

Venice Confronting the Ottoman Empire: A Struggle for Survival (Fourteenth–Sixteenth Centuries)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper may be somewhat misleading, as it suggests a continuous state of warfare between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. It is well known that both powers tried to find a way to peaceful co-existence and that there usually was a constant flow of goods, news and people between Venice and Istanbul. Nevertheless I shall focus only on the military aspects and approach a vast topic – Venice and the Turks¹ – from a narrow perspective, i.e. the conflicts between the two powers. And in so doing I shall introduce a further limitation, focusing on the strategies used by the Republic of St. Mark aimed at checking the Ottoman military power, securing its Levantine possessions and protecting the maritime trade routes.

I am also aware that there are further restrictions to the scope of these piece. From a much longer period of co-existence I have selected only the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries as the core of my analysis. The fourteenth century represents both the beginning of the story and an age when the Venetians' main enemy were the Genoese and the Kingdom of Hungary. Nevertheless, the Ottomans emerged towards the end of the century as a serious threat during the reign of Bayezid I. The fifteenth century seems to be a period of undisputed Venetian hegemony; however the loss of Negroponte in 1470 and the defeat in the war of 1499–1503 are obvious signs of weakness. Somehow during this century the Ottomans were able to match the Venetian maritime power and even to surpass it, a trend which developed in the sixteenth century, when the Ottomans not only succeeded in gathering large numbers of vessels but were also in control of a great part of the shores of Balkan Peninsula, Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, the Sultan's fleet seemed to unmatched in any naval confrontation – until the battle of Lepanto. Hence

¹ Paolo Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi*, (Rome: Viella, 2013) especially pp. 19–43.

I have limited my investigation to the end of the sixteenth century. After this epoch there were still some major clashes but Venice was never able to reverse the balance of maritime power, despite a number of successes in the War of Candia. Another argument in this respect is that after 1569 the *mudae* towards the Levant came to an end. As Claire Judde de la Rivière argues, the Republic was forced to give up its public convoys on the eve of the War of Cyprus as a result of the lack of profitability and the growing insecurity of the maritime trade routes.² The decision can also be viewed as a symbolic one; it was a sort of self-recognition that the Republic could no longer impose its will on the sea.

There is also the problem of documentation. As Suraiya Faroqhi points out, Western documents “became accessible to researchers long before their counterparts in the Ottoman archives” and, consequently, “it is not surprising that they have left profound traces in the relevant historiography”.³ In other words, what we know about the military clashes between the two powers is shaped, especially for the earlier periods, by the Venetian documents, by the Venetian perception of the Turks.⁴ Thus the Ottoman Empire is somewhat overshadowed as its objectives, actions and strategy are, in many cases, represented by the documents pertaining to the other camp; even if we assume that the Republic’s perception of its enemy was accurate (which was not always the case), the risks of distortions persists. Such distortions were sometimes due to misinterpretations or over-interpretations of the epoch. In 1497, for instance, Venice seemed to believe that the Porte was confronted by a “crusade” led by the King of Poland while, in fact, the real target of the Polish expedition was Moldavia;⁵ some years later, in 1514, *Serenissima* pay credit to the news of a very precarious position held by the Ottoman army in the war against the Safavids, a perception contradicted by the Battle of Çaldıran and its aftermath.⁶ In both cases, the Venetians were the victims of rumors and false evidence originating from the Sultan’s camp.

² Claire Judde de la Rivière, *Naviguer, commercer, gouverner. Economie maritime et pouvoirs à Venise (XVe–XVIe siècles)*, (Leiden, Boston : Brill, 2008).

³ Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around it*, (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 42–43.

⁴ On this aspect see Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, *Les Ottomans, les Safavides et leurs voisins. Contribution à l’histoire des relations internationales dans l’Orient islamique de 1514 à 1524* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1987), p. 11.

⁵ On this episode see Ovidiu Cristea, “A Strange Tale: King John Albert’s Moldavian campaign (1497) in Marino Sanudo’s *Diarii*”, *Medieval and Early Modern Studies for Central and Eastern Europe*, 5 (2013): 117–134.

⁶ For analysis of the Venetian sources on the Battle of Çaldıran, see Ovidiu Cristea, *Puterea cewintelor. Stiri si razboi insec. XV–XVI*, (Târgoviste: Cetatea de Scaun, 2014), pp. 247–294.

One should also bear in mind that the Ottoman–Venetian confrontation was only one aspect of a broader Mediterranean picture. Frederic C. Lane has already underlined that the growth of both the Spanish and the Ottoman empires “explains Venice’s decline in naval power more than does any backsliding on her part”⁷ and Daniel Goffman shares the same view when he compares *Serenissima* with a sort of frontier principality caught between “two colossi”.⁸ There were other dangers with which Venice was faced, such as piracy, a ubiquitous phenomenon in the Mediterranean of the sixteenth century,⁹ or the Portuguese rivalry in the spice trade.¹⁰ All these developments as well as others – such as the creation of a Venetian dominion in Northern Italy (the *Terraferma*) – strongly influenced the Republic’s decisions towards its Levantine Empire. This *Stato da Mar* was the backbone of Venetian power and prosperity from 1204 onwards. Its preservation ensured a strong foothold for the Republic in the Eastern Mediterranean and a network of ports of call for the trade and war ships. But from the beginning of the sixteenth century the “backbone” became something of an Achilles’ heel. Even if, as Benjamin Arbel underlines, we should avoid the image of a *Stato da Mar* in permanent contraction,¹¹ these maritime possessions were in a continuous state of alert and their preservation demanded increasingly large financial and military resources.

There are also a number of historiographical myths, some of them born centuries ago. Their force and persistence overshadow the correct understanding of the Ottoman–Venetian relations. For instance, it is easy to quote expressions such as *Venezia amancebada del Turco*¹² or the almost ubiquitous

⁷ Frederic C. Lane, “Naval Actions and Fleet Organization, 1499–1502”, in *Renaissance Venice*, edited by J.R. Hale (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), pp. 146–173 (p. 167).

⁸ Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 139.

⁹ Alberto Tenenti, “I corsari in Mediterraneo all’inizio del Cinquecento”, *Rivista storica italiana* 72 (1960), no. 2, pp. 234–287; Alberto Tenenti, *Venezia e i corsari 1580–1615*, (Bari, Laterza, 1961). For the previous period see Irene B. Katele, “Piracy and the Venetian State: the Dilemma of the Maritime Defense in the Fourteenth Century” in *Speculum*, 63, 1988, no.4, pp. 865–889.

¹⁰ Vitorino Magalhaes-Godinho, “Le repli vénitien et égyptien et la route du cap” in *Eventail d’histoire vivante: hommage à Lucien Fevre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953), pp. 283–300; Ruggiero Romano, Alberto Tenenti, Ugo Tucci, “Venise et la route du Cap : 1499–1517”, in *Méditerranée et Océan indien* (Paris: École pratique des hautes études, 1970), pp. 109–132; Robert Finlay, “Crisis and Crusade in the Mediterranean : Venice, Portugal and the Cape Route to India 1498–1509”, *Studi Veneziani*, 28 (1994) : pp. 45–91.

¹¹ Benjamin Arbel, “Venice’s maritime empire in the early modern period”, in *A companion to Venetian history*, edited by Eric R. Dursteler, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 125–253 (p. 142).

¹² Paolo Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi*, p. 21.

Siamo Veneziani poi christiani – a sentence highly praised by some historians – but impossible to find in any Venetian document.¹³ Such sentences oversimplify a much more complex reality which required from Venice a subtle and flexible approach in its relations with the Sublime Porte.

Another sort of historiographical *cliché* concerns the military premises of the confrontation between the *Serenissima* and the Ottoman Empire. As Palmira Brumett points out, the clash between the aforementioned powers was a sort of duel between a “whale” and an “elephant”, although from a certain moment onwards Venice ceased to act like a whale while the Ottoman Empire resembled an elephant quite adapted to the sea.¹⁴ This metaphor deserves some consideration if we take into account that during the Middle Ages Venice’s hegemonic position was challenged several times by land powers (Byzantium, Hungary), by maritime powers (Genoa, the Turkish emirates of Menteşe and Aydın, the Catalan duchy of Athens) or by a collusion between a continental and naval power (as in the case of the so-called “War of Chioggia”).

Despite some serious setbacks during these confrontations, the Serene Republic eventually prevailed due to its economic power, social stability, institutional strength, diplomatic flexibility and naval prowess. Nevertheless one can ask why all these “key factors” seemed to disappear before the emergent Ottoman Empire. Suddenly, at the end of the fifteenth century the Turkish naval power appeared to be *a fait accompli*. The sea, long perceived as a sort of impenetrable barrier of the Venetian defense system, increasingly appeared to be an uncertain frontier. It is not an easy task to explain how such dramatic change occurred. Some contemporary sources blamed the incompetence of Venetian leaders such as Nicolò da Canal (in the case of the fall of Negroponte) or Antonio Grimani (for the Venetian defeat at Zonchio); others deplored the corruption of the Venetian officials or the decline of the ancient military virtues. Such statements should not be taken at face value. One can assume that the emotional impact of the military disasters played its part in the contemporary judgments. Moreover, such statements seem to emphasize only the Venetian shortcomings, completely ignoring the role played by the Turks in the political and military developments.

Finally, the Ottoman–Venetian wars seem to be a symptom rather than a cause of the drastic change in the balance of forces in the Mediterranean during the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries.

¹³ For an overview see Ovidiu Cristea, “Siamo veneziani, poi christiani. Some Remarks concerning the Venetian Attitude towards the Crusade”, in *Annuario. Istituto Romeno di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica*, 3 (2001): pp. 105–116.

¹⁴ Palmira Brumett, “The Ottomans as a World Power: What We Don’t Know about Ottoman Seapower”, *Oriente Moderno*, 20 (2001), no.1: pp. 1–21

2. THE STAGE

One of the main weaknesses of these overseas Venetian territories was their dispersion over a wide area which covered North-Eastern Adriatic and Istria, Dalmatia, Montenegro, Albania, the Ionian Islands, Epirus, Peloponnesus, the Cretan Archipelago, the Aegean Islands, the Eastern Greek mainland, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵ Thus resulted a lengthy, tortuous and fragmented frontier which required quick mobilization and intervention in an endangered area. Many of these zones were exposed to attack from various enemies even before the rise of the Ottomans. The Aegean archipelago was the target of many attacks from the Genoese, the Catalans of Athens or the Turkish emirates of Menteşe and Aydın; Dalmatia – for centuries the bone of contention between the Republic and the Kingdom of Hungary – was conquered by Louis the Great after the war of 1356–1358 and recovered only in 1409; Tana in the Black Sea was severely damaged by the attacks of the Golden Horde (1343) and Timur Lenk (1395).¹⁶

One should ask whether all the Venetian overseas territories were simultaneously exposed to the same risks and whether the Venetian government attached to them the same strategic importance. In this respect it should be stressed that certain regions such as Dalmatia, Coron and Modon, Crete and Negroponte had a highly strategic value for the Venetian government, Corfu was the cornerstone of the Venetian presence both in the Ionian and Adriatic Sea and Cyprus received particular attention after its acquisition in 1474, while some other possessions were considered important only for a limited period. Such was the case of Tana, a rival commercial emporium for Genoese Caffa, in the fourteenth century,¹⁷

¹⁵ Benjamin Arbel, “Venice’s maritime empire”, pp. 131–136. On the situation of Morea, see Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Griechen, Albaner, Tzakonen, Bulgaren: venezianische Briefschaften aus der Morea (1463/1464)”, in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur SüdostEuropas*, 2 (2000) : pp. 161–189, Bernard Doumerc, “Le problème des confins en Morée vénitienne à la fin du XVe siècle”, in *Italy and Europe’s Eastern Border (1204–1669)*, edited by I. M. Damian, I. A. Pop, M. St. Popović, Al. Simon (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 109–117. On Albania see Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Die Venezianischen Jahrbücher des Stefano Magno als Quelle für die albanische und epirotische Geschichte (1433–1477)” in *Südosteuropa. Von vormoderner Vielfalt und nationalstaatlicher Vereinheitlichung*, edited by Konrad Clewing, Oliver Jens Schmitt (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2005), pp. 133–182. On Dalmatia see *Venezia e Dalmazia*, edited by Uwe Israel, Oliver Jens Schmitt (Rome: Viella, 2013).

¹⁶ Virgil Ciociltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 199–203.

¹⁷ Şerban Papacostea, “Quod non iretur ad Tanam. Un aspect fundamental de la politique génoise dans la Mer Noire au XIVE siècle” in *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, 17(1979), no. 2 : pp. 201–217.

or the island of Tenedos, which was one of the main reasons for the War of Chioggia.¹⁸

The long row of overseas territories shaped Venice's maritime empire. As many studies have shown, the galley – the ship *par excellence* of the medieval Mediterranean – was quite fragile and had limited cargo capacity. Usually it had to put ashore frequently to resupply.¹⁹ This condition was easily satisfied as long as Venice preserved its overseas possessions. As a consequence the loss of a certain territory had direct repercussions on the Republic's ability to control a sea route or to dominate a specific maritime area. Such was the case in 1261 when the fall of the Latin Empire forced Venice to reconsider its policy in Romania; another example is the loss of Dalmatia in 1358, when the conquest of Louis the Great put in jeopardy the Republic's domination in the Adriatic. In both cases Venice struggled to re-establish its control in the contested region. After 1261 Venice struck a balance between military and diplomatic actions. On one hand, the Republic tried to organize an anti-Byzantine crusade aimed at regaining control over Constantinople; on the other, Venice was compelled to sign truces with the Byzantine Empire, a solution which temporarily ensured the protection of the Venetian subjects, ships and territories.²⁰ These measures had only limited success, as the anti-Byzantine crusade was never launched and the survival of the Venetian Empire was counter-balanced by the Genoese foothold in Constantinople and their expansion in the Black Sea.

The loss of Dalmatia was even more significant for Venetian interests. The conquest made by the King of Hungary, Louis the Great, inflicted a double blow, commercial and strategic, on Venetian interests. Not only did Hungary conquer two major trading cities, Ragusa and Zara, but the access gained to the Adriatic broke the Venetian domination in the area and created the premises for a more elaborate attack in the following years. The alliance between a significant land power (Hungary) and a maritime power (Genoa) during the so-called "War of Chioggia" was a serious threat, as Venice could have been attacked from its inner defensive zone – the Adriatic. Indeed, the Genoese fleet used the Dalmatian ports as the base for an attack against the Venetian fleet stationed at Pola and the Hungarian army, with the support of the Lord of Padua, blocked

¹⁸ Freddy Thiriet, "Venise et l'occupation de Ténédos au XIVe siècle", *Mélanges d'Ecole Française à Rome*, 65 (1953) : pp. 219–245.

¹⁹ John E. Dotson, "Foundations of Venetian Naval Strategy : from Pietro II Orseolo to the Battle of Zonchio, 1000–1500", *Viator* 32 (2001): pp. 113–126; John F. Guilmartin, *Galleons and Galleys*, (London: Cassell & Co, 2002), pp. 105–156.

²⁰ Angeliki E. Laiou, *Constantinople and the Latins. The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II 1282–1328*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 101–102; Donald M. Nicol, *Venezia e Bisanzio due città millenarie protagoniste della storia*, transl. Lidia Perria (Milan: Bomiani, 2001), pp. 198–294.

the city of Saint Mark from the land. Venice managed to survive eventually due to popular mobilization, the timely return of Carlo Zeno's fleet from the Eastern Mediterranean and the lack of coordination between its enemies. However, the lesson of the War of Chioggia was a bitter one. Venice had shown serious difficulties in coping with a land army, defending a vast overseas empire with its fleet and even protecting the Adriatic, i.e. the core of its maritime power as long as Dalmatia remained in hostile hands. Many of these problem re-emerged during the conflicts with the Sublime Porte.

The War of Chioggia had another side effect. According to an old but still valuable article by Camillo Manfroni,²¹ the cost of the war forced Venice to reduce the size of its military fleet in the subsequent period to a level which threatened the main interests of the Republic. As long as the Balkan Peninsula remained politically fragmented, this minimum involvement had no serious consequences; but once the Ottomans conquered large parts of the Peninsula along with Western Anatolia, the situation changed dramatically. The Venetian Empire became vulnerable not only from the land but also from the sea, and from the reign of Bayezid I onwards the Ottoman fleet became one of the risk factors for the Venetian ships and territories in Romania.

Along with these developments, from the end of the 14th century onwards, Venice began a policy of territorial conquest in Northern Italy which in the long run shaped its history in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At a certain point the city of St. Mark ceased to be mainly "a maritime Republic" and the Terraferma began to overshadow the *Stato da Mar*. Moreover, "the creation, maintenance, and increasing institutionalization of a standing army affected Venetian life at all levels".²² To quote just one example, "the accumulation of military and Terraferma offices was becoming a major avenue to high political office in the republic".²³

3. THE BALANCE OF FORCES

All these evolutions point out to a significant transformation suffered by the Serene Republic during the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries. To use a metaphor, the "whale" of the previous centuries changed its shape to that of a double-winged lion. Both parts of the body – the Terraferma and *Stato da Mar* – received many

²¹ Camillo Manfroni, "La crisi della marina militare di Venezia dopo la guerra di Chioggia", *Atti del reale istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti*, 69 (1909–1910) : pp. 983–1003.

²² M. E. Mallett, J. R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State, Venice c. 1400 to 1617*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 203.

²³ *Ibidem*.

blows from the Republic's enemies. But while the Terraferma was recovered after the catastrophe of Agnadello in 1509,²⁴ the defense of the maritime territories seemed to be more and more problematic. Not only was the *Stato da Mar* exposed to the Turkish threat in time of war, but it also suffered in peacetime from pirates' raids and Ottoman dignitaries' extortions. Venice tried to react to all these challenges through a combination of diplomatic and military means. If the historians underlined the diplomatic ability of the Republic and its role as a "*centro di mediazione tra Occidente e Oriente*",²⁵ the military route was of no lesser importance. One can count during the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries no less than seven large clashes with the Ottoman Empire: 1416–1419; 1422–1430; 1444 (the Crusade of Varna); 1463–1479; 1499–1503; 1537–1540; 1570–1573. All of them ended in the Venetians' defeat, even if sometimes, as in 1416 (the Battle of Gallipoli) or in 1571 (the Battle of Lepanto) crushing defeats were inflicted on the Ottoman fleet. During each conflict, Venice seemed to build up its strategy on a close collaboration between the fleet and the defensive system overseas or, in Robert Hale's terms, "the dialogue between ships and shore".²⁶ There is also an important difference between the various clashes. During the first three conflicts, Venetian maritime superiority was undisputed, but from 1463 onwards the situation changed drastically. In 1470 Negroponte was lost without any intervention from the Venetian fleet, and the same thing happened in 1499 and 1500, when Lepanto, Modon, Coron and Zante fell into Turkish hands without any serious naval engagement.

Historians have put forward various explanations for this reversal, most of which are strongly related to the political and military aspects of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I shall try to summarize them without any pretensions to being exhaustive.

Both the Ottoman and the Venetian fleet seemed to have used a large variety of oar ships. In the fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth century Venice had the upper hand mainly because of its galleys, while Bayezid I's or Mehmed I's fleets were composed of vessels of lesser tonnage. This tech-

²⁴ On this event, its context and its consequences see *L'Europa e la Serenissima: la svolta del 1509 nel Ve centenario della battaglia di Agnadello*, edited by Giuseppe Gullino (Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2011).

²⁵ This is the title of the collective volume *Venezia centro di mediazione tra Oriente e Occidente secoli XV–XVI: aspetti e problemi*, edited by Hans Georg Beck, M. I. Manousakas, Agostino Pertusi (Florence: L. Olschki, 1977).

²⁶ M. E. Mallett, J. R. Hale, *The Military Organization*, 429; see also Simon Pepper, "Fortress and Fleet. The Defence of Venice's Mainland Greek Colonies in the Late Fifteenth Century", in *War, Culture and Society in Renaissance Venice: Essays in Honour of John Hale*, edited David Chambers, Cecil H. Clough, Michael Mallett, (London, Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1993), pp. 29–55.

nical advantage along with experience at sea goes a long way to explaining the naval superiority of the Venetians. After the fall of Constantinople, the galley became the backbone of the Ottoman fleet as well. Although one should bear in mind the differences between Ottoman and Venetian construction parameters, it is no exaggeration to assume that, from a technical point of view, the two camps used comparable ships. Only at Lepanto did the firepower of the Venetian galleasses placed in the frontline seem to have given an advantage to the Christian camp.

The number of ships gathered by the two camps was a completely different matter. From the beginning the Turks seem to have enjoyed undisputed superiority. In the fourteenth century and in the first half of the following century this was a way to compensate for their navy's technical inferiority; after their conquest of the Byzantine capital it was a method to terrify their enemies and to overwhelm the Venetian defense. The stratagem was efficient at least in the case of Negroponte, where the Venetian admiral Nicolo da Canal fled without putting up a fight, and in the battle of Zonchio (1499), where most of the Venetian ships retreated without engaging their enemies. The example of Zonchio is of particular interest because on that occasion Venice assembled the greatest fleet in its history. According to *Historia Turchesca*, Antonio Grimani had at his command 107 vessels (44 light galleys, 16 heavy galleys, 12 *griparia*, 3 *fuste* and another 32 boats of different types) along with a further 25 ships provided by Andrea Loredan, the *provveditore* of Corfu.²⁷ It was an exceptional military and financial effort if we bear in mind that in 1495 35 galleys were equipped in and in 1498 only 13. By contrast, the Ottoman fleet numbered 277 ships (60 galleys, 30 galiots and *fuste*, 3 heavy galleys, 2 large carracks and so on), a figure not far off the usual estimation of the Sultan's maritime forces; in 1530 the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Tommaso Mocenigo, counted no less than 272 Ottoman galleys "*grosse, bastarde et sottile*", and a main force of 204 galleys in Constantinople and Gallipoli. Although impressive, this estimation seems to ignore the corsair's ships, which could have been added at any moment to *kapudan pasha's* navy.

This striking inferiority explained why Venice always tried to find allies against the Turkish peril. The reasons seem to differ from one epoch to another however. Throughout the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth, the search for allies was strongly related to Venice's intention to keep the war

²⁷ Donado da Lezze, *Historia Turchesca (1300–1514)*, edited by I. Ursu (Bucharest: Carl Göbl, 1909), p. 223. For other estimations see Frederic C. Lane, "Naval Actions", p. 149, Simon Pepper, "Fortress and Fleet", 44; Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea 1500–1650. Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 93; John F. Guilmartin jr., *Galleons and Galleys*, p. 73.

costs as low as possible. Thus in 1363 the Serene Republic offered to equip two galleys in a naval league that was to reunite 8 galleys. Later, in 1396, Venice was ready to equip 5 galleys for the Crusade of Nicopolis but only on the condition that other Christian powers gather a further 20 similar ships. This goal changed drastically from the second half of the fifteenth century, when the Ottoman superiority forced the Republic to find a way to counter the number of Turkish ships.

The search for allies was also a process with continuities and discontinuities. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Venice's main objective was to form an alliance with the Christian powers in Romania threatened by the emergence of the Turks. The victories of Adramyttion and Smyrna were the result of a regional naval league comprising Venice, the Hospitallers, the Kingdom of Cyprus and, theoretically, Byzantium.²⁸ Towards the end of the century this kind of *passagium particulare* no longer seemed efficient and thus, from that moment on Venice supported the crusading projects of the Kingdom of Hungary. All of them shared a similar idea; a Christian fleet was to sever the connection between the Anatolian and European territories of the Sultan while a land army was to crush the Ottoman forces in Europe and relieve Constantinople. Unfortunately, this simple project to isolate the Sultan's forces never succeeded.

The same fate was shared by another strategic idea which aimed to compel the Ottomans to disperse their forces on various fronts in Asia and Europe. In this respect all of the rivals of the Ottoman Empire in Asia such as the Emirate of Karaman, Uzun Hasan or, later, the Safavids were perceived as potential allies of Venice. Despite some success during the reign of Uzun Hassan, such alliances could hardly prove their efficiency. Due to the great distances and different political and military aims coordination between the Christian and Muslim enemies of the Ottomans was almost impossible. Venice or its allies could only hope to keep the sultan busy on various fronts as long as possible in order to obtain acceptable peace conditions.

The situation was not much different in respect of the potential Christian allies. No one was eager to sacrifice financial or military resources to protect the Venetian territories. Even worse, for long periods, the Republic had tense relations with the Kingdom of Hungary and with the Hospitallers of Rhodes, i.e. with two main enemies of the Ottomans. As a result, many anti-Ottoman projects were undermined from the beginning by the lack of trust among the potential allies. This was also the case in the wars of 1537–1540 and 1570–1573.

²⁸ Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, *Trade and Crusade: Venetian Crete and the Emirates of Menteshe and Aydin (1300–1415)*, (Venice: Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies, 1983), pp. 21–40.

Each partner was disappointed and bemoaned a lack of loyalty on the part of its allies. Both conflicts ended in a bitter distrust between the former allies.

Thus it is no wonder that from the second half of fifteenth century one can perceive in Venice a growing lack of confidence towards the idea of an anti-Ottoman alliance. After the war of 1537–1540 many members of Venetian elite cast doubt on the anti-Ottoman projects and expressed the firm idea that the best solution was to maintain watchful neutrality. Bernardo Navagero stated that “all alliances are full of difficulties because each party has different aims and as each is out for his own advantage, problems arise from the moment a treaty is signed; thus many opportunities for attacking the enemy are lost and, besides, the forces promised not being, in practice, actually raised, either for lack of pay or irreconcilable differences of opinion among the commanders, the enemy gains time and you lose reputation which is important in all affairs”. Furthermore, according to the same Navagero “it is better in my view, to treat all enemy rulers as potential friends and friends as potential enemies.”²⁹ As a result Venice was confronted with a large dilemma; it had no sufficient forces to confront the Turks alone but also had little confidence in its allies.

Quite apart from the insufficient military forces and the difficulties finding trustful allies, success in war depended on a valuable strategy. Besides the aforementioned ideas related to severing the link between the European and Anatolian Ottoman provinces and the dispersion of the Sultan’s forces on various fronts, Venice build its strategy on firm confidence in the collaboration between the fleet and the defensive system created in its maritime empire. It was a defensive stance which required very good coordination between the ships and the Venetian garrisons but also the control of the sea. In the first confrontations with the Turks in 1416–1419 and 1423–1430 this condition was fulfilled, but the tide changed in the conflict with Mehmed II. As already mentioned, in 1470 the Ottoman fleet emerged from the Straits. Its main role was to transport and to support the Ottoman troops sent out to conquer Negroponte. It was a delicate mission, as an attack from the Venetian fleet led by Nicolo da Canal could have easily compromised the entire expedition. Nevertheless, such an attack never happened. According to a witness account, the Sultan’s fleet looked like a “floating forest”.³⁰ The terror inspired by such a sight explained the retreat of the Venetian fleet. For Frederic C. Lane, the episode was only a temporary setback which did not shake Venetian confidence in its naval prowess.³¹ Lane

²⁹ *Apud* M. E. Mallett, J. R. Hale, *The Military Organization*, p. 216.

³⁰ Domenico Malipiero, *Annali Veneti dall'anno 1457 al 1500*, edited by Francesco Longo (Florence: Gio. Pietro Vieusseux, 1843–1844), I, 51: “il mar pareo un bosco a sentirlo a dir, ar cosa incredibile, ma a vederlo è cosa stupenda.”

³¹ Frederic C. Lane, “Naval Actions” p. 147.

points out that in the following years the Venetian galleys were able to attack Ottoman coasts and to pursue a campaign to Sattalia and Candeloro without suffering any serious losses. Nevertheless, this perspective should be slightly altered, since it reflects only the Venetian perspective. A more balanced approach would also consider the Ottoman strategy. From the Sultan's point of view, the Venetian naval expedition of 1472 had no serious impact on the war on the Eastern front; Negroponte remained in Ottoman hands and the conquests in Anatolia were short lived.³² Furthermore, the projected conjunction between the Venetian fleet and Uzun Hassan never took place and the collaboration between the Republic and another Anatolian enemy of the Ottomans, the Emir of Karaman, had little impact on the general balance of power. Moreover, the lack of reaction on the part of the Ottoman fleet had to do with the Sultan's preparations for the war against the Ak Koyunlu confederacy, not with any kind of Venetian naval superiority. We could easily accuse Nicolo da Canal of a lack of heart in 1470, but a similar attitude is to be found again during the war of 1499–1503.

My point is that the Negroponte incident not only shook Venice's confidence in its maritime supremacy but also inflicted a heavy blow on Venetian defensive strategy. As the leaders of the fleet decided to take no action, the fortresses were on their own and with some exceptions – such as the siege of Scutari in 1473³³ – resistance depended only on the garrison's determination, on the strength of the fortification and on the abundance of supplies. Venice had to place further emphasis on his strongholds and on its ability to resist an ottoman assault. In this respect the Republic invested a great amount of resources in the sixteenth century. Many fortresses were reconfigured according to what was known as the *trace italienne*,³⁴ a bastion-type fortress with low and thick walls, platforms for the artillery and a wide and deep moat. As military historians stress, this new type of fortifications invalidated the ancient way of besieging a town. But such defensive systems needed time and money. Venice began to rebuild its fortification of *Stato da Mar* in a systematic way only after the war of 1499–1503. The almost continuous state of war in Italy between 1509 and 1530 and the huge expenses incurred explained why this process was slow and only gradually implemented.

³² A similar view is shared by Luciana Pezzolo, "Stato, guerra e finanza nella Repubblica di Venezia fra medioevo e prima età moderna", in *Mediterraneo in armi (sec. XV–XVIII)*, edited by Rossella Cancila, (Palermo: Associazione Mediterranea, 2007), 71. The author underlines that even though the loss of Negroponte was balanced by the acquisition of Cyprus, the war with the Porte (1463–1479) shattered the Venice's conviction in its maritime superiority.

³³ On this episode see Simon Pepper, "Fortress and Fleet", p. 42.

³⁴ Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659. The Logistic of Spanish Victory and Defeat in Low Countries' Wars*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 7–10.

Such fortification works had the expected outcome only in very few cases (for instance during the Siege of Corfu in 1537) but in most situations the Ottomans prevailed in their attempts to conquer the Venetian strongholds. Along with the Ottoman's ability to gather large amounts of troops and resources, the defenders were doomed by the long lines of communication, the insufficient fleet support and the inferior number of land troops.

One should also take into account that the Venetian strategy and tactics seem to have changed very little from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The large fleets of the sixteenth century were composed of various types of ships, with different types of propulsion and different tonnages. It was very difficult to deal with such diversity and even more problematic to compel various types of vessels to react as a single unit on the open sea when various factors such as the winds, the currents and the waves could easily have changed the theatre of battle. There were differences in the speed and mobility not only between oar ships and sailing ships but even between the light galleys and the heavy galleys. In sum, success in the naval war was strongly connected with effective coordination of the entire fleet.

Along with the military and logistic issues, contemporary sources put the blame for the failure against the Ottomans on the abandonment of ancient virtues. Some chroniclers speak of corruption, vices and insubordination in the Venetian fleet which confronted the Ottomans at Zonchio and which was unable to save Lepanto, Coron and Modon. In the same vein, Frederic Lane emphasizes that the career of Antonio Grimani, the Venetian commander at Zonchio, "epitomizes that diplomatic and financial ability were gaining priority over naval service in determining political success in Venice. This change in priorities was one factor in the decline of Venetian sea power".³⁵ As in the case of the Byzantine navy or, later, in the case of the Spanish army and fleet, appointment to high command was more a matter of influence and wealth than a question of military abilities. Thus, the lack of discipline and the vices deplored by the Venetian chroniclers were only a side-effect of a structural crisis.

A similar crisis broke out almost in the same period in Terraferma and the loss of almost all Venetian territories after the Battle of Agnadello is a clear symptom.³⁶ However, in this case the Venetian revival and, ultimately, the recovery of the lost territories were possible not only because the Republic man-

³⁵ Frederic C. Lane, "Naval Actions", p. 167.

³⁶ For the institutional consequences of the military failures, see Bernard Doumerc, "Novus rerum nascitur ordo: Venise et la fin d'un monde" in *Chemins d'outre mer. Études sur la Méditerranée médiévale offertes à Michel Balard*, edited by Damien Coulon, Catherine Otten-Froux, Paul Pagès et Dominique Valérian, (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004), pp. 231–246.

aged to respond adequately to the challenges of the land war at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but also because the struggle in Northern Italy was directed against a coalition undermined by various disputes among the allies. By contrast, the *Stato da Mar* had to confront a single enemy with a unique center of command and with great military and economic potential.

The defensive stance adopted against such foe seemed the best strategy to follow but such a choice compelled Venice to adopt a reactive policy which was doomed to fail in long run. The reactive strategy meant that the Republic was always a step behind, that the Venetians usually awaited the Ottomans' first move. Thus the Ottoman forces were able to invade a territory and triumph over the Venetian defenders by exploiting the local resources. It may seem a minor aspect but for the military strategists of the sixteenth century it was a very important one. Success in the early modern war depended on the ability not only to gather a strong army but also to use it properly, to inflict heavy blows not only on the enemy's troops but also on his territories, population and economy. For the experts of the epoch, the best strategy to pursue was to wage war by invading the enemy's territory. The Ottomans reached the same conclusion by their own means and they basically adopted such strategy in each conflict directed against Venice.

The Republic did not attempt a similar solution until 1463, when an army led by Bertoldo d'Este attacked Peloponesus. But, even in this case, the Venetians planned only a short-lived offensive. Once the expedition's goal – the conquest of Hexamilion – was accomplished, the offensive had to turn into a defensive stance. It was then Bertoldo d'Este's mission to strengthen the fortifications and to protect the peninsula along with the Venetian fleet from the Turkish attacks. In 1463, the sudden death of the Venetian commander put an end to the Venetian ambitions and the following attempts of another Venetian *condottiero*, Sigismondo Malatesta, shared a similar fate.

The defensive strategy had another weak point: it was strongly dependent on accurate and up-to-date information from the Turkish camp. Paradoxically, the impressive network created to collect and to transmit any news of interest from the Ottoman Empire seemed to be of little use to Venice. Not only the Venetians were sometimes misled by rumours or false evidence spread by the Ottomans in order to hide the real intentions of the Sultan, but even in the case of accurate information the Republic struggled to find a quick and adequate response. This was due partly to the "system configuration". Obviously, all the news from the Levantine territories converged in the city of St. Mark but one can hardly find two identical versions of the same event; as a result the Venetian government had to deal daily with a large amount of news sometimes contradictory, sometimes brief, sometimes doubtful, and was forced to postpone the decision until the information was confirmed by other sources. From this fact

derives another important issue: the weak collaboration between the various territories which formed the Venetian *Stato da Mar*. Ships built in Crete or Corfu were sometimes used to defend other territories³⁷ but such actions were possible only at the central government's orders and one should ask oneself if the lack of initiative of local authorities actually strengthened or weakened the overseas territories confronted with an Ottoman attack.

CONCLUSIONS

I am aware that this overview has left aside many aspects of the Ottoman–Venetian relations. I am also aware that rather than offering answers I have just pointed to some issues which still deserve further examination. The general picture of the long period of Ottoman–Venetian contact seems to be one of progressive Venetian decline. The slow process of the Venetian Empire's contraction was less the result of the Republic's policy and reactions and more the consequence of Ottoman imperial policy. In the age of Mehmed II and Bayezid II, the sultans' aim was to expel Venice from the Black Sea and the Aegean area and to conquer the Venetian possessions in Peloponesus and Albania. In a second phase the strategic Ottoman goal was to control the Adriatic shore to contest Venetian maritime power in its own gulf. In fact, as early as 1417, the Ottomans conquered Valona, which secured an important bridgehead in the struggle for the navigation of the Adriatic.

Once these two strategic objectives were achieved, the Ottoman progress slowed and the subsequent targets (Cyprus, Crete) were attacked after long periods of peace. It seems that the Ottomans preferred a weaker and docile Venetian Republic and, as a result, they conquered only the territories which were of strategic or economic value.

The peaceful solution was also supported by the Venetian camp at least from the beginning of the sixteenth century. For the Serene Republic it was the only way to preserve both its *Stato da Mar* and its oriental trade, despite their progressive contraction.

³⁷ Ruthy Getwagen, "The Contribution of Venice's Colonies to its Naval Warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Fifteenth Century" in *Mediterraneo in armi (sec. XV–XVIII)*, edited by Rossella Cancila, (Palermo: Associazione Mediterranea, 2007), pp. 113–174.

