

---

# 1 Language and Translation at the Safavid Court

---

**Summary** 1.1 Languages of the Safavid Diplomacy: “Speaking in Turkish while Writing in Persian”. – 1.2 “Interpreting and Translating for the Shah”.

## 1.1 Languages of the Safavid Diplomacy: “Speaking in Turkish while Writing in Persian”

Knowledge of the local language or languages of the host country was important for early modern diplomats, in addition to the knowledge of the region and its customs. Knowledge of Turkish was particularly useful for European diplomats visiting the Safavid court where the Safavid shahs and courtiers conversed in that language. This fact was attested by numerous European travellers, diplomats, missionaries who had visited the Safavid state in different periods, such as García de Silva y Figueroa,<sup>1</sup> Pietro Della Valle,<sup>2</sup> Pacifique de

---

**1** García de Silva y Figueroa, a Spanish diplomat, Philip III's ambassador to the Safavid court wrote in 1619; Figueroa 1905, 2: 404: “El Enbaxador de Laor [Mughal] [...] no entendiese lo que se auia tratado sobre el tabaco, auriendose hablado en turquesco, lengua común en la corte”.

**2** Della Valle 1843, 1: 506: “In Persia si parla comunemente la lingua Turca: e quasi più della Persiana; particolarmente alla Corte, e fra i grandi”; Della Valle 1843, 1: 656: “Fat-tomi sedere il Re in questa guisa, cominciò a domandarmi, parlando in lingua turca [...]”.

Provins,<sup>3</sup> Adam Olearius,<sup>4</sup> Raphael du Mans,<sup>5</sup> Jean Chardin,<sup>6</sup> Niccolò Manucci,<sup>7</sup> Jean de Thevenot,<sup>8</sup> Angelo Legrenzi,<sup>9</sup> John Fryer,<sup>10</sup> Gemelli Careri,<sup>11</sup> Engelbert Kaempfer,<sup>12</sup> as well as Carmelite friars, including Filippo of Santissima Trinità<sup>13</sup> and John Thaddeus.<sup>14</sup> Turkish was not only a language of the court, but also of provincial administration and of the military, retaining its importance until the very end of the Safavid period.<sup>15</sup> Above all, it was the mother tongue of the Qizilbash<sup>16</sup> tribes, which constituted the backbone of the state. Instead,

**3** The Capuchin Father Pacifique De Provins who was received by Shah Abbās I in late 1628 conversed with the Shah in Turkish (De Provins 1631, 266): “Et moy ie les offris au Roy devant toute fa Cour avec ces mesmes paroles que i’auois bien premeditées en ‘langue Turquesque”.

**4** German Adam Olearius, secretary to the legation of 1635 sent out by the Duke of Holstein to the court of Shah Safi I, wrote (Olearius 1669, 332-3): “Turkish language and by this means it is so common at court that a man seldom hears anyone speak the Persian”.

**5** Du Mans 1694, 137: “La langue ordinaire de la Perse est la langue persienne pour le commun, la turquesque pour la cour”.

**6** Chardin 1711, 5: 30: “Le Turquesque est la langue des armées & de la Cour”.

**7** In 1654, Venetian Niccolò Manucci, who accompanied English envoy Henry Bard (Viscount Bellomont) to the Safavid court of Shah Abbās II, referring to the Bellomont’s audience with the Safavid Grand Vizier, notes (Manucci 1907, 33): “The above conversation was in Turkish, which I could already speak and understand sufficiently”.

**8** De Thevenot 1687, 90: “at the court of Persia, they speak nothing but Turkish”.

**9** Angelo Legrenzi, a doctor and a traveller who visited Safavid lands in 1678, notes (Legrenzi 1707, 2: 139): “quelli della corte parlino alla Turca”.

**10** Fryer 1698, 402: “The Courtiers think the Turkish language more commanding, and therefore addict themselves to that speech”.

**11** Gemelli Careri 1699, 202: “Nella Corte però il Re medesimo parla sempre Turchesco”.

**12** Kæmpfer 1712, 144: “Lingua Aulae Turcica est, nimirum stirpi Regiae vernacula, atque alia quam nationis”.

**13** Filippo of Santissima Trinità who was in the Safavid state in 1630-1631 wrote (Philippe de la Très Sainte Trinité 1666, 357): “in quella [corte] del Rè di Persia la Turchesca ha prevaluto, questa lingua vâ tuttavia perseverando nella corte loro”.

**14** In his report, dated 15 August 1609, intended for the Praepositus General in Rome, Fr. John Thaddeus notes (Chick 1939, 165): “The Turkish language is usually spoken and understood, and the Shah and chief men and soldiers generally speak in it. The common people speak in Persian, and all documents and communications are in that language”.

**15** See Gandjei 1991; Perry 2001; Floor, Javadi 2013.

**16** Its members were drawn from Turkish tribes who were instrumental in bringing the young Ismâil Safavi [figs 1-2] to power and constituted the military aristocracy of the empire. They filled the most important offices of state, and held a dominant position in both political and military affairs (See Efendiev 1975; 1981, 37-8). The name Qizilbash (‘Redheads’) was given to them by their rivals in reference to their red turban with twelve gores, which is also called ‘taj-i Heydari’, the ‘Heydar cap’. In some instances, Safavid chroniclers use ‘the Qizilbash realm’, ‘the Qizilbash territory’ and ‘the Qizilbash state’ as synonyms for the Safavid state (Munshī 1978, 1: 307; Musalī 2011, 293). Furthermore, Ottoman sources mainly describe the Safavids as ‘Kızılbaşlar’, in-

Persian was the preferred language for formal correspondence, chancellery composition, and literary production in the Safavid Empire.

It appears that the Venetian Senate was aware of the role of Turkish in the Safavid Empire and Michele Membré<sup>17</sup> and Vincenzo degli Alessandri's knowledge of that language was instrumental in their appointment as envoys to the Safavid court. Their familiarity with the local language and customs helped Venetian emissaries to build a good rapport with members of the Safavid court. Membré, in particular, benefitted from his command of the Turkish language, gaining the favour of Shah Tahmāsp I (r. 1524-1576) [fig. 3]. Cypriot Michele became 'Mikayıl Bey' in Tabriz, which is how he is referred to in Shah's reply letter to the doge Andrea Gritti (r. 1523-1538), which could be interpreted as a reflection of his success in building friendship ties with the Safavid ruling elite. Enjoying close contact with some Safavid courtiers, he became well informed about local culture and of the state's principal offices and affairs. Membré apparently spoke with them in Turkish, which is clearly evident from the number of Turkish words,<sup>18</sup> and phrases he mentions in his *Relazione*; these include *ordu* ('army'), *otaq* (*ottach*, 'room'), *ishîq* (*icechie*, 'light'), *boghra* (*bogra*, 'camel'), *çay* (*chiaj*, 'river'), *qovurma* (*cavurma*, 'roasted meat'), *okh-yay* (*ochiag*, 'bow and arrow'), and *bayram* (*bairan*, 'holiday'). Throughout his work, Membré transliterates Turkish phrases and words into Latin characters. Furthermore, he attempts to provide an Italian translation of various phrases used by the local people. For example, he writes: "When the Sophians wish to swear they say 'Şah başi ki',<sup>19</sup> that is, 'By the head of the Shah', and when one wishes to return thanks to another, they say 'Şah muradin versin' that is, 'May the Shah give him his desire'".<sup>20</sup>

terchangeably using the names 'Memâlik-i Acem' (the country of Ajam), 'vilâyet-i Acem' (the province of Ajam), or 'saltanat-ı Kızılbaş' (the realm of Kızılbaş) to refer to the Safavid state (Selânikî 1989, 1: 132, 145, 146, 160-1, 201, 217; 1989, 2: 638, 840; Peçevî 1982, 2: 22, 32, 62). The Safavid shah was indicated as 'a Qizilbash' in the map of the world, the text of which was written in Turkish in 1559 by a certain Haji Ahmed of Tunis. See Ménage 1958, 295; Bellingeri 2015, 128. The particular headgear of the Safavid supporters - the Qizilbash frequently caught the attention of the Venetians, as well as of other European authors (BNM, ms. it. VI, 365 (=5957), f. 6r; Albèri 1855, 216-17).

**17** For Membré's life and his mission to the Safavid court, see Guliyev 2011; Arbel 2013; Pedani 2020.

**18** ASVe, Collegio, *Relazione*, b. 25, 1542 *Relatione presentada adi. V lulio per mano de Michael Membré*, ff. 13-16, 18, 24, 28-9, 31; Membré 1969, 20, 22, 25-6, 31, 38.

**19** Membré mentions the shorter version of this phrase, whose full-length version runs: 'Şahın başına and olsun ki'.

**20** ASVe, Collegio, *Relazioni*, b. 25, 1542, *Relatione presentada adi. V lulio per mano de Michael Membré*, f. 35: "Quando li Sophiani voleno giurar, dicono Chiach pachi chi [*Şah başi ki*], cioè, per la testa del Chiach, et quando voleno ringratiarsj, l'uno con l'al-



**Figure 1**  
Cristofano Dell'Altissimo,  
*Ritratto di Ismail I Sophi*.  
1552-68. Galleria degli Uffizi,  
Galleria delle Statue e delle  
Pitture degli Uffizi, Inv. 1890  
no. 5. Reproduced by kind  
permission of Galleria degli  
Uffizi, Florence



**Figure 2**  
A statue of Shah Ismâil I  
in Baku (Azerbaijan Republic).  
Photo © AzVision.az

Membré refers to the Safavid subjects as ‘Sufis’ (‘Sofiani’) (Membré 1969, 29, 37-8, 47) and in one place as ‘the Qizilbash’ (‘Chisilpech’) while discussing Safavid nobles and courtiers (Membré 1969, 35).

His appointment as Public Dragoman in 1550, upon the death of his predecessor Girolamo Civran, was thus in recognition not only of his proven linguistic skills but also of his long diplomatic services to the Republic, and strong connections with Ottoman and Safa-

---

tro dicono Chiach morati versj, cioè Chiach li dia il suo desiderio [*Şah muradin versin*].  
See Membré 1969, 47-8; 1993, 42.



**Figure 3**  
Cristofano Dell'Altissimo,  
*Ritratto di Tammas Sophi*.  
1552-68. Galleria degli  
Uffizi, Galleria delle Statue e  
delle Pitture degli Uffizi, Inv.  
1890 no. 6. Reproduced by  
kind permission of Galleria  
degli Uffizi, Florence

vid elites (Rothman 2012, 173). Vincenzo degli Alessandri was one of the youths ('giovani della lingua') sent by the Venetian Senate<sup>21</sup> to learn Turkish in Istanbul. He was recorded as being in Constantinople in 1565-66 – together with Lodovico Fontana – learning the Turkish language.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to their knowledge of the Turkish language,<sup>23</sup> some travellers and envoys could easily interact with the Shah at his audiences without the need for an interpreter. For instance, Shah Abbās I (r. 1587-1629) was impressed by the Turkish skills of Sefer Muratowicz, an envoy of King Sigismund III of Poland to the Safavid court in 1601, and was content that he could speak with him without having an interpreter present (Muratowicz 1777, 27).<sup>24</sup> Della Valle, in his letter of 18 December 1617, writes:

**21** In 1551, the Venetian Senate made a decision to establish a “state school for dragomans” at its *bailaggio* in Istanbul. See Lucchetta 1989.

**22** ASVe, Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Lettere ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, b. 3, 8 gennaio 1565, 20 luglio 1566, unpaginated.

**23** In this work, the term ‘Turkish’ is not restricted to the official language of the present-day Republic of Turkey.

**24** See also Szuppe 1986.

The Shah asked the courtiers if I knew the language, and they replied yes, because all day I had spoken with them in Turkish, without an interpreter; turning to me with a cheerful face, he spoke to me, in Turkish, using the customary phrase *chosc ghielid, sofà ghieldi*,<sup>25</sup> that is, in a broad sense, welcome, welcome.<sup>26</sup>

The Turkish spoken at the Safavid court was somewhat different from the language spoken in Istanbul. This dialectical difference was also perceived by Della Valle. In the course of conversation with Shah Abbās, he realised that the Shah had difficulty in understanding his Ottoman Turkish and they continued their dialogue through an interpreter.<sup>27</sup> We can assume that the shahs spoke in a dialect of Turkish, which is spoken nowadays by Azerbaijani Turks in the Tabriz region.

In 1620, Della Valle wrote a Grammar of the Turkish language (*Grammatica della lingua turca di Pietro Della Valle il Pellegrino, divisa in sette libri*) during his stay in Isfahan, where he emphasised the importance of knowledge of Turkish in Safavid lands.<sup>28</sup>

The Carmelite friar Felix emphasised the importance of learning the Turkish language, which according to him,

is the most common almost in the East, and is current not only in Turkey, but also in this kingdom [Safavid Empire]. It is the commonest language, and the most esteemed at the Court of ‘the [Safavid] king’. (Chick 1939, 1: 374)

In his memorandum of 2 March, 1573, addressed to Don John of Austria, Matthias Bigudo Furtado, a Portuguese priest, notes, in reference to the skills that should be possessed by an envoy to the Safavid court:

I am of opinion that Your Highness should send by another route some person well known and, if possible, someone with an ac-

<sup>25</sup> This phrase (“Xoş gəldin, səfa gəldin”) is still in common use among Azerbaijani Turks, mainly to welcome guests.

<sup>26</sup> Della Valle 1843, 1: 618: “Domandò il re a quei signori se io sapeva la lingua, e ripostogli che sì, perchè tutto il giorno avea parlato con loro in turchegeo, senza interprete; rivoltosi a me con faccia allegra, mi disse solo come usano, e pur in lingua turca, chosc ghielid, sofà ghieldi, cioè in senso, ben venuto, ben venuto”.

<sup>27</sup> Della Valle 1843, 1: 656-7: “Una volta di non so che non m’intese bene, perchè la lingua turca che io parlo è turca Othmanli, come dicono in Persia, ovvero di Costantinopoli, differente in molti vocaboli dalla turca che si parla qui”.

<sup>28</sup> BAV, Mss. Vaticani turchi, no. 40, *Grammatica della lingua turca di Pietro Della Valle il Pellegrino, divisa in sette libri*, f. 4v: “Non solo alla natione de’ Turchi, et a quella de’ Chizilbasci [...] che da molti anni fin’hora han governato le armi della Persia, è questa lingua propria e comune ovunque vivono”.

quaintance of those parts [Safavid Empire] [...] He should be able to understand and speak very well one of two languages at least, Turkish or Arabic. He should take with him a letter from the Pope, and one also from Your Highness for the Sufi. (Chick 1939, 21)

Although most of the official Safavid letters to Venice were composed in Persian, some were also issued in Turkish. There is evidence in the Venetian archival records that the Safavid envoys sent to Venice carried official letters written in the Turkish language along with missives in Persian. For example, in 1580, one of the two letters brought by the Safavid envoy Haji Mohammad Tabrizi was in Turkish.<sup>29</sup> It was sent to the Doge by Amir Khan Mosullu<sup>30</sup> who was a governor of Tabriz at that time. In 1634, Ali Bali, envoy to Venice of the Safavid Shah Safi (r. 1629-1642) carried two letters with him: one written in Persian<sup>31</sup> and one in Turkish.<sup>32</sup> Only the copy of the Turkish letter has survived; it does not bear the date or the shah's seal and was intended to inform the Doge of the enthronement of Shah Safi I. This was not the only letter of this kind in Turkish. Shah Safi sent two letters in Turkish to announce his accession; one<sup>33</sup> to the Polish King Sigismund III (r. 1587-1632) and another (Fekete 1936, 271-3, 275-6) to the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II (r. 1619-1637). The Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw preserve a letter from Shah Abbās I to the Polish King Sigismund III written in Turkish.<sup>34</sup>

However, it should be noted that the language of the extant letters was heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic, as in the case of the Ottoman Turkish, and differs from the spoken language of the shahs and their Qizilbash subjects. In contrast, as evidenced by the

**29** ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, fz. 3, 1 maggio 1580, c. 320r: "Espose la sua ambasciata, e diede due lettere una scritta in Persiano e l'altra in Turco, la prima fu letta da esso Persiano, la seconda dal predetto Alessandri" (Presented his embassy and gave two letters one written in Persian and the other in Turkish, the first was read by the same Persian, the second by the aforementioned Alessandri).

**30** Amir Khan Mosullu Turkman was one of the powerful Safavid amirs and in 1578 he was given the governorship of Tabriz by the Safavid Shah Mohammad Khodabanda (Munshī 2003, 1: 227).

**31** ASVe, Collegio, Documenti Persia, no. 28.

**32** ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, unpaginated. This letter was first discovered by Giorgio Rota. See Rota 2002, 586. Moreover, Ali Bali wrote a receipt in Turkish, along with one in Persian, regarding the acceptance of the proceeds from the sale of royal silk and goods [fig. 4].

**33** AGAD, AKW, Perskie, no. 5. The transcribed version of this letter, together with its translations into English and Polish, was published in Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk, Mnatsakanyan 2017, 172-9.

**34** AGAD, AKW, Perskie, no. 4. See also Jaśkowski, Kołodziejczyk, Mnatsakanyan 2017, 160-7.

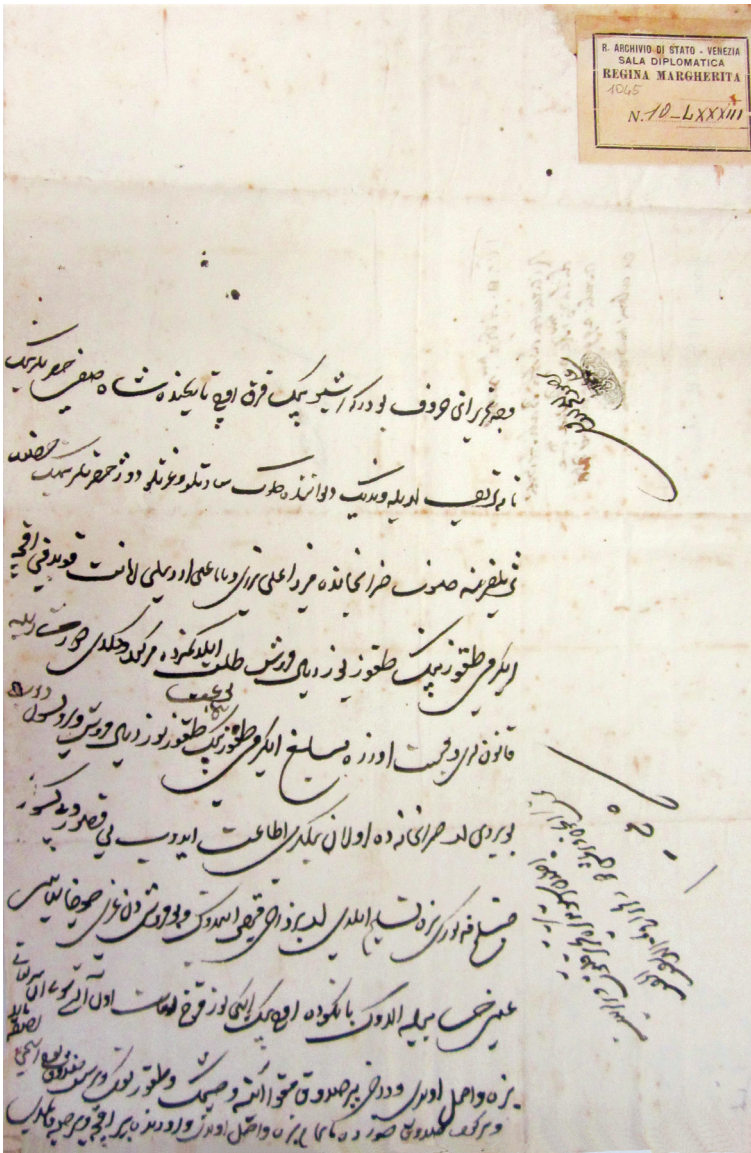


Figure 4 Facsimile of receipt (dated 6 Rajab 1045/16 December 1635) written in Turkish by Safavid envoy Ali Bali (the receipt was also issued in Persian, dated Shaban 1045/10 January-7 February 1636). © Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Documenti Persia, nr.30



Diwan of Khatai, the language of many of the literary works in Turkish of that period appears closer to the vernacular of the Qizilbash. In linguistic and philological Turcological works, the Turkic variety spoken during the Safavid period is referred to as ‘Ajami Turkic’.<sup>35</sup>

We have found a recommendation letter issued by Shah Abbās for Khoja ‘Yeias’ (Ilyas) and Mehmed Emin in the “Lettere e scritte turchesche” series in the Venetian State Archives<sup>36</sup> (see “Appendix 2”). The letter, issued in Qazvin, dated Hijri 1005 (≈ 1597) is preserved only in its Italian translation. Addressing the Venetian Doge Marino Grimani (r. 1595-1605), Shah Abbās asks him to facilitate the purchases of his envoys. Neither the name of the translator nor the original language of the letter are mentioned. In the absence of the original letter, it is difficult to verify whether it was written in Persian or Turkish. There is evidence of usage of both languages in the composition of this kind of letter.

Since the Safavid envoys had no knowledge of Italian, they relied on the Public Dragomans in the Turkish language during their conversations at the Venetian Collegio. The audiences of some Safavid envoys in Venice suggest that they spoke in Turkish. For example, in his audience with the Doge on 19 July 1634, Ali Bali made a speech in Turkish that was interpreted by the Venetian public interpreter (dragoman) Francesco Scaramelli.<sup>37</sup> During his last audience at the Collegio on 18 January 1636, he again expressed his thoughts and needs in Turkish.<sup>38</sup>

This was also the case during the receptions of the shah’s delegates at the Muscovite court. Safavid envoys in Moscow conversed with Russian officials through the medium of interpreters (*tolmachi*)<sup>39</sup> of ‘Tatar’ (Turkish) language (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 3: 570). It is worth noting that, since Turkish was the primary spoken language of both the Ottoman and Safavid courts and among the ruling elites, oral communication between host states and guest missions took place in Turkish without the agency of interpreters (Selânikî 1989, 1: 70-1; Fındıklılı 2012, 1433; Çelebi 2016, 449).

The Venetian Senate sent letters to the shahs written in Italian with a translation into Ottoman Turkish. Draft versions of the Turk-

<sup>35</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Elisabetta Ragagnin for bringing this to my attention. For Ajami Turkic, see Johanson 1997 and Stein 2005.

<sup>36</sup> ASVe, Lettere e scritte turchesche fz. V, c. 195rv. See also Pedani 2010, 138.

<sup>37</sup> ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, fz. 26, 19 luglio 1634, unpaginated; ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, registro 22, 15 luglio 1634, c. 51v: “Quello che disse hieri Ali Bali Agente del Re di Persia in lingua Turca nell’Ecc[ellentissi]mo Coll[eg]io interpretando io Francesco Scaramella”. See “Appendix 5”.

<sup>38</sup> Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, registro 23, 18 gennaio 1635 (*more veneto*), c. 124v. See “Appendix 6”.

<sup>39</sup> This word derives from Turkic word ‘*tylmaç/tilmaç/dilmaç*’ (Fasmer 1987, 72).

ish translations are still extant in the State Archives of Venice. They include drafts of the letters sent in Turkish by the Venetian government as a response to the letters of Shah Abbās delivered by Sujaddin Asad Bey in March of 1600, and by Aladdin and Khoja Shahsuvar in March of 1613, as well as in February of 1622.<sup>40</sup>

We have come across the term ‘turco persiano’ (Persian Turk) in the Venetian official documents, used to refer to the Safavid merchants. According to some Italian scholars, the Venetians commonly used ‘Turk’ as a synonym for all Muslims or for Ottoman subjects (Vercellin 1980, 70; Pedani 2005, 29). Rota argues that ‘turco persiano’ means ‘Persian of Muslim faith’ (Rota 2009a, 21). It appears that in Venetian usage, the term ‘Persiano’ bore no ethnic connotation and designated Safavid subjects in general (Muslims and in some cases also non-Muslims). We argue that in Venetian documents the expression ‘turco persiano’ was employed to describe an ethno-linguistic affiliation rather than a religious one. Thus, a distinction was made between Turkish and non-Turkish Safavid subjects. The ethno-linguistic distinctions among Safavid subjects were raised by the merchants themselves on numerous occasions.

In some instances, Safavid traders preferred to distinguish themselves from other shah’s subjects in Venice by identifying themselves in notarial deeds and petitions to Venetian authorities as ‘Persian Turks’ rather than ‘Persians’.<sup>41</sup> Venetian authorities were well aware of the linguistic divides among Safavid subjects. The merchants Hazimammad ibn Gazi of Tabriz, Baba Ali ibn Galandar of Isfahan, Mirza Ali ibn Arvish Mohammad and Mohammad ibn Hazi Salah of Tabriz were allowed to make their testimonies before the commission in their native language of Turkish interpreted by Francesco Scaramelli.<sup>42</sup> The register of transactions of the Venetian broker Zuane Zacra clearly shows that some Safavid merchants referred to as ‘turcho persiano’ signed in Turkish in order to validate their transactions. For example, Mohammad Çelebi (*Meemet Celebi*) and Haji Yusuf (*Agi Giusuf*) accepted the deal by signing ‘bu bazar maqbulum’ [figs 5-6].<sup>43</sup>

The Russian court, which had frequent contacts with the Safavids, particularly during the reign of Shah Abbās I, sent its official letters in the Turkish language. For example, on 29 July 1592, Clerks (*d’iaki*)

<sup>40</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Documenti Persia, nos. 6, 25 and 27.

<sup>41</sup> ASVe, Collegio, Risposte di Dentro, b. 58, giugno 19, 1662, unpaginated.

<sup>42</sup> ASVe, Savi all’eresia (Santo Ufficio), b. 72, 27 luglio 1624, 13 agosto 1624, unpaginated: “Testes ad defensam Theodoli Tartari examinandos qui turcica lingua loquentur”.

<sup>43</sup> ASVe, Miscellanea di carte non appartenenti a nessun Archivio, b. 29, *Il libretto dei contratti turcheschi di Zuane Zacra sensale*, c. 74r-74v. For a study on this document, see Vercellin 1979.



of the Ambassadors' Office of Tsar Feodor I (r. 1584-1598) handed a letter (*gramota*) of the Tsar to the Safavid envoy Qaya addressed to Shah Abbās I that was written in the 'Tatar' (Turkish) language (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 171). The above examples were confirmed by a Safavid chronicler, Iskandar Bey Munshī, who, while describing the events of H. 1027 (1617-18) writes:

Through the medium of an interpreter, he [Russian envoy] expressed the desire of his master, the Tsar, for a friendly alliance between the two countries, and delivered to the Shah a huge letter written in Turkish. (Munshī 1978, 2: 1160)

This was an embassy led by Mikhail Baryatinsky and received on 4 November 1618 by Shah Abbās I in Qazvin (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 3: 414-35). The Safavid court dispatched its official letters composed in Persian or in Turkish in reply to the Russian tsar. The Safavid envoy Hazi Khosrov, who was received by Boris Godunov on 13 September 1593, gave him a letter from Shah Abbās written in the Turkish language (Veselovskiy 1890-98, 1: 197-8).<sup>44</sup> Shah Abbās I wrote his letter dated Zulqadah 1031 (September-October 1622) to the governor (*voevod*) of Astrakhan in the Turkish language (Shorokhov, Slesarev 2019, 29-30). Seventeenth-century author<sup>45</sup> Heydar Evoğlu (Abu al-Qasim Haydar Ivaghli) informs us that Shah Safi I addressed a letter to Russian tsar Mikhail Romanov in Turkish (Onullahi, Häsänov 1974, 89).

## 1.2 “Interpreting and Translating for the Shah”

Although they maintained diplomatic relations with European powers, Safavid authorities showed little to no interest in organising training for their Muslim subjects in European languages. Therefore, the Safavid court relied on Europeans or its Christian subjects as interpreters. There is just one piece of evidence referring to a Safavid court official learning European languages. According to Philip of Santissima Trinita, Zaman bey, who was appointed as an interpreter of foreign languages by Shah Safi I, received Italian and Latin language training from the friars.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, the original letter has not survived at the Russian State Archives of Ancient Acts (RGADA) (Bushev 1976, 1: 182).

<sup>45</sup> He held the post of Ishik Aghasi Bashi during the reign of Shah Safi I.

<sup>46</sup> Philippe de la Très Sainte Trinité 1666, 454: “Zemam Beq, essendo eletto dal Rè per interprete delle lingue forastiere, fu dato alli nostri Padri per imparare la lingua Italiana e la Latina”.

There are numerous pieces of evidence suggesting that in the first half of the sixteenth century, the Venetian consulate in Damascus played an active role in bridging the language gap between the Safavid and European courts. For example, in 1505, the first letter of Shah Ismāil I (r. 1501-1524) to Doge Leonardo Loredan (r. 1501-1521) was translated into Latin at the Venetian consulate in Damascus before being forwarded to Venice (Sanudo 1879-1903, 6: col. 269). Shah Ismāil's letter to the Doge, which was brought to Venice by the second Safavid envoy in 1509, was also translated in Damascus (Sanudo 1879-1903, 8: col. 232). In 1546, a letter to Shah Tahmāsp from the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, was translated from Latin into Arabic by a Venetian consulate interpreter (*turcimanno*) in Damascus (*Due lettere di Carlo V* 1870, 3).

The first documented case of employment of Europeans as interpreters dates from 1530. In that year, Simon de Lillis, a Habsburg envoy to the Safavid court, presented his credentials to Shah Tahmāsp, which were translated from Latin to Persian by a "Portuguese gentleman" who was present at the Safavid court (Neck 1952, 86).

In 1580, the Safavid envoy Haji Mohammad Tabrizi brought two letters for the Doge, one in Persian and one in Turkic. Curiously, Vincenzo Alessandri read and translated into Italian only the letter in Turkic, while the envoy himself read the other and translated it from Persian into Turkic (Rota 2009a, 50).

Safavid embassies frequently engaged the services of Italians, especially Venetians, during their visits to the Western courts. For example, the Venetian ambassador at the French court reported that a Safavid envoy (Huseyn bey), who had arrived in Marseille in August 1604, was accompanied by a Venetian interpreter.<sup>47</sup> In a report dated 12 May 1601, Giovanni Mocenigo, the Venetian ambassador at Rome, mentions that the shah's representative was provided with an interpreter, who would accompany him to Spain and other places.<sup>48</sup>

With regard to an episode in which Anthony Sherley queried the authenticity of the translation of the credentials of the Safavid embassy, establishing the identity of the ambassador, Mocenigo notes

<sup>47</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Francia, Rubricari, C4, 28 agosto 1604, c. 20r: "Che era arrivato à Marsiglia un amb[asciador]e del Re di Persia con lettere, et ragionam[en]to havuto con un venetiano venuto in sua compagnia"; ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Francia, Rubricari C4, 14 settembre 1604, c. 22v: "Che il Re Cristianissimo [title of the French sovereign] non havea voluto admetter L'Amb[asciador]e persiano, non si sa p[er]che". Eventually, the Safavid envoy was denied an audience with Henry IV, who probably did not want to damage his relationship with the Ottomans.

<sup>48</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Roma, fz. 47, 12 maggio 1601.

that “the Papal court seems to have sent these documents to someone who knows this language or to Venice”.<sup>49</sup>

During the reign of Shah Abbās I, individual Catholic missionaries were actively employed as translators. This fact was even attested by the Safavid historian Iskandar Bey Munshī, who, like other contemporary court chroniclers, very rarely mentions issues concerning Europeans: “This letter was written in some Frankish tongue and arrived, sealed. Some members of the foreign [European] community in Isfahan translated it into Persian” (Munshī 1978, 2: 1307).

The Carmelite friar Juan Tadeo (John Thaddeus) de San Eliseo, one of the founders of the convent of Discalced Carmelites, worked for the shah as a translator and interpreter of European languages. In a postscript of 28 June 1619, he wrote that Shah Abbās had given him a letter to translate, which had been sent from Madrid by Friar Redempt and Robert Sherley (Chick 1939, 226). His report was confirmed by Pietro della Valle, who was at that time at the Safavid court.<sup>50</sup> The Safavids’ reliance on Catholic missionaries as interpreters continued after the reign of Shah Abbās. During his audience with the newly enthroned Shah Safī, Fr. Juan Tadeo wrote: “He [Shah Safī] gave me back the letter of the Pope for it to be translated into Persian” (Chick 1939, 307-8). The employment of individual Augustinian friars as interpreters was also attested by Adam Olearius in 1637:

Our Interpreter was a Portuguez, an Augustine Frier [...]. His name was Father Joseph, of the Rosary, [...] having lived four and twenty years in Persia, he was excellently well skilled in the Language, and thoroughly acquainted with the humour and customs of that Nation. (Olearius 1669, 203)

During the course of his second sojourn in Isfahan, French traveller Jean Chardin noted that he was summoned frequently to the palace to translate petitions and letters of recommendation from various European embassies. At the beginning of the 1670s, Carmelite Fr. Jerome wrote to Rome that he sometimes was “summoned to translate letters from Christian [European] princes sent to the [Safavid] Court” (Chick 1939, 440). Capuchins also provided translation services to the shah. It is known that the Capuchin Father Raphael du Mans was the principal interpreter at the Safavid court from about 1650 until his death in 1696 (Richard 1996).

<sup>49</sup> ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Roma, fz. 47, 21 aprile 1601, c. 99v.

<sup>50</sup> Della Valle 1843, 2: 43: “Cinque giorni prima che il rè partisse, mandò al nostro padre vicario degli Scalzi un gran fascio di lettere, e scritture di Christianità, acciocchè gliele interpretasse”.