

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq. *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq: Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople 1554-1562*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xvi + 265 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-3071-1.

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An Imperial Envoy in Suleiman's Court

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522-92), whose letters make up this volume, was born in western Flanders as the natural son of a local seigneur (though he received a patent of legitimacy from Emperor Charles V in 1540). He obtained an excellent education at the scholarly capitals of Europe, and seems to have been a natural, and quite remarkable, polymath. Busbecq's diplomatic career began in 1554, when he served as part of an imperial embassy attending the marriage of Philip II and Mary Tudor. That same year, in response to worsening tensions between Ferdinand of Habsburg and the Ottomans, Busbecq was sent on a diplomatic mission to the court of Sultan Suleiman "the Magnificent." Between 1555 and 1562, Busbecq then served as imperial ambassador to the Ottoman court, replacing the previous ambassador, whose health had suffered from a two-year stint in an Ottoman prison. In a series of four letters written in Latin to a fellow Habsburg diplomat, he chronicled his experiences and travels, and after his final return to the West he readied them for publication. They first appeared together in 1589, and have been reprinted periodically, and in multiple languages, ever since.

Even leaving aside its historical value, this is an engaging and well-written account of Busbecq's adventures, and an enjoyable and entertaining read. I brought it on vacation with me, and was not at all displeased with my choice—which is more than I can say for most of my "holiday" reading. Still, those more interested in history and pedagogy than in whiling away time at the beach will also be rewarded by this volume. Busbecq provides

fascinating descriptions of life in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, providing analyses of its politics, religion, history, daily life, court life, costume, diet, coinage, technology, military strategy and tactics, medicine, geography, social classes, ethnic groups, women, slavery, art, architecture, flora and fauna, and so on. His interest in the local flora, in particular, has led scholars to credit him as the man who introduced both the tulip (disputed) and the lilac (generally accepted) to the West.

One of the most interesting aspects of this work for scholars of the Empire, however, is its description of the international politics of the time, particularly the relations between the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire. This, alas, is a topic that tends to be ignored in most introductory European history courses, to their detriment. One might even argue that scholars of European history still frequently, and even less appropriately, fall into the trap of insularity demonstrated by old-school British historians as in the classic British newspaper headline: "Fog in Channel—Continent Cut Off!"). Current vigorous scholarship on the Atlantic has forced us to come to grips with the role played by overseas exploration, trade, and conquest when analyzing or teaching continental history, but the eastern borders of Europe are still too often ignored. This is an especially serious problem in introductory Western Civilization classes and, given the political crises of the modern era, one that does a grave disservice to students. (One can only imagine the benefits of having contemporary leaders who had received a proper education on the history of Christian-

Islamic relations.) It is thus in this regard, as a primary document for Western Civilization or upper-level undergraduate courses in European history, that this book will be of the greatest use.

Busbecq is clearly not a dispassionate, unbiased observer of all things Ottoman. Yet this too is part of the book's appeal. For as with all good travel literature, the work provides not just a description of new lands and peoples, it also provides insight into the culture and society of the writer. Busbecq's letters give us the voice of an interesting and educated man of the time, expose some of the inner workings of sixteenth-century European diplomacy, and show us how westerners, albeit quite open-minded ones, viewed the culture and society of the great empire lying to their east. Also interesting is the fear with which Busbecq contemplates the relative strengths of the Holy Roman and Ottoman Empires. Indeed, he seems purposefully to gloss over some of the political weaknesses of the Ottoman state in order to make more potent his warnings about the military threat it, as "a scourge sent against us by the anger of Heaven," posed to all of Christendom (p. 238). Furthermore, he uses his letters to criticize what he saw as the west's dangerous

fixation on blood over merit (a slightly self-serving argument, given Busbecq's own illegitimate birth), and its lax morals and discipline.

The translation is both clear and smooth. The foreword (original to this new edition) and the introduction (by the 1927 translator) are short and informative. There are only three illustrations plus a map, and while the map is quite welcome, it strangely does not appear in the list of illustrations. The text is probably too long to assign in full in most Western Civilization classes, but portions of it would serve quite nicely. The Modern History Sourcebook has only the smallest of snippets available online, so I recommend getting a copy of the entire book so you can easily choose the sections most appropriate to your specific course.^[1] Upper division courses might be able to use the entire text (which is only \$19.95 in this paperback edition), but at 243 pages it might still require some judicious pruning to keep short attention spans focused.

Note

[1]. For the Modern History Sourcebook online, see <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1555busbecq.html>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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