

RALPH S. HATTOX  
HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE

## Sharp Practice in Levantine Trade in the Late Middle Ages: The Brizi-Corner Affair of 1376–77\*

Given the common reputation of Mamluk officials as being, even by the standards of their own time and place, extraordinarily corrupt and grasping, it is hardly surprising that contemporary governments, confronted by reports of Mamluk officials impounding the goods of foreign merchants, and demanding of them outrageous compensation, were inclined to attribute these acts to greed. That this was not always the case, however, that in some circumstances Mamluk officials operated not solely from greed but as well in reaction to some real offense and from a desire for justice for their own subjects, is evident from the documents from the Venetian archives which refer to what, for want of any official title, might be designated the Brizi-Corner Swindle of 1376–77.<sup>1</sup>

The Venetians were, by the fourteenth century, old hands at Levantine trade, perhaps the oldest in Christendom. The national legend of the smuggling of the body of St. Mark from Abbasid Egypt in the ninth century attests not only to the antiquity of Venetian contacts in the East, but also to their self-perception as a people who could take care of themselves in the treacherous world of Eastern Mediterranean trade and politics. They had confronted and dealt with all manner of hazards at one time or another—pirates, cut-throat competition from the Genoese and others, uncooperative or merely corrupt officials, and the uncertain security of the goods, and, indeed, the very persons, of traders living on sufferance in foreign parts. They knew their way around.

Successful trade presupposes mastery of diplomacy, and Venice had learned to play that game particularly well: from Flanders to Tana, even among the crafty Byzantines or the testy Mongols, Venetian diplomats had met with success in securing the trading interests of the Republic. And yet, in the mid- and late fourteenth century, the Venetians apparently found their resourcefulness severely tested by trading conditions in Egypt and Syria. Even for a trading nation of such consummate ability, dealing with the Mamluks was something particularly challenging.

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<sup>1</sup>Brief mention of the swindle discussed in this article can be found in Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1983), 123.



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The rapacity of Mamluk officials has, justly, become legendary; there can be little doubt that they often preyed heavily on whomever they could, to the extent that they may have grievously harmed the economies of Syria and Egypt. The system not only allowed such abuses, but in part made them necessary: the tenure of official posts was uncertain, and the temptation to milk them for all they were worth was great. Abuses of office, impositions of extraordinary levies on the helpless—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—manipulation of the market, or even forced purchases to take advantage of one's own speculations in commodities, were all standard practice for Mamluk officials, both in Egypt and in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly vulnerable to the greed of such functionaries were the communities of foreign, especially Latin Christian, traders conducting their affairs in port towns and inland emporia. Without the protection offered by law to Muslims, or even to Christian subjects of the sultan, their position on Mamluk soil was, at best, equivocal. Security of person or property, let alone expectations of honest trade practices, was not derived from any legal right, but rather depended on the goodwill of the sultan and his deputies, on their willingness to grant safe conduct and special trading privileges. Self-interest, of course, dictated that the Mamluks allow and even encourage trade, but this consideration hardly deterred officials from seeking bribes in exchange for trading concessions. It is no wonder, then, that throughout the late Middle Ages ambassadors from merchant states around the Mediterranean, their purses bulging with cash to buttress their persuasiveness, arrived at Cairo, commissioned to seek the valuable permission of the sultan to carry on trade, to set up factories, to be represented by consuls, and the like. Such treaties were negotiated with various European trading powers, granting them security and establishing guidelines for trade.<sup>3</sup> But these treaties could in no way be viewed as a guarantee of smooth operations and freedom from harassment. The ability of foreign traders to do business unhampered was directly proportional to the sultan's willingness (and ability) to see that his edicts were enforced, and that the concessions he had granted were observed, by his governors and lesser officials in the provinces. In the fourteenth century compliance by local officials with concessions handed out at Cairo could not be taken for granted. They, at the very least, could be expected to demand their own share of the graft before carrying out their duties.

That Venice, along with other trading nations, suffered from these abuses is

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 55–56, 124–25.

<sup>3</sup>Some of the most valuable articles on these concessions have been published by John Wansbrough. See, in particular, his articles "The Safe-Conduct in Muslim Chancery Practice," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34 (1971): 20–35; "A Mamluk Letter of 877/1473," *BSOAS* 24 (1961): 200–13; "Venice and Florence in the Mamluk Commercial Privileges," *BSOAS* 28 (1965): 483–523.



abundantly clear: some sense of how difficult a time Venetian merchants were having in the Levant, and of how extensive and regular these abuses were, can be extracted from the pages of the registers of the *Deliberazioni Miste* of the Senate, preserved at the Archivio di Stato of Venice.<sup>4</sup> Scarcely a register exists—and fourteenth-century registers that cover more than a three to four-year period are rare—that does not contain numerous references to the trials suffered by Venetian merchants at Alexandria, Damascus, or elsewhere. Iniquitous levies (contrary to the privileges granted by the sultan), unwarranted confiscation of the goods of merchants,<sup>5</sup> demands for graft and bribes (Venetian *manzarie*; modern Italian *mangerie*), imprisonment and beatings of Venetian merchants or even of the Venetian consul, all figure in the pages of the registers, and particularly in the drafts of commissions for the embassies that Venice, with monotonous regularity, was forced to send east throughout the last half of the century to secure the interests of her merchants.

The Venetians, like all good negotiators, knew the value of taking the offensive from the first. An ambassador sent on such an important mission was already likely to be well-versed in this cardinal rule of successful negotiation. The commissions, nonetheless, regularly made it clear how the Republic expected her envoys to approach the discussions: however diplomatically he might phrase his arguments, an ambassador was to put all of Venice's grievances to the fore immediately, and to demand satisfaction. Never argue from weakness, never admit even partial culpability for problems arising between the two states—this seemed to be the principle upon which Venetian negotiations with the Mamluks (and with other states as well) were built.

In any event, the commissions, when read as a series, begin to look like form letters: after giving the usual expressions of goodwill, the ambassador is then to mention all the abuses suffered by Venetian merchants at some given place,

<sup>4</sup>The registers for the fourteenth century are to be found under the heading *Deliberazioni Miste* (hereafter given as ASV, Senato Miste); after 1400, most material pertaining to foreign relations can be found in the registers of *Deliberazioni Segrete*.

<sup>5</sup>Particularly vulnerable were the goods of the merchants who died while trading abroad—such goods were supposed to be secured by the consul for disposal as the deceased's will, or law of inheritance, required. But often whatever was found in his possession went into the purse of an official. Such was the case, for instance, of one Nicoletto Trevisan, an agent carrying on trade in the Levant in the early 1380s. Falling ill at Acre, and fearing for his life, he sent his *tarjumān*, with the proceeds from his trading activity, to the captain of a Cretan galley in the harbor, a commission that the *tarjumān* faithfully fulfilled. The luckless Trevisan did die, and the *amiratus* of Acre had his corpse searched immediately. His *tarjumān* was imprisoned and questioned—under circumstances we can only imagine—and the official, having learned the whereabouts of the money, had it extracted from the captain, "per vim." See Venice, Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Senato Miste, 29 July 1382 (reg. 37, fols. 99v–101r).



concerning which the ambassador is to say he is sure that the sultan was unaware, and the news of which is certain to be displeasing to that particular font of justice. Only after unburdening himself of this speech and receiving the sultan's guarantees that such abuses would not be tolerated, and after satisfying himself that these instructions would be carried out, could the ambassador take up other business.

It is in the context, then, of this series of very like commissions that the commission of 8 September 1377 stands out as unusual: the grotesquely un-Venetian tone of apology Nicolò Loredan and Baldo Querini were instructed to take before the sultan was a conspicuous departure from the normal pattern. Why would Venice, usually quick to object indignantly to mistreatment of her citizens and restriction of her trade, instruct her ambassadors to adopt nothing short of a posture of crawling contrition when they went before the sultan?

In light of the usual pattern of commissions, it at first seems worthy of little note that in the winter of 1376–77, the Senate voted to select an ambassador who "shall place before the sultan the [illegal] novelty perpetrated against our consul and merchants in the regions of Damascus, and obtain the release of the goods and merchandise of our merchants, held in said regions."<sup>6</sup> The commission for Nicolò Zeno, selected for the job, was worded in the usual way,<sup>7</sup> and he was sent forth with two thousand ducats for gifts and bribes, and told to stay at Cairo until he had received a promise that the abuses would be rectified, had written to the consul at Damascus to this effect, and had received word back that the promise had indeed been carried out.<sup>8</sup>

No verbatim account of the embassy of Nicolò Zeno can be found, but, from what we know from later documents, it must have turned out to be a singularly awkward and uncomfortable assignment. The ambassador, sent to chide the sultan for letting his officials abuse their positions and molest Venetian subjects who

<sup>6</sup> ". . . exponat [soldano] novitatem factam consuli et mercatoribus nostris, in partibus Damaschi, et procuret liberationem haveris et mercationum nostrorum detentarum in dictis partibus . . ." Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 30 December 1376 (reg. 35, fols. 133v–134r [new numbering 145v–146r]).

<sup>7</sup> Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 17 January 1376 [=1377] (reg. 35, fol. 138v [new numbering 150v]). It does appear that the Senate was a bit more agitated than usual: a vote was taken (14 January 1376 [=1377]) to cut off completely all commerce with Beirut and Damascus, but this was defeated.

<sup>8</sup> Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 19 January 1376 [=1377]. After all this important business has been taken care of, the ambassador is instructed to do "whatever good he can" to effect the release of the king of Armenia and his wife and sons. They had been held by the Mamluks since the dismemberment of the Kingdom of Lesser Armenia two years earlier.



were trading in all good faith, must have been greeted with stony silence, followed by the revelation, supported by what Zeno apparently found sufficient evidence, that it was not owing to malfeasance by Mamluk officials that Venetians were being imprisoned and their goods confiscated at Damascus, but rather it was owing to the fact that certain Venetians had been systematically swindling Muslim traders.

Up to this point, Marco Brizi, the alleged swindler, and his associates appear, as they doubtless appeared both to their compatriots in the Senate and to the Muslim traders who injudiciously trusted them, as honest Venetian businessmen, of long experience in the Levant. It must have been of a shock, then, when a chastened Nicolò Zeno returned from his embassy to Cairo. The main points of his reports to the Senate can be surmised from the very first words of the decree in which the scandal became public:

In that Ser Marco Brizi and Ser Zanachi Cornario have, as has been learned, fled the environs of Damascus with the goods and possessions of Saracens, and have sent some of these goods to Venice; and, as is clear enough, they have delivered some of these goods over to the hands of Ser Jacobello Cornario, accomplice of the aforementioned . . .<sup>9</sup>

The decree goes on to detail steps to be taken: the provisors of the state are ordered to make a thorough investigation; all such merchandise found at Venice is to be immediately impounded; the culprits are to be arrested if they come to Venice or fall into the hands of Venetian officials elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Marco Brizi was a merchant of apparently long experience in the Orient. His subsequent misdeeds must have proved all the more embarrassing for the Republic in light of the position of trust to which he had been earlier assigned: he had served a long tenure as Venetian consul at Damascus, at least through the first half of the 1370s.<sup>11</sup> Nor could that embarrassment have been diminished by the fact that the Senate, just a year before the scandal broke, had ordered their consul at Alexandria to pressure the Mamluk sultan himself for payment of a debt of

<sup>9</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 27 August 1377 (reg. 36, fol. 34r [new numbering 35r]).

<sup>10</sup>Actually, only the Corner brothers are named specifically; Brizi, as later documents reveal, was apparently already dead.

<sup>11</sup>After a short breach of diplomatic and commercial relations in 1369–70, we find reference to permission being given for Marco Brizi to return to his position as consul at Damascus (Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 13 May 1370 [reg. 33, fol. 54r]). He was apparently still consul in early 1375, when he was replaced in that position by Johannes Barbadico (Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 6 February 1374 [=1375], 30 March 1375 [reg. 34, fol. 156, reg. 35, fol. 9v]).



some 8,000 Byzantine gold pieces, which he owed to two Venetian traders, “Jacobus Cornario” and “Marcus de Briciis,”<sup>12</sup> the first time we see together the names that were to be linked only a short time later in an indictment.

In any event, the investigative and punitive measures ordered by the Senate in August 1377 could only be the first steps in repairing the damage done to Venice’s Levantine trade—and her reputation for honesty—by the actions of Brizi and the Corners. All possible means were to be employed to placate the sultan and his officials: on the very day the public condemnation of Brizi and the Corners was issued, the Senate also voted to send yet another embassy to Cairo, this time to express the Republic’s sorrow and mortification over the incident. Nicolò Loredan and Baldo Querini were selected for the task.<sup>13</sup>

The draft of their commission, dated 8 September 1377, outlined in typically scrupulous detail—often specifying the very words that were to be used—just how the Senate wished the new ambassadors to approach their task. In form, it is much the same as the commissions of other ambassadorial expeditions; in content, however, it is unique: after the usual fulsome exchange of words of greeting and undying friendship, the ambassadors were to tell the sultan that the Senate had received and understood the reports of Nicolò Zeno and the letters of the sultan, and was most upset if any of her citizens had perpetrated such an act. They were to tell the sultan further that Venice had launched an investigation of the affair, but that the results would be disappointing to those seeking restitution or revenge: none of the culprits were to be found at Venice, nor could Venice locate any of their belongings that might be impounded. In any event, a warrant had been issued for their arrest and return to Venice, and it was certain that, once they were caught, it would be a long time before any of them emerged from prison.

Had we but known [the ambassadors are further instructed to say] of these things before their flight, we should have taken steps against them of such immediate and personal significance, as they would not have forgotten as long as they lived, both as a punishment for them, and as an example to others in the future.<sup>14</sup>

Venice, the ambassadors were to conclude, would never condone such an act, and such occurrences were expressly contrary to the desires of the doge. Since, therefore, Venice had acted in good faith, it was only right that the goods of honest Venetian merchants be released; they had, indeed, been seized illegally, contrary to the

<sup>12</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 20 May 1376.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 27 August 1377.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 8 September 1377.



sultan's own edicts, which did not recognize guilt by association: "the son should not be made to bear the damages or punishment for his father[']s misdeeds], nor the father for [those of] the son."<sup>15</sup> If by some chance the ambassadors should find the sultan cooperative, they were to press him to order his officials to release the impounded merchandise immediately; one of them was then to go to Damascus to check to see if the order had indeed been carried out, while the other was to remain at Cairo.

And yet so greatly did the Senate recognize the weakness of Venice's position that they were willing not only that their ambassadors should so uncharacteristically abase themselves, but also that they should descend into melodramatic pathos:

And, so that you might attain our end more quickly and easily, you should say to the sultan and his aides that every day orphans, widow ladies, and others appear before us, asking of us the release of the aforementioned goods, saying, most insistently, that they have nothing else in this world.<sup>16</sup>

The Senate's instructions provide as well what we must consider more practical inducements to obtain cooperation on the matter. The commission provides them with 2,000 ducats for "gifts" for the sultan and his men, as well as for paying graft; in an addendum to the commission, however, the ambassadors are authorized to make bribes up to 15,000 ducats, "out of the goods and belongings of our merchants that are held there."<sup>17</sup> In any event, the ambassadors are instructed to use whatever skills they can: the concern is indeed that of securing the release of the merchandise, but further, and ultimately more important, securing good relations for the future.

No mention of the swindle, of the punishment of the Venetian trading community,

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. Compare the text of the safe-conduct granted by Qāṣawh al-Ghawrī to the Florentines, edited and translated by Wansbrough, "Safe-Conduct," 22: "wa-an lā yuṭālib al-ab 'an ibnihi wa-lā al-akh 'an akhihi." Venetian traders at Aleppo had apparently enjoyed similar security at a much earlier time: See G. L. F. Tafel and G. M. Thomas, eds., *Urkunden zur älteren Handels- und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig* (Vienna, 1856), 2:276, mentioned in M. E. Martin, "The Venetian-Seljuk Treaty of 1220," *English Historical Review* 95 (1980): 330; see as well the provisions of the treaty between Genoa and Qalāwūn mentioned in P. M. Holt, "Qalawun's Treaty with Genoa in 1290," *Der Islam* 57 (1980): 102.

<sup>16</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 8 September 1377 (reg. 36, fol. 37v [new numbering 38r]).

<sup>17</sup>". . . quod possitis expendere in manzariis . . . usque ad summam ducatorum .xv. de bonis et rebus nostrorum retentis deinde." Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 14 September 1377 (reg. 36, fol. 38r [new numbering 39r]).



or even of the two ambassadorial missions appears in the usual Mamluk sources. At first this might appear striking, because while arrivals of ambassadors are not always noted by the chroniclers, they are frequently mentioned.<sup>18</sup> But the Islamic years 778–80 [May 1376–April 1379] were ones of particular turmoil in Mamluk Cairo. In March 1377, the sultan al-Ashraf Sha‘bān, who had been on the throne for fourteen years and was the last of the line of the descendants of Qalāwūn to rule in more than just name, was overthrown and strangled, and his son ‘Alī, who was just a boy of seven, was placed on the throne by the coalition of conspirators.<sup>19</sup> There followed a period of instability and even more than the usual court intrigue, as various Mamluk amirs sought to seize for themselves positions of power around the child sultan: the Islamic year 779 [May 1377–April 1378] saw no fewer than four men occupy the post of *atābak al-‘asākīr*, normally the second in command in the state but, when the sultan was a mere figurehead, the position of greatest power.<sup>20</sup> The last of these was Barqūq, who would become sultan in 1382, inaugurating the second, or “Circassian,” phase of Mamluk rule.

In short, the Venetian embassies arrived in a Cairo gripped by political intrigue. If Zeno arrived anytime after March 1377,<sup>21</sup> his audience was not with a single sultan and his advisers, but with a boy surrounded by a throng of amirs who were at that very moment jockeying for power. This could very well explain the eight-month period between the commission and his report to the Senate. Nor was the embassy of Querini and Loredan faced with significantly more stable conditions. It is amazing that they got anything done at all.

<sup>18</sup>For instance, both al-Maqrīzī (*Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma‘rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah [Cairo, 1934–75], 3:1: 254) and Ibn Iyās (*Badā’i‘ al-Zuhūr fī Waqā’i‘ al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā [Cairo and Wiesbaden, 1982–84], 1:2:157–58) mention the arrival of an ambassador from the Byzantine emperor in December–January 1375–76, delivering a gift of an ingenious mechanical clock.

<sup>19</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 3:1:275–83; Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i‘ al-Zuhūr*, 1:2:174–81; Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, [n.d.]), 11:72–78.

<sup>20</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 3:1:303, 305–8, 310, 316–17, 322–24; Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i‘ al-Zuhūr*, 1:2:200, 201–3, 206, 213, 219–20; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:152–58, 160–63. Concerning the position of *atābak al-‘asākīr*, see William Popper, *History of Egypt 1382–1469: Egypt and Syria Under the Circassian Sultans: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī’s Chronicles of Egypt*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology, vols. 15–16 (Berkeley, 1955), 91; David Ayalon, “Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army--III,” *BSOAS* 16 (1954): 58–59; P. M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades* (London, 1986), 146.

<sup>21</sup>It is impossible to establish from the commissions exactly when the ambassador did depart; in any event, the problems of navigation in the Mediterranean in mid-winter may have made for considerable delays.



It was with good reason that Venice viewed with concern her prospects for trade in Mamluk lands, because the Brizi-Corner swindle, far from being an isolated incident, was one of many such incidents that had apparently plagued Venetian-Mamluk relations for decades.<sup>22</sup> An addendum to the commission given to Loredan and Querini suggests that they could strengthen their case before the sultan by mentioning that “at many times many *bancherii*<sup>23</sup> had run off from that region, and never had any sort of innovation or molestation been practiced on that account against merchants or commerce.”<sup>24</sup> Venetian traders, it would seem, as a matter of course had in their possession goods obtained from Muslim merchants for which they had not yet fully paid, goods that had been taken either on credit or on consignment. There is evidence as well that some of these goods were carried off—we must presume legally—from Muslim ports, with expectation of later compensation. In 1369, a time of heightened tension between Venice and Egypt, Venetian citizens who had in their possession the goods of “Saracens of Egypt or Syria, subjects of the sultan of Babylon” are called upon to report the fact, although in this case it is just as likely that what Venice was planning was a confiscation of goods legitimately held in trust, a “freezing of Muslim assets,” as it were, as relations with the Mamluks deteriorated completely.<sup>25</sup> A far more clear-cut case is that of one Christoforo Permarino, who is reported to have fled Syria with the belongings and goods of Muslim merchants, and whom the Senate orders to be held, and “dealt with according to what is just.”<sup>26</sup>

The profits to be made in the Levantine trade were, obviously, enormous, more than compensating for the discomforts and indeed hazards of life in so inhospitable a place. Even without resorting to dishonest means, the person involved in such trade, especially one of such long-term experience as Brizi, could expect to amass a handsome fortune. And indeed, the Venetians had made honesty something of their stock-in-trade. It was a tremendous advantage to Venetian traders in the competitive Levantine marketplace to be regarded as always to be

<sup>22</sup>We must, of course, consider that the charges against the three were manufactured. As noted above, they had lent money in the past to the sultan and, we may assume, lesser officials, and it would not be the first instance where powerful rulers sought to discharge their debts by making accusations of turpitude against their creditors. But the ambassadors and the Senate did find the evidence compelling and the actions of the accused, if not damning, were certainly suspicious.

<sup>23</sup>*Banchiere* generally meant an “international banker,” although it could also mean a local banker or even money changer. See Florence Elder, *Glossary of Medieval Terms of Business, Italian Series 1200–1600* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), 39–40.

<sup>24</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 14 September 1377 (reg. 36, fols. 37r–38v [new numbering 38r–39v]). We do have to wonder how wise a negotiating ploy it was to bring up such past offenses.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 31 August 1369 (reg. 33, fol. 30v).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 20 May 1385.



trusted; shrewd, no doubt, and all the more respected for it, but not dishonest.

How, then, could men like Brizi be drawn into dishonest dealings? How, indeed, could they be put in possession of goods not theirs in the first place? The answer is to be found in the very reputation for trustworthiness that had helped Venetian trade flourish: Muslim merchants were, apparently, willing either to sell to Venetian merchants on credit, or to entrust goods to them on consignment, allowing them to take possession of their goods in advance of full payment, in return for greater profit later on. Such a system must have worked well as long as the merchants themselves remained on the scene. But when, after a career in the east, one decided to clear out for good, there must have been some temptation to buy once more on credit, and abscond before paying.

Venice had already encountered problems owing to this practice. In 1359 the Senate instructed the consul at Alexandria to go to Cairo to urge the sultan to forbid Muslim merchants from selling goods to Venetians on credit, or entrusting them with goods on consignment, recognizing that these sales were potentially dangerous.<sup>27</sup> Little apparently resulted from the mission.

A year before the Brizi-Corner scandal broke, there was again alarm in Venice about the potential harm that could be done Venetian interests by the willingness of Arab traders to sell to Venetians on credit. In 1376 the Senate wrote to the Venetian consul at Alexandria, ordering him to ask the sultan to issue an order forbidding the sale of goods by Muslim merchants to Venetians on credit, ". . . because, owing to the sales on credit made by Saracens to our merchants and citizens at said regions of Damascus and other regions of Syria, many damages and harmful effects might follow, in all sorts of ways."<sup>28</sup> For their own part, the Senate issued an edict a month later, forbidding Venetians from buying on credit from Muslims, as well as entering into mutual relationships that would involve them in having possession of the goods of Muslim merchants.<sup>29</sup> But either the damage had already been done, or Brizi and his associates were able to ignore the order. Sadly, in the commission for Loredan and Querini, the Senate once again takes up the issue:

We also commission you, that when you have cleared away the main object of your mission, you should, how and when it seems best to you, take pains and petition before the sultan, as forcefully as you can, that his subjects may in no way sell to our merchants

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 18 June 1359. Making the situation perhaps even more hazardous was that Mamluk officials themselves often invested in consignments of cargo. See Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 120.

<sup>28</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 20 May 1376 (reg. 35, fol. 100v [new numbering 112v]).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 19 June 1376 (reg. 35, fol. 107v [new numbering 119v]).



on credit, so as to prevent such things from happening again in the future, owing to the desertion of either his subjects or ours. Such an injunction should be backed by all the greatest penalties, restraints and strictures that you can obtain, by showing the sultan and his men how useful—indeed necessary—such a thing is for the sake of merchants and commerce; use such arguments and words as seem useful to you.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly there was great risk in Venetians taking possession of goods that belonged to Muslim merchants, even if by honest means and temporarily. So tenuous and uncertain, so subject to abuse of all sorts, was the position of the Latin trader in the East that even the accidental loss or destruction—let alone intentional theft—of goods not fully theirs would be disastrous. So nervous was Venice about the harm that could be done to her commerce by such a loss, that she even prohibited Venetian ships from turning a profit by carrying goods belonging to Muslims from place to place, “. . . because it might be the cause of great scandal and misunderstanding.”<sup>31</sup> Quite simply, Venice did not want her citizens in the Levant to have in their possession or care goods to which they had not full and clear title.

Given the essentially negative character of the news that they brought to Cairo and the potential for some unpleasantness during—and after—their audience with the sultan, and given the chaos and political turmoil that must have hindered the regular conduct of business at court, few would look with relish on the task to which Loredan and Querini were assigned. Fewer still would anticipate that they would meet with the success that, in spite of everything, the Republic very clearly expected of them. And yet, apparently, they did succeed. Exactly what they said and did, exactly what concessions they had to make, what compensation they had to arrange, whose purses they had to fill, we do not know. But we do have the indirect evidence of commissions to later ambassadors, who were charged with seeing that the sultan enforced the promises he made to ambassador Loredan.<sup>32</sup> Of course, one would not expect the Mamluks to have remained obstinate for long. Trade with the Venetians was dear to Muslim merchants, to the official coffers of the state, and no doubt to the private purses of its minions. We still must, however,

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 8 September 1377.

<sup>31</sup>“. . . quod posset esse causa magni scandali et erroris.” Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 12 May 1384 (reg. 38, fol. 120r [new numbering 121r]).

<sup>32</sup>See, for instance, the commission to Petro Grimani and the same Baldo Querini, Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 29 July 1382 (reg 37, fols. 99v–101r).



pause to appreciate the choice of the Senate in so obviously picking the right people for the job.

What, finally, of the other protagonists of the story, the people who made all this fuss necessary? Their various fates must have, at least, given some comfort and consolation to the merchants whom they had diddled. Marco Brizi apparently did not live to enjoy his profits. Already in the edict of 27 August 1377, we are struck by the fact that orders for arrest are given only for the brothers Corner; Brizi is not mentioned. Our suspicions that he came to a bad end are confirmed by the commission of 8 September 1377. Brizi, it seems, was killed at sea while making his getaway on Genoese galleys. No further detail is supplied. A curious point arises about the role of Venice's arch-rival, Genoa, in abetting Brizi's getaway. Relations between Venice and Genoa, particularly as regarded Levantine trade, had not been unqualifiedly bad in the 1370s. Indeed, the decade opened upon a union of cooperation between the two rivals, engineered and encouraged by the pope, and born of a perceived need to present a united front against abuses in Mamluk ports. But by mid-decade the tension that was ultimately to lead to the unsuccessful Genoese blockade at Chioggia in 1378–80 was already present, nourished by hostility over the dispositions of the islands of Cyprus and Tenedos. Brizi's contacts with Genoa went back at least to 1370, when Genoese ships were possibly involved in transporting the then- consul at Damascus back to that city from Cyprus.<sup>33</sup> It would seem improbable that Genoa played an active role in Brizi's swindle. Nonetheless, in helping him make off with the goods of Muslim merchants, Genoa could but hope that the act would do long-term damage to Venice's interests in the Levant.<sup>34</sup>

Zanachi Corner, it seems, did very little better: he had been found, living as a pauper and beggar on Cyprus. Whether he had already squandered what he had, or whether, when the story first became public, he had to flee without the swag, we cannot say. Both men disappear for good from the records. Not so Zanachi Corner's brother Jacobellus, who, to be just, seems not to have played so damning a role in the scheme. He had also remained in exile, but some four years later we find him petitioning to be allowed to return to Venice to explain himself without being thrown into prison as soon as his foot hit the wharf: in no way, he explained, had he been an accomplice, or even an associate, of Brizi. The Senate seemed willing to accommodate him.<sup>35</sup> And yet, only a few months later, they withdrew their permission allowing him to return with immunity, fearing that, even after

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 13 May 1370.

<sup>34</sup>I have found no mention of the incident in Genoese archival materials.

<sup>35</sup>Venice, ASV, Senato Miste, 30 August 1381.



years had elapsed, Venetians might still suffer.<sup>36</sup> We can only guess how great the original fury of the Mamluk inner circle had been over the crime from the fact that, at least as the Venetians perceived it, it might still be smoldering after four years.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 10 December 1381 (reg. 37, fol. 38v).

