

Venice's Knowledge of the *Qizilbash* – The Importance of the Role of the Venetian Baili in Intelligence-Gathering on the Safavids

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ABSTRACT

While the subject of the Venetian espionage in the Ottoman empire has received scholarly attention, no attempt has been made to study the baili's intelligence-gathering activities on Safavid issues in a systematic way. Through the close scrutiny of baili dispatches and other relevant materials of the Venetian State archives, this paper examines the role of the Venetian diplomats in Istanbul in information-gathering on the Safavids. It demonstrates that the baili used various techniques, particularly gifting, bribery, and information exchange with the Ottoman officials in order to collect and transmit to Venice a wide range of information on Ottomans' arch-rivals, the Safavids.

KEYWORDS

Safavids, Ottoman-Safavid relations, Venetian baili, information-gathering, espionage, intelligence, 16–17th centuries

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I. INTRODUCTION

Early modern Venice has been increasingly recognized by scholars as a center of information and communication (Kissling 1977; Mantran 1977; Hassiotis 1977; Preto 1994; Burke 2000; De Vivo 2007; Dursteler 2009; Iordanou 2019). Standing at one of the important crossroads for East-West trade and thanks to her diplomatic and commercial representatives, stretching westward from Istanbul to Madrid, and northward from the Cairo to London, Venice managed to retain her privileged position as the most important hub of constant news flow in the Mediterranean throughout the early modern period.

In the early modern era, diplomacy and information-gathering were strongly intertwined. With the evolution of resident ambassadorship, the importance of the information-gathering function of the ambassadors greatly increased. The emergence of resident embassies could be largely associated with the need for up-to-date information. The Venetian government needed accurate information that would assist them in the formation of rational policies that would help preserve their state in the new political realities of the early modern world (Dursteler 2011: 239). Ambassadors were expected to send periodic (usually weekly, sometimes biweekly) reports (*dispacci*) back to the Senate on a regular basis.

As pointed out by E. Dursteler (2001: 21) because of the extreme importance that relations with the Ottoman empire had for Venice, the office of no Venetian diplomatic posting, then, was more important than that of bailo in Constantinople. In addition to being a diplomatic representative, 'bailo was a head of the Venetian information service', as termed by B. Simon (1985: 65).

Although the bailate-Venetian embassy in Istanbul and the agency of the baili within the Ottoman-Venetian relations have been the subject of diverse historiography (Bertelè 1932; Preto 1979; Carla Coco and Flora Manzonetto 1985; Simon 1985; Dursteler 2006; Pedani 2009; Rothman 2012; Hanss 2013; Cristea 2018), the intelligence-gathering role of the baili has received relatively little scholarly attention. This topic was treated as a part of the pioneering works of Paolo Preto (1986, 1994) about the Venetian secret services and espionage. E.R. Dursteler (2001: 3–4), in his article on the office of bailo, briefly discusses the baili's information-gathering task. In his another research, he examined how the Venetian baili used food diplomacy to pursue Serenissima's interests in the Porte and to collect intelligence on Ottoman affairs and court politics (Dursteler 2013). The only work focusing solely on the baili's intelligence-gathering activities is the article by E.S. Gürkan (2018). Gürkan has offered an important insight into understanding the baili's role in Venetian espionage in the Ottoman Empire. Gürkan's work has demonstrated the close interrelations and entanglements between the baili's functions as diplomat and spymaster. Recently, I. Iordanou (2019) explored the baili's espionage activities as a part of her monograph on Venice's secret intelligence services.

The baili were not alone to implement information-gathering tasks, as other members of the embassy, particularly dragomans' and physicians' activities also served for these purposes. Their information brokerage activities were treated by F. Lucchetta (1997), G. Rota (2008), E. N. Rothman (2009), and E.S. Gürkan (2015).

Despite these advancements, no attempt has been made to study the baili's task of supplying the Venetian Senate with information on Safavid-related issues in a systematic way. Drawing on the baili dispatches and other relevant documents of the Venetian State Archives, this paper aims to answer the following questions: What were the baili's sources of information on Safavids and what methods and techniques had been employed to acquire this news? What themes concern-



ing the Safavids were of special interest to the baili? Whether and to what extent the information transmitted to Venice was accurate? Furthermore, we seek to understand whether and how were their dispatches influenced by the political climate of their age.

Since there was no Venetian diplomatic representative in the Safavid capital, the Venetian baili in Istanbul were regularly tasked with collecting a wide range of information on Ottomans' arch-rival in the East and communicating it to the Senate, as a part of the periodic *dispacci*, which devoted particular attention to the Safavid-related issues.

The most remarkable example attesting the baili's interests in Safavid affairs is Gianfrancesco Morosini's *relazione*. While speaking about the Ottomans' relations with other states at the Venetian Senate in 1585, Morosini 'begged' the Dodge and *Pregadi* members 'to listen carefully to the part of his report about the state of war with Persia', which according to him 'perhaps is the most important than all the rest' (*la più importante di tutto il resto*) (BNM, Mss. It. VII, 882 [=8505], f.26r; Morosini 1854: 44).

Information on Safavids was considered sensitive and due to this nature, in most cases, it constituted a part of the dispatches written in cipher to make the content impossible to read if intercepted. Another factor that made the baili's position particularly important was the lack of a constant and reliable network of informants and collaborators on-site. Therefore, for information on Safavids the Serenissima Republic depended primarily on the reports she received from her permanent representative in the Ottoman capital. Baili's job was not limited to gathering and transmitting, in most cases, they made attempts to process the information on Safavid-related issues and validate it by collating all relevant data.

II. THE BAILI'S SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON THE SAFAVIDS

Venetian baili obtained information on Safavids from a variety of sources. The information frequently came directly from Ottoman government sources, including both members of the Imperial Council, as well as low-ranking civil and military officials. Venetian baili mainly operated on the principle of 'avoiding suspicion and gaining the trust' of the Ottomans. The lines between diplomacy and espionage were often blurred.

Luxury gifts and bribery proved effective among other means used by the baili in acquiring sensitive information on Safavids from various sources inside the Ottoman civil and military administration. By giving lavish gifts and bribes, the baili succeeded in personalizing their relationships with Ottoman officials.¹ The means used to win their favour were not limited to the gifts of money or luxury goods, as food diplomacy was also frequently utilized for these purposes. Gifts of rare food items, sumptuous public banquets, and intimate private dinners were all used by Venice's diplomats to maintain the reputation of the republic in the Porte, to curry favour among the ruling elite, and to gather intelligence on Ottoman affairs and court politics (Dursteler 2013: 166).

¹ Bribery incidence was not limited to the relationships between the baili and the Ottoman courtiers. The prevalence of bribery among the various layers of the Ottoman bureaucracy is evident also from the works of poets of that time, particularly from the sixteenth-century author Muhammad Fuzuli's well-known '*Şikayatname*' (Letter of Complaint), where he wrote: '*Salam verdim rüşvât degildir deyü almadılar*' (I said hello, but they didn't accept as it wasn't a bribe) (Füzuli 2005: 298).



The role and power of gifting in building friendships with the Ottoman officials were best described by the baili Lorenzo Bernardo² and Cristoforo Valier³, as well as the consul in Aleppo Andrea Navagero⁴. While Cristoforo Valier saw gift or bribe as a ‘fruit’ (*frutto*) of the ‘affection’ (friendship, in this context), we can put it in the opposite way and define that friendship as the ‘harvest of gifts’ in ‘special’ relationships between the baili and Ottoman officials.

It was common for the baili to visit Ottoman grand vizier in order to exchange news and information on recent developments. Particularly, during the Ottoman-Safavid military conflicts, issues regarding the Safavids frequently constituted topics of discussion not only between the bailo and grand vizier, but also other high-ranking officials who played an important role in the formulation and implementation of the Ottoman strategy. In this instance, information was almost like ‘an article of trade.’ For example, in 1609, bailo Simon Contarini, upon inquiry by the Ottoman *Kapudan-ı Derya* (Grand Admiral of the Ottoman fleet) Halil Pasha, shared with him information about Safavid envoy Robert Sherley’s visit to Rome (ASVe, SDC, fil. 68, cc. 376r–377v [28 November 1609]). Furthermore, Venice’s mail monopoly also helped it to preserve its reputation as the most accurate source in the Ottoman Porte for information on European affairs (Dursteler 2009: 620).

As observed by E.S. Gürkan (2017: 79), the baili had informants and spies at every level of the Ottoman administrative and military apparatus. Furthermore, the baili were able to establish and develop effective networks of informants and spies across the Ottoman empire. Thanks to the services of these networks and important connections among the Ottoman elites, Venetians succeeded, to some extent, to penetrate into the secrets of the Sublime Porte. However, the baili had some limitations; hence they could only communicate the information to the Senate that the Ottoman officials wished to share with them.

Ottoman dragomans’ (chief interpreter) linguistic and cultural proximity to European ambassadors allowed these interpreters a greater degree of sociability that facilitated information exchange (Gürkan 2017: 75). Not surprisingly, Orimbei, a former Venetian dragoman, remained on the bailo’s payroll despite being an Ottoman Grand Dragoman, for the valuable information he provided to the baili.⁵ Baili found the Ottoman imperial interpreters in particular valuable sources of intelligence, who had privileged access to diplomatic negotiations and official correspondence between the Ottoman and the European courts.⁶

Sometimes, they even shared documents pertaining to the internal correspondence concerning the Safavids and it seems that they played a vital link in the transmission of sensitive infor-

² *Il donare ai Turchi è così necessario, che chi volesse trattare con loro senza questo mezzo, li levaria il proprio nutrimento, perché talmente è posto in uso appresso loro il ricever doni, che è convertito in propria natura, né si può sperare d’ottener da loro cosa alcuna, o almeno facilmente ottenerla, senza il donativo* (Pedani 1996: 381).

³ *Queste amicizie, Serenissimo Principe, non si possono né contrarre né conservare, senza qualche dimostrazione di amore [.....] che il dono sia il vero segno d’onore ed il vero frutto dell’amore: onde per dichiarazione della forza del donare sono soliti a dire nella loro lingua proverbio tale[...]: man che porta alla Porta e che dà, mai non vien taglià.* (Barozzi-Berchet 1871: 305).

⁴ *..... ho sempre procurato di conservarmi la grazia e la amicizia di quei principali si gnori ministri, e con amorevoli uffici e con doni, senza dei quali è impossibile conservarsi lungamente la loro benevolenza* (Berchet 1866a: 60–61).

⁵ [Orimbei] *diventò poi dragomanno grande della Porta ma continuò ad essere al soldo dei baili, ai quali forniva informazioni* (Bertelè 1932: 140). Another Ottoman dragoman Hürrem bey, who was originally from Lucca, was also on the Venetian payroll (Malcolm 2015: 227).

⁶ Baili’s news sources were not limited to Ottoman officials. The baili had spies and informants in the permanent Western embassies in Istanbul, particularly in the French diplomatic mission. See more: Gürkan 2018: 79.



mation from Ottoman officials to the baili. For example, in November of 1604, Grand Dragoman provided bailo Ottaviano Bon with a copy of Cığalazade Sinan Pasha's letter, which was addressed to Ahmet Hafiz Pasha and brought by a gate-keeper (*kapıcı*) from the Safavid front.⁷

The Ottoman chief interpreters were not the only ones with access to official correspondence; while they translated them, there also were others who composed, filed, and carried them (Gürkan 2017: 76). An important component of Venetian diplomacy in the Porte was personal: the *baili* cultivated an extensive network of friendship and patronage relationships with influential Ottomans able to favor Venetian interests (Dursteler 2013: 168).

The baili were particularly interested to establish and maintain friendships with officials from the Ottoman chancery in order to secure access to official documents. In 1612, bailo Simon Contarini's *relazione*, particularly distinguished two offices, *nishanjibashi*⁸ and *reis ül-küttab*⁹ in terms of their importance to Venice.¹⁰ Similarly, about forty years later, another bailo, Alvise Contarini reiterated the importance of developing friendship ties with the head of the Ottoman chancery.¹¹

Friendships, gifts, and bribes have facilitated the baili's access to the precious documents, including to those concerning the Safavids. This is well illustrated by a *relazione* of bailo Lorenzo Bernardo. In 1590, Lorenzo Bernardo reported on having access to the letters dealing with the Safavids, 'thanks to the friendship links' he managed to build with three scribes from the Ottoman chancery. Baili tended not to disclose the names of their informants in dispatches, using vague phrases to indicate their credibility. Bernardo, without revealing their names, clarifies the functions of his informants within the chancery: 'One of them looks after the bag in which the most important letters and dispatches are kept; the other two write and put them in final form.'¹² Bernardo adds: 'From each of them I get the same letters written about Persia and other places.'¹³ It seems that these three scribes served as informants to the bailo without the knowledge of each other. Furthermore, he notes: 'Many times, they provide me with the original copies of the letters written from the European sovereigns to the Ottoman Sultan' (Pedani-Fabris 1996: 389).

⁷ È comparso qui ultimamente un Capigi espedito dal Cigala [Cığalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha] con lettere al Bassà luogotenente Cafis Acmat [Ahmet Hafiz Pasha]...dalle quale havendone havuto noi copia col mezzo industria ... del Dragomano Grande (ASVe, SDC, fil. 60, c. 186r, [29 November 1604]).

⁸ Head of the chancery. As a member of the Ottoman Imperial Divan, his primary responsibilities included the authentication of imperial documents with the sultan's tuğra (official monogram) and monitoring of the administrative records of the imperial council and the sultan's decrees. See Woodhead 2007.

⁹ Head of the chancery of the Imperial Council.

¹⁰ Due ministri, l'amicizia dei quali molto importa a questa Serenissima Repubblica, sono il Nasangi Bassi [Nişancı Başı] che segna tutti i comandamenti, e il Cancellier grande che molto unito al bassa maggiore può e giovare e nuocere molto quando vuole. Con ambedue questi soggetti mi sono trattenuto in più che ordinaria benevolenza, e me ne ho ritraito sempre di molto comodo, poi ch'è il Nasangi [Nishanjibashi] per onorarmi non volle mai leggere carte ch'io gli inviassi per il Signore, ma avevagli per considerate tutte ed espedivale con gran prontezza immediata. Il Cancellier Gran de ne' miei travagli sempre tenne la parte mia.....il tacessero a tutti, solo che a me (Barozzi-Berchet 1871: 125–254, 149–150).

¹¹ Il Cancellier grande è pur ministro del qual si deve coltivar l'amicizia per i frequenti bisogni, che tengono i Baili di cavar comandamenti, [...] di quello che altre volte è succeduto e dai loro registri non risulta, possono e gran gioventi e gran pregiudizi cagionare (Barozzi-Berchet 1871: 380).

¹² tenevo amicitia con tre scrivani del cancellier grande, uno dei quali ha cura del sacchetto nel quale si conservano le lettere et spedizioni più importanti; gli altri due le scrivono et ingrossano (Pedani 1996: 389).

¹³ et ho havuto amicitia con questi separati l'uno dall'altro; da ognuno de quali havevo l'istesse lettere che erano scritte di Persia et altri luoghi e ch'erano rescritte in Persia et a diversi principi da quel Signore (Pedani 1996: 389).



Ottoman *çavuşes* (messengers) and *ulaks* (couriers), who fulfilled a number of functions ranging from carrying official correspondence between the court and the provinces to acting as envoys to foreign powers, were frequently employed as informants by the baili.¹⁴ Baili's network of informants within the Ottoman court was not limited to messengers and couriers. As it is evident from the baili's dispatches, other officials, such as *kapıcıs* (gate-keepers)¹⁵, *çaşnigirbaşı* (chief taster) (ASVe, SDC, fil 60, c. 222r [13 December 1604]) and *kahyas* (stewards)¹⁶ also served Venetians' information-gathering purposes. For example, bailo Lorenzo Bernardo in his report, dated 4 March 1586, mentioned the arrival of a *kapıcibaşı* (chief gate-keeper) from the fortress of Tabriz 'with news about the powerful siege' of the city undertaken by the Qizilbash under command of shah's son Hamza Mirza.¹⁷ In the same way, in March 1610, bailo Simon Contarini refers to a report by some Ottoman gate-keepers on Shah 'Abbās's massive military presence in Qarabagh, near Ganja.¹⁸ The baili dispatches often included the translated copies of correspondence on Safavid-related issues between Ottoman authorities (ASVe, SDC, fil. 61, cc. 301r-302v [8 August 1605]; fil. 62, cc. 216r-218v [30 December 1605]; fil. 110, cc. 350r-351r [2 June 1630]).

Baili acquired important military information on Safavid – Ottoman front also from informers within the Ottoman army. For instance, in September of 1589, bailo knew about the size of the *Qizilbash* militia from the reports of *sipahis* who returned from the Safavid front.¹⁹ In a report dated 30 October 1610, bailo Simon Contarini mentioned that he had an opportunity to see a letter, written from the Safavid front by an Ottoman soldier to his friend, which indicated that the shah's forces were larger than those of the Ottomans led by Kuyucu Murad Pasha. More interestingly, the bailo mentioned that 'this detail had not been related by a *çavuş*'.²⁰ It appears from this report that by comparing the similar information supplied by two separate sources, the bailo sought additional validations in order to transmit to Venice a more accurate picture of Safavid-Ottoman military confrontation.

Former prisoners of war and deserters also supplied the baili with military-related news (ASVe, SDC, fil. 59, c. 111v [01 May 1604]). For example, in September of 1586, four captives, who escaped from the Safavids, confirmed the inclination of Safavid prince Heydar Mirza (Shah Mohammad Khudabanda's son) 'to make peace' (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 276r ([04 March 1586]).

¹⁴ *Che è gionto uno chiaus con aviso chel Soffi haveva fatto prender Sultan Bay[a]sit* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D1, c. 54v [21-22 March 1561]); *Che il chiaus espedito da Sinan Bassà in Persia* (SDCRubr., D2, c. 68v. [20 September 1581]); *Avisi venuti con un Chiaus da Osman* (SDCRubr., D2, c. 224v. [4 August 1585]); SDC, fil. 63, c. 253r [29 September 1606]).

¹⁵ *Era gionto il Capiggi Bassi ch'era stato in Persia coll'Ambasciador...* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D1, c.78r [11 August 1561]); *Di Persia sono rittornati quelli due Capigi che furono espediti di quà per saper quello faceva il Cigala* (SDC, fil. 62, c. 198r [12 December 1605]); (ASVe, SDC, fil. 69, c. 72r [18 March 1610]).

¹⁶ *è comparso qui il cheiaia (kahya) di quello che si ritrovava Beglierbei di Tauris [Tabriz] quando fù presa quella città dal Re di Persia* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 60, c. 92r [09 October 1604]).

¹⁷ *Avisa l'arivo d'un capigi da Esdrum [Erzurum] espedito da Giafer Bassa dal Forte di Tauris con nova dell'asedio potente, et stretto, che gli fa il figliolo del re di Persia con 50 mila persone* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 277r ([04 March 1586]).

¹⁸ *Sono giunti alcuni capigi, spediti dal Bassà di Damasco, ...raccontano costoro anco trovarsi il Re di Persia conforme lo scritto in Carabach [Qarabagh] presso Genge' [Ganja] con numerosissimo essercito aspettando la mossa verso lui di Morath Generale* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 69, c. 72r [18 March 1610]).

¹⁹ *Spai [sipahi] venuti di Persia referiscono esser in campagna Persiani in buon numero* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D3, c. 115r ([02 September 1589]).

²⁰ *Ho havuto opportunità di veder una lettera scritta da un soldato nel campo di Morath da Esdrum [Erzurum] qui ad un'altro soldato suo amico, ... et dice esser l'essercito Persiano più numeroso assai, che non riferisce il Chiaus sopradetto* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 70, c. 165r [30 October 1610]).



In a report dated 12 August 1606, bailo Ottaviano Bon indicated that the fugitives (*fuggiti*) who had fled from the front reported that Shah 'Abbās, with his army of 30,000 had continued keeping Ganja under siege.²¹

Baili's quite complex information-gathering tasks could not be performed efficiently without the help of embassy dragomans and secretaries whose role should not be underestimated. The bailo's ability to inform the Venetian government in real-time about developments in the Ottoman Empire clearly depended on the labor of his dragomans (Rothman 2006: 215). Particularly, dragomans, some of those born and raised in Istanbul, utilized their excellent knowledge of the Turkish language and society, and their network of friendships both inside and outside of the Ottoman court to gather and transmit precious information, as well as involve spies and informers. For example, in September 1606, an *ulak* who shared a letter sent from the Ottoman grand vizier to the Safavid Shah with a bailo, was a friend of the embassy's dragoman Marcantonio Borisi.²² Due to their Turkish language skills, embassy dragomans also played an important role in contacting Safavid envoys with whom they conversed freely in that tongue (ASVe, SDC, fil. 71, c. 235v [11 June 1611]).

In addition to informants, Venetian diplomatic representatives employed an extensive network of spies as a vital part of intelligence-gathering activities. It was through the Venetian spy Constantine Laschari's mission to the Safavid court in spring of 1502, that the Venetian Senate became aware of the Shah Ismā'il's military power (Sanudo 1879–1903, vol. 4: 281, 353).

The Ottoman government regularly dispatched their spies to the Safavid territories for information-gathering purposes. This is evident from numerous imperial orders sent to the border provinces demanding the dispatch of 'qualified spies' (*yarar casuslar*) to the shah's lands and continuation of intelligence-gathering activities on the Safavids²³. Particularly, during the defection of the both Ottoman and Safavid rebels and renegades, diplomatic conflicts, as well as the Ottoman-Safavid wars, Venetians' espionage activities assumed more intensive character. For instance, the bailo had an access to the reports of the several spy missions, which were sent in 1561 to Azerbaijan to gather information on Ottoman renegade prince Beyazid who had taken refuge at the Safavid court. These missions were also tasked to spy on the Ottoman embassies sent to the Safavid court to negotiate the delivery of Beyazid.²⁴ The baili reports regarding the Safavids sometimes refer to the reports of the Ottoman agents. For example, in his dispatch, dated 28 May 1611 Simon Contarini, reports that the spies, who were sent by Ottoman grand vizier Murad Pasha to

²¹ *Di Persia sono capitati huomini fuggiti di Gengè, li quali riferiscono, che il Re vi stia ancora con l'assedio di 30 mila in circa fra Cavalli, et Pedoni* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 63, c. 166r [12 August 1606]).

²² *Frà tanto le Signorie Vostre Eccellentissime vederanno la lettera che in questo proposito di pace scrive il Bassa Primo Vizir al Re di Persia, quale io ho havuto in mano dallo istesso giorgiano servo di questo Principe espedito da olaco [ulak] per portargliela il quale come amico di casa, et del Borisi è venuto disnar meco, et mi ha dato commodità di cavarne la copia occlusa tradotta dal Borisi* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 63, c. 253r [29 September 1606]).

²³ BOA, MD III, nos. 458 (26 Muharram 967/28 October 1559) and 477 (29 Muharram 967/31 October 1559); MD V, nos. 1613 (25 Şevval 973/15 May 1566); MD VI, nos. 693 (6 Rajab 972/ 7 February 1565); MD VII, nos. 99 (19 Safar 975/24 August 1567), 319 (4 Rabi' al-Akhir 975/7 October 1567) and 490 (Jumādā al-ülā 975/November 1567); MD XII, nos. 118 (13 Sevvāl 978/10 March 1571) and 607 (29 Sevvāl 978/26 March 1571); MD, XXXII, nos. 443 (20 Şa'bān 986/22 October 1578), 529 (27 Zilka'de 986/25 January 1579) and 566 (10 Zilhicce 986/6 February 1579). For Ottoman intelligence and counter-intelligence, see Gürkan, 2012; Gürkan, 2017.

²⁴ *Che una spia ritornata di Persia riporta che Soffi teneva con custodia l'Ambasciador del Signor Turco* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D1, c. 72v [06 June 1561]); *Per spie partite dalli confini di Persia fo riferito chel Soffi havea licentiatto l'Ambasciador et il Capiggi Bassi* (Ibid., c. 77r [05 Agosto 1561]); *Alcune spie ritornate di Persia riferiscono chel Soffi havea gia in esser un grande esercito* (Ibid., 83v [25 Novembre 1561]).



the Safavid territory, found the Safavid fortresses well supplied with ammunition.²⁵ It was also deemed necessary to transmit information provided by the local spies to give a more accurate picture of the Safavid state.²⁶

In the absence of official and more reliable sources, Venetian authorities, sometimes, had to seek local voices, particularly among the merchants who, usually, were regarded as potential informers by foreign espionage. Frequently, Venetian diplomatic and merchant networks cooperated, and indeed merchant news was sometimes faster than diplomatic dispatches (Palazzo 2016: 868). Early modern merchants were perhaps the most mobile part of the population, enjoying a comparatively high level of freedom of movement even in the war times, and possessing always some information on their minds.

Baili and consuls in Syria frequently included merchant news concerning the Safavids in their dispatches. For instance, the report regarding the situation on the Ottoman-Safavid frontier, which was provided by an Armenian merchant, became part of the bailo's dispatch dated 7 March 1579.²⁷ In October of 1609, bailo Simon Contarini noted that some of the news, which he had sent in his previous reports, was confirmed by several Safavid merchants who visited him.²⁸ In the following year, Simon Contarini learned about the arrival of the Safavid envoy to Erzurum to conduct peace negotiations with Ottoman grand vizier Kuyucu Murad Pasha from reports of several merchants who came to Istanbul from Erzurum.²⁹ Safavid merchants travelling to Venice also represented a source of precious and first-hand information (Rota 2009: 18). The value of the merchant news lies in the fact that some of these were eyewitness accounts, however, there were also the ones based on rumours.

Early 16th-century Greek historian Theodoro Spandugino in his work on Shah Ismāil and Shah Tahmāsp indicated a certain 'Mol[1]a' from Ardabil, whom he met in Venice, as the main source of information about the Safavid state.³⁰ Spandugino speaks of him as a 'most learned man' and from his title, we can suppose that he was a member of the clergy.

The baili occasionally relied on unspecified individuals as a source of information. In a report dated 11 May 1567, bailo Giacomo Soranzo mentioned his meeting with a Safavid spy (*spia del Soffi*), who informed him of the military preparations of the Safavids against the Ottomans (ASVe, SDC, fil. 2, c. 78r [11 May 1567]). Based on reports by some persons, who came from the Safavid territory, bailo Ottaviano Bon informed the Venetian government about Shah Abbās's on-

²⁵ *Le spie mandate da Murat Generale in Persia riferiscono per quello ne ho qui penetrato trovarsi quel Rè in Tauris, ammassarvi l'essercito suo, et haver ben munito tutti le sue fortezze* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 71, c. 201v [28 May 1611]).

²⁶ *Parla longamente delle cose di Persia et le relazioni c'havea d'un persiano spia venuto da quelle parti* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 31r [07 May 1579]).

²⁷ *... manda una depositione d'un mercante Armeno venuto dalli confini di Persia delle cose di quei successi* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 30v [07 May 1579]).

²⁸ *Sono stati à vedermi alcuni mercanti Persiani che già forse tre mesi e mezo mancano da quelle parti, et mi hanno confirmato alcuno con diversi miei dispacci passati* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 68, c. 104r [3 October 1609]).

²⁹ *Alcuni mercanti giunti pure qui d'Esdrum [Erzurum] dicono, haver il Persiano ordinato che il quel suo Ambasciadore che fù già qui, andasse con un presente honorato à trovar Murat generale, et trattasse seco la pace* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 69, c. 535r [7 August 1610]).

³⁰ *...per esser quelli discrepanti di legge et di costumi da loro di Persi Soffi, et per quanto mi dissero molte persone, et tra li altri uno Mola, qual Mola trovai a Venetia, et [chi] era nato in Ardueli [Ardabil] prima patria di questi Soffi, et gradissimo huomo dottissimo, qual parti di Persia l'anno 1533 et trovò Ibrain [Ibrahim] bassa in Aleppo, che andava con li campi per andar contra Persi; onde havendo io contratta amicitia con lui, qual mi ha informato si dell'ordinanza, come de li costumi et progressi del paese* (BNM, Cod.It. VI, 365 [=5957], f.14v; Spandugino 164).



going large-scale campaign against the Ottoman strongholds in the provinces of Shirvān, Ganja, Nākhchivān, Qārs and Van in his dispatch, dated 21 May 1606.³¹

The baili, sometimes, sought the collaboration of Safavid renegades that defected to the Ottoman side. For instance, in 1582, bailo drew on Safavid renegade Maqṣud Khan³², who was a former envoy to the Ottomans, for reliable information.³³ Maqṣud's testimony on the political situation in the Safavid state was based primarily on what he witnessed³⁴. His first-hand information was also employed by Giovanni Tommaso Minadio who was a physician to the Venetian consulate in Aleppo, in his book titled *Historia della guerra fra Turchi et Persiani* (History of the war between the Turks and the Persians) (Minadoi 1588: 120, 157, 164–167, 177, 182, 299–300, 326).

III. TYPES, FREQUENCY, AND ACCURACY OF THE INFORMATION TRANSMITTED TO VENICE

Venetian representatives covered a wide range of topics concerning the Safavids. Above all, Ottoman-Safavid military engagements constituted the bulk of this sensitive news. Of special interest were reports concerning the size, composition, and strength of the Safavid army, as well as its movements and maneuvers during the war times (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D. 2, c. 262r [22 January 1585, *more veneto*³⁵]; *SDConsA*, fil. 3, c.6r [28 August 1628]; *SDCRubr.*, D. 3, c.53r [01 July 1588]; *SDC*, fil. 60, c.222r [13 December 1604]; *SDC*, fil. 62, cc. 53v-54r [29 September 1605]; cc. 160r-160v [6 November 1605]; *SDC*, fil. 68, cc. 241v-242r [31 October 1609]). At times, the baili attached to their dispatches, the translated copies of communications between the Ottoman officials about the military developments on the Safavid front. This is evident from the letter of beylerbeyi of Ganja, Ahmet Pasha, addressed to one of the çavuşes of Governor-General of Erzurum, Saatçı Hasan Pasha (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 59, cc. 326r-327r [28 August 1604]). The baili were particularly eager to inform the Senate about the Safavid-Ottoman correspondence and sometimes, managed to communicate the translated copies of official letters between these two powers (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 63, cc. 254r-256r, [29 September 1606]).

³¹ *Qui si tiene per certo per relatione di persone venute di Persia, che tutte le fortezze di quelle provincie di Servan, Gengè, Nascivan, Cars, et Van, per il mal stato in che si ritrovavano di presidio, et di monitioni et per haversi scoperto in campagna il Re di Persia con grosso essercito* (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 63, c. 95r [21 May 1606]).

³² Maqṣud Khan Zulḡadar came to the Ottoman Empire in 1580 as an envoy from Shah Mohammad Khodabanda seeking peace (Selānikī 1989: Vol. I, 129–130; Peçevi 1999: Vol. II, 58–59). Following his return, the shah appointed him governor of Tabriz. In 1582, he next had a falling-out with the shah, causing him to take refuge with the Ottomans, to be appointed governor of Aleppo (Minadoi 1588: 120, 299; Albèri 1839–1863: Vol. VI, 258). In 1585, as a guide, he accompanied the Ottoman army under the command of Osman Pasha to the Safavid lands (Minadoi 1588: 300).

³³ Before Maqṣud Khan there were several instances regarding both Safavid and Ottoman renegades. Among them, Ulama Khan Tekeli, who changed sides twice, presents an interesting case. See more: Dávid [2002] 2003.

³⁴ *Ho per buona mia inteso, che questo Masuch (Maqṣud Khan) ha fatto saper à sua maestà che'l Re di Persia havea inviato un grosso numero di gente à piedi, et à cavallo per impedir scorso di Tiflis facendo imboscar in luogo tanto sicuro* (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 16, c. 181r-v [3 August 1582]).

³⁵ *More veneto* (m.v.) was the calendar used in the Republic of Venice, until its fall in 1797, corresponded to the oldest Roman calendar where March was the first month of the year. As a result, the months of January and February were always reckoned as belonging in *more veneto* to the previous year from the Gregorian years. *More veneto* means 'according to the Venetian custom.'



The peace talks and the arrival of *Qizilbash* envoys to the Ottoman court, as well as the gift exchanges were among the issues drawing the baili's attention (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D. 2, c. 52r [20 August 1580], c. 71r [28 August 1581]; *SDCRubr.*, D3, cc. 15v–16r [16 July 1587]; *SDCRubr.*, D4, cc. 49r [12 September 1591]; *SDC*, fil. 58, c. 193r [06 December 1603]; *SDC*, fil. 68, c. 241v, [31 October 1609]; *SDC*, fil. 71, cc. 25r–27v [5 March 1611]; *SDC*, fil. 77, cc. 355r–355v [August 1614]; *CCX*, *Lett. Amb.*, b.6, c. 26v [18 February 1581, *more veneto*]. In some cases, they even added to their dispatches a detailed list of the Safavid gifts brought for the Sultans (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 2, c. 515r, [27 February 1567, *more veneto*]; fil. 9, c.100r [8 May 1576]; fil.16, c.35r [14 April 1582].

Diplomatic dispatches also contained personal information about Safavid rulers, their personalities, and physical characteristics. Information on Shah's death³⁶ (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D.1, c. 408r [11 June 1576]; *SDCRubr.*, D2, c. 277v [8–9 March 1586]; *SDC*, fil. 108, c. 109r [14.04.1629]) was considered worthy of mention, because it could lead to policy changes, new political developments, and eventually, even to military conflicts or peace, particularly with major neighbouring power, the Ottomans. The enthronement of new Safavid rulers³⁷ was also made part of the news, as the Venetian government was interested to know about new rulers' stance towards the Ottomans, this, in turn, would help the *Serenissima* to formulate a coherent and consistent policy in the Middle East.

The baili had not been always successful to pick up intelligence of value concerning the Safavids due to various reasons, including the Ottomans' concerns to control their activities. Both the Venetian residents and extraordinary ambassadors to the Ottoman court, sometimes, fell short of their tasks to feed the Senate with reliable information on Safavid-related issues. The information provided by the Baili reflected also the scarcity and the dubious nature of the information available to them. The problem was not related to the total lack of news, but the absence of trustworthy news and relatively constant sources of accurate information. The resident Venetian diplomats were subject to much suspicion of the Ottoman authorities as well. As it is evident from Barbaro's case, during wartime the bailo was forced to have janissaries accompany him outside so that he could not talk to anybody (Gürkan 2012: 19). In peacetime, the baggage always included at least two janissaries (Bertelè 1932: 124; Coco and Manzonetto 1985: 70).³⁸

Furthermore, Ottomans possessed a well-organized intelligence service and they were masters of spreading false information (Fodor [2002] 2003: 46). The lack of Venetian resident ambassador in the Safavid capital also negatively affected the quality and reliability of news. These constraints had some impact on their ability to acquire the desired information as evidenced from their occasional complaints regarding the lack of news on 'Sufi' (Safavid ruler) in their dispatches.

For instance, the statements such as, 'Nothing has been heard of Sufi' [Shah Ismāil I] (*Dil Soffi nulla intendeno* (Sanudo 1879–1903, vol. 26: 157); 'I have not heard anything else about Persia, because nothing has reached me from that side'³⁹; 'There are no important issues [news] on Sufi [Shah Tahmāsp I]' (*Del Sophi non c'è cosa di substantia*) (Sanudo 1879–1903, vol. 55: 182); 'News about Persia did not reach here' (*Di Persia non compariscono qui altri avisi*) (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 71,

³⁶ *Avisi intorno la morte del Re vecchio di Persia* [Shah Mohammad Khudābanda] (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D2, fols. 277v [8–9 March 1586]).

³⁷ *Avisi di Persia con la confirmazione della morte del Re orbo et del figliuolo... et con la elezione di Abàs secondo figliolo al Regno* (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D3, c. 5v [18 March 1587]).

³⁸ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

³⁹ *Di Persia non ho inteso altro perche meno è capitato alcuno di quelle parte* (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 62, c. 178r [25 November 1605]).



c. 115r [2 April 1611]); or similarly ‘No news arrived about Persia’ (*Di Persia non capita aviso alcuno*) (ASVe, SDC, fil. 76, c. 399v [19 February 1613, *more veneto*]) were quite common in their reports about the Safavids.

In March of 1606, bailo Ottaviano Bon could not supply the Senate with fresh information on the Safavid issues as ‘from that side neither letters, nor the persons, who could give any news have arrived’.⁴⁰ It seems that in 1610, bailo Simon Contarini experienced difficulty in feeding the Venetian government with reliable and accurate data on the Safavid-Ottoman war⁴¹. A year later, Simon Contarini, due to the lack of available information, contented himself to sending the confirmations of the previous news.⁴² Another bailo, Cristoforo Valier, in 1613, also complained about the lack of fresh information, since a person sent by the Ottoman court to the Safavid Shah had not returned⁴³. The Baili and consuls in Syrian cities made efforts to ensure the flow of accurate information to Venice as this is evident from their dispatches. Venetian consul in Aleppo⁴⁴ Giorgio Emo mentioned that he had always transmitted all the news which ‘reached his ears’ and the information he considered ‘worthy of sending’ to Venice⁴⁵. It seems from the words of Simon Contarini that he carefully observed the events⁴⁶. Bailo Lorenzo Bernardo, in 1586, ensured the Venetian government of always being well-informed of the affairs of the Safavid empire⁴⁷. Bernardo, in his *relazione* boasted that he never sent reports on the Safavid issues that turn out to be false thanks to the friendships with three scribes from the grand chancery.⁴⁸ Furthermore, he mentioned that in order to give ‘extraordinary news’ on important issues concerning the Safavids, he would ‘pay attention if anyone arrives’ from the war zone.⁴⁹

This variety of sources containing information originating mainly in places outside the Safavid lands resulted in giving a confused and often inaccurate picture of the situation in Iran on the whole (Mazzaoui 1979: 427). In addition to the subjective viewpoint of the baili, their reports are not free from inaccurate and contradictory data, therefore, they should be treated carefully, and if available, compared with the information in local sources.

One of the most striking examples of inaccurate news is the reports of the death of Safavid Shah Tahmāsp (r.1524–1576). During a period of four years, from 1572 to 1576, the baili reported

⁴⁰ *Di Persia con queste non haverà Vostra Serenità alcuna cosa di novo perche da quelle parti non sono capitate nè lettere, nè persone che sappiano dar alcun conto* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 63, c. 13r [24 March 1606]).

⁴¹ *Io non so che mi dir con fondamento della guerra di Persia à Vostra Serenità ... et se pur qualche cosa mi permette la ragione ne possa dire* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 70, c. 310r [23 December 1610]).

⁴² *Di Persia non compariscono qui altri avisi, se non qualche confirmatione delle cose scritte, portatavi da mercanti che ordinariamente vi capitano* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 71, c. 115r [2 April 1611]).

⁴³ *Di Persia non capita aviso alcuno né si può immaginare la causa per la quale non sia dopo si lungo tempo, ritornata mai la persona che fù spedita a quel Re dalla Porta* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 76, c. 399v [19 February 1613, *more veneto*]).

⁴⁴ Venetians closed their consulate in Damascus in 1545 following its transfer to Tripoli in the same year. The Venetian consulate in Syria was definitely transferred to Aleppo in 1548 (Molà 2000: 57).

⁴⁵ *Ho sempre dato tutti quelli avvisi che mi sono pervenuti alle orecchie e che ho stimato esser degni a sapersi dalla Sua Sublimità*. (Berchet 1866a: 107–108).

⁴⁶ *Tenendo io sempre l'occhio à qualche opportunità* (ASVe, SDC, fil. 71, c.161v [14 May 1611]).

⁴⁷ *Assicura sua Serenità di esser sempre ben avisato delle cose di Persia, et scrive l'ordine dato à Ferrat sopra la pace con Persiani et con che condecioni* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 335r [23 February 1586, *more veneto*]).

⁴⁸ *Delle cose di Persia, che hora sono in tanta consideratione per li mezzi certi e sicuri che ho procurato d'havere, so non haver scritto mai cosa che non sia uscita vera, né mai cosa importante che doppo habbia ritrattata, perché tenevo amicitia con tre scrivani del cancellier grande* (Pedani 1994: 389).

⁴⁹ *Che starà avvertito al comparer di alcuno, che venga dal campo, per dar aviso straordinariamente di cosa importante et con fondamento* (ASVe, SDCRubr., D2, c. 251r [25 November 1585]).



on the death of Shah Tahmāsp I three times. The first two reports were inaccurate, as the Shah died in May of 1576, not in 1572. Why Venetians were so far ahead of time in circulating death of the *Qizilbash* shah? The first false information on Tahmāsp's death appeared in a report by bailo, Marcantonio Barbaro, dated 10 August 1572⁵⁰. Five months later on 19 February 1573, the same bailo confirmed the death of the Shah⁵¹. This inaccurate news gained circulation and appeared also in a report from Vienna on Venetian news, dated 22 April 1573, which 'verified the death of the *Signor Soffi*' (BAV, *Urb.lat.1043*, fol. 238r). However, the true information came only four years later, in a report dated 11 June 1576.⁵²

It is difficult to identify the origin of this sensitive information since the bailo did not refer to his sources. It is interesting to note that the first false news appeared during the Ottoman-Venetian war over Cyprus (1570–1573).⁵³ In mid-summer of 1571, Venetian envoy Vincenzo Alessandri, who was at the Safavid court with an offer of a military alliance against the Ottomans, noted that the Shah had not been seen in public over the span of many years (Alessandri 1572: unpaginated; Berchet 1865: 170). Perhaps, his illness in the last years of his rule and long disappearance from public view provoked a series of rumor-based and unconfirmed news of his death.

Shah did not respond positively to Venetian's offer by showing unwillingness to break peace with the Ottomans. This should explain partly why the baili were so sensitive concerning the demise of the Safavid ruler. Probably, Tahmāsp's death and succession of a new ruler to the throne might prompt the change of the Safavid stance towards the Ottomans and could fulfill Venetians' desires of dragging the Safavids into war.

IV. 'MORE THAN A COUNCIL': ESPIONAGE ACTIVITIES OF THE VENETIAN REPRESENTATIVES IN ALEPPO

In addition to the bailo's reports from Istanbul, information on Safavids flowed to Venice mainly from Venetian representatives in Aleppo, Damascus, and Cyprus (before 1571) and occasionally from Corfu, Florence, Rome, Milan, Prague, Spain, and France. Due to its geographical proximity and close contacts with the Safavid lands, consulates in Syria enjoyed a privileged position in meeting the needs of the Venetian government for up-to-date news⁵⁴. Although the consuls' primary task was commercial, they also engaged in gathering information on politically sensitive issues. Information supplied by the consuls in Damascus (before 1545) and Aleppo was of critical importance and either transmitted directly to Venice or constituted part of the baili dispatches to the Senate.⁵⁵ From time to time, as an acknowledgment of their services, they received apprecia-

⁵⁰ *Dice quanto gli scriveva esso console [della Siria] della morte del Soffi* (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D1, c. 287v [10 August 1572]).

⁵¹ *Si confirmava la morte del Soffi* (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D1, c. 296r [19 February 1572, *more veneto*]).

⁵² *Partita dell'Ambasciador di Persia, sei giorni dappoi la quale vene nova che il Signor Soffi era morto et c' havea prima che morisse sustituito suo herede il terzo figliuolo* (ASVe, *SDCRubr.*, D1, c. 408r [11 June 1576]).

⁵³ In order to preserve her territories in the Levant and in Dalmatia, the Venetian government initiated unilateral negotiations with the Ottoman Porte in September 1572, and on 7 March 1573 they signed a peace, according to which Cyprus became an Ottoman province and the Serenissima paid an indemnity of 300,000 ducats (Setton 1984: 1089–1091).

⁵⁴ For Venetian consulate in Syria in the period under question, see Pedani 2006: 7–21.

⁵⁵ *Con il spazzo che ho ricevuto di Aleppo mi è capitato nelle mani una lettera di Ali Bey* (ASVe, *SDC*, fil. 62, cc. 263v, [15 January 1605, *more veneto*]).



tion from the Venetian government. For example, in December 1585, the Venetian government praised their consul in Aleppo Giovanni Michiel, particularly for keeping them informed on Safavid-related issues and providing ‘well-founded and important’ information.⁵⁶ In late 1595, the Senate knew about Shah Abbās’s intention to send his envoy to Spain from the letter of the consul in Aleppo that was based on the discourse of the Safavid merchant named *Baba* (ASVe, *SDeLC*, fil. 9, [11 January 1595 *more veneto*], unpaginated). The Senate instructed its consul to continue with ‘all diligence and confidentiality to penetrate into the course of events in order to update them.’⁵⁷

On Safavid-related issues, consuls also relied on the information provided by the Venetians travelling to the Safavid lands. It appears from Giovanni Sagredo’s letter to the Senate that one of his informants on Safavid issues had been a Venetian Giacomo Fava⁵⁸, who was in Safavid capital (ASVe, CEP, fil. 18, unpaginated [02 September 1609]; Berchet 1865: 201–202).

When the opportunity arose, consuls in Aleppo managed to access the content of the communications between the Safavid shahs and European rulers. In 1609, consul Giovanni Francesco Sagredo transmitted the copies of Shah Abbās’s letters addressed to the Pope, Spanish king, grand duke of Tuscany,⁵⁹ and others (ASVe, Inquisitori di Stato, b. 516, cc.30r–53v). These letters were carried by the Safavid envoy Khoja Safar, whom the same Sagredo gave a letter of recommendation, in addition to 200 ducats. The circumstances of Sagredo’s access to the Shah’s missives are obscure. It is difficult to determine whether he did it without the knowledge of Khoja Safar or the latter himself granted him with this opportunity in return for money favour.

In November 1629, Giovanni’s nephew, Alvise Sagredo, who was in Aleppo with an intention to reach the Safavid lands (see Rota 2002: 582), followed the same suit by communicating to the Senate a translated copy of Shah Safi’s letter, dated 19 March 1629, addressed to Pope Urban VIII (r. 1623–1644) (ASVe, *SDConsA*, filza 3, c.69r–71r [24 November 1629]).

While consuls’ reports covered a range of topics from trade (ASVe, *SDConsA*, fil. 1, c.11r [29 January 1619, *more veneto*]; fil.3, fasc. 3, c.5v [28 August 1628] to military issues (ASVe, *SDConsA*, fil. 3, c. 6r [28 August 1628], the dispatches of the Venetian diplomats from European capitals were mostly limited to news on occasional Safavid missions to the European courts. For example, Venetian ambassadors in Rome, Giovanni Mocenigo and Marco Venier, covered in detail Safavid envoy Huseyn Ali bey’s sojourn in Rome (ASV, Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Roma, *fil.* 47, cc. 86r–v [7 April 1601], 91r–v [14 April 1601], 99v [21 April 1601], 29r–130r [5, May 1601], 185r–v [2 June 1601], 207 r–v [9 June, 1601]). Similarly, representatives at Habsburg court in Prague, Piero Duodo and Francesco Soranzo communicated the details of the Safavid embassies of 1600 and 1604, respectively. In June of 1604, Venetian Senate instructed its ambassador in Prague to keep them informed of the nature of the mission of the Safavid envoy Zeynāl bey, who passed through Venice on his way to the court of Rudolf II (ASVe, *SDeLC*, fil. 10, unpaginated [29 June 1604]).

⁵⁶ *...habbiamo veduta la diligentia da voi usata in tenerci spesso avisati di varij successi delle cose di Persia...gli avisi, che ci date, sono fondati, et importanti, tanto maggiormente ve ne laudamo co'l Senato*’ (ASVe, *SDeLC*, fil. 6 [4 December 1585], unpaginated).

⁵⁷ *... continuando voi nondiméno con ogni diligenza et segretezza di penetrar nelli successi, e trattatione per aggiongervi quegli avvisi, che di tempo in tempo occorreranno* (ASVe, *SDeLC*, fil. 9 [11 January 1595, *more veneto*]).

⁵⁸ Berchet misreads Fava’s name as ‘Nava’.

⁵⁹ For Sagredo’s espionage activities, see Wilding 2014: 79–88.



V. ISTANBUL AS A MEETING POINT BETWEEN THE VENETIANS AND SAFAVID DIPLOMATS

Baili dispatches frequently referred to the arrival of a Safavid envoy in Istanbul among the information dealing with the Safavids. It appears from the reports of baili that they strived to make contacts and friendships with the Safavid envoys visiting the Ottoman capital. They regarded a Safavid envoy as a source of reliable and first-hand information on Shah's official stance and plans not only concerning the Ottomans but also regarding the Venetians.

For example, in 1600, bailo Girolamo Cappello, in his *relazione*, mentioned that he had always kept good relations with two Safavid envoys (Pedani-Fabris 1996: 454–455). Cappello learned from these envoys about the Shah's willingness to send his envoys to Venice in order to renew the friendship with the Serenissima Republic⁶⁰. As he did not reveal the names of the Safavid envoys he met and the date of their visit, it is difficult to identify the name(s) of the envoy(s) Shah Abbās wanted to send. It could be one of the following persons: Khoja Ilyās and Mehmet Emin (sent in 1597)⁶¹, Huseyn Ali bey Bāyāt and Anthony Sherley (sent in 1599) or Asad bey (was in Venice in June of 1600). Furthermore, it seems from his *relazione* that he was among the supporters of an idea of accommodating all the Muslim merchants including the Ottoman and Safavid traders in one *fondaco* (Pedani-Fabris 1996: 464–465).

In order to not raise suspicion among the Ottomans, the baili either met the Safavid envoys secretly or in some cases contacted them through the medium of embassy dragomans. In his dispatch dated 11 June 1611, bailo Simon Contarini mentioned that he sent one of the embassy dragomans to meet with a recently arrived Shah's envoy in order to reaffirm the Serenissima's old friendship with the Safavids.⁶² Furthermore, Simon Contarini in his *relazione*, reported that he had the opportunity to meet secretly with a Safavid envoy Mohammad bey⁶³ (*Mehemet beg*), who was sent by Shah Abbās to Istanbul two times⁶⁴. In November 1612, bailo Cristoforo Valier found opportunity to meet with the Safavid peace envoy Qazi Khan al-Huseyni 'with due caution' (*con la debita circospezzione*), at his lodge in Istanbul before his departure (ASVe, SDC, fil. 74, c. 140r-v [22 November 1612]).

⁶⁰ [...] e due d'essi ambasciatori mi dissero ch'il re loro manderebbe ambasciatori a Vostra Serenità per rinovare l'amicizia, e per trattare insieme ciò potesse essere di commune servizio (Pedani-Fabris 1996: 454–455).

⁶¹ A recommendation letter that we have found in the *Lettere e scritture turchesche* series of Venetian State Archives, suggests that Khoja Ilyās (*Yeias*) and Mehmet Emin bey headed the first Safavid trade mission to Venice and brought a letter from Shah Abbās I to Venetian doge Marino Grimani (ASVe, *Lettere e scritture turchesche*, fil. 5, cc. 195r-v).

⁶² Mentre si trovava l'Ambasciador del re di Persia a Scutari [Üsküdar], potendo sicuramente fare mandai a visitarlo per uno de miei dragomani, testificandogli l'antica affettione, che dalla Eccellentissima Republica si portava a quella Maestà (ASVe, SDC, fil. 71, c. 235v [11 June 1611]).

⁶³ This envoy should be Mohammad bey Rumlu, who as a Safavid envoy, visited the Ottoman court several times between 1609 and 1611. He was a son of Huseynqulu Khalifa Rumlu ('Kor Khalifa') who was one of the important Safavid amirs during the reign of Shah Tahmāsp and Shah Ismāil II (Munshi 1978: vol. II, 985, 1021).

⁶⁴ Con Mehemet beg, prudente signore, mandato due volte ambasciatore in Costantinopoli da quel re, mi son trattenuo sempre secretamente ma continuamente (Berchet 1866b: 21).



VI. CONCLUSION

Generally, Venice looked upon the Safavids through the prism of its relations with the Ottomans. This was also true for the Safavids, the nature of whose occasional contacts with the Venetians was influenced by their attitude to the Porte. In other words, the Ottomans served as a kind of political barometer for relationships between the Safavids and Venetians that could be also traced through the quantity of sample baili dispatches. As the Ottoman-Safavid relations were marked with tension and conflict, the baili reports became thicker. Even the quantity of the information on Safavids provided by the Baili could serve as an indicator to measure the quality of Venetian-Ottoman relations. In its relations with the Safavids, the Venetian government pursued a cautious policy and tried not to antagonize the Ottomans. Giorgio Rota (2009: 7) points out that both the Venetian attitude towards the Ottomans as well as Venetian interest in the Safavid state were shaped by the necessity of trading and of defending trade).

European powers, including the *Serenissima* Republic, maintained interest in Safavids on account of their traditional desire to involve the Safavids in an anti-Ottoman alliance.⁶⁵ The Safavid Empire was strong enough to challenge the Ottomans military sphere. The advantages for Europeans resulting from the conflict between the Safavids and the Ottomans had an important place in European strategic thinking, which cherished the idea of two Islamic powers destroying each other (Matthee 2019: 515).⁶⁶ The Ottoman-Safavid wars eased pressure on Europe and meant a temporary respite for European powers, providing them with opportunities to capitalize on the military and economic weaknesses of the Ottomans. According to Pál Fodor ([2002] 2003: 44), to a certain degree both the diplomatic maneuverings around the Safavid empire and the Ottoman – Safavid hostilities may have had their parts in the Ottoman fiascos.

However, from an economic perspective, the Safavid-Ottoman wars did not serve Venetian commercial interests, given their negative impact on the Levantine trade, one of the *Serenissima*'s main sources of revenue. In many respects, Venice pursued *Realpolitik* through safeguarding its commercial relations with the Ottomans, for the purposes of its own existence (Preto 1975: 28).

To conclude, the baili reports can be understood in terms of the socio-political milieu in which they emerged. It should be borne in mind that their reports were written from the perspective of Venetian foreign policy, and the picture they gave of the Safavids obviously reflected their own agenda and state interests.

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⁶⁵ For Europeans' attempts to involve the Safavids in an anti-Ottoman alliance in the end of the 16th and in the beginning of the 17th centuries, see Niederkorn 1996.

⁶⁶ See also Meserve 2008: 231–237 for the image of the Safavids, particularly Shah Ismail I in Renaissance Historical Thought.



Primary Sources

ASVe – Archivio di Stato di Venezia

- SDeLC* – Senato, Secreta, Deliberazioni Costantinopoli, filza 6, 9, 10.
SDC – Senato, Dispacci Costantinopoli, filza 2, 9, 16, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 68, 69, 71, 74, 76, 77, 108, 110.
SDCRubr. – Senato, Dispacci Constantinopoli, Rubriche, filza 1, 2, 3, 4.
SDR – Senato, Dispacci ambasciatori, Roma, filza. 47.
CCX, Lett.Amb – Capi del Consiglio di Dieci, Dispacci (Lettere) degli ambasciatori, Costantinopoli, busta 6.
CEP – Collegio, Esposizioni principi, filza 18.
SDConsA – Senato, Dispacci consoli, Aleppo, filza 1,3.
 Inquisitori di Stato, busta 516.
 Lettere e scritture turchesch, filza 5.

BAV = Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

Mss. Urb.lat.1043, *Notizie da Vienna date negli Avvisi di Venezia, 1 gennaio-31 dicembre 1572.*

BNM = Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana

- Mss. It. VII, 882 (=8505), *Relatione di Costantinopoli di Monsignor Gianfrancesco Morosini che fu poi Cardinale, ritornato di Bailo da Sultan Amurat Signore Turchi l'anno 1581 letta in Senato.*
 Mss. It. VI, 365 (=5957), *Vite di Ismael, et Thamas Soffi, et Re di Persia, composte per Theodoro Spandugino patritio Constantinopolitano.*

BOA = Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri

MD – Mühimme Defterleri III, V, VI, VII, XII, XXXII.

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