

## **TARİHSEL AÇIDAN MARSİLİ’NİN ASKERİ - DİPLOMATİK KARİYERİ: BATI - DOĞU KARŞITLIĞI?**

### **MILITARY-DIPLOMATIC CAREER OF MARSILI FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: WEST VERSUS EAST?**

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**ÖZET:** Marsili’nin askeri-diplomatik kariyeri, doğuda ve batıdaki dönemin güçlü devletlerinin ve toplumlarının sosyal, siyasal ve ekonomik ilişkileri açısından değerlendirilmektedir.

**ABSTRACT:** The military-diplomatic career of Marsili is reviewed with respect to the historical background of social, political and economic relations between powerful states and societies of the east and the west.

#### **Marsili’s Diplomatic – Military Career And Its Historical Background**

It is not easy to understand and put into historical perspective the life of an influential figure such as Marsili with respect to the background social, political, economic climate of the age he lived, representing a period of great changes and upheavals in European and world history.

Marsigli was born in 1658, into the urban aristocracy of Bologna, the meaningless ceremonial emptiness of which had reduced the life of one of Europe's most intellectually stimulating cities to deepest torpor. The young Marsili, after one brief spell of ceremonial nonsense, escaped to a diplomatic mission in Istanbul, sent out by the Republic of Venice. After that he never looked back. A born traveller, he was curious about everything, particularly about natural phenomena, and archaeological remains (Stoye, 1994).

His interest in the Ottoman Empire, and the general desire at his time to know and understand the political/military reality that replaced the former imperial seats of the Roman and Eastern Roman Empires (Tinguely, 2000) led Luigi Ferdinando Marsili, the future general of the Habsburg Empire and founder of the Academy of Sciences of Bologna, to leave University of Padua at age 21 and start for İstanbul, the rising capital of the Empire. This was at a time of well-respected Ottoman power in Europe, in competition with the emerging trade and sea power of Venice and a long lasting fight with the Habsburg Empire for control of Balkans and intense trade relations with Europe. The Ottoman Empire, while having past the peak of Süleyman I (the Magnificent) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was still the most powerful state in the world (Seydi, 2007). From 15th to 17th century twice as many

books were printed on the Ottoman Empire than on America (Atkinsons, 1935). Marsili's book on the Ottoman military – political state (Marsili, 1732) based on his earlier experiences was one of them.

In the mid to late 1600s, Ottoman relations with the rest of Europe were significantly chilled, the relations with Venice being among of the worst. Accused of espionage immediately upon arrival, Marsigli's diplomatic party faced an up-hill battle from the start and prematurely left Istanbul less than a year later, carrying sanctions against Venice that were to be enforced for more than a century (Stoye, 1994).

Marsili leaned towards a military – diplomatic career, later realized under the Habsburg emperor. Although his talent was probably more suitable for natural science and mathematics, having a 'vehement, impatient and unsubtle' personality (Stoye, 1994; Soffientino and Pilson, 2009). Marsili, as many others at his time, was a scientist, soldier, spy and diplomat all at the same time, and his interest in science and long visit to Istanbul did not stop him from serving the Habsburg Emperor Leopold against the Ottoman Porte only one year after leaving Istanbul. He fought as soldier in the Austrian army against the Turks. He was wounded and captured by Tartars to whom he pretended to be civilian and was sold to a pasha of the Ottoman army. He made coffee (a Turkish souvenir for Europe, as well as the croissant) for Ottoman forces and joined the siege and battle of Vienna (1683) between the Holy League (arranged by Pope Innocent XI between Poland, Austria-Hungary, Malta, Venice, with Russia joining in 1687) and the Ottoman Empire, a turning point in favor of the Habsburg empire in the 300 year Ottoman-Habsburg struggle. Marsili was ransomed and got back to Italy, but soon joined the imperial army as military engineer, working on border demarcation after the treaty of Karlowitz (1699). Being involved with English and Austrian politics he was first assigned a position to assist the English ambassador in Vienna, but had conflicts with his former Austrian patrons. Marsili once again visited Istanbul in 1691, without being recognized by Ottoman officials. Marsili then fought as General in the Spanish war of succession, but being found guilty of treachery, his commander in charge was beheaded and Marsili dishonorably dismissed, stripped of all honours and commissions, and his sword was broken over him in public.

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**Fig. 1.** Treaty of Karlowitz, where Marsili was part of the Habsburg delegation.



**Fig. 2.** Marsili's sketches of the (a) battle of Mohacz (1687) where he participated, (b) the spread of Plague along the Danube in Serbia.

His military involvement coming to an end, Marsili went to France and devoted the remaining period of his life to his scientific and geographical work and to the endowment of his native city of Bologna with his scientific collections. During the twenty years he had spent in Hungary (today's Croatia, Serbia, parts of Moldavia, Roumania and Bulgaria) Marsili collected information to produce his monumental work on the Danube, published as a short specimen in 1700, and formally in 1724.

The historical – political climate of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was turning against the Ottoman empire which fell into a state of decline after the treaty of Karlowitz, and it was largely due to the ‘scientific revolution’ that lasted through the renaissance and enlightenment periods, of which Marsili was part, that the superiority of the Ottoman power was overcome by the rising powers of Europe.

The concept of Oriental despotism was created in Europe during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries following a transformation of European attitudes toward the Ottoman empire in a crucial moment in the long and ambiguous encounter between the Christian and Islamic worlds when the pursuit of commercial and maritime interests brought two powerful protagonists - Venice and the Sublime Porte - face-to-face (Valensi 2009). Reviewing communications and views of Venetian Ambassadors to the Sublime Porte over the centuries, Valensi (2009) argues that the initial assessment was one of appreciation of the basic traits and the then invincible power of the Turks, and disquiet at the prospect that the Turks were more likely than any Christian king to reunite Europe. Because of its eastern orientation and commercial interests, Venice was surely better informed about the Turks than any other western polity and had visions of the Sultan as the model of an enlightened Renaissance prince in all but religion. Yet towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the ambassadors began speaking of despotism, ending with the reflections on the arbitrary and bloodthirsty Mehmet IV (the Ottoman Sultan at the time of Marsili’s visit) driven by strange appetites and unknowable impulses, the very image of Montesquieu’s Oriental despot.

Marsili notes of his stay in İstanbul: “I had the unusual pleasure of observing the workings of a government founded on tyranny: the blind obedience of subordinates to their Prince; religious faith maintained with superstition, permission granted to every sect to worship, provided it paid annual tribute to the Ruler”, but then notes also the “admirable appointment of competent people to all administrative positions; the armies, of land and sea; and the industry and the wealth of this nation, not so barbaric and ignorant as we sometimes believe it to be.” (Soffientinos and Pilson, 2009).

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