

Alternative Paths Towards the Age of Mercantilism: The Venetian Project of the *Scala Di Spalato*

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The centuries-long history of the Ottoman Empire has been, and somehow still is, approached by non-Ottoman historians from a teleological point of view.¹ So challenging is the idea that the Middle East has been ruled by an independent, hegemonic state, that the European – or, rather, Eurocentric – culture and mentality need to keep celebrating its actual historical decay and ultimate end. The institutional experience of the Ottoman Empire is still either abused or sentenced to a *dammatio memoriae*.² This is particularly true in those countries, whose lands were part of the Ottoman Empire, such as Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria and other Balkan countries, who by the way host the most extensive Ottoman archives in the world. As far as Italian historiography is concerned, Ottoman documents are seldom directly examined, even when dealing with the ever-fashionable topic of Mediterranean history. Leaving aside the deliberately overlooked period of the relations between Turkey and Italy after its unification, even the diverse relationships between the Ottoman Empire and the Ancient Italian States are traditionally investigated using sources other than Ottoman documents. This has contributed to the hesitation in historiographical advance from the late 1970s onwards. Many questions that had been posed by a generation of Italian historians deeply concerned with economic structures and models and influenced by Fernand Braudel have been abandoned in favour of topics that have more to do with methodological assumptions than with an actual interpretation of historical data.³ It would be hazardous to think that the development of a comparative approach alone would have protected Italian historiography in the uncertain circumstances currently affecting the Humanities. Nevertheless, what is certain is that the perspective offered by a different view of the same structures and events necessarily broadens the horizons of a discipline and makes it more difficult to weaken its cultural significance. The history of the Mediterranean and of the Ancient Italian States is now ready to be verified through Ottoman sources, in all their wide variety.

Furthermore, the actual number and quality of Ottoman sources kept in Italian archives are far from being completely known. In the State Archives of Palermo, for example, Ottoman documents are classified as “unreadable Arabic documents”, which means that the memory of Ottoman interests in Sicily has been completely erased: in 1861, six Ottoman consuls were active on the island and now nobody there is able to read their documents. One may hold the difficulties of the language responsible for the non-involvement of Italian scholars and historians; but this assumption – however scientifically unacceptable – is in-

1 Is there only one way leading to Modernity, or, rather, is there only one Modernity? (Ariel Salzman, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire. Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004).
2 Edhem Eldem, “Osmanlı Tarihini Türkleşen Kurtarmak,” *Cogito* 73 (2013): 260–282.
3 Ruggiero Romano, *Braudel e noi. Riflessioni sulla cultura storica del nostro tempo* (Roma: Donzelli, 1995), 51–52.

The crisis of the seventeenth century is considered a "general" crisis.¹² This means that its causes and effects are traceable in many aspects of the economic life of the time: demographic, industrial and commercial. The English and the Dutch not only won the competition with the former leading economies of Venice, Florence, Genoa, etc., but also laid the foundations of a deal that was completely innovative in the economic history of the world. This process was neither quick nor sudden. On the contrary, throughout the second half of the preceding century the English had slowly proceeded towards what Richard Rapp has called "the unmaking of Venetian hegemony" in Mediterranean trade.¹³ Their first and most effective weapon had been to counterfeit Venetian fabrics. Lower-quality and cheap imitations of Venetian textiles were introduced into the Levantine markets and circulated with the fake brand of the Lion of Saint Marks. This strategy was accompanied by a jump in the industrial system of textile production, supported – so energy economists argue – by mineral energy resources: coal and turf instead of wood.¹⁴ Consequently, lower production costs, together with daring choices of colours and materials, had the effect of expanding the market. More people had access to cheaper products.

This did not mean that Venetian fabrics were about to disappear: on the contrary, the Sultan and the Ottoman elite would continue to favour Venetian luxury items throughout the existence of the Republic. What changed was the system of consumption on a wider scale.¹⁵ The Dutch and English merchants were paying for raw materials such as cotton and wool with (smuggled)¹⁶ American silver, partially recovered through the sale of the end products of their industry. This mercantilist scheme of proto-colonial penetration kept the Mediterranean – and the Ottoman Empire, more than any other state – at the centre of the world's interests. The Mediterranean lands were at the same time both a space where raw materials were produced and a promising, socially diversified community of consumption. Varied strategies were adopted in order to intervene in the different social and institutional realities that came into contact with this new economy.¹⁷ In Southern Italy, for example, the English merchants substituted for the Venetian and Genoese network by developing a pattern of intervention focusing on re-exports.¹⁸ In general, English trade in Italy was mainly a transit trade, Livorno being an indispensable stopping-off point on the route taken by English ships sailing to the Mediterranean.¹⁹ In the Ottoman Empire, too, strategies are

exorably called into question by the deeply-rooted tradition of Turkish and Turkic Studies in Italy.⁴ Another reason might be the previous, lengthy inaccessibility of Turkish archives, but then why should the perfectly accessible Ottoman documents kept in the Italian archives share the same destiny? And why should this reason not be null and void now that the Turkish archives have been opened?

Rather, a peculiar strategy of State-building may be at the basis of this "repression": after 1876, the new Italian ruling class let colonialism transmit a new ideology of consent.⁵ Post-Garibaldi discourses on the pretended "Italianness" of Albania started to fill the pages of the national press, the *Corriere della Sera* printing among the most chauvinist anti-Ottoman prose.⁶ Now that the not-too-glorious age of Italian social-colonialism is only a distant memory, our historical tradition seems still gratuitously bound to the idea that the *storia patria* needs to be based on "native" sources, relegating Ottoman and, in general, foreign records to the status of an exotic curiosity for philologists, if not a rarity for antiquarians.

The relevance of an eastwards-trend in international trade has been considered a structural aspect of the history of the Italian peninsula.⁷ The governments held by the *destra storica* were fully aware of its original character and kept encouraging it by building infrastructure in the country and by demanding high performance from Italian diplomacy abroad, especially in the Ottoman Empire.⁸ The close, substantial connection between trade, peace and diplomacy may be the Republic of Venice's most precious bequest to the modern Italian State. A "quintessentially neutral" power, its ruling class constantly acted as a conflict-defusing factor in sixteenth-century Mediterranean affairs.⁹ As we shall see, this pattern continued with even greater intensity throughout the first decades of the following century, from the (propitious) abandonment of the Holy League (1573) until the War of Candia (1645).

Venice was still among the leading industrial powers of the time and trade with the Ottoman Empire was vital to the very existence of the State. Nevertheless, after the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus, Venetian interests in the Eastern Mediterranean were destined to be seriously compromised. The loss of such an important base for their feudal business economy would soon have deprived the Venetian merchants of their privileged position in the commercial competition of the time. True, the Venetian network in Syria was so deeply rooted that the relatively short war in Cyprus did not have an immediate effect on commercial competition in the area: throughout the subsequent two decades, the merchants of Saint Marks continued to be the most influential and numerous trading nation in Aleppo.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this inertia was destined to end. Moreover, and partially as a consequence of these late-sixteenth-century events, at the beginning of the seventeenth century the first crisis of production occurred in all its dramatic evidence.¹¹

4 Ugo Marazzi (ed.), *Turcica et Islamica: studi in memoria di Aldo Gallotta*, 2 vols. (Napoli: Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Series Minor 64, 2003).

5 Giampiero Carocci, *Storia d'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989), 54.
6 Vera Costantini, "L'Italia post-unitaria e gli Italiani dalle lettere degli ambasciatori del sultano," in Daniele Gutzio (ed.), *Acculturazione e disadattamento* (Venice: Cafoscari, 2009), 29–44.
7 Ruggiero Romano, *Una tipologia economica*, in Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, vol. I: *I caratteri originali* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1972), 286.
8 Federico Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896* (Bari, Laterza, 1971), 563–599.
9 John Rigby Hale, *La civiltà del Rinascimento in Europa: 1450–1620* (Milano: Mondadori, 1994).
10 Vera Costantini, *Il sultano e l'isola contesa. Cipro tra eredità veneziana e potere ottomano* (Torino: UTET Libreria, 2009), 166.
11 Ruggiero Romano, *Tra due crisi: l'Italia del Rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), 189.

12 Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith (eds.), *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), I; Eric Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century," *Past and Present* 5:1 (1954): 33–53.
13 Richard Tilden Rapp, "The Unmaking of the Mediterranean Trade Hegemony: International Trade Rivalry and the Commercial Revolution," *Journal of Economic History* 35:3 (1975): 499–525.
14 Edward Anthony Wright, *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
15 Marcello Carmagnani, *Le isole del lusso: prodotti esotici, nuovi consumi e cultura economica europea 1650–1800* (Torino: Utet Libreria, 2010), 3–35; Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis: 1598–1648* (London: Blackwell, 2001).
16 Zacarias Moutoukias, *Contrabando y control colonial en el siglo XVII. Buenos Aires, el Atlántico y el espacio peruano* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1988).
17 Gigliola Pagano de Divitiis, *Mercanti inglesi nell'Italia del Settecento. Navl, traffici, egemonie* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997), 32–50.
18 *Ibidem*.
19 Fernand Braudel and Ruggiero Romano, *Navres et marchands à l'entrée du port de Livourne (1547–1611)* (Paris: Colin, 1951); Renato Ghezzi, *Livorno e il mondo islamico nel XVII secolo. Naviglio e commercio di importazione* (Bari: Cacucci Editore, 2007); Michela D'Angelo, *Mercanti inglesi a Livorno*

of the Venetian *stato da mar*.²⁸ The proposal was taken into consideration and ultimately accepted by the authorities. Basically, Rodríguez's project was to apply a policy of low customs duties in order to attract Ottoman goods to Spalato rather than to any other Eastern Adriatic port. Spalato being a Venetian colony, the ships would then have compulsorily left for the *Serenissima*. As the Levant Company had its Livorno, Venice could count on its Spalato. As a satellite free port, the Dalmatian city could become Venice's feudal "subterfuge" in the new economy. One only has to look at a map to understand how slim the portion of Venetian territory was on the Dalmatian coast.²⁹ Immediately beyond the border began the boundless *paese turchesco*. The project of the *scala di Spalato* had to count on the benevolent cooperation of the Ottomans or it could not exist.

It has been asserted that economic history has its own chronology, independent of the traditional division of human history.³⁰ Quite similarly, it may be argued that it has its own space too, equally independent from the geography drawn by institutional borders. In this sense, Early-Modern Venetian Dalmatia and Ottoman Bosnia were a concrete example of geographic contiguity and economic interdependence. There were towns under Ottoman rule whose natural port ("marina") was beyond the border, in Venetian territory. Such was the case of Venetian Spalato (Split) and Ottoman Kilitis (Clissa). The more critical and controversial the Balkan border became during the wars, the less intense it became during the longer periods of peace. A pervasive phenomenon of professional cross-migration had already been denounced on many occasions by Süleyman I (mid-sixteenth century): immediately before a military campaign against Persia, the Sultan had to repeat his orders for collecting salt for the army, since all of it was already entirely in the hands of the Venetian merchants, the Ottoman salt-works being monopolized by their network.³¹ The situation might be described in terms of the economic pervasiveness of the city-state of Venice towards the Ottoman periphery.

The current oblivion of Early-Modern history makes everybody remember Ottoman Bosnia as a province far from its political centre, economically depressed and deeply harassed by ethnic disputes and colonial interests. This is mainly due to nineteenth-century and current events connected with this area, but also to the post-Fascist voluntary oblivion of Venice's maritime power on the Eastern coast of the Adriatic. Moreover, it should also be remembered that Ottoman Bosnia corresponded to the western, farthest branch of a trade route whose cohesion was augmented by the unity of Ottoman rule. How this unity contributed to delaying the economic crisis has not yet been investigated.³²

What emerges from the documents is that a whole stream of Eastern products, including, for example, Indian pepper, arrived in Bosnia by caravan.³³ Together with local prod-

28 Renzo Paci, *La "Scala" di Spalato e il commercio veneziano nei Balcani fra Cinque e Seicento* (Venice: Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Venetie, 1971), 45–70.
29 Tea Mayhew, *Dalmatia between Ottoman and Venetian Rule: Coniada di Zara 1645–1718* (Rome: Viella 2008), 91–140.
30 Ruggiero Romano, *Industria: storia e problemi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976).
31 M. Tayyib Gökbilgin, "Venedik Devleti Arşivindeki Vesikalar Kulliyatında Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Devri Belgeleri," *Belgeler* 1:2 (1964): 119–220 and Jean-Claude Hocquet, *Le sel et la fortune de Venise*, vol. 2: *Voiliers et commerce en Méditerranée, 1200–1650* (Lille: Université de Lille, 1979).
32 Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "Le déclin de Venise dans ses rapports avec la décadence économique de l'Empire Ottoman," in *Aspetti e cause della decadenza economica veneziana nel secolo XVII. Atti del convegno 27 giugno – 2 luglio 1957* (Venice: Isola di San Giorgio Maggior: Florence: Olschki, 1961), 275–279.
33 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (herein BOA), A.DVN.MHM.D (herein Mühimme Defteri) 24. büküm 43.

difficult to generalize to a common pattern, each provincial situation – as well as that of the capital²⁰ – needing more detailed inspection.²¹ Nevertheless, all these places had to cope with a new mercantilist approach in commercial transactions and ultimately suffered from it while finding their place within modernity.²² Indeed, the crisis of the seventeenth century introduced structural elements of inequality and disharmony among trading regions. Even today's divergence between Northern and Southern European countries needs to be traced back to the seventeenth century in order to be properly understood.²³ Now, what was the impact of this crisis on the economic policies of the period? Did the former leading economies react? It has been claimed that the *Question d'Orient* cannot be examined without also considering the answers provided to that question by the Orient(s) itself/themselves.²⁴ Did the "old world"²⁵ think about an alternative path towards the age of mercantilism?²⁶

Though structural, the crisis has been described as relative and not absolute as far as the city of Venice was concerned.²⁷ Mechanisms of old-regime social security – such as the guild system – prevented living standards from declining, the highest price of the crisis ultimately being paid by the countryside through re-feudalization methods. This pattern had the effect of protecting the industrial sector and, on a different, though interlinking level, made it possible for the Republican ruling class to establish autonomous priorities in the State's economic policies. If an answer to the crisis has to be looked for, it must be in the Venetian commercial affairs.

In 1577, a Jewish merchant named Daniel Rodríguez presented to the Senate of the Republic a project for establishing an international port in the Dalmatian city of Spalato, formally part

1573–1737. *Alle origini di una "British Factory"* (Messina: Istituto di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini, 2004).

20 Ethem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters, *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Robert Mantran, *Histoire d'Istanbul* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

21 Nelly Hanna, *Making Big Money in 1600: The Life and Times of Isma'il Abu Tagyya, Egyptian Merchant d'Istanbul* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).
22 Bruce Masters, *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East: Mercantilism and the World around It* (London: J. B. Tauris & Co., 2006).
23 Ruggiero Romano, *L'Europa tra due crisi (14. e 17. Secolo)* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980).
24 Paul Dumont, "La période des Tanzimat (1839–1878)," in Robert Mantran (ed.), *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 459.

25 Paola Lanaro (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World: Trade and Manufacturing in Venice and the Venetian Mainland, 1400–1800* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2006).
26 "[S]i sbaglierrebbe a concludere [...] che Venezia assistette inerte a questo declassamento di una marina mercantile che per secoli era stata il suo vano" (Domenico Sella, "L'economia," in *Storia di Venezia*, vol. 6 (Rome: Treccani, 1994), 654–658 and *ibid.*, *Commerci e industrie a Venezia nel secolo XVII* (Rome: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1961).

27 Richard Tilden Rapp, *Industry and Economic Decline in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

in those days. Who were the competitors and who the potential enemies? As stated by the *Cinque Savi* in a paper dated June 1589:

[In]oi, presa informazione particolare et dal clarissimo messer Nicolo Bragadino, ultimamente ritornato di là, et da Daniel Rodriaga, crediamo che i dubii dell'effettuarla si risolvono in dua molto principali, l'uno sopra le difficoltà che potranno esser poste dall'emino di Narenta et dal Sanzaco del Ducado, interessati molto per questa deliberazione, quello come datario di quella scala et questo come patrono del paese per dove convengono passar hora tutte le mercantie, le quali mutando scala converranno tralasciar quel camino con interesse di quel sanzacado. L'altra dubieta nasce dal timore che hanno tutti i mercanti per il pericolo del viaggio, potendo in molti luoghi del paese, per l'abondanza di boschi et altri siti esser assaliti et da Usocochi et da altri [...].³⁷

The Ottoman authorities mentioned by the document occupied different positions in the local administration. The first – the *emîn* of the port town of Narenta – was the person to whom customs duties were entrusted, either in exchange of a salary or, more often in this area, as a share of the income (*iltizam*). The second was the *sancakbeyi* of Duka, an administrative figure of middling importance, also appointed by the Sultan, who mediated between local demands and the *beylerbeyi*. The two of them nourished a direct or indirect interest in trade. Of course, the passage of a caravan through a city meant dependable sources of income under many aspects;³⁸ therefore, it was not even necessary for the political authorities to have a direct interest in the goods actually traded – which, in many cases, they had – in order to intervene in favor of one route or another.

These two figures were neither the only nor the most dangerous competitors of the newly established *scala di Spalato*. True, their bases were closer to Spalato than any other port-town and the growth of the latter would have deprived them of the flow of international goods. According to the *Cinque Savi*, both of them were to be easily neutralized through the well-known strategy of the *negotio*, which in this case consisted of obtaining the support of a higher placed authority (the *beylerbeyi* of Bosnia) and other local figures, playing on the rivalries between the servants of the Sultan. This strategy, which modern culture would classify as political or diplomatic, was, on the contrary, essentially organic to trade, this last being an activity far more complex than we may assume today. The Ottoman functionaries often embraced the Venetian cause out of financial interest, a share of the potential income being destined directly to them.

Merchants from Ancona and from Dubrovnik, whose fortunes were subject to a sudden increase whenever military controversy pitched the Republic of Venice against the Ottoman Empire, were particularly annoyed by the establishment of an international port in Spalato. Certainly, their opposition would have been more challenging than anyone else's for the Venetians, since both of these cities could have turned to the Pope and asked for support. The Venetians were certainly unwilling to deal with direct intervention by the Pope in economic affairs concerning the Gulf.³⁹ Moreover, at the end of the sixteenth century – as in many other periods – the Pope's intervention would have been immediately supported by the King of Spain, both of them being affronted since the Venetian abandonment of the Holy

37 ASV, *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, June 16th 1589.

38 BOA, Mahiyeden Mudevver (MAA D) 706, dating 3.C.986 AH (07.08.1578).

39 Paolo Sarpi, *Domnio del Mar Adriatico della Serenissima Repubblica di Venetia* (Venice, 1685).

ucts, such as wool, wax, cheese, thick felt, silk and semi-processed leather, these goods all reached Saray Bosna and then took different routes to reach the maritime coast westwards. Dubrovnik, Narenta, Makarska, Šebenik (Šibenik), Les (Lezhe) and Castelnuovo (Nova) were the major access points to the sea. The Venetian project of letting the Balkan merchandise converge in Killis and then Spalato was an attempt to clamp down on this fragmentation, preserving the cohesive nature of trade granted by the unity of the Ottoman lands. In this sense, the territory ruled by the Venetians played its traditional role of "natural" continuation of the Ottoman lands. Many authoritative words have been written about the compatibility of the two States.³⁴ The project of the *scala di Spalato* may very well be considered as the extreme declination of this compatibility.

The realization of the project could count on an already well-established Venetian network in the area. A *Conte* was in charge in the port of Spalato and another was in the nearby city of Zara, both submitting to a *Proveditore Generale di Dalmazia*, also established in Zara. These three public offices were assigned to patricians for three years. Moreover, just across the nearby Ottoman border, a Venetian consul – not necessarily a patrician – was appointed both in Killis and in Saray Bosna, nowadays Sarajevo (Daniel Rodriaga, for example, was in charge at the end of the sixteenth century). This institutional network, reaching deep into the Ottoman domains, somehow demonstrates the vitality of Venetian interests in the Balkans even before the actual establishment of the *Scala*. At the end of the sixteenth century, the target became to activate this network towards a new objective: allowing the route from Saray Bosna to Killis, to Spalato and ultimately to Venice to become the preferential path for traded goods travelling westwards. In view of this target, the aforementioned network was integrated by other, not-necessarily institutionalized, figures with the task of facilitating co-operation with the Ottoman authorities established in Skopje, Sofia, and Saray Bosna, and with the merchants at all levels:

[...] Vi commetemo che dobbiate immediate mandar quelle persone che voi stimarete buone per condur a fine questo negotio, facendolo trattar con quella circospezione che dalli savi nostri sopra la mercantia vi è stata scritta, [...] non interversando in ciò il nome publico, ma solamente il beneficio di quei sanzacadi et de mercanti [...].³⁵ – the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* wrote in 1588 to the Rettori di Zara.

As suggested by this quotation, at this stage the Venetian ruling class chose to keep a low international profile on the project. The keyword was indeed *circospezione*. Venetians were particularly careful not to let the project become an international affair. After the loss of Cyprus – or, according to traditional chronological divisions, after the Battle of Lepanto – Venice is relegated by historiography to the role of "regional power". Was it really the case? Yes, would answer in reassuring tones the Venetian ruling class of the day, about whose rare pragmatism many illuminating words have already been written.³⁶ But the reality looked different, and Venetians were playing their cards on a regional basis, in order to re-assess their hegemony on the contended transit trade of their Gulf, as the Adriatic Sea was called

34 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économique et capitalisme (XV^e-XVIII^e siècle)*, vol. 3: *Le temps du monde* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979), 158.

35 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (herein ASV), *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, September 27th 1588.

36 Benjamin Arbel, "Sauterelles et mentales. Le cas de la Chypre vénitienne," *Annales ESC* 5 (1989): 1057–1074, reprinted in *ibid.*, *Cyprius, the Franks and Venice* (London: Ashgate-Vartorum, 2000), 1062.

to let personal interpretations of those very measures become the rule. Ragusean ships were captured and dragged into the lazaret for exasperating quarantines in order to delay the delivery of the goods they transported.⁴⁴

The project of the *scala di Spalato* was indeed at the centre of Venetian trade politics up until the War of Candia. Together with the relatively good performance of the industrial sector, the stubborn defence of the Spalato route may be considered as one of the measures that made the decline of the seventeenth century relative and not absolute as far as urban living standards were concerned. Venetian fabrics kept circulating in the market places of Soha, Skopje and Saray Bosna for much longer than in the new and old trading centres of the Middle East, such as Aleppo, Izmir and Cairo, where the competition of the Northerners had been more successful. This interpretation tells us a lot about the capacities of a state to influence the economic vicissitudes that interfered with the life and means of its people.

The firm intention of avoiding direct involvement by the Sultan in his first stage is confirmed by the Ottoman sources. The Sultan's letters to his representatives in Bosnia dealt with all other topics but the *scala di Spalato*. Nevertheless, in some cases the Sultan ended up legislating in favour of the *scala* without actually being aware of the wrong he was doing to his authorities in Narenta or to his tributary vassals the Raguseans.

These circumstances did not last more than twelve years. Very soon, the competition in the Adriatic became so bitter⁴⁵ that an actual alliance between Venice and Istanbul was required in order to protect the route leading to and from Spalato. The *scala* had become the symbol of Venice's independence and was supported by a strong political project, powered and argued for by such refined intellectuals as Paolo Sarpi. Sarpi challenged Grotius's *Mare Liberum* on a conceptual basis and offered theoretical support to the Venetian sovereignty on the Adriatic.⁴⁶ An undisputed protagonist of the period of the *interdetto*, he foresaw the detrimental influence of the Pope on the relationships among the ancient Italian States and the emerging nations, and even proposed that Venice converts to Protestantism. Was this the price to be paid for an alliance with the only logical trading partner, the Ottomans?

In 1605, when announcing the passage of a Venetian convoy to all the Ottoman *kadis* and *sancakbeys* settled along the route from Istanbul to Killis, Sultan Ahmed I specified that it was to be conducted by a subject of his affectionate friend the Doge, wearing a white turban and a sword as distinguishing marks – optimistically used to discourage the many robbers and bandits infesting the Balkan forests.⁴⁷ These two items – the white turban and the sword – had not been chosen by chance: on the contrary, they were the two gifts offered by the Sultan to a high-ranking officer as a reward for outstanding military performance. Obviously, the Venetians were aware that travelling disguised as rewarded soldiers of the Sultan, rather than in simple merchants' attire, was the best way to avoid unexpected and unpleasant encounters on the Balkan routes. In his letter, which had been solicited by the Venetian ambassador in Istanbul, the Sultan specified that no harm was to be done to the members of the caravan and their properties. Safe conducts or safe-conduct-like documents

44 Paci, La "Scala" di Spalato, 80.
 45 Alberto Bin, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la questione adriatica, 1600–1620* (Rome: Il Velino, 1992), 63.
 46 Paolo Sarpi, *Scrittura seconda che tratta del titolo del legittimo dominio sopra il Mar Adriatico, 1612, 12 apr. in idem, Opere*, ed. by Gaetano Cozzi and Luisa Cozzi (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1969), 623–625 and Dea Moscarda, *L'area alto adriatica tra sovranità imperiale e autonomia locale* (Trieste: Deputazione di storia patria per la Venezia Giulia, 2002).
 47 ASV, *Balio a Costantinopoli, Carte Turche*, b. 250, document no. 12, dating 14.N.1013 AH (04.02.1605).

League. In other words, it was better to pass for an undervalued regional power than to put up with religiously disguised political interference.⁴⁰ Moreover, both Spain and the Papacy could easily count on a third, promising ally in their fight for hegemony in the Adriatic: the Austrian monarchy was taking its first steps towards the Balkans, the Uskok piracy being its (irregular) maritime force.⁴¹ Almost two centuries later, at the end of the eighteenth century, Trieste would turn out to be the enduring and unquestioned winner in the Adriatic competition.⁴²

Though inscribed in the same context, the auspicious *circospezione* mentioned by the *Cinque Savi* was actually remarked on with regard to the central government of the Ottoman Empire. In this first stage, neither the Sultan nor the Grand Vizier were to be informed of the project. This strategy is openly described in Venetian sources, but may also be discernible in the Ottoman accounts of the time. Often, the Venetians instructed the *bey* of Killis – and, through his mediation, the *beylerbeyi* of Saray Bosna – to realize infrastructure projects destined to facilitate the passage of caravans. Whether it was a bridge that needed to be built, or a forest to be cleared in order to flush out the innumerable bandits, the Venetians informed the Ottoman authorities and asked for prompt intervention. In some cases, the tasks were accomplished by the local administration, although intervention from Istanbul was frequently required, especially when permanent features of infrastructure, such as bridges or caravanserais, were planned. Should such circumstances occur, the local authorities informed first the Venetians of the necessity to contact the central government. At this first stage, the *Cinque Savi* would rather have spent money from the Republic's Treasury than have the Sultan consulted on a project that was meant to be kept under wraps. In 1589, the *Cinque Savi* wrote:

[m]a perché conviene per comodo delle mercantie et caravane ottenere che nel paese turchresco, sopra il fiume della Citina lontano da Spalato meza giornata, si da Turchi fabricato un ponte et havendo di ciò trattato il Rodrigo, come egli assertisse, che il sanzaco suddetto, dal quale ha avuto per risposta che non vi porta mano senza espresso comandamento della Porta, sarà necessario procurar in questo, mentre che nel fiume suddetto sino posti doi ponti burchielle secondo l'uso d'Italia, perché comodamente et con prestezza passino le mercantie et caravane. A qual cosa, come crediamo che sarà facile ottenere, renderà anco minor pregiudizio alle cose pubbliche per quei rispetti che sono considerabili molto in questo proposito.⁴³

After all, the heavy customs duty of the *mezi noli*, affecting the ships travelling to and from the rival ports of Narenta and Dubrovnik, was destined to cover the expenses needed for the construction of the lazaret and of any other infrastructure required for the full completion of the route (the customs house, bridges, watchtowers etc.). The lazaret itself was of prime importance in Venetian strategy: the strict sanitary measures adopted by the *Sevettissima* not only served the purpose of preventing dangerous epidemics, but also allowed the authorities

40 Roberto Cessi, *La Repubblica di Venezia e il problema adriatico* (Padua: CEDAM, 1943).
 41 Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Stevka Smitran, *Gli uscocchi: pirati, ribelli, guerrieri tra gli imperi ottomano e asburgico e la Repubblica di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008) and Alberto Tenenti, *Venezia e i corsari 1580–1615* (Bari: Laterza, 1961).
 42 Ugo Tucci, "Una descrizione di Trieste a metà del Settecento," *Quaderni Giuliani di Storia* 1:2 (1980): 95–114.
 43 ASV, *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, 16^m 1589.

of this kind are not rare in the *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi* and, taken at face value, this source would be nothing more than a curious episode of cultural contamination. In reality, the goods transported by the convoy through the Ottoman Balkans had previously been taken from Venice to Spalato. The organization of this trip, from Venice to Istanbul via the Dalmatian port of Spalato, was meant to clear the way for the secure establishment of this new, western branch of the Balkan route leading to the capital of the Empire.

An aura of newness pervades the project of the *scala di Spalato* when mentioned in the Venetian sources. It is frequently defined as *questa nova scala*, more simply as *nuova strada*, or even as *delibrazione*. These formulations lead to the identification of two main features of the project: its character of innovation in the context of Venice's commercial policies and its strict state-determined, endogenous or, more precisely, mercantilist nature. Foreign goods, ships, merchants and capital were attracted to Spalato thanks to the duty-free transit regime. From there, the merchandise left for Venice, in a monopolistic system of trade. At the same time, extremely high duties were imposed on ships coming to Venice from the rival ports of Narenta, Dubrovnik and Ancona. The proceeds coming from these duties went towards the building of infrastructures in Spalato: the customs house, the lazaret and military or para-military fortifications such as watchtowers. The port-town of Spalato was known to the Ottoman central government. In some documents Isplit is defined *kale*, in others *hisar*, both words alluding to the fortifications that surrounded the town.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, during the first stage of its establishment, from the early 1580s till the first decade of the seventeenth century, Spalato is not quoted as a trading centre, but rather as a fortified coastal citadel. This is due to the fact that the Venetians expressly wanted to keep their new route as secret as possible from the Sultan and the sources from Istanbul confirm the effectiveness of this strategy.

Considering the relatively huge amount of letters sent from Istanbul to the various cities and towns of Bosnia, this province was particularly worthy of the Sultan's attention. What is remarkable to the historian's eye is that these letters happen to concern any topic, including those usually dealt with on a local basis. Some provinces present this pattern in particular moments, for example Basra during the war against the Safavids, or Cyprus immediately after the conquest; whereas the Ottoman provincial and local authorities in Bosnia kept receiving orders at a full and constant rate at least throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and into the first decades of the subsequent one. The impression that the reader of these documents might get is that in Bosnia even minor, ordinary topics might matter more than in other places in the Empire. The reason might be found in the peculiar historical position of this province, which bordered on Venetian Dalmatia, on Austrian Croatia and on the Republic of Dubrovnik. The proximity of three foreign states, of whom two were leading powers, had a decisive impact on Bosnian domestic affairs and the Sultan, aware of this trait of Bosnian politics, did not want his (distant) voice to be the weakest in the chorus. In Bosnia, the possibilities of making any event a matter of international politics, if not a diplomatic case, were extremely high.

Of the vast quantity of letters sent from Istanbul to the provincial and local authorities in Bosnia, Hersek and Albania, only a small amount actually concern international trade. Being firstly subjects of a neighbouring state, Venetians were not necessarily mentioned as traders. During the last war, the eastern coast of the Adriatic had been the scene of intense

48 See, for instance, ASV, *Documenti Turchi*, busta 11, d. 1214 and BOA, Mühimme Defteri 30, hükmü 121.

fighting between the Venetian fleet and the Sultan's patrols. Therefore, once the war was over, redefining the borders between the two states became an activity of prime importance, as was the reconstruction of the fortifications that had been shelled by the respective armies.⁴⁹ The neutral vocation of the Republic becomes understandable when considering how circumstances radically changed when a peace treaty was under preparation. In an order dated 23 February 1573, Sultan Selim II announced to the *bey* of Inebahit that peace had been concluded with "the Doge and the Senate". Consequently, explained the Sultan, the attacks on the Venetian islands and ships had to cease immediately. Before this order – and, most probably, even afterwards, though illegally and certainly not as systematically as before – the subjects of the two states were engaged in constant attacks and raids against people and properties.⁵⁰

A few months later, in an order to one of the future protagonists of the establishment of the Spalato route, the *bey* of Killis, Selim II stated that, according to the peace treaty, those towns and fortresses that had been conquered by the Venetians during the last conflict had been re-integrated into the Ottoman Empire and were destined to prompt restoration.⁵¹ At the same time, according to another order to the same addressee a few days later, Venetian properties across the border were not to be attacked.⁵² On 4 October 1573, again, the *bey* of Killis was asked to help the *kadi* of Saray Bosna in the compilation of the new provincial land and population survey (*ahırn*) regarding the newly acquired former Venetian properties.⁵³ Two years later, the Venetian ambassador Giacomo Soranzo questioned the legitimacy of that survey, arguing that Bosnian western borders had been defined without any supervision by the Venetian counterpart.⁵⁴ In response, Sultan Murad III asked the *sancakbeyleri* of Bosna and Killis, as well as the *kadis* of Saray Bosna and Killis, to get together with the Venetian commissioners and proceed to a full redefinition of the frontier. Moreover, such administrative issues gave birth to interesting debates over the ownership of the first harvest coming from soils that had just been declared subject to Ottoman rule.⁵⁵

The issue of the definition of the frontier and, as we shall see, of its protection, was of major importance for the Ottoman central government. This may not seem directly concerned with trade. Nevertheless, even when investigating commercial affairs and networks, it is the broader political framework that should be reconstructed and considered in relation to local circumstances. When the imperial order announcing peace with the Republic reached the *bey* of Killis, Daniel Rodrigo, the inventor of the Spalato Project, was already active in the transit of goods from Narenta to Venice, in spite of the prohibitions due to the war.⁵⁶ Trade was vital to the very survival of these regions and to Venetian industry. It was therefore clear that in such circumstances Venice was determined to fight for its share of the Balkan trade and that peace was to be concluded as soon as possible in order to allow the exchanges to be performed legally and directly by the subjects of the Doge – not by somebody else on their account. Given this discrepancy between the prescriptions of the

49 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 22, hükmü 420.
50 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 19, hükmü 102.
51 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 19, hükmü 194 and 201.

52 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 19, hükmü 122.
53 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 20, hükmü 224.

54 ASV, *Documenti Turchi*, b. 7, d. 829, Sabban's first ten days of 983 (November 25th – December 3rd 1573).
55 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 23, hükmü 171, dating 8.C.981 AH (05.10.1573).
56 Pact, *La "Scala" di Spalato*, 49–50.

unsafe conditions at sea. In the South-Eastern Mediterranean, before the War of Cyprus, Venetians had captured Christian and Muslim corsairs and delivered them to the *kadi* of Antalya.⁶¹ It was in the interest of both states to minimize the damage caused by privateering activities. Corsairs could harm merchant ships as well as the population of the coast, which was susceptible to being kidnapped and enslaved. Although the general scheme of Ottoman-Venetian military co-operation remained the same, in the late-sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Adriatic, the situation was nevertheless different from that in Cyprus waters fifty years ago.

In the Adriatic there were various types of privateering. As for the Dalmatian trade, the Uskoks were by far the most dangerous phenomenon. The indented geography of the Eastern Adriatic coast facilitated the secrecy of their movements, whilst Habsburg ambitions for the Gulf supported their actions against Venetian ships and Ottoman properties. To give an idea of the consistency of the phenomenon, in 1595 the uskoks got to the point of conquering Kitis, which was then liberated by joint Ottoman and Venetian patrols. The ships crossing the Gulf from Spalato to Venice and back became the main target of these Catholic privateers. The Venetians reacted vigorously, installing war ships that patrolled the route, but the problem had already reached such endemic proportions that the Habsburgs were keen to support them. As early as 1574 the Sultan informed the *bey* of Kitis that the topic of the uskoks had been discussed in Istanbul with the Venetian *ballo* and his diplomatic team (extraordinary ambassadors had been sent to the city one year before in order to discuss the terms of the peace).⁶² Selim II wrote explicitly to the *bey* of Kitis that action had to be taken in concert with the Venetians and that a joint fleet was about to be created with the aim of taking on the uskoks. In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Lepanto, the two states were determined to face together an emergency created by an irregular squad, which actually fought for the Holy League proclaimed in 1571. While the Venetian ruling class were aware from the very beginning of the foreign influences hiding behind the uskoks, the Ottoman central government initially saw them as simple pirates. When, after the siege of Kitis, cannon balls with the Habsburg emblem were found in the fortress, even the Sultan had to review his interpretation of Northern Adriatic affairs and for Spalato trade a new era was about to begin.⁶³

Security was not just an important issue on the sea. Bandits were considered a major problem and periodical deforestation was planned by the central government in order to make roads safer for the travelling merchants and caravans. Deforestation, together with the construction of bridges and caravanserais, were infrastructural operations that needed to be permitted and planned by the central government. In 1574, Selim II wrote to the *kadis* of Hersek and Castelnuovo that on the suggestion of the *nazir* Mehmed (the superintendent of all the sources of revenue whose fiscal charging was farmed out), a *han* had to be built at the crossroads of Dubrovnik and Castelnuovo. The document is relevant for understanding how requests from local economic actors were transmitted to Istanbul and eventually acknowledged by the Sultan.

In conclusion, at least until the first decade of the seventeenth century the Ottoman central government was not informed of the Spalato project. In spite of this, the Sultan inter-

61 Costantini, *Il sultano e l'isola*, 18.
62 Costantini, *Il sultano e l'isola*, ix-xi.
63 Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj*, 207-208.

Sultan and the actual circumstances of his well-protected territories, should we then assume a Bosnian or Albanian proclivity to disobey or rather an inclination to receive bribes? The specifics of that region and of that very age permitted an individual to perform a broad spectrum of activities which did not necessarily conflict with one another. A *bey*, officially appointed by the Sultan and formally representing the imperial law on a local or provincial level, might very well pick sides in the trade competition of the time, according to his own or his town's advantages. Actually, the perspective of the central government should not be considered solely as a legal frame under whose surface real economic life took place. In some cases, as it was with the example of reiteration of orders that we discover, life was far more complicated.⁵⁷

One of the main problems the Sultan had to face, in the Balkans as well as elsewhere in his domains, was represented by the many cases of prohibited goods being illegally sold to foreign merchants. Horses, for example, were an item traditionally forbidden for export, though frequently requested by Venetians, who generally ruled over too slim a portion of Dalmatian territory to raise animals. It was clear, for example, that if in Spalato pack animals were needed – as they were – it was in the Ottoman hinterland that the Venetian authorities would have bought them. Let us remember how relevant pack animals were in a pre-industrial economy: apart from the actual merchandise, the main energy source, timber, needed to be transported, in order to heat interiors, to construct buildings, to activate the main processes of industrial transformation, etc. Some economic historians have proposed calculating a pre-industrial society's potential for urban development according to the ratio of human beings and pack-animals.⁵⁸

Grains were also traditionally prohibited goods. On 6 January 1574, Selim II sent the same order concerning Venetian trade to a large number of addressees, respectively: the *scancakbeyis* and *kadis* of Morea, Valona, Kartlieli and Selanik. "You all knew that Venetian ships coming from your ports were prevented from undertaking trade, their sails and helms having been seized and restrained", wrote the Padisah.⁵⁹ "Now it is no longer allowed that the aforementioned nation be prevented from trade. Therefore, it is only prohibited to give them goods other than beeswax, thick felt, leather, tools, silk, wool and cotton". As soon as the formal prohibition on trade was removed, specific bans were introduced in order to regulate the flood of exports. A similar order was sent on 4 March 1574 to the *bey* of Bosnia.⁶⁰ In his order in particular, we discover that the administration of the ports of Šebenik, Narenta, Dubrovnik and Castelnuovo, as well as the collection of the duties, were farmed out. The *bey* of Bosnia had to make sure that the contractors would not let grains, weapons and horses be sold to foreign merchants. Nevertheless, infractions must have been quite common.

Together with the definition of the frontier and the willing-to-be-regulatory attitude towards exports, two more topics may be singled out in the Sultan's letters, both of them directly related to trade: the issue of defence and the construction of infrastructure. It was not the first time that Ottomans and Venetians co-operated in preventing, or at least limiting,

57 Gilles Veinstein, "La voix du maître à travers les firmans de Soliman le Magnifique," in idem (ed.), *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps. Actes des XVe rencontres de l'École du Louvre* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992).

58 Paolo Malanima, *Economia preindustriale. Mille anni dal IX al XVIII secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000).

59 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 23, hükmü 473.
60 BOA, Mühimme Defteri 24, hükmü 43.

vened in many issues that were indirectly related to the establishment of the free port. What did the Ottoman perception of the *scala* consist of, then? A local and provincial viewpoint, sensitized by Venetian propaganda, must be differentiated from the perspective of the centre, unaware though active, as we have seen, in the fight against privatizing and in commercial affairs. Already in 1578, in the earliest stage of the establishment of the *scala di Spalato*, a financial record from Bosnia noted an income of 5 000 *akçe* originating from a fiscal unit that consisted of the following items: "Road tolls from the way towards Isplit and Kitis together with the revenue from the salt-works called 'of the foreigners'"⁶⁴ Indeed, the *scala* was at its (promising) dawn.

Has the realization of the port of Spalato lived up to the expectations of the Venetian leading-class? Has it ever become an alternative path towards mercantilism? In order to answer to these two questions, it should be acknowledged that the project of establishing a preferential route connecting the Eastern and Western shores of the Adriatic truly met the needs of many merchants involved in the Balkan trade. Far from being a merely ideological move, imposed by hopelessly restrictive circumstances, the project of the *scala* may be considered as an actual logistic and infrastructural support to a varied spectrum of operators. Not by chance, the very idea of establishing a free-port in the city of Spalato came to a merchant, Daniel Rodrigo, who even agreed at building part of the necessary infrastructure at his own expenses. Having been active in the Balkan trade since already few decades, Rodrigo was certainly experienced enough to find a pragmatic solution to the scattered character of the Balkan way-outs to the Adriatic. Unsurprisingly, he referred to Venice as the most logical institutional partner: after all, since the fifteenth century, it had always been in the Republic's tradition to greet the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Balkans as a remedy to their structural fragmentation, legitimately considered detrimental to trade. In this framework, the Spalato project may be contemplated as a path fairly considered as new to the commercial policies of the Republic, though consistent with its political traditions towards the Ottoman Balkans, and with its role of independent power. The efficiency of this "consistent-new" path did not only depend on the Venetian efforts and on the concerned cooperation of the Bosnian merchants and administration. Certainly, these were the two factors enabling its very existence. Nevertheless, in order to verify the Project's validity as truly alternative path, it should be considered the whole economic and political context of the Italian peninsula at the beginning of the seventeenth century: not only the (re-)location of the Venetian industry within the new Mediterranean scenario, not only the position of the Republic's leading class towards the Holy Siege, nor its cultural role, proudly opposed to the pontifical obscurantism, but the very institutional experience of the Republic was, indeed, radically alternative to any other Ancient Italian States.