Syria’s Arab Traders as Seen by Andrea Berengo, 1555-1556*

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Fifty years ago, Ugo Tucci published a collection of Venetian merchant letters from Aleppo, from the years 1555-1556.1 The author, Andrea Berengo, otherwise unknown to history, was a prolific correspondent. Between 8 October 1555 and 22 January 1556, and 6 May — 12 August 1556, he wrote 285 letters; of seven other letters that have been found, only three fall in the gap just indicated, between 23 January and 5 May 1556.2 Berengo, a Venetian citizen, had worked for Venetian merchant houses in Cyprus before deciding to seek his fortune in Aleppo.3 His correspondence is rich in detail about the multiple tasks of an independent commission-agent.4 From his patrician patrons5 and from other wealthy merchants he solicits custom, inviting them to consign to him the Venetian silk cloths6 that in Aleppo were ideally to be traded for spices or for Persian silk. He also fills special orders for goods of all kinds — truffles, or soap from Baalbek, or a kind of cotton cloth from Amman that was used

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2 These seven letters form the Appendix.
3 Tucci’s preface, Lettres, pp. 2-4.
4 I cannot make out from the letters whether Berengo received a percentage of the turnover (as opposed to a share of the profit), but if he did he would have been a commission agent in the sense of the term used for Venetian trade by Frederic C. Lane, Venice. A Maritime Republic (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 139-40.
5 In Venice, Zuan Zustignian de San Stin and Antonio Bragadin; in Cyprus, Zuan Contarini (Zustignian’s brother-in-law) in Nicosia, and Marco Antonio Angusolla in Famagosta: see the references to these men in the index of correspondents, Tucci, Lettres, pp. 331-2.
6 Berengo refers to “kerseys” (carixee), but these were silks, not kerseys in the English or Flemish sense, nor mixtures of silk and other threads. For Venetian regulations concerning the so-called drappi da navegar, see Luca Mola, The Venetian Silk Industry of the Sixteenth Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 104-5, 116, 144-6.
for making coverlets. For the shipment of goods in either direction he is constantly in touch with his two business partners, one in Tripoli and the other in Saline (the port of Famagosta), and their subordinates. Finally, in his own name, Berengo had goods sent from Venice by way of Cyprus, and sent back the profits, either in cash or in spices or silk. Aleppo offered many opportunities, but Berengo was not vouchsafed a long life. He complained of a urinary infection, and the gap in his correspondence could be due to illness; in one of his last letters he seems to know his days are numbered. The partner in Tripoli, among whose papers Berengo’s letters were preserved, apparently had to settle his colleague’s affairs.

Berengo arrived in the middle of a boycott (battelazione), dating from July 1555. The Ottoman defterdar had demanded higher duties for the export of goods from Syria; in protest, Venice’s consul and his council of twelve voted to prohibit fellow Venetians from buying the spices that had just been delivered by the caravan from Basra. The consul and the defterdar reached a settlement, but not until January 1556, just in time for the arrival of the caravan from Mecca. According to Berengo this caravan brought less than usual in the way of spices, but some Syrian merchants were reported to have remained behind in Mecca, and it seems more spices eventually did come from Mecca. Since the Ottoman conquest of 1546, the Basra route was becoming more promising for the shipment of spices to Aleppo, but no caravan from there came during the period of the correspondence. In the broad picture of things, Alexandria, not Aleppo, was the prime source of supply for Venice’s spice merchants. From about this time, Aleppo gained importance for the Persian silk

7 See the references to tartufole, balbech, boutanes, and bebrach in the index of goods and coins, Tucci, Lettres, pp. 342-6.
8 Zuan Maria Penzini (Tripoli) and Fabrizio da Legnago (Saline). From the fact that Berengo’s letters seem to have been housed in the Venetian archives with the papers of Penzini, Tucci infers that Berengo died in Aleppo, and that Penzini liquidated his affairs, Lettres, pp. 4-6.
9 Tucci, Lettres, no. 54, Berengo sends to Cyprus two gropi, each containing 350 gold veneziani, one of which is marked with his mark; no. 222, he thanks Antonio Bragadin for selling the two casse of mace on his account.
10 Tucci, Lettres, nos. 2, 222; above, note 8.
12 Possibly during the gap in the correspondence; Berengo does not mention a second caravan, but from the transactions he lists it seems there were more spices on hand in May than in January.
13 Tucci, Lettres, especially pp. 165, 166, 174, 179, 183 (the Mecca caravan); the Basra caravan has not arrived as of 26 May 1556 (p. 223), and there is no further mention of it in the correspondence. The later letters are full of pessimistic reports about the poor quantity of spices to be had in Aleppo.