

OSMANLI ARAŖTIRMALARI
X

NeŖir Heyeti — Editorial Board
HALİL İNALCIK — NEJAT GÖYÜNÇ
HEATH W. LOWRY — İSMAIL ERÜNSAL

THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES
X

İstanbul-1990

A NOTE ON «CHRISTIAN» PREACHERS IN THE
OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Colin IMBER

One of the most striking passages in Franz Babinger's study of events surrounding the Varna Crusade of 1444, is a quotation from the late fifteenth-century *Cronaca Zancaruola*, concerning the execution in Edirne of a Persian preacher who «went about ardently preaching the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the law of Muhammad is a bestial law.»¹ The anonymous chronicler clearly associated the martyrdom of the preacher and his followers with the imminence of the Varna Crusade, since he appended it to a description of the panic among the Turks when, in 1444, «news was heard from Hungary that a huge quantity of men were preparing to go and join the Christian army.» In an inspired interpretation of this passage, Babinger linked it with a story in Taşköprüzâde's *Shakā'ik al Nu'māniyya* (1556) about the (1556) execution of a *hurūfī* who had won the confidence of Mehmed II. Babinger postulated that Taşköprüzâde's story refers to the period of Mehmed's first Sultanate (1444 - 1446), and that the «Persian» of the Italian chronicle was in fact not a Christian, but the *hurūfī* whose fate Taşköprüzâde describes.

Babinger's hypothesis is very convincing. Combining as it does the two stereotyped Christian themes of martyrdom and the conversion of Muslims, it is difficult to accept the story in the Italian chronicle as a simple statement of fact. It is, on the other hand, very likely that a Christian writer would reinterpret events to accord with his own preconceptions, and imagine the *hurūfī*

1 F. Babinger, «Von Amurath zu Amurath: Vor- und Nachspiel der Schlacht bei Varna (1444)», *Oriens*, 3 (1950), 244-245.

to be a Christian martyr. Given the Iranian origins of the *hurūfī* sect², Babinger's interpretation would also explain why the chronicle describes the Christian preacher as a «Persian».

The story in the *Cronaca Zancaruola* is not, however, unique of its kind. There are reports, again in Italian sources, of a similar event, in similar circumstances, in 1495.

The occasion was the French King Charles VIII's invasion of Italy in 1494-1495, a campaign which caused Bāyezīd II great fear, as he was well aware of Charles intention of launching a Crusade and of taking over from the Pope the custody of Cem Sultan as an instrument in his designs. The Venetian Domenico Malipiero, among other informants, noted that: «At the Porte there was great fear of Charles progress in Italy. Seeing a strong French fleet at sea, Bāyezīd had made preparations for 120 galleys to be ready to put to sea; he had placed artillery at the Dardanelles; he had sent 3,000 Janissaries to Gallipoli, a son to Negroponte and another to Mitylene. He was afraid that King Charles might pass to Greece with Cem Sultan and raise the land against him»³.

It was not only the Ottoman rulers who were aware of Charles VIII's intentions. In Florence, on 29 November, 1494, in a broadsheet for public distribution, the King had proclaimed: «... We propose to spare neither our own person, nor our efforts and travails to expel the enraged fury of these Turks and to recover the Holy Land and other states taken by them from Christian peoples.» The Kingdom of Naples, which he claimed as his rightful inheritance would, he announced, give him «an easy access to attack the very perfidious Turks»⁴. Within less than a month of this proclamation, the mood both of panic and of eschatological expectation which had accompanied Charles progress through Italy⁵ had spread to the Balkan peninsula.

2 See H. Ritter, «Die Anfänge der Hurūfisekte», *Oriens*, 7 (1954).

3 Domenico Malipiero, *Annali Veneti dall anno 1457 ad 1500*, ed. F. Longo, in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, vol. VII, Part I, Florence (1843), 145.

4 Quoted in Paul Durrieu, «Valona, base d'une expédition française contre les Turcs projetée par le roi Charles VIII (1494-149)», *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, year 1915, 185.

5 On this subject, see Anne Denis, *Charles VIII et les Italiens: Histoire et Mythe*, Travaux d'Humanisme et de Renaissance, No. CLXII, Geneva (1979).

On 19 December, 1494, the Venetian Captain-General made a report which appears in paraphrase in the *Annals* by Stefano Magno: «The said King of France proclaimed that he wished to go against the infidel Turks, and this was made known in those parts of Dalmatia, Macedonia and Epiros ... where Albanians live. Such was the terror among the Turks who were living on those coasts ... that they left the said shore and went inland. It was the common opinion that if someone with such a reputation had crossed to these regions, all the Christian peoples who live in those areas would have united with him, and would have driven the Turks from the dominion of these places»⁶.

In January, 1495, Charles VIII entered Rome. On the twenty-seventh of that month, he took custody of Prince Cem. On 22 February, he entered Naples, the starting point of his projected Crusade. On 28 February, news reached Venice that Martin, the Albanian Archbishop of the Venetian town of Durrës, «who was much loved by the neighbouring population who are subjects of Bāyezid», had gone to Charles in Apulia, encouraging him to cross to Albania, «claiming that all the people would offer obedience to him»⁷. The *Memoirs* of Charles' ambassador to Venice, Philippe de Commines, record that Charles sent the Archbishop back to Albania, where he «talked to many people who were ready to revolt — children and nephews of several lords and great men of these marches, such as (a son) of Scanderbeg, a son of the Emperor of Constantinople himself, nephews of the lord Constantine (Arianit) ... and some nephews and cousins of the King of Serbia.» De Commines believed that in the lands between Istanbul and Charles' proposed landing-place at Vlorë, there were many people «who had heard the news of the King from their friends who were in Venice and Apulia ... and were only waiting for instructions to rebel»⁸.

6 Extract in C. Sathas, «Evènements en Grèce (1579-1497)» in *Documents Inédits Relatifs à l'Histoire de la Grèce au Moyen Age*, vol. 6, Paris (1885), 239.

7 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, *Documents Inédits*, vol. 6, 240.

8 Philippe de Commines, *Mémoires*, ed. Mlle. Dupont, vol. II, Société de l'Histoire de la France, Paris (1843), 400-401.

As Charles' progress continued, prophecies of the imminent collapse of the Ottomans and the arrival of the conqueror began to circulate in the Balkan peninsula⁹, and a report which reached Venice on 9 March, 1495, indicates a continuing panic among the Turkish population: «When our Captain-General ... passed the shores near Lepanto, and the Turks who were living there saw him, they believed it to be the fleet of the said King (of France) and fled inland»¹⁰. On 26 April, 1495, two months after the death of Cem Sultan, and over six weeks after the Council of Ten in Venice had arrested Archbishop Martin¹¹, the Grand-Master on Rhodes could still write to Charles VIII: «Each day, according to spies which I have in Turkey, I am told that the Turks, having heard of our victory over the Kingdom of Naples are so frightened and terrified that they are already leaving their coastal places and fleeing to mountains and distant spots. And when they see ships at sea, they already imagine they have seen our army»¹².

These fears soon spread to the Ottoman capital where, an entry in the chronicle of Oruç notes: «All kinds of evil rumours were circulating in the mouths of the people, namely that a great Frankish prince called Efrenc had ... conquered all the islands in the land of the Franks, stretched out his hand against the realms of the Pope of Rome and conquered them. Fighting on both land and sea ... he also conquered the land of Apulia»¹³. Popular appre-

9 Anne Denis, *Charles VIII et les Italiens*, 75.

10 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, *Documents Inédits*, vol. 6, 240.

11 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, *Documents Inédits*, vol. 6, 242. Bāyezīd had sent a messenger to Venice to complain that Archbishop Martin had raised 30,000 men in Albania and offered them to the Kings of France and Hungary. On 6 March, 1495, the Venetians sent Alvise Sagondino to assure Bāyezīd that they had had no part in this plan. On 7 March, Archbishop Martin was arrested and put in chains for having attempted to occupy Krujë. See Domenico Malipiero, *Annali Veneti*, 146. On the arrest of Archbishop Martin, see also Philippe de Commines, *Mémoires*, 402-403.

12 Quoted in Paul Durrieu, «Valona, base d'une expédition française», 188.

13 R. Kreutel, *Der Fromme Sultan Bāyezīd*, Osmanische Geschichtschreiber, 9 Graz (1978), 81. There is a slight chronological displacement in Oruç, who puts this entry under the year AH 901, beginning on 21 September, 1495, whereas the panic in Istanbul had begun in February, 1495 at the latest. See note 15.

hension must have increased when Sultan Bāyezīd inspected the fortifications of Istanbul and had artillery placed on the walls¹⁴. This was a public admission that he feared an imminent French invasion.

On 22 February, 1495, two reports reached Rome, which reflect the mood of panic which had gripped the Sultan and the people of Istanbul. Both reports had come via Venice, and both appear in the diary of John Burckard, the Master of Ceremonies at the Pontifical Chapel. He noted that: «On the seventeenth of this month (February), two slaves of the Grand Turk had arrived in Venice in rapid succession, with singular news of the Turk, who greatly feared the arrival of the King of France.» The second report follows immediately: «*Item*: it has been written by trustworthy merchants from Constantinople that the Turks greatly fear the said King of France, and that twelve priests of the Turks are preaching the Faith of Christ»¹⁵. A paraphrase of the second of these reports appears in the *Annals* of Stefano Magno, undated and unattributed, but following an entry concerning the death of Prince Cem:

«Meanwhile in Constantinople, 24 *Cadis* of the Faith began to preach in mosques, recognising that it was not

These rumours, as Oruç reports them, do not indicate any Turkish awareness of the Christian ideal of a Crusade, such as Charles VIII had vowed to lead. However, a passage in the *Kutb-nâme* of Firdevsī-yi Rūmī, celebrating the defeat of the Franco-Venetian forces at Mitylene in 1501, indicates, despite the disparaging Muslim terminology, a fairly precise knowledge of crusading ideals. The author makes the Pope say to the King of France: «It is time the idol-worshippers set out / And that the Benī Asfar should attack the Turks / They should attack Constantinople / And help the idolators' friends / Then the infidels should come to Adana / And make Jerusalem and Damascus their abode / It is time for the Messiah to descend from the sky.» Firdevsī-yi Rūmī, *Kutb-nâme*, ed. I. Olgun and I. Parmaksızoğlu, Ankara (1980), 56.

¹⁴ As Alvise Sagondino reported on his return from Venice in November, 1495. See Domenico Malipiero, *Annali Veneti*, 147.

¹⁵ E. Celani (ed.), *Johannis Burckardi Liber Notarum ab Anno MCCCCLXXXIII usque ad Annum MDVI*, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, vol. 32/1, Città di Castello (1907), 577.

their Faith, but the Faith of the Christians that is good. When the Sultan heard of this, he sent for them and threatened them. When they remained firm in their opinion, the Sultan told them that they were intoxicated and ordered that they be put in prison, telling them that they should reflect. The next day, or the day after, he sent for them and ordered that, if they did not recant, they would be put to death. Whereupon 12 of them recanted, but the other 12 remained constant. He had these cut in half and burned»¹⁶.

This passage contains the same essential elements as the account of the Persian preacher in the *Cronaca Zancaruola* — the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and their martyrdom for the Faith — and, for this reason, looks at first like a story concocted from stereotyped Christian themes at a time of crusading enthusiasm. The fact that the number of martyrs in Stefano Magno's report corresponds with the number of Christ's disciples reinforces the impression that the tale is a fantasy.

There are nonetheless grounds for believing that both stories are more realistic than at first appears. They are, in the first place, undoubtedly correct in asserting that the Crusade of 1444 and the threatened Crusade of 1495, produced great fear in Edirne¹⁷ and Istanbul respectively. Secondly, the claim in both stories that the Ottoman authorities gave the «Christian» preachers an opportunity to repent before executing them, does reflect Ottoman practice in cases of heresy¹⁸. It is, furthermore, not impossible that the preachers in these cases really did make claims which could have led a Christian observer to believe that they

16 Stefano Magno, i C. Sathas, *Documents Inédits*, vol. 6, 241.

17 For evidence of the panic in Edirne, see, in addition to F. Babinger, «Von Amurath zu Amurath», Halil Inalcık and M. Oğuz (eds.), *Gazavât-ı Sultân Murâd b. Mehmed Hân*, Ankara (1978), 43.

18 This was true at least in the sixteenth century. The case of Molla Kâbız in 1527 (see note 19) is one example. The question of whether or not a heretic's repentance was acceptable after his arrest is a frequently occurring topic in *fetvâs* and treatises on heresy. See, for example, M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislâm Ebüssuûd Efendi Fetvaları*, Istanbul (1972), Nos. 481, 973 *et al.*

were converts to Christianity. This possibility arises from an analogy with the case of Molla Kābız in 1527.

A witness to this event was the Nişancı Celälzāde Mustafa¹⁹, who records that «certain zealous *‘ulemā* brought Kābız before the Imperial Dīvān in October/November, 1527, for preaching in public that Jesus was superior to Muhammad. In his first trial before the *kādī’askers*, who were unable to refute his case, and then before the *kādī* of Istanbul and the *şeyhülislām* Kemālpaşazāde, Kābız defended his view with quotations from the Koran and the *hadīth*. When he refused to recant, Kemālpaşazāde issued a *fetvā* declaring that his case warranted the death penalty, which the *kādī* authorised after Kābız had again refused to renounce his beliefs.

There are a few elements in Celälzāde’s account which appear to be literary stereotypes, notably that Kābız preached in «wineshops», wine being a Muslim symbol of infidelity. In general, however, his story is convincing. In particular, his statement that Kābız drew his argument from the Koran and the *hadīth* receives support in Kemālpaşazāde’s *Treatise on the Definition of the Word Zındik*²⁰, which he wrote as a consequence of the case. Here, he defines a *zındik* as someone who, like Kābız, uses the true sources of Islam to propagate heresy. Nevertheless, beyond Celälzāde’s statement that he preached the superiority of Jesus over Muhammad, and supported his view from Muslim scripture, there is no record of Kābız’s beliefs. This is, however, enough to make it clear that he was not a Christian, as this would have required a total refutation of the prophethood of Muhammad and the citation of Christian rather than Muslim texts. Nevertheless, a European hearing his claims might well have believed him to be a Christian, and it is conceivable that the preachers in the *Cronaca Zancaruola* and Stefano Magno’s *Annals* were making claims similar to Kābız’s.

19 Celälzāde Mustafa, *Tabakāt ül-Memālik ve Derecāt ül-Mesālik*, ed. Petra Kappert, Wiesbaden (1981), 172b-175b.

20 *Risāle fī tahkik lafz al-zındik*, printed text in *Rasā’ül Ibn Kemāl*, Istanbul, 1315/1898-9, 240-249.

Another similarity between Kâbız and the earlier preachers is that 1527, like 1444 and 1495, was a time of popular panic. The threat this time came not from a Crusade, but from a series of popular, religiously inspired uprisings in Anatolia²¹. When, on 20 June, 1527, a dervish called Kalender, who claimed descent from Hacci Bektaş and who, according to Celâlzâde, coveted the Sultanate, decisively defeated the Imperial Army under the command of the *beylerbeyis* of Anatolia and Karaman²², the end of Ottoman rule must have seemed as near as it had at the time of the Varna Crusade and the threatened invasion of Charles VIII. As in the times of earlier crises, the Muslim populace of the Ottoman capital became especially receptive to heterodox teaching, as the case of Molla Kâbız demonstrates, and equally the case of Ođlan Őeyh who was executed for preaching heresy in the following year²³.

It seems possible, in fact, that there was a sect in Ottoman popular religion which was not strictly Christian, but which believed in the supremacy of Jesus over Muhammad, and which manifested itself in public at times of crisis, when the collapse of the established religious order seemed imminent. In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Paul Rycaut described just such a sect, which he claimed to be of recent origin: «There is an opinion of late years principally maintained among the gallats of the *Seraglio*, and common in Constantinople, the professors of which are called *Chupmessahi*, or the good followers of the Messiah; these maintain that Christ is God and Redeemer of the world ... O this sort of people there are great numbers in Constantinople, some of which have so boldly asserted this doctrine that they have suffered martyrdom under this denomination ...». Rycaut concluded in tones typical of Christian writers: «It might

21 For the background to, and a conspectus of these events, see Hanna Sohrweide, «Der Sieg der Safawiden und ihre Rückwirkung auf die Schiiten Anatoliens», *Der Islam*, 41 (1965), 167-186.

22 For the disturbances in Anatolia and Kalender's rebellion, see Celâlzâde Mustafa, *Tabakât Ul-Memâlik*, 1646-169a.

23 For the case of Ođlan Őeyh and further bibliography, see El², «Ma-lâmatiyya : 3. In Ottoman Turkey».

take an unexpected footing and prepare the way for the Plantation of the Gospel»²⁴. It is tempting, yet again, to dismiss Rycaut's statement as the fantasy of an over-optimistic Christian. But it is equally tempting to suggest that the sect which he describes really existed, and that it was over two centuries older than he believed it to be.

²⁴ Paul Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, London (1668); reprinted, New York (1971), 129.