CHAPTER TWO

DIPLOMATS

Although a diplomat of ambassadorial rank headed British missions of only the greatest political importance until well into the twentieth century, from the beginning an ambassador was almost always in charge of the post at Constantinople. This was partly in order to impress the sultan and facilitate access at the highest levels, and partly because—until the tradition was too well established to change without causing offence—an ambassador in Constantinople came cheaply to the government. Only during a problematical changeover or when money had to be saved was the ambassador replaced with a lower form of diplomatic life. Who were the ambassadors? How were they chosen? What did they do? Who helped them? The theme that runs through the answers to all these questions is a tussle over influence and money between the Levant Company and the British government, which was not resolved until the company was dissolved in 1825.

The Ambassador

The first five or six ambassadors were all merchants or servants of the Levant Company before their appointment. Levant Company merchants occasionally appeared much later as well. Sir William Hussey in 1691 and Sir Everard Fawkener in the middle of the eighteenth century both worked for many years in the English factory (community of merchants and factors) in Aleppo before going to the embassy in Constantinople. Fawkener’s friend Voltaire was astonished at his promotion, believing that such social mobility would have been impossible in France. Following the arrival at the embassy of Sir John Eyre in 1620 and more certainly that of Sir Thomas Roe at the end of the following year, the

---

1 Factors sometimes traded in their own right and so were merchants as well as agents for merchants at home.
3 Little is known about Eyre, the sixth ambassador, but Wood believes that he was probably not previously a company servant, A History of the Levant Company, p. 84.
ambassadors came to fit the more usual profile of British ambassadors: men of junior aristocratic lineage with a career interest in diplomacy. There remained interesting exceptions: Sir John Finch was a physician who had been for six years professor of anatomy at Pisa; Sir William Trumbull was a leading civil lawyer; Admiral Sydney Smith, who for a while shared the office with his younger brother, was a glory-seeking naval officer; and Sir Henry Layard (‘Layard of Nineveh’) was first and foremost an archaeologist and politician. The first peer to be appointed British Ambassador at Constantinople was Heneage Finch, the third Earl of Winchilsea, who arrived in 1661; among those following him was Lord Elgin at the end of the eighteenth century, who achieved the lasting enmity of the Greeks for his role in the transfer of so many of their priceless ‘marbles’ from Athens (then still a grubby town in the Ottoman Empire) to the British Museum.

Ottoman tradition rejected the view that special respect for an ambassador was based on the theory of sovereign representation, for no foreign sovereign was the equal of the sultan-caliph. In other words, the emerging law of nations on diplomatic immunity meant nothing in Constantinople. Instead, an ambassador was regarded as roughly analogous to that of the leader of one of the empire’s semi-autonomous religious communities (millets) whose privileges depended on his ability to maintain order among his followers and deliver their taxes. As a rule, therefore, the Ottomans treated ambassadors well, even subsidising their embassies until long after this custom was abandoned in Europe. They did this because they usually found their embassies flattering, valuable sources of information and alluring gifts, important props to commerce, useful mediators, and indispensable to the manipulation of the balance of power. However, at some junctures they found them less useful, and there was the risk that at any time an ambassador might fall foul of a malevolent grand vizier or sheikh-ul-Islam with a personal grudge against him. On such occasions, ambassadors in Constantinople risked humiliation, and if their princes should turn hostile towards the sultan their liberty itself was forfeit. In 1651 even the astute and

---

4 Hutton, ‘Finch’.
5 Hanham, ‘Trumbull’.
6 On this episode, see the splendid book by St. Clair, Lord Elgin and the Marbles.
7 Desperate for cash, in 1623 Sultan Murat actually tried to tax the diplomatic corps, Berridge, ‘The origins of the diplomatic corps’, p. 26.
8 TNA, Ainslie to Liston, 10 Mar. 1794, FO261/7.