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***GENTILE BELLINI E L'ORIENTE  
(GENTILE BELLINI AND THE EAST)***



**Summary**

**Incontri presso la Sala dell'Albergo  
Scuola Grande di San Marco  
Venice - 23 June 2016**

In August 1479 an Ottoman envoy was received in the Ducal Palace in Venice. His name was Simone and he invited the doge to the *sünnet* (circumcision) festival organized for prince Bayezid's sons. He had also the task of asking for a painter, a sculptor, an architect, a copper founder and other artisans to be sent to Fatih sultan Mehmed's court. The doge thanked for the invitation but refused to take part personally to the festival and decided to be represented by the new Venetian *bailo* who was on the point of being elected. He chose, however, to send the painter Gentile Bellini while the sculptor Bartolomeo Bellano at first refused but then he said that he would have reached Constantinople at his own expenses later.

In the same year the king of Naples fulfilled a request alike sending another painter to Istanbul, Costanzo from Ferrara, who remained there about two years. We also know that in the same period a third painter worked for the Ottoman court and was very important there («el qual ha grazia et autorità apresso il Signor Turco»): his name was Nakkaş Sinan, he had a Greek origin, knew how to write in Greek, had a cousin whose name was Pantaleone Arfara, was involved in maritime trade and had studied with Paolo from Ragusa, who at his turn had studied with a certain Damiano (perhaps an Ottoman misspelling for Donato, i.e. Donatello?).

We know that at least the request made in Venice by the envoy Simone was strictly linked with the *sünnet* that took place in the following year in Edirne, the city of Ottoman civic celebrations in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Other celebrations were made in 1439 (*sünnet* of Murad II's sons Mehmet and Alâeddin Ali, marriage of a prince with an Isferdyaroğlu princess and capture of Semendire Tower), 1442 (capture and execution of Düzme Mustafa), 1444 (religious holiday),

1450 (marriage of the future Mehmed II with Sitti Hatun of Elbistan), 1457 (*sünnet* of Mehmed's sons Bayezit and Mustafa), 1472 (*sünnet* of Mehmed's sons Cem and Abdullah). Festivals of this kind were organized for the benefit of large crowds of people and were used to stress the importance and the continuity of the Ottoman dynasty. The presence of European artists may be explained by the fact that Mehmed II wanted to be seen as the ruler of the East and the West who derived his power from the Turkish, Arab, Persian and Roman traditions.

The 1480 festival lasted two months. The princes circumcised were Ahmed (b. 1465), Mahmud (b. 1465?), Korkud (b. 1467), Selim (the future Yavuz Sultan Selim, b. 1470), Şehinşah (b. 1471) and probably Oğuz Han and Alem. We know that Gentile Bellini made also a picture of the sultan with a young boy.



On the verso of the painting there is written: «Ritratti di Maometto secondo e di suo figlio di Gentile Bellino» (*Portraits of Mehmed II and his son by Gentile Bellini*) but in 1480 the sultan's son were older than the person represented in the picture: in particular somebody saw prince Cem in the portrait but he was born in 1459 and was then about 20 year old. Then we can think to one of the sultan's grandsons: in particular Ahmed (15), Mahmud (15?) or Korkud (13), since Selim (10) and Şehinşah (9) were clearly too young.

It is interesting to note that in Bellini's painting the young prince has a feather on his turban. In the ancient times this symbol was by member of the Gengis Khan's family and the first Ottoman sultan to use it was Selim I (1512-1520). We do not know why he adopted it. Somebody said because he had married a daughter of the Tatar khan. If it would have been because of his mother instead, we can remember that Korkud and Selim had the same mother and thus the prince in the picture could have been Korkud.

Gentile Bellini did not make only one picture of the sultan. Venetian records give us information of other pictures: in 1648 one of them belonged to the Zen family living in the palace at the Crociferi, while in 1544 another one (or the same?) was present in the list made after the death of Giacomo dalla Vedova, who had been secretary in Constantinople in the years 1531-1533 with the vice-bailo Pietro Zen: «un quadro con el retrato del Gran Turcho»). In the 16<sup>th</sup> c. also Paolo Giovio had a portrait of the sultan made by Bellini.

Among them the most famous portrait is that kept in the National Gallery in London. It can be read not only as an Italian Renaissance picture of a ruler but also from an

Ottoman point of view. Thus, the arch may be a gate, the symbol of justice for the ancient Turkish peoples, used several times in the architecture of the Topkapı. The crowns may be a reference to the previous Ottoman rulers since Mehmed II was the seventh sovereign after three emirs and three sultans. The jewelled carpet was also important. Carpets of this kind were used in the room where the throne stood in the Imperial Palace. The precious stones too may have a symbolic meaning. The five ones repeated four times look like those that belonged to the ring of Osman, according to a myth of the Ottoman family origins. The pearls are twenty-four as the number of the tribes of Oğuz while it is possible to see twice the name Mehmed written in Arabic letters and a seventh crown.

In 1660 in his *La carta del navegar pitoresco* Marco Boschini wrote «Ma la più bella zogia de st'autor / Za puochi zorni è sta portada in Francia... / Questa xe un quadro che Zentil Belin / Fece a Costantinopoli, a richiesta / del bailo...» (*But the most beautiful jewel of this author has been brought to France some days ago. It is a picture that Gentile Bellini made in Constantinople at the bailo's request*). Boschini made clearly reference to the picture representing the reception of the Venetian ambassadors in Damascus that had been the sold to king Louis XIV and is in the Louvre now. It cannot be of Bellini but of his school and a recent study discovered the year 1511 written in it. In this picture we may note that the Venetian ambassador wore a golden piece of fabric on his shoulder. This was a symbol used by important persons who usually were addressed as «kavalier de la stola d'oro» (*knight of the golden stole*). It was not a real knight order but only a distinction used by certain important persons or members of certain families. One of these was the Zen one. Thus we may imagine that

the person in the picture was Pietro Zen who had been consul in Damascus in those years, had been put in prison by the Mamluks and released in 1512.



About 1504-1507 Gentile and Giovanni Bellini made another picture inspired to the East. It was *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria* now kept in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, but made for the Scuola Grande di San Marco.





In this picture we can see several Oriental elements. It is clearly inspired by the so-called Mamluk mode that was present in Venetian paintings between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. The buildings have Mamluk decorations.



It is possible to see the column of Pompey's Pillar and the Lighthouse of Alexandria (totally destroyed in 1480) on the right and the minaret of ibn Ṭulūn mosque of Cairo on the left.



On the left it is possible to see also the obelisk of Theodosius of Constantinople (or that of Heliopolis ?) and on both sides of the central building there are two structures that look like the pulpit of the church of St. Mark's of Venice.



Obelisk of Theodosius



Obelisk of Heliopolis

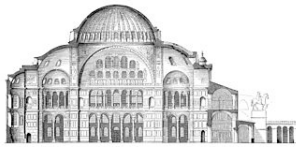


The great building on the foreground hints to Byzantine architectures. It has elements of the Chora church (Kariye Camii), Aya Sofya, Küçük Aya Sofya of Costantinople, St. Mark's of Venice and San Vitale of Ravenna.





Kariye Camii



Aya Sofya



Küçük Aya Sofya



St. Mark's



San Vitale

Between the 1490s and 1520s some Venetian painters chose to represent Eastern persons dressed as Mamluks or Ottomans. We may note that in this period in Venice it was easy to meet persons coming from these two

empires. Between 1490 and 1520 thirty one Ottoman diplomatic envoys were received in the Ducal Palace. Mamluk ambassadors were fewer: Muḥammad ibn Maḥfūz arrived in 1476. Then, there was the interpreter Taġri Berdī ibn ‘Abdullāh from September 1506 to July 1507. He had with him a mamluk (military slave) who took the chance of coming back to his previous religious faith: his name was Giacomo da Malnisio and he became a famous soldier in the Venetian army. We also know that at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Mamluk carpets were made in Venice by a certain Šabān from Cairo («Sabadino tapeziero») who became so famous to be called to Ferrara where he worked until 1528. Also some Venetians had direct contacts with the Eastern world. For instance Zaccaria Pagan from Belluno wrote the report of the voyage to Cairo of his master, the ambassador Domenico Trevisan in 1512. He saw the Mamluk sultan Qānṣaw al-Ġawrī and describes his dress and headgear very well together with those of his officials. The manuscript was accompanied by two coloured drawings that still existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., in the collection of the Piloni family where it was kept together with many works and manuscripts by Cesare Vecellio. Thus it is possible then that the Vecellio’s drawings were inspired by Pagan’s work.



Also a famous map *La vera descrizione de la gran città del Caiero*, carved in wood blocks by Giovanni Domenico Zorzi di Modone and printed in Venice by Matteo Pagan about 1549 has his origin in a lost drawing of the end of the 15<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. because it presents the balm trees gardens that were almost completely destroyed in 1494 but still present in 1512. Another image of Cairo of the same period is that present in Niccolò Zoppino, *Viaggio da Venetia al Santo Sepulchro* (1519). On the contrary no longer existent is the map made for the marquis of Mantua Francesco II Gonzaga in the hall *Camera delle Città* of his palace in Gonzaga between 1493-1497: he refused the drawing presented by Gentile Bellini in 1493 and based on a sketch of Cairo belonging to «un compatre de messer Bellino» (*a godfather (?) of sir Bellini*, Bellini was born in 1429). The following year the picture was made on the basis of a map belonging to Francesco Teldi, who the marquis himself saw in Venice. Teldi was a Venetian merchant of precious stones and in 1504 he was chosen to go to Cairo to suggest to dig a channel in the Isthmus of Suez. Unfortunately he died the same year and such an idea was left aside by the Council of Ten.

The most ancient headgear used by the Muslim rulers of Egypt was the *šarbūš*, a triangular shaped cap that looked like a crown and had no kerchief around. It was used by the Ayyubids (1174-1250) and the Turkish *baḥri* Mamluks (1250-1380 about), but it was abolished by the Circassian *burġi* Mamluks (1380 about - 1517).



Giotto, *Trial by fire* (1325 about, Florence, Cappella dei Bardi)



Giotto (attr.), *St. Francis in front of the sultan* (1295-99 about, Assisi)

The *šarbūš* is not present in the Venetian “Mamluk mode” paintings that however present a real collection of the headgears used in Egypt at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. In *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, for instance, it is possible to recognize the *kallawta*. In origin it was a small, yellow cap without any turban wrapped around while the hairs were long and felt down loosely on the necks. At the time of the sultan al-Ašraf Ḥalīl (1290-1293) its colour was changed from yellow to red and a turban was wrapped around it. When al-Nāšir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (1293-1294, 1299-1309, 1310-41) had his head completely shaved after he went on a pilgrimage in 1332 his entourage copied him and the loss of hair made the *kallawta* much bigger in size and of better quality.



Giovanni Mansueti, *The Capture of St. Mark in the Synagogue*, 1499



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507

Then there was the *tahfifa ṣaġīra* (the small lighter one). Its first mention dates back to the time of Barqūq (1382-1389, 1390-1399) who used it in public in 1394. It became increasingly popular only at the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. After 1467 he is regularly mentioned in the sources and it was worn above all by the Mamluk emirs on certain public but not official outings. Two kinds of it existed: the round one (*mudawwara*)



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507

and the smooth one (*mumallasa*).



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507



Anonymous, *The Venetian ambassadors received in Damascus*, 1511

The *taḥfīfa kabīra* (the big lighter one) was another headgear used by the sultans when they went out on horseback, covered by a parasol. It had the end of the turban (*taylasan*) embroidered with the golden titles of the ruler coming down on his left shoulder. This device was perhaps used to remember symbolically that the sultans were all slaves because Joseph in the Bible had the hairs coming down on the left part of his face as all the Egyptian slaves in his times.

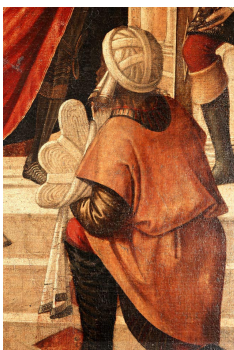


Vittore Carpaccio, *The triumph of St. George*, 1502

The largest version of the *taḥfīfa kabīra* was called *nā'ūra* (waterwheel) and it appeared for the first time in 1496 to remember either Alexander the Great (*Dū al-Qarnayn*, the “two-horned” in the Koran) or, in fabric, the crown of the ancient Sassanid kings. From 1501 onwards,



when Qānṣaw al-Ġawrī (1501-1516) ascended to the throne, the sultans used it as a crown. Usually the sultan's one had six horns, the 100 men emirs' ones had four horns, while the 10 men emirs had two horns.



Vittore Carpaccio, *The triumph of St. George*, 1502



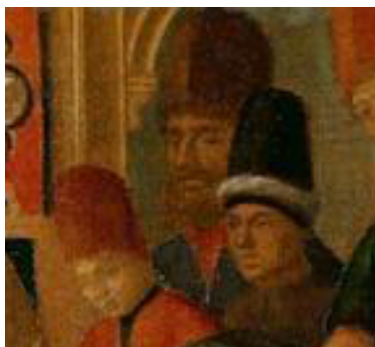
Giovanni Mansueti, *St. Mark heals Anianus*, about 1518-26

Another headgear used by ordinary mamluks was the *ṭāqīya*, a cylindrical hat with a flat top. It was usually one-sixth of an *ell* high. At the beginning of the 15th c. it became taller until it reached two-thirds of an *ell* and the upper part took the shape of a small dome. This was the so-called Circassian. At the end of the century there was a two-

colored version with the upper part green and the lower part black.



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507



Giovanni Mansueti, *St. Mark heals Anianus*, about 1518-26

It is that the red *zamṭ* was in origin the cap of lower classes but in 1422 sultan Barsbāy forbade the *fellās* (peasants) from wearing it and it was used only by the Mamluk soldiers paid by the emirs or the sultan himself. After the Ottoman conquest of Egypt it was consider a symbol of the past military élite and in 1518 and 1521 laws were issued to forbade its use.



Vittore Carpaccio, *St. George baptizing the Selenites*, 1507



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507

The huge and round *'imāma* was the turban worn by ulema. It was used not only in Mamluk Egypt but also in the Ottoman Empire. There it was called *yusufi* and it was chosen by Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) as his own headgear.



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507



Tiziano, *Suleyman the Magnificent*, about 1530

In Mamluk society the dresses were more or less the same for Christians and Muslims, but in 1354 it was established that Christians could use only blue headgears and a white shoe and a black one, while Jews had to use yellow headgears. White remained only for Muslims and green turbans were used only by the descendants of the Prophet.



Giovanni Mansueti, *Scenes of St. Mark's life*, about 1518-26

We can note here that in Venice, in campo dei Mori, there are four statues three of them wear turbans. They date back to the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. and according the tradition they represent three brothers coming from Mora who, on wearing Islamic dresses, wanted to show that the goods they sold came from the East.



Venezia, Campo dei Mori (middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

Two ancient chronicles kept in the Marciana Library (cl. VII cod. 27) make reference to these statues. The first says:

*Veggonsi oggidì le antiche habitationi della casa Mastelli appresso Santa Maria dell'Orto et specialmente le rovine d'un sontuoso edificio, negli angoli del quale sono collocate tre grandi figure di marmo d'uomini vestiti alla greca i quali, sostenendo tutto l'edificio tengono sopra le spalle un fardello, a guisa d'una valigia, per dimostrazione forse delle ricchezze da loro portate in Venetia, nelle quali sono scolpiti i nomi dei tre primi autori di questa casa, et per questa cagione il ponte ivi vicino che attraversa il canal della Misericordia viene chiamato dei Mori.*

and the other:

*Negli anni del Signore MCXII tre fratelli greci, Rioba, Sandi et Afani, per le seditioni civili fuggitisi dalla Morea, ove possedevano molte giurisdizioni, si ricoverarono con grandi averi in Venetia et edificarono l'abitationi loro molto honorevoli appresso il Ponte dei Mori così detto per le figure dei tre sopradetti fratelli che nei angoli della fabbrica insieme coi nomi loro si veggono scolpite.*

If we read carefully these sources we realize that the statues are now four and not three as asserted; only two of them have (or had) clearly a bundles on their shoulders; only two wear Greek dresses. On the contrary two of the statues wear huge *'imāma* turbans and they have also scarfes and long dresses as those used by the men of religion together with a box that looks like that once used to beg.

In *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria* there is also a person wearing an Ottoman turban.



Gentile e Giovanni Bellini, *St. Mark preaching in Alexandria*, 1504-1507

According to the tradition it was Alaeddin, son of Osman, who would have chosen the white colour for the Ottoman turbans, to distinguish them from the headgears used by Byzantines and Turkmen. For the most ancient rulers the fez (*mücevveze*), covered with a white piece of fabric (*dülbent*), was red but in 1371 Murad I (1359-1389) chose the golden colour for it. Mehmed II (1451-1481) came back to red, while Bayezid II (1481-1512) wanted a green *mücevveze*. Every Ottoman sultan decided which kind of turban he wanted to wear when he ascended to the throne. Selim I (1512-1520) covered completely the *mücevveze* with the *dülbent*. At the beginning of the reign of this ruler Ottomans left aside the turban which show the ends of the pieces of fabric.



Vittore Carpaccio, *St. George Baptizing the Selenites*, 1507



The Mamluk style in Venetian paintings started at the end of the reign of the sultan Qā'it Bay (1468-1496) and ended after the conquest of Egypt by the Ottomans. Under the reign of Qānsûh al-Ghawrî, Mamluks and Venetians were united to fight the Portuguese but I do not think that political relations between the two countries greatly influences the perception that the painters of the Mamluk mode had of the East. It is more probable that the presence in Venice of persons who had lived for years in Egypt or Syria and were in strict contact with Mansueti, Carpaccio or Bellini may have influenced them. They too, perhaps, belonged to the Scuola Grande di San Marco and had a direct interest in presenting the East they had directly known during their travels.

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