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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/joie/vol1/iss1/7
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This article is available in Journal of Opinions, Ideas, & Essays: http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/joie/vol1/iss1/7
A Castle in Dalmatia: Zemunik in the Veneto-Ottoman peace Negotiations of 1573-1574

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Abstract:
For a Europe that feared continuing Ottoman expansion, the Battle of Lepanto (1571) was a great relief. But the Ottoman Empire continued to be dominant in the eastern Mediterranean, and in southeastern Europe. The Republic of Venice, a partner in the great Christian victory of 1571, was soon forced to make peace with the sultan, acknowledging the loss of important overseas territories. This essay deals with the vain effort by Venetian diplomats to recover through negotiation a small but strategically important territory lost in the fighting of 1571-1573. Although the Venetian government refused to recognize it at the time, the permanent loss of Zemunik castle meant that the Venetian province of Dalmatia now had to form an economic partnership with the Ottoman province of Bosnia in order to survive.

Larger historical trends are sometimes as it were crystallized in a particular incident. This essay uses a diplomatic episode to mirror an important change in long-term relations between the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire. At issue was Zemunik in the Venetian province of Dalmatia, a castle which the Ottomans captured during the Cyprus War of 1570-1573, and which the Venetians sought to reclaim in five months of intense negotiations (September 1573 – February 1574). This account of the Zemunik negotiations is preceded by an overview of Veneto-Ottoman relations, and followed by a brief conclusion.

Veneto-Ottoman relations in the sixteenth century

From the early times, the Most Serene Republic[8] prospered as a conduit for the flow of Asian spices to Europe. It is common knowledge that Venice’s trading position was threatened when Portuguese mariners established a direct link with Asian markets at the end of the fifteenth century. What is less commonly understood is that Portugal’s lead in the spice trade was relatively short-lived. With some help from the Ottoman Empire, Portugal’s Muslim rivals found ways to evade Portuguese choke-points in the Indian Ocean, and bring their wares to the entrance to the Red Sea, controlled by the Ottomans from 1538.[9] By about 1550, Venice was again Europe’s main supplier of Asian goods, much to the delight of customs officials in Alexandria and Aleppo, both of which were under Ottoman rule.[10] The Venetians and the Ottomans thus had common interests, and the two governments were generally at peace.
But Venice had also built a land empire to support its shipping, gaining possession of Cyprus and Crete as well as outposts in mainland Greece.[11] Her war galleys controlled the sea lanes of the eastern Mediterranean – that is, until around 1500, when the Ottomans began building a fleet.[12] Between 1499 and 1573 Venice fought three wars against the Ottoman Empire, each of which resulted in major losses to its overseas dominions.[13] The last of these wars began with the Ottoman invasion of Cyprus in 1570. Its back to the wall, Venice accepted the mediation of papal diplomats and formed an alliance with her enemy, Spain, long enough for the combined Christian fleet to achieve a great victory over the Ottomans at Lepanto in October 1571. In the long run, this defeat might be seen as representing the high-water mark in the long history of Ottoman expansion. In the short run, however, the Ottoman Empire gave an impressive demonstration of its recuperative powers. A new war-fleet was rebuilt over the winter, and in 1574 the Ottomans re-conquered Tunis from Spain.[14] Meanwhile, the Venetian government saw clearly enough that Spain's Muslim enemies were in North Africa, not the eastern Mediterranean; already in the later summer of 1572 Venice sent Andrea Badoer to the Porte as its ambassador, to negotiate for peace.[15]

As for Dalmatia, the Venetians had brought the coastal cities of this region under their control in the fifteenth century, mainly because the 70-mile long Zadar Channel afforded the safest passage for merchantmen sailing to or from the east.[16] Against possible Ottoman attacks, Venice devoted considerable resources to fortifying its Dalmatian ports, especially Zadar, which became a model of the new-style fortifications pioneered by Italian architects of the early sixteenth century. During the Cyprus War, Ferhat Beg Sokolović, the governor of the neighboring Ottoman province of Klis, conquered much of the contado or countryside under Zadar's jurisdiction, but he made no attempt against Zadar and its formidable defenses.[17] The weakness of Venetian governance in Dalmatia was that less attention was given to the countryside behind the port-cities. Much land that been Venetian was now Ottoman, and many areas still subject to Venice were de facto occupied by Vlach herdsmen who were subjects of the sultan.[18] To counter Ottoman encroachment in rural Dalmatia, Venetian officials promoted resettlement of the contado, especially around Zadar. But settlers had to be provided with security. Even though there were no major invasions during periods of peace, raiders from nearby Ottoman provinces – Klis and Bosnia – came as they wished, taking people and cattle as booty. The solution was to pick one of the rural castles that remained standing, and station there a garrison large enough to fend off raiders. The choice fell on the castle of Zemunik (in Italian, Semonico), ten miles east of Zadar, which had served the same purpose during a previous resettlement effort.[19] But the men serving at Zemunik were ill-paid, and had never faced Ottoman regulars. When Ferhat Beg invaded, the garrison at once deserted; replacements were sent, but their commander surrendered the castle without a fight.[20] By comparison with Cyprus, this was a minor loss. Yet the Venetian government was determined to recover through negotiation what it had lost in the war.

**Zemunik in the peace negotiations of 1573-1574**

In the negotiations that extended from September 1573 to March 1574 there were seven main interlocutors. Venice was represented by the serving bailo in Istanbul, Marcantonio Barbaro, and by his successor, Domenico Tiepolo. Andrea Badoer, sent as an ambassador to negotiate a treaty of peace, outranked the baili, and had authority to make decisions, within the limits of his instructions.[1] The Grand Vezier, Mehmed Paşa Sokolović,[2] spoke for Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-1574), and for the five other veziers who made up the governing council, or divan. 'Ali Bey, the Grand Dragoman, or chief translator, certified the agreement of texts in Italian with the Turkish originals. François de Noailles, the Bishop Dax, was the ambassador of France's King Charles IX (r. 1559-1574), an Ottoman ally;[3] his instructions were to work for peace between Venice and the Sublime Porte. [4] Finally, Solomon Ashkenazi, known in Western sources as Rabbi Solomon, was a native of Udine in the Veneto, with a doctorate in medicine from Padua. As the personal physician of bailo Marcantonio Barbaro and a member of Mehmed Paşa's entourage, he provided an essential channel of communication.[5] The main sources used are the dispatches of the baili,[6] and Noailles' correspondence.[7]
King Charles IX (r. 1559-1574), anxious to pry Venice loose from its alliance with his enemy, the King of Spain, sent Noailles to the Porte to work for a separate peace between Venice and the sultan. When Noailles reached Venice he found that the Republic had tried in vain to have him recalled; Venice wanted peace with the sultan, but without being dependent on French mediation.[21] In fact, the Venetians already had a mediator, in the person of Solomon Askhkenazi. By February 1573, Rabbi Solomon and his friend 'Ali Bey, the Grand Dragoman, had drafted a text: Venice would accept the loss of Cyprus, and pay an indemnity of 300,000 ducats; the Ottomans would return two small coastal towns to Venetian control, and it was stipulated that “villages and places and borders would be held as before the war.”[22] Out of respect for France, the sultan’s ally, signing of the treaty was delayed until Noailles - who had left without authorization[23] - returned to the Porte in early March.[24] Ottoman diplomatic style[25] did not acknowledge any peers of the sultan.[26] A treaty or “Capitulation” was a gracious concession by the Ottoman sovereign, not an agreement between equals. Since it was unseemly for the Padishah[27] to descend into niggling detail, boundaries were left to subsequent discussions, in which Zemunik turned out to be the most contentious issue.

In early September, Mehmed Paşa suggested that the Venetians might get Zemunik back by paying an annual tribute, but Badoer’s secretary told him this was not possible, because his instructions were not to depart from the wording of the Capitulation.[28] Meanwhile, Noailles asked ‘Ali Bey and his own dragoman to compare the Venetian and Turkish texts of the Capitulation; both were indeed found to refer to “old boundaries,” before the war.[29] But there was trouble on the horizon. By late September, Badoer and his colleagues were apprised of the contents of a brief[30] to be submitted to the divan by Ferhat Beg, the conqueror of Klis. He would insist, they were told, that Zemunik was indeed a castle, with four towers (the Venetians had claimed it was not fortified). This meant it could not be returned, for the Ottomans never relinquished captured fortifications. Religious law prohibited its return as well, since a mosque had been built there. The Venetians recognized that neither of these points could be directly contested, at least not by arguments acceptable at the Porte.[31]

They therefore based their brief on the Capitulation, which stipulated that every terra should keep the subordinate villages it had before the war. “All nations,” the Venetians said, “have the same understanding of what a terra is,” namely, a unit of government whose main town had jurisdiction over surrounding villages. Walls and a drawbridge did not make Zemunik a terra, for it was itself a mere village, subordinate to the terra of Zadar.[32] In his report to Paris Noailles agreed: Zemunik was not a separate place forte, as the Ottomans contended, but a dependency of Zadar. Indeed, its countryside, the most fertile land in the region, extended to the very gates of Zadar.[33] Noailles’ opinion did not matter. On this issue, as on others, the Ottomans were not impressed by appeals to the distinctively European idea of a law of nations.[34]

Hence the Venetian brief also pointed to the solemn oath by which Sultan Selim II swore to uphold the Capitulation. In their exchanges with Europeans, officials at the Porte insisted that the sultan’s word, once given, was immutable.[35] This axiom of Ottoman statecraft provided an opening for making an argument, albeit with delicacy.[36] In mid-October, Mehmed Paşa told Rabbi Solomon the Venetians had made a problem for themselves. If they did not want Ferhat Beg for an enemy, they should have punished the unnamed official who spoke to him with “nonchalance,” that is, disrespect. If the land around Zemunik was so important, they should have razed the castle before the war, depriving the area of military value.[37] The Venetians were now writing a second brief, centered on the sultan’s word, and they hoped to frame it so as to have Mehmed Paşa’s approval. This proved difficult, for the text indicated that the Grand Vezier had given the Venetians his own assurances, and Mehmed Paşa did not want it to appear that he had in any way preempted the sultan’s authority. In the end, he crossed out a word that “displeased” him.[38]

This brief may have been submitted at the “hand-kissing”[39] ceremony on November 3, where the Venetians made a show, taking advantage of the fact that the Ottomans “esteemed clothing more than all other forms of pomp.” The three diplomats and the fifteen gentlemen who accompanied them wore cloth-of-gold, while their servants dressed in silk. Like much of the luxury cloth that Ottoman officials used to display their importance, these fabric were the product of Venetian craftsmanship; hence the Venetian parade was “a rational splendor, and a living tableau of trade.”[40] Whether the Ottomans were suitably impressed is unknown. What is clear is that Badoer miscalculated by choosing not to hand over the first installment of the 300,000 ducat indemnity, as the Ottomans had expected (his idea was not to deliver the money until he was given a border settlement “in keeping
with the Capitulation.") [41] ‘Ali Bey conveyed an angry reaction from Mehmed Paşa: “the sultan is not a merchant, whom you Venetians need not give anything unless he gives to you.” The Grand Veizier also read from what he claimed was a letter from the sultan; it said that land conquered by the sword, now held for three years, and where mosques had been built, could never be returned. The Venetians thought they detected the influence of the grand chancellor, a stickler for the requirements of religious law. [42] Whatever the reasons, it does seem that whatever chance they had of getting Zemunik back had now evaporated.

In December, when Mehmed Paşa spoke of reports that mosques were indeed being built in Dalmatia, Rabbi Solomon disputed the idea that religious law forbade the return of land that had a mosque: after all, the Ottomans had been willing to give Zemunik back in return for an annual tribute of 500 ducats. Yes, replied the Grand Veizier, but now I would not do so for 10,000 ducats. [43] Meanwhile, the Signoria had decided that the castle could be razed, if it meant getting the land back; but Badoer and his colleagues were right in thinking this concession would not do any good. [44] The final blow came on December 30, when the Venetians got word that Ferhat Beg had sent “ten sacks” of silver coin to Zemunik, to buy land, and build a mosque. [45] If there had not previously been a mosque in Zemunik, there was now.

Two weeks later, Mehmed Paşa seized Badoer by his vest and spoke frankly: even though his instructions prohibited him from departing from the Capitulation, as Venice understood it, Badoer’s standing in Venice was such that if he chose to end the ongoing contention, the Signoria would accept his decision. [46] In February 1574, Barbaro signed off on a final agreement, with a face-saving clause remitting the decision on Zemunik to the sultan. This was not quite the end of things, because Mehmed Paşa told Noailles the castle would be torn down and the land restored. [47] In the spring, when officials were sent to mark out new boundaries, Rabbi Solomon went with them, in the expectation that he could use his influence to have important parcels of land returned to Zadar and other cities. But his mission was a failure. [48] In the end, Zemunik and its countryside remained Ottoman.

Conclusion

One might well ask why Mehmed Paşa allowed his Venetian interlocutors to drag out the discussion of a matter of such seemingly small importance as Zemunik. One answer would be that he did not want to take any risk that Venetian naval power might again join forces with Spain, at a time when the Ottomans were planning more campaigns against Spanish positions in North Africa. [50] In the longer term, Mehmed Paşa understood that wars of conquest were not the only way by which the Ottoman Empire could advance its interests. [51] Trade was important too, and especially the customs revenue that accrued from trade. As soon as the peace treaty was signed, the Grand Veizier’s cousin, Ferhat Beg, wrote to the doge of Venice proposing a plan to increase trade: if the Venetians would improve the harbor at Split to accommodate more traffic, he would ensure the safety of horse-caravans traveling to Sarajevo. [52]

One might also ask why Rabbi Solomon invested so much effort in trying to resolve the dispute over Zemunik. There is no clear answer. But he was among other things a merchant, with a small fleet, and he seems to have had a broader interest in promoting Jewish trade. [53] As it happens, the man behind Ferhat Beg’s proposal to Venice was Daniel Rodrigues, a Sephardic Jewish merchant who did business from Bosnia. [54] More broadly speaking, this was a period when Jews were very active in the trade between Italy and the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire - a trade which depended on there being a state of peace between Venice and the Ottomans.

Finally, why did Badoer and his colleagues devote so much attention to Zemunik? One might find an answer in a brief sent to the divan by the governor of Bosnia, Mehmed Beg Sokolović (another cousin): he urged that Zemunik be retained, because its possession would allow the Ottomans to put pressure on Zadar any time they wished. [56] To turn the argument around, Zemunik, as a forward position defending Zadar from the landward side,
was an important element in any sensible strategy for defending against another invasion of Dalmatia. One plausible inference from its loss would have been that Venice now had only one way of maintaining its position in Dalmatia, namely, by making sure to retain the good will of the Ottomans. There was thus good reason for favorable consideration of Ferhat Beg’s proposal, quite apart from the fact that Split had suffered heavily in the recent war. As it happened, however, many prominent Venetians abhorred the idea of a partnership with Rodrigues and his Jewish colleagues. Fifteen years had to pass before his plan was taken up, by a joint agreement between Venice and Bosnia. Once it began to function, the Split-Sarajevo connection became the most important route for trade between Venice and Istanbul.[57] In sum, although Venetian anti-Semitism prevented the implications from being grasped at the time, the definitive loss of Zemunik pointed to a re-orientation of state policy. From now on, the only way for Venice to maintain its hold on the coastal fringe of the Balkans was to encourage trade with the Ottoman hinterlands.

[1] The bailo watched over the interests of Venetian merchants and represented his government to the sultan. For special occasions ambassadors were sent. For Veneto-Ottoman relations, Paolo Preto, Venezia e i Turchi (Florence: Sansone, 1975), and Maria Pia Pedani, Dalla frontiere al confine (Venice: Università di Ca’ Foscari, 2002).


[16] Ivan Pederin, *Mletačka Uprava, Privreda i Politika u Dalmaciji (1408-1797)* (Dubrovnik: Casopis “Dubrovnik,” 1990). Zadar was the most important of several ports that Venice ruled.

[17] Tomislav Raukar et al., *Zadar pod Mletačkom Upravom 1409-1797* (Zadar, 1987), 218-222. Ferhat Beg was one of the many cousins of the Grand Vezier holding high office at this time.


[27] Ruler of all: a Persian term used also by the Safavid dynasty in Iran. See Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300-1650* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 115-127.

[28] This was what Mehmed Paşa told Rabbi Solomon, as reported by Badoer and his colleagues, 13 October 1573, ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 356v-357v. The secretary was Daniele Suriano (see next note). For Badoer’s instructions, dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, 24 November 1573, Filza 6, f. 367-367v.

[29] Suriano’s report, 16 September 1573, ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 355-356.

[30] Arz, a written submission to the divan.

[31] Dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, 28 September 1573, ASV, DAC, Filza 6, f. 352-353v.


[36] When Rabbi Solomon ventured to suggest that keeping Zemunik would mean that sultan was “lacking” in his word, the Grand Vezier asked him if he wanted to be “lacking” a head: dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, 28 September 1573, as in note 31.

[37] Dispatch from Badoer and his colleagues, 13 October 1573, as in note 28.

[38] Dispatches from Badoer and his colleagues, 23 and 28 October 1573, ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 358-359v, 361-364v.

[39] From 1519, European ambassadors were carried at the arms by two strong men and made to kneel before the sultan to kiss his hand: Konrad Dilger, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des osmanischen Hofzeremoniells im 15en und 16en Jahrhundert* (Munich: Trofenik, 1967), 70-71.

[40] Dispatch from Badoer and his colleagues, 3 November 1573, ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 364v-365v.

[41] Dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, 3 November 1573, as in note 40, and from Badoer, 11 November 1573, ASV DAV Filza 6, f. 367.

[42] Dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 365v-366v.

[43] Dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, 19 December 1573 ASV DAC Filza 6, f. 370v-372.


[45] Dispatch of Badoer and his colleagues, Pera, 30 December 1573, ASV, DAC, Filza 6, 373v-374v.


[50] For the Ottoman re-conquest of Goletta (1573) and Tunis (1574), Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, 162.


[54] See note 52.


[56] Relazione of Andrea Badoer, 1573, Alberi, Relazioni, III, 347-368, here 354-5, where Bosnia’s governor is called “Assan Pasha” (Hasan-Beg Sokolović had been governor there in 1561-1562).
[57] That is, until about 1620, when the flow of Asian goods to the Mediterranean region dried up, because of the dominance of the Dutch and English East India Companies in the Indian Ocean. Paci, *La “Scala” di Spalato e il commercio Veneziano,* 58-69.