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*The Early Life of Shah Esma'il*  
*In Contemporary Published Venetian Sources*

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**Abstract**

The second earliest published contemporary account that mentions and discusses Shah Esma'il I, the founder of the Safavid dynasty, his family, his rise to power, as well as his Qezelbash followers was a report published in Italian in 1506. This article offers a translation and an analysis of this report, plus four letters that are attached to this report which shed light on the role that the Sophy played in European anti-Ottoman politics.

**Keywords:** Shah Esma'il, Qizilbash, Messianism, Bayazid II, Ottoman-European conflict.

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The first accounts on the rise and life of Shah Esma`il I were not written in Persian. In fact, the first one was published as a broadsheet in German in 1502.<sup>1</sup> Why is it that one year after Shah Esma`il had taken Tabriz and declared himself to be king of Iran and Twelver Shi`ism to be the religion of his state that this was considered important enough to inform the public in Germany about this? The reason was European politics. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent Ottoman conquests of European territory caused much alarm among political and religious leaders in Europe. In fact, on 30 September 1453, Pope Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455) in response to the huge outcry among Europe's intelligentsia and population, immediately called for a crusade against Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1451-1481), but he failed to get support. (von Pastor 1955, vol. 1, pp. 463-64; Kayser 1885, pp. 208-31) Although European states also saw the Ottoman onslaught as a threat, they were more concerned about the threat of their European neighbors and rivals. Therefore, despite continued efforts by successive Popes to drum up support for an anti-Ottoman crusade they were never able to bring about a unified force of European states to execute such an exploit. The idea of a crusade received renewed impetus from the military success of Uzun Hasan, the Turkmen ruler of W. Persia and E. Anatolia (r. 1453-1478) against Mehmed II. The Venetians who in 1463 had established relations with Uzun Hasan, in 1473 sent Giosafat Barbaro as ambassador to Tabriz. He did not come empty-handed for he sailed with three galleys with some cannons, arquebuses, gunpowder and other military equipment and 200 Venetian soldiers. However, the high hopes for Uzun Hasan's continued military success against Mehmed II were dashed when Uzun Hasan was defeated at Bashkent (11 August 1473). ( . von Pastor 1955, vol. 2, pp. 388; von Palombini 1968, pp. 13, 18-23; Berchet 1976, pp. 1-22) When the various Venetian envoys reached Uzun Hasan's court the latter refused to further undertake military actions against the Ottomans. (Babinger 1953, p. 410) Emboldened by Ottoman military reversals in Europe, Pope Innocent VIII (r. 1484-1492) once again called on all Christians to rise against the Turk, but most European states refused to participate. Therefore, after the death of Innocent VIII his successor Alexander VI Borgia (r. 1492-1503) initially did not try to revive the call for a crusade. ( von Pastor

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1 . For an annotated translation and the German text, see Floor 2016.

1955, vol. 3, pp. 221-25; Ferrara 1940, pp. 203-17) However, this changed when in 1499 Ottoman forces attacked Venetian possessions in the Mediterranean. These attacks shook many in their appeasement attitude and on 1 June 1500 Alexander VI called for a crusade against the Turk who was said to be about to attack Rome.( Ferrara 1940, pp. 187, 203-17, 291, 396) However, to launch a crusade required money. Therefore, the Venetians urged Pope Alexander VI to call on the believers in Europe to give money to fund this holy cause. In particular, to use the money collected to induce other Christian states to join the Venetian war effort against the Ottomans.( Fisher 1948, pp. 66-68, 74; von Pastor 1955, vol. 3, pp. 438-41)

Apart from beating the drum about the Ottoman threat, another inducement to attract support to finance and participate in the crusade, was the rise of Shah Esma`il. In the fall of 1501 news reached Venice about the military successes of Shah Esma`il. In the earliest Venetian letters (first half of 1502) he was described as a prophet of 14 years old, with a huge army of 150,000, who preached against the religion of Mohammad and had written to the Ottoman Sultan to withdraw from Anatolia and Karamania otherwise he would wage war on him.( Scarcia Amoretti 1979, pp. 2-3, nos. 2, 3, 6 (March-May 1502)) The Venetians considered this news and the prophet's characteristics a hopeful development that held promise for a new ally and one that might open a second front in the Ottomans' rear. They also viewed the success of this 'prophet' as a potential effective rallying cry to mobilize public opinion and the public's money by depicting the Sophy as coming to Europe's rescue.

To reach the large, dispersed and linguistically diverse population of Europe in a short period of time modern technology was used. The invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century had made books and pamphlets relatively cheap and accessible. Therefore, to reach the European masses, use was made of so-called broadsheets, the forerunner of the newspaper.<sup>1</sup> The first broadsheet about Shah Esma`il in June 1502, was a targeted instrument of Venetian foreign policy to influence the population of Germany to help finance its war effort, one

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1 . On the successful use of this new type of the media, see Houston 1988; Lorenzen-Schmidt and Poulsen 2002.

that was supported by the Pope himself. Although the broadsheet was in German, the source of information was Venetian. To appeal to the credulous masses, the rise of the prophet to the east of the Ottoman lands, who fought the Turk and allegedly denounced Mohammad, and who might even be a quasi-Christian, was used as an inducement to give money. As such it may also be considered one of the early examples of the regular ritual of some European states to try, or at least go through the motions, to include Persia in their unsuccessful attempts to bring about the containment and defeat of the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

After the publication of the German and Latin text of the 1502 broadsheet the myth of the Sophy, as Shah Esma`il was usually referred to, started to take form in Europe. In the subsequent years this myth acquired more definite form, depth, and specific overtones. The purported facts concerning the Sophy were fast food for the early 16<sup>th</sup> century political spin-doctors. He was depicted as being a crypto-Christian or to be at least very friendly to Christians and to be very anti-Turkish, which characterizations were gross exaggerations. The Sophy is painted as the ardent ally of the Christians and the arch-enemy of the Turks. He kills them by the scores and destroys their “temples and mosques.” He was made out to be a crypto-Christian who was “like the dove who brought the olive branch to Noah’s ark, which is the sign of peace, between God and humanity.”(Rouillard 1938, pp. 32-34)

Shah Esma`il or the Sophy as he was generally known, was perceived as an egalitarian, who shared his riches with the common man, which very much appealed to the oppressed masses in Europe at that time. The lower classes of Florence and Venice actually believed that this Sophy would liberate them from their misery. A popular Florentine carnival song of ca. 1503 heralds that “the coming of the Sofi is certain: soon he would redistribute riches, giving to those who have less.”( Rota 2009, pp. 31-37; see also Ponte 1977, 1-2, pp. 5-19) In Germany similar sentiments prevailed as is clear from an excerpt from a letter from Germany by Zacaria Contarini, who compares the desire of the urban population of Germany to be their own rulers to this “superstition of the prophet,” as he called it.( Scarcia Amoretti 1979, pp. 8 (30/05/1502), 12 (11/09/1502)).

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1 . On this issue, see von Palombini 1968.

The Italian broadsheet that I present here in translation is the first attempt by a European author to present a more comprehensive and systematic biography of Shah Esma`il and to ‘explain’ his rise and potential role to a European public that was both interested, beguiled and befuddled by what it had learnt so far about his person. People wanted to know whether he was of royal descent or a commoner, a prophet or a charlatan, and whether the hope that he would, if not stop, at least hurt the Ottoman onslaught, a hope that had been raised by earlier publications and rumors, was true or not. Rota tries to address all these questions and concerns and emphasizes the religious character of the rise and life of Shah Esma`il as the key and driving force of his success.

This second broadsheet presented here in translation from the Italian text known as *La Vita del Sophi* (The Life of the Sophy) was authored by Ioannes Rota. According to Pierre Jodogne, the earliest publication of *La Vita* dates from 1506 and its text is slightly different from the next three Italian editions and, moreover, it does not have the four letters appended to it as the other three. Jodogne assigned 1508 as the date of the second Italian edition, from which a French translation was made. The first complete German translation was made in 1515 from a third undated (1509?) Italian edition, while the fourth Italian edition was published in 1515, which was not translated into other languages. Jodogne discusses the minor textual differences between these various Italian editions as well as the link between a particular Italian edition and its translation into French or German. (Jodogne 1980, pp. 215-32) The French translation was made by Jean Lemaire, who had come across Rota’s *Vita* during his visit to Venice in 1508. When he published his *Traicté de la différences des schisms et des conciles de l’église* in May 1511 Lemaire included a French translation of Rota’s *Vita*, without attribution, as *l’histoire moderne du prince Syach Ysmail surnommé Sophy Arduelin, roy de Perse et de Mede et de plusieurs autres terres et provinces*.<sup>1</sup> Jodogne submits that Giovanni Rota must have written his *La Vita del Sophi*, between 26 August 1504, when Rota wrote a letter from Aleppo, and 1508, when Jean Lemaire acquired a copy of this *Vita*. (Jodogne 1980, p. 218) Because the *La Vita* does not refer to events after 1506, it is likely that it was written prior to that date.

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1 . For a modern annotated and critical text edition, see Lemaire 1997. This French text was translated into Latin in 1572, see Jodogne 1980, p. 217, n. 10.

Thus, in total there are four Italian editions (all undated, but probably published respectively in 1506, 1508, 1509, and 1515), one French translation (1511) and one German translation (1515).<sup>1</sup> The German translation was published twice in 1515; once in Nuremburg and the other in Augsburg. (Göllner 1994, vol. 1, pp. 34 (nr. 32), 60 (nr. 76); Jodogne 1980 pp. 220-21. The electronic version of the German text is available via Google books, q.v. *Das Leben und gewonhait und gestalt des Sophy Königs der Persien.*) Like the 1508 and later Italian editions, the German translation has four letters from Venetian informants, dating from 1507 and 1508, that provide additional information on the Sophy. Of these translations the French one is the best known, i.e., it has been several times reprinted and sometimes used and referred to in a number of articles concerning the Sophy. The other ones they all have in common that they are hardly used in studies concerning the life of Shah Esma`il.

Although this second broadsheet deals with Shah Esma`il's biography I don't discuss this here, because there are many studies available on this subject. I only provide clarifying footnotes to the translated text. When a name occurs for the first time I reproduce the orthography as used in the first Italian edition (e.g. Siras; sic. Shiraz), while when the same name occurs later I use the modern orthography (e.g. Shiraz). Because I had no access to the later Italian editions, this made the translation of the four letters sometimes difficult, but I have tried to make the text as intelligible as I could. For easy reference the page numbers that occur in bold in the translation below refer to the German text.

### **English Translation.**

To the Most Serene and Most High Prince of the Venetian Signoria,  
Lord Leonardo Laurentani.<sup>2</sup>

Ioannes Rota, medical doctor<sup>3</sup>

As I found myself in Aleppo, the city of Soria [sic; Syria], Most Serene and High Prince, I heard that Your Serenity was desirous and

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1 . For a bibliographical discussion, see Jodogne 1980, pp. 215-24. An abridged German translation was published in 1510.

2 . Leonardo Loredan, Doge of Venice (r. 1501-1521).

3 . Nothing is known about Rota; he was in 1504 in Aleppo, while in one letter he is referred to as Zuan Rota, see Jodogne 1980, pp. 217-18.

wishing to learn in particular of things about the amazing Soffi [sic; Sophy], therefore, I have become a more industrious investigator and hope that the present report may satisfy Your Magnificence's curiosity; but not having intended to do so, I only have investigated that which I have been able to learn myself about amazing things and news. About which, for as much as I understand Your Serenity's wishes, I will briefly and succinctly report on what many worthy persons have told me, having omitted all vain talk of the common people, and only reporting all that which many respectable people and honest merchants have told me. This report is in three different parts. First, we will report on his family and descent. Secondly, about his life. Thirdly, about his amazing wars that he has waged so far, with which we will conclude our report and would there be anything in there which is untrue, then I beg Your Eminence not to accuse me of lying because I submit more or less whatever has been reported to me. Thus, is not my fault, having only transmitted it.

As to the first part, I report to Your Serenity that Mahmed [sic; Mohammad] had a brother's son named Hali [sic; `Ali].<sup>1</sup> It was by [Mohammad], after his father's death, that [ `Ali, who] was little, was nourished and raised, and Mohammad always honored and obeyed him. From the aforesaid `Ali, by right and the true male line, is descended he, who nowadays and by us is called the Sophy. Just like the descendents of Mohammad in the male line are called *seriffi*,<sup>2</sup> likewise [end page 2] the descendants of `Ali are called *seriffi*. They are not less respected than the others, in particular by the Persians, who revere `Ali not less than Mohammad. Nor is the aforesaid Sophy, which is his proper and true name. As to their religion, which he heads, he wants that out of humility they do not wear a silken, but only a woolen cap. Because in the Arabic language wool is called *sof* and, therefore, their sect<sup>3</sup> is called Soffi. They have to live in poverty, have to fast and engage in vigils and prayer diligently, although many badly observe these [obligations]. His true and proper name is Siah Ismail [sic; Shah Esma'il], which means 'the prophet Ismail,' his ancestors, and in recent times his father, have almost

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1. `Ali b. Abu Talib, the first Imam of the Shiites, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohammad.

2. I.e. *sharif* or noble, the honorific for descendants of Mohammad, also referred to as sayyeds. The French and German translations have *Scriphi*.

3. The first Italian edition of 1506 has here *sesta* not *secta* like all the other Italian editions. Jodogne 1980, pp. 222-23. Clearly, 'sesta' was a printer's error for 'feda' or 'faith,' and therefore, the translation 'sect' is correct.

always governed a region named Ardueli [sic; Ardabil], because of which the said Soffis are also called 'Ardueli.' Some also call them *Cenaseri*,<sup>1</sup> because they are in the habit to wear a colored head cover with twelve folds, and *cenaser* means 'twelve' in Arabic. Because this headdress is universally red, they are called 'chusel bas' [sic; *Qizilbash*] in the Turkish language, which means 'red head.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this sect<sup>3</sup> due to various circumstances has several names.

His father was a very learned man such as in religion [theology] as well as in many other sciences, in particular in astrology. He was poor, [led] a frugal and simple life<sup>4</sup> and was very much loved by Cassam Beg [sic; Hasan Beg] or as we call him Vson Cassano [sic; Uzun Hasan], so much so that he gave him his own daughter as wife from which [union] was born this Shah Esma'il, whom we now call the Sophy. Because of this it is clear that he is of the noblest royal lineage through his mother. This suffices as to the first subject, i.e. his lineage and his descent.<sup>5</sup>

As far as the next subject, that is his life, is concerned, Your Serenity should know that the father of Shah Esma'il during his life always sought to raise and educate him in both in proper manners as in good learning and mostly in their religion. Of the father it is said that through astrological science he knew from his son's birth [end page 3] what kind of man he would become. It was not given to the poor father to teach him much, because Iacob Beg [sic: Ya`qub Beg], son of Cassam Beg [sic; Uzun Hasan] and his brother-in-law, who shortly thereafter succeeded his father to the Persian throne, hated him very much and persecuted him to death and took from him the small region that he governed.<sup>6</sup> At that time, his son Shah Esma'il was eight years old or

1 . The German translation has *emasari*, which is an improvement and is an adequate transliteration of the Arabic word *ithna`ashari* or twelve. The French translation has *Emanazer*[y] or *Nazer*.

2 . On the various kinds of headdress or *taj* worn by the Safavid followers, see Floor 1999, pp. 277-89.

3 . Here also the Italian original has 'seda' instead of 'feda.'

4 . Soltan Heydar (note: not Sheikh Heydar) knew more about military warfare than about Sufi spirituality. Also, he was neither a poor nor a virtuous man, and he loved to go raiding, killing people and getting booty. Woods 1976, p. 119; Khvandamir 1362, vol. 4, p. 427; Khvonji 1992, p. 58.

5 . Esma'il's father was Soltan Heydar (1459-1488). His mother was Halimeh Begi Agha or `Alamshah Khatun, who was a daughter of Uzun Hasan and Despina, the daughter of Kalo Ionannis, last Greek ruler of Trebizond, both of whom were Christian.

6 . Against the orders of Soltan Ya`qub (r. 1478-1490), Soltan Heydar marched to Shirvan to attack the Shirvanshah. The latter asked Soltan Ya`qub for help, who sent an army that defeated Soltan Heydar, who was defeated and killed by friendly fire in 1488.



thereabouts.<sup>1</sup> Because he was little, and fearing for his death, he was forced to flee to Lezian [sic; Lahejan], a town in the province called Acilan [sic; Gilan],<sup>2</sup> close to the Caspian Sea, whence we get *lezi* and *trachozī* silk.<sup>3</sup> He lived there for many years with a lord called Pir Haly<sup>4</sup> and during the time, eight years or more,<sup>5</sup> he never wanted to eat food from the court [whether] by request or inducement. He only lived of what God gave him<sup>6</sup> and whatever remained on the table he always returned it to God by giving it to the poor. Now he is 22 years old,<sup>7</sup> small of stature, thickset and erect. He is very severe in [the pursuit of] justice in such a way that now all his officials appointed over many a town and province, whom he has found to have taken the goods of private persons or to have committed some other crime, he had them all killed and appointed others in their stead.<sup>8</sup> He is as open-handed as it is possible to say. (al-Qomi 1363, vol. 1, pp. 62, 71; Montazer-Saheb 1349, p. 525; Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 51-52) He does not accumulate money or wealth; he does not care about it. He spends and hands out so much that many believe that he has knowledge of hidden treasures, so that when he needs gold he has it dug it up where it is located. He drinks wine, but in private,<sup>9</sup> and eats pork meat.<sup>10</sup> As one of his servants told me recently, he had a pig in his house and fed it [to become] fat and big, which, to vilify the [Great] Turk, called it *el conduchar baisit*.<sup>11</sup> He likes

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1 . Esma'il was only 15 months old, for he was born on 25 Rajab 892/17 July 1487.

2 . Esma'il with his brothers with 20 *morids* fled to Lahejan at the end of 898/Sept-Oct 1493. Khvandamir 1370, p. 38 has with 200 morids.

3 . The German translation has *letzni* and *tracatzi*. *Lezi* silk means *legi* (Lahejan) and spun silk. The term *trachoze* is derived from Persian, "*tar-i quazz*, i.e. fabric made of the fiber (*tar*) of raw silk (*quazz <qaz, khaz, kaj*)." Scarcia 1969, pp. 211, 228. On the various kinds of silk in Iran, see Floor 1996; see also Molà 2000, p. 55.

4 . Pir Haly or Pir `Ali refers to Kar-Kiya Mirza `Ali, ruler of Lahejan. Laheji, p. 103.

5 . Esma'il came to Lahejan in 1494 and left in 1499, thus, he only stayed there for five years.

6 . That is he lived from what people gave him.

7 . Esma'il allegedly was born on Tuesday 25 Rajab 872 or 17 July 1487. Given that he was 22 years old, this implies that this text may have been written in 1508 rather than earlier as suggested in the Introduction.

8 . In a letter dated 26 August 1504, Joanne Rotha (sic) wrote from Aleppo that the Sophy did not allow anyone to interfere with the passage of caravans. Therefore, a single man could safely travel from Astarabad to Tabriz with gold in the palm of his hand. Scarcia Amoretti 1979, p. 73.

9 . Esma'il was an alcoholic, who drank in public and prided himself on being able to drink anyone under the table.

10 . According to Constantino Lascari, Esma'il I ordered his pigs from Cyprus. Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, p. 36. In 1505, Esma'il allegedly made an Ottoman ambassador eat pork telling him: "I eat it and you don't want to eat it?" Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, p. 81 (25/10/1505).

11 . *El conduchar baisit*, meaning *khondegar* Bayazid II. *Khondegar* is a Persian term meaning 'emperor, king' in particular used as the title of the Ottoman Sultan.

all virtuous works, be it handicrafts or education, and, when somebody makes him a worthy present then he pays twice of thrice its value, so that nobody ever leaves him [end page 4] who is not content or satisfied. He is revered by his people as a prophet and to get more fame he does not let himself seen other than with a covered and veiled face.<sup>1</sup> In carnal matters, quite properly, he heeds the country's customs.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with their custom, he has [female] slaves, but he has married none of them so far.<sup>3</sup> And here ends the second part.

The third and last part still remains, which is about the amazing wars he waged, about which one should know that, when was driven away from his homeland and lived in Lahejan, his maternal uncle and chief enemy Ya`qub Beg died,<sup>4</sup> who, as has been stated above, had his father killed and had taken his land. Because of his death all of Persia was in arms and so much adversity and war happened that in less than two years the kingdom changed hands five times.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, the death of the chief enemy, the armies were busy continuously fighting each other, which made that Shah Esma`il was able to easily return to his homeland, and because he was much loved and revered there he took back the rule over his land. Having obtained this and stayed there for some time, he gathered a small army (if one wants to call 700 men<sup>6</sup> an army) and

- 1 . This indicates that Esma`il still believed that he was the *na`eb-e Imam*, reflecting the artistic practice to depict prophets and Imams with a veiled face in Persian miniatures. The veiled face (*velato capite*) as well as the fact that he was venerated as Ali's substitute (*in loco de uno Ali*) and not as a king, but as a holy man and a prophet (*sancto et propheta*) is also confirmed by a Frenchman, who, in 1507, was in Esma`il's camp. Scarcia Amoretti 1979, pp. 139-40.
- 2 . Esma`il I was a very lascivious men, who had sexual relations with both women and boys. He had surrounded himself with a court that engaged in the same sexual debauchery. For details, see Aubin 1988, pp. 53-54; Floor 2008, pp. 322-24.
- 3 . The French translation has here: "he has no female slaves at all unless they are joined in marriage [to him]." Lemaire 1997, pp. 245-46.
- 4 . Soltan Ya`qub died on 11 Safar 896 or 24 December 1490. His death led to a succession war, which sapped Aq-qoyunlu strength and facilitated the rise of the nominal leader of the Safavid order, Sheikh Esma`il.
- 5 . During 1490 - 1497, there were five Aq-Qoyunlu pretenders, who were competing for the throne, to wit: Beysanghor b. Ya`qub (1490-91), Rostam b. Maqsud b. Uzun Hasan (1490-97), Ahmad Gvde b. Ughurlu Mohammad b. Uzun Hasan (1497), Alvand b. Yusof b. Uzun Hasan (1497-1504), and Mohammad b. Yusof b. Uzun Hasan (1497-1500).
- 6 . This number is also in Lemaire 1997, p. 247; see also Jodogne 1980, p. 222 who notes that in the later Italian editions the number is given as 300. Therefore, the German translation also has 300 men. Esma`il left Lahejan with 20 men (al-Qomi 1363, vol. 1, p. 48; Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 187-88). Having arrived in Ardabil only 200 men promised to join him. Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 47-88, 187-88. He had 300 men in Erzenjan (B. Khvandamir 1370, p. 45), but by August-September 1500 he had been gradually joined by 7,000 followers. Laheji 1352, p. 105; Ben Khvandamir 1370, pp. 51-57.

marched to a town called Symiacque [Shamakhi] not so far from his border. It is a place from where we receive much raw silk [called] *canari*, *thalani*, and *mamodeni*,<sup>1</sup> which he unexpectedly immediately won, sacked and burnt it with fire and flames rather than that he miraculously took it with the men that were with him given that the city and land should have been sufficiently [able] to withstand a large and powerful army of more than three thousand horsemen.<sup>2</sup> When he had done this his fame grew so big that daily from many parts and lands many people of his sect and religion joined him and this because, through their books [they knew] that a new prophet of their religion would come, who would make it prosper and thrive and would [end page 5] subdue and destroy all others. In this connection I need to point out to Your Serenity that the Mohammedan sect is divided into 72 main sects, as stated in the Koran, their law, from which they know that of the 72 [sects] only one will enter paradise and the others to the fires of hell, but it [the Koran] lets undecided which one of them will go to heaven.<sup>3</sup> Because of this each one maintains that its sect is the right one. Of these 72 the Soffica [sic; the Sufis of the Safavid order]<sup>4</sup> is the one and they believe that it is the only one that leads people into paradise and they say this Shah Esma`il has been sent by God to reveal it [i.e. the sect] to everybody, and to increase and expand it [Shi`ism] and to thoroughly destroy the other seventy-one in such a manner, if possible, that no memory would remain of them and would be relegated to oblivion. Because of this, nobody in Shah Esma`il's army is paid, just like when we go on a Crusade. Therefore, from many parts of Asia people from his

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1 . On these terms, see Molà 2000, p. 55; Scarcia 1969, pp. 199, 212.

2 . The people of Shamakhi had fled from the city before Esma`il's arrival. The sources don't report any military activity against the city, let alone burning it. Perhaps Rota or his source confused the massacre of Shamakhi's inhabitants and the destruction of the city and its environs by Soltan Heydar, Esma`il's father, in 1488. Khvonji 1996, p. 62; Parsadust 1375, pp. 152, 258-59.

3 . On this subject, see Goldziher 1971, p. 154.

4 . Initially, Esma`il acted as Sheikh Esma`il, the *morshed* or leader of the Safavid order. It is only, after Sheikh Esma`il had taken Tabriz in the fall of 1501 that he had the Shi`ite version of the *khotbah* read. Parsadust 1375, p. 277. Although he declared himself to be a Shi`ite, nobody in Esma`il's entourage owned even a handbook on Shi`ism. To guide them on this righteous path they had to search hard and long in Tabriz before a long forgotten text, the *Qawa'id al-Ahkam* by Motahhar al-Hilli was accidentally found in a qadi's house. Parsadust 1375, p. 282. For the time being, it sufficed for Esma`il's supporters to curse the first three khalifehs and support Shah Esma`il and kill anybody who opposed him. Much of the practice of the beliefs of Esma`il and his followers showed that it had more in common with ancient Turkic customs and shamanism than with Islam, see Aubin 1988, pp. 44-48.

religion come to join him<sup>1</sup> with wife and children, if they are not hindered and forbidden by their chiefs and lords, as these last two or three years the Turkish king Baisit [sic; Bayazid II] has done.<sup>2</sup> Because he saw this Shah Esma`il's army grow as well as his might and territory, he drove by force all those from Anatolia, who professed [their adherence to] his sect and religion, who numbered as many as ten thousand and had their faces marked, so that they could be recognized by anyone, sent them to Romania and that they might not assemble without great difficult he dispersed them over various regions, far away from one another, such as in the faraway border areas of Greece, Albania, Bosina [sic; Bosnia], and Serbia. I was told [this] by a Turk, a respectable person, who had seen them in Modone.<sup>3</sup> I leave it to Your Serenity to consider, whether the things that are told about him are not fables, given that with all the great power that he has the Turkish king fears that of Shah Esma`il.

But let's return to our subject. After his victory at Shamakhi his army increased such in size, both foot and horse, that it numbered about one thousand or less,<sup>4</sup> and it was bolstered to come to the most noble town of Tauris (sic; Tabriz), the capital of the kingdom of the Persians, [end page 6] to boldly attack king Aluant [sic; Alvand], who at that time was its king, and to do battle with him. He had an army, apart from foot, of five

- 1 . According to the Venetian reports the fact that Esma`il distributed all the booty to his followers and kept nothing for himself" This had the desired result, for even those who were not Sufis, flocked to his banner. In this, in the course of a few days, he had more than 4,000 men, among them, many adventurers in great numbers, who were attracted by the lure of booty and gore. Thus he gathered 5,000 men. Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 47-49, 187-88.
- 2 . In 1502, Shah Esma`il's ambassador brought Bayazid II a letter with the Shah's complaint that the Ottoman authorities had prevented his followers to move from Anatolia to Iran, and he asked Bayazid II to allow their free movement in the future. Esma`il I's argument was that the travelers were pilgrims who came to visit the center of his order at Ardabil, as they had done for decades, rather than soldiers joining his cause. In his reply to Sayyed, not Shah, Esma`il, Bayazid II promised that he would allow free movement of Safavid adherents under certain restrictions, because full-scale departure would hurt the economy and weaken the military levies of Anatolia. Therefore, he would allow new pilgrims to leave, after the old ones had returned, which was, of course, not acceptable to Esma`il I. Feridun Bey 1274, pp. 345-46 (received Safar 908/6 August-3 September 1502). For an analysis, see in particular Allouche 1980, pp. 70-82. On the measures taken by the Ottoman government to prevent this emigration, see Yildirim 2008, pp. 303-15.
- 3 . On this subject, see Sohrweide 1965, pp. 95-221. Venetian reports indeed confirm the marking of the faces of the deported Qizilbash. Scarcia Amoretti 1979, p. 12 (27/07/1502). Modone is the Venetian name for the town of Methoni in Messenia (Peleponnesus – Greece).
- 4 . Esma`il divided the Shamakhi booty among his soldiers. This exploit made him famous and new recruits arrived. Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 51-52, 187-78.

thousand horse, he [Esma'il] broke and defeated it and obtained the rule over Tabriz. Whence it was confirmed that he committed the greatest cruelty against the Turkmen<sup>1</sup> (thus are called the soldiers of this land) and not only against men, but also against women and prostitutes. He had them all killed in various ways. And because he could not take revenge on Ya`qub Beg, his maternal uncle, because he had died, who, as I have reported in the foregoing had killed his father and had taken his land, he went to his tomb, which was very magnificent and beautiful as befits such a king, and he had it totally razed and smashed into pieces, so that no sign of it remained. He had the bones taken out from the grave and had these all burnt and the ashes thrown into the wind.<sup>2</sup> When his mother, Ya`qub Beg's sister learnt about this, who was with Esma'il her own son, she took courage, both because he was her son and because he still an adolescent, took him to task about this. He found this punishment so severe and vexatious that he immediately had his own mother seized and killed. Some say that he killed her with his own hands.<sup>3</sup> Because of the above reasons, day by day, his army grew and it became more audacious and powerful. Because of the great cruelty that he committed against the Turkmen and their relatives they greatly feared the name of the Sophy. Despite all that king Alvand had not lost heart, even though he had been defeated in battle and expelled from the kingdom. On the contrary, full of courage and energy he raised a new army that was even more powerful than the previous one, favored by all lords and soldiers of the country. He put it into proper order and marched against Tabriz and when he was near it he called the Sophy to the battlefield; in accordance with the ancient custom of the armies of that land, who never attack farmed lands [around the cities] and do not destroy and damage them, but always fight in the countryside and whoever is victorious there

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- 1 . Although European authors continued to refer to Safavid soldiers as Persians, they were mostly Turkic tribesmen, see Sumer 1371.
  - 2 . The tombs of the Aq-Qoyunlu kings and of those lords who had been present when Soltan Heydar died were opened and their bones burnt. According to Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, 104-05, 189-91. Aubin 1988, p. 46 has argued that this act may be a shamanistic ritual due to the belief that a person's soul lives on in his bones. Esma'il had started disinterring Soltan Joneyd's enemies already in 1501, when he was at Baku. Khvandamir 1362, vol. 4, pp. 461-62; Qomi 1363, vol. 1, p. 66.
  - 3 . Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 104-05, 189-91. According to Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, p. 22 (27/11/1502) his mother was still alive in November 1503. In fact, Esma'il had another of his father's wives beheaded, because she had remarried one of the men, who had been at the battle where his father died.

becomes lord of the land. When the felicitous Sophy learnt this, he gathered his entire army [end page 7] that was twice or thrice less in bravery and strength than king Alvand's, boldly advanced to attack him and defeated him, and crushed and killed the greater part of the enemy; returned with a large booty; few escaped. This event caused so much terror in the hearts of the Turkmen - they are those of whom I have said above that in this land they always held the military arts in their hands - that as soon as they heard the name of the Sophy they all fled trembling, and did not stop until they were where they believed they were safe. Shah Esma`il returned victoriously to Tabriz with so much glory and fame that after this victory more than before many of his people joined him, and so many that in a few days his army grew to six thousand and more in number.<sup>1</sup> It now came to pass that Morat Can [sic; Morad Khan] learnt that his first cousin king Alvand had died - also called his nephew - to whom he had ceded the rule of Tabriz by agreement, while he had taken the rule of a most noble city in Persia named Siras [sic; Shiraz],<sup>2</sup> which [is known] for its very fine steel, and where are all kinds of splendid arms are made, be it for men or horse, about which I feel unable to satisfactorily have an opinion. Thus, he learnt of the massacre, the dishonor and the killing by Shah Esma`il of the Turkmen, of their wives and their children and therefore, being very cautious in matters of war, recognizing that the longer he continued raising an army against him, the more his force would be growing, he decided to raise a powerful army against the aforesaid Sophy as soon as possible and thus he did. He gathered all his forces to the last man and out of caution he thought, "if I only once triumph over the Sophy then I will be a steadfast and strong king without any opposition in all of Persia," and so it would have been if these events had occurred as he wished. Therefore, he gathered in a

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1 . After Esma`il had taken Tabriz in the summer of 1501, Alvand fled to Diyarbekr where he raised new troops, with whom he returned to Tabriz in May of 1502. Esma`il had just left for Eastern Anatolia to invade Dhu'l-Qadr territory to subdue 'Ala al-Dowleh. When Esma`il learnt that that Alvand had returned to Tabriz he hurried back to Tabriz, where he arrived in October 1502. On arrival he found that Alvand had fled again to Diyarbekr. Alvand was unable to raise new troops and, after having failed to get Mamluk support, sought protection of 'Ala al-Dowleh. For the end of Alvand, see Aubin 1988, pp. 22-23.

2 . In early 906/the summer or fall of 1500, an agreement was reached between Alvand and Morad to divide the Aq-qoyunlu dominions in two parts at the Qizil-Uzan River. Alvand received Diyarbekr, Arminiye, Azerbaijan, Moghan, and Aran, while Morad received the two `Eraqs, Kerman, and Fars. Woods 1976, pp. 171-73, 292, n. 123.

few days a fine, powerful, and very strong army of twelve thousand horsemen covered with the finest, beautiful and exquisitely worked armor with a large number of battle-hardened foot soldiers and departed with the army on the road to [end page 8] Tabriz and took with him, after ancient Persian custom, all his wives and children.<sup>1</sup> This came to the ears of Shah Esmā'il, who energized like a dragon and furious like a lion almost over night gathered his small army, both foot and horse, which did not number more than eight thousand, and was unequal in strength to that of the aforesaid Morad Khan. He [Esmā'il] was so eager for battle that he could not wait in Tabriz for his enemy to come to him, but courageously he marched towards Shiraz<sup>2</sup> - the two cities are at a distance of 20 days journey from one another - and so much did both armies advance towards each other that they met right in the middle of the route. At this point Shah Esmā'il did not tarry, although his force was much weaker than Morad Khan's army, nevertheless he was the first to attack and to inflict wounds. In the first encounter the Sophy had the worst part of the outcome and many of his men were killed. Despite this they never turned away, not because of gold or status, but they fought for [their] faith and none of them feared death, because they believe that if they die they go to paradise.<sup>3</sup> Just like wild boars they continued to fight ferociously, walked over the dead bodies of their comrades without any fear and fought there where the battle was most severe. They fought so much longer and bravely that they broke and smashed Morad Khan's entire army, an event that truly is more miraculous and divine than human. The killing was innumerable; of the prisoners none were spared, but for the women whom he gave in marriage to his men. He acquired great booty of supply wagons [the baggage train], the finest arms and the most beautiful horses. With a few men, Morad Khan fled towards

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- 1 . Morad did not march to Tabriz. In fact, Esmā'il left Tabriz in May 1503 (end 908) (at *Nowruz*, Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, p. 199) and marched towards Hamadan, where Morad and his army were. Here a battle took place on 24 Dhu'l-Hejja 908/20 June 1503 near Alma Bulaghi. Parsadust 1375, p. 289.
  - 2 . After his defeat at Hamadan, Morad fled to Fars pursued by Esmā'il. Morad entered Shiraz in September 1503. Ghaffari-Qazvini 1343, p. 268; Qomi 1363, p. 81. He then fled to Baghdad. He then approached 'Ala al-Dowleh, who welcomed him and gave him one of his daughters in marriage. Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, p. 199.
  - 3 . For the almost divine admiration of Esmā'il by his followers, see Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, pp. 115, 206. The Ostajalu considered him the *moqaddameh-ye zaman* or Precursor of the Lord of Time. Shirazi 1369, p. 38. In general, see Glassen 1971 and Willem Floor and Mohammad Faghfoory, "Shah Esmā'il – Deputy of the Hidden Imam?" (forthcoming).

Bagaded [sic; Baghdad], where, until my departure from Soria [sic; Syria] he still was.<sup>1</sup> After the victory by the courageous and fortunate Sophy, he went with his army to Shiraz, which he reached in a few days, entered it and assumed [end of page 9] the rule of the aforesaid city without any struggle. Here he remained for many months, because it is a city filled with arms with which it was easy to strengthen the army. Here his army became larger than normal, because in numbers it reached over fifty thousand. He made the army that in the beginning was almost without arms into one that was most splendid and well accoutered, which, anyone who saw it, would consider being something amazing and wonderful. Now, in the Persian realm there did not remain a single opponent of note to the Sophy, except for one lord and commander of a very staunch people, who had seven castles that because of its very impregnable and strong location no Persian king, not even Uson Cassano [sic; Uzun Hasan],<sup>2</sup> had been able to take, he then decided to undertake this notable feat. This was not easy for him, because he was occupied for more than two years in constant fighting and besieging them and many of his men were killed, among whom his principal officer. But in the end he took them all and returned victoriously.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, he took many large towns in Media and Persia, amongst which one called Here [sic; Herat], a very big city. Of the others I do not know the names. He then went to Straua [sic; Astarabad] and Corassan [sic; Khorasan] and en route he took a very strong castle from a Turkmen chief, who, all the time, robbed many merchants who passed by to go to Tabriz. This victory brought him quite a large treasure and much silk of various kinds that recently the aforesaid [Turkmen] chief had taken by force from several merchants.<sup>4</sup> He also conquered many [other] towns and lands the names of which I cannot recall. At the time of my departure from Aleppo, he was with his army at eight days journey from Tabriz to conquer a strong castle, the only one in Persia that had remained in the

1. Morad Khan went to Aleppo and in vain asked for help from the Mamluks. Barbaro-Contarini 1873, vol. 2, p. 199.

2. The French translation has "except for," which is the opposite of the meaning of the Italian word "neanche" (i.e. "not even") that is used here.

3. This probably refers to the campaign against Hoseyn Kiya Cholavi or Cholabi in Ramadan-Dhu'l-Hijjah 1504. Fort Golkhandan, Firuzkuh and Fort Asta/Osta were taken and Hoseyn Kiya was burnt alive. Laheji 1352, p. 159; Parsadust 1375, pp. 290-92.

4. This probably refers to the same campaign against Hoseyn Kiya Cholavi. Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, p. 73 (26/08/1504).



hands of the Turkmen. I am certain that since then he has taken it, given the big and mighty army that he has with him now, which number 410 thousand, among which are 100 thousand [end page 10] horses covered with the finest armor, according to merchants who recently came from there, who have informed me. They also report that he has distributed the governorships of all the towns of the Sultan as well as those of the Turkish king among his commanders. The said merchants also state that after he has taken the aforementioned castle, he with his entire army will march to Baghdad and through Mesopotamia will come to Armenia Major and Minor,<sup>1</sup> where he may descend without any opposition. Having arrived there, he will find himself at the borders of Alidoli [sic; `Ala al-Dowleh]<sup>2</sup> and of the Turkish king, and may decide to do whatever he thinks is best and to stay there as long as he likes it.

Herewith comes to an end [the part about] his amazing wars, which is the last part of our report that although it is still rather rough, simple and unadorned, nevertheless it would bring me great pleasure and be a boon to learn that I have given satisfaction to Your Serenity. *Que diu nobis et patrie foelicissima valeat.*<sup>3</sup>

Cum gratia et privilegio/ with gratitude and honor

End.

New information from the knighthood

The Sophi soldiers<sup>4</sup> against the Sultan and the Moslem Turk.

We have received much new information here./ First, that the great Diadare of Cayro<sup>5</sup>/when he arrived in Damasco/and marched against the Arabs/who defeated him/ and sadly have destroyed and shattered him./ Nevertheless this new information is true and reliable/ truly, about him we have new and recent information from one month and less ago/that comes from those parts/one of the news items averred that the Sophy had

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1 . Greater Armenia roughly encompassed the area stretching from the Euphrates River in the west, the region of Artsakh and parts of Iranian Azerbaijan to the east, parts of the modern state of Georgia to the north, with its southern boundary abutting the northern tip of Mesopotamia. Armenia Minor refers to the land lying west and northwest of the river Euphrates.

2 . Ala al-Dowleh Dhu'l-Qadr against whom he marches in the spring of 913/May 1507-1508.

3 . May our God and fatherland be the most auspicious.

4 . The German text here has *Treybentē*, which I read as *trabanten*, or foot soldiers.

5 . "The Great Diadare, the last Mamluke Sultan" Anderson 1732, p. 386.

sent one of his ambassadors/to His Majesty the King of Hungary/because he waged war against the Turks/reason why the said Sophy will soon be on the other side with a large army/which embassy was discovered in Angori and was arrested and taken to Constantinople/and all its members immediately cut to pieces.<sup>1/</sup> The said Sophy/thought [end page 11] to have found another route to come to Suria [sic; Syria]/verily all these lands fall apart of fear. In Aleppo it is ordered to prepare a field for the said Sophy/about whom we learn that at Aynan Arafse and Antepan<sup>2</sup> forty thousand men have been fielded/ and at Antiochia with the Gulf fifty thousand, who after the *Feria*<sup>3</sup> will march to various countries/and Alladoli [sic; `Ala al-Dowleh], when he learnt this news/he immediately sent an envoy to the aforesaid Sophy./ It is said to give him a safe-conduct/ during 15 days/so that he might come in person to him/to talk to him./ And thus he has given him a safe-conduct/and he came to him with two hundred of his knights/ and it is said/ that the first thing was/that the said Alla doli had dismounted from afar/ and continued on foot with all his retainers/and threw himself at the feet of the said Sophy/saying that he is a local lord/and that he wants to be his slave/that is as much as a sold one and servant/with all his towns and castles/ and that he wants to have a good peace with him./ The said Sophy said nothing else in reply, /therefore he wants to pray with all his people, after this prayer had been done/he told him [ `Ala al-Dowleh] that he went forth with God/because why am I an enemy/ to all those who prayed at mid-day/and my sword will never again wait as long as this lineage is in the world,/therefore I do not want you to be my servant in this manner./ When the said Alladoli returned in his country/ and prepared himself with much fear./ Therefore, I tell you/that we receive new information about these matters every day.

It is said that the said Sophy is a good friend of the Christians/and its religion/and that he takes with him the Patriarch of Armenia/with many monks and priests/<sup>4</sup>and twenty thousand brave Armenian men/that he keeps about him/and wherever he lays siege/ he orders the mosques to be razed/ and to let stand the churches of the Christians./ He drinks

1 . On the mention of this embassy, see Lemaire 1997, p. 259, note 399; Göllner 1994, vol. 1, p. 40.

2 . I have not been able to identify these places in Syria.

3 . *Feria* or market festival, often in observance of a religious holiday.

4 . In 1502, the Venetians reported that the Sophy had "three Armenian priest with him, who *per anno octo continui* are there as his preceptors, reading the Evangel and our sacred scripture." Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, p. 23 (27/11/1502).

wine/rather with abandon/ just like us/he eats pork meat./ It is said/ that four quires of paper would not suffice to write the things that they [end page 12] say about the man./ I believe it is true/that this is the one, who will destroy the Mohammedan belief/ That god wants this is submitted/by Priamo Malimpiero<sup>1</sup>/who reports on August 9 from the town of Cogno [sic: Konya]<sup>2</sup> in Caromonia [sic; Karaman]<sup>3</sup> and which is now moving away from Lord Peter<sup>4</sup>/ with the greatest fear/ in the entire surrounding country/thus he had received an order/from the Great Turk through two *vlachi*./ *Vlachi* means something like a courier<sup>5</sup>/ who had to move quickly and rapidly/and that he<sup>6</sup> should see to it with all care/ that his orders were to mobilize as many people as he could/and likewise the said Turkish lord/also sent the [same] command to the lord of Satagli<sup>7</sup>/that he should prepare himself./ Thereafter, came three *vlachi*/one after the other with short intervals/ and all in one day/[ordering that] everybody should mount up/ and ride vigorously to the Dangori region [sic; Ankara] named Cassaria [sic; Kayseria]/that they made there the army's muster/and that from many parts and lands people rode swiftly and all went to the said places of Dangori and Cassari./ The much lauded Sophy was near the border of Trapezonta [sic; Trabson]/and from Asia/ where he stood with an impressive army/ most of which was covered with armor/ as were their horses/ with white steel/

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1 . A high Venetian official in Cyprus.

2 . After the conquest of Karaman the Ottomans moved its provincial capital to Konya in 1483.

3 . On Karaman and its rulers, see F. Sümer, "Karaman-oghullari," *Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup>. This refers to the *Deposition fata a li magnifici signori rectori di Cypri per domino Priamo Malipiero, del magnifico missier Dionisio, novamente venuto del Cogno et Caramania* (24 August 1507). Scarcia-Amoretti 1979, pp. 105-06.

4 . I have not been able to identify this person.

5 . The term *vlachi* (in the Italian original *ulachi*) was used by the ancient Germanic peoples to describe inhabitants of the former Roman Empire, who were largely Romanized and spoke Latin or Celtic languages. The term *vlachi* is probably derived from the name of the Celtic Volcae, a tribe living near the German tribes. The name of the Romanian principality of Walachia is a remembrance of their presence in that region. Their Slav neighbors, borrowing the term from the Goths, gave them the name Vlachi (or Vlasi), while the Vlachs call themselves Romani, Romeni, or Aromani. Kelley L. Ross (2003). "Decadence, Rome and Romania, the Emperors Who Weren't, and Other Reflections on Roman History". *The Proceedings of the Friesian School*. According to the *Encyclopedie methodique: economoqie politique et diplomatique*, vol. 2 (Paris, Liege 1786), p. 3, the term *ulachi* refers to black Italians or *valaques* or Bosnian mountaineers. See also the *Cambridge History of Turkey*. Cambridge 2006, vol. 3, p. 159 for a slightly different explanation.

6 . Presumably Lord Peter.

7 . Satalia, not Antalya (Turkey).

numbering more than an estimated forty thousand or more/without [counting] the innumerable foot soldiers/ and other kinds of mounted people./ And this is a major thing to say/I want to remain silent whether one can believe that./ because / the innumerable people that live around there,/who are mostly subjects of the Great Turk,/ all join the said Sophy/ crying, saying and maintaining/that he is sent by God./ This has been learnt from persons who returned from the said place/where the Sophy is staying./ All of them report the same/ as to the manner in which has made the Great Turk fear him much / as well as all his commanders/so that they feared to march forth/ because of this kind of new information and rumors./ Therefore, one of them departed from Constantinople/recently and it is reported that the Great Turk in person is [end of page 13] en route/with his army/ because he saw and heard about the fear that his commanders and pashas had because of the great and positive reputation of this Sophy/ who was extending his great freedom/ and the very best brotherhood and justice/ that he accorded everybody/ in such a manner/ that innumerable people follow him/ who take their wives and children with them/all in accordance with Persian custom./ They believe/when they die with him/ that they will go to paradise/because they do not wage war to rule/nor to be feared, but only for their faith [in him]/ whom they worship/ and seldom does one see him with uncovered face./ They say he is 24 years old. A Milanese merchant named Dionisio/ who came from Trapezonta/ confirms this./ viz., that he has marched through Caramania/ and says that he has seen the pasha of Caramania/who marched with ten thousand horse/and with five thousand foot soldiers./ He also awaits [another] ten thousand foot soldiers from the Dangori [Ankara] and Cassaria [Kayseri] region./ The general commander of the Turkish army is the pasha of Natalia [Anatolia]/ whose name is Belliarbe.<sup>1</sup>/ One says that so far he is there with eighty thousand men both foot and horse in Angori and Cassaria. And from the Great Turk it has become known that he wants/ to muster a large and powerful army and to be able to do so he has imposed a substantial fiscal contribution on the people/to pay the men who march to war./ The said Dionisio, the Milanese merchant maintains/ that the Great Turk has written to the said commander/ named Belliarbei/that he soon has to break up/and march forth/and that meanwhile he had to

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1 . This was Qaragöz Pasha, *begler-begi* of Anatolia.

destroy the land of Alladoli because the lord of that land has been the reason/ that the Sophy has advanced so far/ as he had given him support and the army passage through his land./ Meanwhile, when the army of the Great Turk was making preparations to march against the said Alladoli/ to cause damage to this lord/ several *vlachi* or couriers came here/ having scouted the country in various towns/ how the army of the Great Sophy marched against a famous Turkish town, which is called Arzmenia<sup>1</sup>/which is situated in the land of the Turk./ When they [end of page 14] learnt such news/the Turkish army did not want to march any more to the city/ where they had decided to go./ This Dionisio said/ when he was staying in Angori [Ankara] on 29 August/that new tidings came, which confirmed for/the commander of the Turkish army/ that the Great Sophy had taken then the city of Arzmenia/and that he had made it his possession/and [that of] his court [and] his entire army/and he reinforces that location,/ which new tidings very much upset the Turkish army./ This was also confirmed from Cogno [sic; Konya]/by many merchants/who had received there new tidings/ such as that Camallo<sup>2</sup> was with 29 sails at war/ that he waged in the Sea of Chaicia<sup>3</sup>/ to smite the son of Carmanico the elder<sup>4</sup>/who is called there Ramadaogli,<sup>5</sup> who was in the environs of Alexandria/and believed that at this location near the sea of Chaicia/ one would find six thousand Mamluks/ sent at the orders of the Sultan [of Egypt] at the request of the Turk/ to expel one chief of various Arab mountains/ who is called Alladoli./ which ruler is also a reason that the Sophy came/ as he gives him passage and support/that he was able to,/ because many chiefs subject themselves to the Sophy/ and innumerable people,/ which is one reason of the Turk's fear/and of the Sultan's/ that which will follow daily/you will be informed about.

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1 . Presumably, Erzerum.

2 . This is Kemal Reis, who was admiral of the Ottoman navy from 1494 until his death in December 1510.

3 . Chaicia, Chalcia, Karka or Karkava, a small island situated near Rhodos.

4 . Probably referring to Turgutoğlu Mahmud Bey (1483-1487), the last Karamanid ruler.

5 . Ramazanoğlu.

Letter from Napoli in Romania<sup>1</sup>

The news is that on the 17<sup>th</sup> of the past month/ the Sophy was only for three days in the land of the Turk/ nevertheless every day his people went to the border of the said Turkish lord/ to do him the greatest damage./ Therefore to defend the country, the Bellibarbei [sic; *begler-begi*] of Natalia [sic; Anatolia]/ was made pasha/and because he knew the great danger/ he declined it/ saying/ that he did not want to go there/ and [then the Great Turk] made him on pain of death/ to accept this task. Thus forced/ he prepared the largest army/ had his men march through Natalia/however, he very reluctantly executes this task. [end page 14]

Letter received from the consul of Scio.<sup>2</sup>

The news is about the Armada/that is the naval fleet in Constantinople/ of 150 ships/ for the most part new galleys/ and one barque [?].<sup>3</sup>/ As I have said in my letter/ these are being equipped/ it is believed that they will sail during the current month./ One awaits from hour to hour the ship from Copa<sup>4</sup>/through which one will receive the truth and of all affairs/so that Your Eminence may know.

Yesterday one received from the factor of the merchants,/ who was constantly at the *Passagli*<sup>5</sup>/ how the Turkish lord has sent troops on receiving information to assist/ in the reconstruction of the new and the old fortress,/ which is partly in ruins. The Sophy has captured and beheaded the son of the lord of Lonadoaula [sic; ‘Ala al-Dowleh] his old

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1. Nafplion fell to the Venetians (who called it Napoli di Romania) in the late 14th century; it was held by the Ottomans from 1540 to 1686, then by the Venetians until 1715, and then again by the Ottomans until 1822, when after their ouster it became the first capital of the Kingdom of Greece. According to the second Italian edition, the only one that has dates for the four letters, this letter is dated 4 August 1507 (*Littere date da Napoli de Romania quarto de di Agosto M.d.vii*). Jordogne 1980, p. 215, n. 2.

2. Scio is the Italian rendering of the name of the Greek island of Chios is in the Northeastern Aegean Sea midway between the islands of Samos and Lesbos. The island is only 8 km from the west coast of Turkey; it is the fifth largest island in Greece. It was held by Genoese until 1566, when it came under Ottoman occupation until 1822. According to the second Italian edition of Rota's *La Vita*, the only one that has dates for the four letters, this letter is dated 3 September 1507 (*Littere hauute dal Consule de Scio tertio di Settembre M.d.vii*). Jordogne 1980, p. 215, n. 2.

3. Here the German text has: *in ainer Barcke*, literally: ‘in one barque,’ which does not make sense here.

4. I have been unable to identify this place.

5. Presumably the bazaar.

enemy<sup>1</sup>/ and the land of that lord is on the border at a location bordering the land of the Sultan [of Egypt]/ the other part with that of the Turk./ He had asked the Turk for help/ and [the latter] had sent orders throughout Natalia/that all the *timorati*<sup>2</sup> had to ride to assist the said Mandaula [sic; 'Ala al-Dowleh]/on pain of [losing] their head/ and already the *singiacho* [*sanjaqchi*]<sup>3</sup> of the Tara/ has gone there with his *timorati* [*timarli*]/. Likewise, yesterday came here from Crasso<sup>4</sup> a messenger, Proteioro, from the said location/ who has confirmed to me that which I have written above/and has told me/ that he as messenger has ridden to all *timorati* [*timarli*]/ and just before his departure from there/ otherwise he had not been allowed to come hither. Et cetera.

After the letter of July 30 our citizen found himself in conversation/ with the said secretary/ of the Fabulario of Morca<sup>5</sup>/named Cernota/who is a Christian,/ who told him/that on the 29<sup>th</sup> of the said month/ that a messenger had come from the Porte to the said Fabulario,/ who brought an order to Fabulario/ that he should mobilize all *timarii* [*timarli*] and Turks/ that are to be found in Morca [Bursa?]/and to make them ready/so that might ready to march/ against the Sophy following the next order/ which order had been sent throughout Serbia, Albania, Bosnia/ and all other places/to the same [end of page 15] purpose/ and that a son of the Great Lord [i.e. the Ottoman Sultan] had sent three thousand horse/ to oppose and to suppress such intention,/ who captured three thousand of the Sophy's men/ and he had them roasted alive/ and two he had flayed/ and he had them all suffer a terrible death,/ because he had learnt/ that the Turk had decided to send the pasha against the Sophy with so many people as there had assembled before him./ The said Cernota also added/that more than 25 Turks have escaped from the Sophy/with money and many presents/and when the Fabulario of Morca/ realized the very great danger/ he had written to his Suesso<sup>6</sup>, /who is close to the Porte/

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1 . Two grandsons of 'Ala al-Dowleh were captured during the 1507 campaign and then prepared as kebabs and eaten by the Qizilbash. Sa'd ed-Din 1280, vol. 2, p. 131.

2 . This refers to the *timarli sepahis*, holders of a piece of land called *timar*. The proceeds of this land constituted their pay in return for their military service.

3 . The *sanjak* was a subdivision of a province or *eyalat*. The chief of the *sanjak* was known as *sanjakchi*.

4 . I have not been able to identify this place.

5 . I have neither been able to identify this person nor his title.

6 . I have not been able to identify this person.

that his person is in great danger, partly because of the prestige of Spagina<sup>1</sup>,/who says he has doubts/ and requests him/that does not want him from Morca/ neither him nor his court/ and alone all the other people/ and so he ever might be needed/ then he would go and also subject himself to the Turk.

Letter from bene in bene Salernitano<sup>2</sup>

Sent to the Eminent Arnolfo Salernitano<sup>3</sup> from Damascus. The news in Damascus is that a king in Persia has arisen/ called Sophy./ In truth he is more divine/ than otherwise/at the border of the Turk/and therefore, the Turk had inflicted on him various extraordinary things/ that are utterly incomprehensible/ both to him and some of his cities./ Although he is but a small worm compared to the Turk/ he arose against the said Turk/ to take revenge for his injustice./ The Sophy was said to have burnt/ a castle called Ventas,<sup>4</sup>/ which had three hundred hearths. The Sophy had with him four thousand horse/ and ten thousand foot/ and one of his commanders/ called Busia<sup>5</sup>/ who is forty years old/ strong and of great reputation./ As they came to the said castle/ and stormed it/although the Turk had about five thousand mercenaries in the castle/because it was close the border of Persia./ He attacked it for two or three hours/ and then took it/and found therein thirty or forty Jews/he had their eyes [end of page 16] taken out/and let them go./ And of women and men he killed about ten thousand persons./ in addition to the mercenaries of the Turk./ Immediately thereafter quite a few other castles thereabouts/ informed and begged him/ that they all wanted to adore the cross/ as does the Sophy./ All that he gains/ belongs to the entire community./ He moves around without a beret on his head/ and is a man of few words/ and has the greatest reputation/ and has about thirty years/ rather less than more./ He is courageous in the manner of how they become victorious/ and marches through the kingdom of Trabisonda [sic; Trabson]/ called the realm of Bemfarmio,<sup>6</sup>/ The Turk heard/ that he

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1 . I have not been able to identify this person.

2 . According to the second Italian edition, the only one that has dates for the four letters, this letter is dated 20 January 1508 (*Littera de bene in bene Salernitano mandata al magnifico Arnolfo Salernitano. XX. Ienaro. M. d.viii in Damasco*). Jordogne 1980, p. 215, n. 2.

3 . Member of a well-known Venetian family, which supplied some Doges to the city.

4 . I have not been able to identify this place.

5 . Properly, Pasha.

6 . I have not been able to identify this term.



burns everything in this realm/ and he thought that his rule had been lost./ He [therefore] sent one of his sons named Catello/ a brave man with four thousand men/who came at Tacaro [sic; Tokat?]/ where a battle took place/ on a plain called Mesto,/ but in reality that location was another Roncivalle<sup>1</sup>,/ because here also a big battle took place/ because the Sophy defeated the Turk and killed thirty thousand persons/ as well as the son of the Turkish ruler.<sup>2</sup>/ Immediately this news tiding spread throughout the entire country/and in one month's time he took it/except for the town of Astur/which was surrounded on one side by a large river/ and as big as Napoli./ In it there were many troops of the kingdom who had gathered there/ and thus they lay there for some days/ until a bare foot monk made a bridge through craft/ because they could not cross the water/and the monk enabled three hundred persons to pass at one time/when the army crossed/ then it rested for four or five days/ and thereafter they say/ he savagely stormed it/ for eight or nine hours/ so that the dead bodies became ladders./ He is the first one/ who attacks/ and he behaves in the following manner before he goes to battle./ He kneels on the ground/ and raises his hands to heaven/ and prays to God/ and the others, all those that are his, act in the same way./ When they have gotten up he then immediately begins the attack/in this manner that he never leaves the battle/ until he is the victor or dead./ In the city died about eighty thousand persons of his,/ he took the city and he had them all killed with the scimitar/ so that it is estimated/ that about two hundred thousand persons died there/ in the [end of page 15] manner/ that he did not withdraw/ until he had won six kingdoms./ Thereafter he marched against the kingdom of Messor<sup>3</sup>/ where he mustered his men/ and found that he had forty thousand horse/ and sixty thousand foot/ and in the kingdom the Turkish soldiers fled before him/ because he had so many men whose number truly is countless./ They follow him everywhere/

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1 . This refers to the battle of Roncesvalles in Spain, where, according to the 'Song of Roland', Charlemagne left a small band of soldiers commanded by Roland to defend the pass at Roncesvalles, which they did to the last man against a superior force of Saracens. It is an epic case of the utmost heroism.

2 . The author of this letter invented this story, which continues until the end of this letter, because there was no battle between Esmā'il and the son of the Turkish Soltan, in which the latter died. Also, none of the other events described there occurred. The intent of the author clearly was to raise hope for a second front in the rear of the Ottomans, which would weaken their penetration into Europe. On this subject, see the Introduction of this article.

3 . Perhaps Messon, if so, then it is Amasiya.

without recompense/ and immediately after they had won that kingdom/ they converted to our religion/before he demanded it from them./ They have now taken twelve kingdoms/ and he always wins them without slaughter and storming,/ because they believe he is a miraculous man./ He had a road cut through a mountain/ named Gazello<sup>1</sup>,/ the most terrible [one],/ with manual labor/ to march into the kingdom of Intrue<sup>2</sup>,/ which he traversed easily/ and if he had not made them cut through that mountain/ he would have had to take a roundabout way of about two hundred miles./ Nobody has been able to govern this kingdom of Intrue/ reason why its people are lawless, very savage and strange. This land produces the Mosto pearls/and other precious stones and the people dress like those in Curtica<sup>3</sup>/ and wear dragon skin as armor to protect themselves/ and on that several shields of tanned leather/ four or five lamb [skins] are needed for one [shield]/ and they are men without fear/ entirely naked/ from birth onwards very strong./ Because of this they have put up much resistance against him/ such that they expelled the Sophi from their lands about four times.

Finally the Sophi had many fireworks made/ in this way that he was able to wreak much death,/ but more among his own than among their people,/ but before he brought them and his banner/ they had to swear to him/ and gave him fifty thousand men of their own/ who are as good as one hundred thousand of the others/ and he immediately departed from this kingdom/ and came to the kingdom of Papallonia [sic; Babilonia or Iraq]/ that he very easily conquered./ There he found many savage people/, but rich in gold and silver,/ whom he now holds as his own people./ In this kingdom he had built two strong castles/ in whose entrance/ they made [guard?] houses./ He then moved to the kingdom of Silinche<sup>4</sup>, which he took/ and where he had many people killed/ as to one part and as to the other part/ he had found many Jews/ whom he had all killed [end of page 16] And he also found there many Christians/ whom he treated very well/ and he took many of them with him./ They have cast cannon for him/in such a manner/ that the Turk is very much upset/ and does not know what he should do./ He had wanted to give him

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1 . I hav not been able to identify this mountain, which probably is fictitious.

2 . I have not been able to identify this place.

3 . I have not been able to identify this place.

4 . Seleucia in Cilicia, now called Silifke (Mersin Province - Turkey).

the entire empire of Trabisonda/and two million gold pieces/ on condition that he would return again to Persia./ Therefore he has decided to take all of his land/of which the least one is the kingdom of Trabisonda/and the Turk has mobilized all his forces/and it does not help him much/ because on a daily basis he takes his land/ in such a way/ that it is an incredible thing to see/ such a large an army and with some many troops.<sup>1</sup>/ He leads twenty thousand horse with the cannon/with it are several Christians./ In this way/ that the Romans never had such an army as this/ apart from the cannon./ He still has to win one kingdom./ Here is it said/ that if he wins/ then he will march against Constantinople./ and thereafter to the Slavic lands./ And he wants to make a law/ to set free/ the Christians in the towns that the Turk holds/and wants to come to Rome/it is believed to have himself baptized there/ and to kiss the feet of our Pontiff./ Then to march to the kingdom of Alla vallona<sup>2</sup>/and take away this other part from the Turk./ It is said that he wants to give a gift of all these things to the Church of God./ Verily brother this is not even one thousand of a part/ because so great is his power/ of this man/ that one hears about him ever more/ that it is truly thought an impossible thing to believe/when I wrote this./ The same day a new tidings has come/that Prester John marches through India<sup>3</sup> and is coming now to Jerusalem/with four times hundred thousand Indians/ in this manner/that the great Khan takes great precautions in Jerusalem/ for it is believed that he wants to conquer Christ's tomb/which deed is God's will./ I do not write more about these matters/I hope in God to be with you in September/or in March next year,/ if not in September./ I beg you to

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1 . According to *Le baptesme*, Esma'il was marching to Trabisonde in 1508. However, according to Ottoman sources, in 1510, Esma'il sent a raiding party under one of his half-brothers against Trabson. Prince Selim killed many of them and took Esma'il's half-brother prisoner. Bacque-Gramont 1987, p. 24.

2 . In the original a la Valona, i.e. to Valona, which probably refers to Valona or Vlorë, a town and port in S.W. Albania, the center of the principality of Valona that included the town of Valona, Berat and Fier. The principality was held by the Ottomans since 1417.

3 . Prester John, the legendary Christian king popular in European chronicles and tradition from the 12th century onwards. Prester John was supposed to live in India (later in Ethiopia), and, although separated from Christendom in the West by a number of powerful Moslem states, he not only was able to defend his own lands, but regularly was depicted as coming to the assistance of the Christians threatened by the Turk. Beckingham, Charles. *Prester John, the Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, Aldershot 1996; Silverberg, Robert, *The Realm of Prester John*, Ohio University Press, 1996.

write me through the de Sauli Bank<sup>1</sup> in Venice/ about some of the events in Italy,/ as I wish to know/ how they develop/ and give my regards to Master Paolo/ and tell him/than when I come/that I will bring him things/from the Levant. May God always protect you against evil in Damascus. Printed in Augsburg by Erhart ogling.

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1 . This refers to the Genoese bank founded by Domenico Sauli, an important merchant-banker.

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