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HERBERT, THOMAS (2)

HERBERT, Sir Thomas (b. York, 2 November 1606; d. York, 1 March 1682), English soldier, traveler and antiquarian who traveled to Persia (FIGURE 1).

Thomas Herbert, the son of Christopher Herbert and Jane Ackroyd, came from a family of merchants and aldermen. His grandfather had been Governor of the Merchant Adventurers' Company (1573-75) and Lord Mayor of York in 1573. They were distantly connected with one the highest noble families in England. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke (1580-1630), the poet George Herbert, and the philosopher Edward, Lord Herbert of Chirbury, were third cousins twice removed. This family tie served the young Thomas Herbert well, for it was the Earl of Pembroke who sponsored Thomas's three-year journey to India, Africa, and Persia in 1627, when he was only 21 years old. The Pembroke connection also served Herbert well after the Earl's death in 1630. It was William's brother Philip (1584-1650), the fourth Earl, who probably introduced Thomas to the inner circles of the court of Charles I, where he met and married his wife Lucy, daughter of Sir Walter Alexander, a Gentleman Usher to the King, and was appointed Esquire of the Body to Charles I. Lucy bore him ten children and when she died in 1671, Herbert married Elizabeth Cutler, the niece of the Earl of Bridgewater. During the English Civil War Thomas Herbert fought for Parliament (as did his cousin Pembroke) and was later entrusted with guarding the king during his captivity. He treated Charles with great courtesy and kindness and accompanied him on his last journey to execution, although he was too overcome by emotion to witness the event itself. The King presented Herbert with a watch and a copy of Shakespeare's

First Folio as keepsakes, and Herbert later wrote an account of Charles's last days, *Threnodia Carolina*, published in 1678. Because of his humane care of the king, Herbert was raised to the baronetcy by Charles II, having previously been deprived of the knighthood he had received at the hands of Henry Cromwell, Lord Deputy of Ireland, in 1658 (since at the Restoration all Protectoral titles had been abolished). The last years of his life were spent as an antiquarian and businessman.

Herbert traveled to Persia and India as a very junior member of an embassy under Sir Dodmore Cotton sent by Charles I to Shah Abbas I (ʿAbbās; q.v.) in 1627 (See Great Britain vii. British Travelers to Persia). The purpose of the embassy was to establish formal trade and diplomatic relations with Persia, but unofficially it was also undertaken to exonerate the adventurer Sir Robert Sherley, who would be accompanying the mission, from charges that had been made against him by Naqd-ʿAli Beg, Abbas's ambassador to England. The Persian envoy had claimed that Sir Robert was not an official representative of the Shah or of England, and that he was moreover an impostor and charlatan who deserved punishment, not commendation. A physical altercation had ensued, and Charles I had attempted to defuse the situation by insisting that Sherley go back to Persia, together with his Circassian wife, Lady Teresia Sampsonia Sherley, who was said at the time to have perhaps been a distant relative of Shah Abbas, although this is not certain. Herbert's book, which first appeared in 1634, was reprinted and augmented five times, the last edition coming out in 1677; a Dutch translation appeared in 1653 and a French one in 1668.

This number of editions is impressive by seventeenth-century standards, and in the last edition, entitled *Some Yeares Travels into Africa and Asia the Great, Especially describing the Famous Empires of Persia and Industant, As also Divers other Kingdoms in the Orientall Indies and The Adjacent*, Herbert displays great erudition and a wide knowledge of contemporary source-material on places he had visited, as well as some, like Japan and Burma which he had not, though he does not explicitly admit to this. Some readers have complained that whilst Herbert himself obviously preferred to be remembered by the latest version of his book, the freshness of the experiences as described in the 1634 edition has given way to a great deal of embellishment and reflections, depriving his text of the spontaneity of a young man's wide-eyed wonder as he gazes on the splendors of the Persian court, the stately ruins of Persepolis, or the architectural marvels of Tabriz and Isfahan,

as well as his amusing and sometimes self-deprecating accounts of the hardships he experienced during his journey.

On the other hand, Herbert's latest edition depicts a traveler looking back to the one significant journey of his life, broadening the experience for the reader by providing details and contexts. Such details as the erotic wall paintings of Ḵāᵛja Naẓar's house in New Julfa or the size of Shah Abbas's moustache, the sorts of things that a young observer might notice, enliven the narrative. It is difficult, too, not to smile as Herbert describes what it feels like to bounce around on the back of a camel when suffering from a fever, or admire him for not turning his thieving nurse, who was supposed to have been looking after him when he was ill, over to the Persian authorities for fear of what they might do to her. The older Herbert enters with historical and reflective passages (and adds a magnificent engraving of Persepolis by his friend Wenceslas Hollar. balancing our impressions of the traveler without destroying the spontaneity of the younger man's experiences. We are told, for example, about the shape of Achaemenid hats, speculate with Herbert on the location of Ophir or exactly which mountain Noah's ark came to rest upon, what dodo flesh tasted like, and invited to make educated guesses about just what all those Persians depicted on the walls of Persepolis were doing. Some readers may find the numerous long digressions and retelling of history tedious in places, but the enthusiastic young traveler never quite gets lost in the successive editions, and the retired gentleman-antiquarian with his sometimes prolix and pedantic mind has his own charm. From a relatively short book containing a few commonplace Latin tags and references Herbert eventually created a chorographical panorama, starting out on a geographical base and branching out into all kinds of wonderful linkages and extrapolations.

In spite of these positive aspects, Herbert's text is not free from the prejudices, ignorance, and confusion one would expect to find in such an account written, as it was, at such a time. There is a marked prejudice against Islam, for example, which is reflected in the sources Herbert probably read, such as Richard Knolles's *General History of the Turks* (1603), William Bedwell's *Mohammedis imposturae* (1615) or Edward Brerewood's *Inquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religion* (1614). His antipathy towards Islam did not preclude him from praising the Persians when he believed praise was due, but this probably related to the largely positive view of Persia which was held in those Western nations who saw that country as the adversary of the Turks.

Herbert noted, for example, that Shah Abbas had little but contempt for the Ottomans, and of course Cotton's mission was undertaken in part to forge an alliance with Persia against the possibilities of Ottoman imperialism. On the other hand, Herbert praises Zoroastrianism, which he encountered in India, where he met and talked with Henry Lord, who had studied and written about that religion, the first Englishman to do so. Herbert also shares the Western stereotype of the "oriental despot," and comments at length about the unfettered power of rulers such as Shah Abbas and Jahāngir (q.v.), comparing them unfavorably with the English system of government, in particular the way the poorer people and peasants are treated. Herbert does not, however, demonstrate much sympathy for the lot of slaves, other than a passing reference to harsh treatment; the institution of slavery was not questioned by Herbert, even if the humanity of their treatment was, and he would have been exceptional for his times had he done so.

On the whole, Herbert's account demonstrates his interest in personalities rather than in scientific observation or even geographical description. He is fascinated, for example, with the way justice is administered in Persia, citing various stories about the cruelty of Shah Abbas, but always with a healthy respect for the latter's power and his desire to make Persia great. He relishes debunking the Shah's "favorite," Moḥammed-ʿAli Beg, and recounting the military exploits of the gallant Prince Ḥamza as he fights the Turks against incredible odds. He tells the story of the widowed Lady Sherley (both Sir Robert Sherley and Sir Dodmore Cotton died in Persia) as she struggles against a Dutch painter trying to make off with her jewels, and he finds Persian women attractive. The historical sections inevitably deal with famous personalities, and we can read accounts of Uzun Ḥasan, Tamerlane, and other great figures of Persian history, all of which was known at the time but which Herbert retells because he finds it interesting. At no point does Herbert exhibit any typically "orientalist" traits; at this early date England would have stood little chance against either the Mughal Empire or Persia, and Herbert's purpose is purely to see what he could see and record his experiences for posterity. The "other," for Herbert, is endlessly fascinating; he describes it as well as he can, knowing that it cannot be contained or controlled, and there is little sense that he is "re-inventing" the Orient for English readers, in spite of the misunderstandings and prejudices that he displays. Herbert's book reveals the mind of a well-read, broad-minded seventeenth-century gentleman, subject to the mindset of his times, but on the whole a good guide, tolerant and enthusiastic, if a little pedantic.

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