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News on the Bulaq: a Mamluk-Venetian Memorandum  
on Asian Trade, AD 1503

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The article presents and discusses a source of unique importance for our knowledge of early modern global exchanges. Produced in 1503 by the Egyptian administration, and found among the records of a Venetian company with global commercial interests, the document records maritime connections with some localities on the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, followed by cargo figures. By sending the Memorandum to the head office in Venice, the Company's agents in Egypt were laboring to solve the most important concern of Venice's information network, that of coordinating Indian with Mediterranean trading seasons. By analyzing the document's context, namely, the Foscari Company and the risky business conjuncture it was undergoing, this paper attributes the Firm's success to the capacity of its agents to gather information through collaboration, networking and ultimately, friendship with Muslim partners and informers.

## Keywords

Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, cross-cultural trade, spices, Mamluk Egypt, Venice, globalization

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## Introduction

One morning in late spring, 1503, Michele Foscari, a Venetian nobleman, had his daily mail opened and read. An active businessman and deeply involved in the city's politics, Foscari was briefed by a secretary about most of his commercial correspondence; a quick abstract can be found in the envelope beside the address. On this day, the letters included a commercial missive from his agent in Alexandria, Marco Zorzi. Inside the envelope, an attached document accompanied Zorzi's last Egyptian letter. This was an unusual practice in the correspondence between the two men; moreover, the attached document differed in content from the cursory, routine succession of commercial news provided by Zorzi and by the other agents in their regular mail. The document in question was a memorandum on the 1503 spice trade season (*questo corso delle spezie*), and, allegedly, was intended to satisfy Foscari's curiosity about a series of topics, in particular whether all Indian spices reaching the Arab countries were later conducted to Christian Europe.<sup>2</sup>

In the following pages, I will investigate the origins of this unusual source of information (see appendices I and II), and will try to clarify its nature, trace its origins back to Mamluk administration of Cairo and in the Red Sea ports, and explain in summary its unique economic and historical contents. Much of the document's significance relies on how information was gathered in premodern long-distance trade, particularly in a context where people from different cultural and religious backgrounds were involved. Whilst interest for Venice is gaining momentum among scholars of communication, this paper addresses one of the most important aspects of Venice's information network: namely, the city's role in coordinating Indian with Mediterranean trading seasons. Zorzi's memorandum, it will be argued, is the material proof that east-west trade, as it was practiced before European hegemony, was sustained by a kind of communication that penetrated linguistic and religious boundaries, the result of mutual collaboration, networking and ultimately, friendship, rather than the work of networks based on a common religious or cultural belonging. In the first section I will briefly sketch Foscari's business firm, its staff, and the global conjuncture that affected the Company. In a second section, based on Foscari's books of account, I will describe Foscari's global network of business partners and particularly the Muslim merchants linking Alexandria with India and Southeast Asia. The memorandum itself is described in section three. The article closes with a few words on the crucial role of Foscari's petty agents in gathering information about global trade.

## The Foscari Company

Marco Zorzi had arrived in Alexandria a few weeks before, probably in early March. The end of Ramadan was still twenty days away, and there was little or no activity in the spice market. He found the city "orphaned" of spices. Far from being a pleasant interlude, the market inactivity was alarming news for Zorzi. The Venetian galleys had set sail long before, and were already in Crete. The convoy was expected to arrive in Alexandria in less than ten days. According to Zorzi, spice merchants had not arrived yet from Cairo, and rumor had it they would not be arriving until the end of Ramadan (March 29, 1503). Zorzi, together with the Venetian consul, tried to counter this worrisome situation, sending letters to the dragoman, to the *merchant of the sultan* as well as to other of his Muslim 'friends', and recommending his fellow merchants to act similarly, so that "the moors may speed up their coming to Alexandria with the spices..., so that they would meet the galley season". There was other news: the sultan, Zorzi added, was considering limiting the sale of spices to Egypt, thus preventing their export to Damascus and to other Syrian cities that year. These and other considerations – mainly news about the amount of spices coming from Cairo, constituted the bulk of Zorzi's letter. With his letters already sealed, a porter arrived from Cairo in the late evening. He was

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<sup>2</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia, *Procuratori di San Marco, Misti* (hereinafter ASV, PSM, M), *busta 43, fascicolo XXIII*. When last consulted in October 2015, the Memorandum was placed as the last document in the file.

carrying an Arabic document – an official memorandum requested by Marco to another of ‘his friends’ – a clerk in the Mamluk administration in Cairo. Marco reopened the seals, translated into vernacular Venetian the Memorandum’s contents and attached it to his last letter to Michele Foscari. The document was already on its way to Venice. Overall, it provided the reader with a list of ships arrived to the Red Sea during the year, arranged by provenance. The memorandum covers some localities on the Arabian Peninsula, the western coast of the Indian Subcontinent and some Southeast Asian harbors, followed by cargo sums.

The Foscari Company operated in the most consolidated sectors of Venice’s commercial economy. In light of the extant accounts, the Company’s core business was the export of considerable quantities of metals, mainly central European copper to the Egyptian market and the subsequent import of spices, drugs, precious stones and high value textiles. Besides this core activity, the Company was heavily involved in dealings with Cretan wine and sold in Egypt many other European commodities, ranging from olive oil to tin. Venice was the traditional outlet for central-European metals, and, by the time the memorandum was written, large importers such as the Fuggers were present in the Rialto as they were seeking to market their own copper and silver directly in the Levant.<sup>3</sup> The Indian spices acquired in Egypt were subsequently redirected by Foscari to the northern European markets, to Germany and most notably to Flanders where Venice had traditionally marketed Mediterranean goods. By the turn of the century, the Venetian economy was more dependent than ever on this ship-to-caravan trade, the city was in large measure reliant on the Levantine imports and the number of galleys dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean reached all-time highs (three to five yearly convoys).<sup>4</sup> Among other factors, the need for spices was motivated by the increasing military expenditure due to the Venetian-Ottoman war.

Until recently, historians have treated the Mamluk sultans as mere trade monopolists without respect for property rights. Nonetheless, under the Circassian dynasty, the Mamluks had indeed set up some sophisticated economic mechanisms to deal with the spice trade. The most important of these devices consisted in the marketing of spice stocks to the Venetians not through regular market exchanges, but through institutional methods. After many failed attempts during the first half of the fifteenth century, the sultan managed to set up a regular exchange pattern with the Venetians, the so-called ‘stock system’. The Mamluks were seeking gold, silver and eventually copper to pay for their professional army, who otherwise threatened rebellion, and the Venetians agreed to exchange their bullion against the sultan’s spice stocks. The ‘sultan’s spices’ and the ‘merchants of the sultan’ appear many times in the letters written by Foscari’s agents, who had to cope with the system when both its advantages and shortcomings were at its height. Foscari’s agents spent a good deal of time negotiating with – and sometimes befriending – the Sultan’s merchants, called *Khawaja* in the Arabic sources and *choxa* in the Company’s letters and accounts. The Khawajas were private entrepreneurs entrusted with the marketing of the sultan’s spices and with other operations of official interest. In 1501, the new sultan al-Ashraf Qansūh al-Ghawrī rose to power and desperately needed Venetian bullion, as the troops’ major requirement was traditionally the ‘welcoming gift’. During the years the Foscari Company was operating in Alexandria, between 1484 and 1506, a substantial amount of the total volume of spices, and particularly of pepper, was marketed by the sultan’s agents. This was good news for Foscari and other Venetian investors who were guaranteed a yearly supply. But the system exhibited serious disadvantages: the Venetians owed the sultans huge sums for spices received but never paid; Qansūh al-Ghawrī was forced to accept payment in copper and started considering a general reorganization of the stock system.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mark. Häberlein, *The Fuggers of Augsburg: Pursuing Wealth and Honor in Renaissance Germany*, (University of Virginia Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Claire Judde de Larivière, *Naviguer, commercer, gouverner : économie maritime et pouvoirs à Venise (XVe-XVIe siècles)*, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Generally, for the stock system, see Francisco Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance en Méditerranée pré-moderne : le deuxième état mamelouk et le commerce des épices (1382-1517)*, (Barcelona: CSIC, 2009). For copper imports, *Ibid.*, 204.



For their transactions with the Levant, the Company made extensive use of the state galleys – endowed with the monopoly of spice transportation – even though it owned private ships. Due most probably to Foscari's involvement with metal exports, the company's ships were investigated by the Venetian government and were accused of indulging in illegal trade with the infidels. Indeed, throughout the late Middle Ages weapons and some metals were banned from trade with the Islamic lands by papal edicts (the inquest, by the way, did not hamper Foscari's brilliant political career).<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, the Company also relied on a network of professional correspondents, or rather, factors, as they seem to have been on Foscari's payroll. Together with Marco Zorzi – who personally sent the memorandum – the most noticeable correspondent in Alexandria was Daniele Coppo. He took on his brother Antonio, who died in Alexandria at the company's service, and worked for Foscari for more than two decades. While Coppo figures prominently in Foscari's extant correspondence, Zorzi, who clearly shared Coppo's knowledge and skill, has barely left traces of himself. As contemporaries of the fourth Portuguese voyage, Foscari's employees seem to have held a more sophisticated knowledge of the Indian Ocean, its geography, and the sultan's commercial policies than that held in Lisbon during the during the same years. In a missive dated 1503, for instance, Coppo describes with great detail the business opportunities that the Portuguese may encounter whenever their fleet navigates beyond Calicut, as far south as Ceylon. What makes Foscari's company unique is the information about these dramatic, ongoing world developments: while Alexandrian factors such as Coppo or Zorzi reported news about the 'Portuguese caravels' and the subsequent reaction of the Indian powers, Foscari's man in Antwerp, Alvise Mocenigo, testified to the arrival of the first 'Portuguese' spices in northern Europe. Although they were conscious that the spice trade was experiencing dramatic changes, their letters relativize the impact on Europe and suggest the resilience of the Arab, Indian, and Southeast Asian actors traditionally involved in the old commercial routes. Speaking about the uncertain conditions of northern-European spice markets – now facing two different streams of spices – Mocenigo expresses his views on the problem in this manner: "if the Red Sea route closes, spices would remain imprisoned, and I believe these spices shall not cost them (to the Portuguese) less than we pay for them, but [will be a] bigger nuisance and expenditure".<sup>7</sup>

Coppo and Zorzi constantly gathered information from among Muslim merchants, and both indeed quote rumors, conversations and commercial letters from Cairo. Moreover, we know that the consulate had informants in Cairo and their own postmen connecting the embassies if Alexandria and Damascus.<sup>8</sup> As for the Memorandum, Zorzi's source was an informant inside the Mamluk Administration, a clerk attached to the bureau of the Nāzir al-Khaṣṣ. The Dīwān al-Khaṣṣ was a department in charge of the sultan's private (*khaṣṣ*) income, mostly commercial revenues from the Red Sea and Alexandria. Since early Mamluk times, the Dīwān had jurisdiction over the Indian traders (the Dīwān, for instance, taxed the inheritances of deceased traders). During the Circassian dynasty, the Department rose to prominence as the sultanate extracted more and more resources from commerce. Most importantly, the Dīwān ran its own communication system, gathering news about the Red Sea traffic and centralizing information in Cairo. For this purpose, unlike in early Mamluk times, the Dīwān did not set a regular postal service but relied instead on the Bedouins of the Sharqiyya province. Little is known about late Mamluk information services; most commercial dispatches were transported by these Bedouin *muleteers* (Arabic *ḥajjān*) who in fact rode fast camels. It seems that urgent news from the harbor of Alexandria was sent to Cairo through a pigeon post service. Money transfers were commonly managed by Khawaja merchants.<sup>9</sup> Zorzi's man at the Dīwān was clearly handling figures on Indian navigation as well as detailed information about the ships' cargo, and as we will see, the Mamluks probably disposed of estimates about the amount of Indian goods exported out

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<sup>6</sup> Marino Sanudo, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto*, (Bologna: 1969), V, 163.

<sup>7</sup> *spero tamen in dio che chi non se metera in fuga non sera tanto malle perche sel fusse serrà la via del mar rosso le specie staria imprixion et so certo queste specie non licosta meno dele nostre, ma piui grande disturbo et ruina.* ASV PSM M 42, letter from Alvise Mocenigo, from Yprès, 14 October 1403.

<sup>8</sup> Consular messengers are mentioned in a letter from Alexandria to Damascus, ASV, *Carte di Benedetto Soranzo, arcivescovo di Cipro*, B. 5A, fascicolo B, n. 18, 28 June 1414, letter to Donà Soranzo.

<sup>9</sup> Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 100-1.

of Egypt. Lastly, the memorandum leaked to Zorzi by his scribe friend in April was not an isolated event. In March, Zorzi confessed to having received a “note” from the Dīwān containing detailed information on both the sultan’s and ‘private’ spices.<sup>10</sup> The April memorandum seems therefore to have been just an update.

By the time the Memorandum reached Foscari’s hands, the situation was dramatic. The company was the victim of a worrying global conjuncture, its destiny depended of drastic investment choices and, last but not least, was in the hands of a crucial political decision by the sultan. Portuguese activities had been disrupting the traffic in the Ocean and seriously threatening Muslim navigation. The years 1502-3 witnessed the second voyage of Vasco da Gama, the fourth of the series of government-led expeditions to India. When the Memorandum was being produced, Da Gama was on his way back from Cannanore to Mozambique. For his return, Da Gama, in unprecedented fashion, followed a direct route across open sea, avoiding the horn of Africa so that he did not disrupt the monsoon navigation season as he had done in his way to India the previous year.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in spring 1502, Da Gama had captured the ship of Khawaja Jawhar and set it afire, killing more than two hundred.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the Company, backed financially by the Fugger, had invested a hitherto unseen amount of money in the ‘copper-for-spices’ business.<sup>13</sup> According to a missive from Antwerp sent on April 26, that is, ten days after the Memorandum, Foscari had bought as much copper as was available in the northern European market, thus trying to outrun his competitors. Third, and more worryingly, the sultan was considering cutting the flow of Indian Spices towards Syria, artificially concentrating exchanges in Alexandria to his own fiscal advantages. The sultan had been experiencing difficulties in marketing his own spices in Syria, where the Venetians incurred the most significant debts, and had been considering this measure for a long time. The firm’s correspondent in Antwerp launched a supplementary warning: if the Syrian merchants could not travel to Egypt that year the demand for Foscari’s copper would be significantly smaller and the Company risked losing everything.

With the uncertainty provoked by Vasco da Gama’s whereabouts, Ramadan threatening the success of the March galley season, and the threat of losing their Syrian investment, the company risked being left with copper worth more than 120,000 ducats. According to Mocenigo, Foscari handled this quantity of copper when he decided to purchase a supplementary stock.<sup>14</sup> The 1503 spice campaign in Egypt became the battlefield where the company’s survival was decided. At such a critic global conjuncture, the memorandum was a unique piece of information, if only because it might help Foscari figure out what the market supply would be in the following months. The Memorandum was a sophisticated piece of information, of a unique commercial utility, and reached the head of a global company, as the result of collaboration between highly skilled correspondents and Mamluk officials, and it did so in a critical moment.

A good deal of the Company’s records has come down to us. They are preserved in five boxes in the Venetian State Archives, under the signature *Procuratori di San Marco, Misti*, numbers 41, 42, 43, 44 and 44a. The *Procuratori di San Marco* was a financial and trust institution, which, among other

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<sup>10</sup> *zenzeri garofali e canele queste son per conto del signor soldan. In man de mori son schibe 3000 in suzo de puo serte spezie ett queste serte spezie o abudo in notta per via del Nadarchas, queste son stado dado in notta*, ASV PSM M 43, 21 March 1503.

<sup>11</sup> For the voyage’s chronology, *Voyages de Vasco de Gama: relations des expéditions de 1497-1499 & 1502-1503*, ed. P. Teyssier and P. Valentin, (Paris: Chandeigne, 1995), 190-200.

<sup>12</sup> *Voyages de Vasco de Gama*, 224-7.

<sup>13</sup> *Priego la divina magnificentia mi face veder bona lettere di Vostra Magnificentia di le cose nostre et che le galie sia zonte e deschargate e comenza a dar via le specie et maxime per el debito sa cum i Focher tegno chel precio sara mior zonte legalie*, ASV PSM M 42, letter from Alvise Mocenigo, from Yprès, 10 September 1503.

<sup>14</sup> *Chel signor dio da chi prociede ogno bene ne vol aiutar piui del nostro desegno perche si le vero che marchadanti damaschini sara in alexandria l levarà i rami per i do viagi et vostra magnificentia ara fato da sapientissimo avendo tolto el resto de rami per quello poso comprender perche aspetando tanta suma per duchati 120M tegno abiatì levato altri rami acio non vadino in man daltri*, ASV PSM M 42, letter from Alvise Mocenigo, from Antwerp, 26 April 1503.

attributions, acted as testamentary executors.<sup>15</sup> Three powerful reasons lie behind Foscari's decision to entrust these officials with his own legacy: he was heirless, or at least had no legitimate sons, he was on bad terms with his own family, and he was a procurator himself. Michele Foscari died in 1506 in an unexpected manner; he left an astonishing personal fortune, 70,000 ducats.<sup>16</sup> An illegitimate daughter benefitted from his last will; with the Foscari family excluded in the inheritance, the procurators guaranteed Foscari that his daughter would be taken care of and regularly paid her pension. Most probably Foscari saw the Procuratori as the only authority able to counter eventual claims on his fortune by the almighty Foscari clan. Be that as it may, the procurators took over Foscari's affairs by seizing whatever documents could be relevant for the task: the five boxes contain commercial correspondence, accounts, contracts, notes of expenses and some judicial records. Incidentally, the collection's highlight was a missive, now lost, with news about India which arrived via Flanders that was smuggled out of the archives sometime before 1983.<sup>17</sup>

## **Foscari's global network**

The Venetian archives have recently yielded well-researched studies on the late medieval spice trade, based on the records left by Levant traders, yet in almost all cases these documents consist of commercial letters. As for business, and therefore interpersonal relations in the marketplace, historians must turn to the records left by overseas notaries. Yet again in many cases the two parties mentioned in notarial deeds were Franks. The nature of sources has conspired to lead medievalists to a kind of history-writing insensitive to multicultural relations, where Franks seemed to have been striking deals only with other Franks and not with the local merchants. The Foscari Company, instead, has preserved a good array of books, or booklets of account, produced by its agents in Alexandria. Encoded in these registers, several decades of mixed business relations can be tracked. This circumstance makes the collection even more unique as, in Venice, accountings in general have been rarely preserved, thus depriving us from her privileged viewpoint on daily transactions with Muslims.

From the analysis of these accounts, covering a twenty-year time span, there emerges a mixed business network, linking Foscari's agents not only with Muslim, but also with Christian and Jewish partners. Foscari's agents dealt in first place with Arab merchants that I will define as 'Mamluk'. Furthermore, many Maghrebi traders are cited, which confirms the importance attributed to Alexandria by recent studies on the Maghrebi diaspora in the East.<sup>18</sup> Mentions of Jewish merchants are particularly important as their role has been somehow obscured by the chronicles and biographic dictionaries of the Mamluk period, which exhibited a clear bias towards Muslims. This is the case for the *Muxe zudeo*, *Isach zudeo* and *Daut zudeo* that exchanged spices for copper worth two thousand ducats in 1501.<sup>19</sup> They often bear Arabic first names. Some Muslims bearing the title of *ḥajjī* sound suspiciously Persian, an origin frequent among Khawaja merchants. They also dealt with the emir of Alexandria and other representatives of the Mamluk hierarchy, and some Turkish names can be found. One eunuch Khushqadam al-Ṭawāshī, appointed as the sultan's representative in Mecca in 1486, exchanged pepper for the firm's oil in 1494.<sup>20</sup> When recording the expenses incurred for each operation, the factors mentioned camel drivers, civil clerks, Jewish courtiers, Muslim notaries and the Christian scribes associated with the customs' offices.

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<sup>15</sup> Reinhold C. Mueller, "The Procurators of San Marco in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; a study of the office as a financial and trust institution", in *Studi Veneziani*, XIII (1971).

<sup>16</sup> Sanudo, *Diarii*, VI, 454, 498.

<sup>17</sup> Originally located in ASV PSM M 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ḥusām Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mu'ī, *al-'Ā'ilah wa-al-tharwah: al-buyūt al-tijārīyah al-Maghribīyah fī Miṣr al-Uthmānīyah*, (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> ASV PSM M 44, accounts of 1501, f. 3a.

<sup>20</sup> ASV PSM M 44A, accounts of 1493, f. 9b. 'Izz al-Dīn 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Umar (1447-1516) Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh al-Qurā bi-Dhayl Ithāf al-Warā bi-Akhbār Umm al-Qurā*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ibn Khalīl Ibrāhīm, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥusayn Abū al-Khayr, and 'Ulyān ibn 'Abd al-'Alī al-Majlabdī, (Cairo: Dār al-Qāhirah, 2005), 454, 463.

Although Alexandrian houses are mentioned in the accounts, the firm operated in a business milieu that was not simply Egyptian. Foscari's agents in Alexandria dealt with Syrians from both Damascus and Aleppo. In the first case they are easily recognizable as they are qualified as *Siāmi* (Arabic *al-Shāmī*, the Damascene), and *Alepin* in the second. Yet it remains equally difficult to qualify many of these associates as Syrian. According to the Arab authors such as Shams al-Dīn Muhammad al-Sakhāwī (1427-1497) or 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn Fahd (1447-1516), who lived in the Hijaz, most of these family companies, in spite of their Syrian origins, set up shop in the Sharifate of Mecca during the fifteenth century. Foscari's local partners were mostly Arabs, often of the second or third generation of well-connected merchant families. Based on Mamluk chronicles such as Ibn Fahd's *Bulūgh*, a closer examination of their trajectories reflect the increasing importance of the Mecca-Damascus-Aleppo axis. Moreover, Foscari operated in a sector vital for the Mamluk political economy, namely the import of raw metals. The strategic character of bullion imports secured the firm a privileged access to the businessmen close to the Mamluk government. At some point in their careers, Foscari's Arab partners enjoyed the designation of Khawaja. Written in vernacular Italian, we may recognize in the accounts the names of the Khawajas Ibn Shams, Ibn 'Ulayba<sup>21</sup>, Ibn al-Mulqī<sup>22</sup>, Ibn al-Khabbāza, or al-Burullussī.<sup>23</sup> An unidentified Hasan Sembrali, who was 'fired' as Khawaja in 1503, used to purchase Foscari's copper.<sup>24</sup> Marco Zorzi welcomes the appointment of 'his friend' Ahmad Abu Bakr as the next Khawaja, who, by the way, was a relative of the emir of Alexandria.<sup>25</sup>

Although the accounts mention many names and only a minority can be traced back to the Arabic form, a good example is provided by the al-Qarrī business clan, mentioned time and again in the books<sup>26</sup>. This family achieved great influence in the civil milieu of Damascus up to the late 1480s, where the patriarch, Khawaja 'Aissā al-Qarrī was entrusted with the marketing of the sultan's spices. He was perceived as one of the sultan's men in the Syrian economic capital at a time when most spices were sold there.<sup>27</sup> Muhammad and Ahmad al-Qarrī, probably 'Aissā's son and grandson bought Foscari's metals against pepper and clove. According to Ibn Fahd, writing from Mecca during those years, the al-Qarrī family company had relatives settled in Khambhat in the Gujarat.<sup>28</sup> Although Portuguese and other sources vaguely refer to Arab merchants as part of the thriving business community of Calicut, the Meccan Ibn Fahd notes some individual names in these family networks extending from Damascus to Malabar, and Foscari's accounts prove their connections with European merchants. Similarly, Ibn Fahd reports the case of the Khawaja al-Hūrānī, a Syrian settled in Mecca with a brother operating from Calicut.<sup>29</sup>

An episode narrated by Ibn Fahd sheds light on the networks woven by these Khawajas who sold spices to the Company in Alexandria. Two of them, Ibn Kursūn and Ibn Ṣadaqa, the latter of Syrian origin, survived a shipwreck in 1492. They had embarked on "the ships of Ibn al-Zaman that were bound for Calicut", where Ibn Kursūn eventually settled. Tracking Foscari's Arab associates one gets the impression that Arab merchants were predominantly Syrian, 'settled' at some point in Mecca and

<sup>21</sup> For Ibn 'Ulayba (*beneoliba*) ASV PSM M 44A, accounts of 1493, f. 2b, 3b, 4b.

<sup>22</sup> For Ibn al-Mulqī (*nasardin benemurchi*), ASV PSM M 44A, accounts 1485-91, f. 8a-b. Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 110, 217.

<sup>23</sup> Among many other examples, ASV PSM M 44, accounts of 1501, f. 1, mentioning purchases of copper by *benechabeza*, *benesamese*, *umar magrabin*, *mamett elchari*, and f. 3a, *ametto elchari*, *mamett alepin rosso*. Similar mentions can be found in the accounts of 1500, f. 1b. For Ibn al-Khabbāza, *Ibn Fahd, Bulūgh*, 2053, for Ibn Shams, a merchant from Aleppo, of Cairene origins, whose father settled in Mecca, Šams ad-Din Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahman (1427-1497) *al-Sakhāwī, al-Daw al-lami' li ahl al-qarn al-Tasi'*, 12 vols., (Cairo: Maktabat al-Quds, 1934-1936), IX, n. 458.

<sup>24</sup> March 1503, Sanudo, *Diarii*, V, 34, Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 108.

<sup>25</sup> Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> ASV PSM M 44, see, among others, the accounts of 1501 by Antonio Coppo, f. 1a, *mamett elchari* appears in a copper deal.

<sup>27</sup> Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 140-41.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 1194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 400.

who either traveled regularly to India or relied on family members established in Calicut or Khambhat. The Ibn Zaman to whom the ships belonged were themselves Syrians of Meccan origin and perceived as the sultan's men in the Hijaz. Appointed Khawaja in 1503, Ahmad Abu Bakr himself had relatives in India and freighted whole ships for his own cargo.<sup>30</sup> The 1492 shipwreck episode narrated by Ibn Fahd seems to confirm that 'Mamluk' merchants owned or freighted 'Indian' ships – either junks or large dhows – entrusted to 'Gujarati' captains, called *nakhudhas* (two of them were in charge of Ibn al-Zaman's vessels), and that they freighted cargo and offered passage to other merchants and Khawajas. Foscari's agents, in sum, were not just dealing with Egyptians but with long-distance Muslim entrepreneurs who closed deals in India and imported spices from the both the subcontinent and as far as Southeast Asia. Although from a Mediterranean viewpoint they could be considered as 'Mamluk' merchants, an East Asian observer may well have used parallel definitions such as *Pardeshi*, to refer to these 'foreign' Muslim entrepreneurs. They seem clearly to correspond with the 'Mouros de Meca' of Portuguese chronicles, this is, Arab Muslims involved in long-distance trade.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Mamluk Memorandum**

Data on Asian trade included in the memorandum looks genuine, complete and accurate. Yet the original Arabic record has not survived, and one may reasonably suspect that the document inserted in the envelope by Marco slightly differed from the one produced by the *Dīwān al-Khaṣṣ*. The resulting translation by Zorzi is divided into three sections. The first one is entirely his own. In it, Zorzi describes the document and sketches how it ended up in his hands. According to Marco, the document describes 'the flow of spices' that year (*questo corso delle spezie*), and provides figures for total imports (*li sume dele spezie*). The phrase 'course of spices' refers to the record of ships arriving at the Red Sea terminus of Indian navigation, namely the harbor of Jedda in today's Saudi Arabia. In all probability, 'this year' means the northeast monsoon season of 1503, whose winds carried Asian ships westwards in the cool, spring months. The northeast monsoon also governed winds in the Red Sea, carrying vessels from the straits of *Bāb al-Mandab* as far north as Jedda, usually from March to May.<sup>32</sup> The Memorandum provides a total figure of fifty-three ships, referring most probably to those vessels who had arrived up to April 16<sup>th</sup>, and that certainly constituted the gross of the navigation season. Nonetheless the figure is not conclusive as Ibn Fahd still mentions a few arrivals after April 1503.

Accordingly, the second section is divided into six headings, mentioning the number of ships arriving to Jedda from, respectively, *al-Shiḥr* in southern Yemen (two small ships), seven from Dabul, eight from Khambhat in the Gujarat, twenty-two from Calicut in the coast of Malabar, four from the island of Ceylon, two from *Pidië* in north Sumatra and finally, nine vessels from the Malay sultanate of Malacca. Under each heading, each section lists the total imports of spices from every one of these cities. Data is divided in three columns. The first indicates the commodity and its amounts, expressed in Indian Ocean measures of transportation and packaging. Most spices traveled in *schibe*, or sacks, (Arabic *zakība*). The second column seems to record the *tithe* (*al-'ushūr*) or tax paid upon arrival by merchants according to Islamic Law.<sup>33</sup> This fiscal regime, generally respected, with some adjustments, in Mamluk times, foresaw the payment of two and a half percent of the value in the case of foreign Muslims and five percent in that of Jews and Christians under Islamic rule. Finally, a third column expresses Venetian measures of weight, as *colli* for most spices and *cafīzi* for mace, and it is clearly an addition by Zorzi. The places mentioned by the memorandum, ranging from Yemen to Malaysia,

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<sup>30</sup> Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> For Ibn Kursūn (*benecharson*) ASV PSM M 44A, accounts of 1493, f. 11a. For the shipwreck incident, Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 763-4. For Ibn Ṣadaqa (*ali benesadecha*), ASV PSM M 44A, accounts of 1485-91, f. 3.

<sup>32</sup> J. L. Meloy, *Imperial power and maritime trade: Mecca and Cairo in the later Middle Ages*, (Chicago: University of Chicago. Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2010), 61.

<sup>33</sup> Paul G. Forand, "Notes on 'usr and maks", *Arabica* XIII (1966), Marie A. P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian trade and European influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630*, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962), 43-4, mentions similar custom duties for Arab vessels in Malacca.

follow a geographical, eastward order. As an only exception to this rule, Dabul is mentioned second in order, although it lies 715 km south of Khambhat and for this reason it should have been mentioned in third place.

Data for Yemen concerns al-Shiḥr, the main port of Ḥādrāmawt. Had the memorandum been drawn up a century earlier, the importance of Aden would certainly have come up; yet the document reflects the Mamluk hegemony over the Red Sea, attained with the takeover of Mecca and Jeddah in the mid-1420s. In this scenario, the Yemenite kingdom no longer captured commercial traffic, something aggravated by the fact that Indian captains (*nakhudhas*) referred to as ‘interlopers’ by Mamluk chronicles, had managed since 1421 to gain direct passage from the Indian Ocean through Bāb al-Mandab, thus bypassing Aden.<sup>34</sup> The Memorandum offers a unique glimpse to the importance of Frankincense, providing the most relevant figures of its production since at least the times of Marco Polo. The two small ships (*vasselli picholi*) mentioned carry what seems to be Arabian commodities, such as dragon's blood, probably from Socotra, turpeth, bitter *costus* and tamarind. Among these Yemenite exports, hepatic aloe ‘of Sumatra’ can be found, yet products’ names often referred to a given quality and not necessarily to its place of origin. Nonetheless, the cargo list for Yemen includes a remarkable stock of nutmeg, indigenous to the Moluccas and what strongly suggests al-Shiḥr’s role in transit trade. According to Duarte Barbosa, al-Shiḥr was important for the ships that missed the monsoon, providing an alternative marketplace for Indian goods, as well as Arabian horses and Frankincense for the outbound trip.<sup>35</sup> For Afonso de Albuquerque, instead, vessels from al-Shiḥr ventured as far as Malacca, where they may have procured for themselves the spice.<sup>36</sup> For *vasselli picholi* Zorzi is most probably translating the word *jilāb*, consistently used by Arab writers to refer to light vessels in use in the Red sea, the Yemen, and as far east as Hormuz, as a contraposition to *markab*, meaning large Indian vessels.<sup>37</sup>

The Memorandum also captures the commercial activity of Dabul in the trade with the Mamluks, six years before its destruction by the Portuguese. Contemporary travelers noted the city’s strong links with the Arab Middle East. The memorandum clearly refers to the city on the northern bank of the Vashishti River, and not to Daybul in the Sind, near today’s Karachi. Dabul figures as the only exporter of textiles in the Memorandum, such as the cloth strips for turbans called by Arabic texts *shāshāt* and the Indian textiles named *lixari* in Venice (*tele over sese lixari fazuoli et peze dettele*).<sup>38</sup> A passage by Duarte Barbosa confirms this, as he mentions the city’s importance as a redistribution center for local fabrics.<sup>39</sup>

With eight vessels, Khambhat is also pictured at its height, before its harbor silted up later in the century. It is worth noting that the placename is rendered in the vernacular version, instead of the most popular Cambay or Cambaya used both in European travel narratives and by the Meccan Arabic sources. The city’s main commodity, the Khambhat lacquer (*lache conbett*) was, as it will be mentioned in the document’s third section, of common use in the Maghreb, probably for dyeing cotton cloth. This is confirmed by extant commercial contracts for the Venetian galley line joining Egypt with Barbary, and it will also explain why so many Maghrebis are mentioned in late-Mamluk Alexandrian sources.<sup>40</sup> Dabul also appears to be as the main outlet for Southeast Asian borax, required by Venetian glass industry.

<sup>34</sup> Meloy, *Imperial power*, 75-76., Robert B. Serjeant, "Fifteenth Century ‘Interlopers’ on the Coast of Rasulid Yemen", in *Res Orientales VI: Itinéraires d'Orient, Hommages a Claude Cahen* (1994, 83-91), 91.

<sup>35</sup> Duarte Barbosa and Fernão de Magalhães, *Livro em que dá relação de que viu e ouviu no Oriente Duarte Barbosa*, (Lisboa: Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, Agência Geral das Colónias, 1946), 45-6.

<sup>36</sup> Afonso de Albuquerque and Walter de Gray Birch, *The commentaries of the great Afonso Dalboquerque, second viceroy of India*, 4 vols., (London: Printed for the Hakluyt society, 1875), 85.

<sup>37</sup> Meloy, *Imperial power*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> They were part of the gift from Malik Ayas of Gujarat, Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 1513. For the Italian terms, see also appendix I.

<sup>39</sup> Barbosa and Magalhães, *Livro em que dá relação de que viu e ouviu no Oriente Duarte Barbosa*, 86-7.

<sup>40</sup> ASV PSM Citra 197, inserto C, 12 June 1487 and 14 June 1488, exports by Piero Morosini & Co.

The document goes on to mention Calicut, the major pepper producer and the main strategic partner of the Mamluks. Twenty-two inbound ships, of what we might assume as large ships, account for the strong ties binding Calicut with Cairo. The city had been at odds with the first two Portuguese missions and was actually embargoing the Portuguese allies of Cochin. Tension escalated into overt conflict during the third expedition, led again by Vasco da Gama. Calicut's ruler assembled a flotilla to chase Da Gama during his trip back to Europe, that is, in spring 1503 when the memorandum was being written. Previously, in his way from the western coast of Africa in 1502, Da Gama had patrolled the Horn of Africa targeting the 'ships of Mecca'. As a result, one of those ships was sunk with hundreds of pilgrims on board as well as the Mamluks' commercial representative in the Calicut, the Khawaja Jawhar.<sup>41</sup> Under these circumstances, the figure of twenty-two ships becomes impressive, and accounts for the city's response to the European challenge, even if the number might have been higher in previous years. In his letters to Foscari, Coppo evaluates the deterrence effect provoked by the Portuguese arrival to the Ocean: "As for the Caravels of Portugal still in those Indian Seas and sailing in those places, none of their ocean-going ships dare to seal for fear of being captured".<sup>42</sup>

We do not know the extent of Calicut's involvement in trade with China, but in any case it had to be much lesser than that of other places listed in the Memorandum, such as Pidië / Pider in Sumatra or Malacca in the straits, whose ships could reach China in a single monsoon but instead needed two seasons to get to Jeddah. Calicut's dependence on Pepper exports to the west must therefore have been crucial. Indeed we have evidence enough to state that Calicut's ruler, the Samorin, (*Sâmûl-liri* = lord of the seas) was providing great quantities of pepper for the Mamluk sultans. By the time the Memorandum was produced, the Indian ruler had a monopoly on pepper, whilst the sultan's supply was guaranteed, and for some years it was the only pepper available in Egypt. The sultan himself had a Khawaja correspondent in Calicut, who was killed during the 1502 incident. Moreover and as we have seen, the thriving Muslim business community in Calicut included many Egyptian and Syrian families that brokered spice deals throughout the year, and some of Foscari's business partners such as al-Qarrî and Ahmad Abu Bakr had relatives settled in Calicut.<sup>43</sup> Yet in spite of this apparently large number of vessels, the figures for Venetian pepper purchases for 1503 are very low if compared with those available for the late 1490s. Commercial networks, shipping links and the monsoon regime all account for Calicut's strategic alliance with the Mamluks and equally explain the uncomfortable position of the Hindu polity vis-à-vis the Portuguese visitors. Incidentally, the city was rightly perceived by Daniele Coppo as dominated in practice by Muslim and Jewish elites.<sup>44</sup>

The Memorandum is the only document attesting Mamluk relations with Ceylon after the 1283 embassy by king Bhuvanaikabahu I.<sup>45</sup> Although it only reports exports of cinnamon and lacquer, the mention of four ships is noteworthy: Sinhalese shipbuilding was known and indeed constituted one of the islands' assets for the Portuguese. Although the Island played a prominent role as a maritime scale for Southeast Asian vessels, the memorandum just seems to be referring here to direct trade – mostly in Cinnamon – probably carried on board Ceylon's own ships. As in Calicut, Ceylon's rulers were not Muslims yet they could rely on a vernacular Muslim commercial milieu – the Mappilas or 'Mouros da

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<sup>41</sup> He was possibly the same *nakhudha* Jawhar at the service of Ibn al-Zaman mentioned by Ibn Fahd in the abovementioned shipwreck incident, Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 763-4.

<sup>42</sup> *respecto al charavele de Portogal chestano in quelli mari dindia e schore in ttantti quelli logi ni un di lor navili de mari non se mettere al mar per dubitto deser prexi. Tandem il di pasadi fo detto per mori publicamente che le charavele avea prexo Cholochut e ttaliato a pezi de gran zentte de quel locho. E qui e fu detto che le dette charavele...*, ASV PSM M 43, 11 March 1504, letter from Daniel Coppo.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Aubin, "Marchands de Mer Rouge et du Golfe Persique au tournant des 15<sup>e</sup> et 16<sup>e</sup> siècles", in *Marchands et Hommes d'affaires asiatiques dans l'Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine, 13<sup>e</sup>-20<sup>e</sup> siècles. Etudes publiées sous la direction de Denys Lombard et Jean Aubin*, ed. Jean Aubin and Denys Lombard, (Paris: EHESS, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> *seveni pocho chomtto che quele charavele posi intrar piui in Cholochutt per eser stado chambiado signoria in quel locho ettaliato a pezi ttutti quei populi chera prima chera Judei chera ttutti xe mori echovernasi per el signor de chombutt*, ASV PSM M 43, unsigned letter, dated solely by the year, 1501.

<sup>45</sup> Jorge Manuel Flores, *Os portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão: trato, diplomacia e guerra (1498 - 1543)*, 1. ed., (Lisboa: Edições Cosmos, 1998), 60-2.

terra' – without which trade with Mecca would have been technically very difficult. As shown by Jorge Flores, Portuguese information gathering about Ceylon was very intense in the years before the first direct contact in 1506, as it was functional to the appropriation of the newly 'discovered' lands. Yet in their letters, Foscari's agents exhibit a much superior geographic and political knowledge of Ceylon than the one being gathered in Lisbon. According to Coppo, if Vasco da Gama had proceeded further south for five days (which he did not) he would have had access to true cinnamon and to other varieties in the minor islands, together with a unique source of gems and rubies.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to Calicut, which gathered forces and copied European technology to resist the Portuguese, the kingdom of Kotte was harmless and would present no resistance to the Portuguese artillery.<sup>47</sup>

Lastly, the Memorandum reflects the growing importance of Pedir/Pidië, called Pider by Zorzi and in the Italian sources, one of the cities that would join the emerging sultanate of Aceh in 1521. This harbor in northern Sumatra is mentioned as the point of departure for two ships, carrying pepper and ginger, this latter spice packaged in 'Bengali boxes'. Pidië is mentioned by the traveler Ludovico Varthema as being acquainted with shipbuilding, and we know that Sumatra was increasingly focusing on pepper cultivation. If Varthema's information is correct, the region was only scarcely involved in trade with the West, as between eighteen and twenty ships were dispatched every year to China from Pidië.<sup>48</sup> Yet the figure of 850 Venetian *colli* of pepper sent westwards is unexpected, and it may nuance the importance traditionally attributed to Western India in pepper production. Again these faraway places seem to have been known to the experienced Venetian correspondents. This can be inferred from the way the name Pidië is transcribed by Zorzi: Pider. There is no equivalent for the sound *p* in Arabic, and actually there is no way to transcribe both *p* and *e* in Arabic script (*p* is invariably rendered as *b*). Therefore Zorzi, or whoever has acted as translator that evening was aware of the term's correct pronunciation. Either the Dīwān's clerks wrote the word by using a Persian transcription (but this is unlikely) or Zorzi knew how to read it properly. Be that as it may, Sumatra was known not only to the Dīwān clerks, but most probably to Foscari's employees as well.

The memorandum provides us with the first – and unique – mentions of direct connections with Southeast Asia as well as with crucial data on its trade with the West. By using figures provided by the customs, the Dīwān clerks came to handle sophisticated geographical data, a knowledge surpassing that of most Red Sea traders and scholars. Ibn Fahd, from a distinguished family of merchant-writers, does not seem to be very aware of Southeast Asian topography. He reports how news about incoming Indian vessels arrived to Jeddah in 1501-1503. According to Ibn Fahd, dispatches (*waraqa*, *kitāb*) were delivered by the ships containing information about new vessels to come. Ibn Fahd reports which ones originate from Khambhat or Calicut, yet he refers to Southeast Asian ships as coming 'from beyond' (*min fawqihī*).<sup>49</sup> Neither Mamluk scholars seem to be familiar with Southeast Asian geography. In his biography of Ibn al-Zaman, whose ships sailed across the Ocean waters, al-Sakhāwī mentions his journeys to faraway places, such as Turkey and *Samandra*, which al-Sakhāwī locates somewhere in the 'country of the Franks', while he is in all probability confusing it with Samudera Pasai or Sumatra itself.<sup>50</sup> Although religious scholars knew little about the regions beyond the Indian subcontinent, the Mamluk realm knew of and was connected to faraway Malay sultanates.

<sup>46</sup> *Arrivando loro alixora de Zilan chexe in chamin avanti el suo andar in cholochutt in quella ixola laverà tutte lechanele fine e pottra aver le grose e salvatiche per eser doaltre ixole a quel chonfin unite insieme ettraxera de questa ixola de Zilan Jolie asai per eser rocha derubini alttro non ttrazerano de XX de piu?*, ASV PSM M 43, unsigned letter, dated solely by the year, 1501.

<sup>47</sup> *dinove che per mori ezontte de qui mie amixi liqua vi de cholochutt ett quelli dixeno che in colochutt son fatto fort ett ano parattado daomini 6000 armadi con archi ett bonbarde asai fatte al muodo nostro per aver viste quele che ando con lazie? Caravele ett stano aspettar cheli vaga per ttaiarli apezi ett dubito siquesto ze son bona nuova perche isera senza piper ezenzari e canele elipuol ttrar perche lilargo de la Zorni 5 in un luogo nominado silan enon ano de far difesa*, ASV PSM M 43, 21 March 1503.

<sup>48</sup> Lodovico Varthema, *Itinerario de Ludouico de Varthema Bolognese nello Egitto, nella Soria, nella Arabia deserta, & felice, nella Persia, nella India, & nela Etyhopia*, (Venice: Alessandro Bindone & M. Pasini, 1535), 157.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn Fahd, *Bulūgh*, 1123.

<sup>50</sup> al-Sakhāwī, *al-Daw al-lami'*, VIII, 260, n. 703.



The last three headings – referring to Ceylon, Pidië and Malacca – are coherent with what we know about south Asian trade yet, paradoxically, exhibit the most puzzling aspects of the Memorandum. Ceylon exports all cinnamon, Sumatra rightly emerges as a pepper exporter, whilst the nine ships from Malacca carry all sorts of spices and drugs from the Moluccas (cloves, nutmeg, mace, brazilwood, camphor, cubeb, white sandalwood, red sandalwood, galangal, aloewood, and benzoin). However, by presenting such an unexpected scenario of direct, trans-global links between Mamluk-dominated Hijaz and Southeast Asia, the Memorandum seems to minimize the weight of middle-range networks and interlopers in the Indian Ocean, such as the Gujaratis or the Mappilas of Malabar, operating in a more articulated commercial geography. <sup>51</sup> Except for Yemen, with exports of Indonesian nutmeg and what probably is Sumatran aloe, the reader is left with the impression that most important commodities were carried westwards without the intervention of collaborative networks and intermediate hubs.

We know that Mamluk and Meccan authors, such al-Maqrīzī (1364-1442) and al-Fāsī (1373-1429) concerned themselves with a category of navigators named *mujawwirūn*, a word translated by the great historian Robert B. Serjeant with the Anglo-Indian term of ‘interlopers’.<sup>52</sup> Originating in places such as the Yemen, Gujarat and Sumatra, the *mujawwirūn* operated in long distance trade, trying to evade Arab custom duties or, as new research by John L. Meloy rightly interprets, laboring to access licensed trade in more hospitable places to do business.<sup>53</sup> By enhancing the importance of inter-state, direct trade, the Memorandum is not only drawing the map of Mamluk allies in the Indian Ocean. But rather, the document, I conjecture, is mapping the existence of agreements with Muslim polities, such as the Malay city-polities and sultanates as well as with Indian cities hosting large communities of Muslim merchants. In other words, the memorandum refers to the very world of licensed, tolerated or officially-sponsored trade with the Mamluks, that fifteenth-century *mujawwirūn* were evading or rather, trying to integrate themselves into.

Such agreements may have taken place in a context where most important trades were participated by the sultans. Forms of state participation are known for the Samorin of Calicut, the sultan in Malacca and it has been suggested for Sumatra’s sultans as well. Similarly, clove was rapidly controlled by Islamized rulers in small producer islands in the Moluccas.<sup>54</sup> Ceylon kings, at least in the thirteenth century, had trade agreements with the Mamluks. In any case, the Memorandum portrays the economic consequences accompanying the so-called ‘second expansion of Islam’ in the Indian subcontinent, and will correct views setting the starting point of many historical processes with the arrival of the Portuguese, as the rise of north Sumatran Islamic trade, or the importance of the Ḥaḍramawt and the straits of Melaka. As historians of Mamluk Mecca are currently showing, the

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<sup>51</sup> Kirti N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: an Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 48-49.

<sup>52</sup> Serjeant, *Fifteenth Century "Interlopers"*, 83.

<sup>53</sup> John L. Meloy, "Fifteenth Century Interlopers in the Red Sea, paper presented to Middle East Studies Association, Boston, November 2006", in *The Mamluk Sultanate and its Neighbors: Economic, Social and Cultural Entanglements, International Conference (Bonn, 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> December 2015) Conference proceedings*, (forthcoming), 7-10.

<sup>54</sup> Jorge M. dos Santos Alves, "The Foreign Traders' Management in the Sultanates of the Straits of Malacca (The Cases of Malacca, Samudera-Pasai and Aceh, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries)", in *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous Notes*, ed. C. Guillot, D. Lombard, and R. Ptak, (Harrassowitz, 1998, 131-42), Richard M. Eaton, "Multiple Lenses: Differing perspectives of Fifteenth-Century Calicut", in *Essays on Islam and Indian History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, (2000), Luis Filipe Thomaz, F. R., "Malaka et ses communautés marchandes au tournant du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle", in *Marchands et Hommes d'affaires asiatiques dans l'Océan Indien et la Mer de Chine 13<sup>e</sup>-20<sup>e</sup> siècles. Etudes publiées sous la direction de Denys Lombard et Jean Aubin*, ed. Jean Aubin and Denys Lombard, (Paris: EHESS, 1988, 31-49). For the Moluccas see David Bulbeck et al., *Southeast Asian exports since the 14<sup>th</sup> century: cloves, pepper, coffee, and sugar*, (Singapore; Leiden; Canberra: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; KITLV Press; Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU, 1998), 17.

Indian presence in the Islamic west was dramatically increasing as the building of religious establishments in the holy city demonstrates.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, a third section provides some estimates for the amount of spices consumed locally and those re-exported to the traditional Mamluk markets, that is, Turkey, the Maghreb and Europe. Here the summary, bureaucratic tone of the memorandum leaves room for Zorzi's own speculations written in first person. The authorship of these last paragraphs remains confusing, so that it cannot be determined to what extent it is still a translation of a Mamluk internal memorandum on spice consumption and distribution, a re-elaboration by Zorzi of some Mamluk data, or simply a personal speculation. It may seem, however, that Zorzi's friend in Cairo has provided him with some data, particularly figures of consumption of Indian Spices by Egypt, Turkey and Barbary, which Zorzi is trying to summarize. According to Zorzi domestic Egyptian consumption amounts to one fourth, although in the next paragraph this figure turns into a vaguer 'majority' of Indian spices. In the same confusing tone, Zorzi goes on to assert that exports to Turkey and the Maghreb reach one third of the total. The Dīwān al-Khaṣṣ obviously gathered and centralized statistics for the import of Indian products, and probably they also recorded data for the outbound flow of spices. While the assessment of the memorandum data on consumption and trade go beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that these crucial figures will provide grounds for a serious reevaluation of the weight of western Europe in east-west trade, and for a fruitful comparison with that of China. However, a first glance suggests that most attempts to build a quantitative approach to south Asian exports will need to be revised, as those presented by Bulbeck, Reid, Tan, and Wu in 1998, since the memorandum shows greater production and commercialization of spices.<sup>56</sup>

### The friends of Marco Zorzi

Historians of communication have focused on whether artifacts such as this memorandum could influence the ability of addressee to actually make decisions. Other discussions have turned around the role of Venetian missives as the forerunner of modern newsletters, or of printed forms of information gathering. The letters of Venetian merchants had traditionally been seen as the means to scrutinize market conditions and to convey political news about non-European powers. Throughout the fifteenth century, Levant traders offered their particular insight on important developments taking place in the Ocean's waters. Venetian records have already yielded a better understanding of the nature and evolution of intriguing economic groups such as the medieval Kārimī. They were equally crucial to explain the opening of new routes for spices in the 1410s, when they started to travel northwards with the Pilgrimage caravan.<sup>57</sup> Cairo and its fluvial port Bulaq were frequented by Venetians hoping to solve the problem faced by Zorzi and described at the beginning of this paper: that of coordinating the Alexandrian galley season, which lasted barely a week, with the maximum flow of Indian spices.

Either in the form of rumors or letters, Coppo and Zorzi gathered news about the Indian Ocean; but how did they know they were reliable? Ibn Fahd reports that often the news regarding the arrival of ships from India and 'from beyond' was false, probably forged with the intention of altering market conditions. On the other hand Venetian companies tried to undermine rival activities by exploiting gaps in each other's communications. Zorzi was seriously disconcerted when rival Venetians informed him that his senior colleague Daniele Coppo had died, which was false, and he had no means to verify it. Religious affiliation, therefore, did not represent a guarantee of reliability. Zorzi dispensed his Venetian rivals a rhetoric traditionally reserved for Muslims, qualifying Venetian competitors as

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<sup>55</sup> Richard T. Mortel, "Madrasas in Mecca during the Medieval Period: A Descriptive Study Based on Literary Sources", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 30, (1997).

<sup>56</sup> Bulbeck et al., *Southeast Asian exports*.

<sup>57</sup> See Apellániz, *Pouvoir et finance*, 76-8, and also, although using second-hand sources, Eric Vallet, "Le marché des épices d'Alexandrie et les mutations du grande commerce de la mer Rouge (XIV<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)", in *Alexandrie Médiévale* 4, ed. Christian Décobert, Jean-Yves Empereur, and Christophe Picard, (CEALEX, 2011), 213-28.

‘dogs’ and ‘liars’.<sup>58</sup> His Muslim informants, vice-versa, proved reliable since they counted among his ‘friends’, his ‘old friends’ or even ‘dear friends’. When trying to determine the volume of spices arriving to Red Sea ports as Sawākin, al-Tor or Jedda, Zorzi supported his estimations by saying “these are not just words, as I have spoken with the Maghrebis, who are my friends and come from these places...”<sup>59</sup> The Memorandum’s contents will certainly nourish ongoing debates on the origins of globalization, and on the Indian Ocean’s resilience when confronted with European aggression. Yet in spite of these exceptional features, Foscari’s archives display the recourse to a rhetoric of friendship between Muslims and Christians as the basis for information gathering, a rhetoric that is difficult to find in scholarship.

As Shylock the Jew suggests in Act I of the *Merchant of Venice*, news was brought to the Rialto by people who may not have prayed together, but who bought, sold, walked and talked together in spite of their religious differences. The Mamluk memorandum has come down to us to remind us of the relative weight of western Europe in the Early Modern world economy, of its relatively peripheral position in the circuits of information, and that knowledge of each other and global interconnections were deeper than often thought. Foscari died rich, the news that saved his 1503 commercial campaign first transited Bulaq before reaching the Rialto. The document’s very existence reminds us that long-distance, ‘cross-cultural’ trade was not necessarily a risky business between ‘strangers’, separated by cultural and religious barriers, but, most often, the work of friends who shared news and struck business deals together.

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<sup>58</sup> ASV PSM M 43, 21 March 1503.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, on Calicut, *dinove che per mori e zontte de qui mie amixi liquial vi de cholochutt ett queli dixeno che in colochutt son fatto fortt ett ano parattado da omini 6000 armadi con archi ett bonbarde asai. On the sultan’s spices, ett arichordo a vostra magnificentia che ultra le spezie quele o scritto de supra quiste zontte al chaiero ett si spetta anchora de Altor e de Suachin de schibe 2000 in suxo de piu forte spezie ett queste non son parole perche ho parlato con margarbini mie amixi liquial me aditto el tutto perche eli vien de quele bande ett me ano fermado sertto.*, ASV PSM M 43, 21 March 1503.

## Appendix 1. The Mamluk-Venetian memorandum<sup>60</sup>

Per la magnificentia de miser Michel Fuschari in Alexandria

Magnifico et gentile domino de puo scritto le mie lettere ett serade in questa sera è zontto una mia littera de alchaiero rabesca de man de uno scrivano del nadarchas mio caro amigo al qual pio mie lettere li o scritto de questo corso delle spezie è zonte de qua in questo ano de India ett li sume dele spezie come qua sutto o scritto a vostra Magnificentia che in son sertto vostra Magnificentia a vera piaxer aver tal avixo

[...] <sup>61</sup> locho nominado Sar dela è zonto al Zidde 2 navili picholi ett portano

inzenzi	schibe <sup>62</sup>	300	son	a	1000	colli <sup>63</sup>	80
alove patticho sumottri	urdri <sup>64</sup>	1300		a	1000		
sangue de dargo	patt <sup>65</sup>	18		a	30		
tturbitti <sup>66</sup>	schibe	30		a	80		
noxe muschade <sup>67</sup>	schibe	400		a	1300	colli	110
costo amaro <sup>68</sup>	schibe	4		a	...		
tamarid	fardi <sup>69</sup>	240		a	400		

In Debul è zonto navili 7 è zonto [sic] al Zidde

lache zerbi	schibe	230		a	800	colli	70
endegi	zurli	400		a			
alove patticho	urdri	200					
tele cioe sese lixari fazuoli et peze de ttele <sup>70</sup>		230					
veriseli nergri	schibe	9		a	32		

<sup>60</sup> I have separated the words, followed modern patterns of capitalization and punctuation, and developed abbreviations. With the exception of my accent marks on the third person of verb *essere* (as in *è* or *zè*), I have respected the grammatical peculiarities of the Venetian text as well as Zorzi's orthographic incoherencies. As for most commodities and measures of packaging, transportation and weight, I refer to the recent and exhaustive work on the Venetian merchant handbooks (*tariffe*) by Alessio Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto alla fine del Medioevo: le tariffe di Alessandria*, (Alexandrie: CEALEX, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Word of uncertain reading.

<sup>62</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 750.

<sup>63</sup> The document refers indistinctly to *collo* (C<sup>o</sup>) and *colli* (C<sup>i</sup>), a known Venetian weight unity for spices, Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 244-51, 748.

<sup>64</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 751.

<sup>65</sup> Stands probably for *pattine* or *piatine*, Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 750.

<sup>66</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 713.

<sup>67</sup> Rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>68</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 674.

<sup>69</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 749.

<sup>70</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 683, 707, 712.

Chonbett navili 8 è zonto al Zidde

lache conbett	schibe	300	a	1100	colli	100
endegi	zurli	250	a			
ttuzia <sup>71</sup>	fardi	6	a	90		
buraxo <sup>72</sup>	patte	32	a	80		
enbeze in siropo mexani			a	130		
armoniago	in pani <sup>73</sup>	260	a	40		
zenzeri verdi <sup>74</sup>	marttapani <sup>75</sup>	80	a	200		

In Cholocut nave 22 è zontte al Zidde

piper	schibe	4800	a	15400	colli	1500
zenzeri <sup>76</sup>	schibe	7400	a	24200	colli	2400 pio presto po che ma[n]cho
zenzeli <sup>77</sup>	schibe	300	a	1950	collo	100
endegi	zurli	300	a			
lache chelechut	schibe	300	a	700	collo	60
anbizi in risopo <sup>78</sup>			a	260		
cebuli sechi <sup>79</sup>	schibe	60	a	180		
indi <sup>80</sup>	schibe	32	a	..		
beleresi sittrini <sup>81</sup>	schibe	100	a	..		
seduaria	schibe	30	a	80	colli	6

Silan navili 4 è zonto al Zidde

chanele	fardi	800	a			
lache	schibe	160	a			

<sup>71</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 713.

<sup>72</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 668.

<sup>73</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 749.

<sup>74</sup> Rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>75</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 749.

<sup>76</sup> Rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>77</sup> *Ziziphus jujuba*, italian *giuggiole*, rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>78</sup> Almost certainly *emblici* myrobalans, Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 689.

<sup>79</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 689.

<sup>80</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 689.

<sup>81</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 714.

Pider 2 navili è zontto al Zidde

piper	schibe	2800	a	7100	colli	850
zenzeri verdi <sup>82</sup>	in marttapani bengeli	220	a	400		

Malecha navili 9 è zontto al Zidde

garofali	schibe	800	a	2000	colli	220
noxè	schibe	1300	a	4000	colli	360
masis	surli	400	a	260	cafizi <sup>83</sup>	70
verzi <sup>84</sup>			a	1600	colli	150
canfira			a	160		
cubebe			a	30		
sandoli bianchi			a	260		
sandoli rusi			a	500		
galanga <sup>85</sup>	schibe	80	a	300		
ligo alove <sup>86</sup>			a	200		
benzui			a	300		

De ttute quise sortte spezie son qua scritte el paexe chonsuma el  $\frac{1}{4}$  de ditte ett la Turchia asai che vano per ttera ett el la Barbaria asaisime ett navi de forestier alevarano asai in fa al ano la Magnificentia del consolo de cattelani aspetta 3 sue navi de Franza de di in di.

El paexe consuma el forzo de ditte spezie menude et spezie grose asai.

La Turchia piper ett garofali endegi verzi asai e noxe muschada<sup>87</sup> inenzi.

La Barbaria lache endegi et spezie menude asai da che ttegnò che un terzo di dite spezie se malteze in ditti luogi ett questo arichordo a vostra magnificentia che non pensa che tutte vegna in paexe de scristiani altro non me achade per ora in deo con vui me rachomando a vostra magnificentia.

A di 16 aprile 1503 el di di paschua 10 io marco de Zorzi.

La lettera che zè qua dentro vostra Magnificentia la mandi a chaxa de Nicolo [...] <sup>88</sup> a San Lio.

<sup>82</sup> Rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>83</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 738.

<sup>84</sup> Rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>85</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 680.

<sup>86</sup> Sopracasa, *Venezia e l'Egitto*, 685.

<sup>87</sup> *muschada* rendered in abbreviation.

<sup>88</sup> Word of uncertain reading, probably a surname.

## Appendix 2. English translation

To the Magnificent Sir Michele Foscari in Alexandria.

Magnificent and kind Sir, after having written and sealed my letters, an Arabic one from Cairo has arrived, by the hand of one of the Nāzīr al-Khaṣṣ' scribes, a dear friend of mine, whom I have questioned in my letters about the course of spices [that have] arrived here in the present year from India, together with the sum of the spices, as I have reported to your Magnificence below, as I am certain your Magnificence will be pleased to receive such a dispatch.

[From a first] place called Sar, two small ships have arrived to Jedda and they carry

frankincense	schibe	300 son	a	1000	colli	80
hepatic aloe of Sumatra	urdri	1300	a	1000		
dragon's blood	patt	18	a	30		
turpeth	schibe	30	a	80		
nutmeg	schibe	400	a	1300	colli	110
bitter costus	schibe	4	a	...		
tamarind	fardi	240	a	400		

from Debul have arrived 7 ships have arrived to Jedda

zerbi Lacquer	schibe	230	a	800	colli	70
indago	zurli	400	a			
hepatic aloe	urdri	200				
cloth this is shashat, lixari, kerchiefs and cloth stripes		230				
black glass beads	schibe	9	a	32		

Chonbett 8 ships have arrived to Jedda

Khambatt Lacquer	schibe	300	a	1100	colli	100
indago	zurli	250	a			
tuchia	fardi	6	a	90		
borax	patte	32	a	80		
emblic myrobalans, preserved in syrup, medium size			a	130		
ammonia	in pani	260	a	40		
green ginger	marttapani	80	a	200		

From Cholocut 22 ships have arrived to Jedda

pepper	schibe	4800	a	15400	colli	1500		
ginger	schibe	7400	a	24200	colli	2400	rather than less	more
chinese dates	schibe	300	a	1950	collo	100		
indigo	zurli	300	a					
Calicut Lacquer	schibe	300	a	700	collo	60		
emblic myrobalans, preserved in syrop			a	260				
chebulic myrobalans, dried	schibe	60	a	180				
<i>indi</i> myrobalans	schibe	32	a	..				
chebulic myrobalans, dark	schibe	100	a	..				
zedoary	schibe	30	a	80	colli	6		

Silan 4 ships have arrived to Jedda

cinnamon	fardi	800	a					
lacquer	schibe	160	a					

Pider 2 ships have arrived to Jedda

pepper	schibe	2800	a	7100	colli	850		
green ginger	in Bengali marttapani	220	a	400				

Malecha 9 ships have arrived to Jedda

cloves	schibe	800	a	2000	colli	220		
nutmeg	schibe	1300	a	4000	colli	360		
mace	surli	400	a	260	cafizi	70		
brazilwood			a	1600	colli	150		
camphor			a	160				
cubeb			a	30				
white sandalwood			a	260				
red sandalwood			a	500				
galangal	schibe	80	a	300				
aloewood			a	200				
benzoin			a	300				



Of all the various spices described above, one-fourth is consumed by the country, and Turkey [consumes] a lot that go overland, and Barbary much more, and foreign ships will lift a good deal during the year and the magnificent Catalan consul is awaiting three of his ships arriving from France any day.

The country consumes the bulk of the mentioned small spices and a good deal of the big ones, Turkey [consumes] pepper and cloves, indigo, a lot of brazilwood, as well as nutmeg [and] frankincense.

Barbary [consumes] lacquer, indigo as well as a good deal of the small spices so that [as] I have it one-third of these spices sell out in these places, and this I recall to your Magnificence who does not think that all [these spices] are conducted to the country of Christians. Nothing else by now, the lord be with you, I commit to your magnificence.

April 16th 1503 Easter day I, Marco de Zorzi.

May your Magnificence send the letter inside [this envelope] to the house of Nicolo [...] in San Lio.

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