

Emilio Sola Castaño,

*Uchalí: el Calabrés Tiñoso, o el mito del corsario muladí en la frontera,*

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Due to the dearth of personal narratives and the lack of printing press in the Ottoman Empire, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the lives of Ottoman grandees. Emilio Sola's *Uchalí* is extremely valuable in this regard, because it provides minute details on the life of enigmatic Ottoman Grand Admiral, Uluc Ali, a.k.a. Dionisio Galea, a Calabrian renegade whose unfortunate capture by corsairs when he was a young boy paved the way for an exceptional success story in Mediterranean borderlands. Quickly rising through corsair ranks, this son of a poor fisherman would first be Governor-General of Tripolitania, then of Algeria, reaching the zenith of Ottoman naval establishment with his appointment as the *Kapudan Paşa* in 1572.

A product of the author's life-long engagement with testimonies from borderlands (not only those of the Mediterranean, but also those of the Far East), the book is the result of an extensive archival research in Simancas, Venice, Florence and Naples. Sola's meticulous handling of documentation in such geographically dispersed archives is remarkable. He does not merely list the data gathered from these sources. By closely following the editorial style in numerous spy reports, merchant letters and official correspondence at his disposal, he reproduces the language of the time, thus creating in the end a work of as much literature as history. This reproduction makes a very enjoyable read; however, extracting facts from his book proves extremely difficult. His choice to vaguely cite documents altogether at the end of each subchapter, rather than using footnotes for each fact mentioned in the text, makes it even harder to clarify the imprecise points in his text, to deal with the ambiguities that are the result of his literary style.

Moreover, although his work includes detailed information on Uluc Ali, this book is not a biography *sensu stricto*. It deals with the Calabrian corsair through the letters and testimonies of a variety of intermediaries who were straddling cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries and through official correspondence that rely on the testimonies of these intermediaries. Based on these intermediaries' reports, Sola could not help delve into the activities of each of these go-betweens, whom he labelled in his previous work as "*los que van y vienen*," those who come

and go, and follow their itineraries along the Mediterranean littoral. The end product is a panoramic sketch of sixteenth-century Mediterranean borderlands with all their chaotic cosmopolitanism which defies every categorization that the authorities of the era established, and following them, contemporary historians are inclined to take for granted.

The book is something of a culmination of Sola's life-long research on Mediterranean go-betweens. In his comprehensive narrative, one finds spies gathering information, saboteurs trying to torch enemy arsenals, agents undertaking secret negotiations between renegade Ottoman pashas and the Habsburg government, corsairs ravaging enemy coasts, merchants tying imperial capitals through trade and finance, ransom agents negotiating the liberation of prisoners-of-war, slaves plotting for their freedom, mercenaries frequenting Mediterranean ports for lucrative contracts, turncoats working for several masters, exiles looking for a possibility to return, rebels seeking military help in foreign capitals, engineers peeping at enemy fortifications, moles compromising state secrets, couriers selling official letters entrusted to them, and pilgrims and clerics pursuing extracurricular missions of diplomacy and espionage.

Most importantly, one finds several renegades. By closely studying their testimonies, Sola aptly demonstrates these converts' vacillation between their past and present, their ongoing connections with their families, friends and compatriots; he shows how these *homines æconomici* used such connections in order to further their interests. I believe his work will gain further meaning if read within the theoretical framework put forth in Natalie Rothman's *Brokering Empire* (Ithaca, 2011). Rothman's argument that such "trans-imperial subjects" had a vested interest in consolidating boundaries, articulating imperial categories of difference, and refashioning themselves as indispensable intermediaries between empires is extremely relevant with the data contained in the book.

While relying on handwritten reports on the Ottoman Empire, *avvisi*, Sola does not leave any detail out; he rather gives us a complete picture of what was on the news market about the Ottomans in Europe at the time. This comprehensive approach to what he termed *vox-pop* (rumors) led him to deal with a wide range of issues such as frontier negotiations between the Ottomans and the Venetians, random corsair raids in the Mediterranean, fire, plague epidemic or grain shortage in Istanbul, etc. Moreover, his reliance on diplomatic correspondence, mainly of the Venetian baili in Istanbul, allowed him to reconstruct interesting diplomatic encounters in sixteenth-century Ottoman capital. Long descriptions of diplomatic

quarrels and ceremonies, myriad diplomatic problems arising from corsair raids, trade-related conflicts between the baili and the Jewish community in Istanbul and several other issues are covered in detail even though most of the time these are only tangentially connected to the main plot.

In spite of its literary value and the original style, the book is not easy to read. It has a confusing language and a complex syntax that often switch between Spanish and Italian while quoting a primary source. Moreover, there are too many details for a non-specialist. Sola includes every bit of information he lays his hands on; and he does this justly because all this information is highly valuable and original for students of sixteenth-century Mediterranean. However, it makes the text hard to read from cover to cover.

In an effort to reconstruct what he calls *literatura de avisos* (or *literatura de la frontera*), Sola reproduces the language of the time through the pen of Mediterranean go-betweens. It is sort of a pastime for him to transcribe long documents in full, always in Spanish, sometimes translated from French or some variant of Italian. Apart from including full-length documents in this work, he has moreover published them on his website [archivodelafrontera.com](http://archivodelafrontera.com), a treasure trove of primary sources where researchers can find hundreds of similar archival documents. However, it should be noted that Sola has an unorthodox method of reproducing these documents. Instead of transcribing them as a normal text, he divides them into verses, making each unity of meaning, each sub-sentence that refers to a specific data, a separate verse. This could at first be a little bit confusing, but once one gets used to it, it proves extremely useful in quickly deciphering the meaning of the text. Moreover, he adds headlines on the side informing the reader of what comes next in the text.

Sola's work is a *magnum opus* not only because it is one of the few detailed biographies of an Ottoman pasha. Even though the biographical aspect of the book merits applause, I believe its strength lies rather in that it allows us a glimpse through the daily realities of Mediterranean borderlands. It moreover carefully scrutinizes the vernacular diplomacy that took place at the hands of small-scale go-betweens as well as Mediterranean-wide epistolary networks and flows of information in sixteenth-century Mediterranean. Finally, it shows us the *Zeitgeist* of sixteenth-century Mediterranean borderlands where conflict is coupled with cooperation, enmity with amity, religious fervor with careful calculation of material interests, and most importantly, rhetoric with reality.

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