



Diplomatic Gifts and Countergifts between Britain and the Muslim East from the Seventeenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century

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Diplomatic Gifts and Countergifts between Britain and the Muslim East from the Seventeenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century

Cadeaux et échanges diplomatiques entre la Grande-Bretagne et l'Orient musulman, XVII^e – début XX^e siècle

Ladan Niayesh and Stéphanie Prévost (dir.)



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Introduction – The Narratives of Gifts: Agencies, Resignifications and Transmissions

Introduction – Les récits des cadeaux : agentivités, re-significations, transmissions

Ladan Niayesh and Stéphanie Prévost

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- 1 A full century after Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (1923-4),¹ our critical understanding of gifts and counter-gifts has much evolved from a perspective that was primarily rooted in classical anthropology and a pacifist, post-World War I European context. As frequently commented on by critics of Mauss's theory, imperialism and colonialism were largely left out of his analysis,² while, as Natalie Zemon Davis underlines, in such contexts the "gift mode" largely interacts or overlaps with "modes of sales and of coercion".³ Meanwhile, such "contentious presents" as the ones on which João Melo's or Jose M. Escribano-Páez's

studies focus, challenge Mauss's peace ideals regarding gift-giving as a tool to forge social and political bonds, since cross-cultural interactions more often than not involve asymmetries of power, rivalries, and dynamics of violence whose ramifications can range anywhere from local to global.⁴

- 2 As was recently pointed out by the initiator of "new diplomatic history", Christian Windler, current studies of gifting processes in diplomatic contexts no longer limit themselves to interrogating the mutual character of gift-giving – the Maussian theory of "reciprocity" – but do so by considering "the polysemy of the gift, [...] the capacity of objects to have multiple meanings".⁵ Taking stock of the exciting avenues opened since the mid-2000s through the methodologies of new diplomatic history, as well as from "thing theory" as it developed out of an anthropological approach from the mid-1980s onward, the contributions to this special issue adopt a multi-scalar and multi-disciplinary approach to diplomatic interactions between western Europe and Islamate Asia over the *longue durée* (late sixteenth to early twentieth century). They do so through the prism of narratives of gifts, considered in their paradoxical agencies, their processes of signification and resignification, and their complex, non-linear circuits of transmission. Together, they make a case for some shared mainstays within that context, with a specific gifting culture which resulted from a convergence of religious legacies, political symbolisms, and dedicated lexicons,⁶ rather than following a conventional narrative which would take for granted that international system in general, and institutionalized diplomacy in particular, were "developed exclusively within Europe and then exported to the rest of the world" from the nineteenth century onwards.⁷
- 3 It is true, as British ambassador Paul Brummell's recent *Diplomatic Gifts: A History in Fifty Present* (2017) tells us, that gifts have been central to cultural diplomacy from the Antiquity. Yet, despite their expected function as a means to establish or maintain relationships between polities, gifts' performances in terms of this expectation have not been homogeneous across time and space. Based on cases in the special issue, we wish by way of introduction to this volume to offer an exploration of gifts originating in or destined to Islamate Asia both *in actu* and in their afterlives, through their peregrinations and narratives, and consider how these affected their meaning, value, power and survival from aesthetic, social, cultural, political or economic points of view, and at a later stage, from curatorial and legal perspectives as well.
- 4 One of diplomatic gifts' prime functions is to impress in all systems, with a focus both on what is given – on the originality of gifts, their rareness, imposing character, material or scientific value, a mix of these, etc. – and on the pageantry around it, which can be context-specific in the Islamate sphere. We can quote as a first example in this respect the simultaneous gift of three giraffes in 1826 to French King Charles X, to British King George IV, and to Francis I, the first Emperor of Austria, by Muhammad Ali Pasha, then the governor of Egypt, an Ottoman province in a receding Ottoman Empire. The despatch of these animals was thought extraordinary at the time, as they had been unseen in Europe since the Renaissance period and remained coveted, invaluable exotica fit for royal menageries.⁸ In this instance, both the rareness of the gift itself and the identities of the three princely European recipients partake of its meaning and implications in redefining the donor's position as far above a mere vassal to the Ottoman sultan. Although "the Nubian giraffe" died within two years of its arrival in England and did not quite fulfil its geopolitical purpose, it remained a memorable gift

with a popular attraction even several decades later.⁹ In the same way, a supposedly intimate gift meant for private enjoyment – such as the portrait Queen Elizabeth I sent to the Ottoman Sultana Safiye in 1593 (see Mathilde Alazraki’s article in this issue) – was not merely meant as a private and personal token of remembrance, but conceived to bedazzle its direct recipient and be remembered in the public sphere through indirect testimonies, potentially passing down even from one generation to the next and reaching a far wider audience. Such testimonies and associated narratives were prime sources for advisors at St James’s Court to try and gauge what might be offered, from sovereign to sovereign, as well as from British royal envoys to “Eastern princes” – a generic term which, as early as in 17th-century British administrative culture, encompassed Russia, the Ottoman, Mughal and Persian Empires, Morocco, China, and many other Asian kingdoms.¹⁰

- 5 Despite the existence of such precious testimonies, disappointing gifts – either because they did not meet personal and cultural expectations, or because they arrived damaged – were always a risk. This was especially true in earlier periods when polities lacked developed protocol offices as exist today and when long journeys carried their lot of havocs. The procurement of suitable gifts required great skill, preparation, but also flexibility, necessitating the manufacturing of a gift for the occasion. Limned letters, clocks, and porcelain dishes come to mind in this respect, or “a shopping spree on the local market, the recycling of items that were already part of a collection, or the systematic purchasing of exceptional things in distant places”.¹¹ No matter the efforts, the good reception of a gift was always – and is still – a delicate matter, especially when it went hand in hand with the negotiation of a specific advantage, such as trade privileges.¹² While the vicissitudes of Sir Thomas Roe, the first English ambassador to the Mughal court (1616-1619) in the early days of the East India Company (EIC), are now better-known and show that “Britain’s imperial destiny at this moment [...] was by no means certain”,¹³ two articles in this special issue further insist that great care was needed to carry gifts safely across, with very uncertain results: Anne-Valérie Dulac’s article on early modern British limned letters and miniatures as gifts to “Eastern princes” with damp-sensitive velum and ink; and Marine Bellego and Marie-Thérèse Bru’s article on botanical diplomacy between Europe and Asia.¹⁴ Above all, this special issue makes the case that even perishable or fragile gifts (plants, food, animals, porcelain, glass) were durably meant to inspire wonder, including through narratives, be it through literary and artistic representations, gift logs, [Figure 1¹⁵] or mentions in records that have often survived the gifts themselves – regardless of whether the gifts succeeded or failed in achieving their goal.

Figure 1: Emperor Qianlong's Gift log (roll 1), 1792-4.



RA GEO/ADD/31/21A. Royal Archives/ © His Majesty King Charles III 2024.

Figure 2: Covered circular box, Lacquer on wood (6.9 x 15.2 cm, diameter).



RCIN 10823. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2024.

- 6 With the passage of time and beyond their direct diplomatic performance, the question of the (non-perishable) gifts' preservation – as national heritage – becomes more acute. Highlights of museum displays or public places tend to retain gifts' original potential for aesthetic fascination, an aspect which may also grow with time. To take an example from outside the Islamicate sphere, the gifts presented by Chinese Emperor Qianlong in 1793 to King George III through the proxy of his envoy Earl Macartney “[did]n’t appear to [the latter] to be very fine”, but they imparted a sense of authentic Chinese refinement to the future King George IV for the China-inspired interior decorations at his fantasy palace, the Brighton Pavilion, despite the failure of the diplomatic mission to which those gifts were attached.¹⁶ Pieces that still remain in the Royal Collections – maps, a red cover-carved lacquer box [Figure 2], Chinese porcelain, a pair of carved red lacquer cabinets, etc. – now form the core of what the Royal Collection Trust sees as “one of the most significant collections of Eastern arts in the Western world”.¹⁷
- 7 By contrast, gifts that are now out of the limelight – either because they are perishable and/or because of ambivalent narratives attached to them – tend to fall into semi-oblivion, no matter their intrinsic cultural value. In such instance, the risk of causing diplomatic tensions between the giving country and the receiving country is very high, even several centuries apart. One such example is the so-called “Cleopatra’s Needle” [Figure 3], an ancient obelisk gifted in 1819 by the same Egyptian ruler mentioned before, Muhammad Ali Pasha, in commemoration of Lord Nelson’s victory at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 and Sir Ralph Abercromby’s victory at the Battle of Alexandria in 1801 over the French after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt – two decisive moments in Egypt’s march towards semi-independence from Ottoman tutelage. In 2019, Egypt expressed outrage at Britain’s refusal to celebrate the bicentennial, thereby reviving the idea that it had always been demoted.¹⁸ Though accepted in 1819, the gift was only transferred to Britain in 1877, due to the technical and financial difficulty for the British to ship it from Alexandria and after repeated demands from Egypt for the gift to be collected. The embarrassment of finding a spot for it in 1878, its subsequent erection on the Embankment in London where it has been exposed to the Thames’ mist and the various discussions since then as to its not being suited to the local climate seem to be early signs of mutual disenchantment that led the Egyptian embassy to call for its repatriation in 1992, when it blamed Britain for improper care.¹⁹ Whereas gifts over time may become reified and forgotten in the receiving country, this is rarely the case in the giving country where such items tend to be invested as “sites of [national] memory”/ “sites of [national] conscience” (after Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*) that the receiving country is expected to continue to honour, out of respect for the good diplomatic relations that the accepted gift was once meant to materialise.²⁰ Put differently, a diplomatic gift that once sealed friendship can very well undo it, years on.

Figure 3: Cleopatra's Needle in London seen from the River Thames, 2005.



Photographed by Adrian Pingstone. Wikipedia.²¹

- 8 As said at the start of this introduction, historians, political scientists and international relations scholars have paid increasing attention to diplomatic gifts and their agency as part of the “new diplomatic history” and the inputs of “thing theory”.²² Just as French anthropologist, sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour reminds us that “a non-anthropomorphic character is a character all the same. It has agency. It moves. It undergoes trials. It elicits reactions. It becomes describable”, a recent special issue of *Parlement(s)* registers gifts as actors of political communication that express political stature and strength and that may take part in a competition for international standing.²³ In her article, Anne-Valérie Dulac gives the fascinating example of the Sultan of Aceh’s beautiful letter addressed to King James I in 1615 to show that diplomatic gifts – especially return gifts – may exhibit the semblance of cordiality, but actually mean dismissal, if not war. In so doing, she fully embraces the actor-network theory, born in the 1990s that considers “things” seriously for their relationships and networks they could build or unbuild. That “things” have a social life in their own right was already explored by Arjun Appadurai in the edited volume *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), where gifts, gift-exchange and gift circulations hold a central and natural place, and the nature of gifts is debated as being distinct from buyable commodities.²⁴ As made clear already, such a neat distinction between gifts/ commodities has since then been overturned – with the case of money transactions presented as “gifts” testing the distinction to the extreme.
- 9 Though gifts between equals tend to be considered as freely consented and thus as “sovereign gifts”,²⁵ our specific take on gift diplomacy between Britain and the Muslim East insists on taking the word “gift” with a pinch of salt, depending on specific contexts and on the nature of the gifts themselves – with for example “robes of

honour” usually meant for “inferiors”, to the risk of sometimes raising anger²⁶ – and on narratives attached to them. Cases discussed in this special issue tend to attune to the argument developed in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (2003) that “gifts” are at the core of transactions, which may actually range from a freely consented present, to tribute, bribes, apology gifts (to avert war) and even outright extortion and theft.²⁷ This moves away from the radical position held by Jacques Derrida that a “true gift” can only be freely and discretely given, calls for no reciprocation, settles no debt and is not involved in power relations.²⁸ Rather, this special issue looks into many so-called “gifts” that actually serve as symbols of authority, such as the robes of honour.

- 10 What may be narrated as a “gift” in one system may not be understood as such by another/others, transforming such gifts into “objects in conflict” or “dangerous gifts”, when sovereignty is at stake.²⁹ Alongside tributary gift-systems in the context of sovereign states (see above and Ladan Niayesh’s article), informal and formal Empire provided many other such contexts. Among the many “contested gifts” in British diplomatic history is the Koh-i-Noor (meaning “the Mountain of Light”), whose conflicted story and belonging were recently revived by the rumour that Queen Consort Camilla might follow tradition and wear it for the 2023 coronation ceremony.³⁰ The Koh-i-Noor, we need to remember, is not just one of the world’s largest diamonds that has been on display at the Tower of London since the Queen Mother’s death in 2002, but it is one that had originally been “presented” to Queen Victoria in 1850 as a part of an imperial pageant that removed it from the Lahore palace of the deposed eleven-year-old Maharaja to imperial London.³¹ Camilla’s opting out of wearing it was read as a way to assuage the Indian government that had again demanded the Koh-i-Noor’s return upon Queen Elizabeth II’s death in September 2022, but also as a signal that the Crown was distancing itself from its colonial legacy – while still clinging to the diamond.³² Robert Ivermée’s article in this special issue (on the so-called gifts in the context of British and French trading companies in Mughal India, 1735-1765 in exchange for “protection”) similarly asks whether objects coercively “gifted” in colonial/imperial contexts can be considered “true gifts” at all, beyond official narratives.³³ In the case of the Koh-i-Noor, the controversy about its status started almost immediately, which is quite typical. In 1849, a young Duleep Singh signed the Treaty of Lahore, by which he resigned his claim to the sovereignty of Punjab after its annexation to the British Empire through the agency of the private East India Company, giving up the Koh-i-Noor as a token of submission in the process. Yet, he contested the validity of this process from his British exile almost immediately. The former Maharaja petitioned the British Parliament that the East India Company and later the India Office did not respect treaty terms regarding his pension, that the treaty had been forced on him as a boy, and that a heritage to which he attached sacred value had been unduly “confiscated”.³⁴ This was to no avail.
- 11 The Koh-i-Noor case also sheds light on British imperial practice in India, whereby the East India Company had priority to “spoils of war” – in connivance with the British Crown over what may be regarded as legitimized “colonial war loot”.³⁵ In this instance, Lord Dalhousie, the British Governor-General behind the treaty that ended the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-1849), decided to bypass this convention given the symbolical value of the Koh-i-Noor, which he came to regard as “a thing by itself” that “ha[d] become in the lapse of ages a sort of historical emblem of conquest in India [and that it] ha[d] now found its proper resting place”.³⁶ Dalhousie thought a jewel with such

potency/agency belonged to the Crown – not to the East India Company, which remained a private, though chartered, trading company. The EIC expressed fierce discontent to Dalhousie for its being deprived of such a jewel, but had to abide with Dalhousie's terms out of loyalty to the Queen. They still made immense money out of the sale of the rest of Duleep Singh's property, which, just like other EIC "confiscated" property, allowed them to build personal fortunes to develop estates in Britain, enrich their interiors out of collectors' spree and gain status back in Britain, including by donating selected artefacts or collections to institutions.³⁷

- 12 Already at the time, there were attempts at turning the British colonial narrative of "gifts" on its head. Duleep Singh's wish to file a legal complaint against the British State in the 1880s and his later decision to rebel against Britain testify to this precisely. But there existed subtler, indirect ways of challenging British hegemony. In 1867, Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz's turning down the gift that Queen Victoria had meant for him – namely the Star of India – on the ground that it was a vassal's gift, not a gift fit for the Sultan-Caliph-Commander of the Faithful amounted to challenging Britain's *Weltanschauung*, which, at the time, registered the Ottoman Empire as "the dying man of Europe" (see Stéphanie Prévost's contribution to this volume). Sultan Abdul Aziz was after the Order of the Garter, which Queen Victoria had already awarded most European sovereign rulers, as he well knew. This episode shows that gift acceptability was meted out in the context of the global circulation of gifts, rather than within bilateral dynamics. Daniel Foliard's article on an 1895-1896 case of loot by Afghan Amir Abdul Rahman Khan's troops, which gets interpreted by British Indian authorities as a replica of European colonial practice, further enforces this dimension.³⁸ Indeed, the next Amir recycled/repurposed the looted Kaffir statues as a gift to France in the 1920s, to mark Afghan control of its foreign affairs away from Britain (1919) and bolster Afghan nationalism. In gifting a war trophy of high archaeological value to the French administration, the Emir showed intimate knowledge of main European museums' acquisition practices, whereby collecting the world's past was a mark of "civilization" central to what had at this point become national narratives in the West.³⁹ Put differently, the Emir's gift was his way to herald that "non-Western" powers should not be bypassed in that "scramble for the past" and in the narrativization of their pasts.⁴⁰ In this instance, he wanted France to record Afghanistan as a successful colonial power (in subjugating Kaffir populations) and an archaeological nation.
- 13 In a founding chapter entitled "The Cultural Biography of Things" (1986), anthropologist Igor Kopitoff invited his readers to consider the history of "things" in the *longue durée*, in their many transactions. This particularly applied to gifts, which he saw as being part of "never ending-chains" of gifts and reciprocations.⁴¹ Since then, object/thing biography has developed into a fruitful method to highlight the singularity of objects and their agency in context.⁴² This special issue makes use of the biographical method to situate gifts in their many journeys/contexts, from the original transaction to gifts' many afterlives, including in their being recycled, appropriated, destroyed, lost, gifted again, or simply in narration and curation. It embraces scholars' more and more pressing call for further research into the moral economy of "things", as well as into the colonial origins of collections held in museums throughout Europe to decolonize history and museography.⁴³ Such a move towards a new relational ethics has fuelled public debates regarding the legacies of empire and issues of ownership, restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage plundered or illegally acquired as a way to restore dignity to "community sources". "Contested gifts" (such as the Koh-i-

Noor) necessarily are at the heart of lengthy legal battles to try and establish ownership (especially when several countries put a claim), build cases for restitution (with regard to international law especially) and prepare return, while managing museum anxiety caused by collection loss.⁴⁴ But in the end, the settlement of such legal contests – especially towards restitution – often rests on finding an amiable settlement between governments, namely within the sphere of action of diplomacy.⁴⁵ A vigilant epistemology and close attention to the many (re)circulations of gifts – such as the one practiced in this special issue – is central towards a new relational ethics and enables us to offer “things” biographies that restore their intertwined relationships over the *longue durée* and thus their stories as completely as possible. While such an approach brings out the agency of all “things” presented in this special issue, it makes way for an attempted “narrative repair” in the case of brutally “dislocated” and “reterritorialized” objects. This brings the question of “gift terminology” once more to the fore in the context of endless power struggles over certain “gifts”, and makes iconoclasm appear as an anti-colonial gesture that refuses the fiction of consent around a supposedly shared memory/heritage.⁴⁶

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NOTES

1. Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques", *Année sociologique*, nouvelle série 1 (1923-24), pp. 30-186.
2. For a general introduction to Mauss and post-Mauss theories, see Karen Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology: An Introduction to Critical Theories of the Gift* (New York: Routledge, 2005). On global gifts and counter-gifts, with which our volume is more specifically concerned, see Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European Histories of a Global Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
3. Natalie Zemon-Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 9.
4. João Melo, "Seeking Prestige and Survival: Gift-Exchange Practices between the Portuguese Estado da Índia and Asian Rulers", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55 (2013), pp. 678-82; Jose M. Escribano-Páez, "Diplomatic Gifts, Tributes and Frontier Violence: Circulation of Contentious Presents in the Moluccas", *Diplomatica* 2 (2020), pp. 248-69.
5. Christian Windler, "Afterword: Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy", *Diplomatica* 2 (2020), pp. 291-304; p. 294.
6. For more on this, see Niayesh's contribution to this issue.
7. Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 14. For more on this aspect, see Guido Van Meersbergen's "Afterword" in this issue.
8. "Zarafa the Giraffe", RTÉ Radio 1 podcast, 26 December 2022, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/clips/22190081/>.
9. "George IV's Nubian Giraffe", *The Field, The Country Gentleman's Newspaper*, Vol. 106, 26 August 1905, pp. 387-8.
10. See Richard Scott Morel, "Words of Majesty: A Brief History of Royal Correspondence between England and Asia, 1600-1858," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 90, no. 1 (312), 2017, pp. 1-28; for a parallel with French diplomacy: François Ternat and Eric Schnakenbourg (eds.), *Une diplomatie des lointains. La France face à la mondialisation des rivalités internationales, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Rennes, P.U.R., 2020).
11. Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, "Introduction", in Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 14. Today, gifts tend to be thought of as non-human, but slaves were frequently part of gift exchanges across the Muslim East and African Kingdoms, well into the nineteenth century. Even before the ban of slavery and the slave trade, receiving slaves as gifts was considered improper by the British Crown and such

“offerings” were rare. When King Gezo of Dahomey refused to end the slave-trade and human sacrifice rituals in his kingdom following a British diplomatic mission in 1850, he finally conceded to spare Aina, a captive meant for sacrifice, and gave her to Queen Victoria. The latter immediately offered protection and liberated Aina, who was renamed Sara Forbes Bonetta. For a broader context, see David Olusoga, *Black and British. A Forgotten History* (London, Macmillan, 2016), p. 330 ff. Today, highly unacceptable gifts include presents of a dubious provenance or those made from protected material /species (such as ivory).

12. On gift exchanges in the context of the EIC’s trading relations in eighteenth-century Persia, see Peter Good, *The East India Company in Persia: Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Eighteenth Century* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2022), pp. 73-96.

13. Nandini Das, *Courting India: England, Mughal India and the Origins of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), p. xvii; see also Anne-Valérie Dulac, “Miniatures between East and West: The Art(s) of Diplomacy in Thomas Roe’s *Embassy*”, *Études Épistémè* 26 (2014), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.343>.

14. See also Easterby-Smith Sarah, “Reputation in a box. Objects, communication and trust in late 18th century botanical networks”. *History of Science* 53, n°2 (2015), pp. 180-208.

15. Emperor Qianlong’s gifts as part of the Macartney embassy, 1792-1794, were fully listed on four scrolls (<https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/trails/the-macartney-embassy-gifts-exchanged-between-george-iii-and-the-qianlong-11>), now preserved in the British Royal Archives.

16. “The Macartney Embassy: Gifts Exchanged between George III and the Qianlong Emperor”, Royal Collection Trust website, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/trails/the-macartney-embassy-gifts-exchanged-between-george-iii-and-the-qianlong>; Shanshan Chen, *Art, Science, and Diplomacy: A Study of the Visual Images of the Macartney Embassy* (Singapore, Springer, 2023), p. 238-242; Vanessa Aleyrac-Fielding, “Le voyage en Chine ou les pièges de la représentation: ‘a puppet show [...] preparing some grand coup de théâtre’”, *Représentations* 3 (2009), https://representations.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/IMG/pdf/Alayrac-Fielding_final_4.pdf.

17. Some of the gifts were auctioned off by the Prince of Wales in 1819 at Christie’s as part of a massive sale of Queen Charlotte’s property, following her death, and were partly reacquired by the royal family later, especially under Queen-Consort Mary in the early 20th century, whereas others are still visible in Chinese museums. See John Ayers, *Chinese and Japanese Works of Art in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen, 3 Volumes* (London, RCT, 2016); Fuxiang Guo, “Presents and Tribute: Exploration of the Presents Given to the Qianlong Emperor by the British Macartney Embassy”, *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 43 (2019), <https://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/2457#quotation>.

18. “Egyptians are upset by Britain’s disregard for a gift”, *The Economist*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/04/egyptians-are-upset-by-britains-disregard-for-a-gift> (last consulted 18 December 2023).

19. Martin Bailey, “Egyptian Embassy Wants Ancient Cleopatra’s Needle Back”, *Deseret News*, 10 April 1992, <https://www.deseret.com/1992/4/10/18978030/egyptian-embassy-wants-ancient-cleopatra-s-needle-back> (last consulted 18 December 2023). Paul Brummel suggests the label “a gift forced in the mouth” for unwanted, but accepted gifts. See “Gifts as Public Diplomacy”, *First Monday Forum* podcast, 7 November 2022, <https://youtu.be/NML48gE7xpc?si=qnOwX-Ech2h48r-t>.

20. For a parallel, on the obliteration of diplomatic gifts from Muslim territories as a political strategy pursued by the Spanish Habsburg monarchy to bolster its imperial self-image as a nation of crusaders: Rubén González Cuerva, “Immaterial Diplomacy: Dissimulating Muslim Embassies in Habsburg Spain”, Conference paper, “Objects in Conflict”, Universität Regensburg, 6 May 2023.

21. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cleopatra_s_needle_from_thames_london_arp.jpg (Last consulted 20 December 2023).

22. See Christian Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l’Autre. Consuls français au Maghreb (1700-1840)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002), pp. 485-554. The literature is now so vast that only

selected recent examples not listed elsewhere in the introduction will be mentioned here. For a review of gift diplomacy in the modern period, Marie-Karine Schaub, “Le cadeau diplomatique à l’époque moderne: au croisement des relations internationales et de l’histoire matérielle”, in *Parlement(s)* 3(2023), pp. 19-34. For special issues: Bing Zhao and Fabien Simon (eds.), “Des arts diplomatiques. Échanges de présents entre la Chine et l’Europe, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles”, *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 43 (2019), <https://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/1592>; Birgit Tremml-Werner, Lisa Hellman and Guido van Meersbergen (eds.), “Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: Afro-Eurasian Perspectives”, *Diplomatica* 2 (2020), <https://brill.com/view/journals/dipl/2/2/dipl.2.issue-2.xml>, from which Windler’s “Afterword” quoted earlier in this introduction was extracted.

23. Bruno Latour, “How Better to Register the Agency of Things”, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 34 (2016), p. 101; Catherine Brice and Emmanuel Fureix, “Introduction”, *Parlement(s)* 3(2023), special issue 18 on “Political Objects”, p. 14.

24. Introduction to Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 1-60.

25. Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 149.

26. Paul Brummel, *Diplomatic Gifts: A History in Fifty Presents* (London, Hurst and Company, 2022), pp. 180-181.

27. Gadi Algazi, “Doing Things with Gifts”, in Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, Bernhard Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift. Premodern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), esp. pp. 10-15.

28. Cited in Jacinto Lageira, “Ramifications et liens du don”, in Marc Jimenez and Vangelis Athanassopoulos (eds.), *La pensée comme expérience: Esthétique et déconstruction* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2016), pp. 61-71.

29. “Objects in Conflict. The Material Culture of Intercultural Diplomacy (1600-1830)”, Regensburg, May 2023, conference report, https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-135992#mtAc_event-87864; Ozan Özacı, *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798-1864* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

30. Paul Schemm and Satwik Gade, “The diamond too controversial for Camilla’s crown: A visual history”, *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/05/kohinoor-diamond-coronation-comic/>.

31. Danielle C. Kinsey, “Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture”, *Journal of British Studies* 48, n°2 (2009), pp. 391-419; Siddhartha V. Shah, “Romancing the Stone: Victoria, Albert, and the Koh-i-Noor Diamond”, *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 24 (Spring-Summer 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1086/693797>.

32. Arman Khan, “Queen consort Camilla won’t wear the Kohinoor at the coronation. But is it enough?”, *Vogue India*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.vogue.in/fashion/content/queen-consort-camilla-wont-wear-the-kohinoor-at-the-coronation-but-is-it-enough>.

33. See also Kayla Reddecliff, “Sovereign Myths and the Realities of Material Diplomacy: British and Princely Indian Gift-Giving in the Late 19th Century” (PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2022), <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0406666>.

34. Lady Lena Campbell Login, *Sir John Login and Duleep Singh* (London, W.H. Allen, 1890), pp. 126-127, 340-341; “Introductory Remarks” in *A Reprint of Two Sale Catalogues of Jewels and Other Confiscated Property belonging to his Highness The Maharajah Duleep Singh* (London?, n.d., 1885), pp. vi-vii. For a discussion of the impropriety of sacred objects as gifts, see Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

35. On how British officers themselves presented the acquisition of artefacts in military colonial contexts, see: Nicole M. Hartwell, “Framing Colonial War Loot: The ‘captured’ spolia opima of Kunwar Singh”, *Journal of the History of Collections* 34 no. 2 (2022), pp. 287-301. For another

instance: Bruce Lenman, *Britain's Colonial Wars, 1688-1783* (London and New York, Routledge, 2002), p. 171.

36. Cited in Ganda Singh (ed.), *History of the Freedom Movement in the Punjab. Vol. 3: Maharaja Duleep Singh Correspondence* (Patiala, Punjabi University, 1977), p. 36.

37. Margot Finn and Kate Smith (eds.), *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857* (London, UCL, 2018); Maya Jasanoff, "Collectors of Empire: Objects, Conquests and Imperial Self-Fashioning", *Past & Present* 184 (2004), pp. 109-135; "Baggage and Belonging: Military Collections and the British Empire, 1750-1900" Project (2017-2021), AHCR Grant AH/P006752/1, <https://www.nms.ac.uk/collections-research/collections-departments/scottish-history-and-archaeology/projects/baggage-and-belonging/>; Anne-Julie Etter, "Collecting Statues in India and Transferring Them to Britain, or the Intertwined Lives of Indian Objects and Colonial Administrators", in Claire Gallien and Ladan Niayesh (eds.), *Eastern Resonances in Early Modern England. Receptions and Transformations from the Renaissance to the Romantic Period* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 183-199.

38. See also the special issue "Tristes Trophées : Objets et restes humains dans les conquêtes coloniales", edited by Laurent Arzelot and Daniel Foliard, *Mondes* 17 (2020), online at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-mondes-2020-1.htm> (last consulted 20 December 2023). Of note, the term "loot" was imported into English in the late 18th century by British soldiers in India and derives from the Hindi lūt ("spoils of war") and even before that, Sanskrit lotra ("rob"). Of course, "loot" in the sense of "spoils of war" should not be regarded as a European (colonial) practice exclusively, as it was frequently exercised by Muslim Eastern States attempting to establish strong central power over peripheral territories and had a long history before that. Cf. Oliver Jens Schmitt and Mariya Kiprovska, "Ottoman Raiders (Akıncıs) as a Driving Force of Early Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans and the Slavery-Based Economy", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 65, n°4 (2022), pp. 497-582.

39. Adam Kuper, *The Museum of Other People: From Colonial Acquisitions to Cosmopolitan Exhibitions* (London, Profile Books, 2023); Margarita Díaz-Andreu García, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

40. See Eva J. Meharry, "Politics of the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism and Diplomacy in Afghanistan (1919-2001)" (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2020), doi:10.17863/CAM.55881. For a parallel with the development of Ottoman archaeology, see: Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik and Edhem Eldem (eds.), *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (Istanbul, SALT, 2011); and Zeynep Çelik, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2016).

41. Igor Kopitoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodization as Process" in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, *ibid.*, pp. 64-91, esp. p. 69.

42. For a literature review, see: Thierry Bonnot, Bérénice Gaillemine et Élise Lehoux, "La biographie d'objet: une écriture et une méthode critique", *Images Re-vues* 15 (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/imagesrevues.5925>.

43. Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (eds.), *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* (London, Routledge, 2013); Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London, Pluto Press, 2020); Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, November 2018, https://www.about-africa.de/images/sonstiges/2018/sarr_savoy_en.pdf; Jos van Beurden, Kathleen M. Adams & Paul Catteeuw, "Dekolonisatie e restitutive" special issue, *Volkskunde* 3 (2019).

44. British PM David Cameron confessed on New Delhi Television Ltd in 2010: "If you say yes to one [return, here of the Koh-i-Noor] and you suddenly find the British Museum would be emptied". See the interview at: https://youtu.be/aAun-xH2UB0?si=c9ex-Kkh_dTpiEBj.

45. See the legal argument made regarding the Koh-i-Noor by India's Supreme Court Case: Central Information Commission, B K S R Ayyangr vs Archaeological Survey Of India, 21 August, 2018. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/19109337/>.

46. See for instance: William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, *Koh-i-Noor: The History of the World's Most Infamous Diamond* (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2017); Laura-Maria Popoviciu & Andrew Parratt, "Enduring Victoria: Iconoclasm and Restoration at the British Embassy in Tehran", 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 33 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.4710>.

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From Medium to Message

Médium et message

Lost in Translation? The Terminology and Practice of Islamic Gifts in Early Modern Travel Accounts in English

Intraduisibles ? Terminologie et pratique des cadeaux en terre d'islam dans les récits de voyage anglais de la période moderne

Ladan Niayesh

Introduction

- 1 Gift exchanges in the context of diplomatic encounters are not solely about individuals and objects in transit, but eminently involve what and how people and objects perform in these transactional moments. As Felicity Heal reminds us in *The Power of Gifts*, a gift is “a process, rather than exclusively a material entity.”¹ In other words, symbolic performance and the rhetoric of service are part and parcel of the meaning and function of gifts. It follows that the success of the process of gifting relies, Heal continues, “on proper understanding between the transacting parties” or, more specifically in intercultural contexts, on a measure of “cultural agreement” between the parties.² Linguists and historians have extensively engaged over the past decades with the larger debate on cultural “commensurability” in diplomatic interactions between Europeans and their cultural others in the wake of early modern voyages of exploration and expansion across the globe, and it is not the purpose of the present article to survey that ongoing conversation.³ What interests me here is rather to address the linguistic impact of diplomatic gifting processes in early modern English texts, since it was in this period that the corpus of English lexicon began to receive and accommodate a culturally loaded terminology of gifting specifically associated to diplomatic transactions with the Islamic empires of Asia. What I find striking is that terminology’s resistance to assimilation in the body of texts where they primarily

appeared, that is to say travel accounts, be they English travels or travels by other Europeans translated into English. I therefore wish to explore in this article some of the specific nuances which that foreign terminology, preserved in its original form, can carry within European records. Its uses and misuses in practice, I will contend, can make it an instrument of integration or exclusion, both for the travellers themselves and for the experience of contact which they document in their travelogues.

Oriental gifting terminology: the background

- 2 A first point to be made in this respect is the pre-existence of a large corpus of gifting terms already shared by the court cultures of Islamic West, Central, and South Asia prior to interactions with and reports by European visitors. Whether of Persian or Arabic origin, that terminology had long travelled across the Persianate cultures of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal courts, where it had accompanied gift-giving as an integral part of the social fabric and the networks of personal, political, and sometimes religious allegiances within and between those polities. A list of those terms comprises *inter alia* such hierarchy-building terms as Persian *bakhshish* or Arabic *‘atīyya* and *iknām* which all suggest a superior’s favour bestowed on an inferior, presented as relief or alms, sometimes with connotations of holiness on the part of the giver. But the list also includes *hadiyya* which is secular in its practice and considered to be carried between equals, or *nazar* and *waqf* which both connote piety and devotional consecration by devout donors for prayers made or granted.⁴ Not all of these terms made it to English texts or survived there in our period or later, but some did in specific contexts, as was infamously the case during the period of spoliations under the Company Raj in eighteenth-century India. This is the context in which the *OED* places the first attested usage of *nazar*, in a 30 September 1765 letter by East India Company administrator Robert Clive. There the author mentions the “congratulatory nazirs” he had received in India for services rendered by him at the decisive battle of Plassey, which had resulted in his putting Mir Jafar on the throne as nominal Nawab of Bengal in 1757. Clive’s return to Europe in 1760 with a staggering £300,000 as personal wealth had prompted his EIC employers to take steps against company servants amassing fortunes under the pretence of complying with local princely gifting customs.⁵ The wording of the 1764 company prohibition gives us an idea of the variety and fluidity of wordings and practices involved in the transactions which the EIC was trying to control at that point in order to preserve its own exclusive right as the Indian authorities’ interlocutor: “any Gift, Reward, Gratuity, Allowance, or Donation, from any of the Indian princes, or any of their Ministers.”⁶
- 3 The scandal of Clive’s “congratulatory nazirs” and his successor Warren Hastings’s impeachment and trial in 1787 on similar charges of extortion and coercion give us the measure of the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the categories and appellations for gift, reward, tribute, booty and bribe in the Indian context of the latter half of the eighteenth century. That example shows how the floating signifier that the material gift is by itself can carry different – sometimes opposite – meanings from the perspectives given by the donor or the recipient for the sake of their audiences during and after the performed transaction. This phenomenon is nevertheless by no means limited in time and context to India in the period of the Company Raj. Indeed, to move back in time by two centuries and changing polities within the Muslim east, the

example of the 1567 presentation of gifts by the Safavid ambassador of Shāh Tahmāsp II to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II on the occasion of the latter's coronation is eloquent in this respect, as illustrated in a 1591 miniature from the *Sehname-i Selim Han* studied by Linda Komaroff.⁷ From the Ottoman perspective, the scene depicts the full glory of the seated Sultan receiving the tribute – *piṣṣhkaṣh* is the term used in the accompanying text – sent to him by a neighbouring state. The scene accordingly shows the parade of precious gifts brought by ambassador Shāh Qolī, starting with a rare Qur'ān and the famed *Shāhnama* copy (Firdawsī's *Book of Kings*) originally prepared under Shāh Tahmāsp I by the greatest artists of his court's workshop.⁸ On the face of it, the message could not be clearer: the word of God and the chronicles of great kings of the past bless and sanction the Sultan on this special day. The ambassador himself, wearing the Turkish robe of honour he has been given, is held on both sides by guards ready to make him perform the ritual of obeisance before the Ottoman monarch. And yet, as Komaroff convincingly demonstrates, the Persian perspective can well reverse the hierarchies and meanings on all counts. Indeed, the Qur'ān chosen by the Shī'a Safavid king for the Sunnī Sultan is specifically the one attributed to 'Alī, the first *Imām* and true successor of the Prophet Muhammad according to Shī'a dogma. Similarly, for all its magnificent materiality, the *Shāhnama* sent by the Persian king remains in its contents the chronicle of the kings of Iran, recording their victories over the Turānians, legendary ancestors of the Turkic peoples. Even the ambassador's name, Shāh Qolī, may not be a random choice. Meaning 'servant of the Shah', it negates in its essentiality any ceremony of submission its wearer may be forced to perform for another ruler. Ultimately, therefore, the whole ceremony which appeared like a tribute and submission in the Ottoman visual narrative of the miniature, can equally and concomitantly mean an act of haughty defiance from the Persian perspective.

- 4 A similar point can be made about the case study by Mathilde Alazraki in this very issue of the *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, about the "upper gowne of cloth of gold very rich, an under gowne of cloth of silver, and a girdle of Turkie worke, rich and faire" sent in 1593 by the Ottoman Sultana Safiye as a gift to Elizabeth I. The gift, Alazraki reminds us, had been chosen on the advice of the English ambassador Edward Barton, who considered that "a sute of princely attire being after the Turkish fashion would for the rareness thereof be acceptable in England".⁹ But as Jerry Brotton equally compellingly demonstrates, what may pass to the ambassador as a curiosity likely to please the English Queen for its exoticism can potentially also mean from the Sultana's perspective a robe of honour making the wearer a vassal to the Ottomans.¹⁰
- 5 So how much of these potentially reversible processes of meaning surrounding acts of gifting were accessible to European travellers' understanding in Muslim lands and to the readers of their accounts back home in the early modern period? Linguistic clues may be gathered when we encounter foreign terms suggesting specific, non-translatable practices in an English text. Sometimes the foreign word visually stands out as not naturalised when it is printed in italic type, and at other times it can be accompanied by a marginal gloss or an English synonym given as clarification to the main text. Even when that English synonym is simply "gift", the doubling of terms witnesses to the fact that English terminology is to be understood as an approximation and not a one-size-fits-all concept. Such is the case for the first two eastern gift terms to enter the English language in print over the course of the seventeenth century: *piṣṣhkaṣh* in Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile, Begynne Anno 1626* (1634, second edition 1638),¹¹ and *khil'at* first appearing in the English translation by

John Phillips of French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's *Six Voyages* (1677). The number of occurrences and the variety of contexts for each term in those two works make the study rewarding when it comes to assessing their range of applications and misapplications, or the understandings and misunderstandings surrounding their practices.

Herbert's *piṣhkaśh*

- 6 Appearing multiple times in Herbert's account, *piṣhkaśh* is defined in our modern *OED* as "a fine or present made to the ruling authority on receiving an appointment or an assignment of revenue", with a first attested usage dated 1619 in manuscript documents related to the East India Company. Such a definition places us right away in a circuit of bribery that the Company would need to enter in order to secure trading privileges against a tough economic context of global competition. But looking at the term's Persian etymology opens up a different avenue, involving not just value for money, but a physical, hierarchical performance, since the term literally means "drawing, carrying forward" a gift, hence implying a protocol of humility for a special gift presented by an inferior to a superior. As a terminology in practice, *piṣhkaśh* is therefore more aptly to be understood, not as a neutral "gift" of value in a monetary transaction, but as a symbolic tribute or mark of fealty towards a ruler and a system, as seen above in full form with the example of the Safavid ambassador to the court of Selim II. The term in its literal meaning thus suggests a form of bonding and a rite of integration for the newcomers in the system, placing themselves under the protection of an authority and getting tolerated in the land by the latter's special favour. Failure of the protocol and absence of the ritual expected with the gift would diminish or even negate the object's symbolic value and social function.
- 7 It is this whole polyglot background of the practised term that helps us understand its full valency and function in Thomas Herbert's account of his travels in Persia and India (1626-1630) as a younger member of the train of Sir Dodmore Cotton, Charles I's ambassador to Shāh Abbās I. The term appears once in Herbert's 1634 edition of his travels, and six times in the 1638 edition. The spelling is not fully stabilised even in the second edition, where it comes mostly as "piscash", but once also as "pishcash", and the typesetters go for italics in half the cases while sometimes capitalisation is used too. Some usages clearly limit themselves to the dark side of gifting as bribery and corruption, as in the following passage about the court favourite "Emamgoly-cawn" (Imām-qolī Khān, governor of Fars, is meant): "not any Mirza, Cawn, Sultan, nor Beglerbeg that depended upon the Pot-shaugh [Pādshāh, the Great King, here Shāh Abbās I] smiles, but in an awfull complement, made him [meaning the court favourite] their Anchor by some annual piscash, bribe, or other".¹² Such is also the case in this other passage, on the King's own appetite for costly gifts: "without some piscash was no saluting him".¹³
- 8 But other occurrences in Herbert's text give us a fuller view of the performance behind the sheer materiality of the gift. Such is the case when the embassy first reaches Persia at the southern port of Gombroone – today's Bandar Abbās – and is entertained by the local Sultan before setting off towards the capital, Isfahān. Interestingly, the item produced upon arrival is not a *piṣhkaśh*, but a royal *farmān* or credential getting the ambassador admittance into the land. The *piṣhkaśh* is resorted to only later, when

specific protection by the Sultan is needed for setting off on the road. This implies his coming in person to make his presence visible to all as the travellers' protector: "the Sultan, who after a *Piscash* or present giuen him (fiue miles accompanying us) returned".¹⁴ The 1638 edition, more developed in its details than the first, adds to this episode by recording the Sultan's ritual formulae upon receipt of the gift: "the Sultan (...) who (well pleas'd with the *Piscash* or Present our Ambassador had given him) payed us all a hundred *Sallams* and *Tesselams*: that is, God speed you well, God keepe you".¹⁵

- 9 If the *piṣṣhkaṣh* is not just a valuable but a performance and a ritual of integration as the example above illustrated, we may note that this performance also needs a specific context and an appropriate timing. One possible pointer to an awareness of this aspect on the part of Herbert is the location of the word on his list of Persian vocabulary, provided as a kind of phrasebook for future travellers in both editions quoted from here. Herbert's more expanded six-page lexicon, appearing pp. 245-50 in the 1638 edition, is interestingly not presented alphabetically, but comes as a set of contextual associations of ideas. It starts, quite expectedly, with terms of reference to God and faith, followed by social hierarchy, from king and nobility to servants and slaves. Body parts and commodities follow, and then come the vocabulary of social interaction and rituals of sociability. This is where we find "piscash" defined as "a Gift", coming between the Persian term for "a Towell" and the ones for "a Platter" and "a Plate".¹⁶ The location could suggest the right moment for making an offering is between the handwashing ceremony upon arrival and the serving of the meal which follows the negotiations. Insults, compliments, and small talk examples wrap up the phrasebook as possible follow-ups to the ceremony and the successful or failing negotiations within that context.
- 10 Beyond the traveller's own experience of the practised terminology, one last occurrence in the 1638 edition signals his understanding of *piṣṣhkaṣh* as a ritual of social integration, or in this specific case re-integration. The passage comes from Herbert's summary of the tumultuous father-son relationship between the reigning Mughal emperor Jahāngīr and the crown prince Khurram – the future Shāh Jahān – and records the peace-making efforts attempted by the son around 1612 after a rebellion. The ritual of submission by the son towards his father culminates in the offering of a *piṣṣhkaṣh* which at this point is quite clearly miles away from the reductive sense of "bribe" with which we started: "hee [meaning prince Khurram] addes a pishcash of rare coignes, a hundred choise Elephants, and some portraits hee borrowed from the Portugals. They are all well taken; his sonnes respected, and word is sent him from *Assaph-cawn* [the Grand Vizier, and the prince's father-in-law] of hopes to re-ingraft him".¹⁷ Here, *piṣṣhkaṣh* is rather a tribute and a mark of submission, requiring an intermediary and a public admittance of one's inferior status by sending a gift ahead of coming in person to be accepted. Beyond its monetary value, the gift is here a marker of social hierarchy, which weakens the son by making him the foreigners' debtor, while proportionately reinforcing the authority of the father over him. Herbert's underlining specifically the debt to the Portuguese, incurred by the prince through this process of humiliation, again indicates the author's awareness of the hierarchy-building consequences of gifting. Herbert's detailed account of prince Khurram's humiliation confirms, in my view, his understanding of the practised usage of the term *piṣṣhkaṣh* wherever he prefers it to "gift" in composing his travelogue.

Tavernier's *khil'at*

- 11 The same sense of hierarchy-making accompanies, at the other end of the spectrum of performance, the second gift term of Islamicate provenance which joined the English lexicon in the seventeenth century and on which I would like to focus: *Khil'at*. The term is defined by the *OED* as “a dress of honour presented by a king or other dignitary as a mark of distinction to the person receiving it; hence, any handsome present made by an acknowledged superior”. It has a first attested usage taken from the English translation of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's account of his travels to Mughal India, *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier* (1677), published one year after the original French edition.¹⁸ Here again, we need the Persian and Arabic etymologies to see the performance beyond the gifted robe, since the Arabic radical *khal'* involves emptying out and disrobing. The ritual suggested through the choice of this term is that of bestowing on a vassal a garment which has just been taken off the ruler's own body. This metonymic gift is therefore to be understood as part of the ruler's public persona of power and authority, that he or she accepts to share with an acknowledged vassal. The gift of the *khil'at* thus opens up the space of a local imagined community around the sovereign to make room for the newcomer getting formally naturalised and integrated.
- 12 The translation of Tavernier's travels to Persia and India includes twenty-four occurrences of the term, spelt “calaat” in the English text and systematically italicised. Some of them are concerned with the particulars of the material items composing the garment, especially for the *khil'ats* Tavernier himself receives from Shāh Safī of Persia and the Great Mughal Shāh Jahān and which he wears on the surviving portraits of him in oriental fashion.¹⁹ The following passage illustrates such usage: “You must take notice, that the *Persians* call a *Calaat*, any Present which one person makes to another inferior to him in dignity; sometimes a Vest alone, sometimes a Tunick with the Girdle only, sometimes a Turbant, or a Horse, with Bridle and Saddle; to those in the Army the King sends a Sword or a Dagger, and all these go by the name of *Calaat*”.²⁰
- 13 Again, beyond the munificence of the gift, what the ritual centre-stages is the metonymic value of the object. A passage in the “Voyage to India” section devoted to the description of Great Mughal's palace in Agra makes this connection most ostensible: before getting to the King's presence, Tavernier explains, “there is a little Hall, rais'd some two or three steps high from the ground. This is the Wardrobe where the Royal Garments are kept; and from whence the King sends for the *Calaat*, or a whole Habit for a man, when he would honour any Stranger, or any one of his Subjects”.²¹
- 14 As the examples above show, the ritual is clearly not just established, but understood as established by the experienced European traveller, which is the *persona* Tavernier gives himself as he documents oriental usages for the benefit of his readers back home. But at other moments in his travelogue, Tavernier distinguishes his cultural position by contrasting it with that of less seasoned visitors. On those occasions he records instances of cultural hiatus, which threatens whenever the foreign recipients, not understanding the symbolism implied in the bestowing of the *khil'at*, refuse what they mistake for just an over-expensive item of clothing not likely to be worn, a useless gift. The most extreme example in this respect is that of the Capuchin Father Ephraim visiting Golconda on his way to Pegu and who is offered a *khil'at* by a Muslim Sheikh, minister and son-in-law to the King of Golconda. As Tavernier reports: “The Friar was

surpriz'd at the present, and gave the *Check* [Sheikh] to understand, that it was not proper for him to wear it: however the *Check* would force him to take it, telling him he might accommodate some of his friends with it".²² We can only imagine the embarrassment entailed by the diplomatic *faux pas* on both sides, for the mendicant Friar who could not wear anything other than his gown of humility, and the Sheikh whose metonymic gift of preferment and protection was refused in his own land.

- 15 To conclude on Herbert and Tavernier's travelogues, their examples of polyglot terminology appear to show, with their resistance to assimilation in English texts and within a European value system, that gifts, like languages, are about sharing, mutual understanding, and bonding. The practiced terminologies of these two travellers demonstrate how failure to take into consideration the added value of the rhetoric and performance going with a material gift can only lead to a communicational dead-end. This would seal not the inclusion, but the exclusion of the transacting partners in the system they wish to enter, and this is a consideration which reaches beyond the sheer materiality of the objects that early modern European visitors were ready to give or receive in their negotiations with the system.

Coda: English (mis-)practice before the terminology

- 16 The terminology of oriental gifting may have reached the English language only in mid-seventeenth century via these authors, at least in printed form. But as a coda, I wish to add that a late date of arrival of the lexicon in printed English texts does not mean that the principles behind those words were not used in transactions with English travellers in Muslim lands long before this moment. On the contrary, it is quite illuminating to return to earlier accounts left by English travellers to see many instances of cultural misunderstanding in contacts about which they reported with ample details, without necessarily grasping the implications of their experiences. As examples, we can turn of course to the many gift-giving and gift-receiving mishaps of Sir Thomas Roe, Britain's first official ambassador in 1615-19 to Mughal India, as studied recently by Nandini Das detailing the relevant passages in Roe's travelogue.²³ But we can equally rewind to the accounts of Muscovy Company factors, the first Englishmen to engage in diplomatic and trade exchanges with Safavid Persia as early as the mid-1560s, under the reign of Shāh Tahmāsp I. The following passage from the Company's fifth Persian voyage in 1568-74 and compiled in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* is telling in this respect: "and the *Shaugh* himselfe bought there of him [Company merchant Thomas Banister is meant] many karsies, and made him as good payment as any man could wish, and oftentimes would send his mony for the wares before the wares were deliuered, that he might be the surer of this honourable intended dealing."²⁴ As seen in the quote, the merchant traveller interprets his experience as one of fair trading on the part of the Shāh as a good customer, sending payment before receiving the goods. But if we turn to the etiquette of gifting and its ordering in the land as we saw it above, we may venture to footnote the episode as a likely instance of showcasing vassal-creating on the part of the king. His sending the gold first honours the foreign visitor with a material token, which makes him subsequently receive the kersies as *piṣṣhkaśh* from the newly arrived, rather than goods simply bought from a random merchant.
- 17 Even earlier in Hakluyt's compilation, the account of the first English trader and diplomat sent to Persia, Anthony Jenkinson in 1561, equally gains from being read

against the imbalance-building consequences of accepting a *khil'at*, such as the one he receives from Abdallāh khan, governor of Shirvān in north-western Iran, *en route* to the capital city of Qazvin. Reporting to his employers in London, the agent faithfully records the gift of “two garments of that countrey fashion, [...] downe to the ground, the one of silke, and the other of silke and golde, sent vnto me from the king”. The robes, Jenkinson reports, were forced on him by the governor’s servants prior to his being received for a public audience: “and after that they caused me to put off my vpper garment, being a gowne of blacke veluet furred with Sables, they put the sayme two garments vpon my backe, and so conducted me vnto the king.”²⁵ Here again, allegiance is forced on the traveller through the local clothing item he is made to wear, in replacement for the Russian furred coat he may have thought of as elegant and fit for the occasion, but which symbolically made him the Tsar’s vassal. The circumstance illustrates once more the distance between the perspective of the European visitor and that of his Persian host.

- 18 “Gifts played a key role in the making of the early modern world”, Zoltan Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello underline as a preamble to their *Global Gifts*, a classic in theorising the field.²⁶ Fully agreeing with their assessment of the identity-making value of diplomatic gifts, I wish to add that a clearer understanding of the symbolic practice and metonymic performance of those gifts, including the terminology and rituals involved, gives a better grasp of the world-making perspectives and ambitions of the transacting parties. Those perspectives are neither aligned unproblematically and commensurably, nor fully opposed, but rather overlap to yield their full identity-building meaning in cumulative manner, and it is the task of the editor of those accounts today to make that overlap visible and understandable for readers from our time.

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NOTES

1. Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 23.
2. Ibid.
3. For an overview on some of the main arguments and counterarguments in the "commensurability/incommensurability" debate, see Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 17-18, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Yale: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 4-6.
4. For more on the specific Islamic terminology and corresponding practices, see Hiroyuki Yanagihaski's entry on "Gifts" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2013.3, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 111-113. For the Persianate sphere in the early modern period, see also Rudi P. Matthee, "GIFT GIVING iv. In The Safavid Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, X/6, pp. 609-614, <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gift-giving-iv>>.
5. See for details H. V. Bowen's ODNB entry on "Clive, Robert, first Baron Clive of Plassey", <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5697>>.
6. Quoted in Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 11.

7. Topkapi Saray Museum Library, Istanbul, MS A.3595, fols. 53b-54a. Reproduced and studied in Linda Komaroff (ed.), *Gifts of the Sultan: The Art of Giving at the Islamic Courts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 17.
8. For more on this volume which is perhaps the most precious illustrated manuscript commissioned under the Safavid kings, see Stuart Cary Welch, *A King's Book of Kings: The Shah-nameh of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), and more sadly on its later mutilations and dispersals, Sheila R. Canby, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014).
9. Quoted by Alazraki from Richard Wrag, "A description of a voyage to Constantinople and Syria", in Richard Hakluyt (ed.), *Principal Navigations* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1904), vol. 6, p. 102.
10. Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 190.
11. There are several seventeenth-century editions for Herbert's text. In this article I use only the first and the second, for which the references are: Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile, Begunne Anno 1626* (London: William Stansby and Jacob Bloome, 1634), and Thomas Herbert, *Some Yeares Travels into Divers Parts of Asia and Afrique* (London: Richard Bishop, 1638).
12. 1638 edition, p. 206.
13. 1638 edition, p. 225.
14. 1634 edition, p. 51.
15. 1638 edition, p. 124.
16. 1638 edition, pp. 247-8.
17. 1638 edition, p. 95.
18. *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier, Baron of Aubonne through Turkey, into Persia and the East-Indies, for the Space of Forty Years*, translated by John Phillips (London: William Godbid, 1677).
19. See Nicolas de Largillère, *Jean-Baptiste Tavernier en costume oriental* (1679), Herzog Anton Ulrich – Museum Braunschweig. The painting served as the basis for the drawing of Tavernier in the Persian dress given to him in 1665 by the King of Persia, used for the frontispiece of the 1712 Paris edition of his *Six Voyages*. See for details Pierre-François Burger, "TAVERNIER, JEAN-BAPTISTE," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2017, <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tavernier-jean-baptiste>>.
20. "Voyage to Persia" section, p. 180.
21. "Voyage to India" section, p. 46.
22. "Voyage to India" section, p. 67.
23. Nandini Das, *Courting India* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 147-54 and 226-8.
24. Richard Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, volume 1 (London: George Bishop, Ralph Newberie and Robert Barker, 1599), p. 395.
25. Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, p. 346.
26. Zoltan Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 1.

ABSTRACTS

Symbolic performance and rhetoric of service are part and parcel of the meaning and function of gifts in any given culture. Exploring the specificity of Muslim Orient's gift terms such as *piṣṣhkaṣh* and *khil'at*, which entered the English language in the wake of trade and diplomatic interactions with the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals in the seventeenth century, this article looks into the protocols and rituals accompanying each term, as a basis for understanding their community-building value. My case studies on the contextual uses of gift terms in travel narratives from the period include Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille, Begynne Anno 1626* (1634), and the first English translation by John Phillips of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's *Six Voyages* (1677). In each case, I argue, practiced uses of terminology illustrate the visitors' cultural and linguistic attempts, but also their failures, at understanding the host system and infiltrating it.

La performance symbolique et la rhétorique du service font partie intégrante du sens et de la fonction des dons dans toutes les cultures. Explorant la spécificité de termes tels que *piṣṣhkaṣh* et *khil'at*, apparus dans la langue anglaise au XVII^e siècle, dans la foulée des relations commerciales et diplomatiques établies avec les empires de l'Orient musulman (les Ottomans, les Safavides et les Mogols), cet article examine les protocoles et les rituels inscrits dans l'étymologie de chaque terme, pour mieux comprendre comment la communauté se construit à travers de telles transactions. Les études de cas choisis incluent les usages contextuels de ces termes dans des récits de voyage tels que *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille, Begynne Anno 1626* (1634) de Thomas Herbert, et la première traduction en anglais par John Phillips des *Six Voyages* (1677) de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier. Dans chaque cas, la terminologie mise en pratique illustre les tentatives – mais aussi les échecs – culturels et linguistiques des visiteurs pour comprendre le système hôte et l'infiltrer.

INDEX

Mots-clés: histoire globale, traduction culturelle, lexique anglais, Thomas Herbert, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Orient persanophone, protocole diplomatique, robe d'honneur

Keywords: global history, cultural translation, English lexicon, Thomas Herbert, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Persianate Asia, diplomatic protocol, robes of honour

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The Queen and the Sultana: Early Modern Female Circuits of Diplomacy and the Consumption of Gendered Luxury Items Between East and West

La Reine et la sultane : réseaux diplomatiques féminins et échange d'objets luxueux entre l'Orient et l'Occident durant la période de la première modernité

Mathilde Alazraki

Introduction

- 1 In 1593, Elizabeth I sent a royal letter and gifts to Murad III (r. 1574-1595), Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.¹ This diplomatic outreach from London to Constantinople is not in itself surprising since England had initiated diplomatic and commercial relations with the Ottomans as early as 1578, when the English merchant William Harborne was dispatched to the Sublime Porte to petition the Sultan for the safe passage of English ships in Ottoman waters. Three quarters of the Mediterranean, “*the international marketplace of the old world*,”² were under Ottoman control at the time, and the English Crown believed that a mutually beneficial trade agreement could be reached with the Islamic empire. England’s position on the European scene had been compromised by the Queen’s 1570 excommunication by the Pope, leaving it vulnerable and in want of commercial partners to fund its costly war against Spain.³ Similarly, the 1571 Battle of Lepanto had been a great defeat for the Ottoman navy against the allied powers of Spain and Italy, and the Ottomans were in need of tin, lead and gunpowder to retaliate against the Holy League. In exchange for the “*Ordinance, powder, and munition*” sent to the Ottomans, the English Crown gained access to the “*silks, dyes, jewels, and spices of the East*.”⁴ In 1579, Murad granted the Queen’s request for safe passage of English ships, and

in 1583 William Harborne, now a merchant for the recently created Levant Company, was appointed first resident English ambassador in Constantinople, effectively signalling hopes of an enduring trade and diplomatic relation between the English kingdom and the Ottoman Empire.⁵

- 2 What is surprising about the 1593 correspondence between Elizabeth I and Murad III is that it also included a royal letter and gifts to Murad's favourite concubine, Sultana Safiye. Safiye (c. 1550-1621) was Murad III's *haseki*, the official title for the mother of the sultan's heir apparent, and the second most powerful woman in the empire after the *valide sultan*, the reigning Sultan's mother.⁶ Of Albanian origins, Safiye was given as a slave to the young Sultan in 1563 and was thereafter brought up in the imperial harem of the Topkapi palace where she was given a new name (Safiye meaning "pure" in Ottoman Turkish), and taught the language and customs of the Ottoman Empire.⁷ Safiye lived during a time that is commonly referred to as "*the Sultanate of women*." The term was originally used by the Turkish historian Ahmet Refik Altınay in his 1923 eponymous book where he criticized the overt influence of women from the imperial harem and linked it to the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.⁸ Nowadays, however, the negative connotation of the term has been mainly shed and "*the Sultanate of women*" instead refers to a period of great involvement from the *haseki* and *valide sultan* in the domestic and foreign affairs of the empire, starting with Hürrem, the wife of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent at the beginning of the century. Like Hürrem and her successor Nur Banu, the Venetian mother of Murad III, Safiye was used to interacting with foreign ambassadors at the Porte through her *kira*, the woman acting as an intermediary between the Sultana and the world outside the imperial harem.⁹ Safiye's *kira*, a Jewish Italian woman named Esperanza Malchi, interacted on numerous occasions with Edward Barton, William Harborne's successor and the second resident English ambassador in Constantinople between 1588 and 1598. At the time, the status of the English ambassador was a new and fledgling one at the Sublime Porte, especially compared to rival European powers like France and Venice, who had older and stronger ties to the Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, gaining the political support of the Sultana, who was said, at the height of her power, to have "*governed, in effect, the whole empire*," was critical to Barton's position at court and would explain why Elizabeth I sent a letter and gifts addressed specifically to Safiye.¹⁰
- 3 Indeed, Edward Barton was the first Englishman in Constantinople to see the diplomatic potential of the imperial harem's inhabitants, and the first to use the fact that England was ruled by a queen to make an ally of Safiye. Unlike most European ambassadors at the time, Barton was fluent in Ottoman Turkish, which gave him insight into the inner workings of the court. When his petitions to the Sultan were dismissed or obstructed by rival ambassadors or courtiers, Barton presented his petitions directly to Safiye, so that she could relay his messages to Sultan Murad without having to go through the usual channels of the Sultan's advisors. For example, in a 1592 memorial to Safiye, Barton petitions the Sultana to help him convince Murad to fight the Spanish forces alongside England. In order to make his case, he emphasizes Elizabeth's heroic stance as a female ruler: "[Elizabeth I] is a woman, and yet has fought and harassed for a long time [the King of Spain]. Worthy therefore is she that his Majesty's power should be displayed in her favour."¹¹ This petition is the first instance of the English ambassador using Safiye and Elizabeth's femininity as a common point meant to overcome the religious, cultural and political differences between England and the Ottoman Empire. This gender-based

strategy was deemed successful enough to warrant a specific letter and gifts for the Sultana.

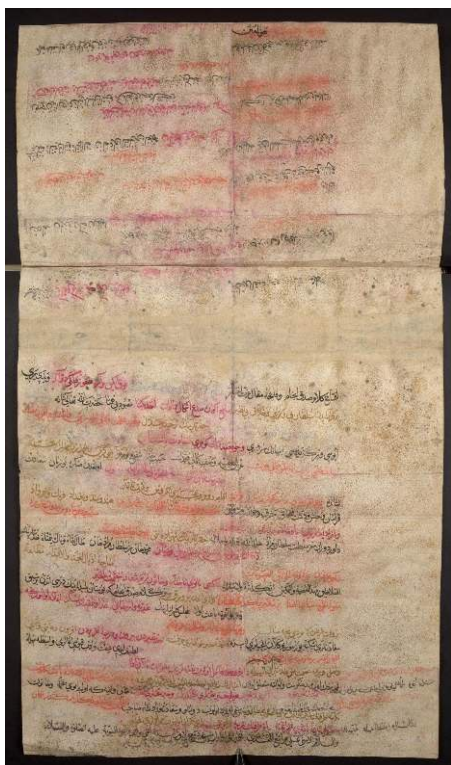
The visual diplomacy of the correspondence between Elizabeth I and Sultana Safiye

- 4 In 1593, Barton presented to Safiye, among other gifts of clothes and glassware, “*a jewel of her majesties picture, set with some rubies and diamants.*”¹² Though Elizabeth sent her portrait to foreign monarchs in Europe on several occasions, her gift to Safiye might be the first and only instance of the Queen sending her picture to the Islamic East.¹³ This unprecedented diplomatic gift in Anglo-Ottoman relations was accompanied by a letter to Safiye which was brought directly to her to the harem, something that would not have been permitted had Elizabeth been a male ruler. Though the portrait and letter sent by Elizabeth I have not been recovered from Turkish archives, contemporary accounts tell us about Safiye’s positive reaction to the Queen’s portrait:

[The Sultana] sent to know of the ambassador what present he thought she might return [which] would most delight her majestie: who sent word that a sute of princely attire being after the Turkish fashion would for the rareness thereof be acceptable in England. Whereupon she sent an upper gowne of cloth of gold very rich, an under gowne of cloth of silver, and a girdle of Turkie worke, rich and faire, with a letter of gratification.¹⁴

- 5 The Turkish outfit sent in 1593 by Safiye was the first gift ever given by an Ottoman Sultana to an English monarch, and the letter accompanying it is still considered today “*an outstanding specimen of Turkish calligraphy,*” its paper “*liberally flecked with gold,*” and written “*altogether [in] five colours, black, blue, crimson, gold and scarlet.*”¹⁵ This letter appears unique not only in England where it was sent, but even in the Ottoman Empire where there is no record of any other Sultana sending such a visually impressive message to Europe.

First letter from Sultana Safiye to Queen Elizabeth I, December 1593



- 6 It is likely that this choice to gift the Sultana a portrait of the Queen, and Safiye's response in the form of an Ottoman dress visually accompanied by a stunning letter, stemmed from a desire to create a visual bridge in the correspondence between the two women. As Rayne Allinson reminds us, "[f]or the Ottomans, the materiality of royal letters carried as much significance as their contents, or even greater significance."¹⁶ Because the Queen and the Sultana were separated physically by the thousands of miles standing between their two cities, as well as linguistically by the language barrier between them, they had to find other ways to perform closeness in order to frame their diplomatic demands in terms of friendship. Indeed, Safiye's letter to Elizabeth is in Ottoman Turkish, which was transcribed in Italian and English by the secretaries at the embassy before being sent to London, where the translations were revised until they were deemed to be fit for the Queen's eyes. As for Elizabeth, she likely wrote to Safiye as she did to Murad, in Latin and Italian.
- 7 Thus, gifting Elizabeth with a Turkish outfit chosen by Safiye herself would serve multiple diplomatic purposes. Since Safiye was unable to return Elizabeth's gesture and send a portrait of herself, which was forbidden by Islamic law, sending traditional clothes in a fashion similar to that which she herself wore was the next best way to help the Queen visualize the Sultana, just as the Sultana could visualize the Queen every time she looked at her portrait.¹⁷ The metonymic and mnemonic function of portraits (and in this case clothes) as diplomatic gifts has already been highlighted by Tracey A. Sowerby who explains how, by looking at the portrait of someone, the observer remembers not only that person, but also the enduring relationship that the gift of the portrait stands for.¹⁸ Finally, the Ottoman costume, made most likely of silk and precious gems from the inter-Asian trade, symbolically stood for the trade relations uniting their two countries, in a much more personal way than by simply

sending raw silk.¹⁹ Indeed, the diplomatic friendship between Elizabeth and Safiye was first and foremost instigated by England's desire to secure and protect in the long-run the newly established trade relations between England and the Ottoman Empire. Safiye was very much aware of this, since, in her letter, she encourages Elizabeth to pursue their correspondence by saying: "*if she will never cease from [sending] such letters, (...) I shall endeavour for her aims.*"²⁰

An exclusively female network of early modern diplomacy between East and West

- 8 But in spite of Safiye's request for their correspondence to continue, it took six years for Elizabeth's next letter to reach the harem. In 1595, Murad III died, leaving the throne to the son he shared with Safiye, Mehmed III, making Safiye now *valide sultan* – the highest-ranking position for a woman at the palace. Only in 1599 did Henry Lello, Barton's successor as English ambassador, present Elizabeth's new gifts and letters to both the Sultan and his mother Safiye. The Sultana's influence over her son was deemed important enough to warrant an expensive "*Coatche of six hundrethe poundes vallue.*"²¹ Such an expense was justified by Safiye's role in the success of Barton's embassy at court, where he obtained an unprecedented amount of influence and helped England establish itself as a worthy partner to the Ottoman Empire. As Barton's contemporaries noted: "*By meanes chefelie of the Turks mother[s] favoure and some mony, he made and displaced both princes and patriarchs, befriended viseroys, and preferred the sutes of cadies (who ar thier chefe preests and spirituall justisies).*"²² It is highly probable that Elizabeth renewed her correspondence with the Sultana in the hopes that she would display the same favours to Lello, her new ambassador. This goal was apparently achieved since Lello reports that "*[t]he Sultana is very pleased with her present and has promised to be my friend.*"²³ This display of friendship extended to Elizabeth as well, and the Sultana requested another portrait of the Queen, which Lello commissioned from the English painter Rowland Bucket for the embassy.²⁴
- 9 Just as she had done in 1593, the Sultana wrote back to the Queen and sent some presents of her own: another Turkish outfit with some jewelry, which Lello dismissed as "*trifles (...), yet these (...) in general esteemed a great matter of freindshypp, because it is not [the Ottomans's] use to send presents to any prynce whatsoever.*"²⁵ According to Lello, the very materiality of the powerful Ottoman Sultana sending gifts to Elizabeth, queen of a remote Western island, was of more importance than the gifts themselves. As for the letter, while Safiye's first missive was visually impressive, her next letter to the Queen appears much simpler, and written in sober black ink.²⁶ This change of style in the correspondence might appear as a step-down aesthetically, but in terms of diplomacy as it was performed in the Ottoman harem, it can be interpreted as a step-up in the intimacy through which Safiye represented her friendship with Elizabeth. By not using the official palace scribe, Safiye foregoes the expected formality of diplomatic relationships and instead speaks to Elizabeth more intimately, as if the English Queen was now a long-time friend. After acknowledging the reception of the coach, Safiye stages herself as a direct mouthpiece for English interests at court: "*We do not cease from admonishing our son, [the Sultan], and from telling him: 'Do act according to the treaty!'*"²⁷ Here, Safiye is referring to the 1579 commercial treaty signed by Murad and granting English merchants safe passage in the Levant.

- 10 Accompanying this answer was another letter addressed to Elizabeth, this time written by Safiye's Jewish Italian *kira*, Esperanza Malchi.²⁸ The *kira* was the one in charge not only of carrying the Sultana's correspondence to and from the harem, but also of "*the trading in jewels, the acquisition of luxury articles for the ladies of the harem,*" as well as "*the dealing with European ambassadors.*"²⁹ It is thus in the hope of securing English cosmetics and clothes for Safiye that the *kira* passes on her mistress' request to Elizabeth: "*on account of Your Majesty's being a woman I can without embarrassment employ you with this notice,*" which is to send "*distilled waters (...) for the face and odiferous oils for the hands,*" as well as woollen English clothes, which would appear "*fantastic*" and exotic to Safiye.³⁰ Femininity is here once again used as a common point between the Queen and the Sultana, one which allows for a closeness and intimacy meant to overcome any religious, cultural, linguistic or geographical barriers between them. Moreover, it illustrates a pattern in the correspondence of Safiye demanding visual pieces of England to be brought for her into the seraglio: first through the portrait of Elizabeth that she commissioned from Lello, then through the requests for cosmetics and clothes relayed by her *kira*. These two exchanges highlight the prominent place held by material culture in female Ottoman diplomacy. Moreover, this letter is a rare example of a female agent, the *kira*, not only inserting herself into the male-dominated diplomatic channels between England and the Ottoman Empire, but also actively excluding any male interference. Indeed, the *kira* asks the queen to send the gifts "*by my hand as, being articles for ladies, [the Sultana] does not wish them to pass through other hands.*"³¹ We do not know if Elizabeth did follow the *kira*'s suggestion, but if she did, this would have been an unprecedented example of an entirely female diplomatic interaction solely aimed at, and mediated by, a diverse community of international women here: a Protestant English Queen, an Albanian Sultana and a Jewish Italian agent.

The Ottoman imperial harem as a cosmopolitan place for the consumption of luxury items

- 11 Looking at the Sultana's request for English goods also allows us to think outside of the Eurocentric appeal for Eastern items and instead look at the consumption of Western items by the East. This reversal of exoticism is especially noteworthy in the early modern period when the Ottoman Empire was more economically powerful than England. In fact, the consumption of Western luxury items by the imperial Ottoman harem even extended to other European powers as well. In 1590, for example, Sultana Safiye requested a specific type of Venetian glassware that imitated chalcedony stone, which was very popular in the fifteenth century but the production of which had been mostly forgotten by the end of the sixteenth century, and the Venetian Senate had to go out of their way to find a craftsman skilful enough to create the glass vases in the style that Safiye wanted.³² It was thus common for the Sultana to collect rare and exotic items in the imperial harem and to use her influence in diplomatic relations to do so. Safiye's role as a curator for the imperial harem's collection of Western luxury goods was most likely a way to reflect her own reach and influence as a powerful Sultana representing a mighty empire that her son would later govern.
- 12 Part of the material display of Safiye's power also relied on her ability to secure fashionable items before anyone else. This desire for a steady stream of luxury goods

could sometimes be a source of diplomatic tension with European powers if they failed to give the exclusivity of their wares to the imperial harem. In 1594, for example, the Sultana complained to the Venetian *bailo* about a type of Venetian glassware that looked like bird feathers that were being sold in the marketplaces of Constantinople – and thus accessible to everyone willing to pay for them – without having been first presented to the imperial harem.³³ The Sultana expressed her displeasure to the *bailo* and demanded that Venetian glassblowers stop sending these products to Constantinople, otherwise “*our friendship will be broken, and I will not favour your negotiations anymore.*”³⁴ The same friendship that the Sultana extended to the English ambassadors Edward Barton and Henry Lello, and which was considered fundamental to the success of their diplomatic missions at the Sublime Porte could thus be retracted from the *bailo* if Venice failed to ensure that Safiye had an early and exclusive access to their luxury wares. Though the Senate apparently went to great trouble to try and stop the export of those new glass items, the matter was ultimately resolved peacefully a few months later, when the Sultana deemed the goods out of fashion and unworthy of being displayed in the imperial harem afterwards: “*let in the future come as many as they want, because they are already in no esteem at all, and if they want to send a thousand ships of them, let them come.*”³⁵

- 13 These different examples of interactions between Safiye and ambassadors from both England and Venice bear testimony to the importance that gift-giving practices held in diplomatic interactions between Europe and the Ottoman imperial harem. Depending on the gifts that were offered – or withheld – the Sultana could further or hinder an ambassador’s diplomatic agenda at the Sublime Porte. Thus, while the *kira*’s request for English cosmetics and clothes for her mistress might appear trivial or anecdotal in the wider context of Anglo-Ottoman exchanges, such a demand was in fact at the heart of commercial and diplomatic relations at the time. As Josie Schoel reminds us in her article on the role of cosmetics in early modern global exchanges, raw materials, such as alum, were imported to Europe from the Ottoman Empire.³⁶ In the case of England and English cosmetics, alum was one of the ingredients used as a whitening agent in beauty products. Following the request of the *kira*, the transformed alum would be sent back to the Ottoman Empire in the form of an exotic Western product. As a consequence, what might appear as a peripheral, feminine, soft power exchange between a Queen and a Sultana was in fact a microcosm of the global trade and economy that was starting to take root between East and West in the early modern world.

Conclusion

- 14 Even though Elizabeth’s letters have been lost and we cannot be sure if she ever sent the cosmetics that Safiye requested, the Sultana’s letters that remain from this exchange make it a unique example of female diplomacy, not only because this correspondence involved two powerful women at a crossroad between East and West, but because there is a clear and deliberate use of their shared femininity as a way to cultivate intimacy and good relationships. Studying this exchange under the light of the New Diplomatic History can help us look at how diplomacy was performed outside of a Eurocentric perception of diplomatic interaction where the ambassador “the primary locus of diplomatic exchanges.”³⁷ Indeed, the correspondence taking place in

1593 and 1599 between Elizabeth I and Safiye involved an array of diplomatic stakeholders outside of the roles of the monarch or of the resident ambassador which have for so long been at the centre of diplomatic studies. Unlike Elizabeth, whose claim to the English throne as a female ruler only came to be recognized in the absence of a male heir, Safiye's role first as *haseki*, then as *valide sultan*, and the influence that these titles gave her in foreign and domestic matters were acknowledged widely at the Ottoman court at the time, including by foreign ambassadors. Similarly, an intermediary like the *kira* Esperanza Malchi, a woman from a religious and cultural minority in the Ottoman Empire, held a place of equal importance to that of an ambassador in the context of the imperial harem, where securing prized gifts was necessary to gain the support of the Sultana in diplomatic proceedings. Barton himself complained about how dealing with the Ottoman Sultana meant dealing with the *kira*: "because my selfe cannot come to the speech of the Sultana, and all my business passes by the hands of the said Mediatrix, loosing her freindshippe, I loose the practick with the Sultana."³⁸

- 15 Looking at the correspondence of Elizabeth and Safiye under the different lights of diplomatic studies, gender studies and material culture studies can help us see how women from different ethnic, cultural, social and religious backgrounds engaged in early modern diplomacy. This involvement was not phrased or performed in the same way as exclusively male interactions, or even as male-and-female interactions like the correspondence between Elizabeth and Murad III. Instead, the relation between Safiye and the English Queen was worded in terms of feminine friendship that were reinforced by very specific gifts chosen not simply for their material value, but rather for the way they could visually symbolize closeness. This diplomatic performance of intimacy relied on the shared consumption of rare and exotic luxury items in female spaces of power, whether it be in the Ottoman imperial harem or in the royal court of Elizabethan England. This cross-cultural friendship allowed Elizabeth and her ambassadors to protect the economic interests of the Levant Company and to secure a lobby against Spain, while corresponding with the Western-most kingdom in Europe allowed Safiye to strengthen her own position as a powerful *valide sultan* following in the footsteps of Hürrem.

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ABSTRACTS

Between 1593 and 1599, Queen Elizabeth I of England corresponded with the Ottoman Sultana Safiye (c. 1550-1606), favorite concubine of Sultan Murad III and mother of Sultan Mehmed III. Of this exchange, only the Sultana's letters and mentions of the expensive and undeniably gendered gifts sent between London and Constantinople (such as English cosmetics, Ottoman female dresses and jewelry...) remain. And yet, these fragments give us a glimpse of how two royal women of the early modern period, at a crossing between East and West, established a transcultural female circuit of exchange, not only to promote efficient diplomatic relationships but also to enable the transit of specifically female objects of status and power between the English court and the Ottoman harem. A close study of Elizabeth and Safiye's correspondence, as well as the role of the Jewish *kira* (the Ottoman equivalent of a lady in waiting) Esperanza Malchi in relaying the correspondence between the royal harem and the English embassy, will help shed light on the often-overlooked roles that female friendship and material culture played in foreign diplomacy, a subject that is only recently coming under attention in gender, global and material studies of the early modern period.

Entre 1593 et 1599, la reine Elisabeth I^{ère} a entretenu une correspondance avec la Sultane ottomane Safiye (1550-1606), favorite du Sultan Murad III et mère du Sultan Mehmet III. De cet échange, seules les lettres de la Sultane nous sont parvenues et, à travers elles, la description de cadeaux luxueux et indéniablement genrés (des produits cosmétiques anglais, des robes ottomanes et des bijoux) échangés entre Londres et Constantinople. En dépit de la disparition des cadeaux et de la lettre d'Elisabeth, ces fragments de correspondance nous offrent un aperçu inédit des échanges entre deux femmes de pouvoir, à la croisée de l'Orient et de l'Occident. Elisabeth I^{ère} et Safiye ont établi par leur relation épistolaire des circuits d'échanges féminins transculturels, non seulement dans une visée diplomatique, mais aussi afin de partager des objets féminins de luxe entre la cour anglaise et le harem ottoman. Une étude approfondie des lettres de Safiye, ainsi que le rôle joué par sa *kira* (équivalent ottoman d'une dame de compagnie), la juive Esperanza Malchi, dans la transmission de ces lettres du harem impérial à l'ambassade d'Angleterre à Constantinople, permettra d'éclairer le rôle, trop souvent sous-estimé, de l'amitié féminine et de la culture matérielle dans la diplomatie de la Première Modernité.

INDEX

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Safiye, Elizabeth I, diplomacy, gift-giving, harem

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« [T]o write and Lyme in Gold and Colours certain Letters » : correspondance diplomatique enluminée dans l'Angleterre de la première modernité

“[T]o write and Lyme in Gold and Colours certain Letters”: Limning Diplomatic Correspondence in Early Modern England

Anne-Valérie Dulac

Introduction

- 1 Le registre des fonctionnaires de la cour britannique couvrant les années 1660 à 1782 recense la création, aux alentours de l'année 1662, d'une charge désormais caduque qui était alors réservée à l'écriture, l'enluminure et la garniture de la correspondance diplomatique à destination des « princes d'orient » :

The writer, flourisher and embellisher of letters to eastern princes was appointed by lord chamberlain's warrant to the gentlemen ushers, daily waiters. He received a fee of £10 a document until Anne's reign, when a salary was established of £60 per annum at the treasurer of the chamber's office. By 1797, the salary had been reduced to £25 16s.¹

- 2 Cette institutionnalisation consacre en réalité une pratique plus ancienne remontant à l'Angleterre élisabéthaine². L'histoire de cette somptueuse correspondance entre l'Angleterre et les souverains de « l'étranger », d'« orient » ou du « lointain » (selon la terminologie fluctuante que l'on retrouve dans les archives) peut être reconstituée à partir de deux types de sources : d'une part, les quelques archives relatives aux mandats ou aux rémunérations des artistes employés et, d'autre part, les lettres elles-mêmes, dont un nombre assez important a été conservé. La littérature secondaire sur le sujet est récente et la recherche encore jeune : cet article doit beaucoup à la

monographie de Maija Jansson consacrée aux lettres enluminées adressées à la Russie et l'Extrême-Orient au cours du XVII^e siècle, ainsi qu'aux travaux de Richard Scott Morel ou Tracey A. Sowerby³. Le présent article envisage dans un premier temps une analyse des termes des patentes et mandats royaux encadrant cette tradition diplomatique afin d'en saisir les origines et le périmètre. Le second temps de la réflexion sera consacré à la description matérielle de ces objets (support, pigments, motifs) à travers quelques exemples choisis, qui permettent de replacer cette correspondance au cœur d'une stratégie aux enjeux tout à la fois politiques, artistiques et commerciaux de don et de contre-don.

Fig. 1 : Lettre de Jacques I^{er} à Ahmed (1627)



Bodleian Library, MS Eng. hist. b. 172 fol. 57.

Aux origines d'une tradition

- 3 On trouve dès le règne de Jacques I^{er} dans les procès-verbaux de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales des indices des raisons qui ont présidé à l'avènement de cette tradition épistolaire. Le 10 février 1606 on trouve ainsi l'entrée suivante : « Letters and commission from the King for the East Indies ordered to be lymned and prepared for His Majesty's signature, and several copies to be translated into Portuguese⁴. » La référence à la traduction portugaise de la lettre ne suit pas la mention de l'ornement artistique par hasard. L'enluminure, comme l'acte de traduction, visent d'abord l'élaboration d'une langue commune à une période (le premier XVII^e siècle) où l'expertise linguistique manquait encore de part et d'autre pour envisager une communication plus directe⁵. Les royaumes et empires auxquels étaient destinés ces lettres enluminées ont en commun, pour la plupart, leur éloignement, tant géographique que linguistique.

- 4 C'est pourquoi les Anglais s'appuyèrent d'abord sur la présence portugaise en Asie, qui datait du ^{xvi}^e siècle, et qui assurait aux émissaires britanniques d'échanger avec leurs interlocuteurs étrangers par l'entremise de locuteurs lusophones sur place. La garniture artistique et la calligraphie jouent en l'espèce une forme de traduction supplémentaire, mais en une langue ornementale cette fois, des intentions de la couronne britannique. C'est ce qu'exprimait déjà de manière on ne peut plus explicite l'ambassadeur anglais résident auprès de la Sublime Porte, Edward Barton, en 1591, dans une lettre à Élisabeth concernant ses courriers à destination du sultan ottoman ou de ses ministres :

[C]onsideringe the barbarousnesse of theise men [who] acquainted w[i]th no other but their mother tongue, and consequently little delighted w[i]th the eloquence in the Q[ueen's] l[ett]res used, [I suggest] yo[ur] ho[nor] would give order that a little more cost were bestowed on the giltinge or paintinge of [the queen's letters] . . . that [they] beinge not able to reade them at least might take pleasure to see the care taken in the outward forme⁶.

- 5 Le terme « barbare » est ici à entendre dans toute sa polysémie : on doit y lire une forme de rejet aux marges du monde civilisé mais aussi une référence probable à la différence religieuse ainsi qu'à l'altérité linguistique⁷. Les textes officiels (minutes, procès-verbaux ou mandats) expriment cette étrangeté de multiples manières : outre le très large « eastern princes » du texte qui officialise cette fonction⁸, on rencontre aussi les adjectifs « foreign », « far distant » ou « remote » pour désigner ce qui rassemble l'ensemble des destinataires de ces courriers magnifiquement enluminés et calligraphiés⁹. Si l'enluminure et les garnitures calligraphiques sont employées pour transcrire l'estime de la cour anglaise à l'endroit de ces lointains « barbares » aux langues et aux coutumes étranges et étrangères, autant que pour engager le dialogue sur un terrain favorable, les parures épistolaires permettent aussi de préserver la teneur du message royal de contresens ou traductions malheureuses commises par les interprètes locaux. Thomas Kerridge (qui occupe le poste de « President of Trade » pour la Compagnie des Indes Orientales de 1625 à 1628) rapporte ainsi que l'un des émissaires de la Compagnie à l'avoir précédé auprès de Jahangir, Paul Canning, avait fait les frais de la formulation de son traducteur et participé malgré lui à ternir la réputation des Britanniques auprès du Grand Moghol :

[The Jesuits] allege further our country and prince of no respect nor force, having only one city wherein a few merchants, and that our king hath no hand in this business, which they instanced upon an answer made by Paul Canning to the king at the delivery of the present. The king [Jahangir] demanded of him from whom the letter was sent, he answered the letter was from his king [James I] and the presents from the merchants which the Jesuits, noting his haughtiness to mislike, they furthered his disesteeming thereof, saying, our king sent him nothing, it was the merchants only through desire of traffic¹⁰.

- 6 La munificence des enluminures des missives royales offrait donc une garantie supplémentaire de communiquer à leur destinataire une première marque de respect et d'amitié. Cela explique également que les enluminures, les motifs et la calligraphie soignée de la lettre sont repris en plus petit format au verso du vélin (je reviendrai plus bas sur les matériaux et techniques employées le plus communément pour cette correspondance) afin que même pliée, et avant même son ouverture, il soit déjà possible d'imaginer la richesse de l'objet une fois décacheté. Le sceau qui maintenait les lettres fermées et la soie qui les protégeait souvent servaient le même effet. De la même façon, on sait que certaines de ces lettres étaient placées dans de luxueuses boîtes

ouvrages afin d'accroître encore leur valeur aux yeux de leur destinataire, comme en témoigne cette note de Peter Floris dans son récit de voyage dans les Indes Orientales (1611-1615) : « Wee wente on shoare in verye greate state, taking with us a present of aboute 600 R8 [Real de a Ocho] to accompanie the King's letter, which otherwyse woulde butt little bee esteemed¹¹. » L'importance que pouvait revêtir l'objet non pas tant en complément mais parfois à l'encontre des périls de la traduction transparait de manière peut-être plus évidente encore dans un épisode rapporté à la date du 16 avril 1609 dans le journal de William Hawkins, un représentant de la East India Company connu pour son rôle de Capitaine du Hector, premier navire marchand dépêché à Surat en 1608 en vue de négociations commerciales avec Jahangir. Hawkins, qui avait reçu la responsabilité de remettre à ce dernier lettres et présents de la part de Jacques en raison de son expérience et de ses capacités linguistiques¹², en donne le récit suivant :

After making my salutation, [Jahangir] bid me heartily welcome with a smiling countenance; on which I repeated my obeisance and duty. Having his majesty's letter in my hand, he called me to come near him, reaching down his hand from his royal seat, where he sat in great majesty on high to be seen of the people. He received the letter very graciously, viewing it for some time, both looking at the seal and at the way in which it was made up; and then called an old Jesuit who was present, to read and explain the letter. While the Jesuit was reading the letter, he spoke to me in the kindest manner, asking me the contents of the letter, which I told him; upon which he immediately promised, and swore by God, that he would grant and allow with all his heart every thing the king had asked, and more if his majesty required. The Jesuit told him the substance of the letter, but discommended the style, saying that it was basely penned, writing *vestia* without *majestad*. On which I said to the king, "May it please your majesty, these people are our enemies: How can it be that this letter should be irreverently expressed, seeing that my sovereign demands favour from your majesty?" He acknowledged the truth of this observation¹³.

- 7 Cet incident autour de la lettre est révélateur à plus d'un titre pour le sujet qui nous occupe. Hawkins note tout d'abord que l'Empereur prend le temps d'observer attentivement l'objet (« viewing it for some time, both looking at the seal and at the way in which it was made up ») avant même de s'enquérir de son contenu. Cette précision dit assez l'importance de la facture épistolaire et du soin apporté à la composition de ces objets. La remarque dédaigneuse émise par le Jésuite au sujet du style, bien qu'elle soit habilement étouffée par la réponse de Hawkins, montre aussi à quel point la richesse des garnitures pouvait parler pour le souverain britannique sans autre entremise nécessaire et par là même battre en brèche tout procès en petitesse ou médiocrité. La seule apparence des lettres dans de tels contextes linguistiquement hostiles acquiert dès lors une importance aisément compréhensible. Dans le cadre de relations entre puissances plus proches géographiquement ou culturellement, la valeur d'une lettre reposait en partie sur d'autres marques d'estime et de sincérité :

[O]ne way in which rulers aimed to deepen their relationships with other princes was through the exchange of autograph and holograph letters. Signing a letter established its authenticity and monarchs were keen to stress that 'our promise delivered in writynge signed with our hand' ensured 'the maintenance of our princely word, as in honour we are bound'¹⁴.

- 8 C'est pourquoi la correspondance diplomatique entre souverains européens, notamment, ne faisait pas l'objet du même traitement artistique. En revanche, dès lors que l'on s'adressait à un responsable politique dont l'accès au texte ne pouvait se faire que par le truchement d'un intermédiaire, au cœur d'un monde dont tous les codes

(linguistiques, politiques, diplomatiques, cérémoniels) échappaient encore très largement à la cour britannique, c'est aux calligraphes et aux enlumineurs qu'incombait une grande partie du travail de communication politique avec « l'étranger ».

- 9 La question de l'incompétence linguistique n'est cependant pas la seule raison d'être de cette correspondance enluminée. En effet, le statut hybride de ces lettres, délivrées par des ambassadeurs-marchands en quête de « faveurs », pour reprendre le terme employé par Hawkins¹⁵, n'est pas sans lien avec leur singulière composition par rapport à l'immense majorité des lettres produites par la cour d'Angleterre à des fins de négociation. Afin de mieux comprendre leur sens et l'effet qu'elles étaient censées produire sur leur destinataire, il n'est que de se tourner vers les termes du mandat royal conféré au calligraphe et enlumineur Edward Norgate en date du 10 mars 1631 :

Warrant from the King to the Secretaries of State, Dorchester and Coke. Edward Norgate, one of the clerks of the Signet Extraordinary, has for many years been employed in preparing for the Royal signature letters to the Emperor and Patriarch of Russia, the Grand Signor, the Great Mogul, the Emperor of Persia, and Kings of Bantam, Macassar, Barbary, Siam, Acheen, Fez, Sus, and other remote kings and princes, which he has always performed to his Majesty's content; but of late many letters of that kind have been written and burned by scriveners and painters about London, and so become exposed to the common view. His Majesty therefore requires that hereafter all such letters be prepared by said Edward Norgate only and his deputies, whom his Majesty has appointed to attend that service¹⁶.

- 10 Ainsi que le note Jansson, il est frappant de constater que la longue énumération de royaumes « lointains » (« remote ») où étaient envoyées ces lettres correspond en grande partie à celle établie par Nicholas Faunt (qui officia en qualité de secrétaire de Sir Francis Walsingham à compter de 1580 puis fut employé comme *Clerk of the Signet* par Jacques I^{er}) dans son *Discourse Touching the Office of Principal Secretary of State, etc.* (1592). Alors qu'il y dresse la liste des registres de négociations utiles au clerc, il recommande la tenue d'un livre spécifiquement consacré aux échanges avec les mêmes royaumes. Aussi trouve-t-on sous l'entrée « A Booke of y^e present negociacions. Or bookes » la description suivante: « Another [Booke] touchinge the intercourse with Denmark, Sweden, Muscovia and Russia, Turkie Barbary and y^e Levant and especially with y^e hanse tounes that insist much upon autient privileges and immunities etc¹⁷. » La possible obtention de privilèges ou d'immunités fiscales et douanières ajoute par conséquent un enjeu supplémentaire à ces premiers échanges entre l'Angleterre et ces royaumes étrangers ou lointains : ces lettres constituent un don qui s'exhibe en tant que tel dans l'espoir d'un contre-don commercial. Ce mélange des genres ne va d'ailleurs pas sans contradiction. Miles Ogborn rappelle par exemple qu'il n'aurait pas échappé aux artistes rémunérés pour ces travaux d'enluminure et de calligraphie que la mise à profit de l'héraldique et des codes d'honneur associés dans le cadre de négociations commerciales entretenait une confusion potentiellement problématique : « [t]he letters [...] confused these categories of honor and profit by using the codes and hierarchies of honor that flowed from the monarch and were based on military achievement to promote the pursuit of profit [...] »¹⁸. La part marchande de ces échanges était d'autant plus importante que la rémunération des artistes, ainsi que le coût des matériaux employés, étaient en grande partie pris en charge par les compagnies de commerce elles-mêmes :

England's relations with Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Asia were established primarily to further the interests of its merchants. The exchange of royal letters

was crucial to the maintenance of such relations; little wonder that establishments such as [...] the East India Company, were asked to contribute to the cost of embellishing these missives.¹⁹

- 11 Ces garnitures soignées et éclatantes contribuent par là même à épaissir la matérialité de l'objet lettre en lui conférant une double valeur politique et économique²⁰. Les cérémonies au cours desquelles ces lettres étaient remises en grande pompe confirment d'ailleurs encore l'analogie entre la lettre et le cadeau diplomatique. En témoigne cette mise en scène du transport de la toute première lettre d'Élisabeth I^{re} au roi de Sumatra et Aceh :

[S]ix great elephants were sent, with many drums, trumpets and streamers, and much people, to accompany the general to court. The largest elephant was about thirteen or fourteen feet high, having a small castle like a coach on his back, covered with crimson velvet. In the middle of the castle was a large basin of gold, with an exceedingly rich wrought cover of silk, under which the queen's letter was deposited.²¹

- 12 De manière plus révélatrice encore pour le sujet qui nous occupe, ces lettres étaient remises dans l'immense majorité des cas en même temps que d'autres cadeaux. L'une de ces lettres enluminées, datée du 20 mars 1609 (1610) signée de la main de Jacques I^{er} et adressée à un prince d'orient non nommé en vue de l'obtention d'un protectorat (« protection for the settling of a factorie ») fait d'ailleurs mention d'un modeste présent (« a small present ») qui l'accompagne²², comme si les deux objets fonctionnaient ensemble, en une paire indissociable partageant les mêmes fins.

L'Art et la manière : analyse matérielle

- 13 Ainsi qu'évoqué plus haut, les premiers exemples de telles lettres richement ornées datent de la période élisabéthaine, qui marque plus largement l'amorce d'une nouvelle étape dans la diplomatie épistolaire :

Elizabeth produced around three thousand letters during her lifetime (1533–1603), either written entirely in her own “skrating” hand (holographs) or bearing her distinctive swirling signature (autographs). A significant number of these letters were addressed to foreign rulers, including not only her near-neighbors, the kings and queens of France, Scotland and Spain, but also the shah of Persia, the Russian tsar, the Ottoman sultan, even the emperor of China. Almost all of them reciprocated, creating an impressive and often beautifully ornamented corpus of “executive diplomacy.” Elizabeth sent more letters into more distant kingdoms than any English monarch had before. Moreover, she wrote more letters in her own hand than any of her predecessors. Her frequent exchanges with an ever-growing number of rulers therefore reflect a significant development in how Western diplomacy was conceived and practiced during the sixteenth century²³.

- 14 C'est au terme du règne d'Élisabeth qu'il devient coutumier de faire appel à un artiste pour embellir les missives diplomatiques à destination des royaumes les plus éloignés de l'Angleterre²⁴. Bien que peu d'exemples de lettres d'Élisabeth à ses « lointains » homologues aient survécu (les archives russes en conservent un nombre important mais les exemples de courriers adressés à d'autres souverains non-européens sont rares), il est désormais établi que le type de garniture et de soin apporté à la correspondance avec la Russie était sans doute comparable à ce qui caractérisait l'ensemble de la correspondance avec « l'Orient », comme en témoigne une lettre jamais parvenue à l'Empereur Wan Li de Chine, datée de 1603²⁵. Il semble en effet que la

notion de réciprocité soit apparue comme tout à fait centrale dans le choix des garnitures et des matériaux, de sorte que les motifs minutieux des enluminures qui ornent cette correspondance semblent parfois rendre et répondre à la richesse des courriers reçus par Élisabeth et ses successeurs de la part de ces « princes d'orient ». L'origine de ces lettres garnies doit dès lors au moins partiellement à l'expression manifeste d'une marque de réciprocité et d'estime mutuelle.

- 15 La toute première lettre du sultan ottoman Murad III à Élisabeth, en septembre 1579, parvient par exemple à Élisabeth enveloppée dans un sac de satin et protégée par un fermoir en argent, afin d'en préserver le magnifique contenu :

[T]he letter was an object of exquisite beauty, unlike any other diplomatic correspondence the queen had ever received. It was written on a large parchment roll dusted with gold and dominated by an elaborate calligraphic monogram and emblazoned with a flourish across the top. The letter was composed in Ottoman Turkish, a stylized Arabic script that was used in all formal correspondence by its sender, the thirty-three-year-old Ottoman sultan Murad III. This was the very first communication between a Turkish sultan and an English ruler²⁶.

- 16 Sur les dix-huit lettres de Murad III à Élisabeth qui ont été conservées, toutes partagent certaines caractéristiques matérielles : d'abord leur taille, près d'un mètre de long en moyenne, mais aussi le soin apporté à la calligraphie et enfin la présence de dorures et autres déploiements chromatiques suscitant l'émerveillement. On sait d'ailleurs qu'Élisabeth savait apprécier la valeur de ces objets puisqu'à une occasion, alors que son second ambassadeur auprès des Ottomans, Edward Barton, avait conservé une lettre originale du sultan par devers lui et n'avait, par souci d'économie sur les frais de transports, transmis à la reine que la traduction de la lettre, Élisabeth aurait expressément demandé à ce que l'original lui parvienne dans les plus brefs délais²⁷. Cet épisode prouve encore l'importance de l'objet, au-delà du message qu'il porte, et sa capacité à exprimer par des moyens matériels une forme de stratégie diplomatique sophistiquée. La beauté de l'objet n'est d'ailleurs pas toujours à l'image du contenu de la lettre : j'en veux pour preuve une lettre adressée à Jacques I^{er} par le sultan d'Aceh, Iskandar Muda, en 1615. Dans ce courrier magnifiquement paré, le sultan exprime son refus de délivrer à l'Angleterre l'autorisation de commercer sur la côte ouest de l'île, à Tiku et Pariaman (fig. 2).²⁸

Fig. 2 : Lettre à Jacques I^{er} du Sultan Iskandar Muda d'Aceh (1615)



Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Or. Rolls b. 1, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/13360d97-7933-4b2d-a01a-372a1b71e7b1/> © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, CC-BY-NC 4.0.

- 17 La lettre se déploie sur une longue feuille de 95 x 42 centimètres (dont 47.3 x 24.5 cm sont réservés au texte seul, ce seul ratio indiquant assez l'importance des bordures ornementales). L'enveloppe de soie jaune doublée de mousseline qui la protégeait a été préservée. La qualité du papier, dit « oriental », les cartouches ornementaux, l'encre dorée et rouge qui pare le fond ou encore les somptueux motifs floraux polychromes sont autant d'éléments qui confèrent à cette lettre une beauté évidente et attestent du soin qui a été apporté à son élaboration. Cette lettre témoigne du fait que même dans le cas de conflits ou de tensions entre puissances étrangères, la valeur et la beauté des lettres échangées garantissaient le maintien d'une conversation diplomatique. En effet, les ornements de cette lettre peuvent ici être lus comme une manière de « mettre les formes », au sens propre, même en cas de crise.
- 18 À compter du règne d'Élisabeth, la couronne britannique dote les lettres enluminées à destination des « princes d'orient » de caractéristiques matérielles communes ou récurrentes : toutes celles qui ont été conservées sont composées sur d'imposantes pièces de vélin (rarement inférieures à une cinquantaine de centimètres de large et de long). La taille n'est pas anodine puisqu'elle traduit déjà l'importance du message mais permet aussi l'ajout au texte de décors travaillés et imposants. Le choix du vélin lui-même peut sans doute se justifier d'au moins trois façons. Tout d'abord, le vélin a vocation à mieux résister que le papier au transport maritime, à l'humidité et au temps parfois long qui s'écoulait entre la création de la lettre et sa réception. Certains vélin enluminés sont d'ailleurs préparés en amont par l'application d'un apprêt (gesso) qui permet de fixer les pigments plus facilement (bien que le vélin supporte aussi très bien l'application directe de la couleur, sans sous-couche)²⁹. Le vélin demeurait par ailleurs

encore le matériau de prédilection des enlumineurs, dont les pigments et les techniques sont le mieux supportés et mis en valeur par lui. Enfin, le prestige et le coût du vélin, bien supérieurs à ceux du papier, participent de l'expression matérielle de la munificence de l'expéditeur et de la valeur de la lettre. S'agissant des pigments que l'on retrouve plus fréquemment, outre le bleu et le rouge de la royauté, c'est sans doute la couleur or qui revient le plus souvent à la fois dans les bordures et le texte. Perçu comme un signe universel de puissance et de richesse, l'or liquide permet notamment de dorer les noms du destinataire et de l'expéditeur, tous deux voyant ainsi leur nom et leur titre rehaussés pareillement et équitablement d'un éclat significatif³⁰. Les motifs abstraits qui caractérisent les courriers aux princes musulmans diffèrent des ornements parfois plus figuratifs que l'on trouve dans certaines lettres à la Russie, comme dans le cas assez exceptionnel d'une lettre de Jacques I^{er} (fig. 3) ornée d'un magnifique portrait en pied produit par un enlumineur (non nommé) dont les talents de miniaturiste (et de portraitiste) apparaissent ici dans toute leur splendeur. Les références figuratives à la couronne britannique (le chardon écossais et la rose Tudor, notamment, ou encore le lion) y sont également présentes, là où les lettres destinées à des souverains de royaumes plus éloignés et étrangers sont souvent plus simplement garnies de motifs floraux ou abstraits.

Fig. 3 : Lettre de Jacques I^{er} au Tsar Michael (20 mai 1623)



© RGADA F. 35, op. 2, no. 33.

- 19 La disposition des ornements relève néanmoins dans tous les cas d'une tradition indigène qui emprunte entre autres aux codes ornementaux et esthétiques des chartes royales anglaises médiévales. En effet, les lettres partagent avec ces chartes un support (le vélin), une taille souvent imposante, des techniques d'enluminure et de calligraphie, des motifs ornementaux et enfin, élément peut-être le plus flagrant, la disposition des motifs ornementaux en trois bandeaux encadrant le texte (l'un sur la partie supérieure,

les deux autres de part et d'autre du texte, à gauche et à droite de lui). C'est à Elizabeth Danbury que l'on doit le travail le plus considérable sur l'histoire des pratiques de décoration et d'illumination des chartes anglaises³¹. Si l'analyse plus poussée de cet héritage excède le périmètre du présent article, il est ici intéressant de noter que ces lettres sont conçues à la fois comme l'expression visuelle de la couronne britannique et le fruit de traditions décoratives nationales (les chartes) mais également comme un objet susceptible de séduire et convaincre leur destinataire d'accorder à la première le contre-don espéré. Autrement dit, la langue ornementale choisie se prête aussi au voyage et à l'étranger, à l'appréciation par l'autre : aussi, peut-on sans doute comprendre en ce sens l'importance des grotesques dans cette production.

- 20 Concernant la longue période pendant laquelle c'est Edward Norgate qui officie comme responsable de l'embellissement des lettres à « l'Orient³² », le poids visuel des grotesques peut être partiellement attribué à la connaissance que l'artiste en avait, de retour de ses séjours italiens, dont il rapporte quelques souvenirs admiratifs dans son traité sur l'art de la miniature, *Miniatura* :

The best Crayons that ever I saw, were those made by Sir Balthazar Gerbier after those soe celebrated Histories done by Raphael of the banquet of the Gods, to be seene in the *Palazzo de Gigi in Longa Ara* in Rome, which rare peeces are surrounded with a world of fruits, *Grotesco*, &c done by the excellent *John d'Udin*. [...] Some of these I saw copied by this Gentleman in Crayon excellently done, and the Colours of as excellent a temper [...], the colours made up like small sticks, about the size, but some what longer then the tag of a point, which would sharpen to draw Lines almost as neat as Lymning.³³

- 21 La comparaison que Norgate établit avec l'enluminure à la fin de ce passage traduit peut-être déjà l'envie de reproduire dans son propre médium de prédilection ces grotesques, auquel il revient quelques lignes plus tard encore, émerveillé : « Of *Don Julio Clovio* we saw another full storyes Compartements and excellent *Grotesco*, and those all full of Curious gold worke [...].³⁴ » Norgate poursuit alors pour évoquer la beauté des figures rehaussées d'or à la coquille et de son souhait de maîtriser la préparation de cette technique de dorure. Aussi retrouve-t-on sans surprise dans ses lettres une riche palette dorée, mais aussi force arabesques et autres motifs grotesques³⁵. L'une des plus belles œuvres d'enluminure de Norgate conservée à ce jour est l'augmentation d'armes octroyée à William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, en 1634, en retour de son implication dans l'entreprise coloniale en Nouvelle-Écosse ou Nova Scotia (fig. 4). La disposition, le nombre et la place occupée par les scènes enluminées au regard du texte disent assez l'importance de la dimension visuelle du document. Sous la magnifique lettrine historiée du C de Charles au centre duquel le roi est représenté offrant l'augmentation à son récipiendaire agenouillé, Norgate a représenté les armes de Stirling encadrées de part et d'autre par une sirène (à senestre) et un homme représentant un Mi'kmaq de Nouvelle-Écosse (à dextre). Outre que cette rencontre picturale produit sur le vélin un rapprochement entre des mondes éloignés, soit tout l'enjeu de la colonisation, les paysages naturels et maritimes qui encadrent la lettre sont destinés à convaincre le spectateur de la profusion de richesses de ce nouveau monde et de l'opportunité de participer à l'entreprise coloniale³⁶. Mais ils représentent aussi une incursion dans le genre naissant, en Angleterre, de la peinture de paysage. Si les voyages de Norgate aux Pays-Bas, sa rencontre avec Rubens ou Van Dyke, ont probablement contribué à ce choix, ce dernier n'en demeure pas moins la preuve que dans certains cas au moins, Norgate n'hésitait pas, dans le cadre d'œuvres décoratives ou ornementales, à explorer

des conventions ou des inspirations nouvelles mais aussi à produire un travail original et innovant d'une qualité absolument remarquable, fruit d'un esprit curieux et ouvert. Plus largement, s'il n'est pas question dans son traité sur la miniature de la garniture de lettres à proprement parler (sans doute pour des raisons de confidentialité), tout son texte laisse entrevoir un appétit non dissimulé pour la nouveauté et l'enrichissement de la langue picturale anglaise, s'abreuvant à de nombreuses influences étrangères. Il n'est peut-être dès lors pas surprenant qu'il ait occupé si longuement et tant marqué la fonction d'enlumineur (et aussi de calligraphe) de courriers diplomatiques, puisque ces derniers requéraient une adaptabilité certaine autant qu'un talent naturel pour saisir ce qui pourrait être perçu immédiatement, par-delà les frontières nationales, comme un geste artistique et politique généreux, un don diplomatique parmi d'autres, conçu dans l'espoir d'un retour.

Fig. 4 : The Grant of Augmentation of Arms of 1634 to William 1st Earl of Stirling.



From a private collection on loan to English Heritage for display at Audley End House, Essex.
Photography courtesy of Mark Asher.

- 22 D'où aussi peut-être son intérêt pour les grotesques, leur adaptabilité (à travers les genres, notamment), et leur propension à circuler et se nourrir d'influences extra-européennes, redoublant en ceci leur vocation à figurer en bonne place dans cette conversation épistolaire internationale³⁷. L'adoption de ce vocabulaire ornemental sur l'ensemble de la période, au-delà de Norgate seul, illustre sans doute plus largement la conscience qu'avaient tous les interlocuteurs de l'internationalisation des formes ornementales et, partant, de leur capacité à voyager et instaurer un dialogue entre les mondes :

By the sixteenth century, if not before, Middle Eastern ornament had become an integral part of an artistic vocabulary that was increasingly international, thereby calling into question, for this period, the validity of traditional art-historical tropes

such as 'exoticism' and 'imitation'. The term 'influence', too, needs questioning: while unavoidable, it must be understood here to operate in the context of a complex set of circulating elements, and not to denote a simple relationship between donor and recipient, that is from a Eurocentric perspective, as unidirectional and insensitive to reciprocity³⁸.

- 23 Il est bien sûr difficile d'associer certains choix précis de présentation à une volonté d'adaptation ou d'appropriation, comme l'a montré par exemple Tracey A. Sowerby au sujet de la position de la signature de Jacques au bas de ces lettres³⁹, mais il semble que les souverains britanniques successifs et les artistes auxquels ils confiaient la garniture de ces échanges aient bien saisi la plasticité de ces décors et leur propension à être lus et vus comme autant de contre-dons susceptibles de provoquer l'émerveillement et l'appréciation jusqu'à l'autre bout du monde, d'où parvenaient des dons aux ornements parfois comparables, qui pour certains avaient d'ores et déjà intégré la culture visuelle européenne.
- 24 Cette lecture de l'ornement comme espace de réciprocité agit dès lors comme une mise en abyme de l'échange même au cœur duquel il est mis à profit dans le cas présent. Cernée qu'elle est par ces formules artistiques qui en font un don en soi et sont susceptibles d'être appréciées par l'expéditeur comme le destinataire, la requête de contre-don contenue dans le texte a d'autant plus de chance d'être reçue avec aménité. On comprend dès lors l'importance et la place de ces ornements qui précèdent le texte, au sens propre d'abord (puisque'ils sont le premier contact du destinataire avec la lettre) mais aussi figuré (dans la mesure où leur disposition et leur vocation à séduire sont pour le souverain un médium plus transparent, et peut-être aussi efficace, que la traduction du texte).

Conclusion

- 25 L'analyse matérielle de ces lettres, le choix des artistes employés pour les garnir et les calligraphier ou encore le cérémoniel encadrant leur remise nous ont ainsi amenés à les envisager comme autant de cadeaux diplomatiques parmi d'autres, destinés à obtenir des faveurs de souverains éloignés mais surtout susceptibles d'offrir à la couronne britannique de contre-dons sous la forme de privilèges commerciaux. La splendeur de ces courriers, qui relèvent d'une stratégie à la fois marchande et politique, n'a d'égal que l'ambition qu'elles traduisent de transmettre un message immédiatement lisible et compréhensible, sans nécessiter d'intermédiaire.
- 26 Dans un contexte de concurrence accrue entre les puissances européennes pour l'obtention de privilèges de la part de leurs potentiels partenaires les plus éloignés, l'Angleterre a su exploiter au mieux certaines de ses forces locales sur la scène internationale. En effet, quoique la langue ornementale employée soit pensée pour circuler et s'adapter aux goûts de lointains royaumes, le choix des premiers artistes à avoir inauguré cette tradition démontre aussi une volonté de démonstration de virtuosité artistique et d'exposition des talents du royaume. Comme Nicholas Hilliard avant lui, qui avait sans doute embelli quelques lettres d'Élisabeth ou de Jacques, Norgate répondait au titre de *limner*, un terme qui renvoie à l'enluminure mais aussi, à la période, à l'art prestigieux du portrait miniature. C'est d'ailleurs un de ces précieuses et curieuses miniatures qui avait été envoyée comme cadeau à Jahangir par l'entremise de Thomas Roe⁴⁰. Alors que l'ambassadeur découvre à cette occasion et à ses dépens la

supériorité des artistes moghols dans l'art de la miniature, le choix de la miniature comme cadeau, à la fois bijou, objet de curiosité et de virtuosité artistique, démontre tout de même la place centrale des *limners* dans les négociations diplomatiques de l'Angleterre de la première modernité. Considérés comme les meilleurs ambassadeurs de l'art anglais, et les témoins de l'excellence de leur royaume, les miniaturistes perpétuaient un art dans lequel l'Angleterre se voyait reine, en même temps qu'ils excellaient dans un domaine dont les productions avaient peut-être plus que d'autres encore vocation à circuler et à voyager. Parce qu'ils sont aisément transportables d'abord, qu'ils sont d'exécution rapide ensuite et qu'ils traduisent un goût pour l'éclat et le lustre des couleurs et de l'or qui leur vaut de se rapprocher du bijou ou du cadeau précieux, la lettre enluminée et le portrait miniature, nés sous les pinceaux des mêmes artistes, traduisent tous deux une volonté commune de briller pour mieux remporter les faveurs et privilèges tant convoités de ces princes du lointain.

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NOTES

1. John Christopher SAINTY, *Officials of the Secretaries of State 1660-1782*, Londres, Institute of Historical Research, 1973, p. 43. La liste est également reproduite sur *British History Online* <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/office-holders/vol11/pp384-390#h3-0021>, consulté le 14 octobre 2022.
2. L'écriture et l'enluminure de lettres diplomatiques à destination de l'orient perdure jusque tard dans le XIX^e siècle, même si la fonction officielle d'embellisseur disparaît autour des années 1800 : « Although letters from King George III for the first Embassy to China were decorated with gold borders, by 1797 the Embellishers salary had been reduced to £25 17s carried on the Stationer's bill of the Foreign Office and by 1800 the post seems to have been abolished. » (Richard Scott MOREL, « The East India Company's Role in the Creation, Diffusion and Exchange of Royal Correspondence between Britain and Asia, 1600-1858 », p. 11 (communication donnée pour le colloque international *The East India Company and Language (1599-1857)*, Londres et Hong Kong, 2010 et 2011). Le texte de la communication de Morel est disponible ici : <https://www.calameo.com/books/0001238694d81f641353f> (consulté le 29 décembre 2022)
3. Voir Maija JANSSON, *Art and Diplomacy. Seventeenth-Century English Decorated Royal Letters to Russia and the Far East*, Leyde et Boston, Brill, 2015; Tracey A. SOWERBY, « Negotiating with the Material Text: Royal Correspondence between England and the Wider World », in Tracey A. SOWERBY et Joanna CRAIGWOOD (dir.), *Cultures of Diplomacy and Literary Writing in the Early Modern World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 203-223. Pour MOREL, voir la précédente note ainsi que « Words of Majesty: A Brief History of Royal Correspondence between England and Asia, 1600-1858. » *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 90, no. 1 (312), 2017, p. 1-28.
4. Noel SAINSBURY (dir.), *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, East Indies, China and Japan, Volume 2, 1513-1616*, version électronique sur *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/calendar-state-papers/colonial/east-indies-china-japan/vol2/pp148-150>, consulté le 28 décembre 2022.
5. Voir Richard Scott MOREL, « The East India Company's Role in the Creation, Diffusion and Exchange of Royal Correspondence between Britain and Asia, 1600-1858 », *op. cit.*, p. 13-14.
6. Barton to Burghley, 11 April 1591, National Archives State Papers 97/2, fol. 95v. Cité par Rayne ALLINSON dans *A Monarchy of Letters. Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 148.
7. Voir les différentes acceptions historiques de l'adjectif « barbarous » dans le *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/view/Entry/15397, consulté le 26 février 2023.
8. Voir note 1 supra.
9. On trouve les termes « far distant » dans l'une des deux transcriptions du texte du mandat délivré à Edward Norgate que j'analyse en détail plus bas. La référence que je donne dans la note 12 ci-après résume en effet le statut des destinataires de ces lettres sous l'expression « and other remote kings and princes ». En revanche, la transcription du même mandat par Bruce John propose « far distant » (voir John Bruce (dir.), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic : Charles I, 1629-31*, Volume 4, Londres, 1860, p. 532). Le terme « foreign », enfin, apparaît dans le mandat qui voit la rémunération de George Tomlins par Sir Edward Griffin en date du 11 juillet 1666 (« Warrant to Sir Edward Griffin to pay to George Tomlins 4l., for embellishing and writing four skins of vellum with the King's arms, ornaments, pictures, &c., sent to the Emperor of Morocco, and other foreign princes. », in Mary Anne Everett GREEN (dir.), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Charles II, 1665-6*, Londres, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1864, p. 525). De manière significative, chacun de ces termes relève à la fois de la prise en compte d'une distance spatiale et de l'expression d'une différence fondamentale où l'étrange a partie liée avec l'étranger.
10. Frederick Charles DANVERS (dir.), *Letters Received by the East India Company from its Servants in the East. Transcribed from the 'Original Correspondence' Series of the India Office Records. Volume I :*

1602-1613, Londres, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1896, p. 282. Les difficultés de communication rencontrées par les premiers représentants de la cour d'Angleterre, tous également « marchands » pour la Compagnie des Indes Orientales et non simples ambassadeurs, font l'objet d'un article de Richmond Barber qui évoque notamment l'épisode mentionné ici. Voir Richmond BARBOUR, « Power and Distant Display: Early English Ambassadors in Moghul India », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 61(3/4), 1998, p. 343-368. doi:10.2307/3817773, consulté le 28 décembre 2020.

11. Peter Floris, *His Voyage to the East Indies in the Globe, 1611-1615*, dir. W. H. MORELAND, Londres, Hakluyt Society, 1934, p. 139. Voir aussi à ce sujet Mike OGBORN, *Indian Ink. Script and the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago et Londres, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 42-45.

12. Voir les minutes de la East India Company du 27 au 30 janvier : « W.m. Hawkins, on account of his experience and language, to deliver his Majesty's letters and presents to the princes and governors of Cambaya » (*Calendar of State Papers, East Indies, 1513-1616*, No. 361, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/east-indies-china-japan/vol2/pp145-148>, consulté le 28 décembre 2022).

13. Robert KERR et F. A. S. EDIN. (dir.), *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels Arranged in Systematic Order: Forming a Complete History of the Origin and Progress of Navigation Discovery and Commerce by Sea and Land, From the Earliest Ages to the Present Age*, vol. VIII, Édimbourg, James Ballantyne and Company, 1813, p. 230.

14. Tracey A. SOWERBY, « Negotiating with the Material Text », *op. cit.*, p. 208.

15. Voir citation supra et la note 11 associée.

16. Noel W. SAINSBURY (dir.), *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, East Indies and Persia, Volume 8, 1630-1634*, Londres, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1892, reproduit sur *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/east-indies-china-japan/vol8/pp125-141>, consulté le 12 janvier 2023.

17. Charles HUGHES, « Nicholas Faunt's Discourse Touching the Office of Principal Secretary of Estate, &c. 1592 », *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 20, No. 79, juillet 1905, p. 499-508, p. 505. Jansson évoque le texte et sa coïncidence avec le périmètre du mandat de Norgate dans *Art and Diplomacy* (*op. cit.*, p. 33).

18. Voir Mike OGBORN, *Indian Ink*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

19. Carlo M. BAJETTA (dir.), *Elizabeth I's Italian Letters, 1533-1603*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 252.

20. Voir Mike OGBORN, *Indian Ink*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

21. Robert KERR et F. A. S. EDIN (dir.), *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels*, *op. cit.*, vol. VIII, p. 121. Au sujet des fastueuses cérémonies de remise de courrier royal voir MOREL, « Words of Majesty », *art. cit.*, p. 23. Ce dernier analyse la façon dont les lettres sont traitées comme une forme de représentation (aux sens diplomatique et symbolique) par procuration du souverain lui-même.

22. *Letter from King James I to an Asian ruler*, 20 March 1610, British Library, Londres, Add. Ch. 56456.

23. Rayne ALLINSON, *A Monarchy of Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

24. Voir Tracey A. SOWERBY (2021), « Sovereign Spaces: *Mise-en-page* and the Politics of English Royal Correspondence in the Sixteenth Century », *Renaissance Studies*, vol. 35, n° 3, 2021, p. 386-402, p. 399.

25. Une reproduction de la lettre est visible ici : <https://nzchinasociety.org.nz/china-receives-letter-from-queen-elizabeth-i-383-years-too-late/>, consulté le 28 décembre 2022. Pour une analyse et description de cette lettre, voir Carlo M. BAJETTA (dir.), *Elizabeth I's Italian Letters, 1533-1603*, *op. cit.*, p. 251-259.

26. Jerry BROTON, *The Sultan and the Queen. The Untold Story of Elizabeth and Islam*, New York, Viking, 2016, p. 10.
27. Voir Allison RAYNE, *A Monarchy of Letters. Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) : « Royal correspondence was also expensive to transport, since the cost was not only determined by the weight of the packet but by the length—and danger—of the journey. On several occasions Barton excused himself for sending only the Latin translation of the sultan's letter to London, 'not having hart to put hir Majestie to so much chardge as the carriage of the gran signor his letter woulde come unto, knoweng how many like formerlie have byn sent, and therefore Sende the coppie onelie worde for worde according to the Interpretacion.' In this instance Elizabeth must have demanded the original too, for Barton later sent it to Walsingham by "the safe hands of this bearer, Mr Henry Candishe" (i.e., Cavendish). 25 Even though she could not read the contents, Elizabeth evidently appreciated the symbolic importance of receiving the Sultan's original letters. » (p. 135)
28. Au sujet du contexte de ce refus et des raisons probables des tensions entre l'Angleterre et le sultan d'Aceh, voir Annabel TEH GALLOP, « Gold, silver and lapis lazuli; Royal letters from Aceh in the seventeenth century », in Anthony REED, Patrick DALY, Michael R. FEENER (dir.), *Mapping the Acehnese Past*, Leyde, Brill, 2011, p. 105-140, p. 105-107.
29. Sur le choix du vélin et sa préparation, voir notamment le chapitre 3 de JANSSEN, « Decoration, Format, Design and Text », p. 32-54.
30. Voir par exemple le titre et le nom du sultan Osman II dans cette lettre de Jacques datée de 1621 : <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-1837964>, consulté le 29 décembre 2022. On y voit notamment à quel point l'or domine les motifs abstraits des bordures.
31. Voir notamment Elizabeth DANBURY, « Décoration et enluminure des chartes royales anglaises au Moyen Âge », *Les Chartes ornées dans l'Europe romane et gothique. Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, Vol. 169, janvier-juin 2011, p. 79-107.
32. Bien avant le mandat de 1631 cité plus haut, on apprend en effet que Norgate est rémunéré dès 1613 pour de semblables travaux : « [o]n 24 April 1613 Edward Norgate, considered the finest limner of the age, was paid £10 by James I's Treasurer of the Chamber 'for his paynes taken to write and Lyme in Gold and Colours certain Letters written from his Majesty to the King of Persia, and the King of Mager », (Edward NORGATE, *Miniatura or the Art of Limning*, dir. Jeffrey M. Muller and Jim Murrell, New Haven et Londres, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 2).
33. Edward NORGATE, *Miniatura or the Art of Limning*, op. cit., p. 102.
34. Edward NORGATE, *Miniatura or the Art of Limning*, op. cit., p. 104.
35. L'identité de l'enlumineur et du calligraphe des lettres que j'étudie ici sont la plupart du temps inconnues, certains éléments chronologiques et stylistiques permettent néanmoins d'en attribuer certaines à Edward Norgate (comme à d'autres peintres après lui, comme William Segar). Voir à ce sujet le chapitre 4 de Maija JANSSON Maija dans *Art and Diplomacy*, op. cit.
36. Pour le détail des scènes et des éléments d'héraldique de l'augmentation, voir David BROOMFIELD, « The Grant of Augmentation of Arms of 1634 to William 1st Earl of Stirling », *The Escutcheon. The Journal of the Cambridge University Heraldic and Genealogical Society*, vol. 25 n°1, Cambridge, Michaelmas Term 2019, p. 5-12.
37. Voir notamment à ce sujet Alessandra ZAMPERINI, *Ornament and the Grotesque: Fantastical Decoration from Antiquity to Art Nouveau*, trad. Peter SPRING, Londres, Thames and Hudson, 2008. Le chapitre 4, en particulier, traite des grotesques que Norgate aborde dans son traité mais l'ouvrage entier envisage aussi plus largement la question de la « vitalité » des grotesques et de leur capacité à se laisser contaminer par d'autres langues ornementales, notamment étrangères.
38. Anna CONTADINI, « Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries », in Gulru NECIPOGLU and Alina PAYNE, *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 290-306, p. 291.

39. « It is tempting to speculate that the continued placement of the king's signature on the right-hand side of the page arose from the conventions of the courts into which many of his letters were sent: after all in courts using Arabic languages, writing conventions made the right, rather than the left, the dominant side. A comparison across James's letters to Japan, India, Turkey, and Russia, however, reveals that it was more likely simply a continuation of established protocol. By the seventeenth century, English royal letters rarely arrived at courts that had no prior experience of European royal letters: many of the rulers or their immediate predecessors had received letters from the French, Portuguese, Spanish, and/or Dutch. There is evidence to suggest that these letters were of a similar design to those sent by the English. The knowledge that many non-European rulers would have had some familiarity with European princely epistolary practices may well have had an impact on the form of James's letters. In that context, switching the left/right hierarchy could have implied that English monarchs occupied a lower rank in the European society of princes than other European monarchs, something they would have been keen to avoid. » (Tracey A. SOWERBY, « Sovereign Spaces: *Mise-en-page* and the Politics of English Royal Correspondence in the Sixteenth Century », *art. cit.*, p. 400).

40. Sur cet épisode et l'incident diplomatique qui s'ensuit, voir DULAC Anne-Valérie, « Miniatures between East and West : The Art(s) of Diplomacy in Thomas Roe's *Embassy* », *Études Épistémè* 26 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.343>, consulté le 12 janvier 2023.

RÉSUMÉS

Le présent article démontre comment les lettres échangées entre la cour britannique et les « princes d'Orient » au cours de la première modernité (le terme « Orient » étant ici calqué sur le terme anglais utilisé aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles) s'apparentent à des dons et contre-dons diplomatiques, dans la mesure où ces missives en répliquent les subtilités dans leur manufacture, leurs cérémoniels et leurs ambitions de bonne entente. La première partie est consacrée à l'avènement de cette correspondance richement ornementée dans l'Angleterre élisabéthaine avant sa pérennisation et sa codification sous le règne de Jacques I^{er}. La deuxième partie de l'article propose une analyse matérielle et visuelle de ces lettres et des cérémonies au cours desquelles elles étaient remises afin de les rapprocher d'autres cadeaux diplomatiques. Dans un dernier temps, l'article revient sur l'identité des enlumineurs responsables de la garniture de ces lettres, ainsi que sur les techniques employées par eux, afin de comprendre comment leur art se prête particulièrement bien à cette conversation internationale nourrie et ces pratiques de don et contre-don par voie épistolaire.

This article shows how some of the limned letters exchanged between the British court and "Eastern princes" throughout the early modern period may be considered as diplomatic gifts and counter-gifts, by looking into their careful manufacture, the ceremonials around them and their political purpose. The first part of the article is devoted to the advent of this richly ornamented correspondence in Elizabethan England before its perpetuation and near-codification under the reign of James I. The second part of the article proposes a material and visual analysis of these letters in terms of both creation and reception, in order to compare them with other diplomatic gifts. Finally, the article looks at some of the limners responsible for decorating these letters, as well as the techniques they used, the better to understand how the curious art of limning lent

itself particularly well to this intense international conversation and exchange of gifts and counter-gifts in epistolary form.

INDEX

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Gifts, Sovereignty and Power: The British and French Trading Companies in Mughal India, 1735-65

Dons, souveraineté et pouvoir : les compagnies des Indes britannique et française en Inde moghole, 1735-65

Robert Ivermee

Introduction

- 1 Diverse forms of gifts contributed to the changing relationships of power between local rulers and the European trading companies in Mughal India. They included the objects presented by Europeans to secure permission to trade in the Mughal Empire, and the items offered in return by Indian courts when their foreign guests were accepted, legally and symbolically, into the Mughal polity and granted commercial rights. In contemporary sources, the former was often referred to using the Persian word *peshkash* – a present made to a ruler in recognition or anticipation of a privilege to be granted – and the latter as *khilat*: a gift presented by a ruler or another acknowledged superior to someone of a lower rank, closely associated with the public display of authority and munificence.¹
- 2 This article focuses on a different type of gift awarded with increasing regularity by Indian rulers to the British and French trading companies and their representatives as the eighteenth century progressed: the gifts bestowed in exchange for services rendered – most notably the provision of military support. During the eighteenth century, the central power of the Mughal Empire collapsed and different provinces, from Bengal in the northeast to the Carnatic in the southeast, established their de facto independence from the Mughal Emperor at Delhi (though, as we shall see, Mughal structures of authority remained symbolically important).² In claiming autonomy, however, regional powers were drawn into conflict with each other. To secure control of territories, they solicited the support of the British and French companies, whose

military technology and small but highly trained armies were often decisive in local conflicts. First the French and then the British began renting their troops to Indian rulers, acting as mercenaries or “*military entrepreneurs*”, before developing expansionist aspirations of their own.³ With their military superiority confirmed, the companies exercised more and more control over rulers that they professed simply to serve and took advantage of their positions of strength to act as imperialist powers, claiming possession of territory and rights to revenue collection across large parts of the subcontinent.

- 3 The significance of the processes of gift-giving and receiving in these changing relations of power between Indian courts and the British and French companies merits careful consideration. In return for their military assistance, the companies were offered new commercial privileges, grants of land, and bullion by local rulers. For their contributions to successful military campaigns, British and French figures were for their part showered with gifts, including valuable objects, bullion, and personal land grants. In what follows it is suggested that this munificence was part of the acting out of sovereignty by the rulers concerned, as they established their authority in different Indian regions with European help. As we shall see, however, such munificence contributed in no small way to the financial problems that those rulers then encountered and their growing indebtedness to the French and British companies, which in turn weakened their position vis-à-vis their supposed protectors. As the companies grew in power, their actions were such, it is argued, that the very notions of gift-giving and receiving are called into question. Awards of objects, bullion, and land frequently referred to in British sources as “*gifts*” or “*presents*” and in French records as “*cadeaux*” or “*dons*” in fact resulted from extensive negotiations, highly transactional in nature, that blur the distinction between gifts and payments. Moreover, the degree of control established over certain Indian rulers by the French and, to an even greater extent, the British was such that questions of coercion and agency arise. Closely supervised by French and British officials, did rulers in different parts of India possess sufficient agency to make gifts to their European allies-turned-supervisors?
- 4 Exploring these questions, our main focus will be the province of Bengal, where the authority of the British East India Company (hereafter East India Company) had been established by 1765, despite the continued pretence of the rule of the *nawab* (governor) of Bengal, nominally a vassal of the Mughal Emperor. We begin, however, in the Carnatic, the most southerly of the Mughal Empire’s provinces, where the European practice of lending military support to local Indian powers, followed by the establishment of control over those powers and acquisition of extensive territory and revenue-collecting rights, was pioneered by the French East India Company (hereafter Compagnie des Indes).

Gifts and conquest

- 5 The East India Company and the Compagnie des Indes began life in India as commercial entities, establishing trading posts around the Indian coastline with the permission of Mughal authorities, to whom regular gifts and payments were made for the maintenance of commercial privileges. From the beginning, however, the companies were also armed entities, with troops to protect their trading posts on land, and warships to fend off aggressors at sea. Where circumstances allowed, they fortified

their trading posts, with local instability and the threat of attack from rival European powers often cited as reasons for the construction of fortifications.

- 6 As the Mughal Empire disintegrated, consenting to the requests of Indian rulers for support in local power struggles was appealing for several reasons. First, it offered the opportunity to ensure that rulers sympathetic to French or British interests – and by extension less favourable to the interests of European adversaries – were in power in different regions. New trading permissions could therefore be extracted, while payments for military services made in bullion and grants of land were potentially lucrative alternative sources of revenue for the companies. Before long it was clear that the profits to be made from the business of war could be far superior to those that they were making from trade.⁴ The gifts made to representatives of the companies by Indian powers were also powerful personal incentives for employees from the French and British governors downwards to get their companies involved in supporting one Indian ruler against another, as we shall see.
- 7 Serving from 1735 to 1741, Pierre Benoît Dumas was the first governor of the Compagnie des Indes' operations in India to go down this route. Within a year of his appointment, soldiers of the Compagnie stationed in its principal colony, Pondicherry, were lent to Maratha chieftain Shahji Bhonsle, who aspired to take control of the kingdom of Tanjore, some 150 kilometres to the south. Once installed on the throne with French help, it was agreed, the Maratha leader would grant the Compagnie the coastal port of Karikal, which fell within Tanjore territories, along with five surrounding villages considered valuable for the provision of cloth. When Shahji Bhonsle reneged on this agreement, an alternative alliance was struck with one of his rivals, Chanda Sahib, whose designs on Tanjore the Compagnie's authorities at Pondicherry committed to supporting. In return, Karikal was captured from Shahji Bhonsle and confirmed as a French possession.⁵
- 8 What Dumas had started was continued by his successor, Joseph-François Dupleix, and transformed under his direction into something far more ambitious. The first six years of Dupleix's governorship (1742-1754) were dominated by conflict with the British, as the War of Austrian Succession raged between the European powers. The British colony of Madras was captured by French forces in 1746, and Pondicherry in turn besieged by the British two years later, before peace was agreed in Europe in October 1748. Just months later, however, Dupleix negotiated a fresh agreement with Chanda Sahib and a second Indian prince, Muzaffar Jang, who now sought to establish themselves in control of the Carnatic and the Deccan respectively. To appreciate the significance of this alliance, an understanding of the structure of the Mughal Empire is required. The province of the Carnatic, in which Pondicherry and Madras were located, was subservient in the Mughal system to the central Indian province of the Deccan; the *nawab* of the Carnatic was at least nominally appointed by the *nizam* (ruler) of the Deccan, who was himself appointed by the Mughal Emperor. It was therefore logical for Chanda Sahib and Muzaffar Jang to collaborate. The latter, once confirmed in power in the Deccan, would rubber stamp the former's possession of the Carnatic.
- 9 Under the terms of the agreement made with Dupleix, a corps of Compagnie troops would be lent to Chanda Sahib and Muzaffar Jang to support their joint invasion of the Carnatic, which was to be followed by an advance on the Deccan. In exchange, the Compagnie would be granted territories on the banks of the Adyar river at Villenour, just south of Pondicherry, adding an estimated 50,000 rupees per year to its revenues.⁶

The campaign was a success. In August 1749, the incumbent nawab of Carnatic, Anwar-ud-din, was killed in battle and his throne taken by Chanda Sahib. Sixteen months later, following a gruelling military campaign, the nizam of the Deccan, Nasir Jang, was also killed and Muzaffar Jang installed in his place. Following these successes, the Compagnie des Indes was awarded new territories in southern and central India far in excess of those promised in the terms of its alliance with Muzaffar Jang, becoming in the process a major territorial and revenue-collecting power.

- 10 Most important for our purposes are the gifts – referred to as “*dons*” or “*cadeaux*” in contemporary French sources – that Dupleix and other Frenchmen received in the aftermath of these victories.⁷ First, the spoils of war were brought back to Pondicherry. Muzaffar Jang arrived in December 1750 with twenty chests of jewels and 12 million rupees in coin, seized from his deceased predecessor’s camp. An estimated 2 million rupees went to Dupleix personally, and a further 400,000 rupees was shared out among the French troops.⁸ “*The treasury was opened for the gratification of the French,*” wrote one eyewitness. “*The officers each received sixty thousand rupees. Never had we seen so much gold at Pondicherry.*”⁹ Dupleix and other high-ranking members of the French party, among them Louis Hubert de Combault d’Auteuil, the commander of the Compagnie’s troops, and Ananda Ranga Pillai, the governor’s chief *courtier*, were then awarded grants of land known in the Mughal system as *jagirs*.
- 11 This was a significant development for two key reasons. Firstly, with the award of the *jagirs*, Dupleix and other Frenchmen were integrated in the Mughal system, their position no longer one of outsiders to the Mughal polity. In a further indication of his new status as an insider, Dupleix was also awarded the honorific title of *mansadbar*, a mark of nobility conferring on him the right to keep 7000 horses and be escorted by twelve elephants.¹⁰ Secondly, possession of a *jagir* meant the right to extract revenue from the land and retain it personally. A large *jagir* was potentially very lucrative; the Tamil territory of Valudavur, which went to Dupleix, was estimated to yield an annual revenue of 150,000 rupees.¹¹ Within the Mughal polity, conditions were usually attached to the possession of a *jagir*; *jagirdars* were expected to remit a portion of their revenue towards the imperial centre and could see their assigned lands removed from them. As such, it would perhaps be more accurate to consider *jagirs* grants than gifts, as one scholar has recently pointed out.¹² However, there is nothing to suggest that Dupleix and his French colleagues concerned themselves with the obligations usually attached to possession of *jagirs* in the Mughal Empire. For Dupleix, the *jagir* was first and foremost an opportunity for enrichment and therefore differed little from the other gifts that he received from Muzaffar Jang at this time. They included a shield, a sword and a dagger that had once been given by Emperor Aurangzeb to the most illustrious of all the former nizams of the Deccan, Asaf Jah I (r. 1724-48).¹³
- 12 From Madras, British authorities watched these events unfold with concern. After the killing of nawab Anwar-ud-din in 1749 they waded into the province’s succession struggle, offering military aid to the deceased ruler’s eldest surviving son, Muhammad Ali, who held territory around the city of Trichinopoly. European rivalry played a part in this decision: the British feared that if Chanda Sahib remained nawab for long, and French influence in the region continued to grow, they would soon be expelled from southern India.¹⁴ However, the material advantages to be derived from supporting Muhammad Ali, measured in terms of land grants and payments to the Company and gifts to its employees, were not ignored either. One of the first agreements between the

prince and the British saw the revenues of Trichinopoly mortgaged to the latter, and in the years that followed revenue collection rights over a succession of other Carnatic districts were handed over to the Company. Generous gifts were meanwhile offered to the British governor at Madras, Thomas Saunders, and other members of his council.¹⁵

- 13 Supported by their rival European backers, the conflict between Chanda Sahib and Muhammad Ali dragged on in the Carnatic until June 1752, when Chanda Sahib was captured and executed, and Muhammad Ali crowned nawab. Dupleix was then recalled to France by the directors of the Compagnie des Indes, who had begun to disown his expansionist and belligerent approach.

Sovereignty and power

- 14 To consider further the significance of gifts in the changing power dynamics between Indian and European parties at this juncture, we must now shift our attention to Bengal, where the French and British policy of lending military support to local powers developed into – or was rather confirmed as – something quite different.
- 15 The events of 1757 in Bengal are well known. Taking advantage of the start of the Seven Years' War, which once again saw France and Great Britain on opposite sides, the British captured the French colony of Chandernagore before agreeing an alliance with opposition factions at the court of the nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daula, to remove the nawab from the throne. After the Battle of Plassey, which saw Siraj-ud-daula's forces pitted against those of the British, this plan was enacted, and the noblemen Mir Jafar installed as nawab.¹⁶ We might be tempted to consider this Bengal "*revolution*", as it later became known, a continuation of the approach pursued by the French and British in southern India of offering military support in a local power struggle, motivated by the promise of lucrative rewards and the prospect of a sympathetic ruler in power. What was different, however, was that from the outset the British intended to control the new nawab, establishing their *de facto* rule over Bengal. Before the removal of Siraj-ud-daula had even taken place, Mir Jafar was envisaged less as a sympathetic ruler than as a puppet or screen for British power, a "*mere pageant*" in whose name the Company intended to rule.¹⁷
- 16 The seeds of this new approach had been sown in the south, where the French and British had increasingly attempted to exert control over their allies, Chanda Sahib and Muhammad Ali. As the conflict in the Carnatic turned against Chanda Sahib, Dupleix in particular sought to control his Indian partner, dictating what he should do to collect revenue and reverse the tide of the war. When Chanda Sahib failed to act on Dupleix's suggestions, the French governor cut the nawab out of decision-making entirely, taking over the revenue collection of parts of the Carnatic and issuing orders directly to the French commanders in the nawab's army. The growing indebtedness of Chanda Sahib was exploited by Dupleix to concentrate power in his own hands – in much the same way that Muhammad Ali's indebtedness was taken advantage of by the British council at Madras.¹⁸
- 17 In the early months of 1757, the ease with which numerically inferior British forces inflicted a series of defeats on Siraj-ud-daula in Bengal offered proof of the superiority of European armies over their Indian counterparts, who could no longer count on support from the Mughal centre. The power dynamic between Europeans and Indians

was now clearly weighted in favour of the former. The secret agreement which the British then concluded with Mir Jafar to prepare his installation as nawab reflected this imbalance, its terms far more generous than the comparable treaties of alliance struck by the French and British in the Carnatic. Not only would Mir Jafar, once confirmed as nawab, cede a large territory around Calcutta to the British and support the Company's army from his own exchequer, but 10 million rupees would be paid to the Company and 5 million rupees to the European residents of Calcutta in compensation for "losses" sustained as a result of Siraj-ud-daula's hostility towards them.¹⁹ On top of this, a "present" of 1.2 million rupees would be made by Mir Jafar to members of the British council at Calcutta and a further "present" of 4 million rupees to members of the British armed forces in Bengal.²⁰

- 18 As the final preparations were laid for the removal of Siraj-ud-daula, William Watts, a member of the Calcutta council, was sent to Mir Jafar to make sure that these terms were respected. After the coronation of the new nawab, they were enacted, with the contents of the Murshidabad treasury loaded onto two hundred boats and shipped down the river Hooghly to the British headquarters at Calcutta. Robert Clive, the commander responsible for the British victory over Siraj-ud-daula, profited personally to the tune of 2 million rupees – the equivalent of £46 million today – and other members of the British council received up 700,000 rupees each. Like Dupleix before him, Clive was also awarded the *mansadbar* title of Mughal nobility and a *jagir* with an annual income of 300,000 rupees, becoming an insider in the Mughal system, and very wealthy.²¹
- 19 The processes of gift-giving and receiving involved in these exchanges require careful consideration. As we have noted, Mughal practices of gift-giving included the tradition of *khilat* – a present made by a ruler or another acknowledged superior to someone of a lower rank. The award of the gift was a display of authority and munificence on the giver's part, the acting out and reinforcing of a ruler's sovereignty. By extension, we might add, the reception of the gift involved an expression of gratitude, loyalty and submission by the recipient. Ostensibly, the awards made by Mir Jafar to Clive and other British officials were exchanges along these lines; the use of the term "present" in British sources implied voluntary and munificent acts of giving by the nawab to his faithful and subservient British subjects. As such, the pretence of the sovereignty of the nawab was maintained. Indeed, in a polity where Mughal structures and symbols remained important, despite the collapse of the centralised power of the Mughal Empire, the acts of gift-giving and receiving that followed the installation of Mir Jafar on the Bengal throne contributed to the construction of the fiction of the nawab's sovereignty – a fabrication that was particularly important given the violent coup d'état and change of ruling dynasty involved in his ascension.²²
- 20 On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the awards made by Mir Jafar to Clive and his colleagues after Plassey were not voluntary acts of generosity on the nawab's part but outlays for specific services rendered during his installation as nawab. As we have seen, the cash "presents" made to members of the British council and armed forces were negotiated with Mir Jafar in advance, which sets them apart from Muzaffar Jang's earlier gifts to Dupleix and his officers at Pondicherry. A distinction between gift and payment is therefore very difficult to maintain. The "presents" awarded by Mir Jafar were in fact part of negotiated transactional exchanges.

- 21 A related question concerns the nawab's agency. If, as we have suggested, the relationship of power between Mir Jafar and the British was heavily weighted in the latter's favour – a reversal of the power dynamic embedded in the practice of *khilat* – how much agency remained for the nawab? Does the act of gift-giving not require that such agency exist? In one of his more honest moments, Clive later admitted that his *jagir* had only been obtained from Mir Jafar through extensive pressure exerted on the nawab, a confession revealing of British motivations to profit personally from the regime change that had been engineered in Bengal.²³ Alongside the permanent presence of a Company agent at his court, the main constraint on Mir Jafar's ability to act independently of the British after 1757 was his indebtedness to them, a direct result of the concessions and "*presents*" agreed in the treaty preceding his installation. Over time, this indebtedness only worsened, as the Company claimed exemption from tariffs on trade in Bengal and assumed revenue-collecting rights over more and more of his kingdom, a process culminating in the granting to the British of the *diwani* or right of revenue collection over the whole of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765.²⁴ As far as cash payments to the Company and its agents were concerned, meanwhile, Plassey was only the beginning. By 1765 an estimated 13 million rupees (the equivalent of £300 million today) had been transferred by Mir Jafar and his successor, Mir Qasim, to the Company and its employees.²⁵ Further rounds of substantial cash "*presents*" to members of the British council had followed its decision to replace the bankrupt Mir Jafar with his son-in-law, Mir Qasim, in October 1760, and subsequent reversal of this act, with the return of Mir Jafar to the throne, in 1763.
- 22 Throughout the period studied, French and British authorities in India downplayed the value of the gifts that they received from Indian courts, no doubt to mask the extent to which they as individuals were benefitting from the regime changes instituted in the Carnatic, the Deccan and Bengal. Dupleix, for example, had omitted details of the gifts awarded at Pondicherry by Muzaffar Jang from his account to the directors of the Compagnie in Paris of the latter's ascension to the Deccan throne.²⁶ As the fortunes made by British figures in Bengal were gradually remitted to Europe, however, the extent to which individuals had benefitted became impossible to deny. Clive, most notably, returned to England in 1760 with more than £300,000 (£48 million today), to which his annual *jagir* income was added.²⁷ The fortune was sufficient for him to buy an Irish peerage and a seat in parliament, plus Powis Castle in Wales.
- 23 Concerns about the impact of this new money on British society, coupled with jealousy, then directed attention to the "*corruption*" of British officials in India.²⁸ A key question in parliamentary debates on the subject was to whom exactly Indian princes – Mir Jafar and Mir Qasim in Bengal, and Muhammad Ali in the Carnatic – had bestowed gifts. To British figures as private individuals or to the office held by them at the time? To the East India Company as a private corporation or simply to the nation? Should Clive, for example, be permitted to retain the income received from his Bengal *jagir* or did it belong to the Company?²⁹ Separating out the finances of company and employee was often difficult, in France as in England, as the lengthy dispute between Dupleix and the directors of the Compagnie des Indes following his return to Paris in 1755 showed.³⁰ What made the situation with Clive's *jagir* even more complicated was that the land granted to the British leader lay in a territory in Bengal over which the the British company had subsequently acquired rights of revenue collection. If Clive was permitted to retain the *jagir* income, the Company was effectively acting as a revenue collector for

one of its former employees.³¹ In the House of Commons, the nature of Mir Jafar's "*gift*" to Clive was argued over and reinterpreted before a compromise was found: Clive would be permitted to retain the *jagir* income for the next ten years (later extended to seventeen years). In exchange, he agreed to return to India to finish consolidating British control over Bengal.³² By this point, both the British and French companies had issued orders prohibiting their employees from accepting *jagirs* and other presents from Indian rulers without their directors' permission. One of greatest ironies of the period is that Clive – as governor and commander-in-chief of the Company's Bengal Presidency from 1765 to 1767 – was responsible for attempting to enforce these orders, provoking in the process a mutiny of British officers resentful that their right to receive presents was being taken away.³³

Conclusion

- 24 By 1765 the East India Company had established a large degree of de facto control over the two Indian provinces considered in this article, the Carnatic and Bengal. The *nawabs* in these territories, who nominally continued to rule on behalf of the Mughal Emperor, were closely supervised by the British, particularly in Bengal, where the Company had also assumed the right of collecting the province's revenues.
- 25 The processes of gift-giving and receiving examined in this article offer a fresh perspective on the changing relationships of power between Indian rulers and the European trading companies that culminated in this British ascendancy. In 1735, when the Compagnie des Indes began renting its army in the Carnatic to rulers involved in local power struggles, those rulers appeared more powerful than the European guests in their territories. The rewards bestowed on the Compagnie and its officials in return for their support – land, bullion, titles and valuable objects – were in keeping with existing Mughal practices for the exercise of sovereignty. Over the years that followed, however, these rewards became something quite different. Though the terms "*gift*", "*present*", "*cadeau*" and "*don*" continued to be used by British and French parties, the processes of giving and receiving that they referred to became highly transactional in nature, with a specific reward demanded in return for a service rendered. The distinction between gift and payment was all-but dissolved, a fact most strikingly illustrated by the British demand for cash "*presents*" from Mir Jafar before his installation as nawab of Bengal. Ultimately, the gifts and payments demanded of Muhammad Ali in the Carnatic and Mir Jafar in Bengal were a major factor in their indebtedness to the British, and therefore exacerbated their positions of subservience to the East India Company. In 1763, when Mir Jafar was restored as nawab in Bengal, his position was so weak that he no longer possessed the agency that we might reasonably expect of a gift-giver. The new round of gifts and payments demanded of him at this moment should rather be framed as extortion.
- 26 The history of the British and French trading companies in Mughal India reminds us of the importance of studying the relationships of power within which processes of gift-giving and receiving take place, along with related questions of agency and coercion. It illustrates that, when deployed indiscriminately or in a deliberately obfuscating way, the terms "*gift*" and "*present*" tend to conceal power imbalances and mask the processes involved in their transmission. Over recent decades, scholars of colonialism have devoted significant attention to the impact of unequal power relations on aspects

of economic and cultural exchange. They should now consider processes of gift-giving and receiving through the same lens.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion, see Ladan Niayesh, 'Oriental Gifts and the Commensurability Question', *Gifting the East*, 26 February 2021 <<https://mhma.hypotheses.org/715>> [consulted 10 November 2022].
2. A useful overview is found in John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire: The New Cambridge History of India 1.5* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 253-81.
3. The quote comes from William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: the relentless rise of the East India Company* (London, Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 134, a major recent study of the British East India Company's transformation into a territorial power in India. See also Robert Ivermee, *Hooghly: The Global History of a River* (London, Hurst, 2020), pp. 83-8. On the earlier transformation of the French company, see Philippe Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 707-50; Marc Vigié, *Dupleix* (Paris, Fayard, 1993), pp. 246-391; and Catherine Manning, *Fortunes à faire: the French in Asian trade* (London and New York, Routledge, 1996), pp. 195-220.
4. See for example Joseph-François Dupleix, 'Mémoire du 16 octobre 1753' in Alfred Martineau (ed.), *La politique de Dupleix : d'après sa lettre à Saunders du 18 février 1752 et son mémoire du 16 octobre 1753* (Pondichéry, Société de l'histoire de l'Inde française, 1927), pp. 99-135.
5. Vigié, *Dupleix*, pp. 169-71.
6. Joseph-François Dupleix, 'Relation des faits principaux concernant le rétablissement de la famille de Chandasaëb sur le trône d'Arcatte', [1749], AN COL C2/82 ff. 231-5. See also Prosper

Cultru, *Dupleix. Ses plans politiques. Sa disgrâce* (Paris, Hachette, 1901), pp. 234-6, and Clarin De la Rive, *Dupleix ou les Français aux Indes Orientales* (Lille, Desclée de Brouwer, 1888), pp. 82-5.

7. See for example the correspondence between Dupleix and his successor, Charles Godeheu, July-October 1754, AN COL C2/84 ff. 171-315.

8. Henry Dodwell, *Dupleix and Clive: the beginning of empire* (London, Methuen & Co., 1920), p. 53; Vigié, *Dupleix*, pp. 325-6.

9. Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil, *Mémoires sur l'Indoustan ou Empire mogol* (Paris, Petit, 1822), p. 50.

10. For an introduction to the Mughal military and administrative system, including the granting of *jagirs* and the role of *mansadbar*, see Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, pp. 58-78. The distributing of *mansabs* to leaders of supportive mercenary armies had been a Mughal practice ever since the Mughal expansion out of central Asia in the sixteenth century. See Kaushik Roy, *Military Manpower, Armies and Warfare in South Asia* (London, Pickering & Chatto, 2015), pp. 45-70.

11. Vigié, *Dupleix*, p. 327.

12. Hira Singh, 'Colonial and postcolonial historiography and the princely states: relations of power and rituals of legitimation' in Ernst Waltraud and Patia Biswamoy (eds), *India's Princely States: People, Princes and Colonialism* (London, Routledge, 2007), pp. 15-29, on p. 22.

13. Vigié, *Dupleix*, p. 326.

14. Stringer Lawrence, 'Narrative of the war on the coast of Coromandel, from the beginning of the troubles to the year 1754', in Richard Owen Cambridge (ed.), *An Account of the War in India. Between the English and French, on the Coast of Coromandel, from the year 1750 to the year 1761* (London, T. Jefferys, 1762), pp. 1-100, on p. 6.

15. On these concessions and Muhammad Ali's growing indebtedness to the British, see Peter Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c. 1750-1783* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 138-45. Marshall notes that Muhammad Ali was "lavish in gifts and promises of gifts to Company servants" (p. 145).

16. Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*, pp. 99-135; Jon Wilson, *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the chaos of empire* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2016), pp. 82-120.

17. Walter K. Firminger, *Historical introduction to the Bengal portion of "The Fifth Report"* (Calcutta, R. Cambray & Co., 1917), pp. xiv, clix.

18. On this changing power dynamic between Dupleix and Chanda Sahib, see Vigié, pp. 351-65, and Cultru, *Dupleix*, p. 273.

19. Articles of agreement between Jafar Ali Khan Bahadur and the Honourable East India Company, 3 June 1757, in S.C. Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756-57, a selection of public and private papers dealing with the affairs of the British in Bengal during the reign of Siraj-Uddaula* (London, Murray, 1905), vol. 2, pp. 383-5.

20. Clive to Watts, 19 May 1757, in Hill (ed.), *Bengal in 1756-57*, vol. 2, pp. 388-9. "The Committee having taken the oath of secrecy upon the Bible, have agreed that Meer Jaffier's private engagements be obtained in writing to make them a present of 12 lack of rupees, and a present of 40 lacks to the army and navy over and above what is stipulated in the Agreement."

21. For these figures, see Wilson, *India Conquered*, p. 106; and Michael Edwardes, *The Battle of Plassey and the conquest of Bengal* (London, B. T. Batsford, 1963), p. 157.

22. For a discussion of the fiction of the sovereignty of the nawab, and therefore ultimately of the Mughal Emperor, in Bengal after 1757, see Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 167-207.

23. Bruce Lenman and Phillip Lawson, 'Robert Clive, the "Black Jagir", and British Politics', *The Historical Journal*, 26:4 (1983), pp. 801-29, on p. 812.

24. On the office of provincial *diwan* in the Mughal Empire, see Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, pp. 58-9; and on the British takeover of the *diwani* in northeast India, Wilson, *India Conquered*, pp. 108-16.

25. Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*, p. 134.

26. Joseph-François Dupleix, 'Journal de ce qui s'est passé depuis la mort de Nazerjingue et pendant le séjour du seigneur Mouzaferjingue dans la ville de Pondichéry', [1751], AN COL C2/82 ff. 355-64.
 27. Lenman and Lawson, 'Robert Clive, the "Black Jagir", and British Politics', p. 812.
 28. For a detailed analysis of this discussion in Britain, which would continue up to and beyond the trial of Warren Hastings later in the century, see Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 9-26.
 29. See [anonymous (ed.)], *The Debates and Proceedings of the British House of Commons, from April 1772 to July 1773* (London, J. Almon, 1774), pp. 1-50 and 240-85.
 30. Vigié, *Dupleix*, pp. 471-9.
 31. Lenman and Lawson, 'Robert Clive, the "Black Jagir", and British Politics', p. 812.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 819.
 33. See Henry Strachey, *Narrative of the mutiny of the officers of the army in Bengal, in the year 1766* (London, T. Becket, 1773).
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ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the gifts awarded by Indian powers to the British and French trading companies and their representatives in Mughal India in exchange for services rendered – notably the provision of military support. As the Mughal Empire disintegrated, Indian powers solicited the military backing of the British and French to secure their positions of power. When this support was delivered, the companies and their agents were handsomely rewarded with payments and gifts, the awarding of which was part of the performance of sovereignty by the rulers concerned. Beneath this appearance of sovereignty, however, real world power was increasingly vested in the British and French companies, which, confident of their military superiority, exercised more and more control over the rulers that they claimed to serve. What role did the gifts offered by Indian rulers to their European collaborators play in these changing power relations? What do the gifts reveal about how these relations changed? Can a distinction be maintained between gifts and payments? And can objects obtained coercively really be considered gifts? These questions are explored in relation to the political ascent of the British and French companies in the Carnatic and Bengal between 1735 and 1765.

Cet article se concentre sur un type particulier de don octroyé par les puissances indiennes aux Européens dans l'Inde moghole : des dons récompensant des services rendus, notamment d'ordre militaire. Avec la désintégration de l'empire moghole, de nombreux souverains indiens demandèrent un soutien militaire aux Britanniques et aux Français, afin de l'emporter sur leurs rivaux et de sécuriser leur pouvoir. Les compagnies et leurs agents accordant ce soutien étaient très bien récompensés, par des cadeaux et de l'argent dont le versement symbolisait l'autorité et le pouvoir du souverain les octroyant. Malgré ce semblant de pouvoir exercé par des souverains locaux, le pouvoir réel des Britanniques et des Français, conscients de leur supériorité militaire sur les puissances indiennes, ne cessait de croître, leur conférant un ascendant croissant sur ceux qu'ils étaient supposés servir. Quel rôle ont donc joué les dons faits par les souverains indiens aux Européens dans le bouleversement de leurs relations de pouvoir ? Que nous révèle l'évolution des dons quant à ces changements ? Est-il pertinent de maintenir une distinction entre don et paiement, étant donné l'aspect transactionnel de ces échanges ? Les objets ou paiements obtenus

par les Européens de manière coercitive peuvent-ils réellement être qualifiés de « dons » ? Ces questions seront abordées au regard de la montée en puissance des compagnies britannique et française au Bengale et dans la Carnatique entre 1735 et 1765.

INDEX

Keywords: gifts, diplomacy, colonialism, empire, Mughal, India

Mots-clés: dons, diplomatie, colonialisme, empire, moghole, Inde

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La diplomatie botanique : don, troc et échange d'objets végétaux au XIX^e siècle

Botanical Diplomacy : Giving, Bartering and Exchanging Botanical Objects in the 19th Century

Marine Bellégo et Thérèse Bru

Introduction

- 1 De nombreuses études historiques classiques et récentes ont souligné l'importance des cadeaux dans l'histoire des relations diplomatiques, en particulier à l'époque moderne et en ce qui concerne les échanges entre l'Europe et l'Asie¹. Lorsque l'on pense aux objets offerts par des ambassades d'État à État, les choses qui viennent spontanément à l'esprit évoquent souvent la stabilité et la fixité, qu'il s'agisse de matériaux (verre, métaux rares, pierres précieuses), d'objets manufacturés à vocation utilitaire ou ornementale (porcelaine, tissus, armures, outils, armes, meubles, tableaux, sculptures) ou attestant plus précisément de la compétence scientifique et technique des offrants (instruments scientifiques, cartes, traités). Bien que parfois très fragiles, en particulier dans le cas de la porcelaine ou des instruments scientifiques, ces objets appartiennent sans ambiguïté au domaine de la matérialité inerte et ont vocation à durer, à rester tels qu'ils sont². Dans bien des cas, même les cadeaux que l'on pourrait penser utilitaires se voient réduits, une fois le don effectué, à une dimension ornementale qui exclut l'usure et met l'accent sur la conservation et la présentation de l'objet.
- 2 Or, de nombreux cadeaux offerts lors des missions diplomatiques n'ont pas cette stabilité matérielle. Historiens, linguistes et anthropologues ont travaillé sur ce qu'on appelle le « langage des fleurs » et le symbolisme variable de ces objets particuliers, situés quelque part entre les domaines du vivant et de la matérialité³. Que se passe-t-il lorsque de tels objets sont investis d'une dimension symbolique suffisante pour concerner les relations internationales ? La question se pose par exemple dans le cas

des denrées alimentaires (à la portée symbolique parfois comparable à celle des fleurs) et des animaux vivants, dont l'utilisation à des fins diplomatiques est bien documentée dans les travaux historiques⁴. La fragilité liée à leur condition vivante, dans le cadre du don, représente une difficulté pouvant conduire à la situation fréquente du « cadeau qui tourne mal » (« *gift gone wrong* »), pour reprendre une expression de Natalie Zemon Davis⁵. C'est aussi le cas de ce à quoi nous allons nous intéresser plus précisément dans cet article, à savoir les plantes et les objets d'origine botanique donnés et échangés. Certains travaux récents se sont penchés spécifiquement sur la question de la matérialité des objets utilisés comme cadeaux dans un cadre diplomatique⁶. Nous voudrions nous ressaisir de cette question de la matérialité pour l'appliquer aux dons et échanges d'objets botaniques, situés à différents endroits d'un *continuum* entre le vivant et l'inerte, et prendre en sérieux la dimension politique de ces échanges.

- 3 Ce continuum vivant/inerte des objets d'origine végétale importe grandement dans l'histoire des empires coloniaux et des circulations qu'ils mettent en œuvre dans la mesure où les savoirs sur les espèces de plantes sont centraux dans l'expansion politique et économique de ces empires. Au XIX^e siècle, des institutions savantes tels que les musées et les jardins botaniques contribuent aux dispositifs coloniaux des puissances européennes en rassemblant et en faisant circuler objets, personnes et savoirs⁷. L'élaboration de tels savoirs comporte à la fois une dimension pratique, puisque l'acclimatation d'espèces répond à des enjeux économiques majeurs, et une dimension symbolique, particulièrement visible dans les espaces d'exposition de plantes et d'objets que sont les jardins botaniques et les musées, en métropole comme dans les colonies. Au XIX^e siècle, Kew Gardens et le British Museum à Londres, le jardin botanique et l'Indian Museum à Calcutta sont des lieux de savoirs étroitement liés à des questions politiques et à des enjeux coloniaux. Les objets botaniques donnés et reçus par les institutions savantes se trouvent à la croisée des sphères scientifique, politique et marchande à une époque où les États européens poursuivent le développement à grande échelle de leurs collections botaniques. Sarah Easterby-Smith a montré le rôle important de l'horticulture, notamment telle que pratiquée par les marchands de plantes et de graines, dans l'élaboration des savoirs botaniques, soulignant la dimension empirique, concrète et collective de la mise en science des végétaux⁸.
- 4 Une étude rapprochée des circulations entre les institutions savantes, ainsi qu'entre elles et des instances politiques, fait apparaître qu'une très grande partie de ces transactions est régie par une économie du don où s'entremêlent des questions matérielles et des enjeux majeurs de reconnaissance et de prestige. Les échanges entre les botanistes, les responsables d'herbiers et les amateurs qui envoient des espèces aux spécialistes ne sont que très rarement monnayés, à l'exception parfois de défraiements destinés à financer les envois. La question se pose alors de savoir quel type de valeur est investie dans ces objets botaniques, qu'il s'agisse de plantes vivantes ou de spécimens séchés. Leur circulation est un point d'entrée vers l'étude de la dimension politique de l'élaboration de savoirs scientifiques en contexte colonial au XIX^e siècle. Les échanges d'objets et de savoirs par les savants entre eux ainsi qu'entre les savants et d'autres instances, notamment politiques, permettent d'envisager comment les objets végétaux et leurs circulations contribuent à construire de la légitimité, du crédit et de la reconnaissance. Le fait que ces transactions prennent souvent la forme de dons est particulièrement intéressant puisque ces dons servaient souvent, *in fine*, les intérêts marchands des empires coloniaux. On retrouve ainsi un phénomène bien documenté d'échanges non-monnayés à petite échelle destinés à servir des intérêts commerciaux

beaucoup plus vastes⁹. Comme l'a souligné l'économiste Kostas Lapavistas, les relations non-marchandes, loin d'être mises à mal par l'essor du système capitaliste, sont mobilisées par différents acteurs pour contribuer aux phénomènes d'accumulation, notamment à travers le crédit¹⁰. L'étude des dons et des transactions d'objets botaniques permet ainsi de décloisonner le domaine scientifique en montrant ses liens tant avec la sphère politique qu'avec le domaine marchand.

Dons et collections botaniques

- 5 Au tournant des XVIII^e et XIX^e siècle, des espèces rares de plantes sont fréquemment offertes par des membres d'institutions savantes à des personnalités politiques. Le naturaliste Joseph Banks (1743-1820), qui a contribué à faire de Kew Gardens une institution botanique majeure, utilise fréquemment les cadeaux botaniques pour asseoir sa renommée et consolider ses relations avec des personnalités influentes¹¹. Le don de plantes exotiques, en 1795, à la grande duchesse Maria Féodorovna de Russie, belle-fille de Catherine II, sert ouvertement les intérêts diplomatiques britanniques tout en favorisant la femme du futur tsar et assoit la renommée scientifique du directeur de Kew. Les plants vivants d'oiseaux de paradis (*Strelitzia Reginae*) et d'orchidées terrestres (*Phaius Tancarvilleae*), accompagnés de peintures les représentant en pleine floraison, sont implantés dans les serres du domaine impérial de Pavlosk, dans les environs de Saint Pétersbourg¹². Les archives de Kew Gardens, à Richmond près de Londres, contiennent des registres de plantes envoyées qui témoignent du caractère courant de ce type d'envois au XIX^e siècle. Les registres de plantes envoyées de 1804 à 1847 comportent de nombreuses mentions d'envois de plantes rares et exotiques à des membres éminents des familles royales européennes, parfois des femmes, mères ou épouses de souverains, en Grande-Bretagne et surtout à l'étranger¹³. Diverses variétés de rhododendrons sont ainsi envoyées en 1808 à la demeure royale de Frogmore, domaine de la famille royale britannique, adressées à la reine et aux princesses Marie et Elisabeth. Parmi les destinataires étrangers, on trouve la comtesse Gourieff (mère du premier ministre de l'empereur de Russie), ainsi que les membres de nombreuses familles royales allemandes : le duc de Saxe-Weimar, les rois de Bavière et de Hanovre, le roi (et la reine) de Wurtemberg, l'empereur d'Autriche, le roi de Prusse, le prince de Saxe-Cobourg, le grand-duc de Bade, la grande duchesse de Mecklembourg-Strelitz. Des envois sont aussi destinés aux consulats britanniques, notamment en Espagne, en Perse et en Suède. Les autres jardins botaniques coloniaux, notamment le jardin de Calcutta (le plus grand jardin botanique britannique hors de la métropole) réservent une partie de leur vaste production de plantes à des dons adressés à des consulats britanniques ainsi que des dignitaires locaux et étrangers. Dans certains cas, les destinataires n'ont pas de pouvoir politique direct – on voit alors apparaître la forte dimension protocolaire et politique de tels dons, comme dans les cas des cadeaux de plantes offerts en 1877 par la direction du jardin de Calcutta à l'ex-roi d'Oudh (déposé par les Britanniques), en résidence dans la capitale de l'empire britannique en Inde et dont le palais se situe en face du jardin, sur l'autre rive du fleuve Hooghly¹⁴.
- 6 Pour l'offrant comme pour le bénéficiaire, ces objets botaniques sont l'occasion de prouver une bonne insertion dans des réseaux savants et de donner à voir la maîtrise des éléments naturels que ces relations permettent. Ils permettent aussi de prouver une efficacité logistique et de désigner l'exploit que représente la réussite concrète

d'une telle transaction, puisque le transport de plantes vivantes, souvent réalisé par voie maritime, est soumis à de nombreux aléas réduisant fortement leurs chances de survie¹⁵. Aussi les questions logistiques d'emballage et de convoyage ne sont-elles pas secondaires mais contribuent-elles de manière centrale à la nature et à la représentation des échanges. Si les envois de plantes et de graines peuvent être résumés par la formule marquante de Sarah Easterby-Smith, la « réputation dans une boîte », c'est aussi parce que les contenants destinés à transporter les plantes, les matériaux dont ces contenants sont faits et leurs caractéristiques, la manière dont ils sont clos, scellés, portés, déplacés, accompagnés, stockés puis finalement (espère-t-on) ouverts font l'objet d'une attention extrême et témoignent, tout autant que les produits qu'ils contiennent, de la compétence des botanistes qui les envoient¹⁶. La généralisation de l'usage de la caisse de Ward dans les années 1840 augmente les chances de survie des plantes lors des transports maritimes mais ne diminue guère l'importance des préoccupations logistiques liées au fort taux d'échec des transports de plantes vivantes¹⁷.

- 7 Les dimensions matérielle, concrète et logistique importent aussi grandement dans les envois de spécimens de plantes séchées que les naturalistes échangent en grand nombre au XIX^e siècle. Les collections de spécimens séchés qui circulent entre les institutions savantes européennes sont fragiles, tant dans leur ordre interne que dans leur matérialité, et doivent être régulièrement préservées des dommages liés aux insectes et à l'humidité. Ces questions sont saillantes dans les climats tropicaux et subtropicaux où se situent de nombreux jardins botaniques coloniaux. Dans l'herbier du jardin de Calcutta, les collections de spécimens sont régulièrement « empoisonnées » (c'est le terme technique qui est employé), badigeonnées de produits toxiques à intervalles réguliers, au même titre que les livres et les documents d'archives, pour les préserver autant que possible des déprédations d'insectes et de rongeurs. Le caractère multimodal des transactions entre botanistes, qui comportent souvent des combinaisons de plantes vivantes, de représentations picturales de ces plantes, de spécimens séchés et de publications concernant ces spécimens, peut être vu comme un moyen de contourner les risques posés par le transport de ces divers objets qui se complètent les uns les autres par le type d'information qu'ils portent.
- 8 Les questions logistiques concernent aussi le prix des matériaux et de la fabrication nécessaires à la production d'objets botaniques ayant une forte valeur d'échange au sein de ce que qu'on pourrait décrire comme le marché non-monnayé de la communication scientifique. Un cas lié au jardin botanique de Calcutta au tournant des XIX^e et XX^e siècles illustre cette question de manière saillante. Soulignons d'abord l'importance des échanges (parfois proche d'un phénomène de troc) dans le fonctionnement des jardins botaniques et des herbiers qu'ils hébergent. Ces envois participent du système d'échanges non-monnayés et de crédit qui prévaut largement dans le milieu des botanistes, notamment entre les naturalistes et les amateurs qui leurs fournissent gratuitement des spécimens. Les pourvoyeurs peuvent espérer une reconnaissance mémorielle lorsque des plantes sont nommées d'après eux : une espèce éthiopienne envoyée à Banks par James Bruce, membre de la *Royal Society*, est nommée *Brucea*¹⁸. L'entreprise de dénomination d'espèces « découvertes » fait partie d'un système d'hommage et de récompense qui contribue de manière décisive à la constitution des collections botaniques européennes. Au sein des jardins botaniques coloniaux, qui ont une dimension à la fois économique et scientifique, les botanistes considèrent comme leur principale mission scientifique le fait d'enrichir les collections

d'herbiers qui jusqu'à la fin du XIX^e siècle sont considérées comme essentiels dans la constitution de connaissances naturalistes fiables, communicables et unifiées¹⁹. Comme y a tout récemment insisté Edwin Rose, le travail dans les herbiers et autour d'eux est indissociable de « technologies de papier » qui interviennent tant lors des différentes étapes de la dessiccation et du montage des spécimens que lors de la création de documents communicables, publiables puis échangeables²⁰. Tout au long du XIX^e siècle, l'élaboration d'une collection botanique considérable dans le jardin de Calcutta et dans son herbier, collection composée de plantes vivantes, de spécimens et de publications, repose sur des échanges fréquents avec d'autres institutions naturalistes. Le règlement du jardin sur la distribution de plantes et de graines (1875) énonce que le directeur du jardin a autorité pour pratiquer des échanges avec toute personne ou institution, qu'elle soit publique ou privée²¹. Les capitaines de navire des grandes compagnies de navigation, comme la *Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company* (P&O) sont régulièrement mis à contribution, à titre personnel et en échange de gratifications (littéralement) en nature, pour transporter des plantes gratuitement d'un continent à l'autre et des demandes sont faites pour que les plantes ayant par ailleurs une valeur marchande soient exemptées de taxes dans ce contexte²².

- 9 Les publications sur les espèces de plantes, qui permettent aux botanistes d'acquérir une réputation scientifique dans leur domaine, sont envoyées gratuitement aux institutions apparentées, quel que soit leur coût de production. Au fil du XIX^e siècle, le papier devenant un produit de plus en plus demandé et dont le cours augmente, cette considération n'est pas marginale et est susceptible d'exacerber la tension récurrente entre ce que les États qui financent les jardins botaniques attendent (à savoir principalement une rentabilité économique accrue pour un investissement modéré) et ce que les botanistes chargés de ces missions considèrent comme leur vocation scientifique. À partir de 1888, les botanistes du jardin de Calcutta font régulièrement paraître des volumes appelés « Annales » – des monographies publiées portant sur certains groupes d'espèces de plantes indiennes. Alors que le gouvernement britannique en Inde a jusqu'alors validé la production et l'envoi de ces ouvrages, en 1908 le *Registry and Record Department* de la région du Bengale émet de fortes réserves sur la publication du volume, arguant de son coût trop élevé et de la nationalité italienne de son auteur, Odoardo Beccari²³. Dans un contexte d'exacerbation des nationalismes, les collaborations trans-impériales, fussent-elles purement scientifiques, commencent à être vues d'un œil plus méfiant par les autorités. Face à cette menace pesant sur une publication emblématique, le directeur du jardin rappelle que ces volumes ne sont pas des documents anodins mais des « actifs » (*assets*) indispensables au fonctionnement de l'herbier. En des termes résolument économiques, qu'il sait sans doute propres à convaincre ses correspondants, il souligne que ces publications sont des « investissements profitables » (*remunerative investments*) susceptibles de produire une rente non seulement symbolique mais bien aussi matérielle, car le budget du jardin exploserait si ses botanistes étaient privés de cette précieuse monnaie d'échange et qu'il fallait alors acquérir financièrement les publications des institutions partenaires. Le volume est finalement publié mais les pressions étatiques concernant les collaborations internationales vont en s'accroissant²⁴. Ce cas pose la question centrale de la valeur accordée par différents acteurs aux objets produits par les botanistes dans le contexte de leur circulation. Cette question de la valeur de ces objets non-monnayés nous semble mériter plus d'attention.

Le cas des collections de Nathaniel Wallich

Les systèmes de don, une intrication scientifique et symbolique

- 10 Dans une initiative singulièrement nouvelle, le directeur du jardin botanique de Calcutta Nathaniel Wallich²⁵ entreprend à partir de 1827-1828 de distribuer des spécimens récoltés sous l'égide de l'East India Company (EIC) sans contrepartie financière directe²⁶. Menée sans programme ni attentes apparentes, cette donation inédite, qui émerge à l'instigation de Wallich et pour le compte de l'EIC, ne manque pas de surprendre par son ampleur comme par sa libéralité²⁷, tout en ouvrant une série de questions sur la catégorie du « cadeau scientifique » qu'elle met en jeu. Pour nouvelle qu'elle soit, l'initiative de Wallich s'insère dans un écosystème déjà bien en place de transactions scientifiques. Le pourtour de l'Océan indien est un bassin d'échange aux frontières mouvantes où les lignes de coupes impériales sont en voie de redéfinition dans les années 1820-1830. Les transactions de matériel biologique sont autant de vecteurs d'interaction entre des administrations coloniales concurrentes, engagées dans une gestion éclairée des tropiques²⁸, et dont le poids relatif dans cette zone est en train de changer. Une culture d'échanges d'objets botaniques s'est tissée entre les sphères scientifiques (naturalistes, collecteurs) et politiques (administrateurs coloniaux), formant un tissu propice au développement de canaux parallèles de discours diplomatique.
- 11 Le don de plantes y répond d'abord à un problème de complémentarité dans l'accès aux ressources biologiques, dispersées à l'échelle d'écosystèmes scindés par des lignes de partage impériales. Mais les niveaux strictement scientifique et symbolique sont étroitement liés dans ces transferts de plantes, dont l'acclimatation constitue à la fois un enjeu et un vecteur de représentation entre des administrations impériales concurrentes. Cette double dimension des systèmes de don est lisible dans la correspondance de Nathaniel Wallich, en Inde, avec le Français Philippe Panon Desbassayns de Richemont à l'île Bourbon (puis à l'administration coloniale à Pondichéry). Les deux hommes appartiennent à un réseau plus large de fonctionnaires et de naturalistes (parmi ces derniers, Leschenault de la Tour) engagés dans des expériences d'acclimatation qui recèlent aussi une dimension d'échange symbolique entre hauts fonctionnaires et membres des cercles administratifs coloniaux²⁹. « J'ai appris avec grand plaisir que l'administration de cette colonie [Bourbon] vous avait envoyé des collections de plantes qui manquaient au jardin botanique de Calcutta en échange de celles que vous aviez eu la bonté de nous donner », écrit ainsi à Wallich en 1820 Desbassayns de Richemont, qui remercie pour « les plantes que vous avez eu la bonté de me donner pour planter à Bourbon (...) Je ne doute pas que vous appreniez avec plaisir le résultat de notre essai [d'acclimatation]. Le jardin du Roi à Paris vous envoie (...) divers arbres, il y a des roses Bourbon que j'ai prié de vous adresser pour Mylady Montagu, je les lui annonce, veuillez les lui offrir »³⁰.
- 12 Les spécimens naturels échangés sont porteurs d'une double valeur utilitaire et symbolique. Ils sont partagés en conséquence, suivant une ligne de répartition à la fois scientifique et diplomatique, tel cet envoi de poissons venus de Chine (*gouramis*) offerts à Lord Hasting, « qui probablement en destinera une partie au jardin botanique »³¹. La simultanéité des niveaux symboliques et informationnels ou expérimentaux dans de tels présents se traduit dans le dédoublement du matériel, pratique déjà particulière à

l'investigation botanique³². Les matériaux offerts font l'objet d'envois identiques, mais étendus à plusieurs acteurs. Desbassayns de Richemont envoie en Inde quatre caisses d'arbres fruitiers à acclimater : les contenus, en partie identiques, sont répartis entre des acteurs différents, publics ou privés, individuels ou collectifs : les duplicats de l'envoi sont destinés simultanément à une société savante (« j'en fais hommage à la société asiatique [de Calcutta] »), au gouverneur général, au jardin botanique et à plusieurs particuliers (Wallich, mais aussi Augustus Brooke, « agent du gouverneur général à Bénarès »)³³.

- 13 Si Wallich entreprend à la fin des années 1820 de distribuer à une tout autre échelle les spécimens tirés des herbiers de Calcutta, il existe donc déjà un cadre expérimental à l'échange non monnayé de plantes autour de l'Océan indien. Ces systèmes de transactions placent la botanique au carrefour d'enjeux d'acclimatation et de représentation impériaux, diplomatiques, et ouvrent la voie à la négociation de matériel biologique entre nations. Wallich, lui, porte pour la première fois peut-être le don scientifique vers une dimension abstraite : il s'agit désormais d'ensembles de données, dont l'offre a des implications pour les rivalités entre nations scientifiques concurrentes. Le projet du directeur du jardin de Calcutta, par son caractère à la fois systématique et initialement dépourvu de règles explicites, a aussi l'intérêt de poser le don scientifique en objet à part entière, qu'il faut cerner, en tant que catégorie nouvelle, par des questions.
- 14 Car la politique de dons de Nathaniel Wallich, précisément, n'en est pas une : relativement ouverte et caractérisée surtout par son absence d'instructions, elle soulève bien des interrogations de méthode chez les destinataires. Les protocoles qui la régissent, loin d'être définis à l'avance, font l'objet d'une construction entre les parties donatrices (Wallich, l'EIC) et les récipiendaires.

Protocoles de dons : répartir les collections de Calcutta

- 15 Une offre massive de matériaux biologiques rares et nouveaux, provenant de sources agrégées par l'EIC sur des décennies, expédiés avec instructions minimales et au moins dans un premier temps sans catalogue de référence³⁴ vers de multiples acteurs de la botanique métropolitaine : la nouveauté de l'entreprise présente un caractère de surprise pour les destinataires, que traduisent des échanges centrés sur des questions de mise en forme des matériaux comme des remerciements. La surprise est d'autant plus grande que Wallich a joint à ses envois des spécimens provenant d'autres informateurs et botanistes (dont le collecteur en Inde Robert Wight³⁵), peut-être avec des vues, via la diffusion de leurs données, sur la restauration de structures comme le jardin botanique de Madras³⁶. Quoique difficile à interpréter, la perspective dans laquelle se place Wallich a l'apparence d'un projet d'ouverture des matériaux : les collections de Calcutta ne seront pas traitées à Calcutta mais par de multiples naturalistes en Europe³⁷.
- 16 La latitude dont Wallich fait montre dans ses envois de spécimens suscite chez ses correspondants des interrogations sur les règles par lesquelles appréhender ce type de donation. Catégorie à définir, le don scientifique pose des questions nouvelles en termes d'exploitation, de mise en forme, de propriété et de valorisation des matériaux. « Veuillez m'instruire du plan qu'il faut suivre dans ces travaux », écrit précisément à Wallich le botaniste parisien Adrien de Jussieu en 1830, « faut-il déterminer purement

et simplement les espèces ? Comptez-vous publier celles qui sont nouvelles et alors quelle latitude donnez-vous aux descriptions ? Ou bien autorisez-vous le botaniste qui les a décrites à s'en servir pour ses travaux particuliers ? »³⁸. Les interrogations formulées par Adrien de Jussieu doivent être comprises à la lumière des habitudes de communication des spécimens qui prévalent à l'époque : souvent contraignant, le prêt ou le don d'échantillons comme de « doubles » est étroitement encadré par des naturalistes soucieux de préserver un capital de données laborieusement accumulées, là où Wallich mise visiblement sur la dispersion des matériaux collectés sur le sous-continent indien.

- 17 Les normes formelles et symboliques encadrant la donation ne sont pas forcément fixées d'avance, mais émergent donc de la correspondance. Le cas d'Adrien de Jussieu suggère même que le système de transfert, de réception et de mise en valeur des spécimens est en fait largement indéfini lors de l'envoi. Il n'est pas certain que Wallich ait eu un plan précis : il n'existe pas d'attentes prédéfinies de ce qui doit être tiré de ses envois. Ce constat recèle quelques implications lorsqu'il est ramené à la définition de ce qu'est un système de dons et de contre-dons, et de ce qu'est un don dans les sciences de la nature. Que les protocoles autour de la communication soient émergents (indéfinis au départ) transcrit une reconnaissance du caractère particulier du matériau scientifique, dont la valeur peut faire l'objet d'invisibles fluctuations en fonction d'incertitudes méthodologiques et théoriques. Il est difficile d'estimer la valeur d'un envoi qui ne prendra son sens que par comparaison avec la masse des données déjà existantes, au sein de laquelle un seul spécimen peut occasionner une divergence taxonomique majeure³⁹. La notion de valeur qui sous-tend la catégorie du don doit ici être revue à la lumière de cette opacité de l'unité transférée.
- 18 Wallich a visiblement largement compté sur la capacité de mise en forme des matériaux de ses correspondants. Ses réponses laissent systématiquement une forme d'initiative, tant en termes de publication que sur des aspects scientifiques plus émergents, comme les normes de reproduction visuelle des matériaux, ou celles régissant la propriété sur les données extraites de la nature. « As to the mode and manner of your Monograph I leave it in every respect to your own choice and will », écrit Wallich au botaniste français Adolphe Brongniart au début des années 1830. « Whatever method you will adopt be assured will have my entire approval ; the more figures your work contains, the more pleased I shall feel [...]. Publish the work separately by itself or [...] do just as you deem fittest and best »⁴⁰.
- 19 Mais, si minimalement définis qu'ils puissent être, et peut-être à cause de cela, les envois de Wallich activent silencieusement des enjeux de relations entre sphères institutionnelles et nationales concurrentes. En plaçant cette masse de données minimalement normée à un carrefour dans les réseaux scientifiques de l'époque, Wallich ne manque pas de soulever le problème de la réception, et donc des capacités de collecte et de traitement des données naturelles par les instances étatiques qui gouvernent les tropiques⁴¹. Largement disséminés à l'échelle de l'Europe en quelques années, les fruits de la collecte de Calcutta ne peuvent que poser la question des instances de leur coordination, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une expression de la diplomatie sur le terrain savant.

Réception et coordination

- 20 Parce que les normes d'exploitation des matériaux botaniques impliquent des mentions de provenance, le traitement des collections de Calcutta s'articule à des protocoles de remerciements. Ceux-ci sont épistolaires ou publiés dans la presse et l'imprimé scientifique. Ces mentions de remerciements constituent un discours diplomatique indirect, puisqu'ils sont adressés, derrière Wallich et à sa demande, à l'*East India Company*. Wallich s'est personnellement attaché à coordonner l'expression publique des remerciements des récipiendaires, comme dans une lettre adressée en 1832 à Cuvier dans laquelle il lui demande de faire adresser une lettre de remerciement à l'*East India Company* par les professeurs du Museum⁴².
- 21 Les cas de remerciements suivant les communications de Wallich sont nombreux. Dans une lettre à Sir William Jackson Hooker (jardins botaniques de Kew) datée de 1830, Wallich se dit ainsi satisfait de la manière dont le botaniste suisse De Candolle traite le don de l'EIC dans une livraison de la *Bibliothèque universelle*⁴³. Mais derrière la diplomatie du cadeau botanique et les obligations qu'elle crée se trouve un problème de traitement des données. Il n'est pas anodin que la même lettre évoque les espoirs de Wallich d'accroître le rayonnement du jardin botanique de Madras en favorisant la publication de ses plantes (empruntées à Robert Wight, dont l'herbier est partie prenante de la distribution générale de Wallich). Le don scientifique, dans sa politique d'expression publique, diplomatique, trouve-t-il un canal supplémentaire d'incitation au traitement de données accumulées de plus en plus massivement depuis la fin du XVIII^e siècle ? « The effect of the distribution was to take away from India the means of identifying plants in the country », note un numéro du *Calcutta Journal of Natural History*, « and to confer them on Paris, London, Berlin, Geneva, Bale, Munich, Halle and other places ». Ce que le journal de Calcutta déplore ; mais qui révèle une tentative de distribuer le traitement de l'information accumulée depuis plusieurs décennies en Inde. Un botaniste comme Robert Wight, dans le même numéro, estime qu'avant la distribution « the claims of English botanists to original discovery were daily superseded by the very recent labours of foreigners having greater facilities of publishing their collections », Wallich ayant eu le mérite d'accroître le rayonnement du savoir botanique dérivant de collections « which had for so many years been accumulating, but were still unknown to science »⁴⁴.
- 22 L'entreprise de transferts botaniques de Wallich peut donc être comprise comme autant de transactions entre structures institutionnelles et nationales engagées dans une concurrence sur le plan scientifique aussi bien qu'impérial. Le discours inter-étatique dans les mentions de remerciement fait aussi la promotion des régimes institutionnels de mise en valeur des données scientifiques. Adrien de Jussieu place le Jardin du Roi, actuel Muséum d'Histoire naturelle, en point d'aboutissement privilégié de cet ensemble de transferts non monnayés : « son herbier qui est au service de tous les savants de tous les pays n'a-t-il pas droit à une part dans la libérale distribution de la Compagnie des Indes ? C'est un dépôt qui a sur tous les autres l'avantage d'être public et par conséquent inaliénable »⁴⁵. La diplomatie de la réception, en justifiant la validité de l'envoi, articule un discours sous-jacent sur les structures de l'accumulation des données qui met en concurrence certains centres de création du savoir, au premier rang desquels Londres et Paris.

- 23 Le remerciement formel est dès lors une occasion de préciser la portée de diffusion des données par les États éclairés (et rivaux) engagés dans la mise en valeur des tropiques. La coordination entre institutions de nations rivales autour des séries de données extraites de la nature devient, dans la reconnaissance publique du don, un enjeu de bon gouvernement⁴⁶. Les gouvernements coloniaux comme les institutions métropolitaines et les naturalistes à leur tête (ainsi de la famille de Jussieu à Paris) convergent sur l'idée que les puissances éclairées sont en capacité de faciliter l'accès aux données⁴⁷. « Some governments, and we are proud to name ours among the first, were always distinguished by the encouragement given to sciences », écrit ainsi le botaniste français Auguste Duvau en remerciement à Nathaniel Wallich en 1829 ; « it was your illustrious company's to set forth an example of such useful communication. I feel very happy to be the first who experienced it, and in a paper about this subject [...] I tried to express the feelings of my countrymen and my own. »⁴⁸
- 24 Mais à une autre échelle, celle du réseau lui-même, les enjeux de coordination autour de la réception d'objets non monnayés posent des problèmes nouveaux. Car les destinataires, individuels comme institutionnels, dispersés dans plusieurs pays, ne se connaissent pas forcément entre eux. Le botaniste parisien Auguste Duvau écrit ainsi à Wallich qu'il a d'abord envisagé de s'adresser lui-même, « pour avoir des notes, aux différents correspondants auxquels vous faites des envois. Mais je n'en connais qu'une partie, et en général il me paraît bien plus naturel et bien plus sûr de vous prier de vouloir bien faire vous-même ces relevés, et de me les communiquer pour faire la liste de mon article. »⁴⁹ Le don scientifique (fragmenté par nature) d'échantillons biologiques ne prend sa pleine signification qu'à l'échelle du réseau de transferts lui-même ; or les destinataires ne se connaissent pas tous. Le *Calcutta Journal of Natural History*, déjà évoqué, établit bien une liste de l'état des travaux entrepris par les botanistes bénéficiaires, qui donne un aperçu de la dimension véritablement internationale de l'entreprise de Wallich ; mais nous sommes au milieu des années 1840. Quand Wallich répartit ses plantes dix ans auparavant, le réseau tissé autour de l'ouverture scientifique des collections de Calcutta n'est pas transparent à lui-même. Ce problème est doublé par l'absence initiale (déjà relevée) d'un catalogue des échantillons qui pourrait constituer une base commune de vérification, et par la soustraction des collections à l'Inde sans qu'y demeure une série d'échantillons de référence, compliquant le travail des naturalistes sur le sous-continent⁵⁰. Cela ne le simplifie en fait guère ailleurs : un Adrien de Jussieu recevant des spécimens en 1830, indépendamment de sa satisfaction, ne peut qu'essayer d'établir quel botaniste de ses connaissances serait « le plus prompt à débrouiller » telle ou telle famille de plantes⁵¹. La catégorie du don scientifique implique ainsi des problématiques nouvelles d'opacité du réseau d'échange à lui-même, mais aussi de comparaison des relevés (c'est le problème qui sous-tend, plus haut, la demande d'Auguste Duvau). Derrière se profilent des enjeux de coordination des nomenclatures de classification, et d'identification de la nouveauté dans la masse des spécimens.
- 25 Qu'un discours de remerciements formel émerge peut donc aussi, dans ce contexte, être compris comme un canal (autant qu'une démonstration) de coordination. La reconnaissance formelle du don permet aussi une reconnaissance au sens exploratoire du terme : les parties concernées prennent connaissance de la portée du réseau d'échange. De ce point de vue, le discours diplomatique qui enveloppe la couche des échanges matériels peut fonctionner comme un mécanisme d'organisation pour les

échanges de données non monnayés ; et son expression imprimée constituer l'un des axes de coordination manquants dans ce type de système de dons, par nature fragmentés.

Conclusion

- 26 Les dons de plantes et de spécimens biologiques se situent donc à de multiples carrefours d'opportunités, qu'il s'agisse de la nécessaire coopération pour l'accès à des ressources dispersées, de l'acclimatation utilitaire, d'enjeux de détermination plus théoriques, ou bien de tout programme derrière lequel se profile en filigrane l'expansion ou la restauration de jardins botaniques dans les mondes extra-européens. Le don et la réception de plantes vivantes et de spécimens font l'objet d'un discours diplomatique indirect, de facture relativement nouvelle au XIX^e siècle, dans un contexte crucial d'accumulation informationnelle par les États coloniaux et leurs institutions scientifiques. Ce discours diplomatique, qui gagnerait à être systématiquement étudié dans les protocoles de circulation comme dans l'imprimé attestant de la réception, se déploie aussi comme une occasion de mettre en évidence les capacités de coordination d'ensembles de données larges par les centres d'accumulation du savoir. Impulsés depuis les « marges » savantes, ces transferts ouvrent enfin la question de l'aptitude de réseaux trans-régionaux étendus à organiser des protocoles parallèles d'échanges, hors de la fonction institutionnelle nationale.
- 27 Au-delà de l'expression d'une concurrence inter-étatique déplacée du terrain impérial vers le terrain savant, la fonction facilitatrice du discours diplomatique pour éclairer des systèmes complexes de transferts mérite d'être relevée. Elle résout en particulier certains des problèmes de coordination des réseaux de destinataires, dans des systèmes de transactions qui s'apparentent à une économie informelle. C'est la notion centrale de valeur que mobilise ici la fonction diplomatique, à la fois dans sa dimension symbolique de représentation interpersonnelle et en tant que clef de voûte des architectures scientifiques qui se développent au XIX^e siècle. Les botanistes de Calcutta ne s'y sont pas trompés, qui greffent leurs propres systèmes d'offres et de demandes savantes sur ce qui est aussi un vecteur d'interaction entre administrations impériales concurrentes.
- 28 La valeur du don de spécimens biologiques, pour autant, reste profondément évasive, y compris au sein des réseaux savants engagés dans la construction de systèmes taxonomiques qu'elle concerne en premier. Il est notoirement difficile de situer l'intérêt du spécimen – du spécimen en tant que « pièce » – dans les architectures scientifiques alors en plein développement.

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31. BCMHN MS CRY 502 n°429 Desbassayns de Richemont à Wallich, St Gilles, Île Bourbon, 8 septembre 1821.

32. Les transferts botaniques procèdent souvent par l'emploi de « doubles », instances multiples d'une même espèce, répondant à la fois à des enjeux de conservation, de répartition, et d'analyse du matériel. ENDERSBY Jim, *Imperial Nature : Joseph Hooker and the practices of Victorian Science*, op. cit., p. 140.

33. *Idem*, note 31.

34. Plusieurs récipiendaires le réclament. La norme est d'accompagner l'envoi d'un système (liste, livre) auquel se référer pour établir les noms des espèces. Wallich édite un catalogue des plantes de l'EIC en 1828.

35. Nathaniel Wallich à William Jackson Hooker, 13 février 1830, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Directors' Correspondence 52/69. Robert Wight à William Jackson Hooker, 25 avril 1832, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Directors' Correspondence 52/159a.

36. Wight, d'abord réticent, se rallie ensuite au projet de Wallich en mentionnant explicitement Madras.

37. Voir note 44.

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46. Sur la botanique comme canal de signalisation politique, cf. DRAYTON Richard, *Nature's Government*, *op. cit.*
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48. BCMHN MS CRY n°525, Auguste Duvau à Nathaniel Wallich, Paris, 3 septembre 1829.
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50. Voir note 43. « *Whatever benefit the distribution may therefore have conferred on Indian Botany [...] it has tied the hands of the Botanist in India* ».
51. Adrien de Jussieu à Nathaniel Wallich, Paris, 2 avril 1830, note 38.

RÉSUMÉS

« Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches », écrivait Paul Verlaine en 1874. Discursivement et concrètement, les végétaux occupent une place de choix dans les pratiques quotidiennes de don. Au plan politique, de nombreux exemples témoignent de l'usage fréquent d'objets végétaux comme cadeaux diplomatiques. Au cours du long XIX^e siècle, les circulations de plantes vivantes, de graines et de spécimens sont nombreuses et massives à l'intérieur des empires européens et entre ces derniers. Ces transactions se situent le plus souvent hors du domaine monnayable, ressortissant plutôt au troc et au don. Produits dans les institutions économiquement centrales que sont alors les jardins botaniques, les objets végétaux, artefacts fragiles dont la valeur souvent incertaine relève à la fois du symbolique et de l'économique, se trouvent au cœur d'un ensemble de liens complexes entre les sphères savante, marchande et politique. Ils témoignent de l'ambiguïté des relations scientifiques inter-impériales, marquées

par une tension constante entre la coopération et la rivalité. Le cas des dons réalisés dans les années 1820 par le botaniste Nathaniel Wallich (1785-1854) à partir des collections du jardin botanique de Calcutta illustre les tensions et les difficultés liées à l'usage d'objets végétaux comme monnaie d'échange contribuant à la constitution d'un capital symbolique. Cette étude poursuit ainsi la recherche sur la « diplomatie fragile » que constitue la circulation non monnayée d'objets convoités dont la valeur est soumise à d'imprévisibles fluctuations.

« Here are some fruit, some flowers, some leaves and some branches », French poet Paul Verlaine wrote in 1874. Discursively and concretely, plants have pride of place in everyday practices of gift-giving. At the political level, many examples show that botanical objects were frequently used as gifts. During the long 19th century, living plants, seeds and specimens are widely circulated within and between European empires. These transactions are often performed without using money, objects being offered, exchanged or bartered. Produced in botanical gardens, which are then central to colonial economies, plants and objects derived from them are fragile artefacts. Their often uncertain value is both symbolic and economic, since these objects are taken into a set of complex relationships between the scientific, mercantile, and political spheres. They testify to the ambiguity of inter-imperial scientific relations, marked by a constant tension between cooperation and rivalry. The case of the gifts offered in the 1820s by botanist Nathaniel Wallich (1785-1854) from the collections of the botanic garden in Calcutta illustrates the tensions and difficulties related to the use of objects derived from plants as a sort of currency contributing to the creation of a symbolic capital. This study explores the notion of « fragile diplomacy », the non-monetary circulation of desired objects the value of which is subject to unpredictable variations.

INDEX

Mots-clés : diplomatie fragile, relations inter-impériales, troc, spécimens, collections, jardins botaniques

Keywords : fragile diplomacy, inter-imperial relations, barter, specimens, collections, botanic gardens

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From Negotiations to Afterlives

Négociations et héritages

Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz's State Visit to Britain (July 1867): A Case in Negotiated 'Ornamental' Diplomatic Gifts

Quand le Sultan ottoman Abdul Aziz rencontrait la Reine Victoria, ou de la négociation des cadeaux diplomatiques (1867)

Stéphanie Prévost

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Introduction

- 1 Historian Felicity Heal presents "sovereign gifts" as part and parcel of State diplomacy in the context of a "gift-exchange between monarchs and states of equal standing".¹ More often than not, especially in the early modern period, gifts to heads of State tended to be presented by intermediaries, notably ambassadors. This remained true in Victorian times when some rulers would not leave their countries for Britain for practical reasons (due to distance and journey facilities), political or personal reasons (like infringing political rules of their own States, or fearing a coup). The direct presentation of gifts was thus far from being the norm in Victorian times, especially for non-European rulers. One such exceptional occasion was Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz's State visit to Britain in July 1867, which is the object of this article.
- 2 While Queen Victoria had received representatives of non-Christian States at Court since her early days as Queen, Sultan Abdul Aziz's State visit to Britain in July 1867 was the first visit of a non-Christian sovereign ruler on British soil – six years before the first visit of a Persian Qajar ruler (Nasir al-Din Shah) to Britain in 1873. Though

recognised at the time as exceptional – for it was the first time an Ottoman Sultan left his country in times of peace –, the State visit to Britain has nonetheless remained understudied, or treated as a corollary to his presence at the inauguration of the Exposition universelle of Paris (before proceeding to Dover).² These “firsts” make it an all the more interesting case of global micro-history as it presented Queen Victoria with a series of challenges in terms of protocol, especially regarding the exchange of gifts.

- 3 With Queen Victoria being initially reluctant to hosting Sultan Abdul Aziz, the British monarch(y) was placed in a tight corner: she was asked to honour her guest in a way that remained uncharted, for Britain had never received an incumbent Muslim ruler of such a high rank. Traditionally, it is admitted that gifts between equals – here two heads of State – are freely conceded. Gift-giving always implies power dynamics on both sides (giver and receiver), but the giver theoretically has the benefit of a freer choice of gifts by setting the mark of gift value and of the expected counter-gift (or return gift). An analysis of gift-giving during Sultan Abdul Aziz’s official visit to Britain nonetheless presents us with a more contrasted perspective. It echoes current research on pre-nineteenth century Ottoman diplomatic encounters as prime occasions of friendship leading to “negotiated identities” rather than outright expressions of hard power.³ This hypothesis of “negotiation” is here taken up to read the Ottoman-British gift-giving processes associated with Abdul Aziz’s State visit to Britain.
- 4 Building on the analysis of relevant sources (mostly in British royal and diplomatic archives), this article suggests that the Sultan’s visit formed a test for British monarchy’s capacity to stand up to its diplomatic obligations, at a time of political retreat for the British monarchy and of high republicanism in Britain.⁴ It argues that negotiation was very much in the hands of the Ottoman Sultan and his diplomatic staff partly due to Queen Victoria’s withdrawal from political affairs, long before gifts were exchanged. As such, this case serves to remind us of the backstage processes that often remain unknown to the public at the time, and that are sometimes lost on historians when archives are lacking. While negotiations kept on, the gift-giving process during this visit was always on the verge of missed encounters (or we may call them “miscounters”), as this article will show. A first section will analyse the symbolical role of the Queen’s granting the Order of Garter to the Sultan in terms of international status and visibility – or otherwise put in terms of “ornamental diplomacy”.⁵ It will particularly concentrate on the Sultan’s diplomatic moves to secure the Garter despite the Queen’s original reluctance. Taking its cue from French sociologist/anthropologist Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le Don* (1950) that gift-giving tends to be a three-way process (giving, receiving, and reciprocating), the second section of this article focuses on the reception of the Garter and discusses the Sultan’s understanding of the ceremony. The final section examines the Sultan’s return gift to Queen Victoria – seven Arab horses – and issues of acceptability from a gendered perspective.

Negotiating the Garter, or the Garter as voucher of full international status

- 5 “The world all half mad about the Sultan’s visit”.⁶ This note from the diary of a British Liberal Lord with diplomatic experience on 15 July, 1867 gives a sense of how historic Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz’s official 12-23 July visit to England) was. It was part of a

broader tour of Europe that took the Sultan from France to England, Belgium, Austria and Prussia between 21 June and 6 August, before he returned to Constantinople via Ottoman principalities in the Balkans. This move, undertaken only six years after the beginning of his reign, was highly significant in the history of the Ottoman Empire: no such visit had been undertaken by his predecessors or would be by his successors – two of whom, his nephews Murad Efendi and Abdul Hamid Efendi, accompanied him on his journey as part of his travelling party of approximately 70 people. Although the Sultan was eventually lionized in the European press, there was little enthusiasm in Britain for that visit originally, apart from railway men, some textile manufacturers and the pro-Ottoman Foreign Affairs Committee for whom trade with the Ottoman Empire was a boon.⁷ Arguments contra the visit were legion, including: the very cost of a State visit (Radicals and Republicans), protests against the status of women in the Ottoman Empire and polygamy (women's reform clubs), or the dread expressed by Queen Victoria herself that the Sultan might travel with several favourites from his harem, thereby contravening to Victorian propriety.⁸

- 6 News of the visit was also very untimely from the perspective of British monarchy. Queen Victoria had withdrawn from public life since the death of Prince Albert in 1861. Her seclusion reached new heights in early 1867 when she originally refused to open Parliament. Victoria eventually changed her mind after her Cabinet pointed to the necessity for her to fulfil her role at a time when British Radicals pressed the British constitutional monarchy to move towards fairer representation (through franchise extension) – or else, would welcome republicanism.⁹ It was in this context of the about-to-be-passed Second Reform Bill that the Queen learned of the Sultan's wish to visit Britain. Upon hearing the news in late May 1867, she had a telegraph sent to the British ambassador in Constantinople, Lord Lyons, stating that "it [would] give her great pleasure if he could extend his journey to this country".¹⁰ In practice, she did not quite see how the visit affected her own plans to stay away from the capital in Balmoral. She even had her doctor attest to the fact that she was not in good health enough to entertain the Sultan for the whole of his British stay, should he maintain his original dates of 12-23 July.¹¹
- 7 While the Foreign Office (hereafter FO) expected outright enthusiasm for such a historic occasion and preparations for a grand State visit, the Queen's reply was cold water. The Sultan expected a formal invitation rapidly upon the notice of his visiting England, which she was purposely trying to defer.¹² To curtail rumours that Britain would not entertain the Sultan and avoid a diplomatic imbroglio, the FO decided to send Victoria's invitation to the Sultan without awaiting further, that is to say: without her prior approval.¹³ The Queen's attitude left the British ambassador Lord Stanley and the British Foreign Secretary Lord Lyons bemused, as they "d[id] not see how it is possible to put off the Sultan's visit now without giving him offence".¹⁴ It eventually took a lot of skill from both Stanley and Lyons to find an agreement with Musurus Pasha, the Ottoman ambassador in Britain since 1861 and a trusted figure in British political circles, to have the Queen consent to receiving the Sultan formally and spending a whole day with him.¹⁵ The public knew nothing of this for the sake of appearances and inter-state diplomacy.
- 8 The official visit of a non-Christian monarch was a first, which required careful preparations. Since the late eighteenth century, the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Ottoman Empire had undertaken a modernising programme of its

institutions and administrations that promised greater equality between all subjects.¹⁶ In that context of the *Tanzimat* reforms programme, European countries rivalled for influence.¹⁷ France had benefited from the preferential regime of “capitulations”, by which its subjects residing or trading in the Ottoman dominions benefitted from certain rights and privileges since the 16th century. But by the mid-1830s, those capitulations were extended to other foreign countries, especially Britain and the USA, with competition increasing over trade. Nonetheless, in many domains (especially legal), France maintained its influence, so that for much of Queen Victoria’s diplomatic staff, the visit was the occasion to try and balance this situation.¹⁸ This was far from being an easy task. All reports from the British delegation at the Paris Exposition universelle, notably that of the Prince of Wales, testified of the warm welcome Sultan Abdul Aziz was given in France and all pressed that a similar enthusiasm should be shown in Britain on this historic occasion, lest Britain lose out in the Franco-British rivalry for influence at Constantinople.

- 9 Pressure built up all the more on Victoria as Abdul Aziz had expressed strong wishes for his English visit. Bickering that he had invited himself – not the reverse – at the last minute on top of all, she made it clear to her FO interlocutors that he should not have excessively grand expectations.¹⁹ At this stage, Queen Victoria failed – or so feigned – to see how pivotal the Sultan’s visit to Britain was for his own politics or how his very presence on British soil was an exceptional gift in itself.²⁰
- 10 On the domestic scene, Abdul Aziz was facing multiple challenges. Ottoman Cretans’ insurrection was ongoing since Spring 1866 and was a sign of Christian discontent at the ineffectiveness of local Ottoman rule in Crete despite the *Tanzimat* programme. As Ottoman central power used military force to crush the rebellion in 1866 and early 1867, Cretan Christians tried to mobilize public opinion and leaders throughout Europe and the U.S. on their behalf to secure autonomy. While French and Russian diplomats favoured such an option in March 1867, the British Foreign Office turned it down. Generally speaking, the latter supported the Ottoman policy in Crete, as they then feared that Cretan autonomy would enhance Russian – and possibly French – influence in the Ottoman Empire and as such a non-concerted proposal contravened the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which had ended the Crimean War by making European powers (France, Britain, Russia, Prussia, Austria, Hungary and Italy) the collective guarantors of the Ottoman territorial integrity and forbade European interference in Ottoman affairs.²¹ Beside his genuine interest in the Paris Exposition universelle, Abdul Aziz hoped that his European tour would help him in three ways on the international scene: 1/ restore trust in Ottoman credit in Europe (that Cretan events had shaken); 2/ forestall any potential Franco-Russian support for Cretan rebels; 3/ strengthen ties with British diplomatic circles to foster their traditional pro-Ottoman, anti-Russian policy.²² Aside from the “Cretan Question” (as it became known), there was another reason behind the Sultan’s visit to Europe, as just but a few weeks before, a coup against him had failed. That overhaul attempt had been conducted by a secret organisation known as Meslek that promoted Ottoman patriotism and blamed Ottoman Sultans for the recent loss of territories or crises such as the one in Crete.²³ Under such exceptional circumstances, the relevance and timeliness of such a journey, which was very much an idea of Sultan Abdul Aziz’s Grand Vizier Mehmet Âli Pasha, was discussed by the Sultan’s Cabinet. Eventually even conservative ministers conceded that a visit to Europe was indispensable to get international backing against the coup (as well as against possible dissidents exiled especially in France and Britain) and did not oppose

it, even if a Sultan's journey into foreign, Christian lands during peacetime contradicted traditional Ottoman diplomatic practices that long regarded Ottoman sultans as the most powerful sovereigns on earth.²⁴ The Sultan's palace imam was including in the Sultan's suite as a way to register support. To overcome the Sultan's fear of leaving the throne vacant, Âli Pasha proposed to the Sultan to take his nephews – the likely heirs to be – with him on his journey to avoid a coup in his absence and to have him stand as regent meanwhile. Fuad Pasha, the incumbent Ottoman Foreign Secretary who had served as Grand Vizier and ambassador to London in 1840, was to accompany the Sultan and thus facilitate exchanges, as the Sultan only spoke Turkish.²⁵ The careful and lengthy preparations reveal how exceptional Sultan Abdul Aziz's visit was from an Ottoman standpoint. The visit was constructed in terms of Ottoman ruler visibility, with both the domestic and international audiences in mind. For several decades now, the Sultan's public image had been a prime concern, first of Abdul Aziz's father (Mahmud II, 1808-1839) and brother (Abdülmeçid, 1839-1861), and was absolutely central in the context of the reforming/modernising Ottoman polity and of a burgeoning Ottoman public opinion.²⁶ One instrument was the growing use of Ottoman Western-style medals and orders, which, as historians argue, was part of the "process of Ottoman integration into the Western system of signs and symbols".²⁷ As Abdul Aziz perfected his conception of "ornamental diplomacy", he styled himself "the fount of all honour" in a way that was both readily readable to Western rulers and congruent with Ottoman identity, especially "with the traditional values of his empire".²⁸ One year within his reign, in 1862, he designed a new order to honour foreign dignitaries: the Osmani order (Osmanî Nişanı) emphasized the place of Islam (via the colour green) and the Sultan's divine guidance (through the inscription).²⁹ Prince Edward, Queen Victoria's own son, was the first to be awarded this distinction as he visited Sultan Abdul Aziz that year and this durably impressed him (Figure 1).³⁰ As the Ottoman system of decorations standardized, it became "part of a wider, concerted Ottoman quest for reciprocity with the West, as well as visibility at home".³¹ The Sultan's pressing demand for the Order of the Garter partook of this new imperial rhetoric, but more than this, the granting of the highest honour in the British chivalric system was to give visible evidence of his full international status as ruler. In addition to this requirement, the Sultan pressed the British Foreign Office to accept that Ismail Pasha, on whom he had recently awarded the hereditary title of Khedive and to whom he gave the right to govern Egypt's internal affairs without resort to Ottoman approval, be dealt with as his political subject and not as an independent ruler as Ismail Pasha would reach London, but a few days ahead of him. Though the British FO did not want to alienate Ismail Pasha just when the Suez Canal was to be entrusted to the French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps, they still thought it best to not endanger British-Ottoman relations and abide by Ottoman political hierarchy on British soil.³²

[Figure 1] Prince Edward's Star of the Order of Osmanieh (Turkey), c.1862. Silver, gold and enamel, 8.5 x 8.5 cm.



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- 11 Seen from Queen Victoria's perspective, the Sultan's royal gift request was more awkward, as it forced her to honour her guest in a way that she had not originally proposed and that she disliked. Indeed, knights of the Garter were the British sovereigns' personal choice in their capacity as "fount of all honour", while governments were allowed to make suggestions. Theoretically, it was for Victoria to decide on whether to grant Abdul Aziz that distinction. When the demand was first made to the British FO in late May 1867, she was kept uninformed. Lord Lyons and Lord Stanley thought it best to settle other matters first – like lodgings, or the programme of festivities – and mention the question at a later stage when Victoria might be more amenable to the idea.
- 12 From Abdul Aziz's perspective, the exceptionalism of his visit to Britain was to be met with a gift of similar value by the British ruler. The Order of the Garter seemed to be the right choice, as it was the decoration that Victoria had awarded virtually all royals in Europe since her accession in 1837.³⁴ In practice, all main European rulers had been honoured in such a way (French Emperor Napoleon III and King of Italy Victor Emmanuel II, both in 1855; King of Prussia Wilhelm I in 1860) or were about to be, as announced publicly in June 1867 (Tsar Alexander II and Francis Joseph, Emperor of Austria). He was now the only member of the Concert of Europe – that informal institution born out of the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) meant to safeguard European peace – not to have it. The Ottoman Empire had been a member since the end of the Crimean war in 1856, as a way to reassert Europe's commitment towards Ottoman territorial integrity, but was some sort of a second-rank, probationary member.³⁵ Abdul Aziz's claim to the Garter would offer worldwide recognition of his

status as a fully-fledged partner in the Concert, at least ornamentally. In the context of the Cretan crisis and the “Meslek incident” (as the assassination attempt became known), the Sultan’s visit to Europe further aimed at impressing upon all – friend or foe – that he was one of the key players in European diplomacy and that he should not be bypassed in the settlement of the Cretan crisis. Receiving the medal from Queen Victoria herself was meant to offer such evidence, all the more so as she had criticised the Sultan’s brutal handling of the Cretan Crisis in her Opening Speech to Parliament only a few months earlier.³⁶ The investiture would be a sign of Britain’s realignment towards the Sultan’s policy in Crete – at least on the surface.³⁷

- 13 Negotiations for the Garter kept on till the very last minute as Queen Victoria and the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Derby were embarrassed by the idea of conferring such a distinction on a Muslim.³⁸ The programme of entertainments issued before the Sultan’s arrival at Dover mentioned the naval review of 17 July, but not any investiture. Besides, the presence of Queen Victoria at the ceremony was very uncertain until a few days before.³⁹ Behind the scenes, the Queen, Lord Derby and the Secretary of State for India Lord Northcote concocted an alternative to the Garter and repeatedly proposed the Sultan with the Star of India until 15 July. Northcote mused that “the acceptance of th[is] Order by HIM [His Imperial Majesty] would greatly enhance its value in the estimation of your majesty’s Mahommetan subjects in India, as well as in that of the native princes in whom yr majesty has been graciously pleased to confer it”.⁴⁰ Abdul Aziz’s answer was always the same, that: he would gladly accept the Star of India, but still wanted the Garter, which his predecessor had been publicly granted by British ambassador Viscount Canning at the British embassy in Constantinople in 1856.⁴¹ Was he not an ally as his brother had been? The Queen counter-argued that the Order of India did not exist in 1856 – it was only created in 1861 as an instrument in the British policy of securing Indian Princely co-operation in the immediate aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion⁴² – and that if there had been such an order, Sultan Abdülmecid would have been granted the Star of India, not the Garter.⁴³ The *passee d’armes* between Victoria and Abdul Aziz betrayed a hierarchy rivalry as he was Emperor – a title that Queen Victoria would not have until 1876 – and the “Commander of the Faithful”, a title by which he theoretically commanded the loyalty of Muslims in British India.
- 14 By proposing to bestow the Star of India onto the Sultan, Queen Victoria had sought to restore a Western power hierarchy and dynamics in ceremonial gift-giving, and here tried to recuperate the giver’s power of a gift choice. It nonetheless became clear that “the Sultan would consider himself slighted if he were given anything but the Garter”, especially as he made it clear that he regarded the Star of India an “inferior order” fitted for his vassals only.⁴⁴ In making the argument, Abdul Aziz subtly reactivated the traditional Ottoman cosmogony by which Ottoman Sultans were direct successors of the Prophet and as Supreme rulers, had no equals.⁴⁵ Deep down, to Abdul Aziz and to an Ottoman public sphere with a sense of history, the Garter functioned not so much as a honorific gift, as a tribute that denied the very idea of a Western power hierarchy.⁴⁶
- 15 In the end, Victoria gave way to the pressures of the FO and Prince Edward and invested Abdul Aziz with the Garter onboard the Royal Yacht Victoria and Albert during the naval review on 17 July, 1867. In trying to maintain British influence in the Ottoman Empire and containing the French one – Napoleon III had already announced that he would personally honour the Sultan by visiting him in 1869 – with the proxy of

the Garter, Victoria fulfilled the Ottoman Emperor's original wish, though rather against her own will.⁴⁷

Receiving the Garter and appraising the ceremony

- 16 Deciding on the counter-gift once back home raised the question of the basis on which to reciprocate. It invites appraising the gift for its value, monetary and/or symbolic, and for the discourse it carried in order to decide on the proper response. Before turning to Sultan Abdul Aziz's gift to Victoria – in the form of Arabian horses – in the final section of this article, one needs to reflect on understandings of the ceremony and its representations, especially from an Ottoman perspective.
- 17 The investiture ceremony is best remembered due to artworks by George Housman Thomas (1824-1868). Thomas had been regularly commissioned by Victoria since 1854 for both private portraits and public occasions. Of the three representations by Thomas, two are now in the Royal Collections (RC) – the watercolour being currently on display at Frogmore House, a favourite royal retreat (Figure 3), while the oil on painting commissioned by Victoria was still on display in the Principal Room of Windsor Castle in 1878 (Figure 2). The third work, an oil painting privately commissioned by the 3rd Earl of Bradford, Master of the Queen's Horses, is still on display at the family residence in Shropshire.⁴⁸ Such representations have guaranteed Abdul Aziz's long-term visibility in British venues of power, historic collections and ensuing popular prints, with British-Ottoman friendship being archived and kept on visual record. Of course, nothing do they say about the weeks-long drama that preceded the award.

[Figure 2] George Housman Thomas, *The Investiture of the Sultan with the Order of the Garter*, 17 July 1867 (1867-1868). Oil on canvas, 45.9 x 66.5 cm.



RCIN 406336. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁴⁹

[Figure 3] George Housman Thomas, *The Investiture of Sultan Abdülaziz I with the Order of the Garter, 17 July 1867* (1867). Watercolour, 28.1 x 43.8 cm.



RCIN 450804. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁵⁰

- 18 Comparing the two works in the Royal Collections reveals how the oil on canvas (Figure 2) was influenced by the Queen's mixed perception. In her own words, the Sultan was "very uncomfortable" at sea and "was continually retiring below" during the review, which took place during a storm. The gloomy atmosphere of the oil – by contrast with the much brighter watercolour (Figure 3) – also reads metaphorically, as the Queen confided in her diary that she granted the Garter "which he had very much set his heart upon, though I should have preferred the Star of India".⁵¹ The Sultan likely did not see Thomas's representations – as unlike Napoleon III, who was similarly honoured by Queen Victoria in 1855, he was not offered one.⁵² However, to 1868 Royal Academy exhibition viewers, *The Investiture of the Sultan with the Order of the Garter, 17 July 1867* (1867-1868) by Thomas must have invited comparison to another royal commission.
- 19 Edward Matthew Ward (1816-79)'s *The Investiture of Napoleon III with the Order of the Garter, 18 April 1855* (1860, oil), on display at Buckingham Palace during the Sultan's stay there, is nearly twice the size in height and three times the size in length (Figure 4). While Thomas's oil's size suggests treatment as a landscape or genre format, the Queen clearly pushed Ward to offer a magnificent rendering of Napoleon III's State visit highlight – the award of the garter – in historical painting format. Superficially, both paintings presented viewers with the same scene – the Queen's putting the Garter ribbon over the soon-to-become-knight –, but the comparison betrays the hierarchy in the Queen's mind. Indeed, Napoleon III's investiture was some form of reciprocation for the warm and grandiose welcome given to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert during their State Visit to France in 1855.

[Figure 4] E.M. Ward, *The Investiture of Napoleon III with the Order of the Garter, 18 April 1855* (1860), oil on canvas, 97.3 x 176.2 cm.



RCIN 402020. Royal Collection Trust /© His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁵³

- 20 But for the Sultan, the essential was elsewhere. First, he rejoiced that the award took place during such an impressive ceremony and that the Ottoman flag floated some time alone, before British pavilions were raised.⁵⁴ And most importantly, he was elated that Queen Victoria had awarded the insignia herself – which placed him on an equal footing with Napoleon III and which was a distinction unknown to his predecessor.⁵⁵ These elements resonated very strongly with the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman honouring tradition, whereby decorations and ceremonial banners were part “of the symbolic dialogue between the ruler and the ruled” and whereby being decorated by the Sultan was still a rare honour.⁵⁶ Abdul Aziz’s acceptance of the Garter implied his acceptance of Victoria’s personal honour/friendship. This was itself an honour by the Sultan-Caliph-Commander of the Faithful, a semi-sacred figure in Ottoman polity. In other words, the garter symbolized a strong, personal bond between the two countries.
- 21 In a way, Thomas’s representations also stressed just this, the “intimate dimension” of the ceremony, which the Sultan valued as primordial.⁵⁷ This was exactly what the Ottoman press emphasized in their coverage of the ceremony and what British visual artist William Barnes Wollen (1857-1936) chose to frontstage in an 1881 close-frame engraving adapted from Thomas’s oil.⁵⁸ In insisting on the investiture ceremony taking place onboard the royal yacht (rather than at the palace), Lord Derby had sensed that this intimacy was what mattered most from an Ottoman perspective, especially as British non-State actors (like the Agricultural Society and the City of London) had organised grand fêtes for the Sultan. He hoped that such private moments would dissipate views (in Britain or abroad) that Queen Victoria did not want to entertain the Sultan.⁵⁹ In two lavishly illustrated reports on the Ottoman Sultan’s stay in Britain, *The Illustrated London News* further made a bombastic point that if Britain shed the pageantry displayed by France when welcoming the Sultan, her reverence for the latter was perhaps more sincere.⁶⁰

Arabian horses for the Garter: on Victorian gender propriety and gift acceptability

- 22 Such a personal distinction commanded exceptional reciprocation. Diplomatic correspondence between the Ottoman ambassador in London and the British FO in September 1867 reveals that Abdul Aziz intended to reciprocate by giving Victoria seven purebred Arabian horses, both as acknowledgement (as from equal to equal) and display of munificence.⁶¹ While the Ottomans had a whole array of possible diplomatic gifts to European rulers – including jewelry, pigeons and hawks (for hunting), exotic animals or clockwork –, gifting an Arabian horse to another head of state was part of a long-standing Ottoman tradition and a highly valued one, especially in the Islamic world, but not only.⁶² The higher the number, the most distinguished the receiver – which was also true for vassals' offerings to the Sultan.⁶³ While numbers mattered – “six beautiful horses” were presented by the Dey of Algiers to King George III in 1819⁶⁴ –, what retains attention is the breed. Animal gifts were meant to be spectacular and rare, as is the case here. Ottoman Sultans had long forbidden the export of purebred Arabian horses and had developed a mixed breed of light horses containing Arabian bloodlines for export and diplomatic gifts instead. Purebreds were regarded as higher in value, also “for their capacity to maintain speed over a distance”.⁶⁵ Both in number and quality, the counter-gift to Victoria was outstanding.
- 23 Ottoman sovereigns attempted to select appealing gifts for the recipient ruler in order to strengthen personal ties. With Queen Victoria a lover of animals, especially of dogs and horses, purebred Arabian horses seemed appropriate. Besides, Victoria was an accomplished horse-rider and many equestrian portraits displayed her in a riding habit and/or reviewing troops, extolling her grandeur as Queen. Altogether, her stables had a capacity for approximately a hundred horses.⁶⁶ It was also public knowledge that Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (1783-1859), a Parsi cotton and opium merchant knighted by Queen Victoria in 1842, had presented “4 beautiful Arab horses, in magnificent Cashmere horse cloths & trappings [...] led round by Indians & their servants” to the monarch and her husband in 1846.

[Figure 5] Edouard Boutibonne, *Queen Victoria* (1856), oil on canvas, 110.9 x 92.6 cm.



RCIN 405278. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁶⁷

- 24 Not only had that present been accepted then, but it had led to a royal equestrian portrait Victoria had given as a return present to Albert in 1856. The painting by Edouard Boutibonne (1816-97), most probably stages her white Arabian horse Korsheed given by Jeejeebhoy. Shortly after Prince Albert died, her doctor suggested horse-riding as therapy (Figure 5). This was all the more public knowledge as in 1863, Queen Victoria commissioned her photographic portrait that would represent her in mourning dress seated on “Fyvie” at Balmoral, alongside her Keepers, John Brown and John Grant (Figure 6).

[Figure 6] G.W. Wilson, The Queen, Balmoral 20 October 1863. Albumen carte-de-visite, 5.8 x 9.1 cm.



RCIN 2333927. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁶⁸

- 25 The portrait, by George W. Wilson, functioned as her tribute to Prince Albert, who had died two years earlier, and as a memorial of her rides with Albert and her Keepers in Scotland. The photograph became an instant success and sales were prompted in sympathy for the Queen's bereavement. The gift of seven purebred Arabian horses, including a white one, thus seemed ideal – one that also would ensure Abdul Aziz posterity in representation, as had happened to Jeejeebhoy. Sultan Abdul Aziz's gift was meant to partake of his self-fashioning on the international scene.⁶⁹ As such, his gift functioned much as ornamental diplomacy.
- 26 And yet, the case shows how the value of a gift can be demoted in a given context, something which was visibly lost on the Sultan here. As defiance had grown towards the British monarchy in the mid-1860s, Victoria tried to rebuild her public image. She commissioned the royal painter Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-1873) for a visual demonstration that the afflictions of her "Body natural" (widowhood) did not affect her "Body politic" (the transcending, effectively ruling monarch) and that her queenship was intact. The result was the equestrian portrait *Queen Victoria at Osborne* (1865-1867), which prominently featured her servant John Brown, in a way that was reminiscent of Wilson's photograph a few years earlier.

[Figure 7] Sir Edwin Landseer, *Queen Victoria at Osborne* (1865-67), Oil on canvas, 147.8 x 211.9 cm.



RCIN 403580. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023⁷⁰

- 27 When disclosed at the Royal Academy in May 1867, the portrait intensified suspicions about the true nature of the widowed Queen's relationship with her Scottish servant, John Brown, thereby completely diffusing the Queen's original purpose in commissioning the painting. *Queen Victoria at Osborne* seemed to offer materiality to an otherwise rather nebulous relationship defying class boundaries (Figure 7). Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, poet and admirer of Victoria, recorded in his diary that "it was the talk of the household that he was 'the Queen's stallion'".⁷¹ Gina M. Dorré convincingly demonstrated in 2016 that the Landseer portrait encapsulated the "shifting and variant cultural meanings generated by the iconography of the horse, as well as the ambiguity surrounding the Brown/Victoria relationship".⁷²
- 28 Proposed but a few months later (when the controversy was still very vivid), the Sultan's gift was conceived as an embarrassment by Victoria and her entourage, who believed that accepting the horses would cause rumours of impropriety to resume. Although the gift was meant to be gender-neutral, it was not read in that way by the Queen, who was about to turn the present down, were it not for the fear of overarching consequences. To ease relations and avoid a diplomatic break, Lord Stanley worked closely with the Ottoman ambassador in London to bring the view across to the Sultan that "horses [were] not appropriate for her use", but that she was not refusing the gift proper.⁷³ After long negotiations through the British FO and the Ottoman ambassador to Britain, Musurus Pasha, a deal was found to avoid a diplomatic crisis: four Arabian horses were to be given by the Sultan to her son Prince Edward instead. They were eventually accepted in November 1867, as was visually reported in *The Illustrated London News*.⁷⁴ As a further compensation, Edward announced that he would gladly honour the Sultan by paying a second visit to him in Constantinople (in 1869).

Conclusion

- 29 For lack of proper documentation, gifts are often orphan artefacts in collections or mere textual mentions, whose history cannot easily be reconstructed. Here, the examination of correspondence has revealed the processes behind the gift-giving between Queen Victoria and Sultan Abdul Aziz in 1867 and shown that gifts need to be inscribed in *longue durée* – because of negotiations prior to the offering, because of subsequent representations, and because of their perennial legacy when they survive in collections. That sense of *longue durée* is especially conspicuous in Sultan Abdul Aziz's handling of the overall gift exchange, as it was central to his self-fashioning on both the domestic and international scenes and as it contributed to construct the international personality of his Empire over the long term, while building on traditional Ottoman world representations. The increasing importance of ornamental diplomacy in Ottoman politics accounts for arduous negotiations on the part of the Sultan, especially to obtain the Garter. As such, this diplomatic episode brings evidence that diplomatic gift-giving is more than a bilateral exchange, but rather needs to be contextualised in the broader setting of global gifts' circulation, if one is to understand the complex dynamics of giving-receiving-reciprocating.⁷⁵ It also firmly demonstrates that reciprocity is not an abstraction, but only really materializes through the exchange of gifts, which thus create social and political bonds.⁷⁶
- 30 This case study also invites us to see protocol in the making in the context of a first ever: – the reception of an Ottoman, Muslim sovereign on British soil. More particularly, the State Visit of Sultan Abdul Aziz to Britain placed two rather asymmetrical gift-giving systems in contact on British soil and at the permanent risk of incommensurability (e.g. over the role the Garter performed or over the interpretation of horses). As shown in this article, that risk was bridged by diplomatic intermediaries on both sides (especially the British Foreign Secretary, the British ambassador at Constantinople, the Ottoman ambassador to St James' Court and Fuad Pasha), who acted as intercultural brokers. Even so, a diplomatic *faux-pas* was always possible, as exemplified by the Sultan's offer of the Arabian horses to Queen Victoria. Musurus Pasha's confusion over British attitudes to the counter-gift between September and November 1867 indicates that even a fine knowledge of the country's culture is insufficient without a subtle and quick understanding of ongoing events, as context can temporarily affect the meaning, value and acceptability of a gift.
- 31 In the end, the visit was a success from both a British and an Ottoman perspective, with the Queen taking up her responsibilities as host and the Sultan affirming his international status, which henceforth strengthened his hold in the Cretan Question. But the essential is probably elsewhere. In forcing both sides to adjust their visions of diplomatic protocol to avert a diplomatic break-off, the Queen and the Sultan created a "third space" that blurred polarized boundaries between "East" and "West" and that gave shape to the idea of "fraternity of monarchs" based on their common identity as sovereigns.⁷⁷ While the British Foreign Office still believed in a hierarchy of States, this new conception durably impacted British gift protocol. From that moment on, the reluctance to grant the Order of the Garter to a non-Christian sovereign ruler on a State visit to Britain was shed, even by Queen Victoria. The most conspicuous testimony of this paradigm shift remains the granting of the Garter by Queen Victoria herself to Persian Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah, as he left his Empire for the first time and toured

Europe in 1873 to register support for the “1872 Reuter concession” by which he had granted German-born British entrepreneur Julius Reuter to exploit the country’s natural resources to develop various communication infrastructures and a national banking system. While the scheme infuriated many sovereigns (especially Tsar Alexander II), Nasir al-Din Shah strengthened his stance in international monarchical diplomacy – at least ornamentally – with the Garter. Its granting was to mark a historic moment in British-Persian relations and was memorialized through a photographic portrait commissioned and gifted by Queen Victoria to the portrait-savvy Shah that symbolizes the new ornamental order in British protocol.⁷⁸

[Figure 8] W. and D. Downey, *Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, Shah of Persia (1831-96) (1873)*, hand-coloured albumen photographic print, 13.6 x 9.8 cm.



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ABSTRACTS

This article examines gift-giving during Ottoman Sultan Abdul Aziz's State visit to Britain in July 1867. An exceptional occasion in itself – for an Ottoman Sultan had never left his Empire in peacetime or ever would again –, the visit offers an interesting case for nuancing the generally accepted idea that gifts between equals (here rulers) are "free gifts". The article makes a case for gift-giving in that particular context being a long and vexed process resulting from negotiations, as Queen Victoria did not originally want to entertain the Sultan, nor did she originally want to invest him with the Order of the Garter, or accept his counter-gift in the form of Arabian horses. Examining relevant diplomatic and private sources reveals the final arrangements to avoid a series of diplomatic *faux-pas* and show how they reflect a transcultural understanding that would help both sides refine their gift-giving protocols.

Cet article porte sur la visite officielle du Sultan ottoman Abdul Aziz au Royaume-Uni au mois de juillet 1867. Il s'agit là d'un événement extraordinaire en soi, puisque c'était la première et dernière visite d'un Sultan ottoman en terre étrangère en temps de paix. Le propos interroge l'idée préconçue selon laquelle des cadeaux diplomatiques entre égaux (ici des souverains) sont librement consentis. Tout dans cette affaire démontre le contraire, et donne à voir de longues et épineuses négociations, alors que la reine Victoria ne voulait à l'origine pas accueillir le Sultan, pas plus qu'elle ne souhaitait le décorer de l'Ordre de Jarretière, ou accepter son cadeau de remerciement dans la forme où il lui était présenté (des pur-sang arabes). Une étude des sources diplomatiques et privées met en lumière des processus de négociations et d'arrangements, qui permirent d'éviter une crise diplomatique et qui témoignent d'une approche transculturelle essentielle à l'évolution des protocoles diplomatiques en la matière pour les deux pays.

INDEX

Mots-clés: diplomatie des médailles, reine Victoria, Sultan Abdul Aziz, Ordre de la Jarretière, histoire globale, réciprocité

Keywords: ornamental diplomacy, Queen Victoria, Sultan Abdul Aziz, Order of the Garter, global history, reciprocity

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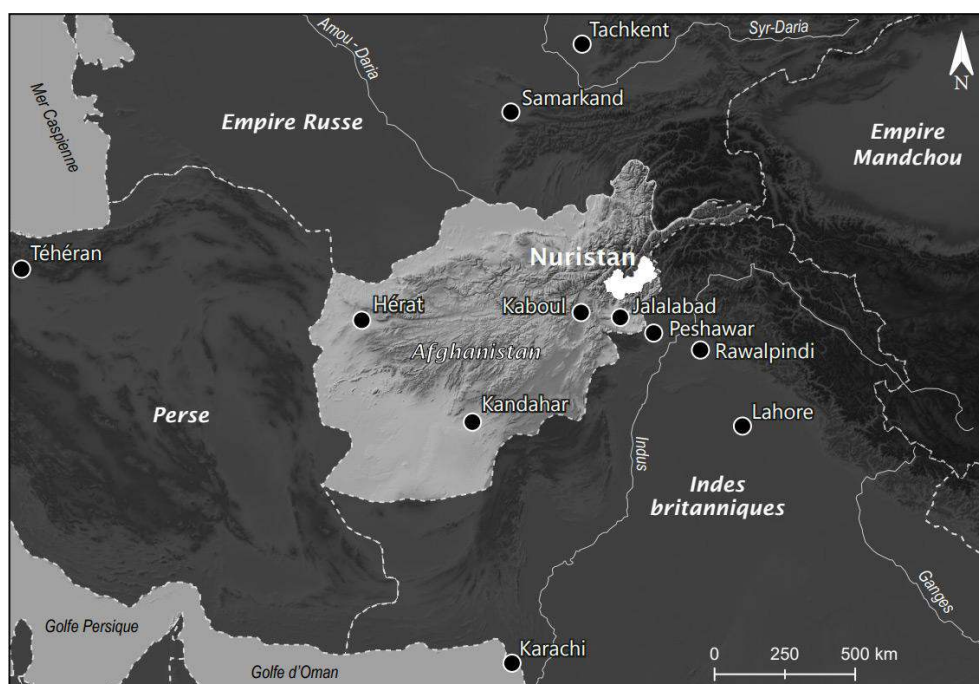
Les statues dites « kafirs » du musée Guimet : politique des dons et compétitions impériales dans l'Afghanistan du début du XX^e siècle

The Guimet Museum's « Kafir » Statues: Imperial Competition and the Politics of Diplomatic Gifts in Early 20th-Century Afghanistan

Daniel Foliard

- 1 Passées les portes du musée national des Arts asiatiques à Paris, deux statues de bois attendent le visiteur du début des années 2020. Elles sont placées au centre du hall d'entrée. Un panneau explicatif présente ce cavalier et cette femme assise. On y apprend qu'elles proviennent du Kāfiristān « converti par la force à l'extrême fin du XIX^e siècle et rebaptisé pour cela Nuristān¹, « pays de la lumière » (divine) » et que ces « sculptures appartenaient aux piliers déterminant les aires sacrées des temples des Kafirs, tout pénétrés d'anciennes croyances indiennes et iraniennes »². Les statues sont originaires d'une région peu accessible située aux confins de l'Afghanistan et du Pakistan actuels (fig.1). Une indication de provenance précise : « don de l'émir d'Afghanistan, Amānullāh Khān, lors du premier partage franco-afghan à l'issue des fouilles réalisées sur le site de Paītava par Joseph Hackin pour la DAFA en 1925 ». C'est la malédiction des cartels d'exposition d'en dire trop, ou pas assez. Il est en l'espèce question de conquête, de toponymes changeants et de dons archéologiques : suffisamment en somme pour rouvrir le dossier de la provenance complexe de ces deux statues de bois de pin dont la longue trajectoire, de l'Hindu Kush au musée Guimet, exprime des forces gravitationnelles contradictoires.

Fig.1 – Carte de l'Afghanistan avec localisation du Nuristān au tournant du XX^e siècle



@geoteca

- 2 « Idoles », « Kāfiristān », « Nuristān », « anciennes croyances » : le visiteur peu soupçonneux est déjà captifs des mots. Ils sont ceux installés dans la littérature sur ces statues depuis le XIX^e siècle. Les Nuristānis y sont très tôt décrits comme une ethnie unique mais divisées en de nombreuses, « tribus ». Mountstuart Elphinstone, représentant britannique à Kaboul dans les années 1800 puis figure majeure du gouvernement des Indes britanniques, en fait le constat quand il écrit en 1815 : « the Mussulmans confound them all under the name of Caufir, or infidel, and call their country Caufiristaun »³. Le gentilé, d'abord porteur d'une stigmatisation de l'idolâtrie par les populations musulmanes voisines du « Nuristān », finit par prendre une existence propre au fil du XIX^e siècle. La conquête de cet espace enclavé par le pouvoir central afghan en 1895-1896 donne en quelque sorte une substance aux dénominations exogènes et englobantes appliquées aux populations de ces vallées. Les populations dites « kafirs » ne semblent pas se penser comme un ensemble cohérent en dépit d'héritages communs. La prise de conscience d'une identité collective est en partie liée à la conversion de masse à l'Islam qui accompagne les campagnes militaires de la fin du XIX^e siècle comme le suggère Jean-Pierre Digard⁴.
- 3 Les travaux d'anthropologie et de linguistique réalisés dans la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle confirment toutefois que la plupart des dialectes parlés dans le Nuristān actuel sont liés à une langue indo-aryenne commune. Il existe par ailleurs de nettes convergences en matière de religion et d'organisation sociale entre les différentes populations de la région avant l'intervention ordonnée par l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān⁵. Ces statues en sont le reflet. Considérées comme des exemples de régression « barbare »⁶ à leur arrivée en France, elles ont été récemment étudiées comme les survivances d'une patrimoine riche et complexe⁷. Elles témoignent des proximités entre les cultures de la région et entre les systèmes polythéistes de croyance qui les caractérisent avant l'islamisation. La littérature sur cette statuaire est abondante et la

connaissance des œuvres dites « kafirs » qui ont survécu aux différents séismes politiques a récemment été enrichie des analyses de Max Klimburg⁸. Leurs re-significations successives après leur capture pour les troupes afghanes en 1895-1896, leur conservation surprenante pendant plusieurs années à Kabul puis leur trajectoire européenne après le don qu'en fit l'émir d'Afghanistan à la France n'ont toutefois pas encore fait l'objet d'une analyse approfondie.

- 4 D'abord trophées de conquête à la suite de leur première translocation vers Kabul au milieu des années 1890, puis objets muséifiés au XX^e siècle, le parcours de ces sculptures en bois apparemment modestes témoigne des forces parfois contradictoires qui présidèrent aux destinées croisées de l'Afghanistan et des puissances impériales ayant une influence dans la région. En s'intéressant tout particulièrement aux statues données à la France et aux présents faits par l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān aux Britanniques, cet article vise à analyser l'économie des dons d'objets qui caractérise les pratiques diplomatiques entre la monarchie afghane et les puissances impériales intéressées à son devenir. Ces dons sont une manière de situer l'État en devenir qu'est alors l'émirat dans le temps et l'espace face aux modernités industrielles. Il s'agit ici de proposer une histoire de ces objets comme des constructions culturelles, productions de contextes géopolitiques et intellectuels spécifiques et placées au carrefour de régimes d'historicités différents⁹. Sujets apparemment modestes, les « idoles kafirs » du Musée Guimet sont donc ici un point d'entrée dans une analyse plus large de l'idée même de ce qui fait patrimoine dans un Afghanistan qui s'invente face aux impérialismes occidentaux au tournant du XX^e siècle.
- 5 Les corpus mobilisés dans cette histoire connective des « idoles kafirs » sont nécessairement transnationaux et trans-impériaux. Ce sont les statues elles-mêmes qui constituent bien évidemment la matière première de ce travail. Quatre furent offertes à la France dans les années 1920. Deux furent confiées au musée de l'Homme, deux au Musée Guimet. Lennart Edelberg a pu dresser une cartographie complète de la « diaspora » de la statuaire dite « kafir » à la fin des années 1960, avant qu'une partie de ces œuvres ne subissent des dégradations, notamment lors de la première prise de Kabul par les Talibans¹⁰. À cette documentation faite des objets eux-mêmes, il faut ajouter les fonds qui permettent de documenter le contexte afghan de la vie compliquée de ces statues. Le *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh*, histoire officielle du pays rédigée par Faiz Muhammad Kāteb au début du XX^e siècle est une source précieuse. Elle a été traduite en anglais R. D. McChesney et M. M. Khorrami dans une édition de grande qualité¹¹. La biographie de l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, elle aussi traduite dès le début du XX^e siècle peut aussi être exploitée¹². Le journal afghan *Sirāj al-akhbār* fondé par Mahmud Ṭarzi, l'un des promoteurs de la modernisation de l'émirat au début du XX^e siècle, offre des perspectives intéressantes sur les rapports changeants au patrimoine au sein de l'élite du pays. Les rapports secrets rédigés par les agents britanniques et leurs informateurs confidentiels – un réseau de *news writers* est actif dans toute la sphère d'influence du sous-empire indien – donnent des informations utiles sur le parcours des statues.¹³ La Wellcome Collection conserve les fonds de Lillias Hamilton, femme médecin à la cour de l'émir au tournant du XX^e et témoin privilégié des destinées des populations Nuristān is déportées à Kabul après la campagne de 1895-96¹⁴. Rapports et documents diplomatiques britanniques et français sont aussi abordés dans ce dossier¹⁵ ainsi que les fonds du musée Guimet, qui conserve en particulier des collections photographiques qui permettent de comprendre ce qu'il advint des statues avant leur envoi vers l'Europe. Les papiers de George Curzon conservés à la British

Library permettent par ailleurs de donner des éléments de contexte cruciaux pour mieux comprendre l'économie des dons entre pouvoirs locaux et puissances impériales étrangères¹⁶. Cet article s'appuie donc sur un croisement d'archives variées afin de suivre les objets dans les différentes phases de leur existence, démontrant à la fois la nécessité de changer de focale pour étudier les trajectoires globales d'objets patrimonialisés et de mesurer la limite des approches aréales comme des découpages traditionnels quand on aborde ce type de circulations.

- 6 Cet article se place à la croisée de deux historiographies. La première regroupe l'ensemble très riche d'études qui se sont penchées sur les intersections entre pratiques archéologiques, orientalismes et conceptions du passé au XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle. Les travaux de Zeynep Çelik sur le développement de l'archéologie ottomane et sur la naissance du musée archéologique d'Istanbul sont de ce point de vue une référence essentielle¹⁷. Ils permettent de prendre une distance nécessaire vis-à-vis des discours eurocentrés qui imprègnent archives britanniques ou françaises pour mieux saisir comment une variété d'historicités se développent autour des vestiges du passé au sein de l'empire ottoman et de ses voisins. Le second ensemble historiographique mobilisé dans ce travail trouve son origine dans les réflexions d'Igor Kopytoff sur la biographie des objets¹⁸. En suivant les aléas et le parcours non-linéaire de ces quelques statues, ce sont autant les fragilités des classifications que les uns et les autres leur appliquent que les forces qui ont présidé à leur improbable survie qui sont ici notre objet.
- 7 La reconstitution analytique du parcours de ces statues, soumis à des influences contradictoires entre l'empire britannique, la France, l'Afghanistan et ses voisins, suit ici les grandes phases de leur translocation depuis les vallées de l'Hindu Kush jusqu'au XVI^e arrondissement de Paris. Il s'agit donc en premier lieu de comprendre pourquoi l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān conserva ces « idoles » à Kabul. Leur survie tient d'une anomalie dont il faut tenter de saisir les ressorts. Dans un second temps, c'est la question de la transformation à Kabul de ces artefacts en objets d'exposition qui fera l'objet d'une attention particulière afin de mieux saisir quelles conceptions du passé de l'Afghanistan coexistent au tournant du XX^e siècle. Pour finir, les quatre statues, offertes à la France dans un contexte de compétition impériale avec la Grande-Bretagne seront replacées dans la constellation beaucoup plus large de dons et de contre-dons qui caractérise les relations de l'État afghan naissant avec les puissances qui participent à le faire naître.

Le « fracasseur d'idoles » et le butin de la campagne de 1895-96 : un cas d'imitation du *looting* britannique ?

À cette époque, le Maréchal Ghulam Haydar Khan envoya à Kabul 19 idoles en bois du peuple du Kāfiristān, certaines étaient assises sur des chaises et d'autres en position debout. C'étaient des objets sacrés (...) Elles furent conservées comme des souvenirs de la conquête du Kāfiristān. C'est pourquoi il convient de se souvenir de sa majesté sous le surnom de « fracasseur d'idoles »¹⁹

- 8 Cet extrait des chroniques de l'histoire afghane rédigée par Faiz Muhammad Kāteb, le secrétaire personnel d'Ḥabībullah Khān (fils et successeur d'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān) laisse apparent tout le paradoxe qui caractérise la survie des statues dites « kafirs » après leur translocation à Kabul. Le « fracasseur d'idoles » que voulait être l'émir aux yeux de la postérité décida d'en conserver quelques-unes en dépit de ses préventions

théologiques inévitables à l'égard de la sculpture figurative de corps d'hommes et de femmes²⁰. Leur arrivée à Kabul ne semble pas être le fruit du hasard mais d'un processus qu'il faut retracer.

- 9 La campagne militaire ordonnée par 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān en direction du Kāfiristān s'inscrit dans un contexte de consolidation du pouvoir central afghan. Soutenue par des financements et des livraisons d'armes britanniques, la politique de structuration de l'Afghanistan en État délimité par des frontières officiellement délimitées est dans l'intérêt des Indes britanniques, qui voient la région comme une zone tampon entre leur colonie indienne et la Russie expansionniste d'Alexandre III et de Nicolas II. D'intenses négociations s'engagent dans les années 1880. Elles débouchent en novembre 1893 sur l'accord de la « ligne Durand », du nom du diplomate britannique qui en est l'architecte. L'émir obtient peu de concessions dans ces discussions si ce n'est, précisément, le Kāfiristān avec la vallée de la rivière Bashgal au statut jusque-là incertain. L'arbitrage se fait sous les critiques de la presse russe qui y voit l'abandon intolérable d'un peuple non-musulman à l'émirat. La démarcation concrète de la frontière sur place sous la direction de Richard Udny et Ghulām Ḥaīdar Khān est réalisée à partir de 1894²¹. Pris entre les avancées russes dans le Pamir et la mise sous tutelle de la région Chitral par le gouvernement des Indes britanniques, l'émir prend la décision de renforcer sa souveraineté en ordonnant une campagne militaire d'ampleur pour soumettre les populations du Kāfiristān restées indépendantes et les convertir à l'Islam. Plusieurs colonnes, dont l'une commandée par le maréchal Ghulām Ḥaīdar Khān, pénètrent dans le Kāfiristān à l'automne 1895²². La résistance des populations de la région est réelle et les combats plus âpres que ne le laisse penser l'histoire officielle afghane²³. La conversion forcée des habitants est effective en 1896. Plusieurs milliers d'entre eux sont déportés à Kabul. Une partie des hommes, qui doivent y apprendre le dari et les bases de l'Islam aux frais de l'émir, rejoignent ensuite l'armée.
- 10 Au lourd bilan humain des opérations, il faut ajouter la destruction d'une partie du patrimoine de la région. Des centaines de sculptures sont détruites sur place tandis que d'autres, y compris des « idoles » en or ou en pierre désormais disparues si l'on en croit certains rapports britanniques²⁴, sont amenées à Kabul. Il semblerait qu'au moins une centaine de ces œuvres soient envoyées à l'émir. Un rapport confidentiel de Shāh Mīr Khān, qui travaille alors à l'hôpital de Kabul et informe les autorités indiennes, précise : « 40 Kafirs et 100 de leurs idoles ont été amenés à Kabul aujourd'hui sous bonne garde »²⁵. Certaines de ces œuvres sont brûlées et détruites en public, sans doute lors des cérémonies de conversion de masse organisées dans les mosquées de la capitale. Les idoles en métal sont probablement fondues. L'attention de l'émir et des imams se porte tout particulièrement sur la statuaire car il semble que de nombreux individus, déportés depuis la région désormais appelée Nuristān, aient continué à vénérer secrètement de petites sculptures après leur conversion forcée.
- 11 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān évoque sa méfiance à l'égard des idoles auprès de Lillias Hamilton (1858-1925), une docteure d'origine britannique employée à sa cour entre 1894 et 1896, précisément au moment où la conquête du Kāfiristān se joue²⁶. Dans un texte sur l'émir jamais publié, elle raconte la réponse, peut-être apocryphe mais néanmoins cohérente, que lui fit le monarque quand elle lui demanda si elle pouvait conserver l'une des statues rapportées de la conquête : « certainement pas, elles doivent toutes brûler (...) vous dites que les Chrétiens ne vénèrent pas d'idoles, mais ne les ai-je pas vu dans leurs églises vénérer une idole représentant la mère de Dieu ? »²⁷.

Comment dans ce cas expliquer l'existence d'une photographie (fig.2) de Lillias Hamilton, photographe passionnée, réalisée lors de son séjour à Kabul et montrant certaines des statues dites « kafir » soigneusement étiquetées et exposées à l'intérieur de la résidence royale ? Alors qu'elle se trouvait à Kabul en 1896, elle indique elle-même dans une lettre envoyée au *London Times* visant à défendre la politique de conquête du Kāfiristān, une « idole me fut montrée pour mon édification ainsi que des arcs et des flèches (...) il s'agissait d'un personnage en bois, grossièrement sculpté et grotesque »²⁸. La mise en scène de la photographie qui montre un soldat afghan posant derrière les statues et divers éléments de ce qui ressemble à un butin de guerre n'est sans doute pas anodine. L'existence des supposées idoles « kafir » est déjà bien connue de l'élite afghane. Comme le souligne Nile Green, des récits contemporains, dont celui d'un « Kafir » converti à l'Islam publié en 1874 dans l'un des premiers journaux afghans, ont pu nourrir l'idée qu'une idolâtrie (*but-parastī*), organisée autour du culte de riches statues, résistait à l'orthodoxie musulmane à l'intérieur des frontières du pays.²⁹ Matérialisations de la victoire d'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān et manifestations de la supériorité religieuse comme culturelle de son Islam, elles ne furent pas toutes vouées à la destruction.

Fig.2 – Lillias Hamilton, *Some of the wooden idols, Kafir - sculptures of human-like figures -, brought from Kafiristan to Kabul after the Islamization of the eastern province of Afghanistan in 1895/96 by King Abdur Rahman*, tirage argentique sur papier baryté



Lillias Anna Hamilton Papers, Wellcome Collection, PP/HAM/A.31, @Wellcome Collection.

- 12 Il faut lire les rapports confidentiels britanniques pour comprendre que la patrimoine « kafir » semble assimilé à du *loot* à l'époque. C'est en tout cas la lecture qu'en font certains des informateurs à la solde des autorités indiennes à l'époque qui n'hésitent pas à utiliser ce terme pour décrire la translocation des statues³⁰. Le mot n'est pas anodin et fait référence en langue anglaise à des pratiques très spécifiques aux guerres coloniales menées par les Britanniques au XIX^e siècle, comme l'a démontré James

Hevia³¹. Il est dérivé de l'Hindi *lūt* et devient un mot couramment utilisé dans les Indes britanniques pour décrire différents types de butins de guerre capturés lors de conflits liés à l'expansion impériale. L'application de catégories liées aux pratiques coloniales britanniques à la conquête du Kāfiristān n'est en rien anecdotique. La politique d'unification de l'Afghanistan menée par 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān s'inscrit ouvertement dans un rééquilibrage régional entre empires et l'émir semble adapter certains des usages et une partie de la rhétorique de ses voisins immédiats. La capture, la revente et la muséification éventuelle des objets patrimoniaux saisis lors des conflits coloniaux sont en effet des pratiques trans-impériales totalement normalisées à la fin du XIX^e siècle. Conseillé par des Européens, le monarque n'ignore rien de leur existence. Alors que l'*Aboriginal Protection Society* s'inquiète du traitement des populations non-musulmanes lors des opérations, T. Salter Pyne, longtemps ingénieur en chef d'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān et présent à Kabul à l'époque des opérations, rapporte en janvier 1896 les justifications de l'émir. Elles font écho aux discours impérialistes européens contemporains³².

- 13 La surprenante conservation par l'émir d'un certain nombre de statues « kafirs » a priori considérées comme des idoles devant être détruites en Islam témoigne ainsi de formes d'hybridations entre les pratiques coloniales européennes et les usages guerriers observés dans l'espace afghan. Cette patrimonialisation inaboutie de *loot* est en réalité l'une des manifestations de profonds changements relatifs aux régimes d'historicités propres à l'aristocratie locale à la fin du XIX^e siècle.

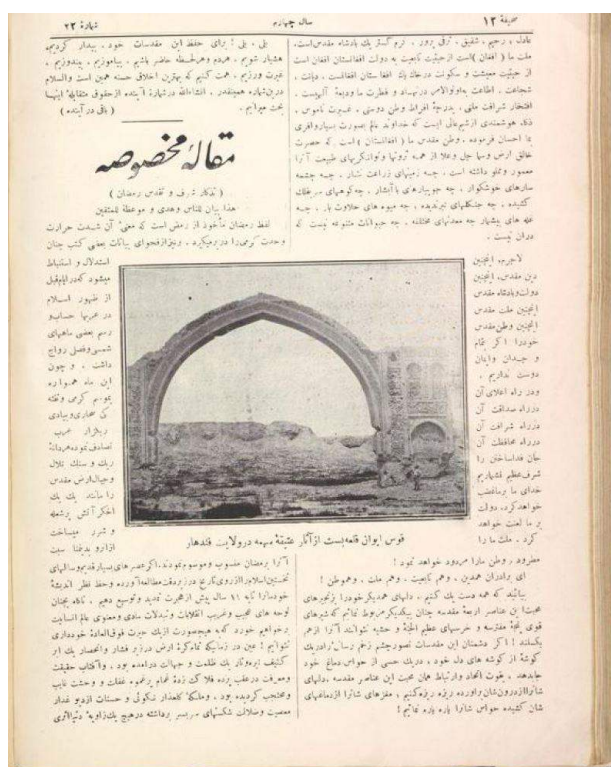
Les traces du passé vues de l'Afghanistan : constructions patrimoniales

- 14 Depuis la perspective des observateurs étrangers, et notamment européens, l'absence d'entretien des nombreux monuments du riche passé de la région par les autorités locales est révélatrice d'un désintérêt marqué pour le passé.³³ D'après de multiples récits de voyage³⁴, les ruines de site majeurs, y compris musulmans, sont délaissées par des populations incapables de reconnaître l'importance de vestiges et d'objets archéologiques. Si un réexamen de ce trope n'a pas sa place ici, force est de constater qu'il écrase sous les stéréotypes des réalités forcément diverses³⁵. La présence de ruines importantes sert par exemple d'arguments dans les disputes frontalières entre Perse et Afghanistan autour de la région du Seīstān dès les années 1880³⁶.
- 15 Une bascule s'opère manifestement de ce point de vue dans les années 1890. Quelques mois avant la campagne organisée par l'émir dans la région du Kāfiristān, son fils aîné Nasrullāh Khān est envoyé au Royaume-Uni pour représenter son père lors d'une visite officielle inédite. Il rencontre à cette occasion la reine Victoria. Au fil des nombreuses visites organisées en l'honneur du prince, la délégation afghane est amenée à visiter le British Museum, décrit dans le *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh* en des termes élogieux : « c'est une maison des merveilles où ils exposent des tableaux et des statues de leurs anciens gouverneurs et sultans, comme Pharaon, Platon et les *padishahs* [grands rois, NDLA] européens »³⁷. Poursuivant sa tournée européenne, Nasrullāh Khān visite ensuite Rome et ses musées, puis Pompéi. Le voyage est ainsi l'occasion d'observer les prouesses industrielles européennes, mais aussi d'examiner comment les traces du passé participent des discours sur l'État, son passé et son avenir³⁸. À la faveur de ses interconnexions facilitées par le développement des infrastructures de transport et de

communication, la visite de Nasrullāh Khān s'inscrit ainsi dans un contexte plus général d'écroulement des conceptions traditionnelles de l'espace-temps en terre d'Islam notamment décrit par Nile Green³⁹.

- 16 En cette fin du XIX^e siècle, l'Afghanistan n'existe pas dans l'isolement total que décrivent les observateurs étrangers. Informé par un dense réseau d'agents, l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān n'ignore pas l'existence des fouilles menées par l'*Indian Archeological Survey* dans le bassin de Peshawar, tout près de la frontière entre les Indes britanniques et son royaume. Elles permettent de mettre au jour les vestiges de la civilisation du Gandhara et les splendeurs de l'art gréco-bouddhique sur le site de Tākht-i-Bahī dès les années 1870. À l'est, la Perse Qājār signe une première convention archéologique avec la France en 1884, puis une seconde en 1895. L'empire ottoman, quant à lui, ouvre le Müze-i Hümayun – le musée impérial rempli d'objets archéologiques – dès 1869. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān entretient des liens forts avec l'administration ottomane, source d'inspiration pour ses propres réformes⁴⁰. Mahmud Tarzī, membre éminent de l'aristocratie afghane, rencontre plusieurs intellectuels ottomans lors de son exil dans les années 1890 et s'intéresse tout particulièrement à l'archéologie et à l'écriture de l'histoire⁴¹. Son retour en grâce sous le règne d'Ḥabībullāh Khān (1901-1919) lui permet de mettre en application ses idées réformatrices en la matière. Ainsi entouré d'états qui négocient leur rapport à des passés jusque-là largement explorés et écrits par des Européens, l'émir et ses fils paraissent peu à peu développer de nouvelles perspectives sur le passé afghan. Nasrullāh Khān devient par exemple un collectionneur assidu de manuscrits illuminés tandis qu'Ḥabībullāh Khān, fils aîné d'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān (il lui succède en 1901) regroupe une première collection d'objets dans la résidence de Bāgh-i Bālā au début du XX^e siècle. L'apparition la même époque de vues de vestiges anciens dans *Sirāj al-akhbār*, le premier journal illustré afghan, édité par le camp des modernisateurs, démontre à quel point le rapport au patrimoine ancien de la région a changé au sein des classes dirigeantes (fig.3).

Fig. 3 – Anon., « Arche de l'ivan de Qal'a-ya Bust, un des principaux vestiges antiques de la province de Qandahār », *Sirāj al-akhbār*, n° 22, 1914



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- 17 Le parcours des statues dites « kafirs » épouse le développement de ces embryons de muséifications du passé afghan. D'idoles impies, elles se transforment lentement en traces d'un passé païen désormais révolu. Dans un premier temps, sous le règne d'Abd al-Rahmān Khān, elles sont probablement stockées, avec d'autres objets rapportés de la campagne contre le Kāfiristān⁴², dans le palais du Bustān Sarāi, construit en dehors des murs de l'Arg, la résidence-forteresse des émirs d'Afghanistan à Kabul. Comme le démontre la photographie réalisée par Lillias Hamilton, elles sont parfois montrées à des visiteurs⁴³. Une partie du groupe de statues est ensuite stockée dans une véranda où un ingénieur américain, A.C. Jewett, les trouve en 1916⁴⁴. Il en réalise plusieurs photographies à cette occasion (fig.4). Les sculptures sont montrées régulièrement aux visiteurs à ce stade. Emil Rybitschka, un officier autrichien, prend les statues en photographie la même année avec l'autorisation de l'émir la même année.⁴⁵ D'autres pièces sont adjointes à la collection créée par Ḥabībullah Khān, d'abord exposée dans la résidence de Bāgh-i Bālā pour être ensuite montrées dans le Koti Bāghcha, un pavillon situé à l'intérieur de l'Arg, au début des années 1920.

Fig.4. – A.C. Jewett, photographie de plusieurs statues « kafirs » réalisée en 1916 au sein du palais royal, Kabul, in A.C. Jewett, *An American Engineer in Afghanistan* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1948), p. 152



Droits : D.F.

- 18 Près de trois décennies après leur capture par les troupes afghanes dans la région du Kāfiristān, les sculptures sont devenues des pièces de musée à part entière. Comme le montre une photographie conservée au musée Guimet et prise par un des Français présents à Kabul au début des années 1920 (peut-être Maurice Fouchet, premier ambassadeur français en Afghanistan), la statuaire « kafir » occupe une place prééminente dans ce premier musée afghan. Légèrement flou sur l'image, Amānullāh Khān, en costume européen, préside une visite de l'exposition qui semble encore en cours d'installation définitive (fig.5). Cette image reflète une double bascule. Celle, tout d'abord, de la position géopolitique de l'Afghanistan. L'issue, favorable aux Afghans, de la troisième guerre anglo-afghane (6 mai-8 août 1919), redonne au pays son indépendance vis-à-vis de la puissance britannique. Cette situation permet aux autorités françaises d'intensifier leurs liens avec l'Afghanistan. Ce rapprochement se traduit notamment par la création de la Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (DAFA) en 1922 à la demande de l'émir. Scellée par une convention, la naissance de cette institution a pour effet d'intensifier les fouilles archéologiques. La seconde bascule, directement liée à la première, concerne le patrimoine afghan. Désormais muséifié, il devient l'arrière-plan nécessaire de la modernité voulue par l'émir et son entourage modernisateur. Les statues « kafirs » ont alors terminé leur mue. Elles sont devenues des traces du passé, riche mais révolu, de l'Afghanistan, au même titre que les bas-reliefs gréco-bouddhiques exhumés par les archéologues français. En 1925, quatre d'entre elles sont donc données au gouvernement français pour équilibrer le partage âprement discuté de sculptures issues des fouilles françaises du monastère bouddhiste de Paītava (situé à 40km au nord de Kabul). *Loot*, traces d'une religion vaincue conservées telles des curiosités par 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān en dépit de sa détestation des idoles, puis objets d'une muséification précoce au début du XX^{ème} siècle, les statues poursuivent alors leur parcours pour devenir des présents archéologiques et diplomatiques. À l'analyse de l'entrelacement complexe entre les trajectoires de ces artefacts et les transformations des rapports des classes dirigeantes afghanes au passé, il faut, pour finir, resituer ces statues dans l'économie générale des

dons qui caractérise les relations entre l'émirat et le monde extérieur au XIX^{ème} et au début du XX^{ème} siècle.

Fig. 5- Maurice Fouchet (?) ; Photographie non-numérotée et non-datée montrant la mise en place des collections du premier musée afghan dans le pavillon du Koti Bāghcha à Kabul, fonds photographiques du musée Guimet, tirage sur papier baryté, début des années 1920



Droits : Musée Guimet.

Economies des dons et concurrences franco-britanniques

- 19 Le don des statues à la France n'est en soi qu'un événement modeste. De part et d'autre, l'art « kafir » est au fond considéré comme « phénomène bien caractérisé de dégénérescence artistique »⁴⁶. Mais il s'inscrit dans une histoire beaucoup large de dons et de contre-dons diplomatiques qui jouent un rôle crucial dans le positionnement du pouvoir afghan face aux puissances impériales qui influencent en partie son destin sur la période considérée dans cet article, de la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle aux années 1920. L'histoire longue de la culture matérielle de la diplomatie dans la sphère persanophone démontre à quel point la pratique du don y est centrale depuis des siècles⁴⁷. Offrir des vestiges du passé ne peut ainsi s'entendre qu'en prenant en compte le paysage bien plus vaste des logiques qui président aux dons diplomatiques du point de vue afghan.
- 20 Au-delà de présents plus traditionnels tels que des vêtements de luxe, des chevaux ou des armes, 'Abd al-Rahmān Khān reçoit des Indes britanniques des objets potentiellement marqueurs de la modernité technique occidentale. Une horloge lui est ainsi envoyée au milieu des années 1890⁴⁸. L'échange de portraits photographiques

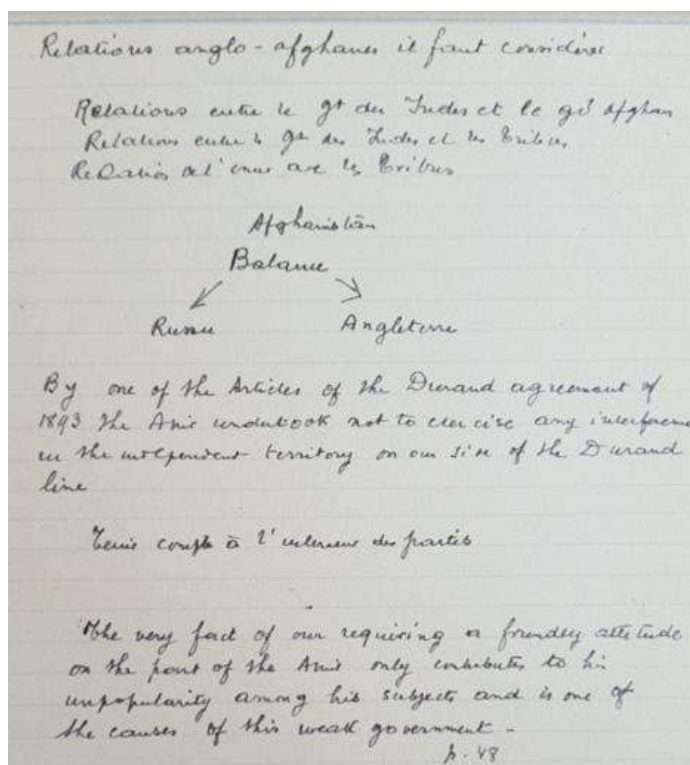
tient aussi une place importante dans l'écheveau des dons et contre-dons. Nasrullāh Khān offre ainsi son portrait à Victoria lors de son séjour à Londres⁴⁹. George Curzon, alors Vice-roi des Indes britanniques, envoie quant à lui un portrait de sa femme à 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān⁵⁰. Plus tard, durant la première guerre mondiale, les Allemands envoient à l'émir Ḥabībullāh – grand amateur d'images – un projecteur de films ainsi que plusieurs appareils optiques et photographiques⁵¹. Comme pour bien d'autres espaces géographiques – Russes et Britanniques s'empressent d'offrir des chambres daguerriennes au shah de Perse dès le début des années 1840⁵² – le don diplomatique tient de l'échange de technologies, et en cela de discours sur le présent et le futur. Il permet aussi de cartographier le proche et le lointain. Ce sont ainsi des curiosités et des objets représentatifs des lointains de l'Afghanistan qui semblent intéresser l'émir. Son fils Ḥabībullāh lui envoie ainsi des « objets exotiques venus d'horizons lointains » en 1894-1895⁵³. Une partie de ces dons est exposée dans les résidences de l'émir 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān où ils viennent compléter un mobilier et une décoration mêlant influences européennes et locales⁵⁴. Curiosités, objets représentatifs de la modernité technologique de l'âge industriel et artefacts venus du passé dessinent ainsi les contours d'un pouvoir qui cherche à se placer à l'interface entre le monde extérieur et la population afghane, mais aussi à la jointure entre le passé de l'Afghanistan (y compris préislamique, au grand dam de certaines autorités religieuses locales) et son futur.

- 21 Le don à la France des statues en bois saisies dans le Kāfiristān des années 1890, puis lentement transformées en vestiges, doit être replacé dans ce panorama plus large. Il est l'une des matérialisations concrètes de la perte d'influence des Indes britanniques et du Royaume-Uni sur l'Afghanistan. Avec le système de partage d'objets instauré par la convention archéologique de 1922⁵⁵ et le privilège exclusif de fouilles accordé à la France⁵⁶, le destin des vestiges afghans, et les constructions de l'histoire de la région qu'ils facilitent, échappent aux Britanniques, longtemps principaux narrateurs des passés des espaces liés au sous-empire indien. L'enjeu dépasse évidemment la simple écriture de l'histoire. Le contexte qui préside à la décision de donner les autres statues est celui de fortes tensions impériales. Les notes de Joseph Hackin, architecte de l'accord avec Amānullāh Khān, démontrent bien à quel point l'archéologue français a pleine conscience des enjeux géopolitiques liés aux fouilles et à leur résultat (fig.6). Dans son carnet, il veille à traduire un extrait d'un rapport officiel britannique qui insiste sur l'importance de pouvoir faire des fouilles au Seistān, de part et d'autre de la frontière perso-afghane dont la délimitation soulève des difficultés jusqu'à aujourd'hui. La présence de ruines témoignant du passé persan de la région devint très tôt un élément des discussions autour de la délimitation entre Afghanistan et Perse au XIX^e siècle. Le soutien des autorités françaises au rapprochement avec la monarchie afghane par le biais de l'archéologie n'est ainsi pas complètement désintéressé. Un rapport au Sénat souligne en 1923 à quel point des relations poussées avec « le seul Etat indépendant susceptible d'être considéré comme le défenseur de l'Islam » après la chute de l'empire ottoman devaient être considérées comme essentielles pour un empire français exerçant son autorité sur de très nombreuses populations musulmanes⁵⁷. Le biais de l'archéologie est aussi une manière de réactiver le passé « européen » de la région et son histoire marquée par les conquêtes d'Alexandre le Grand. Dans les années 1920, le souvenir de la Bactriane gréco-bouddhique est parfois convoqué pour illustrer la capacité supposée de l'Occident à apporter ses bienfaits à l'Asie. Si les statues dites « kafirs » jouent un rôle mineur de ce point de vue, elles sont

tout de même des traces d'un passé préislamique et indo-aryen qui fut mobilisé tout au long du XIX^e siècle, notamment par Rudyard Kipling dans *The Man Who Would Be King*⁵⁸.

- 22 Le flux d'artefacts destinés au musée français et le monopole accordé à la DAFA ne manquent pas de provoquer l'ire des autorités britanniques, bien conscientes de l'importance spécifique des échanges d'objets dans la culture politique et la sociabilité afghane. Arthur Hirtzel, alors *Deputy Under-secretary of State* à l'India Office, enrage de la situation dans un rapport en 1922 : « la politique française qui consiste à nous voler des marches [au sens de frontière, NDLA] à l'Est commence à manquer de dignité quand elle commence à englober le domaine de l'archéologie »⁵⁹. Les autorités afghanes, longtemps liées aux Britanniques par un tissu complexe de dons et de contre-dons, signalent de cette façon la fin d'une ère qui vit les destinées du pays en partie façonnées à l'avantage des Indes pendant des décennies. Noyées dans la myriade de sculptures gréco-bouddhiques offertes à la France ou partagées avec elle par la monarchie afghane, les quatre statues kafirs sont l'une des traces de cette rupture.

Fig.6 – Notes de Joseph Hackin, carnet 1924, fonds Hackin, Archives du Musée Guimet



Droits : Musée Guimet.

Conclusion

- 23 En suivant le parcours de ces statues du Kāfiristān jusqu'à Paris, il s'est agi dans ce travail de dépasser les limites parfois imposées par le prisme des archives nationales et par des perspectives aréales parfois trop cloisonnées. La méthode critique qu'impose la biographie de tels objets permet de proposer une histoire véritablement connective, susceptible de saisir la variété des rapports au passé qui se construisent entre

perspectives européennes et perceptions afghanes dans le contexte des expansionnismes impériaux du tournant du XX^e siècle. Mis en regard d'autres présents archéologiques considérés comme plus prestigieux, à l'instar du vase de Pergame offert par le sultan ottoman Mahmud II à Louis-Philippe en 1837⁶⁰, le don des statues à la France est apparemment secondaire. Cependant, si on le replace dans un environnement plus large et si on le pense comme l'une des étapes du parcours bien peu linéaire de ces œuvres, son analyse permet de mieux saisir le jeu des influences impériales et des rapports de force internes à l'Afghanistan des années 1890 aux années 1920. La trajectoire de ces œuvres et leur don à la France matérialise un changement fondamental dans le rapport à l'histoire de l'Afghanistan. Cela est vrai, en premier lieu, des lettrés et gouvernants du pays au tournant du XX^e siècle. La mise en musée des vestiges du passé – les cultures traditionnelles du Kāfiristān sont en partie éteintes après la conquête et la conversion – est de fait un enjeu de modernisation. La profondeur de champ historique qu'offre l'écriture de l'histoire islamique et préislamique de l'Afghanistan donne un arrière-plan nécessaire des politiques et des discours de réforme qui fleurissent notamment sous les règnes d'Ḥabībullāh et d'Amānullāh. C'est aussi une manière de fragiliser certaines des positions religieuses exprimées par une partie du clergé local et de la population face à l'exhumation d'œuvres considérées comme potentiellement impies. Le musée de Kabul devient de la sorte un enjeu symbolique essentiel dans la définition de ce qu'est l'Afghanistan dans le temps. L'invention du passé de l'Afghanistan est aussi un enjeu important pour les puissances impériales intéressées au sort de la région, au premier chef les Britanniques et les Français. Le don des statues, extension du monopole accordé à la France en matière d'archéologie dans le pays, est ainsi une trace d'une profonde rupture. Il signale une émancipation relative de l'Afghanistan vis-à-vis des Indes britanniques, dont le gouvernement participa si activement à la construction du pays en un État unifié à l'intérieur de frontières stables au XIX^e siècle.

- 24 La vie des statues « kafirs » restées à Kabul ne s'est évidemment pas arrêtée là. Malmenées dans les pillages provoqués par la rébellion de 1929 qui fait chuter Amānullāh Khān, elles sont exposées pendant des décennies dans le musée national afghan ouvert en 1931. Du début des années 1990 à la chute du mollah Omar en 2001, les collections du musée subissent pillages et destructions volontaires. Plusieurs des statues, « idoles » à nouveau aux yeux des Talibans, sont brisées et brûlées. Restaurées et retournées à leur statut d'objets muséifiés, elles sont de nouveau visibles dans les années 2010 dans le musée rebâti que les autorités talibanes décident de maintenir ouvert à leur retour au pouvoir en 2021. Près d'un siècle et demi après leur capture lors des campagnes d'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, entre Paris et Kabul, les voilà pour un temps à un point d'équilibre entre les conceptions divergentes des passés afghans que la déconstruction d'un don diplomatique nous a permis de mieux saisir.

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NOTES

1. Le choix de translittérer ou non selon dépend du degré de normalisation du terme darī en français. Afghanistan n'est par exemple pas translittéré, tandis que Nuristān l'est.
2. Texte du panneau explicatif apposé sur le support des deux statues, vu sur place en juillet 2022.
3. ELPHINSTONE Mountstuart, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, vol.2, Londres, Longman, 1815, p. 373-387. Le terme a d'ailleurs cours de longue date en langue anglaise, avec ce sens spécifique, mais aussi avec d'autres référents. Voir YULE Henry et BURNELL Arthur C., *Hobson-Jobson: Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, Londres, Murray, 1886, p. 140-142.
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11. MUHAMMAD KĀTEB Faiz, *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh* (Kabul, 1913-1915), d'après la traduction proposée par MCCHESENEY Robert et KHORRAMI Mohammad Mehdi, *The History of Afghanistan*, Leiden, Brill, 2012.

12. AL-RAḤMĀN KHĀN Abd, *پندنامه دنیا و دین: خاطرات امیر عبد الرحمان*, [*Worthy Advice in the Affairs of the World and Religion*], Kabul, 1885. Voir aussi MAHOMED KHĀN Sultan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, Londres, Murray, 1901.
13. SCHUYLER Jones, *An Annotated Bibliography of Nuristan (Kafiristan) and the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral*, Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1966.
14. Wellcome Collection, Londres, fonds Lillias Hamilton, CMAC PP/HAM.
15. En particulier la série FO371, National Archives, Kew, Royaume-Uni.
16. En particulier Londres, British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers, Mss Eur F111/361.
17. ÇELİK Zeynep, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2016. Voir aussi ETTER Anne-Julie, *Les Antiquités de l'Inde : monuments, collections et administration coloniale (1750-1835)*, thèse de doctorat en Histoire et civilisations sous la direction de Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, soutenue en 2012 à Paris 7.
18. KOPYTOFF Igor, « The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process », in APPADURAI Arjun (dir.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 64-91.
19. MUHAMMAD KĀTEB Faiz, *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh* (Kabul, 1913-1915), *op. cit.*, vol.3, p. 1562.
20. L'hypothèse d'un accommodement avec la stricte pratique de l'islam afin d'utiliser le transfert des statues comme un processus ultime de soumission de la part de l'émir est envisageable. Pour une analyse détaillée de la perception du rôle de ses statues dans la religion dite kafir, voir l'étude du très rare témoignage d'un converti à l'Islam par ARBABZADAH Nushin et GREEN Nile, « Between Afghan "Idology" and Kafir "Autoethnography" : A Muslim Convert Describes his Former Religion », *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 142/3, 2022, p. 643-670, <https://doi.org/10.7817/jaos.142.3.2022.ar027>.
21. *Agreement signed by Mr R Udny and Sipah Salar Ghulam Haidar Khan, Joint Commissioners for laying down the Afghan boundary from the Hindu Kush range to Nawa Kotal: and confirmed by H H the Amir of Afghanistan on the 19th of December 1895*, India Office Records, British Library, Londres, IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO18/2.
22. KAKAR Hassan, « The Conquest of Former Kafiristan », in KAKAR Hassan, *A Political and Diplomatic History of Afghanistan, 1863-1901*, Londres: Brill, 2006, p. 139-158.
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24. JONES Schuyler, *ibid.*, p.215.
25. JONES Schuyler, *ibid.*, p.170.
26. KADRIE Namatullah, « 'pen and tongue' untied: Lillias Hamilton's uncensored view of 'Abd al-Rahman Khan. Afghanistan », *Afghanistan*, 3/1, 2020, p. 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afg.2020.0043>.
27. Lillias Hamilton's notes on Adbur Rahman Khan, « The Late Ameer », Wellcome Collection PP/HAM/A.23. Citation traduite par l'auteur.
28. HAMILTON Lillias, « The Ameer and Kafiristan », *The London Times*, April 4th, 1896, p. 52. Citation traduite par l'auteur.
29. ARBABZADAH Nushin et GREEN Nile, « Between Afghan "Idology" and Kafir "Autoethnography": A Muslim Convert Describes his Former Religion », *op. cit.*, p. 668. Les auteurs considèrent toutefois que la conservation des statues par l'émir s'inscrit dans d'anciennes traditions persanes marquées par un intérêt exotisant pour les religions à « idoles » voisines de l'aire persanophone.
30. JONES Schuyler, *A Bibliography of Nuristan (Kafiristan) and the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral*, *op. cit.*, p. 192: « the loot wrenched from the unhappy Kafirs had been sent by 100 cart-loads to Kabul ».
31. HEVIA James L., « Loot's fate », *History and Anthropology*, 6/4, 1994, p. 319-45; HILL Katrina, « Collecting on campaign: British soldiers in China during the Opium Wars », *Journal of the History*

of Collections, 25, 2013, p. 227–252; LIDCHI Henrietta and ALLAN Stuart (dir.), *Dividing the Spoils: Perspectives on military collections and the British Empire*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020.

32. SALTER PYNE Thomas, « The Situation in Afghanistan », *The Times* (Londres), 20 janvier 1896, p. 10: « There are no trade routes allowed by the Kafirs through their country, I wish to open trade routes through it. For this I have several reasons. First, in case of complications arising from a source from which there is always a possibility of danger, I wish to be able to push my troops rapidly through Kafiristan instead of being compelled to fight my way through. Secondly, Afghanistan proper is essentially a sterile country of mountains and stones. The valleys of Kafiristan are fertile and well-watered, but owing to the animosity existing for generations between the Afghans and Kafirs they yield no results. This is very detrimental to the Kafirs, who are one of the poorest races in the East ».

33. OLIVIER-UTARD Françoise, *Politique et archéologie histoire de la Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan (1922-1982)*, Paris, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1997.

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41. TARZĪ Mahmūd, *Siyāhat dar sih qita'ah rū-ye zamīn dar 29 rûz: Āsiyā, Ūrūpā, Afrīqā*, Kabul, Matba'ah-e 'ināyat, 1915, p. 223-4, cité par WIDE Thomas, *The Refuge of the World: Afghanistan and the Muslim imagination 1880-1922*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

42. JONES Schuyler, *An Annotated Bibliography of Nuristan (Kafiristan) and the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral*, *op.cit.*, p. 217.

43. Lillias Hamilton demanda à l'émir de lui donner une des statues comme elle le raconte dans un manuscrit inédit intitulé *The Late Ameer*, Wellcome Collection PP/HAM/A.23.

44. JEWETT A.C., *An American Engineer in Afghanistan*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1948, p. 288.

45. Collection Emil Rybitschka, Afghanistan 1915-1920, Rybitschka-Album, ER 72-01, Stiftung Bibliotheca Afghanistanica, Bubendorf, Suisse.

46. HACKIN Joseph, « Les idoles du Kafiristan », *op. cit.*, p. 261.

47. Voir notamment BIEDERMANN Zoltán, GERRITSEN Anne et RIELLO Giorgio (dir.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

48. MUHAMMAD KĀTEB Faiz, *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh*, op. cit., vol.3, p. 1041. Sur le « don du temps » en diplomatie, voir en particulier TALBOT Michael, « Gifts of Time: Watches and Clocks in Ottoman-British Diplomacy, 1693–1803 », in RUDOLPH Harriet (dir.), *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century*, Boston, De Gruyter, 2016, p.55-79. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110463217-003>.
49. FOLIARD Daniel, « Représenter l’Afghanistan », *Photographica* [En ligne], 5 | 2022, mis en ligne le 22 novembre 2022, consulté le 12 avril 2023. URL: <https://devisu.inha.fr/photographica/1029>
50. A Ceremonial Illuminated Letter, *British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers*, Mss Eur F111/361, f 1, in Qatar Digital Library <https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100064311324.0x000002> [accessed 13 April 2023].
51. MCMEEKIN Sean, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 225.
52. LACOUR Annabelle, « Des objectifs royaux ? », *Photographica* [En ligne], 3 | 2021, mis en ligne le 04 novembre 2021, consulté le 21 novembre 2023. URL : <https://devisu.inha.fr/photographica/594>.
53. MUHAMMAD KĀTEB Faiz, *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh*, op. cit., vol.3, p. 980.
54. SCHINASI May, *Kabul: a history 1773-1948*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, p. 63.
55. Convention concernant la concession au gouvernement de la République française du privilège des fouilles archéologiques en Afghanistan, Archives du ministère des Affaires Etrangères, TRA19220002.
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58. KIPLING Rudyard, *The Man Who Would Be King*, Allahabad, Wheeler, 1888.
59. FO 371/8082, Central Asia, 1922, National Archives, Kew.
60. Il est aujourd’hui exposé au Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines du Louvre.

RÉSUMÉS

Depuis des années, les visiteurs du musée Guimet n’ont pas pu manquer de remarquer les deux statues de bois qui trônaient dans le hall d’entrée de l’institution. Les explications portées à leur attention restaient toutefois très elliptiques quant à leur trajectoire depuis l’Afghanistan vers Paris. Cet article propose de rouvrir le dossier du don de plusieurs statues sacrées pillées par l’armée de l’émir d’Afghanistan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Khān au milieu des années 1890 lors d’une campagne contre les populations du « Kāfiristān » (la « terre des païens »). Ces peuples non-musulmans, dont l’origine aryenne supposée nourrit l’inspiration de Rudyard Kipling et de bien des explorateurs de cette zone isolée de l’Hindu Kush, furent convertis de force et déportés lors d’une opération militaire particulièrement brutale. La région fut rebaptisée Nuristān (« le pays de la lumière ») pour saluer la disparition de pratiques religieuses considérées comme contraires à l’Islam. Une partie de la statuaire locale fut détruite sur place, quelques pièces furent emportées par les troupes pour être exposées dans la résidence de l’émir à Kabul. Certaines de

ces statues, convoitées par les archéologues de plusieurs pays européens, furent ensuite données par l'émir Ḥabībullāh à la France dans les années 1920 au grand dam des autorités britanniques. Elles virent dans ce don le signe d'une évolution importante de leurs relations avec le royaume afghan, elles-mêmes régulièrement entretenues et consolidées depuis le XIX^e siècle par des échanges réguliers de présents. Cet article utilise cette étude de cas pour repenser la place des dons d'objets patrimoniaux et leurs muséifications successives au prisme des relations trans-impériales complexes qui caractérisent la zone afghane au tournant du XX^e siècle.

For years, visitors to the Musée Guimet were bound to notice the two wooden statues enthroned in the institution's entrance hall. However, the information label explained their journey from Afghanistan to Paris in a rather elliptical manner. This article reopens the case of the gift of several sacred statues looted by the army of the Emir of Afghanistan 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān in the mid-1890s during the conquest of "Kāfiristān" (the "land of the heathens"). The so-called "Kafirs" were non-Muslim peoples whose supposed Aryan origins fed Rudyard Kipling's inspiration as well as the imagination of the many of the explorers of this remote area of the Hindu Kush. These populations were forced to convert to Islam and were partially deported by the Emir. The region was renamed Nuristān ("the land of light") to mark the disappearance of religious practices considered contrary to Islam. A few pieces of local religious statuary were taken away by the troops and displayed in the Emir's residence in Kabul, while other pieces were destroyed on the spot. Some of these statues were then donated by Ḥabībullāh, then Emir of Afghanistan to France in the 1920s, much to the irritation of British authorities. After decades of well-maintained and consolidated diplomatic connections between British India and Afghanistan, the donation of the statues could be interpreted as one of the many symptoms of a degraded relationship. This article analyses the trajectory of heritage objects from Nuristān to their subsequent transformation into early Afghan heritage and their donation to France through the prism of the complex trans-imperial relations that shaped the area at the turn of the 20th century.

INDEX

Mots-clés : Afghanistan, histoire matérielle, histoire de l'Afghanistan, histoire diplomatique, histoire du patrimoine

Keywords : Afghanistan, history of Afghanistan, material culture, diplomatic history, history of heritage

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Afterword: On Diplomatic Gifts and their Meanings

Postface : Des cadeaux diplomatiques et de leurs significations

Guido van Meersbergen

- 1 As part of the wider socio-cultural turn that has reshaped the study of inter-polity relations over the past two decades, the material culture of diplomacy has emerged as one of the most vibrant areas of research in the so-called “New Diplomatic History”.¹ A focus on “things”, the senses, spatiality, and the non-human has vastly enriched our understanding of the cultures of diplomacy, their rituals and symbolic practices, the multiplicity of actors that shaped them, and the meanings invested in and articulated through a variety of exceptional and everyday interactions. In line with the material turn in global history, recent scholarship on diplomatic gifts and other mobile objects has also provided a productive lens for exploring political exchanges in transcultural settings, contributing much needed global perspectives to a field whose basic concepts and narratives remain stubbornly Eurocentric.² The articles in this special issue further demonstrate the versatility of diplomatic gift-giving as a prism through which to examine and rethink historical themes such as cross-cultural translation and (mis)understanding, asymmetries of power, the gendered politics of consumption, colonial violence and redistribution, and the social lives and changing meanings of objects as agents of imperial, commercial, and scientific exchange. They also invite us to consider political interactions and material exchanges between Britain and the Islamicate world from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth century within a comparative and connected framework, identifying common trends and continuities whilst also highlighting how profound social and political change affected the balance of power between the actors involved and the culture and conduct of diplomacy itself.
- 2 The first insight emerging from the articles under discussion is a reminder of the multiple registers of diplomatic communication employed in simultaneous and complementary fashion, with objects operating in concert with, and sometimes taking precedence over, texts, orality, and ritual performance. Particularly in the absence of a linguistic common ground, the material dimensions of diplomacy could serve to

establish and express a language of honour, magnificence, hierarchy, brotherhood, or indeed sisterhood – as Mathilde Alazraki shows in her analysis of the rhetorical and material exchanges between the Ottoman sultana, Safiye, and Queen Elizabeth I of England.³ The materiality of illuminated diplomatic letters, as argued by Anne-Valérie Dulac, also enabled the letter-as-object to function as an agentic “gift” in its own right, capable of conveying a royal message of authority, friendship, and respect prior to and even independent of the letter’s written content, which was open to the vagaries of (mis)translation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English monarchs dispatched the most richly decorated letters to their counterparts ruling over “remote”, “distant”, and particularly “Eastern” domains, a broad category which included (but was not limited to) North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Safavid Persia, Mughal India, Siam, Bantam, and Aceh.⁴ Such examples speak to the thickening of global connections in the early modern age, a period marked by the rise of expansionist states and empires; the intensification of warfare and slavery in pursuit of new lands, markets, capital, and commodities; and dramatic transformations in trade, consumer cultures, technologies, demography, and the environment.⁵ New channels of commerce, border disputes, piracy and captivity, subjection and tribute, protection and privileges, and the incorporation of outsiders into existing hierarchies were just some of the challenges faced by authorities around the globe that required diplomatic solutions. As contacts between communities from different parts of the world increased in scale and intensity, new forms of political interaction were needed to express and structure new political relationships. In such circumstances, diplomatic gifts could function as “agents of social cohesion”, much like the illuminated letters in Dulac’s analysis.⁶ At the same time, scholars of early modernity now increasingly stress that such understandings of global connectedness must include a full acknowledgement of the tensions, conflict, and inequalities produced in its wake, including how readily the competitive logic of diplomatic gifting could turn objects into agents of strife and contention.⁷

- 3 This brings us to a second insight from the literature on gifts that informs many of the articles in this special issue, namely that of the gift as a “floating signifier”, its meanings multiple and unstable.⁸ Questions about cultural translation have motivated much research on early modern diplomacy in a global context, focusing on the interactions between different modes of expressing, managing, and interpreting asymmetrical power relations. If earlier analyses tended to draw binary distinctions between divergent systems of meaning that remained stable in their differences, recent work has offered means for thinking about the problem of diplomatic understandings and misunderstandings in more complex ways.⁹ For instance, Jose Miguel Escribano-Paéz has made a plea for explanations that “go beyond previous interpretations focused either on the incommensurability of different diplomatic cultures or on shared understandings across cultural divides”, emphasising how the wide array of actors involved in multilateral diplomatic relationships urges us to consider how multiple understandings interacted in shifting ways.¹⁰ Furthermore, Christina Brauner has observed that “early modern stories of misunderstanding and failed communication are more often than not connected to situations of first encounters or at least to situations depicted as first encounters”¹¹ – an understandable focus of much scholarship but one which has skewed our perspective towards the exception and obscured the “rule” that diplomacy was for the most part highly routinised. As she suggests, friction around gift-giving often arose from *disagreements* rather than

misunderstandings, arguing that disagreement ‘presupposes understanding of the other’s position in the first place’.¹² Such disagreements are no less interesting than misunderstandings as moments which reveal the underlying arrangements on which diplomatic relations were based and the strategies which different actors adopted to reassert or alter the terms of the relationship.

- 4 We may consider the case of the French ambassador to the Ottoman Porte, Charles de Ferriol, who in 1700 refused to take off his sword for his audience with Sultan Mustafa II. Rather than misunderstanding Ottoman diplomatic protocol, which did not permit anyone to approach the Sultan carrying weapons, as Christine Vogel explains, Ferriol’s was a calculated act meant to increase French standing in a competitive environment vis-à-vis not just the Ottomans but other European powers as well. Since all European envoys were subject to the custom of being clad in Ottoman robes of honour (kaftans), the practice was accepted by all as a necessary observance despite the associations with submission to Ottoman authority it carried. The French, English, Dutch, Habsburg, and other European ambassadors simply vied with one another for the relative degrees of distinction expressed through the number and quality of robes of honour received. The French had traditionally enjoyed precedence over all other European representatives in Istanbul, and an important part of Ferriol’s job was to maintain this. Aware that the British and Dutch ambassadors had recently received the most prestigious kaftan lined with sable fur, and with the Habsburg ambassador about to arrive, Ferriol’s own receipt of only a simple kaftan during his audience with the Grand Vizier was a clear threat to the status quo. Ferriol’s insistence on wearing his sword, knowing full well that it violated Ottoman protocol, therefore was a strategic decision meant to again tip the balance in his favour. Grounded in a shared understanding of the symbolic meaning of Ottoman ritual, the refusal to admit Ferriol came as no surprise to anyone involved. However, having made a very public point, any ambassador after him consenting to an audience without carrying their sword would implicitly accept a lower ceremonial standing than the French.¹³
- 5 Examples of this kind provide additional context to Ladan Niayesh’s analysis of seventeenth-century European travellers’ encounters with *khil’at* in the Persianate world. She shows how the incorporation of foreign terminology in Anglophone texts signals their “resistance to assimilation”, and a recognition, however imperfect, that terms such as *khil’at*, *pishkash*, and *taslim* carried culturally specific connotations that could not be captured by any English equivalent. As she illustrates through a discussion of Thomas Herbert and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, the extent to which Europeans grasped the symbolism and hierarchical logic of *khil’at* varied, although it is evident that their understandings and those of their hosts were “neither aligned unproblematically and commensurably, nor fully opposed”.¹⁴ Travel accounts provide some of the richest material for examining such questions, yet they often present us with snapshot views of occasional interactions, many of which reflect the “first encounter” bias discussed by Brauner. We typically obtain a different picture of day-to-day interactions from diplomatic correspondence or the records of trading companies, which better enable us to situate specific episodes – such as acts of diplomatic gifting – within the larger web of social relations in which they were embedded, and which often predated them. Studies that trace a diplomatic relationship over time allow us to understand gift-giving and its meanings as the product of an ongoing process of negotiations involving numerous actors on both sides, including those with in-depth knowledge of the other party. Such research shows that European diplomatic actors in sustained contact with

Ottoman, Safavid, or Mughal court cultures became conversant with practices of *pīshkash* and *khil'at*. Moreover, they have demonstrated the pivotal role of translators, scribes, officials, and other patrons, intermediaries, and information brokers in familiarising these outsiders with local diplomatic codes and practices, by communicating demands, norms, and expectations.¹⁵ In other words, our understanding of moments of gift exchange has much to gain from fuller analyses of “backstage processes”, as exemplified in this special issue by Stéphanie Prévost’s analysis of a much later instance of Ottoman-British gift exchange, that between Sultan Abdul Aziz and Queen Victoria in 1867.

- 6 In my own work on diplomatic contacts between the English and Dutch East India Companies and the Mughal imperial state, I have argued that European diplomatic actors not only participated in but actively adopted Mughal gift-giving practices. Political solicitation at the imperial court but also at the *darbars* (courts) of *nawabs* (a title used by provincial governors in Mughal India and some rulers of Mughal successor states) and *wazirs* (chief ministers) formed a routine part of the activities of both East India Companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with material transactions operating “as one of several connected registers through which relations of sovereignty, submission, service, and protection were articulated and acknowledged on both sides.”¹⁶ Although complaints about Mughal greed or arrogance were common, Dutch and British agents tended to comply with the expectations imposed on them and frequently recognised and valued the signs of distinction communicated within the Mughal gift economy. Focusing on the first century of diplomatic contacts, I emphasise that the “representational strategies, routines of social communication, and responses to courtly ritual of VOC and EIC agents stationed in Mughal India increasingly took shape in response to their understandings of local custom”, the outcome of a process that involved learning through observation as well as through instruction.¹⁷ Years of personal and institutional experience in dealing with local political elites familiarised Company agents with the customs of Mughal imperial culture, and they made intensive use of Indian specialists employed as brokers and translators. Their communications with the court were also grounded in long-term relationships with Mughal nobles maintained through correspondence, gift-giving, and mutual favours, which provided the Companies with an important source of advice and advocacy. Moreover, these cases stress the importance of precedent in shaping gift-giving, as earlier gift sets came to constitute the yardstick against which expectations were formed and future gifts were measured, thus emphasising the important role recipients could have in directing the process of gift-giving towards their desired outcomes.¹⁸
- 7 My understanding of East India Company diplomacy in Mughal India has been informed in important ways by thinking comparatively, looking not just west to the experiences of European diplomats in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa, but also east towards China and Japan, which has been the focus of much recent work. As studies by Adam Clulow and Michael Laver have shown, the annual journey which the Dutch East India Company was obliged to undertake from its small base in Deshima bearing gifts to the Shogunal court in Edo constituted a “ritualistic act of submission” that rendered the Dutch into a position of vassalage akin to that of Japanese *daimyo*, or feudal lords.¹⁹ In the words of Laver, the highly regulated pattern of Dutch gift-giving should be understood as “a symbolic representation of the shogun’s control over all things foreign”, with the shogunate using “the yearly reenactment of Dutch servitude” to demonstrate to Japanese nobles and subjects that it “was the uncontested arbiter of

foreign relations in Japan”.²⁰ What in a Japanese context was clearly understood as tribute, he argues, the Dutch were able to justify to themselves as equivalent to a commercial tax, that is “the cost of doing business”.²¹ In other words, the Dutch outwardly complied with the ceremonial performance of tribute-paying demanded by the Tokugawa regime, though for internal purposes they preferred to attach a different meaning to this fairly degrading ritual, which made it more palatable to them. Remarkably, the basic forms of this diplomatic arrangement carried on largely unchanged from the early seventeenth century all the way to the mid-nineteenth century. It offers a case in point of what Christian Windler describes as “the polysemy of the gift”, namely that it was quite possible for multiple meanings of one and the same gift to coexist without necessarily giving rise to tensions, provided they were directed at different audiences and purposes. As Windler put it, “in diplomatic interactions, establishing clarity about the meanings was not necessarily what the actors themselves aspired to”, as some “would understand that the continuity of peaceful interactions depended precisely on the possibility for each participant to save face by interpreting the practices in their own divergent ways”.²²

- 8 Tokugawa-Dutch relations constitute perhaps the most apparent example of the wider logic of European ceremonial submission to powerful states in East Asia and the Islamicate world which was typical of the early modern period. This core hierarchical principle began to change, at different speeds in different regions, from the eighteenth century onwards, a process exemplified in this special issue through Robert Ivermsee’s discussion of gifts by Indian rulers to French and British East India Company agents in the context of the colonial transition in South India and Bengal. Framed around the key question of whether “objects obtained coercively [can] really be considered gifts”, Ivermsee argues that due to the shifting balance of power between the French and British on the one hand and the *nawabs* of the Carnatic and Bengal on the other, “processes of giving and receiving [...] became highly transactional in nature, with a specific reward demanded in return for a service rendered”. As a result, “the distinction between gift and payment was all-but dissolved”, leading Ivermsee to ask “how much agency remained for the *nawab*?”²³ That this case marks a drastic reversal of the power dynamics that underpinned material transactions is beyond doubt, as is the extortionate use the British in India made of their military superiority to amass wealth and power. Yet by emphasising rupture we should not overlook the fact that the transactional nature of “gifting”, as the outcome of extensive negotiations between parties in an asymmetrical relationship, was itself hardly new. Recent work shows how, in a variety of ways, the British conducted their relations with Indian rulers in the decades following according to established patterns of South Asian political and diplomatic practice.²⁴ Nor should we be too quick to dismiss the probability of the weaker party in a political relationship exerting meaningful agency. In his unpublished dissertation on diplomatic relations between the Mughal and Deccani courts, Shounak Ghosh recounts how when the Mughal envoy Asad Beg Qazwini was dispatched to Bijapur to extract tribute from its ruler, Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II, the Bijapuri sultan succeeded in asserting his own autonomy and authority whilst still satisfying his powerful neighbour’s demands.²⁵ The articles in this special issue by Stéphanie Prévost and Daniel Foliard likewise illustrate how either side in an asymmetrical relationship might employ gift exchange to exert political agency whether as donors or as recipients.

- 9 The episode discussed by Prévost takes us squarely into the new international order of the nineteenth century, forged in the decades following the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) in a context of European imperial expansion and Great Power domination. As European legal theorists devised a new normative framework “to demarcate the boundaries of the international legal community”, non-European powers such as the Ottoman Empire experienced a drastic “demotion” of status.²⁶ In the words of Glenda Sluga, “[t]he modernization of diplomacy is the story of who could legitimately engage in diplomacy”, and the Ottomans’ “marginalization in the developing manner of politics between states is in part a modern story”.²⁷ Whilst the empire was formally “admitted” as a member of the Concert of Europe at the end of the Crimean War in 1856, “many jurists continued to question its capacity to participate as a full member of the European ‘family of nations’”.²⁸ Sultan Abdul Aziz’s vying for symbolic recognition of his status on par with that of other European rulers, in the form of investment with the Order of the Garter, aptly symbolises the dramatic role reversal in diplomatic relations compared to previous centuries. Though part of a new system of signs of distinction, the logic behind his pursuit of the Garter is nonetheless familiar from earlier traditions of diplomatic investiture such as that of *khil’at*. The lasting importance of personal relations and inter-dynastic ties as expressed through ornamental means is one of the continuities that cautions us against viewing modern diplomacy solely in terms of a break with past forms. In the way that Ferriol bargained to assert French status within the international community from a subordinate position at the Ottoman court, Sultan Abdul Aziz seized the opportunity of his state visit to Britain to press Queen Victoria to grant him the honour that would raise his status to that of his fellow monarchs, Napoleon III of France, Victor Emmanuel II of Italy, Wilhelm I of Prussia, Alexander II of Russia, and Francis Joseph of Austria.²⁹ Another striking example of diplomatic agency wielded from a position of relative weakness is provided by Foliard in his study of the gift of so-called “Kafir” statues to France in the 1920s by the Afghan Emir Ḥabībūllāh, which he argues was used to signal Afghanistan’s emancipation from British imperial tutelage after a century of political and military involvement from across the border in British India.³⁰
- 10 To return to the versatility of gifts and counter-gifts as an analytical lens, the respective contributions by Foliard and Marine Bellégo and Thérèse Bru also remind us of the many ways in which diplomatic exchange was embedded in, and urges us to take account of, multiple wider contexts, be it imperial, corporate, scientific, museological, or the personal networks of collectors and private correspondents. In Foliard’s analysis, the mobile trajectory of statues from “Kāfiristān” (or Nuristān) to Kabul and onwards to Paris underpins a set of connected reflections on religion and state-building, modernity and historicity. Bellégo and Bru, on their part, offer a rich account of the “botanical diplomacy” conducted by Nathaniel Wallich, director of Calcutta’s botanical garden during the 1820s.³¹ Their analysis of the circulation of fragile and perishable yet no less coveted objects – plants, seeds, and specimens – whose scientific and monetary value was uncertain, not only directs our focus back to the different dimensions of a gift economy and its associated value systems, but also expands our assessment of the materiality of diplomacy by emphasising the crucial importance of preparation, preservation, and transportation. Related skills and expertise were wrapped up in the gift itself and added to its rarity, a process also familiar from the gifting of living animals.³² This once more highlights that the material culture of diplomacy relates to much more than just gifts, including aspects of dress, food, cosmetics, packaging, the

material settings of presentation and display, and objects of authority such as royal letters, as shown by the various articles in this issue. Finally, by taking us beyond the domain of inter-polity relations proper, Bellégo and Bru's account also clearly shows how private networks both overlapped with and helped sustain larger diplomatic aims and interests.

- 11 Straddling the early modern and modern periods, this special issue on “Diplomatic Gifts and Countergifts between Britain and the Muslim East, 17th-early 20th Century” invites us to look across what is traditionally regarded as a sharp divide in the history of diplomacy and international relations.³³ As recent scholarship has shown, the conventional narrative about the modern international system ‘as developed exclusively within Europe and then exported to the rest of the world’ from the nineteenth century onwards disregards how frameworks of international law and sovereignty emerged through global and imperial interactions, as well as that “developments in Europe were not endogenously driven but very much influenced by developments in what is now called the East”.³⁴ Research on the decades either side of 1800 has also urged us to consider Asian-European diplomacy in terms of “transformation and continuity”, rather than only the former, and stressed “the lingering of the Ancien Regime” more generally.³⁵ Yet the reconceptualization of diplomacy as the product of global interactions still has a long way to go. Future work might productively ask how diplomatic norms, structures, and practices of varying cultural origin influenced one another and changed as the result of global entanglements; which agents and processes were most influential in this development and why; and particularly what role non-Western communities and concepts played in the development of the global diplomatic system.³⁶ These are some of the principal questions addressed in the AHRC Research Network “Towards a Global Diplomatic History (c. 1400-1900)” (AH/Y001621/1), which I co-lead with Birgit Tremml-Werner and Lisa Hellman. By connecting and comparing the dynamics of diplomatic exchange in different cultural and geographical contexts between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, we aim to attain a deeper understanding of the interactive development of diplomacy as it played out in a variety of global settings. Most of this work still lies in the future, but with the growing number of case studies now available we can begin to undertake it.³⁷

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NOTES

1. Harriet Rudolph and Gregor M. Metzger (eds.), *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016); Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello (eds.), *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On New Diplomatic History, see for instance Julia Gebke, "New Diplomatic History and the Multi-Layered Diversity of Early Modern Diplomacy", in Dorothee Goetze and Lena Oetzel (eds.), *Early Modern European Diplomacy: A Handbook* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024), p. 27-47, and other contributions in the same volume.

2. On global material culture, see: Giorgio Riello, "The "Material Turn" in World and Global History", *Journal of World History* 33, no. 2 (2022), 193-232. About the Eurocentrism of diplomatic history and international relations, see, among others: Andrew Hurrell, "Towards the Global Study of International Relations", *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 59, no. 2 (2016), p. 1-18; Ayşe Zarakol, "Modernity and Modernities in International Relations", in Mlada Bukovansky, Edward Keene, Christian Reus-Smit, and Maja Spanu (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 410-423.

3. Mathilde Alazraki, "The Queen and the Sultana: Early Modern Female Circuits of Diplomacy and the Consumption of Gendered Luxury Items between East and West", in this issue of *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*.

4. As per the royal mandate conferred on the illuminator, Edward Norgate, in 1631. See: Anne-Valérie Dulac, "« [T]o write and Lyme in Gold and Colours certain Letters »: correspondance diplomatique enluminée dans l'Angleterre de la première modernité", in this issue of *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*.

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6. Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, "Introduction: Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia", in *Global Gifts*, p. 1-33, at p. 24.

7. About disconnectivity, see Zoltán Biedermann, "(Dis)connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity", *Modern Philology* 119, no. 1 (2021), 13-32. For the argument that "a shared understanding of the political meaning of tributes" could lead to "the escalation of violence", see: Jose M. Escribano-Páez, "Diplomatic Gifts, Tributes and Frontier Violence: Circulation of Contentious Presents in the Moluccas (1575-1606)", *Diplomatica* 2, no. 2 (2020), p. 248-269, at p. 263.

8. Ladan Niayesh, "Lost in Translation? The Terminology and Practice of Islamic Gifts in Early Modern Travel Accounts in English", in this issue of *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*.

9. For such earlier examples, see: Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Kim Siebenhüner, "Approaching Diplomatic and Courtly Gift-Giving in Europe and Mughal India: Shared Practices and Cultural Diversity", *Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (2013), p. 525-546.
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12. "Ibid.", p. 91.
13. This paragraph is based on Christine Vogel, "The Caftan and the Sword: Dress and Diplomacy in Ottoman-French Relations Around 1700", in Claudia Ulbrich and Richard Wittmann (eds.), *Fashioning the Self in Transcultural Settings: The Uses and Significance of Dress in Self-Narratives* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2015), p. 25-44.
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20. Laver, *The Dutch East India Company*, viii, p. 56.
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ABSTRACTS

This afterword addresses some of the key insights emerging from the articles in this issue as ways of reshaping our understanding of diplomatic gifts in a global context. These include the multiplicity of registers of diplomatic communication, the versatility of gifts as floating signifiers whose meanings were shaped by a diverse array of actors, and how the wider contexts and afterlives of gifts affect and illuminate questions of value and agency. Together, they stress the importance of examining political and material exchanges between Britain and the Islamicate world from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth century within a comparative and connected framework. The afterword concludes with a call to look for transformations and continuities that do not align with the conventional narrative of the modern international system as shaped exclusively in and by the West, and above all to better account for the roles that non-Western communities and concepts played in the development of the global diplomatic system.

La postface dresse l'inventaire de quelques-unes des idées qui émergent des articles de ce numéro comme moyens de réévaluer notre compréhension des cadeaux diplomatiques pris dans leur contexte global. Ces idées incluent la multiplicité des registres de communication diplomatique, la polyvalence des cadeaux eux-mêmes en tant que signifiants instables dont les contours ont été façonnés par un large éventail d'acteurs, ainsi que la manière dont les contextes plus larges et le devenir des cadeaux affectent et éclairent leur valeur et leur agentivité. Pris ensemble, les contributions rassemblées ici soulignent l'importance d'examiner les échanges politiques et matériels entre la Grande-Bretagne et l'Orient musulman depuis la fin du XVI^e

jusqu'au début du XX^e siècle dans une perspective comparative et connectée. La postface conclut à la nécessité de prendre en compte les transformations et les continuités qui ne s'alignent pas nettement sur le récit conventionnel d'un système international moderne à partir de développements et de concepts façonnés exclusivement par et pour l'Occident. Elle invite à faire une place plus large aux contributions des communautés et concepts non-occidentaux au développement du système diplomatique global.

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Mots-clés: cadeaux diplomatiques, matérialité, diplomatie globale, Royaume-Uni, Orient musulman

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