

Shah Abbas' European Spies – The Polish embassy

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In the last 4 articles, I discussed Shah Abbas's espionage and diplomatic activities in Europe.^[1] This article talks about the fate of Pirgulu bey, who was mentioned in the second article. He was sent to Russia by Shah Abbas on the occasion of Boris Godunov's accession to the throne in 1598 when relations with Poland were resumed.

When the last diplomatic contact between Iran and Poland took place, Aqqoyunlu ruler Uzun Hasan and Polish king Casimir IV Jagiellon were still in power. Diplomatic connections transpired thanks to Ambrogio Contarini (1429 – 1499), but this diplomatic relationship was fruitless. About a century later, Shah Abbas decided to restore diplomatic relations. As we saw in my previous articles, this attempt failed thanks to Russia. Sigismund III made the next step towards reestablishing relations. Sigismund III was the Vasa ruler of both Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the time of the departure of the Grand European Embassy (May 1599).^[2] But only 2 months later, after the successful rebellion of Protestant Swedish nobles and Prince Charles, Sigismund abdicated the Swedish throne and settled for the Commonwealth throne alone.

Sigismund III was elected to the Polish throne in 1587 after the death of Stephen Bathory. Although he was a Swedish prince, since his mother Catherine was from the Jagiellonian dynasty that ruled Poland, he was considered suitable for the new monarch position. This election was opposed by another nobleman, Archduke of Further Austria –Maximilian, who was related to Jagiellons on his mother's side and brother to Rudolph II. When captured Maximilian in a decisive battle in 1558, he had been able to force the Habsburgs to give up their

claim to the Polish throne. Although Sigismund's predecessor, Stefan Bathory, was an Ottoman vassal as the voivode of Transylvania, he sat on the Polish royal throne with the sultan's support and maintained neutral relations with the Ottomans.^{[\[3\]](#)} Although Sigismund wanted to continue his predecessor's principle of neutrality against the Ottomans, the Anglo-Spanish rivalry forced him to take a new look at these relations.



Sigismund III, portrait by Pieter Soutman, c. 1624

Sigismund III experienced a diplomatic crisis with England in the tenth year of his rule of Poland, 2 years before the departure of the Safavid embassy. During this period, England attacked the merchant ships of neutral countries trading with Spain on the high seas, severely affecting the economies of port cities such as Gdańsk and Elbląg. Sigismund III sent Paweł Działyński as an ambassador to the Netherlands and England, where the latter threatened to stop grain exports to the Netherlands if these attacks were not stopped. The threat to Elizabeth I was taken as an insult: the Polish king had remained neutral prior to this moment but now threatened to form an alliance with Austria and Spain against England if these attacks did not stop. Under the influence of the enraged queen, Działyński was attacked and threatened with death on the streets of London. However, the queen eventually agreed to the demands and returned the Polish vessels, but relations were soured by that point.^[4]

In such a geopolitical environment, it was natural for Poland to extend its hand in alliance with Spain and Austria, as well as to the Safavid state, an enemy of the Ottomans. When the expected Safavid ambassadors did not arrive in Poland, the translator and diplomat Krzysztof Dzierżek—a one-time Bathory's ambassador to the Ottomans—advised the king to send an Armenian merchant named Sefer Muratowicz to the court of Shah Abbas in 1602.

Sefer Muratowicz was born in Karahisar.^[5] Most likely, he was given this name because he was born in 1577/78 during the Ottoman “Iran campaign.”^[6] In 1596, he came to the city of Lviv,^[7] which was under Commonwealth rule, and engaged in trade in the Armenian community through a trading company with Armenian merchants Murat Kerimowicz and Norbeg Popowicz. After the death of Murat Kerimowicz in 1599, the identity of Sefer

Muratowicz, who was a partner in the company, was written in Lviv city documents as “Turkish Armenian” (*armenus turcicus*).^[8] The activity of this company spanned from Constantinople to Moscow and from England to Gdańsk. ^[9] Sefer Muratowicz attracted the attention of the palace translator, Krzysztof Dzierżek, after he successfully returned the remaining properties of the company’s former partners from the state, thanks to the appeal of Ottoman ambassadors Ibrahim and Mehmet, who visited the Polish palace since he was also an Ottoman subject. He must have been in contact with Dzierżek during this period.

On 1 April 1601, Sefer Muratowicz set off for Trabzon.^[10] Like Asad Bey, Sefer Muratowicz was officially a merchant and not an ambassador, so he would be able to travel in the Ottoman land without any problems. Muratowicz arrived in the Georgian city of Gori via the Trabzon-Erzurum-Kars route after a 2-month sea journey. He mentions in his memoirs that he chose this route for safety reasons. Sefer Muratowicz arrived in the city of Kashan via Yerevan-Nakhchivan-Julfa-Tabriz-Qazvin. In Kashan, he fulfilled his official mission: he ordered carpets for King Sigismund. The city of Kashan was considered the center of the Iranian carpet industry at that time.^[11] In total, the journey took 158 days.

Having finished the official part of his trip, the merchant went to the palace of Shah Abbas in Isfahan, accompanied by the servant of Anisaddawla Tahmasibgulu Khan Mirimanidze. Tahmasibgulu Khan was the first person to welcome him. While interrogating the ambassador, Tahmasibgulu learned that Huseyn Ali bey and Shirley’s embassy did not go to Poland at all, but was redirected to Moscow. The next day, Sefer Muratowicz told the king at the Naqshi Jahan palace about the events that had happened so far and about the assignment given to him by Krzysztof Dzierżek in the Polish court.

After the conversation, the ambassador was returned to

Tahmasibgulu's mansion on the shah's order. The next day, he was to see Pirgulu Bey, who had taken Huseyn Ali bey's group to Moscow. Muratowicz writes about this in detail:

At night while we were eating, Tahmas bey came to me and said: "It is true that I did not know you before, but I have heard very good things about you from your brothers,^[12] they are good friends. And therefore, I inform you, so that you may know—here is an ambassador from Moscow, who told our king, the Christian rulers, the king of France, England, Venice and other nations and princes, that the king of Poland, your lord, pays taxes to the Tsar of Moscow. Tomorrow this ambassador will be before the shah or his servant. The English ambassador^[13] will be there, and so will the representative of Venice, and they want you to come there too. Think about what the shah will ask you and how you will answer in front of them so that you do not leave in an embarrassing situation." I thanked him for that and then he left me.

Returning to the shah's palace the next day, Sefer Muratowicz saw Robert Shirley, the Venetian ambassador, a boyar from Moscow, and the latter's interpreter, on the shah's left. The shah's five viziers sat to the right of the ruler. The shah instructed Sefer to sit on the left. The shah asked why Sefer did not bring a letter from Sigismund, and in answer, the Armenian stated that he was just a merchant and did not sit in this palace as an envoy. Shah Abbas told him that he had corresponded with the rulers of Moscow, the Holy Roman Empire, Venice, and the Pope, and expressed his regret that no news had come from the Polish king. The merchant, in turn, reminded the king that he himself had not written a letter to the king of Poland. According to Muratowicz's memoirs, the shah, surprised, first angrily looked at Robert Shirley and then at Isa khan Sheikhavand. During the interrogation, it was revealed that a letter was indeed sent to the king of Poland, but the Russian tsar detained the ambassadors and did not let them go to Poland: "The shah did not say anything, he just

shook his head."



Part of a carpet with hunting motifs Sefer Muratowicz acquired in Kashan

In his turn, Sefer Muratowicz showed the credentials given to him by the Polish king to the Venetian ambassador and informed him that the Polish king did not pay taxes to the Russian tsar, but that he himself was the ruler of the Russian lands.^[14] Muratowicz gave the shah a brief history of how Stefan Bathory had taken his lands from the hands of Tsar Ivan IV in 1577-1582, and how the Moscow principality would end if peace was not concluded through the mediation of the Pope. Presenting the official position of the Polish state, the merchant stated that the prince of Moscow was not a tsar,^[15] that is, an emperor, but just a small feudal lord. At the end of his speech, the ambassador said, "That's why I feel bad when the prince of Moscow is called the tsar of All Russia." Touching on the relations of the Polish king with the

Ottomans, Muratowicz talked about the battles of Wallachian prince Michael the Brave (Mihai Viteazul) with Moldavian prince Ieremia Movilă, describing them as proxy wars between Poland and the Ottomans. The shah was very impressed by this speech and told his vizier, Hatam Bey Ordubadi that Sefer Muratowicz, spoke like a diplomat, even if he was not an ambassador.^[16]

After that, the shah summoned Pirgulu bey, who had earlier been sent to Russia as an ambassador. Muratowicz conveyed the shah's dialogue with Pirgulu bey to his readers as follows:

– Do you hear this, Pirgulu bey? Do you see this man? He is not an ambassador, but a mercenary or worker, a man of trade, yet how he defends the integrity, the fame, and the name of his sovereign, I cannot blame him for this. He was not compelled to do so by fear of punishment, but he spoke the truth, and, like a good man, loving the glory of his sovereign, could not remain silent in the face of the slander thrown against him. But you, evil, thoughtless person, forgot your duties; you did not want to do our will and our commands. I sent you to the King of Poland with the brother of the English ambassador. You turned back. You didn't go with him against our word!

– The Tsar of Moscow did not want me to go. He said there was nothing for me to do there, as I did not know the language; he told me it was enough for the English ambassador's brother to leave with letters and gifts.

– And yet you told me that "the brother of the English ambassador went with me from Moscow to Poland." And now I have received word that the Tsar of Moscow has arrested that ambassador, so neither the letters nor the gifts have reached the Polish king.

– It is true what you say, I said that he went with me, but now if we have to tell the truth, he stayed in Moscow and I

came back.

– So why didn't you tell us the truth first?

– I was afraid.

The king turned to his vizier and said: "What is the punishment for those who do not tell the truth?" The Vizier said: "They should suffer whatever punishment Your Highness sees fit." The king said: "Take him away, take out his tongue and eyes!"

Thus, Pirgulu bey was punished in front of the merchant, and gifts were given to Sefer Muratowicz. Although the ambassador from Moscow invited Muratowicz to lunch three times, the merchant refused the invitation, acting discreetly. The merchant had also twice turned down Shirley's offer of dinner. Apparently, since the merchant was not an official ambassador, he was wary of relations with such diplomatic persons and the spread of rumors. Ten days later, the shah invited him to a garden near Isfahan for lunch with his newly married son Muhammadbagir Mirza and Tahmasibgulu khan. During the meal, the Shah turned to Hatam bey and said that he had talked with many ambassadors, but that he enjoyed talking with Sefer the most. According to the shah, the reason for this was that translation was a tiring endeavor, and he could talk to the ambassador in his mother tongue. Presumably, this was Turkish—Sefer Muratowicz was born in the Ottoman Empire and spoke Turkish as his mother tongue.

Later, Muratowicz told him that the Polish king had sent his son and his vizier away, and that he revealed that he was secretly a Christian in a room.^[171] Apparently, Shah Abbas did not know that the throne in Poland was decided by-election because he was trying to create an alliance with between his own son and Sigismund III's son in advance. Sefer Muratowicz followed Shah Abbas on his pilgrimage to Mashhad and noted that he traveled with 600 slaves.

Conclusion

Sefer Muratowicz returned to Poland in August 1602 after a 155-day journey, and on 12 August, he presented Jerzy Młodecki with the travel expenses and a list of the cities he visited. Sefer had bought wares for 876 thalers in Kashan, spent 324 thalers for his trip and returned with total expenditures of 1200 thalers.[18] Considering the mission a success, Sigismund III rewarded Sefer Muratowicz on 26 October 1602, and permitted him to import goods from the Crimean Khanate, the Safavid State, and the Ottoman State without tariffs.^[19] Sefer Muratowicz continued to live in Warsaw and Lviv, and returned to the Safavid state in 1631 as a representative of Polish Armenians. However, this delegation was not sent to the Safavid court, but to the leadership of the Armenian church in Etchmiadzin. Polish Armenians appealed to Catholicos III Movses (1629-1632) and complained about the conversion of an Armenian bishop, Nikol Torosowitz, to Catholicism (Jesuit). Movses in turn asked Sigismund III to stop the process, but the Catholic king did not interfere because he was not worried about the spread of his own view of Christianity. As a result, 90% of the Armenian population left Lviv, and the rest accepted Catholicism.

After this event, the Shah sent ambassadors to Poland 4 times—in 1605, 1612, 1622 and 1627. The Polish front of Shah Abbas's European diplomacy was not very successful because of the Russian and Ottoman factors, and the foreign policy of the Polish Sejm, which was different from that of the monarch. After Sigismund's death in 1632, the carpets brought by Sefer Muratowicz from Kashan were left to his daughter Anne Catherine Constance. Anne Catherine took these carpets to Pfalz as part of her dowry when she married Philipp Wilhelm, Count-Palatine in 1642. The carpets are currently on display in Bavaria, in the Munich Residence where Duke Maximilian once met Huseyn Ali bey.

Sefer Muratowicz's name is mentioned in the sources one last time in 1632 as a resident of Kamenets-Podolsky (modern Ukraine).^[20] His memoir was first published by Casimir Ignat in Warsaw, Poland in 1743. Another version was printed in 1777 by Joseph Minasowitz, a Pole of Armenian origin. The memoir was translated into English in 2014 by Michael Połczyński.^[21]



One of the kilims Muratowitz acquired in Kashan with the coat of arms of Sigismund III

In the next article, I will continue from where I left off, discussing the activities of Huseyn Ali bey and Anthony Shirley in Rome.

References and notes

[1] See: Javid Aga, "Shah Abbas's European Spies – First Contacts," *Baku Research Institute* , January 21, 2024, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/shah-abbas-european-spies-first-contacts/> 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/>; 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/>; Javid Aga, "Shah Abbas's European Spies – The Great European Embassy (Part II)," *Baku Research Institute* , April 14, 2024, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/shah-abbas-european-spies-the-great-european-embassy-part-2/>

[2] Polish: "Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów " (Commonwealth of Two Nations) or "Królestwo Polskie i Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie" (Kingdom of Poland and Grand Duchy of Lithuania), a union of Polish and Lithuanian states established in 1569. It ceased to exist in 1795.

[3] Jerzy Besala; Agnieszka Biedrzycka (2004–2005). "Stefan Bathor ". *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary]. Kraków: Polska Akademia Nauk., 1977, vol . XLIII,

[4] Radosław Patlewicz, *Mała Księga Bohaterów Polski* [Little Book of Polish Heroes] Częstochowa: 3DOM, 2018, p. 61–62.

[5] Modern Shebinkarahisar, Giresun. Historically, this city had a large Armenian population. Famous Armenians such as Aram Haygaz, Andranik Ozanyan and Ara Güler are from here.

[6] Sefer, being the Arabic word for ‘trip, travel’ or ‘campaign’ in this sense. *Morsztyn Zbigniew; Niemirycz Teodor, “Muratowicz Sefer”*. *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographical Dictionary], vol. XXII, p. 269-270.

[7] Modern Lviv, Ukraine.

[8] Tadeusz Mańkowski, *Wyprawa Po Kobierce do Persji w Roku 1601* [Expedition for carpets to Persia in 1601], Kraków: Nakładem Polskiego Towarzystwa Orientalistycznego z zasiłku Ministerstwa Szkół Wyższych i Nauki, 1951, p. 185
<https://polona2.pl/item/wyprawa-po-kobierce-do-persji-w-roku-1601,MTU0MTg2Mzc4/8/#info:metadata>

[9] *Acta judicii Armenorum Leopoliensis* [Acts of the Armenian Court of Lviv], volume 4, pages 3, 818, 839, 859, 861, 866, 892, 894, 928, 999

[10] Henceforth, all references to and quotations from Sefer Muratowicz’s memoirs are from: Kazimir Neselowski, *Otia Publica Vix Domestica* [Public and Domestic Vanities], Warsaw, 1743

[11] Matthee, Rudolph, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600-1730*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 28.

[12] That is, from other Armenian merchants.

[13] Robert Shirley was Anthony Shirley’s brother left in Iran.

[14] Rex Ruthenorum

[15] The title Tsar is derived from the Latin word “caesar” and was used as a title for Roman and Byzantine emperors. It was first used by the Bulgarian khan or prince Simeon I in 927.

[16] Maria Szuppe thinks that this person is Huseyn Bey Zulqadar. See: Maria Szuppe. *Un marchand du roi de Pologne en Perse, 1601-1602* . Moyen Orient & Océan Indien, 1986, 3, p. 92

[17] Shah Abbas treated the representatives of foreign countries like this before. According to Matthee, Shah Abbas himself knowingly “crossed himself” in front of Christian missionaries, asked about Jesus and the Bible, and even dressed as Portuguese. See: 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>

[18] 1 thaler was equal to 25.984 grams of silver.

[19] Acta iudicii Armenorum Leopoliensis ab Anno 1611 ad 1615, vol. 8, fol. 1018

[20] Kołodziejczyk, Dariusz. “Sefer Muratowicz”. D. Thomas (ed.), *Christian Muslim Relations Online II* . Brill, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-9537_cmrii_COM_28799 p. 702

[21] Michael Połczyński , “The Relacyja of Sefer Muratowicz: 1601–1602 Private Royal Envoy of Sigismund III Vasa to Shah ‘Abbas I.” *Turkish Historical Review* 5 (1), 2014: 59-93

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