

«A mari usque ad mare»

Cultura visuale e materiale dall'Adriatico all'India

a cura di Mattia Guidetti e Sara Mondini

## The Affair of Durazzo (1559) and the Controversial Destitution of the *Provveditore all'Armata*

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**Abstract** «Actions speak louder than words». Nothing seems more appropriate than this old saying to describe the 1559 destitution of the *Capitano del Golfo* Pandolfo Contarini. For the sake of maritime security, he overreacted to the violation of a clause of the Veneto-Ottoman peace treaty and shelled the harbor of Durazzo. His destitution, sanctioned in Venice in complete autonomy, succeeded in preempting the Sultan's response and ultimately preserved the peace.

**Keywords** Security. Privateers. Foreign affairs. Administration.

In 1559, while patrolling the Gulf, the *Provveditore all'Armata* Pandolfo Contarini sought a pirate ship. His task being that of keeping the Gulf rid of piracy, he did not hesitate to pursue the aforementioned ship, which eventually found a refuge in the harbour of Durazzo. By sheltering the pirates, the Ottoman authorities of the city openly contravened the agreements reached in 1540 by the Republic of St. Marks and the Sublime Porte. Consequently, Pandolfo Contarini felt himself entitled to shell the harbour: the authorities had to surrender the ship and its cargo. Once back to Venice, Contarini was removed from his functions by the Senate and rapidly replaced (Braudel 1990, p. 150).

Informed of the episode by a petition, which had been sent jointly by the *qâdî* of Durazzo (Draç) and the *bey* of Elbâsan, the Porte showed at first a moderate reaction. In a short letter addressed to the *Doge*, the Sultan Qânûnî Süleyman blamed the *Provveditore* 'named Qôntâr' for having seized (*gasben alub*) with inappropriate violence (*zulm*) the ship and the goods owned by Aḥmed bin Muştafa and Piri bin Muştafa, two soldiers from the fortress of Castelnuovo (Nôva), who were innocently taking to Durazzo scarlet woolen cloths, rice and other merchandise for trading purposes (*ticâret içün*). «In virtue of the sincere and affectionate friendship you feel towards my threshold» (*Astâne' me olan ikhlâşñız mucëbince*), concluded Süleyman, «do investigate until the aforementioned merchandise come up» (3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, *hüküm* 831, 6 Cemâziülevvel 967 / 3 February 1560).

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311

The destitution of Pandolfo Contarini was a measure spontaneously taken by the Senate of the Republic. The memory of the catastrophic vicissitudes occurred in Prevesa was still alive and under such circumstances, after having shelled the harbour of Durazzo, the Venetians would have rather prevented than suffered a negative reaction of the Sublime Porte (Tenenti 1962, p. 10). The Senate replied to the Sultan, giving all the appropriate details about the destitution of the disloyal *Provveditore*, promising the restitution of the confiscated goods and deploring at the same time the presence of pirates in the Gulf, who had seized, just some time before, a whole shipload of olive oil from a Venetian galley on its way back from the Puglie; as to say that the difference between the pirates infesting the shores and the Albanian soldiers of His Highness the Sultan was not always discernible at first sight.

The affair acquired dynamism starting from the imperial reply, which was soon formulated into a long and articulated *nâme-i hümayûn*, filled with rhetoric though meaningful formulas and expressions. The text is based on the main assumption that the Venetians had officially recognized how the facts of Durazzo had happened *nâgâh khaṭâ'en*, «by sudden mistake». More than constituting a contextual assumption, this referred to the conviction, shared both by the Ottoman and the Venetian governments, that the diplomatic agreements taken in the aftermath of the Prevesa events had to be reconfirmed, as it is explicitly mentioned in the *nâme-i hümayûn*: «With the aim of making clear how corroborated (*mü'ekked*) and strongly build (*müşeyyed*) is the perception of friendship represented by a faithful affection towards our celestial threshold of dignity, the *Provveditore* (*prevedôr*) has been dismissed, at his place one of your valiant men has been appointed and the ship and cargo seized from our subjects will be delivered to my servants, the *beyler* ruling the frontier of my territories» (3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, *hüküm* 206, 11 Zilhicce 966 / 14 September 1559).

As far as the pirate issue was concerned, the sultan adopted the well-established attitude to act as if the Venetians, claiming order and control in the Gulf, had so-to-say preached to the converted, since orders had already been given to the Ottoman authorities of the shore to refrain from giving provisions to those defined as *ehl-i fesâd olan harâmî levend ṭâ'ifesi*. And since it was the Venetians who had been tabling the item, Süleyman seized the opportunity to claim the same order and control in the waters surrounding Crete and Cyprus, the faraway 'liquid' frontier of the Venetian State.

By mentioning the issue of the safety in South-Eastern Mediterranean waters, the Sultan established rhetorically a parallel between his own Western frontier and the islands constituting the Venetian Eastern borderline, as to say «I will deal with my pirates, but you must deal with yours». Once again, who's the preacher? and who's the converted?

More than rhetorically effective, the argument was a double-edged weapon. To put the control of Albanian Ottoman subjects who practiced piracy on the same level of the control Venetians should have had upon Maltese, among others, pirates, must have appeared to the lords of the Senate as nothing more than a pretext. The military power of the Ottomans was nevertheless able to make of this pretext a threat, whose likelihood was tested in 1570. For the Venetians, piracy was a substantial and not formal problem. The Ottomans themselves knew that piracy in South-Eastern Mediterranean was far from being subsidized or even encouraged by the Venetians, whose merchant ships often ended up being rather the victims of the local religiously heterogeneous pirate communities. In the first half of the sixteenth century, many self-declaring Christian and Muslim pirates were captured and sent to the *qâdı* of Antalya by the Venetian patrols based in Cyprus (3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, *hüküm* 385, 22 Muharrem 967 / 24 October 1559). The fact that the preservation and the enlargement of trade were the motivations to any hegemonic strategy planned by the Venetian State was itself a guarantee against any action of direct or indirect support towards piracy. Consequently, the imperial claim for order could not but encounter the Venetians' active understanding. Sincere as they might have been, by recommending to the Venetians not to encourage piracy in South-Eastern Mediterranean, the Ottomans were indeed preaching to the converted.

Moreover, the sultan himself was perfectly aware of the irregular conduct of his Albanian *qûllar* and subjects: on the same date of this *nâme-i hümayûn*, other two *hüküm* were sent by the sultan, the first jointly to the *bey* of Elbâsan and to the *qâdı* of Durazzo, the second only to this last. On one hand the sultan underlined how a dispatch had been sent to Venice immediately after the events had been brought to his sublime knowledge, claiming the restitution of the confiscated goods. The lords of the Senate, continued the sultan, while writing me that measures had already been taken to send back the seized merchandise, «have also remembered me that previously some Venetian ships had been attacked by pirates who seized and sold in Durazzo the olive oil they were carrying» (3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, *hüküm* 204, 11 Zilkâde 966 / 15 August 1559). Concerning this issue, «a sacred order of mine has been already sent to you». In his truly imperial wisdom, the sultan chose to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Mentioning the fact that a new order had been given to the *Doge* in order to encourage the appointment of reliable men, able to deliver properly the seized goods to the legal owners, the sultan consequently pointed out that the two authorities to whom the letter was addressed had to supervise as to ensure that on their side too «the job had to be carried out by favourable people, rid of prejudices, and not by swindlers». In the second *hüküm*, Süleyman warned the *qâdı* of Durazzo to compile a *defter* with all the delivered goods and concluded the letter with

a magnificent sentence: *kimesnenüñ haqqı zâyi' olmalu olmaya* («Nobody's interests must be damaged») (3 Numaralı Mühimme Defteri, *hüküm* 204, *hüküm* 205, 11 Zilkâde 966 / 15 August 1559).

In the three letters, the first to the *Doge*, the others to the Ottoman authorities of the Albanian province, I have tried to examine how a different perspective of the same event might be observed, according to the place the addressees occupied in the Ottoman perspective. As far as the Durazzo and Elbâsan Ottoman authorities were concerned, the Sultan had the opportunity to reaffirm the role of Istanbul's hegemonic power at the frontier of its Empire: such affairs were more successfully solved from Istanbul than from Durazzo, due to the powerful influence the Sultan claimed over the Republic of St. Mark.

The Republic of Venice was certainly pleased with the intervention of the Ottoman centre. The restitution of cloths and rice was a very low price to pay in exchange of an imperial claim for order, which would have hopefully settled the undisciplined irregular forces based in Durazzo, Dulcigno and other Albanian centres. In other words, Venetians had all interest in making an important issue out of what the Sublime Porte had considered at first sight almost like a routine business. The legalistic attitude of sixteenth century Venetian *élite*, leading to the formal recognition of having made a mistake, to the destitution of Contarini and to the restitution of the confiscated goods were, so-to-say, the merchandise Venetians were offering in exchange of the respect of 1540 peace agreements and, though indirectly, in exchange of the confirmation of their self-determination policy in the Gulf. In fact, the stricter this attitude might have appeared, the more formal it actually was: the place of Pandolfo Contarini was taken by Cristoforo Da Canal, who dedicated his life to the application of some important reforms in the Venetian marine and who, as his biographer Alberto Tenenti asserts, would have always considered the fight against the Turks «comme une donnée naturelle» (Tenenti 1962, p. 8). Between the *şadâqat*, *ikhâlâs*, *dostluq*, *müvâlât* the Sultan recommended to Venice and the *'ubudiyyet* he claimed from Dubrovnik, a whole paradigm of political and economic self-determination was implied.

Two centuries later, in his *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia dalla sua fondazione sino l'anno MDCCXLVII*, Giacomo Diedo chose to report «le cose accadute a Durazzo» in 1559 as an example of how Ottoman internal affairs could have an impact on the Sultan's diplomatic relations with Venice. If Süleyman was not committed to solve his dynastic problems – connected as they were to the relationship with the Safavid Court – Pandolfo Contarini's initiative might have been taken as an excuse to re-open a military confrontation («per devenire ad aperta rottura») (Diedo 1793, libro V, p. 173).

The profound disparities between the *Signoria* and the Empire did not undermine their common trust in the respect of laws and international

treaties, mostly and especially in the frontier areas, during the long periods of peace enjoyed by the two States in the sixteenth century. On one side, the Venetian State, being in itself a frontier, a long and thin succession of harbours and islands, was therefore permanently seeking for peace and what we might call a state of maritime legacy as diffused as possible. On the other side, the Ottomans, far from seeking a permanent state of war, once peace was agreed, had the habit, on their Western as well as on their Eastern frontier, to trust their neighbours, who were officially recognized as partners. In spite of the numerous and often long-lasting wars broken out between the two States, the Republic of Venice maintained for four centuries a trading and diplomatic partnership with the powerful neighbour. As I have tried to demonstrate through the interpretation of the 1559 Durazzo affair, this partnership was constituted by both formal and substantial elements. All along the sixteenth century, Venice tried hard to keep the hegemonic conflict with the Ottomans on a formal and diplomatic base, where acts, words and the varied perceptions they could have meant a unique goal: to let trade flourish and prevent war from breaking. Until 1797, the Venetian sovereignty over the Gulf was never successfully denied, strange as it may seem, thanks and not always in spite of, the Ottomans.

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