



HERBERT, THOMAS

HERBERT, SIR THOMAS, author of the first English account of Persia. Herbert was born in York in 1606 of a minor aristocratic family connected with business interests. He made a name for himself in London in court circles and accompanied the royal embassy of Sir Dodmore Cotton from King Charles I to the court of the Safavid Shah 'Abbās I in 1626-29. His reputation rests on his account of this embassy, *A Description of the Persian Monarchy* [ADPM] (London, 1634), which George Nathaniel Curzon praised as “by far the most amusing work that has ever been published on Persia” (I, p. 18). It was an ill-fated mission involving the British ambassador and the two ambassadors sent by Shah 'Abbās, the Englishman Sir Robert Shirley and the Persian Naqd-'Alī Beyg, who both died during the course of it.

Thereafter, Herbert served the British royal court in a number of minor appointments, married, lived comfortably, attended Charles I during his imprisonment, and waited upon him at his execution. His memoirs of the trial of Charles, edited by Roger Lockyer, were published in 1959. His years of retirement were spent in managing his estates and pursuing his literary and scholarly interests and editing three more volumes of his Persian travels. His first wife died in 1671, and in the same year he remarried. He died in York on 1 March 1682 after an equable life of compassion and goodness.

His comments on Persia are modest rather than profound, with a sense of wonderment and lacking in conceit. It was his friends who insisted that “these rude and undigested notions from me which being accompanied with truth and simplicities (the soule of history)” should be published (ADPM, p. 1). He had



a sympathetic nature and showed great interest, among other things, in the dangers for the sailors, the changing climatic conditions, the indications of fate reflected in the ruins he saw, especially of Persepolis, the hardships of traveling where there were no inns. He was attracted by the nomadic life “which has no certain habilitation” (ADPM, p. 54). He admired Persian entertainers with their feats of strength and agility. He was impressed with the mosques, which “are round like theaters” and with “azure stones resembling Turquoises” (ref. ADPM, p. 61). He particularly commended the Şayḵ Loṭf-Allāh Mosque in Isfahan (ref. ADPM, p. 86).

He enjoyed the pageantry of official occasions, the gorgeous clothing, and the table services of gold plate at banquets. Herbert recognized the absolutism of the Persian monarchy when he described officials seated in the royal presence like “so many statues, rather than living men” (ADPM, p. 98). The hospitality in Shiraz of Emām-qoli Khan (q.v.), the governor-general of Fārs, was magnificent, “Wine, Women and a Banquet” (ref. ADPM, p. 63). Herbert was ambivalent towards Shah ‘Abbās, impressive in appearance but capable of cruelty to his children (ref. ADPM, pp. 99-104). Though he did not envy the life of Persian women, he found them very attractive. He noted the jealousy of Persian men, for when sleeping out one night he saw a man with all his household on the rooftop and admitted that it “was indeed rashly done of me to view them,” as it could have cost him his life (ref. ADPM, p. 115). Their furniture was simple and their “diet is soone drest, soone eaten, soone digested and soone described” (ref. ADPM, p. 149). They drank large quantities of coffee. He enjoyed the many Persian cities he visited, in particular “stately” Isfahan whose *maydān* he praised as well as the palaces, gardens, mosques (ref. ADPM, p. 84), and baths, but it was people who interested him most.

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