
2 Safavid Letters to Venice

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2.1 Material and Visual Features of the Diplomatic Epistles

A letter’s material and visual characteristics did more than connote magnificence: they were essential to the meaning of the texts (Sowerby 2019, 219). The type and quality of the paper, the colour of the ink, the materials with which the letters were bound, the way in which the letter was folded all reflected the social distance between the sender and recipient (Sowerby 2019, 204).

Safavid letters addressed to European sovereigns were usually decorated in coloured inks (red,¹ blue, and gold), especially in the parts emphasised by means of elevation.² It was customary for all

1 Red ink was not employed in the texts of the surviving Safavid letters; however, sources and samples of missives sent to the rulers of Poland and Russia attest to its usage in the shahs’ correspondence.

2 *Tadhkirat al-Mulūk* 1943, 40a: “The duty of the *Munshī al-mamālik* [‘State scribe’] was to draw in red ink and liquid gold the tughra on all the King’s missives”. From the seventeenth century on, documents with the introductory formula (tughra) were exe-

Safavid letters to begin with an invocation to God (*invocatio*), the shortest form of which was *Huwa* and the commonly used formula was *Huwa Allāh subhānahu (wa-ta'ālā)*, 'the Most Glorified and Exalted is He'. In Shah Tahmāsp's letter, this formula appeared as *Huwa Mālik al-Mulk al-Muta'āl* ('He is the Owner of the Dominion and Most Exalted'). A large space was usually left blank beneath this formula as a sign of reverence. In some letters, the *invocatio* to God was followed by an invocation to Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali. In *intitulatio*, the titles and names of the Venetian rulers were placed above the text by means of honorific elevation. The shahs addressed the Venetian Doges by means of the customary honorific epithets, such as mighty, glorious, great, renowned, just, and august.

While Shah Tahmāsp used the Turco-Mongol title of *Khan*, alongside other honorifics, in addressing Andrea Gritti, Shah Abbās I called his Venetian counterpart the *Padshah*. Venetian Doges were addressed as *Farmānfarmā* ('ruler') by Shah Safi I and by Shah Abbās II (r. 1642-1666) in his two letters. The latter also called the Doge the *Padshah*.³ Instead, Shah Suleyman I (r. 1666-1694) and his successor Shah Sultan Huseyn (r. 1694-1722) employed the title of *Wāli-ye Kabir* (Great Governor-general) in addressing the Venetian ruler.

A number of letters referred to the addressee's territories, in addition to their name and titles. For example, a letter dated 27 October 1570 sent by the Council of Ten to Shah Tahmāsp lists the principal territories of the Safavid Empire, such as Iran, Azerbaijan, Shirvan, Iraq, Khorasan, and Ghilan.⁴ In 1696, Shah Huseyn devoted three lines of his ten-line letter to Doge Silvestro Valier (r. 1694-1700) to citing the territories of the Republic, including Crete (Candia), even though it was under Ottoman rule at that time.⁵ Similarly, it appears that the Venetian government recognised the mainly Ottoman-controlled Iraq as a Qizilbash dominion. The vast majority of the letters sent to Venice were issued by the shahs, only one by Grand Vizier Qazi Jahan Qazvini and another one, which was not survived, by the governor of Tabriz Amir Khan Mosullu.

Standing out, in particular, in terms of material embellishment are two letters of Rabi' al-Awwal 946 (August 1540): one from Shah Tahmāsp and another from Qazi Jahan Qazvini to Venetian Doge An-

cuted in the chancellery of the *wāqī'a-niwis*, who was also responsible for letters addressed to foreign princes (Busse 1991, 312).

³ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 62, 28 marzo 1650, unpaginated.

⁴ ASVe, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Segrete, fz. 14, 27 ottobre 1570, unpaginated.

⁵ ASVe, Collegio, Documenti Persia, no. 36.

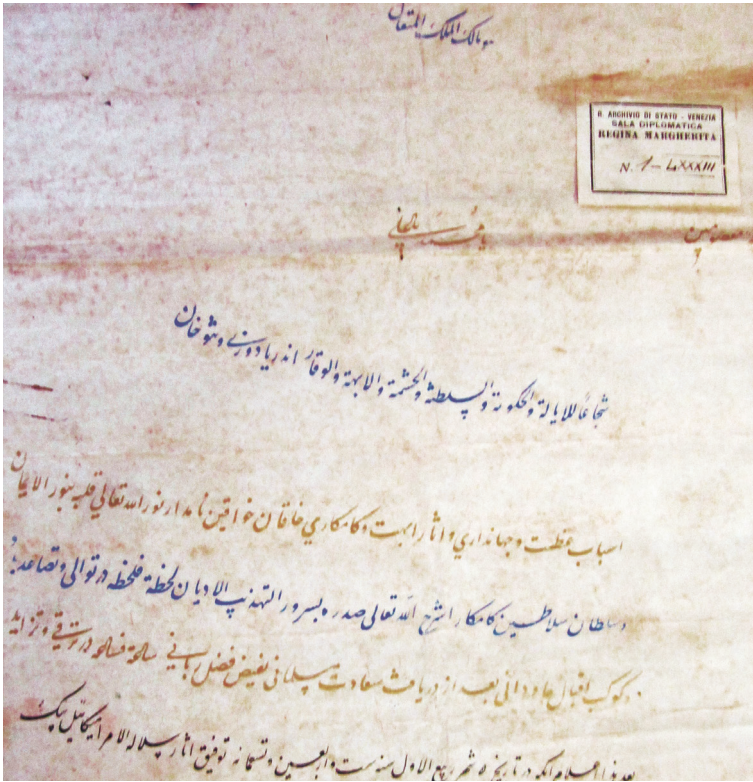


Figure 7 Fragment of Shah Tahmāsp's letter (1539) to Venetian doge Andrea Gritti.
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drea Gritti are among other Safavid missives preserved in the State Archives of Venice. Both letters make abundant use of gold ink compared with other Safavid missives. Moreover, Shah Tahmāsp's letter is the only missive where blue ink was used in addition to gold [fig. 7]. This could be explained by the fact that blue, like red, was a colour often associated with royalty. While the name and titles of the Venetian Doge were written in blue in the *intitulatio* part of the Shah's letter, the same part was written in gold in his Vizier's missive.

The correspondence of the succeeding Safavid rulers appears to have been relatively simple both in decoration and in style of writing; the use of coloured ink decreased and black ink replaced blue and gold in the *intitulatio*.

In seventeenth-century letters, gold ink was mainly used for the invocation of God, Muhammad, and Ali, as well as for Qur'anic citations. It is worthy of note that, similarly, references to Christianity (*Masihi* or *Isaviyye*) were also highlighted with gilded letters.⁶ Various features of the Safavid missive brought by Fathi Bey in 1603 caught the attention of seventeenth-century Venetian historian Alessandro Maria Vianoli (1684, 382) who mentioned that the names of God ("Dio") had been written in gilded letters ("caratteri d'oro"). The letter brought by Khoja Safar was written completely in black with no parts of the texts emphasised with gold, except the customary invocation to God, which was in gilded letters.

The material embellishment of the royal missives was not limited to Safavid-Venetian relations. For example, Oruj Bey Bayat, who accompanied shah's envoy Huseyn Ali Bey to various European capitals in 1599-1601, gave material details of the Shah's letter in his description of the audience with Spanish king Philip III:

The ambassador came forward bearing the Letter, and this, after the Persian fashion, was written in letters of gold and coloured ink on a sheet of paper more than a yard⁷ in length and curiously folded, for the length in Persian style was doubled up. (*Don Juan of Persia* 1926, 291)

Russian Tsars tried to imitate the Safavids by sending their missives with embellishments. On the eve of Grigoriy Vasilichkov's embassy to the Safavid shah in 1588, the Tsar's chancery in Moscow experienced difficulties in decorating the letter artistically, including embellishing it with gold ink and producing an appropriate ornament, etc. Eventually, they found specialists in Astrakhan capable of doing this (Bushev 1976, 1: 82). Similarly, on 25 September 1595, Boris Godunov, who at that time was the *de facto* ruler of Russia, dispatched a letter to Shah Abbās written in 'Tatar' (Turkish), with gilded titles and names (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 307-8). In a letter dated 23 July 1614 from the Russian Tsar Mikhail Feodorovich to Shah Abbās I, the titles and name of Shah Abbās and of the Tsar were written in golden ink (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 2: 365-6).

The Safavid chancery used the same strategy with other royal documents, such as patents and trade privileges. Jean Chardin in 1673 described a patent that was granted to him by the Shah as follows:

⁶ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 62, 28 marzo 1650, unpaginated.

⁷ 1 yard ≈ 91 cm.

All the great men admired the words wrote in gold, and the flowed work in the margin, which was very large. It was one sheet of paper, two feet⁸ and a half long and thirteen or fourteen inches⁹ broad. Besides the writing in gold, there were words in blue, and others in red, thus the principal words and sentences were distinguished, while the rest were written in black. (Sir John Chardin's travels 1777, 165)

During his fourth expedition in 1568, the English merchant Arthur Edwards obtained other privileges for the trade of merchandise into Safavid lands, which were “all written in Azure and gold letters, and delivered unto the Lord Keeper of the Sophie his great seale” (Hakluyt 1926, 416-17).

It is interesting to note that in all the Safavid official letters preserved at the Venetian State Archives, the lower right corner has been cut off. This is also the case with missives sent to European and Muscovite rulers. According to Chardin, this was done as a sign that “all earthly things are incomplete” (Chardin 1811, 293). Bhalloo and Rezai point out that “other hypotheses attested in the sources include the ‘inauspiciousness of square shapes’” (Bhalloo, Rezai 2019, 842).

2.2 Dimensions of the Letters

The format of the Safavid letters to Venice varied in width from 23.5 to 51.5 cm and in length from 64.5 to 119.5 cm. Most of the documents were less than one meter long. The largest Safavid epistle, which was sent from Shah Abbās I to Doge Marcantonio Memmo (r. 1612-1615), measures 119.5 × 51.5 cm [fig. 8].¹⁰ These missives can be distinguished by their smaller dimensions in comparison to the size of the letters of Ottoman sultans, sent in the same period to the Venetian doges. For example, an Ottoman fethname of 1597 sent to the Doge measures 165 × 41 cm (Pedani Fabris 1998, 187).

⁸ 1 feet ≈ 30.5 cm.

⁹ 1 inch ≈ 2.5 cm.

¹⁰ ASVe, Collegio, Documenti Persia, no. 18.

Table 1 The dimensions¹¹ of the letters sent by the Safavid shahs to the Venetian Doges

Sender	Addressee (Doge)	Brought to Venice by	Date	Length (cm)	Width (cm)
Shah Tahmāsp I	Andrea Gritti	Michele Membré	1540	80	23.5
Qazi Jahan ¹	Andrea Gritti	Michele Membré	1540	77.5	25
Shah Abbās I	Marino Grimani	Fathi Bey	1602	114.5	30.5
Shah Abbās I	Leonardo Donà	Khoja Kirkuz (Kirakos)	1608(?)	79.5	29.5
Shah Abbās I	Leonardo Donà	Khoja Safar	1609	83.5	26.5
Shah Abbās I	Marcantonio Memmo	Khoja Shahsuvar	1612	119.5	51.5
Shah Safi I	Francesco Erizzo	Ali Bali	1634	96.5	49
Shah Abbās II	Francesco Molin	Antonio di Fiandra	1647	53.5	30
Shah Abbās II	Francesco Molin	Domenico de Santis	1647(?)	77	36.5
Shah Abbās II	Francesco Molin	Catholic priest Ferdinando Gioverida	1649(?)	75	45 ²
Shah Suleyman	Domenico II Contarini	Two anonymous Dominican priests	1670	98	38
Shah Sultan Huseyn	Silvestro Valier	?	1694	64.5	38.5

1 Grand vizier of Shah Tahmāsp.

2 ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni principi, fz. 62, 28 marzo 1650, unpaginated.

Table 2 The dimensions¹² of the letters sent by Safavid shahs to the Grand Dukes of Tuscany

Sender	Addressee (Duke)	Length (cm)	Width (cm)
Shah Abbās I	Ferdinando I de' Medici	76.5	33
Shah Abbās I	Ferdinando I de' Medici	112.5	37.5
Shah Abbās I	Ferdinando I de' Medici	98	38
Shah Abbās I	Cosimo II de' Medici	68.3	27
Shah Abbās I	Cosimo II de' Medici	59.5	29.5

11 These data were generously provided by the staff of the State Archives of Venice to whom I am very grateful.

12 ASF, Mediceo del Principato 4274a. The measurement belongs to us. For the letters of Shah Abbās I to Grand Dukes of Tuscany in the first decades of the seventeenth century, see Pontecorvo 1949.

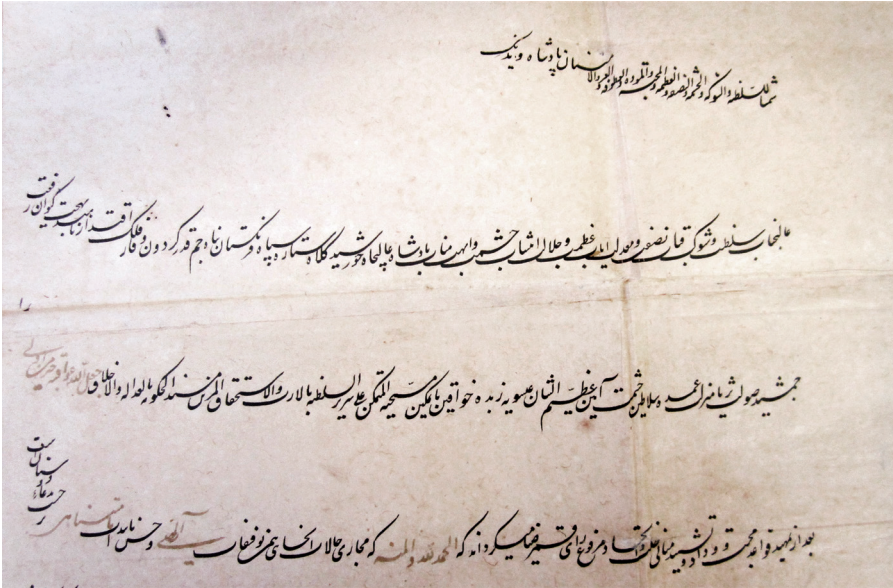


Figure 8 Fragment of Shah Abbās I's letter (1612) to the Venetian doge.
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While studying Qaraqoyunlu and Aghqoyunlu documents, Busse argues that the higher the rank of the recipient of a document, the wider it was. He adds that this may have also been the case under the Safavids.¹³ Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk and Mnatsakanyan also came to similar conclusions based on the comparative analysis of the letters sent by the shahs to Polish rulers and dignitaries in the first half of the seventeenth century. According to them, the letters addressed to the Polish kings were larger than those addressed to their dignitaries and “it was the width, not the length, that mattered” (Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk, Mnatsakanyan 2017, 108).

When comparing the dimensions of the letters sent to the Venetian doges, the grand dukes of Tuscany, and the rulers of Poland, it appears that on average, the missives to Venice are greater both in length and in width than those dispatched to the other two sovereigns. However, letters addressed to the Popes were usually the largest. For example, the letter from Shah Huseyn to Pope Innocent XII measures 97 × 59 cm.¹⁴

¹³ Busse quoted in Martin 1965, 172.

¹⁴ BAV, Ms. Vat. pers. 31. See also Piemontese 2007 for Shah Sultan Mohammad Khodabande's letter to Pope Sixtus V.

2.3 Locations of the Seals in the Safavid Missives

Seals were used to authorise and authenticate a variety of official Safavid documents, including the shah's missives sent to foreign countries. While Shah Ismā'īl's seal was described by a Venetian merchant in the first decade of the sixteenth century (Grey 1873, 205-6), the seals of the following century were described by Olearius (1669, 254-5), Tavernier (1678, 179), and Chardin (1711, 1: 135). Safavid royal seals which appear on letters sent to the Venetian Doges had undergone some changes both in design and content. While Shah Tahmāsp's seal was almond-shaped, starting with Shah Abbās I, its headpiece took the shape of a roof. Whereas in 1540, Tahmāsp's seal was designed with nine concentric circles, the number of small circles later reached twelve, as is evident from Shah Sultan Husayn's seal.

In 1580, Haji¹⁵ Mohammad Tabrizi, a Safavid envoy to Venice, mentioned that while the shah endorsed letters with three seals, other sultans would use only one seal.¹⁶ According to *Tadhkirat-al muluk*, there were four seals in use in the late seventeenth century. Three of them were considered royal seals, namely: *muhr-i humāyun* ('August seal'), *muhr-i sharaf-i nafāz*, *muhr-i angushtar-i āftāb-āthār* ('seal of the signet ring'), and one seal of the divan called *muhr-i musavvadayi dīvān-i a'lā* (*Tadhkirat al-Mulūk* 1943, 62-3, 202). *Muhr-i sharaf-i nafāz*, which, along with *muhr-i humāyun*, was considered a 'large seal', had a roof shaped headpiece and was identical to the seal appended on the Safavid letters addressed to European sovereigns, including the Venetian Doge.

The location of the seal in the shahs' letters reflected the status of the addressee as perceived by the Safavid rulers. As is evident from the extant Safavid missives preserved in the Venetian State Archives, all the letters sent to Venice by the shahs and by Tahmāsp's vizier bear the seal at the bottom on the reverse side. A letter from the Shah Tahmāsp differs slightly from others by having the seal located at the top of the reverse side rather than at the bottom of the front side. This practice was also confirmed by Adam Olearius (1669, 255):

In the letters, he sends to Christian Princes, he [Shah Safi] observes this respect, that he does not set the seal on the same line with the writing, but on the other side, at the very bottom.

¹⁵ Berchet reads his title as 'Chogia' (Berchet 1865, 38, 183, 184, 190) and Rota as 'Xwāje' (Rota 2009b, 219-21). However, this name should be written as 'Haji', a title given to a Muslim person who has successfully completed his Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

¹⁶ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 3, 1 maggio 1580, c. 321r.

According to the Calendar of State Papers, the letter sent by Shah Abbās to the King of England James I (r. 1603-1625) had the seal placed on the reverse side ‘to show respect’ to the English sovereign:

The King’s name is Shaw Abbās, and is in the character or seal which is stamped on the back side, somewhat low, under part of the writing which they say is for more respect. (Sainsbury 1884, 6: 170)

As pointed out by Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk and Mnatsakanyan, this privilege was reserved for monarchs, thus in the letter sent by Abbās I to Polish notables, and in the two letters sent by Abbās II to Chancellor Jerzy Ossoliński and Hetman Mikołaj Potocki, the seals of the shahs figure at the top of the documents on the obverse side (Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk, Mnatsakanyan 2017, 110).

The seal location in the missives sent by the shahs to foreign rulers and governors of lesser status was identical to that of the Safavid *fir-mans* (royal decrees) where the seals of the rulers are usually found above the texts (Martin 1965, 246-54). For example, an imprint of the round seal of Abbās I is located above the text of his letter addressed to the governor (*voevod*) of Astrakhan (Shorokhov, Slesarev 2019, 29). This is also the case of the letter (measuring 90 × 37.5 cm) from Shah Sultan Huseyn to the ruler of Malta (Rossi 1933, 357). Referring to the patent given by the shah to Anthony Sherley, Huseyn Ali Bey commented that “it only bore the seal at the top of the front page, which showed that it was the epistle of lesser importance, since all important official documents bore the seal at the bottom and on the back” (Steensgaard 1974, 220).

2.4 Containers of the Letters

The covers and containers of the royal letters were also important elements in determining a missive’s authenticity. Letters to foreign sovereigns were usually sent in pouches of gold-embroidered silk cloth, brocades in particular. This practice was described by Jean Chardin as follows:

it is another piece of Eastern Civility, to put the letters into rich boxes, or into purses made of stuffs, more or less rich, in proportion to the quality of the persons to whom they are directed. (Chardin 1927, 41)

According to Marin Sanudo, the first Safavid envoy to appear before the Venetian Collegio in March of 1509 brought a letter enclosed in a silk cloth (*revolta in cendado*) (Sanudo 1879-1903, 8: col. 14). In 1610, Khoja Safar brought Shah Abbās's letter enclosed in two bags, one of crimson satin (*raso sguardo*), the other of green velvet, which were, in turn, contained in a box covered with 'Bursa cloth' (*panno di Bursa*).¹⁷ Giovanni Mocenigo, the Venetian ambassador in Rome, attests that Husayn Ali Bey brought the Shah's letters contained in golden purses (*borsa d'oro*).¹⁸

There is some evidence to suggest that sometimes the letters were dispatched in gold boxes. For instance, on 23 July 1609, Shah Abbās gave the Carmelite Father Vincent a letter addressed to the Pope, which was contained in a little box of gold with a cover made of the "most beautiful' brocade" (Chick 1939, 188). In addition to boxes, Safavid missives were also carried in other containers, such as canes. In 1582, Simon Contarini, the Venetian *bailo* (resident ambassador)¹⁹ in Istanbul, reported that a Safavid envoy handed him a letter from the Shah, enclosed in a gold cane (*canna d'oro*).²⁰ In 1571, Venetian envoy Vincenzo Alessandri mentioned that the Safavid prince Heydar Mirza took a ducal letter from him and wrapped it in a handkerchief to present it to the Shah (Berchet 1865, 32). Handkerchiefs were sometimes interpreted as symbols of imperial power.²¹

The missive bag (*kise*) was protected against unauthorised views by a wax seal. Unfortunately, the bags in which such letters were brought to Venice are no longer extant. However, previous research on Shah Sultan Huseyn's letters to other European rulers, suggest that such bags were tied up with two gilded cords from which hung a red wax seal (Rossi 1933, 360). The wax seal appended to the bag containing the letter, sent to the King of Poland Frederick Augustus I bore the following phrase: "Slave of God, Sultan Huseyn" (Fekete 1936, 271). The address of the letter was also stitched onto the bag (Rossi 1933, 360).

¹⁷ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 18, 30 gennaio 1609 (*more veneto*), unpaginated.

¹⁸ ASV, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Roma, fz. 47, 14 aprile 1601, c. 90v-91r.

¹⁹ Since there was no Venetian diplomatic representative in any of the three Safavid capitals, the Venetian baili in Istanbul were regularly tasked with collecting a wide range of information on the Ottomans' arch-rival in the East and communicating this to the Senate, as a part of the periodic reports (*dispacci*), which devoted particular attention to Safavid-related issues (Guliyev 2022a, 81).

²⁰ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 16, 20 marzo 1582, c. 33r.

²¹ The Portrait of Mehmed II with his handkerchief is one of the famous examples representing this tradition. See Mangir 2014, 828.

In January 1610, the Venetian public interpreter Giacomo Nores reported the arrival of the Safavid envoy Khoja Safar bringing a letter from Shah Abbās “without a sealed bag”. It seems that Giovanni Francesco Sagredo, the Venetian consul in Aleppo, had managed to access the contents of the communications between Shah Abbās and European rulers. The circumstances of Sagredo’s access to the Shah’s missives are obscure. It is difficult to determine whether he did so without the knowledge of Khoja Safar to whom he had also a letter of recommendation, in addition to 200 ducats. Another possibility is that Safar himself granted Sagredo this opportunity in return for money. Following his meeting with Safar, Sagredo transmitted the copies of Shah Abbās’s letters addressed to the Pope, Spanish king, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and others back to Venice.²²

The breaking of the seal by someone other than the intended recipient and the failure to keep contents hidden from the eyes of others was treated seriously and considered a crime by the Safavids. Evidence of this emerges from Iskandar Bey Munshī’s narrative describing the reasons leading to the execution of Daniz (Dangiz) Bey, a former Safavid envoy to the Spanish court in 1611-12:

One of Dengiz Beg’s crimes was that when he reached Cadiz, at the insistence of Buzra, who was the governor of the city [...], he broke the seal on the Shah’s letter to the King of Spain, read the letter and revealed its contents to the governor. The sacrilegious act of breaking the royal seal is considered by kings to be a serious crime, and to divulge to another the secret communications of kings is a heinous crime. (Munshī 1978, 2: 1075)

Crimson satin was the preferred material for the pouches used by the Ottomans.²³ The material of the wax seal also served as an indicator of the status of the sender, and – to a lesser extent – of the receiver. The Ottoman imperial letters to Venice were usually dispatched in pouches sealed with golden wax. On 29 May 1602, Ottoman envoy Khalil çavuş brought a letter of the Ottoman Grand Hasan Pasha in a pouch of crimson satin closed with silver wax seal (*sigilata in cera col coperchio d’argento*).²⁴

²² ASVe, Inquisitori di Stato, b. 516, unpaginated. For Sagredo’s espionage activities, see Wilding 2014, 79-88.

²³ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 1, 31 ottobre 1567, c. 161r; ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 18 maggio, c. 111r.

²⁴ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 12, 20 maggio 1602, unpaginated.

2.5 Letters of Recommendation

During the reign of Shah Abbās I, in particular, the commercial agenda of Safavid diplomacy was reflected in the content and type of the missives sent to the Doges. Accounting for most of the Shahs' correspondence, these missives could be characterised as royal letters of recommendation in support of specific persons. Recommendations were a way of establishing the person's credentials and the purpose of his visit (Ortega 2016, 128). It not only helped guarantee a modicum of protection but also distinguished the bearer from the masses of people who passed from East to West and West to East (Ortega 2016, 134).

The letters, which usually start with flowery compliments addressed to the Doge, contain a general assurance of friendship, confirmation of the rights granted to Christians in Safavid lands and a culminating clause of introduction and recommendation of the shah's envoy-royal merchant requesting the Doge to help facilitate the acquisition by a Safavid envoy-purveyor of various articles necessary for use in the royal household.

As mentioned before, the first known letter of this type dates from 1597 and was issued by Shah Abbās for Mehmed (Mohammad) Emin Bey and Khoja Ilyas. The letter exists only in Italian translation in the Venetian State Archives; the original document appears not to have survived. These documents correspond in style and construction to the letters sent with Safavid envoy-merchants to the Muscovite rulers at the end of the sixteenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 190, 326-8).

In addition to bearing the shah's missives, envoys (purveyors), whose trade missions combined with diplomatic duties, were charged with selling various commodities on the shah's account, including royal silk, and with procuring the goods 'necessary' for the court. When in Venice, their list of purchases usually included Venetian luxury textiles (satin, velvet, 'ormesino' and 'damask' fabrics) and glass products (including mirrors, lenses, drinking glasses),²⁵ while they were usually commissioned to buy wool fabrics, sable fur, leather, walrus tusks ('fish teeth'), wax, and metal wares in Russian markets (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 311; 2: 58). Arms were the most common items travelling in both directions (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 190, 201, 311; ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 10, 18 gennaio 1604, unpaginated).

Evidence from the Venetian archival records suggests that some Safavid envoys also travelled to Venice with recommendation letters

²⁵ ASVe, Documenti Persia, no. 21.

from Ottoman and Venetian officials. For example, in August-September 1609, prior to setting off for Venice, Khoja Safar was granted a letter of recommendation to the Venetian authorities by the Venetian consul in Aleppo, Giovanni Francesco Sagredo²⁶ Furthermore, in 1612, Safavid envoys Khoja Shahsuvar and Aladdin Mohammad, who had travelled via Istanbul, brought with them a letter of recommendation from the Ottoman Grand Vizier Nasuh Pasha following the signing of a peace accord between the Ottomans and the Qizilbash.

2.6 ‘Hidden Letters’

Contacts between the Safavid shahs and Venetian doges were possible only by means of intermediaries-envoys. Envoys or messengers, often travelling in disguise through the Ottoman territories, had to take great care that sensitive materials involving correspondence were properly stored, concealed, and safely delivered to their destination. Letters were often hidden or kept in rolls of silk, linings of garments, inside book covers, metal containers, walking-sticks, and in other places deemed to be secure.

In the summer of 1510, a Cypriot messenger, Nicolò Surier, and two Venetian merchants were intercepted by Mamluk authorities near the fortress of Bira (Birecik) and it was said that they were carrying letters from the Shah Ismâil to the Venetian consuls of Alexandria and Damascus, hiding them in their walking-sticks (Rabie 1978, 77). In 1539, Michele Membré carried a letter from the Doge to Shah Tahmâsp bound inside a Greek book (*salterio* or psalter), “so that it would go safely and in good condition” (Membré 1969, 5). In 1571, another Venetian, Vincenzo Alessandri, carried a letter to the Safavid court, hidden inside a tin jar (Berchet 1965, 32). In the same year, Khoja Ali Tabrizi brought a letter from the Venetian Council of Ten to Qazvin, hidden inside the cover of a book (Berchet 1965, 34). In 1580, while travelling through Anatolia merchant - envoy, Safavid Haji Mohammad tied the letters in one of the silk rolls; he sold all the silk rolls except the one with the letter inside.²⁷ In 1599, Michelangelo Corrai brought letters from Antony Sherley to the Venetian Doge and several European rulers, hiding them in the stocks and barrels of harquebuses.²⁸

²⁶ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 18, 2 settembre 1609, unpaginated.

²⁷ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 3, 1 maggio 1580, c. 329v.

²⁸ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, registro 14, 18 novembre 1599, c. 69r.

