

# The Content and Authorship of the *Historia Turchesca*

Pierre A. MacKay\*

A note on the most accessible MS of *Historia Turchesca*, (Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, Cod. mixt. 1238), identifies the work as, «Historia Turchesca di Gio. Maria Angiolello schiavo et altri schiavi dall'anno 1429 sino al 1513». The editor of this manuscript, Ion Ursu, noted the two passages in which Angiolello makes a personal reference to himself, but he noted other passages as well, where a certain Donado da Lezze does the same thing. Faced with this alternative, Ursu chose to ascribe the work to Donado da Lezze and, although this attribution has not found much favor, it may well be correct.<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is not, however, to vindicate the claim of Donado da Lezze, but to rescue Giovan-Maria Angiolello from any charge that he was responsible.

We can ill afford to lose any documentation from the first one and a half centuries of Ottoman History, and it is certainly true that the *Historia Turchesca* contains some extremely valuable detail, some of which is undoubtedly copied from Angiolello's work. This is probably the most valuable part of *Historia Turchesca*, but it needs to be recognized that it is Angiolello at second hand and it needs, above all, to be recognized that the general content and flavor of the work is in no sense representative of Angiolello's experience and judgement.

The general habit of referring to the *Historia Turchesca* as the work of Angiolello has had the unfortunate effect of drawing attention away from his *Memoir of the fall of Negropont and what came after, up to my return*, which has far greater historical value than any part of *Historia Turchesca* that covers the same period.<sup>2</sup> In all the studies collected in the recent transactions of

---

\* For publication data see the last page.

1 *Historia Turchesca*, pp. ix-xxx.

2 Kenneth Setton, for example, whose reference carry great authority, ascribes the *Historia Turchesca* to Angiolello in several references in *The Papacy and the Levant*, Vol 2: pp. 302-03, notes 115 and 118..

the symposium on *The Ottoman Emirate*, Angiolello's *Memoir* is not once cited, although it would have enriched several of the best articles in that collection.<sup>3</sup> In Johannes Koder's major study of Negropont,<sup>4</sup> Angiolello, who has more and better detail about the city under siege than any other contemporary writer, is never cited and, in general histories of the period, when the capture of Negropont is mentioned, the operative exaggerations of other writers, including the real author of *Historia Turchesca*, are routinely repeated. I hope that this paper will help to put an end to those habits.

Giovan-Maria Angiolello was born some time after 1452, in Vicenza, Italy. In 1468 he accompanied his older brother, Francesco, to the Venetian outpost of Negropont on the island of Euboea. The city was not then under siege but, already in 1460, even before the outbreak of the Venetian-Ottoman war of 1463, it was recognized as vulnerable. When the siege finally came, in June 1470, Francesco served in the defense, and was killed in the final assault on July 12. Giovan-Maria survived; his obvious youth spared him from the execution of all surviving men of military age on the next day, and from that we can determine that he must have been somewhere between 14 and 18 years old.<sup>5</sup> He was turned over to Mehmed II as a palace slave, and thereafter served Mehmed's son, Mustafa for several years until Mustafa's death, when he returned to Mehmed's service and was shortly afterward appointed to one of the positions in the *defterdarlık*, probably *mal defterdari*.<sup>6</sup> To serve effectively in this position, he will have had to read and write Turkish, probably in both *Naskhi* and *Siyakat* scripts as well as speak it.

His account of the siege of Negropont is vivid and detailed, and agrees with the terrain, with surviving maps, and with the more reliable contemporary accounts among Venetian sources. The title on the one surviving manuscript suggests that Francesco may have started it, but there is no change in style

---

3 But see Galotta, «Il Mito Oguzo», pp. 47-48, n. 36, who erroneously cites Giambattista Angiolello.

4 Koder, *Negroponte*, especially pp. 56-62, and 69-95.

5 Previous scholars have used the fact that he was younger than the men who were executed to declare that he must have been 18 years old, but this judgement does not allow for the possibility that he was a mature 15 or 16-year old. We really cannot specify his birth year accurately, except that it was in the mid 1450s. Note the phrase «pizolo stando» in the following note.

6 His elevation to this position is mentioned in a note on Bibl. Marciana.Cod. Lat XIV. 123. According to Niccolo di Lenna, «Richerche», p. 18n3, this MS begins, «El testamento fece Maumeth nel morire ad Hali suo genero, traduto da idioma turchesco in italo per Juan Maria Anzelelo nobile vincentino, il quale, pizolo stando stato preso da Turchi, fu alevato con gran credito apresso il signor Turco . . . , et era thesoriero de tute le sue intrade». Di Lenna was sceptical about this, but without good reason. It is particularly likely during the time of Mehmed II. The details and pay scales in the organizational survey of the Ottoman court which will be mentioned later could hardly be known except by a *defterdar*.

to indicate where Giovan-Maria took it over. For Giovan-Maria, the siege and sack of the town was the turning point of his life, and if he had had any hand at all in the formation of the *Historia Turchesca* one might reasonably expect that some element of his experience would be reflected in that work. There is, however, very little of Angiolello to be recognized in the short and somewhat sensationalized account in *Historia Turchesca*.

In 1469, Niccolo da Canal, a legal scholar and orator for Venetian interests at the papal court in Rome, was appointed Captain General of the Venetian Navy. That he had no naval experience was a difficulty, but perhaps not insurmountable,<sup>7</sup> That he covered his own inadequacies by play-acting the part of a daring and bloodthirsty corsair was a disaster. His sack of the relatively unimportant and poorly defended port of Aenos in Thrace provided Mehmed II with an emotionally charged incentive to destroy Negropont.<sup>8</sup> The *Historia Turchesca* is aware of this, and may ultimately have derived the knowledge from Angiolello's *Memoir*, but it was also general knowledge among other Venetian and Italian contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> Beyond that point, the account in *Historia Turchesca* bears very little relation to the precise details supplied by Angiolello in the *Memoir*. One of the striking things about Angiolello's eyewitness account is that he assesses the various conspiracies, defections and supposed communications with the Ottomans as unimportant. He gives the full story of Tomaso Schiavo, commander of the four hundred man mercenary force in the town, but treats it as a case of war nerves and panic rather than as a considered preference for the Ottoman side. «Tomaso Schiavo was an able fellow personally, but no man for an undertaking such as that of Negropont, and since he had some relations on the Turkish side, when he found himself besieged by so great a force as the Turks had, he had misgivings, and decided secretly to send a messenger to the Sultan so that he might save himself and his family from death».<sup>10</sup> Others, following after Tomaso Schiavo, are dismissed as «sorry creatures»

---

7 He served the year before, under Giacomo Loredan, and it would be interesting to have Loredan's reaction to that experience. Some resolutions in the records of the Senato Mar make it evident that, in effect, he bought the office.

8 *Historia Turchesca*, pp. 34-35.

9 Iorga, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, Vol. 2: p. 146n3, cites a chronicle from Dresden, "Molti hanno creduto che per questo mancamento fossero puniti nella presa di Negroponte." (Chron. F. 33).

10 Tomaso Schiavo era valente della sua persone, man non era huomo da si fatta impreza come quella di Negroponte, et per haver alcuni suoi parenti con il Turco, trovandosi in cosi grand' assedio, come era il sforzo del Turco: dubitò, et pensò seacretamente di mandar un messo al Gran Turco per francar la persona, et famiglia sua da morte..MS Vicenza, folio 2v, 24-28.

of little concern to anyone in the city.<sup>11</sup> Angiolello had the opportunity to speak both to the Sultan himself and to the real architect of the Ottoman victory, Mahmud Pasha, and he knew that intelligence carried by defectors was of no importance during the siege. For Angiolello, the only significant fact was the exposure and public execution of Tomaso Schiavo, which resulted in the loss of trust among the various defense units in the city.<sup>12</sup>

This was not what Venetians wanted to hear. Tales of a «stab in the back», of sinister acts of premeditated treason, make a crushing defeat seem much less crushing. The popular taste developed elaborate and operatic tales of espionage, treason, and rather silly acts of personal bravado to disguise the fact that they had simply been outgunned, and that the overt cowardice and incompetence of Niccolo da Canal had lost them a real chance of saving the town at the last moment. The *Historia Turchesca* contributes its own detail to the collection of fairy tales in the person of a pirate named Zuan Monaco, and claims that Tomaso Schiavo had told the Ottomans where the city walls were weakest well before the siege began. The author is unfamiliar with the name of Mahmud Pasha, somebody Angiolello knew and admired, and it finishes the account of the siege with a touching story about the last act of the Venetian Bailo, Pollo Erizzo, awaiting death in the main chamber of the council. Angiolello, the only person who was in the city when it fell, is also the only source to inform us that Erizzo died early on the last morning, fighting at the breach in the southeast wall.<sup>13</sup>

The *Historia Turchesca* account of the fall of Negropont is clearly not by Angiolello, and several of the details in it are so very much at variance with what Angiolello knew that they indicate that he had no part, not even an editorial part, in the organization and general tone of the work. This conclusion requires us to read even those passages that are obviously copied

---

11 MS Vicenza, folio 4r, 16-19.

12 . . . li predetti Cittadini et Candiotti, si missero in sieme, opponendo à molt' altri Soldati et per esser nella detta Terra più forti essi Cittadini, et Candiotti, li Presidenti non gli potevano contradire, et quasi contra sua voglia gli fecero appressentar alquanti altri Soldati alli prigioni. Oltra questo, dove che s'incontravano per la Terra erano alle arme, ferendosi, et ammazzandosi come inimici capitali, e tutt' erano danno nostro, et degl' huomini che mancavano perli predetti errori. MS Vicenza, folio 4r, 19-27.

13 MS Vicenza, folio 6r, 20. The real Pollo Erizzo found an honorable end beside his Venetian and Negropontine neighbors. It is something of a relief to know this, because the actions of the operatic Erizzo often seem rather servile and discreditable. Erizzo was a quite distinguished Venetian family, and one wonders how they liked hearing of their ancestor skulking around in the cellars and sewers of Negropont after all his companions had been executed. His operatic daughter, Anna, is entirely fictional, but her image survived to be transformed as the heroine of Rossini's opera "The Siege of Corinth," so named because few opera-goers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be expected to know or care about Negropont.

directly from Angiolello's genuine works with a little caution. It also means that where the *Memoir* and the *Historia Turchesca* disagree, the passage in *Historia Turchesca* ought not to be ascribed to Angiolello. Nowhere is this more important than in the outline history of the Ottoman dynasty.

Close to the mid-point of the unique manuscript of Angiolello's *Memoir* he gives an account of the beginning of the Ottoman state under Osman. This is an extraordinary passage, a calm and judicious attempt to understand the circumstances of tribal life in a semi-nomadic environment. It reads a bit like modern anthropology, and offers a picture very like what Rudi Lindner offered in his study, *Nomads and Ottomans in Mediaeval Anatolia*:

Before the family of the Sultan began to achieve their dominion, know that in various parts of Asia, that is, in Tartary, in Persia and Turcomania, and in many other pagan regions, there are numerous herdsmen, rich in all sorts of animals, camels and other livestock, and the herdsmen of this sort, with their wives, their families, and their herds, live out in the open, where they have cleverly contrived huts, made of wicker and covered with felt, which are very easy to dismantle and reassemble, and to transport from place to place. Of these herdsmen, 200 or 300, more or less, will come together, each with his own household, and from among their number they elect a chief who will have authority over the entire gathering, and will be obeyed by all. This man they call *Tugcu*, which in our language means "Chief of the herdsmen." When he starts out they all follow him, and arrange their dwellings in order about the home of their chief. According to whether the season is hot or cold, they travel to where there is good grazing and water, and they keep searching for temperate weather. Many of them sow fodder crops in numerous places, and where the temperatures range from cold to hot, they begin by sowing the high cold places, then the middle, and finally the lowest places. The harvest, however, starts from the bottom, and goes back up, since the last sown areas produce first, owing to their being warm. The women work too, and make fine carpets and other woolen stuffs.

Osman was the first Sultan in the present line—the Ottoman house is named after him---and this Osman became *Tugcu*, that is to say Chief of the herdsmen, at a time when a pagan ruler named Boga ruled over the country where Troy once stood. At the death of this ruler, there was no heir remaining to whom

the succession might pass, but all remained in confusion, ready to the hand of whoever might have most power. Now Osman was well thought of in the region, and had a large following of herdsmen, among whom it was customary that there should always be a supply of good horses. He began to arm himself, therefore, and to do what a great many others like him were doing, that is, to loot and conquer those less powerful than himself, and since he had no battle standard, he cut the tail off a horse, and put that on the tip of his lance as a banner, and from that day to the present the Turks carry one or two horsetails as a standard. They also carry other standards made of the same tails, as I have described, and this is in memory of the same Osman, who by his good conduct of affairs gained many victories. Many herdsmen, and others too, ranged themselves under his banner, until he came to lay siege to the fortress of Bilecik, and put the finish to it. From then on, he became greater, day by day, with the result that before his death he had become lord over much of the territory of the lord Boga, and of the region of Troy also.<sup>14</sup>

---

14 Prima che la progenia del Gran Turco comincio à pigliar signoria sappiate come nelle parti dell' Asia, cioè in Tartaria, in Persia, in Turchamania, et in molt' altri luoghi di Pagani, si trovano assai Pastori ricchi d' ogni conditione di bestiami, cioè Cavalli Gambelli, et altre bestie grosse; et questi tali Pastori con le mogli, et figliuoli, et suoi bestiami vivono in campagna, i quali hanno alcune case di Vimene coperte di feltre congregate, che commodamente si possono far, et disfar, et portar da luogo à luogo, et serano 202 et 300 di questi Pas<tori> piu, et meno, et siascuno c la sua casa fra loro eleggono il Capo, il quale habbia il governo di tutta la congregatione et sia ubedito da tutte, et lo chiamano Dogge che in nostra lingua vuol dir Capo di Pastori. Quando lui si leva, tutti lo seguitano et con ordine alloggiano attorno le case del suo Capo, et secondo il caldo, et fredo vano dove conoscono esser buoni pascoli, et buoni acque, et cercano gl'aeri temperati. Molti di questi seminano in piu luoghi molte sorte di biave, et in luoghi caldi, et freddi cominciano à seminar prima i luoghi alti, et freddi, et poi li mezzani, et poi li piu bassi, lo raccolto comincia di sotto in suso, perche gli ultimi seminati producono piu à buon' hora per esser luoghi caldi. Ancora le loro Donne lavorano et fanno di buoni, et belli tapeti, et altri lavori fatti di Lanna.

Osman, il quale è stato principio alla signoria del Gran Turco da lui è chiamato la casa di Osmani, questo Osman trovandosi Dogge, cio è Capo di Pastori, in quel tempo un signor pur Pagano, il quale haveva nome Boga, et signoreggiava le dette contrate dove fu già Troia, et dopo la sua morte non gli rimase herede al quale toccasse la signoria, ma rimase in confusion, et in man di chi piu poteva, et Osman, il quale era ben voluto in quelle contrade, et haveva seguito dalli suoi Pastori, i quali di consueto sempre si atrovano buoni Cavalli. Ancora questo Osman si messe ad armeggiare, et far quelli che facevano molti altri suoi simili, cio è à saccheggiar, et abbatte chi di lui manco poteva, et per non haver standardo, taglio la coda ad un Cavallo et posela sopra una lancia per standardo, et fin il giorno di hoggi li Turchi portano uno ò due code di Cavalli per standardo. Ancora portano altri standardi delle dette code per memoria del predetto Osman, il quale per suoi buoni portamenti hebbe assai Vittorie, et molti Pastori et altri si riducevano sotto la sua bandiera per modo ch'egli mise l'assedio ad un Castello chiamato Billezuch, et con questo fece testa, et à giornata andavasi facendo grande, per modo che avanti la sua morte si fece signor di gran parte del paese del detto Signor Boga, et anco del paese di Troia. MS Vicenza folio 10v 4-11r 19.

Angiolello has benefited from his opportunity to observe the phenomena of Anatolian nomadism during the campaign against Uzun Hassan in 1473. He has put his observations together with older traditions that could still be heard around the Sultan's court, traditions that had not yet been replaced by the dynastic and religious themes of post 15<sup>th</sup> century historiography. The result is something that is almost uncannily like Lindner's reconstruction of the beginnings of the Ottoman enterprise. This passage, so far as I can determine, has never been cited in studies of Ottoman origins. It ought to be one of the primary sources.

Whether the author of the *Historia Turchesca* had any knowledge of the text quoted above, is difficult to say. He certainly made no use of it. At the beginning of the book he introduces the Ottomans with a trivial piece of derogatory rhetoric that is historically inaccurate in virtually every detail:

The descendants of the Ottoman house have their origin in the year 1300 A.D. The first of these people was a low-born plowman and trench-digger named Zich.. This man at the time of his death had a 15 year-old son named Ottoman, and the name of the Ottoman house derives from him. He was an evil man, of vile character, a highwayman, and with this he acquired authority and many friends just like him. He made himself their leader, and managed to become master of a castle of the Greeks which lies 6 days journey from Bursa in the direction of Trebizond, to which he gave the name Osmancik.<sup>15</sup>

This puerile, spluttering is echoed by numerous 16<sup>th</sup> century writers, and notably by the influential Paolo Giovio in his short biography of Osman (misnamed Suleyman in at least one printing). It is somewhat interesting that it shows an awareness of the association of the diminutive *Osmancuk* applied to Osman I by Ibn Battuta.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the Italians had learned this appellation from their contacts with the Emirate of Germiyan, where it would certainly have been used pejoratively. That is clearly the way Ibn Battuta intends it. The association with the town of Osmancik, halfway across

---

15 La progenie della casa ottomana principiò del 1300 di Christo. Il primo de questa gente fu villano, arator, et zappatore di terra per nome chiamato Zich. Costui hebbe un figliuolo alla morte sua, d'anni 15, per nome chiamato Ottomano, dal quale fu denominato la casa ottomana. Era huomo vitioso, et di mala natura, huomo di strada, et con questo acquistò facoltà, et amici assai simili a'lui., et fattosi capo di costoro hebbe modo di farsi signori d'un castello dei Greci, qual'e lontano da Bursa 6 giornata verso Trabisonda, al quali messe nome otoman Zich. *Historia Turchesca*, p. 4.

16 Defrémery and Sanguinetti, *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah* p. 321.

Anatolia from Osman's original territory is utter nonsense. The Ottomans did not acquire Osmancik until near the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

I do not think there is the slightest possibility that Angiolello was responsible for this passage, and I do not think that it would have appeared at the start of the *Historia Turchesca* in its present form if Angiolello had had anything to do with the organization of the book. There are many other places where the *Historia Turchesca* comes up wanting by comparison with the few passages known to be by Angiolello, but these two ought to be sufficient to rescue him from any taint of responsibility for it. There is, of course, a great deal of Angiolello in *Historia Turchesca*, long passages copied, we may hope verbatim, from some manuscript of Angiolello's that has not survived. We need to look at even those passages carefully, however, and correct them for the fact that Angiolello probably knew Turkish better than any of his contemporaries, and the writer of the *Historia Turchesca* had no more than a slight acquaintance with the language.

There are a few simple criteria that can help to distinguish quotations of Angiolello from the rest of the work. The most obvious is his preference for the phrase, «Gran Turco» to designate the Sultan. Where alternatives such as «Signor Turco» are used there is usually other evidence that Angiolello is not the source. I have made a tentative list of the pages most obviously copied or derived from Angiolello, and it amounts to 131 out of 276 pages, but some of these are substantially reworked. Pages 39-59 are approximately the same material as is found in Ramusio, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, folios 66-70.<sup>17</sup>..Pages 59-110 appear to be almost all Angiolello, with the exception of an intruded document on page 107. Pages 63 and 102 contain the direct statements of authorship by Angiolello. Pages 110-111 seem to be another source, but Angiolello is probably the author of pages 112-118, and there is probably a good of Angiolello in 119-123, although there seem to be other sources here as well. The survey of the principal institutions of the Ottoman state with detailed pay-scales for all officers occupies pages 123-152. A much fuller version of this is in the *Memoir*, where it runs from folio 20r 24 to the abrupt end of the manuscript on folio 32r...When the two versions are compared it can be seen that the *Historia Turchesca* leaves out a lot, such as the delightful description of how the horses are reared in the Imperial stables. The part of the survey in *Historia Turchesca* pages 145-150 is known only from this work. The list of *Sancaks*, on pages 152-164 is not by

---

17 In Grey's Hakluyt Society translation it is pages 73-93.

Angiolello, but there is likely to be some Angiolello in pages 164-183 where the struggle between Beyazid Veli and Cem is recounted.

The remainder of the *Historia Turchesca* contains a great deal of interest, but little or none of it is derived from Angiolello. The whole work needs a re-edition, with perhaps more attention paid to the earlier, Venetian dialect manuscripts. Perhaps in the course of such an effort it will be possible to determine whether Ursu's ascription of it to Donado da Lezze ought to stand.

## Bibliography

### Manuscripts

Angiolello, Giovan-Maria. *Come l'Anno 1468, io Francesco et Gio. Maria, mio Fratello de gli Anzolelli Vicentini, partissimo da Vicenza à di 5 Agosto, per lo Viaggio di Negroponte, et quello, che ne incontra fino alla ritornata.* MS Vicenza 413, Biblioteca Civica. Bertoliana.

----- .*El testamento fece Maumeth nel morire ad Hali.* MS Venice Bibl. Marciana. Cod. Lat XIV. 123.

Incert Aut. *Historia Turchesca.* MS Paris. Bibl. Nationale. Cod. Mixt. 1238; MS Paris. Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Turquie. No. 2, folios 410-517; MS Milan. Bibl. Ambrosiana. No. 113 sup., folio 181.

### Published References

Angiolello, Giovan Maria. *Viaggio di Negroponte*, ed. Cristina Bazzolo. Vicenza, 1982.

Caporozzo, A. *Di Gio. Maria Angiolello e di un suo inedito manoscritto.* Vicenza, 1881.

Defremery, C. & B. R. Sanguinetti. *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah.* Paris 1877.

Galotta, Aldo. «Il 'Mito Oguzo'». In *The Ottoman Emirate.* Rethymnon, 1993.

Grey, Charles (Earl). *A Narrative or Italian travels in Persia, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.* London, 1873.

Iorga, Nicolae. *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches.* Gotha, 1908.

Koder, Johannes. *Negroponte.* Vienna, 1973.

di Lenna, Niccolo. «Ricerche allo storico G. Maria Angiolello». *Archivio Veneto-Tridentino.* V, 1924.

Lindner, Rudi Paul. *Nomads and Ottomans in Mediaeval Anatolia.* Bloomington, Indiana, 1983

Ramusio, Giovanni Baptista. *Navigazioni et Viaggi.* Venice 1563-1606 (Rpt., Amsterdam, 1967-1970).

Reinhard, Jean. , *ANGIOLELLO, Historien des Ottomans et des Persans.* Buenos Aires, 1913(?) A bad and almost unobtainable edition. (Also cited as printed at Besançon, 1913).

Setton, Kenneth. *The Papacy and the Levant. Vol. II. The Fifteenth Century.* Philadelphia, 1978.

Ursu, Ion. *Historia Turchesca, 1300-1514,* publicata, adnotata, împreuna cuo introduce de I. Ursu. Bucharest, 1909.

This paper represents the text and also the pagination of:

“The Content and Authorship of the *Historia Turchesca*,” in

*İstanbul Üniversitesi 550. yıl, Uluslararası Bizans ve Osmanlı Sempozyumu (XV. yüzyıl) : 30–31 Mayıs 2003 / editör, Sümer Atasoy = 550th anniversary of the Istanbul University, International Byzantine and Ottoman Symposium (XVth century) : 30–31 May 2003 / edited by Sümer Atasoy. (Istanbul, 2004) . pp. 213–223.*