

Marseilles, gateway to Turkey

For the Christian West in the 17th century, “Turkey” comes across as a vast territory rich in desirable products (cottons, wools, leathers, waxes, medicinal drugs, olive oils...). Added to that is the appeal of the lands beyond it, with their exotic or precious goods such as Persian silks, brought in by caravans. As it gradually became a large port and a warehouse for regional internal trade and oriental products, as well as for European and American imports (cloths and woolly headgear, cochineal, indigo, coffee, sugar...), Smyrna attracted the activities of French firms, following the example of the Venetians. Due to its geographic location and the involvement of its merchants, Marseilles for its part became the main supplier of armaments for the *Ports of the Levant and of Barbary*.

Connections with the eastern Mediterranean basin were made easier due to favourable diplomatic arrangements between the two States. Starting in 1514, French merchants could travel to the provinces of the *Sultan* thanks to travel passes granted by Selim I. A few years later, Soliman II and Francis I formed an alliance against Charles V. Their agreement gave France a commercial preference over its European neighbours by way of treaties named *Capitulations* on one side and *Ahdnâme* on the other. Under the reign of Henry IV in 1597, Mehmet III confirmed France’s privileges and the benefits given its merchants and travellers, while granting additional ones.

This situation was further improved thanks to the involvement of the new Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles. Based upon the terms of its founding deliberations of 1599, the aim of this assembly was to re-establish local trade “to its initial state and resplendence, in order to maintain it, hold it, defend it...”, which was in line with the goals of Minister Colbert, who was keen to encourage the national manufacturing industry! In March of 1669, an edict of exemption released the port of Marseilles from most of the royal duties to which it was subjected.

Marseilles, which was already supplying most of the professionals established in the Ports and in the merchant sailing ships used in their voyages, appears to have been the main beneficiary of these regulations. It was also strengthened in its intermediate role as a warehouse for goods coming from the Arabic near-east for the French, and also for the northern Europeans, the impact of which could be felt far to the East. While its ties to the ancient Phocaea, the mother-city which had created it in the year 600 B.C., had been severed for more than two millenniums, its interests in the Aegean, on the other hand, were boosted. Smyrna was considered to be a city that welcomed the *Francs* (Europeans in the broad sense). Thus Marseilles and Smyrna were to occupy strategic positions in the distribution of desirable goods, in the East as well as in the West.

The Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles contributed to the implementation of Colbertist policies, aimed principally at cracking down on abuses in the Ports, but also at bringing about the training of interpreters. By letter dated February 1670, Colbert informs the Chamber that it must henceforth meet the costs of travel, education, food and clothing of the *Children of Language*, these young boys chosen by the King to be sent to Constantinople, and for a time to Smyrna, for the purpose of learning foreign languages and becoming interpreters-translators.

Following in the political footsteps of his father Colbert, the Marquis de Seignelay submitted relations with the Ottoman Empire to stricter regulations, in which the Chamber of Commerce continued to be a stakeholder, being empowered by Ordinance dated 21 October 1685 with the

control of French settlers there. This assembly was also auditing the accounts of French communities in the Ports. But the Chamber of Commerce's role was not solely limited to surveillance. It could also provide material support in case of need, such as in Smyrna during one of the worst earthquakes ever to occur in that region. A lengthy "Official Report on the subject of the fire and upheaval of the city" was written and published in Marseilles. The Chamber got itself involved in the rebuilding of the houses and churches of the Capuchin monks, the Jesuits, and a hospital when it authorized the levying of a tax on the layovers of French ships in Smyrna, then advancing the funds for construction.

Wishing to better supervise the expatriated professionals, the government not only entrusted their control to the Chamber of Commerce, but it obliged it to pay the salaries and expenses of the consulates. Proof of the importance of Smyrna, its French consul was one of the best paid. With help from their Chamber, the merchants maintained a beneficial position, in spite of unfavourable economic conditions and a loss of interest in the cloths of the Languedoc. The Count of Choiseul-Gouffier mentioned Turkey as being "one of the richest of the French colonies"! The author of a memoir from 1788 shows the importance of those connections with a reminder of these colourful words: " One says *Marseilles in Turkey* because its trade with the Levant is its wealth and its privilege".

With the French Revolution, freedom of trade between France and all the Ports was decreed on 29th July 1791. While the National Assembly maintained the requirement of a returning quarantine in Marseilles or Toulon, it authorized trading by foreigners on condition that French ships be used. On 27 September 1791 it ordered the abolition of all Chambers of Commerce as they were deemed unconstitutional. Faced with the necessity for Marseilles to have an organization dedicated to economic matters, the municipality in 1792 set up a "Provisional Bureau of Commerce", which was in turn eliminated in 1793. The port's exempt status was then removed in 1794. Thus vanished all the structures and networks enabled by generations of professionals.

Reinstated in March of 1803, the Chamber of Commerce recovered some of its assignments; again, no French citizen was allowed to settle in the Ottoman Empire without its authorization; however, as the Empire war years went by, France's trading and naval power diminished. The functions of the Marseilles assembly in the Near-East and North Africa were permanently revoked by royal Ordinance dated 18 April 1835. Everyone then became free to establish his professional residence wherever he wished.

Today the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Marseille-Provence is proud to be the oldest of the CCI's, and considers itself to be the inheritor of those ancient missions now renewed. This again is all about promoting people and equipment; about being in the pursuit of service to businesses, especially on the international level. May this brief account be an invitation to consult this institution's archives, which are a true economic memoir of the Mediterranean rim, where many of the components of Smyrna's past may be found. Marseilles, in times past *Gateway to the Levant*, is, it is worth pointing out, still a partner of Izmir in many fields.