JEMS - Journal of Early Modern Studies

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-jems

Citation: C. Houston (2026) 'Printers they know none': The Material Text and Textual Culture in Seventeenth-Century European Travel Writing about Persia. *Jems*. 15: pp. 129-142. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.36253/JEMS-2279-7149-17194

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Editors: D. Pallotti, P. Pugliatti (University of Florence)

'Printers they know none' The Material Text and Textual Culture in Seventeenth-Century European Travel Writing about Persia*

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Abstract

Many European seventeenth-century travellers to Persia observe that the Persians did not produce printed books. The article explores the context for the apparent absence and attempted introduction of printing with movable type in Persia in the seventeenth century and considers the representation of Persian textual culture in European travel writing. European attempts to introduce printing with movable type were unsuccessful due to technological challenges, but also because of the book culture that already thrived in Persia, in which manuscript and oral traditions played an important part. European travel writings noted the presence of these other forms of literary culture, even when they did not fully understand them. The article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how Persia as a material space was understood in early modern Europe by examining the ideas about Persia which the absence and introduction of printing technology permitted or perpetuated.

Keywords: Manuscript, Orality, Persia, Print Culture, Travel Writing

The history of the book and the history of travel in the early modern period are closely interwoven. Journeys, actual and imagined, created writing: vast amounts of written material pertaining to travel, including books, in both print and manuscript, were produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This proliferation of travel books not only recorded but promoted travel abroad, such as the 'fonde bookes … sold in euery shop in London' (1570, 26) that Roger Ascham feared would tempt

* I am grateful to Dr Borna Izadpanah of the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading for his comments on an earlier draft of this article, and to the anonymous reviewers for their assistance in clarifying aspects of its context, particularly with regard to the production of Armenian-language texts in New Julfa.

Englishmen to go to Italy when they might better stay at home. Travellers carried books with them, for instruction and entertainment, as gifts, and for practical use, as diaries, records and aides-memoires of their experiences. Books, like other commodities, were travellers themselves. In *The Book in the Renaissance*, Andrew Pettegree describes how in Europe, printed books travelled along the networks used for other merchandise, and particularly 'along the rivers … that linked Europe's major printing cities' (2010, 78). Indeed, 'the success of the European printing revolution … was predicated upon its ability to be symbiotically interactive with networks of transportation and communication' (Aslanian 2014a, 62), because, as Lisa Jardine writes, 'From the very beginning of printing, book-distribution followed the same routes, with the same remarkable efficiency, as other consumer goods' (1997, 319). The efficiency of these routes meant that in Europe in 1500, a book printed in Rome could be available to readers in England within a matter of weeks (*ibid.*).

Books and travel were of course also related in other, less literal, ways. Benedict Anderson (1991, rev. ed. 2006) has explained how standard print cultures played an important role in the creation of national identities in the colonial intelligentsia in Asia and Africa, following the European model.[1] Print cultures had the capacity to develop and describe groups and communities, and to shape their readers' ideas about places and peoples. This article considers how various travel writings printed in the seventeenth century represented Persian literary culture and production, and thus contributed to a developing sense of Persia as a material space, at a time when both the material text and contemporary understanding of Persia and its environs were changing rapidly.[2]

Despite the growth of printing and its importance to the development of travel literature, writing about travel also continued to be a manuscript form long after the invention of printing, especially beyond Europe. As Gerald MacLean points out, 'The impact of movable print on the development of early modern travel writing was widespread, but not global' (2019, 62). The transition from a manuscript culture to a print one was slow, and in many parts of the world, travel literature continued to be essentially a manuscript genre, a reminder of the importance of attending to the global context, both in studying travel writing and in book history. In the last two decades, the tendency for the emergent discipline of book history towards Eurocentrism is gradually being corrected, reflecting the 'global turn' in historical studies (Aslanian 2014a, 51). Recent scholarship has shown the inter-connected nature of 'Eastern' and 'Western' print cultures and has addressed the deficit in the study of the history of the book beyond Europe and North America (Ghosh 2003; Aslanian 2014a).

This article begins from an observation sometimes made in passing by European travellers to Persia in the later seventeenth century: that Persia had no printing press. When I first encountered such comments in travel accounts, I became interested in what these travellers to Persia made of the comparative lack of printed texts, particularly in contrast to the growing importance of print in seventeenth-century European literary culture. In this article I attempt firstly to locate these observations within the broader contexts of the role of printing in the Middle East during this period, and the printing of Persian-language texts in Europe. I also explore European attempts to introduce printing to Persia in the seventeenth century, and what these can tell us about European desires and initiatives in the Islamic world more broadly. In

[1] See also Ghosh 2003, 23.

[2] In this article I use the term 'Persia' rather than 'Iran' because it is more commonly used in the early modern European texts which are my source material. The Persian empire at times incorporated parts of modern Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics. On the usage of 'Persia' and 'Iran', see Daryaee 2012, 3.

particular, I am interested in travellers' representation of the material text in Persian culture – via book production, education, and reading, for example – and the understanding of Persia and its people that this suggests. What did early modern English travellers to Persia observe about printing or its absence? What ideas about Persia as a place did the absence of a printing press permit or perpetuate? How was an image of Persia as a material space constructed by the unique form of literary production that early modern European travel writing is, and how far was Persia's own literary culture present in that image?[3]

Printing with movable type was not firmly established in Persia until the early nineteenth century, when presses were set up in Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan; by the latter half of that century, printing was widespread (Farman Farmayan, 1968, 145-146). Lithographic printing was the most widespread printing method in the latter half of the nineteenth century, although only a handful of titles were printed using movable type (Izadpanah 2023, 84-90). Printing was not an entirely unknown phenomenon prior to this time; block printing, for instance, had been used in Persia in the late thirteenth century, when an Ilkhanid ruler had attempted, unsuccessfully, to introduce printed money (Farman Farmayan 1968, 144-145; Bloom 2001, 219; Izadpanah 2023, 77). However, printing technology was very rarely used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period when European travel to Persia, and literature about Persia, increased greatly in volume and Persia became a much more familiar place to European readers.

The increase in publication of travel texts about Persia from the early seventeenth century stems from the rise in European travel to Persia from the later sixteenth century onwards.[4] Many such texts describe the places and people that European travellers encountered in detail, sometimes including observations on Persian book culture via descriptions of Persian education, institutions or standards of knowledge. In earlier seventeenth-century accounts of English travels to Persia, such as those which appeared in printed books by William Parry and Thomas Herbert in 1601 and 1634 respectively, these subjects are mentioned, but the absence of a printing press is not directly remarked upon.

The closest reference to printing in Persia in texts published in England in the first half of the seventeenth century is made by Parry, who was one of the retinue of men and officers who accompanied Anthony Sherley on his journey to Persia, which they reached in 1598. Parry is generally positive in his description of Persia, which he preferred to his time in the Levant. In *A new and large discourse of the trauels of ſir Anthony Sherley, Knight, by sea, and ouer land, to the Persian Empire …* (1601), Parry mentions Persian books only briefly. He refers to the practices of Persian handwriting, and remarks that Persians do not have many books, but the lack of printing or a printing press is not directly stated. For Parry, the implied absence of the printed book is associated with a general weakness in learning and knowledge on behalf of the Persians:

> They [the Persians] haue not many Bookes, much leſſe great libraries amongst their best clarkes. They are no learned nation, but ignorant in all kinde of liberall or learned ſciences, and almoſt of all other arts and faculties; except it be in certaine things pertaining to horſes, furniture, and ſome kindes of carpettings and ſilke workes, wherein they excell. (1601, 35)

The observation that Persia has no printing press is made more explicitly in accounts of Persia produced in the later seventeenth-century by travel-writers such as Adam Olearius, Jean Chardin,

[3] In this article I focus on English-language travel writings, i.e. the texts available to an English readership, including the translated texts of non-English European writers.

[4] On the rise in European travel to Persia during this period, see for example Braun 1969, 194-195; Stevens 1974, 421; Morgan 1988, 139.

John Fryer, and John Ogilby. The German mathematician and scholar Adam Olearius, who travelled to Persia in 1637, and whose account of his travels was translated into English in 1669, comments that the Persians 'have not as yet … the use of Printing, as we have in *Europe*' (1669, 272). Jean Chardin, a French traveller who visited Persia in the 1660s and 1670s, is more fulsome. He writes that:

> [The Persians] have desired a hundred times to have Printing-Houses; they acknowledge the Usefulness and Necessity of them; they see the Advantages and the Profit of them; yet no body undertakes to set up one. The Brother of the Great Master, who was a very Learned Man, and the King's Favourite, would have engaged me, in the Year 1676, to send for Workmen to teach them that Ingenious Art: He showed His Majesty the *Arabick* and *Persian* Printed Books I had given him; whereupon a Contract was made; but when they should have laid down the Money, all was broke off. (1927, 249 quoted in Izadpanah 2023, 81)

In *Asia, the first part being An Accurate deſcription of Persia* (1673), the Scottish geographer John Ogilby, who did not travel to Persia himself, but produced an atlas and description of Persia in his book, remarks that the Persians are 'utterly ignorant in the Art of *Printing*' (1673, 64). John Fryer, who perhaps had more detailed knowledge of Persia, having undertaken a long tour of Persia and India between 1672 and 1682 in the interests of the East India Company (Goodwin and Carter 2004), notes in *A new account of Eaſt-India and Perſia in eight letters…* (1698) that in Persia 'Books are all written with the Pen … not committed to the Preſs' (Fryer 1698, 361).

These later seventeenth-century travellers, as we will see in more detail, do not pursue Parry's association between a lack of printed books and a lack of learning and knowledge; indeed, later seventeenth-century European travellers to Persia discuss the Persians' learning and the importance of books in Persian culture in some detail, and demonstrate a greater awareness of the presence of a rich manuscript book culture in Persia. The French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who undertook six voyages to Persia and India between 1630 and 1668, stated in his own record of travels through Persia that 'Their nobler Arts are Writing, for Printers they know none. All their Books are writt'n, which is the reason they so much esteem that Art' (1684, 229). Not only does Tavernier not repeat the assertion that a lack of printing or printed books is associated with a lack of knowledge, but he directly states that it results in a more developed and respected art of writing by hand. The continuation of this manuscript culture in favour of a printed one, and the absence of printing in Persia during this period, are both phenomena that need to be understood in the broader context of the adoption of printing in the Middle East.

Persia was not the only country in the Middle East where printing did not quickly become established. European travellers to the Ottoman empire, for example, also remarked upon a lack of printed text. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century travellers, writing of the Turks, note that: 'they will ſuffer no Printing' (Purchas 1626, 320); 'they have no Printing' (Botero 1630, 525); 'the Turkes vse no printing' (Baudier 1593, 15). Such observations have also become commonplace in histories of the book in the Muslim world. Some of these question why, in Geoffrey Roper's words, book printing was

> not adopted by Muslims for more than 1,000 years after it was invented in China and 250 years after it became widespread in western Europe (in spite of its use by non-Muslims in the Muslim world)? (2010, 332)

Scholars have addressed this question in a number of ways, including by making reference to the widespread Muslim reverence for handwritten word, arguing that that 'the Islamic world

turned its back on printing technology for being an ungodly invention' (MacLean 2019, 62).[5] It has become a commonplace in scholarship on the subject that 'Islamic culture itself remained cautious about acceptance of Arabic printing' (Ahmad 2015, 53). But understanding of the status and adoption of printing in the Ottoman empire and elsewhere is currently being rethought, traditional models being problematic because of how they centre the European experience of print, to the exclusion of other models (Schwartz 2017, 1). To suggest that Islamic countries were 'cautious' or 'turning [their] back on' printing technology suggests the presence of an actively negative attitude to printing, which may have become accepted as a commonplace in book history. Such attitudes frame the fact that Muslims countries did not adopt printing quickly as a regrettable failing, even when, as Jonathan Bloom does in his chapter on printing in Islamic countries, they minimise its effect in holding back global progress; Bloom writes that 'the tardiness of the Muslim world to adopt printing was just a brief pause in a continuous diffusion of inventions across Eurasia' (2001, 224). It is clear that early modern travellers to the Middle East were as likely to rely on European models for understanding book culture and the material text as were modern book historians in their discussions of the absence of print in these regions.

Persian- and Arabic-language texts were not printed with movable type in Arabic script in Arabic- or Persian-speaking countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ayalon 2016, 1).[6] Twentieth-century scholarship maintained that because of Islam's resistance to the printed text, printing failed to be adopted by European countries as quickly as it might otherwise have done. Thomas F. Carter, for example, argued that Islam was an impediment to the transmission of print from China to Europe from the medieval period, when it formed 'a barrier rather than a bridge for the transmission of block printing to Europe' (1943, 213). As Calestous Juma has pointed out, explanations of Muslim countries' reluctance to print which point to Islamic conservatism and mistrust of the products of non-Muslim civilisations are inconsistent with Muslim countries' readiness to adopt other non-Muslim innovations and technology during this period (2016, 70). Juma argues that the delay in the adoption of printing technology is more complicated than such arguments allow.

Kathryn A. Schwartz's examination of the Ottoman 'ban' on printing has established that, even in the twenty-first century, investigations into why Ottomans did not print tend to rely on 'generalisations about Islamic mores' or the frequently repeated idea that 'Middle Easterners viewed print technology negatively' (2017, 3).[7] As Schwartz and others have demonstrated, the widely held belief that the Ottomans actually banned printing requires reconsideration, not least because there is no sound documentary evidence of such a ban (28). When it comes to thinking about the absence of print in other Muslim countries, Schwartz's work demonstrates the problems that occur when historians of the book rely on the European experience of print, which they take to be paradigmatic of other experiences, rather than understanding 'the European experience of print as one of many' (29). In looking at the reasons why printing was not common in Persia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is important to bear in mind that speaking of an 'aversion' or 'reluctance' to print, especially when such attitudes are

[5] See also Schwartz 2017.

[6] As Ayalon notes, such texts were produced from the sixteenth century in Europe, including Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands and England, and texts in other languages were printed in the Arab-speaking world, such as the Jewish exiles from Spain who opened printing houses in Istanbul from the mid-1490s (2016, 1-2).

[7] On the 'frequently cited objections made in the Islamic world to printing when it was first introduced', see Mahdi 1995, 4.

taken as resisting the advent of a 'civilising' or 'advancing' technology, is to take the European experience of print as the right and proper one, from which certain other countries deviate unnecessarily and at their peril.

Given the earlier use of block printing and the fact that, as Bloom notes, Persian leather bindings were 'pressure-molded using delicately carved metal stamps' (2001, 219), it is evident that other aspects of printing technology were also available in Persia prior to the introduction of the printing press in Europe. Nonetheless there are a number of likely technological reasons why the Persians, like other Islamic societies, did not quickly adopt the technologies of print once they were introduced. These include widespread difficulties for printers in reproducing Arabic and Persian or Farsi scripts and the difficulties in producing fonts (Ahmad 2015, Ch. 2). Printing in Persia, as we will see, may also have experienced setbacks due to other technical problems involving paper, ink, and the dryness of the climate. These constitute technical inhibitors to the adoption of print which may have been a factor in its failure to take off when it was first introduced.

The predominant literary culture of Persia must also be taken into account. In Persia, this was a manuscript age, with illuminated manuscripts being 'one of the most significant art forms in … early modern Iran' (Quinn 2015, 97). Book culture was thriving; the early seventeenth century was a period during which the arts, including bookbinding, calligraphy and illustration, flourished in Persia (95-96). The richness of manuscript culture, as we shall see, was surely also a contributing factor to the slow adoption of print technology. In Islamic countries, calligraphers fulfilled a role which was markedly different from that of European scribes (Juma 2016, 73); and 'writing [by hand] is one of the most important threads that runs through Islamic civilization' (Blair 2006, xxvii). This is one reason why it is inaccurate to dismiss the absence of printing in Persia as simply part of a distaste for or caution regarding the new technology. Traditional frameworks for understanding printing in the Ottoman empire and Persia are ahistorical because of their reliance on the European experience as a way of understanding the adoption of print and the printed book (Schwartz 2017, 1). It is important to bear in mind that the absence of printing in Persia can be understood as stemming from the contemporary strength of manuscript culture as much as from a lack of interest in printing or print technology.

The early modern period saw the development of European scholarship on 'Oriental' languages and manuscripts, including Persian, and the gradual increase in the representation of these languages in texts printed in Europe, from the late fifteenth century onwards. These were not texts written entirely in languages such as Arabic or Syriac, but including words or portions of text in such languages, either in woodcuts or in handwritten additions to printed texts. The first printed text which included the Arabic script was printed in Mainz, Germany in 1486; Bernhard von Breydenbach's *Peregrinatio in terram sanctam* included a woodcut of the Arabic alphabet (Toomer 1996, 38). Some texts which included sections in Persian were printed outside of Europe in the sixteenth century, if not in Persia itself; the first book printed that included the Persian language in the Near East was a Torah in Hebrew characters published in 1498 in Istanbul (Farman Farmayan 1968, 145). It was not until the sixteenth century that Arabic and Persian began to be printed on European presses using movable type. Arabic types existed in Germany as early as 1587, although they were not frequently put to use (Toomer 1996, 38). Persian punches, meanwhile, were produced in Europe at the Medici Press in the 1590s, although they were not being used in Persia at this time (Izadpanah 2018, 93).

In England, the first ever book to be printed with Arabic characters was Robert Wakefield's *Oratio de laudibus & utilitate trium linguarum: Arabicae, Chaldaicae & Hebraicae*, which was produced by the German printer Wynkyn de Worde in London in 1528 (Smyth 2024, 35).

Without access to Arabic movable type, de Worde inserted Arabic words cut from wood in between the metal letters as he set the pages for the press. Printing in 'Oriental' languages continued to present technical challenges for printers working in England, perhaps reflected in the fact that the next book printed in England with Arabic type would not be produced until 1592; in 1597, Joseph Barnes' edition of Richard Brett's book on languages, printed in Oxford, left space in the printed text for Syriac, Arabic and Ethiopian text to be added later by hand (*ibid.*). Indeed, printed books continued to use this method, of leaving space in the text for Arabic words to be written by hand, well into the seventeenth century (e.g. Greaves 1639). In 1637, the Oxford Press bought the first Oriental founts including Arabic type. In his *Elementa linguae Persicae*, published in London in 1649, Graves states that the printing of the work was delayed for five years owing to the scarcity of Arabic types (Ahmad 2015, 65).

From the 1630s, the first Persian-language characters printed using movable type appeared in books printed in Europe. The text which has usually been taken to be the earliest printed book to include the Persian language produced in Europe is the *Dastan-e-Masih amma aluda*, a translation into Persian by Hieronymo Xavier from a Latin text, *Historia Christi*, published in Leiden in 1639 (Floor 1990; Ahmad 2015, 111). However, Borna Izadpanah has established an earlier text, the anonymous *Alphabetum persicum*, as the first known instance of a book including Persian printed using movable type in Europe. The *Alphabetum persicum*, which does not bear a title page, date or place of publication, was printed at the press of the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in Rome in 1633 (Izadpanah 2018, 97). This is the first complete book printed using Persian *nastaʿlīq* type although, as Izadpanah notes, the earliest known printing with this type is from the Arabic and Persian proofs printed with the small *nastaʿlīq* type of the Medici Press in the 1590s (94). In any case, it seems reasonable to judge that European travellers to Persia in the earlier part of the seventeenth century (such as Parry and Herbert) would certainly not have seen Persian characters in print, either in Europe or in Persia; later travellers, such as Fryer and Ogilby, might well have done.

It is important to note that these early printed Persian texts include Persian words and phrases, but are not exclusively in the Persian language; they are texts predominantly in another language, such as English or Latin, which include phrases or sections in Persian (Izadpanah 2018, 99). Moreover, the Persian they represent is often incomplete or inaccurate, recognisable as Persian but by no means a perfect representation of the Persian language as it was actually written. It is worth noting, as Izadpanah emphasizes, that 'the knowledge of and drive to study the Persian language in Europe was very limited' at this time (90). The Persian-language sections included in predominantly English- or Latin-language texts during this period frequently included errors which were presumably not evident to their English readership, although they would have been – and indeed were – to readers of Persian. In *Elementa linguae Persicae* both the Latin and Persian text are corrected in the copy held by the Bodleian (Mar. 119 (3)) and the text has been heavily annotated by hand. The manual annotations and corrections to the Persian suggest there was difficulty in correctly printing the Persian language, even when Persian movable type became available. Hence it seems reasonable to conclude that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although it was possible to encounter books in Europe in which 'Oriental' languages such as Persian appeared, these were sometimes, perhaps frequently, only European ideas or approximations of what such languages actually were. The representations of languages such as Persian in dictionaries seem to suggest an exactness and precision of linguistic accuracy which are not in fact the case. Rather, the Persian language as it is represented in early printed examples of Persian in English texts is very much a European construct. It is important to bear in mind, then, that English readers of Persian in print in the later seventeenth century

encountered at best an English version of Persian: accurately printed Persian-language text in this period is very rare, both in Europe and the Muslim world.

European travellers' observations on the lack of printing in Persia can thus be placed within a wider context in which the Persian language was rarely available (especially in an accurate state) to European readers, and Persian-language texts were not being printed either in Europe or Asia. Nonetheless, Tavernier's statement of the Persians in his 1684 that 'Printers they know none' (229) was not in fact literally true at the time of his travels in the 1630s and early 1640s. There were two printing presses in Persia during this period, the earliest present from 1629, both of non-Persian origin: the first of these was delivered from Rome to the community of Carmelite friars at Isfahan, and the second built by Armenian monks at New Julfa. As we will see, these presses were part of Christian missionary efforts, and had a negligible impact on book culture in Persia in the seventeenth century.

In 1604 Pope Clement VIII, supported by Sigismund III Vasa of Poland, sent a mission of Discalced Carmelite fathers to Persia. The Carmelites, under the leadership of Father John Thaddeus (or Taddeo) of St. Elisaeus, established a monastery in Isfahan from 1608; Carmelites were to continue living in Persia until 1752, following the death of Philip Mary of St. Augustine, then bishop of Isfahan, in 1749 (Richard 1990). In 1618, Father John Thaddeus apparently presented Shah ʿAbbās I with an alphabet in Arabic and 'acquainted him with the printing of Arabic and Persian letters' (Chick 2012, vol. 1, 305). The Carmelite *Chronicle* of these events includes Thaddeus' report that Shah ʿAbbās 'showed much interest and expressed a wish to introduce it into his own country' and 'has even charged me to procure [a set of type]' (*ibid.*). Rosemary Lee quotes from Pietro Della Valle's letter on the subject, which also describes ʿAbbās' particular interest in the press. Della Valle writes that: 'The shah was delighted to see all of these books, and showed great interest in having a printing press for Persian and Arabic brought to Isfahan' (1972, 327 quoted in Lee 2013, 24). Thaddeus, according to Della Valle, 'sparked within them [i.e., ʿAbbās and his courtiers] the desire for a printing press, which would print works in Persian, but remain entirely in the hands of our religious'. Della Valle sees the press as a potential agent of conversion:

> Without doubt, it would be a great means to spread books and achieve great gains in the conversion of souls. Because in fact the Persians, who are as curious as can be and well-schooled in philosophy and other sciences, not only freely receive and read our books, but also speak and debate doctrines of faith, as I have seen many times. They debate both in public and in private, and do not have the same stem unwillingness to listen that the Turks do. (1972, quoted in Lee 2013, 24)

Nonetheless, as Lee notes, the press was not only or exclusively intended as a means of disseminating Christian texts in a Muslim country. The 'unseen Italian printing-press was also a mechanical marvel and curiosity' which 'fascinated the Safavid shah independent of its evangelistic function'; Thaddeus 'used the tantalizing offer of a Persian language printing-press as leverage in his ongoing negotiations with the shah' (Lee 2013, 204). In this respect, the introduction of the printing press to Persia can be classed alongside other marvels and curiosities via which Christian European travellers and diplomats sought to build relationships with their Muslim hosts.[8]

A printing press was eventually prepared in Rome, apparently ready to be sent in 1624, although it did not arrive in Isfahan until early 1629. It seems likely that the press was accompanied by apparatus for setting type and casting letter forms; in 1642, Bernard of St. Theresa,

[8] The most obvious comparison would be the organ given by Thomas Dallam to Sultan Muhammad III in 1599 (see Danson 2009).

then bishop of Baghdad and temporary vicar apostolic at Isfahan, left behind him in Isfahan matrices for 349 Arabic letters, together with such apparatus, presumably intended for use on this press (Floor 1980, 370). However, there is no evidence that any book was ever printed on it. In 1638 the Vatican wrote to enquire whether or not the press was in use, but there is no record of a reply to this enquiry (Richard 1990). The printing apparatus was stored in the Isfahan office of the Dutch East India Company from 1648 until 1669, when it was returned to the Carmelites (Floor 1980, 371; Bloom 2001, 221). The French Carmelite missionary Joseph Labrosse, known as Father Angelus of St. Joseph, who visited Persia from 1664 to 1678, later reported that 'Our old Carmelite fathers founded an Arabic-Persian printing-press in their convent in Isfahan … They still have it' (Floor 1980, 369, footnote 2). Attempts may have been made at printing using the Carmelite press at Isfahan, but evidently they were not successfully established (Afšār 1958 quoted in Floor 1990; Farman Farmayan 1968, 145).[9]

The second printing press in Persia was also established by a religious community, in this case of Armenian monks living in New Julfa, a quarter of Isfahan. Like the Carmelites, the Julfan community had close relations with ʿAbbās (Herzig 1996, 313). The press was established by Bishop Khach'atur Kesaratsi' in 1637 at the monastery of the Holy Saviour (Richard 1980, 483; Taylor 1995, 70; Bloom 2001, 221); Floor records that: 'After struggling for seventeen months he was able to print the Psalms … in … 1638 … the first book printed in Iran' (1990). In order to do so, Alice Taylor suggests,

> the monks virtually had to reinvent the whole printing process. None of them had ever seen a printing press; they depended on what information they could gather from travellers who had. The monks made their own ink and paper and employed Armenian goldsmiths of Isfahan to make type. They concentrated on essential devotional books, beginning with a psalter that they completed in 1638. (1995, 70-71)

This first book from the first printing press in Iran to successfully produce books in any language was printed in Armenian; the early texts produced on this press followed in their decorations and general appearance the traditions of Armenian manuscripts (71). The major limitation of this press as a technology for printing Persian-language texts is thus evident: the blocks used to produce Armenian-language texts would be of no use in printing books in Persian. Indeed, producing the blocks needed to print in Persian would have been a challenging and costly endeavour, the Persian language requiring four distinct blocks for each of its 32 letters, because the letter shape varies according to whether it appears in the initial, middle, final, or isolated position (Parhami 2019, 182). This perhaps explains why the Persian court apparently showed little interest in block printing, once it had been reintroduced (Farman Farmayan 1968, 145).

Another serious difficulty in managing to print books in any language seems to have been the unavailability of ink and paper of sufficiently good quality. The paper was too soft, and the print flawed by 'uneven letters – the result of uneven pressure on an amateur press' (Taylor 1995, 70). In 1640 the Capuchin monks at Julfa appealed to Paris for help on behalf of the bishop; Richard (1980, 483-484) notes that Father Joseph du Tremblay, who had supported efforts at establishing printing in the East and might have been able to help, had died two years earlier. The Julfan press did produce two more books, religious works printed in 1641 and 1642. The bishop then sent a pupil, Hovhannes, to Europe for the purpose of learning printing; Hovhannes printed a book in Armenian in Livorno before returning to Persia with another printing press and some lead type (Bloom 2001, 221). Access to the right sort of ink

[9] See also Bloom 2001, 221.

continued to be a problem, however, and this press was not used until 1687, when nine further books were printed (*ibid*.).

The Armenian press at New Julfa seems somewhat more successful than the Carmelite press at Isfahan, in that there is evidence of it having been used to produce books, but neither press made any significant impact on book culture in Persia or produced texts that were entirely printed in the Persian language. James Barry notes that Armenian merchants negotiated the boundaries of the Christian West and Muslim East in their use of the printing press, as they did with their trading habits. As he argues, 'this innovation [the press] was introduced by the Church for the Church's own needs and no effort was ever made to share this technology with their Muslim neighbours' (2019, 159).[10] As agents of conversion, the printing presses had very little success. It seems that they were never intended as a means of introducing print technology to Persia, and so it is hardly surprising that they did not achieve this goal, either.

The information available on these attempts to introduce the printing press to Persia in the seventeenth century suggests that technical difficulties were likely a major reason why they were unsuccessful. There is another factor, however, which European travel writings to Persia themselves suggest, and that is the rich oral and manuscript traditions which dominated Persian literary culture during and beyond this period. Both oral and manuscript cultures thrived in Persia, although they have been marginalised in modern European scholarship; an appreciation of these traditions helps explain why printing did not take off in Persia in the early modern period.

Orality and oral traditions are central to Persian culture from the classical through the medieval and early modern periods and to the present day; many traditional Persian literary forms are oral rather than textual (Rubanovich 2012; Shahbazi 2012, 121). Nonetheless, Julia Rubanovich notes, 'scholarship has tended to ignore orality in medieval and early modern Persia' and 'discussions of oral tradition and orality in the Iranian world have been limited in scope … especially during the medieval and early modern periods' (2012, 653 and 2015, 2-3). Rubanovich also emphasizes the complex and intertwined relationship between textual and oral culture during these periods, pointing to the 'important evidence of textual culture's intimate, extensive, and ongoing interaction with the realm of orality', evidence which 'refute[s] the exclusivity of the oral and literate worlds' (2015, 13).

The importance of the handwritten text to Persian culture should also not be underestimated. Persian culture, in common with that of other Muslim countries, 'revere[d] … the (hand) written word' (Bloom 2001, 222).[11] Calligraphy or the art of fine handwriting had long been important to Islamic traditions, and particularly in Persia. Sheila S. Blair describes the importance of the Safavid period (1501-1722) to the history of Iranian calligraphy and the rich collections of manuscripts which were commissioned and maintained by Safavid rulers from the early sixteenth century (2006, 417). The reign of Shah ʿAbbās I (1587-1629), Blair notes, 'is considered by many the apogee of artistic production in Safavid Iran' (423) a time when calligraphers were closely associated with the royal court and there was vibrant and active production of texts in manuscript form (426). Persian manuscript production was 'highly revered' under Safavid rule and at its height during this period (Izadpanah 2023, 79). This is clearly a reason why 'the fine art of calligraphy was never seriously challenged until the nineteenth century' (Farman Farmayan 1968, 144).

The strength of oral and manuscript culture in Persian literary production is an important reason why Persia did not quickly welcome the advent of the printing press in the early seven-

[10] See also Ghougassian 1998, 138.
[11] See also Aslanian 2023, 120.

teenth century. Persian literary production did not provide the same space or opportunity for print as did the literary production of early modern Europe. While in Europe, print and manuscript literary cultures continued to coexist for many years after the introduction of printing with movable type, in Persia, the combined centrality of manuscript and oral cultures, along with the technical challenges printing involved, meant that the odds of the early seventeenth-century presses starting a Persian printing revolution were very slim.

European travellers, perhaps unsurprisingly, do not make such direct observations about the importance of manuscript and oral traditions in Persian literary production as I have done above. But their texts do signal their awareness of the strength of these cultures, and their intertwined nature, in the places and peoples that they encountered. Early modern European travel writings about Persia reflect a society in which there is a thriving literary culture which has no need of print, because books are widely available, and cheap and easy to purchase in manuscript, and orality plays an important role in literary transmission.

The travel-writers frequently comment on the ubiquity and value of handwritten books in Persian society. When European travel-writers mention seeing Persian books, or encountering people reading books, it is handwritten texts that they are describing. As Susan Mokhberi notes, French travellers such as Jean Chardin praised Persians 'as beacons of learning and civility'; Chardin records that 'many peasants themselves go to read good books' (2019, 19 and 18). In *Asia*, Ogilby writes that 'Their chief Book is … *Culustan* [Gulistān], that is, *Rose-Valley*, made by the famous Poet *Schich Saadi* … every *Perſian* hath this Book in his Houſe'; he notes that '[books of philosophy are rare and kept] as a great Treaſure' (1673, 60). Olearius describes encountering a library where:

> The books were lay'd in Drawers, ſhuffled one upon another, without any order, but otherwise well enough kept. They were all Manuſcripts, ſome, upon Parchment, others upon Paper, moſt in *Arabick,* and ſome in the *Perſian* and *Turkiſh* Languages, but all excellently painted, richly bound, and cover'd with Plates of Gold and Silver, carv'd, and branch'd. The books of Hiſtory were enrich'd with ſeveral representations in colours. (1669, 179)

Fryer speculates that Persian books, being in manuscript, are more accurate than they would be if printed, which are 'leſs free from Errors', suggesting one way in which handwritten texts might be valued over printed ones (1698, 361). These sources also note the prestige accorded to the scribe (Ogilby records in a marginal note that 'Writing [is] the moſt advantageous Employment') (1673, 64), and the importance of handwriting as an art form (Fryer, for example, explains that the Persians are 'mightily taken with a fair Hand and good Writing') (1698, 361).

The richness of Persian oral culture is less commonly noted, but is not absent from travel-writers' observations. Ogilby, in noting the ubiquity of books in Persia, also records the Persian tradition of learning poetry by heart: 'every *Perſian* hath this Book in his Houſe; nay, ſome there are which carry it in their memory, and are therefore accounted very learned; this they repeat at all Feaſts and other Merry-meetings' (1673, 60). Olearius, who calls the Persians 'addicted to Poetry', explains that 'the Great Lords think they cannot give their Friends a better entertainment, than by Diverting them, while they are at Dinner, with the recital of ſome Poem' (1669, 251). In a fascinating image of literary production, he describes Persian poets, who

> are known from others by their Habit, which is the ſame with that of the Philosophers; to wit, a long white Coat, but open before, with great broad Sleeves, and they have at their Girdle a kind of a Hawking-bag, in which are their Books, Paper, and an Ink-horn, that they may give Copies of their verſes to ſuch as deſire them. (*Ibid*.)

In these glimpses into the richness of early modern Persian literary culture, travel-writers show – unwittingly – why Persia had little need for print technology as a means of textual production.

In the early seventeenth century, there was considerable enthusiasm among European travellers about Persia as a prospective trade and diplomatic partner. For a brief period of time, the printing press looked as though it might function to strengthen links between Persia and Christian Europe, by producing texts in European languages in Persia, and even possibly becoming established as part of the technology of Persian literary production. In this sense the printing press is exemplary of European hopes for closer relations with Persia at that time: much effort made, but not much consequence to follow. Printing failed to take off because of the technological difficulties it faced, but also because of the book culture that already thrived in Persia, in which manuscript books were plentiful and accessible.[12] But as well as noting the absence of a printing press in Persia – and thus the failure to establish printing – European travellers also recorded other aspects of Persian book culture which show the development of an understanding of Persia as different to Europe in this regard. In commenting on the absence of print, European travel writings reflected the strength of other forms of literary culture which European travellers registered even when they did not fully understand them.

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[12] On the successful introduction of printing with movable type to Persia in the early nineteenth century, see Green 2010.

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