

Shah Abbas' European Spies – The Great European Embassy

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We ended the last article with the scandal between the Ottoman ambassador Mehmet Agha and Shah Abbas. We will start this article from the events of 1599 and conclude with the events of 1601.

In his memoirs, Shirley noted that he fell ill in Isfahan and adds: “The next morning, the Shah came to visit me and said that he accepted my proposal. He said that since I was the proposer, I should be the executor.” Shirley, in turn, tells the Shah that he should have a Safavid subject with him.[\[1\]](#)

After long discussions, the members of the embassy are appointed by the Safavid palace. At the embassy, Shirley's team included the Frenchman Abel Pinçon, the Englishmen George Manwaring, William Parry, Friar Nicolas de Melo of the Augustinian order, and Friar Alfonso Cordero of the Franciscan order. The ambassador appointed by the Shah was Huseyn Ali bey Bayat. Huseyn Ali bey chose 4 secretaries for himself: Oruj bey Bayat, Aligulu bey Bayat, Bunyad bey and Hasan Ali bey. There were a total of 25 people in the embassy.



Huseyn Ali bey gravure, 1601, Prague

Huseyn Ali bey served Shah Abbas's father Muhammad Khudabanda and Crown Prince Hamza Mirza. Huseyn Ali bey's brother Sultan Ali bey participated in the negotiations with Amir Khan Turkman, Beylerbey of Tabriz, as a representative of Hamza Mirza. After Sultan Ali bey was killed during the battle against the Ottomans in 1582, his son Oruj Bayat continued to serve the Safavids.[\[2\]](#) Oruj Bayat and his cousin Aligulu bey successfully participated in the battle of Herat against Uzbek Din Muhammad Khan in 1598.

Why these three people? Most likely Huseyn Ali bey, his nephews Oruj and Aligulu beys' long-term loyal service played a role in Shah Abbas' choice of them for the ambassadorship. The trust shown to Huseyn Ali bey would later play an important role in the worsening of his relationship with Shirley. Although English sources report -that the main ambassador of the embassy was Shirley, Oruj Bey later insisted in his memoirs about this trip that Huseyn Ali bey was the real leader of the embassy sent to Europe. This ambivalence regarding leadership was the main reason for the problems that later befell the embassy.

It is impossible to say exactly when the diplomatic group left Isfahan. Venice's ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire, Pietro Duodo reported the date as 24 May,[\[3\]](#) while Oruj bey Bayat suggests 9 July. Duodo's version gives the same date as Shah Abbas's credential letters received by Shirley in Gilan. Therefore, 24 May 1599 should be considered the embassy's date of departure. Considering that the embassy arrived in Gilan via the Isfahan-Dowlatabad-Kashan-Qum-Saveh-Qazvin route, we can put the time of their departure from Isfahan at the beginning of May. The rest of Shirley's contingent, Anthony's brother Robert, John Ward, John Perrot, and Gabriel Brooks, whose names we mentioned in the last article, left them in Dowlatabad and stayed in the palace of Shah Abbas.

Russia



Boris Godunov, 17th century (Wikimedia)

Huseyn Ali bey could not reach the caravan leaving Isfahan and

caught up with Shirley only in Gilan. The embassy remained in Gilan until the end of June due to bad weather conditions. According to the writings of Oruj bey Bayat, the embassy was caught in a storm in the Caspian Sea after leaving Rudsar and reached Astrakhan via Mankyshlak in mid-September. It then met Pirgulu bey, who was sent as an ambassador to Russia.[\[4\]](#) Pirgulu bey was sent by Shah Abbas in 1598 on the occasion of the accession of Boris Godunov to the throne. According to the notes of Abel Pinçon, one of the members of the Safavid ambassador's entourage welcomed by Pirgulu bey in Astrakhan, the city's voivode (chief of the city troops), although he was not mentioned by name, Ivan Vasilyevich Sitsky (d. 1608) was dozing at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, so they had to wait.[\[5\]](#)

After staying in Astrakhan for 16 days, they left for Nizhny Novgorod on the Volga River in a five-oar boat. The embassy, which was on its way to Moscow via Kazan, lost 7 weeks on the way. Huseyn Ali bey's embassy was supposed to go to Poland from here. However, Tsar Boris Godunov apparently did not allow them to go to Poland intentionally. Presumably, the tsar, who wanted to play a more active role in European politics, was afraid that a Polish-Safavid alliance would make Russia an outsider. This delay would later reverberate in Venice. Sigismund III, the ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, actually aimed to take joint action against the Ottomans in order to capture Moldavia. According to this plan, a Holy Roman Empire-Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth-Spanish-Safavid alliance would start a total war against the Ottomans. In any case, Huseyn Ali bey and his entourage reached Moscow only at the end of November.

But why were there two Portuguese in the embassy? Nicolas de Melo and Alfonso Cordero did not arrive with Shirley. De Melo was born in 1548 in Belmonte, Portugal. Melo, who was sent to the Philippines in 1582 as a member of the Augustinian order, was elected procurator of the order on 29 August 1597. Since

the Catholic Church had not yet sent a bishop to the Philippines, Nicolas de Melo had to return to Rome because he had decided to use the right to vote in this election.

Normally, the route from the Philippines to Spain was via Mexico, but this time, to make the journey faster, the Vatican changed Melo's route from Goa, a Portuguese colony in India. Melo would leave Goa for Spain and from there for Rome. De Melo, who set off in November 1597, took with him his namesake, an 18-year-old Japanese convert named Nicola, whom he baptized. The monks arrived in Goa only in 1598. Due to the change of season, ships would not leave for Portugal for another year. Therefore, the priests decided to travel through the Safavid state. While in Goa, Simon, the bishop of the Church of St. Francis, approached them and asked permission for Alfonso Cordero to join them.

The monks left Goa in February 1599 and arrived in Hormuz. Having learned that the ambassadors of the new Spanish king had arrived in the palace of Shah Abbas in Hormuz, the priests went to Isfahan. However, only after arriving in Isfahan in April did they realize these ambassadors were not Spanish, but English. Giacomo Fava, a Venetian who visited Iran the previous year, introduced them to the Shah. Fava represented the Venetian merchant Bartolomeo Bontempelli (1538-1616) and the Flemish Carlo Helman in Iran and soon became a favorite of Shah Abbas. Receiving the unexpected guests, the king decided to join the team of priests to Shirley and Huseyn Ali bey, who were already going to Spain and Rome. Shah Abbas, who entrusted the priests with embassies in Spain and Rome, unknowingly harmed the work of the embassy. He did not know the protocol of European diplomacy, and when he gave credentials to the ambassadors, he did not care which of them was the main ambassador. Shirley would later be in competition with Melo for that position.

In his memoirs, Shirley accuses Melo of committing acts contrary to Christian morality and even says that he slept

with prostitutes during his stay in Isfahan. According to Arnulf Hartmann, these were slanderous rumors spread by an Armenian priest who was translating for Melo in Hormuz and wanted to be part of the embassy.[\[6\]](#) In Moscow, the rivalry became fiercer, and Shirley threw a punch that resulted in Nicolas de Melo falling to the ground. Antonio de Gouvea, the future ambassador of Portugal to the Safavids, wrote in his memoirs that Shirley once wanted to drown Melo in the river, but Huseyn Ali bey stopped him at the last moment and put the priest on his ship.[\[7\]](#)

In any case, in 1600 the embassy was already in the palace of Boris Godunov. and Shirley and Huseyn Ali bey were still disputing among themselves who was the real ambassador. Godunov successfully exploited this confusion and accepted Huseyn Ali bey first, Melo second, and Shirley third. When Shirley, who considered himself a real ambassador, angrily protested, the tsar arrested him and kept the embassy in Moscow for 6 months. It is interesting that Pirgulu bey, who returned to Moscow with Huseyn Ali bey, did not inform the Safavi palace about this delay.

A disagreement between De Melo and Shirley led to Melo leaving the embassy and living in Moscow with a Milanese named Doctor Paolo. In his memoirs, Oruj bey writes about the priest's sudden disappearance. According to him, Melo had lent Shirley a large amount of money and the conflict arose because of that.[\[8\]](#) In fact, Melo was in trouble for baptizing Dr. Paolo's 9-day-old daughter. According to the Ruthenian rite, it was necessary to baptize a child after 40 days, and Melo's violation of the law was seen as heresy in Russia. Shirley made good use of this and was able to put Melo in prison. Sent to Solovetsky Monastery in Onega Bay together with his Japanese namesake Nicola, Melo lost contact with the embassy. He would be executed after Mikhail Romanov came to power.[\[9\]](#)

Shirley, who was practically imprisoned in Moscow, wrote two letters during that time. The first letter was addressed to

Anthony Bacon (1558-1601), the brother of the famous philosopher Francis Bacon. This letter, written on 12 February 1600, emphasized that England could trade with the Mughals in India via Russia. It should be noted that Bacon, like Shirley, belonged to the spy circle of Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex. Shirley's second letter, dated 10 June 1600, was written from Arkhangelsk and addressed to Robert Cecil. Robert Cecil was Francis Bacon's half-brother and Devereaux's rival. In his letter to Cecil, Shirley complained that Huseyn Ali bey wanted to go to the Holy Roman Empire. At the same time, he mentioned that Boris Godunov was looking for a son-in-law for his daughter Ksenia Borisovna, suggesting that such a man could be provided for by the English royal family. On 17 October 1600, Cecil wrote in a letter to Henry Lello, the English ambassador in Istanbul, that Queen Elizabeth was angry and complained that Shirley had arbitrarily declared himself ambassador. Cecil also said that only fools would believe that goods from China could be transported to England via the Caspian Sea.[\[10\]](#)

The embassy, which spent the cold seasons in Moscow, finally arrived in Arkhangelsk via Yaroslavl-Rybinsk-Totma-Turavets-Kholmogory. After a stay of 20 days, the embassy, which had found a Flemish ship, sent thirty-two boxes of presents directly to Rome ahead of themselves, at Shirley's suggestion, before leaving. These gifts never reached Rome, however. Oruj bey Bayat noted that Shirley actually sold these gifts to that captain. According to Shirley's own argument, those gifts were not worthy of European monarchs, they were of poor quality, and therefore he had them sent back to Iran.[\[11\]](#)

The embassy then came from Arkhangelsk via the Norwegian coast to Stade, a Hanseatic city at the mouth of the Elbe River.[\[12\]](#) Here William Parry, Shirley's secretary, left them and returned to England. Parry would later publish his own memoirs, *A New and Large Discourse of the Travels of Anthony Sherley, Kt.*, in 1601.

The embassy left for Emden in August. Here the embassy was

received by Count Enno III of East Frisia. Although Enno forgot to inform the emperor about the embassy, Huseyn Ali bey sent a messenger. The members of the embassy, who reached Oldenburg via the Aurich-Friedeburg-Neuenburg road, met Duke Johann VII of Oldenburg here. On 14 September, they arrived in Kassel from Oldenburg. Here they met Landgrave Moritz. Moritz sent a 3-horse carriage to meet them at the palace.

The ambassadors were entertained with the landgrave for ten days; Moritz showed them the rooms of his palace, gave them a private tour of the alabaster room, the cabinet of precious stones with coral walls, the armory, the stables, and demonstrated the city's new cannons. At the formal dinner table in the dining hall, he served them fruit, knives and "salt" made of marzipan. The embassy members at first did not understand the taste and laughed. Moritz even organized a jousting tournament in which his son played a leading role.

Finally leaving Kassel and heading east via Weimar-Alsfeld, the embassy arrived at Rothenburg an der Fulda, passing through Schmalkalden, Gotha and Erfurt on 30 September to Naumburg and the next day to Leipzig. Huseyn Ali bey tried to meet with the Duke of Saxony Christian II in Leipzig, but the duke ignored them, and the ambassadors left for Prague.

Prague



Modletický House, 2016

The embassy passed from Saxony to the lands of Bohemia and set foot in Louny where they stopped for lunch. [\[13\]](#) It is interesting that the local historian Pavel Mikshovich's chronicle of the city mentions not only the fact that the Iranian embassy is in the city, but also its political purpose. The chronicler even wrote about the length and difficulty of their journey, probably hearing it from them. The embassy left in the evening and waited for 3 days at Modletický House in Slaný.

Jiří Vojna, the city's burgrave, wrote that he spent 27 kopa of Meissen groschen [\[14\]](#) to host the Iranian embassy. (1 kopa = 60 pieces; $27 \times 60 = 1620$ grosch.) This money was paid to the owner of the inn, Vilém Modletický. This amount was 17 kopa more than the mayor of the city paid him.



Prague, 1606 (Met Museum)

The embassy left Slaný on 10 October and arrived at the Stella Pavilion (modern Letohrádek Hvězda) in the west of Prague. The Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II prepared a grand reception for the embassy. Pietro Duodo, the Venetian ambassador in Prague, wrote:

The two Persian Ambassadors made their entry into the city. One of them is an Englishman, named Anthony Shirley. As far as I can understand, he is the principal Ambassador. And the other is a Persian named Hossein Ali Bey [\[15\]](#); there are about 20-25 people with them. His Majesty for their greater honoring caused about three hundred citizens to mount horses, and sent his Grand Chamberlain, with about fifteen carriages and a vast concourse of people to meet the Ambassadors at the Stella, a place two Italian miles outside Prague. Inside the town, the street was lined with troops from the gate to their lodging in the Lesser Town. The entry was most honorable; and his Majesty himself was present at a window of the Palace, which, being far off and high up, commanded a view of the general effect, but nothing else. The Ambassadors have not yet been received in the audience. [\[16\]](#)



Now demolished “Mad Man” (U Divého muže) hotel where Safavid embassy stayed, 20th-century (starapraha.cz)

After meeting with the emperor’s representative, the embassy entered through the western gate, which was once located on present-day Úvoz Street. They went east along modern Nerudova Street and turned right. Here they entered the “Mad Man” (U Divého muže) hotel, owned by the Přehořovský family, located on Karmelitská street. Oruj bey called this Renaissance-style hotel “a palace.” The embassy stayed here for 1 week.

The emperor received them only on 7 November. Greeted by the imperial guard at the palace gate (the future Matthias gate), the embassy went up the stairs from the western entrance. The meeting took place in the rooms on the first floor of the summer residence of the new palace. The embassy entered the official rooms consisting of two antechambers and the main audience hall where the emperor awaited them. The reception protocol was unusual. Rudolph stood, did not sit, did not extend his hand for a kiss, and, advanced towards the ambassador to take the king’s letter, which lessened the solemnity of the occasion a little.

During the meeting, Anthony spoke to him in Spanish and presented Shah Abbas with an alliance proposal. Later, within a week, Huseyn Ali bey had meetings with the ambassadors of other countries. At the time of the meeting, Anthony was suggesting to Pietro Duodo that the Safavids were a better choice than Portugal for the spice trade. In his opinion, it was more logical to bring from Iran to the Caspian Sea, and from here to Europe via the Volga and Russia rather than going to India. However, as this thought did not occur to Robert Cecil, it did not make sense to Duodo either.

Later, Huseyn Ali bey made visits to Prague Castle several times by special invitation, and the emperor's servants organized a typical tour intended for the highest-ranking guests. The members of the embassy visited the armory, the cabinet of wonders with various animals and natural objects, the imperial wardrobe, the stables and the lions' den.

Huseyn Ali bey's embassy was already preparing to leave Prague on 17 November. The emperor advised the ambassador to return to Iran. The emperor could also deliver the Shah's letters with his couriers according to his suggestion. Huseyn Ali bey refused. Huseyn Ali, who had not left Prague for 3 days, wanted to get the emperor's promise for the alliance. Another condition of the ambassador was more severe: if war broke out, the emperor could not make peace without the knowledge of the shah.

The discussions were prolonged. Huseyn Ali bey was still in Prague on 18 December. The Germans tried to make him understand that when the emperor wanted peace, he could not quickly send a messenger to the shah. Because it could take months for a letter to reach Iran. The Germans also expected a dragoman to translate the letters. The slowness of Dr. Bartholomew Petzen, the interpreter, reportedly infuriated Rudolph. On 25 December, Guillen de San Clemente (1530-1608), the Spanish ambassador in Prague, met Anthony Shirley. After learning the details of this meeting, the Venetian ambassador

reported:

I suspected some secret negotiation, and my suspicions were just. I find that the Englishman has proposed to take over the captaincy of the mouth of the Red Sea, where all the Indian traffic passes on its way to Suez, and to pay for it 200.000 crowns a year in place of the 40.000 the captains now pay, and he offers sufficient security. His object is to divert the Indian trade altogether from Egypt and to send it through Muscovy. Grand schemes, impossible to accomplish. I have seen his credentials; they do not give him the title of Ambassador, which the Persian who is with him has. He has spent much and made presents. Although living at his Majesty's charge, he has contracted 46.000 thalers[\[17\]](#) of debt; and his creditors are after him. [\[18\]](#)

It seems that Shah Abbas was thinking of establishing an alliance with Russia as a means of economic pressure against the Ottomans. In his reply to the emperor, Anthony proposed a joint attack against the Ottomans the following spring. Shah Abbas would attack with his Georgian vassals and Russia, and Rudolph with Europe. Rudolph also requested religious freedom for Christians in Iran as a condition.



Pietro Duodo (1554-1610) bust, Monselice (Wikimedia)

Huseyn Ali bey was already preparing to go to Italy in January. On 15 January 1601, he presented his credentials to

the Venetian ambassador. However, even on 22 January, the ambassadors could not leave Prague. The Venetian ambassador wrote:

The Persian Ambassadors are still waiting for an audience. The Englishman is in a fury. He went to take his leave of the Spanish Ambassador and complained bitterly of Dr. Petzen, who had answered to his remonstrances that if he did not like to stay, he could go. I think there is some mystery underneath all this; for though, as your Serenity will see from the letters I sent, the Englishman is not really the Chief Ambassador, yet in the answer they give him that title to flatter and please him. They tried to persuade them to go back to Persia by Muscovy. The Englishman refused; and now they wish to separate him from the Persian, to whom they would attach an ambassador of their own, who would bring them more honor than the Englishman. Dr. Petzen aspires to that post, and this explains his desire to weary out the Englishman. I do not think it will be easy to separate them, though there is a certain amount of ill feeling between them on account of the vanity of the Englishman and the caution of the Persian. The Englishman told the Spanish Ambassador that if he has to leave without an audience, he will go to Florence, and then to France and England, without visiting Spain. In England, he will attend to his private affairs and then return, to Persia by sea. [\[19\]](#)

The embassy finally departed on 15 February 1601. The emperor gave Shirley 2.000 florins and another 700 florins for travel. The two ambassadors received a total of 2.000 thalers worth of silver, far less than they had hoped for. In general, each day they were in Prague cost the emperor 120 thalers. This meant a total of 10.200 thalers for 85 days. If we consider that 1 thaler equals 1,2 gulden, and 1 gulden equals 21.653 grams of silver, the emperor spent more than 150.000 USD (2023 value) on the Safavid ambassadors.

From the letters of the Venetian ambassador, it was already known to the signoria that large alliances were forming in the geopolitical arena of Europe–Spain, Portugal, the Holy Roman Empire, the Vatican, Russia and Iran–formed a league and united against England, France, and the Ottomans. The embassy had to speed up because they were already late for the rest of their meetings. There was no news from Isfahan. However, another Safavid mission had already begun to operate in Venice. We will discuss this in detail in the next article.

[1] E. D. Ross, *Sir Anthony Sherley and His Persian Adventure*, Psychology Press, 2005, p. 53

[2] F. Cutillas, José, "Don Juan de Persia", *Christian-Muslim Relations* 1500 – 1900, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2451-9537_cmrii_COM_27088

[3] J. Schefer, *Estat de la Perse en 1660 par le P. Raphaël du Mans...*, Paris, 1890, p. 277

[4] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World*, 2011, p. 100

[5] E. D. Ross, *Sir Anthony Sherley*, p. 165

[6] Arnulf Hartman, *Father Nicholas Melo and Brother Nicholas of St. Augustine, Martyrs*, OESA, Augustiniana, Vol. 9, No. 3 (AUGUST 1959), p. 277-303

[7] Antonio de Gouvea, [*Glorioso Triunfo de tres Martires Españoles, dos Portugueses, y frailes de la Orden de S. Agustin, y vno Castellano hijo de Madrid, etc.*](#) 1623, p. 10

[8] G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia – A Shia Catholic 1560-1604*, Harper & Brothers, 1926, p. 258

[9] Hartman, *Father Nicholas Melo*

[10] British National Archives, State Papers Foreign, Turkey, SP 97/4, sheet 105

[11] Ross, *Sir Anthony Sherley* , p . 68

[12] The adventures of the embassy to Prague are taken from the memory of Oruj Bey Bayat. See G. Le Strange, *Don Juan of Persia*

[13] What happened during the embassy's meeting with the emperor in Prague is taken from this source: Horníčková, K., & Šroněk, M. (2022). Staging Oriental Delegations at the Habsburg Imperial Court in Prague (1600-1610). *Digital Journal of Culture & History* , 11 (2), e019. <https://doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2022.019>

[14] Groschen (alm. groschen) – a currency used in the Holy Roman Empire. The Turkish word *kuruş* came from here.

[15] Written mistakenly “Hassan Nabrech” in original.

[16] ‘Venice: October 1600’, in *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 9, 1592-1603*, ed. Horatio F Brown (London, 1897), pp. 425-431. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol9/pp425-431>

[17] Thaler (alm. Thaler) – currency of the Holy Roman Empire. This is where the word dollar comes from.

[18] ‘Venice: December 1600’, in *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 9, 1592-1603*, ed. Horatio F Brown (London, 1897), pp. 434-438. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol9/pp434-438>

[19] ‘Venice: January 1601’, in *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume*

9, 1592-1603 , ed. Horatio F Brown (London, 1897), pp. 438-444. *British History Online*
<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol9/pp438-444>

Shah Abbas' European Spies – First Contacts