

Intelligence Activity in the Ottoman Capital as a Backdrop of International Diplomacy at the end of the Sixteenth Century

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In the two last decades of the sixteenth century, the intelligence activity that European nations developed in the Ottoman capital can be perceived as a backdrop of the diplomatic relationship that these nations maintained at the same time. In Istanbul, political themes that were then at stake in Europe were addressed officially, in the Sultan's Court, but also in a more subterranean way, in local information circles. That period being characterized by a situation particularly chaotic in most European countries, some political figures in these places were compelled to seek for assistance in the Ottoman Empire. Henry of Navarre and Antonio of Portugal, claimants to the French and Portuguese thrones respectively, as well as Queen Elizabeth I, trapped in a conflict with Spain since 1585, were trying to get closer to the Ottoman power by increasing their influence in the political life of the Sublime Porte. The considerable means that the Habsburg Philip II of Spain displayed in espionage in Istanbul in the same time, in parallel with the consolidation of the modern state system and the subsequent bureaucratization of

polities, allow us to have nowadays at our disposal abundant documentation pointing to the importance of the role that the Ottoman capital played in international diplomacy in that time¹. The city was then enjoying a privileged situation due to the rich and complex cross-confessional diplomacy that was then dominating its political life². Several European diplomats were then present in the Ottoman court and different religious communities used to live together in the city, especially in information circles.

In this article, we will focus on the role played by some protagonists who gathered the two following characteristics: they were involved in these secret activities and related to the political situation in Portugal, in France and, not so directly, in England. The

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- 1 Several works have been published on this question. See for example: Carlos Carnicer García and Javier Marcos Rivas, *Espías de Felipe II. Los servicios secretos del Imperio español*, Madrid, La Esfera de los libros, 2005 ; Raphaël Carrasco, «L'espionnage espagnol du Levant au XVI^e siècle d'après la correspondance des agents espagnols en poste à Venise», in Béatrice Pérez (Dir.), *Ambassadeurs, apprentis espions et maîtres comploteurs. Les systèmes de renseignement en Espagne à l'Époque moderne*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2010, p. 203-222 ; Fernando Fernández Lanza, «La imagen de España en el Imperio Otomano a través de los embajadores de Carlos V», *L'Empire ottoman dans l'Europe de la Renaissance*, ed. Alain Servantie, Louvain, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2005, p. 167-190 ; Emrah Safa Gürkan, «Espionage in the 16th century Mediterranean: Secret Diplomacy, Mediterranean Go-betweens and the Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry», Ph. D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2012 ; Emilio Sola Castaño and Gennaro Varriale (Coords.), *Detrás de las apariencias. Información y espionaje (siglos XVI-XVII)*, Alcalá de Henares, Universidad de Alcalá, 2015 ; Emilio Sola, *Los que van y vienen. Información y fronteras en el Mediterráneo clásico del siglo XVI*, Alcalá de Henares, Universidad de Alcalá, 2005 ; Gennaro Varriale, *Arrivano li Turchi. Guerra navale e spionaggio nel Mediterraneo (1532-1582)*, Novi Ligure, Città del Silenzio, 2014 ; Gennaro Varriale, «Líricas secretas: los espías y el Gran Turco (siglo XVI)», *Hispania*, Vol. LXXVI, n° 252, Madrid, C.S.I.C., 2016, p. 37-66.
- 2 The reasons that enabled this privileged situation are discussed in Emrah Safa Gürkan, «Mediating Boundaries: Mediterranean Go-Betweens and Cross-Confessional Diplomacy in Constantinople, 1560-1600», *Journal of Early Modern History*, 19, 2015, p. 107-128.

purpose of this work is not to present a description of the European intelligence networks operating in Constantinople at the end of the sixteenth century³, but rather to link the intelligence activity concentrated in Constantinople with the political context in Europe at the time. We will see that the Ottoman court was the place where all the nations involved in different political issues wished to be present for several reasons: first, in order to get the support of the powerful Ottoman Empire, but also because there, they could meet each other, elaborate strategies and organize possible alliances⁴. We will see that we here face what Emrah Safa Gürkan decided to call «secret diplomacy», a field in which the frontiers between diplomacy and espionage were quite porous. We will approach this thematic from the angle of some individual careers: those of Portuguese people who had to leave their country for political or religious reasons and whose peregrinations across Europe, North Africa, and the Levant eventually led them to Constantinople circles of intelligence⁵.

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- 3 The most achieved description of Habsburg intelligence networks in the Levant will be found in Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Espionage in the 16th century mediterranean...*, *op. cit.* About Portuguese espionage in the Levant, see Dejanirah Couto, «L'espionnage portugais dans l'empire ottoman au XVI^e siècle», *La Découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe*, Paris, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Centre Culturel Portugais, 1990, p. 243-267 ; Dejanirah Couto, «Au-delà des frontières: réseaux d'espionnage portugais dans le Levant méditerranéen et dans l'océan Indien au XVI^e siècle», *La Frontière Méditerranéenne du 15^e au 17^e siècle: échanges, circulations et affrontements*, Bernard Heybergerand and Albrecht Fuess (Eds.), Turnhout, Brepols, (Collection études renaissantes), 2012, p. 233-252.
- 4 An interesting description of the different alliances and cooperation settled by the Catholic states in Europe, in their struggle against the Ottoman empire, will be found in Géraud Poumarède, *Pour en finir avec la Croisade. Mythes et réalités de la lutte contre les Turcs aux XVI^e et XVII^e siècles*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.
- 5 This work is focused on Portuguese individuals since it is essentially based on the Portuguese archives documentation. More precisely, the portuguese collection of *Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo* (Secretary of State and Dom Antonio, prior of Crato sections), but also the French *K collection* (and other references) of *Archivo General de Simancas* (Spain). Some information was also collected in *Archivo Histórico Nacional de Madrid*, and *Biblioteca Nacional de España*.

As we saw in the introduction, the political situation at the end of the sixteenth century was particularly chaotic in several European countries. In France and Portugal, political questions of successions were completing the religious backdrop of internal troubles.

In France, the massacre of Huguenot (Protestants) citizens perpetrated on 1 March 1562 in the city of Wassy by the Catholic troops of the Duke of Guise (Massacre of Wassy) triggered the first of the eight civil wars that would be fought in France between 1562 and 1598 and would constitute the so-called Wars of Religions⁶. The year 1580, that corresponds to the end of the seventh civil war (November 1579 - November 1580), was followed by a period of relative peace that was broken in 1584 by the death of Francis of Anjou, the brother of the king Henry III, an event which meant the extinction of the House of Valois and the accession of the House of Bourbon⁷. According to the French Salic law, the new legitimate heir to the throne of France was thus a Bourbon, the Huguenot Henry of Navarre. Henry was considered by the Catholics as a relapsed heretic since, after first converting to Catholicism in 1572, following the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (24 August 1572), he had abjured this religion four years later to rejoin the Huguenot forces. The Catholic opposition to Henry of Navarre's rights to the throne provoked political and social unrest and the constitution of a League (or the Holy Union) of the Catholics and therefore, the beginning of the eighth and last civil war of the conflict, that would end in 1598. The two last decades of the century were thus essentially marked by this succession issue and Henry of Navarre's attempts to defend his rights, especially after king Henry III's assassination in 1589.

In Portugal, the year 1580 corresponds to a real breaking off in the history of the country. In the previous decades, some New Christians (former Jews, called Marranos) had been compelled to

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6 Arlette Jouanna, Jacqueline Boucher, Dominique Biloghi, Guy Le Thiec, *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion*, Paris, Éditions Robert Laffont, 1998, p. 110-120 ; Nicolas Le Roux, *Les guerres de religion, 1559-1629*, Paris, Éditions Belin, 2009, p. 61-81.

7 Arlette Jouanna, Jacqueline Boucher, Dominique Biloghi, Guy Le Thiec, *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion, op. cit.*, p. 305-322.

leave the country and settle in other European countries or Ottoman lands, trying to escape the persecution they were suffering in their country, especially since the creation in 1536 of the Portuguese Inquisition⁸. The repressive activity of this severe court gained importance after 1580 with the crowning of the Habsburg Philip II of Spain as King of Portugal. Indeed, eleven public *autos de fe* (public ceremonies in which judgments rendered by the Portuguese Inquisition were executed, mainly on heretics) were organized in the district of Lisbon court between 1582 and 1600 whereas their number was ten between 1536 and 1580⁹.

In the political field, this last date coincides with the beginning of the succession issue that enabled the annexation of the Portuguese crown by Philip II of Spain¹⁰. After renouncing his former plan of launching a crusade against the Ottoman Empire on suggestion of the Pope – for which purpose he had even settled some contacts with the Persian Shah in order to coordinate actions –, the young Portuguese king Sebastian – *Dom Sebastião* – decided in 1578 to attack the Sultan of Morocco *Abd-al-Malik*, also called *Muley Moluk*, in order to defend the interests of prince Mohammed, or *Mulay Hamed*, who had been expelled from his throne by the former, his uncle, and found refuge in Portugal. Despite the warnings he had been given, aimed to convince him to renounce his crazy enterprise (the clear imbalance between the Portuguese and the Moroccan military forces eventually led the Portuguese troops to a stinging defeat), Sebastian undertook the journey that led him to grave at the battle of *al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr* (*Alcácer-Quibir* in Portuguese, also called the Battle of the three kings) in the summer of 1578.

The cardinal Henry of Portugal (*Dom Henrique*), the grand-uncle of the late king, succeeded him on the throne, but for a very short time, since he died in January 1580 leaving the question of

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8 Giuseppe Marcocci and José Pedro PAIVA, *História da Inquisição portuguesa: 1536-1821*, Lisbon, A Esfera dos livros, 2013.

9 Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (Antt), Conselho Geral do Santo Ofício, Livros 435 and 436.

10 Geoffrey Parker, *Felipe II. La biografía definitiva*, Barcelona, Editorial Planeta, 2010, p. 700-715, 720-734.

the succession to the throne of Portugal unsolved. The Spanish king Philip II, the uncle of Sebastian, seized the opportunity to invade Portugal and settle himself on the throne, overcoming the pretensions of *Dom Antonio*, Prior do Crato, the head of the Maltese Order of Saint John in Portugal. In 1581, Philip II became officially the King of Portugal, as Philip I, and *Dom Antonio* and his supporters had to take the road of exile, staying in France and in England, and from then on, they tried to organize Antonio's restoration to the Portuguese throne, until his death in Paris in 1595.

This period of time was punctuated by several episodes that could have a direct influence on the records of some important figures of espionage in Constantinople at the same time. If we go on following Dom Antonio's journey around Europe, through the documentation conserved in Dom Antonio's section in Lisbon archives, we can see that even in France, the «King of Portugal», as he was referred to, was regularly persecuted, most probably by Philip II's agents.¹¹ He decided in 1585 to go to England where he thought he would be more secure; he was still there in January 1587, as confirmed by the letter that Sebastiano Pardini sent him from Paris, advising him not to come back to France¹². It is essentially during this period of time that the frustrated King planned the recovery of his throne, trying to raise funds and gathering political support. The first goal that he was purchasing – raising funds – drives us to the circles of espionage in Istanbul where we will stop for a while on the itinerary of the Portuguese spy-cum-diplomat Álvaro Mendes. The purpose of this lecture is not to reconstitute this man's biography – even if it's necessary to remind some details of it –, but to show the connections between the political situation in Europe and the circles of espionage in Constantinople at the same time.

As we can read in José Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim's article¹³, Álvaro Mendes was born in a new Christian family, Jewish

11 Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Docs. 21, 22.

12 Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Doc. 26, 17/01/1587.

13 José Alberto Rodrigues Da Silva Tavim, «La "Materia Oriental" en el trayecto de dos personalidades judías del Imperio Otomano: João Micas / D. Yosef

of origin, in the south of Portugal (Tavira). He made a fortune by dealing in the trade of diamonds in the Indian Kingdom of Vijayanagara (Bisnaga in the Portuguese documentation) and went back to Portugal in 1555 where he entered the Court of King Don João III (1521-1557) who gave him the title of Knight of the Order of Saint James. When Dom João died in 1557, Mendes left the country to settle in Madrid first and later several other capitals such as Florence, Paris and London where he played the role of advisor to several European monarchs such as Elizabeth I of England and Henry III of France and offered his support to the defeated claimant to the Portuguese throne Dom Antonio during his years in France.

With such an individual career, it is not surprising to find this figure involved in Constantinople information circles in the mid-1580s when the situation was becoming too chaotic in France and England. However, this is not the only reason. Indeed, we can identify mainly two reasons why such a figure decided around 1585 to leave Europe for Constantinople where, according to Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, he changed his name to Salomon Ibn Yaïsh or, according to a French document dated 1592, to the name of «Salamon M...»¹⁴.

The first reason was his personal situation and, effectively, the threat that was targeting him: in a document conserved in Dom Antonio's archival section¹⁵, dated 5/10/1587, the Portuguese noble Estevão Ferreira da Gama testified that Mendes was suspected of having left Portugal for France, a few years ago, because in his country he was accused of having stolen an impressive amount of gold from King Sebastian. The same document relates that Mendes then decided to leave the country to settle in Constantinople, in part to avoid the menace of being caught by Dom Antonio who, precisely in the mid-1580s, would have been very happy to catch Mendes and confiscate his fortune, in order to finance his bid for the Portuguese throne. But in 1587, when Ferreira da Gama was

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 Nasí, Álvaro Mendes / D. Shelomó Ibn Ya'ish», *Hispania Judaica Bulletin*, 7, 2010, p. 211-232.

¹⁴ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 2, Doc. 176, 4/10/1592.

¹⁵ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Doc. 131, 5/10/1587.

supplying Dom Antonio with every bit of information he had about Mendes, this one was already well established in the Ottoman court. However, his fear of Dom Antonio was not the only reason why he was in Istanbul. Another was his knowledge of diplomacy and his contacts in European courts, which led Queen Elizabeth of England to send him to the Ottoman court in order to negotiate an Ottoman-English alliance against the Habsburg as demonstrated by Rodrigues da Silva Tavim and Emrah Safa Gürkan. Effectively, as soon as he arrived in Constantinople in 1585, he joined the group of relatives of Murad III, developed his own spying network at the service of the Sultan who rewarded him with the title of Lord of Tiberias and the fiscal holder of Mytilene – the island of Lesbos – and went on serving the Sublime Porte’s diplomacy until his death in Istanbul in 1603.

After Álvaro Mendes arrival in Constantinople in 1585, the “Portuguese King” Dom Antonio was still fighting for recovering the throne by any means, especially by pursuing his second goal: trying to gather as much political support as he could from England.

Fearful of the links established by English Catholics with Spain, Queen Elizabeth I had executed in February 1587 Mary Stuart, the Catholic Queen of Scotland, a decision which triggered the invasion attempt of Philip II’s “Invincible Armada” which was compelled to withdraw because of a deficient command organization and bad weather. Officially, this Spanish withdrawal was quickly transformed into an overwhelming victory of England by Philip II’s enemies: the notice of the “disaster” of the “Invincible Armada” was, for example, one of the arguments brandished by Dom Antonio to convince his possible allies of Spanish weakness. One of his men was immediately sent to Morocco to inform the Emperor of the Spanish Disaster¹⁶ and he carried on seeking for support: in 1588, he was trying to consolidate his connections with the Emperor of Morocco, the king of Fez and other political figures in North Africa, especially via his son Christovão, and even with the Persian Shah.¹⁷

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¹⁶ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço I, Doc. 142, 4/10/1588.

¹⁷ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço I, Docs. 37, 38, 39.

He moreover established regular correspondence with the Catherine of Medici and the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic via his ambassador Diogo Botelho – the province of Zeeland even voted in favor of supporting Dom Antonio’s plans and supplying him with military equipment for his ships¹⁸ –. He even distributed titles and honors to some Portuguese lords. The final result of all these efforts was Dom Antonio’s attack on Lisbon in 1589 with the help of the English navy.

After the failure of this enterprise, Dom Antonio had to return to England where he faced some pressure. In the same year, Sir Francis Walsyngham wrote to Dom Antonio and advised him to leave England because of “the general state of mind created by the news of the failure of his last expedition to Portugal”¹⁹. Dom Antonio finally decided to leave England for France, where he died, in Paris, in August 1595.

But the last years of his life were still punctuated by several interventions of another regular of intelligence circles in the Levant, called Matías Vicudo. In 1589, the date of Dom Antonio’s Portuguese expedition, Matías Vicudo was settled in Morocco where he was maintaining a regular correspondence with Dom Antonio and informing him about the local political situation and about his activity that included ransoming Portuguese prisoners of war who might join Dom Antonio’s band of supporters. Two years later, despite his old age, the same Matías Vicudo was still working for Dom Antonio and keeping him informed about the relationship between the Emperor of Morocco and the Ottoman Sultan Murad III.

What allowed an old man like Matías Vicudo to keep his relevance in this complex diplomatic game was, however, his perfect knowledge of the situation in Levant and Constantinople since 1571, for almost 30 years. He was already a secret agent before, but on Habsburg payroll: the archival fonts in Madrid tell us that he was then settled in Rome where his knowledge of Egyptian provinces

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¹⁸ Several documents in Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, 1586-1587.

¹⁹ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Doc. 51.

allowed him to supervise a clandestine operation that aimed at inciting the Ottoman governor of Alexandria to rebel against the Sultan²⁰. Around 1575, as we can read in Emrah Safa's dissertation, he was a member of César de la Marea's spying network settled in Ragusa, in charge of forwarding the correspondence coming from Constantinople to Spain; he was already complaining in his letters about his old age and his need to retire²¹. In 1577, we know that he had already left the Ragusan network and traveled to Europe, in order to settle in Spain²².

Some years later, he was once again involved in intelligence circles but on Dom Antonio's payroll this time. In 1582/1583 (H. 991), the Grand Vizier wrote to Dom Antonio to assure him of the Sultan's support for his cause and mentioned that the person who had been specially dispatched in Constantinople to defend this cause was precisely Matías Vicudo who was there in the company of a certain Hasan Aga²³. The letter also mentioned a reference that the Grand Vizier received from the French King in favor of Dom Antonio's claim to the throne.

Between 1589 and 1591, when this question was yet to be solved, as we saw, the same Matías Vicudo still dedicated himself to this cause; he was working on Dom Antonio's payroll in Morocco this time²⁴. According to the correspondence he had from there with the «Portuguese King», Dom Antonio dispatched a new agent

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20 Archivo General de Simancas (AGS), Estado (E), 1134, fol. 164 ; Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), Fondo Cervantes, Manuscritos, Signatura 783 (III, 15), (1571), fols. 111 r°-v° ; Signatura 783 (XII, 18), (1573), fols. 434 r°- 435 v° ; Ags, E 1138, (1572).

21 The following references were found in Emrah Safa Gürkan, *Espionage in the 16th century mediterranean...*, *op. cit.* AGS, E 1517, cuaderno IV, fol. 1 (29/08/1575) ; AGS, E 1062, fol. 206 (18/06/1573); E 1063, fol. 29 (18/06/1572) ; Ags, E 1514, fol. 129 (28/10/1574); E 1517, cuaderno IV, fols. 1 (29/08/1575), 9-10 (13/10/1574), 23 (1/10/1575), 24 (9/11/1575) and 30-1 (7/11/1575); E 1519, fol. 1 (23/01/1576) ; AGS, E 1517, cuaderno VI, fols. 18-9 (27/05/1577).

22 Ags, E 1075, fol. 18 (17/01/1577).

23 Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 3, Doc. 358.

24 Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Docs. 48, 53, 60, 223.

to Constantinople, called Francisco «Caldera», to defend his cause. Nevertheless, it seems that it was Matías Vicudo who was really playing the role of adviser to Dom Antonio: his letters leave us the testimony of an old and experienced agent, distrusted by all – the Sultan, the Persian Shah, even Dom Christovão, Dom Antonio's son – not a very surprising reputation for an agent who had been on Habsburg payroll for many years and ended up in the service of Dom Antonio of Portugal, an enemy of Philip II.

the progress of Dom Antonio's enterprise leads us this time to France where, in 1589, the Catholic king Henry III's assassination had turned the situation to Henry of Navarre's advantage²⁵. As we saw before, Dom Antonio was compelled to leave England to find refuge in France where he received the backing of the Reformed party's members who then had the upper hand in the civil war. There, he went on maintaining some correspondence with Murad III as testified by the letters which he exchanged with Murad's pashas and which Diogo Botelho, his main reliable man until his death, deposited in safe custody at the Duchess of Lodunois's – a relative of Henry of Navarre – home²⁶.

In the last years of his life, Dom Antonio still remained in the complex game of diplomatic relations in the Sublime Porte. In 1590, according to the spies of Francisco de Vera, the Spanish ambassador in Venice, he was planning to get to Constantinople: in his letter to Philip II, de Vera described his intelligence network in Constantinople that provided him with Dom Antonio's plans

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25 As we saw before, the country was then trapped in its eighth civil war since the beginning of the conflict in 1562. The assassination of Henry III on 2 August 1589 was a turning point for the History of France since Henry of Navarre, who was the legitimate heir of the throne, became the new King. However, as he had then still not renounced Protestantism, his right to the crown was disputed by the Catholic party. He would definitely overcome the Catholic opposition in 1598 with the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes (30/04/1598) and the Peace Treaty of Vervins (2/05/1598) with Spain. Michel De Waele, *Réconcilier les Français: la fin des troubles de religion (1589-1598)*, Paris, Hermann Éditeurs, 2015, p. 303-328.

26 Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Doc. 62, 8/06/1591.

regarding a travel to Constantinople²⁷. In 1592, according to de Vera, “the Portuguese king” had not given up on his quest for the money stolen from him years ago by the Portuguese spy-cum-diplomat Álvaro Mendes who was then residing in Constantinople²⁸. In October 1592, the French noble Horace Lambert sent Dom Antonio some recommendation about the way he should address the Sultan in order to obtain his help in confiscating Mendes’s possessions. This letter is another good example of the complexity of diplomatic questions that were at stake and of the multiplicity of political and intelligence persons involved in that case – the French ambassador monsieur de Lancosme ; the English ambassador Lord Burton and Henry of Navarre’s agent, monsieur de Brèves.

Connections of Álvaro Mendes not only in Constantinople, but also in other European courts – his brother-in-law was Queen Elizabeth’s physician, and he had previously received financial support from the French King Henry III – sheltered him however from the threat of Dom Antonio. The latter kept on trying to recover the Portuguese crown until the very end: even in the last days of life, he was sending letters to the King of France and the Queen of England to thank them in advance for the attention they should dedicate to the question after his death²⁹.

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²⁷ Ags, E K1674, Doc. 136 (31/03/1590).

²⁸ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 2, Doc. 176, 4/10/1592.

²⁹ Antt, Fundo Dom Antonio e seus descendentes, Maço 1, Doc. 76, 4/10/1592; Doc. 83, 26/08/1595.