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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Intercultural Communication and the Representation of the "Iranian Other" in Adam Olearius's Travelogue: A Study of Iran during the Safavid Period

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Adam Olearius (1599–1671) traveled to Iran in the seventeenth century and, during his approximately eighteen-month stay in the country, learned Persian. In his travel account, he provides a substantial body of information about Iranian society under the Safavids. Travelogues are among the most important sources for historical, social, and cultural studies because, unlike many court historians, travel writers often observe and record aspects of everyday life, public behavior, customs, modes of subsistence, power relations, and the cultural signs of the host society at close range.

Using a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing primarily on Adam Olearius's travelogue, the present study examines aspects of cultural communication in Safavid Iran from the perspective of a European traveler and diplomatic agent. The central question is what kind of image of Iranian society emerges from the cultural and economic data recorded in Olearius's

account and to what extent this image can be regarded as reliable and useful for the study of Safavid cultural history.

The findings indicate that Olearius provides extensive information on such areas as education and writing practices, language and literature, poetry and learning, religious rituals, social ceremonies, food, clothing, etiquette, popular beliefs, markets, silk production, caravanserais, and the taxation system. These materials, however, need to be interpreted in light of the author's social and political position, the objectives of the diplomatic mission, cultural distance, European intellectual assumptions, and the possibility of misunderstanding in encounters with Iranian-Islamic culture.

The study therefore argues that Olearius's travelogue can be regarded as an important source for understanding cultural communication between Iran and Europe in the seventeenth century, provided that a clear distinction is made between direct observation, second-hand reports, evaluative judgments, and the author's cultural presuppositions.

Method:

This study adopts a library-based research method. The data were collected from relevant books and written sources through systematic note-taking. The collected materials were then classified according to cultural themes and categories, after which they were processed, examined, and analyzed in accordance with the objectives of the study.

Findings:

The first finding is that Olearius's travelogue presents a multidimensional image of Safavid Iran. This image is not confined to the royal court and political affairs but also encompasses schools, markets, food, clothing, rituals, poetry, language, and everyday customs. For this reason, the travelogue can be regarded as an important source for the study of the cultural and social history of Safavid Iran.

The second finding indicates that, in Olearius's account, Iranian culture appears as one strongly shaped by literary refinement, ritual practices, and collective social occasions. He pays particular attention to poetry, "Gulistan", writing and calligraphy, "ta'arof" (ritualized politeness), hospitality, religious ceremonies, and public celebrations, thereby transmitting these aspects of Iranian culture to his European readership.

The third finding concerns the simultaneous presence of admiration and misunderstanding in Olearius's narrative. At times, he praises the taste, intelligence, hospitality, courtesy, and learning of Iranians, while elsewhere he offers negative judgments concerning what he perceives as superstition, "ta'arof", or certain forms of social behavior. This ambivalence demonstrates that the travelogue is not an entirely neutral reflection of Iranian society, but rather an intercultural text that requires critical interpretation.

The fourth finding is that the economic information contained in the travelogue is closely intertwined with cultural data. Markets, taxation, currency, and silk are not merely economic subjects in Olearius's account; they also reveal the mechanisms through which Iran was connected with Europe, Russia, India, and the Ottoman Empire. From this perspective, such material is also relevant to the history of cultural communication and intercultural exchange.

Conclusions:

An examination of Adam Olearius's travelogue demonstrates that it is an important source for understanding Safavid Iran from a European perspective. With considerable attention to detail, Olearius recorded various aspects of Iranian cultural, social, and economic life and, alongside his account of the German delegation's political and commercial mission, offered

descriptions of schools, markets, rituals, clothing, food, language, poetry, learning, social etiquette, and financial relations. This thematic breadth makes his travelogue a valuable source for the study of Safavid cultural history.

In the cultural sphere, his observations suggest that Iranian society was shaped by an interconnected system of Persian literary culture, religious education, collective rituals, "ta'arof", hospitality, the aesthetics of dress, religious ceremonies, and historical memory. His references to the "Gulistan" and "Bustan", Persian poetry, writing and calligraphy, schools, and the social status of learning clearly indicate that language and literature in Safavid society functioned not merely as means of expression, but also as forms of cultural and communicative capital.

In the economic sphere, Olearius provides information on markets, caravanserais, currency, taxation, commodities, silk, and trade routes. These accounts reveal that Safavid Iran was integrated into extensive regional and transregional networks and that its connections with Europe were not limited to diplomatic exchanges and courtly relations. Markets, commodities, silk, and commercial routes also played a significant role in sustaining intercultural contact and exchange.

Nevertheless, the travelogue should not be used uncritically. Cultural differences, the author's political and commercial mission, his European intellectual background, and his occasional reliance on second-hand information mean that some of his judgments concerning Iranians require careful evaluation. The reliability of the travelogue therefore depends on distinguishing among direct observation, mediated reports, and value-laden judgments, while also comparing its information with Iranian sources and other travel accounts from the Safavid period.

Ultimately, Olearius's travelogue is not merely a record of a German traveler's journey to Iran, but a text documenting an encounter between two cultures. Just as it introduces Safavid Iran to European readers, it also reveals the European gaze through which Iran was observed and interpreted. Its significance may therefore be understood on two levels: first, as a source for reconstructing aspects of the cultural, social, and economic history of Safavid Iran; and second, as a text through which the formation of the image of Iran in seventeenth-century European thought can be examined.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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