and both names were jointly recorded in official decrees (Ülken, 2006, pp. 56, 62). Turkic khatuns held political voice; among them were women who set the direction of state policy, who ruled as sovereigns, and who governed as regents, at times receiving foreign envoys independently and regularly participating in councils of state (Kafesoğlu, 1998, p. 270). The political roles of the wives of Toğrul Beg, Alp Arslan's sister, Malik Shah's consort Terken Khatun, and Sultan Sanjar's consort of the same name (Turan, 2009, p. 311), together with the prominent Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Qoyunlu consorts Jan Begüm and Despina Khatun, situate Taclı Begüm — consort of Shah Ismail I, founder of the Safavid state — as the direct heir of this Turkic-Turkmen customary and legal tradition of shared sovereignty.

3.2 Complementary gender roles in Alevi-Bektashi belief

The Turkic "alp erkek–alp kadın" (heroic man–heroic woman) parity sought a renewed legitimizing framework with the advent of Islam, and the alp prototype embodied in Oghuz Khan was gradually reconstituted through the figure of Hazrat Ali. Accordingly, Hazrat Ali and his spouse Fatima came to be represented in Turkic narrative tradition as the male-female heroic pair of the Islamic era, portrayed with protective, supportive, and martial qualities alike.

The historical role of women, however, cannot be confined to political actors distinguished within Turkic statecraft alone. Within the Turkmen-inflected strand of Islamic mysticism known as Alevi-Bektashism, female figures appear alongside male saints (veli) and spiritual guides (pir). As exemplified by Hacı

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Bektaş Veli and Kadıncık Ana, the presence of a female saint beside a male one attests to a complementary function assigned to women within this belief system. Likewise, the naming of seventeen women in the foundational "Assembly of the Forty" (Kırklar Meclisi) narrative, together with the familiarity of the Ali-Fatima pairing within Turkmen popular religion, indicates that women played a substantive role in the community's religious life (Bahadır, 2004, p. 175).

Within this belief system, the institution of musahiplik (spiritual brotherhood) practiced in ocak (lineage-based religious households) required that a male candidate for the office of dede (spiritual guide) undergo an ikrar (avowal) ceremony together with his spouse prior to consummation of the marriage, administered by the presiding dede of the hierarchically superior ocak. Because this rite is performed jointly, spousal pairs entered the sacred circle together as musahip, and the husband's eventual elevation to the "post of dede" was mirrored by his wife's elevation to the "post of Anabacı" — a symbolic parity understood as the ritual counterpart of the union of Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Fatima. In some ocak traditions, the dede and the Anabacı sit and officiate side by side during the communal cem ritual. Until recent times, it was common for a woman either to preside over the cem ritual herself or to sit beside the officiating dede; such women, known by the honorific "Taçlı Bacı," are attested in particular in the cem rituals of the Tahtacı (woodworking Turkmen) communities, where Taçlı Bacı traditionally sits to the dede's right (Bahadır, 2004, p. 175). This same complementary cosmology, in which the union of woman and man was understood to hold the secret of life, underlay the Umay and Ayzit cults associated with divine blessing (kut) bestowed upon women, cults that in turn shaped Turkic conceptions of the bride as a symbolic embodiment of the first sacred woman sent to earth (Ergün, 2010, p. 276).

3.3 Women in the Safavid founding period under Shah Ismail I

When the history of the Safavid state — itself a major institutional expression of the Alevi-Bektashi tradition — is examined, the position of women in governance

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does not depart from the pattern described above. During the state's founding phase and the subsequent reign of Shah Ismail I, women performed significant functions in politics, the economy, and the military. Both contemporary chronicles and the accounts of travelers who visited Safavid and Ottoman territory record women occupying an unusually active position in public life. Taclı Begüm, consort of Shah Ismail I and, in his capacity as spiritual guide of the order, simultaneously his companion-in-arms, exemplifies this pattern; her prominence was not an isolated case. That the corpses of masked women warriors were recovered from the field after the Battle of Chaldiran demonstrates that women of this era were not confined to the harem.

Ibn Fadlan, the tenth-century traveler whose account remains a foundational source for early Turkic social history, recorded that the wives of Oghuz rulers participated directly in councils convened to discuss matters of state, and further noted that Oghuz women did not veil their faces from either their own men or from strangers (Şeşen, 2010, p. 11). Ibn Fadlan's description bears a striking resemblance to the later observations of envoys and travelers who visited Qizilbash society in the Safavid domains, among them the Venetian envoy Michele Membré. Present in Tabriz in 1538 for an audience with Shah Tahmasp, Membré described Qizilbash women in the following terms: they were strikingly attractive, wore necklaces of large, rounded, and fine pearls, and were treated with notable affection by their husbands; a man in need of money would obtain it from his wife, since household wealth rested largely in women's hands; and Qizilbash women rode on horseback through the city as men did (Membré, 2015, p. 226).

Elsewhere in his account, Membré describes witnessing a military review of Tahmasp's army, in which women — likely relatives of the sultan — rode among the ranks dressed as men. He recorded observing fourteen or fifteen such women, whose faces could not be fully seen, yet all appeared beautiful; they rode their horses at a gallop across a river-like expanse, performed remarkable equestrian

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feats, jumped obstacles, and displayed skills demanding considerable mastery (Membré, 2015, p. 216). Membré's observations, largely dating to the period of the Safavid state's consolidation, indicate that the public visibility of Qizilbash women — their apparent equality of status and even their role in managing economic affairs — represented a continuation of patterns established under Shah Ismail I. As Zarinehbab-Shahr notes, the social standing of women reached a particularly elevated level in the early Safavid period, and leading female members of the Qizilbash military-tribal aristocracy possessed considerable social and economic power (Zarinehbab-shahr, 1998, p. 248).

3.4 Taclı Begüm: warrior, consort, and political actor

The role of Taclı Begüm cannot properly be confined to the battlefield of Chaldiran alone. She remained at Shah Ismail I's side from Chaldiran until his death, but her political prominence becomes most clearly visible in the period following his passing. To forestall the disorder that might follow Ismail's death and to protect the state from succession struggles, two highly respected Qizilbash elders — Dev Sultan Rumlu and Köpek Sultan Ustaclu — together with Ismail's vizier Qadi Jahan Husseini, placed the ten-and-a-half-year-old Tahmasp on the throne (Kadı Ahmed Münşî Kumî, 2005, p. 155). Jawahir al-Akhbar describes Taclı Begüm's standing and authority at court as follows: she entered the shah's harem together with her sister; being renowned throughout the realm for her beauty and virtue, she gained the shah's favor and became known as "Taclı Khanım"; the shah, who propagated the faith, lived in greatness and chastity to the end of his life, and amirs and viziers were chosen at her direction; under Shah Tahmasp, too, she remained for many years the effective authority within the harem, until she was eventually ordered to leave it (Budak Münşi Kazvinî, 2009, p. 122).

In the early years of Tahmasp's reign, Taclı Begüm played a serious role not only in domestic governance but also in foreign affairs. In 1534–35, for example, she appointed Sayyid Abdullah Lalani as envoy and dispatched him to the governor

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of Baghdad, Ibrahim Pasha, to negotiate terms of peace (Kadı Ahmed Münşî Kumî, 2005, p. 242). Contemporary correspondence indicates that Taclı Begüm was among the central figures of the state and stood at the heart of its politics; she had, in effect, become the successor and representative of the state's founder and the Qizilbash order's spiritual guide. Tahmasp himself appears to have acknowledged this standing: following the Safavid victory over the Uzbeks in 1528–29, he sent Taclı Begüm, then in Qom, a fathnama (victory dispatch) (Kadı Ahmed Münşî Kumî, 2005, p. 186). Her strong personal authority and standing among the Qizilbash further extended to resolving disputes among court officials and mediating or guaranteeing settlements between rival factions. In 1520–21, for instance, when the governor of Herat, Amir Khan, killed a prominent local scholar, Sayyid Mir Muhammad, and was consequently removed from office and brought before the court for punishment, he sought Taclı Begüm's intercession; as a result of her intervention he escaped execution (Budak Münşi Kazvinî, 2009, p. 137). The timing of this episode — during Shah Ismail's lifetime — underscores how considerable Taclı Begüm's influence already was even before her husband's death.

Her later years, however, ended in sorrow. According to *Khulasat al-Tawarikh*, a rupture developed between Tahmasp and Taclı Begüm around 1539–40, following which she was exiled by camel from the capital, Tabriz, to Shiraz, where she subsequently died (Kadı Ahmed Münşî Kumî, 2005, p. 290). Safavid-era historians offer no explicit explanation for the cause of this rupture; Qadi Ahmad Qumi describes it only briefly as a "misunderstanding" between the two. Michele Membré, who was in Tabriz at the time and recorded what he heard locally, offers a different account: he reports that Taclı Begüm attempted to poison Tahmasp in order to place her son Bahram Mirza on the throne, and that Tahmasp consequently exiled his mother to Shiraz (Membré, 2015, p. 226). The precise motive behind Tahmasp's decision remains difficult to establish with certainty; what can be said is that it coincided with a period of pronounced

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doctrinal and political realignment at court, raising the possibility — considered further in Section 4 — that the underlying conflict concerned resistance to the dismantling of Shah Ismail's Qizilbash-Alevi legacy, or a succession dispute involving the more Qizilbash-aligned Bahram Mirza.

3.5 The Battle of Chaldiran and the veiled women warriors

The presence of women warriors within the Qizilbash army is one of the persistent and well-attested features of the Battle of Chaldiran (1514), fought between the Ottoman and Safavid states. Taclı Begüm's own participation in this battle, and her subsequent fate, continue to attract scholarly interest, although the present study's central concern is not the long-debated question of whether she was captured, a subject already examined in considerable detail by Turkish, Iranian, and European scholars (Savory, 2003).

Alam-ara-yi Safavi describes veiled warriors appearing at several points in the battle narrative. In the episode of Malkoçoğlu's challenge to Shah Ismail, a mounted warrior wearing full armor and bearing a lance rides out to meet him; the text records that, on Shah Ismail's signal, this veiled warrior returned to the side of Durmuş Khan Şamlu (Anonim, 1972, pp. 486–487). A veiled warrior appears again during Shah Ismail's charge against enemy artillery positions, where the chronicle notes a masked figure among the seven hundred Qizilbash surrounded by Ottoman troops, without specifying that figure's identity or sex (Anonim, 1972, p. 491). Later in the battle, a veiled warrior surrounded by twenty-four janissaries and fighting in hit-and-run fashion is described in direct speech: on recognizing the shah, the warrior declares having come to fight and die rather than be thought captured and delivered to the Ottoman sultan; the shah orders the warrior escorted safely from the field, at which point five thousand Ottoman troops are dispatched specifically to capture this masked fighter, having been informed that the warrior is none other than Taclı Khanım, Shah Ismail's consort (Anonim, 1972, pp. 494–495).

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This passage confirms that the figure appearing in this particular episode was indeed Taclı Begüm, though it remains uncertain whether the veiled warriors mentioned earlier in the same battle narrative refer to the same individual. Given that these episodes occur in different sectors of the field, it is reasonable to infer that the masked riders described were in fact several distinct women, a pattern consistent with the broader condition of Qizilbash women in this period. Surviving Safavid-era combat masks, some preserved in museum collections, corroborate this reading: variation in their material quality — from richly ornamented, gilded examples to plainer, utilitarian pieces — indicates that they were worn across different social strata, and their documented use, particularly in the sixteenth century, supports the inference that Qizilbash women warriors made use of such masks in combat.

Venetian accounts add a further layer of corroboration. Caterino Zeno wrote of Qizilbash women that they armed themselves and went into battle alongside their men, shared in their husbands' fate, fought as men did, and displayed their martial skill in battle in a manner comparable to the Amazons (Caterino Zeno, 1971, p. 274). Giovanni Sagredo, a Venetian representative and knight of St. Mark, recorded that the bodies of women warriors were found among the dead after Chaldiran, noting that these women had donned male attire in order to share their husbands' fate and partake in the honor of battle, and reporting that they were subsequently interred with full military funeral rites on the order of Sultan Selim I (Felsefi, 1954, p. 107; Mircaferî, 1975, p. 469; Savory, 2014, p. 223).

3.6 The reversal: Tahmasp I and the religious re-engineering of gender norms

This pattern of visibility did not persist unchanged. It began to give way to stagnation as a consequence of the doctrinal and spiritual transformation that overtook Tahmasp in his later years. Tahmasp's self-described "repentance" (tawba) of 939 AH / 1532–33 CE marked the beginning of a series of religious, sectarian, and ideological shifts. As Arab scholars from the Jabal Amil region of

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Lebanon entered the Safavid court, the influence of juristic Shia clergy grew steadily, while the authority of the Qizilbash-Alevi Turkmen who had built the state was correspondingly curtailed. The Qizilbash worldview and its associated Alevi orientation, dominant since the time of Shah Ismail, gradually yielded ground to a Shiism grounded in strict juristic authority. This process of doctrinal engineering, and the resulting turn toward a shariah-centered Arab-Islamic conception of religious authority, exerted a profound social and religious effect on Safavid society (Baharlu, 2020, p. 83; Baharlu, 2021, p. 17). As a consequence, the customary practices (*erkân*) and ceremonial forms of the Sufi Qizilbash — and, with them, their broader worldview and their approach to relations between women and men — steadily gave way to the requirements of the new juristic school.

The new legal-religious norms were severe and unambiguous. A decree attributed to Shah Tahmasp prohibited women under any circumstances from riding on horseback, forbade them, except in cases of genuine necessity, from mounting a saddle or taking the reins in hand, and barred all but elderly women from appearing among itinerant performers and wandering dervishes (Râvendî, 1979, p. 703; Takavî & Musevî, 2014, p. 85; Dihganî et al., 2016, p. 2). Under Tahmasp's directives, the scope of women's activity contracted sharply; many were effectively barred even from leaving their own homes (Râvendî, 1979, p. 703). As a consequence of Tahmasp's severity and the increasingly rigorist orientation of the clergy, women lost a substantial measure of their former standing: excluded from public life and the field of battle alike, they were confined within the household and, within elite harems, increasingly reduced to ornamental status (Râvendî, 1979, p. 702).

The consequences of this transformation were documented by the Carmelite missionary who visited Isfahan in 1604 and described the condition of women within that city's multicultural milieu. According to this account, women rarely left their homes and could be seen by no one outside their immediate relatives;

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those who did go out wore long garments together with a white cotton veil that concealed them entirely, including their hands (Zarinehbab-shahr, 1998, p. 249). The speed and severity of this transformation within a relatively short span of time is itself striking.

3.7 Partial amelioration under Shah Abbas I

It should be noted that the material drawn from the Carmelite mission corresponds to the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1588–1629). Scholars of the Safavid period generally agree that the position of women in society improved somewhat under Abbas I relative to the preceding Tahmasp period (Takavî & Musevî, 2014, p. 85; Dihganî et al., 2016, p. 3). This relative easing, however, was confined largely to commoners and did not extend to women connected to the ruling and bureaucratic elite, whose circumstances remained essentially unchanged. Under Shah Abbas I's order, several nights were set aside exclusively for women's festivities and recreation; from 1609–10, certain districts of Isfahan were designated on Wednesdays for women's promenade, allowing women to circulate free of men's presence and without veiling their faces (Râvendî, 1979, pp. 703–704; Felsefî, 1980, p. 919). The contrast with the founding period remains stark, however: whereas women under Shah Ismail I participated across every domain of public life without being subject to a sexualized gaze, under Shah Abbas I women came increasingly to be perceived as sexual objects, and the separation and distancing of women from men acquired the character of a religious norm. It should also be noted that meaningful socio-cultural differences existed between Tabriz, Ismail's Turkic/Turkmen capital, and the predominantly Persian-populated Isfahan of the later Safavid court.

4. DISCUSSION

The results presented above indicate that the prominence of Qizilbash-Turkmen women in politics, diplomacy, and warfare during the founding decades of the Safavid state cannot be adequately explained as an accident of individual

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biography. Taclı Begüm's career — from her presence on the field at Chaldiran to her diplomatic missions and her effective governance during the early years of Tahmasp's minority — is best understood as the institutional expression of a pre-existing cultural template: the alp kadın archetype of Turkic epic tradition, reinforced by the complementary cosmology of Alevi-Bektashi belief and by the customary legal parity of khan and khatun under Oghuz töre. Read against this background, the masked women warriors recovered from the Chaldiran battlefield, and Membré's testimony regarding mounted women in the Safavid military review, appear not as isolated curiosities but as visible instances of a broader and culturally sanctioned pattern of female participation in Qizilbash public life.

The subsequent contraction of this pattern under Shah Tahmasp I is equally instructive, precisely because it cannot be reduced to a single cause. The chronology developed here suggests a convergence of factors: Tahmasp's personal religious "repentance" of 1532–33; the growing institutional presence of Arab Twelver Shia clergy imported from Jabal Amil, whose juristic conception of gender relations differed sharply from Qizilbash-Alevi custom; and the concurrent political weakening of the Qizilbash-Turkmen tribal aristocracy that had underwritten the earlier, more fluid gender order. Taclı Begüm's exile in 1539–40 sits precisely at the intersection of these processes. Whether her rupture with Tahmasp, as Membré's Tabriz informants suggested, reflected a succession dispute favoring the more Qizilbash-aligned Bahram Mirza, or whether — as this study is inclined to suggest — it reflected deeper resistance to the dismantling of her late husband's Qizilbash-Alevi religious and political legacy, cannot be resolved definitively on the basis of the available sources; both readings, however, situate her downfall within the same structural transformation rather than treating it as a matter of purely personal court intrigue.

The partial and socially uneven amelioration documented under Shah Abbas I further supports a structural rather than a purely doctrinal explanation. That

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greater freedoms were extended to commoner women in early seventeenth-century Isfahan while women of the ruling and bureaucratic elite remained closely confined suggests that the contraction of women's public role under Tahmasp was driven at least as much by the political consolidation of court authority and its supporting juristic establishment as by religious doctrine narrowly conceived. This reading is consistent with, and extends, Zarinebaf-Shahr's (1998) archival findings on the economic agency of Safavid women in Ardabil, and it complements the biographically focused studies of Taçlı Begüm by Gündüz (2009) and Tekleli and Aliyeva (2014) by relocating her career within the wider Turkic *alp kadın* tradition rather than treating her primarily as an exceptional individual.

These findings carry implications beyond Safavid historiography narrowly defined. They suggest that the historiographical tendency to read pre-modern Islamicate gender relations through a uniform lens of confinement risks flattening genuine regional and temporal variation, particularly within Turkic-Turkmen political cultures where customary law, epic tradition, and heterodox Sufi cosmology jointly sustained a more complementary gender order well into the sixteenth century. The Safavid case further demonstrates that such orders were not static cultural inheritances but were actively contested and could be dismantled through deliberate doctrinal and institutional intervention within the span of a single generation.

5. CONCLUSION

In Turkic modes of thought, women and men moved side by side in maintaining social order and discipline through cooperation and mutual support, a pattern reflected in the positioning of the *alp kadın* beside the *alp* (hero) throughout Turkic epic tradition. Turkic statecraft exhibits the same pattern: women who directed state policy, offered counsel, and governed when circumstance required were a recurring, not exceptional, feature of Turkic political history — not a

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matter of individual preference, but a structural necessity of a social order in which the fates of all members of the community, bound together by shared time and place, required that the whole community act in concert.

The Alevi-Bektashi belief system exhibits a comparable logic. Hazrat Fatima is at once the Prophet's daughter, Hazrat Ali's spouse, and the mother of the imams — the figure through whom divine blessing was united and perpetuated. Within Alevi-Bektashi cosmology, Fatima and Hazrat Ali constitute two halves of a single whole; the presence of a saintly woman such as Kadıncık Ana beside Hacı Bektaş Veli is no accident, and the continuing practice of a woman's presence beside the officiating dede during cem worship signals women's standing and significance within this religious community. The joint participation of women and men — of bacı and sufi alike — in worship within this belief system further indicates a mode of religious practice that does not separate the sexes but operates according to a logic transcending gender categories.

Given this background, it is unsurprising that a comparable structure existed within the Safavid state, built as it was around Alevi-Qizilbash belief and the Turkmen social order. In the early years of the Safavid state's founding, the role of women in society and politics differed markedly from that of later periods, a contrast that struck contemporary European travelers as well. Qizilbash women performed tasks conventionally assigned to men, rode on horseback, managed household economies, and, when necessary, took up arms alongside their husbands within the ranks of battle.

Following Shah Ismail's death, however, the new worldview that emerged under Tahmasp progressively diminished women's role in society, the economy, and politics. Although no single date can be identified for the onset of this marginalization, Tahmasp's decrees — issued under the influence of the new Shia clergy, particularly in matters of belief and social conduct, or his endorsement of their directives — may reasonably be regarded as its point of origin. Although this transformation did not proceed abruptly within Turkmen society, its

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cumulative effects became increasingly visible in subsequent decades. Consequently, the practice of keeping women apart from men gained ground in the period after Tahmasp, and even under Shah Abbas I, an era researchers have generally regarded as comparatively permissive for women, certain districts were set aside for women's exclusive use only on designated days of the week.

Taclı Begüm stands as the clearest illustration of women's position in Safavid society during its founding period and under Shah Ismail I. During Ismail's lifetime she served as his right hand, consort, companion-in-arms, and fellow traveler. She held a genuine share in governance, dismissing and appointing viziers and amirs of the highest rank; she mediated disputes and was heeded as a trusted representative; she spoke with authority on matters of foreign policy and took part in negotiations over war and peace; she appeared on the battlefield when circumstance demanded; and, after the shah's death, she governed the state and forestalled its disintegration. In these respects, Taclı Begüm served as the complement to Shah Ismail, the Qizilbash order's spiritual guide, and thereby became one of the most compelling embodiments of Turkic womanhood in history and culture.

5.1 Recommendations For Further Research

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, several directions for future scholarship may be proposed. First, the social status of Qizilbash-Turkmen women within Safavid history merits recognition as a distinct research category, with dedicated scholarly publications developed in Turkic languages — Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz among them — since the bulk of existing scholarship on this subject remains confined to English, Persian, and Turkish, and has received comparatively little sustained attention within Uzbek academic circles. Second, annotated translation of primary sources such as *Alam-ara-yi Safavi*, *Jawahir al-Akhbar*, and Michele Membré's travel account into Uzbek would benefit not only Safavid historiography but also the study of Turkmen-Uzbek historical relations more broadly. Third, a methodology that examines "woman within the belief

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system" and "woman within the structure of the state" as jointly constituted dimensions — an approach the present article has sought to model — merits further development and application to comparable Turkic polities. Fourth, the figure of Taclı Begüm and the alp kadın tradition deserve incorporation as a distinct topic within Central Asian and Caucasus history curricula and cultural studies coursework.

The scholarly and practical value of this study lies in several contributions. It addresses an existing gap in the historiography of the Safavid period concerning women's political role, working in particular to reconstruct Taclı Begüm's function beyond the Chaldiran episode — in governance, diplomacy, and as a unifying symbol for the Qizilbash community. Its comparative reading of indigenous chronicles, European travel accounts, and modern secondary scholarship offers a methodological model for future researchers of this period. Its scholarly grounding of the alp kadın tradition within Turkmen-Qizilbash culture offers contemporary Turkic peoples — Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz among them — a basis for reassessing and valuing their own cultural heritage. Finally, by synthesizing Turkic, Persian, and European sources, the article should prove useful not only to historians but also to researchers in gender studies, cultural studies, Islamic history, and Central Asian studies, and its comparative and multilingual scope should render it of interest to an international academic readership.

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