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# Recognition and evaluation in the field for the Grand Duke. The ‘Syrian trip’ of Giovanni Altoni

Daide Trentacoste

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*Recognition and evaluation in the field for the Grand Duke. The 'Syrian trip' of Giovanni Altoni*



## Recognition and evaluation in the field for the Grand Duke. The 'Syrian trip' of Giovanni Altoni

### Ricognizione e valutazione sul campo per il granduca. La 'gita siriana' di Giovanni Altoni

Davide Trentacoste

(The Haifa Center for Mediterranean History University of Haifa)

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#### *Riassunto*

All'inizio di ottobre 1607 il granduca di Toscana Ferdinando I stipulò un trattato di alleanza con il pascià di Aleppo, il quale si era ribellato nel 1605 al dominio ottomano. Purtroppo per entrambi, circa venti giorni la stipula del trattato, le forze ottomane sconfissero l'esercito del pascià ribelle, costringendolo a fuggire da Aleppo, vanificando così le speranze toscane di ottenere vantaggi e privilegi in Siria e quelle siriane di affrancarsi dal dominio ottomano. Se queste vicende risultano relativamente note, meno lo sono i processi diplomatici e informativi attraverso i quali i granduchi decisero se fosse o meno il caso di impegnare le proprie forze in queste operazioni militari dall'esito incerto. Si propone qui la pubblicazione e la disamina di un documento poco conosciuto, riguardante una ricognizione in Siria ordinata da Ferdinando I a un suo ingegnere militare di nome Giovanni Altoni allo scopo di capire se e come era possibile intervenire in appoggio delle rivolte anti-ottomane.

#### *Parole chiave*

Granducato di Toscana; Ferdinando I; Giovanni Altoni; 'Ali Jānbulād; Levante; Storia mediterranea; ingegnere militare; Siria.

#### *Abstract*

In early October 1607, the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinando I signed an alliance treaty with the Pasha of Aleppo, who had rebelled against Ottoman rule in 1605. Unfortunately for both of them, about twenty days after the treaty was signed, the Ottoman forces crushed the rebel pasha's army, forcing him to flee Aleppo, thus thwarting Tuscan dreams of gaining advantages and privileges in Syria, and crushing Syrian hopes of freeing themselves from Ottoman rule. If these events are relatively well-known, less so are the various diplomatic and information avenues explored by the Grand Dukes when trying to decide whether or not to engage their forces in these military operations with an uncertain outcome. Here, it is proposed to edit and examine a little-known document concerning a reconnaissance in Syria. Ferdinando, I commanded one of his military engineers named Giovanni Altoni to make the trip in order to understand if and how it was possible to intervene in support of the anti-Ottoman revolts.

#### *Keywords*

Grand Duchy of Tuscany; Ferdinando I; Giovanni Altoni; 'Ali Jānbulād; Levant; Mediterranean History; Military engineer; Syria.



*1. Introduction. - 2. Historical Context. - 3. Tuscan Military Engineers as Diplomats and Informers. - 4. Giovanni Altoni and his Mission to Syria. - 5. Altoni's Report. - 6. Summary of the Text. - 7. Final Remarks. - 8. References. - 9. Curriculum vitae.*

### *1. Introduction*

It is well documented that the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, especially during the first twenty years of the seventeenth century, had great ambitions regarding the Levant and that they intervened several times, both militarily and diplomatically, in the Eastern Mediterranean region in an attempt to realise them. These "Oriental" aspects of Tuscan diplomacy have been rediscovered in very recent years, and this has also made it possible to better understand the "global" role that Tuscany played in the early modern age in areas such as diplomacy and the circulation of knowledge, things and people<sup>1</sup>.

However, while the ambitions of the Grand Dukes are well known, the same cannot be said of the way in which they made decisions concerning their Eastern policy. I refer in particular to how the Grand Ducal court managed to obtain the necessary information about the Levant, who the agents entrusted with the task of gathering and verifying the news were, what news the Grand Dukes were interested in, whether it was reliable and how much so<sup>2</sup>.

The aim of this paper is therefore to present the report provided by a Tuscan agent who, on the orders of Grand Duke Ferdinando I, carried out extensive reconnaissance in Syria in 1606 with the purpose of gathering the information necessary to make important decisions regarding military and diplomatic intervention in support of a Syrian Pasha who had rebelled against the Ottoman Sultan. The analysis of this particular case will thus make it possible to better frame the decision-making processes of the Tuscan government in the early seventeenth century and the link between information gathering and diplomacy and, above all, also to better identify some types of agents and the skills required for the role of informer.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of these recent volumes: Caroscio - Arfaioli, 2016; Freddolini - Musillo, 2020; Brege, 2021; Trentacoste, 2021b.

<sup>2</sup> On the Tuscan information system regarding the Levant during the seventeenth century, see, Trentacoste, 2021b, pp. 97-175.

## 2. Historical Context

During the early seventeenth century, but actually already from the years immediately following the Catholic victory at Lepanto (1571), the Grand Duchy of Tuscany showed great ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean and towards the Levant. In fact, after the naval clash that took place in Greek waters between the great fleets of the Ottoman Empire on one side and Venice and Spain (aided by smaller fleets) on the other, an empty space was created in the Mediterranean that some of the smaller Italian states tried to fill (Tenenti, 1961, pp. 7-9; Greene, 2010, pp. 6-7). Ruling families such as the Savoia, Gonzaga and Medici hoped to carve out a prominent role in Mediterranean politics and diplomacy, and in particular in the war against the Ottoman Empire, by directly participating in (or financing) Habsburg military campaigns in the Balkans, or by arming small fleets with which to conduct their own naval operations against the Ottoman coasts, islands and ships<sup>3</sup>. This was also due to the renewed crusading vigour shown by the Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation, which, after having succeeded, albeit briefly, in uniting the Catholic powers precisely at Lepanto, hoped to be able to replicate its success thereafter by spurring the Catholic rulers to take up arms against the infidels, or at least to support the Habsburg wars<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, the Medici Tuscany was perhaps the one that did the most to succeed in enhancing its status as a small Italian power to something resembling, albeit distantly and faintly, that of the great European states with large fleets, global economic interests and large colonial empires<sup>5</sup>. Among the various attempts made by the Grand Dukes, which were directed from time to time towards Cyprus, Bra-

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<sup>3</sup> On the attitude of the Italian states in the Mediterranean after the Battle of Lepanto, see Tamborra, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> On this, see Caccamo, 1970, pp. 255-281.

<sup>5</sup> On this issue, I refer to the remarks made a few years ago by Giuseppe Marcocci, who wrote that the Tuscan one was the attempt "forse più organico di creare una struttura istituzionale che potesse integrarsi pienamente nella dimensione globale da parte di un potere italiano", (Marcocci, 2014, p. 35). Moreover, a good synopsis of the various paths taken by the Tuscan Grand Dukes in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries can be found in Brian Brege's recent book. The bibliography in Brege's book is quite up-to-date, both on Mediterranean and non-European politics. However, it must be avoided thinking that these ambitious Tuscan policies were the result of a precise "plan", but actually were occasions that arose from time to time and which the Grand Dukes tried to take advantage of.

zil or Africa (just to mention the most important examples), some of the most interesting ones concerned the Eastern Mediterranean and in particular its Syrian and Lebanese shores. It was precisely the Levant that was, in the first decade of the seventeenth century, the focus of the ambitions of Grand Duke Ferdinando I (r. 1587-1609), who sought to take advantage of the rumoured weakness of the Ottoman Empire, which was going through a moment of crisis due to the rebellions of numerous provinces. Indeed, Aleppo's Pasha 'Ali Jānbulād (d. 1610) had rebelled in 1605 and his troops had emerged victorious from several clashes with the Ottoman forces, debilitated by the empire's internal situation and by the war against the Safavid Persia of Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 1587-1629), who had inflicted a severe defeat on the Ottoman army led by Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha in 1605<sup>6</sup>.

'Ali Jānbulād's rebellion had also encouraged other Levantine princes to revolt, such as the Druze Emir Fakhr al-Din (r. 1592-1635), and the news about these revolts, which appeared victorious, prompted Ferdinando to contact these Muslim rulers, in the hope of being able to intervene in their support and thus gain something from any success. In fact, although officially driven by the spirit of crusade and war against the infidel, Tuscan policy was actually led by economic and commercial ambitions. Trade from the Levant was still monopolized by Venice, although the presence of the English and French was increasingly strong, and Tuscany and its merchants were cut off from this trade<sup>7</sup>. Ferdinando's real objectives were therefore to be able to carve out his own space within the Eastern Mediterranean trade and, why not, obtain a few port cities to use as bases, both commercial and naval, for further military action against the Ottomans (Trentacoste, 2021, p. 61; Brege, 2021, 248-251).

A turning point in Tuscan politics came a few years before the Pasha of Aleppo rebelled against Ottoman authority: in 1601 Florence was visited by a great Persian

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<sup>6</sup> 'Ali Jānbulād started his rebellion in 1605, when the Pasha of Aleppo, his uncle Huseyn Jānbulād, was blamed by Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha for causing the Ottoman defeat by arriving late with his supporting army and being executed. On Sinan Pasha, see Bostan, 2018, pp. 15-17.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the bad relations between Tuscany and the Ottoman Empire, due to the aggressiveness of Tuscan vessels and the hostility of the Venetians and French towards a stronger mercantile presence in the Levant, meant that Tuscan merchants were forbidden to trade in Ottoman ports. However, the Tuscans were able to trade in the Levant indirectly, i.e. through foreign ships and trading partners such as the English. On Tuscan-Ottoman relations at the end of the sixteenth century, see Mercan, 2020, pp. 169-188.

embassy sent to Europe by the Shah of Persia, 'Abbās I, and although actually nothing concrete had been agreed, the good relations that seemed to have been established with the Shah gave the Grand Duke the conviction (maybe the illusion) of having found a powerful ally in his Levantine aims<sup>8</sup>. In the Grand Ducal plans, if Persia had engaged the Ottoman army, the latter would not have been able to defend the islands and coasts of the Levant, and in fact it is no coincidence that it was indeed after 1601 that Tuscan diplomacy worked close with the Papacy in imagining enterprises that could have led to the occupation of some islands or territories in the Levant (Trentacoste, 2021, pp. 63-66).

Moreover, the numerous reports arriving from the Levant concerning the critical situation of the Ottomans were echoed in European Catholic propaganda publications inviting Christian princes to take up arms against the Sultan. One of the most active of these authors was indeed a Tuscan named Antonio Mossi, who published a letter to the Pope in 1603 urging him to declare a new crusade and also a short treatise in 1604 explaining that the Ottoman Empire was on the verge of collapse<sup>9</sup>. Encouraged by this news, Ferdinando decided to take advantage of the situation by supporting some of the rebels but, of course, before he could do so safely, he needed to gather as much information as possible to decide which of them seemed to have the best chance of success. The Pasha of Aleppo in Syria appeared to be the strongest<sup>10</sup>.

Actually, already in 1605 Ferdinando had become interested in the possibility of intervening in the Levant, through information brought to him by a Venetian named Raffaello Cacciamari, and shortly afterwards he had obtained permission from Pope Paul V (r. 1605-1621) to supply weapons to rebellious Muslim princes (something that was generally strictly forbidden by the Papacy)<sup>11</sup>.

So, Ferdinando immediately contacted the rebel Pasha, but before making a final decision as to whether he should intervene on his behalf, he decided to send a man, experienced in war and diplomacy, to Syria to assess the situation. The choice fell on one of the many military technical experts, whose skills were a source of

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<sup>8</sup> On Tuscan-Safavid relations, see Trentacoste, 2021e, pp. 21-41.

<sup>9</sup> See, just to give a couple of examples, Mossi, 1603 and Mossi, 1604. See also, Trentacoste, 2021c, pp. 108-110.

<sup>10</sup> On Tuscany and the Pasha of Aleppo, see Brege, 2020, pp. 19-32; Brege, 2021, pp. 243-280.

<sup>11</sup> On Cacciamari's report, see Carali, 1936, pp. 134-138.

pride for the Grand Duchy of Tuscany: the military engineer and captain Giovanni Altoni.

### *3. Tuscan Military Engineers as Diplomats and Informers*

Before dealing specifically with the question of Giovanni Altoni and his mission, it is necessary to dwell briefly on the careers of those other Tuscan military engineers and architects and their contribution to the foreign policy and diplomacy of the Medici.

In the development of the new Medici state, after the definitive annexation of Siena (1559), Cosimo I (r. 1537-1574) had already made extensive use of military architects and engineers to secure his territories: one has only to think of the considerable number of towers built on the Tuscan coast or the many fortifications and fortresses erected to defend roads and cities. All this military construction activity brought a certain fame to Tuscan engineers and architects, who were requested as advisors and consultants and sent to all the courts of Italy and Europe. For instance, during the wars between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans that inflamed Hungary at the end of the sixteenth century, several Tuscan military professionals were sent as consultants for the defence of forts<sup>12</sup>. In addition to their work as military (and civil) consultants, these architects and engineers, who also had a humanistic and political background, were furthermore employed as diplomats. This is the case, for example, of Antonio Lupicini, a Florentine military technician, author of several texts on fortifications and a civil, military and diplomatic consultant in both Venice and Mantua, who was in Hungary in 1594 in the wake of the above-mentioned imperial campaigns<sup>13</sup>.

This export of technical and military know-how reached its peak during the reign of Ferdinando I, who intervened in many Mediterranean and European theatres of war, sending many of his technicians as consultants to various courts. In fact, the eighteenth-century Tuscan historian Jacopo Riguccio Galluzzi, describing the technical and scientific progress in Tuscany between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, dwelt at length on the Tuscan school

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<sup>12</sup> On Tuscan architects and engineers in Europe and their role in diplomacy and warfare, see Spini, 1976; Spini, 1991, pp. 77-92; Sodini, 2001, pp. 245-250.

<sup>13</sup> On Lupicini, see Doti, 2006. For his treatise, see Lupicini, 1582; Lupicini, 1587. Some of his writings were published in Lanteri - Zanco, 1601.

of architecture and engineering, also providing a list of architects and engineers whose skills had made the name of Tuscany great<sup>14</sup>. Many of those he listed were military technicians who had served in the Hungarian campaigns of the Habsburgs and among them, more than one had also written treatises on the art of warfare and fortifications, such as the above-mentioned Lupicini<sup>15</sup>. It is therefore not surprising that the Grand Dukes greatly trusted these persons to establish comprehensive military assessments, as well as to conduct diplomatic negotiations.

Moreover, the fact that these professionals were widely employed by other sovereigns made their fame reach far beyond Europe: for instance, Baccio da Filicaia was employed by the Portuguese as a military architect in Brazil towards the end of the sixteenth century<sup>16</sup>. Another example is the request for technical support that arrived in Florence in 1589 from Persia through the Papal diplomat (but of Florentine origin) Giovanni Battista Vecchietti. Returning to Europe from a long mission that had taken him to Egypt, the Levant and Persia, Vecchietti told the Grand Duke Ferdinando that the Persian sovereign would certainly appreciate the sending of Tuscan military technicians to instruct his men in the use of artillery and fortresses<sup>17</sup>. These demands were reiterated in 1609 when the Tuscan court was

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<sup>14</sup> "A proporzione delle scienze dovea avanzarsi lo studio delle matematiche e produrre alla Toscana il glorioso secolo di Galileo. Leggeva matematiche in Pisa nel 1588 Don Filippo Fantoni Camaldolense, ed in Firenze era mattematico di Corte Ostilio Ricci da Fermo, quello di cui si valse il G. Duca per dirigere le fortificazioni dell'isola d'Yff e di Pomegues. Una scuola di architetti e d'ingegneri la più florida e accreditata che fosse in Italia promoveva lo studio delle matematiche. Dalla disciplina del Buontalenti erano emanati molti soggetti che poi esercitatisi al di fuori con le loro opere fecero onore alla Patria. Sono perciò noti Benaiuto Lorini architetto della fortificazione di Palma, e autore del trattato della *Fortificazione*, Antonio Lupicini ingegnere, Giovanni Altoni, Alessandro Pieroni architetto della nuova città di Livorno, Gabbriello Ughi e molti altri, dei quali sono opera le Piazze dell'Ungheria, e molte Fortezze fabbricate dalla Casa d'Austria sulle sue frontiere". See, Galluzzi, 1781, pp. 193-194.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of these military engineers, see Promis, 1874. For an extensive list of names of Italian military writers between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries and their works, see Ilari, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> On Baccio da Filicaia see Pagano, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> See, Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASFi), *Mediceo del Principato (MdP)*, vol. 4920, f. 23. For the Vecchietti's relation on Persia, see Tucci, 1955, pp. 149-160. On the diplomatic mission of Giovanni Battista Vecchietti in Persia, see Bernardini, 2011, pp. 265-282;

reached by an embassy led by the Englishman Robert Sherley<sup>18</sup>. Grand Duke Cosimo II (r. 1609-1621) had a passport prepared to send Costantino de' Servi, an architect and engineer who was already well known and highly regarded at the time, to Persia. However, at the last moment Costantino's mission was cancelled and he was sent to England, where for years he held the same positions he would have held if he had gone to the Persian court, i.e. technical consultant, diplomat and informer<sup>19</sup>.

One more example, still linked to the Eastern policies of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, and very similar to the one analysed in this paper, is the journey made in 1614 to the Levant by the engineer Giovanni Battista Santi to update Grand Duke Cosimo II on the situation in Lebanon. At that time, in fact, Tuscany had formed an alliance with Emir Fakhr al-Din of Lebanon, who had rebelled against the Ottoman government, as 'Ali Jānbulād had done some ten years earlier, and who had had to flee to Italy where he was hosted by, among others, the Medici<sup>20</sup>. In 1614 he had recently arrived in Florence and Cosimo II decided to send some of his military experts to understand what was happening in the territory of the fugitive Emir. In this case too, the Grand Duke's choice fell on a number of military officers accompanied by the two engineers Cesare Antogniacci and Giovanni Battista Santi<sup>21</sup>. The latter wrote a long report for Cosimo II on the condition of the domain of Fakhr al-Din, which is preserved in the State Archives in Florence<sup>22</sup>.

A closing aspect that I think is worth remembering is that this Tuscan technical-military school was actually part of a broader and solid Italian tradition. In fact, especially during the sixteenth century, Italian architects and engineers were extensively employed in the construction of fortresses, especially by foreign powers,

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Piemontese, 2017, pp. 199-238. On the Persians and the use of firearms and fortresses, see Matthee, 1996, pp. 389-416.

<sup>18</sup> On Robert Sherley's embassy in Florence, see Trentacoste, 2021b, pp. 258-265.

<sup>19</sup> On Costantino De' Servi, see the recent Bachelor dissertation of Davide Martino and his up to date bibliography: Martino, 2016. Many thanks to Davide Martino for providing me with a copy of his dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> On the alliance between Cosimo II and Fakhr al-Din, see El Bibas, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> On Santi's mission, see Galluzzi, 1821, p. 148; Carali, 1936, pp. 208-224.

<sup>22</sup> The report written by Giovanni Battista Santi is relatively well known and studied, especially as a result of the great interest that the alliance between the Medici court and the Lebanese Emir has always aroused in scholars. For the original report, see ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4276, ff. 528-535.



such as Portugal and Spain, interested in defending their colonies and trade routes: Africa, South America and the entire Asian area between the Persian Gulf, the south of the Arabian Peninsula and present-day India and Indonesia, are dotted with fortresses designed and built by Italian architects and engineers<sup>23</sup>.

#### 4. Giovanni Altoni and his Mission to Syria

There is little information about Giovanni Altoni, either before this mission or after. He was perhaps the son (or at least a relative) of Francesco di Sandro Altoni, who had been Cosimo I's sword master and to whom he had dedicated a treatise on the art of fencing<sup>24</sup>. During his lifetime Giovanni Altoni was an esteemed engineer and career soldier, and in 1604 wrote a treatise on the art of war entitled *Il Soldato* (*About the Soldier* in the English translation), which he dedicated to Cosimo II (Altoni, 1604). The other few details we have about his life comes from his works and what was written about him later. Giulio Negri, in his *Istoria degli Scrittori Fiorentini*, wrote only that Altoni was born in Florence in the sixteenth century, that he served valiantly in France and that he was "very competent, thanks to his great experience and deep scientific knowledge of such a noble discipline" (Negri, 1722, p. 259). The fact that he had served in France in the retinue of Henry IV (r. 1589-1610) is also confirmed in the dedication that Altoni himself wrote for Cosimo II in his

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<sup>23</sup> The question of the importance of the Italian military-technical school in the modern era, and its influence outside Italy as well, is dealt with in Hanlon, 1998, pp. 50, 73, 79, 348 (the map with the places of origin of Italian military engineers is interesting on this page). I also mention Pepper, 2000, pp. 13-32. For an overview of Italians in the service of Portugal, the state that perhaps most of all employed Italian engineers and architects in its colonies, see Finizio, 2006; De Sousa, 2020, pp. 1-13; Tavares da Conceição - Malcher de Araujo, 2021, pp. 34-50.

<sup>24</sup> Francesco di Sandro Altoni, *Monomachia ovvero Arte di Scherma*. The original work survives only in two manuscript copies, preserved respectively in the National Central Library of Florence and the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati of Siena. On Francesco Altoni, see D'Ayala, 1854, p. 3.

treatise<sup>25</sup>. Later, he was a captain in the Tuscan contingent of the imperial army in Hungary<sup>26</sup>.

In 1810 Luigi Marini described him as a military theorist well ahead of his time, comparing some of the solutions he proposed for fortifications to those that would be devised two centuries later by Henri Jean-Baptiste de Bousmard de Chantereine<sup>27</sup>, while in 1854 Mariano D' Ayala counted him among the best military writers (pp. VI-VII, 2-3). Some of the indications that Altoni gave in his treatise are still valid today, as evidenced by the fact that his work is cited in contemporary studies on the use of artillery and new technologies by commanders: "[...] in 1604 in his treatise *About the Soldier*, Giovanni Altoni advised officers to get acquainted with new military techniques if they did not want their prestige and authority to suffer due to the "superiority" of engineers" (Keller, 2016, pp. 130-131). It is therefore not surprising that, in the light of all this information, the Grand Duke decided to send Giovanni Altoni to Syria. Besides already being probably highly esteemed in his time, in 1606, by then he had a very respectable *curriculum*, as we might say today.

Even regarding Altoni's mission there is not much information, except for what can be deduced from his letters and his report on Syria. Considering that the explanatory letter that he attached to his report is dated 19 November 1606, it is plausible to think that he went to the Levant in the summer of that year and stayed there for at least a few weeks. At that time Ferdinando I had already established relations with 'Ali Jānbulād and it is therefore also plausible to think that Altoni was hosted by the Pasha.

On his return to Tuscany, presumably in the late autumn of 1606, he provided Ferdinando with his report on Syria, but before dealing with this I would like to

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<sup>25</sup> Altoni, 1604, pp. I-II. It is worth noting, by the way, that one of Henry IV's greatest supporters during the last religious war in France (1585-1598) was Ferdinando I himself, both militarily, diplomatically and financially.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, his name appears in the above-mentioned list provided by Jacopo Riguccio Galluzzi among the Tuscan military technicians who worked in Hungary. See Galluzzi, 1781, pp. 193-194.; Sodini, 2001, pp. 245-250.

<sup>27</sup> See, Marini, 1810, pp. 52-53. For the work of Bousmard de Chantereine, see de Bousmard de Chantereine, 1797.

briefly discuss his (few) other letters concerning his mission<sup>28</sup>. These are two requests for reimbursement for himself, for the expenses he had incurred in carrying out his mission, and the two collaborators who had followed him to the Levant<sup>29</sup>. The tone of the request denotes a certain urgency, since Altoni claimed not to have enough to live on, but according to a note added at the foot of the first request, already by 16 November 1606, the Tuscan captain was reimbursed. There is also a list of the things he had bought for his mission, including hats, socks, boots, cutlery, chests, knives, six military books, eyeglasses and a book in which he could write down what he saw<sup>30</sup>.

It is likely, but not sure, that Altoni and his assistants were accompanied to Syria by Michelangelo Corai (also spelled Michel Angelo), a dragoman (interpreter) of Syrian origin, with the task of facilitating communication with the locals<sup>31</sup>. Corai, whose real name was Fathullah Qurray, had served as secretary to the aforementioned Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan Pasha during the Ottoman-Persian war of 1578-1590 and in 1597 had to flee Syria due to his conversion to Christianity in order to marry a Christian woman. The same year he had come to Mantua where he entered the service of Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga (r. 1587-1612), following him as a dragoman to Hungary in the Habsburg military campaigns (incidentally, the same ones in which Altoni had participated). In the spring of 1598 he travelled to Persia with a group of English adventurers and once he arrived at the court of Shāh 'Abbās, the latter sent him back to Europe as his agent to warn the Catholic courts that a Persian embassy would soon arrive. In the winter of 1599, after landing in Venice, Corai reached the Florentine court and then from there went to Rome, where he began to serve as a diplomat to the Papacy. Later he entered permanently into the service of Ferdinando I. I deemed it necessary to make this *excursus* on Corai because Giovanni Altoni speaks a lot about him in his report on Syria, and not in very favourable terms, as we shall see.

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<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the small corpus of sources produced by Altoni about his mission includes three letters (two requesting reimbursements and one introducing his account) and the report. ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, ff. 10-15.

<sup>29</sup> ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, ff. 10, 11.

<sup>30</sup> ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, f. 12.

<sup>31</sup> On Corai, see Faridany, 2011, pp. 119-141; Federici, 2014, pp. 81-104; Trentacoste, 2021d, pp. 266-283.

### 5. *Altoni' Report*

A final clarification to be made before dealing with Giovanni Altoni's report specifically concerns its attribution. In fact, the text is unsigned and the last section, the largest one in fact, concerns the question of who was the right man to lead the negotiations. The author affirms that the Grand Duke should have entrusted the negotiations with the Pasha of Aleppo to him, avoiding entrusting it to Michelangelo Corai, who was considered too unreliable, and who should have merely served as interpreter (and, in any case, under the supervision of another interpreter). However, as we will see shortly, the leadership of the negotiations was entrusted in fact to Corai and a French Knight of Saint Stephen named Ippolito Lioncini. In his essay on Corai, the scholar Federico Federici, tends to attribute the report to Lioncini, stating that it was nothing more than proof that relations between the two were not good and that there were discussions about roles<sup>32</sup>. Even if it is likely that there was some disagreement between Lioncini and Corai, if there were ever any real discussions at court, in reality, they were not raised by Lioncini but by Altoni, as is clear from the letter attached to the report, signed by the engineer. In this letter he not only states that he sent the report on Syria together with this letter, thus assuming his authorship, but also insists that the Grand Duke must absolutely not delegate the negotiations to Michelangelo Corai<sup>33</sup>.

Having established its authorship, we can move on to the text of the report. It is a "Discourse" divided into four "considerations": the first three concern the situation of the rebels, while the last consideration specifically concerns Corai. The text is transcribed as it appears on the original document except for the abbreviations, all of which I have written out in full, and the addition of accents to make it easier to read; punctuation is as it was originally. I tried to translate the full text into English, but unfortunately, I was unable to do so satisfactorily. This was certainly due to the difficulty of rendering a long text written in seventeenth-century Italian into English, but also and above all due to the complexity and ambiguity of several points in the text, due to the author's style: Altoni was certainly a good soldier but not a great writer. Therefore, after the transcription, I will provide a sum-

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<sup>32</sup> "Corai's role had not been attributed without considerable friction. Ippolito Leoncini's plea to be put in charge of the expedition is documented in ff. 14-15 of the same folder 4275 of Mediceo del Principato [...]". See Federici, 2014, pp. 93-94.

<sup>33</sup> ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, f. 13.

mary, as accurate as possible, of the four considerations into which the text is divided by analysing them one by one.

[f. 14r] Discorso sopra la Gita di Soria

È considerazione ch'essendo, il Serenissimo Gran Duca di gran lunga e' più Degenio, più Nobile, più Potente, più Grande, e' di più Merito, et Principe Reditario, di Honorevolissimo et potentissimo Stato, essendo ripieno et adorno di honorati, et dengnissimi Sudditi; sì di Nobiltà, come ancora di Virtù, et facultà; sì che per tale causa, si puo giudicare che si convenga, che Sua Altezza Serenissima debba essere Lei ricerca; et che fussi stato trattato con Arte, et Giudizioso Ordine, che dovessi ricevere Sua Altezza Imbasciadore à posta; Ateso, ch'essi devono ricercare per trovarsi i' necessita et in bisogno; essendo che una sola volta che perdino questi tali Ribelli verranno disfatti, et forniti; se non haranno appoggio, et aiuto da Principe stabile, et Potente.

Seconda Considerazione che essendo i ribelli di Soria nuovi in tale Stato, con notabile manchazza, al loro Principe, di Natura; et se perderanno in Campangnia, una finale fazione, saranno portati via; che per essere tiranni novelli, di arisichato, et ingiusto Augusto; non anno sottratto da Popoli, né amore, né benivolenza: sì che con la prima perdita si abbandoneranno per ché non ci è fondamento né stabilità di seguito; se già come si è detto, qualche Potentato, no li protergie, et mantiene con le forze proprie.

3a Considerazione che la Soria non si può reggere, né stabilire meglio; che col mezzo delli aiuti del Re, di Persia essendo convicino, con numeroso Esercito, di sua Sudditi, et disciplinati Soldati; la quale Potenza è sommaria in tali parti à quella del Gran Turcho: sì che con tale mezzo, si manterria tali Ribelli, con potente rigore; Al Gran Turcho sarà difficile di ricuperare, la Soria per havere a condurre una unita forza competente, ò maggiore cominciando a raquistare il perso, dove è necessario che ci sia intervallo di tempo con molto suo disavvantaggio, per havere araquistare il tutto, con la lontananza in che si truova; acompangnato dalle molte necessità, che à di dovere Militare in molte Partj.

[f. 14v] 4 Considerazione come Messer Michelangelo essendo di Soria non è stato spedito da tal Luogho per trattare con Principi né manco à da mostrare Lettere, di Credenza, ma capitato qua, solo per avventurare i suoi discorsj in vocie, senza apoggio alcuno, di credulità, Aparendo solo l'avidità di buscare et profittare in su le molte Parole; sì che per tale causa pocha fede se li può dare; essendo che è Suddito di Soria, ne' uomo sempre più per i suoi Capi di tal luogho; che per Sua Altezza Serenissima havendo esso in tal luogho Moglie, et figli da pensare al suo profitto con mille vani discorsi, et altro si come fanno molti Huominj vagabondj: Sì che questi tali con ragio-

ne, possono essere tenuti sospetti: et questo tanto più poi che Fra Piero ne à detto molto male, e che non è da darli Fede et dicie ch'è possa havere conrispondenzia in Venezia; per che talj abbracciano il più che possano; per cavarne Danarj e profitto, Rivedendo, et rivoltando à loro utile, et volontà; e' di questo si sono ubligati non tenghono conto. Si che tali non arieno d'averè altra alturità che di dovere eseguire li Ordini della Struzione secondo, che il Capo Superiore ne commette, alla giornata; per sfuggire, che non possa negoziare cosa pensata; né una per un'altra, con pericolo, et precipizio del Negozio: Imperò mi parria necessario, che Sua Altezza Serenissima debba fare trovare uno che havessi buona lingua Turchesca, et se fusse possibile Soriana, o Persiana che fussi fidato da poterlo mandare inanzi, et indreto per referire puramente il ritratto de Negozij che seguano; e che habbi amore di volere ritornare da Sua Altezza Serenissima et così questo tale potrà intendere, et chiarirsi se Messer Michelangelo è fidele, ò no; et non essendo; il medesimo Negozio potrà fare questo tale ancora che fussi Huomo di poco conto; et essendo il prefato Messer Michelangelo fedele, potrà eseguire il Negozio; et ancora se uno dei dua si ammalasse; l'uomo, si potrà servire dell'altro, senza intervallo; et per dire à fatto il mio parere, questo Messer Michelangelo a quanto proposto di dovere fare, doverria essere ito da sé a fare venire Imbasciadore da Sua Altezza Serenissima se è vero

[f. 15r] che habbi credito; massimo che ricercheria, aiuto, et convenzione per i sua Principi, i quali hanno di bisongnio. Iò in questo à me ò dato volentierj la mia Parola, à Sua Altezza Serenissima et con ongnj risicho assistenza, et fidelità, la servirò in tale negozio, pure che io Habbia huomo fidato che intendj le lingue sopra nominate; et in somma tutto quello che comanderà Sua Altezza da me sarà accettato volentierj et segua qual si voglia, in mio danno; basta che Sua Altezza Serenissima et la stessa Patria, conoscerà l'affetto di un buono et fidele Suddito: Poi che mi è stato concesso che io dica il mio parere, dirò anco liberamente, che questo Michelangelo doverria servire solo per Torcimanno et che l'alturità fussi data solo a mè; à volere che' l Negozio passi bene et senza competenza, et sarà eseguito con più gravità, et riputazione<sup>34</sup>.

## 6. Summary of the Text

The first consideration concerns the fact that the Syrian rebels could never succeed in their rebellion without the support of a powerful and stable foreign prince (*stabile, et Potente*) and that at the first defeat they would have disperse, if deprived of

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<sup>34</sup> ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, ff. 14-15.

such an ally<sup>35</sup>. The latter, according to Altoni, could be none other than the Grand Duke of Tuscany, who ruled a state strong and rich enough to support the Pasha's rebellion.

The second consideration seems to recall in some ways some paragraphs of Niccolò Machiavelli's famous treatise *Il Principe* (*The Prince*). In fact, Altoni adds that at the first military defeat the rebels would surely fall not only for lack of a strong external ally, but above all for being "new rulers" (*Tiranni novelli*) in those territories, i.e. they had not had time to earn the favour of their new subjects, for whom 'Ali Jānbulād was not the "natural prince" (*con notabile manchazza, al loro Principe, di Natura*)<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, without the support of the population and without a strong state behind them, the rebels had no hope. The only hope lay in external help.

The third consideration is therefore linked to the questions raised in the first two: in addition to Tuscan support, it was absolutely necessary for the Pasha to obtain the support of the Shah of Persia, the only sovereign powerful enough to confront the Ottoman Empire on equal terms (*la quale Potenza è sommaria in tali parti à quella del Gran Turcho*). Interestingly, Altoni attributes a large part of the Shah's strength to the fact that his army is not made up of mercenaries but of Persian soldiers (*con numeroso Esercito di sua Sudditi, et disciplinati Soldati*)<sup>37</sup>. With the Shah's

<sup>35</sup> The consideration about stability can also be found in Brege, 2019, pp. 263-280.

<sup>36</sup> Although Machiavelli stated that if it was not possible to have both, between being loved and feared the second condition was preferable, at the end of the chapter on fortresses (XX) he stated that the only secure fortress for a prince was not to be hated by his people. Below are the two extracts from *The Prince* to which I have referred: "nasce da questo una disputa: s'egli è meglio essere amato che temuto, o e converso. Rispondesi che si vorrebbe essere l'uno e l'altro; ma perché egli è difficile accozzarli insieme, è molto più sicuro essere temuto che amato, quando si abbia a mancare dell'uno de' dua"; "però la migliore fortezza che sia, è non essere odiato dal popolo; perché, ancora che tu abbi le fortezze, e il popolo ti abbi in odio, le non ti salvono; [...]". For these see, respectively, Martelli, 1971, pp. 282, 291.

<sup>37</sup> A reference to Machiavelli could also be found in this reasoning regarding having an army made up only of one's own soldiers, considered superior to an army of mercenaries: "concludo, adunque, che, senza avere arme proprie, nessuno principato è sicuro; anzi è tutto obligato alla fortuna, non avendo virtù che nelle avversità con fede lo difenda. E fu sempre opinione e sentenza degli uomini savi 'quod nihil sit tam infirmum aut instabile quam fama potentiae non sua vi nixa'. E l'armi proprie son quelle che sono composte o di sudditi o di cittadini o di creati tuoi [...]". See Martelli, 1971, p. 278.

support, the Ottomans would certainly have found it very difficult to recover Syria, due to the time it would have taken to gather enough soldiers and the fact that the Sultan would have had to fight on several fronts anyway (surely a reference to the ongoing rebellions in the empire and the war against Persia).

The last consideration relates exclusively to the role of Michelangelo Corai, whom Altoni considered unsuitable to conduct such important and delicate negotiations as those with the Syrian Pasha. The reasons put forward relate first and foremost to the credibility of the dragoman: according to Altoni, Corai had come to Europe only for profit, without any official credentials other than those declared by him verbally and therefore he could not be trusted. Since Corai was originally from Aleppo, and therefore had a wife and children there, one might have thought that in the negotiations he would not have served Tuscan interests but only his own, and since he was a man without a homeland, since he was not Tuscan but no longer even an inhabitant of Syria, he was to be considered suspect like all vagabonds in search of profit (*da pensare al suo profitto con mille vani discorsi, et altro si come fanno molti Huominj vagabondj*). Furthermore, according to some rumours, he had secret dealings with the Republic of Venice (*Fra Piero ne à detto molto male, e che non è da darli Fede et dicie ch'è possa havere conrispondenza in Venezia*), i.e. a rival state in the Levant, and there was therefore the suspicion that he served several masters in order to gain as much as possible (*per che talj abbracciano il più che possano; per cavarne danarj e profitto*). Thus, according to Altoni, Corai should have no other task than to follow his masters' instructions to the letter, so as not to damage the negotiations (*Si che tali non arieno d'averè altra alturità che di dovere eseguire li Ordini della Struzione*). Again, however, it would have been necessary to place him alongside another dragoman, of proven loyalty and able to speak several languages such as Turkish, Syriac and Persian (all languages known by Corai), so that he could observe the work of the Syrian and be able to report to the Grand Duke on whether Corai was loyal or not (*Sua Altezza Serenissima debba fare trovare uno che havessi buona lingua Turchesca, et se fusse possibile Soriana, o Persiana che fussi fidato [...] per referire puramente [...] se Messer Michelangelo è fedele, ò no*). With another dragoman at his disposal, it would also have been possible to continue negotiations even if Corai had turned out to be a traitor or, if being loyal, he had fallen ill (*l'uomo, si potrà servire dell'altro, senza intervallo*). Altoni concluded by saying that this was what he thought should be done with Corai and that the official ambassador should be a capable, experienced and trustworthy man and, for this role, he proposed himself (accompanied, of course, by a trusted dragoman).



The part relating to Corai certainly reflected some of the rivalry and jealousy that might have existed within the Tuscan court and, perhaps, also certain of Giovanni Altoni's concerns, probably in *bona fide*, about a man he regarded as suspicious. However, except for this last more "personal" part, the other political, military and diplomatic considerations are more interesting, particularly the one concerning the alliance with Persia, which at that time was at war with the Ottoman Empire and was, in the eyes of Europe, a crucial ally against the Sultan.

It is possible that it was this point, among others things, that convinced the Grand Duke to intervene in support of the Pasha of Aleppo. In fact, relations between the Shah and Tuscany had been cordial since 1601, the year of the first Persian embassy, and, according to the Grand Duke's information, Persia was already supporting the rebels while at the same time conducting a so far victorious campaign on the Eastern borders of the Ottoman Empire<sup>38</sup>. Shāh 'Abbās was asking for time for Europe to attack the Ottomans and, consequently, any intervention in the Levant by a Christian state would be viewed favourably by the Persian Shah. All this was perfectly in line with the pro-Persian policy that the Grand Duchy had been pursuing for some years<sup>39</sup>.

### 7. Final Remarks

Although Giovanni Altoni had pointed out important issues (some of them even being common sense), the Grand Duke's choice eventually fell on Corai, who was joined by Ippolito Leoncini. They left in the middle of 1607 and after a few months drew up a treaty of friendship and alliance with the Pasha: Ferdinando undertook to provide military and technical support and armaments in exchange for privileges for Tuscan merchants, for one or more ports for the exclusive use of his ships and those of his allies, and for a commitment by the Pasha to help the Christians reconquer Jerusalem<sup>40</sup>. The treaty was signed on 2 October 1607 and Leoncini im-

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<sup>38</sup> There is no certainty that Shāh 'Abbās really supported the various rebellions: the information that arrived in Europe claimed that he did, but actually it is likely that this was not the case. On this, see Rota, 2021, pp. 597-598. On the news of Persian victories at the beginning of the seventeenth century, see Trentacoste, 2021c, pp. 103-117.

<sup>39</sup> On this, see Trentacoste, 2021e, pp. 21-41.

<sup>40</sup> The Italian version of the capitulations discussed by Corai with 'Ali Jānbulād is kept in ASFi, *MdP*, vol. 4275, ff. 113-117.

mediately left for Tuscany to take a copy to the Grand Duke, while Michelangelo Corai remained in Syria to serve the Pasha and travel to Persia to negotiate with the Shah, if necessary. But things did not go as 'Ali Jānbulād and Ferdinando I had hoped: on 24 October the Syrian rebel army was defeated by the Ottoman troops sent to quell the revolt and both the Pasha and the dragoman had to flee, the latter to Persia<sup>41</sup>. However, this did not put an end to the Eastern ambitions of the Grand Dukes, who continued to maintain ties with the Levant and in particular with the Emir Fakhr al-Din<sup>42</sup>.

Giovanni Altoni, with his mission to the Levant and his professional assessments of the Syrian revolt, undoubtedly contributed to tilting the Grand Duke's balance towards direct intervention. His reconnaissance, and the ensuing report, represent a very important moment in the Grand Duke's decision-making process, as well as in the elaboration of future military strategies to be implemented in the Levantine scenario. Furthermore, Altoni's work shows clearly what skills were required of the agents who were sent to make strategic assessments.

However, this episode has remained little known, certainly due to the fact that Ferdinando, having entrusted him with such a delicate task, thereafter preferred others to conduct the negotiations with the Pasha of Aleppo. Nevertheless, Altoni's "Syrian trip" is certainly an interesting case to be studied in depth, as it contributes another piece to the mosaic of knowledge on the collection and management of information in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as well as on the identity of the agents, their skills and, above all, the use made of these professional figures by the Italian princes, Medici *in primis*.

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<sup>41</sup> After his escape, Michelangelo Corai remained at Shāh 'Abbās' court, continuing to work to keep relations between Persia and Tuscany alive, until at least 1615 when he had to flee to escape the increasing pressure from the Shah to convert to Islam. See Faridany, 2011, pp. 127-129.

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### 9. *Curriculum vitae*

Davide Trentacoste is a postdoctoral research fellow at The Haifa Centre for Mediterranean History, Israel. He obtained his PhD within the framework of an international joint supervision between the University of Teramo (Italy) and the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (France), with a dissertation on Tuscan-Persian diplomacy in the seventeenth century, a subject on which he has published several articles. His main research interests concern the "Oriental" projection of pre-unitarian Italian States, their Eastern Mediterranean policy, their diplomatic relations with Muslim Empires (in particular Safavid Persia) and their knowledge of the East in the Early Modern Age (particularly between 1550-1750).





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