The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran

Silk for Silver, 1600–1730

Rudolph P. Matthee's book offers a sophisticated, revisionist interpretation of the economy of Safavid Iran. Using a wide range of archival and written sources in languages ranging from Persian to Dutch and Russian, the author considers the economic, social and political networks established between Iran, its neighbors, and the world at large, through the prism of the late Safavid silk trade. In so doing, the author demonstrates how silk, the only commodity which spanned Iran's entire economic activity, was integral to various aspects of late Safavid society, including its approach to commerce, export routes, and, crucially, to the political and economic problems which confounded the Safavid state in the early 1700s. In a challenge to traditional scholarship, the author argues that, despite the introduction of the maritime, western-dominated channel, Iran's traditional land-based silk exports continued to expand and diversify right up to the end of the seventeenth century. The book makes a major theoretical contribution to the current debates on the social and economic history of the pre-modern world.

RUDOLPH P. MATTHEE is Associate Professor of History at the University of Delaware.

© Cambridge University Press
Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization

Editorial board
DAVID MORGAN (general editor)

VIRGINIA AKSAN  MICHAEL BRETT  MICHAEL COOK  PETER JACKSON
TARIK KHALIDI  ROY MOTTAEDEH  BASIM MUSALLAM
CHASE ROBINSON

Titles in the series

STEFAN SPERL, Mannerism in Arabic poetry: a Structural Analysis of Selected Texts, 3rd Century AH/9th Century AD–5th Century AH/11th Century AD  0 521 35485 4

PAUL E. WALKER, Early Philosophical Shiism: the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abû Ya'qûb al-Sijistânî 0 521 44129 3

BOAZ SHOSHAN, Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo 0 521 43209 X

STEPHEN FREDERIC DALE, Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750 0 521 45460 3

AMY SINGER, Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem 0 521 45238 4 (hardback) 0 521 47679 8 (paperback)

TARIK KHALIDI, Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period 0 521 46554 0 (hardback) 0 521 58938 X (paperback)

REUVEN AMITAI-PREISS, Mongols and Mamluks: the Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281 0 521 46226 6

LOUISE MARLOW, Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought 0 521 56430 1

JANE HATHAWAY, The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: the Rise of the Qadâqîsîs 0 521 57110 3

THOMAS T. ALLSEN, Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: a Cultural History of Islamic Textiles 0 521 58301 2

DINA RIZEK KHOURY, State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mamluq, 1540–1834 0 521 59060 4

THOMAS PHILIPP AND ULRICH HAARMANN (eds.), The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society 0 521 59115 5

PETER JACKSON, The Delhi Sultanate: a Political and Military History 0 521 40477 0

KATE FLEET, European and Islamic Trade in the Early Ottoman State: the Merchants of Genoa and Turkey 0 521 64221 3

TAYER EL-HIBRI, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hârîân al-Râshîd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbâsid Caliphate 0 521 65023 2

EDHEM ELDOM, DANIEL GOFFMAN AND BRUCE MASTERS, The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul 0 521 64304 X

ŞEVKET PAMUK, A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire 0 521 44197 8
The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran
Silk for Silver, 1600–1730

RUDOLPH P. MATTHEE
To my mother, Gerardina Matthee-Verspoor, 
and my late father, Antonius Matthee
This book is published with the generous assistance of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Delaware.
Contents

List of plates

Preface

Acknowledgments

Note on transliteration

List of abbreviations

Maps

Introduction

1 The Iranian silk trade: from the Silk Road to the Safavids

2 Procedures, logistics, and finances

3 Shah 'Abbas I and the Safavid political economy: territorial expansion, anti-Ottoman diplomacy, and the politics of silk

4 Government control and growing competition: the silk export monopoly and the advent of the European maritime companies

5 The complications of privatization: from the abolition of the silk export monopoly to the peace of Zuhab, 1629–1639

6 Conflict and reorientation: silk to silver, 1640–1667

7 Renewed regulation and the rise of the Russian connection, 1660s–1690s

8 Contraction and continuity, 1690–1730

Conclusion

Appendix

Glossary

Bibliography

Index
Plates

1 Receipt for silk consignment handed over to and accepted by Darvish Muhammad Makari, ARA, 1e afd., Coll. Gel. de Jongh 298. (Courtesy of Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague) page 47

2 Caravanserai of Mahyar, as drawn by Cornelis de Bruyn, and published in Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indie, 2nd edn, 1714. (Courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague.) 51

3 View of Isfahan, 1703–04, as drawn by Cornelis de Bruyn, and published in Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indie, 2nd edn, 1714. (Courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague.) 64

4 View of the Mayan-i naqsh-i jahan, the Royal Square of Isfahan, 1703, as drawn by Cornelis de Bruyn and published in Reizen over Moskovie, door Persie en Indie, 2nd edn, 1714. (Courtesy of Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague.) 65

5 First page of a Dutch silk invoice. In ARA, 1e afd., Coll. Gel. de Jongh, 92. (Courtesy of Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague) 107


7 Entry into Isfahan of Dutch envoy Johan Joshua Ketelaar and his suite, 16 May 1717. Drawing in J. G. Worm, Ost-Indian und persianische Reisen, 1737. (Courtesy of Thüringer Universitäts und Landesbibliothek.) 217
Preface

In the last quarter-century the study of long-distance trade in south and southwest Asia in early modern times has developed into a serious field of inquiry. The Mughal state and, to a lesser extent, the Ottoman Empire in particular have seen a rich production of monographs on various aspects of domestic trade and traders, the activities of the newly founded European maritime companies in Asian waters, the commodities they exchanged and conveyed, the place of merchants in society, and their interaction with the state. With the notable but partial exception of Niels Steensgaard’s and Stephen Dale’s studies – neither of which deals with Iranian trade per se – Iran in the Safavid period has not shared in this surge in scholarly interest. This lacuna may have had its origins in the geopolitical position of Safavid Iran, a country squeezed, as it were, between two empires of admittedly greater wealth and resources, and more remote from the West than either; yet it remains curious and unjustifiable – curious in the light of the celebrated encouragement of long-distance trade by Shah ‘Abbas I, the Safavid ruler whose reign is virtually synonymous with commercial efflorescence, which thus remains in isolation, suspended as a unique burst of energy and foresight without antecedents or follow-up, and unjustifiable because of the existence and availability of rich source material in the form of the archival records of the Dutch and English East India Companies and, to a lesser extent, of documentation in the Russian archives.

The present book seeks to contribute to a redressing of this situation. It examines aspects of long-distance trade in Safavid Iran, focusing on one commodity, silk. It does not claim to be a comprehensive study of silk in early modern Iran; it considers raw, unprocessed silk, pays some attention to its cultivation, but virtually none to the mechanics of silk manufacturing or the technicalities of silk textiles. Those interested in the latter two topics will therefore have to look elsewhere. This study does aspire to being more than an examination of silk and how it was exchanged and transported, however; by way of silk, it seeks to uncover the nexus of commerce and political power in late Safavid Iran. Silk is not an obvious key for this
Preface

purpose: silk famously counts as a luxury commodity, and as such is often seen as being of limited value for the study of social and economic processes in non-modern societies. In the Safavid period, however, silk formed Iran’s most valuable and lucrative export product. Central to the royal court as a source of revenue and a resource in state-controlled textile manufacturing, and crucial to the long-distance trade radiating out of Iran, silk affected much more than the elite. Its economic and political significance therefore greatly exceeded that of a preciosity, and it thus serves to illustrate one of this study’s main arguments – that commerce can only be studied fruitfully in its political context.

Owing to its centrality to the state – and the nature of the available source material – silk in Safavid Iran forces the researcher’s attention on the royal court, the locus of power and the arena where decisions were made that involved the entire realm, at least in theory. This focus places the book somewhat outside the mainstream of current scholarship on Asian trade and its practitioners, which tends to concentrate on the periphery, often confining itself to port cities, and to look for regional variation, resistance to central control, and the potential for regeneration in the face of a disintegrating center. These themes will be addressed as part of this study’s concern with the economic and political crisis that befell Safavid Iran in the late seventeenth century. Yet the central state and the part it played in procuring, negotiating, and distributing silk remain the primary focus. Through this focus Safavid Iran emerges as a distinct political entity ruled by an elite with a clear sense of self, and as a territory that paired fluid cultural and social boundaries with rather well defined geographical and even economic borders marked by unambiguous crossing points.

Iranian silk in the Safavid era, finally, crossed regional and national boundaries and changed hands and was carried halfway around the globe in the context of one of the great processes of all time, Europe’s maritime expansion and the global intercultural contact it spawned. Safavid silk was one of the commodities that helped integrate economic regions across imperial and cultural boundaries. It did so in more than one way, for even after the opening up of the maritime connection, linking Iran with Europe via the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, Iranian silk continued to be exported to the Mediterranean basin along the terrestrial trade routes traversing the Ottoman territories of Anatolia and Mesopotamia. In documenting the continued vitality and, to some extent, increased activity of the latter routes, the study revisits and, by adding a great deal of new evidence, modifies Steensgaard’s well-known thesis about the decline of the overland trade following the entry of the European maritime companies. By the same token, it demonstrates the limited impact of the European companies on the economy and society of seventeenth-century Iran, revealing this to be a combined function of difficult, even inaccessible terrain and the limited attractiveness of Iran as a provider of commodities.
Acknowledgments

I have incurred a great many debts in the process of researching and completing this book. More than anyone, it has been Nikki Keddie who made me an historian. Her intellectual stimulation and generosity have made a lasting impression on me. I will always be grateful for her suggestion that, as a Dutchman, I explore the Safavid era from the angle of the Dutch maritime sources. By following that advice, I have been able to catch two birds with one stone: a rich and fascinating period in Iranian history has opened up to me, and while exploring it, I have come to learn a great deal about my own past. Michael Morony, always challenging in his questions and never satisfied with easy answers, has done his part in honing my critical faculties.

I am grateful to those colleagues and friends who read the book in its various incarnations. Willem Floor, Edmund Herzig, and Nikki Keddie read the entire work in typescript and made many incisive comments and valuable suggestions. I appreciate Ahmad Ashraf’s comments on an individual chapter, and Robert McChesney for inviting me to present some of my ideas at New York University. All those who made suggestions will recognize where I followed their advice and where I did not. None is in any way responsible for any errors and poor judgment; all that’s mediocre in these pages is mine alone. I thank Iraj Afshar and Aghsah Mahdavi for assisting me with the siyay part of the silk receipt, and Stefan Heidemann for helping me procure a photograph of the drawing of Ketelaar’s 1717 mission to Iran. I am greatly indebted to Charles Melville for drawing my attention to a passage in the third volume of the “Afzal al-tavarikh,” recently discovered by him, with the proclamation of the silk export monopoly, the only such reference in the Persian-language sources. Afshin Matin-Asgari has been a kindred spirit for years. I appreciate him for that as well as, more mundanely, for copying, among other things, more pages of Chardin than he will care to remember. I also would like to thank Stefan Troebst for sending me unpublished work, and John Emerson, Michelle Marrese, and David Shearer for their help in locating sources.

I received institutional support from the Social Science Research Council
Acknowledgments

for dissertation research. Though the book has little in common with my
dissertation, some of its archival research was done while preparing my
thesis. Travel grants from the Mellon Foundation and the Gustave von
Grunebaum Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a
General University Research grant from the University of Delaware, made
subsequent overseas research possible. I gratefully acknowledge the subven-
tion toward publication offered to me by the Dean’s Office at the University
of Delaware, as well as the subvention toward the drawing of the maps
awarded to me by the Persian Heritage Foundation in New York. I thank
Barbara Broge for drawing the maps. The librarians and archivists of the
India Office Library in London, the Archives des Affaires Etrangères, the
Archives Nationales, and the Archives des Missions Etrangères, all in Paris,
the Carmelite, Jesuit, and Propaganda Fide Archives in Rome, and the
Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague all deserve credit for their efficiency
and helpfulness. Marigold Acland and Philippa Youngman of the Cam-
bridge University Press saw the manuscript through to publication in a
most gracious and professional manner.

My family members are my real role models. Ruth O’Brien, constant
source of inspiration and emblem of integrity and creative thinking, I thank
for her intellectual companionship and love. Max, with his incomparable
lust for life, has made every day a joyful one for the last two years. My final
and most heartfelt thanks go to my mother and my late father. I cannot
remember a time when they did less than put their full trust in me by letting
me pursue my own intellectual interests. Though they must, at times, have
been wondering where it all would lead, they never showed their apprehen-
sion. I hope I haven’t disappointed them. This book is a token of my
gratitude. I dedicate it to them.
Note on transliteration

The Arabic and Persian transliteration used in this book follows the Library of Congress system without the diacritical marks. Exceptions are non-Roman place names, such as Ganja, and terms such as jizya, which are spelled without the final h. Dates are given according to the Common Era calendar, except when the source is a Persian-language work, in which case the solat hijri reckoning is added. Russian spelling, too, conforms to the Library of Congress system.
Abbreviations

AE  Archives des Affaires Etrangères
AME  Archives des Missions Etrangères
ARA  Algemeen Rijksarchief
BN  Bibliothèque Nationale
BSOAS  Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CMR(S)  Cahiers du Monde Russe (et Soviétique)
EHR  Economic History Review
EIC  East India Company
Elr  Encyclopaedia Iranica
FOG  Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte
IOR  India Office Records
IS  Iranian Studies
IZ  Istoričeskie Zapiski
JA  Journal Asiatique
JEH  Journal of Economic History
JESHO  Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JGO  Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas
KSINA  Kratkie Soobshheniya Instituta Narodov Azii
MOOI  Le Moyen Orient et l’Océan Indien
REA  Revue des Études Arméniennes
VOC  Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie
Map 1 Silk routes between Iran and Europe, seventeenth century.
Map 2 Silk routes through northern Iran, seventeenth century.
Map 3 Silk routes through southern Iran, seventeenth century.
Map 4 The Volga route, seventeenth century.

XX
Map 5  Silk routes to the Levant, second half of the seventeenth century.