

# IN THE SHADOW OF THE GRAND TURK. HISPANIC INTELLIGENCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN IN THE 16TH CENTURY

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**Abstract.** This essay has two aims. First, it analyzes the Spanish monarchy's intelligence system with special reference to its European domains ca. 1550-1650. Secondly, it pays particular attention to the role of espionage in the Spanish struggle against the Ottoman empire. Thus it contributes to two current historiographical debates by arguing that, first, early modern Spanish intelligence networks were crucial means whereby the Spanish monarchy pursued its geopolitical goals and defined the best ways to fight against its main enemies in the Mediterranean, namely, the Turks, and, consequently against their European allies, such as Elizabethan England and France. Traditionally, the study of Spanish foreign policy has shied away from intelligence sources. Instead, this article demonstrates that they are essential if we are to get to grips with motives, planning and geopolitical vision in early modern affairs. Secondly, it argues that the Ottoman empire was perceived and treated as Spain's greatest foes throughout the period under consideration here. English-speaking historians are still reluctant to admit that the Spanish empire considered its fight against England as rather peripheral by comparison with its struggle against the mighty Turks. This article dovetails neatly with the latest Spanish-language historiography about it by showing that the Spanish monarchy spent significant intelligence resources on the Ottomans above all other threats.

**Keywords:** intelligence, Spanish monarchy, Ottoman empire, geopolitics, early modern Europe

## Introduction

1636, the heart of Europe was wounded by a war that left a continuous trail of blood on the battlefields, while the end of the conflict was not on the horizon. Until then the hegemonic power, the Spanish Monarchy was entering a phase of decline that was to change the geopolitical balance in favour of France. The author of the first treatise in Spanish on the office of ambassador, the Count of La Roca wrote a letter to Philip IV from Venice, where the nobleman was the *King's* diplomatic

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representative<sup>1</sup>. The letter pointed out the importance of intelligence. According to the ambassador, the search for a good spy was an activity akin to planting an olive grove, involving patience and perseverance<sup>2</sup>. After more than a century at the top of the world, the Habsburgs knew the value of confidential news in international relations.

In modern times, espionage in the Hispanic Monarchy maintained features that reflected the basic characteristics of an empire where the sun never set<sup>3</sup>. Firstly, intelligence was framed in a hierarchical and pyramidal regime, so that information from spies entered the complex system of the administration from the closest institution. The procedure had a gradual development that reached a more precise pattern under Philip II, when the councils became paradigmatic tools of governance<sup>4</sup>. The second distinctive feature was the geographical distribution of tasks. As the most powerful European power at the time, the Spanish Monarchy faced different enemies that could sometimes strike at the same time: France, England, the United Provinces, the German Protestants and, above all, the Ottoman Empire. Each territory was therefore responsible for gathering sensitive information on the nearest adversary, as well as organising operations beyond its borders<sup>5</sup>.

A final typical aspect of Hispanic espionage, albeit shared with other secret services, was the osmosis between administration and private networks. Ancien Régime society did not contemplate a clear distinction between the public and private spheres, so members of aristocratic lineages took advantage of institutional positions, occupied on a temporary basis, to expand or reinforce the family's projection. In fact, most spies signed on as *servants*, or servants, when they ran the offices of top-level politicians. The relationship was dialectical. Certainly, the addressees were looking for news that was difficult to access, but at the same time the authors of the letters wanted to get into the graces of influential people<sup>6</sup>.

The following pages aim to present Hispanic espionage against the Ottoman Empire throughout the 16th century, without falling into stereotypes consolidated in historiography. In order to avoid anachronisms, the article is based on a conspicuous corpus of primary sources that are nowadays preserved in Spanish and Italian archives, the nature of which was confidential at the time of writing. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the essay consists of three parts. The first focuses on the institutional system that allows intelligence to function. The next looks at the role of the various possessions. Finally, the third section examines the work in the field.

### **Institutional skeleton of espionage**

During the 16th century, the audiencias were the institutions of the Hispanic Monarchy most closely linked to spies. Written on the frontier, most of the letters ended up in the hands of provincial secretaries, who kept the codes to decipher the dispatches in code. In addition, the same officials interrogated agents returning from a mission in enemy territory. In the war against the Grand Turk, the areas with the greatest movement of information were the two Puglia provinces of Terre de Bari and Terre d'Otranto, which were often ruled by the same governor. Indeed, the heel of the Italian boot became the Crown's main window on the Ottoman universe.

Thanks to the geographical proximity and the massive presence of Greek-Albanian refugees, ports such as Otranto and Lecce already had specialised personnel in the 1530s to collect information from the agents. On 22 March 1532, in the harbour of Lecce, a secretary examined the agent Joanne Genaro, who had been living in Constantinople for almost two months, in order to gather news about Suleiman the Magnificent<sup>7</sup>. A couple of weeks later, in the same place, another official took a statement from Stasio, an agent of Greek origin, who had been in Corfu, then a Venetian territory. On the island, the spy had met Joan Antony of Rhodes, from Constantinople, who was in the service of the Grand Master of Malta. The Rhodian had therefore provided invaluable news about the Ottoman capital. Finally, Stasius returned with a child of Christian origin, but converted to Islam, whom he had bought for 4 escudos<sup>8</sup>.

The audiencias also drew up summaries of various interrogatories or notices, a polysemic word, the meaning of which is the subject of long debate in historiography<sup>9</sup>. By order of the provincial governor, the writings were sent to the courts of the kingdoms, where the documentation was attached to the official correspondence directly to the sovereign<sup>10</sup>. At the time, the governors represented the link between the provinces and the capital of each possession, as they were in charge of the audiencias. To follow in the Land of Otranto, the key figure was Alfonso Granai Castriota, Marquis of Atripalda, who founded Hispanic espionage in the Levant<sup>11</sup>. Of Albanian origin, the nobleman was governor of the province while Cardinal Pompeo Colonna was viceroy. However, the marquis reached the height of his influence with the arrival in Naples of Pedro de Toledo in 1532, when Alfonso led the secret network in the shadows, without holding an official position. In less than a year, the viceroy wrote to the secretary of state, Francisco de los Cobos, that the Marquis of Atripalda was the most honourable gentleman in the world, even if he had an eccentric appearance with long hair and a dyed beard<sup>12</sup>.

While Alfonso Granai Castriota was still in charge of espionage, the post of governor passed to his nephew Pirro, brother Giovanni's natural son. A few months before the campaign against Tunis in 1535, Julius de Gallipoli returned from Vlorë, where insistent voices confirmed the Ottoman defeats in Persia<sup>13</sup>. In the same period, an urgent dispatch warned of a plot against Clisa to Pirro Castriota, who gathered all the information before sending it to Pedro de Toledo<sup>14</sup>. Although the Granai Castriota may have lost control of the office, in the following years the governors of Puglia maintained a dominant position in the espionage network. In June 1550, for example, Ferrante Loffredo summarised the information gathered by the spies beyond the sea. The governor emphasised, above all, the news of the Albanian rebellion in the Himara mountains, where the Spanish Monarchy had the opportunity to foment a *proxy war* against the Turk<sup>15</sup>.

In the following decades, the system of transmission improved. With their increasingly skilled staff, local bodies played the essential role of refining and checking the news before providing the data to the higher level, which repeated the procedure until the information reached the sovereign's court. A fundamental role therefore fell to the territorial courts, which were under the command of governors general and viceroys, who usually belonged to aristocratic lineages, as well as having demonstrated

steadfast loyalty to the Crown. In the fight against the Sultan, the viceroy of Naples had a privileged position due to the data he obtained every day. Apart from the information sent through the administration, the Neapolitan court handled news from many other places. On the eve of the campaign against Tunis, Pedro de Toledo transmitted the notices from Venice, which he had crossed with those from Sicily, so the viceroy guaranteed the authenticity of the information about Barbarossa, then master of the Tunisian capital<sup>16</sup>.

Although resident abroad, ambassadors performed a similar function<sup>17</sup>. In the Mediterranean conflict of the 16th century, diplomats in Venice had a privileged perspective because of the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of St Mark. From the capital of the Serenissima, Charles V's representatives sent exceptional warnings from Constantinople, which revealed the enemy's reading of any event. As early as 1530, the ambassador Rodrigo Niño recounted conversations with the Doge about Suleiman's plans, which reached only Venice<sup>18</sup>. Two years later, the same politician warned of a rumour about an Ottoman plot to occupy Otranto, which was insistently circulating between St. Mark's Square and the Rialto Bridge<sup>19</sup>. In short, the palaces of diplomats became veritable dens for spies. In 1567 Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, ambassador to Genoa, lamented in a dispatch that sending confidential information was one of his greatest expenses, never reimbursed by Madrid<sup>20</sup>.

The monarch exchanged news about the Ottoman Empire even with diplomats, who resided far from the Mediterranean. After the victory at Lepanto, Philip II notified Guerau de Espés, ambassador in London, who hastily requested an audience with Isabella I to inform her of the happy event. Faced with such momentous news, the queen could do no more than express her satisfaction and organise celebrations in honour of the triumph. On the other hand, Philip II sarcastically confessed the Anglican sovereign's duplicity and irritation in a letter to Diego Guzmán de Silva, ambassador in Venice, who had lived for four years on the banks of the Thames<sup>21</sup>.

The captain general of the galleys performed a similar role, since, thanks to his position, he could favour both the movements of agents and letters and logistical support for operations in enemy territory. Perhaps the most significant case in the Mediterranean in the 16th century was García de Toledo, at the same time admiral of the fleet and viceroy of Sicily. In 1565, a few months before the siege of Malta, spies dispatched notices to Toledo without intermediaries, in order to speed up the transmission of information. The informants described the personalities of the Turkish-Berber commanders who were to lead the expedition against the island<sup>22</sup>.

The information from viceroys, ambassadors and captain general of the galleys had passed through several filters before being communicated to the monarch, so the data was considered more reliable. Likewise, due to the social origin of the author, this news had more value, according to the mentality of the time. Indeed, a recurrent concern of the intelligentsia was the authenticity of the information. In 1532, a summary of warnings preached calm about an attack against the Kingdom of Naples, because among the informants there was no 'trustworthy' person, an adjective more commonly used to indicate the administration's confidence in a spy<sup>23</sup>.

Another central issue was the time it took for the information to reach the court. The commands of the local networks signalled the communication of recent news with a suggestive image: “fresh notices”<sup>24</sup>. After analysis and verification, the data was sent to the sovereign through the postal system, which in the Western Mediterranean was a well-publicised mechanism<sup>25</sup>. Urgent news could travel between Constantinople and the Italian territories in less than a month. In 1562, Suleiman released some captive nobles. The information was transmitted to Madrid by Gómez Suárez de Figueroa. The ambassador in Genoa had received the news on 10 September thanks to the courier from Naples, where a notice had arrived on 6 September, signed on 11 August in the Ottoman capital<sup>26</sup>.

In the 1570s, a dispatch from Constantinople to Madrid could take less than three months, even in difficult shipping periods<sup>27</sup>. Meanwhile, in the same years, a letter from Tunis reached Philip II’s palace in 40 days<sup>28</sup>. Once in the capital, confidential information only reached the secretary of state, who represented the institutional connection between territorial and central organs. During the 16th century, the role of this figure depended on the political situation. A paradigmatic example was Antonio Pérez, who went from being the most powerful minister in the empire to the worst traitor. In any case, before his fall from grace, the Aragonese received letters directly from the most influential confidants<sup>29</sup>.

At times without institutional conflict, information from the territories was passed to the most prominent bodies of the Hispanic Monarchy, the Council of War and the Council of State, where news was discussed before a resolution and summary was sent to the monarch. It came as no surprise, then, that in 1536 the governor of Oran sent a messenger to the Council of War to improve the system for paying spies<sup>30</sup>. Over the decades, the Council of State displaced the Council of War in intelligence matters. In 1577, the Council of State was deliberating on the plans of several spies, notably the Franciscan Diego de Mallorca<sup>31</sup>. Once a decision had been taken, the body passed the consultation to Philip II, who wrote his position in the left margin of the minutes<sup>32</sup>. On 9 May the following year, the Council of State reviewed Giovanni Margliani’s letters on a possible armistice with the sultan<sup>33</sup>. The information was analysed with other data transmitted from Constantinople, in order to have a clearer idea of such a delicate situation<sup>34</sup>. In the last period of Philip II, an increasingly important role was assumed by the Junta de Noche, an institution parallel to the administration, which aimed to prevent the leakage of news<sup>35</sup>.

At the apex of the Hispanic Monarchy, the approach to spies was conditioned by the personality of the monarch. In this respect, the two Habsburgs of the 16th century, Charles V and Philip II, maintained antithetical attitudes. The former usually delegated the management of espionage to his most loyal ministers, which almost made him blush because it was a deceptive and shady job, antagonistic to the ideal of the Christian emperor. On the contrary, the son was fascinated by this world of mystery. Philip II was a tireless reader of secret reports, where he often left autograph notes, which demonstrated a profound knowledge of intelligence<sup>36</sup>. The monarch even wrote letters to spies. Finally, Philip II received the agents in the palace, who had demonstrated their ability and loyalty<sup>37</sup>. Despite a stereotypical view, the sovereign showed no remorse in exchanging letters with Jews, Muslims or renegades,

when they could be conducive to espionage. On 10 May 1567, a Hebrew from Constantinople signed a dispatch to Philip II, in which the author affirmed a willingness to enter into intelligence, as well as professing complete submission to the Catholic King<sup>38</sup>.

### Intelligence rearrangements

In the conflict against the Ottoman Empire, the only force with such power, the intelligence of the Spanish Monarchy rested on a triangle formed by the embassy of Venice, the Kingdom of Naples and the island of Sicily. After all, the Italian area was the natural hinge between the two spheres of influence in the Mediterranean Sea. The dynasty's possessions in the area became the bastion of Christendom in the face of the feared Turkish advance towards the West<sup>39</sup>.

Because of the economic and political ties that the Serenissima had in the Levant, the embassy in the city of canals represented an ideal observation point over the Ottoman Empire<sup>40</sup>. The Spanish diplomats built up a network of spies who gathered information both in the back streets of Venice and in the overseas territories, *Stato da Mar*. Above all, the Ionian islands were essential for the search for information, as communication with Constantinople was constant. From spring onwards, ships from the Golden Horn arrived every day at Corfu, Cephalonia or Zakynthos. Likewise, any movement of fleets and soldiers in space was an indicator of enemy plans. When the Serenissima reinforced the defence of the area, the panic of an Ottoman attack spread throughout Christendom<sup>41</sup>.

The Venetian embassy played a dominant role until 1529, when the Sultan's hordes threatened Vienna. From that moment on, the Crown felt the need to achieve strategic autonomy from the Venetian filter. Rodrigo Niño left no room for doubt. In 1530, the ambassador commented on the behaviour of the doge, who passed on only part of the news sent by the bailiff of Constantinople<sup>42</sup>. Meanwhile, thanks to his infiltrators in high society, Rodrigo Niño had more information about Suleiman's plans against the West<sup>43</sup>. Venetian behaviour did not change in the following decades. Even after the joint victory at Lepanto, Diego Guzmán de Silva was suspicious of the senators' omissions. Dated 9 February 1572, a letter to Philip II contained a ciphered part in which the ambassador made evident the Venetians' concealment of news that could harm the Serenissima<sup>44</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the most important vertex of the information triangle was Naples, whose kingdom enjoyed an unbeatable location. The sea was calm and unhurried, and any ship could cover the route between Constantinople and the Land of Otranto in 10 days<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, the Kingdom of Naples possessed demographic and financial resources that were unmatched by other possessions in the Italian area. The decisive moment was the government of Pedro de Toledo, which certified the new status of the territory on the geopolitical scene<sup>46</sup>.

The viceroy exploited the work of his predecessor, Pompeo Colonna, who had relied on the Marquis of Atripalda, to create a network of spies throughout the Levant<sup>47</sup>. The Albanian-born nobleman confirmed the imperial court, which had correspondents in both Venetian and Ottoman places, as well as often sending agents on missions to Constantinople<sup>48</sup>. Alfonso Granai Castriota was so valuable in the

Mediterranean that as early as 1526 he was asking personal favours of Charles V, who never refused anything to the loyal vassal<sup>49</sup>.

In the 16th century, Neapolitan intelligence increasingly perfected its network, which obtained news from all over the Euro-Mediterranean area, from Egypt to Scotland<sup>50</sup>. The agents also obtained information about the Indian Ocean<sup>51</sup>. At the same time, the organisation achieved unprecedented numbers. In the spring of 1569, Philip II read a report certifying the extent of the network in Constantinople, where it had 112 confidants<sup>52</sup>. Eventually, Naples became the most populous city in Europe, with populations from every corner of the world living there; therefore, the administration could count on skills conducive to espionage, such as knowledge of languages and idiosyncrasies.

The third joint was Sicily, an essential possession for controlling the passage between the two Mediterranean basins. The Spanish Monarchy kept a special watch over the Sicilian Channel, a key geostrategic space. In this sense, the court of Palermo was essential, as news from Tunis took only three days<sup>53</sup>. Although they were kingdoms with different laws and institutions, the island and the southern mainland played the same role in the conflict against the Turk<sup>54</sup>. Alone, Palermo was in a subordinate position to Naples, whose kingdom had more military and economic resources. In May 1563, the viceroy of Sicily hurriedly sent notices to Philip II; however, the king's secretaries noted in the document that the news had been dispatched by the Neapolitan administration some time ago<sup>55</sup>. On some occasions, however, the island overtook its neighbour in the hierarchy of information; for example, after the death of Viceroy Toledo<sup>56</sup>.

The Spanish Monarchy possessed the most strategic port in the war in Sicily, Messina, where the fleets gathered before embarking on an expedition against the Ottoman Empire. From the city on the Straits, the administration would organise stafetas with small vessels to spy on the Levant and Maghreb<sup>57</sup>. Messina was a place where there was a copious presence of soldiers and sailors, who received information, perhaps unpublished, from their comrades on the fronts. Some viceroys of Sicily, such as the Duke of Medinaceli, granted patents in abundance to corsairs, who not only carried out raids, but also collected news. In June 1559, Santo Orbe returned from an expedition to Messina, where he informed the secretaries that he had sighted an enemy fleet of 26 galleys<sup>58</sup>.

In 1571, the Count of Landriano had commissioned Giorgio Sesto to spy on Uchali. However, the corsair came across a flotilla on the island of Pantelleria, where he captured two Berbers, who later gave information about the sultan's navy to the secretaries of Palermo<sup>59</sup>. Sicily represented an ideal platform for all Christian privateers. In 1557, a Maltese reported relevant news, as he had spent some time in the Maghreb as a prisoner after a raid. The most important information referred to the meeting in Tripoli between Dragut and the French ambassador, who had come from Constantinople with the promise that, the following summer, Suleiman would have supported Henry II with 100 galleys<sup>60</sup>.

Despite the primacy of Naples, Sicily and the Venetian embassy, the espionage network included other places that sometimes obtained valuable information. Malaga and Valencia were key to observing the Berbers and supplying

the fortresses in the western Maghreb. In 1529, while Charles V was riding through central Europe, Rodrigo Ronquillo signed an epistle to Isabella of Avís in Malaga. The dispatch recounted the mission of a brigantine bound for Oran, which had been ambushed on its return. Although the crew had made it to safety, the famous "licentiate" reproached the skipper of the ship, where letters from Tremecén were kept. Barbarossa could then discover the secret correspondence between the Maghreb emir and the imperial court<sup>61</sup>.

Since the conquest of the Barbarossa brothers, Algiers was the great capital of the Muslim corsairs<sup>62</sup>. Due to its proximity, the Kingdom of Valencia became the Spanish territory that had the closest relations with the Algerian port<sup>63</sup>. Although there was a ban on trade, Valencian merchants set up very profitable businesses. The situation must have been an open secret. Indeed, in 1555, the governors of the Neapolitan confraternity for the redemption of captives wrote to the viceroy of Valencia, asking him to help them with the Algerians. No intermediary seemed more appropriate to obtain safe conduct<sup>64</sup>. Trade facilitated intelligence work. On the other hand, the Kingdom of Valencia was a problematic area, because there was a large presence of Moors who could perhaps spy for the sultan<sup>65</sup>.

Although similarly located, other territories of the Crown of Aragon such as the Balearic Islands and Sardinia played a less prominent role. The gathering of information about the Ottoman Empire seemed more the result of exceptional circumstances than of an organised network. In 1554, the governor of Menorca knew of the union between the French and the Berbers thanks to a Catalan ship from Sicily, loaded with wheat, which had been heading rapidly towards the Balearic Islands when the crew had sighted the enemy fleet<sup>66</sup>.

On the other hand, the Principality of Catalonia obtained news through the French channel, especially at times of greater collaboration between Constantinople and Paris<sup>67</sup>. While Barbarossa was wintering in Toulon, a whip from Algiers was forced to be repaired by a storm near Perpignan, where the Berbers were imprisoned. Captain Arce captured a messenger of the eunuch Hasan Agha, who was carrying letters in Arabic<sup>68</sup>. The booty was fantastic, but in Barcelona there was no one capable of translating the information, a clear sign of the lack of organisation compared to other capitals of the Spanish Monarchy<sup>69</sup>.

A fundamental area for espionage were the presidios, a constellation of fortified posts that the Spanish Monarchy conquered on the North African coast. Troops occupied strategic points such as Oran and Melilla, the initial purpose of which was to create a buffer state to prevent the return of armed Muslims to the Iberian Peninsula. The appearance of the Turk completely changed the role of the fortresses<sup>70</sup>. The geographical proximity and the characteristics of those societies favoured the mission of agents, often Jews and Muslims, who went more unnoticed<sup>71</sup>. On 6 March 1557, Muça Ben Hamadur, a native of Mostaganem, returned to Oran. The governor of the prison had sent him to Algiers, where the spy had discovered a plan against the stronghold<sup>72</sup>.

Finally, the tentacles of intelligence reached Central and Eastern Europe through the ambassador in Vienna and diplomats in Germany, who transmitted the information to Venice, from where it was sent to Castile<sup>73</sup>. A piece of news travelled

between the Viennese court and the lagoon city in about ten days, even in winter, when transit over the Alpine passes was difficult<sup>74</sup>. In the early 1530s, the whole of Europe feared a new offensive by Suleiman, while Lutheranism was spreading unchecked. At that time, a spy sent a report in Italian from Saxony, the conclusion of which was Ibrahim Basha's alleged statement on the religious madness of the Germans, which allowed the author to accuse the Protestants of Ottoman violence without qualification<sup>75</sup>.

In the 16th century, the Magyar plain and the Balkan lands were a space of contact between areas of influence. Unlike the Spanish branch, the Habsburgs in Vienna had official relations with the sultan because there was a land border, often subject to change. The Viennese court sent diplomats to Constantinople to negotiate an armistice or prisoner exchange. Like others, the Habsburg ambassadors constituted a network of spies, seeking information. A very interesting case was the Greek merchant, Jacob de Drapperiis, who was in the service of Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq. In 1566, the Hellenic travelled to Persia to contact Shah Tahmasp I on behalf of Maximilian II. Later discovered by the Ottomans, Drapperiis had to flee to Naples, where he died in 1575<sup>76</sup>.

### Spies

The victory at Lepanto instilled confidence in the Spanish side as it reversed a ten-year trend in the war. In March 1572, Diego Guzmán de Silva wrote a letter in which the ambassador explained the Ottoman interpretations of the defeat. What were the diplomat's sources? First of all, Don Diego quoted a Venetian who had returned from Constantinople with an emissary of the French king. The ambassador also referred to dispatches sent both from the Ottoman capital and from other places, including Poland<sup>77</sup>. Thanks to archival documentation, we can now distinguish spies into two categories, based essentially on their place of residence: agent and correspondent.

The former was a subject who, under the mandate of the monarch or a local power, carried out a mission in enemy territory. Therefore, the spy had freedom of movement, which was the main reason why the work was entrusted to trusted persons. However, the correspondent was an individual who lived outside the Hispanic Monarchy, from where he transmitted missives. In most cases they were merchants, who were among the few able to write letters, and their travels and contacts with foreign countries would not have aroused suspicion. The added value of the correspondents was their reading of events, because they saw the war from a different perspective. Of course, the boundaries between the two groups were blurred; the same person could play different roles in contemporary or lifetime<sup>78</sup>.

In any case, information could come from people who were not directly linked to intelligence. Hernando de Alarcón had already pointed out to the emperor the plurality of news, which complicated espionage activities<sup>79</sup>. A long account, which Philip II read in 1566, was emblematic. The author, Vespasiano Ariete, had no connection with Hispanic institutions, but was a servant of the Venetian cardinal Marco Antonio da Mula, who had passed on the letter, which told an unbelievable

story. After the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Vespasian visited a Bedouin sheikh in the desert, called King Borisse, in the hope of forming an alliance against the Turk<sup>80</sup>.

On 29 December 1532, Pedro de Toledo described a mission carried out by an Albanian priest with the most typical characteristics of an agent. The ecclesiastic came from Ottoman territory to the Land of Otranto, by order of the Marquis of Atripalda. After a stay in Albania, the clergyman guaranteed the wishes of the natives to start a general rebellion<sup>81</sup>. During the reign of Charles V, the agent's journey was the usual method of obtaining information. In March 1551, fear of a Turkish attack was so widespread in Italian cities that the viceroy of Sicily sent a spy to Ragusa, now Dubrovnik, to discover the condition of the enemy fleet. The anonymous spy sent two letters, in which he confirmed the worst predictions: the Ottoman navy was going to be impressive<sup>82</sup>.

The intelligence of the Spanish Monarchy was soon able to infiltrate agents both in the Sultan's army and in the upper echelons of Ottoman society. The Neapolitan network had at least one confidant who marched alongside the janissaries when the Turk was advancing for the second time towards Vienna<sup>83</sup>. Meanwhile, in 1536, Joan de la Vecchia made a revealing statement to a secretary of the ambassador in Venice. Leaving the lagoon city on 6 June, the agent disembarked in Constantinople on 15 July, when he went to the house of the grand vizier, Ayas Mehmed Baya, who was his relative. Joan was thus able to obtain privileged information about the war in Persia, as well as detailing the political situation in the Ottoman provinces. Finally, the agent held talks with the voivode of Wallachia, with whom he planned an alliance between the Balkan princes and the emperor<sup>84</sup>.

The agent's mission was a formula, which was kept alive during the reign of Philip II. In 1574, Giovanni Curenzi returned from Constantinople, where he spent 11 days in hiding with accomplices. Once in the Kingdom of Naples, the spy provided information unknown in Europe, such as the arrival of a Venetian who was negotiating a peace that would have broken the unity of Christendom, embodied in the Holy League<sup>85</sup>. The agents carried out tasks that went beyond news. In August 1575, Francesco Peloso proposed to the Duke of Newfoundland to assassinate Uchali<sup>86</sup>. The spy had a close relationship with the Calabrian renegade, who was very fond of Italian cheeses and jams; Peloso therefore planned to poison some food brought from Sicily. Although the plan was not carried out, the court in Palermo went along with the agent, who travelled in search of an odourless poison<sup>87</sup>.

In 1568, the intelligence organised a sabotage that could have had significant consequences: the burning of the arsenal in Constantinople. Encouraged by the viceroy of Naples, Giulio Caracciolo's son devised the project, which obtained the support of Philip II<sup>88</sup>. On 27 December 1570, thanks to the help of a Corsican renegade, Suleiman Bey, some agents set fire to the Bosphorus dockyard, although Caracciolo's name disappeared from the documentation<sup>89</sup>. The flames caused panic for a night; however, the operation ended in failure, as the conspirators did not manage to burn the ships or the warehouses. All those involved were impaled<sup>90</sup>. The Ottomans had been on the alert for months for an attack on the dock, where they had been ordered to keep the lights on at night<sup>91</sup>. Suleiman Bey was the only one to escape unscathed, so in March 1571 the Corsican escaped to Naples<sup>92</sup>.

In the second half of the sixties of the 16th century, a Venetian wrote a memorial, in which the author offered services and contacts to Philip II, as the anonymous writer claimed to be a relative of the bailiff in Constantinople, as well as having friendships with members of the Ottoman elite. Apart from exhibiting his own courage, the Venetian presented a general picture of secret communication in the Levant, which revolved around five places: Zakynthos, Corfu, Kotor, Ragusa and, above all, Constantinople. The author explained the advantages and disadvantages of each. In conclusion, the intrepid man proposed himself as a correspondent in one of the cities, from which he could transmit dispatches with the official mail to Venice, where a liaison would bring the papers quickly to Milan<sup>93</sup>.

But the intelligence of the Spanish Monarchy had covered all five places long ago. The Greek islands of Venice were the first target. The Crown soon funded correspondents in the area; indeed, even before Pedro de Toledo arrived in Naples, the Marquis of Atripalda was constantly receiving warnings from the region<sup>94</sup>. Enemies were aware, so the Ottomans often protested with the Serenissima authorities. In 1554, the corsair Dragut even threatened the Venetians that he would hang a Neapolitan spy living in Corfu<sup>95</sup>.

The Ionian islands of Venice were the setting for the Greek Prototico family. In Ancien Régime society, it was customary for sons to inherit their fathers' trades: espionage was no exception. The founder of the lineage was Baldassarre, who, for at least two decades, passed on warnings to Naples and Sicily. In 1563, the influential spy wrote to Philip II, to whom he detailed the risks of an existence, lived under the sword of Damocles, which meant the risk of falling into Ottoman hands<sup>96</sup>. The following year, Baldassarre signed another memorial, reconstructing his career. The Hellenic had entered espionage 15 years earlier on the orders of Ferrante Loffredo, then governor of Otranto, where Prototico was living as a refugee<sup>97</sup>.

In addition to sending dispatches, Baldassarre infiltrated agents into Ottoman palaces. In 1562, the Greek confirmed to the court in Palermo that he was getting news from the immediate vicinity of the sanjak-bey of Morea<sup>98</sup>. Prototico's success depended very much on residence, as the Ionian islands were in a privileged location on the routes of secret information<sup>99</sup>. Indeed, the correspondent was among the first to learn of Topkapi's reading of García de Toledo. Baldassarre reported to Gómez Suárez de Figueroa that in Constantinople the most expert sailors were showing some concern<sup>100</sup>. Eventually, the Greek became so influential that he was in direct contact with the Serenissima authorities; in April 1560, the spy sailed from Otranto to Corfu on the Venetian admiral's ship<sup>101</sup>.

Baldassare Prototico set up an information centre, into which he integrated his two sons, Annibale and Niccolò. Both became key figures in espionage. Annibale became a trusted agent who, as early as 1562, visited the Genoese island of Chios to spy on the Ottoman fleet<sup>102</sup>. Meanwhile, the younger Niccolò travelled several times to Naples, Sicily and Genoa, where he carried his father's dispatches, which were often called Zacinto's notices to distinguish them from other correspondents<sup>103</sup>. On at least one occasion, Niccolò was received by Philip II<sup>104</sup>. However, Baldassare's son was involved in a financial scandal in 1565, when the Greek dispensed false bills of exchange to Florentine merchants, so the Medici sent him to row in the galleys. When

Philip II heard the news, he asked the Duke to release him, who accepted the request, but did not hide his resentment towards Niccolò<sup>105</sup>.

The port of Cattaro, now Kotor, was another key location for secret information, although the Spanish Monarchy never showed as much interest in maintaining a correspondent in the city as in other areas. To get news from Kotor, the intelligence depended on Geronimo Bucchia, who had a personal relationship with Cardinal Granvela, a former colleague at the University of Padua. Originally from the Balkan port, the spy had previously lived in Trento and later in Naples, but took advantage of a network of relatives and friends living in Kotor. Among Bucchia's most important correspondents was Brother Vincenzo, a Dominican with Petrarchan literary interests<sup>106</sup>.

Thanks to the monk, Geronimo learned of Suleiman's alleged addiction to an opiate concoction<sup>107</sup>. From Naples, Bucchia wrote letters on issues that went beyond war. For example, the Dalmatian proposed the transfer of a Greek to a university in the Spanish Monarchy, whose skills would have been of great value; on the contrary, Venice would have acquired the services of the scholar<sup>108</sup>. Not fully integrated by the viceroy's organisation, Bucchia's network clashed with the administration on more than one occasion. A representative dispute occurred in February 1552, when an envoy of the Dalmatian was captured in Lecce, where the guards seized the papers in bad manners and in the sunlight at the risk of discovering the secret courier<sup>109</sup>.

However, the most important stop in the Balkans was Ragusa. Named after St Blaise, the Dalmatian republic represented a unique experience, whose existence and continuity were possible only within the framework of the Mediterranean frontier. Formally a vassal of the Kingdom of Hungary and therefore of the Habsburgs, Ragusa paid tribute to Constantinople every year to prevent the Sultan from attacking the territory, which had become an enclave within the Ottoman Empire. The Ragusans were in a difficult situation in the midst of the struggle between the two empires. Despite external pressures, the Republic of Ragusa was a useful space for both; in fact, the Adriatic capital became the most suitable area for informal contacts and prisoner exchanges<sup>110</sup>.

Ragusa was a key place for espionage. Most of the agents stopped in the city on their way to Constantinople via the overland route<sup>111</sup>. For years, Marino Zamagni was a correspondent in the capital of San Blas, from where he kept a close eye on the conflict. The confidant drafted letters on any matter, which he sent via Naples or Venice to Castile. Zamagni could warn of the arrival in Ragusa of European emissaries travelling to the Sultan's court. In 1547, the correspondent signed a dispatch in which he corroborated the transit through the city of a Frenchman, whose mission worried the Spanish elite<sup>112</sup>. The fear was due to the presence in Constantinople of Girad Weltwich, remembered in the sources as Master Girardo, who was to seal the only diplomatic rapprochement between Charles V and Suleiman<sup>113</sup>.

Clearly, the most important city for the correspondents was Constantinople. Undoubtedly, the capital represented the area most closely controlled by the Ottomans, who kept an eye on foreign merchants and renegades whose loyalty was always in question. At times of heightened opposition, spies were quick to point out

the danger of repression. After the victory at Lepanto, tensions in Constantinople were at an all-time high, so the sultan's guards redoubled their efforts to uncover informers. According to a warning from the Bosphorus, correspondence with the outside world was becoming more and more difficult, and any letter addressed to the West risked being impaled<sup>114</sup>. In the same context, a long-time correspondent like Gregorio Bragante, alias Morat Agha, suffered a terrible punishment: drowning<sup>115</sup>.

The Spanish Monarchy found it more difficult to form a stable network in Constantinople. For years, the Crown could not count on permanent correspondents; indeed, most of the information on the Ottoman capital was provided by agents until the defeat of Los Gelves in 1560, when many nobles were imprisoned in the Sultan's dungeons. Then, some Constantinople-based figures were instrumental in rescuing the aristocrats, who recommended the members of an organisation that went down in history as the Conjuración of the Hidden<sup>116</sup>.

Originally from Sanremo, Giovanni Maria Renzo was the link between the Constantinople group and Naples, which, once again, represented the logistical base of operations. The Ligurian had already been to the Ottoman capital, where he knew some of those who became the Hidden Ones. In January 1562, Philip II gave his support to the project, which became the most effective tool for obtaining news<sup>117</sup>. Renzo received 1500 escudos from the Neapolitan viceroy to undertake the mission<sup>118</sup>. The sovereign also sent letters to the Duke of Florence, García de Toledo and Gómez Suárez de Figueroa to facilitate the spy's journey, whose official objective was the redemption of captives<sup>119</sup>.

In Constantinople, Renzo's main contact was the interpreter Adam de Franchi, originally from Chios, who had been praised by nobles and soldiers who had been imprisoned. An authoritative voice was Captain Rodrigo Zapata, who attested to the translator's role in the ransom negotiation<sup>120</sup>. Once in Constantinople, Renzo created a *task force* with Franchi, whose members were two renegades, Simon Masa and the aforementioned Morat Agha, a native of Santa Margherita Ligurian. However, the main leaders were Aurelio Santa Croce, alias Battista Ferraro, and Giovanni Agostino Gilli, alias Urban or Viban de Mengrelia<sup>121</sup>.

According to sources, Aurelio Santa Croce was the leader of the Occultos. When he returned to Madrid after the first mission, Renzo delivered memorials of the conspirators. In his document, Santa Croce gave biographical details. A native of the Veneto, Aurelio had been in Constantinople for 15 years, where he had married, as well as having dealings with influential people at court<sup>122</sup>. However, the other conspirators called Giovanni Agostino Gilli secretary, who was the material author of many dispatches due to the illiteracy of the majority<sup>123</sup>. Born in Naples, Gilli was a sculptor and painter, but he got into trouble with the law on the slopes of Vesuvius for forging bills of exchange, which got him sentenced to rowing in the galleys. Once free, the artist went back to the same wanderings, although he managed to escape to Chios, where he carved out a new identity for himself and landed on the shores of the Bosphorus<sup>124</sup>.

The main purpose of the Occulto was the renewal of the route, which carried the information from Constantinople to Naples, where the news was more and more in doubt. Giovanni Agostino Gilli was in charge of the modification<sup>125</sup>. The

conspirators also promised sabotage at the arsenal. Finally, the group claimed the possibility of seizing a galley thanks to the rebellion of the crew, since the presence of renegades and Christian slaves, linked to the Occulti, was numerous. In the following months, the appearance in Messina of two mutinous ships, both owned by Uchali, gave much weight to the words of the spies<sup>126</sup>.

Despite early successes, the Duke of Alcalá never showed confidence in Renzo or the men of Constantinople<sup>127</sup>. The viceroy's suspicions were not trivial. Over the years, the Occulti took advantage of their privileged position to pass on information to various potentates of the Italian peninsula such as Venice, Florence, Rome and Genoa. Today, archival documentation leaves no room for doubt, as the names and pseudonyms of the conspirators often appear in the secret correspondence. In the 16th century, first-hand news about the Ottoman Empire was a commodity for pecuniary gain, as well as a means of forging relations with the elite.

For example, Giovanni Agostino Gilli established a long-lasting correspondence with the authorities in Genoa<sup>128</sup>. The secretary of the Occulti had created a coded system, so as not to be discovered. Thus, the letters were signed with the pseudonym of Alexandro Borgio, while the addressees were Pantaleo Marziano and companions. After the first trip to Constantinople by order of Philip II, Giovanni Maria Renzo wrote a letter to Gilli, in which the herald confirmed to the secretary that his dispatches had been very well received in Genoa<sup>129</sup>.

Aurelio Santa Croce did the same with Venice thanks to his brother Antonio, who travelled frequently from Constantinople to the lagoon city, where he had contacts with all the ambassadors, as well as providing information to some of the Serenissima's senators. In March 1572, Diego de Guzmán de Silva informed Philip II that Antonio had gone to the palace to send him dispatches from Aurelio about the Turkish armada<sup>130</sup>. Meanwhile, the following year it was the Florentine diplomat, Orazio Urbano, who told the Grand Duke of a meeting with the brother of Santa Croce, who had proposed himself as an informer for the Medici<sup>131</sup>.

Nor should the sultan's men have been unaware of the activity of a group that had been active for years in Constantinople. Until they carried out sabotage operations that were too damaging, perhaps the Ottomans preferred to know the enemy's sources of information, so as to keep them under control and even pass on false information<sup>132</sup>. Eight years after the criticism signed by the Duke of Alcalá, another viceroy of Naples was even more blunt; Cardinal Granvela insinuated the possibility that the Occultos were double agents of the Turk<sup>133</sup>. In fact, from the very beginning, Giovanni Agostino Gilli had been very clear with Philip II, when the secretary had warned that loyalty in Constantinople depended on the best bidder, because nothing had so much virtue as money<sup>134</sup>.

## Conclusion

Around 1603, William Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, arguably the Bard's greatest effort to introduce English audiences to the Mediterranean of the time. First of all, the choice of setting, located between Venice and the Levant, should come as no surprise. Also, from London, the societies of the Mare Nostrum appear mixed by nature; therefore, there is no contradiction in a Moor leading the fleet of the Serenissima

against the Ottoman Empire. Finally, the characters in the tragedy are subject to feelings typical of hot climates: passion, jealousy and rancour. Orientalism *ante litteram*.

However, Shakespeare constructs an emblematic scene in the opening pages of the tragedy that has often gone unnoticed. Indeed, the war breaks into the story with an impassioned debate in the council chamber. No one knows the true objective of the Ottoman army. The arrival of two messengers further complicates the discussion between the doge and the senators, who are at a loss until the protagonist enters the palace, when Brabancio accuses Othello of having even seduced the daughter, Desdemona, with witchcraft.

Leaving aside the grief of a Venetian father at his daughter's interracial marriage, the element of greatest interest, from our perspective, is the importance Shakespeare attaches to information from a war front. As a child at the moment when Elizabeth I reluctantly organises the Lepanto celebrations, the English playwright is aware, albeit indirectly, of the value of the battle in the geopolitical balances of the preceding generation. Artists and, even more so, geniuses like Shakespeare have the ability to make visible the karstic waters of the age in which they are immersed, far more than any scholar. Thus, the English writer introduces the war in the Mediterranean with the arrival in Venice of confidential news, the primary purpose of espionage.

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