
4 **Safavid Subjects in Venice**

Venice was a key entrepôt for the Safavid silk trade throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and served as the ideal location in which to commission and purchase the items needed for the shah's court. The main arena of contact between the Safavids and Venetians, in both in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was trade and it was their mutual trade interests that kept these contacts alive even when the anti-Ottoman alliance was no longer pursued.

Venetian archival records give scanty information about the presence of Safavid merchants in the city. Comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims, most of the Safavid merchants found in the Venetian sources were small traders. Little is known about their business activities, though available evidence from Venetian sources suggests that Muslim Safavid merchants, who formed a part of the wider Levant trade, played a considerable role in trade with Venice. Some merchants travelled in the company of the envoys to take advantage of the favourable tax conditions guaranteed by trade with Venice. In addition to silk, Safavid merchants brought to Venice large quantities of herbs such as rhubarb¹ and

1 Rhubarb is a plant also used for medicinal purposes.

spices like cloves (*garoffoli*).² In his preface to Marco Polo's travel account, Giovanni Battista Ramusio notes that a certain Haji Mohammad (*Chaggi Memet*), a merchant active in Venice, had brought to Venice large quantities of rhubarb from China (Ramusio 1559, 14b).

Throughout the sixteenth century and in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, Safavid merchants stayed in brokers' houses or in private residences throughout the city. The merchant Khalil from Nakhchivan who brought rhubarb stayed at Corte Nuova in Campo Santa Maria Nuova (sestiere³ di Cannaregio) in Venice.⁴ Garakhan bin Haji Bayram from Nakhchivan brought to Venice 20 bales of silk.⁵ Sahib son of Murat from Tabriz who brought rhubarb stayed at Corte Nuova in Campo Santa Maria Formosa (sestiere di Castello) in Venice. Hüseyin son of Ali from Nakhchivan also stayed at Corte Nuova in Campo Santa Maria Formosa (sestiere di Castello). In 1624, the merchants Mirza Ali and Baba Ali also lived in Campo Santa Maria Formosa.⁶ This could be explained by its proximity to the commercial areas near the Rialto Bridge and St Mark's square. Safavid trader, Molla Najaf (*Moria Nariaf*), indicated as 'turco persiano', died on 15 July 1690, aged 86 in the parish of Santa Maria Formosa. Santa Maria Formosa was also the preferred neighbourhood for Ottoman merchants to stay in Venice, at the end of the sixteenth century (Pedani 1994, 61). Following the opening of *Fondaco dei Turchi* in 1621, most of the Safavid merchants relocated into lodgings here.

The only Safavid merchant-envoys to mention his quarantine experiences was Khoja Shasuvar, who quarantined (*far la contumacia*) in Spalato before proceeding to Venice in 1622 (Berchet 1865, 213). As a measure of disease prevention related to the plague, both ships and people had to spend forty days in isolation in one of the ports in Dalmatia or in one of the Lazarettos in Venice before entering the city.⁷ Although he was frustrated by the duration of the quarantine

² ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni, Mar, Filza 157, 15, 16 marzo 1603, unpaginated.

³ 'Sestiere' is a subdivision of certain Italian towns and cities. Venice is divided into six sestieri (districts): San Marco, San Polo, Dorsoduro, Cannaregio, Santa Croce, and Castello.

⁴ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni, Mar, Filza 157, 13 marzo 1603, unpaginated.

⁵ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni, Mar, Filza 157, 13 marzo 1603, unpaginated.

⁶ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, unpaginated.

⁷ For more on Venetian anti-plague measures, see *Venezia e la peste* 1979. Venetians took the lead in measures to prevent the spread of the plague. Quarantine was first introduced in 1377 in Dubrovnik on Croatia's Dalmatian Coast and the first permanent plague hospital (lazaretto) was opened by the Republic of Venice in 1423 on the small island of Santa Maria di Nazareth. This system spread to other Italian cities and was

(*così lunga dimora con molto patimento*), in particular, by the length of waiting time for a galley, he expressed his gratitude to the Venetian government for the good treatment he received, both in Spalato and Zara. Some Ottoman envoys, particularly Halil in 1602 and Suleyman in 1615, also complained about the length of the quarantine (Pedani 1994, 55).

Some of the Safavid envoys arrived in Venice on their way to other European courts, the Habsburg and French courts, in particular. The Venetian government granted letters of safe conduct or passports to Safavid envoys or other subjects travelling through Venetian territories on their way to other European domains. As in the case of Zeynal Bey, a Safavid ambassador to the Habsburg court in Prague, who arrived in Venice in the late spring of 1604.⁸ Zeynal Bey sailed to Venice from Syria on a Venetian galley named *Nave Liona*, travelling under the guise of a merchant, probably in order not to attract the attention of Ottoman spies. He was dispatched by Shah Abbās to Rudolf II (r. 1576-1612) to hand over the shah's letter and to update the Emperor on the progress of the Safavid-Ottoman war. He came to Venice with a retinue of four or five, including an interpreter called Angelo who joined them in Syria. After spending about a month in Venice, Zeynal Bey and his companions travelled north to Prague. It is likely that his retinue included another Safavid envoy called Huseyn Bey who made his way to Marseille.

A report by the Venetian ambassador at the French court indicates that the Safavid envoy sought an audience with French King Henry IV (r. 1589-1610) and was accompanied by a Venetian interpreter.⁹ Zeynal Bey Shamlu reached Prague in July 1604, where he was joined by other envoys: Hasan Bey and Mehdi Gulu Bey in December of the same year. In 1636, Safavid envoy Ali Bali sailed off to England on a recommendation letter granted by the Serenissima.¹⁰ In 1656, Seyfi agha (*Sep aqa*), a Safavid subject travelled to Paris with a passport issued by the Venetians (Pedani Fabris 1995, 228).

later adopted by other European countries. According to the Carmelite letter addressed to the Roman Curia in 1772, even letters coming by sea from countries suspected of contagion (i.e. from the plague) were processed in the *lazzareto* and quarantine posts, where they were unsealed and fumigated as a precaution (Chick 1939, 697).

⁸ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 10, 29 giugno 1604, unpaginated: "Con la nave Liona venuta il mese passato di Soria arrivò in questa città un Persiano nominato Ogià Seinà della città di Corasan espeditto come mercante dal Re di Persia dopo la presa di Tavis sono già otto mesi".

⁹ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Francia, Rubricari C4, cc. 20r (28 agosto 1604), 22v (14 settembre).

¹⁰ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, registro 23, 26 gennaio 1635 (*more veneto*), c. 147r. See "Appendix 7".

Evidence from Venetian sources suggests that the Safavid court also granted safe conduct (passage) letters or passports to foreign envoys, including the Venetians. For example, Shah Abbās II gave a passport to allow the Venetian emissary Domenico de Santis to travel to Moscow, but he was denied entry at the border by the Russians.¹¹

¹¹ ASVe, Collegio, Relazione, b. 25, *Relazione del viaggio fatto da Domenico de Santis in Persia*, f. 7r.