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Diplomacy by Dispensation: Arms Embargoes, "Illicit" Gifts and Papal Oversight in Mantuan–Ottoman Exchange

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits a famous case of transgressive gift-giving between Christian and Muslim rulers, apparently in violation of papal embargoes that banned the export of war materiel. Involving the exchange of Italian-made arms and armour for Ottoman horses, the relationship between Francesco II Gonzaga of Mantua and Sultan Bāyezīd II from 1489 to 1499 has been taken to exemplify a Renaissance ethos of cosmopolitan expediency that replaced divisive religious attitudes prevalent in the medieval period. Examining correspondence from the *Archivio Gonzaga*, this article conclusively demonstrates that on the contrary, Gonzaga consistently complied with papal regulations. Introducing the concept of "diplomacy by dispensation" to understand how this compliance helped Gonzaga legitimise his gifts, forestall criticism and remain in communion with the Church, it amplifies the growing recognition that embargoes, a regulatory and discursive legacy of medieval crusading, continued to shape cross-confessional commerce and diplomacy through the end of the fifteenth century.

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Introduction

As historians have reduced their emphasis on conflict as an inevitable feature of relations between Christians and Muslims in the early modern Mediterranean, Italian rulers accused of seeking military alliances with the Ottoman Empire have been rehabilitated.[1] No longer condemned for betraying Christendom, they are now frequently regarded as pragmatists whose ethos of political expediency appears incipiently modern, a "triumph of Renaissance inquisitiveness and acquisitiveness" over religious antagonisms stoked by the "crusading ideologies" of the Middle Ages.[2] Exemplifying this ethos are their

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[1]Eric Dursteler, "On Bazaars and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts", *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 5 (2011): 413–34. See for example: Giovanni Ricci, *Appeal to the Turk: The Broken Boundaries of the Renaissance*, 1st ed., trans. Richard Chapman (Viella, 2018).

[2]Sean Roberts, "The Lost Map of Matteo de' Pasti: Cartography, Diplomacy, and Espionage in the Renaissance Adriatic", *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 1 (2016): 33; responding to Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the*

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transgressive gifts to Ottoman sultans. Comprising military treatises, weapons and (allegedly) secret maps, many of these items appear to have contravened trade embargoes imposed by the papacy. These restrictions prohibited Christians from providing war materiel to Muslims on pain of excommunication. However, the true scope of these clandestine exchanges is often difficult to discern. Moreover, *a priori* assumptions about their illicit nature have at times exaggerated both how easily these rulers disregarded religious norms and the strategic importance of the gifts themselves.[3] A more holistic investigation into the selection, representation and contested meanings of gifts, understood not as "given, fixed entities, but [as] contested constructions of social transactions", is therefore needed.[4] While attention to diplomatic gift exchange around the Mediterranean is growing, merchant republics remain the best-studied actors in Italian–Ottoman cases and Venice dominates existing literature.[5] Looking beyond these titans of trade therefore diversifies our understanding of how Italian rulers navigated the promise and peril of diplomacy with Muslim courts through gifts.

Accordingly, this article revisits the well-studied diplomatic friendship between Marquis Francesco II Gonzaga of Mantua (r. 1484–1519) and the Ottoman Sultan Bāyezīd II (r. 1481–1512). Between 1489 and 1499, Gonzaga received permission to ship more than 90 horses from the Ottoman Empire. In exchange, he offered the sultan political intelligence and lavish gifts of embargoed armour, swords and crossbows. While Christian contemporaries often strongly condemned these "presents of arms" as a "flagrant act" of Christian infidelity, modern assessments are split.[6] Political and diplomatic histories tend to portray Gonzaga as an unrepentant accomplice to the Ottoman infiltration of Italy.[7] By contrast, cultural histories focus on his breeding of exotic horses. Underscoring how Gonzaga flaunted his Ottoman ties widely, they argue that he leveraged diplomatic recognition from a powerful foreign ruler to increase his status.[8] While each perspective has value, both are limited by the shared assumption

Renaissance (Papermac, 1997). This strand of scholarship is carried forward by, among others: Jerry Brotton and Lisa Jardine, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West*, Picturing History (Cornell University Press, 2000); Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (Oxford University Press, 2002); G. Maclean, *Re-orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Anna Contadini and Claire Norton, eds., *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World* (Routledge, 2016).

[3]Roberts, "Lost Map", 29, 36.

[4]Gadi Algazi, "Introduction: Doing Things with Gifts", in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi et al. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), quote on 10, see also 12.

[5]Luca Molà, "Material Diplomacy: Venetian Luxury Gifts for the Ottoman Empire in the Late Renaissance", in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Anne Gerritsen et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2017); E. Natalie Rothman, "Accounting for Gifts: The Poetics and Pragmatics of Material Circulations in Venetian–Ottoman Diplomacy", in *Cultures of Empire: Rethinking Venetian Rule 1400–1700: Essays in Honour of Benjamin Arbel*, ed. Georg Christ et al. (Brill, 2020); contributions to the section on gifts in Frédéric Bauden, ed., *Culture matérielle et contacts diplomatiques entre l'Occident Latin, Byzance et l'Orient Islamique (XIe–XVIe siècle)*, Islamic History and Civilization, volume 183 (Brill, 2021); Leah R. Clark, *Courtly Mediators: Transcultural Objects between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Sinem Arcak Casale, *Gifts in the Age of Empire: Ottoman–Safavid Cultural Exchange, 1500–1639* (University of Chicago Press, 2023). Beyond the circum-Mediterranean, see also Linda Komaroff, ed., *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts* (Yale University Press, 2011).

[6]Humanist Floriano Dolfo relayed these objections, heard at the Bentivoglio court in Bologna, to Gonzaga in 1504; trans. Antonia Gatward Cevizli, "Portraits, Turbans and Cuirasses: Material Exchange between Mantua and the Ottomans at the End of the Fifteenth Century", in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Anne Gerritsen et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 52.

[7]Hans Joachim Kissling, *Sultan Bâjezîd's II. Beziehungen zu Markgraf Francesco II. von Gonzaga* (Hueber, 1965). His narrative is the basis for Ricci, *Appeal to the Turk*, 89–95.

[8]Giancarlo Malacarne, *I signori del cielo: la falconeria a Mantova al tempo dei Gonzaga* (Artiglio Ed, 2003), esp. 295; Elizabeth Tobey, "The Palio Horse in Renaissance and Early Modern Italy", in *The Culture of the Horse: Status, Discipline, and Identity in the Early Modern World*, ed. Karen Raber and Treva J. Tucker (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), esp. 81; Andrea

that Gonzaga defied papal regulations with impunity. Thus, whether Gonzaga ever attempted to justify his illicit gifts has not been investigated, nor have scholars explored whether allegations against him carried material repercussions.

This article therefore contributes the first sustained analysis of Francesco Gonzaga's strategies of legitimation. Rather than prioritising Ottoman codes of gift-giving, it shifts attention to how Gonzaga represented his gifts to other Christians as proof of his princely liberality and Christian faith.[9] Arguing that Gonzaga simply could not ignore allegations of misconduct, it reveals how throughout his decade of diplomacy with Sultan Bāyezīd, he complied with papal regulations in order to justify his gifts, forestall criticism and remain in communion with the Church. I call this strategy of compliance "diplomacy by dispensation", which involved 1) applying for licences to gift embargoed goods by 2) engaging with a papal discourse of Christian common interest and 3) petitioning for absolution after goods were exchanged.

The article opens by situating Mantuan–Ottoman ties within the complex politics of the eastern Mediterranean in the 1490s. Next, it establishes a new narrative of Mantuan embassies to the Ottoman Empire during their peak intensity between 1487 and 1495 in order to analyse how diplomacy by dispensation in Rome facilitated these ventures. Tracing the varied success of these efforts across the reigns of two very different popes, this article argues that while diplomacy by dispensation did secure approval for Gonzaga's gifts, it came at the expense of growing papal oversight over Mantuan–Ottoman diplomacy. Contributing a wealth of new details about the practicalities of cross-cultural gift exchange, it reveals that this putatively definitive case of transgressive military collusion in fact depended on officially sanctioned gifts.

Context: A Contested Peninsula

At first glance, the extensive cooperation between Bāyezīd II and Francesco Gonzaga appears somewhat inexplicable. After all, Mantua was a small state with limited participation in Mediterranean trade: what could its ruler offer a rising imperial power? The answers lies in the escalating conflicts and foreign interventions that characterised Ottoman and Italian politics in the 1490s. It is therefore necessary to outline the main fault lines and alliances of the period, before explaining how a temporary alignment of strategic interests brought Bāyezīd and Gonzaga together.

For present purposes, the most relevant political development of the period was the intensification of Ottoman diplomatic ties with Italian states following the contested accession of Sultan Bāyezīd II in 1481. At their father Meḥmed II's death, both Bāyezīd and his younger brother Cem (d. 1495) proclaimed themselves sultan. Defeated on the battlefield for a second time in 1482, Cem fled to Rhodes and sought asylum from the Knights Hospitallers of St John. Instead, they agreed with Bāyezīd to hold Cem in exile, then dispatched the captive prince to southern France. This set off a fierce

Tonni, "The Renaissance Studs of the Gonzagas of Mantua", in *The Horse as Cultural Icon: The Real and the Symbolic Horse in the Early Modern World*, ed. Peter Edwards et al. (Brill, 2012), 268; Antonia Gatward Cevizli, "Representing the Ottomans and Their World in 1490s Mantua: The Lost 'Ottoman Mode' in Mantuan Painting in Comparative Perspective", *I Tatti Studies* 23, no. 1 (2020): 128, 134.

[9]Ottoman conventions are valuably discussed in Gülru Necipoğlu, "Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople", *Muqarnas* 29 (2012): 45–8; and Cevizli, "Portraits", esp. 48–9.

competition among rulers from Hungary to Cairo to gain possession of Cem. Keeping him prisoner promised to shield the Ottomans' most vulnerable neighbours from attack, while aspiring crusaders hoped setting him free might soften up the empire by renewing civil conflict. Among the main contenders was the vocal crusading advocate Pope Innocent VIII (Giovanni Battista Cybo, r. 1484–92), who began negotiating for custody of the prince shortly after his accession in 1485 and succeeded in transferring Cem to Rome in March 1489.[10]

Becoming a papal hostage thoroughly intertwined Cem's fate with power politics on the Italian peninsula, where a complex web of alliances was rapidly destabilising. A major accelerant was the Angevin–Aragonese dispute over Naples, which had smouldered for decades and was reignited by the death of King Ferdinand I (r. 1458–94). King Charles VIII of France (r. 1483–98) seized this opportunity to realise the Angevin claim to the throne, forcing Italian polities into pro- or anti-French camps. Innocent's successor, Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, r. 1492–1503), who nominally could grant Naples as a papal fief, played both sides to consolidate his power. Charles VIII invaded Italy in 1494 and reclaimed custody of Cem as part of his announced plan to use Naples as a springboard for a new anti-Ottoman crusade.[11] Bāyezīd responded throughout these developments with strenuous diplomacy stretching from Rhodes, Venice, Naples and Rome to Florence and France to trace Cem's whereabouts and prevent his return.[12] Beyond these short-term concerns, diplomatic recognition from abroad also served Bāyezīd's broader aim of "establish[ing] the Ottoman court, and his own royal person, as the paramount political and intellectual centre of its time" in order to counteract domestic dissatisfaction with his father Meḥmed II's aggressive drive to expand and centralise the empire.[13]

During these events, Mantua – a small seigneurial state ruled by the Gonzaga family – was outclassed territorially and financially by expansionist neighbours. Unlike merchant republics such as Venice, Genoa and (from the 1450s) Florence, its rulers lacked both longstanding ties with the Ottoman court and the consular representatives abroad that might have fostered them.[14] Nonetheless, the Gonzaga exercised considerable "protagonism in foreign affairs" during the conflicts of the Italian Wars (1494–1559) through a distinctive style of "small state diplomacy".[15] This was characterised by ambitious marriages, nimble negotiation over mercenary contracts, opportunistic alliances with the interventionist French and Spanish, and diplomatic personnel recruited through feudal bonds of service. Francesco II Gonzaga exemplifies this pattern. Ascending to the marquisate as a

[10]Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571): The Fifteenth Century*, II (American Philosophical Society, 1976), 381–7, 404–6.

[11]Isabella Lazzarini, "Renaissance Diplomacy", in *The Italian Renaissance State*, ed. Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 429. Christine Shaw, *The Italian Wars, 1494–1559: War, State and Society in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2018), 6–12.

[12]İsmail Hikmet Ertaylan, *Sultan Cem*, Reprint (ALFA Tarih, 2015), 317–60.

[13]Ahmet Tunç Şen, "Reading the Stars at the Ottoman Court: Bāyezīd II (r. 886/1481–918/1512) and His Celestial Interests", *Arabica* 64, nos. 3–4 (2017): 567.

[14]Isabella Lazzarini, "Écrire à l'autre. Contacts, réseaux et codes de communication entre les cours italiennes, Byzance et le monde musulman aux XIVe et XVe siècles", in *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités-États*, vol. 2, ed. Denise Aigle and Stéphane Péquignot (Brepols Publishers, 2013), 167–70.

[15]Quote in Daniela Frigo, "'Small States' and Diplomacy: Mantua and Modena", in *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800*, ed. Daniela Frigo (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148; building upon Isabella Lazzarini, *Fra un principe e altri stati: relazioni di potere e forme di servizio a Mantova nell'età di Ludovico Gonzaga* (Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1996).

young man, Francesco first served Milan before embarking upon a "rapid and sometimes foolhardy" series of realignments, becoming captain of Venice in 1489, leading the forces of the Holy League in 1495, and breaking with Venice to return to Milanese service in 1498. Charles VIII's invasion confronted Gonzaga with conflicting interests between his marriage ties (largely pro-French) and his contracted service to Venice, which he navigated in partnership with his consort Isabella d'Este.[16]

Motivations and Early Contacts

Within this political context, Francesco Gonzaga was a potentially valuable friend for Sultan Bāyezīd in Italy because of his noble rank, extensive kinship ties and captaincy with Venice. Thus, although their rapport has sometimes been attributed to "their shared passion for breeding fine horses",[17] it was, from an Ottoman perspective, all business. Frequent allusions made by Ottoman interlocutors and Italian observers in Istanbul suggest that Gonzaga's Venetian captaincy was especially respected.[18] Combined with his other ties, it granted him high-level access to breaking political news, which set him apart from the many sailors and merchants who often feature in Ottoman palace intelligence reports.[19] While the contents of Gonzaga's surviving news bulletins do not appear very sensitive, the contemporary example of the double agent Niḳolā from Filibe, whose information gleaned from years of sea voyages was found to be "without basis" (*aṣlı yoḳtır*), illustrates the imperative to cultivate multiple sources for rigorous comparison.[20] Here, Gonzaga's standing as a second-rate insider was a distinct advantage, because he might attract less scrutiny and be suspected of fewer vested commercial interests.[21] The same dynamic has also benefitted historians, resulting in the survival of Mantuan reports which are sometimes "more revealing than those sent by the envoys of first-rate powers".[22] Moreover, because the Ottomans did not establish resident

[16]Frigo, "'Small States'", 153; for background, see Giuseppe Coniglio, *Mantova, la storia, le lettere, le arti: La Storia*, I, part 2, ed. Leonardo Mazzoldi (Istituto Carlo d'Arco, 1958), 77–9, 154–6; Sarah D. P. Cockram, *Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Power Sharing at the Italian Renaissance Court* (Ashgate, 2013), 129, 157.

[17]Tonni, "Renaissance Studs", 268.

[18]See for example the overture from provincial official Mustafabegh Signor del paese de Herzegh in [Chocia] to Gonzaga, 22 May 1492; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 37. Whether the Venetians valued Gonzaga's Ottoman ties to the same degree is less clear. Gonzaga offered to pursue Venetian interests during his most public encounter with an Ottoman envoy in 1493, but was given no specific instructions; see Gonzaga in Mantua to Antonio Salimbeni, 8 July 1493; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 1, c. 96r and Salimbeni's reply on 13 July; ASMn AG b. 1434, c. 77. Whether Gonzaga's agents referred to Ottoman affairs in their negotiations over his contracts merits further research.

[19]For selected Ottoman reports, see İsmail Hakki Uzunçarşılı, "Cem Sultan'a Dair Beş Orijinal Vesika", *TTK Belleten* XXIV, no. 95 (1960): 457–83; V. L. Ménage, "The Mission of an Ottoman Secret Agent in France in 1486", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 3/4 (1965): 112–32.

[20]Political reports include Gonzaga to Bāyezīd II, 11 May 1495; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 3, c. 91r-92r (loose copy [n.d] in b. 2961, lib. 3, c. 1bisr-v); Gonzaga in Mantua to a son-in-law of the sultan (*Genero Turchi),* probably Hersekzāde Aḥmed Pasha, on 10 December and to Kasım on 28 December 1495; ASMn AG b. 2962, lib. 4, c. 120r-121r and lib. 5, c. 2r-3v (loose copy [n.d] in b.2191, c. 162). Ottoman requests for news are acknowledged in Gonzaga in Mantua to *Bustafabei* [Muṣṭafā Bey], 15 February 1496; ASMn AG b. 2962, lib. 5, c. 25r-v. On the exposure of Niḳolā, see the petition from Muṣṭafā Bey to Bāyezīd [n.d.], Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi Evrak [hereafter BOA TS.MA.E] 745/22 (formerly 6110/6).

[21]Unsurprisingly, Florentines such as Benedetto Dei selected the information they shared with the Ottomans to pursue anti-Venetian rivalries; Kate Fleet, "Florence and the Ottoman Empire in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century", in *Ötekilerin peşinde: Ahmet Yaşar Ocak'a armağan = In pursuit of the others: Festschrift in honor of Ahmet Yaşar Ocak = A la poursuite des autres: mélanges en l'honneur d'Ahmet Yaşar Ocak*, 1. baskı., ed. Mehmet Öz and Fatih Yeşil (Timas Yayınları, 2015), 787–88.

[22]Vincent Ilardi, "Fifteenth-century Diplomatic Documents in Western European Archives and Libraries (1450–1494)", *Studies in the Renaissance* 9 (1962): 99.

ambassadors in Europe until the end of the eighteenth century, Bāyezīd's envoys would benefit from having supporters "on the spot" in cases of trouble abroad. Gonzaga would prove himself a particularly zealous friend in this regard.[23] Circumstances during Cem's captivity therefore favoured diplomatic ties between Istanbul and Mantua, although it should not be forgotten that Gonzaga's gifts and embassies also magnified Bāyezīd's sovereignty at a critical juncture in his rule.

On Gonzaga's part, the acquisition of horses, and to a lesser degree of precious Christian relics seized with the Ottoman capture of Constantinople, motivated his diplomatic overtures.[24] Since at least the 1460s, the Gonzaga dynasty had bolstered their standing as mercenary captains by breeding excellent military horses.[25] Fast, manoeuvrable and enduring horses from the Ottoman Empire (It. *turco,* pl. *turchi*) were especially coveted in Italy for light cavalry use. However, export restrictions meant only a small trickle of animals arrived through diplomatic channels.[26] Pursuing licences to export horses through diplomatic missions, Gonzaga's agents bought animals at scale not only in the Ottoman Empire, but also in Iberia, trans-Alpine Europe and North Africa. This straight-to-the source approach was an innovative response to equine supply issues on the Italian peninsula, which were becoming more acute as growing armies increased the fiscal and military burdens of Renaissance states.[27] Beyond these practical needs, horses were also a reputational asset which Gonzaga gifted selectively among relatives and clients.[28]

While a combination of prestige, politics and equestrian interests thus explains both Gonzaga's overtures and Bāyezīd's receptiveness, the first contact between their representatives has been a point of uncertainty. Scholars have proposed that Gonzaga aspired to send a delegation to Istanbul as early as 1489 and that his agents met with Ottoman officials for the first time in Istanbul in 1491.[29] Consulting a wider corpus of Gonzaga's correspondence reveals that, in fact, substantive relationships were begun in Italy. These were pivotal to the success of the first credentialled Mantuan embassy to the Ottoman capital. Thus, Gonzaga's earliest known approach to an Ottoman envoy occurred in Venice in 1487. He then dispatched the future overseer of his stud on an informal visit to buy horses in Istanbul in 1488, and received a *turco* horse from an unidentified giver in the winter of 1489/90.[30] Nonetheless, these early approaches gained little

[23]Bülent Arı, "Early Ottoman Diplomacy: Ad Hoc Period", in *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?*, ed. A. Nuri Yurdusev (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 36–44; for a more capacious model, see Michael Talbot and Phil McCluskey, "Introduction: Contacts, Encounters, Practices: Ottoman–European Diplomacy", *Osmanlı Araştırmaları: The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 48 (2016): 270–1.

[24]On relics, see Franz Babinger, *Spätmittelalterliche fränkische Briefschaften aus dem Grossherrlichen Seraj zu Stambul* (R. Oldenbourg, 1963), 96–119; Setton, *Papacy*, II, 421; Cevizli, "Portraits", 48.

[25]Covered comprehensively in Giancarlo Malacarne, *Il mito dei cavalli gonzagheschi: alle origini del purosangue* (Promoprint, 1995); Galeazzo Nosari and Franco Canova, *Il palio nel Rinascimento: i cavalli di razza dei Gonzaga nell'età di Francesco II Gonzaga 1484–1519* (ELui, 2003); Galeazzo Nosari and Franco Canova, *I cavalli Gonzaga della* raza de la casa: *allevamenti e scuderie di Mantova nei secoli XIV-XVII* (ELui, 2005).

[26]Hedda Reindl-Kiel, "No Horses for the Enemy: Ottoman Trade Regulations and Horse Gifting", in *Pferde in Asien: Geschichte, Handel Und Kultur*, ed. Bert G. Fragner et al. (Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 43–4.

[27]Fabrizio Ansani, *Il cavallo da guerra e lo Stato del Rinascimento: una storia politica, economica e culturale* (Il Mulino, 2024), 15–17, 201.

[28]For gifts of *turchi* horses, see Marissa Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy: Ottoman Horses, Mantuan Buyers, and Renaissance Equestrianism (1489–1600)" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2024).

[29]Kissling, *Beziehungen*, 6–8; Ansani, *Il cavallo da guerra*, 189.

[30]Alessio [Alexio] *Turco* in Venice to Gonzaga, 4 April 1487; ASMn AG b.1432, c. 376. Bernardino da Bergamo in Istanbul to Gonzaga; 29 August 1488; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 29. On contact in 1489–90, see Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy", 160–6.

traction. This is probably because Gonzaga's agents still knew very little about securing formal diplomatic recognition from the Ottoman court at the time.

Negotiations conducted between Pope Innocent and Bāyezīd in the winter of 1490/91 transformed Francesco's prospects because they brought an intimate of the sultan's palace administration to Italy. Under discussion were the conditions of Cem's captivity. The pope wanted a treaty that would protect Christians from Ottoman attacks and to claim the annual "pension" (a staggering 40,000 ducats) which Bāyezīd was currently paying the Knights Hospitallers to maintain Cem in exile. The sultan wanted Cem to remain abroad, and sent his head chamberlain (*kapıcıbaşı*) Muṣṭafā Bey to Rome to make it happen with a minimum of military concessions.[31] During his stay in Rome from 30 November 1490–8 January 1491, Muṣṭafā visited Prince Cem and fenced with the pope and the Hospitallers during a series of three formal audiences in consistory.

Previously, it was assumed that Muṣṭafā confined himself to these formal appearances and that his embassy to Rome had "been fully explored by modern historians".[32] However, the letters of Giovanni Lucido Cattanei, Francesco's resident diplomat at the curia, show that Muṣṭafā also deftly exploited the city's role as a diplomatic hub to widen his ties in Italy. According to Cattanei, he was introduced to Muṣṭafā at his lodgings by the Venetian diplomat and humanist Ermolao Barbaro. During their audience, Muṣṭafā welcomed Cattanei warmly and promised to promote Francesco's "name and quality" upon his return home.[33] True to his word, Muṣṭafā became Francesco's staunch advocate in Istanbul and reportedly delivered a glowing report about him to the sultan. Later correspondence between the two, in which Muṣṭafā addressed Gonzaga as his "brother", reflects their growing rapport.[34]

These gestures were not empty courtesies. Muṣṭafā was one of Bāyezīd's long-serving statesmen whose political career would culminate in the Ottoman administration's highest office: that of Grand Vizier. During Cem's exile, Muṣṭafā acted as Bāyezīd's *de facto* "chief of intelligence services in Italy". [35] For this reason, Muṣṭafā was under perennial suspicion from the Council of Ten, Venice's committee for state security, which had already warned Barbaro that Muṣṭafā might try to assassinate Prince Cem only a few days before their meeting with Cattanei.[36] Whether or not these allegations influenced Barbaro's introduction of the pair is unclear. Nevertheless, keeping this political context in view is helpful because it restores emphasis to Ottoman initiative within Italy. Indeed, it was this winning combination of Venetian tutelage and cooperation from Ottoman personnel while abroad that helped Gonzaga and his agents to build competency in Ottoman diplomacy with remarkable speed.

Among the topics they learned about was gift-giving, a practice central to Ottoman diplomatic protocol.[37] Accordingly, the following sections will each consider distinct

[31]Halil İnalcık, 'A Case Study in Renaissance Diplomacy: The Agreement between Innocent VIII and Bayezid II on Djem Sultan', in *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?*, ed. A. Nuri Yurdusev (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 72–7, originally published in *Journal of Turkish Studies* 3 (1979): 209–30. Cf. Setton, *Papacy*, II, 418–22.
[32]İnalcık, "Case Study", 75.
[33]Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome to Gonzaga, 7 January [1491], ASMn AG b. 848, c. 399.
[34]Reported by the Ottoman envoy Alessio [Alexio] *Turco* via Giorgio Brognolo in Venice to Gonzaga, 7 August 1491; ASMn AG b. 1433, c. 203v; Muṣṭafā Bey in Istanbul to Gonzaga; 30 September [1491]; ASMn AG b. 795, c.41.
[35]Vatin, Nicolas, "Itineraires d'agents de la porte en Italie (1483-1495)", *Turcica* 19 (1987): 40, n.34.
[36]Setton, *Papacy*, II, 418, n.7.
[37]A good introduction is Cihan Yüksel Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World* (IB Tauris, 2014), 37–48.

aspects of gift-giving in Gonzaga's embassies to Istanbul in 1491 and 1492. The first will establish what gifts were exchanged and how they were selected. It will also demonstrate how Gonzaga built reciprocal relationships with Ottoman interlocutors while simultaneously burnishing his reputation at home. The second pivots to the first element of his programme of diplomacy by dispensation in the papal curia, establishing how Gonzaga fashioned another image of himself as a faithful Christian to secure papal licences from Pope Innocent VIII.

Signs of Liberality: Choosing Gifts for the Embassies in 1491 and 1492

Guiding Gonzaga's early selection of gifts was liberality. The virtue of "knowing how to spend and how to give", liberality enjoyed a rising profile in the Renaissance because it gave largesse an ethical gloss, allowing a prince to fulfil his proper *noblesse oblige* toward friends and clients with discernment.[38] This sense of propriety also made liberality a key part of diplomatic giving. Since Marcel Mauss's landmark *Essai sur le don* first directed attention to how gifts foster reciprocal obligations, scholars have probed the anxiogenic boundaries between "free" gifts, bribes and tributes.[39] While Hedda Reindl-Kiel and others have rejected the totalising elements of Mauss's model for Ottoman and other Muslim-majority cases, the performance of reciprocity remains central to analyses of propriety in late medieval and early modern gift exchange.[40] Among the European diplomats circulating in sixteenth-century Rome, Catherine Fletcher has argued, exchanging favours possessed connotations of venality. Among princes, therefore, a discourse of liberality arose which dissimulated expectations of reciprocity in order to portray gifts as "honourable, voluntary, and disinterested" and to differentiate them from potentially corrupting *quid pro quo* arrangements and rewards for service in hierarchical patron–client relationships.[41] By contrast, republics such as Venice codified gift protocols early to alleviate anxieties surrounding the behaviour of state officers, mitigate costs, and govern how gifts received during diplomatic negotiations were

[38]Guido Guerzoni, *Apollo and Vulcan: The Art Markets in Italy, 1400–1700* (Michigan State University Press, 2011), 30–2.

[39]Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Reprint, with W. D. Halls (WW Norton, 1990). More recently, historians have drawn on alternative formulations, such as the "social life of things" developed in Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value", in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jean Baudrillard's "sign value", for which see Anthony Cutler, "Significant Gifts: Patterns of Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 79–101; and the substantivist school of economic anthropology, especially the typologies of exchange advanced by Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd Beacon Paperback ed. (Beacon Press, 2001); on which see also C. M. Hann and Keith Hart, *Economic Anthropology: History, Ethnography, Critique* (Polity Press, 2011), 55–62. Importantly, the editors of a recent volume on early modern gifting caution that interpretive emphasis on reciprocity should not obscure how gifts "serve to establish difference and imbalance", Zoltán Biedermann et al., "Introduction: Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia", in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Anne Gerritsen et al., Studies in Comparative World History (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 26.

[40]Hedda Reindl-Kiel, "East is East and West is West and Sometimes the Twain Did Meet, Diplomatic Gift Exchange in the Ottoman Empire", in *Frontiers of Ottoman Studies: State, Province, and the West*, ed. Colin Imber and Keiko Kiyotaki, Library of Ottoman Studies 5 (IB Tauris, 2005), 113–14; Paul Dresch, "Mutual Deception: Totality, Exchange, and Islam in the Middle East", in *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. Wendy James and N. J. Allen, Methodology and History in Anthropology, v. 1 (Berghahn Books, 1998), esp. 114–18; the challenges of a universal application of Mauss's theory are usefully addressed by Patrick J. Geary, "Gift Exchange and Social Science Modeling: The Limitations of a Construct", in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi et al. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 129–32.

[41]Catherine Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome: The Rise of the Resident Ambassador* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 155, 161.

redistributed.[42] Such anxieties differentiated gift-giving on the Italian peninsula from Ottoman practice, where gift exchange was "routinised and bounded by rules" that more openly acknowledged reciprocity.[43] Informed by his interlocutors that gifts could make or break an embassy, Francesco Gonzaga seems to have approached the Ottoman court from the beginning with a determination not to be outdone in liberality, even by a sultan – a resolution celebrated by Mario Equicola (c.1470–1525) in his contemporary *Chronica di Mantua* (1521).[44] This helped Gonzaga, as a young ruler who had only recently shaken off the influence of an overbearing uncle, to establish his image as a princely patron.[45]

Planning for Gonzaga's first credentialled embassy, which would be led by Bernardino Missaglia, had begun by August 1490 but was delayed by plague and only resumed in May 1491.[46] The party of approximately eight men departed from Venice around 27 July. They reached Istanbul on 14 September, where they were received by the sultan and Muṣṭafā Bey, and remained until 2 October, returning to Mantua via Puglia by 5 January 1492. Missaglia carried with him a lavish array of presents including 25 pieces of cheese, cloth valued at over 576 ducats, and several cuirasses (*corazzine*) – a type of armour protecting the front and back of the torso with large plates of curved steel.[47] But who selected these items, and why?

Exchanges between Gonzaga and his representative in Venice, Giorgio Brognolo, reveal that the textiles were chosen through consultation with the Greek–Venetian secretary, Giovanni Dario. Born on Crete c. 1414, Dario undertook numerous negotiations with the Ottoman Empire on Venice's behalf, including peace treaty talks in 1478.[48] Such experiences had given Dario a "most sound knowledge of affairs there".[49] Among other insights, Dario advised that unless all four principal viziers received suitable gifts, "everything would be thrown away". Brognolo therefore substituted green velvet cloth for two items that could not be split four ways.[50] Unfortunately, the cuirasses are harder to trace. Antonia Gatward Cevizli argues that Italian armour would have been highly desirable because it was stronger than Ottoman work.[51] However, it is unclear how many pieces

[42]Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome*, 156; Molà, "Material Diplomacy", 60–6. Scrupulous Venetian records also tracked their community's integration into tributary relations in the Mamlūk Sultanate of Cairo through regular payments and gift exchange; Georg Christ, "Settling Accounts with the Sultan: Cortesia, Zemechia and Venetian Fiscality in Fifteenth-Century Alexandria", in *Trajectories of State Formation across Fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia* (Brill, 2020), 324, 329, 336.

[43]Boğaç A. Ergene, *Defining Corruption in the Ottoman Empire: Morality, Legality, and Abuse of Power in Premodern Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 230. Although Fletcher does not address whether gifts to Muslim recipients were more anxiogenic, Lazzarini suggests they were; Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict: Italian Diplomacy in the Early Renaissance, 1350–1520*, Oxford Studies In Medieval European History (Oxford University Press, 2015), 257–8.

[44]Cevizli, "Portraits", 35.

[45]Bourne, 29, 36.

[46]See the instructions from Gonzaga to Giorgio Brognolo in Venice; ASMn AG b. 2903, lib. 135, cc. 48v, 59r, 65v from 1490 and Giorgio Brognolo in Venice to Gonzaga; ASMn AG b. 1433, cc. 146, 153 from 1491.

[47]For cheese, see Cevizli, "Portraits", 42. On textiles, see Giorgio Brognolo in Venice to Gonzaga, 21 July 1491; ASMn AG b. 1433, c. 188. The presence of cuirasses is alluded to in Gonzaga in Marmiolo to Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome, 16 April 1492; ASMn AG b. 2904, lib. 141, c. 15v.

[48]M. F. Tiepolo, "Greci nella Cancelleria Veneziani: Giovanni Dario", in *I Greci a Venezia: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio Venezia, 5–7 Novembre 1998*, ed. M. F. Tiepolo and Eurigio Tonetti (Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2002), 268–87.

[49]Giorgio Brognolo in Venice to Gonzaga, 31 May 1491; ASMn AG b. 1433, c. 153.

[50]Giorgio Brognolo in Venice to Gonzaga, 21 July 1491; ASMn AG b. 1433, c. 188.

[51]Antonia Gatward Cevizli, "More Than a Messenger: Embodied Expertise in Mantuan Envoys to the Ottomans in the 1490s", *Mediterranean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2014): 172–3.

were sent, why they were chosen, and for whom. Nonetheless, Brognolo's careful research paid off. In return, the sultan presented Gonzaga with a diplomatic gift package of Ottoman robes made of cloth-of-gold, textiles and cash. These, Missaglia alleged, outstripped the honours shown to all other envoys (including those from Florence and Naples) in quantity and ceremonial pomp. Bāyezīd's gifts also included four caparisoned horses and permission to purchase others. Meanwhile Bāyezīd's viziers reportedly promised that if Gonzaga "would be patient this time, they would do something they hoped would be welcome to [him] another time".[52]

The second embassy was led by Francesco's captain of stradiots, Alessio Beccaguto. Preparations were underway by April 1492, enabling the party to depart from Venice around 22 August. They stayed in Edirne from approximately 19 October until 7 November and returned to Italy via Brindisi before 19 December, arriving in Mantua in late January 1493. As gifts, Beccaguto brought two swords, six cuirasses and six breastplates (*panciere)* for protecting the front of the chest, plus hunting dogs and approximately six mules with golden trappings. These were joined by two chests of additional gifts and Francesco's portrait, which Beccaguto displayed to Bāyezīd during his audience.[53]

Compared to the year before, Ottoman interlocutors participated far more actively in the selection of this gift package. One cuirass and two breastplates were commissions taken from viziers (unfortunately not named) by Bernardino Missaglia in 1491. He reportedly refused payment for the items. Instead, they were to be presented *gratis* to demonstrate Francesco's "natural liberality".[54] By contrast, the animals were intended personally for the sultan, an avid hunter.[55] His ambassador to Rome in 1492, a man named Kāsım whom we will meet shortly, therefore insisted to Gonzaga's men that the marquis "could not make a present more welcome and acceptable" to Bāyezīd than a pair of large dogs. Gonzaga eagerly agreed to send some.[56] The armour and animals had the desired effect: Beccaguto reported obtaining 29 horses during his trip, including four from the sultan and 10 given to him by Ottoman officials – again, unfortunately, unnamed.[57]

Missaglia and Beccaguto's experiences illustrate clearly how Ottoman court officials in Istanbul were becoming increasingly "important arbiters of hierarchy among European princes", wielding the "differential treatment" of visiting ambassadors to confer esteem.[58]

[52]Bernardino Missaglia in Istanbul to Gonzaga, 25 September 1491; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 35. Among the Ottomans and their Muslim neighbours, one sovereign accepting a robe of honour (*ḫil'at*) from another signalled acquiescence to vassal status. However, robes given to ambassadors of foreign rulers in their own person did not connote a transfer of loyalty, but instead the esteem of the host; Muslu, *Imperial Diplomacy*, 42–3. In his letter, Missaglia distinguished between three horses for Gonzaga and one for himself; the robes are among the items thereafter enumerated as gifts to himself. Keeping in mind the caution that *ḫil'at* presented to vassals were distinguished not so much visually as by the word itself, and that "robes of honour therefore could be understood as innocent garments presented from an equal to an equal, at least if not specified otherwise in the accompanying documentation", the precise symbolism of these robes must remain unclear; Reindl-Kiel, "East is East", 120.

[53]On the portrait, see Alessio Beccaguto in Brindisi to Gonzaga, 19 December 1492 as copied in MS Harley 3462, British Library ff. 17v–18r. For the final numbers of pieces, see Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 30 August 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 71–2.

[54]Reported by Giacomo d'Atri in Rome to Gonzaga, 1 July [likely June in fact] 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 97–8.

[55]Hedda Reindl-Kiel, "Dogs, Elephants, Lions, a Ram and a Rhino on Diplomatic Mission: Animals as Gifts to the Ottoman Court", in *Animals and People in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Eren, 2010), 276–7; Melis Taner, "Power to Kill: A Discourse of the Royal Hunt during the Reigns of Suleyman I and Ahmed I" (MA Thesis, Sabancı University, 2009), 55.

[56]As reported by Giacomo d'Atri in Rome to Gonzaga, 1 July [likely June in fact] 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 97–8 and agreed to in: Gonzaga in Mantua to Fioramonte Brognolo, 13 June 1492; ASMn AG b. 2905, lib. 143, c. 9r–v.

[57]Alessio Beccaguto in Brindisi to Gonzaga, dated 19 December 1492; MS Harley 3462, British Library ff. 17v–18r.

[58]Rothman, "Accounting for Gifts", 416.

While we might suspect Missaglia of exaggerating the warmth of his reception, the conviction that lavish giving might enable Gonzaga to claim precedence over larger states such as Florence and Naples underscores the dual audience for his gift-giving. The concentration of merchants in Istanbul, the seed of a developing "diplomatic corps", ensured that news of these amicable gestures quickly reached Italy.[59] However, Gonzaga did not wait for the lively traffic in dispatches to circulate tales of his liberality. Before his departure from Venice in 1492, Alessio Beccaguto had exhibited Gonzaga's gifts to the sultan for Doge Agostino Barbarigo, who exclaimed at their cost. Beccaguto's polished reply, that his lord "esteems nothing in this world except honour and fame", epitomises how a discourse of liberality disavowed reciprocal interests and established Gonzaga as a consummate prince.[60]

But while Beccaguto scrupulously reported on the gift inspection, he never mentions the armour. Indeed, cuirasses and breastplates are not explicitly discussed by Brognolo, Missaglia, or Beccaguto in their correspondence about these embassies, even in Beccaguto's otherwise comprehensive *relazione* about his audiences in Edirne.[61] Such omissions may not always have been calculated. However, the pervasive absence of the armour from outward-facing representations of Gonzaga's embassies suggests that the imperatives of diplomatic courtesy and liberality alone were perhaps not enough to excuse these gifts.

Asking Permission: Obtaining Licences During the Pontificate of Innocent VIII

Fortunately for Gonzaga, there was a time-honoured solution to this problem: papal dispensations. Since 1179, when embargoes were imposed on commodities such as wood, iron, slaves, staple foodstuffs and arms, a robust system of exemptions had also developed. Merchants could petition either for trade licences applicable to a single voyage (the Genoese pattern), or request years-long exemptions applicable to a number of state-run vessels (the Venetian approach). Licences formally required the proceeds to support charitable purposes, such as crusading, hospitals, the redemption of captives or the purchase of relics.[62] Previously, economic historians regarded these licences as an indicator of the debility and profit-mindedness of the papacy, concluding that by the close of the fourteenth century their "time had passed".[63] Recent studies have demonstrated that, on the contrary, embargoes were gaining increasing salience in the fifteenth century. Reissued annually from 1363 in public readings of the Holy Thursday Bull *In Coena Domini*, these embargoes provided a precedent both for the papal alum monopoly in 1474 and for fifteenth-century export bans in Genoa and Venice.[64] While embargoes and exemptions therefore empowered the papacy, scholars also emphasise how it acted as

[59]Harriet Rudolph, "The Ottoman Empire and the Institutionalization of European Diplomacy, 1500–1700", in *Islam and International Law: Engaging Self-Centrism from a Plurality of Perspectives*, ed. Marie-Luisa Frick and Andreas Th. Müller (Brill, 2013), 178.
[60]Alessio Beccaguto in Venice to Gonzaga [n.d., approximately 12–22 August 1492]; ASMn AG b. 1433, c. 571.
[61]For the description of his reception, see Alessio Beccaguto in Brindisi to Gonzaga, dated 19 December 1492, copied in MS Harley 3462, British Library f. 16r.
[62]Mike Carr, "Crossing Boundaries in the Mediterranean: Papal Trade Licences from the Registra Supplicationum of Pope Clement VI (1342–52)", *Journal of Medieval History* 41, no. 1 (2015): 113–15.
[63]Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 109.
[64]Krasimir Stefanov Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality: Papal Embargo as Cultural Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 164–73, 182–7.

a form of communal boundary maintenance.[65] As such, embargo was not just imposed from above; many Christians sought out dispensations on their own initiative to allay moral anxieties surrounding close contact with Muslims.[66]

Francesco Gonzaga deserves to be recognised among their number. During the reign of Pope Innocent VIII, he received licences for his gifts of arms and armour in both 1491 and 1492. Pivoting from the discourse of liberality highlighted above, his appeals to the pope presented him as a faithful Christian whose activities would advance the pope's own policy aims. What distinguishes these appeals as a consistent policy of diplomacy by dispensation is 1) their regularity, and 2) the rhetorical engagement with ideas of Christian common interest as defined by papal embargoes. Together, these establish that papal dispensations were a routine part of Gonzaga's diplomatic practice.

Both elements are evident in an illuminating set of instructions Gonzaga sent to his resident ambassador in Rome, Giovanni Lucido Cattanei, to coach him in making a case for a papal licence in April 1492. While known, this letter has only been partially transcribed in print and therefore merits close analysis.[67] First, Cattanei was enjoined to thank the pontiff for allowing the export of "several cuirasses" by papal licence in 1491. To date, this is the only reference to this licence I have found. Gonzaga expressed satisfaction with the gifts, celebrating the "great profit" in horses he had received from them.[68] This highly transactional approach to gifts openly acknowledges their function within a reciprocal *quid pro quo* and departs significantly from the professions of liberality Gonzaga and his agents made to other audiences. Then, Gonzaga instructed Cattanei how he ought to represent a new shipment of Ottoman gifts to the pope. He first minimised them as mere "courtesies (*centileze*)" which could not "be deemed against our faith", then conceded: "except for the cuirass and breastplates". But even these would not compromise Christendom's safety because, Gonzaga explained, the Ottomans "have them in such abundance that these ones will not really become cause to give them either succour or aid". He combined this pragmatic claim with renewed emphasis on their efficacy, promising: "we will strike a better bargain than them". The agonistic undertones of this statement, suggesting that canny Christians could exploit their Muslim interlocutors' taste for arms and armour, is again very different from rhetoric Gonzaga employed elsewhere.[69]

Rather than closing his ears, it seems likely that Innocent's well-publicised attempts to unite the princes of Europe in a new crusade against the Ottoman Empire at his so-called Turkish Congress in spring 1490 made him more receptive to such arguments.[70] After all, Innocent had already approved a large consignment of lances to Egypt in 1487 to build common ground with the Mamlūk Sultan Qāytbāy against their mutual enemy and was also willing to negotiate with Bāyezīd directly.[71] Repeatedly called to support Innocent's

[65]Carr, "Crossing Boundaries", 108.
[66]Arnold Esch, "New Sources on Trade and Dealings between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean Region (ca. 1440–1500)", *Mediterranean Historical Review* 33, no. 2 (2018): 135–48.
[67]Gonzaga in Marmiolo to Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome, 16 April 1492; ASMn AG b. 2904, lib. 141, c. 15v–16v. Kissling omitted Innocent's earlier licence from his transcription; *Beziehungen*, 7–8. Gatward Cevizli follows Kissling; "More Than a Messenger", 171, n.27. Coniglio also omits the pope; *Mantova: La Storia*, I, part 2, 136.
[68]Ibid., c. 15v.
[69]Ibid., c. 15v.
[70]İnalcık, "Case Study", 74.
[71]Anna Maria Oliva, "Il Sultanato Mamelucco d'Egitto e Siria e la curia pontificia negli anni di Innocenzo VIII. Prime ricerche", *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea*, Nuova Serie, vol. 3 (December 2018): 57.

crusading plans, Gonzaga was well informed about Innocent's policy aims and what he might be willing to tolerate to achieve them. Therefore, in his instructions to Cattanei, Gonzaga not only minimised the gifts themselves, but also argued that Mantuan embassies could actively support the pope's defence of Christendom with valuable intelligence. Praising his ambassador's "wit and acumen", Gonzaga invited Innocent "to command him as he [saw] fit" in gathering specific information on his travels.[72] This point-by-point briefing, thoroughly pragmatic in outlook, concluded with expressions of Gonzaga's pious submission to the will of the pope.

Over the following weeks, Cattanei diligently carried out these instructions. When Innocent finally granted the licence on 9 May 1492, however, he did so orally (*vive vocis oraculum*), "not being accustomed to giving such licence by brief".[73] If trade licences were so commonplace, why this air of secrecy? The Roman diarist Sigismondo de' Conti suggests that opposition to the pope's negotiations with the Ottomans may have played a role. Thus, while de' Conti defended Innocent's efforts "to lift from Christians the calamities of war and, with *apparent friendship*, procure some of the holy relics of Our Saviour" (emphasis mine) as acts of pious dissimulation, his remarks indicate a substantial gulf between official approval and social acceptance.[74] Oral dispensations avoided a paper trail that might become embarrassing later. For Gonzaga, however, secrecy was undesirable. After all, a licence had limited value without proof. To meet this need for evidence, Cattanei arranged for the Cardinal of Genoa to write a letter, still held in the *Archivio Gonzaga*, attesting that he had personally witnessed the dispensation.[75]

In subsequent approaches to the curia, moreover, Gonzaga consistently prioritised expediency over discretion. When he wanted to increase the amount of armour he was sending, Gonzaga despatched another representative to amend the licence, Fioramonte Brognolo, who was so persistent he had to be forbidden from harassing the pope about it on his deathbed![76] After Innocent's passing, Gonzaga then urged Brognolo to petition the entire College of Cardinals for a similar dispensation for two swords, a breastplate and two armoured caps intended for the King of Tunis.[77] Only the beginning of the conclave to select Innocent's successor prevented him from following through. When Rodrigo Borgia was elected as Alexander VI, Gonzaga hastily sought confirmation of both licences as soon as possible. He again received them *vive vocis oraculo*.[78] The urgency and persistence of these efforts suggest that Francesco regarded diplomacy by dispensation as an indispensable precaution for rendering his gifts beyond reproach.

As the following section will show, however, diplomacy by dispensation also empowered the pope to intervene more directly in Gonzaga's relations with Bāyezīd. This will be demonstrated by returning to the narrative to analyse the Ottoman ambassador Kāsım's official visits to Rome and Mantua in 1493. Although Gonzaga initially celebrated

[72]Gonzaga in Marmiolo to Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome, 16 April 1492; ASMn AG b. 2904, lib. 141, c. 15v–16r.
[73]Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome to Gonzaga, 9 May 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 29.
[74]Sigismondo dei Conti da Foligno, *Le Storie de' suoi tempi dal 1475 al 1510: ora la prima volta pubblicate nel testo latino con versione italiana a fronte* (Ministerio di Agricoltura, Industria e Commercio, 1883), 2:lX:26.
[75]Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome to Gonzaga, 9 May 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 29; Cardinal of Genoa in Rome to Gonzaga, 15 May 1492; ASMn AG b.849, c. 126.
[76]Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 25–26 July 1492; ASMn AG b.849, c. 58.
[77]Gonzaga in Gonzaga to Fioramonte Brognolo, 31 July 1492; ASMn AG b. 2905, lib. 144, c. 45r and Brognolo's reply from Rome, 7 August 1492; ASMn AG b.849, c. 64.
[78]Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 13 and 30 August 1492; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 66, 71–2.

Kāsım's visit as a diplomatic success, it ultimately contributed to a stark reversal of Francesco's fortunes in the curia, which would prompt a new approach to papal dispensations.

Enemies of Success: Kāsım's 1493 Embassy to Mantua

Upon his return from Bāyezīd's court in early 1493, Alessio Beccaguto had thrilled Francesco Gonzaga with news that an Ottoman ambassador would grace Mantua with a return visit.[79] It would be conducted by an Ottoman ambassador named Kāsım. As a palace *çavuş*, Kāsım's responsibilities included carrying imperial orders and acting as a ceremonial officer during diplomatic audiences. Although his background is unclear, Kāsım had a close relationship with Muṣṭafā Bey (both were likely Christian converts), and his individual duties demonstrate a high degree of trust and a specialisation in Italian affairs. In 1492, he carried the Holy Lance relic from Bāyezīd to Rome as a gift for Pope Innocent. In 1494, he was both the sultan's envoy to Venice in the spring and later carried 40,000 ducats for Cem's pension to the papal court. Later, according to Venetian sources, he negotiated peace terms with the King of Hungary in 1502–3.[80] While Kāsım's sojourn to Mantua in 1493 therefore communicated Bāyezīd's high esteem for Francesco Gonzaga, the city on the Mincio was indisputably less significant to Kāsım's mission than Rome.

Credentialed in Istanbul on 12 April, Kāsım travelled quickly overland before crossing the Adriatic to Ancona. He arrived in Rome on 11 June, where he stayed until permitted to depart on 22 June. While there, he conveyed the sultan's accession presents to Pope Alexander in a formal audience and met personally with Prince Cem.[81] Kenneth Setton has downplayed his visit as an exchange of "diplomatic courtesies" which "naturally neither side took … very seriously".[82] But an Ottoman letter to the pope copied after the visit shows that, on the contrary, Kāsım had a serious commission: renewing the terms of Cem's imprisonment, which Innocent had agreed to but not entirely fulfilled.[83] Perhaps reflecting the urgency of these matters, Alexander attempted to prevent Kāsım's onward journey to Mantua. Instead, he pressured Gonzaga to meet Kāsım in Rome or intercept him on his direct return to Ottoman territory. As an incentive, he argued that because Kāsım expected cash gifts far exceeding his putative rank, Gonzaga could economise by meeting him "in a foreign place".[84] Having already authorised a 100-ducat *per diem* for Kāsım's expenses during his journey toward Mantua, however, Gonzaga was unpersuaded.[85]

[79]Reported in Gonzaga in Lucca to Isabella d'Este, 6 February 1493; ASMn AG b. 2905, lib. 147, c. 44r.
[80]Kissling, *Beziehungen*, 40–1, 57; Barbara Flemming, "Zwei türkische Herren von Avlona", *Der Islam* 45 (1969): 312–16; Peter Mario Luciano Sebastian, "Turkish Prosopography in the *Diarii* of Marino Sanuto 1496–1517/902–923, Vol. I" (PhD Diss., SOAS, University of London, 1988), 418–21.
[81]Stefano Infessura, *Diario della città di Roma di Stefano Infessura scribasenato*, new ed., ed. Oreste Tommasini (Forzani e C. Tipografi del Senato, Palazzo Madama, 1890), 285–6. Cf. Kissling, *Beziehungen*, 19.
[82]Setton, *Papacy*, II, 442.
[83]Bāyezīd proposed confirming the peace agreement negotiated in winter 1490/1 and asked for Alexander to appoint a legate to Istanbul; Bāyezīd II to Pope Alexander VI [n.d. but probably August–December 1493], BOA, TS.MA.E 815/19 (formerly 7219/1). On Bāyezīd's priorities, see Selâhattin Tansel, *Sultan II. Bâyezit'in siyasî hayatı* (M.E.B. Devlet Kitapları Müdürlüğü, 1966), 62.
[84]As reported by Giovanni Lucido Cattanei in Rome to Gonzaga, 23 June 1493; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 311.
[85]Gonzaga in Mantua to Bernardino Antonio Giacomo in Ancona, 3 March 1493; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 1, c. 34v–35r.

Instead, he welcomed Kāsım in spectacular fashion. Arriving by a luxury barge, Kāsım was greeted with a ceremonial entry on 18 July accompanied by fanfare and "a shout of 'Turco!'" (the Gonzaga's battle-cry).[86] His formal audience was held in the *Camera degli sposi* in the Castello di San Giorgio, whose sumptuous frescoes epitomised the power and impeccable taste of the Gonzaga dynasty, and was followed by a bucolic hunting retreat. The visit concluded on 24 July with a cascade of "imperial gift[s]" for Kāsım and his retinue, including textiles, a gold chain, a breastplate, a mail surcoat and three fine crossbows. Combined, their value rivalled the gifts that Pope Innocent had presented to Prince Cem upon his entry to Rome in 1489.[87]

To supervise Kāsım in Mantua, Alexander dispatched his nuncio, Giorgio Bucciardo. Proficient in Turkish, Bucciardo was a Genoese relative of Innocent VIII and had accompanied Kāsım on most, if not all, of his diplomatic travels between Istanbul and Rome, playing a central, but hitherto little studied role in papal–Ottoman negotiations.[88] Introducing himself *en route* to Gonzaga via letter, Bucciardo took credit for convincing the pope to allow Kāsım's diversion to Mantua and placed himself at the marquis's service.[89] When Kāsım and Gonzaga rode together into Mantua, he personally interpreted their exchange.[90] Combined with the device of St Peter displayed openly next to the arms of the Gonzaga and the sultan on triumphal arches decorating the city, his presence clearly advertised the pope's approval.[91]

On the ground, however, affairs were more ambiguous. Mantuan courtiers observed that Bucciardo and Kāsım often lodged and dined separately and were at odds over the length of Kāsım's stay.[92] After the embassy, Gonzaga even blamed Bucciardo for having "continually incited [Kāsım] to depart" Mantua early, allegedly to save money on their passage across the Adriatic.[93] This ambivalence extended to Gonzaga's assessment of the visit. To his sister Chiara, Gonzaga predicted triumphantly that he might soon obtain the same relic of the shirt of Christ for which Innocent had unsuccessfully lobbied Bāyezīd in 1491.[94] To Pietro Gentili, however, Francesco confided his fear that Bucciardo would report unfavourably on Gonzaga's hospitality to the pope because he had received fewer presents than Kāsım. Francesco therefore defended his conduct before asking Gentili to refute any criticism he might hear in the curia.[95]

The disagreements between Gonzaga and the pope that preceded Kāsım's widely advertised embassy to Mantua have not been discussed by previous scholars, and Bucciardo's involvement has also attracted little sustained attention.[96] Illustrating the

[86]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 283–4.
[87]P. Ferrato, *Il Marchesato di Mantova e l'Impero Ottomano alla fine del secolo XV* (Stabilimento Tipografico Mondovi, 1876), 12–13. The gifts are itemised on an anonymous loose sheet under the heading "to the Ambassador of the Lord *Gran Turco*" [n.d.]; ASMn AG b. 2190, c. 648. For the valuation, see Cevizli, "Portraits", 47.
[88]*Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani (DBI)* 14 (1972), s.v. "Bucciardo, Giorgio" by Roberto Zapperi.
[89]Giorgio Bucciardo in Cattolica to Gonzaga, 10 July, 1493; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 453.
[90]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 279, 283–4.
[91]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 286.
[92]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 276, 279.
[93]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 290–1.
[94]Gonzaga in Mantua to Chiara Gonzaga, 25 July 1493; ASMn AG b.2905, lib. 148, c. 13v. The sultan appears to have earmarked this relic for the pope; Bāyezīd II to Pope Alexander VI [n.d. but probably August–December 1493], BOA, TS.MA.E 815/19 (formerly 7219/1).
[95]Malacarne, *Signori del cielo*, 294–5.
[96]Kissling hypothesised that Bucciardo was in Gonzaga's service in 1496, but did not trace their relationship any earlier; *Beziehungen*, 61, n.137. Bucciardo's identification in German-language works has largely not been taken up by later scholars; see Flemming, "Zwei türkische Herren", 314.

depth of papal involvement, these details explain how Gonzaga hoped to get away with his very public exchange of embargoed gifts: for a year, Pope Alexander had known about, and sanctioned, similar gifts of arms and armour. Perhaps surprisingly then, these very gifts soon contributed to Gonzaga's worsening standing in Borgia circles. This fall from papal graces occurred as Gonzaga pursued a key dynastic aim: the elevation of his younger brother Sigismondo to the rank of cardinal. Placing his conduct with Ottoman interlocutors under intense scrutiny, these developments prompted a shift in Gonzaga's diplomatic strategy from seeking trade licences to another time-honoured practice: requesting absolution.

Begging Forgiveness: Absolution in the Pontificate of Alexander VI

Negative rumours about Gonzaga's conduct during Kāsım's embassy were already circulating by September 1493. Reflecting continuing tension between the norms of princely liberality and Christian fidelity, these rumours revolved around the gifts presented by Gonzaga and the nature of his relationship with Bāyezīd. That autumn, Carlo Canale, husband of Alexander VI's mistress Vanozza Cattanei, warned Gonzaga that he was being censured in the circle of the pope's son, Cesare Borgia. These critiques were apparently incited by letters from the Archbishop of Arles, Niccolò Cybo, a relative of Bucciardo and Pope Innocent.[97] Through Bucciardo, Cybo claimed that Gonzaga had given "all the keys of [his] lands and state" to Kāsım in Mantua. At issue was not the "liberality" of the gifts themselves, which the assembled listeners deemed "well done" and legitimate. Rather it was the keys, interpreted "as an act and demonstration that Your Lordship recognises him [Bāyezīd] as Your lord", which exceeded the bounds of propriety.[98]

These allegations accurately reflected not only certain facets of Gonzaga's own conduct, but also Ottoman rhetoric surrounding relations with foreign rulers. In drafted correspondence to Muṣṭafā Bey, Gonzaga had indeed adopted the rhetorical posture of a faithful vassal, placing himself at the sultan's disposal. In return, he requested an Ottoman standard (Tr. *sancak*) to "hold for the sake of [the sultan's] glory".[99] Gonzaga would repeat the request again after 1495 when he claimed the Battle of Fornovo as a victory over the French on Bāyezīd's behalf.[100] Not just a Turkish collectible, the standard implied Gonzaga's investiture as an Ottoman captain and might have been intended to join standards from Gonzaga's mercenary contracts held in his armoury.[101] The incumbent Grand Vizier certainly understood it this way when he responded that Gonzaga had already received the customary Ottoman reward for valour in the sultan's service: a caparisoned horse and two golden robes. Because of the circumstances and the luxurious

[97]On Cybo, possibly an Ottoman collaborator, see Giovanni Ricci, "Les Lettres de 1494 Entre Alexandre VI Borgia et Bayezid II: Les Effets Indubitables d'une Documentation Douteuse", in *Épistolaire Politique II: Authentiques et Autographes*, ed. Bruno Dumézil and Laurent Vissière (Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2016), 239.
[98]Carlo Canale in Caprarola to Gonzaga, 11 September 1493; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 458.
[99]Gonzaga in Mantua to Muṣṭafā Bey, 24 July 1493; ASMn AG b. 2190, c. 636.
[100]Gonzaga in Mantua to a son-in-law of the sultan (*Genero Turchi),* probably Hersekzāde Aḥmed Pasha, 10 November 1495; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 4, c.120v–121r.
[101]These were inventoried at the death of Francesco's son Federico; Daniela Ferrari, ed., *L'inventario dei beni del 1540–1542*, Le collezioni Gonzaga 1 (Silvana, 2000), 283–4, items 5942–5959.

material, these were likely robes of honour (*ḫil'at*).[102] Even before the news of Fornovo, however, Muṣṭafā clearly represented Gonzaga as a vassal. In an intelligence report submitted to Bāyezīd, he wrote:

> it was heard that the Lord of Mantova intended to send a man to [your] servant [Muṣṭafā] in order to consult together [and] request that permission be granted from the Asylum of the Sultanate [Bāyezīd] to meet the French army and make war upon the enemy.[103]

Through hierarchical codes of gift-giving and diplomatic rhetoric, therefore, Gonzaga and the sultan were certainly performing an asymmetrical relationship of love and service. In Ottoman diplomatic practice, this was far from exceptional.

Indeed, Ottoman sultans' universalist claims depended on rhetoric which, as Güneş Işıksel argues, "defined relations with other political entities and the reception of their envoys, as favours bestowed by the sultans, thus placing all interlocutors in a subordinate position".[104] This emphasis on the Ottoman sultan as the unilateral guarantor of "a harmonious, well-ordered equilibrium" among subordinate rulers has been attributed to the later sixteenth century, when territorial expansion through conquest slowed.[105] However, such ideas were already developing in Bāyezīd's reign. The chronicler Aşıkpāşāzāde wrote along these lines c. 1484 when describing how the sultan's magnificence filled the inhabited quarter of the world, drawing in ambassadors from the rulers of Hungary, Poland, Wallachia and Egypt as well as from the Franks, Tatars and Circassians. Aşıkpāşāzāde celebrated how all these envoys "accepted the presents (*in'āmlarını*) and favours of Sultan Bāyezīd Han [and] made a visitation to the foot of his throne" before returning home.[106] That they did so as awed vassals is implied by Aşıkpāşāzāde's language, which emphasised the hierarchical nature of the exchange. For while early Ottoman chronicles used a variety of synonyms for gifts, palace documents distinguished items presented from inferiors to superiors (*pişkeş*) from benevolent donations given by the sultan to his subjects (*in'ām*), whether in the form of cash or goods including robes of honour and horses.[107] Peter Burschel has argued that this system, which valued re-gifting by the sultan to his subordinates, alienated Habsburg diplomats in the early seventeenth century. He thus contends that "two political economies of gift-giving" divided

[102]Hersekzāde Aḥmed Pasha in Istanbul to Gonzaga, 20 March [1498]; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 83. For this purpose, military commanders sometimes took *ḫil'at* on campaign to distribute on the sultan's behalf; Reindl-Kiel, "East is East", 118. Because Aḥmed Pasha clearly communicates their function, I depart from Gatward Cevizli's contention that "Francesco was probably unaware of" the robes' meaning as a symbol of exemplary service as a vassal; see "Portraits", 49. Similarly, I do not see a progressive assertion of Western diplomatic codes in Gonzaga's Ottoman relationships; see Lazzarini, "Écrire à l'autre", 180.

[103]Muṣṭafā Bey to Bāyezīd [n.d. but attributable to early 1495], BOA, TS.MA.E 592/11 (formerly 3293/1).

[104]Güneş Işıksel, "Hierarchy and Friendship: Ottoman Practices of Diplomatic Culture and Communication (1290s–1600)", *The Medieval History Journal* 22, no. 2 (2019): 288. This is an oft-cited feature of Ottoman diplomatic practice, but scholars including Işıksel now emphasise greater flexibility in its legal underpinnings. Cf. Arı, "Early Ottoman Diplomacy", 44; Daniel Goffman, "Negotiating with the Renaissance State: The Ottoman Empire and the New Diplomacy", in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65, 73; Gilles Veinstein, "Les fondements juridiques de la diplomatie Ottomane en Europe", *Oriente Moderno* 88, no. 2 (2008): esp. 520; Rudolph, "Institutionalization", 167.

[105]Işıksel, "Hierarchy and Friendship", 286.

[106]Aşıkpaşazade, *Âşıkpaşazâde tarihi [Osmanlı tarih (1285-1502)]*, ed. Necdet Öztürk (Bilgi Kültür Sanat, 2013), 293.

[107]Necdet Öztürk, "Osmanlı Kroniklerinde Hediye Kayıtları (1299–1500)", in *Hediye Kitabı*, ed. Emine Gürsoy-Naskali (Kitabevi, 2007), 51; on these terms, see Muslu, *Imperial Diplomacy*, 37. On the fiscal dimensions of *pişkeş* in Persianate West Asia, see Ann Lambton, "'Pīshkash': Present or Tribute?", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 57, no. 1 (1994): 145–58.

Europeans from the Ottomans, creating a gulf of misunderstanding which European parties were disinclined to overcome.[108]

Increasingly, however, scholars including Natalie Rothman have situated Ottoman–European relations within a shared Eurasian field of courtly interaction in which gifting practices were at least "potentially commensurable". Nonetheless, even in this "trans-imperial" framework, Rothman identifies a strategic bivalency surrounding gifts.[109] This involved European parties, including Venetian, Habsburg and, later, French and British representatives framing objects as free gifts between sovereigns, while Ottomans portrayed the same exchanges as tributes from vassals.[110] Both sides upheld this diplomatic fiction as a measure to save face, often through the ambiguities of translation. For example, internal Ottoman discourse represented seventeenth-century Habsburg gift packages as tribute (*haraç*), while in texts for Habsburg recipients they were presents (*armağanlar*).[111] Christian Windler has extended this argument to European negotiations in the western Mediterranean with the semi-independent regencies of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Essential to rendering "rituals of inequality acceptable" to European consuls, this ambiguity over gifts was joined by a discourse of Muslim alterity that allowed consuls to divorce their acts of submission in Maghrebi courts from questions of status at home.[112] In this context, Francesco Gonzaga appears unusual not because his gift-giving symbolically subordinated him to an Ottoman sovereign, but because both parties explicitly acknowledged a shared understanding about their relative positions (at least to each other).

While Gonzaga's example therefore strongly affirms commensurability between gift-giving practices, his case is nonetheless distinct from the dissimulated tributary relations discussed above. Most significantly, as a marquis in a world of emperors, kings and *padişahs*, he staked no universalist claims to rival Ottoman sovereignty.[113] Instead, Gonzaga described himself as a "free lord" whose state, while small, was "without dependency upon others of Italy", thereby emphasising his capacity to conduct relations unfettered by another's oversight.[114] Nor do Gonzaga's gifts satisfy Sinem Arcak Casale's definition for tribute, whose quantity, value and frequency were stipulated in advance. Such distinctions, she argues, analytically separate the lavish gifts given by Safavid rulers to the Ottoman court from Habsburg tributary payments fixed through negotiation, even if their lack of reciprocation registered a relative decline in Safavid power.[115] Importantly, Gonzaga retained control of the decision to send or forgo an embassy to Istanbul. Despite

[108]Peter Burschel, "A Clock for the Sultan: Diplomatic Gift-giving from an Intercultural Perspective", *The Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (2013): 558. His emphasis on disjunction and misunderstanding builds on the "fundamental disagreement between East and West concerning gifts" diagnosed by Reindl-Kiel, "East is East", 113.
[109]Rothman, "Accounting for Gifts", 415, quotes on 416.
[110]Rothman, "Accounting for Gifts", 416–17.
[111]Burschel, "A Clock for the Sultan", 554.
[112]Christian Windler, "Performing Inequality in Mediterranean Diplomacy", *The International History Review* 41, no. 5 (2019): 951–4, quote on 952.
[113]Windler sets out to explain the presence in the Mediterranean of multiple, competing and yet (largely) peaceably co-existing universalisms; "Performing Inequality", 949.
[114]Gonzaga in Mantua to Muṣṭafā Bey, 24 July 1493; ASMn AG b. 2190, c. 636.
[115]Casale, *Gifts in the Age of Empire*, 15; compare with the combination of tribute payments and ad hoc gifts to Ottoman provincial office-holders in the Ragusan case; see Vesna Miović [Perić], "Beylerbey of Bosnia and Sancakbey of Herzegovina in the Diplomacy of the Dubrovnik Republic", *Dubrovnik Annals* 9 (2005): 39–56; and Jesse C. Howell, "The Ragusa Road: Mobility and Encounter in the Ottoman Balkans (1430–1700)" (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2017), 44–9.

pressure to maintain a steady stream of gifts and information, then, his offerings were not like Habsburg tribute. Finally, his obligations were not formalised through a treaty (*ʿahdname*). He instead enjoyed the sultan's friendship, a bond more "flexible and unrestricted by legal sanctions", though still hierarchically structured.[116] These considerations, however, did not blunt the political utility carried by accusations of defecting to the Turk.

By February 1494, the rumours against Francesco Gonzaga reported by Carlo Canale had escalated into allegations levelled by the pope himself. Before these charges can be analysed, however, Canale's letter of warning needs to be placed within the context of Borgia politics. After discussing Kāsım's embassy, Canale reported that the conversation turned to Giovanni Sforza of Pesaro's recent marriage to the pope's daughter Lucrezia. Although the groom was Gonzaga's brother-in-law by his first marriage, Gonzaga had apparently spent more on the Ottoman ambassador than on presents for the bride. Canale worried that such oversights might disadvantage "our Mantuans" in the fierce competition over ecclesiastical preferment then unfolding in the curia.[117] Like many prominent families, the Gonzaga anticipated that a new pope would expand the College of Cardinals and advocated furiously for Francesco's younger brother Sigismondo to be elevated. Although the Gonzaga had cordial relations with Rodrigo Borgia before his elevation, both contemporaries and modern scholars agree that the family's shallow pockets, relative lack of influence and frequent indiscretions kept Sigismondo off the roster of new appointees.[118] In slighting both Lucrezia and Giorgio Bucciardo, Gonzaga had seemingly squandered important opportunities to gain the Borgias' favour.

These political crosscurrents converged in February 1494 when Gonzaga instructed his current representative in Rome, Fioramonte Brognolo, to seek absolution on his behalf "for the arms given to the *oratore* of His Majesty the *Gran Turco*" during the 1493 embassy.[119] Like trade licences, absolution for contact with Muslims was a bureaucratic process, one administered by the Apostolic Penitentiary. In 1494, it was headed by Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, but proctors at the 12 minor penitentiaries processed routine petitions in exchange for fees of up to 600 ducats.[120] Like licences, absolutions should be seen as essential to the functioning of embargo, guiding violators back into the Christian fold. As Stantchev explains, "the loss of sheep was not the point of excommunication".[121] Illustrating this principle, Gonzaga himself wanted absolution so he could take communion at Easter, and had made a similar request at least once before.[122] This suggests that absolution, too, formed part of Gonzaga's diplomacy by dispensation. However, Francesco's case soon escalated when Fioramonte was referred to a higher-ranking curia official, the Datary (*datario*) Juan López, who would compose a bull of absolution after consulting the pope.[123]

[116]Işıksel, "Hierarchy and Friendship", 289.
[117]Carlo Canale in Caprarola to Gonzaga, 11 September 1493; ASMn AG b. 849, c. 458.
[118]*DBI*, 22 (1979) s.v. "Cattanei, Giovanni Lucido" by Roberto Zapperi; A. Luzio, "Isabella d'Este e i Borgia", *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, Serie V, I, no. 3 (1914): 469–82. On the appointments, see Michael Mallett, *The Borgias: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty* (Bodley Head, 1969), 131–2.
[119]Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 13 February 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 32–3.
[120]Ludwig Schmugge, "Cleansing on Consciences: Some Observations Regarding the Fifteenth-century Registers of the Papal Penitentiary", *Viator* 29 (1998): 346–52.
[121]Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality*, 199.
[122]Gonzaga to Giorgio Brognolo, [n.d., approximately 15 March 1494], ASMn AG b. 2905, lib. 149, c. 40r; on his previous absolution, see Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 13 February 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 32–3.
[123]For Datary fees, see Esch, "New Sources on Trade", esp. 136.

This mired both Fioramonte and his brother Giorgio in weeks of protracted negotiations at the curia, where they countered a shifting barrage of character attacks. First, the pope alleged that Gonzaga had procured sexual favours for Kāsım after the ambassador "became enamoured of one of his youths (*se inamoro de uno suo regazo**)". Fioramonte denied the charge.[124] While this allegation's source is unclear, Gonzaga did have a known taste for younger male partners.[125] Such liaisons were widespread in both Italian and Ottoman societies, but Italians nonetheless stereotyped Ottoman diplomats as predatory pederasts.[126] The pope's suspicions may reflect these wider anxieties. Then the pontiff's objections shifted to reports that Gonzaga "had taught these Turks how to make arms".[127] Kāsım had indeed toured Mantua's fortifications, although proof of more substantive technology transfer remains elusive.[128] The Brognolo brothers nonetheless strenuously denied it as slander from politically motivated cardinals.[129] The weapons and armour that Gonzaga had undeniably given Kāsım, however, needed a different defence. These, they claimed, were antiques given "more for beauty than because they could be suitable for offence", and had been an effective way to elicit unprecedented concessions from the sultan.[130] Finally, Gonzaga himself appealed by letter to his scrupulous record of seeking out papal licences in the past. He defended himself for giving a crossbow to Kāsım by claiming that the pope's own nuncio had approved the act.[131] Given that Gonzaga's diplomacy by dispensation has been extensively documented here, this at least was likely true.

Nonetheless, the decision to keep these dispensations off the books in previous years had created plausible deniability. The pope now leveraged this convenient fact to drive up the cost of Francesco's absolution and his brother Sigismondo's promotion to cardinal, both of which were discussed during the same audiences. But while Alexander permitted Gonzaga to confess and be absolved on 23 March provided that he swore "to never again give any aid whatsoever to the Turks, neither of arms nor of any other thing", the pope adroitly avoided committing to Sigismondo's promotion.[132] Instead, he delegated both matters to the Datary, who negotiated a payment of 15,000 ducats to the pope and a further 1,000 to his office for both affairs.[133] Ultimately these arrangements fell through, and Sigismondo would not be named cardinal until 1505.

[124]* The gender ending of regaz- is ambiguous but *suo* is clearly masculine; Fioramonte Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 13 February 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 32–3.
[125]Molly Bourne, "Mail Humour and Male Sociability: Sexual Innuendo in the Epistolary Domain of Francesco II Gonzaga", in *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Ashgate, 2010), 202.
[126]Noel Malcolm, *Forbidden Desire in Early Modern Europe: Male–Male Sexual Relations, 1400–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 8.
[127]Giorgio Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 23 March 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 57.
[128]Gatward Cevizli discusses Kāsım's military interests, but not accusations levied in Rome; "More than a Messenger", 169–70, 180.
[129]Giorgio Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 5 March, 1494; ASMn AG b. 850, c. 41v.
[130]Giorgio Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 23 March 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 57.
[131]Gonzaga to Alexander VI, 29 March 1494; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 3, c. 4r.
[132]Giorgio Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 23 March 1494; ASMn AG b.850, c. 57r–v.
[133]Giorgio Brognolo in Rome to Gonzaga, 17 March 1494; ASMn AG b. 850, c. 51r. On costs, see Marco Pellegrini, "A Turning Point in the History of the Factional System in the Sacred College: The Power of Pope and Cardinals in the Age of Alexander VI", in *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492–1700*, ed. Gianvittorio Signorotto and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 19.

Coda: A Promise Ignored

Despite Gonzaga's protestations that he "would more readily die than commit" the sins ascribed to him, his brush with infamy in the papal curia in 1494 did not prevent him from resuming his gifts of arms.[134] That very month, one of his servants planned to meet one of Bāyezīd's sons-in-law, seemingly to exchange "ten or twelve mares of good pedigree" for "a beautiful breastplate, though it cost a hundred ducats", in addition to a cuirass with a pair of mail sleeves and two or three gorgets made to measure.[135] Later, in 1497, Gonzaga presented Bāyezīd with the sword and helm of Matthieu de Bourbon captured in the Battle of Fornovo.[136] While Gonzaga thus continued small-scale diplomatic giving, some Ottoman interlocutors wanted commercial consignments of Italian wares. For example, after receiving a breastplate from Mantuan envoys as a gift in December 1496, the Ottoman sub-governor in Podgorica named Firüz requested 30 or 40 more, complete with gorgets and helms.[137] Although it is unclear if Gonzaga fulfilled Firüz's request, Venetians suspected him of continued arms trading and espionage during the Venetian–Ottoman war of 1499–1503.[138] In 1501, these "dealings with the Turks" even attracted the condemnation of King Louis XII of France, with whom Gonzaga had taken a contract in 1499.[139]

Whether Gonzaga continued to lean on the methods of diplomacy by dispensation to excuse these gifts is not yet clear. Nevertheless, threads of diplomacy continued to link Rome, Mantua and Istanbul despite Alexander's earlier censure. In November 1494, Bucciardo was returning from Istanbul with Kāsım on a mission to secure Ottoman funds and diplomatic support for the pope against the invading French. The pair were ambushed outside Ancona and divested of Cem's pension payment, Kāsım's luggage and Bucciardo's compromising dispatches. Kāsım escaped, while Bucciardo was imprisoned. After Gonzaga advocated for his release, Bucciardo gratefully sourced horses for him and even tried to cut Gonzaga into a papal deal with the sultan over the repatriation of Cem's remains after he died in 1495.[140]

Conclusion: Liberality and Licit Gifts

This article has established that Francesco Gonzaga did not defy or ignore, but instead worked through the papal regulations that governed diplomatic and commercial

[134]Gonzaga to Alexander VI, 29 March 1494; ASMn AG b. 2961, lib. 3, c. 4r. b.2961, lib. 3, f. 4r.
[135]Andrea Albanese in Venice to Gonzaga, 10 March 1494; ASMn AG b. 1434, c. 460; quote from Muṣṭafā de la Valona in Vlorë to Gonzaga, [copy dated 1495 but probably March-September 1494]; ASMn AG b. 86, lib. 16, c. 94/141r–v. On his debated identity, see Vatin, Nicolas, "Itineraires d'agents", 39–40, n.34.
[136]Hersekzāde Aḥmed Pasha in Istanbul to Gonzaga, 20 March [1498]; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 83; on Matthieu's capture, see Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy", 381.
[137]Firüz in Podgorica to Gonzaga, 26 December 1496; ASMn AG b. 795, c. 71.
[138]This eroding trust began as early as 1494, when Gonzaga entertained overtures to enter French service, and deteriorated sharply in June 1497 when the *Consiglio dei Pregadi* stripped Gonzaga of the title of Captain General, alleging he had taken a contract with Charles VIII; see Coniglio, *Mantova: La Storia*, I, part 2, 150–4. Related anxieties may have exacerbated the difficulties faced by Gonzaga's envoy to Istanbul in the winter of 1496/7; see Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy", 366–87. Ansani follows Kissling in blaming the situation largely on the envoy's own poor character; Ansani, *Il cavallo da guerra*, 197–201; Kissling, *Beziehungen*, esp. 61.
[139]Reported by Marin Sanudo, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto (MCCCCXCVI–MDXXXIII) dall' autografo Marciano ital. cl. VII codd. CDXIX–CDLXXVII*, ed. Federico Stefani et al. (F. Visentini, 1879), III: col.1254. See discussion in Kissling, *Beziehungen*, 97; and Sebastian, "Turkish Prosopography, Vol. I", 129.
[140]Giorgio Bucciardo in Podgorica to Gonzaga, 23 and 26 December 1496; ASMn AG b.795, c. 70, 79; for full analysis, see Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy", 298–342.

exchanges between Christians and Muslims, a policy described here as diplomacy by dispensation. In his repeated petitions for trade licences and absolutions between 1491 and 1494, Gonzaga advanced diverse justifications for his gifts of arms and armour to Ottoman interlocutors. Sometimes, he minimised them as courtesies and *objets d'art.* At other times, he made pragmatic appeals to their diplomatic efficacy, to the defensive value of the horses they procured for him, and to their strategic insignificance. Throughout, he used embargoes as a discursive resource to articulate the utility of his gifts to the papacy and Christendom, styling himself a faithful servant of both. Gonzaga's diplomatic success at the Ottoman court therefore simply cannot be understood without recognising Rome's unique logistical and ideological functions.[141] The city both served as a space of encounter with Ottoman diplomats and provided an arena where claims about his conduct could be staked, contested and defended among Christian audiences.

But while embargoes in the fifteenth century furnished "a broader discourse of proper behaviour in business and politics" through which a ruler like Gonzaga could legitimise his gifts to Muslim courts, this discourse was also available to other actors.[142] This potential was seized by Gonzaga's rivals in the curia and, it seems, by Pope Alexander himself, who staked competing claims about Christian common interest. In doing so, they redefined Gonzaga's sanctioned gifts as illicit contraband and construed displays of princely liberality as a compromising act of submission to the sultan. Echoing hierarchical Ottoman understandings of gift-giving, this redefinition placed Gonzaga among the ranks of other prominent fifteenth-century figures whose licensed gifts of arms were later turned against them. For example, the wealthy financier Jacques Coeur's fall from French royal favour in 1451 incited charges of trafficking war materiel to Muslims. He protested that the diplomatic gifts of weapons to the Mamlūks that he arranged were purely ceremonial and, moreover, had been licensed by the pope.[143] The rhetorical similarities between this case and Gonzaga's demonstrate the stability of embargo as a discourse, even as they reveal that the meanings produced by such a normative social "script" are, like the meanings negotiated through gifts themselves, never stable and "closed".[144]

Undoubtedly, such cases constitute exceptions to the routine of papal dispensations that permitted the major players in Mediterranean commerce to conduct large volumes of exempted trade over prolonged periods. Their value lies in revealing mobilisations of time, money and influence usually hidden by bureaucratic processes. Diplomacy by dispensation may therefore be a particularly fruitful heuristic for other cross-confessional exchanges at this intermediate scale. More broadly, it contributes to the ongoing re-evaluation of tired periodisations and Eurocentric paradigms at the heart of "new diplomatic history". Coining the term in 2008, John Watkins celebrated the progress scholars had already made to revise teleological accounts of modern diplomacy's origins in fifteenth-century Italy. He then called for further deconstruction of the boundary separating Europe from its neighbours and of "the distinctions between sacred and

[141]Affirmed generally, though not with reference to Ottoman affairs, by Daniela Ferrari, "I Gonzaga e la corte papale nella documentazione diplomatica mantovana del cinquecento", in *I Gonzaga e i Papi: Roma e le corti padane fra Umanesimo e Rinascimento (1418–1620); atti del convegno Mantova–Roma, 21–26 febbraio 2013*, ed. Renata Salvarani, Monumenta studia instrumenta liturgica 74 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 80–1.
[142]Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality*, 188–9.
[143]Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality*, 188–9.
[144]Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality*, 196.

secular, [and between] medieval and Renaissance experience" adapted into the field from Jacob Burckhardt's influential work.[145] Since then, historians have amply demonstrated that the decisive participation of religious authorities and exclusionary rhetoric in Mediterranean diplomacy was not a medieval hold-over. Instead, figures such as the Ottoman *şeyhülislām* (chief juristconsult to the sultan) were elaborating novel methods "to give Islamic legal sanction to pragmatic … decisions" well into the seventeenth century.[146] The parallels between this "*fetvā* diplomacy" based on legal competence and diplomacy by dispensation suggest that early modern comparisons between the pope and *şeyhülislām* were not idle.[147] Instead, they grasped how across the Mediterranean, it was not always the repudiation of religious norms but sometimes the harnessing of boundary maintenance mechanisms by authorities within faith communities that shaped cross-confessional commercial and political exchange.[148]

Routine alone, however, does not explain why Gonzaga's diplomacy by dispensation remained so invisible to historians. It is therefore useful to conclude by reflecting on this absence. As we have seen, the dubious grounds of the dispensations may have played a role by encouraging dissimulation by many parties. Orality in the papal curia contributed, but so too did textual practices such as the Gonzaga dynasty's curation of eulogistic anthologies of their diplomatic correspondence.[149] These furnished many of the earliest documents of Mantuan–Ottoman diplomacy to be published, and the least compromising.[150] The organisation of correspondence by place of origin in the *Archivio Gonzaga* has also encouraged researchers to concentrate on the Levantine folders. By contrast, this story has traced actors in the archive along complex itineraries to recover crucial conversations between Venice, Rome and Mantua, among others. Finally, the selective transcription in the early twentieth century of documents relating to Gonzaga–Borgia relations effectively pruned Ottoman affairs out of the picture, leaving Gonzaga's diplomacy by dispensation hidden in plain sight.[151] These absences have permitted Gonzaga's friendship with Bāyezīd's court to become instead a symbol of Mediterranean

[145]John Watkins, "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 2–4, quote on 2; see Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Penguin Classics (Penguin Books, 1990); Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Jonathan Cape, 1955); Donald E. Queller, *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1967).

[146]Joshua M. White, "Fetva Diplomacy: The Ottoman *Şeyhülislam* as Trans-Imperial Intermediary", *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, nos. 2–3 (2015): 200–1.

[147]For sources comparing the two, see White, "Fetva Diplomacy", 200–1.

[148]Emanuel Buttigieg and J. Carvahlo, "'Clash of Civilizations', Crusades, Knights and Ottomans: An Analysis of Christian–Muslim Interaction in the Mediterranean", in *Religion and Power in Europe: Conflict and Convergence* (PLUS-Pisa University Press, 2007), 207–12; Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Mediterranean*, Princeton Modern Greek Studies (Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 8. A turn toward the analytic of confessionalisation has helped to bring these dynamics into focus; see for example Terzioğlu, Derin, "How to Conceptualize Ottoman Sunnitization", *Turcica*, 44 (2013): 301–38; Jacob Norris, "Dragomans, Tattooists, Artisans: Palestinian Christians and their Encounters with Catholic Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 1 (2019): 68–6.

[149]Isabella Lazzarini, "Patterns of Translation: Contacts and Linguistic Variety in Italian Late Medieval Diplomacy (ca. 1380–1520)", in *Translators, Interpreters, and Cultural Negotiators: Mediating & Communicating Power from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, ed. F. Federici and D. Tessicini (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 40. On the biography of the codex used most intensively here, British Library MS Harley 3462, see Smit-Bose, "Multispecies Diplomacy"44 n.144; 214 n.217–19.

[150]Beginning with Ferrato, *Il Marchesato di Mantova*.

[151]Kāsım is excerpted out of the account of events from July 1493 to March 1494 in Luzio, "Isabella d'Este e i Borgia", 475–85; and idem. "Isabella d'Este e i Borgia: Documenti XXVI", *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, Serie V, II, no. 3 (1915): 414. Ottoman affairs are also omitted from the *DBI* entries for Giorgio and Fioramonte Brognolo.

cosmopolitanism unhindered by religious strictures, when in fact the regulatory and discursive legacy of medieval crusading was integral to his success.

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