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Published on H-Italy (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

In 1593, Friedrich von Kreckwitz, imperial ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, described Benedetto Bruti’s assistance to him: “He served me in the most constant and useful way; for when I was in extreme peril, abandoned by everybody, and with my dragoman in prison, this man ... not only offered himself for these dangerous services, but immediately engaged in the business, and went everywhere making enquiries, gaining information, taking soundings and making proposals ... as an Albanian he has acquaintance and dealings with, and access to, the most prominent people at the Porte (as almost all of them are from that place), and many other significant people in these territories; he is, for a Christian, in considerable credit with them, and in any important matter can very quickly obtain information, negotiate, and get things done, better than anyone else” (pp. 396-97). With this glowing endorsement, von Kreckwitz summed up the careers of several members of the Albanian Bruti and Bruni clans, the titular figures in *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World*. This prosopography of brothers Serafino, Giovanni, and Gasparo Bruni, their brother-in-law Antonio Bruti, and their descendants, provides a narrative frame allowing author Noel Malcolm “to build some broad, more thematic accounts of East-West relations and interactions” in the sixteenth century (p. xvii).

The Bruni/Bruti story began in Ulcinj, an Adriatic coastal city that formed an important outpost of the Venetian overseas empire or *stato da mar* until its conquest by the Ottoman Empire in 1573. There Antonio Bruti married Maria Bruni, consolidating the political and social connections of several prominent families. This milieu allowed them to garner familiarity with local power networks, languages, and politics, all of which would aid Antonio’s entrance into the service of the Venetian empire. Their very heritage as citizens of this hybridized Balkan borderland made the Bruni and Bruti “trans-imperial subjects,” to use Natalie Rothman’s helpful terminology (*Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*, 2012). Their linguistic skills, political
connections, and wide-ranging information networks rendered them invaluable to Venetians, but also capable of selling their skills to the highest bidder, be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim; Spanish, Venetian, Ottoman, or other. And so they did: over subsequent generations these kinsmen became diplomats, dragomans (official translators), men of the church, “cup bearers” at the Moldavian court, and warriors in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The reputation for loyalty and service earned in the Ottoman war of 1571-73 afforded subsequent generations of Bruni and Bruti men sympathy, offices, and even nobility granted by the doge of Venice when war forced their relocation to Istria. The names Bruti and Bruni carried such political capital that Pasquale Drabi, dragoman to English ambassador to Istanbul Edward Barton, was commonly called by his mother’s maiden name, Bruti. These intertwined families experienced highs and lows akin to those of the family of Samuel Pallache, a Jew of Fez described in Mercedes Garcia-Arenal and Gerard Wieger’s *Man of Three Worlds* (2010) who changed, chameleon-like, his national (and religious) identity in order to suit his political circumstances as he moved from Spain to North Africa to Amsterdam. Together these and other recent studies of trans-imperial or transnational subjects do much to complicate our understanding of identity politics in the early modern Mediterranean.

Despite the wealth and fame they gained, the lives of the Bruni/Bruti men also demonstrated the perils feared by von Kreckwitz. In addition to dying in war, these men risked imprisonment and the threat of captivity, a topic that will be familiar to readers of Linda Colley’s *Captives* 2004). Here Malcolm sheds considerable light on the evolving processes of confinement and prisoner exchange in the Mediterranean. Finally, given the propensity (or necessity) of regularly changing sides, more than one Bruni/Bruti male was executed for treasonous crimes.

Following the peregrinations of the Bruni/Bruti clan in such detail over a period of one hundred years allows Malcolm to cover political and military developments in nearly all the Mediterranean, from Spain and its North African ambitions to the Malta of the Hospitallers, to Venice, Rome, and the Bruni/Bruti’s Balkan homelands, a frontier vied for by Venetians, Ottomans, and Habsburgs alike. Malcolm’s truly is the “greater” Mediterranean as his characters take the reader beyond the sea to Romania, Poland, and as far north and east as Russia. The narrative of this work and its focus on the entire Mediterranean thus effects a welcome shift from western into central Europe, reminding readers again and again of the interconnected nature of Eurasian empires in the sixteenth century by presenting political developments east and west in one narrative, and striving to resituate the center of and/or broaden the spectrum of early modern European history, which tends, with seeming inevitability, to look west.

Malcolm’s sizeable text offers new focus and insight into other themes common to Mediterranean scholarship. He demonstrates the complexities of early modern empire building. Great distances (geographical, linguistic, and cultural) led to governance challenges between imperial metropoles of Venice, Vienna, Madrid, and even Istanbul, and their widely scattered peripheries. Resistance to imperial power was far from uncommon, despite attempts to maintain local traditions, and information provided by brokers like the Bruni and Bruti kinsmen was often an essential bulwark to organized opposition. Malcolm closes his book with an account of a history of Albania written by Antonio Bruti, whose namesake uncle had first established the family’s fame there and beyond. It is clear from the text that the author hoped its description of land, people, and politics could be used by the Ottomans’ enemies to free his former homeland. Entire groups of people (“raiding societies” in Malcolm’s terminology), such as the Barbary corsairs, Uskoks, and
Cossacks, constantly destabilized empires with both their military acumen and trade interventions and rightly should be considered a part of the system rather than a contravention. The costs of maintaining borders, armies, and information networks played on early modern empires, and it was the cost of imperial maintenance (and imperial growth) which most challenged empires like the Ottoman in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rather than those elements pointed to by contemporary Western rivals: “corruption and luxury among the ruling élite, the political influence of women in the Sultan’s harem, and the increasing remoteness of the Sultan” (p. 413).

Readers will glean much about myriad Mediterranean and central European topics in Malcolm’s notable text, but little about female agents of empire, whether sultanas or the wives and daughters who played their role in bringing together and cementing the Bruni/Bruti alliance, perhaps because of the nature of Malcolm’s sources. The very impressive vastness of the book may also be the cause of a source of frustration for some readers. The author and/or his editors have chosen to include one footnote per paragraph throughout the book. Although this no doubt makes for a more concise notes section, for scholarly readers it presents two possible complications. First, it is sometimes challenging for a reader to identify the specific author of a given quotation from a long paragraph in the text, as a given note sometimes contains upwards of ten references. Second, Malcolm has limited his notes to direct citations: in such a rich text the curious reader intrigued by any number of fascinating topics included in this history may be left longing for suggestions for further reading or general historiographical references. These lacunae do not in any way diminish the significance of this book, which does much to reframe the East/West dichotomy, brings central and eastern European politics into the Mediterranean picture, and introduces some intriguing characters along the way.
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