The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval Studies

of

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on

CYPRUS IN OTTOMAN AND VENETIAN POLITICAL IMAGINATION, C. 1489-1582

will be held on

Tuesday, 7 June 2016, at 2:00 pm

in the

Senate Room – Monument Building
Central European University (CEU)
Nádor u. 9, Budapest

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Cyprus in Ottoman and Venetian Political Imagination, c. 1489-1582 is a doctoral dissertation that draws on a variety of Venetian and Ottoman visual, architectural, narrative and poetic sources to shed light on how groups and individuals in these two imperial polities imagined the political significance of conquering and possessing Cyprus. The period under scrutiny is between the island's Venetian annexation in 1489 and the aftermath of its Ottoman conquest in 1571. In investigating the ways in which different Venetian and Ottoman actors attached historical, mythological, political and eschatological connotations to Cyprus or exploited the already existing ones for their political ends, I pick apart various early modern discursive threads about the Venetian and Ottoman occupations of Cyprus, and then study how they were entangled within and across religious and political boundaries in the early modern Mediterranean and beyond. The result is the only cultural study of how the two major sixteenth-century Mediterranean empires contested the island and what it meant for their respective imperial projects.

The Venetian annexation of Cyprus had a decisive influence on Venetian imperial identity and, consequently, state iconography. The Ottoman attack on Cyprus increased apocalyptic fears throughout the wider Mediterranean region and, after a devastating series of hard-won battles, resulted in one of the last Ottoman major territorial gains in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the formation of a long-awaited Holy League in the West. In 1571 the League, as is well known, defeated the Ottoman navy at Lepanto, thereby inaugurating the Battle of Lepanto as a major theme of literary, artistic, and historical works produced across Europe. Yet, the Veneto-Ottoman contestation of Cyprus has so far received almost no attention from cultural historians.

Modern scholarship typically cites pragmatic reasons for the Ottoman attack on Cyprus in 1570: the newly inaugurated Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-74) needed a military success to prove himself, and the fact that the sea routes between the Ottoman capital and Syria and Egypt were repeatedly disrupted by pirates taking refuge in Venetian Cyprus, made this island a logical target. However, as this dissertation posits, already in the early modern period Cyprus became enveloped in a variety of symbolic discourses and narratives about the conquest by both Venetians and Ottomans that make this story much less straightforward. In what follows I single out four *topoi* that appear both in early modern and modern scholarly narratives of what taking and keeping Cyprus may have "meant" to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Venetians and Ottomans. These four are: Queen Caterina Cornaro's supposed gracious ceding of her kingdom to and her adoption by the Venetian state in 1489; the ambiguous *casus belli* of Sultan Selim II; the Selimiye mosque's supposed ideological relationship to the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus; and a performance at Prince Mehmed's circumcision festival in 1582 that allegedly re-enacted the Ottoman occupation of Cyprus.

Notwithstanding their frequent appearance in the literature, as this dissertation demonstrates, ideological claims embedded in these *topoi* prove unfounded upon closer inspection. I argue that these *topoi* could survive from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the modern day only because they have come down to us as parts of dominant western historical narratives. The Venetian state's mythology was ultimately more powerful than

the Cornaro family's narrative about the state's forceful seizing of the crown of Cyprus that rightfully belonged to Caterina Cornaro. The *topos* of the drunkard sultan's craving for Cypriot wine and other fictitious causes of war discussed in early modern western sources were more relatable than the complex diplomatic machinations behind the attack and internal political debates related to it that have to be reconstructed from Venetian and Ottoman archival sources. Similarly, western sources affirming a western misreading of the purpose of the oddly located (as in, not in the capital) and awe-inspiring Selimiye mosque in Edirne were inevitably better circulated than Ottoman sources revealing the original, eschatologically-inspired purposes of building that mosque. Western first- and second-hand accounts circulating throughout Europe about a mock battle at an Ottoman festival staged to exasperate the Venetian guests were plausible from a western point of view and more readily available to modern historians than those sources which could have disproved them. In this dissertation, I go behind the façade of these dominant historical narratives by untangling the discursive threads that they are made of and decoding their central themes through a dialogue of Venetian/Western and Ottoman sources. Consequently, in Chapter 1, I unravel the cultural and political context of the Venetian state's forging a narrative about its annexation of Cyprus against the narrative of the Cornaro family; in Chapter 2, instead of perpetuating the rumours about Selim's striving for Cypriot wine and his advisor Joseph Nassi's aspirations for the Cypriot crown, I examine the diplomatic negotiations that preceded the War of Cyprus and the Ottoman *casus belli* that sought to justify the war to the enemy on the one hand, and to the Ottoman public on the other; I challenge western "misreadings" of the Selimiye mosque and offer a cultural historical context within the framework of a shared Christian-Muslim imperial as well as eschatological tradition lending rationale to both the construction of the mosque and the Ottoman attack on Cyprus in chapters 3 and 4; and in Chapter 5 I investigate the narrative and demonstrative purposes of the performance in 1582 that has been interpreted by both contemporaries and modern historians as the re-enactment of the conquest of Cyprus.

While political imagination about Cyprus in the Ottoman Empire seems to have been used to legitimize Sultan Selim II's rule, and later to augment the late-sixteenth-century styling of the House of Osman's messianic profile, imagining Cyprus for political ends was, in Venice, part of a debate about the very political identity of the republic and its elites. Therefore, in this dissertation I examine how representatives of the city-state, by imagining the political significance of annexing and possessing Cyprus, handled the problem of Venice's dual political identity through various commissioned artworks, and how the patrician victims of Venice's imperial expansion responded to it. I also investigate what the specifics of this communication imply about the ways early modern Mediterranean Empires operated.

The early modern "myth of Venice," or the idealized attributes of "Venetianness" and their expression in various art forms and literary genres, was incompatible with one of Venice's "equal" patrician families, the Cornaros, holding royal titles and practicing monarchical rights. By flouting the Venetian ideals of modesty and equality, the Cornaros and other patrician families, like the late fifteenth-century Barbarigo doges (Marco and Agostino) attempted to refute the myth (or follow a counter-myth) of Venice. They looked

up to the resplendent lifestyles of their Roman and Florentine peers, displaying quasi-monarchical power. The ensuing contradictions between political identity and practice of power were addressed by the Venetian state, the doges, and the Cornaro family through allegorical imagery of their direct or symbolic association with Cyprus. The messages through which the representatives of the Venetian state and the city state's patrician families expressed these political imaginations were aimed predominantly at a domestic audience. Thus, even though these messages were inevitably picked up on by western interpreters (and critics) of Venice's prosperity and political as well as social stability, the senders and receivers of these messages shared a dominant meaning system (i.e. a coherent network of shared ideas, values, beliefs and causal knowledge—that is ruling ideas).

In parallel with the Venetian examples, I also analyze the ways in which Ottoman individuals imagined Cyprus for their own political purposes, including Selim II, who followed in both Mehmed II's and Süleyman's footsteps in legitimizing his power by fashioning himself through the construction of his sultanic mosque as the Emperor Justinian I (r. 527-65 CE) of his time as well as the messianic ruler whose association with Cyprus on the eve of the Apocalypse had been foretold by so many an oracle. However, at the same time, I also observe what communicating these imaginations tell the modern historian about the dynamics of late sixteenth-century Mediterranean empires. Just like with the previous, Venetian example, some messages containing Ottoman political imaginations about Cyprus were aimed at a domestic audience—although perhaps not exclusively. Regardless, western visitors to the Ottoman Empire and sedentary authors alike interpreted these messages with confidence. As a result, the "authorial intent" of Sultan Selim II's mosque in Edirne was ill-decoded on the western receiver's end. These misreadings receive special significance in discussing inter-imperial communication.

By borrowing from Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" theory I argue that misinterpretations were possible because there was an asymmetry between the Venetian and Ottoman actors' "meaning structures" which determined the possible "dominant," "negotiated" and "oppositional" readings of messages. As opposed to his theoretical forerunners like Saussure and Jakobson, Stuart Hall's model is not about interpersonal but mass communication, which emphasizes the importance of active interpretation. Although originally proposed as a model for television communication in 1973, Stuart Hall's theory is highly relevant for my analysis of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century intra- and inter-imperial communication. Firstly, all of the cases discussed in this dissertation involve imperial messages aimed at large audiences, that is to say instances of early modern mass communication, even where interpersonal communication intervened. (Take for instance the Ottomans' testing their tentative *casus belli* on the Venetian bailo Barbaro in Chapter 2.) Secondly, Hall's theory helps explain why some messages containing political imaginations were correctly decoded by the intended audiences while ill-decoded by others. Thirdly, by allowing the notion of "culture" to be bypassed, it helps avoid essentialist explanations such as blaming the different degrees of (un-)successful interpretation on "cultural differences," which would make little sense in analyzing communication in an early modern imperial setting.

Hall's theory opened the way for a semiotic approach to communication models such as the cultural semiotic model of Yuri Lotman. According to Lotman, the

semiosphere, one of the key concepts of cultural semiotics, is a set of inter-related sign processes (semiosis) with social, linguistic, and even geographical delimitations, outside which "meaning" cannot exist. Consequently, decoding (i.e. translating) a message from outside (or even, in fact, from a different code *within* the semiosphere) will generate a message different from the original one. Thus, essentially, both Hall and Lotman argue that translation not only happens between two codes ("languages") but also between the socially, geographically, ideologically (etc.) determined and confined mechanisms within which the "sender" created the message and the "receiver" interprets ("consumes") it.

Recently, E. Natalie Rothman argued that the linguistic, religious, and political differences between Venice and the Ottoman Empire were continuously re-created, to a large extent by "trans-imperial subjects," who played a vital role as boundary-makers between the two polities. One of the boundary making processes was "institutionalized" translation—both linguistic and socio-cultural. Regarding translation as boundary making, Rothman focuses on the dragomans as the specialized professional intermediaries of a slightly later period, whereas in two of the studies below (chapters 3 and 5), I show that toward the end of the sixteenth century, the differences between the individual Venetian and Ottoman spheres of meaning were perhaps not as clearly recognizable as they later (1630s onward) became. Some western recipients of (assumed) Ottoman messages seem to have underestimated the limitations of interpretability. On the one hand, I argue that the partial overlapping of spheres of meaning between a Venetian (or another Western European, although Venetians were overall much better informed about Ottoman ways than other Europeans) and an Ottoman did not allow the former to decode correctly Ottoman politically infused "messages" where there was a lack of a social and intellectual common ground (i.e. imperfectly matching meaning structures) or a well-informed interpretation by a trans-imperial intermediary. On the other hand I hypothesize that confident (and false) interpretations of Ottoman messages as references to the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus were perhaps possible due to the western actors' assumption that the meaning structures on the Ottoman sender's end were not so much different from theirs and thus direct decoding *was* possible. After all, the Ottoman Empire was integral to and resonant of the past and present politics and culture of its western partners or rivals. In turn, Venetian arts, learning, and material culture were influenced by the Ottoman Levant, while its political establishment was attentive to Ottoman politics. Consequently, the partial overlapping of semiospheres was not only responsible for ill-decodings, but it also made ill-decoded messages seem sensible, and not only in their own time. Some of the *topoi* discussed in this dissertation survived in scholarship as widely accepted facts even to our time.

Notwithstanding, the possibility of a partial overlapping of semiospheres also allowed some political imaginations or politically infused messages about Cyprus to cross the political boundary while retaining their intended meaning without difficulty. In exploiting Cyprus's eschatological connotations shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean region (the eschatological connotations of Cyprus had been well known to the peoples of the Mediterranean region since late antiquity), Sultan Selim II and his ideologues produced messages about the new sultan's reign as that of the last universal monarch before the Last Judgement. Because of the intertwined medieval

apocalyptic traditions of the monotheistic religions, and their early modern (re-)interpretations, the clash between Christians and Muslims on the island of Cyprus was recognized in Venice, the Ottoman Empire and even in far-away Spain as one of the foretold harbingers of the Apocalypse (see Chapter 4). Unlike the aforementioned ill-decoded messages, some of which were not meant to be interpreted by foreigners, the Ottoman court's messages based on the island's inter-religious eschatological connotations were intended for, besides a diverse domestic audience, a foreign, predominantly Venetian, audience. Consequently, the Ottoman, eschatological contextualization of the 1571 conquest of Cyprus was readily picked up on by various individuals and communities across the Mediterranean region regardless of their religious or political affiliations.

In this dissertation I frequently refer to the Venetian state's manipulation of its public image or the Ottoman court's orchestration of its own cultural historical contexts. However, imagination is always an activity done by individual actors or groups of them. If this dissertation is about communication, it is also about the individuals, members of political factions and political bodies in Venice and the Ottoman Empire who partook in communication, as either senders or receivers of messages.

In Venice, all of the actors discussed in Chapter 1 were members of the patriciate and, naturally, possessors of the highest posts in the city-state's political system. Although the members of the Cornaro family imagined Cyprus in their political self-fashioning differently from the Barbarigo doges or the members of the Council of Ten, the ways they imagined Cyprus were not so different from each other after all. All of these actors expressed their interpretation of the inconsistencies of Venice's image as a republic as well as empire and imagined a direct or symbolic association between themselves and the island to propagate their own position in the duality of Venice's metropolitan and *stato da mar* establishment. In Chapter 2 and 5, the actors, who misinterpreted Ottoman visual messages imagined that the Ottoman court was sending them political messages across the boundary. They believed that with the building of the Selimiye mosque and a performance enacted at the 1582 circumcision festival the Ottomans were communicating to them their colonizer superiority. As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, the recently inaugurated Sultan Selim II and his ideologues on the one hand, and the receivers of their messages all over the Mediterranean on the other, partook in a communication exchange about the eschatological importance of Cyprus. The foretold apocalyptical clash between Christians and Muslims on the island allowed for creating an image and interpretation of Selim II as the Last (World) Emperor. Furthermore, western interpreters of a performance at Prince Mehmed's 1582 circumcision feast still believed that they were presented with the woeful sight of the War of Cyprus. These and all of the political imaginations discussed here tell the modern historian less about late fifteenth- to sixteenth-century Cyprus than about the ways early modern individuals in the Mediterranean region, especially in Venice and Istanbul, engaged with and read imperial mechanisms of power. For all the postulation of "cultural" boundaries between the Ottoman Empire and Venice that necessitated mediation, this thesis shows that there were many individuals and publics in both empires who believed that messages sent across imperial boundaries could be *directly* decoded and assumed a universally intelligible language of imperial power.

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PUBLICATIONS:

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'"Instead of Attacking the Turks...": The War of Tunis in Habsburg Propaganda', in *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*, 68 (2014).

Michael Walsh, Tamás Kiss and Nicholas Coureas (eds.), *'The Harbour of All This Sea and Realm'*: *Crusader to Venetian Famagusta* (CEU Press: Budapest, 2014).

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