



# LETTURE

## Appealing to the enemy, breaking boundaries

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The volume by Giovanni Ricci, *Appeal to the Turk. The broken boundaries of the Renaissance* (Viella, Rome, 2018, pp. 190), along with his previous publications, *Ossessione turca* (Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002) and *I Turchi alle porte* (il Mulino, Bologna, 2008), make up a trilogy in which the author develops the theme of the Turkish threat, whether real or imagined, in the Italy of the Renaissance. And with a final *coup de théâtre*: the appeal to the Turk.

In the first of the three books the danger was for the most part imaginary, the fruit of that fear which since 1453, the year of the fall Constantinople, had spread throughout Europe, to such an extent as to transform itself into a pathological reaction, a real obsession that was impossible to suppress, even in a city like Ferrara, a place well behind the lines, which was indeed not at all exposed to the danger. This obsession was transformed into a real danger, on the other hand, in the second volume, *I Turchi alle porte*, which has as its focus of interest the actual incursions made by the Turks into Italian territory towards the end of the fifteenth century: at least five in Friuli and a devastating attack in 1480 on Otranto in Puglia, territory belonging to the Kingdom of Naples. The two worlds, the Christian and the Muslim, that *appear* to be in contrast in the first book, thus really do oppose each other in the second. But let us come to the third, whose title raises several questions. To appeal means to invoke, to call someone, to make them come, to turn to someone in order to receive their help. How is it possible that this obsession and this opposition should then become an invocation, a call for help?

It is the breaking of a border, of a stereotype; one of contrast, of opposition, of the division between two worlds. And it is significant that this emerges on the political level, or rather that political powers and

religious authorities appealed to the enemy par excellence in order to solve political or even personal problems. It would seem inconceivable: how could France, Venice, even the Papacy itself («as the source of all legitimacy in the Catholic system») commit such treachery? And yet this can be understood if we step out of the frame of the “Clash of Civilisations” and enter the frame of “the clash between powers”: here the context is that of alliances with my enemies’ enemies. In short, nothing to do with civilisations, identities or religion. By this time, between the fourteen and fifteen hundreds, the Turks were part of the European geopolitical scene and one could fight with them, trade with them, or negotiate or even form alliances with them, just like with anyone else. For them as well, the Mediterranean was virtually their ‘private garden’. They were, at the same time, from beyond and within European history, at least from the moment when, in 1352, they had made their entry at Gallipoli, on the western side of the Dardanelles: “Turkey in Europe” had in this way begun its journey. In short, they were «significant players at the table of European diplomacy» (p. 10).

Despite this clash, the Mediterranean remained an area of contact, a permeable frontier, in which diplomatic relations, cultural exchange and commercial interests continued to be practised. And in which, for this very reason, there could also be space for an appeal to the eternal enemy. The hostile dimension did not entirely put a stop to the “system of interdependence” that characterised the Mediterranean in the centuries of the early modern age: they observed and they negotiated, they tested each other’s powers on water and in the field. But all of this is only an indication of the complexity of this story, in which, as the author notes, «there is nothing simple and linear» (p. 13).

Let us return to *the appeal*. Often it was launched in a hidden way. Conclusive proof is missing. In many cases it is only a view, something said or unsaid, diplomatic language in code, which requires us to read between the lines. Not everything can be revealed, not everything can be handed down to us, «the history of the appeal to the Turks is thus a collection of mutilated fragments, of secret thoughts, of abortive attempts, of justified accusations or unfounded smears, of blackmail on all sides, of letters never sent, replies never written or which never reached their destination, of coded messages that were not always authentic, of gifts intercepted, of informers in constant alarm, of ambushes in the ports of the Levant or on the Italian coast» (p. 145). To appeal to the Turk remained, however, a gesture that was formally impious.

In some cases a doubt exists that the sources are false, a product of propaganda, put together merely to deride the enemy or to cast him in a bad light. In many other cases the sources exist, but official or moralising selection for political advantage has not given us the record

of them, concealing the memory of betrayal. And when they were “seen”, as in the book by Hans Pfeffermann, published in Switzerland in 1946, in which the author inspected (not without imprecisions) the philo-Turkish actions of the Renaissance popes, the volume was ostracised in Italy and considered offensive and tendentious.

Thus Ricci writes a history of problematic contacts, of ambiguity, negotiating material that is extremely fragmentary and discontinuous, attempting to make absences explicit, to make silences speak. In the texts taken into consideration, «everything and the contrary of everything can be found: peace and war, alliance and suspicion, curiosity and rejection» (p. 98). The author leads us in such a knowledgeable way through a sequence of episodes, of dossiers, often connected to each other in a single narrative thread, a red line that links each chapter to the next, giving a unity to the story. In fact, each one can also be read individually, but undoubtedly a complete reading of the book sheds light on aspects that help the reader to reconstruct the overall framework, «letting them interact in a kind of system» (p. 12). All Giovanni Ricci's skill in narrating history emerges; telling stories with gusto and elegance, and with the awareness of someone who knows and is familiar with the sources, giving the reader a completely enthralling plot. Instead, on the level of content, Ricci lays bare the two sides of the coin: Christians willing to make alliances with the Turks to the point of finding them on home territory; and Turks who, on the other hand, declined these offers, in this way revealing themselves to be less accustomed to aggression than is generally supposed. In some cases those that did arrive were fakes, like when they processed in great pomp in Naples, under threat as it was from Louis XII in 1499: probably this was all an act by which Frederick of Aragon intended to let the French king know he was not alone. Or again, when a fake ambassador appeared dressed as a Turk in Ferrara in 1576 to offer the crown of Jerusalem to Alfonso II d'Este, who welcomed him and received him with all honours: probably a trick, perhaps orchestrated by the Medici to mock the Duke who, falling for the prank, nevertheless revealed his openness to this kind of thing.

The book in great part hinges on the history of Italy between the fourteen and fifteen hundreds, with the Italian wars as background, wars that made Italy into a true battlefield. On the stage there were precarious and short-lived equilibriums, political vendettas, alliances that were redrawn across the board from time to time on the basis of calculation, advantage and marked by the conviction that one party's enemies might be friends to the other. It was a political situation, that of the Italy of the time, that was shot-through with rivalries and ambiguities. We might think of Venice, in Spanish spheres defined as the “concubine” of the Turk, who was deeply hated in Italy and who

promoted an anti-French alliance in the time of Charles VIII and was then to ally herself with Louis XII against Ludovico il Moro. Suspicions even hung in the air about her in connection with the landing by the Turks at Otranto, or a few years later in 1484 when a naval squadron was intercepted, that, in violation of the blockade decreed by Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, was taking supplies to the Moors in the port of Almeria (p. 40). Or even against Lorenzo de' Medici who went as far as to coin a medal to celebrate Mehmed II's action at Otranto. And again, for example, we might think of the behaviour of Frederick II Gonzaga, considered a man for sale, a traitor due to his about-turns between the French and the Emperor in the years 1526-1527.

For many Italians of the time, the Turks were preferable. They were preferred by the Pisans in comparison to the Florentines: they would have handed themselves to the Turk or they would have had themselves killed rather than be brought under the Florentine yoke again, on the sidelines of the arrival of Charles VIII. Even for the people of Puglia, who had known Turkish domination in Otranto, they were preferable to the French: in 1499, while the danger of Louis XII hung over them, a Neapolitan ambassador declared to the cardinal Ascanio Sforza: «we prefer the Turks to the French, because the Turks leave us in our homes, provided that we pay them a tribute; but the French do not do the same» (p. 73). And what can be said of Ludovico il Moro who, commenting on the situation of Naples when it was threatened by Charles VIII in 1494, admitted: «if I were in King Alfonso II of Aragon's place, I would not only call on the Turks, but the devil as well» (p. 56). He who had previously attempted an alliance by a female route, asking, as a widower that he then was, for the hand of the daughter of Bayezid II in marriage. He later really did make the appeal in 1499, invoking the aid of the Sultan against Venice, the ally of the French, in an attempt to drive off Louis XII who was by then master of Milan. His Ottoman plans were discovered and Ludovico il Moro was mocked especially in Venetian circles: besides, his nickname lent itself easily to jokes and derision. It was even said of Pope Alessandro VI Borgia that «it was better the government of the Turk than of the priests» (p. 84).

Without going quite so far, even the Popes indeed appealed to the Turks, while in between times they announced crusades, as was the case of Pope Pius II, the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, and Alessandro VI, the worldly Rodrigo Borgia. All this serving to demonstrate that in this game one group or other belonging to Christendom or Islam was completely unimportant. The former became Pope in 1458, a few years after the fall of Constantinople, and, in a fit of pessimism, he dreamed up an unscrupulous manoeuvre: «now the empire of the Turks is beginning» he declared, expressing his concern about Ottoman successes against the Byzantines (p. 17). What would

have happened in a scenario of the Turkish conquest of Italy? What would have happened to the Pope? Better then to look for a channel of communication. In this climate of catastrophe Pius II wrote a letter to Mehmed II taking advantage of the myth – deeply rooted in the mediaeval image of Islam – of the Christian caliph: he exhorted him to convert, offering in exchange the title of Emperor of the Christians and the beginning of an era of peace. But, Ricci asks, «how and where would this coronation of the new Christian emperor have taken place? In Rome, in Saint Peter's? In Constantinople, in the Hagia Sophia?... So let us ask ourselves again: what Christian name would the Sultan have taken...?» (p. 20). The letter was circulated in various languages and was printed eight times by 1482, but was never forwarded to Istanbul. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the argument had been used, perhaps as a sort of warning to European sovereigns and Italian princes that were reluctant to resort to force. Because in this climate, in 1459, the Pope meanwhile announced a crusade against the Turks, making use of the term in an official document for the first time. In the end the crusade was not carried out because the Pope died at Ancona in 1464, leaving everyone in the lurch. But he had undoubtedly made himself the representative of behaviour that was soon to become particularly widespread: mixing advances and flattery with threats and blackmail.

On the other hand it is not surprising that the humanist Pope par excellence promulgated a crusade, breathing life again into a cycle that had come to an end in 1270 with the failure of Louis IX, Louis the Holy, the most celebrated crusader of the Middle Ages. Italian Humanism of the fifteenth century supported an ethics of boldness and of militancy without reserve in a climate of general exaltation of crusade and hostility towards the Turks who represented in the eyes of Christians the synthesis of the infidel, inhuman people, *immane genus* where the adjective 'immanis' is semantically the opposite of all that derives from 'humanitas'. Only in the first years of the sixteenth century, with Erasmus of Rotterdam, did the pacifist option begin to make its presence felt, but the myth of Ottoman invincibility would only be undermined much later, and by another myth, that of the victory of Lepanto in 1571. Historiography has by now distinguished the mediaeval phase, in which pilgrimages in arms were declared with the aim of liberating the holy places, from the Renaissance crusades, defined as "belated" in which the main objective by then was not so much attack but *defensio* of the frontier. And it is certainly significant that precisely in this situation the term crusade asserted itself in official diplomatic usage by this time.

Pope Alessandro VI, the other great protagonist of Ricci's book, also promulgated one in 1500, refuting behaviour that had been philo-

Turkish up until then, even if always ambiguous and marked by tactics and blackmail. The King of France, Louis XII also joined, but was defeated at Mitilene in 1501: it was to be the last defeat of a French king on crusade. Some decades later, in 1536, the most Christian Francis I, heir of Charlemagne and Louis IX, agreed terms with the Ottoman Sultan, an alliance defined as impious by Spanish propaganda, promoted in order to avenge the shame of Pavia and oppose Charles V's hegemony in Europe, something feared by the Pope as well after the Sack of Rome in 1527.

The Borgia Pope's crusade is to be seen in a climate of the recommencement of hostilities and of a return to arms, after a phase of intense contacts between Rome and Istanbul. A key person in the transactions of those years is Cem, the younger brother of Bayezid, who, defeated in the race to the throne, had taken refuge on Rhodes, and then was sold to France and at last ceded to the Pope who kept him until 1489 largely in agreement with the Sultan: Bayezid in actual fact paid 40,000 Venetian ducats a year for his brother's upkeep and de facto to keep him away from Istanbul, a sum which constituted a regular income in the Papal accounts. In this way Pope Alessandro VI used Cem skilfully as a weapon of blackmail, letting the Sultan know that if the Kingdom of Naples had fallen into the hands of Charles VIII it would have been unlikely that the hostage would be kept in Rome, and instead would be sent to Turkey to harass the Sultan. In addition the Mameluke sovereign of Egypt, Bayezid's enemy, would have paid a huge fortune just to get his hands on Cem; and the Pope himself could have used him in the case of persecutions of Christians in Hungary and Croatia. Bayezid responded to the Pope's solicitations in his turn with letters, at least five, and in one especially scandalous letter he suggested the Pope kill Cem, «who in any case is subject to death .... Might be hastened to death, which would be for him a new life and would represent benefit and peace for Your Power and for us great satisfaction» (p. 61). He left the Pope ample freedom of choice concerning the means to be used in return for 300,000 ducats, paid in advance and in trust. Cem died in 1495 in mysterious circumstances in Naples – where he found himself after being taken from the Pope by Charles VIII according to an official agreement – and a great scandal resulted from this, all the more because the correspondence (the Pope's instructions to his envoy and five letters with the Sultan's replies) had in the meantime been intercepted by Giovanni Della Rovere, ruler of Senigalia, brother to the Cardinal Giuliano Della Rovere, the future Pope Giulio II, enemy of the Borgia, and the correspondence was then sent to Florence where it was translated and published by the notary Filippo Patriarchi.

The question remains as to how to assess the authenticity of the translation and of the documentation, the original version of which, what



is more, disappeared, all the more so as the enemies of France and of the Pope had great interest in discrediting the Pope's image, already quite compromised as it was by the unscrupulous nepotism that had characterized his political actions. Examination of the letter books of the Ottoman chancery now incline us to tend towards their authenticity. In any case, among the incongruences of the sources and possible adaptations there must have been something authentic and something to hide in those pages, all the more as the Pope did not make the effort to declare them as false. Thus the consideration is absolutely credible that «between the totally genuine and the complete fake there is an infinite range of gradual variations» (Ricci, p. 64). And anyway – Ricci notes – the Pope undoubtedly asked for help from the Sultan in the attempt to block the conquest of Naples on the part of Charles VIII and he became furious with the culprit of the ambush, excommunicating him with the accusation of violation of Pontifical correspondence and theft of money (the 40,000 ducats destined towards Cem's maintenance). On the other hand, the incredible escape between Ancona, Mantua and Venice of the Sultan's military messenger (Kasim) who had fallen into Giovanni Della Rovere's trap, «traces a geography of the philo-Turkish positions existing on Italian soil at that moment» (p. 59).

In this scenario the position of the Gonzaga of Mantua deserves some attention. Francesco II Gonzaga – great connoisseur of Turkish horses, symbols of status and wealth, indispensable in war, «precious economically and replete with symbolic value» (p. 91), probably at the basis of the friendship between the Marquis and the Sultan – in 1510 was prisoner of the Venetians. It is certainly significant that his wife, Isabella d'Este even made appeal to the Sanjak of Bosnia to obtain his freedom so that Venice would intercede in his favour: Ricci considers that the person was in effect «a reliable intermediary between two friends (or two non-enemies) of the Turks, Mantua and Venice, who are momentarily at odds with each other» (p. 94). The fact remains that Gonzaga was freed – and certainly not thanks to the King of France or the Pope, his powerful allies.

The agreement between Frederick II Gonzaga and Suleiman the Magnificent a few years later appears to be more disturbing in an era in which, between 1526 and 1529, or rather between Mohács and the siege of Vienna, Europe was being heavily threatened by Ottoman armies on the Hungarian front. Italy was there, almost within their reach, and the position occupied by Mantua was undoubtedly strategic. It was precisely in these circumstances that the Gonzaga's betrayals against their allies occurred, but there was also an ambiguous correspondence between him and the Sultan, filled with heavy expressions, of things said and not said, virtually a coded language, that was comprehensible only to those in the know and able

understand, which Ricci tries to discern beyond the silences. And so, the author asks: «what were they preparing for, in Mantua and Constantinople, while Suleiman's attack on Central Europe took shape?» (p. 104).

Of a completely different tenor, but no less significant for Ricci's thesis, is the letter written, but probably never delivered, by Lucrezia Gonzaga, belonging to a lesser branch of the Marquises of Mantua, to the Sultan with the aim of obtaining the freedom of her husband Giampaolo Manfrone, prisoner of Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara. That a lady, a Gonzaga, noted for her religiosity and culture, close to positions inspired by Erasmus, could even conceive of enrolling the feared corsair Dragut (Turgüt Ali), who in that era raged around the Mediterranean, sowing terror and death, leaves some margin for reflection open to us: we do not even know whether the letter is authentic, but besides this, «the appeal to Suleiman is thus of value because it was published under the name of Gonzaga and because it was not repudiated by her: this is the level of factuality that interests us and not other questions of authenticity» (p. 128).

The subject of true or false, of the authenticity of sources, the role of propaganda and of discrediting one's enemy is – as has been seen – always just around the corner, and probably represents the greatest challenge that the historian has to face from a methodological point of view. Ricci's book is a concrete example on this terrain of that which is, or should be, the task of a historian, equipped to move among the hidden dangers of the sources and of their translations, capable of going beyond the *known* and the *it is said*, so as to give voice to absences and silences, interpreting them, to grasp what the words say, but also what they mean, in a language which at times can be understandable only to those directly involved, who know the context. Here one cannot improvise: the skill of the expert is required.

But Ricci gives us another challenge on the level of content, and one no less important: the need, that is to say, to make a reckoning of this frontier reality, that the Mediterranean was-is-will be, in which those who have lived around it have learned to coexist with the dangers, but also with the opportunities that being an avant-garde brings with it. Transforming danger into opportunity, exorcising fear, breaking the boundaries of prejudice, adjusting to plural presences thus represents the authentic Mediterranean alternative to the theory of collisions.

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(English translation by Richard Chapman)