Preface to the ‘Travel to Iran’ Special Issue

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Westerners—academics and laypersons alike—have long used western travel accounts as a way to explore ‘the other’, both past and present. In the field of Middle Eastern Studies, such works have featured prominently in what has often been labelled ‘Orientalist’ discourse.

In recent years scholars generally have become aware of the pitfalls of relying on such accounts; as a discipline, Middle Eastern Studies has been no stranger to ‘Orientalist’ critiques.

1 The authors included in this volume would like to acknowledge the sponsorship of the following institutions and individuals for the symposium on “Traveling to and in Safavid Iran (1550-1700): European and Iranian Perspectives” held on May 9, 2009: the Committee for the Provostial Fund in the Arts and Humanities, Harvard University; the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (especially Steven Caton, Alison Howe); the Department of Literature and Comparative Literature, Harvard University (Luis M. Girón Negrón, Wanda Di Bernardo); and the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University (especially Nagmeh Sohrabi). Elio Brancaforte (Tulane University, New Orleans), Sonja Brentjes (University of Seville, Seville).


Recourse to Western travellers’ accounts has been of particular import to scholars of Safavid Iran (1501-1722). If the remarks of Edward Browne (d. 1926) on the Safavids in his 1924 *A Literary History of Persia*, volume 4, represent the starting point of ‘modern’ Safavid studies, then it has been only very recently that scholars in Safavid studies, and mainly the recently arrived among them, have begun to address what can and cannot be learned from such accounts.

In 2002, for example, I. McCabe, P. Loloi and J. Ghazvinian explored the varied agendas of such foreign residents as the French Huguenot Jean Chardin (d. 1713), whose account has long been a staple of Western discourse on mid-to-late seventeenth century Iran, and Père Judasz Tadeusz Krusinski (d. 1756), the procurator of the Jesuits in Isfahan. McCabe, for example, suggested that Chardin’s writings reveal more about the religio-political climate of contemporary France than that of Safavid Iran. Moreover, McCabe argued that Chardin’s critique of the Safavid court was a less-than-veiled attack on French absolutism by a man who, as a Huguenot, was an arch opponent of the established Catholic Church in France.4

As usual within the field, the Ottomanists have been at the forefront of the critique of the use of travellers’ accounts: Lockman notes the presence of Ottomanist auto-critiques as early as 1958 (149); Leslie Peirce addressed western accounts’ distortion of the position of women in Ottoman society, in *The Imperial Harem: women and sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, 1993) and, more recently, Ottomanists have even called attention to the existence of Ottoman travel accounts. See C. Herzog and R. Motika, “Orientalism ‘alla turca’: Late 19th / Early 20th Century Ottoman Voyages into the Muslim ‘Outback’”, *Die Welt des Islams*, NS, 40/ii (2000); M. Ursinus, “Ottoman Travels and Travel Accounts from an Earlier Age of Globalization”, *Die Welt des Islams*, NS, 40/ii (2000), 139-195. Thanks to Gene Garthwaite for the reference to Peirce.


On Chardin, see J. Emerson, “Chardin”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Elr)* 5(4), 369-70. Although Chardin, aged 22, arrived in Iran in 1666, more than three decades after ‘Abbas’