



ITALY III. CULTURAL RELATIONS

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Artistic influences. Italy and Persia have hardly ever had a direct and continuous cultural exchange. During the Middle Ages, when Italy and Persia were not clearly definable cultural entities, the translated works of significant Persian literature had a great influence on Italian and European culture. This, however, was part of the greater process by which Islamic heritage flowed into Christian and European culture mainly in Arabic and through Latin translation. Only approximate traces can be identified of a more direct relationship between Persian and Italian works until the introduction of Amir ẖosrow Dehlavi's *Hašt behešt*, as the famous *Peregrinaggio* (1557) by Cristoforo Armeno, which had an enormous cultural influence throughout Europe. Its heritage in Italy is most noticeable in the work of Carlo Gozzi (the tragicomic theatrical fable *Il Re Cervo*, 1762; see Cerulli, 1975, pp. 335-58). A possible link between the Pahlavi account of the celestial journey of Ardā Wīrāz (q.v.) and the oriental material on which Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* was based has been the source of much discussion (see Blochet). This possibility, however, has been rejected by scholars who prefer to view the episode regarding Ardā Wīrāz as belonging to a type of tale which spread throughout the Indian world and filtered into primitive Christian and Islamic spheres. The



Ketāb al-Me'rāj, an Arab folk tale about the Prophet's ascension to Heaven, which was translated into Castilian and then into Latin in the 12th century as the famous *Libro della Scala*, is more easily identifiable as the direct reference text for Dante's work, even if to a lesser degree than was initially suggested (Cerulli, 1949). These conclusions are now almost unanimously accepted by scholars, who also disregard the question of a possible relationship between the *Sayr al-'ebād ela'l-ma'ād*, a mystic *maṭnawī* by the Persian poet Sanā'i, and the Italian masterpiece (Bausani, 1979).

Analogously, it was certainly through the mediation of the Arabic language that a typical theme of the Persian cultural and literary tradition established itself as a semiotic map for ethical and intellectual literature in the West, and in particular in Humanist and Renaissance Italy. This was the symbol of the garden. The garden-paradise, an ancient symbol of Persian monarchic power, a framework and structural model for major works in Persian literature, arrived in medieval Italy via Arab architecture and literature. There, combined with the strong Greco-Roman tradition, it gave rise to an original symbolic literary model, which can be found in important works such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (1349-51), Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), and numerous other works (including the *Peregrinaggio*), as well as at the heart of Leon Battista Alberti's (d. 1472) architectonical reflections (Tornesello, 2002). This consideration can be extended to much of the literary material in circulation between the ancient and medieval eras between the East and the West. Through many different kinds of linguistic and cultural mediation, various themes and motifs, probably of Persian origin, though not always perfectly identifiable, reached the Italian literary milieu. Italian texts made use of Eurasian expansive narrative cycles such as the *Arabian Nights*, the *Book of Sinbad*, the *Book of Kalila and Demna* (absorbed in the works of the prominent humanist and writer Anton Francesco Doni [d. 1574]), the *Vis o Rāmin* (a love story of Parthian origin) of Fakr-al-Din Gorgāni (q.v.), which was perhaps reflected in the story of Tristan and Isotta, and which is also present in Italian literature (Minorsky; Piemontese, 1999).

As the effects of medieval literary circulation faded and the modern era dawned, direct influences appeared less frequently. Even the excellent divulgation of Ḥāfeẓ by Pietro Della Valle does not appear to have left any evident traces in Italian literature, although it is certainly at the origins of European masterpieces such as Johann Goethe's *West-Östlicher Divan* (see



GEOTHE). Della Valle himself composed a brief epigram inspired by a visit to his mausoleum in Shiraz (Bertotti, 1990). Perhaps the only writer to have an explicit effect on the Italian literary scene was Omar Khayyam (ʿOmar Kayyām), whose work reached Italy from England and mostly through the filter of French and German languages. The very personal interpretation of Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald (q.v.) found an ideal fertile terrain in Italian decadentism, where Khayyam's poetry earned critical attention and underwent several indirect translations. The themes and the character of Khayyam's poetry were picked up again in poetic texts by esteemed writers such as Arturo Graf (d. 1913), Giovanni Pascoli (d. 1912), Vincenzo Cardarelli (d. 1959), as well as in specially written musical compositions (see Piemontese, 2002-2003). Besides the beginning of a work of translation of Persian literary works (see ITALY xi), other signs of the absorption of Persian literary influence can be found in the works produced within the rising academic circle of Iranian studies, for example in the novel *Miro e Naida: romanzo orientale*, by Italo Pizzi (Turin, 1901), and in the poetry of the authors who had had personal contact with Persia, such as Gina Labriola and Alessandro Coletti (1970-80).

Perhaps it was through a rather indirect historical approach that Persia and Persian culture made a mark on Italian artistic expression. From classical sources (Greek, Latin, and Biblical), the Italian Renaissance brought back the names of the ancient sovereigns, Cyrus, Darius I, Darius III (qq.v.; the adversary of Alexander; q.v.), Artabanus, Tiridates, Šāpur, and Ƙosrows (Chosroe), especially Ƙosrow II Parvēz (adversary of Heraclius, emperor of Byzantium; q.v.); the names of the ancient cities, Ekbatana (q.v.), Susa, Ctesiphon (q.v.); the names of emblematic figures such as the *Sibilla Persica*, who was the first among the sibyls scattered around the ancient world, according to Latin tradition. The figurative representation of these characters through bass-reliefs and frescoes in Italian art between the 15th and 18th centuries (the Persian Sybil was produced twice for Pope Julius II by Bernardino Pinturicchio in Santa Maria del Popolo and by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel) was accompanied by a flood of ancient Persian themes in the literature of the day, spanning all genres (chivalric legends, heroic, festive or jousting poems, baroque novels, comedies, tragedies, dramas for music, oratorios) with thousands of works. The systematic diffusion of this literary and figurative usage appears as an implicit proto-nationalistic awareness of Persia as the paramount counterpart to the ancient glory of Imperial Rome. The particular influence of this thematic category on the formation of drama



for music can be seen in more than 270 works of the genre produced in Italy, or by Italians, in the 17th and 18th centuries, and particularly in the theaters of Venice. In-depth research on this important matter has yet to be completed, however (Piemontese, 1982, pp. 803-60; idem, 1993; idem, 2003, pp. 29-30).

Alongside this ancient evocation, there also was the representation of current affairs. On 2 March 1473, Rome witnessed the performance of a play based on the victory of Uzun Ḥasan, the ideal ally of Pope Sixtus IV, against the common Ottoman enemy (Piemontese, 1991). In the same period, a milestone of relations between Italy and Persia, envoys and presents of the Persian king are portrayed in outstanding works of art (paintings, miniatures) dedicated to the Duke of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro, one of the main weavers of the anti-Ottoman alliance (Piemontese, 2004). Following this, the term Sofi (the distorted name of the Safavid king, whose application was later extended), the king of Persia, became a common figure in both scholarly and folk Italian literature, and was immortalized in the 19th century in a sonnet by the Romanesque poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (d. 1863), *Er re de nov'idea* (The king of the New Idea, 1834), written upon the news of Fath-ʿAli Shah Qājār's death. As the political situation grew more distant, this exotic taste gradually wore out and the 20th century, which began with the institutionalization of Iranian Studies in Italy, has not yet witnessed the foundation of a relationship of direct literary or artistic influence.

In the other direction, sporadic examples of the influence of Italian literature on Persian works can be identified only from the 20th century onwards, with the first translations of Italian works (see [ITALY xii. TRANSLATIONS](#)), and within a relatively limited range. While the introduction of Giovanni Boccaccio and Nicolo Machiavelli to Persia had some effect on the development of sociological and political thinking in that country, the main example of a piece of Persian literature inspired by the *Divina Commedia*, the *Jāvid-nāma* by Indo-Persian philosopher and poet Moḥammad Eqbāl (which came two decades earlier than the translation of Dante's work into Persian) derived from the long standing worldwide fame of the Italian poem, known through translations into many other languages (Bausani, 1952). As occurred in the rest of the world, the introduction of Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* certainly appears to have played a significant role, especially in a phase of re-foundation of literature for children in Persia, following the earlier progressive pedagogical ideas. This role was brought to the readers' attention in the preface of the book by the first translator, Šādeq Čubak (tr. as *Ādamak-e*



čubi, Tehran, 1955; see also Casari). Only a careful study, which has yet to be carried out, will determine the influence of 20th-century Italian literary works (imported since the end of the Second World War) on recent Persian literature, whereas it is unanimously acknowledged that an important contribution was made on its development by the acquisition of English and French literary models for story-telling and novels.

A field in which it is perhaps possible to identify a more direct relationship between the two countries is that of dramaturgy in its wider sense. There are similarities between the Italian and Persian traditions of the so-called *Commedia dell' Arte* and folk theater (including puppet shows), which could provide important parallels between distant characters such as *Pahlavān(-e) kačāl* and the Florentine mask of Stenterello. Nevertheless the various attempts, which have been made to mark out direct routes, have not yet borne any fruit. The trend is to be satisfied with imagining a common origin (perhaps Greek?) and parallel developments. It does, however, appear certain that modern Italian theatre (from Machiavelli's *Mandragola* to Carlo Goldoni, from Pirandello to Dario Fo) did fascinate Persian intellectuals of the post-Second World War. They imported texts, plays, and radio play-readings, using them as a model and a support for the rising Persian theater and for modern literature in general (Piemontese, 2003 pp. 69-71). In an important performance of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* in Tehran in 1964, the role of the protagonist was played by the already established poet Foruḡ Farroḡzād (q.v.; see Šāberi). During the 1970s, the number of performances of Italian musical operas multiplied, but this approach, which was interrupted by the advent of the Islamic Republic, does not seem to have interacted either with the deep rooted tradition of Persian music, nor with the dramaturgical forms which were developing.

Italian neo-realist and auteur cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, famous all over the world, had a definite influence on the Persian movie industry. From the beginning of the 1960s onwards, the importation of the masterpieces of Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio de Sica, Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni, dubbed into Persian, were accompanied by the publication of screenplays, interviews, and critical literature, establishing itself as a structural and ideological model for the so-called nouvelle vogue of directors such as Dāriuš Mehrju'i and Mas'ud Kimiā'i, and later as an inspiration for the post-revolutionary cinema of the likes of Amir Nāderi, Moḥsen Maḡmal-bāf, 'Abbās Kiārostami, Ja'far Panāhi, whose international recognition has often



been associated with reference to the great Italian masters, requested by the Iranian directors themselves (Piemontese, 2003, p. 76; Tornesello, 2003). In 1975 the citadel of Bam in southeastern Persia was the set for the Italian-French movie production, *Il deserto dei Tartari*, directed by Valerio Zurlini and based on the celebrated novel of Dino Buzzati.

Institutional relations. While this complex web of reciprocal influences often spread through the abstract and indirect routes of art, concrete, internationally recognized cultural relations only began to take shape around the middle of the 19th century, when the Persian government hired Italian instructors to serve at state institutions and a number of Persians studied at Italian universities. Initially, this took place in a sporadic and casual manner, but subsequently became increasingly organized and structured. Besides those serving as instructors of the Persian army (see [ITALY ii. DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS](#)), there were several Italian teachers at Dār al-fonun (q.v.), a modern school founded in Tehran in 1851 by Mirzā Taqī Khan Amir(-e) Kabir. Included among them were Captain Zatti, engineering lecturer (who died suddenly in 1852) and Focchetti, instructor of Physics and Chemistry at the Dār al-fonun from its foundation until 1862. Focchetti also accompanied Farroḡ Khan Ġaffāri on his mission to Italy in 1858. Also some of the Italian military instructors, such as Michele and Francesco Materazzo, Luigi Pesce, Enrico Andreini, occasionally taught at the Dār al-fonun. An institutional agreement signed in 1927 established the despatch of Persian cadets to the Naval Academy in Livorno, where they were mainly taught (up to diploma level) scientific subjects with the aim of serving in the new Persian Royal Navy. This agreement remained in effect, with a few interruptions, until the end of the 1970s. However, the first official confirmation of cultural relations between Italy and Persia was the Cultural Agreement signed in Rome on 29 November 1958 by the two ministers of foreign affairs, A. Fanfani and ‘Ali-Aṣḡar Ḥekmat. This agreement encouraged the exchange of cultural material between the two countries (books, publications, radio programs, scientific or educational films, works of art for exhibitions, etc.) as well as exchange trips combined with various forms of financial aid and grants for the students, researchers, and cultural personalities of the two countries (see *Accordi culturali*, pp. 326-32).

The agreement was also designed to spread the historical, linguistic, and cultural knowledge of each country with the institution and the development of teaching and readership positions in the relative subjects. This agreement



laid the basis for the foundation of respective cultural institutes in each country. The Italian Cultural Institute was founded in 1962 through the collaboration between the Italian Foreign Ministry and IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), transforming the Italian Cultural Center, which had been founded in 1960 by Giuseppe Tucci. The IsMEO has worked for many years with the Institute, setting up both excavation and restoration projects. The Institute had organised various cultural initiatives, in particular to stimulate the study of Italian culture and language, even in Persian university systems. These initiatives led to various types of scientific collaboration, in particular in the field of architecture, exhibitions, concerts, plays, cinema festivals, and numerous publications regarding Italian and Iranian cultures. In 1986, however, the Cultural Institute was closed to the public, following a dispute between the Persian authorities and the Italian state-run television. The institute was shut down definitively in 1994, leaving the embassy's cultural attaché as the only figure of its kind (Ministerial Decree 2518 of 17 January 1994; see also Piemontese 2003, p. 10).

Also during the 1960s, on the basis of the above-mentioned Cultural Agreement, the Iranian Cultural Institute was founded in Rome, first located in the building of the embassy. In 1991 the Institute moved to an autonomous residence in Monte Mario, where it is still situated. An Iranian school, called “Šahid Bāhonar,” with official Persian curriculum, was established in Rome in 1995, and is mainly attended by children of Persian diplomatic staff.

The agreement of 1958, which was renewed and enlarged by a subsequent agreement in 1970, is designed to promote technical and scientific cooperation in Persia and is to this day the cornerstone of cultural cooperation between the two countries. This cooperation was confirmed in 1996 and again in 2000 with an executive program presenting a detailed extension into numerous fields and sectors, including universities and related study grants, music, theatre, cinema, exhibitions, archives, libraries, publications, measures for the conservation of cultural heritage, as well as scientific and technological cooperation. The theoretical basis of this new long-term project is the concept of historical and cultural affinity and links between the two countries, established between 1999 and 2001 by a series of parliamentary dialogues on ancient Mediterranean civilizations (Egypt, Greece, Italy, Persia) held in each of the countries. In the context of the above mentioned executive programme of 2000, and in order to support a cultural policy of exchange and integration, Persian authorities recently (2004) decided to include Italian as an elective



subject in the curriculum of certain schools at the same levels that English and French are offered, while Italian authorities introduced Persian as one of the optional languages valid for the open competition finalized to diplomatic career.

Persian students. Despite the lower degree of familiarity concerning recent history and politics, compared to other European countries such as France, Great Britain, or Germany, Persians have always felt and demonstrated an instinctive sense of closeness to the Italian cultural and artistic spheres, perceived in many ways as having a high degree of affinity to their own. It is mainly for this reason that, from the middle of the 19th century, a small but constant number of Persian students chose Italy as the country for their university education, particularly in the field of fine arts. After the Second World War, this flow of Persian students to Italy increased notably, mainly towards the arts faculties (fine arts, architecture, music) and some specific fields of science (engineering, medicine, agronomy). Since the signing of the Cultural Agreement in 1958, these students in Italy have been eligible for study grants, though the distribution of the grants was never constant and was suspended many times.

The number of Persian students in Italy at any one time appears to have never risen above 10,000 and at the present time (2004) is lower than 5,000. Of the Persian students who have finished their studies in Italy, many have chosen to remain in the country, joining one of many Italian institutions, including newspapers, publishing firms, art galleries, and theaters, as well as becoming engaged in movie production. Among those who returned to Persia, there are some, almost all with an artistic or literary education, whose translations of Italian works contributed to widening the horizon of Italian literature in Persia (see [ITALY xii. TRANSLATIONS](#); Piemontese, 2003, pp. 126-44).

Italian schools. The formation of Italian educational nucleuses can be attributed to the Salesian missionaries, who have been present and active in Persia since 1936. Most of these schools have remained affiliated to the church, and their size is proportionate to the small parish communities of each locality. The history of the Salesian school of Tehran is, however, more complex. It was founded as soon as the missionaries arrived in the capital, initially as part of the parish of the Consolata. The school, which had been closed during the Second World War, was reopened in 1944 and then moved to a series of different locations, until it found a permanent home in a building that had been erected to house it in 1958 on the Andiša hill in Tehran. The



school came to be known as the Don Bosco College. The number of pupils attending the nursery, elementary, middle and high schools grew to around 1,700 by the middle of the 1970s. From an administrative point of view, the school had a private statute and was attended not only by the children of Italian workers and diplomats living in Persia, but also by many young Persians as well as those of other nationalities. At a certain point, a managing committee, established by the Italian companies present in the country, took on the administration of the school. Around the 1970s, the increase in the school's prestige, and in the number of students attending, made it necessary to open a new building, specially commissioned by this committee, at Farmāniya in a space allocated by the Italian embassy in Tehran. At the same time, in 1976, the school was officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1980 the Persian authorities banned all Catholic schools and consequently the Italian school, still a Salesian institution, closed down only to re-open immediately as the official school of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, the ban on attending foreign schools for children with Persian fathers, enacted by the Persian authorities of the Islamic Republic, meant that the school was attended almost exclusively by Italians. It included a nursery school, elementary school, middle school, and a science high school. In December 1995, the school was renamed "Pietro Della Valle" as a tribute to the famous Roman traveler. Many schools teaching in Italian on a smaller scale and with a precarious statute have opened in areas where Italian companies operate, but they have almost always been used by the children of the employees of these companies.

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