Observing the Ottomans—Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq in Istanbul (1552–62)

Abstract

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522–1592), an Imperial subject from Walloon (i.e., French) Flanders, provided Christian Europe with its most comprehensive and informed perspective on the Ottoman power. The illegitimate son of a nobleman, he studied at Leuven/Louvain and a number of Italian universities before entering the service of King (later Emperor) Ferdinand I around 1552. Late in 1554, Ogier traveled to Istanbul for the first time as Ferdinand's ambassador to the sultan. In 1562, he returned bearing his greatest accomplishment, a peace treaty he had negotiated in Ferdinand's name with the sultan.

Ogier came to the capital of a young civilization at its peak under Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520–66), who was called "the Magnificent" by Europeans but "the Lawgiver" by his own people. At the time, Western Christians typically viewed the Ottomans through four distinct lenses: the ethnographic—the Ottomans as an exotic but also comprehensible people; the military—the Ottomans as a conquering race under their sultan, a great warlord, who made war and peace with Christian rulers; the moral—the Ottomans as a cruel, tyrannical, and fearsome race; and, finally, the theological—the Ottomans as agents of the Antichrist, enemies of God and, for the Protestants, spiritual allies of the Roman pope in the world's headlong plunge toward the Last Days. More than any other Christian writer, Ogier brought a vast amount of practical information—much of it accurate, all of it thoughtful—to the ethnographical perspective. He also presented an exceedingly detailed description of Istanbul, the Ottoman capital. His *Turkish Letters*, first published in 1582 in Latin, were translated into the major European languages. They became the Christian Europeans' most important source of information on the Ottomans, their civilization, and their empire.

The excerpts reproduced here illustrate two aspects of Ogier's travels to the heart of Ottoman civilization. The first excerpt (A) records his impressions of Istanbul during his first sojourn in the capital. The second (B) offers his reflections on Ottoman and Christian civilization after returning to the Empire in the company of the first Ottoman envoy to a western Christian king.

Source

A. Ogier in Istanbul.

But I must return to my subject. A messenger was sent to Soleiman with a dispatch announcing my arrival. While we were awaiting his reply, I had an opportunity to see the sights of Constantinople at my leisure.

My first desire was to visit the church of St. Sophia, admission to which was only granted as a special favour; for the Turks hold that the entrance of a Christian profanes their places of worship. It is indeed a magnificent mass of buildings and well worth a visit, with its huge vault or dome in the middle and lighted only by an open space at the top. Almost all the Turkish mosques are modelled upon St. Sophia. They say that formerly it was much larger and that its subsidiary buildings spread over a large area but have now been done away with, and that only the central shrine of the church remains.

As for the site of the city itself, it seems to have been created by nature for the capital of the world. It stands in Europe but looks out over Asia, and has Egypt and Africa on its right. Although these latter are

not near, yet they are linked to the city owing to ease of communication by sea. On the left lie the Black Sea and the Sea of Azof, round which many nations dwell and into which many rivers flow on all sides, so that nothing useful to man is produced through the length and breadth of these countries which cannot be transported by sea to Constantinople with the utmost ease. On one side the city is washed by the Sea of Marmora; on another side a harbour is formed by a river which Strabo calls, from its shape, the Golden Horn. On the third side it is joined to the mainland, and thus resembles a peninsula or promontory running out with the sea on one side, on the other the bay formed by the sea and the above-mentioned river. From the centre of Constantinople there is a charming view over the sea and the Asiatic Olympus, white with eternal snow.

The sea is everywhere full of fish, either making their way down, as is their habit, from the Sea of Azof and the Black Sea through the Bosporus and the Sea of Marmora to the Aegean and Mediterranean, or else on their journey up thence to the Black Sea. They travel in such large and densely packed shoals that they can sometimes even be captured by hand. Mackerel, tunny, mullet, bream, and sword-fish are caught in great abundance. The fishermen are usually Greeks rather than Turks. The latter, however, do not despise fish when they are placed before them, provided they are of the kind which they regard as clean; they would sooner take deadly poison than eat the other kinds. I may mention in passing that a Turk would rather have his tongue cut out or his teeth drawn than taste any food which he looks upon as unclean—frogs, for example, and snails and tortoises. The Greeks entertain similar scruples. I had engaged a boy of the Greek religion to serve as a caterer in my household. The other servants had never been able to induce him to eat shell-fish, until one day they placed before him a plate of them so cooked and seasoned that, thinking that they were some other kind of fish, he ate most heartily of them. But when he learnt from their laughter and derision and from the shells which were afterwards shown to him that he had been deceived, you cannot imagine how upset he was. He retired to his chamber and indulged in endless vomiting and tears and misery. It would take fully two months' pay, he said, to atone for his sin; for the Greek priests are in the habit of charging those who have confessed to them a greater or a less sum for absolution according to the nature and gravity of the offence, and will only grant absolution to those who pay them the price they ask.

At the end of the promontory, which I have mentioned, is the Palace of the Sultans, which, as far as I can judge (for I have not yet myself entered it), is not remarkable for the splendour of its architecture or decoration. Beneath the Palace, on lower ground, stretching right down to the sea, lie the Imperial Gardens. It is usually held that the ancient Byzantium lay in this quarter. You must not expect me to tell you why the people of Chalcedon, the site of which was opposite Byzantium and scarcely shows a trace at the present day, were called blind; nor about the perpetual and tideless current which flows down the Straits; nor about the pickled delicacies which are brought to Constantinople from the Sea of Azof and are called by the Italians *moronella, botarga*, and *caviare*. All these details are unsuited to a letter, the limits of which I have already exceeded; besides, they can be learnt from authors, both ancient and modern.

But to return to Constantinople. No place could be more beautiful or more conveniently situated. As I have already said, you will look in vain for elegant buildings in Turkish cities, nor are the streets fine, being so narrow as to preclude any pleasing appearance.

In many places there are remarkable remains of ancient monuments, though one cannot help wondering why so few have survived, when one considers the number which were brought by Constantine from Rome. It is beside my present purpose to describe them in detail; but I will mention a few of them. In the space occupied by the ancient Hippodrome two serpents of bronze are to be seen, also a fine obelisk. Two remarkable columns are also to be seen in the city. One of them stands in the neighbourhood of the caravanserai where we lodged, the other in the market which the Turks call Avret-Bazar, that is, the Women's Market. This column is covered with reliefs from top to bottom representing some expedition of Arcadius, who set it up and whose statue long surmounted it. It would be more accurate to describe it

as a spiral than as a column, on account of the interior staircase which gives access to the summit. The column which stands opposite the apartments usually occupied by the imperial representatives is composed, except for the base and capital, of eight solid blocks of porphyry so fitted together that they appear to form a monolith; and indeed this is the popular belief. Where the blocks fit into one another there are laurel-wreaths surrounding the whole column, so that the joints are hidden from those who look up from below. This column, having been shaken by frequent earthquakes and burnt by a neighbouring fire, is splitting in many places, and is bound together by numerous iron rings to prevent it from falling to pieces. It is said to have been crowned by statues, first of Apollo, then of Constantine, and finally of Theodosius the elder, all of which were dislodged by gales or earthquakes.

The following story is told by the Greeks about the obelisk in the Hippodrome, which I have mentioned above. It was torn from its base and for many centuries lay upon the ground, until in the days of the later Emperors an architect was discovered who undertook to re-erect it on its base. When the price had been agreed upon, he set up an elaborate apparatus consisting chiefly of wheels and ropes, whereby he raised the immense stone and lifted it into the air, so that it was only a finger's length from the top of the base on which it had to rest. The spectators imagined that he had wasted his time and trouble on such vast preparations and would have to make a fresh start with great labour and expense. However, he was not in the least discouraged, and, profiting by his knowledge of natural science, ordered an immense quantity of water to be fetched. With this he drenched his machine for many hours, with the result that ropes which held the obelisk in position gradually became soaked and naturally tightened and contracted, so that they lifted the obelisk higher and set it upon the base, amid the admiration and applause of the multitude.

At Constantinople I saw wild beasts of various kinds—lynxes, wild cats, panthers, leopards, and lions. One of these was so well broken in and tamed that it allowed the keeper before my eyes to pull out of its mouth a sheep, which had just been given to it to eat, and remained quite calm, though its jaws had barely tasted blood. I also saw a quite young elephant which greatly amused me, because it could dance and play ball. I imagine that you will be unable to suppress a smile and will exclaim: "What! an elephant playing ball and dancing!" But why not, when Seneca tells us of one which walked the tight rope, and Pliny is our evidence for another which knew the Greek alphabet? Now listen to my account, so that you may not think I am inventing or misunderstand what I say. When the elephant was ordered to dance it advanced on alternate feet, swaying to and fro with its whole body, so that it obviously meant to dance a jig. It played with a ball by cleverly catching it, when it was thrown, with its trunk and hurling it back, as we do with the hand. If you are not satisfied from my account that it danced and played ball, you must find some one to give a clearer and more learned description.

There had been a camelopard (giraffe) among the animals at Constantinople, but it had died just before my arrival. But I had its bones, which had been buried, dug up for my inspection. This animal is much taller in front than behind; it is, therefore, ill adapted for carrying a rider or a load. It is called a camelopard because it has a head and neck like a camel's and a skin covered with spots like a leopard's.

If I had not visited the Black Sea when I had an opportunity of sailing thither I should deserve to be regarded as very lazy; for to have seen the Black Sea was regarded as not less difficult than to have sailed to Corinth (*n*). I had a delightful excursion, and was allowed to enter several of the Sultan's country-houses, places of pleasure and delight. On the folding doors of one of them I saw a vivid representation in mosaic of the famous battle of Selim against Ismael, King of Persia. I also saw numerous parks belonging to the Sultan situated in charming valleys. What homes for the Nymphs! What abodes of the Muses! What places for studious retirement! The very earth, as I have said, seemed to mourn and to long for Christian care and culture. And even more so Constantinople itself; nay, the whole of Greece (*n*). The land which discovered all the arts and all liberal learning seems to demand back the civilization which she has transmitted to us and to implore our aid, in the name of our common faith, against savage barbarism. But all in vain; for the lords of Christendom have their minds set on other objects. The

grievous bonds wherewith the Turks oppress the Greeks are no worse than the vices which hold us in thrall—luxury, gluttony, pride, ambition, avarice, hatred, envy, and jealousy. By these our hearts are so weighed down and stifled that they cannot look up to heaven, or harbour any noble thought or aspire to any great achievement. Our religion and our sense of duty ought to have urged us to help our afflicted brethren; nay, even if fair glory and honour fail to illumine our dull minds, yet at any rate self-interest, the ruling principle of these days, ought to stir us to rescue from the barbarians regions so fair and so full of resources and advantages, and possess them in their stead. As it is, we seek the Indies and the Antipodes over vast fields of ocean, because there the booty and spoil is richer and can be wrung from the ignorant and guileless natives without the expenditure of a drop of blood. Religion is the pretext, gold the real object.

It was far otherwise in the days of our forefathers. So far from thinking that, like traders, they ought to seek those lands where gold was most plentiful, they went wherever the best chance was offered for showing their valour and doing their duty. Honour, not self-interest, was the goal of their toils, their dangers, and their distant expeditions. They returned from their wars, every one of them, not wealthier in money but richer in renown. These opinions of mine are for your ear alone, lest haply any one should deem it a crime that I find anything lacking in the morals of the present age. However that may be, I see that the arrows are being whetted for our destruction, and I fear that in the future, if we refuse to fight for glory, we shall be obliged to fight for our very existence.

But to return to the Black Sea, or as the Turks call it, Karadenis, which means the same thing. It flows through narrow straits into the Thracian Bosporus, along which, buffeted against headlands, it reaches Constantinople with many eddyings and bendings in one day's journey. Then through an almost equally narrow passage it bursts its way into the Sea of Marmora. In the middle of the entrance into the Bosporus is a rock with a column upon it inscribed with the name of some Roman (Octavian, if I remember right). On the European shore is a high tower, called the Pharos, on which a light is burnt to guide sailors at night. Not very far away a little stream flows into the sea, in the bed of which we picked up pebbles hardly inferior to onyxes and sardonyxes; at any rate, when they were polished, they were almost as brilliant. A few miles from the entrance is shown the narrow passage over which Darius led his army into Europe against the Scythians. About half-way down the Bosporus are two castles, one in Europe (Roumeli Hissar) and the other opposite on the Asiatic shore (Anatoli Hissar). The latter was held by the Turks before their attack on Constantinople; the former with its strong towers was built by Mahomet some years before the storming of the city, and is used at the present day as a prison for distinguished captives.

[…]

B. Departure and Return to the Empire.

Although I could have no doubts about my master's wishes, yet, mindful that in the entourage of a prince there are never lacking persons ready to blacken the services of others, however distinguished, especially if they be foreigners, I resolved that, as far as was practicable, everything should be reserved as free as possible for his decision. And so in my negotiations with Ali I managed to point out that, although the proposed conditions did not entirely conform with the Emperor's expectations, yet I was sure that he would accept them, provided that some one were sent with me who could explain anything in them which was obscure or could in any other way give rise to discussion. I suggested that for this purpose Ibrahim would be the most suitable person, since it was through him that the Pashas themselves knew how anxious the Emperor was for peace. He was easily induced to accept this proposal, and so the finishing touch was put to our long negotiations.

It is customary for the Pashas to invite an ambassador, who leaves Constantinople in good odour, to dinner in the Divan. But since I wished that everything should seem to be in suspense and undecided

until a reply was brought from my master, this honour was not paid me, a loss which I bore with equanimity.

It was my wish to take back with me some fine horses, and so I instructed my servants to attend the market frequently in hopes of finding what I required. Hearing of this, Ali himself had a splendid thoroughbred of his own exposed in the market as though for sale. My men hurried to the spot and bid for it, and, when 120 ducats was asked, offered eighty, not knowing who the owner was; but the men in charge of the horse would not sell it at that price. A day or two afterwards, the same horse, with two others equally well bred, was sent me by Ali Pasha as a gift. One of them was a beautiful Arab riding horse. When I thanked him for his gift, the Pasha asked whether I did not think that the horse, which my men had wished to buy in the market for 80 ducats, was worth a good deal more. “Much more,” I replied, “but they had been instructed by me not to exceed that price, for fear lest I might lose heavily (as sometimes happens) by their purchasing, without knowing it, a horse which had hidden defects.” He then advised me about the feeding of Turkish horses at the beginning of a journey, namely, that they ought to be kept on small rations at first, and that I ought to travel by short stages until they had become accustomed to the work; and he recommended me to spread the journey to Adrianople over nine or ten days instead of the usual five. He also gave me a really beautiful robe interwoven with gold and a box full of antidote to poison of the finest quality from Alexandria, and lastly a glass vessel full of balm, which he praised very highly. “The other gifts which he had given me he did not,” he said, “value very greatly, because they could be bought with money, but this was a rare present, than which his master could give nothing more precious to a friendly or allied prince. He had been Governor of Egypt for some years, and so had had the opportunity of acquiring it.” Two kinds of juice are produced from this plant: one is extracted from the oil of the leaves, which are boiled down, and is black and cheap; the other, which is yellow, is distilled from an incision in the bark, and is the genuine article, some of which he presented to me.

He expressed a wish for certain gifts from me in return: a coat of mail of a size to fit his tall and stout frame, a sturdy charger to which he could trust himself without fear of a fall (for he has difficulty in finding a horse which is equal to his great weight), and, lastly, some bird’s-eye maple, or similar wood, such as we use for inlaying tables.

From Soleiman I received nothing beyond the customary gifts which are presented to departing ambassadors, such as I had generally received on bidding him farewell on previous occasions. He briefly inveighed against the insolence of the Heydons and the garrison at Szigeth. “What,” he said, “has been the good of having made peace here, if they are going to disturb it and continue to fight?” I told him that I would report his complaint to the Emperor, and that I hoped that the matter would be arranged.

Thus under favourable auspices I started on my long-desired journey towards the end of August [1562], taking back as the result of my eight years’ mission a truce for eight years, which, unless any important change occurred, was easily capable of extension for as long a period as we wished.

On our arrival at Sofia, from which town, besides the road to Belgrade, another route leads to Ragusa, whence it is only a few days’ passage to Venice, Leyva and Requesens asked permission to take the road for Ragusa in order that they might shorten their journey to Italy and carry out as quickly as possible the promise which they had made to send gifts to the Pashas and to discharge the debts which they had incurred for various expenses at Constantinople. They offered to give me letters for the Emperor expressing their gratitude to him for their liberation, and saying that they would gladly have thanked him in person, if they had not been prevented by the obligations to which I have referred. I made no difficulty about complying with their request. The death of Requesens, at an advanced age, before he could reach Ragusa, made me all the more glad that I had consented; I was glad that I had done him a favour, since a refusal might have been alleged as partly responsible for his illness.

De Sandé and I accomplished the remainder of our journey cheerfully enough without encountering any serious hindrances. De Sandé is a cheery fellow, of infinite jest, and quite ready, if need be, to forget his anxieties and make merry. Every day provided food for gaiety and joke. Sometimes it amused us to leave our carriages and try which of us could keep up walking the longest. In this I easily proved superior, being thin and unburdened by a load of corpulence, while my opponent was stout and impeded by his weight, beside being sluggish from the effects of his long imprisonment. When we came to a village it amused us to see Ibrahim, who was following us with great dignity on horseback with his Turkish escort, dash up to us and entreat us by all we held dearest to mount again into our carriages, and not to disgrace the party by allowing men of our high rank to be seen journeying on foot, which the Turks regard as highly undignified. His eloquence sometimes induced us to re-enter our carriages; but very often we laughed and took no notice.

I will now give you an example of de Sandé's many witticisms. When we left Constantinople, not only was the heat still oppressive, but I was in so low a condition from the recent hot weather that I could hardly eat at all, or at any rate was content with very little. De Sandé, on the other hand, being a lusty fellow and accustomed to eat enormous meals, which he always took with me (*n*), devoured his food rather than ate it, and encouraged me to follow his example and show myself a man and eat lustily. His exhortations produced no result until at the beginning of October we were approaching the Austrian frontier. Here, owing partly to the climate and partly to the season, refreshed by the cooler atmosphere, I began to feel better in health and so ate more liberally than I had done during the earlier part of the journey. De Sandé, noticing this, exclaimed that he was amply rewarded for his trouble and that the toil and training which he had lavished upon me had not been thrown away, since under his tuition and guidance I had learnt how to eat, after having reached my present age without acquiring the science or practice of that very necessary art. He might, he said, owe me as great a sum as I cared to name for having delivered him from a Turkish prison, but my debt to him for having taught me to eat was equally great! Thus with many a jest we reached Tolna.

[At Tolna a quarrel occurred between de Sandé's Spanish doctor and a Janissary, which was eventually settled by the intervention of Ibrahim.]

On the next day we continued our journey towards Buda, the doctor being as active as ever in spite of his serious bruises. When we were already within sight of Buda, some members of the Pasha's household came out by his orders to meet us, accompanied by several cavasses. The most remarkable members of the party were some young men on horseback who were adorned in the following extraordinary manner. On their heads, which were shaved almost bare, they had made a long incision in the flesh and had inserted feathers of some kind or other in the wound: they were dripping with blood, but they concealed their pain as though they did not feel it, and behaved gaily and cheerfully. Just in front of me there were several of them on foot, one of whom was walking with his bare arms crossed over one another, both of them pierced above the elbow with the kind of knife which we call a "Prague Knife". Another, who was naked to the middle, had cut two slits in the flesh of his loins, one above the other, and had inserted a cudgel in the slits, so that it hung as from a girdle. Another man had fixed a horseshoe on the top of his head by several nails; this must have been done some time before, as the nails had so fastened on the flesh as to be immovable.

With this escort we entered Buda, and were ushered into the presence of the Pasha, with whom I had a lengthy conversation about the observance of the truce, while de Sandé stood by. The extraordinary band of young men who showed such contempt for pain had taken their stand inside the threshold of the court. Noticing that I glanced towards them the Pasha asked me what I thought of them. "I like them very much," I replied, "but they treat their skin in a manner in which I should not like to treat my clothes, which I prefer to have whole." The Pasha laughed and then dismissed us.

On the next day we reached Gran, whence we proceeded to Komorn on the river Waag, the first fortress

in the possession of the Emperor. On both banks of the river the garrison of the place with the naval auxiliaries, whom they call Nassadistas, were waiting for us. Before I crossed, de Sandé came up to me and disclosed the anxiety which he had long kept hidden and, embracing me, again thanked me for the recovery of his liberty; he confessed that he had hitherto felt sure that the Turks could not possibly be acting with good faith in the matter, and that he had, therefore, been in perpetual fear that he might have to go back to Constantinople and spend his old age in prison. Now at last he recognized that the liberty which he owed to my kindness was sure and certain, and on this account he would be under great obligation to me as long as his life lasted.

A few days later we reached Vienna. The Emperor Ferdinand was at the moment attending the Imperial Diet with his son Maximilian, whose inauguration as King of the Romans was being celebrated. I sent information to the Emperor of my return and of the arrival of Ibrahim, and asked his pleasure about him; for he was urgently requesting to be taken to Frankfort. At first the Emperor replied that he thought it better that the Turks should await his return in Vienna, since it would be hardly advisable that such bitter enemies should be conducted through the heart of the Empire all the way from Vienna to Frankfort. But this meant a long delay and might give the Turks a handle for suspicion of various kinds; there was really no cause for alarm in the journey of Ibrahim and his suite through the most flourishing part of the Empire, nay, it was actually desirable, in order that he might thus estimate its strength and size, and above all, that he should be witness at Frankfort of the unanimity with which the greatest princes of the Empire designated Maximilian as the successor of his imperial father. When I wrote to the Emperor setting forth these considerations, he consented that Ibrahim and his followers should be conducted to Frankfort. So we set out thither by Prague, Bamberg, and Wurzburg. Ibrahim was anxious not to pass through Bohemia without paying his respects to the Archduke Ferdinand. The Archduke, however, did not think fit to have an official meeting with him.

When I was within a few days' journey of Frankfort, I resolved to warn the Emperor about several matters connected with my embassy, and to arrive for this purpose a day or two ahead of the Turks. I therefore took post-horses and reached Frankfort on the eve of the date upon which several years before I had begun my second journey to Constantinople. My gracious Sovereign received me with a courtesy and indulgence which I was far from meriting, but which was in keeping with his usual custom and natural kindness of heart. You can picture my pleasure, after so many years of absence, at seeing my master not only in good health but also enjoying every kind of prosperity. He showed his satisfaction at the successful termination of my mission, which had fulfilled all his expectations, and expressed his gratitude and appreciation for my devoted services and the negotiations which I had carried out, and left nothing unsaid which could betoken his cordial goodwill.

On the eve of the inauguration Ibrahim reached Frankfort quite late in the evening after the gates had been shut, which, by ancient custom, are not allowed to be opened during the whole of the following day. But by a special order of his Imperial Majesty permission was given for them to be opened for the Turks the next morning. A place was assigned to them whence they could see the newly elected Emperor pass by with all pomp and ceremony. They fully appreciated what was truly a grand and splendid spectacle. Amongst the rest who accompanied the Emperor in a place of honour, the three Dukes of Saxony, Bavaria, and Juliers [Jülich] were pointed out to them, each of whom, of his own resources, could have put a regular army into the field; and many other proofs of the strength, dignity, and greatness of the Empire were presented to their gaze.

A few days later Ibrahim was received in audience by the Emperor and explained the reasons of his arrival and presented such gifts as are held most honourable by the Turks. After the peace had been ratified, the Emperor bestowed splendid presents upon him and sent him back to Soleiman.

I am anxious to escape from the court and return to my own home, but private business still detains me here. […] In my eyes a life of retirement and peaceful study is far preferable to the throng and clamour of

a court. But eager as I am to depart, I am afraid that my gracious master may keep me here, or else send for me when I have gone to the retirement of my home. He has, it is true, assented to my departure, but only on condition that I return if he sends for me. If remain I must (and who can refuse the courteous request of one who has power to command what he will and to whom one owes so much?) I shall be able to find pleasure in the consolation that I can contemplate continually and gaze upon the countenance of my revered Emperor, nay, upon the living image of true virtue. For I assure you that the sun has never shone upon a nobler prince or one more worthy to be entrusted with the rule of an empire. Supreme power must always win men's homage; but for a monarch to deserve such power and to prove himself worthy of it seems to me something far more noble. […]

There may, perhaps, be some who regret that the Emperor has not shown more zeal for warlike achievements and has not sought laurels in that field. The Turks, it may be urged, have raged over Hungary for many years, laying it waste far and wide, and we have never come to the rescue, as our reputation demands; we ought long ago to have marched against them and, massing all our forces together, decided in a pitched battle which nation fortune desired should rule. Such advice is bold, but I doubt whether it is wise. Let us consider the matter rather more closely. In my opinion we ought to judge of the capacity of generals and emperors rather by their plans than by their fortune and the results which they achieve. In their plans they ought to take reckoning of their opportunities, their own strength, and the nature and resources of their enemy. If an ordinary enemy, well known to us, and lacking the prestige of victory, were to attack our territory, and our forces were equal to his, it would, I fear, be imputed to cowardice if we did not face him and check his advance in a pitched battle. But if our enemy were a scourge sent against us by the anger of Heaven (such as was Attila in the olden time, Tamerlane within the recollection of our grandfathers, and such as the Ottoman Sultans are in our own days), to whom nothing is an obstacle, and before whose advance everything falls—to hurl oneself precipitately against such a foe with a small and hastily levied army would deserve, I am afraid, the imputation not merely of rashness but even of madness.

Soleiman stands before us with all the terror inspired by his own successes and those of his ancestors; he overruns the plain of Hungary with 200,000 horsemen; he threatens Austria; he menaces the rest of Germany; he brings in his train all the nations that dwell between here and the Persian frontier. He is at the head of an army equipped with the resources of many kingdoms; of the three continents into which our hemisphere is divided, each contributes its share to achieve our destruction. Like a thunderbolt he smites, shatters, and destroys whatever stands in his way; he is at the head of veteran troops and a highly trained army, which is accustomed to his leadership; he spreads far and wide the terror of his name. He roars like a lion along our frontier, seeking to break through, now here, now there. Before now nations threatened by much less serious peril have often left their native land before the pressure of a powerful foe and sought homes elsewhere. There is little credit in remaining calm in the face of trifling dangers; but not to be alarmed by the approach of such an enemy as ours, while kingdoms crash in ruin around us, seems to me to betoken Herculean courage. Yet the heroic Ferdinand stands his ground with invincible spirit, never deserts his post, and refuses to retreat from the position which he holds. He would fain possess such resources that he could stake his all on the hazard of a battle at his own risk and without incurring the charge of madness; but prudence tempers these generous impulses. He sees what ruin any failure in so mighty an enterprise would entail upon his own faithful subjects, nay, upon Christianity in general, and deems it wrong for an individual to harbour designs for his private gratification which can only be carried out by calamitous sacrifices on the part of the State. He reflects how unequal the struggle will be if 25,000 or 30,000 infantry, together with a small force of cavalry, join battle with 200,000 cavalry supported by veteran infantry. What he must expect from such a contest is clear to him from the precedents of the past—the disasters of Nicopolis and Varna, and the plains of Mohacs still white with the bones of slaughtered Christians. […]

The Emperor Ferdinand's plan was the same as that of Fabius Maximus; after estimating his own and

Soleiman's resources, he judged that the last thing which a good general ought to do was to tempt fortune and encounter the attack of so formidable an enemy in a pitched battle. He, therefore, resolved to throw all his energies into the other alternative, namely, to delay and check the tide of invasion by the construction of dykes and ramparts and every kind of fortification.

It is now about forty years since Soleiman captured Belgrade, slew King Louis, and reduced Hungary, and so secured the prospect of possessing himself not only of this province but also of territory farther north. In this hope he besieged Vienna; then, renewing the war, he captured Güns and again threatened Vienna, but this time only at a distance. But what has he achieved by his mighty array, his unlimited resources, his countless hosts? He has with difficulty clung to the portion of Hungary which he had already captured. He who used to make an end of mighty kingdoms in a single campaign, has won, as the reward of his expeditions, some scarcely fortified citadels and unimportant towns and has paid dearly for the fragment which he has gradually torn away from the vast mass of Hungary. He has once looked upon Vienna, it is true, but it was for the first and last time.

It is said that Soleiman has set before himself the achievement of three ambitions: namely, to see the completion of his mosque (*n*), which is indeed a sumptuous and splendid structure; to restore the ancient aqueducts and give Constantinople a proper water supply; and to capture Vienna. His first two objects have been achieved; in his third ambition he has been baulked—I hope, for ever.

[Busbecq then continues his panegyric of Ferdinand, and describes his public and private virtues.]

You ask about my Greek books, and say that you have heard that I have brought back a number of curiosities, including some rare animals. As to the latter there is nothing of great interest. I have brought back a very tame ichneumon, an animal notable for its hatred of and internecine warfare with the crocodile and asp. I had a remarkably handsome weasel of the species called sable, but I lost it on the journey. I also brought with me several very fine thoroughbred horses—it is the first time anyone has done so—and six female camels. I have brought back hardly any plants or herbs, but I have some botanical drawings which I am keeping for Mattioli; I also sent him a good many specimens many years ago. Carpets and linen embroidered with Babylonian work, swords, bows, horse-trappings, articles of leather, chiefly horse-leather, finely worked, and other trifling examples of Turkish workmanship and ingenuity—of these I have, or to speak more accurately, I had an abundance. For I have but little left; in this vast assembly of princes and princesses at Frankfort, I make many presents of my own freewill to do them honour, while I am ashamed to refuse the many requests which are made to me by others. The rest of my gifts have, I think, been well bestowed; but there is one thing of which I regret that I have been so lavish, namely, the balm, on the genuineness of which the doctors have thrown doubts, on the ground that it does not seem to possess all the qualities which Pliny's description demands. It may be that it has been extracted from very old plants, which have lost something of their strength, or there may be some other cause; of this, however, I am certain, that it was produced from the shrubs which grow in the gardens of Matarieh, near Cairo. […]

I also brought back a large miscellaneous collection of coins, the best of which I intend to present to my master. I have also whole wagon-loads, whole shiploads, of Greek manuscripts. There are, I believe, no fewer than 240 volumes, which I have sent by sea to Venice, whence they are to be conveyed to Vienna. They are destined for the imperial library. Many of them are quite ordinary, but some of them are not to be despised. I hunted them out from all sorts of corners, so as to make, as it were, a final gleaning of all merchandise of this kind. One treasure I left behind in Constantinople, a manuscript of Dioscurides, extremely ancient and written in majuscules, with drawings of the plants and containing also, if I am not mistaken, some fragments of Cratevas and a small treatise on birds. It belongs to a Jew, the son of Hamon, who, while he was still alive, was physician to Soleiman. I should like to have bought it, but the price frightened me; for a hundred ducats was named, a sum which would suit the Emperor's purse better than mine. I shall not cease to urge the Emperor to ransom so noble an author from such slavery

(*n*). The manuscript, owing to its age, is in a bad state, being externally so worm-eaten that scarcely any one, if he saw it lying in the road, would bother to pick it up.

But enough of this letter; you may expect me in person before long. Anything else I have to say shall be kept for our meeting. But take care to provide men of worth and learning to meet me, the pleasantness of whose conversation and company may enable me to rid myself of any traces of boredom and depression that still cling to me as the result of my long sojourn among the Turks. Farewell.

Frankfurt, December 16, 1562.

Source of the English translation from Latin: Edward Seymour Forster, *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople, 1554–1562*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927, pp. 34–42 (A); 231–43 (B).