

Venetian Consuls in Egypt and Syria in the Ottoman Age

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1. The Venetian consular network

At the beginning of the 16th c., when the Ottoman ruler Selim I conquered Egypt, the Venetian consular network spread from London to Bruges, from Messina to Naples, and from Alexandria to Damascus. Venice had appointed consuls since the Middle Ages. Their task was to protect a Venetian community abroad, to be a judge for it, to control commercial exchanges, to collect taxes and duties, to get in touch with local officials and to inform Venetian home authorities about trade and international politics. Just one year after the fall of Constantinople, in 1454, the newly settled agreement between Venice and the sultan established consular privileges for an official, who maintained the old name of *bailo a Costantinopoli* and was the doge's first permanent envoy in the Ottoman Empire. The name *bailo* was given to many European officials in the Middle Ages. It probably comes from the Latin word *baiulus* which originally meant 'porter', even if later it also assumed other meanings. It was used for the first time in Latin translations of Arabic documents of the second half of the 12th c. At the beginning it referred only to Muslim officials (as in the expressions 'bailis et amiraglis', or 'bailis et miraliis et scribanis' i.e. *baili* and emirs and clerks) and this fact may hint to a literal translation of the word *wasîr*, which also originally meant 'porter'.¹

In the Middle Ages, the office of a Venetian *bailo* was only a little different from that of a consul. Even if the responsibilities were the same, the two positions were not at the same level. The former was more important than the latter. In the Modern Age, the only *bailo* still existing was that in Constantinople, while, since the 15th century, also resident ambassadors had made their appearance in international relations. The Venetian *bailo* went on in being responsible for all the Venetian consuls living in the Ottoman Empire but he began to deal more and more with the highest authorities of the state, even if extraordinary ambassadors were still sent to Istanbul if it was necessary to discuss a peace agreement or to congratulate a sultan for his ascension to

¹ M. Amari, *I diplomi arabi del R. Archivio Fiorentino*, Firenze 1863-1867, p. 257 (1173); *I trattati con Aleppo 1207-1254*, a cura di M. Pozza, Venezia 1990, pp. 32, 43, 53-54, 61; M.P. Pedani, *Bahr-i Mamluk-Venetian Commercial Agreements*, in *The Turks*, ed. by H.C. Güzel, C.C. Oguz, O. Karatay, 6 voll., Ankara 2002, II, pp. 298-305.

the throne or for a victory. At last, in 1575, a law officially recognized that the *bailo* behaved as a resident and put his position on the same level of that of an ambassador.²

The 1454 capitulations³ established the privileges of Venetian communities and consuls in the Empire. The doge's subjects, as well as those who put themselves under the protection of their flag, were allowed to trade in all the places of the sultan's country; Ottoman subjects in Venetian lands had the same rights. They both had to pay the same amount of import-export taxes (2%, except silver, whose trade was free in the Empire). Fleeing thieves from both sides had to be captured and given back to their home authorities. In Ottoman lands Venetian merchants could be accompanied by some servants, who enjoyed the same privileges of their masters. If a Venetian died without a will the *bailo*, or the *kadı* or the *subashi* of a place, had to make an inventory of his goods; these had to be kept by the *bailo* or, if he was not in the place, by another merchant, till an official letter arrived from Venice with instructions. The *bailo* was appointed as the head of the Venetian community in the Empire, he had civil jurisdiction on it («el qual habia libertà in civil reger et governar, et iustitia administrar infra suo venetiani de ogni condition») and could apply to the *subashi* if he needed his help. The texts of the agreements established between Christian and Muslim countries form a corpus of relevant documents and the most ancient ones have clauses which have been copied into the following ones, with small changes and arrangements in order to adapt them to different situations. Thus, news about the jurisdiction attributed to a Venetian consul and the help of local authorities can also be found in the Venetian agreements with Aydın and Mentеше emirs since 1337 and it was also present in the 1375 treaty which was then ratified by Bayezid I in 1390, when he conquered Mentеше.⁴

Capitulations were not the only basis for the status of Venetian communities and officials in Ottoman lands. Imperial decrees, issued because of special events, also existed and could affect the living of a foreigner community. Moreover, the sultan always maintained the right of revoking his privileges. A peace agreement sworn by the ruler needed a *fetva* of the *sheyhülislam* to be revoked, as it happened, for instance, just before the war for Cyprus.⁵ On the contrary, capitulations issued in the form of *berat* (unilateral decree) could be more easily dismissed. France, England and the Dutch Republic obtained documents of this kind from the very beginning of their commercial relations with the Empire. Ottomans used above all documents of the first kind with their neighbouring countries (and Venice with its Dalmatian and Greek lands was among these) and *berats* with the states which had not a border in common with them.⁶

² ASVe, Compilazione leggi, b. 157, c. 357

³ Venetian State Archives (hereafter ASVe), *Commemoriali*, reg. 14, cc. 136-137v.

⁴ E. A. Zachariadou, *Trade and Crusade. Venetian Crete and the Emirates of Mentеше and Aydın (1300-1415)*, Venice 1983, pp. 191-192, 197, 214, 221, 229, 236.

⁵ Peçevi İbrahim Efendi, *Peçevi Tarihi*, haz B.S. Baykal, Ankara 1999, 2 voll., vol. 1, pp. 466-467.

⁶ M.P. Pedani, *Dalla frontiera al confine*, Roma 2002, pp. 34-35; M.H. van den Boogert, *Consular*

In the Modern Age in Venice the consular institute underwent other important changes. In 1586 a law established that consuls had to be chosen in accordance with the public office dealing with trade, i.e. the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*. Moreover, it confirmed a previous decree issued in 1443 and established that they had to be, if not noblemen, at least Venetian citizens. From this time onwards the three most important consular officials in the Ottoman Empire (i.e. the *bailo a Costantinopoli* and the consuls in Aleppo and Alexandria of Egypt) were chosen among the nobility, while most others were citizens and some also ordinary Venetian subjects, if it was not possible to find any other person to have the position. To belong to one social class or to the other meant above all to have the possibility of behaving as a judge or not. In Venice, jurisdiction belonged only to the governing class, the aristocracy. In this way the consular institute drew towards the contemporary one. In 1786, to regulate completely all mercantile maritime matters, a general code was issued, the *Codice per la Veneta Mercantile Marina*. It remained in force for a few years, till the end of the Republic in 1797, but it formed the basis of the modern consular law with its re-organization of the consular institution. Now consuls were considered to be mere officials of the Republic and their task was to protect subjects and goods in the cities and regions entrusted to them. In this way they lost for good the possibility that some of them had had in ancient times to act as judges as well. They could only be appointed by the Venetian public authority. To have the title of consul a person had to be a Venetian subject, at least twenty-five years old, and to have a clean record. The appointment lasted five years but a person could easily be re-appointed to the same office. If a consul did not fulfil his duties he could be removed from office. The consuls could appoint vice-consuls and agents. They could not ask for extra levies, duties and taxes from the merchants. They had to keep a register in which they recorded all the Venetian ships which reached the port, their goods, the captain's patent and other information. They had to check the bill of lading, the sanitary documents and the licences, inform the *Cinque Savi* about trade and shipping, and send them the Venetians who had been arrested for some reason. At the same time Venetian merchants had to refer to their consul alone, and to obey him even if they could appeal to the competent offices against his decisions. The consuls had to appoint their own chancellors; the chancellor had to take the place of the consul if he died. The consul could also act as a public Venetian notary. The consulates in North Africa and the Levant had to pay Catholic priests to look after the Venetian community, and also safety guards.

2. European communities in Muslim lands

Besides capitulations and imperial decrees, a customary praxis evolved in the

Jurisdiction in the Ottoman Legal System in the Eighteenth Century, «Oriente Moderno», n.s., 22, 3/2003, pp. 605-661.

Mediterranean countries.⁷ Ottomans usually did not consider Europeans according to their nationality but they were perceived as an indistinct group of Christians, i.e. the Franks. On the contrary, relations between European nations were often in opposition and did not co-operate. If we consider a foreign community under a consul as a traditional Muslim *millet* (in Arabic *milla*), i.e. the society of the adherents of a 'protected' religion (*ḍimmīs*), then it is easy to understand why local customs could be more important than capitulations. European merchants had to behave in the same humble way as the *ḍimmīs*. Official Arabic and Ottoman letters addressed to a Christian sovereign often as the «head of the *millet* of the Messiah» or similar expressions. For instance in 1473 Qa'it Bay called the doge of Venice *mağd al-milla al-masīhiyya* («glory of the Christian community»)⁸ while the Ottoman sultan Murad IV wrote in 1625: *meraci' u ku kübera' i al-fiham fi al-milleti al mesihiye Venedik doji olan Civane Kornaro ve sayir begleri*. («to the arbitrator of the illustrious lords of the religion of the Messiah Giovanni Corner, doge of Venice, and to the Signoria»)⁹.

Moreover, for centuries in some Muslim countries consuls had received also a salary: in 1400 the ruler of Granada agreed to give 200 golden dobles a year to the Venetian one, while in 1422 the Mamluk sultan began to pay a salary to the person who had that position in Damascus. In Egypt too they received money from the sultan, whoever nation they belonged. This salary was called in Arabic *ğâmakîyya*, the word used for the wages paid to Mamluk officers, as if European consuls were part of the state bureaucracy as well: thus, their position seems to have been assimilated to that of a Mamluk state officer.¹⁰

Every *millet* was headed by a person who represented its members in relation to Ottoman authorities, was responsible for maintaining order within the group, collected taxes and had also an internal jurisdiction. The same functions belonged to consuls. It has been said that this office developed in the Italian (and in particular Venetian) communities abroad during the Middle Ages and that the evolution which had place in Venice in the Modern Age, epitomized in the *Codice per la Veneta Mercantile Marina*, formed the basis for the modern consular law.

⁷ M.H. van den Boogert, *The Capitulations and the Ottoman Legal System. Qadis, Consuls and Beratlis in the 18th Century*, Leiden-Boston 2005, pp. 58-61.

⁸ M. Amari, *De' titoli che usava la cancelleria de' Sultani di Egitto nel XIV secolo scrivendo ai reggitori di alcuni Stati italiani*, «Reale Accademia dei Lincei», s. III, 12 (1884-1885), pp. 507-534; J. Wansbrough, *A Mamaluk Letter of 877/1473*, «Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies», 24/2 (1961), pp. 200-213, M.O.H. Ursinus, *Millet*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, VII, Leiden 1999, pp. 61-63.

⁹ M.P. Pedani, *La dimora della pace. Considerazioni sulle capitolazioni tra i paesi islamici e l'Europa*, Venezia 1996, p. 73.

¹⁰ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum*, a cura di G.M. Thomas R. Predelli, Venetiis 1880-1899, 2 voll., II, Nos. 189-195; *Handelsvertrag zwischen der Republik Venedig und dem Königreich Granada vom Jahre 1400*, eingeleitet und herausgegeben von G.M. Thomas, «Adhandlungen der k. bayer. Akademie der Wiss.» I, cl. XVII, bd. III abth. (1885), pp. 609-638; Amari, *I diplomi arabi*, pp. 347-359; J. Wansborough, *Venice and Florence in the Mamluk Commercial Privileges*, «Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies», 28 (1965), pp. 487-497; E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983, p. 413; H. Mones, *Djamakiyya*, in *Encyclopaedia*, II, p. 413.

Venetians had frequented Muslim ports at least since the 9th c.: the relic of St. Mark, the patron saint of the city, was brought from Alexandria of Egypt in the year 828 and their merchants had settled there probably since that period. It would not be strange if that community had also been influenced by Muslim customs and uses. Even many commercial words, still in use, come from Arabic: *cheque* derives from the Arabic word *šakk*, written document, as well as the Italian *avallo*, guarantee, from *hawāla*, the endorsement on a bill, and *sensale*, broker, from *simsâr*. The institution of *commenda*, a commercial society well-known in the Middle Ages, derived from the Arabic *qirâd* or *muđâraba*.¹¹ The figure of the consul, who made his appearance as the officer who had to take care of a community of foreign merchants in a Muslim land, may have followed the same route. In fact Venice was one of the first states to make use of officers of this kind to lead communities in the Levant. In the following centuries, an almost complete disregard for the generally accepted *ius commune* allowed the Venetian Republic to give new features to this old position. In this way the office of consul, as it is now conceived, saw the light of day.

In the Ottoman Empire foreigners were often granted more privileges than they had in official documents. Part of this power came sometimes from being well acquainted with Ottoman officers, or from the possibility of using money and bribe to settle an affair. For instance Pietro Michiel¹², consul in Syria from 1582 to 1584, was a friend of Hasan pasha, Sokollu Mehmed pasha's son, *beylerbeyi* of Damascus and then of Aleppo. To fulfil his desires, this provincial governor saved the convent of the Grey friars in Jerusalem when the *kadı* of the place wanted to destroy it, since the friars did not behave in a humble way but had entered the city with such a large retinue that people believed them to be rich pasha. Also the consul Tomaso Contarini (1591-93)¹³ became friend of a *beylerbeyi* of Aleppo, Ali pasha, and Venetians obtain from him the permission to land in Iskenderun instead of in Tripoli; in that period the Republic saved about 10,000 ducats a year, since it avoided bribing the greedy Ottoman officials of this port. Consuls had other means at their disposal. For instance, they could also decide that the whole community had to boycott a market and to leave a place in order to obtain something from an Ottoman provincial governor. In 1597 Sayyid Mehmed pasha sentenced to death Paolo Mariani, the French consul in Egypt, and asked merchants of every nation to pay him an incredible sum of money otherwise they had to leave immediately Cairo. Andrea Paruta¹⁴ and the other consuls decided that the whole European community had

¹¹ M. Çizakça, *A Comparative Evolution of Business Partnership. The Islamic World and Europe, with Specific Reference to the Ottoman Archives*, Leiden 1996, pp. 3-9.

¹² Giovanni Michiel's report, 1584; G. Berchet, *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria*, Torino 1866, p. 79.

¹³ Tommaso Contarini's report 1593; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 75; N. Steensgaard, *Consuls and Nations in the Levant from 1570 to 1650*, «The Scandinavian Economic History Review», 15/1-2 (1967), pp. 13-55.

¹⁴ Andrea Paruta's report, 1599; *Relazione di Andrea Paruta, console per la Repubblica Veneta in Alessandria*, a cura di L. Baschiera, Venezia 1883.

to go to Alexandria and, within four months, the *beylerbeyi* was obliged to change his mind and to ask them to come back. The ability of a person to adapt himself in special events and to make the most of the existing power balance was another important factor. If a consul had little or no prestige the whole community suffered. A consul well introduced in Ottoman high society could also intervene in the frequent struggles for power which occurred among the sultan's officials and, in this way, he could also help his countrymen. For instance, Alessandro Malipiero¹⁵ supported the party of Ali pasha and of the *sheyhülislam* and succeeded in getting rid of the *defterdar-i Arab ve Acem* (or *defterdar-i shikk-i salis*), who was, at last, put in prison and replaced by Ali himself. Sometimes the influence of a consul could extend even further: in 1614, Girolamo Morosini¹⁶ proudly stated that he complained so much to Istanbul against the *beylerbeyi* of Aleppo, Davud pasha, that at last he was dismissed.

Consuls always had to act within the limits imposed by the Ottoman law. If we start from this point of view we also realize that some practices may seem to exceed these limits but always have a logical explanation. For instance the jurisdiction they enjoyed related only to the members of their communities, but it has been proved that several times consuls also pronounced judgements in mixed cases. The explanation of this practice, too, lies in Islamic law itself. According to it, in a quarrel with Christians a Muslim could make reference to an infidel judge, even if he had to consider the decision not a real judgment but only arbitration. Since to make a trial was expensive, if the Christian consul's fee was lower than that of a *kadi*, it is clear why a Muslim could decide to agree to the decision of the first and not to plea his cause in front of the other.¹⁷

3. Venetian trade in Syria and Egypt

Indian spices were brought both to Syria and Egypt but Venetian trade did not follow the same trends in the two countries. In the first half of the 16th c. the market of Damascus underwent a severe crisis while Aleppo took advantage from this situation; it flourished, helped also by the sultan himself who wintered with his troops in the city in 1548-49 and enjoyed its air very much. In 1559¹⁸ 250 Venetian merchants lived there and they received their new consul riding in a procession. A little later, in the 1560s, Venetian trade in Syria became worst, while in Egypt it was at its best. Cloth factories were created by Ottomans in Aleppo to use the large quantity of silk which came from Persia: about 1560, 500 silk

¹⁵ Alessandro Malipiero's report, 1596; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Girolamo Morosini's report, 1615; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 157.

¹⁷ D. Santillana, *Istituzioni di diritto musulmano malichita con riguardo anche al sistema sciafiita*, 2 voll., Istituto per l'Oriente, Roma 1926-38, I, p. 106.

¹⁸ Lorenzo Tiepolo's report, 1563; *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria per la Repubblica Veneta tenuti da Lorenzo Tiepolo negli anni MDLII-MDLX*, a cura di E.A. Cicogna, Venezia 1857, pp. 30, 37.

looms existed there. The quality of the manufacturing (velvet, satin, *ormesini* and, from the 1550s' also damask) was not good, when compared with Venetian standards, but they marred Venetian trade.¹⁹ In the same period spices arrived in Syria, mostly from Mecca, although the Portuguese who were in Ormuz blocked trade via Baghdad for a while: the Aleppo market then had to rely on smugglers to receive the goods it needed. The Venetian community changed according to the trend of trade: in the 1590s' there were no noble merchants any longer and only 16 commercial houses.²⁰ In the following period this number reduced even more and in 1625 it was reduced to five.²¹

Two elements helped the Venetians in Syria to recover for a short period at the turn of the century. First of all their consuls succeeded in changing the port of call for galleys from Tripoli to Iskenderun. This last was not ideal, because of high water and bad air²² but using it prevented them from paying the high commissions claimed by the notables in Tripoli.²³ It lost its appeal about 1610 when it too became too expensive.²⁴ In the second place, till the end of the 16th century, in Ormuz, Venetians paid the same duties as the Portuguese, that is to say about 10%, while other nations had to pay taxes for about the 20% of the value of their merchandise, and half a ducat for every person.²⁵ The difference allowed the Portuguese Jews, who brought spices from Ormuz to Cairo, to become rich and the Venetians who traded in Syria did the same. It was cheaper to make use of the route via Basra-Baghdad-Aleppo-Iskenderun-Venice instead of buying spices in Cairo and bringing them to the city of the Lagoon. For this reason the Egyptian market soon lost appeal for them. In the same period other Portugueses sailed round Africa to bring goods to Europe but the Venetian route was shorter and cheaper, and for this reason spices were sold at a lower price in Venice till the end of the century. In the following period, when Portugueses obliged Venetians to pay the same taxes as Ottomans and other Christian nations in Ormuz, their trade began to decline also in Syria. Pirates and corsairs did the rest. In the meanwhile the silk trade with Persia underwent a crisis, since the shah introduced a new fashion of wadding cotton cloth and began to sell all his rough silk to the Ottomans.²⁶

The Venetian trade in Egypt had a different trend. Towards 1550 the principal Muslim

¹⁹ Lorenzo Tiepolo's report, 1563; *Relazioni dei consolati*, p. 39; H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman State: Economy and Society, 1300-1600*, in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, ed. by H. Inalcik - D. Quataert, Cambridge 1994, pp. 9-410, in particular pp. 246-250.

²⁰ Tommaso Contarini's report, 1593; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 77; Alessandro Malipiero's report, 1596; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 80.

²¹ Giuseppe Civran's report, 1625; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 162.

²² Giorgio Emo's report, 1599; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 107; Vincenzo Dandolo's report, 1603; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 123.

²³ Tommaso Contarini's report, 1593; Berchet, *Relazioni*, pp. 74-77.

²⁴ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report 1611; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 132.

²⁵ ASVe, *Quarantia Criminal*, f. 97, fasc. 40, letter dt. 18 Nov. 1582, 12 May 1586.

²⁶ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report 1611, Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 131; Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 141.

market was in Cairo, while the subjects of the Republic lived in Alexandria and used Jewish middlemen, who had in their hands almost the whole Venetian trade and, by buying and selling their goods, made a profit of about 15 to 20%. To avoid their interference the central government decided to give permission to its merchants to reach Cairo. Trade went very well in the 1560s', then a crisis began and it reached its climax around 1600, when greedy *beylerbeys* governed the country and Indian spices followed other routes.²⁷ Then, there was a slow recovery but about 1620²⁸ the complete lack of Indian spices, most of which were brought by Dutch merchants to Europe round Africa, forced Venetians, from both the capital city and the Italian mainland, to leave the country for a little while. During the same years, many Venetian subjects who lived in Greece went to Egypt as well as to other Mediterranean ports: they used to sell wine and *aquavit* and to buy grain, pulses, rice, sugar, salted fish, linen cloth and leather; they sailed in small ships and were considered too poor and their goods too trifling to be attacked by pirates, who were looking for richer preys. About 1623²⁹ almost all Venetian merchants who still traded in Egypt had moved to Cairo, where commodities from all over the world arrived again, thefts and murders were very few and the nights were illuminated by several lamps lit by guards. However, it was a short lived recovery. Within a few years trade went from bad to worst again. The situation was so tragic that at a certain point even the Venetian central government decided to leave the Egyptian market to its destiny and to concentrate its effort to help only the Syrian one.

4. Wars

Different events had a capital importance for the volume of the Venetian trade in Syria and Egypt in the 16th and 17th centuries. First of all there were wars. Those fought between the Republic and the Ottoman Empire clearly produced a block of trade and Venetian merchants had to choose another flag if they wanted to go on with their activity. In the meantime other nations improved their business. France was usually the first to take advantage of a situation of this kind. For instance, during the Cyprus war (1570-73), several French merchants went to Syria and in this way French trade began to grow more and more in the Ottoman Empire.³⁰

A war fought by the sultan against other enemies did not always produce a bad influence on international trade. For instance in 1551-1553, the Portuguese-Ottoman war allowed Muslim merchants to bring Indian spices to Egypt, without paying extra duties to the Portuguese. Venetian trade improved from the situation.³¹ On the contrary, a struggle with

²⁷ Vincenzo Dandolo's report, 1591; *Relazione del NH ser Vincenzo Dandolo console in Egitto*, a cura di A.M. Palazzi, Venezia 1873.

²⁸ Antonio Cappello's report, 1623; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 72-84v.

²⁹ Antonio Cappello's report, 1623; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 72-84v.

³⁰ Andrea Navagero's report, 1578; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 60.

³¹ Daniele Barbarigo's report 1554; C. Poma, *Il consolato veneto in Egitto con le relazioni dei consoli*

Persia could be dangerous above all for Syrian trade,³² as happened around 1628,³³ when the passes and the routes from Persia to Aleppo, via Basra and Baghdad, were blocked, although smuggling continued. Another Ottoman-Persian war favoured the Aleppo market. Suleyman the Magnificent spent the winter of 1548-1549 in that city during his campaign and he liked it so much that he decided to make it the capital of a province, governed by a *beylerbeyi*: at the end of the century it had about 300,000 inhabitants and one third of them were foreign merchants.³⁴

Internal riots could interfere with provincial business too, even if their aim was to struggle against the central Ottoman government: not only rebels but soldiers themselves, sent from Istanbul to restore order, sometimes ravaged a country.³⁵ An uncertain political situation pushed people to flee, while money disappeared and, in the end, it destroyed trade.³⁶ Even the life and property of consuls were often in danger: for instance at the end of the 16th century the Venetian *fondaco* in Cairo would certainly have been laid waste if a guard of janissaries had not protected it.³⁷

Sometimes, peace too could create a commercial crisis; for instance in 1607³⁸ in Cairo, after a long period of riots, the recently elected *beylerbeyi* Öküz Mehmed pasha, also called *Kulkıran* (destroyer of Mamluks), expelled 16 *sancakbeyis* who had abused their power; they were forced to leave the city with their men and although this meant more security for common people it was a disaster for many merchants because the soldiers were well paid, had a lot of money and used it to buy large amounts of woollen and silk cloth.

5. Plague

Another important event which could influence the trend of business was a plague. The small Venetian community in Egypt often suffered for the high mortality caused by a pestilence, even if consuls and merchants used to remain shut up in their *fondaco* to avoid any possible infection. In 1554 in Cairo about 220.000 persons died and among them there were 40 Venetians.³⁹ In the same period, because the Nile River had not flooded, famine too ravaged

Daniele Barbarigo (1554) e Marco Zen (1664), «Bollettino del Ministero degli Affari esteri», 109 (ott. 1897), pp. 463-502.

³² Inalcik, *The Ottoman State*, pp. 246-250, 335-340.

³³ Alvise Pesaro's report, 1628; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 166.

³⁴ Lorenzo Tiepolo's report, 1563; *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria*, p. 35; Giorgio Emo's report, 1599; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 102.

³⁵ Vincenzo Dandolo's report, 1603; Berchet, *Relazioni*, pp. 110-116 (description of Karayazici's and Hüseyin pasha's rebellions).

³⁶ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1611; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 131; Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 139.

³⁷ Andrea Paruta's report, 1599; *Relazione di Andrea Paruta*.

³⁸ Antonio Donà's report, 1609; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 44-47.

³⁹ Lorenzo Tiepolo's report, 1556; *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria*.

the country; cereals disappeared from the market and the central government was compelled to send them from Istanbul; the *beylerbeyi* established that they could not be sold to Christians, unless they had an imperial permission to buy, but Venetians often succeeded in getting the sultan's orders of this kind.

Another plague had place in April and May 1602 in Cairo and then the dead were about 300.000: however, the inhabitants of the city were so many that the streets were always crowded as usual.⁴⁰ A disaster of this kind could be useful above all for the treasure house of the Ottoman governor. In fact if a foreign merchant died intestate and heirless and there was no consul to take care of his goods, the state took possession of them. Venetians were always very careful about events of this kind and clauses to protect the merchants' property were usually included in the capitulations. Others were not so careful: during the 1602 plague the *beylerbeyi*'s treasure increased considerably because many Indian merchants died and nobody laid claim to their goods.

In the years 1620-23 there were two plagues in Egypt: according to some sources, about 700,000 persons died in Cairo during the first one, and 300,000 during the second. During this period, the *beylerbeyi* tried to take advantage of the situation and obliged Muslim merchants to pay a huge quantity of money; then, he asked the same to the European nations, that is to say Venetians, Frenchmen and Dutchmen, compelling them to pay 50,000 rials; moreover he increased duties, thinking that the consuls would not have dared to leave their houses in order to go to his castle to protest. However, the Venetian consul himself rode to the palace with four of his men. Then, he went and saw many important Muslims and Jews to plead his cause. In the end the governor had to give up and he decreed only that the duties were paid in money instead of goods. The Venetian consul risked a lot and two of his men fell ill and died. During the same years the plague raged throughout Palestine as well, and in Jerusalem in particular. All the Catholic friars living in the convent of St. Catherine of Mount Sion died; other friars were sent from Messina and, in order to reach their new house, they travelled via Alexandria where they were received by the Venetian consul. Another plague had place in Egypt, at the beginning of the Cretan war (1644-1669) but then Venetian trade were on the point of coming to a complete stop.⁴¹

6. Taxes

The trend of Venetian trade could also be influenced by the taxes and duties paid to local authorities on import and export. In the Venetian-Ottoman capitulations the amount of these was not mentioned: the 1513 agreement and the following ones only established that Venetians could not pay the capitation tax, as *dimmiš*, or any extra tax, but in reality, they had often to

⁴⁰ Giovanni Da Mosto's report, 1603; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 38-42.

⁴¹ Marco Zen's report, 1664; Poma, *Il consolato veneto in Egitto*.

pay commissions and extra money: custom officials often took advantage of their position⁴² as well as their masters. In 1556 the Venetian consul had to pay the usual 23% tax even on the silk cloth he had brought as a gift to the *beylerbeyi* and the most important officials.⁴³ Usually some goods, such as the wine used by the Venetian colony, were not subject to taxes in the Ottoman Empire, but there is evidence that, when it was brought from Bulāq to Cairo, a duty was charged even on it and it was impossible to get rid of this practice.⁴⁴

From the end of the 16th to the middle of the following century governors increased taxes and duties. It was a general trend: offices began to be sold; provincial governors knew that they could keep their position for a very short period instead of the usual three years. Thus, they were forced to recover their money as soon as possible and earn what they might. In this period official counts and unofficial ones often did not fit. For instance in 1584⁴⁵ the annual income of Egypt was of 2,400,000 Venetian ducats which came partly from land taxation and partly from duties collected in Alexandria, Rosetta, Burullus, Damietta, and on the route from Bulaq to Cairo and most of them were spent to pay soldiers, to control the pilgrimage route and to restore the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, while 500,000 ducats were sent to Istanbul. Unofficially, the situation was a little different as it is clear from other sources. For instance when Ibrahim pasha became governor of Egypt (16 May 1583) he had a debt of more than 100,000 *zecchini* (about 28,100 ducats); but after 17 months he was considered to be worth more than 1,000,000 golden coins in cash, and he also possessed horses and precious weapons; at that time he was on the point of marrying the sultan's daughter and had prepared for the marriage a bed and a chair, encrusted with rubies, diamonds, emeralds and balas rubies, worth 400,000 *zecchini* (about 112,400 ducats); notwithstanding all this, common people liked him because he was not considered too greedy.

The behaviour of Ottoman lower officers was often modelled on that of their masters. For instance, in 1600 the *khaya* of the *beylerbeyi* of Egypt, a Christian Armenian, was considered so greedy that people began to hate him; at a certain moment he managed to hide the money for the soldiers' wages. This caused his ruin; they rebelled, killed him, putting his head on a stake and carried it round the city. On that occasion the Venetian consul was also at risk because he had bought cereals from the *khaya*.⁴⁶

7. European rivals

In the second half of the 16th century in the Ottoman Empire Venetians had to confront

⁴² Daniele Barbarigo's report, 1554; Poma, *Il consolato veneto in Egitto*, pp. 463-502.

⁴³ Lorenzo Tiepolo's report, 1556; *Relazioni dei consolati di Alessandria e di Soria*.

⁴⁴ About Ottoman coins in Egypt, cfr. S. Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 95-101.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Emo's report, 1584; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 21-24.

⁴⁶ Giovanni Da Mosto's report, 1603; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 38-42.

merchants coming from other European countries:⁴⁷ France, England and later the Dutch Republic. The Cyprus war helped French trade and when the war ended, in 1573, Venetians had to turn it to good account. Up till then their rivals had only been galleys from Dubrovnik or Ancona. In 1578 their consul in Aleppo began to complain about the presence of Frenchmen in Syria.⁴⁸ They were not considered good merchants but only sailors who also dealt in trade: every seaman had a sum in cash and bought goods at very high prices, since he was already paid a wage for his job and trade simply meant extra profit. Other money was entrusted to them by friends and relatives at 10%, at the lender's risk in the event of pirates or shipwreck.⁴⁹ On the contrary, Venetians were merchants first and foremost and they used to barter. In 1591 and in 1615, the Venetian consuls in Egypt complained very much about the quantity of cash available, introduced above all by sailors from Marseilles.⁵⁰ Many nations used to sail under the French flag: people from Genoa, Messina, Lucca, Chios, as well as Catalans and Bretons.⁵¹ French ships in general were good; they embarked not only sailors but also soldiers, to fight pirates. They too were paid cash and had the possibility of carrying a certain quantity of goods with them.⁵²

In 1580 England too obtained commercial privileges. Its merchants went above all in Syria, and disliked Egypt. About 1596⁵³ they began to buy resin from Zante, and then they went to the markets of Mora, Istanbul and Syria. At the end of the 16th century they used to sell there cloth (above all *carisee* and *pannine*), iron and other metals. Their cloth was of poor quality, according to Venetian standards, but it was very cheap. They soon entered into competition with the other European merchants, even if they did not use cash. After some years, Venetian too began to sail on English vessels since they were cheap. The Venetian consul in Syria strove against this practice: he refused to give sanitary passports for Venice to English ships and also refused to receive duties in advance, as usual for the goods sent to Venice, if they were embarked on ships of this kind.

In 1610 the Dutch Republic too received capitulations. Its ships were already present in the seas of the Levant, as well as in the Indian Ocean. They too marred Venetian trade, even if in another way: for instance, Flemish merchants brought Venetian woollen cloth to Aleppo from Goa, and sold it at a very cheap price.⁵⁴ They also traded directly in goods from Germany,

⁴⁷ S. Faroqhi, *Crisis and Change 1590-1699*, in *An Economic and Social History*, pp. 411-636, in particular pp. 515-526; Steensgaard, *Consuls and Nations in the Levant*, pp. 3-55.

⁴⁸ Andrea Navagero's report, 1578; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 149.

⁵⁰ Vincenzo Dandolo's report, 1591; *Relazione del NH ser Vincenzo Dandolo*; Marco Paruta's report, 1615; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc.48-51v.

⁵¹ Giorgio Emo's report 1599; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 103.

⁵² Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 150.

⁵³ Alessandro Malipiero's report, 1596; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 87; Giorgio Emo's report, 1599; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 103.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1611; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 132; Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 151.

amber, quicksilver, cinnabar, copper, brass and iron thread which once were bought and sold in Venice.⁵⁵ Dutch merchants also agreed with the Persian ruler to buy raw silk that they brought to Europe travelling round Africa and not via Aleppo.⁵⁶ They used to bring spices from India using the same route and were among the first Europeans to make agreements directly with the North African Ottoman provinces.⁵⁷

Other Europeans too were present in the Ottoman markets: for instance at the turn of the 16th century, merchants from Tuscany arrived in Syria with cash and silk cloth, but the grand duke's agents were ill-treated by the Ottomans and they could not establish commercial houses there.⁵⁸ In the same period the Portuguese were in Ormuz and Goa. Moreover, Muslim and Christian pirates and privateers often attacked the Venetian ships, which were slow and badly armed. Some Venetian consuls too sailed on French ships, if those from Venice were late because of the dangers of navigation.⁵⁹ Other problems were caused to Venetian trade by unfaithful agents,⁶⁰ the rise in insurance costs owing to shipwrecks and piracy,⁶¹ and the use of forged coins.⁶²

The agreements made by the European nations with the Ottoman Empire were not all alike. Even if the taxes were the same, according to the most favoured nation clause, they could establish a different way of payment and for a merchant this could make the difference between making a profit or losing.⁶³ In Egypt, according to a very ancient privilege, Venetians had to pay the duties on exported and imported goods in two instalments according to what they effectively sold and bought. All the others had to pay the 20% of taxation, in a lump sum, when they arrived in Alexandria, as if they had already sold all their goods and bought merchandise for the same value; then they had to pay taxes according to the different transactions but, if they did not reach the exact amount of imported and exported goods, they obviously lost the difference. The consul Antonio Cappello (1620-23) struggled with the governor, who wanted to put Venetians on the same level of other merchants. At last he won and this halted the negative trend of Venetian trade, at least for the moment, and Venetians went on paying fewer duties than the others.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Girolamo Morosini's report, 1615; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 158.

⁵⁶ Giuseppe Civran's report, 1625; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Girolamo Foscarini's report, 1628; ; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 52-61.

⁵⁸ Vincenzo Dandolo's report, 1603; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 126.

⁵⁹ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report 1611; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 137.

⁶⁰ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1611; Berchet, *Relazioni*, pp. 133-135; Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report, 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, pp. 143-147.

⁶¹ Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 140.

⁶² Giovanni Francesco Sagredo's report 1612; Berchet, *Relazioni*, p. 145.

⁶³ When a nation obtained a privilege the other nations had to apply to the Porte for confirming it to them too; thus they could advantage from a privilege given to others (cf. Boogert, *The Capitulations*, p. 25) but scholars did not realize that the difference could lie, for instance, in the way of payment of a tax and not in the tax itself.

⁶⁴ Antonio Donà's report, 1609; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 44-47; in this period Venetians

However, the crisis was too serious and general to be avoided. Within a few years the situation became desperate. Spices followed other routes to reach Europe and the Venetian market lost its pre-eminence. Privateers and pirates attacked ships and ruined commerce. The provincial governors did not obey the sultan's orders. Other nations made agreements directly with local rulers. In Egypt French, Italian and Greek goods and even local products entered into competition with the Venetian ones: silk cloth was made by the Egyptian state factories while velvet, satin and damask was made by the moors from Granada. Lastly the outbreak of the Cretan war gave the final stroke to the Venetian trade in the Ottoman Empire.

8. Conclusion

A thorough analysis of the consular reports from Egypt and Syria from 1525 to 1664 informs us that the Venetian trade in Syria suffered in the first half of the 16th c., then recovered a little and reached its climax around 1600. On the contrary the Venetian trade in Egypt flourished till the 1560s⁷, but after the Cyprus war experienced a more and more dangerous crisis, with only some moments of renewal. The two markets were clearly different: in Egypt Muslim merchants primarily sold spices, which they had bought in Ormuz from the Portuguese; more items were present in Syria and the Venetians who travelled there could go directly to Ormuz where they were treated at the same level of the Portuguese till the end of the 16th century. Thus, they began to export from Egypt above all low-priced, voluminous goods and from the other country high priced and small items; in this way a ship going to Venice from the Syrian coast had a more precious cargo than one from Alexandria. Moreover, it was possible to change the port of call from Tripoli to Iskenderun and vice versa to avoid Ottoman vexations; on the contrary Alexandria was an unavoidable destination and when it became a free port, about 1628⁶⁵, Venetians began to be treated as all other nations and their goods, even if of a higher quality, soon lost their appeal for Muslim merchants. For all these reasons at a certain point the Venetian central government decided to protect only the convoys of ships sailing for Syria and to disregard the Egyptian market. Less than twenty years later the Cretan war put an end to both.

In the second half of the 17th c. the Serenissima fought two wars against the sultan and in this period the Venetian merchants who wanted to go on trading were compelled to put themselves under the protection of other nations' flags. In the 18th c. trade was resumed even if it never reached the past levels. New consuls were appointed both in Egypt and Syria but they were no longer chosen among the noblemen of the Republic; now they were only subjects and they enjoyed a lower degree of jurisdiction, as all the other consuls of the Serenissima in

paid as the Ottoman subjects. Antonio Cappello's report 1623, ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 72-84v.

⁶⁵ Girolamo Foscarini's report, 1628; ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 31, cc. 52-61.

Europe. This change took place in Venice, was ordered by the central government and was not due to an external interference. In this way the position of Venetian consul in the Levant changed its juridical nature, lost some of the qualities it had inherited from the Middle Ages. Thus, at last, it fell into line and became exactly alike that of a Venetian consul in a European country, which had undergone the same changes in a former period.