COFFEE IN SAFAVID IRAN: COMMERCE AND CONSUMPTION

BY

RUDI MATTHEE

(University of Delaware)

Ay sīyāḥ-rū keh nām ast qahveh
qat-e naum qaṭeh-yē shahveh

Oh blackfaced one whose name is coffee
killer of sleep, destroyer of lust

Persian proverb

Introduction

The introduction and popularization on a global scale of psychotropic substances such as tobacco, coffee, tea and chocolate are inextricably bound up with the trade revolution that got under way after the European discovery of the Cape route to India at the turn of the sixteenth century. Hitherto unknown to entire continents, these substances began to spread from South America or Asia in the age of maritime expansion and within one hundred and fifty years after Columbus’s American journey and Da Gama’s rounding of the Cape of Good Hope had become staples of a vast trading network that brought them within reach of ever growing numbers of people around the globe.

Coffee, the only one of these stimulants not to originate in either South America or East Asia, was first cultivated in the lands that straddle the Red Sea, Ethiopia in northeast Africa and Yemen in southwest Arabia. With the exception of tea, coffee was also the only substance to spread beyond its original region of cultivation slightly prior to, and independently from, the tremendous European commercial expansion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was, after all, to the Ottoman Empire that coffee was

---


first introduced from Yemen after the Turks conquered Egypt and the Hejaz in the early sixteenth century. From Istanbul, coffee spread to southeastern Europe, where it was sold in Venice in 1638, years before the English and Dutch East India Companies began to ship it to western Europe.

Whereas the introduction and dissemination of coffee in (northern) Europe is fairly well documented, the history of coffee, ironically, remains much less well known in its west Asian lands of origin and early spread. It is only with Ralph Hattox’s recent study that the political and social aspects of coffee consumption in the Ottoman Empire have received serious scholarly attention). The history of coffee in early modern Iran, by contrast, remains much less well studied, despite the information provided in Aladin Goushegir’s recent article on the evolution of coffee in Iran from the sixteenth century to the present).

The present article intends to expand our knowledge about coffee in Safavid Iran through a discussion of the maritime network that supplied it to the Persian Gulf ports, and an examination of the sources about coffee consumption, in the context of socioeconomic and political developments. The first question to be raised is one of chronology, and concerns the introduction of coffee in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Safavid state. When did Iran first become acquainted with coffee, and via which channels? This is followed by a discussion about the routes and the participants active in the transportation and distribution of coffee. Who imported the beans into the country, in what quantities, and what were the commercial networks? Particular attention will be paid to the question of the relative importance of the maritime routes and the overland caravan trade with regard to the importation of coffee, and of the extent to which the indigenous traders were able to hold their own against the European maritime companies.

---
