

Rudi Matthee. « Between Arabs, Turks and Iranians: The Town of Basra, 1600-1700 ». *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 69/1, 2006, pp. 53-78.

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- 1 As the Persian Gulf became increasingly important in 17th century global trade dynamics, the city of Basra assumed a comparable geopolitical significance as an entrepôt linking the Persian Gulf with the Tigris-Euphrates river complex, the Hijaz, and the southern reaches of the Iranian Plateau. Moreover, this region was host to a number of local elite constituencies who vacillated between the two dominant, centralizing empires of west Asia: the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Rudi Matthee's stated purpose in this article is to flesh out the existing narrative of 17th century Basra as it appears in S.H. Longrigg's *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, and in doing so, provide a more nuanced presentation of how Basra stood as a nexus of competing interest groups. Written in 1925, Longrigg's monumental narrative did not have access to a number of now-published primary sources in Arabic and Persian, as well as new Dutch East India Company records. Basra had historically done well as a staging area for pilgrimage caravans to the Hijaz, but the port city assumed a new political and economic presence when the Ottoman empire extended its sphere of influence south from Baghdad to the Persian Gulf during the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent. However, it would be a mistake to characterize this region as an Ottoman province from 1549 onwards. To the contrary, the Ottoman Turkish authorities were constantly challenged and threatened by well-connected indigenous groups like the Āl 'Ilayān (dominant tribe of the Gulf) and the Musha'sha' (a notable politico-religious order based in Khuzistan). Moving beyond standard narratives of local rebellion and armed response by the centralized state, we hear of one Ottoman governor, 'Ali Pāshā, agreeing to sell his governorship lock-stock-and-barrel in 1596 to another competing

local group, the Afrasiyabs. From this point forward, Basra operated under a unique arrangement whereby a local dynasty of notables were given hereditary control over an Ottoman *eyelet*. Afrasiyab sovereignty was soon challenged by the Safavids under Shāh ‘Abbās, and despite repeated attacks in the 1620s, Basra maintained its regional independence in conjunction with a symbolic relationship with Istanbul. This relationship became markedly more complicated in 1654 during an internecine conflict which broke out between the Afrasiyab ruler ‘Ali Pāshā and his rebellious, Ottoman-supported uncles; indeed, Matthee gives a very detailed narrative here thanks to the unpublished diary of Elias Boudaen, the Dutch East India Company Resident of Basra in the 1650s. The second half of the 17th century was particularly destructive for the Basrans as the Ottomans invaded the region on numerous occasions to suppress Arab revolts in the surrounding region. The temporary military occupation of Basra by the Safavids at the close of the 17th century, combined with the numerous streaks of revolts and rebellions by Arab tribal elements, only underscores Matthee’s argument that the Ottoman control of Basra was tenuous at best in the

2 17th century.

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**Thèmes** : 4.2.1. Safavides et Qājārs

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