

ALESSIO SOPRACASA  
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

## Venetian Merchants and Alexandrian Officials (End of the Fifteenth–Beginning of the Sixteenth Century)

### Introduction

In the late Mamluk period Venetian merchants in Alexandria were confronted with a complex administrative, bureaucratic, fiscal, and commercial system. This system was dominated by local elements that were represented, on the one hand, by the Alexandrian authorities and merchants, and on the other by the Venetian consular authorities and merchants. Venetian documents recently studied and known as “tariffs”—dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—present a clear picture of the administrative, fiscal, and economic reality of the Alexandrian market, linked to international trade, at the end of the Mamluk period. Only recently has this kind of document received attention, many years after the pioneering studies by Prof. Ugo Tucci.<sup>1</sup> Various dated from the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, “tariffs” are handwritten booklets (a few to dozens of folios according to the degree of elaboration) concerning only one commercial place. Unsurprisingly, archives and libraries preserve specimens of these documents for Alexandria in Egypt,<sup>2</sup> Constantinople (1482),<sup>3</sup> England,<sup>4</sup> and Syria (sixteenth century),<sup>5</sup> that is, for the “pillars” of the Venetian economic world of that

---

<sup>1</sup>U. Tucci, “Tariffe veneziane e libri toscani di mercatura,” *Studi veneziani* 10 (1968): 65–108; idem, “Manuali di mercatura e pratica degli affari nel Medioevo,” in *Fatti e idee di storia economica nei secoli xii-xx: Studi dedicati a Franco Borlandi* (Bologna, 1977), 215–31.

<sup>2</sup>Of the two most important specimens, one is held by the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, dated 1494 and bearing the name of Lorenzo Arimondo, son of the consul of Alexandria Alvise, and the other by the Venetian State Archives. A text identical to the latter is also found in a manuscript from the middle of the sixteenth century in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, a manuscript formerly property of the cardinal Mazzarino. There are two other Alexandrian “tariffs” of lesser importance copied in miscellaneous codices preserved in England (London and Oxford). All these texts are now published and studied in Alessio Sopraccasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto alla fine del Medioevo: Le tariffe di Alessandria* (Alexandria, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Only one manuscript, held by the Venetian State Archives and now published and studied in Alessio Sopraccasa, “Les marchands vénitiens à Constantinople d’après une tarifica inédite de 1482,” *Studi veneziani* 63 (2011): 49–220.

<sup>4</sup>Only one specimen (not dated but from the second half of the fifteenth century) copied in a Venetian merchants’ manual transcribed in the same manuscript of the Alexandrian “tariff” from the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and published in Sopraccasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, 502–15.

<sup>5</sup>Three specimens held by the Venetian State Archives, the Biblioteca del Museo Civico Correr, and the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana are still unpublished and understudied. For some insights



time. These documents were written locally by Venetian merchants and consular authorities and they were made public (available to both the resident merchants in Venice and the commission agents overseas). Additionally, they were approved by the Venetian Senate and were of practical use (they are more practical than merchants' manuals and more theoretical than account books).

These documents, far from being the mere product of the action of the central power, collect a knowledge developed by the local administration in close contact with Western merchants; if the general treaties were the junction between the two centers—Venice and Cairo—the “tariffs” were conceived at the periphery, presenting their object—Alexandria—with a depth that is not reflected in any other known source. Thanks to them we can follow the route of the goods imported to and exported from the Egyptian port: this is the route they follow upon leaving the harbor until reaching the Venetian *fondaco*s after leaving the customs house and back. For each commodity the “tariffs” give a list of expenses for its handling, through operations like transport (to or from the harbor, the customs, the *fondaco*), weighing, measuring, warehousing, sifting, packing, registering of the sale, etc.; they explain the local metrological system; they physically describe spices; there is advice on the best way to negotiate; and, of course, they give a complete description of the taxation on goods. The richness of their information is comparable to what the *al-Minhāj* by al-Makhzūmī was for an earlier period. They offered the Venetian merchant back then and the historian today some useful insight into the Alexandrian market and the economic policy of the Mamluk sultanate, for a period in which the Venetian commercial activity in Alexandria had reached its height. In particular, the procedures of exporting the famous spices<sup>6</sup> are highly multifarious if we consider the number of officials involved and the range of taxes to be paid.

## Administrative and Commercial Structures

In 1490 the Venetian consul Ambrogio Contarini, already known for his travel report on Persia at the court of Uzun Ḥasan,<sup>7</sup> stipulated an agreement with the Alexandrian port and customs authorities to fix once and for all (if possible) the nature and extent of the expenses for export that Venetian merchants would have

---

about the Syrian “tariffs,” see Alessio Sopracasa, “Le condizioni della presenza veneziana: le tariffe,” in *Rapporti mediterranei, pratiche documentarie, presenze veneziane: le reti economiche e culturali (XIV–XVI secolo)*, ed. Gherardo Ortalli and Alessio Sopracasa (Venice, 2017 [forthcoming]).

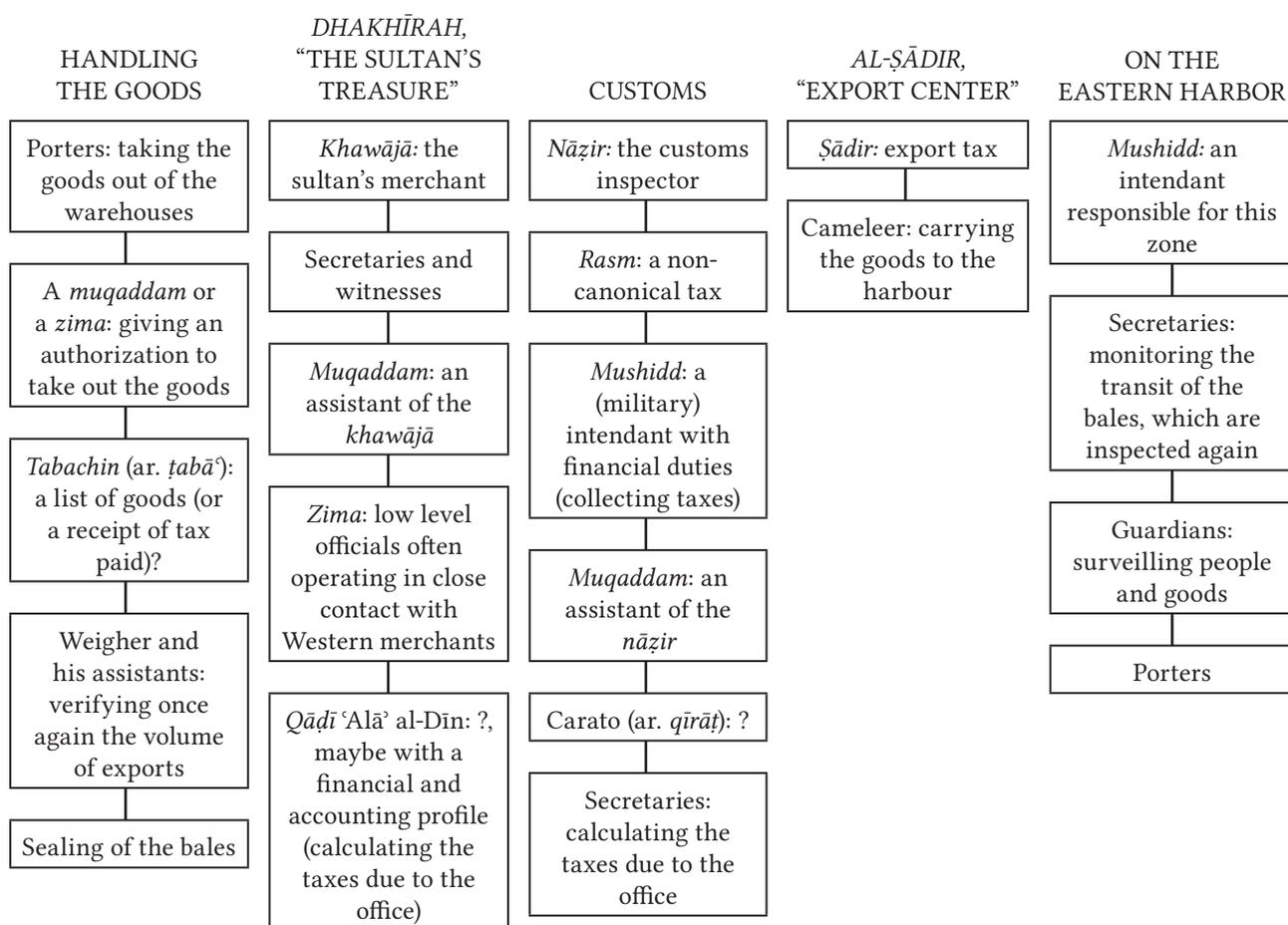
<sup>6</sup>The word “spices” was used by Italian merchants with a commercial—and not a scientific—meaning: it represented the category of the products exported from (in this case) Alexandria.

<sup>7</sup>*I Viaggi in Persia degli ambasciatori veneti Barbaro e Contarini*, ed. Laurence Lockhart, Raimondo Morozzo della Rocca, and Maria Francesca Tiepolo (Rome, 1973), 175–234; on Ambrogio Contarini see Sopracasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, 68–69, and the bibliography cited there.



incurred. The document was written in Arabic, translated into Venetian for the merchants, kept in the Venetian chancery of Alexandria, and then copied in the “tariff” of the city.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that it represents one of the fruits of the negotiations between Venice and Cairo in 1489–90, concluded with the promise of better conditions for Venetians in the sultanate.<sup>9</sup> This agreement is summarized as follows:<sup>10</sup>

**MAIN EXPORT PROCEDURES: OFFICES, OFFICIALS, AND TAXES**  
FOLLOWING AN AGREEMENT PASSED IN 1490 BETWEEN THE VENETIAN CONSUL  
AND THE ALEXANDRIAN CUSTOMS AND PORT AUTHORITIES



<sup>8</sup>And edited in Sopracasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, 590–93.

<sup>9</sup>On these negotiations see *Ambasciata straordinaria al sultano d’Egitto (1489–1490)*, ed. Franco Rossi (Venice, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed analysis of this agreement see Sopracasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, chapter ix.

After the purchase, the goods were stored waiting to be shipped by sea; among the many places where Venetian merchants could leave their goods in Alexandria, the most obvious was their own *fondaco*. Venetians had two of these buildings in the period under consideration. One of them was located where St. Catherine's church lies today,<sup>11</sup> in the vicinity of a sensitive zone of Alexandria, around the northern wall, towards the Eastern Harbor. Then the goods were brought out from their place of storage by porters, once the Venetians obtained a permit to do so. The goods were probably annotated on a kind of receipt, re-weighed, and the bales sealed.

At this point the three main offices with the most important people come into play. First was the bureau of the "sultan's treasure" (*dhakhīrah*) for the distribution of the sultan's spices:<sup>12</sup> it is well known that in the Circassian sultanate there was a system of annual sale of fixed amounts of pepper to the Venetian merchants.<sup>13</sup> The most important figure was called in the Italian sources "merchant of the sultan" (bearing the title of *khawājā*, Venetian *coza*), a merchant who, in addition to his own private business, did business on behalf of the sultan.<sup>14</sup> The sources show that the *khawājā* actually had a very broad field of action, as he was also involved in political matters, and within the framework of commercial activities he frequently interacted directly with the Venetian merchants, as I will soon show. "Officials" such as scribes/secretaries and witnesses, or others with tasks of a financial nature (i.e., accounting) or control and organization belonged to this office.

The official who was always present in Alexandria, and with whom the Venetian merchants had to deal on a daily basis, was the customs inspector. The regular conducting of fiscal and commercial practices depended on him and he was also a merchant, because he profited greatly from the position he occupied, at the

<sup>11</sup>Oueded Sennoune, "Fondouks, khans et wakalas à Alexandrie à travers les récits de voyageurs," *Annales Islamologiques* 38, no. 2 (2004): 457.

<sup>12</sup>On the *dhakhīrah* see Igarashi Daisuke, "The Evolution of the Sultanic Fisc and *al-Dhakhīrah* during the Circassian Mamluk Period," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 14 (2010): 85–108 ([http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR\\_XIV\\_2010-Daisuke-pp85-108.pdf](http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_XIV_2010-Daisuke-pp85-108.pdf); last accessed 20 September 2016).

<sup>13</sup>This system is studied throughout the book by Francisco Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance en Méditerranée pré-moderne: le deuxième État mamelouk et le commerce des épices (1382–1517)* (Barcelona, 2009); for the first half of the fifteenth century see Georg Christ, *Trading Conflicts: Venetian Merchants and Mamluk Officials in Late Medieval Alexandria* (Leiden-Boston, 2012), chapters 13 and 14.

<sup>14</sup>Francisco Apellániz discussed them recently: Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance*, 68–83, 106–30.



forefront of international trade.<sup>15</sup> Again, the office comprised staff with various duties of a financial and organizational nature.<sup>16</sup>

The third element was the tax and the bureau both known as *ṣādir*. The name clearly shows that it was a tax on exports, even if everything on the previous diagram was taxation on exports. In fact it had a much more varied nature compared to the import, which was reduced to only one tax, 10% of the value of the goods. *Al-ṣādir* was also a physical place, mentioned, for example, by al-Nuwayrī in 1368, near Bāb al-Baḥr, the Sea Gate through which the goods left the city. Ottoman documents of the sixteenth century mention the *sūq al-ṣādir*.<sup>17</sup> Quite logically, associated with this phase is the cameleer, who carried the goods to the Eastern Harbor. In this area, which had its own staff and administration, the goods were checked one last time before they were loaded onto *jurūm*—the traditional Nilotic boats—and taken to Venetian ships or galleys.

### The Urban Context of the International Trade: Some Topographic Elements

Bāb al-Baḥr, the Gate of the Sea, was a massive double gate dedicated to the transit of people, of the goods exported from the city, and of wine, although that was an imported product. Its architecture was similar to that of Bāb Rashīd/Rosetta Gate, with a zig-zagged passage that separated a small door from a massive gate immediately following. Once this was crossed, a short road between two walls led to the second massive gate which gave access to the inner part of the city. Next to Bāb al-Baḥr was the customs house. The descriptions of the city's gates left by Ghillebert de Lannoy<sup>18</sup> and Emmanuele Piloti<sup>19</sup> find an exact match with the

<sup>15</sup>Dr. Christ has fully discussed this topic in his recent monograph about the consulate of Biagio Dolfin: Christ, *Trading Conflicts*, 91–92, and chapter 12.

<sup>16</sup>Regarding the *rasm*, for example, the exact nature of which I can't define, we know from al-Maqrīzī that merchants from India paid it to the customs inspector of Jeddah: Éric Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande: État et commerce sous les sultans Rasūlides du Yémen (626–858/1229–1454)* (Paris, 2010), 669.

<sup>17</sup>Michel Tuchscherer, "Bāb al-Baḥr ou Porte de la Marine, un quartier commercial en déclin dans Alexandrie *intra muros* (1550–1650)," in *Histoire, archéologies et littératures du monde musulman: Mélanges en l'honneur d'André Raymond*, ed. Ghislaine Alleaume, Sylvie Denoix, and Michel Tuchscherer (Cairo, 2009), 59, 64.

<sup>18</sup>*Œuvres de Ghillebert de Lannoy, voyageur, diplomate et moraliste*, ed. Charles Potvin with Jean-Charles Houzeau (Leuven, 1878), 107–8.

<sup>19</sup>*Traité d'Emmanuel Piloti sur le Passage en Terre Sainte (1420)*, ed. Pierre-Herman Dopp (Leuven-Paris, 1958), 179–82.



oldest views of Alexandria, dating from the second half of the fifteenth century,<sup>20</sup> that show, from west to east, the *Porta principalis* (main gate), *arsenal* (dockyard), and *doana* (customs). These are the same buildings of which the remains were seen and studied by the engineers of the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt in the late eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> So, the customs area represented an intermediate zone between the external and the internal parts of the city. It was of course equipped with warehouses, a courtyard, and had at least two doors, one opening towards the Eastern Harbor and the other leading to the city.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to a superposition—made by the service of the topography of the “Centre d’Études Alexandrines” (CNRS, USR 3134)—between the Alexandrian cadaster of the thirties and forties of the twentieth century and the plan of the *Description de l’Égypte* we can recognize the areas of the church of St. Catherine and the Consuls Square as the areas most frequented by Venetian merchants dealing with tax, administrative, and partly commercial procedures.<sup>23</sup>

### The Interaction between Venetian Merchants and Alexandrian Officials: Some Case Studies Concerning the *Khawājās*

Together with the customs inspector, the most important official the Venetians had to deal with in Alexandria was the *khawājā*: *khawājās* stood out during the fifteenth century and are mentioned in Venetian sources from the second half of the century. In the Venetian sources they are often described in negative terms, as they repeatedly made the regular conducting of commercial exchange awkward for Venetians.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Atlas historique de la ville et des ports d’Alexandrie*, ed. Gaston Jondet (Cairo, 1921), table 1 (Biblioteca Vaticana Codex Urbinas Latinus 277); Albert Kammerer, *La Mer Rouge, l’Abyssinie et l’Arabie depuis l’Antiquité: essai d’histoire et de géographie historique*, I/1, *Les Pays de la mer Érythrée jusqu’à la fin du Moyen âge: Alexandrie et l’Érythrée* (Cairo, 1929), table 2 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS Latin 4802, fol. 136r).

<sup>21</sup> *Description de l’Égypte, ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, État Moderne*, Planches (Paris, 1817), II: tables 84, 88, 98.

<sup>22</sup> See also the city plan accompanying the travel report written by Johann Helffrich in the sixteenth century: Johann Helffrich, *Kurtzer und warhafftiger Bericht von der Reyss aus Venedig nach Hierusalem, von dannen inn Aegypten, auff den Berg Sinai, Alcair, Alexandria und folgens widerumb gen Venedig* (Lipsia, 1581). These places can be found on a recently published plan of the city from 1605: Oueded Sennoune, “Le commerce dans les témoignages des récits de voyageurs,” in *Alexandrie Médiévale* 4, ed. Christian Décobert, Jean-Yves Empereur, Christophe Picard (Alexandria, 2011), 114.

<sup>23</sup> The topography of Alexandria is treated in more detail in Sopracasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, 305–23.

<sup>24</sup> In the Venetian sources—first of all the resolutions of the Senate—one reads that the relations between the two states were troubled by the violation, on the part of the Mamluks, of the terms

The import of hazelnuts (or of walnuts or chestnuts) was a very important feature of commerce in Alexandria, as this kind of fruit was highly appreciated by the local population; for example, hazelnuts were eaten during Ramadan. In 1498 the merchant Alvise Corner was in Alexandria as a commission agent of Giovanni Bragadin and brothers to sell two cargoes of hazelnuts on their behalf. Of these two cargoes, only one had already been sold, and by letter, dated 4 August,<sup>25</sup> Alvise explained to the Bragadins that only a part of it was delivered as there were still 210 sacks to deliver because there were no camels available and roads were in bad condition. The Bragadin brothers had seven debtors, who had to deliver pepper in exchange for the hazelnuts, but they were all in Cairo and as soon as they returned to Alexandria, Alvise would urge them to make the deliveries. Furthermore, the Bragadins had two major debtors—bad debtors according to Alvise—Borgomani and Nasandin bene Murchi, who owed 1800 and 1200 ducats respectively.

But from letters dated 14 September 1498 we know that Alvise Corner died,<sup>26</sup> perhaps from the pestilence of those days. The problem relating to the two hazelnut cargoes was pending: one still had to be negotiated, while the bulk of the other was sold but sellers had not yet delivered the fifty-four *sporte*<sup>27</sup> of pepper according to the terms of the barter. The pepper was still in the hands of the “Moors.” The Counsel of Twelve, which assisted the consul in the administration of local affairs, elected the merchant Alvise Mora to deal with that matter. In October, Alvise wrote about that to the Bragadin brothers.<sup>28</sup> He was confronted with an inevitable series of abuses and deceptions, and particularly with juridical problems because, as he wrote, he had to be “officially recognized through the judgment of a *qāḍī* as a true *wakīl*,” a representative. Alvise sent the consul to talk with the *khawājā*, who was our Borgomani, and with the amir of Alexandria; he obtained a charter subscribed to by twelve merchants to certify his role; he found two sultanic regulations establishing that the person elected by the consul was a “true *wakīl*” for administering the personal properties of any Venetian who died in the sultanate (according to the general treaties between Venice and Cairo), and on that matter he also obtained a document delivered by a *qāḍī*. But nothing was

---

of the treaties: in many cases this was a centralized view of local conflicts involving, for example, apart from the *khawājā*, the customs inspector or the governor. In the commercial practice the local element was often predominant: on this topic see Christ, *Trading Conflicts*, 225–26, 281–84, 286–87.

<sup>25</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia Miscellanea Gregolin busta 9, not numbered.

<sup>26</sup> *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*, ed. Guglielmo Berchet (Venice, 1879), 2:87.

<sup>27</sup> The *sporta* (plural *sporte*) was a weight used especially for pepper (1 = approximately 217 kg): Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 215, 237–42.

<sup>28</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia Miscellanea Gregolin busta 9, not numbered.

effective and the *khawājā* and the amir were deaf to the Venetians' grievances. Alvise concluded that both the Bragadins and he had to be very patient because neither the law, nor the consul, nor the promise of extra money had sorted it out to any effect. Alvise put pressure mainly on Borgomani, who was a *khawājā* but also, as we know, one of the debtors when he asked him for at least one or two bales of pepper, hoping that the others would do the same. Alvise was able to obtain seven bales with great difficulty from five different people. He could do nothing more before the departure of galleys, but he promised the Bragadin brothers to keep on it: "like a snake I'll be behind these traitor debtors, trying to find any solution to collect what they owe." But the whole commercial season of that year was difficult and unfavorable to the Venetians, and the reason was due to the *khawājā*: "this disaster and ruin came mainly from the Moor merchants who wanted to damage Borgomani: they wanted the galleys to come back to Venice empty, this way Borgomani would not be able to comply with the obligation of the *dhakhīrah*'s pepper ...; we are the victims of this bad blood between them."

The plan of the Alexandrian merchants was successful because in May 1499 a new *khawājā* came to Alexandria, Ibn Mulqī, with whom the Venetians seemed to have better relations than with Borgomani, who had a debt of 24,000 ducats with the sultan and was hence risking his life.<sup>29</sup>

With the successor of Ibn Mulqī the situation was difficult again. In September 1503, the former consul of Alexandria, Alvise Arimondo,<sup>30</sup> suggested to the Senate to send the galleys to Abūqīr instead of Alexandria until the *khawājā* Amet Bubaco was dismissed from his office. This is because from the latter, as the consul said, "had come all extortions and deceptions last year."<sup>31</sup> In December 1503, the Senate gave some attention to one of these problems because the merchant Nicolò Bragadin was concerned.<sup>32</sup> In the previous year, 1502, Nicolò sold to Amet Bubaco a cargo of hazelnuts for 3000 ducats, but Amet refused to give to Nicolò 1800 ducats and tried to force the Venetian to accept spices for twice their value. According to the *khawājā*, the reason was that in 1501 he had a loss of 2000 ducats related to another cargo of hazelnuts negotiated with the same Nicolò. The Senate gave instructions to the vice consul of Alexandria, Fantino Contarini, to make every effort to obtain the whole payment from the *khawājā*, otherwise Amet would be boycotted.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*, 758–59.

<sup>30</sup> For his biography see Sopraca, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 39–45.

<sup>31</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia Senato Mar reg. 16, fols. 32v–33r.

<sup>32</sup> He was one of the brothers of the above-mentioned Giovanni.

<sup>33</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia Senato Mar reg. 16, fol. 41r. The boycott—which Venetians trading with Islamic countries called (a)batalazione, from the Arabic baṭṭāl or ibṭāl—was the interruption of the economic relations with a group or an individual decided by Venetian authorities in

However, this kind of situation could generate, to some extent, a domino effect. On 26 November 1504, Bartolomeo di Lamieri and Giovanni Francesco Bragadin<sup>34</sup> filed a protest with the consul of Alexandria Alvise Contarini against the above mentioned Nicolò Bragadin.<sup>35</sup> Bartolomeo arrived in Alexandria with a hundred casks of olive oil; as he wrote in the protest, “because I was unexperienced about the things of the city, I approached Sir Nicolò to be instructed.” Nicolò, on 6 September, in Bartolomeo’s absence but under his name, sold eighty of those casks to Amet Bubaco *khawājā* in a barter for cloves. Afterwards, the cloves were sieved and transported to the harbor arranged in five bales to be stowed on board galleys. But at that moment Amet refused to allow the spices to leave Alexandria because in his opinion he should have received 516 *qintārs*<sup>36</sup> of hazelnuts from Nicolò Bragadin. Amet negotiated the sale of the olive oil with Nicolò and so he refused to talk with Bartolomeo; the latter was the aggrieved party in that affair and he correctly pointed out that his own goods couldn’t be used to pay Nicolò’s debts. Nicolò, for his part, had done nothing to break the deadlock and the galleys were about to leave Alexandria, which is why Bartolomeo was forced to make a protest. The only thing we know about Nicolò’s answer is that he promised to give an explanation in due time. How this affair ended is unknown. What we do know is that in 1515 Nicolò Bragadin was elected consul of Alexandria, the last of the Mamluk period.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that Venetians had many troubles when Amet Bubaco was a *khawājā* in Alexandria. On 8 August 1505 the Venetian ambassador to Cairo, Alvise Sagundino, received some useful information to properly execute his diplomatic mission. Among this information, there was a list of people who were in favor or not with Venice and, among the latter, “above all” there was Amet Bubaco, who was considered to be an enemy.<sup>38</sup>

These examples show to what extent *khawājās* were embedded in the international trade and could influence it. They were also tied to the central power, even if Alexandrian *khawājās* seemed to have a certain degree of “independence” from

---

Alexandria or in Venice as an extreme measure of retaliation against a behavior considered very damaging to Venetian interests: Ugo Tucci, “Mercanti veneziani e usi di piazza ad Alessandria alla fine del Quattrocento,” in *Relazioni economiche tra Europa e mondo islamico, secc. xiii-xviii*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Florence, 2007), 1:366.

<sup>34</sup>He was the nephew of Nicolò.

<sup>35</sup>Archivio di Stato di Venezia Miscellanea Gregolin busta 11/I, not numbered.

<sup>36</sup>The *qintār* used in Alexandria for hazelnuts—as for many of the goods imported into Egypt by Venetians—was named *jarwī* (1= approximately 94–95 kg): Sopracasa, *Venezia e l’Egitto*, 202, 215.

<sup>37</sup>Archivio di Stato di Venezia Segretario alle Voci reg. 8, fol. 110v.

<sup>38</sup>*I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*, ed. Guglielmo Berchet (Venice, 1881), 6:206–7.

that power,<sup>39</sup> pursuing personal interests thanks to their position at the forefront of the international trade and to their participation in the diplomatic and political life of the sultanate.

---

<sup>39</sup>Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance*, 224, 232–33, 258–59.

