

Foreign Doctors at the Imam's Court: Medical Diplomacy in Yemen's Coffee Era

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The New Diplomatic History

Once believed to be the most “conservative” subarea in historical studies, seemingly “impermeable to theoretical and methodological innovations that have transformed almost every other sector of the profession,” early modern diplomatic history has witnessed a rebirth (Watkins 2008b, 1). Under the rubric of the “new diplomatic history,” scholars from literary studies, art history, theater and performance studies, and international relations have joined historians to reconsider the early modern cross-cultural encounter as ambassadors, diplomats, envoys, and emissaries initiated and engaged in it. A number of recent publications on the topic attest to the revitalization of this wave of inquiry.¹

Those who have spearheaded this initiative would agree that a revived early modern diplomatic history should be wholly interdisciplinary in scope and method, but they are far from unanimous about the finer shape and direction this refashioned subfield should take. Even so, recent studies have shown a few

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Transliteration of Arabic words has been simplified in this article. Only *'ayn* and *hamza* have been marked with special symbols. Dates are given in CE only unless they derive from an Arabic source, in which case they include the AH (after *hijra*) date separated from the CE date by a slash, such as 1103/1691–92.

1. In addition to specific references included in the following paragraph, see Watkins 2008a; Charry and Shahani 2009a.

dominant preoccupations. Many historians have been interested in the question of sources and call on records that have been overlooked or need to be read again in more nuanced and dynamic ways (Mokhberi 2012; Hevia 1995). The imperative to find non-Western sources that describe diplomatic exchanges, including East-East and South-South meetings, is particularly pressing in response to the Western bias implicit in most studies of the cross-cultural encounter (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2007, 54–82; Subrahmanyam 2011, 73–132; Matar 2009, 72–135). Literary scholars have turned avidly to the themes of messaging, representation, and reception, exploring the heightened instability of signs as they cross cultural borders (Loomba 2009). Yet others have looked at the diplomatic encounter through the lenses of spectacle and cultural performance (Banerjee 2009). There is also an effort to bring the new diplomatic history in line with gender studies, highlighting the embassies sent by powerful queens and queen mothers (Watkins 2008b, 7). If one salient feature of this wave of scholarship may be identified, it is that the ambassador can no longer be seen as a passive figure simply transmitting a stable message from a distant state but must be considered as an actor in his or her own right, reacting to the vagaries of circumstance and sometimes improvising responses or deviating from a dispatched mission. So the independent gaze of the envoy, once a “seemingly nameless and faceless messenger,” has emerged as a compelling force with the potential to convey, bolster, or subvert the larger needs of the state (Charry and Shahani 2009b, 3).

The present study eagerly pursues this recrafted critical interest in premodern diplomatic engagements as a way to explore the multifaceted cross-cultural encounter in the early modern Indian Ocean. The focused site of exploration is the Arabian Peninsula during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, a slice of time within the longer period that I refer to as the era of coffee, when foreigners flocked to Yemen’s shores to procure a commodity that was then still difficult to obtain outside the region. But rather than look at cross-cultural diplomacy from a generic position, I will examine a few instances when foreign doctors were called on or enlisted to treat the imam of Yemen, which happened on several occasions. Admittedly, the scattered references to these events of cross-cultural medical care are usually short and fleeting, and thus on their own they appear unremarkable. But when one reads across an array of European and Arabic historical sources from Yemen, informal patterns of “medical diplomacy” emerge.² Its recipient, the

2. The term *medical diplomacy* was coined in 1978 by Peter Bourne of the Jimmy Carter administration. Since then it has represented a larger set of initiatives under the umbrella of global health

imam of Yemen, frequently sought care by foreign doctors and medicine from abroad. These requests were not always obliged but nevertheless may be characterized as a distinct register of exchange that was intertwined with the political, religious, or commercial agendas of foreign emissaries and merchants in Yemen.

By turning to this overlooked aspect of Yemen's cross-cultural relations, this study responds to the directives of the new diplomatic history that look beyond the large-scale political or commercial ramifications of foreign envoys and their lofty goals of cross-cultural self-representation (although these features are also present in some of the exchanges described below). Cross-cultural medical care may have been a prosaic by-product of diplomatic exchange in at least one case and in others may have been used as a tool to gain commercial leverage. But by highlighting the seemingly incidental and secondary aspects of these contacts rather than the deliberate and immediately visible ones, we may explore the fundamental imbrication of various sets of interests that defined cross-cultural phenomena in Yemen's age of coffee. Moreover, while the goals of this study are empirical, with the desire to document heretofore unremarked upon events, the larger objective goes beyond a simple recording or reconstruction of the past. At stake here is an investigation of the role foreigners played as both agents of exchange and recorders of events in Yemen's early modern history.

Yemen's Coffee Era

The period I refer to as Yemen's coffee era begins around 1570, when Ottoman rule, which lasted from 1538 to 1636, facilitated large-scale local coffee cultivation (Tuchscherer 2003, 50). It ends by 1740, after Dutch experiments with growing coffee in Southeast Asia succeeded and coffee plants were then transported beyond their earliest homes in Yemen and the Horn of Africa to colonial plantations in other parts of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic world (Knaap 1986; Campbell 2003). In contrast to the following periods of global dispersal, during Yemen's coffee era the demand for this relatively new commodity was on the rise, and the region provided beans to most of the world.

The coffee era is particularly worthy of scholarly investigation, because it marks a moment of Yemen's heightened cross-cultural contact when merchants

diplomacy. But as the authors of a recent study describe, in a rapidly globalizing world these terms are highly unstable and hardly fixed (Katz et al. 2011, 505–6). Here the term is used in a much looser fashion to describe the overlap of medical care with diplomatic and trade missions.

from around the world arrived at its ports to engage in trade. Among them were the ship captains from western India, such as those employed by the shipping magnates from Gujarat, Mulla 'Abd al-Ghafur and his grandson Mulla Muhammad 'Ali, and traders from Persian Gulf cities, such as Basra, Bandar Kung, and Matrah (Das Gupta [1979] 1994; Nadri 2007; Abdullah 2001). Carrying with them products such as Indian textiles, Southeast Asian spices, dates, and copper work, these merchants dominated the trade of Mocha. European merchants were also continuously installed in Yemen's ports during the decades under consideration. The English and the Dutch had visited and traded in Yemen as early as the first decades of the seventeenth century, when they initiated their overseas enterprises in Asia. By the end of that century, when coffeehouses could be found in most of the major cities of Europe, Yemeni coffee had become a lucrative commodity for both groups (Chaudhuri [1978] 2006, 359–84; Glamann 1958, 183–211). In the early eighteenth century other Europeans joined them, namely the French and the Ostenders.

Although European merchants appear prominently in the present study, it is crucial to understand that they were not the most avid purchasers of Arabian coffee beans or the most important merchants in Yemen's ports and emporia. In fact, their counterparts from Cairo and the Persian Gulf regularly outnumbered them in Yemen's coffee market. Moreover, the trade of Eastern products that were handled mostly by the merchants of India, rather than coffee alone, dominated the international port of Mocha, although this city has been famously and erroneously associated with coffee as its main if not sole commodity (Brouwer 2006, 49–57; Um 2009, 36–47). Even so, the Europeans hold a unique and outside place as historical observers of Yemen's commercial climate during this era. As such, the dynamic age of coffee in Arabia is defined by the diversity of merchants who engaged in its trade but is also delimited by a fundamental imbalance in the sources that describe it.

The Qasimi Imams of Yemen

The entrepreneurial foreign merchants of the coasts traveled to inland Yemen only occasionally, yet still they maintained close connections to the Zaydi Qasimi imams (r. 1598–1872) who resided there. In the period under consideration the imam of Yemen participated directly in the international trade, sending two ships to India each year. He communicated regularly with foreign merchants, both

Asian and European, often through his provincial governors and officials, intermediaries who were also responsible for bringing considerable revenues from the coast to the capital (Um 2009, 53–77).

To understand the unique nature of the Qasimi imamate, we must go back to longer patterns of Yemeni history. Located at the strategic hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean worlds, Yemen has always occupied an important place in a maritime sphere that extends to the east and west and to the north and south. Its medieval and early modern states, namely, the Zurayids, Ayyubids, Rasulids, and Tahirids, communicated actively with the outside world through the region's ports, particularly Aden (Margariti 2007). But it is important to highlight that these Sunni states were all based in the southern part of Yemen, distinct from the Shi'i Zaydi imams who ruled from capitals in the north with the support of the local tribes. The Zaydi imams were, by contrast, famous for their relative isolation.

Although this image of seclusion lived on until the fall of Yemen's imams in 1962, the Qasimi worldview was decidedly wider reaching than that of their predecessors. They engaged in territorial expansion, eventually subsuming under their umbrella Sunni majority areas of the lowlands and coasts, including the eastern stretch of Hadramawt for at least a short time in the seventeenth century (Klarić 2008). The scholar of Islam and the Arabian Peninsula Bernard Haykel (2003, 47–75) has argued that the Qasimis modeled their state, which diverged from Zaydi precedents over time, after the Ottomans, whom they ousted in 1636. The Qasimis also continued the avid Ottoman engagement with the overseas trade and thus sustained their outward-looking stance, which is of interest to the present study (Casale 2010).

The key figure is Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad bin al-Mahdi Ahmad (b. 1047/1637), also known as Sahib al-Mawahib (a title that refers to his final capital city), who ruled from 1686 to 1718. Al-Mahdi is an important figure in Qasimi history, because, as Haykel has shown, his imamate represented a turning point in the ruling system of the Zaydis. Whereas his Qasimi predecessors adhered to the Zaydi ideal of an erudite and militarily adept imam who was chosen and approved by the notables, al-Mahdi did not engage in scholarly pursuits and could only win his position by force. Rather than gaining renown and respect from the Zaydi religious establishment and the notables, al-Mahdi was disparaged for having used his office to acquire riches (al-Jirafi 1987, 239). Indeed, his more worldly interests seem to have motivated his avid pursuit of relations with foreign

ambassadors and merchants.³ After al-Mahdi's pivotal rule, the Qasimi imamate changed structurally, becoming a hereditary dynasty until the Ottomans returned for a second occupation in the nineteenth century (Haykel 2003, 44).

Al-Mahdi also experienced many health problems during the last twenty years of his imamate. An Arabic source indicates that the imam's poor health began in 1110/1698–99, when he was around sixty years old, and that these medical problems were serious enough to cause him to abandon his chosen capital city (Abu Talib 1990, 266). While his predecessors usually chose a single seat, resided there continuously, and died and were buried there, al-Mahdi was particularly peripatetic. He first declared his imamate in the fortress of al-Mansura in the area of al-Hujariyya in 1686, but in a few years, in 1103/1691–92, he ordered that the town of al-Khudra' near Rada' be walled and built up as his new seat with houses, palaces, mosques, markets, and bathhouses. The city's immediate and comprehensive construction suggests that al-Mahdi had intended to stay there for the long term (al-Jirafi 1987, 242). But in 1110/1698–99, after less than a decade of residence there, the imam became so ill that he nearly died. The sources do not describe the nature of his ailment, but it is clear that he associated his sickness with the unhealthful environment of al-Khudra' (Abu Talib 1990, 266; al-Jirafi 1987, 242). He then escaped his still new capital while his son Muhsin and his wazir or adviser Shaykh Salih bin 'Ali al-Huraybi sought a new base for him. Al-Huraybi, who will be mentioned many times in this article, was one of al-Mahdi's main confidants, served as the governor of Mocha, and played an important role in facilitating communications between the imam and the city's foreign merchants (Um 2009, 64–68). Eventually the two selected al-Mawahib, a small village northeast of the city of Dhamar, as an ideal and naturally defensible site. Under al-Huraybi's supervision, construction on the city was accomplished quickly, and later that year the imam entered his new capital. He lived the rest of his years in al-Mawahib, and this is where he welcomed the visitors described below.⁴

3. In this way his rule could be compared to that of his much more highly regarded predecessor, al-Mutawakkil Isma'il (r. 1644–76), who led the vast territorial expansion of the seventeenth century. These relatively stable years, which were considered the golden age of the Qasimis, yielded the possibility of external exchange as represented by the sustained letters and diplomatic delegations dispatched between the Qasimis and the Ethiopian emperor Fasiladas in the 1640s and the communications between al-Mutawakkil Isma'il and the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb between 1657 and 1661 (Van Donzel 1979, 1986; Blukacz 1992).

4. The earthquake of 1982 damaged the village of al-Mawahib, leaving only the ruins of al-Mahdi's palace to crumble off the western face of the hill. Al-Mahdi's small mosque and mausoleum still sit at the bottom (Um 2011).

Historians of Yemen have placed little emphasis on al-Mahdi's recurring health problems, apparently considering them relatively incidental points in the texts. But clearly they were significant enough for him to abandon a newly built city along with the considerable resources he had allocated to it.⁵ As will be described below, these health problems also came to constitute a noteworthy dimension of foreign exchange at the time. For that reason, al-Mahdi's frequent bouts of illness must not be overlooked as supplementary details of a larger and more important dynastic, political, or economic history. Rather, I contend here that his illnesses, the treatment by various foreign doctors and imported medicine, and the context of exchange that facilitated the treatment constitute Yemen's early modern history rather than comprising peripheral material that falls outside its accepted bounds.

A Doctor from Safavid Iran

We begin with the Yemeni historian Muhsin bin al-Hasan, also known as Abu Talib, who describes the first decade of al-Mahdi's rule, which began in 1686, in tumultuous terms. Rather than taking the imamate by the widespread acceptance of his *da'wa*, literally summons or call, al-Mahdi took it by force and spent most of his imamate trying to put down contenders to the position. For that reason, not until 1109/1697–98 do we hear of the first two formal embassies sent by this imam (Abu Talib 1990, 265). One traveled to the court of Safavid Shah Sultan Husayn with the poet Muhammad bin Haydar Agha as the Qasimi ambassador.⁶ This ambassador excelled in Humayni verse, a vernacular genre of poetry popular in Yemen, and carried gifts of swords, horses, objects crafted of carnelian, and Yemeni treasures to Iran.⁷ Abu Talib tells us that the “enviers and informers” proliferated on this difficult and politically charged mission but without any details of it. That same year al-Mahdi sent some unnamed sayyids (descendants of the

5. 'Abd Allah al-Jirafi (1987, 242) describes how the city then quickly fell to ruins after al-Mahdi's premature departure.

6. Abu Talib calls Muhammad Haydar by the names Haydar Agha and Muhammad Haydar “Aghabawtj” in other parts of the text. Muhammad Haydar did not merit a biographical entry in any of the major compilations. Only his father, Haydar Agha, appears in Yusuf bin Yahya al-Hasani's *Nasmat al-Sahar* (1999) as al-Amir Abu Muhammad Haydar Agha b. Muhammad. Haydar was a member of the Ottoman cavalry, but he did not return to Turkey in 1636, choosing rather to remain in Yemen until his death in Duran in 1108/1696–97 (2:75, 76, 83).

7. As Mark Wagner (2009, 73–74) describes, some Yemeni poets occupied administrative roles and were charged with composing poems to be recited at major events of state.

Prophet) to the Mughal Aurangzeb (called *malik al-hind*, the king of India), again with copious gifts but in this case to “express the greatness of his circumstance in Yemen.”⁸

We hear nothing more about the Indian mission, but the Safavid shah returned an embassy to al-Mahdi four years later in 1113/1701–2. The group included his original envoy, Muhammad Haydar, who had apparently stayed on in Iran during the interim period, along with a Safavid ambassador. On the surface, this embassy fulfilled the classic desire for two early modern royal cultures to portray their greatness to each other through pomp and display. As described by Abu Talib, onlookers in Yemen were in awe of the amazing gifts the Persians brought and the impressive scale of their retinue. Similarly, al-Mahdi ordered that the cities along the embassy’s route be ornamented and that the group be welcomed generously at each stop.

However, this embassy, which represented an opportunity for one Shi‘i state, the Twelver Safavids, to come in contact with another Shi‘i state, the Zaydi Qasimis, is presented in a relatively oppositional light. As described by Abu Talib, this meeting did not highlight their potential shared interests, such as their mutual antagonism toward the Sunni Ottomans. Rather, our narrator uses terms that focus on intrasectarian difference as a defining factor of the Safavid-Qasimi encounter. He tellingly refers to the Safavid ambassador not by name but rather as *al-‘ilji*,⁹ the infidel, indicating the hostile Zaydi stance toward the Twelvers (297–301). In this manner, the account echoes those that describe prior embassies from the Safavids to major Sunni powers, such as one sent by Shah Isma‘il to the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria in 1511 (Jafarian 2012). In the same light, these concerns about the legitimacy of Zaydism dominated correspondence between the earlier Qasimi imam al-Mutawakkil Isma‘il and Aurangzeb (Blukacz 1992).

According to Abu Talib, the express reason for this embassy was not simply to repay the respect that al-Mahdi had offered years earlier. Rather, he states that the shah wanted to inquire about the title the imam had recently adopted, al-Mahdi al-Muntazar, which means the awaited messiah. In fact, in 1109/1697–98, after having abandoned two previous titles, al-Nasir and al-Hadi, this notori-

8. Although this appears to have been al-Mahdi’s first formal embassy to the Mughals, communication between the Qasimis and the Mughals was relatively fluid because of trade relations between Mocha and Surat in addition to the constant flow of Mughal pilgrimage ships that docked at Mocha before continuing on to Jidda each year.

9. It appears, however, as *al-‘ilji* in the text.

ously fickle imam had chosen the new title al-Mahdi li-Din Allah, or the rightly guiding to God's religion, which did not assimilate the messianic notions of the Twelvers.¹⁰ Moreover, many previous Zaydi imams had used the title al-Mahdi before, including this imam's father al-Mahdi Ahmad, who died in 1681. But by representing the embassy's mission as undergirded by contestation over the right to this title, which held particular resonance among the Twelvers, Abu Talib casts its basic purpose in an oppositional light. We may never know what the shah's larger motives for the return embassy were, just as we may never know what the precise mission of the initial Yemeni embassy to Iran was. But surely the shah had more at stake than simply inquiring about the imam's newly fashioned title.¹¹ As Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig (2012, 2) state, the question of how significant Safavid religious identity was to their external relations is still "an unresolved argument." Nevertheless, the case of the Safavid-Qasimi meeting adds a new dimension to our understanding of intra-Muslim encounters, which are often reduced to a binary between Sunni and Shi'i.

Moreover, Abu Talib portrays this event as defined by breaches (or near breaches) of court protocol on both the Yemeni and the Persian sides. These clashes were akin to the "struggle over audience forms" described by James Hevia (1995, 228) for the British at the Qing court at the end of the same century or the "skirmishes over matters of precedence and ceremony [that] played a central role in the assertion of the relative status of rulers and countries" that Susan Mokhberi (2012, 58) cites as a key feature of diplomatic interface in early modern Europe. For instance, soon after arriving the messenger presented the imam with the shah's letter, which was decorated with silk. To receive this missive, the imam stood up. But rather than moving quickly to deliver the message, the Persian envoy hesitated a little, thereby leaving the imam standing on his own, which angered him immensely. To amend his error, the Persian ambassador then

10. Al-Mahdi's rapid succession of titles also inspired interest from foreign rulers. When he exiled Ni'amat al-Lahuri to India in 1109/1697–98, the king of India ("malik al-hind"), presumably Aurangzeb, asked him if the imam of Yemen was one or three because of his three titles or *laqabs* (Abu Talib 1990, 265).

11. Evidence from other diplomatic missions of the time suggests that the Safavids were concerned with maritime trade and security as major issues during this period. For instance, the threats of Omani piracy instigated a Safavid envoy to France in 1715, although the idea for this embassy was first initiated in 1708 (Mokhberi 2012, 60). Moreover, the shah's predecessor, Sulayman, sent a return embassy to the Thai court at Ayutthaya, a major international trading center, a few years earlier (Marcinkowski 2012, 390). When the embassy to Yemen is considered along with these two other diplomatic missions, it appears that the later Safavids were interested in maintaining relations with those who were involved with maritime trade across the Indian Ocean.

placed the letter in a copy of the Qur'an, which he presented to the imam as a gift. Because the imam was used to standing before the presentation of this revered book, the breach of protocol was narrowly averted (Abu Talib 1990, 298). As Hevia (1995, 48) describes for the later embassy to China led by George Macartney, "Participants scrutinized the bodily movements of others as outward signs of inner conditions in an effort to determine whether verbal statements or other kinds of action (such as gift giving), all of which presumably manifested loyalty and submission, were indeed sincere." As such, the subtlest physical gestures could have major ramifications in these exchanges. And according to Mokheri, this volatility over ceremonial procedures was by no means limited to the East-West encounter but also constituted a major feature of intra-European exchanges at this time.

Later, after receiving the ambassador's impressive gifts,¹² the imam hosted a gathering with many local people of distinction. As usual in Yemen, poets were called on to entertain the group. Ahmad bin Ahmad al-Anisi, al-Mahdi's "main panegyrist," presented a poem that praised both the guest and the imam (Wagner 2009, 78). After the recitation, the imam awarded the poet with a robe of honor, or *khi'a*, and a horse. But when the ambassador followed suit by presenting him with a Persian garment, al-Anisi refused to accept this bestowal, which would confirm the ambassador's elevated status, saying that it was beneath him. As Abu Talib later reflected on this snub he noted that the imam was not pleased with the poet's actions. Not long after this event, in 1115/1703–4, al-Anisi was jailed, and he died in prison (Abu Talib 1990, 310). Although the perceived diplomatic fumble was not described as the immediate cause of his fall to disfavor, it may have contributed to it.¹³

Even outside Abu Talib's account of the Persian delegation we find evidence that this embassy caused further tensions at court. Another famous poet, Yusuf bin Yahya al-Hasani (d. 1121/1709–10), author of the biographical work *Nasmat al-Sahar* (1999), was also in al-Mawahib to greet the visitors. It was said that he

12. Abu Talib does not disclose the details of the Persian gifts, but we know that one was a dagger encrusted with jewels. This gift was mentioned as having come from the shah when al-Mahdi repurposed it as a gift to an Ottoman envoy who appeared at al-Mawahib in 1114/1702–3 (Abu Talib 1990, 305).

13. Wagner (2009, 75) describes the Qasimi court as generally full of intrigue and political complexity, but al-Mahdi was "particularly dangerous" as a patron of poetry, as the case of al-Anisi illustrates. But becoming a poet was also a "means of upward mobility" (78) and a way to accumulate wealth, as al-Anisi's lavish gifts indicate.

became close to the Persians and showed a dangerous affinity to their beliefs. Before long he was forbidden from seeing them and was ordered to leave al-Mawahib (al-Huthi 1429/2008, 3:512). So while some of those at al-Mahdi's court refused to acknowledge the stature of the Safavid envoy, like al-Anisi, at least one other was drawn in by Twelver Shi'ism. Clearly, both reactions elicited discomfort among the imam and his advisers.

According to Abu Talib, the ambassador stayed in al-Mawahib for four months and during this time received many gifts and rewards, including a present to take back to the shah. The delegation left Yemen via Mocha, where the Dutch East India Company (VOC) sources comment on the same embassy while expressing quite different interests in its activities. On June 14, 1701, a VOC factor remarked in the Mocha logbook that a Persian ambassador had arrived at the port earlier that year and at the time of writing was at the court with the imam.¹⁴ The Dutch called the envoy "Miersja Chelardien," which may be a faulty transcription of the name Mirza Jalal al-Din. According to Dutch sources, this envoy went to al-Mawahib carrying a great gift from Iran and was being celebrated there daily, an assessment that agrees largely with Abu Talib's account. The Dutch and other merchants in Mocha worried about this visit, however. It was said that the imam was spending three hundred rijksdaalders daily to entertain his high-profile guests. They worried that these expenses would ripple down to the coast and that the merchants of Mocha would be called on to cover the extraordinary costs through newly imposed taxes.

The Dutch went further, mentioning that the doctor who came with the Persian delegation had cured the imam of a case of hemorrhoids (*ambaijen*) that had plagued him for a long time. For this reason, the governor of Mocha, the above-mentioned al-Huraybi whom the Dutch describe as a "good friend" of the imam, was very happy and ordered that shots be fired around the port in celebration. While Abu Talib focuses on the ceremony, pomp, and lavish displays associated with the meeting of the two Shi'i states and highlights some uncomfortable aspects of their interface, he makes no mention of this much more direct service offered by the Persian delegation. Even so, it is clear that the news of the imam's recovery was important enough to travel to the coast, where it was celebrated.

14. Report by the junior merchant Dirck Clercq and the bookkeeper Cornelius Snoeck, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 1660, May–September 1701, fol. 784.

The VOC's Responses to Requests for Medical Assistance

Both Arabic and Dutch sources indicate that al-Mahdi continued to experience serious ailments in the following years. In 1704 the Dutch wrote that the imam had been *onpasselijk*, indisposed, for several months previously but had gotten much better. Once again al-Huraybi ordered that shots be fired around Mocha, including from the ships in the harbor.¹⁵ Like this passing reference, most discussions of the imam's health problems are short and do not provide details on the nature of his illnesses. But when read as a body, they point to the pressing issue of the imam's physical condition and the impact it had on foreign communities in Yemen, particularly merchants.

In 1117/1705–6 Abu Talib (1990, 316) wrote about yet another serious sickness of the Imam, this one so grave that al-Huraybi rushed from the coast to sit by his bedside along with the imam's nephew, Sidi al-Qasim, who would later successfully challenge his uncle under the title Imam al-Mutawakkil. Again Abu Talib's account is full of court intrigue. He tells us that al-Huraybi was aware that he would be able to conquer the lucrative lowlands of Yemen with its revenue-producing ports and rich agricultural lands if the imam died. For that reason, al-Qasim watched him closely to make sure this ambitious governor did not flee quickly if the imam's condition became dire. Eventually, however, the imam was cured, and al-Huraybi returned to his original post.

This brief account in Arabic may be connected to and augmented by one in Dutch sources. In May 1706 al-Huraybi asked that the surgeon (*chirurgijn*), Otto Mueller, of the Dutch ship *Oostersteijn*, which had docked at Mocha, go to al-Mawahib to treat the imam.¹⁶ The Dutch, who were the only European merchants at the port during this trade season, refused, and when they were asked a second time declined again.¹⁷ At the third request they believed they had no choice but to accept. In a letter to VOC administrators in Batavia, they express worries that

15. Report by the Mocha chief and junior merchant Joan Josua Ketelaar and the bookkeeper Slaacq van der Hoeve, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 1714, September 17, 1704, fol. 152.

16. At this time European surgeons dealt with external treatments, and physicians focused on internal ones. Although the status of the former was on the rise, the latter were considered more highly qualified and usually occupied posts at universities. Surgeons, some of whom were also barbers, were more likely to accompany VOC missions than physicians (Bruijn 2009, 19, 29).

17. These events may be culled from the VOC Mocha daily logbook (Dag Register) and from a letter to Batavia. Mocha Dag Register, May 23, 1706, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 9115, fol. 184v–185r; report from Joan Josua Ketelaar and Joan van den Needen to Joan van Hoorn, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 9115, fol. 45–48.

a final refusal could cause the company to fall out of favor with the imam and governor and thus would have negative ramifications for the company's trade. So they finally agreed to send Mueller with the stipulation that he had to return to Mocha by July 1, in time to leave the port at the end of that month. On May 23, 1706, Mueller left for al-Mawahib with two European soldiers, a letter, and some small gifts for the imam. Although not mentioned, it is certain that he also brought with him necessities from the ship's medical chest and some of his own medical instruments (Bruijn 2009, 67–69). Other than his name, which indicates that he was German, as many VOC doctors were in the eighteenth century, we know little about this surgeon employed by the Dutch (157).

In later letters from al-Mawahib, Mueller relates to VOC merchants in Mocha that he had successfully cured the imam, although he did not identify the nature of his sickness. On June 17 the imam sent a letter to Joan Josua Ketelaar, the senior Dutch merchant in Mocha, thanking him for sending his doctor and offering him a *khil'a* as recognition. When Mueller returned to Mocha on July 4, he was greeted warmly outside the city walls, then the governor received him with a banquet.¹⁸ In addition, the imam had given horses as gifts to Mueller and each of the soldiers who had accompanied him along with one for Pieter de Vos, previously VOC director in Surat, and one for Ketelaar. The surgeon also brought two letters from the imam, one directed to Joan van Hoorn, the late governor general of Batavia,¹⁹ and another to Ketelaar. Apparently, al-Huraybi then tried to convince the Dutch to leave at least one of the horses behind for him rather than sending all of them on the eastbound ship. Following the advice of their broker and a local merchant named Qasim al-Turbati, the Dutch gave two horses to al-Huraybi as a gift. They were warned that al-Huraybi could interfere in their future trade if they did not oblige his request, although they were supposed to send all the gifts they received to Batavia. It is unfortunate that Mueller's separate report about his time in al-Mawahib, which would have surely described the details of the imam's illness and his treatment along with an account of the capital, can no longer be found.²⁰

18. The Dutch accounts do not corroborate Abu Talib's claim that al-Huraybi was at the imam's bedside at this time. The daily accounts, which are usually fastidious about recording the governor's movements, do not mention al-Huraybi leaving Mocha during this period.

19. Apparently, the imam was unaware that Van Hoorn had passed away in 1711.

20. It was numbered attachment 44 but was not conveyed with the other documents from this trade mission. Report from Joan Josua Ketelaar and Joan van den Needen to Joan van Hoorn, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 9115, fol. 47.

But Mueller's 1706 visit was not the last instance in which the imam sought Dutch medical assistance. In their yearly letter to Batavia in 1712, the Dutch factors at Mocha wrote yet again about the imam's poor health and the decision that they would resist any requests for their *oppermeester*, or chief surgeon, who was Jan Abraham Zimmerman at that time, to travel to the capital. While they acknowledged that the imam's gratitude for such care could be beneficial for the company, there were several reasons why they did not want to be involved with his future treatment. For one, they had serious patients of their own who required medical care in Mocha. More important, they feared the consequences of caring for the imam, whom they described as recklessly taking hundreds of types of medicines given by "various doctors from various nations."²¹ Indeed, the Dutch can be counted as contributors to this stockpile of drugs, as they had delivered medicine for the imam from Batavia, the medical hub for the Dutch enterprise in Asia, on at least one documented occasion in 1709.²² According to them, in a single day or hour the imam could take two or three types.²³ In addition, because of his advanced age,²⁴ the Dutch feared that he would die in the care of a European physician and that the blame would then go to that nation, causing problems for all of the Europeans residing in Yemen. Their ruminations provide a clear sense that involvement with the imam's medical care could be useful to merchants but was also a risky endeavor, given his fragile physical state.

A French Surgeon in al-Mawahib

After being refused by the Dutch in 1712, the imam then turned to the French, who had arrived at the port on their second visit to Yemen. The French account, however, does not describe their invitation as an alternate one. According to Jean de la Roque, narrator of these early French trade missions, al-Huraybi, who was residing with the imam in al-Mawahib at the time, recommended the French doctor highly and sent a distinguished envoy to request their medical assis-

21. Christiaan van Vrijberghen to Abraham van Riebeeck, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company records, VOC 1843, August 20, 1713, fol. 6.

22. Mocha Dag Register, June 20, 1709, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company records, VOC 1784, fol. 2165.

23. They also insinuate that al-Mahdi's active attachment to women posed a problem for his health.

24. Although he was in his late sixties at this time, the Dutch cite his age as eighty-four, and Jean de la Roque ([1732] 2004, 198) says eighty-seven.

tance.²⁵ Major de la Grelaudiere of the Pondicherry garrison, who was said to speak Arabic, led the delegation. Once again the doctor in question was a ship's surgeon, Monsieur Barbier, who had come aboard the *Diligent*.²⁶ In February 1712 the two left Mocha with around twenty other people, a large mirror, two pistols, and some high-quality textiles as gifts (La Roque [1732] 2004, 191–92). As they passed through the cities of Ta'izz, Jibla, Yarim, and Dhamar, they were received by local notables, suggesting that the imam had sent word to expect their arrival as he had done for the Persian delegation a decade earlier, thus assuring that they would receive due respect and comfortable lodging along the way.

After a journey of eight days, they arrived in al-Mawahib. Al-Huraybi greeted them at the palace and escorted them directly into the imam's bedchamber. The doctor immediately examined the imam and found that he had an abscess in his ear. Apparently, some yellow clay had been applied to dry it out, which Barbier saw as an inferior treatment that had inflamed the swelling, causing the imam more pain and a fever. Assuring the imam that he could cure him, the French surgeon used rose oil to remove the yellow clay and applied a plaster to drain the abscess. He treated a sore on the imam's hand the same way. After his treatment, the imam was relieved enough to turn to pleasantries and asked about their journey. At this time they presented him with their gifts, of which the mirror seemed to inspire the most interest. They were housed in an apartment in the palace complex.

The French group stayed in al-Mawahib for three weeks, and during that time Barbier restored the “King to his perfect Health” (203). According to La Roque, Barbier tended to the imam carefully: He “purg'd him, and gave him several cooling Medicines, without forgetting outward Applications; so that by Degrees the Distemper decreas'd, and his Sleep and Appetite return'd, to the great Satisfaction of every Body” (201). After regaining his comfort, the imam took every opportunity to meet with these foreigners, usually inquiring about France, its king, and the “magnificence of his court and his Palace” (202). He treated the French exceptionally well, by their own account, sometimes sending

25. For the tense circumstances surrounding the governor's recall to the highlands, see Um 2009, 67.

26. The French kept the chief surgeon of the fleet, Monsieur des Noiers, in Mocha in case of any emergencies there. Barbier was their second surgeon. Although translations of La Roque's text into English use the more generic terms *doctor* and *physician*, the original French text specifies that both occupied the post of surgeon, “chirurgien” (La Roque 1716, 227).

them “Dishes from his own Table,” which the recipients did not always enjoy. Additionally, the French visitors were given the opportunity to walk around the town and to ride through the surrounding areas in the company of the imam’s officers, including a visit to an enclosed garden near al-Mawahib that was planted with coffee trees (204).

La Roque also includes a discussion of the imam’s harem, which was estimated to number between six and seven hundred women. True to many other European records of the Middle East at this time, La Roque’s provides intimate details about women in Yemen, such as their dress, cosmetics, and social habits, while also admitting that the French visitors had no access to the women they described so earnestly.²⁷ Clearly, other men at the court, whom we can presume were equally prohibited from access to the female areas of the palace precinct, conveyed these “facts” to their curious visitors. Only Barbier had limited contact with two court women he treated, the wife of a wazir and the wife of one of the imam’s officers. Apparently, both had rheumatism, one in the arm and leg. However, even during their successful treatment, which entailed physical contact, he was not allowed to see their faces (218–19).

While they were in al-Mawahib, the French witnessed the arrival of another foreign embassy to the imam, a Turkish ambassador who “appear’d with a great deal of Pomp, and a large Retinue” and presented the imam with a valuable clock as a gift (219). From La Roque’s account it is clear that the French were not given the opportunity to interact with the Ottoman delegation, but based on information from their sources at court, La Roque explains the reason for this visit: “In Appearance, it was an Embassy of Honour and Ceremony, to keep up Friendship and a good Understanding between the two Mossleman Monarchs; but that in reality his Business was to transact Matter relating to Trade, and particularly that of Coffee” (220).²⁸ Apparently, the Ottomans blamed the European arrival in Yemen’s coffee market as the cause for the diminished availability and rise in price of this precious commodity. According to the French, the imam saw this embassy as an “attack [on] the Sovereign Authority” (220). Accordingly, he treated them respectfully but did not oblige their requests to limit European sales.

27. The French did have the opportunity to observe the imam’s wedding when he married a young Turkish woman. Although La Roque ([1732] 2004, 222) does not specify, it is obvious that they only viewed the public portion of this event, which did not include any direct visual or physical contact with the young bride or any other women of the court.

28. Abu Talib (1990, 404–5) and Dutch and English observers describe later Ottoman envoys on similar missions to curb the rise of European trade of coffee in the following years (Um 2015).

In the last audience before the departure of the French, the imam asked again about France and its king, offering five hundred bales of coffee as a gift to him. They declined, saying that they had already filled their cargo. This was, however, just an excuse. They feared that the ships' captains would not want to receive a present without clearing it with the court first. Al-Mahdi did give the major and the doctor a number of textiles and two well-equipped horses. Robes of honor and horses were also conveyed to the captains in Mocha, gifts similar to those given to the Dutch group at the end of their sojourn at the court in 1706.

That the objective of this medical mission was worth more than horses and robes is clear, however, as the French described it as an opportunity "to make their advantage of this conjuncture, to make known the French Nation to the King of Yaman [*sic*], and to become better acquainted, than any yet had been, with the Country under his Subjection, in Order to draw from thence all the advantage possible for their Commerce" (190). Indeed, they felt immediate benefits on their return to Mocha, where the governor helped dispatch their coffee quickly and without hindrance. He also abolished a new tax that the governor of the inland coffee market of Bayt al-Faqih had just levied (228). The French attributed this assistance directly to the success of their mission in the capital.

The 1712 mission was not the last French visit to the imam's highland court for the purpose of medical care. Although it dates from a later era and comes with little documentation, a second episode took place ten years later, in 1722, under the imamate of the successor to al-Mahdi, Imam al-Mutawakkil Qasim. Al-Mutawakkil's imamate was not defined by the frailty and ill health that characterized the last years of his uncle's rule. In fact, this reference to al-Mutawakkil's use of a foreign doctor is unique. In this case, the merchants of the English East India Company (EIC) wrote about it rather than a French narrator. In a letter to Bombay they mentioned that the French sent a doctor to the imam and so were granted six hundred bales of duty-free coffee annually, a privilege the English had already obtained.²⁹ Although this incident falls outside the sphere of al-Mahdi's rule and its associated patterns of medical diplomacy, it is important, because it demonstrates the direct relationship between medical favors and trade privileges in Yemen at this time.

29. Henry Albert and John Geckie to William Phipps, April 22, 1722, Mocha Factory Records, G/17/1, pt. 1, fol. 121.

Early Modern Medical Diplomacy in Yemen

The above accounts, drawn from Arabic, Dutch, French, and English sources, have demonstrated the Yemeni imam's sustained faith in the powers of foreign doctors and imported medicine in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Although unmentioned, the imam clearly had access to all of Yemen's healers, who would have treated him based on principles of classical Arab medicine. The Arab approach shares with European traditions its foundations in Greek sources but also draws from Indian healing traditions and the "Prophet's medicine," which relies on his prescriptions and actions regarding health in addition to some pre-Islamic practices (Helmeyer and Schönig 2012, 1; Fleurentin 2012, 157). Traditional Yemeni medicine could also involve various "magical" modes of intervention, with amulets, potions, and talismans as possible tools. Our sources tell us nothing about these local treatments, but we can be certain that the best local doctors and healers attempted to cure al-Mahdi's many illnesses. We can also discern that those local practitioners were unsuccessful in relieving his case of hemorrhoids and his two abscesses in addition to two cases of rheumatism among his subjects.

While much has been written about traveling merchants and increasingly more is being said about foreign diplomats in the early modern era, the physicians who often accompanied these long-distance ventures are rarely highlighted. Yet a doctor was always present on European maritime trade missions (Bruijn 2009, 59). Sickness stemming from long voyages and tropical diseases was, and to a certain extent still is, a constant feature of the cross-cultural encounter. For that reason, ships' surgeons, such as Mueller and Barbier, who sometimes operated on land as well, must be understood as major figures in the Age of Discoveries along with the merchants and statesmen who have already received greater attention. The Dutch historian Iris Bruijn's (2009) work on this class of traveling medics has laid the groundwork for widening our understanding of their social status and the intricacies of their highly portable trade.

Moreover, the imam was not the only one to extol the services of Western physicians in Yemen at this time. As mentioned above, two court women were willing to contravene social standards of gender segregation to accept the care of a foreign doctor. At the faraway and much more cosmopolitan Mocha, European medical care was also deemed extremely valuable. European doctors were

sometimes called to treat Yemenis inside and outside the city.³⁰ In some cases, Europeans sought the care of the doctors associated with other companies. For instance, in 1719 many residents at the VOC factory, including its doctor, fell ill, and they had to rely on the services of the English doctor, which they paid for.³¹ Additionally, the Bohemian Franciscan missionary and doctor Remedius Prutky (1991, 377), who stopped at Mocha in 1753 for a two-month stay, treated European merchants and also provided spiritual guidance to fellow Christians far from home. But as the case of the Safavid mission shows, it was not only European medical expertise that was in demand in Yemen at this time.

Rather than holding any presumed fear of foreign science or imported innovation, the imam of Yemen seemed open to any possible introductions these foreigners brought to his aid. In fact, cross-cultural medical care appears not to have been bound by fixed cultural barriers, and Nabil Matar (2009, 24) describes it as one “area of contact and curiosity across the Mediterranean.” Indeed, more recent episodes suggest that this openness regarding foreign medical intervention may be considered an enduring feature of the early modern and modern Yemeni imamates. In her study of contemporary Yemeni medical travel, the anthropologist Beth Kangas (2002) defines medicine as an area in which the later Hamid al-Din imams, Yahya and his son Ahmad (1918–62), eagerly sought outside expertise. They used health technology tools to legitimate their rule during a time when they rejected other external influences; for example, they banned most foreigners from access to the country and refused outside nations diplomatic representation. Kangas speaks of a “link between foreigners, medicine, and technology” (67) that endured through the mid-twentieth century and continues today as well. For instance, Italian medical missions have been posted in Yemen since 1926, foreign X-ray machines have been used since the 1930s, and Imam Ahmad traveled to Rome for medical treatment in 1959.³² In this way medical connections may serve

30. Mocha Dag Register, February 27, 1725, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 9119, fol. 137.

31. Abraham Pantzer, Joan van Leeuwen, Gabriel Scholten, Pieter Zegens, and Jan van Alderwereld to Christoffel van Zwoll, Mocha Dag Registers and Letters, Dutch East India Company Records, VOC 9103, August 19, 1719, fol. 72.

32. Moreover, Yemeni newspapers noted many short-term foreign medical missions during this time, such as two British doctors who came from Aden in 1937, a French doctor who treated the royal family in 1946, and an Italian doctor from Asmara who came specifically to operate on Ahmad's throat in 1949. Ahmad established a hospital, with new medical machinery from abroad and doctors from Syria, Lebanon, Italy, and France, in Ta'izz in 1952 (Kangas 2002, 69–73, 80).

as exceptions or perhaps even challenges to the overriding perception of seclusion that has dominated our understanding of Yemen's Zaydi imams, both premodern and more recent.

While most studies that look at medicine in networks of exchange, trade, and empire focus on Asia and the tropics as sources for new remedies and treatments, this article has little to say about the development of medical knowledge (Harrison 2010; Cook 2007). Moreover, these sporadic moments of medical contact must be differentiated from other, more sustained East-West exchanges in medicine, such as those afforded by the presence of the VOC settlement in late seventeenth-century Dejima, which spurred the publication of a number of medical texts and manuals for both Japanese and European audiences (Cook 2007, 347–61; Bowers 1970, 27–58). In sharp contrast, the accounts treated here were sporadic and isolated incidents that were unevenly documented and rarely delved into the details of particular ailments and their treatments.

Nevertheless, rather than a concern secondary to larger political, religious, and commercial ones, cross-cultural medical care ultimately was tightly interwoven with those associated interests in this era. Obviously, al-Mahdi had an immediate personal stake in wooing foreign doctors to his court. As his agent on the coast, al-Huraybi helped the imam identify and communicate with European doctors and the merchants who employed them. They offered commercial favors to those who successfully treated the imam, such as the six hundred duty-free coffee bales that the French received annually beginning in 1722. But even so the Dutch warned of the possible risks of such engagements. Although it is difficult to say what developed from the Persian embassy of 1701, the most tangible and uncontested outcome of the Safavid-Qasimi encounter may have been the imam's remedy. As such, medical diplomacy was tied up with multiple overlapping interests and consequences that reached from London and Zeeland to Isfahan and Batavia.

Conclusion—Writing the Cross-cultural Encounter

This study has used a “multi-vocal narrative, a ‘montage of fragments’” (Matar 2009, 19), to present a relatively coherent image of al-Mahdi's continuing poor health through the last twenty years of his imamate and his serial treatment by various foreign doctors. But as much as these sources seem to agree about the imam's proclivity toward outside medical care, the various records are undoubtedly distinct, oriented around specific interests, and bound by certain limitations.

Commercial records, namely those left by VOC and EIC merchants, were intended to detail their trade activities for home offices in the Dutch Republic and England but also in Batavia and Bombay. Indian Ocean economic historians have used these sources to explore and document networks of early modern long-distance trade during the age of European commercial expansion. These sources also provide perspectives on the local history of the southern Arabian Peninsula, which was intertwined with the extended world of Indian Ocean commerce. These letters and logbook entries show an intense European commitment to the maintenance of a profitable trade on the Arabian Peninsula, which was accomplished not only through wise commercial ventures but also through other types of personal engagements and services. It is crucial not to read these documents as transparent bearers of fact but to acknowledge that they were penned to explain expenditures and allocation of staff resources to readers in home offices, where they would be scrutinized closely.³³ For that reason, the Dutch sketch foreign medical care in terms of net loss and gain for the company, whether it was a fear of being levied extra taxes as a result of the lavish treatment of another embassy at court or quibbling over the number of horses to be sent back to India and Batavia. The brief EIC account shows that English merchants closely investigated the affairs of other European traders (in this case the French) and reported them duly to their home offices.

Although La Roque's narrative of the first French missions to Yemen was based on commercial records and ships' logs, it must be set apart from archival trade records. La Roque, unlike VOC and EIC observers, never traveled to Yemen but drew from the memories and letters of those who had. Moreover, his text was produced for a public readership and not for the eyes of trade administrators. In fact, La Roque's volume became immensely successful as a popular account and was reprinted and translated multiple times throughout the early eighteenth century.³⁴ Undoubtedly, the latter section of the book, which focuses on coffee (with

33. According to K. N. Chaudhuri ([1978] 2006, 113) and Miles Ogborn (2007, 98), supervisors were perennially suspicious about the activities of company merchants posted in various sites in Asia and around the Indian Ocean.

34. It was published first in 1715 (Paris: Huguier) and again in 1716 (Paris: Cailleau; Amsterdam: Steenhouwer et Uytwerf). An English translation appeared in 1726 (London: Strahan and Williamson) and subsequently in two editions under the title *A Voyage to Arabia Foelix* (Cornhill, UK: Symon, 1732; London: Hodges, 1742). It was published in German in 1740 (Leipzig: Braun). In 2004 the 1732 English version was reprinted with a new introduction by Carl Phillips (2004) and with an account of travels to Yemen by M. Cloupet from 1788.

detailed illustrations of the leaves and fruits of the plant) and a brief account of its trade to Europe, garnered great interest at the time of its publication.³⁵ As the historian Ina Baghdiantz McCabe (2008, 163–82) has shown, La Roque's text on coffee appeared in France at a time when the origins, effects, and medicinal qualities of this relatively new and increasingly popular beverage were being hotly debated. Moreover, La Roque was an Orientalist scholar who became interested in these commercial missions because he was in the process of translating the writings of the twelfth- to thirteenth-century Ayyubid scholar Abu'l-Fida's geographic work on the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶ As such, his narrative oscillates between direct transcriptions of captains' letters that use the first person, his narrative of these missions derived from others' firsthand documents, and moments of his own speculative digression. During these interspersed intellectual ruminations, he ponders geographic information based on medieval Arabic texts, the origins of the Yemeni imams in the longer stretch of Islamic history, and the unique nature of Zaydi succession. Consequently, his text is quite unresolved in its character, including multiple perspectives and oscillating between many authorial voices. But its goals move resolutely beyond the limits of commerce.

These European sources have formed the backbone of writing about Yemen's coffee age with their wealth of quantitative data and detailed eyewitness observations from Yemen's major trading sites.³⁷ By contrast, contemporary Arabic chronicles are almost mute on this vibrant era in Yemen's commercial history. While focused on events such as battles, natural disasters, and happenings at court, they omit any mention of the imam's involvement in the overseas trade, such as the ships he sent along Indian Ocean routes yearly. They also make only scant reference to his frequent communications with foreign merchants, which were voluminous when we take into account the number of letters mentioned or translated in European archives. This exclusion of commercial references was by design rather than by chance, as it was accepted that the Zaydi imam should maintain distance from the worldly affairs of business and economic transactions. In the case of al-Mahdi, it is clear that he was, to the contrary, quite actively

35. This section, "A Treatise concerning the Tree and Fruit of Coffee," was based on studies by the chief French surgeon, Noiers, in *Bayt al-Faqih* (La Roque [1732] 2004, 234–49).

36. This translation was eventually published as part of his edition of Laurent d'Arvieux's travel narrative from Palestine (La Roque 1717).

37. These European sources are considered so valuable for Yemeni history that a few key VOC documents have been translated into Arabic (Brouwer and Kaplanian 1989).

involved in the commercial sphere. As much as he was criticized for his worldly engagements, very few specific episodes of his dealings with foreign merchants find their way into the narratives of his rule. For this reason, our main local narrator, Abu Talib, describes the Safavid embassy extensively but pays little attention to al-Mahdi's frequent exchanges with foreign merchants and their associated doctors, even while describing his bouts of sickness as a recurring motif of the later part of his imamate.

Yet it is important to resist distilling these voices into cultural essences, with the Dutch merchants characteristically parsimonious and solely focused on economic ramifications and the French scientific, curious, and outward looking. Indeed, the Yemenis may appear to be trapped in the confines of an Islamocentric perspective and an obsession with petty intrigues in the court. To the contrary, each of these sources represents the limits of its format and the demands of its particular audience. Moreover, it is important to note that local sources in Arabic have not been used to *balance* the European perspective but rather to provide different ones with their own interests, goals, and biases. For instance, our main narrator in Arabic, Abu Talib, was one of al-Mahdi's harshest critics and can hardly be counted as a neutral observer.³⁸

Even with these varied interests, European and Arabic sources come together to present a relatively resolved picture of medical diplomacy during the era of al-Mahdi. It is rare to find European and Arabic accounts that describe the same identifiable event in Yemen's history. But when they do, they sometimes represent contesting positions, and the reader is forced to validate one source over the other.³⁹ In this case, the sources line up to communicate with each other in a way that is productive and relatively conclusive, perhaps because of the perceived incidental nature of these events and the secondary context of their recording. Moreover, the above accounts may surprise readers who expect to find tension in the early modern East-West encounter. For instance, the French stay at al-Mahdi's court was defined by cross-cultural curiosity and generosity rather than hostil-

38. In fact, he was quite young during al-Mahdi's reign, so he clearly drew on other sources for his accounts of this era, although they are not cited specifically.

39. As an example, in 1737 the French bombed Mocha from the sea. In this case, the French blamed Mocha's governor Faqih Ahmad Khazindar and the city's chief *sarraf*, money exchanger, Hasan Hasusa, for refusing to uphold their negotiated trade treaty. The short Arabic account of the same attack starts by mentioning Khazindar's alleged mistreatment of foreign merchants but then describes the French demands to ride horses in the city, to visit prostitutes, and to drink wine as major reasons for this military action (Zabara, n.d., 303).

ity. By contrast, the intra-Shi‘i meeting of the Safavids and Qasimis is portrayed with discomfort and perceived challenges to each other’s status. Even the Ottoman embassy to al-Mawahib, which was mentioned only briefly by the French, reflects significant debates over sovereignty and commercial rights in a decidedly “postcolonial” fashion.⁴⁰

The encounters between foreign doctors and the Qasimi imam were not simple visits. Rather, multiple intersecting gazes characterized the events of cross-cultural medical diplomacy during Yemen’s dynamic age of coffee. The Dutch carefully observed and recorded the activities of a Persian embassy even long after it left Mocha. While avidly exploring the Yemeni highland capital, the French devoted at least some of their time at the imam’s court to inspecting the Ottoman envoy who had arrived in al-Mawahib with great pomp. During the same era the English dutifully kept an eye on French commercial privileges in Yemen’s coffee market. These various vectors of viewing and recording did not point definitively in any single direction. This article has attempted to read across these various European and Arabic narratives to locate their points of salient intersection.

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40. Although the Ottomans left Yemen in 1636, they maintained an interest in this strategic area. They considered strategies for reoccupation over the following years and eventually succeeded in occupying Yemen for the second time in the nineteenth century.

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