

SUSAN MOKHBERI, *THE PERSIAN MIRROR: FRENCH REFLECTIONS OF THE SAFAVID EMPIRE IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE*, NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS (USA) 2019, ISBN 978-0-19-088479-6, 151 P., ILLUSTRATIONS, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX



Susan Mokhberi is assistant professor of history at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey. She concentrates on the early modern period history and relations between Europe and the Middle East. Her work published by OUP is a resultant of her effort based on studies in archives in Paris allowed by support from the Fulbright Program. Prior to some issues described in the publication was a study entitled *Finding Common Ground between Europe and Asia: Understanding Conflict during the Persian Embassy to France in 1715* published in the *Journal of Early Modern History* in January 2012.

In her reviewed work, the author deals with the development of French-Persian relations in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Based on studying diplomatic correspondence, belles-lettres and picture sources she depicts how the development of the French relation to Safavid Persia progressed, how the French defined themselves towards this country, and how a frequently distorted image of Persia itself reflecting ambitions of missionaries, travelers, courtiers, diplomats and mostly him, the Sun King, was created. Afterward, a long-standing interest in Persia caused that enlightened authors chose Persia as a means to illustrate problems faced with by the old regime in France. So in the *Persian Letters* published in 1721, Montesquieu used Persia as a tool to criticize the French state and society.

However, a long history had preceded this volume. Diplomatic contacts, pictures, texts and objects that created a mutual image interlinked France and Persia. As well as they reflected effort the French state made to build up a collection of oriental manuscripts, to establish business relationships and effort to increase importance of Louis XIV by baroque performances. On the other hand, Persia played a role in creating its image disseminated by diplomats sent to Versailles, who endeavoured to establish improbable political alliances.

In this context, it must be pointed out that the French did not show superior disrespect for Persia, vice versa, they emphasized their connection and their analogies with Persians. For Louis XIV it was mostly a rich competitor in the sphere of monarchical grandiosity, another 'Empire of the Sun'. French intellectuals, diplomats, even ordinary people in Paris were fascinated by Persia; they would eagerly read books of travels, tales and watched a show offered when Persian ambassador visited Paris and Versailles in 1715. Their relation to Persia was not the one to the monolithic Orient. The image of Persia in France would develop depending on the development of a political situation, the French society and its material culture, its particular display reflected a social origin and thinking of each of the authors.

Therefore, Mokhberi emphasizes that the changes did not relate to the whole French society. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, which the French had closer business and political ties, Persia was a distant country. Both the Safavids and the Bourbons took agreements concluded between both countries less seriously. That allowed to use Persia for ideological aims of single authors and logically led to fabrications, exaggeration and groundless ideas of kinship or vice versa of divergence in one thing or another. Thus, Persia was used as a critical mirror of French luxury and despotism



standing in contrast to alleged culture, moderation and erudition of the Persian court. From the broader perspective, Persia was used for forming the French identity.

The overview of events as to the French-Persian relations begins in the first two chapters of the book by narrating missionaries' reports who regarded Persia as a country, which could be converted to Christianity. Later on, in 1660, French Finance Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert backed studying Oriental languages, including Persian, and pieces of translation from Oriental languages. A group of translators created the first image of Persia then. The thing that had the cardinal importance was activity of trader Jean Chardin according to whom the Persian court was the mirror for French elites. However, a range of translation created a fairy-tale and magical picture of Persia, which would last until the 18th century. Also in fine arts, a painting of 'Persian Queen at Alexander's feet' by Charles Le Brun evoked Persia in allegory emphasizing noble virtues into which Louis XIV projected himself.

Another form of the French-Persian relations was diplomacy. The description of the French diplomatic mission to Isfahan in 1706–1708 given by the author indicates what sorts of challenges Envoy Pierre-Victor Michel was confronted while directing the court fractions towards an agreement with France in the sphere of trade and religion. She depicts his struggle with Marie Petit for his position of a sole representative of France on the Persian ground. The author compares experience depicted in Michel's memories with reports presented by Oriental diplomats from the Ottoman Empire, Siam and Morocco, whose reception into the French court generated a range of ceremonial problems on one hand and the other hand it sparked great curiosity at Asian courts, which Louis XIV was able to use in his favor. The reception of Asian envoys was a grandiose Baroque theatre used for backing the monarchy.

The reception that might have been the most famous was the visit from Mohammad Reza Beg, the Oriental envoy sent to Louis XIV in 1715 to which the author devotes nearly three chapters. The mission is well documented in the period prints, official documents, or is even reported by witnesses, most of all Duke de Saint-Simon or Baron de Breteuil. It was just he who arranged that visit with extreme care based on consulting with Orientalists and reading books of travels. Despite that preparation, the visit resulted in 'a cultural conflict of interests', which, however, did not have negative impact on the Treaty of Versailles signed on 13 August 1715 on trade and diplomatic contacts establishment. The visit was reflected in literature in a fantasy work entitled *Amanzolide, nouvelle historique et galante, qui contient les aventures secrètes de Mehemed-Riza-Beg, ambassadeur du Sophi de Perse a la Cour de Louis le Grand en 1715*, which was a mixture of royal propaganda and a romantic depiction of a grand life of the exotic envoy. The literary comparison of France and Persia in the following era of regency was rather used for depicting ills and evils inside France, and reflected increasing tension inside the French society.

The author devotes the final, seventh chapter to reports on the fall of Safavid Persia, which completely changed the image of Persia in France. The description of Afghan siege of Isfahan in 1722 and Sultan Husain's abdication shocked enlightened authors such as Montesquieu and Voltaire. Persia could not serve as a comparative model of the French society any more. French authors tried to explain the decline of that civilized and luxurious empire similar to France, as France had been depicted until then and considered consequences for France itself. They pointed out fragility

of civilization, how easily it might turn into barbarism and cruelty. Therefore, the Persian mirror of France fragmented. The image of Persia once used for enhancing a perfect picture of the Sun King of France began to serve for increasing critique of the French Bourbons' despotic reign.

The book by Susan Mokhberi is modern and complete exploration of the given issues. It follows known interpretation of classic works of French literature devoted to the given theme, but it is remarkably unfolded and carefully and sensitively interpreted. So it gives a picture of the French-Persian relations in brighter vividness, thereby it revises common ideas about Orientalism and exoticism and suggests that early modern Europeans held a broad and more structured view on Asia than it has been thought until now. The asset of the book is quality replicas of iconographic sources.

Michal Wanner

