

LIFE&WELLBEING HISTORY



The sea battle between a convoy of Turkish ships carrying a number of pilgrims bound for Mecca, attacked by the Knights Hospitaller of Malta during the action of September 28, 1644. Engraving by Sébastien Beaulieu de Pontault (1612-1674) titled *Combat Naval 1645* [sic], Paris, c.1670. JOSEPH SCHIRO COLLECTION

THE HISTORY
Of the THREE late famous
IMPOSTORS,
Padre Ottomano,
viz. Mahomed Bei, and
Sabatai Sevi.
The One, pretended Son and Heir
to the late Grand Signior;
The Other, a Prince of the Ottoman Family,
but in truth, a Valachian Counterfeit.
And the Last,
The Suppos'd **MESSIAH** of the Jews,
in the Year of the true Messiah, 1666.
With a brief Account of the Grand, and Occasion
of the present war between the
TURK and the **VENETIAN**.
Together with the Cause of the final
Extirpation, Destruction, and Exile
of the **J E W S** out of the
EMPIRE of **PERSIA**.
In the **S A F O T**,
Printed for Henry Herringman at the Sign
of the Anchor in the Lower-Walk of
the New-Exchange, 1669.

One of the publications published in 1669 where the author claims that Padre Ottomano was an impostor.



Fr Osman wearing the habit of the Dominican Order. Engraving by Baltazar Moncornet, signed Baltazar Moncornet exc. [udit] cum priv. regis. ALBERT GANADO COLLECTION



Portrait of the young Osman. Engraving by Baltazar Moncornet (1600-1668). In 1660, he engraved a portrait of Grand Master Martin de Redin. ALBERT GANADO COLLECTION

The Dominican Father Osman in Malta. An Ottoman prince?



Among the precious memorabilia exhibited from July to October last year in the exhibition Valletta and the Dominicans: A Common Journey at the Dominican priory in Valletta, there was a simple chalice that reveals a unique and incredible story not widely known beyond the Dominican community.

It served a Catholic Ottoman prince to celebrate Holy Mass at the Church of Porto Salvo (Safe Haven) as it was then known. It happened in the 17th century when the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of the Order of St John were still deadly enemies, although not as acrimonious as it was in the previous century.

Notwithstanding the enormous losses at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, the legend of the invincibility of the Ottomans at sea still reigned supreme among the so-called infidels. However, slowly but surely, circumstances in the Mediterranean started changing with the dramatic increase in commerce between the Christian and the Muslim worlds. Indeed, while still

marauding the sea during the Corso, the galleys of the Order of St John avoided to capture ships belonging to the Ottoman Sultan.

The unexpected once occurred in 1644, a memorable year in the history of the Order's fleet. On August 27 of that year, six galleys of the Hospitallers set sail from the Malta's harbour towards the east under the command of the Captain General Fra Gabriel de Chambres Boisbaudran.

After a whole month of a useless search, the galleys were returning to base, but on the morning of September 28, 70 miles off Rhodes, they sighted some vessels leaving Constantinople for Alexandria. Little knowing what was in store, the knights swiftly set upon the enemy vessels, capturing the two nearest to them.

Suddenly, the captains of three galleys, San Lorenzo, commanded by Fra Nicolò Cottoner, the Santa Maria and the Vittoria, were staring excitedly at a huge ship they had never seen before, the galleon of the Sultan's harem. The knights were completely unaware that two august personages were on that huge ship, namely, the beautiful Zafira, the Sultan's favourite, and her two-year-old son Osman, born on January 2, 1642, son of Sultan Ibrahim I. She was travelling on a holy pilgrimage to Mecca with her numerous retinue and slaves.

Three galleys sprang to the attack of the large vessel and a fierce battle

ensued, but the decks of the galleon were so high that the knights were unsuccessful to force a passage on board, suffering heavy casualties. It was only when the Capitana and the other two galleys joined the fray that about 400 knights were fighting on board the galleon.

At the end of a battle that lasted seven hours, the standard of the Order was flying on the mast. Nine hospitallers had lost their lives, with another 11 seriously wounded. Of the remaining soldiers and sailors, 116 were dead and over 251 seriously wounded. But it was the grandest prize ever.

The galleon was the largest vessel in the Ottoman fleet, known as the Gran Sultana, heavy with fabulous riches. It was stacked with merchandise worth 200,000 scudi,

"The knights were unaware that two august personages were Zafira, the Sultan's favourite, and her two-year-old son Osman, son of Sultan Ibrahim I"

carrying a treasure of precious jewels, gold and silver objects. In the hyperbolic words of the historian Bartolomeo dal Pozzo, the booty enriched half of Malta.

After having emptied the galleon of its extraordinary cargo and having taken 380 prisoners, the six galleys proceeded with their prize on the way to Malta. However, severe storms forced the ships to seek refuge in Crete and eventually the galleon was abandoned, becoming a wreck at Calabria, in the extreme southwest of Italy. It was only in February 1645 that the galleys reached Malta.

It was only some weeks afterwards that the presence of the royal personages became known. Grand Master Jean Paul de Lascaris (1636-1657) ordered their release and they were housed in the palace of Ignazio Ribera, a very rich merchant, familiar with the Turkish language.

In the meantime, Sultan Ibrahim, livid with anger and frustration at the unforeseen tragedy, was bent on terrible revenge against all those he could lay his hands upon. He vowed war against Malta and gave orders to build up a strong invading force. Breaking off the relations of neutrality with Venice, he attacked Crete, a Venetian dominion, for having hosted the Order's galleys, creating a long disastrous conflict that sealed the fate of Crete.

In view of this increased tension the Grand Master ordered immediate

preparations for the defence of the island. Besides, for reasons of safety and security, he decided to lodge Zafira and the child prince inside the Palace tower, heavily guarded.

As the alarm subsided following the start of the Cretan war, they were taken back to the house of the rich merchant under the constant protection of a company of soldiers and the surveillance of two prominent knights, Fra Tommaso de Hozes and Fra Dionisio de Pollastron Lailliere. All the while, the house of Ribera was besieged by a crowd of curious people. Consequently, it was decided that no one could visit the inmates without a written authorisation signed by two Grand Crosses.

The Grand Master treated them with due deference and royal magnificence. Their quarters were adorned with the tapestries retrieved from the galleon, rich clothes were restored to them, together with silver objects, and gifts given to them from time to time. They were served by the royal retinue of which Zafira was the master.

However, when her health started deteriorating from an unknown cause Lascaris placed at her disposal for a change of air his palace at Boschetto, Verdala Palace, where she was sent in the Order's carriages, accompanied by the pages of Lascaris himself. Both Lascaris and other knights, including Grand Crosses, paid her regular visits.

All these concerns served no purpose. She died after barely three months on January 6, 1645. If her burial place becomes known, exhuming her remains might establish the cause of death at so young an age.

What happened to baby Osman, the eldest son of Ibrahim, and successor to the throne? Various attempts at a huge ransom were refused and the Grand Master was attracted to Osman as if he were his son. When he started growing up, he was taken to participate at a dinner held by the Grand Master. When he refused to partake of any food and the reason was sought, he replied in his gentle infantile voice that he would not eat any food unless he was served on golden plates like His Eminence! Lascaris immediately complied.

At the time Zafira's ladies were ransomed, Osman was less than 13 years old and he became a solitary orphan. As he was not a Christian, he had not been baptised. The Grand Master decided to give him a proper education as he did not wish to violate his sentiments. Various options were discussed, including trusting him to the Jesuit College, but eventually he was sent to the Dominican priory in Valletta, where he was received with great pomp and reverence on November 17, 1654.

A saintly young Dominican monk, Fr Giuseppe Cafà, was entrusted with his education, assisted by another monk for the child's literary accomplishments. He was kind and obedient, with a sharp mind, keen to learn, but he shied away at the mention of religion. His ardent wish was to remain a follower of Muhammad.

The unexpected happened when he decided to become a Christian and expressed the wish to be taught the mysteries of the Faith. On January 6, 1656, he was taken to the Conventual Church, knelt at the feet of the Grand Prior (later Bishop of Malta), Fra Luca Bueno, and opted to be baptised with the name: Domenico di S. Tommaso. He received the sacrament of baptism on February 23 of that year at a religious

ceremony of extreme rejoicing never witnessed before.

The baptism was followed on August 4, 1658, by the sacrament of confirmation administered by the Bishop of Malta Michele Belaguer, while Fra Luca Bueno was his godfather. His life at the convent was so peaceful and welcoming that Osman decided to join the community.

Fra Luca and the Grand Priory of the Conventual Church were appointed to test his vocation. They confirmed his firm will and spirituality. Having completed the novitiate and obtained an apostolic brief and other essential papers, he was duly invested with the white habit of the Dominican Order on October 30, 1658 at the church of Our Lady of the Grotto of Rabat. A year later, Osman took the solemn vows of his profession.

Amid universal sadness, Osman, under his name of Fra Domenico di San Tommaso, left Malta towards the end of March 1660 to further his religious studies abroad. By the end of the year, after having spent some months in Naples, he reached Rome where he was received by Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667) with affectionate kindness.

His presence at Minerva College excited the curiosity of all Rome, from the high prelate to the lowest inhabitant. Although exalted by many privileges and favours, he spent a solitary life in his convent cell and very rarely appeared in public. He became known as the Ottoman Father.

However, in 1665, he visited Paris and was received by King Louis XIV accompanied by some French knights of the Order of St John. He made an appearance in Crete during the 1668 Ottoman siege of the capital city Candia, hoping to assist in turning the tide of war against the attacking forces. When it was agreed that there was no way for him to help, he went to Rome and lived once more as a recluse.

On July 4, 1675, he was appointed prior of the Dominican church of Porto Salvo in Valletta and vicar general of



The beautiful Zafira, Sultan Ibrahim I's favourite. Engraving taken from Johann Peter Lotichius & Matthaeus Merian, Theatri Europaei Fünffter Theil..., Frankfurt, Andrea; Merian, 1707. ALBERT GANADO COLLECTION

the Dominican convents in Malta. He was back in the island on March 28, 1676 in poor health and passed away in his early 30s on October 25 of that year.

Was the Padre Ottomano the son of Sultan Ibrahim, received in virtue of his high birth by many European princes and sovereigns, or did he wear the crown of an impostor, voluntary or involuntary, as some writers have claimed?

Acknowledgement

I owe a debt of gratitude to Joseph Schiro for typing the text and for giving me permission to reproduce the very rare Sébastien Beaulieu de Pontault print, titled *Combat Naval 1645*.