


REVIEW ESSAY

Book review for Sinem Arcak Casale's *Gifts in the Age of Empire: Ottoman-Safavid Cultural Exchange, 1500–1639* (University of Chicago Press, 2023)

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The Ottoman-Safavid rivalry was one of the most significant geopolitical struggles of the early modern Middle East, shaping the political, religious, and cultural landscape of the region. While scholars have thoroughly examined its military, religious, and ideological dimensions, Sinem Arcak Casale's *Gifts in the Age of Empire* takes a novel approach by focusing on material culture and diplomatic exchange. Through a careful examination of gifts – including opulent objects, symbolic gestures, and even living persons – Arcak Casale demonstrates how material exchanges were not merely ceremonial but played an active role in shaping imperial relationships, asserting claims to sovereignty, and negotiating religious and political boundaries.

Structured into an introduction and five chapters, *Gifts in the Age of Empire* is visually rich, containing high-quality images of miniatures, documents, and illustrated depictions of gift-giving ceremonies. This visual component is especially crucial, as nearly all Safavid gifts sent to the Ottoman court – except for the famous *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb – have been lost. Given this absence, Arcak Casale relies heavily on Ottoman, Safavid, and European sources to reconstruct the nature and significance of these gifts. Her engagement with foreign, particularly Italian, accounts adds a fresh perspective, as these observers often provided detailed, firsthand descriptions of the ceremonies, free from the political biases of the Ottoman and Safavid courts.

One of the book's key arguments is that Ottoman-Safavid gift exchanges were asymmetrical. Arcak Casale notes that the Safavids consistently sent more gifts to the Ottomans than they received in return. While this might suggest a tribute relationship – an interpretation often reinforced by Ottoman sources – Arcak Casale challenges this idea. She argues that Safavid gifts did not follow the structured framework of traditional tribute payments, as they were not sent according to fixed amounts, pre-established schedules, or contractual obligations. Instead, these exchanges were highly flexible and politically charged, serving as tools for asserting influence, maintaining imperial hierarchies, and crafting narratives of legitimacy. The book also highlights the multiple layers of meaning embedded in gifts. These objects were not just diplomatic offerings, they carried religious, political, and historical significance. Gifts were meant to be seen not only by the presenter and recipient but also a broader audience, including courtiers, ambassadors, and foreign observers. This visibility made gift-giving an essential part of imperial image-making.

The first chapter traces the early diplomatic and material exchanges between the Ottomans and Safavids in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Under Sultan Bayezid II and Shah Ismail, relations were relatively amicable, with Bayezid addressing Ismail as his “son,” offering advice on governance, and sending gifts. This period saw a more balanced exchange of gifts, including Shah Ismail’s symbolic *qizil taj* (red headgear) sent to Sultan Bayezid. However, tensions escalated when Shah Ismail sent the skull of the Uzbek ruler Muhammad Shaybani Khan to the Ottoman court in 1510, an act that reflected his triumph over a Sunni rival and also foreshadowed growing hostilities with the Ottomans.

Relations deteriorated significantly after Selim I took the throne in 1512. Unlike his father, Selim viewed Shah Ismail and his Qizilbash followers in the Ottoman lands as a direct political and religious threat. This period saw a shift in gift-giving practices, with Shah Ismail sending provocative offerings such as opium and weapons, which the Ottomans categorized as *garaib* (strange and unusual). The Safavids’ defeat at the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) was a turning point. Arcak Casale notes that, rather than ceasing gift exchanges, the Safavids increased the number of gifts they sent to the Ottoman court while continuously attempting to forge alliances against it, a pattern that continued throughout the 16th century.

Chapter two focuses on one of the most significant Safavid gifts: the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb, sent to Ottoman Sultan Selim II following his ascension to the throne in 1566. Arcak Casale examines how this lavishly illustrated manuscript functioned as a statement of Safavid imperial ideology, connecting the dynasty to the legacy of ancient Persian kingship. Accompanied by a rare Quran believed to be copied by Imam Ali, this gift also reinforced the Safavid claim to religious legitimacy. The chapter argues that such gifts were not simply displays of wealth, they were also deeply symbolic assertions of Safavid sovereignty, Shi’i identity, and cultural sophistication.

Chapter three shifts focus to Ottoman representations of Safavid gifts in illustrated *sehnames*. These depictions framed the Ottomans as the dominant power, portraying Safavid offerings as acts of submission rather than diplomatic exchanges. Arcak Casale examines how the repetition of certain visual motifs – such as highly structured gift presentation scenes – helped reinforce the idea of Ottoman supremacy. Even as the actual number of Safavid gifts decreased, their representation in Ottoman court art became more elaborate, demonstrating how visual culture was used to shape imperial narratives.

Chapter four explores the transfer of Prince Haydar Mirza to the Ottoman court in 1590. Sent by Shah Abbas as part of a peace settlement, Haydar Mirza functioned as a living diplomatic gift, reinforcing Ottoman claims to superiority over the Safavids. Arcak Casale highlights how Ottoman sources framed his reception as a grand spectacle, emphasizing the sultan’s generosity. However, his sudden death in 1595 disrupted Ottoman expectations that he might serve as a pro-Ottoman ruler in Iran. This chapter underscores how even human gifts could be used to negotiate power and status.

Chapter five examines later Safavid-Ottoman exchanges under Shah Abbas, focusing on the strategic use of gifts as political statements. The 1599 embassy of Muhammad-quli Beg Arabgirli provides a key example, as Shah Abbas’s gifts – twelve gold and twelve silver keys symbolizing conquered fortresses – provoked Ottoman outrage rather than reaffirming submission. Arcak Casale also discusses Shah Abbas’s silk diplomacy, in which he sought to bypass Ottoman-controlled trade routes by forging direct economic ties with Europe. This shift demonstrates how gift-giving intersected with economic and geopolitical strategies.

Gifts in the Age of Empire is a significant contribution to the study of Ottoman-Safavid relations. Certain aspects of its argument could, however, be further developed. In the introduction, Arcak Casale raises the important question of how studying gifts can lead to a novel history of rival court interactions. By the conclusion, however, this question remains somewhat unresolved. While the book convincingly demonstrates that gifts played a crucial role in diplomacy, it does not fully articulate how this perspective fundamentally alters our understanding of Ottoman-Safavid relations beyond confirming known power dynamics.

The discussion of tribute versus gifts is another area that could have been explored in greater depth. While Arcak Casale persuasively argues that Safavid gifts were not structured as tribute payments, the book does not fully engage with broader debates on how early modern states categorized and interpreted such exchanges. A deeper comparative analysis with other imperial gift-giving and tribute traditions could have further strengthened this argument.

Despite these minor critiques, *Gifts in the Age of Empire* is a groundbreaking work that offers a fresh and sophisticated perspective on Ottoman-Safavid relations. By shifting the focus away from traditional military and political narratives, Arcak Casale foregrounds material culture and diplomatic exchange as crucial elements in shaping imperial hierarchies, religious identity, and geopolitical strategy. By situating gift-giving within a broader early modern context, Arcak Casale invites scholars to rethink the ways in which power was asserted and contested beyond the battlefield. This book is thus an essential read not only for specialists of Ottoman and Safavid history but also those interested in material culture, diplomacy, and empire-building in the early modern world.