



## CAPUCHINS IN PERSIA

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**CAPUCHINS IN PERSIA.** The mission of the Capuchins in Persia began with the arrival of two French monks, Father Gabriel of Paris (ca. 1595-1641) and Father Pacifique of Provins (1588-1648), at Isfahan late in 1628. It was to last for more than a hundred years. The two monks were sent out by their superiors and by the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide of Rome. The Capuchins were mendicant (i.e., propertyless) friars of a reconstituted branch of the Franciscan order. In France at that time the Capuchin order was in vigorous growth, and its religious and charitable ideals were attracting many young men of the nobility and bourgeoisie. From 1626 onward the French Capuchins established a number of missionary posts in the Near East with two objectives: to work for union of the oriental churches (including the Armenian) with the Roman Catholic church and to try to convert Muslims through preaching that would respect Islamic values and through good example. Capuchin monks lived solely on the alms that were given to them. After 1640 the French Capuchin missions in Persia were staffed by the ecclesiastical province of Touraine and supervised by a “custos” who resided at Aleppo.

Soon after the arrival of the two monks, Father Pacifique was received by Shah ‘Abbās I at Qazvīn and sent by him back to France with orders to negotiate various projects, including the purchase of cannons and a printing press; these were subsequently abandoned by Shah Şafī. Thus Father Gabriel was at first left alone. He encountered strong opposition from many sides, but in 1634, thanks to the good offices of the captain of the Dutch East India



Company and the *qāzī*, he succeeded in obtaining the use of a house near the castle of Ṭabarak. This house, which was to be the seat of the Capuchin mission until about 1656, lay in a quarter partly inhabited by Christians, and the Safavid government's subsequent decision to concentrate the Christians of Isfahan in New Jolfā gravely impaired the work of the mission. The Capuchins had won a number of Armenian confessants, and repeated attempts, notably by Father Gabriel of Chinon in 1653 and again in 1664-65, to obtain premises in the center of New Jolfā came to nothing.

The superiors in charge of the Capuchin hospice at Isfahan were Fathers Gabriel of Paris until his recall to Paris in 1636, Blaise of Nantes until his replacement in 1640 by Valentin of Angers (who died at Isfahan in 1665), Ambroise of Preuilly from 1643 until his departure to India, Raphaël of Le Mans (du Mans) who was in charge from 1649 until his death in 1696 and for much of that time had only one colleague, Séraphin of Orléans. The next Superiors were Jean-Baptiste of Montmoreau from 1696 to 1714, Denis of Bourges until his death in 1738, and Clément of Oléron, the last Capuchin in residence at Isfahan, who had to abandon the convent and later died at Basra in 1747. One of Father Clément's colleagues, Father Archange, was nevertheless able to take part in the work of translating the Gospels ordered by Nāder Shah and completed in 1740 (Archives Relations Extérieures, *Corr. Pol. Perse*, 7, fol. 171).

The first Capuchins at Isfahan had assiduously learned Persian and Turkish. Fathers Gabriel of Paris and Blaise of Nantes knew enough to be able to compile a dictionary and write several short works for presentation to their Muslim protectors. Enjoying a privileged position and close contacts with certain members of the Safavid court, they became very well informed about Persian culture and the country's institutions and affairs. Father [Raphaël du Mans](#), who arrived at Isfahan in 1647, profited from the respect that his forerunners had earned and also put to use his own knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. He was the court translator for European business right up to his death. The favor he enjoyed in the later years of Shah 'Abbās II's reign impressed observers such as Tavernier and Bedik, an Armenian and the author of *Cehel sutun*, an account in Latin of Persia and the Shi'ite religion (Austria, ca. 1676). Much of the material in the travel accounts of Tavernier, Thévenot, Chardin, Fryer, and Kaempfer is derived from the reports on Persia written by Raphaël du Mans and from oral information given to them by him. The Capuchins were not, strictly speaking,



representatives of France. They were loyal to the government of Persia, and this loyalty was appreciated. Their evangelizing efforts, however, seldom bore any fruit.

In August 1628 the Capuchins had left one of their colleagues, Father Juste of Beauvais, at Baghdad, which was then under Safavid rule. He founded a convent there and set on foot a successful mission, which was subsequently taken over by the [Carmelites](#).

A second Capuchin hospice was established at Tabrīz in 1656 by a remarkably able missionary, Father Gabriel of Chinon (d. 1668). He enjoyed the protection of the *beglarbeg* and the provincial vizier, Mīrzā Ebrāhīm, later that of Mīrzā Ebrāhīm's son, the vizier Mīrzā Moḥammad-Ṭāher, who had studied with him. He made several journeys from Tabrīz: to Urmia (Orūmīya), where Father Victor of Blois began a short-lived mission to the Nestorians (1662-63); to Georgia in 1666 at the invitation of its prince Wakhtang V; and lastly to Yerevan (Īravān), where a Catholic chapel was built by the Capuchins in 1667 under the protection of the khan and of an Armenian named Azaria, only to be demolished a few months later at the behest of the Gregorian Armenian clergy.

The convent at Tabrīz, however, remained active for almost a hundred years. The monks in charge, all sent out by the Province of Touraine, were Fathers Joseph-Marie of Bourges until 1676; Georges of Vendôme until 1697, when he became the Custos; Pierre of Issoudun, who was stoned to death at Mosul in 1722; Bernard of Bourges, who was killed in the Ottoman invasion of Tabrīz in 1725; Clément of Oléron until 1738; and Damien of Lyon, who before his death in 1746 accompanied Nāder Shah on several campaigns, leaving Pellerin of La Mirandole in charge during his absences. The convent was then abandoned, not only because of the insecurity in Persia but also for lack of monks due to a sharp fall in recruitment to religious orders in France.

Nothing came of a plan to set up a convent at Shiraz. Nor did a tour of Christian Armenian and Georgian villages in the Peria (Farīdan) district near Isfahan by Father Ambroise in 1649 achieve the intended establishment of a hospice there.

In Georgia the Italian Capuchins maintained a mission from 1661 onward at Tiflis, Gori, Ganja, and elsewhere. They contributed significantly to the religious and national revival of the Georgians that began in the early 18th



century. They were expelled from Georgia in 1845.

The activities of the Capuchins in Safavid Iran, particularly their relations with court officials and certain notables and with the Armenian and Georgian Christians, have received little attention but were not unimportant. In addition to their purely religious role, they played a part as cultural intermediaries.

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See also various documents in the archives of *Propaganda Fide* (Rome), *Missions Etrangères* (Paris), etc.