Venice and Crete: 
Documents from the XVIth to XVIIIth Centuries

by Dionysios Hatzopoulos

Nineteen manuscripts, all containing official documents, are presented in this article. They refer to Venetian involvement and presence in the Levant, mainly in Crete. They cover the period between the end of sixteenth and the beginning of eighteenth centuries, when the struggle with the Ottomans had reached its most critical point. The documents mention the activities of members of the Mormori, Cattaneo and Michieli families. In addition, a legal document is presented: a "livello" (long term lease) executed in Crete.


Venetian rule in Crete or Candia, as it was also known then, from the name of the capital city, dated from the first decade of the thirteenth century (Figure 1). The collapse of the Byzantine Empire, following the occupation of Constantinople by the knights of the fourth crusade in 1204, was followed by the distribution of Byzantine territories among the victors. Crete was initially given to Boniface of Montferrat who, in turn, sold the island to Venice in August 1204.1

While the Republic's initial interest was limited to the use of the island's main harbours, especially that of the capital city of Candia, now Herakleion, by the long haul convoys plying the sea lanes between Venice and the Levant, the final elimination of the Byzantine state by the Ottomans, in 1453, changed the area's geopolitical realities. Venice faced now a strong expansionist state. This, and the fact that the local Greek population, especially the Greek speaking nobility, could no longer refer to an independent Greek political center, brought a mutual change of attitudes.

Relations between the Venetian masters and the local population improved, especially among the upper and middle classes. Many Greeks served Venice faithfully and fought against the common enemy down to the bitter end in 1669, when the island, after a protracted struggle, was finally occupied by the Ottomans.

The administrative system in Crete was based on the metropolitan one. The central administration—Regimen—sat in Candia and was composed of three members: the Duke and two councillors. They were appointed by the Venetian Senate for a period of two years. In the fourteenth century the island was divided in four administrative districts (territoria): Candia, Canea, Rethymno and Siteia. The office of Provveditor General, combining military and administrative authority, was introduced in 1569.2 Local nobility, Italian and Greek speaking, had limited authority, being only consulted in its collective bodies: the Consilium Feudatorum, the Maggior Consilium and the Consilium Rogatorum.3
Noua Græcia, secundum omnes eius regiones & provincias citra & ultra Hellepontum.

Figure 1. From Sebastian Münster's Cosmographia, ca. 1544.
Venice and Crete

During the four centuries of Venetian administration Cretan society remained almost unchanged. It was strongly stratified, with the local nobility at the top (nobili), followed by the urban middle class (cittadini). The bottom of the social scale was occupied by the urban poor (plebe) and the peasants, either free or serfs (contadini, villani).

A few years ago I published with commentary three Venetian manuscripts, seen at McGill and initially recorded by Seymour de Ricci, concerning Emmanuel Mormori, a Cretan officer in the service of the Venetian Republic in the sixteenth century. Recently, I was pleasantly surprised to be told by Dr. Richard Virr, Curator of Manuscripts, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, that the Department preserves a number of uncatalogued Venetian manuscripts. As a researcher I was gratified with the study and analysis of these new manuscripts which further increased my respect for McGill’s as yet relatively unknown and uncatalogued collection of manuscripts.

To the three published Mormori manuscripts are now added seven referring to other members of the family. Among them one refers again to Emmanuel. The three published manuscripts have now been re-catalogued and are part of the Mormori family manuscripts. These manuscripts are followed by five referring to the activities of the Veneto-Cretan Cattaneo family; also by three referring to Donato Michieli, an army engineer, and finally by a “livello” (long term lease) executed in Candia in the late sixteenth century. With the exception of the introductory and closing sentences, which are in Latin, the rest of the texts are composed in Italian.

MORMORI FAMILY

The Mormori family referred to in ten documents (MS 687) came, originally, from Naflion, in the Peloponnese. The first known Mormori was a wealthy landlord, whose first name was Emmanuel. He was married, in the late fifteenth century, to a lady from the powerful feudal family of Buas.

Following the capture of the Venetian possessions in the Peloponnese by the Ottomans in November 1540, the Mormoris fled Naflion. Members of the family settled in the Ionian islands, along the Western coast of Greece, where they soon joined the local nobility; others settled in Venice, while another branch of the family moved to Crete. The Cretan Mormoris distinguished themselves in many fields of social activity. Thus, a Marco Mormori, a notary in Candia, is mentioned in 1555; a Giovanni Mormori, “ingegniero”, was killed in June 1571 during the siege of Ammochostos (Famagusta) by the Ottomans; an “Ioannes Marmorius cretensis” graduated from the University of Padua in 1581; Jacomo Mormori contributed financially to the Cretan participation in the battle of Lepanto and is mentioned in the manuscripts as commander of the “stradioti” stationed in Candia. Following his death he was succeeded in this position by his son Zorzi.

The family continued to be mentioned in seventeenth century records from Crete and Venice. Following the occupation of Candia by the Ottomans in 1669, they became, once more, refugees. The McGill manuscripts also mention two previously unknown eighteenth century descendants of the family: “capitano” Zorzi Mormori, in 1718, and “sargente maggiore” Antonio Mormori, in 1730.

The documents are:


r. “Aloysius Mocenigo Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc.…. Datae in N(ost)ro Ducali Palatio Die prima Junii, Indictione tertia, MDLXXV”.

Registrations in Crete: 24 May 1576, 25 May 1576.

v. “Nobilibus et sapientes viris Jacobo Fuscareno equiti Provisori g(e)n(eral)ali ac Inquisitori in regno nostro Cretae nec v(iri) Aloysio Justiniano Ducha et co(n)siliarii ac Paulo Cont(ar)ino cap(itane)o Cretae et eorum suc(cessori)bus”.

Note: “1575, del cavalire d’(omon) Zorzi M(ormori)”. 

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This Ducal letter informs Jacomo Foscarini, Provveditore Generale in Crete, Alvise Justiniano, Duke of Crete, and Paolo Contarini, Captain of Crete, about Zorzi Mormori’s appointment as Commander of the “stradioti” stationed in the island. He succeeded, in the position, his father Jacomo Mormori, who had recently died. The Doge informs the Cretan authorities about Zorzi’s distinguished record during the war against the Ottomans in 1570-71, and his subsequent reward with a “cattena d’oro di ducati cinquanta” and the title of cavaliere.

During or shortly before the plague epidemic which hit Crete from January 1592 to July 1594, Zorzi Mormori was named “sopraintendente alla sanità” for the city of Candia. He had almost dictatorial authority, overseeing and directing all activities related to health conditions in the city of Candia. During the period referred to by the manuscript Zorzi Mormori suffered heavily. Indeed, he lost many members of his family, including four sons. Filippo Pasqualigo recognized Mormori’s contribution and sacrifices and recommended him warmly to his successors.

By 1611 Zorzi Mormori had been serving the Republic for over thirty years. In the Ducal letter he is referred to as Commander of the fortress of Suda in Western Crete. He is given an annual salary increase of 100 ducats, from 500 “servendo” and 400 “non servendo” to 600 “servendo” and 500 “non servendo”. His house is referred to as “honoratissima casa”.

The note on the verso referring to the registration of the letter carries the signature of “Emanuel Mormori cavalier”. 11

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Figure 2. Doge Alvise Mocenigo, 1570-1577. From Leone Matina, Ducalis Regiae Lararium... Padua, 1659.
mentions Colonel Emmanuel Mormori’s appointment as Commander of the local Infantry units (“ordinanze”). He replaced Antonio Emiliani, from Ascoli, and was to receive an annual salary of 500 ducats.


r. “Nos Paschalis Ciconia, Dei Gratia, Dux Venetiarum, etc…./ Datae in Nostro Ducali Palatio Die IIIa Iulii, Indictione tertia, MDXC”.


The letter is addressed to Emmanuel Mormori by Doge Pasquale Cicogna. It sets out his responsibilities during the operations against Alfonso Piccolomini, Lord of Montemarciano. Mormori was to act in close collaboration with the Venetian authorities in Chioza, Adri, Loreo, Rovigo and elsewhere. His task was to act according to circumstances and avoid any disastrous encounter with the rebel. Besides his own infantrymen Mormori’s force was composed of Proveditore Grimani’s ten “cappeletti”, Captain Francesco Canuova’s Infantry unit, Gregorio Detrico’s fifty “cappeletti”, Giulio Savorgnan’s twenty light horsemen as well as by men put under his command by the Rectors of Chioza, Adri, Cavarzere and Loredo, who were described as bombard operators, militiamen or possessing other military skills. He was, furthermore, instructed to ask for any additional assistance he thought necessary. He was given liberty to take any necessary action required to prevent Piccolomini from entering Venetian held territory.12


r. “Joanis Cornelio Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc…./ Datae in Nostro Ducali Palatio die vigesima octava maii indictioni undecima, anno MDCCXVIII”.

v. “Nobili et sapienti viro Federico / Nani, Provvedori Generale in / Dalmatia”.

Federico Nani is informed that he has to facilitate the transport by sea of a cavalry unit (“stradioti”) dispatched from Dalmatia to Candia, as well as of the baggage of Emmanuel Mormori, who is also travelling to Candia.

The letter probably refers to Emmanuel Mormori’s return trip to Crete, following his participation in the military operations against Alfonso Piccolomini, a period from the middle of June 1590 to the 16th of March 1591, when the rebel was executed in Florence.


r. “Pascalis Ciconia, Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum, etc…./ Datae in Nostro Ducali Palatio, Die XVI Iulii, Indictione V, MDLXXXXII.”

v. “Nobili et sapienti viro Ioanni I Mocenigo Provvedori Nostro / Generali in Regno Cretae.”

Pasquale Cicogna informs Giovanni Mocenigo, “Proveditore Generale” in Crete, that Emmanuel Mormori will be placed under his command. He is to employ him according to the needs. Mormori’s annual salary amounts to six hundred ducats.


r. “Pascalis Ciconia Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc…./ …Data in Nostro Ducali Palatio die vigessima octava maii indictioni undecima, anno MDCCXVIII”.

v. no notes.

The letter refers to “capitano” Zorzi And. Mormori’s posting as “capitano de battaglione” in one of the units formed in Treviso and preparing to move to the Levant. The document fixes his monthly salary at 40 ducats. Zorzi And. Mormori is designated as “di famiglia nobile e distinta”.

Ms 687/10. Vellum, 446 × 307 mm. One column, 8 lines. Ducal letter issued on behalf of Antonio Mormori. Dated 18 July 1730.
Venice and Crete

Figure 3. Doge Leonardo Dona, 1606-1612. From Leone Matina, Ducalis Regiae Lararium...
Padua, 1659.
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Doge Alvise Mocenigo III (1722-1732).

r. "Aloysius Mocenigo Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc..../...Datae in Nostro Ducali Palatio die decima octava Julii, Indictione octava. MDCCXXX".

Follow registration notes.

v. no notes.

The letter refers to the appointment of Antonio Mormori to the position of “Sargente Maggiore” in the Regiment of the city of Rovigo. Mormori is already serving there and he commands a Company of the same Regiment. He is described as an able and efficient officer. This had been proven during the tests and military games performed in Verona.

CATTANEAO FAMILY

Manuscript 688/5 indicates that the Cattaneo family arrived in Crete with the first Venetian settlers. That mission (1210/11) was composed of 132 cavalieri and 48 sargenti. The “feudati” were given lands, houses and serfs (villani) attached to the land. Initially, the foreign, Italian speaking, nobility’s relations with the indigenous Greek speaking one were tense. Soon, however, from the early thirteenth century, compromises, agreements and Venetian concessions, melted the ice which separated the two aristocracies. A “nobilitas Cretense” emerged, having common socio-economic and political interests. Characteristically, manuscript 688/3, dating from 1692, still refers to Pietro Cattaneo as “nobil Cretense”.

The five McGill manuscripts (688) which refer to the Cattaneo family mention Giovanni Cattaneo’s heroic deeds during the Ottoman-Venetian struggle for control of Crete (1645-1669). During the war he lost his five brothers. It appears, from the documents, that Giovanni was the most important member of the family.

The family was in fact distinguished not only for the martial feats of its members, but also for the literary and intellectual preoccupations of some of its scions. Manuscript 688/5 mentions Giovanni’s son Tommaso professore...nell’ Universita nostra di Padova”, Tommaso born in Corfu in 1660, received his doctorate in Philosophy and Theology from the Collegio Romano. He next taught in Venice at the Collegio Greco Flangini; in 1686 the Senate offered him the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Padua. He taught there until 1710, when he returned to Venice. He died in 1725, leaving behind a strong reputation of scholarship and eloquence. His sons Giovanni and Pietro published his works posthumously (1736). Giovanni (1691-1761) is best known as opponent of the Enlightenment. He attacked the scientific and philosophic culture of his century and defended Catholicism with passion. He was convinced that very soon the whole edifice of modern astronomy was going to collapse (“non passera gran tempo, che tutto il vano dell’astronomia moderna cadera”). It is true, however, that during the final period of Venetian independence Cattaneo’s conservatism was widely emulated among his fellow citizens.

The documents are:


r. “Bertuccius Valerio Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc./...Data in Nostro Ducali Palatio Die Decima Martii, Indictione Decima MDCLVII. / Ant(onio) di Negri / Seg(retario)”.

On top and on left margin registrations at Corfu, Zante and Cephalonia.

v. no notes.

The letter mentions the heroic acts performed by “il capitan” Giovanni Cattaneo during the siege of Canea, where he lost five brothers, and his participation in the operations against the Ottomans in the Dardanelles, Monemvasia, Tenedos and Lemnos. Giovann’s salary is fixed to 400 ducats annually.


r. “Francescus Mavrogeno Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc./.../...Data in / N(ost)ro Ducali Palatio. Die decima Maii / Indictione decima quinta. MDCLXXXII”.

v. no notes.
Figure 4. Doge Nicolo Daponte, 1578-1585. From Leone Matina, Ducalis Regiae Lararium... Padua, 1659.
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This document mentions past services performed by “il Governator” Giovanni Cattaneo, during the war against the Ottomans. It also mentions the loss of his five brothers during the siege of Canea in 1645. Giovanni Cattaneo is now Governor of Bergamo. At the expiration of his term his annual salary will be fixed at 500 ducats.


r. “Franciscus Maurogeno Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc..../ Data in N(ost)ro Ducali Palatio. Die / sexta Augusti, Indictione Xma 5ta. MDCLXXXII / Felice Gallo Segreta rio”.

Followed by registration note.

The document refers to the participation of “il capitan” Pietro Cattaneo “nobil Cretense” and son of Giovanni Cattaneo in the last war against the Ottomans. Again Giovanni’s heroic deeds are mentioned and also, this time, his capture by the Turks. Pietro Cattaneo is named Commander for life of a Company of Corsican infantrymen.


r. “Aloysius Mocenigo Dei Gratia Dux Venetiarum etc..../ Data in Nostro Ducali Palatio die Tertia Martii Indictione Septima. MDCCXXVIV”.

Followed by registration notes.

v. Illegible note.

The document refers to Bernardin as the “unico in presente rimasto” descendant of the Cattaneo family. He is also the grand-son of Giovanni Cattaneo, whose deeds are again mentioned along with his brothers deaths during the siege of Canea in 1645. The Great Council feels that it has to reward, in the person of Bernardin, the noble Veneto-Cretan family for what its members did for the Republic. Bernardin, who now receives a foot-soldier’s pay, is to receive more, seven and a half ducats monthly, until he reaches the grade of Company Captain.

Ms 688/5. Vellum, 470 x 340 mm. One column, 30 lines. Memorandum about the activities of various members of the Cattaneo family. Based on “Libri, Chroniche, Decretti et Ducali dell Eccel(entissimo)mo Senato”. Composed by Francesco Bonamino “Publicus Venetiae Notarius”. Dated 30 August 1739.

r. “Punti pertinenti alla fammiglia Cattaneo, nobile Feudatoria Cretense /...et sign(at) abque Reg(istro)”. 

v. no notes.

This document records the arrival of the family in Crete in 1210. The Cattaneos were among the first Venetian settlers and this is supported by official documents. Two branches of the family are mentioned. The one that remained in Venice died out after 1400. Of the surviving branch, Giovanni Cattaneo and his five brothers who were killed in Canea, are again mentioned. His son Pietro is also mentioned followed by an account of his achievements during the wars against the Ottomans in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Tomaso Cattaneo, well known “professore...nell’Universita nostra di Padova”, is mentioned next. He is Giovanni’s son and Pietro’s brother also.

MICHIELI FAMILY

The Michieli or Michiel family appeared early in Venetian history. Three Doges, who belonged to the family, are mentioned in the XIth century: Vitale I (1096-1102), Domenico (1117-1129) and Vitale II (1156-1172). Among members of the family who were active in the Levant, are Giovanni, Venetian podesta in Constantinople in 1238, Domenico, active in Crete in 1355, Luca, provveditore in Crete in the 1570’s, and Marino, who fought against the Ottomans in 1668 and 1687.

The Michieli manuscripts (689) reflect events of the 1684-1718 war against the Ottomans, during which Venice annexed the Peloponnese (Treaty of Carlowitz, January 1699) to lose it again to the Ottomans by the Treaty of Passarowitz (July 1718). During operations in the Peloponnese, Donato Michieli served as army engineer, being wounded seven times.
Figure 5. Letter of Doge Francesco Morosini, 1688-1694. MS 6891/1.
The documents are:

Ms 689/1. Vellum, 670 × 405 mm. One column, 14 lines. Ducal letter referring to Donato Michieli. Dated 26 March 1692. Doge Francesco Morosini (1688-1694). (Figure 5) r. “Francescus Mauroceno Dei Gra(tia) Dux Venetiarum etc./... Data in Nostro Ducali Palatio. Dia vigessima sexta Martii, Indictione Xma / 5ta. MDCLXXXXII. / Felice Gallo seg(retario).

Followed by registration note: 28 August 1692.

v. Note: “No 3”.

Doge Morosini expresses his satisfaction with Donato Michieli’s contribution to the war effort in 1690. Michieli, an army engineer, had received a monthly salary of 40 ducats. An increase is now decreed and his new monthly salary will reach 50 ducats.


Followed by registration note: 12 July 1704.

v. “S. Collo(nelo) Dona Michieli”.

This Ducal letter cites Michieli’s accomplishments during the last war against the Ottomans. He served the Republic well and even carries, on his body, seven scars from wounds he received in the battles in which he participated in the Peloponnese. He has been given as a reward, the command for life of an army company stationed in the Venetian Terra Ferma. Michieli, however, wants to serve in Dalmatia and leave the command of his company to his son Angelo, who, in turn, will receive a Captain’s salary, his father having offered to serve in Dalmatia as a volunteer. His request is accepted and confirmed by the Ducal letter.


r. “Ioannes Cornelio, Dei Gratia, Dux Venetiarum, etc./... Data in Nostro Ducali Palatio. Die vigessima tertia Maii, Indictione 8a. MDCCXV”.

v. No notes.

By the year 1715 Donato Michieli had been serving in the army corps of engineers for thirty years. He had reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and had served the Republic faithfully, constantly providing proof of his skills. At the time of the letter, Michieli was serving in the Lagoon area, he was “Luogotenente Maggior” of Lido where he distinguished himself in finding ways to carry on efficiently his military and engineering duties. He was congratulated by the Doge.

A “Livello”.

Ms 690. Vellum, 332 × 400 mm. One column, 48 lines. First nine lines imperfect. Long term lease (Livello) contract between Zuan-Battista Pasqualigo, his brothers and Giacomo d'Artona, from Candia, for the amount of 52 ducats annually. Document composed by George Dafnomili, Notary. Dated 10 February 1589.

r. “In Christi Gloriosissimi Nomini Amen. Anno (n)ativitatis eiusdem Milles(s)i(mo) quin(g)essi(mo) ottag(essi)mno nono .../... Georgius Dafnomili (P)ub(li)cus Notarius manu (p)riora scripsit”.

v. “1589, 10 Feb(ruari)o. Liv(ellario)o fatto .../... per ducati 52 all’anno”.

The document provides a list of property to be leased by the absentee Pasqualigo landlords to Giacomo d'Artona from Candia, for the annual amount of 52 ducats, with all the legal terms and conditions attached, in accordance with the law. The terms of the lease are written by the Candiote notary George Dafnomili, and witnessed by four persons. The lease refers to sections of three fiefs: one situated in the district of “castel nuovo”, the second designated under the name of Fam(a)chia and the third under that of Giofirechia.

Venice was present in Crete for more than four and a half centuries, that is from 1204 until 1669. Its influence was pervasive and in many respects, especially cultural ones, positive. In fact the Venetian connection brought the island into the mainstream of European Renaissance. On a more practical scale the Republic clung to Crete, thus defending its
own geopolitical interests, with a tenacity being, at times, close to ruthlessness. The documents, catalogued and described here, reflect that presence and influence and contribute, in this capacity, to the long history of Venetian presence in the Levant and to its struggle against the Ottomans.

Acknowledgement: I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Richard Virr, Curator of Manuscripts, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, for bringing these manuscripts to my attention; for making them available to me; for showing a spirit of collegiality; and for being most helpful throughout.

7. The "stradioti", from the Greek word for soldier, formed lightly armed cavalry units. They were young men of Greek and Albanian origin. For centuries they were the backbone of the Venetian armies fighting in the Levant against the Ottomans. See: D. Nicol, *Byzantium and Venice: A study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, (Cambridge, 1988), 417; and, in A. Vacalopoulos, 'Ιστορία του νέου ελληνισμού, (Thessaloniki, 1968), vol. 3, 5-6, 26-31, where the nature and importance of the "stradioti" are examined extensively.
8. For information on the Mormori family see: I. K. Chassiotes, Οἱ Ἑλληνες στὶς παραμονές τῆς ναυμαχίας τῆς Ναυπάκτου Ἑκκλησίας ἐπαναστατικῆς κυψέλες καὶ ἐξεγέρσεις στὴν ἐλληνική χερσόνησο ἀπὸ τὶς παραμονές ὁς τὸ τέλος τοῦ
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11. Emmanuel Mormori is also referred to as Zorzi's brother. See: M. Lambrynides, 'Η Ναυτιλία από των ήρωών χρόνων μέχρι των καθ' ήμός (Athens, 1898), 98.


15. Canea was besieged by the Ottomans from June 24, 1645 to August 22, 1645, when it surrendered. See S. Romanin, Storia documentata di Venezia (Venice, 1855-1861), vol. 7, 359-364. The Straits, Monemvasia, Tenedos and Lemnos operations were conducted by the Venetians during the Venetian-Ottoman war, 1645-1669.

16. There seems to be, however, considerable uncertainty among authors concerning the exact dates of administration of early Venetian Doges.