The Maritime Expansion of the Ottomans and the Rivalry between Venice and Genoa in the Levant in the Time of Orhan I

Ardian MUHAJ *

During the fourteenth century the gradual weakening of the Byzantine power reignited the rivalry between the Italian maritime commercial city states, Genoa and Venice for commercial supremacy in the Bosphorus. On the other side exactly during the same centuries one can detect a dramatic decline of the spirit of crusade in the Mediterranean. In many ways, this internalization of the forces of European powers facilitated the Ottoman advance in the Balkans and the consequent end of the Byzantine Empire. Therefore the Ottoman expansion in Europe, started during the reign of Orhan I, and continued in the subsequent years by Murat I and Bayezid I happened in a troubled situation in Europe and in the Balkans.

The Ottomans were another important actor emerging since the mid-fourteenth century in the area. The Ottoman emirate during the time of Orhan I (r. 1326-1362) gained a new territorial dimension. From a landlocked emirate, it gained a very important maritime space that changed decisively the balance of power in the Marmara Sea and the Dardanelles straits. The Ottomans under the leadership of Orhan I started and carried out a series of successful conquests in northwest Anatolia that brought the Ottomans in direct contact with these two Italian maritime republics.

Also one of the most factors that greatly benefited the Ottomans were the series of civil wars that affected the Byzantine Empire in the 1340s and 1350s. The conquest of the two sides of the Dardanelles Straits, Çanakkale and Gallipoli, on one side and the conquest of the Kocaeli Peninsula on the other side, were particularly important since they brought the Ottomans naturally into this rivalry. Thus, the beginning of the maritime history of the Ottomans is linked to the emirate of Orhan I and their debut into the maritime history of the Mediterranean influenced also the dynamic of the rivalry between Genoa and Venice, although it can be said from the start that the Turkish advances and their presence in the Dardanelles intensified Genoese-Venetian rivalries rather than uniting them.

Although until late fourteenth century the Ottomans, did not own a naval fleet that could form a maritime threat,4 the significance and strength of the Ottomans was their territorial possessions in the Sea of Marmara and in the Dardanelles, which they achieved through conquests of the sea shores. In the Sea of Marmara the Ottomans as a result of their conquest of Maritime Bithynia in the years 1345-1346 took Imrali, Pasalimani and Marmara in the Asian side. In the Dardanelles they took complete control of the northern entrance of the Straits after taking Lapseki in the 1340s on the Asian side and later Gallipoli on the European side of the Straits. After taking these two important cities the Ottomans gained a very important maritime space that changed decisively the balance of power in the Mediterranean, bringing them naturally into the rivalry between the Italian maritime republics.

1 The Institute of History, Tirana, Albania, The Portuguese Academy of History, Lisbon, Portugal, e-mail: ardian300@yahoo.com
3 This process of Byzantine decline and weakening happened at a time when also the situation in Europe was becoming dramatic and anarchical. In 1345, Pope Clement VI wrote separate letters to Kings Philip VI of France and Edward III of England asking them to stop fighting and to unite to go on crusade. "Oh, how much better to fight against the Turkish enemies of our faith, than the present fraternal strife," the pontiff wrote to the English king. But the following year brought the battle of Crecy and the siege of Calais, and distant Turkish incursions became unimportant.
4 The Venetian chronicler blames clearly and openly the war that the Hungarian King and its allies the Genoese were waging against Venice as the ultimate cause of the Ottoman expansion in the Marmara Sea and in the Balkans. "dell’Imperio Constantinopolitano, il qual’era in manifesto pericolo, per cagione di Turchi, le forze de quali ogni giorno crescevano, havendo Solymano figliuolo d’Orcane Signor de Turchi passato lo Stretto et preso Gallipoli, procedeva contra Andrinopoli, perciocche il Re d’Ongaria, havendo all’hora volle le sue forze in Friuli, Trivisana et Dalmata, per offender lo Stato Veneto, dava adito a Turchi di molestar et ruinar l’Imperio di Constantinopoli; [..] (Caroldo, 237a) Questo Re Lodovico 4., molto intiero a dominar Italia, conquistò il Regno di Napoli, fece guerra all’Imperar di Bulgar et al Despota di Servia et era poco amico dell’Imperar di Constantinopoli, dando mirabili occasione, con le perversa sue operazion, ad Orchan di mandar Turchi nella Grecia, invitat da Christiani, et al figliuolo Amurath di passar lo stretto et acquisitar Gallipoli, perciocche la Ducal Signoria, essendoli fatta guerra dal Re d’Ungaria, non potend mandar fuori l’armate sue contra Turchi, come soleva, /... concluendo che l’ambizione di questo Re, con la discordia de Precipci Greci, et etata cagione che Turchi habbino fermato il piede in Europa. (Caroldo, 318a-318b). On this argument see also Ardian Muha, "The Hundred Years War and the Ottoman Expansion in the Balkans in the Second Half of 14th Century”, International Symposium on Gazi Suleyman Paşa and History of Kocaeli, Kocaeli, 2018, pp. 699-704.
its.5 Upon annexing the beyliks on the west coast of Anatolia to their lands, Ottomans became an important naval actor in Aegean.

Among the Latin states, it was the maritime republic of Genoa that established the earliest official contacts with the Ottomans by concluding a treaty with them in 1352. This was the first step in the development of relatively smooth relations between the Genoese and the Ottoman Empire, which lasted from the mid-fourteenth until the mid-fifteenth century. Within Christendom, such familiarity earned the republic a negative reputation, which the adversaries of Genoa – Venice among others – tried to exploit for their own purposes. Another interesting fact to point out is the mutual accusations between the European powers fighting each other about the depiction of the enemy as friend of the Ottomans. This kind of war propaganda based more on deliberate plans to invent imaginary plots between the Ottomans and the European adversary dates very early. On the eve of the Battle of Crécy between the English and the French in 1346, the British had information that Philip VI of France, through the Genoese, was planning to call contingent of Turkish mercenaries to their aid.6 Another element that contributed to the idea of a close connection between the Genoese and Ottomans was the outstanding position gained by some citizens of Genoa at the Ottoman court. They were influential men of affairs who owed their acquaintance with the sultans to their specific commercial activity. However, despite the fact that in some cases they held offices in the Genoese colonial administration, these merchants acted quite independently of Genoa itself and sometimes contrary to its directives.7

On the other side, in 1301 Venice established a permanent fleet to safeguard her interest in the Mediterranean. Since the third decade of the fourteenth century the fleet was occupied also by escorting the Venetian commercial convoys composed of merchant galleys to their various destinations in the eastern Mediterranean.8 Furthermore, there was in the early fourteenth century another and separate fleet in charge of the protection of the Venetian colonies in the territories of the former Byzantine Empire, known as Romania. During the Bosphorus crisis, the Senate nominated a supreme commander/captain general in charge of all the maritime affairs, “capitaneus generalis maris”, under whose authority were the captain of the Adriatic, the captains of the other maritime units and the governors of the Venetian colonies in the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea, regarding maritime issues. This office created for the first time during the Third Genoese War (1350-1355) continued to exist even later, during the Fourth War, The War of Tenedos/Chiochja (1377-1381).9 Because of the frequent crisis that existed since the late fourteenth century and during the fifteenth century, this office functioned more often then not. Other units were employed to safeguard the Venetian ships from pirates and corsairs operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the high expenses for employing such ships, which Venice found hard to meet, especially with the increasing of hostility between her and Genoa that reached its peak in the Third Genoese, War (1351-1355), forced Venice to cancel these units.10

On the other side, the Genoese held the colony of Galata on the Golden Horn across from the city of Constantinople since 1261 as part of the Treaty of Nymphaeum, a trade agreement between the Byzantines and Genoese. As a consequence of the Genoese control over the trade in the Bosphorus was waged the Byzantine–Genoese War of 1348–1349, which was fought over control of custom dues through the Bosphorus. The Byzantines attempted to break their dependence for maritime commerce on the Genoese merchants of Galata, and also to rebuild their own naval power. Their declined navy however was captured by the Genoese, and a peace agreement was concluded.

However, the decline of the Byzantine Empire following the civil war of 1341-1347 was easily shown in the control of custom duties through the strategic straights of the Bosphorus. Only one fifth of custom dues passing through the strait were going to the Byzantines. The remaining was controlled and collected by the Genoese from their colony of Galata. In the war between the Genoese and the Emperor, the Byzantines entered at a difficult situation. Their navy was destroyed during the civil war of the years 1341–1347, that ruined further the impoverished Empire. Byzantine trade declined and there were few other financial reserves for the Empire other than the duties and tariffs from the Bosphorus. In order to regain control of the custom duties, the emperor John VI Kantakouzenos tried to lower Constantinople’s duties. This led the merchant shipping coming through the strait to bypass Genoese Galata and to divert their ships across the Golden Horn by Byzantine Constantinople.

---

5 Ruthy Gertwagen, “Venice, Genoa and the fights over the island of Tenedos (late fourteenth and early fifteenth century”, Studi Veneziani, 67/2013, p. 53.
7 Cristian Caselli, Genoa, Genoese Merchants and the Ottoman Empire in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century: Rumours and Reality, Al-Masāq Vol. 25, Iss. 2, 2013.
10 B. Doumerc, La difesa dell’Impero, p. 246.
The Genoese, financially hard-hit from this policy, declared war on the Empire, and in August 1348, a flotilla of ships sailed across the Horn and attacked. The Byzantine fleet was destroyed by early 1349. The Byzantines retaliated by burning wharves and warehouses along the shore and catapulted stones and burning bales of hay into Galata, setting major parts of the city on fire. After several weeks of fighting both parties negotiated a peace agreement. The Genoese agreed to pay a war indemnity of 100,000 hyperpers. In return the Byzantines agreed not to challenge the commercial position of the Genoese in the area and the Genoese custom duties remained in effect.\(^\text{1}\) The 1348-49 war was the last attempt by the Byzantines to retake control of the trade passing through Bosphorus. Therefore, from 1350, the Byzantines allied themselves to the Republic of Venice, the commercial and maritime rival of Genoa, but this did nothing to improve their situation.

It was exactly the rivalry for the commercial routes in the Marmara Sea and Black Sea that prompted the outbreak of another war in 1350, in which Venice allied with King Peter IV of Aragon, who was at odds with Genoa over control of Sardinia and the commercial rivalry between his Catalan subjects and the Genoese, and entered the war in 1351. The events that started in the 1350s culminating in the open conflict between Genoa and Venice, prove that Venice’s persistent efforts to gain a foothold in North Eastern Mediterranean primarily in the island of Tenedos, and if possible also in Scutari as a defensive move against the Genoese.

Following clashes between local forces in the Aegean and around the Bosphorus, in 1351 a major Genoese fleet under Paganino Doria besieged the Venetian colony of Negroponte before advancing to Constantinople. The Byzantine Emperor John VI, who had lost the war with the Genoese in 1348-1349, had been induced to enter the war on the Venetian side and assisted them in attacks on Pera. A combined Venetian-Catalan fleet under Niccolo Pisani arrived soon afterwards and joined forces with the Byzantines, and the battle of the Straits was fought in the Bosphorus in February 1352. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, but the most serious losses were inflicted on the Catalans. As a consequence Pisani had to withdraw and this enabled Doria to force Byzantium out of the war.

Later in August 1353, Pisani led the Venetians and Catalans to a crushing victory over the Genoese under Antonio Grimaldi off Alghero in Sardinia. Alarmed by the defeat, Genoa submitted to Giovanni Visconti, Lord of Milan, in order to secure his financial and military support. In 1354 Paganino Doria caught Pisani unprepared in his anchorage at Zonklon (Sapienza) in the Peloponnese and captured the entire Venetian fleet. This defeat contributed to the deposition of doge Marino Faliero, and forced Venice to make peace with Genoa on 1 June 1355. Though inconclusive in itself, Venice's exhaustion by this war helped bring about the loss of Dalmatia to Hungary shortly afterwards. Freed of the need for support from Milan, the Genoese brought an end to Milanese rule in 1356.

In a way the War of the Bosphorus of the years 1352-1355, was reopened in the War of Chioggia. One could safely argue that the pact of Turin (1381), which confirmed the Pact of (1358), forced Venice to acknowledge officially and publicly the collapse of her political-economic and military supremacy in the Adriatic. The Pact of Turin (1381) forced Venice to implement the earlier Pact of Ragusa (1358), according to which Venice had to relinquish Dalmatia, Zara and Ragusa to Hungary. Consequently, the Venetian doge had to remove the title of the Duke of Dalmatia and Zara, which he had held since 1002.\(^2\) Ragusa had extensively evolved in the second half of the fourteenth century, and became a competitor to Venice on the trade between the Balkan and Europe on one hand, and on the other between the Adriatic and the ports of Sicily, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.\(^3\) From the naval point of view, Venice lost by these territorial loss of Dalmatia and Ragusa a major source of man power, which had been indispensable especially after the Black Death (1347-1349).\(^4\)

The pact of 1358 was preceded by the pact of Milan (1355) that ended the Third War between Genoa and Venice. Genoa had succeeded the War of the Bosphorus (1352-1355), to regulate the navigation of the Genoese mercantile marine in the Adriatic to Dalmatia, where it received the goods, brought from the Mouth of the Danube in the Black Sea via Hungary. During this war the Genoese had conquered the former Byzantine ports in the mouth of the Danube, including Kilia, rich with vast fertile wheat fields. The Genoese, who cut the Venice off an important source of wheat in the Black Sea, took advantage of their ties with the Hungarians for the transportation of the Far Eastern luxurious goods and the local commodities of the Black Sea by Genoese merchants from the port of Kilia in the mouth of the Danube to Hungary. After the conquest of Dalmatia by Hungary in the 1350s, these commodities were brought into the Adriatic. Thus Genoa challenged and threatened Venice

---

3. B. Krešić, ‘Un mercante e diplomatico da Dubrovnik (Raguse) a Venezia nel trecento’, in *Id., Dubrovnik and the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages*, n. V, pp. 77-80, 85-88, 101
at its thresholds as the reloading port in the northern Adriatic for the international trade between the Far East, the Black Sea and northern Italy and central and southern Europe. Genoa's achievement in the Adriatic undoubtedly sharpened Venice's awareness to its loss of economic hegemony in this zone, known for years, as above-mentioned, as the "Gulf of Venice". Papacostea claims that this Genoese-Hungarian collaboration was the essential factor that connected the Third Genoese or the Bosphorus war of 1352-1355 with the Fourth one, the War of Tenedos/Chioagia (1377-1381).¹⁵

The Venetians tried to improve their relations with the Ottomans after the war with Genoa, but on the other side the Venetians did not gave up and continued their efforts to impose their presence in the Marmara Sea. In 1359 they tried unsuccessfully to take over the town port of Lapseki joining naval forces with the Hospitellers. They were defeated on land not on the sea by the Ottoman.¹⁶ They sent an embassy to the Ottoman court that was transferred to Edirne after its conquest on 1359-1360. Nevertheless, between 1360-1362 the Genoese harassed continuously the Venetians merchants in Pera and in the Marmara and Black Sea, because they were lacking any logistic base for their ships in the entire area. After the failed attempt of the Venetians in Lapseki and their diplomatic mission in the Ottoman court, the Ottomans seemed to have changed their attitude towards the Venetians and offered to the Serenissima Scutari in return for Venice's refusal to take part in any Crusade against them. But, the Venetians did not hold their promise and joined the Crusade of Amadeus of Savoy in 1366.¹⁷ On the other hand, one important motive in the Venetian acquisition of many of these places in Romania from in the second half of the fourteenth century was not only to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Genoese,¹⁸ but also to compensate for the lack of maritime bases in the Bosphorus and the Marmara Sea.

In the fourteenth century, in Europe, had emerged plans for a crusade whose intention was not Jerusalem, but to save Constantinople from the Ottomans and the union of the two Churches, project was considered with great zeal. But the attitude of the Byzantines was conditioned by the need to stop the Ottoman danger and not a sincere desire for unity of the two Churches, or to bring Latin crusaders to Byzant. Genoa and Venice, though alarmed at the success of the Ottomans, were not sufficiently so close to make common cause against them. This was also related to the fact that the conquests that gave the Mamelukes and the Ottomans control over trade routes from the Mediterranean to the East were not in themselves prejudicial to commerce. Frequent wars interrupted commerce, but it was in the interest of the Mamelukes and the Ottomans to encourage trade; and they did so. As Ch. Boxer states, the Muslim world was thus not an impenetrable barrier to the Christians but rather a sieve through which Christians and Christian traders could pass, albeit always under Muslim control.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ruthy Gertwagen, “Venice, Genoa and the fights over the island of Tenedos”, op. cit, p. 56