

FOREWORD

The present publication is due to two fortunate circumstances: the possibility to spend the years 1999–2003 in Venice, doing research in the local archives and libraries, and the chance to attend the conference organized in 2004 in St. Petersburg by the Iranian Heritage Foundation and the Hermitage Museum on “The study of Persian culture in the West: Sixteenth to Early Twentieth Century”, where I presented the original nucleus of this essay.

This book focuses on the knowledge the Venetians had of Persia, but above all on the ways this knowledge was gathered in the city, and only to a limited extent on what this “raw material” was converted into. This because I am convinced that an exhaustive research on Perso-Venetian relations should likely be the crowning achievement of a life-long research (given the number, nature and location of the sources, which are far from being adequately known and investigated), and therefore I did not aim at saying the last word on the subject: rather, I would like to offer a synthesis and a starting point, from which further research can take the clue and develop. The constraints of such a project imposed some arbitrary choices: for instance, I remained faithful to the original time-frame of the conference. More important, I also remained as strictly focused as possible on Venice and the Venetians, being nonetheless aware that the city and its inhabitants were anything but isolated from the rest of Italy or Europe, where interest for the Muslim East was also strong: the merchants engaged in international trade, who played a major role in gathering and spreading information on remote countries and therefore play a major role in this book as well, were by necessity open to contacts, and the members of the *Respublica litterarum*, who often translated the oral information provided by the traders into written texts, were by definition international and cosmopolitan. On the other hand, the need to highlight (at least summarily) the potential ramifications followed by the raw information through Venetian society may have forced me to enter areas which belong perhaps more to political, diplomatic or economic history than to cultural history. In any case, human societies are not divided into waterproof compartments. Venice was a great supplier of information on the Muslim Middle East to the rest of Europe, but it was not necessarily one of the leading centres for the conversion of this “raw material” into a systematic, scholarly knowledge. Why? This book tries to offer a tentative answer to this and

other questions, but I would like to repeat that this is a starting point, not a conclusion of any sort.

Another aim of this essay is to help rekindling an interest in the Italian contribution to the “discovery” of Persia and to Iranian studies. Recently, the importance of Portugal and Portuguese sources for the study of the Safavid period (1501–1736) of Persian history has drawn a new and well-deserved attention at the international level. In my opinion, it is high time that something similar should also be undertaken with regard to Italy and the Italian sources: after all, it was the pioneer of Luso-Persian studies, Jean Aubin who wrote that Italian sources “constituent l’essentiel des sources européennes” on the reign of Šāh Esmā’il I (1501–1524) (AUBIN 1995, 247). Yet much more remains to be unearthed and studied, both for this as well as for other periods of Persian history. Of course, such an effort would also benefit still less-known aspects of the intellectual and cultural life of the Italian states of the time, for instance the question of the interest for the Oriental languages during the Renaissance and that of the “early Orientalism”, to which Angelo Michele Piemontese devoted many pages.

There is no doubt that the information yielded by European sources can shed light on aspects of Persian history, culture and society over which the Persian sources of the time pass in silence. However, in order to be fully understood, such information need be placed in the context where it was produced: for instance, as far as Venice is concerned (but this certainly holds true for other countries as well), prosopographical and biographical studies would be very helpful better to understand the men (and women, in some occasions) who played a role in in the different fields of Perso-Venetian contacts, and why they (and not others) played such a role. Analogously, the “genetical links” connecting the different written sources still available to us need be better understood, not to mention the need of critical editions of Venetian works dealing with Persia. Quite of course, such a task cannot be left solely to the students of Iran or to those of the Republic of Venice: I hope that the present essay will also show the potential hidden in joint effort and interdisciplinary research, and encourage them.

This book is dedicated to Dr. Velizar Sadovski, good friend and “primo mobile”.