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Theodoridis, C.P.

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The *Keyser Octavianus* incident and Dutch-Hospitaller relations during the Cretan War (1645–1669)¹

On 7 May 1663, six ships entered Aboukir Bay, just east of Alexandria, sailing in close formation and flying Ottoman colors. The Dutch merchant ship *Keyser Octavianus*, captained by Marten Reylofsen Vijgeboom, was laying in port waiting to sail on the established route between Alexandria and Constantinople, carrying goods belonging to Ottoman merchants and dignitaries. As the small flotilla was drawing closer, the largest ship – sporting an armament of 28 cannons – replaced the ensign on its main mast with the flag of Saint Mark, patron saint of Venice. The bold act of deception had worked brilliantly and the Dutch merchantman had now little room for escape: the captain simply chose to board a smaller craft and surrender himself to this small fleet that – as it turned out – was made up of three Maltese galleys of the Order of Saint John, two galleys of Livorno, and a Venetian sailing ship.²

Ever since their expulsion from Rhodes and resettlement in Malta in 1530, the Knights of the Order of Saint John devoted themselves to raiding Muslim shipping, as a means of waging a ‘maritime holy war’. On the southern shore of the Mediterranean, the corsairs of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli – all nominally under the suzerainty of the Sultan – were devoted to the same end.³ With the outbreak of the Fifth Ottoman-Venetian War, also known as the Cretan War (1645–1669), the Order joined forces with Venice and her allies, while the Barbary states provided their galleys for the Sultan’s effort to capture the island

1 Research for this paper was funded by the Onassis Scholarship for Master’s Studies (2015–2016). Special thanks are due to Professors Michiel van Groesen and Catia Antunes for their remarks and corrections.

2 K. Heeringa ed., *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van den Levantschen handel*, vol. III (The Hague 1917) 164–165, doc. 41, Wijgeboom to Warner, 29 June 1663. The terms ‘Knights

of Saint John’, ‘Order of Malta’, and ‘Hospitallers’ will be used interchangeably in this paper.

3 The literature on corsairing and piracy in the early modern Mediterranean is vast and expanding. For a concise standard account see P. Earle, *Corsairs of Malta and Barbary* (London 1970).



The Eastern Mediterranean as depicted in Joan Blaeu's *Atlas Novus* (detail), 1658. COLLECTION ERFGOED LEIDEN EN OMSTREKEN.

of Crete. As the Eastern Mediterranean turned into a battleground, Ottoman merchants became increasingly dependent on neutral Christian vessels, such as those of the Dutch, the English, and the Greeks. This strategy had serious limitations: potential attackers (especially the Maltese), could claim as legal prize any ship carrying a Muslim cargo.⁴ The seizure of the *Keyser Octavianus* was one such case.

When news of the ship's capture reached Constantinople, it became clear that the incident was bound to have grave consequences for Dutch-Ottoman relations. The loss of the valuable cargo, in conjunction with the lack of resistance on behalf of the captain and crew, had raised the suspicion of compliance with the attackers. The Dutch ambassador to the Porte, Lewin Warner (1655–1665), was summoned to provide explanations in an audience with Grand Vizier Köprülü Fazıl Ahmed in Adrianople (Edirne), where Sultan Mehmed IV held his court.⁵ As expected, the Dutch stressed the numerical superiority of the attackers and denied the accusations of compliance. The Dutch consul in Alexandria, Jan Theyls, had been an eye-witness to the attack, and assigned blame on the ship's crew: only three crewmembers were actually Dutchmen while the rest were “all sorts of Italians and Greeks that had no

4 For the limitations of relying on Christian shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean see M. Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Early Modern Medi-*

terranean (Princeton 2010).

5 M.D. Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (New York 2011) 145.

intention to fight against their own nation.”⁶ Moreover, in their address to the Porte the States-General promised to investigate the stance of Vijgeboom (the ship’s captain), and punish him “with the utmost diligence” should he be found guilty.⁷

Ottoman officialdom was not satisfied with the excuses, and, in July, Warner was thrown in jail, remaining imprisoned for about a month. More importantly, the incident resulted in one of the heaviest *avantias* (extortory payments) in the history of the Dutch Levant trade, as the Ottomans demanded the payment of 78.445 *leeuwendaalders* (or 157.000 *gulden*) in damages.⁸ The heaviest burden was bore by the Dutch merchant communities in Smyrna, Aleppo, and Alexandria, who were advised to simply proceed with the payment as soon as possible and keep a low profile: As the sum was huge, however, the Directorate of the Levant Trade decided the imposition of an extra 1% duty on all Dutch cargoes, the so-called *tanza* or *Levantrecht*.⁹

In 2012, the Netherlands and Turkey celebrated the conclusion of four hundred years of official diplomatic relations, starting with the grant of the Dutch ‘Capitulations’ (*ahdnameler*) of 1612 by Sultan Ahmed I. Meanwhile, in the course of the past two decades, a significant number of publications has become available on Dutch-Ottoman relations.¹⁰ The events surrounding the capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* have not been ignored in this secondary literature. An awkward chapter in the history of Dutch-Ottoman relations, the incident and its aftermath is portrayed as an unfortunate moment governed by happenstance, which revealed the limits of the principle of ‘free ship, free goods’ in the form it was propagated by the Dutch.¹¹ In this article, I place the

6 Heeringa, *Bronnen*, 444, doc. 172, Theyls to the Directors of the Levant Trade, 22 May 1663, “allerhande soorten van Italiane en Grieken (...) eygen natie niet wilden vechten”.

7 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (NL-HANA), Staten-Generaal (SG), inv.nr. 6909, The States-General to the Porte, 1 December 1663, “sullende alle diligentie (...) laten doen”.

8 M. Hoenkamp-Marzon, *Palais de Hollande te Istanboel: het ambassadegebouw en zijn bewoners sinds 1612* (Amsterdam 2002)

9 On the topic of *avantias* and European misunderstandings of Ottoman laws see M. Olzon, “Towards Classifying *Avantias*: A Study of Two Cases involving the English and Dutch Nations in Seventeenth-Century Izmir” in: A. Hamilton, A.H. de Groot and M.H. van den Boogert eds., *Friends and Rivals in the East: Studies in Anglo-Dutch Relations in the Levant from the Seventeenth to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Leiden 2000) 159–186; M. van den Boogert, *The Capitulations and the Ottoman Legal System: Qadis, Consuls, and Beraths*

in the 18th Century (Leiden 2005) 117–157.

10 Heeringa, *Bronnen*, 10.

11 For the early history of Dutch-Ottoman relations see A. de Groot, *The Ottoman Empire and the Dutch Republic: a History of the Earliest Diplomatic Relations 1610–1630* (Istanbul/Leiden 1978); B. Mehmet, *Ottoman-Dutch Economic Relations in the Early Modern Period 1571–1699* (Utrecht 2000). For the conclusion of four hundred years of official diplomatic relations see I. Karaçay, *400 jaar officiële betrekkingen Turkije-Nederland en 50 jaar Turkse migratie. Türkiye-Hollanda arasında 400 yıllık resmi ilişkiler ve Hollanda’ya Türk göçünün 50’nci yılı* (Almere 2012).

12 For accounts of the incident see Z. Çelik-kol, A. de Groot and B. Slot, *Lale ile başladı: Türkiye ve Hollanda arasındaki dört yüzyıllık ilişkilerin resimli tarihçesi* (Ankara 2000) 68; Hoenkamp-Marzon, *Palais de Hollande* 50; Wout Troost, *Istanbul en Den Haag: de betrekkingen tussen het Ottomaanse Rijk en de Republiek (1668–1699)* (Dordrecht 2014) 16–17.

Keyser Octavianus incident in the context of Dutch involvement in the Cretan War and the siege of Candia (1647–1669), through the prism of Dutch-Venetian relations. Moreover, by turning to the study of Dutch-Hospitaller relations, I will argue that the seemingly incidental capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* can be linked to a policy of reprisals which the Order of Malta had adopted against the Dutch Republic as retaliation for the sequestration of the Order's possessions in the Netherlands – a process initiated during the Dutch Revolt, some ninety years earlier. This wider context of the incident will reveal the extent to which the Cretan War (a Christian-Muslim standoff likened to a crusade) became an ideal stage for old inter-Christian rivalries to be played out.

THE DUTCH REPUBLIC AND THE CRETAN WAR (1645–1669)

Lewin Warner, Dutch ambassador to the Porte between 1655 and 1665, has attracted scholarly attention mostly thanks to his fame as a renowned Orientalist (and contributor of a large collection of manuscripts to the library of the University of Leiden), and not so much because of his skills as a diplomat.¹² Originally of German extraction, Warner enjoyed corresponding with the Dutch States-General in Latin, and luckily a letter penned after his release from Adrianople provides an insight into what determined the measure of the Ottoman reaction. According to Warner, Ottoman officials who were present during his audience demanded a harsh punishment for the Dutch by specifically mentioning that “Dutch ships had always provided all sorts of assistance to the Venetians.”¹³ In fact, Ottoman suspicions of the Dutch captain's compliance were further fueled when it became known that, after its capture, the *Keyser Octavianus* was led to the (besieged) Venetian port of Candia where its cargo was divided; this is downplayed in the consular reports, but clearly stated in a resolution of the States-General.¹⁴ In view of this, it is imperative to place the whole incident within the context of Dutch involvement in the Cretan War.

The outbreak of the Cretan War was caused by an act of violence at sea that actually bore strong resemblance to the capture of *Keyser Octavianus*. In September 1644, the corsairs of Malta set upon an Ottoman ship which was carrying pilgrims and high-ranking Ottoman officials on their way to Egypt. As the incident had taken place in the vicinity of Crete, Venice was accused of harboring the aggressors in defiance of earlier agreements.¹⁵ Thus, in the spring

12 J. Drewes, *Levinus Warner and his Legacy: Three Centuries Legatum Warnerianum in the Leiden University Library* (Leiden 1970).

13 G.N. du Rieu ed., *Levini Warneri De Rebus Turcicis Epistolae Ineditae* (Leiden 1883) 91, doc. 83, Warner to the States-General, 17 September 1663, “addiderat voces, tanquam Belgicae naves semper essent subsidiariae Venetis”.

14 Heeringa, *Bronnen*, 54, doc. 4, Extract (...) van de H. M. Staten-Generaal, 1 December 1663, “tot Candia opgebracht, ende de ladinge onder deselve ses schepen verdeelt sijnde”.

15 K. Setton, *Venice, Austria and the Turks in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia 1991) 104–137. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Venetian shipping itself had actually suffered quite a few depredations by the

of 1645 an Ottoman expedition set sail for the island. Venetian defenses were swiftly overrun, and most of the hinterland came under Ottoman control in less than one year. In May 1648 the Ottoman troops finally laid siege on Candia, the island's heavily fortified capital, which the Venetians were determined to hold at any cost. The city would not surrender before 1669 after twenty-one years of siege, making the siege of Candia one of the longest sieges in history.¹⁶

Throughout the war, Venice garnered material and moral support from all over Europe, earning this conflict the name of the 'last Crusade'.¹⁷ From as far as Protestant Scandinavia, mercenaries and volunteers joined the ranks of the Venetian army and the Maltese galleys in order to "fight against the Turks."¹⁸ More importantly, the French mounted two expeditions, the first in 1660, and the second in 1669, aiming to assist Venice by relieving the siege of Candia.¹⁹ To be sure, the Cretan War posed a challenge for all mercantile states that traded in the Mediterranean – and therefore sought peaceful relations with the Sultan. Thus, despite public enthusiasm for the Venetian cause, England tried to remain as aloof of the conflict as possible – a stance dictated by the considerations of the Levant Company, but also largely by the costs of the English civil-war.²⁰

From the perspective of Dutch-Ottoman relations, we can safely assume that the timing of the outbreak of hostilities in Crete was not fortuitous for Venice: the Dutch Republic had concluded peace with Spain in 1648, and its commerce was greatly benefitting from the disruptions of the Venetian Levant trade. In fact, Jonathan Israel has claimed that the most dynamic phase of the Dutch *Straatvaart* should be placed in the period between 1647 and 1672 – roughly corresponding with the timespan of the Cretan War.²¹ To be sure, the

Maltese. See the classic study by A. Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice, 1580–1615* (Berkeley 1967).

16 For some standard concise accounts of the main events of the Cretan War (and the siege of Candia) in different Mediterranean historiographic traditions see İ.H. Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi: XVI* (Ankara 1954) 142–146; R. Mantran, 'Venezia e i Turchi (1650–1797)' in: C. Pirovano ed., *Venezia e i Turchi. Scontri e confronti di due civiltà* (Milan 1985) 250–267 and esp. 250–256; I. Hasiotis, 'O Kritikos Polemos (1645–1669) kai i Epopoia tis Poliorkias tou Xandakos (1648–1669)' in: (multiple eds.), *Istoria tou Ellinikou Ethnous, O Ellinismos Ypo Kseni Kyriarxia (1453–1669), Tourkoratia – Latinokratia* (Athens 2009) 334–350.

17 Ö. Bardakçı and F. Pugnère eds., *La Dernière Croisade. Les Français et la guerre de Candie, 1669* (Rennes 2008).

18 J.M. Jensen, *Denmark and the Crusades*

1400–1650 (Leiden/Boston 2007) 294–295, 319.

19 The French had also participated in the Battle of Saint-Gothard (1664), assisting Austria against the Ottomans, see Bardakçı and Pugnère, *La Dernière Croisade* 61–77.

20 B. Gounaris, "See how the Gods Favour Sacrilege": *English Views and Politics on Candia under Siege (1645–1669)* (Athens 2012).

21 J. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585–1740* (Oxford 1989) 203–204. For the Dutch *Straatvaart* see F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, vol I. (Paris 1966) 355–369; J. Israel, 'The Dutch Merchant Colonies in the Mediterranean During the Seventeenth Century' in: *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 30 (1986) 87–108; J. Israel, 'The Phases of the Dutch *Straatvaart* (1590–1713): a Chapter in the Economic History of the Mediterranean', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 99 (1986) 1–30; P.C. van Royen, 'The First Phase of the Dutch *Straatvaart* (1591–1605): Fact and Fiction',

Dutch government allowed Venetian agents to recruit troops (and order munitions) in its territory, as – especially after 1648 – there was a large number of mercenaries readily available in the Republic.²² However, it was only logical for Dutch policy makers that refraining from direct involvement against the Ottomans was the right path for the protection of the Republic’s lucrative Levant trade: as Aitzema noted on the occasion of a visit of a Venetian envoy in 1646, any help offered to Venice would be “an offense against the Turk [...] and the Navigation and Commerce in the Levant would suffer.”²³ Throughout the conflict the States-General settled for strict adherence to neutrality, denying direct forms of military or naval support. The Dutch may have also purposefully disengaged from Candia in terms of diplomatic representation: after consul Joost van Hoorn was deceased, the Dutch consulate in Candia was simply left vacant in 1660.²⁴

Implementing official policy in the Levant, however, was an extremely difficult task, and Dutch subjects on the ground would take divergent courses of action. Giacomo Strijker, Dutch consul in Venice between 1648 and 1687, saw the war as a perfect opportunity to be accepted among the Venetian nobility, by providing ships and money for the Venetian cause. Also aiming at entering the ranks of the city’s patriciate, other members of the “Flemish nation” followed suit; most notably, the sons of the aristocratic Van Axel family.²⁵ As far as shipping is concerned, we should note that both the Venetians and the Ottomans commissioned (or simply requisitioned) Dutch merchantmen for the transport of troops and victuals. Daniel Panzac has studied the contract lists of foreign captains in the service of the *Serenissima*. Panzac mentions no numbers, but claims that Dutch names appear much more regularly on the list than do English or French names.²⁶ Moreover, some Dutch merchantmen were used by Venice as warships after the necessary addition of extra cannons. Such was the case of the *Madonna della Vigna*, *Salomons Gerecht*, and *Abrahams Offerande*, which helped the Venetian fleet score a major victory against the Ottomans in the bay of Phocaea (near Smyrna) in 1649.²⁷ Dutch captains in

International Journal of Maritime History 2:2 (1990) 69–102; M. van Gelder, *Trading Places: The Netherlandish Merchants in Early Modern Venice* (Leiden 2009).

22 J. Poelhekke, ‘Enkele aantekeningen over Lieuwe van Aitzema’, *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* 22 (1960), 403–446 and esp. 410–411.

23 L. van Aitzema, *Saken van Staet en Oorlogh In en de omtrent de Vereenigde Nederlanden*, vol. III (The Hague 1669) 105, “tot offensie van den Turck was (...) de Navigatie ende Commerce in de Levant daerom soude te lijden hebben”.

24 O. Schutte, *Repertoria vertegenwoordigers in Nederland en in het buitenland 1584–1810*

(The Hague 1976) 328.

25 Van Gelder, *Trading Places*, 73–74, 198.

26 D. Panzac, *La marine ottomane. De l’apogée à la chute de l’Empire (1572–1922)* (Paris 2009) 150.

27 J.C. de Jonge, *Nederland en Venetie* (The Hague 1852) 247; D. Blackmore, *Warfare in the Mediterranean in the Age of Sail: A History, 1571–1866* (Jefferson 2011) 87. For the Ottoman naval construction program, which also included both sailing vessels and galleys, see İ. Bostan, *Osmanlı Bahriye Teşkilatı: 17. Yüzyılda Tersane-i Amire* [Ottoman Naval Organisation: the Tersane-i Amire in the 17th Century] (Ankara 1992) 83–87 and 94–96.



Battle of the combined Venetian and Dutch fleets against the Turks in the Bay of Phocaea, 1649.
 Painting by Abraham Beerstraten, 1656. COLLECTION RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

Venetian pay did not necessarily have the same interests as the Dutch merchant communities in Smyrna or Aleppo: the latter were dependent on the good will of the local Ottoman authorities, making them less likely to jeopardize their position.

“Crusade discourse” was hardly in the mainstream public sphere of the Dutch Republic. The concept of fighting against the “common Christian foe”, however, had largely retained its currency, and the Dutch public was largely sympathetic to the Venetian cause. A number of pro-Venetian pamphlets circulated in the Netherlands, such as the one containing the reports sent by Captain-General Francesco Morosini to the Venetian Senate, concerning the “Successes of the weapons of the Christians against the Turks” in 1660. In a rather inflammatory fashion, the Dutch public would get to read about the “common interest of the Christians”, in this “war against the Saracens.”²⁸ Dutch newspapers published countless of news stories on the latest developments in Crete and the Aegean throughout the course of the lengthy war. In fact, throughout 1669 – the last year of the conflict – the siege of Candia remained the most meticulously covered topic in the Dutch press.²⁹

28 Anonymous, *Notabel Schryvens uyt Venetien, Volgens de Brieven van den Generalissimus Morosini, Aen d’Heeren Senaet vande Serenissime Republycque, Aengaende de Successen vande wapenen der Christenen, tegens de Turcken in’t Coninckrijk Candia* (s.l. 1660) 3, “want sulcx het algemeene intrest van der Christenen is”. Knuttel 8265; Another anonymous pamphlet accused the rulers of Christendom of “dancing a princely ballet

with the Turk”: Anonymous, *Het vorstelyck ballet, gedanst in’t jaer 1660, door de potentaten van ’t Christenrijk, ende den Turck* (s.l. 1660). Bibliotheca Thysiana 6954.

29 For news on the Cretan War in the Dutch press, see C.P. Theodoridis, “From Candia to Haarlem”: Mediterranean News in the Haerlemsche Courant (1660–1669) (Unpublished MA Thesis Leiden 2016) 40–56.

It goes without saying that Venetian participation in the capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* was bound to have negative consequences for Dutch-Venetian relations. In the aftermath of the incident, the States-General addressed both the Doge of the *Serenissima* and the Grand Duke of Livorno with an official protest, asking for the immediate payment of reparations, and assistance in locating and retrieving the stolen cargo.³⁰ No such measures were taken. Instead, in an act of diversion, the Venetian envoy to Louis XIV's court, Giovanni Sagredo, presented his complaints to the Dutch ambassador in Paris, Willem Boreel. According to Sagredo, the participation of the *Keyser Octavianus* in the carrying trade between Ottoman ports was nothing less than "an act against Christianity".³¹ Despite their refusal to provide any sort of compensation, the Venetians clearly felt embarrassed for the undiplomatic nature of the incident, and this is reflected in subsequent Venetian accounts. Writing his *History of the War of Candia* in the immediate aftermath of the Cretan War, senator Andrea Valiero carefully glossed over any shameful details concerning the identity of the attackers. According to Valiero, Lewin Warner had initially been "extremely favorable" towards the *Serenissima*, but was then "thrown on the side of the Turks after [...] a Dutch vessel, called emperor (sic) [...] was attacked by three Christian corsair ships."³²

Despite the temporary cooling off of Dutch-Venetian relations, Dutch policy towards the Cretan War remained ambivalently fragmented, and past trends continued. In 1667, Giacomo Strijker turned a blind eye on the sequestration of two Dutch ships by the Venetian authorities. The ships were used to supply the Venetian troops in Candia, and remained in commission for up to three months. In an abortive effort to achieve the dismissal of Strijker, six members of the Dutch *nation* addressed the Directorate of the Levant Trade and the States of Holland, accusing the consul of acting "in disfavor of the *nation* and its navigation."³³ In 1668, the States-General even received congratulations from the Venetian embassy in London, after decreeing to prohibit all Dutch ships from delivering supplies to the Ottoman forces besieging Candia.³⁴ Venice played the card of "the common Christian religion" until the very end, and continued to petition the States-General in order to achieve the "humiliation of Ottoman arrogance in the Levant."³⁵ In their answer to a new series of beseeching letters in 1669, the States-General expressed their sympathy to the

30 NL-HANA, SG, inv.nr. 6909, The States-General to the Doge, 1 December 1663.

31 A. Casteleyn and P. Casteleyn, *Hollandse Mercurius behelsende het gedenckweerdigste in Christenryck in het Jaer 1663* (Haarlem 1664) 75-76, "een saecke in der daet tegens de Christenheyt".

32 A. Valiero, *Storia della guerra di Candia* (Venice 1670) 213, "si getasse al loro partito (...) un vascello olandese, chiamato imperatore (...) da tre vascelli di corso Christiani".

33 NL-HANA, Levantse Handel, inv.nr. 190, Missive van de nederlands natie, 14 November 1667, "naar Candia gedestineert (...) twee a drie maenden opgehouden".

34 Aitzema, *Saken*, vol. VI, 428, "alle Nederlandsche Scheepen te verbieden eenighe Vivres of Getwaren voor de Turcksche macht (...) te voeren".

35 NL-HANA, SG, inv.nr. 6910, rec. 30 May 1669, "humilier l'orgueil ottoman du coste de Levant".

Serenissima “because of reasons of State and Religion”, but also made clear that it would be “absolutely impossible” to divert part of their forces to support a third party.³⁶ In the months leading up to the fall of Candia, however, Venetian agents visited the Dutch Republic once more in order to recruit some mercenary regiments of the Duchy of Lüneburg – with the silent consent of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt.³⁷

THE DUTCH REPUBLIC AND THE KNIGHTS OF SAINT JOHN (1645–1667)

Seen through the prism of Dutch-Venetian relations, the capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* and its aftermath look like the predictable outcome of Dutch attitudes towards the Cretan War. However, the incident can be placed in an even wider context, if seen through the prism of Dutch-Hospitaller relations. The extensive literature available on the (early modern) Knights of Saint John is marked by geographic and linguistic fragmentation. Studies dealing with the Order’s activities in the Mediterranean sometimes ignore the vestiges of the Knights’ presence in other regions, and vice-versa. As a consequence, the Order’s ‘grand strategy’ is usually difficult to discern; this is particularly problematic for the period between 1651 and 1665, during which the Knights became active in the colonization of the Americas by acquiring the islands of Saint Christopher, Saint Croix, Saint Martin and Saint Barthélemy.³⁸

The Order of Saint John had taken part in the attack with three ships (led by three of its Knights), and no less than 415 men.³⁹ As the Knights had contributed most of the ships and men, we cannot rule out the possibility that they were also in charge of the operation. Interestingly enough, earlier that year, a controversy had emerged between the Order and the Venetians over the issue of precedence in the order of battle, and this may have rendered the Knights intransigent in their claim to be in charge of mixed flotillas.⁴⁰ Thus, in a letter to Grand Master Cotoner (1663–1680), the States-General demanded restitution (as they had done in the case of the Venetians and the Grand Duke of Livorno), and expressed their “extreme surprise” at the incident, as this was the first time that the Order’s galleys had attacked a Dutch ship.⁴¹

36 NL-HANA, SG, inv.nr. 12578.46, Antwoort op het versoek van Secours aen Candia, “par raison d’estat et de religion (...) impossibilitè absolue de diverter la moindre partie au secours d’autruy”.

37 P. J. Blok ed., *Relazioni Veneziane. Venetiaansche berichten over de Vereenigde Nederlanden van 1600–1795* (The Hague 1906) 289.

38 T. Freller and W. Zammit, *Knights, Buccaneers, and Sugar Cane: The Caribbean Colonies of the Order of Malta* (Valetta 2015).

39 Heeringa, *Bronnen*, 164–165, doc. 41, Wijgeboom to Warner, 29 June 1663, “Bellica met (...) 170 man (...) Verdelen[sic] met (...) 145 man (...) Constantin (...) 100 man”.

40 R.C. Anderson, *Naval Wars in the Levant 1559–1853* (Liverpool 1952) 175–176.

41 NL-HANA, SG, inv.nr. 6909, The States-General to Cotoner, 1 December 1663, “extremement surpris (...) affectionement beneficent dans le passé”.

The ‘Liasen Italien’ in the Dutch National Archives contain both the official letter of protest (addressed by the States-General to Cotoner) and its initial draft. The two texts display two differences worth commenting upon. To begin with, the honorific “Your Eminence” in the draft, has been replaced with “Your Excellency” in the official letter. Ever since the late sixteenth century, the Pope allowed the Grand Masters to be addressed with the same honorific (i.e. “Your Eminence”) reserved for Roman Catholic Cardinals – a practice condemned by some within the Order.⁴² Thus, the States-General may have opted for a less powerful honorific for fear of seeming too servile in their request. More importantly, the draft contained a crossed-out paragraph which was scraped from the official letter. In this paragraph, the States-General promise to “perfectly cover any wish presented by the Order” and “always give everything that may be demanded” from them as long as the Order safeguards “the freedom of commerce.”⁴³ This would have been a somewhat strange addendum to a letter protesting for an incident that had compromised diplomatic relations among multiple parties; but not quite.

Traditional Dutch historiography has blamed seventeenth-century diplomat-historian (and libertine) Lieuwe van Aitzema for sharing the state secrets of the Republic by setting up a news agency that operated on the basis of international subscribers.⁴⁴ The Venetian envoy to the Congress of Münster, Alvise Contarini, figured among Aitzema’s most prominent subscribers, and twelve letters of this correspondence have been preserved in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. On 23 November 1649 Aitzema closed his letter with a piece of news which he thought would be of interest to Contarini: acting in his capacity as Grand Prior of the Knights of Saint John in Germany, Frederick of Hesse-Darmstadt had sent an envoy to the States of Holland, demanding the restitution of the possessions that the Order of Malta claimed in the city of Haarlem.⁴⁵

In the wake of the sixteenth century, the Knights still maintained numerous possessions in the northern part of the Low Countries, the most important of which were to be found in Haarlem, Utrecht, Arnhem, and Leeuwarden. Administratively, the local commanderies of the Order were organized under the Bailwick of Utrecht.⁴⁶ In its turn, the Bailwick of Utrecht belonged to the Grand Priory of Germany, itself a subdivision of the German Tongue of the Knights of Saint John. Unlike the Bailiwick of Utrecht of the Teutonic Order, most of

42 B.G. Flavigny, *Histoire de l'ordre de Malte* (Paris 2010) 202.

43 NL-HaNA, SG, inv.nr. 6909, The States-General to Cotoner, 1 December 1663, “responder parfaitement a ce qu’il le pleura (...) favoriser nostre commerce”.

44 For Aitzema’s news service see G. van der Plaats, *Eendracht als opdracht: Lieuwe van Aitzema’s bijdrage aan het publieke debat in de zeventiende-eeuwse Republiek* (Hilversum

2003) 23, 242.

45 NL-HaNA, Aanwinsten 1e afdeling, inv.nr. 1879, IX, Aitzema to Contarini, 23 November 1649, “A scavoire le recouvrement ou vindication des biens de Malta, que la ville de Haarlem a incorpore y reste”. Photocopies of the originals in Venice.

46 E. van Berensteyn, *Geschiedenis der Johaniter-Orde in Nederland tot 1795* (Assen 1934) 13–14.



Haarlem's Janskerk — now housing the archives of North Holland — used to be one of the Order's most precious possession in the Netherlands. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/MYCOMZX.

the Dutch Hospitallers refused to turn Protestant during the Dutch Revolt, and thus lost most of their possessions. The last phase of the sequestration was concluded in 1625 with the States of Holland “incorporating” what remained of the Knights’ possessions in Haarlem, after the death of Andries van Souwen — the Order’s last *conventuaal* in the city.⁴⁷ This was a serious blow for the Knights, as the said possession alone was supposed to contribute 500 *guldens* annually, specifically for the naval struggle of the Order’s galleys against the Ottomans.⁴⁸

This is where we could start connecting the dots. In July 1644 Grand Master Lascaris and his Council authorized the Knight Jack de Souvre to reclaim the Order’s possessions in the Netherlands, accusing the Dutch of usurpation.⁴⁹ Two nearly simultaneous developments were soon to render the incomes of the remaining of the Knight’s possessions in northern Europe indispensable. On the one hand, the outbreak of the Cretan War in 1645 meant that the Order would have to increase its expenditure on naval armaments (i.e. galleys) and fortifications. On the other hand, the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 spelled the definitive and official loss of the Knight’s northern-German commanderies, most of which had already turned Protestant.⁵⁰

47 Van Berensteyn, *Geschiedenis*, 28.

48 T. van Bueren, *Macht en onderhorigheid binnen de Ridderlijke Orde van Sint Jan* (Haarlem 1991) 20.

49 J. Maria van Winter, *Sources Concerning*

the Hospitallers of St. John in the Netherlands 14th-18th centuries (Leiden 1998) 128, doc. 158, “usurpata, detenta et absque titulo et legitima provisione nostra occupata pretendum”.

50 Flavigny, *Histoire*, 207.

In 1649, the task of recovering the Order's possessions and incomes was taken up by the Grand Prior of the Hospitallers in Germany, Friedrich of Darmstadt-Hesse, who was elevated to the rank of Cardinal by the Pope in 1652. Friedrich had spent a brief spell in Malta as commander of the Order's galleys in the early 1640s, and was no stranger to naval warfare.⁵¹ Throughout the 1650s, he pressed for retaliation against Dutch vessels in the Mediterranean, as a means to exert pressure for the restitution of the Order's possessions. The 'Venerable Council' in Malta of the Knights considered his propositions, but not without some reservation: most of the Knights of St. John were French, and hence, the fact that Louis XIV was in an alliance with the Dutch Republic had to be taken into consideration.⁵² In March 1662, Grand Master Cotoner wrote back to the Grand Prior, explaining that an indiscriminate attack on Dutch shipping would be difficult, as Dutch merchant ships usually carried "cargoes belonging to third parties which were Christian", and would unavoidably demand restitution.⁵³ Alternative targets would have to be found if such a plan could go on.

Coming closer to the date of the *Keyser Octavianus* incident, a seven-page document with the title 'Various memories and pieces pertaining to the possessions on which the Order Malta pretends to have a claim upon' has survived in the 'Secrete Kas Italië' of the States-General. It appears that in May 1662, Friedrich of Darmstadt-Hesse unilaterally proceeded to have two Dutch ships sequestered while they were anchored in the port of London, as retaliation for the – so far – negative stance of the States-General.⁵⁴ On this occasion, the Knight's envoys threatened the Dutch government that the restitution of their possessions "would greatly serve to prevent all sorts of inconveniences that may result from a longer postponement", and that amicable relations could not be guaranteed.⁵⁵

At this point, we can finally attest that the capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* was not just a thorny chapter in Dutch-Ottoman relations. Instead, it fits into the pattern of hostility evident in Dutch-Hospitaller relations during the Cre-

51 A. Brück, 'Friedrich, *Landgraf von Hessen-Darmstadt*' in: *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 5 (1961) 504.

52 Van Winter, *Sources*, 142–143, doc. 169, "Perche in quell tempo la corona di Francia haveva lega offensiva e defensiva con li stati d'Olanda". For the cordial relations between the Order of Malta and the French monarchy see P. W. Bamford, 'The Knights of Malta and the King of France, 1665–1700', *French Historical Studies* 3:4 (1964) 429–453.

53 Van Winter, *Sources*, 145–146, doc. 171, Cotoner to the Grand Prior, 18–3–1662, "Ruyter estant venu le Mois passe, (...) devant ce port (...) pour le tier et pour le quart (...) dedomager ceux ausquelz les marchandises

appartiendront". The Grand Master did not fail to inform the German Grand Prior that Michiel de Ruyter was in the Mediterranean with fifteen ships.

54 Charles II of England was on particularly good terms with the Knights; he even aimed at resuscitating the Order in England as a means of appeasing his Catholic subjects, see D.F. Allen, 'Attempts to revive the Order of Malta in Stuart England', *The Historical Journal* 33:4 (1990) 939–952.

55 NL-HANA, SG, inv.nr. 12592.8, 15 June 1662, "Ce qui servira beaucoup pour prevenir tous les inconveniens [sic] qui pourroient resulter d'un plus long retardement".

tan War. The attack itself may not have been premeditated, but – along with the sequestration in London – functioned as a means of forcing the States-General. In December 1663, the Knights made use of the Holy Roman Emperor’s envoy to the Dutch Republic to put the issue simply: the States-General were in possession of “means necessary to fight the Turk”, and everything would be done by the Order to ensure that there were enough resources to improve their naval armaments and then “unite its ships with those of the Republic of Venice.” Furthermore, the States-General were reminded that the friendship of the Order “will not be useless [...] not only for the interest of their merchants who trade with the Levant but also for [...] the commodity of their [Dutch] fleet”, which should be “reinforced by the galleys of Malta.”⁵⁶ Finally, in April 1664, Grand Master Cotoner wrote back to clarify that there would be no compensation for the cargo of the *Keyser Octavianus*, claiming that (despite his “affection” for the States-General) it was the Order’s duty to “hit the enemy wherever possible.”⁵⁷ There was little need for further pressure on behalf of the Order and its allies: between 1665 and 1667, the States of Holland payed out a series of sums as compensation for the sequestration of the Order’s possessions, closing the case for ever.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The seizure of ships, merchandise, and people in the name of a ‘maritime holy war’ constituted a perennial Mediterranean reality; the capture of the *Keyser Octavianus* and its Ottoman cargo by a flotilla consisting of three galleys of the Order of Malta, two galleys of Livorno, and a Venetian sailing ship, seem hardly extra-ordinary at first sight. For all its typical traits, however, the incident did not occur in a void: the harshness of the Ottoman reaction can be attributed to the ambivalent stance of the Dutch during the long Cretan War. Moreover, it exposed the frailness of the slogan of ‘free ship, free goods’; maintaining complete neutrality *vis-à-vis* both combatants proved unfeasible in the context of the mid-seventeenth century Mediterranean ‘free for all’. Finally, studying the incident from the Order’s perspective one concludes that the Knights may have acted on the basis of specific calculations when attacking the *Keyser Octavianus*. The seizure and its aftermath can be placed in the background of Dutch-Hospitaller hostilities concerning the Order’s possessions in the Dutch Republic, the incomes of which were meant to help fund the Knight’s naval struggle against the Ottomans during the Cretan War. Rather than constituting the ‘last Crusade’, the Cretan War and its wider

56 NL-HaNA, SG, inv.nr. 12578-47, Friquet to the States-General, 24 December 1663, “afin qu’estant unis a ceux de la Republique de Venise (...) pour l’interest de leurs marchands traffiquant au Levant”.

57 Van Winter, *Sources* 150–151, doc. 176, Cotoner to the States-General, 16 April 1664, “en quelque lieu que nous le rencontrions”.

58 Allen, ‘Attempts’, 942.

context provided one more stage where intra-European rivalries could be played out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Constantine P. Theodoridis is currently following a MA in Turkish Studies at Leiden University. He holds a MA in Colonial and Global History (Leiden University) and a BA in History (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki). His research interests focus on cross-confessional trade and diplomacy in the early modern Mediterranean, with a special emphasis on Dutch-Ottoman relations.