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# Seljuk Ardabil: From a Frontier City to a Center of Sufism and Urban Trade, with Emphasis on Its Peak Flourishing and the Groundwork for the Safavid Rise

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the city of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE) as a historical turning point in the trajectory of urban transformations from the advent of Islam to the rise of the Safavids. Focusing on the question of “how Ardabil was transformed from a frontier city into a religious-commercial center,” the study demonstrates that the Seljuks, through the policies of Niẓām al-Mulk, a bureaucratic-religious administrative structure, organized urban planning—including the congregational mosque, bazaar, madrasas, dams—a market-oriented economy based on silk, textiles, and metalwork, the organization of guilds and the office of the muhtasib, and support for Sufism through Sufi lodges and endowments, elevated Ardabil into a multifunctional urban center. These transformations paved the way for the emergence of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabīlī and the Safavid family. The Seljuks created a bridge between early Islam, characterized by Sunni-Abbasid structures, and the Safavid state, marked by Shiʿi-national state formation. Ardabil's legacy in Shiʿi state-building included local-national identity, the endowment-based structure, militarized Sufism, the Turkic language, and a model of urban planning. Drawing on historical, geographical, and endowment sources, this study presents Seljuk Ardabil as a successful model of a secondary city in shaping major historical transformations.

**Keywords:** Ardabil, Seljuks, Islamic urbanism, Sufism, Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, Niẓām al-Mulk, bazaar, waqf, silk trade, Sufi lodge, Shiʿi state-building, Safavids, Azerbaijan, irrigation, guilds

## Introduction

The city of Ardabil, as one of the key centers of Azerbaijan in the Islamic period, underwent a long and turbulent course of urban, social, economic, and religious transformations from the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE to the rise of the Safavids in the early sixteenth century CE. These transformations not only shaped the local identity of the city but also turned it into a center for the emergence of one of the most important Shiʿi states in Iranian history. Within this process, the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE) holds particular importance as a historical turning point, because during this period Ardabil was transformed from a frontier and military base conquered by the Arabs into a dynamic religious-commercial center with an organized urban structure, a market-oriented



economy, and a central role in Islamic Sufism. This transformation prepared the ground for the emergence of the Safavid family and the establishment of a Shi'i state in later centuries, elevating Ardabil from a peripheral city to one of the key points in the urban-religious network of Islamic Iran. The main research question of this study is: How was Ardabil transformed during the Seljuk period from a frontier city into a religious-commercial center? Answering this question requires an in-depth examination of the administrative structure, urban planning, economy, society, and the role of Sufism during this period.

The importance of the Seljuk period as a turning point can be analyzed across several dimensions. First, from a political-administrative perspective, the Seljuks, through the establishment of an organized vizierial system and the appointment of figures such as Niẓām al-Mulk Ṭūsī, transformed the administrative structure of Iranian cities from the military-oriented model of the Umayyads and Abbasids toward a bureaucratic-religious system. Ardabil, which had previously been merely a military base on the Byzantine and Caucasian frontier, was transformed in this period into an equipped seat of administration, where shihnas, governors, and local bureaucrats were stationed (1). By founding Niẓāmiyya madrasas in major cities, and through indirect influence on Ardabil, Niẓām al-Mulk created a network of scholars and jurists who later became concentrated around the shrine complex of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabilī (2).

Second, from the perspective of urban planning and physical structure, the Seljuks implemented in Ardabil a model of the Islamic city consisting of a central core composed of the congregational mosque, bazaar, seat of government, and madrasas. This model, which can also be observed in Seljuk cities such as Isfahan, Baghdad, and Nishapur, was adapted in Ardabil to local features such as proximity to Mount Sabalan and the Bālharud River. The construction of stone dams, irrigation canals, and new qanats made it possible to expand agricultural lands and, consequently, increase the urban population (3). Ardabil's bazaar developed during this period with specialized rows for silk, metalwork, and textile production, while caravanserais and timchas were added to it. This development turned Ardabil into one of the key stations on the northern silk trade route (4).

Third, from an economic perspective, the Seljuks stimulated urban production through waqf policies and tax exemptions. Textile production, especially silk and carpets, metalwork, and pottery in Ardabil reached a level of quality that enabled its products to be exported to Anatolia, Syria, and even Europe. Guilds became more organized during this period, and the muhtasibs played a stronger supervisory role (5). Agriculture also became stable through Niẓām al-Mulk's land reforms, including the endowment of agricultural lands to mosques and madrasas, while wheat, barley, cotton, and cold-climate fruits entered regional markets.

Fourth, from a religious and social perspective, the Seljuks prepared the ground for the transformation of Ardabil's religious identity through their support for Sufism. Although Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabilī, born in 1252 CE, lived in the late Seljuk and early Ilkhanid periods, the context for his Sufi activity was shaped in the Seljuk zawiyas of Ardabil. The Seljuks used Sufism as an instrument of political-social unity, and zawiyas, ribats, and khanaqahs were established in important cities, including Ardabil (6). These zawiyas later developed into the shrine complex of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn and transformed Ardabil into a center of Sufism and, subsequently, Shi'ism.

The main research question—how was Ardabil transformed from a frontier city into a religious-commercial center?—has multiple answers in this period. During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, Ardabil was primarily a military and administrative base under the control of caliphal governors, and its congregational mosque was its only limited religious center. In the Seljuk period, however, the arrival of waqf-based investments, the expansion of the silk trade, and support for Sufism transformed the city into a multifunctional center. This transformation was not

accidental; rather, it resulted from deliberate Seljuk policies that used a combination of military, economic, and religious power to control frontier regions. Ardabil, because of its geographical location on the north-south trade route and its proximity to the Caucasus, was the most suitable site for this policy.

Drawing on historical, geographical, and waqf sources, this study seeks to answer how the Seljuks, through the instruments of urban planning, economy, and Sufism, transformed Ardabil into a successful model of the Islamic city. This transformation affected not only the physical structure of the city but also its social organization, religious identity, and connection with the Safavid family, turning Ardabil into a bridge between the local history of Azerbaijan and the national history of Iran. Ultimately, the Seljuk period, as a turning point, demonstrates the high capacity of secondary cities to shape major historical transformations.

### **Administrative and Political Structure**

The administrative and political structure of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE), as one of the key cities of Azerbaijan, represented an advanced model of a bureaucratic-religious system shaped by the central policies of the Seljuks, particularly the vizierate of Niẓām al-Mulk Ṭūsī, as well as the local role of governors, shihnas, and bureaucrats. This structure transformed Ardabil from a military frontier base, which during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods was mainly under the control of the caliph's governors, into a semi-autonomous administrative center with strong ties to the Seljuk court. In this period, viziers, particularly Niẓām al-Mulk, played a central role in urban policymaking; shihnas ensured security and military order; governors administered daily affairs; and the dīwāns managed fiscal, judicial, and waqf-related matters. By combining central authority with local autonomy, this system not only created political stability but also prepared the ground for economic development, urban planning, and Sufism in Ardabil, which later led to the emergence of the Safavid family.

#### *The Role of the Viziers: Niẓām al-Mulk as the Architect of the Administrative Structure*

The vizierate in the Seljuk period, especially under Niẓām al-Mulk Ṭūsī, the vizier of Alp Arslan and Malik-Shah from 1063 to 1092 CE, reached the height of its power and influence, and Ardabil also benefited from these policies. Through the establishment of the supreme dīwān and the organization of the dīwāns of istīfā', ṭughrā, and ishraf, Niẓām al-Mulk transformed the administrative system of Iran from a military-centered model into a bureaucratic-religious one (1). In Ardabil, Niẓām al-Mulk's influence can be seen indirectly but profoundly through extensive waqf deeds and the selection of governors and shihnas loyal to the court. He endowed the agricultural lands surrounding Ardabil to mosques, madrasas, and Sufi zawiyas so that both a stable income would be generated for the scholars and local loyalty to the Seljuks would be secured (3).

In his *Siyāsatnāma*, Niẓām al-Mulk emphasizes that viziers must administer frontier cities such as Ardabil by appointing learned governors and firm shihnas in order to prevent the influence of foreign powers, including Byzantium and Georgia (7, p. 112). He also ordered that the dīwān of istīfā' be established in Ardabil so that kharāj, zakāt, and commercial taxes would be accurately recorded. This dīwān, in cooperation with the agents of the public treasury, transferred market and agricultural revenues to the Seljuk treasury and allocated part of them to the repair of qanats and the dams of the Bālharud River. Niẓām al-Mulk also created a model for Ardabil through the establishment of Niẓāmiyya madrasas in major cities; although no direct Niẓāmiyya madrasa is recorded in Ardabil, the maktabas attached to the congregational mosque of Ardabil followed this model and trained Shafi'i scholars (8).

### *The Shihna: Guardian of Military and Political Order*

In the Seljuk structure, the shihna was the military commander of the city, appointed directly by the court and responsible for the security of the citadel, the city walls, and the suppression of local revolts. In Ardabil, the shihnās had a dual military-administrative role: on the one hand, they protected the northern frontiers against Georgian and Armenian attacks; on the other hand, they cooperated with the governors to enforce court decrees (9). The shihna of Ardabil was usually selected from among Turkish ghulams or loyal amirs, and his seat was located in the citadel, which had been transformed into the seat of government.

The shihnās also participated in the collection of kharāj and the enforcement of judicial rulings. For example, when peasants refused to pay kharāj, the shihna intervened with military force (2). This dual role made the shihna one of the most powerful local officials, but Nizām al-Mulk prevented their abuse of power through the supervision of the dīwān of ishraf. During the reign of Malik-Shah, the shihna of Ardabil was responsible for repairing the city walls and constructing watchtowers, which guaranteed the commercial security of silk caravans (10).

### *The Governor: Executor of Local Policies*

The governor, or local ruler, was the direct representative of the sultan in Ardabil and administered the daily affairs of the city. The governors of Ardabil were usually selected from local Iranian families or Seljuk amirs and acted under the supervision of the shihna and the dīwān of istīfā'. The governor's responsibilities included tax collection, supervision of the bazaar, resolution of local disputes, and support for scholars and Sufis (3). In Ardabil, the governors cooperated with the mīrābs to regulate the distribution of qanat water and with the muhtasibs to maintain order in the bazaar.

The governors also acted as mediators between the court and the local population. For example, during periods of famine, the governor of Ardabil distributed grain from the local treasury and obtained authorization from Nizām al-Mulk to reduce kharāj (8). This flexibility made the governors popular local figures and helped prevent peasant revolts.

### *The Dīwāns: The Backbone of Bureaucracy*

The dīwāns in Ardabil included the dīwān of istīfā', responsible for taxation and kharāj; the dīwān of ṭughrā, responsible for official documents; the dīwān of ishraf, responsible for supervising officials; and the dīwān of awqāf, responsible for managing endowments. Through the precise registration of agricultural lands and production workshops, the dīwān of istīfā' created stable revenue. The dīwān of awqāf, influenced by Nizām al-Mulk's waqf deeds, managed agricultural lands and textile workshops, allocating their income to mosques, zawiyas, and the poor (9).

The dīwān of ṭughrā sealed waqf and commercial documents and prevented forgery. In Ardabil, this dīwān registered contracts of muzāra'a and musāqāt and referred property disputes to the judge. The dīwān of ishraf prevented corruption among governors and shihnās by dispatching secret agents and sending annual reports to the court (7).

The Seljuk administrative structure in Ardabil combined Seljuk centralism with local flexibility. Nizām al-Mulk attracted the loyalty of scholars through waqfs and madrasas; the shihnās guaranteed frontier security; the governors functioned as bridges to the local population; and the dīwāns created bureaucratic efficiency. This

structure prepared Ardabil to receive Sufism and the Safavid family, because Sufi zawiyas were supported by Seljuk waqfs. In comparison with the Abbasid period, which emphasized the caliph's governors, the Seljuks gave greater authority to local officials, and this flexibility transformed Ardabil into a semi-autonomous center that later, in the Timurid period, rose to the status of a Sufi pole.

### **Urban Planning and Urban Fabric**

The urban planning and physical fabric of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE), as an advanced model of the Islamic city, were shaped by the central policies of the Seljuks, particularly Niẓām al-Mulk, as well as by the geographical, economic, and religious necessities of the region. This period witnessed the development of the city's central core, consisting of the congregational mosque, bazaar, madrasas, and seat of government, which was complemented by irrigation systems such as dams and qanats and transformed Ardabil from a military frontier base into a dynamic religious-commercial center. The urban fabric of Ardabil in this period combined traditional Iranian elements, such as the citadel and qanat, with Seljuk Islamic innovations, such as specialized bazaar rows and Niẓāmiyya-like madrasas, and was adapted to the cold mountainous climate and the city's strategic location on the northern silk trade route. This section examines the bazaar, mosque, madrasas, and dams, and concludes with a hypothetical reconstructed map of the urban fabric of Seljuk Ardabil.

#### *The Bazaar: The Economic and Social Heart of the City*

The bazaar of Ardabil during the Seljuk period developed as the main axis of the urban fabric, with specialized rows, timchas, caravanserais, and domed roofs, representing a model comparable to Seljuk bazaars such as those of Isfahan and Tabriz. The bazaar was located adjacent to the congregational mosque so that supervision by muhtasibs would be easier and commerce would remain consistent with Islamic legal principles (11). The main rows included the silk row for trade with China and Byzantium, the textile row for local wool and silk production, the metalworkers' row for copperware and weapons, and the leatherworkers' row.

By endowing production workshops to the bazaar, Niẓām al-Mulk stimulated production and constructed neighboring caravanserais for foreign merchants (3). The bazaar of Ardabil had entrance gates and watchtowers that provided commercial security, and small timchas were added for luxury transactions involving jewelry and spices. This bazaar was not only economic but also social; guilds held professional celebrations there, and muhtasibs settled commercial disputes (5). The location of the bazaar in the city center facilitated access to the citadel and neighborhoods and turned Ardabil into a key station on the northern silk route.

#### *The Congregational Mosque: The Religious and Educational Core*

The congregational mosque of Ardabil, rooted in the Umayyad period, expanded under the Seljuks as the religious-educational core of the city and, with its tall minarets, four iwans, and spacious courtyard, became a model of Seljuk mosques. The mosque was located adjacent to the bazaar and the seat of government, and the maktabas attached to it taught Shafī'i jurisprudence and religious sciences (12). Through the endowment of land and bazaar revenues to the mosque, Niẓām al-Mulk made its repair and expansion possible and established a library on the northern side of the mosque that preserved manuscripts of jurisprudence and literature.

The congregational mosque was a center of public assembly; Friday sermons were delivered by Shafī'i judges, and the sultan's decrees were announced from the minarets (2). The central courtyard, with its pool and plane trees,

provided a resting space for pilgrims and merchants. Seljuk mosaic tilework with Qur'anic verses and arabesque motifs turned the mosque into a work of art. This mosque was not only religious but also political; governors and shihnas consulted scholars there.

### *Madrasas: Centers for the Training of Scholars and Administration*

Although Seljuk Ardabil did not have a direct Nizāmiyya madrasa like Baghdad, the maktabas attached to the congregational mosque and the Sufi zawiya played a similar role. By establishing the Nizāmiyya madrasa model, Nizām al-Mulk founded maktabas in Ardabil where jurisprudence, hadith, literature, and astronomy were taught (1). These madrasas had stable incomes through the endowment of agricultural lands surrounding the city and attracted students from distant regions.

The madrasas were located on the southern or eastern side of the congregational mosque and contained student cells, lecture halls, and libraries. The Shafi'i scholars of Ardabil, who later became concentrated around the shrine complex of Shaykh Ṣafī, were trained in these madrasas. The madrasas also had administrative roles; the dīwān of ũghrā registered waqf documents in them, and judges resolved disputes there (8).

### *Dams and the Irrigation System: The Vital Artery of the City*

Dams on the Bālharud and Qara-Su rivers, together with new qanats, formed the backbone of Seljuk urban planning in Ardabil. Through advanced engineering, the Seljuks built permanent stone dams that directed water into main and secondary canals (3). These dams not only supported agriculture on the Mughan plain but also supplied drinking water for the city and its bathhouses.

Mīrābs, selected from among local scholars, regulated water distribution according to Islamic law, and water-related disputes were resolved in the judge's court. Deep qanats, extending up to ten kilometers, made dry lands fertile and expanded the apple and pear orchards surrounding the city. This irrigation system increased the urban population and brought agricultural surplus to the bazaar.

## **Economy and Trade**

The economy and trade of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE), as one of the main pillars of urban transformation, reached a peak of prosperity through a focus on the silk trade, textile production, and metalworking, turning the city into one of the key centers of the northern silk trade route and the regional markets of Azerbaijan. This market-oriented economy was supervised by organized guilds and Islamic muḥtasibs, who ensured production quality, fair pricing, and compliance with Islamic principles. Through the waqf policies of Nizām al-Mulk, tax exemptions, and the construction of commercial infrastructure such as caravanserais and timchas, the Seljuks stimulated production and trade and elevated Ardabil from a military base to a dynamic economic center. This section examines silk, textiles, and metal as the main commodities, as well as the role of guilds and the muḥtasib in organizing the economy.

### *Silk: The Commercial Artery of Ardabil*

The silk trade in Seljuk Ardabil played a central role because of the city's geographical location on the north-south trade route from China to Byzantium and Syria, making this commodity a symbol of the urban economy. Raw

silk was imported from Gilan and Transoxiana and transformed in Ardabil's workshops into gold-woven fabrics, dībā, and satin (4). The silk row in Ardabil's bazaar, with its specialized timchas and secure warehouses, served as the center of transactions, where Armenian, Jewish, and Iranian merchants were active.

By endowing silk-weaving workshops to mosques and Sufi zawiyas, Niẓām al-Mulk stabilized production and granted tax exemptions to silk exporters (3). Ardabil silk was exported to Anatolia, Baghdad, and even Constantinople, and in exchange, spices, jewelry, and metal tools were imported. The caravanserais adjacent to the bazaar ensured the security of foreign merchants, and shihnas escorted the caravans (2). The silk trade not only increased public-treasury revenue but also engaged women in spinning and dyeing silk at home, thereby strengthening the household economy.

#### *Textiles: Mass Production and Export*

Textile production in Ardabil, using the wool of local sheep, imported silk, and cotton from the Mughan plain, included various woolen fabrics such as cloaks and shawls, silk fabrics such as dībā and brocade, and gold-woven textiles for the court. Large workshops in the textile row operated hundreds of vertical looms, and knotted carpets with Seljuk arabesque designs were presented as diplomatic gifts to the caliphs of Baghdad (11).

By promoting Persian knotting techniques and importing natural dyes such as madder and indigo, the Seljuks raised the quality of Ardabil textiles to an international level. Niẓām al-Mulk's waqf deeds exempted workshops from taxation, and women set up handlooms in their homes (5). Woolen textiles were exported to the tribes of the Caucasus, while silk fabrics were sent to the Seljuk court. Textile timchas in the bazaar facilitated wholesale transactions, and the textile guilds had internal regulations governing size and quality. This production created employment for thousands of people, and the surplus reached the markets of Tabriz and Shirvan.

#### *Metal: Vessels and Weapons*

Metalworking in Ardabil included copper and brass vessels, such as cauldrons, trays, and ewers, as well as weapons, including swords, daggers, and armor. These were supplied by copper from the mines of Sabalan and iron imported from the Caucasus. The metalworkers' row, with large furnaces and advanced hammering techniques, produced engraved vessels bearing Qur'anic verses, which were endowed to mosques (12).

Weapon production served the Seljuk army and aristocratic hunting, and Ardabil's tempered swords were used in the Crusades. Niẓām al-Mulk endowed metal workshops to madrasas and promoted engraving and early enameling (1). Ardabil's metal products were exported to Syria and Egypt, while silver and gold were imported in exchange. Women participated in polishing vessels, and children worked as apprentices.

#### *Guilds: The Organization of Production and Trade*

Guilds in Seljuk Ardabil were powerful professional organizations that controlled production, quality, and prices. Each guild, such as textile producers, metalworkers, and silk merchants, had a guild head, or amīn, internal rules, and a support fund. Guilds were located in specialized timchas and held professional celebrations, such as Nowruz festivities (5).

Niẓām al-Mulk encouraged production through tax exemptions for waqf-affiliated guilds, and the guilds participated in repairing qanats and bathhouses. Women were active in household guilds, including spinning and pottery, while children began apprenticeships from the age of seven. Guilds resolved internal disputes in the

presence of the muhtasib and prevented forgery. This organization stabilized the economy and turned Ardabil into a model guild-based city.

### *The Muhtasib: Guardian of Islamic Law and the Bazaar*

The muhtasib, as a religious-administrative official, was responsible for supervising the bazaar, the quality of goods, weights, and prices. The muhtasib of Ardabil was selected from among Shafi'i scholars and patrolled the bazaar with market officers, known as 'arifs. He checked standard scales, prevented hoarding, and implemented fair pricing (7).

The muhtasib also supervised the observance of veiling, the prohibition of usury, and the lawfulness of goods. In cases of violation, financial penalties or flogging were imposed, and reports were sent to the governor. The muhtasib cooperated with the guilds and organized bazaar celebrations. This supervision attracted the trust of foreign merchants and made the economy compliant with Islamic law.

The Seljuk economy of Ardabil was integrated: silk supported global trade, textiles enabled mass production, and metal supplied local and military needs. Guilds created organization, and the muhtasib established supervision. This economy made Ardabil resilient against crises and prepared the ground for the Safavid shrine complex, because bazaar revenues were endowed to the zawiyas. In comparison with the Abbasid period, which emphasized state-controlled trade, the Seljuks strengthened the local-guild economy.

### **Society and Sufism**

The urban society of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE) was a dynamic combination of ethnic groups, classes, and professions that, under the influence of Sufism as a socially and religiously integrative force, moved toward a unified identity and prepared the ground for the emergence of the Safavid family. This multicultural society included local Iranians, consisting of farmers and artisans; migrant Turks, consisting of pastoralists and soldiers; Armenian dhimmis, consisting of merchants and metalworkers; and remaining Arabs, consisting of scholars and bureaucrats, who were organized into professional and ethnic neighborhoods. Seljuk Sufism, through the establishment of zawiyas and support for extensive waqfs, played a central role in linking these groups and turned Ardabil into a center for the cultivation of Shaykh Şafī al-Dīn Ardabilī, who lived from 1252 to 1334 CE and was the ancestor of the Safavid family. This section examines the social structure, the role of Shaykh Şafī al-Dīn as the ancestor of the Safavids, zawiyas, and waqf as instruments of Sufism.

### *Social Structure: Multicultural but Integrated*

Seljuk Ardabil's society was organized around professional and ethnic neighborhoods: the Iranian neighborhood in the south of the bazaar, inhabited by textile producers and metalworkers; the Turkish neighborhood north of the citadel, inhabited by soldiers and pastoralists; the Armenian neighborhood in the east, inhabited by silk merchants and leatherworkers; and the scholars' neighborhood adjacent to the congregational mosque. These neighborhoods were separated by winding alleys, local bathhouses, and small mosques, but the bazaar and the congregational mosque served as shared centers (11).

Women played a key role in the household economy; they participated in silk spinning, pottery, and dairy processing and contributed to small waqfs, such as household gardens. Children began guild apprenticeships at the age of seven, and young people received ethical training in Sufi zawiyas. Shared celebrations such as Nowruz,

Eid al-Fiṭr, and mourning rituals for Muḥarram, which began under the Seljuks, created social cohesion (5). Guilds, as supra-ethnic organizations, created links between groups, and muḥtasibs prevented discrimination.

### *Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabilī: Ancestor of the Safavid Family and Symbol of Local Sufism*

Although Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabilī was born in the late Seljuk and early Ilkhanid periods and lived from 1252 to 1334 CE, the context for his Sufi activity was shaped in the Seljuk zawiyas of Ardabil. He came from an Iranian-Sufi family that lived in the scholars' neighborhood and studied Shafī'i jurisprudence in the maktabas of the congregational mosque. Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn was a disciple of Shaykh Zāhid Gīlānī, and after his master's death, he transformed the Ardabil zawiya into a center of Sufism (13).

The Seljuks, through their support for Sufism, prepared the ground for his emergence. In the *Siyāsatnāma*, Niẓām al-Mulk emphasizes that Sufis should be supported in frontier cities such as Ardabil in order to prevent Isma'ili influence and local revolts (7, p. 145). By attracting disciples from among Turks, Iranians, and Armenians, Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn integrated the multicultural society and promoted the Turkic language among his disciples, which later became the language of the Safavids. Through marriage alliances with local families, he created a kinship network and prepared the earliest waqf deeds for the zawiya. Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn symbolized the transition of Sufism from Sunnism to Shi'ism; although he himself was Shafī'i, his disciples later inclined toward Shi'ism (14).

### *Zawiyas: Centers of Sufism and Social Education*

Zawiyas in Seljuk Ardabil, as small khanaqahs, were established near the congregational mosque and the scholars' neighborhoods and functioned as schools, guesthouses, and social centers. Each zawiya included a hall for dhikr, cells for disciples, a kitchen, and a bathhouse. Zawiyas were supported by Seljuk waqfs, including land, workshops, and gardens, and attracted disciples from various social classes (6).

Zawiyas provided ethical education; children learned etiquette, the Qur'an, and Sufi music there. Young people participated in samā' ceremonies, and women attended in separate zawiyas or from behind curtains. Zawiyas also offered hospitality; pilgrims from the Caucasus and Anatolia stayed there and received food. The elders of the zawiyas consulted with governors and mediated disputes. The Ardabil zawiya, which later became the shrine complex of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, was the main core of local Sufism, and its disciples numbered in the thousands during the Timurid period.

### *Waqf: The Economic Instrument of Sufism and Social Cohesion*

Waqf in Seljuk Ardabil was the backbone of Sufism and society. Niẓām al-Mulk endowed agricultural lands, textile workshops, and fruit gardens to the zawiyas in order to create stable income for disciples and the poor (3). Waqf deeds were registered in the dīwān of ṭughrā, and trustees, chosen from among scholars or disciples, managed them. Waqfs were multifunctional:

Economic: income for repairing the zawiya and providing food and clothing for disciples.

Social: distribution of bread and soup to the poor during ceremonies.

Religious: support for maktabas and the copying of the Qur'an.

Aristocratic women also established small waqfs, such as household gardens, and merchants endowed silk workshops. Waqfs were tax-exempt, and trustees submitted annual reports to the judge. This system reduced

poverty and attracted disciples from the lower classes. Seljuk waqfs formed the initial core of Safavid endowments and transformed Ardabil into an economic-religious center.

Seljuk Sufism in Ardabil integrated multicultural society, prepared the ground for the emergence of the Safavid family, and created a waqf-based economy. Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn was the bridge in the transition from Sunni to Shi'i Sufism; zawiya were centers of education and hospitality; and waqfs guaranteed social stability. In comparison with the Abbasid period, in which Sufism remained marginal, the Seljuks turned Sufism into a political-social instrument and transformed Ardabil into one of its poles. This transformation prepared Ardabil for Safavid state-building.

## **Agriculture and Environment**

The agriculture and environment of Ardabil during the Seljuk period (1038–1194 CE), as the foundation of the rural-urban economy, reached a level of sustainability and productivity through advanced irrigation systems, the diversity of cold-climate crops, and the land reforms of Niẓām al-Mulk. This not only met the city's food needs but also enabled agricultural surplus to be exported to regional markets and increased the kharāj revenues of the public treasury. Ardabil's natural environment, with its cold mountainous climate, the fertile alluvial soil of the Mughan plain, the water-rich Bālharud and Qara-Su rivers, and the springs of Sabalan, created both challenges and opportunities for agriculture, which the Seljuks transformed into opportunities through irrigation engineering and waqf policies. This section examines irrigation, crops, and reforms and shows how Seljuk agriculture in Ardabil strengthened the village-city connection and prepared the ground for the development of the Safavid shrine complex.

### *Irrigation: Advanced Engineering and Islamic Management*

The irrigation system of Seljuk Ardabil combined stone dams, deep qanats, main and secondary canals, and noria waterwheels that directed water from rivers and springs to fields and gardens. By sending engineers from Nishapur and Baghdad, the Seljuks built permanent dams on the Bālharud, some of which reached five meters in height and stored water in stone reservoirs (3). These dams controlled spring floods and, in summer, directed water into the main canals, or jūybārs, which extended up to fifteen kilometers.

The qanats, which had survived from the Sasanian period, were deepened and extended; some were excavated up to twenty kilometers and carried the groundwater of Sabalan to the Mughan plain. Mīrābs, selected from among Shafi'i scholars or Sufis of the zawiya, regulated water distribution according to Islamic shares, for example one-third for the landowner and two-thirds for the farmer, while water disputes were resolved in the judge's court (2). Ox-driven noria wheels carried well water to gardens, and an early form of drip irrigation using clay jars was employed for fruit trees. Women participated in collecting water for household fields, and children helped repair the canals. This irrigation system made a three-year crop rotation possible, consisting of fallow, grains, and legumes, and maintained soil fertility. Irrigation supplied not only agriculture but also bathhouses, the mosque, and the bazaar, turning Ardabil into a green city in a cold region.

### *Crops: Cold-Climate and Commercial Diversity*

The agricultural products of Seljuk Ardabil included grains such as wheat and barley, legumes such as lentils and chickpeas, cold-climate fruits such as apples, pears, grapes, pomegranates, and apricots, industrial crops such

as cotton and hemp, and fodder such as alfalfa. These crops were compatible with the cold climate and alluvial soil. Local hard wheat was cultivated for urban bread consumption and export to Tabriz, while barley supplied fodder for the horses of the Seljuk army (8).

The red apples of Ardabil, sweet and large, were exported to Baghdad, and grapes were dried for raisins and syrup. Cotton from the Mughan plain supplied raw material for textile production, and alfalfa supported pastoralist animal husbandry. The crop rotation promoted by Niẓām al-Mulk stabilized production: grains in the first year, legumes in the second year for nitrogen fixation, and fallow with alfalfa in the third year. The orchards surrounding the city were protected by mud walls, and the apiaries of Sabalan produced honey for export. The products were not only food items but also commercial goods; raisins and dried apples were sent to Anatolia, and cotton reached Ardabil's workshops. Women played a role in harvesting and drying fruit, and children helped collect legumes. This diversity created food security and brought surplus to the bazaar.

### *Reforms: Waqf, Kharāj Reduction, and Seed Distribution*

Seljuk land reforms, led by Niẓām al-Mulk, transformed Ardabil's agriculture. He revived abandoned lands that had resulted from earlier uprisings and reduced kharāj to one-fifth of the harvest in order to encourage farmers (7). The endowment of agricultural lands to mosques, zawiyas, and madrasas created stable income for the repair of qanats and the distribution of seed. Cold-resistant seeds were imported from Iraq and Khurasan, and steel ploughs were distributed from Isfahan.

Muzāraʿa and musāqāt contracts were registered in writing in the dīwān of ṭughrā, and waqf trustees provided free seed to poor farmers. Turkic tribes were transformed into settled farmers through compulsory settlement, and Armenian dhimmis specialized in horticulture. Reforms included land measurement by rope, using the jarīb unit, and registration in the dīwān of istīfāʿ. Women participated in small waqfs involving household gardens, and Sufis of the zawiya helped distribute food to farmers. These reforms doubled production and reduced famine. Mīrābs guaranteed justice in water allocation through Islamic legal opinions.

Seljuk agriculture in Ardabil was sustainable and integrated: engineered irrigation, diverse crops, and waqf-based reforms. This system created a village-city connection; agricultural surplus reached the bazaar, kharāj flowed to the public treasury, and food was delivered to zawiyas. In comparison with the Abbasid period, which imposed heavy kharāj, the Seljuks strengthened local agriculture. Agricultural waqfs formed the core of Safavid endowments and turned Ardabil into the granary of Azerbaijan. The cold environment was overcome through irrigation engineering, and the multicultural society cooperated in the fields.

### **Conclusion**

During the Seljuk period, Ardabil functioned as a firm bridge between early Islam and the Safavid state and left a rich legacy in Shiʿi state-building. This role was not accidental; rather, it was the result of deliberate Seljuk administrative, urban-planning, economic, social, and religious policies that elevated Ardabil from a military frontier city to a religious-commercial and Sufi center and prepared the ground for the emergence of one of the most powerful Shiʿi states in Iranian history. By establishing a bureaucratic-religious system under the leadership of Niẓām al-Mulk, the Seljuks transformed Ardabil's administrative structure from direct Abbasid caliphal control toward local semi-autonomy; shihnas guaranteed frontier security, governors administered daily affairs, dīwāns managed taxation and waqf, and this flexibility made possible the growth of local scholars and Sufis, from which the Safavid

family later benefited. Seljuk urban planning, with the central core of the congregational mosque, bazaar, madrasas, and dams, created an Islamic model that turned Ardabil into a key station on the northern silk route, while its irrigation infrastructure made sustainable agriculture possible. This urban fabric, supported by extensive waqfs, was transferred directly to the shrine complex of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabilī and expanded during the Safavid period into the great Dār al-İrshād complex. The Seljuk market-oriented economy, based on the silk trade, textile and metal production, and the supervision of guilds and the muḥtasib, generated stable income, part of which was endowed to Sufi zawiyas; these waqfs formed the initial core of Safavid endowments that financed the economy of the Shi'ī state. The multicultural society of Ardabil, which the Seljuks integrated through shared celebrations, supra-ethnic guilds, and Sufism, prepared the ground for Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn to attract disciples from different social classes. Seljuk zawiyas, supported by Niẓām al-Mulk's waqfs, were centers of ethical education, hospitality, and social mediation, uniting Turkish, Iranian, and Armenian disciples within a Sufi identity that later became the Safavid Shi'ī identity. Seljuk Sufism, which Niẓām al-Mulk regarded as an instrument of political-social unity, reached its peak in Ardabil, and Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn, trained within the zawiyas of this period, laid the foundations of Safavid state-building by attracting thousands of disciples and creating a kinship network. The Turkic language promoted in the zawiyas became the language of the Safavids, and the mourning rituals initiated under the Seljuks developed into Shi'ī rites. Seljuk agriculture, through land reforms, kharāj reduction, and the endowment of lands, created food security, and its surplus reached the zawiyas; this waqf-agricultural system developed during the Safavid period into the tiyul system and supplied the Qizilbash army. The Seljuks not only moved Ardabil from the margins to the center but also, by creating administrative, economic, and religious infrastructures, made possible the emergence of a Shi'ī state that began in Ardabil and unified Iran. Ardabil's legacy in Shi'ī state-building is evident in several dimensions: first, local-national identity, as Ardabil, through the shrine of Shaykh Ṣafī, became the spiritual capital of the Safavids and the city from which Shah İsmā'īl rose; second, the waqf structure, as Seljuk endowments, including land, workshops, and gardens, expanded under the Safavids and created enormous revenue for the state; third, militarized Sufism, as the disciples of the Ardabil zawiyas became the Qizilbash and formed the Safavid army; fourth, language and culture, as Ardabili Turkic became the language of the court and Sufi literature was transformed into Shi'ī poetry; and fifth, urban planning, as the Seljuk model of Ardabil was repeated in Safavid İsfahan, with the bazaar, mosque, and seat of government remaining the core of the city. This legacy shows that Seljuk Ardabil was not merely a bridge between early Islam, represented by the Sunni-Abbasid order, and the Safavid Shi'ī-national order, but also a successful model of a secondary city that, by combining local and central power, made major historical transformations possible. By investing in Ardabil, the Seljuks unintentionally created a state that kept Iran unified and Shi'ī for centuries and immortalized Ardabil's legacy as the cradle of political Shi'ism. This transformation offers an important lesson for understanding how frontier cities become centers of power and shows that Seljuk Ardabil, by linking Islam, trade, and Sufism, laid a firm foundation for Shi'ī state-building whose effects remain visible today in the identity of Azerbaijan and Iran.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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