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Suleiman’s Empire in the Memoirs of a European Diplomat

This volume is a re-issue of a translation of four texts by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq recounting his embassy for Ferdinand I of Habsburg to Ottoman ruler Sultan Suleiman (“the Magnificent”). The 1927 translation by Edward Seymour Forster appears here with a new foreword by Karl A. Roider. [1]

Busbecq was born between 1520 and 1522 in Comines, present-day France, as the illegitimate son of the seigneur of the nearby village of Bousbecque in southwestern Flanders. Flanders at the time was part of the Netherlands, under Spanish control, but became part of the Holy Roman Empire in 1529. Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V later granted Busbecq a patent of legitimacy. Busbecq was educated at Italian universities and subsequently entered the service of Ferdinand of Habsburg, brother of Charles, overseer of the Habsburg hereditary lands, and Charles’s successor on the imperial throne. Busbecq’s embassy to the Ottoman Empire began in 1554 during a period of relative peace between the religious and political factions within the Holy Roman Empire. Emperor Charles had been forced to enter into the Treaty of Passau by his Protestant adversaries in the Schmalkaldic League in 1552. The treaty was followed three years later by the Peace of Augsburg, which recognized the status quo between Lutheran and Catholic territories and solidified the right of individual sovereigns to establish the confession of local churches in their territories. The calm within the Empire allowed Charles to renew his efforts, led by his brother Ferdinand, to finally come to an accommodation with the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Suleiman, whose troops had conquered most of Hungary and had threatened the Habsburg capital of Vienna. Busbecq’s embassy lasted until 1562, when he returned to Vienna and served as counselor to Emperor Ferdinand and later his successors Maximilian II and Rudolph II. Busbecq died in 1591 in St. Germains.

During his embassy, Busbecq corresponded with Nicholas Michault, another Habsburg diplomat; Michault is the purported addressee of the Turkish Letters. The first of the four was published in the original Latin in 1581, and all four appeared together for the first time in 1589 and were subsequently also published in several other European languages. Busbecq gives the appearance that the letters were actually written during his embassy, but Karl A. Roider notes in his foreword that the last two were in fact drafted for publication in the 1580s, long after his return (p. x). There are also reasons to doubt the purported date of composition of the first two letters. For example, the published version of Busbecq’s first letter bears the date of September 1, 1555. At the beginning of his letter, Busbecq refers to his trip to London to attend “the marriage of King Philip and Queen Mary.” However, Philip was not entrusted with the official functions as ruler of Spain by Charles until after the Peace of Augsburg on September 25, 1555, and did not become king of Spain until 1556. (Edward Seymour Forster, the translator, is equally inaccurate when he refers to Ferdinand as
“Emperor” in 1554 [p. xxi], a title he did not assume until 1556 and which he did not formally receive until 1558. Zweder von Martels actually places Busbecq’s arrival in Constantinople at the beginning of January 1556, which further calls into doubt the veracity of the dates claimed in the published letters.[2] What is more, Martels, in a study comparing the content of the Turkish Letters with Busbecq’s actual correspondence, finds that “‘false’ dating seems to have been part of Busbequius’s technique for arranging his rich material” and asserts that there is enough evidence to suggest that "they were written ... before 1581 (first partial edition) and 1589 (complete edition).”[3] The letters in their published form consequently do not represent an actual "running commentary" on Busbecq’s travels to the Ottoman Empire, but rather recollections written in the best case several months but in some instances more than a decade after his return. The Turkish Letters must therefore not be viewed as travel literature, but as the memoirs of one of the preeminent European diplomats of the time.

With such caveats out of the way, let us turn our attention to the content of the Turkish Letters. The first letter comes closest to a travel narrative and recounts the various stations in the journey of Busbecq’s embassy, supplemented with extensive observations on many aspects of Ottoman life. The second letter is rather short by contrast, spanning a mere eight pages, although the text was shortened in two instances by the translator to an unknown degree, and deals with Busbecq’s second trip to Constantinople. The third and fourth letter are not sequenced by places on his journey but organized associatively by topic and read the most like a conventional memoir. In addition to recounting Busbecq’s experiences as a diplomat, the four letters together cover a broad array of topics, from animals and flowers to architecture, history, government, food and drink, dress, crafts, daily life in the Ottoman Empire and at the Ottoman court, customs, religious practices, and fire-fighting techniques, although this list is by no means exhaustive.

The book is an entertaining read overall, and in particular the first letter will not bore the reader. This effect occurs not least thanks to Forster’s lively translation. Busbecq presents an absorbing eyewitness account of the Ottoman Empire from the perspective of a well-educated Western observer at the time of one of the Ottomans’ most influential rulers. This sets it apart from other early modern eyewitness accounts, such as Georgius de Hungaria’s Tractatus de Moribus, Condictionibus et Nequicia Turcorum (1481).[4] Though Busbecq provides fascinating observations on countless aspects of Ottoman life, we have to remain conscious of the caveats discussed earlier, namely that they in fact represent a memoir rather than a travel narrative and when Busbecq was preparing them for publication he would certainly have wanted to appeal to a broad audience. Busbecq’s letters may therefore be most valuable to those interested in how the Ottoman Empire and its inhabitants were portrayed in the West at that time, or in a description of sixteenth-century European diplomacy by one of its foremost representatives. Busbecq’s texts are also particularly engaging whenever he comments on his own culture, such as his criticism of the exploration of overseas territories, where “[r]eligion is the pretext, gold the real object” (p. 40). Scholars may find this book unsatisfactory in two regards: the translator relied on a Latin edition published in 1633, and quite apart from Forster’s abridgements no critical examination is offered of how the 1633 edition may differ from the material Busbecq had originally prepared for publication. A new, critical translation of the Turkish Letters therefore would have been vastly preferable. The publisher may have been aware of these shortcomings and calculated correctly that for the affordable price of $19.95 this book, nevertheless, would be hard to pass up.

Notes

[1]. Readers of this review may also be interested in that of Tryntje Helfferich, “An Imperial Envoy at Suleiman’s Court,” Review of The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq. Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople 1554-1562, by Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq. H-HRE. http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=80521161007648.


