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MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS, DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES AND THE PRESENCE OF VENICE: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL NETWORKS (14-16TH CENT.)

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Venetian commerce as reflected in the "Registers concerning foreign states" (Düvel-i ecnebiye defterleri)

Abstract

In the early 1600s, Venetian trade in the Eastern Mediterranean was in serious difficulty. The Dutch penetration into the seas surrounding the spice-producing islands in today's Indonesia had begun in 1595-96, when the brothers De Houtman reached the islands by sailing around the Cape of Good Hope. Dutch control of oceanic routes was far more effective than earlier Portuguese attempts at monopolizing the spice trade had ever been; and this time, the crisis of the Venetian spice trade was permanent and not temporary, as it had been in the early 1500s.

Furthermore, the decline of Venetian commerce in the early 1600s was also linked to a downturn in Venetian cloth manufacture; and shipbuilding was also in difficulty. All these issues have been extensively studied; and probably many historians of Venice, due to an acute consciousness of their city's commercial and political decline, have shown but limited interest in Venetian commerce with the Ottoman Empire after 1600.

But remarkably, Ottoman sources on trade with Venice become more numerous in the years after 1600, no matter whether commerce was declining or not. As far as I can see, the reason is only partly connected with Venice, and to a greater extent with an internal dynamic: in the 1600s, and later on in the 1700s as well, the central authorities seem to have wished to facilitate consultation of their archives, and keep track of a perhaps increasing quantity of correspondence. Thus in addition to the by now standard Registers of Important Affairs (Mühimme Defterleri), very difficult to consult because a document concerning Tripoli in

today's Lebanon might follow the record of an affair that had taken place in Eastern Anatolia, Istanbul's officials began to create more specialized registers. Probably the "Registers concerning foreign states", which contain only responses to petitions handed in by the representatives of foreign rulers, in the Venetian case the baili, were an early example of this new and more differentiated type of record keeping. As the registers contain responses to queries, they do not give us much quantitative information; but they are quite rich, where the qualitative aspect is at issue.

Moreover in the 1610s, when the 'Ecnebi defterleri' began, the Ottoman central government also had political reasons for paying close attention to political relations with western polities, Venetian affairs included. In 1617, Sultan Ahmed I had died before reaching the age of thirty; and his sons were as yet too young to rule. As the sultan was the cornerstone of the empire, the lack of a man able to actually govern must have been most disquieting for the empire's elite. In this unusual situation, Ahmed's brother was placed on the throne as Mustafa I – this move ran counter to the Ottoman tradition of rule as it had been up to this time; for in the Ottoman tradition, sons had always followed their fathers on the throne.

Moreover, after a few months, the empire's high dignitaries decided that Mustafa I had mental problems rendering him unfit for the sultanate, and deposed him. Ahmed's son Prince Osman was only fourteen when placed on the throne as Osman II, and just eighteen in 1622, when the janissaries deposed and murdered him.

In addition, while the Long War against the Austrian Habsburgs had ended in 1606, there was another long war going on at the empire's eastern border, against Shah Abbas I.

While the war against the Habsburgs had been moderately successful, in 1618 the Ottomans had to acknowledge defeat; they lost most of their recent conquests in the eastern borderlands.

Given this unprecedented instability in the palace, and defeat on the eastern border, it made sense for the viziers, who must have undertaken much of the business of governing, to maintain reasonably good relations with Venice. This fact is apparent from the everyday and often mundane matters treated in the "Registers concerning foreign states". At the same time, the latter are precious because they reflect the issues cropping up in a 'normal' year; and the responses issued to queries and requests by the Venetian baili allow the historian access to quite a few issues not ever mentioned elsewhere.