



THE MAMLUK DOCUMENTS OF THE VENETIAN STATE ARCHIVES: HISTORICAL SURVEY

Author(s): MARIA PIA PEDANI

Source: *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 2002-2003, Vol. 20/21 (2002-2003), pp. 133-146

Published by: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25802960>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*

MARIA PIA PEDANI

THE MAMLUK DOCUMENTS OF THE VENETIAN STATE ARCHIVES: HISTORICAL SURVEY

Documents and archives

The importance of the Islamic documents kept in the Venetian State Archives is well known by scholars. Most of them are in Ottoman Turkish, but some of them are also in Arabic and a few were produced in Mamluk Egypt. John Wansbrough first studied some important ones, which testified the diplomatic relations that took place between that regime and the Republic of Venice in the 15th and 16th centuries. They were included in his thesis entitled *Documents for the history of commercial relations between Egypt and Venice 1442-1512*, submitted in October 1961 for the degree of Ph.D. at the University of London and later published in various articles.¹ However, some of the Mamluk Venetian documents passed unnoticed. The aim of this essay is to present the whole *corpus*, describe the archives in which they are still kept and explain the reasons why they were produced and then brought to Venice.²

The first document published by Wansbrough was issued by the chancery of the Mamluk state. It is dated 877/1473 and in 1960-1961, when it was studied, it was kept in the collection *Documenti Turchi*, box 15.³ In the same box there was also a receipt of 895/1490, which this scholar only quotes but not transcribes, and its cover.⁴ This

¹ J. Wansbrough, «A Mamluk letter of 877/1473», *BSOAS*, 24/2 (1961), pp. 200-213; J. Wansbrough, «A Mamluk Ambassador to Venice in 913/1507», *BSOAS*, 26/3 (1963), pp. 503-530.

² Cf. F. Bauden's essay in the second part of this article for a survey of the same documents.

³ J. Wansbrough, «A Mamluk letter», pp. 200-213. On the verso of the document: «18» written in red pencil; it makes reference to an old index (No. 166-II) of Turkish documents made in 1878; «45/2» chancery script in black ink of the 18th century which appears also in some Turkish Documents (cf. *I 'Documenti turchi' dell'Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, a cura di M.P. Pedani Fabris, Roma 1994, pp. 642-697, No. O); «N.S. 8 bis» black pencil, written by the 19th century archivist Riccardo Predelli, the same number which refers to a «Nuova Serie» is present also in other Turkish documents (cf. *I 'Documenti turchi'*, No.N); again «N.S. 8 bis», «N. 5», «18» in black pencil; «No. 1 1476 in circa» in black ink; «Copia di comandamento in idioma turco senza traduzione datta li 887 cioè di Nostro Signore li 1476 in circa» in black ink, with the date corrected with «1482» in black pencil.

⁴ Wansbrough, «A Mamluk Ambassador», p. 506. On the verso of the receipt: «Documenti Egitto 2», written by myself when I was putting in order the collection of Turkish documents; «192» written in red pencil with reference to index No. 166-II; «4» red pencil; «a» black

collection was created in the sixties of the 19th century to put together all the documents in Arabic and Turkish, according to a method of classification used in the archives in those years based on the subject of the documents and not on the original relation existing among the papers. In the same period, Louis de Mas Latrie was looking for the documents which he published in his huge volume about the relations between Christian Europe and North Africa in the Middle Ages. He describes the collection with the following words: «une série que j'ai vu former à regret, parce qu'elle ne me semble pas bien justifiée, sous le titre provisoire, j'espère, de *Documenti turchi e arabi*».⁵

Another document edited by Wansbrough is the draft of an agreement signed by the Mamluk ambassador Tagrī Birdī in 913/1507 in Venice.⁶ It is written in Italian, but has some formulae of attestation in Arabic. It was then kept in the *Miscellanea atti diplomatici e privati*, no. 1576 but from 1880 until the fifties of the 20th c. it was exhibited in the Sala Diplomatica Regina Margherita of the Venetian State Archives, series LXXXII, No. 1.⁷

Now the documents are put together in a box called *Documenti Egitto*. It was created during the work of classification of the collection *Documenti Turchi*⁸, when all the papers in Arabic, Armenian, Persian existing among them were put aside since they had no original relation with the papers produced by the Ottoman chancery. The idea was to go on preparing either their summary, or even their edition. For example, all the Moroccan documents so collected were then edited.⁹ The work proceeds now with the Mamluk ones.

pencil; «Lettere serenissimi domini sultani pro receptione ducatos.Vimila.» black ink of the beginning of the 16th century On the verso of the cover: «Documenti Egitto 3», written by myself; «192» written in red pencil with reference to index No. 166-II; «3» red pencil; «b» black pencil; «Lettere serenissimi domini sultani pro receptione ducatos.Vimila.» black ink of the beginning of the 16th century.

⁵ L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix et de commerce et documents divers concernant les relations des Chrétiens avec les arabes de l'Afrique septentrionale au moyen âge*, Paris 1866, p. XX.

⁶ Wansbrough, «A Mamluk Ambassador», pp. 503-530. On the verso of the document: «XXIII» into a circle, in black ink of the 16th century (it refers to the collection of the most important international papers once kept in the Secret Chancery of the Republic; now these documents are the bulk of the *Miscellanea atti diplomatici e privati*); «1507 Capitula conclusa cum oratore sultani Tangayvardi carta .98.», black ink of the 16th century; «olim Margherita LXXXII.1» with reference to the documentary exhibition once held in the Archives; «Documenti restituiti dal Governo Austriaco N. 81» black pencil; «Miscellanea atti diplomatici e privati, b. 49 No. 1576» black pencil written by the archivist Maria Francesca Tiepolo when the Sala Diplomatica was dismissed.

⁷ A. Da Mosto, *L'Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, Roma 1940, vol. 2, p. 273, series 87 (Firmani barbareschi e del Marocco, 1507-1791) (*sic*).

⁸ *I 'Documenti turchi' dell'Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, pp. XI-XVI.

⁹ Cf. M.P. Pedani, «Appunti sul consolato Veneto in Marocco nella seconda metà del XVIII secolo», *QSA*, 19 (2001), pp. 87-100, and the bibliography quoted there.

All the three documents kept in the box *documenti Egitto*, testify diplomatic relations, exchanges of ambassadors, international politics. The Venetian Secret Chancery (*Cancelleria Secreta*) used to keep the papers of this kind in separate series. In particular, till the end of the Middle Ages, international treaties and foreign ruler's letters, but the Ottoman ones, were kept in the series which gave origin to the *Miscellanea Atti Diplomatici e Privati*. On the other hand, almost all *name-i hümayuns* (letters) issued by the Ottoman sultan were in a series of their own which bulk gave origin to the collection *Documenti Turchi*. It is probable that the only Egyptian document written in Italian was put together with other Latin and Italian ones while the other two, written in Arabic, were kept together with the Ottoman ones. This fact may explain why they were found in two different places.

The other documents coming from Mamluk Egypt and kept in Venice are in the series of *Procuratori di San Marco*. The dignity of the Procuratore lasted life-long and was the most important one in the Republic but that of the doge. These officers were encharged of the care of the ducal chapel of St. Mark's, and of the estates of orphans and madmen. They had also the care of heritages entrusted to them either for a certain period, till the heirs could receive the due, or for ever, if the heritage had been left for a charitable purpose. In this way the files of the *Procuratori di San Marco* are formed by the archives of most persons whose estates they administrated: there are many private documents, above all parchments from the Middle Ages. After the fall of the Republic, a great confusion arouse among their papers and it was a great archivist of the last century, Luigi Lanfranchi († 1986), who fulfilled the task to separate the different files, and recreate an original order. It is important to remind the names of past archivists since if an archive has no index and is not in order it is very difficult to consult it. Many times the archivists were the persons who discovered important documents, then published by other scholars, who simply received the information of the existence of a paper and then often forgot to quote even the name of those who helped them. Lanfranchi succeeded in re-creating the archives of the *Procuratori di San Marco* which are now formed by thousands of small private archives. In three of them some Egyptian documents have been discovered. In two cases these documents are quoted in the index. These three private archives belonged to Biagio Dolfin (*Procuratori di San Marco*, series *Misti*, bb. 180-181 in particular Arabic documents are in box 180, fasc. IX, lettere in arabo), Alvise Correr (series *Misti*, box 205, in particular fasc. II) and Marino Morosini (series *Citra*, bb. 190-204, in particular b. 198, fasc. G). They all were Venetian merchants who traded with Alexandria of Egypt in the 15th century.

Venice and the Mamluks

At least since the 9th century Venice had contacts with Alexandria of Egypt. According to the legend, from that city the relic of St. Mark was brought to the Lagoon in 828 and we know that in that period the byzantine emperors ordered Venetians not to trade in wood and weapons with the Saracens. It was at the beginning of the 13th

century, during the Ayyubid period, that the *Comune Veneciarum* began to make agreements with the rulers of Egypt,¹⁰ but it was above all during the reign of *Bahri* Mamluks (1250-1390) that the relations between the two countries became tighter and tighter. According to Eliyahu Ashtor,¹¹ in that period this country underwent an economic expansion. About one century of peace determined a growth of population; the immigration from other Muslim countries, and above all Iraq, increased; physicians, merchants, scholars, artisans, soldiers reached Syria and Egypt; the improvement of general sanitary conditions averted the danger of epidemics; agriculture too flourished and the production of grain increased; the monetary system became more stable. The European merchants took advantage of so favourable a situation and their business flourished. They used to buy spices, aromatic drugs, dyes, Oriental commodities, textiles produced by royal Mamluk manufactures as well as agricultural products of the Near East and, above all, wheat. In exchange they sold Western goods leaving also large quantities of silver and gold coins. These Frankish merchants came from Catalonia, Marseilles, Genoa, Pisa, Messina, Ancona, and mainly from Venice. In fact, in the middle of the 13th century in the city of the Lagoon, a new ruling class which began to rule in 1249, tried to support trade in all the possible manners. Moreover in 1261 the Latin Empire of Constantinople was destroyed and the new Greek rulers began to favour Genoese trade; for this reason Venetians began to prefer other important markets, as for instance Tunis (agreement of 1251) and Egypt. Here sultan al-Mu'izz Aybak (d. 1257) renewed the former privileges with Venice, granted Venetians safety and security in the sultan's dominions and confirmed a series of commercial facilities. After the fall of the last Crusaders' city, Acre, in 1291, the pope tried to restrain the trade of Christian merchants in Muslim lands. Venice tried to resist but, in 1323, the papal edicts were renewed and for more than twenty years the trade with Egypt stopped. Then it was resumed and a new consul was appointed in Egypt in 1344. The old agreements were confirmed again in 1344 by al-Šāliḥ Ismā'il, in 1355 and 1361 by al-Nāṣir Ḥasan and, lastly, in 1375 by al-Ašraf Ša'bān but with reference only to the region of Damascus.

During the first period of the *Burḡi* Mamluks (1382-1517), the Venetian trade with Egypt went on as usual. It was not the adventure of Tīmūr to mar it, but the pretention of sultan Faraḡ (1398-1412), who increased abuses and vexations against the Franks. The following ruler Mu'ayyad (1412-21) began a policy in favour of Venetians and renewed the old commercial agreements. This was the period of the consuls Pietro Trevisan (1412-14), Bartolomeo Storlato (1414-16), Fantino Viaro (1416-18), Biagio Dolfin (1418-20) and Francesco Michiel (1420-22). After the brief reign of sultan Ṭaṭar, who was again against the Venetians, the commercial agreements were renewed by Barsbay (1421-38) in 1422, even if the new statal monopolies on sugar and pepper

¹⁰ Cf. the list of the agreements from 1206 to 1516 in M.P. Pedani Fabris, «Gli ultimi accordi tra i sultani mamelucchi d'Egitto e la Repubblica di Venezia», *QSA*, 12 (1994), pp. 49-64.

¹¹ E. Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*, London 1976, pp. 3-100.

increased the prices of these goods. A more soft policy towards foreign merchants was made by his successor, Ġaḡmāq (1438-53). The expansion of the Ottomans stimulated the relations between South European trading nations and Egypt. The sultans of Cairo, as well as the Āq Qōyūnlū ruler Uzun Ḥasan, were aware of the danger that the sultan of Constantinople represented for their regime and they began to send their envoys to Christian rulers. In 1473, during the war between Venice and the Ottomans (1463-1479), Qā'itbay (1468-1495) wrote the letter to the doge of Venice which was edited by Wansbrough. Moreover, in 1489, Venetians acquired the island of Cyprus from Caterina Corner, the widow of the last king; they assumed all the engagements of the past dynasty and also the tribute of 8000 ducats every year to the Mamluk regime. It had been established in 1427 as ransom for the king Janus who had been made prisoner by Barsbay during an expedition he had made against Egypt. It was payed in cloths and was employed for the benefit of the Holy Places. Every year, at the moment of the payment, the Egyptian treasury had to issue a receipt and the document still kept in Venice¹² is the receipt for the year 1490. At the turn of the century new commercial routes were discovered, but in this period the trade of the Portuguese in India did not yet mar the Venetian spice trade, which went on also in the 15th century. The problems came from the high profits the sultans wanted to gain above all from pepper, both selling it to a very high price, and compelling foreign merchants to buy it in great quantities. The matter gave rise to much controversy with European commercial partners and to solve them the sultan sent to Europe his ambassador Tagrī Berdī. In 1507 he reached also Venice and, on this occasion, signed an agreement with the Republic which was, however, very unfavourable for the sultan, who in effect propably never ratified it. The last Mamluk-Venetian agreement was issued in Cairo by sultan Qanṣūh al-Ġawrī (1501-16) in 1512. Five years later, the Mamluk regime was destroyed by Selim I.¹³

The Venetian community in Alexandria

In the Middle Ages, Alexandria was the most important commercial center in Egypt for the Venetians who only later decided to move to Cairo.¹⁴ The head of the colony was the consul who was a nobleman; he was elected by the Great Council of Venice every two years. He was paid by the government; he had to collect custom duties and other revenues and to administer justice for Venetians. He had with him servants, a cook and a secular priest who had to be also a notary to act as the chancellor of the colony and, at

¹² State Archives of Venice (hereafter ASVe), *Documenti Egitto*, Nos. 2-3. It is probable that, at least for about one century, Christian cloths were used for the Ka'ba.

¹³ F. Gabrieli, «Venezia e i Mamelucchi», in F. Gabrieli, *L'Islam nella storia*, Bari 1966, pp. 97-115.

¹⁴ On 16 July 1553, the Venetian consulate in Alexandria was transferred to Cairo, cf. M.P. Pedani, «The Oath of a Venetian Consul in Egypt», *QSA*, 14 (1996), pp. 215-222. ASVe, *Collegio, Relazioni*, b. 62, cc. 31-37, 17 Aug. 1554, Daniele Barbarigo's report from Alexandria.

the same time, to attend to the spiritual needs of the community. Two councils helped the consul to manage their fellow-citizens: the council of twelve, formed of the most important twelve merchants, and the great council, formed by all the Venetian present in the city.¹⁵ Consuls had to visit the sultan at least when they arrived in Egypt, to present him the letters of the doge, and when they were on the point of leaving, to obtain the permission and to present their successor; other visits might be done when the local or international situation required them. They used an interpreter to communicate with local authorities and Arab merchants; these *trucimanni* of the community might be Venetians, but sometimes they had also Jewish names. The sultan too had interpreters who were Muslims. There was also some Venetian who knew Arabic very well. This was the case of Lorenzo Capello, sent as ambassador to sultan Barsbay in 1422 to ratify the agreement of peace; he translated the general *amān* given by the sultan to Venetians and in the end of the Italian translation there are the following words:

Translactada in latin per trucimanno Sain, grando trucimanno del soldan, e Zanon Saimben, scriptor de la fe sarainescha, presente a tutte cose i signori ambascadori, e specialmente misser Lorenzo Capello predicto, de la lingua arabica peritissimo et molto esperto.

It looks like a homage to the knowledge of Arabic of the Venetian ambassador, who intervened surely to sustain Venetian interest and to check the conformity of the Italian and the Arabic texts.¹⁶

At least from the times of the first Venetian-Egyptian agreement in 1206, Venetians had a storehouse (*fondaco*), used to store goods but probably also to sell them since its name was then the *sūq* of Venetians (*Sogve[ne]diki*). In 1238, the buildings belonging to the colony were already two and there was also a church, with mosaics and marbles, dedicated to St. Michael. The name of the saint to whom it was dedicated, different from the usual St. Mark, may denote that originally it did not belonged to the colony even if this is a mere hypothesis with no document to sustain or to dismiss it. Venetians had also the possibility of using a bath, called *del Chalige*, from the Arab word *ḥalīḡ*, that is to say 'canal'. It was established that the Venetians had to pay no admission tax to use it. This means that probably it was far from the *fondacos*, in a different place, probably near the canal which crossed the city. In 1254 the Venetians built also a bakery and they had also a cistern of fresh water and a well of brackish water. Moreover, they could sell and drink wine in their buildings, which had however to be closed on Friday. Clearly enough, Mamluks liked Venetian wine: for instance in 1442 a Mamluk law established that every galley which brought to Alexandria fifty barrels of wine had to

¹⁵ Pedani, «The Oath», pp. 215-219.

¹⁶ *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum*, ed. by G.M. Thomas and R. Predelli, Venetiis 1880-1899, vol. 2, No. 174, pp. 320-327. In 1418 Venetians had a Jew ('Obeit') as interpreter, while the great interpreter of the sultan was Šams; ASVe, *Procuratori di S. Marco, Misti* (hereafter *Misti*), b. 181, fasc. XXIII, note e appunti; fasc. XV, d.

give one to the *cadì nadro*.¹⁷ Venetian-Mamluk trade was suspended from 1323 to 1344 and the old buildings were dismissed. So, in 1346, when a new consul was established, he had the task of hiring again the old *fondaco* called *la duchela*.¹⁸

Venetians were not the only Europeans to have a *fondaco*, a church and also an inn in Alexandria. Venetian documents sometimes hint also to building belonging to other nations. At the beginning of the 15th century in Alexandria, there was for instance a *fondaco* of Ancona, where the Venetian merchant Giacomo Zorzi put his goods.¹⁹ In 1362-1363, for instance, Andreolo de Fantebonus from Venice, but inhabitant in the city of Candia, who was dying in Alexandria, asked to be buried in the church of St. Nicholas, as well as others as Jacobello De Lio from Candia and Gerardo de Colçedo from Treviso.²⁰ In his will this last left also some money to Caterina, the inn-keeper of the *fondaco* of Marsilia. The colonial life had an all-male nature, since wives usually remained in Venice to look after children and properties while their husbands went to trade in the Levant. Others were the women which may be found in the documents made in Alexandria: they were often of Greek origin and most were inn-keepers. Venetians often set up their household with slave girls whom they used to set free when they were on the point of dying or of leaving the city. The merchants came not only from the city of Venice but also from other small towns of the state or even from the island of Crete, but they all enjoyed the status and benefits of being Venetian subjects.²¹

A Venetian consul and merchant: Biagio Dolfin

The Arabic documents kept in the series of the *Procuratori di San Marco* are the proof of the commercial relations which took place between Venetian and Arab merchants. They were not produced because of international political relations at a high

¹⁷ *Diplomatarium*, No. 190, pp. 357-358, No. 194 pp. 361-362. The *cadì nadro* (*qāḍī nāzīr*) was an officer of customs, cf. M. Amari, *I diplomati arabi del R. Archivio Fiorentino*, Firenze 1863, p. 471.

¹⁸ M.P. Pedani, «Baḥrī Mamlūk - Venetian Commercial Agreements», in *The Turks*, ed. H. Celāl Güzel, C. Cem Oğuz, O. Karatay, 6 voll., Ankara (Yeni Türkiye) 2002, II, pp. 298-305.

¹⁹ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XXIII.

²⁰ ASVe, *Cancellaria Inferiore, Notai* (hereafter *Notai*), b. 36, Campio Giovanni, I, c.101v, 102v; in the second half of the 12th century this church belonged to the *fondaco* of Pisans, D. Jacoby, «Les Italiens en Égypte aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles: du comptoir à la colonie?», in *Méthodes d'expansion et technique de domination dans le monde méditerranéen (XI^e-XVI^e siècles)*, Paris 1994, pp. 76-107.

²¹ ASVe, *Notai*, b. 36, Campio Giovanni, I, c.111 (a certain Benedetta, the daughter of donna Arier, had a share in the property of the Venetian *fondaco* in 1363); cf. also c. 103v (Leo from Negroponte and his wife are in Alexandria, 1362), 109 (Thomio from Padua and his wife are in Alexandria, 1363), c. 109-109v (Baialardo de Lapo from Venezia and his wife Segorelle from Sicily are in Alexandria, 1363; Baialardo receives money from Thomasia de Sicilia, perhaps his mother-in-law, 1364), 111 (the taylor Leone from Negroponte lives in Alexandria with his wife Ryni in 1363), 112v (will of Andrea Scandolano from Candia in favour of his slave Chali who is in Alexandria and of his wife who is in Candia, 1362).

level, as for the other Mamluk documents kept in Venice, but to solve particular problems which arose in trading. Looking at them and at the names of the owners of the small archives where they are kept, one realizes the tight links which existed between Venetian mercantile families. Some branches of these families appear to have been specialized in trading with some countries but they had relatives which used to travel in other places: in this way goods could be bought in the Levant and be sold in Northern Europe by brothers or cousins. In the Middle Ages in Venice, noble families were commercial houses and, at the same time, governed the state itself.

The oldest papers are those belonging to the archives of Biagio Dolfin and date back to the beginning of the 15th century.²² The date of Biagio Dolfin's birth is unknown but his father was Lorenzo and his mother Maria Malipiero; one of his brothers was Antonio, while another one was Marino, the grand-father of Marino Dolfin who in 1432 married the sister of Alvise Correr, whose archives also preserve Arabic documents. Moreover, the mother of the first wife of Biagio, Elisabetta Gradenigo, was Cristina Morosini da San Zulian while the third archives we are speaking of belonged to a Marino Morosini da San Giovanni Crisostomo.

Biagio Dolfin began his important commercial career in Alexandria where he went together with his brother Antonio in 1391. In 1395, Antonio reached again Alexandria while the following year Biagio went to Egypt where he was already considered as the most important merchant of the colony, then in 1397 Antonio went to Bruges while his brother remained in Venice. Antonio died at the beginning of 1399 leaving a son, Lorenzo, who in the following years helped his uncle in trade and then became an important merchant himself. In the meanwhile, Biagio, who had lost his wife Elisabetta in 1401, got married twice: first with Cecilia Querini, who died very soon, and then with Pasqualiga Pasqualigo; this woman got married in 1405, survived her husband and, in the twenties, got married with a member of a Venetian merchant family, the Signolo.²³ At a certain moment her brother, Paolo Pasqualigo, was entrusted of Biagio's affairs in London and in 1418 he brought there with him Lorenzo Dolfin. From 1408 until 1410, Biagio was appointed consul in Alexandria, and then came back to Venice; in 1416 he was the Venetian central government representative in Sebenico but at the end of 1418 he was again in Egypt with the charge of consul. In 1420, his nephew Lorenzo reached him and became also vice-consul for a while.

Biagio was on the point of coming back to Venice when he went to Cairo for affairs in april 1420. At the end of the month, he died there of the plague which infected also other Venetian merchants: in the same days, Orso Dolfin died, Marco Bembo,

²² The news about Biagio Dolfin's life are scattered in ASVe, *Misti*, bb. 180-181.

²³ In 1401, just after the death of Biagio's first wife, a merchant, Caterino Signolo, sold him a twenty-seven-years-old slave girl from Bosnia, whose name was Stoilana-Maria, for 52 ducats. ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, perg., 16 July 1401.

Francesco Zorzi, Bernardo Querini were ill, Piero Bernardo and Giorgio da Milano had already recovered, while Carlo Contarini did not fall ill.²⁴

The documents that Biagio Dolfin had with him in Egypt were brought to Venice by his nephew Lorenzo and they remained with this last's paper till his death when his estates were given to the *Procuratori* to be administrated. It is probable that the two small archives, of Biagio and of Lorenzo,²⁵ were originally only one; otherwise there was no reason for the papers of the first to be kept by the *Procuratori*.

It is well known that Venetian merchants traded in spices, but there were also other goods which they imported and exported from the Levant. When he arrived in Alexandria with his brother at the end of the 14th century, Biagio Dolfin bought spices but there is evidence that he traded also in slaves, wheat, olive oil, soap from Gaeta, amber from Flanders, even cheese from Puglia. According to the Venetian laws, when he became consul, he and his close relatives could no longer trade but in jewels, according to an ancient tradition. In fact, some official representatives of the state in foreign lands could trade in some special items and this to give them the possibility of gaining some extra money and also to be more eager to accept the charge. For instance, the *bailo* in Armenia could trade in cotton (*bombacio*) (1273) while in Tunis the consul had a share in the trade of wood (1279).

In the Middle Ages, slaves were usually bought and sold by most Venetian merchants. Often, before their leaving for far countries, they received letters with commissions of buying slaves of a certain kind and a certain age. Some of this letters are really peculiar, since the future owner described the merchandise he wanted. For instance, Marco Morosini wrote:

*Avendo gran bixogno d'un schiaveto non el siando venuti st'anno da la Tana e non avendo ventura in questi de Schiavonia, xiandomene schampado quel ultimo mi delibero de mudar ventura, zoè d'aver questo negro per ho tra vui et ser Orso ve priego provezate de mandarmene uno d'anni XII in XIII vel zircha c'habi bon aire et sonra tuto habi bone membre vel raxionevel et non de queste gambe sotil chome hanno la plui parte per che quei tal non hanno possa alguna et ser Zuanne ma dato gran speranza che presto m'el rechateri et chussi assai ve priego et mandemel quanto presto podi fazando de prexio chome ve par.*²⁶

In another letter of the same period there is written:

Fazove a saver che per inpedir de le melinconie de questi nostri barcarioli io dado hordene a ser Zuanne Morexini mio zenero che vi era con queste presente galee che faza a tuta so possa de mandarme con le dite galie uno puto negro de hetade de ani 14 in 16 che sia de bona complexion de quello se po veder et bon aspeto et in quanto

²⁴ Biagio Dolfin's will is in ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, perg., 27 Apr. 1420. A letter written by a servant, Filippo, informs us that a death-rate of 50/60 persons per day meant that the plague was decreasing in Cairo. ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d, 1 Jun. 1419.

²⁵ Now in ASVe, *Procuratori di San Marco, Citra* (hereafter *Citra*), b. 181, where also some other papers of Biagio Dolfin are kept.

²⁶ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d), 11 Jan. 1418 (*inv?*).

*el non podesse aver per queste galie che ve lasi i denari che vuy mel faze comprar a qualche vostro amico et mandamelo...*²⁷

Sometimes, the transactions did not end well and the money which had been paid in advance had to be given back.²⁸ In his will, Biagio himself, spoke of his two slaves, a negro called Giacomo, and a woman called Nastasia; he freed them, but the one after four years of work in the house of his nephew and the other after six years in the house of his widow.²⁹ It seems that, notwithstanding the prohibitions of trading, Biagio Dolfín used to buy some special items in Alexandria to send them to his friend who had asked for. For instance, Nicolò Dolfín had a slave, three 'dindion' and some white wax candles.³⁰ There are some letters, written by the women of his family asking for carpets and even precious stones.³¹ Sometimes, it was possible to buy strange items on the Alexandrian market. For instance in 1419, a slave called Giorgio, offered the head of St. Mark the Evangelist to the consul; Biagio Dolfín preferred to ask the opinion of the council of twelve about this business and the most important merchants of the colony decided to buy it to prevent that it was bought by the Genoese or the moors.³²

In his last years, Biagio Dolfín was involved in an important trade in precious stones, above all between Alexandria, Venice and London. His agents in the English capital were a Venetian merchant, Nicolò da Molin, his brother-in-law, Paolo Pasqualigo, and also, for a short period, his nephew Lorenzo Dolfín. Biagio sent to Venice several gems he found in Egypt: diamonds, rubies, balases, sapphires and pearls from Hormuz. But in London, he sent above all big balases. The gain that this trade allowed was high, even of 100% of the price paid in Egypt if the gem was sold to a French or an English person who eagerly desired it.³³

In Venice the prices of a diamond varied from 11 to 24 ducats per carat, but normal stones were sold 12-14 ducats per carat and beautiful ones 16-20. Giacomino from Paris (not by chance a Frenchman) bought two diamonds (6 carats together) at the high price

²⁷ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d), Dec. Cf. also *Misti*, b. 180, fasc. VII, recordationi e varie comm, 31 Aug. 1418 and *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, e), 1419 (Biagio sends a fourteen years old negro slave-girl to Nicolò Dolfín, who had ordered 'una schiaveta negra saracina d'anni 14 in circa').

²⁸ Cf. Biagio Dolfín had received 29 ducats to buy a slave-girl but he died in the meanwhile and for this reason the judge established that his heirs had to give the money back. ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, perg., 21 Jan. 1422.

²⁹ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, perg. 27 Apr. 1420.

³⁰ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, fasc. VII, recordationi e varie comm. It is difficult to understand what kind of animal was then the 'dindion'; in another letter Pasqualigo speaks of 'galline d'India' (ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d) but nowadays both words refer to turkey, which comes from America.

³¹ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d), 16 Jun. 1419 («tappeto da barca»); *Misti*, b. 180, fasc. VII, recordationi e varie comm (two balases asked by Pasqualigo for her new sisters-in law).

³² ASVe, *Misti*, b. 180, fasc. III, decreti, 1419.

³³ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d), 29 March 1419.

of 24 ducats per carat. In Egypt, the prices were lower: for instance, Biagio bought two exceptional gems (7 carats together) for 21 ducats and a half.³⁴ There is also an order for two sapphires, from India and beautiful, to be bought in Alexandria for 25 ducats each, but we do not know their weight.³⁵ Rubies were then more considered than diamonds, even if one must pay attention at the old documents: once, and even today, if a person is not very skillful, he can easily mistake a ruby with a spinel. Some scholar think that the spinel itself was called *balas* if it had a light colour, violet-pink, and ruby if it looked like fire. The name *balas* derived from the region of origin of most of them, the *Badaḥshān* (or *Balaḥshān*). Moreover, all red stones were called carbuncles, if they looked like blood. However, there is a great difference between a real ruby and a spinel (ruby-*balas*). The spinel is an aluminate of magnesium and its hardness and weight are less than that of the ruby, which is a corundum, as even the sapphire is. If the hardness of a diamond is 10, that of a ruby is 9 and that of a spinel 8.³⁶ An experienced jeweller and, above all, a cutter of gems certainly knew the difference between a ruby and a *balas*. The fact that Biagio Dolfin advised his agents to sell a very beautiful ruby of 3 carats and a half for 300-500 ducats, that is to say 86-143 ducats per carat and in general *balases* for 4 ducats per carat,³⁷ make us understand that he had to be an expert. Moreover he was in close contact with a family of gem cutters, the Spiera. Pietro Spiera was also his partner in some of his commercial enterprises, while Maffeo Spiera, one of the Pietro's sons, reached him in Egypt in order to buy precious stones. Moreover, we know that the Spiera used to cut the raw stones bought by Biagio Dolfin.³⁸

³⁴ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, e), 1419; fasc. XV, lettere, d), 20 Jan. 1419 (mv?).

³⁵ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, d), 20 Jan. 1419 (mv?); *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, e), 1419.

³⁶ S. Cavenago-Bignami Moneda, *Gemmologia*, Milano 1959, pp. 316-320, 397-401

³⁷ ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, e), 1419.

³⁸ At least two of the *balases* Biagio Dolfin sent to London had to be really exceptional. The first did not belong to this merchant alone, but to a company. This fact may be explained because of its price. If an item was very precious and a single merchant could not afford the risk of buying it, usually many persons made a society. In the first months of 1413, the *balas* was in London, in the hands of Nicolò da Molin, who had been encharged of its sale. The Venetian partners wanted 1800 ducats for it, but Molin found a buyer only for 1200 ducats; so he asked to the partners if they agreed and Biagio Dolfin wrote him to sell. We do not know the name of the person who had it but, according to Biagio, he was involved with the English mint («me pare sia uno che ha la zecha de là» (I think he is a person who has the mint there), that is to say he was a person of high rank. According to its price (4-8 ducats per carat), we may think that this stone was about 150/225 carats. The other *balas* was seen by the king of England Henry V many times in the last months of 1414; he wanted to buy it but his treasurer and his chancellor did not agree with the price made by the Venetians, who wanted first 240, then 200 Lire; they offered 120, 150 and later 160 lire, that is to say that the price varied from a maximum of 1108 ducats to a minimum of 830 ducats (P. Spufford, *Handbook of Medieval Exchange*, London 1986, p. 206). Molin thought he could arrive to 180 lire but at this point he preferred to ask the owner's permission. So he wrote to Biagio Dolfin the letter we have where informations about the affair are intermingled with news about the king's marriage. In effect,

The documents kept in fasc. IX of *Misti*, box 180, of the Commissaria Dolfin are eleven in Arabic, one in Persian and two translations into Italian.³⁹ Two translations of other Arabic documents accompany them. These translations refer to the story of a Venetian merchant, Giacomo Zorzi, who was held prisoner for debt in Alexandria for about 21 months, from February 1418 until November 1419. A series of losses had involved him and his brother Giovanni since 1415: first they lost hundreds of ducats trading in spices, then they bought pepper for a very high prize and were obliged to sell it in Venice under cost; they sold olive oil in Alexandria but the buyer did not pay them and, lastly, they brought chestnuts, 1800 ducats worth, to Egypt, but, after a voyage of two months, they arrived rotten and were thrown overboard to avoid paying the import taxes. If they had arrived safe, they would have been sold for 5000 ducats. In this way, Giacomo Zorzi arrived to have more than 1500/2000 ducats of debt with the muslim merchant Ġamāl al-Dīn and others. Beside this, Ġamāl al-Dīn bought his bills of exchange from other creditors and he went to the *amir* of Alexandria asking for justice. So Giacomo was put in prison where he found also other Venetians as, for instance, Andrea Benedetto, who died there. However, he went on attending to his business by means of his servant Filippo even if in the end he was obliged to live on the charity of the Venetian colony. Lastly his uncle Antonio Moro, a procuratore di San Marco, sent to the consul 1500 ducats to pay the debt; a bill of exchange for other 1000 ducats were sent by Alessandro Zorzi and the former consul in Alexandria, Fantino Viaro; other money came from the cash of the Venetian community (*cottimo*). In this way, it was possible to pay 3000 ducats and extra expenses: Ġamāl al-Dīn signed two receipts, the first was written in Italian and was for both 1000 ducats, given secretly to him, and the other 2000, he had to share with other creditors; the second receipt was only for the 2000 ducats and was in Arabic. At last Giacomo Zorzi, who was ill, could leave Egypt for Venice. He was about 41 years old. In fact, he was born around 1378; in 1407 he

Henry wanted it to make it set on his new crown which had to be ready for his marriage with Catherine of France; however, the agreement was postponed and a war broke out with France. On 25 October 1415 there was the battle of Azincourt, and on the battlefield the king wore a helmet with a huge balas on it. According to the tradition, it was the so-called Black Prince's ruby, a spinel of 170 carats which is now on the British imperial state crown. The legend tells us that this gem once belonged to a Moorish prince of Granada, Abū Sa'īd; then it was of Pedro the Cruel of Castille who gave it to the Black Prince to pay him for his help in the battle of Nájera (1367); then the stone disappeared and made its next appearance on Henry V's helmet during the battle of Azincourt. We have no proof that this last was or was not one of Dolfin's balases; however, this second stone too was very big, about 138-207 carats, and one may think that there was a sharp irony if a stone which had to adorn the crown of the marriage with the king of France's daughter would have been set on the helmet of the war against France. ASVe, *Misti*, b. 181, fasc. XV, lettere, b, 2 april 1413; fasc. XV, lettere, a, 31 Jan. 1414;

³⁹ Cf. F. Bauden, «The Mamluk Documents of the Venetian State Archives: Handlist», in this volume.

had married Francesca Zen *quondam* Andrea; in 1423 he was appointed Venetian central government representative in Trau, on the Dalmatian coast. He died on 16 October 1425.

The second small archives with Arabic documents belonged to Alvise Correr, another Venetian merchant who had business above all in the reign of Cyprus.⁴⁰ He was born about 1400 and in 1424 married a woman of the Morosini family. In the thirties, he used to lend money to the king of the Lusignano family. For this reason, he had contacts also with the company of Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici in Rome, where one of his uncles, Antonio Correr (d. 1445) was cardinal. In 1432, his sister Cristina married Marino Dolfín, son of Domenico, son of Marino brother of Biagio and Antonio. For a certain period, Alvise Correr and his brother-in-law shared some business, but in 1434-1435 they had a trial in front of the court of Petizion. Marino Dolfín had sent some goods from Nicosia to Venice under his name; on the contrary Alvise Correr informed against him saying that they were of his own. Documents were produced to sustain the two different versions, and among these also an Arabic document, and others of the King Janus's chancellor Jacques Salah (*le baille de la secrete*) and of the clerks Guy Salah and Bibi. Probably in those years, the Cypriot chancery had not only an interpreter, Davud *turcimannus*, but also some clerks who were Christian Arabs. Marino Dolfín himself knew Arabic, as the documents show; he too was a merchant as his grand-uncle and, as him, he was in contact with the family of jewellers Spiera. The trial ended with his victory and the judges recognized that the goods belonged to him and not to his brother-in-law.

The last archives belonged to Marino Morosini dalla Tressa, da San Giovanni Crisostomo, son of Domenico.⁴¹ He lived in the second half of the 15th century and was an important merchant. However, he did not use to leave Venice; on the contrary he had agents in the Levant: his brother, Giovanni Alvise (born about 1459, d. 1499), as well as persons who worked for the Morosini firm. Giovanni Alvise remained for a long period in Aleppo and wrote several letters to his brother in Venice. The presence of many agents testify that the way of trading of Venetian families has changed from the beginning of the century. Biagio Dolfín went in Alexandria by himself or with his brother or his nephew while his wife and his cousins managed his business in Venice. Now the most important persons of a family firm remained in Venice and sent younger brothers and, mainly, agents in far countries. Giovanni Alvise was specialized in the fabric trade; he used to sell various grades of European wool and, sometimes, small quantities of silk and cotton; he also used to meet the caravans which arrived in Aleppo from the East.

⁴⁰ Cf. ASVe, *Misti*, b. 205.

⁴¹ ASVe, *Citra*, b. 198.

In box 197 of Marino Morosini's huge archive, there are letters from Aleppo (1482-91), from Damascus (1482-90), and the journals of a voyage to the Barbary coast (1485) and to Syria (1487).⁴²

The great period of Venetian merchants in the Levant was not yet finished but the Ottomans were on the point of conquering Egypt. In 1517 Selim I put an end to the Mamluk rule. From this moment onwards, even the trade with Egypt became part of the commercial relations which had place between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire. The doge's counterpart was no longer in Alexandria or Cairo, but in Istanbul.

UNIVERSITÀ CA' FOSCARI, VENEZIA

SUMMARY

The business intercourses which had place between Venetian and Muslim merchants lasted for centuries. In particular, the contacts between the city of the Lagoon and Mamluk Egypt gave origin to several documents which lay scattered in the different boxes, still kept in the Venetian State Archives. Most of them are in Latin and Italian but there are also some in Arabic. The aim of this essay is to present the historical background of these documents, produced in the Mamluk period, and to discover the reasons why they were produced, the persons involved, the kind of business they refer and the life of the Venetian colony in Alexandria and Cairo.

⁴² ASVe, *Citra*, bb. 190-204. Two of the letters which Giovanni Alvise wrote to his brother from Aleppo are now in James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota f. It No. 7 (30 July 1482) and f. Mo No. 1 (5 April 1483). E.A. Congdon, «Venetian Merchant Activity within Mamluk Syria (886-893/1481-1487)», *Al-Masāq. Studia arabo-islamica mediterranea*, 7 (1994), pp. 1-33.