



SAFINE-YE SOLAYMANI

SAFINE-ye SOLAYMANI (“Ship of Solayman,” henceforth *SS*), a Persian travel account of an embassy sent by the Safavid ruler Shah Solayman (r. 1666-94) to Siam in the year 1685. The *SS* was written by the embassy’s secretary Moḥammad Rabi’ b. Moḥammad Ebrāhim (commonly referred to as Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim) and translated for the first time into English by John O’Kane, based on a British Museum manuscript. O’Kane’s translation from the 1970s has been reprinted once (see Bibliography), with an introduction by the present author. According to Jean Aubin (Jean Aubin, “Les Persans au Siam sous le regne de Narai (1656-1688),” *Mare Luso-Indicum* 4, 1980, p. 97, n. 12), a second manuscript copy of the *SS* is said to be extant in Iran. In 1977, ‘Abbās Fāruqi published his edition of the Persian text, which was reprinted in 1999.

The *SS* consists of four main parts, referred to as ‘gifts’, *tohfe* in the Persian text, but translated as ‘jewels’ by O’Kane. The entire account contains Qur’anic quotations and lines of Persian poetry, some apparently by Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim. It starts with the usual doxology of God, the Prophet and ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb. After this, the author states his own name and profession, “Ebn Mohammad Ebrahim, Mohammad Rabi” [i.e., Moḥammad Rabi’ Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim], “scribe to the contingent of the royal musketeers,” which refers apparently to the *tofangči* [or musketeer-corps]. This is followed by ornate praise of Shah Solayman. The name of Siam’s king Narai (r. 1656-88) does not appear throughout the account, although he is referred to indirectly as a tolerant monarch. Moreover, the introduction refers to the purpose of the Iranian embassy: a response to a Siamese embassy to Iran in 1682 which was



led by an Iranian, as we shall see later. Our author mentions furthermore his appointment as official scribe for the delegation.

The *First Gift* (and in fact the whole account) is written in a highly embellished style and reports on the first part of the travel aboard an English vessel, which started on 25 Rajab 1096 / 27 June 1685, from the Persian Gulf port Bandar-e ‘Abbās via Muscat in Oman, for Madras in India. With regard to Muscat, he mentions that it was previously under the Portuguese. After a turbulent journey the ship arrives at *Chinapatam*, i.e., Madras, in Southeast India, then under the control of the British. There follows a detailed description of the fort and the respectful reception given to the delegation by the British. He reports, that the nearby city of *Maylapur*, too, had been previously under the “Franks” (i.e., the Portuguese), but that it was reconquered by the Qotbšāhis, to whom he refers interestingly merely as *vālis*, ‘governors’. He also mentions that news of the death of England’s King Charles II (which had occurred on 6 February 1685) reached Madras during his time of stay there.

The *Second Gift* elaborates on the travel from India to the then Siamese port of *Tanasuri*, i.e., Tenasserim in present-day Burma, by crossing the Gulf of Bengal, and from Tenasserim via land first to Ayutthaya and then to Lopburi, at that time the residence of the Siamese king Narai. The ship left Madras on 17 Šawwāl 1096/16 September 1685. This time they almost suffered shipwreck near the coast of the Burmese kingdom of *Paigu*, i.e., Pegu, to which Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim refers strangely as a part of *Kheta*, ‘Cathay’, i.e., China, however, with a “separate king.” Finally, the embassy arrives at the Siamese port of Mergui, where the Iranian Hāji Salim, a representative of the Siamese king and former ambassador to the court to Iran, welcomes them. Hāji Salim introduces them also to some aspects of Siamese customs and protocol. The reception on the part of Siamese officials present at that port is described as particularly respectful. Interestingly, our author mentions another Iranian by name of Moḥammad Sādeq as governor of Siamese Mergui and the entire adjoining province, who functions as their host during their stay in that city. After some days of rest, the embassy continues its way by boat to Tenasserim. Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim refers sometimes to the entire country of Siam as *Šahr-e Nav*, but at other occasions he applies that expression only to its capital, Ayutthaya. With regard to Tenasserim, he states that it was inhabited by Siamese, Indian Sunnites, Hindus and ‘Franks’. Interestingly, the Persian word for “Frank,” which refers to a “Westerner,” entered as a loan word in the Thai language, where it is still used today. From Tenasserim the embassy continues



its way to Ayutthaya. *En route* it is received by one Sayyed Māzandarāni, another Iranian governor in Siamese service. They proceed to a city to which our author refers to as ‘*Suhan*’, by the “river to *Šahr-e Nav*,” situated in one day distance by boat-travel from the capital. The present writer is not certain about its exact location, but the river seems to be the Chao Phraya. The governor, *raje*, in charge of that town was another Muslim, referred to by our author as ‘*Čelebi*’. According to Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim, he was “from Rum,” i.e., an Anatolian Turk, who had recently “converted” to Shi’ism. Anthony Reid identifies the area administered by ‘*Čelebi*’ with that of today’s Bangkok (Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis*, p. 191). At that place, the delegation is also greeted by members of the local Iranian community. Soon later, they proceed upstream, thus on the Chao Phraya River, to the royal capital Ayutthaya. There, they are informed of the fact that the king had left for *Lubu*, i.e., Lopburi. The author describes it as a strong fortress and mentions a certain K̄vāje Ḥasan-‘Ali K̄orāsāni, supposedly a descendant of K̄vāje ‘Abd-al-Laṭīf, a former Safavid vizier of Khorasan, as the head of the Iranian community residing in Siam and the successor in that position to Āqā Moḥammad, who had died earlier. Interestingly, the lodgings for the Iranian guests in Lopburi are described by the author as “Iranian” in style, furnished with baths (*hammāms*), carpets, etc. Very important is also his account on the background of the Iranian community’s loss of influence and favor with the king, which the author attributes to the “machinations” of a new favorite of the king, the Greek Constantine Phaulkon, to whom he does not refer by this name, but rather by the contemptuous expression “the evil Frank.” Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim even claims that it was this person who persuaded the king not to meet the Iranian embassy en route and then also postpone the audience. Finally, a first audience does take place, whose formalities are described by the author, focusing in particular on the manner in which the letter of the Safavid Shah was presented to the Siamese monarch. About the actual contents of the letter, however, the reader is left in the dark. There follows a description of several hunting expeditions and dinner invitations at which the Iranian delegation had been participating. Subsequently, the king moves to his capital Ayutthaya and the Iranian delegation has to follow him. Again, they are lodged in ‘Iranian’ houses, with Siamese and Iranian attendants. Soon later, the members of the Iranian embassy decide to embark on their return journey, this time directly by sea. The author inserts here the important information of the Iranian community in Siam’s custom of performing *ta’zia* or mourning ceremonies and performances in memory of the martyrdom of the Prophet’s



grandson Ḥosayn b. ‘Alī at Karbalā, which were financially supported by the (Buddhist) Siamese monarch, who also provided special buildings and other facilities for the purpose. The French traveler Guy Tachard, who was about the same time at the Siamese capital, has left us an impressive account of such a performance of particularly Shi’ite religiosity.

The *Third Gift* amounts to what can be called a ‘report on the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Siam’. The author begins by referring to the terms *Čin* and *Māčīn* as they appear in Muslim geographical literature of earlier times, but, more interestingly, he gives an explanation for the expression *Šahr-e Nav* for the country of Siam and, more specifically, for its then capital Ayutthaya. He refers in some length to the conflict of Siam with neighboring Pegu. Of particular interest is his statement that Iranians had been highly respected in the kingdom and that they are even said to have brought King Narai to the throne. Iranians, he claims, used also to exercise a strong influence over the private habits of the king, such as his choice of dishes and drinks as well as his clothes. Moreover, King Narai, he says, used to surround himself with bodyguards from India, most probably Iranians, or at least Shi’ite Indian Muslims from the southern part of the subcontinent. He refers at some length to the conflict between Phaulkon with his ‘pro-French leanings’ and the Iranian community. The third part contains also ‘comments’ on Siamese religious practices, legal system, as well as holidays and festivals, marriage and funeral rites, official titles, criminal investigations and varieties of punishments, but all this from a somewhat haughty perspective of assumed cultural superiority. After reporting on the suppression of a revolt started by the resident community of Macassar Sunnite Muslims, he closes with a lengthy reference to the daily routine, income, and expenses of the Siamese monarch, and adds to this some remarks on the economy and the major trade goods, as well as the lifestyle and food of the common people. The importance of the ‘*Third Gift*’ lies in the fact that it highlights the role played by various members of the local Iranian community as supporters of the Siamese ruler, who is portrayed as an extreme Iranophile. This portion is also very valuable with regard to the earliest history of the still influential Bunnag family which traces its roots back to Iranian ancestry, and which exerted some impact at the Siamese court during the following centuries.

The *Fourth Gift* concerns itself in a rather general fashion with an account of some of Siam’s neighbors, such as the Philippines, the Dutch possessions in what is now Indonesia, and even China and Japan, mostly based on hearsay,



since he did not visit these countries himself. He starts with a ‘geographical section’, which contains ‘observations’ on Siam’s flora and fauna, and what he perceived to be the ‘effects’ of the tides, which is generally rather bizarre and fantastic than informative. He refers also to Ceylon, Aceh, the Nicobars and Andamans. This is followed by remarks on countries, which he certainly did not visit, such as the Philippines. He identifies the “Castilians” (Spaniards) as its rulers and gives a detailed (and rather admiring) account of the installment of its governors and the presence of Chinese settlers. To this he adds what he had heard about Japan, beside the fantastic stories, in particular of the activities of the Dutch and Portuguese in that country, and that only the Dutch were able to retain some favor there. In a similar style he refers to Siam’s then neighbors Pegu and China. With regard to his return travel, he states that he passed Pattani, the rebellious Siamese vassal and one of the petty Malay principalities. Interesting is his accurate account of the Malay custom of sending a “golden flower” (Malay: *bunga mas*) to the kings of Siam as a sign of loyalty. He refers also to the then Dutch port of *Malake*, i.e., Malacca, but states that he did not land there. Passing on to India, he makes reference to *Kučī*, i.e., Cochin, then also under the Dutch suzerainty, and the Malabar coast. He states that the Dutch had recently taken over the port from the Portuguese. The returning Iranian delegation had to stay six full months at Cochin, since they missed the season for sailing directly to the Persian Gulf. Instead, they embarked on a ship bound to Surat. While trying to enter the port of Surat, they found it under a blockade of a British fleet, due to a conflict with the Mughals. The British forced the ship to sail to *Mumbai* (Bombay), which was under their control, and the party stayed three and a half months there, even if they were apparently treated with consideration by the British. The author here mentions that the city was given by Portugal as dowry to the English king Charles II. Finally, the embassy leaves Mumbai on 5 Jumada II 1099/8 April 1688 on a ship bound for the Persian Gulf. They arrive back at Bandar-e ‘Abbās on 24 Rajab 1099/14 May 1688.

The *Fourth Gift* is followed by a detailed ‘Appendix’ on the Mughal conquest of Hyderabad on the Deccan – the capital of the Golconda kingdom, ruled by the Shi’ite Qotbšāhs – which happened actually on 21 September 1687. News of this significant event had apparently also reached the returning Iranian mission which was passing close by. The earlier fall of the kingdom of Bijapur on 12 September 1686 is also noticed by the author. Remarkably, he refers to the rulers of both kingdoms merely as ‘governors’. The *SS* closes with the mentioning of the escape of the Mughal prince Akbar (not to be confused with



his namesake, the famous Mughal emperor) to the court of Persia, which took place in 1682. Substantial are also Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhim's observations on the activities of Western powers in the Indian Ocean region, in particular the Dutch, the British and the waning fortunes of the Portuguese. From the perspective of Persian as well as Southeast Asian and Thai studies, the account is particularly rich in information on Siam's late seventeenth century Persian community, providing a kind of "Who's Who" for it. However, it has no answer to the burning question of *who* were actually the first Iranian visitors to the country and what were the circumstances of their settlement there. Moreover, it does not contribute to our knowledge of "Shaikh Ahmad of Qumm" (whose name does not even appear in the book), the ancestor of the powerful Bunnag family and Siam's first *Shaikh al-Islām*, but it does refer to his early successors. The SS is furthermore contemptuous of Siamese customs and beliefs, evincing its author's complete lack of understanding of and sympathy for the country and its hospitable people. He refers constantly to a supposed cultural superiority of Persia and its religion. There are, however, no traces of "ethnic bias" in the text. Finally, Thai expressions, if he bothers to refer to them at all, appear mostly in a corrupted and at times unintelligible form in his account.

Nonetheless, the SS is an outstanding document for the historical and cultural presence of Persia in the eastern Indian Ocean region. It constitutes the only extant Persian source for the extensive Safavid contacts with the region and is also of relevance for the history of the Indian subcontinent, southern India in particular, during the 17th century.

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