

The Ottoman-Venetian Border (15th-18th Centuries)

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6 Beyond the Marks

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6.1 Marks on Things

How can a border be established among peoples or kingdoms that belong to wide plains with neither peaks of mountains nor silver lines of rivers? How can a spatial limit be defined there and how is it possible to avoid that everything become prey to the men of one or the other frontier? Some nomadic peoples, for whom the country was the road they covered day after day, rejected the furrow of the plough and chose to leave a mark on what belonged to them; the herds of stock were branded with the owners' symbol. Zanini defined it as a «portable border».¹ Areas such as the steppe seem to refuse the borders among states; the flat immensity of the land never changes and everything mingles and blends; the border of one's own living space has to be rebuilt and redefined every day. Fences cannot be built because other people will be there the next day; the only way to identify what belongs to one or the other is making it recognisable by means of clothes, marks, symbols known and recognisable by everyone.

The brand used to recognise the stock developed in its own way among peoples in the Near East. *Tamğa*, *tuğra* and *tabın* probably originated from this function. The word *tamğa* means brand,² mark and then, by extension, seal. It was originally affixed on stock or personal belongings and little by little it was used to mean specific tribes and, after the Mongolian invasion, appeared also in some documents, for example those of the Ak Koyunlu, the Golden Horde or Tatars of Crimea. *Tamğa* may also be imprinted on coins or in the ornamentation of carpets or else reproduced as a heraldic device on Mamluk coats of arms. As Mayer stated, some blazons of the time, otherwise unintelligible, may be explained by means of brands used in heraldry as well, even though their meaning continues to be very ob-

1 Zanini, *Significati del confine*, 47 (translation made by the translator of this text).

2 Leiser, *Tamgha*, 182-183. There are also examples closer to us: the *signum* (sign or seal) of the *Lex Wisigothorum* transformed also into the border mark, whereas in Sardinian *sinnu* means the brand for the animals and *sinnare* is the action of branding the stock; Mastrelli, *Riflessi*, 789-811.

scure because it is not possible to equate them to symbols that indicate a specific profession, contrary to other marks used in the same context. According to Maḥmūd al-Kāšġari, *tamġa* was synonymous with the Arabic *ṭābi'* (print, mark).³ Ghizela Suliteanu showed that, among the Nogay Tatars, there are and there were specific geometric signs, called *tabın*, used to emphasise the belonging to a particular family and the descent from a common ancestor. They often represented a stylisation of the object to which the name of the line referred and were the symbol of both a warlike unity and a territorial prohibition.⁴

The origin of the *tuġras*, i.e. the sovereign monograms used not only by Ottomans but also by other peoples such as Seljuqs, Ayyubids and Mamluks, has been thoroughly analysed. They have been equated to a falcon, namely a totem bird of some Turkish tribes or to a bow with some arrows; other scholars, in order to explain them, thought about the imprint of Murad I's hand (1359-1389) or associated its name to the word *tuġramak* (to cut) or to the *tuġs*, i.e. the horsetails that were a symbol of sovereignty in the Ottoman world. The most followed hypothesis saw them as born from the brands used for the stock. Maḥmūd al-Kāšġari says that the animals and the slaves of the Oġuz sovereigns were branded with an element called in this way.⁵

6.2 Marks on People

Borders sometimes may be brought along, not only on what belongs to us but also on one's body, the clothes or an object put on. Many tales of slaves or prisoners on the run emphasise the clothes that distinguish a Christian from a Muslim, or the inhabitant of a village on this side of the

3 Bates, Darley Doran, *The Art*, 387, no. 526; Talbot Rice, *I selgiuchidi*, 181-183; Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry*, 18-19; Maḥmūd al-Kāšġari, *Türk Şiveleri Lügati*, vol. 1, 321.

4 Suliteanu, *Le «tabın»*, 93-113, especially 98 where we read (the following passage was translated from French by the translator of this text): «The *tabın* is a geometric mark that the Nogay assumed to mark their belonging to a same family and their descent from a common ancestor. In Tatar, it literally means 'bend down', but it indicates the 'holy respect' as well as the 'citizenship'. The following words are related to it: *tabı* (trace, frontier [with the nuance of respect of the frontier]); *tabınmaq* (pray), *tabıntaşı* (gravestone [with the nuance of respect of ancestral noble belonging]); it may be found in the saying: *Tabındın tamagaşı bolmağan qazaqqa oğrar* ('he who does not have a *tabın* showing his descent is a pagan'). As it may be seen, the word *tabın* does not only mean 'mark', for which the Nogay use the term *tamġa*, but it also indicates a certain historic function of moral education and a form of social organisation». See Karataev, *The Seals*, 476-488.

5 Cahen, *La tuġrā seljukide*, 167-172; Wittek, *Notes*, 310-334, no. 18; 267-293, no. 20; Bayramoġlu, *Firmans enluminés*, 14-36; Babinger, *Die Grossherliche Tughra*, 3-16; Umur, *Osmanlı*, 11-24; Kütükoġlu, *Osmanlı belgelerinin dili*, 71-75.

barrier from the one who lives on the other side.⁶ Changing one's clothes, wearing a turban or throwing it away meant taking on a different political and religious identity, mingling with the people of the village just crossed and, thus, being able to go unnoticed. In societies that did not know – or where it had just started to spread – an international document of personal identification such as the passport, clothes were an important identifying element, just like the language that could be correctly spoken, without accent, ignored or stammered.

Let us consider the Moors on the run from Spain in 1609. Forced to leave their lands and their houses, they poured not only into North-African Muslim lands, but also into other European states to reach the Ottoman Empire. Harbours such as Marseilles, Livorno or Venice were reached by this fleeing mass that very often, if it did not find ships on which to sail for a Muslim country, tried to cross the line that separated Christianity from Islam in the Balkans. In those years, an Ottoman envoy came to Venice to help them, bearing imperial letters that asked the doge to allow this mass of wretches, once they arrived as far as the eastern limits of his state, to freely change the western clothes used up until then as a cover and dress as a Muslim; the Venetian officials, as a matter of fact, thinking they were Christians, prevented them from crossing the border.⁷

Several reasons could push a man to wear a turban or western clothes. Some people left a country where they had had an experience of imprisonment or slavery; others, right for the job they did, voluntarily left their homeland to go to distant and different lands hoping to go back. They were above all merchants, but also people with official tasks and often interpreters. The lowest level of diplomatic envoys were usually allowed to disguise themselves; this does not mean their missions were not important, but that they often did not hold the official character that was necessary for an important legation made up of many people. They were messengers, secretaries or interpreters often sent in times of war or international tension in order to keep the contacts in an understated manner.

In the relations between Venice and the Porte, the most ancient traceable example seems to be that of three Muslims, Yusuf, Mehmed and Ağa, sent by Hamza, *dizdar* of Herceg Novi, with credentials and the written information, addressed to the Republic, that they would be dressing up as Christians during the journey. As for the Venetian interpreters that went to the Porte, instead, the imperial safe-conducts that are still kept date back mainly to the Cretan War: they are letters of the sultan to its subor-

6 Cf. for example Osmân Agha, *Prisonnier des infidèles*, 180.

7 *Documenti turchi*, no. 1190; Pedani, *In nome del Gran Signore*, 176-178; Temimi, *Le Gouvernement Ottoman*, 32-42; *Le passage de morisque*, 304-316; Mangio, *Echi italiani*, 555-568.

dinates who ruled countries and harbours along the route between Venice and Istanbul; those documents informed that the bearers were allowed to be armed and, in dangerous places, to wear a turban and dress up as Muslims. Passing for subjects of the sultan probably was not very difficult for those who, such as the Venetian interpreters, had a perfect command of spoken Turkish, besides the written language, and knew Ottoman customs and traditions because of their long stays in the Empire.⁸

It was not only the manner of dressing, but also the use of specific colours, that identified a Christian or a Muslim. The eastern clothes were usually coloured, as the renegades who went back to the Christian land often reminded, impressed by daring combinations such as white with red, black, or green. Also the Venetian aristocratic ladies were amazed at the showy clothes of the noblewomen who had had to leave the native Crete and go back to their ancestors' land. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, light blue and yellow characterised mainly Christian and Jewish headdresses; at the end of the sixteenth century, heavy caps – yellow for Jews, blue for Christians and striped for Armenians – were very common, even though for a short period of time. It was in 1693 that Englishmen, soon imitated by the other Europeans, started to wear their national outfit, since they were ordered to wear only black dresses, shoes (not clogs or slippers) and bells as well; but, by then, black was still a very fashionable colour in Europe among the upper classes, since dyeing clothes in that way was difficult and expensive and, thus, using them meant showing wealth. Up until then, foreigners in Istanbul had tried to blend into the resident population.

Besides clothes, Christians and Muslims differed in another mark. If baptism does not leave any trace on those who receive it, circumcision marks men's body forever and was different for Jews and Muslims, as surgeons summoned by the Inquisition observed. If changing clothes could have a symbolic value, when it was not imposed by a necessity of safety during the journey; if a Turkish haircut (which left only one lock on the shaved head) could be imitated by making one's hair grow for a few weeks, circumcision definitely marked the passage to Islam and was often loathed by those who experienced it in adulthood also because of the pain and the danger it entailed. Bartolomé and Lucile Bennassar describe with a wealth of examples the various methods of the surgery, which could be done in secret or in public, without any other ceremonies or followed by celebrations. They observe, however, that specific circumstances could delay or

8 Bombaci, *Il "Liber Graecus"*, 298, no. 21; Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi*, 95-115; Lucchetta, *La scuola*, 19-40; *Lo Studio*, 479-498; *Un progetto*, 1-28; *Una scuola*, 21-61; *L'ultimo progetto*, 1-43. Cf. *Documenti turchi*, nos. 1485, 1497, 1499.

even spare it, mainly for those who converted in adulthood.⁹ In any case, it was a rite of passage in which men symbolically crossed the ideal border that divided the Christian world from the Muslim one. The opposite passage was obviously marked by baptism, which was charged with a similar value but was not so traumatic from a physical point of view.

6.3 Turks and Ottomans

Circumcision, together with clothes, was for people what the *tamğa* or the heraldic device was for things, i.e. the element that allowed to identify a group, besides the geographic space where an individual, a herd of stock or an object was. When we talk about a Mediterranean environment, the first major distinction is based on religion. On the one side, there was Europe, where the word 'Turk' became synonymous with 'Muslim' in the Modern Era. Expressions such as 'I become a Turk', 'to dress as a Turk', 'to smoke as a Turk' or 'to swear as a Turk' became very common and indicative of a world with blurred and indefinite outlines, different and 'distant'. In the Middle Ages, Muslims were often denoted as 'Saracens' or even 'Hagarenes' – from Hagar, Abraham's slave from whom they descended. Then, other peoples converted to Islam when they went closer to the Mediterranean basin. Tartars, more correctly called Tatars, were associated with the pagan afterlife, the Tartar. Among them were the *kipçaks* (also called Cumans), who settled north of the Black Sea and were called 'Westerner Tatars' for this reason, whereas people from Persian Ilkhanate were 'Levantine Tatars'. For the Europeans at the end of the Middle Ages, 'Turks' were generically the inhabitants of the principalities of Mentеше and Aydın, to which other groups such as Ottomans were added. These peoples were often called 'Teucrici' in Latin documents, i.e. with the name of ancient Trojans, in whose area they had settled. Then, Ottomans became 'the Turks' par excellence and 'the Turk' or 'Great Turk' was their leader, namely the sultan.¹⁰

The distinction between the words 'Turk' and 'Ottoman', however, is often unclear today. 'Turk' is an ethnic term referring to populations of Turkish origin, whereas 'Ottoman' meant not only those who belonged to an empire, but above all the ruling class of that state. Coming from various provinces, when they were not converted Europeans, the members of this group considered themselves as slaves of the sultan, forgetful of their origin and ethnic group, while among the subjects there were Turks, Arabs, Serbians, Croatians, Berbers, Kurds, Armenians etc.

9 Bartolomé Bennassar, Lucile Bennassar, *I cristiani di Allah*, 320-331.

10 Preto, Venezia e i Turchi, 13-22; Soykut, *Image of the "Turk" in Italy*, 1-45.

This distinction, however, was often unclear even at that time. Only those who unceasingly mixed with them, i.e. above all merchants, could have more precise ideas on the point. For example, in 1604 in Venice a decree issued by the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*¹¹ established that the negotiations concluded by Turks, up until then registered in the same book together with those of all the other subjects of the sultan, had to be listed separately. The understanding of the distinction between Ottoman subjects in general and people from different ethnic groups (i.e. Armenians, Greeks, Bosnians...) on the part of the Venetian bureaucracy was very clear in this case.

Also in the high-ranking Venetian politics there were those who knew the difference between 'Turk' and 'Ottoman'. A quick examination of twenty-eight reports by Venetian ambassadors or diplomats written between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century allows to make some remarks. They were edited some years ago using modern scientific parameters and not the rather superficial criteria that characterised some of the most famous nineteenth-century editions, in which language often appears to be Italianised and the most difficult sentences are replaced with dots. Moreover, these reports, unpublished up until then, were taken from the original manuscripts given to the *Collegio* of the Republic after the public reading in the Senate. As a matter of fact, the nineteenth-century editions were based on copies, or copies of copies, made by friends or people interested in the topic; this happened also because at that time the access to the State Archives was difficult for scholars, who had to be content with codices scattered in several Italian libraries.

Looking through this material, we may observe that in the oldest report, Andrea Foscolo's one of 1512, the word 'Ottoman' or *othomano*, as it was spelled at that time, is never mentioned but only the terms 'Turks', *turchesco*, the 'Turkish Lord' and 'Turkey' are employed. Also the few pages by Tommaso Contarini (1522), Tommaso Mocenigo (1530) and the long report by Alvise Renier (1550) produce the same result. Only Nicolò Michiel (1558) talked about the 'Ottoman house' and the 'Ottoman lords', referring only to the dynasty though. The following reports resumed the ancient usage and it was only with Giacomo Soranzo (1576 and 1584) that such terms were used again, but very seldom and with the same meaning. This applies also to Giovanni Correr (1578), Lorenzo Bernardo (1590), Girolamo Cappello (1600) and Ottaviano Bon (1609). More specifically, however, Alvise Bonrizzo (1570) used the word *mori* referring only to those coming from Granada, whereas Correr, Soranzo and Bernardo and their successors distinguished among Moors, Arabs and Turks: «If we talk about Aleppo and the neighbourhood, everybody knows that Moors do not want

11 Mentioned in Vercellin, *Mercanti turchi*, 70.

to hear the word 'Turks' and it is very well-known that Arabs, both from the Arabian desert and *Arabia Felix*, hate it and so do the Moors of Cairo and Alexandria»;¹² «Not only Christians are ill-treated and tyrannised by Turks; Arabs and Moors, who are of the same religion, are oppressed by the ruling Turks; therefore, they often would rather be subjected to the Spanish government than the Turkish one».¹³

In 1637 Angelo Alessandri, who not by chance was in the *bailo* Pietro Foscarini's employment, was the first to speak both of 'Turks' in general and of 'native Turks', 'Ottoman Empire' and 'Ottomans', showing that he knew the first word could be considered to be an ethnic term and that the state was not Turkish but Ottoman. The same remarks apply also to Tommaso Tarsia (1683), a Venetian interpreter who knew well the Turkish language and was with the army of Kara Mustafa under the walls of Vienna in 1683.

In general, it seems that there was a more correct understanding of the terms during the eighteenth century: Carlo Ruzzini (1706) used both 'Turks' and 'Ottomans' but distinguished the 'Barbary states' inhabitants' from them; Vignola (1724), another secretary, knew that 'Turk' was an ethnic term as well: «Pushed by curiosity, a great number of Greek, Armenian, Turkish women and men from every nation poured into the streets to see him»;¹⁴ Francesco Gritti (1727) almost exclusively employed the term 'Ottoman', whereas Giovanni Donà (1746) completely forgot to use the word 'Turk' in its place. Finally, the last representatives of the Republic to the Porte employed again both terms.

Besides what people thought in the West, the Ottoman Empire continued to consider itself as a multi-ethnic empire, to the extent that only after the rise to power of the Young Turks was this concept, in the wake of the many nationalistic claims followed by territorial losses, laid aside. One of the items of the Committee of Union and Progress' programme supported the acknowledgement of the existence of a single people and a single nationality, the Ottoman one, in the Empire: as a consequence, Armenians, Greeks,

12 *Relazioni inedite*, 237, report by Giovanni Correr (1578). The translation is made by the translator of this text. The original reads: «Se parlo d'Aleppo, et quei contorni, ogn'uno sa che i Mori non vogliono sentir Turchi, et è cosa notissima che gli Arabi, sì della Arabia deserta come felice, l'odiano estremamente, né miglior volontà si ritrova nei Mori del Cairo et d'Alexandria».

13 *Relazioni inedite*, 316-317, report by Lorenzo Bernardo (1590). The translation is made by the translator of this text. The original reads: «Né soli li Cristiani sono da Turchi maltrattati e tiranneggiati, gli Arabi e i Mori, che pure sono della medesima loro religione, sono di maniera oppressi da Turchi che governano, che ben spesso hanno più tosto voluto sottoporsi al governo delli Spagnoli che de Turchi».

14 *Relazioni inedite*, 866, report by Girolamo Vignola (1724). The translation is made by the translator of this text. The original reads: «Concorrivi a vederlo per le stradde la curiosità di un affollato numero di femine greche, armene, turche e di huomini pure d'ogni nazione».

Albanians, Arabs etc. had to consider themselves to be just Ottomans, like Basques and Bretons regarded themselves as French.

6.4 Franks

In the last few years, historiography has often underlined that the idea of crusade, as it is understood in the West, was totally extraneous to the Arab historians of that time who did not distinguish, among the crusaders of the first generation, the different national groups but indiscriminately labelled them for their religion or their place of origin. The others, i.e. the different ones who suddenly attacked Islam at the end of the eleventh century, were just a group of unbelievers, infidel barbarians, *ḥarbīs*, namely those who lived in the *dār al-ḥarb*. The same word *kāfir* basically became synonymous with Christian, the infidel par excellence. If historians wanted to employ a geographic term, they called them 'Franks' (*Farāngs*).¹⁵

Just as in the West there was a certain confusion as to the use of the terms Muslim, Arab, Ottoman and Turk for many centuries, in the Near East there was the same uncertainty in defining the Europeans, who were generally still defined as 'Franks' or 'belonging to the nation of the Messiah' during the Ottoman period. Especially the documents concerning international relations bear witness to a first necessary effort towards the identification of the groups belonging to different nations, even though within Christianity. If an agreement was entered into with a foreign country, it was necessary to be able to exactly recognise the subjects, even more so if the sovereign granted a general safe-conduct (*amān 'āmm*) to those who came from a specific reign or republic. Besides truces, therefore, agreed on with crusading states which were easily recognisable in the diversified eastern world of the Middle Ages, there were documents issued by Ayyubid and Mamluk sovereigns (when not by other North-African countries), aimed at protecting groups of western merchants above all. In this case, Venetians, Pisans, Genoese, Florentines and Catalans were correctly identified as members of specific communities. Venetian subjects were usually called *al-banādiqiyyīn*, whereas *al-Bundaqiyya* – the only case of an Arabic place-name that was completely different from the sound (even though not in its etymology) of the original – was the city they came from.¹⁶

The same two trends of knowledge of the other proceeded side by side also with regard to the Ottoman world. A survey conducted on the *elkabs* (*inscriptions*) of the imperial letters addressed to various sovereigns shows that a different title was reserved for each of them. Two concepts,

15 *Storici arabi*, v-xvi; Piacentini, *Le crociate*, part 1, 243; part 2, 282.

16 Nallino, Venezia, 111-120.

however, recur in the letters addressed to the king of Poland, the doge of Venice, the tsarina of all Russias, the king of England or of France, or the Habsburg emperor: all of them were 'distinguished' in the country (*millet*) of the Messiah and judges of the people (*tayfe*) of the Nazarene. If in the sixteenth century *millet* meant only a group organised on the basis of religion, the *tayfe* was the band, the troop, the group whose members had common characteristics: *tüccar tayfesi*, therefore, was the whole of foreign merchants. In general, in the *ahdnames* this word was much more used than *halk*, which theoretically indicated the folks, the nation, the people and also the crowd with greater precision. According to Viorel Panaite, the *ahdnames* allow to state that, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, subjects of different countries could be distinguished with even greater precision.¹⁷

The word *millet* was employed to mean most of all a confessional community. Right after the capture of Constantinople, Mehmet II acknowledged the Greek patriarch as the leader of the community, but there was not a proper 'system of the *millets*' still in the sixteenth century. At that time, the European consuls were considered to be the leaders of their colonies, but they were neither independent nor had territorial or protection rights; only with time, when they were regarded as substitutes of the ambassadors, did they start to enjoy diplomatic immunity. This explains how after the outbreak of the hostilities the *bailo* could often be imprisoned: he was an ambiguous character who combined the competencies of a consul with some functions typical of an ambassador. Finally, in the most ancient times, a foreign trade community in the Ottoman Empire, even though it was protected by capitulations, was often considered to be responsible *in solidum* of crimes of debts of one of its members.¹⁸

It was in the eighteenth century that the representatives of the communities became proper *milletbaşıs*, i.e. high state dignitaries bestowed with the honour of two horsetails; they had a very specific role within the Ottoman administration and a civil and military authority; moreover, they were free from external interferences in the religious field and possessed fiscal and judiciary competencies. The mid-nineteenth century reforms tried to establish a centralised state on the basis of the European model, reducing the *millets'* authority and the dictatorial powers of patriarchs, rabbis and high officials by means of new constitutions and boards of governors; also those who did not join Islam were considered to be just like Muslims in front of the law. At that time, western powers supported the spreading of the nationalism among the *millets* to be able to proceed

17 Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı belgelerinin dili*, 149-152; Panaite, *Ethnicity*, 201-212.

18 İnalçık, *The Ottoman State*, 190-192. As to the Venetian consuls in the Ottoman Empire, cf. Faroqhi, *The Venetian Presence*, 368-384.

to the dismemberment of the Empire with the aid of the various peoples who lived there.

It was mainly in the chronicles that the old word 'frenk' continued to be used to mean all the Europeans. It was sometimes employed as a patronymic by converts, mainly if they had become powerful or came from aristocratic families. Alvise Gritti, son of Andrea the doge, even though he was still a Christian, struck up important friendships with the highest officials and was known as 'Beyoğlu', i.e. 'son of the lord'. This patronymic, then, was used to mean one of Istanbul's neighbourhoods. 'Bey', as a matter of fact, was the title used to indicate Venetian nobles, but not only the doge as someone argues. Another example of this use is in Selânikî Mustafa *efendi* who, among other things, tells the adventures of 'Mehmed Frenkbeyoğlu', i.e. 'son of the Frank lord', who was *cebecibaşı* first and then leader of the troops of the *ulufeciyânî yesârs* when they killed the *kira* Esperanza Malchi; he was a scion of another important Venetian family and, before the conversion, he was known as Marc'Antonio Querini.¹⁹

As time went by, however, the perception of the differences among the European states was clearer and clearer in the Ottoman world where people started to coin also puns formed by a national adjective followed by an abusive epithet and based on the use of alliteration too. There are *ingiliz dinsiz* (English without religion), *fransız cansız* (soulless French), *engürüs menhûs* (ill-fated Hungarian), *rus ma'kûs* (wicked Russian), *alman biaman* (ruthless German), and so on and so forth.²⁰

19 Selânikî Mustafa Efendi, *Tarik-i Selânikî*, 738, 854.

20 Lewis, *Europa barbara e infedele*, 172.