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Reclaiming the Past: Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar, the Ilkhanid Legacy, and Dynastic Legitimacy in Sultaniyya

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Abstract: *Sultaniyya emerged as a significant site during the reign of Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar, reclaiming a prominence it had not known since the 14th century. Its favorable climate, proximity to Azerbaijan – then an active front in the war with Russia – and the enduring remnants of Ilkhanid splendor attracted the Shah to the site each summer. The dynamic interplay between ruin and resilience lent Sultaniyya a symbolic allure, making it an ideal setting for royal presence and symbolic reclamation. This paper examines how Fath ‘Ali Shah’s engagement with Sultaniyya was shaped by the site’s historical and spatial legacy, and how he reconfigured the site to serve political and cultural purposes. Focusing on his selective appropriation of Ilkhanid heritage through architectural interventions and spatial reconfigurations, this article evaluates how these initiatives transformed the local landscape. Ultimately, the study argues that this reciprocal relationship served broader Qajar ambitions of dynastic legitimacy, historical continuity, and the performative construction of territorial identity.*

Keywords: Fath ‘Ali Shah, Sultaniyya, Qajar dynasty, Sultaniyya palace, dynastic legitimacy, Ilkhanid heritage

Introduction

The plain of Sultaniyya was closely associated with Ilkhanid kingship, having served as an important royal and seasonal centre. Although the city gradually declined after the 14th century, its monumental remains and historical associations preserved the memory of its former imperial status. In the early 19th century, Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar reintegrated the plain into the Qajar political geography by establishing a seasonal court, commissioning a palace, and using the site for military and diplomatic purposes.

This article examines why Fath ‘Ali Shah selected Sultaniyya as a seasonal royal residence and how his engagement with the site contributed to the construction of early Qajar dynastic legitimacy. It argues that the shah’s presence in Sultaniyya cannot be

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explained solely by the plain's environmental and strategic advantages. Through seasonal residence, architectural patronage, military display, and the selective appropriation of the site's Ilkhanid associations, Fath 'Ali Shah incorporated Sultaniyya into a broader project of dynastic consolidation. By analyzing Sultaniyya as a political landscape rather than merely as an architectural site or seasonal encampment, the article shows how historical memory, royal mobility, and territorial presence intersected to shape early Qajar authority. Drawing on both Iranian and European sources, the study examines Fath 'Ali Shah's seasonal presence, architectural patronage, and political activities in Sultaniyya, as well as contemporary representations of his engagement with the site.

Ruy González de Clavijo, who visited Sultaniyya in 1404, when the city was under the rule of Miran Shah (d. 1408), the son of Timur, provided a detailed account of its remarkable economic prosperity.¹ However, Miran Shah's later destruction of the city² marked the beginning of a prolonged period of decline.

During the Safavid era, Sultaniyya no longer functioned as a major royal residence, and much of the city was eventually abandoned.³ Travellers in the 16th and 17th centuries described it as a small, insignificant settlement surrounded by extensive ruins.⁴ Nevertheless, the Safavids used the *chaman* (or meadow⁵) for military reviews [Fig. 1], thereby preserving one of the plain's earlier political and military functions. This practice continued into subsequent periods, particularly during the early Qajar era under Fath 'Ali Shah (1797-1834).



Fig. 1. Location of the Qajar palace (marked in yellow) and the pasture (*Chaman-e Sultaniyya*, marked in red) on a satellite image of the Sultāniyya plain. Source: Google Earth, 2015; DigitalGlobe imagery dated 11 October 2015.

¹ Clavijo, 1859: 93-96.

² According to Clavijo (1859: 95), he suffered from madness towards the end and destroyed many of the buildings in the city of Soltaniyeh.

³ Minorsky, Bosworth & Blair, 1997: 859. Sultaniyya still remained an occasional summer camp for Safavid rulers (Blair, 2014: 159).

⁴ Olearius, 1666: 454; Deslandes, 1673: 15; Chardin, 1811, 2: 381-382; De Bruyn & Picart, 1718: 173; Çelebi, 2010: 184.

⁵ Amīnī, 2004: 267; Vālah Esfahānī, 1993: 790.

Shortly after the outbreak of the First Russo-Iranian War in 1804, Fath ‘Ali Shah set up camp in Sultaniyya with his entourage while en route from Tehran to the Caucasian front.⁶ Napoleon’s envoy Pierre-Amédée Jaubert, who travelled to Sultaniyya from Tehran with the Shah’s *urdū* or army camp, mentioned the stops along the way during the Shah’s journey in 1806. The *urdū* halted first at the village of ‘Alishah ‘Avaz and then at Haji Abad, Qazvin, Sayin Qal’eh, and finally Sultaniyya.⁷ The *urdū* moved at night and paused during the day.

Attracted by the lush pastures and striking landscape, Fath ‘Ali Shah chose to establish his summer quarters there, using the location for seasonal hunting and pasturing his horses. The Qajar camp, established initially with royal tents, had been in use since 1804, when the Shah first decided to remain close to Azerbaijan during the ongoing conflict with Russia. In 1808, he commissioned master builders to construct a palace, which was completed towards the end of the First Russo-Iranian War (1804-1813).⁸ Even after the war, the Shah continued to hold diplomatic meetings and receive foreign envoys at his encampment.⁹ Politically, Sultaniyya’s proximity to the Azerbaijani front made it a suitable site for receiving local rulers and conducting military reviews.

Both the Qajars’ pastoral-nomadic heritage and the region’s favorable environmental conditions influenced the Shah’s decision to select this site. Moreover, he recognized that the presence of ancient ruins provided a material basis for establishing a symbolic connection with the area’s historical legacy. His patronage brought a level of prosperity to the region that had not been seen since the fall of the Ilkhanate, effectively adding a new chapter to the history of Sultaniyya. His seasonal presence further stimulated activity on the plain and attracted numerous visitors, including members of the Qajar elite and European travelers.

During his reign, Fath ‘Ali Shah spent sixteen summers in Sultaniyya to review his troops and oversee the war effort against Russia.¹⁰ However, following Iran’s defeat in the Second Russo-Iranian War and the signing of the Treaty of Turkamanchay in 1828, he ceased using the palace as a regular seasonal residence.¹¹ As political and strategic concerns had been central to his annual visits, the royal complex was subsequently abandoned and soon fell into disrepair, losing much of its former political significance.

In the aftermath of the treaty, Russian authorities objected to any continued military activity near Azerbaijan, viewing Sultaniyya as a strategically sensitive location from which the Qajars might launch renewed hostilities.¹² Scottish traveler James Baillie

⁶ Donboli, 2010: 188; Bournoutian, 2021: 68.

⁷ Jaubert, 1821: 336.

⁸ Marvazī, n.d.: fols. 271-272.

⁹ Kondo, 2013: 397.

¹⁰ Kondo, 2013: 392.

¹¹ Kondo, 2013: 398; Khāvarī, 2001: 592.

¹² Māfi, 1983: 365.

Fraser, who visited the site in the mid-1830s, reveals that Fath ‘Ali Shah “deigned to come here no more” because “the Russians had approached so near as Toorkomanchai” following the treaty of 1828.¹³ When Fraser visited the site in 1835 – after the Shah’s death – he found the royal complex in a state of decline, having been largely abandoned since the end of the war.¹⁴ Fraser therefore did not witness Sultaniyya during its period of renewed Qajar activity.

According to Gavin Hambly, the Qajars’ gradual transition from a tribal background to an established urban dynasty, accompanied by the decline of many nomadic characteristics, provides another explanation for the abandonment of Sultaniyya as a regular seasonal residence.¹⁵

Beyond the observations of travelers, scholarly attention to Sultaniyya during the Qajar period remains limited. Most studies focus primarily on its Ilkhanid history and address the Qajar period only briefly. Among the limited studies addressing the Qajar occupation of Sultaniyya, Gavin Hambly’s work serves primarily as a selective bibliography of European travel accounts,¹⁶ while Nobuaki Kondo’s *Between Tehran and Sultānīyya* examines the itineraries of the early Qajar rulers and the relationship between royal mobility, Tehran, and seasonal residences such as Sultaniyya, demonstrating that their travels were largely driven by political and military considerations.¹⁷ More recently, Assef Ashraf has shown that early Qajar claims to authority were articulated through textual, visual, material, and administrative practices that linked the new dynasty to earlier traditions of Iranian kingship. His analysis places such appeals to historical continuity within a broader Qajar imperial vision concerned with kingship, legitimacy, and the remaking of empire.¹⁸ Persian chronicles and Iranian travel accounts provide evidence that is often absent from European narratives, particularly concerning the palace’s water-supply system and associated structures, the foundation and development of Sultanabad, changes in the older settlement of Sultaniyya – including its bazaar, population, and caravanserais – as well as the name and construction context of the palace and its subsequent repairs. European travel accounts, by contrast, are especially valuable for their contemporary descriptions of the palace’s architecture, the royal encampment, ceremonial activities, and the changing physical condition of the site. Drawing on these complementary bodies of evidence, the present study illuminates Fath ‘Ali Shah’s relationship with Sultaniyya, focusing on his architectural initiatives and his efforts to establish dynastic legitimacy through engagement with its Ilkhanid legacy.

¹³ Fraser, 1838: 385.

¹⁴ Fraser, 1838: 385.

¹⁵ Hambly, 1972: 93.

¹⁶ Hambly, 1972.

¹⁷ Kondo, 2013.

¹⁸ Ashraf, 2024: 46-49.

To better understand this interaction, the present article approaches Fath ‘Ali Shah’s engagement with Sultaniyya as part of a broader strategy to strengthen his dynastic legitimacy by linking himself to the historical memory of past empires. Sultaniyya, with its Ilkhanid ruins and past grandeur, offered a symbolic landscape for such an engagement. Fath ‘Ali Shah’s repeated visits, architectural initiatives, and reuse of architectural materials from Ilkhanid monuments can therefore be understood as an attempt to claim continuity with traditions of Persian kingship. In this light, the Shah’s actions in Sultaniyya were not merely personal or seasonal choices, but part of a broader political project concerned with historical continuity, dynastic legitimacy, and royal authority.

Pursuit of Legitimacy

Fath ‘Ali Shah oversaw a remarkable period of palace construction and architectural development during his reign. He sponsored numerous building projects in and around Tehran, as well as in other major Iranian cities.¹⁹ His architectural patronage was intended to demonstrate his legitimacy as a sovereign capable of establishing royal authority through monumental construction.²⁰ Fath ‘Ali Shah also recognized the political value of imagery; he thus sought to present himself on equal footing with his illustrious predecessors through image-making, frescoes, and rock reliefs. This emphasis on visual representation can be understood in the context of the Qajars’ relatively weak ideological claims to rule. Unlike the Safavids, whose authority was buttressed by claims of sacred descent, the Qajars came to power with relatively limited religious credentials.²¹

Sultaniyya, as a symbolic site embedded in both Iranian and Turco-Mongol cultural memory, offered a compelling venue for Fath ‘Ali Shah to associate his rule with the Ilkhanid legacy. Qajar historical narratives connected the dynasty’s origins with the broader Turco-Mongol past.²² Sa’id Nafīsī, a modern Iranian historian, notes that Qajar chroniclers emphasized Fath ‘Ali Shah’s references to Mongol lineage as a calculated strategy to enhance his legitimacy.²³ In the Qajar period, the Ilkhanid and Timurid dynasties were held in high esteem; by affiliating himself with Mongol heritage, Fath ‘Ali Shah sought to elevate his own prestige and reinforce his claim to sovereignty. This historical context illustrates how lineage and the perception of dynastic continuity were deeply entwined in early Qajar governance. His repeated presence in the former Ilkhanid capital and his decision to construct a favored summer

¹⁹ Amanat, 1999; Ashraf, 2016: 565-566.

²⁰ Ashraf, 2016: 566.

²¹ Matthee, 2005: 182.

²² Fasā’ī, 1999, 2/1: 634; Hedāyat, 2001, 9/1: 7075.

²³ Nafīsī, 1965, 2/1: 21.

palace there were thus closely linked to his pursuit of legitimacy. As Colin Meredith observes “Apart from the need to provide a theoretical justification for Qajar rule, there was the absolute necessity of embodying its various legitimizing claims in concrete form”.²⁴

Fath ‘Ali Shah chose to build his palace roughly one mile from the old city and simultaneously sought to develop the region by establishing the village of Sultanabad. Gavin Hambly suggests that by founding a village on government-owned land near the Ilkhanid ruins, the Shah was contemplating the revival of the old Mongol city.²⁵ The choice of this location further associated the new Qajar complex with the Ilkhanid past.

Materials from the ruins of the old city, including the old Friday Mosque and other Ilkhanid monuments, were reused in the construction and decoration of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s palace.²⁶ British diplomat, writer and traveler James Morier criticized this practice, arguing that the Shah was destroying the monuments of his predecessors to create new structures that would bear his own name.²⁷

‘Abd al-‘Ali, an Iranian traveler who visited the site in 1872, also reported that the palace tiles had been brought from the Oljeitu Mausoleum.²⁸ Nevertheless, the decision to build a new palace near the ruins and to reuse Ilkhanid materials can be understood as an effort to establish continuity with the site’s past while strengthening the Shah’s dynastic standing.²⁹ Taken together, the location of the palace and the reuse of Ilkhanid materials suggest a strategy of dynastic association in which Qajar royal authority was linked to the historical prestige and material remains of Sultaniyya.

Fath ‘Ali Shah also demonstrated a personal interest in the antiquities of the site, suggesting an awareness of its historical significance. William Price, assistant secretary to British envoy Gore Ouseley, recorded an incident in June 1811 in which laborers uncovered an ancient tomb belonging to a Mongol khan. Upon hearing the news, the shah

hastened to the spot, ordered all persons to retire, and descended himself to the receptacle of the dead; he found the corpses of a Tartar khan and his ten daughters [...] They had lain there about eight hundred years; and, on examining the whole, the shah discovered jewels, pearls, and gold coins of an immense value.³⁰

²⁴ Meredith, 1971: 60.

²⁵ Hambly, 1991: 551.

²⁶ Morier, 1812: 256-257; Johnson, 1818: 180-181; Sarreshtehdār, 2001: 47.

²⁷ Morier, 1812: 256-257.

²⁸ Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 50.

²⁹ Ashraf, 2019: 48; for the historical continuity of the Qajars see Amanat, 2008: 7-13.

³⁰ Price, 1825, 2/1: 44.

British envoy Sir Harford Jones Brydges described the Shah's departure from Sultaniyya as a magnificent spectacle and compared the procession to the march of Darius as described by Arrian, Quintus Curtius, and Rollin.³¹ Such processions provided a visible display of royal authority beyond the capital.

Fath 'Ali Shah's patterns of travel and encampment also shared certain features with those of his Ilkhanid predecessors. Nobuaki Kondo notes certain similarities between Fath 'Ali Shah's itineraries and those of the Ilkhans, particularly the movement of the ruler with a large royal camp.³² He nevertheless emphasizes that the differences were more numerous than the similarities and that Fath 'Ali Shah's travels were largely guided by political and military circumstances.³³ The comparison with Ilkhanid patterns should therefore not be understood as evidence of a direct imitation of an earlier itinerary, but rather as one aspect of a broader pattern of royal mobility in which Sultaniyya again acquired political significance under the Qajars.

The Palace

In the midst of the plain, Fath 'Ali Shah chose a tall mound – identified by Kaykāvus Mirza as “Tol-e Sultānābād” and described as offering the best view in the region and a commanding perspective over the surrounding structures³⁴ – as the site for his palace, known as “Sepehr Barīn.” According to the Qajar chronicler Mohammad Sādeq Marvazī, an inscription bearing a poem by Fāzel Khān Garusī and the date of completion was installed above the main entrance during the palace's construction, though it has not survived.³⁵

Mohammad Hosayn Khān Nezām al-Dawla Esfahānī, who later served as chancellor to Fath 'Ali Shah, oversaw the construction from its inception in 1808 until its completion in 1812-1813.³⁶ The palace was one of several grand architectural projects commissioned by the Shah at the time.

Today, the remains of the palace survive on a mound complex located approximately 1,700 meters northwest of the ancient city and known as “Tapeh-e Qaleh” [Figs. 4-5]. No standing architectural structures remain on the surface, and the site consists of two adjoining mounds. Aerial photographs from the 1960s show two distinct foundations: a rectangular structure on the northern mound and an octagonal one on the southern mound [Fig. 6]. German archaeologist Wolfram

³¹ Brydges, 1834: 242.

³² Kondo, 2013: 399.

³³ Kondo, 2013: 412.

³⁴ Kaykāvus Mirza, 2016: 425.

³⁵ Marvazī, n.d.: fol. 271; Fāzel Khān Garusī, n.d., n.p.

³⁶ E'temad al-Saltana, 1978: 113.

Kleiss, who visited the site between 1968 and 1984, identified remnants of Qajar-period buildings and referred to the mound as “Tapeh Salmān” [Fig. 7].³⁷

The mound appears to have formed over earlier structural remains. American missionary James Bassett, who visited Sultaniyya in 1871, described it as an “artificial mound” and suggested that the palace may have been erected on the site of a building originally constructed by Oljeitu (*Khodābandeh*).³⁸ Kaykāvus Mirza’s account also notes that the palace was built on a tall mound – an unusual feature in the otherwise flat pastures (*chaman*) of the region.³⁹ Taken together, these observations raise the possibility that the Qajar palace was constructed over earlier structural remains, although their date and identification cannot be established with certainty.

Although no standing architectural elements survive today, numerous fragments of bricks and lime mortar, together with smaller quantities of pottery and tiles, have been recovered from the site [Fig. 8].⁴⁰ According to Kleiss, prehistoric material, including Bronze and Iron Age pottery and fragments from the 4th millennium BCE, has also been discovered on the mound’s surface. This has led some to speculate that the site occupation may date back to the pre-Islamic period.⁴¹ However, a brief surface survey conducted by the author in 2016 identified no prehistoric pottery. Instead, the majority of the diagnostic material examined during the survey – especially glazed ceramics and tiles – could be dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries [Fig. 8].⁴² While it remains uncertain whether the mound was actively occupied during the Ilkhanid period, historical accounts indicate that Ilkhanid building materials were reused in the construction and decoration of the Qajar palace.

The layout of the palace can be reconstructed only from aerial photographs from the 1960s, descriptions of the site, and available textual sources. The complex apparently comprised several residential and public quarters arranged in a terraced, multi-storied configuration. In addition to multiple bathhouses (*ḥammām*), two *qanāts* [Fig. 9], and ten to twelve courtyards, the site also featured an open area known as the *Maydān*, used for military reviews and market activities.

The palace was composed of five main sections, each serving a distinct residential, ceremonial, or functional purpose.⁴³

³⁷ Kleiss, 1997: 385-386.

³⁸ Bassett, 1886: 79, 81.

³⁹ Kaykāvus Mirza, 2016: 425.

⁴⁰ Kleiss, 1997: 385-386.

⁴¹ Kleiss, 1997: 387.

⁴² Feizi, 2019: 232, fig. 56.

⁴³ For the best description of the palace by a European see, Johnson, 1818, 2/2: 181-185.

Entrance

British officer John Johnson and Iranian traveler Adīb al-Mamālek visited the palace at different times and each described one of its two main gates. Johnson, who visited in 1817, offered a detailed account of the southern entrance. He wrote:

We entered first the enclosure for security, a mud fort about 100 yards square, having on two opposite sides two gates – one from without, and the other leading into the gardens of the royal residence. The area of the fort is filled with small arched mud hovels eight or ten feet high.⁴⁴

From this gate, Johnson followed a tree-lined avenue approximately 200 yards long to reach the palace complex.⁴⁵ The palace entrance itself, he noted, was a typical Iranian octagonal structure, with a passage leading directly to the women's quarters. As neither he nor his courtier companion was permitted to enter the harem, his description of that section remained external.

A clearer image of the northern gate emerges from Adīb al-Mamālek's observations during his visit in 1858. This gate, which passed through terraced levels and led to the audience hall, was likely the main entrance to the palace.⁴⁶ According to his account, visitors entered the palace through the northern gate and proceeded along three terraced levels, which allowed access to corridors leading to rooms situated on either side of the main hall.

Audience Hall (Divān-khāna)

This rectangular building was situated atop the highest mound, facing north. It featured open rooms on either side of a central columned hall, offering an expansive view of the surrounding landscape. Overlooking the entire plain, the *Divān-khāna* provided the Shah with a vantage point from which to observe military parades and public ceremonies.⁴⁷

Similar audience halls, though lower in height, existed in other contemporary Qajar palaces, such as the Marble Throne Hall in the Golestan Palace and Takht-e Qajar in Shiraz. Comparable columned *Divān-khānas* used as audience halls also appeared in Qasr-e Qajar (Tehran), Emarat-e Cheshmeh 'Ali in Damghan, 'Abbās Mīrzā's Ujān Castle, and Bāgh-e Now in Shiraz.⁴⁸ Unlike some of these structures, however, the *Divān-khāna* at Sultaniyya appears to have been relatively simple and lacked elaborate decoration.

⁴⁴ Johnson, 1818, 2/2: 184; Keppel, 1827, 2/2: 151.

⁴⁵ Johnson, 1818, 2/2: 184.

⁴⁶ Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 58.

⁴⁷ Johnson, 1818, 2/2: 149.

⁴⁸ Scarce, 1992: pls. LXXXV, XXXI.

This type of *tālār* was not unique to the Qajar period. As Jennifer Scarce argues, it has roots in the architectural tradition of the Safavid era, as seen in ‘Ali Qāpu and Chehel Sotūn in Isfahan.⁴⁹ The Qajars continued to employ terraced arrangements and columned *iwan* forms associated with earlier Persian royal architecture.

The Khalvat-khāna (Private Hall)

Behind the audience hall, and accessible through a series of narrow passageways, was the *Khalvat-khāna*, a private hall with two rooms on either side and a small pool at its center. The main hall was adorned with eight niches – four on each side – and frescoes depicting Fath ‘Ali Shah and his sons.⁵⁰ The most prominent of these frescoes, located directly opposite the entrance, portrayed the Shah on horseback in pursuit of a gazelle and extended across an entire wall.⁵¹ According to Iranian art historian Ruyin Pakbaz, this motif evoked an ancient Iranian theme associated with royal power and the legitimacy of kingship.⁵²

The *Khalvat-khāna* served as a space for informal or private meetings between the Shah and his trusted courtiers. A comparable architectural arrangement appeared in the Negarestan Palace in Tehran, where the *tālār* known as the *Tālār-e Salām* (Reception Hall) served as a setting for formal royal ceremonies.⁵³ Its layout closely resembled that of the *Khalvat-khāna* at Sultaniyya, and its painted walls likewise featured full-length portraits of the Shah and his sons.⁵⁴

Other comparable halls decorated with royal imagery were constructed during the same period at Sulaymaniyya (Karaj), Qasr-e Qajar, and ‘Abbās Mīrzā’s residence at Ujan.⁵⁵ Such richly painted *tālārs* provided settings in which royal authority and dynastic representation could be visually communicated to courtiers and foreign envoys, reinforcing broader claims to power and legitimacy.

The Pavilion (Kolāh Farangī)

The pavilion was a two-story, octagonal structure, with a single room on each floor, each approximately ten feet high and fourteen by ten feet in plan (see: the octagonal building on top of the palace in figs. 2, 3, 10, 11). It was decorated with tiles bearing Persian inscriptions, many of which had been taken from the old Friday Mosque and

⁴⁹ Scarce, 1992: 333.

⁵⁰ Ouseley, 1823, 3/3: 386.

⁵¹ Johnson, 1818: 183; Ouseley, 1823, 3/3: 386.

⁵² Pakbaz, 2010: 15, 19.

⁵³ Soheili Khansari, 1974: 32.

⁵⁴ Scarce, 1992: 338; about the *tālār-e Salām*, see Soheili Khansari, 1974: 32; Flandin & Coste, 1851, 2/1: 237.

⁵⁵ Farhad Mirza, 1987: 21; Soheili Khansari, 1974: 33.

Oljeitu's mausoleum.⁵⁶ British traveler and diplomat James Morier described the building as a polyangular structure capped with a small dome and enclosed by a Chinese-style railing.⁵⁷ Connected to the women's apartments by a narrow hallway,⁵⁸ the pavilion was readily identifiable in historical photographs and drawings.

In formal terms, the pavilion may be compared with Safavid garden pavilions such as Hasht Behesht in Isfahan, particularly in its octagonal form and its position as a freestanding garden structure.

The Tower

Located adjacent to the pavilion, the tower was a two-story structure, with two rooms on each floor connected by narrow staircases leading to an enclosed terrace (see: the rectangular building beside the pavilion in figs. 11-12). The terrace was decorated with tiles repurposed from Oljeitu's mausoleum and the old Friday Mosque.⁵⁹ Benefiting from natural air circulation during the summer months, the tower served as a leisure space for the Shah and the women of the royal household. According to Adīb al-Mamālek, women could sit atop the tower and enjoy expansive views of the plain without being seen from the outside.⁶⁰

Towers also featured in early 19th-century royal residences outside or on the fringes of urban centers. A comparable example existed at the Negarestan Palace in Tehran, where a tower constructed along the enclosure wall served a defensive function.⁶¹

The Women's Quarters (Harem)

The women's quarters, like the pavilion and tower, were located on the southern side of the compound. This area consisted of a series of courtyards, residential rooms, kitchens, and bathhouses. Each courtyard and its immediate surrounding area appear to have been allocated to royal women and their children.⁶² A southern terrace and courtyard, remnants of which were identified during Wolfram Kleiss's survey,⁶³ likely represent part of the *harem* complex.

French diplomat Félix Édouard Comte de Sercey, who visited the palace in 1840, when it was already showing signs of deterioration, described it as a pleasure palace

⁵⁶ Johnson, 1818: 180-181.

⁵⁷ Morier (1812: 260) believed that it was built after a drawing, based on a European plan, presented to the shah by a French member of the Gardane mission in 1808. See Flandin & Coste, 1851, 2/1: 205.

⁵⁸ Kotzebue, 1820: 230; Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 60.

⁵⁹ Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 60; Johnson, 1818: 183.

⁶⁰ Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 60.

⁶¹ In Negarestan, as in Sultaniyya, a tower was constructed to serve as a defensive structure. "The entire area was guarded by a small tower erected on the eastern wall, atop was a bronze canon mounted on a gun carriage to protect the area from any presumed assault." (Tancoigne, 1819, 2/1: 282).

⁶² Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 60.

⁶³ Kleiss, 1997: 386, Abb. 61.

where the Shah spent time with his wives.⁶⁴ Iranian visitors, including Soltān Mohammad Mirza Sayf al-Dawla (d. 1874), who visited the site in 1862, offered similar descriptions.⁶⁵

Following its construction, Fath ‘Ali Shah used the palace as a regular summer residence outside Tehran for more than a decade. He generally spent three months there each year, except in 1808-1809, when his stay was considerably longer.⁶⁶ However, the buildings required repairs only a few years after their completion. By the final decade of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s reign, the palace had deteriorated significantly, apparently as a result of poor-quality materials and inadequate maintenance.

Despite its declining condition, minor renovations were undertaken when official ceremonies were held or foreign ambassadors were received. These measures, however, were insufficient to prevent its continued deterioration. The palace declined throughout the nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century, it had fallen into ruin.⁶⁷

The Sultaniyya palace was situated within a network of *qanāts*, and its water supply depended primarily on two nearby channels – one designated for domestic use and the other for agriculture and gardening.⁶⁸ By the mid-19th century, however, these *qanāts* had largely dried up, and the resulting water shortages may have contributed to the palace’s decline. Wells appear to have been excavated subsequently to compensate for the shortage, particularly within the women’s quarters, where water was required for the bathhouses.⁶⁹

The Sultaniyya palace incorporated several features characteristic of early Qajar palace architecture. Its terraced arrangement, location atop a high mound, and enclosure by tall, largely blind exterior walls corresponded to a type of royal architecture employed in palaces outside urban centers, where such features provided both security and commanding views of the surrounding landscape.⁷⁰ While these architectural elements were present at Sultaniyya, they appeared in a more modest form than in more elaborate contemporary examples such as the Negarestan Palace.

⁶⁴ Sercey, 1928: 183.

⁶⁵ Sayf al-Dawla, 1985: 331.

⁶⁶ Kondo, 2013: 395.

⁶⁷ Mohandes ‘Abdollah, 2010: 50. Two state documents from the late 1880s indicate Nāser al-Dīn Shah’s attempt to partially renovate the palace, likely as part of a broader restoration initiative. The first document, dated 1887, records the Shah’s authorization to allocate a budget of four thousand tomans for palace repairs. The second, a directive from the minister Amīn al-Molk to the local governor, orders the dispatch of a certain ‘Alī Me’mār to oversee the restoration of both the palace and the mausoleum of Oljeitu. For documentation related to ‘Alī Me’mār’s role in the restoration, see Edāra-ye Owqāf-e Zanjān, n.d. For contemporary witnesses who observed the renovation efforts, see (Nāser-e Dīn Shāh, 2000: 60; Hesām al-Saltana, 2010: 325; and Sarreshtehdār, 2001: 147).

⁶⁸ Hesām al-Saltana, 2010: 312. For maps of the *qanāts*, see Feizi, 2019: 370.

⁶⁹ Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 64; Hesām al-Saltana, 2010: 312.

⁷⁰ Diba, 1998: 33.

Royal Encampment and Its Local Legacy in Sultaniyya

In 1803, an earthquake struck the region,⁷¹ causing severe damage to Sultaniyya's surviving monuments. Nevertheless, life on the plain persisted, and people continued to inhabit the old city and its surrounding villages. Between 1858 and 1880, the area supported approximately 30 to 40 shops and about 30 caravanserais.⁷²

The presence of the Qajar king and his royal camp brought several changes to the cultural landscape of the region and influenced the lives of its local inhabitants.

Fath 'Ali Shah's frequent presence on the plain alongside his palace in the pastureland of Chaman-e Sultaniyya led to the establishment of a new village called Sultanabad – now known as Qaleh village – on the western outskirts of the city during his reign. Initially, the area included a mosque and several buildings for palace staff. Over time, these structures expanded and gradually developed into the village of Sultanabad. The village's taxes were allocated to maintenance of the palace, and most of its residents worked as caretakers. By 1858, the village was home to about thirty families. By 1899, however, only a few families remained.⁷³ The establishment of a new settlement beside the palace and close to the remains of the old city may also have reflected Fath 'Ali Shah's interest in associating his new foundation with Sultaniyya's Ilkhanid past. It is possible that Sultanabad was intended to develop into a more substantial settlement alongside the palace, although this development was never fully realized.

During the Ilkhanid period, Sultaniyya was also an important commercial center in northwestern Iran. Its position on major routes contributed to its role in trade and exchange. Although its commercial importance declined after the fifteenth century and it eventually became a mere regional market, commercial activity continued in and around the settlement.

This activity received renewed stimulus during the Qajar period. Royal visits brought temporary concentrations of population and commerce to the plain, and a local market known as Araliq later emerged as the town's principal center of trade. By the early 20th century, a new marketplace had been established in the town's main square, together with several smaller subsidiary squares. It contained approximately 100 shops that traded primarily with nearby villages.⁷⁴ Although this market may represent a legacy of Qajar-period development, its precise relationship to the earlier seasonal markets remains uncertain.

⁷¹ Ambraseys & Melville, 1982: 57.

⁷² Sarreshtehdār, 2001: 147; Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 51.

⁷³ Kaykāvus Mirza, 2016: 425; Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 61; Nāser-e Dīn Shāh, 2000: 61.

⁷⁴ Malekī, 2011: 337-338.

In 1817, Moritz von Kotzebue, a Prussian officer in the service of a Russian diplomatic mission to Qajar Iran, described one such seasonal market near the royal summer camp:

the Bazar formed a straight avenue between the castle [palace] and our camp [Russian ambassador's camp]. Each merchant had a miserable little tent in which stood a box containing all his riches.⁷⁵

Kotzebue's account demonstrates that commercial activity formed an integral part of the temporary royal encampment, although the extent to which these seasonal markets contributed to the later permanent marketplace cannot be established with certainty.

The presence of Qajar troops stationed on the plain is highlighted by the Dutch traveler Chevalier T. M. Lycklama à Nijeholt, who visited Sultaniyya in 1866 and described an old barrack situated to the left of the Oljeitu mausoleum and to the right of the palace.⁷⁶ The rectangular foundations of this structure remain visible today. Flanked by towers, the barrack was attributed to the reign of Fath 'Ali Shah and appears to have been constructed over an earlier site dating to the late medieval period.

The renewed Qajar presence on the plain was thus expressed not only through the palace and military installations, but also through attempts to establish a new settlement beside the remains of Ilkhanid Sultaniyya. Contemporary accounts reveal how this new foundation was understood in relation to the former city and its historical significance. During a visit to Sultaniyya in 1818, while traveling from Tabriz to Tehran, the British painter and traveler Sir Robert Ker Porter recorded a conversation with Crown Prince 'Abbās Mirza. Porter wrote:

observations on what Sultania [the Mongol capital] had been, and what he ['Abbās Mirza] hoped Sultanabad [the Qajar settlement] would be, brought him round to his favourite discussion: the general state of Persia under its different dynasties, ancient and modern.⁷⁷

Porter's account suggests that 'Abbās Mirza viewed the new settlement of Sultanabad in relation to the former grandeur of Sultaniyya and placed both within a broader reflection on Iran's dynastic past and present. The ambitions associated with the new settlement, however, were not fully realized, while Fath 'Ali Shah's palace subsequently deteriorated.

⁷⁵ Kotzebue, 1820: 253-254.

⁷⁶ Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1875, 4/2 : 133.

⁷⁷ Ker Porter, 1821, 2/1: 282.

By the latter half of the 19th century, the palace had deteriorated considerably, while Sultanabad itself had become a small settlement surrounded by the remains of earlier occupation.⁷⁸

As the French painter and orientalist Eugène Flandin observed:

Fath 'Ali Shah, driven by the desire to give a new impetus to Persia, wanted to regenerate the country that was devastated by long-lasting civil war. He then came up with a plan to revive the ancient Mongol site and to build a new town around his palace [...] this project failed like many others, and the palace itself was abandoned.⁷⁹

Flandin's assessment captures the limits of the Qajar project at Sultaniyya. The seasonal court, palace, military installations, and new settlement temporarily reactivated the plain and reshaped its local landscape, but they did not restore Sultaniyya as a major urban center. The Qajar legacy therefore survived less in a successful revival of the old city than in the smaller-scale settlement, market, and spatial organization that developed around the royal camp.

Conclusion

Fath 'Ali Shah selected the plain of Sultaniyya as a seasonal royal residence at a site that combined environmental advantages, strategic importance, and strong historical associations. Through the construction of a palace, the establishment of a royal encampment, and the development of a new settlement and seasonal commercial activity, the Qajar presence brought renewed activity to the region. These interventions also transformed the existing landscape, most visibly through the reuse of architectural materials from Ilkhanid monuments and changes in the use of local resources.

These activities formed part of a broader effort to strengthen early Qajar dynastic legitimacy. As a recently established dynasty, the Qajars sought forms of historical continuity through which royal authority could be expressed and reinforced. At Sultaniyya, Fath 'Ali Shah engaged particularly with the site's Ilkhanid past: he repeatedly resided on the plain, constructed his palace near the former Ilkhanid capital, reused architectural materials from its monuments, and incorporated the site into the seasonal movements and ceremonial practices of the Qajar court. Rather than constituting a direct imitation of Ilkhanid practices, these actions demonstrate the political value that the historical associations of Sultaniyya acquired under the early Qajars.

⁷⁸ Some sources estimate the population of Sultaniyya at that time to be approximately 300 households. See Tabātabā'i Dībā, 2011: 33; Adīb al-Mamālek, 1970: 150.

⁷⁹ Flandin & Coste, 1851, 2/1: 205.

More modest in scale and decoration than some of Fath ‘Ali Shah’s palaces in Tehran, the Sultaniyya palace nevertheless served several functions. It was a seasonal royal residence, a setting for courtly and diplomatic activities, and, particularly during periods of conflict with Russia, part of a broader military and political presence on the plain. Archaeological remains, historical photographs, and Iranian and European textual sources together make it possible to reconstruct important aspects of the complex and to situate it within the architectural practices of the early Qajar period.

Fath ‘Ali Shah’s project did not result in the lasting revival of Sultaniyya as a major urban center. The palace deteriorated, and the new settlement of Sultanabad remained limited in scale. Nevertheless, the Qajar presence left a significant imprint on the local landscape through the palace, military installations, settlement, and commercial activity that developed around the royal camp. By drawing on Persian chronicles, Iranian and European travel accounts, and archaeological evidence, this article has argued that Sultaniyya was more than a seasonal retreat: it was a political landscape in which historical memory, royal mobility, architectural patronage, and territorial presence contributed to the construction of dynastic legitimacy in early Qajar Iran.



Fig. 2. Louis Dubeux, *Drawing of the Qajar palace at Sultānīyya*, 1841. Source: Dubeux, 1841: 17.



Fig. 3. Jules-Barthélemy Feuvrier, *Drawing of the Qajar palace at Sultānīyya*, from *Trois ans à la cour de Perse* (Feuvrier, 1900: 215). Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-OD-44.



Fig. 4. View of Tapeh Qaleh from the east. Photograph by the author, summer 2016.



Fig. 5. Ceramic sherds and brick fragments on the surface of Tapeh Qaleh. Photograph by the author, summer 2016.



Fig. 6. Aerial photograph showing the remains of two foundations (A and B) on Tapeh Qaleh, 1964. Source: Iran National Cartography Center.

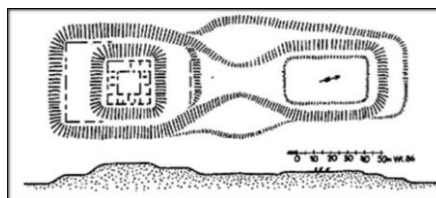


Fig. 7. Remains of structures on Tapeh Qaleh, 1960s–1980s. Drawing by Wolfram Kleiss (Kleiss, 1997: 385, fig. 61).



Fig. 8. Diagnostic pottery sherds and tile fragments from the 2016 surface survey at Tapeh Qaleh. Photograph by the author, summer 2016.



Fig. 9. Satellite image of the Sultānīyya plain showing the locations of two qanāts and three archaeological sites near Tapeh Qaleh. Source: Google Earth; DigitalGlobe imagery dated 11 October 2015.



Fig. 10. Architectural drawing of the Qajar palace at Sultānīyya by Mohandes 'Abdollāh, late 19th century. Source: Mohandes 'Abdollāh, 2010: 51.



Fig. 11. The Qajar palace at Sultānīyya with an adjacent structure. Photograph from the local archive of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO), Sultānīyya World Heritage Site.



Fig. 12. The Qajar palace at Sultaniyya. Drawing by Moritz von Kotzebue, 1817. Source: Kotzebue, 1820: 249.

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