

Fonds for the Sultan:

HOW TO USE VENETIAN SOURCES FOR STUDYING OTTOMAN HISTORY?



Certain developments in the last decade familiarized Ottomanists with European sources in general and Venetian sources in particular. First, the proliferation of government-funded scholarships in Turkey enabled young scholars to undertake extensive archival research in foreign countries; second, Turkey's further integration to global capitalism not only reduced economic disparities between Turkey and Europe, but also opened up the Turkish society; third, educational reforms democratized the language training, increased its quality and expanded its scope beyond the traditional linguistic trivium of Turkish universities, English, French and German; and finally, the digitalization of archival sources in Venice and the availability of their reproduction granted easy access to foreign scholars and rendered amassing sources for later study possible.

Venetian sources' importance for Ottoman History has long been appreciated. Hammer-Purgstall used them as early as 1827 in his multi-voluminous opus magnum, *Geschichte des osmanischen Reiches*. In the 20th century, however, this early interest did not develop into full-scale use of these sources. While Italian academy produced a number of historians who studied Ottoman History (Bombaci,

Pedani-Fabris, Costantini), Turkish historians paid little attention to Venetian sources save a few historians such as Tayyip Gökbilgin, Şerafettin Turan and Mahmut Şakiroğlu who made a couple of trips to Venetian archives, only to read Ottoman sources without either exploring the depth of Venetian archives or producing any analytical material.

Venetian sources are extremely important especially for studying early modern Ottoman political history. Before the digitalization and democratization of Venetian archival sources, few Ottoman historians who could read Italian resorted rather to more accessible ones such as the *relazioni* (Peirce 1993) or Sanudo's *I Diarii* (Necipoğlu 1993, Brummett 1994, Ebru Turan 2007), both available in print since the 19th century. Nevertheless, historians recently started to recognize the value of unedited sources (Faroqi 1999, 66-7). For instance, ambassadorial correspondence (*Dispacci* and *Archivio Proprio Costantinopoli-APC*) between Venice and Constantinople - and to the extent that these survive, between Venice and Venetian consulates in the Levant - started to be used in order to shed light on aspects of Ottoman history which government documents that dominated Ottoman archives and contemporary Ottoman chroniclers which survive to-day conveniently neglected. Most of these available Ottoman sources concern finances, taxation and military while few archival fonds that are relevant for political history, such as *Mühimme* and *Düvel-i Ecnebiyye*, are short accounts in summary form that do not provide the reader with precise information.

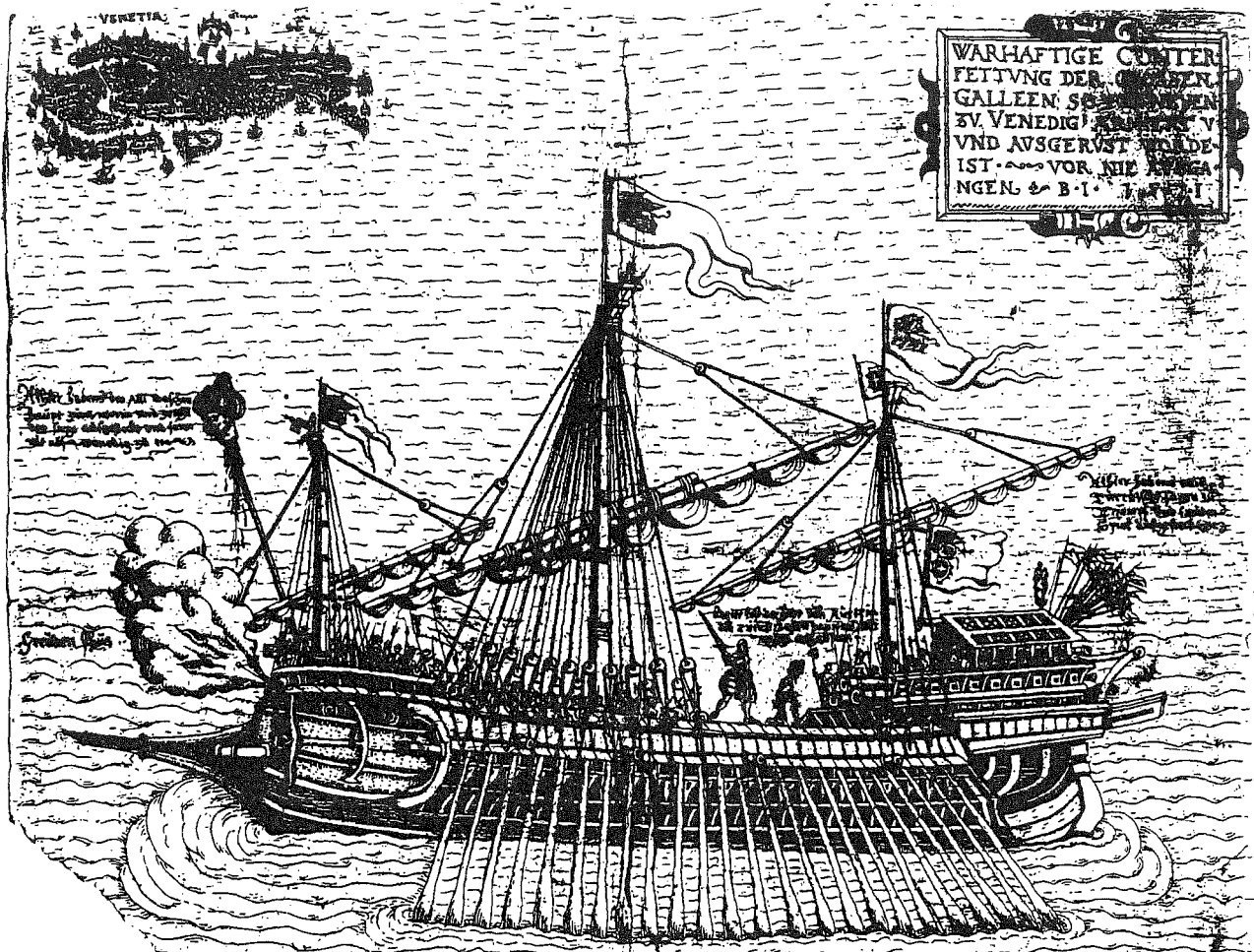
More importantly, neither these documents nor Ottoman chroniclers provide the reader with detailed information regarding the actors of political life bar the Sultans and the most important officers of the State. In the absence of a supplementary and

substantial body of Ottoman first-person narratives, personal literature and autobiographical material (There are exceptions; yet the exaggerated value attached to them confirms the rule, Behar 2003, 24), more descriptive European sources became more important. This is confirmed by the fact that the most comprehensive monograph (Peirce 1994) on Ottoman dynasty heavily relied on Venetian *relazioni*. Peirce's success in developing her groundbreaking theories based on these sources which are no match for *APC/Dispacci* in volume, originality, chronological continuity or explicatory power, can better highlight the potential contribution of the *APC/Dispacci* to Ottoman dynastical history, especially when it comes to its less visible members such as women (Arbel 1992, Pedani 2000). As these women were active political figures who engaged in all sorts of dealings with European ambassadors and through them with European governments ---needless to say, always by means of an intermediaries, their "voice" can easily be heard through *APC-Dispacci*, the rich content of which calls for a substantial historiographical revision on Ottoman dynasty in general and the political and diplomatic role of imperial women in particular.

Furthermore, the information that the Venetian baili, experienced diplomats who established important connections among the Ottoman elites and employed an extensive network of spies and informants in key positions, provided in their correspondence (*APC/Dispacci*) can divulge the intricacies of Ottoman factional politics and help Ottomanists reconstruct power relations in the Ottoman capital (Börekçi 2011). As most of the time the baili themselves were caught up in these power struggles as active participants in the game of Ottoman factional politics and as their most important duty was to inform their government which way the wind blew in Constan-



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tinople, they included in their letters detailed information. By exposing the balances of power between different factions, their members, objectives and financial resources at their disposal, such information will enable the historian to overcome the contemporary Ottoman sources' reluctance to demonstrate fractions within the Ottoman government.

The baili's active role in Ottoman factional politics, their connections among the Ottoman elite and their web of spies and informants enabled them to get a true grasp of Ottoman decision-making process and their strategic calculations. The chronological continuity of the *APC/Dispacci* (starting in a regular manner from the 1560s with occasional decreases in intensity, yet without interruptions during wartime)

increases their value for students of Ottoman strategy even further. Anxious to read the minds of Ottoman decision-makers and inform their governments on how Ottomans would employ the resources of their empire, the baili wrote page after page, reflecting their perception of Ottomans' political and military considerations. Moreover, the most recent news that reached Constantinople from the army fighting in the frontier were diligently transmitted by the baili as employment of Ottoman military machine elsewhere meant a temporary respite for European powers. Given that it is hard to differentiate fact from rumor, speculation and misinformation, events recorded in these letters should only be used in conjunction with available Ottoman documentation. They can thus not

only contribute to our understanding of Ottoman military activity against their enemies in far away frontiers, but also enable us to fully appreciate the whimsical nature of the *vox populi* and the ebbs and flows of public opinion in Constantinople in the face of incoming information.

By delineating the relations between Ottoman elites and European ambassadors which were less than innocent most of the time, baili's correspondence offers an alternative political culture where individual and corporate interests prevailed over a purported state interest, contrary to the paradigm put forward by contemporary Ottoman sources and modern Ottoman historiography that followed their lead. A careful analysis of intimate social relations between these two elites across

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cultural and religious divides can also reveal Constantinople's status not only as a center of information, but also as a "contact zone". If read with other ambassadorial correspondence located in other European archives and traveler accounts, the *APC/Dispacci* will demonstrate how diplomacy played a vital role in cultural and artistic transfer between the two halves of the Mediterranean, a role which was further enhanced by the fact that the Ottomans did not have permanent embassies located in Europe. As Pera/Galata with its European embassies and merchant communities became the Ottoman window into Europe, *APC/Dispacci* will become the historians' major source in analyzing what the Ottomans saw through that window.

Moreover, marginal political figures such as Christian and Jewish power brokers as well as small-scale actors who ran the daily politics in the imperial capital can only be studied from European ambassadorial correspondence, the most regular and extensive among which are the Venetian *APC/Dispacci*. While the activities of these marginal power brokers who operated outside the official state apparatus (Alvise Gritti, Carlo Cicala, Joseph Nasi, Salomon Ashkenazi, David Passi, Alvaro Mendez, Moses Benveniste) portray a different political structure by enlarging the scope of Ottoman political elite beyond the officers of the state and the content of Ottoman households and factions beyond Muslims and renegades, a careful study of small-scale actors that Ottoman sources did not bother to mention can also provide crucial insights: several *çavuşes* who not only carried news and orders between the center and the provinces, but also in an appalling liberty shared (or pretended to have shared) classified information with European ambassadors; dragomans either of the bailate or of the Imperial Council, *Divan-ı Hümayun Tercümanı*, who ran the

actual course of diplomacy not only by handling the daily negotiations between Venice and the Ottomans, but also by engaging in espionage, drafting international treaties and brokering power; stewards of pasha households (*kahya*) who provided channels of communication between the Ottoman political elite and European ambassadors and thus revealed the former's political motives and priorities.

Even though this introductory essay is not the proper venue for a long treatment of methodological problems of using European sources while studying Ottoman history, a general warning has to be made for those who wish to use the *APC/Dispacci*. The limits of Ottoman documentation may force Ottomanists to broaden their source base as much as possible and overcome formidable linguistic and paleographical challenges while sailing in the *mare incognitum* of European archives. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that, no matter the extent to which they succeeded in penetrating through Ottoman

political structure, the Venetian baili still remained outside observers. More importantly, it is imperative to remember that these baili were writing with their own agenda; rather than disinterested observers, they were public officers craving for higher appointments. Therefore, it was only natural for them to apply strategies of self-promotion while writing to their government by exaggerating the role they played in Ottoman politics, playing down their failures and glorifying their successes. Thus, their accounts should be read together with Ottoman sources and, in their absence, with other European sources. If both are unavailable, one final solution can be to read baili's accounts within a general framework, drawing comparisons and conclusions from other similar examples in order to decide whether a suspicious narrative is likely to reflect the truth or not.

Ambassadorial correspondence also contain interesting details regarding the rules of diplomacy in Constantinople, demonstrating how Ottomans conducted their foreign relations (Işıkse



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2012), where they stood among the actors of early modern diplomacy and to what extent they took seriously responsibilities imposed by international treaties, i.e. *utrum pacta fuissent servanda necne*. Long and strenuous negotiations between Venetian baili and the Ottoman authorities over viola-

tions of the articles of capitulations constitute the bulk of the *APC/Dispacci*. These negotiations can expose mutual cooperation and willingness between the Ottomans and the Venetians in imposing a circum-Mediterranean maritime legal order for the sake of an “interimperial space within which mer-

chants could move with relative ease, transparency and confidence” (Greene 2010, 17). Moreover, while a detailed study of baili’s correspondence will disclose Ottoman reception of and contribution to early modern diplomatic practices and mores (Goffman 2007), ambassadorial correspondence in general will help us understand the Ottomans’ diplomatic relations with their European counterparts and their image in the eyes of European rulers and diplomats. Only then can the academic debate whether the Ottomans were part of European international politics or not be settled once and for all.

The *APC/Dispacci* is not the only fond that will contribute to Ottoman diplomatic history. The *Bailo a Costantinopoli*, which comprises the documentation left behind by the Venetian bailate in Constantinople, includes valuable information not only regarding the operation of an ambassadorial household (Dursteler 2006), but also concerning the nature of diplomatic negotiations in the Ottoman capital as much between the Ottomans and European resident ambassadors as among the latter. Moreover, as Pedani-Fabris demonstrated in her book (1994b), records of the Senate, the Council of Ten and various Venetian magistrates, located in a wide range of archival fonds, can demonstrate us how Ottoman diplomats dispatched to Serenissima negotiated and will thus help us position the Ottomans in early modern diplomacy. It is not only open diplomacy that such sources deal with. While the *Dispacci* and the *Inquisitori di Stato* reveal Venetian espionage activity in Constantinople and major Ottoman cities (Gürkan 2012b), records of Ottoman spies caught by the Venetian authorities appear as the major source for studying Ottoman espionage, especially given that there are no extant documentation in Ottoman archives regarding the organization and activities of Ottoman secret

service which was not an institution of the central government, but was run instead by households independently of the state (Gürkan 2012a).

Another area where Venetian sources will be of utmost importance is the maritime history of the Ottoman Empire. As Venetian baili and ambassadors were highly interested in the production of the Ottoman Arsenal, their information is strikingly valuable, especially for the 16th and 17th centuries during which we have less information on what was going on in the Arsenal and with the Navy. Furthermore, they provide interesting information on the activities of Ottoman corsairs in the Eastern Mediterranean, disputes between Venice and Constantinople regarding their infractions of international agreements, the *ahdnames*, and most importantly their political activities in the Ottoman capital. Moreover, these sources demonstrate to us the multi-cultural composition of the Ottoman Arsenal and the Navy which the Ottoman historiography stubbornly overlooked, relegating the Ottoman maritime activity to *ghaza* which the same historiography caricatured and simplified as the Holy War against infidels (Gürkan 2012c).

Since Ottoman documentation from the provinces has not survived to-day, Venetian sources such as *Lettere di Rettori et di altre cariche* are of utmost importance for the study of Ottoman frontiers. While Pedani-Fabris' book (2002) and a number of articles disclose the political tensions, diplomatic negotiations, commercial relations in and legal disputes across the Ottoman-Venetian frontier, Dursteler's most recent book (2011), a study of individuals in Ottoman-Venetian frontier, therefore demonstrates how Venetian sources can fill two lacunae that contemporary Ottoman sources forced on modern Ottoman historiography. Moreover, Rothman's works that relied solely on Venetian sources made important contributions on boundary-

making, conversion and translation (2009a, 2009b and 2012a) which, if Ottomanists take her lead, will be of cardinal importance to many underdeveloped aspects of Ottoman history. Similarly, Venice as well as its dominions in Ottoman-Venetian frontier was home to several Ottoman merchants. Several archival fonds, most importantly *Cinque Savii alla Mercanzia*, will provide Ottomanists with crucial information regarding Ottoman merchants' commercial activities in Adriatic (Kafadar 1986), a central issue which seldom attracts attention.

Venetian archives do not only contain documents written in Venetian. Ottomanists with minimal knowledge of Italian can still work on Ottoman documentation located in *Documenti Turchi* and *Bailo a Costantinopoli*. While Gökbilgin reproduced half a century ago 213 "Turkish documents" from the 16th century in two separate articles (1964 and 1968-71), Pedani-Fabris (1994a) prepared an inventory that comprised short summaries of 2022 documents. Recently, a student of the latter, Serap Mumcu prepared a similar inventory of three *buste* entitled *Carte Turche*, located in *Bailo a Costantinopoli*, b. 250, 251 and 252 (in print).

Debutants of Venetian language and paleography can start their research with sources such as *Parti Segrete* and *Senato Deliberazioni Costantinopoli* which contain useful information of introductory nature regarding several aspects of Ottoman-Venetian relations. Written in clear handwriting in summary form and including a "Contents" section or an alphabetical index, they are easy to read, understand and skim through. Moreover, those who want to familiarize themselves with the *APC/Dispacci* should use *APC*, filza 5 as a training ground as it was written by an exceptionally diligent scribe whose handwriting is the easiest one can hope to encounter in any European archive.

Apart from archival sources, Venetian manuscripts in libraries such as Biblioteca del Museo Correr and Biblioteca Marciana can be useful for Ottomanists. As these manuscripts dealt with all sorts of issues, they can provide myriad new perspectives for Ottoman historiography, as proven by Rothman's latest article (2012b) on an interesting "trans-imperial" project, a miniature album produced in the Venetian bailate by the most unusual cooperation that cut across religious and civilizational frontiers: the one between the Venetian bailo, his dragomans, Ottoman miniaturists and Italian draftsmen.

Venetian sources will provide Ottomanists with an extensive corpus of primary materials which, if used with methodological rigor, will present new horizons for and challenge the established paradigms of early modern Ottoman history. This short essay could not do justice to their true potential; it just sought to introduce the material for future use.

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