

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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(1600-1700)

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Don García de Silva y Figueroa

DATE OF BIRTH	29 December 1550
PLACE OF BIRTH	Zafra, province of Badajoz, Extremadura, Spain
DATE OF DEATH	22 July 1624
PLACE OF DEATH	At sea in the Atlantic Ocean

BIOGRAPHY

Don García de Silva y Figueroa is one of the most outstanding personalities through whom to understand Spanish-Iranian relations in the 17th century. As ambassador of King Philip III (r. 1598-1621) to the court of Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1588-1629), he wrote the *Comentarios*, a chronicle of the embassy, a valuable source of data about Iran in the 17th century. Details about his life are scarce, but his family is known to have been related to the Spanish nobility. He studied at the University of Salamanca and held various positions in the administration of the towns of Jaen, Toro and Badajoz. Other than this, up until 1595, the date he assumed the role of mayor of Jaen, there is no documented evidence about him. From 1601 to 1604, he was mayor of the city of Toro, and from 1609 he lived in Madrid. His works show evidence that he was a deeply cultured and educated man. In the *Comentarios* and *De rebus Persarum epistola* (Antwerp, 1620) he demonstrates his knowledge of Italian and Latin, and considerable expertise in geography and other subjects. In Goa in 1615 he wrote another work in Latin, *Hispanicae historiae breviarium* (Lisbon, 1628).

After some consideration, the Council of State considered appointing an ambassador of high rank, and decided, by order of the king (2 October 1612), to send Don García de Silva y Figueroa as senior ambassador to the Safavid court with the primary aim of curtailing Shah ‘Abbās’s ambitions regarding Portuguese possessions in the Persian Gulf, as well as to revive the old alliance against the Ottomans.

On 8 April 1614, at the age of 64, Don García finally sailed from Lisbon to Goa, and from there to Hormuz (29 April 1617). After this long journey, he eventually reached Iran, where he lived on the mainland for two years of a journey that lasted in total ten years, 1614-24. He arrived in Qazvin on 15 June 1618. On this occasion, however, he failed to discuss the issue of war against the Ottoman Empire, or the complaints relating to the conquest by ‘Abbās of the fortress of Bandar ‘Abbās (Comorão) and the

island of Queshm (Fortress of Queixome), or the hostilities suffered by Hormuz. On the other hand, Don García had to listen to complaints from ‘Abbās about apparent inaction against the Ottoman Empire on the part of the Christian kingdoms. In Qazvin, he met with the Carmelite friar Juan Tadeo of San Eliseo and the Franciscan friar Hernando Moraga, who wrote an account of Don García’s meeting with Shah ‘Abbās (*Relación breve*). Finally, ‘Abbās ordered Don García to return to Isfahan, which he reached on 13 August 1618. Thus failing to conclude his diplomatic mission, Don García’s return to Spain was delayed. In Isfahan, he dispatched some letters to the Spanish court and wrote a colourful account of his journey. In this, he describes the city, the customs of the people, religious monuments, and all his observations about Shī’a religiosity, including notably his depictions of the ‘Āshūrā religious commemorations.

The following year, on 19 June 1619, Shah ‘Abbās reached Isfahan and, after the festivals and ceremonies, he granted an audience to Don García on 2 August. In this audience, Don García laid claim to the islands of Qeshm, Bahrain and the fortress of Bandar ‘Abbās, all of them lost to the Portuguese and now in the hands of the Persians and Arabs, and also raised other issues related to alliances against the Ottomans, the silk deal with the English, and missionaries in Safavid territories. But his requests were not granted. He was eventually given permission to return to Spain via Goa, although he died of scurvy (‘the evil of Loanda’) on 22 July 1624 in the Atlantic Ocean not far from the Flores and Cuervo islands, as is documented in a note added to the *Comentarios*.

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Comentarios de Don García de Silva, 'Commentary of Don García de Silva'

DATE Before 22 July 1624

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Spanish

DESCRIPTION

Comentarios de don García de Silva que contiene su viaje a la India y de ella a Persia, cosas notables que vió en él y los sucesos de la embajada al Sophi ('Commentary of Don García de Silva containing his trip to India and from there to Persia. The remarkable things that he saw there, and the achievements of the embassy to the Sophy') is a complete description, in eight books or chapters, of Don García's journey from Lisbon to Iran, the embassy to the court of Shah 'Abbās I, and the sea voyage back to Europe, during which he met his death. In the autograph manuscript, the work covers 558 folios. It offers a rich source of information for the study of Iran and Portuguese India during the Iberian Union, and early modern interactions between Europe and Iran. Until Abraham de Wicquefort's French translation, published in 1667, there was no Spanish edition of the *Comentarios*, or any translation into any other language. Although Jean Chardin mentions it as an outstanding reference when he visited Persepolis (Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, Amsterdam, 1711, vol. 3, p. 139), no complete Spanish edition of the work was prepared until the beginning of the 20th century, when M. Serrano y Sanz edited the *Comentarios* (1903-5), but without any annotations. More recently, in 2011, Rui Loureiro, Ana Cristina Costa Gomez and Vasco Resende have edited the *Comentarios*, and published it, along with studies, in four volumes. During the long interlude preceding the 2011 edition, the *Comentarios* fell into oblivion, despite its relevance.

Loureiro notes that the title was inspired by other titles from the time, such as the work of a similar name by Julius Caesar (Loureiro, *Don García de Silva y Figueroa*, p. 57). Don García wrote in the third person but his manuscript is an autograph and describes his journey from Lisbon in April 1614, finishing ten years later with his death at sea, somewhere in the Atlantic.

According to Loureiro, the eight books of the *Comentarios* can be organised into four periods (Loureiro, *Don García de Silva y Figueroa*).

The first covers the long sea journey to Goa (Books, 1, 7 and 8), containing insightful information about the route. The second covers the period he spent in the Persian Gulf (Book 3), offering a geographical description, along with fascinating details about relevant monuments and constructions, as well as cities, populations and cultural practices and routines of daily life. The third period, which is the longest (constituting Books, 4, 5, 6 and a part of 7), covers the embassy and the journey through Safavid territory to meet Shah 'Abbās. Don García's assiduousness in noting every episode and social, religious, cultural, ethnographic and artistic manifestation over the course of two-and-a-half years, is what makes the *Comentarios* such a noteworthy source of information about Iran. Don García was a cultivated man who travelled with his personal library, seeking references and information for everything he observed, for example, from Ruy González de Clavijo's account of his 15th-century embassy to Tamerlane, or Pedro Teixeira's *Relaciones*. Moreover, he was the first European to provide a description of Chilminara ('forty pillars', the ruins of Persepolis / *Taht-e Jamshīd*), including several drawings and images and a reproduction of 'unknown letters' from Persepolis that proved to be Kufic script. As Loureiro notes, an interesting chapter in this section contains the polemic with the Jesuits about the existence of Cathay. The fourth period focuses on notes and descriptions of events in Goa (Books 2 and 7). Don García remained in Goa for several years (1614-17, 1620-4), and his descriptions contain a remarkable level of detail. They cover every aspect of life in Goa, and include a commentary about the Brahmans and political relations with the Mughals that goes into exceptional detail.

SIGNIFICANCE

Don García's *Comentarios* provides compelling and essential insight into and understanding of the perceptions that a Spanish courtier had of Safavid Iran in the 16th-17th centuries, and complements other travelogues from the same period in painting a vivid image of Safavid Iran. It is a first-rate historical narrative that elucidates interaction in the Early Modern era between Europe and Iran and a source of historical, geographical and ethnographical information.

Concerning religion, the *Comentarios* does not devote any specific chapter entirely to Islam, but reports relevant events as Don García encountered them in the course of his trip. The style in which these are recounted reveals aspects of Don García's personality and attitudes, suggesting that he was a tolerant man, and objective in describing particular

characteristics of Muslims and Jews. His descriptions are not specialist studies, or based on full knowledge of the real situation, but they are realistic, depicting mosques, and Muslim traditions and festivities without prejudice. For example, concerning Shīʿī ceremonies, he devotes a chapter to a fascinating description of ‘Āshūrā’, describing its origins, practice, recitals, performances and readings of *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn*, and summarising the main facts surrounding the death of the Imam Ḥusayn at the Battle of Karbalā’. Regarding Muslim clerics (‘alfaquíes’) and dervishes (‘derviches’), he uses the two terms interchangeably. Concerning these dervishes, he describes with an attitude of respect their physiognomy, dress, lifestyle, good deeds and miracles, sanctuaries and the religious places in which they reside. Don García describes mosques from an architectural perspective and with evident interest.

As well as dealing with Shīʿa Muslims, he also considers the non-Muslim communities, describing the Armenians of Isfahan and conveying fascinating data on the Zoroastrian community. He provides a description of the Safavid court, noting Shah ‘Abbās’s strikingly reverent attitudes concerning churches, images and Christian rituals. This work is without doubt a vast and highly valuable dataset for understanding the nature and perceptions of Safavid Iran. The *Comentarios* reflects the personality of Don García as a scholar who was balanced and objective in the information he provided.

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