



## DELLA VALLE, PIETRO

---

**DELLA VALLE, PIETRO** (b. Rome, 11 April 1586, d. Rome, 21 April 1652), one of the most remarkable travelers of the Renaissance, whose *Viaggi* is the best contemporary account of the lands between Istanbul and Goa in the early 17th century. He was born into a distinguished aristocratic Roman family, received a thorough education in the classics, had a knowledge of music and letters and an interest in medicine and the sciences, and, as a member of the Accademia degli Umoristi, played a prominent part in Roman and Neapolitan intellectual and cultural circles (Maylender, pp. 369-81). Through this select group he was in touch with the outstanding orientalist of the period, including Diego de Urrea Conca and the Vecchiotti brothers (Gabrieli, 1926-27, pp. 105-14; idem, 1938, pp. 504-09, 529-30; Fischel, pp. 7-17). In 1611 he participated in an expedition of the Spanish fleet against pirates on the Barbary coast. Whether it was this experience, rejection in love, or, as he put it, simply the quest for glory, he decided to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, sailing for Istanbul from Venice in June 1614. He stayed at Istanbul from August 1614 to September 1615, then went by sea to Alexandria before traveling overland to Cairo, Mount Sinai, and Gaza, eventually reaching Jerusalem in time for Easter 1616 (Della Valle, 1843, I, pp. 51-52, 134-35, 164-65, 264-307, 344, 346, 481-82; II, pp. 95, 165).

On his return journey, while at Aleppo, he totally changed the direction and scope of his travels, deciding to join a caravan destined for Baghdad. The motive behind this apparently impulsive decision was to offer his services to Shah 'Abbās I (q.v.; 996-1038/1588-1629) in a "crusade" against the Ottomans;



two years of traveling through the Ottoman empire had only strengthened his antipathy for them (Della Valle, 1843, I, pp. 259, 267, 283, 291, 348, 511-13). At Baghdad he equally impulsively fell in love with Ma'anī Jowayrī, daughter of a Nestorian Catholic father and an Armenian mother. After a short, passionate courtship they married in December 1616, and the progress and ultimate tragedy of their love is an engaging leitmotiv throughout the rest of their travels together (I, pp. 397-405; II, pp. 291, 303-15). This alliance provided Della Valle with another reason to meet Shah 'Abbās I, whose reputation for religious tolerance encouraged his own vision of establishing a colony of Chaldean and Nestorian Christians at Isfahan under the shah's benevolent protection.

Della Valle left Baghdad in January 1617, surmounted the difficulties of the snowbound passes of Kurdistan, and reached Isfahan in February. Shah 'Abbās was in the north, and Della Valle had to wait almost a year in the capital before deciding to find the shah for himself, traveling through Kāšān, Fīrūzkūh, and the Alborz mountain range, finally reaching the court at Faraḥābād in February 1618 (Della Valle, 1843, I, p. 596). After eventually being granted an audience, he followed Shah 'Abbās and part of the Safavid army to Ardabīl (q.v.), which was threatened by an Ottoman attack. Tabrīz was lost briefly, but after a Safavid victory over a branch of the Turkish forces the campaign was abandoned for that season. By November 1618, after victory celebrations in Qazvīn, Shah 'Abbās was ready to return to his usual winter quarters at Faraḥābād and Ašraf (now Behšahr, q.v.), but Della Valle, who was unwell, went back to Isfahan, where he hoped the Augustinians and Carmelites (q.v.) would restore him to health (I, pp. 818-20, 836-37).

He stayed in Isfahan from December 1618 to October 1621, a time of gradual convalescence, absorption in the problems of his wife's relatives, pursuit of plans for an alliance with the Cossacks in a renewed war against the Ottomans, and efforts to establish a Chaldean colony (Della Valle, 1843, II, pp. 107-09). With the frustration of these hopes he decided to return to Europe via India. As soon as he recovered his health, he set off for the Persian Gulf through Shiraz, but the Persian and English blockade of the Portuguese on Hormuz prevented his sailing (II, pp. 289-90). While waiting at Mīnāb, near Bandar(-e) 'Abbās (q.v.) Ma'anī, who was several months pregnant, caught fever; the child was stillborn, and Ma'anī died shortly afterward. Della Valle had her body embalmed in camphor, so that it could be buried in his family sepulcher at Rome, a decision that involved him in innumerable difficulties



throughout the rest of his journeys. A more immediate problem was his own health, as he too succumbed to the same fever; in a state of semiconsciousness he was taken to Lār, where he slowly recovered his spirits and health between January and June 1622 (II, pp. 325-53). By that time Hormuz had fallen, and after another short stay in Shiraz it was possible to leave for Surat on an English East India Company (q.v.) ship in January 1623, with Ma'anī's coffin covered with clothes at the bottom of a large leather chest; their adopted daughter, a young Georgian called Mariuccia, dressed as a man to escape the attention of port officials.

It was more than another three years before Della Valle returned to Europe. He progressed slowly down the western coast of India as far as Calicut, staying from April 1623 to November 1624 at Goa (Della Valle, 1843, II, pp. 592-789), whence he sailed for Muscat and Baṣra; then, traveling overland to the Mediterranean via Aleppo, he finally reached Naples in February and Rome in late March 1626, nearly twelve years after he had left Italy. The rest of his life was spent in Rome in the pursuit of his literary and scholarly, especially musical, interests, except for a brief banishment for his part in a brawl in the Vatican (Bianconi, pp. xxxiv-ix; Blunt, pp. 304-07). He died in April 1652 and was buried by Ma'anī's side in the church of Ara Coeli in Rome. Some time after his return he had married Mariuccia, who bore him fourteen sons, a turbulent but mostly undistinguished progeny.

From the beginning of his travels Della Valle wrote regularly to a learned friend at Naples, Mario Schipano, who, he hoped, would edit his unsystematic, verbose outpourings, written at great speed and inordinate length, into digestible form (Della Valle, 1843, I, pp. 473-74). In all there were thirty-six letters (only one of which was mislaid by Schipano), containing more than a million words. It was only two years before his death that the first volume of letters was published, slightly edited with the excision of a few personal details; the second and third volumes, edited by four of his sons, followed in 1658. Aside from the immediacy and vivacity of these letters, Della Valle displayed excellent narrative and descriptive skills, powers of acute observation, and a genuinely scholarly breadth of learning. He refused to comment on what he had not witnessed himself or checked against the best authorities (I, pp. 130-31, 141, 254, 860-61). He had attempted to learn some oriental languages, particularly Turkish and later Persian but also Arabic and Hebrew (I, pp. 131-33, 141-42, 522-24, 860-62; II, p. 51). With Ma'anī's knowledge of Armenian, Arabic, Persian, and Georgian, between them there



were few levels of Safavid society with which they could not converse.

Given these opportunities and his own qualities of mind and spirit, together with prodigious industry and curiosity, it is no surprise that Della Valle's eighteen letters from Persia provide one of the most detailed sources of information for most aspects of Persian life in the second half of Shah 'Abbās' reign. Like most 17th-century travelers, he offered a catalogue of information on festivals (Della Valle, 1843, I, pp. 504-06, 536-41, 550-54, 829-30; II, pp. 31-32, 70, 73-75, 96-97, 129), architecture (I, pp. 443, 453-61, 502-03, 602, 673-76, 705-07, 742-44, 779-84, 840-41; II, pp. 104, 116-20, 247-68, 376-79, 415-16), and customs and pastimes (I, pp. 443, 627-28, 677, 691-93, 709-10, 713-14; II, pp. 7-26, 37-38, 401-03, 475) of the main towns through which he passed, as well as food and drink (I, pp. 443-47, 503-04, 653-54, 669, 689, 752, 836; II, pp. 105-07, 283-85), dress (I, pp. 568-72, 591, 639-40; II, pp. 288-89), flora, crops, drugs, and spices (I, pp. 413-18, 472, 634, 668-69, 823; II, pp. 105, 206-10) of rural and urban society. Much precise economic detail is found on prices, weights, and currency (I, pp. 471, 586, 631-33); industries and workshops (I, pp. 562, 566-72, 584, 706); and the cultivation and marketing of silk (I, pp. 566-67, 590, 847-48; II, pp. 57-59, 171). More unusual are his descriptions of the Safavid legal and administrative system, derived from his own personal experience or based on close observation. Several incidents reveal the system at work, for example, a brawl in the *bāzār* at Kāšān (I, pp. 564-66), a case of his own brought before the provincial court at Shiraz (II, pp. 387-89), and two others involving the *dīvānbeḡī* (q.v.) at Isfahan (II, pp. 78-83, 166-67, 175-76). His first-hand observations on military affairs are also of value; they include information on the composition, preparation, tactics, arms, and pay of the Persian forces in battle against the Ottomans (I, pp. 686-87, 759-69, 803-09, 865-67), as well as a description of the war against the Portuguese in the south (II, pp. 178-80, 322-26). Scattered throughout the letters are Della Valle's disparaging comments on the Qezelbāš military elite, whose pretensions to nobility he ridiculed and whose domination over Persians from older backgrounds he thought insufferable (I, pp. 644, 679, 762, 788). The group in Safavid society that attracted his deepest concern and affection was the Georgians, whether crypto-Christians or apostates. He was impressed by their personal qualities, their courage and civilized courtesy; he obtained a great deal of information about their plight, especially that of the Georgian royal family (I, pp. 469-71, 597-99, 745-47, 844-45; II, pp. 146-57, 393-99). Other minorities, especially the Chaldean relatives of Ma'anī (I, pp. 854-59; II, pp. 107-08), Armenians (I, pp. 598-600, 846-52; II, pp. 84-94, 214-17), Jews (II, p. 72), Zoroastrians (I, pp.



497-500), and Indians (I, pp. 489-97, 534-36; II, pp. 426-29, 447-52) are also frequently mentioned.

The thread that runs through all his Persian letters, however, giving them a certain cohesion, is the account of Shah ‘Abbās and his court: the magnificent feasts at Solṭānīya and Ašraf, ambassadorial receptions, the closing (*qoroq*) of the Isfahan *bāzār* to the general public, Armenian epiphany celebrations, polo and wolf baiting, Āšūrā’ (q.v.), and the festival of *ābrizān* (I, pp. 636-73, 707-11, 752-58; II, pp. 7-32). Della Valle’s description of ‘Abbās is a masterly, exact portrait of the shah, aged forty-seven years when Della Valle first saw him at Ašraf. He left a verbatim account of their discussion, the topics involved, ‘Abbās’ mannerisms, his sense of fun, his skill in drawing information out of visitors, and his curiosity about their customs and forms of government. Characteristically Della Valle tried to see beyond ‘Abbās’ public persona and to understand his quixotic changes of temperament, the moods of impenetrable melancholy, the inconsistencies in his religious views, and particularly his attitude toward his sons (I, pp. 636-73, 729-31, 737-40, 755-56, 867-69; II, pp. 197-98, 210-11). It was in these letters, rather than the account he published after his return to Europe (Della Valle, 1628), that Della Valle provided a vivid insight into the complex, tormented personality of the greatest of Safavid rulers.

Different from almost all other 17th-century travelers to Persia in his motivation, education, and cultural sophistication, Della Valle reacted to the intellectual and cultural life of Persia in a particularly interesting way. His gradual appreciation of these aspects of Persian society, culminating in the few months at Lār, reveals a world that few foreigners ever reached (II, pp. 326-53). Although few of his own literary or scholarly projects were completed, he left in his incomparable letters a fitting memorial to Persian life as he understood it in the early 17th century, as well as to his own extraordinary personality, at times arrogant and pretentious but always intelligent, high-spirited, and full of panache.

The most recent complete edition of Della Valle’s letters is that of G. Gancia, *Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle, il Pellegrino*, 2 vols., Brighton, England, 1843, but Luigi Bianconi, ed., *Viaggio in Levante di Pietro Della Valle*, Florence, 1942, is useful for the earlier letters; some of those from Persia have been edited with valuable introduction, notes, and comments by Franco Gaeta and Laurence Lockhart, *1 viaggi di Pietro Della Valle. Lettere dalla Persia I*, Rome, 1972. Complete French, German, and Dutch translations are available, but only the



letters from India and the return journey have been translated into English, by G. Havers, as *The Travels of Sig. Pietro Della Valle into East India and Arabia Deserta . . .*, London, 1665, and *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, ed. E. Grey, 2 vols., London, 1892. G. Bull has translated and abridged selections from all the travels, *The Pilgrim. The Travels of Pietro Della Valle*, London, 1989. A Persian translation of the Persian letters has been published by Šo‘ā‘-al-Dīn Šafā, *Safar-nāma-ye Petro Delā Vāla*, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

Della Valle’s other published works include *Delle condizioni di Abbas re di Persia*, Venice, 1628; “Informatione della Georgia,” printed in J. Thévenot, *Relations de divers voyages curieux qui n’ont point este’ publiees . . .*, I, Paris, 1663; “Della musica dell’eta nostra,” written in 1640 but first published in the collection of G.-B. Doni, Florence, 1763; “De Recentiori Imperio Persarum Subiectis Regionibus,” in *17 saggi di iranisti italiani*, Rome, 1977, pp. 287-303.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

M. Alemi, “I ‘teatri’ di Shah Abbas nella Persia del XVII secolo dai inediti del diario di Pietro Della Valle,” *Storia della Città* 46, 1989, pp. 19-26.

R. Amalgia, “Per una conoscenza piu completa della figura e dell’opera di Pietro Della Valle,” *Rendiconti dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, ser. 8/6, 1951, pp. 375-81.

C. Bertacchi, “C. E. Biddulph e Pietro Della Valle a proposito di un’escursione nel deserto salato persiano,” *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* 29, 1892, pp. 427-34.

F. Bertotti, “Un viaggiatore romano e un poeta persiano. Pietro Della Valle estimatore e divulgatore di Hafiz,” *Islam.Storia e civiltà* 31, 1990, pp. 121-27; tr. as “Petro Delā Vāla mosāfer-e rūmī wa Ḥāfeẓ Širāzī,” *Ḥāfeẓ-šenāsī* 11, 1368 Š./1989, pp. 137-44.

L. Bianconi, *Viaggio in Levante di Pietro Della Valle*, Florence, 1942.



- P. G. Bientenholz, *Pietro Della Valle 1586-1652. Studien zur Geschichte der Orientkenntnis und des Orientbildes in Abendlande*, Basel and Stuttgart, 1962.
- W. Blunt, *Pietro's Pilgrimage. A Journey to India and Back at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1953.
- I. Ciampi, *Della vita e delle opere di Pietro Della Valle, il pellegrino*, Rome, 1880.
- W. J. Fischel, "The Bible in Persian Translation," *Harvard Theological Review* 45, 1952, pp. 3-45.
- G. Furlani, "Pietro Della Valle sui Yezidi," *Oriente moderno* 24, 1944, pp. 17-26.
- G. Gabrieli, "I primi accademici Lincei e gli studi orientali," *Bibliofilia* 28, 1926-27, pp. 99-115.
- Idem, "Il 'Linceo' di Napoli," *Rendiconti dell' Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, ser. 6/14, 1938, pp. 499-565.
- J. D. Gurney, "Pietro Della Valle. The Limits of Perception," *BSO(A)S* 49, 1986, pp. 103-16.
- G. de Lorenzo, "Pietro Della Valle's Letters on India," *East and West* 2, 1952, pp. 205-17.
- M. Maylender, *Storia della Accademie d'Italia V*, Bologna, 1930.
- A. M. Piemontese, "Pietro Della Valle," *Bibliografia italiana dell'Iran (1462-1982)* I, Naples, 1982, pp. 153-60.
- G. Rocchi, *Funerale della Signora Sitti Maani Gioerida Della Valle celebrato in Roma l'anno 1627 . . .*, Rome, 1627.
- E. Rossi, "Importanza dell'inedita grammatica turca di Pietro Della Valle," in *Atti del XIX Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti*, Rome, 1938, pp. 202-09.
- Idem, "Versi turchi e altri scritti inediti di Pietro Della Valle," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 22, 1947, pp. 92-98.
- Idem, "Pietro Della Valle orientalista romano (1586-1652)," *Oriente moderno* 32, 1953a, pp. 49-64.
- Idem, "Poesie inedite in persiano di Pietro Della Valle," *Rivista degli studi*



*orientali* 28, 1953b, pp. 108-17.