

The Levant Company Between Trade and Politics: or, the Colony That Wasn't **Martin Devecka**

The Levant Company formed, in 1592, as the result of what could be called a “merger” between two earlier merchant corporations, the Venice Company and the Turkey Company, themselves both Elizabethan foundations. It isn't immediately obvious why these two companies should have wanted to set up shop under a common shingle. Since their merchandise and zones of operation hardly overlapped--the one carrying agricultural products from Venice's overseas empire, the other carrying silks and other partially-finished luxuries from the Ottoman mainland--a unified charter did nothing to eliminate redundancies. Attempts to explain the merger as reflecting a “regionalist” approach to Mediterranean trade are vexed by the long career of the Barbary Company, which, despite significant overlap between its membership rolls and those of the Levant Company, was to continue trading independently with the littoral states of North Africa well into the 18th century.¹

So there are no simple explanations for the origin of the Levant Company. I would like to begin by proposing a complex one, which has its roots in a commodity that seems to have made up the bulk of the company's trade in the century after its charter. The currant was a phenomenally popular comestible in Tudor and Stuart England. Whether used in baked goods or eaten fresh, it provided a valuable source of sweetness at a time when sugar was still a luxury. There were only two places in Europe where currants could be acquired: the island of Zacynthus (Zant or Zante in contemporary documents) and its neighbor Cephalenia. Both, in the 16th and 17th centuries, were under the sovereign control of Venice, which had monopolized their trade in the early Tudor period.²

Currants had begun to be shipped in English bottoms during the Spanish embargo of the early 1570's, and the traffic had proven profitable. The Venice Company established a monopoly over this trade on the part of a group of London merchants in exchange for a quantity of customs receipts which they undertook to pay to the crown yearly for the six-year duration of their charter. Whether the royal treasury was best served by this arrangement, or by something resembling free trade, was a matter for pamphleteers to debate now and throughout the following century. Elizabeth, in any case, must have been convinced that an open arrangement was more to her benefit, since the charter of the Venice Company was not renewed in 1588. The Venice merchants themselves seem, in an odd way, to have agreed with her, since they had been farming out their charter privileges to all comers for several years prior.³

The currant trade, in short, was or could seem too profitable to be engrossed. At about the same time, the merchants of the Turkey Company were confronting an opposite problem. The terms of their charter, which dated from 1585, required them to maintain an agent in Constantinople who had quickly taken on the functions, and financial obligations, of an official ambassador. The outlay involved outstripped the company's discretionary funds, raised by the collection of modest membership dues. So, while the Turkey trade itself might be quite profitable, the organization of that trade under a chartered company appeared unsustainable because of the corporate political obligations that attached.⁴

The embassy in Constantinople was indispensable for the protection of English merchants trading in the Mediterranean, and for the extension of their trading privileges within the Ottoman Empire. But such a far-off diplomatic establishment could claim, too, to have done some service for the English Nation at large. At a time when Spain had wanted to hurl its whole military might against the shores of England, the deft negotiations of the Turkey Company ambassador had prevented an Ottoman-Spanish peace and kept valuable Spanish ships bottled up in the Mediterranean - or, at least, so the Company claimed in an early attempt to renegotiate its charter⁵

A plea in such circumstances is liable, of course, to overrate the influence of an ambassador who should not have been directly involved in the negotiation of any such peace. The correspondence of William Harborne, England's first ambassador to the Ottomans, does however show that he was actively at work to sabotage Spanish diplomatic interests in Constantinople. So the Company's claims had not been ginned up for the benefit of England's political classes, since we find them repeated in intra-company documents as well. Indeed, Elizabeth and her advisors never seem to have questioned the utility of maintaining an ambassador in Constantinople. It was the merchants of the Turkey Company that remained unconvinced: they were prepared to terminate the office on Harborne's recall in 1588, against the latter's strenuous objections. The expense of maintaining an embassy, with regular lavish gifts to the Sultan and his court, was too great for a small private company of merchants to bear.⁶

So the Turkey Company had undertaken to maintain an embassy that was beyond its means, while the Venice Company needed to defend its lucrative monopoly against the petitions of competing merchants. The companies thus labored under complementary burdens which could be lightened by amalgamation. A combined Levant Company offered a broader fiscal base from which to draw support for the ambassador, whose office made a valuable hostage against attempts to revoke or modify the company's currant monopoly. Thus, when this charter was left to lapse by James I, who was experimenting with ways of regulating the currant trade that might prove more profitable to the crown, the members of the Levant Company left their embassy in place at considerable expense to themselves; this was an important bargaining chip in their ultimately successful negotiations to recover the monopoly.⁷

Consequently, the Levant Company was from its foundation an organization that combined political and economic goals. That it did so was key, indeed, to its success on both fronts: the delegated sovereign powers of the ambassador at Constantinople served both to protect English merchants there and to hinder interlopers against the company's monopoly rights, while the ambassador's influence with the Sultan rose or fell with the level of English trade.⁸

The Levant Company seems to have stumbled quite by accident upon an amalgamation of commercial interests and sovereign power that was characteristic of other, more colonial and expansive English chartered companies, which, from America to India, developed commercial interests using means and administrative devices borrowed from the state apparatus. So the eventual trajectory of the Levant Company calls for explanation. As we know, there was never an English colony in Turkey; rather than developing into a quasi-autonomous engine of empire, the Company remained bottled up in a few trading ports until its dissolution near the beginning of the nineteenth century. Why did it fail to become "territorialized," as so many other, organizationally-similar chartered companies did?⁹

One appealing answer to this question would be to say that the Ottoman Empire simply wasn't a fertile ground for colonial projects: that, as a sovereign state with imperial ambitions of its own and the military strength to attempt them, the Ottoman Empire was in a position to resist any enterprise that would have impinged upon its sovereignty. I think this response is incorrect or at least insufficient. First, it puts us in the difficult position of determining what made the Ottomans more of a "sovereign state" than, say, the Mughal Empire. Then, and perhaps most importantly, the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire was already laboring under centrifugal tendencies and structural problems that would prove fatal to it at a later date. It was able to confront these problems successfully, for a time, precisely because it could count on limited foreign interference in its internal affairs. To blame the Levant Company's limited success on the "strength" of the Ottoman State is therefore a kind of circular reasoning.¹⁰

The reasons for the Levant Company's "failure" to become territorialized lie rather closer to home. In the late 1620's, King Charles I began to exert his influence in the choice of the English

Ambassador to Constantinople, a privilege that had previously lain with the Company's governors and assistants. Sackville Crowe, the last ambassador appointed before the outbreak of the Civil War, had in fact been chosen over the Company's veto. King Charles knew his man; Crowe began to distrain the property of parliamentarian Turkey merchants as early as 1642, and continued to do so, much to the Company's chagrin, until his recall in 1646.¹¹

The pattern of royal interference thus established continued after the restoration, and the embassy had been practically "nationalized" by 1700. This matters because the Levant Company thereby lost control of the only institution that could have developed into an autonomous administrative apparatus-- as it did, for instance, in the East India Company. Soon the home government began to choose, not only the ambassadors, but also the consuls, who in turn influenced the selection of the company's factors; by which point, the whole governmental structure of English activity in the Levant had effectively got out of the Company's hands.

So a schism emerged between elements that remained integrated for other English colonial enterprises. The Civil War split them neatly: the embassy, as we saw, labored hard in the loyalist cause, while the merchants of the Company could be counted upon by parliament, which renewed their charter as exclusive importers of currants into parliament-controlled ports in 1644. While the Company's trade in currants and other commodities continued to thrive through the rest of the century, the administrative apparatus that could have organized this trade on a territorial basis had effectively been captured by the crown. It seems, then, that domestic politics bears the blame for the Levant Company's decidedly humble career.¹²

This analysis invites a further question. Why did Charles regard the Turkish embassy as sufficiently important to arrogate to himself, while he let the embassy to the Mughals remain in Company hands? The documents tell us only that Charles wished to increase "the dignity of the office." This would answer to a difficulty much attested by earlier ambassadors - namely, that they were slandered by the representatives of other nations as "mere merchants" or "the stipendiaries of merchants." Royal selection, and the relatively high social status of the ambassadors that Charles chose, might be expected to lay such charges to rest.¹³

One is inclined to regard such an argument from dignity as specious, or at least secondary. It points, though, to another, more substantial difference between the Ottoman Empire and the Mughals. By 1640, the Ottomans were hosting ambassadors or lesser diplomatic representatives from most of the nations of Europe. In the Mughal Empire, the English held the field themselves. The English representative to Constantinople thus had to deal with the whole European diplomatic scene - because the Ottomans were a European power, to advance or impede whose designs might be a matter of importance, not only to the members of the Levant Company, but to the nation of England as a whole.¹⁴

The ability of the Ottomans to resist a corporate mode of English colonialism appears to have depended, then, not so much upon the "strength" of the seventeenth-century Ottoman state as upon its location within the diplomatic zone of Europe. Its status as a European state made the English embassy there too important to be left in the hands of mere merchants, and the Stuarts arrogated the management of that embassy to themselves--though its maintenance remained the responsibility of the Levant Company well into the eighteenth century. The fusion of political and economic machinery upon which the formation of the Levant Company had been predicated, and which foreshadowed later English colonial enterprises, was thus, at least in part, broken. Although the embassy continued to provide protection to the company, it was no longer "of" the company, as its actions during the English Civil War would show. And so the history of the Levant Company ended by running in reverse.

¹ For the "standard" narrative of the Levant Company's formation, see Epstein, M. *The Early History of the Levant Company*. Reprints of Economic Classics. New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968 (1935): 25-45. For a summary narrative of the fusion of these

companies, On the Barbary Company, see Cawston, G. *The Early Chartered Companies*. London: E. Arnold, 1896: 236, and for membership overlap between these two Companies see Lewes, R. *The Merchants Mappe of Commerce*. London: Printed for Ralph Mabb, 1638:235-236.

² On the currant trade, see e.g. Sandys, G. *A Relation of a Iourney Begun an: Dom: 1610: Foure Bookes. Containing a Description of the Turkish Empire, of Ægypt, of the Holy Land, of the Remote Parts of Italy, and Ilands Adioyning*. Richard Field, 1973 (1615):5-6. For the use of currants as a sweetener in medieval and early modern England, see Mintz, S. *Sweetness and Power*. New York: Penguin, 1986: 84-85. On the breadth of the market for currants in England, see Brenner, R. *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993:42

³ For this brief history of the Venice Company, see Epstein 1935: 21-24. For early disputes regarding free trade in currants, see Robert, R. *Chartered Companies and Their Role in the Development of Overseas Trade*. London: Bell, 1969:39, Epstein 1935: 24. The debate continued into the seventeenth century: compare Malynes, G. *The maintenance of free trade according to the three essentiall parts of traffique*. London: Printed for William Shefford, 1622:25-27 with Misselden, E. *The circle of commerce. Or The ballance of trade in defence of free trade: opposed to Malynes little fish and his great whale, and poized against them in the scale*. London: Printed for Nicholas Bourne, 1623: 33.

⁴ The first ambassador, William Harborne, began to exercise his duties in 1583 (Epstein 1935: 8). For the events leading up to his dispatch and arrival, see Rawlinson, H. G. "The Embassy of William Harborne to Constantinople, 1583-8." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1922): 1-27: 1-5. For a detailed treatment of the Company's difficulties in maintaining this embassy, see Rosedale, H. G. *Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company a Diplomatic and Literary Episode of the Establishment of Our Trade with Turkey*. The Making of the Modern World. Part 2 (1851-1914). London: H. Frowde, 1904. *passim*.

⁵ For the primary responsibility of the ambassador to defend English merchants, see e.g. the instructions issued by King James I to Thomas Roe or Rowe, who served in that position from 1621 to 1628 (Roe, Thomas. *The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe in His Embassy to the Ottoman Porte, from the Year 1621 to 1628 Inclusive: Containing ... His Correspondences ... And Many Useful and Instructive Particulars, ... Now First Published from the Originals*. London: printed by Samuel Richardson, at the expence of the Society for the Encouragement of Learning, 1740: 2); for examples in practice, see Rawlinson 1922: 10; Bent, J. T. *Early Voyages and Travels in the Levant. I. The Diary of Master Thomas Dallam, 1599-1600. II. Extracts from the Diaries of Dr. John Covel, 1670-1679. With Some Account of the Levant Company of Turkey Merchants*. Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society, 1st Ser no. 87. New York: B. Franklin, 1964: 73-74, and Rycout, P. *The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire...* Charles Brome, 1971 (1638): 60. On the embassy's claims to political utility, see Rosedale 1904: 44-45 and Epstein 1935: 30.

⁶ For these disputes and negotiations, see Rawlinson 1922: 16-18.

⁷ For the events leading up to the renewal of the Levant Company's charter in 1605, see Epstein 1935: 50-51 and Robert 1969: 40-43.

⁸ Rowe, for example, clearly felt he had a duty to defend the Company's privileges by requiring foreign traders who wished to ship in English bottoms to pay the Company's "consulage fee" (Roe 1740: 449-450, 635-637). In the period following the 1605 charter, the company seems to have felt secure enough in its charter to experiment with new forms of joint-stock and monopsony management (Epstein 1935: 110-123).

⁹ The interchange of personnel between the Levant Company and its more directly imperial contemporaries is perhaps revealing in this connection. Rowe had served as ambassador to the Mughal Court for the East India Company (Roe 1740: viii), whose house in London the governors of the Levant Company used briefly for meetings in the 1620's; indeed William Hawkins, that pioneer of the East Indies trade, had trained up in the service of the Levant Company (Robert 1969: 68). For the extensive overlap between investors in these two companies, see Brenner 1993: 21. There were American connections as well, of whom the most famous is doubtless George Sandys, a traveler who had stayed in the house of the Company's ambassador at Constantinople (Sandys 1615: 1-2); but for John Winthrop, jr. and Edward Hawkins, too, the journey East had preceded the journey West (Bailyn, B. *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012: 402, 474).

¹⁰ On "centrifugal tendencies" in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire, see Finkel, C. *Osman's Dream*. New York: Basic Books, 2005: 228-252 and Barkey, K. *Bandits and Bureaucrats*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994: 48-54.

¹¹ For increasing Stuart influence on selection of ambassadors, see Epstein 1935: 78-81. For Crowe's heavy-handed royalism, see Bent 1964: xii and Bendish, T. *Newes from Tvrkie, or, A true relation of the passages of the Right Honourable*

Sir Tho. Bendish, baronet, Lord Ambassadour, with the Grand Signieur at Constantinople, his entertainment and reception there. London: printed for Humphrey Blunden, 1648 *passim*.

¹² For this parliamentary employment of the Levant Company, see the proclamation of parliament printed for Edward Husbands, 1644: *An ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament for appointing a solemne day of thanksgiving for the happy success of the forces under Sir William Waller and Sir William Balfore : against the forces under the command of Sir Ralph Hopton, who were totally routed on the 29 of March last, 1644 : together with an ordinance of the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament to enable the merchants of Levant company, to import in English bottomes any currans and to land them within any port within the power of the Parliament.* Of the Company's ambassadors prior to 1620, at least two ended up serving in the Long Parliament; after the restoration, the office became a prerogative of the nobility for half a century.

¹³ Roe 1740: ix-xii. Compare Rawlinson 1922: 11.

¹⁴ For an enumeration and a perhaps biased ranking of these embassies, see Rycout 1638: 105.