Shah Abbas' European Spies – The Great European Embassy (Part 2)

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In the first article, I described the geopolitical scene on the eve of Shah Abbas sending an embassy to Europe,[1] and in the second article, I discussed the adventures of the great European embassy of Shah Abbas from Gilan to Prague.[2] In the third article, I turned to the secret diplomatic mission Shah Abbas launched in Italy at the same time.[3] This article continues the direction of the second article; it discusses the next adventures of Huseyn Ali bey and Shirley.

In Germany

On 5 February 1601, the embassy left for Italy after finishing negotiations in Prague. Before leaving, Emperor Rudolph II ordered the famous Flemish engraver Aegidius Sadeler to paint a picture of both ambassadors. The embassy of the emperor's horse-drawn carriages from Prague was accompanied by Rudolph's host to the town of Beroun, 25 kilometers away.



Huseyn Ali bey, 1601, Prague (Aegidius Sadeler)



Anthony Shirley, 1601, Prague (Aegidius Sadeler)

Although Oruj bey Bayat notes the path of the embassy in his memoirs, unfortunately, he does not include information about the settlements where they stopped. He mentions the names of the people they met, but those names reach us in a corrupted state.[4] Therefore, I will list the names of the cities in the clarified order proposed by the German orientalist Franz Babinger.[5] The embassy left the Bohemian lands after Beroun and entered Bavaria via the Rokycany,[6] Plzen,[7] Kladruby,[8] Přimda[9] route. Although we know that the embassy visited the towns of Waidhaus and Vohenstrauss, Babinger could not find the location of the settlement called "Ginthoth" mentioned by Oruj bey. From here they went by way of Hirschau and Hanbach and stopped in the city of Sulzbach to spend the night. At that time, Sulzbach Castle was the residence of Otto Henry, the Count Palatine of Sulzbach.[10] According to Oruj bey's memoir, Count Palatine provided them with all kinds of hospitality. The next morning, the embassy left for the city of Herzburg and entered Nuremberg, passing through the city of Lauf an der Pegnitz.

Considering the way the embassy traveled to this point and the city where they stopped, it can be assumed that Huseyn Ali bey's team followed the Golden Road,[11] the traditional route of the Holy Roman Emperors to travel from Prague to Nuremberg, and it appears that they used the southern alternative to shorten the route even more.

According to the memoirs of Oruj bey, the embassy rested in Nuremberg on February 12-15 and continued its journey in Franconian lands. They passed the cities of Kornberg, Roth, Pleinfeld, Ellingen, Weissenburg, Monheim, Kaisheim and Donauwörth and reached Augsburg, one of the main cities of the Duchy of Bavaria. This route also shows us that the embassy traveled along the Via Imperii[12]—another road built by the Holy Roman Empire—after Nuremberg.

Oruj bey says that he stayed in this city for 6 days and received gifts from the mayor. It is interesting that the authors who chronicled the life of the city did not mention serious information about such a large embassy. The embassy is mentioned only in a note written by Haans Starck in 1628, Nuremberg City Chronicle (not to be mistaken for famous Nuremberg Chronicle). The Augsburg Chronicle only provides superficial information about the money spent on the embassy.

In any case, the embassy, which proceeded to Munich, remained here for 3 days according to the notes of Oruj bey and was well received by Maximilian I, Elector of Bavaria:

> He treated us most generously, lodging us in rooms of his own palace.[13] He showed us his jewelhouse therein, which is most rich in precious stones, and more especially in well-wrought pieces of plate, both silver and gold. Among the rest that they showed us, that seemed very curious, was a garden, and in its midst was a dining-saloon after a strange fashion. There was a fountain cut in bone, and of the same material all round it were the figures of every species of animal, bird and fish of which description is made, and each one of these figures throws out water from its mouth. A whole month would not be sufficient for anyone completely to examine all these objects. Having stayed three days in Munich, the Duke gave us coaches, and one of his chamberlains to go with us, adding all that was necessary for the journey, and then, most grateful for his hospitable reception, we took our leave of this noble prince.[14]

Leaving Munich, the embassy set off from Innsbruck along the Via Imperii and reached the city of Trento, through the Brenner Pass, which connects Germany to Italy, passing through the Alps and then Mantua, where Duke of Mantua Vincenzo I Gonzaga received them. Considering that the Safavid spy Michelangelo Corai worked in Mantua earlier, it can be assumed that he was the one who proposed to include this city in the route. Most likely, this was the main reason why Oruj bey

praised Vincenzo and Mantua. Despite this, Oruj bey gives incorrect geographical information. He notes that Mantua is located next to a lake, but in fact it is most likely the river Mincio. This is what Oruj bey writes about his experience in Mantua:

> The Duke and Prince, who is of the illustrious house of Gonzaga, sent coaches and his chamberlain to meet us, and in these we entered Mantua. The Duke very graciously came to the antechamber of his palace to receive us, ordering that we should be lodged within the palace itself, which is most richly furnished, for the Duke is much given to hospitality. Here we stayed for two days. We were shown his rich jewels, and more particularly his pictures, which are very fine, being by great painters; also, his wardrobe, full of the national dresses of diverse foreign countries. Having then received us at a banquet and given us many entertainments, he ordered that a galley should be provided for us, in which we now embarked, and he sent his servants to accompany us as far as Florence.[15]

But it seems that the embassy decided to go to Venice before Florence. The embassy and Corai soon found each other and they sent Corai to Venice. The embassy, which had been waiting for official permission from the Doge for 3 days in Verona, received unexpected news: Venice was currently hosting an Ottoman ambassador, and the Safavid ambassadors would not be welcome there. According to Oruj bey, this made Huseyn Ali bey furious as he took it as an insult.

In any case, the embassy left for Ferrara, where Shirley had come to fight 4 years earlier. On 16 March 1601, the ambassadors arrived in Florence, the capital of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Ennea Vaini di Imola, butler of the Medici, welcomed them in the village of Scarperia. While passing through the village of Pratolino, Shirley galloped his horse and wanted to get to Florence earlier than Huseyn Ali bey, which made Ennea Vaini suspicious:

On the 20th, this ambassador [Sir Anthony Shirley] arrived from Scarperia. I met him with a good company of gentlemen and carriages. He did not want the Persian [Huseyn Ali bey] to enter with him; in fact, he revealed that he started to gallop from Pratolino to leave him behind, and if they are not pretending, they come with little understanding and satisfaction together. I left Knight Scipione at the door, who with two carriages led the said Persian a short distance away from us. The Englishman is jealous, fearing that these men speak their language […]. […] From Prague to here, he stopped at no other court except in Mantua, where they praise having been treated very well, even though they say they did not bring any letters or embassy of business to that duke, and that in Italy they have orders to deal only with Your Serene Highness and the Pope, and abroad with the king of France and Spain, and then they would go to England, and from there to Persia. […] this Englishman does not come in very good health, I don't know about his spirit, his appearance does not seem good to me, and if I went with him with money, I would fear that he would not leave me a pledge at the inn. He speaks a mixture of Italian and Spanish, very intelligibly and with terms of humility and courtesy, and especially about the authority and name of Your Highness.[16]



Ferdinando de’ Medici (Scipione Pulzone,1590)

At this point, we should discuss the propaganda work that Corai had been doing in Tuscany. The Tuscan court, more specifically Duke Ferdinando Medici, had long awaited the arrival of the Safavid embassy. While Asad bey was engaged in his alternative mission in Venice, Corai came to Florence on

17-20 December 1599 and announced the arrival of Huseyn Ali bey in advance. The Tuscan nobles were skeptical of this information. At that time, the duke, who was in the rivalry with the Ottomans, looked positively at every possibility, as well as the possibility of an alliance with Shah Abbas. Corai also told the duke the same story he told everyone – the shah's wife was a Georgian Christian, the shah himself walked with a cross around his neck, he had 50,000 cavalry, 20,000 riflemen, 100,000 mounted archers, and many spearmen.[17]

The information provided by Corai on 20 December is more interesting. At that time, the janissary centurions Cusaenand The Scribe, who served Cigalazadeh Yusuf Sinan Pasha, were in revolt against the Ottomans, and many Christians in Syria were ready to revolt against the Ottomans with the support of Shah Abbas. This Cusaenwas most likely Huseyn Pasha, the Karaman beylerbey and *müfettiş* of Anatolia at the time. The Scribe was Abdulhalim, nicknamed Karayazıcı (literally "the Black Scribe" in Turkish) who started the rebellion in Urfa. The fact that Corai already had information about these two people, nowadays known as the biggest Jalali rebels, is proof that Shah Abbas had a wide spy network in Anatolia. The Venetian Consul in Aleppo, Giorgio Emo, reported to the Signoria 5 days before Corai's departure for Florence:

> It is judged that certainly this year he [Shah Abbas] will start a war with the Ottoman house, promising much from himself, and being also called and invited by the Georgians, the Kurds, and some peoples from Shirvan, who offer him the Ottoman fortresses to take, as they are very tired and fed up with that government.[18]

Corai gained the attention of Duke Ferdinando with this information. Like his father Cosimo, Ferdinando wanted to turn Tuscany into a Mediterranean power to rival Venice, and elevate the Medici dynasty from a house of bankers and

merchants to the status of powerful monarchs. In order to get the support of the Roman Catholic Church and to unite the Tuscan lands which Florence had annexed earlier, he chose the Ottomans as his enemy. For this purpose, Ferdinando used the knights of the Order of St. Stephen, founded by Cosimo.[19] That same year, Ferdinando even tried to take the island of Chios from the Ottomans. Corai providing this information would play an important role in his later career, he would become a spy for the Medici in addition to the Safavids. Since this topic exceeds the scope of this series of articles, I return to Huseyn Ali bey and his embassy.

In Tuscany

The embassy spent the night at the Pitti Palace on the order of Vaini. Vaini chose rooms for Shirley and Huseyn Ali opposite one another for his guests' comfort. Huseyn Ali bey and his followers spent the night in four rooms next to the guest hall, and Shirley and his group spent the night in four rooms next to the palace chapel. The next day, 19 March,the ambassadors set out with Vaini and arrived at Pisa, where the duke was staying, via San Romano. The duke's purpose in delaying the meeting was to obtain further information about Anthony Shirley. At this point, Vaini realized that Anthony Shirley was actually the brother of Robert Shirley, who was close to Ferdinando. Vaini in his letter to the duke's secretary, Marcelo Accolti, noted that Robert who had lived in Florence five years ago learned to ride from Piccardini, a personal knight in charge of the duke's horses.[20]

Vaini did not trust Shirley. Anthony claimed that he had received orders to negotiate only with the pope and Ferdinando in Italy, and that during his visit he stopped only at Prague and Mantua without negotiating in the latter city. However, Vaini found out that Anthony had lied about his stops: before the Imperial Palace, the Safavid embassy had visited several German princes, received many gifts, and was even accompanied

by a man from the Imperial Palace. In addition, the Safavid ambassadors had several private meetings with Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in Mantua. Information like this that came to light later increased Shirley’s anxiety.



Enea Vaini (anonymous)

Ferdinando received the ambassadors on the banks of the Arno River at the Medici Palace, which is now the National Royal Palace Museum. The first person to greet the ambassadors in front of the palace was Giovanni de' Medici, the duke's illegitimate younger brother, the son of Cosimo by his mistress Eleanora dell'Albicci.[21] Since Giovanni also served as the Tuscan ambassador to Spain, it made sense for him to take one of the leading roles in this meeting. As the embassy arrived at the palace late in the evening, Giovanni showed them to their rooms on the side of the palace facing the church of San Nicola.



National Royal Palace Museum (Museo nazionale di palazzo Reale a Pisa) and Tower of the San Nicola church

The following day, when they met with Ferdinando in the main meeting hall, the embassy was sitting on the floor covered with gold cloth, and the duke was sitting on the throne. During the meeting, the duke gave Shirley 700 scudi,[22] and Huseyn Ali Bey two medals and a gold chain worth 300 scudi.



Henry Wotton (Michiel Jansz van Mierevelt, 1620)

The rivalry between Shirley and Huseyn Ali Bey exhibited itself in Tuscany as well. Shirley met the duke separately and gave him a letter purporting to be from Shah Abbas. Oruj bey does not give any information about this letter, written entirely in Italian, kept in the Florentine archives.[23] According to the information provided by Huseyn Ali Bey, Shah Abbas did not write a special letter for Ferdinando. The letter contained specific information about how many janissaries the Ottomans kept in cities such as Jerusalem, Aleppo, Damascus, Antioch, and the situation of Catholics and Druze in Lebanon. Written in neither Turkish nor Persian, the letter, which carried so much unique information about Syria, was most likely the work of the Safavid spy Corai. In general, the fact that Corai and Shirley acted together on most issues may be because Shah Abbas gave them secret tasks.

While in Pisa, Shirley met his old friend Henry Wotton, whom he knew from England. Like Shirley, Wotton was from the circle of Robert Deveraux, Earl of Essex. He had previously spied for him in Transylvania, Poland and other territories of the Holy

Roman Empire. From 14 April to 4 September 1599, he rose to the position of Secretary of State for Ireland. After Robert Deveraux fell out of favor with Queen Elizabeth, he sent Wotton to seek support from Ferdinando. Wotton, who met Ferdinando thanks to an introduction by Shirley, would live here for a while.[24]

Before the embassy left Pisa, the Medici court notified the Tuscan ambassador in Rome, Giovanni Niccoloni, on 24 March, to make preparations. Two days later, the Roman nuncio in Florence, Ascanio Jacobazzi, reported to the pope about this. According to the writings of Oruj bey, the embassy stayed in Pisa for 10 days, but official Tuscan documents show that they stayed a little more than a week. The duke took them to the city of Livorno and showed them the newly built fortifications and port, which astonished the Safavid ambassadors. On 28 March the embassy returned to Florence with the duke and was preparing to leave for Rome. As Shirley was still competing with Huseyn Ali Bey, he hastily sent a letter to the pope with a knight named Julio Cesare Caietano and announced his arrival.[25] But the next day he was shaken by bad news reported in a letter he received from Venice: Shirley's relative and patron, the Earl of Essex, was accused of treason and executed on 25 February 1601. Many connected to the earl had been imprisoned. Having lost his main benefactor Shirley hastily invented a new lie—before leaving, on 30 March he told the duke that Shah Abbas had recaptured Tabriz, according to a report he had received "from a good merchant."[26]Ferdinando had no reason to suspect Shirley just yet. After learning that there was an Englishman in the Safavid embassy, Elizabeth I was furious and sent her own agent to Prague because she thought it would hurt Anglo-Ottoman relations. Piero Duodo, the Venetian ambassador in Prague, sent a letter to the Signoria dated 2 April, saying that the person was detained while crossing the Moselle in France, and his fate remained

unknown.[27]

In the concluding part of the article, I will discuss the last argument between Shirley and Huseyn Ali bey. Although the context of the dispute is known, the reports given by Oruj bey and the Duke of Sessa, the Spanish ambassador in Rome, differ as to the place where the incident took place—Oruj bey points to the city of Siena which is on the outskirts of Tuscany, while Duke Sessa indicates the city of Viterbo near Rome. The distance between these two cities is 140 km at best. Huseyn Ali accused Shirley of stealing their gifts in Arkhangelsk. These gifts were supposed to arrive directly to Rome from Arkhangelsk. Shirley had promised to explain everything when the right time came. In any case, the embassy was already in Viterbo on 2 April. Shirley wrote a letter from this city to Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini on that date. The person who delivered the letter was a Signor Angelo[28]—most likely Michelangelo Corai.

It was Cinzio Aldobrandini who took the embassy to Rome, who in turn told the parties that he would settle the problem between the ambassadors in the Vatican.

The result

The dispute between Shirley and Huseyn Ali, who traveled in Italy in February-March-April, continued to interfere with the work of the embassy. However, Shirley and Corai inspired Ferdinando, Duke of Tuscany, to wage his own private war against the Ottomans. We also saw that Shah Abbas wanted to create chaos in the Ottoman Empire, either through rebellions or via the interference of European countries, within the framework of his broad geopolitical strategy.

In the next article, I will change my focus to the east and discuss the Safavids, the fate of Pirgulu bey, whom Shah Abbas sent as an ambassador to Russia, and the process of rebuilding relations with Poland.

References and notes

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[2] Javid Aga, “Shah Abbas’s European Spies – The Great European Embassy,” *Baku Research Institute,* February 22, 2024, https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/shah-abbas-european-spies-the-great-european-embassy/

[3] Javid Aga, “Shah Abbas’s European Spies – The Secret Embassy,” *Baku Research Institute,* March 15, 2024 https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/shah-abbas-european-spies-the-secret-embassy/

[4] G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia – A Shiah Catholic 1560-1604,* Harper&Brothers, 1926, chapter 6 – all references to Oruj Bey from this point on are from this chapter.

[5] Franz Babinger, *Sherleiana: I. Sir Anthony Sherley’s Persische Botschaftsreise (1599-1601),* Berlin: Gedruckt in der Reichsdruckerei, 1932, 22-24

[6] German: Rokitzan

[7] Czech: Plzeň; German: Pilsen

[8] German: Kladrau

[9] German: Pfraumberg

[10] Georg Christoph Gack, *Geschichte des Herzogthums Sulzbach: nach seinen Staats- und Religions-Verhältnissen, als wesentlicher Beitrag zur bayerischen Geschichte,* Weigel, 1847, p.183

[11] German: Goldene Straße, for more information about the road see: https://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Goldene_Stra%C3%9Fe

[12] A route that stretched from the Baltics to Italy. For more information about the road, see: Christoph Kühn, *Die Via Imperii als Pilgerstraße In: Unterwegs im Zeichen der Muschel. Rundbrief der Fränkischen St. Jakobus-Gesellschaft Würzburg* , issue 52, January 2005, p. 13–14

[13]Most likely, we are talking about the modern Munich Residence. German: Münchner Residenz

[14] G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia, p. 280*

[15] G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia, p. 281*

[16] Davide Trentacoste. *Granducato di Toscana e Persia Safavide. Informazione, politica e diplomazia mediterranea e levantina nel XVII secolo*. Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle – Paris III; Università degli studi (Teramo, Italy), 2021, p. 224-225

[17] Davide Trentacoste, *Granducato di Toscana e Persia Safavide,* p. 223

[18] Guglielmo Berchet, *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria* , Turin 1866, 108

[19] Roger Mason. *The Medici-Lazara Map of Alanya* . Anatolian Studies 39 (1989): 86.

[20] Davide Trentacoste, *Granducato di Toscana e Persia Safavide,* p. 225

[21] G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia, p. 282*

[22] Scudo (scudi in plural) – Currency used in Italy until the 19th century.

[23] Florentine archives, Carte Strozziane, Serie 1, 15, ff. v. 66-69.

[24] Gustav Ungerer, *A Spaniard in Elizabethan England. The Correspondence of Antonio Pérez's Exile*, 2 vols (1974–1976), 2: 322

[25] Vatican Archives, Fondo Borghese, III, vol. 106, fasc. E, doc 3.

[26] Florentine archives, Mediceo del Principato, 896, f. 577.

[27] 'Venice: April 1601', *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, vol. 9, 1592-1603, (London, 1897) p. 449-457. British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol9/pp449-457

[28] Carlos Alonso, *Embajadores de Persia en las cortes de Praga, Roma y Valladolid (1600-1601):* Anthologica Annua 36 (1989) p. 73 – I am indebted to Hernán Godoy of the Spanish Institute of Ecclesiastical History for helping me obtain this document.

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