

Teaching Asian and African Languages in Ca' Foscari (1868-1929)

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Abstract The Royal High School of Commerce in Venice was created just when the Suez Canal was opened. Its aim was to prepare young people for international trade or a consular career. Thus, also some languages spoken in the East began to be taught (Arabic, Turkish and Japanese) but the idea was to enlarge this offer with Chinese, Persian and also Amharic. The first years were difficult: courses were opened and closed according to the presence of students or professors who could teach them.

Summary 1 The Beginning. – 2 Teaching Arabic, Turkish and Japanese. – 3 Students. – 4 Conclusion.

Keywords Eastern languages. Venice. Venetian Royal High School of Commerce. Ca' Foscari University. History.

1 The Beginning

In November 1866 in Venice the twentyfive-year-old Luigi Luzzatti (1841-1927), who would have become an important Italian academician, economist and politician, had the idea of creating a new school with a strong focus on trade and foreign languages: the Scuola superiore di Commercio (Berengo 1989, 8-11). He aimed to begin a renewal of the Italian education system and, at the same time, to show the strategic and economic importance of the city of Venice, after its annexation to the kingdom of Italy that had place on the previous 19 October. The following year he went to Antwerp and Mulhouse to get in touch with other two European institutes of the same kind. A commission formed by Agostino Colletti, Eduardo Deodati, Antonio Fornoni, Daniele Francesconi and Luigi Luzzatti himself was created to study the project and, in November 1867, they presented their report: it made also reference to modern languages, such as Arabic, that were not taught in other commercial schools in Italy (*Notizie* 1881, 69).

In the same period the Suez Canal was built. It was begun in 1859 and officially opened on 17 November 1869 (Bono 2006). Six months earlier also the American transcontinental railroad was completed and on the 23 October 1868 Japan opened the doors to the external influence and the emperor of the Meiji dynasty went to his new capital, Tokyo. The world was

becoming smaller and smaller, it could be circled in record time and the Suez Canal reduced the journey between the North Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. Egypt was again in a commercial strategic position as it was in the middle ages, when Indian spices crossed the Red Sea, arrived in Cairo and Alexandria and were sold to Venetian merchants who brought them to the heart of Europe. In the same period also the Italian plenipotentiary in Japan, Alessandro Fè d'Ostiani, so appreciated by the Meiji emperor, gave his support to the new role attributed to Venice. He thought that in this way it was easier to send the boxes of silk moth eggs from Japan to Italy in order to help the Italian silk production ruined by a disease, called *pébrine* (Boscaro 1991). In particular, Luigi Luzzatti's idea was to take advantage of the new commercial routes to stress the role of Venice as a new strategic trade terminal. To do this a new generation of entrepreneurs and diplomats, expert of international trade and foreign languages, was required.

In March 1868 a new commission was created to plan the new school in detail. Its project was sent to the Italian government (*Notizie* 1881, 73-84). It contained also a reference to oriental languages: it said that the monks of the Mekhitarist monastery of Venice had already offered their collaboration to teach them and the Comune of Venice had agreed to. They could teach Modern Greek, Arabic and Persian; these languages would have been very important to prepare also new diplomats and in this way the Venetian institute would surpass Antwerp school. The Mekhitarist religious order had been created by Mekhitar of Sebaste (1676-1749), an Armenian Catholic monk who had arrived in Venice from Constantinople in 1715, escaping persecution from Ottoman authorities. In 1717 the Most Serene Republic gave him the island of San Lazzaro to create a monastery and, from this time on, his community was renowned for its library, museum, school, press (in Oriental alphabets) and cultural activity. It was considered to be an Armenian oasis transplanted in the Venetian lagoon. No wonder that these monks were involved if the Venetian authorities were looking for teachers of Arabic, Persian and Modern Greek.

It is also important to note that, after 1866, Venetian patriots were deeply involved in stressing the past glories of their city in order to show that also their ancestors wrote an important page of the history of Italy. In this period, the myth of the Lepanto battle (1571), fought and won against the Ottoman Turks, was discovered again, after having been forgotten for centuries (Stouraiti 2004). Also the widespread destruction of ancient buildings to re-use their bricks to create new houses had a stop and ruined palaces, churches and monasteries began to be restored and brought to a new life as it happened to the Fondaco dei turchi that became the first seat of the Correr Museum (Pedani 2010, 221-2). Venice enjoyed a very lively cultural life whose core were the Venetian State Archives, the Marciana Library, the Istituto Veneto di Lettere Scienze ed Arti and the Querini Library. Some of the professors of the new School were involved in this intellec-

tual activity, such as Antonio Fradeletto (1858-1930), who was among the founders of the Biennale d'Arte. Other Venetian personalities supported the new institute such as Guglielmo Berchet (1833-1913), historian and honorary consul of Japan from 1880 to 1913; Filippo Grimani (1850-1921), major of Venice in the years 1895-1919; Piero Foscari (1865-1923) who supported the idea of creating a new industrial port in Venice;¹ and Pacifico Ceresa (1833-1905) a senator of the kingdom of Italy who strongly supported the new school as it is shown in a note (17 August 1872) he sent to the Consiglio Provinciale of Venice (*Relazione straordinaria* 1873, 12).

On this background the Regia Scuola Superiore di Commercio was created. Then, the Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade presented to the king a report about the new institute where he too stressed the importance to learn modern Oriental languages such as Arabic, Persian and Turkish for a commercial school and the long lasting Italian tradition in trading with the East (*Notizie* 1881, 88-90).

On 6 August 1868 the king's decree approved the statute of the new school (1881, 91-4). Among the aims described in the first paragraph there were: a) to improve young people's knowledge to apply to commercial professions, and b) to teach, besides the principal modern European languages, also the Oriental ones, such as Arabic, Turkish and Persian, in order to facilitate relations and exchanges with the Eastern countries.

2 Teaching Arabic, Turkish and Japanese

The first academic year of the new school was 1868-1869 and on 13 April 1871 also the course for consuls was approved. Since 1868 to 1889 don Raffaele Giarue from Aleppo taught Arabic, while since 1869 to 1877 Zuchdi Effendi from Constantinople (*recte* Zühdi *efendi*) taught Turkish. Modern Greek was taught by Costantino Triantafillis from Athens, director of the Greek College Flangini in Venice. In this period Arabic (or another Oriental language) was present only in the consular course (from the 2nd to the 5th year) and not in the other courses, included that of foreign languages. Moreover, a note in the programme specified that the Board of the school could give permission to study, instead of Arabic, another Oriental language such as Turkish, Persian, Japanese and Chinese (if these two last ones would have been activated). Arabic, however, was recommended (*Notizie e dati* 1871, 94, 96-7).

The programme of Arabic was divided into two parts: the first contained elements of pronunciation and reading according to Giuseppe Sapeto's

¹ Bonfiglio Dosio 1984, 78, 115, 135: b. 48, fasc. 2/IV: *Promemoria. Per l'istituzione di una cattedra di lingua giapponese alla R. Scuola Superiore di Commercio in Venezia. Sulla utilità di studiare l'Oriente e le sue lingue.*

grammar book (Sapeto 1866); the presentation of the regular verbs and exercises of translating the tale of *Mahmud the Persian and the Kurd Sharper* from Arabic into Italian and the other way round according to Robertson's system. The second part presented the regular and irregular verbs, according to Sapeto's examples and exercises of reading, analysis and translation of the tale of *Budûr and Qamar al-Zamân* from *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Notizie e dati* 1871, 136). Giuseppe Sapeto (1811-1895), of the order of San Francesco de Paoli, was a missionary, explorer and agent of the Italian government in Danakil. After a period spent in Lebanon and Ethiopia he left the priesthood and became Professor of Arabic in Florence and Genoa.

The program of Turkish was divided into three parts and was taught in French. It comprehended grammar, syntax, words of Persian and Arabic origin, while the translations were made from French into Turkish and the other way round (*Notizie e dati* 1871, 136-8).

The courses of Japanese were activated on 30 November 1873 and between 1873 and 1888 five teachers followed each other: Yoshida Yosaku, Ogata Korenao, Kawamura Kijo, Naganuma Moriyoshi and Ito Heizo (Boscaro 2007). Japanese and modern Greek were elective courses from the second to the fifth year, also for the language programme together with French, German and English. Soon afterwards the lessons were interrupted because of lack of money. They started again in 1908-09 with Professor Terasaki Takeo, an artist who lived in Venice but they were immediately suppressed again and then resumed only in 1957 (Boscaro 1991). In this period Chinese language was not taught, notwithstanding the school founders' hope. Persian had to be taught by the Professor of Turkish but in 1905 it was not yet activated since no student had expressed the desire of studying it (*Statuto* 1905, 56).

At the same time even Arabic and Turkish had serious problems: for instance Zühdi *efendi* left Ca' Foscari in 1877 and in 1881 nobody had yet taken his place (*Notizie* 1881, 17) while in 1891 also Arabic was interrupted because of lack of students. At the same time the board of the school was thinking to replace this language with Amharic, bearing in mind the beginning of Italian colonial goals in East Africa (*Notizie e documenti* 1891, 15). In 1909-10 Arabic had not yet been resumed, but since March 1909 Turkish was a choice course held by Agop Kerdbadjian from Constantinople who taught also in the Armenian college Moorat Raphaël in Venice (Bellingeri 1991). Soon after Italians and Ottomans fought for Libya (1911-12) and to know French began to be considered enough to trade in an Empire where the whole élite spoke fluently in that language. Moreover, just at the end of the war, Professor Kerdbadjian became ill: he had to leave Ca' Foscari and Arabic took the place of Turkish that was resumed only in 1970 with Asım Tanış (*Annuario* 1912-13, 10; *Tracce. İzler* 2017, 75-7).

Since 1913-14 to 1928-29 Arabic was taught by another Armenian professor of the Moorat-Raphaël college, Garabed Tsoorbadjian (*recte* Çorbacan), *hoca efendi, décoré de palme academique*, who lived near

Carmini (in *Fondamenta Rossa* in 1924-25 and in *Fondamenta dei Cereri*, no. 2448 first floor, in 1928-29) (*Annuario* 1924-25, 169; *Annuario* 1928-29, 211). The course was divided into three parts: 1) alphabet, writing, speech and numbers; 2) grammar, nouns, plural, pronouns, adjectives, numbers, regular verbs, reading and writing, translations from Arabic into Italian and vice versa, dictation, study by heart of verses of the Koran; 3) advanced grammar, irregular verbs, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, translations from Arabic into Italian and vice versa (*Annuario* 1921-22, 219). Tsorbadjian died in December 1929 and left 130 volumes in Arabic to the library of Ca' Foscari. After him no Arabic course was taught until 1962 when Maria Nallino arrived in Venice (Gabrieli 1991; Baldissera 1991; cf. Zilio Grandi in this volume).

3 Students

The new school was imagined also to attract students coming from other countries but the beginning was difficult. A comparison for the period 1875-76/1889-90 shows that the 27% (i.e. 415) of the students came from Veneto region and the 25% (381) from the city of Venice. Then, there was Lombardia (9%, 139), Emilia (8%, 125) and the rest of Italy. In the same period only 22 students came from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, 5 from Romania, 6 from Egypt and 18 from other countries (*Notizie e documenti* 1891, 23). We may also note that in the academic year 1879-80 also one student from the Ottoman empire attended to the courses of the school (*Notizie* 1881, 22-3). More or less the same trend had place in the following years: in the period from academic year 1913-14 to 1922-23 the students from Veneto were 1,337, from the city of Venice 416 while the bulk of the rest came from other regions of Italy; there were also 10 students from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, 44 from Fiume, 6 from Dalmatia, 7 from Greece, 6 from Romania, 9 from Turkey and 76 from other foreign countries. In 1923-24 there was also an Arab, Abdi Sobuachakis from Bengasi, who attended the courses of economic and commercial sciences (*Annuario* 1923-24, 146, 152, 158). Students from Libya began to arrive above all after 1923-24. In the following years other students coming from Egypt or Turkey had Italian names such as Lorenzo Bianchi from Alexandria of Egypt and Riccardo Tubino from Constantinople (1924-25) or Mario Bertolissi and Gino Dell'Amore from Cairo (1923-28) (*Annuario* 1924-25, 140, 148; *Annuario* 1928-29, 150). It was a period in which foreigners were not usually present in Italian schools. Different scales of values could create difficulties that were, however, soon overcome as when Vera Michelson from Vilnius in Poland (1923-24) was afraid to say to her Catholic classmates that she was the daughter of a protestant minister.

The courses of the Venetian school opened the way for new jobs in foreign

lands. The prize of the Mariotti award was given for Anatolia and Syria in 1908-09 and it was won by Gino Buti from Florence who immediately left for Izmir. In the same year Timo Pastorelli from Melara (Rovigo) went to teach Italian in Tokyo and, when the director Enrico Castelnuovo was opening the new academic year, he was travelling along the Trans-Syberian railroad to reach Vladivostock and then to sail to Japan (*Annuario* 1909-10, 10-12). In the following years the Mariotti award for India was given to Giuseppe Gmeiner (*Annuario* 1910-11, 10-11; *Annuario* 1911-12, 10-11) who went to Calcutta. At the same time Giuseppe Maniago from Vicenza had the Mariotti award for the Middle East but the outbreak of the war for Libya obliged him first to postpone his journey (*Annuario* 1911-12, 10-11) and then to go to Russia, where he had the possibility to learn Russian (*Annuario* 1912-13, 14-15). Another award for foreign business given by the Italian government allowed Erminio Mariani from Civita Castellana to go to Japan that he reached by sea, and during his journey he sent also a card to his professors from Ceylon (*Annuario* 1911-19, 12). Also in the following years the Mariotti and Italian government awards helped Ca' Foscari students to go to far away countries. In his speech held on 23 November 1913, the director Enrico Castelnuovo recalled Gentilli from Friuli who went to Morocco, Arcudi to Tunis, Mariani to Yokohama, Pastorelli and Cavazzani to Tokyo, Beltrame to Buenos Ayres, Weigelsperg to Hong Kong, Gorio to Bombai, Perera, Buti and Petrocelli to New York, Ceccato to Washington, de Parente and Gentilli to Tangeri and Maniago to Baku and Tiflis (*Annuario* 1913-14, 23-4).

In 1911 the association of former students of Ca' Foscari rewarded two foreign students with two golden medals: Yakir Bekir (Behar) from Constantinople and Pietro Fredda from Corfu even if, in this case too, the award to the Turkish student could not be immediately given because of the war (*Annuario* 1911-12, 19-20; Bellingeri 1991). Behar discussed his dissertation about the Ottoman system of taxation in July 1913 and it was so good that it deserved to be published by Ca' Foscari (Behar 1914). He was a Jew and freemason of the Beni Berith lodge of Constantinople; he collaborated with Luigi Luzzatti (1841-1927) and in 1919 was the secretary of the Board of directors and CEO of the Italian consumer cooperative "Luigi Luzzatti" (Behar 1919, 1922, 1923, 1928).

4 Conclusion

After the beginning of the Venetian commercial school, other institutes alike began to appear in Italy: in 1884 in Genoa, in 1886 in Bari, in 1906 in Turin while, in 1902, also Bocconi University was created in Milan.

In 1905 the R. Scuola Superiore di Commercio in Venice began to issue *laurea* degrees and in 1914 it became the R. Istituto Superiore di Commercio (Meregalli 1958, 1991). In the same years also a Scuola Media

di Commercio existed in Venice in Palazzo Morosini near Santo Stefano. In 1909 its director was Gilberto Secrétant, Professor of Italian literature in Ca' Foscari from 1908 to 1922.²

The Venetian courses of Oriental languages were appreciated also abroad. For instance, in 1910 the honorary consul of Japan, Guglielmo Berchet, was present at the final exams, together with the Ottoman consul Celaleddin pasha and Berovich pasha. In this occasion, the Ottoman government sent three volumes for the three best students of Turkish, while the Venetian Camera di Commercio gave money to sponsor the Japanese course (*Annuario* 1910-11, 9-10).

Ca' Foscari interest for the East took advantage of both the geographic location of Venice and the ancient links that united the city to Eastern countries. The first statal school of Arabic, Turkish and Persian for official interpreters was created by the government of the Most Serene Republic in the middle of the sixteenth century and we may conclude this paper recalling the unknown scholar who used to teach Arabic in the main Venetian street at the beginning of that century, as Marin Sanudo wrote in his diary on 6 October 1517: "È da saper: vidi, cossa notanda, in Marzaria, di una scola che insegna lezer e scriver in moresco" (Sanuto 1889, 20).

2 Bonfiglio Dosio 1984, 78: b. 18 fasc. 13: *Scuola Media di Commercio, 1904-1909*.

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