



ITALY IV. TRAVEL ACCOUNTS (2) QAJAR PERIOD

There is ample evidence of an Italian presence in Persia throughout the Qajar period, when many Italians went to work there as physicians, military advisors, or merchants. They left little written testimony of their Persian experience until the second half of the 19th century, when the number of Italians who went to Persia increased, and with them the bulk of recorded data. The most salient aspect of the accounts written by Italians who lived in Persia between 1850 and the turn of the century is that almost all of them had official assignments. In fact, most of the Italian material published are the reports of military officials who were in Persia to train the Persian army, of natural scientists researching the zoological world, or of financial advisors to the Persian government.

The first Italian travelers who left significant accounts of their visits to Qajar Persia were the members of the 1862 mission, which included diplomats, scientists and military officers. The greatest contributions in terms of scientific articles and general information about Persia were brought by Filippo de Filippi (q.v.) and the physician Michele Lessona (1823-1894). Lessona was particularly interested in zoology and his essays are basically devoted to natural life in Persia, such as its landscapes and “magnificent nature [that is] so great and excellent that I cannot describe it properly” (letter written in 1865, in Camerano, pp. 25-26). He also became very interested in the Bahai religion, so much so that he wrote a book on it (*I Babi*).



In the second half of the 19th century, Qajar governors employed Italian officers both as teachers at the Dār al-Fonun (q.v.) in Tehran and as advisors within the ranks of the military. The first Italian officer who left a written account of Persia was Count Luigi Serristori (1793-1857), in whose brief account one finds information on Persian geographical and economic conditions, on the trade and commerce, as well as many comments on Persian people with whom the author sympathized, because they were “repressed by the monarch’s endless tyranny” (p. 211), but whom he also accused of barbarous customs and of falsehood and vanity, although they were also “intelligent, quick learning, cordial, and merry tempered” (p. 214).

More substantial and responsible are the accounts by two other officers, Alessandro de Bianchi and Enrico Andreini. De Bianchi was a captain of the Italian army, who served in the Ottoman armed forces in the 1850s and came into contact with the Persians who lived on the borders between the Ottoman and the Qajar domains. Most of de Bianchi’s observations concerned the Kurds, whose way of life he described in detail, especially their bellicose recreations.

De Bianchi presented himself as an expert on Muslim manners and languages (p. 38) and enriched his narrative with historical notes, legends, anecdotes and linguistic annotations. Muslim women were another interesting topic for de Bianchi, who reflected on their ways and manners among the Turks, Armenians, Kurds and Persians. He scorned the overall confusion made by books on the Middle Eastern people, and he was particularly critical of the Christian missionaries (such as the Italian Father Maurizio Garzoni, author of the first vocabulary of the Kurdish language, who would antagonize everyone who professed a non-Christian religion; de Bianchi, p. 225). He also labeled the Christians who resided in the Levant as “ignorant, full of prejudices, fanatically attached to their religion and therefore hostile to other religions’ believers” (p. 226).

The Captain Enrico Andreini, who lived in Persia from 1857 until his death in 1895, was an instructor of the Persian army and also taught at the Dār al-Fonun. He was appointed general in 1872, soon after his proposal to the Italian governor to become the Italian correspondent for Persian affairs. His 437 reports are a very complete account of the most important Persian events in those crucial years. Andreini’s main concern was the reform of the Persian armed forces, and in 1864 he translated into Persian a French manual on infantry maneuvers (*Ḥarakāt-e afwāj*; see *Piemontese*, 1969, p. 156, and n.



14), one of the first works of this genre to be published in Persia. In May 1875 he also wrote in French a project of reform of the Persian army, which he addressed to Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, whom he highly esteemed. Andreini also had a great interest for the Central Asia question and devoted many dispatches to the analysis of the various components involved in the Great Game (q.v.), in which he showed his political and diplomatic acumen (see Piemontese, 1972).

Very little is known about Giuseppe Anaclerio, who spent three years (1862-65) in Persia working in the army. His account, *La Persia descritta*, although much influenced by his prejudices and preconceptions about Persian civilization, nonetheless gives interesting descriptions of life in Persia. Particularly remarkable is his description of Tehran prisons, which he had the chance to visit.

Some 19th-century travelers to Persia went to investigate the Persian methods of silk-worm cultivation for the Italian government, such as Giulio Adamoli (1840-1926), an engineer and mathematician, who was extremely knowledgeable about Middle Eastern countries and who lived in Kōqand for about one year (1870). He only wrote some articles in which he described the Kōqand Khanate in great detail: its mosques and sanctuaries, the bazaar, the Khan's residence and private dwellings, the administrative system, the local customs and celebrations, including the ceremony for the circumcision of a dignitary's son and some *ruhawzi* performances. He was very critical of the conditions of women and ascribed all the faults of Kōqand's society to the "most fanatic and stubborn ignorance" ("Un'escursione," p. 442) and to the superstition that abided among every social group.

More ponderous is the account written by Eteocle Lorini (1805-1919), a professor of Financial Sciences at the University of Pavia who spent the years 1897-98 in Persia. His extensive monograph, *La Persia*, covers a variety of topics, ranging from religion to political institutions, from the world of work and business to that of art and literature, from the public realm to the private. It is an interesting, readable guidebook, in which Lorini showed his familiarity with, and knowledge of, both past and present Persia. His chapters on Persian administrative hierarchy is a model of clarity and accuracy, as are his economic and financial observations, which reveal both his wit and capacity for perceiving and analyzing the complex Persian situation. Another outstanding aspect of Lorini's study is a collection of authoritative assertions aimed at correcting and eliminating many prejudices about Persia and her people. He contradicted the common Western bad opinion about Muslim



education (p. 103). He also had a series of provocative assertions on Persian women, whom he described as the sovereigns of Persia, happy with their position in the harem, and protected by Muslim law (pp. 107-9). He is also the author of reports on Persian commerce (Lorini, 1887, 1888, 1983).

More extensive was the Persian experience of Carlo Chiari, who had previously studied Persian and other Asian and African languages at the Institute of Oriental Languages in Paris. At the turn of the century he went to Persia and entered the Persian financial services under the directorship of the Belgian Josef Naus. In 1910 he was appointed director of customs of Persian Kurdistan, where he lived for about thirty years. His autobiography, *Notti persiane*, describes at length the Kurdish way of life and the manners of Christian populations dwelling on the fringes of the Qajar realm; but it is also rich in episodes regarding the eventful period of civil war in western Persia in the first decades of the 19th century.

The writings of Italian travelers in Qajar Persia reveal some common characteristics: the majority of the writers showed a sympathetic attitude towards the country they visited and its people. Though they were critical of certain events and situations, they were usually not affected by the prejudices and preconceptions of the time; moreover, they were eager to make a good impression in the foreign country. This attitude and the way it is expressed in these accounts is important as these writings fostered other Italian interests towards Persia and Persian studies. They offered information about Persian matters which were virtually unknown in Europe, such as the richness of Persian zoological and botanical life, the organization of the Persian army, and the life of the people who lived on the periphery of the Persian world.

Moreover, the material provided about Persian politics benefited from the authorship of politically impartial observers; Italy had no immediate or direct interest in the rivalry among European powers, for it was too small and too weak a state to entertain such ambitions.

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