

Reviews

Persica Vaticana: Roma e Persia tra codici e testi, Angelo Michele Piemontese, Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, 2017, ISBN 978-88-210-0982-2 (pbk), 533 pp.

Just three years after delivering his remarkable study on the interactive legacy of Persia in Rome, *La Persia istoriata in Roma* (reviewed in *Iranian Studies* 49, no. 5, 2016), Dr. Angelo Piemontese has produced another volume that sparkles with erudition worn lightly. With *Persia Vaticana* he supplements his 1989 catalogue of Persian manuscripts held in the libraries of Italy—which did not include those of the Vatican.¹ This volume opens up the vast holdings on Iran and its written legacy preserved not just in the Vatican Library but also its subsidiaries. It covers Persian-language codices, single manuscripts, reports, diplomatic letters, poetic *divans*, treatises on astronomy, Qur’ans, Muslim-Christian disputations, anything related to Iran and the Persian language that is kept in the Biblioteca Apostolica and the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, but also in the Villa Borghese and the Archivio de Propaganda Fide, now located on the Gianicolo Hill just outside Vatican City. Comprehensive and equipped with copious explanatory footnotes, it renders E. Rossi’s 1948 catalogue of Persian manuscripts in the Vatican Library obsolete.²

Part One serves as an introduction and sets the tone for the creative and intricate (if occasionally confusing) way in which the author weaves bibliographical data involving

provenance, dimensions, signatures, monograms, subdivisions and other particulars, often with long excerpts from the texts, together with church history, the origin and evolution of the various collections used here and the biographies of those who put them together. The result is anything but a dry enumeration of the titles of manuscripts, their authors' names and their shelf numbers. Instead the reader is offered an engrossing narrative, a *catalogue raisonné*, so to speak. Not just in the introductory chapter but throughout the book, Piemontese alleviates the gravity of the catalogue with a learned introduction and running cultural commentary filled with colorful vignettes and priceless anecdotes. In the initial chapter, for instance, he tells the fascinating story of the way in which the Vatican Library's Persian-language holdings came into being in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beginning with the custodianship of the brothers Ranaldi, Federico (d. 1590) and Marino (d. 1606), between 1559 and 1602. We learn how the Biblioteca Vaticana grew by acquiring the publications of various existing colleges and presses such as the Collegio dei Maroniti and the Tipografia Orientale Medicea; how it was consolidated in the eighteenth century; and how further additions, mostly by way of donations or purchases, have accrued to it ever since. In the process the reader encounters and learns about literati such as Leonetto della Corbara, inquisitor in Malta from 1607 to 1609; Leonardo Abeli (c. 1544-1605), bishop of Sidonia, who collected manuscripts during his sojourn in the Levant; Federico Cesi (1583-163), scientist and naturalist, and cofounder of the Roman Accademia dei Lincei; Pietro Della Valle, the well-known Roman nobleman who spent years in Iran during the reign of Shah 'Abbas I; and the Spanish Discalced Carmelite Juan Tadeo di S. Eliseo, who, having served as that same ruler's interpreter and confidant, in 1623 returned from Iran after twenty-two years of missionary work. There is also the story of Domenic Silveo Passionei, cardinal and manuscript collector, and eventually custodian of the Vatican Library (1755-61), who broke a leg during a trip to Holland visiting the Protestant Synod of Utrecht in 1708, a mishap quickly immortalized in a Latin poem by Adriaan Reland (1676-1718), who became Professor of Oriental Languages at Utrecht University at the tender age of twenty-five. And then there is Phillip von Stosch, a famous German art collector and connoisseur who, while living in Rome in the 1720s, ingratiated himself with the pope and assembled a vast library, in part with manuscripts pilfered from the Vatican Library—many of which were later repurchased by Cardinal Passionei.

Part Two covers the Persian arts and sciences. A bit of a medley, it lists the multiple manuscripts of the *Shahnama* held in Rome, in addition to many poetic *divans*, and it discusses the various editions of Sa'di's main works, the *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, held in the Vatican, as well as its vast holdings in the fields of medicine, astrology and the occult sciences. But it also includes Vat. *Pers.* 33, an interesting collection of seventeenth-century letters and documents involving some correspondence relating to the Dutch East India Company.

Part Three, on Islamic texts, mostly deals with the many copies of the Qur'an held in the Vatican, in addition to an array of religious works.

Part Four discusses and inventories the Gospels in Persian translation. It begins with a learned linguistic disquisition on the meaning of terms for Christian(s) con-

nected to the Gospels and their occurrence in Persian, such as *tarsa*, *tarsā*, *mozhdā* and Sulvan, the well where Jesus is said to have cured the blind man, all of which, the author argues, point to the existence of a very old Persian translation of the Gospels. The first to enter the Vatican Library, that of Matthew, did so before 1598. Copies of all four Gospels are preserved in Rome, including a Gospel of John, listed under 1338 BAV, *Bor. Pers. 19*, which was probably collected by Giovanni di Firenze OP, bishop of Tiflis in the early fourteenth century.

Part Five, titled “G. B. Raimondi and G. B. Vechietti, Precursors,” combines the biographies of these two luminaries with information on other, less well-known bibliophiles, collectors, agents of the papacy and cultural explorers linked to the Vatican Library through diplomacy, peregrination and collection, all of it interspersed with detailed descriptions of the individual manuscripts. Giovanni Battista Raimondi (1536-1614), eminent mathematician, linguist and Orientalist, and director of the Stamperia Orientale, the Medici Oriental Press, considered Persian the most beautiful of the (many) languages he knew, a gift of God as expressed through its poetry. Raimondi curated multiple Persian-language books and authored an early Persian grammar, the *Rudimenta Grammaticae Linguae Persicae*. We also get closer to the Florentine merchant-intellectual Girolamo Vecchietti (1557-1636), who together with his brother, Giovanni Battista (1552-1619), traveled to Iran in the 1580s, at the behest of Pope Gregory XIII and Cardinal Ferdinand de’ Medici, the founder of the Stamperia Orientale, and who was the first to bring a copy of the *Shahnama*—the oldest one known—into Europe (now kept in the National Library of Florence). Giovanni Battista, in turn, brought back a multitude of manuscripts in Turkish, Persian and Arabic for the Stamperia Orientale. He also inaugurated the study of Judeo-Persian in Europe, collecting many books among Iran’s Jewish communities for the purpose of printing a Persian Bible—a project he never finished.

Pietro Della Valle, who was given little attention in *Persia istoriata*, here gets his full due. Influenced by Raimondi and the latter’s publishing activities, Della Valle spent ten years in the Islamic world, six of them in Iran (1617-23). He is, of course, best known for the panoramic view of the country and especially Isfahan under Shah ‘Abbas I that he presented in the many letters he wrote to his Neapolitan friend Mario Schipano during his stay in the capital, letters which in 1658 were published as *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino*. The Vatican Library holds a rich collection of manuscripts collected by Della Valle, ranging from religious works and grammars to editions of the works of Hafez and Sa’di, to various astrological almanacs containing horoscopes and calendars, a science which had the Roman nobleman’s special interest and in which he was instructed by Mullah Zayn al-Din Lari, an accomplished mathematician and astronomer he had befriended in Lar in 1622. While describing Della Valle’s life and career, Piemontese demonstrates why the “Della” in his name should be capitalized.

Christian-Muslim disputations are addressed in Chapter 7. This chapter presents numerous apologetic treatises that, depending on authorship, defend and “prove” the truth either of Christianity or of Islam. We learn about the *Lavamī al-rabbani fi radd al-shubha al-Nasraniyya*, a refutation of Christianity as presented by Della

Valle and written by the prominent Safavid scholar Sayyid Ahmad ‘Alavi, as well as accounts of various disputations held between Iranian literati and representatives of the Christian faith residing in Isfahan in the Safavid period. Highlighted here is the complicated story of the *A’ina-i haq-numa*, a work produced as a vindication of Christianity by Portuguese Jesuits in sixteenth-century India, which, in abbreviated form, made it to Isfahan under Shah ‘Abbas I, where Sayyid Ahmad ‘Alavi wrote a tract titled *Misqal-i safa* in refutation. The Carmelites stationed in Iran—who had received the original copy of the *A’ina-i haq-numa* and kept it in their library in Isfahan—next took the *Misqal-i Safa* to Rome, where the rebuttal was analyzed and translated by the Propaganda Fide. The response, a rebuttal of the rebuttal, came out in four volumes between 1628 and 1649.

All along, we meet yet more cultural brokers and middlemen, interpreters, translators and converts, men whose activities make up the little-known antecedents to the “terrains of exchanges” between the Christian and the Islamic world that would emerge in full (Protestant, Anglo-Saxon) view in the early nineteenth century.³ Most intriguingly, Piemontese’s research has unearthed a number of hitherto unknown Muslim converts to Christianity, mostly after they had arrived in Italy in the early 1600s. These represent the Italian equivalent of the Spanish so-called Persian Gentlemen, the well-known Don Juan of Persia (Uruch Beg) and his companions, who adopted the Christian faith upon arriving in Madrid in 1609. The creation by Pope Urban VIII in 1627 of a college for foreign students, the Collegium Urbanum de Propaganda Fide, was designed in part to facilitate subsequent conversions. A decade later twelve scholarships were created, two each for young students from the nations of Georgia and Persia, for the Nestorians, the Jacobites and the Copts. Surely the most colorful of such converts is a polyglot Muslim from Bukhara who had converted to Christianity, possibly in Aleppo and who next moved to Venice. Christened Theodoro Persico, he was suspected of remaining a crypto-Muslim.

Chapter 8, “La Via Roma-Georgia-Armenia-Persia-India,” does involve connections to Iran via Rome, the Caucasus and India, such as an illustrated album, *muraqqa’*, BAV, *Barb.or.136*, prepared at the Mughal court in the late 1620s, which contains, among other things, images of Shah ‘Abbas I. But the chapter also lists various works by Sa’di and Hafez. In addition, it includes copies of the Psalms translated by Juan Tadeo de S. Elisio, various letters from the Georgian King Teimuraz to the pope, and a number of dictionaries, including Latin-Persian, even a trilingual Italian, Persian, Turkish, Armenian dictionary, and one Italian-Persian-German phrase book, all composed by missionaries with a good command of Oriental languages.

Chapter 9 addresses diplomatic relations, beginning with a letter Shah Isma‘il wrote to Pope Charles V in 1523, the first one in which the Safavid ruler proposed a joint coalition against the Ottomans, and ending with the contacts between the Papacy and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran’s last shah. It contains many little-known diplomatic nuggets, such as the documents listing the gifts Shah Tahmasb I offered to the Ottoman sultan in 1568 and 1576, an album with portraits, and correspondence related to the well-known English adventurer-diplomats, the brothers Anthony and Robert Sherley.

The last chapter (10), “Letters between Popes and Shahs,” delves more deeply and systematically into the epistolary record, listing the actual letters exchanged between Roman popes and Iranian shahs in chronological order, beginning with the famous message the Mongol ruler Güyük Qa’an wrote to Innocent IV in 1246, all the way to the exchange of letters between Pope Pius XI and Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1930s. This enumeration reveals that eighteen letters went back and forth between Rome and the Mongol capital between 1246 and 1329, and that the papacy and the Safavids exchanged at least 100. Piemontese helpfully provides the full text of many of the unpublished ones.

This work is a treasure trove, the crowning achievement of a scholar driven by sheer love of learning and remarkable scholarly commitment. We should be grateful to Dr. Piemontese for the many thousands of hours of assiduous work that must have gone into this monumental study. *Persica Vaticana* offers a taste of what he calls the *mare magnum* of Rome’s historical archives, leaving us to guess how much this ocean yet conceals.

Notes

1. Angelo M. Piemontese, *Catalogo dei manoscritti persiani conservati nelle biblioteche d'Italia* (Rome, 1989).
2. E. Rossi, *Elenco dei manoscritti persiani della Biblioteca Vaticana, Barberiani, Borgiani, Rossiani* (Rome, 1948).
3. See Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (Oxford, 2015).

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Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran, Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters, Ilker Evrim Binbaş, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, ISBN 9781107689336, hardback, 364 pp.

Ilker Evrim Binbaş’ *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran* is a model of textual scholarship—and a dauntingly difficult book to read. Binbaş utilizes a formidable array of Persian, Turkish and Arabic texts as he reconstructs the informal intellectual networks and analyzes the historical writings of the Iranian occult scholar and historian Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī (1370-1454). In the course of explaining the range of Yazdī’s scholarly interests and describing those of individuals who formed part of his intellectual milieu, he has, first of all, illumined little known aspects of a small group of early Timurid individuals, who were particularly distinguished by their belief in the mystical revelations of