

Chapter 6

BETWEEN WORD AND IMAGE: REPRESENTATIONS OF SHI'ITE RITUALS IN THE SAFAVID EMPIRE FROM EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN TRAVEL ACCOUNTS

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ABSTRACT

This essay will present close readings from several early modern European travel accounts that describe Shi'ite religious practices in the Safavid Empire and that integrate images into the written narrative. The depictions, in order to be properly understood, need to be considered in conjunction with the author's text—otherwise valuable information about the subject matter risks becoming lost, which also increases the possibility for the misinterpretation of the portrayal. These images in the works of Pietro Della Valle, Adam Olearius, and Jean de Thévenot help transmit a particular world view for the European readers who encountered this foreign subject matter for the first time; the appeal to the visual component is meant to help the viewer “see” the practices of Islamic culture via a copperplate engraving. These inquisitive European travellers, who seek to call attention to the remarkable religious customs that they observe, all emphasize that they have produced eyewitness accounts ... a fact that the images are meant to support. Using both text and image, these authors present their representations of contemporary Muslim societies and thus contribute to the European understanding of the “other,” in this case by participating in the transfer of knowledge about religious customs and values that they observed while journeying through the Safavid Empire.

Keywords: Safavid, word and image, Shi'ite, travel literature

AT THE BEGINNING of the seventeenth century, the Safavid Shah 'Abbas I (1571–1629)¹ actively encouraged foreign travel to Iran, and created a hospitable situation for trade and diplomatic exchange. Europeans from a number of Catholic and Protestant

¹ On this important Safavid ruler, see David Blow, *Shah Abbas: The Ruthless King Who Became an Iranian Legend* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); and Sheila R. Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (London: British Museum Press, 2009). For historical background on the Safavids see Andrew Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

lands were attracted by “his outward looking agenda [...] centered on a new resplendent capital, Isfahan. This coincided with and was partly responsible for, an active European interest in Iran as a land of religious, commercial, and strategic opportunity.”² Some came as missionaries hoping to establish residency in Isfahan; many others came as merchants wishing to take advantage of the silk or jewel trade; still others arrived as ambassadors trying to convince the Safavids to attack the Ottomans. There were also curious travellers who wanted to learn more about Persia on their way further east. What all those European travellers had in common was their interest in describing the land, its peoples, customs, history, along with details of the flora and fauna.³ These early modern voyagers, most of whom arrived from areas of religious strife, and had witnessed numerous wars on the European continent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, saw the split between Sunnis and Shi’ites as paralleling the Protestant/Catholic divide. Religious difference in Iran was therefore a prime concern, and most European travel accounts devote a number of pages to pointing out how the natives worshipped, in what ways their rites were different from their Sunni neighbours, and what similarities existed between Shi’ite and Christian beliefs. A large number of publications about “the Turk” and the Ottoman state, along with important visual material, had been published throughout Europe during the sixteenth century, but Safavid Iran was relatively unknown to the late sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century European reader. This helps explain the interest in the new works about Persian customs, the people, and the form of religion practised there: Shi’ism.

The following essay will present close readings from several early modern European travel accounts that describe Shi’ite religious practices in the Safavid Empire and that integrate images into the written narrative. The depictions, in order to be properly understood, need to be considered in conjunction with the author’s text—otherwise valuable information about the subject matter risks becoming lost, which also increases the possibility for the misinterpretation of the portrayal. These images help transmit a particular world view for the European readers who encountered this foreign subject matter for the first time, and the appeal to the visual component is meant to help the viewer “see” the practices of Islamic culture via a copperplate engraving. These inquisitive European travellers, who seek to call attention to the remarkable religious customs that they observe, all emphasize that they have produced eyewitness accounts ... a fact that the images are meant to support. In their attempt to acquire and present new information about Shi’ism, these early modern authors follow a trend in travel literature that can be noted since the late Middle Ages: “This attention to the narration of observed

2 Rudi Matthee, “The Safavids under Western Eyes: Seventeenth-Century European Travelers to Iran,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 13 (2009): 138. See also his valuable “Safavid Iran through the Eyes of European Travelers,” in Elio Brancaforte and Sonja Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies: European Travels to Safavid Iran (1550–1700)*, *The Lands of the Sophi: Iran in Early Modern European Maps (1550–1700)*, *Harvard Library Bulletin* 23 (2012): 10–24.

3 For examples of the kinds of objects these travellers took back with them to Europe see the exhibition catalogue by Brancaforte and Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies*.

experience, with special attention to human subjects, can in a general sense be seen as the ultimate relocation of the paradigm of travel from the ideal of pilgrimage to those of empirical curiosity and practical science.”⁴ Using both text and image, these authors present their representations of contemporary Muslim societies and thus contribute to the European understanding of the “other,” in this case by participating in the transfer of knowledge about religious customs and values that they observed while journeying through the Safavid Empire.

Some travellers took notes along the way, or wrote letters back home about their journeys; others had professional artists in their retinue who recorded what they saw in sketches. These notes and sketches could then serve as the basis of a published travel account in their home country that combined, for example, a traveller’s written descriptions of a city with an engraved cityscape that represented in pictorial form what the author tried to express in words. On the other hand, notes or sketches could be “adapted” by a publisher to fit the expectations of a reading public, sections of a narrative could be changed or censored by an author, a publisher, an ecclesiastic official, images could be altered, and the resulting work would be far removed from the “reality” of what the traveller had actually witnessed. Sonja Brentjes, in a compelling study that examines the process by which information produced by certain travellers or mapmakers about Safavid Iran made its way into print in early modern Europe, notes that:

More often than not, arguably factual elements are complex constructions no less than are discussions of events, evaluations of customs, or reports on the sciences. Many elements of the verbal, cartographic, and pictorial representation of Safavid Iran in early modern Catholic or Protestant sources are of a literary character [...] they are seldom true or objective in the sense that they directly and reliably reflect the Iranian conditions at stake in a particular representation.⁵

In other words, one must take care when studying representations—verbal or pictorial—of Safavid Iran. They usually do not depict “reality” in the modern sense of the term, and the information presented was often recycled from previous accounts or invented entirely by someone who had never actually visited the country.

The subject of religion was of great interest not only to early modern visitors to Iran but also to the publishers of their travel accounts, since they knew that the topic could help sell books. For example, in the work by Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille* (London: William Stansby and Jacob Bloome, 1634), that chronicles the author’s travels

⁴ Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, Introduction to *Voyages and Visions: Towards a Cultural History of Travel* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 31.

⁵ See Sonja Brentjes, “Immediacy, Mediation, and Media in Early Modern Catholic and Protestant Representations of Safavid Iran,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 13 (2009): 175.

to “the Territories of the *Persian Monarchie*: and some parts of the *Oriental Indes*, and *Iles adjacent*” the title page (see [Figure 6.1](#)) announces that the book will speak “Of their Religion, Language, Habit, Discent, Ceremonies, and other matters *concerning them*.” The accompanying frontispiece portrays on the left an “Abdall or Priest” (namely a dervish) pointing toward the heavens, while a threatening Qizilbash with a raised scimitar stands on the right; below these two dominating figures we find two smaller scenes of religious worship, with people wearing turbans kneeling and praying to a strange demon (left) and to a cow (right). Herbert’s observations concerning religious practices were later used by other writers such as John Ogilby (1600–1676)⁶ and Thomas Hyde (1636–1703).⁷

A careful observer such as the German doctor Engelbert Kaempfer comments on the role of dervishes in Safavid society, discusses madrasas and mosques, and gives a detailed description of Shah Sulaiman I’s ceremonial departure in 1684 from Isfahan for the Festival of Sacrifice (Eid-e Qurban) outside the city (that is accompanied by an engraving depicting the scene).⁸ Several other travellers write—with varying degrees of accuracy—about the differences between Sunnis and Shi’ites, and about ‘Ashura rites such as Jan Janszoon Struys,⁹ the French travellers Jean-Baptiste Tavernier¹⁰ and Jean Chardin,¹¹ the Dutch painter Cornelis de

6 John Ogilby, *Asia. The First Part: Being an Accurate Description of Persia, and the Several Provinces Thereof: The Vast Empire of the Great Mogol, and Other Parts of India, and Their Several Kingdoms and Regions: With the Denominations and Descriptions of the Cities, Towns, and Places of Remark Therein Contain’d: The Various Customs, Habits, Religion, and Languages of the Inhabitants: Their Political Governments, and Way of Commerce: Also the Plants and Animals Peculiar to Each Country* (London: Printed by the author at his house in White-friers, 1673).

7 Thomas Hyde, *Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum, Eorumque Magorum [...] Zoroastris Vita, Ejusque Et Aliorum Vaticinia De Messiah È Persarum Aliorumque Monumentis Eruuntur [...] Atque Magorum Liber Sad-Der (Zoroastris Praecepta Seu Religionis Canones Continens) È Persico Traductus Exhibetur. Dantur Veterum Persarum Scripturae & Linquae [...] Specimina* (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1700).

8 See Engelbert Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum Exoticarum Politico-Physico-Medicarum Fasciculi: V. Quibus Continentur Variæ Relationes, Observationes & Descriptiones Rerum Persicarum & Ulterioris Asiae, Multâ Attentione in Peregrinationibus Per Universum Orientem* (Lemgo: Typis & impensis H.W. Meyeri, 1712). The engraving of the procession is located between pages 210–11.

9 See Jan Janszoon Struys, *The Perillous and Most Unhappy Voyages of John Struys: Through Italy, Greece, Lifeland, Muscovia, Tartary, Media, Persia, East-India, Japan, and Other Places in Europe, Africa and Asia [...]*, trans. John Morrison (London: printed for Samuel Smith at the Princes Arms in S. Pauls Church-yard, 1683), especially 263–66 for a description of ‘Ashura in Shamakhly.

10 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six Voyages De Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Ecuyer Baron D’aubonne, Qu’il a Fait En Turquie, En Perse, Et Aux Indes* (Paris: G. Clouzier, 1676). In volume 1, chapter 7 he discusses the “religion of the Persians, the great feast of Hocen & Hussein, and that of the camel” (423–30).

11 Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient* (Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711). In volume 2 the author includes a description of the Persian religion (311–454), along with his own thoughts about the Persian religion (448–49). In the

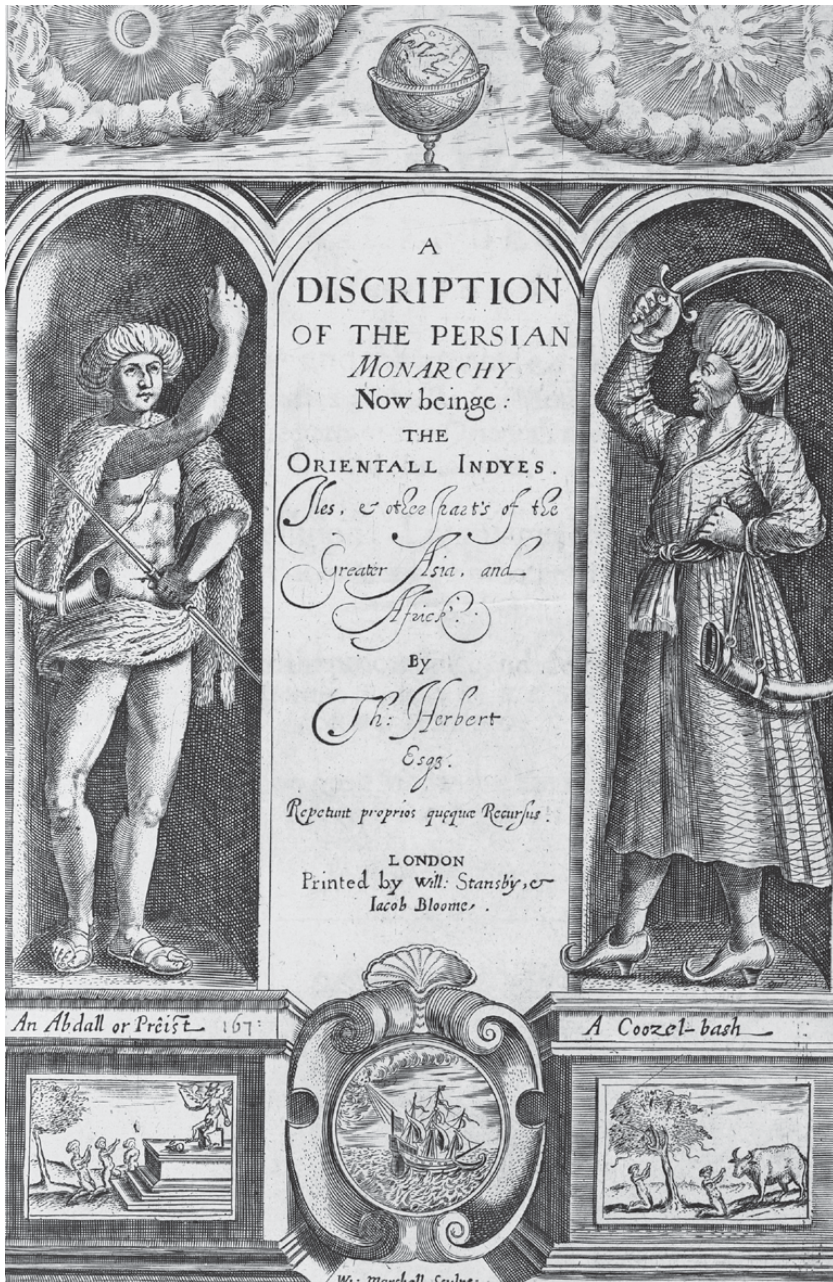


Figure 6.1. Frontispiece for Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile* (London: William Stansby and Jacob Bloome, 1634). Call number: Typ 605.34.450. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Bruyn,¹² and the Capuchin friar Raphaël du Mans, author of *Estat de la Perse* (1660), who lived in Isfahan for almost half a century and who provided information for a number of European travellers to Iran.¹³

We shall turn now to the travel accounts of three European visitors who went to Iran during the seventeenth century, namely Pietro Della Valle, Adam Olearius and Jean de Thévenot. Specifically, I will focus on some of their observations regarding religion. These travellers write about the differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites, describe religious practices of the Iranians, and comment on Shi'i rites that they observed. I will pay special attention to what they write about the commemorations for the deaths of 'Ali and his second son, Husayn (the rites for the latter are known as 'Ashura). After presenting the narrative descriptions of these rites I will examine those engravings in the three travel accounts that illustrate these specific Shi'ite rituals and consider what information from the written account was included in the image.

Shi'i Muslims consider 'Ashura as their most important religious event, the day on which they commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, one of the Prophet's grandsons, who was killed near Karbala in 680 CE.¹⁴ Husayn was the leader of a small group of the Prophet Muhammad's descendants and their families that was defeated by an Umayyad army of some 4,000 men. Shi'ites hold commemorative events in honour of the martyred Imam at which elegies are recited and the events leading up to Husayn's death are recounted. Participants seek to symbolically recreate the tragedy and engage in the martyr's act of self-sacrifice by shedding blood (e.g. cutting themselves with knives), beating themselves with chains, crying, and experiencing hunger and thirst in remembrance of the sufferings experienced by Husayn and his family.¹⁵

third volume Chardin explains the differences between Sunnis and "Chia" (163–72), comments on the feast of the camel (164–65) and briefly mentions the martyrdom of 'Ali (211).

12 Cornelis de Bruyn, *Voyages De Corneille Le Brun Par La Moscovie, En Perse, Et Aux Indes Orientales. Ouvrage Enrichi De Plus De 320 Tailles Douces [...] Et Quelques Remarques Contre Mrs. Chardin & Kempfer. Avec Une Lettre Écrite À L'auteur, Sur Ce Sujet* (Amsterdam: Freres Wetstein, 1718). In volume 1 de Bruyn writes about Beyram (188), the commemoration of 'Ali's death (190), Abraham (193), the rites in honor of Hussein (217–22), and Persian customs with regard to births, marriages, death, and burial (222–26).

13 Raphaël du Mans, *Estat De La Perse En 1660*, ed. Charles Schefer (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1890), with an account of 'Ashura (53–56). See also Francis Richard, *Raphaël Du Mans, Missionnaire en Perse au XVIIe Siècle* (Paris: Société d'histoire de l'Orient, 1995).

14 See Kamran S. Aghaie, "'āshūrā' (Shi'ism)," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*, Brill Online, 2013, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ashura-shiism-COM_23855.

15 For a useful overview of which European travellers witnessed the 'Ashura ceremonies in Safavid Iran, see Jean Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 139–90.

Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652)

Born into a wealthy aristocratic Roman family, Pietro Della Valle became one of the most important travellers of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ As a result of a failed love affair, the young Della Valle went to Naples from 1609 to 1614 where he encountered scholars interested in Oriental literature, history, science, and philosophy, including a certain Mario Schipano. Della Valle ended up travelling throughout the Middle East, Turkey, Persia, and India from 1614 to 1626, and sending Schipano a series of letters that he hoped the medical professor would publish for him.

Calling himself “the pilgrim,” Della Valle travelled to Istanbul, Cairo, Damascus, and other Ottoman cities, accompanied by servants and a painter. He started learning Turkish and wrote about Sunni rites; in Egypt he purchased two mummies (now in Dresden). With the assistance of Jewish merchants and teachers he was able to buy several Arabic and Turkish dictionaries, grammars, and treatises on medicine. Finding himself in Aleppo in 1616, instead of returning to Italy he decided to travel to Iran with a caravan on its way to Baghdad. The reason for this spontaneous decision was to offer his services to Shah ‘Abbas I, who had a reputation for tolerance toward Christians. He hoped he could sway the shah to launch a “crusade” against the Ottomans and convert to Catholicism. On the way to Iran, Della Valle met and fell in love with the daughter of a well-off Assyrian family (who were Nestorian Christians) named Sitti Ma’ani.¹⁷ They were married soon after, and travelled together to Isfahan at the beginning of 1617. Sitti Ma’ani was a remarkable young woman, who knew Armenian, Arabic, Persian, and Georgian; she opened many doors for Della Valle, and helped him obtain information about the Safavid court and society.

Della Valle was able to meet Shah ‘Abbas in February 1618 at his court in Farahabad on the Caspian Sea and meet members of the court there. Together with his wife, he followed the shah’s army to Qazvin and Ardabil, hoping for a war with the Ottomans. Della Valle learned Persian and bought a number of manuscripts on various subjects during his stay in Isfahan from December 1618 to October 1621. The couple decided to travel to India, but because of the Persian and English blockade of the Portuguese on Hormuz they had to wait for a ship on the coast, at Minab. Sitti Ma’ani, who was pregnant, caught a fever, miscarried, and died in 1621. Della Valle was distraught, and almost died from the same fever. Eventually he was able to embalm her body in camphor and take her back to Italy via India, hidden in his luggage. Back in Rome, in 1626, in a great public ceremony with poetry and music, Sitti Ma’ani was buried in the Della Valle family

¹⁶ For basic background on Della Valle see Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Della Valle, Pietro (1586–1652),” in *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. Speake (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 326–28; entry 50 of Brancaforte and Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies*, 92–94; and John Gurney, “Della Valle, Pietro,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/della-valle. On Della Valle’s “self-fashioning” see Nathalie Hester, *Literature and Identity in Italian Baroque Travel Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), esp. 51–93.

¹⁷ See Cristelle Baskins, “Lost in Translation: Portraits of Sitti Maani Gioerida Della Valle in Baroque Rome,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7 (2012): 241–60.

chapel in Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Della Valle ended up marrying his adopted Georgian daughter, named Mariuccia, and having fourteen children. He spent the next twenty-six years reworking his diary notes and letters to produce a published version of his travels that were published between 1650 and 1663. He also wrote a Latin geography of Safavid Iran,¹⁸ a Turkish grammar, a description of 'Abbas I (Rome, 1628), along with other works.

Della Valle includes a great deal of information concerning religious practices that he encountered during his voyages. He writes about the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite religious practices, on 'Ashura, and the camel sacrifice in Isfahan. In order to illustrate some of these various rites and festivals, the 1666 Dutch edition of his travels (*De volkome beschryving der voortreffelijcke reizen* [...],¹⁹ translated by J. H. Glazemaker), includes a number of engravings by an anonymous artist. A later German edition of the work, *Petri della Valle [...] Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche Theile der Welt* [...] (Geneva, 1674),²⁰ contains engravings by the Swiss artist Johann Jakob Thurneysen²¹ that were copied from the Dutch edition.

Thurneysen's frontispiece (see [Figure 6.2](#)) in the German edition is completely new: it portrays the Ottoman sultan and the Persian shah—mirroring the Sunni/Shi'ite divide; and a small cartouche (below the putto holding the title of the work) that displays opposing war camps emphasizes the conflict between the two potentates.²² Engravings

18 Sonja Brentjes and Volkmar Schüller, "Pietro Della Valle's Latin Geography of Safavid Iran (1624–1628): Introduction," *Journal of Early Modern History* 10 (2006): 169–219.

19 Pietro Della Valle, *De volkome beschryving der voortreffelijcke reizen van de doorluchtige reisiger Pietro Della Valle: in veel voorname gewesten des werrelts, sedert het jaer 1615 tot in 't jaar 1626 gedaan / uit zijn schriften, aan Mario Schipiano geschreven, door J. H. Glazemaker vert. [...]; met XXV konstige kopere platen en een reg. verciert* (t'Amsterdam: voor Jan Rieuwertsz Boekverkoper, 1666).

20 Pietro Della Valle, *Petri della Valle, Eines vornehmen Römischen Patritii, Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche Theile der Welt/ Nemlich In Türckey/ Egypten/ Palestina/ Persien/ Ost-Indien/ und andere weit entlegene Landschafften/ Samt Einer aussführlichen Erzählung aller Denck- und Merckwürdigster Sachen so darinnen zu finden und anzutreffen; Nebenst den Sitten/ und Gebräuchen dieser Nationen und anderen Dingen/ dergleichen zuvor niemals von anderen angemercket und beschrieben worden* (Genff: In Verlegung Johann-Herman Widerholds, 1674).

21 On the Swiss graphic artist and copper engraver Johann Jakob Thurneysen the Elder (also known under the name "Thourneysen, Thourneyser," etc.), who lived 1636–1718, see the *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon Online*, s.v. "Thurneysen, Johann Jakob," *Oxford Art Online*, s.v. "Thurneysen [Thourneysser], Johann Jakob, I," and Tapan Bhattacharya, "Thurneysen, Johann Jakob," in *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/d/D19161.php.

22 The publisher includes a helpful explanation of the frontispiece in the form of a short poem:

Erklärung des Kupffer=Tituls.

Es meynt der Groß=Türk zwar / er hab nicht seines gleichen

In diesem gantzen Rund / und müß ihm alles weichen;

Weil er den Orient / und Constantinus=Statt

Durch seiner Waffen Stärck siegreich bezwungen hat.

Doch hält sich der Monarch in Persen nicht viel minder /

Weil er die Reuterey viel besser und geschwinder



Figure 6.2. Frontispiece by J. J. Thurneysen for Pietro Della Valle, *Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche Theile der Welt ...* (Genff: In Verlegung Johann-Herman Widerholds, 1674). Call number: Spec. Coll. MCZ F832. From the collections of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

in the Dutch and German editions illustrate some of the more grisly elements relating to religious ceremonies: (a) how Shah 'Abbas received a special present for Noruz—the new year's celebration—namely the heads of 600 Turks on pikes. The author refers to Strabo in the text and notes that this kind of gift had a long tradition in Persia; (b) the forced circumcision of an old Armenian priest is vividly displayed along with the knife about to cut the foreskin; and (c) a description of the camel sacrifice at the little Bayram (which Della Valle terms the Muslim Easter) in Isfahan. The text recounts how the participants vie with each other to tear out a piece of its fur for good luck, and then once the "poor animal" has been killed, they fight to grab a piece of its meat to take back to their city quarter, where it is salted and preserved for good luck—the head is given to the Shah, however.²³

In his "Letter 4. from Farahabad the first days of May and from Qazvin, 25 July 1618," Della Valle provides a description of the mourning rituals of 'Ashura, which he observed in Isfahan in January 1618, on the tenth day of the lunar month of Muharram. Della Valle begins his account of 'Ashura in Isfahan by providing some background about Husayn and his death, and notes that: "This Hussein is regarded to the point of folly by all the Mohammedans as a great saint; but by the Persians of the Shia belief also as the legitimate Imam and supreme head of their sect (from whom the kinds of Persia today claim descent)."²⁴ He goes on to describe various lamentation rites: many people wear black, and nobody bathes or shaves their head or beard. "Many poor people, too, are in the habit of burying themselves in busy streets up to the neck and even part of their heads,

Ins Felde bringen kan / und ist so wol bestellt /
Daß er dem Türcken=Reich die Segen=Wage hält.

Explanation of the Copper Plate.

The Grand Turk, to be sure, thinks that there is no one equal to him

In the entire globe and that everyone has to cede to him;

Because he has conquered the Orient and the City of Constantine
Through the strength of his weapons.

However the monarch in Persia holds his own,

Because he can take his cavalry better and faster

To the battle field, and he is so well-appointed

That he can balance the scales against the Turkish empire.

23 For an interesting and thorough study of this topic, see Babak Rahimi's work *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), along with his earlier article on "The Rebound Theater State: The Politics of the Safavid Camel Sacrifice Rituals, 1598–1695 C.E.," *Iranian Studies* 37 (2004): 451–78.

24 Pietro Della Valle, *The Pilgrim: The Travels of Pietro Della Valle*, trans. George Bull (London: Hutchinson, 1990), 142. In this section I provide Bull's English translation, but his version of events is abridged. The original reads: "[...] il quale Hussein, tenuto sciocamente da tutti i Mahomettani per gran Santo, ma da' Persiani, di credenza Sciaiti, per legitimo Imàm ancora, e supremo Capo della loro setta, da cui i Rè di Persia di hoggi si vantano di discendere," Pietro Della Valle, *Viaggi Di Pietro Della Valle Il Pellegrino, Descritti da lui medesimo in Lettere familiari All'erudito suo Amico Mario Schipano, La Persia-Parte Prima* (Rome: A spese di Biagio Deversin, 1658), 138–39.

in earthenware jars, wide all around from the feet and narrow to fit the head at the top.”²⁵ These jars are buried in the ground with a person remaining inside for the entire day, while someone else asks alms of passersby. In order to express grief for the death of Husayn, other people paint themselves black from head to toe, resembling devils, and run through the streets naked—except for the private parts that are covered by a small black cloth. Others colour themselves red to symbolize blood and the martyr’s violent death. They walk together, “beating time with castanets of bone or wood,”²⁶ singing sorrowful dirges.

Others perform in public like acrobats and receive alms. Every day around noon a mullah, wearing a green turban (an unusual colour, seen normally in Turkey) recounts the deeds and the death of Husayn from a raised seat in the square. His audience of men and women stand or sit on the ground or on benches around him while “from time to time he shows some painted figures illustrating what he is recounting” and tries “to move the onlookers to tears.”²⁷ These preachings elicit moans from the listeners, especially the women, who beat their breasts and reply “‘*Vah Hussein! Sciah Hussein!*’ meaning ‘Ah Hussein! King Hussein!’”²⁸

On the tenth day of Muharram one can see: processions in all the streets of Isfahan, where people carry very long poles with flags; a camel carrying a coffin with three or four children inside, who represent the children of the martyr who were taken in captivity; a coffin covered in black velvet with a turban resting on it, along with a sword; a number of arms as trophies that are carried above the heads of certain men who dance and twirl around. One also finds men from neighbouring areas with large sticks, who are ready to fight with the men from other processions, not only for the sake of precedence, but also to represent the battle in which Hussein was killed. They also say that whoever dies during ‘Ashura enters straightaway into Paradise.

The rites for the death of Hussein are the same as those for ‘Ali, the only difference is that the former are more solemn, and more people take part in the processions. There is also more desire to fight with sticks—and many men return home with broken heads. They also say that during the following night, they burn statues of Omar and of other heads of the opposite sect that had Husayn killed, and publicly execrate them. “But this I did not see, so I omit it.”²⁹

25 Della Valle, *Pilgrim*, 143; “Vsano, molti poueri, di sotterrarsi per le strade frequentate, mettendosi sotto terra infin’alla gola, e con parte anco della testa, dentro a certi vasi di terra cotta fatti a posta, larghi da piedi intorno, e con la bocca stretta a misura del capo,” Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 139.

26 Della Valle, *Pilgrim*, 143; “[...] sbattendo certi legnetti, ouero ossi, che hanno in mano,” Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 139.

27 Della Valle, *Pilgrim*, 143–44; “[...] & alle volte mostra alcune figure dipinte di quel che racconta; & in somma per tutte le vie procura di muouer più che può i circostanti al pianto,” Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 140.

28 Della Valle, *Pilgrim*, 144; “*Vah, Hußein! Sciah Hussein!* che significano Ah, Hussein! Rè Hussein!,” Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 140.

29 “[...] ma questo, io non l’hò veduto, e però ne fò passaggio,” Della Valle, *Viaggi*, 142; with thanks to Renzo Bragantini (Rome) for assistance with the translation.

The Italian editions of Della Valle's published account do not contain engravings that illustrate scenes from his journey, so I will refer to the German edition of the account. If we consider J. Thurneysen's engraving³⁰ that accompanies the description of 'Ashura (see [Figure 6.3](#)) we can see the following: six dark figures (three bearded men, three women) wearing loincloths and holding small sticks dance in the foreground, while in the lower left a head emerges from the ground while another figure seems to place a pot over the head. To the right a figure lying on the ground looks at a pot resting on the earth. The lower middleground has two standing men on the left; a woman with her head covered by a cloth sits on the ground while a bearded man reaches out to her; behind him two women gaze off in the distance. Above them on a raised platform in the centre sits a turbaned man who seems to be smiling slightly; three other turbaned men, two on the left, one on the right, gesture to people below the platform on the left and to others kneeling and standing on the platform to the right (consisting of a kneeling woman holding her hand to her breast; and bearded men some of whom have no head coverings, two of whom wear turbans). The scene is framed by a number of buildings that look vaguely "Southern European," with an arch in the background on the right.

What is perhaps most incongruous in this "composite" image concerns the fact that half-nude women are portrayed front and centre, in the foreground. Women would not have gone through the streets of Isfahan during 'Ashura painted black, with only a black cloth covering their nether regions. The artist, who obviously did not know very much about Iran, has chosen to depict a scene that could be situated in Italy (going by the architecture and the tile roof of the house). The large male figure dancing in the right foreground, in particular, seems to be derived from classical statuary, with a very well-developed, muscular, upper torso. The seated woman in the left middleground could be a Madonna facing a bearded Joseph; the bearded man below the windows of the apse-like structure on the right resembles a bearded Franciscan monk. Thurneysen has selected a number of elements from Della Valle's narrative—the mullah recounting the death of Husayn, the penitents who are buried in the earth, or who are coloured black, the women who look pathetically into the distance as they hear about the martyr and his family ... and the turbans provide a touch of exoticism to the proceedings. However, overall the engraving is not an accurate portrayal of 'Ashura in Isfahan.

Adam Olearius (1599–1671)

Adam Olearius is known as the author of a seventeenth-century travel account that chronicled the voyage of a German embassy to Isfahan from 1635 to 1639.³¹ At the mid-point of the Thirty Years' War, Duke Frederick III, ruler of the small Northern German duchy of Holstein-Gottorf, decided that he would try to convince Shah Safi of Persia

³⁰ Thurneysen's engraving is located in Part 2 of Della Valle's *Reiss-Beschreibung*, between pp. 132–33.

³¹ The biographical information about Olearius is quoted from entry 30 of Brancaforte/Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies*, 71–72. See also Dieter Lohmeier, "Nachwort," in *Vermehrte Neue Beschreibung der Muscowitischen und Persischen Reyse*, ed. Dieter Lohmeier (Tübingen: Niemeyer,



Figure 6.3. Depiction of 'Ashura ceremonies by J. J. Thurneysen in Pietro Della Valle, *Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche Theile der Welt ...* (Genff: In Verlegung Johann-Herman Widerholds, 1674). Call number: Spec. Coll. MCZ F832. From the collections of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

to export his country's silk via the Volga, through Muscovy and the Baltic regions, to Gottorf; from there it would be sold throughout Northern Europe. In 1635, after coming to an agreement with Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich Romanov (1596–1645; founder of the Romanov dynasty), Duke Frederick decided to send an embassy to the shah's capital in Isfahan, which included the poet Paul Fleming (1609–1640) and nearly one hundred support personnel. Adam Olearius, the son of a tailor and a graduate of the University of Leipzig, was chosen to chronicle the mission as its official secretary.

After a long and hazardous journey in which the embassy had to contend with attacks by Cossacks and Dagestani Tatars, as well as shipwrecks on the North Sea and the Caspian, the travellers returned to Germany in 1639. Soon afterwards, a Persian delegation sent by Shah Safi arrived in Gottorf. It had been sent to Holstein in order to discuss details of the proposed agreement, express the shah's friendship to the duke, and invite further contact. As it turned out, the few bales of silk that the emissaries presented to Duke Frederick as a present from the shah were the only pieces of the precious material that Gottorf would ever obtain from the mission.

Olearius's monumental account of the journey, *Offt Begehrte Beschreibung der Newen Orientalischen Reise* (Schleßwig, 1647) and the considerably expanded second edition, *Vermehrte Neue Beschreibung der Muscowitischen und Persischen Reyse* (Schleßwig, 1656), are truly encyclopedic works that cover topics corresponding to our modern-day disciplines of ethnography, geography, biology, zoology, linguistics, and history.

Until his death in 1671, Olearius kept extremely busy at Gottorf preparing the different editions of the travel account, editing works of other travellers, working on a (never published) Persian-Turkish-Arabic dictionary, and co-translating the Persian poet Sa'di's *Gulistan* into German. He was appointed court librarian by Duke Frederick and given the task of cataloguing and expanding the ducal collection. Olearius's interest in the sciences led him to build an astrolabe, a microscope, a telescope, and his crowning achievement, a giant globe, which was later presented to Peter the Great. All these achievements earned Olearius the sobriquet "the Holstein Pliny."

Olearius provides a great deal of information about religious practices in Iran in his travel account of 1647,³² from explaining the differences between Shi'ites and

1971), *1–*80; and Elio Brancaforte, *Visions of Persia: Mapping the Travels of Adam Olearius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

32 Adam Olearius, *Offt begehrte Beschreibung Der Newen Orientalischen Reise / So durch Gelegenheit einer Holsteinischen Legation an den König in Persien geschehen. Worinnen Derer Orte und Länder/ durch welche die Reise gangen/ als fürnemblich Rußland/ Tartarien vnd Persien/ sampt ihrer Einwohner Natur/ Leben vnd Wesen fleissig beschrieben/ vnd mit vielen Kupfferstücken/ so nach dem Leben gestellet/ gezieret. Item Ein Schreiben des WolEdeln etc. Johan Albrecht Von Mandelslo/ worinnen dessen OstIndianische Reise über den Oceanum enthalten. Zusampt eines kurtzen Berichts von jetzigem Zustand des eussersten Orientalischen KönigReiches Tzina ...* (Schleßwig: Bey Jacob zur Glocken, 1647).

I will also refer to the first English translation: Adam Olearius, *The Voyages & Travels Of The Ambassadors From The Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia, And other adjacent Countries. With several Publick Transactions reaching neer the Present Times; In*

Sunnis,³³ to describing the burial practices of the “Kebber” (a Zoroastrian sect) with an accompanying engraving of their cemetery in Isfahan.³⁴ An engraving in the second edition of the account from 1656 depicts the Shi’ite burial procession of a Persian nobleman in Shamakhi (who died after drinking too much Aquavit with the German ambassadors); the accompanying text carefully explains in twelve distinct sections who the different members of the procession were, along with their functions.³⁵ The author also notes how Persians use a prayer stone, which is made of greyish earth and comes from “Netzeff und Kufa,” (Najaf and Kufa) where Hossein’s blood was spilled and where he lies buried with ‘Ali.³⁶ The stone is octagonal, and Olearius notes that it is approximately the same size as the one depicted on the page. The stone contains the names of their twelve saints along with that of Fatima; they put it on the ground and touch their foreheads to it while praying.

Olearius was present on February 7, 1637—the 22nd of Ramadan—in Shamakhi at the commemoration of Imam ‘Ali’s death (that he terms “Aschur.”)³⁷ He notes that the “Ceremonies and Devotions were performed in a House built for that purpose”³⁸ outside the city. The accompanying engraving (see Figure 6.4) (by Christian Rothgießer?)³⁹

Seven Books. Illustrated with diverse accurate Mapps and Figures. By Adam Olearius, Secretary of the Embassy. Rendred into English, by John Davies, of Kidwelly (London: Printed for Thomas Dring, and John Starkey, 1662).

33 Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 465; Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 371.

34 Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 429; Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 302 (without an illustration).

35 Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte Neue Beschreibung Der Muscowitischen vnd Persischen Reyse: So durch gelegenheit einer Holsteinischen Gesandschafft an den Russischen Zaar vnd König in Persien geschehen ...* (Schleßwig: Johann Holwein, 1656), 686–88.

36 Olearius, *Vermehrte*, 681 (although the page is misprinted, and has “691”). Husayn was killed near Karbala, where he is buried, whereas ‘Ali is buried in Najaf. The English translation, *The Voyages and Travels* of 1662, which has very few illustrations, indicates that the stone is “somewhat above 3 inches Diameter” and that the earth derives from “Metzef and Kufa” thus distorting “Najaf” further; see Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 375.

37 I should note that there are substantial differences between the English and the German versions. The most striking is the personal tone of the German original, where the author uses the first person plural to describe what “we” did (for example, how the Chan invited the foreign guests to join him and view the spectacle); on the other hand, the English version retains the third person throughout.

38 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] sonderlichen Ceremonien und devotion gehalten worden / und zwar neben einem vor der Stadt darzu erbauetem Hause,” Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 302.

39 Christian Rothgießer (d. 1659) produced a large number of engravings for Olearius and worked with him closely to illustrate his publications. On the artists at the court of Schleswig-Gottorf see Heinz Spielmann and Jan Drees, *Gottorf im Glanz des Barock: Kunst und Kultur am schleswiger Hof 1544–1713. Kataloge der Ausstellung zum 50-jährigen Bestehen des schleswig-holsteinischen Landesmuseums auf Schloss Gottorf und zum 400. Geburtstag Herzog Friedrichs III* (Schleswig: Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum, 1997); and Holger Borzikowsky, *Von Allerhand Figuren und Abbildungen: Kupferstecher des 17. Jahrhunderts im Umkreis des Gottorfer Hofes* (Husum: Husum Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft, 1981).



Figure 6.4. Depiction of the commemoration of 'Ali's death in Shamakhi by Christian Rothgießer (?) in Adam Olearius, *Offt begehrte Beschreibung Der Newen Orientalischen Reise* (Schleßwig: Bey Jacob zur Glocken, 1647). Call number: A: 263.1 Hist. 2°. Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel.

shows that special house, built of dark wood, at the centre of the image, with the walled city in the background. The house is raised up toward the back at an unnatural angle—most likely in order to show the gallery on the right side of the house where the notables were seated so that they could view the “*Chatib*, that is, their Prelate, clad in a blew

Garment, which is the Mourning-Colour of that Country.”⁴⁰ Seated under a large awning on a chair that was 8 feet high (at the extreme right of the engraving), the orator read and sang for over two hours from the “*Machtelnama*,” a book that recounted the life of ‘Ali. The “Priests” standing around him would sometimes finish singing some of the verses, and at the end of every passage one from among them would cry out: “*Luanet Chudai ber kuschendi Aaly bad*, that is, *God’s Curse be on him who kill’d Haly*: whereto the whole Assembly answer’d, *bisch bad kem bad*, that is, *rather more than lesse*.”⁴¹ The audience is moved to tears when it hears that ‘Ali foresaw his death and could have avoided it; they “weep and sob most biterly”⁴² when his death is described and the effect it had on his children. After the *Chatib* finishes his recitation, he receives a silk coat from the *Chan*. This is followed by a procession with three camels carrying coffins covered in black cloth (representing “*Haly*, and his two Sons, *Hassan* and *Hossein*.”⁴³) Next came two chests covered in blue cloth that contained ‘Ali’s written works, and then two superb horses with “several Bows, Arrows, Turbants, and Flaggs”⁴⁴ attached to the saddle. Subsequently a man carrying a long pole at the top of which was “a kind of Tower or Steeple, in which there were thrust four Cimitars, but they were cover’d with so many Ribbons, and other Toyes, that they could hardly be perceived.”⁴⁵ Finally, a number of men carrying boxes (containing the Qur’an) on their heads, dancing to sorrowful music, passed by. “On the other side” many young boys holding sticks clapped each other on the shoulder and shouted “*Heder, Heder*, which is the name of *Haly, Hassan, Hossein*,”⁴⁶ and then they all returned to the city. This ceremony for ‘Ali is celebrated throughout Persia with great sadness; there is no day of remembrance for Muhammad, however.

The engraving contains these various parts of the ceremony, as though they were all happening simultaneously: a camel carrying a coffin is in the foreground at the bottom left,

40 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] der *Chathib* oder Hoherpriester in einem blawen Traurkleide; Dann was bey uns in der Trauerzeit die Schwartze / das ist bey ihnen die blawe Farbe,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 302. Willem Floor also makes reference to this engraving in his discussion of *takiyeh* in *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2005), 135–37. On “*ta’zia*,” the Shi’ite passion play, see also Peter Chelkowski, “*Ta’zia*,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tazia.

41 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “*Laanet Chudai ber kuschendi Aaly bad!* Der sey vor Gott verflucht / welcher *Aaly* umbbracht. Darauff antwortet die gantze Gemeine: *bisch bad, kem bad*. Das geschehe lieber mehr als minder,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 302.

42 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “Fiengen die Perser alle an zuweinen,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 302.

43 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] so *Aaly* und dessen zweyen Sohnen *Hassans* und *Hosseins* Sarge,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 302.

44 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] auf welchen Bogen / Pfeile und kostliche Hauptbunde lagen / viel Siegesfahnen,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 304.

45 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] einen kleinen runden Thurm / den sie *Nachal* nanten / auff welchem 4. Sebel gesteckt / die man unter den aufgeheffteten Zieracht kaum sehen kunte,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 304.

46 Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 217; “[...] *Heider, Heider* (diß ist *Aalij* Name) *Hassan, Hossein*,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 304.

while one of the splendid horses carrying arms is at the bottom right, as the men with the boxes on their heads dance between the animals, in the centre. The boys shouting “*Heder*” are in the left middle ground, above the camel’s head, and next to their group stands the man holding the long pole with the four swords. The image gives the impression of a somewhat chaotic scene with a great throng of participants—but it can be decoded with the help of the text. One should also note the presence of the two German visitors, standing at the bottom left edge of the awning, and distinguishable by their European clothes and hats: the European figure on the left is a nobleman, whereas the other figure next to him could be Olearius. This emphasizes the eyewitness value of the work, to which the author refers throughout his travel narrative.

The ‘Ashura ceremonies that Olearius witnessed in Ardabil began on May 14, 1637. The author notes the seventy-two arrows that pierced Husayn and the extreme thirst that he suffered in the desert. During the time of ‘Ashura Persians “live very soberly,”⁴⁷ they do not use razors, and drink water instead of wine. Children carry large banners that have snakes made of “Pastboard winding to and fro, much like *Mercury’s* Caduceus” at the end.⁴⁸ After sunset, men gather in tents illuminated by torches, they also have long poles with oranges stuck on the end, they cry out “*ja Hossein ... with such violence, that it chang’d the colour of their countenances.*”⁴⁹ On the tenth day there is an oration in the courtyard of the shrine to Shah Sefi with the same ceremonies as the ones performed for ‘Ali in Shamakhi. Even though Olearius did not witness it, he tells of a special banner that

shakes of it self, as often as they pronounce the name of *Hossein*, during the Sermon [...] and that when the Priest makes a recital of the particular of his death, how he was wounded with seventy two Arrows, and how he fell down from his horse [...] that, the staff breaking, it falls to the ground.⁵⁰

That evening, the German ambassadors were invited to the *Chan’s* palace, where they sat on chairs that had been specially prepared for them (instead of sitting on the ground with their hosts). Paper lanterns were attached to the walls, there were also wax candles and paper lanterns in great number; porcelain vessels filled “with Suger’d and Perfum’d waters”⁵¹ were set before them. Representatives of the five main quarters of Ardabil sang “a Serenade” for the Governour, verses in honour of ‘Ali and Husayn, for two hours ...

⁴⁷ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 235; “leben messig,” Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 327.

⁴⁸ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 235; “[...] mit gegen einander gekerten Schlangen gezieret / *Eschder* genant,” Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 327.

⁴⁹ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 235; the German edition has “riefen und schreyen [...] auch so hefftig / daß sie gantz braun wurden” (that they turned completely brown), Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 327.

⁵⁰ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 235; “[...] sol / wenn Hosseins Name in selbiger *Parentation* gedacht wird / sich starck bewegen / wo aber die Word verlesen werden: das Er mit 72. Wunden beschädigt vom Pferde gefallen / soll sie so sehr schwancken / daß sie oben am Holtz gantz abbricht un[d] herunter fällt,” Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 328.

⁵¹ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 235; “[...] von süssen und wolriechenden Wassern,” Olearius, *Offt begehrte*, 328.

but the author notes “they may be rather said to cry out and roar, than to sing.”⁵² At the same time, seven almost naked youths, painted black and resembling devils, were dancing. They were poor boys, called “*Tzatzaku*,” and they knocked small stones against each other and sometimes against their chests to convey their grief for Husayn’s death. When these ceremonies had ended, the *Chan* regaled his guests with a fireworks display, “which most of the *Persians* took very ill at his hands, and thought it not over religiously done of him, to give such Divertisements to the *Christians* during the time of their *Aschur*, which ought to represent onely things conducing to sadness and affliction.”⁵³ Nonetheless, the Germans enjoyed the display, and Olearius notes the various kinds of fireworks and ingenious inventions, such as: a little castle that was set on fire; a kind called *Derbende*, in the form of a “Saucidge” and “Squibs and little Serpents, which falling among the people, set their Cotton Garments on fire.”⁵⁴ The delegates returned to their quarters after midnight and went to bed hungry since they had expected supper at the palace. Just before sunrise there was another procession in honour of Husayn’s burial. When the sun rose a large number of men gathered in the courtyard of Shaf Sefi’s shrine and cut themselves with sharp knives (“*Lanzetten*”)—there was so much blood that an ox could have been slaughtered there. Youths cut themselves above the elbow, made the blood spurt out, and then ran through the city in order to atone for their sins.

An unsigned engraving (see Figure 6.5), perhaps by the artist Franz Allen, depicts the nocturnal celebration in the courtyard of the *Chan*’s palace in Ardabil. The silhouettes of turbaned Persians can be seen in the foreground, and the German guests are seated on chairs along the wall on the right. Paper lanterns hang on the wall at the back, and various fireworks are going off all at once, most spectacularly from the “castle” firework. Since they are painted black, it is hard to distinguish the seven youths dancing to the right of the Persian holding the long pole with the light at the end. This engraving was only included in the first edition of 1647, it was not reproduced in later editions of the travel account—perhaps due to the poor quality of the image.

Jean de Thévenot (1633–1667)

Born in Paris in 1633 and independently wealthy, Jean de Thévenot also had the good fortune of having an uncle, Melchisédech Thévenot,⁵⁵ who compiled travel accounts from various countries and helped to inspire a passion for travel in his nephew. In 1652, the young

⁵² Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 236; “[...] sungen / oder rieffen viel mehr / was sie auß Leibes Krefften vermochten,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 329.

⁵³ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 236; “[...] zwar nicht ohne mißfallen etlicher Perser / welche vermeinten / daß an so hohem Traurfeste solche Feuerwerke / die nur in Lust und Freudentagen üblich / sich nicht wol ziemeten,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 330.

⁵⁴ Olearius, *Voyages and Travels*, 236; “[...] nach art der kleinen Schwermer / tumultuirete unter den Völckern herumb / nicht ohne schaden dero Kleider / welche / weil sie von *Catun*, leicht Feur fingen,” Olearius, *Offt beehrte*, 330.

⁵⁵ On Melchisédech Thévenot see chapter 2 of Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



Figure 6.5. Depiction of 'Ashura in Ardabil by Franz Allen (?) in Adam Olearius, *Offt begehrte Beschreibung Der Newen Orientalischen Reise* (Schleßwig: Bey Jacob zur Glocken, 1647). Call number: 3000-4733. Universitätsbibliothek Braunschweig.

Thévenot travelled for three years through England, the Netherlands, German lands, and Italy. In Rome he met the French scholar Barthélemy d'Herbelot, and the two men decided to embark on a trip to the Ottoman Empire together.

It is important to note that, inspired by the example of his uncle Melchisédech, he also intended from the outset of his explorations to keep meticulous records of his observations for later publication. Jean remained true to this resolution during the remaining 12 years of his life, valiantly maintaining his notes en route up until two weeks before his death.⁵⁶

D'Herbelot was unable to go on the journey due to family affairs, so Thévenot decided to travel on his own. He learned Turkish and Arabic during this first trip to the Ottoman Empire, and also visited Anatolia, Egypt, Tunis and what were considered to be the ruins of Carthage before returning to Paris after an absence of seven years.⁵⁷ He left

⁵⁶ Michael Brennan, "Thévenot, Jean de, (1633–1667)," in *Literature of Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J. Speake (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 1174.

⁵⁷ See also the introduction by Stéphane Yerasimos of Jean de Thévenot, *Voyage Du Levant*, ed. Stéphane Yerasimos (Paris: F. Maspero, 1980), 5–27.

Paris in 1663 for Egypt, travelling to Alexandria, Damascus, Aleppo, Mosul, and Baghdad to Safavid Iran, where he learned Persian and spent five months in Isfahan before visiting Shiraz and the ruins of Persepolis. In November 1665 he sailed on an English ship to India, where he visited different regions over the span of thirteen months and collected plants for a herbarium.⁵⁸ After trying to recuperate for two months from cholera, he sailed for Bandar 'Abbas. In Shiraz Thévenot accidentally shot himself with his own pistol. After another period of convalescence in Isfahan he tried to return to Europe overland via Tabriz, but caught a fever and died in a small village on November 28, 1667. The first part of Thévenot's travel account—*Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant*—appeared in 1664–1665, and the other two parts were published posthumously by his friend the Sieur de Luisandre and François Pétis de La Croix. His journeys were translated into Dutch (1681–1682), English (1687), and German (1693), and reprinted several times in French and English.⁵⁹

"The Religion of the *Persians* is in substance the same with that of the *Turks*, though, nevertheless, no Nations in the World hate one another so much upon the account of Religion as those two do: they look upon one another as Hereticks; not without appearance of reason." (1687).⁶⁰ This observation serves to introduce Thévenot's chapter on the "Religion of the Persians" (*De la Religion des Persans*), in which he mentions some of the differences between "*Schiar*"⁶¹ and Sunnis. The Persians "celebrate their little *Bairam* or Easter of Sacrifices, in the same manner as the *Turks*"⁶² by sacrificing sheep, sometimes an ox, but in Isfahan there is a special camel sacrifice. The

58 For this journey see the introduction by Francoise de Valence to Jean de Thévenot, *Les Voyages Aux Indes Orientales: Contenant Une Description Exacte De L'indostan, Des Nouveaux Mogols, Et Des Autres Peuples Et Païs Des Indes Orientales, Avec Leurs Moeurs Et Maximes, Religions, Fêtes, Temples, Pagodes, Cimetières, Commerce, Et Autres Choses Remarquables* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008), 7–23.

59 For the following section I will refer to this English edition of his travels: Jean de Thévenot, *The Travels of Monsieur De Thevenot into the Levant. In Three Parts. Viz. Into I. Turkey. II. Persia. III. The East-Indies*, trans. Archibald Lovell (London: Printed by Henry Clark for John Taylor, at the Ship in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1687); as well as to the following French edition: *Voyages De Mr. De Thevenot, Tant en Europe qu'en Asie & en Afrique Divisez en trois Parties, qui comprennent cinq volumes ...* (Paris: Chez Charles Angot, 1689).

60 The citation in the original reads: "La Religion des Persans est en substance la même que celle des Turcs, quoique pourtant il n'y ait guere de Nations, qui se haïssent davantage entre'elles pour le sujet de la Religion que font celles-ci. Ils se regardent les uns & les autres comme heretiques; non sans apparence de raison..." 374.

61 This corresponds to part 2, chapter 13, of the English Thévenot, *Travels*, 106–110; and to chapter 13 of Thévenot, *Suite*, 374–387. The chapter that follows continues with the topic of religion and is titled: "Of Jews, Guebres, Banians, and Armenians" ("Des Juifs, Guebres, Banjan, & Armeniens"). Thévenot, *Travels*, 107; the French edition uses the term "Schiaïs," Thévenot, *Suite*, 376.

62 Thévenot, *Travels*, 107; "Ils celebrent le petit Baïram ou Pâque des victimes, de même que les Turcs," Thévenot, *Suite*, 377–78.

shah, or sometimes the governor of the town, dispatches the animal with a lance thrust, and some participants are always killed as they attempt to obtain a valued piece of the camel's meat.⁶³ Persians and Turks pray differently, and the former also

lay down a little gray stone before them, which they always carry about, and every time they prostrate themselves on the ground, lay their Forehead on that stone, which is made of the Earth of *Kerbela*, the place where *Hussein*, the second Son of *Aly*, was killed by the men of *Yezid*; his tomb is there still.⁶⁴

Thévenot goes on to describe the history and death of Husayn, the ceremonies surrounding 'Ashura, and mentions the feast of "*Serten*," which takes place forty days after 'Ashura. *Serten* signifies "*Head Body*" and "(say they)" it commemorates the day when Husayn's head joined itself to his body forty days after his death.⁶⁵ The chapter concludes with a mention of the rites performed in observance of 'Ali's death ("celebrated much after the same manner as that of *Hussein* his Son, but it lasts only a day");⁶⁶ a history of 'Ali's death; and the listing of other Persian festivals.

In the 1689 French edition of Thévenot's travels, which contains a few engravings by the Dutch artist Johannes van den Aveele,⁶⁷ there are two images in the first volume relating to religion from the author's stay in Istanbul: the first, from the chapter "Of the *Bairam*, the Turks *Easter*," depicts the festivities associated with the day, showing a man on a swing in the foreground, and a kind of simple ferris wheel in the background;⁶⁸ the second image relates to the funeral rites of the Turks, and shows how they do not sew up the burial shroud so that the dead person can kneel in front of the Angels more easily, when he is to be examined by them.⁶⁹

Thévenot prefaces his description of the 'Ashura ceremonies that he witnessed in Shiraz in July 1665 with an account of Husayn's death at Karbala. "Having suffered Hunger and Thirst [...] he [...] marched courageously towards [his Enemies] [...] charged into the thickest

⁶³ Thévenot, *Travels*, 107–8; Thévenot, *Suite*, 378–79.

⁶⁴ Thévenot, *Travels*, 108; "[...] mettent à bas devant eux une petite pierre grise, qu'ils portent toujours, & toutes les fois qu'ils se prosternent en terre, ils appliquent le front sur cette pierre, qui est faite de la terre de Kerbela, qui est le lieu ou Hussein second fils d'Aly fût tué par les gens de Yezid; son tombeau y est encore [...]" Thévenot, *Suite*, 380.

⁶⁵ Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; "[...] Serten, c'est-à-dire, tête corps [...] disent-ils," Thévenot, *Suite*, 385.

⁶⁶ Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; "[...] célébrée presque de même que celle d'Hussein son fils, mais ce n'est que durant un jour," Thévenot, *Suite*, 385.

⁶⁷ On this Dutch graphic artist and copper engraver, who lived 1655–1727, see the *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon Online*, s.v. "Aveele, Johannes van den"; *Oxford Art Online*, s.v. "Aveele, Johannes van den."

⁶⁸ The engraving is found in Thévenot, *Voyages de Mr. De Thevenot*, vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 35, between 140–41; see also Thévenot, *Travels*, pt. 1, bk. 1, chap. 35, 45–46.

⁶⁹ The engraving is found in Thévenot, *Voyages de Mr. De Thevenot*, vol. 1, pt. 1, chap. 43, between pp. 178–79; see also Thévenot, *Travels*, pt. 1, bk. 1, chap. 43, "Of the way of Mourning for the Dead among the Turks, their manner of Burying, and of their Burying-places," 57–58.

of them with extraordinary vigour,”⁷⁰ before being defeated. His wives and children were taken prisoner “to *Yezid*, who treated them honourably, seeming to be grieved at the death of *Hussein*.”⁷¹ The author notes the fact that during the ten-day commemoration period the Persians dress in black, some of them wear black turbans, they refrain from shaving “nor commit any debauch.”⁷² “The inferiour sort of people signalize their Zeal by a thousand foolish pranks”.⁷³ some of them bury themselves in the earth with only their head sticking out (which is covered with a pot filled with soil); others (“those Fools”)⁷⁴ mix soot with oil and smear it all over their naked bodies (a black cloth covers their private parts); others take Armenian bole (a red earthy clay), dissolve it in oil and stain themselves blood red. The most “sincere” penitents cut themselves, “in the Head too, so that the blood comes running down on all sides.”⁷⁵ With naked sabres in their hands and yelling “*Ya Hussein*” (Oh, Husayn) at the top of their lungs, they strike two stones together, producing a “wretched Musick”⁷⁶ as they run through the streets of the city. A mullah recounts the particulars of Husayn’s death at night in a public square, causing the audience members to break into tears; such sermons are also held during the day, which is when “many persons of Quality”⁷⁷ attend. In Isfahan, on the tenth and last day, the shah must be present at the ceremonies dressed in mourning.

In Shiraz Thévenot describes the processions that passed by the governor’s house, carrying banners, “the Rabble naked and besmeared in the manner I mentioned before.”⁷⁸ Many children on horseback followed, symbolizing the children of Husayn who had been taken prisoner. Horses draped in black with arms attached to the saddle passed by next, then men carrying coffins covered with black velvet with a turban on each one. They all continued out of the city gate to finish the commemoration at the Mosque of Khatun (named after one of ‘Ali’s daughters) for a final sermon that was followed with food (mainly rice and a soup made with wheat) being given as alms to the poor.

The engraving⁷⁹ (see Figure 6.6) by Johannes van den Aeele (who actually signed his work: “*Joh: v: den Aeele inv. et fecit*”) combines some of the most striking features of

70 Thévenot, *Travels*, 108; “[...] mais après avoir encore souffert la faim & la soif [...] il alla donc à eux courageusement, il donna dans leur gros avec une vigueur extraordinaire,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 381–82.

71 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] à Yezid, qui les traita honorablement, témoignant même du déplaisir de la mort de Hussein,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 382.

72 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] ne font aucune débauche,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 382.

73 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “Le menu Peuple signale son zele par mille folies,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 382.

74 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; the term used is “ces fous,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 383.

75 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] même à la tête, en sorte que le sang coule de tous côtes,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 383.

76 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] une miserable musique,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 383.

77 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] plusieurs personnes de qualité,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 384.

78 Thévenot, *Travels*, 109; “[...] toute cette canaille nuë & barbouillée de la manière que j’ai dit,” Thévenot, *Suite*, 384.

79 The engraving is located in Thévenot, *Suite*, vol. 2, chap. 13, between pp. 382–83. See also Brancaforte and Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies*, entry 60, 105–6.



Figure 6.6. Depiction of 'Ashura in Shiraz by Johannes van den Aveele in Jean de Thévenot, *Suite du Voyage de Mr. de Thevenot Au Levant ...* (Paris: Chez Charles Angot, 1689). Call number: M: Gv 125:4. Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel.

Thévenot's account as though they were all occurring simultaneously—as was also the case with Rothgiesser's image accompanying the commemoration of 'Ali's death outside the gates of Shamakhi. The picture can be divided into three main sections. (1) First, in the foreground, the viewer is given a "closeup," so to speak, of some of the most dramatic elements of the ceremony. Three stages of the burial of penitents is displayed: at the bottom left, a man who is praying prepares to descend into the hole that his companion is digging for him, while the earthen pot that will cover his head rests in the bottom left-hand corner of the image. To the right, still in the foreground, a man places a pot over a penitent's head, and slightly to their left one can see a pot resting on the ground, which represents the final stage of this ritual. The pot at the centre is being showered with blood that pours from a self-inflicted head wound by two half-naked penitents who are at the centre foreground of the engraving. To their right we see two other men who seek forgiveness for their sins by knocking together stone blocks and creating "music" for the proceedings. (2) In the right middleground on a high dais a mullah has stood up from his chair and recounts the events leading to Husayn's death. Two figures kneel to the right of the chair, a throng of turbaned men crowd around the dais to hear the sermon, while other figures listen from windows above, to the right of the mullah. (3) A procession

from the background is about to join up with another procession that enters the large square from a crenellated tower. The latter procession includes, from the back, two coffins, horses carrying weapons, and children on horseback that pass in front of the governor's house. It snakes its way from right to left until it reaches the middleground from where it continues from left to right. The architecture is a hodgepodge of classical columns that frame the image on the extreme left- and right-hand sides; it has elements of medieval European castle construction; and includes vaguely "Oriental" structures, such as the minarets in the background (one of which has an Ottoman-style crescent moon attached at the top). The drapings on the governor's house, above the mullah's dais, and at the top right of the engraving give the image a theatrical feel: 'Ashura is on display for the European viewer.⁸⁰ Although van Aevele invented a great number of components in the image and did not know what Shiraz (or any Safavid Iranian city) actually looked like, one can say that he was able to provide a comprehensible tableau of 'Ashura from the narrative that was available to him as source material.

Conclusion

Early modern travellers to the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire, and the Safavid Empire were instrumental in collecting knowledge about these areas in their accounts, and they also brought back texts on history, religion, geography, science, and literature to Europe for further study. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see the first chairs in Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew established at European universities along with the publications of fundamental grammars in "Oriental" languages, such as Guillaume Postel's *Grammatica Arabica* (Paris, 1538) and Lodewijk de Dieu's *Rudimenta Linguae Persicae* (Leyden, 1639). Spurred initially by an interest in early Christianity and classical antiquity and then by the Ottoman threat to Christendom, European scholars sought to learn about the customs and rituals in these far-off lands. To varying degrees, early modern European travellers to Safavid Iran were sensitive to the concept of religious difference, and several sought to give detailed information about Shi'ism in their accounts for their readers. Whether Protestant or Catholic, they had an innate sense of superiority vis-à-vis Islam. Nonetheless, whether out of duty, or out of scholarly interest, they sought to shed light on the strange rituals they observed and provide explanations about the various activities that were to be found at commemorative festivals such as 'Ashura. Publishers were also interested in promoting the topic of religion when it came to selling books and would also highlight the fact that their accounts included new information about Shi'ite rites and rituals. Title pages or visual elements of books—such as frontispieces or engravings accompanying the narrative—would often include familiar tropes designed to elicit the attention of a potential consumer ... such as a dervish mutilating himself, or a turbaned Ottoman soldier standing with upraised sword in front of a mosque, ready to threaten Christian Europe. One can also think of works such as *Catharina von Georgien* (1657) by

80 Babak Rahimi provides an analysis of this same engraving in *Theater State*, 1–6, and makes a reference to the idea of the Orientalist stage of Edward Said.

the German dramatist Andreas Gryphius that describe the tribulations of the Georgian queen who preferred to die as a Christian martyr rather than marry Shah 'Abbas I.

Publishers would hire artists in order to enhance the selling potential of a work: "Travel accounts that contained little or no illustration in their first edition were often reprinted with sumptuous frontispieces, engravings, and maps in the next edition."⁸¹ This was the case for the Dutch and German publishers of Della Valle's travel account, as well as for the French edition of Thévenot's narrative that have been considered here. The Swiss artist/engraver of the German edition, and the Dutch artist/engraver of the French edition point to the international character of the publishing trade—but they also help substantiate the claim that many representations of Safavid Iran were created by artists who had never travelled to the country themselves. The engravings in Olearius's account may be considered the most "authentic," since they were produced by an engraver working under the traveller's supervision, presumably using sketches drawn in situ, and during the voyager's lifetime in contrast with the engravings in the Della Valle and Thévenot editions, that were produced decades after the travellers had died. In short, the visual representations of Safavid Iran in travel accounts must be examined individually and carefully, in order to determine to what degree they are constructed from an artist's imagination and/or from previous images, and how much they represent the "reality" of what they are supposed to depict.

81 Brancaforte and Brentjes, *From Rhubarb to Rubies*, 6.