

THE RHETORIC OF THE FRONTIER OF CHRISTENDOM IN THE DIPLOMACY OF RENAISSANCE RAGUSA (DUBROVNIK)

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to analyse the most important rhetorical strategy of Ragusan diplomacy, traditionally directed towards the Christian Europe: an endlessly repeated claim that Ragusa, situated on the frontier with the Orthodox “schismatics” and Muslim “infidels”, performs an important mission in the interest of Catholic and Christian religion. The first goal of this article is to reconstruct the historical development of this rhetoric, starting from its first appearance in the fourteenth century until its full articulation in the sixteenth. The second goal is to analyze the types of situations in which it was used and the purposes for which it served. The third goal is to put the Ragusan rhetoric in context, comparing it to the rhetoric of other Renaissance states situated on the frontier of religions, such as the Iberian kingdoms, Poland, and Hungary.

Keywords: Dubrovnik (Ragusa), identity, diplomacy, rhetoric, frontier, *antemurale christianitatis*

Introduction: A city “in-between”

Beyond any doubt, one of the most salient characteristics of Ragusan history was the city’s position on the frontier—the frontier of empires, religions, even civilisations. Already in the medieval period Ragusa was a Catholic city facing

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a Balkan hinterland which was predominantly Orthodox or heretical, belonging to the so-called Bosnian Church. In the fifteenth century the situation became even more complex: that hinterland came under the dominion of yet another culturally and religiously alien power, the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman conquest led to the crystallisation of a multiple frontier which shaped Ragusan history for centuries, until the fall of the Republic in the early 1800s. Politically, Ragusa lay between the Ottoman and Venetian empires, while in the religious and cultural sense it represented a Catholic enclave facing predominantly Orthodox and Islamic communities in the hinterland.¹

Although such a delicate position brought many dangers, Renaissance Ragusa managed to turn it into an advantage, using it to achieve disproportionate political importance and spectacular wealth. Profiting from its position at the frontier of the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe the city turned into an indispensable mediator, providing a much-needed flow of goods, information and technologies. Such an international role, however, required enormous diplomatic efforts and finesse. Since Ragusa's ample trading privileges depended upon the goodwill of the Mediterranean powers, the small republic repeatedly faced an exasperating mission of trying to stay on good terms with mutually hostile states (most obviously, the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Spain). In trying to appease the conflicting interests of its patrons, Ragusa played a perilous double game in which it spied, sent resources, and provided various services to both the Christians and Muslims. Indeed, the small city-state was probably the most successful double spy and war profiteer of the Renaissance Europe. However, such policy did not go unnoticed and the Ragusans constantly faced accusations and suspicions from all the sides. Especially vocal were their main economic competitors, the Venetians, whose diplomats regularly defamed Ragusans as cynical merchants who betrayed their Christian religion assisting the Ottoman "infidels" for the sake of immense profits.²

¹ The most important overviews of Ragusan international position are: Vesna Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*. Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU, 2003; Ivan Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska u XIV i XV veku*. Belgrade: SAN, 1952; Toma Popović, *Turska i Dubrovnik u XVI veku*. Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1973; Jorjo Tadić, *Španija i Dubrovnik u XVI veku*. Belgrade: SKA, 1932; Đuro Körbler, »Dubrovačka republika i zapadne evropske države: veze Dubrovnika s Napulem, Sicilijom, Francuskom i Špañolskom«. *Rad JAZU* 93 (1916): pp. 165-252. A good summary in English is: Robin Harris, *Dubrovnik: A History*. London: Saqi, 2003: pp. 77-117.

² The Venetian defamations will be addressed in more detail below. The numerous references to Ragusan international double game can be found in literature quoted in footnote 1. Most important among many studies of Ragusan espionage are: *Tajna diplomacija u Dubrovniku u XVI stoljeću*, ed. Mirjana Polić-Bobić. Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 2011; Mirjana Polić-Bobić, *Među križom i polumjesecom*.

In sum, Renaissance Ragusa had a lot to explain. This article is a history of such explanations during the fifteenth and sixteenth century: it investigates the ways in which Ragusan diplomats at the Western courts thematized their Republic's frontier position and its delicate role of a mediator between Islam and Christianity. A closer look at the rich diplomatic correspondence of Renaissance Ragusa reveals that the same arguments were applied ever again regarding the city's role on the religious frontier. That is, the Ragusans developed a system of well-established *topoi*, a set of traditional arguments which justified their behaviour, enabling them to answer to the reoccurring accusations with a dose of routine. At the core of this rhetoric was an image of Ragusa as a frontier guard of *respublica Christiana*: a staunchly Catholic city which performed a crucial mission for the sake of Christianity (or Catholicism) due to its perilous position at the frontier with Muslim "infidels" and Orthodox "schismatics." Such insistence on the unique position of the city, its peculiar mission, and the special treatment which it therefore deserved, represented the basic rhetoric of the Ragusan Republic towards the Christian states throughout the Renaissance period.³

In analysing the genesis and changes of such rhetoric this article proceeds in a roughly chronological order. Its opening section traces the earliest references to Ragusa as a Christian frontier guard, found in diplomacy of the fourteenth century, which represented the city as a stronghold and propagator of Catholic faith in the "infidel" and "schismatic" Balkans. The second and main part of the text discusses the drastic reconfiguration of this image after the mid-fifteenth century when Ragusa became an Ottoman tributary state. Obviously, this presented Ragusan diplomacy with a difficult task of explaining to the Christian states the highly profitable, occasionally even cordial, relationship which Ragusa hence enjoyed with the Ottoman "infidel". As a result the Ragusans developed

Zagreb: Ljevak, 2000; V. Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*: pp. 127-140; Josip Žontar, *Obveščevalna služba in diplomacija avstrijskih Habsburžanov v boju proti Turkom v 16. stoletju*. Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1973; Nicolaas H. Biegan, »Ragusan Spying for the Ottoman Empire«. *Belleten* 27 (1963): pp. 237-255; Paolo Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia*. Milano: il Saggiatore, 2004: passim, especially pp. 235-245.

³ The related issue of how the Ragusans justified their close ties with Christian Europe to the Ottomans deserves a separate study. Important insights can be gained from V. Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*: passim; eadem, »Diplomatic Relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Dubrovnik«, in: *European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević. Leiden: Brill, 2013: pp. 187-208. For Ragusan interpretation of tributary relationship and the ensuing obligations to the Ottomans see also: Lovro Kunčević, »Janus-faced Sovereignty: The International Status of the Ragusan Republic in the Early Modern Period«, *ibidem*: pp. 91-122.

a peculiar rhetoric which represented the city's cooperation and close ties with the Ottomans as something which in fact enabled the Republic to perform a crucial mission in the interest of entire Christendom. Finally, the last section of the article adopts a broader perspective, comparing Ragusan frontier rhetoric with those of other Christian states situated on the borderlands with Islam (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Aragon, Castile). The result is an insight into the striking originality of Ragusan rhetoric, which stemmed from the fact that for a champion of Christianity Ragusa had a highly surprising attitude towards the infidel: except for one short episode the city never went to war with the Sublime Porte, but spent centuries as its dutiful tribute-payer.⁴

Ragusa as a Christian frontier guard in the medieval diplomacy

The first references to Ragusa as the guardian of the “true faith” on the frontier with “schismatics” and “heretics” emerged in the diplomacy of the late fourteenth century. In this period Ragusa was already an independent city-state under the nominal sovereignty of the Hungarian king, bordering with the largely heretical Bosnia and Orthodox Serbian Empire. The insistence on Ragusa's praiseworthy role on the religious frontier usually emerged when the city asked for concessions and help from Western rulers during the numerous conflicts with its non-Catholic neighbours. Predictably, in the late 1300s the principal addressees of such self-representation were two rulers—the king of Hungary and the pope.

When it came to the kings of Hungary, the Ragusans used the obvious tactic. Since the various neighbouring magnates with whom they waged wars in this period were not Catholic, the Ragusans began to represent these conflicts as a struggle of a Catholic city with “schismatics” and “heretics.” Of course, in asking for help from their sovereign, the Ragusans insisted primarily on the ruler's obligation to protect the city, but increasingly also stressed his duty to defend fellow Christians from the enemies of the faith. Already during the conflict with

⁴ The last introductory remark to be made is one regarding terminology. The terms “Christian” and “Christianity” in this text are used in an ambiguous way, to designate both Catholicism in particular and Christianity in general. This ambiguity originates from the Ragusan documents and has been kept here, since it is hard to decide each time what exactly the Ragusans had in mind, especially because they themselves were deliberately ambiguous on many occasions. Another term borrowed from the sources is that of “infidel(s)”. It is, of course, far from expressing a value judgement of Islam, but is kept here to mark the strongly negative attitude of the Ragusans and other early modern Christians.

the Serbian warlord, Vojislav Vojinović, in 1359 and 1360, the Ragusans pointed out in several letters that this “perfidious tyrant” was also an “infidel” (*infidelis*).⁵ With time such religious derogations of the city’s enemies at the Hungarian court became increasingly elaborate. Thus, in 1430 the Ragusans described one Bosnian magnate as “the perfidious Pataren and the public enemy of your crown” or “the villainous Pataren and the whip of the Catholic faith”, while their main antagonist in the 1450s became “the enemy of God, the Hungarian crown and this city”.⁶

The first unquestionable traces of the new image of the city, however, are noticeable in the instruction which the Ragusan government issued to its envoys at the Hungarian court in 1371. Asking for help in a war with the neighbouring Serbian warlord, Nikola Altomanović, the envoys were not only to derogate their enemy, but also accentuate the important role which Ragusa performed for the sake of Christianity. They were to begin their audience with the king with a catastrophic description of the state of the city, devastated by the warlord’s armies, after which they were to make the following point: “If we do not soon receive help from your royal majesty in these immense anxieties and sufferings of ours, then a great part of our peasants who came from the aforementioned Kingdom of Serbia, and since they were schismatics we had them baptized in the Catholic faith... will leave Ragusa and again become schismatic, as was the case before”.⁷

After this blatant moral blackmail the diplomats were to invoke the king’s duties both as a ruler and a Christian, stressing that he should help the city “for the love of God and the Catholic faith and for your honour”. They finished by once again appealing to him not to allow the “Christians” to be destroyed by the “schismatics and pagans such as the aforementioned Župan Nicola and his men”.⁸

⁵ *Diplomatarium relationum reipublicae ragusanae cum regno Hungariae*, ed. Josip Gelcich and Lajos Thalloczy. Budapest: Kiadja a m. Tud. Akadémia Tört. Bizottsága, 1887: pp. 13, 17.

⁶ The first two references were to Radoslav Pavlović, while the last was to Stjepan Vukčić Kosača, both of whom were at war with the city at this time (*Diplomatarium*: pp. 337, 341, 351, 495). An early example of such rhetoric in front of the pope is a letter of Gregory XI to the Ragusan government from 1371 in which the pontiff mentions that he was told their city was built in the vicinity of “the heretics and schismatics” (*Vetera monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium historiam illustrantia*, ed. Augustin Theiner, vol. I. Zagabriae: Academia Scientarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1863: p. 284).

⁷ *Et la macor parte deli nostri contadini, li quali son vignudi dalo dito regno di Rassa, et siando scismatici, li havemo fatti bapticare alla fe catholica et mantegnimo dentro dela citade, lor sconvignera di andar foura di Ragusa et tornara scismatici, sicho era avanty, se remedio non havaremo in brieve dela vostra regal magestade in queste nostre grande angustie et afflictioni* (*Diplomatarium*: p. 52).

⁸ *Diplomatarium*: p. 52.

The important role of Ragusa in baptising the neighbouring “heretics” and “schismatics” alluded to in the aforementioned instruction was accentuated even more clearly before another addressee—the pope. The insistence on the “missionary” role of Ragusa was instrumental in the attempts of Ragusan government during the 1370s and 1380s to gain papal approval for not collecting the ecclesiastical tithe in the recently acquired peninsula of Pelješac. In 1333 Ragusa had bought this strategically located area to the northwest from the Bosnian ban and the Serbian emperor and immediately begun to ensure its authority by redistributing the land, erecting fortifications, and re-Catholicizing the population with the help of the Franciscans.⁹ The way in which these efforts were presented to the pope can be reconstructed from a letter by Urban VI from 1386 to the bishop of Korčula-Ston, under whose jurisdiction the peninsula was. The pope mentions that he was informed that the Ragusans had acquired the schismatic and Pataren peninsula and “as the faithful sons of the Church, striving laudably towards the conversion of the schismatic infidels and Patarens” they had invited the Bosnian Franciscans, who were successfully dissuading the locals from their false beliefs. Moreover, the Ragusans were fortifying the settlement of Ston, located on the peninsula: “...so that the city would not come into the hands and under the power of the surrounding schismatic infidels and Patarens to the detriment of the aforementioned [Catholic] faith, but even more so that the Christian cult would spread more strongly from that opportune place to the neighbouring areas”.¹⁰

This claim that Ragusa was a “missionary” city, working tirelessly on the conversion of the surrounding non-Catholic populations, became a genuine commonplace in Ragusan diplomacy. In fact, it was the first of the several important missions for the sake of Christendom which the diplomats attributed to the small

⁹ Vinicije B. Lupis, »Pregled povijesti Stonske biskupije od osnutka do 1541. godine«, in: *Tisuću godina Dubrovačke nad(biskupije)*, Zbornik radova znanstvenog skupa u povodu tisuću godina uspostave dubrovačke (nad)biskupije/metropolije (998.-1998.), ed. Želimir Puljić and Nediljko A. Ančić. Dubrovnik and Split: Biskupski ordinarijat Dubrovnik-Crkva u svijetu, 2001: pp. 197-217; Zdravko Šundrica, »Stonski rat u 14. stoljeću (1333-1399)«, in: idem, *Tajna Kutija dubrovačkog arhiva*, vol. I. Dubrovnik: HAZU Zavod za povijesne znanosti, 2008: pp. 209-392.

¹⁰ ...*ne ipsa civitas ad huiusmodi schismaticorum infidelium et Patarenorum circumvicinorum manus et potestatem deveniat, in dicte fidei detrimentum, sed potius Christianus cultus, ex eius statu prospero, in ipsis circumvicinis partibus augeatur...* This papal letter, together with a few similar ones related to the same issue, was published in: Daniele Farlati, *Illyrici sacri tomus sextus. Ecclesia Ragusina*. Venetiis: Apud Sebastianum Coleti, 1800: pp. 334-335. Even on later occasions—for instance, in 1403 proving legitimacy of their possession of Pelješac at the Hungarian court—the Ragusans insisted on the huge sums and efforts which they spent on converting the local inhabitants to Catholicism (*Diplomatarium*: p. 153).

republic in order to elevate its prestige and make its requests harder to deny at Western courts. Another typical example of the missionary *topos* was used in a letter to King Sigismund in 1434, where the Senate proclaimed: “We are continuously vigilant regarding that which we consider will be to the enlargement of the piety of our [subjects] and to the conversion of heretics with whom we are surrounded and who are to be attracted into the Christ’s faith; into which, thanks to the God almighty and his truest faith, they are being baptised every day and become good Catholics with the honour to the divine name and the glory to your highness”.¹¹

How important and well-established this image of Ragusa became by the first half of the fifteenth century can be seen from the fact that it also began to be used outside of a narrow diplomatic context. Probably the earliest literary reference to the frontier position of Ragusa appeared in a public speech by Filippo de Diversis, delivered during the city’s celebrations of the coronation of the new Hungarian king, Albrecht of Habsburg, in 1438. Echoing the words of Ragusan diplomats, Diversis proclaimed that Ragusa was built “among schismatics, infidels and adherents of bad doctrines”. Nonetheless, he continued, “not only does it preserve the purest Catholic faith, but it managed to convert and keep converting to the true faith many souls among the aforementioned, with enormous effort and strain, examples and exhortations”.¹²

Besides the insistence on the missionary role of Ragusa, the first decades of the fifteenth century saw the emergence of yet another image of the city, which was also based on its frontier position. In this period, which was characterised

¹¹ *Continue uigilantes ad ea, que concernimus fore augmentum deuotionum nostrarum et ad suasionem hereticorum, quibus circumdati sumus, ad christicolam fidem alicienorum, in quam gratia omnipotentis et sue uerissime fidei dietim baptizantur et boni fiunt catholici cum honore divini nominis et gloria serenitatis vestre (Diplomatarium: p. 383).* A similar example is to be found in: *Litterae et commissiones Ponentis*, series 27.6 (henceforth: *LP*), vol.16, f. 63r (State Archives of Dubrovnik, henceforth: *SAD*). Such a characterisation of Ragusa soon emerged also outside of the diplomatic context in a public speech by the Humanist Filippo de Diversis which commemorated the coronation of the Hungarian king Albrecht in 1438 (*Filip de Diversis. Dubrovački govori u slavu ugarskih kraljeva Sigismunda i Alberta*, ed. Zdenka Janeković Römer. Dubrovnik-Zagreb: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2000: p. 121).

¹² F. de Diversis, *Dubrovački govori u slavu ugarskih kraljeva*: p. 121. A similar but less elaborate reference also appears in Diversis’ description of Ragusa (Filip de Diversis, *Opis slavnoga grada Dubrovnika*, ed. and trans. Zdenka Janeković-Römer. Zagreb: Dom i svijet, 2004: pp. 143-144). Of course, Ragusa’s position at the religious frontier was a crucial topic not only of its diplomacy but also its historiography and literature. For such broader context see: Zdenka Janeković Römer, »Osmanlis, Islam and Christianity in Ragusan Chronicles«, in: *Tolerance and Intolerance on the Triplex Confinium*, ed. Egidio Ivetić and Drago Roksandić. Padova: Cleup, 2007: pp. 61-79.

by growing Christian alarm at the rapid Ottoman advance—taking place largely in the city’s Balkan hinterland—the Ragusans began to insist on the desperate situation of their republic and its miraculous survival despite the infidel threat. A telling example of such self-representation—but also the way in which it was used to achieve diplomatic goals—is to be seen in a letter of the Ragusan government to Queen Joan II of Naples in 1431. Refusing to extradite one of her subjects whom they had imprisoned, since he allegedly worked against the city, they justified themselves by painting the following stark picture of their position: “In truth this city of ours is situated on the steepest rock and almost completely enclosed by the sea, and, even worse, surrounded by the devious Patarens and the infidel Turks who are even more wicked. These aforementioned neighbours are day and night striving to destroy our possessions and lives and to deprive us of this republic of ours with their inherent and inhuman sly cunningness. Were it not for the divine grace which defends us with its most powerful shield, and were we not vigilant in opposing the betrayals committed against us by the same Patarens... we would not be able to defend and protect ourselves from these neighbours”.¹³

This description of Ragusa contains several elements which attained immense importance in later elaborations of the city’s frontier position. The first is the insistence on the desperate situation of Ragusa, allegedly under constant pressure from its non-Catholic neighbours. The second is the claim that it enjoys divine protection, that providence itself ensures the improbable survival of a Catholic city in such surroundings. The third element is the emergence of a new religious “Other”—the Ottoman “infidel”—who gradually came to marginalise the traditional “schismatics” and “Patarens” in Ragusan rhetoric. All these claims were repeated and elaborated upon *ad nauseam* in the diplomatic self-representation of the republic. The reason for their importance and persistence is simple: describing the city’s position in utterly catastrophic terms while at the same

¹³ *Sed cum hec nostra civitas sit scopulo arduissimo sita, marique quasi tota amplexata, et, quod deterius est, patarinis nequissimis circumdata, quibus patarinis nequiores se denuntiantur Teucrici infideles, qui tales memorati convicini nostri die noctuque ipsorum innata versipelli inhumana sagacitate nos posse in ere et persona offendere ac huius nostre Reipublicae privare admodum vigilant, contra quos quidem ni divina pereunte clementia, que suo seriusissimo clipeo nos custodit, vigilem sollicitudinem obstandi prodigionibus in nos perpetratis per ipsos patarinos prestaremus, nec non ipsos eosdem deliquentes cum acie, ensis et vigore iuris puniremus, hucusque non potuissemus ab ipsis convicinis custodisse et defendisse (Dubrovačka akta i povelje, ed. Jovan Radonić, vol. I/1 [Zbornik za istoriju, jezik i književnost srpskog naroda, vol. III. 2]. Beograd: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1934: p. 325). For similar rhetoric in another letter to Queen Joan II, see: *ibid.*, p. 333.*

time accentuating its divine protection enabled the Ragusans to ever and again request special treatment and extraordinary concessions from Western rulers.

Importantly, it seems that this tactic worked remarkably well. Namely, both frontier images of Ragusa—that of a besieged Catholic fortress and that of a “missionary” city—were soon confirmed by the highest authority of the *respublica Christiana*. In 1433, after comprehensive diplomatic action, Ragusa managed to gain a privilege from the ecclesiastical synod in Basel which allowed it to trade with the Muslim world. The main agents in arranging this important document were King Sigismund and Ivan Stojković (Johannes de Ragusio, 1395-1443), an influential Dominican of Ragusan origin, were most likely responsible for the fact that the charter clearly echoes the rhetoric of Ragusan diplomacy. In the opening lines the participants of the synod proclaimed that Sigismund had told them: “That the city of Ragusa is situated on the shore of the sea, with whose waves it is frequently battered, shaken and endangered, and on the harshest of rocks in an infertile area. The neighbouring infidel rivals of the Christian faith and the enemies of the Catholic Church of different sects, heretics and schismatics, often used to attack it in big numbers, with various prosecutions and wicked wars. To them the citizens resisted strongly, luckily and fearlessly, equipped and strengthened by the divine force, not sparing any effort, strain nor expense in various occasions for the glory of divine name and defence of the Catholic faith, since the right hand of the Lord gave them virtue. With their honest and Catholic exhortations, zeal and incitements, they have managed and are still managing every day to attract [the surrounding non-Catholics] of both sexes to the love of our redeemer Jesus Christ and have them baptised in great numbers. This city persists in Christian faith and cult as well as in the most faithful obedience towards the Hungarian King, and humbly and consistently accepts the teachings of the apostolic see and the holy Roman Church. We have heard many other laudatory things as well, which rightly make this city worthy of commendation before us and the whole Church and deserving of every grace and favour”¹⁴

This is the first but not the last instance in which the authorities of the Catholic Church acknowledged the great merit and the special status of Ragusa as a frontier guard of Christianity. Yet there was an embarrassing fact that the majority of the synod’s participants was not aware of. Just a little before it received such a flattering description by the authorities of the Western Church,

¹⁴ *Dubrovačka akta i povelje*, I/1: p. 430. For the historical context of this privilege see: I. Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska*: pp. 57-60.

Ragusa made a move which was quite at odds with its new international image. In 1430 it had sent the first official embassy to the sultan, arranging peaceful relations with the Ottoman Empire and obtaining a permit to freely trade in its territories. To make things even worse, since the Ottomans came to dominate its whole Balkan hinterland, soon the city had to agree to much more than that. In a few decades the heroic frontier guard of Christianity became a tributary state of the Sublime Porte, establishing not only peaceful but also highly profitable, even a comparatively cordial, relationship with the Ottoman infidel.

“Shelter, shield, and firm bastion of the entire Christian republic”: The representations of tributary status in Ragusan Renaissance diplomacy

The Ragusan government long avoided initiating official diplomatic communication with the Ottoman Empire. However, by the 1430s it became impossible to ignore the powerful state which was rapidly expanding in the city’s hinterland, conquering areas vital for its trade and even threatening Ragusa itself. Therefore, in a series of ever-more-cumbersome treaties—in 1430, 1442 and finally in 1458—Ragusa negotiated its position towards the Sublime Porte. Since the Ottomans needed a mediator with the Christian Mediterranean, the small republic received terms that were in fact quite generous. According to the sultan’s charters (*ahdnames*), Ragusa owed a relatively small annual tribute of 12,500 ducats and a vaguely defined “faithfulness” or “obedience”, in practice also providing the Ottomans with military assistance such as skilled labourers and strategic information. In return the republic gained Ottoman military protection—much needed against Venice—and unprecedented trading privileges in the empire which enabled it to amass enormous wealth. Despite numerous crises, this mutually useful relationship proved to be remarkably long-lasting; with only one minor seventeenth-century interruption, Ragusa remained an Ottoman tributary state until its fall in 1808.¹⁵

Clearly, such a close relationship with the infidel was profoundly embarrassing for a city which claimed to be the frontier guard of Christianity; therefore it was an absolute imperative for Ragusan diplomacy to find a good way of explaining it to Western princes. How deeply problematic Ragusa’s position was

¹⁵ The classic overviews of Ragusan-Ottoman relationship are: I. Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska*; T. Popović, *Turska i Dubrovnik*; V. Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*; Nicolaas H. Biegan, *The Turco-Ragusan relationship*. The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1967; Vesna Miović, *Dubrovačka Republika u spisima osmanskih sultana*. Dubrovnik: Državni Arhiv u Dubrovniku, 2005.

becomes apparent when one recalls that religious concerns continued to play a fundamental role even in the increasingly “secularised” politics of the Renaissance period. Namely, the old medieval idea about the unity of the “Christian republic” (*respublica christiana*) and the irreconcilable antagonism of that *respublica* towards the Muslim infidel continued to exert a profound influence, at least on the level of official rhetoric. Invoking the unity of Christian princes in order to organise a joint crusade against the Ottomans was a genuine commonplace, an indispensable part of “politically correct” European discourse, which featured not only in numerous international treaties but also in public speeches, poetry, and historiography. The powerful appeal of such a sense of Christian unity is visible through the fact that it survived, at least to a certain extent, even the deep chasm caused by the Reformation. Christian solidarity in front of a demonised infidel was so deeply rooted that even in Protestant England the ecclesiastical authorities encouraged prayers for the victory of the otherwise detested Catholic powers in their struggles against the Ottomans in the Mediterranean.¹⁶

All of this makes it clear how dangerous and compromising close relations with the Muslim powers could have been for a Catholic state. As early as the ninth century, Pope John VIII invoked the words of St. Paul: *nolite iugum ducere cum infidelibus* (Rom. 1: 32), formulating the doctrine of the “impious alliance”, which strongly condemned any form of alliance with the Muslims. By making such an alliance a Christian ruler was understood to have excluded himself from the community of Christians, becoming *exterus inimicus* and *Christo adversus*, to be treated in the same way as the infidels themselves. Through repeated elaborations of the concept, by the thirteenth century an understanding emerged that *impium foedus* referred not only to alliance, but also to any kind of treaty with the infidel that could damage Christian interest.¹⁷ It is largely due to this fact that merchant city-states, such as Venice or Genoa, and later also Ragusa, took care to obtain specific charters from the ecclesiastical authorities which legalised their trade with the Muslim world. In other words,

¹⁶ For the concept of *respublica christiana* see: Giulio Vismara, *Impium foedus: le origini della respublica christiana*. Milano: A. Giuffrè, 1974; Jean Rupp, *L'idée de Chrétienté dans la pensée pontificale des origines à Innocent III*. Paris: Presses modernes, 1939; Werner Frizemeyer, *Christenheit und Europa. Zur Geschichte des europäischen Gemeinschaftsgefühls von Dante bis Leibniz*. München, 1931. For the sense of Christian unity even after the schism of the Reformation see: Franklin Le Van Baumer, »The Conception of Christendom in Renaissance England«. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945): pp. 131-156.

¹⁷ For the idea of *impium foedus* see: Vismara, *Impium foedus*; Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World and Western Political Order*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002: pp. 108-113, 149-151.

while economic and even diplomatic contacts were tolerated, an accusation of (overly) close cooperation or alliance with the infidel could have led to the gravest ecclesiastical punishments such as excommunication or interdict. Clearly, in the Renaissance period the influence of the Church over the whole issue waned somewhat, but the dealings with the infidels nonetheless remained profoundly scandalous. This is demonstrated by the conspicuous hesitation of Christian rulers to establish formal diplomatic ties with the Ottoman court. Despite undeniable usefulness of such arrangements, most European states established permanent embassies in Istanbul only in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. Even more revealing was the fate of France, a state which did create strong diplomatic ties with the Porte before the others. The Ottoman-French alliance of 1536 and especially the joint operations of their fleets in the Mediterranean led to an enormous diplomatic scandal, even a genuine propaganda war. The French king had to hire whole teams of jurists, theologians, and historians to defend him from the accusations of Habsburg apologists who insisted that he had behaved like the worst of “pagans” and betrayed the interests of Christendom.¹⁸

In a way, for Ragusa the stakes were even higher than for France – the very economic survival of the small city depended upon its reputation. As a trading community which enjoyed broad privileges all over the Mediterranean, Ragusa was strongly dependent on the benevolence of numerous authorities and could not afford to be seen as a subject of the infidel empire. Therefore, from the very beginnings of the tributary status, the city’s diplomats had to find a way of explaining this embarrassing arrangement to the Christian public.

The profound discomfort connected to this issue can be grasped from the fact that between the mid-fifteenth and the early sixteenth century the Ragusans devised no less than three different rhetorical strategies in order to trivialise, obfuscate or justify their tributary status. The first and simplest was silence, an attempt to hide the whole arrangement from the Christian public. Such an approach was apparently taken as early as March 1458, when the Ragusans

¹⁸ On this polemic see: Géraud Poumarède, «Justifier l’injustifiable: l’alliance turque au miroir de la chrétienté (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)». *Revue d’histoire diplomatique* 3 (1997): pp. 217-246; Michael Hochedlinger, «Die französisch-osmanische “Freundschaft” 1525-1792. Element antihabsburgischer Politik, Gleichgewichts-instrument, Prestigeunternehmung. Aufriss eines Problems». *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 102/1-2 (1994): pp. 108-164. On Christian Ottoman alliances in the early modern period see also: Emrah Safa Gürkan, «Christian Allies of the Ottoman Empire». *European history online* (2010), available at: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/alliances-and-wars/alliances-and-treaties/emrah-safa-gurkan-christian-allies-of-the-ottoman-empire#OttomanAllianceswiththeChristianStates>.

were negotiating with Mehmed II what was to become the most important *ahdname*, a model for all the later ones. Having agreed on the instructions to its negotiators with the Ottomans, the Senate decided that the envoys to the new Hungarian king, Matthias Corvinus, were to be sent, intriguingly, without any “addition”. It is not hard to guess what that “addition” should have been—probably the Senate decided not to notify the king about its decision to once more turn Ragusa into a tributary state.¹⁹ Although it is hard to be certain since most of Ragusan diplomatic material between the 1460s and the 1490s has been lost, it seems that this kind of silence was typical for the city’s diplomacy of the period. This can be inferred from the preserved correspondence of the 1490s, in which Ragusa kept silent regarding its tributary status, representing itself as nothing but a poor Catholic city bravely defying the Ottoman menace.²⁰

If the first line of Ragusa’s defence was silence about the tributary status, the second was representing it as a completely harmless arrangement. A good example of such a diplomatic strategy is found in the instruction issued to the Ragusan envoys at the Hungarian court in October of 1443. The diplomats were to mention the recent treaty with the sultan, made in 1442, only if the king asked directly why Ragusa had sent an embassy with gifts to the Sublime Porte. Faced with a direct question, they were to admit, but immediately resort to misinterpretation. They were supposed to claim that the embassy was sent in order to liberate the city’s merchants captured during the recent Ottoman conquest of Serbia and also in order to ensure free trade in the territory which was crucial for the city’s survival. This was a remarkably euphemistic interpretation of the treaty of 1442. Indeed, the Ragusans had ensured free trade in the Ottoman possessions, but they also had to promise an annual tribute and “faithfulness” to the sultan—two embarrassing issues which were not mentioned to their Hungarian sovereign.²¹

¹⁹ Namely, in 1447 the tributary relationship, established by the *ahdname* of 1442, was cancelled, to be restored only in 1458. On the Senate’s decision in March 1458 and these negotiations in general, see: Branislav M. Nedeljković, »Dubrovačko-turski ugovor od 23. oktobra 1458. godine«, in: *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta* 11/1 (1970) [= *Spomenica Jorja Tadića*]: p. 372, passim.

²⁰ For instance: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje*, ed. J. Radonić, vol. I/2 [Zbornik za istoriju, jezik i književnost srpskog naroda, vol. III.3]. Beograd: SKA, 1934: pp. 802, 819; *Diplomatarium*: pp. 642, 646, 661.

²¹ *Diplomatarium*: pp. 442-443. A similar diplomatic tactic is noticeable regarding the earliest embassy sent to the sultan in 1430, which the Ragusans admitted to King Sigismund. They insisted, however, that it was done “not gladly but out of necessity” so that they would “survive in this city of your majesty”. Revealingly, they failed to mention the profitable permit to trade freely in the Ottoman territories which they also acquired (for that instruction see: *Diplomatarium*: p. 351).

Despite the ever-closer Ragusan cooperation with the Ottomans, such a combination of silence and obfuscation seems to have worked well. During the second half of the fifteenth century, Christian rulers, even the well-informed pope and the Hungarian king, never raised the issue of the city's tributary status. In their communications with the city, the Hungarian kings did not once mention the tribute it paid to the Ottomans nor its connection to the Sublime Porte in general. Quite the contrary, they persistently lauded the city's faithfulness [sic] and insisted on its great merits for the Hungarian Kingdom and the Catholic religion, both of which it allegedly defended from the neighbouring "tyrant".²² Other Christian rulers, such as the pope or the king of Naples, also echoed what was clearly the standard Ragusan rhetoric of the period. If they mentioned Ragusa's relationship with the Ottomans at all, they always depicted it in the most catastrophic of terms as the confrontation of a small Christian city with an aggressive infidel empire.²³

Yet with time Ragusan diplomatic tactics grew ever harder to reconcile with reality. That is, by the early 1500s it became increasingly difficult for the city to hide its close relationship with the Ottomans—the thriving economic relations and, especially, the political patronage of the Sublime Porte. Thus, for instance, every year Ragusa ceremoniously dispatched its emissaries with tribute to Istanbul, celebrated sultan's victories with cannon fire, maintained an Ottoman customs official (*emin*) in front of its gates, sent gifts to the neighbouring *sanjaks*, and in general conducted vibrant diplomacy at the Porte.²⁴ Another factor probably also

²² For instance *Diplomatarium*: pp. 620, 626, 634, 635, 636-637, 641, 650.

²³ For the kings of Naples, see: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje*, I/2: pp. 662, 748-749, 778. For the papacy: *Vetera monumenta* I: pp. 504, 515-516. Of course, the fact that Christian rulers did not mention tributary status when corresponding with Ragusa does not mean they were not aware that the city had close contacts with the Ottomans. In fact, although normally avoiding it, the Ragusans themselves occasionally admitted their ties with the Sublime Porte to the Christian powers (see, for instance: *Istorijski spomenici južnih Slovena i okolnih naroda*, vol. II, ed. Vićentije Makušev. Beograd: Štamparija Kraljevine Srbije, 1882: pp. 55-56). Moreover, even if Ragusans tried to hide their relationship with the "infidels", their Venetian rivals were eager to publicise it. They did it, for example, to the Hungarian king in 1466; although not mentioning the city's tributary status, the *Serenissima's* diplomats insisted that the Ragusans had helped the Ottomans in their recent war against Venice (*Magyar diplomaciai emlékek Mátyás király korából 1458-1490*, vol. II, ed. Iván Nagy and Albert Nyáry. Budapest: A M. Tud. Akadémia, 1877: pp. 19-20). Regardless of such isolated examples, two general points can safely be made: first, during the late fifteenth century the Ragusans normally avoided mentioning the tributary status in their diplomacy with Western powers; second, although increasingly aware of the city's ties with the Ottomans, contemporary Christian princes probably had a relatively vague idea of their nature and extent.

²⁴ On Ragusan diplomacy in Istanbul, see: Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*, passim. On the signs of Ottoman protection in the public life of the city, see: Konstantin Jireček, »Beiträge zur ragusanischen Literaturgeschichte«. *Archiv für slavische Philologie* 21 (1899): pp. 399-412.

played a role in the change of Ragusan rhetoric. By the first decades of the sixteenth century—especially after the Hungarian disaster of 1526—it became increasingly evident that the Ottomans were there to stay. It was due to these reasons that a third strategy emerged in Ragusan diplomacy, which represented the city’s tributary position in a strikingly original, even completely unprecedented manner.

This new diplomatic self-representation managed to fulfil a demanding ideological task: it reconciled the older images of Ragusa as a Christian frontier guard with the hitherto unimaginable acknowledgement of its deep dependence on the neighbouring infidel empire. Unable to deny the obvious, Ragusan diplomats at the Western courts admitted—albeit, as the instructions often put it, “with tears in the eyes”—that their city indeed paid an annual tribute to the sultan and even served him in many other ways. However, after this embarrassing admission a remarkable twist followed. The diplomats insisted that the Ragusans did all this not only to preserve their poor Catholic city, situated “in the jaws of the infidel”, but also for *the sake of all Christendom*. The tributary status began to be represented as an altruistic sacrifice on Ragusa’s part, an arrangement which, although involving collaboration with the infidel, in fact enabled the small republic to perform tasks of immense importance for the Christian faith. As early as the 1530s and 1540s the praiseworthy purpose of Ragusan cooperation with the Ottomans began to be proclaimed in the clearest of terms. For instance, in 1535, the diplomats at the court of Ferdinand of Habsburg stated that the Ragusans appeased their infidel neighbours with gold “not so much for the conservation of our private goods, as much as *in the name of the whole Christian republic* which can be in better spirits seeing that [Ragusa still] marches under the banner of Christ”.²⁵ Similarly, in 1540 the diplomats were to mention to the Venetian doge the immense tribute which the Ragusans “pay annually to the sultan in order to preserve this city under the banner of Christ, to the service and interest of this state [Venice] and the entire Christian republic”.²⁶

²⁵ *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1: p. 375; on this see also Vinko Foretić, *Povijest Dubrovnika*, vol. II. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1980: pp. 26-27.

²⁶ The instruction to the envoy in Venice is worth quoting *in extenso* for being truly typical: *Qualmente trovandosi quella città situata in uno sterilissimo luogo, dal quale non se puo cavare tanta vitovaglia che basti per uno mese del anno, e sendo angaridiati dal tributo, qual annualmente pagamo al Gran Signore Turcho per conservare quella città et habitanti sotto lo vexillo de christo, et al servizio e commodita di questo Dominio e tutta la Republica Christiana.* (*Litterae et commissiones Levantis* (hereafter: *LL*), ser. 27.1, vol. 22, f. 108r, SAD, Senate’s letter to Serafin Zamagna, dated 14 February 1540). Other examples of such statements typical of Ragusan diplomacy are: *LP*, vol. 3, f. 104r; vol. 6, f. 9r; vol. 15, f. 11r.

Clearly, Ragusan diplomats had to work exceedingly hard to demonstrate the surprising claim that being an Ottoman tribute-payer served to promote Christian interests. In order to achieve this goal they insisted that Ragusa performed a series of unique tasks which were crucial for the defence and even propagation of the “true faith”. Importantly, all of these tasks were represented as being possible exactly *because* Ragusa was an Ottoman tributary state or, at least, because it maintained good relations with the infidel. In a nut-shell, Ragusa was represented as a pious mole, dissimulating friendship with the Ottomans while in fact working tirelessly for the sake of the Christian republic.

The first among the important tasks that diplomats attributed to Ragusa is visible in the explanation of the tributary status that Frano Gondola, the city’s envoy to Rome, offered to Pope Pius V in May 1570. In the dramatic circumstances of the war for Cyprus, Gondola admitted the city’s ties with the Ottomans but immediately explained the specific rationale behind them. Narrating his audience with the pope to the Senate, he wrote: “Afterwards I said that the Ragusans admittedly do pay the tribute to the Turks, but they do that since they are forced to; nor does it seem unworthy to them to pay that sum in order to keep alive in these parts the faith of Jesus Christ and that city with its inhabitants...”²⁷

How exactly Ragusa maintained the Christian faith in “these parts” becomes apparent from the instruction which the Senate sent to Gondola few weeks afterwards. Answering the Venetian accusations that the city cooperated with the Ottomans, Gondola was supposed to accentuate not only the Christian loyalty but also the exceptional strategic significance of the small republic. Throwing himself at the pope’s feet, he was, among other things, to tell him: “By preserving the city of Ragusa your Holiness will preserve not only our nation in the faith of Christ and in the most holy worship of God, but also the most tormented people in the world, that is, the poor slaves of which the whole land of the Turk is full. Namely, not so much for the salvation of the souls of our Ragusans who are trading in the land of the Turks, but more to make an immensely pious and Christian deed for the salvation of the souls of the poor slaves, my lords have many years ago attained wonderful privileges from the

²⁷ *Dissi poi che, se bene li Ragusei pagan oil tribute al Turco, lo fanno per mera forza, nè li pare inconveniente pagar quella somma de danari per manterenere in quelli paesi viva la Religione di Gesù Christo et quella Città con il suo popolo...* Lujo Vojnović, »Depeschen des Francesco Gondola, Gesandten der Republik Ragusa bei Pius V und Gregor XIII (1570-1573)«. *Archiv für österreichische Geschichte* 98 (1909): p. 558.

Emperors of the Turks allowing them to keep priests and monks near their merchants in those lands. And therefore, in whatever city, castle or house our Ragusans are—and they are everywhere—so are the priests and monks who administer the holy sacraments of the Church, not only to the Ragusans but also to the slaves, and baptise their sons, and preserve and stabilise them in Christian faith, with the grace of God and their work. Therefore, if the city of Ragusa were lost, these and many similar Christian deeds—which I omit to mention here so my lords do not appear boastful—would all be lost with immense loss to Christianity, since in this way the faith of Christ would disappear in many regions of the Orient, which [faith] is preserved in the midst of infidel peoples due to the miracle of God and the zeal of my lords...²⁸

As is apparent from Gondola's dramatic rhetoric, the first task attributed to Ragusa in order to justify its tributary status was preserving Catholicism in the Ottoman Empire.²⁹ How important and deeply rooted this claim was can be seen from the fact that it emerged almost a century afterwards in the instructions to the Ragusan envoy at the court of Louis XIV in 1667. Asking the king to help Ragusa, devastated by an earthquake, the diplomat was to proclaim that

²⁸ *...conservando V.B. ne la città di Ragugia, non solo viene a conservare la nostra nazione nella fede di christo et nel culto s.mo di Dio, ma le più afflitte genti che siano al mondo, che sono i poveri schiavi dei quali n'è pieno tutto il paese del Turco; imperoche non tanto per salute dell'animo dei nostri Ragugei che praticano nel paese del Turco, qua per fare un(a) opera tanto pia et christiana à salute delle anime dei poveri Schiavi, hanno ottenuto da molti e molti anni in qua bellissimo privilegi dagli imperatori dei Turchi de potere tenere appresso i mercatanti nel paese loro Preti et Frati, et così non è città non è castello non è villa, dove siano dei nostri Ragugei che non ci sono anco dei Preti o Frati, i quali amministrano i sancti sacramenti della chiesa, non solo à i Ragugei, ma à gli schiavi et schiave, et battezano loro figliouli et gli conservano et stabiliscono per gratia di Dio et per opera loro, nella fede christiana, onde se venisse à perdersi la città di Ragugia queste e simili altre christiane operationi le quali tralascio di dire per non mostrare i miei signori vanagloriosi, verrebbero insieme à perdersi con grandissima perdita del christianesimo, perche à questo modo si finirebbe di perdere la fede di Christo in molte parti dell'Oriente la quale si va conservando tuttavia fra gente infidele per miracolo di Dio et per zelo dei miei Signori... L. Vojnović, »Depeschen des Francesco Gondola«: p. 571.*

²⁹ Although the sultan's privileges about which Gondola boasted in fact never existed, in general there was some truth to his claims. With their religious activities silently tolerated, Ragusan merchant colonies indeed played a significant role in the maintenance of Catholicism in the empire. Regarding the alleged Ragusan privileges see: Antal Molnár, *Le Saint-Siège, Raguse et les missions catholiques de la Hongrie Ottomane 1572-1647*. Rome-Budapest: Accademia d'Ungheria, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, METEM, 2007: pp. 57-58; for Ragusa's role in preserving Catholicism in the Balkans and Hungary see the entire impressive work, but especially pp. 53-58. On the Ragusan role as promoters of Catholicism see also: V. Miović, *Dubrovačka Republika u spisima Osmanskih sultana*: pp. 110-115; eadem, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*: pp. 101-103.

“due to the privileges which the Republic enjoys in the entire Ottoman Empire, the Christians of these parts are maintained with the comfort of churches and distribution of most holy sacraments, to the great benefit and consolation of these peoples”.³⁰ The insistence that Ragusa played a fundamental role in the preservation of Catholicism under the sultan’s rule also emerged outside the narrow diplomatic context. Thus, it was one of the most prominent themes in the description of the Ottoman Empire written in the 1620s by Matteo Gondola, a former Ragusan ambassador to Istanbul. Stressing the Republic’s merit in not only defending the Catholics but even converting the Orthodox, Gondola also proudly mentioned a certain Ragusan burial in Hadrianople, which included a public Catholic procession headed by a priest carrying a cross—all of it deep in the infidel empire.³¹ In his seventeenth-century description of the world, cosmographer Luca de Linda illustrated the alleged religious privileges of Ragusa with a similar story. He narrates that in 1621, during the Ottoman campaign in Poland, the priests from the retinue of the Ragusan ambassadors publicly served mass in the middle of the infidel camp. De Linda continued by proclaiming that all Catholics in the Ottoman Empire lived under Ragusan patronage “so that these small remnants of Christianity are maintained in the purity of Catholic faith through the endless expenses of this most religious republic”.³²

This image of Ragusa as a guardian of Catholicism in the Ottoman Empire was clearly a modification of its older image as a missionary city, typical of the diplomacy of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Simply put, as the frontier on which Ragusa was situated changed—from a mosaic of Orthodox and heretical polities to a Muslim superpower—so did the religious mission attributed to the city. It should be stressed, however, that the Ragusan republic was not the

³⁰ *Borba Dubrovnika za opstanak posle velikog zemljotresa 1667 g. Arhivska građa (1667-1670)*, ed. Radovan Samardžić. Beograd: SAN, 1960: p. 131.

³¹ Karlo Horvat, »Novi historijski spomenici za povijest Bosne i susjednih zemalja«. *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine* 21 (1909): pp. 388-389. Another version of this *relazione*, unknown to Horvat, is to be found in: *Clairambault* 1017, f. 37r-48v, *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris). The literature on Matteo Gondola and his *relazione* is given in Zdenko Zlatar, *Between the double eagle and the crescent*. Boulder, Colo: East European Monographs, 1992: p. 256, note 76.

³² *Le relationi et descrittioni vniversali et particolari del mondo. Di Luca di Linda et dal marchese Maiolino Bisaccioni. Tradotte, osseruate, & nuouamente molto accresciute, e corrette*. In Venetia, Per Combi, & LaNoù, 1664: p. 641. Other examples of non-diplomatic documents accentuating the importance of Ragusa for preserving Catholicism in the Balkans are: Stijepo Skurla, *Sveti Vlaho, biskup i mučenik od Sevasta: dubrovački obranitelj*. Dubrovnik, 1871: pp. 85-87; Giacomo Luccari, *Copioso ristretto degli annali di Rausa*. Venezia: Ad instantia di Antonio Leonardi, 1605: p. 115.

only Western state which justified close contacts with the sultan by claiming that they served to promote Christian interests in the Ottoman Empire. A relatively similar argument was used by the apologists of the French king in order to justify their patron's alliance with the Sublime Porte. It was represented as an arrangement of general benefit to Christianity, since it enabled the French monarch to protect European merchants in the empire and, even more importantly, to ensure the safety of pilgrims to the Holy Land.³³

Another important task attributed to Ragusa for the benefit of Christianity was saving and redeeming Christian prisoners from Ottoman slavery. Again, this was a reworking of an older *topos* which had emerged as early as the fifteenth century: for instance, in 1459 the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus lauded Ragusa's efforts to liberate prisoners from the infidels, adding that the city was therefore considered "a port of Christian freedom".³⁴ A typical later example of such diplomatic rhetoric appears in the instruction issued to the Republic's envoy in Ancona in 1578. Attempting to achieve the abolishment of newly introduced customs for Ragusan merchants, the envoy was instructed to warn the local authorities that if this "novelty" were maintained, the Ragusans "would no longer be able to pay the tribute, nor help our poor citizens in their needs, nor save our subjects and foreigners from the hands of the infidels where they end up every day".³⁵ Another example of such a claim appears in a letter from the Ragusan Senate to the pope from 1603, in which the Ragusans boasted about a certain young man from Bologna who had converted to Islam and intended to depart the city for the Ottoman Empire. Hearing of this, the government had—allegedly with great "scandal"—torn the youth from the hands of the Turks at the very gates of Ragusa and sent him to Rome as concrete evidence of "the zeal with which the Christian faith is preserved in our city".³⁶

Finally, the third task attributed to Ragusa by its diplomats at Western courts was also the most important: the city had, allegedly for centuries, stopped the Ottoman advance towards the West. According to Ragusan diplomacy, maintaining itself with extraordinary efforts in the "jaws of the infidel", the small republic

³³ G. Poumarède, »Justifier l'injustifiable«: pp. 238-246.

³⁴ *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* I/2: p. 620.

³⁵ *LP*, vol. 3, f. 104r-104v, Senate's letter to Jeronim Caboga, dated 24 January 1578: *...non potriamo pagar piu il tributo, ne soccorrere i poveri nostri ne i bisogni loro, ne cavare i suditi nostri e forestieri dalle mani degli infideli dove vi capitano giornalmente*. Similar examples are found in: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1: pp. 124-125; *Borba Dubrovnika*: p. 131.

³⁶ *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1: p. 129.

was the first line of defence of the Christian world, enabling its coreligionists to enjoy peace while it held back the Ottoman tide. Typical of such rhetoric was the insistence on the immense strategic importance of Ragusa, the fact that its fall would have catastrophic consequences for all Christianity, enabling the Ottomans to assault Italy. Thus, in 1572, asking the pope to allow the export of armaments to Ragusa, the aforementioned Frano Gondola accentuated that the city's existence was immensely important for Christianity, on whose eastern side it was the "last frontier". Then he offered a highly dubious geo-strategic estimate, warning that the consequence of Ragusa's fall would be that "Christianity in the eastern parts would not reach further than Venice", since the Dalmatian cities, weak and poor as they were, "would fall at the first occasion when the Turk showed his face".³⁷ Almost two centuries later, in 1752, in a report on the Republic's conflict with the Venetian general *proveditore*, an anonymous Ragusan repeated the same traditional argument. Complaining about the Venetian fleet harassing Ragusan shipping, he warned that the *Serenissima* should treat Ragusa with more respect, since it was not in its interest that the smaller republic should fall under the Ottomans. The reasons were clear: "Let the Christian princes consider what would happen with the safety of Italy if a territory so elongated, so full of excellent ports, so close to many very populated Ottoman provinces would come under the absolute power of the Turk?"³⁸ That the Ottoman conquest of Ragusa would have fatal consequences for other Christian lands was also acknowledged by foreign rulers and, most importantly, the papacy. For instance, Pope Clement VIII wrote to Emperor Rudolf in 1595 asking him to forbid Uskok raids on the Ottomans over Ragusan territory since they might provoke the sultan to "conquer that city from which he would lean over the neck of Italy to the great detriment of everyone".³⁹

The claim that Ragusa was an obstacle to the infidel tide was a re-elaboration of an older image of the city, typical of the fifteenth-century diplomacy—the idea

³⁷ L. Vojnović, »Depeschen des Francesco Gondola«: p. 612.

³⁸ *Ora riflettano i Principi Christiani qual sarebbe la sicurezza d'Italia, se uno stato tanto disteso in lunghezza, così pieno di ottimi porti, così vicino a tante provincie Turche sì popolate, venisse sotto al Dominio assoluto del Turcho?* (Mss. Correr 1411, Miscellanea, saec XVII-XVIII, f. 173r, Museo civico Correr, Venice). A similar argument from a high Venetian official, most likely a senator, in the late seventeenth century is to be found in a sketch for a public speech: Codice Cicogna 697/25, *Che i Veneziani debbano nelle presenti congiunture permettere il passo del Golfo all'esercito Turchesco per assediare la città di Ragusa*, f. 76r, Museo civico Correr, Venice).

³⁹ *Vetera monumenta Slavorum Meridionalium historiam illustrantia*, vol. II, ed. Augustin Theiner. Zagabriae: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1875: p. 89.

that Ragusa was a Catholic fortress heroically resisting the pressure of neighbouring “schismatics” and “heretics”. An intermediate phase between this older image and the new one seems to have been the specific rhetoric typical of the Hungarian kings in the second half of the fifteenth century. Probably echoing the rhetoric of the city itself—which is unknown, since the documents are lost—the Hungarian kings had regularly described Ragusa as the “wall for our faithful” or the “shield of the borders of our Dalmatian Kingdom”. Building on such stereotypes, sixteenth-century Ragusan diplomats gave new meaning to the city’s struggle for survival in infidel surroundings: Ragusa was not only defending itself, or even the Hungarian Kingdom, but the *entire* Christendom.⁴⁰

This heroic role of Ragusa was often expressed through an ancient and influential metaphor since the Middle Ages applied to the territories which had bordered on the Muslims—the metaphor of “the bulwark of Christendom” (*antemurale* or *propugnaculum christianitatis*).⁴¹ Beginning in the sixteenth century, Ragusan diplomacy used many variants of this metaphor, all of which suggested the same image of Ragusa as an isolated fortification of Christianity, exposed to the first wave of the infidel assault. Thus, in the 1570s and 1580s, before the pope, Frano Gondola spoke about the city “as a true bulwark of entire Italy and its rulers” or “the bulwark of Christianity which on its shoulders on that side keeps closed the frontiers with the barbarians”.⁴² Besides the terms *antemurale* and *propugnaculo* in diplomatic rhetoric similar notions of *riparo* (shelter), *scudo* (shield), *bastione* (bastion) or *argine* (embankment) also emerged, all of which suggested the idea of stopping an enemy assault. For instance, in the instruction to its envoys to Rome in 1607, the Senate described Ragusa as “a shelter, shield and firm bastion of the entire Christian republic”, while the ambassador to Louis XIV characterised the city as “embankment, support and shelter of Christianity”.⁴³

⁴⁰ For instances when Ragusa was called a “shield” and “wall” of the Christians in the charters of Ladislav Posthumous (1454) and Matthias Corvinus (1459), see: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* I/1: p. 557; *Diplomatarium*: p. 615.

⁴¹ On the origin of this expression, see: Nora Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom: Jews, Muslims and “Pagans” in Medieval Hungary c. 1000-c.1300*. Cambridge: CUP, 2001; »Antemurale Christianitatis«, in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*, vol. I. Zagreb, 1941: p. 469.

⁴² L. Vojnović, »Depeschen des Francesco Gondola«: pp. 546, 558, 571.

⁴³ ... *come a riparo, scudo e saldo bastione de tutta la Republica christiana* (*Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1: p. 180); *un argine sostegno e riparo della christianità* (*Borba Dubrovnik*: p. 252). In characterising the frontier position of the Republic in diplomacy different metaphors such as “the column of Christ’s faith” (*colonna della fede di Christo*) or even “a true shelter and landmark of the entire Christian republic” (*uero riparo e bersaglio di tutta la Republica christiana*) occasionally also emerge (*LL*, vol. 30, f. 101r; vol. 6, f. 9r).

While it was surprising for an Ottoman tributary state to claim that its position served Christian interests, it was absolutely unprecedented for such a polity to appropriate the prestigious title of “the bulwark of Christendom”. As the comparative section at the end of this article will show, other states which claimed the title of *antemurale* all had an impressive record of military conflicts with the Ottomans. Being a Christian bulwark meant primarily defending the true faith on the battlefield—it was a warrior’s myth *par excellence*. Clearly, Ragusa was singularly unfit for such an image, since, except for a short episode in 1444, the city had not spent a single day at war with the Ottomans. Even worse, it maintained a highly profitable relationship with them, enjoyed the political protection of the Sublime Porte, and did everything in its power to appease the huge empire at its borders.

To deal with this embarrassing situation of an utterly pacifist and militarily negligible *antemurale*, Ragusan diplomats had to remove the bellicose component typical of the image while keeping the praiseworthy function of “bulwark”. This was done by claiming that Ragusa did indeed stop the Turk for centuries, yet it was not done with arms but with diplomacy, by having found a way of appeasing and manipulating the Ottoman barbarian. This unusual solution does seem to have caused some unease, because references to such “diplomatic *antemurale*” often emerged together with a story which gave it a high sanction. That is, when thematising the appeasing, even servile, Ragusan relationship with the Ottomans, the city’s diplomats hurried to narrate an anecdote according to which such demeanour was lauded by no less than Emperor Charles V. As Frano Gondola explained to the viceroy of Naples in the early 1580s, the Ragusan government could not allow an exiled Spanish spy to return to the city since: “concerning the Turks one should also follow the advice of Charles V, the Emperor of most glorious memory and the wisest lord of that [Neapolitan] Kingdom, who encouraged the Republic through his emissaries to avoid any quarrel with the Turk, to *feign friendship* and to *seek peace*, because its preservation is to the utility both to him and to the entire Christian republic...”⁴⁴

Gondola soon explained the strategic importance of Ragusa, echoing the well-known argument: “evidently, that city is like a ferry and gate for the attack on this [Neapolitan] Kingdom, this is known everywhere”. He continued by

⁴⁴ ...*rebus Turcae morem gerere oportere consilio etiam magni illius Caroli V. Imp. gloriosissime memoriae, sed enim sapientissimi et istius Regni domini qui Remp. per eius oratores hortabatur ut cum Turca quaevis dissidia fuggeret, amicitiam insimularet, et quietem quereret, cum salus eius, et illius et totius Christianae Reip. commodo cedat ... (Diplomata et acta saec. XVI, vol. 8, no 424/22, Lettere di Francesco Gondola da Roma e da Napoli degli anni 1581-1583, appendix 50/1, [6-7]).*

accentuating the bulwark function of Ragusa, insisting on the terrible consequences which would follow if the Ottomans were to gain possession of its fleet and excellent ports, from which Italy could be reached in one night.⁴⁵

An equally interesting reference to the peculiar Ragusan bulwark and its imperial approval is found in the instructions to the envoy to Charles V himself. In 1547, asking the emperor to understand the Republic's considerations for the Ottomans, the envoy had to remind him that Ragusa was situated in dangerous infidel surroundings: "And therefore your Majesty, after being thoroughly informed regarding all these issues, not once but many times encouraged the ambassadors of my lords that they should strive with all the possible diligence for the survival of that city, on which [survival], except its special interest, depends also the general benefit of the entire Christian republic. Of this opinion were also the popes and in general all the rulers who continuously lauded the *wisdom* of my lords who knew *how to conduct and behave* towards the Turkish Grand Signore on whom, due to vicinity, depends the survival of that city".⁴⁶

Here the approval of the way in which Ragusan patriciate "knew how to conduct and behave towards" the Ottomans was attributed not only to Charles V, but also to other unspecified rulers and even popes. According to Ragusan diplomats, the *respublica Christiana* not only tolerated the city's relationship with the infidel, but even encouraged Ragusa to continue with it.

However, the claim that Ragusan behaviour was sanctioned by the Christian authorities was most clearly expressed by yet another version of the anecdote with Charles V (which, apparently, changed according to the circumstances). Writing to the same emperor in 1547, the Ragusan Senate reminisced about a certain episode when the envoys of Messina had "before his majesty defamed the customs and the ways in which we live with those neighbours of ours". It seems that the emperor, to the Senate's great delight, responded by defending Ragusa and warning the Messinesi: "Had the inhabitants of Rhodes known how

⁴⁵ *...est nimirum illa Civitas ad hoc regnum invadendum velut scala et porta, scitur hoc passim...* (*Lettere di Francesco Gondola da Roma e da Napoli degli anni 1581-1583*, appendix 50/1, [7])

⁴⁶ *Onde la Maiesta vostra, sendo minutamente informata de questi andamenti, non una ma piu volte ha eshortato gli ambasciatori delli miei signori douessero con ogni debita diligentia attendere alla conseruazione di quella citta, dalla qual, oltre la particolare commodita sua, ne dipende uno beneficio uniuersale de tutta la republica christiana. E di quella opinione parimente suono stati i pontifici e generalmente tutti li principi, quali continuamente hano comendato la buona mente delli miei signori, quali hano saputo gouernarse e tratenerse col Gran Signor turco, dal quale per la vicinta del luogno depende la salute di quella citta* (*Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1: p. 494).

to behave and conduct with the Turks, as the Ragusans do, they would not be without a state as they are, but would enjoy it in peace, as Ragusans are doing”.⁴⁷

In order to understand the full weight of this statement, one should keep in mind that Rhodes—conquered by the Ottomans after a bloody siege in 1522—was synonymous with heroic resistance to the infidel and was, doubtlessly, one of the most famous “bulwarks” of the Mediterranean. The point of this anecdote is therefore truly surprising: the Ragusan way of “behaving” and “treating” (*governare e tratenerè*) with the Ottomans is represented as *superior* to that of Rhodes, a prestigious military *antemurale*. Moreover, such a judgement was—perhaps even with some basis, since the Ragusans repeated it before the emperor himself—attributed to Charles V, himself a celebrated defender of Christendom.⁴⁸

This kind of diplomatic rhetoric remained the main way in which Ragusan diplomacy represented the city in front of the Christian princes throughout the Early Modern period. The last important question to be addressed therefore remains: What were the reasons for the importance and longevity of this rhetoric? What purposes did it serve?

Generally speaking, the insistence on the praiseworthy tasks which Ragusa performed in the Christian interest—maintaining the Ottoman Catholics, redeeming Christian slaves, and stopping the infidel advance—had the one basic purpose: Ragusan diplomats tried to give Western rulers as many reasons as they could to help their city. The conclusion which they tried to provoke was well summarised in the instructions issued to the envoy to Rome in 1602, who had to mention “our Republic for whose survival his Holiness and the entire Christendom have to struggle, due to the place where it is situated”.⁴⁹ In other words, Ragusan diplomats were trying to persuade Western rulers that the survival and welfare of the Republic were not only Ragusa’s concern, but also in *everyone’s* interest. This in turn enabled them to do something convenient: to represent the particular, even selfish, requests of their city as being of general utility to Christendom. Needless to say, this kind of request was quite hard for any Christian prince to reject.

⁴⁷ *Quando i Rhodiotti s’ hauessero saputo governare e tratenerè con li Turchi sicome fanno li Ragusei, non sariano fuora del Stato loro come si trouano, anzi quietamente lo galdariano, come fano li Ragusei* (Ibid., p. 503; for the context, see: J. Tadić, *Dubrovnik i Španija*: pp. 37-38).

⁴⁸ Other variations of the same anecdote with Charles V are to be found in: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1: pp. 494, 499; *LL*, vol. 31, f. 240v. An interesting version of the tale is also found in: G. Luccari, *Copioso ristretto*: p. 139.

⁴⁹ *LP*, vol. 8, f. 205r, Senate’s letter to Đuro Gozze in Rome, dated 18 November 1602: ... *nostra Republica la quale, et la Santità sua e tutta la christianità debbono procurare che sia conseruata, rispetto al sito doue si troua.*

However, besides accentuating the important tasks of the Republic, there was yet another element in Ragusa's rhetoric which added further persuasiveness to its diplomatic requests. This was an insistence on the catastrophic situation of the city, which was allegedly on the verge of falling to the infidel. On endless occasions Ragusan envoys at Western courts were instructed to—“if possible, with tears in the eyes”—lament their poor city [sic], built on infertile rock and surrounded by wicked infidels plotting its destruction. Similar insistence on Ragusa's desperate situation is already visible in several medieval examples mentioned above—for instance, laments about Altomanović in 1371 or the letter to the Queen Joan II in 1431—but with time it attained truly epic proportions. A good example of such self-victimisation is found in the letter to the ambassador in Rome in 1578, who was reminded by the Senate: “...as you know, in these lands we are not tolerated as Christians, because as Christians we are harassed with iron and fire, but are tolerated since our blood is sucked every day, now with this, now with that scandal; and besides all the suffering and efforts that we go through and the insupportable expenses that we make, we [also] live in continual fear”.⁵⁰

Sometimes the threat inherent in such an image of the city was explicated; the diplomats would claim that if their requests were not fulfilled, Ragusa would surely be destroyed by the Ottomans. Thus, in 1588 the Ragusan envoy to Rome had to persuade the pope to renounce the reform of the city's Church by insisting on the “misery of our state” and explicitly asking for special treatment due to the Ragusan position on the frontier. Warning that “our state is very different from other states of Christian princes”, the envoy was to ask the pope to leave things as they were “since if our government were to change, we would not be tolerated anymore by the aforementioned tyrant [the sultan] and from it would follow our ruin and destruction.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ *LP*, vol. 3, f. 113 v, Senate's letter to Jeronim Caboga, ambassador in Rome, dated 29 March 1578:... *perche come sapete, noi non siamo comportati in questi confini come cristiani, perche come a cristiani, ci è apparecchiato il ferro e'l fuoco, ma siamo comportati, perche quotidianamente ci viene succhiato il sangue, hor con uno, hor con un altro garbuglio, e oltre i stenti et travagli che soportiamo, et le insuportabili spese che facciamo, viviamo in continuo [!] timore.*

⁵¹ *LP*, vol. 6, f. 13v, Senate's letter to Vladislav Menze in Rome, dated 13 August 1588: *sicome il stato nostro è molto diverso dagli altri stati di Principi Christiani si degni comportarci nel governo in che siamo stati sempre sin qui, perche quando questo nostro governo si alterasse non sariamo già mai comportati dal detto tiranno et ne seguirebbe la ruina et perdita nostra* (similar rhetoric is also used on f. 8v).

In sum, the Republic's diplomats created a highly useful image of the city which rested on two basic elements. The first was an insistence on the immense importance of Ragusa for all of Christianity, and the second was an insistence on its desperate situation in the "jaws" of the infidel. The reasons why this image was used when asking for concessions from Western rulers are clear. Rejecting the pleas coming from such a community would have been quite embarrassing, since it meant taking responsibility for damage to or even destruction of a place of extraordinary importance for the Christian faith. In other words, Ragusan rhetoric owed a great deal of its effectiveness to the fact that it put its addressee in a politically uncomfortable position—it rested on a kind of moral blackmail. Skilfully playing on religious solidarities, Ragusan diplomacy formulated its requests in such a way that fulfilling them seemed like a religious duty, while rejecting them appeared as betraying the interest of *respublica Christiana*.

However, besides making Ragusan demands harder to reject, this rhetoric occasionally served yet another function. It was used to counter the anti-myth, the accusations that Ragusa collaborated with the infidel to the detriment of Christianity. Although the city's tributary status was mostly accepted without much scandal in the West, there still were instances when such accusations surfaced. They were the most obvious argumentation to reach for when one wanted to defame Ragusa and were thus used by its rivals. The case when envoys of Messina brought them before Charles V has been already mentioned, but that seems to have been only a minor episode.⁵² On the contrary, truly dangerous and persistent in their defamations of Ragusa were the traditional enemies and main economic competitors of the city—the Venetians.

The most serious Venetian campaign against Ragusa was conducted at the papal court during the war of Cyprus (1570-1573), a massive naval conflict between a coalition of Christian states and the Ottomans. On the one hand, the Venetians were rightfully irritated by the Ragusan assistance to the Ottoman war effort, but, on the other, they were also attempting to use the situation in order to get rid of an important economic rival. Their goals were therefore not only to make Ragusa stop assisting the Porte, but also to force it to join the Christian league or, at least, to provide the Christian allies with significant assistance. Such requests were completely unacceptable to the small Republic, since accepting either would have almost inevitably provoked the Ottoman intervention and the destruction of Ragusa. The most important obstacle to the Venetian designs was Pope Pius V, who seems to have been remarkably

⁵² On that situation see: V. Foretić, *Povijest Dubrovnika* II: p. 15; *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1: pp. 238-240.

benevolent towards the Republic and prone to believe its envoy Frano Gondola, often quoted above. Trying to change the pope's mind, the Venetian ambassadors represented the Ragusans as traitors who "not only do not want to help the Christians, but even want to damage them so they unite with the Turks", or as hypocritical profiteers who were led to aid the Ottomans "not so much by fear... but the desire to stay with them due to great profits".⁵³ Revealing how familiar they were with Ragusan rhetoric, the Venetians warned the pope that "under the pretext that they are forced to cooperate with the Turks, since they are so close to them, [Ragusans] are doing many things which are not good".⁵⁴ The Serenissima's diplomats went as far as to claim that Ragusa was "a serpent in the bosom of Christianity" and even "a plague and a rotten member" to be removed.⁵⁵ The best summary of Venetian propaganda, however, came from the Council of Ten, which sketched a genuine mirror-image of Ragusan self-representation by warning its ambassador in Rome: "...these bad Christians, even worse than the infidels, are behaving in the aforementioned way to the common loss of the Christian republic... They are such that they should not be helped by any Christian prince unless it is desired to one day through them inflict exceptional harm and shame upon the Christian name".⁵⁶

In sum, during the turbulent years of the war for Cyprus the struggle between Venetian and Ragusan diplomats seems to have been exceptionally fierce. This was only natural, since the stakes were immensely high: the very survival of Ragusa depended upon its image, on whether the city was seen as a champion or a betrayer of Christendom. Although undeniably exceptional, this episode nonetheless reveals the importance of the international image for the survival of the small mercantile Republic, dependent upon the benevolence of the Mediterranean powers.

⁵³ Both examples are taken from the reports of Venetian ambassadors to the Senate about their conversations with the pope in 1571: *...perche non solamente li Ragusei non vogliono aiutar li christiani, ma vogliono farli danni, et si uniscono con li Turchi alla loro destruttione...* Senato, *Dispacci di Ambasciatori, Roma*, Filza 7 (1571), f. 258r, letter dated 18 June 1571 (Archivio di Stato di Venezia, henceforth: ASV); *Dicessimo; Padre Sto non tanto il timore, che hanno de Turchi li persuade à queste cose cosi mal fatte, quanto il desiderio, che hanno di trattenersi con loro per li gran guadagni...* (Senato, *Dispacci di Ambasciatori, Roma*, Filza 7 (1571), f. 282r, letter dated 30 June 1571, ASV).

⁵⁴ *...che li Ragusei sotto coperta di essere astretti tratteresi con Turchi, per esserli cosi vicini, facevano molte operationi, che non erano bone* (CCX, *Lettere di ambasciatori Roma*, b. 25 (1566-1573), letter dated 7 October 1570, ASV).

⁵⁵ *...morbo et membro putrido; un serpe nelle viscere della Christianità* (L. Vojnović, »Depeschen des Francesco Gondola«: pp. 556, 629).

⁵⁶ *...quelli cattivi christiani anzi peggiori che Infedeli si portano nel modo che e soprascritto a danno commune della Respublica Christiana ...sono tali che non possono esser sopportati da alcun Principe christiano se non si vuole per causa loro un giorno ricever qualche segnalato danno et ignominia al nome christiano.* (CCX, *Lettere secrete*, b. 8 (1571-1573), letter dated 23 June 1571, ASV).

Conclusion: The Ragusan rhetoric of the frontier in comparative perspective

It is an old cliché to state that Ragusa was a city between the “East” and “West”, the “Cross” and “Crescent”, the “Dragon” and “Eagle”—all in all, a community situated on the frontier of religions, empires, even civilisations. Such widespread qualifications, here borrowed from the titles of several recent books, in fact echo the self-understanding of medieval and Renaissance Ragusans, who also saw their city as a frontier community *par excellence*. As early as the fourteenth century Ragusa began to represent itself as a staunchly Catholic city heroically resisting the assaults of the neighbouring “Patarens” and “schismatics” and tirelessly converting them to the true faith. The prestigious status of the Christian frontier guard was acknowledged by the ecclesiastical Council of Basel in 1433, but was soon brought into question because in the mid-decades of the fifteenth century Ragusa became a tributary state of the Ottoman Empire. This new political status created what was doubtlessly the greatest problem Ragusan diplomacy ever faced: one had to find a way to reconcile the prestigious image of Christian frontier guard with the embarrassing position of tribute-payer to an infidel state. The solution which was found was remarkably original and long-lasting. Beginning in the sixteenth century and until the very end of the Republic, the close ties with the infidel were represented as something of immense usefulness to Christianity. Ragusa was represented as a heroic Christian city which endured great sufferings in the “jaws of the infidel”, feigning friendship and paying an enormous tribute so it could function as a Christian mole behind infidel lines. Namely, the tributary status was interpreted as enabling the city to perform a series of important tasks for the entire Christendom: to take care of the remains of Christian faith in the Ottoman Empire, to redeem Christian prisoners from Ottoman captivity and, finally, to block the further advance of the infidel towards the West.

Needless to say, the Ragusan republic was far from being the only European state which represented itself as a defender of Christian interests at the frontier with the infidel. Many other polities situated on the religious borderlands developed a similar diplomatic rhetoric. They ranged from Aragon, Castile, Malta, Rhodes or Venice all the way to the best known Christian frontier guards, the Hungarian and Polish kingdoms. Despite the significant differences in size, location, and political organisation, in many regards the diplomatic self-representation of these states was similar to that of Ragusa. For instance, the Hospitallers of Rhodes also boasted of their great service to the Christian

cause due to their redeeming Christian prisoners from Ottoman hands.⁵⁷ Another analogy to Ragusan self-representation is the rhetoric of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Polish diplomacy, which insisted on the missionary role of the kingdom. The main argument of Polish diplomats in the West—often in fierce polemics with the representatives of Teutonic order—was the exceptional merit of their kingdom for Christianity due to the massive conversions of Lithuanian and Ruthenian pagans and schismatics to Catholicism.⁵⁸ Even the vocabulary which the diplomats of the frontier states used to describe their situation was remarkably similar. For instance, the non-Catholic neighbours were often characterised as “perfidious” infidels, “barbarians” or “enemies of the Christian faith”, while the metaphor of being “in the jaws” of the infidel reoccurred in places as distant as Ragusa and Livonia.⁵⁹

Finally and most importantly, all of these states claimed that they held back the infidel advance towards other Christians, suffering enormous ordeals and losses in defence of *respublica Christiana*. Here again a similar vocabulary was used to describe their function, a recognisable set of metaphors which originated from the Bible and was initially disseminated by the papal chancellery.⁶⁰ The polities facing non-Catholic neighbours were described with the terms: *antemurale*, *propugnaculum*, *scutum*, *clypeus*, *murus*, *munimentum*, *praesidium*

⁵⁷ Nicolas Vatin, »The Hospitallers at Rhodes and the Ottoman Turks, 1480-1522«, in: *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century. Message and Impact*, ed. Norman Housley. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: pp. 160-161.

⁵⁸ Admittedly, one important difference was that these schismatics and pagans were largely within the Polish state and not outside as in the Ragusan case, yet the basic symbolic profit derived from missionary activity was the same. Another difference was that the Polish claim was largely articulated through a fierce debate with the Teutonic order—culminating at the Council of Constance—while the Ragusan missionary role was never debated or disputed. For the Polish case, see Jadwiga Krzyżaniakowa, »Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis*: The Political and Ideological Foundations of the Idea«, *Polish Western Affairs* 33 (1992): pp. 9-15.

⁵⁹ Some examples of similar rhetoric are: Anti Selart, »Political Rhetoric and the Edges of Christianity: Livonia and its Evil Enemies in the Fifteenth Century«, in: *The Edges of the Medieval World*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz and Juhan Kreem. Budapest: CEU Press, 2009: pp. 62, 64; Paul W. Knoll, »Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis* in the Late Middle Ages«, *The Catholic Historical Review* 60 (1974): p. 392; Sante Graciotti, »L'antemurale polacco in Italia tra Cinquecento e Seicento: il barocchizzarsi di un mito«, in: *Barocco fra Italia e Polonia*, ed. J. Ślaski. Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1977: pp. 306-307.

⁶⁰ On the origin of this set of metaphors, see: N. Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*: pp. 209-210; Urszula Borkowska, »The Ideology of *antemurale* in the Sphere of Slavic Culture (13th-17th centuries)«, in: *The Common Christian Roots of European Nations. An International Colloquium in the Vatican*, vol. II. Firenze: Le Monnier, 1982: pp. 1206-1207; entry *Antemurale Christianitatis*, in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*: p. 469.

christianitatis and so on, all of which mediated the same basic idea of an obstacle to the enemy assault.⁶¹ As J. Bak has noted, this function of a bulwark brought significant international prestige, since it was seen as a kind of “defensive crusading” and thus played a significant role in the diplomacy of these countries.⁶²

Ragusan frontier rhetoric differed most strongly from those of other states in portraying this fundamental function of bulwark. Clearly, for an *antemurale Christianitatis*, the Ragusan Republic had quite an unusual relationship with the Ottoman infidel. Except for a short episode in 1444, when it participated in the failed crusading adventure of King Wladislas, the city had never been at war with the Ottomans, but spent most of the Renaissance as their tributary state.⁶³ While the other border polities had impressive records of military engagement with the infidel to boast about, Ragusa was a mercantile and militarily weak state, notorious for appeasing the Ottomans. Unable to invoke heroic struggles of their community against the Turks as the diplomats of other polities did, the Ragusans resorted to a different and strikingly original argument. They began claiming that the city indeed held back the Ottoman tide, however, not with the force of arms but with its prudent diplomacy. This is the central difference between the bulwark *topos* in the self-representation of Ragusa and other frontier states. The Ragusan rhetoric was completely devoid of the warrior pathos so typical elsewhere, lacking the usual imagery of heroic Christian knights defending Christendom on the battlefield. Quite the contrary, Ragusans insisted they had found a way of defending Christendom without having to wage war with the Ottomans, that they knew “how to conduct [themselves] and behave” with the infidels, as the aforementioned letter from 1547 put it. The method was to “feign friendship and seek peace”, as the ambassador F. Gondola put it, that is, to be an Ottoman tributary state. Unable to boast of their military merit, Ragusans stressed their diplomatic skill and prudence, their political virtue (*virtù*) in the Renaissance meaning of the term.

In sum, if other bulwarks of Europe were military, the Ragusan one was “diplomatic”. Further distinctive traits of the city’s image as a Christian frontier guard stemmed from this basic difference. To begin with, since the Hungarian, Iberian, and Polish kings indeed waged war with non-Catholics, they had at their disposal a much-used and powerful argument which Ragusa did not. It was a

⁶¹ U. Borkowska, »The Ideology of *antemurale*«: pp. 1206-1207; J. Krzyżaniakowa, »Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis*«: p. 5.

⁶² János Bak, »Hungary and Crusading in the Fifteenth Century«, in: *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Housley. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: p. 118.

⁶³ Good summaries of the events of the mid-1440s are: V. Foretić, *Povijest Dubrovnika*, I: pp. 212-214; R. Harris, *Dubrovnik*, pp. 86-87; I. Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska*, pp. 99-103.

complaint that the other Christians had left them to bleed and struggle alone, a lament which only deepened the element of moral blackmail that was inherent in much of the frontier rhetoric in any case. Another difference was that as much as the diplomats of these larger states insisted on their desperate situation, such self-victimisation never attained the proportions of the Ragusan lamentations. In the rhetoric of the large monarchies, self-victimisation interchanged with a diametrically opposite insistence on military prowess and optimistic announcements that the Turks would soon be expelled from Europe. Nothing similar can be seen in Ragusan diplomatic discourse, which always insisted on the catastrophic situation of the small city, constantly represented as being on the brink of destruction.

Such Ragusan laments about the infidel threat should be considered together with two other arguments which frequently appeared in the city's diplomacy and have been cursorily mentioned above. The first were grievances about the Republic's poverty and the sterility of its territory, while the second were the admissions that it could not survive without the protection of more powerful states.⁶⁴ In the diplomatic instructions this kind of self-deprecating rhetoric was often accompanied with the suggestion that the envoys should utter it with "tears in the eyes" and "a broken voice".⁶⁵ All of this reveals a peculiar strategy of self-representation typical of Ragusan diplomacy: in creating the Republic's international image, its diplomats insisted on its *weakness*, not its strength. While the majority of early modern states attempted to depict their situation and resources in a better light than they really were, Ragusa did just the opposite. It persistently sought to persuade the Western powers—and also its Ottoman patrons—that it was poorer, weaker and even more helpless than it truly was. Instead of trying to impress, which was evidently a hopeless cause, Ragusa tried to invoke pity and a protective attitude or at least to persuade the other states of its utter harmlessness.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Several examples are: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1: p. 374; III/1: p. 115; *LL*, vol. 22, f. 282r.

⁶⁵ On crying in Ragusan diplomacy, albeit in the context of envoys in Istanbul, see: V. Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*: pp. 160-161.

⁶⁶ This was stressed already by the seventeenth century scholar and diplomat Stijepo Gradi who summarized Ragusan diplomatic strategy—admittedly, in front of the Ottomans—by stating that the main maxims of the ancestors *sono state di far apparire al mondo, che siamo cosa di poco prezzo* (*Abatis Stephani Gradii Ragusini ad Consilium Rogatorum Rei Publicae Ragusinae Epistolae scriptae*, ed. Đuro Körbler. [Monumenta spectantia historiam Slavorum meridionalium, vol. 37]. Zagreb: JAZU, 1915: p. 168). For the pompous self-representation of contemporary small Italian states, see: Daniela Frigo, »'Small states' and Diplomacy: Mantua and Modena«, in: *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of Diplomatic Practice, 1450-1800*, ed. Daniela Frigo. Cambridge: CUP, 2000: especially pp. 151, 156. On the Ragusan insistence on the city's alleged poverty in diplomacy with the Ottomans see: V. Miović, *Dubrovačka diplomacija*: pp. 201-210.

The last point to be made when Ragusan frontier rhetoric is considered in a comparative context regards the uses to which it was put. By and large the Ragusan variant served the same purposes as the variants of powerful monarchies on the fringes of the Catholic world, such as Aragon, Castile, Hungary, and Poland. Similarly to Ragusa, the rulers of these kingdoms used the frontier position of their realms in order to make their diplomatic requests harder to reject and to incur exceptional favours from other Christian powers, especially the papacy. Thus, frontier rhetoric was used to justify otherwise unacceptable political behaviour such as blocking the reforms of the local Church or refusing to participate in crusades. Moreover, the ideology of defence of Christendom also served to fill the royal coffers, since the papacy occasionally granted part of ecclesiastical revenues or the right to sell indulgences to the Crown.⁶⁷ The elites of frontier kingdoms achieved all these goals by using the same rhetorical strategy as Ragusa—a kind of moral blackmail directed to other Christians. On the one hand, they fostered “anxiety with a spectre of disaster to the Christian cause at the hands of the Muslims”, insisting on the perilous situation of their homelands.⁶⁸ On the other hand, they trumpeted the exceptional tasks they had performed in the common interest of Christianity, most frequently as its bulwarks. In sum, the frontier states of premodern Europe spent centuries persuading their less exposed neighbours of one crucial message: that their existence was simultaneously fragile and precious, of immense benefit to others. The conclusion to be drawn by these others was obvious—they should treat their valiant defenders with special care.

⁶⁷ Good overviews of the diplomacy of other Christian frontiersmen are: Nora Berend, »Défense de la Chrétienté et naissance d’une identité: Hongrie, Pologne et péninsule Ibérique au Moyen Âge«. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 58 (2003): pp. 1009-1027; P. Knoll, »Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis*«. pp. 381-401, especially pp. 392-393; J. Krzyżaniakowa, »Poland as *Antemurale Christianitatis*«. pp. 3-24; J. Bak, »Hungary and Crusading in the Fifteenth Century«. pp. 125-126; A. Selart, »Political Rhetoric and the Edges of Christianity«. pp. 55-69; *Govori protiv Turaka*, ed. Vedran Gligo. Split: Logos, 1983: pp. 7-65.

⁶⁸ The quotation is from: N. Berend, *At the Gate of Christendom*: pp. 213-214.