



ITALY I. INTRODUCTION

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Direct commercial and political relations between the Italian peninsula and the Iranian plateau date at least from the Parthian period when, after the fall of the Seleucids, the border between the Arsacids and the Roman Empire was set on the Euphrates, while Mesopotamia and Anatolia provided the setting for trade and commerce, contact and war. In the surviving sources a long silence follows the fall of the Sasanian Empire, though we may surmise the existence of commercial relations of the Papacy, and later the maritime republics (Amalfi, Genoa, Pisa, and Venice), with Iran. However, it is only in the thirteenth century, during the Il-khanid period, that we again have positive proof of the presence of Italian travelers in Iran. Through the late Middle Ages and the early modern era we know of a few travelers, mainly men of religion and merchants, who journeyed to Iran and Central Asia. Still later we have reliable information about trade between Safavid Iran and Venice and other Italian states. Both the Papacy and Venice tried to establish diplomatic relations with the Safavid court, which they viewed as a possible ally against the Ottomans. Later, in the nineteenth century, it was the turn of the Savoia, rulers of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, who sought to establish diplomatic relations with the Qajars. These efforts continued after the unification of the kingdom of Italy and led to a visit by NāsÂer-al-Din in 1873, during his first European tour. Earlier, in 1862, Marcello Cerruti had traveled to Iran to obtain the permission to export the renowned silk worms of Gilan



(see below, ii. DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS and iv. TRAVELOGUES).

Not being a colonial power, Italy played a very minor role in the events of the Qajar period limited to the presence of a few Italians, such as General Enrico Andreini, who were active in training the army of the shahs. Italy's economic involvement in Iran grew strong during the Pahlavi period, when Italian concerns obtained significant contracts in Iran and made considerable investments in the country. One example for all: the Italian petroleum company ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi), has had a presence in Iran since 1957, when, together with the National Iranian Petroleum Company (NIOC), it created the Société Irano-Italienne des Pétrols (SIRIP). Commerce between the two nations continued to flourish after the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran—although with fluctuations due to the international political context—to a degree that in 1999 the Camera di Commercio Italo-Iraniana (Italo-Iranian Chamber of Commerce) was created in Rome; and two years later the Iranian Bānk-e Markazi and the Arab Italian Bank signed an agreement aimed at increasing trade between the two countries. As a consequence commerce increased by nine percent during 2001-03, due mainly to the increased demand for products “Made in Italy.” At present Italy is one of the main commercial partners of Iran; it is the third-ranking source of Iran's imports (six percent of the total) and second among importers from Iran, receiving 17.1 percent of total Iranian exports (Alessandro Marrone, “L'Italia in Iran tra affari (molti) e politica (poca),” at <http://www.magna-carta.it/node/1372>, 5 February 2007).

Italy has also been particularly active in the study of the cultural heritage of Iran, especially through the activities of the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO, now Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, IsIAO). It opened its first archeological mission in Iran in 1957, thanks to the efforts of Giuseppe Tucci, and contributed significantly to the restoration and conservation of the monumental complex of Persepolis; it also conducted archeological excavations in Sistān and at the Masjed-e Jom'a of Isfahan (the latter is ongoing; see below, xv. ISMEO INSTITUTE). Finally it should be mentioned that the oldest existing manuscript of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, unfortunately incomplete and dating to 1217 C.E., is today preserved in the Italian National Library of Florence (see below, viii. PERSIAN MANUSCRIPTS IN ITALY).

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