

# Shah Abbas' European Spies – First Contacts

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Towards the end of the 16th century, Europe, a continent of political and religious upheaval, became a center of intrigue and diplomacy. After the death of Suleiman the Magnificent, the powerful Ottoman Empire entered a period of stagnation, changing the balance of power in a region where tensions prevailed. This period, marked by the Protestant Reformation, was a time when Europe was divided along religious lines, when nations united under the banners of Catholicism and Protestantism, and went to war with each other and abroad. Enriched by riches from America and India, the states under the rule of the great Habsburg dynasty engaged in endless conflicts with their rivals, while England emerged as a new naval power under the wise rule of Elizabeth I. Engrossed in its own internal religious conflicts, France sought internal peace with the Edict of Nantes, trying to extinguish the flames of sectarian conflict. The Holy Roman Empire continued to be an empire in name only, with various princes and emperors struggling with the waves of the Counter-Reformation. This period was not only one of internal struggle, but also one of external expansion. Christians should unite against *the Turks*, the war machine—at least that's what Spain and the Vatican thought. Farther east, the Safavid Shah Abbas signed the shameful Peace of Istanbul with the Ottomans, and Azerbaijan, one of the core areas of the empire was lost with the exception of Ardabil.

In times of diplomacy and intrigue, the essential role of dragomans is often overlooked. In this series of articles, we will look at the attempts of Shah Abbas to form an alliance with European countries against the Ottomans, and we will try to reconstruct the activities of ambassadors and translators, who were minor figures ignored by chroniclers, in order to

understand how they influenced events. The first part of this series of articles covers events up to 1599.

## Mantua



Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua (Rubens, 1600)

Perhaps the spark of the causal chain reaction began in 1594, in the city of Mantua. Giovanni Battista Ruffini, a member of

the Franciscan order and chief confessor of the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo I Gonzaga, set out for Jerusalem on a pilgrimage with special permission from the Ottoman sultan. Leaving Venice, the group of priests would pass through the islands of Zakynthos and Crete to reach the Holy Land. But the priests were forced to stay in Crete because they contracted an illness. Since Crete was still a Venetian possession at that time, Ruffini was comfortably treated there for a while.

After recovering, Ruffini headed for Constantinople, which was closer to Jerusalem, and arrived there in November. After reaching the Ottoman capital, the priest was hosted at the monastery of St. Francis<sup>[1]</sup> in Pera, or Galata, the European quarter of the city. He wrote that “he was received with great enthusiasm in his monastery in Pera”<sup>[2]</sup> and that he was to stay until spring. This would force Ruffini to postpone his trip to Jerusalem until after Easter, which fell on 26 March 1595. After the Easter, the priest planned to go to Syria either by caravan or by ship, depending on the local advice he received.

One of the events that Ruffini witnessed in the capital took place on 13 December—the Ottoman admiral Cıgalizade Yusuf Sinan Pasha made an outstanding entrance to the city. Pasha, who had just captured 4 Ragusan ships headed for Spain, presented 400 slaves and 40 boys to Sultan Mehmed III.<sup>[3]</sup> The sultan was epileptic and was living out the last days of his life. Cıgalizade Yusuf himself was originally a Genoese Italian and was brought to the Ottoman Empire as a prisoner in 1560. His father was buried in the church where Ruffini was staying in 1564. After converting to Islam and proving his loyalty, he rose to the point of marrying one of the Ottoman princesses. But he had many enemies in the palace, and due to intrigues, his reputation would soon experience sudden decline and rise. Only one month later, on 31 January 1595, the Venetian ambassador living next door to Ruffini (where the

Italian consulate is now located) reported that Cigalizade was removed from the admiralty and replaced by Halil Pasha.<sup>[4]</sup> On 27 October 1596, Sinan Pasha was given the post of Grand Vizier (Sadrazam) only to be dismissed from the position 45 days later. He then served as governor in Syria until 1598.

Ruffini had recovered and was on his way before Easter. During that time, he visited many Christian centers including Jerusalem and collected information for his master. He even sent a cat from Aleppo to the duke along with a letter he wrote on 8 June 1596.<sup>[5]</sup> Ruffini, who left towards the end of the year, fell ill again and stayed in Venice for a while on the eve of Christmas, waiting for the goods he brought from Aleppo for the duke to arrive. Among these was one of the people who would play a key role in establishing Shah Abbas' relations with Europe. Because it is so important, I must quote directly from Ruffini's letter to the duke: <sup>[6]</sup>

"I brought back a Syrian with me, who owns beautiful writings, can make beautiful things with his hands. I would like you to consent for me to bring him to meet with His Highness [...]. He has three or four very ancient Asiatic books in Ajam-Persian, Chaldean,<sup>[7]</sup> and Arabic, and I hope he will have something to please His Highness; he speaks very well; writes Arabic, Persian, Chaldean and Turkish. He is such a man as I think will not displease your Excellency; he was Cigala's private secretary when he was Sinan Pasha<sup>[8]</sup> of Babylon,<sup>[9]</sup> he has a father, wife and children in Aleppo, but he came with me because he was oppressed by a fellow Turk."



Cigalazadeh Yusuf Sinan Pasha (Dominicus Custos, 1579 – 1615)

Federico Federici and Davide Trentacoste give the name of this

Syrian as Michelangelo Corai.<sup>[10]</sup> The former secretary of Cigalazade, whose real name was Fathullah Qurrai, was most likely a *qurra*—reader of holy texts in one of the mosques. The problem with Sinan Pasha was that he most likely converted to Christianity and changed his name from Fathullah to Michelangelo. Sinan Pasha was never given this opportunity. In any case, Corai sailed to Venice in 1597 on the *Ponteliona*, and from there to Mantua with Ruffini. Corai, who was received with great interest by Vincenzo, also surprised the duke with his Italian. He probably learned the language from Sinan Pasha.<sup>[11]</sup>

In 1597, Corai, who was employed as the duke's official interpreter to join the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II on military operations against the Ottomans in Hungary, and priest Ruffini accompanied the duke on official visits. He provided good counter-intelligence support to the imperial army as he and Ruffini read and translated the captured secret letters of the Ottomans. On 28 March 1598, he most likely played a decisive role in the capture of the city of Raab (modern Győr, Hungary). A week after the successful siege, Corai was officially recognized as a knight of the Holy Roman Empire. The duke's Latin order stated that he was from the city of Hierapolis. If this is true, the city in Syria, called Hierapolis in Latin, is modern Manbij, where Turkmens also lived during this period. It also gives a hint as to Corai's ethnic identity.

## England

Now let's shift our focus from Mantua to England and then to Venice.<sup>[12]</sup> In 1561, Thomas Shirley, a student at Cambridge University, did not yet know that his future children would play a significant role in the history of European diplomacy.

Thomas, Anthony and Robert Shirley were the sons of Thomas Shirley (d. 1612), a member of the English Parliament. He was

knighted in 1573 and served as Sheriff of Surrey and Sussex in 1576. In 1586, Queen Elizabeth I appointed Thomas as Treasurer of War to the English forces serving in the Netherlands against Spain during the Dutch Rebellion. Thomas performed this duty so poorly that he fell into debt and lost his property. This led his sons to search for adventure in other countries. Thomas' eldest son, his namesake Thomas, does not play a significant role in the scope of this series of articles, so we will not discuss him much. But we should note that he started privateering because of his father's debts; he was mainly engaged in robbing Spanish and Dutch ships. Years later he was in Tuscany in the service of Ferdinando de' Medici.

The second son, Anthony Shirley, one of the main protagonists of the article, was born in 1563. At the age of 16, he was enrolled as a bachelor at Hart Hall, Oxford University, and in 1581 at All Souls College<sup>[13]</sup> of the same university to study for a master's degree. After university, he became known in the aristocratic circles after joining the Inns of Court<sup>[14]</sup> in London. During his stay in London, he met Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. Devereux was the second Earl of Essex and a favourite of Queen Elizabeth. Wanting to make the most of this acquaintance, Anthony's life as an agent began here. When the Dutch rebellion against Spain took place during this period. England intervened in the war to support this rebellion and score at its rival, Spain. Shirley participated in the Battle of Zutphen against Spain in 1586 as part of the English army that joined the rebellion. Anthony strengthened his ties with the Earl of Essex by participating in several battles like this. Although the battle ended in failure for England, Anthony was remembered for his bravery.



Anthony Shirley (Dominicus Custos, 1600-1604)

In August 1591, on the orders of Queen Elizabeth, Anthony went to support the Protestant King Henry IV of France, who had

escaped at the last moment from the famous St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. France at the time was mired in religious wars, and Spain did not want a strong Protestant neighbour. And England had every interest in this—like the Netherlands, it would help France. The head of the English army here was the Earl of Essex. Shirley, who soon received the rank of colonel from the earl, commanded 4.000 soldiers. After fighting for 2 years and participating in the particularly unsuccessful siege of Rouen in 1592, Shirley still received the Order of St. Michael from the French king on the advice of the earl.<sup>[15]</sup> Suspicious, the queen commissioned John Plucking, Speaker of the House of Commons, and Robert Sackville, Anthony's university friend and another member of the Inns of Court, to inspect Shirley. Elisabeth is said to have said this about Shirley:

"I will not have my sheep marked with a strange brand, nor suffer them to follow the pipe of a strange shepherd."<sup>[16]</sup>

He was therefore recalled to be tried on this charge, and on 12 March 1594, he was found guilty at his first trial and, as punishment, was bound to serve there as a prisoner of the Fleet, but was shortly afterwards released after a second trial acquitted him. It seems that the Earl of Essex also had a role here. His wife Frances Vernon, whom Anthony married the following year, was the daughter of Elizabeth Devereux, aunt of the Earl of Essex. The marriage was not very happy; it seems that it was designed entirely to strengthen the relationship with the earl. Shortly after his return to England, Shirley, with his father and under Essex's auspices, began planning an attack on the Portuguese colony of São Tomé, off the coast of Africa.

Having completed his preparations, Anthony set sail from Southampton on 23 April 1596, with nine ships and one galley. On reaching Plymouth, he found the Earl of Essex preparing to

sail in the Cadiz Action and gave him three of his ships and 500 men. After this, six ships, one galley, and one schooner remained in his fleet. Departing from Plymouth on 21 May, Shirley, after arriving at Cape Verde in July, instead of going to Sao Tome, suddenly turned the stern of the ship to the island of Santiago. Presumably, the Earl of Essex, fearing counterintelligence, wanted to attack the enemy from an unexpected front. Having taken the capital of the island, Praia, without a fight, Shirley, after besieging other cities for 2 days, changed direction again and headed for the Caribbean islands and headed for the island of Dominica. Heading from here to the island of Jamaica, Shirley entered the town of Santiago de la Vela with one of the local Taino guides and plundered it. After that, the Caribbean islands would be attacked by English pirates for a long time. It was the Earl of Essex who led these raids and attacks. But this expedition, whose goal was to seize the treasure of the Habsburg fleet, remembered in history as "Islands Voyage," ended in failure. Thus began the process of the Earl of Essex falling out of favor with the Queen.

In the summer of 1597, Shirley, who had the honor of meeting the Queen, received another assignment from the earl. Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, died in October. Since he left no heir, Pope Clement VIII claimed his lands. This decision of Emperor Rudolph II, who recognized Alfonso's illegitimate cousin Cesare as heir, was not recognized by the pope. Cesare had to rely on foreign powers to assert his claim. One of these powers was Elizabeth, one of the greatest Protestant rulers and an enemy of the papacy. Therefore, Shirley went to fight for Cesare under the orders of the Earl of Essex.

Taking with him his 16-year-old younger brother Robert and 5,000-foot soldiers, Shirley began his journey from Suffolk. The army, advancing by way of Vlissingen-Middelburg-Duisburg-Cologne-Nuremberg, learned at Augsburg that Cesare had made a peace with the Pope. The soldiers, now without a mission, became discouraged and followed Anthony to Venice.

Anthony stayed there for 10 weeks and sent his brother Robert to seek support from the Duke of Tuscany. Duke Ferdinand I (1549-1609) welcomed Robert with luxury, presenting him with a gold chain. Robert lived there for 5 years from 1592 to 1597 and learned to ride a horse.



Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex (Marcus Gheeraerts, 1596)

## Venice

Anthony, who was forced to stay in Venice, met a merchant who said he was a representative of the Safavid palace. A Turkish traveller met him later.<sup>[17]</sup> One of Shirley's comrades-in-arms, George Manwaring, remembers him as *Angelo*. In fact, this was none other than the aforementioned Michelangelo Corai. Corai was knighted just a few days ago. But what brought him to Venice so soon? We do not have exact information about this. Federici thinks his employers may have been Venetians,<sup>[18]</sup> But Trentacoste notes there is not enough data to confirm this.<sup>[19]</sup> In any case, after long conversations with the Safavid merchant and Corai, Anthony embraced the idea of going to Iran.

Here we can take a break and look at the situation of Shah Abbas, the then-ruler of the Safavid state. At this time, Abbas was fighting the Bukharan Khanate. The state of peace with the Ottomans allowed him to focus on the east. Having appointed the Georgian Allahverdi Khan Undiladze as the commander-in-chief of the army, the Shah was rapidly reforming the armed forces. However, he was aware that he would always be one step behind the Ottomans as long as there was no support from the west. Abbas needed two things—a good economy and modern weapons. Economically, the steps taken were satisfactory: he took a series of measures to stimulate trade,

which increased taxes and enriched the treasury. European merchants were given the right to trade freely. In 1598, the Shah made Isfahan his capital, and a large-scale construction program transformed it into the most beautiful city in Iran, a center of artisans' workshops, and an area of luxurious carpet production. *Gerekyaraq*<sup>[20]</sup> Asad Bey Tabrizi was one of the ambassadors received by the Shah that year. Asad Bey, who came from the Deccan states, brought with him a caravan of Indian goods.

How did Corai come from Venice and find Shirley with an Iranian ambassador? For this, we should take a closer look at the activities of the Venetians in the Ottoman Empire. Venice had 3 diplomatic representatives in the Ottoman Empire – a bailo sitting in Constantinople, consuls based in Aleppo and Alexandria. As early as 1559, 250 Venetian merchants lived in Aleppo.<sup>[21]</sup> Venice's ambassador to Syria, Alessandro Malipiero, praised Shah Abbas in a report he sent to the Venetian senate on 15 February 1596: <sup>[22]</sup>

*“This prince is of medium height, has a well-proportioned and harmonious body, and has brown complexion. His appearance is noble, lively, and he has very intelligent eyes. He has a friendly nature, is very humane, and treats people of all classes cordially; far from the lofty habits of the Turks. He is especially generous with soldiers, attracting them with large rewards, which allows him to gather supporters from all over. But most importantly, he is distinguished by his very fair mind, very sharp and intelligent spirit, decisive and flexible in his actions. He has big plans in mind and aims to restore the former glory and honour of the Persian state. The only thing missing from his noble features are the powers to match his generous spirit.”*

The report, which was quite detailed, extensively discussed the geopolitical position of the region, Shah Abbas's sympathy

for Christians, his relations with Russia and Spain, and his desire to retake Azerbaijan, Shirvan, and Georgia. From this report, which contains detailed information, especially on the internal politics of the palace and carries enough Safavid propaganda, it can be assumed that Corai, who had not yet left for Mantua, had already entered into contact with the Safavid palace and was mediating with Venice. According to Corai's later report to the Venetian court, he had already befriended a merchant named Antonio Padovan in Aleppo in 1590.

Let's go back to Venice in 1598. After Corai told Shirley about the positive aspects of working for Shah Abbas, they set sail on the *Nana e Ruzzina*<sup>[23]</sup> for Alexandretta on 24 May.<sup>[24]</sup> There were 26 people on board. Some of them are named in the sources and we will see them again in the following articles:

1. Anthony Shirley
2. Robert Shirley
3. George Manwaring
4. John Morris
5. Thomas Davis
6. Arnold Roldcraft
7. Abel Pinçon
8. William Parry
9. Gabriel Brookes
10. John Ward
11. John Parrott
12. Edward Vanthivier<sup>[25]</sup>
13. Michelangelo Corai

The rest of the crew consisted of servants. Although they first came to the island of Zakynthos (or Zante), the English, who had an argument with the Italians, were expelled from the ship, although the situation calmed down with the mediation of Armenian merchants. After 10 days of searching here, they finally found an Ottoman merchant ship (karamursel) and had to

go to the Venetian-ruled Island of Crete (or Candia). While coming to the island of Crete for a break, another misfortune happened when a ship approaching the harbour crashed into their ship. After another 9 days of delay, the English travellers headed for Cyprus. Upon arriving from Cyprus to Tripoli, the travellers saw the Venetians with whom they had previously quarrelled. Corai, who appealed to the governor of Tripoli, was soon arrested after being slandered by the Venetians. Freed after they paid the ransom, the group arrived in Antioch in a small fishing boat. Here, Corai, who had access to a wide spy network, persuaded two Hungarian janissaries whom he personally knew before to let them stay in their house for the night. Later, the travellers who set out for Aleppo were welcomed here by Richard Colthurst, the English consul. After staying there for 5 weeks and trading, they set off for Baghdad on 2 September 1598. Although they reached Baghdad on September 29, an order came from Constantinople to arrest them and confiscate their property. They were secretly transferred to Iran on 4 November by a Florentine merchant named Victorio Speciero.<sup>[26]</sup> Victorio, who claimed he was travelling to China, was probably connected to Duke Ferdinando of Tuscany's spy network in the Ottoman Empire, and Corai must have been aware of this incident.

## In the Safavid realm



Portrait of Shah Abbas as a young man, c. 1590

We will finish the first article with Shirley's meeting with Shah Abbas. The English group passed through Qasri Shirin and Kermanshah and arrived at Astarabad on 27 November. There, John Ward, Abel Pinçon and Corai left the main group and secretly came to Qazvin and started looking for a place to stay. Later, Shirley himself came to Qazvin at night and stated his desire to stay secretly. But it seems that Corai had already informed the Safavid palace. Because according to Manwaring's memoirs, they were unexpectedly welcomed here by

Marjan Bey, the Shah's steward. According to Orujali Bey Bayat's memoirs, Shirley introduced himself to the court as a relative of King James of Scotland. Marjan Bey told them that Shah Abbas is currently at war with the Uzbeks, and until then the palace would give them 20 pounds of gold per day. By this time, the Shah had already decided to move the capital from Qazvin to Isfahan and had started infrastructure projects to improve the city. However, Shah Abbas' road to Isfahan still passed through Qazvin. After the magnificent parade of the Shah, who returned with a victory over the Uzbeks, the Shah welcomed the English and named Shirley *Mirza Antonio*. On 25 January 1599, the Shah arrived in Isfahan and spent the winter there. The Shah there consulted with the generals of Qizilbash and discussed the idea of sending an embassy to Europe to establish an alliance against the Ottomans. Shirley and Corai told the Shah about the latest geopolitical developments in Europe. Although Grand Vizier Hatam bey Ordubadi looked at the proposal coldly, the Georgian servants of the palace—Anisaddawla Tahmasibgulu Khan Mirimanidze and Governor of Fars Allahverdi Khan Undiladze—welcomed this idea. According to the information provided by qorchibashi Allahgulu bey Qajar to Shirley, Hatem bey was not amenable to the idea of an alliance with Christians. While these discussions were going on, the demands of Mehmet Agha, the new ambassador sent by the Ottomans to Isfahan, seem to have changed Shah Abbas's mind. Through his new ambassador, Mehmed III demanded Shah Abbas send one of his sons to the Ottomans as a hostage, return Khorasan to the Uzbeks, and return 10.000 families who fled from Ottoman lands to Iran. The Shah was angry and sent Mehmet Agha back after shaving his moustache and beard. The Sultan had unknowingly given impetus to the starting of the great European diplomatic embassy of Shah Abbas. Readers can learn more about this in the following articles in this series. [\[27\]](#)

## References

[1] For the history of the church, see Paolo Girardelli, "Between Rome and Istanbul: Architecture and Material Culture of a Franciscan Convent in the Ottoman Capital", *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 19 (2010), 162-188.

[2] Gonzaga Archives, ASMn, AG, p. 795, f. LXVI, c. 275.

[3] Davide Trentacoste, "Mantova porta d'Oriente. Il pellegrinaggio di Giovanni Battista Ruffini, confessore del duca Vincenzo I" (Gonzaga tra Oriente e Occidente. Viaggi, scoperte e meraviglie esotiche, edited by Andrea Canova, Daniela Sogliani (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2022), 63).

[4] "Venice: January 1595." *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 9, 1592-1603*. Ed. Horatio F Brown. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1897. 149-153. British History Online. Web. 2 January 2024. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol9/pp149-153>

[5] Trentacoste, "Mantova porta d'Oriente," 55.

[6] Gonzaga Archives – ASMn, AG, b. 1529, f. VIII, cc. 475-476 (C) web: <http://banchedatigonzaga.centropalazzote.it/collezionismo/index.php?page=Visualizza&carteggio=6826>; for English translation: Federici, FM (2014). *A Servant of Two Masters: The Translator Michel Angelo Corai as a Tuscan Diplomat (1599–1609)*. In: Federici, FM, Tessicini, D. (eds) *Translators, Interpreters, and Cultural Negotiators*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137400048\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137400048_6)

[7] The name of one of the members of the Aramaic language group.

[8]It refers to the Italian name of Cigalazadeh.

[9]We are talking about the time when he was the beylerbey of Baghdad (1586-1590).

[10]Many documents refer to this person variably as Angelo, Michel, Michel Angelo or Michelangelo, I have chosen the version Michelangelo here.

[11]For the life and activities of Sinan Pasha, see: Levent Kaya Ocakaçan , ‘ Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha (c. 1545–1606)’, *Mediterranea: Recherche Storiche*, 12 (2015),

[12]The main source for the following section of the article, dealing with the Shirley family, is from the book *Stemmata Shirleiana*, published in 1873.

[13]Full name: The Warden and the College of the Souls of All the Faithful Departed in the University of Oxford.

[14]“Inns of Court” were and still are professional associations of barristers. For example, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, members of the Lincoln’s Inn; and Winston Churchill from Gray’s Inn can be cited as an example.

[15]In French: Ordre de Saint-Michel.

[16]Harley MS 6696, p.82, vol. xv. 6-287.

[17] Anthony Shirley, “Three Brothers”, London, 1825, p. 25

[18]Federici, A Servant of Two Masters, p. 85-86

[19]Trentacoste, “Mantova porta d’Oriente,” 70

[20]An official in the Safavid palace dealing with logistical matters.

[21]Report of Lorenzo Tiepolo, 1563; Relazioni dei consulate di Alessandria e di Soria per la Repubblica Veneta tenuti da

Lorenzo Tiepolo negli anni MDLII-MDLX, a cura di EA Cicogna, Venezia 1857, p. 30, 37.

[\[22\]](#) Guglielmo Berchet, Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria , Torino 1866, 91.

[\[23\]](#) Interestingly, Shirley would later refer to this in his memoirs as a commission from the Earl of Essex. But it is absurd to think that Elizabeth, who had established an alliance with the Ottomans, ordered this. We will explore the reason for this in later articles.

[\[24\]](#) Shirley mentions it in his memoir as “Morizell,” but we think the version of Corai, who was fluent in Italian, is more appropriate. We used that version in this article.

[\[25\]](#) His real name was probably Eduard van der Veer.

[\[26\]](#) Interestingly, only Shirley says this. Other memoirists do not include such details. Even Manwaring said that this person was an Armenian named Margavelo, an assistant to the pasha who helped to ransom the Venetian merchants. Apparently, everyone except Shirley was unaware of this detail. For more information, see Sir Anthony Sherley and His Persian Adventure, Psychology Press, 2005, 49.

[\[27\]](#) Most of the events mentioned above are taken from Anthony Shirley’s own memoir. See Anthony Shirley, Sir Antony Shirley: His Relation of his Travels into Persia, N. Butter & I. Bagfet, London, 1613.