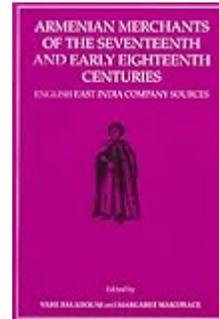




VahĀ© Baladouni, Margaret Makepeace, eds. *Armenian Merchants of the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries: English East India Company Sources*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998. xxxvii + 294 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87169-885-8.



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Armenian Diaspora Merchants in New Julfa

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With an Armenian homeland situated astride major overland trade routes between Europe and Asia, Armenian merchants became the most successful commercial carriers and conduits for various Eurasian civilizations. The high point of this Armenian cross-cultural nexus came in the seventeenth century, when Shah Abbas I (1587- 1629) of Safavid Persia gave the Armenian merchants of New Julfa, a suburb on the outskirts of Isfahan, a monopoly over Persia's raw silk export trade. Silk became the lifeblood of a flourishing commerce, with New Julfa the axis in a profitable overland and maritime network traversing Europe, the Levant, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, and the East Indies. Armenians from New Julfa were well positioned to control Persia's silk trade even after Abbas's successor abolished their monopoly. In addition to ready capital and resources, they benefited from a far-flung web of Armenian diaspora communities connected by ties of kinship, religion, and language, by cooperation and mutual support, by relatively easy credit, and by contracts based on trust and good will. Through their commercial school and pub-

lished manuals and guidebooks, New Julfa's Armenians also provided apprentice traders with business training and expertise.[1]

This thriving New Julfa mercantile community is the subject of a collaborative effort by VahĀ© Baladouni of the University of New Orleans and Margaret Makepeace, formerly Head of Reader Services at the India Office Library and Records. The volume contains 270 selected documents from the archives of England's East India Company, covering the relationship between New Julfa traders and the Company during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In a concise scholarly introduction, with two excellent maps of Armenian commercial centers across Europe and Asia, Baladouni discusses the main themes of these extracts and places the activities of Armenia's intermediaries in historical context. Drawing on relevant scholarly literature and sharing some of the historiographical debates on European-Asian trade, he describes key factors explaining the success of New Julfa's merchants and the failure of the East India Company to divert the Persia-Levant caravan route to the Persian Gulf and India.

The introduction might have been more effective had it elaborated several points. For instance, the Ottoman and Persian governments used religion rather than ethnicity as the primary organizing principle for their diverse non-Muslim populations, and the resulting Jewish and Christian communities had autonomy under their own religious (not “ethnic” as the author mistakenly notes, p. xvii) laws and administrative institutions. Since Persia’s Armenians had extensive interaction with Ottoman Armenians in Aleppo and other mercantile centers of the Levant, more information on this exchange and on how these diaspora communities fared under Islamic rule (Ottoman Sunni and Safavid Shiite) would have clarified the larger picture of Armenian middlemen in the Middle East during the early modern era. It would have been useful to know more about the variety of occupations and functions among New Julfa’s Armenian merchants, as well as their economic stratification and social pecking order. Baladouni is no doubt accurate when he says that an “ethos of trust” and “shared moral and ethical norms” proved crucial in the mutually profitable dealings between Armenian trading firms (p. xxiv). As a principal feature and means of doing business among family and countrymen, trust certainly would have facilitated the sharing of information, the drawing up of contracts, and any number of other cost-saving measures. But a few concrete examples of this bond would have substantiated the author’s hypothesis. Lastly, some additional details might have been given on New Julfa’s Armenian merchants after the early eighteenth century, when Persia’s political and military disarray and the demise of its silk trade drove many traders to migrate to India, Russia, and other parts of Europe, where they adapted their business expertise to new settings, markets, products, and trade routes.

The strength of this work is the rich assortment of documents from the East India Company, detailing the unsuccessful attempts by the Company to wrest control of the lucrative silk trade from New Julfa’s Armenian traders. Helpful topical indexes allow the reader to explore specific threads of the story through the compendium of Company correspondence, memoranda, and other records. Citing documents by number, the various indexes identify a range of topics: individual Armenian merchants; statements made about Armenians and Armenian traders by the East India Company and its factors; capacities in which some Armenians assisted the Company (as interpreters, contractors, shipowners, set-

tlers in Company towns, soldiers, trading partners); references to rival European trading states; place names; individual Company officials, factors, and representatives; exports to Asia; imports to England; ships; and currencies, weights, and other measurements. While specialists will discover myriad nuggets combing through the extracts, the collection reveals some of the difficulties the East India Company encountered in negotiating with New Julfa’s merchants. One problem was tension and mistrust between Company directors in London and Company factors in India, fueled in part by their divergent views toward Armenian traders. While factors had an uneasy, at times hostile, relationship with Armenian merchants, Company directors regarded Armenians as reliable and efficient and their own factors as negligent and dishonest. The Armenian side in the negotiations encompassed various merchants and trading houses whose sole unifying tie was opposition to Company overtures to break into Armenian-managed caravan routes and markets. Until the early eighteenth century, Armenians continued to transport Persian silk to Levant centers, above all Aleppo, where they sold or bartered it for European cloth and made a handsome profit.

The authors deserve high praise for gathering and publishing valuable primary sources on the Armenian diaspora and its commercial dealings with the East India Company during a particularly important period. The volume serves as a reminder of the need to mine the many archives and manuscript repositories—in Erevan, New Julfa, Istanbul, London, Moscow, Venice, Lisbon, Paris, Amsterdam—for relevant materials on the activities not only of Armenian merchants but of Jewish, Greek, and other cross-cultural middlemen who played major roles in Ottoman, Persian, and Russian commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Notes

[1]. Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 179-206, on Armenian overland commercial carriers between Europe and East Asia in the seventeenth century. Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the Islamic Economy in Aleppo, 1600-1750* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), pp. 23-36, 82-88, on the importance of Armenian traders in Ottoman Aleppo’s silk-cloth exchange in the seventeenth century.

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