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## FROM DUSK TO DAWN, THE UNUSUAL DONANMA FOR THE BIRTH OF THE SULTAN'S DAUGHTER IN 1761<sup>1</sup>

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Childbirths within ruling dynasties became matter of public interest, since they ensured the biological and genealogical continuation of the dynast. They were usually the cause for extensive celebrations, as their importance transcended the mere familial nature of a regular birth. In many cultures, these public celebrations assumed an unprecedented and varied degree of grandiosity, length and cost. The Ottoman Empire was certainly no exception to this, but how did the Ottoman sultans publicly celebrate these events? And what was the significance of these celebrations for the dynasty, elites, commoners and foreign representatives?

In order to answer these questions, I examined reports written by the *chargé d'affaires* of the Republic of Ragusa to Istanbul Pietro Cingria (Petar Čingrija in Croatian). Cingria was a Ragusan merchant who was well acquainted with the reality of the Ottoman capital, not only because he remained in charge for more than a decade, from 1755 to 1768, but also due to his marriage to a woman of Levantine heritage.<sup>2</sup> As such, with his background, experience and family connections, he knew Istanbul well and had access to a great deal of information.

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<sup>2</sup> Miović, *Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Dubrovnik*, 196.

Cingria reported a number of imperial births, but I have chosen in one particular, which shows noteworthy features. It took place in 1761, during the rule of Mustafa III, and was described in more detail than other imperial births. The Ragusan diplomat, as well as other foreign representatives or chroniclers, indicated the public celebrations connected to the birth of an imperial offspring with the word “donanmà”, which in Ottoman Turkish simply meant “decoration of the streets of a city”. This term was used for celebrations that could be proclaimed not only for a birth of sultan’s progeny, but also for other important religious or secular reasons.<sup>3</sup>

The *donanma* for a newborn child was an occasion for public rejoicing, but probably even more so than other events it offered the occasion for the elite class to demonstrate their support to the ruling dynasty, as their loyalty would certainly be put to a test.

Let’s start with some background by way of Sultan Mustafa III’s ascension to the throne at the end of 1757. His two predecessors (and cousins) Mahmud I and Osman II, neither of whom had children, ruled from 1730 to 1754 and from 1754 to 1757 respectively. The last sultan with a family was Mustafa’s father, Ahmed III, who fathered 45 children, the youngest born in 1732. When the first daughter of Mustafa III was born in 1759, Istanbul had not witnessed an imperial birth for nearly three decades, so as a result great and sumptuous celebrations took place.<sup>4</sup> According to Baron de Tott, since celebrations for the birth of an Ottoman princess normally only consisted in revelries on the sea, these great festivities were an exception to the rule, organized to celebrate the break of “a long sterility” rather than just the princess’ birth.<sup>5</sup>

When in March 1761 Cingria informed the Ragusan government that one of the women of the harem was pregnant, he confirmed that the gender of the newborn would have determined the extent of the festivities. He wrote that according to general hearsay the odds were in favour of a boy. Had this been the case, large celebrations were expected not only in Istanbul but throughout the whole empire. However, should a princess be born, these would have been restricted to the “only Gates of the Seraglio”.<sup>6</sup>

After the joy with the birth of his first daughter in 1759, along with the break

<sup>3</sup> Ménage, “Donanma”, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 2, 615. Girolamo Vignola, secretary of the Venetian Bailo in Constantinople described the public celebrations for the conquest of Yerevan in 1725. Vignola also mentioned the distinction between the *donanma* “da terra” and the one “da mar”. The former implied all the celebrations in the streets and on land, whilst the latter involved ceremonies, fireworks (and even a re-enactments of the battle in this case) made at sea. Pedani, *Relazioni di ambasciatori veneti*, 876. A recently published volume by Sinem Erdoğan İşkorkutan offers an updated overview on the research on Ottoman festivals in general. Erdoğan İşkorkutan, *Imperial Circumcision*, 18-23. The volume itself is a significant contribution to the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Cingria wrote that the celebrations were so solemn that “nothing like that had ever been seen in Constantinople”. Pietro Cingria to Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1759), Državni Arhiv u Dubrovniku (hereinafter DAD), *Diplomata et Acta* (hereinafter *DeA*), 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3165, n. 56, foll. 1v-2r.

<sup>5</sup> de Tott, *Mémoires*, 1, 150n1.

<sup>6</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n. 2, fol. 2v.

of such a long dry spell providing with a renewed confidence in Mustafa's ability to produce children,<sup>7</sup> two years later the sultan's focus turned to his impatience for a son.<sup>8</sup>

## THE PREPARATIONS

No imperial order for a public festival had yet been issued, but the preparations were in full swing and everyone was busy with these according to the "force, and the convenience" of each person.<sup>9</sup> In all this uncertainty the only sure thing was the great deal of expenditure "among all the classes and orders of this little world".<sup>10</sup>

The ministers were the ones more engaged as they were "studying the way to invent something new" to please and impress the sultan.<sup>11</sup> What struck Cingria the most was the scale and pace of the preparations, despite the fact that the sultan was still silent about the celebrations.<sup>12</sup> Even the foreign diplomats, who were also supposed to participate in the festival, had not been provided with any information, as the instruction was to first wait for the birth and then enter in the "disposition of the universal glee".<sup>13</sup>

In this frenzied atmosphere the sultan apparently kept conducting his business as usual, expanding his incomes and going out on horseback to inspect several parts "of this vast metropolis" every day, looking for those items on which he could impose new duties and taxes, while leaving the administration of the government to the Grand Vizier.<sup>14</sup>

## BIRTH AND CELEBRATIONS

On 11<sup>th</sup> April Cingria wrote that the delivery was imminent and that the expenses for the *donanma* were very high.<sup>15</sup> The event took place only few days later, but Cingria only reported it on 9<sup>th</sup> May and placed this news at the opening of his letter, which was normally devoted to the most compelling and important issues. The birth was also singled out by the simultaneous occurrence of Ramadan, which had put all other business "in oblivion". High hopes and great expectations for a male heir were dashed, since on 19<sup>th</sup> April a girl was brought into the world, saluted for three days

<sup>7</sup> Pietro Cingria to Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1759), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3165, n. 56, fol. 1v.

<sup>8</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n. 2, fol. 2v.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 2v.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 3r.

<sup>11</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n. 3, foll. 1v-2r.

<sup>12</sup> "e tutto ciò senza che sin a quest'ora sia emanato alcun commando della Porta tendente a preparativi tanto straordinari et strepitosi." *Ibid.*, fol. 2r.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 2r.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 2r.

<sup>15</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Constantinople, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n. 4, fol. 4r.

in a row by cannon fire. The child was the second-born daughter of the sultan and was named Şah Sultan.<sup>16</sup>

The disappointment connected to her gender was evident:

[...] Per tutto il corso della notte non si seppe à che tenersi: fù sparsa la voce senz'eccezione che fosse uscito alla luce un Prencipe, mà in seguito trà discorsi ambigui e masticati, convenne dichiararsi, et esporre alla pubblica notorietà la nascita poco gradita d'una Principessa. Per raddolcire questo boccone d'amarrezza, immantinente fu propalata la gravidanza d'un'altra Sultana, che frà 5 a 6 mesi prometteva di dar un successore all'Imperio [...].<sup>17</sup>

The day after the birth, the solemnity of the *donanma* was finally proclaimed. At first, everybody thought the celebrations were to follow a much lower profile, but things turned into something very different. Cingria attributed the following unfolding of events to the desire of the ministers to please the sultan, which in turn unleashed the rest of the population in indulging in pomp, with setting precious ornaments made of fabric and other expensive decorations.<sup>18</sup>

In his description, Cingria makes one understand that once the celebrations began, the initial disappointment turned into a “general mania”, as he underlined the remarkable fact that people of more modest condition were spending more than the wealthy and that nobody restrained expenditures until the end of the festival.<sup>19</sup>

A visual element of great impact were the lights that illuminated throughout the night:

[...]“tutti li Seragli, moschee, mercati, botteghe et altri luochi pubblici e con tal affluenza di popolo che sin all'alba non è possibile di romper la calca per caminare per le strade.[...].<sup>20</sup>

As this *donanma* occurred during the month of Ramadan, it was possible to celebrate only from the sunset to the sunrise.

However, not everyone was willing to share such a joy and expenses. Cingria

<sup>16</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n.5, foll. 1r-1v. The daughters of the sultans could not access to the throne, but by no means they were relegated to a passive and segregated life. Boyar, “Political Visibility of Ottoman Women”, 230-252. There is not much information on Şah Sultan, but after being betrothed twice at a very early age, she was given in marriage to an Ottoman notable at the age of 17 and was very active throughout her life. *Çağatay Uluçay, Padişahların kadınları ve kızları, 153-154.*

<sup>17</sup> “[...] Throughout the night it was impossible to understand [what happened]: rumours spread that with no doubt a Prince was born, but afterwards between ambiguous and chewed speeches, it was necessary to admit and bring to the public knowledge the little welcome birth of a Princess. To sweeten this bite of bitterness, it was immediately divulged the pregnancy of another Sultana, who within 5 or 6 months promised to give a successor to the Empire [...]”. Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n.5, fol. 1v.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 1v.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 2v.

<sup>20</sup> “[...] all the Seraglios, mosques, markets, shops and other public places and with such a turnout of people that until dawn it is not possible to break the crowd to walk in the streets [...]”. *Ibid.*, fol. 1v.

mentioned that several people claimed to be ill or absent, but unfortunately for them the sultan pushed everyone to celebrate, and orders imposed that even those who were distant from the capital “or even dead”, the latter through their heirs, had to contribute to the “universal cheerfulness” according to their status and wealth.<sup>21</sup>

Another element that stunned the Ragusan diplomat was that good public order was observed by all. In these few strokes, Cingria depicted Istanbul of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a city which was the mirror of the empire, with an extremely rich and multi-confessional diversity and teeming with foreigners:

[...]Quello che reca però somma meraviglia è il buon ordine osservato sulla solennità; più di 400 milla huomini, sparsi per le contrade di quest’immensa Città, sono in piedi dal tramonto sin al levar del sole, fra danze, tripudij, soni di tromba, timpani, ecc. e la più gran mischia di tutte le nazioni [...].<sup>22</sup>

Cingria wrote that this atmosphere could be the perfect environment to encourage crimes such as “thefts, murders and brawls”, but neither of these, nor any minor disturbances, took place. There were “no arguments, no insults, but not even a Turk raising his voice against a Raya” (infidel), with Muslims offering to any stranger whatsoever refreshments such as sorbets, sweetmeats, coffees and similar.<sup>23</sup> Cingria added that, to preserve the law and order, the authorities reinforced the number of the guards in the streets on the basis of the “quality and quantity of the inhabitants” and that only the women had the privilege “to have company in public during the *donanmas*.”<sup>24</sup> Though the festival was said to last five days, it actually ended after ten, including three days of fireworks on the sea.<sup>25</sup>

The elites, especially government ministers, did not pay mind to the expenses of the celebrations. The Grand Vizier paid more than 90 bags<sup>26</sup> just for the illumination of his palace, whilst other notables spent in proportion to their office and wealth.<sup>27</sup> Cingria reported that the European diplomats had used more moderation. The only exception was the Prussian minister, who did “something more than ordinary” as he hired “a Coffee seller, another one of Sorbets and a third one of sweet things”, so as to distribute these delicacies to all those who asked for some, with the total cost exceeding 5,000 piastres, a small fortune.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., fol. 1v-2r.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] What stuns the most is the good order observed for the solemnity; more than 400 thousand people, scattered through the neighbourhoods of this immense City, who are standing from the sunset to the sunrise, among dances, jubilation, sounds of trumpets, timpani, etc. and the biggest mix of all the nations [...]”. Ibid., fol. 2r.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., fol. 2r.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., fol. 2r. On the policing of the streets of Istanbul, see Wishnitzer, “Shedding new light”, 68. Zarinebaf, *Crime and Punishment*, 125-140.

<sup>25</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n.5, foll. 2r-2v.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Baron de Tott, one bag corresponded to 500 Ottoman piastres that in turn could be converted for 1,500 French livres. de Tott, *Mémoires*, 1, 156n1.

<sup>27</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Pera of Constantinople, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n.5, fol. 2r.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., fol. 2r.

Even weeks after the end of the celebrations Cingria kept writing about this *donanma*. He stressed some negative consequences on the poorer classes, as after days of “forced celebrations” they definitely suffered the financial burden of the event. He also wrote about the deposition of the *ağa* of the Janissaries, who was “disgraced and exiled” and sent “on a boat transporting coal to Rodosto” (Tekirdağ). Cingria added that this man’s fall was the consequence of the “sultan’s curiosity”, who delighted himself by going around the city *in incognito* to observe the celebrations. At some point he passed by the barracks of the Janissaries, where, in stark contrast from what could be seen in the rest of the city, the sultan found “a kind of disgusted and sad silence”, with no lights, few guards, and no entertainment or gestures of hospitality. The day after he questioned the men in the barracks, who replied they had done enough to celebrate the birth of the princess, since they were in a state of poverty and need. Upon hearing this answer, the sultan deposed the *ağa* and sent money to the whole corps of the Janissaries as a “donation for the efforts they suffered in the festival of the Donanmà”.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

An aspect that strongly emerges from Cingria’s account is the behaviour of the elites, that with their lavish preparations were willing to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to the ruling dynasty and legitimise their position, as well as their standing in the social hierarchy. This behaviour would most likely be even more pronounced in the presence of a sultan like Mustafa III, who was known for riding *incognito* around the city monitoring the elites’ behaviour, as the removal of the *ağa* of Janissaries demonstrated.

As previously noted, the foreign representatives were to participate in the festival. Such an occurrence could also be a prime occasion for diplomats to stand out and gain the favour of the sultans. Cingria spotlighted the energetic efforts to honour the occasion by the Prussian representative Karl Adolf von Rexin. His enthusiasm might be justified by the fact that at the beginning of the 1761 he was very likely in the final negotiations that led to the first Ottoman-Prussian *ahdname* (or capitulation), which was finally achieved in July of that year. He was in fact tasked by Frederick the Great to seal a commercial treaty and an alliance with the sultan.<sup>30</sup>

It is evident the *donanma* for the birth of an imperial offspring was indeed an occasion that carried a strong political significance and allowed the sultan to find a moment of unity with his subjects. The people’s expression of happiness for the continuity of the dynasty was certainly one of the ways the rulers also found legitimacy for their position. As Rhoads Murphy noted, only from the interactions

<sup>29</sup> Pietro Cingria to the Republic of Ragusa, (Constantinople, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1761), DAD, *DeA*, 18<sup>th</sup> c., 3166, n. 6, fol. 1v.

<sup>30</sup> Aksan, “Ottoman Portrait of Frederick the Great”, 205-206.

with the public “could the sultan acquire real power, which resulted not from a radiating outwards of power hereditarily assumed by a secluded and isolated monarch, but from a collecting inwards of power which had to be acquired through an interactive process”.<sup>31</sup> I would add that in the specific case of Mustafa III the celebration of the birth offered additional legitimacy to the ruler, who wanted to show he was further able to procreate and therefore biologically ensure the future of the dynasty. Probably this might also explain the extension of the festival, an attempt to encourage a prolonged contact with his subjects.

Another element used to emphasise this unity were the illuminations. In normal times the use of artificial lights, coming not only from the lanterns but also generated by fireworks, in a city where the dark usually overwhelmed the urban space once the sun set, was a privilege of the elites and its use was a status symbol.<sup>32</sup> A *donanma* offered the rare occasion to share the light with the rest of the population. On the one hand this might be seen as a concession from the ruling classes to the commoners for the occasion, but on the other its significance might also be a sort of elevation of the whole city, where elites, and people of the most disparate condition were able to share a bright common and ceremonial space outside the walls of the palaces to celebrate the event, while identifying with the ruling household and its achievements.

It is possible that the *donanma* for the birth of Şah Sultan was brighter than others as it fell during Ramadan, and as Avner Wishnitzer reminded “one of the most important features of Ramadan nights was their illumination”, a tradition known as *mahya*.<sup>33</sup>

Thus this case, when scrutinised, indeed had an unusual scenario since the celebrations could only take place after dark. This situation clearly created the fascinating atmosphere that Cingria described in detail and favoured a further extensive use of lights, since the *donanma* added to what already took place for Ramadan.

The light also offered an occasion to women to be in the streets during night time, as they were normally not allowed to do that without risking their reputation.<sup>34</sup> As such, the *donanma* seemed to work as a sort of extension of the daylight, or in this specific case as an alternative daylight, since the religious prescriptions for Ramadan did not allow people to benefit from the regular one. The *donanma* waived several rules, and this sharing between the classes can be seen symbolically as an exceptional moment in time.

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<sup>31</sup> Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Wishnitzer, “Shedding New Light”, 69-72.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 69. Boyar, “Ottoman Female Public Presence”, 188.



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