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ANGLO-IRANIAN RELATIONS I. SAFAVID TO ZAND PERIODS

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i. *Safavid to Zand Periods*

1. *Introduction*. English interest in Persia during this period is almost exclusively concerned with trade and has almost nothing to do with political relations. Relations arose as the result of a failure to trade eastwards through Russia and Central Asia in the mid-16th century by merchants of the Russia Company, which, though formed in London on 26 February 1555, had already dispatched their first voyage of three ships by the northeastern route round

Russia on 18 May 1553. The sea passage was blocked by ice and they resolved to travel across Russia after receiving permission in Moscow. Later, when that proved difficult, they decided to pursue the possibility of overland trade with Iran to outflank the domination exercised by the Portuguese on the eastern maritime spice trade and by the Spanish in their trade with the Americans, particularly of gold. In the early 17th century the East India Company, which was formed to develop an English seaborne trade with Asia, just as the Levant Company had been previously established on 11 September 1581 to develop trade throughout the eastern Mediterranean lands, tried to trade with Persia by exchanging cloth for silk. This trade remained throughout the rest of the Safavid period as the raison d'être of Anglo-Persian relations. There were occasional instances of royal concern but they were mostly interventions on behalf of the merchants. Possessing trading interests in both the Ottoman and Persian empires it was inappropriate for the English to take sides in Ottoman-Persian hostilities.

In the Afšār and Zand periods English attention was concentrated onpromoting their trade mostly up through the southern ports and to some extent down the northern routes through Russia, when merchants revived trading in that direction in the 1740s. The accounts of British travelers to Persia during this time reveal a lively and often well-informed interest in the country. They make a useful contribution to cultural understanding. English poets anddramatists were inspired by images of opulence and luxury and scholars started to study Iranian history, language, religion, and astronomy in the early 17th century.

2. *The Early Safavids 1501-1587*. Anthony Jenkinson, a prominent merchant of the Russia Company, who had had experience of the Levant trade and had received **a** grant of privileges from Sultan Solaymān I in Aleppo between 7 December 1553 and 24 March 1554, was sent to Russia in 1557 to survey the possibilities of trade beyond Russia. He reached Bokhara in December, 1558, but he left in March, 1559, disappointed, because wars in the east had interrupted the caravans between China and the west. Moreover, Persia was then engaged in hostilities with the Turkman Khans. Nevertheless, on his return to England Jenkinson advised his directors that trade with Iran would be profitable. He left England again in May 1561, this time with a letter from Queen Elizabeth requesting "safe conducts" and with instructions to apply for permission from the Shah to establish "further trade in merchandise by us hereafter to be made . . . not only that we may freely sell in all places within

his dominions such wares as we carry hither, but also buy and bring away any manner of wares or merchandises whatever it be . . . with free passage" (Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages*, p. 117; Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* II, pp. 3-4). Jenkinson was knowledgeable, resourceful and competent but his audience with Shah Ṭahmāsp on 2 November 1562 in Qazvīn ended in ignominy, when the Shah remarked that "we have no need to have friendship with the unbelievers." The Shah requested him to leave followed by "a man with a Basanet of sand, sifting all the way I had gone within the said pallace" (Hakluyt, op. cit., p. 22). Amends were made later and he was presented with a robe of honor before leaving on 20 March 1563.

It was not anauspicious start, but on the advice of Jenkinson who had learnt much about the state of trading during his stayin Qazvīn, the Russia Company decided to persist with the further trading expeditions. As Jenkinson had realized, the Ottomans were opposed to the idea as they did not want trade diverted from the routes across their territories and the Armenian merchants resented any competition that would interfere with their virtual monopoly of the Levant-based trade centered on Aleppo and handled in association with Venetian merchants. These considerations remained important throughout the Safavid period, because the textile industries of Turkey were dependent on Persian silk and the Armenians were the main intermediaries.

The expeditions of the Russia Company varied in success, the third being the most profitable and the fifth the largest with goods for sales amounting to a value of β30-40,000. The main British exports were woolen cloth, a vital contribution to the English national economy, velvets, stains, damasks, copper, lead, and tin. Imports from Persia included raw silk, spices, dyes, drugs, and precious stones. On 29 June 1566 Arthur Edwards in charge of the 3rd expedition wascourteously received by Shah Ṭahmāsp in Qazvīn. The Shah granted him improved privileges and expected a greater volume of trade including 1,000.000 pieces of cloth in return for "monie, silke and other wares as we will," because the Turks were again interfering with trade between the two countries (Morgan and Coote, *Early Voyages*, pp. 393-402).

The last expedition of the Russia Company in 1579-81 was ambitious but dogged with disaster. The Turks, at war with the Persians, had cut many of the routes, the security of the provinces had deteriorated after the death of Shah Ṭahmāsp in 984/1576, extortion was rife, the Russians uncooperative and the climate particularly appalling. The trade was discontinued because of such adverse conditions and because there was no guarantee of safety or payment

in Persia. A prominent English courtier, Sir Francis Walsingham, remarked in 1578, “in all trades two thinges princypally are to be Considered, profitte and suertie” (Skilliter, p. 28). These no longer applied in Persia so attention was switched to the Levant as an alternative route to Persia in spite of the Persian-Turkish Wars. Attempts were also made by two merchants of the Levant Company to test the desert routes through Mesopotamia to Baṣra and on to the entrepôt island of Hormoz near the entrance to the Persian Gulf. The merchants, Ralph Fitch and John Newberry and their two companions, William Leedes, a jeweler and James Story, a painter, were seized and imprisoned from 9 September to 11 October by the Portuguese authorities, who claimed a protectorate over the island, before being taken to Goa from which they escaped about year later. That route also was too dangerous to be practical. So, just before the accession of Shah ʿAbbās I the northern, western, and southern overland routes to Persia were virtually closed to British trade by Russian, Ottoman and Portuguese opposition.

3. *The Reign of Shah ʿAbbās* (996-1038/1588-1629). The reign of Shah ʿAbbās was a turning point in modern Persian history. Threatened at once on all borders, the new Shah defeated his enemies, defended his territories, stabilized the administration, revived the economy and endowed his successors with a legacy of good government which lasted for about half a century. In the early part of his reign arrived in Qazvīn in autumn 1598 the adventurous English courtier Sir Anthony Sherley and his brother Robert, in search of fame and fortune. Member of a prominent Sussex family, Anthony Sherley’s father had served with distinction in the wars against the Spaniards in the Netherlands. Outlawed by the court of Queen Elizabeth, but emboldened by his reception in Persia, the knight inveigled the Shah into sending him on **a** mission to European monarchs to drum upsupport for an alliance against the Ottomans. It was a grandiose proposal which fired the imagination of the Shah. It was, however, a diplomatic impossibility, despite the plausible persuasive power of Sherley who was an opportunist machiavellian in manner. Sherley’s querulous disposition and the animosity which existed between him and his companions, including a morose Persian companion, Ḥasan Khan, doomed his embassy to failure, though its reception in Europe found echoes even in the plays of Shakespeare (see below).

Whilst his brother vainly frequented the royal courts of Europe, Robert languished in Persia as a hostage providing tuition in cannon construction. The interest of the Shah having been once aroused, he was still anxious to

promote his proposals again for a “second front” against theTurks, in spite of the failure of Sir Anthony Sherley. He dispatched Robert Sherley in 1608 on a similar mission, but he tooafter numerous adventures and many discussions was unable to convince the European courts to make common cause against the Ottomans. Robert was well received on his visit to England in 1611 by James I, who had earlier befriended the Sherley family.He stayed for two years. Unfortunately, propositions for trade or military assistance were unappealing to merchants or courtiers. They said, “his projects are to little purpose, for the way is long and dangerous, the trade uncertain, and must quite cut off our traffick with the Turk, of which one of the main benefits was sales of English cloth in return for purchases of silk” (Ferrier, *Iran* 11, p. 80). The Spaniards, with whom he had spent some time before coming to England, were sympathetic but uncertain. Robert Sherley returned to Isfahan in March, 1615. There, ironically, he was approached by two merchants of the East India Company, Richard Steele and William Crowther, visiting the Iranian capital from their base at Surat on the northwestern coast of India, for information about trade in Iran and a request for assistance in obtaining its authorization from the Shah. He was helpful but in a few months, on 30 September 1615, he again left for Europe accompanied by his Circassian wife.

Shah ʿAbbās, having conquered the province of Lār and secured control of the southern coast in 1614, was fretting at the presence of the Portuguese in their trading fortress on Hormoz, from which they controlled much of the trade of the Persian Gulf. He instructed Sherley to reach an agreement with them in Spain as the Spanish and Portuguese nations were in full alliance at this time. Sherley, however, was suspected by the Spaniards, who had already sent their own ambassador to Shah ʿAbbās, the elderly taciturn noble Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa, who did not make an impressive appearance at the Safavid court. Making no headway in Madrid, Sherley traveled again to England where he was well received by Charles I, on 28 January 1624, but royal advocacy once again could not persuade the merchants of the East India Company to take Sherley seriously. The arrival of a second royal ambassador, Naqd-ʿAlī Beg, who repudiated and assaulted Sherley, claiming that he had no credentials from Shah ʿAbbās, completed his discomfort. Charles I was dismayed and indulging in his own personal diplomacy appointed Sir Dodmore Cotton on 15 April 1626 as his ambassador in Persia. Cotton was instructed to vindicate Sherley’s reputation and to offer an exchange of royal friendship and trade to Shah ʿAbbās. The three ambassadors sailed together for Persia in March, 1627, but none was destined to live long. Naqd-ʿAlī Beg

fearing disgrace on his return poisoned himself with opium towards the end of the voyage. Robert Sherley, after being spurned by his royal master, passed away in Qazvīn on 13 June 1628 and Sir Dodmore Cotton afflicted by dysentery died there ten days later. Within months Shah ʿAbbās too was dead. His ambitious diplomatic and commercial initiatives to divert the trade of Iran from the overland east-west routes to the north-south sea lanes and his attempts to forge a political alliance with the European powers against the Turks faded with him.

Yet, he had succeeded in diversifying the trade of his country. Unlike some of the directors of the East India Company in London, who suspected the motives of the Sherley brothers, some other company merchants, who had established themselves at Surat understood how difficult trading conditions were. They realized their problems in selling sufficient quantities of woolen cloth in India which had a warm climate and produced a vast volume of light cotton cloths of its own. In desperation they informed the Company in 1614 that they had made “full inquiry concerning the state of Persia, where we are certainly informed of the vent of much cloth in regard their country is cold . . . and what they have is brought overland from Aleppo with great charge” (Ferrier, *Journal of Economic and Social History of theOrient*, 1973, p. 182). Persia was potentially a good market and “as the King of Persia being one that much favoureth our nation and is of late fallen out with the Portingals in so much we shall never have a better occasion than now” (ibid.). This situation was the origin of the East India Company’s trade with Persia, commercial in significance and opportunist by intention. By the time that diplomatic and other arguments had been raised, trading had already commenced with the arrival of the “James” which had been sent from Surat and which anchored off Jāsk on 2 December 1616 with a cargo of goods in value amounting to β6,333,15 s. 11 d.

The decision to open up a trade with Persia was a controversial decision opposed by the recently arrived English ambassador to the Mughal Court, Sir Thomas Roe, who doubted whether the Turks would permit it for “the trade will not be turned from his ancient course. Great waters will keep their own channel.” Roe, aware of his limitations, disputed the judgement of the merchants that a trade would be sustained in Persia because “those they call merchants pass up and down like badgers [pedlars], with packs, and buy only by little quantities,” whereas the ambassador insisted that “we ayme not at gnatts and small flyes, but at a commerce honourable and equall to two so

mighty nations" (ibid., p. 184). He also feared Portuguese opposition. In many respects Roe was right, but he underestimated the tenacity of the English merchants and was unaware of the economic transformation, which was to be achieved by Shah ʿAbbās. Shah ʿAbbās was pleased with the arrival of the merchants and their goods, early promising contracts for silk in exchange for cloth, requesting armaments, hinting at assistance against the Portuguese and granting the requisite trading privileges. His ministers were sceptical, remarking on the lack of resources of the English merchants, their mean appearance and poor organization. The Portuguese tried to sink their ships and belittle their presence. The Armenian traders were hostile.

The first agent, Edward Connock, appointed on 6 October 1616 and who had experience of the Levant trade, was optimistic about trade, believing that within "a few years the whole quantity of silk made in this his kingdom, amounting to full one million sterling at 6s the 16 ounces," would be put at the disposal of the Company as it was a royal monopoly and referring to it as "the only richest yet known in the world." The reality was different for by April, 1618, the merchants in Persia admitted "wee are destitute of money, commodities and creditt" (Ferrier, *Economic History Review* 26, p. 41).

It was the victory of the East India Company's ships over the Portuguese fleet off the island of Hormoz in 1622 which turned the scales. The Persians detained the raw silk purchased by the English merchants on its way to port. The Company's ships were forced to ferry Persian troops to capture the island in 1622, before the silk bales would be released. At one blow the Portuguese domination of the Persian Gulf was virtually ended, the blockade of Persian ports lifted and freedom of navigation for shipping to Persia secured, whilst at the same time the reputation of the East India Company was enhanced. Part of the agreement with the English merchants, which preceded the operations, was the grant of half of the customs of Bandar ʿAbbās and freedom from dues and taxes for English goods entering the port, if the Portuguese were defeated (Savory, *The Safavids*, pp. 114-18). Though this stipulation was never fully observed, the financial pressure on the English merchants in Persia was alleviated and an encouragement given for more trade. It was an important development in the maritime trade of Persia because the defeat of the Portuguese was followed by the appearance of Dutch merchants the following year. They became the great rivals of the English Company till the end of the 17th century.

4. *The Later Safavids*. Though the Company declined to assist the Persians with

ships to attack Muscat alter the successful assault on Hormoz, it enjoyed the favor of Shah ʿAbbās to the end of his reign. Three special voyages were sponsored to Persia from England in his last years and the early years of Shah Ṣafī through the negotiation of royal contracts. There were, however, two great differences between trading in the reigns of Shah ʿAbbās and his successors. Firstly, Shah Ṣafī early in his reign "gave lycence to buy silks in all parts of his kingdome without restriction" whereas Shah ʿAbbās "by his commands prohibited all men what nation soever to buy any silks unless from his hands" (Ferrier, op. cit., p. 46). The remonstrances of Charles I on behalf of the merchants made no difference to the Shah Ṣafī's policy. Secondly, Armenian traders came to control the overland trade of Persia with the Mediterranean ports through Anatolia and Syria even more closely in this period and opposed the trading activities of the English merchants.

Indeed, this domination was so great that around **1**640 the directors in London were complaining that the "Gulf of Persia devours all that comes within its grasp" and that "silk had become an unprofitable commodity" (ibid., p. 47). By the middle of the 17th century English trade to Iran was so low in English goods that it had to be supplemented by trade in cotton cloths and other goods from India in order to withstand the intense and successful competition from the Dutch whose imports of spices and cloths provided them with very profitable returns. The success of the Dutch in the first two Anglo-Dutch wars in Europe in mid-century had its impact on the respective positions of the twonations in the east to the Dutch advantage, as much of the East India Company's fleet was destroyed in Asian waters.

The restoration of the Stuart royal family in 1660 and the reversal of fortunes after the third Anglo-Dutch war led to the renewal of trading activity towards the east, including Persia. Thomas Roltarrived in Persia in

January 1670 as Agent torevive trade. In 1672 he presented a royal letter from Charles II to Shah Sultan Ḥosayn. The Shah, however, was little inclined to state affairs, which he left toShaikh ʿAlī Khan, "whilst the young king spends his time wholely in pleasure," as Rolt commented (India Office Records, G/36/l06, 27 January 1671/72).

A decade later the directors of the Company decided "to continuea constant and direct trade between Persia and this place . . . being resolved by God's permission that the trade of Persia shall not lye fallow to the English nation, as it hath done too long" (Ferrier, op. cit., p. 49). The decline of the Mughal

Empire and disorders in India were affecting the Company's trade there and Indian silk was in short supply from its principal source in Bengal. Moreover, there was muchrivalry and competition between the Levant andEast India companies towards theend of the 17th century. The directors of theEast India Company hoped to replace the Dutch in Iran as the customer of Persian silk and the sole supplier of "broad cloth and all sorts of woolen manufacturers" (ibid.).

This was similar to Jenkinson's earliest plans in 1561 andof Connock later in 1616, but Shah Sultan Ḥosayn was indifferent, unlike Shah ʿAbbās. One of the reasons for the attempted revival of trade to and from Persia was the state of the Ottoman Empire weakened at this time by its wars and defeats in Europe, which were having an adverse effect on trade. These disruptions harmed the interest of many Armenian merchants at the same time as the cohesion of the Armenian community in Isfahan was being doubly threatened. On the one hand there was increasing French missionary activity in Jolfā, across the river Zāyanda-rūd from Isfahan, the major community of Armenians in Persia, whilst at the same time there was increasing persecution of the Armenians by zealous Persians. As a result some Armenian merchants were trying to associate themselves with English, Dutch and French companies. In June 1688 the East India Company made a contract with the Armenian Callendar family through the mediation of Sir John Chardin (q.v.), the French traveler to Persia, who had settled in England. The agreement was commended to the Company's merchants in Isfahan, but little came of it there, though it had some success in India.

The East India Company's charter was renewed in November, 1693, with stringent conditions attached to the exports of woolen cloths which obliged it to the "necessity of reviving their ancient cloth trade in Persia" (ibid., p. 51). At the same time the harassing of shipping in the Mediterranean by French fleets provided the East India Company with an opportunity for supplanting the Levant trade, "to turne the course of trade between Persia and Aleppo." This would not be accomplished without the capital and collaboration of the great Armenian merchants established in Isfahan. So, in 1694, the Company offered five of the most important Armenian merchants the complete disposal of English goods to be sent out in three ships, amounting to a third of its total overseas involvement for that year. The Company contended that the Armenians accepted they would not need to travel for their purchases or sales "but may do both better and cheaper in their own country and at their own

doors" (ibid., p. 52).

The Armenians were unimpressed claiming there was no advantage for silk exports, "yt is but wind, for nobody will be so mad, when we carry it to Aleppo; we have more ways than one to dispose of it" (ibid., p. 56). This was the last major trading initiative of the East India Company in Persia. The Company continued trading to Persia, pressing for cloth exports and silk imports and enlisting the services of former Levant Company merchants. Its privileges were renewed by Shah Sultan Ḥosayn in 1697. At the end of the century it had surpassed the trade of theDutch East India Company. Its shipping carried increasing numbers of local traders and their goods between the Persian Gulf and India. Nevertheless, by the time that Safavid Persia collapsed before the Afghan invasion, when Maḥmūd took control of Isfahan in October, 1722, English merchants had not succeeded in diverting the flow of Persian overland trade to the shipping lanes.

5. *The Successors of the Safavids and Nāder Shah*. During the Afghan occupation conditions were difficult for trade. The merchants in Isfahan and Bandar ʿAbbās suffered greatly. After the deposition of Maḥmūd in April, 1725, it seemed initially that his cousin, Ašraf, would be more inclined to encourage the revival of trade but uprisings in the country caused by his brutal behavior plunged the country into more conflict and disruption. The English merchants were fortunate to escape with their lives although their goods were plundered and money stolen. Trading on a restricted scale still continued in Company vessels up the Persian Gulf. In the interior it ceased and no supplies of goat's wool (fine hair for making hats and buttons) were obtainable in Kermān. Although Nāder Shah in November, 1729, restored a semblance of order with Shah Ṭahmāsp II before deposing him and taking the throne for himself in 1736, the demands of his army, the invasion of India, conflict with the Ottomans and the extent of his exactions reduced trade to a trickle. Armenian merchants, who had been ill-treated and deprived of their possessions, scattered. Armenian trading links with the Ottomans were mostly severed as well as their connections with Russia. Nāder Shah's life was a period of glory and oppression, in which merchants hardly flourished.

In 1738 an intrepid English merchant, John Elton, revived the idea of trading with Central Asia through Russia but on reaching Astrakhan in 1739 he learnt that the routes were blocked to Ḵīva and Bokhara. Crossing the Caspian Sea, he landed his merchandise at Rašt, where he received a friendly reception and was able to procure the necessary privileges. Returning to England he

described optimistically the opportunities for trade, stating that the capital of Persia was changed to Mašhad, which was too far from the Persian Gulf to be supplied by the East Indian Company from its base at Bandar ʿAbbās. He remarked that the overland trade through Turkey was seriously disrupted, partly due to Ottoman-Persian hostilities and partly the result of Turkish involvement in European conflict over the question of the Polish Succession. With extraordinary energy and confidence he obtained transit permission from the Russian government. He constructed and launched two ships at Kazan on the Volga in 1743. He sailed them over the Caspian Sea to Rašt with a Captain Woodruffe. There he unfortunately quarreled with the Russian consul. A year later despairing of any future trading prospects he took service with Nāder Shah as Jamāl Beg, Chief Naval Constructor, to the consternation of the merchants of the Russia Company, who feared that the Russians would retaliate with an embargo on all British trade. In the Persian Gulf Nāder Shah was harboring naval ambitions. He acquired several vessels including two from the East India Company with the intention of attacking Muscat.

Another merchant, Jonas Hanway, was sent to Persia to inquire into the conduct of Elton and take measures for trade. Hanway, who met Elton and was not without his admiration for him, resolved to take his merchandise to Mašhad but before he reached the capital he was robbed of his goods and nearly lost his life at the hands of a revolting Qajar leader. While traveling bravely to Hamadān to complain to Nāder Shah some of his goods were retrieved and he received compensation for some of the rest. After Elton refused to leave the service of Nāder Shah, the Russians stopped the passage of English goods to Persia in 1746, thus effectively destroying all hope of such a trade over the Caspian. A year after the assassination of Nāder Shah English goods at Rašt to the value of β80,000 were looted and never recovered. The merchants withdrew. Once again the northern route into Persia for British trade had failed.

6. The Zands. Northern Persia remained too unsettled for trade to be active. The authority of the Zands was not exercised. They were limited to the south of the country, administering their power from Shiraz. The East India Company continued to trade from India along the Persian Gulf to Baṣra up to the death of Karīm Khan Zand in 1193/1779.

In spite of economic difficulties, the depredations of Baluchis and feuding between local khans, trading continued at Bandar ʿAbbās, which was still receiving some consignments of goat's wool from Kermān. In 1763, however,

the bombardment of the port by a French frigate persuaded the East India Company's Presidency in Bombay to do what it had contemplated for some years, withdraw from Bandar ʿAbbās. The depôt was abandoned after 150 years of trading and the goods and services transferred to Baṣra. Unfortunately the agent in Baṣra was not well disposed towards Persia and, when negotiations were opened for the establishment of trading facilities at Bushire in July, 1763, he was opposed to the idea. Nevertheless, an arrangement was reached for exclusive representation, duty-free concessions and an agreement over exporting coinage. It was of limited success because Karīm Khan Zand expected British naval assistance against his enemies in the Persian Gulf, a region where the politics were particularly complicated at this time and alliances shifted unpredictably. A considerable local trade was still being transacted, much of it carried in the Company's shipping and some of it in Arab ships. The actual trade transacted by the East India Company was declining and it withdrew from Bushire in 1769.

There was much trade to and from Baṣra in the decade from 1763 to 1773 but thereafter, because of the plague, Russian-Ottoman hostilities, the Persian capture of the port and Arab privateering it was very much reduced. As this reduction coincided with increased East India Company trading to the Far East, so British trade to the Persian Gulf dwindled. Yet, in spite of frequent threats to withdraw entirely some trade was maintained with Baṣra and southern Persia. These connections proved invaluable in the subsequent wars with the French in maintaining communications between Europe and Asia. By then trade with the Persian Gulf was not just part of the relations with Persia, but a factor related to conditions in Europe where the French Revolution and the ambitions of Napoleon were presaging the political interests of the 19th century. The nature of the relationship was changing. Politics were beginning to impinge upon relations with Persia whereas previously the emphasis has been almost exclusively confined to trade.

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