A native of western Flanders, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq served in several posts as diplomatic representative for the Habsburg ruler Ferdinand I (King of Bohemia and Hungary, 1526–64, and Holy Roman Emperor, 1556–64). Busbecq's most famous mission was undoubtedly to the Ottoman Empire at the zenith of its power and glory during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. In four letters to his friend Nicholas Michault—who had been Busbecq's fellow student in Italy and afterwards was imperial ambassador to the Portuguese court—he details impressions on everything he saw and experienced in Turkey, including landscapes, plants, animals, Islam, ethnic groups, architecture, slavery, military matters, court practices, clothing, gender and domestic relations, and the Sultan himself.

Suleiman (spelled Soleiman in the translation) the Magnificent is perhaps the most distinguished figure in Turkish history, and his reign saw the greatest extension of Turkish power. His devotion to his own religion and his tolerance of other faiths, his munificence and generosity, won him the fidelity of his subjects and the respect of his enemies. Busbecq was given the assignment of using diplomacy to check the raids of the Turks into Hungary, and he proved very effective with his quick sympathy, appreciation of the Turkish character, and untiring patience. He returned from Constantinople in the autumn of 1562 with an established reputation as a diplomatist.

Busbecq's Turkish Letters is a treasure of early travel literature, reflecting Busbecq's rich literary talent, classical education, love for collecting antiquities, and remarkable power of observation. Delightfully entertaining reading, it also offers invaluable lessons on understanding and bridging cultural divides.
THE TURKISH LETTERS OF
OGIER GHISELIN DE BUSBECQ
THE TURKISH LETTERS OF OGIER GHISELIN DE BUSBECQ
Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople 1554-1562
TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN OF THE ELZEVIR EDITION OF 1633
BY EDWARD SEYMOUR FORSTER
With a Foreword by Karl A. Roider

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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TO
H. A. O.
IN MEMORY OF A
TOUR IN THE NEAR EAST
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

OGIER GHISELIN DE BUSBECQ  Frontispiece
TITLE-PAGE OF THE ELZEVIR EDITION OF
THE TURKISH LETTERS, 1633  facing xxvi
SOLEIMAN THE MAGNIFICENT. From a wood-
cut by Cesare Vecellio (reproduced by permission
from Solyman the Magnificent Going to Mosque,
edited by Sir William Stirling Maxwell, 1877)  facing 64

FOREWORD

THE Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Bus-
becq represent the finest contemporary ac-
count published in the West of the Ottoman Em-
pire in the latter part of the reign of its most
glorious sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. Interest
in the history of the Ottoman Empire has enjoyed
a resurgence in recent years because of the troubles
in its former provinces such as Bosnia and Kosovo
in Europe and Iraq and Israel/Palestine in the
Middle East. Traditionally, Western historians
have put forth the view that the Ottoman Empire,
especially in its later years, was an oppressive, cor-
rupt, overbearing state that treated its subjects—
Muslim, Christian, and Jew—with contempt. As
the complexities and difficulties in governing its
former lands have become increasingly evident to
the modern world, historians have come to appre-
ciate the more tolerant, effective side of Ottoman
rule and have argued that perhaps the Empire was
not the obscurantist state earlier historians had
portrayed it as.

To some extent these revisionist views have con-
tributed to the modern debate about Orientalism,
to which Busbecq’s Letters offer significant insights.
Whereas many nineteenth- and twentieth-century
Western travelers and scholars viewed the Ot-
FOREWORD

becq exaggerated the openness of Ottoman politics, there were considerably more opportunities for men of ability to rise in that system than there were in any European country.

Busbecq likewise admired the discipline, moderation, and order of the Empire, especially among its soldiers, and believed that the West had better learn from the Turks or face ruin at their hands: "On their side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unimpaired, experience and practice in fighting, a veteran soldiery, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, order, discipline, frugality, and watchfulness. On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training; ... licence, recklessness, drunkenness, and debauchery ... ." If there is war, Busbecq wondered, "Can we doubt what the result will be?" (112).

Busbecq left on his first mission to the Ottoman Empire in late 1554 at the age of thirty-two in the service of Ferdinand of Habsburg, King of the Romans, King of Bohemia and Hungary (1526–64), and later Holy Roman Emperor (1556–64). Busbecq’s only prior experience as a diplomat had been as witness to the wedding of Philip of Spain and Mary of England in Winchester Cathedral earlier that year. His first Turkish letter, addressed to another Habsburg diplomat, Nicholas Michault, and

...toman Empire and its legacy as backward, impoverished, irrational, sensual, and anti-modern, Busbecq, in a much earlier time, spoke of the Empire’s willingness to adapt, to learn, and to lead. “No nation has shown less reluctance to adopt the useful inventions of others,” he wrote. “For example, they have appropriated to their own use large and small cannons and many others of our discoveries” (135).

In keeping with his underlying respect for Ottoman politics and culture, Busbecq belongs to that group of observers of Eastern ways who believed that the East had much to teach the West. In one way this perspective was personal, for Busbecq was the natural son of George Ghiselin II, Seigneur de Busbecq, born in 1522 and legitimatized by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1549. Since he was conscious of the stigma of his own illegitimate birth and understood that he could overcome it only by his ability and skill, Busbecq displayed an understandable affinity for what he perceived as a society and political system that prized talent over birth. “Among the Turks, dignities, offices, and administrative posts are the rewards of ability and merit; those who are dishonest, lazy, and slothful never attain to distinction, but remain in obscurity and contempt. . . . Our [Christian Europe’s] method is different; there is no room for merit, everything depends on birth” (60). Though Bus-
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dated September 1, 1555, resulted from this first mission, which lasted less than a year. The second letter, dated July 14, 1556, marked his return to Constantinople, and the last two letters date from during and after his long embassy that ended in 1562. Although Busbecq told his friend Michault that these letters were not for publication, in fact Busbecq composed the final drafts between 1580 and 1589, two decades after his mission, from notes he took during his time in the Ottoman Empire, precisely for publication. His first letter appeared in print in the original Latin in Antwerp in 1581, and the first edition of all four letters appeared in Paris in 1589, prior to his death in 1592. Over the course of the centuries many other editions appeared, and the Letters were translated into a number of European languages.

In the political sphere, perhaps Busbecq’s great contribution is his nuanced portrayal of Suleiman (Busbecq’s “Soleiman”) the Magnificent and his entourage in the latter years of the great Sultan’s reign. Busbecq had his first audience with the Sultan not in the capital city of Constantinople but in the interior of Anatolia, where Suleiman was with his army, engaged in peace negotiations with the Persians. Busbecq’s portrayal is one of the Sultan in his later years, and it describes particularly the aging Sultan’s relationships with his wife and his sons, which were of great importance in the Ottoman Empire at that time as potential successors vied for power. Each sultan who reached the throne had the right to murder any possible rivals, including his brothers. Because of this custom, as a sultan aged there was considerable and urgent jockeying for the succession among his sons, their mothers, ministers, eunuchs of the palace, and the Janissaries, the elite Ottoman infantrymen who formed a kind of palace guard. In the Ottoman Empire the succession was literally a life-or-death matter, for not only would the sons who failed to secure the throne be killed but neither would their supporters escape retribution.

Busbecq in his letters wrote of three sons who were possible successors: Selim, the Sultan’s choice; Mustafa, the choice of the Janissaries; and Bayezid, younger brother of Selim and the choice of their mother. Given Busbecq’s warnings about the prospect of future wars between the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe, he was probably not unhappy to report the demise of the two talented sons, Mustafa and Bayezid, in favor of the less promising one, Selim, who succeeded his father and earned the moniker “the Sot.” He even described Selim in his second letter as a man “naturally gluttonous and slothful,” who would therefore hold a “promise of peace” (165). Although he
used that phrase to describe relations between the Ottomans and the Persians, he undoubtedly believed that Selim would be interested in peace with the West as well. Perhaps when Busbecq composed these letters from his notes, he was reflecting on the significant ebb of the Ottoman threat between 1562 and the 1580s. The ineffectual Selim did succeed in 1566, was himself dead by 1574, and was in turn succeeded by his equally weak son Murad III. Whether or not Busbecq sensed it as early as the 1580s, the low quality of the post-Suleiman sultans marked the beginnings of Ottoman decline.

Politics was by no means the only interest Busbecq revealed in his letters. He was an avid plant collector, animal observer, gatherer of antiquities, and numismatist. He is often credited with bringing a number of plants to Western Europe for the first time, notably the tulip and the lilac. Though there is some doubt about his introduction of the tulip, most scholars have no hesitation in crediting him with the lilac. His pursuit of antiquities generated a wealth of knowledge for Western Europe about classical Greece and Rome. He gathered, by his own calculation, 240 classical manuscripts, some of which scholars credit as real finds, especially a manuscript of Dioscurides, the Greek physician whose work was the cornerstone of medical herbal therapeutic knowledge for centuries. To

this day this manuscript is regarded as a masterpiece of book art of the classical world. Busbecq donated his treasures to the imperial library in Vienna, and they became the foundation of the classical collection of that distinguished institution. Philologists also credit him with making a significant discovery, described in the fourth letter, of the presence of Goths in the Crimean Peninsula, a remnant of the original German tribes that migrated into the Roman Empire in the first centuries after Christ.

Busbecq's Letters represent considerable insights into the Ottoman governmental system at its best, the practice of diplomacy in the sixteenth century, the nature of the Muslim life and practice as interpreted by a Westerner, the world of antiquities and antiquities-gathering, and the everyday culture of many different peoples from long ago. Busbecq was a remarkable observer of his world, and his Letters help us appreciate both that world and Busbecq himself as a humanist of the first order.

The translator and introducer of this book, Edward Seymour Forster (1879–1950), was the son of Elizabeth Humphreys Forster and Michael Seymour Forster, the latter the headmaster of Oswestry Grammar School in Oswestry, an old market town in Shropshire near the English-Welsh border. Edward Seymour Forster became a lecturer
in classics at the University of Sheffield in 1905, practically upon his graduation from Oriel College, Oxford University. An eminent classical scholar and translator, he remained at Sheffield throughout his academic career, climbing to the rank of professor and retiring in 1945.

Forster was one of the stable of translators for one of the great translation and scholarship projects of the twentieth century, the Loeb Classical Library. James Loeb, who made his fortune from the banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb, and Company, of which his father was a founder, created the Loeb Classical Library with two goals in mind: to make the work of classical authors accessible to a wide reading public untrained in classical languages and to provide a venue to showcase the very best in Anglo-American scholarship. The first twenty publications appeared in 1912, and, even during the First World War, fifty-four new volumes were published. Forster provided translations for a number of Aristotle’s works, as well as Florus’s *Epitome of Roman History* and Isaeus’s *Isaen*.

In some striking ways Forster and Busbecq had similar experiences. Busbecq was educated in the classics, and his four or five years in the Ottoman Empire marked his introduction to a world outside Western Europe. He was fascinated by antiquities, but he was also intrigued by the contempo-

rary scene in the foreign culture in which he lived and worked. Forster, a professor of classics, saw the new Near East as a soldier with the British army in the Salonica and Black Sea theaters during the First World War, fighting in a great East/West conflict that in some ways Busbecq foresaw 350 years earlier. Busbecq was intrigued by the Ottoman Near East of the mid-sixteenth century, and Forster was intrigued by the increasingly modern Near East of the early twentieth. As Busbecq wrote letters of his impressions of what he saw, Forster, notwithstanding his reputation as a translator of Greek classics, brought the Ottomans and the land they ruled to the West by publishing Busbecq’s *Turkish Letters* and later by writing *A Short History of Modern Greece* (1946), which was updated by others following his death in 1950.

As he says in his introduction, Forster came across a 1633 Latin edition of Busbecq’s letters and was intrigued by their content. He read them first for entertainment while riding trains and then used them as illustrative material in some of his lectures. Because they generated interest among his students, he decided to bring forth a translation with an introduction that is included in the Louisiana State University Press edition. Forster notes that, before his translation, Busbecq’s letters had appeared twice before in English, once in 1694 and,
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as part of a larger collection of Busbecq's work, in 1881. Forster's translation is a fluid one, which makes for easy and entertaining reading.

—Karl A. Roider

PREFATORY NOTE

THE present translation of the Turkish Letters of Busbecq owes its origin to the fact that many years ago a copy of the little Elzevir edition of 1633 came by chance into my possession shortly after a visit to Constantinople. Being a convenient book for the pocket, it served to while away many tedious hours of railway travel, and eventually provided material for a lecture. As the subject matter of the book and the personality of its author aroused some interest, it seemed that it might be worth while to undertake a translation which could be published in a handy form and make the Letters accessible to a larger public.

I find that the Turkish Letters have already twice appeared in English; first, in an anonymous version, published in London in 1694 (this work is only known to me from bibliographies); secondly, in an elaborate treatise, The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, by C. T. Forster and F. H. B. Daniell in two volumes (London: Kegan, Paul & Co., 1881). The latter work deals with the whole of Busbecq’s career, and includes his later correspondence from France with Maximilian and Rudolph; it contains valuable historical notes and appendices, and is indispensable to the historical student who wishes to study Busbecq’s career as a whole.
PREFATORY NOTE

The present translation has the less ambitious aim of presenting only one aspect of Busbecq to the general reader, as the writer of a series of delightful letters which give a unique picture of Turkey in the sixteenth century, and deserve a place by the side of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s eighteenth-century series of letters and Kinglake’s Eothen.

In order to bring the work within a reasonable compass, uninteresting matter has been sometimes omitted. Such omissions are always indicated in the text. Brief notes explanatory of the less obvious allusions have been added. The details of Busbecq’s life given in the introduction have been mainly derived from the Latin life prefixed to the Elzevir edition.

Those who would know more of Busbecq’s later career as an ambassador are referred to the work of Forster and Daniell mentioned above. For the history of Turkey, reference may be made to Von Hammer’s Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches, Sir Edward Creasy’s History of the Ottoman Turks, A. de la Jonquière’s Histoire de l’Empire Ottoman, and Stanley Lane-Poole’s Turkey in the ‘Story of the Nations’ Series.

I have to thank my friend Professor H. A. Ormerod for kindly reading through the translation in proof.

INTRODUCTION

THE name of Busbecq is familiar to the students of history from the numerous references to his work which are to be found in the foot-notes of Gibbon, Motley, Robertson, and other writers. Numerous editions of his Turkish Letters, published in the later sixteenth, the seventeenth, and the early eighteenth centuries, testify to their former popularity, but in more recent times they have fallen into comparative neglect in spite of the fact that they contain the best extant description of the Ottoman Empire at the height of its glory, when it was not merely a preoccupation but an actual menace to Europe. The letters are also full of the quaintest lore and the most delightful stories, several of which are quoted in Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy. Diplomatist, traveller, linguist, scholar, antiquarian, zoologist, and botanist, Busbecq was one of those many-sided men who seem to touch no department of human knowledge without making valuable contributions to it. He has a special claim to the attention of the learned world in his profound knowledge of the classical authors, his diligent collection of ancient manuscripts, and his interest in antiquities, inscriptions, and coins. He was the first European to penetrate into certain parts
of Asia Minor since their occupation by the Turks; he was the first copyist of the most famous of all Latin historical inscriptions, the Monumentum Ancyranum; and he brought back to Vienna some 240 classical manuscripts and greatly enriched the imperial collection of coins. He has other claims to fame in that he was the first to introduce the lilac and the tulip into Western Europe, while his preservation of the Crim-Gothic vocabulary was a unique contribution to the history of language. Last, but not least, the Letters reveal a charming personality, a man of the world with a strong sense of humour, a frank and genial observer of human life.

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was the natural son of George Ghiselin, Seigneur de Busbecq, and was born in 1522. His birthplace was Comines, on the right bank of the river Lys in Western Flanders, and about ten miles southeast of Ypres, while the village of Busbecq lies near at hand on the left bank of the same river, in what is now the French Département du Nord. In 1540, in accordance with a common practice of the day, Charles V issued a patent legitimizing him as a member of the ancient family whose name he bears and whose history can be traced back into the twelfth century.

No one who reads the Letters can doubt that Busbecq received an excellent classical education. He first entered as a student at the local University of Louvain, whence, in accordance with the custom of his time, he migrated first to Paris, thence to Venice, where he was a pupil of Johannes Baptista Egnatius, the friend and correspondent of Erasmus, and afterwards to Bologna and Padua. The astonishing knowledge which he acquired of the classical languages and ancient history stood him in good stead when he came to travel in the Near East.

Busbecq's first introduction to public life occurred in 1554, when he was a member of the special embassy sent by the Emperor Ferdinand to England to attend the marriage of Queen Mary and Philip II of Spain in Winchester Cathedral. It is unfortunate that he has left us no account of this mission, which is only casually mentioned in his letters. Immediately after his return to Flanders he received an urgent summons to proceed to Vienna and undertake the important duties of imperial ambassador at Constantinople.

Soleiman the Magnificent had been on the throne of the Ottoman Empire since the year 1520, and was among the most striking personalities of his age. The sixteenth century produced many notable rulers—Charles V,
Francis I, and Elizabeth among them—and of these Soleiman was a worthy compeer. He is perhaps the most distinguished figure in Turkish history, a man endowed by nature with the highest intellectual and moral gifts. His personal courage and military genius, his sense of justice and his chivalrous conduct towards a brave foe, his devotion to his own religion and his tolerance of other faiths, his munificence and generosity won him the devotion of his subjects and the respect of his enemies. His reign saw the greatest extension of the Turkish power; the descendants of the tribe of Othman, who had made their first appearance in history only three hundred years before, were lords of a mighty empire which stretched from Bagdad to the Atlantic, and from Mecca almost to the walls of Vienna. To give the barest outline of his achievements would be far beyond our scope. Succeeding his father, the cruel and detested Selim, at the age of twenty-six, he signalized his accession by capturing Belgrade, which had successfully resisted the assault of the greatest of his predecessors, Mohamed the Conqueror, and thus opened to Turkey the rich plains of Hungary. In 1522 the capture of Rhodes, after its heroic defence by the Knights of St. John, set the seal on Soleiman’s military glory, while his generous treatment of a gallant foe won him the admiration of Europe. In 1526 he led a vast army northward and defeated Louis II at the fatal battle of Mohacs, which made Hungary for nearly 150 years a Turkish province and Buda a Turkish outpost. It was only by a supreme effort that Vienna was saved from a like fate. Three years later Soleiman returned to the attack; but by this time a foe had arisen in Charles V who was worthy of his steel, and the Sultan contented himself with ravaging the open country, and in 1533 peace was concluded at Constantinople on terms advantageous to Turkey. But hostilities again broke out and continued over a period of several years until in 1547 Charles V and Ferdinand were forced to ask for peace, and a truce of five years was granted. In 1551 Ferdinand rashly broke faith with the Turks by his invasion of Transylvania; whereupon the Sultan seized Malvezzi, the imperial ambassador, and flung him into prison, where he remained for two years, and from which he emerged practically a dying man.

It was to succeed Malvezzi that Busbecq was dispatched to Constantinople in 1554. His mission was to check by diplomacy the raids of the Turks into Hungary, which was then practically at their mercy, and, above all, to gain
time and give the Empire a breathing space to recruit for a fresh effort. Busbecq amply justified the hopes of his master, and was able to effect much by his quick sympathy and his appreciation of the Turkish character, his love of straightforward dealing, his personal courage, and, above all, by his untiring patience.

The four *Turkish Letters*, which give the full story of his mission, were addressed to Nicholas Michault, who had been Busbecq’s fellow student in Italy and was afterwards imperial ambassador to the Portuguese court. They were never intended for publication. Though Busbecq is sometimes apologetic about his style, he writes easy flowing Latin, garnished with classical quotations and allusions. His favourites among the ancient authors seem to have been the elder Pliny and Tacitus; and we may perhaps trace the influence of the latter in the way in which Busbecq sums up a situation in an epigram. For example, in speaking of the then recent conquest of Mexico and Peru, he concludes quite in the Tacitean style with the words *pietas obtenditur, aurum quaeritur*—‘religion is the pretext, the object is gold.’

Busbecq returned from Turkey in the autumn of 1562 with an established reputation as a diplomatist. It was not long before he again obtained employment. Philip of Spain proposed to Maximilian that a marriage should be arranged between the Infanta of Spain and one of Maximilian’s sons, but stipulated that the young Archdukes Rudolph and Ernest should be sent to Spain to be educated. To Busbecq was entrusted the task of accompanying them thither. On his return Maximilian conferred on him the honour of knighthood, and afterwards appointed him governor to his four younger sons. But a still more important post was in store for him. In 1570 the Archduchess Isabella was married to Charles IX of France, and Busbecq was sent with her as master of the household, afterwards returning to Vienna. On the death of Charles IX he was again sent to Paris to bring back the widowed queen, and then from 1574–92 resided in the French capital to look after her interests and secure the punctual payment of her dowry. At the same time he acted as an unofficial observer in Paris, and his letters to Maximilian and his successor Rudolph are full of interesting sidelights on French affairs at a most important period of European history.

During his absence abroad Busbecq’s thoughts must often have turned to his old home on the Lys. He had had the château of Busbecq repaired, and no doubt hoped to pass his last
years there. But fate had ordained otherwise. In 1592, in his seventy-first year, he obtained leave of absence from the Emperor and set out to revisit his home. While journeying through Normandy, then much disturbed by civil war, he and his baggage were seized at Cailly by soldiers from a neighbouring camp, who professed to be acting by orders of the Governor of Rouen. Busbecq, courageous as ever, violently protested and claimed the privileges of an ambassador and refused to believe that orders had been given to molest him. His protests had such an effect that the robbers restored to him his belongings and escorted him back to Cailly and then made good their escape. The Governor of Rouen, on being informed, hastened to make his apologies and promised that the offenders should be brought to justice; but Busbecq replied that he preferred to make his peace with heaven rather than to take vengeance on his aggressors. Knowing that his end was near, he begged that he might be conveyed to the neighbouring castle of Maillot near St. Germain, where eleven days later he breathed his last on 28 October 1592. He was buried in the church of St. Germain; but his heart was enclosed in a leaden casket and placed in the family tomb at Busbecq.
THE FIRST LETTER

Vienna, 1 Sept. 1555 (n).

I promised, when I parted from you, that you should have a full account of my journey to Constantinople. I am now preparing to fulfil this promise; nay more, if I mistake not, I shall discharge the debt with interest, for to the story of my journey to Constantinople I intend to add that of my expedition to Amasia, a much less hackneyed and ordinary undertaking. If you find that I have met with delightful adventures, you will partake of my enjoyment; we are such old friends that we share in each other's pleasures. If, on the other hand, as must necessarily happen in a journey of such length and difficulty, any disagreeable incidents occurred, you must not take them to heart; they are past and over, and the greater the annoyance they caused me at the time the greater is the pleasure which I take in relating them.

You will remember my return home from attending the marriage of King Philip and Queen Mary (n) in England (where I was in attendance upon Don Pedro Lasso, whom my most gracious master Ferdinand, King of the Romans, sent to do honour to the royal pair), and the summons which I received from Ferdinand to undertake this journey. I was at Lille when his letter reached me on 3 November, and I only delayed my journey to turn aside to Busbecq and bid farewell to my father and my friends, and then hurried through Tournai to Brussels. There I met Don Pedro himself, and he, as they say, spurred on the willing horse by showing me a letter from the King, in which he commanded him to