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BASILE VATATZES AND HIS HISTORY OF NĀDER ŠĀH

In 1748 the traveller and merchant Basile Vatatzes completed a history in Greek¹ of the life of the extraordinary Persian military adventurer and self-made monarch Nāder Šāh, who had been assassinated the previous year. Vatatzes' book is important as an early history of Nāder by a sympathetic contemporary observer. This article gives a review of the background to this text and Vatatzes' other writings, an account of what is known of Vatatzes' life, and a preliminary assessment of a few excerpts from the text itself, comparing the version of events it gives with what appears in the accounts of some other contemporary authorities.²

It was known for many years that Vatatzes had written a history of Nāder Šāh. The work was thought to have been lost,³ but the distinguished Rumanian historian Nicolae Iorga⁴ found a manuscript of it in an old library of books in

1 – Basile Vatatzes (ed. N. Iorga) *Persica: Histoire de Chah-Nadir*, Bucharest, 1939. Iorga included in the book a long contents section, which is effectively a summary, and an introductory essay (both in French). Both are useful, but must be used with caution: Iorga made some errors when translating Vatatzes' text. For example, Iorga appears to have made a mistake in misreading Vatatzes' account of the blinding of Režā Quli Mirzā in 1742 to signify that Vatatzes himself was in Mašhad at the time (*History*, viii). Vatatzes' text does not say so – certainly not at the page reference Iorga gave (p. 278). See also nt. 28 below.

2 – This article is based on a presentation to the 4th International Round table on Safavid Studies held at Bamberg on 3-6 July 2003 and on the research toward my book *The Sword of Persia* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2006). I am grateful especially to Christos Nifadopoulos and Leo Drollas for their translations, without which these studies would have been impossible; to Dr John Appleby, who first drew my attention to Vatatzes' *History*; to Ernest Tucker, who commented on the original presentation and made some suggestions, and to Jeremy Black, who also suggested some improvements.

3 – This was Laurence Lockhart's conclusion (concurring with earlier scholars) when he published his biography of Nāder Šāh in 1938 (Laurence Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, London, Luzac and Co, 1938, p. 312). When Lockhart published his follow-up book, *The Fall of the Safavi Dynasty* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958) he included the Iorga edition of Vatatzes' *History* in his bibliography, but I have found only two references to it in Lockhart's footnotes, on pages 248 and 296, both addressing points of detail arising out of Iorga's French introduction and contents section. Lockhart did not give an assessment of the value of Vatatzes' work in his appendix of notes on sources, and it seems likely that this was because he never got far into the Greek text and had not reached a proper judgement on it. I have found no reference to Vatatzes' *History* in anything published since 1958.

4 – Iorga was also an important statesman in Rumania between the wars. He was murdered by

Greek and Russian at Cotnari in Moldavia, and published the original Greek text in 1939 with the French title *Persica: Histoire de Chah-Nadir* (referred to hereafter as Vatatze's *History*). Iorga's publication has not been much used by scholars since 1939; reflecting perhaps the difficulty of Vatatze's Greek but also a general neglect (until recently) of the Nāder Šāh period in academic studies outside Iran.⁵

Vatatze's account of Nāder's life is not his only known book. An edition of his other work, the *Voyages de Basile Vatace en Europe et en Asie* appeared in 1886.⁶ It seems Iorga was not aware of the *Voyages* when he drew up his edition of the *History*, which was unfortunate because in the *Voyages* Vatatze gave details of his own life, his origins and his activities in Persia that were missing from the *History*. In many ways the texts are complementary; when he refers to Nāder in the account of his travels, Vatatze frequently directs the reader to his biography. In addition Vatatze produced a map of the Caspian and Aral Sea regions, drawing on his travels, in London in 1732. There are copies of this map in the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale.

According to his own account in the *Voyages*, Vatatze was born in 1694 in Therapia, a suburb of Constantinople.⁷ His father was a poor priest of the Orthodox church and Basile was the youngest of five sons. He lived with his family up to the age of 14, and was probably educated by his father. At that age he went out into the world, and set himself up as a merchant. He went to Moscow. After three years there, he returned to Constantinople, and then set out on further travels; but he always returned to Moscow.

Over the years Vatatze travelled to most of the main capitals of Europe as well as the Caucasus, Persia and the main towns of Central Asia. He visited Darband and Šamāḥi, Gilān, Qazvin, Qom, Kašān and Iṣfahān in 1716; Khiva, Buḥārā, Kalāt, Mašhad, Māzanderān and Gilān again in 1727-1729. He met Nāder personally two or three times in Mašhad on the second trip, not leaving the city until after Nāder left on his campaign against Herāt in May 1729. At that time Nāder was known as Ṭahmāsp Quli Ḥān, having been given that title by the Safavid prince Ṭahmāsp, whom he served as *generalissimo*. Vatatze claims that he had private audiences with Nāder and conducted secret business with him on behalf of the Russian commander in Gilān, General Levashov. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate further on the nature of that business. Nāder gave Vatatze a fir-

the fascist Iron Guard. IN 1940.

5 – Iran has always been called Iran by the people of that country, but has only been generally called by that name by English speakers since the 1930s. I use the term Persia in the 18th century context because that was the convention in English at that time.

6 – Basile Vatatze (ed. E. Legrand) *Voyages de Basile Vatace en Europe et en Asie* (Paris, 1886) (sometimes called the *Itinerary of Basile Vatatze*). Legrand included a fairly extensive summary in French. Unlike the *History*, the *Voyages* in this edition reached a relatively wide readership. For example, Lord Curzon referred to it in his description of the fortress of Kalat in his book *Persia and the Persian Question*, London, 1906, vol. 1, p. 136 (originally published 1892) – though Curzon mistakenly credited C. Schefer as the editor. The great Curzon described Vatatze's Greek as 'quaint, but very intelligible'.

7 – Vatatze, *Voyages*, p. 195.