

THE GENOESE COLONIES IN FRONT OF THE TURKISH ADVANCE (1453-1475)

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The situation of the Genoese colonies in the East after the fall of Constantinople is efficaciously reflected in two letters sent to Genoa, a few months distant the one from the other, from Pera and from Chios. In the first letter, written on the 23rd of June 1453, the ex-podestà of Pera, Angelo Giovanni Lomellino, related the tragic events of the conquest of the Greek Capital city and the surrender of the Genoese colony: the escape of the Christians' ships, the sack, the demolition of all fortifications. That meant the order for Chios to pay a tribute, and the possibility of Kaffa and the other lands of the Black Sea of being asked to pay some tributes too; that exorted the government of Genoa and the Christians to intervene; it revealed the wish of Mehmed to reach and to conquest Rome within two years⁽¹⁾.

On the 27th of September 1453, from Chios, Franco Giustini-ani, who should have succeeded Lomellino as the Podestà of Pera, sent to Genoa other details about the dramatic situation of Latin peoples in the East. Pera was imposed a Turkish government, taxes from Chios and from the colonies were demanded in the Black Sea, and the promises the Sultan had made were not reliable. It particular gave prominence to the fears of the habitants inspired by the Eastern colonies, and their doubts about the future, especially regarding the last initiative taken by Mehmed: the reinforcement of the fortress of Rumeli Hisary, to control the navigation through the Bosphorus, and the rigging of at least two-hundred bo-

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(1) A. PERTUSI, *La caduta di Costantinopoli: I, Le testimonianze dei contemporanei*, Verona, 1976, pp. 39-51.

ats whose aim was ignored. It finally pointed out the fact that only an intervention coming from the Western powers could restrain a further intervention of the Turkish power and avoid the Genoese positions in the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea to fall down⁽²⁾

For other twenty years, until the fall of Kaffa in 1475, the same problems, shown in those two letters, would be the preoccupation of the Eastern Latins in their everyday life and their relations with

- (2) A. PERTUSI, *La caduta di Costantinopoli*, II, *L'eco nel mondo*, Verona, 1976, pp. 98-105. About the history of the Genoese colonies in Levant, see: C. MANFRONI, *Le relazioni tra Genova. l'Impero bizantino e i Turchi*, in: "Atti della Società ligure di storia patria", XXVIII, Genova, 1898, pp. 577-973; R. S. LOPEZ *Storia delle colonie genovesi nel Mediterraneo*, Bologna, 1938; M. BALARD, *La Romanie Génoise (XII. e- début du XV. e siècle)*, in "Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria", XVIII (XCII), Genova, 1978; GEO PISTARINO, *I Gin dell'Oltremare*, Civico Istituto Colombiano, Studi e testi, Serie storica diretta da G. Pistarino, Genova 1988; Id., *Genovesi d'Oriente*, Civico Istituto Colombiano, Studi e testi, Serie storie storica diretta da G. Pistarino, in the press. About the participation of the Genoese to the defence of Constantinople and the situation of their colonies in front of the Turkish advance, see A. ROCCATAGLIATA, *Da Bisanzio a Chio nel 1453*, in *Miscellanea de storia italiana e mediterranea per Nino Lamboglia*, Collana Storica di fonti e studi diretta da G. Pistarino, 23, Genova, 1978, pp. 381-408; EAD., *Con un notaio genovese tra Pera e Chio nel 1453-1454*, in "Revue des études sudest européennes", XVII, 1979, n.2 (April-June), pp. 219-239; G. PISTARINO, *Note alle fonti sulla caduta di Costantinopoli*, in "Atti dell'Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere", XL, Genova 1984, pp. 4-13; ID., *I Genovesi nel Levante fra il tramonto di Costantinopoli e l'Impero ottomano*, in *Aspetti della vita economica medievale. Atti del Convegno di studi nel X anniversario della morte di Federigo Melis. Firenze-Pisa-Pranto. 10-14 marzo 1984*, Firenze, 1985, pp. 91-125; ID., *La caduta di Costantinopoli: da Pera genovese a Galata turca*, in *La storia dei Genovesi*, V, Genova, 1985, pp. 7-47; ID., *The Genoese in Perà-Turkish Galata*, in "Mediterranean Historical Review", I, n. 1, giugno 1986, pp. 63-85 (Italian edition: *I Genovesi in Pera Galata turca*, in ID., *I Gin dell'Oltremare* cit., pp. 409-456); ID., *Tra i Genovesi dell'Oriente turco dal tramonto del Medioevo al primo tempo dell'età moderna*, in "Atti dell'Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere", XI, III, Genova, 1988, pp. 200-212; G. OLGIAI, *Angelo Giovanni Lomellino: attività politica e mercantile dell'ultimo podestà di Pera*, in AA.VV. *La storia dei Genovesi*, XI, Genova 1989, pp. 139-196; EAD., *I Genovesi in Oriente dopo la caduta di Costantinopoli*, in "Studi Balcanici", Quaderni di Clío- 8, Roma 1989, pp. 45-59; EAD., *Genovesi alla difesa di Costantinopoli*, in "Atti dell'Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere", Genova, 1990, pp. 492-503. For the editions of sources: L.T. BEYGRANO, *Prima serie di documenti riguardanti la colonia di Pera*, in "Atti della Società ligure di Storia patria", XIII, Genova, 1877, pp. 97-317; ID., *Seconda serie di documenti riguardanti la colonia di Pera*, ibidem, pp. 931-1003; A. ROCCATAGLIATA, *Notai genovesi in Oltremare. Atti rogati a Pera e Mitilene. I, Pera (1408-1490); II, Mitilene (1454-1460)*, Collana storica di fonti e studi diretta da G. Pistarino, 34, 1-2, Genova 1982; EAD., *Notai genovesi in Oltremare. Atti rogati a Chio (1453-1454, 1470-1471)*, Collana storia di fonti e studi diretta da G. Pistarino, 35, Genova 1982; GIUSTINA OLGIAI, *Documenti genovesi sulla caduta di Costantinopoli*, Civico Istituto Colombiano, Studi e testi, Serie storica diretta da G. Pistarino, in the press.

their native land: it was impossible to reach the Black Sea, because of the bombardments of the Rumeli Hisary fortress; the Sultan demanded taxes always heavier, in exchange for a peace not always protected; the Turkish navy that periodically came into sight as a sign of the precarious political situation; they called out the Western countries for help, trying like that to avoid a tragedy, that, however, seemed unavoidable by then.

The Western countries, besides, had already known about these fears, even before the fall of Constantinople. The payment of taxes to the Turks, in exchange for some commercial facilities or for their keeping peace, was customary practice in Mehmed Father's times, The Sultan Murad II. The news concerning the military potential of the Turks and their probable objectives reached the West, not only through the reports of the colony's authorities, but also through the merchants that made business in the Eastern countries. Mehmed intended to build a fortress on the west side of Bosphorus, and the Council of Genoa had heard about this purpose in March 1452, before the beginning of its construction. In such circumstances, even if the Government recognized the serious danger that was to happen, it had not approved any measure implying a military or diplomatic intervention of Genoa; the community of Pera had to attend to the matter, sending ambassadors to the Sultan to convince him, but only using timely and deferential speeches, to give up his purpose⁽³⁾.

The Rumeli Hisary fortress, raised in a few months, from April to August 1452, symbolized from its rising the failure of the non-intervention policy that the Western states had followed when the siege of Constantinople was imminent. In November 1452, the assault from the fortress against the Venetian ships revealed without any doubt the war function of the castle rightly called "Boghaz - Kesen" by the builders, as it was the "Blockade of the Straits"⁽⁴⁾. The peace treaties with the Sultan did not constitute a security for any ship crossing the Bosphorus anymore: all the ships steered towards or coming from the Black Sea were checked from the Turkish garrison and had to pay a tax on their way crossing the Bosphorus. After the fall of Constantinople, the Rumeli Hisary fortress became a nearly insuperable obstacle for the Genoese who, unlike

(3) L. T. BELGRANO, *Prima serie cit.*, n. CXLIV, pp. 221-223 (March 13, 1452).

(4) F. BABINGER, *Mehmed der Eroberer und seine Zeit*, Munchen, 1953. Italian edition: *Maometto il Conquistatore ed il suo tempo*, Torino, 1967, pp. 81-85.

the Venetians, had not obtained any treaty from the Sultan that could have secured, at least in theory, the free passage through the Straits. It now became vious that at any time the fortress was able to blockade the entrance in the Black Sea according to the Sultan's wills. The survival of the colonies of the Republic of Genoa, even the most remote ones, who represented the last survival of Christendom in the see now completely submitted to Turks and Tartars, was now really precarious and drammatical. For other twenty years, the survival of Kaffa and other Genoese territories of the Black Sea depended upon the captains of the fleets of the Bank of San Giorgio and the merchants that accepted, sometimes at the cost of their life, the risk to break through the big Turkish blocking.

The important business of the colonies , that called the merchants back to the East, even after the fall of Constantinople, was perhaps one of the reasons why Mehmed, even if he could do it, had not begun immediately to conquest the Latin territories in the East. The yearly tax that had to pay, in 1453 and 1454 ,all the territories depending upon Genoa, was actually an important source of income , and increased according to what Mehmed wished.

As Genoa and its colonies were far the one from the other, the agreements concerning the taxes were established by the Turks and the representatives of the colonies, without any direct intervention coming from Genoa. The habitants of Chios, Lesbos and Enos had to pay a tax to the boats and the messengers sent by the Sultan. The habitants of Kaffa sent their representatives to Mehmed, to assure their own safety, but they didn't want, or perhaps they could not save the colony of Samastri, even with such agreements⁽⁵⁾ . The fact that these taxes had been accepted by the colonies populations without the acceptance from their native lands did not compromise the availability of the agreements, based not on the rights but on the military force of the Turks. The possession of Pera, whose habitants had decided to surrender to the Sultan without the intervention of the Genoese government could not be claimed by Genoa only because of the rights of the Republic. However, an attempt had been made in that way from the Doge of Genoa, in 1454 , through the diplomatic mission he had sent to the Sultan. The ambassadors,

(5) A. VIGNA, *Codice diplomatico delle colonie Tauro-liguri durante la signoria dell'Ufficio di San Giorgio (MCCCCLIII-MCCCCLXXV)*, in "Atti della Società ligure di storiapatria", IV, Genova, 1868, n. CXVII, pp. 297-301 (March 18, July 1 August 13, 1455); F. BABINGER, *Maometto*, cit., p. 110.

Baldassarre Marruffo and Lucano Spinola, had to ask for the restitution of the colony and the reconstruction of its fortifications paid by the Turks, but without pointing out the fact that Pera had always been the Sultan and his predecessors' possession and that if Genoa had controlled Pera again, it only would have become the coffer of all the precious goods coming from the West, useful for the Ottoman House⁽⁶⁾.

The recovery of Pera seemed impossible. But other Genoese colonies were able to act as commercial junctions useful for both Latins and Turks. Chios was one of these colonies, able to preserve its independence till 1566. The other Genoese territories, guarantees of the safety, were on the contrary very precarious. In exchange their locals had to pay very heavy taxes without any help from the mother land. Anyhow, the increasing taxes were always reported to the Genoese government, as the proof of the increasing of difficulties and the request of a reduction of taxation, or arming that the Republic had to pay. Besides, the Council of Genoa intended sometimes not to consider really those demands of interventions since the Sultan would have protected and would not have attacked those lands from which he received a regular income⁽⁷⁾.

Such an estimation was not completely wrong since Mehmed wanted to include the islands of Chios, Lesbos and Enos in the territories under his protection, in the treaty signed with Venice in 1454⁽⁸⁾. However, payment of taxes and consequently the safety of the colonies were still dependent on the Sultan's wills and sometimes by some unponderable factors. On 1455, that is because of the claim of a credit due to Francesco Draperio, collaborator of the Ottoman House since the times of Murad II, that Focea passed into the Turkish hands for which Chios paid very heavy taxes because of its important business of alum⁽⁹⁾. On the same year, the death of Dorino I Gattilusio, Prince of Lesbos induced the Sultan to double the

(6) L.T. BELGRANO, *Prima serie cit.*, n. CLIV, pp. 261-270 (March 11, 1454).

(7) State Archive of Genoa (A.S.G.), ARCHIVIO SEGRETO (A.S.), *Frammenti di Diversorum* 712A (March 5, 1455): "... dicens morem esse Turcorum ut eos tueantur et protegant qui sibi tributarii facti sint".

(8) E. CORNET, *Giornale dell'assedio di Costantinopoli 1453 di Nicolò Barbaro, corredato di note e documenti*, Vienna, 1856, n.14, pp. 80-82.

(9) A. VIGNA, *cit.*, n. CXVII, pp. 297-301 (March 18, July 18, August 13, 1455); M. L. HEERS, *Les Génois le commerce de l'alun à la fin du Moyen Age*, in "Revue d'histoire économique et sociale", 32, 1954, p. 50; F. BABINGER, *Maometto cit.*, pp. 139-141.

taxes on the island, which was his way of recognizing the new prince of the island. Domenico Gattilusio that, in the new circumstances did not possess the Tasos island anymore, had to pay a tax of three hundred golden ducats for the islands of Schirro, Skiatos and Skopulos that were first under his rights because of sultan order and the wills of the habitants., and then under the power of Venetians⁽¹⁰⁾. In 1456 the appearance of the Turkish fleet near the territories of Dorino II Gattilusio, Prince of Enos, let the habitants and, their sovereign to surrender almost unconditional: Enos, Imbro and Samotraccia became dependant of the Turks in spite of the money paid to the Sultan to exploit their rich salt - mines. It was the same for Gattilusio of Mitilene Lemno's island. In 1462, the Turkish attack against Lesbos made the Gattilusio's dynasty disappear in the Egean Sea⁽¹¹⁾. With the loss of the island and its rich mines, Genoa was finally out from alum business. Two years after, however, Mehmed signed agreements with the Maonese allowing this business to start again⁽¹²⁾.

These trials and offers co-operation that happened by turns between the Sultan and Genoa made the Turkish fleet become more and more important. The appearance of Mehmed's boats, sometimes even small but numerous, was followed with anxiety, and the news about their military forces and their objectives were conveyed from colony to colony. According to Turkish movings forwards, colonies asked their native land to help them, sometimes overstanding the dangers, because, in any way, the intervention of the mother-country couldn't have arrived before several months.

Though, those fleets, that always spread panic from Famagosta to Rhodes, from Mitilene to Chios and up to the far Kaffa, were not invincible at all. Their crews were untrained, sometimes under the command of admirals that were here only because the Sultan liked them, they were powerful only because they were numerous and because everyone was struck with terror as soon as they appeared. Their few encounters with the Latin ships caused them, in spite of their numeric superiority, some important defeats. During the siege of Constantinople, the entire Turkish fleet couldn't win in front of

(10) A. S. G., A. S., *Frammenti di Diversorum* 712A, (August 18, 1456); F. BABINGER, *Maometto* cit., pp.141-142;

(11) F. BABINGER, *Maometto* cit., pp.144-146, 223-227.

(12) A.S.G., A.S., *Diversorum Registri* 557, cc. 139r-140r, (May 14, 1464).

four Genoese commercial wessels, moreover in a lack of wind. They often tried to fight against small possessions, trying to avoid the island the most fortified or protected by Genoese ships. Some admirals like Balta-Oghlu, Hamza Beg and Junus Pasha provoked the Sultan to anger because they were incapable in front of the enemy⁽¹³⁾.

The origin of the terror caused by the Turkish fleets was based upon a collective influence and not upon real facts. It was conveyed to the West, together with the demand of military helps to the mother-country. The Genoese Government couldn't ignore those demands, even if from the 15 november 1453 no colony was under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Genoa anymore, at least in teory. After the fall of Constantinople Genoa had lost Pera, had sold the colonies of Black Sea to the Bank of San Giorgio, the administrator of Famagosta; it still partially controlled Chios, given out by contract to the Maonese, and Gattilusio's possessions, nominally feudataries of the Byzantine Empire and therefore protected by the Republic. Despite, in front of the Turkish threat, Genoa confirmed without hesitations his lies with those Eastern Latins, who were not considered as Genoese citizens though. The interventions in favour of the Eastern colonies, however, were always somewhat unusual measures, decided to face only some serious dangers, without any real provided plans. After the suppression of the *Officium Provisionis Romanie* (the magistrature at the head of the colonies), due to the selling of the lands of the Black Sea, the "management" of the Genoese interest in the East was assured by officials elected only at the right momet, as the *Officiales rerum Chiensium et Mitilenensium* entrusted with the measures to take to protect Chios and Lesbos, threatened by the Turkish fleet⁽¹⁴⁾.

Each mesure to help the Eastern colonies was taken in order not to be considered from the Sultan as hostilities in front of him. Besides, the dramatic situation of Kaffa, that a single order of the Sultan could have condemned to a complete isolation, did not allowed Genoa to think of a fight with Turks. In case of conflict, the Genoese could not trust any secure allies. The Turkish threat didn't represent the glue for a possible reconciliation of the Western States able to cancel the causes of mutual tensions. Moreover, the old

(13) F. BABINGER, *Maometto* cit., pp. 93-94, 139-141, 143.

(14) A.S.G., A.S., *Frammenti di Diversorum* 712A.

oppositions in the colonies had not appeased: the tensions with Greeks, in Chios; the difficult cohabitation between the Genoese of Famagosta and the king of Cyprus; the fights, in Kaffa, with the Armenian minority and, outside, with the Khan-tartars.

While, in the West, now only the Pontifex dreamt of an impossible crusade, the Genoese Government had to subordinate the protection of the colonies to problems that threatened the Republic safety. The common risk, on the contrary, led to the mutual collaboration of the Eastern Genoese, at least during the moments of absolute emergency. In 1455, some groups of mercenary soldiers of Pera origin were engaged from the captain of Famagosta to protect the colony⁽¹⁵⁾; in 1458, the representatives of the Maona sent letters to ask a military intervention in favour of Lesbos, where most of the population of Chios, threaten with plague, had sheltered⁽¹⁶⁾.

Till the fall of Constantinople, Chios carried on an important activity to co-ordinate military helps between East and West; those helps were often very late, especially because of the war against Alphonso of Aragon, and discharging the costs on the shipping business and on the incomes coming from the colonies. As the objectives of Mehmed were not known, the destination of the helps was sometimes hazy too: the captains of the ships sent to Kaffa in 1455 were ordered to stop rather in Chios, to protect the island, provided that the Maonese paid all the expenses⁽¹⁷⁾. The lack of a real plan of operations from the Genoese and the indifference of the Western powers made useless the few successes against Mehmed: in 1456, the failure of Turks in Belgrade made the Christendom very enthusiastic, but without meant a further political intervention in the East and the Genoese Government decided not to renew the salary of the crossbowmen sent to Lesbos, since there was no risk anymore⁽¹⁸⁾; in 1459 the Pontifical fleet made the islands of Lemnos, Tasos and Samotracia free from the Turks, but the Protectors of San Giorgio refused to protect them, because they were afraid of the possible re-

(15) A.S.G., Archivio di San Giorgio (S.G.), *Primi Cancellieri*, busta 88, cc. 702-703 (February 6, 1455), 705 (March 5, 1455), 721 (September 26, 1455).

(16) A.S.G., A.S., *Diversorum Registri* 564, cc. 13v.-14r. (February 26, 1459).

(17) A.S.G., A.S., *Frammenti di Diversorum* 712A (March 5, 1455).

(18) A.S.G., A.S., *Frammenti di Diversorum* 712A (August 18, 1456).

taliations from Mehmed against Kaffa⁽¹⁹⁾. In 1474-1475, the news concerning the new ruggings of Turks led Genoese Government and the Maonese to intensify the defence of Chios⁽²⁰⁾. However, Mehmed fleet entered in the Black Sea, ending the independence of Kaffa, tearing off in that way the last base of the Genoese in the Black Sea.

Chios was now the last surviving base of Genoa in the East, and could survive thanks to the profits that Genoa and the Turks could draw from it. That did not mean it was free from dangers. In 1475, after the conquest of Kaffa, the Sultan wanted to control the Port of Chios: the only way to escape for the Maonese was to declare to be citizens of Venice, raising the insignia of San Marco⁽²¹⁾. That event, that didn't have any political consequence, induced Genoese to write a warning letter to the Maonese: but, choosing the solutions of a compromise and collaborating with both Genoa and the Turks, Chios found a clever way to survive, in spite of many difficulties, until 1566.

(19) A. VIGNA, cit., n. CCCCLIII, pp. 937-938 (June 12, 1459).

(20) A.S.G., S.G., *Primi Cancellieri*, busta 89, cc. 252-285.

(21) A.S.G., A.S., *Diversorum Registri* 597, cc. 9r.-10r. (August 30- September 1, 1475).