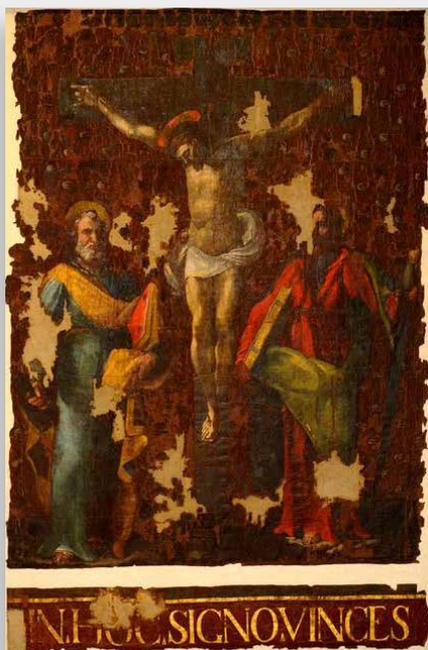


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N. 6
2025

Fascicolo 23. Luglio 2025
Storia Militare Moderna (6)



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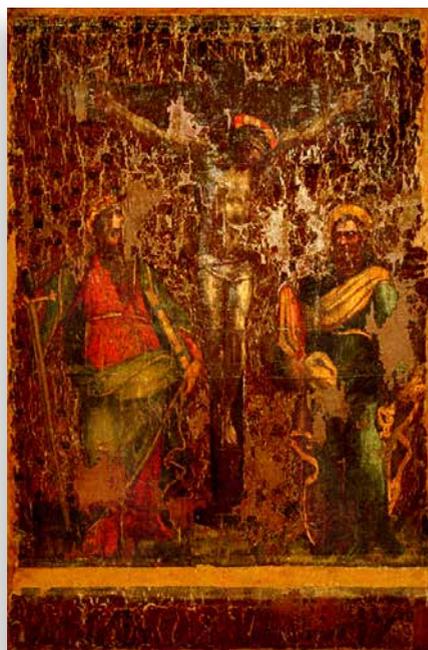
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Stendardo di Lepanto (1570), Lati A e B, Museo Diocesano di Gaeta. Wikimedia Commons. Lo stendardo fu dipinto a tempera su seta da Girolamo Siciolante da Sermoneta (1521-1575), su incarico del Cardinale Onorato Caetani. L'11 giugno 1570 fu benedetto da Papa Pio V nella Basilica di San Pietro e consegnato a Marcantonio II Colonna ponendolo al comando della flotta pontificia. Partito da Civitavecchia e giunto a Gaeta il 22 giugno 1571, Marcantonio Colonna, fece voto di consegnare lo stendardo al patrono della città qualora fosse tornato vincitore. Il 13 agosto Pio V fece consegnare un secondo stendardo della Lega a Don Giovanni d'Austria, comandante generale della flotta cristiana che, riunitasi a Messina, salpò il 24 agosto verso Lepanto. Durante la battaglia del 7 ottobre i due vessilli sventolarono rispettivamente sull'Ammiraglia e sulla Capitana pontificia e non furono mai centrati dal tiro nemico. Nelle stesse ore il papa ebbe la visione della vittoria e in ricordo rifinì l'Ave Maria nella forma attuale, aggiunse le Litanie lauretane alla recita del Rosario e l'appellativo mariano di *Auxilium Christianorum* e consacrò il 7 ottobre a Santa Maria delle Vittorie sull'Islam, celebrato con lo scampanio al mattino, a mezzogiorno e alla sera in ricordo della vittoria. Papa Gregorio XIII trasferì poi la festa alla prima domenica del mese di ottobre intitolandola alla Madonna del Rosario. Al ritorno da Lepanto, Marcantonio Colonna sciolse il voto consegnando lo stendardo al vescovo Pietro Lunello. Il vessillo fu poi conservato presso la cattedrale dei Santi Erasmo e Marciano.

Cannons, spices, timber and diplomacy

The Conflict between Venice-Mamluks and the Portuguese Empire

by ALESSANDRO GIRAUDO¹

ABSTRACT: In six years, Europe and the world lived an incredible experience: the opening of two large windows for Europe with the discovery of America and the opening of the oceanic route Lisbon-Calicut. Flows of the spices market (1/3 of the global trade) changed radically with a dramatic impact on Venice, Mamluk transit business and the entire Middle East. Commercial, diplomatic and military activities became frantic. Venice had the project to dig the Suez Canal, Cairo built a new navy, Lisbon created the *Armada da India*. The strategic Portuguese victory of Diu had three major consequences: Venice entered a sparkling golden decade, the Mamluk Sultanate suffered a terrible collapse under the shots of the Ottoman powerful artillery, Lisbon transformed the Indian ocean in a Portuguese lake, before suffering a classic crisis of a thalassocracy.

KEYWORDS: VENICE, MAMLUKS, PORTUGUESE EMPIRE, INDIAN OCEAN, SPICES, DIU BATTLE

In a span of only six years the world lived a dramatic revolution. The Columbus' discovery in 1492 of the *islands at east of Ganges* (America) and the opening by Da Gama of the route Lisbon-Cape of Good Hope-Calicut (1498) changed the world and modified fundamentally the traditional commodities flows, in particular the trade of spices produced in the Far East and in the Indian basin, and the totally new agricultural products grown in "West Indies" entering the global trade circuit.

¹ The Author teaches "Commodity Geopolitics and Risk Management" at INSEEC, Paris. He is the author of several books on the role of commodities in the economic history.

It is interesting to observe the reaction of four important economic centers to this new reality. Florence and Genoa understood immediately the new opportunity, mainly on the West; they invested huge amounts of capitals in trading business, in the mining industry (employing German miners that had the best experience in Europe and Italian engineers, bringing a strong Renaissance proto-scientific knowledge) and in slaves commerce. The Bavarian banks and trading houses (for example Fugger, Hochstätter and Welser, the latest obtained from the emperor Charles V the monopoly to develop Venezuela) chose a risky strategy with capitals invested in large mining business and trading.

On the opposite, Venice that was one of the first cities to be informed², put very little attention to this news and it did not react immediately. Girolamo Priuli, the very acute observer of the life in Venice, wrote in his *Diario* already in August 1499 (so before the Da Gama's return to Portugal) that some letters – sent from Alexandria to Venice – reported that “three caravels belonging to the Portuguese king berthed at Aden and at Calicut searching for *the dispersed islands*, under the command of...Christopher Columbus (sic!). If this news were true, it would be much worse than the war against the Turks; but I do not think it is true”. Only in June 1501, the Sultan's court received the official news of the “Francs” landing in India³. And in July 1501, a tragic news circulated in Venice: seven boats of a convoy of 13 vessels sank during the trip to India. The Priuli's comment was: “a lot of people consider this news as fake; other say that the Portuguese King will not be any more able to continue to send vessels to Calicut”⁴.

In September 1500, the Venetian ambassador in Spain Domenico Pisani was sent to Lisbon to discuss with the Portuguese king not the spices matter but a possible Lusitanian participation to an anti-Turks coalition. The official report on Da Gama's voyage arrived in Venice only in March 1501. The Serenissima sent a special envoy to Lisbon, Pietro Pasqualigo, to draw a full analysis of the new re-

2 Colombo's discovery news arrived in Venice only a couple of weeks after the anchor drop in Restelo (Portugal). The news arrived in Rome one month later and in Constantinople three months later.

3 Miotto, Marco “Le navi del Soldano e le speranze di Venezia” in *History Studies*, Vol. 3/2 - 2011, p. 304.

4 «Multi judichavano anchora questa nova non dovesse esser vera ; altri dicevano che il Re di Portogallo non potria continuar questa navigatione di Cholocut». Renato Fulin, «Girolamo Priuli e i suoi diari», *Archivio veneto*, 22 (1881), p. 137-248.

ality.⁵ The diplomat, a former bright merchant, wrote in June a detailed analysis (“*hic sunt leones*”) documenting a sharp increase of the arrivals to Lisbon of several vessels carrying spices and other products from the Indian Ocean. Girolamo Priuli wrote « if the voyages to India continue, the king of Portugal could become the *king of money* because all European merchants will go to Lisbon to buy Indian spices; Venice, without the spices business, will be like a baby without his mother milk...I can see the ruin of the Serenissima”.⁶

The « spices crisis » in Venice

The new spices route become “operational” during 1500 and had a terrible impact on the economy of Venice that was already suffering a serious financial crisis of the banking sector. The year 1499 was a “*annus horribilis*” for Venice. The Serenissima was fighting two wars: the first on the land of Lombardy and the second on the sea against the Ottomans and it was hit by the panic caused by the banking crisis. Three banks (Garzoni, Lipomano, Priuli) out of the “Four Columns of the Temple”, as the four top banks were called, went belly up in spite of the support (official and grey) of the Venetian political power and other medium-small banks fell with huge losses for several merchants⁵. Several merchants went bankrupt, a lot of Northern European merchants (mainly located at the *Fondaco de Tedeschi*) transferred their business to Lisbon or to Antwerp because they were no more able to find the goods they were used to buy to export to their markets. Furthermore, the public finances of the city suffered a large drop of fiscal revenues (transit taxes).

The success of the Portuguese did not depend on the fact that shipping along the Cape route was cheaper than shipping through the Middle East, nor on the fact that, by passing through the Cape, spices avoided the heavy duties that weighed on them in the Levant. It depended, instead, on the ability of the Portuguese to prevent, with warships stationed in the Indian Ocean, the Arab and Indian shipping from bringing spices both into the Red Sea and into the Persian Gulf.⁷

5 Donald Weinstein, *Ambassador from Venice; Pietro Pasqualigo in Lisbon, 1501*, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 1960, pp. 10-11.

6 Juraj Kittler, «1499-1500 banking crisis in Renaissance Venice», *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2012, pp. 165-178.

7 Steensgaard, Niels *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East In-*

And prices of spices and of Indian goods climbed very steadily because of the scarcity of the products with huge profits for merchants sitting on abundant inventories. In November 1501, prices of pepper jumped to 95 ducats/*cargo* (one *cargo* = 120 kilos). Traditionally pepper prices were fluctuating in the 50-60 ducats range before the Rialto market was hit by the news that the Mamluk commercial fleet was sunk by the Portuguese navy near the Indian coast. During the latest years of XV century pepper prices were fluctuating in the range 40-50 ducats.⁸

All academic research (Lane, Braudel, Cipolla, Tenenti, Luzzatto) about the volume of Indian spices handled by Venice before Da Gama estimate the tonnage of pepper at 1500-1800 metric tons/year and of other spices at 400-500 tons/year. This volume does not consider the smuggling activity that was not so important considering the very efficient custom administration of Venice. Figures may seem small, but prices of these commodities were very expensive and a lot of other Indian origin raw materials were shipped to Venice.⁹

Function of spices and the quasi-monopoly of Mamluk Sultanate and of Venice

The impact of Da Gama's voyage on the economies of the Mamluk Sultanate and of the Serenissima was dramatic. Both were the two major engines of the trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

Three important channels were the fundamental routes of the trade between the East and Europe:

- The traditional Silk Road connecting Xian with the Black Sea (with the important trading post of Caffa, controlled by Genoa) and the northern regions of the Middle-East and the Levantine ports
- The Persian Gulf Route: Bassora, Tigris/Euphrates, desertic transfer to Levantine ports
- The Red Sea Route: Suez, Nile, Alexandria

dian Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 40.

8 Frederic C. Lane, «Pepper prices before Da Gama», *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 28, No. 4, December 1968, pp. 590-597.

9 Frederic C. Lane, «The Mediterranean Spice Trade: Its Revival in the Sixteenth Century», *American Historical Review*, 45, 1940, pp. 581-597.

In the eastern Mediterranean ports galleys from Venice (mainly), Genoa, Marseille, Barcelona and from the Maghreb area loaded all these oriental goods to be carried to Southern and Northern Europe and to the big North-Western Africa regions...with a very lucrative business for all merchants...and for the states cashing transit taxes.

The profitable caravans' business

It is necessary to mention the painful, very risky but highly profitable business of the trade-carrying of all these goods on the back of Bactrian camels (two humps). These animals can transport up to 250 kilos of goods at a speed of 4 km/h for more than 40 km/day ...maybe more, but human beings can't afford a longer distance because they need a minimum five liters of water/day and frequent rests, while camels can live more than a week without water and food. Very few camels (one hump) were used by caravans because they can carry only 150 kilos and a camel driver was in charge of 18 animals; so camels had higher operating cost than the cost of Bactrian ones. The *khabir* was the leader of the caravan with a charismatic power justified by his long experience and deep knowledge of the crossed regions. A caravan was formed by 500-2000 animals, some of them carrying water, food, belongings, weapons and tents for the camel-drivers. The transport capacity was of 100-400 metric tons, with some exceptional caravans composed by 10 000 animals and a transport capacity up to two thousand tons.¹⁰

A sudden and dramatic crisis hit Venice, Mamluk Sultanate and all the Middle East

As soon as Portuguese merchants started to ship to Lisbon spices and other Far Eastern goods coming from the Indian basin and the countries east of Malacca, a sharp fall of supply and even scarcity of these goods was reported in the Eastern Mediterranean ports (specifically in Alexandria and Levantine ports). This very severe and dramatic conjuncture had a huge negative impact on local merchants, on transit traders, on fiscal revenues of Venice and Cairo and on all the prices. On the 5th of December 1502, Venice decided to create the *Giunta alle Spezierie*, a

¹⁰ Alessandro Giraudo, *Matières Premières: géopolitique, économie, histoire et anecdotes*, Versailles, VA Editions, 2024, pp. 130-132.

body with the mission to inform and help the *Consiglio dei Dieci* that had to take special measures to reverse the extremely delicate situation for the Rialto market and for the financial budget of the Republic.

Few weeks later, the Portuguese king gave an order to Da Gama to create a permanent military fleet (a real navy) in the Indian Ocean with a precise function: to stop the navigation of the Egyptian commercial fleet in the region and to sabotage the Arab and Indian traders' activities.¹¹

The first decision of the *Giunta* was to send an envoy to Egypt, Benedetto Sanudo, to attract the Sultan's attention about the problems created by the Portuguese merchants and to invite him to get in touch with the Indian Princes to try to block the purchases of spices by the Lisbon merchants and to put a break to these sharp increases of the prices of the spices in order to let the Venetian traders to remain competitive in Europe. The ambassador had some colloquial meetings (May 1503) with the Sultan, he got several words of sympathy and friendship but no effective decisions.

Venice prepared the project to dig the Suez Canal

After the peace signed with the Ottomans in 1503, Venice started to think of a pharaonic project: the building of the "Suez Canal"! In an official document of the Council of Ten it is written: "it is possible to dig a canal from the Red Sea to the two Bitter Lakes and from there to a branch of the Nile to reach Alexandria. Two big fortresses must be built at the beginning and at the end of the canal to protect the navigation."¹²

It would have been possible to build this structure because the Venetian (civil and military) engineers had an efficient and rich experience in the construction of big artificial canals and in rivers deviation. Furthermore, the two seas are at the same level. In 1312, the Venetian geographer Marino Sanudo Torsello wrote that the two seas are not at the same level and any structure linking them would have terrible flooding effects on the entire Egypt; this catastrophic hypothesis

11 Alessandro Giraud, *Quand le fer coûtait plus cher que l'or*, Paris, Fayard, 2015, pp. 171-174.

12 « *Far una chava dal Mar Rosso che mettesse a drectura in questo mar de qua, come altre volte etiam fo rasonado de far: la qual chava se potria assegurar al una et l'altra bocha cum do forteze per modo che altri non potrian entrar ne ussir, salvo quelli volesseno el Signor Soldan...».*

was largely abandoned. Venice was ready to finance the total amount of the investment and the canal would favor the transit of military ships of the Venice's and Mamluks' navies.

On the 5th of February 1504, three Venetian galleys berthed in Venice with no spices on board; they did not find any spices in Alexandria to load; this news sparked some panic on the Rialto market. On the 9th of March, the *Giunta* decided to send to Lisbon and to Cairo two men (not ambassadors, but senior merchants, fluent in the local language) with a lot of experience and knowledge of the two regions, able to carry on a very secret negotiation without a risk of damaging the Venice's image, in case of a negative result. Leonardo da Ca' Masser was sent to Portugal with the target to collect the maximum of details on the Portuguese spices trading system (price formation, negotiations with suppliers, shipping problems). Francesco Teldi, a well know precious metals merchant, was chosen for the mission to Cairo but he had to be replaced because he fell dangerously ill. Bernardino Giova, another merchant, replaced him. He had to propose to the Sultan the Suez Canal project and invite him to more actions against the Portuguese merchants. On the 24th the *Consiglio dei Dieci* prepared the text of the mission (still with name of Teldi). But the order to talk about the project was written off when the letter was delivered to Giova. The text is in the Archivio di Stato of Venice.¹³

Why this important U-turn, after a very violent political debate among the members of the *Consiglio*? The prudent low profile was chosen with fears to wake up an aggressive sentiment against the Serenissima "accused" of trying to modify dramatically the political equilibria in the world. Giova had an insignificant success in Cairo, while the Portuguese fleet was able to impose a very effective blockade in the Indian and Arabic peninsula ports against Egyptian commercial vessels.

The Portuguese strategy

After the first success of the opening of the route Calicut-Lisbon, the Portuguese met a strong opposition of Muslim merchant elites in the western coast of India, who incited attacks against Portuguese *feitorias*, ships, and agents; sabo-

13 Maria Pia Pedani, *Venezia e Suez 1505-2012*, mostra "Venezia e l'Egitto". Venezia, Palazzo Ducale 1 ottobre 2011–22 gennaio 2012, Porto di Venezia, 2012.

taged Portuguese diplomatic efforts; and led the massacre of the Portuguese in Calicut in 1500.¹⁴ Thus, the Portuguese signed an alliance with a sworn enemy of Calicut instead, the Raja of Cochin, who invited them to establish headquarters. The Zamorin of Calicut invaded Cochin in response, but the Portuguese were able to devastate the lands and cripple the trade of Calicut, then the main exporter of spices back to Europe, through the Red Sea. In December 1504, the Portuguese destroyed the Zamorin's yearly merchant fleet, bound for Egypt and loaded with spices.¹⁵

When King Manuel I of Portugal was informed of these developments, he decided to appoint Dom Francisco de Almeida as the First Viceroy of India with expressed orders not just limited to safeguarding Portuguese *feitorias*, but also to curb hostile Muslim navigation. Dom Francisco departed from Lisbon in March 1505 with twenty ships and his 20-year-old son, Dom Lourenço, who was himself nominated *capitão-mor do mar da Índia* or captain-major of the sea of India.¹⁶

The Mamluks' strategy

The Mamluk economy suffered a dramatic setback with a sharp fall of all trading activities and the dangerous drop of the fiscal revenues collected with the taxes on transit goods. The Sultan forced his ambassadors in Rome, France, Spain and even in Portugal to call for the suspension of the traffic via the Cape and menaced, even, to close the Saint Sepulcher Basilica to Christian pilgrims. The sultan Qânsûh al-Ghawrî called for help from Ottomans; Bayezid II (1481-1512) sent a decent volume of raw materials to build a fleet in the Red Sea. Traditionally, the Mamluks had a modest army penalized by a poor technology (but with a strong emphasis on the cavalry) and a quasi-inexistent navy.¹⁷

The Sultan took the decision to increase the fiscal pressure on the spices exported mainly to Venice to augment the revenues of the budget that was mobilized

14 Saturnino Monteiro, *Portuguese Sea Battles. Volume I – The First World Sea Power*, Lisbon, SM Publ., 2011, pp. 153-155.

15 Monteiro, *ibidem*, pp. 200-206.

16 José Pissarra, «Chaul e Diu 1508 e 1509. O Domínio do Índico», *Tribuna da História*, Lisbon, 2002, p. 25.

17 David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: Challenge to a Medieval Society*, London, Routledge, 1956, ch. 7-8.

to finance the new navy. He had several contacts with the Zamorin and the city of Calicut, whose walls were fortified by two unknown Italian military engineers.

The serious problem for the Mamluk naval engineers was to find all the timber to build – rapidly – the ships in a region where the good quality timber is only available in the Chouf Lebanese mountains and in the Anatolian Taurus forests. The insufficient supply of timber has been a permanent problem for all empires of the region, from Mesopotamian ones to the pharaonic Egypt, from Califates to the Ottoman empire. To protect their forests, the Ottomans created special janissary forest units in charge of fighting against the tree cutting by Ottoman farmers and by enemies' commando operations (tree cutting and fires). Venice and Ottoman Empire were used to organize – during the tree hundred years war – reciprocal commando operations meant to destroy the trees, to steel them and set ablaze forests to sabotage the timber supply to the enemy. All civilizations of the M/E area had to import large volumes of timber from the Black Sea; the same decision was taken by the Sultan.¹⁸

Timber was essential for the construction of civil and military buildings and boats; furthermore, it was fundamental to get the charcoal used to produce cannons (bronze and iron), weapons and civil instruments. Timber was a strategic raw material! A lot of timber came from the northern regions of Anatolia, from Caucasus, Euxine forests and from Crimea.

The very efficient Venetian intelligence

The doge and the *Consiglio dei Dieci* got very rapidly the information about the building of the Mamluk navy. At that time, Venice had the best intelligence service in Europe (with highly professional men in charge of the cypher...that a lot of nation tried to hire). The “omnipresent” secret police of Venice employed several courtesans (good looking, intelligent, multilingual) to “softly debrief”, during a meal or in the bed, all berthing boats captains and pilots and several important visitors (ambassadors, diplomats, high ranking religious men of the *Curia*). The target was to collect the latest news, rumors, details of special or catastrophic events, weather conditions and crops progress. In addition, all Venetian

18 Lise Hammestad, *Timber as a Trade Resource of the Black Sea*, online in Antikmuseet.au.dk., pp. 85-97.

diplomats (ambassadors, *oratori*, consuls) and a lot of travelling merchants and commercial agents (located in major trading places and ports) were informing the police with any kind of news or rumors that could have an impact on the Republic.¹⁹

Venice jumped on the Mamluks' project of the fleet. It proposed to the Sultan to build six powerful galleasses. Venetian navy engineers, *maestri d'ascia* and several *arsenalotti* (the very highly professional workers of the *Arsenale*) were sent to Alexandria to build the vessels. All these people were "accompanied" by several cooks in charge of the preparation of the meals and... a "sufficient" number of *donne da lume* for an "horizontal comfort". This was a strong recommendation proposed by the secret police who wanted to avoid any possible "pillow leak" on the mission and on the naval know-how of the *Arsenale*, that at that time was the most advanced shipyard of the world.

The *arsenalotti* brought some heavy cannons manned by Venetian artillery gunners, all professional and technical instruments with them, some special pieces of timber and metal but had to find locally the timber, mainly purchased in the Black Sea. They knew the different nature of the Red Sea from the Mediterranean (higher salinity, more aggressive flora and fauna attacking the hull of the ship). They utilized local materials to caulk all vessels. All the boats were built in Alexandria, tested in the Mediterranean Sea, disassembled, all the pieces were transported to Suez, re-assembled and joined the Sultan's navy. The galleasses could mount cannons fore and aft, but not along the gunwales because the guns would interfere with the rowers. These cannons were very powerful if compared to the light Mamluks' artillery and the Venetian gunners exercised themselves in Alexandria harbour.

The three targets of the Sultan's navy

According to Ibn Iyâs, the well-informed court chronicler, the fleet, composed by twelve vessels, had three different targets: to attack the Portuguese navy, to take the control of the emirate of Yambu (Western Saudi Arabia) and to stop the revolt of the Arab tribe of Banû Lâm (Egyptian province of Kark).

¹⁹ Paolo Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia. Spionaggio e controspionaggio ai tempi della Serenissima*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2016.

The expedition troops were of Maghreb origin (large majority) with some black slaves (equipped with fire weapons) and a big number of Turkish, Nubian and Ethiopian mercenaries as well as Venetian gunners. Very few soldiers were Mamluk. The sultanate discovered the insufficient preparation of its army (number of the troops, poor quality, insufficient equipment with a large share of the artillery that had to be imported). Masons and carpenters were on board of the ships; they had to repair the walls of Jeddah. All these details were given by some letters written by the Venetian consul Alvise Secondino.

The fleet sailed early 1506, according to several letters written by Venetian merchants and to diplomatic dispatches. It berthed at Jeddah disembarking all the workers and it sailed for the island of Karamân (near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait) where it spent four months waiting for the favorable monsoon (South-West winds). Finally, on the 20th of September, the fleet dropped the anchor at Diu (N/W in India) where it found 34 vessels of the Indian fleet.²⁰

A Pyrrhus victory?

The fleet was composed by six round ships and six great galleys called galleasses; 1500 combatants were on board, as well as the ambassador of the Zamorin ruler of Calicut, Mayimama Mārakkār.²¹ The fleet had to be joined by Malik Ayyaz, a former Russian slave, who was in the service of the Sultan Mahmud Begada of Gujarat Sultanate. But Ayyaz was not very in favor of fighting against a powerful Portuguese navy; so, he decided to only cautiously support Hussain.²² The fleet was also planning to join with the Zamorin of Calicut, and then to raid and destroy all the Portuguese possessions on the Indian coast, but the Zamorin, who was expecting the Mamluk fleet in 1507 had already left.²³

The Portuguese, under Lourenço de Almeida, son of the Viceroy Francisco de Almeida, were inferior in number with only a light force and located in the nearby harbour of Chaul. The rest of the fleet had sailed north to protect shipping and to fight the very active piracy. The Mamluks sailed into Chaul and fought for two

20 Several details reported by Sanudo in his *Diarii*.

21 Bailey Wallys Diffie, *Foundations of the Portuguese empire, 1415–1580* Oxford, OPU, 1978, pp. 234 ss.

22 José Pissarra, *Chaul e Diu 1508 e 1509*, *cit.*, pp. 32–33.

23 Peter Patfield, *Tides of Empires: 1481–1654*, New York, Routledge, 1979, pp. 62 ss.

days with very poor results, being unable to board the Portuguese ships. Finally, Malik Ayaz sailed in with his own galleys. The Portuguese had to retreat, and Almeida's ship was sunk at the entrance of Chaul harbour with Almeida aboard. Amir Hussain returned to the port of Diu, but from that point abandoned any further initiative on the Indian coast, his ships becoming derelict. Hussain had lost between 600 and 700 out of a total of 800 soldiers; the remainder of his forces feared European weaponry. ²⁴News of the Portuguese defeat were welcomed in Cairo with three days of feasts. The news of the victory arrived in Venice in June through a letter of the consul in Alexandria, Marin da Molin, dated of the 20th of March. He informed Venice that "the Soldan had a certain victory against the Portuguese".²⁵

Venice sent immediately three galleys to Alexandria and other three to Levantine ports. At the end of the month of August a dispatch of the consul in Damas arrived in Venice reporting the arrival in Egypt (port of al-Tûr, south of Sinai) of about 30 vessels from India, fully loaded with spices. This news had a very positive impact on the Venetian merchants.

De Almeida vs de Albuquerque and the strategic battle of Diu

Dom Francisco de Almeida was in Cochin when he learnt the news of his son's death; he was heart-stricken and promised to revenge his son. Clearly the presence of a Mamluk-Indian fleet in the region represented a serious menace for the Portuguese projects. De Almeida marshalled all vessels before the September monsoon to prepare a response to the enemy.

Before they could depart though, on the 6th of December 1508, de Albuquerque arrived in Cannanore from the Persian Gulf with orders from the King of Portugal to replace de Almeida as governor with a precise mission: to prevent Muslim navigation from entering or leaving the Red Sea. De Almeida refused to allow his appointed successor to take office. The viceroy was in official rebellion against royal authority and ruled Portuguese India for another year as such. He ordered the Portuguese fleet to sail to Diu on the 9th of December 1508. The battle

²⁴ Roger Crowley, *Conquerors: How Portugal seized the Indian Ocean and forged the First Global Empire*, New York, Random, 2015, ch. 13.

²⁵ «Il soldan à 'uto certa vitoria contro portogalesi verso Coloquut» (Sanudo, VII, p.542).

of Diu was fought only on the 3rd of February 1509. On one side the Portuguese fleet with 18 vessels, 800 Portuguese soldiers and 400 Indian troops. On the other the ships of the Mamluk Sultanate, Gujarat Sultanate and of the Kingdom of Marakkar. The battle ended with a large victory of the Portuguese and a terrible defeat of the Mamluk coalition with a serious loss of ships and huge number of casualties. Probably, the Portuguese gunners inaugurated a new technique of shooting the enemy's boats under the flotation level; a lot of vessels sank.

The battle was strategic and fundamental because it put an end to the Egyptian control of the west Indian ocean region and opened the doors to the conquer of the basin to the Portuguese empire. The battle of Diu is considered one of the most important battles in history. It marked the beginning of Western European dominance in the Indian Ocean. The author William Weir in his book *50 Battles That Changed the World*, ranks this battle as the 6th most important in history, after the Battle of Marathon, the Nika Rebellion, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Battle of Arbela (Gaugamela) and the Battle of Hattin.²⁶ He wrote: «When the 15th century began, Islam seemed about ready to dominate the world. That prospect sank in the Indian Ocean off Diu.²⁷ The historian Rainer Daehnhardt says that this battle is compared only to the Battles of Lepanto and Trafalgar in terms of importance and legacy.²⁸ And Michael Adas wrote this battle “established European Naval superiority in the Indian Ocean for centuries to come”.²⁹

Portuguese expansion and fall of Mamluk Sultanate

After the battle, the Kingdom of Portugal rapidly captured the key port of Goa. Indian princes called Cairo for help, as indicated Ibn Iyas, and then Mamluks sent several diplomatic messages to Venice. The Sultan decided to build a new fleet. The Venetian intelligence reported numerous Mamluk diplomats and merchants were very active in all Europe trying to buy timber, iron, bronze, Greek pitch,

26 William Weir, *50 Battles That Changed the World: The Conflicts That Most Influenced the Course of History*, ReadHowYouWant, March 30, 2009.

27 Weir, *ibidem*, April 3, 2009. Weir, *ibidem*, April 3, 2009.

28 Rainer Daehnhardt, *Homens, Espadas e Tomates*, Portugal, Zefiro Edições, Actividades Culturais, Unipessoal Lda, 2005, p. 34.

29 Michael Adas, *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, , 1993, Ch. 3-41.

ropes and cords and a lot of firearms and heavy guns. Venice got some news on a big “coup” done by the Knights of St. John of Rhodes; on the 20th of August 1510, they seized all the all timber and goods loaded on a convoy (22 boats) in the port of Ayas (Cilicia).³⁰ Cairo asked, again, Venice for some urgent help and the Venetian Ambassador Domenico Trevisan was sent to Egypt to discuss the assistance (October 1511). But all the operations to prepare a new fleet suffered several delays. In the meantime, the Portuguese realized new conquests like the island of Kamarân (1513), the strategic island at the beginning of the Red Sea. Two years later the Ottomans decided to stop any help because the Mamluks refused to furnish wheat to the Ottoman empire fighting against the Safavids. Finally, in August 1516, the new fleet sailed with more than 6000 men, well equipped with modern cannons. Just a couple of months later the fleet was hit in the ocean by a powerful monsoon storm; it was partially destroyed; at the same moment the Ottomans attacked the Mamluks. The final battle of Ridaniya, on 22nd. of January 1517, put an end to a war that was a conflict between the elegant and ceremonial Mamluk cavalry and a strong and modern artillery supporting the infantry of the Ottoman army. It was the end of the Mamluk Sultanate.³¹

The Portuguese Lake and the crisis of a thalassocracy

The Portuguese continued to expand their possessions in the Indian Ocean: Ceylon, Malacca, Bom-Baim (Bombay) and Ormuz. The Indian Ocean became a *Portuguese lake* with progressive conquests realized by de Albuquerque and the opening of several trading posts up to Macao. Portuguese merchants found an intelligent system to finance the trade in the Ocean: they were exporting German and Spanish copper and gold from West Africa and from Sofala (Mozambique) to Southern Persian to obtain silver (the “larins”, from the silver mine of Lars): the white metal was strongly demanded by a thirsty Indian basin, recording a permanent silver deficit.³² But after a first impressive development and a bright success, favored by the introduction of the “cartaz” system to control the commercial business in the Indian ocean, the Portuguese empire entered a long-lasting classic

30 Giraud, *Quand le fer*, cit, p. 174.

31 André Clot, *L’Egypte des Mamelouks: 1250-1517. L’empire des esclaves*, Paris, Tempus-Perrin, 2009, pp. 410-450.

32 Alessandro Giraud, *Or, argent et folies des grandeurs*, Paris, Economica, 2017, ch. 18.

thalassocracy crisis with all trading profitable activities penalized by a dusty and baroque behavior of the government administration.³³ Venice entered a shining golden decadence with the transfer of a lot of capitals from the mercantile-shiping sector to the agricultural and proto-industry area on the western regions of the Serenissima. The Mamluk Sultanate suffered a rapid loss of power and Egypt became a strategic piece of the Ottoman empire.

The hundred years pepper war between Venice and Lisbon

In 1503, Lisbon proposed to Venice to handle the pepper monopoly, but the Serenissima refused because it thought the crisis was very conjunctural and temporary.³⁴ In 1515, the scarcity of pepper in Venice forced several local merchants to buy the spice in Lisbon. And in 1527 Venice proposed to Lisbon to pay to get the monopoly of the pepper distribution in Europe. After a negative reply, Venice started a very efficient “marketing campaign” against the image of the “Portuguese” pepper accused of fundamental losses of organoleptic qualities after the long oceanic voyage in the holds of the carracks. At the same moment Venetian merchants started to ship to the Levantine ports high quality artefacts and good quality metals, extracted in the European mines, to attract the offer of several kind of spices.³⁵ After the Lepanto battle (1571), in 1575 Lisbon proposed the monopoly to Venice that refused it. At the same moment Lisbon was forced to declare bankrupt for its finances with a very negative impact on the German merchants-bankers. The Medici of Florence were able to recuperate the monopoly for two years (1576-1578), but with a very moderate benefit. After the transfer of the Portuguese power to the Spanish Empire (1580-1640), in 1585 Philip II offered, again, to Venice the monopoly, but he got a negative response. Madrid made the same proposal to merchants of Milan, Genoa and Florence, with no success. Spain decided to split the monopoly in two contracts: the distribution of the pepper in all Europe and the shipment of the pepper from Indian ports to Europe (30 000 tons/year for a period of six years). The latter was signed by a group of

33 Charles River, *The Dramatic Rise and Fall of the Portuguese Empire: The History and Legacy of Portugal's Mercantile Empire across the World*, London, I.P. 2024, ch.7.

34 Gino Luzzatto, *Storia economica di Venezia, dal XI al XVI secoli*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1995, p. 241.

35 Alessandro Giraudo, *Histoires extraordinaires des Matières Premières*, Paris, Bourin, 2017, pp. 93-96.

bankers: the powerful Fugger house, the Welser family, the banker Rovalesca of Milan, the merchant Giraldo of Limburg (important copper trader), the Spanish merchants Francisco and Pedro Malvenda and the Portuguese merchants Andreas and Tomas Ximenes. The European contract was signed by the Welser, some small European merchants and the Fugger that sold it back to the Portuguese merchants Evora³⁶. At that time the “Venetian” pepper was trading at a premium over the price of the Portuguese pepper (lower quality) and often some pepper was carried by caracks strait to Venice. But the large availability of the pepper and of other spices had a negative impact on the prices that lost their shining. Other raw materials (indigo, red of cochineal, black of Campeche, quinine), gold and silver replaced the pepper as a conflict commodity and attracter the privateers’ activity mainly in the Caribbean basin, where Dutch, English and French privateers and pirates fought a very special war against the Spanish galleons carrying to Sevilla precious metals, spices and dying products³⁷ ... Commodities and raw materials were and they still are a “casus belli” and financial components for wars and conflicts in all history³⁸.

Note: *The five essential functions of spices*

Spices had five fundamental functions:

- as aphrodisiacs, reputedly powerful ;
- as incredible imaginary vector of dreams and reality of distant locations ;
- as a testimony of wealth; in several cases prices of pepper and of gold were the same; pepper was a classic gift offered to kings... in 408 a. C., to avoid the plundering, Rome offered to Alaric 5000 pounds of gold, 30 000 pounds of silver, 3000 pounds of pepper, 3000 pieces of purple fabric, 4000 coats of silk.
- increasing and enhancing the taste of the food; meat and fish were kept in salt to be conserved and were washed before the consumption, with a big loss of the taste. Very often, salted cod - coming from North Atlantic regions - was transported by the barges

36 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen au temps de Philippe II*, ch. «Les économies : commerce et transport», Paris, Livre de poche, 1993, pp. 181-270.

37 Timothy R. Walton, *The Spanish Treasure Fleets*, Warszawa, Pineapple Press Inc, 1994, pp. 121, 154-155.

38 Giraud, A. *Matières premières: géopolitique*, ibidem, pp. 200-214.

in the water of rivers and canals to the interior of the European continent. It was the case of well documented transport of cod on the Garonne-Lot rivers up to the mountains of Alvernia to feed peasants and coal miners. All the pieces of salted cod were kept in special hemp bags floating in the water. Bags were attached to the stern of the barge that was hauled by animals or even by people. The fish was cooked with a lot of spices and became a high quality dish of the local cuisine (“estofinado”).

essential ingredient to treat illnesses; during several centuries, healers, monks (cultivating medicinal herbs in one of the four sections of the cloister garden, *hortus simplicium*) and apothecaries utilized herbs and spices to treat sick people. A short list of examples:

Black pepper: it enhances the absorption of curcumin from turmeric and can help clear nasal congestion. Origin: India, Indochina, Sri Lanka;

Ginger: it can reduce inflammation and soothe the throat. Origin: India, China, Indonesia;

Turmeric/curcuma: it contains curcumin, which has anti-inflammatory effects. Production: Indonesia, China, India;

Cardamon: it helps to control bad breath and digestive disorder. A whole cardamom chewed is good for coping with diabetes. Production: India, Guatemala;

Cinnamon: it supports natural production of insulin and reduces blood cholesterol. Production: China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Clove: Clove oil is beneficial for coping with toothache and sore gums. It is also a beneficial remedy for chest pains, fever, digestive problems, cough and cold. Production: Indonesia, India

Coriander: It can be used externally on aching joints and rheumatism. It is also good for coping with sore throat, allergies, digestion problems, hay fever etc. Production: China, India, and Bangladesh

Cumin: it is a good source of iron and keeps the immune system healthy. Water boiled with cumin seeds is good for coping with dysentery. Production: Iran, India,

Ginger: it helps to avoid digestive problems. It is beneficial for coping with coughs and colds. Production: India, China, Nepal

Nutmeg: it is very efficient against general pain and diarrhea. Production: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Philippines. During the third quarter of XVII century, Netherland and England fought two wars to take the control of the island of Run (Indonesia) that was kept by the Dutch against the cession of New Amsterdam (Manhattan) that became New York

Quinine: strong anti-fever and efficient treatment against malaria. Production: Peru



Carle Vanloo (1737 / 1747), *Le Voeu de Louis XIII au siège de la Rochelle en 1628*, esquisse du tableau du Maître-autel de l'église de Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris, P1912, CC0 Paris Musées / Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris,

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