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SHAH ABBAS I'S DIPLOMATIC VISION IN THE ACCOUNTS OF EUROPEAN TRAVELERS

This article examines the foreign policy and international relations of the Safavid Empire in the early seventeenth century through the accounts of European travelers, diplomats, and ambassadors. The study aims to analyze the diplomatic outlook of Shah Abbas I (1587–1629), his perceptions of European powers, and his approach to international politics based on the observations recorded by the Italian traveler Pietro della Valle and the Spanish ambassador Don García de Silva y Figueroa. Employing comparative-historical and source-critical methodologies, the research evaluates the reliability, context, and historical significance of these travel narratives as sources for the study of Safavid diplomacy and foreign relations.

Particular attention is devoted to Don García de Silva y Figueroa's diplomatic mission to the Safavid court, the development of Safavid–Spanish relations, Shah Abbas I's policy toward the Ottoman Empire, and his efforts to establish and strengthen political contacts with European states. The analysis demonstrates that the Safavid ruler actively pursued a foreign policy aimed at creating strategic alliances against the Ottoman Empire and sought to position the Safavid state as an influential actor within the broader political landscape of Eurasia.

The accounts of Pietro della Valle reveal that Shah Abbas I possessed a remarkable degree of knowledge concerning European political affairs, the Papacy, the governmental structures of European monarchies, and the religious conflicts that shaped early modern Europe. These observations indicate that the Safavid court was not isolated from contemporary international developments but was well informed about major political and religious transformations occurring beyond its borders. The evidence further suggests that Shah Abbas regarded diplomacy as an essential instrument of statecraft and actively employed diplomatic missions, correspondence, and negotiations to advance Safavid interests.

The study concludes that Shah Abbas I should be regarded not only as a successful military commander and state builder but also as a farsighted diplomat and statesman with a broad geopolitical vision. His foreign policy reflected pragmatism, flexibility, and a sophisticated understanding of international affairs. European travel accounts and diplomatic reports constitute indispensable historical sources for understanding the place of the Safavid Empire within the international system of the early modern period and for reassessing the nature of political and diplomatic interactions between Europe and the Islamic world in the seventeenth century.

Key words: Shah Abbas I, Safavid Empire, Pietro della Valle, Don García de Silva Figueroa, foreign policy, diplomatic relations, European travelers.

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ДИПЛОМАТИЧНИЙ СВІТОГЛЯД ШАХА АББАСА І У СВІДЧЕННЯХ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКИХ МАНДРІВНИКІВ

У статті досліджуються зовнішня політика та міжнародні зв'язки держави Сефевідів на початок XVII століття крізь призму свідчень європейських мандрівників, дипломатів і послів. Основною метою дослідження є аналіз дипломатичного світогляду шаха Аббаса I, його уявлень про європейські держави, а також підходів до міжнародної політики на основі повідомлень і спостережень італійського мандрівника П'єтро делья Валле та іспанського дипломата Дона Гарсії де Сільви-і-Фігероа. Дослідження ґрунтується на порівняльно-історичному методі, критичному аналізі джерел та міждисциплінарному підході до вивчення дипломатичної історії ранньомодерного періоду.

Особливу увагу приділено посольству Дона Гарсії де Сільви-і-Фігероа до двору Сефевідів, розвитку сефевідсько-іспанських дипломатичних відносин, політиці шаха Аббаса I щодо Османської імперії та його прагненню

до розширення контактів із європейськими державами. Аналіз свідчень європейських авторів показує, що сефевідський правитель уважно стежив за політичними процесами в Європі та прагнув використовувати міжнародні суперечності для зміцнення позицій своєї держави на Близькому Сході.

Важливе місце в дослідженні займають відомості П'єтро делла Валле, які свідчать про високий рівень поінформованості шаха Аббаса I щодо діяльності Папського престолу, політичних інститутів європейських держав, а також релігійних конфліктів, що визначали розвиток Європи в ранньомодерну добу. Джерела демонструють, що шах Аббас I розглядав дипломатію як один із ключових інструментів державного управління та намагався інтегрувати державу Сефевідів у ширшу систему міжнародних відносин.

Результати дослідження дозволяють дійти висновку, що шах Аббас I був не лише видатним військовим реформатором і правителем, але й далекоглядним дипломатом та державним діячем із широким геополітичним баченням. Його зовнішня політика характеризувалася прагматизмом, гнучкістю та здатністю враховувати зміни міжнародної ситуації. Європейські подорожні записки та дипломатичні звіти становлять важливий комплекс історичних джерел, який дає змогу глибше зрозуміти місце держави Сефевідів у системі міжнародних відносин ранньомодерного світу та оцінити її роль у формуванні дипломатичних контактів між Сходом і Заходом.

Ключові слова: Шах Аббас I, держава Сефевідів, П'єтро делла Валле, Дон Гарсія де Сільва Фігероа, зовнішня політика, дипломатичні відносини, європейські мандрівники.

Statement of the Problem. The foreign policy of Shah Abbas I and the diplomatic relations of the Safavid state with European powers have attracted considerable scholarly attention. However, the political views of Shah Abbas I as reflected in the accounts of European travelers and diplomats have not been sufficiently examined. In particular, the observations of Pietro della Valle and Don García de Silva y Figueroa provide valuable information regarding the Safavid ruler's perception of Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and contemporary international politics. The problem addressed in this article is the extent to which these travel accounts contribute to our understanding of Safavid diplomatic thought and foreign policy during the early seventeenth century.

Purpose of the Article. The purpose of this article is to analyze Shah Abbas I's political and diplomatic views through the travel accounts of Pietro della Valle and Don García de Silva y Figueroa. The study aims to examine the Safavid ruler's attitudes toward European states, the Papacy, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as to evaluate the role of diplomacy in the foreign policy of the Safavid state. Special attention is devoted to the diplomatic exchanges between the Safavid court and European representatives in the context of early modern international relations.

Research Analysis. The study is based on a comparative analysis of primary travel narratives and relevant secondary literature. Particular attention is given to the writings of Pietro della Valle and Don García de Silva y Figueroa, which provide first-hand observations of the Safavid court and its diplomatic practices. The research demonstrates that Shah Abbas I possessed a broad understanding of international affairs and employed diplomacy as an important instrument of state policy. The findings also highlight the significance of European travel accounts as historical sources for reconstructing Safavid-European relations and the geopolitical vision of Shah Abbas I.

1. Don García de Silva y Figueroa's Embassy and Safavid-Spanish Diplomatic Relations

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Safavid Empire occupied an important position in the diplomatic calculations of several European powers seeking potential allies against the Ottoman Empire. Within this broader geopolitical context, the embassy of Don García de Silva y Figueroa, dispatched by King Philip III of Spain, represented one of the most significant diplomatic initiatives aimed at establishing closer relations with the Safavid court. After departing from Spain in 1614 and undertaking a lengthy and demanding journey, the Spanish envoy eventually arrived in Qazvin, then one of the principal centers of Safavid political authority, in 1618 (Amanat, 2017: 93–94).

The primary purpose of Silva y Figueroa's mission was to strengthen political ties between Spain and the Safavid state, explore possibilities for cooperation against the Ottoman Empire, and promote sustained diplomatic engagement between the two monarchies. Contemporary accounts indicate that his arrival was marked by elaborate ceremonies that reflected the importance attached by the Safavid court to foreign diplomacy. According to both Mohammad Tahir Vahid and Pietro della Valle, the Spanish ambassador was received with exceptional honor and granted a series of formal audiences at court (Newman, 2006: 52–58).

On 17 June 1618, Don García de Silva was granted an audience with Shah Abbas I. During this meeting, he presented a letter from the Spanish monarch together with an impressive collection of diplomatic gifts (Newman, 2006: 52–58). These included precious objects crafted from gold and silver, luxury items adorned with valuable gemstones, firearms, military equipment, and examples of European craftsmanship. Such gifts served not merely as ceremonial offerings but also as tangible expressions of Spain's desire to cultivate a closer political relationship with the Safavid ruler.

The significance of Silva y Figueroa's embassy extends beyond the immediate diplomatic objectives of the mission. His observations, later recorded in his travel narrative, provide valuable information concerning the political institutions of the Safavid state, courtly culture, diplomatic protocol, and the empire's position within the international order of the early modern period. Consequently, his embassy should be regarded not only as an important diplomatic episode but also as a major source for the study of Safavid-European relations.

The activities of the Spanish envoy further illustrate Shah Abbas I's broader diplomatic strategy. While maintaining military pressure on the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid ruler simultaneously sought to expand contacts with European powers in order to strengthen his international position and create a favorable balance of power. Such initiatives contributed to the growing prestige of the Safavid state and reinforced its status as one of the leading political forces of the contemporary Middle East.

Pietro della Valle and several other European visitors viewed Safavid Iran as a culturally unfamiliar and religiously distinct environment. Reflecting on the behavior of Christian communities under Ottoman rule, della Valle observed that Catholics and other Christians in Constantinople often set aside their internal disagreements when confronted with common challenges. According to his account, Christian diplomats and merchants abroad frequently acted collectively in defense of their shared interests despite confessional divisions. In their perception, Muslims represented a common political and religious adversary.

These remarks suggest that, in the minds of many European observers, both the Safavid and Ottoman states were frequently grouped together within a broader conception of the Muslim world (Bayramlı, Shabiyev, 2016: 110). Such attitudes reveal the persistence of confessional perspectives in early modern diplomacy and international relations.

Della Valle also records a private meeting between Shah Abbas I and an Ottoman envoy concerning the possibility of a peace settlement. According to his account, the Shah strongly favored peace but insisted that any agreement must preserve both his political dignity and the prestige of the Safavid state. He was unwilling to accept Ottoman demands requiring the relinquishment of disputed territories or the payment of regular silk tribute. Nevertheless, he was prepared to send silk to the Ottoman sultan as a diplomatic gift on one or even two occasions as a gesture of goodwill (Matthee, 1999: 33–48]. What he categorically rejected was the permanent cession of territories claimed by the Safavid state.

During the same period, diplomatic exchanges with European representatives continued. When Don García de Silva visited the royal court, Shah Abbas organized a grand banquet in his honor (Uzuncharshili, 1988: 25–47). More than one hundred participants attended the event, including foreign diplomats, military officials, and court dignitaries representing diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Pietro della Valle himself was among the guests present at this gathering.

The Spanish ambassador brought gifts whose total value reportedly reached one hundred thousand écus, together with one hundred camel-loads of pepper imported from India (Newman, 2006: 52–58). A portion of these luxury goods was distributed among influential members of the Safavid elite in Isfahan. The diplomatic gifts presented to the Shah included gold and silver vessels, crystal objects, emeralds, diamonds, jeweled chains, richly decorated saddles and bridles, bows, arrows, matchlock firearms, military equipment, and finely crafted ceremonial weapons. Among the most remarkable items was a jeweled sword and dagger associated with the Spanish monarch himself.

According to Pietro della Valle, these gifts were selected with particular care because the Spanish court was aware of Shah Abbas's personal interest in craftsmanship, especially metalworking and carpentry. Additional presents included European bows, Indian-made lances, luxurious textiles, paintings, and even a portrait of the newly crowned Queen of France (Pietro della Valle, 1843: 660–665; Valle, Pietro della, 1843: 175–179). The composition of these gifts reflected not only diplomatic courtesy but also a deliberate effort to appeal to the Shah's personal tastes and thereby strengthen political goodwill between the two courts.

2. Shah Abbas I's Diplomatic Strategy in the Accounts of Pietro della Valle

Pietro della Valle's observations highlight the significant role of diplomacy in the foreign policy of the Safavid state during the early seventeenth century. While Shah Abbas I consistently sought to maintain peaceful relations with the Ottoman Empire, he remained unwilling to accept concessions that could undermine the political authority, prestige, or territorial integrity of his realm. This position reflects a diplomatic strategy that combined political pragmatism with a firm commitment to safeguarding state interests.

At the same time, the reception accorded to Don García de Silva y Figueroa and the valuable gifts exchanged during his embassy demonstrate the importance attached by the Safavid court to relations with European powers. The Spanish mission was not only

an attempt to explore possible cooperation against the Ottomans but also an indication of the growing international significance of the Safavid monarchy. Through ceremonial diplomacy, political negotiations, and the cultivation of foreign alliances, Shah Abbas sought to strengthen the position of his state within the wider geopolitical landscape of the period.

Consequently, Pietro della Valle's account constitutes an important historical source for understanding the diplomatic priorities of Shah Abbas I. His testimony reveals a ruler who skillfully combined negotiation, strategic calculation, and international engagement in order to preserve peace where possible while defending the interests and sovereignty of the Safavid state. The evidence provided by the Italian traveler confirms that Safavid diplomacy under Shah Abbas I was characterized by flexibility, political foresight, and an acute awareness of the changing balance of power in both the Middle East and Europe.

3. Shah Abbas I's political and diplomatic vision

The observations recorded by Pietro della Valle suggest that diplomacy occupied a central place in Safavid foreign policy during the early seventeenth century. Although Shah Abbas I consistently favored the preservation of peace with the Ottoman Empire, he remained unwilling to accept any settlement that might compromise the political prestige, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of his state. His approach demonstrates a careful balance between diplomatic pragmatism and the protection of dynastic interests. At the same time, the ceremonial reception of Don García de Silva y Figueroa and the exchange of luxurious diplomatic gifts illustrate the growing importance of Safavid relations with European powers. The activities of the Spanish embassy not only reflected attempts to explore cooperation against the Ottomans but also highlighted the increasing international standing of the Safavid monarchy. In this respect, Pietro della Valle's testimony serves as an important source for understanding the flexibility and strategic vision that characterized Safavid diplomacy under Shah Abbas I.

Pietro della Valle's encounter with Shah Abbas I provides valuable insight into the Safavid ruler's perception of Europe and the Christian world. His account reveals that the Shah's interests extended beyond military affairs and regional politics. He displayed considerable curiosity regarding the institutional structure of the Papacy, the organization of the Catholic Church, and the broader political situation in Europe. Such inquiries indicate that Shah Abbas closely followed developments beyond the Islamic world and possessed a sophisticated understanding of contemporary international affairs.

According to della Valle, the Shah questioned him extensively about the Pope, his age, health, election procedures, and the authority exercised by the papal office. He also sought information about the College of Cardinals and the administrative mechanisms of the Catholic Church. During the conversation, Shah Abbas reportedly translated parts of the discussion into Persian for members of his entourage and ensured that they fully understood the topics being addressed. Della Valle further notes that the Shah occasionally acted as an intermediary in conversations between individuals of different linguistic backgrounds, demonstrating both his intellectual curiosity and his active participation in diplomatic dialogue (Pietro della Valle, 1843: 656–659).

One particularly revealing aspect of the conversation concerns the Shah's discussion of Armenian Catholic communities living in the regions of Nakhchivan and Alinja. His detailed knowledge of their settlements, religious affiliations, and social characteristics suggests a ruler who was well informed about the diverse religious groups residing within his realm. This awareness reflects not only administrative competence but also an appreciation of the broader religious landscape that shaped Safavid relations with Christian communities and European powers.

The dialogue also sheds light on Shah Abbas's views regarding European politics. He expressed the opinion that the Spanish monarchy should adopt a more resolute stance toward the Ottoman Empire and attributed the relative weakness of European powers to their internal divisions. His familiarity with the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, particularly his reference to the Lutherans, demonstrates a noteworthy awareness of the political and confessional tensions that characterized early modern Europe. Such remarks indicate that the Shah closely monitored developments beyond his immediate geopolitical environment.

From this perspective, Shah Abbas emerges not merely as a regional ruler but as a statesman capable of interpreting international affairs on a broader scale. His comments reveal an understanding of the relationship between political unity, effective leadership, and military success. The image that emerges from Pietro della Valle's narrative is that of a ruler who regarded foreign policy as an integral component of statecraft and who actively sought to position the Safavid state within the wider political framework of the early modern world.

Therefore, Pietro della Valle's account represents a valuable source for examining Shah Abbas I's diplomatic outlook and geopolitical thinking. The evidence suggests that the Safavid ruler was well informed

about European political structures, the institution of the Papacy, and the internal challenges facing the Christian world. His observations demonstrate a capacity to evaluate international developments beyond regional concerns and confirm the existence of a broad political vision that informed Safavid foreign policy during one of the most significant periods of the dynasty's history.

4. Shah Abbas I and his perception of "the West"

The conversations recorded by Pietro della Valle provide important insights into Shah Abbas I's understanding of contemporary international politics and his perception of Europe. The Safavid ruler's remarks reveal not only a keen awareness of regional affairs but also a sophisticated understanding of political and religious developments within the Christian world. According to contemporary accounts, Shah Abbas used his discussions with della Valle to express opinions about European rulers and to offer observations on the political challenges confronting Western powers (Uzuncharshili, 1988: 140).

The dialogue demonstrates that Shah Abbas possessed a notable degree of familiarity with the Papacy, the Spanish monarchy, and the religious divisions that characterized early modern Europe. His questions concerning the structure of the Catholic Church, the authority of the Pope, and the political influence of religious institutions suggest a genuine interest in understanding the foundations of European political power. Equally significant is his apparent awareness of the conflicts generated by the Protestant Reformation. By identifying the Lutherans as one of the principal challenges facing the Spanish monarchy, the Shah displayed an understanding of the confessional tensions that had reshaped European politics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

During one of his conversations with Pietro della Valle, Shah Abbas reportedly remarked that the King of Spain should lead his forces personally "as a soldier," and either achieve victory or recover Jerusalem (Pietro della Valle, 1843: 660). This statement reflects more than a simple criticism of European rulers. Rather, it reveals the Shah's conviction that effective leadership required personal commitment, military courage, and direct involvement in state affairs. In his view, the inability of European powers to challenge the Ottoman Empire successfully stemmed largely from political fragmentation and weak leadership.

Della Valle responded by explaining the difficulties faced by the Spanish monarchy, emphasizing internal problems and the absence of a unified political and military front against the Ottomans. The Shah's reaction to these explanations is particularly

revealing. He argued that a ruler must first establish authority, command his army personally, and ensure political cohesion before pursuing broader foreign-policy objectives. Such observations reflect a pragmatic understanding of statecraft and correspond closely with Shah Abbas's own political experience. Throughout his reign, he had strengthened central authority, reorganized the military, and personally directed major campaigns, thereby transforming the Safavid state into one of the most powerful political entities of the region.

The Shah's comments also reveal elements of political realism. He viewed internal stability and unity as essential prerequisites for successful foreign policy and regarded strong leadership as the cornerstone of state power. His advice to European rulers therefore represented more than casual diplomatic conversation; it reflected a broader political philosophy shaped by his own experience as a monarch and military commander.

Taken together, Pietro della Valle's observations portray Shah Abbas I as far more than a successful military ruler. They reveal a statesman who closely followed international developments, possessed considerable knowledge of European political and religious affairs, and evaluated global events through a broad geopolitical lens. His reflections on the weaknesses of European states, the role of political leadership, and the importance of internal cohesion offer valuable insight into Safavid political thought and diplomatic culture. Consequently, della Valle's account remains an indispensable source for understanding Shah Abbas I's worldview and his place within the wider international environment of the early modern era.

Conclusions. The accounts of European travelers and diplomats provide valuable evidence for understanding the foreign policy and diplomatic vision of Shah Abbas I and the Safavid state in the early seventeenth century. The observations of Pietro della Valle and Don García de Silva y Figueroa demonstrate that Safavid diplomacy was not limited to regional affairs but was closely connected with broader international developments involving the Ottoman Empire, European monarchies, and the Papacy.

The analysis of these sources reveals that Shah Abbas I pursued a pragmatic and flexible foreign policy aimed at strengthening the political position of the Safavid state while preserving its territorial integrity and international prestige. His willingness to engage in diplomatic negotiations with the Ottoman Empire, combined with his efforts to cultivate relations with European powers, reflects a carefully balanced strategy designed to secure both peace and political

advantage. The reception of foreign embassies, the exchange of diplomatic gifts, and the maintenance of regular contacts with European representatives illustrate the importance of diplomacy as an instrument of Safavid statecraft.

The testimonies of Pietro della Valle further demonstrate that Shah Abbas I possessed a remarkable understanding of contemporary international affairs. His familiarity with the political structure of European states, the institution of the Papacy, and the religious conflicts that shaped early modern Europe indicates a ruler who closely followed developments beyond the boundaries of his own realm. His comments on the internal divisions of European powers and the necessity of strong leadership reveal a sophisticated political outlook grounded in practical experience and strategic thinking.

The diplomatic mission of Don García de Silva y Figueroa likewise highlights the growing signi-

ficance of Safavid–European relations during this period. The Spanish embassy represented an important attempt to establish political cooperation against the Ottoman Empire and reflected the increasing role of the Safavid state in the international balance of power. The detailed descriptions preserved in European travel narratives therefore constitute indispensable sources for reconstructing the political culture, diplomatic practices, and international position of the Safavid Empire.

In conclusion, the evidence examined in this study confirms that Shah Abbas I should be regarded not only as a successful military commander and state-builder but also as a skilled diplomat and farsighted statesman. His foreign policy combined military strength, diplomatic engagement, and geopolitical awareness, enabling the Safavid state to emerge as one of the most influential powers of the early modern Middle East.

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