

The Religious-Political Essence of the Feast of Sacrifice in the Safavid Period: Based on Traveler Notes

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Abstract

The article examines the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice in the seventeenth-century Safavid state of Azerbaijan on the basis of travelers', missionaries', and merchants' accounts. Its main aim is to show that in the Safavid context Qurban Bayram functioned not only as a religious right, but also as a court ceremony, a public ritual, and a means of political legitimation. Using the comparative-historical method, the study analyzes the accounts of Pietro della Valle, Fedot Kotov, Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and other observers within the framework of the Safavid religious-political system. The article demonstrates that the Feast of Sacrifice operated on two levels: while the slaughter of sheep and other animals continued at the family and neighborhood level in accordance with Islamic tradition, camel sacrifice in the capital and major urban centers assumed the form of a state ceremony. The decoration and public procession of the sacrificial camel, the participation of state representatives in the ritual, and the distribution of the meat among the population all reinforced its collective and political significance. The novelty of the study lies in interpreting Qurban Bayram in the Safavid state as a ritual institution situated at the intersection of Shia political ideology, courtly representation, and social integration. The findings show that the camel sacrifice ceremony was an important symbolic instrument in strengthening the religious and political legitimacy of Safavid royal authority.

Keywords: *Safavid state, Qurban Bayram, camel sacrifice, Pietro della Valle, Fedot Kotov, Isfahan, religious ceremonies, political legitimacy, 17th-century traveler accounts*

1. Introduction

In the Islamic world, Qurban Bayram is not only one of the most important ceremonies in the religious calendar but has also taken on different forms of observance in various political and cultural settings. In this regard, the celebration of Eid al-Adha during the Safavid state of Azerbaijan is of particular interest. Since the Safavids made Shiism the state ideology, religious ceremonies were not only a level of worship practice but also a means of legitimizing power, demonstrating court prestige, and symbolically organizing urban space. From this perspective,

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the Feast of Sacrifice was not only a religious rite commemorating the story of the Prophet Abraham's sacrifice, but also a broad socio-political ceremony involving the state and the court.

The relevance of the topic is that while research on the religious ceremonies of the Safavid period has focused primarily on the rituals of Muharram, the Ashura ceremonies, and the ritual manifestations of Shia ideology, the political-ritual nature of the Eid al-Adha has been relatively understudied. However, the records of 17th-century European travelers, missionaries, and Russian merchants indicate that in the Safavid state, particularly in large cities—most notably the capital, Isfahan—the Eid al-Adha was observed as a ceremony with both religious and demonstrative purposes. Details in these sources, such as the decoration of the sacrificial camel, its procession through the city accompanied by music and crowds, and the subsequent sacrifice with the participation of a state representative, indicate that the holiday had a meaning that went beyond simple religious worship.

The purpose of the study is to examine the forms of the Qurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha) celebration in the Safavid state of Azerbaijan, particularly the religious, social, and political nature of the camel sacrifice ritual, based on the records of 17th-century travelers and merchants. The study comparatively analyzes information from authors such as Pietro della Valle, Fedot Kotov, Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and others. The main focus is on the function of the Feast of Sacrifice, on the one hand, as an act of worship within the Islamic tradition, and on the other hand, as a ceremonial institution that demonstrates the sanctity and authority of the shah's power.

1.1 Literature Review

The ritual life of the Safavid state has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to Shia mourning ceremonies, court ceremonial, and the ideological use of religion in state formation. However, compared to Muharram rituals and the broader problem of Safavid confessionalization, the celebration of Eid al-Adha has received relatively limited attention as a distinct political and ceremonial institution. Existing scholarship has mostly addressed the feast in passing, either as part of descriptions of Safavid court life or in studies of Islamic ritual practices in Azerbaijan (Bayramlı Z., Shabiyev B., 2016).

Among the most valuable primary testimonies are the travel accounts of seventeenth-century European observers and Russian merchants. Pietro della Valle provides one of the earliest detailed descriptions of the Safavid camel sacrifice and emphasizes its public and ceremonial character. Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and others likewise recorded important details concerning the ritual organization of the feast, the role of the shah, the public procession of the camel, and the distribution of sacrificial meat. Fedot Kotov's account is especially useful for understanding the social atmosphere of the festival, including the suspension of trade, festive music, and forms of public interaction among the urban population .



In modern historiography, the most important contribution to the subject has been made by Jean Calmard, who interpreted the Safavid camel sacrifice as a distinctive political-religious ritual that connected urban ceremonial space with royal authority. Babak Rahimi further developed this approach by analyzing the camel sacrifice within the framework of the Safavid “theater state”, arguing that such rituals functioned as performative expressions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and symbolic control over the public sphere. Azerbaijani ethnographic and historical studies have also contributed to the understanding of sacrificial customs, festive etiquette, and the continuity of ritual practices, although they generally focus more on ethnographic survivals than on the political meanings of the Safavid ceremony itself.

Thus, the existing literature makes clear that the Safavid Eid al-Adha ceremony can be approached from several interconnected perspectives: as a religious rite rooted in Islamic tradition, as an urban public festival, and as an instrument of dynastic representation. At the same time, the comparative analysis of travel narratives specifically devoted to the ritual and political dimensions of Eid al-Adha in the Safavid state remains insufficiently developed. This article seeks to address that gap by examining how the feast functioned simultaneously as a form of devotion, a public spectacle, and a medium of political legitimation.

1.2 Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative historical analysis of narrative and descriptive sources related to the celebration of Eid al-Adha in the Safavid state during the seventeenth century. The research draws primarily on travel accounts, merchant reports, and missionary observations, including the writings of Pietro della Valle, Fedot Kotov, Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and others. These sources are examined not merely as descriptive testimonies, but as texts reflecting particular cultural perspectives, political interests, and modes of observation.

The methodological framework combines comparative-historical analysis, source criticism, and contextual interpretation. First, the accounts of different observers are compared in order to identify recurring elements in the celebration of Eid al-Adha, such as the ceremonial role of the camel sacrifice, the participation of the shah and state officials, the use of urban space, and the distribution of sacrificial meat. Second, these accounts are subjected to source-critical analysis, taking into account the authors’ backgrounds, purposes of travel, and possible confessional or cultural biases. Third, the ritual is interpreted within the broader political and ideological context of the Safavid state, especially in relation to the formation of Shia royal legitimacy and the use of public ceremony as a means of political communication.

The study also makes selective use of modern historiography, particularly the works of Jean Calmard and Babak Rahimi, in order to situate the primary evidence within broader debates on ritual, kingship, and the symbolic performance of power in Safavid (Calmard, 1996). Through



this combined methodological approach, the article aims to reconstruct not only the outward form of the Eid al-Adha ceremony, but also its social and political meanings within Safavid society.

2. Pietro della Valle on Eid al-Adha in Safavid Isfahan

The Italian traveler, writer, and diplomat Pietro della Valle (1586–1652) was one of the most important European observers of the Safavid East in the first half of the seventeenth century. During his travels through the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Iran, and India, he recorded valuable information on the political, social, and religious life of the regions he visited. His travel accounts are especially significant for the study of Safavid court ceremonies, urban life, and religious practices. Pietro della Valle describes the Eid al-Adha ceremony in Isfahan, the Safavid capital, as follows: "The festival is dedicated to the memory of the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. While in other Muslim countries a lamb is mainly sacrificed, in Persia, especially in the large cities, a camel is sacrificed, because they believe that God had sent a camel to Abraham instead of his son, not a lamb." (Pietro della Valle, 1843). Pietro della Valle's observations indicate that during the Safavid period, Eid al-Adha was celebrated not only as a religious rite but also as a state celebration and a mass public ceremony. According to his description, the holiday is celebrated on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Hijri calendar, and although it is accompanied by the sacrifice of a sheep or lamb, as in general Muslim tradition, the most notable feature of this ceremony in the Safavid state of Azerbaijan was the sacrifice of a camel. The author notes that the Qizilbash accepted that the animal Abraham sacrificed in place of his son was a camel, and for this reason, in the major cities, especially in the capital where the Shah was, the camel sacrifice was carried out with great ceremony. It is clear from the description of the Italian traveler Della Valle that the camel sacrifice was a ceremony of a symbolic and demonstrative nature, in addition to being a religious rite (Pietro della Valle, 1843). The sacrificial camel was paraded through the city for several days beforehand, adorned and prepared for the ceremony with music, prayers, and a crowd. On the day of the festival, a sacrifice ceremony was held as a grand public spectacle in the great square of Isfahan, with the participation of the Shah, court dignitaries, the military elite, and the people. The camel's ceremonial bringing into the square, the striking of the first blow by a chosen person, and the subsequent rush by the crowd onto the animal to share the sacrificial meat demonstrate the ceremony's collective, emotional, and ritual character. This information indicates that in the Safavid environment, Eid al-Adha was not merely the fulfillment of a religious duty; it was also a public event where Shi'a-political legitimacy, courtly pomp, and popular religious culture converged. Details such as the camel sacrifice being conducted with the king's participation, the preservation of the meat as 'blessed,' and the throwing of the camel's head at the palace gate indicate that the ceremony carried symbols of both sanctity and power.

Other European and modern observers of the Safavid period also confirm this tradition. The French jeweler and traveler Jean Chardin (1643–1713), whose travel account is regarded as



one of the most detailed European descriptions of Safavid Iran, notes that during the Feast of Eid al-Adha, in cities where the shah was present, a camel was brought into the square in a special manner, and the first blow was usually struck by a state representative. Afterward, the sacrificial meat was distributed among the city's population. Similar information is provided by the French Capuchin missionary Raphael du Mans (1613–1696), who spent many years in Isfahan and left valuable observations on the social and religious life of Safavid Iran. He reports that in Isfahan this ceremony was accompanied by several days of preparation, a ceremonial procession, and mass distribution (Özban, 2007). The significance of this ritual has also been emphasized in modern historiography by the French historian Jean Calmard (1931–2017), a prominent scholar of Safavid religious and ceremonial life. According to Calmard, the camel sacrifice ceremony was one of the rituals that reinforced the religious-political legitimacy of the shah's authority and symbolically mobilized the urban space and the masses (Rahimi, 2004).

3. Testimonies of other travellers and merchants

Information about the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice in the Safavid state of Azerbaijan in the early 17th century is not limited to the descriptions of Pietro della Valle. The records of the Russian merchant Fedot Kotov, who was in the country at that time, and of Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and others for a later period, indicate that this ceremony was a grand, state-organized religious-political right. Important information on the celebration of Eid al-Adha in the Safavid capital is also found in the notes of the Russian merchant and traveler Fedot (Fedor) Kotov, who visited Isfahan in 1624 as part of a commercial mission. Kotov's travel account is among the early seventeenth-century Russian narrative sources that contain valuable observations on the urban life, trade practices, and festive culture of Safavid Iran. Although his descriptions are relatively concise, they are significant in that they reflect the perceptions of a contemporary eyewitness regarding the public and everyday dimensions of religious celebrations. From the writings of F. Kotov, it is known that the Feast of Sacrifice lasted for three days, during which trade and ordinary work were suspended, while the city atmosphere was transformed by public festivity. According to his account, the sounds of the zurna and karnay filled the streets, festive goods and attributes were sold in the markets, and people exchanged greetings and gestures of respect appropriate to the occasion (Хождение купца, 1958). These observations show that Eid al-Adha in Safavid Iran was not confined to the sphere of ritual sacrifice alone, but also functioned as a broader social celebration that temporarily altered the rhythm of urban life, commerce, and public interaction.

Particularly noteworthy is Kotov's remark that people "kissed each other's hands," which may be regarded as one of the earliest written descriptions of the custom of expressing respect to elders during the holiday. This detail suggests that the celebration incorporated not only collective and ceremonial practices but also interpersonal forms of etiquette and reverence embedded in family and communal relations. In this sense, Kotov's testimony helps to illuminate the everyday



social culture of Eid al-Adha in the Safavid period and demonstrates that the holiday served simultaneously as a religious observance, a public festivity, and a medium for reinforcing social hierarchies and norms of respect. However, in Safavid Iran, the most striking feature of the Eid al-Adha was the ceremonial procession of the sacrificial camel through the city, followed by its grand sacrifice. Pietro della Valle notes that for several days before the festival, a decorated camel was paraded through the city streets, accompanied by musicians, mullahs, and a crowd. On the day of the festival, the camel was taken to an altar outside the city, where it was sacrificed in the presence of a high-ranking state official. Accounts by Jean Chardin and Raphael du Mans also indicate that, unlike a typical private sacrifice, this ceremony was carried out under the patronage of the state and was a public spectacle. Chardin characterizes the Eid al-Adha as one of the Safavids' "most respected and solemn" holidays and presents it among the day's held in special esteem in the Shiate calendar.

Ottoman traveler and writer Evliya Chelebi (1611–c. 1682), author of the monumental "Seyahatname", is one of the most important seventeenth-century sources on the social, religious, and cultural life of the Islamic world. His observations, based on extensive journeys across Ottoman territories and neighboring regions, contain valuable information on local customs, religious ceremonies, waqf institutions, and Sufi centers. Evliya Chelebi's account demonstrates that the Feast of Sacrifice was celebrated not only in urban settings, but also in waqf villages and Sufi lodge environments. According to his description, a prosperous village of around 200 households located near Ladik was a large waqf settlement. It contained the tomb of the prominent Sufi figure Davud Sultan, alongside a tekke inhabited by attendants, dervishes, and members of sayyid families (Челеби Эвлия, 1983). Evliya Chelebi notes that in 1057/1647 the pasha performed the Eid al-Adha prayer there, offered sacrificial animals, and organized a large feast in the gathering place of the sheikhs.

This account indicates that the Feast of Sacrifice was not confined to individual religious devotion or to courtly urban ceremony, but also functioned within waqf and tekke settings as a collective event through which political authority, religious prestige, and social solidarity were displayed. The fact that the pasha performed the holiday prayer in a waqf-tekke environment and then sponsored sacrifice and communal feasting highlights the role of Sufi institutions and endowed religious spaces in the ceremonial life of the period. In this context, Eid al-Adha appears not merely as a religious observance, but also as a ritual occasion that reinforced patronage, legitimacy, and communal cohesion.

4. The Camel Sacrifice as a political and ritual institution

A comparative analysis of the sources shows that in the Safavid state, the Eid al-Adha was carried out on two parallel levels. On one hand, the traditional Islamic practice continued at the family and neighborhood level, involving the slaughter of sheep and other animals, the



distribution of meat to the poor, and the fulfillment of a religious duty. On the other hand, especially in cities where the shah was present, the camel sacrifice became a state ceremony, organized with the participation of palace officials, city governors, and public groups. In this regard, the sacrificial camel was not just a religious symbol, but also the sacred-political embodiment of the shah's authority. The procession of the camel through the city, accompanied by music and a crowd, and the distribution of sacrificial meat among the city's neighborhoods revealed the festival's function in both creating collective solidarity and demonstrating the legitimacy of the central authority.

As researcher Jean Calmard also emphasizes, during the Safavid period, the ritual of the “camel sacrifice” had become a local-imperial manifestation of the classical Islamic sacrificial practice. While the memory of the sacrifice of Isaac was preserved, the organization of the ceremony, the fact that the sacrificial animal was a camel, its prior adornment, its display in the urban space, and the participation of state representatives transformed this rite into a broader political-theatrical event rather than a simple religious act. It became a symbol for the Safavids to enhance their prestige and respect, and a symbol of their power and authority over the people. For this reason, the records of 17th-century travelers should be valued as an important source, showing that in Safavid society, Eid al-Adha was not just a religious observance, but also a multifaceted ceremonial form where power, urban culture, and social relations intersected.

5. Results

The analysis of seventeenth-century travel accounts demonstrates that Eid al-Adha in the Safavid state was celebrated on two interconnected levels: as a religious obligation observed by the population and as a public ceremonial event closely associated with the monarchy. At the communal level, the feast retained its conventional Islamic meaning as a commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice, involving the slaughter of sheep and other animals, the distribution of meat, and the fulfillment of religious duty. At the state level, however, particularly in cities where the shah resided, the ceremony acquired a more elaborate and distinctly political form centered on the sacrifice of a camel.

The evidence of Pietro della Valle indicates that the camel sacrifice was one of the most visible features of the Safavid celebration of Eid al-Adha. The camel was decorated and paraded through the city before the feast, accompanied by music, prayers, and crowds, before being sacrificed in a public setting. Other observers, including Jean Chardin and Raphael du Mans, confirm that the ceremony involved official participation, public spectacle, and collective engagement. The presence of the shah or his representatives, the ceremonial first blow delivered by a designated figure, and the subsequent distribution of meat all suggest that the ritual was carefully staged as an act of both devotion and authority.



Fedot Kotov's account further reveals the broader social atmosphere of the feast. His remarks about the suspension of trade for three days, the sale of festive items, the playing of zurna and karnay, and the gestures of greeting and respect among townspeople show that Eid al-Adha was not limited to the sacrificial act itself. It functioned as a wider urban festival that temporarily reorganized daily life, intensified public interaction, and reinforced communal identity. The ritual therefore operated at the intersection of religion, sociability, and political representation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that in the Safavid state Eid al-Adha functioned not merely as one of the principal Islamic festivals associated with the commemoration of Abraham's sacrifice, but also as an important symbolic institution through which political authority was represented, legitimized, and publicly enacted. The available travel accounts and narrative sources indicate that the celebration of the feast in Safavid Iran, and particularly in the major urban centers of Azerbaijan and the capital Isfahan, was marked by a high degree of ceremonialization. In this context, the ritual of sacrifice exceeded the boundaries of private piety and assumed a broader public and political significance, becoming part of the visual and performative language of power.

The camel sacrifice occupied a central place within this ceremonial order. Unlike the more common practice of sacrificing sheep or lambs in many Muslim societies, the Safavid emphasis on camel sacrifice endowed the feast with a distinctive dynastic and ideological character. As reflected in the accounts of Pietro della Valle, Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and other observers, this ritual was carried out in the presence of the shah or his representatives, often in urban squares and before large crowds, accompanied by processions, official participation, and the distribution of sacrificial meat. Such features transformed the act of sacrifice into a state-sponsored public spectacle, one that linked the ruler directly to the performance of piety, generosity, and communal guardianship. In this sense, the ceremony symbolized the convergence of Shia dynastic ideology, public ceremonial culture, and the sacralization of political authority.

At the same time, the celebration of Eid al-Adha also reveals the broader social dimension of Safavid religious life. The suspension of trade and daily work, the festive atmosphere of the city, the circulation of ceremonial goods, the use of music, and the exchange of greetings and gestures of respect all indicate that the feast operated as a moment of collective social cohesion. It was not only a court-centered or state-directed ritual, but also a lived urban festival that involved merchants, artisans, dervishes, local communities, and ordinary townspeople. In this regard, Eid al-Adha served as a point of interaction between the court and society, where the official ideology of the Safavid state was translated into shared ritual practice and public participation.

Therefore, the Feast of Sacrifice occupied an important place in the ritual and political life of the Safavid polity. It illustrates how a canonical Islamic observance could be reinterpreted within the framework of Safavid Shiism and transformed into a performative language of



sovereignty. Through ceremonial sacrifice, public procession, charitable distribution, and symbolic participation of the ruler, Eid al-Adha became one of the means by which the Safavid state articulated its religious identity, displayed its authority in urban space, and reinforced the connection between sacred tradition and dynastic rule.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the records of 17th-century travelers, missionaries, and merchants shows that in the Safavid state of Azerbaijan, the Eid al-Adha was not limited to the fulfillment of a religious duty, but functioned as a multifaceted ceremonial system. While the basis of the festival was the sacrifice of animals, as in Islamic tradition, in the Safavid context, this ceremony was enriched with courtly pomp, public participation, and political symbolism. Especially in large cities and centers where the shah was present, the camel sacrifice, unlike a typical religious rite, became a public ceremony performed under state patronage.

Based on information from Pietro della Valle, Fedot Kotov, Jean Chardin, Raphael du Mans, and other authors, it becomes clear that the sacrificial camel was first adorned, paraded through the city, accompanied by music and a crowd, and the sacrifice was initiated by a state representative or a high-ranking official, and the subsequent distribution of the meat among the population revealed the ceremony's both religious and political character. Through this ritual, the Shah presented himself as the patron of the Shiite world, the guardian of religious order, and the guarantor of public welfare. The consideration of the sacrificial meat as "blessed," and its distribution among urban neighborhoods and various social groups, reinforced the festival's function of collective solidarity and social integration.

Thus, during the Safavid period, Eid al-Adha was a ceremonial form where Shia state ideology and popular religious culture converged. The camel sacrifice ritual held a special place within this system, both perpetuating the religious memory of Abraham's sacrifice and visibly embodying the sanctity, legitimacy, and political authority of the shah's power within the public sphere. In this regard, 17th-century sources allow us to assess the Feast of Sacrifice in Safavid society not only as a religious event but also as an important political-ritual institution where power, urban culture, and social relations intersected.

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