OSMANLI ARAŞTIRMALARI

THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES

İstanbul-1990
A NOTE ON «CHRISTIAN» PREACHERS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Colin IMBER

One of the most striking passages in Franz Babinger's study of events surrounding the Varna Crusade of 1444, is a quotation from the late fifteenth-century Cronaca Zancaruola, concerning the execution in Edirne of a Persian preacher who «went about ardently preaching the Faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the law of Muhammad is a bestial law.» The anonymous chronicler clearly associated the martyrdom of the preacher and his followers with the imminence of the Varna Crusade, since he appended it to a description of the panic among the Turks when, in 1444, «news was heard from Hungary that a huge quantity of men were preparing to go and join the Christian army.» In an inspired interpretation of this passage, Babinger linked it with a story in Taşköprüzade's Shaka'īk al Nu'māniyya (1556) about the (1556) execution of a hurufī who had won the confidence of Mehmed II. Babinger postulated that Taşköprüzade's story refers to the period of Mehmed's first Sultanate (1444-1446), and that the «Persian» of the Italian chronicle was in fact not a Christian, but the hurufī whose fate Taşköprüzade describes.

Babinger's hypothesis is very convincing. Combining as it does the two stereotyped Christian themes of martyrdom and the conversion of Muslims, it is difficult to accept the story in the Italian chronicle as a simple statement of fact. It is, on the other hand, very likely that a Christian writer would reinterpret events to accord with his own preconceptions, and imagine the hurufī

1 F. Babinger, «Von Amurath zu Amurath: Vor- und Nachspiel der Schlacht bei Varna (1444)», Oriens, 3 (1950), 244-245.
to be a Christian martyr. Given the Iranian origins of the hurüfi sect, Buhinger’s interpretation would also explain why the chronicle describes the Christian preacher as a «Persian».

The story in the Cronaca Zancaruola is not, however, unique of its kind. There are reports, again in Italian sources, of a similar event, in similar circumstances, in 1495.

The occasion was the French King Charles VIII’s invasion of Italy in 1494-1495, a campaign which caused Bayezid II great fear, as he was well aware of Charles intention of launching a Crusade and of taking over from the Pope the custody of Cem Sultan as an instrument in his designs. The Venetian Domenico Malipiero, among other informants, noted that: «At the Porte there was great fear of Charles progress in Italy. Seeing a strong French fleet at sea, Bayezid had made preparations for 120 galleys to be ready to put to sea; he had placed artillery at the Dardanelles; he had sent 3,000 Janissaries to Gallipoli, a son to Negroponte and another to Mitylene. He was afraid that King Charles might pass to Greece with Cem Sultan and raise the land against him».

It was not only the Ottoman rulers who were aware of Charles VIII’s intentions. In Florence, on 29 November, 1494, in a broadsheet for public distribution, the King had proclaimed: «... We propose to spare neither our own person, nor our efforts and travails to expel the enraged fury of these Turks and to recover the Holy Land and other states taken by them from Christian peoples.» The Kingdom of Naples, which he claimed as his rightful inheritance would, he announced, give him «an easy access to attack the very perfidious Turks». Within less than a month of this proclamation, the mood both of panic and of eschatological expectation which had accompanied Charles progress through Italy had spread to the Balkan peninsula.

5 On this subject, see Anne Denis, Charles VIII et les Italiens : Histoire et Mytho, Travaux d’Humanisme et de Renaissance, No. CLXI, Geneva (1979).
On 19 December, 1494, the Venetian Captain-General made a report which appears in paraphrase in the *Annals* by Stefano Magno: «The said King of France proclaimed that he wished to go against the infidel Turks, and this was made known in those parts of Dalmatia, Macedonia and Epirus ... where Albanians live. Such was the terror among the Turks who were living on those coasts ... that they left the said shore and went inland. It was the common opinion that if someone with such a reputation had crossed to these regions, all the Christian peoples who live in those areas would have united with him, and would have driven the Turks from the dominion of these places».

In January, 1495, Charles VIII entered Rome. On the twenty-seventh of that month, he took custody of Prince Cem. On 22 February, he entered Naples, the starting point of his projected Crusade. On 28 February, news reached Venice that Martin, the Albanian Archbishop of the Venetian town of Durrës, «who was much loved by the neighbouring population who are subjects of Bayezid», had gone to Charles in Apulia, encouraging him to cross to Albania, «claiming that all the people would offer obedience to him».

De Commynes believed that in the lands between Istanbul and Charles proposed landing-place at Vlorë, there were many people «who had heard the news of the King from their friends who were in Venice and Apulia ... and were only waiting for instructions to rebels».


7 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, *Documents Inédits*, vol. 6, 240.

As Charles progress continued, prophecies of the imminent collapse of the Ottomans and the arrival of the conqueror began to circulate in the Balkan peninsula, and a report which reached Venice on 9 March, 1495, indicates a continuing panic among the Turkish population: «When our Captain-General ... passed the shores near Lepanto, and the Turks who were living there saw him, they believed it to be the fleet of the said King (of France) and fled inland» 10. On 26 April, 1495, two months after the death of Cem Sultan, and over six weeks after the Council of Ten in Venice had arrested Archbishop Martin 11, the Grand-Master on Rhodes could still write to Charles VIII: «Each day, according to spies which I have in Turkey, I am told that the Turks, having heard of our victory over the Kingdom of Naples are so frightened and terrified that they are already leaving their coastal places and fleeing to mountains and distant spots. And when they see ships at sea, they already imagine they have seen our army» 12.

These fears soon spread to the Ottoman capital where, an entry in the chronicle of Oruç notes: «All kinds of evil rumours were circulating in the mouths of the people, namely that a great Frankish prince called Efrenc had ... conquered all the islands in the land of the Franks, stretched out his hand against the realms of the Pope of Rome and conquered them. Fighting on both land and sea ... he also conquered the land of Apulia» 13. Popular appre-

9 Anne Denis, Charles VIII et les Italiens, 75.
10 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, Documents Inédits, vol. 6, 240.
11 Stefano Magno, in C. Sathas, Documents Inédits, vol. 6, 242. Bayezid had sent a messenger to Venice to complain that Archbishop Martin had raised 30,000 men in Albania and offered them to the Kings of France and Hungary. On 6 March, 1495, the Venetians sent Alvise Sagondino to assure Bayezid that they had had no part in this plan. On 7 March, Archbishop Martin was arrested and put in chains for having attempted to occupy Krujë. See Domenico Malipiero, Avviali Veneti, 146. On the arrest of Archbishop Martin, see also Philippe de Comynnes, Mémoires, 402-403.
12 Quoted in Paul Durrieu, «Valona, base d'une expédition françaises», 188.
13 R. Kreutel, Der Fromme Sultan Bayezid, Osmanische Geschichtsschreiber, 9 Graz (1978), 81. There is a slight chronological displacement in Oruç, who puts this entry under the year AH 901, beginning on 21 September, 1495, whereas the panic in Istanbul had begun in February, 1495 at the latest. See note 15.
hension must have increased when Sultan Bayezid inspected the fortifications of Istanbul and had artillery placed on the walls. This was a public admission that he feared an imminent French invasion.

On 22 February, 1495, two reports reached Rome, which reflect the mood of panic which had gripped the Sultan and the people of Istanbul. Both reports had come via Venice, and both appear in the diary of John Burckard, the Master of Ceremonies at the Pontifical Chapel. He noted that: «On the seventeenth of this month (February), two slaves of the Grand Turk had arrived in Venice in rapid succession, with singular news of the Turk, who greatly feared the arrival of the King of France.» The second report follows immediately: «Item: it has been written by trustworthy merchants from Constantinople that the Turks greatly fear the said King of France, and that twelve priests of the Turks are preaching the Faith of Christ.»

A paraphrase of the second of these reports appears in the Annals of Stefano Magnio, undated and unattributed, but following an entry concerning the death of Prince Cem:

«Meanwhile in Constantinople, 24 Cadis of the Faith began to preach in mosques, recognising that it was not

These rumours, as Oruç reports them, do not indicate any Turkish awareness of the Christian ideal of a Crusade, such as Charles VIII had vowed to lead. However, a passage in the Kutub-nâme of Firdevsi-yi Rûmi, celebrating the defeat of the Franco-Venetian forces at Mitylene in 1501, indicates, despite the disparaging Muslim terminology, a fairly precise knowledge of crusading ideals. The author makes the Pope say to the King of France: «It is time the idol-worshippers set out / And that the Beni Asfar should attack the Turks / They should attack Constantinople / And help the idolaters' friends / Then the infidels should come to Adana / And make Jerusalem and Damascus their abode / It is time for the Messiah to descend from the sky.»


14 As Alvise Sagondino reported on his return from Venice in November, 1495. See Domenico Malipiero, Annali Veneti, 147.
15 E. Celani (ed.), Johannis Burckardi Liber Notarum ab Anno MOCCLXXXIII usque ad Annum MDVI, Rerum Italianarum Scriptores, vol. 32/1, Città di Castello (1907), 577.
their Faith, but the Faith of the Christians that is good. When the Sultan heard of this, he sent for them and threatened them. When they remained firm in their opinion, the Sultan told them that they were intoxicated and ordered that they be put in prison, telling them that they should reflect. The next day, or the day after, he sent for them and ordered that, if they did not recant, they would be put to death. Whereupon 12 of them recanted, but the other 12 remained constant. He had these cut in half and burned.

This passage contains the same essential elements as the account of the Persian preacher in the Cronaca Zancaruola — the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and their martyrdom for the Faith — and, for this reason, looks at first like a story concocted from stereotyped Christian themes at a time of crusading enthusiasm. The fact that the number of martyrs in Stefano Magno's report corresponds with the number of Christ's disciples reinforces the impression that the tale is a fantasy.

There are nonetheless grounds for believing that both stories are more realistic than at first appears. They are, in the first place, undoubtedly correct in asserting that the Crusade of 1444 and the threatened Crusade of 1495, produced great fear in Edirne and Istanbul respectively. Secondly, the claim in both stories that the Ottoman authorities gave the «Christian» preachers an opportunity to repent before executing them, does reflect Ottoman practice in cases of heresy. It is, furthermore, not impossible that the preachers in these cases really did make claims which could have led a Christian observer to believe that they

16 Stefano Magno, i C. Sathas, Documenta Indita, vol. 6, 241.
17 For evidence of the panic in Edirne, see, in addition to F. Babinger, «Von Amurath zu Amurath», Halil Inaleik and M. Oğuz (eds.), Gazavât-i Sultân Murad b. Mehemmed Han, Ankara (1978), 43.
18 This was true at least in the sixteenth century. The case of Molla Kâzım in 1527 (see note 19) is one example. The question of whether or not a heretic's repentance was acceptable after his arrest is a frequently occurring topic in fetvâs and treatises on heresy. See, for example, M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, Seyhülislâm Ebussuud Efendi Fetvaları, Istanbul (1972), Nos. 481, 973 et al.
were converts to Christianity. This possibility arises from an analogy with the case of Molla Kābz in 1527.

A witness to this event was the Nişancı Celâlzâde Mustafa, who records that «certain zealous ‘ulema brought Kābz before the Imperial Divân in October/November, 1527, for preaching in public that Jesus was superior to Muhammad. In his first trial before the kâdaraskers, who were unable to refute his case, and then before the kâdi of Istanbul and the şeyhülislâm Kemâlpaşa-zâde, Kābz defended his view with quotations from the Koran and the hadith. When he refused to recant, Kemâlpaşa-zâde issued a fetva declaring that his case warranted the death penalty, which the kâdi authorised after Kâbz had again refused to renounce his beliefs.

There are a few elements in Celâlzâde’s account which appear to be literary stereotypes, notably that Kābz preached in «wineshops», wine being a Muslim symbol of infidelity. In general, however, his story is convincing. In particular, his statement that Kābz drew his argument from the Koran and the hadith receives support in Kemâlpaşa-zâde’s Treatise on the Definition of the Word Zındık, which he wrote as a consequence of the case. Here, he defines a zındık as someone who, like Kābz, uses the true sources of Islam to propagate heresy. Nevertheless, beyond Celâlzâde’s statement that he preached the superiority of Jesus over Muhammad, and supported his view from Muslim scripture, there is no record of Kābz’s beliefs. This is, however, enough to make it clear that he was not a Christian, as this would have required a total refutation of the prophethood of Muhammad and the citation of Christian rather than Muslim texts. Nevertheless, a European hearing his claims might well have believed him to be a Christian, and it is conceivable that the preachers in the Cronaca Zancaruola and Stefano Magno’s Annals were making claims similar to Kābz’s.

20 Risâle fi tahâkîk lâfz al-zındîk, printed text in Raś’il Ibn Kemâl, İstanbul, 1315/1898-9, 240-249.
Another similarity between Kabız and the earlier preachers is that 1527, like 1444 and 1495, was a time of popular panic. The threat this time came not from a Crusade, but from a series of popular, religiously inspired uprisings in Anatolia\(^{21}\). When, on 20 June, 1527, a dervish called Kalender, who claimed descent from Hacı Bektaş and who, according to Celâlsâde, coveted the Sultanate, decisively defeated the Imperial Army under the command of the beglerbegis Anatolia and Karaman\(^{22}\), the end of Ottoman rule must have seemed as near as it had at the time of the Varna Crusade and the threatened invasion of Charles VIII. As in the times of earlier crises, the Muslim populace of the Ottoman capital became especially receptive to heterodox teaching, as the case of Molla Kabız demonstrates, and equally the case of Oğlan Şeyh who was executed for preaching heresy in the following year\(^{23}\).

It seems possible, in fact, that there was a sect in Ottoman popular religion which was not strictly Christian, but which believed in the supremacy of Jesus over Muhammad, and which manifested itself in public at times of crisis, when the collapse of the established religious order seemed imminent. In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Paul Rycaut described just such a sect, which he claimed to be of recent origin: «There is an opinion of late years principally maintained among the gallats of the Seraglio, and common in Constantinople, the professors of which are called Chupmessahi, or the good followers of the Messiah; these maintain that Christ is God and Redeemer of the world ... O this sort of people there are great numbers in Constantinople, some of which have so boldly asserted this doctrine that they have suffered martyrdom under this denomination ...» Rycaut concluded in tones typical of Christian writers: «It might

\(^{21}\) For the background to, and a conspectus of these events, see Hanna Sohrweide, «Der Sieg der Safawiden und ihre Rückwirkung auf die Schliten Anatoliens», Der Islam, 41 (1965), 167-186.

\(^{22}\) For the disturbances in Anatolia and Kalender's rebellion, see Celâlsâde Mustafa, Tabakât Ul-Memâlik, 1646-169a.

\(^{23}\) For the case of Oğlan Şeyh and further bibliography, see El\(^{3}\), <Malamatiyya: 3. In Ottoman Turkey>. 
take an unexpected footing and prepare the way for the Plantation of the Gospel. It is tempting, yet again, to dismiss Rycaut's statement as the fantasy of an over-optimistic Christian. But it is equally tempting to suggest that the sect which he describes really existed, and that it was over two centuries older than he believed it to be.