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Shah Esma'il, Deputy of the Hidden Imam?

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Summary: There are hardly any contemporary Persian sources discussing Shah Esma'il I's claim to semi-divinity. In this article we offer the translation of an unpublished and hitherto unknown contemporary Persian account that provides proof that Esma'il was indeed believed to be the expected deputy of the Imam. This belief is further supported by contemporary European sources that reflect the impressions and sentiments that their informants had about Esma'il and his followers, of which we give relevant examples.

As ERIKA GLASSEN already pointed out in 1971, official Persian chronicles are mostly silent about the claim to divinity, prophethood or deputyship (*velayat*; *niyyabat*) of Shah Esma'il I (r. 1501–1524).¹ Nevertheless, one finds some references to the alleged otherworldly nature of Esma'il, such as in QOMI's *Kholasat al-Tavarikh*.² Another later source, 'ABDI SHIRAZI's *Takmilat al-Akhhbar* reports that when Esma'il arrived in Minkul at the Ostajalu tribe that he was welcomed by a dancing and singing crowd led by the tribal elders, who honored him as the *moqaddameh-ye zaman* or the Precursor of the Lord of Time.³ However, the claim to divine essence was not unique to Esma'il at that time, it was, as it were, in the air of the era. Some of Esma'il's contenders for power likewise claimed it, such as his contemporary Sayyed Mohammad b. Falah Musha'sha'.⁴ Likewise, before Esma'il took Yazd, its governor, Mohammad Kurrah, had been recognized as Mahdi by the city's notables.⁵

It is evident that these notions about the semi-divine status of some religious leaders were not isolated and single instances among the Turkic groups in Anatolia and even if they were it begs the question where did the Ustajalu get this notion about Esma'il being the *na'eb* or the Imam's deputy? As GLASSEN pointed out the millenarian beliefs were thriving in

¹ GLASSEN 1971, p. 64.

² AL-QOMI 1363, vol. 1, p. 75.

³ SHIRAZI 1369, p. 38.

⁴ CASHEL 1929, p. 57.

⁵ HAYATI TABRIZI 2018, f. 187r–v [318–321] Based on a *hadith* allegedly concocted by the Qadi of Aberquh: *Raytu al-Mahdi fi qaryatin yuqalu laha qurat*. (I saw the Mahdi in two villages and they called him Qurat – رأيت المهدي في قريتين يقال له قرّة).

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