

# Between conflict and cooperation: The Contrasting image of the Ottoman Turks in Late Medieval Ragusan Sources<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The present study focuses on the late medieval commune of Dubrovnik, known in Latin and Italian sources as Ragusa, and its precarious relationship with the Ottoman Turks while placing a particular emphasis on the various strategies that Ragusans employed throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in attempting to navigate a difficult political existence between their own interests and the interests of a unified Christendom which stood in complete opposition to the Ottomans. Numerous surviving records created in Ragusa at the time depict the Ottoman Turks in a completely inconsistent light, demonstrating that historians, as always, need to take particular care about accepting claims from diplomatic sources at face value and that relations between Christians and Muslims during the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans were not always as unambiguous or constantly hostile as they are often presented to be in contemporary works, modern historiography, and public discourse.

**Keywords:** Ragusa/Dubrovnik, Ottoman Turks, Ottoman Empire, Mediterranean, diplomacy.

## [es] Entre el conflicto y la cooperación: la imagen contrastante de los turcos otomanos en las fuentes bajomedievales de Ragusa

**Resumen.** El presente estudio se centra en la comuna bajomedieval de Dubrovnik, conocida en fuentes latinas e italianas como Ragusa, y su precaria relación con los turcos otomanos, al tiempo que pone un énfasis particular en las diversas estrategias que emplearon los ragusanos a lo largo de los siglos XIV y XV para intentar acomodarse a una existencia política difícil entre sus propios intereses y los intereses de una cristiandad unificada que se encontraba en completa oposición a los otomanos. Numerosos registros sobrevivientes creados en Ragusa en ese momento describen a los turcos otomanos bajo una luz completamente inconsistente, lo que demuestra que los historiadores, como siempre, deben tener especial cuidado en aceptar al pie de la letra reclamos de fuentes diplomáticas y que las relaciones entre cristianos y musulmanes durante la conquista otomana de los Balcanes no siempre fueron tan inequívocas o constantemente hostiles como a menudo se presentan en las obras contemporáneas, la historiografía moderna y el discurso público.

**Palabras clave:** Ragusa/Dubrovnik; turcos otomanos; Imperio otomano; Mediterráneo; diplomacia.

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## 1. Introduction

During the last decades of the fourteenth century, the armies of the expanding Ottoman Empire arrived to the immediate continental hinterland of the coastal mer-

chant commune of Ragusa in the Adriatic. Although initially apprehensive in their dealings with the Ottomans, the ever-pragmatic Ragusan traders were rather quick to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with Ottoman officials in their vicinity. These seemingly

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friendly contacts with the Muslim Ottomans could have been perceived as rather problematic by their Christian contemporaries, so the Ragusan government crafted a very sensitive and tactful approach to the way they talked about Ottomans to others, as opposed to how they actually dealt with them in practice. This then gave rise to the construction of a conflicting and contradictory image of the Ottoman Turks preserved in the very rich and extensive archival records of the Dubrovnik State Archives.<sup>3</sup> Namely, according to the specific context of the situation, and depending on the very nature of the communication as well as on the needs and interests of the Ragusans, the Ottomans were characterized either in relatively negative or in relatively positive terms. Furthermore, there is a paradoxical difference in the overwhelmingly unfavorable portrayal of Ottoman Turks that can be encountered in the surviving Ragusan correspondence with their Christian partners in comparison to how they were presented and treated in the existing written exchanges that the Ragusans had with the Ottomans themselves. These latter interactions in many cases contain phrases and expressions of admiration which extended far and beyond common diplomatic courtesy.

Seeking to shed some more light on the precarious nature of the early relations between Ragusa and the Ottoman Empire,<sup>4</sup> this paper will analyse the various rhetorical and practical strategies that the Ragusans developed in their effort to maintain their political existence and preserve their economic wellbeing as they found themselves positioned in the midst of a brewing conflict between the Christian states of Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> In order to do so, the work will first provide a cursory overview of the initial contacts between the Ottomans and Ragusa, and will then present some clear and obvious examples of the malleable, inconsistent and contrasting manner in which the Ragusans wrote about the Ottoman Turks and how they described them to others. In the end, the paper should

explain the reasoning behind this cautious and diplomatic approach which was in its essence an ultimately effective survival strategy that allowed the small merchant Republic of Ragusa first to acquire and then to retain a virtually unchallenged status of political and commercial autonomy within the Ottoman Empire for centuries to come.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Ottoman Expansion in the Balkans and the first Ottoman contacts with Ragusa

The almost relentless Ottoman territorial expansion in the Balkans began in the mid-fourteenth century and was driven by dynamic, rapid and efficient armed forces under the command of several capable military leaders who were united in comparatively loose allegiance to the ruler of the Ottoman state. In those early stages of growth, they fully capitalized on the political, social, and economic fragmentation and instability that characterized the region at the time, moving swiftly along the banks of the major rivers, capturing weakly defended strategic urban points, and thus establishing their authority over large parts of Thrace, Bulgaria and Greece in a matter of mere decades. Gaining control of these areas provided them with a base from where they could then tackle more prosperous and distant countries in the West, such as Serbia, Bosnia, and Hungary, as well as to attack Adriatic coastal towns and ports in Albania and Dalmatia.<sup>7</sup>

Within this process of enlargement, the Ottoman military elites relied on several tried and tested techniques which provided them with the best results and allowed their warriors in frontier areas to engage in armed combat for as long as was absolutely necessary.<sup>8</sup> However, it was in the initial phases of expansion that Ottoman Turks subjected those territories to persistent, ruthless and violent raids, led by an order of soldiers known as *akıncıs*, who were free to pillage, plunder, burn and enslave anything and anyone they came across. These mobile warriors, capable of traversing hundreds of miles in a relatively short period of time, essentially acted as a vanguard for the regular Ottoman troops, but with their brutal and uncompromising attitude towards warfare they also actively participated in the devastation of economic infrastructure by destroying towns, villages and

<sup>3</sup> According to the number of preserved documents, their age and value, the Dubrovnik State Archives are among the richest of their kind in this part of Europe. Fernand Braudel considered them to be “far and away the most valuable for our knowledge of the Mediterranean.” Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 2, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 1995), 1258-1259. For the potential and limits of these documents for the study of early Ottoman history, see: Emir O. Filipović, “Researching Early Ottoman History in the Balkans through Slavic, Latin and Italian Records in the Archives of Coastal Dalmatia,” in *2. Usluslararası Osmanlı Coğrafyası Arşiv Kongresi. Bildiriler*, vol. 1, edited by Hatice Oruç, Mehmet Yıldırım and Songül Kadioğlu (Ankara: T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı – Tapu ve Kadastro Genel Müdürlüğü Arşiv Dairesi Başkanlığı, 2019), 269-278.

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive work on this topic is still: Ivan Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska u XIV i XV veku* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka, 1952).

<sup>5</sup> On the various discursive models that Ragusans employed in their dealings with foreign powers, see: Lovro Kunčević, *The Myth of Dubrovnik (Ragusa). Civic Identity of an Adriatic City-State in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Dubrovnik: Matica hrvatska, 2022), 169-219. See also: Zdenka Janeković Römer, “Kraj srednjovjekovnog Bosanskog Kraljevstva u dubrovačkim izvorima,” in *Stjepan Tomašević (1461.-1463.) – slom srednjovjekovnog Bosanskog Kraljevstva*, edited by Ante Birin (Zagreb and Sarajevo: Hrvatski institut za povijest – Katolički bogoslovni fakultet u Sarajevu, 2013), 47-67.

<sup>6</sup> Vesna Miović, “Diplomatic Relations Between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Dubrovnik”, in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, edited by Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 187-208.

<sup>7</sup> For a commentary on the current state of the field, see: Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Introduction: The Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans. Research Questions and Interpretations.”, in *The Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans. Interpretations and Research Debates*, ed. Oliver Jens Schmitt (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 7-45; and for a succinct overview of key events with references to the most important scholarly literature on the topic, see: Oliver Jens Schmitt, “The Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans and its Historical Arenas: On the Relationship Between Regional and Supra-regional History”, *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, no. 59 (2021): 9-35.

<sup>8</sup> Halil İnalcık, “Ottoman Methods of Conquest”, *Studia Islamica*, no. 2 (1954): 103-129.

communities, crops, fields and other natural resources, seizing cattle and capturing humans as slaves, instilling fear and insecurity among the local population. In fact, the early Ottoman economy in the Balkans was for the most part based on the abduction and sale of enslaved individuals who were then resold at inflated or deflated prices on some of the slave markets in the Balkans or the Aegean islands.<sup>9</sup>

All of this resulted with the quick spreading of uncontrolled panic and an almost paralyzing terror that soon came to be known as the proverbial “fear of the Turks” – *metus Turchorum*.<sup>10</sup> Just the very rumour of the movements and a possible arrival of an Ottoman army were enough to terrify and fill the local population with dread, forcing them to flee their homes and look for shelter elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> The ever-present military threat in the borderlands was so much of a hindrance to everyday life and to the usual trading activities that it was even seen as a valid reason to release business partners from contractual liability.<sup>12</sup> And it was on the account of these early reports about the danger, atrocities and cruelty of the Ottomans that they gained an extremely bad reputation in the Christian West, which eventually culminated in the construction of an enduring stereotypical image of the “Terrible Turk” that dominated the European literary imagination and political discourse on the Ottoman Empire throughout its existence.<sup>13</sup>

It is also under this initial, profoundly negative impression that Ragusans slowly and progressively came into closer contact with the Ottoman Turks. As is to be expected, the first substantial mentions of Turks in Ragusan sources concern their military assaults on the

neighbouring Kingdom of Bosnia in October 1386 and those documents, although brief and concise, still manage to paint a vivid image of terror, anxiety and turmoil caused by their arrival.<sup>14</sup> They talk about a frenzied group of people chaotically appearing with their animals and belongings on the borders of Ragusa, looking for shelter as they escaped the “Turkish terror”,<sup>15</sup> and during the following years these Ottoman attacks on Bosnia became more frequent so similar situations kept reappearing regularly in the minutes and deliberations of the Ragusan city councils. For instance, in 1390 the distressed communities from the adjacent hinterland areas were forced to “flee fearing the Turks” and seek refuge on the state territory of Ragusa. They were subsequently allowed to save themselves, their families and cattle, by coming to the fortified settlement of Ston on the Pelješac peninsula which was under Ragusan jurisdiction at the time.<sup>16</sup> The same privilege was afforded eight years later to merchants from Ragusa who resided in the nearby market town of Narenta and were thus allowed to retreat to Ston “on the account of the fear of the Turks”,<sup>17</sup> while the lords and nobles from the surrounding areas were received with dignity behind the city walls of Ragusa as they ran away “fearing the Turks and other enemies”.<sup>18</sup>

The Ottoman succession crisis which began after the Battle of Ankara in 1402 and lasted until the Battle of Çamurlu in 1413, provided the Balkan Christians, including those from Ragusa, with a brief respite from similar attacks.<sup>19</sup> However, once the elites of the Ottoman Empire resolved their internal issues, the assaults

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Jens Schmitt and Mariya Kiprovska, “Ottoman Raiders (Akincis) as a Driving Force of Early Ottoman Conquest of the Balkans and the Slavery-Based Economy”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, no. 65 (2022): 497-582; Adrian Gheorghe, *The Metamorphoses of Power: Violence, Warlords, Akincis and the Early Ottomans (1300-1450)* (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2023). See also: *Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman Borders (Early Fifteenth – Early Eighteenth Centuries)*, edited by Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Hans J. Kissling, “Türkefurcht und Türkenhoffnung im 15./16. Jahrhundert. Zur Geschichte eines ‘Komplexes’”, *Südost-Forschungen*, no. 23 (1964): 1–18; Jovanka Kalić, “Strah turski posle Kosova”, in *Sveti knez Lazar. Spomenica o šestoj stogodišnjici Kosovskog boja 1389-1989* (Belgrade: Sveti arhijerejski sinod Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1989), 185-191.

<sup>11</sup> Emir O. Filipović, “The Ottoman Conquest and the Depopulation of Bosnia in the Fifteenth Century”, in *State and Society in the Balkans Before and After Establishment of Ottoman Rule*, edited by Srđan Rudić and Selim Aslantaş (Belgrade: The Institute of History Belgrade – Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, Turkish Cultural Centre Belgrade, 2017), 79-101.

<sup>12</sup> Emir O. Filipović, “Force Majeure, Act of God or Natural Disaster? Ottoman Military Threat as a Cause for Exemption from Contractual Liability During the Conquest of the Balkans”, *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, no. 59 (2021): 157-174.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Ottomans* (London: Viking, 1993), 231-239. See also: James Hankins, “Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 49 (1995): 119-122, 135-144; Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West. Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008); Noel Malcolm, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought 1450-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Emir O. Filipović, *Bosansko kraljevstvo i Osmansko carstvo (1386-1463)* (Sarajevo: Orijentalni institut, 2019), 83-90.

<sup>15</sup> “Prima pars de permittendo quod recipiatur in Stagno familie, pastores, animalia et arvensia Vlacorum et circumvicinorum propter eorum salvamentum terrore Teucrorum partes discurrentium. Captum per omnes”. (23 October 1386), Dubrovnik State Archives (hereafter: DSA), *Reformationes*, vol. 27, fol. 7r; Mihailo Dinić, *Odluke veća Dubrovačke republike*, vol. 2 (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1964), 298.

<sup>16</sup> “Prima pars de dimittendo et concedendo Vlachis et Sclavis hominibus armorum cum eorum familiis et bestiamine, quod possint fugere et se reducere et salvare in Stagno et in Puncta timore Turchorum fugientibus si se voluerint ibi salvare, et hoc ex auctoritate maioris consilii presenti consilio attributa. Captum per omnes”. (4 July 1390), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 28, fol. 88r; Nella Lonza and Zdravko Šundrica, *Odluke dubrovačkih vijeća 1390-1392* (Zagreb and Dubrovnik: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2005), 96.

<sup>17</sup> “Prima pars de dando libertatem domino rectori et eius minori consilio cum consilio rogatorum quod si eis videbitur propter timorem Turchorum possint dare fidem e liberam fiduciam mercatoribus nostris Raguseis habitantibus in Narento per illud temporis quo videbitur ipsis consiliis presentibus quod possint se reducere in Stagno. Captum per LXVII”. (22 January 1398), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 31, fol. 161v.

<sup>18</sup> “Prima pars est de dando arbitrum et liberam auctoritatem domino Rectori et eius minori consilio et consilio rogatorum subueniendi dominis et aliis nobilibus archaicis volentibus se reducere ad saluandum in Ragusium timore Turchorum et aliorum inimicorum de comoditate et habilitate quibus possint huc venire et se reducere per modum quo videbitur dictis consiliis ac illis dandi in Ragusio domum pro habitatione illis videlicet quibus videbitur dicto consilio rogatorum et in hoc faciendi quantum facere possint maius consilium presens. Captum per XXXVII”. (7 February 1398), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 31, fol. 162r.

<sup>19</sup> For the Ottoman succession crisis, see: Dimitris J. Kastritsis, *The Sons of Bayezid. Empire Building and Representation in the Ottoman Civil War of 1402-13* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

recommended almost immediately with the same intensity as before. Already in June 1414 the Ragusan merchants from Narenta anticipated a new Ottoman attack and were thus permitted to seek shelter in Ston as they fled “because of the fear of the Turks”.<sup>20</sup> Responding to a Bosnian nobleman knez Vukosav Kobiljačić in 1420, the Ragusans accepted his claim that “the Turks caused a lot of evil now as they entered Bosnia”, and wholly agreed with his statement that “wherever the Turks go, they do no good”, adding that their city was free for all those seeking refuge, but also expressing concern that “if those who fled came to us, the Turks could follow them and inflict great damage to us too”.<sup>21</sup>

These cases represent just a handful of examples from which it becomes patently clear that any movement of Ottoman armies in the Ragusan hinterland also involved the movement of frightened people who were hoping to escape and avoid the consequences of war. In fact, it was precisely due to these disturbances in their immediate neighborhood during August of 1388 that the government of Ragusa sent their first ambassador to an Ottoman military commander, hoping to negotiate and avoid any possible attack on the city itself.<sup>22</sup> The first known and recorded embassy sent to the Ottoman sultan was mentioned several years later, in May 1392, and concerned an attempt to liberate a Ragusan patrician who was abducted and held captive by the Ottoman Turks.<sup>23</sup> From that moment on, the Ragusans began developing their contacts with Ottoman rulers and officials, trying to regulate trade and attempting to limit any potential damage that their merchants suffered on Ottoman territory. They did both with mixed results for a number of decades until 1430 when they eventually had to send a couple of messengers on a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman capital of Edirne, where they acknowledged the Sultan’s supremacy, presented him with gifts and established a formal rapport with his court.<sup>24</sup>

To a certain degree, the official verification of the mutual relationship improved the position of Ragusan merchants who travelled and traded across the width and breadth of the Ottoman Empire, but it certainly did not represent the end of all of their problems with the

easily irritable Ottoman authorities. Already in 1436 the government of Ragusa informed their suzerain lord Sigismund, king of Hungary and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, that the power of the Turks grew stronger every day in those regions which surrounded their city, where they not only captured many towns and fortresses with their military might, but also managed to contain the domains of seemingly independent lords who trembled with fear not daring to contradict them, so much so, that everything was under their control, including all the lands which extended to the very walls of Ragusa.<sup>25</sup> This meant that the city was completely surrounded either by Ottoman held territory or by the estates of their vassals, making it difficult to continue the unobstructed conduct of trade on any different terms other than the ones imposed by the sultan. Therefore, in the same letter they complained to King Sigismund about the destruction and oppression, the daily vexations, molestations and constant losses that their merchants suffered at the hands of the Turks in Bosnia, Serbia and Zeta.<sup>26</sup> Merely a year later they also claimed that the Ottomans introduced novelties into the existing commercial conventions and that their recent raid on Serbia caused lots of damage to Ragusan traders who were there at the time.<sup>27</sup>

As the political situation in the Balkans developed to the detriment of the Balkan Christians, the Ottoman Turks once again began intimidating the Ragusans and requesting from them the payment of annual tribute as an effective sign of their political subordination. Since the city’s governing elites, quite expectedly, attempted to avoid recognizing Ottoman sovereignty and incurring even greater expenses in the process, the Ottomans placed Ragusa into a brutal economic isolation, capturing, imprisoning and torturing all of their merchants that they encountered on Ottoman territory, until the Ragusans finally folded and accepted their status as Ottoman

<sup>20</sup> “Captum fuit de portando ad maius consilium de faciendo salvum-conductum mercatoribus Narenti prosertim illis qui sunt debitores precipuis personis quod ob metum Turchorum possint se reducere Stagnum cum omnibus rebus et mercanciis suis per totum mensem augusti proxime futuri”. (28 June 1414), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 34, fol. 128v.

<sup>21</sup> (28 February 1420), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 112v.

<sup>22</sup> “Prima pars de mittendo unum nuncium ad Sayn caput Turchorum. Captum per omnes”. (20 August 1388), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 27, fol. 87v; Dinić, *Odluke veća Dubrovačke republike*, vol. 2, 298.

<sup>23</sup> “In dicto minori consilio captum fuit de scribendo Theodoro de Gisla in Novaberda, quod debeat ire ad imperatorem turchum Chuchabasa qui est in partibus Romanie citra peregium, in servicium Pirchi filii ser Andree Dobre de Binçolla capti per Turchos, et pro mercanciis Ragusei capti in eius societate, et hoc sub pena voluntatis domini”. (12 May 1392), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 29, fol. 42v; Lonza and Šundrica, *Odluke dubrovačkih vijeća 1390-1392*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Valentina Zovko, “The First Ambassadors from Dubrovnik at the Sublime Porte (1430/31)”, in *Turkey & Romania. A History of Partnership and Colaboration in the Balkans*, edited by Florentina Nitu, Cosmin Ionita, Metin Ünver, Özgür Kolçak and Hacer Topaktaş (Istanbul: Türk Dünyası Belediyeler Birliği – İstanbul University, 2016), 37-68.

<sup>25</sup> “In quibus partibus nulli latet, quanta dictio quantaque sit potentia Teucrorum et quantas vires capiant cotidie, qui, si vera pro veris fateri volumus, non modo ipsis in regionibus, in quibus potentius militant, plures civitates et oppida occupavit, sed dietim vires augentes, sub tremore eorum dominorum et dominia continent, nec est, qui eis contradicat vel eat, adeo, quia usque ad proxima confinia, ymo quasi limina huius maiestatis vestre civitatis in ipsorum quodammodo manu et potentia omnia sunt”. (4 May 1436), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 24rv; Lajos Thallóczy and Jozsef Gelcich, *Diplomatarium relationum Reipublicae Ragusanae cum Regno Hungariae* (Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, 1887), 397-398.

<sup>26</sup> “Cuius Zelapie adventum, qui nec celari poterit, cum presenserit ad hanc civitatem, quantum eos exarcebaturus esse sperare possumus ad perniciem et oppressionem mercatorum nostrorum illis in regionibus Bosne, Sclavonie et Zente, in quibus periti sunt, dominantur et possunt, si ex minima re Albanorum adversus nos conciti sunt; quorum cotidianas devexaciones atque molencias quamquam ad serenitatis vestre noticiam interdum non perducimus, tamen damno et detrimentorum nostrorum multociens experimur”. (4 May 1436), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 24v; Thallóczy and Gelcich, *Diplomatarium relationum Reipublicae Ragusanae cum Regno Hungariae*, 397-398.

<sup>27</sup> “Et si quid aliud mali deficiebat, substulimus eciam, serenitatis domini nostri naturalis, non parva damna in partibus Sclavonie, ubi totum mercanciarum nostrarum trafficum, usum et avere habemus; prout non dubitamus maiestati vestre notum fore solum executis novitatibus perfidissimorum Teucrorum, qui oras illas domini despoti depredati fuerunt”. (14 November 1437), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 71r; Thallóczy and Gelcich, *Diplomatarium relationum Reipublicae Ragusanae cum Regno Hungariae*, 405.

tributaries in 1442.<sup>28</sup> While the noose around their neck seemed to tighten, the Ragusans were still very much willing to cooperate with the Western Christian powers hoping to alleviate Ottoman pressure on the Balkans. In 1451 they instructed their ambassador to complain to János Hunyadi, the governor of the Kingdom of Hungary, that the Bosnians often allowed Turks to enter their lands, and how these Turks had done great damage by robbing the Ragusan merchants they encountered there, and moreover, the said Turks also threatened to assault and plunder the territories of Ragusa, making it necessary for the city's government to spend large amounts of money in order to guard its fortresses and territories.<sup>29</sup> They made these claims as a cry for help in the hope of evoking a response from those who were more powerful than they were. However, instead of an expected unified Christian military reaction that would push the Ottomans back, it was the Ottomans who expanded their authority further and assumed an even firmer grip over all of the Balkan territories where the Ragusans previously used to trade without any impediment. Having lost almost all hope that their European co-religionists will come to the rescue, the Ragusans eventually made a new agreement with Sultan Mehmed II in 1458, pledging their loyalty and agreeing to pay him an annual tribute of 1,500 gold ducats. In return they received written confirmation of their protected status and a number of privileges for their merchants who operated in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>30</sup> While the saga of their mutual interactions did certainly not end there, the relationship entered a distinctive new phase which was characterized by a completely different set of legal norms and obligations.

### 3. Were Ottoman Turks really that 'bad' or were they actually any 'good'?

Contemporary Ragusan sources, mostly records produced in the official state chancery, minutes of council meetings, letters, and instructions to their messengers abroad, contain an abundance of references to Ottoman Turks as "evil" and "malicious" enemies who sought

any possible opportunity to cause harm to the city of Ragusa and its merchants. On the other hand, at the same time, the very same kinds of documents also portray a completely contradictory image of the Turks and present them as worthy "friends" and honest "partners" who protected the Ragusans and their trading interests. And while making alliances and cooperating with the Ottomans were not completely excluded as viable options in the process of achieving strategic political goals, it was still an uncommon practice for Christians during the last decades of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, and any potential contact with such 'infidels' needed to be approached with great caution and diplomatic tact.<sup>31</sup>

Ever since Ragusans initiated their first concrete exchanges with them in 1388 and 1392 respectively, the Ottoman Turks became an unavoidable instance for Ragusan traders since they gradually gained control over most of the lucrative commercial routes and silver mines in the Balkans. The Ottoman officials in the continental hinterland were also concerned with gaining income from trade and interested in growing their revenue, so they did what they could to engage the initially apprehensive Ragusans into doing business with them. In March 1396 the Ottoman *kadi* of Gluhavica in southern Serbia sent a letter to Ragusa, confirming the "promise of the great emperor" that the Ragusan merchants could travel across his Empire without obstruction, under the condition that they paid the usual tariffs. The contents of the Ragusan response are very enlightening as they show us that they had previously established communication with the *kadi* who they address as "our esteemed friend".<sup>32</sup> Just a few months later the Ragusan government received a new letter from the Turks concerning the security of their merchants.<sup>33</sup> And even though they obviously possessed some kind of a written document in which "the great emperor allowed and wrote down that all Ragusan merchants are free to travel, buy and sell whatever they want all over the emperor's land", this did not prevent those merchants from being apprehended, detained and abused by Ottoman authorities who would often appropriate their money and merchandise.<sup>34</sup>

As this hostile approach eventually led to the diminishing of trade under their control, the Ottoman officials decided to implement a more conciliatory commercial policy. In May 1398, the emperor's "promise" was

<sup>28</sup> Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska u XIV i XV veku*, 82-92. On the status of Ottoman tributary states, see: Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, "What is Inside and What is Outside? Tributary States in Ottoman Politics", in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, edited by Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 421-432; Viorel Panaite, *Ottoman Law of War and Peace. The Ottoman Empire and Its Tribute-Payers from the North of the Danube* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> "Oltra questo li Bosignani spespe volte hanno menato in Bossina li Turchi, i quali Turchi hano fatto grandi danni et robamenti a li merchadanti della dicta cittade, i quali se ritrovavano in Bossina secondo li tempi; et di piu li detti Turchi menazavano di assaltar, et predar li territorii della dicta cittade, e per detta cason fu bisogno a la detta citta far gran spexe in guardar le sue forteze e territorii". (14 April 1451), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 14, fol. 76v; Thallóczy and Gelcich, *Diplomatarium relationum Reipublicae Ragusanae cum Regno Hungariae*, 494.

<sup>30</sup> Branislav Nedeljković, "Dubrovačko-turski ugovor od 23. oktobra 1458. godine", *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta*, no. 11-1 (1970): 363-392. Cf. Miović, "Diplomatic Relations Between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Dubrovnik", 187-188.

<sup>31</sup> For early instances of cooperation between the Christian rulers of the West with the Ottoman Turks, see: Emir O. Filipović, "Colluding with the Infidel: The Alliance between Ladislaus of Naples and the Turks", *Hungarian Historical Review*, no. 8.2 (2019): 361-389.

<sup>32</sup> (28 March 1396), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 4r; Ljubomir Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2 (Belgrade and Sremski Karlovci: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1934), 217-218.

<sup>33</sup> "In dicto minori consilio captum fuit de dando Nicole Greco, olim magistro slavichico, pro quodam litera quem portavit a Turchis securitatis nostrorum mercatorum yperperos decem". (20 June 1396), DSA. *Reformationes*, vol. 30, fol. 37v; Nella Lonza, *Odluke dubrovačkih vijeća 1395-1397* (Zagreb and Dubrovnik: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2011), 128.

<sup>34</sup> (1 October 1397), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 8r; Ljubomir Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 1 (Belgrade and Sremski Karlovci: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1929), 184.

confirmed once again by Pasha Yiğit, the *uç bey*, military commander and lord of Skopje who was referred to as “much respected and very brave voivode” when the Ragusans sent him “a much loving salutation” in response to “the honest letter” of his “kindness”. Keen to stimulate trade and resume regular business relations as they used to be before, Pasha Yiğit liberated the Ragusan merchants from one third part of the customary tax, and they expressed their “extreme gratitude for this kind gesture as to a beloved and very honest friend”.<sup>35</sup>

In the following few years, the Ragusans exchanged several such letters with Ottoman officials in their immediate hinterland, always addressing them with “generous” and “cordial” salutations, praising their bravery and honest benevolence, emphasizing their titles, and wishing them good health.<sup>36</sup> These warm and affable interactions were enough to raise suspicion among contemporary Christians who began accusing the Ragusans of being too close to the Turks. In June 1399 the Ragusan Senate deliberated on a motion which alleged that they are “as one” with the Bosnians who are in turn allied with the Turks.<sup>37</sup> Despite this possibly damning allegation, the Ragusan authorities were not overly concerned. Just a month later they sent a curious letter to Ottoman commander Sarhan, which particularly stands out on the account of the affection that they expressed towards this warlord:

*The honest kindness of your lordship should know that our merchants told us and praised all the virtuousness and honesty of your famous lordship, but we can also now see it for ourselves after your lordship has been sent here in good health by the great lord. And we were very happy and our hearts rejoiced immensely on hearing of your good health and arrival.*<sup>38</sup>

The frequent exchanges of letters and messengers between the two sides eventually resulted with Sultan Bayezid issuing a new charter containing detailed regulations and greater trading privileges for Ragusan merchants, and the first concrete mention of this document can be dated to 7 October 1399, when Feriz, the *kephale* of Zvečan, brought to Ragusa the “charter of great lord emperor Bayezid with the emperor’s sign”.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the friendly correspondence was continued and

maintained in the following years until 1402, when it was abruptly stopped after the demise of the Ottoman army at the hands of Tamerlane’s forces near Ankara.<sup>40</sup> In fact, having learned of the Ottoman defeat, the Ragusans once again reached out to Pasha Yiğit, expressing their sorrow that they were now “in conflict and disturbance”, stating that they would prefer it if they “stood in peace and unity” as they did before, “since it was better both for you and for our merchants”.<sup>41</sup>

Although severely reduced, the relations between Ragusa and the Ottoman Turks were not completely broken off during the succession crisis that ensued after the Battle of Ankara and would last for more than a decade. In the confusion that followed Sultan Bayezid’s death, his oldest son Suleyman managed to retain authority over the majority of Ottoman Balkan possessions and maintained a policy of appeasement towards his Christian neighbours.<sup>42</sup> His envoy arrived to Ragusa already in December 1402 where he was allowed to buy and export textiles from the city, but only after he swore an oath that he was buying them for himself and not for any Bosnians who had recently initiated military hostilities against the Ragusans.<sup>43</sup> As the war continued the Ragusan government even considered hiring Ottoman mercenary forces to help them fight against the Bosnians – *inimicos nostros capitales*,<sup>44</sup> and to that extent they sent a messenger to Valona, modern Vlorë in Albania, so that he would explore the possibility of employing Turks who would attack the Bosnians on their behalf.<sup>45</sup> This development was certainly a far cry away from the very first nervous and fearful impressions of the Ottoman Turks that can be encountered in Ragusan documents composed only a few decades earlier.

<sup>35</sup> (26 May 1398), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 12r; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 218.

<sup>36</sup> For an in-depth analysis of these letters, see: Miloš Ivanović, “Cyrillic Correspondence Between the Commune of Ragusa and Ottomans from 1396 to 1458”, in *State and Society in the Balkans Before and After Establishment of Ottoman Rule*, edited by Srđan Rudić and Selim Aslantaş (Belgrade: The Institute of History Belgrade – Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, Turkish Cultural Centre Belgrade, 2017), 43–63.

<sup>37</sup> “Prima pars de dicendo consilio maiori quia castellanus Almixe nobis scripsit et quia Pasayt nobis misit dictum quod nos sumus una cum Bossignanis qui sunt concordati cum Turchis essere bonum quod nostri ambaxiatori repererit se apud nostrum dominum nostrum. Secunda pars de non dicendo ista verba. Captum per XVIII”. (31 June 1399) DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 31, fol. 134v.

<sup>38</sup> (28 July 1399), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 18r; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 222.

<sup>39</sup> (7 October 1399), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 21v; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 220.

<sup>40</sup> Klaus-Peter Matschke, *Die Schlacht bei Ankara und das Schicksal von Byzanz. Studien zur spätbyzantinischen Geschichte zwischen 1402 und 1422* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1981).

<sup>41</sup> (12 December 1402), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 37r; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 221.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth A. Zachariadou, “Süleyman çelevi in Rumili and the Ottoman chronicles”, *Der Islam* 60 (1983): 268–296.

<sup>43</sup> “In minori consilio predicto captum fuit de concedendo ambassiatori imperatoris Turcorum quod possit emere et trahere de Ragusii usque ad XX brachia pani iurando per sacramentum quod vult pro se et ser non pro aliquo Bosinensis”. (12 December 1402), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 32, fol. 55v. On this particular war between Bosnia and Dubrovnik, see: Gavro Škrivanić, “Rat bosanskog kralja Ostoje sa Dubrovnikom”, *Vesnik Vojnog muzeja*, no. 5 (1958): 35–60.

<sup>44</sup> “Ser Nicholaus de Gondola, ser Simeon de Bona, ser Marinus de Chaboga, electi fuerunt officiales ad ponendum in forma modis tractandi et componendi cum Chatharensibus, cum Turcis, cum Albanensibus et generaliter cum quibusquam aliis qui paruerint dictis officialibus posse tractare et ligas facere contra Bosenenses inimicos nostros capitales et contra eorum fortificia. Et reportent ipsos modos et tractatis consilio rogatorum in forma ut predictum”. (17 July 1403), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 32, fol. 47v.

<sup>45</sup> “Prima pars est de concedendo Pripcho Budchouich. .. quod in casu quo velit ire usque ad Aualonam ad loquandum cum domino Merchxa et experiendum ibi cum eo si possumus habere Turchos qui veniant supra Bossinam cum nostris denariis dando eis commodum paregii et bazarum et Bossinenses quos caperent. Captum per XX-III”. (21 July 1403), DSA, *Reformationes*, vol. 32, fol. 160v. He was instructed to ask Mrkša Žarković, the lord of Valona, “whether he had at his disposal some Turks who would be willing to come and cause offence to the Bosnians” (27 July 1403), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 4, fols. 38r–39r.

The connections that certain Ragusan merchants established with Ottoman officials implied a proper cooperation in terms of business dealings and commercial transactions. For instance, Ragusan patrician Junius de Sorgo owned the proceeds of a quarter of a silver smelting furnace with Pasha Yiğit.<sup>46</sup> But aside from being willing to collaborate with them in terms of trade and military, the Ragusans were also ready to use their favourable interactions with the Ottomans in order to admonish or shame those Christians who committed any kind of offence against their citizens. This was the case in 1410 when a group of Hungarian soldiers who were fighting in Bosnia at the time, inflicted damage to the property and merchandise of some Ragusan citizens. Following the event, the Ragusan government lodged a number of formal complaints, expressing surprise at the behaviour of these soldiers and emphasizing that the “pagan” Turks, while waging war in Serbia and Bosnia, never ever offended a single merchant of theirs.<sup>47</sup> A couple of years later, a Ragusan nobleman was robbed and murdered in Bosnia by the nephew of the Bosnian King. The Ragusans protested to the king, claiming that their people “travel among Turks and other pagans, but nowhere have they suffered such evil”.<sup>48</sup> In a way, the Ottomans became somewhat of a reference point against which the concepts of “good” and “bad” eventually came to be measured.

The commercial cooperation between Ragusa and the Turks was also continued after the resolution of the Ottoman interregnum, since both sides were keen to resume relations as they had been before the Balkans were plunged into years of political turmoil and incessant warfare. Following the Ottoman recuperation of the Albanian Adriatic Sea coast, the Ragusan citizens were invited in 1415 by Balaban Bey, the *subaşi* of Krlež and Albania, to travel and trade freely across the lands that were under his command. Having expressed their “abundant gratitude” to a “beloved friend who shows us such great love”, the Ragusans reciprocated by inviting his people, regardless “whether they are Turks or Albanians”, to freely come to their city “with or without merchandise”, not having to pay any customs taxes.<sup>49</sup> They also received a similar cordial invitation in 1417 from Hamza Bey, the lord of Valona, as he encouraged them to send their traders to his towns and lands. They courteously thanked him for his “honest letter”, assuring him that they know very well how their merchants “have always been welcome and protected in the Turkish state”.<sup>50</sup> In the same year, deeper in the continental hinterland, the Ragusans suffered some inconveniences

in the town of Novo Brdo, so they wrote to the Despot of Serbia, reminding him “that his grace knows how not only in Christendom, but also among the Turks and strangers and other pagan people who do not celebrate the glory of Christ, with whom we have not waged war, our merchants are everywhere generously accepted”.<sup>51</sup>

As the Ottomans strengthened their hold and authority over the lands where the Ragusans traditionally used to trade, the intensity of their mutual dealings and interactions also increased exponentially. Hoping and expecting favours in return or rewarding them for their help and assistance in various matters, the Ragusan government began showering Ottoman officials with expensive presents in money or luxurious goods. For example, in 1420 the Ragusan government decided to purchase a substantial gift for Pasha Yiğit’s successor Isak,<sup>52</sup> and soon after they also contemplated about offering him Ragusan citizenship.<sup>53</sup> In 1426 the Ragusan councils elected a committee with the task of buying a present and sending it to Isak,<sup>54</sup> and the whole process was repeated again the following year with the involvement of all merchants who operated in Serbia and who contributed with financial donations for the gift.<sup>55</sup> Shortly afterwards, Isak’s son Barack was also presented with a generous gift to the value of a hundred gold ducats, a considerable sum at the time and in the given circumstances, while his two messengers who came to Ragusa were also rewarded with presents valued at around 30 gold ducats each.<sup>56</sup> This approach certainly reaped dividends so that in 1429 the Ragusans boasted to the Bos-

<sup>51</sup> (13 August 1417), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fols. 107vbis-108r; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 1, 223-224.

<sup>52</sup> “Prima pars est de portando ad consilium maius impetrandi licentiam de enseniando Isaach Teucrum parte dominii. Captum per XXVIII. Contra II”. (24 May 1420), DSA, *Consilium rogatorum*, vol. 2, fol. 118r; “Prima pars est de enseniando parte et sumptibus dominii nostri voyuodam Isaach Theucrum. Captum per LXXXVII. Contra VIII. Prima pars est de enseniando predictum usque ad summam yperperorum quadrigentorum. Captum per LVIII.” (24 May 1420), DSA, *Consilium maius*, vol. 2, fol. 29r.

<sup>53</sup> “Prima pars est de dando libertatem ambassiatoribus existentibus apud voyuodam Sandaliam offerendi ciuilitatem Ragusii Isaach Theucro si eam poterit. Captum per omnes”. (29 May 1420), DSA, *Consilium rogatorum*, vol. 2, fol. 120v.

<sup>54</sup> “Ser Johannes Lamp. de Zrieua, ser Stefanus de Zamagno, ser Nicola Si. de Goze, electi fuerunt officiales ad emendum donum mictendum ad voyuodam Isach, cum moris et conditionibus consuetis”. (17 June 1426), DSA, *Consilium minus*, vol. 4, fol. 16v.

<sup>55</sup> “Prima pars est quod omnes mercatores qui versantur in contrata domini Georgii Volcouich et mercatores de Noua Berda soluat in pensam futuram ambassiatorum deputatorum pro dono mittendo ad voyuodam Ysach Theucrum. Captum per XXVII”. (8 February 1427), DSA, *Consilium rogatorum*, vol. 4, fol. 10v.

<sup>56</sup> “Prima pars est de dando libertatem domino rectori et minori consilio respondendi Huyc Teucro, oratori voyuode Barach, dando sibi blandia verba et bona pro verbis per ipsum platis. Captum per omnes. Prima pars est de eundo ad mayus consilium de donando voyuode Barach et istis oratoribus suis qui venerit Ragusii. Captum per XXXIII. Prima pars est de eundo ad mayus consilium pro donando voyuode Barach predicto in pannis pro ut domino rectori et minori consilio videbitur, valore ducatos centum. Captum per XVIII. Contra XVI. Prima pars est de donando istis oratoribus voyuode Barach in pannis valore yperperos centum. Captum per XXIII”. (21 April 1427), DSA, *Consilium rogatorum*, vol. 4, fols. 19v-20r; “Ser Anthonius Cle. de Goze, ser Lucas de Sorgo, ser Paladinus de Gondola, electi fuerunt officiales ad emendum donum futurum voyuode Barach Theucro, filio voyuode Isaach, et istis oratoribus suis duobus in pannis omnibus, videlicet voyuode Barach ducatos centum et oratoribus

<sup>46</sup> “Ancora aço quarta parte de uno carro cum misser Passaith voyuoda...”. (21 October 1409), DSA, *Testamenta Notariae*, vol. 9, fol. 132r.

<sup>47</sup> “Et similamente li Turchi, chi sono pagani, ne in Sclauonia ne in Bosna ostizando mai, non ofexe a nessuno nostro mercadante perche sono cosi ali oste como al paexe doue uxano utili a tute le parte. ...”. (16 March 1410), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 5, fol. 7r.

<sup>48</sup> (16 May 1412), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 88r; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 1, 442.

<sup>49</sup> (22 December 1415), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 103v; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 225-226.

<sup>50</sup> (9 August 1417), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 1, fol. 107v; Stojanović, *Stare srpske povelje i pisma*, vol. 2, 227.

nian voivode Sandalj Hranić that their merchants were “well seen and well treated in all Turkish places”.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the close relationship that Ragusa had with Isak and his family managed to raise a few eyebrows among contemporaries, and the king of Bosnia attempted to separate them by telling Ragusan ambassadors who visited his court that Isak was not a friend of their city. The authorities of Ragusa were not convinced or impressed by this, and responded that they did not believe the king’s claims.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, they soon informed the Bosnian voivode Radosav Pavlović how they have amicable relations with “this man who is at your and our borders”, meaning Isak, that they also had good relations with his father Pasha Yiğit, and that “no damage ever came from them”, going on to say that since the time of Pasha Yiğit their merchants peacefully travelled and traded through the lands of the Turks where they were well received and dealt with.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, having obtained a charter from Sultan Murad II in 1430, the Ragusans developed their relations with the Ottoman officials in the Balkan hinterland even further. We are fortunate to have preserved several instructions for Ragusan messengers sent on diplomatic missions to these Ottoman commanders in their immediate vicinity, and the contents of these letters are rather suggestive in terms of understanding the way in which the relationship between Ragusa and the Ottomans functioned in principle. Namely, in 1436 an emissary was ordered to travel to the camp of Isak’s son Barack where he was supposed to tell him how the Ragusan *signoria* always stood in agreement, “singular dilection and love” with his magnificent father, as was plainly manifest to the whole world since the Ragusan merchants were always treated favorably by him, with liberty and security as if they were in their own city.<sup>60</sup> A couple of years later

they sent an envoy to Isak himself, repeating the words of “singular dilection and love” that they had between them, again thanking him for his conduct towards their merchants who have always been greeted and received by him with humanity and favor, feeling free and secure in his domains. They also decided to honor him with a lavish gift, four pieces of cloth, as a sign of their respect, “great love, and benevolence”.<sup>61</sup> In the following year the Ragusan government dispatched a messenger to Isak’s other son, Sebalia, hoping to remind him of the “outstanding friendship” that they had with voivode Pasha Yiğit, Isak and his whole family, flattering him that he is his father’s true son since he follows the customs and practices of his father who has always loved the government of Ragusa and its nobility with great fervour and care, providing their merchants with ample support in his places.<sup>62</sup>

All these claims regarding the behaviour of the Ottoman Turks stand in stark contrast to the information contained in other sources and are not easily squared with an account that the Ragusans themselves narrated to the bickering Bosnian voivodes Radosav Pavlović and Sandalj Hranić just a few years previously:

*Remind yourself, your lordship, of the evil and cunning of this Turk Isak which is familiar to us, and even more so to your lordship on the account of the long-lasting relations you have with him in your dealings, because he never thinks of anything else apart from creating and sowing discord among the Bosnian lords so that he could swallow them and destroy them one by one. And this is the custom of the Turks who a hundred years ago did not have any possessions in Romania, and acting for a hundred years with their malice, sowing discord among the Greek lords, which they destroyed one by one, the arrived*

suis yperperorum centum”. (21 April 1427), DSA, *Consilium minus*, vol. 4, fol. 85r.

<sup>57</sup> “... hora per la Dio gratia et della vostra signoria li nostri mercatanti per tucti luoghi di Turchi son ben veduti et ben tractati et le mercatantie corre per tucto ...” (5 June 1429), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 10, fol. 65v.

<sup>58</sup> “Noi intendessimo per le vostre lettere che aui sentito che Isach non e nostro amigo ... la qual cosa noi non credemo ...” (1 June 1428), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 10, fol. 89v.

<sup>59</sup> “Prima a quello che dice che quello anno mandato a dir per lo fatto de li Turchi altramente non anno possuto far, ma lo anno fatto per bona cason, acio che con questo homo il quale e alli suo et nostri confin, avessimo qualche bona amista con avessimo, con suo padre Pasaito, che qualche danno da luy non ne fosse ... Per li Turchi veramente gli direte, che tanto al tempo de Passaito Turcho quanto de quelli che son mo li mercatanti nostri nelle lore terre et parte pacificamente briganno e conversano, e da essi son ben veduti et tratat. Et loro essi signori Turchi honorano come sempre anno fatto e cusi sigeremo per lo avvenire che con la gratia et favor suo, e de li altri boni e cordiali amici de Ragusa seran ben veduti et tratadi”. (16 June 1429), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 10, fol. 68r.

<sup>60</sup> “Magnifico voiuoda Barach, la signoria mia de Ragusa con la qual il magnifico padre vostro voiuoda Ysach e conzonto com singulare dilection et amor, como e manifesto a tuto lo mondo dil qual amore asai bona testimonianza ne fa li suo mercadanti Ragusei i quali sempre da esso magnifico voiuoda con humanita e fauore sono stati ben veduti et fauorizati con quella francheza e segurezza che seriano entro la cita de Ragusi. Secondo sempre e stato di suo costume et a fatto al vostro padre cusi mo me a mandato com suo doni ad honorare la magnificencia vostra tanto per gratia dil bon amore li porta il vostro padre quanto che anche da voi cognosse esser amata et li suoi

mercadanti ben veduti et tratadi”. (20 March 1436), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 18v.

<sup>61</sup> “Magnifico voyuoda Ysaach, la mia signoria de Ragusa, la qual e conzonta con voy, con singular dilection et amor, et alla qual asai bona testimonianza ne fa li soy mercadanti ragusey. La qual sempre da vuy voyuoda, e da li nostri con humanitate e fauor sono senti ben saluat e fauorizati con quella franchiça e segurta che seriano entro la cita di Ragusa secondo sempre esta di so costanze nie a mandati con soy doni ad honorar la magnificencia vostra tanto per gran amor vi porta quanto per che da voy cognosce esse amata. Caper sentando li le ditte 4 peze de panno per parte de la nostra signoria, pregando humanamente e con dolce parole sedegni acetar quelle in segno de amor e beniuolentia li portemo non risguardando la purita del done el qual ben cognosscemo che ala soa maiesta mazor si inguerebbe ma per rispetto de de la grande affection et beniuolentia nostra quello don per vno segno de amor acetar voya”. (1 January 1438). DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 74r.

<sup>62</sup> “Magnifico voyuoda, la mia signoria di Ragusa la qual longo tempo a abuto singular amicia con la bona memoria del condam voyuoda Pasayth e Isaach, vostro Padre, e con li vostri e la magnificencia vostra, del qual voyuoda Ysaach ben si puodir vuy esser proprio et vero figliolo per che seguiti le uestigie et costumi de quello el qual sempre a amato e dilecto con grandissimo feruor di carita essa mia signoria e suoi zentilomeni come cari amici soi et li soi mercadanti proseguiti in qualunche logo doue se ritrouato con amplo fauor. Abiando intexo per relation del detto vostro messo como el signor Imperator Turcho vi a dato in guardia e tenuta queste parte e confini di Bosina li quali ano tenuti i vostri antecessori a poter comandar alto e basso quanto la propria soa persona”. (March 1439), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 12, fol. 125v.



*to a great dominion and power. They did the same thing with the Bulgarian emperors, and similarly in the Kingdom of Serbia, and they have attempted and are still attempting to do the same in Bosnia. Seeing the great love and unity between the Bosnian lords and Dubrovnik, which has an open path towards the sea, they have tried to instigate disunity in order to get all those tributes and honours that we give to the lords of Bosnia. But we are, as we have been before, for as long as there are spirits in our bodies, inclined towards our custom to always defend, honour and respect our charters, as with the crown of Bosnia, so with your lordship and the other lords and barons of Bosnia with who we have certain promises, sacraments or written documents, and we are sure that the Bosnian crown and your lordship will do the same, and that we will in this way thwart all the evil thoughts of your and our enemies.*<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The inconsistent and contrasting image of the Ottoman Turks that can be encountered in the presented sources was just one aspect of the many discursive strategies that Ragusans employed in order to manipulate different political situations to their advantage. Having been forced to establish commercial relations with the Ottoman Turks out of a practical necessity, since theirs was a coastal town that survived by virtue of trading with the hinterland, the Ragusans developed a cautious, practical and pragmatic approach to dealing with their vastly more powerful neighbours that was conditioned by the constantly changing political circumstances and actual events on the ground. This obviously implied the construction of a narrative in which, according to the requirements of the situation, they emphasized either the “bad” or “good” character of the Ottomans and their conduct, creating for them a flexible image that could be changed depending on the conditions and needs of the time. In fact, for Ragusans the Ottoman Turks became a standard measure for the very evaluation and assessment of what it meant to be “good” or “bad”.

These adaptable and malleable images of the “traditional enemy” stood in complete opposition to the dominant, overly negative perception of the Ottomans that was created at the same time in the Christian West. In a way and to an extent this is completely understandable since it was much easier for those who were far removed from the frontlines of the battlefield and had no immediate dealings with the Turks, to maintain a rigid and extreme policy of unequivocal hostility towards them. Those who, like the Ragusans, were closer to the Ottoman Turks and had to have direct experience with them, quickly came to realize that an absolute and firmly fixed negative image of them could not be easily established. Since they had to be more intelligent and accommodat-

ing in their approach, the Ragusans adopted this tactic as a tool in their diplomatic arsenal so that they could try to preserve their political and commercial interests in face of ever-growing adversity.

But this contrasting image should not necessarily be seen as a misleading one. It is extremely difficult to ascertain the existence of anything absolutely “good” or absolutely “bad” about the Ottoman Turks, at least from the Ragusan point of view. There were certainly situations in which they behaved better or worse towards their merchants, and in the long relations between the two sides the Ragusans had plenty of different examples to choose for both should they have needed to emphasize either in their diplomatic communication. In the initial stages of Ottoman expansion, they obviously had a much more difficult relationship with the Turks, especially in the borderlands while they waged constant and destructive wars. However, once they managed to regulate their mutual trade relations, customs duties, commercial practices, policies, etc., Ragusan merchants began to be treated relatively well on Ottoman territory. They brought the Ottomans significant profits by paying taxes, stimulating exchange of goods, importing merchandise from distant Christian lands that was otherwise inaccessible to the Turks, and by buying expensive gifts for the cooperative, perhaps even corrupt, Ottoman officials and administrators. And while the friendly and kind disposition towards the Ottomans in Ragusan written correspondence can at least partially be ascribed to flattery or attempts to avoid oppression and abuse, the Ragusans actually made a point of publicly advertising the good relations with the Turks to their Christian friends and partners.

Therefore, the described cases also show the variable and inconsistent nature of diplomatic documents for the study of the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, or indeed of any conflict or cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the past, and that singling just one of them out to make an argument can result with misleading and incomplete results. Therefore, these sources should be observed within a much broader context, and historians should take particular care about accepting their claims at face value, since interreligious relations between different communities were not always as unambiguous or constantly hostile as they are often presented to be in contemporary works, modern historiography, and public discourse.

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<sup>63</sup> (29 May 1429), DSA, *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 10, fols. 57v-58 r, 59rv.

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