

## Introduction

Long-distance trade has forever been a quintessential part of life on the Iranian plateau. A crossroads between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, Russia, and the Mediterranean basin, Iran was the scene of east–west commerce even before the early days of the fabled Silk Road, an important branch of which traversed the country. Of the many commodities ferried across Asia, silk was invariably one of the most precious. In the West, however, silk has never readily been associated with Iran, not even in the form of the country’s well-known carpets, the most priceless of which have always been made of silk rather than wool. The popular identification of silk with China has obscured the fact that silk did not just pass through Iran but that for many centuries the country was also an important producer of raw silk as well as of silk textiles. The latter were among the commodities carried to Byzantine textile workshops in late antiquity. Sasanian silk patterns remained popular in Asia long after the fall of the dynasty in the seventh century. In the Middle Ages raw silk from Gilan and Mazandaran was coveted by Italian merchants who imported it to feed an expanding textile manufacturing industry at home. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Iranian silk transported to the Levant provided the raw material for textile manufacturing in the Ottoman city of Bursa. And in the 1600s, Western travelers marveled at the high-quality brocades and taffetas produced by Iran’s workshops, while Dutch and English merchants purchased large quantities of Iranian raw silk to satisfy a growing demand in Amsterdam and London.

Iranian silk long remained embedded in what Marshall Hodgson has called the Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, the world between the Mediterranean and Central Asia that was knitted together by common cultural patterns and a comprehensive trading network.<sup>1</sup> This world was challenged in a process that, though known under different names, can be summed up as the “rise of the West.” Historians differ about the precise timing of this process, but most have placed it in the context of the great maritime

<sup>1</sup> Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, ii, 330–5.

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discoveries and the “commercial revolution.” Fernand Braudel sees a “turning point” in the late sixteenth century, when Spain retreated from the Mediterranean and the Atlantic became the world’s center stage.<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein’s European world-economy “emerged” in the mid-fifteenth century and was “consolidated” after 1640.<sup>3</sup>

Situating the critical moment of European hegemony before 1800 easily leads to a conflation of ascendance and hegemony, rendering Asia subordinate and peripheral in a manner that is as inexorable as it is anachronistic. It makes early modern Europe prematurely cast a shadow over Asia, projecting power borrowed from a nineteenth-century reality that extends far beyond its actual influence on the world in the 1600s. Conversely, it turns Asia’s history into mere reactive behavior to European commercial entrepreneurship and doomed resistance to Western political and military hegemony. In the master narrative thus scripted, anything beyond the purview of Western merchants recedes over the horizon. Trade with Russia becomes trade initiated by Europeans, and activity beyond Moscow, if addressed at all, is viewed as an extension of English ventures; merchant operations east of Izmir and Aleppo occur in the penumbra of the light cast by western Levant Companies; commerce in the Indian Ocean turns into an offshoot of a Western-dominated maritime trading world that touches little more than port cities and their immediate hinterland, leaving Asia’s vast interior waiting to be opened up by nineteenth-century Western commercial and military initiative.<sup>4</sup>

In the last few decades scholars have been busy revising the picture of early modern Asia as a continent impervious to change, lacking in agency, and wanting in commercial sophistication. Ottomanists have begun to look into the ports of the Levant beyond the activities of Western merchants and consular representatives, while students of pre-colonial India have initiated the study of trade and merchants indigenous to the subcontinent and operating across Asia.<sup>5</sup> Much of this work represents a shift from European expansion in Asia to the maritime history of Asia and continues to explore the sea and the littoral rather than the hinterland.<sup>6</sup> More recent studies have shifted attention to the interior but in the process often lose sight of the maritime connection.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Braudel, *Mediterranean*, ii, 891, 1165, 1176.

<sup>3</sup> Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*, i, 10, 63, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Even J. C. van Leur, a lone dissenter who in the 1930s argued that the extent of commercial innovation and impact of the European East India Companies on Asia had been minimal, assumed an unchanging Asia. See van Leur, *Indonesian Trade*. This study, van Leur’s dissertation, was originally published in Dutch in 1934.

<sup>5</sup> For the Ottomans, see Masters, *Origins*; and Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower*. Among the more numerous studies on India and the Indian Ocean, see Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants*; Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*; and Subrahmaniyam, *Political Economy*.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this trend, see Wills, “European Consumption,” 135.

<sup>7</sup> A good example of this development is Dale, *Indian Merchants*.

Safavid Iran has yet to become fully integrated in this revisionist discourse. Excellent work exists on some aspects of its economic history. We have a number of thorough studies of land ownership, mostly carried out by Russians,<sup>8</sup> and institutional-administrative history, pursued mainly by German scholars concerned with questions of chancery documentation, historiography and urban geography, is well represented, too.<sup>9</sup> Its commercial history, by contrast, remains underdeveloped compared with the state of the field in Mughal studies especially. Good general overviews are available and various aspects of trade have been highlighted in articles, but more probing studies have yet to be written. Serious impediments account for this situation, ranging from a dearth of surviving indigenous archives, a strong cultural and idealist bias in Iranian historiography, to the postwar failure of Iranian scholars to translate their quest for answers about material backwardness into solid research on the pre-nineteenth-century period. Inquiries into trade, moreover, either bear the imprint of what Martin Dickson has called the “Curzon-Sykes school,” in reference to British scholars who have studied commerce as a derivative of Western-oriented political and diplomatic history,<sup>10</sup> or view Iran as a giant clearing house through which a considerable volume of trade passed on its way to somewhere else – following the seventeenth-century French cleric du Mans who compared Iran to a caravanserai with one gate open to Turkey and another to India.<sup>11</sup> Scholars continue to marvel at the commercial infrastructure set up by Shah ‘Abbas and the expansion of trade effected by him, but thus far have done little to examine critically the commercial approach and practice of this most famous of Safavid shahs, let alone that of other rulers.<sup>12</sup> Even Niels Steensgaard’s study on Iran’s role in the transformation of Eurasian trade patterns, to date the only monograph that deals with Safavid trade, falls short in this regard.<sup>13</sup> Steensgaard, keen to demonstrate how the English and Dutch maritime companies rendered their Portuguese predecessors uncompetitive, and land-based trade obsolescent, touches on Safavid commercial policy, but his focus and concern lie elsewhere, and his

<sup>8</sup> Examples are Petrushevskii, *Zemledelie i agrarniye otnosheniia*; Papazian, *Agrarnye otnosheniia*; and Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*.

<sup>9</sup> This German tradition goes back to the scholarship of Walther Hinz and Hans Robert Roemer.

<sup>10</sup> Dickson, “Fall of the Safavi Dynasty.” See also Emerson, “Some General Accounts.” For a defense of the “traditional” school of Safavid historiography, see Savory, “Tahlili.”

<sup>11</sup> Richard, *Raphaël du Mans*, i, 149–50.

<sup>12</sup> Excellent recent dissertations by René Barendse and Rüdiger Klein discuss Iran’s important role in intra-Asian commerce but do not address the role of the (central) state in trade. See Barendse, *Arabian Seas*; and Klein, “Trade in the Safavid Port City.” Stephen Dale’s study on Indian merchants in Iran does include a discussion on commerce and the state. Edmund Herzig’s first-rate dissertation on the merchants of New Julfa explores the wide-ranging trade practices of an important group among Iran’s indigenous merchants. See Herzig, “Armenian Merchants.”

<sup>13</sup> Steensgaard, *Asian Trade Revolution*.

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work has been rightly faulted for its Eurocentric bias, overreliance on Western maritime sources, and scant attention to chronology, technology, and geography.<sup>14</sup>

The present study seeks to explore the dynamics of the interaction between political power and commercial activity in Safavid Iran. Its focus is the approach of the Safavid political elite to commerce and, more particularly, long-distance, transregional, and intercontinental trade, as seen in the role and place in society of Iran's domestic merchants and the encounter between the royal court and the agents of foreign trading companies. It does so by concentrating on one commodity, silk, from its productive source to its distribution and sale for export, between the reign of Shah 'Abbas I (1587–1629) and the demise of Safavid power in the 1720s, a period when relations between Europe and Asia reached a new level of intensity without yet bearing the weight of inequality that would subsequently mark them.

Within the field of Safavid economic and commercial history, the rather narrow topic of silk has received considerable scholarly attention. However, in keeping with the above-mentioned trend, historians interested in it have generally treated the subject as part of arguments external to Iran. Exemplifying this tendency, British scholars, the pioneers of the study of silk in Iran, have let an interest in political history and concern with Western commerce determine their approach to the Safavid silk trade, which thus became part of their study of the diplomatic forays of English envoys and adventurers and the activities of the English East India Company. In addition, their fascination with great rulers and the rise and fall of empires has led to a concentration on the reign of Shah 'Abbas, seen as a visionary in his state-building project and a European-style mercantilist in his approach to economic issues, at the expense of other periods in Safavid history.<sup>15</sup> Iranian scholars, hampered by limited access to the Western archival records, have done little to undermine the nationalist myth of Shah 'Abbas the Great, dispenser of justice and economic prosperity, one of the "good" kings in the Iranian tradition of statecraft.<sup>16</sup>

As Iran's most important export commodity and the mainstay of trade between the Safavid realm and the outside world, silk is ideally suited as a telescope bringing into focus a world far more complex and intricate than one perceived as a mere passive supplier of raw materials and an inert recipient of foreign envoys. To be sure, the study of Safavid silk points up fundamental changes in Eurasian commerce that seem to confirm Europe's

<sup>14</sup> See the critique of Steensgaard's book by Meilink-Roelofs, "Structures of Trade."

<sup>15</sup> See Savory, "The Sherley Myth"; Ferrier, "British-Persian Relations"; "European Diplomacy"; Stevens, "Robert Sherley." For a critique of this view, see Steinmann, "Shah 'Abbas," 16. Edmund Herzig's recent studies, "Volume of Iranian Raw Silk Exports," and "Iranian Raw Silk Trade," have initiated a reexamination of Shah 'Abbas's involvement with silk and the role of Iran's Armenian merchants in its procurement and distribution.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Falsafi, *Zindigani*; and Bastani-Parizi, *Siyasat va iqtisad*. For the tradition of the good king, see Christensen, *Decline of Iranshar*, 27–31.

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poise for hegemony. Increased demand led to intensified trade relations and greater competition. Its economy expanding, Europe imported a greater volume of (new) Asian commodities and explored various avenues in a competitive search for secure and cost-effective supply lines. Asia, in turn, and especially India, absorbed unprecedented amounts of gold and silver, most of it originating in the New World, in exchange for its products. Europe's quest for Asian goods and Asia's hunger for Western bullion added complexity to existing networks and arterial flows. The opening up of the oceanic route around the Cape of Good Hope gave Western merchants a direct presence in the Indian Ocean. In a pincer movement, they also began to explore the land-based access route to Asia through Russia. Their *modus operandi* in all this was new. Unlike their medieval predecessors, who hailed from individual city states and maritime republics such as Genoa or Venice and who tended to operate as private individuals or as envoys-cum-traders in the Asian ports where they engaged in business or took up residence, the new merchants served as commission agents or salaried employees of powerful chartered companies that at once operated as bureaucratic, state-like organizations far away from home and in various ways derived legitimacy from the power of the states that backed them and oversaw their activities. Whereas medieval trade had proceeded in stages, passing through many hands en route, the new commerce carried goods in single unbroken voyages linking producers and consumers.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the abundant documentation on (northwestern) European entrepreneurship easily obscures the Iranian dimension of these changes. First, the Europeans by no means held a monopoly on any commodity originating in or being supplied to Iran, including silk, bullion, or spices. Asian merchants joined their European colleagues in partaking of the intensified activity unleashed by the great changes of the sixteenth century. Armenian and Indian mercantile elites based in south and west Asia displayed a degree of energy and enterprise that owed little to Europe, operating as they did in family firms that often successfully competed with the maritime companies. Elusive because of the paucity of surviving documentation, these groups are just now emerging from obscurity.<sup>18</sup> The merchant diasporas they constituted shared in the greater complexity and the extension of existing networks as well. The Dutch and English established maritime (and military) superiority in some of the ports where they settled. In terms of the aggregate volume of trade and precious metals handled by them they were, however, no match for the Indian merchants who carried the bulk of the regional maritime trade, or the Iranian Armenians who, aside from being very active

<sup>17</sup> Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation*, 95–6.

<sup>18</sup> For the Armenians, see Herzig, "Armenian Merchants"; idem, "Family Firm"; idem, "Rise of the Julfa Merchants"; Baghdiantz, "Armenian Merchants"; and Bayburdyan, *Naqsh-i Aramanah*. The Indian merchant diaspora in Iran, Central Asia and Russia has received its first scholarly treatment in English in Dale, *Indian Merchants*.

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in regional commerce, created a near-monopoly for themselves on the Anatolian trade route and managed to secure a privileged position in the overland transit link through Russia, where they outdid the notoriously inefficient and undercapitalized Russian merchants. Nor did the Armenians simply engage in private trade. In the early seventeenth century, the Safavid state turned its domestic Armenian merchant community into what may be called a service gentry, employing them in ways that are reminiscent of the links between the contemporary Russian state and its *gosti* merchants.

A second development that tends to receive short shrift concerns the alternative to the maritime link, the land-based connections. To be sure, scholars concerned with continuity in the overland trade have begun to examine the “horizontal” axis linking Iran with the Ottoman Empire, the Mughal state, and Central Asia, long the main avenue for cross-cultural transmission.<sup>19</sup> The “vertical” axis connecting Iran and Russia via the Volga route, by contrast, has not received the same amount of interest.<sup>20</sup> Long the subject of research among Russians and Armenians,<sup>21</sup> the Volga route was until recently little studied by Western scholars, who mostly concentrated on the (limited) extent to which it was used by English merchants in the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Whereas silk formed a small proportion of the oceanic trade, it represented a large share of the wares carried via the Levant route and made up the bulk of the goods exported from Iran via Russia, and as such may be called emblematic of continuity and change along those routes.<sup>23</sup>

All three routes form the subject of this book, as do all merchants who competed for a share of the trade carried along them. If the study pays disproportionate attention to English and Dutch attempts to capture a share of Iran’s silk market, it does so only in deference to the fact that most of the extant documentation relevant to trade in Safavid Iran springs from the quills of the Western company agents and that most Persian-language sources yield virtually no data on trade, indigenous and international alike. Aside from being factually informative, the European sources are also the only ones that permit an exploration of the personal and dynamic encounter

<sup>19</sup> See Rossabi, “‘Decline’ of the Central Asian Caravan Trade”; Klein, “Caravan Trade.”

<sup>20</sup> The terms are borrowed from Allen, *Problems of Turkish Power*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Kukanova, “Russko-iranskii torgovye otnosheniia”; idem, “Iz istorii russko-iranskikh torgovykh svyaziei”; idem, “Rol’ armanskogo kupechestva”; idem, *Ocherki*; Iukht, “Torgovye svyazi”; and idem, *Torgovlia*.

<sup>22</sup> Exceptions to the scant Western attention to the Russian trade link are Mattiesen, “Die Versuche”; and Emerson’s pioneering dissertation “Ex Oriente Lux.” The “opening up” of eastern Europe in the 1990s has dramatically altered this situation. Aside from Dale, *Indian Merchants*, see Sartor, “Die Wolga”; Troebst, “Isfahan–Moskau–Amsterdam”; idem, “Narva und der Aussenhandel Persiens”; idem, *Handelskontrolle*; Matthee, “Anti-Ottoman Politics”; Ahmedov, “Export of Iranian Silk”; and Heller, “Zur Entwicklung.”

<sup>23</sup> In her critique of Steensgaard, Meilink-Roelofs rightfully called silk less an index than emblematic of such developments, but failed to differentiate between the various itineraries. See Meilink-Roelofs. “Structures of Trade.” 5.

between the world of the merchant and that of the political elite. Yet the importance of Armenian (and other Iranian) merchants will be fully acknowledged and, whenever possible and appropriate, their role and participation in the silk trade – which at all times exceeded that of the Europeans – will be integrated into the narrative.

Safavid silk permits a diachronic study of the interaction of political structures and economic processes in early modern Iran. Silk connects production to sale, sale to distribution and transportation, and all of these to manufacture. Silk involves the question of the extent of penetration of the production process by commercial capital, the expansion of the latter, and ultimately the potential for indigenous development. Silk connects the interior to the coast and is in fact the only commodity that crosses boundaries in Iran's fragmented economy. It thus tells us a great deal about geographical linkages, trade routes, and infrastructure. Above all, the trade in Safavid silk invariably involved the state. Its study therefore ought to encompass the intersection of state power and mercantile activity, and not just for the (brief) period in the early 1600s when Shah 'Abbas "monopolized" the country's silk export. From taxing production to engaging in embassy trade to levying export tolls, the state at all times had a role in the trajectory from production to export. Although Safavid silk cannot be understood simply through the lens of government involvement, a comprehensive picture of the silk business is impossible without recognizing that, until its demise, the Safavid state continued to have a crucial role in the collection, sale, domestic manufacturing and distribution of silk.

Unlike students of Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire, Safavid scholars have done little to reexamine the role of the state in commercial life in the light of new historiographical insight and perspectives. Most continue to emphasize the interventionist nature of the state's approach to economic life, focusing on the reign of Shah 'Abbas I as the period when intervention was beneficial rather than detrimental.<sup>24</sup> Recently, some have opted for a "non-etatist" approach to the study of economic process, which makes a more or less explicit case against the inhibiting effects of state organization and behavior on commercial activity.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, its advocates primarily focus on maritime trade and port cities, the area where (central) governments are least visible, where commerce is most unregulated, and where "ecumenical trade zones" appear to prevail.

The present study rejects the notion of trade as spontaneous diffusion and directly confronts the role of the (central) state in it, analyzing the ways in which the profit-seeking merchant interacted with the revenue-seeking

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Bastani-Parizi, *Siyasat va iqtisad*; Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*; and Tajbakhsh, *Tarikh-i Safaviyah*.

<sup>25</sup> This trend is currently prominent in the study of Mughal India. See Arasaratnam, *Merchants*; and Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy*. For Safavid Iran, see Klein, "Trade in the Safavid Port City"; and, for a more implied example, Dale, *Indian Merchants*.

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state. One of its premises holds that, while the autonomous market – as a place of economic exchange – is an ideal-type rather than an historical reality, its logic is fundamentally different from that of the state. While the former operated on the basis of exchange between neutral partners, the latter made itself felt in the market on the basis of extra-economic mechanisms such as force, tribute, expropriation and monopolization. The Safavid state was a command polity (at least in its ambition) that operated on the principles of reciprocity and redistribution. It did not “monopolize” trade as such, nor did all commercial (or manufacturing) activity occur in its orbit. It rather coexisted and interacted with an active mercantile economy of indigenous and foreign merchants operating on calculations of loss and gain.<sup>26</sup> The apparent similarities with many contemporary European states, meanwhile, should not tempt us to treat Safavid Iran as the equivalent of the early modern European state or to divide its historical record into a short moment of capitalist potential inadvertently thwarted by internal distress or outside pressure. There is no a priori reason why the Safavid approach to trade should have resembled that of contemporary European states. A specific cultural, legal, and social context naturally lent Iran its own norms and practices, some of which were akin to the ones found elsewhere, some superficially similar, and some wholly different.<sup>27</sup> If we have to reexamine the state in Middle Eastern history, it ought to be a different kind of state, a more complex agent than one that either engages in rapacious policies or remains indifferent to economic activity, with equally deleterious consequences for order and profitability, but not necessarily a doppelgänger of the governing elite of the Dutch Republic or the administration of Restoration England. The Safavid state’s approach to commerce is best analyzed on its own terms, both with regard to its objective – fiscal revenue – and its methods, which ranged from active encouragement to blatant exploitation. Silk permits insight into this approach, into the coexistence and interaction between the Safavid political–military elite and Iran’s merchants, and into the ways in which the state dealt with the accumulators of wealth through a range of mechanisms between accommodation and coercion that included infrastructural services, licensing, taxation, protection mechanisms, price fixing, and outright confiscation.

In addition to being a command polity, the Safavid state was also a forum of negotiation rather than simply a place or a set of (fixed) institutions. The “state” centered on the shah and his entourage regardless of location, and institutions, though they existed, were fluid and flexible inasmuch as circumstance and royal disposition directly influenced their composition, function, and effectiveness. Rather than forming a fixed set of hierarchical relationships, the state acquired and dispensed power and profit

<sup>26</sup> The term “command economy” derives from Hicks, *Theory of Economic History*.

<sup>27</sup> For this, see Lieberman, “Abu Lughod’s Egalitarian World Order,” 547.

through a process of bargaining whose main characteristics were inclusion and manipulation.

Here, too, Iran's silk trade reveals the notion of trade as spontaneous diffusion to be misleading. In its trajectory between production and export, silk went through numerous transactions. Each and every one of these involved negotiation, a process in which economic realities interacted with political modalities, the dynamic of personal encounter and, in the case of the contact between Iranians and Europeans, different cultural premises and "mentalities." To follow the intricate negotiations surrounding silk is to follow the working of Safavid power in ways that neither court chronicles nor foreign travelogues allow us to reconstruct. The process reveals a network of power and authority at once far more fluid and personal than is portrayed in the formalized officiousness of the *Tadhkirat al-Muluk* and the *Dastur al-muluk*, and yet far more intricate and dynamic than what emerges from the accounts of foreign travelers, many of whom lacked insight into the workings of the Iranian state or failed to spend enough time in Iran to get acquainted with its bureaucratic norms and vagaries and the shifts in its power constellation.<sup>28</sup> It also reveals an indigenous merchant community of great resilience and resourcefulness ready and able to engage political forces in negotiation, manipulation, and resistance.

The Safavid trade in raw silk, aside from representing a fascinating case study of cross-cultural contact, also reveals that the encounter between the European maritime merchants and the Safavid court cannot be viewed in simple terms of unequal power or of Iran's incorporation into the world market. Steensgaard's contention that the European companies were successful because they managed to "internalize" protection costs and that those who "produced" violence also maximized their revenue only stands as long as one disregards the political dimension of trade. Far from enhancing the so-called transparency of the market, the Europeans in their quest for silk found themselves as dependent as any domestic merchant on forces they could not control, most of them having to do with the intricacies of the Safavid power structure.

Jacob van Leur's claim that the European political and cultural impact on early modern Asia was minimal is as true for Safavid Iran as it is for China and Japan.<sup>29</sup> The failure of the chartered companies to establish territorial control in Iran is related to the limited economic attractiveness of the country as much as to physical and political impediments. Aside from silk, Safavid Iran had few resources for which outsiders were willing to take great logistical and financial risks. Add to that Iran's particular physical and political circumstances. Unlike India, where nature made the interior relatively accessible from the coast, Iran could only be approached from the

<sup>28</sup> Minorsky, *Tadhkirat al-Muluk*; Rafi'ah, *Dastur al-muluk*.

<sup>29</sup> Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade*. 21. 238.

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southern ports of entry, which were separated from the capital and the country's most productive regions by 1,000 km of semi-desert and formidable mountain ranges. Unlike Ceylon and most of southeast Asia, including the Indonesian archipelago, where fragmented political power enabled Europeans to establish local footholds, Iran was a centralized state or at least a state with a central power structure, and a polity based on a set of clear assumptions and values transmitted over countless generations.<sup>30</sup> Even if their actual power often did not reach far beyond the confines of Isfahan and the major provincial cities, the Safavids never faced a serious challenge to their legitimacy before the Afghan invasion of the early 1700s, and until then represented the only authority with which outsiders could hope to make workable and lasting arrangements. The Europeans were backed by powerful navies, whose might was at times invoked and applied but, in (later) Safavid Iran at least, never successfully deployed for the furtherance of commercial objectives, let alone for the extension of political domination. Safavid authorities, in sum, never found reason to give up their autonomous power or even to question the age-old universal claims of Iranian kingship. Inevitably this bred the (mistaken) conviction that the Europeans were willing to pay any price for their trading privileges.

The student of late Safavid Iran inevitably labors in the shadow of the fall of Isfahan in 1722. Decline is still the operative word in much of our thinking about the period, accentuated, it seems, by the lingering notion that the Safavid state was somehow the first "national" Iranian state, the one that might have taken Iran into the modern age. Were it not for Shah 'Abbas's reputation as state builder, the demise of the Safavids would have been unremarkable, the passing of one dynasty in a long sequence in Iranian history. Safavid historians, moreover, find themselves in a less comfortable position than their Ottoman and Mughal colleagues who can circumvent or even dismiss the notion of decline either because the regime survived, because the dissolution of the core matched the emergence of the periphery, or because fragmentation and failure are attributable to other than orthogenetic causes. Though weakened, the Ottomans in the eighteenth century held on to power, and even managed to "restore public trust in government."<sup>31</sup> In the case of the Mughals, retrenchment at the center was arguably accompanied by invigoration in the provinces.<sup>32</sup> The demise of Mughal rule, moreover, formed the prelude to the region's incorporation into the British Empire. The disintegration of the Safavid state, by contrast, did not spawn viable and lasting regional centers. Nor are the main causes of centrifugal tendencies and their outcome – instability and collapse – easily externalized.

<sup>30</sup> In this respect Iran was rather like China. See Murphey, *Outsiders*.

<sup>31</sup> Idem, "Continuity."

<sup>32</sup> As demonstrated by Bayly, *Rulers*.