“Giving What They Hold Dear”: Safavid Diplomatic Gifts to Venice

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Abstract

The exchange of gifts was an important aspect of the relations between the Safavid Empire and the Republic of Venice. Drawing on Venetian archival documents, the article aims to explore the nature and significance of Safavid diplomatic gift-giving to Venice in the first third of the seventeenth century. In particular, it examines the place and importance of precious objects in gift exchanges, looking at specific types of gifts given such as carpets, textiles, and weaponry. The article sheds light on the role religion played in the determination of a Shah’s choice of a gift to the Doge. Furthermore, this article examines how the diplomatic gifts from the Safavid rulers were viewed and conceived in Venice. Using a comparative perspective, the article explores the differences between the Safavid gift-giving strategies towards Venice and Ottomans. It reveals that the Safavids and Venetians had a common understanding of what was worthy of giving.

Keywords

Introduction

Gift-giving, as a basic and universal part of social life, has been a long-entrenched practice among many cultures along with other kinds of exchange. On the other hand, in the field of international relations, the exchange of gifts has been a regularly observed custom.

The gift-giving has always been a prominent topic in the field of anthropology since the publication of sociologist Marcel Mauss’ Essay on the Gift of 1925. In recent decades there has been a growing awareness of the importance of gift exchanges and the role played by material culture in diplomatic relations in the early modern world. Although the existing historiography notes the essential role of gift-giving in the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations, the nature and importance of gift exchanges between the Safavid Empire and European powers, including Venice remain under-studied. In his article on Safavid gift-giving Rudi Matthee provides a synopsis of the types of objects sent to and from the Safavid Empire. Marianna Simpson limits her study to the religious gifts sent to Shah Abbās I (r.1587–1629) through Carmelite missionaries. Giorgio Rota touches on some gifts exchanged in the context of the Safavid missions to Venice, but he does not give insights into the meaning of these items within their contemporary political and cultural contexts. Gianpiero Bellingeri and Elisa Mangilli’s articles in a small volume briefly discuss the Safavid gifts sent to Venice in the first quarter of the seventeenth

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1 For the role of gifts in early modern diplomacy see special issue: “Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: Afro-Eurasian Perspectives” Diplomatica 2 (2) (2020).
century. Sinem Casale focuses mainly on gold-embroidered velvet with the figures of “Christ and his mother Mary,” which was among the gifts sent by Shah ‘Abbās I to the Venetian doge in 1603.8 Despite these advancements, few attempts have been made to study in a systematic way the cultural and political meanings of gifts, connections between gifts and identities in diplomatic gift exchanges of the Safavids with the Venetians.

Drawing on archival documents and historical sources, the article aims to examine the nature and significance of Safavid diplomatic gift-giving to Venice. We will analyze the gifts by arranging them along with the typological categories. What types of gifts did the Safavids send to Venice? How carpets and textile goods from the Safavid rulers were viewed and conceived in Venice? What kinds of textiles had a particular significance? What particular arm gifts were selected as gifts for the Venetian ruler? Was the nature of the diplomatic gifts determined by the individual preferences of the Safavid rulers or by their political culture?

The article also attempts to explore the various meanings attached by the Safavid court to diplomatic gifts sent to Venice. How did the Safavids assert their own distinct cultural and political identity through gift exchange? Did the Safavids and Venetians have a common understanding of what was worthy of giving and of the symbolic power of the given objects? What role did religion play in the determination of a Shah’s choice of a gift to the Doge? Finally, we will briefly carry out a comparative analysis of the Safavid gift-giving strategy towards Venice and Ottomans. Was there a difference or similarity between the gifts that were sent to these states?

**Historical Background**

The emergence of the Safavid Empire in the early sixteenth century marked a significant change in the geopolitics of the Middle East. This momentous change coincided with the widening of Ottoman expansion eastward and European powers, especially Venice, explored the possibilities of the formation of an alliance against the Ottomans with the involvement of the Safavids. Thus, the Safavid-Venetian diplomatic contacts gave rise to the cultural encounters between these two polities and contributed to the transnational movement of material objects in the form of diplomatic gifts.

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The nature and intensity of Safavid diplomatic engagement with Venice could be understood in the light of Ottoman-Venetian relations, as they were closely related to each other during this period.9 As pointed out by Giorgio Rota, both the Venetian attitude towards the Ottomans and Venetian interest in the Safavid state were shaped by the necessity of trading and of defending trade.10 According to Paolo Preto, in many respects, Venice pursued Realpolitik by safeguarding its commercial relations with the Ottomans for the purpose of its own survival.11

G. Rota divides the history of Safavid-Venetian diplomatic relations into two different phases.12 During the first period (1501–87), each of the two states still saw in the other a possible military ally against the Ottomans. Securing military support against the Sublime Porte was, more likely, the common purpose of the first two Safavid envoys who visited Venice in 1509. However, the Serenissima was not in a position to offer the support the Shah sought due to waging war for its own survival against the League of Cambrai.13 The defeat of the Safavids at the battle of Chaldiran (August 23, 1514), Shah Ismail I’s death (1524), and Venetian policy of reconciliation with the Ottomans resulted in a lull in the relations between the two polities. The new Ottoman-Venetian war, which broke out in 1537, contributed to the revival of Venice’s traditional desires to draw the Safavids into the anti-Ottoman alliance. However, Venetian emissary Michele Membrè’s mission (1539)14 to the Safavid court had failed due to Ottoman-Venetian peace negotiations that started in the spring of 1540.15

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9 For Ottoman factor in Safavid-Venetian relations see Guliyev, A. *Safavids in Venetian and European Sources* (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2022), 71–79.
13 The League of Cambrai, an anti-Venetian alliance consisting of Pope Julius II, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, Louis XII of France, and Ferdinand II of Aragon, was formed on December 10, 1538.
15 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter: ASVe), Senato, Deliberazioni, Segrete, reg. 60, ff.115a–115b.
Similarly, Venetians looked again to the Shah after the outbreak of the Ottoman-Venetian war over Cyprus in 1570.\(^\text{16}\) They dispatched Vincenzo degli Alessandri and a Safavid subject Khoja Ali Tabrizi to Tahmāsp’s court to urge him to join the anti-Ottoman league. However, by refusing to grant an audience to Vincenzo Alessandri, Shah showed his unwillingness to put peace of Amasya (1555) with the Porte at stake. Similarly, in 1580, when the Safavids sent the embassy led by Haji Mohammad in an attempt to get at least “moral” support against the Ottomans, it resulted in failure due to Venetians’ reluctance to break peace with the Ottomans.\(^\text{17}\)

The commercial agenda increasingly characterized the Safavid diplomacy towards Venice in the second phase of the mutual relations that started with the accession to the throne of Shah Abbās in 1587 and lasted throughout the seventeenth century. Shah Abbās, who attached importance to trade relations with Venice, within the period covering from 1597 to 1629 dispatched no fewer than eight diplomatic cum trade missions there. Venice, by contrast, is known to have not reciprocated with any missions in the same period. The prospect of a military alliance against the Ottomans, that had shaped the agenda of occasional Safavid-Venetian negotiations in the sixteenth entury, was largely put aside. In the first third of the seventeenth century, the Safavid representatives were merchants of relatively low status who were not in charge of military negotiations, but carried letters from the Shah and dealt exclusively with commercial matters.\(^\text{18}\) In 1601, the only Safavid embassy, headed by Huseyn Ali Bey Bayat that was charged with discussing a military alliance against the Ottomans was not given permission to enter Venice. The reason for this can be interpreted as abstaining of the Venetian government from involvement in any action that could endanger peaceful relations with the Sublime Porte. For the most part, Venice maintained neutrality or amicable relations with the Ottomans, except when the possession of certain territories and bases was at stake.\(^\text{19}\)

Ali Bali, who reached Venice in 1634, was the last Muslim to be sent as a Safavid envoy to the Serenissima.\(^\text{20}\) Beginning of the Cretan war (1645–69)

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\(^{16}\) ASVe, Consiglio di Dieci, Deliberazioni, Segrete, filza 14, October 27 and 30, 1570, unpaginated; Berchet, G., ed. \textit{La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia} (Turin: G.B. Paravia, 1865), 29–30.

\(^{17}\) Rota, G. “Safavid Persia and its Diplomatic Relations with Venice,” 150.

\(^{18}\) For Safavid missions and gifts brought by them to Venice, see the table in Appendix 1.


\(^{20}\) Rota, G. “Safavid Persia and its Diplomatic Relations with Venice,” 151.
prompted the Venetian government to send several missions to the Safavid court in order to urge the Shah to join the anti-Ottoman alliance. However, from the signing of the peace of Zohab (1639) until the end of Safavid rule in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Safavid rulers sought to avoid involvement in an alliance against the Ottomans, maintaining an extremely cautious policy designed not to antagonize their western neighbor.21

Some Aspects of Safavid Gift Exchanges with Venice

While the tradition of exchanging gifts was a significant aspect of Safavid court society, it also held a prominent place in Safavid diplomatic etiquette. Gift-giving was not only a diplomatic activity that served to create, preserve, and strengthen political relations but also a demonstration of the wealth, position, and strength of the Safavid shah. Culture, religion, geographical position, distance, and the status of political relations between the Safavid court and the recipient power determined the richness and value of the presents given at diplomatic encounters.

We lack evidence about the instances of gift-giving during the first three Safavid missions sent to Venice in the sixteenth century. The first documented case of Safavid gift presentation to the Doge occurred in June of 1600 when Sujaddin Asad bey brought gifts from Shah Abbās I to doge Marino Grimani (r.1595–1605). Gifts-giving as a medium of symbolic communication was used by the Safavid shahs, particularly by Shah Abbās I and his successor Shah Safi I (r.1629–42) to transmit the messages of prestige and honor to the Venetian rulers. Beyond these functions, gifts in Safavid-Venetian diplomatic encounters were also a means of dialogue between the sovereigns and an essential component of political communication like letters.

While the carpets were exclusively offered by the Safavids, the most popular gifts that were given by Venice included silverware and glassware gifts. Textiles, along with arms, were also the most common types of gifts given by both sides. In comparison, the Ottoman court mostly offered fabrics, which were usually of little value. Sometimes, the Ottoman envoys brought dogs and carpets, more rarely bows, quivers, horses, and handkerchiefs.22 While the Safavid-Venetian gifts exchanges were exclusively focused on royal gifts, in addition

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22 Pedani, M.P. In nome del Gran Signore. Inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia (Venezia: Deputazione Editrice, 1994), 75–76.
to the Sultan’s presents, the Doge received gifts also from the local rulers of Ottoman lands bordering the Venetian possessions, particularly from beylerbey of Bosnia and sanjakbey of Avlona (present-day west Albania). M. Pedani notes that the gifts they presented to the Doge were richer than those brought from Istanbul and included embroidered falcon gloves, bows, arrows, and carpets.

Despite cultural differences, Safavids and Venetians had a shared understanding of what gifts were worthy of giving and of the symbolic power of the given objects. Those items were mainly selected in response to the recipient’s tastes. On the other hand, the Safavids and Venetians utilized these ritual gifts as a showcase of their unique and distinct culture and value system. For example, gifts brought by Shah Abbās’ representative Fathi bey were nine pieces. Another Safavid envoy Ali Bali, who was sent by Shah Safi, followed a similar pattern by bringing 18 items of silk fabrics for the Doge. The presentation of nine gifts meant particularly friendly intentions. Sending and receiving some gifts in numbers of nine makes it clear that the Safavids preserved that ancient Turkic tradition.

Therefore, material objects exchanged as diplomatic gifts between these two powers, are concrete evidence of both their common and distinctive cultural traits, as well as a mirror of their tastes, values, economy, and productive skills.

The ceremonial presentation of shah’s gifts took place at the Venetian Collegio usually presided over by the Doge and the ceremonies were carefully managed. Venetian guest ritual was flexible and practical, so it was modified in accordance with the political importance of the relations with the state whom the envoy represented. The great variety of elements, rich clothing, rare and expensive gifts all served the purpose of demonstrating the importance of the occasion.24 Audiences at the Hall of the Collegio (Sala del Collegio) provided the occasion for the Safavid emissaries to display their relative diplomatic position and cultural identity. The presentation of diplomatic gifts was the most spectacular part, a centerpiece of the reception ceremonies.

Fathi bey’s embassy of 1603 provided a good example of the reception of the Safavid envoys at the Venetian Collegio.25 The reception of the foreign diplomats was a ceremonial affair manifesting respect for the principal whom they represented.26 This was best described by the words of Fathi bey: “all the

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23 Ibid., 44.
25 ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni principi (hereafter cep), filza 13, March 5, 1603, unpaginated.
26 Queller, E.D. “Early Venetian Legislation Concerning Foreign Ambassadors.” Studies in the Renaissance, xII (1965), 8. See also Guliyev, A. “Venice’s Ceremonial Treatment of the
favors that will be done to me by the Venetian government will be bestowed on Shah.” 

The gifts functioned as mementos of reception ceremonies at the Venetian Collegio. The painting was also inspired by this diplomatic episode that brought the Venetians into contact with the Safavids. This scene was well captured in *Doge Marino Grimani receiving the Persian Ambassador* by Venetian Gabriele Caliari (1568–1631). 

Produced with the purpose of commemorating the reception of the Safavid embassy, the picture enables us to reflect on how the Venetian government viewed the Safavid envoy missions. The foreign ambassadors, including Safavid envoys, were usually seated next to the Doge, on his right, located above that of the *Savi di Terraferma.* This was the place where the oldest ducal counselor usually sat. Interestingly, it appears from Caliari's famous painting that four members of the Safavid mission, including Fathi bey, were seated next to the Doge, two on each side, while some of the other members of the Safavid embassy unfold silver foliage embroidered fabrics.

This painting poses questions on the issues of diplomatic gifts: Why did the Venetians choose this particular scene of envoys submitting the diplomatic gifts to depict the Safavid envoy mission? This scene highlights visually the preponderance of commercial motives in the diplomatic contacts between the Safavid court and the Serenissima during the reign of Shah Abbās I. With this painting, the Venetian government seemed to demonstrate the true nature of their relations with the Safavids in the early seventeenth century.

**Textile Gifts**

The most popular gifts, given by both sides, were textiles, particularly luxury silk fabrics. For the Safavids, perhaps the most desirable and lucrative commodities were silks, which reached their technical and artistic pinnacle in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, the trade of
raw silk and manufactured silk products was the core of the Safavid economy. Venice was one of the important destinations for Safavid silk and served as a conduit to the western European markets. At the same time, Venice itself was a major producer of silk luxury textiles in the sixteenth century, which was one of the main sources of its prosperity and income. Silk fabrics hold both commercial and cultural value. Similar to the case of carpets, Safavid manufactured silk goods that were highly appreciated by Venetians as a coveted commodity and this made it a valuable tool for diplomacy. Silk fabric, often associated with luxury and wealth, served as a form of artistic expression.

Unlike the carpet trade, which appears to have been almost exclusively in an east-to-west direction, textile commerce between Venice and the Islamic Middle East was distinguished by the flow of textile goods in both directions. Textile goods were objects that held cross-cultural appeal among both Safavid and Venetian dignitaries and the use of luxury textiles as diplomatic gifts indicated commonalities and shared elite tastes.

The list of gifts delivered from the Safavid court to Venice in 1603 can help us to highlight the distinctive features of the Safavid-Venetian diplomatic exchange. A Safavid list of the gifts was ranked in descending value and a higher position was granted to Shah Abbās’ personal gift to Doge Marino Grimani: a mantle of cloth of gold (manto). One splendidly crafted carpet was ranked second in value in the Safavid gift inventory. The variety of the objects and the value of the gifts can clearly show the basic distinctions between the gifts given to the Venetians and the Ottomans.

**Gift of Clothing**

The prominent place of the mantle of cloth of gold in the gift inventory is remarkable due to the fact that this was an individual and personalized gift and symbolizes the closeness between the giver and the recipient. Fathi bey told the doge that this robe was produced specially for him and “it was all made from one piece of fabric without any stitching.” The gift of the mantle was a tangible expression of goodwill and was intended to be regarded as a token of friendship between these two sovereigns. Fathi bey added that shah sent a similar one as a gift to the Mughal ruler, “his great friend.” By equating the Doge

32 ASVe, *cep*, filza 13, March 5, 1603, unpaginated.
with the Mughal emperor, Safavids aimed to show their respect and honor to the Venetian ruler. This mantle can be identified probably as a khilat made of expensive silk textiles, particularly from velvet. The investitures of robes (khilat) were common in the Safavid period used by the shahs to reward their illustrious subjects, foreign envoys, as well as were sent to foreign rulers as a mark of honor and signifier of shah’s generosity. Luca Molà points out that the Venetian Republic had adopted the Asian tradition of giving ceremonial silk robes. Although Shah Abbās is documented as preferring simple cloth, his ambassadors with their shimmering khilat became a walking advertisement for dressing in the Safavid manner: a prime opportunity to market figural silks as the zenith of Safavid silk-weaving. Fathi bey was portrayed by Caliari wearing a gold-embroidered cloak.

Ottoman and Safavid sources of that period mention dozens of instances of khilat-giving. Gold-threaded silk robes were among the gifts brought by the Safavid envoy to Sultan Murad III in 1580. In 1597, a Safavid envoy brought to the Ottoman court 9 gold-embroidered velvet robes (veste), 18 gold brocade robes, a gold thread garment woven with the loop over loop technique (riccio sopra riccio), 18 robes of damask fabric, 27 half-satin robes, and 18 robes of rich

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37 ASVe, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, filza 14, September 3, 1580, c.223r.
watered silk (tabino).[^38] Ottoman sultans frequently gave Safavid envoys a robe of honor (hil'at-ı fahire) together with an allowance (“harclık”).[^39]

The presentation of costly gifts to the Doge was also motivated by the Shah’s desire to display his wealth and power. At the same time, with this gift, he wished to show the sophisticated craftsmanship of Safavid weavers. Shah Abbās paid attention to the choice of gifts and it seems that the shah was directly involved in the selection of this special present. Shah Abbās’ gift-giving behavior in the selection of the gift to the Doge reflects his awareness of the clothing habits of the recipient. The significance of the robe was expressed by the quality of the fabrics from which it was made. Cloth of gold was one of the symbols of royalty and nobility and it demonstrates that the choice of gifts was related to the status attributed to the recipient. The mantle is among the Safavid gifts that had a relatively short life and it was probably used until it was worn out.

**Christian-Themed Textile Gifts**

Textile items that incorporated religious symbolism were among the Safavid gifts brought to Venice by Asad bey in 1600 and Fathi bey in 1603. This series of gifts draw attention to their spiritual significance. Shah Abbās sent to the doge of Venice a piece of cloth made of gold and velvet with a picture of the Annunciation and a piece of velvet with images of Christ and Mary. A gold-woven velvet fabric featuring the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary by the Angel Gabriel was presented to doge Marino Grimani by Asad bey on June 8, 1600.[^40] The velvet measuring 7 x 8 braccia[^41] (≈ 447 x 510 cm.) was later hung in the Hall of the Council of Ten (Sala del Consiglio dei Dieci) at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice.[^42] This gift has not survived to the present day.[^43]

“A gold-embroidered velvet fabric with the figures of Christ and his mother Mary” was among the luxury items, brought to Venice as diplomatic gifts for the Doge by the Safavid embassy in 1603. Its original dimensions were 7 x 7 braccia (≈ 447 x 447 cm) and the scene of the Virgin Mary nursing Jesus in a landscape was repeated fourteen times.[^44] A fragment of this textile currently

[^38]: ASVe, Senato, Dispacci degli ambasciatori, Deciferazioni, Costantinopoli, registro 11, January 14, 1596 (more veneto), 258.
[^40]: ASVe, *cc*, registro 3, June 11, 1600, c. 13v; ASVe, *CEP*, filza 11, June 8, 1600, unpaginated.
[^41]: 1 Venetian silk braccio ≈ 63.8 cm.
[^42]: ASVe, *CEP*, filza 11, June 8, 1600, unpaginated.
[^44]: ASVe, ASVe, *cc*, registro 3, March 9, 1603, c. 180v.
measuring 136 cm all around is preserved at the Museum of Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice. Fathi bey was reported as saying that Shah sent this fabric to be presented to the Church of San Marco. The silk velvet vividly captures this point with power and eloquence, as it presents a fundamentally Christian theme from a uniquely Safavid point of view.

Due to the labor-intensive technique and use of metal-wrapped threads, velvets were the most costly and time-consuming textiles to produce, and therefore, their production were often connected with royal patronage. The difference in the selection of diplomatic gifts might serve as evidence of Shah Abbās’ attention to the receiver’s cultural interests. The choice of Christian-themed items by the Safavids as gifts for the Doge seems to point to the latter’s Catholic identity and were appropriate for the mission. We argue that this kind of gift is paramount to the understanding of the Safavid perception of Venetian religious identity and beliefs.

**Safavid Luxury Silk Fabrics**

Among the diplomatic gifts exchanged between Safavids and Venetians, precious silk fabrics played a remarkable part. Silk textiles from the Safavid territories played an important role in luxury trade throughout the early modern period. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why the Safavids sent mostly textile goods to foreign states as diplomatic gifts. The famous luxury textiles were originated in the court workshops of Shah Abbās.

In 1603, Fathi bey offered six lengths (donluk) of silk, three golden silk fabrics (zarbaft) with figures and three other without gold but with figures each equal to the amount of fabric needed to make a single robe. In Safavid terminology, this luxury silk fabric was called zarbaft, a gold brocade. By a decree of the Venetian Senate dated March 6, 1603, the silk fabrics were to be fashioned into priestly garments. In 1634, another envoy Ali Bali brought to Venice 18 pieces of fabric woven with silk and gold threads each measuring about 223 x
223 cm (3.5 braccia). These white-colored textile items were classified into two groups of nine by the shades of white.52

Safavid textile gifts to Venice were not limited to silk fabrics. In 1622, in addition to other gifts, Khoja Shahuvar brought to Venice 25 pieces of _lizari di India_ and 25 items of _giurini._53 These fabrics were probably made out of cotton. _Giurini_ was the term used in Venice for a type of fabric used to line and reinforce clothes.54 In the early sixteenth century, Italian traveler Ludovico de Varthema mentions _lizari_ among the cotton and silk fabrics exported from India to the Ottoman and Safavid territories.55 However, interestingly, a certain plant called “Indian Madder” (_Rubia cordifolia_), which root was used to dye textiles in red is also known by the name of _lizari_.56 These textile gifts along with carpets were consigned to the office of Procurators of St. Mark’s57 to be used in the church of San Marco and in public ceremonies.

As for the luxury Italian (_firangi_) textiles, they were highly valued in Safavid society, and Italian silk and, in some instances, velvet fabrics were re-gifted to the rulers of the neighboring powers.

**Carpet Gifts**

In early modern Europe, Safavid carpets as valuable assets were in demand among European courts and nobles. The Most Serene Republic was a primary entrepôt for the importation into Europe of profitable goods such as carpets and textiles.58 Venetians were in a leading position in Europe in their sophistication about the Islamic world, and few surpassed them in their knowledge, admiration and cultural approbation of the material products of Islamic

52 ASVe, Senato, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli (hereafter _SdeLC_), filza 26, May 13, 1634, unpaginated.
53 ASVe, Commemoriali, registro 28, February 4, 1621 (more veneto), c. 60r.
57 This office was mainly in charge of the administration of the assets owned by St. Mark’s church.
58 Denny, W.B. “Oriental Carpets and Textiles in Venice,” 175.
The main items prepared by Safavids as diplomatic gifts were carpets and textiles, both of which were admired and favored by Venetians. A growing appreciation of Safavid silk rugs among the Venetians led to the reputation of carpets as a symbol of cultural exchange between the Safavids and the Venetians. The carpets as luxury goods symbolized wealth, power, purity and the Safavids used objects as vehicles of cultural identity.

According to our estimations based on the available Venetian archival documents, the Safavid missions gifted the doges with eight floral patterned, silver-wrapped-thread luxury carpets, five of which are still on display today in the St. Mark’s Basilica Museum in Venice. Some colors in existing carpets have faded. The highest amount of Safavid carpets presented by a single embassy belongs to the mission of 1622 led by Khoja Shahsuvar who brought to Venice four rugs.

The art of carpet weaving in Azerbaijan and Iran reached its height during the Safavid era. The period of Shah Abbās introduced a new type of rug that differed from all others mainly in their color scheme, for instead of strong reds and blues, the colors predominating are delicate pinks and greens, silvery greys and golden hues ranging from palest lemon to reddish amber. Mistakenly identified as “Polonaise,” these silk carpets were woven with silk pile and brocaded precious metal threads. The design elements of most Polonaise carpets are purely floral and include palmettes, curving leaves, and vines.

With an exception of the gold and silver threads woven silk velvet carpet that was brought by Fathi bey, Venetian archival records do not give details regarding the size and design of the Safavid carpets presented to the Doge. Antonio Pasini identified the rug measured 181 x 258 cm with the one brought by Fathi Bey which according to the archival records was sized at that time 3 x 4 braccia (≈191 x 255 cm). Fathi bey noted that “this is one of the finest carpets ever made. My king, having understood that every year the treasure of San Marco is put on view, very famous throughout the world, sends this carpet, so that every time the treasure is exhibited, it might be displayed on this carpet due to its great beauty.” Three other rugs of this class have been linked to the presents brought by another envoy Khoja Shahsuvar in 1622, two of which

59 Ibid.
63 ASVe, Annali, filza 13, March 5, 1633, c.iv.
are called “twin” carpets according to their identical design and corresponding dimensions.

The remaining carpet with cartouche design measured 192 x 131 cm and was dated to the second quarter of the seventeenth century might be presented by Ali Bali as a diplomatic gift from Shah Safi I to doge Francesco Erizzo (r. 1631–46) in 1634. Gifts of carpets brought by Safavid envoys provided liturgical furnishing in St. Mark’s church. For instance, by a decree of the Venetian Senate dated May 13, 1634, all the rugs brought to Venice by Ali Bali were consigned to the Procurators of St. Mark’s and deposited in the Basilica treasury. Here we can observe the symbolic transfer of the carpet’s significance from a profane setting to a religious setting. The carpet was to be kept in the treasury at St. Mark’s and displayed on special occasions on the high altar. This fact exemplifies the prominence of Safavid carpets in Venice and indicates the high estimation the Venetians had for luxury Safavid carpets. There is some evidence suggesting that carpet gifts were also offered to Venetian envoys who visited the Safavid court. For example, in 1571, a Venetian envoy to the Safavid court Vincenzo Alessandri was given a silk carpet of small size.

Compared to the carpet gifts to the Ottoman sultans, rugs presented to the Venetians doges were relatively limited in size and type, probably due to the transportation issues and Venice’s geographical remoteness from the Safavid Empire, as well as the nature of the relations of the Safavids with these two polities. Carpets made from the finest wool brought by Safavid envoy Shah Qulu Ustajlu in 1567 “were so big that they could barely be carried by seven men.”

Venetian bailo (resident ambassador) in Istanbul Giacomo Soranzo mentions both small silk and gold threading and large woolen carpets among the gifts presented to the Sultan. In 1576, the Safavid embassy brought 76 carpets of different types and sizes to the Sultan. Safavid diplomatic gift-giving of carpets was not limited to the Serenissima. For instance, on July 19, 1604, the Safavid envoy to the Habsburg court of Prague, Zeynal Khan Shamlu presented...
Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II gifts of silk carpets along with figured velvet fabrics. 

**Gifts of Arms**

In addition to the carpets and textile items, various types of weapons and pieces of armor and weaponry served as diplomatic gifts from the Safavid shahs to the Venetian rulers. Some of the surviving items are now part of the collections of the Correr Museum in Venice. Museum holdings include gauntlets, a shield, ornamented Safavid daggers, and swords of different qualities. The arm gifts symbolized power and military competence and highlighted the martial glories of the sender. Thus, for a foreign addressee to receive a weapon as a gift was a great honor and a sign of friendship and trust.

One of the gauntlets probably was brought to Venice by Angelo Gradenigo, an emissary of the Shah Abbās I, who appeared before the Venetian Collegio in May 1602. Gradenigo was reported telling that Shah Abbās had sent this gift as a “confirmation of his love” to the Most Serene Republic and the Venetians. According to the Venetian archival records, the gauntlet was made simply of polished iron and bore an inscription on it. A surviving example of a gauntlet includes gilded decoration. Zanotto mentioned that the Safavid cane shield, which then was at Sale D’armi of Council of Ten, was decorated with precious stones. However, the one, which is currently on display at Correr Museum does not bear any stones, probably they later were removed from it. Thin cane rods are spirally plaited around gilt-decorated steel boss, they are then stitched firmly with textile threads and covered cane with studs of stylized floral form. This type of battle shield is lightweight but was effective to protect against arrows or sword blows. A similar wicker shield which was called “kalkan” can be seen in Ottomans.

The Doges were not the only Venetian officials that received the Safavid arm gifts. The Venetian bailo in Istanbul Simon Contarini in his relazione, reported that Safavid envoy Mohammad bey presented him a sword “as a keepsake of his king [Shah Abbās I].” In return for Safavid arm gifts, the
Venetian government mostly included chainmail and arquebuses in gift packages sent to Shah Abbās. For example, in 1600, as a return gift to Shah Abbās, the Venetian government sent two arquebuses and six chainmail with Asad bey. The inclusion of these weapons in the gift inventories reflected the effort of Venetians to appeal to the personal interests of the shah. Demands by the Safavid shahs for these types of armor and firearms had already been known to the Venetian government. In the early-seventeenth century, the Safavid envoys to Venice were also commissioned to purchase chainmails and arquebuses in addition to other things needed for the royal household. The successive shahs continued to be keen on acquiring military technology from Venice. In 1635, the Venetian government sent two muskets “for carrying on horseback with their leather pouches” as diplomatic gifts to Shah Safi I.

The Distinction between the Safavid Gift-Giving Strategies toward Venice and Ottomans

The Safavid Empire had much more extensive diplomatic relations with Turko-Muslim polities, particularly with the Ottomans if compared to the European states. Safavids and Ottomans interacted with each other actively and managed their relationships through relatively regular exchanges of envoy missions. The importance that Safavids placed on the relationship with the Ottomans was reflected in the values of the gifts made to the Sultan. Subsequently, the amount, quantity, and variety of gifts sent to the neighboring powers were higher than the gifts sent to European countries. Both Safavids and Ottomans paid attention to variety and quantity in mutual gift-giving. Sources of both sides record numerous diplomatic gift exchanges. The most telling examples of the diplomatic exchanges of gifts occurred when peace negotiations were at stake or a new ruler ascended the throne. In 1568, the Safavid embassy, led by Shah Qulu Ustajlu reached the Ottoman court in Edirne bearing a letter, immense gifts and presents (pîşkeş u hedâyâ) from Shah Tahmāsp (r. 1524–76) and accompanied by 1,000 Qizilbash. The gifts for Sultan Suleyman were so numerous that it took thirty-four camels to carry them. Venetian baili in

72 ASVe, CEP, filza 11, June 8, 1600, unpaginated; Cicogna, E.A. Delle inscrizioni Veneziane, V (Venezia: G. Molinari, 1842), 648. ASVe, SdcLC, registro 23, October 24, 1635, c.123v.
73 ASVe, CEP, filza 12, May 17, 1602, unpaginated; Guliyev, A. “From the Doge to the Shah: Venetian Diplomatic Gifts for the Safavid Empire.” Revista istorică, 31 (3–4) (2020), 216.
74 Guliyev, A. “From the Doge to the Shah,” 217.
75 Selanîkî, M.E. Tarih-i Selânîkî v. 67.
Istanbul provided information about the nature of the gifts presented by the Safavid envoys to the Ottoman sultan. The baili did not only mention incidents of gift-giving but also gave detailed lists of the Safavid gifts. In contrast to the Safavid gifts to the Ottoman court, which typically included a large variety of objects with high monetary, cultural, and historical value, Shah ‘Abbās’ gifts to the doge were a small selection of luxury objects, all of which epitomized and promoted the visual, tactile, and technical possibilities that Shah Abbās’ silk network could offer. Items that incorporated religious symbolism, especially copies of the Quran, were often exchanged between the Safavid and Ottoman rulers. It should be noted that in the Safavid-Ottoman diplomatic context gifts were instrumental in the negotiation of peace treaties. Gifts in Safavid-Ottoman relations, as the practical part of their diplomatic relations, functioned as political mediators.

**Conclusion**

The exchange of gifts on the basis of reciprocity had an important place in the Safavid Empire’s diplomatic relations with the outside world. With few exceptions, Safavid missions to Venice were principally trade missions rather than diplomatic, as the vast majority of them had a commercial dimension. Particularly during the reign of Shah Abbās I the commercial agenda increasingly characterized the Safavid diplomacy towards Venice as the diplomacy and commerce had become inextricably intertwined. Diplomatic gift exchange, along with trade, was an important means by which Safavid objects found their way to Venice. Venetian archival records did not mention the gifts presented by the Safavid embassies of 1509, 1580, and 1613, but it is hard to believe that they arrived at Venetian Collegio empty-handed. Even if the Safavid mission had not brought the gifts from the Shah's court, they were obliged to make presents from themselves, upon their own account. The diplomatic gifts to Venice were not always the same in quantity and kind, but major items were always carpets and textiles. The Safavid presents for Venetian doges were limited in number and type, as compared to those for the Ottoman sultans.

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76 ASVe, sdc, filza 2, February 27, 1567 (more veneto), c. 515r; ASVe, sdc, filza 9, May 8, 1576, c.103r; ASVe, sdc, filza 16, April 14, 1582, c. 35r.  
78 ASVe, sdc, filza 2, February 27, 1567 (more veneto), c. 515r; ASVe. sdc, filza 16, April 14, 1582, c. 35r.
Diplomatic gifts exchanged to strengthen the trade and political relations between the Safavids and Venetians, had a significant symbolic role to play and therefore were selected carefully. The choice of gifts shows that the Safavids carefully staged their own identity and material goods acted as bearers of culture. Particularly, carpets from the Shah’s court carried cultural, commercial, and symbolic value and represented Safavid culture. Furthermore, the choice and procurement of gifts were so important that shahs sometimes interfered. It is noteworthy that Safavid diplomacy to some degree was associated with commercial publicity and in this regard, Safavid gift-behavior could be termed as commercial strategy. In addition to honoring and impressing a host ruler, gift exchanges provided an opportunity for the Safavids to display the luxury products of their local manufacture and the artistic tastes of the Safavid elite to Venice and other parts of Europe. On the other hand, Safavids made a calculated effort to appeal to the Doge’s religious orientation by sending him the Christian-themed textile gifts. The religious identity of the recipient was one of the potential factors influencing the nature of a shah’s personal gift to the doge.

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### Appendix 1

List of Safavid envoys to Venice (1509–1634)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of visit/s to Venice</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Aim of the mission</th>
<th>Gifts brought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>March 1509</td>
<td>Envoy</td>
<td>Probably, to get military support ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>May 1509</td>
<td>Envoy</td>
<td>Probably, to get military support ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Haji Mohammad</td>
<td>1580</td>
<td>Envoy, merchant</td>
<td>To give an account of the Safavid military engagement against the Ottomans and explore the Venetians' stance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Khoja Ilyas</td>
<td>1597</td>
<td>Envoy, merchant</td>
<td>To sell royal silk and other merchandise and procure goods and luxuries for the royal court</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sujaddin Asad Bey</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>Envoy, Royal purveyor</td>
<td>Diego de Miranda stated that Asad Bey's real task was “to give money to Anthony Shirley for the embassy if he finds him”^a</td>
<td>- A gold-woven velvet fabric featuring the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary by the Angel Gabriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Angelo Gradenigo^b</td>
<td>1602</td>
<td>Envoy</td>
<td>To obtain news of the Safavid embassy headed by Huseyn Ali Bey Bayat and accompanied by Anthony Shirley</td>
<td>- Gauntlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Date of visit/s to Venice</td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Aim of the mission</td>
<td>Gifts brought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Khoja Fathi Bey</td>
<td>1603</td>
<td>Envoy, Royal purveyor</td>
<td>In addition to bearing Shah Abbās I’s letter to the Venetian Doge, he was charged to sell the 139 bales of royal silk and procure the necessary goods for the Safavid court</td>
<td>– A mantle of cloth of gold; A gold-embroidered velvet fabric with the figures of Christ and his mother Mary; Three golden silk fabrics (zarbaft) with figures; Three golden silk fabrics without gold but with figures; A gold and silver threads woven silk velvet carpet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Khoja Kirkuz (Kirakos)</td>
<td>1608</td>
<td>Envoy, merchant</td>
<td>To retrieve the remaining goods and merchandise belonging to Fathi Bey, which were brought back to Venice following his arrest in Alexandretta (Iskenderun) in 1603 on his way to the Safavid court</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9  Khoja Safar  1609  Envoy, merchant  To retrieve the remaining goods and merchandise belonging to Fathi Bey

10  Khoja Shahsuvar  1613  Envoy, purveyor  To sell the royal silk and procure the necessary goods for the Safavid court

11  Khoja Shahsuvar  1622  Envoy, purveyor  To sell the royal silk and procure the necessary goods for the Safavid court
– 3 silver-wrapped-thread luxury carpets;
– 25 pieces of *lizari di India*;
– 25 items of *giurini*;

12  Ali Bali  1634–36  Envoy, merchant  To announce the enthronement of Shah Safi I and recover the proceeds from the sale of royal silk
– 18 pieces of fabric woven with silk and gold threads;
– A carpet with cartouche design (?)

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*a* Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Fondo Conflonieri 22, c. 317v.

*b* He was a Venetian Jew converted to Christianity. Rota, G. “Safavid Persia and its Diplomatic Relations with Venice,” 151.