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CONGRESS

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Studies

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Panel 4

Power and Society in Safavid Iran (1501-1722): New perspectives on the use of non-courtly, local and independent historiographical traditions

In the medieval and modern Turco-Iranian world, the act of writing history is essentially defined by its ethical value, making it a primary tool for the legitimation of political power. This explains why historiography has, in this period, mainly been treated as a court phenomenon. Contrary to this approach, the present panel vows to question the relationship between power and society in the specific context of Safavid Iran (1501-1722), thereby offering a fresh perspective on the modern and medieval historiography of the region. To this end, we will articulate our analysis around the material produced outside of the court, such as oral or written literary works, biographies and hagiographies, epigraphy, archives, local historiography, travelogues and missionary accounts. Through the study of this multilingual and marginalized material, we notably aim at answering the following research questions: what are some of the prevalent topics treated by non-courtly authors, and in what type of texts? What were their sources, means of living and professional networks? How were these texts received and circulated, and how do we now know about them? Can we expect this diverse material to contribute to our knowledge of the medieval and modern Turco-Iranian world in such a way as to renew our understanding of fields such as political, social, or economic history? Is there a difference between writing outside of the court and writing against the court? Is it possible to identify a recurrent pattern in the approach to power found in these texts? Finally, can we, and should we, turn away from official historiography?

People in charge : Sacha Alsancakli (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle / CeRMI) and Camille Rhoné-Quer (Aix-Marseille Université / IREMAM)

Discussants : Rhoné-Quer Camille (Aix-Marseille Université / IREMAM) and Szuppe Maria (CNRS / CeRMI)

Program :

Mattéo Coq (Aix-Marseille Université / IREMAM) – doctorant

On the difficulty of writing a critical history of the reign of Shāh 'Abbās (r. 1587-1629): The Noqāvat al-āṭār by Maḥmūd b. Hidāyat-Allāh al-Afūšṭānī al-Naṭanzī.

By contrast with most Safavid chroniclers, al-Naṭanzī did not come from a long lineage of renowned Persian scholars. Writing in the 1590s, he also composed his works without courtly patronage, nor was he sponsored by a powerful prince or an influential amir. In the *Noqāvat al-āṭār*, the author seems to blame Shāh 'Abbās for his precarious situation, and he presents a detailed account of the civil war of 1578-1598, a troublesome period for the dynasty usually downplayed in official chronicles. In addition to highlighting the precious contribution of this original text to our knowledge of the period, we will

question the historical value found in this type of historiographical works produced outside of the court and critical of its members.

Davide Trentacoste (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Université de Teramo / CeRMI) – doctorant

'In lode dell'Invitto, Vincitore Abas Re Di Persia.'

Italian historiography on Persia at the beginning of the 17th century

Writing outside of the court does not necessarily mean writing against the court; to the contrary, it is not always possible or advisable to deviate from official historiography, as the composition of a text always serves specific purposes and interests. In this regard, 17th-century Italy provides us with several examples of individuals not only estranged from the Persian court but also, for some of them, complete outsiders in Persia, who nonetheless produced works strikingly similar to those written by Safavid court chroniclers. In this presentation, we will study three texts published in Italy at the turn of the 17th century, written by a Venetian merchant who sojourned in Safavid Persia (Stropeni, 1605), an English adventurer, whose book was printed in Bologna (Sherley, 1605), and a man of letters from Florence (Mossi, 1606). By studying these little-known works, we will try and determine how non-Persian historiography of the modern period still contributed, in some cases, to perpetuating a vision of Persia perfectly in line with the official vision put forth by the Persian state.

Werner Gaboreau (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle / CeRMI – EPHE / LEM) – doctorant

Astonishment and religious education: Describing Iran in 17th-century missionary travel literature

The travelogues produced by Catholic missionaries in the lands of Islam during the 17th century belong to an “astonishing and orientalist” literature that evades the official historiography of the Church. This literature also puts forth another perspective than that found in the official chronicles of the Safavid royal court. These writings are introducing readers to a “fabulous Orient” traveled by Europeans, all the while glorifying missionary work. In their description of Safavid society, they also present readers with a revealing “mirror image” of European society. This communication will explore these various aspects by introducing two texts written by missionaries, the travel account of Capuchin friar Pacifique de Provins (1631), and that of Capuchin friar Gabriel de Chinon (1671).

Sacha Alsancakli (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle / CeRMI)

A Kurdish vision of Safavid Iran as told through folk stories: The epic of the Golden-Hand Prince and the Dimdim fortress

As Iskandar Bay, official chronicler of 'Abbās I, begins his narrative of the Safavid siege of Dimdim (1018/1609), a Kurdish fortress located in the Birādōst region, some 20 kilometers south of Urmiya, he warns the reader that this story is, in fact, “an exemplary tale for humanity” ('ibratbakhsh-i ālamiyan), in an ominous reference to the sinister fate that befell Amīr Khān, prince of the Birādōst, and the rest of the besieged, indiscriminately slaughtered by the army of the Shah. Feqiyê Teyran, a Kurdish poet and contemporary of the events, essentially agrees with Iskandar Bayg on this exemplary character, and the numerous oral versions of the Kelayê Dimdim epic, documented from the mid-19th century onwards in Kurdistan, place a similar emphasis on a moral side to the story. Yet, as expected, interpretations differ widely on the actual events, described as a senseless revolt by a traitor filled with hubris in Iranian histories, while Kurdish folk narratives highlight the heroic resistance of a faithful amir against heretical invaders. Following up on earlier studies devoted to the topic (notably Thomas Bois, 2005), we will endeavor, in this communication, to confront these two perspectives, and to question the contribution of literary sources, both written and oral, to our understanding of historical events and their impression in collective memory.