

DESCRIBING OR DISTORTING THE "TURK"?:  
THE *RELAZIONI* OF THE VENETIAN AMBASSADORS  
IN CONSTANTINOPLE AS HISTORICAL SOURCE

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**ABSTRACT**

*Since at least the time of Leopold von Ranke, the famed final reports, or relazioni, of the Venetian ambassadors have enjoyed a unique reputation among historical testimonies. Historians have often viewed the Venetian ambassadors as dispassionate and sophisticated witnesses of the courts in which they served, and treated their reports, often uncritically, as unbiased and fully reliable appraisals. More recently, however, some scholars have cast doubts on their value and indeed their validity as historical testimonies.*

*Critiques have tended to focus on two perceived problems: First, the sources are of little value because Venetian diplomats were not privy to the most sensitive and important political information, and therefore their reports are rife with hearsay and misinformation. Second, and more damning, Venetian diplomats are accused of being hopelessly biased and Veneto-centric and therefore inaccurate and unreliable reporters, rendering their relazioni useful not as testimonies of the cultures observed, but as windows into the cultural attitudes and values of the observers. Ironically, these challenges have originated primarily from scholars of Venice, precisely at a time when the relazioni are being rediscovered and revalued by scholars of the Ottoman Empire.*

*In this paper I focus on the Venetian relazioni on the Ottoman Empire, and argue that while the relazioni have much to tell us both about the individuals and the ruling class that produced them, when reconsidered within the institutional context in which they were generated, these reports, while not the ideal and idealized source of Ranke, still can provide an accurate window onto the political and cultural realities of the Ottomans, as well as the attitudes and concerns of Venice. The relazioni do not simply represent an imagined or invented Ottoman Empire, nor do they merely refract the likeness of their authors onto the Ottoman visage. While the relazioni certainly construct an image of the Ottoman Empire, it is not always or entirely created in Venice's self-image.*

*Key words: Venice, Ottoman Empire, Ambassadorial reports, Orientalism*

## DESCRIZIONE O DEFORMAZIONE DEL "TURCO"? LE RELAZIONI DEGLI AMBASCIATORI VENEZIANI A COSTANTINOPOLI COME FONTE STORICA

## SINTESI

*Almeno fin dai tempi di Leopold von Ranke, i famosi dispacci finali o le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneziani hanno goduto di una considerazione unica nell'ambito delle testimonianze storiche. Gli storici spesso vedevano gli ambasciatori veneziani come testimoni imparziali e sofisticati delle corti dove questi prestavano servizio, vagliando le loro relazioni, sovente senza la dovuta critica, come valutazioni obiettive e completamente attendibili. Più recentemente, però, alcuni studiosi hanno messo in dubbio il loro valore o, per meglio dire, la loro validità come testimonianze storiche.*

*Le critiche tendono a concentrarsi su due problemi: in primo luogo, le fonti sono considerate di poco valore perché i diplomatici veneziani non sarebbero stati a conoscenza di informazioni politiche più delicate e importanti; si sostiene perciò che le loro relazioni abbondino di dicerie e disinformazioni.*

*In secondo luogo, più condannatorio, i diplomatici veneziani sono stati accusati di essere del tutto soggettivi e veneto-centrici, e pertanto cronisti inattendibili; di conseguenza, le loro relazioni non sono più considerate utili come testimonianze delle culture osservate, ma come canali privilegiati attraverso cui poter cogliere gli atteggiamenti e i valori culturali degli osservatori. Queste contestazioni hanno avuto origine principalmente tra gli studiosi veneziani e proprio nel periodo quando le relazioni vengono riscoperte e rivalutate dagli studiosi dell'Impero Ottomano.*

*Il presente contributo si concentra sulle relazioni veneziane concernenti l'Impero Ottomano e sostiene che esse rappresentano una fonte ricca di informazioni sia sulle singole persone che sulla classe dominante che le ha prodotte. Quando vengono riesaminate nel contesto istituzionale nel quale sono state realizzate, queste relazioni – sebbene considerate da Ranke una fonte non ideale – possono tuttavia offrire una finestra fedele da cui osservare le realtà politiche e culturali degli Ottomani, come anche gli atteggiamenti e gli interessi di Venezia. Le relazioni non presentano semplicemente un Impero Ottomano inventato o immaginato, e nemmeno si limitano a rifrangere l'immagine dei loro autori sul volto ottomano. Anche se le relazioni senza dubbio contribuiscono a costruire un'immagine dell'Impero Ottomano, questa non è sempre o interamente creata sull'immagine che Venezia dà di se stessa.*

*Parole chiave: Venezia, Impero ottomano, relazioni degli ambasciatori, orientalismo*

The *relazioni* (reports) of Venice's ambassadors have been regarded by many as the classic expression of early modern Venetian diplomacy, an "original and inimitable creation of Venetian culture" (Ventura, 1981, 553; Queller, 1967, 110; Queller, 1973, 174; Antonibon, 1939, 17; Valensi, 1993, 14). Historians especially have long privileged the *relazioni* as uniquely accurate and reliable historical witnesses. Already in 1810, Johannes von Müller suggested their potential for historical research, however, they are most closely associated with the father of modern historiography, Leopold von Ranke, who made extensive use of the *relazioni* in many of his most influential monographs, and indeed was a collector of original manuscripts (Tucci, 1990, 102–105; Von Ranke, 1975, 112–113). He considered the *relazioni* "the perfect type of testimony" because of the synthetic and analytical picture of political and diplomatic matters that they provided, which he viewed as much superior "to the spurious documentation" of chronicles and histories. In contrast to these "so-called narrative sources," which were well-removed from actual events, Ranke felt that the *relazioni* were the quintessential historical witness, providing "a direct contact with the men who did politics, that is, with the narrow circle of the principal figures responsible for the life of the states" (Benzoni, 1990, 48, 51; Queller, 1973, 177; Tucci, 1974, 5–6, 14–15; Antonibon, 1939, 20; Tucci, 1990, 99–100).

Ranke's enthusiasm was not unique, rather it simply reaffirmed the status of the *relazioni*, for among generations of European statesmen and political thinkers they enjoyed great renown for their incisive political, economic, social and cultural observations. There was an active market for *relazioni* in early modern Europe, and the most insightful reports were repeatedly copied or printed for circulation, often commanding high prices. They were considered from early on "the Italian political writings of greatest notoriety" (Ventura, 1976, 1, XII; Allegri, 1988, 953–954; Tucci, 1990, 100; Valensi, 1993, 14; Mattingly, 1963). The first error-filled summaries and selections from renowned *relazioni* were surreptitiously published in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the *Tesoro politico* and the *Tesori della corte romana* (Benzoni, 1990, 49; Antonibon, 1939, 19). Venice's rulers tried to prevent the spread of what were restricted government documents: Lazzaro Soranzo's 1598 *L'Ottomanno* was based on several *relazioni* on the Ottoman Empire, which led to the book being banned in Venice because it "spoke of matters of state which our laws prohibit revealing" (Sforza, 1922, 207, 210–213; Preto, 1975, 299–301). Ultimately these efforts failed, and contemporary diplomats and governments, though forbidden to listen to the reports as they were presented before the Senate, were able to acquire copies through well-placed bribes to the Senate's secretaries who were charged with recording the reports. In Oxford's library, for instance, already by the start of the seventeenth century there were copies of thirteen *relazioni*, and many others existed elsewhere (Antonibon, 1939, 17–18; Queller, 1973, 177).

The modern prestige of the *relazioni*, which began with Ranke, was sealed in the nineteenth century by their publication, making them much more accessible to researchers. N. Tommaseo's two volume collection of Venetian reports dealing with sixteenth-century France appeared in 1838, and the following year saw the first volume of Eugenio Albèri's justly famed collection, *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al senato* (Benzoni, 1990, 49–50; Antonibon, 1939, 21). Albèri produced fifteen volumes over the next 25 years, attempting to gather in one collection the best editions of all the sixteenth-century *relazioni* available. His volumes were supplemented by several subsequent editions, including Niccolò Barozzi and Guglielmo Berchet's collection of seventeenth century reports, *Le Relazioni degli stati europei lette al senato dagli ambasciatori veneziani nel secolo decimosettimo* (Ventura, 1976, 1, XCVII–CV). There was also a flurry of publications of *relazioni* and other important historical documents in the mid-nineteenth century by aristocratic families as gifts to newlyweds and graduates. While scholars have subsequently identified numerous problems with these editions, they continue to be widely used. Indeed, Luigi Firpo is in the process of reissuing photostatic copies of all printed *relazioni* and publishing those which have remained unedited until now, guaranteeing the availability and popularity of these unparalleled documents for future generations of scholars (Baschet, 1862, chap. 7; Antonibon, 1939, 21–22; Queller, 1973, 177).

While occasional reservations about the *relazioni* as historical sources were expressed already among Ranke's contemporaries, the general consensus aligned more often with the view of one scholar who considered Venice's ambassadors "clear-eyed and politically seasoned gentlemen" (Davis, 1970, 1). This view obtained for over a century, until the late 1960s when scholars began to question the generally uncritical acceptance of the *relazioni* as testimonies to the past (Droysen, 1967, 104–130; Desideri, 1980, 44). One of the earliest attacks was by C. H. Carter, who made a provocative, if somewhat meagerly substantiated, argument that because of Venice's loss of power and prestige, combined with the regular rotation of its diplomats, Venetian ambassadors were able to obtain little firsthand information, and were instead dependent on rumors, official sources, and tips from other diplomats. These informants were often unreliable, and indeed routinely and intentionally disseminated misinformation to the Venetians. For Carter, Venice's ambassador became a simple observer: "He had not enough prestige or precedence to gain personal access to the seats of power and thus to first-hand information at that indispensable level, nor enough importance to have personal contacts highly enough placed to keep him informed about inner affairs, nor enough money to engage in effective espionage" (Carter, 1965, 279–280).

Carter's critique did little to diminish the *relazioni*; however, subsequent, more compelling attacks cast greater doubt on some of the foundational assumptions about these famous sources. These critiques were based not on Venetian ambassadors'

access to accurate information, but rather on their very ability to see and to comprehend the diverse cultures that they encountered. This cultural myopia, according to these new, more sophisticated criticisms, was especially prominent in Venice's relations with, and reports on, the Ottoman Empire. The most important scholar on Veneto-Ottoman relations, Paolo Preto, was the first to suggest that Venetian ambassadors' views of the Ottomans, expressed most clearly in the *relazioni*, were deformed by their authors' cultural biases. He found the *relazioni* distorted by the diplomats' "mental laziness, [and] anti-Ottoman prejudices," and as "paint[ing] an image of the Turk nation distorted and deformed by racial and religious prejudices" that was deeply rooted in western anti-Islamic bias (Preto, 1979, 129–130; Preto, 1975, 100).

In a similar vein, the great promoter of Venetian scholarship, Gino Benzoni, has contended that despite the dozens of ambassadors reporting over the span of several centuries, in the end all the *relazioni* are of a piece, linked like "so many chapters of a single collective history." They are united by "their insistently Venice-centered perspective. [...] Venice is the observatory from which the *relazioni* are external projections." Because of this veneto-centric quality, the reports have more to say about the observer than the object observed. According to Benzoni, if an ambassador "praises a particular procedure practiced abroad, this constitutes a veiled criticism of the absence of that procedure in Venice [...] In more than one *relazione*, it can be observed that 'intender li fatii di altri' (understanding the affairs of others) means 'dar maggior lume alle cose nostre' (highlighting our own affairs)" (Benzoni, 1990, 54–56). The reason for this distorted self-reflectiveness among Venice's ambassadors is their conviction "that civilization cannot be anything but European and Christian." They refused to learn Turkish or anything true about the Ottoman Empire, which "is an indication of an allergy, of a closed-mindedness toward the Other, to diversity" (Benzoni, 1995, 72–76; Benzoni, 1990, 57; Tenenti, 1985, 12–15).

The views of Preto and especially Benzoni, are clearly informed by Edward Saïd's widely influential orientalist paradigm. For Saïd, the West has historically defined itself through "an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and [...] 'the Occident'." How the West has historically represented the Orient – in literature and art, but also in what Saïd calls "truthful text(s)," such as histories, philological analyses, political treatises – has always been a product of its exteriority. Representation versus reality is essential to Saïd's argument: he maintains that what the West has historically said about the Orient, its own internal, cultural discourse, is not "truth," but instead portrayal. These representations witness very little about the object observed, but rather say much more about those making the observations (Saïd, 1978, 1–3, 20–22). A similar position in a new world context is evident in Stephen Greenblatt's idea of "engaged representations," which warns against "taking anything Europeans wrote or drew as an accurate and reliable account

[...] We can be certain only that European representations of the New World tell us something about the European practice of representation" (Greenblatt, 1991, 7–13).

With the critiques of Preto and Benzoni, informed by post-modern literary theory, the privileged position of the Venetian diplomats and their *relazioni* has been overturned. No longer Ranke's ideal observers – the dispassionate, firsthand witnesses simply and objectively reporting reality – Venice's ambassadors are now chained by their cultural biases. The reports are no longer windows onto the Ottoman Empire, but only onto themselves and their own state, conveying misperceptions and prejudices about the world that they inhabit, but which they seemingly are barely able to comprehend.

I want to propose a functionalist defense of the *relazioni* and their continued utility to discerning readers. To be sure, Benzoni, Preto and other critics are not incorrect in describing the *relazioni* as the product of a homogenous ruling caste, and pointing to their formulaic quality, their tendency to repeat and crib from previous reports, and their depictions of Ottomans as the barbarous epitome of the Other (Valensi, 1993, 56). However, this view ignores the plurality of opinions about the Ottomans that existed in Venice, which were "not simply and universally [characterized by] fear and loathing," but rather contained "both positive and negative features" (Blanks, 1999, 40; Vitkus, 1999, 211, 219). It also fails to consider the *relazioni* diachronically, and to acknowledge changes in their form and structure, as well as their depictions of the Ottomans, in response to ongoing developments in both Constantinople and Venice (Valensi, 1993, 55–71, 96; Rodinson, 1987, 8, 17–19). And finally, this generalizing vision is overly reductive in uprooting the reports from the specific political and institutional context in which the *relazioni* were generated. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the survival of the weakened and increasingly marginalized Venetian Republic was at stake, and this situation demanded accurate, up-to-date, actionable information, rather than stereotypical, self-validating representations of the "Turk".

The ambassadorial reports occupied an important, even privileged place in satisfying Venice's informational imperative. By the sixteenth century, the *relazione* had evolved into its mature form as the final report by an ambassador to the Senate on his diplomatic mission, which covered a number of specific areas of interest to the senators who were responsible for the conduct of Venetian foreign affairs. As Niccolò Tiepolo observed in 1532, the object of a *relazione* was "not to render account of [the ambassador's] actions [...], which can be clearly grasped from the dispatches [...], but to report if he has learned anything of the country from which he comes worthy of being heard and pondered by prudent senators for the benefit of the *patria*." The *relazione* was intended to provide "a broad and comprehensive synthesis," a tableau of the "political, military, economic and social conditions of the country," as well as insights into "the characters of princes and ministers, the attitudes and

sentiments of peoples, the strengths and weaknesses of states." Because of the nature of the information presented, and its practical purpose, in general the *relazioni* were stylistically not particularly literary, and only occasionally "adorned [...] with classical, scriptural and other allusions and quotations" (Queller, 1973, 175–176, 179; Queller, 1972, 655; Benzoni, 1990, 47). They were not, as some suggested, primarily intended to demonstrate "the intellectual acuteness and writing skill of its author," nor to showcase their author's "compositional dexterity" (Benzoni, 1990, 47).

Which is not to say, however, that ambassadors did not care deeply about the quality of their *relazioni*. Though the reports have survived in written format, we should not overlook the fact that these documents were composed for public presentation before a gathering of the most powerful patricians in the Venetian oligarchy. It was a performance that reunited the ambassador with his peers, illustrated his political savvy and acumen, and reaffirmed his commitment to the *patria* (Del Negro, 1984, 431). Ambassadors' reports usually drew large crowds, despite often lasting well over four hours. Individuals went to great lengths to hear the *relazioni*: in one instance, four patricians "removed part of the roof of the Palazzo Ducale in order to listen to a confidential report from Istanbul" (Burke, 2000, 392). The *relazione* was the "crowning moment" of a mission: it placed an ambassador on center stage, with his peers' undivided attention, and gave him "the opportunity to show the lucidity of his judgement, to display his culture and eloquence, to prove his knowledge of the world and of men, and to demonstrate that he embodied all the virtues of the political man." An effective and insightful report often resulted in praise from the Doge before the most important men in the ruling class, and had significant implications for a patrician's subsequent career (Valensi, 1993, 13–17; Queller, 1978, 178–179; Ventura, 1981, 553–554).

As a result, *relazioni* were prepared with care and forethought. Though presented orally, they also had to be submitted in written format, which contributed to the generally polished rhetorical style of many of the reports. These were not extemporaneous presentations; the ambassadors and their secretaries often kept notes throughout their mission for use in composing the final report (Davis, 1970, 11; Queller, 1973, 180). Nor was the written report always identical to the oral version; the former often was edited and embellished, as in the case of Marco Foscarini's relation on Florence, which was registered fully five years after his embassy ended. The report of Lorenzo Bernardo in 1592 is another example of this, and because the *Archivio di stato* contains both his working copy with numerous additions and the final version, we can get some sense of the thought process and effort that went into the preparation of a *relazione* (ASV-CL, Relazioni, b. 4).

Utility and function were key factors in most of what an ambassador presented. This is evident in the legislation regarding the *relazioni*. Though the earliest surviving *relazione* dates only from 1492, the reports' origins trace back to a law of 1268

requiring returning ambassadors to report on "whatever they might have learned and heard said which they deemed to the profit and honor of Venice." After their oral presentation, the reports were then to be given to the Grand Chancellor, who stored them in the closets of the *Secreta* section of the archive reserved for diplomatic documents. While most ambassadors presented their oral report, it was a constant struggle to compel ambassadors to provide a written version, thus the law was revisited and revised several times. The final fine-tuning of the legislation took place over several decades during the early sixteenth century, and the repeated attention of the Senate to the issue suggests a level of anxiety on its part that all ambassadors provide timely written and archived reports (Queller, 1967, 143–144; Queller, 1973, 184–187; Antonibon, 1939, 13; Baschet, 1862, 11). This concern certainly seems to have succeeded in the case of Constantinople, as no ambassadors failed to register written *relazioni* from the mid-sixteenth century onward.

The motivation for the Senate's concern was clearly expressed in the law of 1524, which stated that when written reports were not filed, "much of value to the city is lost because those who heard the *relazioni* could not remember what had been said" (Queller, 1973, 184–187). In part this was because one purpose of the reports was didactic, they were meant to serve as a type of "manual of political science for the training and edification of the ruling elite" (Valensi, 1993, 14). Lazzaro Soranzo, who cribbed much of his book *L'Ottomanno* from the reports from Constantinople, maintained that they existed as historical examples for "the youth, that they may be raised in the study of political matters; [...] and also so that the Republic might be better governed, with the example of past events and with new information of present events" (Sforza, 1922, 209). Similarly, writers of diplomatic guides stated that because of Venice's practice of producing *relazioni* "there are no better instructed negotiators in Europe than those of Venice" (Callières, 1963, 112–113).

An even more important reason that the Senate required reports from its ambassadors, beyond training budding generations of diplomats, was to provide the Republic with accurate and current information with which to navigate the troubled waters of the sixteenth century. This is why they demanded detailed, regular correspondence from their ambassadors, and why they were so anxious to obtain reflective reports upon the ambassadors' return. As Marino Cavalli stated, it was essential to be informed on all aspects of a diplomatic mission, because "the greater part of the most damaging errors in deliberations proceed from not knowing well the forces and the mode of government of others, nor how much confidence and trust one can have in these, thus knowing and understanding this minutely is of extreme utility, and is a sure way never to commit errors" (Ventura, 1981, 555–556).

Indeed, it is clear that the *relazioni*, once presented, were not archived and forgotten, but rather directly informed Venice's diplomatic relations. When Sebastian Venier was elected bailo in 1627, he consulted documents "from the *secretata*" in



preparation for his posting, "so as not to arrive there without these and thus in a state not able to confront and effectively serve the state's objectives." He did this "knowing full well how necessary instructions in the negotiations of the embassies are to serving the *Patria* well, and especially in [Constantinople], in which all sorts of things of a diverse nature, and of the greatest importance occur" (ASV-SD, Costantinopoli, b. 104, c. 360r). Fifty years later, Giovanni Battista Donà made similarly extensive preparations for his posting to Constantinople: he met with travelers and former diplomats who had been to the city, studied Turkish, and read books and examined diplomatic documents related to the Ottoman Empire (Donado, 1688, 6–7).

The rulers of Venice and their diplomatic representatives needed precise information that would assist them in formulating rational policies that would help preserve their state in the new political realities of the early modern world (Queller, 1973, 176). This was one of the most trying periods in Venetian history, as the city and its land and sea empires faced challenges from all quarters. Most serious was the advance of the Ottoman sultans who made increasing inroads into Venice's eastern Mediterranean *stato da mar* empire of islands and port cities, and into Venetian commercial hegemony in the region. Economically, the successful voyages to Calicut of da Gama and Cabral created a changed situation which threatened to squeeze off the city's commercial lifeblood, the spice trade (Dursteler, 2001b, 43–64). The War of the League of Cambrai and Venice's temporary loss of almost its entire *terraferma* state had a lasting impact on Venetian confidence, and this combined with the disastrous series of Ottoman wars in the century from 1470 to 1570, served final notice to Venice's rulers that the situation in the Italian peninsula and in the Mediterranean had been permanently altered. Venetians recognized this and pragmatically accepted a new political and commercial reality. They realized, in short, that their state was "unequal in strength and situated so as to be easily attacked" (Albèri, 1840, 434). Therefore, throughout the sixteenth century and beyond, the Republic pursued a precarious policy of non-alignment and neutrality, based on an active and able diplomatic corps, buttressed by a strong defensive military presence to deter potential antagonists. These strategies were especially germane to Venice's relationship with the Ottoman Empire.

In order to preserve its state and status, throughout the early sixteenth century the *Signoria* initiated a number of institutional and diplomatic innovations and reforms (Borgherini-Scarabellin, 1925; da Mosto, 1937, 1, 38).<sup>1</sup> This included increasing fi-

1 Evidence of Venetian concern for the Ottoman question includes the 1506 creation of the *V Savi alla Mercanzia*, or board of trade, charged with nurturing Venice's Levantine commercial relations and the 1556 reorganization of the Senate's archives on the Ottomans into their own separate category, the *Senato Costantinopoli*. Only the affairs of the Papacy were deemed important enough to warrant a separate archival series, the *Roma ordinaria*, established in 1560.

nancial investments in the Ottoman mission, more diplomatic personnel in the Ottoman capital, and great care in selecting Venice's chief diplomat in the Porte, the bailo, who played a crucial role in the maintenance and defense of the weakened Venetian state (Dursteler, 2001a, 1–25). The flow of accurate information was key both for officials in Venice and ambassadors and baili going to Constantinople, and the *relazioni* were an important aspect of this information-sharing process. Indeed, between 1507 and 1598 Venice sent 33 baili and 27 extraordinary ambassadors to the Ottoman capital, and the reports produced by these diplomats represent one of the most complete, continuous and revealing collections of *relazioni*. In this period 39 reports were presented to the Senate on the Ottoman Empire, as compared with 27 on the Papacy, 23 on France and 18 on the Empire and Spain (Baschet, 1862, 215; Valensi, 1993, 16). Another component of this institutional imperative for accurate information on the Porte was the significant Venetian investment in maintaining a regular postal service between the lagoon and Constantinople in order to monopolize and exploit the flow of information to and from the Ottoman Empire (Dursteler, 2009, 2, 601–623). The objective of this immense effort and investment was for Venice's rulers "to be so well informed [...] that they could make no fatal missteps:" what was at stake was the survival of the Republic (Davis, 1970, 6–7, 27; Valensi, 1993, 15).

The close relationship between effective diplomacy and information is evident in Lorenzo Bernardo's widely popular *relazione* of 1590. Bernardo had a long and lustrous political career, and enjoyed a unique perspective on the Porte, as one of the rare patricians to have served there twice. He went first as bailo in 1585–87, and presented a detailed report upon his repatriation that lasted over four hours. He returned to the Porte in 1591–92 when he was sent to replace Girolamo Lippomano, who it was believed was engaged in treasonous activities. Upon his return to Venice, Bernardo presented a second, equally lengthy *relazione*, which was hailed as particularly insightful because of its author's extensive experience in the Ottoman Empire (Pillini, 1967, 9, 308–310; Queller, 1973, 182). In it Bernardo emphasizes the importance of accurate and timely information on the Ottomans: This was "a consideration not just for the curious or dilettantes, but to this Senate of the highest necessity" because of Venice's intimate ties with the sultans, which were more important than those of "all the other princes combined." There was nothing more important to the Republic's survival than correct information about the Ottomans. "Thus," according to Bernardo, "hearing about them every once in a while from the baili's *relazioni* cannot be superfluous or boring, because one of the principal things that makes a prince safe and prudently careful in his matters of state is having true and accurate information on the actions of the princes who border him" (Pedani-Fabris, 1996, 313–314).

Indeed, in order to meet the requirement for "true and accurate information," over the course of the sixteenth century, the structure and focus of the *relazioni* became increasingly systematized and didactic. Where reports before 1550 combined "both the curiosity of the traveler and the interest of the merchant and the desire for the learning of the humanist," by 1600 "the viewpoint of the minister and the servant of the state triumphed (Del Negro, 1984, 435)." Instruction manuals for ambassadors became more common and provided directions both on the duties of the ambassador, and the construction of an effective *relazione* (Queller, 1973, 180; Cavalli in Bertelé, 1935, 180). A Venetian ambassadorial guide from the 1570s provides a very specific outline:

*"First, describe the site of the province in which one has been; [...] Second, it is necessary to treat the qualities of this province, [...] Third, it is important to discuss its inhabitants, showing their customs and habits. [...] The order and apparatus of war by land and by sea. Their industries [...] Which merchandise they export and which they import from strangers. The government of the princes or rulers, their richness, nobility, etc. [...] Fourth, it is necessary to cover the particulars of the prince [...] to describe his person, his life, what he does and what his customs are, [...] how much his income is, how many expenses he has, the guard he maintains, the size of his court, and which princes are his friends and which his enemies"* (Queller, 1972, 670).

These were only guidelines, however, and "although strong custom sanctioned the treatment of certain topics, every ambassador quite properly retained great freedom concerning the form of his *relazione*" (Queller, 1973, 181). A close reading of all the early modern Ottoman reports reveals that ambassadors did not feel obligated to conform to this formulaic model. As a result there was significant diversity which depended on both the individual experiences and assumptions of the ambassadors as witnesses, but even more on the situations that they encountered and the specific political expediencies of the moment. The report was, in short, time and context sensitive, and not generally intended to be a timeless work of rhetoric and erudition.

These characteristics are evident in the report of Alvise Renier, who returned from Constantinople in 1550, which contains many of the fundamental elements of the model *relazione*. He describes the sultan's physical appearance and provides some general observations about his character, but only briefly because as he acknowledges, ambassadors meet the ruler only twice, and are thus not well placed to judge him. Renier follows with a discussion of the principle officials in the Porte with whom he treated, assessing their personality and their inclination toward Venice, and he devotes significant attention to the rivalries and intrigues in the Porte, and their impact on Venetian policies. He then develops a detailed examination of the

Ottoman army and fleet, including their size, organization, level of preparation and ability to mobilize, which was information of critical importance to Venice's rulers intent on preserving peace with the sultan. Renier also discusses several specific issues he treated while in the Ottoman capital, including the Uskok problem and the recovery of slaves from the war of 1537–40. It is only in the final section of his report that Renier briefly provides some of the expected cultural commentary representing the "Turk", discussing the depopulation of the countryside (which he attributes to Ottoman tyranny), and the practice of cannibalizing classical ruins for building materials. This is never the focus, however, rather the bulk of the report emphasizes time-sensitive information relevant to current issues in the Veneto-Ottoman relationship (Pedani-Fabris, 1996, *passim*).

Sixty years later, another bailo, Ottaviano Bon, returned from his posting in Constantinople and tendered a *relazione* that presents a suggestive comparative foil to Renier's. Bon begins by stating "I will leave out a discussion on the specifics of the forces, income, the state and government of the empire of Sultan Ahmet, because I know that there is not one of your lords who has not heard them many times from the baili [...] also because they are things described in many books, which can be read easily by whomever might be curious." Instead, he states, his focus will be on the present situation in the empire in three key areas – government, military and finances – which will be more directly applicable and useful to "the public service" (Pedani-Fabris, 1996, 477).

Bon was the scion of one of Venice's oldest and most noble families, and he had a long and illustrious political career, culminating in his election to one of the Republic's highest offices, *Procuratore di San Marco* (Dursteler, 2001a, 9–10). Based on his five years in the Porte, Bon argues that Ottoman power has been greatly reduced in comparison to previous times, which is evidenced in the shortcomings of many of the chief government officials. It is also apparent statistically in the decreased number of soldiers the sultan is able to mobilize, and in his extreme "shortage of money" due to excessive expenditures. Bon then overviews the current situation of the empire's various provinces and their inhabitants, and contends that the internal and external hostilities pursued by the sultan during his reign had seriously reduced his control over these areas. There follows a detailed discussion of the state of Ottoman relations with neighboring states, focusing heavily on attitudes toward Venice and its dominions. Bon addresses the ongoing concerns of Venice's rulers for its exposed *stato da mar*, and suggests concrete ways to discourage any Ottoman aggression, particularly against Corfu and Crete. The *relazione* concludes with a discussion of the sultan, the principle individuals in his government as well as those outside the institutional order who exercise influence. As with Renier, Bon focuses primarily on the current state of Veneto-Ottoman affairs and makes specific, concrete recommendations on how to preserve the peace (Pedani-Fabris, 1996, *passim*).

As both Bon's and Renier's *relazioni* suggest, it became increasingly common in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for many (though not all) ambassadors to skim over, or skip entirely, the more formulaic elements of their reports and to cut straight to the pressing issues facing Venice, which were the matters of greatest interest to their audience. Thus, when Antonio Tiepolo presented his report on the Ottoman Empire in 1575, he announced he would not describe the seraglio or its staff, the sultan, or the wealth of the empire, because, as Bon had also stated, "these are things described in books that are published, and because they are superfluous matters" (Albèri, 1840, 6, 167). A willingness to pass over basic information known to all listeners is similarly evident in Giovanni Michiel's report on Germany: he states that since "'many historians and geographers' had dealt with that place, this authorized him to pass over a detailed description of the location, its regions, cities and people." Many ambassadors chose to leave out a discussion of the history of the state, or to include only a very brief overview of what was becoming increasingly common knowledge, referring their listeners instead to the many texts which treated the Ottoman Empire's history, its geography, the sultans' genealogy, etc (Del Negro, 1984, 434).

The need for accurate information and the significant resources and effort invested to acquire and disseminate it evident in the *relazioni*, seems ultimately to have succeeded in producing useful, unique insights into the Ottoman Empire that fulfilled the institutional imperative of early modern Venice's rulers. The same information was for Ranke, and continues to be for modern scholars, invaluable in understanding Venice, the Ottoman Empire and the broader Mediterranean world. Indeed, while Venetianists such as Preto and Benzoni have mobilized pointed critiques of the *relazioni* and other similar documents, Ottoman scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of Venetian sources to writing Ottoman history. According to Robert Mantran, the *relazioni*, the dispatches, and other Venetian sources "constitute today a unique mine without equal for the study of the Ottoman Empire" (Mantran, 1977, 112, 114–115; Gökbilgin, 1979, 277). Cemal Kafadar has noted, "the *Archivio di Stato* of Venice is certainly the most important [of all European collections for Ottoman history], in certain matters surpassing even the Istanbul archives, [...] Venetian diplomats were well informed and insightful observers of Ottoman politics, institutions, finances and trade" (Kafadar, 1994, 629; Pedani-Fabris, 1997, 75). Suraiya Faroqhi has similarly written that while "it is tempting to disregard the testimony of European travelers altogether [...] many kinds of information that we urgently need have been preserved only by these authors, [...] and thus] the information relayed by Venetian, English, or French travelers and embassy personnel is so important that we cannot simply neglect it" (Suraiya, 1999, 15, 110). While not advocating a return to earlier practices of writing Ottoman history entirely from European sources, Venetian sources have been recognized as essential complements without which certain as-

pects of Ottoman history could not be written (Rubiés, 2000, 389; Subrahmanyam, 2005, 20).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is revealing that some of the more unflattering characterizations of Ottoman rulers and the disorder of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made by Venetian ambassadors, and held up by critics as evidence of the Veneto-centric biases of Venetian sources, have been shown to have been commonly held by early modern Ottoman observers, and have been fundamentally buttressed by more recent historiography (Shaw, 1974, 120; Valensi, 1993, 79, 85). This reconsideration of the *relazioni* and other European sources is part of a larger reaction against the binaries of the Orientalist model. While they were certainly culturally situated, early modern ambassadors, pilgrims, travelers and others still proved able to "see" in a fashion that was not "determined by a kind of pre-defined power strategy, or [...] ideology." As a result, "inter-cultural dialogue" as well as misunderstanding was possible, and observers were often able "to portray, record, or analyze another culture and the actions of its members" in a reasonably accurate and informed fashion that can tell us something about the object observed (Schwartz, 1994, 1, 6–7; Rubiés, 2000, XVII, 393).

And so it seems that the pendulum may be swinging back in favor of the *relazioni*. It is clear that so-called western sources, like Venice's ambassadorial reports or travel accounts, cannot so easily be dismissed as simple and solely self-reflective representations unable to accurately depict anything tangible or concrete. The Venetian informational imperative in which the *relazioni* were created suggests that these storied sources may be able to cast an accurate light onto the Ottoman political and cultural realities that the ambassadors encountered. They do not simply manifest an imagined or invented Ottoman Empire, nor do they always simply refract and distort the image of their creators onto the Ottoman visage. While the *relazioni* certainly construct an image of and represent a witness to the Ottoman Empire, this was not always or entirely reflective of Venice's self-image, but rather of the need for accurate and timely information to assist the republic's rulers in navigating this critical relationship.

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2 A parallel development has occurred in Indian studies, which initially devalued European accounts' ability "to transcend their own prejudices and assumptions." More recently, scholars "have emphasized the crucial role of foreign descriptions" for understanding Indian history.

## OPISOVANJE ALI POPAČENJE "TURKOV"? POROČILA BENEŠKIH VELEPOSŁANIKOV V KONSTANTINOPLU KOT ZGODOVINSKI VIR

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## POVZETEK

*Že vsaj od časa Leopolda von Rankeja zasedajo slovita končna poročila ("relazioni") beneških veleposlanikov posebno mesto med zgodovinskimi pričevanji. Zgodovinarji so njihove avtorje imeli pogosto za brezčutne in visoko izobražene priče dogajanja na dvorih, na katerih so služili, njihova poročila pa, pogosto nekritično, za nepristranske in povsem zanesljive ocene. Toda v zadnjem času so nekateri strokovnjaki resno podvomili, ali se jih lahko obravnava kot uporabna, še zlasti pa nesporna zgodovinska pričevanja.*

*Kritiki poročilom večinoma očitajo dve stvari. Prvič, kot zgodovinski vir ti dokumenti niso kaj dosti vredni, saj beneški diplomati niso poznali najboljčutljivejših in najpomembnejših političnih informacij, tako da je bilo v njihovem pisanju vse polno čenč in napačnih informacij.*

*In drugič – in ta očitek je veliko hujši – beneški diplomati so bili izredno pristranski in so vse presojali zgolj in samo z beneškega zornega kota, zaradi česar so bili kot poročevalci nenatančni in nezanesljivi. Njihovih poročil zato ne moremo uporabljati kot pričevanj o določeni kulturi, temveč kot vir informacij o kulturni držbi in vrednotah samih opazovalcev. Pri vsem skupaj je še najbolj ironično, da so te kritike izrekli predvsem zgodovinarji iz Benetk, in sicer prav v času, ko so poročila na novo odkrivali in ocenjevali njihovi kolegi iz Osmanskega cesarstva.*

*V prispevku se avtor osredotoča na beneška poročila o Osmanskem cesarstvu. Poskuša dokazati, da nam lahko veliko povedo tako o posameznikih kot vladajočem razredu, ki so jih napisali. In kar je morda pomembnejše: če jih vnovič premostrimo znotraj institucionalnega konteksta, v katerem so nastala, se resda ne izkažejo za idealen von Rankejev vir, kljub temu pa nam učinkovito odstirajo pogled na politično in kulturno dogajanje v Osmanskem cesarstvu, pa tudi na držbo in interese samih Benetk. Nikakor ne bi mogli trditi, da nam samo prikažejo neko umišljeno ali izmišljeno Osmansko cesarstvo ali zgolj nanesejo poteze njihovih avtorjev na osmanski obraz. Resda ustvarijo določeno podobo Osmanskega cesarstva, vendar to še ne pomeni, da v njej vedno ali docela odseva beneška samopodoba.*

*Ključne besede: Benetke, Osmansko cesarstvo, veleposlaniška poročila, orientalizem*

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