

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TOWARDS THE AGE OF MERCANTILISM:  
REVISITING THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY'S ECONOMIC CRISIS.

The centuries-long history of the Ottoman Empire has been and somehow still is considered by non-Ottoman historians from a teleological approach<sup>1</sup>. So challenging is the idea that the Middle East has been ruled by an independent, hegemonic State, that the European – or, better to say, Eurocentric – culture and mentality need to keep celebrating its actual historical decay and ultimate end. The institutional experience of the Ottoman Empire still happens to be either abused or sentenced to a *damnatio memoriae*. This is particularly true in those countries that are directly caught up in the Ottoman memory. These nations, such as Turkey, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and other Balkan countries, also happen to host the most extensive Ottoman archives in the world. As far as Italian historiography is concerned, Ottoman documents are seldom directly examined, even when dealing with the ever-fashionable topics of Mediterranean history. Leaving aside the deliberately overlooked period of post-unitary connections, even the diversified relationships between the Ottoman Empire and the Ancient Italian States are traditionally investigated using sources other than Ottoman documents. This, I believe, has been conducive to producing a hesitation in historiographical advances from the late 1970s onwards. Many questions that had been posed by a generation of Italian historians, deeply concerned with economic structures and models, and influenced by Fernand Braudel's perspective, have been abandoned in favor of topics that have more to do with methodological assumptions than with an actual interpretation of historical data<sup>2</sup>. It would be hazardous to think that the development of a comparative approach, alone, would have protected Italian historiography in the uncertain circumstances currently affecting humanities. Nevertheless, what is certain is that the perspective offered by a different point of view of the same structures and events necessarily broadens the horizons of a discipline and makes it more difficult to weaken its cultural significance. The history of the Mediterranean and of the Ancient Italian States is now ready to be verified via Ottoman sources, in all their wide varieties.

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<sup>1</sup> Salzmann, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Romano, 1995.

Furthermore, the actual amount and quality of Ottoman sources kept in Italian archives is far from being completely known. In the State Archives of Palermo, for example, Ottoman documents are classified as “unreadable Arabic documents”, which means that the memory of Ottoman interests in Sicily has been completely erased: in 1861, six Ottoman consuls were active on the island and now nobody there is able to read their documents. One may hold the difficulties of the language as responsible for the non-involvement of Italian scholars and historians; but this assumption – however scientifically unacceptable – is inexorably called into question by the deeply-rooted tradition of Ottoman studies in Italy<sup>3</sup>. Another reason might be the previous, lengthy inaccessibility of Turkish archives, but then why should the perfectly accessible Ottoman documents kept in the Italian archives share the same destiny? And why should not this reason be null and void, now that the Turkish archives have been opened? Rather, I am inclined to think that a peculiar strategy of State-building is at the basis of this “repression”: after 1876, the new Italian ruling class let colonialism transmit a new ideology of consent. Post-Garibaldi discourses on the pretended “Italianness” of Albania started to fill up the pages of the national press, the *Corriere della Sera* printing among the most chauvinist anti-Ottoman prose.

Now that the not-too-glorious age of Italian social-colonialism<sup>4</sup> is only a distant memory, our historical tradition seems still gratuitously bound to the idea that the *storia patria* needs to be based on “native” sources, relegating Ottoman and, in general, foreign records to being a curiosity for philologists, if not a rarity for antiquarians. Will a department of comparative/world history ever be founded in Italy? It seems perhaps more appropriate – however provocative – to keep an eye on the interest shown in the last few months by the Italian industries in the Turkish economic boom and to claim that at least this renewed commercial vocation eastwards will demand and produce an innovative cultural and political base for its development.

The eastwards trend in international trade has been considered a structural aspect in the history of the Italian peninsula<sup>5</sup>. The governments held by the *destra storica* were fully

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the late-19<sup>th</sup> century establishment of the chair in Turkish Language at the *Scuola Superiore di Commercio* in Venice (Bellingeri, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Carocci, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Romano, 1972.

aware of its original character and kept encouraging it by building infrastructures in the country and by demanding high performances from Italian diplomacy abroad and especially in the Ottoman Empire<sup>6</sup>. The close, substantial connection between trade, peace and diplomacy is maybe the Republic of Venice's most precious bequest to the modern Italian State. A "quintessentially neutral" power, its ruling class constantly acted as a conflict-defusing factor in 16<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean affairs<sup>7</sup>. As we shall see, this pattern continued with even more intensity throughout the first decades of the following century, from the (propitious) abandonment of the Holy League (1573) till the War of Candia (1645). Venice was still among the leading industrial powers of the time and trade with the Ottoman Empire was vital to the very existence of the State. Nevertheless, after the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus, Venetian interests in the Eastern Mediterranean were destined to be seriously compromised. The loss of such an important base for their feudal business economy would have soon deprived the Venetian merchants of their privileged position in the commercial competition of the time. True, the Venetian network in Syria was so deeply rooted that the relatively short war in Cyprus did not have an immediate effect on the commercial competition in the area: throughout the subsequent two decades, the merchants of Saint Mark's continued to be the most influential and numerous trading nation in Aleppo. Nevertheless, this inertia was destined to end. Moreover, and partially in consequence of these late-16<sup>th</sup>-century events, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the first crisis of production occurred in all its dramatic evidence<sup>8</sup>.

The crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is considered a "general" crisis<sup>9</sup>. This means that its causes and effects are traceable in many aspects of the economic life of the time: demographic, industrial and commercial. Some historians prefer to stress its "structural" pattern, pointing out the irreversible failure of a whole model of development<sup>10</sup>. The English and the Dutch not only won the competition with the former leading economies – the so-called "Italians" – but also laid the foundations of a completely innovative deal in the economic history of the world. This process was neither quick nor sudden. On the contrary, throughout the second

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<sup>6</sup> Chabod, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Hale, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Romano, 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Parker and Smith, 1978; Hobsbawm, 1954; Wallerstein 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Rapp, 1976.

half of the preceding century the English had slowly proceeded towards what has been called “the unmaking of Venetian hegemony” in Mediterranean trade<sup>11</sup>. Their first and most effective weapon had been to counterfeit Venetian fabrics. Lower-quality and cheap imitations of Venetian textiles were introduced into the Levantine markets and circulated with the fake brand of the lion of Saint Mark’s. This strategy was accompanied by a jump in the industrial system of textile production, supported – as argued by the energy economists – by mineral energy resources: coal and turf instead of wood<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, lower costs of production, together with daring choices in the fields of colors and materials, had the effect of expanding the market. More people had access to cheaper products. This did not mean that Venetian fabrics were about to disappear: on the contrary, the Sultan and the Ottoman *élite* would continue to favor Venetian luxury items throughout the existence of the Republic. What changed was the system of consumption on a wider scale<sup>13</sup>. The Dutch and English merchants were paying for raw materials such as cotton and wool with (smuggled)<sup>14</sup> American silver, partially recovered through the sale of the end products of their industry. This mercantilist scheme of proto-colonial penetration kept the Mediterranean – and the Ottoman Empire, more than any other State – at the center of the world’s interests. The Mediterranean lands were at the same time a space where raw materials were produced and a promising, socially diversified community of consumption. Varied strategies were adopted in order to intervene in the different social and institutional realities that came into contact with this new economy<sup>15</sup>. In Southern Italy, for example, the English merchants substituted the Venetian and Genoese network by developing a pattern of intervention focusing on re-exports<sup>16</sup>. In general, English trade in Italy was mainly a transit trade, Livorno being an indispensable stopping-off point on the route taken by English ships sailing to the Mediterranean<sup>17</sup>. In the Ottoman Empire, too, strategies are difficult to generalize to a common pattern, each provincial situation – as well as that of the capital<sup>18</sup> – needing a more

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<sup>11</sup> Rapp, 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Wrigley, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Braudel, 1974; Carmagnani, 2010; Parker, 2001 and Pamuk, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Moutoukias, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Pagano de Divitiis, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Braudel and Romano, 1951; Ghezzi, 2007; D’Angelo, 2004 and Pagano de Divitiis, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Eldem, Goffman and Masters, 2003 and Mantran, 1996.

detailed inspection<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, all these places had to cope with a new mercantilist approach in the commercial transactions and ultimately happened to suffer from it while finding their place within modernity<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, the crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> century introduced structural elements of inequality and disharmony among trading regions. Even today's disparity between Northern and Southern European countries needs to be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century in order to be properly understood<sup>21</sup>. Now, what was the impact of this crisis on the economic policies of the period? Did the former leading economies react? It has been written that the *Question d'Orient* cannot be examined without also considering the answers provided to that question by the Orient(s) it(them)self(-ves)<sup>22</sup>. Did the "old world"<sup>23</sup> think about an alternative path towards the age of mercantilism<sup>24</sup>?

Though structural, the crisis has been described as relative and not absolute, as far as the city of Venice was concerned<sup>25</sup>. Mechanisms of old-regime social security – such as the guild system – prevented living standards from lowering, the highest price of the crisis being ultimately paid by the countryside, through re-feudalization methods. This pattern had the effect of protecting the industrial sector and, on a different though interlinking level, made it possible for the Republican ruling class to establish autonomous priorities in the State's economic policies. If an answer to the crisis has to be looked for, it must be in the Venetian commercial affairs. In 1577, a Jewish merchant named Daniel Rodriga presented to the Senate of the Republic a project of establishing an international port in the Dalmatian city of Spalato, formally part of the Venetian *stato da mar*<sup>26</sup>. The proposal was taken into consideration and accepted by the authorities. Basically, Rodriga's project was to apply a low-custom policy in order to attract Ottoman goods to Spalato rather than to any other Eastern Adriatic port. Spalato being a Venetian colony, the ships would have then left compulsorily for the *Serenissima*. As the Levant Company had its Livorno, Venice could count

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<sup>19</sup> Hanna, 1998; Khouri, 1997; Goffman, 1990; Frangakis-Syrett, 1992; Smyrnelis, 1999 and Faroqhi, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Masters, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Romano, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Georgeon, 1989.

<sup>23</sup> Lanaro, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> "[S]i sbaglierebbe a concludere [...] che Venezia assistette inerte a questo declassamento di una marina mercantile che per secoli era stata il suo vanto" (Sella, 1961 and 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Rapp, 1976.

<sup>26</sup> Paci, 1971.

on its Spalato. As a satellite free port, the Dalmatian city could become Venice's feudal "subterfuge" to the new economy. One only has to look at a map to understand how slim the portion of Venetian territory was on the Dalmatian coast. Immediately beyond the border, began the boundless *paese turchesco*. The project of the *scala di Spalato* had to count on the organic cooperation of the Ottomans or it could not exist.

It has been written that economic history has its own chronology, independent from the traditional partition of human history<sup>27</sup>. Quite similarly, it may be argued that it has its own space too, equally independent from the geography drawn by institutional borders. In this sense, Early-Modern Venetian Dalmatia and Ottoman Bosnia were a concrete example of geographic contiguity and economic interdependence. There were towns under Ottoman rule, their natural port ("marina") being beyond the border, in Venetian territory. Such was the case of Venetian Spalato (Split) and Ottoman Kilis (Clissa). The more critical and controversial the Balkan border became during the wars, the less intense it became during the longer periods of peace. A pervasive phenomenon of professional cross-migration had already been denounced on many occasions by Qānūnī Süleymān (mid-16<sup>th</sup> century): immediately before a military campaign against Persia, the Sultan had to repeat his orders of salt for the army, since all of it was already in the hands of the Venetian merchants, the Ottoman salt-works being monopolized by their network<sup>28</sup>. The situation might be described in terms of economic pervasiveness of the city-State of Venice towards the Ottoman periphery. The current oblivion of Early-Modern history makes everybody remember Ottoman Bosnia as a province far from its political center, economically depressed and deeply harassed by ethnic disputes and colonial interests. This is mainly due to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and current events concerning this area, but also to the post-Fascist voluntary oblivion of Venice's maritime power on the Eastern coast of the Adriatic. Moreover, it should also be remembered that Ottoman Bosnia corresponded to the western, farthest ramification of a trade route whose cohesion was augmented by the unity of Ottoman rule. How this unity contributed to delaying the occurrence of the economic crisis has not been investigated yet<sup>29</sup>. What emerges from the documents<sup>29</sup> is that a whole stream of Eastern

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<sup>27</sup> Romano, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> Gökbilgin, 1964 and Hocquet, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Barkan, 1961.

products, including for example Indian pepper, arrived in Bosnia by caravan<sup>30</sup>. Together with local products, such as wool, wax, cheese, thickfelt, silk and semi-processed leather, these goods all reached Saray Bosna and then took different routes to reach the maritime coast westwards. Dubrovnik, Narenta, Maqarsqa, Şebenik, Leş and Nova were the major accesses to the sea. The Venetian project of letting the Balkan merchandise converge in Kilis and then Spalato was an attempt to clamp down on this fragmentation, preserving the cohesive nature of trade granted by the unity of the Ottoman lands. In this sense, the territory ruled by the Venetians played its traditional role of “natural” continuation of the Ottoman lands. Many authoritative words have been written about the compatibility of the two States<sup>31</sup>. The project of the *scala di Spalato* may very well be considered as the extreme declination of this compatibility.

The realization of the project could count on an already well-established Venetian network in the area. A *Conte* was in charge in the port of Spalato and another was in the nearby city of Zara, both submitting to a *Provveditore Generale di Dalmazia*, also established in Zara. These three public offices were assigned to patricians for three years. Moreover, just across the nearby Ottoman border, a Venetian consul – not necessarily a patrician – was appointed both in Kilis and in Saray Bosna, nowadays Sarajevo (Daniel Rodriga, for example, was in charge at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century). This institutional network, reaching deep into the Ottoman domains, was somehow the demonstration of the vitality of Venetian interests in the Balkans even before the actual establishment of the *Scala*. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the target became that of activating this network towards a new perspective: allowing the route from Saray Bosna to Kilis, to Spalato, and ultimately to Venice, to become the preferential path for traded goods travelling westwards. In view of this target, the aforementioned network was integrated by other, not-necessarily institutionalized, figures with the task of facilitating cooperation with the Ottoman authorities established in Skopije, Sofia, and Saray Bosna, and with the merchants at all levels: “[...] *vi commetteremo che dobbiate immediate mandar quelle persone che voi stimarete buone per condur a fine questo negozio, facendolo trattar con quella circonspezzione che dalli savii nostri sopra la mercantia*

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<sup>30</sup> BOA, MD 24, hüküm 43, 16/Za/981.

<sup>31</sup> Braudel, 1972-73.

*vi è stata scritta, [...] non intervendo in ciò il nome pubblico, ma solamente il beneficio di quei sanzacadi et de mercanti [...]*<sup>32</sup>, the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* wrote in 1588 to the *Rettori di Zara*.

As is suggested by this quotation, at this stage the Venetian ruling class chose to keep a low international profile on the project. The keyword was indeed *circonspezione*. Venetians were particularly careful not to let the project become an international affair. After the loss of Cyprus – or, according to traditional chronological partition, after the Battle of Lepanto – Venice is relegated by historiography to a role of “regional power”. Was it really so? Yes, would answer in reassuring tones the Venetian ruling class of the day, about whose rare pragmatism many illuminating words have already been written<sup>33</sup>. On the contrary, Venetians were playing their cards on a regional base, in order to re-assess their hegemony on the contended transit trade of their Gulf, as the Adriatic Sea was called in those days. Who were the competitors and who the potential enemies? As stated by the *Cinque Savi* in a paper dated June 1589, “[n]oi, presa informazione particolare et dal clarissimo messer Nicolò Bragadino, ultimamente ritornato di là, et da Daniel Rodriga, crediamo che i dubbii dell’effettuarla si risolvono in dua molto principali, l’uno sopra le difficoltà che potranno esser poste dall’emino di Narenta et dal Sanzaco del Ducado, interessati molto per questa deliberazione, quello come datiaro di quella scala et questo come patrone del paese per dove convengono passar hora tutte le mercantie, le quali mutando scala converranno tralasciar quel camino con interesse di quel sanzacado. L’altra dubietà nasce dal timore che hanno tutti i mercanti per il pericolo del viaggio, potendo in molti luoghi del paese, per l’abondanza di boschi et altri siti esser assaliti et da Uscocchi et da altri [...]<sup>34</sup>. The Ottoman authorities mentioned by the document occupied different positions in the local administration. The first – the *emin* of the port town of Narenta – was the person to whom customs duties were entrusted, either in exchange of a salary or, more often in this area, of a share of the income (*iltizām*). The second was the *sancaqbeyi* of Duka, an administrative figure of middling importance, also appointed by the Sultan, who mediated between local demands and the *beylerbeyi*. The two of them nourished a direct or indirect interest in trade. Of course, the passage of a caravan through a city meant dependable sources of income under many

<sup>32</sup> ASV, *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, September 27th 1588.

<sup>33</sup> Arbel, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> ASV, *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, June 16th 1589.



aspects<sup>35</sup>; therefore, it was not even necessary for the political authorities to have a direct interest in the goods actually traded – which, in many cases, they had – in order to intervene in favor of one route or another. These two figures were neither the only nor the most dangerous competitors of the newly established *scala di Spalato*. True, their bases were closer to Spalato than any other port-town and the growth of the latter would have deprived them of flow of international goods. According to the *Cinque Savi*, both of them were to be easily neutralized through the well-known strategy of the *negotio*, which in this case consisted of obtaining the support of a higher placed authority (the *beýlerbeyi* of Bosnia) and other local figures, playing on the rivalries between the servants of the Sultan. This strategy, which modern culture would classify as political or diplomatic, was on the contrary essentially organic to trade, this last being an activity far more complex than we may assume today. The Ottoman functionaries often embraced the Venetian cause out of financial interest, a share of the potential income being destined directly to them.

Merchants from Ancona and from Dubrovnik, whose fortunes were subject to a sudden increase whenever a military controversy would pitch the Republic of Venice against the Ottoman Empire, were to be particularly annoyed by the establishment of an international port in Spalato. For sure, their opposition would have been more challenging than any other's for the Venetians, since both of these cities could have turned to the Pope and asked for support. The Venetians were certainly unwilling to deal with a direct intervention of the Pope in economic affairs concerning the Gulf<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – as in many other periods – the Pope's intervention would have been immediately supported by the King of Spain, both of them being affronted since the Venetian abandonment of the Holy League. In other words, better to pass for an undervalued regional power rather than to put up with religiously disguised political interference<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, both Spain and the Papacy could easily count on a third, promising ally in their fight for hegemony in the Adriatic: the Austrian monarchy was taking its first steps towards the Balkans, the Uskok piracy being its (irregular) maritime force<sup>38</sup>. Almost two centuries later, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>35</sup> BOA, MAD 706, 3/C/986.

<sup>36</sup> Sarpi, 1685.

<sup>37</sup> Cessi, 1943.

<sup>38</sup> Bracewell, 1992.

Trieste would turn out to be the long-lasting and unquestioned winner in the Adriatic competition<sup>39</sup>.

Though inscribed in the same context, the auspicated *circonspezzione* mentioned by the *Cinque Savi* was mentioned rather as regards to the central government of the Ottoman Empire. In this first stage, neither the Sultan nor the Grand Vizier were to be informed of the project. This strategy is openly described in Venetian sources, but may also be discernible in the Ottoman accounts of the time. Often, the Venetians instructed the *beý* of Kilis – and, through his mediation, the *beýlerbeýi* of Saray Bosna – to realize infrastructures destined to facilitate the passage of caravans. Whether it was a bridge that needed to be built, or a forest to be cleared, in order to flush out the innumerable bandits, the Venetians informed the Ottoman authorities and asked for prompt intervention. In some cases, the tasks were accomplished by the local administration, although an intervention from Istanbul was frequently required, especially when permanent infrastructures, such as bridges or caravanserais, were planned. Should such circumstances occur, the local authorities informed first the Venetians of the necessity to contact the central government. At this first stage, the *Cinque Savi* would rather spend money out of the Republic's Treasury, than have the Sultan solicited on a project that was meant to be kept under wraps. In 1589, the *Cinque Savi* wrote: “[m]a perché conviene per comodo delle mercantie et caravane ottenere che nel paese turchesco, sopra il fiume della Citina lontano da Spalato meza giornata, sii da Turchi fabricato un ponte et havendo di ciò trattato il Rodriga, come egli asserisse, che il sanzaco suddetto, dal quale ha avuto per risposta che non vi porrà mano senza espresso comandamento della Porta, sarà necessario procurar in questo, mentre che nel fiume suddetto siino posti doi ponti sopra burchielle secondo l'uso d'Italia, perché comodamente et con prestezza passino le mercantie et caravane. A qual cosa, come crediamo che sarà facile ottenere, renderà anco minor pregiudizio alle cose pubbliche per quei rispetti che sono considerabili molto in questo proposito.”<sup>40</sup> After all, the heavy customs duty of the *mezi noli*, affecting the ships traveling to and from the rival ports of Narenta and Dubrovnik, was destined to cover the expenses needed for the construction of the lazaret and of any other

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<sup>39</sup> Tucci, 1980.

<sup>40</sup> ASV, *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, I serie, b. 162, 16th 1589.

infrastructure required for the full completion of the route (the customs house, bridges, watchtowers etc.). The lazaret itself was of prime importance in the Venetian strategy: the strict sanitary measures adopted by the *Serenissima* not only served the purpose of preventing dangerous epidemics, but also allowed the authorities to let personal interpretations of those very measures become the rule. Ragusean ships were captured and dragged into the lazaret for exasperating quarantines in order to delay the delivery of the goods they transported<sup>41</sup>.

The project of the *scala di Spalato* was indeed at the center of Venetian trade politics up until the War of Candia. Together with the relatively good performance of the industrial sector, the stubborn defense of the Spalato route may be considered as one of the measures that made the decline of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century relative and not absolute as far as urban living standards were concerned. Venetian fabrics kept circulating in the market places of Sofia, Skopije and Saray Bosna for much longer than in the new and old trading centers of the Middle East, such as Aleppo, İzmir and Cairo, where the competition of the Northerners had been more successful. This interpretation tells us a lot about the capacities of a State to influence the economic vicissitudes interfering with the life and means of its people.

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

These circumstances did not last more than twelve years. Very soon, the competition in the Adriatic became so bitter that an actual alliance between Venice and Istanbul was required in order to protect the route leading to and from Spalato. The *scala* had become the symbol of Venice's independence and was supported by a strong political project, powered and argued for by such refined intellectuals as Paolo Sarpi. Sarpi challenged Grotius's *Mare Liberum* on a conceptual basis and offered theoretical support to the Venetian sovereignty on the Adriatic<sup>42</sup>. An undisputed protagonist of the period of the *Interdetto*, he foresaw the

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<sup>41</sup> Paci, 1971.

<sup>42</sup> Moscarda, 2002.

detrimental influence of the Pope on the relationships among the ancient Italian States and the emerging nations, and even proposed the State's conversion to Protestantism. Was this the price to pay for an alliance with the only logical trading partner, the Ottomans?

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