

## The Safavids under Western Eyes: Seventeenth-Century European Travelers to Iran

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### Abstract

This essay takes a fresh look at the voluminous yet understudied Western travel writing about 17th-century Iran. It argues that, after this material is properly subjected to close scrutiny for authorial bias, interest and intertextuality, it remains exceedingly valuable for the information it provides on Safavid Iran. Early modern European travelers to Iran brought remnants of past religious and cultural prejudice with them, yet the best explored the country with an open eye, an appreciation for difference, and even a critical perspective on their own culture. They also provide remarkable, at times unique information about Iran and its inhabitants, opening up aspects of Safavid left uncovered by indigenous sources.

### Keywords

Travel narratives, Safavid Iran, Orientalism

Man kann von fremden Völkern immer, wenn man nur will, etwas Gutes lernen.  
Provided one is willing, one can always learn something good from foreign peoples.  
Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte neue Beschreibung der muscowitischen und persischen Reyse*

### Introduction

Until 1600, Iran, though renowned as a land of great antiquity and biblical import, remained largely unknown to Europeans.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of the Safavid dynasty at the turn of the sixteenth century had awakened a new curiosity in the country and its charismatic leader, Shah Isma'īl, but

<sup>1</sup> First-hand European knowledge about the country in the fifteenth century remained limited to the observations of a handful of Venetian travelers to the court of Uzun Hasan, the ruler of the Aq-qyunlu dynasty, which preceded the Safavids.

news about these developments mostly filtered through to Western Europe second-hand, by way of reports written by Venetian representatives stationed in Istanbul. For a full century, no more than a handful of Western, mostly Portuguese and Italian travelers serving as envoys actually visited Iran beyond Hormuz, leaving only fragmentary descriptions of life and politics in the Safavid realm.<sup>2</sup>

At the turn of the seventeenth century, all this changed. The rise to power of Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) and his outward looking agenda, epitomized by an energetic foreign policy, created a freshly inviting political and economic environment centered on a new, resplendent capital, Isfahan. This coincided with and was partly responsible for, an active European interest in Iran as a land of religious, commercial, and strategic opportunity. Representatives of various Catholic missionary orders entered the country and set up convents in places like Isfahan and Shiraz. Encouraged by Iran's anti-Ottoman policy, diplomats from a variety of European nations meanwhile began to frequent Isfahan in hopes of swaying Shah 'Abbas to join Europe's rulers in their struggle against the Turks. Before long, English and Dutch merchants, agents of the newly founded East India Companies, entered the Persian Gulf and established trading posts in the ports of Bandar 'Abbas and Kung as well as in Isfahan, Shiraz, and Kirman. The maritime network they created, which included regular shipping between various ports in the Persian Gulf as well as between Iran and India, facilitated access to the country and brought yet more Europeans. What had been a trickle in the sixteenth century turned into a flood after 1600, with a variety of travelers, tourists, people in search of profit, adventure or knowledge, and keen to visit an ancient land led by a fabled ruler, flocking to Iran in growing numbers. Whereas in the preceding period, the names of Vincentio d'Alessandri, António Tenreiro, Michele Membré, Anthony Sherley and Pedro Teixeira all but exhaust the list of visitors who left written accounts of value and substance, between 1600 and 1722 we have Antonio de Gouvea, Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa, Pietro della Valle, Adam Olearius, Cornelis Speelman, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Raphael du Mans, Jean Thevenot, John Fryer, Jean Chardin, Engelbert Kaempfer,

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<sup>2</sup> Examples are Antonio Tenreiro, *Itinerarios da India a Portugal por terra* ed. Antonio Baiao (Coimbra, 1923); Michele Membré, whose account has been translated and edited by A. H. Morton as *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)* (London, 1993); and the Italian travelers whose (translated) accounts on Iran are assembled in Charles Grey, ed., *A Narrative of Italian Travels in Persia* (London, 1873).

François Sanson, Cornelis de Bruyn, and Artemii Petrovich Volynskii, to name but the most prolific, perceptive, and informative ones.<sup>3</sup>

Their observations, brought out in dozens of travelogues, vastly enhanced and improved the volume and quality of knowledge in Europe about Iran, lifting the country out of the state of a fabled realm and turning it into a place explored and described from an experiential, empiricist perspective. Not to depict it as an imaginary world inhabited by mythical creatures, followers of a false, perverse prophet, but to observe and analyze it without prejudice became the self-appointed task of the best of these travelers.

The information their accounts offer has long been an important component of our knowledge about early modern Iran. In recent times the value and relevance of this type of information has become the object of intense scrutiny. Under the influence of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the scholarly discourse about cross-cultural contact generated by its thesis, Western travelers to the Islamic world have come under suspicion of being biased observers with ulterior motives whose writing objectified a supposedly stagnant Islamic world into a negative mirror image of the advancing West. *Orientalism* barely pays attention to early modern travelers, to be sure. Said never even mentions Jean Chardin, arguably the most renowned of the seventeenth-century travelers, and in a single reference to the Capuchin Raphael du Mans, mistakenly calls this source of much of the information purveyed by visitors to Iran in the Safavid period, a seventeenth-century geographer.<sup>4</sup> For the last three decades, Said's acolytes have been busy filling many of the gaps left by him, though not this one. To date, their work has continued to focus on the nineteenth century, the heyday of "Orientalism," and on specific topics, notably the harem. The ones who have investigated earlier periods have typically turned their attention to pre-colonial India, casting a post-colonial eye on the activities and attitudes of figures such as Thomas Roe, England's first ambassador to the court of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the period 1600-1730, Anne Marie Touzard has counted thirty-six French visitors alone whose accounts have been published. Most of these were men of the cloth, mainly missionaries. Many were marginal in terms of the time they spent in Iran and the quality of their reporting on the country. See Anne Marie Touzard, "Les voyageurs français en Perse de 1600 à 1730," *Eurasian Studies* 4:1 (2005), 41-7.

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978), 65.

<sup>5</sup> As someone who wrote in English, Thomas Roe has been an easy target for the Anglophone scholarly community. For different interpretations of his way of seeing and interpreting India and the Mughal court, see Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives/Cultural*

Not only have the seventeenth-century travelers been largely spared the anti-Orientalist and post-colonial gaze of modern scholarship, recent years have seen the appearance of a number of valuable studies on aspects of their work that, while paying full attention to the motives and interests that impelled them to leave home, have kept an open eye to their contribution to the formation of early modern cross-cultural knowledge. Examples are the remarkable studies of Dirk Van der Cruysse on Jean Chardin and on early modern European travel to Asia in general, Dominique Carnoy's discussion of French travelers to the Islamic Middle East, Hamid Tafazoli's recent book on the German contribution to knowledge about Iran and, most importantly, Joan-Pau Rubiés's work on Renaissance travelers to India, a brilliant example of the recent trend in scholarship about cross-cultural contact of bringing out "similarity, convergence and complementarity, rather than stark difference."<sup>6</sup>

The present essay follows this trend of seeking commensurability, arguing that, while their background and attendant assumptions clearly shaped their understanding of Safavid Iran, precluding cultural transparency, the seventeenth-century travelers also brought with them a set of specific ways of seeing that facilitated the translation and the mediation of difference to the point of engaged empathy. In this they represent a unique moment in the history of alterity. Throughout the sixteenth century, the majority of

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*Dialogues: "Discoveries of India in the Language of Colonialism"* (London, 1996); William Pinch, "Same Difference in India and Europe," *History and Theory* 38 (1997), 389-407; and Colin Paul Mitchell, *Sir Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire* (Karachi, 2000). For a good discussion of their various interpretations, see Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, 2007), 27-32. An alternative trend, sometimes articulated as a direct attack on Bernard Lewis's *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London, 1982) and its alleged binary opposition between Europe's kinetic curiosity and the complacent inertia of Muslims, has been to unearth and bring to light the exploits of early modern Muslim travelers beyond the well known Ibn Battuta. Alam and Subrahmanyam's recent book on Muslim travelers in the early modern period is a good example of this trend. The authors not only highlight the accomplishments of the (few) Indian and Iranian travelers whose works are known to us, but make an (unstated) attempt further to enhance the gloss of these accomplishments by juxtaposing them to a few carefully selected Western travelers from the same period, ones known for their perceptual limitations or for organizational defects in their published accounts. See Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> P. J. Marshall, "Afterword: The Legacies of Two Hundred Years of Contact," in H. V. Bowen, Margarete Lincoln, and Nigel Rugby, eds., *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, UK, 2002), 223.

Westerners traveling to the Islamic world were either pilgrims visiting the Holy Land, missionaries motivated by the urge to convert Muslims or non-Catholic Christians, or diplomats. Their accounts, especially the ones written by men of the cloth, clearly bear the remnants of a medieval sensibility, which includes a tendency to portray foreign lands as strange and savage and their inhabitants as exotic, bizarre and incomprehensible creatures. Most importantly, they abound in moralistic judgment, bespeaking their authors' ontological certitude about the unquestioned superiority of the Christian faith and an attendant contempt for Islam.

A similarly complacent attitude, now compounded by theories about race, permeates cross-cultural travel in the nineteenth century. At that time, the Western traveler, operating in a context of rapidly expanding European economic power and burgeoning imperialism, went East laden with preconceived notions about backward lands only redeemable through a massive civilizing effort by the West. His gaze is as condescending as that of his sixteenth-century forebear, but his is a different kind of superiority; he is no longer the Christian pilgrim unselfconsciously convinced of the truth of his faith, but the panoptic, omniscient European, the Westerner—a government official doubling up as secret agent, a physician, an archeologist—fully aware of his natural superiority, which to him is a matter of civilization, a complex set of habits and attitudes of which culture and race are essential components.

The Iranian case differs from that of the Ottoman lands in several important ways. One difference concerns the type of traveler. Those visiting Ottoman lands, a few scholars and artists aside, were mostly pilgrims heading for Jerusalem or merchants and diplomats with business in Istanbul. The narratives of the former often express strong anti-Muslim feelings. Even those who went to the Ottoman Empire with an antiquarian interest managed to imbue their descriptions of classical monuments with a decidedly anti-Islamic flavor.<sup>7</sup> Iran did not have any Christian shrines, hence was little visited by the religiously inspired even in the sixteenth century. Another difference between early modern travelers to Iran and those traveling to Ottoman lands involves access and travel routes. Foreigners had easy access to Ottoman lands via the sea. They often saw no more of the country than Istanbul, and few in fact crossed over into the Asian part of

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<sup>7</sup> See Amanda Wunder, "Western Travelers, Eastern Antiquities, and the Image of the Turk in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Early Modern History* 7:1-2 (2003), 89-119.

the realm.<sup>8</sup> Iran's capital, by contrast, was located inland, hundreds of miles from the country's borders. Both visitors arriving from Ottoman lands and those traveling via Russia had to cover long distances, causing them to see many towns and landscapes before they arrived at the shah's court. Isfahan was far removed from the Persian Gulf as well, so that even those who arrived by ship had to make the long overland trek before getting there, passing through Lar and Shiraz, and taking in Persepolis on the way, gaining a flavor of the country, its inhabitants and its monuments.

What is similar is that the early visitor of Iran first and foremost was fulfilling a mission and a mandate. In his written account, he might describe some aspects of the court and a few cities, but his own assignment and his own experience remained central to the narrative. The seventeenth-century travelers to Iran naturally carry with them vestiges of the preceding age and foreshadow the attitudes of those who came after them, but they are different in some crucial respects. The late humanists and the protagonists of the early Enlightenment were the first ones to offer a panoramic picture of the alien society they visited. While principally moved by official mandates or motives of personal gain, they embarked on their journeys determined to gather empirical knowledge and to portray what they observed realistically and accurately. The sense of the exotic is still there, as is the antiquarian interest, but it finds new outlets, such as detailed descriptions of pre-Islamic monuments embedded in a history that is Renaissance-humanist in its admiration for the classical past rather than biblical in focus and justification. Many of the Europeans who went to Iran at the time were driven by curiosity and exhibit a tendency to view the world beyond Christendom largely within its own civilizational framework or as part of a universal theater. From the Renaissance humanists Pietro della Valle and Adam Olearius to the pioneers of the Enlightenment, Jean Chardin, Engelbert Kaempfer, and Cornelis de Bruyn, we see what Rubiés calls a transition from an "essentially theological language towards a fully secular understanding of nature and history."<sup>9</sup> Hardly any of them voice skepticism about religion as such, but they clearly show a willingness to contemplate truth outside of a religious context, and they thus represent a step toward transcending their own culture and its assumptions and biases.

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<sup>8</sup> See Alexandre Merle, *Le miroir ottoman. Une image politique des hommes dans la littérature géographique espagnole et française (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris, 2003), 58, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Joan-Paul Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance. South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2000), 2:353.

The most perceptive of these travelers are remarkable for shedding as much of their ethnocentric prejudice and exhibiting as generous a type of universal humanism as might be expected of anyone traversing the boundaries of culture at a time when little information was available and the chances of seeing the other as grotesque and inhuman were much greater than the possibility of recognizing difference as just that. Their writings demonstrate a willingness to grapple with difference, as well as the unfolding of a process of self-reflection in competition with an abiding sense of self-evident superiority.<sup>10</sup>

### **Diversity of Background, Motives and Interests**

Seventeenth-century Western travel accounts to the Muslim world, including Iran, are simply too diverse in character and motivation to be brought under one rubric. The authors of these accounts were Catholic Fathers intent on establishing missionary posts, envoys on diplomatic or scientific missions, mercenaries seeking employment, merchants in search of profit, or gentleman scholars driven by curiosity. Their age and background, mandates, motives and interests naturally influenced and inflected their way of seeing the world, and they all wrote from different perspectives and with different purposes. Some were astonishingly young. Thomas Herbert was twenty-two when he accompanied the English ambassador Robert Dodington to the Safavid court; Ambrosio Bembo was of the same age when he left Venice to explore Asia. Heinrich von Poser was only a year older at the time of his wanderings through unknown parts of eastern Iran. Missionaries traveled to Iran in hopes of converting its Muslim inhabitants to Christianity; diplomats representing European courts sought to enlist the shah in anti-Ottoman alliances, mercenaries and merchants went east to seek their fortune, while others traveled beyond Istanbul to slake their curiosity. At least one, Pietro della Valle, left his native Rome to seek (and find) solace from an unhappy love affair (which he did by finding and marrying an Armenian-Nestorian woman in Iraq); another traveler, Jan Struys, found himself in Iran involuntarily, having been sold into slavery. Some travelers represented commissioning agents, kings or companies, others only spoke for themselves. Some combined mandates and motives. The most famous one, Jean Chardin, by his own admission initially went to

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<sup>10</sup> Dirk Van der Cruyssen, *Chardin le Persan* (Paris, 1998), 25.

Asia principally to make money. Yet his search for material gain did not prevent him from “becoming acquainted with the countries and peoples that I visited.” His second journey to Iran was mainly inspired by curiosity, causing him to familiarize himself with Persian-language histories and to visit Persepolis three times.<sup>11</sup>

Travelers’ motives for writing their accounts were diverse as well. Some did their professional duty and simply reported back to their superiors. Their writings were never meant to be available to the public; they were composed for the eyes of those who had commissioned them, such as the members of the Collegio di Venezia in the case of Michele Membré, the directors of the Dutch East Indies Company in the case of Cornelis Speelman, the French Minister of Finance, Colbert, in the case of Raphael du Mans, or Peter the Great in the case of Artemii Volynskii.<sup>12</sup> Most, however, and certainly those who went east as private individuals, were eager to have their accounts published, for money, fame or both.<sup>13</sup> Returning home, they were faced with a book market that was as hungry for descriptions of far-away lands as it was competitive, thus breeding opportunities as well as anxieties.<sup>14</sup> Tavernier, Chardin and De Bruyn are good examples of the urge to appear in print. A few authors became instantly famous and widely admired in this manner; their writings were often copied if not always cited, serving as templates for those who followed in their tracks. Others saw themselves frustrated in their ambition to see their works in print in a timely fashion, during their life time, or at all. Thevenot died too

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<sup>11</sup> Dirk Van der Cruyse, *Le noble désir de courir le monde. Voyager en Asie au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 2002), 32, 319.

<sup>12</sup> An institution like the Dutch East Indies Company tried to prevent the publication of the early, mostly maritime travelogues written by those it had sent around the world. See Vibeke Roeper and Diederick Wildeman, “Reizen en schrijven in de zeventiende eeuw,” in Henk den Heijer and Cees van Romburgh, eds., *Reizen door de eeuwen heen. Honderd Jaar Linschoten-Vereeniging (1908-2008)* (Zutphen, 2008), 75-76. This reminds one of the successful efforts by the English Muscovy Company to prevent the publication of the first edition of Giles Fletcher’s unflattering portrait of Russia, *Of the Russe Commonwealth*, in the late sixteenth century.

<sup>13</sup> An ambiguous case is Heinrich von Poser, who visited Iran in the 1620s. It is not clear whether he wrote his diary, which only came out in 1675, with an eye to having it published. See Hamid Tafazoli, *Der deutsche Persien-Diskurs. Von der frühen Neuzeit bis in das neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld, 2007), 158-59.

<sup>14</sup> As Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, 359, point out, this urge made Western travelers very different from contemporary Muslim travelers, who operated in a world without a book market.

soon—before he even left Iran—to see his completed work in published form. Kaempfer had to wait seventeen years after his return to Europe before his account came out. Written in Latin, it found few readers, was never reprinted, and was never fully translated into any other language. In quite a few cases, their works did not see the light of day until modern times.<sup>15</sup>

Travelers to Iran also differed greatly in the degree of knowledge of the country and its ways—as well as in the way they converted their memories to print. Chardin became intimately familiar with the main language, Persian, and the country's religious customs and doctrines, to the point where, by his own account, he felt more at home in Iran than in France and knew Isfahan better than his native Paris.<sup>16</sup> The Capuchin Father Gabriel de Chinon, the author of a relatively unknown travelogue, spent more than twenty years in Iran and in that period learned Persian, Turkish and Armenian.<sup>17</sup> Sanson, too, knew all three languages. Tavernier, by contrast, always needed an interpreter and, a merchant rather than a scholar, was more pragmatically oriented than philosophically inclined. Chardin talks in a self-conscious manner about the difference between the journals he kept while in Iran and the printed version of his work, whereas Tavernier, who apparently could barely read and write, upon his return to France had his jumbled notes transcribed and edited by others. He has rightfully been taken to task for his confused chronology and his occasional credulousness.<sup>18</sup> Jean de Thevenot, whose description of the country shows a distinct lack of connectedness and whose style Raphael du Mans characterized as

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<sup>15</sup> Raphael du Mans is a good example. The first edition of (part of) his works was only published in the late nineteenth century. See Raphael du Mans, *Estat de la Perse en 1660* ed. Ch. Schefer (Paris, 1890). The full version was published as recently as 1995. See Francis Richard, *Raphaël du Mans missionnaire en Perse au XVII<sup>e</sup> s.* 2 vols. (Paris, 1995). Ambrosio Bembo is another. His work had to wait until the early twenty-first century to be edited and published, in the original Italian as well as in an English translation. See Ambrogio Bembo, *Viaggio e Giornale per Parte dell' Asia (1671-1675)* ed. Antonio Invernizzi (Turin, 2005); and Ambrosio Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo* trans. Clara Bargellini; edited and annotated Anthony Welch (Berkeley, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Jean Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin, en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient*. ed. L. Langlès, 10 vols and map (Paris, 1810-11), 1:xxix.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel de Chinon, *Relations nouvelles du Levant ou traités de la religion, du gouvernement et des coutumes des Perses, des Arméniens, et des Gaures* (Lyon, 1671), introd.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Joret, *Jean-Baptiste Tavernier. Écuyer, baron D'Aubonne chambellan de grand électeur* (Paris, 1886), 245-47.

sincere but naïve, was even further removed from all things Iranian.<sup>19</sup> Then there is John Fryer, a physician who knew no Persian, had nothing but contempt for Islam, and considered the natives “semi-savages and mere idolators.”<sup>20</sup> And finally we have someone like the Dutch sail maker-cum adventurer Jan Struys, whose work blends reality with the fabulous and the fantastic, to the point where some have doubted whether he actually visited the places he claimed to have seen. We have enough evidence to conclude that he did, though he may still be regarded a “throwback” to earlier times, when the traveler to exotic lands was expected to entertain and intrigue his readers with tall tales about bizarre people and fantastic events, the equivalent of today’s science fiction.<sup>21</sup>

### Commonalities

While European travelers to Safavid Iran were diverse in the motives and interests they brought to their peregrinations, they also evince similarities. These similarities did not simply result from the common habit of assimilating the works of their predecessors. Their collective observations rather generated a palimpsest that allows us unique insight into life on the Iranian plateau.

Many travelers insisted that their published works only reflected what they had seen with their own eyes. In the introduction to his book, Kaempfer states: “I have not included anything based on my fantasy, nothing that smacks of the writing desk and reeks of the study lamp. I only limit myself to writing about those things that are either new or have not been thoroughly and fully described by others.”<sup>22</sup> More self-congratulatory, Tavernier assures his readers that he has reported about matters the way they

<sup>19</sup> Raphael du Mans, Isfahan to Baron, Aleppo, 23 April 1668, in Richard, *Raphaël du Mans*, 1:227. Also see Dominique Carnoy, *Représentations de l’Islam dans la France du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. La ville des tentations* (Paris, 1998), 131.

<sup>20</sup> Introduction by William Crooke to John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia Being Nine Years’ Travels, 1672-1681*, 3 vols (London, 1909), 1:XXXVI.

<sup>21</sup> See Willem Floor, “Fact or Fiction: The Most Perilous Journeys of Jan Jansz. Struys” in Jean Calmard, ed., *Etudes Safavides* (Tehran-Paris, 1995), 57-68; and the comprehensive study by Kees Boterbloem, *The Fiction and Reality of Jan Struys, A Seventeenth-Century Globetrotter* (New York, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Engelbert Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs 1684-1685* trans. by Walther Hinz (Leipzig, 1940; new edn, Tübingen and Basel, 1977), introduction by editor, 16.

were, and that he has seen things “more often and longer” than any Westerner who had visited Asia.<sup>23</sup> De Bruyn took great pride in the accuracy of his drawings of Persepolis and criticized the renderings of his predecessors, Chardin and Kaempfer, for sloppiness.<sup>24</sup>

Several travelers indicate that they prefer to remain silent on matters they don't feel qualified to write about. Della Valle tells his readers of his intention to keep his comments on Armenia brief because he had visited the region but little, and uses the same argument to justify his decision not to say anything about an outlying region like Sistan.<sup>25</sup> Chardin, not otherwise known for his modesty, insisted that he had written nothing on India since he had only resided there for five years and did not know any of its languages other than the vernacular ones, Persian and Hindi.<sup>26</sup> Such self-restraint includes the royal harem, allegedly an object of lurid fascination among European travelers. Herbert chooses to remain silent on the seraglio, explaining that it would be “dangerous to inquire and much more to view.”<sup>27</sup> The French cleric Bénigne Vachet tells his readers that he could not “say anything about the female quarters,” which he only got to see “from afar.”<sup>28</sup> Chardin did write on the Safavid harem. Yet the many pages he devotes to the topic are based on information he received from a eunuch serving an aunt of Shah Sulayman with whom he had become very close.<sup>29</sup>

The travelers' insistence on truthfulness may betray a guilty conscience or perhaps served to preempt criticism of the kind articulated by the

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Van der Cruysse, *Le noble désir de courir le monde*, 460.

<sup>24</sup> J. L. de Jong, “‘Tot meerder naeukeurigheid.’ De ruines van Persepolis in prent gebracht” in Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, ed., *Persepolis en Pasargadae in wisselend perspectief* (Groningen, 1989), 58; and J. W. Drijvers, “‘Deez tekende en schreef niet anders dan hij zag’ Cornelis de Bruijn, Nicolaes Witsen en Gysbert Cuper,” in *ibid.*, 67, 76-78. De Bruyn was in turn taken to task by Carsten Niebuhr, who visited Persepolis in the eighteenth century.

<sup>25</sup> In Sonja Brentjes and Volkmar Schüller, “Pietro della Valle's Latin Geography of Safavid Iran (1624-1628): Introduction” *Journal of Early Modern History* 10:3 (2006), 191, 205.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Chardin, *Journal du voyages en Perse et aux Indes orientales* (London, 1686), quoted in Van der Cruysse, *Chardin le Persan*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Herbert, *Travels in Persia, 1627-1629*, abridged and ed. William Foster (London, 1928), 132.

<sup>28</sup> Archives de la Société des Missions Etrangères (AME), Paris, vol. 347, Bénigne Vachet, “Journal d'un voyage en Perse,” 500.

<sup>29</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 7:22.

eighteenth-century Dutch philosopher Cornelis de Pauw, who sneered that out of 100 travelers only ten spoke the truth, sixty were outright liars because they were stupid, and thirty lied out of self-interest or malice.<sup>30</sup> Self-fashioning was inherently part of the enterprise of writing a travelogue, or at least of its autobiographical element. The author, after all, typically appears as the hero in a story full of danger and adventure.<sup>31</sup> Yet acknowledging a degree of possible embellishment in the service of self-presentation does not justify blanket cynicism about the information offered in travel narratives. Bembo's caveat that his offerings on Persian weddings were not based on first-hand information since he had not witnessed a wedding himself does not stand alone in its persuasive earnestness.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, it would be naïve to take at face value all that does appear in the travelogues as first-hand information. After all, their authors operated in the context of the incipient Republic of Letters; they had read the work of their predecessors, and they frequently incorporated information thus gleaned into their own writings. Especially trailblazers such as Della Valle and Olearius, whose travelogues were translated into various European languages, figure in many later works and set the tone for a reassessment of Iran and the world of Islam among Europe's literati.<sup>33</sup> Over time, the observations of Tavernier and Chardin, which also found wide distribution, either in the original French or in translation, became the standard accounts to quote or borrow from.<sup>34</sup> Most often, the travelers assimilated without acknowledgement. Tavernier especially has been accused of plagiarizing from various colleagues, among them Raphael du Mans, who probably gave him a copy of his first description of Iran and whose account of the Safavid administrative system he reproduced.<sup>35</sup> Daulier-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> For this element, see Rachel Lauthelier, "Quand le récit de l'aventure supplante le relation du voyage. Le voyage de Perse au XVIII siècle," *Revue d'Histoire de la Littérature de la France* 104 (2004), 871-86.

<sup>32</sup> Bembo, *Travels*, 353.

<sup>33</sup> The prominent Dutch Enlightenment figure Pierre Bayle thus is said to have received much of his information about Islam from reading Della Valle's account. See Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006), 616.

<sup>34</sup> For a good overview and discussion of the numerous translations made of these and other authors, see John Emerson, "Ex Oriente Lux: Some European Sources on the Economic Structure of Persia between about 1630 and 1690" (Ph.D. dissertation. Cambridge University, 1969).

<sup>35</sup> Richard, *Raphaël du Mans*, 1:74-75; Joret, *Jean-Baptiste Tavernier*, 250-54.

Deslandes freely cribbed from Della Valle and Tavernier. Kaempfer carried a copy of Olearius with him on his travels, and had read Della Valle, Tavernier, as well as Thevenot and Chardin. Chardin had seen the accounts of all those who had preceded him. Like virtually everyone who visited Iran in the second half of the seventeenth century, he borrowed a great deal from Du Mans, who came to Iran in 1647, to reside in Isfahan until his death in 1696, serving as the court's translator and informant, and who showed a never-ending willingness to share his vast knowledge of the country and its ways with anyone who sought him out. Testifying to Du Mans's role as an oracle, Chardin writes that all that was best in the travelogues about Iran derived from information offered by the Capuchins.<sup>36</sup> But even Du Mans is likely to have read Olearius in Abraham de Wicquefort's French translation.<sup>37</sup>

Commonality manifests itself in other ways as well. Many travelers, steeped in the classics, saw Iran through the eyes of antiquity, rendering its regions with their Latin names, and sprinkling their accounts with quotes from Strabo, Ptolemy and Xenophon. Increasingly given to an encyclopedic approach to knowledge, they also tended to follow a certain patterned model, mixing a store of knowledge gained from reading those who had gone before them with their own empirical observations. In as far as they did not recount their personal experience, in the process of describing landscapes, cities and their monuments, they generally followed a template in their portrayal of the country. They typically first present an outline of Iranian history, either from pre-Islamic times or the emergence of the Safavid dynasty onwards, and go on to describe Iran's general characteristics, including its climate, topography, flora and fauna, agriculture, industry and commerce. This is usually followed by an overview of the country's administrative and political system. The final part of the narrative often deals with the people and their mores, rites and rituals, pertaining to religion, birth, marriage and death.

Finally, the travelers greatly varied in the reasons for traveling, but almost all showed an insatiable curiosity to discover and to learn. The attitude is summed up in Olearius's disarming words quoted at the top of

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Richard, "L'apport des missionnaires européens à la connaissance de l'Iran en Europe et de l'Europe en Iran," in Calmard, ed. *Etudes Safavides*, 265.

<sup>37</sup> Richard, *Raphael du Mans*, 1:49. Wicquefort's translation of Olearius appeared as *Relation du voyage de Moscovie, Tartarie, et Perse...* (Paris, 1656).

this essay: "Provided one is willing, one can always learn something good from foreign peoples."<sup>38</sup>

This statement, naive as it sounds, may serve as a guiding principle for the evaluation of those who visited Iran in the seventeenth century. Like all of us, the travelers do not stand apart from their own time and its received wisdom. They reinforced the idea of oriental despotism, which they often contrasted with a generic and idealized European antithesis. They prepared the ground for later stereotypes about "Oriental" women being simultaneously secluded and lustful, hinting at a causal connection between the two. As will be seen below, even Chardin does not escape the trope of the vacuity of the Iranian penchant for luxury and ostentation.<sup>39</sup>

In many cases their delight in difference is tempered by a reassuring tone. Tavernier, for instance, is frequently informative but he is never subversive in that he always confirms his readers in their certitudes. If he praises Iranians for being sophisticated, they are similar to the French. If one of the bridges spanning the Zayandah Rud in Isfahan, the *Pul-i si-u sib*, is a beautiful structure, in fact the prettiest one in the entire country, it is not nearly as solidly built as the Pont Neuf in Paris.<sup>40</sup> Whereas Tavernier is very French, displaying a deep affinity with his home country and its civilization, Chardin, a Huguenot, is ambivalent. Hounded by growing religious intolerance at home and practically a refugee from his own country the second time he arrived in Iran, he was receptive to the unfamiliar, and even willing to question his own assumptions.<sup>41</sup>

With the exception of the laconic Boullaye-le-Gouze, all travelers expressed variations of condescension vis-à-vis Islam, echoing the medieval perception of its prophet as a lascivious impostor—though not necessarily any longer as an emissary of Satan. Their prejudices branch out in different and unexpected directions. Bembo, for one, makes disparaging remarks, not about the Iranians he encounters, but about fellow Europeans, in *casu* the Portuguese, who, he claimed, all "profess nobility" as soon as they pass the Cape of Good Hope even "if laborers," and think it below them to do hard

<sup>38</sup> Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte neue Beschreibung der muscowitischen und persischen Reyse sodurch gelegenheit einer holsteinischen Gesandtschaft an den Russischen Zaar und König in Persien geschehen* (Schleswig, 1656; facs. repr. ed. by Dieter Lohman, Tübingen, 1971), 68.

<sup>39</sup> See also François Sanson, *Voyage ou relation de l'estat présent du royaume de Perse* (Paris, 1694), 59.

<sup>40</sup> Carnoy, *Représentations de l'Islam*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> Chardin ended up in England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 made life in France difficult for Huguenots.

work, and whose women live in constant laziness since they have nothing to do, not even for entertainment.<sup>42</sup> At their best, and *pace* Edward Said, they did shatter Western perceptions of the East, opening up new vistas of a world that was as yet poorly known in Europe.<sup>43</sup>

### Value and Relevance

With all due caveats about limitations set by motives, interests, and appropriation, what do these travelers offer the modern reader and scholar? The answer is, quite simply, a whole world that would otherwise remain largely hidden from view. Without their accounts we would be mostly dependent on Persian court chronicles and religious material for textual evidence of life on the Iranian plateau. The court chronicles and religious texts are very informative, but, in their focus on politics and religion from an elite, Isfahan-centered perspective, they leave out as much as they include. Court chronicles were not composed to reveal Safavid society but rather to confirm God's plan with the world, to extol the virtues of the dynasty and to justify the actions of the shah. In Beatrice Manz's words, they were written as literature and as morality tales.<sup>44</sup> Annalistic rather than analytic, they offer us frequent references to, though not necessarily detailed accounts of, military campaigns and battles, brief reports on diplomatic exchange and mostly generic descriptions of royal feasting. Above all, they allow us to follow the careers of large numbers of officials, but in most cases only in outline and from the vantage point of the ruler who appointed and promoted for loyalty and good service and who demoted and dismissed for reasons of "disobedience and treason." The same is true to an even greater degree for the religious texts. Members of the clerical class composed their treatises not to offer outsiders insight into Safavid religion, but to present and defend theological and legal arguments. They enable us to reconstruct the divisions and disputes among the Shi'i clergy, but they do not tell us much about the true state of religion, its rituals and its popular manifestations. The writings of courtiers and clerics offer a carefully constructed, idealized portrait of certain aspects of Safavid society.<sup>45</sup> The travelers constructed,

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<sup>42</sup> Bembo, *Travels*, 232, 272, 235.

<sup>43</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Beatrice Forbes Manz, *Power, Politics and Religion in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge, 2007), 49-50.

<sup>45</sup> This generalization naturally fails to do justice to variety and difference. Iskandar

too, but their objectives were different, and so is the outcome. They sought to present a panoramic picture of Iran. The best travel accounts succeeded in this. If they failed, it was less by design than because of inherent limitations in their vision or experience.

The travelers make Iran come to life—just as some travelers come to life through their descriptions of Iran. Some recorded; others recorded and interpreted. Membré, Silva y Figueroa, Tavernier, Carré, Fryer and Bembo mostly offer the raw information they had gathered en route, either narrating in a straightforward manner or larding their accounts with anecdotal digressions; others, typically the ones who stayed longer, delve into politics, religious beliefs, and social customs, and thus dig into the reality underneath the surface. They enable us not just to fill in many factual gaps, but to see the context, to piece together the story behind the story. Either way, their narratives, alternatively engaged and dispassionate, paint a vibrant, dynamic society for us, a society filled with color, movement, and diversity.

Without the travelers we would know next to nothing about many aspects of life in early modern Iran. Ironically, this includes travel itself. We would be largely in the dark about itineraries between cities followed by merchants and pilgrims, the nature of traveling by caravan, about the hardship involved in moving through mountains and long stretches of desert, about security and thievery along the road, about accommodation, the shape and quality of caravanserais.

Without the travelers, cities and their physical appearance would remain abstractions, and in some cases wholly undocumented. Tabriz during the period when it was the Safavid capital in the early sixteenth century is only known through the descriptions of Tenreiro and Membré.<sup>46</sup> What we know about the physical appearance of Mashhad largely comes from

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Munshi's famous *Tarikh-i alam-ara-yi 'Abbasi*, for instance, is far more realistic and psychologically complex than most chronicles, offering, in the words of Roger Savory, "breadth of view and remarkable clarity of outline." See Roger Savory, "'Very Dull and Arduous Reading: A Reappraisal of the History of Shah 'Abbās the Great by Iskandar Beg Munshī," *Hamdard Islamicus* 3:1 (1980), 22.

<sup>46</sup> António Tenreiro, "Itinerário de António Tenreiro." In António Baião, ed., *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra* (Coimbra, 1923). An English translation of Tenreiro's description of Tabriz appears in Ronald Bishop Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations in Persia (1507-1524)* (Bethesda, 1970), 85-87. Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)*, transl. A. M. Morton (London, 1993), xx, 51-52.

the description of António de Gouvea, who visited the city in 1602.<sup>47</sup> Kaempfer, who was well acquainted with the natural sciences, and specifically botany, presents his readers with an extraordinarily detailed description of a date palm oasis in southern Iran that is filled with minutiae concerning the trees and their fruit but also with unique information about economic and social life in that part of the country.<sup>48</sup> Images of seventeenth-century Shiraz, Lar, Kashan, Ardabil, and Shamakhi come to us through the narratives of foreigners who passed through and recorded their impressions, which often came with facts and figures about the number of inhabitants, data about economic life, and information about political conditions. Parts of Chardin's detailed description of Isfahan might still guide the modern tourist. Going through the city, quarter by quarter, he takes the reader by the hand and provides him with a wealth of information not available anywhere else. A generation later, De Bruyn covered the same city in sometimes astonishing detail. De Bruyn's exploration of the Chahar Bagh in Isfahan, for instance, takes up more than two folio pages of extremely detailed narrative filled with endless measurements of size and distance.<sup>49</sup> Without the travelers, seventeenth-century landscapes could only be imagined by projecting backward from their current appearance. The Jesuit Jean Baptiste de la Maze, crossing Gilan, gives his readers a sense of that province not found in any other writings.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, whole parts of the country, areas not ordinarily visited by Europeans, such as Khurasan and Baluchistan, remain all but invisible to the modern observer.

Without the European travelogues, we would not have any real-life narratives of negotiations between Safavid officials and visiting envoys, such as emerges from the account in Speelman's journal;<sup>51</sup> we would have to do

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<sup>47</sup> See António de Gouvea, *Relaçom em que se tratam as guerras e grandes victorias que alcançou o grãde Rey da Persia Xã Abbas do grão Turco Mahometto, & seu filho Amethe* (Lisbon, 1611), fol. 37v.

<sup>48</sup> Engelbert Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum exoticarum politico-physico-mediarum*, fasc. IV (Lemgo, 1703), 661-756, which is available in a modern German translation. See *Phoenix Persicus. Die Geschichte der Dattelpalme*, trans. and ed. Wolfgang Muntzschick (Marburg, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> Cornelis de Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indië* (Amsterdam, 1714), 150-51.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Baptiste de la Maze S.J., "Journal du Père de la Maze, de Chamakie à Ispahan, par la province du Guilan." In *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères*, 8 vols (Toulouse, new edn, 1810), 4:43-90.

<sup>51</sup> Cornelis Speelman, *Journal der reis van den gezant der O. I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651-1652*, ed. A. Hotz (Amsterdam, 1908).

without reports about royal audiences, about the food and drink served at them, the rituals, pomp and circumstance surrounding these and other formal receptions. We would be lacking descriptions of Safavid rulers, their physical features, their garb, their mannerism and their character traits. Very little would be known about religious practices, civil celebrations, the rites of birth, marriage and death, about food and entertainment. We would know as little about religious minorities, Armenians, Zoroastrians, Jews and others as we know about these in the pre-Safavid period (or, for that matter, the eighteenth century, when European travelers all but ceased coming to Iran).<sup>52</sup> The travelers inform us about the currency Iranians used and the musical instruments they played, and offer insight into matters like their cultivation and ways of harvesting cereals, of the types of bread they consumed. Their narratives are filled with charming details, telling us about the colors favored by people in Iran, unusual encounters with women in the countryside, and the fact that in Safavid lands a buyer could always return the merchandise he had acquired to the vendor if he was not satisfied or had found the same item cheaper elsewhere, up to three days after the purchase.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps most importantly, absent their reports, we would be left without any substantive information about ordinary people, city dwellers, peasants, tribal folk, and women.

The value of foreign travel accounts is not confined to the physical reality and material culture of Safavid Iran. Used judiciously, with an eye for their limitations, they help us understand the workings of the country's political apparatus as well, in substance as well as in detail. The Mughal political system, in Subrahmanyam's words, was not beyond the comprehension of the visitors from the West, even if it was difficult to translate.<sup>54</sup> The same is true for Safavid Iran. Olearius, Du Mans, Chardin and Kaemp-

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<sup>52</sup> For a study of information about Zoroastrianism in Safavid Iran found in European travelogues, see Nora Kathleen Firby, *European Travellers and their Perceptions of Zoroastrians in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Berlin, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Almost all travelers offer information on coins and currency. For musical instruments, including drawings, see Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum exoticarum*, fasc. IV, 740-45. For cereals and bread, see De Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*, 180, 203, 336-37; for the right to return purchased items, see Jan Jansz. Struys, *Drie aanmerkelijke en seer rampspoedige reysen door Italie, Griekenlandt, Lijfflandt, Moscovien, Tartarijen, Meden, Persien, Oost-Indien, Japan, en verscheyden andere gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1676), 289, 295; and Bembo, *Travels*, 345, and 186 for the contrast with India, where one could not return clothing once tried.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall, "Afterword," 232; and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Submissions: The Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Norris," in Bowen and Rugby, eds., *The Worlds of the East India Company*, 69-96.

fer offer a systematic overview of the Safavid bureaucracy and its hierarchy but they also paint the administrative order for us as living, evolving process, as opposed to the formal and formulaic system described in the two famous manuals of government, the *Tadhkirat al-Muluk* and the *Dastur al-Muluk*, and often allow us to compare and test the content of the latter against conditions in real life. For certain periods, traveler accounts of Iranian political systems are especially valuable, even indispensable. Imagine for a moment that none of what Chardin, Kaempfer and Sanson have to say about the reign of Shah Sulayman would be available to us; most of the events occurring between that ruler's enthronement in 1666 and his death in 1694 would be shrouded in mystery. With the exception of events in Kirman, which are recounted in a local chronicle, even for information about court officials in this period we would depend on fleeting comments in a summary annalistic work like the *Vaqā'ih al-sinnin*, and scattered references in the *Tazkirah-i Nasrabadi*, a compendium of poets' lives.<sup>55</sup>

Lastly, there is the visual component to the usefulness of travelogues. Several travelogues include illustrations, drawings, plates and engravings. Some of these are from the hands of the authors themselves or were done by artists accompanying them. Sometimes pictures were added later, for the published volume, produced by artists who had never been to Iran. Especially in the latter case, the result is often idealized or even imaginary images, mostly of cityscapes, that lack any relevance as direct visual evidence. The illustrations that liven up Olearius's account, for instance, seem mostly there for "entertainment value, to highlight . . . the most adventurous moments of the journey."<sup>56</sup> Not all are like that, however. The engravings accompanying Kaempfer's work and the ones created by G. J. Grelot, who first worked for Chardin and later became Bembo's companion, while not especially masterful, give us real-life views of the palaces and mosques in Isfahan, of caravanserais throughout the country, as well as of smoking clerics, veiled women, merchants and representatives of religious minorities. All these aspects of life either fell outside the purview of Iranian artists or are rendered in a stylized, idealized manner in the rich indigenous body

<sup>55</sup> The local chronicle is Muhammad Sa'id Bardsiri (Mashizi), *Tazkirah-i safaviyah-i Kirman*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim Bastani-Parizi (Tehran, 1369/1990); Sayyid 'Abd al-Husayn Khatunabadi, *Vaqā'ih al-sannin va al-a'vam* (Tehran, 1352/1973); Muhammad Tahir Nasrabadi, *Tazkirah-i Nasrabadi*, ed. Muhsin Baji Nasrabadi, 2 vols. (Tehran, 1378/1999).

<sup>56</sup> Elio Brancaforte, *Visions of Persia: Mapping the Travels of Adam Olearius* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 18. The entertainment aspect is especially obvious in the visual material in Struys's account.

of painting, mostly in the form of illustrated manuscripts, generated by the Safavid period. In some cases the contribution of European illustrations is unique. No other images reveal the physical appearance of Safavid shahs. Bembo's account includes the only drawing of the building housing the royal mint in Isfahan. The drawings of De Bruyn, a professional artist and draftsman, stand out for their attention to detail. His famous image of the royal square in Isfahan covered with tents brings the place to life. The same is true of his renderings of the Hazar Jarib gardens and the famous Chahar Bagh Avenue. With Della Valle, Chardin, and Kaempfer, De Bruyn helped open up Iran's ancient history and its many monuments, and his images played an especially important role in this.<sup>57</sup> It is thanks to their meticulous descriptions and the accompanying drawings that the country's pre-Islamic ruins became known to the larger world. The visual images of Persepolis De Bruyn created during his two-and-a-half month stay at the site remained unsurpassed in detail and accuracy until the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century.

### Images of Iran

How did the travelers view Safavid Iran?

They all saw flaws, some of which involved received wisdom from antiquity that would later harden into stereotypes of national character. One of these, the notion that Iranians considered themselves superior to all other peoples, goes back all the way to Herodotus.<sup>58</sup> It is reflected in the verdict of an EIC official who insisted that the people of Iran "reckon themselves inferior to no nation,"<sup>59</sup> and is echoed by various travelers claiming that Iranians exhibited a natural sense of superiority and were easily offended in their pride.<sup>60</sup> Poulet intoned that the "spirit of Persia is not to want to accept anything from strangers and to show that it knew more than any-

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<sup>57</sup> See Josef Wiesehöfer, "A me igitur . . . figurarum verum auctorem . . . nemo desideret," in Detlef Haberland, ed., *Engelbert Kaempfer. Werk und Wirkung* (Wiesbaden, 1993), 105-32; and Jan Willem Drijvers, "Persepolis as Perceived by Engelbert Kaempfer and Cornelis de Bruijn," in *Ibid.*, 85-104.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (Woodstock and New York, 2006), 13.

<sup>59</sup> India Office Records, British Library, IOR G/40/4, Isfahan to London, 5 June 1686, fol. 112.

<sup>60</sup> P. P. Bushev, *Posol'stvo Artemiia Volynskogo v Iran v 1715-1718 gg.* (Moscow, 1978), 50.

one else.”<sup>61</sup> Fryer opined that Iranians had “small regard either to Foreigners or their Countries, in respect of their Native Soil or abilities, conceiting themselves superlative in everything.”<sup>62</sup> Villotte conveyed the same sentiment when he said that the Iranians tended to be surprised when they learned about the relatively small size of their country (presumably compared to the Ottoman Empire or Russia).<sup>63</sup>

European travelers also came away with the impression that appearance was very important to Iranians. Kaempfer insisted that Christian monks dressed in coarse habits and walking around in open sandals did not make a great impression as diplomats at the Safavid court.<sup>64</sup> As De Bruyn put it, “Anyone who is not dressed magnificently here does not enjoy any standing and is passed over.” He compared Iranians to Turks in this regard, and concluded that among the latter, males dressed modestly whereas in Iran both sexes had a penchant for elegant clothing.<sup>65</sup> The attendant opinion that Iranians were spendthrift and loved ostentatious display is widespread as well.<sup>66</sup>

Beyond ostentation and love of luxury, there was the image of flattery and hypocrisy. The complex code of Iranian etiquette known as *ta'aruf* did not go unnoticed. Even though most seventeenth-century travelers did not yet imbue it with the censorious whiff of ingrained dishonesty and habitual lying that their nineteenth-century counterparts, far more preoccupied with immutable racial and cultural difference, would raise to a trope, the link between the two is old. Giovanni Tomasso Minadoi who spent seven years in the East in the 1570s and 1580s, said of Iranians that they were “great deceivers, full of craftie stratagemes, unconstant, and breakers of their word.”<sup>67</sup> A missionary at the turn of the seventeenth century similarly called them “unreliable and deceptive.”<sup>68</sup> To Chardin the inhabitants of the

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<sup>61</sup> Pouillet (d'Armainville), *Nouvelles relations du Levant. Avec une exacte description... du Royaume de Perse*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1668), 2:217.

<sup>62</sup> Fryer, *A New Account*, 2:323.

<sup>63</sup> [Père Jacques Villotte], *Voyage d'un missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jesus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Armenie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie* (Paris, 1730), 446.

<sup>64</sup> Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs*, 273.

<sup>65</sup> De Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*, 165.

<sup>66</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 3:407.

<sup>67</sup> John Thomas Minadoi, *The History of the Warres between the Turkes and the Persians*, trans. Abraham Hartvell (London, 1595; new facs. edn, Tehran, 1976), 74.

<sup>68</sup> Carlos Alonso, “Due lettere riguardanti i primi tempi delle missioni agostiniane in Persia,” *Analeccta Augustiniana* 24 (1961), 158-59.

Safavid realm were great flatterers, and De Bruyn agreed. The latter conceded that, like everywhere else, good and bad people were to be found in Iran, yet insisted that Iranians tended to be ungrateful and without shame.<sup>69</sup>

There was also Iran as a realm of the senses—perhaps the oldest and the most enduring of stereotypical images. Persians, Thevenot insisted, were both vain and voluptuous.<sup>70</sup> Without generally having much experience themselves, aside from encounters with tribal women selling food in caravanserais and female dance troupes that often enlivened official banquets, the travelers called (urban) Iranian women at once secluded and prone to sensuality and unchaste behavior, adding that their men were exceedingly jealous.<sup>71</sup> Some expressed amazement about the large number of public women found in the country's urban centers, and the openness with which they purveyed their (officially sanctioned and taxable) trade.<sup>72</sup>

In this context, the royal harem naturally was of particular interest to the travelers. The notion that Westerners who visited the Islamic world had a voyeuristic obsession with the oriental harem as an “institution that seemed to epitomize the insidious nexus of sexual and political power exercised by the female sex,” constitutes a central theme in the critique of “Orientalism,” to the point where at times preconceptions and assumptions overshadow reality. The implication is that, because of their titillating fascination with the topic, travelers made up stories and let their fantasies run wild about the supposed lubricity of the place.<sup>73</sup> If anything, this trope belongs to the nineteenth century, when Romanticism and, in the case of

<sup>69</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 3:413-14; De Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> Jean de Thevenot, *Travels*, 90.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, John Cartwright, *The Preacher's Travels* (London, 1611; repr. Amsterdam, 1977), 63; Don Garcia Silva y Figueroa, *Comentarios de D. Garcia de Silva y Figueroa de la embajada que de parte del Rey de España Don Felipe III hizo al Rey Xa Abas de Persia*, 2 vols (Madrid, 1903-05), 1:361; H. Dunlop, ed., *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis der Oostindische Compagnie 1621-1638* (The Hague, 1930), 736, travel account Jan Smidt; Olearius, *Vermehrte neue Beschreibung*, 529; and Chardin, *Voyages* 3:414-15.

<sup>72</sup> For this, see Rudi Matthee, “Courtesans, Prostitutes and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid Iran,” in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron, eds., *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie* (Costa Mesa, CA, 2000), 121-50.

<sup>73</sup> For an example indicting Chardin, see the otherwise fine article by S. Amanda Eurich, “Secrets of the Seraglio: Harem Politics and the Rhetoric of Imperialism in the Travels of Sir John Chardin,” in Glenn J. Ames and Ronald S. Love, eds., *Distant Lands and Diverse Cultures: The French Experience in Asia 1600-1700* (Westport, CT, 2003), 58.

Britain, a stifling Victorian environment made it a topic of prurient interest. Seventeenth-century travelers, at least the ones visiting Iran, tended to be different, even if someone like De Bruyn prefigured a later stereotype with his scathing remark about the royal harem as a center of sexual excess overseen by brutish eunuchs.<sup>74</sup> Incidentally, we owe the only real descriptions of the royal harem to some of these travelers. The best ones are, again, sober in tone and very informative in content, although a lack of access inevitably causes them to leave out important aspects. Chardin's detailed account of the transition of power following the death of Shah 'Abbas II in 1666 is a case in point. There is nothing prurient about his depiction of the royal harem as part of his account, for which he collected information from a major eunuch. This contact put him as close as an outsider—any male, Iranian or non-Iranian—could have come to the center of events at the heart of the royal court, and he gives a blow-by-blow, utterly enthralling account of circumstances surrounding the enthronement of Shah Sulayman, in a narrative that formed the heart of his first published volume, *Le couronnement de Soleïman troisième roy de Perse*.<sup>75</sup>

For all the flaws that the European visitors detected in Iran and its inhabitants, positive images prevail in the travelogues. Despite the long distances, the heat, the dust and the fatigue, most Europeans found travel in Iran an energizing, ultimately positive learning experience. More interesting than the tropes they transmitted and reinforced, is the extent to which some of them manage to step outside of their own culture, identify with the age-old, complex civilization they entered, engage in critical comparisons, show a willingness to change preconceived notions rooted in their own cultural context, and end up in a position of liminality, ready to embark on the road to cultural relativism.

Della Valle set the tone for this with his observation that, unlike conditions in Europe, where villagers and peasants would flee in the face of approaching armies for fear of looting and extortion, Shah 'Abbas's soldiers behaved well in their contact with people in the countryside. Not only did they abstain from plunder, they paid for every single item they wished to acquire.<sup>76</sup> Kaempfer finds himself on the same road to relativism with his

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<sup>74</sup> De Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*, 164.

<sup>75</sup> This volume came out in 1671. Chardin's biographer, Dirk Van der Cruysse, *Chardin le Persan*, 81, rightfully argues that one cannot but admire the verve with which Chardin rendered in four pages the discourse of Aqa Mubarak swaying his fellow eunuchs toward electing the older son.

<sup>76</sup> Pietro della Valle, *Delle condizioni di Abbàs Rè di Persia* (Venice, 1628), 35-36.

remarks on the Safavid justice system. He voices harsh criticism of the venality of Iran's officials, arguing that their corruption made it virtually impossible for common people to find justice, but tempers this verdict by adding that "one needs to consider, though, that at our courts justice is twisted often enough as well."<sup>77</sup> Another excellent example of a willingness to change through discovery is Chardin's account of the Iranian system of justice. When he first arrived in Iran, he tells his readers, he saw Iranians as barbarians for not going about punishing criminals as methodically as Europeans, wondering about their lack of public prisons, examining boards, orderly procedures, public executions, and executioners. Fifteen years spent in the country, Chardin goes on, changed his mind. He came to realize that the Safavid way of dealing with criminals had to do with the rarity of crime in Iran, where home invasions and killings were all but unknown. In all of his time in the Safavid state, he had only witnessed one execution. Besides, the shah alone had the right to order capital punishment. Similarly, Chardin praised the security of Iran's roads, attributing this safety to natural conditions (the lack of water and the resulting difficulty of hiding), the good order of the country and the strict laws, and in part to the fact that the governor of a province was held responsible for all theft occurring in his domain.<sup>78</sup>

Chardin's assessment of the Safavid judicial system exemplifies a general tendency among travelers of viewing Iran in a sympathetic light, even considering it superior to Europe in some respects. Chardin famously said about Iranian peasants that they were better off than their French counterparts.<sup>79</sup> Tavernier called the Safavid city police among the best in the world for being vigilant about food prices, praised Iran's gold and silversmiths, and thought the chinaware from Kirman superior to that of Nevers.<sup>80</sup> In the 1690s, the Italian Gemelli Careri called Iranian caravanserais so "uniform and well proportioned that they are not inferior to the best structures in Europe."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs*, 43-44.

<sup>78</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 6:98-100, 123, 127.

<sup>79</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 5:391.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier*, 2 vols (Paris, 1686), 1:606, 608, 619.

<sup>81</sup> Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo del dottor D. Gio. Francesco Gemelli Careri*, 6 vols (Naples, 1699), 2:76.

It would be hard to imagine anything matching the evocative vividness and precision of the way the 22-year old Thomas Herbert described the timeless beautiful architecture of Shiraz:

The houses of sun-burnt bricks, hard and durable; the building not very lofty (seldom exceeding two stories), flat and terraced above, having balconies and windows curiously trellised: within they are spread with carpets; little other furniture elsewhere is noted. Soltan Schock Allybeg's house (where the first night we were banqueted) is inferior to few, for his dining-room is high and round and spacious, the roof was arched, the walls embossed with gold and wrought into imagery, so shadowed that it was hard to judge whether embossed, ensculpt or painted. The windows were of painted glass, the floor spread with curious carpets. Few or none here are without their gardens (forests rather) of high chenaers (resembling our elm) and cypresses; so as indeed a more delightful object can hardly be than what this city yields the eye from the neighbouring mountain; the palaces rise so amiably, and the mosques and hammams [hammams] with their cerulean tiles and gilded vanes among the cypresses so glitter by reflecting the sunbeams in a curious splendour.<sup>82</sup>

Westerners generally felt good about Iran. The exceedingly hospitable reception they typically enjoyed clearly played an important role in this sense of well-being. Della Valle called Iranians very obliging and welcoming of strangers, claiming that, traveling through Mazandaran, he and his companion "never had to pay for anything" and were always "hospitably received in some noble place in the next village or town."<sup>83</sup> Carré tells the unusual story of how a widow in a small village in the south offered him lodging. Surprised, he was told that her late husband had enjoyed the company of Westerners (*Farangis*) so much that for as long as he lived he had always insisted that passing European travelers stay in his house and that he had recommended that his wife should continue the custom after his death.<sup>84</sup>

Iran's renowned hospitality, moreover, came with a unique bonus. Anyone who traveled with an official mandate received *mihmandari*, which included not just free food and lodging but even a generous per diem allowance. Tournefort rightly called Iran the only country in which envoys

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<sup>82</sup> Herbert, *Travels in Persia*, 70.

<sup>83</sup> In Brentjes and Schüller, "Pietro della Valle's Latin Geography," 200; Barthélemy Carré, *Le courrier du Roi en Orient. Relations de deux voyages en Perse et en Inde 1668-1674*, ed. Dirk Van der Cruyssen (Paris, 2005).

<sup>84</sup> Carré, *Le courrier du Roi en Orient*, 239-41.

lived at the expense of the ruler.<sup>85</sup> As a result, it was not just the Portuguese who turned into noblemen the moment they rounded the Cape of Good Hope. Bembo was surely right in claiming that European visitors to Iran were much respected for traveling in style and that many of them would not get half the respect in their own countries that they received in Iran.<sup>86</sup> A similar tone is struck by a missionary who was astounded at the freedom enjoyed by Europeans in Iran, even those who, as he said, misbehaved by getting drunk and by galloping their horses across city squares while hitting people. He insisted that the “Persians will allow Franks to do everything except forcing the *harams* of the elite, because the Shah so wills it.”<sup>87</sup> These images prefigure the latitude accorded to foreigners in Qajar Iran and, in a contemporary setting, remind one of the privileges enjoyed by Western expatriates living beyond their original class and means in the non-Western country where they are temporarily stationed. So many foreigners came to Iran in the early seventeenth century that Imam-quli Khan, the governor of Fars at the time, reportedly proposed destroying Persepolis so as to remove one major attraction for visitors from abroad.<sup>88</sup>

Iran’s popularity among early modern travelers was tangibly bound up with the country’s vaunted road security, which contrasted markedly with the lawlessness of the Arab and Kurdish border lands infested with armed tribesmen prone to shaking down travelers that the overland traveler had to cross before reaching Iran. For all their disdain for Safavid despotism, even the English East India Company servants recognized that they “traded with a tolerable degree of security under the aegis of a government that maintained an order in which property rights were protected.”<sup>89</sup> Tavernier insisted that, coming from Ottoman territory, past Yerevan a traveler could leave his caravan if he wished, since in Iran one no longer ran the risk of unsafe roads.<sup>90</sup> As the same author put it, “Turkey is full of thieves...” which is something one does not fear in Persia, where good order exists

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<sup>85</sup> J. Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d’un voyage du Levant*, 2 vols (Paris, 1717), 2:343-44. The institution of *mihmandari* existed in the Ottoman Empire as well until the late eighteenth century, though the arrangement does not seem to have been as elaborate and generous as in the case of Iran. For one, it is not clear if a daily allowance was involved.

<sup>86</sup> Bembo, *Travels*, 319.

<sup>87</sup> Anon., ed., *Chronicle of the Carmelites*, 1:104.

<sup>88</sup> See Bembo, *Travels*, 311. The same story occurs in De Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie*.

<sup>89</sup> Marshall, “Afterword,” 232.

<sup>90</sup> Tavernier, *Les six voyages*, 280.

for the comfort of travelers.”<sup>91</sup> Both Tavernier and Thevenot called Iranian caravanserais more beautiful and comfortable than the ones they had encountered in Ottoman territory.<sup>92</sup> Boullay-le-Gouze refrains from making explicit comparisons, but he is critical of the Ottoman system of government whereas he offers his outline of the Safavid counterpart without any negative comments.<sup>93</sup> The same observer opined that in Iran thieves were small in number because the “khans chase them,” and because there were no Turkmen or Arab rebels on Iranian soil.<sup>94</sup> Upon leaving Iran for Iraq in 1674, Bembo fondly spoke of good lodging and abundant food at excellent prices, and of a country where he had felt safe from robbers and murderers. At the first inn where he stayed in Ottoman territory after leaving Iran, the owner personally watched the animals entrusted to him—a clear sign Bembo insisted, that the security of Iran was gone.<sup>95</sup> In 1701, Tournefort crossed over into Safavid territory near the northwestern border town of Kars and found that the Iranian border guards were much more civil than the rapacious Turkish guardsmen he was used to, and that foreigners could enter and leave Iran at will. But then he had heard that, unlike Turks, Iranians respected foreigners.<sup>96</sup>

The comparative comments on the state of road safety, travel comfort and border crossings reflect a widespread preference for Iran among travelers, who, entering from Anatolia or Iraq, often explicitly compared life and society in the country favorably to conditions in the Ottoman Empire. Cartwright, traveling through the country’s northern region in 1603, commented on the industriousness and contentment of the villagers and farmers near Sultaniyah, and marveled at the “great peace and tranquillitie which the commons of Persia live above the commons of Turkey.”<sup>97</sup> Della Valle, arriving in Kangavar in Iranian Kurdistan, was quick to speak out on the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>92</sup> Jean de Thévenot, *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant*. Vol. 2, *Suite du voyage de Levant* (Paris, 1674), 233; Tavernier, *Les six voyages* (1714), 2.

<sup>93</sup> Boullay-le-Gouz, *Les voyages et observations du Sieur de la Boullay-le-Gouz*, ed. Jacques de Maussion de Favières (Paris, 1994), introd., 29.

<sup>94</sup> Boullay-le-Gouz, *Les voyages*, 81. At the end of his journey, before reaching Bandar ‘Abbas, the same author again insists that there were no thieves, adding that he had traveled alone without having heard about or experienced any untoward encounter, “because of the khan of Lar and the sultan or governor of Bandar ‘Abbas.” See Ibid., 91.

<sup>95</sup> Bembo, *Travels*, 296, 391.

<sup>96</sup> Tournefort, *Relation d’un voyage*, 2:303.

<sup>97</sup> John Cartwright, “Observations of Master John Cartwright in His Voyage from Aleppo to Hispaan,” in Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (New York, 1965), 8:504-05.

advantage of Iran over the lands of the Turks, in bounty, population, culture and any other circumstance, and deemed the country in many respects not even inferior to Christian lands.<sup>98</sup> The image was to persist over time. Even the Italian cleric Leandro de Cicilia, traveling through a desolate Iran following the onslaught of the Afghans and the fall of Isfahan, in 1730 compared the country favorably to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>99</sup>

This differentiation reflects respect for Iran as an ancient land of great cultural achievement, and scorn for the Turks as uncouth and uncultured tribesmen, upstarts and usurpers through brute force. The imagery was both old and recently revised. Since antiquity, Iran, synonymous with classical Persia, had been the ultimate enemy of the West. Iran remained a paragon of oriental despotism, cruelty and decadence until the arrival of the Turks in the Middle East early in the second millennium. The Turks—first the Seljuks, later the Ottomans—quickly inserted themselves into the continuing discourse on the history of civilization as the nemesis of the West and all it stood for, temporarily crowding out the Iranians. Medieval authors had difficulty classifying the Turks, but generally settled on demonizing them as primitive barbarians from Scythia, beyond the pale of civilization. Humanist geographers and historians tended to follow this paradigm. But, keen to rekindle the crusading spirit and looking for allies in the anti-Ottoman struggle, they also refashioned the narrative by reinserting the Iranians. Relying on Xenophon rather than Herodotus, they highlighted one element in the arsenal of old stereotypes about Iran—that of an ancient and sophisticated civilization. The resulting narrative portrayed Iran as a land of refined, alert and curious people ruled by a philosopher-king, a font of knowledge and spiritual wisdom. The other

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<sup>98</sup> Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle. Il Pellegrino descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia e l'India*, 2 vols (Brighton, 1843), 1:440.

<sup>99</sup> See Paula Orsatti, "Il Carmelitano Leandro di S. Cecilia viaggiatore in Oriente (1731-1751)," *La conoscenza dell'Asia e dell'Africa in Italia nei secoli XVIII e XIX*, 2 vols. (Naples, 1985), 2:516. G. A. Olivier, who visited Iran at the turn of the nineteenth century, has an entire chapter on the differences between Iran and the Ottoman Empire in his travelogue. He, too, compares Iran favorably to "Turkey," and along the same lines. See G. A. Olivier, *Voyage dans l'Empire Othoman, l'Egypte et la Perse*, 6 vols (Paris, 1807), 5:251-89. The sole exception to this pattern is de Bruyn, who is more positive about the Turks than about Iranians (and Arabs). See See Jan de Hond, "Den vermaarden Cornelis de Bruijn," een korte biografie," in Jan Willem Drijvers et al., eds., *Ik hadde de nieuwgierigheid. De reizen door de Nabije Oosten van Cornelis de Bruijn (ca. 1652-1727)* (Leiden and Leuven, 1997), 12.

element, despotism and barbarism, devolved on the Turks to become their defining trait.<sup>100</sup>

The accumulated weight of this imagery clearly predisposed seventeenth-century Europeans in their evaluation of Iran. Poser in 1621 came to Yerevan from Erzurum and exclaimed that he thought he had entered a different world, marked by a budding spring and Persian amiability.<sup>101</sup> Gaudereau, entering the town of Kirmanshah from Iraq in 1690, welcomed the “sweetness of Persia” after the “fatigue suffered in Turkey.”<sup>102</sup> Both voiced a trope. Yet, the issue of safety and comfort was not just a matter of bias and imagination. Lived experience gained from traveling in Iran and interacting with its inhabitants arguably played a role as well. Travelers’ appreciation for the cultural sophistication they detected in Iran was surely informed and reinforced by internalized imagery, but it was also a function of a genuinely felt cultural affinity, a convergence of taste and sensibility, which most Europeans found lacking among Turks (and Arabs). Travelers saw this sophistication in the good physique of the typical Iranian, in his concern about cleanliness, in the quality of the fruit served in people’s homes, in the modesty of their eating habits, and in their refined manners and quick wit, all of which received widespread praise.<sup>103</sup> They saw it in the importance Iranians attached to civility and good manners.<sup>104</sup> For these and other reasons, they could identify with the country and its culture, even if it appeared to some as a degenerate version of the classical picture they gleaned from reading Herodotus and Strabo.

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<sup>100</sup> Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 150-51, 203, 218-19; and Sonja Brentjes, “Early Modern Western European Travellers in the Middle East and their Reports about the Sciences,” in N. Pourjavady and Ž. Vesel, eds., *Sciences, techniques et instruments dans le monde iranien (X<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Tehran, 2004), 379-420.

<sup>101</sup> Friedrich Kochwasser, “Persien im Spiegel der Reisebeschreibung Engelbert Kaempfers,” in Wilhelm Eilers, ed., *Festgabe deutscher Iranisten zur 2500. Jahrfeier Irans* (Stuttgart, 1971), 83.

<sup>102</sup> AME, vol. 348, M. Gaudereau, M., “Relation du voyage de M. Gaudereau à Ispahan adressée aux supérieurs et directeurs du séminaire de Tours, le 22 janvier 1691,” fol. 492.

<sup>103</sup> For some examples, see Sir Roger Stevens, “European Visitors to the Safavid court,” *Iranian Studies* 7 (1974), 443-45.

<sup>104</sup> Carré insists that one never heard quarrels or swearing or people getting upset at one another in the country’s coffeehouses, which struck him as institutions where customers were educated in modesty and good manners rather than merely as venues of entertainment. Carré, 206, 242.

Even religious life had a touch of the familiar. If Islam was different, Shi'i Islam was at least familiar in its iconography, with its saintly depictions of Imam 'Ali and the veneration of the Messiah-like Imam. The Muharram passion play must have reminded Europeans of popular expressions of Christian devotion. And if Shi'i rituals were strange, they were interesting rather than just bizarre, and they certainly did not equal Hindu rituals in strangeness. In temperament, taste and esthetic sensibility, in sum, Iranians struck Europeans as less alien than Turks, Arabs or Indians, and in some ways as quite close to Europeans. Vachet considered the bazaars of Isfahan to be on par with the best in Ottoman lands, but added that in Iran merchants had the habit of putting out the most precious wares, filling their stores with them from bottom to top in the European manner. At dusk, Iranian shopkeepers would light a multitude of lamps. The most humble stores were festooned with at least five or six and the more elaborate ones sported twenty, thirty to forty. The Turks, by contrast, closed up and went home as soon as the sun set.<sup>105</sup> Herbert put it best when he said that "for their manner of husbandry, buildings, and civility," Iranians were "more resembling ours of Europe than any other we had hitherto observed in Asia."<sup>106</sup> Along the same lines, though in a somewhat backhanded way, Chardin complimented Iranians for being the "most civilized people of the Orient."<sup>107</sup>

This perceived cultural affinity is perhaps best exemplified in the assessment of gardens. European visitors were enthralled with Iranian horticulture to the point where Chardin recreated a Persian garden at his English estate at Turham Green upon his definitive return to Europe.<sup>108</sup> Barthélemy Carré writes of the royal gardens of Shiraz as charming, manicured grounds, where people of class and distinction would go for leisurely walks. He draws attention to the ornate entrance gate built of quality stone, to the spacious interior of the park, with its small palaces and pavilions, rows of trees, flowers, fountains, water basins laid out in multicolored stone, and infinite number of trees and plants, which made the place look like eternal spring and summer.<sup>109</sup> Tournefort, a botanist, drew an explicit comparison between Persian and Turkish gardens. Iran's gardens, he observed, were pleasant and

<sup>105</sup> Vachet, "Journal d'un voyage en Perse," 415.

<sup>106</sup> Herbert, *Travels in Persia*, 168.

<sup>107</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 3:417.

<sup>108</sup> See Olivier H. Bonnerot, *La Perse dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. De l'Image au Mythe* (Paris, 1988), 269, fn. 108.

<sup>109</sup> Carré, *Le courrier du Roi en Orient*, 228.

well maintained, and the country's gardeners exhibited great skill and taste, creating gardens with rows of perfectly aligned trees and properly spaced plants. With the Turks, by contrast, "all was confusion."<sup>110</sup>

A crucial element in the admiring tone of many of the observers is the receptivity to the unknown they detected in Iran. Many spoke highly of the curiosity and openness to new things Iranians exhibited, their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, their eagerness to learn about the sciences, their interest in military matters.<sup>111</sup> One noted the enthusiasm with which the mathematicians of Isfahan and Shiraz sought out missionaries to learn about new instruments of measuring time.<sup>112</sup> Chardin writes about the love the governor of Yerevan felt for the arts and sciences, and how he asked his French guest about current events in Europe and its latest inventions. The same author tells us how he spent two hours with Mirza Tahir, the son of Mirza Ibrahim, governor of Azerbaijan, who had acquainted himself with Western philosophy and "all our sciences," and who made his guest narrate the latest news from Europe and particularly novelties concerning the arts and sciences.<sup>113</sup> Manucci praises Shah 'Abbas II's curiosity with regard to the "state of things among the kings of Europe"<sup>114</sup> Volynskii in a discussion with the governor of Shamakhi, Khusraw Khan, was asked about Peter I's visit to Holland and the peace Russia had recently concluded with Sweden.<sup>115</sup>

A related trait, and one that impressed many Western visitors, is a certain indifference to religious identity, at least among the Safavid upper classes.<sup>116</sup> Europeans found unexpected forms of liberty in the land of the

<sup>110</sup> Tournefort, *Relation de voyages*, 2:332. For a dissenting view, see Chardin, who was not very complimentary of Iranians as gardeners. See Stevens, "European Visitors to the Safavid court," 436-37.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 1:511; Richard, *Raphaël du Mans*, 1:42; Thevenot, III/3, 309; and *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 4:108.

<sup>112</sup> Ange de St Joseph, *Souvenirs de la Perse safavide et autres lieux de l'Orient (1664-1678)*, ed. and trans. Michel Bastiaensen (Brussels, 1985), 118-19.

<sup>113</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 2:195, and 345.

<sup>114</sup> Nicolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mugul India 1653-1708*, trans. William Irvine, 4 vols. (London, 1907), 1:41.

<sup>115</sup> Bushev, *Posol'stvo Artemiia Volynskogo*, 194. This refers to the treaty that concluded the so-called Northern War.

<sup>116</sup> Paul Stevens draws attention to this tendency in Mughal India as detected by various European visitors, calling this an example of how early modern travelers had an eye for the unexpected. See Paul Stevens, "England in Moghul India: Historicizing Cultural Difference and Its Discontents," in Balachandar Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Imperialisms: Historical and Literary Investigations, 1500-1900* (New York, 2004), 75-92.

Sophi, not just a remarkable freedom of conscience but the ability to speak out on one's beliefs. As Manucci put it, whereas in Turkey, Arabia, the realm of the Mughals, and in Balkh, Uzbekistan and among the Pathans, it was not possible to question the law of the Prophet without risking losing one's head, in Iran "you may use arguments, make inquiry, and give answer in matters of religion without the least danger."<sup>117</sup> Emphasizing tolerance was in part a strategic device, to be sure, a way to criticize their own rulers, most notably Louis XIV in the case of late seventeenth-century French visitors. Conversely, someone like Chardin elaborated on this in order to indict superstition and bigotry in all cultures and religions. Yet, here too, the travelers' attentiveness to the theme reflects a genuinely felt sentiment. Herbert described the mixture of nations and ethnic groups inhabiting the town of Amul in Mazandaran, Armenians, Scythians, Persians, Jews, Kurds, Banians, Indians and Muscovians, as living harmoniously together, adding that they all "tolerated their own forms, because "in matters of conscience they question none where there is no breach of peace."<sup>118</sup> Boullaye-le-Gouz echoes this, likening the Iranians to the French for allowing liberty of conscience. But in Iran, he added, individuals, locals as well as foreigners, were permitted to discuss religious issues in all openness.<sup>119</sup> He was not alone in his observations. Numerous authors report that members of the Iranian elite were fond of engaging in this type of disputation, and quite a few were invited to participate in debates on religious and philosophical matters. Chardin, who sought to demonstrate that in some ways Islam was superior to Catholicism, called Iranians very human and very fair about matters of faith, except for the "clerics who, like everywhere else, hate those who don't believe in their religion."<sup>120</sup> Yet, high-ranking religious ulama, too, are known to have challenged foreigners to debates on matters of faith and philosophy.<sup>121</sup>

## Conclusion

As Iran opened up to the world under the Safavids, the country became a favorite destination for Europeans. Especially the reign of Shah 'Abbas I

<sup>117</sup> Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, 1:41.

<sup>118</sup> Herbert, *Travels in Persia*, 178-79.

<sup>119</sup> Boullaye-le-Gouz, *Les voyages*, 89.

<sup>120</sup> Chardin, *Voyages*, 3:408-09.

<sup>121</sup> For examples, see Rudi Matthee, "Christians in Safavid Iran: Hospitality and Harassment," *Studies on Persianate Societies* 3 (2005), 26-27.

attracted growing numbers of Western visitors, ranging from diplomats intent on persuading the shah to join forces against the Turks, to missionaries eager to save souls, to merchants and mercenaries keen to make their fortune. Most came to the Safavid realm on political or religious assignment or for commercial purposes; some combined motives and mandates. Many recorded their experience and impressions for superiors. Those who wrote to inform the wider public typically did so from a desire to see their works in print and to gain fame and wealth. Their travelogues, published in many editions and translations, reflect their diverse motives, ambitions and interests, offering the modern reader insight into the background and biases of their authors. It is imperative to read these works in this light, and in combination with an awareness that they greatly differ in perceptiveness and the ability and willingness to probe beneath the surface.

It is equally important to approach these works as representing a genre with its own genealogy, and to look at them as a palimpsest rather than a series of discrete texts. Their authors freely borrowed from each other, incorporating and assimilating available information. All this compels the modern scholar to look into the background of the authors, their biases and their ulterior motives, into the ways they borrowed from the writings of their predecessors and used these as a template for their own. The study of the resulting intertextuality has hardly been undertaken.

The travelers also—and, as pioneers, inevitably—inscribed Iran in the European imagination. Their impressions created a picture of the country and its inhabitants that, over time, added up to a topographical and cultural template, one that influenced those who subsequently wrote about Iran, its history and its culture, both actual visitors and the armchair travelers. When the Safavid state dissolved and Iran fell into chaos in the eighteenth century, as security lapsed and easy communication was lost, the imagination of Iran became frozen, resulting in an idealized portrayal of an imaginary country defined by its timeless literature and nostalgia-inducing ruins.<sup>122</sup>

This portrayal had consequences beyond literary musings. Inasmuch as knowledge is power, the traveler is “‘always, potentially, a colonist,’ and those he encounters always, potentially, the colonized.”<sup>123</sup> The Europeans visiting Iran in the seventeenth century mapped the country, apprized their readers of its governmental structure and social mores, and opened

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<sup>122</sup> For this, see Tafazoli, *Der deutsche Persien-Diskurs*, passim.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Roxanne L. Ruben, *Journeys to the Other Shore. Muslim and Westerner Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, 2006), 41.

up its pre-Islamic past to Western scholarly inquiry. Yet they were not agents of the type of settlement advocated in the late sixteenth century by Richard Hakluyt for the New World, who recommended outright colonization.<sup>124</sup> Most of Asia, with its ancient and highly developed civilizations, did not lend itself to that type of intrusion, and to attribute imperialist designs to these observers would be anachronistic. Still, collectively they were responsible for the growing repository of knowledge that over time would enable the real mapping of the country, thus facilitating outside economic and, in some ways, political hegemony.

None of the future uses of these accounts would have diminished the value of the reporting. In Peter Mancall's words, "for all the problems modern readers have navigating those travel accounts, the texts that survive should not be dismissed as revealing more about the observer than the observed."<sup>125</sup> The travelogues offer a kaleidoscopic panorama of Iran, elevating our knowledge about the Safavid realm to unprecedented heights. They open up the country in sometimes unique ways, revealing aspects of Safavid society and government that remain obscure or wholly unreported in the indigenous sources. Beyond their professional assignments, their authors were all driven by a remarkable curiosity, which even took the form of a willingness to test and even transcend the confines of their culture and its assumptions. We don't have to fall into a naïve reading of early modern travelers' accounts to appreciate this feature, and the resulting value and relevance of the information they convey.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, it would be an underestimation of the intelligence and curiosity of the best authors to equate the similarities their works evince with a lack of imagination.

What makes especially the seventeenth-century travelogues remarkable is not just the level of detail they provide, but the new approach to cross-cultural knowledge they represent. The authors neither project the self-evident superiority of faith of their sixteenth-century forebears nor were they moved by the nineteenth-century notion that race and culture inher-

<sup>124</sup> See Peter C. Mancall, *Hakluyt's Promise* (New Haven and London, 2007).

<sup>125</sup> Idem, ed., *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery. An Anthology* (Oxford, 2006), introduction, 13.

<sup>126</sup> See Alam and Subrahmanyam's critique dismissing Peter Burke's article on Bernier as "simplistic", "The Philosopher as Traveler: Bernier's Orient," in Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds., *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (London, 1999), 124-37, and of Rubiés himself as following in the footsteps of Burke, in Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, 358, fn. 38.

ently elevated the Western visitor above the natives. Intensely curious, the more perceptive ones sought to depict what they saw as faithfully and accurately as possible. They came to recognize and appreciate the intrinsic merits of Iranian society and culture. Most remarkably, the best ones show a willingness to test and even transcend the limitations of their culture and its assumptions.

Westerners generally liked and felt comfortable in Iran. They praised the country's secure road system, admired its refined culture and the sophisticated manners of its people, and especially enjoyed their renowned hospitality. They could even relate to Shi'ism, with its portrayal of 'Ali and the Imams, and its rituals of suffering and redemption. They felt far more at home than they did in India with its religious promiscuity and its cacophonous cultural universe, and among the Turks, whom they saw as primitive and predatory. Of course prevailing stereotypes played into this. The reputation of the Turks as primitive tribesmen as well as the status of the Ottoman Empire as a direct military adversary and a rival European power, and, conversely, Iran's hallowed status as an ancient, refined civilization, predisposed the travelers in their views. Yet their preference for Safavid lands was not just a matter of internalized prejudice but also drew on lived experience. Europeans do seem to have felt a congeniality of spirit among Iranians that they found generally missing among Arabs and Turks. They express this most strikingly in their admiration for what they saw as a remarkable openness to novelty among educated Iranians as well as for their willingness to debate religious and philosophical issues with them, which far outstripped what they saw as negative traits, most notably a love of ostentation and a tendency for excessive flattery and deception. Much of the generally sympathetic portrait of the country found in the travelogues derives from this shared affinity.

In the end, there is a reason why even those who look with suspicion at European travelers, and who write them off as irredeemably biased outsiders, depend on them and occasionally even quote them. The factual information offered in these works, based on empirical observation, remains valuable for its ethnographic detail, and is often verifiably "true," and at times unique in that no other sources offer anything like it. They remain indispensable as evidence for life and society in seventeenth-century Iran. In addition, their accounts retain their value for offering us knowledge of the way Europeans at that time viewed a country like Iran as well as their own society and culture. As such they continue to inform us as much as they delight us.



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