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ITALY II. DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS
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ii. DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS

A privileged relationship between Iran and Italy dates back to the age of the ancient Roman and Persian Empires. Despite their ever-changing internal affairs, the two political centers of Europe and Asia, throughout the entire ancient time, experienced long lasting contacts that produced political and military rivalries as well as economic and cultural relations of mutual interest (see BYZANTINE-IRANIAN RELATIONS). In the Middle Ages, the powers in Italy with an international horizon belonged first to the Papacy and later to the maritime republics of Pisa, Amalfi, and particularly Genoa and Venice. Documentation of direct contact is lacking for a long time, although the exchange of material goods is always testified (see GENOA, VENICE). Evidence of renewed diplomatic and commercial contacts between the two regions date back to the period when Persia was under the Il-khanid (q.v.) dynasty, as a part of the great Trans-Asiatic Empire of the Mongols (see Spuler, pp. 86, 229, 235, 435, 436). The reasons inducing Italian states towards Persia were of three natures: religious, economic, and political, not to mention “those travelers who passed through (Persia) on their way to or from India or beyond” or “visited the country merely out of curiosity” (Lockhart, pp. 373-75). The first was missionary activity, urged on by the Papacy further east beyond the Holy

Land, especially after the foundation of the Dominican (1216) and Franciscan (1223) Orders. The economic reason was the trade of exotic products, particularly silk, which had never completely stopped. The political incentive, which came into play at a later stage, was the continuous attempt to establish an alliance with Persian rulers against the common Ottoman enemy.

The will of Pietro Vioni, possibly a business agent, redacted in Tauris (Tabriz) in 1264, is the first document attesting Italian presence in Persia (Cecchetti). There are more substantial traces concerning the existence of a Genoese colony in Persia at the end of the 13th century. From this environment came the Genoese Buscarello di Ghisofili, a member of the royal guards (*qurči*), who was sent by the Il-khan Arḡun (r. 1284-91, q.v.) as ambassador to the pope and the king of France, bringing proposals for an alliance against the Mamluks of Egypt (Mostaert and Cleaves, eds., pp. 18, 29; Spuler, pp. 229-30). At that time Genoa and Venice had their own consulate in Tabriz. Because during the Mongol domination travel throughout Asia was relatively easy, many Italians passed through Persia with commercial aims. Some left accounts of their travels, such as the Venetian Marco Polo, author of the celebrated *Il Milione*. At the same time, through missionary activity, diplomatic relations between the Papacy and the Il-khanid sovereigns were developed. From 1289 one Dominican and two Franciscan convents were set up in Tabriz. Pope Nicholas IV (r. 1288-92) kept close contact with the Il-khan Arḡun, an allegedly pro-Christian king. Nicholas sent many missionaries to Asia, who often crossed Persia. Among the others were Guglielmo and Matteo from Chieti, and the Franciscan missionary Giovanni Montecorvino (1247-1333), who later became the first archbishop of China's Catholic Church (1307) in Peking (Ḵānbāleḡ). In 1318 Pope John XXII (r. 1316-1334) issued a bull establishing Soltani (Solṭāniya) a metropolitan see with jurisdiction over the whole of Persia, and he nominated as its first archbishop the Dominican Francus of Perugia. His successors were all Dominicans. In the next decade, bishopries were set up in Tabriz and Marāḡa, all supervised by Dominicans (Spuler, pp. 233-34). In 1330 an important missionary expedition ordered by Pope John moved towards many oriental potentates, including Persia (Richard, pp. 180-83).

The fall of the Il-khanid dynasty towards the end of the 14th century reduced contacts between the two regions, and the age of Timur seriously damaged the traditional communication system, but Timur sent Johannes de Galonifontibus, the Archbishop of Solṭaniya to Venice, Genoa, Paris, and London with the news of his victory over the Ottomans in 1402 (Lockhart, p.

375). Travelers and merchants also appear in this difficult era, such as Nicolò de' Conti (1395-1469), who visited the east in the 1420s and wrote some observations on Persia (Cusmai Belardinelli). A new and substantial leap was made in the Italian-Persian relationship in 1459 with the rise to power of the Āq Qoyunlu Uzun Ḥasan (r. 1457-78). The Papacy and the Republic of Venice tried independently or together to build a political and military alliance with him against the Ottomans. Many diplomatic missions were exchanged between 1463 and 1477 (see Berchet; Woods, pp. 18-19, 127-28, 271, n. 117). In December 1463, the Venetian senate opted to enter an alliance with Uzun Ḥasan and Lazzaro Quirini was sent to Persia, who remained there for seven years, returning in February 1471. In the same year, the Persian ambassador Ḥāji Moḥammad was sent to Rome for the inception of the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471-84) and then to Venice, and Caterino Zeno was dispatched by the senate on a similar mission to Persia. Zeno, having married a niece of Uzun Ḥasan's wife (Lockhart, Morozzo della Rocca, and Tiepolo, eds., p. 12; Caraci, p. 52), in a way counted as a member of his family and was very well liked at his court. Uzun Ḥasan later sent him as an envoy to European allies. Two Venetian envoys in Persia, Giosafat Barbaro and Ambrogio Contarini, left highly regarded accounts of the country, rich in detail and of high literary quality (see Gabriel, pp. 49-51). In Rome, Pope Sixtus IV, following the strategy introduced by his predecessor Calistus III (1455-58), was among the major supporters of establishing connections with Persia. He confirmed Rome's confidence in Ludovico Severi of Bologna, a Franciscan who served as the Papal ambassador (nuncio) in Armenia, Persia, and elsewhere (1455-79), and sent to Persia some other nuncios charged with particular missions. Marino Saxo was appointed as ambassador to Uzun Ḥasan and then dispatched to the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1444-76), in order to exhort him to participate in the forging of the alliance (Piemontese, 1998, pp. 93-94). In the exchange of embassies between Uzun Ḥasan and the Papacy, the Duke of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro also played an important role (Piemontese, 2004). The alliance between the Italian States and Persia was actually established, many times confirmed, and enforced with military supplies. Uzun Ḥasan was promised control of all Anatolia on the condition that he would not construct any fortresses on the coastline and would allow free passage for Venetian ships (Woods, p. 271; Inalcik, p. 28). Nevertheless, Uzun Ḥasan's hesitations and rare success at war, in particular his total defeat at the battle of Baškent in August 1473, limited the results, and by the end of his reign, disillusionment had set in and he was out of the international arena. With his death in 1478, all hope of an alliance vanished. In that same year, Venice

signed a peace treaty with the Ottomon Turks.

New hopes arose with the rise of Shah Esmāʿil I (q.v.) and the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. Their vehement Shiʿism was initially interpreted by the Italian side as a kind of Catholic religion in their own style, able to overthrow the Muslim religion as embodied by the power of the Sunni Ottoman Turks. Relations between Venice and Shah Esmāʿil can be followed in the fragmentary collection of documents of the *Diarii* by Marin Sanudo (1531-32). After the negative valuation of a possible alliance by the envoy Constantino Lascaris, the first initiative was taken by Esmāʿīl himself, who in 1508 sent a legation to Venice, proposing an agreement like that drawn up with Uzun Ḥasan. Venice was engaged in the struggle against the Cambrai League and was unable to take advantage of the opportunity. Friendship and an intention for an alliance was repeatedly reaffirmed, but nothing actually happened, neither with Esmāʿīl (r. 1501-24), nor with his successor Shah Ṭahmāsb (r. 1524-76). An important embassy was dispatched to the latter in 1539, led by the Venetian-Cypriote Michele Membré. This embassy is not recorded in Persian sources, but two magniloquent letters on the subject by the Shah survive in the State Archive of Venice (Scarcia, 1968; *Le relazioni tra l'Italia e l'Iran*, pp. 72-74) and, moreover, a detailed and objective account was left by Membré himself. Meanwhile, the Venetians and Ottomans started peace negotiations, which eventually led to the 1540 peace treaty. These contacts adversely influenced Membré's mission and caused its failure. The indecisiveness of Ṭahmāsb's character is depicted by numerous Venetian accounts, the last by Vincento degli Alessandri, the envoy extraordinary sent to Persia in 1570 in order to propose a joint military action, but he was not even received at court (see Berchet). In the second half of the 16th century the Papal States sent an envoy, Gian Battista Vecchietti, to examine the possibility of an Asian front against the Ottomans. This mission failed as well, but Vecchietti was able to collect a large number of precious literary texts. However, a friendly letter of Shah Moḥammad was brought to Pope Sixtus V by Vecchetti himself in 1586 (Piemontese, 2007a).

Increasingly, the idea of a political and military understanding waned, although strong commercial ties between Persia and many Italian states remained, especially during the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I the Great (r. 1587-1629, q.v.). An important embassy reached Venice in 1603, and the meeting between the Persian envoy and the Doge Marino Grimani is depicted in the Doge's Palace (PLATE I; Berchet, pp. 44-47). In 1609 two other ambassadors of Shah

ʿAbbās, ʿAliqoli Beg and Robert Sherley, were received by Pope Paulus V: the event is magnificently depicted in the Palace of Quirinale in Rome (See PLATE II and PLATE III; Piemontese, 2005 and 2006).

It is said that during this period Venetians imported from Persia the secret of the glass coloring substance called “Venetian blue.” In turn, Persians imported from Venice, among other things, the blown glass mirrors. While the Armenian Kᵛāja Ṣafar served as Shah ʿAbbās’s ambassador in Venice, the missionary Giovanni Taddeo exerted influence at the king’s court. He was able to collect a number of Shah ʿAbbās’s personal letters, which are preserved in Naples. Shah ʿAbbās also maintained cordial relationships with the Dukes of Tuscany Ferdinand 1 (1587-1609) and Cosmo II (1609-21) (Pontecovro).

The second half of the 17th century witnessed the decline of both Venice’s intense diplomatic and commercial activity and the Safavid expansion. Persia entered a long period of decay, while Italy as a whole entered a time of troubled crisis that would result in its national unity. Sporadic missions continued during the 18th century, especially from Venice and the Papacy (see Chick; Vanzan). A semblance of contact between the two countries was resumed after the rise of a new strong Italian state whose political horizon touched Asian shores again, and at the same time the establishment of a new stable dynasty on the Persian throne. The kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, ruled by the Savoias, made some attempts to establish diplomatic contacts with Persia (ca. 1830-50), especially through the action of Romualdo Tecco, a diplomat and Orientalist settled in Istanbul (D’Erme). The first concrete result came after a Persian initiative encouraged by Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (r. 1848-96). In 1857, a Persian delegate led by Farroḵ Khan Amin-al-Dawla Ḡaffāri (q.v.) signed a friendship and business treaty in Paris with the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. A year later, Farroḵ Khan went to Turin where he met Prime Minister Cavour and King Vittorio Emanuele II. Then he went traveling through Italy, thus occasioning one of the first direct descriptions of Italy in Persian (Sarābi, pp. 387-401). A periodic exchange of letters began between Vittorio Emanuele II and Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah, who also kept friendly correspondence with Pope Pius IX and his successors (see Piemontese, 1969; idem, 2007b). In 1862, a large scale Italian mission, organized in three sections of diplomatic, military and scientific, and led by Marcello Cerruti, set out for a serious exploration of the possibilities offered by Persia. A new agreement signed in September followed faithfully that of 1857, but additionally conceded to Italy the right to export the valuable Gilān silkworms, a privilege that Persia

had previously refused to France and Russia (Piemontese, 1968; idem, 1972). Yet the agreement was not actualized for many different reasons, and, besides, the Italian state had to first settle its internal situation resulting from the unification, which came in 1861, before undertaking intended international initiatives again. Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah visited Italy in 1873 on the occasion of his first European journey (Piemontese, 1970). In 1886 the first permanent Italian chargé d'affaires, A. de Rege di Donato, was sent to Tehran. The Persian chargé d'affaires, Narimān Khan, arrived in Rome in 1896. From 1899 to 1908, Malkom Khan was in Italy as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. During this period, up to the first decades of the 20th century, Italian representatives stayed in Persia as neutral observers of the struggle of interests played by the two great powers, Russia and Great Britain.

Mention must also be made of the Italian army officers working as instructors of the Persian army. Besides Neapolitans Luigi Pesce, Antonio Giannuzzi, Michele Materazzo, and Benedetto Barbara, all of whom had left Italy after the fall of the Venetian Republic, arriving in Persia in 1852, a relevant role was played by Captain (later General) Enrico Andreini, from Lucca, who arrived in Persia in 1857. For many years, starting in 1872, Andreini was the chief instructor of the Persian army, and until 1886 he also served as the actual intermediary between the Italian and Persian governments, taking the singular initiative to write periodical reports on Persia to Italian ministers of foreign affairs (1871-86) (see Piemontese, 1969). Military relations entered a new phase between 1926-36, when the Italian royal army contributed to the creation of the first nucleus of modern Persian navy with providing supplies and by having young Persian cadets trained at the Naval Academy in Livorno. This practice lasted, with a break during the period 1941-55, until the late 1970s. From the rise to power of Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925), the two governments showed, in different ways, friendly intentions towards each other, the Persians in order to find European support away from the interferences of Great Britain, and the Italians aiming to gain a considerable role in the Persian Gulf (Pasqualini, 1992b).

The Second World War vicissitudes interrupted all projects, and in the aftermath, Italy was dedicated to its own reconstruction and eventually integrated into NATO for its foreign policy. Since the end of the 1950s, however, Italy has been able to make some autonomous choices, which have had a significant influence on relations between Persia and the West. In 1957, the ENI (Ente Nazionale Indocarburi), the Italian state oil agency, and the NIOC

(National Iranian Oil Company) signed an agreement in which, for the first time, the so-called Fifty-Fifty rule was established, recognizing equal rights for the producing country and the concessionary firm (see *Le relazioni tra l'Italia e l'Iran*, pp. 175-76). Italian participation increased in many other Persian projects, such as the construction of the Dez hydroelectric power plant (completed in 1963). Also, after the revolution of 1978-79 and during the war with Iraq, the relations between the two countries continued, with Italian firms and skilled workers engaged in different sectors on Persian soil. In the last decade of the 20th century, relations between Italy and Persia seem to have taken a relatively friendly and independent course. After the crisis in European Union-Iran relations (1997), and its solution (1998), Italy was the first European country to send its Foreign Minister and its Prime Minister to Tehran. Moreover, with Mohammad Khatami's visit in 1999, Italy was the first Western country to host a President of the Islamic Republic.

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