



CARMELITES IN PERSIA

CARMELITES IN PERSIA. In 1604 Pope Clement VIII, with the support of Sigismund III Vasa of Poland, dispatched a mission of Discalced Carmelite fathers (*pādrīān-e* [< Portuguese *padre*] *pā-berehna-ye kūh-e Karmel*) to Persia; the embassy represented the culmination of a policy of seeking alliances against the Ottoman empire that had been initiated by Pius V when he had attempted to formalize relations with Shah Ṭahmāsb (cf. Alonso). These first reformed Carmelites, whose vocation was both contemplative and missionary, had been recruited in Italy in order to evade the control of the king of Portugal, who had a monopoly on missions in Asia; they received a very warm welcome from Shah ‘Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) and were permitted to settle at Isfahan in 1608 under the direction of Father Jean-Thaddée de St.-Elisée (John Thaddeus of St. Eliseus; 1574-1633). As ambassadors, they were given a royal residence near the Meydān-e Mīr, where they established a handsome monastery. For many years it sheltered a varying number of fathers from a wide range of national backgrounds. In 1165/1752 the last Carmelite departed, only a short interval after the death of Philippe-Marie de St.-Augustin (Philip Mary of St. Augustine), bishop of Isfahan, in 1162/1749.

From the beginning it was clear to the Carmelites that, while ‘Abbās I reigned, their diplomatic mission would achieve only minor and temporary success and that the vaunted benign attitude of the shah toward Christianity was entirely relative. On the other hand, their apostolic mission could be furthered in a number of fields. In 1017/1608 Father Paul-Simon de Jésus-Marie (Paul-Simon of Jesus-Mary) proposed the establishment of a school for Armenians.



In general, however, Carmelite efforts to draw the Armenian Gregorian church into the Roman see encountered many obstacles, for ‘Abbās I was fundamentally hostile to such a union and supported the opposition. This opposition was made easier by the fact that the thousands of Armenians whom he had transplanted to Isfahan had gradually been reunited under the jurisdiction of the bishops of New Jolfā of Isfahan, a city with privileged status. On the other hand, a celebrated mullah undertook, in cooperation with the Carmelites, to translate an Arabic version of the Gospels into Persian (now apparently lost) and to circulate it among learned circles in the capital (it was later revised, about 1618, perhaps by Father John Thaddeus; see also [bible vii. persian translations of the bible](#)). The zeal of the first Roman Catholic fathers did meet with some success and even a number of conversions. In 1609 Robert Sherley petitioned Pope Paul V to send Carmelite missionaries to Persia to assist in furthering the work of those already there. Nevertheless, in 1031/1622 there was an outbreak of persecution, which was directed particularly at Muslim converts, five of whom were put to death in Isfahan by royal command (cf. Bugnini, pp. 154-59). There was also a concerted effort in the villages to convert transplanted Armenian Christians to Islam by force; the Carmelites intervened on behalf of the Armenians of [Čahār-Maḥāl](#), when some of their villages were forcefully converted to Islam.

Carmelite efforts to become fluent in the Persian language led to the composition of a number of works: a Persian dictionary by the linguist Father Balthazar de Ste.-Marie (Balthazar of Sta Maria; de Azevedo, 1590-ca. 1668), the later dictionaries and grammars of Father Ignace de Jésus (Ignatius of Jesus; Leonelli, 1596-1667), and the *Gazophylacium Persarum* of Father Ange de St.-Joseph (Angelus of St. Joseph; Labrosse, 1636-97; čāp). The Carmelites also maintained several other foundations in Persia. The most important of them was the monastery at Shiraz (*A Chronicle* II, pp. 1056-71), where several Roman Catholic families lived and where the Armenians had no church; in 1032/1623 Dominique de Ste.-Marie (Dominic of Sta. Maria) was installed in a beautiful house there under the protection of the governor, Emāmqolī Khan, and some relatives of Pietro Della Valle. The Augustinians also were briefly in residence at Shiraz, from 1035/1626 to 1043/1633. At the end of the 11th/17th century the Roman Catholic community in Shiraz was suppressed, however, and the conquest of the city by Nāder Shah in 1142/1729 brought about its demise, though the monastery continued to be used for services until 1151/1738. It was then abandoned. On the other hand, the Armenians were permitted to open a church in the city. The Carmelites also established other,



less important missions: at Hormoz (from 1022/1613 until the Persians took the city from the Portuguese in 1032/1622); at [Bandar-e ‘Abbās](#), where a chaplain served the factories intermittently between 1099/1688 and 1189/1775; at [Būšehr](#) (after 1166/1753); at [Kārg](#) (during the Dutch occupation, from 1168/1754 to 1180/1766); and at Hamadān, where between 1124/1712 and 1159/1746 they officiated in the mission established in 1095/1684 by Monsignor Picquet (formerly French consul in Aleppo and consecrated as bishop of Isfahan in 1677, where he arrived in 1682; d. Hamadān 1685; Goyau).

Father John Thaddeus of St. Alisaeus, who had been a member of the first Carmelite group sent to Persia and had written several works in Persian, was named bishop (vicar apostolic) of Isfahan in 1042/1632 but died in Spain before taking up the post. This bishopric was created so that Roman Catholics in Persia might be more effectively protected. John Thaddeus' successor as bishop, the French Carmelite Bernard de Ste.-Thérèse (Bernard of Sta. Theresia; Duval, 1597-1669), stayed only briefly at Isfahan (1050-52/1640-42), where he established a cathedral in the Shaikh Sabnā (“Shabana”) quarter; it did not survive for long, however. After his departure there was no resident bishop for forty years, so that all these early efforts were wasted. There are said to have been three Carmelite bishops of Isfahan during the 12th/18th century, but of them only Philippe-Marie de St.-Augustin, appointed in 1144/1732, actually lived in the Persian capital; his successors, Corneille de St.-Joseph (Cornelius of St. Joseph) and Sébastien de Ste.-Marguerite (Sebastian of Sta. Margarita) did not go there at all. The Roman Catholic community of Isfahan had, however, become much less numerous after the early 11th/17th century.

After 1065/1655 the Carmelites of Isfahan lived in isolation among the Muslims, far from the Christian quarters of Jolfā. All their efforts were aimed at establishing a presence in the latter town, but they were continually frustrated by the Gregorian clergy. An attempt in 1063/1653 had met with failure. In 1086/1675 the vicar provincial ordered Father Angelus to found a community there, but he too was unsuccessful. Not until 1094-96/1683-84 did the Carmelites achieve their goal, when the energetic Father Élie de St.-Albert (Elias of St. Albertus; Mouton, 1643-1708) settled at Jolfā (*A Chronicle* II, pp. 859-66); he opened a Roman Catholic church there in 1102/1691. In 1105/1694 Father Elias was named bishop, but later in the same year the Carmelites were violently expelled from Jolfā, as a result of efforts by their Armenian opponents. Owing to the intervention of Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn I



(1105-35/1694-1722), in 1109/1697 the Carmelites returned in triumph to Jolfā, where their monastery remained active until 1165/1752. As its mission was aimed exclusively at the Armenians, it remained, even after the departure of Father Elias in 1111/1699, a focus of violent opposition between Roman Catholic partisans and their adversaries, attested in an extensive Armenian literature. The collaboration between Armenian clergy and missionaries of the early 11th/17th century, when the fathers could say Mass in the Armenian churches and Armenian priests and bishops lived and studied with the Carmelites in Isfahan, was a thing of the past. Doctrinal positions had hardened, and the stakes had changed. The Armenians had experienced a cultural and religious renaissance, for which they were in fact partly indebted to the Roman Catholic fathers, who introduced books from Europe, taught young Armenians, assisted Armenian traders in Europe and the Far East, and so on; but the latter had sought increasingly to “Romanize” the clergy and the faithful.

The primary importance of the Carmelites in Persia was as witnesses to history; they were observers of political and social events through the reigns of ‘Abbās I and Şafī I (1038-52/1629-42), the fall of the Safavids, and the subsequent period of troubles. In addition, as great travelers, the Carmelite missionaries were often reassigned to new posts and covered hundreds of kilometers in order to join their provincial chapters: The vicar provincial of Persia was responsible for an enormous territory. Two Carmelites may be mentioned as authors of printed travel accounts: Father Philippe de Sainte-Trinité (Philip of the Holy Trinity), author of *Voyages d’Orient*, who spent 1038-40/1629-30 and 1049-50/1640 in the Orient, and Léandre de Ste.-Cécile (Leander of Sta. Cecilia; 1702-84), author of three *Viaggi*, which were printed at Rome between 1753 and 1757. With the closing of their missions in Persia after 1174/1760 the Carmelites did not withdraw totally from the Middle East; they remained active in Mesopotamia (at Baghdad and Basra) and in India. The Persian mission had, however, known some triumphant moments. For example, the superior of the mission sent by the pope to Persia, Father Paul-Simon, was elected superior general of the Carmelite order three times, in 1623, 1632, and 1641.



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