

FROM VENICE TO CAIRO:  
NOTES FROM AN EARLY 16<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY VOYAGE  
ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

LAURA BENEDETTI  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



I. *Zaccaria Pagani's Journey*

On 22 January 1512, Zaccaria Pagani embarked on a galley en route from Venice to Egypt as part of a large delegation headed by special envoy Domenico Trevisan. Over the course of several months, Pagani and his companions made stops at all the main Mediterranean ports, such as Umago, Zadar, Split, Zakynthos and Candia, until they reached Alexandria, where they boarded a lighter vessel sailing to Cairo via the Nile. After almost three months in the city, the delegation set out on its journey back, finally casting anchor in Venice's harbor on 23 October 1512, nine months after their departure. Pagani recorded the details of the expedition in an engaging and recently rediscovered travelogue that not only chronicles the relations between the Republic of Venice and the Mamluk sultanate of Cairo, but also provides a wealth of information about sailing techniques, cultural practices, psychological traits, and diplomatic protocols.<sup>1</sup> This essay aims to examine some features of Pagani's account while discussing the circumstances surrounding his voyage and the editorial history of his work, from the manuscript to its most recent edition.<sup>2</sup>

Much was at stake in ambassador Trevisan's mission, as a harmonious relationship with the Mamluk sultanate was crucial for the prosperity of the *Serenissima*. For centuries, the Mamluks brought from the Far East to Egypt spices

---

<sup>1</sup> ZACCARIA PAGANI, *Viaggio del Magnifico et Preclarissimo Cavalier et Procurator di San Marco Domino Dominicho Trivisano*, in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Archives et Manuscrits, Italien 2111.

<sup>2</sup> LAURA BENEDETTI, ENRICO MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo. Il viaggio di Zaccaria Pagani nel primo Cinquecento*, Il Poligrafo, Padua 2021. Research for this volume and for this article was made possible by the Renaissance Society of America, the Bogliasco Foundation, and the Delmas Foundation.

and other goods, which the Venetians in turn transported to their hometown and sold throughout Europe. Cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, but also sandalwood, cotton, linen, dates, lemons, and capers, constituted the foundations of the republic's financial well-being,<sup>3</sup> not to mention pepper, the most sought-after commodity, which comprised the bulk of Venetian imports.<sup>4</sup> Apart from operating a regular schedule of galleys – the so-called *mude* – that visited Levantine ports at certain times of the year,<sup>5</sup> the Venetians could rely on well-established communities. From the beginning of the thirteenth century, Venice was the only Western power that ran two *fondaci* in Alexandria, serving both as warehouses and lodging for the merchants. Venetians were also allowed to worship in their own church and even drink and sell wine inside the *fondaci*. All these prerogatives were clear signs of the value that the Egyptians placed in their commercial partnership with the *Serenissima*.<sup>6</sup>

As the Mamluks controlled Jerusalem and other holy sites of Christianity, the sultan's cooperation was also crucial in another sector of the Venetian economy, namely the organization of Christian pilgrimages. Travelers from all over Europe gathered in Venice to be transported to Egypt and Syria, where they were entrusted to Mamluk authorities for the rest of their complex itinerary.<sup>7</sup> Only a cordial relationship between Venice and Cairo could guarantee the safety of the pilgrims and a successful outcome for their journey.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, however, some important developments put this long-standing partnership to test. Vasco da Gama's circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and the discovery of a new route to India threatened to bring an end to Venetian supremacy in the spice trade. In his second trip alone, in the years 1502–1503, Da Gama brought back « nearly 1,700 tons of spices, i.e. about the same as annual Venetian imports from the Middle East at the end of the fifteenth century ». <sup>8</sup> Not only were the

---

<sup>3</sup> WILLIAM HEYD, *Le colonie commerciali degli italiani in Oriente*, Antonelli and Basadonna, Venice 1868, p. 235–236.

<sup>4</sup> See the data presented by PAUL FREEDMAN, « Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value », *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, 80 (2005), p. 1209–1227. See also GINO LUZZATTO, *Storia economica di Venezia dall'XI al XVI secolo*, Centro Internazionale delle arti e del costume, Venice 1961, p. 242, and SALVATORE COGNETTI DE MARTIIS, *I due sistemi della politica commerciale*, in *Politica commerciale dei più importanti stati civili nell'ultimo decennio*, UTET, Turin 1896, vol. II, p. CLXXXIV.

<sup>5</sup> BENJAMIN ARBEL, « The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria », *Mamlūk Studies Review*, 2 (2004), p. 37–86.

<sup>6</sup> WILLIAM HEYD, *Histoire du commerce du Levant*, Émile Lechevalier, Paris 1886, p. 411–412.

<sup>7</sup> For some accounts of these travels see ANTONIO LANZA, MARCELLINA TRONCARELLI, *Pellegrini scrittori. Viaggiatori toscani del Trecento in Terrasanta*, Ponte alle Grazie, Florence 1990. See also ANTONIO LANZA, « La visione del mondo arabo nelle relazioni dei pellegrini scrittori del Quattrocento », *Carte di viaggio*, 1 (2008), p. 11–33.

<sup>8</sup> ANGUS MADDISON, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, OECD Publishing, Paris 2001, p. 63.

Portuguese able to import to Europe an extraordinary quantity of spices, but they could do so without relying on intermediaries, which meant higher profits than those of their competitors.<sup>9</sup> For the *Serenissima*, this was an unmitigated and unexpected disaster – an unforeseeable evil (« il male non pensato »), to use Pietro Bembo's poignant definition.<sup>10</sup> The new route not only posed a serious financial threat to Venice and Cairo, but also strained on their relationship, as opinions diverged over the best way to confront the Portuguese threat. For the Venetians, military intervention was out of the question. Supporting the Muslim sultanate in the fight against the very Catholic Portuguese monarchy, as sultan Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī would have liked, could have serious repercussions insofar as it would put the *Serenissima* on a collision course with other European states and in particular with Pope Julius II. This led to the search of other possible solutions. Benedetto Sanuto, special envoy to Cairo, went as far as suggesting the creation of a passage between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, a sort of precursor to the Suez Canal.<sup>11</sup> Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī's lukewarm response to the idea and perceived lack of initiative disconcerted the Venetians: « [H]e didn't seem to take the matter seriously, and said he would take care of it [...], but he won't », reported Benedetto Sanudo in front of the Senate.<sup>12</sup> His bleak assessment was shared by Bartolo Contarini, who wrote from Damascus that the sultan was only willing to react to the Portuguese threat in words, but not in deeds.<sup>13</sup>

The contemporary rise to power of the charismatic Persian shah, Ismā'īl I, made matters even more complex. The Persians were traditional allies in Venice's struggle against the Turks, but Ismā'īl's growing influence in the region was a source of concern for Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī, especially after the Persian conquest of Baghdad. Aware of the danger that a close relationship with the Shah could entail, Pietro Zen, the Venetian consul in Damascus, acted with great caution. He refused to meet personally with Ismā'īl's messengers and, while facilitating their journey to Venice, he made sure they would not be accompanied by Venetians.<sup>14</sup> All these precautions were not sufficient to avert a major diplomatic incident. In the summer of 1510, the Mamluk governor of Birecik

---

<sup>9</sup> MADDISON, *The World Economy*, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> PIETRO BEMBO, *Della Istoria Viniziana*, Società Tipografica de' Classici Italiani, Milan 1809, p. 347.

<sup>11</sup> RINALDO FULIN, « Il canale di Suez e la Repubblica di Venezia », *Archivio veneto*, 2 (1871), p. 175–199. On the differences between the Venetian and the Mamluk perception of the Portuguese threat see MARCO MIOTTO, « Le navi del Soldano e le speranze di Venezia », *History Studies*, 3/2 (2011), p. 301–320.

<sup>12</sup> « Il ditto Soldan mostrava non stimar, dicendo provederia, [...] però niuna provision farà » (MARINO SANUTO, *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto, 1496–1533, dall'autografo Marciano Ital. Cl. VII Codd. CDLXIX–CDLXXVII*, 58 vol., F. Visentini, Venice 1879–1903, t. v, col. 140).

<sup>13</sup> « El soldan a le cosse di Coloqut nulla provision fa, salvo parole » (ibid., t. vi, col. 68).

<sup>14</sup> Francesca Lucchetta offers a detailed account of these events in « L'affare Zen in Levante nel primo Cinquecento », *Studi veneziani*, 10 (1968), p. 109–207.

arrested some Venetian merchants who carried incriminating letters to several European rulers. The one addressed to the Doge was particularly damning, as it announced a campaign aimed at conquering not only «the country of the Turks» but also Mamluk-controlled Damascus, and asked for military support from the *Serenissima*.<sup>15</sup> To make matters even worse, one of the merchants who carried the letter revealed under torture that contacts with Ismā'īl had been facilitated by none else than Pietro Zen. This is precisely the scenario that the consul had tried to avoid. The letter, together with the carrier's confession, not only disclosed Ismail's bellicose intentions, but also the Venetian government's connivance, if not complicity, in his plan. The sultan's reaction was prompt and harsh. He imprisoned Pietro Zen, Tommaso Contarini (the Venetian consul in Alexandria), and many merchants, suspended commercial relations with Venice, and barred access to the holy sites. Zen's report of his tense hearings before the sultan attests to a deep crisis in the relationship between the two states. The incriminating letters were in fact only one item in Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī's list of allegations. The Venetians, he maintained, were proving unreliable commercial partners, and had even provided logistical support to the Hospitallers of Rhodes after their attack on some Mamluk ships.<sup>16</sup> In vain did the *Serenissima* offer elaborate justifications and professions of friendship in a letter that stressed its long-standing and privileged relationship with the sultanate, denied any collusion with the Persians, and pledged renewed commitment in the fight against piracy.<sup>17</sup>

Several months passed, but the situation did not improve. It became increasingly clear that only a special envoy could attend to such a complicated and delicate state of affairs. Indeed, both the consuls and some merchants in their letters express their belief that only a highly esteemed representative, endowed with lavish gifts, could mollify the sultan.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the Venetian senate could not authorize a diplomatic mission for several months. This crisis in fact could not have come at a worst moment for Venice which, in the same years, suffered major defeats in its fight against a coalition of the other European states (the League of Cambrai), as well as excommunication from the Catholic church. The situation suddenly improved in the fall of 1511 when Pope Julius II, concerned about rising French influence, decided to form a new coalition, the

<sup>15</sup> « [...] al principio de primavera li nostri standardi et bandiere victoriose saranno verso el paese di Turchi et Damasco. La via del'amor serà questa: quando venirà questa nostra brigata predicta, vui ni mandereti persone che sapia butar bombarde e di quelle trazer » (SANUTO, *I Diarii*, p. 190).

<sup>16</sup> SANUTO, *I Diarii*, t. XII, col. 236–239. On the Hospitallers' capture of the sultan's ship see HEYD, *Histoire*, vol. II, p. 538, and ALBRECHT FUESS, « Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors: The Naval Policy of the Mamluks », *Mamlūk Studies Review*, 5 (2001), p. 58–59.

<sup>17</sup> The letter, dated June 20, 1511, is now in Archivio Statale Veneto, Senato, Deliberazioni, Secreti, Registri, reg. 44, 42 r.–43 r.

<sup>18</sup> See the letters included in SANUTO, *I Diarii*, t. XII, col. 235, 238, 239 and 381.

Holy League, which included Venice. This gave the Serenissima some much-needed respite and the opportunity to select a special envoy to properly address the situation in Egypt. The choice fell on Domenico Trevisan, an experienced diplomat who had just successfully negotiated the peace agreement with pope Julius II.<sup>19</sup> For his mission to Cairo, Trevisan was put in charge of a particularly large delegation which included another prominent officer, Andrea de Franceschi.<sup>20</sup> And it was precisely as an attendant to de Franceschi that Zaccaria Pagani travelled, as he himself affirms in the what could be considered both the title of and the introduction to his travelogue:

Journey of the magnificent and most illustrious Sir Domenico Trevisan, Knight and Representative of Saint Mark, worthiest ambassador of the Venetian state, to the most serene Great Sultan of Cairo, with a salary of 300 ducats per months, and 1,000 ducats as a gift before His Excellency's departure with a retinue of twenty people, among whom I, Zaccaria Pagani from Cividale di Belluno, was enlisted in the service of his Lordship Sir Andrea de' Franceschi, ducal secretary of Venice.<sup>21</sup>

This introduction already shows some characteristics of Pagani's writing, particularly his attention to the practical aspects of the journey, such as Trevisan's salary. As they follow the author in his itinerary, readers learn all sorts of information, from the daily number of chickens eaten at the sultan's court to the estimated value of the house where Trevisan resides in Alexandria. It is possible that such a fastidious attention to detail should not only be attributed to the author's personality, but also to his attempt to imitate the style of *Itinerario di Germania*, the work in which Andrea de Franceschi described his voyage to Germany.<sup>22</sup> The lives of these two men show in fact a certain similarity. Andrea de Franceschi, who exactly twenty years before had visited Germany as an attendant to the then Secretary of the Serenissima, Giorgio Federici, was now traveling to Egypt as a secretary himself. In that capacity, he could bring along an attendant, and chose Zaccaria Pagani, a man who belonged to a noble family from de Franceschi's own hometown, Cividale di Belluno. Given the circumstances, it

---

<sup>19</sup> I would like to thank GIUSEPPE GULLINO for allowing me to consult his entry on Domenico Trevisan, forthcoming in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*.

<sup>20</sup> See SERGIO ZAMPERETTI, « De Franceschi, Andrea », *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome 1986, vol. XXXVI, p. 24-26.

<sup>21</sup> « Viaggio del Magnifico et Preclarissimo Cavalier et Procurator di San Marco Domino Dominicho Trivisano, ambasciator dignissimo per lo Illustrissimo Dominio Veneto al Serenissimo Signor Gran Soldano al Caero, cum salario de ducati 300 al mexe, et ducati 1000 de dono avanti Sua Magnificenzia si parta cum famiglia di persone xx, nel numero di la quale io Zacharia Pagan da Civaldi di Bellun mi atrovava al servitio di sua Signoria secretario Messer Andrea di Franceschi, ducale secretario veneto » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 49).

<sup>22</sup> ANDREA DE FRANCESCHI, « Itinerario di Germania dell'anno 1492 », ed. ENRICO SIMONSFELD, *Miscellanea di storia veneta*, 2/9 (1903), p. 275-345.

was only normal for Pagani to consider de Franceschi somewhat of a mentor and a role model. As the mission to Germany constituted the prelude for de Franceschi's brilliant career, Pagani probably hoped that the trip to Egypt could serve a similar function in his own life. The similarities between the two men extend to their writings. They both keep track of the daily distance their group travels and the food they eat, and both are fascinated with the rivers they encounter – the Danube and the Nile, respectively.

The introductory passage shows another characteristic of Pagani's prose, namely the reverence towards authorities, such as the « most illustrious » Domenico Trevisan and the « most serene » sultan of Cairo. This feature seems to suggest that his report had some kind of official function, or at the very least that it could be reviewed by his superiors. In other words, the travelogue does not appear to be simply a memoir for the sole benefit of its author. Indeed, it begins as an impersonal account in which Pagani disappears or, more precisely, is subsumed in the first-person plural:

On January 22, 1512 we went to Poveglia [...] We stayed in Poveglia for four days [...] On the 26 of the same month, which was a Monday, as the sun rose, we went out the port of Malamocco, and that day and the following night we stayed at sea [...] until in the evening [...] we reached Umago, a castle in Istria, 100 miles from Venice.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, as the voyage progresses, Pagani's focus changes. Without giving up his role as faithful reporter, he begins to take a genuine interest in the lands he passes through and the people he sees.<sup>24</sup> The first manifestation of this new, inquisitive attitude is almost amusing for modern readers. In Candia, he witnesses a highly unusual phenomenon:

It seems to me I should not neglect to mention something rare and memorable: the mother in law of the Magnificent Sir Girolamo Cornaro is still alive, and so is her mother, and her mother's mother; while her daughter – who is the wife of the above-mentioned Sir Girolamo – has a daughter, and I saw them all, so that the oldest has seen the fifth generation come out of her womb, and they are all of the

---

<sup>23</sup> « Adì xxii zenaro MDXII [...] cum barche andassemo a Poveia [...] In quello loco di Poveia dimorassemo giorni 4 [...] Adì 26 dicto, et fo de luni, nel apparir del giorno, uscissemo del porto de Malamocco, et quel giorno et la sequente nocte stessemo in mare [...], adeo che la sera [...] giongemo a Umago, castello de l'Ystria lutan da Venetia miglia 100 » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 49–50).

<sup>24</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this development see ENRICO MUSACCHIO, « Il Viaggio di Zaccaria Pagani », *Letteratura Italiana Antica*, 22 (2021), p. 273–281.

female sex, that is, five women who have come out from one another, and all of them are alive, and I saw the oldest one in church.<sup>25</sup>

Like a line of Russian dolls, these women form an ordered succession, « so that the oldest has seen the fifth generation come out of her womb ». Pagani is positively amazed. Almost apologetically (« it seems to me I should not neglect to mention »), he abandons his role as an impassive chronicler and switches to the first person (« I saw the oldest one in church »). As trivial as the encounter with the Cornaro women may seem, it signals a shift in Pagani's narration, that becomes much more enticing for a modern reader. The humble attendant becomes akin to those intrepid travelers who not only for practical reasons, but also for their irrepressible « desire to see »,<sup>26</sup> visited distant lands. Shedding off the guise of the accountant whose only concern is to keep track of the miles covered each day, Pagani begins to savor the rich new world laid out before him. His description of bananas, for instance, is quite memorable: « They are almost similar to cucumbers, they are sweet and can be peeled like figs, and it would be impossible to describe how exquisite they are ».<sup>27</sup>

This new, bolder attitude extends beyond the sensorial into the political, when he harshly critiques the sultan's rule. Struck by the desolation of Alexandria, Pagani blames excessive taxation:

The reason for such destruction is the enormous abuse of the rulers, who fleece their people to such an extent that they are forced to abandon their land and their lodgings. Consequently, many houses are uninhabited, and deteriorate in a short time.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> « El mi par de non dover preterir una tal cosa memoranda et rara, che la suosera del Magnifico Domino Hyeronimo Cornaro soprascritto si atrova viva, et ha viva etiam sua madre, et la madre di sua madre; et sua figliuola, qual è moglie del prefato Domino Hyeronimo, si atrova etiam una figliola; et tute quante ho viduto io, sì che la più antiqua ha visto la quinta generatione uscita dil ventre suo, et tute sono in genere femenino, zioè cinque done uscite una de l'altra, et tute vive, et la più vechia ho visto in chiesa » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 59).

<sup>26</sup> I am referring to DARIA PEROCCO, *Per desiderio di vedere... Viaggi e narrazioni di viaggio tra Cinque e Seicento*, Argo, Lecce 2019, which in turn alludes to a sentence by Alessandro Magno, « per desiderio di vedere non temevamo pericolo alcuno » (« because of our desire to see, we didn't fear any danger »), in ALESSANDRO MAGNO, *Voyages (1557-1565)*, ed. and trans. WILFRED NAAR, Schena Editore-Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Fasano-Paris 2002, p. 657.

<sup>27</sup> « [S]ono ala similitudine quasi di cogumeri, dolci como figi, et schorzasi como essi, et è tanto suavissimo, che impossibel sarebe volerlo descrivere » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 67).

<sup>28</sup> « La causa di tal distructione sono le tirranie grandissime de li Signori che scortegano tanto li loro populi che gliè forza abandonar la patria et proprie stantie, et per tal causa le caxe vanno inhabitate, e in breve ruinano » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 63).

Pagani's remarks surprisingly echo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, completed only a year after Trevisan's journey. The Mamluk sultanate posed a problem for the Florentine writer, in that it escaped the neat distinction he establishes at the beginning of his work. « Principalities are either hereditary, in which the family has been long established; or they are new », <sup>29</sup> he confidently proclaims in the very first chapter of *The Prince*. Yet, he is later forced to admit exceptions to this rule. Machiavelli's focus on structure, rather than ideology or religion, allows him to discover similarities between two very different rulers – the Mamluk sultan and the pope:

But you must note that the state of the Soldan is unlike all other principalities, for the reason that it is like the Christian pontificate, which cannot be called either a hereditary or a newly formed principality; because the sons of the old prince are not the heirs, but he who is elected to that position by those who have authority, and the sons remain only noblemen.<sup>30</sup>

Machiavelli attributed the sultan's scarce concern for the welfare of his subjects precisely to this mode of transmission of power: « The kingdom of the Soldan [...] being entirely in the hands of soldiers, it follows again that, without regard to the people, he must keep them his friends ». <sup>31</sup> Pagani's direct observation about excessive taxation complements Machiavelli's theory by focusing on one particular aspect of the sultan's rule and its consequences on peoples' lives, drawing conclusions that modern historians have essentially confirmed.<sup>32</sup>

Trevisan carried out his mission during seven meetings with the sultan, discussing increasingly delicate topics, including the Serenissima's role in the fight against the Portuguese, access to the holy sites, and the price of pepper. The

---

<sup>29</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, trans. WILLIAM K. MARRIOTT, Dutton, London et al. 1980, p. 7. « E' principati sono o ereditarii, de' quali el sangue del loro signore ne sia suto lungo tempo principe, o e' sono nuovi » (NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Il principe*, ed. LUIGI FIRPO, Einaudi, Turin 1972, p. 13).

<sup>30</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, p. 162-163. « Et avete a notare che questo stato del Soldano è disforme da tutti li altri principati; perché elli è simile al pontificato cristiano, il quale non si può chiamare né principato ereditario né principato nuovo; perché non e' figliuoli del principe vecchio sono eredi e rimangono signori, ma colui che è eletto a quel grado da coloro che ne hanno autorità » (NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Il Principe*, p. 94-95).

<sup>31</sup> NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*, p. 162-163: « [E]l regno del Soldano sendo tutto in mano de' soldati, conviene che ancora lui, senza rispetto de' populi, se li mantenga amici » (NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Il principe*, p. 94).

<sup>32</sup> See JONATHAN P. BERKEY, « Culture and Society During the Late Middle Ages », *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1: *Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*, ed. C. F. PETRY, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 375-411; AFAF LUTFI AL-SAYYID MARSOT, *A History of Egypt from the Arab Conquest to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 43; and ANDRÉ CLOT, *L'Égypte des mamelouks. L'empire des esclaves (1250-1517)*, Perrin, Paris 1996, p. 182.



long stay in Cairo, from 7 May to 2 August 1512, gave Pagani the opportunity to become familiar with the city and its people. He reports that, at night, at every four or five houses a light shone over the door to increase public safety; he is fascinated by the sight of women who are completely covered in white linen except for the hands, which are embellished by red nail polish; he notices men who, on the contrary, roam the streets completely naked and are reputed to be saints.<sup>33</sup> He also records an interesting episode that seems to imply a certain degree of initiative on his part, as well as greater independence from his Venetian travel companions. His acquaintance with some « Greek friends » – presumably people he met during his stay in Cairo – allows him to see the prior of the monastery of Saint Catherine, who shows him a precious document: « It is written in Arabic. I saw it and held it in my hands. It prescribes that nobody should harass the monastery and its monks ».<sup>34</sup>

Pagani's emotion is understandable: the document he describes seems to be the *Ashtiname of Muhammad*, i.e. a charter allegedly signed by Mohammed and entrusted to the monks of the Mount Sinai Saint Catherine's Monastery. It was, in essence, the document that granted Christians permission to practice their faith in Egypt. Pagani's emphatic switch to the first person and insistence on sensorial experience (« I saw it and held it in my hands ») signals his awareness of the document's historical, cultural, and religious relevance.

The Venetians were by no means alone in their attempt to strengthen their relationship with the sultan. As Egyptian chronicler Ibn Iyâs wrote, no less than fourteen foreign ambassadors visited the city in a month.<sup>35</sup> This hectic diplomatic activity can perhaps be linked to the events unfolding in the neighboring Ottoman Empire. In April 1512, in fact, Selim I rose to power after forcing his father, Bayezid II, to resign. On May 26, when Trevisan and his retinue had already been in Cairo for three weeks, Bayezid died. This change in leadership would effectively make any agreement between the Mamluk sultanate and the Republic of Venice rather short-lived, as Selim's military campaigns would cause Qanşūh al-Ghūrī's disappearance in the battle of Marj Dabiq in 1516, his successor's brutal death in Cairo a year later, and the end of over 250 years of Mamluk rule over Egypt. In that summer of 1512, however, few could have guessed what was about to happen, and foreign dignitaries kept negotiating prices and privileges with the sultan. Supported by the entire Venetian community in Egypt, Trevisan spared no efforts to reach his goals. He wore his

---

<sup>33</sup> BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 87–88.

<sup>34</sup> « È scripto in arabesco. Io lo ho veduto et tenuto in mano: comanda a tuti che non deba molestar dicto monastero over suoi religiosi » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 84).

<sup>35</sup> IBN IYAS, *Journal d'un bourgeois du Caire*, ed. G. WIET, 2 vol., Armand Colin, Paris 1955–1960, vol. I, p. 251–252.

best outfits and gave out impressive gifts,<sup>36</sup> while a band of Venetian trumpeters provided the soundtrack to his mission. The show went on as usual, in spite of disturbing news from Istanbul. And what a show it was. Pagani's painstaking account provides a vivid picture of the elaborate protocol that informed the meetings, starting with Trevisan's first encounter with the sultan:

As he entered [the courtyard], with all his retinue and the four young men who lifted his cloak, two on each side, the Magnificent Ambassador took his velvet hat off while looking towards the Sultan, who was at the other end of the courtyard. The Ambassador bowed, touched the ground with his hand and brought both hands to his mouth and then over his head, following the ceremonial protocol of the tribute that befits such a great ruler. Having moved forward fifteen steps, the ambassador repeated the same action with his entire retinue. Having reached the furthest marking, which was about twenty steps away from the Sultan—a space entirely covered with carpets that were not to be stepped on—and having bowed in a similar way, he put his hand to his chest and took out the letter from the Doge, which was of a purplish color with a hanging golden bull and golden strings and ribbons. [...] He kissed the letter, placed it over his head, and handed it to the Great Emir, who took it to the Sultan and opened it. [...] Once he had finished reading the letter, the Sultan asked through the Emir, who walked up and down between the two, how the Doge was doing, and welcomed the Ambassador. The Ambassador gave the prescribed answer and took four steps backwards, while the four youth lifted his cloak so that he would not trip over it and fall down. After performing a most respectful bow, the Ambassador turned around and we all went home.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> The magnificence of the Venetians made an impression in the streets of Cairo. Ibn Iyâs has words of admiration for the gifts Trevisan brought (IBN IYAS, *Journal d'un bourgeois*, p. 242).

<sup>37</sup> « Ne la quale entrato, il clarissimo Ambasciatore cum tuta la sua compagnia et 4 gioveni che li teneva il manto levato, doi per lato, si cavò la bereta de veludo, guardando verso il Signor Soldano, quale era da l'altro capo di la corte. Chinatosi, pose la mano in terra, et ambe se le pose ala bocha, et poi sopra del capo, secundo il costume de le reverenzie se richiede a tanto Re. Factosi un pocho più avanti circa quindici passa, fece il simile cum tuta la compagnia hor tandem. Tiratosi a l'ultimo segno, qual era circa venti passa lutan dal Signore, qual spatio era coperto tuto di tapedi sopra de li quali non bisognava ascender, et facta un'altra simile reverenza, si pose la mano in seno et cavò una lettera ducale tenta in pavonazo cum la bolla pendente doro, cordoni et fiochi doro [...], la quale basciata e postasela sopra del capo la consignò al Memendar grandando, loqual la portò al Signor Soldano et etiam la aperse [...]. La qual fornita di legere, fece adimandar per el Memendar, qual andava suxo e zoxo, como stava il suo Doxe et etiam che sua Magnificencia fosse il ben venuto, et simil altre parolle. A le quale facta la prescritta risposta per esso Magnifico Oratore, se retirò in drieto per spatio di passa 4, pur cum li 4 gioveni che li levavano il manto, che ricessando non zappasse suxo et cascasse. Et facta ossequiosissima reverenza se rivoltò, et se ne venissemo a caxa » (BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 71).

A keen observer, Pagani records every detail of this important event. After travelling more than five months, Trevisan is admitted to the presence of Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī and can plead for the release of the prisoners. The occasion is solemn and marked by the envoy's decision to don his best outfit, which did not go unnoticed in the streets of Cairo. Ibn Iyās spotted Trevisan on his way to the hearing and described him in his chronicle as an imposing old man with a white beard, whose appearance commanded respect, and who was wearing a yellow suit under a golden-colored cloak.<sup>38</sup>

Pagani's close attention to every aspect of the meeting – from the number of steps the envoy takes to the color of the letter he presents to the sultan – should not be interpreted as a personal idiosyncrasy, but rather as a reminder of the very structured protocol that informed the interaction between the two men. When Pagani reports that Trevisan replied to the sultan with a « prescribed answer », he seems to be aware that the envoy was following a precise set of instruction. Indeed, the Doge, Leonardo Loredan, had given Trevisan a letter that specified the topics to be discussed at each meeting, from the standard professions of respect and good will to the specifics of the mission.<sup>39</sup> Trevisan's gifts, clothes, and body language, were all meant to show reverence toward the sultan, while at the same time convey the authority and wealth of Venice that he embodied. Diplomacy, an indispensable political tool, was also a performance, as recent studies have pointed out.<sup>40</sup> Pagani's contemporaries also seemed to be very aware that successful negotiations entailed convincing acting and effective *mise en scène*. On 2 May 1513 – less than a year after the end of Pagani's journey – one of the doge's nieces held her wedding ceremony in Venice. A huge celebration was organized and envoys from Rome, Spain, and Hungary were treated to a rich banquet with over 420 participants. After the banquet, the doge entertained his guests with a theatrical performance whose actors pretended to be the representatives of various rulers, such as the pope, the King of France, and the Sultan of Cairo. There were musical interludes, dances, the offering of gifts, and speeches in the fake envoys' original language and in translation. Marino Sanuto,

---

<sup>38</sup> IBN IYAS, *Journal d'un bourgeois*, vol. I, p. 199.

<sup>39</sup> Like Pagani's manuscript, this letter also ended up in Schefer's possession and, after his death, in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Archives et Manuscrits, Italien 2110, *Instructions secrètes du doge Léonard Lauredan à Dominique Trevisan*). It is now included in BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 103–108.

<sup>40</sup> See in particular TIMOTHY HAMPTON, *Fictions of Embassy. Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca–London 2009, and MARK HUTCHINGS, « Diplomacy Narratives as Documents of Performance », in ANA SÁEZ-HIDALGO, BERTA CANO-ECHEVARRÍA (eds.), *Exile, Diplomacy and Texts: Exchanges between Iberia and the British Isles, 1500–1767*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2021, p. 208–228 (<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1sr6jg2.16>> accessed 15 September 2021).

who describes the event, reports that the performance lasted several hours.<sup>41</sup> The fact that diplomacy was literally turned into entertainment is a powerful indication of the performative elements intrinsic to the elaborate protocol official representatives in foreign lands were expected to follow.

Even the way Trevisan managed to obtain the release of Piero Zen is theatrical. In order to mend the strained relationship with the sultan, it was crucial that Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī believed – or at least pretended to believe – the consul had established ties with Ismā‘īl out of his own initiative, without any involvement on the part of the Venetian government. This interpretation of the events averted a diplomatic crisis but put Zen’s life in danger, because the sultan was willing to release the consul only if the Venetians themselves committed to execute him. In other words, Zen risked becoming the designated victim whose sacrifice restores the social order or, in this case, a political and commercial alliance – in short, a scapegoat. Trevisan managed to save both the reputation of Venice and Zen’s life by promising the consul would be tried with the utmost severity for his crime and by placing chains around his neck in front of the sultan. This was nothing more than a *coup de théâtre*, a performance staged to please Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī – « per contento del signor Soldano », to use Pagani’s words.<sup>42</sup> In fact, not only did the promised trial never take place, but Pagani reports that, at the beginning of August, Zen was on his way to Damascus, seemingly unimpeded by chains. This is but one example of Trevisan’s diplomatic ability that resulted in the release of all the prisoners, the reestablishing of commercial relations between the two states, and the permission to access the Christian holy sites for the pilgrims.

## II. *A Mysterious Author, A Magnificent Library, and a Missing Manuscript*

There is scant information about Pagani after his return to Venice. In 1514, he appears to have been part of another delegation, this time as a representative of his town, Cividale di Belluno.<sup>43</sup> Historian Giorgio Piloni, however, only mentions his brothers, Carlo and Teodoro Pagani, in his discussion of prominent figures active in Belluno in the 1520s, which could be taken as an indication of Zaccaria’s premature death.<sup>44</sup> It seems the similarities between Pagani and the elder de Franceschi end with their trip to Egypt: while the latter continued his brilliant career, culminating in his election to Great Chancellor, the former disappeared into obscurity. Luckily, Pagani’s travelogue survived. The manuscript ended up in

---

<sup>41</sup> See LUDOVICO ZORZI, *Carpaccio e la rappresentazione di Sant’Orsola*, Einaudi, Turin 1988, p. 69–71. I would like to thank my Georgetown colleague Gianni Cicali for bringing this event to my attention.

<sup>42</sup> BENEDETTI, MUSACCHIO, *Da Venezia al Cairo*, p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> GIORGIO PILONI, *Historia*, Rampazetto, Venice 1607, fol. 286v.

<sup>44</sup> PILONI, *Historia*, fol. 289r.

the Biblioteca Piloni in Casteldardo, near Belluno, a private collection that was dear to art connoisseurs as well as bibliophiles. As books were stored with their fore-edge, rather than their spine, facing the public, the Pilonis commissioned Cesare Vecellio to decorate the blank pages with illustrations, essentially using each fore-edge as a canvas. The result was so striking that, according to an eyewitness, visitor had the impression of stepping into an art gallery rather than a library.<sup>45</sup> Given Pagani's attention to clothing, it is not surprising that his travelogue should attract the attention of Cesare Vecellio, who used it as a source for his *De gli habiti antichi, et moderni di diverse parti del mondo*. In this work, first published in 1590, the artist accompanies his illustration of Sultan Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī with a long passage derived from the travelogue, explicitly quoting his source:

This great sultan in 1512 lived in the great city of Cairo in his castle, or rather palace, with great magnificence, as attested by Sir Zaccaria Pagani, noble from Belluno, who went there with the most illustrious Sir Domenico Trevisan, special envoy of the Most Serene Republic of Venice to the great sultan.<sup>46</sup>

Also the following illustration in the volume, that depicts the sultan's functionaries (« Ammiragli, et consiglieri del Gran Soldano »), is inspired by Pagani's account, as it refers to the respect shown to « the Venetian ambassador ».<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, these two illustrations bear a striking similarity with two watercolors that decorate Pagani's manuscript, which can therefore tentatively be attributed to Cesare Vecellio.

Despite its obvious historical and artistic relevance, Pagani's work was destined to remain hidden from sight and forgotten for many years. It would only resurface in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when financial constraints forced Francesco Piloni to sell the family library to a relative, Paolo Maresio Bazzolle, who brought it to Venice. It was at this point that Niccolò Barozzi, Venetian scholar and director of the Museo Correr, published an edited version of the manuscript to celebrate the wedding of Augusto Miari e Claudina Buzzati.<sup>48</sup> In his brief introduction, Barozzi expresses regret that time constraints prevented him from providing the text with the explanatory notes that he felt

---

<sup>45</sup> ANDREA TESSIER, *Di Cesare Vecellio e de' suoi dipinti e disegni in una collezione di libri dei secoli XV e XVI*, Cecchini, Venice 1875, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> « Questo gran Soldano dunque del 1512 habitava nella grandissima città del Cairo, et nel suo Castello, overo Palazzo con molta grandezza, sì come riferì M. Zaccaria Pagan, Nobile di Belluno, che quivi andò con il Clarissimo Signor Domenico Trivisano, Ambasciatore destinato dalla Serenissima Repubblica Venetiana ad esso Gran Soldano ». (CESARE VECCELLIO, *De gli habiti antichi, et moderni di diverse parti del mondo*, Zenaro, Venice 1590, fol. 478r).

<sup>47</sup> VECCELLIO, *De gli habiti antichi*, fol. 479v-480r.

<sup>48</sup> ZACCARIA PAGANI, *Viaggio di Domenico Trevisan*, ed. NICCOLÒ BAROZZI, Antonelli, Venice 1875.

were necessary. What happened to the manuscript after that is not entirely clear. The Venetian community had warmly welcomed the Piloni collection and pledged it would not be dismembered or leave the city: « If good fortune allowed for such a wonderful and unique collection to land in Venice, may it never go elsewhere or be recklessly dismembered with great loss, in either case, for our letters and fine arts », vowed Andrea Tessier.<sup>49</sup> Only nine years later, however, a French scholar, Charles Schefer,<sup>50</sup> declared that he owned Pagani's manuscript and kept it under his eyes while preparing his French edition and translation:

J'ai eu sous les yeux, pour la traduction de la relation de Pagani, le volume publié à Venise en 1875 par les soins de M. le commandeur N. Barozzi et le manuscrit ayant fait autrefois partie de la collection de M.P. Maresio Bazzolle et qui se trouve aujourd'hui en ma possession.<sup>51</sup>

In 1899, a year after Schefer's death, the manuscript entered the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. A comparison of the three versions – the manuscript, the Barozzi edition, and the Schefer translation – is highly informative. It reveals, first of all, Barozzi's heavy editorial interventions that essentially translated into standard Italian Pagani's colorful Venetian. Barozzi's version was undoubtedly easier to read, which may explain why Schefer preferred to use it as the basis for his translation, in spite of having, indeed, come into possession of the original. Textual evidence supports this hypothesis, as the few passages from the manuscript that Barozzi did not include in his edition are also systematically omitted by Schefer. Even in these less than ideal conditions, Pagani's travelogue did not fail to elicit interest and admiration. Kenneth Meyer Setton, for instance, praises it as « one of the fullest and closest views of the Mamluk court to be found in any contemporary source », <sup>52</sup> while Anne Wolff compares it to « some fabulous tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* ». <sup>53</sup> There

---

<sup>49</sup> « [S]e lieta ventura faceva approdare alla nostra Venezia una sì meravigliosa ed unica collezione, non avvenga giammai che essa valichi altrove, o che vada sventuratamente a disperdersi, con danno gravissimo in entrambi i casi, delle nostre lettere ed arti belle » (TESSIER, *Di Cesare Vecellio*, p. 29).

<sup>50</sup> On Charles Schefer see NADER NASIRI-MOGHADDAM « Schefer, Charles-Henry-Auguste », *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition 2021 (<<https://iranicaonline.org/articles/schefer-charles-henri-auguste>> accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>51</sup> CHARLES SCHEFER, *Le voyage d'outremer*, Leroux, Paris 1884, p. LXXXIV–LXXXV. This volume includes Schefer's translation of Pagani's journal, *Voyage du magnifique et très illustre chevalier et procureur de Saint-Marc Domenico Trevisan* (p. 147–226).

<sup>52</sup> KENNETH MEYER SETTON, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*, 4 vol., The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia 1984, vol. III, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> ANNE WOLFF, *Merchants, Pilgrims, Naturalists: Alexandria through European Eyes from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, in ANTHONY HIRST, MICHAEL SILK (eds.), *Alexandria, Real and Imagined*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2006, p. 199–223, 215.

are various reasons, however, why it was appropriate and timely to provide readers with a version that faithfully reproduced the original. Pagani's spirited Venetian, that likely reflected the language that he and his fellow travelers spoke, documents linguistic practices of the early sixteenth century, before the adoption of medieval Tuscan as the Italian vernacular. An accurate rendition of the manuscript also filled some of the gaps left by previous editions by clearly indicating passages that were either problematic or indecipherable. Additionally, 280 explanatory notes discuss and clarify Pagani's often cryptic references. Readers of this new edition are also able to admire for the first time the two watercolors that decorate the manuscript and that, as discussed above, can tentatively be attributed to Cesare Vecellio. Together with the testimonies of other participants in the expedition, included as appendixes in the volume, Zaccaria Pagani's travelogue paints a fascinating picture of the complex interactions between Venice and Cairo, and provides an eye-witness account of the Mamluk court just a few years before its demise. At a time when the relationship between Western and Arab countries is a particularly pressing concern, it is important to rediscover documentation of the commercial, diplomatic and cultural ties that have linked different populations across the Mediterranean and that reveal communication between, rather than a clash of, civilizations. Domenico Trevisan's voyage, so vividly narrated by Zaccaria Pagani, is a meaningful episode in this common history, and as such it deserves to be known, studied, and shared.