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PER CONSERVARE LA CITTÀ TRIBUTTARIA ET DIVOTA: RAGUSA (DUBROVNIK) AND THE 1590-91 CRISIS¹

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ABSTRACT: Within the broader context of the 1590 grain shortage crisis, for many historians the main food crisis that had struck Mediterranean in the sixteenth century, the author focuses on the continual problem of grain supply in the Republic of Dubrovnik. The pattern of government intervention is reconstructed not only in the face of famine, but also in relation to the system of food administration taken as a whole. The aim of this article is to highlight the political genius and commercial enterprise with which Dubrovnik managed to secure its demands for cereals through a privileged relationship with the Ottoman Empire, here defined as Ragusa's 'corn diplomacy'.

Key words: famine, corn, shortage, Rupe granary, privileges, Levant, Albania, Republic of Dubrovnik, Ottoman Empire, sixteenth century

The Mediterranean society, according to Braudel, "never lived under the sign of affluence".² Famine, in other words, represented "normality" in a general situation in which "the Western man had to adapt himself to a constant dearth of food",³

¹ I wish to thank Nenad Vekarić, Director of the Institute for Historical Sciences of Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Dubrovnik for his hospitality and Vesna Miović, who first suggested I should write this article and whose esteem and constant help throughout all these years have been—and still are—of fundamental importance for my research.

² Fernand Braudel, *Civiltà e imperi nel Mediterraneo nell'età di Filippo II*, I, Torino: Einaudi, 1986 [*La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris ³1982]: p. 614.

³ Fernand Braudel, *Civiltà materiale, economia e capitalismo*, I, *Le strutture del quotidiano (secoli XV-XVIII)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1982 [original title: *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV^e-XVIII^e siècle*, I. Paris 1979]: p. 89.

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to such an extent that one could claim that “the idea of a precarious condition determined by huge variations in the levels of agricultural production was deeply rooted in the society of the ancien régime”.⁴

At the same time, however, grain shortages also represent a unique opportunity for historians to investigate the politics of food administration in the early modern period. Indeed, in “normal” times, these politics seem to be part and parcel of a wider field of government activity, so that “the sources seem to become less visible”, demanding from the historian “a great skill in the analysis of administrative procedures and a thorough knowledge of the competence of each branch of the administration”.⁵ Quite to the contrary, during a period of famine everything becomes more simple, not only in relation to the obliged strategies of government intervention (food rationing and/or expulsion of undesired population, search for food supplies outside the traditional trade circuits etc.): the need for public authorities “to gain the utmost external relevance for their activities”⁶ provides historians with an immediate knowledge—and with the opportunity to make an easier survey—of their interventions.

Yet a historian needs here to be cautious: it is true that, on one hand, studying food administration by means of a “conjuncture-based model”⁷ makes it more understandable, but, on the other hand, one should avoid regarding it “as an unchanging factor [...] undergoing only superficial changes during very short and critical periods of time”.⁸ One should not mechanically apply a pattern of government intervention worked out for different historical contexts that were not necessarily characterized by the same level of intelligibility and comparability. In other words, not only every individual crisis differs from the other, but it is what goes on between one critical moment and another that sheds light on the entire system:⁹ a long-term study appears thus as the best possible approach.

⁴ Alberto Guenzi, «Le magistrature e le istituzioni alimentari», in: *Gli archivi per la storia dell'alimentazione*, I. Roma: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali and Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1995: p. 292.

⁵ A. Guenzi, «Le magistrature e le istituzioni alimentari»: p. 289.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ivo Mattozzi, Francesco Bolelli, Carmen Chiasera, Daniela Sabbioni, «Il politico e il pane a Venezia (1570-1650): calmieri e governo della sussistenza». *Società e Storia* 20 (1983): p. 273.

⁸ I. Mattozzi, F. Bolelli, C. Chiasera, D. Sabbioni, «Il politico e il pane a Venezia (1570-1650)»: p. 272.

⁹ As Mattozzi effectively argues, what “matters is the variation in price from one critical period to another” (ibid.). I address here only some of the issues concerning the politics of food administration that are discussed more widely in my on-going study, to which I refer the readers for more details.

What I am about to put forward here is the analysis of a grain shortage crisis—one that was, indeed, for many historians the main sixteenth-century crisis—within the context of a comparative approach embracing the whole century.¹⁰ I shall thus try to reconstruct the pattern of government intervention used by the Republic of Ragusa not only in the face of famine, but in relation to the system of food administration taken as a whole.

Il nostro bisogno consiste in la prestezza: *famine viewed from Ragusa*

“[...] Essendo lo Territorio nostro privo di frumenti per essere questi luoghi nostri sterili, e sassosi”;¹¹ no doubt, such an image of a poor and disadvantaged country was one of the most recurrent self-representative stereotypes instrumentally used by the Republic. It is equally certain, however, that the territory of the Republic was indeed barren and—excluding Konavle¹²—scarcely fit for cultivation.¹³ As a consequence Ragusa imported wheat in order to feed its inhabitants: “où il ne se mange ung seul grain de bled qu'il ne faille aller cercher à cinq cens mil d'icy”.¹⁴

¹⁰ For a general overview on crises in early modern Europe, see, *Famine, disease and social order in early modern society*, ed. John Walter and Roger Schofield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989—a book dedicated to the memory of Andrew P. Appleby, a pioneer in this field of research—and the more recent study by Andrew Cunningham and Ole P. Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹¹ Among many possible examples, I chose a letter dated 28 October 1563, written to Paulus de Menze, who had been sent to Naples to buy the *tratta* needed for the importation of 500 *carra* of wheat from Apulia (*Lettere e commissioni, Lettere di Levante*, ser. 27.1, vol. 29, f. 129v, State Archives of Dubrovnik, hereafter cited as: SAD).

¹² On this important region see *Konavoski zbornik* 1 (1982) and *Konavle u prošlosti, sadašnjosti i budućnosti*, vol. 1, Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 1998.

¹³ This does not necessarily mean that the Republic did not try, in every reasonable way, to support agricultural production where it was possible to develop it: we may see an example of this in the measures—attested since the end of the fifteenth century—aimed at limiting the expansion of vineyards by granting each family in the region of Dubrovačko primorje (coastal area to the north of Ragusa) a piece of land “equivalent to one quarter of a *soldo*, the latter of which equaled 1,680 square meters”; cfr. Nenad Vekarić, «The population of the Dubrovnik Republic in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries», *Dubrovnik Annals* 2 (1998): p. 11 (a longer version of the article in Croatian appeared in *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku* 29 (1991): pp. 7-22). Periodic controls over the implementation of this prescription rested with a special commission, whose reports also represent an excellent demographic source, as was first demonstrated by Nenad Vekarić in his works on the demographic history of the Republic.

¹⁴ Ernest Charrière, *Négociations de la France dans le Levant*, vol. III. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880: p. 245.

This well-known observation, contained in a letter written in January 1572 by François de Noailles, bishop of Dax, to the French King Charles IX, may well be slightly exaggerated, but it is a good portrait of the state of dependence in which Ragusa was forced to live; it may also be regarded as an indication of the Republic's extraordinary ability in coping with its difficulties. Indeed: "Le navi, e il mar, son' invece à Raugia, di campi e d'oliveti [...]", wrote Serafino Razzi towards the end of the sixteenth century, adding that: "à questa penuria di grano e d'olio, supplisce la gran comodità del mare. Imperochè con le loro molte navi tengono i Raugie la città abondante d'ogni bene".¹⁵

In reading these words, one cannot help recalling the analysis of food administration policies in Europe made by Ferdinando Galiani in his *Dialogues su le commerce des blés* (1770): on one hand, Ragusa perfectly falls within the number of the small States in which the administration of corn supplies "è un affare di stretta competenza della politica";¹⁶ on the other hand it also possesses a "marineria fiorente", and this makes it similar to the Republic of Genoa or to the United Provinces, middle-sized States "posseggono terreni così miseri, così magri, che [...] possiamo considerarli poco o niente, se non producono affatto grano".¹⁷ Indeed it is this navy that makes the difference: "Uno Stato piccolo senza una flotta può acquistare il grano soltanto dalle province vicine [...]. Ma una nazione con una marineria fiorente e un grande mare aperto davanti a sé cerca e trova, anche in capo al mondo, il mercato conveniente".¹⁸

Ragusa did not need to reach "in capo al mondo" in order to obtain wheat supplies. In fact, for most of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Apulia was the main supplier: it is not without reason that in Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's *Pratica della Mercatura* (1343)—probably the most important medieval handbook on trade, written by the agent of the powerful Bardi family who were among the biggest corn merchants in that period—Ragusa was mentioned only once in Chapter XXXVIII, entitled *Come la misura del grano di Puglia*

¹⁵ Serafino Razzi, *La storia di Ragusa*. Lucca: Per Vincentio Busdraghi, 1595 [reprint Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1980]: pp. 119 and 124.

¹⁶ Ferdinando Galiani, *Dialogo sul commercio dei grani*, Torino: Boringhieri, 1958: p. 40. Galiani, however, makes direct reference to Geneva and not to Ragusa; in fact the latter is not even mentioned.

¹⁷ F. Galiani, *Dialogo sul commercio dei grani*: p. 54: On Genua see also Ferdinando Galiani, *Considerazioni sul sistema annonario di Genova*, ed. Luigi Dal Pane. Bagnacavallo: Società Tipografica Editrice, 1935.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

torna in diverse parti del Mondo.¹⁹ But the dependence on Apulia is above all demonstrated by the data on the imports of corn across the fourteenth century²⁰ and by the fact that no less than 79% of 12,387 *stara* “frumenti comunis reposta in fossis” at the end of the fifteenth century came from that region.²¹

Thereafter, the Levant will play master. In fact, starting from 1458, Ragusa—after the end of the Venetian rule in 1358 formally submitted to the Kingdom of Hungary—begins to pay an annual tribute to the Ottoman Empire that, from the initial amount of 1,500 golden ducats will grow up to stabilize at 12,500 golden ducats in 1482.²² A formal submission to the Porte that will open up the large and protected Turkish markets for Ragusan ships²³: indeed, apart from

¹⁹ “Salme cento di formento di Puglia fanno a Raugia staia 260 in 265”: see Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, in: Giovanni Francesco Pagnini, *Della decima e di varie altre gravezze imposte dal Comune di Firenze*, vol. II, part III, Lisbona and Lucca, 1766 [reprint Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1967]: p. 169. On handbooks on trade—such as Balducci Pegolotti, but also Giovanni di Antonio da Uzzano and pseudo-Chiarini—as a source for the study of wheat trade in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages, see Ruggiero Romano, *A propos du commerce du blé dans la Méditerranée des XIV^e et XV^e siècles*, in: *Éventail de l'histoire vivante. Hommage a Lucien Febvre*, vol. II, Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1953: pp. 149–161.

²⁰ Dušanka Dinić-Knežević, »Trgovina žitom u Dubrovniku u XIV veku«. *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu* 10 (1967): pp. 121-124. On the relationship between Puglia and Ragusa in this period see Mirjana Popović-Radenković, »Le relazioni commerciali fra Dubrovnik (Ragusa) e la Puglia nel periodo angioino (1266-1442)«. *Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* 37 (1958): pp. 73-104 and 38 (1959): pp. 153-206 and the more recent study by Victor Rivera Magos, »La Chiave de tutta la Puglia. Presenze straniere, attività commerciali e interessi mediterranei a Manfredonia, 'agriporto' di Capitanata (secoli XIII - XVI)«, in: *Storia di Manfredonia*, vol. I - *Il Medioevo*, ed. Saverio Russo. Bari: Edipuglia, 2008: pp. 63-99.

²¹ *Debita notarie pro comuni*, ser. 36, vol. 1, ff. 101v–102r (SAD). I recall that Ragusa's *staro* was equivalent to about 99 liters (71,5 Kg.) and was divisible into 6 *copelli*. From this source, dated 1 June 1499, we learn that in Ragusa there were 28 *fosse* (cfr. infra), five of which were used for storing wheat classified as “old” and one was reserved for the needs of Ston, the city on the Pelješac peninsula, center of a saltpan.

²² See Vesna Miović, »Turske priznanice o uplaćenom dubrovačkom haraču«. *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku* 42 (2004): pp. 53-77 and, in general, eadem *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, Zagreb–Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2003. The defeat of Mohács, in 1526, will mark the definitive exit of scene of the Kingdom of Hungary and the end of what could be defined as “double protectorate”.

²³ Ragusa began to use the eastern markets well before becoming tributary to the Porte. Indeed, if the first mention of the purchase of Turkish wheat dates back to 1347, thereafter we find more and more documents attesting the presence of Levantine wheat, where “Levantine” means coming from Albania or Greece, which the sources call “Romania”: see Barisa Krekić, *Dubrovnik (Raguse) et le Levant au Moyen Âge*. Paris-La Haye: Mouton, 1961: pp. 91-94 and, for a more general overview of the Turkish market, Kate Fleet, *European and Islamic Trade in the Early Ottoman State. The Merchants of Genoa and Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

the burden of paying the *haraç*,²⁴ Ragusa enjoys a truly independent position within the Ottoman Empire,²⁵ bolstered up by large commercial privileges, first of all the privilege of being the only nation that was allowed to buy wheat in the territory of the Empire, at the only condition that it should not be resold in *Dār ul-Harb*, that is to say in non-Muslim countries.²⁶

Corn had to be stored properly and, indeed, starting from the fourteenth century,²⁷ Ragusa launches a policy of structural intervention aiming at the creation of a storage system.²⁸ The chronology of this policy closely matches that of the crises, both in food supply and in other fields: the year 1410—when Ragusa started a large-scale project for the stockpiling of corn²⁹—coincided with a difficult period in which the very survival of Ragusa was at stake.³⁰

²⁴ On Ragusa's real position within the Ottoman imperial system, see Nicolaas H. Biegan, *The Turco-Ragusan relationship according to the firmāns of Murād III (1575-1595) extant in the State Archives of Dubrovnik*. The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1967.

²⁵ This contrasts with a stereotype of Venetian origin—which is hard to eradicate even in today's historiography, and especially among Italian (but also non-Italian) historians, who often continue to use the contemporary, scornful judgements by the Serenissima as a veritable historical source—a stereotype according to which the tribute was nothing less than a due act of total submission: “La comunità di Ragusi vive, come fa la quaglia sotto lo sparviero, tutta piena di timore; paga il suo tributo di zecchini dodicimila all'anno, e più altrettanto di straordinario, spesso viene travagliata da avanie turchesche, ma tutte le accomoda con danari per vivere, e sostenere quella sua apparente libertà” (“Relazione dell'Impero Ottomano di Lorenzo Bernardo del 1592”, in: *Relazioni di Ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Luigi Firpo, vol. XIII. Torino: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1984: p. 389).

²⁶ See N. H. Biegan, *The Turco-Ragusan relationship*: pp.107-125: and one should not forget that Ragusa benefited from a favourable import duty (2% whereas all the other merchants paid 4%) and from the abolition of many minor tributes.

²⁷ The 1272 Statute does not mention any particular structure for the storage of wheat, but only refers to the «fundico», which was the only place where wheat sales could take place: *Statutum Ragusinum, Manuali pratici del Cancelliere - Leggi e Istruzioni*, ser. 21.1, vol. 9, now entirely published in *Statut Grada Dubrovnika*. Dubrovnik: Državni Arhiv u Dubrovniku, 2002.

²⁸ On this system see now Stefano d'Atri, «“Adi 2 di marzo 1590 porta fornita”. Rupe, il granaio di Ragusa (Dubrovnik)». *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 120/2 (2008): pp. 569-580.

²⁹ On 21 January the Massari bladorum received an order “de reperiendo unum magistrum a faciendo fossas ad tenendum blada” (*Reformationes*, ser. 2, vol. 33, f. 133r; SAD) and in the following March Antonio Manfei from Trani was entrusted with this mandate (ibidem, f. 141v). Until then, the city only possessed a single dry well (*fossa*) of the capacity of 500 *stara*, about which we know very little, except that it was certainly operative in 1409: see Lukša Beretić, «Dubrovačka žitnica 'Rupe'». *Dubrovnik* 2/2-3 (1956): p. 71.

³⁰ Having been at war from 1403 to 1405 with the Kingdom of Bosnia whose troops devastated its territory, from 1409 onwards Ragusa was to cope with a greater danger, caused by the Venetian expansion in Dalmatia, after Venice had acquired the rights of Ladislav, King of Naples, on part of the Eastern coast of the Adriatic sea. See: Bariša Krekić, *Dubrovnik in the 14th and 15th. A City between East and West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972: p. 49.

Whereas the proposal of building a large granary (*Rupe*) was advanced in 1541, when the city had just overcome the terrible famine that struck the city in the last months of 1539 and was foreshadowed in December 1538 by the shut down of the Apulian markets.³¹

Indeed, in the first months of 1539 the Republic already begins to perceive the danger. In a letter written on 19 February, the Rector of Ragusa replies to the ambassadors sent by the Spanish governor of Herceg Novi that he cannot grant the amounts of corn they requested because “noi siamo ridutti ad una extrema penuria nella città”; and he goes on to explain this difficulty not only with the shut down of the Apulian market, but also with the Ottoman ban on exports from the Levant and with the high prices of Sicilian grain that is now burdened with new taxes.³²

Needless to say, the claim of Ragusan authorities that they do not know “in che modo potere nutrire el populo nostro non havendo che puocha vittuaglia della vecchia”³³ conceals more substantial political reasons: in no ways can Ragusa help the new rulers of Castelnuovo,³⁴ and thus fall out with the Ottomans.³⁵ But the danger must have been real, if in August the Senate decided that all the owners of Ragusan ships should bring the corn loaded in the Levant to Ragusa, “Trovandosi la citta nostra in penuria e carestia de frumenti, causata dalla triste raccolta, la quale è stata in molte parti d’Italia e dalla clausura delle trattae, tra molte altre provisioni fatte per frumenti”.³⁶ This

³¹ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 22, ff. 24v-26v, 4 December 1538. In fact it was no longer possible to buy wheat in Apulia since the first months of 1537, even though Ragusa—on the strength of its ancient right, confirmed by Charles V in 1523 and 1531, to import 500 carra of wheat from the Kingdom of Naples—repeatedly tried to reach Sicily (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 21, ff. 72r-73r and *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, ser. 3, vol. 44, on the claims for Sicilian wheat).

³² *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 22, f. 30r. Hereafter, the word Rector indicates the Ragusan government, from the moment that all the letters of the Republic began with the formula “Il Rettore di Ragusa con il suo Consiglio et di Pregati”.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ One must note that after the defeat suffered at the Prevesa during the war waged by the First Holy League, in October 1538 Andrea Doria had reconquered the Turkish stronghold, which was then recaptured by the Ottomans on 10 August 1539 with an expedition led by Hayreddîn (Barbarossa).

³⁵ It is not without meaning that the Rector did not refrain from stressing that the city was full of “hebrei e turchi assai residenti” who could act as spies of the sançakbey, the governor of a sançak, the basic administrative unit of the Ottoman empire (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 22, ff. 29v-30v).

³⁶ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 22, f. 67r, 2 august 1539.

document, known as *Patentes pro navibus, ut omnes frumentum conduceant Rhagusium*, may be regarded as the first attempt to establish an effective and compulsory service for the supply of wheat. This is one of the instruments that the Republic will use so as to struggle against famine, and, significantly enough, it will be officially created during the 1555 famine (see *infra*).³⁷

On November 1539 the Minor Council (*Consiglio Minore*) makes some important decisions: on one hand, it obliges the Officials “deputatis super frumento comunis nostris” to store millet rather than corn in the staple “attenta penuria frumenti quam civitas hic nostra patetur”; on the other hand, it simultaneously decides to ration wheat in the measure of 1 and $\frac{1}{2}$ *copelli* per person, asking that the Officials must receive from each family-head a sworn declaration upon the number of those “quas habebit in domo sua”.³⁸ In less than a year the price of *frumentum comunis* rises from 9 to 13 *grossi* per *copello*³⁹ and the Republic will even turn to Marseilles,⁴⁰ an entrepôt definitely outside the range of the city’s traditional food-supplying areas.⁴¹

³⁷ The Republic, from at least 1533 onwards, had also started to use what we may define as “obbligo del quarto”, which meant that all Ragusa’s patroni had to carry $\frac{1}{4}$ of every wheat cargo to Ragusa and deliver it to the *massari blavarum*: see *Secreta Rogatorum*, ser. 4, vol. 1, f. 88, 15 October 1533 (SAD). In this case the difference between my chronology and that of Maurice Aymard might be due to the fact that the French historian focused his research in the second half of the sixteenth century: see Maurice Aymard, *Venise, Raguse et le commerce du blé pendant la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle*, Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N, 1966.

³⁸ *Acta Minoris Consilii*, ser. 5, vol. 38, f. 286v. Thereafter, in February 1540, the government even suspended the sale of millet, replacing it with “mistura seu sumiziza”, sent by the ambassador in Herzegovina Sigismundus de Gozze, whose price was subsequently fixed at 6 and $\frac{1}{2}$ *grossi* (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 44, f. 282v).

³⁹ *Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 44, ff. 263v, 269r.

⁴⁰ This request has already been made in January 1539, when there were the first indications that Apulia’s markets would be shut down (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 44, f. 126v) and we are informed that the purchase actually took place in a document dated January 1540, in which we learn that Frano Skočibuha, the *patrono* of the ship who had been to Marseille, had gained on the hire of 10 *grossi* established for the transport of 400 carra of wheat (*ibidem*, ff. 269v-270r).

⁴¹ This was the first and last case (at least during the sixteenth century) in which Ragusa went so far in the search of wheat. Provence, on the other hand, was of fundamental importance for Genoa during the famine that struck the city in 1541, given that to the “Genovesi venne il soccorso donde meno l’attendevano, [...] poterono procacciarsi il frumento dai mercanti di Provenza, concedendolo Francesco I di nemico divenuto loro benevolo” (cfr. Alfonso Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie accorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850*, part II - dal 1501 a tutto il 1600, Bologna: Tipi Gamberini e Parmeggiani, 1867: p. 20, note 1).

In the end there will be more than 4,000 victims and a strong pressure will be put on the Republic's traditional structures of social care,⁴² as Nicolò de Ragnina will write in his *Annali di Ragusa*: “per detta fame fu speso dall'erario comune d. 2000, per nutrimento delli mendicanti et per populo menuto, ponendoli alli ospitali: oltra che compravano in el paese lo grano a grossetti 22 lo copello, per poter meglio subvenir allo populo menuto. Nelle qual spese consumò il pubblico più de d. 8000”.⁴³

The famine was made even more difficult by what Angelo Antonio Frari described as a “doppio flagello”:⁴⁴ “L'anno di Cristo 1540 mortalità di febre cominciò a Ragusa, nel principio di martio, (ed era) ira di Dio. Così fu per tutto il mondo, ne alcun rimedio si trovava, salvo buon governo con la dieta. La qual malattia durò molti mesi”.⁴⁵

It is only during the first months of 1541 that the situation returns to “normality”: in March wheat is sold in the city's grain warehouse (*fondaco*) at the same price as in the period before the crisis, that is 8 *grossi* per *copello*, the same as in December 1538,⁴⁶ and the Republic can afford ordering its envoy in Barletta “di conservare nelle fosse dove stanno” the supplies of corn he had bought, considering “come stanno li granari e fosse del comune nostro, per la moltitudine delli frumenti condutti li giorni passati”.⁴⁷

⁴² The situation became so difficult that, for example, Pietro Fogliatino “mosso da compassione vedendo tanta carestia quanta in Ragugia”, went “in Manfredonia di Puglia a comprar pane, come gia due volte havea fatto prima, senza nessuna provisione” (*Lamenta politica*, ser. 11, vol. 4, f. 140r; SAD).

⁴³ *Annali di Ragusa del Magnifico Ms. Nicolò di Ragnina*, ed. S. Nodilo (hereafter cited as: *Ragnina*). [Monumenta spectantia Historiam slavorum meridionalium, XIV]. Zagabriae: JAZU, 1883: p. 293. It must be emphasized that on 26 February 1540 the Senate decided to build “unum xenodochium seu hospitale” for the benefit of the poor and of the sick, both citizens and foreigners (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 44, f. 291v): this was the Domus Christi hospital, whose history has now been reconstructed in Tatjana Buklijaš and Irena Benyovsky, »Domus Christi in Late-Medieval Dubrovnik: a Therapy for the Body and Soul«, *Dubrovnik Annals* 8 (2004): pp. 81-107.

⁴⁴ Angelo Antonio Frari, *Della peste e della pubblica amministrazione sanitaria*. Venezia: Antonelli, 1840: p. 358.

⁴⁵ *Ragnina*: pp. 293-294. According to Serafino Razzi, there were more than 4,550 casualties, including 56 nobles (Razzi, *La storia di Ragusa*: p. 95).

⁴⁶ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 45, f. 118r; vol. 44, f. 121r, 14 December 1538. It must be noted that, although Ragnina's description of the famine is, on the whole, fairly plausible and is confirmed by other sources, nonetheless the *Annali* purport that the food shortage lasted for 22 months starting from October 1539 (cfr. *Ragnina*: p. 293).

⁴⁷ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 22, f. 234r, 25 May 1541.

The following crises apparently follow the same scenario. The “penuria di grano [...] il che nasce da male e triste raccolte”,⁴⁸ is followed by the shut-down of the Apulian market. Yet, the famine that strikes Italy between 1548 and 1551 does not apparently affect Ragusa. On 16 January 1549 the Senate even decrees to move the pupils from the building near S. Francis to a larger school “super fundico comunis nostri”, in order to use the former building to store wheat, because “horrea comunis sunt plena”⁴⁹—the food shortage of the years 1555-57 is different for at least one reason: it strikes Istanbul, the big capital of the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁰

This does not only mean that the Sublime Porte will not grant permission to buy corn, but also that it will seize merchant ships at its will and, first of all, Ragusan vessels. Thus the Republic will be bound, on one hand, to apologize to Pope Paul IV for placing ships flying Saint Blaise’s flag at the orders of the Sultan⁵¹ and, on the other hand, to seek alternative markets, especially in the Balkans.

In July 1555 the Senate already bought 5,000 *stara* of grain and a quantity of millet that were to be carried on land via Neretva, Zvornik (on the river Drina, nowadays at the boundary between Bosnia and Serbia), Albania and Patras.⁵² In January 1556, considering “la penuria e Caristia qual habbiamo di

⁴⁸ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 26, f. 7r, 25 September 1555.

⁴⁹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 48, f. 234r. In the previous months the Republic had bought wheat from Apulia (ibidem, f. 193r, September 1548) and had cancelled the orders previously sent to its patroni in the Gulf of Patras because wheat had been purchased at a better price from foreign merchants (2 thousand *stara* from two Greek *patroni* at 5 *grossi* and ½ per *copello*: ibidem, f. 205v, November 1548).

⁵⁰ One cannot help recalling Fernand Braudel’s description of “hunger” in the biggest early modern period city: every day, “the city consumed between 300 and 500 tons of wheat, providing work for its 133 bakers [...]”, and needless to say, a large quantity of meat quantifiable in almost 7 million sheep and 200 thousand cattle (F. Braudel, *Civiltà e imperi nel Mediterraneo nell’età di Filippo II*: p. 371; these data were drawn from Robert Mantran’s study on Istanbul in the second half of the seventeenth century but Braudel considered that they could be extended even to the preceding period). Recent studies by Turkish historians slightly reduced some of the figures concerning Istanbul: by the middle of the sixteenth century the city’s population came close to 500,000 inhabitants and, on the basis of the bakers’ production capacity, the annual volume of wheat trade was estimated at about 97,000 tons (cfr. E. Özveren, »Black Sea and the Grain Provisioning of Istanbul in the Longue Durée«, in: *Nourrir les cités de Méditerranée. Antiquité – Temps modernes*, ed. Brigitte Marin and Catherine Virlouvet. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003: pp. 224-225).

⁵¹ See the long letter sent on 18 March 1556 to the ambassador in Rome, by which we also learn that the famine has struck Persia as well (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 26, ff. 50r– 60r).

⁵² *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 53, f. 48r, 26 July 1555.

Grani [...]”, Ragusa sends “provido e prudente” Iacobus Gion on a journey to the *Bassa* of Bosnia and Zvornik with a *cociumo* for the purchase of 300 *mutti* of corn to be carried to Ragusa via Neretva and Ston, instructing at the same time another envoy to look for millet and sorghum.⁵³

This crisis is a serious one,⁵⁴ and Ragusa will cope with it mainly by tightening controls over markets and supplies.⁵⁵ A few months before the famine started, the Republic established—or, more precisely, institutionalized—the “compulsory service for the wheat supply” (*servizio obbligatorio del grano*). Applying a decree issued by the Senate on 20 April 1555, ten days later Ragusa sends “lettere patentes pro navibus extractes ad capellum” to its consuls: “come ciascun anno ne convien nel tempo delle raccolte far provvisione di condur dalle parti di levante la summa di dumillia carri di fromento per uso della Città e Territorio nostro e non trovandosi haver la comodita di navi siamo stati afforzati aggravar qualche padrone a far dui viaggi uno doppio l’altro acio la Citta non havesse patire [...] et volendo proveder che di qua in avanti non habbi tal inconveniente seguire [...], abbiamo ordinato che tutte le navi tanto grandi quanto piccole [...] condur ogni anno la summa di dumille carri di fromento [...]”.⁵⁶

But at present these measures are not sufficient. Thus the government resorts to a sort of census of possible cargos, in an attempt to encourage the arrival of corn in the city, going so far as to grant an unusual privilege in that anybody carrying wheat to Ragusa “partibus ultra flumen” may keep the

⁵³ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 26, ff. 41r–43r, letters dated 22 January 1556. The *cociumo* (sometimes written *hochiumo*), that is the *hüküm*, was the part of the firman containing the Sultan’s authorization and a document that permitted Ragusa to buy wheat.

⁵⁴ The Republic went so far as to ask permission to buy wheat even from the Duke of Ferrara and the Duke of Urbino, who usually appear in the city’s documents as demanders: cfr. *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 26, f. 141r (27 December 1556); on Ferrara, f. 99v and the following (September 1556) and ff. 160v–161r (February 1557) on Urbino.

⁵⁵ The building of the big granary was carried out expeditiously. In November 1555 it was decided that the officials entrusted with the building of the pits “debeant cum omne possibile diligentia” go on with these works, “iuxta formam modelli facti” (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 53, f. 115r); and it is not by mere chance that the only documents we possess on the actual works (such as the receipts for the payment of the lime and the warrants issued to the labourers who worked at the building) all go back to the period 1555–1558 (see S. d’Atri, «Adi 2 di marzo 1590 porta fornita»).

⁵⁶ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 25, f. 287v. Note that in order to make this service more convenient, it was declared that the ships “nel venir a Raugia [prima di partire per il Levante] habbino condur uno carico del sale per il quale habbino haver il pagamento [...]”.

amount of corn needed for himself and his family for six months and hand over the rest to the city's staple.⁵⁷

In 1557 the crisis has not yet abated, as shown by a request for *cociumi* to import millet from Bosnia and Albania, and beans (and even sorghum) from Alexandria,⁵⁸ by the rise in the price of *frumentum comunis* to 10 *grossi*⁵⁹ and, above all, by the fact that the Senate assigns, until June 1558, a prize, equivalent in value to the *gabella*, to those “*civibus nostris*” who take corn into Ragusa.⁶⁰ The situation returns, very gradually, to normality. Yet, even for the year 1558 there are contrasting indications: if on one side the Senate accepts a request by “D. Antianos” from Ancona asking for 600 stara of wheat,⁶¹ on the other side, an exemption is introduced from paying duties “*super bladis et aliis bladis minutis*” imported in Ragusa, and a prize is assigned to anybody who imported *biave* by land.⁶²

Given this difficult situation, the Republic tries to make the best of its privileged position within the Ottoman Empire. On 4 May 1558 the Rector writes a letter to the Tribute Ambassadors in Constantinople: “*procurarete d’impetrare dalla porta li cociumi, per cavare dalla schala del volo, loghi circumvicini, la summa de otto mille mutti di frumento [...], e quando vi fusse replicato, che la summa fusse troppo grande, responderete, chel nostro paese, è tutto sterile, e sasoso, e non habbiamo dove servirse, che nelle parti di Levante e che glie coveniente cosa, che noi quali siamo devotissimi caracciari della porta [...]*”.⁶³

⁵⁷ *Acta Maioris Consilii*, vol. 44, f. 50v, 5 November 1555. Still in 1557, the Ragusan government will arrive to give “*civibus nostris*” that bring wheat to Ragusa a commission like the *gabella* until June 1558 (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 54, f. 52v, 5 October 1557).

⁵⁸ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 54, f. 42v, 19 August 1557 and f. 44r, 21 August 1557. Note that the request for *cociumi* has to be made through Marinus de Crieva, called back in Constantinople as Tribute ambassador.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, f. 50v, 24 September 1557.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 52v, 5 October 1557.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, f. 156r, 4 June 1558. The agreed price is 10 *grossi per copello* to be paid before the end of the month, with the *plegiaria* of Johannes de Gondola, who was Ragusa's agent in Marca.

⁶² *Ibidem*, f. 176v, 17 August 1558. The duty (*gabella*) on the imports of wheat will be reintroduced only in March 1559, and it will be fixed at 3 *grossi per copello* (*ibidem*, f. 245v, 7 March 1559).

⁶³ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 27, f. 4v. The Costantinople *mutto* (mudd) was the equivalent of 512,8 kg.

This is the biggest order for *cociumo* ever presented to the Porte by Ragusa, which did not usually ask for more than 4,000-5,000 *mutti*.⁶⁴ One gets the impression that the Republic wishes to reach a more “comfortable” situation, recalling the experiences of previous years, when even the Ottoman markets gave signals of uncertainty. The ambassadors’ requests are not going to be satisfied,⁶⁵ but that letter shows, to some extent, the “strenght” of Ragusa. All the more so, if we add that, among the instructions sent to the ambassadors, there is one asking that “gionti in Constantinopoli debbiare informarve come lo paese di Varno sia abondante de miglio se da quello luogo se ne possa cavare, e quanta quantita, come detti migli siano boni e che prezzo se potran havere, et in che modo se potranno tragere e con quanta spesa se potranno condurre alla marina, e di tutto ne darete particolare avviso”.⁶⁶

This unusual reference to the Black Sea is quite surprising: indeed the “Ottoman lake” had long been shut to Western merchants and the entire region had been assigned the exclusive function of supplying goods to the Turkish capital.⁶⁷ We may thus see this reference as an indication of the peculiar position of the Republic of St Blaise within the Ottoman imperial system.⁶⁸ This is confirmed by new requests in the following years, for example in 1559, when the Republic will even dictate some conditions: “vogliamo [...] uno cociumo di potter cavar dalle parti di Varno mille mutti di miglio, ma che tale cociumo sia libero, et che li ministri nostri possino ditto miglio comprare da chi li parera”. Yet in the case “[...] lo volessero limitar, che tale miglio s’havesse comprare dalle persone serano dal Bassa determinate e specificate”.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ According also to Vesna Miović, *Dubrovačka Republika u spisima osmanskih sultana. Dubrovnik: Državni Arhiv u Dubrovniku*, 2005.

⁶⁵ Moreover, as they will later find out, “nel Volo, e [...] schala circumvicina è stata una triste annata” (ibidem, f. 43r).

⁶⁶ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 27, f. 5r.

⁶⁷ Cfr. E. Özveren, «Black Sea and the Grain Provisioning of Istanbul in the Longue Durée» and, more generally, Charles King, *Storia del Mar Nero: dalle origini ai nostri giorni*. Roma: Donzelli, 2005 [original title: *The Black Sea: A History*. Oxford 2004].

⁶⁸ About the “special favours” granted to Dubrovnik, see N. H. Biegan, *The Turco-Ragusan relationship*: pp. 106–125.

⁶⁹ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 27, f. 155v., 20 July 1559. On Ragusa’s attempts, beginning in the mid 1550s, to penetrate the Black Sea, see Bogumil Hrabak, *Izvoz žitarica iz Osmanlijskog carstva u XIV, XV i XVI stoleću*, Priština: Zajednica naučnih ustanova Kosova, 1971: pp. 292–294. Ragusa’s merchants already sailed across the Black Sea, as is attested, for example, by the request made by Nicolo di Sorgo to the Senate concerning one of his business partners who had been sent “in mare maggiore con ordine e commissione ampia di negoziare e fare incetta, di quelle mercantie, e cossae che le pareranno opportune [...]” (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 50, f. 38v, 14 March 1551).

The following course of events apparently rewards the foresight previously shown by Ragusa. In fact this crisis is strictly linked to the somewhat unexpected food shortage that will once again strike the Italian peninsula between 1560 and 1562: “Contra la commune e generale opinione, questo anno sie successo, che la ricolta de frumenti in alcuni luoghi, per inundatione delle aque, et in altri luoghi ch’ella nun è successa, si cume si sperava è stata triste, et per esser in ogni luogo gran domanda et molti compratori, noi siamo constretti, di ricorre alle parti di levante”.⁷⁰

It seems that the Republic had prepared for the situation. In June 1559, the Senate instructs one noblewoman in Holland to ask King Philip for the reconfirmation of all the privileges gained by the citizens of Ragusa in the Kingdom of Naples and in Sicily, the most important of which was the annual grant of 500 *carra* of wheat.⁷¹ In December of the same year, the Senate cancels an order for the purchase of wheat in the *Marca* region, “perche trovandose per la divina gratia, stare alquanto commodi di frumento se tali grani da vui comprati, conducessimo quivi, ne veneriamo [!] a perdere pur assai”.⁷² Moreover, a month later, the Senate, requested to make a decision “super frumentis, quae habemus in civitate”, eventually grants permission “de emittendo frumentum ex civitate, ut venundetur” for a maximum amount of 3,000 *stara*, choosing wheat from the Levant and the *Marca* region as the destination market.⁷³ The famine, however, has once again struck the Ottoman capital: in December 1560 the Sultan sends 10 galleys to Volo in order to intercept ships loaded with corn and redirect them to Constantinople and, among others, two

⁷⁰ Thus the Rector of Ragusa wrote to the ambassadors in Constantinople who were instructed to request the cociumi for the importation of wheat (*ibidem*, f. 155r, 20 July 1559). In reading the Italian chronicles from that period, quoted by Corradi, the situation was really alarming, especially in the Northern part of the Peninsula: “La Signoria di Venezia fece dare a Verona mille staja di miglio di quello delle munizioni”, in Casalmaggiore the government made millet bread “ed in Cremona fu ajutato il popolo con grande quantità di riso” (A. Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie*: p. 188).

⁷¹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 54, f. 292r, 27 June 1559.

⁷² *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 27, f. 236v, 1 December 1559.

⁷³ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 55, ff. 57v-58r, 5 January 1560. A few days earlier Benedetto Gondola, who was Ragusa’s agent in *Marca*, had informed that wheat prices in that province ran high and that they were getting even higher, so that on the very same day it was decided to send 150 *carra* of “bel grano di Levante [...] a fine, che voi cerchiate di farlo vendere ò costi, ò altrove nella Marca, ò in Ferrara, ò in Vinetia (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 27, f. 252v).

ships from Ragusa are seized.⁷⁴ The crisis does not seem as serious as the one of 1555 had been,⁷⁵ yet it does bring about some trouble, especially because a period of *yasağ* begins, which means that exports from all the territory of the Ottoman Empire are banned.⁷⁶ Venice will suffer the worst consequences of this situation, to such an extent that in March 1560 the Porte will refuse to sell corn to the *Serenissima*.⁷⁷ Venice is thus forced to seek alternative solutions to its growing difficulties,⁷⁸ but it will not refrain from using the one remedy that is always at hand, that is the seizure of ships from Ragusa,⁷⁹ which is part of a wider strategy aimed at putting pressure on the Republic's food supplying system.⁸⁰

The general difficulties of this period will force Ragusa to diversify food supplies—as it had already done in the past—by deciding, first, to sell 30 *stara* of

⁷⁴ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 28, ff. 124v-127r, letter dated 17 January 1561. The Rector reproaches Simone di Matteo Benessa, ambassador to the Porte, for his delay in giving the information—se “haveste mandato tal aviso per uno corriero apposta [...] forse sarebbe gionto prima delle gallere”—and asks him to plead Ragusa's cause with Chrustambassa (Rüstem Pasha, Soliman's Grand Vizier), given that “queste due navi tanto giouamento portaranno a Constantinopoli quanto portarebbe uno bichiere d'acqua al mare, [...] perché sendo in Constantinopoli uno popolo infinito, ha bisogno d'una grossissima provisione” (f. 125r).

⁷⁵ This is in contrast with some Venetian documents—I refer to the dispatches sent to the Senate from Constantinople—in which one reads that in the capital there was no bread for three days in November 1560 and that the “disette” got worse in the following January “avec les tempêtes de la Mer Noire, qui détruisent ou dispersent les flottes du ravitaillement de la ville” (M. Aymard, *Venise, Raguse et le commerce du blé*: p. 134). There is no trace of all this in Ragusan documents (in this very same period Ragusa has a special ambassador in Constantinople who is instructed to attend some very important trade negotiations), and at the moment I can suggest no plausible explanation for such a discrepancy between the two sources.

⁷⁶ For Ragusa this often causes difficulties in finding meat. See *Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 46, f. 125r, 9 September 1561: The price of wether at 12 *follari* and that of all other kinds of meat at 10 *follari* “hoc donec iasachus durabit” (30 *follari* were the equivalent of 1 *grosso* and 1 *libra* was the equivalent of 358 grams).

⁷⁷ See M. Aymard, *Venise, Raguse et le commerce du blé*: p. 134.

⁷⁸ Venice will go as far as to appoint, in 1564, a person entrusted with organizing an illegal wheat trade resident in La Canea (Crete) (*ibidem*, p. 136).

⁷⁹ Aymard counted 6 episodes of this kind between December 1563 and January 1566, totalling 36,700 *staia* of wheat, i.e. about 22,000 quintals (*ibidem*).

⁸⁰ It is only in this perspective that we may understand the seizure of “ottocento quaranta ducati d'oro, in 410 dopponi spagnoli” by the *Balio* of Corfu at the expense of one of Ragusa's *patroni*, who had been sent to buy the wheat offered by the Sancakbey of Valona and was intercepted in the Venetian island, “del qual atto”—the Rector will write “Al Principe di Venetia”—“noi prendiano [sic] non minor meraviglia, che dispiacere, non sapendo imaginar la cagione [...]” (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 28, f. 33v, 24 May 1560).

beans from Alexandria each month⁸¹ and, later on, by storing durra and sorghum in the staple “pro usu pauperum”.⁸² At the same time, Ragusa will try to buy food supplies on the Neapolitan market, as proven by the order issued by the Senate to the *massari bladorum* for hiring some ships to Barletta and by the subsequent decision to sell the wheat carried from Apulia at 11 *grossi per copello*.⁸³

In April 1562 the crisis seems to be over. This is confirmed by the decision, made on the very same day, to lower the price of rye and to restart paying soldiers their wage, one third of which in corn.⁸⁴ But here comes again the spectre of the ban on exports from the Kingdom of Naples. The Republic turns once again to the Sublime Porte asking for help. Considering “la gran penuria di grani, nella quale si ritrovamo per causa delle tristissime raccolte successe in Italia”, the Rector asks for the maximum effort in order to gain some *cochiumo* and, given that Ragusa is “sempre stata promptissima et hora più che mai alli servigii di sua Altezza è conveniente cosa che noi siamo accomodati di tre mille mutti di frumento se non più, da cavarsi dalle parti di Volo, e luoghi circumvicini, la quale concessione dovera essere tanto più facile, quanto che in Constantinopoli per la gratia di Dio si trova abondanza, no solamente di frumento ma di qualunque altra cosa necessaria al vitto humano”.⁸⁵

But Volo’s *scala* is shut—and it will remain so for a long time—to ships from Ragusa, which will be more and more often diverted towards Valona. Albania is thus about to become Ragusa’s privileged wheat market,⁸⁶ and this will not fail to have a positive—and sometimes, as we shall see, also a negative—influence on the history we are telling.⁸⁷

⁸¹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 56, f. 3r., 23 settembre 1561: the price of 7 *copelli* and 5 *parvoli* is apparently the lowest in the last two years, which is an indication that this product could be easily supplied (see *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 55).

⁸² *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 56, f. 39v, 16 December 1561.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, f. 1r, 17 September 1561 and f. 65v, 2 April 1562.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 87r, 30 April 1562.

⁸⁵ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 29, f. 15rv, 19 August 1562. The letter also contains—once again—instructions for the request of *cochiumi* to import millet from Varna and “cavare di Alessandria carri 200 di fave, significando a quelli Signori che per havere noi gran popolo, conveniene che procuriamo di nutrirlo, e ci bisogna havere ogni sorta di biade [...]” (f. 16v).

⁸⁶ See B. Hrabak, *Izvoz žitarica iz Osmanlijskog carstva*: p. 312 and following.

⁸⁷ Moreover, one should not forget the impact of *Rupe*, the big public granary, whose construction was completed by the beginning of the 1560s (see S. d’Atri, »“Adi 2 di marzo 1590 porta fornita”«). It is not by mere chance that one of the first documents attesting its effectiveness was a decree issued by the Minor Council asking that the official called *scrivano del frumento* “curam habere et tenere debeat” of the new wheat carried from Valona which must be stored “horreis novis nostris” (*Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 50, f. 13r, 27 November 1570).

Albania will play this role even in the more difficult years 1585-86—terrible years⁸⁸—with famine striking on many Mediterranean regions and on some European areas as well, such as central and northern France.⁸⁹ As far as Ragusa is concerned, events follow, once again, the scenario we are familiar with “di grani habbiamo bisogno grandissimo e non habbiamo da poterci provvedere d’altrove che dal paese di gransignore, essendo stato da pertutto cativissime raccolte, et essendo fatta la prohibitione della estrattione”.⁹⁰

The situation is alarming for the Republic. At the beginning of 1586, the Senate deliberates on the city’s corn requirements, asking the competent Officials to monitor the situation: given that the monthly requirement “singole familie tam nobilium quam civium” is 1.5 *copelli* per capita, the Senate decrees that, in case of need, the *Massarii bladatum* must report on the twentieth day of each month to the Minor Council so that it may take the due measures.⁹¹ Thereafter, during the same meeting, the Senate forbids the sale of the wheat carried overland to Pile and Ploče (the city’s gates), ordering that it must be stocked in the public warehouses and then sold on behalf of the municipality at the price of 13 *grossi* per copello.⁹²

This price will not last for long. In a year’s time *frumentum comunis* will rise up to 18 *grossi* (in March 1587),⁹³ and will jump to 22 *grossi* two months later.⁹⁴ But the main sign of the crisis may be seen in the huge amounts of food supplies granted by the Republic to its subjects from January 1586 onwards. “Res cibarias” are sent far and wide, covering almost the whole territory of the Republic, starting with 100 *stara* of millet for the poor of the island of Lopud;⁹⁵

⁸⁸ How can we forget, for instance, Naples’ revolt of 1585 and the lynching of Giovanni Vincenzo Farace, which was triggered by the decision to raise the price of bread. See Rosario Villari, *La rivolta antispagnola a Napoli: Le origini*, Bari: Laterza, 1994 [1976]: pp. 33-58.

⁸⁹ On this famine, which may be regarded as “l’une des plus graves pénuries de céréales qui aient touché non seulement Rouen et la Normandie, mais un large Bassin parisien”, see Jacques Bottin, «Négoce et crises frumentaires. Rouen et ses marchands dans le commerce international des blés (milieu XVI^e – début XVII^e siècle)». *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 45/3 (1998): p. 565.

⁹⁰ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 35, f. 189v, 16 July 1585.

⁹¹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 68, f. 262v, 4 January 1586.

⁹² Transgressors will be fined 100 *perperi* (ibidem, f. 263r).

⁹³ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 69, f. 105, 21 March 1587. The wheat came from Valona. No longer than 8 months before, Albanian wheat was sold in the storehouse at 12 *grossi* (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 68, f. 10v, 2 June 1586).

⁹⁴ Ibidem, f. 146v, 27 May 1587: in this case the price refers to 400 *stara* of deteriorated wheat from Apulia, which was stored in the city’s granary (and this demonstrates both the better quality of Apulian wheat and the gravity of the situation).

⁹⁵ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 68, f. 275v, 23 January 1586.

100 *stara* of millet, 40 *stara* of wheat and 20 *stara* of oil are sent to Stagno for the inhabitants of the *Terre nuove*; and, finally, 50 *stara* of millet, 10 *stara* of wheat and 10 *stara* of oil are sent to Trsteno “pro subventione hominum a Slano versus orientem”.⁹⁶

Ragusa will have to exert strong pressures upon its “protected” supplying markets in order to overcome this crisis. The letters written by the government to its envoys in Constantinople are more and more apprehensive and tend to emphasize Ragusa’s special relationship with the Porte, characterized by traditional munificence on one side and respectful gratefulness on the other: “trovandoci in grand[issi]mo bisogno di grani ne sapendo voltarci altrove che alla benignita del Gransignore sotto la cui prottettione siamo stati sempre conservati”, thus writes the Rector to Nicola Prodanelli, an envoy to Constantinople, and adds: “Noi perdirvi quello che è in effetto siamo senza ogni sorte di biave, e patiamo una estrema necessita, et se non veniamo provisti presto, sara molto male si che per quanto desiderate far servitio alla patria usate ogni cura studio e diligenza, et operate quanti amici havete per farci havere quanto prima li sudetti chochiumi [...]”.⁹⁷

The *cociumi* will eventually arrive,⁹⁸ as will arrive the corn from Sicily⁹⁹ and from Senigaglia, in the *Marca* region.¹⁰⁰ But a “universal famine” is also on its way.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 286, 8 February 1586. The day before, the Minor Council had also granted the permission to carry to Stagno “ex alienis locis [...] genus segetum” and to sell it at a free price, on the one condition that it would not be higher than that of Ragusa. This faculty was also extended to bread, which had to be sold at Stagno’s usual price (*Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 58, ff. 207v-208r).

⁹⁷ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 35, ff. 117v-118v, 10 September 1585.

⁹⁸ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 35, ff. 149v-151v, 30 August 1586: “li chochiumi per l’estrattione di grani e migli della Valona et d’Albania habbiamo ricevuti e ci pare che stano bene. Iddio faccia che habbino l’effetto come è il desiderio nostro”.

⁹⁹ *Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 59, f. 18r, 11 July 1587: as many as 2,700 *stara*, “exonerati in Pescariam, et inde deportati in ore comunis”.

¹⁰⁰ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 69, f. 203r, 9 November 1587: the sale price is fixed at 18 copelli and a half.

Siamo senza un granello di grano onde patiamo: *the 1590-91 crisis*

Shortly after a disastrous famine had struck the whole of southern Europe between the end of 1590 and the first months of 1591, in the *Discorso sopra la carestia e fame*, Giovan Battista Segni wrote: “[...] se era carestia in una provincia, era abbondanza in un'altra, onde una poteva aiutar l'altra. Veniva il grano d'Egitto, d'Affrica, di Turchia, di Marsilia, di Francia, di Sardegna, d'Asia, di Sicilia, di Grecia, di Spagna. Ma come oggidì quasi tutti siamo increduli e scelerati al possibile, la carestia è universale”.¹⁰¹ This famine was different from the previous ones: people living in those times, who were accustomed to grain shortages, perceived it in a dramatic manner, of which Segni's words are perhaps the most famous example.¹⁰²

In actual fact, the famine of the early 1590s was not so “universale”: it struck mainly the Italian peninsula,¹⁰³ the Iberian peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean, and it was caused by a series of bad harvests in Italy, starting from 1586, compounded by the terrible atmospheric conditions—very rainy winters followed by unusually cold summers—of the biennium 1589-90.¹⁰⁴ Central and Northern Europe were not affected by the famine. As a result, they soon became the target of the appeals launched by many of the European states that had been deprived of their customary supplying markets,¹⁰⁵ to such

¹⁰¹ Giovan Battista Segni, *Discorso sopra la carestia e fame*. Ferrara: appresso Benedetto Mamarello, 1591, now published in I forni di Maiolo, ed. Girolamo Allegretti. [Studi Montefeltriani – serie monografica, 14]. San Leo: Società di Studi Storici per il Montefeltro, 1997: p. 42.

¹⁰² The cause is probably to be found in the growing intensity of these crises that do not, however, simultaneously become less frequent. Indeed—as we already saw—one may count, more or less, one crisis every five years, taking only the second half of the sixteenth century into account. See F. Braudel's considerations in *Civiltà e imperi nel Mediterraneo nell'età di Filippo II*: pp. 630-631.

¹⁰³ “Roma la prova, Venezia la sa, la Lombardia la conosce, Toscana la gusta, il Piemonte la sente, Romagna ne sta disperata, la Marca stenta, Napoli non n'è senza, e tutte le città, terre e castella e ville ne gemono e stridono” (G.B. Segni, *Discorso sopra la carestia e fame*: p. 30).

¹⁰⁴ See some of the essays collected in *The European crisis of the 1590s. Essays in Comparative History*, ed. Peter Clark, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985 and especially the contributions: N. S. Davidson, «Northern Italy in the 1590s»: pp. 157-176, Peter Burke, «Southern Italy in the 1590s: hard times or crisis?», pp. 177-190 and James Casey, «Spain: a failed transition»: pp. 209-228. According to Segni, this famine could have been caused only by God's will, given that the “fame appunto è flagello appropriato alli peccati, che oggi sono il colmo e regnano in questi perversissimi tempi nostri” (G. B. Segni, *Discorso sopra la carestia e fame*: p. 29).

¹⁰⁵ Although generally “the amount of Baltic grain shipped through the Sound was relatively small in aggregate terms (enough to feed about 750,000 people according to one calculation)”, it cannot be denied that “the margin was not invaluable in dearth years” (C. S. L. Davies, «Popular Disorder», in: *The European crisis of the 1590s*: p. 252).

an extent that in the port of Danzig, at the end of 1591, it was already impossible to find corn and ships, because of the “condotte che hanno fatto gli spagnoli, veneciani, fiorentini et altri particolari et si dice sian partite questo anno al meglio di trecento navi”.¹⁰⁶

The very fact that many envoys from the Italian states were present, at the same time, in the Baltic ports is a sign that the situation was particularly serious.¹⁰⁷ Certainly it was not the first time that corn from Northern Europe made its appearance in the Mediterranean,¹⁰⁸ yet it is only in the 1590s, through the exportation of wheat, that Northern European navies really begin to penetrate into the *Mare Interno*,¹⁰⁹ where they will become predominant in the second half of the seventeenth century.¹¹⁰

As far as Ragusa is concerned, shortly before the crisis struck, the situation is apparently under control: “Trovandosi per Iddio gratia la Città nostra ben provvista di grani, e capitandone ogni di grani in molta quantità dalle parti d’Albania, e da terra ferma a prezzi honesti, oltre molte altre nostre provisioni che habbiamo fatto, et di Sicilia, et di Ancona, et dalla Vallona, nece torna conto travagliarci nelli grani d’Abruzzo, o di Puglia perche ci sarebbero di molto danno”.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Letter written by Robert and Sigismund Ausserstofer to the Duke of Mantua on 1 December 1591, in Carlo M. Belfanti, «Una città e la carestia: Mantova, 1590-1592». *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi* 16 (1982): p. 112. Mantua, instead, succeeds in obtaining supplies of wheat coming from Bavaria, also on account of the personal ties between the duke’s family and the Habsburg (see pp. 117-118).

¹⁰⁷ On Venice, see Mario Brunetti, «Tre ambasciate annonarie veneziane». *Archivio Veneto*, ser. V, 93-94 (1956): p. 108 and ss.; on Florence, see Anna Maria Pult Quaglia, ‘Per provvedere ai popoli’. *Il sistema annonario nella Toscana dei Medici*. Firenze: Olschki, 1990: pp. 120-121.

¹⁰⁸ See the pages dedicated to the Portuguese and Spanish importations of wheat from the Baltic in the second half of the fifteenth century in F. Braudel, *Civiltà e imperi nel Mediterraneo nell’età di Filippo II*: pp. 631-636.

¹⁰⁹ The “blé du Nord”, totally absent until 1585 in the registers of Livorno’s harbour, amounts to 47.06 % of the wheat imported in the biennium 1590-91, 94.42 % in the biennium 1591-92, and as much as 96.22 % in the following two years, and in the same period wheat from Sicily falls from 47.06 % to 2.18 % (Fernand Braudel and Ruggiero Romano, *Navires et Marchandises à l’entrée du Port de Livorne (1547-1611)*. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1951: p. 107, table X). For a more general overview see also M. Aymard, *Venise, Raguse et le commerce du blé*: p. 155 and ss.).

¹¹⁰ On some of the more general issues concerning the presence of the northern ships in the Mediterranean see Elena Papagna, *Grano e mercanti nella Puglia del Seicento*. Bari: Edipuglia, 1990 and Gigliola Pagano de Divitiis, *Mercanti inglesi nell’Italia del Seicento: Navi, traffici, egemonie*. Venezia: Marsilio 1990.

¹¹¹ *Lettere e commissioni di Ponente*, ser. 27.6, vol. 6, f. 51r, 24 February 1589 (SAD). The Republic had been unjustly accused by the *Vicerè* of Naples for having redirected to Ragusa one ship loaded with wheat from Abruzzo destined to the capital.

But it does not last for long. The summer of 1590 witnesses the first signs of famine. On 27 July the Senate grants freedom to carry wheat “et aliarum segetum” to Ragusa from anywhere, by land or by sea, and to sell it “vel in proprium usum convertere” without any restriction, all over the territory of the Republic.¹¹² The following day a number of letters are sent to the Republic’s agents and ambassadors to the *Bassa* of Bosnia and Herzegovina, asking them for information about the possibility of buying wheat.¹¹³

It is not surprising, therefore, that in a letter to Marco Buzignolo and Orsatto Cerva, ambassadors in Constantinople, one may find an explicit statement that “Noi ci troviamo in grandissima necessità del vittovagliamento per il mancamento delli grani et di altre vettovaglie [...]”.¹¹⁴

The following letter addressed to the same ambassadors at the end of October portrays a situation that is unfolding all its nasty implications: “Li hochiumi che ci havete mandato per la estrazione di formento et di migli di Valona, et di Albanan non ci servono a nulla perche in tutti li detti luoghi vi è mancamento et di piu le galere Venetiane vi si trattengono tutta via attorno, le quali ci tengono assediati”.¹¹⁵

Here are two of the *leitmotiv* that will characterize this crisis from Ragusa’s perspective:¹¹⁶ the difficulties in resorting to its habitual—and often providential—protected supplying markets and the obstacles caused by constant presence of the Venetian navy,¹¹⁷ whose activities in the Gulf had already been planned at the end of August and were to be justified “per nuova, che teniate di corsari”, as we find stated in the ordinance issued by the Senate

¹¹² *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 70, f. 240r.

¹¹³ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, ff. 85r-86v. *Bassa*, or *Beylerbey*, was the governor of *Beylerbeyilik* (*Eyâlet*), the largest administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 97r, 4 September 1590.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 119r, 31 October 1590.

¹¹⁶ One should not forget another aspect that makes this crisis even more difficult. In this period the Republic of Saint Blaise is fully involved in the so called “Enecano crisis”, that is with the problems triggered by the attempts made by the former *Nâzir* of Belgrade Ine Hân, from 1580 onwards, to occupy part of Ragusa’s territory assuming the title of *Sancakbey* of Konavle. On this very important yet little-known affair, see the chapter entitled “Ejnehanova kriza” in Toma Popović, *Dubrovnik i Turska u XVI. veku*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1973: pp. 340-364 and N. H. Biegman, *The Turco-Ragusan relationship*: pp. 61-63.

¹¹⁷ “Quanto alla necessità di grani in che ci troviamo”—the Rector writes to the ambassadors in Constantinople in November 1590—“conviene che voi vi sforziate servirci come vi habbiamo scritto [...], perche ne patiamo molto havendoci le Galere Venetiane presso con due navette ducento carra di grani di Sicilia” (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, f. 121r, 8 November 1590).

of the *Serenissima* on 31 August 1590.¹¹⁸ The immediate result is that Ragusa, at least in the first and most difficult phase of the crisis, will have to rely for food supplies on its local markets, which are often based on smuggling, as one may deduce from the small amounts of goods mostly carried by foreign merchants, which is something quite unusual for the Republic.¹¹⁹

But it is the shut down of the Albanian market that represents the keystone of this crisis. The shut down is not caused mainly by the “mancamento”, to which the Rector referred in the letter mentioned above, but rather by the fact that the local population, faced with a severe food shortage, does not hesitate to take arms, so as to prevent local corn from being shipped abroad. On 18 September 1591 Ragusa’s consul writes from Valona that there is not “molta copia di grani et che quei populi tengono l’armi in mano per non lasciarlo estrare ad alcuno”.¹²⁰

Undoubtedly, it is not the first time that Albania proved to be a dangerous country. Starting from at least 1575, as B. Hrabak had once highlighted,¹²¹ the struggle of the local population against Ragusa had become one of the recurring features of this commercial partnership: this critical situation will reach its peak in 1583, when Giovanni Gionoma, the presbyter to whom Ragusa had commissioned the purchase of corn in Albania in the previous few years, got killed in Durrës.¹²² The tension runs so high that the Rector writes to the

¹¹⁸ See M. Brunetti, »Tre ambasciate annonarie veneziane«: p. 108. The novelty is not so much in the requisitions, which, as we already saw, represented one of the food supplying system used more frequently by *Serenissima*, but rather in the systematic character of these actions. One must remind that Venice itself had undergone similar attacks during the famine of 1539-40, when Barbarossa “dopo la presa di Castelnuovo, tenendo chiuso il Golfo di Cattaro, non lasciava entrare vettovaglia di nessuna sorta nella città” (A. Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie*: p. 117, n. 3).

¹¹⁹ See the decrees issued by the Minor Council from January 1591 onwards that very often refer to payments for the purchase of grain (mainly wheat, but also millet and barley) carried by small Turkish and Greek boats, whose cargos range from 14 to 142 *stara* (*Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 61, f. 4r and ss.).

¹²⁰ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, f. 243v. This struggle very much recalls—if the comparison does not sound too bold—the battles fought at the other end of Europe, in England, where during the first half of the eighteenth century the popular classes firmly appealed to the principle, which was a non negotiable part of their ‘moral economy’, that “wheat must be consumed in the region where it was produced, especially in times of famine” (Edward P. Thompson, »L’economia morale delle classi popolari inglesi nel secolo XVIII«, in: Idem, *Società patrizia cultura plebea: Otto saggi di antropologia storica sull’Inghilterra del Settecento*. Torino: Einaudi, 1981: p. 79).

¹²¹ See B. Hrabak, *Izvoz žitarica iz Osmanlijskog carstva*: pp. 316-318.

¹²² *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 35, ff. 5r-9v, 8 September 1583: Gionoma was out of the ship together with many sailors and had already received the wheat, when “vennero molti e molti Turchi di Durazzo” that killed the friar, stole four thousand thalers, “ferirno et bastonarno i marinari, et gli spogliorno tutti di camisa [...]” (ff. 6v-7r).

ambassadors in Constantinople firmly asking them to appeal to Siaus bassa (Siyāvūş Pasha, Murād III's Gran Visir).¹²³ The latter, he states, “vuole che si proceda come nelle cause civili con intervento in iudizio dell'una e dell'altra parte co' prove alla parte nostra”, whereas according to the Rector “queste son cause criminali, dove vi è il dispregio de comandamenti di sua Altezza”.¹²⁴

What is it that makes the revolt of the 1590s different for Ragusa? Mainly, the lack of possible alternatives: “Siamo senza un granello di grano onde patiamo pur troppo non possiamo dove voltarci per poterci provvedere de grani che ci bisognano, et per quanto siamo stati informati non lascaranno l'estrattione ne le tratte per questo anno nel regno di Napoli ne tampoco nel regno di Sicilia”.¹²⁵

And the gravity of the situation is perfectly reflected in the verbal escalation revealed by the letters sent to the ambassadors to the Porte. At the beginning of March 1591 the Rector writes: “Noi stiamo male, et se presto non ci soccorrete staremo peggio, sollecitate, et vigilate per questo negocio [...], anzi trovate ogni via, et modo da poterci soccorrere con ogni prestezza in questa grandissima necessità in che ci troviamo”.¹²⁶

Only a few days afterwards the situation becomes much more dramatic: “Noi stiamo molto male non habbiamo nella città [...] sorte di vettovaglie, se non grano per pochi giorni tutto il popolo patisce estremamente et li suditi nostri de territorio nostro non havendo con che sostentare muoreno ogni di di fame, insomma se presto non ci soccorrete ci troveremo in pessimi termini. Però [...] ingegnatevi di trovar ogni via et modo di poter comprare con ogni prestezza quella maggior quantità di migli et di formento che porrete havere non guardando al prezzo [...] et in mancamento di migli et formenti comperete

¹²³ Only a few days after Gionoma's killing, Ragusan ships were assaulted again. After gaining “un chochiumo [...] per estrarre per nostro uso una quantita di grani dalla Valona” and sending a ship “per caricarli et pagar i denari, sono stati alcuni insolenti nella Valona et vilipeso l'ordine di sua Altezza sollevorno il popolo a impedire l'estrattione di detti grani et piu volte assaltarno co' l'arme [...] il ponte della nave et i marinari, et ne ferirno et bastonarno alcuni et credendo che il sopraccarico si trovasse in una cassa nascosto l'abruciarino [...] onde i nostri impauriti di peggior successo sene tornarono a Ragusa in capo di tre mesi senza poter tener il carico” (ibidem, f. 7v).

¹²⁴ Ibidem, f. 10rv, 5 October 1583. And he adds: the Republic deserves it, “perché attendendo noi giorno e notte senza risparmio di cosa alcuna, a servir co' ogni nostro potere questo Serenissimo Imperio” (f. 11r).

¹²⁵ *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, f. 200r, 12 June 1591.

¹²⁶ Ibidem, f. 163r, letter sent on 8 March 1591 to Matteo Ghetaldi, ambassador to the Sancakbey of Herzegovina.

del pane, perche la gran necessità nostra ricever tutte quelle sorti di vittovaglie con che l'huomo si puo sostentare".¹²⁷

Eventually one gets to September of the same year when "per dirlo a voi ci troviamo senza un granello e se presto non siamo socorsi ci conviene morir di fame".¹²⁸

This letter highlights the dramatic character of the crisis. In September 1590 the Republic had already decided to ration the supplies of wheat that were distributed monthly "particularibus personis": they were fixed at 1 *copello* per capita.¹²⁹ But prices are the best mirror of the situation: communal wheat, which at the beginning of the crisis, in August 1590, cost 20 *grossi* per *copello*,¹³⁰ will rise to no less than 26 *grossi* in two months' time,¹³¹ whereas the price of millet will rise even more, reaching 12 *grossi* per *copello*, the highest price in the century.¹³²

Ragusa faces all this first of all by tightening internal controls. Market regulations become even stronger. Besides the usual ban on the exports of wheat out of the Republic's territory—which is typical of times of famine, but in this case is repeated in the forms that appear definitely more incisive, both substantially and verbally, and was accompanied by higher penalties¹³³—there is the order "dominis iustitiariis ut facere debeant publicum proclama" forbidding the sale of corn without any exception.¹³⁴ But one is above all struck by the instructions concerning bread, which for the first time¹³⁵ introduce tight

¹²⁷ Ibidem, f. 168, letter sent on 15 March 1591 to Stefano di Nicolo, envoy in Alesso (that is Leshë, in Albania).

¹²⁸ Ibidem, ff. 243v-244r, letter sent 18 September 1591 to Secondo de Luccari, envoy to the Bassa of Bosnia.

¹²⁹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 70, ff. 256v-257r, 4 September 1590. I remind that, until then, the lowest limit of 1 *copello* and ½ had been reached at the beginning of 1586 (cfr. *supra*).

¹³⁰ Ibidem, f. 245r, 6 August 1590: the Senate decided to raise the price on that occasion.

¹³¹ Ibidem, f. 262v, 19 October 1590.

¹³² Ibidem, f. 263r, 19 October 1590. In March the price was 7 *grossi* (ff. 160v-161r). In February 1592 the Republic goes as far as to appoint two officials who are instructed to sell *sorghum comunis* in the city and in its territory at the price of 10 *grossi* per *copello* (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 61, f. 216r).

¹³³ *Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 61, ff. 181v-182v, 23 December 1591: it was allowed to carry wheat only within the territory of the Republic and to the mills for grinding, provided one had a written permission by the Rector.

¹³⁴ Ibidem, f. 196r, 3 January 1592.

¹³⁵ The only precedent goes back to the 1520s, when the Republic first of all structured the control system and then placed the bread market under the competence of the new *ufficiales pancocularum* (*Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 34, f. 161r, 9 July 1522 and f. 228r, 1 April 1523).

controls over the final phase of the bread production process: on the one hand, all the city's bakers are bound to give notice (to the *ufficiales pancocularum*) of all the people that daily bring bread to be baked at their ovens; on the other hand, all the bakers and any other person that makes bread *venalem* “*debeant ubi primum illum habuerint, et acceperint a furnaris*” take it to the officials and weigh it before them (otherwise, sale is prohibited).¹³⁶

These measures, perhaps more than others, give us a feeling of the gravity of the situation: Ragusa is a city where bread cannot be made and sold by private individuals; bread must be made from *frumentum comunis* and must be bought in the *Platea*,¹³⁷ where one may find as many as 60 “*mulieres pancocolae pro conficiendo pane pro usu plateae*”¹³⁸ and where controls concern mainly the ban on selling flour, which was restricted to the bread-making of private persons. Yet one is very surprised, in the present state of research, by the total absence of prices and of any information on the bread production process, given that the government restricted itself to selling bakers the flour at fixed prices—mostly the same as the prices at the staple—and to control smuggling of both corn and flour.

But the clampdown on internal resources is not enough to get out of the crisis. As Giovan Battista Segni wisely suggested, the “*principale rimedio et aiuto che porgere si deve nelle carestie è mettere fuori o le biade o gli denari [...]*”.¹³⁹ And thus Ragusa will even be prepared to pay 28 *grossi per copello* (plus a commission of 2 *grossi*) in order to buy Levantine corn from Virgilio Corbizzi, from Florence, *sopracarico* of the *navetta* owned by Vincenzo Sliscovich from Ragusa,¹⁴⁰ and the Republic will pay nothing less than 26

¹³⁶ *Acta Minoris Consilii*, vol. 61, ff. 114v-115r, 24 July 1591. Transgressors shall be whipped “in Platea in loco consueto”. The following month the Senate decrees that all the bakers are obliged to make “*panem venalem ad mensuram*” and an order is issued “*officialibus pancocularum*” to choose 40 bakers (ibidem, ff. 194r, 195r, 19 August 1591).

¹³⁷ *Platea* or *Platea communis* was the city area between the Customs (Sponza) and the Cathedral where the market was situated and where the public activities of the Republic were concentrated. It was connected to *Platea magna*, or *Placa (Stradun)*, the main street, the center of the city's economic life.

¹³⁸ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 45, f. 126r, 2 April 1541.

¹³⁹ G. B. Segni, *Discorso sopra la carestia e fame*: p. 34. The “drama of wheat imported from distant, and even from far-off, regions”, Braudel states, “is a measure of men's hunger, but it is also a measure of buyers' wealth” (F. Braudel, *Civiltà e imperi nel Mediterraneo nell'età di Filippo II*: p. 631).

¹⁴⁰ *Lettere e commissioni di Ponente*, vol. 6, f. 198, 22 April 1591. The price is accepted “*benche qui nella città nostra si vendono li grani di Sicilia che sono molto migliori di quei di Levante, a grossi venti sei il copello*” (f. 198r).

grossi per copello in order to buy corn from Volo —which now reappears in Ragusa after more than thirty years—“a particularibus personis”.¹⁴¹

The Republic will exert the maximum pressure on all possible supplying markets, and will try to take the best possible advantage from the ‘situation rent’ accumulated after years of privileged relationships with the various Ottoman officials.¹⁴² This pressure will be brought to bear especially on the continental regions of the Balkans—the Republic instructs its ambassadors to write “una lettera alli mercanti in Saraevo che facino le incette di grani con bona licenza del Signor Bassa”¹⁴³—and corn will arrive from the Balkans. In October 1591 the Rector writes to Valentino de Giorgi, ambassador to the Sancakbey of Herzegovina: “Con la vostra lettera di primo del corrente ci havete scritto la prestezza trovata et nel signor Sangiaco, et nel suo chichaia di concedere il passo libero ad ogni sorte di biave havendo il paese di Herzegovina piu grande abondanza di migli raxi [segale], orzi sorghi et avena infuori di formento del quale il paese ne haveva carestia”.¹⁴⁴

Yet, as the Rector himself will have to admit, “vediamo le promesse larghe ma non ancora gli effetti”.¹⁴⁵

To conclude: why is the 1590-91 crisis different?

No doubt the crisis of the 1590s was one of the most disastrous in the sixteenth century that marked a watershed in the general history of Europe, particularly in the history of the Mediterranean. There were different reactions to this crisis, depending on the economic resources that each of the governments

¹⁴¹ *Acta Consilii Rogatorum*, vol. 71, f. 188r, 9 January 1592.

¹⁴² Ragusa sometimes even buys wheat when it does not need it, with the only aim of winning the favours of the various local potentates who draw much of their revenues from the sale of wheat. See, for example, the letter sent in February 1579 to Giacomo Codutto, consul at Valona, where it is clearly stated that “sebene noi siamo abondantemente provisti delli grani, habbiamo non di meno animo di fornirci costi di stara Ragugei quattro milla [...], alli quali Mufetise, et Ciauso farete sapere che prendiamo li detti grani piu presto per satisfare a loro che per altro” (*Lettere di Levante*, vol. 33, ff. 168v-169r, 5 February 1579 (Mufetise, that is *Müfettişi*, a fiscal inspector and Ciauso, that is *Çavuş*, was a Palace official who was often sent to the provinces to carry out orders).

¹⁴³ See the letter, already quoted, dated 18 September 1591, addressed to Secondo de Luccari, envoy to the Bassa of Bosnia in *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, f. 244r.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 248v, 9 October 1591. Chichaia, or *Kethüdâ*, was generally a deputy of the provincial governor, in this case he was the deputy of the Sancakbey.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 249r.

involved was able to muster, but they all went towards ensuring the subsistence of growing masses of people¹⁴⁶ in an attempt, certainly successful, to avoid serious consequences at the social level.¹⁴⁷

And what about Ragusa? The Republic is apparently well prepared for this situation. It possesses solid economic and financial foundations and a commercial power having its mainstay in one of the strongest navies in the Mediterranean.¹⁴⁸ Its food-supplying structure can rely on diversified markets both in the West and in the East, and, above all, on the “protected” Ottoman markets; last but not least, Ragusa has a system for the storage of corn supplies with an overall capacity of 28–30,000 *stara*, half of which in the new, huge granary.¹⁴⁹

Everything fine? Not exactly, if one considers that this crisis highlights both the strength and all the possible weakness in the system created by Ragusa. The crisis of the 1590s is not the hardest for the Republic of Saint Blaise. In fact, the crisis of the years 1539–41 was worse, especially for the contemporary “double scourge”. In the 1590s, however, Ragusa can no longer play on different fronts. The shut down of the Apulian markets, on which Maurice Aymard’s analysis relied to a considerable extent, is important for Ragusa especially when it cannot turn to the Ottoman markets: Ragusa, in other words, is not like Venice, and for Ragusa “le déclin du blé turc”¹⁵⁰ does not at all mean the end of food supplies from the Levant. Of course, for many years Ragusa will have to be satisfied with Albanian wheat, but this is a handy market, based upon long-standing political and economic relationships.

¹⁴⁶ One may read, for example, some descriptions of the Italian situation in A. Corradi, *Annali delle epidemie*: pp. 302–305.

¹⁴⁷ “The surprising feature about western Europe in the 1590s is not the extent of popular disorder but, by and large, its successful containment” (C.S.L. Davies, «Popular Disorder»: p. 251).

¹⁴⁸ Jorjo Tadić reckons that in the period 1570–1585 Ragusa’s fleet was made up by 170 ships with a capacity of 33 thousand *carra* («Organizacija dubrovačkog pomorstva u XVI veku». *Istorijski časopis* 1 (1948): p. 30 and, more generally, idem, «Le port de Raguse et sa flotte au XVI^e siècle», in: *Le navire et l’économie maritime du Moyen-Age au XVIII^e siècle principalement en Méditerranée*, ed. Michel Mollat. Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1958: pp. 9–26. According to Edoardo Grendi, Genua could not by any means compete with “Ragusa’s merchant navy, that also played a prominent role in the trade of Genua’s harbour” so that Ragusa’s navy may be more properly compared to that of Venice “also considering that the trade of the Venetian harbour was tributary to Ragusa’s navy” (Edoardo Grendi, «Traffico e navi nel porto di Genova fra 1500 e 1700», republished in: Idem, *La repubblica aristocratica dei genovesi. Politica, carità e commercio tra Cinque e Seicento*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987: p. 337).

¹⁴⁹ See S. d’Atri, «“Adi 2 di marzo 1590 porta fornita”».

¹⁵⁰ M. Aymard, *Venise, Raguse et le commerce du blé*: p. 135 and ss.

It is no chance that when that market shuts down, Ragusa falls into a crisis. The famine of the 1590s represents the first crisis of Ragusa's food supplying system or, to say it better, the first sign of future problems. Because Ragusa cannot, even if it wishes, operate in a different manner. Even when facing its worst difficulties in obtaining food supplies, Ragusa knows it can rely on the system it has built with a mixture of political genius and commercial enterprise to such an extent that its ambassadors in Bosnia—with a half-hidden rhetorical blackmail—may frankly ask that “per conservare la città tributaria et divota del gran Signore la voglia soccorrere con una quantita di grani facendo spedire subito li sua ministri per tutti quei lochi del suo paese dove è fatta bona raccolta questo anno e facendo levar quella quantita maggiore che sia possibile et condurre alla città nostra”.¹⁵¹

And we finally arrive to that masterpiece in the art of rethoric which is represented by the letter sent October 1591 to the ambassador to the Sancakbey of Herzegovina: “Noi stiamo molto male trovandoci senza grani, et se fin qui il popolo nostro si è cibato con li fichi et con le uve, nel avvenire non havremo più [...] cibo [...], voi con ogni prestezza ci soccorriate, che altrimenti converra a tutti morire miseramente di fame [...]”.¹⁵²

In this document Ragusa's extraordinary ability in taking a stand in front of its commercial and political partners is very well represented. With what we may regard as a highly symbolic display of strength, the Republic declares that its people survive by eating the available and very nourishing food. Here we do not only find the usual appeal to the benevolence of the powerful Ottoman neighbour, which is typical of what I defined as Ragusa's “corn diplomacy”:¹⁵³ even in the middle of one of the most devastating grain shortage crises of the sixteenth century, the Republic does not abandon its *modus operandi* and tries not to fall to the rules of “nature” and of the economy, which would have liked to see it—in accordance with the famous and already mentioned report of a Venetian ambassador—“tutta piena di timore”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See the letter dated 18 September 1591, quoted above, in *Lettere di Levante*, vol. 37, ff. 243v-244r.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*, f. 247v, 3 October 1591.

¹⁵³ This issue is at the core of the research I am about to finish, to which I refer the readers for further details.

¹⁵⁴ Cfr. *supra*, note 25.