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0521641314 - The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600-1730

Rudolph P. Matthee

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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.

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To my mother, Gerardina Matthee-Verspoor,
and my late father, Antonius Matthee

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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

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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 preciousness, 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 adducing 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.

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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 Asghar Mahdavi for assisting me with the *siyaq* 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.

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xiv 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 subvention 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 Cambridge 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 apprehension. I hope I haven't disappointed them. This book is a token of my gratitude. I dedicate it to them.

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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 solar *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
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CMR(S)</i>	<i>Cahiers du Monde Russe (et Soviétique)</i>
<i>EHR</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
EIC	East India Company
<i>EIr</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i>
<i>FOG</i>	<i>Forschungen zur Osteuropäischen Geschichte</i>
IOR	India Office Records
<i>IS</i>	<i>Iranian Studies</i>
<i>IZ</i>	<i>Istoricheskie Zapiski</i>
<i>JA</i>	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Economic History</i>
<i>JESHO</i>	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
<i>JGO</i>	<i>Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas</i>
<i>KSINA</i>	<i>Kratkie Soobshcheniya Instituta Narodov Azii</i>
<i>MOOI</i>	<i>Le Moyen Orient et l'Océan Indien</i>
<i>REA</i>	<i>Revue des Etudes Arméniennes</i>
VOC	Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie

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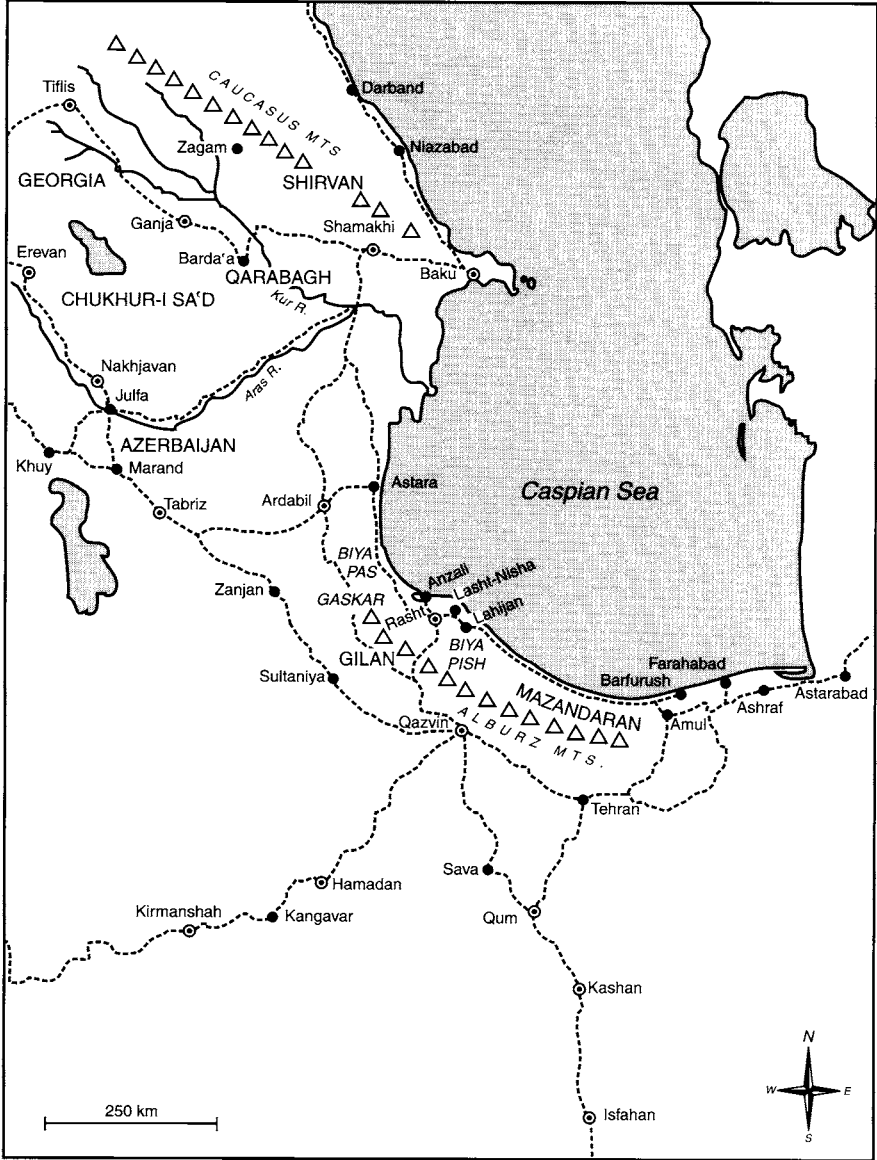
Map 1 Silk routes between Iran and Europe, seventeenth century.

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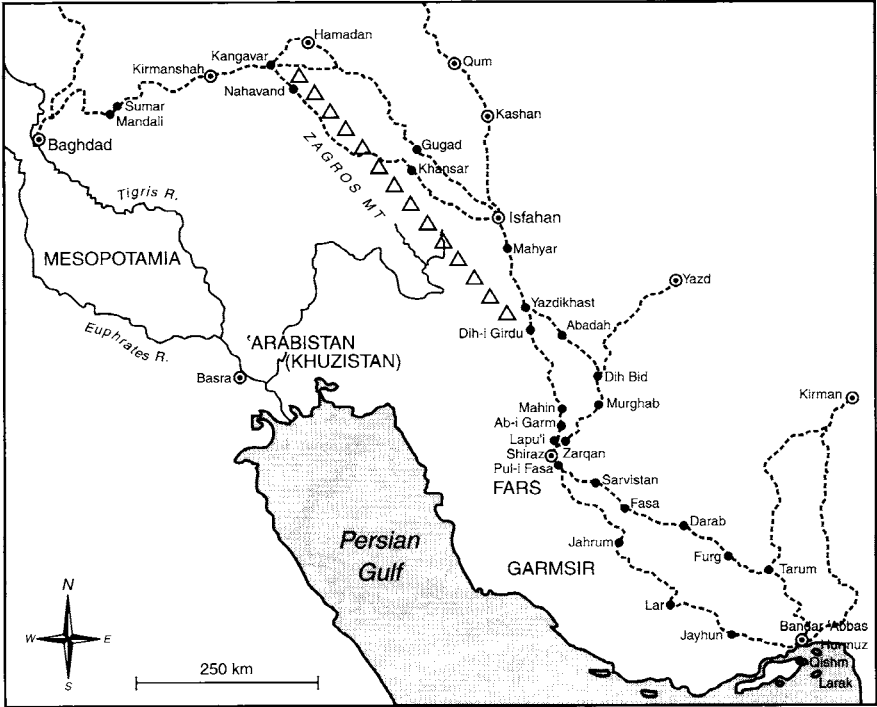
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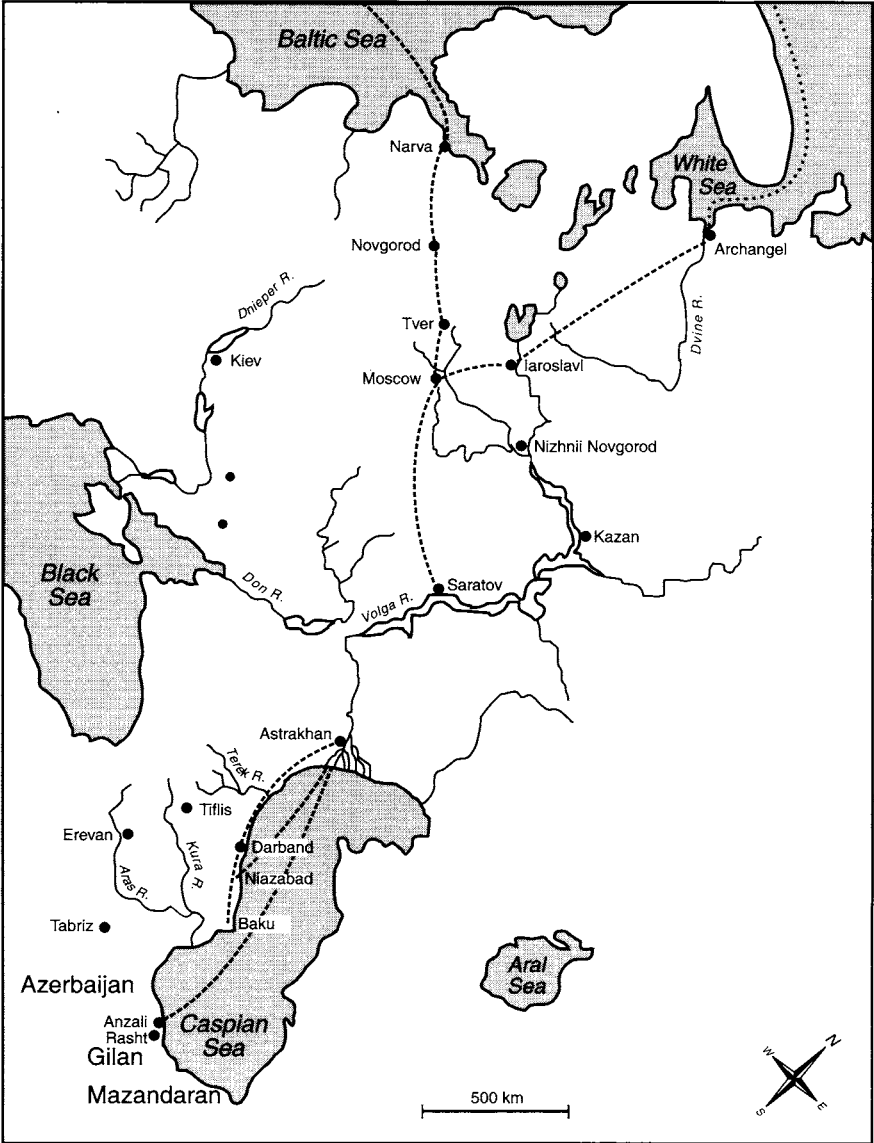
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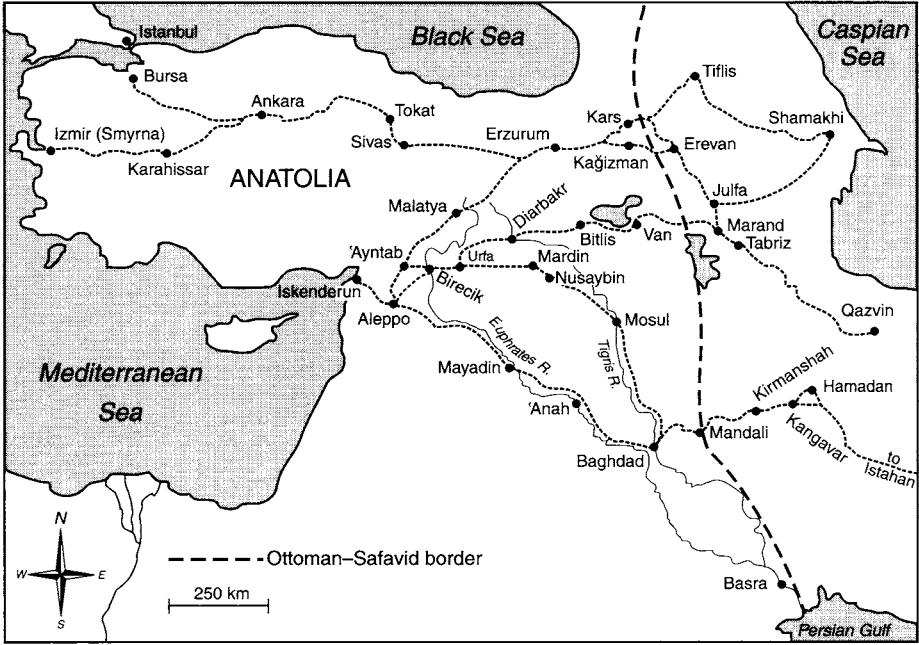
Map 2 Silk routes through northern Iran, seventeenth century.



Map 3 Silk routes through southern Iran, seventeenth century.



Map 4 The Volga route, seventeenth century.



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