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# THE BRITISH SHIRLEY BROTHERS AND THE SAFAVID STATE



*Shah Abbas I the Great. Illustration from a book published in Augsburg in 1600. This is how the Europeans saw the Shah.*

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Azerbaijani Safavid state waged heavy wars with the Ottoman Empire. Only with the greatest effort of all the forces of the state, did Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) manage to repel Ottomans attacks. He also began radical reforms in all spheres of state building, which strengthened his state, restored the power of the Safavids and earned him the nickname «the Great». The shah reduced the number of tribal militias and created new units armed with modern weapons and totally dependent on the central government. The Safavids had high quality firearms, but they were in limited supply. According to Europeans' description, one can imagine what the harquebuses of the Safavid troops looked like<sup>1</sup>: «In addition to swords and spears, all warriors can skillfully use harquebuses. The barrels of harquebuses are 6 spans long (one span is 9 inches) and they throw balls that weigh a little less than 3 ounces (one ounce is 28 grams). They handle them so easily that it does not prevent them from carrying bows or holding swords, attaching the latter to their saddles until they are needed. The harquebus is worn behind the back so one weapon does not hinder the use of another ... The Qizilbash have excellent weapons and they are better than the weapons of any nation.»

However, the army reform required not only

1. The harquebas is a smooth-bore fuse muzzle-loaded rifle. Editor's note

upgrading, but also structural changes. And in this process a certain role belongs to Englishman Robert Shirley. In 1597, returning from a successful campaign against the Sheybanid state, Shah Abbas I met a delegation of 26 Europeans led by two English travelers - brothers Anthony and Robert Shirley. According to information from a number of sources, Anthony Shirley was sent to Italy, but his mission was pointless and he went to Venice, where he met a Christian living in the East and a Safavid merchant who vividly described to him the prospects of trade in the Safavid state. Shirley was a man of action and decided to persuade the Shah to join forces with Christian kings in their struggle against the Ottoman Empire and to improve commercial relations between the Safavids and England.<sup>2</sup>

Shirley arrived in the Safavid state in December 1598 - just two years before Queen Elizabeth signed the Charter of the East India Company. The eloquence of Anthony Shirley was effective, and six months after his arrival, he was sent to Europe as an ambassador of the Great Sofi (the title of the Persian monarch - from the word «Sufi»). Robert stayed with the Shah.<sup>3</sup> Anthony and Ambassador Huseyn Ali Bay Shah were carrying letters to the Pope, German Emperor Rudolf II, the Kings of France, Spain, Scotland, Poland, the Queen of England, the rulers of Venice and a number of other rulers.<sup>4</sup> The delegation handed over the letters to Emperor Rudolf II and the Pope. In 1602, the Emperor sent his own mission to the Safavid state, but Ambassador Stephan Kakasch von Zalonkemeny died in Gilan and only his secretary made it to the Shah. The Emperor was willing to conduct joint military operations against the Ottomans, but in the end the Shah sent a new ambassador Shah-guli bay to detail the arrangements.

The King of France refused to receive the envoy as he



was negotiating with the Ottoman Sultan, and the Shah's letters proposed an alliance in the common struggle.

Angelo, the translator of Sir Anthony Shirley, who traveled with him, said that Shah Abbas could mobilize

2. According to other sources, Anthony Shirley's delegation to the Safavid state was not a result of his inspiration, but a carefully planned diplomatic move by the English Kingdom. Given that Anthony's elder brother Thomas Shirley was a member of the English Parliament, this version seems more plausible. Editor's note
3. According to another version, the Shah received the Shirley brothers, but did not reply to the vague proposals of the English court. However, he suggested that the brothers serve in his court and they agreed. After one year, Abbas I sent Anthony on a diplomatic mission to Europe. The Shah's letter to European rulers said: "You, princes that believe in Jesus Christ, know that he [Anthony Shirley] will continue the friendship between you and me...". See Бушев П.П. История посольств и дипломатических отношений Русского и Иранского государств в 1586-1612 гг. М., 1976.с. 340. Editor's note
4. Oruj Bay Bayat, who was more known as "Don Juan of Persia" wrote that "Don Antonio left his younger brother with 15 Englishmen in Persian, and the Persian Shah gave them a house and enough allowance, as befits the person he posed as". He also reports the composition of Anthony Shirley's delegation (Don Antonio) – an envoy called Huseyn Ali bay, four noble people and 15 servants, two monks, Don Antonio, five translators and 15 Englishmen, 32 camels loaded with gifts, horses and pack animals required for this number of people." Editor's note



*Robert Shirley. Artist Van Dijk, 1622.*

up to 100,000 armed mounted warriors with bows, arrows and scimitars. «In addition, he has 50,000 warriors armed with harquebuses and scimitars. At one point, he did not use warriors armed with harquebuses, but now he admires them, showing an increased degree of care and providing them with everything. The Shah has artillery guns seized in clashes with strong adversaries. Moreover, there is no shortage of masters for the production of new guns, many of these masters were hostile to the Turks and came to serve the Shah.» However, according to Sir Anthony's manager, «the infantry was little appreciated and poorly worshiped in the Safavid state». Another

member of the delegation, George Mainwaring, reported: «The Safavids are very experienced, well-versed and handle their weapons very well, including muskets<sup>5</sup>; although there are those who recently wrote that they had not used weapons until we arrived in the country.» He points out that he had never seen so many good muskets as he saw at the Safavids.»

However, in Rome ambassadors Anthony Shirley and Huseyn Ali Bay fell out. History does not give a precise answer about the causes of the quarrel, but it is known that the first, second and third secretaries of the Embassy, as well as the cook and the barber converted to Catholicism. Huseyn Ali Bay went on a trip to Spain alone. Sir Anthony stayed in Italy and was involved in some intrigue with Spain. He never returned to the Safavid state.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Shirley (1581-1628) left a more significant mark on history. In his letter in April 1619, the Venetian ambassador Pietro della Valle noted that the corps of musketeers was created by Shah Abbas «a few years later» on the advice of Shirley. Purchas, who personally knew Robert Shirley, wrote in 1624: «The predominant part of the Safavids studied the so-called art of war on 'the method of Shirley', and he now has 500 high-ranking military units and 6,000 musketeers. Thus, those who once seemed terrible to the Turks with a sword in their hand now inspire more fear, making strikes from a remote distance with their frightening art of war.» However, sources from the inner circle of the Shah and Robert Shirley advise not to exaggerate the role of Robert Shirley in the development of Safavid firearms.

By the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Safavid army had 500 guns of various calibres, a large number of rifles and heavy muskets, and cannons were cast and infantry units of tufangchis were established here.<sup>7</sup>

In August 1603, the Shah retook the central Azerbaijani city of Tabriz from the Ottomans and defeated the strong enemy army on the northern shore of the Lake Urmia. In this battle, Robert Shirley received three wounds, but showed courage and bravery, which were so highly valued by the Safavids.<sup>8</sup>

Over the next two years, the Shah retook the whole

5. The musket is the heaviest type of the fuse rifle. Editor's note
6. It is known that Anthony went to a state hostile to England – Spain, where he died in 1635. Editor's note
7. For more details about the process of military reform by Shah Abbas, see Васильев Л.С. История Востока. Т.1. М., 2003, с.320. Editor's note
8. It is believed that Robert Shirley was personally in charge of Safavid artillery. In 1607, he married a daughter of Circassian ruler Ismayil Khan who served the Shah. Editor's note

*Shah Abbas I the Great. Picture from a postcard. The early 20th c., France. This is how the Shah was seen in the East.*

of the South Caucasus from the Ottomans, but the Ottoman Empire was in a hurry to make peace with Austria (1606). The alarmed Shah decided to send an embassy to Europe, setting two goals: to conclude an offensive alliance against the Ottomans and change the silk trade route passing through Turkey. The negotiations were entrusted to Robert Shirley. The Shah's letter to King James I said that his candidacy was chosen due to the fact that the envoy «belongs to you and to us» and the hope was expressed that the name of Turkey could soon be destroyed - «this is how Christian countries and we will unite».

The envoy visited Russia, Rzeczpospolita, the Holy Roman Empire, Florence, Milan, Genoa and Papal Rome, and reached Spain.

Robert Shirley in Prague was knighted by the Holy Roman Emperor. Interestingly, he wore oriental clothes, but his turban was crowned with a gold crucifix. The negotiations with Spain failed and Sir Robert turned his eyes upon his homeland, believing that an agreement with Britain on a purely commercial basis would not cause any major difficulties. Spanish underhand plotting and intrigue delayed his departure, but he still made it to England.

The Shah's projects met with great resistance from traders doing their business through Aleppo, as they believed that the change in the Silk Route would destroy them.

While Sir Robert was in Europe, Shah Abbas received a Spanish mission headed by Antonio de Gouvea. The Shah did not respond to accusations of strengthening the position of the Safavids in the Persian Gulf and again proposed redirecting all silk trade towards Hormuz (the Island of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf). The treaty of 1612 with the Ottomans gave a respite not only in the war with them, but also in the tough negotiations with the Europeans.<sup>9</sup>

Sir Robert's stay in England did not produce any significant results, and in January 1612, he boarded a ship at Dover for a return journey through India. In 1613, Shirley returned to the Shah, but after two years, due to the threat of a new war with the Ottomans, he went to Europe again. He settled in Madrid, intensifying the negotiations with Spain, and at the same time, negotiations were underway with Spanish delegations in



the Shah's court. It should be noted that Robert Shirley's predecessor as the Safavid ambassador in Madrid, Dengiz Bay, was executed by the Shah for the failings of the embassy.

The Spaniards sought to use the Ottoman threat as a means of pressure on the Shah, trying to knock him out of Bahrain, Qeshm and Gombrun, after taking which the Shah began to control the passages into the Persian Gulf. However, all the intrigues of the Spaniards ended in the fact that one day, during a horseback ride with the Spanish ambassador Don Garcia de Silva Figueroa, the Shah rode away, leaving the ambassador behind.

In accordance with the political situation, England suddenly started taking an interest in the Safavid state. The Dutch East India Company methodically expelled English merchants from Indonesia while in India trouble emerged with the opening of a trading post in Gujarat. The opening of English trading posts in the Persian Gulf

9. The Third Years' War was looming in Europe, the Moscow State was gripped by trouble, and none of the countries was interested in plans to forge an alliance against Turkey. Only England was interested in the Safavids, but only as a trading partner. Editor's note



*Map of the Safavid State. Compiled in 1598 by European cartographers*

could provide an excellent opportunity for trade in the East. The idea of moving the silk trade to the road that ran along the Caspian Sea and the Volga to the White Sea and from there to the North Sea began to take on a more and more concrete shape. The English had the right of transit and free trade in Russia, and raising the agreements signed by Robert Shirley on behalf of the Safavid Shah, they became convinced that he had provided benefits for English merchants. In many ways, it predetermined the further successes of Britons in the East, which is why Sir Robert is revered by British historians.

In November 1627, Robert Shirley left Madrid and returned to the Shah's court, where he died a year later.

Thus, the role of the Shirley brothers in the reorganization of the Safavid army was quite modest and technical, but they played a significant role in the Safavid policy of opening a second front against the Ottomans, weakening the positions of Spain in the Persian Gulf and in the subsequent strengthening of the positions of England. 🌱

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