



E. Natalie Rothman. - *The Dragoman Renaissance: Diplomatic Interpreters and the Routes of Orientalism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2021), 419p.

E. Natalie Rothman's *The Dragoman Renaissance: Diplomatic Interpreters and the Routes of Orientalism* is a comprehensive survey of the Istanbul-based diplomatic translator-interpreters, known as the dragomans, who accompanied European ambassadors on their audiences and acted, ritually, as their mouth and ears, mediating the unfolding ceremony. As a foreignizing loanword, "dragoman," reveals its Mediterranean roots, being traced to the cognates *targemān*, *turgeman*, *dragoumanos*, *tarjumān*, *tarjomān*, and *tercüman* in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish, respectively.

Combining the prosopographical study of dragomans' kinship and social networking strategies with an in-depth exploration of the texts and images they produced, the book situates the articulation of a field of Ottomanist knowledge in relation to contemporary Mediterranean diplomacy and scribal and print cultures. Through this combined methodology the book offers a more fine-grained periodization of changes in European understandings of Ottoman society, politics, history, and religion. Rothman's book therefore aims at answering the following questions: Who were the dragomans? Where did they hail from, and what were, exactly, their missions? How were they represented and perceived by contemporary political and diplomatic circles in Istanbul and beyond, and what roles did they play in systematizing and circulating knowledge of the Ottoman Empire, its histories, languages, and societies?

Contemporary diplomatic correspondence from Istanbul bears out the important role of dragomans in framing the Ottoman world for their employers through daily material and textual practices. European scholars who sojourned in the Ottoman Empire in search of ancient manuscripts, artifacts, and inscriptions similarly show in their accounts a heavy reliance on local intermediaries, especially embassy dragomans, in their scientific endeavors. Sojourners' accounts tended to focus on the practical nature of such mediation, for example in acting as guides and in obtaining permits for archeological excavations from Ottoman officials.

Rothman delves into the dialectical relationship between several processes that gave shape to the Venetian dragomanate by illustrating the importance of dragomans' positionality for emergent trans-imperial practices of diplomatic knowledge production. The author first situates the evolution of the institution of the dragomanate itself at the intersection of Venetocentric, circum-Mediterranean, and Ottomancentric practices for mediating language and power. She then considers why and how dragomans became central to Venetian-Ottoman diplomacy, that

is how dragomans' sources of recruitment and modes of socialization gave shape to particular modalities of diplomatic knowledge production.

The author then probes into different texts translated or produced by dragomans to examine the hermeneutic strategies that dragoman authors developed for representing Islamicate – Ottoman as well as Safavid, and metropolitan as well as provincial – sociocultural practices within a Venetocentric, humanistically inflected political vocabulary. She considers how four Venetian dragomans' reports from official diplomatic missions, or *relazioni*, articulated the relationship between their object of observation and their authorized public. From the Latinate root "to relate", *Relationi* – translations of Ottoman charters, grammar books, and even pictorial representations – aimed to provide a highly conventionalized report about a foreign court as seen through the eyes of an official Venetian representative.

Rothman moves to consider Venetian dragomans' practices of visual (self-) representation by comparing two sets of artifacts. The first is a miniature album of ca. 1660, whose visual program and narrative luster reveal dragomans' trans-imperial view on Istanbul and on Venetian-Ottoman history. The second is a cluster of more than a dozen large oil portraits of dragomans of the Tarsia-Carli-Mamuca della Torre families and their spouses, produced at the turn of the eighteenth century and hung in their ancestral palaces in Koper and Poreč (today in Slovenia and Croatia, respectively). Despite their contrasting media and intended audience, both miniatures and portraits use the visual conventions of their respective genres to offer a concordant sense of dragomans' self-presentation and positionality as proper Ottoman Catholic urbane elite.

After underscoring the centrality of dragomans to the diplomatic institutions through which knowledge about the Ottomans circulated from Istanbul to other sites of intellectual production, the author then explores the role of the dragomanate in the very introduction of the Ottoman Turkish language into an emergent Orientalist curriculum. She takes up dragomans' role in the institutionalization of Ottoman language studies in Europe, tracing their substantial output of Ottoman-language grammars, dictionaries, lexicons, and vocabularies. The author also contrasts dragomans' works with those of other professional groups, particularly seminary-trained missionaries and university-trained philologists, and separate their unique contributions to the study of the Ottoman language and its ideological framing.

Rothman surveys dragomans' translational oeuvre to underscore its embedding in a rich intertextual web. Moving beyond cataloging what dragomans translated, the author asks how they did so. By contrasting two dragomans' divergent translations of the same sultanic decree, and by tracing the evolution over time in dragomans' translations of Ottoman historical works, Rothman considers how specific translation practices such as glossing, commensurating, and voicing related to individual dragomans' intimate ties to multiple bureaucratic elites and imperial institutions.

These ideas are further foregrounded more when Rothman explores the unique features of dragomans' participation in a sprawling Republic of Letters. She has charted the long temporal arc of dragomans' translation and publication activities,

positioning them squarely within an emergent Ottomanist field of knowledge. That field's specialized work practices and regimes of circulation, deep embedding in a courtly and diplomatic Istanbulite milieu, and, especially, dragomans' centrality to it, have been largely forgotten – a testament to the multiple erasures at work in the articulation of modern disciplines.

The Dragoman Renaissance offers two substantial contributions to our understanding of diplomacy, mediation, and even incipient Orientalism in the early modern Mediterranean. First, it challenges Eurocentric assumptions still pervasive in Renaissance studies by showing the centrality of Ottoman imperial culture to the articulation of European knowledge about the Ottomans. By studying the sustained interactions between dragomans and Ottoman courtiers in this period, Rothman, therefore, destabilizes common ideas about a singular moment of “cultural encounter,” as well as about a “docile” and “static” Orient, acted upon by extraneous imperial powers. Second, Rothman creatively uncovers how dragomans mediated Ottoman ethno-linguistic, political, and religious categories to European diplomats and scholars, showing how these intermediaries did not simply circulate fixed knowledge. Rather, their engagement of Ottoman imperial modes of inquiry and social reproduction shaped the discipline of Orientalism for centuries to come.

Rothman's riveting study contributes to a broader effort to decenter a once dominant Eurocentric and scholastic vision of the Republic of Letters in general, and of early modern Orientalism in particular. It also critically spotlights a still pervasive tendency to treat “center” and “periphery” as stable and binary categories that can be mapped onto distinct institutional spaces. Dragomans were not, at least *prima facie*, “typical” Ottoman subjects. *The Dragoman Renaissance* challenges both the spatial and temporal boundaries of Orientalism. It suggests, first, that the genealogies of Orientalist epistemologies and methodologies, while profoundly shaped by Enlightenment scientific preoccupations and by myriad colonial endeavors thereafter, have longer routes that twist, *inter alia*, through the inter-imperial contest of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean and its reworkings over a long seventeenth century.

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