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Safavid Persia Through the Eyes of French Travellers

THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS one chapter in the long and rich history of exchange between Persia and the West.¹ It focuses on the State Library of Victoria's holdings of 17th-century French accounts of travels to Persia, in particular those of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Jean de Thévenot and Jean Chardin. The 17th century was a period of great travel and exploration. It also marked the rise of direct trade between Persia and Western Europe – exchange generally occurring previously via Ottoman Turkey, Russia and elsewhere. The great Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbas I came to power in 1587 and ushered in a period of political and economic stability as well as a cultural renaissance, centred around his rebuilding of Isfahan as his magnificent new capital.

European merchants were keen to do business with Persia and the 17th century opened with the establishment of the East India Company in London in 1600, and the Dutch East India Company two years later. Persia and Western Europe also shared a common concern at this time – the increasing power of the Ottoman Empire. Diplomatic missions and envoys were sent in both directions, seeking alliances as well as trade agreements. Also at this time, a number of Christian missions were established in Persia, under the tolerant rule of Shah 'Abbas I (ruled 1587–1629). Isfahan was soon inhabited by European merchants, diplomats, missionaries and even independent travellers who were curious to experience the wonders of Persian culture and court life, of which they had heard tantalising reports from those who had been before them.

Compared with the English and the Dutch, the French were late to trade with Persia, their East India Company not being established until 1664. Persia was also late to seek diplomatic ties with France due to French-Ottoman alliances. The first significant French presence in Persia was that of Capuchin missionaries who arrived in 1628, followed later by the Jesuits. For nearly 50 years, from 1649 until his death in 1696 at the age of 93, Father Raphaël du Mans headed the Capuchin mission. Father Raphaël became proficient in Persian and was often engaged at the royal court to act as an interpreter in dealings with French visitors. He was also an important source of information about Persia for French visitors as well as for Louis XIV's influential minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert.²

The three French travellers who are the subject of this paper were all young when they arrived in Persia – Tavernier was 27, Thévenot 31 and Chardin only 22.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–89) made six journeys to Persia between 1632 and 1668, after which he published his *Les Six Voyages*, first issued in 1676 (opposite). Tavernier was a Protestant and a jewel merchant and his trade gave him privileged access to Persian royalty and elite circles. He is famous for selling to Louis XIV the large diamond now known as the Hope Diamond, believed to have been sourced from India and now one of the treasures of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

In addition to gemstones and items of jewellery, Tavernier brought large items to Persia such as crystal chandeliers and mirrors adorned with precious stones.³ He was often a guest at court and, at one point in his account, expressed relief at being able to finally make his exit after a particularly exuberant seventeen-hour feast, held by Shah ‘Abbas II (ruled 1642–66) to celebrate his purchase from Tavernier of a large quantity of jewels.⁴ By Tavernier’s own account, the master of the royal household stated, ‘This European gentleman has brought the King so many rarities, and so many kinds of jewels and beautiful gold and silver plate, that it has delighted the King’s heart.’⁵ Tavernier also stated that the Shah wished to give him a full robe of honour, the gift of which was usually reserved for dignitaries such as provincial governors.⁶

While his works contain much in the way of useful information, Tavernier was very much the merchant rather than the scholar. He provided details on Persian government, society and religion but focused on what he saw to be of value to his fellow merchants, such as trade routes and caravanserais, currency and exchange rates, customs duties and local taxes.⁷ As Sir Roger Stevens noted, ‘He is good on commerce, weak on antiquities and fairly successful in concealing his ignorance of Persian’.⁸

Tavernier was not easily impressed and his accounts do not contain the glowing praise for the Persian people and culture which characterises much of the writings of his compatriots, referring dismissively, for example, to the patrons of Isfahan’s fine coffee houses as ‘tobacco whiffers and coffee quaffers’.⁹ Much of his observations are made in comparison to French customs, such as the inability of Persians to understand the propensity of the French to take lengthy turns about a garden, of which he wrote:

when they see us walking to and fro together in a Garden-Ally for two or three hours together, they are amaz’d. They only spread a Carpet in the fairest place of the Garden, and set themselves down to contemplate the verdure of the place: if they rise, ’tis only to pull the fruit from the trees.¹⁰

As Tavernier grew older, he groomed his nephew to take over his business, sending him to the mission in Tabriz to learn Persian and Turkish at the age of around ten – as Tavernier stated, ‘a very suitable age to learn languages’.¹¹ In 1670 and by then enormously wealthy, Tavernier purchased the Barony of Aubonne near Geneva and settled down to write the account of his travels. By 1689 however, he was on the move again. He died in Moscow that year, where it is believed he was on his way to Persia once more – at the age of 84.



Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier.

From Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six Voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier, ecuyer Baron d'Aubonne: en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes*, Paris: 1679.

State Library of Victoria, RARES 915 AU1S (1679), plate following title page.

Jean de Thévenot

Jean de Thévenot (1633–67) was independently wealthy, which enabled him to travel purely to satisfy his own curiosity about the world (opposite). After travelling throughout England, the Netherlands and Germany he went to Italy where he met the French Orientalist Barthélemy d'Herbelot in Rome. D'Herbelot invited Thévenot to accompany him to the Levant, at the news of which Thévenot 'hugg'd myself a long while, in hopes of so good company'.¹² D'Herbelot was detained at the last minute, so in May 1655 Thévenot set off alone for Istanbul. After then travelling to Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia he returned to France for four years.

In 1663 Thévenot set sail again for the East, visiting Damascus, Aleppo and Baghdad before arriving in Persia in August 1664. He stayed for five months with Father Raphaël at the Capuchin mission in Isfahan, after which he travelled through Shiraz to Bandar 'Abbas, hoping to find a passage to India. This proved difficult due to Dutch opposition, and Thévenot returned to Shiraz, subsequently visiting the great ruins of Persepolis. In November 1665 he succeeded in securing a passage to India where he remained for thirteen months before returning to Shiraz.

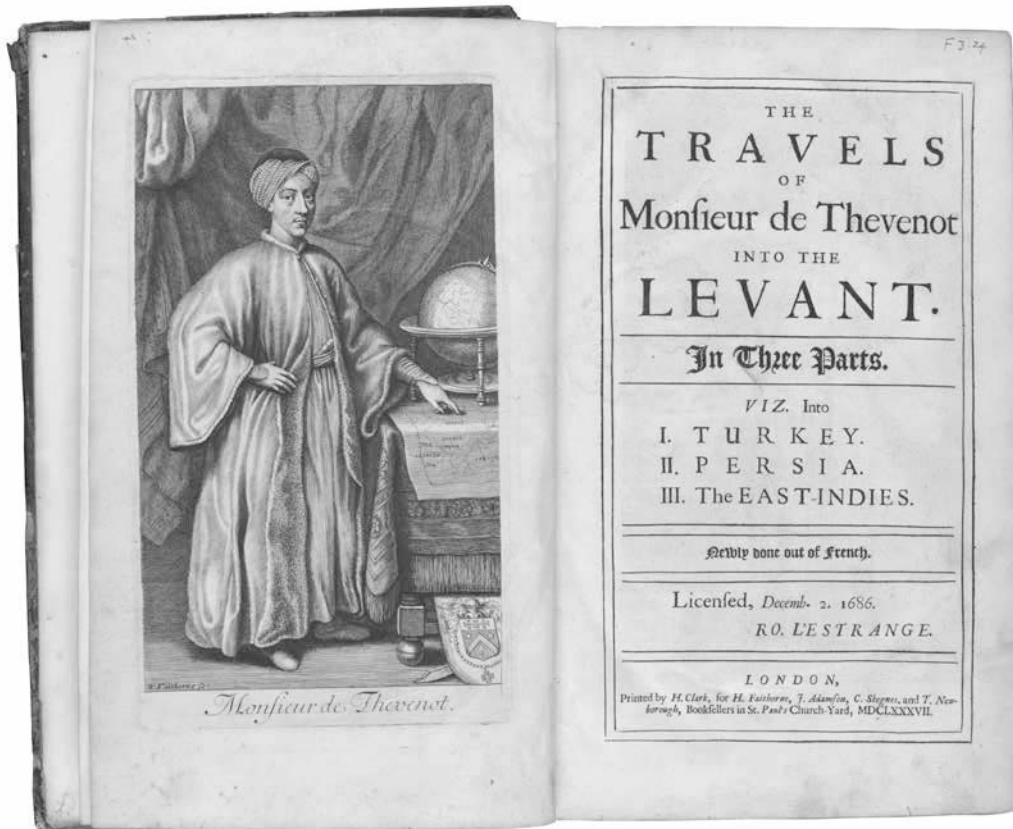
Thévenot was accidentally wounded by gunshot and spent the summer of 1667 recuperating in Isfahan. He set out for Tabriz in October but died on the way, at the age of 34. His *Voyages* were published posthumously, an English edition of which, held by the State Library of Victoria, was published in 1687. In the preface, Thévenot was described as having attained

great knowledge in natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, and all the mathematicks; and had especially studied the philosophy of Descartes, rather that he might with pleasure examine natural effects in their principles, than magisterially dictate and decide, as those who nowadays make a show of that philosophy, commonly do.¹³

Thévenot was a skilled linguist and became proficient in Persian, Turkish and Arabic. He was interested in the natural sciences and made botanical collections during his travels. He was more generous than his compatriot Tavernier in his observations of Persian life and culture. For example he wrote of the Maydan-i Shah, Isfahan's great square built during the rule of Shah 'Abbas I, 'Of all the regular piazzas, it is the greatest and finest place in the world'.¹⁴

Jean Chardin

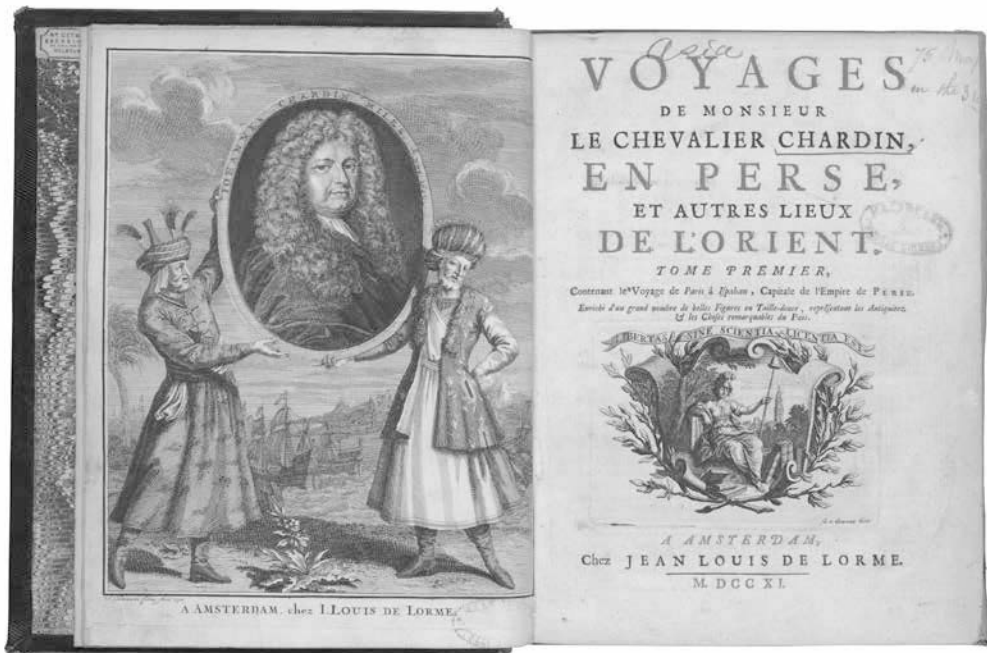
The Frenchman who spent the most time, and gained the most insight, into Persian life and customs was Jean Chardin (1643–1713). Chardin spent the equivalent of ten years in Persia between 1665 and 1677 (see p. 70). Like Tavernier, Chardin was a Protestant and a jewel merchant who travelled independently to Persia for commercial purposes. His father was also a jewel merchant and Chardin first travelled to Persia and India with Antoine Raisin, a business associate of his father. During his first visit Shah 'Abbas II welcomed him to his court, appointing him a royal merchant and commissioning jewellery based on his own designs.¹⁵



Jean de Thévenot, *The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant*, London: H. Faithorne, J. Adamson, C. Skegnes and T. Newborough, 1687.
State Library of Victoria, RARESF 915 T34.

Shah 'Abbas II died before Chardin completed the commission back in France. However, the increasing restrictions on Protestants in France motivated Chardin to return to Persia on a more ambitious venture. In August 1671, he and Raisin set off once more, not only with the commissioned jewels (which they hoped to sell to 'Abbas's successor, his son Sulayman) but with a rich store of other jewels and precious stones, clocks and watches, many of the smaller items sewn into their coats or hidden in secret compartments of their saddles.¹⁶ Sulayman refused to buy the jewels commissioned by his father, but for the next four and a half years Chardin travelled throughout Persia, doing business with the elite of Persian society, and recording his observations of Persian life.

Chardin had become aware of the great interest in Persian customs and society amongst his French compatriots after returning from his first voyage. He resolved that during his subsequent travels he would consciously observe and record all that he could



Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711.
State Library of Victoria, RARES 915.5 C37, vol. 1.

in order to provide as detailed an account as possible, and it is this that sets his work apart from others and made it the definitive reference on Persia for many years. He studied the accounts of those travellers who had preceded him, regularly met with the Capuchin Father, Raphaël du Mans, and engaged the services of colleagues and local residents to assist him in the compilation of detailed information, such as on the various quarters of the great Safavid capital Isfahan. He also employed an engraver by the name of Grelot to illustrate some of what he described.¹⁷ When Chardin had met Shah 'Abbas II during his first voyage, he required the services of an interpreter, however he soon became proficient in Persian, claiming later that his Persian was as good as his English (which was good, but not always perfect).¹⁸

After a subsequent two years in India, Chardin returned to Europe in 1680. Because France was not welcoming towards Protestants, he soon moved to London where he remained for the rest of his life. There he found his travels to be of great interest to members of the Royal Society, to which he was elected, and he was also knighted by King Charles II. He set about writing the account of his travels and, after a first volume appeared in 1686, his complete work was eventually published in 1711 as both a three-volume and a ten-volume series.



A seated Persian.

Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Amsterdam:

Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711.

State Library of Victoria, RARES 915.5 C37, vol. 2, plate 21.

Chardin's work covers a great variety of topics about Persia – including history, government, religion, economics, trade, anthropology, medicine, art, architecture, education, agriculture and botany. Chardin was also very interested in the character of the Persian people. Of them he wrote:

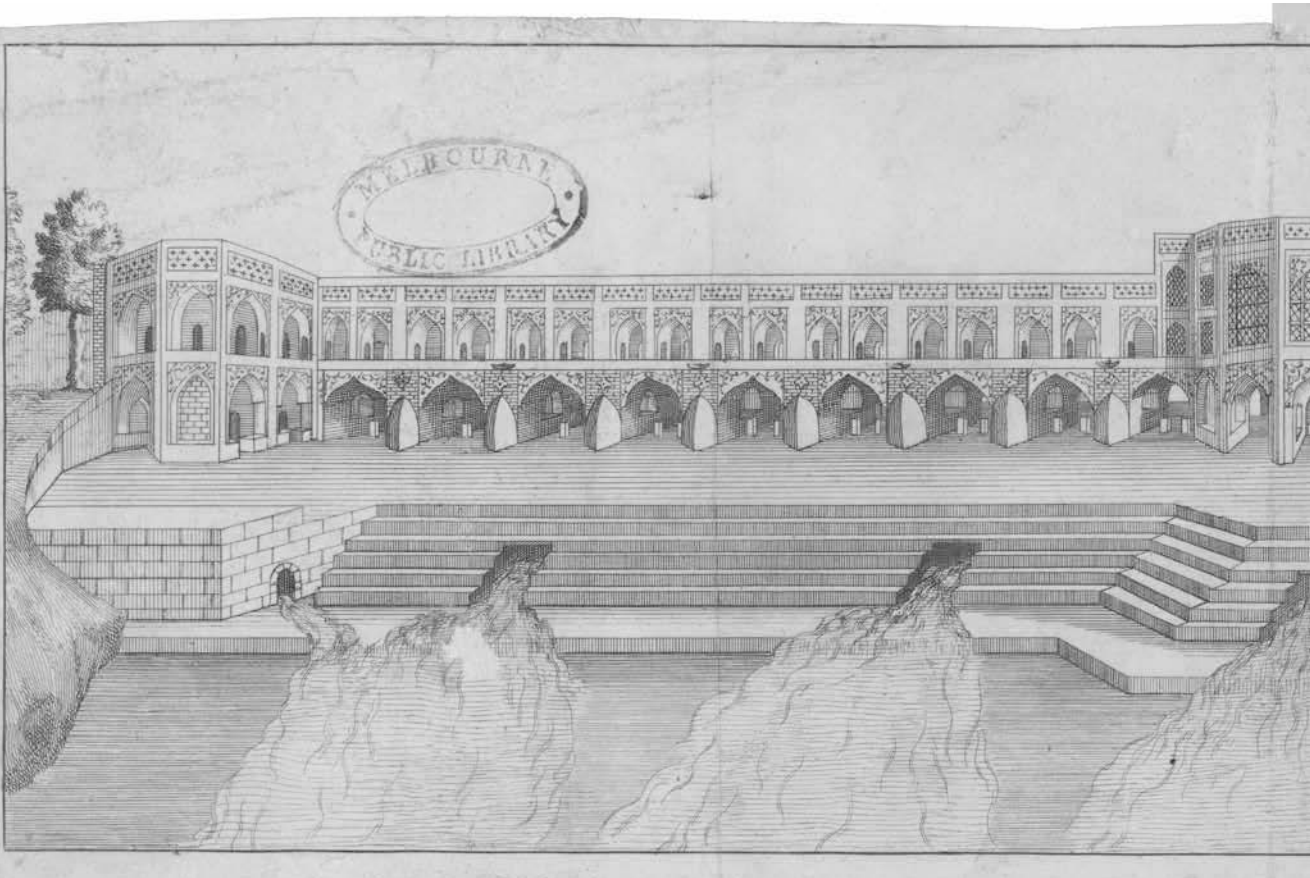
The Persians are the most kind people in the world; they have the most moving and engaging ways, the most complaisant temper, the smoothest and most flattering tongues, avoiding in their conversation stories or expressions which may occasion melancholy thoughts.¹⁹

One aspect of Persians' behaviour that caught Chardin's attention was their ability to sit still (above). Like Tavernier he remarked on the Persian habit of sitting in a beautiful garden rather than needing to promenade about it. On the subject of conversing without the need of gesticulation, he wrote:

The Eastern people are not nearly so restless or uneasy as we, they sit gravely and soberly and make no motion of their body. . . to help their discourse.²⁰

Of Persian poetry he wrote:

The number of figures of speech of which Persian poetry makes full use is almost limitless. Nevertheless all of them are sublime.²¹



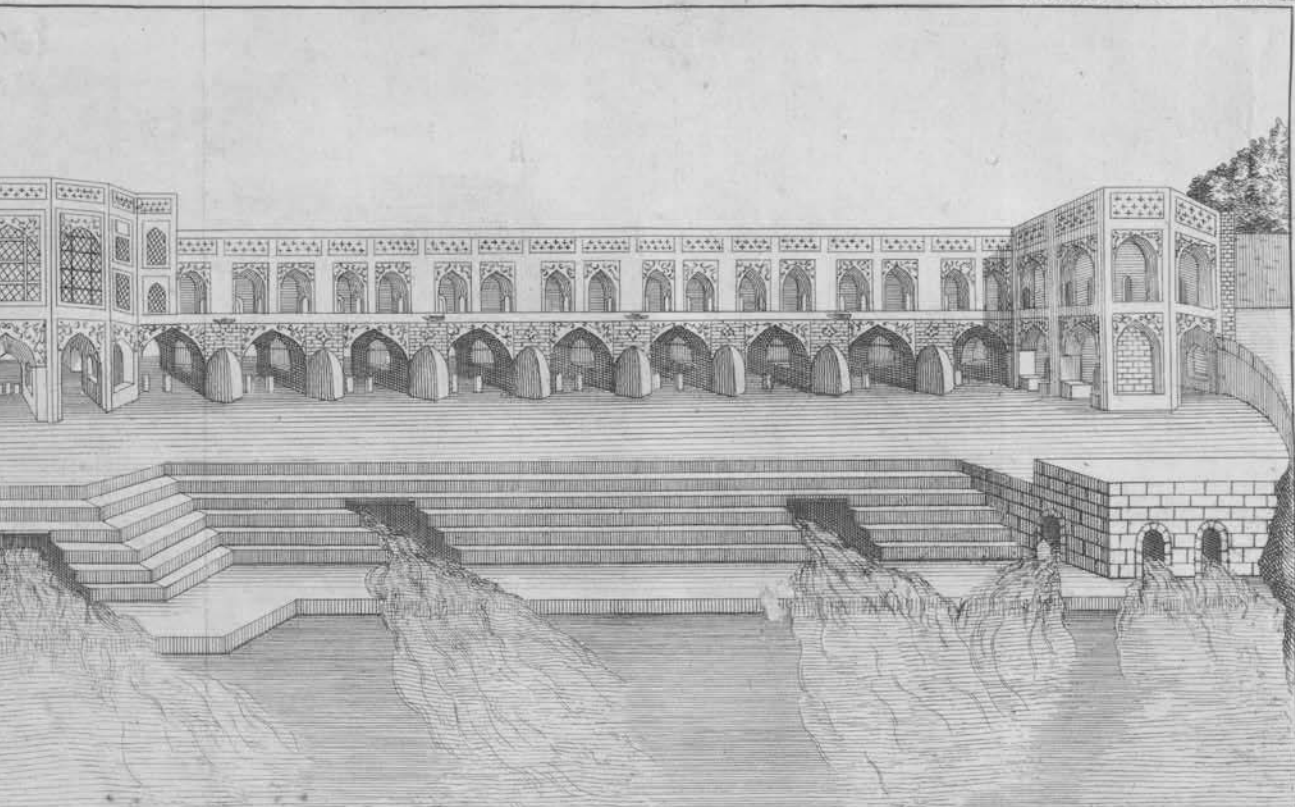
And of their script:

there is no more beautiful writing in the world than the Persian. Their letters are formed from thick and fine strokes which are delightfully finished off with a flourish well devised and delightful to see. No other people can write so well.²²

Chardin was not always full of praise and described the rule of the shahs as despotic. However, he credited the endurance of the ruling system to the climate – proposing that the weather sapped the people of any desire to rise up and overthrow their ruler.

The climate of each people is always, I believe, the chief cause of men's customs and inclinations, which differ no more from one another than the nature of the air differs from one place to another.²³

Chardin was also critical of the French nobles who were sent to Persia as part of the French East India Company and who made no attempt to understand the language, culture or etiquette of the people with whom they expected, generally unsuccessfully, to negotiate.²⁴



Khwaju Bridge.

From Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Amsterdam:

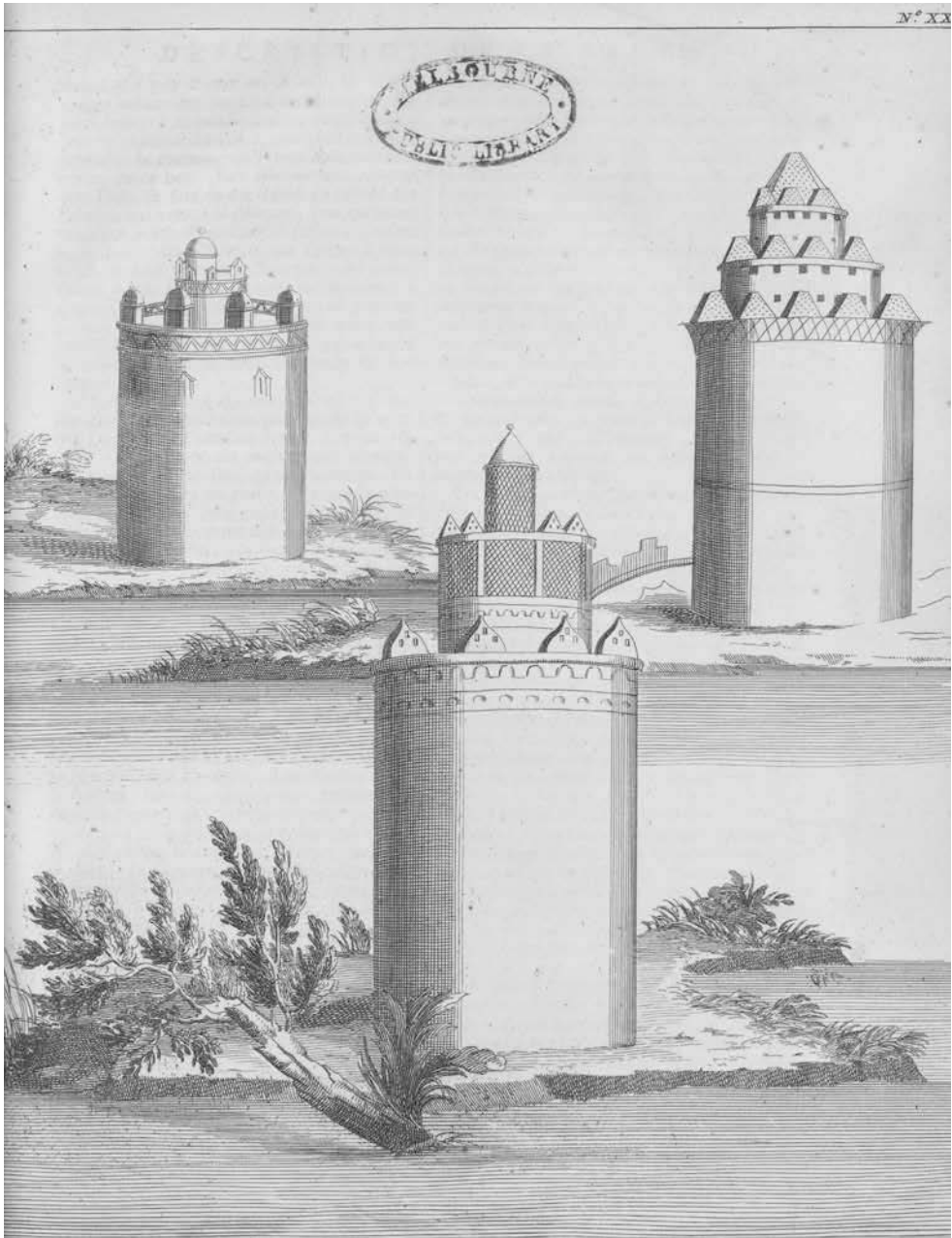
Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711.

State Library of Victoria, RARES 915.5 C37, vol. 3, plate 48.

Chardin was very interested in the architecture of Isfahan. His work includes a number of engravings of the famous Khwaju Bridge (above). One of the iconic images of Isfahan today, it is interesting to consider that this was a new construction at the time of Chardin's residency there, built under Shah 'Abbas II in the mid-17th century. Chardin quotes one of the texts that originally adorned the bridge:

The world is truly a bridge; pass over it. Weigh and measure all that you meet with on your passage.²⁵

In addition to grand public structures, Chardin took great interest in functional buildings such as pigeon towers (see p. 74). Chardin stated that there were more than 3,000 pigeon towers in and around Isfahan. Rather than provide homes for the pigeons, their main purpose was to collect their manure – ideal fertiliser for the melons and other fruits that were so prominent in the Persian diet.²⁶



Pigeon towers.

From Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le Chevalier Chardin en Perse*, Amsterdam:
Jean Louis de Lorme, 1711.

State Library of Victoria, RARES 915.5 C37, vol. 2, plate 20.

While the works of Tavernier, Thévenot and Chardin provided detailed information of great use to the traders, travellers and diplomats of their day, they also lived on in the literature and thought of Europe for subsequent centuries. The age of Louis XIV is today generally seen as having been primarily classical in focus, however Orientalism was beginning to emerge at this time. Louis XIV's minister Colbert sent scholars to the East and directed them to acquire manuscripts for the royal library – the precursor to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The reports of travellers were the inspiration for much of this new interest. As Nicholas Dew has pointed out:

the scholarly engagement with exotic learning was made possible – inevitably – by the movement of people and books around the networks created by diplomacy and trade.²⁷

The arrival of *1001 Nights* in Europe around this time was a product of this engagement, translated into French by the Orientalist scholar Antoine Galland.

Europeans were not major powerbrokers in the East at this time and were conscious of the dominance in the region of the Ottomans, the Mughals, and the Safavids. It would only be later that Orientalism would more regularly tend to be associated with a superior attitude towards its subjects, as analysed by Edward Said in his contentious and influential essay.²⁸ This is not to suggest that the writings of European travellers were without bias or free of misunderstandings. But as Judith Still has pointed out in relation to Chardin's work, the disciplinary term Orientalism, 'encompasses knowledge, translation, affection, admiration – it is not only or not always a peddling of stereotypes'.²⁹

The reports of travellers were of particular interest to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. Figures such as Rousseau, Voltaire and, particularly, Montesquieu, read these accounts, seeing in them new ways in which to consider the world as a whole and Europe in particular. Chardin was a particular source for Montesquieu, most obviously for his *Lettres Persanes* ('Persian Letters'), but also his major work, *De l'Esprit des Lois* ('The Spirit of the Laws'). For example Montesquieu's theory on the relationship between climate and society was directly inspired by that of Chardin. The *Lettres Persanes* is a critique of French government and society, conveyed through the imaginary correspondence of two Persian visitors to Paris. Scholars have identified at least 38 references to Chardin throughout the *Lettres*.³⁰

If the reports of French travellers to Persia were of great interest to, and had a great impact on, Europeans, one wonders what the Persians themselves made of these visitors. Chardin recounts the story of two French travellers, Lalain and Boullaye, who arrived in Isfahan bearing letters from Louis XIV that introduced them as gentlemen 'with an inclination to travel'. According to Chardin, the very concept was alien to the Persians and,

they asked if it was possible that there should be such people among us who would travel two or three thousand leagues with so much danger and inconvenience just to see what we Persians look like.³¹

In short, there were – just as there are today.