

*The Commentaries of D. García de Silva y Figueroa on His Embassy to Shah 'Abbās I of Persia on Behalf of Philip III, King of Spain.* Jeffrey S. Turley and George Bryan Souza, eds.

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The *Commentaries* of Don García de Silva y Figueroa (1550–1624), long known to scholars, have attracted increasing attention during recent years. Their author was sent on what turned out to be an extremely prolonged diplomatic mission to Shāh 'Abbās I (1588–1629), the ambitious Safavid emperor whose reign saw a striking increase in Iranian power, particularly around the Persian Gulf, and this provides the basis for an extended travelogue. The embassy itself was at best a failure, at worst little short of a fiasco. Leaving Europe in 1614, Silva y Figueroa was reduced to pursuing Shāh 'Abbās from one location to the next, pleading with his advisers for a formal interview with the emperor, who was clearly toying with him. Setting off to return to Europe only in 1624, Silva y Figueroa died crossing the Atlantic two months before his ship reaching the Iberian Peninsula.

His mission underlined the geostrategic problems for Iberian diplomacy created by the Iberian Union of the Crowns (1580–1640/68), particularly in Asia. Spain's traditional rivalry with the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean could only with difficulty be reconciled with Portugal's hostility towards a Safavid-dominated Persian Gulf, particularly given the central importance of Hormuz to the *Estado da Índia* and how deeply ingrained the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry was by this point. The intermittent informal conversations and formal interviews which Silva y Figueroa finally managed to secure with Shāh 'Abbās were dominated by the latter's strictures against Spain's failure to fight the Ottoman Empire mingled with complaints about Portuguese activities around the Persian Gulf, where Iberian observers in their turn resented Safavid encroachments on Hormuz. One incidental insight offered by the *Commentaries* was the relative lack of ceremonial surrounding Safavid diplomacy (e.g., 343, 366), at least by the standards of formality now prevailing in Western Europe and also at the Ottoman court.

Silva y Figueroa's insatiable curiosity together with his acuity as an observer have ensured that the *Commentaries* have long been recognized as a major source for early seventeenth-century Asia, particularly the Portuguese sphere of influence. Spanish editions were published in 1905 and 2011, but this is the first complete English translation. It is to be warmly welcomed, despite the eye-watering price which will make it a purchase for research libraries rather than individual scholars. The translation by Jeffrey S. Turley reads fluently, while the level of annotation accompanying the text only occasionally seems excessive. The edition is based on a careful comparison with the manuscript—in Silva y Figueroa's own handwriting—in the Spanish National Library in Madrid, and this enhances its scholarly value.

The *Commentaries* clearly originate in a diary kept by the author and provide valuable information on a whole range of interesting topics. The difficulties of travel, at sea and on land, and how to overcome these, are a recurring theme. Silva y Figueroa also inserts into his narrative several noteworthy digressions: on the city of Goa and its hinterland, in all its fascinating diversity (160–243); on the “Regions of the Persian Empire” (508–630), which is unsurpassed as a contemporary view of Shāh ‘Abbās’s territories; and on his negotiations with the emperor—when he finally runs him to ground—highlighting especially the latter’s quixotic personality (677–707).

Silva y Figueroa’s ethnographic approach has recently commended itself to scholars, and this primarily underpins the noted revival of interest in his writings. The introduction makes some very large claims indeed for the text’s importance, rather more than it will comfortably bear, and most readers will want to reach their own assessment of its value. It is also disappointingly silent on the author’s own intellectual world, on which the *Commentaries* offers numerous clues, while the account of Silva y Figueroa’s background in the Spanish nobility also has shortcomings. Nevertheless, the value of a reliable and comprehensive English text of this key work far eclipses any limitations in the editorial introduction.

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*Formation of a Religious Landscape: Shi’i Higher Learning in Safavid Iran.*  
Maryam Moazzen.

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Shi’ism is not just any sectarian uber-phenomenon. It is arguably the most philosophically charged movement in Islamic history. Its philosophical developments and dynamic epochs of transformation find their kernel, their real beginning, not in its earliest days, but rather in its then newly founded Persianized form during the reign of the Safavids (1488–1722). It is quite remarkable that any foreign incursion that manifested itself physically (by force) or ideologically into the borders of Iran was always more influenced by their host culture (Iran and Iranians) than the other way around. Similarly, Shi’ism’s passionately dogmatic philosophical and legal parameters were reimagined into a social cognizance that was to be a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* for Iranians and those who emulated them for centuries after.

Shi’ism’s parameters were reintroduced in toto during the reign of the Safavids in the sixteenth century and of course, as part of any successful all-encompassing takeover, education was the watershed. As the author articulately puts it: “Indeed, the rise of Twelver Shi’ism to imperial-sponsored dominance was not without precedent, yet the transformation of Shi’ism to a state religion at the turn of the sixteenth century proved to be a long