

“Dragomans and the Cultivation and Use of Trust in Thirteenth-Century Mediterranean Commerce”

ABSTRACT The medieval Mediterranean has emerged in recent years as a laboratory for studying intercultural relations. Historians have moved away for the most part from the binary oppositions that so often served as the analytical context for communications across and throughout the Middle Sea. As the Mediterranean has become almost synonymous with intercultural contact, numerous studies have centered on those who facilitated contact between members of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. Dragomans played an essential role in binding this world together: finding and connecting merchants, witnessing transactions, translating letters, and negotiating differences. I argue that dragomans relied on a kind of trust capital similar to that which bound commercial relations in far-flung business networks. As actors who operated in the interstitial spaces of the medieval Mediterranean, dragomans used language, cultural knowledge, and their own reputations as tools in facilitating the international language of commerce. **KEYWORDS** dragomans, intercultural relations, interstitial spaces, Mediterranean, medieval commerce

The medieval Mediterranean has emerged in recent years as a laboratory for studying intercultural relations. Historians have moved away for the most part from the binary oppositions that so often served as the analytical context for communications across and throughout the Middle Sea. As the Mediterranean has become almost synonymous with intercultural contact, numerous studies have centered on those who facilitated contact between members of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. Stephen Epstein has referred to these people as “boundary breakers”, opposing them to the “boundary makers, who are always busy sharpening the differences between humans.”¹ Epstein highlights slaves, mercenaries, and diplomats among those who transgressed boundaries. This article concentrates on translators: those who eased the transgression of boundaries, facilitated contact, and created contacts of their own. Leaving aside literary, scientific, and polemical translations, the role of translator could encompass a wide range of functions and practices in the medieval Mediterranean, oral and written, from diplomatic to bureaucratic and commercial.² Roser Salicrú Lluç has noted that translators did more

1. S. Epstein, *Purity Lost. Transgressing Boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1000–1400* (Baltimore, 2006), 204.

2. For current theoretical approaches to medieval translators, see C. Gilbert, “Social Context, Ideology and Translation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Culture*, ed. S.-A. Harding and O. Carbonell I Cortés (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018): 225–42. Literary, scientific, and polemical translations and translators are the subject of an ample and engaging body of scholarship. Among the more relevant works in recent years, see especially R. Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative: Reading and Religious Authority in Medieval Polemic* (Philadelphia: University

than simply express speech from one language in the words of another.³ She stresses the diplomatic importance of such figures as they helped royal officials and governmental agents, Christian and Muslim rulers even, to act correctly and properly and to prevent cultural misunderstandings. High level diplomatic activities such as those Salicrú Lluç describes are of course an essential part of medieval Mediterranean history, but this article will focus on the everyday interpreters, or dragomans, who were usually peripheral actors in the historical record, but who nevertheless were essential agents in the functioning of Mediterranean society.

Dragomans played an essential role in binding this world together: finding and connecting merchants, witnessing transactions, translating letters, and negotiating differences.⁴ I argue that dragomans relied on a kind of trust capital similar to that which bound commercial relations in far-flung business networks. Dragomans had to be trusted by each of the parties involved in intercultural trade. The diwan⁵ recognized them as morally competent and qualified to act as its representatives and as instrumentary witnesses. Merchants trusted them to act as competent translators. Even those who likely spoke rudimentary Arabic relied on dragomans as commercial agents, brokers, and fixers who arranged and negotiated transactions with local merchants. As actors who operated in the interstitial spaces of the medieval Mediterranean, dragomans used language, cultural knowledge, and their own reputations as tools in facilitating the international language of commerce.

The documentary context for this study is a corpus of letters sent from Tunis to Pisa between 1200 and 1204.⁶ In the late summer of the year 1199, two Pisan galleys,

of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) and T. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

3. R. Salicrú i Lluç, “Translators, Interpreters and Cultural Mediators in Late Medieval Eastern Iberia and Western Islamic Diplomatic Relationships,” in *Tenth Mediterranean Research Meeting (Florence & Montecatini Terme, March 24–27, 2009)*, Workshop 3: *Language and Cultural Mediation in the Mediterranean, 1200–1800*, 5. <http://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/12714/1/Translators%20interpreters%20and%20cultural%20mediators.pdf>.

4. On the role of dragomans in Mediterranean commercial society, see L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix et de commerce et documents divers concernant les relations des chrétiens avec les arabes de L'Afrique Septentrionale au Moyen Age* (Paris: H. Plon, 1866), 189–90. Although it covers a later period, see also N. Rothman's *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Until its much needed publication, readers should also consult W. S. Murrell, Jr.'s excellent “Dragomans and Crusaders: The Role of Translators and Translation in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean, 1098–1291,” PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2018, especially chapter 2, “Life and Death: War & Diplomacy.”

5. The diwan was a governmental agency responsible for tax collection and customs dues. As indicated by ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Abī Ṭāhir’s different titles in Latin and in Arabic in doc. 6—*al-nāzīr bi-dīwān Ifriqiya* and *rector omnium Christianorum qui veniunt in tota provincial de Africa*—the diwan was also responsible for the non-resident Christians who were in Tunis and Ifriqiya. This included managing a kind of escrow account for foreign merchants from which local merchants could be paid, as well as overseeing the legal observation of commercial sales between foreign and local merchants. See L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 186ff. See also D. Valérien, “Les marchands latins dans les ports musulmans méditerranéens: une minorité confinée dans des espaces communautaires?” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 107–10 (2005): 444–7 and C. Cahen, “Douanes et commerce dans les ports méditerranéens de l’Égypte médiévale d’après le *Minhādīj* d’al-Makhzūmī,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 7.3 (1964): 217–314.

6. The letters are currently housed at the Italian State Archives in Pisa, after having been for a time part of the collection at the State Archives in Florence. My translations and analyses are based on a critical re-edition of these

accompanied by two smaller ships, entered the port of Tunis and captured three Muslim ships, in violation of the treaty that still pertained between the two cities.⁷ A group of translators from the diwan and Pisan scribes present in Tunis negotiated the release of the passengers and two of the ships.⁸ The pirates later released the remaining vessel, keeping, however, all the stolen goods. They communicated to the Almohad authorities that they should seek restitution from their compatriots still in Tunis, who could then be reimbursed upon their return to Pisa. The affair was presented to the newly arrived governor of the region, who convened the judge, notables, and instrumental witnesses to hear the testimony and oaths of the surviving ship owners and passengers concerning the damages done and goods taken. The governor ordered that the Pisans' wheat be seized and sold in their presence to reimburse the victims. A list was drawn up by a Pisan scribe of the amounts that the pirates owed their fellow Pisans.⁹ This list was sent along with a number of missives in Arabic with some extant Latin translations from the Almohad governor and the director of the diwan to the Pisan authorities, informing them of the affair, requesting that the pirates be punished, and that the Pisan merchants be reimbursed.

The same diplomatic package carried eight personal letters from Tunis officials and merchants to a group of Pisan merchants who had fled the city following the attack, perhaps out of fear of reprisals.¹⁰ These letters are all in Arabic, with no surviving translations, if there ever were any. The Pisans' departure was so precipitous that their accounts were left open at the diwan and their slates unpaid with local merchants. None of the letters communicate any kind of aggression or resentment, and the authors almost unanimously reassure the Pisans of the profitable market and welcome they will find when they return. Besides the names involved, there is no indication of any kind of cross-cultural or interreligious exchange, simply financial matters that need to be resolved. In fact, these letters closely resemble messages exchanged by members of the Jewish merchant community as they sought to collect debts from various business partners scattered across

letters produced in the context of 'Imperial Government and Authority in Medieval Western Islam' (IGAMWI), a research project financed by the European Research Council Starting Grant 263361, directed by Pascal Buresi and with major participation by Hicham El Aallaoui, Mehdi Ghouirgate, Hassan Chahdi, and Travis Bruce. For the reader's convenience, I will cite the documents in abbreviated form following their listing in M. Amari, *I diplomati arabi del R. archivio fiorentino: testo originale con la traduzione letterale e illustrazioni* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1863), and list them *in extenso* at the end of this article. Readers may also refer to Buresi's critical edition, French translation, and study of a selection of these letters: "Les documents arabes et latins échangés entre Pise et l'Empire almohade en 596–598/1200–1202: la chancellerie au coeur des relations diplomatiques," in *Documents et histoire Islam VIIe–XVIIe siècle. Actes des premières Journées d'étude internationales. École pratique des hautes études, IV^e section, musée du Louvre, département des Arts de l'Islam. Paris, 16 et 17 mai 2008*, ed. A. Regourd (Geneva: Droz, 2013), 13–88.

7. The affair is described in a letter from the director of the diwan in doc. 6. The governor of Tunis also describes the affair in a letter to Pisa in doc. 9; the Latin version (ed. Amari, II:278–9, n. 19) is missing from the inventory of the Pisan archives.

8. The presence of the translators and Pisan scribes is specified in a subsequent letter (doc. 11) from the director of the diwan. These were likely men similar to Leonardo Fibonacci's father, who worked as a scribe in the port of Bijaya.

9. The list was witnessed and attested to by a group of Tunis notables, as well as the governor in two separate letters: docs. 12 and 13.

10. Docs. 8, 14, 16, 18, 19, and 20.

the Islamic Mediterranean.¹¹ Similarly to those messages, the present letters were concerned primarily with debt collection and the continuation of beneficial commercial relations. In writing to their Pisan clients, the Tunis merchants applied various public- and private-order pressures, while also seeking to maintain amicable and open exchange.

Since their nineteenth-century publication by Michele Amari, these letters have served many scholars in their analyses of medieval Mediterranean diplomacy and commerce.¹² Most recently, Pascal Buresi, Mohamed Ouerfelli, and I have drawn on them to examine relations between Tunis and Pisa during the thirteenth century, as well as Mediterranean merchant culture in general.¹³ All three authors discuss the dated editorial criteria that detract from the usefulness of Amari's publication as a primary source, and refer to much needed new critical editions or revisions of the letters.¹⁴

These letters are well-trod in part because they are unique in that they are tangible examples of the multilingual context of Mediterranean intercultural trade, and especially

11. For the commercial implications of this incident, as well as the complications presented for intercultural commercial contacts, see T. Bruce, "Commercial conflict resolution," in which I outline connections between the merchant culture manifest in these letters and those of the Cairo Geniza.

12. D. Abulafia, "Christian Merchants in the Almohad Cities," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 2 (2010): 251–7; O. Banti, "I rapporti tra Pisa e gli stati islamici dell'Africa settentrionale tra l'XI e il XIV secolo," in *Le ceramiche medievali delle chiese di Pisa. Contributo per una migliore comprensione delle loro caratteristiche e del loro significato quale documento de storia* (Pisa: Pacini, 1983), 9–26; O. Banti, "I trattati tra Pisa e Tunisi dal XII al XIV secolo," in *Scritti di storia, diplomatica ed epigrafia*, ed. S.P.P. Scalfati (Pisa: Pacini, 1995), 321–50; O.R. Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World. Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); R. Hopley, "Aspects of Trade in the Western Mediterranean during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: Perspectives from Islamic Fatwās and State Correspondence," *Medievalia* 32 (2011): 5–42; L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*; E. Salvatori, "Corsairs' Crews and Cross-cultural Interaction: The Case of the Pisan Trapellicinus in the Twelfth Century," *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007): 32–55; E. Salvatori, "Il corsaro pisano Trapellicino: un'avventura mediterranea del XII secolo," *Bollettino Storico Pisano* 76 (2007): 31–56; M. Tangheroni, "Sui rapporti commerciali tra Pisa e la Tunisia nel Medioevo," in *L'Italia ed i paesi mediterranei. Vie e comunicazione e scambi commerciali e culturali al tempo delle repubbliche marinare. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Pisa, 6–7 giugno 1987* (Pacini: Pisa, 1988): 75–90; D. Valérian, "Les marchands latins"; D. Valérian, "Marchands latins et sociétés portuaires dans le Maghreb medieval. Le rôle central des intermédiaires," in *'Arriver' en ville. Les migrants en milieu urbain au Moyen Âge*, ed. C. Quertier, R. Chilà, and N. Pluchot (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014), 213–24.

13. P. Buresi, "Les documents arabes et latins échangés entre Pise et l'Empire almohade," *passim*; T. Bruce, "Commercial Conflict Resolution across the Religious Divide in the Thirteenth-century Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 30.1 (2015): 19–38; M. Ouerfelli, "Personnel diplomatique et modalités des négociations entre la commune de Pise et les États du Maghreb (1133–1397)," in *Les relations diplomatiques au Moyen Âge. Formes et enjeux. XL^e Congrès de la SHMESP (Lyon, 3–6 juin 2010)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011), 119–32; M. Ouerfelli, "Les traités de paix et de commerce entre Pise et l'Égypte au Moyen Âge," in *L'autorité de l'écrit au Moyen Âge (Orient et Occident). XXXIX^e Congrès de la SHMESP (Le Caire, 30 avril–5 mai 2008)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009), 45–58; M. Ouerfelli, "La correspondance entre les marchands ifrîquiens et pisans au début du XIII^e siècle," in *Les documents du commerce et des marchands entre Moyen Âge et époque modern* (eds. C. Mantegna and O. Poncet) (Rome: École française de Rome, 2018): 55–72.

14. As Bruce notes, citing Buresi, 'Azzāwī's more recent edition of the Arabic letters, although improved, is not consistently faithful to the original texts, hypercorrecting, for example, what might be considered scribal errors or regional divergences from an idealized linguistic norm: *Rasā'il Muwahhidiyah: Majmū'ah Jadidah* (al-Qunaytirah: Manshūrat kulliyat al-adab wa 'l-'ulūm al-insaniyya bi-'l-Qanītra, 1995), 176–177, 212–217, 220–225. To my knowledge, two European-funded projects have either proposed or undertaken a partial or complete critical edition and translation of these letters: "The Diplomatic Exchanges between Islamic Mediterranean and Christian European Powers in the Middle Ages: New Methods for the Analysis of Documents," which includes Salicrú Lluch and Ouerfelli, and IGAMWI, lead by Buresi and cited supra.

because they have survived to the present day.¹⁵ What they describe, however, is unexceptional. These few letters provide a paper trail of evidence to the everyday exchanges borne of Mediterranean intercultural commerce. Moreover, although they were not the main actors in this incident, and tend to slip through analyses of these letters, the letters give us a rare window onto the multiple roles of dragomans in a commercial context.

This article examines the unique characteristics that enabled dragomans to carry out their responsibilities, using the specific Pisa-Tunis incident as a case study.¹⁶ In this, I draw on previous works on commercial dragomans, and in particular on Dominique Valérian's excellent review of their various roles in North African ports.¹⁷ I build on those works by examining the role that trust played in creating and maintaining relations and networks across distance or across cultural divisions. The essay traces references to the mechanisms of trust throughout these letters, specifically to the ways that these pertained to individual translators and to their corporation.

I also address the internal plurality of the dragomans, and in particular how and why individuals activated different aspects of themselves according to context and situation.¹⁸ As Burke explains, individuals hold multiple identities that are tied to group memberships and specific roles they might play.¹⁹ These identities may complement or even conflict with each other. According to context and situational factors, people activate or perform specific overlapping identities, none of which necessarily exclude the other facets of themselves.²⁰ These identities may be linked to religious affiliation, cultural background, professional activities, membership in a social group, or any number of other factors. Moreover, Burke adds that individuals are likely to activate together identities that have common meanings and that repeated contact with the people for whom those roles are performed together will reinforce the association of those roles and the likeliness of their occupying a higher place in the hierarchy of identities. In addition, when individuals meet through one identity, they may activate others according to context and to build and reinforce ties with others. I argue that the Tunis translators' ability to activate certain dispositions or roles, and bundle them together, contributed to their ability to build and maintain trust with both the Almohad diwan and the Pisan merchants, while they were

15. Their possible uniqueness may help to explain their preservation in the Pisan archives.

16. I am limiting the scope of this article to the letters presented here, and to the specific context of this incident. Many relevant comparisons, however, can be made with dragomans, treaties, and merchant records and letters elsewhere in the Mediterranean. As such, this article is the beginning of a larger long-term project, "Truchement et traduction: les dragomans comme médiateurs culturels dans la Méditerranée médiévale," funded by the Quebec Research Program for New Academics (FRQSC). That project examines the role of commercial translators in the greater context of the Western Mediterranean and develops comparisons with relevant interpreter, diplomatic, and commercial activities elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

17. Cf. *supra*, note 10; D. Valérian, "Marchands latins et sociétés portuaires."

18. Eric Rebillard summarizes well the pertinent literature on identity theory and the internal plurality of the individual in his *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3–5.

19. P.J. Burke, "Relationships between Multiple Identities," in *Advances in Identity Theory and Research*, ed. P.J. Burke, T.J. Owens, R. Serpe, and P.A. Thoits (New York, 2003), 195–214; P.J. Burke and J.E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford, 2009).

20. B. Lahire, "From the Habitus to an Individual Heritage of Dispositions: Towards a Sociology at the Level of the Individual," *Poetics* 31.5–6 (2003): 329–55.

also able use that trust to lean on the dispositions, ambitions, and moral expectations of the Pisans to call out identities that would play in favor of their compatriots.

BUNDLED RESPONSIBILITIES AND ROLES

Frontiers are the natural home of interpreters and translators, as Bernhard Bischoff noted a half century ago.²¹ Toledo or Salerno are often mentioned as hubs of translation and intercultural contact for the Middle Ages.²² However, the Romance-Arabic divide did not lie only across the Iberian Peninsula or southern Italy, but also included the ports of the Mediterranean. Islamic geographic texts apply the term *thaghr*, or frontier, to Mediterranean ports as do everyday exchanges between merchants in the Cairo Geniza.²³ Ports were crossing points, political borders marked by customs and tax officials, something that clearly appears, for example, in the travel account of Ibn Jubayr.²⁴ At a time when territory was fluid and power ebbed from one center of power and faded into the next, ports were one of the few places where sovereignty was fixed in time and space, and where one clearly entered or exited a territory.²⁵ Ports were thus a natural home for dragomans, the bureaucratic, linguistic, and cultural mediators who translated and negotiated contact between foreign merchants and local officials and merchants.

The importance of a good dragoman is a common topic in medieval travel literature. Investing in a good translator is one of the first things that Francesco Pegolotti's fourteenth-century merchant manual advises its readers.²⁶ This was, apparently, second only in importance to not shaving and allowing one's beard to grow. Pegolotti, in fact, adds that it does not pay to skimp on this essential service. The fifteenth-century French pilgrim Anselmo Adorno describes the difficulties of travel and negotiating the market place without an honest translator.²⁷ He complains of having been swindled by a dishonest translator from Granada, while remarking that a monk from Mt. Sinai whom he employed in Egypt was well worth the high price he charged for his services. He justifies the dragoman's price in two ways: the trust Adorno could give him, and

21. B. Bischoff, "The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 36.2 (1961): 211.

22. Cf. T. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom*; C. Burnett, "The Translating Activity in Medieval Spain," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1036–58; M.-T. d'Alverny, "Les traductions à deux interprètes, d'arabe en langue vernaculaire et de langue vernaculaire en latin" in *Traduction et traducteurs au Moyen Age: Actes du colloque international du CNRS organisé à Paris...les 26–28 mai 1986*, ed. G. Contamine (Paris, 1989), 193–206; M.-T. d'Alverny, "Translations and Translators," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. R. L. Benson and G. Constable (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 421–62.

23. R. Brauer, "Boundaries and Frontiers in Medieval Muslim Geography," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 85.6 (1995): 14.

24. Ibn Jubayr, *The travels of Ibn Jubayr, being the chronicle of a mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning his journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the holy cities of Arabia, Baghdad the city of the caliphs, the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Norman kingdom of Sicily*, English translation R. J. C. Broadhurst (London, 1952), 31.

25. On the nature of territories and boundaries in medieval Islam, see R. Brauer, "Boundaries and Frontiers," *passim*.

26. Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, ed. A. Evans, Medieval Academy Books, No. 24, 1936, 21–2.

27. Anselmo Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno en Terre Sainte (1470–1471)*, ed. and French trans. J. Heers and G. de Groer (Paris, 1978), 209–15.

how he avoided overpaying customs and tax officials. This recalls analysis by Goldberg and Udovitch on the importance of personal relations for merchants dealing with public officials in the Islamic Mediterranean.²⁸ Geniza merchants travelling to ports where they knew no one, neither administrative officials nor business contacts, were faced with much higher tax burdens than when they were accompanied by partners who knew the lay of the fiscal land. Accompanied by trustworthy dragomans, fortunate foreigners could thus pay to have access to a network of contacts. Although the privately-engaged dragomans mentioned in these accounts differ substantially from the administrative agents studied in this article, partly because of context, partly because of a chronological gap, it nevertheless behoved foreign merchants to cultivate relationships with dragomans they could trust.

Dragomans in thirteenth-century North Africa were much more than simple translators. They were agents of the diwan, the governmental agency that acted as both a customs office and supervisory agency for foreign merchants travelling and trading in Islamic lands. Dragomans served as instrumentary witnesses for commercial transactions and legal matters related to the diwan. The precise amounts for the debts the Pisans owed written in the letters of this study indicate that transactions were recorded. Moreover, a thirteenth-century treaty with Genoa specifies that transactions would be registered with the diwan.²⁹ As credible witnesses, dragomans validated records of foreign merchants' sales and purchases and are carefully mentioned in those documents. Dragomans thus acted as facilitators, but also as the mobile agents and witnesses of the diwan. They were the guarantors of the Islamic government's respect for and surveillance of commerce. In this capacity, they could even act as judges in disputes between Christians and Muslims, as stipulated by an article in the 1234 treaty between Tunis and Pisa, one that specifies that this was already the custom.³⁰

Although treaties did not require foreign merchants to employ an official dragoman, all transactions conducted through a dragoman, or with one as a witness, were backed by the diwan in case of nonpayment. This was a common treaty agreement that applied to all transactions, whether within the diwan, at the auction market, or in the *souq*.³¹ Dominique Valérian has argued that Muslim authorities developed these policies to direct as much as possible of the Christians' commerce through the diwan's supervision to ensure proper taxation.³² Whether or not this was the case, the presence of a dragoman implied the presence and reassurance of the state, the identity that they performed and activated

28. J. Golberg, "Choosing and Enforcing Business Relationships in the Eleventh-Century Mediterranean: Re-assessing the 'Maghribi Traders,'" *Past and Present* 216 (2013): 3–40; A.L. Udovitch, "Merchants and Amirs: Government and Trade in Eleventh-Century Egypt," *Asian and African Studies* 22, 1988, 53–72.

29. D. Valerian, "Marchands latins," 221–2; L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 126.

30. L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 33 (art. 9).

31. D. Valerian, "Marchands latins," 221–2; L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 119 (art. 6); M. Amari, *Diplomi arabe*, 229, 321.

32. D. Valerian, "Marchands latins," 222. Although possibly meant to curtail smuggling, measures such as this were likely more intended to reinforce fiscal controls and to strengthen the regime's hand in the marketplace: see, for example, D. Bramoullé's *Les Fatimides et la mer (909–1171)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), ch. 8.

was an agent of the state. It also meant that dragomans often parlayed their unique function and situation into the role of broker. For each of the transactions described in these letters, the letter writer specifies that the goods were exchanged via a dragoman, and larger transactions carry the names of more than one dragoman. They likely invoked the dragoman's presence as proof of the commercial agreement and debts owed; the letters also ascribe to them an active role in the affair. For example, in a letter from the leather merchant Manād b. ʿAbd Allāh to Pace, the Pisan merchant most frequently mentioned in these letters, Manād is careful to record the goods purchased, their price, and the translators who facilitated the deal.³³ Broker was a common profession in the Islamic commercial world, where independent agents created connections between buyers and sellers.³⁴ As a simple extension of their linguistic and cultural functions, dragomans naturally fell into this role as commercial middlemen.

Translators could not refuse their services to anyone who requested them, but later treaties allowed foreign merchants and trading nations to choose their translators and representatives at the auction market.³⁵ In a letter from 1207, Aḥmād b. Tamīm asked the Pisan magnate Lamberto del Vernaccio to recommend him to the director of the Bijāya diwan so that he could offer the Pisans his services as both a translator in all their affairs and as a broker at the auction market.³⁶ He specifies that it was customary that the Pisans would have as translators or brokers only those whom they had chosen. And, while those roles could blur together, it is important to remember how different they were, what responsibilities they required, and what identities they implied. Dragomans thus needed the trust of both the Islamic authorities and the foreign merchant communities to be named to their positions.

Who were these trusted men? The dragomans in these letters were not members of the Islamic elite. Pascal Buresi has shown that the witnesses' signatures in the notarized letter recapping the pirate attack show clear class distinctions.³⁷ The letter was signed by two notaries, a secretary, four translators, and the director of the diwan.³⁸ The absence of a *nisba* from the translators' names, along with the simplicity of those names, with only the *ism* and father's *ism*, Qāsim b. ʿAlī, for example, contrasts with the elaborate names of the legal officials and director of the diwan meant to communicate their attachment to an elite lineage and social status. This pattern continues in subsequent letters, where translators are often referred to as simply So-and-so the translator, supplemented occasionally with their father's *ism*.³⁹ Moreover, while the legal officials and the diwan director signed their names for the notarized letter, the translators' are in the same hand as the letter itself. Although this does not necessarily mean that they were unable to sign, their status

33. Doc. 17.

34. D. Valérian, "Marchand latins," 228.

35. 1421 Florence-Tunis treaty: L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, sec. IX, doc. II, art. 13. Note that only the "Christian" version specifies this.

36. Doc. 25.

37. P. Buresi, "Les documents arabes et latins," 40–41.

38. Doc. 12.

39. E.g. ʿUthmān the dragoman, doc. 16.

did not warrant their individual signatures.⁴⁰ To what extent this lower status contributed to their roles as dragomans is not clear, but we should note that their Italian interlocutors were propertied merchants – Pace, for example, owned his own ship and property in Pisa.⁴¹ This was thus an asymmetrical relationship on those terms.

These dragomans were also not the men who translated from the original Arabic the official letters sent by the Almohad governor and diwan director to the Pisan authorities. A close analysis of the Latin translations of letters sent at this same time by the governor of Tunis to Pisa, especially the translations of typical Islamic formulas or praises of the Prophet and Caliph, highlights a sensitivity to potentially problem-causing phrases that were either best avoided or significantly altered for Christian audiences.⁴² This is precisely the role that Salicru Lluç has ascribed to diplomatic translators as intercultural facilitators, as they helped to avoid conflict due to differences in cultural or religious practices, though in this case the mediation was probably done without the knowledge of either party. Buresi has argued that this sensitivity, as well as a clear knowledge of Latin diplomatics, points to the use of translators with advanced education and training, either Jews or Christians, who likely were members of the Pisan or greater Italian community residing in Tunis. In an earlier epistolary exchange between Pisa and Ceuta on the coast of modern-day Morocco, in fact, we see the Pisans sending copies of their Latin letters to Tunis for translation, and those translators demonstrate an equally adept mastery of Almohad diplomatics and chancellery practice.⁴³ These were then highly trained individuals, not just in language, but also in cultural and governmental practices. Only one letter, discussed below, indicates that any of the dragomans mentioned in the present letters may have possessed those rare skills or served in that capacity.

Other studies of translators have concentrated on people such as Mudéjars and Jews who lived in the interstitial spaces between the dominant religious communities. This does not seem to have been the case for the dragomans recorded in these merchant letters. Of the eight or nine translators, only one, referred to as the translator called in Frankish *Azmāt Dafrakā*, may have been either a recent convert or immigrant.⁴⁴ Only one carries an out of town *nisba*, al-Qabīsī, or Gabes, a coastal town south of Tunis.⁴⁵ The rest carry banal Muslim names and occupied a place between elite Islamic society and the merchant class. One of the dragomans, ʿUthmān, refers to himself as *scriba* in the Latin address of

40. As Ouerfelli notes, many of the merchant letters seem to have been written by the same well-trained hand, most likely a scribe attached to the Tunis diwan. He does not, however, speculate as to whether this was one of the dragomans mentioned: “La correspondance entre les marchands ifrīquiens et pisans,” 65.

41. ASP, *Diplomatico San Michele in Borgo*, n. 184, ed. M. L. Blanda, “Le Pergamene dell’Archivio di Stato di Pisa dal 1184 al 1188” (Tesi di Laurea, Università degli studi di Pisa, 1967), doc. 32.

42. P. Buresi, “Traduttore traditore : à propos d’une correspondance entre l’Empire almohade et la cité de Pise (début XIII^e siècle),” *Oriente Moderno* 88.2 (2008): 301.

43. It is likely that these were different teams of translators specialized in one direction of translation from source to target language, Arabic to Latin, and Latin to Arabic. P. Buresi, “Les plaintes de l’archevêque: chronique des premiers échanges épistolaires entre Pise et le gouverneur almohade de Tunis (1182),” in *Documentos y manuscritos árabes del Occidente musulman medieval* (Madrid, 2010), 87–120.

44. Doc. 19.

45. Doc. 20.

his letter, but that is the sole indication of a special status.⁴⁶ This letter to Pace the Pisan merchant was written in Arabic, with only the address in Latin. It is difficult to know what if anything we can conclude from this. Was Pace perhaps literate in Arabic, engaging the dragomans' services only as brokers and witnesses? Was ʿUthmān able to interpret only orally and into the vernacular for his Italian associates? Could he expect the presence of translators in Pisa? Did the position or identity of scribe carry more weight than that of translator, and that is why ʿUthmān chose to identify himself as such in the Latin address? Did that title imply that he himself had written the letter, creating a more direct connection with Pace? Whatever the case, men such as ʿUthmān parlayed their linguistic and cultural knowledge along with their reputations into an essential role for themselves at the nexus of the Mediterranean trade networks.

Individual Connections

The facilitating role of dragomans emerges clearly from these letters, as do the familiarity and habitual connections that grew between merchants and dragomans. Foreigners were not allowed to have their own personal translators, and the diwan placed a pool of dragomans at the specific disposal of each nation. Later treaties stipulated that these men were to be equally qualified for their positions, although we have no description of how they were chosen. There is also no information on how they were selected for the service or trained. Treaties treat them as a corporate body, sharing the payments they received and collectively upholding their responsibilities as an extension of the state.⁴⁷ Despite this interchangeability, there were possibilities for closer relationships between dragomans and specific members of the merchant community. There was likely even a tension between state policy and the needs and desires of local and foreign merchants and their translators. As his letter to Lamberto del Vernaccio shows, Aḥmād b. Tamīm must have personally known the Pisan magnate, requesting his help to be named as an official translator for the Pisan *funduq* in Bijaya.⁴⁸ As seems to have happened in that case, merchants developed personal relationships with the translators who accompanied them in their business dealings. For example, Pace worked closely with ʿUthmān the dragoman.⁴⁹ This translator brokered and witnessed at least four transactions with different merchants for Pace during the 1199 trading season.⁵⁰ One of these transactions was even arranged and partially paid for in Pace's residence.⁵¹ Another letter notes that ʿUthmān acted as a courier for Pace, and was entrusted with the responsibility of paying part of Pace's debts with goods owed the Italian by another Tunis merchant.⁵² Before fleeing the city, Pace had charged ʿUthmān with collecting copper he had not been able to load from one Tunis merchant to pay another for skins Pace had bought. ʿUthmān personally wrote

46. Doc. 16.

47. D. Valérian, "Marchands latins," 221; L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 124.

48. Doc. 25.

49. See also Valérian's brief discussion of this relationship: "Marchands latins," 223–4.

50. Docs. 16 and 17.

51. Doc. 17.

52. Doc. 18.

Pace to inform him that the governor had reissued the safe-conduct for Pisan merchants, and that a number of Tunis merchants had been inconvenienced by their inability to finalize their debts with Pace.⁵³ In this situation, ʿUthmān was able to activate multiple identities: as a representative of the diwan contacting an elite foreign merchant and encouraging him to return, and as an agent for local merchants who needed to regularize their financial situations vis-à-vis each other and the diwan. He was also serving as Pace’s local contact, informing him of the political and commercial situation that awaited him in Tunis.

Pace seems to have regularly visited Tunis and he was well-known amongst the local merchants and even officials. In their letters to Pace, they evoke lines of trust that come from repeated interactions and from the identities Pace himself had performed in his interactions with them. Manād b. ʿAbd Allāh, with whom Pace had conducted business in his own home, via ʿUthmān, reminded Pace that the local merchants appreciated him and that his status as a ship’s captain carried weight amongst them.⁵⁴ Muḥriz al-Qābisī wrote to ask Pace to collect money owed to him by one of Pace’s compatriots, Piero Cacolla: “You, my friend, you have left us with a good memory of you, you enjoy a good reputation among the merchants...Without your intervention in his favor we would have left him no delay.”⁵⁵ Pace thus seems to have engaged his own trust capital in favor of Piero. Similarly, referring to debts owed by Pace’s colleagues, the leather merchant Ibrahim b. Khalifa wrote:

“I inform you, Pace, that you are the sole person responsible for this money. Thus, do not come without the merchants who were with you, so that you might be liberated of your responsibility for them, because no one knows them here; we know only you.”

Pace also knew the director of the diwan, Yūsif b. Muḥammad, who personally wrote Pace to inform him of the governor’s reissuing of a safe conduct for the Pisans.⁵⁶ More significantly, in the same letter, Yūsif asks Pace to find and pay the ransom for the brother of a Tunis translator who had been captured by the pirates. Since he specifies the translator’s name, Wahhāb, we might assume that Pace also knew the dragoman. There were thus multiple people who claimed connections with Pace, connections with implied identities and experiences that they sought to highlight and activate in their efforts to manipulate the Pisan merchant.

ʿUthmān concludes his letter to Pace with greetings from others, and even asks Pace to send his regards to his children. This letter clearly indicates a familiarity beyond a bureaucratically arranged business transaction. ʿUthmān was a trusted contact to whom Pace turned for brokering purchases and sales, and with whom he entrusted his affairs in his absence. Theirs was not a partnership, and they did not share in profits. If later treaties are an indication, ʿUthmān would have been paid a commission for his services, the *torcimanīa*, sometimes regulated at ½ of a percent and chargeable only once over the course of

53. Doc. 16.

54. Doc. 17.

55. Doc. 15.

56. Doc. 7.

a business deal.⁵⁷ Dragomans were prohibited from receiving any gifts above this commission, and some treaties seem to indicate that payments went to them as a group, not individually.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, personal ties grew through repeated contact between translators and foreign merchants. Dragomans such as ʿUthmān bundled multiple identities and responsibilities together to build relationships of trust with foreign merchants. In doing so, they acted similarly to local agents, serving as regular contacts for foreign merchants such as Pace, helping them navigate the customs process upon arrival, finding clients for them outside the diwan, and supervising their affairs in their absence.

Trust and Identity

Questions of trust and identity run throughout the relations outlined in these letters. Dragomans gained access to their profession by engaging a capital of competency and reputation, and it was this same capital that they employed in building lasting relations with foreign merchants. They also carried within them the presence of the state, and the capacity of the state to intervene when necessary to ensure legal market practices.⁵⁹ Because they could trust their dragomans, at once translators and brokers, as well as human instances of the Almohad state, the Pisan merchants could confidently participate in the Tunis marketplace.

Dragomans were able to perform their roles and build relationships with merchants because of their ability to grow and maintain trust with those involved. They accumulated a “reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” that allowed them to act as intermediaries between foreign and local merchants, as well as with the state.⁶⁰ Scholars such as Avner Greif, Jessica Goldberg, and Francesca Trivellato have highlighted the essential role of reputation and trust as informal enforcement mechanisms in medieval Mediterranean and pre-modern trade.⁶¹ In merchants networks such as that of the Maghribi traders outlined in the Cairo Geniza, or the late-medieval Florentine Datini trading house, letters continuously circulated among members in

57. L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 189–90.

58. D. Valérian, “Marchands latins,” 221; L. de Mas Latrie, *Traité de paix*, 124. It is tempting to speculate as to what would have motivated the dragomans if it was not direct payment. Brokering these transactions might have raised their status or their family’s in the community. As seen in doc. 25, by gaining the trust of foreign merchants, they might then hope for career advancements within the diwan.

59. As Bourdieu would note, by acting as administrative agents, dragomans helped contribute to the legitimacy of the bureaucratic state, the legitimacy that allowed the Almohad state to exert violence in any necessary intervention, whether physical or symbolic: P. Bourdieu, *Sur L’État: Cours au Collège de France, 1989–1992. Cours et Travaux*, (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2012), 322.

60. This is perhaps Bourdieu’s most succinct definition of his use of the term symbolic capital: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 291. On the importance of symbolic capital in processes of exchange and negotiation, see P. Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris, 1980), 32, 170–1, and *passim*.

61. A. Greif, “The Maghribi Traders: A Reappraisal?,” *The Economic History Review* 2 (2012): 445–69; A. Greif, “Reputation and Coalitions in Medieval Trade: Evidence on the Maghribi Traders,” *Journal of Economic History* 49.4 (1989): 857–82; J. Golberg, “Choosing and Enforcing Business Relationships,” *passim*; J. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean. The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); F. Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers. The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

a constant maintenance and renegotiation of reputation and trust.⁶² These far-flung systems simply could not function without trust. Goldberg has shown, moreover, that Geniza merchants relied on a combination of formal and informal mechanisms in their contractual relations, evaluating risk based on the reputation capital of their potential partners, but also bringing to bear emanations of the state when appropriate.⁶³

In the case of the Pisan merchants and Tunisian dragomans, these individuals performed multiple roles, activating multiple identities in their relations with each other. Some of their identities conflicted or competed, but others were complimentary or shared. In a binary approach, ‘Uthmān was likely Muslim, and Pace Christian, but these were not the identities that defined them in this situation, despite whatever rhetoric may have been simultaneously spewing from certain authorities on either side of that divide. ‘Uthmān’s religious culture was likely situated within a more complex local context that he mediated for foreign merchants, but he also required business acumen in his role as broker and associate in the service of foreign merchants. Beyond this, habitual relations over time created a new identity for ‘Uthmān, one that he activated in inquiring about his friend Pace’s well-being, assuring his associate of beneficial conditions in Tunis, and engaging with a father in wishing his children well.

This bundling and selective activation of identities also involved questions of class, and specifically the unique role of the dragomans that bridged class. As mentioned above, ‘Uthmān and his colleagues were not members of the Tunis elite, neither economic nor administrative. Yet, their role made them crucial for the correct functioning of elite Mediterranean society. It was their responsibility to create connections with wealthy foreign merchants, mediating relations with local merchants and elite members of the Almohad administration, connecting even on a personal level. Pace was the captain of his own ship, and references to him in notarial records from Pisa show that he owned substantial tracks of land.⁶⁴ ‘Uthmān writes to him, nevertheless, almost as an equal, acting on behalf of merchants and powerful officials in Tunis.

CONCLUSION

The complex exchange between Pace and ‘Uthmān highlights how dragomans activated different identities to fulfill their roles. The identity of translator is obvious enough; this is what brought ‘Uthmān and Pace together. That role bundled together a number of identities that included language and cultural background. To perform his role as middleman effectively, though, ‘Uthmān could activate other identities that would allow him not just to connect with Pace, but to connect Pace with local merchants. This is where we see, for example, him sending his regards to Pace’s children, perhaps calling on an identity that they both shared, perhaps that they had discussed in their time together. Referring to

62. I.H. Michienzi, *Datini, Majorque et le Maghreb (14^e–15^e siècles): réseaux, espaces méditerranéens et stratégies marchandes* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 276.

63. J. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 78–84.

64. ASP, *Diplomatico San Michele in Borgo*, n. 184, ed. M. L. Blanda, “Le Pergamene dell’Archivio di Stato di Pisa dal 1184 al 1188,” (Tesi di Laurea, Università degli studi di Pisa, 1967), doc. 32.

Pace as his friend, mentioning his family, ‘Uthmān was recreating lines of reciprocity, lines that he could tug on to pull Pace in his direction, and hopefully, to lead him to honor the debts he had left with the merchants in Tunis. In this, there is also likely a gender component, as this network of merchants and translators was comprised entirely of men, and aspects of a shared Mediterranean masculinity allowed these men to anticipate and respond to each other’s expectations.⁶⁵

Translators were thus able to create and maintain trust by activating and performing specific identities. In instances of shared identities, such as membership in the commercial networks of Tunis, or Mediterranean masculinity, they could count on and play on expectations for shared beliefs and dispositions. These shared beliefs were not tied directly to religion, but to a shared moral code. The merchants’ letters, in fact, make no reference to there being a difference of religion, and they regularly pray that Allah the most gracious and most merciful might guide the Pisans on the moral path, presumably a path that would lead to them settling their debts. By playing on the moral code that allowed them to trust each other, ‘Uthmān and his fellow dragomans, and the merchants they represented, hoped to activate or provoke feelings of guilt and loss of honor in the Pisans, thereby influencing their behavior.

Christian and Muslim were not the only categories that delimited peoples’ identities in the medieval Mediterranean, or that the boundary makers used to create difference, but accepting group identities with clear boundaries as a historical reality dulls the complexity of individuals in the past. Dragomans, however, allow us to see the complex identities at play between and within individuals, despite boundaries. They thus represent a key object of study for understanding the complex mechanisms of exchange that bridged divides during the Middle Ages.

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Doc. 7: ASP, Atti Pubblici, Dipl. cartaceo, 1200 settembre ?; ed. Amari, I:29–30, n. 7.

Doc. 8: ASP, Atti Pubblici, Dipl. cartaceo, 1200 settembre ?; ed. Amari, I:8, 31–2, n. 8.

Doc. 9: ASP, Atti Pubblici, Dipl. cartaceo 1200 settembre 11; ed. Amari, I:33–5, n. 9; the Latin version (ed. Amari, II:278–9, n. 19) is missing from the inventory of the Pisan archives.

Doc. 11: ASP, Comune di Pisa, Div. A n. 80, ins. 4: 1201 maggio 27; ed. Amari, I:38–42, n. 11.

65. As one reviewer has rightfully noted, this observation deserves fuller development. I am, however, unaware of existing studies on the interaction between Mediterranean masculinities and medieval merchant culture. This is a gap that needs to be filled. Forrest and Haour also refer to the importance of masculinity as a framework for commercial trust, with, unfortunately, no more development or citation than I am able to provide here: I. Forrest and A. Haour, “Trust in Long-Distance Relationships, 1000–1600 CE,” *Past & Present* 238, Issue suppl. 13, 2018, 190–213.

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