
5 **The Safavid-Ottoman Gift Exchanges Through the Eyes of the Venetians**

Safavid Empire had much more extensive diplomatic relations with Turco-Muslim polities, particularly with the Ottomans, compared to the European states. Safavids and Ottomans interacted with each other actively, managing their relationships through relatively regular exchanges of envoy missions. The importance that Safavids placed on their relationship with the Ottoman was reflected in the values of the gifts made to the Sultan. Subsequently, the value, quantity, and variety of gifts sent to their neighbouring powers was greater than those sent to European countries.

Both Safavids and Ottomans paid attention to variety and quantity in mutual gift-giving. Sources from both sides record numerous diplomatic gift exchanges.¹ The most telling examples of diplomatic exchanges of gifts occurred when peace negotiations were at stake or when a new ruler ascended the throne. In addition to the local sources, the Venetian baili in Istanbul also provided information on the nature of the gifts presented by the Safavid envoys to the Ottoman sultan. The baili not only mentioned instances of gift-giving, but also gave detailed lists of the Safavid gifts.²

1 For the material dimension of the Safavid-Ottoman relations, see Arcak 2012.

2 ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 9, 8 maggio 1576, c. 100r; ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 16, 14 aprile 1582, c. 35r.

According to Ottoman chronicler Mustafa Efendi Selânikî, in 1568, the Safavid embassy led by Shahqulu Sultan Ustajlu reached the Ottoman court in Edirne bearing a letter, immense gifts and presents (*pîşkeş ü hedâyâ*) from Shah Tahmâsp and accompanied by 1,000 Qizilbash (Selânikî 1989, 1: 67). The gifts for the Ottoman sultan were so numerous that they had to be transported by thirty-four camels.

Gifts sent from the Safavid court to the Porte can help us to highlight the distinctive features of the Shah's gifts for the Sultan. Gifts selected had to be appropriate for the mission. The presentation of costly gifts to the Sultan was also motivated by the Shah's desire to display his wealth and power. At the same time, with this gift, he wished to showcase the sophisticated craftsmanship of Safavid artisans and weavers. As a rule, in addition to the gifts, which were presented on behalf of the Safavid shahs, Qizilbash envoys were also expected to offer their own personal gifts to the Sultans.

Safavid lists of gifts were ranked in descending value with the highest position granted to Holy Qur'an gifts to the Ottoman rulers. Despite being adversaries in times of war, the gifts of the Qur'an made by Shahs were intended to remind the Sultan of their shared Muslim identity and highlight their Muslim solidarity. The number of the Qur'an gifts ranged from one to eighteen. The largest numbers of the Qur'an gifts for the Ottoman ruler were presented in May 1576 by an embassy headed by Mohammad Khan Tokhmaq Ustajlu. While Shah Tahmâsp sent eighteen copies of the Qur'an (nine large and nine small), his envoy offered only one copy. The Safavid court paid special attention to the decoration of these holy books. For example, according to Marc'Antonio Pigafetta, the covers of the Qur'an brought by the 1568 Safavid embassy headed by Shahqulu Sultan Ustajlu were encrusted with gold and jewels (Pigafetta 2008, 235). Similarly, five copies of the Qur'an that were bought by the Qizilbash embassy in 1582 were bound in gold and jewelled inside.³

In addition to Muslim holy books, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmâsp*, one of the most famous illustrated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*, was among the special gifts presented to Sultan Selim II by the Safavid embassy of 1568. The manuscript was originally commissioned by Shah Ismâil I from the calligraphers and painters of the royal palace in 1522 (Savory 1980, 129). According to Safavid chronicler Budaq Munshî Qazvini, many renowned artists worked on the *Shahnameh*, which took thirty years to complete (Qazvini 1999, 226). Venetian bailo Soranzo

³ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 16, 14 aprile 1582, c. 35r.

described *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmāsp* as “a book [...] which one prince sends another in gold illuminated leaves with 259 figures”.⁴

Safavid rulers followed mobile court life by moving between winter and summer quarters. This was reflected also in their gifts of ornate pavilions⁵ to the Ottoman sultans. The gift of pavilions can be found on almost every list of gifts provided by the Venetian baili. The most telling description of the Safavid pavilion gifts was made by Soranzo in 1568. He remarks:

A Pavilion is 16 *ferse* [12 metres]⁶ lined with damask and covered with crimson satin with the columns painted in blue and silver and covered with green on top. Three umbrellas are placed at the door of the Pavilion, one is worked with azemine gold, and another is of satin and the other of hermesine.⁷ Their columns were painted with azure with the joints of silver illuminated with gold and jewelled, and two sets of ropes of silk and gold, one [intended] for the Pavilion, and the other for the umbrellas.⁸

The largest number of pavilions were brought by an embassy of 1576. According to bailo Giovanni Correr:

The first one was 33 *ferse* (\approx 25 metres) in size and embroidered with flowers in the Persian style, and lined with crimson satin. The second pavilion was built in the manner of a dome with gilded timbers. The columns of the said pavilion were all jewelled and illuminated.⁹

4 ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 2, 27 febbraio 1567 (*more veneto*) c. 515r.

5 Venetian envoy Membré described Shah Tahmāsp’s pavilions (1993, 19): “This palace has three pavilions, one behind the other, and the second pavilion is very large. There, within, stands an *utaq*, which is made of sticks of gilded wood in the form of a dome and covered over with scarlet. Upon the cloth is foliage, cut out and sewn with silk”. Habsburg ambassador Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq gave details of the pavilions which were among the diplomatic gifts brought by the Safavid embassy led by Farrukhzad Bey Qaradaghli in 1555, on the occasion of Amasya peace negotiations: “Babylonian tents, the inner sides of which were covered with coloured tapestries, trappings and housings of exquisite workmanship” (Busbecq 1881, 156-7). The description of the same pavilion also appeared in a report concerning the Ottoman-Safavid conflict in 1553-55 and Amasya peace talks: “this Ambassador [Farrukhzad Bey Qaradaghli] [...] brought to the Turk [Ottoman sultan] a very beautiful camp pavilion, superbly worked in gold and silk [thread], the supporting pillars [of the pavilion] worked in gold and jewels” (ASV, Misc., Arm. II, 94, f. 194v).

6 Probably, a pace, as a unit of measurement. 1 pace= 0.75 metres.

7 Precious light silk fabric, which took its name from Hormuz city.

8 ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 2, 27 febbraio 1567 (*more veneto*), c. 515r.

9 ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 9, 24 maggio 1576, c. 100r.

The Venetian baili did not describe the interior of the pavilions. In 1590, Venetian bailo Giovanni Moro mentioned “a war pavilion of crimson satin” among other Safavid gifts presented to the Ottoman sultan Murad III.¹⁰

Precious stones were also included in the gift packages sent to the Ottoman court. In particular, Venetian baili mention turquoise brought by the Safavid embassies. Turquoise was worn as an ornament and as jewel adorning rings, cameos, and amulets. Khazeni (2014, 2-3) notes that it became an imperial stone in the early modern Muslim empires negotiating their power with rival states. While the 1568 embassy brought nine bags of Turquoise (*rocca di Turchine*), in 1576, the Safavid envoy offered the Sultan twenty-nine bags of these precious stones.

Baili mention both deer tears (*Lacrime di cervo*) and bezoar stones (*Bezuar pietre*) in the Safavid gift lists. Deer tears were brought in boxes in 1568 while the gift package sent in 1582 included a big bejewelled deer tear. In 1597, baili Marco Venier and Girolamo Capello confirm the use of bezoar stones against poisons (*contra veneni*). According to them, these stones were presented in settings of gold and musk (*legate in oro et muschio*).¹¹

Bezoar stones were valuable because they were believed to have the power to act as a universal antidote for poison. According to Barroso (2013, 198), the origin of bezoars was linked with snake-stone legends, an ancient belief present in many cultures. Bezoars were associated with deer tears, also thought to be effective against all kinds of poisons. Shah Tahmāsp himself had acquired a lasting fear of being poisoned in the wake of a plot to poison him in 940 (1533-34) (see *A Chronicle of the Early Safawīs* 1934, 116). The Shah’s practice of protecting himself against poison emerges from Michele Membré’s description:

As for the water he drinks, one of his *farrashs* holds it in a jar of porcelain or silver, for I have seen two sorts of a jar; and the King seals it with his seal, and when he wants to drink, unseals it, and, when the meal is removed, seals it up. (Membré 1993, 34-5)

Carpets were among the diplomatic gifts most frequently given by the Safavids and were much admired and appreciated by the Ottoman court. It should be noted that the art of carpet-weaving reached

¹⁰ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 30, 3 febbraio 1589 (*more veneto*), c. 390v.

¹¹ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Deciferazioni, Costantinopoli, registro 11, 14 gennaio 1596 (*more veneto*), 258.

its height in Azerbaijan and Iran during the reign of the Safavid dynasty. As luxury goods, carpets symbolised wealth, power, and purity, and were among the objects used by the Safavids as vehicles of cultural identity. No gift could be more effective than carpets projecting Safavid sophistication in the art of weaving [fig. 12]. The carpets made from the finest wool brought by the Safavid envoy Shahgulu Bey Ustajlu in 1568 “were so big that they could barely be carried by seven men” (Pigafetta 2008, 235; see also Hammer-Purgstall 1828, 3: 521). Pigafetta referred to these wool carpets as *teftich* (tiftik), which were made from the finest wool. According to him, the Safavid envoy brought “20 big silk carpets and many other small gold-threaded silk ones embroidered with bird and animal figures” (Pigafetta 2008, 235).

Giacomo Soranzo, the Venetian bailo in Istanbul, mentions both small silk carpets with gold thread (*3 tappeti di seta piccoli*) and large woollen carpets among the gifts presented to the Sultan. Four of the 21 large carpets were intended to be laid in the pavilions. In addition to carpets, Soranzo itemises 6 felts from Khorasan.¹² As is evident from Michele Membré’s *Relazione*, the province of Khorasan was renowned for the production of luxury felt carpets during the Safavid period: “The King [Shah Tahmāsp] was thus seated upon a *takya-namad*, that is a felt of Khurasan, which was of great price” (Membré 1993, 21).

Compared to the carpet gifts made to the Ottoman sultans, rugs presented to the Venetians doges [fig. 13] were relatively limited in size and type, probably due to transportation issues and Venice’s geographical remoteness from the Safavid Empire, as well as to the different nature of relationships that the Safavids had with these two polities. The carpet gifts presented in 1576 were noteworthy both in quantity and in variety. Without counting the personal carpet gifts made by the Safavid envoy, Shah Tahmāsp’s gifts to the Ottoman ruler comprised seventy-four carpets and rugs of different sizes, materials, and assortment, including carpets of silk and fine wool, mosque carpets (*tapedi moschetti*) and prayer rugs (*sezzade*).

In addition to carpets and textiles, the Safavid shahs also gave various types of weapons and pieces of armour and weaponry as diplomatic gifts to the Ottoman rulers. Gifts of weaponry symbolised power and military competence and highlighted the martial glories of the sender. According to baili reports, weapons brought as diplomatic gifts by the Safavid envoys were mainly arms like ‘Ajami’ scimitars (*Lame di scimitarra azimine*), Damascus steel scimitars,¹³ and bows and arrows.

¹² ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 2, 24 febbraio 1567, c. 515r.

¹³ Jewelled Damascus scimitars were also included in gifts brought by Safavid envoy Farrukhzad Bey in 1555 (Busbecq 1881, 157).



Figure 12

The Ardabil Carpet, unknown. 1539-40, Iran.
Museum no. 272-1893.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The most popular gifts, given regularly by both sides, were textiles, especially luxury silk fabrics. For the Safavids, the most desirable and lucrative commodities were probably silks, which reached their technical and artistic pinnacle in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the early modern world, textiles were the most important gift item and vehicle for all other kinds of social recognition. Silk fabric, often associated with luxury and wealth, served as a form of artistic expression, an important tool for the communication of artistic ideas. The Safavids also managed to display their refined handicrafts by presenting different kinds of textiles, which were the most successful in-kind currency, both in diplomatic and commercial spheres. Gold-threaded silk robes were among the gifts brought by the Safavid envoy to Sultan Murad III in 1580.¹⁴

In 1597, a Safavid envoy brought to the Ottoman court 9 gold-embroidered velvet *veste*, 18 gold brocade robes, a gold thread garment woven with the loop over loop technique (*riccio sopra riccio*),¹⁵ 18 robes of damask fabric, 27 half-satin robes and 18 robes of a rich

¹⁴ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 14, 3 settembre 1580, c. 223r.

¹⁵ Wright 1997, 1176: “*Riccio sopra riccio* was the most extravagant and costly use of precious gold threads. The technique was, therefore, reserved for the making of wall hangings and ecclesiastical and royal garments”.



Figure 13

A Safavid carpet, probably brought as a diplomatic gift to Venice. Venice, Museo di San Marco.
Photo © Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia

watered silk (*tabino*).¹⁶ According to Venetian bailo Almorò Nani, in 1619, another Safavid envoy offered the Ottoman sultan 32 *veste* of cloth of gold, 24 *veste* of velvet with the pile cut at different heights (*d'alto e basso*), and 9 robes made from damask cloth (*damascio Persiano*).¹⁷ Gifts of robes were highly individual and personalised gifts, symbolising the closeness between the giver and the recipient.

Hunting was a favourite pastime of rulers in the pre- and early-modern world. Safavid and Ottoman courts had several officials dealing with hunting. Ottoman officials included the *Doğancıbaşı* (chief hawkler), *Atmacacıbaşı* (chief of the staff responsible for the hunting hawks), *Çakırcıbaşı* (chief falconer), and *Şahincıbaşı* (chief falconer).¹⁸ As for the Safavids, according to the *Tadhkirat al-mulūk*, the *Amirshikar-bashi* (master of the hunt) was “one of the amirs of high rank” and all of the falconers (*qushchiyan*) were subordinated to him (*Tadhkirat al-Mulūk* 1943, 51). According to Bailo Soranzo, in 1568, Shah Tahmāsp sent 81 falcons¹⁹ as diplomatic gifts to the Sultan, however “due to their big size” they were left to Pasha of Erzurum.

¹⁶ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Deciferazioni, Costantinopoli, registro 11, 14 gennaio 1596 (*more veneto*), 258. For Venetian clothing of that period, see Rosenthal 2013.

¹⁷ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 87, 1 luglio 1619, c. 303r.

¹⁸ For more on Ottoman hunting organisation, see Uzunçarşılı 2014, 403.

¹⁹ According to Pigafetta (2008, 230, 235), Shah Tahmāsp sent to Sultan 40 falcons and they died during the journey.

In September 1580, bailo Paolo Contarini reported that money gifts were included among the presents offered to the Ottoman ruler by the Safavid envoy.²⁰

In some cases, the Safavids included objects taken as trophies during their military raids in the gift packages sent to the Ottoman court. In order to preserve peace with the Ottomans, Shah Abbās dispatched Zakir Agha Qushchi (*falconer*) to the Porte. Among the gifts that he sent to Sultan Ahmet I (r. 1603-1617) was a crown, encrusted with pearls and rubies, which had been taken as booty during the Qizilbash expedition to Kakhetia in 1614 (Munshī 1978, 2: 1093). This crown was valued at 500 royal Iraqi *tūmāns* (Munshī 1978, 2: 1088). In his letter to the Sultan, Shah Abbās wrote:

Since I resolved to raid and conduct holy war against some infidels of Georgia [...]. I marched against them solely for the purpose of exalting the banners of Islam and punishing the rebels. (Munshī 1978, 2: 1093-4)

According to the Venetian bailo Cristoforo Valier, a Safavid envoy presented “a helmet with some book covers that were taken as trophies in Georgia; all were richly jewelled”.²¹

It appears from the reports of Venetian baili that sometimes the gifts brought by the Safavid embassies to the Ottoman court were in sets of nine, in particular when the gifts concerned were clothes, textiles, or weapons. Turkic peoples have always considered the number nine as having a special mystic significance.²² Abu’l Gāzī, the author of *Shajarah-i-turk*, divided his work into nine chapters because “wise men have said: nothing must exceed the number nine” (Abu’l Gāzī 1906, 5). Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid chroniclers often mention ‘nine skies’ and ‘nine vaults of heaven’. The tradition of exchanging gifts held a prominent place in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal court etiquette and diplomatic protocol.²³ The number ‘nine’ also played an

²⁰ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, fz. 14, 3 settembre 1580, c. 223r: “L’Ambasciadore di Persia ... presentato di alcune borse nelle quale vi erano 100 mille aspri”.

²¹ ASVe, Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, fz. 77, 20 agosto 1614, c. 366r.

²² For the significance of the number ‘nine’ for the states and societies in the early modern Turkic Empires see Guliyev 2022b (forthcoming).

²³ Shah Abbās I sent Husain Beg to the ruler of Golconda to lead an embassy who brought some *tuqiz* (nine-pieces) of cloth from the Deccan and Gujarat (Beveridge 1909, 372). According to Abul Fazl, among the gifts from the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmāsp I (r. 1524-1576) to Humayun (r. 1530-1540; 1555-1556), were “twelve times nine pieces of silk, including velvet, satin, European and Yezdi *kamkhāb* and *bafta-shami* (Syrian cloth) and other choice materials” (*Akbarnama* 1907-39, 1: 427-8). A letter dated from the mid-

important role in gift exchanges: it was customary to give presents in groups of nine. The presentation of nine gifts meant that the donor had particularly friendly intentions. Sending and receiving some gifts in groups of nine clearly reveals that the Safavids had preserved this ancient Turkic tradition.

The vast majority of the textile and porcelain gifts sent to the Ottoman sultan Ahmet II (r. 1691-1695) on the occasion of his enthronement in 1692 by the Safavid shah Sultan Huseyn (r. 1694-1722), through his ambassador Kalb'Ali Khan, were in nines and multiples of nine:

Thirty-six cups and bowls of blue, twenty-seven bows, nine pieces of silk fabric, twenty-seven pieces of velvet, nine pieces of cashmere fabric, nine pieces of satin fabric, nine pieces of cotton fabric of various colours, eighteen carpets of small and big sizes. (Hammer-Purgstall 1827-1835, 6: 569)

The usage of the number nine by the Safavids was also recorded by the Italian envoys and travellers visiting the Safavid and Ottoman empires. Michele Membré, a Venetian envoy to the Safavid court in 1539-40, writes:

So, after an hour had passed, he [Shah Tahmāsp I] ordered him [Gāzī Khan Takali] to be summoned; and he came alone with a present to give to the said Shah: there were camels, 45 in number, fine horses 25,²⁴ mules 36, lances of Babylonia about 200, slaves 9 in number and gold coins in a little bag, the quantity of which I do not remember. (Membré 1993, 45)

The gift-giving in nines and multiples of nine on the occasions of the *Novruz* holiday was also described by Membré:

After this the Easter festival which they call *Bairam* was celebrated and many festivities were held, in the way I have already said: the pavilions placed in the *maidan* and polo played, as I have said above. And the next day, the King's Minister, Qadi-yi Jahan, gave a very great present to the Shah, which was, if I remember correctly,

dle of Dhu'l-Hijja 817 (February 1415) from the Ottoman sultan Mehmed I (r. 1413-21) to the Mamluk sultan al-Muayyad Shaykh (r. 1412-21) stated that, "We have sent to you... intended as a gift, five *taqūzāt* of various *Rūmī* fabrics, three *taqūzāt* of the European fabric, and two bundles of Persian fabric" (Muhanna 2010, 191).

24 A. Morton was right in noting that there should be 27 horses in accordance with the old Turkish practice of gift-giving (Membré 1993, 45).

9 fine horses with brocade horse-cloths and saddles of massy gold and with threads of gold in the middle of their hair; and 18 fine mules, and 36 very fine camels; and velvets, satins, many turban-cloths and cups of silver, bottles, gilded belts and I know not how much money in cash. (Membré 1993, 36)

Pietro Della Valle, who visited the Ottoman empire in 1614-16, writes that:

When this prince of Bitlis went to the divan to an audience with *Grand Signor* (Ottoman Sultan) he did not go without gifts, he brought [...] nine pieces of velvet, nine pieces of satin, nine damask fabric, and nine pieces of wool and silk fabric. (Della Valle 1843, 1: 125-6)

Rhoads Murphey points out that:

The processing and parading of the governors and their presentation of the *piskesh*, often deliberately denominated in nines and multiples of nine to accord with ancient Turkic customary practice, provided not only a spectacle for onlookers but also a demonstration that faithfulness to tradition and sensitivity to the proper performance of these rituals of respect and subservience carried a profound significance for the Ottomans. (Murphey 2008, 189)

The practice of sending gifts in by the Safavids in nines and multiples of nine was not limited to the Turco-Muslim powers. The embassy headed by Khoja Fathi Bey sent by Shah Abbās I to the Doge of Venice, Marino Grimani, in 1603 brought nine gifts.²⁵ Another Safavid envoy, Ali Bali, who was sent by Shah Safi, followed a similar pattern by bringing 18 items of silk fabrics for the Doge in 1634.²⁶

²⁵ ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni principi, fz. 13, 5 marzo 1603, unpaginated.

²⁶ ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, 13 maggio 1634, unpaginated.