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Safavid Iran through the Eyes of European Travelers

Rudi Matthee

Man kann von fremden Völkern immer, wenn man nur will, etwas Gutes lernen (Provided one is willing, one can always learn something good from foreign peoples).

Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte newe Beschreibung der muscowitischen und persischen Reyse* (Schleswig: Johann Holwein, 1656)

Introduction

Until about 1600, Iran, though renowned as a land of great antiquity and biblical import, remained largely unknown to Europeans. The establishment of the Safavid dynasty at the turn of the sixteenth century had awakened a new curiosity in the country and especially its charismatic leader, Shah Isma'il I (r. 1501–1524), but news about these developments mostly filtered through to Western Europe second-hand, by way of reports written by Venetian representatives stationed in Istanbul. For a full century, no more than a handful of Westerners, mostly Portuguese and Italian travelers, actually visited Iran, leaving only fragmentary descriptions of life and politics in the Safavid realm.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, all this changed. The rise to power of Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) and his outward-looking agenda, epitomized by an energetic foreign policy, created a political and economic environment that attracted keen European interest in Iran as a land of religious, commercial, and strategic opportunity. Catholic missionaries at this time entered the country and, allowed to set up convents in various places, became residents. European diplomats began to frequent Isfahan in hopes of swaying Shah 'Abbas to join Europe's rulers in their struggle against the Turks. English and Dutch merchants, agents of the newly formed East India companies, established trading posts in various Persian Gulf ports and several towns in the interior. The maritime network they created facilitated access to the country, bringing yet more Europeans, so that what had been a trickle in the sixteenth century soon turned into

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a flood. The list of notable visitors between 1600 and 1722, the year of the fall of the Safavids, includes Don García de Silva y Figueroa, Pietro Della Valle, Adam Olearius, Cornelis Speelman, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Raphaël du Mans, Jean de Thévenot, John Fryer, Jean Chardin, Engelbert Kaempfer, François Sanson, Cornelis de Bruyn, and Artemii Volynskii, to name but the most prolific, perceptive, and informative ones.[1]

Their observations, brought out in dozens of travelogues, vastly enhanced and improved the volume and quality of knowledge in Europe about Iran, lifting the country out of the state of a fabled realm and turning it into a place explored and described from an experiential, empiricist perspective. Not to depict it as an imaginary world inhabited by followers of a false, perverse prophet, but to observe and analyze it without prejudice became the self-appointed task of the most insightful of these travelers.

Information offered by their accounts has long been an important component of our knowledge about early modern Iran. Recent critical research on the putative biases and ulterior motives of Western travelers to the Middle East has done little to detract from that importance. The seventeenth-century ones have largely been spared the anti-Orientalist and post-colonial gaze of modern scholarship.[2] What is more, recent years have seen the appearance of a number of valuable studies on aspects of their observations that, while paying full attention to the travelers' backgrounds as well as to the motives and interests that inspired them to leave home, have sought out "similarity, convergence and complementarity, rather than stark difference" in their contribution to the formation of early modern cross-cultural knowledge.[3]

The present essay follows this trend, arguing that, while their background and attendant assumptions clearly shaped their understanding of the Muslim world,

1 Anne Marie Touzard has counted thirty-six French visitors alone in the period 1600–1730 whose accounts have been published. Most of these were missionaries. Many were marginal in terms of the time they spent in Iran and the quality of their reporting on the country. See Anne Marie Touzard, "Les voyageurs français en Perse de 1600 à 1730," *Eurasian Studies* 4:1 (2005): 41–47.

2 Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) barely deals with early modern travelers to the Islamic world, and his acolytes have mostly followed him in focusing on the nineteenth century.

3 E. P. J. Marshall, "Afterword: The Legacies of Two Hundred Years of Contact," in H.V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rugby, eds., *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2002), 223. Examples are Dirk van der Cruysse, *Chardin le Persan* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Dirk van der Cruysse, *Le noble désir de courir le monde. Voyager en Asie au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); Dominique Carnoy, *Représentations de l'Islam. Représentations de l'Islam dans la France du XVIIe siècle. La ville des tentations* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); and Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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precluding cultural transparency, the seventeenth-century travelers brought with them a set of specific ways of seeing that facilitated the mediation of difference to the point of engaged empathy. They mark a unique moment in the history of alterity. The typical sixteenth-century Western traveler, a pilgrim in the case of the Ottoman Empire and a diplomat in the case of Iran, fulfilled a mission and a mandate. In his written account, he might describe the country but his own assignment and his own experience remained central to the narrative. He showed himself steadfast in his biblical convictions, dismissing Islam as a fraudulent faith. By the nineteenth-century the typical visitor, a civil servant, an explorer, or a military officer, had become a panoptic, omniscient European who operated in the context of institutions of power, knowledge, and culture. He, too, was firmly convinced of the superiority of his own world, which now had become a matter of civilization, of culture and race.

The late humanists and the protagonists of the early Enlightenment were the first ones to offer a panoramic picture of the alien society they visited. While still moved by official mandates or motives of personal gain, they embarked on their journeys determined to gather empirical knowledge, to portray what they observed realistically and accurately. The sense of the exotic is still there, as is the antiquarian interest, but the focus has shifted from the biblical past to pre-Islamic civilization. No longer unselfconsciously firm in their own faith, many now saw the world beyond Christendom largely within its own civilizational framework and as part of a universal theater, exhibiting what Joan-Pau Rubiés calls a transition from an "essentially theological language towards a fully secular understanding of nature and history." (Rubiés, 353) The best of these travelers are remarkable for shedding as much of their ethnocentric prejudice as might be expected of anyone traversing the boundaries of culture at a time when little information was available and the chances of seeing the other as grotesque and inhuman were much greater than the possibility of recognizing difference as just that. In their writings, we encounter self-reflection, as well as a willingness to see and appreciate difference rather than self-evident superiority.[4]

Diversity of Background, Motives, and Interests

Seventeenth-century Western accounts of travel to the Muslim world, including Iran, are simply too diverse in character and motivation to be brought under one rubric. The authors range from Catholic men of the cloth intent on establishing missionary posts to diplomats dispatched to woo the shah into anti-Ottoman alliances, from merchants in search of profit to gentleman scholars driven by curiosity. Some represented commissioning agents, kings, or companies; others only spoke for themselves.

4 Paul Hazard, *La crise de conscience européenne 1680–1715* (Paris: Boivin, 1935), 17, as cited in Cruysse, 1998, 25.

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Travelers' motives for writing their accounts were diverse as well. Some did their professional duty and simply reported back to their superiors—the king, the company directors, or the head of the religious order who had sent them. Their writings were never meant for the public but composed only for the eyes of those who had commissioned them. Most travelers, however, were eager to have their accounts published for money, fame, or both. Returning home, they were faced with a book market that was as hungry for descriptions of far-away lands as it was competitive, thus breeding opportunities as well as anxieties. Tavernier, Chardin, and De Bruyn are good examples of the urge to appear in print. A few authors became instantly famous and widely admired in this manner. Others saw themselves frustrated in their ambition to see their works in print in a timely fashion, during their life time, or at all.

Travelers to Iran also differed greatly in the degree of their knowledge of the country and its ways, depending on the duration of their stay and their linguistic abilities. Chardin, who spent years in Iran, became intimately familiar with the main language, Persian, and the country's religious customs and doctrines. Various missionaries became fluent in Persian as well as in Turkish and Armenian. Most, however, knew no Persian and at all times depended on interpreters and translators.

Commonalities

While European travelers to Safavid Iran were diverse in the motives and interests they brought to their peregrinations, they also evince similarities, and the palimpsest created by their writings allows us unique insight into life on the Iranian plateau. Many proclaimed that their published works reflected only what they had seen with their own eyes. Kaempfer insisted that his book did not "include anything based on fiction or fantasy."[5] Della Valle chose to keep his comments on Armenia brief because he had visited the region but little, and to say nothing about an outlying region like Sistan which he had not seen.[6] The best of them do not discuss matters they do not feel qualified to write about, including the royal harem, allegedly an object of lurid fascination among European travelers.[7] Chardin, who did write about the shah's private

5 Engelbert Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs 1684–1685*, trans. Walther Hinz, new ed. (Tübingen and Basel: Horst Erdmann Verlag, 1977), Introduction by editor, 16.

6 In Sonja Brentjes and Volkmar Schüller, "Pietro della Valle's Latin Geography of Safavid Iran (1624–1628): Introduction," *Journal of Early Modern History* 10:3 (2006): 191, 205.

7 Thomas Herbert, *Travels in Persia*, 1627–1629, abr. and ed. William Foster (London: George Routledge Sons, 1928), 132; Bénigne Vachet, "Journal d'un voyage en Perse," Archives de la Société des Missions Etrangères (AME), Paris, 347:500.

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quarters, based his account on information he received from a palace eunuch he had befriended.[8]

Such insistence on truthfulness might betray a guilty conscience or served perhaps to preempt criticism of the kind articulated by the eighteenth-century Dutch philosopher Cornelis de Pauw, who sneered that out of 100 travelers only ten spoke the truth, that sixty were outright liars because they were stupid, and thirty lied out of interest or malice (Chardin, 7:22). Such cynicism is not justified in all cases, yet it would be naive to take at face value all that does appear in the travelogues as first-hand information. Operating in the context of the incipient Republic of Letters, their authors had read the works of their predecessors before embarking on their own journeys, in some cases carried copies of previous accounts with them, and frequently incorporated information thus gleaned into their own writings—often without acknowledgment. Della Valle and Olearius, whose travelogues were translated into various European languages, figure in many later works. Over time, the widely translated accounts of Tavernier and Chardin became the standard ones to quote or borrow from. And almost everyone who visited Iran after 1660 owed a great deal to Raphaël du Mans, who served as the court's interpreter and translator for much of the half century that he lived in Isfahan and who was always willing to share his vast knowledge of the country and its ways with anyone who sought him out. But even du Mans is likely to have read Olearius in Abraham de Wicquefort's French translation.[9]

Commonality manifests itself in other ways as well. Many travelers, steeped in the classics, saw Iran through the eyes of antiquity, rendering its regions with their Latin names while quoting Strabo and Pliny the Elder. They also tended to follow a certain template in their presentation of Iranian history, in their descriptions of the country's general characteristics, including its climate, topography, flora and fauna, agriculture, industry and commerce, and in their narratives about administrative practices, military matters, and religious beliefs.

Finally, the travelers varied greatly in the reasons for traveling, but almost all showed an insatiable curiosity to discover and to learn. The attitude is summed up in Olearius's disarming words quoted as this talk's epigraph: "Provided one is willing, one can always learn something good from foreign peoples."[10] This statement, naive as it

8 Jean Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin, en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient*. ed. L. Langlès, 10 vols. and atlas (Paris: Le Normant, Imprimeur-Libraire, 1810–1811), 7:22.

9 Francis Richard, *Raphaël du Mans missionaire en Perse au XVIIe s*., 2 vols. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 1:49. Wicquefort's translation of Olearius appeared as *Relation du voyage de Moscovie, Tartarie, et Perse* . . . (Paris: Pierre Aubouin, 1656).

10 Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte newe Beschreibung der muscowitischen und persischen Reyse sodurch gelegenheit einer holsteinischen Gesandschaft an den Russischen Zaar und König in Persien geschehen*, facs. repr. of 1656 original ed. Dieter Lohmeier (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1971), 68.

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sounds, may serve as a guiding principle for the evaluation of those who visited Iran in the seventeenth century. They inevitably brought their own world with them as a frame of reference, and their delight in difference is frequently tempered by reassuring intimations that home is still best.[11] They reinforced the idea of oriental despotism. They prepared the ground for later stereotypes about women being simultaneously secluded and lustful. With the exception of the laconic Boullaye-le-Gouze, they all expressed reservations about Islam, echoing the medieval perception of its Prophet as a womanizer and an impostor—though not necessarily any longer as an emissary of Satan. But their prejudices are not necessarily directed against Iran and its people, and they are more than offset by their keen eye for reality. At their best, and *pace* Edward Said, the seventeenth-century travelers did shatter Western perceptions of the East, opening up new vistas of a world that was hardly known in Europe (Said, 65). Some show themselves not just receptive to the unfamiliar, but even willing to question their own assumptions (Carnoy, 169).

Value and Relevance

So, with all due caveats about limitations set by motives, interests, and appropriation, what do the travelers offer the modern reader and scholar? The answer is, quite simply, a whole world which would otherwise remain largely hidden from view. Without their accounts we would be mostly dependent on Persian court chronicles and religious material for textual evidence of life on the Iranian plateau. These sources are very informative, but, in their focus on politics and religion from an elite, Isfahan-centered perspective, they leave out as much as they include. Court chronicles were not composed to reveal Safavid society but rather to extol the virtues of the dynasty and to justify the actions of the shah. Annalistic rather than analytic, they offer us frequent references to, though not necessarily detailed accounts of, military campaigns and battles, brief accounts of diplomatic exchange, and mostly generic descriptions of royal feasting. Above all, they allow us to follow the careers of large numbers of officials, but in most cases only in outline and from the vantage point of the ruler who appointed and promoted for loyalty and good service and who demoted and dismissed for reasons of "disobedience and treason." The same is true to an even greater degree for the religious texts. Members of the clerical class composed their treatises not to offer outsiders insight into Safavid religion, but to present and defend theological arguments. They enable us to reconstruct the divisions and disputes among the Shi'i clergy, but they do not tell us much about the true state of religion, its rituals, and its popular manifestations. The writings of courtiers and clerics offer a carefully constructed,

11 Tavernier is a case in point. He is often informative but he is never subversive in that he always confirms his readers in their certainties about France and its preeminence. See Carnoy, 149.

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idealized portrait of certain aspects of Safavid society.[12] The travelers constructed, too, but their objectives were different, and so is the outcome. They sought to present a panoramic picture of Iran. Some succeeded in this. Others failed less by design than by the inherent limitations in their vision or experience.

Whether they just recorded or recorded and interpreted, the travel narratives, alternatively engaged and dispassionate, paint a vibrant, dynamic society for us, a society filled with color, movement, and diversity. Without the travelers we would know next to nothing about many aspects of life in early modern Iran, including travel itself. We would be largely in the dark about itineraries between cities followed by merchants and pilgrims, the nature of traveling as part of a caravan, about security and thievery along the road, about accommodation, the shape and quality of caravanserais.

Without the travelers, cities and their physical appearance would remain abstractions and in some cases wholly undocumented. Tabriz during the period when it was the Safavid capital in the early 1500s is known only through the descriptions of Tenreiro and Membré.[13] What we know about the physical appearance of Mashhad largely comes from the description of António de Gouvea, who visited the city in 1602.[14] Images of seventeenth-century Shiraz, Lar, Kashan, Ardabil, and Shamakhi come to us through the narratives of foreigners who passed through and recorded their impressions. Parts of Chardin's detailed description of Isfahan might still guide the modern tourist. Going through the city, quarter by quarter, he takes the reader by the hand and provides him with a wealth of information not available anywhere else. Conversely, entire parts of the country, areas not ordinarily visited by Europeans, such as Khurasan and Baluchistan, would remain all but invisible to the modern observer.

12 This generalization naturally does not do justice to variety and difference. Iskandar Munshi's famous *Tarikh-i alam-ara-yi 'Abbasi*, for instance, is far more realistic and psychologically complex than most chronicles, offering, in the words of Roger Savory, "breadth of view and remarkable clarity of outline." See Roger Savory, "'Very Dull and Arduous Reading:' A Reappraisal of the History of Shah 'Abbās the Great by Iskandar Beg Munshī," *Hamdard Islamicus* 3:1 (1980): 22.

13 António Tenreiro,"Itinerário de António Tenreiro," in *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra*, ed. António Baião (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1923). An English translation of Tenreiro's description of Tabriz appears in Ronald Bishop Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations in Persia (1507–1524)* (Bethesda, Md.: Decatur Press, 1970), 85–87. Michele Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539–1542)*, trans. A. M. Morton (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1993), 20:51–52.

14 See António de Gouveia, *Relaçam em qve se tratam as guerras e grandes victorias qve alcançou o grãde Rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Turco Mahometto, & seu filho Amethe* (Lisboa: P. Craesbeectt, 1611), fol. 37v.

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Without the European travelogues, we would not have any real-life narratives of negotiations between Safavid officials and visiting envoys;[15] we would have to do without reports about royal audiences, about the food and drink served at them, about the pomp and circumstance surrounding these and other official events. We would be lacking descriptions of Safavid rulers, their physical features, the clothes worn by them, their character traits. Very little would be known about religious practices, civil celebrations, the rites of birth, marriage and death, about food and entertainment. We would know as little about religious minorities, Armenians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and others as we know about these in the pre-Safavid period (or, for that matter, the eighteenth century, when travelers all but ceased coming to Iran).[16] Perhaps most importantly, we would be left without any substantive information about ordinary people, city dwellers, peasants, tribal folk, and women.

The value of foreign travel accounts is not confined to the physical reality and material culture of Safavid Iran. They help us understand the workings of its political apparatus as well, in substance as well as in detail. Olearius, du Mans, Chardin, and Kaempfer offer a systematic overview of the Safavid bureaucracy and its hierarchy but they also paint the administrative order for us as living, evolving process, as opposed to the formal and formulaic system as described in the two famous manuals of government, the *Tadhkirat al-Muluk* and the *Dastur al-Muluk*. Their accounts often allow us to compare and test the content of the latter against conditions in real life. They are especially valuable, even indispensable, for periods that generated few indigenous narrative sources, such as the reign of Shah Sulayman (1666–1694).

Lastly, there is the visual component. The Safavid period generated a rich indigenous body of painting and illustrated manuscript artistry. But the travelers add a measure of realism not found in this material, and they depicted aspects of life that fell outside the purview of local artists and craftsmen. Travelers often drew images of what they observed or, in some cases, were accompanied by artists who drew plates for them which were included in the published travelogues. Sometimes, visual material was added later, done by artists who had never been to Iran. Especially in the latter case, this often resulted in idealized or imaginary cityscapes with no, or little, relation to reality. In many instances, though, the images depict scenes from life and especially architecture that give the modern reader a good idea of what palaces and mosques, Qizilbash soldiers and Armenian women looked like. In some cases they provide us with the only existing images of Safavid shahs. The engravings by De Bruyn,

15 See, for example, Cornelis Speelman, *Journaal der reis van den gezant der O. I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651–1652*, ed. A. Hotz (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1908).

16 For a study of the information about Zoroastrianism in Safavid Iran offered by the European travelogues, see Nora Kathleen Firby, *European Travelers and their Perceptions of Zoroastrians in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Berlin: D. Reimer Verlag, 1988).

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who himself was a professional draftsman, astonish us in their attention to detail. His famous image of the royal square in Isfahan covered with tents brings the place to life. With Della Valle, Chardin, and Kaempfer, De Bruyn also helped open up Iran's pre-Islamic history and its many monuments, and images played an especially important role in this (see figure 2.1). The visual rendering of Persepolis by the latter was easily the most detailed and accurate until the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century.

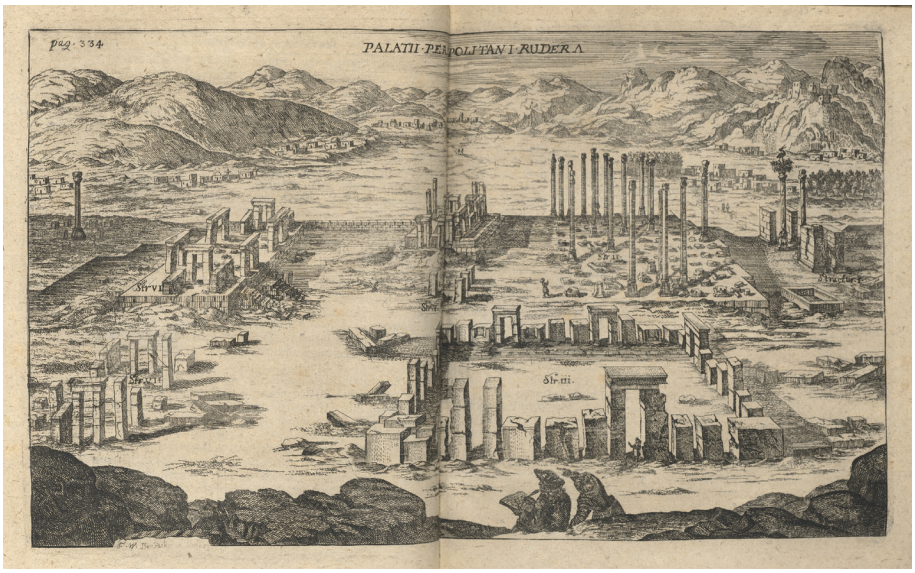


Figure 2.1. "Persepolis" in Engelbert Kaempfer, *Amœnitatum Exoticarum Politico-Physico-Medicarum Fasciculi V*. . . (Lemgo, 1712), showing the author in the foreground sketching the ruins of the palace (Part I, entry 18), Houghton Library, Asia 1417.12*, gift of John Hancock, 1767.

Images of Iran

How did the travelers view Safavid Iran?

They all saw flaws, some of which quickly turned into received wisdom and then into stereotypes of national character in the nineteenth century. One of these flaws, reiterated by various travelers, is that Iranians exhibited a natural sense of superiority and were easily offended.[17] Villotte summarized this trait by saying that Iranians were often surprised learning about the relatively small size of their country within

17 P. P. Bushev, *Posol'stvo Artemiia Volynskogo v Iran v 1715–1718 gg.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), 50.

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Asia.[18] Several travelers also came away with the impression that appearance was very important in Iran. As De Bruyn put it, "Anyone who is not dressed magnificently here does not enjoy any standing and is passed over."[19] The attendant opinion that Iranians were spendthrift and loved ostentatious display is widespread as well (Chardin, 3:407).

Beyond ostentation and love of luxury, there was the image of flattery and hypocrisy. The complex code of Iranian etiquette known as *ta'aruf* did not go unnoticed, prompting observers like Chardin and De Bruyn to conclude that Iranians were great flatterers and others to call them "unreliable and deceptive" (Chardin, 3:413–414; De Bruyn, 162).[20]

Iran was also depicted as a realm of the senses. Even with their limited personal experience, the travelers called (urban) Iranian women both secluded and prone to sensuality and unchaste behavior, adding that this was one reason why their men were exceedingly jealous (Olearius, 529; Chardin, 3:414–415).[21] Some expressed amazement about the large number of public women found in the country's urban centers and the openness with which these purveyed their (officially sanctioned) trade.[22] The royal harem naturally was of particular interest. Yet, the travelers exhibited little of the voyeuristic obsession with the inner palace as a den of iniquity that would characterize many of their nineteenth-century successors, who sought relief from a stifling Victorian environment in the fantasy of oriental lubricity. Incidentally, we owe the only real descriptions of the royal harem to some of these early modern travelers, and the best ones are, again, sober in tone and very informative in content.

For all the flaws detected in Iran and its inhabitants, positive images prevail in the travelogues. Chardin famously said about Iranian peasants that they were better off than their French counterparts (Chardin, 5:391). Tavernier called the Safavid city

18 [Père Jacques Villotte], *Voyage d'un missionaire de la Compagnie de Jesus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Armenie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie* (Paris: Jacques Vincent, 1730), 446.

19 Cornelis de Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indië* (Amsterdam: Rudolph en Gerard Wetstein, Joannes Oosterwyk, Hendrik van de Gaete, 1714), 165.

20 Carlos Alonso, "Due lettere riguardanti i primi tempi delle missioni agostiniane in Persia," *Analecta Augustiniana* 24 (1961): 158–159.

21 See, for example, John Cartwright, *The Preachers Travels* (London: T. Thorppe, 1611; repr. Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1977), 63; Don García de Silva y Figueroa, *Comentarios de D. García de Silva y Figueroa de la embajada que de parte del Rey de España don Felipe III hizo al Rey Xa Abas de Persia*, ed. Manuel Serrano y Sanz, 2 vols. (Madrid: Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1903–1905), 1:361; H. Dunlop, ed., *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis der Oostindische Compagnie in Perzië, vol. 1 (1611–1638)* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1930), 736, travel account by Jan Smidt.

22 For this, see Rudi Matthee, "Courtesans, Prostitutes and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid Iran," in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron, eds., *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 2000), 121–150.

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police among the best in the world for being vigilant about food prices, praised Iran's gold and silversmiths, and thought the chinaware from Kirman superior to that of Nevers.[23] Despite the long distances, the heat, the dust, and the fatigue, travel in Iran was an energizing, ultimately positive learning experience for most Europeans. More interesting than the tropes they helped shape, is that the best ones manage to step outside of their own culture, identify with the age-old, complex civilization they entered, engage in critical comparisons, show a willingness to change preconceived notions rooted in their own cultural context, and end up in a position of liminality, ready to embark on the road to cultural relativism.

An excellent example of a willingness to change through discovery is Chardin's account of the Iranian system of justice. When he first arrived in Iran, he tells his readers, he considered Iranians to be barbarians for not going about punishing criminals as methodically as Europeans. Fifteen years spent in the Safavid state Iran, Chardin goes on, changed his mind. He came to realize that the Safavid way of dealing with criminals had to do with the rarity of crime in Iran, where home invasions and killings were all but unknown and where roads were safe following a system whereby the governor of a province was held responsible for all theft occurring in his domain (Chardin, 6:98–100, 123, 127).

Westerners generally felt good about Iran. The hospitable reception they tended to enjoy clearly played an important role in their sense of well-being. Iran's renowned hospitality was all the more remarkable because it came with a unique bonus. Anyone traveling in an official capacity received *mihmandari,* which included, aside from free food and lodging, a per diem allowance. Tournefort rightly called Iran the only country in which envoys lived at the expense of the ruler.[24] So many foreigners came in the early seventeenth century that Imam-quli Khan, the governor of Fars at the time of Shah 'Abbas I, reportedly intended to destroy Persepolis so as to remove one major attraction for foreign visitors.[25]

The sympathetic portrayal of Iran found in the travelogues is also related to the safety and comfort their authors experienced during their sojourns. Many praised the country's vaunted road security, which stood in such contrast to the lawlessness of the Ottoman Empire and particularly the Arab and Kurdish borderlands that the overland traveler had to cross before reaching Iran. Both Tavernier and Thévenot called Iranian

23 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gervais Clouzier & Claude Barbin, 1686), 1:606, 608, 619.

24 J. Pitton de Tournefort, *Relation d'un voyage du Levant*, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1717), 2:343–344.

25 See Ambrosio Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, trans. Clara Bargellini; ed. and ann. Anthony Welch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 311.

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caravanserais more beautiful and comfortable than the ones they had encountered in Ottoman territory (Tavernier, 1:107).[26]

But the European visitors liked Iran above all for its cultural sophistication. They saw it in the good physique of the typical Iranian, in his concern about cleanliness, in the quality of the fruit served in people's homes, in the modesty of their eating habits, and in their refined manners and quick wit, all of which received widespread praise.[27] Europeans felt comfortable because they could identify with the country and its culture. In temperament, cultural taste, and sensibility, Iranians struck them as less alien than Indians. If Islam was different, Shi'i Islam was at least familiar in its iconography, with its saintly veneration of Imam 'Ali. They tended to compare Iran favorably to the Ottoman Empire as well—and not just because the Ottomans were perceived as a direct threat to Christendom and Europe's rulers had long tried to enlist Iranian support against the Turks. Whereas the Safavid realm commanded respect as an antique land of great cultural achievement, Turks were seen as uncouth and uncultured tribesmen, upstarts and usurpers through brute force. Herbert put it best when he said that the "husbandry, buildings, and civility" of Iranians resembled more those "of Europe than any other we had hitherto observed in Asia." (Herbert, 168) Along the same lines, though in a somewhat backhanded way, Chardin complimented Iranians for being the "most civilized people of the Orient." (Chardin, 3:417)

The travelers also saw sophistication in Iranian tolerance of others and their opinions. They found unexpected forms of liberty in the land of the Sophi, most notably the freedom to think for oneself and the ability to speak out on one's beliefs. As Manucci put it, whereas in places like Turkey, Arabia, in the realm of the Mughals, and in Balkh, Uzbekistan, and among the Pathans it was not possible to question the law of the Prophet without risking losing one's head, in Iran "you may use arguments, make inquiry, and give answer in matters of religion without the least danger."[28] Emphasizing tolerance was in part a strategic device, to be sure, a way for especially the French to question their own absolutist rulers. Yet the travelers' attentiveness to the theme also reflects a genuine sensation. Boullaye-le-Gouz likened the Iranians to the French for allowing liberty of conscience.[29] He was not the only one to claim that members of the Iranian elite were fond of engaging in this type of disputation, and many were

26 Jean de Thévenot, *Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant*. Vol. 2, *Suite du voyage de Levant* (Paris: Charles Angot, 1674), 233.

27 For some examples, see Sir Roger Stevens, "European Visitors to the Safavid Court," *Iranian Studies* 7 (1974): 443–445.

28 Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India 1653–1708*, 4 vols., trans. William Irvine (London: John Murray, 1907), 1:41.

29 François de la Boullaye-le-Gouz, *Les voyages et observations du Sieur de la Boullaye-le-Gouz*, ed. Jacques de Maussion de Favières (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1994), 89.

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even invited to participate in discussions on religious and philosophical matters. Even high-ranking Shi'i clerics are known to have challenged foreigners to debate on their religious beliefs.[30]

Many travelers similarly were impressed with the curiosity and openness to novelty that Iranians exhibited (Richard, 1:42).[31] One noted the enthusiasm with which the country's mathematicians studied imported watches.[32] Chardin recounts several examples of provincial governors asking him about Europe's latest inventions and showing an acquaintance with Western philosophy and science (Chardin, 2:195, 345). Manucci noted Shah 'Abbas II's curiosity with regard to Europe (Manucci, 1:41). The governor of Shamakhi asked Volynskii about Peter I's visit to Holland and Russia's recent peace with Sweden (Bushev, 194).

This perceived cultural affinity is perhaps best exemplified by the assessment of gardens. European visitors were enthralled with the horticultural skills and tastes of Iranians. Carré wrote of the royal gardens of Shiraz as charming grounds that looked like eternal spring and summer, free and well tended, where people of class and distinction would go for leisurely walks.[33] Tournefort, a botanist, drew an explicit comparison between Persian and Turkish gardens. Iran's gardens, he observed, were pleasant and well maintained, and the country's gardeners exhibited great skill and taste, creating gardens with rows of perfectly aligned trees and properly spaced plants. With the Turks, by contrast, "all was confusion." (de Tournefort, 2:332)[34]

As Iran opened up to the world during the reign of the Safavids, the country became a favorite destination for Europeans. Diverse in motives and mandates, visitors ranged from diplomats intent on persuading the shah to join forces against the Turks, to missionaries eager to save souls, to merchants keen to make their fortune. Those who wrote down their impressions offer a multifaceted panorama of Iran, elevating our knowledge about the Safavid realm to an unprecedented level.

30 For examples, see Rudi Matthee, "Christians in Safavid Iran: Hospitality and Harassment," *Studies on Persianate Societies* 3 (2005): 26–27.

31 See, for example, Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle. Il pellegrino descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano divisi in tre parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia e l'India*, 2 vols. (Brighton: G. Gancia, 1843), 1:511; Jean de Thévenot, *Livre troisième de la suite du voyage de Mr. de Thévenot au Levant* (Paris: Charles Angot, 1689), 309.

32 Ange de St Joseph, *Souvenirs de la Perse safavide et autres lieux de l'Orient (1664–1678)*, trans. Michel Bastiaensen (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1985), 118–119.

33 Barthélemy Carré, *Le Courier du Roi en Orient. Relation de deux voyages en Perse et en Inde 1668–1674*, ed. Dirk van der Cruysse (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 228.

34 For a dissenting view, see Chardin, who was not very complimentary of Iranians as gardeners, as discussed in Stevens, 436–437.

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What makes the seventeenth-century travelogues especially remarkable is not just the level of detail they provide, but the new approach to cross-cultural knowledge they represent. Their authors do not project the self-evident superiority of faith of their sixteenth-century forebears nor do they indulge the notion that race and culture elevated Western visitors above the natives. Intensely curious, the more perceptive early travelers sought to depict what they saw as faithfully and accurately as possible. Most remarkably, the best of them show a willingness to test and even transcend the limitations of their culture and its assumptions.

None of this absolves the modern scholar from looking into the background of the authors, their biases, and their ulterior motives, into the ways they borrowed from the writings of their predecessors and used these as a template for their own (Stevens, 462, 468). Yet, the value of the reporting remains intact. We do not have to fall into a naive reading of early modern travelogues; we can acknowledge the fact that they inscribed foreign lands in the European imagination, that they were responsible for the growing repository of knowledge that later facilitated the real mapping of those lands and ultimately outside economic and, in some ways, political hegemony, and still appreciate this feature. A modern reader would probably agree with Peter Mancall that "for all the problems . . . [we] have navigating those travel accounts, the texts that survive should not be dismissed as revealing more about the observer than the observed."[35] European travelogues about Iran surely inscribed the country in the European imagination, but they also opened it up in unprecedented and sometimes unique ways, revealing aspects of Safavid society and government that remain obscure or wholly unreported in the indigenous sources. In combination with the indigenous sources, they enable us to see the context, to piece together the story behind the story.

Although hostility to Islam remains pervasive among the travelers, most painted a sympathetic portrait of Iran and its people. They spoke highly of the safety of the country's roads and generally felt comfortable among its inhabitants, enjoying their renowned hospitality, their refined culture, and their openness to novelty. They discovered a cultural affinity and congeniality far greater than what they experienced in India with its religious promiscuity and its cacophonous cultural universe, or among the Turks and Arabs, whom they considered primitive and predatory. This affinity, represented by openness to novelty among educated Iranians and their willingness to debate religious and philosophical issues with them, far outstripped what they saw as negative traits, most notably a love of ostentation and a tendency for excessive flattery and deception.

In the end, there is a reason why even scholars who look with suspicion at European travelers as irredeemably biased outsiders rely on them and occasionally

35 Peter C. Mancall, ed., *Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Introduction, 13.

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even quote them. The information found in these works remains valuable for its ethnographic detail, stands out for its verisimilitude, and is at times unique in that no other sources offer anything like it. The Western writings on seventeenth-century Iran remain indispensable as evidence for life and society of that time. They also show us how Europeans viewed Iran as well as their own society and culture. As such, these travel accounts continue to inform us as much as they delight us.

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