The Safavid Dynasty

Founder: Shah Ismail
Branch of Islam: Shia, opposed to Ottoman Sunni rule

Sufism: a spiritual component of Islam. This spiritual path encourages believers to seek union with God on a deeper, mystical level.
The Jizya Tax: This tax represented the contractual relationship that granted to some, but not all, non-Muslim minorities, a degree of protection of life and property under the Sharia Islamic Law in return for payment of the jizya, or poll tax. This poll tax was in force until the nineteenth century, and was ‘never at anytime or anyplace allowed to lapse.’

In public, women were expected to be veiled, yet women enjoyed some legal rights; could inherit property, and in rare cases, divorce their husbands.

Those in the court of the shah ranked highest on the social pyramid, followed by the bureaucracy, the wealthy aristocrats, and then the common people. The Safavid dynasty operated a theocracy, where Islam dominated the culture. Advanced weapons included artillery and cannons, both of which relied on gunpowder.
The Qizilbash were early Safavid warriors intent on creating an Islamic empire. They wore their characteristic red heads, earning them the name “Redheads.” Military technology included weapons expected in gunpowder empires: the use of artillery, & cannons.

Given their different interpretations of the Qur’an, the Safavids and Ottomans were opposed to each other. While the Ottomans practiced Sunni Islam, the Safavid believed this to be scandalous and maintained their Shiite faith. As a result, the two empires engaged in fierce warfare, such as the Battle of Chaldiran. It wasn’t until Shah Abbas the Great when this religious fanaticism of the Safavid diminished, ushering in a period of peace in the region.
Shah Abbas was known for his tolerance of diverse religious traditions. His popularity grew as a result of his superior military skills as well as his care and concern for the Safavid people. Under his leadership, the size of the military grew significantly, mostly through conscription (the draft) of foreign subjects, similarly to the Ottoman tradition of janissaries. The dynasty reached its greatest extend under Abbas rule.

After Abbas, other Shahs were less tolerant of religious traditions, especially toward sunnis. In time, the oppressed Sunnis revolted, and the ongoing battles weakened the dynasty. Aghan warriors battled against the weakened dynasty, causing further disintegration.

Dotted throughout the empire are large mosques and other building structures with their signature “blue tile” features. The ceramic tiles were painted their distinctive color, then glazed prior to being attached to large mosques and other municipal buildings.

Just as the Persians maintained the Royal Road, so too did the Safavids. Safavid rulers increased their trade with their interaction with the Silk Road.

The Safavid agricultural advances included animal husbandry, as they matched desirable traits of certain animals to produce larger off springs.

The Safavid dynasty controlled the valuable Strait of Hormuz, giving them access to the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean beyond. This access would not have been possible without the aid of the British, who were eager to trade with the empire.
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Founder: Location:
Capital: Title of ruler:

• Describe the role of women within the Safavid Dynasty.

• What was the purpose of the jizya tax?

• Describe the role of the Qizilbash, or ‘Red Heads.’ How did they earn this nickname.

• Describe the military technology of the Safavid.

• What was the impact of the role of Shah Abbas on the dynasty?

• How did the empire decline?

• How did the Safavid empire interact with the physical environment?

• How did the Strait of Hormuz benefit the dynasty?

• What was distinctive about the architecture of this dynasty? What kinds of buildings could a person expect to see?