

# Metaphoric Meaning of Sir Robert Sherley's Exotic Appearance: From the History of Anglo-Safavid Relations

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## Abstract

The purpose of the research is to examine Safavid Shah Abbas's ambassador Sir Robert Sherley's all known portraits, to explore what was the purpose of a born Englishman in wearing Safavid honorific garments and turban permanently in public and to define the role of Sherley's exotic appearance in further expanding and strengthening Anglo-Safavid relations in particular? The methodology of research is based on implementing of one of the unobtrusive qualitative research methods – content analysis, as well as on an integrated application of historical, retrospective and general scientific (analysis, synthesis, generalization) methods. Sherley's four known portraits painted in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the XVII century was chosen as the units of analysis. The scientific novelty is that an attempt to study the portraits of Sir Robert Sherley as valuable historical sources to study Anglo-Safavid relations is being taken for the first time in domestic historiography. Although there are a lot of works devoted to Anglo-Safavid relations both in domestic and foreign scientific literature, this issue has never been the object of special scientific interest either of domestic or foreign researchers. Detailed analysis of Robert Sherley's portraits as well as analytical study both of contemporaneous sources and historical events revealed that portraits were not just a pictorial representation of Robert and his appearance was neither a cultural cross-dressing, nor self-fashioning, nor cultural distancing, nor religious devotion, but was a part of his diplomatic strategy during his ambassadorial missions. As a part of proto-*soft power* policy Sherley turned his appearance into the best instrument of diplomatic manipulations. His exotic clothes carried in themselves coded political messages and served several principal goals, both diplomatic and personal, and, moreover, reflected on literature, theatre, art (portraiture), and even court fashion of early modern England.

**Keywords:** Sir Robert Sherley, Anglo-Safavid relations, England, Safavid Empire, portraits, Shah Abbas, clothes, robe of honor, silk, proto-*soft power* policy.

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## Sir Robert Şerli'nin Görünüşünün Metaforik Anlamı: İngiliz-Safevi İlişkileri Tarihinden

### Özet

Araştırmannın amacı, Safevi Şah Abbas'ın elçisi Sir Robert Şerli'nin bilinen tüm portrelerini incelemek, bir İngiliz'in toplum içinde sürekli Safevi fahri kıyafeti ve sark takmasının amacının ne olduğunu araştırmak ve özellikle de Şerli'nin dış görünüşünün İngiliz-Safevi ilişkilerinin yaygınlaşması ve güçlenmesindeki rolünü tanımlamaktır. Araştırma metodolojisi, pek bilinmeyen niteliksel araştırma yöntemlerinden olan - içerik analizinin yanı sıra tarihsel, geçmişe yönelik ve genel bilimsel yöntemlerin (analiz, sentez, genelleme) karmaşık uygulanmasına dayanmaktadır. Araştırma konusu olarak Şerli'nin XVII. yüzyılın 1. çeyreğinde yaptığı bilinen dört portresi seçilmiştir. Makalenin bilimsel yeniliği, yerel tarih yazımında ilk kez, İngiliz-Safevi ilişkilerini incelemek için değerli bir tarihsel kaynak olarak Sir Robert Şerli'nin portrelerini inceleme girişiminde bulunulmasıdır. Hem yerli hem de yabancı bilimsel literatüründe İngiliz-Safevi ilişkilerine yönelik pek çok çalışma olmasına rağmen, bu konu hiçbir zaman yerli ve yabancı araştırmacıların özel bilimsel ilgi alanına girmemiştir. Robert Şerli'nin portrelerinin detaylı analizi ve hem dönemin kaynaklarının hem de tarihi olayların analitik incelenmesi, portrelerin Robert'ın sadece görsel tasviri olmadığını ve görünüşünün onun tarzı, kültürel uzaklaşması veya dini inancı ile ilgili olmadığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu onun elçilik görevleri sırasındaki diplomatik stratejisinin bir parçasıydı. Proto-*soft power* politikasının bir parçası olarak Şerli, görünüşünü diplomatik manipülasyonların en iyi aracına dönüştürmüştü. Kıyafetleri siyasi mesajlar taşımış, hem diplomatik hem de kişisel birçok temel amaca hizmet etmiş ve dahası edebiyat, tiyatro, sanat (portre) ve hatta erken modern İngiltere'nin saray modasına yansımıştı.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sir Robert Şerli, İngiliz-Safevi ilişkileri, İngiltere, Safevi İmparatorluğu, Şah Abbas, elbise, şeref cübbesi, ipek, proto-*soft power* politikası.

### Introduction

#### The Problem Statement

Portrait is not just a piece of art, but at the same time along with archival documents may serve as a valuable source of information that enables researchers to fill in the gap in studying certain historical issues. That is why alongside with the written sources, examining the life-size portraits of Englishman, diplomat Sir Robert Sherley (1581-1628), who spent almost 30 years of his life at the service to

the Safavid Shah Abbas, will allow to define the role and place of the former in Anglo-Safavid relations that today needs to be studied more detailed. An attempt to study the portraits of Sir Robert Sherley is being taken for the first time in domestic historiography.

The main attention in this article will be paid to the appearance, i.e. to the exotic clothes of Sir Robert Sherley depicted in portraits as the object of our research and the role it played in his diplomatic missions. Some contemporary sources and several portraits show that as a representative of a Safavid Shah to a number of European courts, including England, Sir Robert Sherley, despite his English origin, habitually appeared in Safavid garments. According to some contemporary sources, donning European clothes in the East could be dangerous for European diplomats, travelers, traders. But in one of his recent works Prof. Nabil Matar claims that Eastern diplomats also sometimes faced humiliation, insult and even violence in European countries. So, Sherley's permanent appearance in Safavid's honorific garments in public demanded courage. According to the report of historian Thomas Fuller, Robert "*much affected to appear in foreign Vestes; and, as if his Clothes were his limbs, accounted himself never ready till he had something of the Persian [Safavid] Habit about him.*"<sup>1</sup> People were so accustomed to seeing Robert in Safavid attire that the Venetian ambassador in London was very surprised to see him in traditional England dress at the royal reception at King James I's court in 1611.

The question may arise: Why did a born Englishman need to wear exotic garments in European countries, in England in particular? Although there are a lot of works devoted to Anglo-Safavid relationships both in domestic and foreign scientific literature, this question has never been the object of special scientific research either of domestic or foreign researchers until the first attempt taken by Prof. Ladan Niayesh in one of her recent works "The Fabric of Silk Power in the Sherley Portraits" (2016), Prof. Gary Schwartz in his "The Sherleys and the Shah: Persia as the stakes in a rogue's game" (2013), and partly Roger Stevens in his "Robert Sherley: The Unanswered Questions" (1979). These are Prof. Niayesh, Prof. Gary Schwartz and Roger Stevens's mentioned works that inspired us to conduct a content analysis of Sir Robert Sherley's hitherto four known portraits painted in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the XVI century by various painters both in Roma and London that were chosen as a unit of analysis (Illustrations 1, 2, 3, 4).

1 Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, Vol. III, P. Austin Nuttall LL.D, London 1840, s. 255.



**Illustration 1:** Sir Robert Sherley's reception by Pope Paul V in Rome (1609). Author: Matthaus Greuter / The National Portrait Gallery ©



**Illustration 2:** Sir Robert Sherley's reception by Paul V in Rome in 1609.



**Illustration 3:** Sir Robert Sherley (1622). Author: Anthony Van Dyck / Petworth House ©



**Illustration 4:** The anonymous portrait of Sir Robert Sherley (1624–1627) / The R.J. Berkeley collection ©

### **The Purpose of the Article**

Since Anglo-Safavid relations were not only a part of geopolitical system in Early modern period, but as well as a part of complex East-West relations and Islamo-Christian civilization system, studying the role of an English gentleman Sir Robert Sherley and particularly the role of his public appearance played in establishing and further developing of bilateral relations between the two major states of the early modern time is of great scientific importance. As we know, cultural cross-dressing was famous in portraiture in early modern Europe. The fascination with the Orient in the XVII century encouraged the beginning of a new genre in portraiture – painting of exotically dressed Europeans. Famous European artists Rubens's and Rembrandt's portraits of Europeans in Oriental clothing may serve as good examples. Some of scientists could represent cultural cross-dressing as Europe's domination over the Orient. But in general, in early modern period Eastern forms of dress played a vital role in European self-fashioning and self-promotion. Nevertheless, in the case of Robert Sherley self-fashioning and self-staging was a part of his diplomatic strategy. It is noteworthy that as a cultural marker, clothes do not only define national allegiance, religious affiliation and personal social status, as Prof. Nabil Matar stated, but at the same time they carried in themselves political messages too and were one of the important tools in diplomatic negotiations, as it was in the case of Sir Robert Sherley, who turned into the symbol of Anglo-Safavid relations. Although about four hundred centuries have passed since the death of Sir Robert Sherley, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. One of them is the main research question: What was the purpose of an Englishman Robert's habitual public appearance in exotic Safavid clothes in Europe, particularly in England?

The answer to this question may be found in the following reasons:

- The Safavids' wish to forge the military and political alliance with England against their common rival – the Ottoman Empire;
- Propaganda of profitability of spreading the exclusive silk trade between England and the Safavid Empire;
- Necessity to confirm Sherley's ambassadorial status;
- Wish to restore the image of the Sherley family in front of the English Crown.



### **Forging a Military Alliance Against Ottoman Empire: Sir Robert Sherley's Appearance as Encoded Diplomatic Messages and Instrument of Diplomatic Manipulations**

Despite Sir Anthony Sherley's failure of ambassadorial mission to Europe, his younger brother Sir Robert Sherley was chosen by Shah Abbas to head two long-term diplomatic missions to England and other European courts on behalf of the Safavid Shah. Shah Abbas was a farsighted diplomat and sensitive politician. As Ronald Ferrier states, "*ruthless in purpose, he was flexible in method*".<sup>2</sup> Choosing no other, but Sir Robert Sherley, being both an Englishman and Christian, who spent 9 years in the Safavid Empire and knew very well the particular features of diplomacy of both England and the Safavid Empire, was not a random decision, but a part of Shah Abbas's wise diplomatic strategy. As Shah Abbas stated in his letter to King James from 1607, "...wee had thought to haue sent one of o<sup>r</sup> owne subject ts to aunswaere the Christian Princes, But the Worthie gentleman Robert Shirley to us most deere and beloued...And bycause he is both yo<sup>r</sup>s and o<sup>r</sup>s" "...bycause he understandes o<sup>r</sup> state, kingdome, and what we desire..."<sup>3</sup> As we know, Shah Abbas sent an embassy to Europe setting two main goals, one of which was to form a military alliance against the Ottoman Empire. England was a Christian state, and the Safavid Empire, as the Ottoman Empire, was a Muslim state. In early modern period religion was closely connected to policy. Robert was aware of how sensitive was the religious question for the English court. Since England was not eager to form a political alliance with the Safavids against the Ottoman Empire or even be engaged in extensive military actions against the latter, Robert Sherley could realize the importance of religious factor and needed to convince the English Crown to persuade to ally with the Safavids. For that a presentable appearance was important. Clothes were chosen by Robert as an impact tool for propagandistic purposes.

As in all Europe, almost until the end of the XVII century Islam and Muslims in general were associated with the expansionist wars of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, wearing Muslim clothes could make an impression of a powerful would-be-partner the Safavid Empire could be for England. No wonder that England's attitude to Islam went through a long way from prejudice to tolerance.

2 Ronald W. Ferrier, "The European diplomacy of Shah 'Abbas I and the first Persian embassy to England", *Iran*, 11, 1973, s. 75.

3 Evelyn Ph. Shirley, *The Sherley Brothers, an Historical Memoir of the Lives of Sir Thomas Sherley, Sir Anthony Sherley, and Sir Robert Sherley, Knights*, The Press of Charles Whittingham, Chiswick 1848, s. 60-61.

England's complex and extensive relationship with the Islamic world went back to Elizabethan England. As Prof. Jerry Brotton stated, the amicable relations between England and the Islamic world that prospered under Elizabeth arose not from a principle of tolerance but as a result of political expediency. Split between Catholics and Protestants, the Pope's decision to excommunicate Elizabeth opened a new page in the history of bilateral relations between England and the Islamic world – an era of not just political, economic cooperation, but at the same time cultural influence on each other.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, starting from the XVI century in England attitude to Islam turned gradually from “threat to Christianity” into a “potential ally”. No wonder that Western scientists have started using such terminology as “*Orient Isle*” (talking about England), “*England's “Muslim policy”*” (not “Eastern” as previously), “*theological Brexit*” (i.e. early modern England's active policy with Muslim World). If some decades earlier they almost completely ignored a significant place and role of Islam both in diplomatic and cultural life of early modern England, today there are a big number of researchers who do not only admit it, but claim the aforementioned. Besides, back in early modern England one even started to see the parallels between Protestantism and Islam, Shiism particularly. There are a lot of works of early seventeenth-century travel literature in which one may see correlation between Protestantism and Shiism. According to Chloe Houston, “*the contrasts between the Safavid and Ottoman Empires, and specifically Persia's [Safavid Empire's] Shi'ite status, were used by English travel writers during this period in order to create an image of Persia [Safavid Empire] as a nation open to English trade and travel.*”<sup>5</sup>

As prof. Julia Schleck argues, “*the conclusion to the Sherley's efforts to unite England with Persia [the Safavid Empire] – militarily, economically and textually – remind us that the Sherley's success was highly determined by the audience to which they addressed themselves.*”<sup>6</sup> And, as we know out of sources, Robert's target objects were the English court and the merchant community. That is why Robert, as his elder brother Anthony, turned his appearance into the best instrument of diplomatic manipulations. According to some contemporary sources, within his 15-year ambassadorial activity, Robert

4 See: Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle. Elizabethan England and the Islamic World*, Allen Lane, London 2016.

5 Chloe Houston, ““Thou glorious kingdome, thou chiefe of Empires’: Persia in early seventeenth-century travel literature”, *Studies in travel writing*, 13/2, 2009, s. 149.

6 Julia Schleck, *Telling true tales of Islamic lands: forms of mediation in English travel writing, 1575-1630*, Susquehanna University Press, Selinsgrove 2011, s. 70.

Sherley habitually appeared in public with a *turban* – a distinctive Muslim headwear – on his head that symbolized Islam. Almost in all the portraits Robert Sherley is depicted in sumptuous Safavid attires with a turban on his head. As Prof. Nabil Matar pointed out in one of his works, "...the Muslim head-dress became the most dominant, the most feared, and the most awe-inspiring symbol of Islam in Renaissance. ... The turban became... the preeminent symbol of Muslim power and hegemony."<sup>7</sup> So, wearing turban, Robert managed to demonstrate the Safavid Shah's imperial power as well as his will to cooperate with the English Crown.

Thus, Robert's habitual appearance in expensive Safavid high-status garments in public and turban on his head was neither the matter of the cultural distancing, nor confrontation between East-West, nor expression of an antagonism of "otherness" and "Englishness", nor display of his religious devotion, nor superiority or inferiority of East or West. On the contrary, first and foremost, it was a demonstration of the Safavid Empire's power and then possibility of both political cooperation between the two Empires and religious coexistence between the Safavid Empire and England as between Muslims and Christians. Moreover, the presence of such English elements of clothing as English boots, stir-ups, starched collar and sleeve turn-ups in Robert's exotic Safavid outfit was obvious expression of readiness of the Safavid Empire to a dialogue between Orient and Occident, and at the same time demonstration of a possible symbiosis of Christianity with Islam. Robert's attempt to unite both Muslim and Christian elements of clothing in his outfit was aimed at demonstration of the Safavids' ethno-religious tolerance and openness to Christendom that would help them to form a military alliance against their common rival with Europe – the Ottomans, who as the Safavids were Muslims.

The Safavids attached great importance to the figurative images on Safavid silks. They did not only reflect the artists' highest technical weaving skills, but at the same time had a historical value. Galina Lassikova who studied the woven images on Safavid textiles suggested that every image had a message and particular function and, moreover, those images reflected contemporary significant events that took place in the Safavid Empire. Such scenes as the fight between Simurgh and dragon, hunting, the prisoner imagery depicted on both velvets and lampas, the images of Hushang's exploit in miniature, even the scenes of love between Layla and Majnun had a hidden metaphoric meaning. In this respect ambassadorial gifts are

7 Nabil Matar, "The Renaissance England and the Turban", *Images of Other: Europe and the Museum World before 1700*, ed. by D. Blanks, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 1996, s. 39.

of great importance. Thus, being deliberately chosen textile presents, in particular images woven on them, sent by a Shah to his European counterparts played the role of visual language and encoded certain diplomatic messages. For instance, Shah Tahmasb I presented the Russian tsar Ivan IV the *khilat* (robe) with the image of Hushang trying to kill the dragon with a piece of rock what, according to Lassikova, could symbolize Shah's need in military alliance, i.e. supply of firearms, against joint rival – the Ottoman Empire associated with a dragon on the *khilat*.<sup>8</sup> Shah Tahmasb's gift to the Ottoman Sultan may serve as another example of symbolic meaning of textiles. In order to keep the Amasya peace treaty of 1555 the former sent to Sultan Murad III a tent made of velvet. Lassikova argues that sending to Sultan Murad III a tent made of velvet with a scene of hunting with the use of gun was aimed to intimidate the Ottoman Empire to renew the war by showing Safavids' possession of firearms what in its turn symbolized the military power of the Safavid Empire.<sup>9</sup> As we know, on the portrait pictured by an unknown English painter Sir Robert Sherley is depicted wearing a knee-length robe with the image of Hushang's fight with a dragon (Illustration 4), the same image as on the *khilat* presented to tsar Ivan IV. As Lassikova noted, "*the khil'at of Abbas's ambassador provides evidence that the illustrations of this Shahnama episode became an integral part of the diplomatic arguments inherited by Shah Abbas I from his ancestors.*"<sup>10</sup> But if previously the image of Hushang fighting alone with the dragon could be considered for hint to get firearms from European rulers, now, in the case of Sir Robert Sherley, it seems reasonable to assume that it could represent the strength of Shah Abbas armed with only a stone to fight independently such a world evil like a dragon who can be associated with the Ottoman Empire – the major rival to most of European states.

### **Silk Trade as the *Raison D'être* of Anglo-Safavid Relations: Sir Robert Sherley's Silken Robes as "A Sartorial Practice of Diplomatic Lobbying"**

The Safavid Empire was one of the major silk-exporting empires in the early modern period, and England in its turn was searching for new exporters of raw silk. As we know, along with forging a military alliance against the Ottoman Empire, one of the principal aims of sending Safavid diplomatic missions to

8 Galina Lassikova, "Hushang the Dragon-slayer: Fire and Firearms in Safavid Art and Diplomacy", *Iranian Studies*, 43/1, 2010, s. 41-42.

9 *Ibid.*, s. 51.

10 *Ibid.*

Europe, particularly to England, was expanding an exclusive silk trade. No wonder that silk trade was the *raison d'être* of Anglo-Safavid relations in general. By the way, it was England who first made an attempt to begin a silk trade, not the Safavid Empire. The content of Queen Elizabeth's letter to Shah Tahmasb sent through her ambassador Anthony Jenkinson dated 8 May 1561 proves the aforementioned. Although in 1565, 1568 and 1570 the English Muscovy Company merchants managed to gain several *farmans* from Shah Tahmasb which granted them freedom to travel to Safavid Empire, the latter could not fulfil their demands in silk supply because silk-producing areas were out of his direct control. But at the time of Shah Abbas the situation was different. Shah Abbas established monopoly on silk trade. Thus, trade and silk production in particular was under the direct control of Shah Abbas. The Safavid Empire in its turn pursued an independent silk trade policy regardless the plans of the rulers of European states. As Linda Steinmann states,

“Control of the silk trade was an economic component in Abbas's centralizing policies and part of his vision of the Iranian state [Safavid Empire]”. ... Although the diversion of that trade to the Persian Gulf away from the Ottoman lands may have formed part of Abbas's foreign policy, it was not merely that, as some Western historians would indicate. ... Thus, “the reorientation of the silk trade” ... can be seen not as a consequence of the policies of the European trading companies, but rather as part of an ongoing, planned system of economic changes which contributed to the centralization of 'Abbas's state.”<sup>11</sup>

Statistical data testifies to England's growing demand in raw silk. If in 1520 the total import of raw silk to England was 12000 pounds, in 1621 it significantly increased and reached 120000 pounds per year and further in 1630 it grew up to 172000 pounds, in 1634 and 1640 the total import reached 200000 and 220000 pounds respectively.<sup>12</sup> Safavid Empire could fulfill England's need in raw silk.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the East India Company was not sure in a prospective future of silk trade proposals made by Robert to the English Crown. So, Sir Robert Sherley

11 Linda K. Steinmann, “Shah 'Abbas and the Royal Silk Trade 1599-1629”, *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, 14/1, 1987, s. 69-70.

12 Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653*, Verso, London and New York 2013, s. 25.

13 See: Edmund Herzog, “The volume of Iranian raw silk exports in the Safavid period”, *Iranian Studies*, 25/1-2, 1992, s. 61-79.

needed to convince the English Crown that the Safavid Empire could be a profitable potential trading partner. In this regard, Robert's sumptuous gold and silver-colored attires made of expensive Safavid silk and as well as abundant use of silk costumes in his life-size portraits served both as an advertisement and proof of the opulence of silk and as his promise of a fruitful silk trade.<sup>14</sup> No wonder that silk, silken carpets and outfits were the main items of the Safavids' royal gifting diplomacy. As Prof. Ladan Niayesh stated, Robert's habitual appearance in expensive Safavid silken robes was "*a sartorial practice of diplomatic lobbying*."<sup>15</sup> England became one of the largest importers of the Safavid silk and silken products.

### **The Issue of Robert Sherley's *Bona Fides***

Although Robert Sherley is mentioned as an ambassador almost in all travelogues and other contemporary sources, the issue of his ambassadorial status is still controversial and poorly studied. First attempts to examine Robert's status and responsibilities have been taken by Sir Edward Denison Ross, Roger Stevens, Nedda Mehdizadeh. So far in both domestic and foreign historiography Robert Sherley is differently characterized: from traveler, adventurer, emissary, agent, envoy, ambassador to impostor. According to Prof. Jonathan Burton, whose article is devoted to examination of the differences between the status of European and Safavid ambassadors, "*the safir was typically one of multiple envoys sent to a single location, a practice Abbas implemented as part of his ongoing efforts "to establish a variety of links... by which to strengthen ties to the West" and redirect trade away from Ottoman dominated ports.*"<sup>16</sup> No wonder, as a result, Safavid ambassadors' contest for their ambassadorial status was a common practice at that period of time. One of such shameful conflicts that occurred between the two Safavid ambassadors Robert Sherley and Naqđ Ali Beg for the right to represent the Shah in 1626 in London undermined seriously their credibility in front of the English Crown and caused expulsion of both ambassadors back to the Safavid Empire by King Charles I. Moreover,

14 Ladan Niayesh, "The Fabric of Silk Power in the Sherley Portraits", *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, ed. By N. Rivere de Carles, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016, s. 213.

15 *Ibid.*, s. 210.

16 Jonathan Burton, "The Shah's Two Ambassadors: The Travels of the Three English Brothers and the Global Early Modern", *Emissaries in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Mediation, Transmission, Traffic, 1550-1700*, ed. by B. Charry and G. Shahani, Routledge, London and New York 2016, s. 34.

Charles I sent an English delegation under the command of Sir Dodmore Cotton with the purpose to define whether Sherley was empowered by Shah Abbas to represent him in front of the Crown and to conduct trade negotiations. By the way, Sir Dodmore Cotton was the 1<sup>st</sup> ambassador sent from England to the Safavid Empire. So, probably Robert's habitual appearance in public in Safavid honorific garments could also be aimed at affirmation of his ambassadorial status.

Though Robert's credentials during his first ambassadorial mission were not dubious, during his stay in England in 1611-1612 he faced Spain's attempts to tarnish his ambassadorial reputation that in its turn made his position in England precarious.<sup>17</sup> The main reason of Spanish Court's hostile attitude towards Robert was competing interests of both Spain and England in the Safavid trade. As we know, the principle goal of Robert's mission to England in 1611 was offering to England a monopoly on the trade routes out of the Safavid Empire what could seriously affect the Spanish commercial capital. It was Sir Robert Sherley due to whose attempts the conservative merchants of the East Indian Company who at first were hostile, skeptical and suspicious to Robert's trading proposals got interested in the Safavid silk trade.

Noteworthy that in the face of need to prove that his credentials were not fake, Robert's elder brother Anthony, who also was sent to European courts as Shah Abbas's ambassador, practiced ordering to paint *twin portraits* of him and his rival Husain Ali Beg with special inscriptions "*Legate*" and "*Associate of the Legate*" respectively, thus claiming Anthony's privileged position over Husain Ali Beg.<sup>18</sup> According to Shenasa and Munroe, Robert could practice this tactic too: "*In light of his precarious position at the court of Shah Abbas in 1622, it seems reasonable to assume that Sherley had his portrait painted to immortalize himself in the role of Ambassador...*"<sup>19</sup> So, inscription "*Ambassador*" on the portrait painted by Van Dyck indicated Robert's ambassadorial status. Noteworthy that Van Dyck was famous for his sartorial

17 See: Jennifer Scarce, "Style from top to toe: how to dress in Isfahan", *Safavid Art and Architecture*, ed. by Sh. Canby, British Museum, London 2002, s. 45-46.

18 See: Gary Schwartz, "The Sherleys and the Shah: Persia as the stakes in a rogue's game", *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European dialogue in seventeenth-century art & contemporary art of Teheran*, ed. by A. Langer, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2016, s. 90-91.

19 Nazanin Hedayat Shenasa-Nazanin Hedayat Munroe, "Donning the Cloak: Safavid Figural Silks and the Display of Identity", *Textile Society of America 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial Symposium: Textiles as Cultural Expressions*, Honolulu September 4-7, 2008, *Proceedings*, ed. by Ann Svenson Perlman, the Textile Society of America, Honolulu 2008, [https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/133\\_last](https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/133_last) accessed: 28.03.2022.

manipulations through the portraits. Besides, as Tara Mayer stresses, “*Van Dyck’s reputation for capturing exotic dress was established with his 1622 portrait of Sir Robert Shirley, which has been credited with pioneering the European fashion for posing in oriental costume.*”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, there are still various and different points of view among western researchers regarding Sir Robert Sherley’s status. Rudi Matthee claims that “*seen from Iran [the Safavid Empire] rather than from England, the Sherleys were rather minor agents who were manipulated by the shah in the service of a much larger diplomatic offensive.*”<sup>21</sup> Prof. Ladan Niayesh expresses completely different point of view. She argues that

“... on the development of a commercial diplomacy involving neither traders nor ambassadors but a new type of diplomatic agent as the negotiator of a cross-confessional dialogue between the East and the West. Bringing together the cultural, the political, the military and the commercial, the Sherleys’ experience testifies to the emergence of a dynamic comprehensive diplomacy. The pictorial representation of the Shirley brothers emphasizes new methodological approaches to confessional peace and the actual incapacity of diplomatic agents to handle such protean instrument as dynamic diplomacy. ... Such confusion regarding their status raises the question of the emergence of diplomatic agents playing the part of commercial lobbyists”.<sup>22</sup>

In Prof. Nedda Mehdizadeh’s view, Robert Sherly was just “*one of the most famous English travelers to Safavid Persia*”, who admired Shah Abbas and was bestowed by him the title of *ilchi* in 1608. “*The post of ilchi*”, Prof. Mehdizadeh states, “*referred to a Persian [Safavid] envoy who would be entrusted to do the bidding of the shah in foreign lands, someone who might be thought of as a “messenger” with specific duties and responsibilities*”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, based on the description of Robert’s death given in Cotton’s gentleman attendant, Sir Thomas Herbert’s travelogue that Robert “*...wanting a fitter place of Buriall, was put into the earth at the doore of his owne House inCazbeenwhere he died*”, Prof. Mehdizadeh argues that

20 Tara Mayer, “Cultural Cross-Dressing: Posing and Performance in Orientalist Portraits”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2012, s. 286, n11.

21 Rudi Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: silk for silver, 1600-1730*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, s. 77.

22 Niayesh, agm., s. 205, 209.

23 Nedda Mehdizadeh, “*The Last Goodbye: Robert Sherley’s “Vltimum Vale” in Safavid Persia*”, 17 August 2020, <https://memorients.com/articles/the-last-goodbye-robert-sherleys-vltimum-vale-in-safavid-persia>, last accessed: 29.03.2022.



“Sherley canon’s representation of Robert as a “Persian ambassador” [Safavid] rather than a Persian[Safavid] ilchimanufactured the promise of Anglo-Persian [Anglo-Safavid] co-existence and the fantasy of unlimited and unregulated English access to the Safavid Empire. Such an achievement would surely merit a more honourable end than an unceremonious dismissal followed by a humble burial “at the doore of his owne House inCazbeen.” Herbert’s account of Robert’s death, however, punctures the hopeful image of what a “Persian ambassador” [Safavid] had come to mean.”<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Sir Robert Sherley’s portraits prove the exact opposite of Prof. Mehdizadeh’s statement. In all portraits Robert was dressed in Safavid honorific garments – *khilçat* (robe of honor) and *taj* (the upright rod around which the cloth of the turban is wrapped) (Illustration 1) on head, the prerogative of reception of which had only few favored and influential persons close to the Shah’s court. Khilat as well as *taj* was a mark of a giver’s high esteem towards a recipient. As Prof. Christine Riding states that “*the shah would invest a departing ambassador with a khilçat as a token of his imperial immanence in the ambassador’s person*”.<sup>25</sup> According to Patricia Baker, “*the quality of the robes awarded depended on their ranking at court. Envoys important to the Safavid shah received garments of cloth of gold, while their inferiors were given silk or even cotton robes*”.<sup>26</sup> Sherley’s attires were made of gold and high quality silk that testifies to his significance to the Shah. By the way, the practice of presenting the honorific garments had an old tradition in Islamic world.<sup>27</sup>

Not only Sherley’s portraits, but clothes played their role in affirmation of his ambassadorial status. Kate Arthur, who as well as Jennifer Scarce<sup>28</sup>, one of the first researchers supposed that Robert’s appearance had a particular symbolic and practical meaning for his ambassadorial status and diplomatic mission, states that “an Englishman who had spent his formative years in the employ of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, a Catholic, and a stranger to the English court with an exotic foreign wife, Robert’s allegiances were always in question. He needed to make

24 *Ibid.*

25 Christine Riding, “Travellers and Sitters: The Orientalist Portrait”, *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, ed. by N. Tromans, Tate Publishing, London 2008, s. 49.

26 Patricia L. Baker, *A History of Islamic Court Dress in the Middle East*, SOAS University of London, Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of philosophy, University of London 1986, p. 315.

27 See: Patricia L. Baker, “Islamic Honorific Garments”, *Costume*, 25/1, 1991, s. 25-35.

28 Scarce, agm., pp. 72-76.

a dramatic and distinctive statement about his status as an agent of the Safavid Empire; a symbol of its power and beauty, and a reliable representative of (competing) European values and interests. He attempted to encode this matrix of dynamic relationships through the costume in which he appeared...<sup>29</sup>

According to Shenasa and Munro, “*though there is no known evidence that Shah Abbas ever saw Van Dyck’s portrait of Sherley, it could also be assumed that this particular choice of costume was a further attempt for Sherley to solidify his position with the Shah.*”<sup>30</sup>

Besides, receiving, wearing and other operations with robes of honor were particularly serious matters, which even could cost the life of a wearer as it was in the case of Dengehiz Beg Rumlu, the Safavid envoy to Spain. He had the misfortune to appear in black mourning robes on the death of the Spanish Queen for what he was sentenced to death “...without giving him a chance to make excuses for his sins. .... It is the custom for ambassadors, when they are sent on missions to foreign lands, to continue to wear the style of dress which is usual in their own country, and at no time in history have kings permitted their ambassadors to do otherwise.”<sup>31</sup>

According to the contemporary sources, ambassadors in the Islamic world could have a lot of honorific robes. For example, Sir John Finch, an English envoy in the Ottoman Empire in 1674, had up to 15, and the Venetian representative had 17 robes of honor. The more ambassador had the robes of honor, the higher the Ruler’s esteem to him was. In all four known portraits Sir Robert Sherley is dressed in four different magnificent robes. It does not seem plausible that Robert could run the con on getting the honorific garments which, as we know, were exclusively given by the Shah himself to ambassadors as a mark of esteem. The *Tadhkirat al-muluk*, a manual of Safavid administration, which, according to Prof. Minorsky, is one of the exceptional sources of the Safavid period, describes the production of the robe of honor in the Safavid Empire. Thus, producing of these honorific garments was a long, rigorous and expensive process at the Royal Tailoring Department (*qaychaji-khana*) under the direct control of its Head (*Sahib-jam*) that encompassed such stages as, first, preparing petition and its endorsing

29 Kate Arthur, “You will say they are Persian but let them be changed:” Robert and Teresa Sherley’s embassy to the Court of James”, *Britain and the Muslim World: Historical Perspectives*, ed. by G. MacLean, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, s. 38.

30 Shenasa-Munroe, *agm*.

31 *Tadhkirat al-Muluk: A Manual of Safavid Administration (circa 1137/1725)*, translated and explained by V. Minorsky, E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, London 1943, s. 1075.

by the Grand Vazir with subsequent approval by the Nazir, only then, choosing and purchasing the precious textiles, its further registration, cutting of honorific garments at the hour fixed by the Chief Astronomer in the presence of a number high ranking officials, and, finally, delivery and issue of the robes of honor to the grantee.<sup>32</sup> So, all the above-mentioned facts exclude the possibility of Sherley's scam on his ambassadorial status.

Moreover, referring to Pietro della Valle, according to whom Robert was that rare occasion when a foreigner was bestowed by taj as a sign of Shah's respect, Prof. Gary Schwartz notes that "*more exceptional was the right to wear a taj*".<sup>33</sup> As we know, Shah Abbas revived the tradition of wearing of the Safavids' symbolic headgear – *taj* – which became a direct indication of wearer's commitment to Shah himself and the Safavid traditions. Following Dr. McChesney's claim that after ascending to the throne Shah Abbas was using a number of "propaganda tools" in order to reaffirm his commitment to the true Safavid traditions, Barbara Schmitz suggests that "*reinstating the taj can thus be seen as yet another of the symbolic acts of Shah Abbas aimed at reviving and unifying a morally weakened Safavid state.*"<sup>34</sup>

The respect the taj had in Safavid society is demonstrated in Iskandar Beg Munshi's information on executions of two Safavid high-ranking officials: both officials were executed only after the removal of taj. Based on this information, Barbara Schmitz, whose main object of research were miniatures and other pictorial sources of the Safavid time, supposed that "*...the hat [taj] symbolized a special relationship between the wearer and the Persian Shah [Safavid Shah Abbas] which was terminated when the hat was removed.*"<sup>35</sup> Besides, Shah Abbas's high official Imam Quli Khan and Shah's representative in Prague Mahdi Quli Beg, whose status was not in doubt, were portrayed in manuscripts also wearing the taj. Therefore, wearing the taj by Sir Robert Sherley was the outer manifestation of his allegiance to Shah Abbas and the Safavid Empire what in its turn may be considered as a proof of Sherley's true ambassadorial status. Moreover, the fact that "*...during the seventeenth century only those men with immediate allegiance to the Shah, his governors, generals, envoys, and his personal bodyguard were permitted (but also required) to wear "the crown of the loyal*

32 *Ibid.*, s. 50, 65-66.

33 Schwartz, agm., s. 94.

34 Barbara Schmitz, "On a Special Hat Introduced during the Reign of Shāh 'Abbās the Great", *Iran*, Vol. 22, 1984, s. 110.

35 Schmitz, agm., s. 105-106.

*followers of Shaykh Safi of Ardabil*”<sup>36</sup> shows how significant Sir Robert Sherley was for Shah Abbas that he bestowed him the right to wear the taj, despite his being a foreigner and Christian.

If the ambassadorial status of Robert Sherley during his first diplomatic mission to England was out of doubt, though the matter of status during his second ambassadorial mission to England was enough vague and obscure. The only reliable evidence that Robert Sherley indeed was Shah Abbas’s ambassador could be the letter of credence itself given him by Shah before departing to Europe in 1615, but, unfortunately, its destiny is unknown. According to Roger Stevens, “*although there was little in the circumstances of his departure in 1615 to warrant it, it seems more likely than not that Shah Abbas did give Sherley some kind of a letter to James I at that time. It may have been mainly intended to smooth his return to England if and when the time came...*”<sup>37</sup> The complexity of the issue is that there are no other contemporary sources except for relations taken by some members both of Sherley’s crew and an English ambassador to the Safavid Empire Sir Dodmore Cotton’s entourage. Nevertheless, we are lucky to have such sources as “A relation of some yeares travaile, begunne anno 1626...” written by Sir Thomas Herbert and “Stodart’s Journal” (1626-1630) written by Robert Stodart. As both authors accompanied Sir Dodmore Cotton during his mission to the Safavid Empire and witnessed almost all the conversations between Sir Dodmore Cotton, Dr. Gooch who replaced him after the death, Shah Abbas, his Chief Minister Muhammad Ali Beg and Sir Robert Sherley, the information they provide us is very valuable.

Dr. Gooch claims that Sir Robert Sherley was an ambassador and had letters of credence. As evidence he cited the text of Shah Abbas’s letter that had been presented to King Charles I by Robert during royal audience: “...*I [Shah Abbas] have committed unto him, by word of mouth, certain businesses wherewith he has to acquaint your Majesty, which, when he cometh, he is to declare unto you; whom I desire you would acknowledge to be my Ambassador; and whatsoever he shall say, to hear him.*”<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, Dr. Gooch provides us another significant evidence on Robert’s being ambassador. So, in respond to King Charles I’s question whether Robert’s rival Naqd Ali Beg was an ambassador or no, some of English factors answered: “...*No, but he was an Agent... Elchye Cachit [Elchi-yi-Kuchik], that is a petty Ambassador;*

36 *Ibid.*, s. 110.

37 Roger Stevens, “Robert Sherley: The Unanswered Questions”, *Iran*, 17, 1979, s. 124.

38 *The Journal of Robert Stodart*, ed. by E. D. Ross, Luzac & Co, London 1935, s. 34.

*and thereupon despatched this Noghte Beg, as such another Elchye Cachit, without any farther commission than only matter of compliment.*"<sup>39</sup>

Besides, during the audience with Sir Dodmore Cotton on 25 May 1628 Shah Abbas did not refute Robert's ambassadorial status: "*My Lord Shirley he neither disavowed, nor approved Noghte Beg.*"<sup>40</sup>

Sir Thomas Herbert, as a member of Sir Dodmore Cotton's embassy to the Safavid Empire, witnessed most conversations there. Herbert's "A relation of some yeares travaile, begunne anno 1626..." provides us with precious information that testifies the existence of the Letter of Credence signed by Shah Abbas himself that proves Sir Robert Sherley's true ambassadorial status. Herbert supposed that the reason Robert fell out of Shah Abbas's favor was a Safavid chief minister Muhammad Ali Beg's plot:

"For my owne part I am verily perswaded, the Kings Seales and Phirman were true, and that either Mahomet-Ally-beg jugled with him (for wee had but his word, for all wee knew, and neuer more came in presence of the King) he might forge other Letters to shew the King, else why kept he them two dayes without deliury, or he might haue slandered the King, to say hee burnt them, being an act, not worthy so just a Prince as Abbas was reputed for."<sup>41</sup>

Talking about Muhammad Ali Beg in regard to Sherley, Herbert called him an "enemy" and expressed doubt in Muhammad Ali Beg's honesty and goodwill towards Robert.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Sherleys' reputational credit**

One of the possible reasons of Robert's addiction to Safavid clothes was his desire to restore the fallen image of Sherley family in front of the English crown. Because of his father, Sir Thomas's financial fraud during being a Crown's treasurer at war, Queen Elizabeth declared Sir Thomas and all his heirs "fallen". As a result, the Sherleys lost their reputation and support in England. As Prof. Schleck states, "*to gain financial credit, they would need reputational credit. The search for credit led all three of Sir*

39 *Ibid.*, s. 26.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Thomas Herbert, *A relation of some yeares travaile, begunne anno 1626...*, W. Stansby and J. Bloome, London 1634, p. 124, last accessed: 28.03.2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/a03065.0001.001/5:8.13?page=root;size=125;vid=20350;view=text>

42 Herbert, *age.*, s. 123-124.

*Thomas's sons... to take to the seas... Each of them sponsored a series of publications detailing their exploits in Islamic lands, seeking to turn their travels abroad into credit at home.*<sup>43</sup> One of Robert's main goals during his ambassadorial mission to England was to represent himself a wealthy, honorable and powerful man that would enable him to return the Sherley family's previous prestige and respect in front of English Crown. We may assume that depicting himself through the full-size portraits was chosen as one of the principal instruments of manipulation. Analyzing the portraiture as public performance, Peggy Phelan claims that during posing for a portrait "*we imagine what people might see when they look at us, and then we try to perform (and conform to) those images. ... Costume and fashion function to look like someone else, we quote and imitate the look of the visible model.*"<sup>44</sup> As Anthony Parr states, "*...a considerable literature, much of which is dedicated to enrolling them in the pantheon of the nation's [English nation] worthies.*"<sup>45</sup> No wonder that in all travelogues and pamphlets, intended for the English audience, Robert was glorified as the Safavid Shah Abbas's ambassador. The higher the quality, the richer the design, the more expensive the cost of the *khilat* (robe of honor) was, the more respectful, the more esteemed and the more important was the wearer; the higher the status the recipient had. As the sixteenth-century Safavid proverb says, "*kurbat bi-libas*", what means honour is given according to the habit.<sup>46</sup>

### The Conclusions

Studying Sir Robert Sherley's four famous portraits revealed how great the possibilities offered by the visual arts for the propagation of one's diplomatic and personal purposes could be. Sir Robert Sherley left a huge mark in England's history and it was mostly due to his portraits. Sir Robert Sherley's public appearance in Safavid honorific garment was not a show, masquerade, role-playing, fashion, impersonation, it was a political expediency, more precisely – a visual display of *soft power* policy (in early modern definition of this term!) of the Safavid Empire toward England and a part of *impression management*, although both terms are relatively new in international relations and psychology and were conceptualized in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the XX century. According to Tara Mayer, the

43 Schleck, *age*, s. 64-66.

44 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London and New York 1993, s. 36.

45 Anthony Parr, "Foreign Relations in Jacobean England: The Sherley Brothers and the "Voyage of Persia"", *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, ed. by J-P Maquerlot and M. Willems, Cambridge University Press, New York 2006, s. 18.

46 See: Baker, *Islamic*, s. 25.

principal goal of Orientalist portraits and hidden sartorial codes in them as a form of public performance is to "...gain power over the domestic European imaginary."<sup>47</sup> Thus, nothing but political aims were coded in Robert Sherley's outfit. As Prof. Gary Schwartz stated, "*the Sherley brothers stagecrafted their public appearance...*"<sup>48</sup>. No wonder that during the very first visit of Sherley brothers to the Safavid Empire in 1599 they with their entourage arrived all dressed in rich gold and silver attires decorated with gems and turbans on their heads in order to make an impression on Shah Abbas and win his favor.

Thus, studying the life-size portraits of Shah Abbas's ambassador Sir Robert Sherley, what is very important not only from scientific, but at the same time political perspective, revealed that the Safavid Empire wasn't a marginal or secondary state on diplomatic arena of early modern Europe, but being a "gunpowder empire", was one of the powerful states and major actors of the geopolitical system, and not just conducted an independent external policy, but even implemented a *soft power* policy to such a major early modern European state as England and pursued its economic interests by establishing mutual commercial links, what in its turn proves that the Safavid Empire was not just an object of the British colonial policy and an instrument of European states against the Ottoman threat as most Western and Soviet historians used to present.

Moreover, studying Sir Robert Sherley's diplomatic missions in England, particularly his proto-*soft power* policy revealed that his activity not only resulted in strengthening and deepening the interstate and commercial relations, also lead to a cultural exchange on the base of East-West, Islam-Christianity dialogue, further left a significant mark in English literature, art (portraiture), plays and even fashion. Moreover, Sir Robert Sherley played the role of bridge in Anglo-Safavid relations. Further cultural interaction between the two great Empires of early modern period proves aforementioned. It was due to Robert Sherley that the Safavids' influence penetrated even Early Modern English society and was reflected in courtly fashions, court painters' works, and literature. A lot of contemporary travelogues were written in support of closer Anglo-Safavid relations. Sherley's portrait written by British unknown artist is one of the 1<sup>st</sup> portraits of Britons in Eastern clothes. Moreover, Robert Sherley even had a walk-on role in Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night", the word "*the Sophy*" was mentioned

47 Mayer, agm., s. 297.

48 Schwartz, agm., s. 87.

twice in this play, later Safavid “vest” was introduced to British fashion by King Charles II. So, analyzing Robert’s public appearances in sumptuous Safavid garments demonstrated not only the importance of studying clothes as an act of public performance, but revealed far-reaching implications both for the Safavid Empire and England.

Thus, examining and deep analysis of Sir Robert Sherley’s exotic appearance in his portraits not only shed light on the history of both contemporary Anglo-Safavid and modern Great Britain-Azerbaijan relations as well as the East-West cooperation, but, what is more important, proved the inadequacy of such Eurocentric concepts as predominance of Europe over the East, exceptional role of the Western civilizations, “cultural polarizing” of the continent, dispelled the myth of *monolithic culture* of both the West and the East, and, moreover, revealed the significant role of Eastern civilizations, the Safavid Empire particularly, in world history and culture.



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