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# EUROPE, PERSIAN IMAGE OF

**EUROPE, PERSIAN IMAGE OF**. To Persians, as to other Muslim peoples, Europe was long synonymous with Christendom and was thus closely associated with Rūm, the realm of Byzantium or eastern Christianity. Prior to the Mongol era, information available to Persians about Europe beyond the Byzantine frontier was scanty and consisted largely of fixed and formulaic wisdom. Persian geographers, like their Arab colleagues, subscribed to a Ptolemaic world view, which divided the world into seven latitudinal zones (*eqlīm*s “climes”) and three regions, Asia, Libya (Africa), and Europe. Their works reserve detailed information on the latter for Spain (Andalos), only offer snippets on places like Rome and England, and leave out all other parts (e.g., *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, ed. Sotūda, pp. 181-87, tr. Minorsky, pp. 154-58). Following the notion that peoples were progressively more barbaric as they lived farther away from the temperate zone in which the central Islamic lands were situated, Europeans were thought to be pale and sluggish owing to the rigors of the cold and damp climate prevailing in the north.

It is only with the coming of the Crusaders to the Levant that the (Arab) Muslim view of Europe and Europeans began to transcend the fantastic and the bizarre. It took longer for this to be reflected in the historiography of Persia, which was not directly engaged in the military and cultural confrontation with the “Franks” (one Persian chronicler of the Crusades ʿEmād-al-Dīn Eṣfahānī, q.v., lived in Damascus and wrote in Arabic). Thus Zakarīyā b. Moḥammad Qazvīnī (d. 682/1283), who borrowed from the 10th-century account of Ebrāhīm b. Yaʿqūb, included no more than a cursory

description of the “land of the Franks” in his geographical work, *Āṯār al-belād*, dwelling on the coldness of the land and the abundance of its produce, and, in keeping with convention, treating the area as one realm ruled by one king (pp. 498, 576).

Rašīd-al-Dīn Fażl-Allāh (d. 718/1318), vizier and physician at the court of the Il-khan ruler, Ḡāzān Khan (q.v.), was the first historian to break with these conventional views in his *Tārīḵ-e Afranj* (History of the Franks). Commissioned by Ḡāzān Khan as part of Rašīd-al-Dīn’s universal history (*Jāmeʿ al-tawārīk*ò), this work reflects the interests of a dynasty that spanned Eurasia in its origins, its conquests, and its political and commercial scope and interaction. Although it retains much of the traditional imagery, the work offers a relatively well-informed geographical and political-historical overview of Christian Europe. The first work to differentiate between countries and regions, it covers territories from Norway and Sweden to Spain and the Italian republics, and from England and Flanders to Hungary, and within these numerous subregions. Among the rulers mentioned the Pope and the emperor of the Holy Roman empire are portrayed as the most important ones, while the king of France is seen as the third most illustrious ruler of Christendom. Rašīd-al-Dīn used written as well as oral sources. Among the former are the world chronicle, *Chronicon Syriacum*, by the Syrian monophysite theologian and historian Bar Hebraeus (1226-86; see EBN ʿEBRĪ), and the papal and imperial chronicle of archbishop Martinus Oppaviensis (Martin von Troppau, d. 1278). The lively diplomatic and commercial exchange between Europe, especially Italy, and the Il-khan court at Tabrīz provided him with direct informants, two of whom are identified by Rašīd-al-Dīn as the Genoese diplomat Buscarello Ghizolfi and the Pisan Ciolus Bofeti (Jahn, 1977, pp. 3-21).

With the exception of Moḥammad Banākatī (d. 730/1329-30), poet-laureate of Ḡāzān Khan, whose *Tarīḵ-e Banākatī* hardly expanded on his work, Rašīd al-Dīn had no direct successors and his work did not spawn a genre. Although Uzun Ḥasan, the 9th/15th-century Āq Qoyunlū (q.v.) ruler, exchanged embassies with European rulers, no accounts of European lands are known from his time.

Only with the rise of the Safavids to power in the early 16th century did interest in Europe revive, mostly as a result of the ensuing diplomatic and commercial interaction between Persia and the West. Especially during the reigns of Shah ʿAbbās I (996-1038/1588-1629, q.v.) and his successors, westerners came to Persia in ever larger numbers, as a result of which the

Safavid acquaintance with Europe reached an unprecedented degree of complexity and sophistication. Suggesting the level of differentiation in imagery and stereotype that existed by the second half of the 17th century, one observer asserts that the Persians saw the Russians as uncultured, the Poles as bellicose, the French as quarrelsome, the Spanish as noble, the Italians as sagacious, the English as politically inclined, and the Dutch as mercantile (Bedik, p. 387).

Several levels can be distinguished in the Safavid perception and treatment of resident and visiting Europeans. Little of the high profile of westerners in late Safavid times is reflected in official Safavid historiography, which at most pays perfunctory attention to relations with the West and the presence of Europeans in Persia. Officially, Europeans were never accepted as equal to the representatives of the Muslim states surrounding Persia. For all the frequency and seeming importance of the various Sherley missions to Persia under Shah ʿAbbās I, not one Persian chronicle so much as mentions the name of either of the two brothers. If the chroniclers refer to European embassies at all, they tend to speak in generic terms of "a visit by westerners" (*farangīān*). They occasionally deem the Portuguese, the English, or the Dutch worthy of specific mention, but, with the exception Eskandar Beg's account of how the English assisted Shah ʿAbbās in expelling the Portuguese from Hormuz (pp. 981-82), never grant them more than cursory treatment.

Such aloofness was clearly instilled by the Safavid *Weltanschauung*, which was underpinned by unquestioned assumptions of religious and civilizational superiority. Safavid chronicles suggest a universe with Persia at its center and a realm ruled by a monarch who was seen as God's vicegerent and, as grandiosely, the exalted sovereign of the world. Europe hardly figured in such a worldview. Europeans were assumed to be Christians, that is, People of the Book (*ahl-e ketāb*). As such they enjoyed a higher status than pagans, but less prestige than fellow Muslims. Indeed, some claimed that, following Shiʿite notions of purity and contamination, more scrupulous Muslims saw them as unclean (*najes*), shunned physical contact, and refused to eat with Christians or from vessels that the latter had used (Jenkinson, I, pp. 145-46; Chick, ed., I, p. 157; Chardin, VI, pp. 319-20). Little of this was noticeable, either at the royal court or among the common people, during the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I and his immediate successors, who welcomed westerners, including western missionaries, to their court. A new emphasis on religious orthopraxis during the period of Shah Solaymān and Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn, however, led to a

revival of older perceptions and practices. European residents (as well as indigenous Christians and Jews) became the target of verbal insult and subject to decrees that forbade non-Muslims to leave their houses at times of rain for fear that they might spread pollution (Chick, ed.,I, pp. 446-47; Dutch National Archives, The Hague, VOC 1779, 10 Dec. 1708, fol. 313). This change of attitude was led by members of the Shiʿite clergy, who in time became more outspoken in their disapproval of western merchants and missionaries, attributing the country's misfortune to their presence and influence (Hairi, 1988, pp. 480-89).

In terms of literary metaphor, daily interaction, and political and diplomatic contact, the Safavid perception and treatment of Europeans was much more complex and differentiated. In Safavid poetry the *farangī* is often equated with the *kāfer*, but as frequently is positively portrayed as being of pink-colored (*lāla-rang*) complexion (Naṣrābādī, pp. 97, 206, 368, 396). European missionaries who visited the Safavid capital in large numbers and who since the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I had an established presence in Persia were generally held in low esteem, though not necessarily because they were conspicuous representatives of the Christian faith. Considering mendacity ignominious, the Persians regarded the austerity of the European missionaries as mere folly. They did, however, respect them as "learned folk," and many courtiers were eager to converse with them on matters of religion and philosophy (Chick, ed., I, p. 447; Zimmel, pp. 21-22; Kaempfer, p. 273; Bachoud, p. 108).

On the political and diplomatic level, the reception of Europeans was informed, more than by religious credentials, by pragmatism, that is, by combination of military power and its perceived usefulness, and the extent to which this power was projected in the form of outward splendor and the quality and quantity of gifts during visiting embassies. Insofar as visiting Europeans acted as official representatives of countries and commercial enterprises, their status as well as their actual power and the splendor of their missions tended to determine their reception. The Safavids preferred to deal with representatives of clearly defined sovereign states that projected grandeur and splendor through territorial size and military might and by way of richly equipped delegations bringing prodigal gifts. Among the Europeans they considered Portugal, Spain, France, England (until the regicide of 1649), Poland and, to a lesser extent, Russia, as such states. Envoys officially representing these countries were received as official dignitaries, though with less ceremoniousness than delegates from neighboring Muslim states. Western

documents suggest that merchant envoys enjoyed a much lower status, something that is already noticeable in Il-khanid times (Jahn, 1971, p. 445). Merchant delegations that were directly subordinated to their governments, such as those of the Portuguese and French, might benefit from the same honor. The English and Dutch merchants were not always accorded similar treatment, for the Safavids quickly learned that their maritime companies were not simply extensions of the English crown and the Dutch States General, respectively. While Holland was looked down upon as a republic or government by the many, the Dutch knew how to compensate for their lack of official status with their wealth and naval power and thus gained more than a little respect in Persia.

Of all major non-Muslim peoples, none were held in lower esteem than the Russians. Russia, which did not count as Farang and whose envoys are always mentioned separately, enjoyed neither the status of Persia's Muslim neighbors nor the prestige of some of the more established western nations. Russia as a country grew in importance and relevance to Persia in the course of the Safavid period, and the fear of Russian expansionism that would later mark Persia's views of its northern neighbor actually dates from the turn of the 17th century, when Muscovy launched its first advance toward the Caucasus. But Russians as individuals never enjoyed high esteem and were often singled out for humiliation and abuse. The Persians, John Chardin (q.v.) claimed, thought the Russians to be the "most base and the most infamous of all Christians" and the "Uzbegs of Europe" (III, p. 185; X, p. 113). Jean de Thevenot, observing a Russian embassy to Persia in 1664, noted that the Russians had left behind "such a reputation of filthiness and nastiness in their feeding" that the Persians likened the Muscovites to the Tatars (II, p. 108).

Numerous references in the sources to Persian curiosity about the outside world seem to belie Chardin's claim (III, p. 429) that Safavid government officials were poorly informed about conditions in Europe. The Safavid political elite received a steady stream of news about Europe from informants such as Persian-Armenian merchants and foreigners residing in the country, displayed a continuous interest in European military affairs, and were generally rather well informed about political developments in the West and the balance of power between the major European states (Palombini, p. 81, Speelman, p. 295; Tavernier, I, pp. 548-53; Bushev, p. 194; Matthee, 1997, forthcoming).

Curiosity had its limits, however. As the Safavids were above all interested in

European states inasmuch as these offered the prospect of a diplomatic and military alliance against the Ottomans, their interest in things European centered on weaponry and military expertise. Successive shahs requested European artillery specialists as well as firearms and items such as glasses and binoculars. Artisans, such as goldsmiths and watchmakers were also in demand, as were artists, mostly painters (Qāʾemmaqāmī, p. 34; Fekete, pp. 529-33). In keeping with their fascination with astronomy and astrology, Persians were also keen to learn about the latest western developments in those fields (Della Valle, II, pp. 326-27; Petis de la Croix, p. 143). Courtiers, including harem women, imitated European dress (see CLOTHING x). Safavid painters finally adopted the techniques of European painting, experimenting with principles of perspective and adapting these to their own style (Canby, pp. 46-59).

Yet Persian society showed itself little inquisitive about the dynamics of European society and culture. The manifestations of European technology were admired, and sometimes successfully adapted to Persian taste and need, the adaptation of heavy matchlock musket into a light and elegant weapon used for sport being a case in point (Zygulski, pp. 444-45). The sources of inventiveness and technological achievement, however, seem to have held little interest for the Safavids. Averse to the idea of travel for its own sake, they made no efforts to deepen their knowledge of western culture or to master western science through first-hand contact. Nor did they attempt to gain an advantage in negotiations with European powers by learning their languages. The court in Isfahan relied on Europeans or Armenians as interpreters and, while several cases of Persians learning or wanting to learn foreign languages are recorded (Della Valle, pp. 326-27; ʿĀmelī, p. 21), no examples are known of Muslim Persians serving in an official capacity who had acquired foreign linguistic skills. The counterpart of this is the Safavid attitude toward curiosity shown by visitors to Persia. Individual travelers and merchants were generally well received, but if their goals were ill-defined and especially if they listed travel and curiosity as their objective, they were likely to arouse suspicion on the part of Persians who assumed ulterior motives (Chardin, III, pp. 429-30; Stevens, p. 448).

Safavid court officials distrusted Europe's military intentions and were apprehensive that, should the Ottoman empire disappear as a buffer, the European powers might try to bring Persia under their control (Matthee, 1997, forthcoming). A more subtle assessment of Europe's potential impact is found

in the work of the Indo-Persian poet, ʿAbd-al-Qāder Bīdel (1054—1133/1644-1721, q.v.), who prefigured a later Persian ambivalence in his portrayal of the West as simultaneously menacing and seductive (Rouhbakhshan, 1995-96). These, however, represented practical considerations and isolated sentiments that had no bearing on the overall Safavid worldview, which appears to have been imbued with the same sense of self-evident superiority that also permeates the chronicles. Referring to the profound sense of self-sufficiency felt by the Safavid elite vis-a-vis the outside world, several outside observers noted that the Persians were convinced that they possessed everything necessary or agreeable in life, and that they had a low opinion of other peoples and their talents and abilities (Chardin, IV, pp. 89, 192, 197; Fryer, I, p. 323). Indeed, Safavid envoys to E urope—Mūsā Beg who went to Holland in 1625, Naqdī Beg who was sent to England in 1626, and Moḥammad-Reżā Beg who visited France in 1714-15—showed a conspicuous lack of curiosity in the world they visited, except for its women. The French were amazed at the fact that Moḥammad-Reżā Beg, despite a long stay in France and frequent visits to factories and cultural events, did not seem to care for the manifestations of the modern world, much less for their causes and context (Herbette, pp. 201-2). Neither M oḥammad-Reżā Beg nor any of his colleagues seem to have recorded their impressions of their European journey, something that can only in part be attributed to the fact that most Safavid envoys committed suicide before returning to Persia for fear of the shah's wrath at having failed their mandates. Don Juan of Persia (Orūč Beg) is the only exception, but, having adopted Christianity, he never intended to return to Persia and he therefore did not write for a Persian readership (Hairi, 1988, pp. 159-64, 176).

Nor were these merely western impressions. In the 1690s the Khan of Lār told an envoy of the Dutch East India Company (q.v.) that the Persians assumed that the Dutch were eager to do business in Persia because they knew the country's value as a source of commercial profit and stood in awe of Persia's fame and antiquity, while they revered its sovereign. They also believed that Persia's horses, wine, and other commodities were highly esteemed and in great demand abroad, and thus were worth the rich presents received from the Dutch (Dutch National Archives, The Hague, VOC 1520, Report van Leenen, 20 June 1692, fols 213b-14).

Afsharid and Zand chronicles for the most part continue to refer to Europe in terms of an undifferentiated Farang. Only Russia, its profile raised through its

southward drive and Czar Peter I's achievements, consistently receives specific mention. Moḥammad Moḥsen's *Zobdat al-tawārīk*ò (comp. ca. 1148/1733-34) is an exception in providing seperate descriptions of various regions and countries in Europe and by giving details about popes and emperors. Yet in its approach and the kind of information it offers, the work remains thorougly faithful to the conventions of classical geographical compendium (Moḥsen, ff. 224-33).

Appreciable change in the transmission of knowledge between west and east occurred at the turn of the 19th century, when Persian knowledge of and familiarity with Europe began to be mediated through India, which at that time gradually became incorporated into the British empire and where many Persians had migrated in the aftermath of the fall of Isfahan in 1722. These direct contacts marked the beginning of the Persian "discovery" of Europe, which was distilled in the first Persian eyewitness accounts of Europeans and western life. The earliest of these is Abu'l-Ḥasan Qazvīnī's *Fawāʾed al-Ṣafawīya*, a history of the Safavid shahs and their "legitimate" successors written in 1211/1796-97. It contains a long section on Abu'l Fatḥ Mīrzā, the last of the Safavid pretenders, who ended up in Lucknow in Awadh, enjoying a stipend from the British East India Company, and in this context contains a great deal of information on officials of the English East India Company and British Orientalists residing in India (Abu'l-Ḥasan Qazvīnī, pp. 115 ff; Rota, p. 362-77).

Among the most informative of these works are those of Mīr ʿAbd-al-Laṭīf Khan Šuštarī, a native Persian who moved to Hyderabad in about 1790, and of Mīrzā Abū Ṭāleb Khan Eṣfahanī (q.v.), the only one to have first-hand knowledge of Europe. Šūstarī's *Toḥfat al-ʿālam* is the first Persian work that contains in-depth information about European countries, especially England. It discusses Europe's geopolitical power configuration and the prevailing system of alliances, French-British rivalry over the access routes to Asia, and the colonial ventures of both powers. The author describes the origins of the Anglican Church, the question of Ireland, modern western inventions and achievements such as paved roads, indoor plumbing, street lighting, and microscopes, scientific beliefs and theories including the Copernican solar system, matters of economic import such as joint stock, the patent system, fixed prices and window shopping, and social and cultural issues ranging from newspapers to the British legal system and western table manners. Far from just summing up technical achievements, Šuštarī noted how inquisitiveness and inventiveness, economic specialization, and the efficiency and punctuality

of the English all played a crucial role in British advancement (pp. 238-349; Cole).

A descendant of a Persian family and a native of Lucknow, Mīrzā Abū Ṭāleb traveled to Europe via south Africa, spent time in Ireland and England from 1799 to 1803, and returned via France and Italy. His travelogue records facets of English society ranging from social clubs and parliamentary procedures in minute detail, exploring some of the same themes as Šuštarī, such as the egalitarianism and the mechanical inventiveness of English society. Like virtually all early observers, he pays a great deal of attention to the position of western women and their role in public life (Eng. tr., 1814, I, pp. 80-84, 123-24, 263-64, II, pp. 27-31, 254-55, 293-95).

These writers' accounts are mostly positive in their assessment of western achievements. Their praise is only tempered by mild disapproval of the negative effects of egalitarianism on hierarchical relations and of western-style gender relations on an Islamic society. They also foreshadow a later topos of Persian criticism of the West by faulting the English for their materialism and chauvinism and, interestingly, for some of the same vices that westerners often ascribed to Persians, such as greed and a propensity for extravagance and arrogance and idleness. Their writings are less a mirror image of Orientalism than an extension of the West's power to shape images (Cole, p. 15). It is therefore not surprising that none of them criticized the imperialist dimension of the western impact on Asian societies, or even showed much awareness of the trend toward Western global hegemony. A rare, precocious exception is the 18th-century Persian author Moḥammad-Hāšem Āṣaf, who accused the Europeans of having conquered India with cunning and fraud, warning that Persia might fall under European domination as well (Āsaf, p. 385; Haeri, 1988, p. 223). Their perception of Europe through English eyes produced some negative views of the French and their Revolution, which Persians, horrified by its regicide and republicanism, anyhow equated with anarchy and mob rule.

The Napoleonic period, followed by British diplomatic and commercial overtures toward Persia, and the early 19th-century Russo-Persian military confrontation provide the backdrop to the beginning of a more intensive interaction between Persia and Europe and thus a more profound knowledge of Europe among Persians. A reflection of this is the appearance of the first translation of European books, commissioned by the crown prince, ʿAbbās Mīrzā (q.v.), and executed by European residents (Kāẓem Beg, pp. 458-59), and

the first attempt at establishing a modern school system under the auspices of the crown prince (Busse, p. 82).

This era also marks the transition from self-aggrandizement to an awareness of material backwardness and political inferiority. Altough Qajar officials failed to grasp the true import of Europ's ascendance and felt unmoved to call the existing social and political order into question, they did realize that appeasement and accommodation, rather than war, would be the answer (Amanat). The Qajars thus began to send envoys to European capitals, which also played host to the first Persian students sent to acquire western military and technical skills. This development spawned a new genre of writings on Europe by Persians with first-hand experience of the continent, travelogues (*safar-nāma*), which were either commissioned officially or privately written. Mīrzā Abu'l Ḥasan Šīrāzī, Persia's first diplomatic envoy to England since the 1600s, wrote a diary under the telling title of *Ḥayrat-nāma* (Book of bewilderment), in which he marveled at the amenities of modern western life. Mīrzā Ṣāleḥ Šīrāzī, one of the first students to be sent to London, wrote admiringly of his host country, showing the ways and means of new developments occurring in England. Like many after him, he returned to Persia to play a pioneering role in introducing western ideas and establishing modern institutions such as a newspaper in Persia (Maḥbūbī, *Moʾassasāt*, pp. 222-24). Many of these accounts of life and customs in Europe continued to be marked by traditional literary and historiographical conventions. Even as late a work as Moḥammad-ʿAlī Sayyāḥ's mid-19th-century travelogue of numerous European countries still follows the traditional format, which catalogues and enumerates the sights and curiosities of each city and country visited in a formulaic manner rather than putting his observations in a systematic historical or thematic context.

The influence of such works, some of which remained either in manuscript form or were published in India, was extremely limited. As no newspapers were published in Persia until the mid-19th century, the country generally remained very isolated from the world at large, and its inhabitants, secure in their belief that their country was unique and unsurpassed in many respects, were hardly less ignorant of the geography and political conditions of European countries than their ancestors had been (Mounsey, pp. 271-72).

In the second half of the 19th century yet another change is noticeable in Persian perceptions of the West. Those who learned about Europe and visited it followed their predecessors in putting great emphasis on the material

progress of European society and its system of legal justice and individual freedom. However, whereas their predecessors recorded western life to edify and educate rather than to exhort and criticize, later writers, intent on bringing about reform, became more and more emphatic in contrasting Europe's modernity to Persia's backwardness, and harnessed their admiration for the west to assail directly political and social conditions in their own country. Hailing the principles of patriotism, secularism, freedom of expression, and the rule of law, observers such as Malkom Khan, Mīrzā Fatḥ-ʿAlī Aḵūndzāda and ʿAbd-al-Raḥīm Talebov (qq.v.) ascribed Persia's stagnation to the absence of such notions and institutions, and advocated introducing these as a way to bring the country into the modern world. By borrowing ideas such as the exclusionary nation based on pure ethnicity and primordial (pre-Islamic) origins, they laid the groundwork for the imagining of Persia as a nation-state undertaken in late Qajar times and prefigured the search for authenticity that would, in the 20th century, evolve into an anti-western nativism.

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