

## “A Continual Tavern in My House”: Food and Diplomacy in Early Modern Constantinople

ERIC R. DURSTELER



Following a series of disastrous wars with its Ottoman neighbor in the decades following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Republic of Venice at the start of the sixteenth century settled into a political position that emphasized neutrality and diplomacy in the place of open hostility. This pragmatic policy acknowledged the reality that Venice could not compete militarily with its rivals, but it might preserve its political and commercial position through the careful management of its relationship with the sultans. Key to this new strategy was Venice’s diplomatic mission in Constantinople. Over the course of the century the Venetian Signoria expanded and strengthened its diplomatic mission by earmarking ever-increasing financial support, expanding the size of the embassy’s support staff, and by sending its most able diplomats as Venice’s chief representative in the Porte, the *bailo*, who functioned as both ambassador and consul. While Venice’s diplomatic efforts took many forms, food played an unexpectedly important role. Gifts of rare food items, sumptuous public banquets, and intimate private dinners were all used by Venice’s diplomats to maintain the reputation of the republic in the Porte, to curry favor among the ruling elite, and to gather intelligence on Ottoman affairs and court politics.

The nexus of food and diplomacy was a common theme in early modern diplomatic advice literature. Christopher Varsevicius directly linked a diplomat’s reputation to his table: “If an ambassador does not respond to the kindness of others toward him by splendor of food and banquets, he is accused immediately of niggardliness and his embassy is openly despised.” In contrast, “opportune banquets” loosened tongues and eased diplomatic negotiations: when “great men...grow warm at table there is even a desire for discussing the greatest things. For many

voluntarily profess at table more than they would confess under torture. Thus, this practice will not only give much glory to our princes but it provides us with a short cut to the favor of others.”<sup>1</sup> The French diplomat Monsieur de Callières concurred: “To maintain the dignity of diplomacy the negotiator must clothe himself in liberality and generosity of heart, even in magnificence...Let him frequently give banquets and diversions in honour of the principal persons of the court in which he lives.”<sup>2</sup>

Marino Cavalli, one of Venice’s most accomplished sixteenth-century ambassadors, similarly underlined the role of food in effective diplomacy. In 1561, after returning from Constantinople, he composed a treatise, “*Informatione dell’offitio dell’ambasciatore*”, intended for a son leaving on a diplomatic mission to Savoy. Less interested in theoretical reflections, Cavalli instead focused on a range of very pragmatic issues. He advised his son that, while an ambassador’s reputation for “humanity, splendor, beneficence, far-sightedness, and prudence” was his most essential asset, second in importance was his ability to maintain a “table more abundant than lavish”.<sup>3</sup>

Cavalli considered the *credentiero* and the chef two of the embassy’s most important staff members. The *credentiero* was charged with maintaining the sideboard containing flasks, cups, bowls, linens, candelabra, and silver, which accompanied every ambassador. He also oversaw the logistics of seating and serving dinner parties, and ensured that the table was honorably furnished. The key figure, however, was the chef: Cavalli wrote that “the best thing that an ambassador has in his house is a good chef”. A good chef contributed to his master’s reputation and attracted guests and clients to the embassy’s table; this, in turn, helped accomplish the mission’s diplomatic objectives. As an example, while ambassador in Bavaria, Cavalli’s chef prepared a banquet of fifteen courses, each one a different color, which so impressed Emperor Charles V that he hired the man at three times his

1. ROBERT LEO FERRING, *The Accomplished Ambassador by Christopher Varsevicius and Its Relation to Sixteenth Century Political Writings with a Translation of the Treatise from Latin*, Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame University 1959, pp. 154, 312–333.

2. MONSIEUR DE CALLIÈRES, *On the Manner of Negotiating with Princes*, trans. A. F. WHYTE, South Bend 1963, p. 23.

3. TOMMASO BERTELÈ, *Informatione dell’offitio dell’ambasciatore di Marino de Cavalli il vecchio*, Florence 1935, pp. 5–29, 33–35, 59.

salary. Though he lost his chef, Cavalli observed, “these things create great favor and make an ambassador acquire much grace in a court”.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of this culinary diplomacy is especially evident in Venice’s mission in the Ottoman capital. An important component of Venetian diplomacy in the Porte was personal: the *baili* cultivated an extensive network of friendship and patronage relationships with influential Ottomans able to favor Venetian interests. Paolo Contarini explained that in Constantinople “friendships...were necessary to terminate negotiations successfully, and to have the information which is so important and necessary to the government of [Venice]”. Friendships were developed through personal visits with important officials, liberal use of gifts or bribes, the provision of a range of personal services, and the maintenance of an open table in the *bailo*’s palace, at which the wine flowed freely.<sup>5</sup> Many important Ottomans came regularly to the table of the *bailo*; Marco Venier reported that his staff was always busy because of “the flood of people” who came to the embassy at all hours of the day.<sup>6</sup> Contarini concurred: he found that for Venice to preserve an honorable reputation in the Porte, it was necessary “to feed whomever desires it; and I can say with truth to have had a continual tavern in my house, and I very often needed to set three or four tables a day, because in this way friends are kept and new ones acquired, and the greatness of this Most Serene Republic is made known to the world”.<sup>7</sup>

This open-table policy produced concrete diplomatic results for Venice. One of many examples occurred in 1584, when Venetians attacked an

Ottoman ship and killed a number of the sultan’s subjects, including women and relatives of important officials. To prevent the incident escalating into a major crisis, Gianfrancesco Morosini worked his network of relationships aggressively. This included a private dinner with a *çavuş* (messenger) who reported on discussions in the court, and discussed possible strategies to manage the situation. Ultimately Morosini was able to resolve the incident in Venice’s favor.<sup>8</sup>

Gifts were another important element of Venetian diplomacy. Inventories indicate that luxurious cloths were most common, but other items included “soap bubbles, small paintings, perfumes, gloves, eyeglasses,...mirrors, chests”. Delicacies such as pistachios, almonds, marzipan, and other sweets were also common offerings.<sup>9</sup> Cheese was particularly popular: the sultanas and other high-ranking individuals ate Piacentine cheese “often and with great pleasure” because its flavor and texture were judged superior to those of Ottoman cheeses.<sup>10</sup> It was not uncommon for Ottoman officials to request specific foods: when Daniele Barbarigo departed for Venice by way of Crete, a *paşa* informed him, “I will expect you to send me some of the good oils and juices that are found on that island”.<sup>11</sup> In 1613 when the sultan was hunting near Adrianople, a court official wrote Cristoforo Valier asking him to send cheese and Venetian sweets.<sup>12</sup>

The cost of all of these gifts was significant. A 1620 *relazione* indicates that the *baili* spent 400 ducats monthly on small gifts and bribes, which combined with the more formal gifts to the sultan and important officials equaled over 200,000 ducats annually.<sup>13</sup> The reason for such significant expenditures was the central place of gift-giving in Ottoman culture. One

4. BERTELE (as in n. 3), pp. 43–44, 56–57, 70–75.

5. “Amicizie,...fossero necessarie per ben terminar li negozj e aver quelli avvisi che sono così importanti e necessari al governo di [Venezia]”: “Relazione di Paolo Contarini”, in EUGENIO ALBÈRI, *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al senato*, 3rd series, 3 vols., Florence 1840–55, III, pp. 213; also 231–232; Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Archivi propri – Costantinopoli, busta 17, fol. 13r, 22 August 1620. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

6. ASV, Senato Dispacci – Costantinopoli (hereafter SDC), busta 39, fol. 55r, 24 March 1594.

7. “Dar da mangiare a chi ne vuole; e posso dir con verità di aver avuto continua osteria in casa, essendomi bisognato molto spesso far 3 o 4 tavole al giorno, perchè con questi mezzi si conservano gli amici e se ne acquistano de’ nuovi, e si fa conoscer al mondo la grandezza di questa Serenissima Repubblica”: “Relazione di Paolo Contarini” (as in n. 5), p. 250.

8. ASV, SDC, busta 20, fols. 214r–220r, 5 December 1584; SDC, busta 20, fols. 442r–444r, 7 January 1584 (Venetian style); SDC, busta 21, fols. 1r–5v, 12 March 1585; SDC, busta 32, fols. 4v–5r, 1 September 1590.

9. ASV, Bailo a Costantinopoli, busta 297, fols. 26v–45v.

10. TOMMASO ALBERTI, *Viaggio a Costantinopoli di Tommaso Alberti (1609–1621)*, ed. ALBERTO BACCHI DELLA LEGA, Bologna 1889, p. 153; MARIA PIA PEDANI, *In nome del gran signore. Inviati ottomani a Venezia dalla caduta di Costantinopoli alla guerra di Candia*, Venice 1994, p. 61; SURAIYA FAROQHI, *Subjects of the Sultans*, London 2000, p. 214.

11. “Relazione di Luigi Bonrizzo”, in ALBÈRI (as in n. 5), II, p. 65.

12. ASV, SDC, busta 74, fol. 260r–v, 11 February 1612 (Venetian style).

13. *Bilanci generali della repubblica di Venezia*, 2nd series, I, Venice 1912, pp. 469–470.

*bailo* wrote that gift-giving was “so universal and common that a son does not treat with his father or brother without a gift”, a point reiterated by other diplomats in Constantinople,<sup>14</sup> and treatises inevitably encouraged developing a reputation for “liberality and prodigality”.<sup>15</sup> Cristoforo Valier reported that in Constantinople it was said that “the hand that comes to the Porte and gives, never is cut off”, and “birds are tamed with little, but daily, food”.<sup>16</sup> More than just bribery, gift-giving was a means of creating and maintaining personal bonds with a clear expectation of reciprocity in the resulting patron–client relationship. In the Ottoman Empire, gifts or *piskes* were “a mark of respect and dependence”.<sup>17</sup> While Venetian diplomats invariably complained about the necessity of offering gifts, they understood their cultural significance in Ottoman society: Girolamo Lippomano wrote that “giving was the first sign of love”.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to its use in forming relationships, obtaining information, and achieving diplomatic objectives, food was also essential to the reputation of the state and its representatives. Image was especially crucial to the success of Venice’s Ottoman diplomacy, because, as one *bailo* wrote, “one is unable to make oneself esteemed...except by dressing richly, [and] maintaining an honorable *famiglia* [household]”.<sup>19</sup> This is evident in one of the most important ceremonial moments in a diplomat’s career, his processional entrance into Constantinople. When the future doge Leonardo Donà came in 1595 to renew Venice’s capitulations with the Ottoman Empire following the death of Sultan Murad III, he was met outside the city by the Venetian merchant

nation, members of other European nations, the *çavuş paşa* (the head of the sultan’s corps of courtiers) and eighty *çavuşes*, and several dozen janissaries. Together they processed in great pomp with the ambassador to his residence.<sup>20</sup>

Following the procession, a public banquet was held at the embassy complex. The janissaries and other lesser individuals were fed at tables set up in the embassy’s courtyard. Many did not even sit down; rather they rushed to the food, “stuffing it in handkerchiefs, and in clothes, without worrying about getting dirty, and then carrying it off, so that it was all over very quickly, without any sort of civility”.<sup>21</sup> The *bailo* and his most honored guests – the Ottoman officials, important merchants, fellow ambassadors, and “several Turks of honor” – attended a more decorous reception inside the embassy. This was followed by a large banquet for the 90–100 guests who dined with the newly arrived diplomat. The *çavuş paşa* joined the ambassador and other important guests at the head table, where the conversation tended toward “senatorial opinions...[and] concepts... from the Koran”. The meal was sumptuous and expensive: it included forty capons, twenty-five wethers, eighteen ducks, thirty-five cocks, one pheasant, fifty-two quail, four hundred eggs, two geese, and one hundred and twenty guinea hens, and cost 24,055 *akçe*, or over a thousand ducats.<sup>22</sup>

During the early modern period, Venice’s famed diplomatic corps was an essential element of attempts to preserve its state and its relevance in a rapidly changing, often perilous Mediterranean world. Culinary diplomacy was an integral, costly, time-consuming part of the development and maintenance of personal relationships, which were the heart of Venetian negotiations. Whether as gifts, public displays of the wealth and prestige of the Republic, or means to develop relationships and gather information, sumptuous banquets, endless supplies of wine, fine cheeses and other exotic foods, all represented important tools to which Venice’s representatives had regular recourse as they struggled to maintain the sometimes precarious relationship with the Ottoman Empire.

14. “Relazione di Cristoforo Valier”, in *Le Relazioni degli stati europei...nel secolo decimosettimo. Turchia*, ed. NICOLÒ BAROZZI and GUGLIELMO BERCHET, I, Venice 1871, pp. 303–304; OGIER DE BUSBECQ, *Turkish Letters*, London 2001, p. 17; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Manuscrits français, boîte 7094, fols. 51v–52r, 30 April 1586; Državni Arhiv u Dubrovnik, Lettere e commissioni di Levante, busta 27, folder 1, no. 37, fol. 10r, 9 March 1590.

15. GASPARO BRAGACCIA, *L’Ambasciatore*, Padua 1626, pp. 411–429.

16. “Relazione di Cristoforo Valier”, in BAROZZI and BERCHET (as in n. 14).

17. SHARON KETTERING, “Gift-Giving and Patronage in Early Modern France”, *French History*, II, 1988, p. 131; HALIL İNALCIK, “The Ottoman State: Economy and Society, 1300–1600”, in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. HALIL İNALCIK and DONALD QUATAERT, I, Cambridge 1994, pp. 47–48, 76–77.

18. ASV, SDC, busta 32, fol. 51r, 2 September 1590.

19. “Relazione di Paolo Contarini” (as in n. 5), p. 250.

20. Museo Correr (hereafter MC), Donà delle Rose, busta 23, fols. 66r–67r.

21. “Mettersela chi in fazzoletti, chi nelli vesti, senza curarsi d’imbrattarle, e portarla via; si che fu spedito molto presto, senza alcuna sorte di civiltà”: PIETRO DELLA VALLE, *De’ Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle il Pellegrino*, Rome 1650, I, pp. 184–187; MC, Donà delle Rose, busta 23, fols. 66r–67r; ASV, SDC, busta 104, fols. 35v, 37v, 13 April 1627.

22. MC, Donà delle Rose, busta 23, fols. 66r–67r; *ibid.*, fol. 353r–v.