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EAST INDIA COMPANY (FRENCH)

EAST INDIA COMPANY (THE FRENCH), a company established in 1664 to conduct all French commercial operations with the Orient. Colbert, minister of Louis XIV, had been aware of the great profits earned by the Dutch and English merchants in importing and selling Asian goods to the French (Kaepplin, p. 3). He wanted to deprive foreigners of such a profitable market and, therefore, founded a chartered company modeled on the Dutch company, which could, with the support of a reviving merchant marine and the protection of the king's vessels, carry on trade with countries east of the Cape of Good Hope. Subscriptions were raised, though with few results; the king and his court had to be the main contributors, since French traders were rather suspicious of a state-launched venture. The geography of France also engendered rivalry between Atlantic-oriented merchants and those looking toward the Mediterranean Sea, who were already using the overland routes to the Persian Gulf.

The company's statutes provided for a settlement in Madagascar which would serve as the base for activities on the model of Batavia (Java), the center of Dutch trade in Asia. The company was to contribute to the propagation of Christianity by supporting Catholic missionaries (Furber, pp. 103-07).

Colbert had been informed by Father Raphaël du Mans, a Capuchin friar active in the convent of Isfahan since 1054/1644, that Shah ʿAbbās II, like his

predecessors, had spoken in favor of establishing diplomatic and commercial relations between Persia and France. The French jeweler Isaac de l'Étoile, who belonged to a group of European craftsmen working for the shah and his court, corroborated the information. Colbert and the company's directors decided to send representatives to Persia and India to request from the sovereigns a trading license like the one obtained by the English and Dutch companies. Three merchants, Mariage, Beber, and Dupont, were chosen to carry out the mission, and as a matter of prestige, Louis XIV named two gentleman, Nicolas de Lalain and François de La Boullaye Le Gouz, to be the king's representatives and to conduct negotiations. La Boullaye, who belonged to the king's chamber, had traveled in the Orient, and Lalain, a member of the parliament in Provence, would give the mission dignity and significance. Unfortunately, the five men never agreed. In Isfahan, Father Raphaël du Mans, acting as interpreter, did his best to coordinate the negotiations and to instill coherence into the French envoys' demands (Schefer, in Raphaël du Mans, pp. l-li). In 1076/1665, the shah issued a firman granting the company the right to free trade, the use of a house in Bandar-e ʿAbbās, and the right to make wine in Shiraz for its employees. After a trial period of three years, these privileges were to be reexamined with the obligation of once again offering presents to the shah and his attendants. New authorized envoys were to be sent and would receive, as accredited guests of the shah, a daily allowance, *taʿyīn*, as had the five Frenchman of this mission (Kroell, pp. 5-6).

Mariage went to Bandar-e ʿAbbās to take possession of the house and arrange storerooms where the company merchandise would be unloaded. In 1079/1669, three small vessels were sent from Surat by François Caron, a defector from the Dutch Company who had been recruited by Colbert to handle French trade in Asia. Only the *Marie*, with a light freight of pepper and indigo, anchored at Bandar-e ʿAbbās; the *Force* and the *Salomon* went on to Baṣra, where they traded their cargo with profit (Martin, I, pp. 199-209).

The company settlement in Madagascar turned out to be a disaster, and financial problems became so pressing that no advantage was taken of the privileges granted by Shah ʿAbbās II and renewed by Shah Solaymān in 1082/1671. Louis de l'Étoile, Isaac's son, had come to Surat to conduct his own business. He persuaded Guêton, recently arrived as a company director, to travel to Isfahan to present the promised gifts to the shah and to reaffirm France's determination to pursue its trade with Persia. Guêton and his suite sailed to Bandar-e ʿAbbās on the *Saint Paul*, carrying rich presents (Raphaël du

Mans, pp. 334-35) and an important cargo of India goods. Following Guêton's sudden death at Shiraz, the Carmelite missionaries, fearing the whole enterprise would collapse, advised Jonchères, captain of the *Saint Paul*, to take over; he did so, but, according to Chardin's testimony, with flippancy (Chardin, III, pp. 222-25, 232-46). Nevertheless, the privileges were renewed for three years, again, with no concrete results on behalf of the company. The house in Bandar-e ʿAbbās was soon deserted, and the missionaries were left utterly disappointed, considering it worthless to invoke the protection of a king whose ships seldom sailed the Persian Gulf. Alexandre de l'Étoile, Isaac's grandson, still held the title of company's agent and the right to make wine in Shiraz (Kroell, p. 7).

In Persia, political unrest was aggravated by the threat of Arab hegemony in the Persian Gulf. The powerful Imam of Oman's navy, based at Muscat, multiplied its attacks against merchant-ships, avoiding the most heavily armed vessels. Safavid ministers, remembering the 1032/1622 capture of Hormoz, thought of mounting a similar expedition against Muscat, with European naval support. Dutch and English agents eluded the proposed alliance, as it would have required the mobilization of an important task force and troops that the Safavid state, harassed on its frontiers, appeared unable to muster. The French missionary Martin Gaudereau, having heard of the plan, asserted that the capture of Muscat would secure the French company a permanent base in the Indian Ocean and free trade with Persia. He repeatedly encouraged French authorities to enter Muscat (Lockhart, pp. 66-69, 434-36.). From this time on, the overthrow of the Omani power became the dream of a few Frenchmen who were convinced that it would revive a moribund company. Étienne Pilavoine, then chief at the Surat factory, flatly denied that the project had any sense. He knew of the Omani naval strength and of the failure of a Portuguese undertaking in 1110-11/1699, when vessels sent from Goa had waited at Bandar Kung for Persian troops that never came. Moreover, France did not maintain sufficient naval forces in the region. Jérôme de Pontchartrain, Trade and Navy secretary of state (1110-127/1699-1715), assumed the same prudent attitude when Pierre Victor Michel, French envoy to Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn, resumed previous agreements in 1120/1708 and later, when Moḥammad-Reżā Beg, Persian ambassador at Versailles (1127/1715), proposed military action against Oman. A treaty was signed and ratified in 1134/1722, establishing diplomatic and commercial relations, but with no mention of an alliance (Lockhart, pp. 437-68; Kroell, pp. 36-41, 56-57.).

The expansion of war in Europe "had sealed the fate of Colbert's Company," which had been periodically insolvent since the beginning (Furber, p. 207). Pontchartrain granted the company privileges to a group of Saint-Malo merchants willing to invest in inter-Asian trade, or "country trade." Not until 1131/1719 did two Malouin ships anchor at Bandar-e ʿAbbās to unload goods freighted at Chandernagor, Bengal, and did the supercargoes manage to obtain from the Šāhbandar (customs office) all trading facilities (Kroell, p. 64.). After Louis XIV's death in 1715, an astute banker, John Law, appointed by the new government, invented an overseas trading consortium that merged all the existing companies. This second "Compagnies des Indes," 1131-83/1719-69, outlived Law's financial bankruptcy (Furber, p. 210). In Persia Ange de Gardane, chief consul at Isfahan (1129-42/1716-30), and Étienne Padery, consul at Shiraz (1131-36/1718-23), were its representatives. They differed totally on the Muscat affair. Padery had been secretly entrusted to negotiate a French military assistance, while Gardane earnestly denied the reality of the project. Fearing retaliation from the Omani navy on French merchant-ships, he wrote long pleading letters to the French ministers, successfully asking them to dismiss Padery (Kroell, pp. 58-76).

Already on the verge of collapse, the Safavids could no longer ensure an effective commercial policy. Despite its incidental efforts, the French East India Company could not, even in subsequent years, establish any permanent commercial links with Persia (Otter, I, pp. 224-25, II, pp. 32-34, 86-87; Masson, pp. 533-43).

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