

History of the Ottoman documents in the State Archives of Dubrovnik*

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By the end of the 14th century the Dubrovnik Republic had already established some friendly contacts with the Ottomans. But, as the Ottoman army quickly advanced towards the West, it was obvious that the Ottoman attitude towards Dubrovnik would soon change. In this connection, Dubrovnik pinned all its hopes on the Christian anti-Ottoman leagues. Western countries, however, were too disunited and unable to form a strong enough protective shield. So, by the middle of the 15th century Dubrovnik gave up hopes, turned towards the Ottomans and started to negotiate. Naturally, Ragusan efforts would have been fruitless if the Ottomans themselves had no interest in these negotiations. Fortunately for Dubrovnik, at that moment it was just what the Ottomans needed - it was the Catholic state with good trade and political connections with the West, especially with the Papal state; also, Dubrovnik was a state militarily too weak and harmless, so the Ottomans could let it be independent in order to be neutral - and this was crucial. In other words, Dubrovnik seemed to be perfect for the role of a neutral mediator between the Empire and the West. This role was induced by the Ottomans and accepted by the Western countries.

On this basis, Dubrovnik acquired several political and trade privileges from the Ottoman sultans. Similarly, Dubrovnik was granted the explicit right to trade with the Ottoman enemies. Ragusan merchants were well protected on the Ottoman territory and paid the lowest customs fees. Each Ottoman sultan swore to protect Dubrovnik's territory from various aggressors, especially from the Venetians.

As for Dubrovnik's obligations towards the Ottoman Empire, it was to be loyal and to pay the tribute whose amount varied at first, and around the 1480s reached a steady figure of 12,500 golden ducats per year. The sum was disbursed regularly until the end of the 17th century, when it was paid every third year. It was delivered to the sultans by the so-called tribute ambassadors, who, without exception, were all Ragusan nobles. Apart from being assigned to deliver the tribute, they equally dealt with diverse consular and diplomatic affairs in Istanbul.

The above mentioned Turco-Ragusan agreement had been reached in 1458. On this occasion the first Ottoman-Ragusan treaty called Ragusan *ahdname* was issued.

Twenty five years later the Ottomans reached the Republic borders and occupied all the territories in Dubrovnik's immediate vicinity and hinterland. From that time on Dubrovnik had most intensive contacts with the neighbouring Ottoman authorities.

In brief, this has been the historical background to the Ottoman-Ragusan relations and the Ottoman documents issued over the period.

Documents were kept and preserved in the so-called Turkish chancellery, which was situated in the Rector's palace of Dubrovnik together with all other state chancelleries. The state officials in charge of the Turkish chancellery were trained interpreters for the Ottoman language, the so-called dragomans. Since they had a crucial role in preserving, classifying and translating of the Ottoman documents, let us dwell upon their training and professional life.

Young Ragusan men in pursuit of a dragoman's career acquired their basic knowledge of Ottoman language in Dubrovnik, under the tutorship of the masters, recruited mainly from Bosnia and Istanbul. If a young man proved gifted at this elementary stage, the Dubrovnik authorities would proclaim him "student of the Ottoman, Arabic and Persian language", grant him a scholarship, and send him to the Ottoman Empire for further schooling, where they were also taught by carefully chosen masters. These students would leave Dubrovnik between the ages of 15 and 20, spend their first years of study in Thessaloniki, Edirne, Smyrna or Plovdiv, and finally in Istanbul.

A number of students from Dubrovnik managed to complete the studies and became excellent interpreters. Let me draw your attention just to two of them. Vicko Bratutti was a famous Dubrovnik dragoman in the 17th century. After service for the Dubrovnik Republic, he acted as a dragoman with the Austrian emperor Ferdinand III as well as with the Spanish king Philip IV. He translated Saddedin ibn Hasan Can's chronicle on the dynasty of the Ottoman sultans into Italian.

Miho Zarini was the best dragoman of the Dubrovnik Republic. During 40 years of service he worked very hard in the Turkish chancellery, made numberless visits to the Ottoman dignitaries of Bosnia and was appointed 13 times to Istanbul with the tribute ambassadors. His pleasant nature, eloquence and perfect knowledge of the Ottoman language made him popular in Bosnia and Istanbul alike.

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At the end, his competence literally killed him. Namely, in 1763 he wrote to Dubrovnik authorities, offering his resignation: “Illustrious Excellences, it has been 40 years now that I have had the honour to serve you as a dragoman. I’m over sixty now, weary and exhausted from the long journeys, which I can no longer take. My life, which I have entirely devoted to my country, is coming to its end. I would like to spend my last days in preparing for the final encounter with death.” Unfortunately, he was much too precious. The authorities rejected his resignation and dispatched him to Istanbul again. He obeyed, wrote his last will, went to Istanbul and died there, just as he had foreseen.

As we can see, Ottoman documents were in the hands of devoted and highly professional individuals. They did their best to preserve and classify the materials. Many of their translations have been preserved to date. Also, during the 18th century they made several indexes and inventories.

Turkish chancellery had a useful reference library and Dubrovnik authorities made regular book-acquisitions.

All damaged documents and books were carefully restored.

The rules in all archives sections were very strict. A good illustration is a case of a man who dared steal two notarial registers and was sentenced to death for it.

Concerning the Archives’ general condition during the Republic, let us mention the report written by Le Maire, French consul to Dubrovnik in the 18th century. As his mission was marked by the constant struggle with the local authorities, his view of the Ragusan society, politics, economy, culture and lifestyle is, quite expectedly, cynical and hostile. But, he describes the Dubrovnik Archives as “one of the oldest, best organized and best preserved Archives in Europe”.

But, with the fall of the Republic in 1808, the Turkish chancellery and the Archives in general witnessed a sequence of dramatic events.

The same year, Napoleon’s soldiers were ordered to empty the Turkish chancellery. An eyewitness described the operation in the following words: “Soldiers started to empty the Turkish chancellery in a most careless and ruthless way. While carrying the documents in piles, many had fallen all around. It was then that a number of the most important, beautiful and richly decorated Ottoman documents were lost.”

Also, the Archives was superficially reorganized and divided in two main sections: Political Archives and Legal Archives. This was done because the legal documents were

needed daily. As for the Political Archives, including Ottoman documents, it was completely neglected. The documents thus lost any connection with its inventories and turned into piles of paper without identity and any proof of existence.

From 1814 Dubrovnik was under Austrian rule. Its territory was entrusted to the so-called Austrian district governor with the office in the Rector's Palace, where the Political Archives was, and the governor was in charge of it. The first governor had a strange habit in dealing with this Archives. He would open its doors to his friends and offer them to take any document they liked.

In 1817 the military bakery, situated near the Rector's Palace, caught fire, which immediately spread to the Archives. The exact number of destroyed documents is not known.

In the late 1820s, Vienna started to show an increasing interest in the Archives of Dubrovnik, especially in the Latin, Cyrillic and Ottoman documents. On account of this, the Austrian local authorities in Dubrovnik were ordered to engage experts to make adequate inventories.

Two dragomans of the former Republic, Nikola Radelja and Miho BeniĆ, were the only experts who could deal with the Ottoman documents. But they refused to cooperate for reasons of old age and poor health, which obviously was a sabotage. Vlaho Caboga, nobleman of the former Republic, was responsible for the taking of inventories. He also tried to sabotage the order and avoid the sending of documents to Vienna. Upon his suggestion to send copies to Vienna and keep the originals in Dubrovnik, he received the following answer from the Austrian Imperial Archives: "Dubrovnik should be proud to have its documents in our Archives. Originals from all Austrian provinces are preserved here, including those from the former states and republics, which once were much more important than the Republic of Dubrovnik. Besides, nobody ever complained about the initiative to concentrate the most valuable documents and charters at the Austrian Imperial Archives."

Since all efforts of Dubrovnik's patriots remained fruitless, in 1833 some thousand sultans' documents and about fifty manuscripts and printed books from the former Turkish chancellery were sent to Vienna.

Three years later, the Austrian authorities ordered that all Ottoman documents from the province of Dalmatia were to be collected in Zadar, the province capital, in order to be sent all together to Vienna. On that occasion another 860 documents were sent from Dubrovnik. In a letter accompanying the delivery, the Archives' director told that concerning

the Ottoman documents, that was all they had.

But this was not true. Namely, at that time, some 12,000 Ottoman documents were kept in big sacks in the Sponza Palace, not far from the Rector's Palace. Most probably they were transported there during the above mentioned fire in 1817, which caught the part of the Archives. The director must have known this, but kept it a secret.

After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and according to the Saint-Germain treaty new-formed states reclaimed their cultural heritage which had been taken to Vienna. Thus a delegation of the new state - the Kingdom of Croats, Serbs and Slovenians - reclaimed the Ottoman and other documents that once belonged to the Dubrovnik Archives.

The documents were eventually restored, not to Dubrovnik, however, but to the Serbian Royal Academy in Belgrade, the Kingdom capital. The director of the Dubrovnik Archives persisted in transporting the documents from Belgrade to Dubrovnik, which the Serbian Royal Academy successfully postponed. Twenty years of fruitless negotiations were interrupted by Hitler's invasion of Belgrade. The Germans reclaimed the Ottoman documents and transported them back to Vienna. After the Second World War, in 1946, the documents finally arrived home. To be more exact, the documents arrived, but fifty books are still in the Austrian National Library.

The question is how many of the documents were lost during the French rule and in the early period of the Austrian rule. A rough examination of the *fermans* issued from 1627 to 1647 indicates that 40% of them are lost.

The most valuable and most beautiful collection of Ragusan *ahdnames* and *hatt-i humayuns* has suffered the worst fate. Instead of fourteen *ahdnames*, only three are extant. At least one hundred of *hatt-i humayuns* should have been issued for Dubrovnik. Today only eight are extant.

Currently, the State Archives of Dubrovnik houses a collection of 15,000 Ottoman documents from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th century. They were issued by the sultans and the Porte, provincial administrative and judicial authorities, and are thus of diverse nature, such as sultans' documents, *buyrultu*, *arz*, *ilam*, *hüccet* and many official and private letters.

It is impossible to mention all the topics of 2,000 sultans' documents, that is mostly *fermans*. They are principally of political and economic nature, such as sultans' protection, prohibitions to Ottoman local authorities to interfere in Ragusan affairs or to step on the

Ragusan territory, customs fees and other taxes, Dubrovnik's salt monopoly on Herzegovinian territory, along with contumacy measures, hajduks, outlaws, corsairs and slaves; and, for example, an intriguing topic: Ragusan spying for Ottomans. Namely, among more important issues, which the Ottomans had established in their relations with the Ragusans, was their spying upon European states. Sultan himself addressed them several times after receiving information. For example, in 1571, during the formation of the anti-Ottoman league, sultan Selim the Second wrote:

“...When the imperial, illustrious sign arrives, it shall be known that you have sent a letter to my Gate of Happiness, that king Philip has given hundred galleys to the Pope to assist Venice. In short, everything which was communicated concerning Venice, the Pope, the Doge, the king of Vienna, and the rest of Europe, came in details to my noble knowledge.

You are not to cease to study and spy on the circumstances in those parts, in future as well, without failure, and report continuously true information, according to the devotion and sincerity that you have had from old days towards my Gate of Happiness. And you shall rely upon my noble sign.”

Buyrultu is yet another kind of Ottoman document preserved in the State Archives of Dubrovnik. It is a written order mostly issued by the Bosnian beylerbeys. These orders generally follow or carry out sultans' decrees, but also describe the relations with the neighbours.

For example, here is a *buyrultu* in shortened version concerning a sick Ragusan nobleman: “since the Ragusan nobleman Luka Sorgo suffers from the stomach catarrh, he intends to take cure in the mineral springs of Kiseljak in the kadilik of Fojnica. So, all of you kadis and officers posted on his way to Kiseljak are to take perfect care of him, provide him a secure lodging for the night and protect him during his journey.”

Following are judicial documents, such as *arz*, *ilam* and *hüccet*, in other words, statements, reports and verdicts. These documents reveal a great deal about daily contacts between Ragusan and Ottoman subjects. They treat problems such as debt collectings, robberies, fights, murders. Any of these problems, if left unsolved, could easily cause disorder and revenge, especially in the border area. Thus, it is clear that both Ragusan government and the Ottoman cadies were equally concerned about keeping up the good relations.

Approximately one third of Ottoman documents are official and private letters. They were written by the officials of the Porte, and the provincial and local administrators on the

territories from Dubrovnik's immediate vicinity in Herzegovina to Istanbul and North Africa. These letters reveal the Ottoman-Ragusan relations in a more vivid and diverse manner, since official documents are limited by form. Topics are numberless. The letters pertain to politics and economy, but also personal relations, friendships and hostilities, ordinary, everyday problems, desires, needs. Let us point out one unusual need from the Bosnian court:

“My dear friends, may it be known that we need a few poisonous snakes for the preparation of certain drugs. For this reason we ask you to catch eight snakes, not small but big ones. Please, put them into a small wooden box, with some soil and a few holes to let the air in. Send the box to our protomedicus haci Mehmed-aga. Please, do not forget our friendship, and do it immediately. May God's blessing be on the one who follows the right road.”

In order to make the Ottoman documents more accessible, in 2002 the State Archives of Dubrovnik set up the large project to classify, catalogue and publish them. The first phase was completed by the publishing of the sultans' documents. The inventory of these documents will be available on the Internet in few months. Forthcoming is the analysis of the *buyrultu* papers issued by the Bosnian beylerbeys.