

**“BORN TO RULE THE WORLD”:
AN ITALIAN POET CELEBRATES THE DEEDS OF THE SULTAN SELİM I**

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Özet

Bu kısa yazının amacı tarihçilerce hala bilinmeyen I. Selim'in şerefine İtalyanca yazılmış anonim bir şiiri sunmaktır. Şiir, sultan hayatta iken yaklaşık 1518-20 yılları arasında yazılmıştır. Şiir 1511 Çorlu savaşı ile başlar 1517 Kahire'nin fethiyle sona erer ve sultanın oğlu Süleyman'a ithaf edilmiş ayrıntılı bir zayıçeyi içerir. Şair, ya Venedikli yada Venetolu'dur. O İtalyan klasiklerinden ilk Rönesans dönemi şövalyelik şiirlerine uzanan geniş bir edebiyat eğitimine sahipti. Ayrıca o Türk dilini biliyor ve İstanbul şehrine de aşinaydı. Şiirin ilk satırları eksikse de bu şiirin kompozisyonu yüksek seviyeli şiirsel bir standarttır. Bu şiirin tek mevcut sureti İtalya'da Treviso'dadır ve ben bunu yayına hazırlıyorum. Bu şiir İtalyan Rönesans Edebiyatı'nda eşsiz bir eserdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *I. Selim, İtalyanca Şiir, Treviso, İtalya.*

Abstract

The goal of this short paper is to present an anonymous Italian poem in honour of Selim I, which is still unknown to scholars. It was written about 1518-1520, when the sultan was still alive, even if the narration begins with the battle of Çorlu (1511), ends with the conquest of Cairo (1517) and includes a detailed horoscope dedicated to sultan's son, Süleyman. The poet was a person either from Venice or from Veneto; he had a wide literary education, ranging from Italian classics to early Renaissance poems of chivalry, but he also knew the Turkish language and familiar with the city of Istanbul. This poetic composition, even if deprived of the first part, shows an high level poetic standard. I discovered the only existing copy of this poem and I am now preparing its edition. It is an intriguing unicum in the Italian Renaissance literature.

Key words: *Selim I, Italian Poetry, Treviso, Italia.*

In the 15th century, especially after the conquest of Constantinople (1453), the presence of the Ottoman Empire started to claim the attention of the Christian, European countries. In Italy too, literary works on Turkish subjects flourished, particularly in Venice, which was closely in contact with that world. They were mainly pamphlets of political and religious propaganda, literary celebrations of past battles or

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memorable events, travel diaries and reports.¹ With the only partial exception of the last ones – among which a special prominence must be given to the famous report of Giovanni Maria Angiolello from Vicenza (1451 c. – 1524), who was taken prisoner in Negroponte at first and then became treasurer at the court of the Sultan Mehmet II–, all these works share a common, definite ideological bias: the Turk is merely seen as an enemy to be defeated. This negative flavour pervades the most ambitious writings as well as the literary works of a lower standard, addressed to a less demanding reading public. An example of this genre is given by the “cantari”, sorts of long, poetic compositions, telling, in a popular style, rich of imagery, the most renowned war actions from Negroponte (1470) to Scutari (1474), from Modon (1500) to Lepanto (1571).²

Against this background, an Italian poem in ottava rima stands out for its originality – an absolutely unique case in the whole Italian literature, not only in the 16th century. The manuscript, totally unknown up to now³, is entirely dedicated to the deeds of Selim I. The still living Sultan has the central role of the absolute protagonist and an encomiastic attitude towards him is clearly evident, as if the anonymous author (coming from Northern Italy, possibly Venice, as the language analysis reveals) aimed at celebrating an Italian Renaissance prince in a poem of chivalry.

The work covers Selim’s heroic actions during the crucial years of his life, including the fight for the conquest and implementation of his power (1511-13), his victorious campaigns against the Persian Shah (1514-15) and the Mamelukes in Syria and Egypt (1516-17). The narration starts from the battle of Çorlu (3 August 1511) – but the text has come to us deprived of the first canto and of part of the second one –⁴ and ends with the conquest of the city of Cairo and the settlement in the fortress of al-Qal’a (15 February 1517). Since it is certain that the second book was written after April 1517, it is highly probable that the work was completed in the first months of 1518⁵ at the latest: the deadline is anyway 21 September 1520, since Selim I is considered to be alive in the course of the whole poem.

¹ Significant information about this literary output in the Serenissima Republic is given by P. Preto, *Venezia e i Turchi*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1975. In general, for the printed works of the period here considered, see: C. Göllner, *Turcica. Die europäischen Türkendrucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, Baden-Baden, Koerner, 1994².

² The text of 44 of these short poems in ottava rima can be read (in anastatic edition) in the fourth volume (“Guerre contro i Turchi”) of the collection *Guerre in ottava rima*, edited by M. Beer and C. Ivaldi, Modena, Panini, 1988-89.

³ The work has been transmitted by the ms. 4700 in the Town Library in Treviso, unique sample known up to now. See E. Lippi, “1517: l’ottava al servizio del Sultano”, *Quaderni veneti*, 34, 2001, pp. 49-88 (then in Id., *Contributi di filologia veneta*, Treviso, Antilia, 2003, pp.139-88).

⁴ The work is divided into two books: the first one is formed of nine cantos, for a total of 4976 lines, the second one includes four cantos, for a total of 3024 lines.

⁵ The latest mentioned event is the appointment of Gänberdī Gāzālī as Governor of Aleppo by the Sultan who gives the position to his former enemy. The event took place at the beginning of 1518, provided that the author did not simply express an expectation rather than a fact. See D.

And now a short summary of the work.⁶ In the cantos 2 to 4 of the first book the events linked to the accession to the throne are told. After being defeated by his father in Çorlu, Selim re-organises his army in Crimea and obtains the support of the janissaries, who were against Bayezid II's intention to name his son Ahmed as his successor. Selim enters Istanbul and is appointed by his father, who leaves the capital of the Empire and dies a short time later. In the course of the summer 1512 the Sultan starts his fight against Ahmed and murders his second brother Korkud. On 14 April 1513 he moves a direct attack against Ahmed in Yenişehir, defeats and kills him. After re-organising the State, he prepares his army to march against the Shah of Persia Isma'îl (canto 5). While crossing Anatolia he reaches – this is the most significant of the various legendary digressions recurring in the work – a temple dedicated to the god Mars; here the God shows him the ancient heroes and the predecessors of the Ottoman stock, and predicts him his future successes and those of his son Süleyman (canto 6). Selim is able to avoid the traps set by Alâüddevlé, lord of Dulkadir, and faces the Persians in Çaldıran: the fight is cruel and its outcome is initially uncertain, but eventually Selim wins the battle, putting the Shah to flight (cantos 7-8). After killing the traitor Alâüddevlé together with his sons, Selim enters Tabrîz, the Persian capital city. Due to a shortage of food supplies and the approaching winter, he leaves the conquered territory and goes back to Istanbul where he executes his son-in-law İskender.

The second book opens with the preparations for a new war expedition against the Shah, who has meanwhile found a new ally in the Egyptian Soldan, Qānsūh al-Gawrî. The latter enters the city of Damascus with his army in parade order and is paid homage by the Venetian consul Andrea Arimondo (canto 1). Selim sets out for Aleppo and meets his enemy at Marğ Dābiq, scattering the Soldan's forces and killing the Soldan. Afterwards he enters Aleppo and Damascus and takes possession of Gaza (canto 2). After a short stay in Jerusalem and a new successful campaign against the troops of the new Soldan Tūmānbāy, Selim crosses the Sinai desert helped by a heaven-sent rain. He defeats the Mamelukes again and after a three-day, door-to-door fight he succeeds in submitting the city of Cairo (canto 3). Tūmānbāy tries to re-organise his army in the Sa'īd region, but is definitely defeated: the conquest of Egypt has been completed (canto 4).

In the course of this long narration several imaginary digressions are present, with supernatural interventions, even in the form of pagan deities. Anyway they do not encumber the proceeding of the tale and Selim's deeds, although mantled by an evident apologetic cover, which is typical of the tradition of the *Selīm-nāme*, appear to be substantially faithful to the actual, historical events.

Ayalon, "The end of the Mamlūk Sultanate (Why did the ottomans spare the mamlūks of Egypt and wipe out the mamlūks of Syria?)", *Studia islamica*, LXV, 1987, p. 135.

⁶ The adopted sequence of the events – and their dates – is the one proposed by the anonymous author: the datation has proved to be generally correct from the historical point of view.

It is important to point out that the author is in close contact and total agreement with the social environment forming the setting of his work. He reveals to possess a detailed knowledge of the Turkish social scene of the time, especially as far as its political, administrative and military institutions are concerned. He is well informed about the history of the Ottomans – he is able to correctly list all the members of that dynasty, showing special admiration for Mehmet II – and is acquainted with the geography of the country: this is evident in his description of the march towards Persia, across Anatolia and Karaman, Sivas and Armenia, with the punctual recollection of places which must have been generally unknown to a European.⁷

He is likely to have written in Istanbul since he shows to be familiar with the city: he makes reference to some of its gates – i.e. Edirnekapı and Topkapı “which is named after the gun” – and to the well-known arsenal Kasım Paşa “where the sweet waters of Pera flow”; he mentions other, less famous places, such as the New Garden – where Selim set his camp when he entered the city on 19 April 1512 – and the *imaret* (amarato) of Bayezid II, where his father was buried.

Although we should rule out the hypothesis that he was an eye-witness to the events he describes – as it was the case for Angiolello in the war between Mehmet II and Uzun Hasan in 1472-73 –, he shows to draw from first-hand sources, whatever historical foundation we may give them today.

A great part of the second book is realized thanks to the account of a *Kadıasker* who among Selim’s retinue during the campaign of Syria and Egypt. The letter text was certainly completed in April 1517: the last event it reports is in fact the capture and execution of the Soldan Tumanbay on 13 April. Our author shows to have used its Italian translation, which was already circulating between Milan and Venice in October 1517⁸ and which has been preserved thanks to Giovan Battista Ramusio who would include it in the second volume of his *Navigazioni e viaggi* (*Navigations and Travels*), printed in Venice in 1559.⁹ This translation is the basis of the poetic version of our anonymous poet, who takes the most significant events – in the same sequence – as well as a series of small details, with several literal coincidences that might appear to be due to a sort of ‘internal memory’: these analogies make us even think that the author of the poem and the translator of the *Kadıasker*’s account might be the same person.

⁷ An example is offered by the burial site of the legendary hero Seyyd Battal Gazi, where Selim stopped, and by the caravanseray so-called ‘Chiasamba’, located in Karaman.

⁸ As it is testified by a letter from Milan dated 22 October 1517 of the Venetian secretary Gian Giacomo Caroldo to Donato da Lezze, see D. Da Lezze, *Historia Turchesca (1300-1514)*, publicată, adnotată, împreună, cu o introducere de dr. I. Ursu, Bucuresti, Ed. Academiei Române, 1909, p. XXIX n. 1.

⁹ Modern edition: G. B. Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, ed. by M. Milanese, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, III, pp. 359-420.

A significant example of the general mood of the society in which our poet lived and worked is offered by the large space devoted to an episode which can be considered absolutely trivial from the point of view of the events: it is the solemn welcome given to the Soldan Qānsu al-Gāwrī at his entrance in town (20 June 1516) by the Venetian Consul of Damascus. It is necessary to point out that the Venetian Consul is the only European personality quoted in the whole book. The same curious event is narrated with essentially coincident details in a letter of a Venetian merchant which has been transmitted to us by the diarist Marin Sanudo:¹⁰ it seems to be therefore evident that our author had easy access to this kind of documents circulating among the Venetian mercantile circles of the time.

Now, why should a European, however integrated and well at ease with the Turkish society, be willing to spend months, or even years, writing a poem to honour a Sultan whom he has not seen yet, as he himself declares? Moreover, although it seems natural for him to use his mother tongue – which he masters with great competence, revealing a good sensibility for style and a wide literary education ranging from the Italian classics such as Dante and Petrarca to the early-Renaissance authors of poems of chivalry such as Luigi Pulci and Matteo Maria Boiardo) – why did he not choose to write in Turkish or in any other language spoken at the Istanbul court at that time? What sort of addressees did he appeal to with his message in Italian? At the present stage of the studies we can only make hypotheses, which are still untimely to be discussed longer. Anyway the writer's strategy is not ingenuous: he seems to be trying to reach, in some unusual way, the top of the power in Turkey. It is not casual that he finds a way to linger on the figure of Süleyman, who, strictly speaking, might have been left out from a report of his father's conquests, as he did not even take part to them. To Süleyman, cherished restorer of the golden age and patron of poets, an extremely detailed horoscope is dedicated: it forecasts him a bright future both as a successful warrior and wise ruler of the State. His procreation must be considered – as it is openly stated – the greatest of all his father's great deeds. But even our foreseeing writer could not imagine that his prediction would start to come true in less than three years' time.

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¹⁰ See M. Sanuto, *I Diarii*, ed. by R. Fulin, F. Stefani, N. Barozzi, G. Berchet, M. Allegri, Venezia, Visentini, 1879-1902, XXII, coll. 584-87.

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