DIPLOMAŢIE ŞI DARURI

FROM THE DOGE TO THE SHAH: VENETIAN DIPLOMATIC GIFTS FOR THE SAFAVID EMPIRE*

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INTRODUCTION

Gift-giving was an important feature of early modern diplomacy and as a tangible expression of goodwill and generosity, it helped build ties and maintain relationships. The gift was not only a sign of goodwill. As means of symbolic communication, diplomatic gifts conveyed political messages. Apart from facilitating diplomatic encounters, diplomatic gifts revealed the relative status of states as well as their political, economic, and cultural intentions. Furthermore, the rulers used such gifts to display their power and wealth. The emergence of the Safavid Empire in the early sixteenth century coincided with the sustained eastward expansion of the Ottoman Empire, and the European powers, especially Venice, explored the possibilities of forming an alliance against the Ottomans with the involvement of the Safavids. The Ottoman threat and mutual commercial interests contributed to the emergence and development of diplomatic, cultural, and trade relations between the Republic of Venice and the Safavid Empire. The Safavid-Venetian diplomatic relationship was generally characterized by its infrequent nature and only the reign of Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) witnessed a relative increase in diplomatic contacts between these states.

Although the existing historiography notes the important role of appropriating material objects as a medium of diplomacy, the significance of the gifts in mediating the cross-cultural diplomatic encounters between the Safavids and the Venetians remains understudied. The lack of historical interest in Safavid-Venetian gift exchanges is rather surprising since there has been considerable scholarly interest in the agency of objects in Venice's diplomatic relations with the Islamic Middle East, particularly with the Ottomans over the last two decades.[1] While it is true that the

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[1] Maria P. Pedani, *Venetian Hosts and Ottoman Guests in the Venedik Sarayı in Constantinople (c. 1670–1681)*, in "Annali di Ca' Foscari," Serie orientale, 54, 2018, pp. 11–26; Luca Molà, *Material*

ambassadorial ceremonies were described in several works,[2] little is said there about the nature of the gifts themselves. While particular gifts which were brought to Venice among other Safavid luxury presents have been a subject of study,[3] the Venetian gift-giving to the Safavids has not received scholarly attention. The present study addresses this lacuna by examining the Venetian gift-giving to the Safavid court during the first third of the seventeenth century: What types of gifts did the Venetians send to the Safavid shahs? Were the gifts chosen by the Venetians tailored to meet the desires of the shah? How did the Venetians appeal to the latter's taste and preferences? The paper will also discuss the institutional aspect of the Venetian gift-giving by trying to answer the following question: On the Venetians' side, who prepared diplomatic gifts and with what funds? Finally, we will briefly carry out a comparative analysis of the Venetian return gifts to specific Safavid and Ottoman envoys and members of their retinues. Was there a difference or similarity between the gifts that were bestowed on envoys representing these powers?

VENETIAN GIFTS FOR THE SAFAVID SHAHS

Following the accession of Shah Abbas I to the Safavid throne, a new era of relations with the *Serenissima* started, which was marked by the preponderance of trade issues in bilateral relations. Safavid envoys, combining the roles of royal agents and merchants, were tasked to sell royal silk and to purchase the things needed for the royal household. Venetians called this kind of envoy "latore di una lettera" – bearer of a letter.[4] They usually were received in Venice warmly and, on their departure from the lagoon city, they were presented with return gifts. The return gifts to the Safavid side were divided into two different sets: first, gifts for the shah, and second, departure gifts bestowed on the envoy and their entourage in recognition of their service in diplomatic relations.

The custom of assessing and recording the monetary value of gifts brought by foreign missions seems to have been a common practice observed by early modern

Diplomacy: Venetian Luxury Gifts for the Ottoman Empire in the Late Renaissance, in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. by Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello, Cambridge, New York, 2018, pp. 56–87; Ovidiu Cristea, *Diplomacy and Gifts in Constantinople: The Book of Accounts of Bailo Piero Bragadin (1524–1526)*, in "Revista istorică," XXIX, 2018, nos. 1–2, pp. 15–32; E. Natalie Rothman, *Accounting for Gifts: The Poetics and Pragmatics of Material Circulations in Venetian-Ottoman Diplomacy*, in *Cultures of Empire: Rethinking Venetian Rule, 1400–1700. Essays in Honour of Benjamin Arbel*, ed. by Georg Christ, Franz-Julius Morche, Leiden, 2020, pp. 414–454.

[2] G. Rota, *Safavid Envoys in Venice*, in *Diplomatisches Zeremoniell in Europa und im Mittleren Osten in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by R. Kauz, G. Rota, J.P. Niederkorn, Vienna, 2009, pp. 213–245.

[3] *I doni di Shah Abbas il Grande alla Serenissima. Relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia Safavide*, ed. by E.G. Mangili, Venice, 2013; S.A. Casale, *The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle*, in "Art History," 38, 2015, no. 4, pp. 636–651.

[4] *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, Turin, 1865, p. 38.

states. The value of the return gifts was determined by considerations of the status and the prestige of both donor and recipient, as well as by political expediency and the purpose to be achieved.[5] The Venetians managed to understand the reciprocity-based nature of gift-giving in Safavid society. It appears from the Venetian registers that the basic concept of appraising return gifts was reciprocity.[6] Return gifts were likely calculated according to the value of the received gifts and the political status of the foreign state. For example, with its decision dated 11 June 1600, the Venetian Senate granted permission to the College to spend up to 200 ducats on gifts for Shah Abbas I "in reciprocation of the presents" brought by his envoy Sujaddin Asad bey.[7] Similarly, in 1622, the Venetian government granted authority to the College to offer return gifts to the Safavid shah with a value corresponding to the presents brought by the Safavid delegation led by Khoja Shahsuvar and Haji Eyvaz.[8] However, archival records do not provide us with details on how the received Safavid gifts were evaluated in terms of money.

The final decision on the contents and the value of the return gifts for the shah and his delegations was made by the Venetian Senate. The officials of *Rason Vecchie* were responsible for providing return gifts to the Safavid ruler and visiting envoys, in addition to the hosting and entertainment of the latter. The amount spent by the Venetian government on gifts for the shah in 1603 added up to 1,300 ducats.[9] The cost of the gifts sent from Venice to Shah Abbas I through Khoja Shahsuvar in 1622 was 600 ducats.[10] In total, 500 ducats were spent by the College on the gifts to Shah Safi I.[11]

The Republic took the different tastes and needs of the Safavid court into consideration. Some gifts were even specially designed according to purchase lists sent from the Safavid court. The inventory of Venetian gifts to Shah Abbas I indicates the diversity in taste among the Safavids. The luxury goods selected for important foreign rulers were the best among the Venetian products, and therefore they served as a promotion of local products and an advertisement for the city's industrial and artisanal skills.[12]

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[5] Franz Rosenthal, *Hiba*, in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. III, Leiden, London, 1986, p. 344a.

[6] Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter: ASVe), Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli (hereafter: SdeLC), register 23, 24 October 1635, c. 124r: "Noi avemo stimato bene di corrispondere con altri doni a lei."

[7] Idem, Collegio, Cerimoniali (hereafter: CC), register 3, fol. 13b (11 June 1600): "… fù data libertà all'Eccellentissimo Collegio di spender in ricompensa del sudetto presente fin ducati duecento."

[8] Idem, SdeLC, binding (*filza*) 16, 14 October 1622, unpaginated: "… sia data libertà al Collegio nostro di valersi presenti gnare all'Agente del Serenissimo Re di Persia da portare in dono alla Maestà sua la summa di onze cinquecento in circa di alcuni pezzi d'argente dorati che hora si trovano nella cecca nostra in corispondenza delli quatro tapeti, et delle cinquanta pezze tra lisari, et giurini."

[9] E.A. Cicogna, *Delle inscrizioni veneziane*, vol. V, Venice, 1842, p. 647.

[10] *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia: nuovi documenti e regesti*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, Venice, 1866, p. 29.

[11] ASVe, SdeLC, register 23, 24 October 1635, c. 123v.

[12] Luca Molà, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

WEAPONS AND ARMOR GIFTS

The arms symbolized power and military competence. In some ways, presenting weapons as gifts could be a sign of the trust and alliance between the exchanging parties. These objects were among the Venetian gifts particularly favored by the Safavid shahs. Demands by the Safavid shahs for suits of armor and firearms – particularly chain mails (*zacco*[13]) and arquebuses – had already been known to the Venetian government. The Safavid preference for the *zacco* (light chain mail armor) could be explained by the fact that all-metal body armor was not appropriate for the Safavid cavalry, which represented the backbone of the Qizilbash army, because it hindered them from making swift attacks. The inclusion of arquebuses in the gift packages also reflected the effort to appeal to the personal interests of the shahs, as it was well-known that some of them had a passion for weapons.

The Venetian registers mention three instances of presenting armor and firearms as diplomatic gifts to the Safavids. The first case was documented in connection with Safavid envoy Asad bey's visit to Venice in 1600. The Safavid embassy was comprised of eight people.[14] As a return gift to Shah Abbas I, the Venetian government sent two arquebuses and six chain mails with Asad bey.[15] However, he could not deliver these gifts to the shah because of his death in Baghdad on the way home. According to Fathi bey, the pasha of Baghdad made an inventory of the gifts Asad bey carried from Venice and sent these gifts to Shah Abbas.[16] It appears from Angelo Gradenigo's speech during his audience at the Venetian College that it was he who had consigned these presents to the Safavid court.[17]

Another Safavid envoy, Fathi bey, who came to Venice in 1603 on both diplomatic and trade missions, experienced a similar fate. Fathi bey's embassy was the biggest known mission comprised of nine attendants.[18] Upon his departure from Venice, he was entrusted with four arquebuses, two chain mails, and a full-body mail.[19] He set off from Venice in September 1603 and sailed on the galley *La Nave Moresina e Agustina*,[20] which was heading for Alexandretta, under captain Batta

[13] *Zacco* or *giaco* was a flexible and light chain mail. Giuseppe Boerio, *Dizionario del dialetto veneziano*, Venice, 1829, p. 729.

[14] ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni principi (hereafter: CEP), binding 11, 8 June 1600, unpaginated.

[15] *Ibidem*, binding 12, 17 May 1602, unpaginated.

[16] Idem, Quarentia criminal, binding 114, 3 March 1603, fols. not numbered: "Disse anco che … altro Persiano, che fu qui, et mori in viaggio, et havendo il Bassia di Babilonia fatto inventario di tutto … mandò al Re di Persia le lett[er]e, et il p[rese]te, Sua M[aes]ta l'hebbe."

[17] Idem, CEP, binding 12, 17 May 1602, unpaginated: "Serenissima furono consegnate due anni sono a Efet beg persiano (1), che avendo portate a S.S. lettere del re di Persia, gli furono date colla risposta per appresentar ad esso re, cioè sei zacchi (2) e due archibusi, il quale Efet beg morì in detta città di Babilonia."

[18] *Ibidem*, binding 13, 5 March 1603, unpaginated.

[19] E.A. Cicogna, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 648.

[20] The owner of this ship was Francesco Moresini. ASVe, SdeLC, binding 10, 23 December 1604, unpaginated.

Tagier. When he arrived in Alexandretta, a great part of his goods and merchandise were confiscated by the local Ottoman authorities and he himself was arrested.[21] However, not all goods, including the four arquebuses given as gifts, were confiscated and the Venetian consul in Aleppo, Giovanni Francesco Sagredo, later transferred these goods to Venice on the same galley. In 1610, these arquebuses along with other items were consigned to the Safavid emissary Khoja Safar, who, by the order of Shah Abbas, had come to Venice to retrieve them. These items had to wait until 1618 to be delivered to the shah. In June 1618, the Spanish envoy Garcia de Silva Figueroa presented these firearms together with other gifts sent by Philip III. According to the Carmelite report, "when the arquebuses and muskets arrived, he called for one to inspect it (the one which he noticed to be the largest) and showed signs of great satisfaction at seeing it."[22]

The successive shahs continued to be keen on acquiring military technology from Venice. In 1635, the Venetian government sent two muskets "for carrying on horseback with their leather pouches" as diplomatic gifts to Shah Safi I. Historic circumstances are mirrored by the presence of the firearms, which could be related to Shah Abbas's military reforms, one of whose objectives was to expand the corps of musketeers (*tufangchi*). This partly explains why musketeers became an increasingly important unit of the Safavid army subsequently. According to Jean Chardin, during the first decade of the rule of Shah Suleyman I (r. 1666–1694), the number of Safavid musketeers rose to 12,000 men[23].

Armors and weapons obtained through diplomatic gift exchanges did not meet the increased demands of the Safavid court for such objects. Therefore, in the early eighteenth century, the Safavid envoys, in addition to their diplomatic tasks, were commissioned to purchase arms along with other needed items. In 1603, for the needs of the Safavid court, Fathi bey bought 114 chain mails in Venice.[24] Here we can make a distinction between weapons and armors clearly made to be offered as gifts, on the one hand, and those purchased by the Safavid merchant-envoys. Firearms and armors offered as gifts to the shah were highly decorated and carried marks of luxury and richness. For example, in 1603, the arquebuses (handguns) that were sent as diplomatic gifts to Shah Abbas I were decorated on one end with gold and studded with pearls.

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[21] *Ibidem*: "Le quali mercantie, et denari furono consignati a lui medesimo al suo disbarco eccetto casse quatro in Alessandreta, dove subito giunto fù fatto prigone di Turchi, che gli levarano ogni suo havere eccetto le casse quatro predetto rimaste in Nave con di più tre archebusi et una armatura, et che essendo state ricondotte dette case."

[22] *Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, ed. by H. Chick, vol. I, London, 1939, p. 240.

[23] John Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient, enrichis d'un grand nombre de belles figures en taille-douce, représentant les antiquités et les choses remarquables du pays*, vol. V, Paris, 1811, p. 305.

[24] *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, p. 47; E.A. Cicogna, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 647.

In addition to Venice, Shah Abbas actively requested firearms from Russia, England, and Portugal,[25] which is evident from his letters to Muscovite rulers. In 1591, in his letter to Boris Godunov, Shah Abbas asked him to allow the Safavid envoy Haji Khosrov to purchase "all kinds of things needed" for the royal household, and above all military equipment.[26] The Muscovites provided the shah particularly with chain mails (*pansyr'*) and arquebuses.[27] According to the Carmelite report, in 1621, the representatives of the English East India Company presented to Shah Abbas 1,500 arquebuses along with other gifts, but "of all this he accepted only the arquebuses."[28] This piece of evidence once again confirms the shah's personal interest in the purchase of firearms.

It should be noted that the export of arms to Islamic regions, particularly to the Ottoman Empire, was forbidden by papal bulls. However, as it is clear from the Safavid-Venetian gift exchanges, in many instances, the papal bans did not prevent the Venetians from supplying the Safavids with military technology. The export of weapons to the Safavid Empire might be explained by the fact that the Safavids were frequently in conflict with the Ottomans during the reign of Shah Abbas I. In other words, supplying the Ottoman rivals with military technology did not constitute an infringement of the abovementioned papal decrees.

By delivering highly developed firearms, the Venetians tried to demonstrate their superior technical knowledge. In this sense, diplomatic gifts could act as a driving force for technological innovation. In order to satisfy the continuous requests for original objects coming from the Ottoman court, from the 1580s onward, the government of Venice launched public competitions among skilled craftsmen with the request of inventing procedures that would allow the production of new goods, thus pushing forward the technical boundaries of the Venetian artisans.[29]

SILVERWARE AND GLASSWARE GIFTS

The most frequent type of gift, other than arquebuses, was tableware, mostly silverware. Luxury tableware presents that were sent to Shah Abbas I were made of precious metals, which proves once again that the choice of gifts was related to the status attributed to the recipient. Most of these types of gifts were gold-plated. Gilded items are among the expensive objects that transferred material value across space and time. With its sixteen items, the tableware articles represented around

[25] Rudi Matthee, *Firearms*, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. IX, p. 621; R. Matthee, *Unwalled Cities and Restless Nomads: Firearms and Artillery in Safavid Iran*, in *Safavid Persia*, ed. by C. Melville, London, 1996, pp. 389–416.

[26] *Pamyatniki diplomaticheskikh i torgovykh snosheniy Moskovskoy Rusi s Persiyey*, ed. by N.I. Veselovskiy, vol. I, Saint Petersburg, 1890, p. 190; P.P. Bushev, *Istoriya posol'stv v diplomaticheskikh otnosheniy Russkogo i Iranskogo gosudarstv v 1586–1612 gg (po russkim arkhivam)*, vol. I, Moscow, 1976, p. 183.

[27] *Pamyatniki diplomaticheskikh i torgovykh snosheniy*, ed. by N.I. Veselovskiy, p. 97.

[28] *Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia*, ed. by H. Chick, p. 255.

[29] *Global Gifts*, ed. by Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello, p. 30.

two-thirds of the total gifts listed in an inventory of 1603 (See Appendix 1). The first two items of this type were large silver bowls with their pitchers. Then, two basins with their vases appear on the list. The first one was a gilded silver basin with its gilded vase, while the second was a white silver engraved basin with a vase. The tableware category of the register ended with two engraved silver flagons (flasks) with their glasses, two engraved cups and two saucers of silver. In 1622, the Venetian government sent several gold-plated silver vases of 500 ounces through Safavid envoy Khoja Shahsuvar to Shah Safi I.[30]

Venetian glassware was highly prized as well in the Safavid Empire and this product was not just an item of trade. It also represented a part of the gifts that the Venetian Republic sent to the Safavid Empire during the first third of the seventeenth century.[31] Furthermore, eyeglasses and mirrors were also part of the purchase list of Fathi bey, who had been commissioned to buy the necessary goods for the Safavid royal household. Luxury glass products made of rock crystal and *cristallo* were among the most prized gifts.

GIFTS FOR THE SAFAVID ENVOYS

As it is evident from Fathi bey's case, Safavid envoys and their attendants who visited Venice received mainly textile gifts. Luxury Italian (*firangi*) textiles were highly valued in Safavid society, and Italian silks and, in some instances, velvet fabrics were re-gifted to the rulers of the neighboring powers. Apparently, the number, type, and quality of the robes offered were decided upon according to the rank of the mission member. The envoys received the most precious ones and the largest number. While Safavid envoy Fathi bey was gifted with several garments of silk, valued at 200 ducats, the members of his retinue received only one piece of scarlet (woolen) robe.[32] The value of the gifts presented to Khoja Shahsuvar in 1622 was 100 ducats.[33] It appears that the amount that was spent on gifts to the Safavid representatives varied in value and ranged from 100 to 200 ducats, less than the value of the gifts presented to their Ottoman counterparts. The Venetian government usually chose to offer the Safavid envoys non-monetary gifts. However, Haji Mahammad's case was different; in 1580, instead of textile items, he was rewarded with monetary gifts in the amount of 300 ducats.[34] He was also the envoy who received the highest-value gift.

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[30] *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia: nuovi documenti e regesti*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, p. 29.

[31] ASVe, Documenti Persia, document no. 21; idem, SdeLC, binding 10, 18 January 1604 (*more Veneto*), unpaginated.

[32] E.A. Cicogna, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 647: "Al quale siano parimenti donate in nome della Signoria Nostra tante vesti di seda di quella sorte che parerà ad esso Collegio per il valor di ducati ducento (200); et alli otto huomini che sono in sua compagnia sia data una vesta di panno scarlatino per cadaun da esser dette vesti pagate delli medesimi denari del Deposito per le occorrentie."

[33] ASVe, SdeLC, binding 16, 14 October 1622 (unpaginated).

[34] Idem, CEP, binding 3, c. 303r; idem, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Segrete, register 12, June 1580, c. 40v: "Et cosi tolta licentia con molta summissione, si licentio et io secre[tari]o prima

The average amount of the monetary gifts granted to the Ottoman envoys was bigger than that offered to the shah's representatives. For example, Ottoman envoy Hasan *çavuş*, who visited Venice in 1576, received 500 ducats in addition to the gifts of robes.[35] This could be explained by the fact that the *Serenissima* had closer relations with the Sublime Porte and, in many respects, Venice pursued *Realpolitik* for safeguarding its commercial relations with the Ottomans, in order to preserve its own existence.[36] As for the Safavid court, the Venetian Republic sent diplomatic gifts exclusively to the shah. In contrast, apart from the sultan, Venice frequently offered gifts to several members of the Ottoman court, including the grand vizier, the viziers, the *kapudan-ı derya* (grand admiral of the Ottoman fleet), and the Ottoman *beylerbeyis* of the provinces bordering the Venetian possessions. The role and power of gifts in building friendship relations with the Ottoman officials were best described by the *baili* Lorenzo Bernardo[37] and Cristoforo Valier,[38] as well as the consul in Aleppo Andrea Navagero.[39]

As noted by Luca Molà, the Venetian Republic had adopted the Asian tradition of giving ceremonial silk robes.[40] As in the case of the Safavid delegations, the quantity and quality of these textiles given to their Ottoman colleagues varied according to the recipient's position, status, and, in some instances, individual personality. Ottoman ambassadors were entitled to two or three valuable garments on their departure, while other robes, some of them made of wool, were granted to members of their retinue. For example, in 1633, while Ottoman envoy Mahmut Agha received three robes of damask, satin, and scarlet, each member of his retinue was given a length of scarlet cloth, which was equal to the amount of fabric needed to make a single robe.[41]

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che uscisse della stantia ove era sua ser[eni]ta li diedi in mano la borsa d'ormesin cremesino con li cechini trecento dentro."

[35] Idem, CC, register 2, c. 41r.

[36] P. Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi*, Florence, 1975, p. 28.

[37] *Relazioni di ambasciatori veneti al senato.* vol. XIV, *Costantinopoli relazioni inedite*, ed. by Maria P. Pedani-Fabris, Padua, 1996, p. 381: "Il donare ai Turchi è così necessario, che chi volesse trattare con loro senza questo mezzo, li levaria il proprio nutrimento, perché talmente è posto in uso appresso loro il ricever doni, che è convertito in propria natura, né si può sperare d'ottener da loro cosa alcuna, o almeno facilmente ottenerla, senza il donativo."

[38] Nicolo Barozzi, Guglielmo Berchet, *Relazioni degli stati europei lette al senato dagli ambasciatori veneziani nel secolo decimosettimo*, part I, *Turchia*, Venice, 1871, p. 305: "Queste amicizie, Serenissimo Principe, non si possono nè contrarre nè conservare, senza qualche dimostrazione di amore […] che il dono sia il vero segno d'onore ed il vero frutto dell'amore: onde per dichiarazione della forza del donare sono soliti a dire nella loro lingua proverbio tale […]: man che porta alla Porta e che dà, mai non vien tagià."

[39] *Relazioni dei consoli veneti nella Siria*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, Turin, 1866, pp. 60–61: "ho sempre procurato di conservarmi la grazia e la amicizia di quei principali signori ministri, e con amorevoli uffici e con doni, senza dei quali è impossibile conservarsi lungamente la loro benevolenza."

[40] Luca Molà, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[41] ASVe, SdeLC, register 22, 18 August 1633, c. 98r: "… et per l'esped[itio]ne del stesso Mehemat Agà sia preso che il magistrato med[essim]o delle R.V. [Rason Vecchie] debba donarle reali duecento, Damasco per una vesta, rasi per una veste, scarlato da sessanta per un'altra, et per gl'huomini, che sono con lui tanto pannò scarlatin, che faccia una veste a'ciasche dun di loro."

Surviving records do not reveal the Safavid envoys' reactions regarding the return gifts they were given in Venice. Furthermore, the sources do not provide any evidence of rejected or unaccepted gifts.

FOOD GIFTS

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the connection between food and diplomacy. Offering food and refreshments (*refrescamenti*) to foreign envoys was an essential part of Venetian diplomatic hospitality. These food provisions were of crucial importance to Venetian hospitality strategies and can be considered as the first diplomatic gifts that ambassadors received.[42] The role of food diplomacy in resolving conflicts was appreciated by the Venetians and they used this tool effectively to improve their relations, particularly with the Ottomans.[43] The Venetian *baili* in Istanbul used gifts of rare food items and sumptuous public banquets to maintain the reputation of the Republic at the Porte.[44]

Refreshments offered to the foreign envoys included mainly fine sugar, *zucchari* (sugar confections), various types of nuts, the famous Piacenza cheese, fresh fruits, herbs, and spices.[45] All these components were arranged into small packages and the average amount spent on one package of food gifts during the second half of the sixteenth and first quarter of the seventeenth century was twenty-five ducats.[46] In June 1580, Ottoman envoy Müsliheddin *hoca* received a one-time food allowance of 25 ducats.[47]

Available documents suggest that the value of refreshments offered to the Safavid envoys were the same, amounting to 100 ducats,[48] irrespective of the size of their retinue. The exception was the embassy of Fathi bey in 1603. Due to their longer stay (more than six months) in Venice, in accordance with the decision of the Senate, dated 14 August 1603, a sum of 200 ducats[49] was allotted in addition to

[42] Laura Mesotten, *A Taste of Diplomacy: Food Gifts for the Muscovite Embassy in Venice (1582)*, in "Legatio. The Journal for Renaissance and Early Modern Diplomatic Studies," I, 2017, p. 134.

[43] Maria P. Pedani, *In nome del Gran Signore. Inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia*, Venice, 1994, p. 59; Eric R. Dursteler, *A Continual Tavern in My House: Food and Diplomacy in Early Modern Constantinople*, in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Joseph Connors*, ed. by Machtelt Israels, Louis A. Waldman, Cambridge, Mass., 2013, pp. 168–169.

[44] E.R. Dursteler, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

[45] M.P. Pedani, *In nome del Gran Signore*, p. 92.

[46] ASVe, SdeLC, binding 14, 23 June 1618, unpaginated; L. Mesotten, *op. cit.*, p. 147; *Calendar of State Papers relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, vol. X, *1603–1607*, ed. by Horatio F. Brown, London, 1900, pp. 88, 184.

[47] ASVe, CC, register 1, 4 June 1580, c. 93v.

[48] *I libri commemoriali della Repubblica di Venezia, Regesti*, vol. VII, ed. by Riccardo Predelli, Venice, 1907, p. 63, 107; *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, p. 48; ASVe, Commemoriali, register 28, 23 February 1621 (*more Veneto*) c. 60r; idem, SdeLC, register 23, 18 January 1635 (*more Veneto*), c. 146r.

[49] *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, ed. by Guglielmo Berchet, p. 198.

the previous one of 100 ducats given in early March of the same year. As it is evident from the case of Safavid envoy Fathi bey, the food allowances were provided in parts (*parte a parte*).[50] Food gifts offered the Venetians another opportunity to promote local and regional products. In other words, diplomacy contributed to the foreign diplomats' culinary awareness of the local food culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Although diplomatic gift exchanges are scarcer in the history of Venetian-Safavid relations than in the interactions between the *Serenissima* and the Ottoman Empire, the Venetians succeeded in understanding gifts as part of the diplomacy of the Safavids. The exchange of gifts during the diplomatic encounters attested to the good relations between the two states, particularly during the reign of Shah Abbas I, who pursued an active foreign policy. As characterized by the Venetian registers, gifts to the Safavid sovereigns served "as a sign of the continuing goodwill."[51] An analysis of the Venetian gift-giving to the Safavids shows how these two powers shared common objectives. Both the Venetians and the Safavid rulers had a mutual understanding of the importance of gifts as a means of conveying political messages, acknowledging and honoring their counterpart.

The Venetian government put more emphasis on the artistic value and the quality of diplomatic gifts than the quantity. Venetian gifts for the shah concentrated on tableware, particularly various items of silverware and glassware, and military technology. Although gift-giving did not supplant commercial activity, it provoked domestic production, gave and impulse to trade, and served as economic motivation for craftsmen. The diplomatic gifts sent to the shah were chosen to showcase Venice's best national industries and craftsmen with the intention of preserving good relations with the Safavids. At the same time, these were an indicator of the social and economic conditions of the *Serenissima* and served as a way of marketing Venetian luxury goods to the Safavid consumers.

It appears that, generally, the nature of the given gifts was determined by the recipient's needs, tastes and predilections. The *Serenissima*'s government proved to be well aware of the high Safavid regard for weapons and the personal interests of the Safavid shahs in acquiring European military technology; armors and arms were therefore a constant presence on the list of diplomatic gifts. Besides these, considering the tastes and personal preferences of the shahs, the repertoire of gifts also included gilded and silver objects. However, not all the gifts sent to the shahs were necessarily based on the recipients' needs. At the same time, these gifts had to bear testimony to the technological innovations developed by Venice.

The Safavid envoys were also presented with gifts, particularly textile items, by the Venetian government. The value of the gifts granted to the Safavid envoys

[50] *Ibidem*.
[51] E.A. Cicogna, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 648.

and members of their retinues corresponded to the status of their recipients; the material used for the robe and the number of pieces of cloth given differed according to the recipient's rank.

It appears that none of the Venetian gifts to the shahs survived the turmoil following the Afghan occupation of the Safavid capital of Isfahan in 1722 and the fall of the Safavids in 1736. By contrast, Venice's public museums hold a number of objects that originated from the Safavid Empire, most of which were given as diplomatic gifts to the doges, including ceremonial arms and armors, jewelry objects inlaid with precious stones, and textiles, from fragments of silk to beautifully woven garments.

APPENDICES

1.

Inventory of gifts sent to Shah Abbas I in 1603[52]

1. Un bacil col suo ramin d'argento lavorado a figure et tutto dorato.
2. Un altro bacil et ramin d'argento bianco lavorado a figure.
3. Un cadin d'argento con oro et la sua broca anco essa con oro.
4. Un cadin d'argento bianco lavorado con la sua broca.
5. Dui fiaschi d'argento intagliadi col suo vedro dentro.
6. Doi tazze intagliade et doi sotto coppe d'argento.
7. Una armadura.
8. Dui Zacchi forniti con li suoi bottoni d'oro, cio é uno con veludo verde con fondi d'oro, et uno con raso cremesino, tutti dui con la romaneta d'oro.
9. Quatro arcobusi lavoradi di radise di perle con oro.

Translation

1. A bowl with its pitcher of silver engraved with figures and gilded all over.
2. Another bowl and pitcher of white silver engraved with figures.
3. A gilded silver basin with its gilded vase.
4. A white silver engraved basin with its vase.
5. Two engraved silver flagons (flasks) with their glasses inside.
6. Two engraved cups and two saucers of silver.
7. A full body armor.
8. Two chainmails with their gold buttons, one of which is on a green velvet background, another one is on crimson silk satin background, both of them with a gold *romaneta*.
9. Four arquebuses decorated on one end with gold and studded with pearls.

[52] *Ibidem*.

2.

List of gifts sent to Shah Safi I in 1635[53]

1. Una bellissima armatura rimessa a'oro, dentro ad un sepetto di velluto cremisino.
2. Due schiopetti per portar all'arcion del cavallo, bellissimi et con fonde.

Translation

1. A very beautiful gold-plated armor[54] inside a crimson velvet bag.
2. Two very beautiful shotguns (muskets) for carrying on horseback with their leather pouches.

FROM THE DOGE TO THE SHAH: VENETIAN DIPLOMATIC GIFTS FOR THE SAFAVID EMPIRE

Abstract

The exchange of gifts was an important feature of the relations between the Safavid Empire and Venice. The complex and comparative analysis of Safavid-Venetian gift exchanges could contribute towards a better understanding of the diplomatic relations between these two powers, in general, and the significance of the non-verbal communication, in particular. Drawing on Venetian archival documents, this paper aims to examine the nature and significance of Venetian diplomatic gift-giving to the Safavids in the first third of the seventeenth century. The paper attempts to examine whether the needs and preferences of the Safavid court played a part in the Venetian government's choice of gifts granted to the Safavid rulers. The present article demonstrates that the description of the Venetian gifts to the Safavids not only sheds light on the latter's needs but also allows us to see how the Venetians appealed to the shahs' taste and preferences. Using a comparative perspective, the paper briefly explores differences and similarities between the gifts that the Venetians bestowed on Safavid and Ottoman envoys and members of their retinues.

Keywords: Safavid-Venetian diplomatic relations; Shah Abbas I; Shah Safi I; Safavid envoys; Venice; early modern gift-giving; diplomatic history

[53] ASVe, SdeLC, register 23, 27 October 1635, c. 124v.

[54] *Ibidem*, 18 January 1635 (*more Veneto*), c. 145v: "It was reported that the gilded armor had formerly belonged to a deceased Duke of Mantua and shotguns «would arrive very soon» from Brescia."