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Feridun M. Emecen – Ali Akyıldız

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Ali Akyıldız

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Reception, Display, And Representation: Exotic Animals In Early Modern Istanbul¹

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Introduction

Among the animal gifts exchanged between Safavids, Mughals, and Ottomans, exotic animals played an important part. Rulers of these empires were keen on collecting exotic animals in their royal menageries.² The paper aims to explore how various exotic animals from Safavid and Mughal lands were viewed and conceived in Istanbul. The ‘regifting’ phenomenon in Safavid-Ottoman gift exchanges, including the role of the Safavids in the circulation of Indian animals has been largely understudied. We will explore how the animals of Indian origin circulated as diplomatic gifts from the Safavid shahs to the Ottoman court.

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- 1 The paper was written within a research project titled ‘Gifts without borders: Material and symbolic dimensions of Safavid-Mughal diplomacy’ funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (AZ 46/F/22).
- 2 Ahmad Guliyev, “A Brother’s Portion’: Regifted and Requested Items in Safavid-Mughal Diplomatic Gift Exchanges,” *Acta Orientalia* (August 2024), p. 3, DOI:10.1556/062.2024.00425.

The display of animals, particularly exotic beasts was an element of court culture across the Eurasian continent, aimed to impress both foreign visitors and the locals. How were they represented in Ottoman chronicles and miniatures? Furthermore, we will also discuss how animal symbolism was used to represent power in the Ottoman court. The use of elephants obtained as diplomatic gifts from the Safavids in Ottoman warfare will also be explored. Finally, we will look at the relevant infrastructure for accommodating animals and officials in charge of their feeding and care in Istanbul.

Exotic animals in Early Modern diplomatic gift exchanges

Gifts, including animals, were an essential feature of early modern diplomacy. Rarity always played an important role in diplomatic gifting. Presents were particularly appreciated when they had an exotic nature or rare value. Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal chronicles and correspondences frequently mention ‘rarities’ or ‘choice objects’ in connection with diplomatic gifts.³

The consistent references to the rare artefacts in the descriptions of gift packages suggest that both Safavid and Ottoman rulers preferred to offer diplomatic gifts that might not have been considered as select or curious objects. Exotic animals were one of the most appreciated kinds of diplomatic gifts, and they are often richly described in contemporary writings. Such gifts were also indicative of the rulers’ chains of exchange across larger geographical areas.

The presence of animals in court ceremonies and royal processions was a key part of the manifestations of power and the standing of rulers. Thomas Allsen notes that “in exchanging unusual animals, rulers quite consciously (...) helped to solidify each other’s regimes

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3 İbrahim Efendi Peçevi, *Peçevi Tarihi*, nşr. Bekir Sıtkı Baykal (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1999), II, s. 345; Iskandar Beg Munshi, *History of Shah Abbas the Great (Tārīk-e Ālamārā-ye Abbāsī)*, trans. Roger M. Savory (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), II, pp. 704, 978, 1026; Wheeler M. Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama: memoirs of Jahangir, emperor of India* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 121, 261, 319.

through a kind of professional courtesy.”⁴ Exotic animals projected the power of the prince through magnificence in the ability to possess items of the utmost rarity and expense. Hunting was also a key facet of the articulation and maintenance of notions of kingship, governance, and human domination over the animal world.

Ottoman sultans received a variety of exotic animals from their tributaries, provincial governors, and their counterparts, particularly Safavid and Mughal rulers. Frequent diplomatic contacts and trade relations between the three major empires of the early modern Muslim world—the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals—facilitated the movement of exotic animals of symbolic and economic importance from South Asia and Safavid lands to Istanbul. Among the gifts exchanged between the Ottomans and Safavids, the rare animals played an important part. As a way of manifesting princely magnificence and power, rulers of both powers were keen on collecting exotic animals in their royal menageries.

The royal menageries must have contributed to breeding exotic animals for diplomacy. Thus, both contemporary narrative and visual sources depicting the arrival of diplomatic gifts frequently highlight large mammals, particularly elephants and lions. Particularly, elephants known to have arrived in Istanbul were gifts from the Safavid shahs, who maintained close relations with the Mughal rulers. Alan Mikhail points out that “the history of Indian elephants is a prime example of the circulation of prized living creatures among the three empires. In Istanbul, Asian elephants played an active role as instigators of imagination, projections of imperial authority, and symbols of Ottoman attempts to manage and come to terms with nature.”⁵

The elephant, at all times the favorite animal of India, was also an important status symbol for the Mughals.⁶ The elephant was an integral part of the imperial self-presentation in South Asia. One of

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4 Thomas T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 235.

5 Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 114.

6 Ebba Koch, ‘Carved Pools, Rock-Cut Elephants, Inscriptions, and Tree Columns: Mughal Landscape Art as Imperial Expression and Its Analogies to the Renaissance Garden,’ in: *Gardens of Renaissance Europe and the Islamic Empires*,

the principal factors prompting demand for Indian elephants in both the Ottoman and Safavid empires was their dual use as diplomatic gifts and symbols of imperial power. In comparison with the African elephants, the Asian elephants were easy to tame and train, and therefore they played a role in diplomatic gifting.

The significance of rare animal offerings is also vividly illustrated in several miniatures (*Süleymannâme*, *Hünernâme*, *Şehnâme-i hümayun*, *Şehnâme-i Sultan Murad III*, etc.) depicting the sultanic hunts and imperial festivities. Miniatures depicting the arrival of diplomatic gifts often highlight elephants, lions, and rhinos. The famous themes in miniatures were the Ottoman claim to the world dominion and the dynasty's ability to control, command, and display the natural world.

Valuables captured as spoils in a successful expedition were highly favoured as gifts, for besides being gifts, they were also tokens of victory. As irrefutable evidence of a triumph, they could aim to manifest the military might and commemorate the glory of the sender. For example, in 1655 Shah Abbas II sent the Ottoman sultan Mehmed IV an elephant from the spoils taken following the defeat of the final Mughal expedition to Qandahar in September 1653.⁷

Some historians argue that the Ottomans never took elephants along to war.⁸ However some sources gave evidence of the use of elephants in warfare, albeit on a limited scale due to the difficulties to guide and care them. For example, the Ottomans used the elephants that they had received as diplomatic gifts from the Safavids during their operation against the Cossacks in July 1621 on the Black Sea.⁹ Moreover, a miniature showed an elephant taken along on the Hotin campaign (1621) and ridden by a drummer whose “no-

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ed. Mohammad Gharipour (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), p. 196.

7 Riazul Islam, *A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations, 1500-1750* (Tehran: Iranian Cultural Foundation; Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1979), I, p. 334.

8 Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*, 119.

9 Katip Çelebi, *Fezleke [Osmanlı Tarihi (1000-1065/1591-1655)]*, nşr. Zeynep Aybican (İstanbul: Çamlıca, 2016), II, 528-529.

ise was to encourage the sultan's warriors and terrify his opponents". There is another miniature showing a prisoner taken during the siege of Belgrade (1521) being trampled to death by an elephant. However, the reality of this illustration is debated.

The 'regifting' in Ottoman-Safavid animal gift exchanges

The 'regifting' of luxury objects and exotic goods across physical and cultural boundaries was a common practice in the early modern period.¹⁰ Rulers occasionally offered their counterparts rare gifts which they had previously received from somebody else. Such gifts emphasized the importance of their sender.¹¹ Furthermore, the regifting added to a gift the prestige of all its former possessors.¹² The circulation and redistribution of gifts also contributed to the creation of connections between parties that were not otherwise in direct contact.¹³

In April-May 1619, the Safavid ambassador, Yādīgār 'Alī Sultan, better known as 'Burun Qasim', arrived at Istanbul with one hundred loads of silk, four elephants, and one rhinoceros, as well as other gifts for the Ottoman Sultan Osman II (r. 1618-1622).¹⁴ The Safavid envoy centurion Tākhtā Beg Ustājlu, who was dispatched to the Ottoman court in the second half of 1620, brought with him letters addressed to the Sultan and the Shaykh al-Islam along with various gifts, including four elephants.¹⁵ Tākhtā Beg's gifts were

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10 Guliyeve, "A Brother's Portion," p. 2.

11 Riazul Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations: a Study of the Political and Diplomatic Relations between the Mughal Empire and Iran* (Teheran: Iranian Culture Foundation, 1970), p. 229.

12 Stephan Popp, 'Presents given to and by Jahangir and Shah Jahan: a comparison,' in: *The Mughal Empire from Jahangir to Shah Jahan*, eds. Ebba Koch and Ali Anooshahr (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2019), p. 134.

13 José M. Escribano-Páez, "Diplomatic Gifts, Tributes and Frontier Violence: Circulation of Contentious Presents in the Moluccas (1575-1606)," *Diplomatica*, II, 2 (2020), p. 255.

14 Mustafa Efendi Naimâ, *Târib-i Na'imâ*, nşr. Mehmet İpşirli (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2007), II, 448-449.

15 Özer Küpeli, "Osmanlı-Safevi Münasebetleri (1612-1639)" (doktora tezi), *Ege Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü*, 2009, s.72.

also mentioned by an Italian traveller Tommaso Alberti, who was an eyewitness of his embassy to the Ottoman court. In particular, he described the rhino (*rinoceronte*) in some detail.¹⁶

Another Safavid envoy, Najaf Qulu Beg, who visited the Ottoman court in the same year, also brought four elephants and a rhinoceros, along with other gifts.¹⁷ The elephants and rhinoceros offered to the Ottoman court in 1619 and 1620 had, in all probability, originally been gifts from the Mughal court to the Safavid ruler, possibly brought by the embassy of Mirza Barkhudār, better known as Khān Alam.

In 1648, the Safavid shah Abbās II (r. 1642-1666), at the request of Ottoman Sultan Ibrāhim (r. 1640-1648), dispatched a luxuriously caparisoned elephant, along with several elephant-riders (*filbān*) and other gifts, through his envoy Muhammad Qulu Beg (Qazvīnī 1950: 97-98). On the occasion of the enthronement of Sultan Mehmed IV (r. 1648-1687), Shah Abbās II, through his ambassador Khān Muhammad, offered two elephants as gifts.¹⁸ It is possible that the elephants that came to the Safavid court with one of the Mughal embassies during the second half of the 1640s were eventually regifted to the Ottomans.

A 'big elephant' was among the gifts sent to the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed II (r. 1691-1695) on the occasion of his enthronement in 1692 by the Safavid shah Sultan Huseyn (r. 1694-1722) through his ambassador Kalb 'Alī Khān Ziyādoghlu Qājār.¹⁹ In April 1697, a Safavid envoy, Abu'l Masum Khān Shāmlu, was dispatched to congratulate Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695-1703) on his accession to the throne. He too offered the Sultan an elephant, along with several rows of camels, each covered with silk carpets, bearing gifts.²⁰

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16 Tommaso Alberti, *Viaggio a Costantinopoli di Tommaso Alberti (1609-1621)*, ed. Alberto Bacchi della Lega (Bologna: Presso Romagnoli Dall'Acqua), 1889, pp. 56-57; Hedda Reindl-Kiel, 'Dogs, Elephants, Lions, a Ram and a Rhino on Diplomatic Mission,' in: *Animals and People in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Suraiya Faruqi (Istanbul: Eren, 2010), p. 282.

17 Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches* (Pest: C.A. Hartleben 1827-1835), IV, 521

18 Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, V, 490.

19 Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, VI, 569.

20 Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, VI, 631.

Other rare animals received from India were also sometimes regifted to the Ottoman and Muscovite courts.²¹ For instance, in 1555, a Habsburg ambassador Busbecq, while describing the diplomatic gifts brought by the Safavid embassy led by Farrukhzād Beg Qarādaghlī on the occasion of the Amasya peace negotiations, noted that ‘amongst other gifts, rare animals were sometimes sent, for example, there was an Indian ant,²² as large as a fair-sized dog, and extremely fierce and snappish’.²³

The redistribution of presents was common practice in early-modern Ottoman and Middle Eastern gift exchanges.

Before the Safavids, the Mamluks also sent elephants to the Ottoman rulers, which they obtained from India. In 1515, the Mamluk sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri passed on an elephant that he had received from India to Sultan Selim I. This tradition was continued by successive dynasties such as the Afsharids and Qajars. In 1738, Nadir Shah sent the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud I an Indian elephant as part of his attempts at rapprochement with the Ottoman Empire.²⁴ In the spring of 1818, a group of Indian elephants accompanied by five elephant handlers was hired to look after the creatures that came to the Ottoman capital as a gift from the Qajar court.²⁵

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21 See Guliyev, “A Brother’s Portion,” pp. 4–6.

22 The gold-digging ant is a mythical insect described in classical and medieval bestiaries. They were four-footed animals larger than foxes but smaller than dogs that dug up gold in sandy areas. Michael J. Curley (trans.) *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 84–85. The animal concerned was probably an Indian pangolin (anteater); as the editors of Busbecq’s ‘Letters’, Ch. Th. Foster and F. H. Daniell remark, ‘the most plausible conjecture is that which identifies this animal with the Pangolin or Ant-eater’. Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, ed. and trans. C. T. Foster and F. H. Blackburne Daniell (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), I, 375, n. 2.

23 Busbecq, *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, I, 375.

24 Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*, 114.

25 Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*, 120.

To some extent, the Ottomans played an intermediary role in the circulation of Safavid objects to Europe, including the animal gifts they received from the Qizilbash. For example, in 1699, after the peace of Karlowitz, twenty-five horses were dispatched to Vienna, this time accompanied by two leopards. These leopards might originally have come as presents from the Safavid court, since on their backs they wore embroidered Persian coats.²⁶

Some parts of the gifts exchanged between them can be attributed to specific requests. In 1648, the Safavid Shah Abbās II (r. 1642-1666), at the request of Ottoman Sultan Ibrāhim (r. 1640-1648), dispatched a luxuriously caparisoned elephant, along with several elephant-riders (*filban*) and other gifts, through his envoy Muhammad Qulu Beg.²⁷ However, not all time, the requests for specific gifts was granted. For example, in 1568, the Ottoman grand vizier refused the Habsburg envoys' request for a giraffe to be sent for the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II.²⁸

Animal Collecting in the Ottoman Empire

At the early modern courts, the collection of wild animals, an exclusive domain of imperial power, became a symbol of princely magnificence and rule. The exchange of exotic animals as diplomatic gifts gave rise to a culture of collecting and the emergence of a space made specifically to house and display such objects. Assemblages of living exotica have been a common feature of many early modern royal courts, including the Ottoman. The menageries that the Ottoman sultans established in Istanbul were as rich, diverse, and impressive as those of the Mughal and Safavid courts.

The collecting of wild, rare, and exotic birds, mammals, and reptiles depended largely on the ability to access supply channels of animals from Asia and Africa. The Ottomans' success in the procurement of animals was achieved largely by the expansion of their empire in geographical areas and centers that lay in the very heart of the trading networks that linked Central Asia, India, Arabia, and

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26 Reindl-Kiel, 'Dogs, Elephants, Lions,' p. 273.

27 Guliyev, "A Brother's Portion," p. 4.

28 Reindl-Kiel, 'Dogs, Elephants, Lions,' p. 281.

Europe. The conquest of Egypt in 1517 played a crucial role in the creation and expansion of the palace menagerie.²⁹ European visitors to the early modern Istanbul commented on the diversity of the exotic fauna in the Ottoman menageries.³⁰ Allsen notes that “The best royal zoo in early modern times was found in the Ottoman capital.”³¹ In addition to the pleasure they provide through observation and curiosity, menageries of exotic animals are also external signs of wealth and instruments of power.

Arslanhane (“**Lion house**”): The large-scale, intricate, and sophisticated administration built around the maintenance of lions in Istanbul and the priority given to lions over other animals were results of the important functions these animals played in projecting Ottoman imperial authority and articulating ideas of state sovereignty.

Lions were also frequently theatrically employed in imperial processions through Istanbul as public displays of dynastic authority. Lions were usually either gifted to Istanbul from the empire’s North African provinces or the Safavid realm. They were effectively used in Ottoman miniature paintings as symbols of the dynasty’s authority over nature.

The existence of a lion house in Istanbul created the need for an animal administration to oversee all matters related to the presence of lions in the imperial capital. With the circulation of animals, the expertise of the successful handler had an important place in

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29 Deniz Dölek-Sever, “Captive wild animals as visual commodities in the Ottoman Empire: a historical review,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, LX, 3 (2024), p. 369.

30 Jean Chesneau, *Le Voyage de Monsieur d’Aramon, Ambassadeur pour le Roy en Levant* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1887), pp. 35–37; Wenceslas Wratislaw, *Adventures of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw of Mitrowitz* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1862), pp. 70–71; Lehatsi Simëon. *The Travel Accounts of Simëon of Poland*, intro. and annot., trans. George A. Bournoutian (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2007), pp. 37–38; Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, *A voyage into the Levant, perform’d by command of the late French king : containing the antient and modern state of the islands of the archipelago [...]* (London : Printed for D. Browne, A. Bell, J. Darby, 1718), I, 360.

31 Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, p. 204.

the court environment. The responsibility of overseeing the feeding and well-being of these animals fell to the empire's chief lion keeper (*arslancıbaşı*), who was a regular salaried member of the imperial bureaucracy.³²

Transporting and keeping exotic animals:

Exotic animals were most challenging in acquisition and transportation, an aspect that in turn increased the animals' price and prestige. Transportation of exotic birds was problematic, and not all the "living gifts" could survive the long journey.

According to Venetian Pigafetta in 1568, Shah Tahmāsp sent to Sultan Selim II 40 falcons and they died during the journey.³³ Particularly, large mammals, such as elephants, which needed special care, were accompanied by expert handlers to ensure their well-being during the long journey. With the circulation of animals, the expertise of the successful handler had an important place in the court environment. Alan Mikhail suggests that Indian mahouts (elephant handlers) remained in Istanbul for at least some time to care for the creatures in their new home and to teach others how to properly tend to them.³⁴

Animals on Display:

Exhibiting the animals articulated the rulers' power by displaying the geographic reach of their alliances. Exotic animals could be used to project the power of their owner in a variety of ways: The animals may be housed in a menagerie for display; on special occasions, they were taken along in festive processions.

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32 For more, see Suraiya Faroqhi, *Another Mirror for Princes The Public Image of the Ottoman Sultans and Its Reception* (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2008), pp. 87-101; Aziz Altı, "Osmanlı Devleti'nde yırtıcı ve yabani hayvanlar için ihdas edilmiş bir kurum: Arslanhane," *Kare*, 10 (Aralık 2020), pp. 120-39.

33 Marc'Antonio Pigafetta. *Itinerario di Marc'Antonio Pigafetta gentil'huomo vicentino*, ed. Daria Perocco (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2008), p. 235.

34 Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*, p. 119.

The animal displays in festivals were actually considered a manifestation of the sultan's dominance over wild nature. Horses, dogs, and falcons were of practical use for the recipient; but the lions, tigers or rhinos served purely for display.

The Ottomans also used elephants and other exotic beasts to impress foreign ambassadors. The Ottoman sultans used these rare beasts to underscore the extent of their African and Asian alliances with ambassadors from across the globe. The Hippodrome, or *Atmeydanı* was the site where many of the Ottoman court festivals (imperial festivals - *Sûr-ı Hümayûn*) were held. They serve as a tool of political authority to observe and supervise social life. One of the most important types of performances in the festivities were the shows performed with various animals. At these shows, the performances of animals created special emotional atmospheres.

Conclusion

In the 16th and 17th centuries, exotic animals had a special place in the animal gift exchanges between the Safavids, Mughals, and Ottomans. In particular, the Safavids sometimes offered to their Ottoman counterparts, elephants that they had formerly received from Mughal rulers. It appears that the Indian elephants were mainly sent to congratulate the new Ottoman sultans on their enthronement. Occasionally, the Safavids included elephants in the diplomatic gifts they dispatched to the Muscovite court.

Presents were often regifted, in particular when they had an exotic character or rare value. This offered a way to impress or amaze the recipient with rarities. The whole process is indicative of chains of exchange that transcended geographical boundaries. In general, in terms of regifting, the Safavid shahs used to share with their Ottoman counterparts gifts received from the Mughal Empire (mainly elephants), Russia (especially gyrfalcons and furs), and Venice.

