

The Encounter between Pietro Della Valle and García de Silva y Figueroa at the Safavid Court of Shah 'Abbas I

ELIO C. BRANCAFORTE *

On May 21, 1615, while in Istanbul, the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle witnessed a military parade of some 25,000 Ottoman soldiers who were on their way to fight against the Persians. He observed that at the parade:

[...] the First Vizier, Pasha Mohammed, the general of the army [...] and the Grand Signor [...] courteously acknowledge everyone, bowing their heads this way and that very solemnly, and sometimes with a little smile, according to the important people they see, such as ambassadors and suchlike: but even when smiling joyfully they retain their majesty, just exactly like haughty Spaniards.

In this connection, I believe you will wonder, though I tell it truly, that there is no Spaniard on earth, however ridiculously portentous, whose pretentiousness and solemn prosopopeia surpasses that of a commonplace Turk. I know you will not have heard this much, or rather have perhaps believed the contrary, but learn it from me and believe it, as it is really true.¹

Besides indicating what Della Valle thought about the loquaciousness of Turks, this quote also gives a good idea of the traveler's attitude toward the typical Spaniard, an attitude that he would find confirmed, when he met Philip III's ambassador to Persia, García de Silva y Figueroa some three years later in Qazvin. Although these two voyagers have relatively little to say about each other in their voluminous travel accounts, their texts do include some references to one another, some direct, others more oblique. While Silva y Figueroa barely takes note of the Italian, Della Valle does mention the movements and activities of the Spaniard, adding commentary about the ambassador's behavior at several court functions.

* Tulane University, New Orleans.

¹ Cited in Pietro Della Valle, *The Pilgrim: The Travels of Pietro Della Valle*, trans. and ed. George Bull (London, 1990), pp. 33-34 [Letter from Constantinople, 13 June 1615]. The author refers to the Ottoman Grand Vizier Mehmed Pasha Öküz (1557?-1620), and the "Grand Signor" Ahmed I (1590-1617), the fourteenth Ottoman sultan (r. 1603-1617).

In this essay I shall examine the encounter in Iran between these two European travelers, one a Roman adventurer who was able to develop an amiable rapport with Shah 'Abbas I, the other, an official who represented the interests of the Spanish-Portuguese crown. In order to shed light on this specific encounter, I will examine some of their writings on topics relating to Persia, in particular their descriptions of Shah 'Abbas. Before turning to an analysis of their writings, it would be useful to provide some background on these two travelers, whose eyewitness accounts are so important as chronicles of Safavid Iran under Shah 'Abbas.

Pietro Della Valle and García de Silva y Figueroa: Background and travels

The intrepid adventurer Pietro Della Valle (see Figure 29) (1586-1652) was born into a noble Roman family that prided itself on having produced two cardinals from among its ranks. Della Valle received a thorough education in classics, law and Italian literature (especially Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso), and became a member of the *Accademia degli Umoristi*. He was very passionate about his literary pursuits and about composing music as well.² He lived in Naples from 1609 to 1614, where he befriended the scholar and naturalist Mario Schipano, a physician who read Arabic and collected Oriental texts. Perhaps as a result of an unhappy love affair, Della Valle decided to journey to the Holy Land, and took on the title of *Il Pellegrino* (The Pilgrim). He promised his friend Schipano to purchase a long list of items – including dictionaries, books on grammar and medicine, as well as drugs, plants and minerals – and to write regularly about his travels. Della Valle set sail from Venice in June 1614, and spent one year in Istanbul (August 1614 – September 1615), where he promptly began learning Ottoman Turkish and exploring the city. He then traveled to Alexandria, Cairo and the Pyramids of Giza (acquiring two mummies); continued to Mount Sinai and Gaza, and took lessons in Arabic; before arriving in Jerusalem, where he spent Easter of 1616.

On his return journey in the summer of 1616, while in Aleppo, Della Valle decided to head toward Persia and India, and joined a caravan headed for Baghdad. There, the traveler met the great love of his life, the Nestorian Christian Sitti Ma'ani Jorrida, whom he then married. Hoping to convince Shah 'Abbas I to fight against the

² On Della Valle's life see Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Vita di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino* (Roma, 1662); Ignazio Ciampi, *Della vita e delle opere di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino: Monografia, illustrata con nuovi documenti* (Roma, 1880); and Rafaella Salvante, *Il 'Pellegrino' in Oriente. La Turchia di Pietro Della Valle (1614-1617)* (Florence, 1997). See also Pietro Della Valle, *Abbas re di Persia: Un patrizio romano alla corte dello scià nel primo '600*, ed. Antonio Invernizzi (Torino, 2004).

Ottomans, the newlyweds headed toward Isfahan, where they arrived in February of 1617. After spending almost one year in the capital, Della Valle decided to travel north on his own to meet Shah 'Abbas, arriving in Farahabad, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, on February 14, 1618. But it was not until the beginning of May, in Ashraf, that the Roman was finally granted an audience with the shah, which is described in great detail in the travel account. From there, the shah left unexpectedly for Qazvin on May 11, and Della Valle, along with the rest of the court followed suit, arriving at the former capital on June 10. It was there that García de Silva y Figueroa met Della Valle on June 15, 1618.

Della Valle remained in Iran, mainly in Isfahan, until October 1621. Then he left the capital for Hormuz, accompanied by Sitti Ma'ani, her brother, their servants, and a young Georgian orphan girl named Mariuccia whom his wife had befriended. Because of the preparations for war between the Portuguese and the Persian/English forces,³ they were not able to find passage over to the island. They continued along the coast to the town of Minab, where the unhealthy climate and a miscarriage led to Ma'ani's death. Della Valle, who almost succumbed to fever as well, was so bereaved that he decided to embalm her body in camphor and then carried it with him hidden in a trunk during the rest of his travels. After spending several months in Lar (January to June 1622) to recover his spirits, he was able to travel to Hormuz and see the results of its conquest by the Persians with the help of the English (May 12, 1622).⁴ In January of 1623 he set sail on board the British ship *Dolphin* for India, where he stayed for almost two years. From there he returned to Rome on March 28, 1626, after an absence of almost twelve years, where he married Mariuccia, had fourteen children with her, and began the process of transforming his letters into an epistolary travel narrative. When Della Valle died in 1652, he was buried next to Ma'ani in the Ara Coeli church in Rome.

Della Valle's extraordinary travel account, the *Viaggi*,⁵ benefited from a number of factors: his unique background and personality; the fact that he studied Turkish,

³ For background on the history of the Persian Gulf during the Safavid age, see Willem M. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of Five Port Cities, 1500-1730* (Washington, DC, 2006). See also C. R. Boxer, "Anglo-Portuguese Rivalry in the Persian Gulf," in *Chapters in Anglo-Portuguese Relations*, ed. Edgar Prestage (Watford, 1935), pp. 46-129.

⁴ See Elio Brancaforte, "The Italian Connection: Pietro Della Valle's Account of the Fall of Hormuz (1622)," in Dejanirah Couto & Rui Manuel Loureiro (eds.), *Revisiting Hormuz: Portuguese Interactions in the Persian Gulf Region in the Early Modern Period* (Wiesbaden, 2008), pp. 191-204.

⁵ Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino Con minuto raguaglio Di tutte le cose notabili osservate in essi, Descritti da lui medesimo in 54 Lettere familiari, Da diversi luoghi della intrapresa peregrinatione, Mandate in Napoli All'erudito, e fra' più cari, di molti anni suo Amico Mario Schipano. Divisi in tre parti, Cioè, la Turchia, la Persia, e l'India* (4 vols., Rome, 1650-1663); and Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle, il pellegrino, descritti da lui medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano, divisi in tre*

Persian and Arabic and spent almost six years in Iran; Sitti Ma'ani's knowledge of Armenian, Georgian, Arabic and Persian; as well as her ability to gain access to the lives of Safavid courtiers and their wives. The narrative of his published voyages is divided into three parts that contain his travels to Turkey, Persia and India.⁶ Each of the three parts contains eighteen letters (addressed to his friend Signor Mario Schipano in Naples), however only the first part – on Turkey – was published during his lifetime. The other two parts were published posthumously by four of his sons. The *Viaggi* were very popular, and were soon translated into several foreign languages including French, German, English and Dutch.

It should be pointed out that the original letters sent by Della Valle to Schipano were based on his diaries,⁷ and the traveler hoped that his learned friend Schipano would edit and publish the letters for him. Yet that did not happen. The published letters are thus a reworked version of the original letters, which in turn are based on his diary entries, which leads to questions about how much material was amended, cut out, and restructured from the "original" diary entries to the final, published product.⁸

There are over one million words in Della Valle's *Viaggi*, and there is no complete English translation of Della Valle's letters concerning Persia.⁹ From this plethora I

parti cioè: la Turchia, la Persia, e l'India, colla vita e ritratto dell'autore (Brighton, 1843). In my essay, when I cite the original I use the latter edition of the *Viaggi*, which has modernized the seventeenth-century Italian. However, I will provide references to both of these editions, namely to the two volumes of the 1658 edition that relate to *La Persia*, and the two volumes of the 1843 edition (abbreviated as "Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton").

⁶ For a recent analysis of Della Valle's narrative strategies and engagement with Italian literary models in the *Viaggi*, see Nathalie Hester, *Literature and Identity in Italian Baroque Travel Writing* (Aldershot, 2008), chapter 2.

⁷ The diaries are located in the Vatican Library in two parts: one part in the *Codex Vaticano Ottoboniano latino* 3382; another part in the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, fasc. 186 of the *Archivio Della Valle-Del Bufalo*, 1627-1651.

⁸ For a brief description of this process, as well as some examples of censorship that occurred before publication of the letters, see the introduction to Pietro Della Valle, *I Viaggi ... Lettere Dalla Persia*, ed. Franco Gaeta & Laurence Lockhart (Roma, 1972), pp. xiv-xxi. See also Sonja Brentjes, "Immediacy, Mediation, and Media in Early Modern Catholic and Protestant Representations of Safavid Iran", *Journal of Early Modern History*, 13 (2009), pp. 173-207, in particular pp. 180-181 and pp. 196-201.

⁹ See Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, for a selection of the letters concerning Persia that have been translated into English. An English translation of his travels to India does exist: Pietro Della Valle, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India: From the Old English Translation of 1664*, ed. Edward Grey, trans. G. Havers (London, 1892); Pietro Della Valle, *The Travels of Sig. Pietro Della Valle, a Noble Roman, into East-India and Arabia Deserta: In Which the Several Countries, Together with the Customs, Manners, Traffique, and Rites, Both Religious and Civil, of Those Oriental Princes and Nations Are Faithfully Described: In Familiar Letters to His Friend Signior Mario Schipano: Whereunto Is Added, a Relation of Sir Thomas Roe's Voyage into the East-Indies*, trans. G. Havers (London, 1665).

will select pertinent passages that relate to García de Silva y Figueroa and compare Della Valle's impressions of Persia with those of his Spanish counterpart.

Don García de Silva y Figueroa

The mission of the Spanish ambassador García de Silva y Figueroa (b. Zafra, 1550 – d. at sea, 1624) will be outlined only very briefly here (especially since the present volume is devoted to investigating various aspects of his journey to Iran). In April of 1614 Philip III, King of Spain and Portugal, sent Silva y Figueroa to the court of Shah 'Abbas, in response to the Persian monarch's desire to deal with a nobleman, instead of with a monk (such as Antonio de Gouvea, an Augustinian missionary, who served as an envoy to the shah three times between 1602 and 1613). Silva y Figueroa was supposed to discuss a range of issues with the Persian ruler, including Portuguese control over Hormuz, matters concerning the silk trade, as well as the Safavid-Ottoman conflict.¹⁰ After arriving in Goa, and then experiencing a very long delay (among other issues, the governor felt that a Portuguese, not a Spaniard, should be sent as ambassador to the Persian court), Silva y Figueroa finally set sail for Hormuz in March of 1617. He then arrived on the Persian coast at Bandar 'Abbas in October of 1617, traveled to Lar and Shiraz, where he stayed for 4 months, until April 4, 1618. The ruins of Persepolis (*Chilminara*) were next on the agenda for the ambassador, who was extremely interested in antiquities and had a strong background in classics.¹¹ From there, via Kashan and Qom, he visited Isfahan, before finally arriving on June 15, 1618 in Qazvin, where he was received by Shah 'Abbas. During the following six weeks, Silva y Figueroa was able to meet with 'Abbas several times, but it soon became clear that their negotiations would lead nowhere. Having received word that an Ottoman army was on its way to Van, 'Abbas left for Ardabil to join his army, and sent Silva y Figueroa on July 27, 1618 to Isfahan to wait for him. It was not until June 1619 that the shah made his way to Isfahan, and during those ten months the frustrated ambassador had to bide his time, writing about the city, its inhabitants, and various religious festivals. When 'Abbas finally did arrive in the capital, the entry was marked by festivities in honor of the monarch and the five foreign ambassadors who all were in Isfahan at the time. The shah had a final meeting with Silva y Figueroa in the *maydan* (main square) on August 2, 1619, where nothing was resolved regarding the interests of Philip III, and

¹⁰ For background on the ambassador's mission, see Luís Gil (ed.), *García de Silva y Figueroa: Epistolario diplomático* (Cáceres, 1989). A good overview of the journey is provided by Carlos Alonso, *La embajada a Persia de D. García de Silva y Figueroa (1612-1624)* (Badajoz, 1993).

¹¹ In this context, see Juan María Córdoba, "Don García de Silva y Figueroa, y el redescubrimiento de Irán", in Joaquín María Córdoba & María Pérez Díe (eds.), *La aventura española en Oriente (1166-2006): viajeros, museos y estudiosos en la historia del redescubrimiento del Oriente Próximo Antiguo* (Madrid, 2006), pp. 89-97.

where the ambassador was given leave to return to Spain. He then headed south, following the same route as he had taken on his journey to Isfahan, and landed on the island of Hormuz on October 18, 1619, two years after his initial arrival. The inhabitants there were worried about the imminent Persian/English attack on the island. Silva y Figueroa spent the winter on the island and described the poor state of the defenses before leaving for Goa at the beginning of April 1620. From there he found passage on a ship bound for Spain on December 19, 1620, but because of contrary winds, the vessel had to return to Goa in March 1621.¹² It was not until January 28, 1624 that Silva y Figueroa was finally able to make another attempt to leave for Spain: he took passage on a ship bound for Spain, but died en route, on July 22, 1624, some 110 leagues from the Azores, supposedly from the *mal de Luanda*, namely scurvy. The memoir of his travels was translated into French in 1667, by Abraham de Wicquefort.¹³ However, a Spanish edition of Silva y Figueroa's travels, the *Comentarios*,¹⁴ did not appear until 1903-1905, thus his accomplishments and writings were not well known in his home country for several centuries.

A Comparison of the Two Accounts

A comparison of Silva y Figueroa's *Comentarios* with Della Valle's *Viaggi* offers a study in both similarity and contrast. Whereas both authors are learned, curious observers with broad interests, eager to report on what they see and experience during their travels in Safavid Iran and use common tropes in their descriptions, they often present their information about the new and exotic in different ways. The narrative strategy of the Spanish ambassador is one that emphasizes objectivity: he writes in the third person, like Caesar, and seems more circumspect, more distant from the facts that are related in his account. A description of a city usually includes information about its geographical location, its architectural highlights, its inhabitants and their customs, as well as its agricultural products. Della Valle employs similar techniques, and both authors make reference to their classical learning, by citing the works of authors such as Xenophon, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, or Quintus

¹² On the ambassador's portrayal of the city, see Fernando Marías, "Don García de Silva y Figueroa y la percepción del oriente: la 'Descripción de Goa'", *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte*, 14 (2002), pp. 137-149.

¹³ García de Silva y Figueroa, *L'ambassade de D. Garcias de Silva Figueroa en Perse: contenant la politique de ce grand empire, les moeurs du roy Schach Abbas, & vne relation exacte de tous les lieux de Perse & des Indes, où cet ambassadeur a esté l'espace de huit années qu'il y a demeuré*, trans. Abraham de Wicquefort (Paris, 1667).

¹⁴ García de Silva y Figueroa, *Comentarios de D. García de Silva y Figueroa de la embajada que de parte del Rey de España Don Felipe III hizo al Rey Xa Abas de Persia*, ed. Manuel Serrano y Sanz (2 vols., Madrid, 1903-1905). Quotes from Silva y Figueroa's travel account in the present essay will refer to this edition.

Curtius Rufus. One of the main differences between the two works lies in the way that Della Valle reports his findings, namely his choice of the epistolary form. As Nathalie Hester observes:

[...] the *lettere familiari* genre provides a suitable paradigm because of the variety it allows in tone, linguistic register, and topic. This variety means that all facets of his letters, from irreverent remarks to lowbrow comic episodes to sophisticated political, cultural, and literary commentary, was acceptable.¹⁵

The Roman traveler's account is a first-person narrative, it includes more subjective, personal observations than that of Silva y Figueroa. As Della Valle himself admits, he is prolix at times, and repeats himself. He has a tendency toward restlessness and flamboyance, he often digresses and reports on gossip. On the other hand, because of his knowledge of Persian and Turkish, and his greater familiarity with the native customs, he is often able to get closer to the subject matter than Silva y Figueroa, who is at a disadvantage in certain situations, due to his official position as well as his reliance on an interpreter.

An example of Della Valle's informal style occurs at the very start of his journey to the Middle East, when he describes the journey from Venice to Istanbul:

Let me just repeat that the whole journey so far has been delightful. Certainly there have been some bad experiences, but these have been willingly endured [...]. No one was sea-sick, as it was always calm, except the second day after we left Venice when I felt some discomfort [...]. It was a sea that troubled us all, even the sailors, though there was never any dangerous storm. So we vomited in unison, all laughing and making fun of each other.¹⁶

This kind of personal, practical information is not deemed to be inappropriate, and the text is interspersed with such moments that are supposed to reveal the intimate feelings of the author and bring the reader closer to the experience of travel. Della Valle is also very conscious of his role as narrator and prime mover of the text. Hester describes the "self-fashioning" of the author, and notes that "he dresses up for his readership in Europe; that is, he represents himself as a consummate role player".¹⁷ When he and Sitti Ma'ani are about to cross into Iran, the traveler notes:

I started to change my mode of dress from Syrian to Persian [...]. I found a country barber and very ceremoniously I had him remove, all in one piece and at a stroke, my long, renowned beard [...]. I wanted him to make me look entirely Persian:

¹⁵ Hester, *Literature*, p. 66.

¹⁶ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 4 (Letter from Constantinople, August 23, 1614).

¹⁷ Hester, *Literature*, p. 61.

namely, with my cheeks and chin clean-shaven, and with mustachios (with their broad growth covering half my cheeks) stretching to my ears. In short I so transformed myself that I believe no one who has seen me in Turkey, nor you who have seen me looking Italian, would ever have recognised me. [...] Enough. I adopted Persian style, and I shall not fail to have a little portrait done of how I look [...].¹⁸

In other words, Della Valle finds it necessary to adapt to the customs of the lands through which he travels, and makes a point of recording the changes to his persona for posterity. Another topic that relates to the hardships of travel has to do with the state of his health, describing symptoms to his friend, Schipano, the physician. He also comments on the food that he receives in Iran, and which is not at all to his liking:

[...] I conclude that my leanness comes only from my not eating as usual and this is because I do not have ingredients, and someone to cook them, to my taste. Who can eat without salads, without citrus fruits, without fish, without broccoli, without green vegetables and a thousand other appetising things, which we are denied, not by the earth, but by the foolishness of these people? It is extraordinary that in all Asia I have not been able to find someone to recognise and bring me some endive, or who even knows its name in his own language.¹⁹

If it were not for pilau, grapes and other fruit, he fears that he could die from hunger – an exaggeration, certainly, but the passage does provide some insight into the concerns of early modern travelers and the author's tendency to dramatize certain situations.

Silva y Figueroa shares some of these same worries about obtaining provisions on the road. Four leagues south of Qazvin

[...] llegó el Enbaxador á Monbara, otra aldea, adonde tambien tuuo rrazonable posada, y aunque en ella auia malissima y pestilencial agua se halló el mejor carnero y de más sabroso y delicado gusto que se auia comido en otra ninguna parte hasta aqui, y que se podia igualar con el mejor que ay en España.

[...] the ambassador arrived in Monbara, another village where there was a nice inn, and even though it had the most horrible and pestilential water, we discovered the best mutton which had the tastiest and most delicate flavor that we had eaten anywhere until now, and which could be compared to the best that can be found in Spain.²⁰

¹⁸ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 121 (Letter from Isfahan, March 17, 1617).

¹⁹ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 139 (Letter from Isfahan, December 18, 1617).

²⁰ *Comentarios*, vol. II, pp. 78-79.

The 67-year-old ambassador often remarked on the fact that he became quite tired at the various official banquets and festivities that he had to attend in his capacity as ambassador and that often lasted well into the night. He found himself especially ill at ease when he had to sit cross-legged for a long time on cushions, as was the Persian custom. At a four-hour banquet given in his honor at the fort of Isfahan, Silva y Figueroa noted the different foods (large platters filled with chicken, mutton and multicolored rice), followed by fruit (plums, green apricots and sour grapes), the women and effeminate youths who danced for him, but what he really wanted was a decent chair to sit in:

[...] y ansi pidio le traxesen alguna cosa leuantada en que sentarse, por estar muy cansado y fatigado en el suelo, sobre las alhonbras. Vinose á hallar acaso en la mesma fortaleza una silla alta, signn nuestra costunbre, despojos del fuerte de Comoran, y un poco apartado de la conversacion estuuu en ella descansando hasta que toda la fiesta fue acabada.

[...] and thus he requested that they bring him something elevated which he could sit on, since he was very weary and tired from sitting on the floor, on cushions. By chance they were able to find in that same fortress a high chair, made in our fashion, spoils from the fort of the Gombroon, and he relaxed in it, rather removed from the conversation, until the feast was over.²¹

This episode leads Silva y Figueroa to remark that the Persians believed that he was quite ancient, approximately 120 years old. This idea came about in the following manner: When the ambassador had been in a village near Shiraz, the local officials had offered him some women, according to the laws of hospitality. The Spaniard, who had white hair and a white beard, refused their offer, stating that he was too old for such amusements. The Persians were amazed at his refusal. Afterwards, when he went to Shiraz, he met several physicians and other learned men, and asked them about the geography of their country, and it turned out that from his study of ancient and contemporary authors, he knew even more about the history of Sheikh Haydar, Shah Ismael I (r. 1488-1524) and Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576) than they did. The Persians deduced that since he knew so much about the reign of Shah Tahmasp, he must have been an ambassador at that time, which would make him at least 120 years old. On the other hand, since Silva y Figueroa was quite nimble and was able to travel on foot and on horse, the superstitious Persians were convinced that supernatural forces and magic must have been at work.²²

²¹ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 46.

²² See *Comentarios*, vol. II, pp. 46-49.

Both Della Valle and Silva y Figueroa make use of familiar examples from their home countries to describe unknown cities or geographical features for their readers, a common strategy in travel accounts. In his portrayal of Isfahan, the Italian traveler notes that the city is "little or no smaller than Naples";²³ he is so impressed by the *maydan* that he remarks: "I dare to place it before the Piazza Navona";²⁴ the *Chahar Bagh* avenue is a "road [...] two or three miles long, and perhaps twice as broad as that of the Ponte Molle in Rome".²⁵ On his journey to visit Shah 'Abbas near the Caspian Sea, he stops "at a Turcoman village called Ciarman, situated by another very small stream, like the Marana in Rome".²⁶ Silva y Figueroa does the same. When describing the symbolically important folds on Shah 'Abbas's *mandil* (turban), he refers to equivalents in Spain: "[...] como las caperuças de luto que traen en España, ó como las que vsan como trage ordinario la gente comun de la Mancha ó Castilla." [... like the hoods of mourning that are worn in Spain, or like those that common folk usually wear in la Mancha or Castile].²⁷ The game of polo is also compared to similar Spanish contests: "Y de la manera que los labradores en las aldeas de España juegan este juego á pie, lo jugauan á cauallo y con la mesma contençion y porfia..." [And in the same way that peasants in the villages of Spain play this game on foot, they play it on horseback and with the same sense of rivalry and stubbornness].²⁸ Della Valle compares polo to Florentine *calcio*:

The only difference between the Persians' game and the Florentines' *calcio* is that the Florentines play with many people on foot in smaller piazzas, knocking the ball through the air, and very often try to grab it from each other, or to impede or vex one another, they punch each other madly on the nose, thumping each other on the face, and bruising themselves more than gentlemen rightly should. But the Persians play the game in nobler fashion on horseback, with few in number (only five or six each side: I do not know why but it must needs be so, and the experts know this), and without punching or striking each other. They only strike the ball [...].²⁹

There are many other such examples which illustrate how these authors try to make the foreign intelligible for their readers.

²³ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 122 (Letter from Isfahan, March 17, 1617).

²⁴ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 123 (Letter from Isfahan, March 17, 1617).

²⁵ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 124 (Letter from Isfahan, March 17, 1617).

²⁶ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 149 (Letter from Farahabad the first days of May and from Qazvin, July 25, 1618).

²⁷ *Comentarios*, vol. II, pp. 46-49.

²⁸ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 113.

²⁹ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 175 (Letter from Farahabad the first days of May and from Qazvin, July 25, 1618).

Impressions of the other: Della Valle and Silva y Figueroa

As mentioned previously, Pietro Della Valle pays much more attention to the movements of Silva y Figueroa than the other way around. At the beginning of May 1618, while at Shah 'Abbas's palace of Ashraf (see Figure 30), Della Valle recounts how the monarch receives a letter stating that Silva y Figueroa has arrived in Isfahan.

The King asked me if this ambassador was a great man, as they said. I replied that he was, and that although I did not know him by sight, I knew nonetheless that his house and kinship were of the most noble of Spain. He turned to ask me whether he was Spanish, namely from the kingdom of Castile, or Portuguese. I replied that I had heard that he had relationships with both parts, but that by inclination and profession he was Spanish.³⁰

The next account of the Spanish ambassador in Della Valle's work occurs at the end of May, when he hears from the Shah's secretary, Agamir, that Silva y Figueroa was not on good terms with the Portuguese Augustinian friars of Isfahan, especially with Father "Melchior degli Angeli", assistant to the King of Spain. Agamir considers the ambassador to be a "uomo stravagante"³¹ (strange fellow), since Father Melchior had served the king well for many years. In short, Della Valle sets the stage for Silva y Figueroa's arrival in Qazvin on June 15, 1618. The Roman devotes several pages to this first encounter between the two outside the city. Della Valle explains how he rode ahead of all the others, meeting the ambassador one mile outside the city, showing him all manner of courtesy, even indicating that he would dismount from his horse.³² The ambassador is described in the following manner:

Ma, tornando al mio filo, questo ambasciadore di Spagna, si chiama don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa: è vecchio assai, non solo con barba bianca, ma anco senza denti: è robusto con tutto ciò, e nella città entrò a cavallo, quantunque per viaggio soglia andare in lettiga. Venne molto ben vestito, con tutti i suoi, alla spagnuola; tesi, con collari a lattughe ed altre galanterie che qui sono strane; ed avrebbero fatto assai bella vista, se avesse avuto più gente: ma, vestite alla franca, non aveva più che venti o venticinque persone.

³⁰ Della Valle, *The Pilgrim*, ed. Bull, p. 162 (Letter from Farahabad the first days of May and from Qazvin, July 25, 1618). See also Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, pp. 652-653 and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, pp. 250-251.

³¹ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 696, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, p. 298 (Letter from Farahabad, the first days of May, and from Qazvin, July 25, 1618).

³² Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 718, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, p. 323 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 - May 8, 1619).

But returning to my train of thought, this ambassador from Spain is called Don García de Silva y Figueroa: he is quite old, not only does he have a white beard, but he is also toothless: nonetheless, he is quite robust and he entered the city on horseback, although when traveling he normally is carried in a litter. He was quite well dressed, along with his retinue, in the Spanish fashion; erect, with stiff posture and wearing ruffs and other trifles that seem strange here; and it would have been a rather nice spectacle if he had had more followers: however he had no more than twenty or twenty-five people dressed in European fashion.³³

Della Valle goes on to say that he accompanied the ambassador to his lodgings. "As a countryman (because that is how all Christians from Europe are considered in these parts)" ["come paesano (che per tali ci trattano, in queste parti, tutti i cristiani di Europa)"],³⁴ the Roman stayed with Silva y Figueroa for more than an hour in his room, where they discussed matters concerning Iran. He also explains in detail how he convinced all the Christians to call the ambassador "excellency" instead of "your lordship". This passage indicates how far Della Valle went out of his way to be kind and courteous to the Spanish visitor. It should be emphasized that Silva y Figueroa makes no mention of Della Valle before his audience with the shah.

On June 17, Silva y Figueroa was invited to meet Shah 'Abbas at the "Garden of Paradise". Della Valle recounts how, early in the morning, the ambassador made himself ready, how each present from King Philip had to be carried individually by a different Persian youth – there were about 500 or more – and then the entire procession set out to meet the shah. The Italian then confides in the reader that, knowing that the audience would last well into the night, and in no hurry to sit cross-legged for many hours, he had decided to wait until later to join the festivities. Silva y Figueroa, however, was forced to wait for about two hours before the shah was ready to see him in the garden. Della Valle notes that the "povero vecchio" [poor old man]³⁵ must have suffered in both body and spirit: in spirit, since people of his rank normally did not have to wait so long in the street; and in body, since he had to wait in the heat, out in the open, dressed in his finery and wearing his ruff.

Silva y Figueroa, as can be expected, had a slightly different perception of the events. According to the Spaniard's version, he had to wait "mas de media ora" [more than half an hour],³⁶ and he admits that he was very tired and uncomfortable

³³ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 719, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, p. 324 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 – May 8, 1619).

³⁴ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 720, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, pp. 324-325 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 – May 8, 1619).

³⁵ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 722, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, p. 328 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 – May 8, 1619).

³⁶ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 84.

in his "vestido de gala" [gala dress].³⁷ He finally complains and asks one of the court officials whether the shah can receive him – and is given leave to enter into the garden. At that point the ambassador was "bien enfadado, porque no sentia tanto el cansancio como la fastuosa y arrogante costumbre de estos barbaros orientales de hazer detener y aguardar los Enbaxadores" [very angry, not so much because of fatigue, but by the ostentatious and arrogant custom of these oriental barbarians to cause delays and obstructions for the ambassadors].³⁸ Once he meets the shah, he provides a candid description of the ruler, whose modest dress and comportment do not conform to the fame of a great monarch. Silva y Figueroa also points out the hands of 'Abbas, "que eran notablemente cortas, gruesas y negras, como las podria tener un muy rustico y grosero pastor" [which were notably short, thick and black, and could have been those of a very rustic and coarse shepherd].³⁹ At another audience, Silva y Figueroa criticizes the shah's "animo lleno de engaño y maligna simulacion" [spirit full of deception and malevolent dissimulation].⁴⁰ The monarch is given a new translation into Persian of the Psalms and the New Testament by the discolored Carmelite John Thaddeus, and he proceeds to open the work and kiss it in feigned devotion, as Silva y Figueroa notes.⁴¹ Della Valle, who hears of this encounter, also provides a description, but omits any criticism of the shah.⁴²

The Italian traveler is also quick to point out the problems that the Spanish ambassador causes while at court: "L'ambasciador di Spagna in questo mentre, saputo che il re doveva partir presto da Cazuin, fece gran fracasso per aver un'udienza secreta, cosa che in Persia di rado si usa..." [The Spanish ambassador in the meantime, after finding out that the king was going to quit Qazvin soon, caused a great uproar in order to have a secret audience, something that is seldom done in Persia...].⁴³ Silva y Figueroa, must have been disconcerted by the strange behavior of the monarch, who showed up unannounced at the ambassador's lodgings in Isfahan,⁴⁴ or who met him in the *maydan* to discuss politics, instead of in a more private setting.⁴⁵ However, it seems that eventually the monarch's familiarity grew on the ambassador, so that by the time of their final meeting in August 1619 the farewell was quite friendly:

³⁷ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 84.

³⁸ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 84.

³⁹ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 89.

⁴⁰ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 102.

⁴¹ This episode is mentioned in *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* (2 vols., London, 1939), vol. I, pp. 240-241.

⁴² Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, pp. 737-738, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, pp. 344-345 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 – May 8, 1619).

⁴³ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. I, p. 737, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. I, p. 344 (Letter from Isfahan, April 22 – May 8, 1619).

⁴⁴ See *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 363.

⁴⁵ See *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 97.

[...] el rey [...] le leuantó y abraçó, llamandole padre y diziendo que sienpre seria grande amigo. El Enbaxador, por este fauor que particularmente le hazia á su persona, se baxó y le besó la mano, cosa que nunca hasta entonçes auia hecho [...].

[...] the shah helped him rise and embraced him, he called him father, saying that he would always be a great friend. The Ambassador, because of this favor which was done especially toward him, bent down and kissed his hand, something which he had never done before [...].⁴⁶

* * * * *

While a certain rapprochement can be seen on the personal level between Silva y Figueroa and the shah, there was no such tender scene between Della Valle and the ambassador when the latter left Isfahan. In fact, Della Valle makes a point of mentioning the fact that he alone was absent from the departure ceremony:

Vi fu accompagnato da molta gente e da tutti i Franchi che si trovavano qui: io solo non vi andai, per la poca corrispondenza che era passata in questa corte fra di noi.

He was accompanied by many people and by all the Europeans who were here: I alone did not go along, because of the lack of understanding between us at this court.⁴⁷

The question arises as to why the two could not get along, for they seemed to have the prerequisites for a beneficial relationship: they were both Catholic, aristocrats, and very cultured, with strong backgrounds in classics, interested in describing Safavid Iran, its peoples, cities, architecture, agriculture, economy, politics, history and natural wonders. They could have had much to say to each other, whether on a scholarly level, or in trying to understand the intricacies of the court. Della Valle's contacts among the Safavid administration and insight into the social fabric could have been of use to the ambassador, who is depicted as rather aloof from day-to-day activities that were not related to his embassy. Della Valle would no doubt have been interested in hearing about the ambassador's experiences in Goa, in Hormuz, and at the ruins of Persepolis. But they likely did not have those kinds of exchanges of information. Silva y Figueroa devotes only twenty-two lines to his description of the Roman nobleman, whom he calls "Pedro de la Val":

⁴⁶ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 411.

⁴⁷ Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. Brighton, vol. II, p. 54, and Della Valle, *Viaggi*, ed. 1658, vol. II, p. 61 (Letter from Isfahan, October 21, 1619).

Este, por curiosidad y natural inclinacion, como otros muchos tienen de andar vagando y peregrinando por el mundo [...] [en] Bagdad [...] se casó con una muger pobre, de profesión cristiana nestoriana [...] despues de llegado con ella y una su ermana, á Span [...]. Pero vsando, ansi él como ellas, el habito persiano, no se sabe por que fin este hombre seguia la corte del rey de Persia cargado de estas dos mugeres, no obstante que algunas vezes le uviesen dicho que si no tenia cosa que tratar particularmente con el rey, se boluiese ó quedase en Casbin [...].

That one, due to his curiosity and natural inclination, like many other people, who need to wander and travel the world [...] in Baghdad [...] married a poor woman, of the Nestorian Christian faith [...] after which he arrived with her and one of her sisters in Isfahan ... However, he, as well as the two women, wore Persian clothes, and nobody knows why this man followed the court of the Persian king, burdened by those two women, notwithstanding the fact that he had been told several times that if he did not have any particular business with the king, that he should either return or remain in Qazvin [...].⁴⁸

Silva y Figueroa may have been a good ambassador and excellent bureaucrat, who did not appreciate a "free spirit" such as Della Valle, the flamboyant adventurer. A Roman nobleman who tried to pass as a Persian by wearing native clothes, who followed the shah's court for no apparent good reason, did not fit into the general order of things. However, by confronting these two travelers, and examining their very personal and detailed travel writings we can gain new insight into the workings of the Safavid court as well as into the character of Shah 'Abbas I. Ultimately, the accounts, which are written in different styles, mirror the individual backgrounds and literary intentions of their authors in their representations of Safavid Iran.

⁴⁸ *Comentarios*, vol. II, p. 121.