Noel Malcolm,

***Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in The Sixteenth Century Mediterranean World*,**

London: Allen Lane, 2015, xxv+604 pp., ISBN 978-019-0262-78-5.

Noel Malcolm's exhaustively researched new book on several generations of the Albanian Bruni family will no doubt receive a good deal of attention from historians of Catholic Europe and the Counter-Reformation, and deservedly so. But Ottoman historians should read it as well. In vivid and elegant prose, Malcolm gives us the best account I have seen yet of the Ottoman conquest of the Albanian world, as well as a fine-grained study of cross-border relations and Ottoman diplomacy at work, both in the region and in Istanbul.

As he tells us in the Preface, the idea for the book took shape more than twenty years ago while reading a sixteenth-century Italian text on the Ottoman Empire. There was a reference to a treatise written by a certain Antonio Bruti who was identified as an Albanian. This was a thrilling moment for Malcolm because "[h]ere was a reference to a text about (or at least partially about) Albania, written by an Albanian – something of special significance to those who study the history of that country, since it would appear to be the first ever work of its kind by a named Albanian author."(p. xvii)

Thus began a hunt for the traces left by Antonio Bruti in the historical record, a hunt that ended up uncovering a number of prominent individuals, all of whom were members of either the Bruni or the Bruti family, the latter having married into the former. Over the course of the sixteenth century the family could boast of, among others, a knight of the Order of St. Mark for services rendered to Venice, a Knight of Malta, an Archbishop and a servant in the entourage of Sultan Murad III. Given their remarkable history, Malcolm decided to write his book as a "collective biography" and to use that biography "as a framework on which to build some broader, more thematic accounts of East-West relations and interactions in this period."

Malcolm's lengthy study is divided into twenty two chapters and an Epilogue. The book moves chronologically, beginning with the Ottoman advance into the western Balkans in the fifteenth century and concluding with the Long War of 1593-106. Various members of the Bruni family figure prominently in the tumultuous events of these one hundred and fifty years and many of the chapters are organized around one particular individual. Others are of a more general nature and serve to move the narrative along.

The book opens with the Ottoman conquest of Albania, viewed from the then Venetian town of Ulcinj (Dulcigno) in today's Montenegro, because it is there that the family's story begins. Malcolm does this throughout, weaving together the history of the region with the family's history; this makes for a text that is more engaging than most academic writing and no doubt explains why a book about a sixteenth century Albanian family has been reviewed, and reviewed very positively, by publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement.*

Ottomanists will appreciate his synthetic narrative of the arrival of the sultan's armies since, outside of the rebellion of Skanderbeg, Albania in this early period usually gets short shrift. The northern/southern divide is key in Malcolm's account. Most of the country's ports clustered towards the northwest and were strongly oriented towards Venice. In Shkodër, Lezhë and Durrës the largely Catholic, Italian-speaking population fled, either to Venice itself or to other towns in the Venetian Adriatic, and these towns became majority Muslim. Vlorë, in the south was different. There the Greek-Orthodox residents surrendered and urban life was far less disrupted. The city remained majority Christian into the Ottoman period and a number of Spanish Jews settled there as well. More generally, mostly peaceful conditions prevailed in southern Albania under the new masters

while the Ottoman advance "was more traumatic for the northern half of Albania than for almost any other part of the Balkans."(p. 16) This, he suggests, was not because the Ottomans adopted harsher policies towards the north. Rather, the flight of most of the commercially active population combined with the drawn-out wars of resistance to devastate local society.

The Bruni and Bruti families were among those who fled from the sultan's armies over the course of these decades, ending up in Ulcinj just across the border. But flight did not mean the cutting of ties with their ancestral cities. Malcolm begins his story of the family with Antonio Bruti, who was born in Lezhë in 1518 and moved to Ulcinj when he was nineteen, under pressure, it seems, from the Ottomans. Arriving during the Ottoman-Venetian war of 1537-1540, Bruti was immediately given a ship and sent to report on Ottoman ship movements along the coast. Charmingly, this activity had a name; he was sent to "pigliar lingua," literally " to take tongue (p. 37), which involved landing on the coast and questioning local sailors and fishermen about conditions. It seems he also took the opportunity to buy a good deal of Albanian grain. After the war ended he continued his services, including negotiations with local Ottoman officials, becoming, in Malcolm's words, "a negotiator, local diplomat and all-purpose 'fixer.'"(p. 38) Indeed, far from breaking with the Ottoman Balkans, Bruti's value lay precisely in his ability to operate on both sides of the border.

Antonio Bruti lost his life in 1571 when the Ottomans seized Ulcinj, and subsequent chapters move on to his brothers-in-law. Giovanni Bruni was in attendance at the Council of Trent as the Archbishop of Bar and Gasparo Bruni became a Knight of Malta. One of the things that the books shows very well is how many opportunities there were for well-connected Catholics in this sixteenth-century world, both within the world of Catholic politics as well as across the eastern Mediterranean. Like Antonio, Gasparo became a key figure in the transmission of information across political and religious boundaries. No sooner was he inducted into the Order of St. John then he was sent to Dubrovnik (Ragusa) to await letters from informants in Istanbul. Malcolm takes this opportunity to describe the extraordinary events that took place in the city just before Gasparo's arrival. A commander of the fortress at Barletta, in Spanish held Italy, went to Istanbul and converted to Islam. He then promptly turned around and denounced the Ragusans for sending intelligence reports to Naples, something which he knew all about since his own father was a vital part of this chain. (p. 96) The authorities at

Ragusa immediately put a complete (if temporary) halt to all intelligence-gathering in the city. The book is full of such vivid anecdotes, which marvelously convey this connected world stretching from Istanbul to the Italian peninsula.

One story in particular has already been mentioned more than once in other reviews of this book and I must give it here too. Not only is it dramatic; it is also a particularly dazzling example of the assiduous research undergirding this book. In the run up to the battle of Lepanto, the Ottomans seized Bar and Giovanni Bruni was enslaved. Despite his high status, the Ottomans decided to humiliate him, because he had passionately opposed the city's surrender, by making him a galley slave. Thus he participated in the famous battle as a rower on an Ottoman ship. He survived the battle but not its aftermath. In the wake of the Ottoman defeat, victorious Christian soldiers poured onto the Ottoman galleys, looking for loot. But not only that, they actually killed Christian captives in order to rob them of what little they had. From a report compiled by the Vatican after the events, we learn that Giovanni Bruni was among their victims, even though he shouted "I'm a bishop, I'm a Christian."(p. 168) As if that weren't wrenching enough, Malcolm's meticulous reconstruction of the battle strongly suggests that Giovanni's brother, Gasparo, was less than a hundred yards away, commanding his own galley, when his brother died.(p. 169)

In the wake of the war, the Bruni/Bruti families relocated to Koper, in the north-eastern corner of the Adriatic. Their services to the Ottomans, the Venetians and now the Spanish, continued. By the mid 1570s Bartolomeo Bruti, a member of the next generation, was a Spanish spy resident in Istanbul. Their story goes all the way up to the Long War, 1593-1606, when we find Benedetto, the son of Antonio whose treatise started Malcolm on his long quest, assisting the Habsburg Ambassador in Istanbul. Prior to that he had spent time in Moldavia, acquiring a position at the voivod's court as well as property in the province.

Malcolm's book comes to an end in the 1590s, with a wave of deaths in the Bruno and Bruti families. Some of their descendants would go on to have illustrious careers of their own "but theirs is a different story."(p. 430) Considering that both families continued in some ways, it would have been interesting to have Malcolm's thoughts, however brief, on how their descendants story was different. In the 17$^{th}$ century how did the world change for these Albanian Catholics, hanging on at the edges of the Ottoman and Catholic worlds? But

perhaps that is too much to ask in what is already a very long and thorough study.

I have already mentioned the contributions that Malcolm has made to Ottoman history. Let me conclude with one more. Although Malcolm's book is structured in the decidedly old-fashioned form of a *histoire événementielle*, his keen observations of the Ottoman borderlands are very much in line with recent trends in Ottoman diplomatic history, as well as diplomatic history more generally. For a long time historians emphasized a radical divide between Europe and the Ottoman Empire; the former established embassies in Istanbul while the Ottomans did not do the same in Europe. Therefore, it was pronounced, the Europeans engaged in diplomacy and the Ottomans did not. Then, all sorts of essentialist statements about the Ottomans – their insularity, their commitment to an eternal *jihad* and so on and so forth – were piled on top of the discussion about embassies. More recently, scholars have begun to develop the concept of "vernacular diplomacy" which, among other things, shifts the focus from official diplomatic channels and offices to the many informal diplomatic actors who operated in diverse networks of contact and exchange, including on the borders. Malcolm's book is full of these people. There are, of course, the Brunis and the Brutis themselves but the Ottomans also appear. For example, when writing about Dubrovnik we think first of the tribute which this city had to send to the Ottomans. But "the registers of the city council record a regular flow of gifts from the Ottoman side."(p. 40) The voyvoda of Trebinje sent livestock and cheese, the emins of Vlorë delivered carpets and two sets of horse's harnesses; even a feared corsair captain, Kara Hoca, sent a carpet to Dubrovnik. (p. 40) In the last ten years or so, in fact, enough has been written on Ottoman vernacular diplomacy that perhaps it is time to convene a conference to bring everyone – from the Adriatic to the Kurdish tribal zones – together. Noel Malcolm's outstanding book makes it clear that the Bruni family deserves to be there.

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