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EUROPEAN ISLANDS BETWEEN ISOLATED AND INTERCONNECTED LIFE WORLDS

INTERDISCIPLINARY LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVES



Editors

Laura Dierksmeier,
Frerich Schön,
Anna Kouremenos,
Annika Condit &
Valerie Palmowski

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Martin Bartelheim and Thomas Scholten

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Nevin Zeynep Yelçe and Ela Bozok

Islands as Transit Posts in the News Networks of Early Sixteenth Century AD

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, Corfu, Zakynthos, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus, news

Summary

This paper reflects on the role of islands in the Mediterranean as transit posts in the news networks of the early 16th cent. AD. Based on research carried out within the framework of the ‘TUBITAK 1001 Scientific and Technologic Research Support Fund’ project numbered 113K655 (Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean Intelligence Network during the First Half of the 16th Century), this study traces the routes of letters and reports from eastern Mediterranean port cities to Venice from where news would be distributed to various cities in Europe. Our research investigates the hubs where various pieces of oral and written news within a wide range of sources, from official letters to eyewitness accounts, from familial correspondence to rumours, came together to be delivered collectively. As news travelled through the sea routes, this study focuses especially on the islands of Corfu, Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus as main information hubs. In a period when regular postal systems were not fully developed, the role of the islands as transit points for news flow sheds light on the importance of islands in the dynamics of communication in the early 16th cent. AD.

Introduction

‘The Mediterranean is an intricately patterned kaleidoscope’, is the first sentence of the introductory chapter of a recent volume on the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, focusing on cross-cultural

encounters in a historical framework (Caykent/Zavagno 2014, 1). The kaleidoscope is perhaps the best fitting metaphor to describe the Mediterranean in light of modern scholarship. Whether one argues for the fragmentary nature of the Mediterranean based on territorial and religious conflicts or for its unity based on commercial and cultural relations, the kaleidoscope metaphor reflects simultaneous fragmentation and fusion experienced in the Early Modern Mediterranean. The Mediterranean has long been defined as a space where people of different lands, languages, religions, ethnicities, and professions interacted, voluntarily or involuntarily, with different motives and aspirations. Recent scholarship has addressed its nature ‘as a space of exchange and of conflictuality, and as an arena for international competition and collaboration’, emphasising both cross-cultural and intercultural interaction and suggesting a network approach to achieve a clearer understanding (Marzagalli 2016; Lugli 2017). Others, without overlooking the fragmented geographical and political outlook of the region, have drawn particular attention to a sense of connectivity and overlap through ‘a set of city-linking itineraries, routes for the transmission of ideas, goods, and military forces [...] marked by complex, overlapping, ethnolinguistic, commercial, and cultural identities’ (Brummett 2007, 10). Considering ‘the multiple and overlapping identities of the inhabitants’ in zones involved in the routes (Brummett 2015, 244) and their ‘constant exposure to transnational strategies’ (Darling 2012, 55), the Mediterranean has been analysed through the lenses of frontier and borderland paradigms; confirming not only the connectivity but also the fluidity and porousness characterising this maritime space. Thus, modern scholarship agrees that

the Mediterranean, neither a distinctly unified and unitary space nor an absolute zone of conflict, remained ‘a main route for communication and exchange’ (Kopaka 2008, 190) throughout the 16th cent. AD.

This paper examines a specific portion of this communication route to shed light on the dynamics of transmission and distribution of news focusing on ways and manners of transmission, the sources and agents responsible for the process, as well as the identities and motives of the recipients. It investigates the role of the four larger islands in the Mediterranean – namely Corfu, Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus (*fig. 1*) – in the news traffic of the early 16th cent. based on the findings of a three-year project: ‘Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean Intelligence Network during the First Half of the 16th Century’.

In and around the 16th cent. Mediterranean, characterised by ‘interdependent societies linked by ever faster channels of communication’ (Watkins/Reyerson 2014, 4), Venice was undisputedly the ultimate centre of information regarding news about the Ottoman Empire in particular, and the Levant in general (De Vivo 2007). In terms of acquisition and distribution of news, it was rivalled only by Genoa and Antwerp regarding economic information and by Rome itself for political news on the larger European scale (Burke 2003; Dursteler 2009).

The nature of the tri-partite administrative structure of the Venetian Republic – consisting of the city of Venice, the mainland territories called *terraferma*, and the overseas colonies called *stato da mar* (alternatively called *terre da mar*, *stato di mare*, *stati oltremare*) – allowed not only for more effective commercial operations and enterprises but also for a more systematic flow of news in the absence of official ‘global’ postal services. The *stato da mar*, characterised by being ‘accessible only by the sea’, formed the most important element of the maritime network established by the Venetians in the eastern Mediterranean and the Adriatic (Arbel 2013a, 125, 127). It was thanks to this particular overseas system that Venice, defined as a ‘thalassocracy’ by some (Tucci 2002), became an ‘empire’ essentially based ‘primarily on control of the sea and the sea lanes and ruled

through a large variety of different governance structures: colonies, dependent kingdoms, and dominions’ (Fusaro 2016).

Technically operating under Venetian jurisdiction, maritime colonies were subject to different administrative and judicial systems than mainland territories. Apart from the semi-independent Duchy of Naxos, ruled by a Venetian nobleman under the protection of Venice and several Aegean islands under its jurisdiction, overseas colonies were ruled by direct authority of Venice under the *reggimento* system. The Venice-based *savii ai ordini*, the board of directors responsible for the administration of the colonies, were also responsible for overseas trade and naval activities. The colonies constituting the *stato da mar* served not only as check points for merchants but were also essential parts of the communication – and thus intelligence – network which utilised the same routes and the same people. Venice continued to maintain some of its colonies, despite the economic burden, because of their strategic positions in the information network (Arbel 2013a).

The *Stato da Mar* and the Islands

Islands, as ‘arguably the purest, most concentrated expression of a Mediterranean geography’ (Watkins/Reyerson 2014, 7), situated on the trade and communication routes, often reflected the overlapping nature of the peoples of the Mediterranean. The interaction taking place on and around them confirmed the connectedness, interrelatedness, and connectivity (Knapp 2007, 45) of not only the sea but the islands themselves. On the other hand, the notion of isolation, in other words insularity, made them somewhat distinct units (Marangou/Della Casa 2008, 172). Through their function as elements in a network, however, islands combined ‘these two seemingly opposing aspects of isolation and connectivity’ (Sicking 2014, 495). And this can be best observed in their roles within the communication network.

Islands by nature constituted stopping points, and thus hubs of interaction, along the sea routes. They provided shelter and harbour for ships. They served as supply stations for water and provisions.



Fig. 1. Map of the Eastern Mediterranean with the relevant islands (<https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=13554&lang=en>, reworked).

They were hubs for the transfer of people and goods, not to mention ideas. Their needs for subsistence were delivered by various parties from other islands or mostly from the mainland. Several islands came to be commercial hubs as well (Sicking 2014). Likewise, Venetian colonies served as safe havens for merchant fleets. Since they were commercial and maritime stations, not only merchants but travellers of all sorts passed through the islands. As such, they also took on the role of receiving news and information by these stoppers-by and transmitting it to Venice. As an extension of these two functions, overseas colonies, including the islands, served as hubs where delicate information of hostile fleets was gathered, and security instructions were transmitted (Gertwagen 2002).

The contemporaries were increasingly aware of the significance of islands, as demonstrated by the growing interest in the genre of island books, starting with Benedetto Bordone's 'Isolario', first published in 1528. In 'The Most Famous Islands of the World' (1572), Tomaso Porcacchi described the route from the Adriatic to Istanbul as 'the head, or prince of the seas, because of the many islands it has' (as quoted in Brummett 2015, 273).

Given the maritime-economic character of the Republic, the *stato da mar* had a dual role to play in Venetian networks. While these overseas colonies functioned as important sources of agricultural and industrial products as well as raw materials for Venice; they also served as indispensable links in the maritime-commercial network of the Republic. The colonies lay on two

main commercial routes linking the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean with southern and eventually western coasts. One route passed through Corfu, Modon (Methoni) and Coron (Koroni), and Negroponte to Constantinople from Venice. The second route, more relevant to the purpose of this paper, went through Corfu, the Peloponnese, and Crete to Alexandria and Syria (Gertwagen 2000; 2002; 2014). It is this second route and the major islands thereon – Corfu, Zakynthos, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus – that this paper investigates.

The same officials responsible for protecting the interests of Venice and ensuring the well-being of the colony handled the traffic in their respective stations and thus the news flow on the route. They claimed different titles according to their place of assignment within the *reggimento* system. The governor of Crete was given the title of *duca* (duke), while Cyprus was governed by the *luogotenente* (lieutenant). The rector of the island of Corfu was called *bailo*, though not to be confused with the resident Venetian ambassador to Istanbul (Arbel 2013a, 147). Similar to the ambassadors, though, these officials were given written instructions and were expected to govern in accordance with the laws and decisions disclosed therein. In times of need, a *provedditore* would be dispatched to a colony. These temporary officials with extraordinary power were appointed ‘immediately following the inclusion of a territory in the maritime empire or when a need arose to carry out a thorough re-ordering of the administration or of local institutions’ (Arbel 2013a, 149). Occasionally assumed by the rectors, the post usually involved important colonies such as Cyprus, Crete, and Corfu.

During the first half of the 16th cent. AD, the *provedditore generale da mar*, the supreme commander of the fleet in peacetime, who resided in Corfu, appears as the highest authority of the Ionian Islands. Apart from their assigned responsibilities, these officials were mediators of information and news. As these governors could not make any significant decisions on their own, they regularly sent official reports known as *relazione* to the *Collegio* in Venice, which then decided how to proceed. It was common practice to attach third-party letters and reports to the *relazione*. Although the sending of official reports in the form of *relazione* can be traced back to 1524, frequent and intense

quasi-official communication included personal observations, information gathered through various means, third-party letters and accounts as attachments (Arbel 2013a). Thus, these officials either served as the origin of news and information or transmitted what they heard, read, or witnessed.

Corfu, situated in the northeast Ionian Sea at the entrance to the Adriatic, appears as the major news hub with simultaneous access to both routes. A Venetian colony since 1386, Corfu was already an important trade emporium serving as a transit station for goods from the Mediterranean trade by the beginning of the 16th cent. AD. (Arbel 2001, 154). By 1492, it had become mandatory for merchant galleys and the naves on their way to the western Mediterranean to anchor in Corfu (Gertwagen 2014, 360). With the loss of Modon to the Ottomans in 1500 AD, the significance of Corfu was emphasised by the new decrees issued by the senate of Venice after 1501 AD (Arbel 2001, 149). Corfu seems to have assumed the status of the ‘eye of Venice’ either simultaneously with or right after the loss of Modon and Coron known as the ‘two eyes of Venice’. A very well-informed contemporary Piri Reis remembers the infamous Kemal Reis, a corsair and Ottoman captain, saying: ‘Kemal Reis the deceased would say that Venice has two eyes; the left eye is the Castle of Modon, and the right eye is the [aforementioned] island of Corfu’ (Piri Reis 2002, 330). Even though Corfu lost some of its importance in trade, especially after the Ottoman invasion in 1537 AD, and turned progressively into a military stronghold, for the period under discussion, it was still the most important island in the ‘triumvirate of Ionian Islands’, namely Corfu, Cephalonia, and Zakynthos (Arbel 2001, 156). As a commercial centre and a garrison station, Corfu was one of the central hubs of information as trade and news went hand in hand. It was the nodal point for exchange of letters between Venetian officials and spies dispersed throughout the Levant, sent from Istanbul, Crete, Cyprus, Aleppo, Alexandria, Rhodes, Venice, and the Venetian fleet (Gürkan 2018, 30).

Zakynthos, known as Zante to the contemporaries, was another hub of information under the rule of Venice. An island situated on the Ionian Sea, it was a recent addition to *stato da mar*, occupied

by Venice only in 1482 AD. After the loss of Modon and Coron, Zakynthos along with Corfu assumed a prominent place in Venice's Mediterranean trade. The location of Modon and Coron at the entrance of the Adriatic made them 'ideal emporia, with storage and transshipment services for vessels that brought commodities from the East and preferred to avoid sailing up the Adriatic' (Arbel 2013a, 228). Thus, these were mandatory stations for Venetian merchants sailing beyond the Adriatic Sea. After the loss of these important posts, Zakynthos and Corfu filled this role which enhanced the importance of these islands not only as trade centres, but also as hubs of information (Gertwagen 2002, 366). By the beginning of the 16th cent. AD, Zakynthos was already established as a hub of information where a variety of news arrived from the Levant. Similar to the other islands under focus, local and trans-local news about a plethora of subjects ranging from trade to politics, from social crisis and upheavals to diplomacy, from military affairs to trivial incidents, arrived in Zakynthos. Distinctly, though, Zakynthos also functioned as the frontier location for gathering news about neighbouring Ottoman lands, which required constant negotiation. Frontier islands like Corfu, Zakynthos, and Cephalonia were often at the mercy of Ottoman officials who exercised various tactics of extortion on their neighbours, adding to the sense of insecurity felt by most colonies among the *stato da mar* even in peacetime (Arbel 2013a, 129). In this context, Zakynthos came to the fore with news about the neighbouring region of Morea and the dealings of the *provveditore* with the local Ottoman governor (*sancak beği*).

The island of Crete (Candia) was the earliest colony of Venice in the eastern Mediterranean. It laid on the intersection point of major maritime routes that connected, on the one hand, Constantinople with Alexandria and, on the other hand, the western Mediterranean with Syria (Georgopoulou 2001, 5). During the four-hundred-year Venetian rule from 1211 AD to 1669 AD, the island was an important commercial centre whose strategic location made it invaluable as a hub of information. The only colony purchased by Venice, Crete was an obligatory port of call for the convoys of Venetian merchant galleys going from Venice to Cyprus from 1300 onwards (Gertwagen

2000, 202). As Crete was a customary stop-over for ships headed to Alexandria (Lugli 2017, 171), the news items ranged from corsair activities to trade, from the movement of the Ottoman navy to news from Egypt and Syria.

Rhodes, the only island in this study that was not under Venetian colonial rule, was located on the Venice-Alexandria route. Because of its strategic location, Rhodes matched Crete and Cyprus in significance within the information network. From 1309 AD on, the island served as the permanent headquarters of the Order of Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, also known as Knights Hospitaller, after their expulsion from Acre on the eastern Mediterranean coast until the Ottoman conquest in 1522 AD. Linking the eastern Mediterranean with the Aegean and Adriatic seas, the knights played an important role in trade, piracy, and traffic of pilgrims to and from the shrines in the Near East. An important element in the balance of power in the region throughout the 15th cent. AD, Rhodes was swift and flexible in shifting alliances and adapting to changing situations (Vatin 2015, 426). As Rhodes was not self-supporting, in order to sustain people and obtain much-needed supplies, the order permitted eastern Mediterranean merchants to follow their usual trade routes. This meant that Muslim merchants moved goods through Rhodes, and non-Christians lived within the city itself (Vann 2014). Even though this might seem ironic for an island ruled by a religious order whose main aim was to act as a safeguard against Islam, this was a necessary condition in order to survive. This also created an environment ripe for gathering and sharing valuable intelligence. In the late 15th cent. AD, for example, Grand Master Pierre D' Aubusson is known to have instructed Rhodian merchants, who traded with Mamluks and Ottomans, 'to collect whatever information they could about the Muslims but not to reveal anything about conditions in the city of Rhodes itself'. Muslim merchants visiting Rhodes most probably were expected to note important information about the island and report on their return. The Rhodians often turned this fact to their own advantage by feeding these merchants with false information (Vann 2007, 162).

Cyprus (Cipro), the largest island in the region, was one of the most important colonies of the Republic of Venice. The salary of the *luogotenente*,

appointed governor of Cyprus, attests to the significance of the island as it was highest among officials sent to overseas colonies (Arbel 2013a, 149). Apart from its strategic location in terms of security and defence, Cyprus was the main point of trade with Egypt and Syria. The island was a relatively late addition to the *stato da mar* as it came under the control of Venice *de facto* in 1473 AD and *de jure* in 1489 AD (Arbel 2004, 65 f.). When Ottomans conquered Syria and Egypt in 1516–1517 AD, Venice agreed to continue the annual 8,000 ducats tribute paid to Mamluk Sultans for Cyprus. This can give an idea about the Venetian desire to keep this precious colony in its possession.

The News

Research carried out within the project ‘The Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean Intelligence Network during the 1st half of the 16th cent.’ has traced news items involving 310 different localities. Analysis of the news items reveals 70 locations as departure points of correspondence. Thus, it can be concluded that local news items were gathered in particular centres through oral and written means before being transmitted collectively. These centres are mainly constituted of capital cities, followed predominantly by port cities and commercial centres. While war times bring forth army camps as original loci of news production, ships replace them as main sources of information during naval conflicts (Yelçe et al. 2017).

The main source of news before the advent of the newspaper was, not surprisingly, letters, whether in form of casual correspondence or official reports. As parts of the maritime-commercial network, the colonies were particularly prominent for the efficient flow of information to Venice, which served as a hub from where news was distributed. Before the institutionalisation of postal services around the mid-16th cent., letters were transmitted by sea or land, and by whoever was willing to provide the delivery service. The initiative for the gathering of information often fell on the local Venetian governor of a colony on route. The governors relied on a variety of individuals for acquiring information. Apart from officials and agents working on their behalf

for intelligence, seamen and Venetian merchants who owned ships (*nave*) and operated privately constituted the foremost information source of local governors. Shipping activities of these seafaring men permitted daily contact between the colonies as well as other maritime centres in the eastern Mediterranean. News also found its way to Venice through foreign merchants who frequented several busy port towns and international commercial centres around the Mediterranean (Gertwagen 2000; 2002). The second part of this paper aims to illuminate the process of news transmission through specific cases from *I Diarii* of the Venetian statesman Marino Sanuto. Spanning the years from 1496 AD to 1533 AD in minute detail, the diaries include Sanuto’s meticulous recording of written and oral information received through a plethora of official and unofficial sources ranging from state reports to ambassadorial hearings, familial and business letters by merchants, travellers to and from Venice, and others. Examining Sanuto’s entries not only provides ample information about individual news items but helps evaluate the various aspects of Venetian information networks in the early 16th cent.

Dead or Alive: Featuring a Corsair Attack (1497 AD)

On 10 July 1497 AD, merchant Alvise Zorzi wrote a lengthy letter from Crete to his brother-in-law Girolamo Zorzi about their encounter and escape from the Ottoman ships under Cape Maleas (Capo Malio) and Kythera (Cerigo), which took place on June 30th 1497 AD. The location he mentioned in his letter was a strategic crossing point from the northeast Mediterranean to the west, and notorious for its dangerous waters. The letter was received in Venice on August 24th 1497 AD, via Coron. It was written in detail as the aim of the author was to inform his brother-in-law that he and, more importantly, the recipient Girolamo’s son who was with Alvise during the skirmish, were alive. Alvise, in this letter, actually corrected the misinformation sent to Venice by the *provveditore* Francesco Venier, who previously notified the Signoria of the death of Alvise Zorzi and the son of Girolamo Zorzi (Sanuto 1969, I:728).

30 June 1497 Corsair Attack

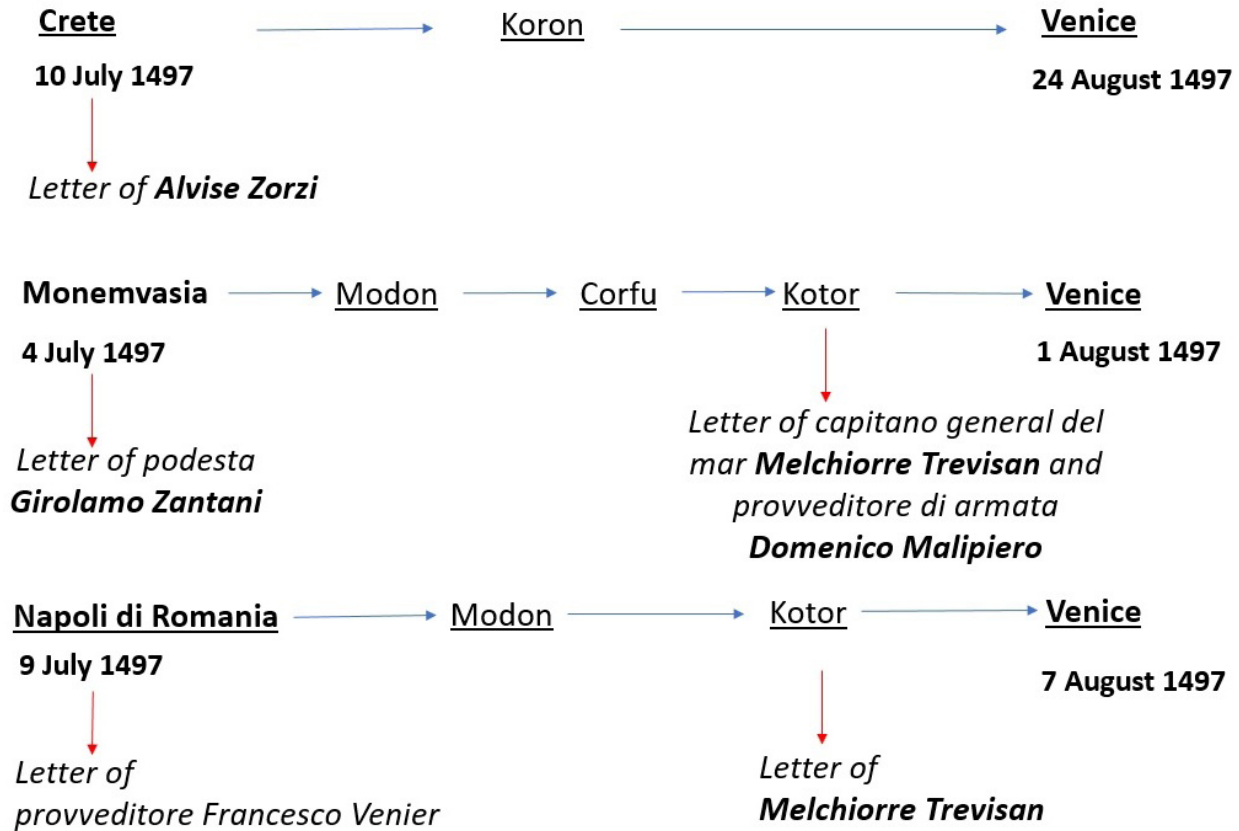


Fig. 2. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence from Crete, Monemvasia and Napoli di Romania to Venice of the Corsair Attack on June 30th 1497 AD.

Alvise's letter was received at a time when news regarding this particular event already poured into Venice from various locations under the rule of the Republic (fig. 2). Although Sanuto recorded this letter in his diary on August 24th, he had already heard about the event as early as August 1st from a ship arriving from Kotor (Cattaro), a Venetian possession in Montenegro. The *capitano general del mar* Melchiorre Trevisan and the *provveditore di armata* Domenico Malipiero had basically sent the news they received from Corfu. A closer reading of Sanuto's report reveals that the news originated from Monemvasia (Malvasia), a Venetian colony situated in Morea, close to Kythera (Cerigo) where the event took place (Sanuto 1969, I:702). The *podesta*, governor of Monemvasia, Girolamo Zantani, had written to Modon on July 4th 1497 AD, five days after the event, explaining the details as well as when and how the ships

were lost. His letter was transmitted to Corfu from Modon (Sanuto 1969, I:703). On August 7th 1497 AD, Sanuto recorded yet another letter informing about the event. Writing from Kotor, Melchiorre Trevisan passed on a letter by *provveditore* Francesco Venier from Nafplio (Napoli di Romania) dated 9 July, which he received via Modon. This letter corrected previous letters and informed that most of the passengers of the ship made it safely to Crete, even though some arrived injured, and others died *en route*. This was a better outcome than most expected (Sanuto 1969, I:707). Alvise Zorzi was apparently one of those survivors who ended up in Crete and met Venier to correct his assumptions a few days later (Sanuto 1969, I:728).

The news caused alarm when first received in Venice, as the ship carried not only valuable merchandise but also high-ranking individuals: pilgrims going to Jerusalem, a member of the Knights

of St John going to Rhodes, and our protagonist Alvise Zorzi and his nephew. The presence of such high-profile passengers can explain why Sanuto relentlessly followed and recorded news about this particular event, while it was not uncommon in this period for corsairs attacking merchant ships full of merchandise and people. In fact, corsair activity from both sides was a pressing issue between the Signoria and Porte throughout the early 16th cent. AD and frequently appears as a casual news item.

This case vividly demonstrates certain aspects of the late 15th and early 16th cent. AD eastern Mediterranean information network, particularly the section on the Ionian Sea. First of all, it shows the intricate news gathering and transmitting system with the Venetian maritime colonies as hubs of information. It is no coincidence that the fastest news came from these locations, which served both accurate and false news about the event. In this case, relatively more distant locations to the region of the event, Corfu and Kotor acted as transmission points, marking their role as main hubs of information from the Levant. Secondly, it shows the amount of time needed for the transmission of news and how it changed depending on the location. The voyage from Crete to Venice normally took six weeks during the late 15th cent. AD (Gertwagen 2002, 357). The time between the date of Alvise's letter (July 10th 1497) and the date of arrival in Venice (August 24th 1497) confirms the conventional timeframe. More importantly, this case points out that even though the letter of Alvise Zorzi explained the correct version of events because his letter arrived in the regular speed of six weeks, news that originated from other destinations such as Monemvasia, though initially false, was quicker to reach Venice via Modon as it took less than a month. This suggests that the letter from Monemvasia may have been given priority because it was shared between high-ranking officials, namely from the *podesta* to the *capitano general del mar*; or simply the news transmission from Modon was more efficient than the route from Coron through which the letter of Alvise Zorzi travelled. Thirdly, it shows the role of Crete as transmission point to the East, as pilgrims destined for Jerusalem and others destined for Rhodes were on the ship. Crete not only acted as part

of the news system of the Ionian Sea in particular, but also as a transmission point for news from the East in general through such travellers.

Keeping an Eye on Ottomans and Safavids (1507 AD and 1512 AD)

Crete, as mentioned earlier, appears as the ultimate gathering point for news of all sorts. The cases in this section illustrate this nodal position of the island in the network as well as that of Cyprus (see *fig. 3*).

On September 4th 1512 AD, Sanuto included in his diary a letter from Alexandria, dated June 23rd, penned by a Giovanni Marcello to his father. The Venetian informant wrote about the negotiations that took place between Mamluk Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri and Venetian ambassador Domenico Trevisan for the release of Pietro Zen, the Venetian consul in Damascus accused of spying on behalf of Safavids against the Mamluks (Sanuto 1969, XV: 17–20).¹ Before being privy to the details of the matter, Sanuto already mentioned the incident in his diary on September 2nd, based on a letter from the *rettori* of Crete. The Cretan letter, dated August 14th, included news from Alexandria, which the *rettori* obtained from another letter written in June by a Stefano Mora about the events taking place in Cairo. This was not the only third-party letter transmitted by the *rettori* of Crete; the letter included yet another news item. Originating from Rhodes, this item involved the succession crisis going on in the Ottoman Empire: Selim I who had recently ascended the throne on April 24th 1512 AD was fighting against his older brother Ahmed, a strong claimant to the throne. The letter stated that Prince Ahmed had escaped to the mountains while sending one of his sons to the Safavids in order to request their assistance (Sanuto 1969, XV: 16).² This letter exemplifies the entangled nature of the Muslim polities in the East from a Venetian intelligence perspective. News from the East, whether

¹ For a detailed discussion of the incident, see Lucchetta 1968, 109–219.

² For the succession struggle, see Çıpa 2017, 55–61.

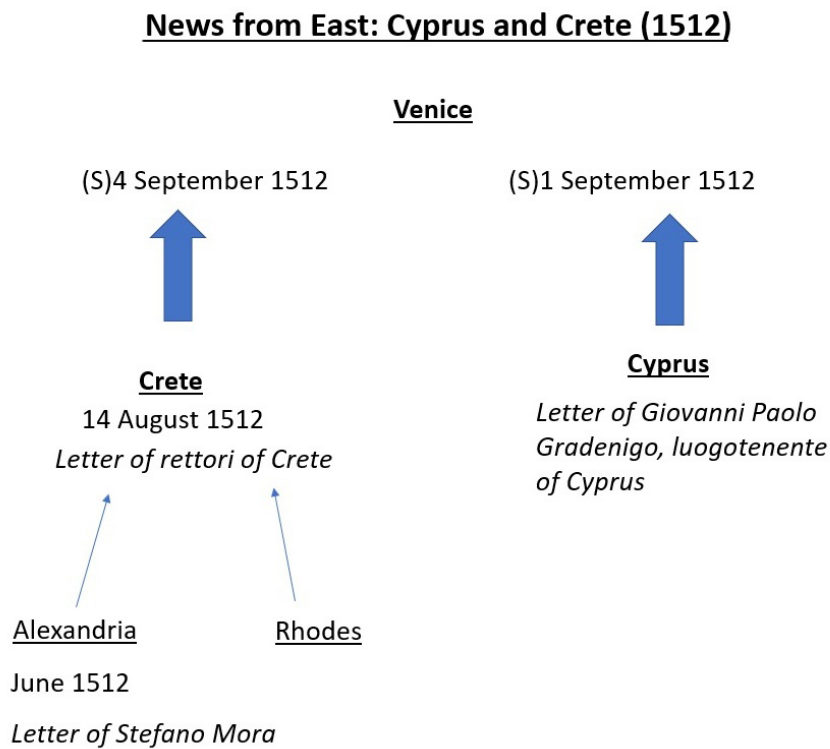


Fig. 3. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence from Crete and Cyprus to Venice, 1512 AD.

about the Ottomans or the Mamluks – featuring the Safavids in both cases – similarly found its way to Crete before being sent collectively to Venice. A comparison between the transmission process of the two different letters mentioning the Zen affair demonstrates the advantage of Crete as a nodal point for news traffic, as news about the same incident takes only three weeks to reach Venice through Crete instead of six.

News about the Ottoman succession crisis of 1512–1513 AD came not only through Crete; Cyprus as a busy port was another transit point for such news. An undated report by Giovanni Paolo Gradenigo, *luogotenente* of Cyprus, provided a detailed account of the most critical few months of the crisis, which ended with Prince Ahmed's execution in April 24th 1513 AD. Sanuto recorded Gradenigo's report on 1 September 1513 (Sanuto 1969, XVII: 10–13). Intelligence about the Safavids also arrived in Cyprus to be transmitted to Venice. In 1507 AD, for example, Priamo Malipiero, returning from Konya to Cyprus, wrote about the movement of Safavid Shah Ismail's army into Anatolia. The report was sent to Venice by the governing council of Cyprus on August 24th 1507, and

recorded by Sanuto on October 21th (Sanuto 1969, VII: 166).

Another example from the same year demonstrates the process of news collection from the East at one nodal point to be dispatched collectively. On April 26th 1507, Sanuto recorded several letters arriving from Crete by the ship *Mosta* (fig. 4). Among these letters, one was from *duca Girolamo Donato*, the governor of Crete, who passed on news about Crete along with attached letters from Cyprus, Rhodes, and Damietta. The letters from Rhodes and Damietta were penned directly to Donato. The grand master of Rhodes, in his letter, informed about the movement of the Ottoman navy against corsairs. From Damietta, a merchant wrote about the naval preparations of the Mamluk sultan in the Red Sea against the Portuguese. The letter from Cyprus, on the other hand, reported in general about the success obtained by the Safavids against the Ottomans (Sanuto 1969, VII: 55).

These examples attest to the role of Cyprus as an important hub of eastern news. They also show that the eastern part of the Mediterranean, similar to the Ionian Sea, possessed an information network that included Cyprus, Crete, and Rhodes

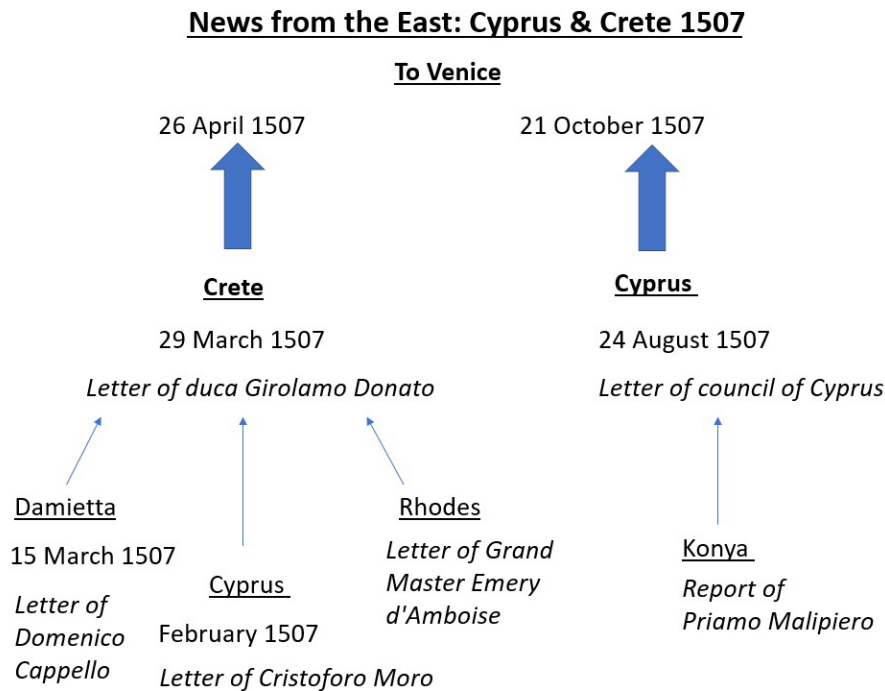


Fig. 4. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence from Cyprus and Crete to Venice, 1507 AD.

as intertwined hubs. Secondly, these cases demonstrate the influential role of the governors and the officials stationed at the various locations of the *stato da mar* not only as administrators, but also as active actors in gathering and transmitting news. Moreover, these examples also show the Venetian interest in Ottoman domestic politics. Internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire were closely monitored by Venetian officials on these major islands as Venetian profits were often tied to regions under Ottoman control. A similar consideration and cautious interest can be observed regarding the Safavids as this newly emerging power in the East was perceived to have the potential to become an ally against the Ottomans when needed (Meserve 2014, 593). The importance of Cyprus as a hub of eastern news particularly peaked during the decisive Battle of Chaldiran between Ottomans and Safavids (Palazzo 2016).

A News Miscellany (1507 AD)

On March 16th 1507 AD, a letter by Donato da Leze, the *provveditore* of Zakyntos, arrived at Venice to be presented to the *Pregadi*, one of the

councils of Venice. The letter contained a variety of news items collected from different locations: preparation of the Ottoman navy in Gallipoli against the corsairs, Ottoman dispatch of men to Modon and Coron, Ottoman mistrust against Ferdinand II of Aragon, the King of Spain, who recently arrived in Naples, and the agent sent to Zakyntos by Mustafa Beg, the Ottoman governor of Morea, regarding his ship that sunk during his tenure as governor of Vlore (Valona). The letter also included information about the arrival of spices specified as pepper, ginger, and cinnamon from Alexandria, about the on-going famine in Morea, and Ottoman interest in Nafplio, a location under Venetian rule (Sanuto 1969, VII:30). This letter displays certain aspects of Zakyntos that are both similar and different from those of Cyprus and Crete.

This case points to the existence of a parallel route using an alternative path for news from Constantinople and thus suggests a different information pattern. The news about the movement of the Ottoman navy against corsairs was also a topic of note in the above-mentioned letter from Rhodes, which reached Venice via Crete on April 26th 1507 AD. Leze's letter from Zakyntos with

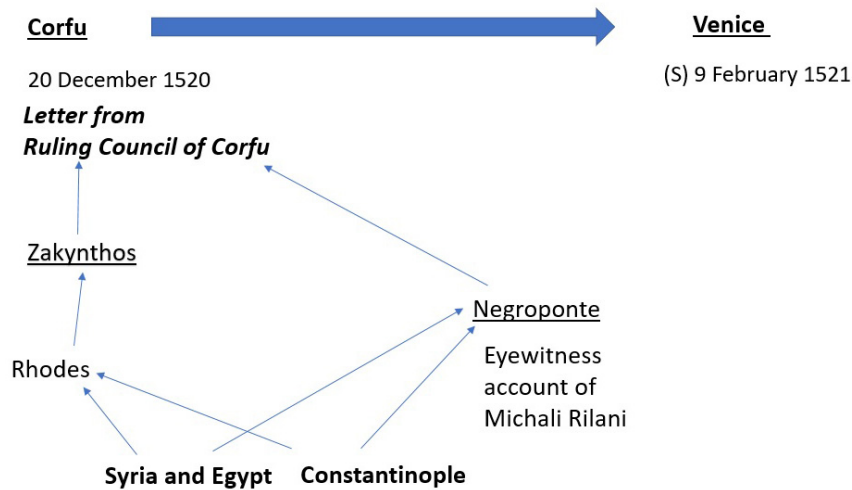
News from East: Letter from Corfu (20 December 1520)

Fig. 5. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence from Corfu to Venice December 20th 1520 AD.

the same information, on the other hand, was received in Venice more than a month earlier on March 16th. This time difference in travel time suggests that news originating from Constantinople, or thereabouts, reached Venice faster through this route – from Morea through Zakynthos to Venice – than the alternative route employed for eastern news – from Rhodes through Crete to Venice.

The significance of Corfu as a hub of information gathered from different locations can further be illustrated by an example from the beginning of the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I (*fig. 5*). On February 9th 1521 AD, Sanuto recorded a letter dated December 20th 1520 AD sent by the ruling council of Corfu. The letter contained an array of news items obtained from different sources. One of these sources was a man named Michali Rilani who recently arrived at Corfu from Negroponte, an Aegean island under Ottoman rule since 1470 AD. Rilani reported the preparation of Ottoman ships and the arrival of four messengers from Constantinople who passed on to Morea to gather infantry for the Ottoman army. He also reiterated the rumours he heard in Negroponte about the rebellion in Syria and Egypt of Canberdi (Janbirdi) Ghazali, a former Mamluk and the current

Ottoman governor of Damascus, against the Ottoman sultan. As far as rumours were concerned, Safavids were reportedly coming to his help with great force. The letter from the ruling council of Corfu also included other letters received from Zakynthos conveying news acquired from a ship from Rhodes. These reports claimed that Suleiman I was poisoned, and his five-year-old son was to ascend to the throne. This piece of false information was accompanied by yet another mistaken claim about the success of Ghazali's rebellion and his enthronement as sultan in Cairo (Sanuto 1969, XXIX:625). In fact, the rebellion of Ghazali had been harshly suppressed in February 1521 AD and the ring-leader murdered, let alone enthroned (Yelçe 2009, 160 f.).

This detailed letter is important for several reasons. First of all, it shows how correct and false news went hand in hand in the early 16th cent. AD. There was a rebellion by Ghazali against the Ottomans; but it was in Syria, not in Egypt. Moreover, he was defeated and killed around the time this letter arrived in Venice. Suleiman I was not dead. The Safavids were far from running to Ghazali's help with great force, only engaging in border skirmishes. It appears that informants at

various locations were too hasty – or optimistic – in coming to conclusions about the final outcome of the crisis. Furthermore, the means of transmission of information, however false it may be, demonstrates how islands were connected to each other: news gathered in Rhodes and transmitted to Venice through both Zakynthos and Corfu. Also important was the fact that news spread not only through written means but also through oral communication. Oral delivery of news did not lose its importance during the 16th cent. AD either for elites or for the general public (De Vivo 2007; 2012). As demonstrated by this case, hearsay and gossip were quite influential along with written testimonies; and islands played a crucial role also for this type of news dissemination. This example highlights the momentum gained by the process of news gathering and dissemination during times of crisis, especially where economic interests of Venice were under threat.

What About Business: Conquests of Selim I (1516 AD to 1517 AD)

The change in authority as the Mamluks were replaced by Ottomans in Egypt and Syria in the early 16th cent. AD was no doubt perceived as a threat to Venetian mercantile interests in the region (*fig. 6*). Venetian merchants were increasingly granted commercial contracts by the Mamluk sultans towards the end of the 14th cent. AD. When rival European cities began to lose profits in the eastern Mediterranean market for various reasons during the second half of the 15th cent. AD, the Republic of Venice secured a position as a monopoly in the spice trade from the eastern Mediterranean to Europe. While Mamluk sultans were dependent on Venice, especially for the import of metals such as silver and copper, Venetian merchants certainly needed the privileges provided by the Mamluk sultans for the purchase of spices (Ashtor 1974; Arbel 2004). Thus, the stability of the region and continued support of the Mamluk sultans were of utmost importance for Venice.

Venetian correspondence of this transformative period illuminates the news flow and traffic during times of major armed conflict. An analysis of such news items and their dissemination shows

that the permeation of news about war depended on the location of the armed conflict and that the speed of transmission changed according to the perceived significance of the incident. During the Ottoman conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516 AD and 1517 AD, the majority of news was gathered in Cyprus, a Venetian colony paying tribute to the Mamluk sultan. Sanuto's diaries allow the historian to follow two distinct phases of the conflict in the region: the first phase in Syria in August and September 1516 AD, and the second phase in Egypt in January 1517 AD.

During the first phase, news arrived in Cyprus primarily from Damascus, Tripoli, and Aleppo through letters by Venetian consuls or merchants situated in these cities, and by those who escaped to Cyprus during the turmoil and narrated their eye-witness accounts. Those who managed to find their way to Cyprus also recounted the rumours they heard on the way. On October 24th 1516 AD, Sanuto recorded a series of letters, six of which were from Cyprus. Among these letters, one was from Andrea Arimondo. As the consul of Damascus, Arimondo was responsible for the protection of the Venetian community as well as controlling commercial exchanges, collecting taxes and duties. The consul also served as the official representative of the Republic in formal communication with local officials. Informing authorities of the *Serenissima* about developments in trade and international politics also fell under his responsibilities (Pedani 2006, 7). Writing on August 30th 1516, Arimondo told about the death of the Mamluk sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri during the war with the Ottomans and how Selim I took Aleppo. Dated September 4th and 5th 1516 AD, two letters from the bundle were penned respectively by Venetian merchants Pietro Morosini and Antonio Testa, who had both escaped from Tripoli to Famagusta, a major port city of Cyprus. From Famagusta, they wrote to Nicosia, the seat of the *luogotenente* of Cyprus. Both letters informed about the movement of Selim I from Aleppo to Tripoli, not withholding information about the riots and looting that took place in the city of Tripoli. Added to these eye-witness accounts were two letters written by the *luogotenente* and the ruling council of Cyprus. Both parties wrote further about what they had 'heard' in Nicosia about the ongoing war. The source of

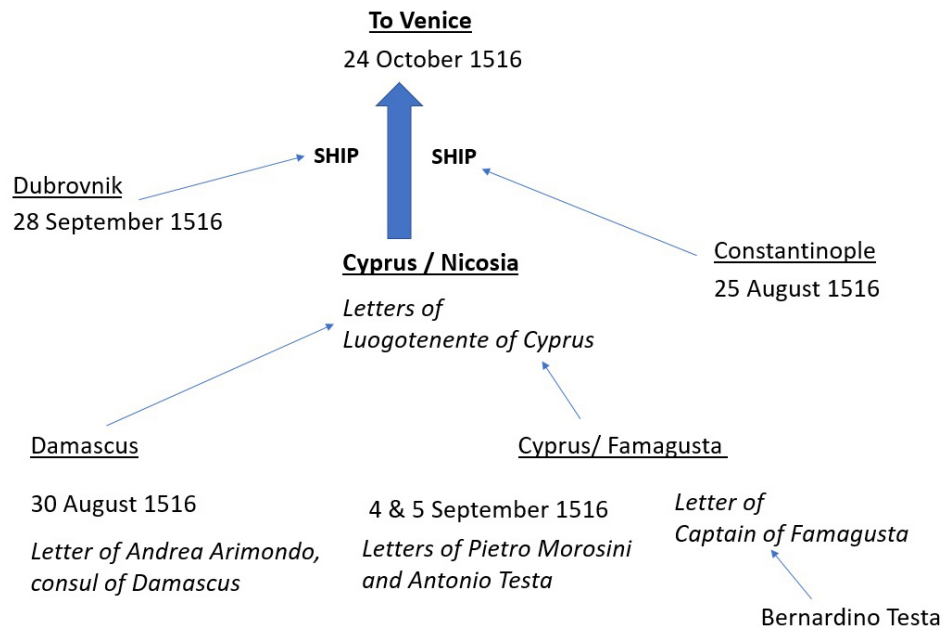
Ottoman Conquest of Syria and Egypt (1516-17): Phase I

Fig. 6. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence during the Ottoman Conquest of Syria and Egypt on Phase I, 1516 AD to 1517 AD.

the oral testimony was a Bernardino Testa who fled to Famagusta from Tripoli. Bernardino's testimony was transmitted to the Nicosian authorities in a letter by the captain of Famagusta to whom the fugitive related the information he had (Sanuto 1969, XXIII: 106–109).

The ship bringing the bundle from Nicosia carried four other letters: from Dubrovnik, Constantinople, Crete, and Corfu. The letters from Dubrovnik and Constantinople, dated September 28th and August 25th 1516 AD, respectively, included news concerning the conquest of Syria (Sanuto 1969, XXIII:109). Both letters mentioned messengers arriving from Selim I's camp to the capital to provide the latest news to Prince Suleyman (later Suleyman I) who was guarding the city during his father's absence. The letters from Corfu and Crete, on the other hand, did not mention Syria at all. The letter from Crete informed about the attack of the notorious Ottoman corsair Kurdoglu on certain towns of Crete and his men, killing several people and looting their possessions. Similarly, the letter from Corfu also warned about the same corsair who was seen on waters close to Zakynthos (Sanuto 1969, XXIII:109–110).

This bundle of letters provides a glimpse into the initiation of the circulation of a news item or miscellany. They involve locations and individuals directly affected by the war who narrated what they saw or heard to a secondary group of persons located at the nearest information hub, in this case Cyprus. A second circulation phase can be traced within the island, from the eastern port of Famagusta, where those fleeing the conflict zones in Syria sought refuge, to Nicosia, where the interested party – the gatherer of news – was located. The main actors of this dual process were often Venetian officials or merchants; however, people of various occupations and social standings were also engaged as observed in later correspondence, such as that by a priest (Sanuto 1969, XXIII:328). A tertiary level of circulation involved high-ranking Venetian officials in Nicosia putting all letters together and sending them on an appropriate – and available – ship to Venice. Judging by the additional four letters from closer locations, the ship apparently stopped at these ports and collected whatever correspondence was to be sent to Venice; thus, adding a fourth level to the process of news transmission.

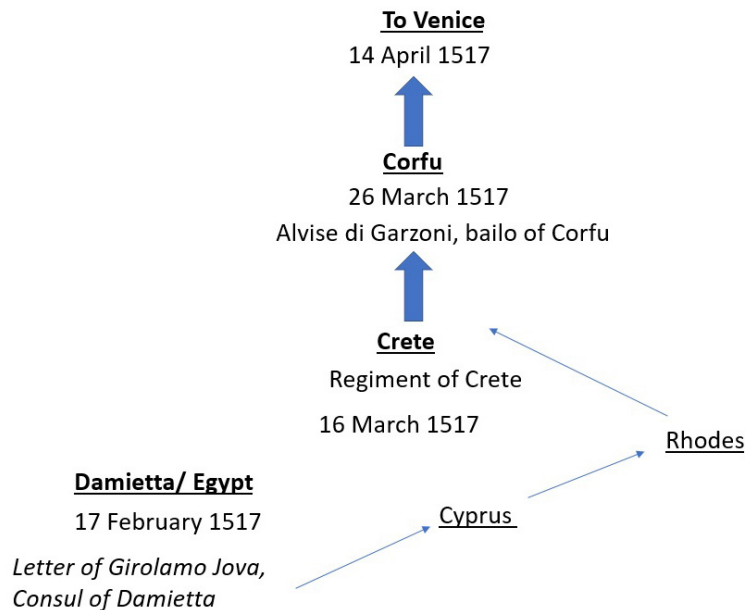
Ottoman Conquest of Syria and Egypt (1516-17): Phase II

Fig. 7. Graphical representation of the postal correspondence during the Ottoman Conquest of Syria and Egypt on Phase II, 1516 AD to 1517 AD.

The second phase of Selim I's campaign against the Mamluks, until January 1517 AD, was carried out in Egypt. The speed and the pattern of the news network seems to have slightly changed. It has been suggested that news transmission accelerated during the occupation of Egypt as compared to the slower pace of news flow during the military operations in Syria. The Venetian Senate members, who previously hesitated to send ambassadors to Selim I and opted to wait for the outcome of the conflict, accelerated the process upon receiving the Ottoman ruler's official letter proclaiming the victories he achieved in Syria. Venetian ambassadors were hastily – and prudently – dispatched to Egypt via Cyprus in order to be ready in the face of an ultimate Ottoman victory in the region at large (Arbel 2013b, 118). Selim I entered Cairo on February 15th 1517 AD, with great pomp (Emecen 2009). The first to convey this news was Girolamo Jova, Venetian consul of Damietta, a city close to Cairo, on February 17th 1517 (fig. 7). Rather than using the more conventional route through Cyprus, the consul sent his letter to the regiment in Crete onboard a ship departing from Damietta. Receiving the letter on March 16th, the regiment of Crete interrogated the owners of the

ship, Stamati Magnati and Pietro de Micono, who were also eye-witnesses to the events in Egypt; and sent two individual detailed reports on their testimonies (Sanuto 1969, XXIV:161–64).

These reports show that the ship did not sail directly to Crete from Damietta. It first made a stop at Cyprus, and then at Rhodes, which explains the period of one month between the date of the letter and the date of arrival. The details about the voyage of the ship, as well as what the two ship owners saw and heard during their stop at Rhodes, were also included in the reports. In this case, the circulation of news started at a single point of origin, namely Damietta, but unlike the news from Syria, it spread to different destinations through the eastern Mediterranean information network. This difference could be based on the caution on the part of the ship's captain due to the alleged movement of the Ottoman navy toward Egypt. The ship crew may also have aimed to notify these other islands, Cyprus and Rhodes, about the immediate situation in Cairo as this time, unlike the Syrian phase, it was for certain that the Mamluk Sultanate had fallen, and its capital had been taken over. In this phase, Crete comes forth as important a transmission node as Cyprus was during the

Syrian phase. The second circulation level, thus, originated in Crete as the letter from Damietta, the two reports written by the regiment of Crete, as well as two letters from Venetians in Crete directed to two individuals in Venice, one of which was our Marino Sanuto himself. The bundle first reached Corfu, although the officials of the island were not included in the information loop during the Syrian phase. From here, as the tertiary level of transmission, the letters were sent to Venice by Alvise di Garzoni, *bailo* of Corfu, on March 26th 1517 AD to arrive in Venice about three weeks later, on April 14th 1517 AD (Sanuto 1969, XXIV:159–60).

Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to illuminate the role of major islands in the Venetian news network in the early 16th cent. AD. The cases under focus demonstrate that an information network with a definite pattern – including Cyprus, Crete, and Rhodes as intertwined hubs – was at work for news from the eastern sector of the Mediterranean, similar in function to the information network on the Ionian Sea. The cases point out the crucial nodal role of Crete, not only as part of the news network of the Ionian Sea in particular, but also as a transmission point for news from the East along with Cyprus. The cases also show that the flow of information changed according to circumstances and the nature of the incidents to be recounted. While some news hubs were informed about the general situation in the East during times of peace, they may have remained ignorant to the incidents during times of crisis. Furthermore, certain hubs would change or re-arrange their operations during times of conflict, depending on the location and immediacy of the events. Changes in the manner and speed of delivery and transmission are observed due to the impact of climatic conditions on sailing.

The examined cases reveal not only the spatial nodal roles of the islands in news transmission but also the nature of the agents involved in the process. The governors and the officials stationed

at the islands as parts of the *stato da mar* and as posts operating under the *reggimento* system proved to be the most influential and crucial elements in the efficient operation of the news network. These high-ranking Venetian officials did not act solely as administrators, but also as active actors in gathering and transmitting news. Their sources ranged from their own agents to travellers and merchants from all nations. The rich variety of travellers, having to stop over on these islands, either for provisions and shelter during long sea voyages or for commercial reasons, often provided these officials with a plethora of news items to be conveyed to Venice. The cases also suggest that although these men were responsible for collecting and submitting news, they were not very keen on confirming the accuracy of the information, at least in the short run. The information obtained from such a variety of sources could at times prove to be unreliable as news also spread through rumours – occasionally distorted unintentionally or deliberately. Oral delivery of news did not lose its significance throughout the 16th cent. AD; hearsay and gossip remained quite influential along with written testimonies. Thus, islands played a crucial role in disseminating also false information as part of the news networks.

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