Fire and water on the Seine: the Venetian ambassador’s fireworks party

If Louis XIV was baroque Europe’s « roi du feu », « la reine des eaux » was undoubtedly the Republic of Venice. Venice had a long history of self-promotion through the iconography of water. This showed her mastery of the problematic water-bound civic environment, her ‘marriage’ with the sea, and her vast maritime empire, the Stato da Mar. However, in the seventeenth century, Venetian dominance of the water was increasingly challenged by other nations, including France. At the same time, Venetian territories in the Stato da Mar began to fall to the Ottoman Turks, and she had to seek allies among the great European monarchies.

This paper will analyse this uneasy conjunction of French and Venetian power, as symbolised in a fireworks display given in Paris in 1649 by the Venetian Ambassador. This fire and water pageant took place on the Seine, ‘au pont des Tuileries’, and celebrated the successful Venetian defence of Candia against Turkish attack in 1649. Fireworks illuminated a naval victory, which referenced and mixed French and Venetian iconography, fire and water. The paper will analyse contemporary pamphlet accounts of the fireworks display, comparing it to previous Franco-Venetian displays to ask how ideas about fire and water had developed, but also how public reception of this iconography had changed. Indeed, was this effort by the Venetians to promote their power on the Seine a subject of French mockery?

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