



Introduction to Harvard Library Bulletin, Volume 23.1-23.2

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Introduction

TRAVEL IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD WAS DIFFICULT AND DANGEROUS. Political and commercial envoys, missionaries, soldiers, gentlemen travelers and adventurers, and people fleeing the narrow confines of European societies made their way to Asia. Their travels to Iran and other Asian countries by ship and various overland routes often took years, not least because travelers had to carry along many items, making movement cumbersome. Gifts were important aids, meant to ensure a safe and successful outcome to the journey. The entourage of a traveler might have consisted of business partners, priests, surgeons, painters, interpreters, and servants—depending on his mission and the size of his purse. How long the visit lasted could depend on the presence of other travelers and visitors from Protestant and Catholic Europe or on the local conditions that were encountered.

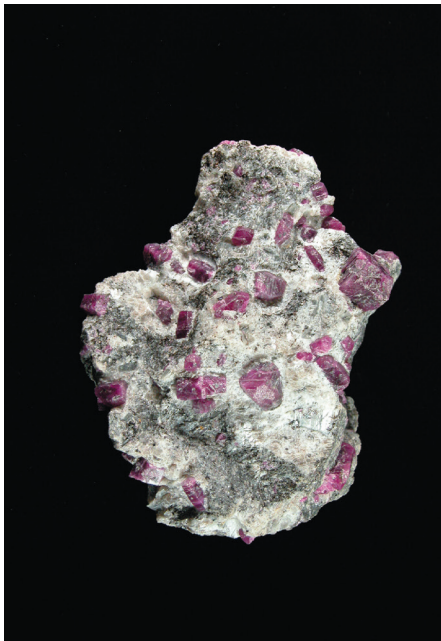


Figure 1.1. Corundum variety ruby, Karnataka, India (Part I, entry 25), Harvard Mineralogical Museum, 127493; Rhubarb, Xiangcheng, China. (Part I, entry 97), Herbarium of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University Herbaria, 29320.

Safavid Iran¹ served as an end point of travel as well as a land of transit. It was not entirely unknown to the educated visitor because he had studied earlier Iranian history, geography, conflicts, and victories in classical literature that had been revived in the Renaissance. He also knew of its ancient peoples and societies, its rulers and their contacts with the world through his study of the Bible and other religious texts.

Iran was coveted as a place for commerce. The three products most sought after by merchants and diplomats from Catholic or Protestant Europe were silk, drugs, and gemstones. Iran was also courted as a possible powerful ally against the Ottoman Empire, its western neighbor. Iran was seen as a country with a different form of Islam—Shi'ism—than the Sunni societies surrounding it. In many ways Safavid Iran was depicted as the antithesis of the Ottoman Empire and considered a fertile ground for Catholic missions, whether they came from the Spanish or Portuguese monarchies, the papal courts, or the French kings. European travelers discovered “affinities” between themselves and their Iranian hosts that they were unable to see when traversing the Ottoman Empire. They praised Safavid scholars and instrument makers who studied the same ancient authors and used the same kinds of scientific instruments as the Europeans. In contrast to that positive view vis-à-vis the Safavids, the European visitors did not like Ottoman scholars; on the contrary, they criticized them for pursuing the same activities as their Persian neighbors. The travelers maintained that there was a dichotomy between the two Muslim powers in western Asia, be it in the existence of madrasas, the beauty of landscapes and buildings, the safety of roads and inns, the elegance of women, men, and languages, or the cruelty and autocracy of rulers, their wives, concubines, and eunuchs. The heaping of blame and shame on the “Turks” reached such a degree that some Catholic and Protestant European writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries criticized their compatriots for their prejudices and lack of knowledge.

However, the prevalently positive portrayal of Safavid Iran by European travelers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries was as artful a construction as was their negative depiction of the Ottoman Empire. The Westerners “saw” customs, landscapes, and policies that seemed to be identical to those described by Herodotus, Xenophon, Pliny the Elder, Curtius Rufus, Polybius, and other ancient writers, and that they believed had not changed over the centuries. The visitors structured and described territories under the Safavid dynasty according to concepts they found in Strabo's or Ptolemy's geographies and were eager to determine which geographical unit

1 The Safavid dynasty ruled in Iran from 1501 to 1722. The term “Safavid” was derived from the founder of a Sufi order in Ardabil, Sheikh Safi al-Din (1252–1334). For the historical background on the Safavids see *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 6, *The Timurid and Safavid Periods*, ed. Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and, more recently, Andrew Newman, *Safavid Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

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of Safavid Iran corresponded to names they had found in ancient sources. “Truth” in published travel accounts was not first and foremost achieved by critical reflection or on-site investigations; it was determined by the academic practice of quoting “good authors” and by trust in the Scriptures. This practice led to replacing locally collected information by quotations from the Bible, from Latin and Greek authors, and to the evaluation of local customs through the lens of texts written centuries earlier. This practice also extended to the structure of travel narratives, the selection of topics, and methods of acquiring information. Even though this theoretical framework was mainly conceived for travel accounts within Europe, its impact can also be felt in many travel accounts about Safavid Iran. Authors and readers assigned different values to diaries, personal, public, and semi-public letters, reports to superiors, and other documents. A traveler’s diaries and letters were by no means unmediated texts about his personal experiences. Some wrote down only laconic notes about the length of journeys, resting places, diseases, deaths, failed meetings with the shah or one of his officials, the acquisition of goods and books, and occasionally of a shift in the weather. Others filled their diaries with summaries of events and undertakings, leaving out days or weeks of hardship and misfortunes. But none of the extant diaries contains sufficient material for writing the travel account published by their authors.

Iranian subjects born in the Safavid Empire also traveled. Their motives were equally broad, although they differed from those of the Western visitors. They traveled in Iran or to foreign Asian and European countries as pilgrims, for political reasons or trade, in search of wealthy patrons, and to study with a famous professor or a charismatic Sufi. Ambassadors were sent to the Ottoman Empire, India, Central Asia, Russia, Spain, England, the papal court, France, Poland, and even Siam [Thailand]. Merchants traveled to Venice and London, where they were welcomed, and to Marseille, where they were viewed with suspicion. Their business led them to India, Malaysia, China, Java, and other eastern regions. Pilgrims, including women, went to Ardabil and Mashhad in Iran, and also to Karbala, Damascus, and Mecca. Scholars, painters, and architects traveled to the court of the Mughals in India for patronage, professional advancement, the exercise of their religious beliefs, and the acquisition or dissemination of scholarly knowledge. Others went westward, as far as the Ottoman capital Istanbul. They took along manuscripts with religious, literary, historical, philosophical, or mathematical texts, some of them handsomely illustrated or even illuminated. Some of these Iranian voyagers also wrote accounts of their travels. In contrast to the Europeans, however, they did not emphasize realistic descriptions in their accounts. They preferred the metaphors and images of the Sufi, speaking about the impact of the journey on their souls and about the hope to achieve spiritual rather than worldly gains. There even exist some travel accounts of women who considered this mystic framework of sorrow and hope appropriate in order to further emphasize their experiences as pilgrims.

The exhibition “From Rhubarb to Rubies: European Travels to Safavid Iran (1550–1700)” held in the Edison and Newman Room of Houghton Library, traced some of the experiences of early modern travel to and within Iran. It depicted various sources from which travelers could gather information about languages, peoples and their customs, animals, plants, dangers, and diseases. It also displayed various technical tools that would be useful en route, such as astronomical instruments for determining time and direction, medical instruments, maps, and books. The exhibition showed the means of traveling (ships, camels, horses, donkeys, walking) and the various routes (Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Volga River, Caspian Sea, Tigris River, Persian Gulf, Ottoman Empire, Caucasus Mountains) that travelers took to arrive in Tabriz, Qazvin, or Isfahan, the three Safavid capitals.

The manifold interests that brought travelers to Iran were the focus of the exhibition, which consisted of one hundred objects (and which correspond to Part I of the exhibition catalog in this issue). We displayed early modern printed travel accounts and ancient coins; we showed merchandise, such as raw and polished stones, dried plants, drugs, and velvet, as well as the types of money (e.g., European and Safavid coins) used for buying such items (see figure 1.1). The sciences were represented through maps, musical and mathematical instruments, astronomical tables, horoscopes, engravings, and animals preserved in oil or by other means. Finally, the outcome of the various travels was displayed, namely, how these objects were integrated into cabinets of curiosity and museums; how these journeys added to scientific, historical, or geographic knowledge; and how Safavid Iran stirred the imagination of early modern artists and printers.

The themes of early modern travel to Iran were presented in ten cases and on four wall panels:

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Case 1: Preparations | Case 6: The Mathematical Sciences |
| Case 2: How to Travel | Case 7: Ethnography |
| Case 3: History | Case 8: Reminiscences and Echoes |
| Case 4: Commerce | Case 9: Fauna |
| Case 5: The Life Sciences | Case 10: Flora |

Wall Panels

The exhibition displayed objects that the Europeans needed for their travel to Iran and that they acquired in Iran in order to describe the nature and culture of the land they visited. These items were complemented by objects that the Safavid culture produced by and for itself: miniatures, manuscripts, astronomical instruments, weapons, commercial goods, and articles of everyday life. Not only did they show us the differences that separate the early modern era from our times but they also

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illustrated the shared cultural space occupied by peoples from Europe and Safavid Iran: astrolabes, compasses, Euclid's *Elements*, swords, and jewelry used in Europe as well as in Iran. The miniature paintings indicate the arrival and acceptance in Iran of art forms developed in Europe. Iranian poems of the time show us that some customs of European origin were accepted by the Iranians whereas others became objects of ridicule. Then as today, the spread of cultural goods was a complex phenomenon that included adaptation, transformation, subversion, misunderstanding, and rejection. Yet, in contrast to our own times, European travelers and their goods were only a small part of Iranian public and private life in the early modern period. Despite efforts to improve mutual relationships, Europe and Safavid Iran were geographically and culturally too far away from each other to have a pervasive impact on each other. At the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, European courts and governments as well as scholars lost much of their previous interest in Safavid Iran. The internal troubles of the country led to weakened ties with those European states with which it had enjoyed trade and diplomatic relations in the previous century.

The complementary exhibition—"Land of the Sophi: Iran in Early Modern European Maps (1550–1700)"—showed atlases and individual maps made between the middle of the sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries.² Thirty different objects (corresponding to Part II of the exhibition catalog in this issue) were displayed in three cases and in the exhibition space of the Harvard Map Collection. The exhibition focused on the shift from a Ptolemaic perspective on Iran's territory and landscape to a contemporary local view, based on medieval Arabic and Persian geographical texts and astronomical handbooks, medieval and early modern travel accounts, and orally transmitted information by people from western Asia. It traced how the image of Iran developed by cartographers in sixteenth-century Venice influenced the mapping of Iran in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Antwerp, Amsterdam, London, and Paris. The exhibition demonstrated the limitations of geographical knowledge among mapmakers and publishers, while also showing shifts of emphasis and information between 1550 and 1730. It highlighted the dependence of publishers on the output of their predecessors and pointed to the importance of literary sources in the work of leading mapmakers of the period. Maps, like travel accounts, were skillfully arranged representations of the beliefs that mapmakers, geographers, and publishers held about Iran. The final appearance of these maps often depended on cost factors and even arbitrary decisions made by publishers.

Early modern travelers, writers, artists, and craftsmen cooperated in creating representations of the society, territory, landscape, nature, and history of Safavid Iran. Famous engravers, who had not seen the Safavid Empire themselves, provided

2 "The Sophi" refers to the Safavid shahs. The word conflates the Arabic word *Sufi* with the Latin word *sophus* derived from the Greek word σοφός. For a fuller explanation of the term see Part II, entry 16.

illustrations based on sketches that a traveler or an artist had produced en route. Maps and images from other published sources were added by artists and publishers, who modified them in various ways. They copied Safavid art works, Ottoman custom books, Italian, Dutch, and French maps, Portuguese and other European depictions of Safavid cities, and ancient Greek and Latin geographies and histories. They lifted information, stories, images, and metaphors from each other and from ancient, medieval, and contemporary books and maps. Preparing a travel account for publication was therefore much more than collecting one's notes. There had to be quotes—explicit or not—from fellow travelers of the past and present, from ancient and modern writers that were appreciated for their style and knowledge, from the Bible and other sacred texts. In the course of the seventeenth century, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish authors and their texts became part of the canon to be consulted by a travel writer.

However, not all authors wished to undertake this overwhelming amount of work themselves. They hired scholars, poets, or other talented people to collaborate with them. Sometimes these ghostwriters were identified in the finished product; more often they remained invisible. Final products were thus the result of complex activities and consisted of many layers which explain their thematic richness, their similarities with each other, their differences from Persian sources, their internal contradictions, and the verbal and pictorial fantasies contained in the accounts. This cooperative procedure of compiling travel accounts for publication and the appropriation of maps from other sources increased the spatial and temporal distance of the final text from the immediate travel experience. A further layer of transformation crept into the accounts when they were translated into foreign languages. Translators sometimes misunderstood the text; they freely edited passages and chapters, driven by the belief that a foreign language audience demanded it.

Publishers also had an active role in the design of the often costly books, which of course they wanted to sell. They included frontispieces, images, and maps that had sold well already or were composed of themes and icons well known to the public. Travel accounts that contained little or no illustration in their first edition were often reprinted with sumptuous frontispieces, engravings, and maps in the next edition. Famous artists, who themselves were also engravers or who collaborated with engravers, were hired to design woodcuts or copperplate illustrations that depicted the ruler, his high officials, officers, and members of the court. Some of these depictions were based on observations by painters attached to the traveling group, some based on miniatures made in Iran, some the product of a visual artist's vivid imagination. A well-prepared and well-to-do traveler would take a painter along with him (but sometimes the artist's level of skill and preparation were not up to the task). The process of transfer by which paintings and sketches were transferred onto copperplate required decisions about type, size, and content of the final illustration—and it was often the publisher,

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not the traveler or his painter, who made the final decisions. Thus, the representation of Safavid Iran could suffer from choices made by people who had never seen the country.

The exhibitions were curated by two scholars from different disciplines—comparative literature and history of science. We agreed to represent our own views and perspectives on Safavid Iran and its visitors from Catholic and Protestant Europe using objects available at Harvard University. Although books are dominant in the exhibition in Houghton Library, and maps are prevalent in the Map Collection, we decided to present as many images as possible: pictures in books and manuscripts, pictures and diagrams scanned from books, miniatures from albums, prints, and maps. We also created placards that accompanied the exhibition cases with portraits, vignettes, short summaries of the subjects, short bibliographies, and other descriptions of the objects displayed in the cases.

Not all the exhibited objects come from Safavid Iran. Some botanical and zoological specimens were collected in the twentieth century by American scientists for their home institution; some were bought from the Russian and the Soviet Academies of Sciences; ancient coins were donated to Harvard; the nineteenth-century Caspian tiger skin—an Orientalist object from a time when people were not as sensitive to animal rights as we are today—is included because tigers and lions play an important role in Safavid royal iconology and can be found on early modern maps and portraits.

This double issue of *Harvard Library Bulletin* includes lectures by Dr. Rudi Mathee (University of Delaware) and Dr. Kathryn Babayan (University of Michigan) given in the Thompson Room of the Barker Center for the Humanities, Harvard University, on the opening day of the two exhibitions (May 8, 2008). Dr. Mathee presented an overview of travel accounts by European travelers to Iran; Dr. Babayan described travels by Iranians and highlighted, among others, the pilgrimage of a widow from Isfahan to Damascus and Mecca. The catalog contains a description of all the objects shown in the two exhibitions, as well as research results about several displayed items. In the entries we reproduce the name of the author as it appears on the title page (with original spelling), but afterward we give the name as it is used today, according to bibliographical conventions. We abstained from pointing to errors of any kind in early modern titles. If they are substantial, they are mentioned in the text of the entry. The transliteration of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish words follows academic conventions in a highly simplified form, but retains different signs for the consonants hamza (') and 'ayn ('). Arabic words, if used in a Persian context, follow Persian conventions for the consonants. The three short vowels *a*, *i*, *u* are transliterated as such, ignoring different modes of pronunciation. Personal names are given in Anglicized forms, if extant. We applied spelling and other rules consistently, unless there were reasons to deviate. The latter occurred more than once in regard to the entries on flora and fauna. There we

followed the rules specific to the different museums and collection holders at Harvard University.

We thank all the colleagues who helped us identify the objects and their stories: David A. King (Frankfurt am Main), Carmen Arnold-Biucchi (Cambridge, Mass.), Rika Gyselen (Paris), Vladimir Novák (Prague), Sara Schechner (Cambridge, Mass.), Karin Rührdanz (Toronto), Massumeh Farhad (Washington D.C.), Jürg Meyer zur Capellen (Münster), Kathryn Babayan (Ann Arbor), Gottfried Hagen (Ann Arbor), Feza Günergün (Istanbul), Bronwen Wilson (Vancouver), Joanna Karlgaard (Cambridge, Mass.), Patricia A. O'Connell (Cambridge, Mass.), and Yasmin Hilloowala (Cambridge, Mass.). We thank David A. King and Mary McWilliams for writing entries 13 and 96 of Part I.

The translations in Parts I and II into English from original foreign-language sources (unless otherwise indicated) were done by the curators. Any remaining mistakes in the catalog are, of course, our own.

We are especially grateful to William Stoneman and David Cobb for allowing us to hold the two exhibitions at Houghton Library and the Harvard Map Collection. We would also like to thank all the other curators of the Harvard museums and libraries who lent their objects to the exhibition, provided information about them, and assisted us in various ways. We would like to thank Mary and William Bromell, who allowed us to show the splendid Safavid astrolabe made by Muhammad Husayn. We are indebted to everyone who helped us, but we would like to acknowledge in particular Mary McWilliams, Kimberly Masteller, Carmen Arnold-Biucchi, Susan Dackerman (all at the Harvard University Art Museum); Sara Schechner (Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments); Linda Ford, Mary Catherine Boyett, Janis Sacco, as well as the curators at the Museum of Comparative Zoology who assisted us; Judith Warnement, Lisa Ann DeCesare (Botany Libraries); Melinda Peters, Stephanie Zabel, and especially Henry Kesner (Harvard Herbarium and the Economic Botany Collection); Carl Francis (Harvard Mineralogical Museum); all the reference librarians at Houghton Library for their expert advice, and Mary Haegert for her help in compiling the images.

The two exhibitions were complemented by a symposium on “Traveling to and in Safavid Iran (1550–1700), European and Iranian Perspectives” held on May 9, 2009. The papers from this symposium appeared as “The Pen and the Brush: Reflections on Foreign Visitors and Their Hosts in Safavid Iran (Special Issue),” *Journal of Early Modern History* 13, nos. 2–3 (2009). We would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following institutions and individuals: the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (especially Steven Caton, Alison Howe, Anna Kreslavskaya); the Committee for the Provostial Fund in the Arts and Humanities, Harvard University; the Department of Literature and Comparative Literature, Harvard University (Luis M. Girón Negrón, Wanda Di Bernardo); the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University (especially Naghmeh Sohrabi); and the Bogliasco Foundation.

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Elio Brancaforte
Tulane University, New Orleans

Sonja Brentjes
Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin

June 2012

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Contributors

KATHRYN BABAYAN is Professor in the Departments of Near Eastern Studies and History, University of Michigan, and the author of *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (2003), which earned her honorable mention for the Saidi-Sirjani Book Award in 2004. Babayan has also co-authored *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavi Iran*, with Sussan Babaie, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, and Massumeh Farhad (2004), and co-edited with Afsaneh Najmabadi *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (2008). She is currently working on a monograph that explores the history of friendship and epistolarity in early-modern Iran.

ELIO BRANCAFORTE is Associate Professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies, Tulane University (New Orleans). He has worked on the travel accounts of Adam Olearius, Engelbert Kaempfer, and most recently on “The Encounter between Pietro Della Valle and García de Silva y Figueroa at the Safavid Court of Shah Abbas I,” in *Estudios sobre Don García de Silva y Figueroa e os «Comentarios» da embaixada à Pérsia (1614–1624)* (2011). Presently he is working on a book that examines the representation of Safavid Iran in six European travel accounts.

SONJA BRENTJES is Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, Germany. Recent publications include *Travellers from Europe in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, 16th–17th centuries: Seeking, Transforming, Discarding Knowledge* (2010) and, as co-author with Robert G. Morrison, “Sciences in Islamic Societies,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, Volume 4 (2010). Her current research concerns a text on balances by the twelfth-century scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khazini.

RUDI MATTHEE is John and Dorothy Munroe Professor of History at the University of Delaware. His latest book is *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (2012). He is currently working on Iranian perceptions of the outside world since 1500 as well as on the role the Safavids played in East-West diplomacy.