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ILCAA Forum

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Title:"Europian(Farangi) and Europe (Farang) in Iranian Historiography: A case study of the chronicles of The Safavid era (16th - 18th centuries)"

Jean Chardin, a French traveler who spent several years in Iran, claimed that Safavid government(1501-1736) officials were poorly informed about conditions in Europe and that most courtiers took Europe to be a little island in the Northern Seas. With regard to the position of Chardin, and his considerable knowledge of the cultural and political conditions of Iran during the Safavid period, especially the seventeenth century, this claim must be taken seriously. But it seems that the question of Iranian knowledge of the West during the Safavid period needs more research. The principal aim of this study is to explore the understanding of Iranians of the West during this period. The study will be treated by investigating both Safavid chronicles and other historical documents.

The establishment of the Safavid state in Iran coincided with the overseas expansion of the countries on Europe's Atlantic seaboard and the beginning of direct relations between Iran and the West began. Two main factors, war with the Ottomans and trade, led to the establishment of close relations between the Safavid kingdom and European states. Through the presence of Westerners in Iran as travelers, merchants, adventurers, diplomatic envoys and missionaries, the Iranian elite and courtiers changed their views and understanding of the West. Despite the persistence of traditional opinions about the West, which Iranians inherited from the pre-Safavid period, it appears that they changed their understanding gradually and names like *Farang* (Europe), *Farangi* (European) and *Farangistan* were re-defined. This was because of, first, direct contact with Westerners in Iran; second, events relating to the military and political conditions of the Ottoman Empire; and finally the land and maritime contacts with the Indian Subcontinent. For the subject of this study, the most important question is, how did Safavid chroniclers represent past and present information about the West in their works? It seems that during the sixteenth century, because of the presence of the Portuguese and Spanish in the East, the Safavid historians were familiar with those two names. Although there were no close diplomatic relations between the Safavid state and Portugal, and the Safavids did not send diplomatic envoys to Europe in this period, there were common interests which gave rise to relations between Iran and the West. However, this had little effect on the composition of Safavid chronicles. Up until the end of the sixteenth century, there were no details concerning Europe in Safavid historical writings.

The picture of *Farang* and *Farangi* in Safavid sources varies according to the kind of source. To some poets, the *Farangi* was the supreme example of beauty of which they said: *Farangi*: Idol or moon? From the commercial point of view, there were those who came to Iran with gold and silver coins to purchase the Safavid silk and other commodities. As for the Safavid government, sometimes they were allies against the Ottomans. Within the framework of traditional Safavid historical writing, the focus of which was significant dynastic events, there was no reason to include much information about the West. As for the most part, European commercial, political, and military developments remained marginal to Safavid affairs, it is not altogether surprising that Safavid histories only very rarely mention the names of European kings and rulers. Many of the existing written sources about the West concern religious polemic. These demonstrate the attempts of the religious leaders to refute Christianity. It seems that Safavid Iran had an ideology, they considered to be superior and purer to that of foreigners like Europeans, so they did not need to refer to them generally. For them Iran was the center of the universe and the Safavid Kings were its pivot. They believed that they were the only true believers on earth. Safavid Iran was a rich and flourishing country and it seems that because of this pride and perhaps negligence, they did not concern themselves with problems like the growing European naval and commercial power.

On the other hand, although Iranian curiosity towards new subjects were recorded by the European travellers, it seems that the motivations that caused the Europeans to begin a new understanding of the world was not present amongst the Iranians to any great extent. An analysis of the Safavid sources makes it clear that in the period from the reign of Shah Abbas I. to the final years of Safavid rule, a considerable and increasing number of people travelled abroad, but the main destination was India. There is not much detail about those who travelled to Europe. It seems that during the last years of Safavid rule, the Iranians began to investigate other parts of the world, but only gradually. However, the fall of the Safavid rule in Iran, led to a long interruption in this process.