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The Postal System in Safavid, Afsharid, and Zand Iran

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Abstract

While the functioning of the postal system in Iran before 1500 and after 1800 has been studied, this article analyzes, based entirely on primary sources, the operation and characteristics of the Iranian postal system between 1500 and 1800 for the very first time. Such a study enables scholars to better understand the functioning of communication between both government officials and private individuals in Safavid, Afshari, and Zand Iran. During this time, there were two types of messengers: express-mounted couriers (*chapar*) for official business and foot messengers (*shaters*) for both official and private mail. The designation of *qased* was rarely used to denote mail foot messengers.

Keywords: *chapar*; *shater*; Safavid; Afsharid; Zand; mail; European companies

Since Achaemenid times, a system of postal riders had existed in Iran, in one way or another, and included an infrastructure of relay stations where fresh horses, food, and fodder was available. This system was known as *barid* during the early Islamic period. Under the Seljuqs, the relay system was abandoned; but under the Mongols, it was re-established and named *yam*.¹ Then, under the Ilkhanids and their successors, the postal system with relay stations was again abandoned. The term *barid* was still known and used in Timurid and Aq-Qoyunlu times, but clearly referred to an earlier historical period, as a relay system for post riders no longer existed.²

Under the Safavids, both mounted and foot messengers were used to relay administrative, military, and private messages and orders. Messengers mounted on horse or camel were express messengers, traveling *chapari* (galloping) and therefore referred to as *chapar* (چاپار).³ *Chapars* were employed exclusively by the shah and his officials. Foot messengers, on the other hand, were either permanently employed by the shah, government officials, and major merchants or hired incidentally by merchants and private individuals. Two kinds of foot messengers may have existed: *shater* (شاطر), who appear to have been the better trained, and *qased* (قاصد).⁴ Both were long-distance runners. *Qaseds* are mentioned in Aq-Qoyunlu times, but as a generic term rather than a specific type of messenger.⁵

¹ For more information on the pre-1500 postal system in Iran, see Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids. Their empire in Afghanistan and eastern Iran*, 72, 76, 93–95; Silverstein, *Postal systems in the pre-modern Islamic world*; and Allsen, “Imperial Posts, West, East, and North, A Review Article,” 239.

² Khonji, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Amini*, 189, 207.

³ Mervi, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Naderi*, 159, 182, 912, 936, 959, 964, 967, 1000, 1017, 1032.

⁴ There are many other terms in Persian to denote a messenger, including *peyk* (پیک; see, e.g., Vasefi, *Badaye*, vol. 1, 493–94, 496), but such were hardly used during the Safavid-Afsharid-Zand period, and never by European sources. I have therefore not included these, as such would also not change the situation discussed below.

⁵ Khonji, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Amini*, 196, 215.

Chapar

To send orders and distribute or receive information and news, the shah and his officials exchanged messages across the country, even though the relay station system of reserve horses that had existed under the *barid* and *yam* system no longer existed in Safavid times.⁶ Thus, if a message was very urgent, it was sent by *chapari* or *chaparvar*—i.e., post-haste—referring to the name of these express messengers.⁷ *Chapars* were not only sent with oral or written messages, their regular occupation, but occasionally also with presents and goods.⁸

Officials in the capital, provincial governors, and other important local officials used these *chapars* to inform the shah, army, and civil authorities when needed.⁹ The *chapars*, however, were not the only messengers mounted on horseback. The royal army and governors also made use of express messengers, often Arabs, mounted on fast dromedaries or *jam-mazeh*.¹⁰ The *chapars* were not specially trained messengers: any person from among the royal court or a government official's retinue could be used as such, depending on the circumstances, meaning that high-ranking persons were also used.¹¹ Express couriers with diplomatic messages from the shah were sometimes referred to as *chapar-e ilchigari*, and local governors were ordered to provide a departure escort (*badraqeh*) for such messengers.¹²

People were obliged to obey the *chapars*, as they were certainly on official and urgent government business. Thus, *chapars* wore a special, immediately recognizable outfit: a white cloth was hung around the messenger's neck by the government official (usually a governor or court official) whose message the *chapar* was carrying.¹³ If the messenger was accompanied by somebody else, that person would also wear the same outfit. In 1648, this outfitting was described as follows:

This white cloth was crosswise bound around the breast and back and in front a knot was made. This knot the messenger may not undo on pain of corporal punishment until he had reached his destination and has handed over the letter. This is done, partly so that the imperial post may be recognized, and partly so that messenger does not stop long to care for his body.¹⁴

⁶ Villotte, *Voyages d'un Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Arménie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie*, 180.

⁷ Anonymous, 'Alamara-ye Shah Tahmasp, 350; Astarabadi, *Az Sheikh Safi ta Shah Safi (az Tarikh-e Soltani)*, 256 (*beh-rasm-e chapari*); Moshizi, *Tadhkireh-ye Safaviyeh-ye Kerman*, 395 (*beh esm-e chapari* from the Makran to Kerman in 1081/1670–71); Don Juan of Persia, *Don Juan of Persia, A Shi'ah Catholic*, 225, 248.

⁸ For reference to their primary occupation, see Mervi, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Naderi*, vol. 1, 101, 133, 156, 158–59, 170, 175, 180; for reference to gift and good delivery, see *Ibid.*, 126.

⁹ Anonymous, 'Alamara-ye Shah Tahmasp, 209, 219, 388; Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 1, 686; Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 160–61; Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia being Nine Years' Travels, 1672–1681*, vol. 3, 40 ("Chuper, that is, a Post with Royal Order"); Fraser, *The History of Nadir Shah formerly called Thomas Kuli Khan*, 189 (*choppar*, an express messenger); Zak'aria of Agulis, *The Journal of Zak'aria of Agulis*, 84; Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 56; Behbahani, *Badaye' al-Akhbar*, 15–16, 54.

¹⁰ Shirazi, *Fotuh-at-e Homayan*, 143. Kaempfer (*Exotic Attractions in Persia, 1684–1688. Travels & Observations*, 457) mentions three travel options: "Either fast runners شاطر the *sjathir*, or mounted couriers چپر the *tsjapaar*, or cameleers mounted on slow-footed animals." As to the camels, Barbaro-Contarini 1873, part 2, 24 opines: "the dromedary being so swift as to travel without intermission further than any other animal." The camel riders probably were selected from those attached to an army. Sistani, *Ehya al-Moluk*, 376 (300 *jamazeh-ye savar-e tofangchi*).

¹¹ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 201; Zak'aria of Agulis, *The Journal of Zak'aria of Agulis*, 126 (Sarukhan Bek).

¹² Puturidze, *Persidskie istoricheskie dokumenty v knigokhranilishchakh Gruzii*, vol. 1/4, doc. 3 (Nader Shah sent Mehr 'Ali Beg Daghestani to the Russian court as an express messenger).

¹³ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 200; Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

¹⁴ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 148. "They have a coat tied behind them, and a small satchel, which passes through the pommel of the saddle, and is attached to the hind-bow. They wear a large scarf,

Even the most important civil servant personally performed this outfitting service, as Jürgen Andersen relates:

The royal chancellor with his own hands bound the white sash around the neck of myself, my interpreter and the [*chapar*] messenger; he bound it crosswise on the breast and back and made a knot in front and gave me a royal missive for the governor of Erevan.¹⁵

One hundred years later, this outfit had still not changed. According to Hanway, “These couriers wear a white sash girded from their shoulders to their waist many times round their bodies, by which means they are enabled to ride for many days without great fatigue.”¹⁶

For better protection, *chapiers* often traveled in pairs and were sometimes accompanied by Qizilbash soldiers and/or other persons with a special task to perform.¹⁷ As Jürgen Andersen, a German gunner in the military service of the Safavid army, reported: “On 8 February [1649], at the written order of the royal chancellor, I, accompanied by the royal messenger and several Qizilbash rode to Qandahar.”¹⁸ In the Safavid period, *chapar* messengers carried a musket, sword, and cudgel for protection.¹⁹ In the Afsharid period and thereafter, they “were armed with musquets, though in general they only wear sabres.”²⁰

As horses were unable to last the entire journey, given the speed at which *chapiers* traveled, they had to be changed regularly. Despite the need for such changes, there was still a preference for a special kind of horse. According to Bedik, writing in 1688, the preferred horse for the express messengers was one that:

looks somewhat like the horses that are called *Alascia*,²¹ but are more solid and faster in their gallop and their outward appearance. They are called *Ciab-cun*,²² i.e. ready for attack. They are able to make a journey day after day that is much longer than those that we earlier talked about, but in a less comfortable way. Among the Persians it is the messengers and couriers who use them, reason why they call these horses *ciapar*.²³

In the absence of *chapar-khanehs*, governors were obliged to supply horses for express messengers.²⁴ According to Tavernier, the governor or official who supplied the *chapar*'s horse sent a mounted person with him to retrieve it.²⁵ Further, the express messengers had the right to take better, less fatigued horses from anyone they met along the way. However, not every *chapar* had the right to do so, allegedly. According to Andersen:

which it turned twice at the neck, crosses over the back and the stomach, and is tied to the belt.” Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 200–201.

¹⁵ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 148, 151.

¹⁶ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 262.

¹⁷ Regarding traveling in pairs, see Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 200–201. Sometimes, there were more than two *chapar* riders. See Mo'men Kermani, *Sahifat al-Ershad*, 262, 271, 292, 346, 391, 428, 432, 450 (*chaparan*); Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 193, 204, 228, 235–36, 259, 308; Idem., vol. 4, 4 (a courier was “sent in company with another courier, as is frequently practised in Persia”).

¹⁸ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 159.

¹⁹ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 200 (“The bow goes over their body, and they have a dagger, sword and quiver at the side, and a cudgel in their hand”); Sistani, *Ehya al-Moluk*, 376.

²⁰ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 262; Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

²¹ *Asbi lāsha*, a horse bred from an Arabian sire and an Anatolian dam.

²² *Chāp uchun*, “ready to attack.”

²³ *Chapar*, “courier.” Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds. Pedros Bedik in Iran 1670–1675*, 285.

²⁴ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 201.

²⁵ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 1, 686.

Some messengers also have the privilege or freedom, when they meet with a horseman in the road, even when it is a Khan or Soltan, whatever rank he may have, to take a better and fresher horse than his own, and this may not be denied to him. Thereafter one may get it back.²⁶

However, this claim is refuted by other contemporary sources. According to Ange de St. Joseph, the requisitioning of horses was a serious imposition: not only were the horses taken by force, but they were left wherever the *chapar* wanted. St. Ange considered this to be a great injustice.²⁷ In theory, however, the horse would be later returned to the owner.²⁸

The *chapars* indeed took riding animals wherever they could find them, i.e., mostly from villagers. Armed *chapar* messengers often forced unwilling peasants, who generally fled at the sight of them, to surrender their horses. If escape was not possible, villagers would offer the *chapar* money to keep their horse or send someone to retrieve the animal.²⁹ Thus, wealthy merchants traveling in caravans only used donkeys as riding animals.³⁰ Even though they formally had the right to do so, *chapars* did not dare demand riding animals from important people or, in most cases, Europeans.³¹ The right to requisition a horse led to misuse. Père Philippe Avril reported that when his party met a *chapar* en route, the courier wanted to take their best horse. However, a present of a silver coin changed his mind, a seemingly common occurrence.³²

Although *chapars* had the right to use a borrowed horse only once, this happened more often on highly frequented routes. Thus, this regular horse borrowing amounted to a kind of service fee generally known as *ulagh*, and occasionally known as *kerayeh-ye ulagh*, *yabu-ye chapar*, and *savari*. Villagers might also be subject to *ulum* (the duty to provide road guidance), *ulufeh* (the obligation to provide fodder), *alafeh* (the provision of rations), and *qonalgha* (the fee for the upkeep of officials).³³ In the Afsharid-Zand period, the expense of supplying *chapars* with animals and provisions was called *ekhrajat-e motaraddedin wa chaparan* or just *chapari*.³⁴ Such costs not only included those of horses, but also food and fodder, as royal officials had to provide these services to couriers. However, if there were no royal officials residing along the *chapar*'s route, it appears the couriers had to pay for their own food. As Andersen reported: "Although the *schappar* or royal messenger, as has been mentioned, receives

²⁶ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 148–49.

²⁷ St. Ange de Joseph, *Souvenirs de la Perse safavid et autres lieux de l'Orient (1664–1678)*, 86–87; Villotte, *Voyages d'un Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Arménie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie*, 180. "They even dismount travellers, and often leave them with their baggage." Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 262.

²⁸ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 149; Gemelli Carer, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 56; Villotte, *Voyages d'un Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Arménie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie*, 180; Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

²⁹ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 201.

³⁰ Bazin, "Memoire sur les dernieres annees du regne de Thamas Kouli-Khan etc.," 294–95 (letter dated Bandar Abassy, February 2, 1751).

³¹ Cunaenus, *Journal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaenus naar Perzië in 1651–1652*, 246; Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 200–201; Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 1, 687 (he wrote that he was never harassed by them, while sometimes he gave them some wine to drink); Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

³² Avril, *Voyage en divers Etats D'Europe et D'Asie*, 82; Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 1, 687; Villotte, *Voyages d'un Missionnaire de la Compagnie de Jésus, en Turquie, en Perse, en Arménie, en Arabie, & en Barbarie*, 180–81 (sometimes a well-armed rider would beat the *chapar* for his insolence); Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia being Nine Years' Travels, 1672–1681*, vol. 2, 348 reported a similar case, but refused to acquiesce to the *chapar*'s demand. In the final instance, the *chapar*, after an altercation, went to a nearby village to get another horse.

³³ Schimkoreit, *Regesten publizierter safawidischer Herrscherurkunden*, see index; Dhabihi and Setudeh, *Az Astarā ta Astarabad*, vol. 6, doc. 35; Fumani, *Tarikh-e Gilan dar vaqaye'-ye salha-ye 923–1038 qamari*, 231. *Ulagh* was the term used for an express messenger in the Ottoman Empire. Avril, *Voyage en divers Etats D'Europe et D'Asie*, 82.

³⁴ for *ekhrajat-e motaraddedin wa chaparan*, see Davudi, "Asnad-e khandan-e kalantari-ye Sistan," doc. 10. In 1750, Ali Mardan Khan Bakhtiyari, when he arrived with his army at Shiraz, demanded—among many other things—*chapari*, i.e., payment for horses for courier service. Kalantar, *Ruznameh-ye Mirza Mohammad Kalantar-e Fars*, 42.

free food from royal servants, nevertheless there are many places and caravanserais where for money, one may neither for one self nor for one's horse obtain food."³⁵ In theory, the above-mentioned service fees could be deducted from the official tax burden.³⁶ However, due to the imposition of providing services to *chapiers*, some tried to receive an exemption from this duty. In 1712, after a petition from the Catholicos of Ejmiatsin, Shah Soltan Hoseyn (r. 1694–1722) explicitly "Forbade couriers [*ch'ap'ars*] to requisition horses from the people of Ejmiatsin."³⁷

Chapiers were paid by the recipient, not the sender, unless the letter was for the shah. This was the operating procedure for any messenger, whether *chapar*, royal *shater*, or any incidental servant sent with a message and/or present by his master. The level of payment depended on the nature of the service provided or the message contents, the importance of both the sender and recipient, and whether or not the recipient wanted to show respect and appreciation for the sender.³⁸ In the 1730s–1740s, according to EIC documents, *chapiers* usually received between four and twenty *tumans* as payment for their service, depending on the above parameters.³⁹ In 1739, Captain Elton and Mr. Graeme received, by courier, a decree from Reza Qoli Mirza, Nader Shah's eldest son and regent, granting the Russia Company the right to trade in Iran. "We presented the courier; with a complete Persian habit, which, according to the custom of the country, he wore in honour of us, and, in return, he insisted on our servants acceptance of three gold ducats."⁴⁰

In 1651, the royal *chapar* promised the VOC ambassador Cunaeus to deliver the royal *farman* to Bandar Abbas in five days, over a distance of about 1,000 km, 200 km per day. This sounds incredible, but it is reported that Shah Abbas traveled from Yazd to Shiraz, a distance of about 440 km, in 28.5 hours. When, in 1645, merchant Willem Bastinck was sent from Isfahan to Bandar Abbas to deliver the shah's invitation to come to court to the Dutch admiral, he was given the same rights as *chapar* couriers—i.e., to demand horses, fodder, and food en route. On June 14, 1645, Bastinck left Isfahan, arriving in Shiraz on June 16, Jahrom on June 17, and Lar on June 18. In Lar, however, he noticed he had lost the pouch with the royal order and had to return to Isfahan to get a new one. As a result, he only arrived in Bandar Abbas on June 27. Still however, by traveling day and night, he covered the distance between Isfahan and Shiraz (460 kms) in 48 hours, a pace of 9.5 km per hour on average.⁴¹ EIC data for the Afsharid period evidence these feats. *Chapiers* were able to ride between 70 and 100 miles per day. In one instance, a *chapar* traveled from Bandar Abbas to Isfahan in 7 days; this was exceptional, as this distance usually took between 10 to 14 days.⁴²

In the case of Andersen, who rode with a *chapar* three times, we have his exact itinerary. From this data, it is clear they were not riding post-haste, although faster than traveling by caravan, as he pointed out several times.

Itinerary and timetable: Mashhad to Isfahan⁴³

City	Date of departure	Date of arrival	Distance to
Mashhad	October 3		18 <i>farsakh</i>
Nishapur		October 5	

(Continued)

³⁵ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 148–49.

³⁶ Puturidze, *Persidskie istoricheskie dokumenty v knigokhranilishchakh Gruzii*, vol. 1/1, 68, doc. 27. On these and other similar service fees, see Floor 1998.

³⁷ Kat'oghikos Simeon, *Jambr*, 352.

³⁸ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 2, 201–202.

³⁹ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55–56.

⁴⁰ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 30.

⁴¹ Cunaeus, *Journal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651–1652*, 246, note 1.

⁴² Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

⁴³ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 148.

(Continued.)

City	Date of departure	Date of arrival	Distance to
Sabzevar		October 8	
Semnan		October 14	
Caravanserai Kulaschach caravanserai ⁴⁴		October 18	
Bumahe/Bumahen (بومهن).		October 25	5 days to
Kashan		October 31	4 days to
Isfahan		November 4	

The distance between Mashhad and Isfahan, about 1,150 km was covered in 32 days, not very fast. In fact, Andersen himself noted:

We had a very pleasant journey from Mashhad to here. Because when en route we came to a city or a place with royal servants we went to them and we enjoyed from them goodwill and friendship and were entertained free of charge.

From Isfahan, Andersen was sent with a *chapar* to Erevan, a journey that “usually needs 34, nay even 40 days travel. However, we, because wherever we found royal servants and wanted to have fresh horses, were able to do this journey much faster.” Andersen covered the distance of 1,350 km in 29 days, not much faster.

Itinerary and timetable: Isfahan to Erevan⁴⁵

City	Date of departure	Date of arrival	Distance
Isfahan	November 10		
Kashan		November 15	Caravan takes 3 days to
Misendro caravanserai ⁴⁶ on the right hand we saw lying in front of us the old residence city Heran. ⁴⁷		November 17	Caravan takes 5 days to
Qazvin		November 20	Five days to
Hammami-chay	21 November	November 22	
Tabriz		November 24	
Jolfa		November 30	Caravan needs 13-14 days
Erevan		December 9	
Total days			

After Andersen’s return to Isfahan on May 19, 1648, he reported: “together with a *chapar* or royal messenger and my interpreter, I was dispatched to the Soltan of Bandar or Gamron to fetch some cannon pieces and similar things.” This time he traveled faster, because Andersen arrived 16 days later in Lar, a distance requiring 27–30 days by caravan. He may have tarried in Shiraz, as he reported: “Here also live four Carmelite monks, Italians, as

⁴⁴ I have been unable to identify this caravanserai. The name probably is Kolah-e Shah.

⁴⁵ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 151.

⁴⁶ I have been unable to identify this caravanserai.

⁴⁷ Probably Rey (Tehran) is meant, which, as Rhaga, was a capital of the Arsacids.

well as two Capuchins, Frenchmen.”⁴⁸ From Lar, Andersen reached Bandar Abbas in two days, half the time it would take a caravan to cover this distance.

Itinerary and timetable: Isfahan to Bandar Abbas⁴⁹

City	Date of departure	Day of arrival	Distance
Isfahan	May 19		
Persepolis		May 25	
Shiraz		May 26	Caravan takes 27–30 days
Lar		June 4	Caravan takes 4 days
Gamron		June 6	

The relative slow pace at which Andersen traveled may be due to the fact that he was not a seasoned horse rider, a fact the *chapar* rider must have considered. Also, Andersen’s missions were not extremely time-sensitive.

It was only in the 1730s that Nader Shah (r. 1736–1747) tried to revive the old relay station system of reserve horses on certain roads.⁵⁰

Postmasters are supplied by the king’s orders with 30, 40, or 50 horses, according to their appointments; but as the demand is frequently greater than they are able to supply, and the Shah’s allowance very small, they are often obliged to abscond, which is a great cause of the barbarity of the couriers [*choppars*]. One of these postmasters being challenged upon this account by Nadir, answered in these terms: “That I have not supplied your couriers with horses, is most certain; because for every ten horses you provided, you sent me twenty couriers: a man had better die at once, than live to serve a rascal”; and immediately he stabbed himself: The Shah cried out “that is a brave fellow save him”: but it was too late.⁵¹

In April 1739, it seems the system had partially broken down. In that same month, the Dutch reported that there was almost no news of Nader Shah, who was campaigning in India at that time, in Isfahan. This lack of news, according to the Dutch, was due to the fact that all the *chapar* stations had been demolished and the soldiers in them withdrawn by Nader Shah to serve in his army. The abandonment of the relay postal system seems to have concerned only the routes between Mashhad and Naderabad (Kandahar) and between Isfahan and Kerman.⁵²

Nader Shah’s successor and murderer, his nephew, Adel Shah, continued to use the *chapar* system and even intended to reestablish the relay system with reserve horses.⁵³ In 1747, he issued an edict outlining what policy changes would be made to show that his reign would be different from that of his tyrannical uncle. The oppressive *chapar* system was one of the subjects addressed in this edict.

What concerns the support of post-horses, those to whom this office belongs shall take proper care; and for the future double the number of horses shall be kept at each stage, as was lately ordered; and the money for maintaining of them shall be taken out of the

⁴⁸ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 153; see also, Anonymous, *A Chronicle*, vol. 1, 369–70.

⁴⁹ Andersen and Iversen, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibungen*, 153.

⁵⁰ Given the chaotic state of the kingdom, Tahmasp II still used the courier system of his predecessors. Fasa’i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, vol. 1, 506.

⁵¹ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 262.

⁵² Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 81; Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 56.

⁵³ Gmelin, *Travels through Northern Persia 1770–1774*, 123 (Adel Shah).

treasury of the province. In case of any deficiency, a representation being made to us, it shall be supplied from other treasuries.⁵⁴

Despite these good intentions, Adel Shah was soon usurped and killed by his brother, setting off a long period of succession wars. The fact that 116 *chapari* horses were captured in 1165/1751–52 suggests that the relay system was still functional in parts of Fars at that time.⁵⁵ The relay stations only served royal messengers, while the public still suffered the demand for their horses.⁵⁶ Such horses were frequently not returned to their owners.⁵⁷

As a result of the drawn out drawn-out succession wars, the relay station system broke down entirely in the second half of the eighteenth century, as anarchy prevailed across much of Iran at that time. This did not mean that, for example, the successor states of the Durranis⁵⁸ and Zands, alongside their governors, no longer employed courier messengers; they did. Such messengers operated just like in the Safavid period: there were no fixed relay stations with reserve horses, so messengers instead changed horses where they could find them.⁵⁹

Shater

As stated in the introduction, there are two terms to denote foot messengers: *shater* (شاطر) and *qased* (قاصد). Were these different types of messengers, as some think, or were they the same?⁶⁰ Was there a difference between the *shater* and the *qased*? Let us resolve this problem up front, to clear up any confusion or misunderstanding about the two terms.

The VOC, EIC, and major Persian, Armenian, and Banyan merchants permanently employed one or more foot messengers, or hired them when needed. It seems the *shaters* in the service of such merchants and trading companies were the same as those referred to as *qased*. Good is of the opinion that the *shaters* and *qaseds* were two different types of messengers. He argues: “Cossids ... seem to have been employed on long distance routes, only used between Bandar Abbas-Kerman or on shorter trips to accompany others as protection.”⁶¹ The problem with Good’s argumentation is that this limited regional use of and scanty data about *qaseds*, in and of itself, does not constitute proof of different types of messengers. In Persian texts, foot messengers are almost invariably called *shater*, while the generic term for messenger, *qased*, is rarely used.⁶² European sources always refer to messengers as either *shater* or use the various terms for “foot messenger” in their respective languages; they do not use the term *qased*.⁶³ In fact, letters from the *English Factories in India*, published by Foster, use the term *cossid* (*qased*) only in letters from India, not Iran. In 1651,

⁵⁴ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 4, 289.

⁵⁵ Fasa’i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, vol. 1, 590; Kalantar, *Ruznameh-ye Mirza Mohammad Kalantar-e Fars*, 42.

⁵⁶ Bazin, “Memoire sur les dernieres annees du regne de Thamas Kouli-Khan etc.,” 294 (letter dated Bandar Abassy, February 2, 1751).

⁵⁷ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 262. Villagers in Gilan had even barricaded the road out of fear of the shah’s couriers. Idem, vol. 1, 261.

⁵⁸ al-Monshi, *Tarikh-e Ahmad Shahi*, 11a, 84a, 297a, 583a.

⁵⁹ In 1194/1780, Karim Khan sent *chaps* to all parts of his realm to mobilize troops. Ghaffari Kashani, *Golshan-e Morad (Tarikh-e Zandiyeh)*, 522; Kalantar, *Ruznameh-ye Mirza Mohammad Kalantar-e Fars*, 62; Nami-ye Esfahani, *Tarikh-e Gitigoshā*, 110; Gmelin, *Travels through Northern Persia 1770–1774*, 78–79 (Karim Khan), 291 (Hedayat Khan of Gilan).

⁶⁰ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55.

⁶¹ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55.

⁶² For example, *qased* is only mentioned once in Anonymus, *’Alamara-ye Safavi*, 210, while the term *shater* is used many times in the same text.

⁶³ E.g., Valentyn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, vol. 5, 245 (post-looper), 251 (Sjatiers, of loopers), 259 (in 1691, Ambassador van Leene’s Sjatie-Bassa [zijnde de overste der Sjatiers]).

the VOC ambassador Cunaeus sent a message from Shiraz to Bandar Abbas with the *shater* Jowhar.⁶⁴ It is of course possible that a royal messenger had been attached to the embassy as a courtesy, but it is unlikely, as the same Jowhar is later referred to simply as the company's *looper* or foot messenger.⁶⁵ Thus, it is clear that a foot messenger was called *shater*, rarely *qased*, in Safavid and Afsharid Iran.

According to Chardin, *shaters* were express messengers who were “the Meanest and Wretchedest of Men.”⁶⁶ Chardin was probably referring to this group of people's lower-class origins, from among the *qalandar* or dervish movement, which had dominated religious life in Iran for centuries. In particular, *shaters* seem to have originated from the *'ayyars* and *javanmardan*, and were linked with the *zur-khaneh*, as indicated by their dress and activities.⁶⁷ In the Abbasid and Seljuq periods, members of vigilant bands and paramilitary local defense groups were variously known as *'ayyarun*, *ahdath*, and *shuttar* (sing. *shater*).⁶⁸ For example, one official boasted that his *shater* did not have a peer in *'ayyari* or chivalrous behavior.⁶⁹ Hoseyn-e Kurd-e Shabestari, the hero of a popular Persian romance, is a late example of the traditional Persian ideal of chivalry. In the story, he is said to be a *shater-e bachcheh*.⁷⁰ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the *shater-e bachcheh* was also the subject of a few poetic lines (*qet'at*) in the *shahr-e ashub* genre.

Description of the fast-running young shater (shater-e bachcheh)

The young *shater* whose agility is the moon's envy
 Yesterday, came to me perspiring
 His thin and graceful body covered with sweat
 Like a raw silver wire in a wet pearl⁷¹

In the Safavid and Afsharid period, the term *shater* denoted a foot messenger who, when in the employ of the shah or other highly-placed officials, was always at his employer's service.⁷² It seems there were two types of *shaters*. The first were those in royal service who, before being accepted into that rank, had to complete an endurance race.⁷³ The second

⁶⁴ Cunaeus, *Journal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651-1652*, 130.

⁶⁵ Cunaeus, *Journal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651-1652*, 214. Dutch sources usually just use the term foot messenger or *looper*; if a Persian term is used, it is invariably *shater*.

⁶⁶ Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673-1677*, 283. In Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 9, 90, he describes them as “a kind of footmen, who go in front of the horse, to support me on horseback, in case my strength was not sufficient.” See also, Du Mans, *Estat de la Perse en 1660*, 103, 157.

⁶⁷ For example, the bells worn by the *shaters* appear to have been peculiar to the Heydari *qalandars*, see Beyza'i 1337, 29, note 2; see also Golchin-Ma'ani, *Shahr-e ashub dar she'r-e farsi*, 152-53 (*qalandar*).

⁶⁸ To discuss the link between the *shatters*, the *'ayyars*, and the like would go beyond the scope of this article. I refer the reader to Beyza'i, *Tarikh-e Varzesh-e Bastani-ye Iran (Zurkhaneh)*, 65-70; Kadkani, *Qalandariyeh dar Tarikh*; Cahen, “Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l'Asie musulmane du moyen age”; and Shakeri, “Javanmardi.” There is also a well-known story line by Sa'di (Golestan II, 5), which states: “I will be of service to men and not an encumbrance (بار شاطر باشم نه بار خاطر).” Also, see, Vasefi, *Badaye'*, vol. 1, 496. The patron saint of the *shaters* was `Amr b. Damri Omayyeh (d. ca. 55 A.H.), a companion of the prophet Mohammad, see Afshari, *Ayin-e Javanmardan*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, *'Alamara-ye Safavi*, 231.

⁷⁰ Anonymous, *Hoseyn-e Kord Shabestari*, 328.

⁷¹ For the full text of the poem, see Golchin-Ma'ani, *Shahr-e ashub dar she'r-e farsi*, 155-56.

⁷² Herbert 1634, 101, 172 (“a shooter or footman”); Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 38. “We met a Sater, that is, a letter carrier, on foot. Around his belt he had many little bells that serve to keep him awake, since he walks day and night.” Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, 291. The translator and annotator of Bembo's text interpreted Bembo's “Sater” as *chapar*, which is clearly wrong, as is evident from his description of the Sater's function and outfit. Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, 289, note 2, 426.

⁷³ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 38-39. The royal *shaters* or foot messengers should not be confused with other footmen, the so-called *rika*, “who were under the chief errand runner (*rika-bashi*). He was the chief of all errand runners (*rika*) and he had to be in attendance of the victorious Shah with other *rikas*, when he traveled

were those employed by private persons, major merchants, and trading companies. In 1617, Spanish Ambassador Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa reported:

In Persia, instead of footmen, the king and persons of some rank generally retain several rough [*sueltos*] men who are runners, called Xatales [*shaters*], which is the same as couriers, [...] Their function is to carry a blanket, or the cover that they place on the horse after [the rider] dismounts as well as to most rapidly carry letters and any other dispatches to one place or the other.⁷⁴

All *shaters* were under the so-called *shater-bashi*, an official of the royal court.⁷⁵ According to the *Dastur al-Moluk*, his task was as follows:

The chief messenger (*shater-bashi*). He had to be in attendance of the victorious Shah with other *shaters*, when he traveled or was in residence. He was not expected to be negligent at anytime. Inspection of presence and absence of [his subordinates] is his responsibility. With his approval and the recommendation of H.E. the court's steward, after it was signed by H.E. the grand-vizier, a fixed salary and cash would pass from their office and an amount of [blank] was assigned to him.⁷⁶

One of the *shater-bashi's* tasks at court was to hold the reins of the horse the shah had selected while the *uzangi qurchisi-bashi* held the stirrups and helped the shah mount.⁷⁷ Another, likely incidental, task was to attend to certain ceremonial duties, such as when the *shater-bashi* was present during the farewell escort (*badraqeh*) of the VOC ambassador Johan van Leene in 1691.⁷⁸

Shaters formed a separate group of people, as the profession was passed from father to son. From the age of six or seven, they trained to be long-distance runners. First, they learned to walk lightly and, in the first year, ran a daily distance of one league of 3.25 km in a kind jog. In the second year, they ran two to three leagues and, in the following years, the distance was increased proportionally. When the aspiring *shater* reached the age of eighteen, they were given a messenger bag filled with flour, a plate for baking bread, and a bottle of water.⁷⁹ They then had to run carrying this load, a task training them for, when on the job as messengers, the need to take short-cuts and not use the caravan routes. *Shaters* would even cross waterless areas and, thus, needed to be accustomed to carrying provisions.⁸⁰

When a *shater* wanted to rise to the rank of master runner, and his employer agreed, he had to pass a test. In Isfahan, this meant he had to run seven times the distance between the Ala Qapi and the so-called "marker of the courier's race," called the *mil-e shater davani*, on a mountain (Kuh-e Soffeh) three miles from Isfahan. He was not allowed to eat during that time, although drinking was permitted. Each time he reached the sign post, he took a small flag, which he placed near the mark. After the royal *shaters* approved that he passed

or was in residence." Ansari 2007, 126. Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 251 translates *rika* as "stirrup-holders," a task they undoubtedly also performed. *Rika* means "loved, beloved object, a category of ushers at the royal court." They were not necessarily beautiful boys, as suggested in Mo`in's dictionary, because many were adult, even older, males.

⁷⁴ De Silva y Figueroa, *Comentarios de la Embaxada al Rey Xa Abbas de Persia (1614-1624)*, vol. 2, 345, see also 297.

⁷⁵ Valentyn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, vol. 5, 259.

⁷⁶ Floor-Faghfoory 2007, p. 126. The *shater-bashi* was paid 670 tumans per year and was also governor of Shiraz. Fasa'i, *Farsnameh-ye Naseri*, vol. 1, 199.

⁷⁷ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 300; Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 221 (*sindar-basci, ozangu-curchisi*); Kaempfer, *Exotic Attractions in Persia, 1684-1688. Travels & Observations*, 169; Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 5, 365-366; Du Mans, *Estat de la Perse en 1660*, 24.

⁷⁸ Valentyn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, vol. 5, 259.

⁷⁹ The plate for baking bread was a so-called *saj* or *taveh*, see Floor, *The History of Bread in Iran*, 39-40.

⁸⁰ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 38. `Isa Bek Zanganeh-nevis was the son of Shater Mohammad and the grandson of Shater `Ali. Valeh Esfahani, *Khold-e Barin*, 463.

the test, he was promoted.⁸¹ This kind of race was also run in provincial capitals in case a *shater* in a governor's employ wanted to become a master of his profession. One such race took place in Shiraz on August 1, 1587, in which the runner, Shater `Ali, ran thirty *farsakh* (180 km) and collected five arrows.⁸² For a race in Isfahan in the 1670s, the *shater* wore a kind of uniform particular to them:

He was in his Shirt with a single Roll of Cloth pretty thin, with a Silver Ground, which cover'd his Breech. He carried a Linnen Cloth in several Doubles folded upon his Stomach in a St. Andrew's Cross, which kept his Breasts up very close, and was tied to his Waste: And he had another Linnen Cloth that went between his Legs well bound: His Arms, Legs, and Thighs, were rubed with an Ointment of a dark Yellow Colour made up with a mixture of Oil of Roses and an Oil of Nutmegs and Cinamon: He had Footmens Shoes on upon his bare Feet, which is a Shooing peculiar to them: And though he had no Stockings on, as I have said, he had Garters. In short, he had a Cap upon his Head which came almost to the bottom of his Ears, adorn'd with three or four little Feathers, as light as Wind. Upon his Bonnet, Neck, Arms, and upon his Stomach, you see Amulets, hung as I have been representing to you but just now.⁸³

The description of the folded cloth is reminiscent of the white cloth the *chapiers* were outfitted with when they began their messenger service (see above). The description of the *shater's* dress, alongside the drawing of a foot messenger by Cornelius de Bruyn, is slightly different from the one given by Chardin. De Bruyn writes, when leaving Isfahan on October 26, 1704:

We had several couriers, whose dress is very different from those who live in Ispahan.⁸⁴ The reader will find a representation of them in plate 110. The plumes which they wear on their turbans, and the ornaments that accompany them, are of various colours. Their vests are usually of scarlet, and little bells are fastened to their girdles, with tufts of black silk. The sound of these bells is heard at a considerable distance, when the couriers are in motion. Those who hire them, are obliged to furnish them with this habit, which becomes their own at the end of the journey, over and above the wages they receive. It is usual to hire as many of these couriers as are judged necessary; with a bearer of *Caljan*, or a bottle of tobacco, who is mounted on a mule, that likewise carries two portmantles [*Jagtan*], or leathern cases, filled with coffee, rose-water, tobacco, and such like accommodations. We have represented one of these persons, with his equipage, in plate 111. The *Persians* are always attended by some of these servants, in their travels, and are imitated by all Europeans of any rank.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 117–18. For detailed descriptions of this race, see Appendix I.

⁸² Beyza'i, *Tarikh-e Varzesh-e Bastani-ye Iran (Zurkhaneh)*, 68–69; Mir Ja'fari, "Shateri va Shaterdavani dar `Asr-e Safavi," 55.

⁸³ Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 208. For a description of *shaters'* clothes during Shah Safi's reign, see Mir Ja'fari, "Shateri va Shaterdavani dar `Asr-e Safavi," 60. He refers to a source here that does not give a reference for this description. A similar description, also without reference, is given by Barzegar, *Tarikh-e Varzesh-e Iran*, 132–33. These descriptions are probably based on illustrations of the footmen. Apparently, the dress of Uzbek *shaters* was different from that of Timurid ones because, to circumvent enemy sentinels, a Timurid *shater* would dress like a Chaghatay *shater* (*beh ravesh-e shater-e chaghatatayi sakhteh*). Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Safavi*, 231; Anonymous, *Hoseyn-e Kord Shabestari*, 372; Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Shah Tahmasp*, 42.

⁸⁴ In the original Dutch version (p. 201): "whose dress is entirely different from the way they usually are in the cities." Other differences with the English translation include: "the feathers, plumes and wrought flowers"; and "they have several large bells fastened to their belt. ...The tassels that they have on their body are of black silk."

⁸⁵ Le Bruyn, *Travels into Muscovy, Persia and Part of the East-Indies*, vol. 2, 2. In 1617, they were described as those "who dress in a short red colored damask *jubbeh* [coat] that extends to the knee. On their turbans they wear a big plume of feathers that reaches down to their shoulders, and their belts hold several tiny bells and an iron ax or mace." De Silva y Figueroa, *Comentarios de la Embaxada al Rey Xa Abbas de Persia (1614–1624)*, vol. 2, 345.



Figure 1. *Shater*. Le Bruyn, *Travels into Muscovy, Persia and Part of the East-Indies*, vol. 1, plate 110.

The difference in Chardin and de Bruyn's descriptions of the *shaters'* dress is clear when seeing their drawings, as well as those by others (Figs. 1 and 2). De Bruyn's drawing is the most detailed one, as is expected from a professional artist. However, he pointed out that in Isfahan and other cities, *shaters* wore a different dress, which is borne out by Kaempfer's depiction (Fig. 3). It would seem the dress drawn by Kaempfer was indeed what could be called the *shaters'* "court dress," as the same is also depicted in several contemporary Persian miniatures (Fig. 4). However, the miniature of *Shater Abbas Sabuhi* (Fig. 5) shows a dress more akin to that drawn by de Bruyn. Chardin also did a drawing of the *shater*, which is different and much more simple than the others. The only explanation I can offer is that Chardin's draughtsman made a simplified drawing of the *shater's* dress, focusing



Figure 2. *Shater*. Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, Atlas, plate XXII.

on the characteristics of shape, length, tightness, etc., because this and other drawings of people accompanied Chardin's description of male and female dress in Iran.⁸⁶

There may have been differences between the outfits of *shaters* in royal service and those in the service of officials, in particular the number of bells they wore. Gemelli Careri met a *shater en route*,

who had six bells on his belt. Those in the service of princes were allowed to wear 12 bells, which served both to warn people of his approach as well as to urge him on. Some also wore long colored plumes, which were attached to one another as a palm.⁸⁷

Others had even fewer bells. For example, another *shater* seen by Gemelli Careri, "this time one in the service of the *divan-begi*, wore ... three small bells at the back of his belt."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 4, 3–18.

⁸⁷ Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 68, 265.

⁸⁸ Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 117.



Figure 3. *Shater*. Kaempfer, *Exotic Attractions in Persia*, 1684–1688, 171.

Once a *shater* had joined the ranks of royal *shaters*, he had to be in attendance wherever the shah went. In fact, Membré reported in 1540:

[whenever] the King rides about 10 footmen go before him, who are called *shatirs*; each of them wears a white cloth skirt, cut short to the knees; and they wear trousers, and have plumes on their heads, and on the front of their belts, a little bell. And such men always go in company with Qadi Jahan, his minister, the Qurchibashi and sometimes Bahram Mirza, his [only uterine] brother.⁸⁹

The number of *shaters* preceding or accompanying an official was directly related to his importance. For example, although Tahmasp I was only preceded by ten *shaters* in 1540, he ordered that twelve accompany Emperor Homayun, each of whom wore a hat with golden bells and pheasant feathers (*qarqavol*), a short gold braided garment (*qantureh*), and golden battle-axes (*najaq* or *najak*) on their belt.⁹⁰ This higher number of *shaters* was likely a form of flattery and show of respect.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539–1542)*, 24. The *shaters*' dress was the same in case of government officials: "he wears wide stockings to the knee and cloth breeches and a shirt of white cloth to the knee. And he has a little bell on the front of his belt." *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹⁰ Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Shah Tahmasp*, 413. They still wore a similar outfit in 1587 in Shiraz, when Shater `Ali wore a gold-brocaded figured *qantureh*, a white *taqiye* (a headband; a ribbon or other band used to tie the hair up, keep a headdress in place, or for decoration), and an adorned belt. Beyza'i, *Tarikh-e Varzesh-e Bastani-ye Iran (Zurkhaneh)*, 69; see also Fotuhi, *Sharafnameh*, 344–45; see also Vasefi, *Badaye'*, vol. 1, 494, 496.

⁹¹ Given that Shah Soleyman was preceded by twelve *shaters* in 1684 (Kaempfer, *Exotic Attractions in Persia, 1684–1688. Travels & Observations*, 171), it is also possible that Shah Tahmasp increased the number of his footmen to twelve prior to Homayun's arrival in Iran.



Figure 4. *Shater*. Drawing after Nezami's *Khamseh*, 1560–1561, 10r, BnF (Persian Supplement 1956). Credit: Guus Floor.

It was not only the shah who employed *shaters*, but also local rulers and high-ranking government officials. Khan Ahmad Khan, the local ruler of Gilan, had a *shater* in his employ, as did Luarsab II, the Georgian viceroy (1605–1614).⁹² As Membré reported: “When a soltan [governor] goes to court, there goes before him on foot a servant whom they call *shater*.”⁹³ It seems that over time the number of *shaters* in employ increased and, as Gemelli Careri reported in 1690, “The magnates employed many of these *shaters* to show off their importance.”⁹⁴ Upon entering Isfahan in August 1732, Tahmasp Qoli Khan—the later Nader

⁹² Fumani, *Tarikh-e Gilan dar vaqaye`-ye salha-ye 923-1038 qamari*, 114; Arak`el of Tabriz, *The History of Vardapet Arak`el of Tabriz*, vol. 1, 88.

⁹³ Membré, *Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)*, 34. “One of the *shaters* of Mohammad Hasan Khan.” Ghaffari Kashani, *Golshan-e Morad (Tarikh-e Zandiyeh)*, 52. In 1639, the Khan of Erevan escaped “with only one speedy runner [*shat`er*].” Zak`aria of K`anak`er, *The Chronicle of Deacon Zak`aria of K`anak`er*, 126; Natanzi, *Noqvāt al-Athar*, 49; Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Shah Tahmasp*, 45, 47, 156, 320–21.

⁹⁴ Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 117.



Figure 5. Shater Abbas Sabuhi. Malek Museum Tehran.

Shah—was accompanied by, in addition to many other civil and military personnel, 400 *shaters* wearing a golden, bejeweled dagger (*khanjar*) in their waistband and walking on either side of him.⁹⁵ Also, at less official occasions, Nader Shah was always accompanied by

⁹⁵ Mervi, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Naderi*, vol. 1, 229; *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 490.

shaters.⁹⁶ Tahmasp Khan Jalayer Wakil al-Dowleh, governor of Isfahan and army commander in the 1730s, was also accompanied by 400 *shaters*.⁹⁷

The royal *shaters* did not only accompany the shah or high officials for show and pageantry; they were also used on the spot, if the need arose, to carry messages to whomever and wherever their master required.⁹⁸ These messages were not necessarily always written; they could be also transmitted orally.⁹⁹ Sometimes *shaters* were mounted.¹⁰⁰ Under Nader Shah, foot messengers were also used to keep important persons “under custody.”¹⁰¹

Shaters were able to run long distances and were excellent dancers and jumpers. This aspect was strong among those in the employ of high-ranking officials, who often had *shaters* perform dances for their amusement. In fact, when the shah danced on one occasion, a person in attendance was asked how well the king had danced, and he replied: “By God, he is an excellent *shater*.”¹⁰²

It seems that some *shaters* had a special relationship with their employer, probably due to their particular skills.¹⁰³ `Obeyd Khan, the Uzbek ruler, had a *shater* in his employ named Shaneh-bin, meaning he could “foretell” by “reading” sheep scapulas, who was asked to foresee how a forthcoming battle would end.¹⁰⁴ The same `Obeyd Khan wanted to seize Herat in the spring of 921 A.H./1515, but his attack was repelled. Among the defenders, Shater `Abdollah figured prominently due to his bravery.¹⁰⁵ Some *shaters* were employed in important official positions. In 957 A.H./1550, Shater Beg was the *darugheh* or tax collector of the Yaqqa Turkmans, and a relative and confidante of the Turkman governor of Astarabad.¹⁰⁶ In 1615, Shater Shahi Nuri was the castellan of the citadel of Tiflis.¹⁰⁷ Shater Abbas Sabuhi, also known as Sag-e Lavand (سگ لوند) or the Libertine Dog, was a poet in the service of Shah `Abbas I (r. 1587–1629). On one occasion, he was supposed to have joined the shah’s hunting party but arrived late, and thus was unable to participate. To apologize, he wrote a very self-deprecating poem:

سحر آمدم به کویت به شکار رفته بودی تو که سگ نبرده بودی به چکار رفته بودی؟

In the morning I came to your quarters,
You had already left for hunting;
You had not taken the dog – why were you gone?¹⁰⁸

⁹⁶ Mervi, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Naderi*, vol. 1, 346. Towards the end of his reign, he was said to have had 200 *shaters*. Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 251.

⁹⁷ Mervi, *Tarikh-e Alamara-ye Naderi*, vol. 2, 643.

⁹⁸ Qomi, *Kholasat al-Tavarikh*, vol. 1, 434; Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Safavi*, 188, 197, 201, 210, 283, 323–27, 366, 410, 479, 514–15, 520, 524, 557; Behbahani, *Badaye` al-Akhbar*, 46; Tehrani, *Mer`at-e Varedat*, 185.

⁹⁹ Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Safavi*, 277, 283 (oral messages).

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Safavi*, 188, 197 (*savar va shater*), 326 (*shater mounted*).

¹⁰¹ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 153, 243 (“Such were the terrors of Nadir’s tyranny, that this single person [i.e., the royal foot messenger] kept eight or ten officers of distinction, with all their servants, as prisoners”).

¹⁰² Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient*, vol. 3, 453, 457; Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 208; Shirazi, *Takmelat al-Akhbar (tarikh-e Safaviyeh as aghaz ta 978)*, 119 refers to Soltan Mohammad Mirza, his royal patron who died in 1561, as “*shater-e Mohammad maghfur*,” i.e., the late Shater Mohammad, indicating that the term *shater* also had a positive connotation used to refer to royalty.

¹⁰³ One Shater `Ali is frequently mentioned in the early Safavid period. Jonabadi, *Rowzat al-Safa*, 403; Hayati Tabrizi, *A Chronicle of the Early Safavids and the Reign of Shah Isma`il (907–930/1501–1524)*, 333; Ghaffari Qazvini, *Tarikh-e Jahanara*, 285.

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, *Alamara-ye Safavi*, 437.

¹⁰⁵ Khvandamir, *Habib al-Siyar*, vol. 4, 580–81.

¹⁰⁶ Rumlu, *Ahsan al-Tavarikh*, 447; Eskander Beg, *Tarikh-e `Alamara-ye `Abbasi*, vol. 1, 107; Jonabadi, *Rowzat al-Safa*, 335–36.

¹⁰⁷ Eskander Beg, *Tarikh-e `Alamara-ye `Abbasi*, vol. 2, 1025–26.

¹⁰⁸ Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature*, 100.

Other *shaters*, outstanding ones, were well-known beyond the confines of the royal court. For example, Shah Soleyman (r. 1666–1694) had a large number of *shaters* in his service, amongst whom there was one “called *Hot Hot*,¹⁰⁹ the hoopoe, who is better than all others.”¹¹⁰

While the royal *shaters* could only be used by the shah and his officials, this did not mean that “non-royal” *shaters*, so to speak, could not serve as footmen for others. In fact, affluent notables and merchants always moved around the city on horseback preceded by one or two *shaters* to make way.¹¹¹ Likewise, everyone’s mail was delivered by *shaters* or foot runners either permanently employed by wealthy private persons, major merchants, and trading companies or employed incidentally. Merchants, both Iranian and foreign, were these letter carriers’ main employers, alongside missionaries. Merchants in particular needed market information and were therefore, either directly or indirectly, willing to pay for that information.¹¹²

Private persons often made use of the services of company messengers. When *shaters* were hired for a letter-carrying journey, they made this known in the city so as to get letters from other people, and thus additional money, for the same destination.¹¹³ The *shaters* traveled fast and were simply dressed. According to Della Valle in 1618,

Sciaters, or couriers, who deliver letters both ways, but they also go in front of the horses like footmen, with a bunch of feathers on their head and small bells on their belt that ring, so that those who are on the same road make way for them when they hear them. They have their legs and thighs partly bare, with a smart shirt, but they are always at a trot, or rather galloping, and if people would see them at Rome they would never believe how much distance they cover per day.¹¹⁴

In 1690, Gemelli Careri confirmed Della Valle’s description, observing a *shater* who “wore short trousers, open as in the case of our runners. His legs and thighs were naked and greased with a certain oil to prevent tiredness.”¹¹⁵ Chardin provides additional information about how *shaters* traveled and what they carried apart from letters.

They are known in the Road by a Bottle of Water, and a Satchel they have at their Back, instead of a Knapsack, to carry Provision for thirty or forty Hours time, and to make more Speed, they leave the High-Road, and cross the Country: They are known also by their Shoes and some Bells, like our Wagon Horse Bells, which stick to their Girdle to keep them Awake. They are bred up to that Business, and it goes on from Father to Son; they are taught to walk at a good round Rate with the same Breath at eight Year old.¹¹⁶

The largest foreign trading company in Iran, the VOC, employed three permanent couriers, in addition to incidental ones, to maintain communications between the director in Bandar Abbas, the Isfahan office, and other locations (e.g., Kerman). This was necessary because the main office in Bandar Abbas wanted regular updates on the market and price developments in Isfahan. Therefore, messengers between the two factories were exchanged every

¹⁰⁹ *Hodhod* (هُدُود), the hoopoe.

¹¹⁰ Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds. Pedros Bedik in Iran 1670–1675*, 309.

¹¹¹ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 38 (he does not distinguish between royal and common *shaters*).

¹¹² On this information problem, see Floor 2000, pp. 120–23; Barendse 2002, pp. 164–69, and in particular, Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean The Global Trade Network of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*. Berkeley: UniCal Press, 2014 and Gagan D.S. Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands. An Eighteenth-Century World of Circulation and Exchange*. Cambridge: CUP, 2016.

¹¹³ Gmelin, *Travels through Northern Persia 1770–1774*, 85–86, 154, 193, 470.

¹¹⁴ Della Valle 1843, vol. 1, p. 541.

¹¹⁵ Gemelli Careri, *Giro del Mondo*, vol. 2, 117–18.

¹¹⁶ Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 283.

fortnight.¹¹⁷ When in June 1624, merchant Jan Granyer went from Isfahan to Bandar Abbas, he was ordered to send a messenger to Isfahan immediately after the VOC ships arrived with information about their lading. If they had already arrived and a messenger had already been sent, he then had to send another messenger to report what had happened since, “because with double letters we will be more certain how to act in the Company’s best interest in this country.”¹¹⁸

The EIC employed messengers as well, although it sometimes piggy-backed on the VOC or messengers employed by other merchants or missionaries to save money.¹¹⁹ This was not an unusual arrangement, as even competitors like the VOC and EIC often carried each other’s letter pouch by ship. Letter inviolability was generally respected, although rare exceptions occurred, usually in the case of war. In one such instance, be it an uncertain one, a letter was “received by way of Batavia on the 8th current. As this came open, no doubt the Dutch have made themselves acquainted with its contents.”¹²⁰

Often, the couriers employed by the Dutch and English were Armenians, which, given the close contacts between both the VOC and EIC with Armenian merchants, is not surprising. The use of Armenian messengers was particularly evident on postal routes to the Ottoman Empire, where Shi’ite Persian messengers would have had a difficult time for both religious (purity) and political reasons (suspicion of being spies). For letters outside Iran, the network of other merchants and, in particular, Catholic missionaries—such as the Carmelites and other religious orders—were also used.¹²¹

Private individuals, such as Chardin, also used *shaters* for the delivery of mail. In 1674, he employed a *shater* named Mohammad `Ali, who returned from Basra to Hormuz with a packet of letters.¹²² Likewise, Armenian and other merchants also hired *shaters*.¹²³ Catholic orders such as the Carmelites, Capuchins, and Augustinians also made use of these letter carriers.¹²⁴

Shaters’ remuneration differed according to the milieu in which they worked. In government circles, a royal *shater* might be richly rewarded. For example, Khvajeh Nezam al-Molk, who was sent as an envoy to appease Shah Esma`il in 1505, sent a *shater* to Soltan Hoseyn Mirza, the last Timurid ruler in Iran, who was so thrilled by the news of the mission’s result that he gave the *shater* 500 Khorasani tumans.¹²⁵ *Shaters* were also the target of court intrigue. In one case, a *shater* was given fifty tumans to arrive late, making the order to cancel an execution too late.¹²⁶ These kinds of rewards, however, were not paid for the delivery of normal mail. According to Chardin, “Messengers are hired at a very easy Rate; for they

¹¹⁷ Barendse, *The Arabian Seas 1640–1700*, 167; Siebertz, *Preise, Löhne und Lebensstandard im safavidischen Iran*, 16, 18.

¹¹⁸ Dunlop, *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis der Oostindische Compagnie in Perzië 1611–1638*, 54 (Instruction merchant Jan Granyer going to Bandar Abbas, 01 June 1624). They also used foot messengers to inform the director of the trading station, when he was traveling, of important events that had taken place, time of estimated arrival, etc., including the demise of members of staff. Le Bruyn, *Travels into Muscovy, Persia and Part of the East-Indies*, vol. 1, 246; *ibid.*, vol. 2, 121, 129. Therefore, traveling VOC ambassadors always had a large number of *shaters* in their retinue. In 1701, Ambassador Hoogkamer had twenty-five *loopers* or foot messengers with him. Valentyn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, vol. 5, 272.

¹¹⁹ Ferrier, *British-Persian Relations in the 17th Century*, 252; Barendse, *The Arabian Seas 1640–1700*, 166; Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55.

¹²⁰ Foster, *The English Factories in India*, vol. 8, 141 (Bantam July 1647). For the Dutch “circumvention” of letters in 1664, when the Dutch and English were at war, see Foster, *The English Factories in India*, vol. 12, 15–17.

¹²¹ Gollancz, *The Settlement of the Order of Carmelites in Mesopotamia*, 448, 454, 464 (the Carmelites also mostly used Christians as letter carriers); Barendse, *The Arabian Seas 1640–1700*, 166–67 (the Carmelites gave a written receipt of letters received).

¹²² Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient*, vol. 3, 287; Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 137; see also Zak`aria of Agulis, *The Journal of Zak`aria of Agulis*, 76 (bringing a letter from the author’s brother).

¹²³ Zak`aria of Agulis, *The Journal of Zak`aria of Agulis*, 103.

¹²⁴ Barendse, *The Arabian Seas 1640–1700*, 166–67; Gollancz, *The Settlement of the Order of Carmelites in Mesopotamia*, 448, 454, 464, 503, 516.

¹²⁵ Anonymous, *‘Alamara-ye Safavi*, 201.

¹²⁶ Anonymous, *‘Alamara-ye Safavi*, 210–11.

send an Express a thirty Days Journey for thirty Livres.”¹²⁷ In 1717, a VOC express messenger was paid thirty-five *mahmudis* per month, five *mahmudis* more than in 1641.¹²⁸ In 1729, the EIC paid its six to twelve *shaters* the same wage, viz., seventy *shahis* per month, i.e., twice as much as for an EIC writer. *Qaseds* employed by the EIC do not seem to have been paid a fixed wage, but paid instead by time limit. In 1746, a *qased* was ordered to deliver a letter from Bandar Abbas to Kerman in eight days, about 400 miles as the crow flies.¹²⁹ However, the same time limit arrangement also was used by the VOC in the case of a *shater*, later referred to as a foot messenger, who was ordered to deliver a letter from Isfahan to Bandar Abbas within sixteen days.¹³⁰ It seems to have been a standard procedure, because a Capuchin monk in Baghdad sent a courier to the Carmelites in Basra, writing: “I expressly sent the letter-carrier to your reverence by payment of 20 scudos, who set out on the last day of Ramazan on a Sunday night, on condition that he should reach you within a week.”¹³¹

According to Chardin, a *shater* took a journey, “which may amount to three hundred French Leagues, in eighteen or twenty Days time, and sometimes in fifteen.”¹³² Chardin also mentions a competitive race where the winners covered 36 leagues or about 125 km in 14 and even 12 hours, or, respectively 8.9 km per hour and 10.4 km per hour.¹³³ A letter carrier ran from Isfahan to Shiraz, a distance of about 480 km, in 7 days, i.e., 68 km per day.¹³⁴ Taking into account the other running feats, it seems this *shater* did not even run all day, he also rested. In 1645, a foot messenger ran from Bandar Abbas to Surmaq in 6 days, when the roads were still sometimes covered in heavy snow.¹³⁵ Good reports that in the Afsharid period, *shaters* ran from Bandar Abbas to Kerman in 7–10 days and to Isfahan in 14 days.¹³⁶ This seems to have been standard practice; indeed, on December 15, 1635, Overschie, the then head of the VOC in Iran, wrote that he had received a letter in Isfahan from Bandar Abbas, brought by messenger in 16 days’ time, reporting that the ships had arrived on November 27.¹³⁷ The distance between the cities was 1,340 km, and the VOC ambassador Joan Cunaeus had traveled this path himself in 1651 in 46 days, meaning the messenger had on average covered 84 km per day!¹³⁸ However, the distance for these messengers was actually shorter than that of the caravan route, as they made use of short-cut paths, very well-known to them, but inaccessible to quadrupeds. This was also the reason that Bembo, in May 1674, “took into service a *shater*, who is like a foot guide, very experienced about the roads. With one of those, one can go safely alone through Persia without a caravan.”¹³⁹ This situation changed after the death of Nader Shah in 1747. Hanway’s “courier, whom I sent to Mesched, poor and despicable as he was, did not escape without being robbed.”¹⁴⁰

¹²⁷ Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 283.

¹²⁸ Siebertz, *Preise, Löhne und Lebensstandard im safavidischen Iran*, 110. On Table 10.3 (p. 125), Siebertz lists forty-five *mahmudis* as the monthly wage, without indicating the year. In 1684, the messenger Simeon even received a pension. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas 1640–1700*, 167.

¹²⁹ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55 (one *mahmudi* = two *shahis*).

¹³⁰ Cunaeus, *Journaal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651–1652*, 214.

¹³¹ Gollancz, *The Settlement of the Order of Carmelites in Mesopotamia*, 454.

¹³² Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673–1677*, 283.

¹³³ Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient*, vol. 3, 464. The French *lieu* or league varied from between 3.25 to 4.68 km. I have taken the distance at 3.5 km.

¹³⁴ Anonymous, *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia*, vol. 2, 1056.

¹³⁵ Valentyn, *Van Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, vol. 5, 245. Surmaq, some 40 km south of Abadeh, was situated on the winter route between Isfahan and Shiraz. This is a distance of 560 km as the crow flies and 725 km by road.

¹³⁶ Good, *The East India Company in Persia*, 55.

¹³⁷ Dunlop, *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis der Oostindische Compagnie in Perzië 1611–1638*, 549.

¹³⁸ Cunaeus, *Journaal der Reis van den gezant der O.I. Compagnie Joan Cunaeus naar Perzië in 1651–1652*, 214.

¹³⁹ Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, 289 (the translators wrongly identified Bembo’s *sater* as *chapar*, which I have corrected in the quote).

¹⁴⁰ Hanway, *An Historical Account of the British Trade over the Caspian Sea*, vol. 1, 317. This also, but rarely, happened during the Safavid period. For one instance, see Herbert 1634, 93. For security on the roads during that period, see Floor, *The Economy of Safavid Persia*, 31–35.

Although *shaters* were trained from an early age to develop their running endurance, it seems they used doping to sustain this capacity. According to Herbert, who had first-hand experience with *shaters* in 1628–29, opium was the drug of choice.

The footmen use it too as a preserver of strength, and which is strangest, so giddies them, that in a constant dreame or dizziness, they run sleeping not knowing whom they meet, and yet misse not their intended places: and by its power protract their travell, to deceive their body of reasonable rest of lodgings.¹⁴¹

Discussion

From the above, it is clear that both official and private communications were maintained throughout the kingdom through the use of mounted (*chapar*) and foot messengers (*shater*). Although lacking a system of relay stations with reserve horses and fodder, the Safavid-Afsharid-Zand express courier system was an effective one. It was also a formalized one, to the extent that *chapars* were recognizable by their dress and rules existed for their sustenance en route and use of private mounts. The *chapar* service, unlike the *shaters*, was entirely government operated, although in exceptional cases diplomats were allowed to avail themselves of *chapar* couriers. In the case of important diplomatic messages, courtiers were sometimes used as *chapar* messengers. In the 1730s, Nader Shah reestablished the *chapar* system with relay stations and reserve horses in part of the country, but by 1739 it had fallen into disuse due to his demand for men and horses for the army. As of the 1750s, due to the chaotic situation in Iran caused by succession wars, the relay system broke down and the *chapar* system operated as it had during the Safavid era. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the fast courier system with relay stations was reestablished again.

The slower *shaters* or foot messengers were employed by government and private institutions, both local and foreign. Foot messengers were rarely referred to as *qaseds* during this period. *Shaters* in government employ had to pass an athletic endurance test held regularly in both the national and provincial capitals. The government-employed *shaters* accompanied the shah or his governors whenever they traveled, ready to be dispatched immediately if needed. *Shaters* not in government employ also delivered mail for private individuals who were not their employer. The system of foot messengers continued unchanged despite the upheaval of the fall of the Safavids, the Afghan occupation, and the insecurity of the Afsharid and Zand reigns. In the nineteenth century, the *shater's* function was reduced to that of royal footman, while the term *qased* became the general term for foot messenger.¹⁴²

Appendix I The Shater's Race or Shater Davani

Tavernier

If the employer of the *shater*, who wants to become a master, is a magnate, he invites all his friends and has platform erected on the Meydan where snacks are prepared, and where the courtesans come to entertain the gathering. There is no invited person who does not bring something to give to the *shater* after his race. One brings a hat, the other a belt, and he gives some of the various presents that he receives to other *shaters*. Thus, he comes to the square, his thighs totally bare and his legs rubbed with a certain fat, wearing nothing but simple shorts with a belt with three bells that bang against his stomach. With that outfit he leaves the Ala Qapi, and from sunrise until sundown he runs twelve times as far as a stone that is in the mountains at one and half league from the city, covering in this short time thirty-six of our common leagues, that is longer than the distance between Paris to Orleans. While the *shater* runs, there is kourouk [*quruq*] in the Meydan and along the entire route where he passes, and three or four hundred riders go constantly up and down to see to it that no tricks are played in the *shater's* route. When he nears Isfahan

¹⁴¹ Herbert 1634, 151. On the use of opium and other drugs during the Safavid-Afsharid-Zand period, see Floor and Javadi, *Persian Pleasures. How Iranians Relaxed Through the Centuries. Food, Drink & Drugs*, 496–515.

¹⁴² See Floor, "The Chaparkhaneh System in Qajar Iran."

they go ahead to warn that he is returning. Each time that he leaves and returns, the trumpets and drums make themselves heard. At the stone, which is at the end of the quarry there are people who hold arrows, and who give one to the *shater* after each leg, which he carries to the Ala Qapi. Each time when he returns the courtesans wipe caress him. During the entire race he eats nothing, because that would impede his running, but once in a while he drinks some sorbet. After he has completed his twelve laps, he receives the rank of master by the approval of the chief footmen of the king, who are in charge of all others, and whom he has asked to approve his acceptance. The Khans of governors of the major provinces have their shatters also race in the area of their residence and with the same ceremony. Each one of them give presents just like in Isfahan, which sometimes amounts to a rather large sum, of which they give a part to their friends, as I have said.¹⁴³

De Thevenot

Amongst the lowest Officers of the King are the *Schaters* who are as the King's Foot-men. To be admitted into this Office, besides credit, one must be an extraordinary good Foot-man, and give proofs of it; and therefore when a man desires to be received into the King's Service, in quality of a *Schater*, and hath made interest enough to be admitted to this trial, he must run a race, which is to be his Essay. He starts at *Hali Capi*, and twelve times in one day runs to a certain place towards the Hills, a long French League and a half distant from *Hali Capi*. At the end of this Carrere there are men who have several Arrows ready, with little pennons hanging at them; and every time the *Schater* comes, they give him one of these Arrows, which he carries to the *Hali Capi*, so that coming and going twelve times, he brings with him twelve Arrows, and runs about six and thirty French Leagues from Morning to Night. In the mean time there is *Kourouk* in the Meidan and all along the way he goes: The Elephants and a great many horse-men are ranked in the *Meidan*, where there is a noise of trumpets and timbrels all day long. All the great men make presents to the *Schater*, some ten or twenty, and some thirty *Tomans*, and all this to ingratiate themselves at Court: They who have nothing to give, are nevertheless present; nay, the People are forced to come, in so much that at *Giulfa* they drive out all out of doors with Cudgels and oblige them to come to this spectacle; none but old men, women and children are excused. The *Armenians* are also taxed in a certain Summ which they are to present to the *Schater*: When I was at *Ispahan* there was one of those races, and the *Armenians* were taxed in thirty *Tomans*. All bring their presents to *Hali Capi*, whilst the Race is running. Some of the Countrey would needs have perswaded me, that the presents which are made to the *Schater* who runs, might amount in all sometimes to two thousand *Tomans*; but others who were more moderate, told me two or three hundred *Tomans*. This permission to run is earnestly solicited for, and he must have favour that can obtain it: He that ran whilst I was at *Ispahan* had been six Months in suing out the permission. *Monsieur Diegre* master of the Dutch Factory at *Ispahan*, a very knowing man, so curious and exact, that he omits not the smallest Circumstance, as much as possibly can, in describing all things punctually, measuring even publick places, Mosques and Gardens almost to half a foot, and more exactly too, if he can; set out one day from *Hali Capi*, which is the place where the *Schaters* starts who are to perform their trial, and went to that place where they take their Arrows, keeping pace on hoirse-back with his Foot-man that went before: He told me that he was an hour and a half on the way, and that having obliged his Foot-man to reckon all their steps, and to mark them by hundreds, he found that they had made four thousand Geometrical paces, which make a German mile, and is a French league and a half: So that the trial of the *Schaters* is in traveling thirty six French Leagues from Morning to Night.

The *Chans* in their Government make their *Schaters* also run, and all make them presents, there being no difference but in more and less. When a *Schater* would be received into the Service of any Lord, he performs his trial, which is to go an *Agatsch* from the Town, where he finds a man that gives him an Arrow marked with a certain mark, that he may not play the cheat; he puts it through a hole in his coat on the shoulder, and so brings it to the Town, where he leaves it and returns back for another; and in one day betwixt Sun and Sun he must go and bring twelve, and so run four and twenty *Agatsch*: At Night they cocunt the Arrows which he hath brought, and if there be twelve of them he is received. He rests not all day long, neither eats; for that would hinder his going, but is continually in motion, save sometimes when he drinks *Sorbet*. I have been assured that there are some of the Lords *Schaters*, who in a frolick sometimes will carry on their shoulders four and twenty *Mans of Tauris*, which make a hundred and forty pound Weight, or thereabouts, and with that load travel thirty *Agatsch* a day, (that's to say) thirty French Leagues.¹⁴⁴

Chardin

Description of a very solemn Diversion in Persia, which is the Feast of the Chatir;, or Footman of the King. This is, when the Overseer of the Foot-men has a mind to be receiv'd into the King's Service. He must go from the Gate of the Palace to a Pillar, which is a French League and a half from the Palace, and fetch twelve Arrows from thence one

¹⁴³ Tavernier, *Suite des Voyages*, vol. 2, 39–40.

¹⁴⁴ De Thevenot 1686, pp. 104–05.

after the other, between the two Suns. He is not receiv'd as the King's Footman till after that Trial. When King Soliman was mounted on his Throne, they show'd him some things in his State; and as they spoke very much concerning the Feast of the Chatir, he order'd that it should be solemniz'd with all the Pomp imaginable, and that they should spare no Cost; and this is that which was perform'd the 26th Day of May, 1667; a Day set a-part by the Astrologers, who judg'd that to be the most Auspicious for this Festival. The General of the Musketeers who was, at that time, the Favourite, had brought a Chatir; the Day before to the King, who promis'd to take him, if he accomplish'd his Course, and gave him a Calaat or entire Habit, with Permission to begin at four a Clock in the Morning, this was granting him a Favour of nigh an Hour; for the Order, as I have said, is for them to do it between the two Suns, as they call it: And they immediately give Orders for opening the Houses, setting out the Shops, and watering the Streets all along the Ways: That was done to a nicety; and the next Day every thing was set out, adorn'd and fitted.

The Streets through which he that Runs must pass, which for the greatest part were cover'd Markets, were likewise wonderfully set out; the Shops were spread with rich Stuffs, and some were set out with Arms like the great Room of an Arsenal, with a great many Colours intermix'd. The Way was water'd every time he that Run came to go by it, the Moment before he came, and they strew'd it with Flowers. The Suburbs were spread with Pavillions, and the City likewise, to the turn where he fetch'd the Arrows. A Body of Indians to the number of two or three Thousand, were there in; one place. That of the like Number of Armenians, in another. The Ignicoles, or Worshipers of Fire, in one Place, the Jews in another; every Body as well plac'd as he could to please the King, who had desir'd it. At the Gates of the Greatest Lords who were in the way, were Tables covered with Perfume-Pots, Sweet-Waters, and Basons with Sweet-meats: In short, all the Way was as it were border'd with Instruments of Musick, with Kettle-Drums and Trumpets, who play'd in Companies, as soon as they perceived him who Run, was; coming.

...

He always run his Course with a great many in Company sixteen or twenty Footmen belonging to great Lords, run on Foot before him, and by his Sides, at the Rate he went at, relieving one another. They were preceded by a Number of Gentlemen, five and twenty, or thirty in Number, among whom there were moreover, some of the greatest Lords, who run two hundred Spaces before, more out of State, than to make Way. A Courier on Purpose, nam'd by the King, follows him each Course, to be a Witness of it. They refresh his Face at every Turn, with sweet Waters, and they throw some all along upon his Thighs, Arms, and Legs, to refresh them. They continually Fan him, both behind and on his Sides and all that with so much Dexterity and Nimbleness, tho' the Way was always cover'd with People, both Foot and Horse there is never any Body before him. Every one resounded his Praises, and made a thousand Vows for him, calling upon God, and imploring the Saints with Cries, that rent the Air and the great Lords, who met him in his Course, promis'd him Wealth and Honours, by which his Swiftnes, Courage, and Strength were Animated. He could not do it, but from being Spirit'd, and rais'd to a degree of Inchantment, by the agreeable Noise that is made about him.

I forgot to tell you, that upon the Pillar that marks the End of his Course, and where the Arrows which he goes to fetch, are pass'd thro' a Scarf there is a *Pavillion* built half as big as that which I have describ'd before the Gate of the Palace, which was Adorn'd after the same Manner, and furnish'd with several Entertainments. When he who runs, goes the first time before the Gate, he sets forward by leaping and capering, and moving his Arms, as if he had a mind to Fence, and show Postures. This was to put himself in Wind he does this the first Course, without Resting, either going or coming but in the other Courses, he stops a little to take Breath. When he enter'd the Tent where the Arrows were, two of the strongest Footmen took him by the Strength of their Arms, or main Force, set him down upon a Carpet, where during the Space of a *Pater*, or *Pater-Noster*, they put some *Sherbet*, or other Cordial to his Mouth, and hold *Perfumes* to his Nose and at the same time another Footman, took an Arrow out of one of the King's Officer's Hands, and there put it thro' his Back. These Arrows are about a Foot long, and not thicker than a large Writing Quill, having a little sort of a Streamer at the End of it, like that which is put to the *Consecrated Bread*. The Foot-man perform'd his six first Courses in six Hours, for the others, he took a little more time. The greatest Lords of the Court, as I have said, all Accompanied him, one after the other in his Courses. *Cheic-Aly Can*, Governour of the most [209] important Province in *Persia*, and at that time, mightily in Favour, tho' he was sixty eight Years of Age, rode six Courses with him, changing his Horse so many times. The first Minister, almost as old as the other, rode three Courses. The *Nazir*, or High Steward, a Lord of very near the same Age, perform'd but two Courses, being call'd elsewhere, upon the King's Service: But the better to make his Court to the King, he made his only Son, a Youth of about two and twenty Years of Age, well made, and charmingly handsom, perform the twelve Courses intire, he continu'd running, without any Intermission, from four of the Clock in the; Morning, till six at Night, in; the midst of all this hurly-burly, and terrible Noise, and without any Refreshment, but a little *Cordial*. The King had order'd, that twelve Principal Workmen belonging to the Palace, should run each of them a Course with the Footman; which was accordingly done. I follow'd him all the seventh Course, in which he began to slacken his Pace, by Reason of the Heat of the Sun, and the Sand he pass'd nevertheless he always put me to the Gallop. When he came into the Palace Royal, there was such Hollowing, Shouting, Musick playing, and above all, upon certain Kettle-Drums, carry'd upon Carts, which were bigger than Tunns. I never heard such a Noise in;

all my Life: And I learnt afterwards, that they heard it a League off. At the sixth Course, the King came to the Door of the Tent, to see him who run, come in, and to encourage him. At the eighth Course, the Tent was serv'd with thirty Basons of Massiff Gold, full of good Meat, to regale the Footmen and at three in the Afternoon, the King appear'd at the Windows of the Pavillions, which were upon the Place, before the great Gate, then began all the Diversions which had been prepar'd for that Purpose, each before him, without any Regard to the Spectators; the Beasts to Fight, the Men and Women Dancers to Dance, each Company apart; the Rope-Dancers to fly about, the Jugglers to play their Tricks, the Wrestlers to Engage. This; Confusion of Exercises and Sports, where one did not know which to fix ones Eyes upon, was the most whimsical Sight in the World, but every one almost was intent upon the Fighting of the wild Beasts, which is one of the most ravishing Sight among the *Persians*: Among the rest, that of the *Lion* or *Panther*, with the *Bulls*; and upon the Fight of the *Buffler*, the *Rams*, *Wolfs*, and of the *Cocks*. These Horn'd Beasts don't Fight with one another after equal Manner; for these *Bufflers* rush upon, and take hold of one another's Horns; they push at one another and never quit, till one or other is overcome, and fled out of the List: But the *Rams* rush upon one another at ten or twelve Yards distance, and meet each other with such a dreadful Shock, that one may hear the Stroak at fifty Yards distance; after that, they retire quick, running backwards to about the; same distance, when they return to the Charge, and run against one another again, and so on, till one or t'other be laid upon his Back, or that the Blood gush out of his Head: As for the *Wolfs*, they stand upon their Feet, and take hold of one another's Bodies: As this Beast is heavy, they must make him Angry before he will Fight and they do it after this Manner, they tie him fast by one Foot to a long Cord or Rope, then they show him a Child, or little Boy in the Place, and they let him go at him; he runs hard at him, thinking to glut himself; but when he is just ready to throw himself upon the Child, they gather in the Cord, and draw him back, then they let go a little, upon which he warms, stands up upon his Feet, and roars, to which they stir him up, by irritating him, till he was grown as furious as they would have him. I say nothing here concerning the Fights of the wild Beasts, because I shall have Occasion to mention them elsewhere. To conclude this Relation of the Feast of the *Chatir*, I shall say, that the King gets on Horseback at Five a-Clock, and going before him, he meets him again at the Gate of the Suburbs: When he understood the King came, he took a little Child, which he found in a Shop, and put it upon his Shoulders, to let him see that he was not Spent and this redoubl'd their Shouts and Acclamations of Joy. The King call'd to him as he was going by, and told him, he would give him the *Calaat*, or *Royal Garment*, from Head to Foot, 500 *Tomans*, which is 22000, 500 *Livres*, and make him Chief or Head of the *Chatirs*, which is a considerable Trust, in respect to the Income. All the *Grandees* sent him likewise Presents. Yet it was said that he had not run well, because he had not brought the twelve Arrows in twelve Hours, but had taken near fourteen to do it in. They say that a Foot-man in the Reign of *Chasefy*, did it in that Time. It is a fine Foot-Course, to run six and thirty Leagues in twelve Hours.¹⁴⁵

Bedik

CHAPTER XXII.

Other Persian games and recreations.

There are two particular kinds of games. The first is called *Sciaticir Dovini*,¹⁴⁶ i.e. the great run. In fact, in addition to the messengers who travel on very well-known horses, who are called *chapar*, the king has numerous other couriers on foot, called *shater*. This means about the same thing as what Europeans call footmen.

In front of the king's horse, men with special very tight and well fitting clothes rush forward. They are so well trained in the art of running that in a single day they can travel many miles. As soon as their master and director learns that such a race is to be organized, he notifies the king so that he may benefit from that event.

Then, in summer, on the king's signal, [280] a runner has to show his speed and agility over a length of 24 miles, and he has to run the distance without any moment of rest. At the chosen day, the prime minister of the king takes care to publish an edict that prohibits anybody from engaging in trade, handicraft or any other work. All, without exception, common people and nobles, princes and satraps have to attend the race spectacle.

Thus, on that day the runner has to run 12 times between the king's first palace and the other, a distance of one league or *Aghaci*,¹⁴⁷ as the Persian say. Without stopping he has to return via the same route to this first palace, so that a league or *aghaci* be measured 24 times. The number of turns is counted with arrows. In fact, when the runner has made his first turn from the first royal palace, he carries in his hand one arrow, which he puts down at the

¹⁴⁵ Chardin, *Travels in Persia 1673-1677*, 206, 208-11; Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 3, 458-64.

¹⁴⁶ *Shater davani* or courier race.

¹⁴⁷ *Agach*, a Turkish term equivalent to *farsang*, generally taken to measure about 6 km or the distance one travel's in an hour. A league can vary from about 2.4 to 4.6 miles, 3.86 to 7.41 km. If it is one league between palaces, the total distance traveled would range from 57.6 to 110.4 miles, 93 to 178 km. We think the round-trip distance will be two leagues of not more than 2.4 miles and the total distance not more than 58 miles (93 km), still a great feat. If the round trip is about 12 km, then the total distance traveled would be 144 km (89 miles)! This is nearly 4 marathons! If it lasts about 14 hours, then the runner would have to average over 10 km per hour (6.4 miles per hour).

second palace, or he will take another one, to be deposited at the first palace when he reaches that again and there he again picks up another arrow, until 12 arrows have been transported from the first palace to the second, and 12 arrows from the second to the first one.

This race begins at sunrise, as soon as it skims the heights of the royal palace, and continues late, about 8 o'clock in the evening. The route is magnificently decorated by the population, also to honor the king as well as to encourage the runner. To that end the satraps, the princes and all the magnates have to accompany him on foot as far as the palace, but not all at the same time, and they congratulate him continually with vivaciousness and encourage him, so that with virile energy he may run a glorious race and so that in honor of the king and to show his bravery he does not spare his strength. Moreover, the grand pontiffs themselves come to watch and to encourage him with the same words and support him with friendly compliments. [281]

When the satraps, princes and magnates have sufficiently accompanied him, the nobles surround him, and then the common citizens, and finally all the servants and runners of the king and those from other provinces, and all support his morale so that he may make a speedy race. The great support that one gives the runner, and a good way to stimulate his bravery, is that, each time he comes from one palace and arrives at the other and drops his arrow they welcome him with all kinds of music instruments and congratulate him with all kinds of gestures and lavish him, loudly crying, with titles of glory.

In short, on that day all treat this runner as an idol, and after the race the king gives him very costly gifts, and the entire court, the royal city and the whole kingdom bring him presents to honor and please the king, and to recompense the runner for his effort. But often the life of these runners is short and it cannot be otherwise. They have to constrain and moderate themselves considerably. The current king Soleyman has, among a large number of runners, one who is called *Hot Hot*,¹⁴⁸ the hoopoe, who is better than all others. [282]¹⁴⁹

Kaempfer

Not far from there is a second tower, at a distance of one parasang from the court. It is called *Mili tsjatir dauni* [*mil-e shater davvani*],¹⁵⁰ i.e. turning-post of the couriers'. It is thus called, because during royal games it serve as a marker for the couriers, who, to prove their talent, have to run to that marker from the court precinct, then return, and do this 12 times. They also have to carry a spear as far as the marker and there take another one and carry it back to the court precinct, at both sides it is the sign that they have completed the leg. This race takes place with the court's and the city's loud participation. The inhabitants of all quarters stream to the stadium and with musical instruments encourage the courier, who does not dare to dawdle, to urinate, not even to drink. Having thus run 12 times, going and returning, this distance between sunrise and sunset, he receives the title of royal courier and from the court a large number of presents.¹⁵¹

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¹⁴⁸ *Hadhad*, the hoopoe.

¹⁴⁹ Bedik, *A Man of Two Worlds. Pedros Bedik in Iran 1670-1675*, 307–309.

¹⁵⁰ *Mil-e shater davvani*.

¹⁵¹ Kaempfer, *Exotic Attractions in Persia, 1684-1688. Travels & Observations*, 159–60.

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