

Glass Bridges: Cross-Cultural Exchange between Florence and
the Ottoman Empire

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The exchange of objects and people across physical borders amidst an atmosphere of cultural and religious differences holds a relevance that transcends time, echoing throughout the pages of history and persisting in the twenty-first century. This movement of objects and people through the means of trade, travel and diplomatic exchange forms the basis of multi-faceted cross-cultural relations, at times even creating a sense of cultural convergence. This concept will be examined in this paper through the analysis of interactions and exchanges between the Ottoman Empire and Florence. Only upon grasping the literal movement of objects and people across physical borders, the metaphorical movements between faith and skepticism, order and chaos, exteriority and interiority can be fully understood.¹ Even objects of trade are based on an idea, a preconceived notion the buyers possess regarding the specific object or material, reflecting in the sellers' perceptions of the buyers' demand for it. Such a web of ideas and thoughts form the crux of cross-cultural interactions, which occur against the backdrop of tension, created by the push and pull of opposing religious beliefs and social biases. Hence, it is necessary to first consider the crusading rhetoric and religious conflict which was an important undercurrent in the relationship between Italian city-states such as Florence and the Ottoman Empire.

The fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453, after an intense and aggressive siege by the Ottoman Turks, has often been cited as a turning point in the ties between Europe and the Levant, specifically with the Ottoman Empire. Powerful crusading rhetoric echoed throughout the continent in the years that followed. By late fifteenth century, the term 'barbarian' became popular in describing the Ottoman Turks, its ideological relevance mainly due to the unrelenting pace of Turkish advance.² Yet it was events such as the failed crusade at Nicopolis (1396) that may have forced Florentine scholar and statesmen Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) to rise above the crusading polemic and consider the Ottoman's military and social organization. His description of the power and ambition of the Turks was admittedly designed to alarm his contemporaries. However, his description of Turkish customs indicated a keen interest in their culture and displayed more accurate knowledge than he had previously demonstrated in earlier writings. He portrayed the Turk in the classical model of the 'noble savage', commending their simple lifestyle and military

¹ Greenblatt 2010, p. 250.

² Bisaha 2006, p. 74.

discipline.³ However, his was one voice among a thousand other statesmen, diplomats, clergymen and humanists who chose to focus on the Ottoman Turks as uncouth brutes who were uneducated and uncivilized in equal measure and whose designs on territorial control needed to be stopped through the means of an armed response, a crusade.



Fig 1.1 Riza Bey, Mohammed Entering Constantinople, c.1858-1913

³ Bisaha 2006, p. 56.

During the medieval period, the main aim of the crusades was recovery of the Holy Land. However, this changed in the fifteenth century for various reasons. Firstly, the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt controlled the Holy land in the fifteenth century. The Mamluks were not seen as a specific military threat to the Latin West, especially because the Italian powers had agreed upon a mutually beneficial trade arrangement. The Ottoman Turks with their dynamic military power and expansionist designs in Europe were a far greater threat. Besides, there was an initial fear amongst the Italian commercial powers that they would adversely affect trading interests in the Levant. Furthermore, the reconquest of Constantinople would be a strategic move that would divide the Ottoman lands in two and curb the development of Turkish naval power in the northeastern Mediterranean.⁴ However, as Sultan Mehmet II established trade agreements with various Italian city-states shortly after conquering Constantinople, commercial interests began to outweigh crusading sentiment, at least amongst the statesmen of Italy. Pope Pius II himself, admitted in a passionate and bitter letter after the Council of Mantua that the 'princes of Europe could not be brought to place the good of Christendom above that of their several principalities'.⁵

Florence was no different. Growing commercial interests in the east and hostility to Venice, a dominant trading partner with the Ottoman Empire, predisposed the city-state against a war with the Turks. However, this did not stop Florence from publicly supporting efforts to launch a crusade in the years following 1453. Privately, there were misgivings. Some Florentines were wary about wasting good money on futile holy wars, especially when other Christian states were just as unwilling to come forward. There was a strong feeling that crusading was a means of papal extortion. Florentines were particularly unwilling to give their full support to a war in which their political and commercial rival, Venice,⁶ would take the lead and reap profits.⁶ On the other hand, the claims of the papacy on Florence were powerful as well. Florence, after all, was a Christian state, which moreover was tied to the papacy by the strongest political and commercial bonds, and a sense of political expediency coupled with Christian duty compelled Florence to succumb to a determined pope such as Pius II.⁷ In fact, in the period between 1453 and 1456, Florence openly voiced support for papal crusading efforts and contributed the proceeds of tenths collected in their territories to provide galleys, ships and men. However, beginning in

⁴ Hankins 1995, p. 113.

⁵ Ibid. p. 114.

⁶ Black 1984, p. 241

⁷ Ibid.

1457, they became markedly less willing to join the holy war proving to be considerably less malleable to papal influence. One reason for this change of attitude was, presumably, their expanding trade with the Levant – voyages of communal galleys to Turkish Constantinople had resumed in 1456 and protection for Florentine merchants had to be sought from Sultan Mehmet II.⁸

This juxtaposition of opposing factors is a prevailing theme in the cross-cultural relationship between Florence and the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing its multi-faceted nature. The events of the Congress of Mantua provide insight of a situation where Florence had to manage its relations with Mehmet II in the face of papal pressure and its own mercantile ambitions. Shortly before his arrival in Mantua, Pius II wrote to the Florentines that he expected their ambassadors to arrive at the congress no later than the official opening day of 1 June 1459.⁹ However, due to split opinions about participation in the crusades and an unwillingness to send their ambassadors before any other European power, Antonio Ridolfi and Franco Sanchetti, the elected ambassadors, were given their instructions only on 14 August and finally departed on 31 August.¹⁰ Both the pope and the Florentines had referred to a possible conflict of interest, which were presumably the two Florentine galleys that had sailed for the Levant in the middle of August 1459. They arrived in Constantinople on 28 September, one of them proceeding to the Black Sea, which was the first voyage of a Florentine gallery to that specific region.¹¹ This level of concern on the part of the Florentines to protect their galleys was mainly due to a state-initiated effort ever since the purchase of Porto Pisano and Leghorn in 1421 to establish Florence and its newly built galley system as a major player in the Levantine maritime trade.¹² In fact, this possession of a galley system proved to be a vital instrument of trade, enabling Florence to oust Venice as the predominant trading colony in Constantinople in 1453.¹³ Given these circumstances, the instructions passed to the ambassadors at Mantua make pragmatic sense.

The ambassadors were given public instructions to be read out in front of the rest of the congress as well as a set of private instructions in which they were explicitly forbidden to commit Florence in any way without the expressed consent of the Signoria.¹⁴ In this secret mandate, they were told to say that Florentines were

⁸ Black 1985, p. 246.

⁹ Ibid, p. 249.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 251.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mallet 1967, p. 21.

¹³ Ibid, p. 19.

¹⁴ Black 1985, p. 251

ardent supporters of the Roman church whose honor and welfare they have and would always serve and even though the Florentine people considered no undertaking more worthy than a war against the infidel, they also lacked strength to contribute to the extent they wished to. They also apologized for their late arrival, citing that it was only appropriate to arrive after the other greater states. Their public instructions were written in the same thread except that more space was devoted to Turkish atrocities.¹⁵

At the end of September, at the Congress of Mantua, when each Italian state was called upon in a public assembly to declare its subsidy, the Signoria dispatched a letter by special courier to Mantua reminding Schetti and Ridolfi on the gravity of the negotiations because the Turks had in their port at Constantinople the two galleys worth hundred thousand florins or more as well as five hundred Florentines, two hundred of whom belonged to the best families.¹⁶ Thus, the ambassadors were told not to put anything in writing but to go to the pope in secret to assure him of their approval of his intentions. Provided other Christian states cooperated, the Florentines would play their part, confident that the Pope would impose a just subsidy upon them. However, due to their merchants being more actively engaged in trading in Turkish lands than those of any other nations, they needed to be especially sensitive in public declarations made. Additionally, there were some states, previously active in Levantine trade, having lost their dominance in the East, would stop short of nothing to hurt Florentine commercial prospects there. This was an obvious reference to Venice.¹⁷ Hence, the pope was asked to take personal responsibility for Florence's part in the crusade. If he was unwilling, the ambassadors would ask the Duke of Milan to do so as well but it was preferable to keep this between only themselves and the Pope.¹⁸ The ambassadors were told to delay as long as possible so as to discover the intentions of the Venetians, but secrecy was crucial, as only six principle Florentine citizens knew of these instructions and any betrayal of the strictest confidence would be punished severely. There was a great deal of anxiety on the part of the Florentines that any undertaking signed by them should reach the hands of Mehmet II and so their ambassadors obtained a private papal audience where in the presence of two cardinals, they pledged Florence to the same contribution as that offered by other states.¹⁹ The assembly of the Italian nation took place on 30th September, when everyone signed the agreement proposed

¹⁵ Black 1985, pp. 251-252.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Black 1985, p. 251.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 251.

¹⁹ Black 1985, p. 252.

except the Venetians, who said they were still awaiting instructions and the Florentines, whose agreement was guaranteed by the pope and the duke of Milan. Eager to avoid public exposure at the Congress of Mantua with their galleys at Constantinople, the Florentines instructed their ambassadors to leave Mantua as soon as possible and they returned to Florence by 10 November.²⁰

As clearly shown in the negotiations at Mantua, an important aspect of the trade relations between Florence and the Ottoman Turks is the role Venice played, both directly and indirectly. Besides having to appease papal authority, Florence also had Venice and its maritime and commercial powers to compete with. Land locked Florence, known for its fine woolen textiles, had been forced to channel its precious commodity eastward by way of Venice and in the holds of Venetian ships until it had secured the city of Pisa and the port of Livorno. Thereafter its merchants attempted to break into the Ottoman market directly but to no avail because their Italian rivals effectively blocked this until the 1450s.²¹ The long war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire that marked the second half of Mehmet II's reign (1463-79) provided a motivation for the sultan to favor the Florentine traders. Mehmet had always been sensitive to the fact that his principal maritime rival Venice was also his chief trading partner in the Mediterranean world. After 1453, the sultan began to endorse Florence in an attempt to break this dependence. Florence not only secured capitulations from Mehmet II, but as early as 1454, Florentine ships laden with woolens began anchoring at Constantinople.²² In the midst of growing tensions between Venice and the Ottomans, the Sublime Porte in 1462 expelled many Venetians from government houses in Galata and installed Florentines in their place. During the first years of the war, business between Ottomans and Florentines replaced the lost Veneto-Ottoman nexus and flourished. Nonetheless, Venice was simply too entrenched in the eastern-Mediterranean world for another Italian state to completely dislodge them.²³

It is important to note that Venice and Constantinople were not the only spaces for cross-cultural interaction. In the study of the literal movement of objects and people across cross-cultural boundaries, multiple entry and exit points are usually involved, leading to different routes being used. By 1478, trade between Florence and Constantinople increasingly used the overland route via Ragusa (present day Dubrovnik), and for the short crossing of the Adriatic sea which this

²⁰ Black 1985, p. 252.

²¹ Goffman 2002, p. 176.

²² Ibid.

²³ Goffman 2002, pp. 176-177.

route involved, ships were hired in Ancona.²⁴ In this manner, a multitude of spaces for interaction between Florentines and the Ottoman Turks were created. The following two chapters will highlight these various spaces by examining the movement of people and exchange of goods such as silk, wool, carpets and spices.



Fig. 1.2 Map of Ottoman Empire at Fall of Constantinople 1453

For now, it is imperative to take into consideration that these trade relations were not a one-sided pursuit by the Italians. In 'The Muslim Discovery of Europe', Bernard Lewis states that, for Ottomans, 'the idea of an alliance with Christian powers, even against other Christian powers, was strange and, to some, abhorrent'.²⁵ In reality, as the aforementioned commercial ties with Venice and Florence prove, alliance with Christian powers were a natural and inevitable aspect of Ottoman policy from its earliest days.²⁶ Taking over Constantinople provided Mehmet II with a seat of power from which to consolidate his military and commercial dominance. He reconfirmed the commercial privileges of the Italian maritime states almost immediately after taking over the previously Byzantine ruled city. Interacting with individuals from Christian states who were frequently cited as 'infidels' was not

²⁴ Mallet 1967, p. 72.

²⁵ Lewis 1982, p. 62.

²⁶ The term 'alliance' is used to represent ties of both a political and commercial nature because even though the Ottoman empire was not inclined to defend these Italian city-states or vice versa, they were not beyond encouraging each other's political agenda or requesting for military aid, as will be shown in the later chapters.

as much an issue or deterrent to travel as previously assumed in academic research. The following chapters will show the passage of Muslim merchants into non-Islam lands or what is known as Dar Al-Harb, as well as their interactions with Christian travelers and merchants in their own cities, such as Bursa and of course, Constantinople. In fact, in an effort to revive economic prosperity in Constantinople, Mehmet II built commercial centers – large covered bazaars - in the various parts of the city including in the port area, Tahtakale and in the middle of the city, Fatih.²⁷ Presumably, this was done to facilitate trading activities of the Muslim Turks as well as Jewish and Armenian communities, discrediting the previously widely held notion among scholars that only members of the non-Muslim communities formed the bulk of merchants in Constantinople and other cities in the Ottoman Empire.²⁸

Conversely, these interactions and movements of merchants, travelers, artists, diplomats and consuls of contrasting socio-religious background does not imply acceptance or harmony on either side. Neither should the conservative religious rhetoric raging throughout Europe be mistaken for a lack of interest in an alien culture. The reality is a multi-faceted, precarious relationship between two different cultures, which constantly mutated and shifted for the benefit of trade and political purposes, whether on an individual or state level. In fact, Italian city-states were not beyond using their affiliations or hostilities with Ottoman Turks for their own political machinations, given the constant power struggle between the various principalities and states within Italy itself. Florentine ambassador, Otto Niccolini, once suggested that it would be to the advantage of all Italy if the Venetians and Turks were left alone to annihilate each other.²⁹ This remark highlights the tone of Italian power politics during the late fifteenth-century - 'the interplay between prevailing moral assumptions and the exigencies of practical politics'.³⁰ Chapter four will examine this power play in relation to Florence, specifically with regards to the events surrounding the Pazzi Conspiracy, which provides the backdrop to the diplomatic exchange between Florence and the Ottoman Empire at the time. More importantly, Bertoldo di Giovanni's medal, which was sent by Lorenzo to the Sultan following the events of the Pazzi Conspiracy, will take center stage. The context of the commissioning of this medal as well as its iconography provide a wealth of information which enforce two crucial points of this paper.

²⁷ Inalcik 1994, p. 18.

²⁸ Goffman 2002, p. 91.

²⁹ Schwoebel 1967, p. 60.

³⁰ Ibid, p.33.

Firstly, the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the political power play in the Italian peninsula by the Italian city-states themselves as well as Sublime Porte's own submission. The Ottoman Empire was no isolated enemy of Christendom – it was very much involved politically and commercially with the goings-on of the land, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Secondly, through analyzing the medal itself and the exchange it was involved in, we come to grasp the ideas, beliefs, intentions and varying agendas underlying cross-cultural interactions. We come to witness how these exchanges occur both across physical as well as metaphysical boundaries. Against the background of crusading polemic, military ambitions, commercial interests, mercantile activities and political intrigue, the medal forms a point of convergence between two disparate cultures, a convergence which is also apparent in matters of taste and industrial development influenced by the export and import of goods between the Ottoman Empire and Italian city-states. It has to be noted that much emphasis has been made on the interactions and relations between the Ottoman Empire and Venice in the recent years of Renaissance scholarship, which has begun to look towards the Levant and even Asia in an effort to discard the euro-centric approach amongst scholars of the past years³¹. This paper attempts to look at another Italian city-state, Florence, a city that always loomed large in the Renaissance imagination, and examine its exchanges and interactions with the Ottoman Empire, establishing its role in the stage of commerce and politics between Christendom and the Levant, highlighting the different textures and facets of cross cultural relations as well as the cultural convergence it creates.

³¹ Carboni 2007, p. 15.

Chapter 2: Travel

From 1460 to 1500, there was a great deal of interaction between Florence and the Ottoman Empire. In fact, there were Florentine colonies living and thriving in various places in the Empire itself. Using material from 'Alcune Memorie di Benedetto Dei', Pagini del Ventura listed approximately 50 Florentine merchants. They almost all belonged to famous families, who were active in Constantinople in 1469, some of them in other Ottoman trading centers such as Bursa and Adrianople. The list begins with the consul Mainardo Ubaldini and continues with Piero Doni, Bartolomeo Sapiti, Piero Berti, Agnolo Buondelmonti, Niccolo' Ardinghelli Leonardo Salvucci, Angiolino Capponi, Piero Ottavanti, Piero Ottavanti, Piero Gaddi, Matteo Cerretani, Andrea Rondinelli, Francesco Ugolini, Niccolo' Serragli, Deo Frescobaldi, Francesco Capponi, Gentile Altoviti, Paolo Vettori, Iacopo Ricci, Manetto Martelli. Moreover, the Florentine colony in Galata (also known as Pera in Greek) a wealthy district north of the Golden Horn, practically opposite to Constantinople, enjoyed a good relationship with the Sublime Porte. Benedetto Dei, a Florentine agent settled in Galata, became the most trusted advisor to the sultan in the years 1460-72.³² In 1463, on the occasion of the sultan's victory in Bosnia, the Florentines of Pera decorated their houses and streets and the Sultan himself honored them by visiting and dining at the mansion of the Florentine banker, Carlo Martelli. More importantly, the consul Mainardo Ubaldini, head of the Florentine colony of Pera, and the Florentine agents and merchants of Pera, were actively involved in Mehmet II's decision to declare war against Venice in 1463.³³ Florence enjoyed this beneficial relationship with the Ottoman empire due to Mehmet's policy, which showed them special favor in order to decrease his dependence on the Venetians and Genoese who were challenging his plans to expand into Morea, Albania, Bosnia and the Black Sea. Furthermore, the Ottomans were also aware that fine woolen cloth, the principal export item from the West, was originally made or finished by the *arte di lana* of Florence and exported to the Ottoman markets through Venice.³⁴ Mehmet's interest in encouraging Florentine involvement in the Levantine trade dated back to the days of his conquest of Constantinople. By 1455, the Sultan was extending benefits and favors to the Florentines in his territories. The specific provisions included in the capitulations granted by the Sublime Porte to Florence only goes to show the extent of these

³² Inalcik 1994, p. 231

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Inalcik 1994, p. 230.



Fig 2.1 Buondelmonti, Map of Constantinople, 1422

special favors. These provisions included double taxation, the hiring of native non-Muslims as aides and the validity of the documents issued in different areas of jurisdiction.³⁵ Indicative of the growth of trade after 1454, the number of Florentine ships visiting Constantinople increased from one to a convoy of three ships annually in the period 1455-61.³⁶

³⁵ Inalcik 1994, p. 233.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 231.

Florentine merchants took the sea route from Ancona or Ragusa to Constantinople usually on ships from these places. However, in order to avoid corsairs or Venetians, they preferred the sea and overland routes of Ancona-Ragusa-Sarajevo-Novibazar-Edirne(Adrianople)-Pera. These overland routes were also used by Ragusans and Muslim merchants, becoming one of the main trade routes crossing the Balkan Peninsula from the Adriatic.³⁷ There was another variation to this route of travel for Florentines – it started from Rimini to Ragusa by ship, subsequently followed by overland travel to Constantinople.³⁸ These routes were not only used for the movement of goods and merchants but by travelers as well.

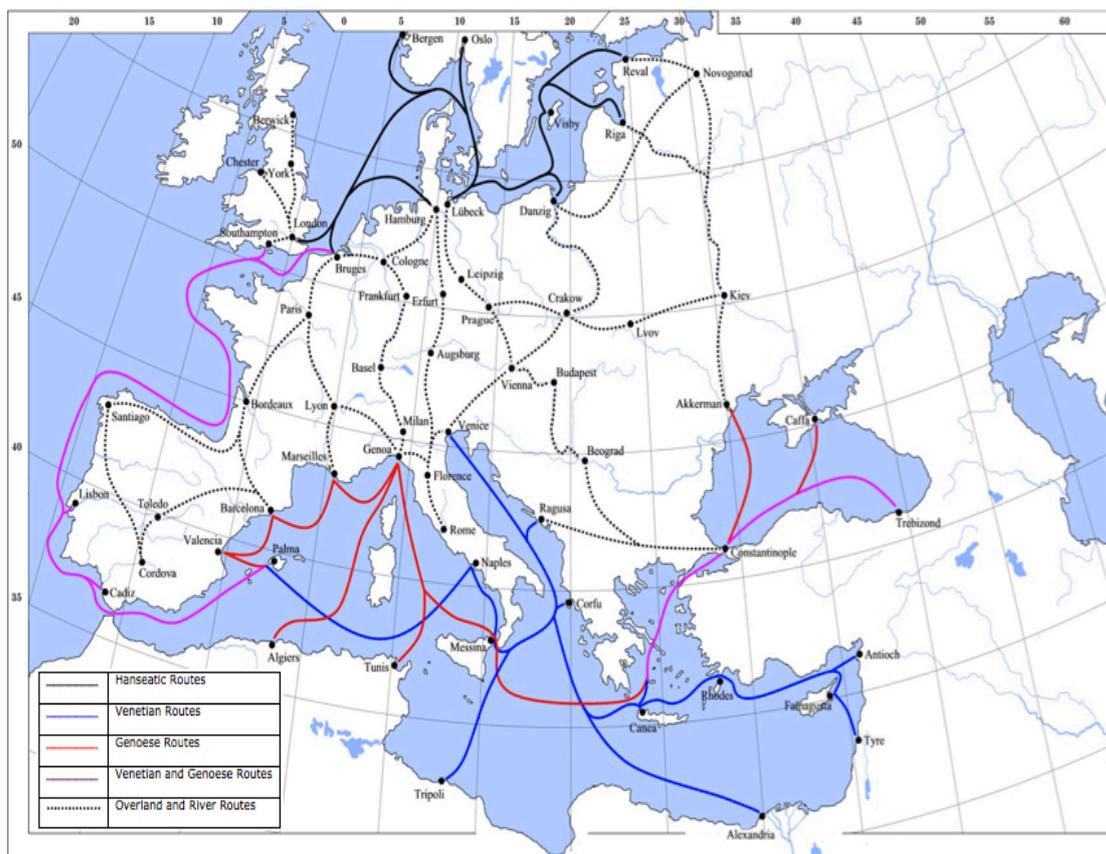


Fig. 2.2 Map of Late Medieval Trade Routes

Motivated by antiquarian interests and religious pilgrimage, Florentines often journeyed through the Levant towards the Holy Land, even after the fall of Constantinople. For example, Bernardo, the brother of Lorenzo Medici’s secretary Niccolò Michelozzi and his fellow companion Bonsignore Bosignori, both clergymen, journeyed through the Ottoman Empire on the way to Rhodes between July 1497 and November 1498.³⁹ In the letters written by Bonsignore and Bernardo Michelozzi,

³⁷ Inalcik 1994, p. 232.

³⁸ Borsook 1973, p. 146.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

while travelling, as well as Bonsignore's memoirs written years afterwards at the request of a friend, all still preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale of Florence, there is a wealth of information on the Florentines living in Adrianople, Constantinople and Bursa.

Adrianople was one of their stops during the land journey. Until 1458, this city used to be the capital of the Ottoman Turks. It was considered an important trading centre for cloth and there were several Florentine agents present in this city to extend hospitality to Michelozzi and his companions.⁴⁰ An aspect of the city that caught his attention was the sultan's garden where the Florentines were allowed to indulge in the Italian 'sport' of bird catching. Bonsignore mentioned Fra Biagio, an active Franciscan missionary who was chaplain to the Florentine colony in Adrianople.⁴¹ This exemplifies the issue of freedom of worship, which was at the core of extraterritoriality in the Ottoman Empire. Each legate had a church or a chapel where he and his staff could worship freely and each ambassador and consul had legal jurisdiction over his 'nation'. No other state employed such a sweeping extraterritoriality until well after the religious wars of the sixteenth century, which aided in quelling the notion of universal law. This idea became an axiom of diplomacy in Western Europe thereafter.⁴²

More importantly, the presence of such facilities indicate that Florentines were very much able to create a home away from home in a space that had been perceived as hostile to their own cultural and religious practices but obviously was not. Bonsignore also gave an account of a conversation with a Turk concerning 'Turkish law and the relative merits of Christianity and Mohammedanism'⁴³. Presumably 'Modammedanism' refers to Islam. Bernardo, on the other hand, was engaged in a hunt for books and texts, specifically those owned by the Greek colony. This was a major preoccupation of travelers to the Ottoman Empire. Bernardo details his attempts, both frustrating and successful, in procuring Greek texts of good quality at reasonable prices. Given the fascination with classical history among humanists in Florence, this was understandable.

From Adrianople, they travelled onto Constantinople. Their first month in Constantinople involved a sightseeing agenda presumably typical of a traveler to the city. Bernardo visited the Hippodrome, then used by the Turks as an exercise yard for their horses and copied the Greek inscriptions and made Latin translations of

⁴⁰ Borsook 1973, p. 157.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 158.

⁴² Goffman 2002, p. 187.

⁴³ Ibid.

them.⁴⁴ Bonsignore admired the bronze column of the three serpents from Delphi, the fifty-foot-high obelisk of Egyptian granite with its marble base commemorating the Emperor Theodosius who raised it after an earthquake.⁴⁵ The travelers saw many churches, both Greek and Armenian, as well as S. Michele, the Florentines' church served by Fra Bernardino, a Franciscan chaplain.⁴⁶ Needless to say it was the former Santa Sophia which impressed them most. However, from what was described about the mosaics, it is not clear how much was visible. Bonsignore refers to an image of God the Father over the main entrance, which was already partly concealed by whitewash and Turkish inscriptions. Other images, which impressed Bonsignore in the church, were panels of veined marble, which represented figures of St. Jerome and the Virgin on the walls of a gallery, clearly left untouched by the Turks.⁴⁷

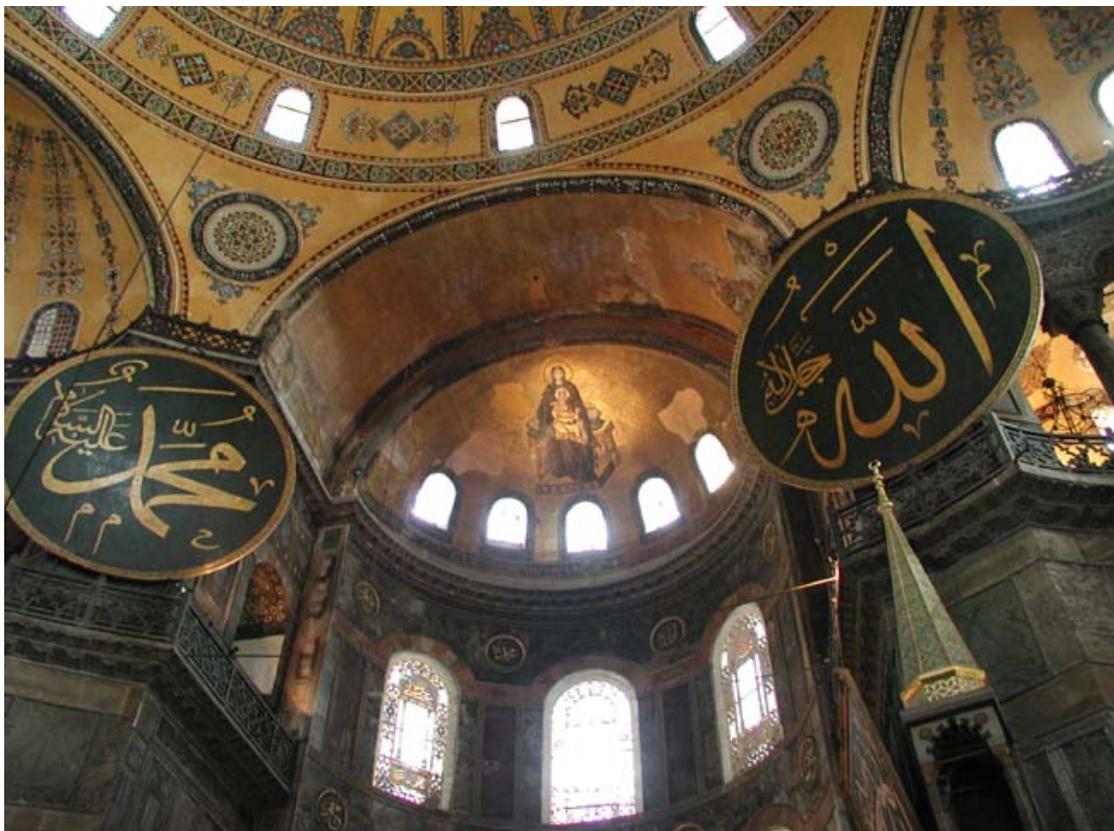


Fig. 2.3 Present day Hagia Sophia (Previously known as Santa Sophia)

Another place of great interest was the harbour with its great traffic: 'every hour one sees something new and each morning the port is a canebrake of ships' masts which have vanished by evening; and thus each day there is fresh news and

⁴⁴ Borsook 1973, p. 159.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Borsook 1973, p. 161.

different people in various costumes to contemplate'.⁴⁸ In spring, the travelers headed to Bursa, fifty-seven miles east of Constantinople. Here they lived with a Florentine Tommaso Fronte who took them around sightseeing.⁴⁹ Bonsignore went off to ride around Mt. Olympus several times taking note of the vegetation.⁵⁰ However, Bursa's main attraction was its reputation as the great centre of the silk trade. In spite of the fact that more silk and cloth of gold were manufactured here than produced in the whole of Italy, Bonsignore, judged them to be of a lesser quality.⁵¹ Aside from silk, the bazaars were full of ornamental leathers, skins worked into textiles such as camlets, rugs and jewels – all of these were objects which participated in the movement across physical boundaries, facilitated by the purchases of travelers such as Bonsignore and Bernardo as well as merchants and agents such as Giovanni Di Francesco.

The letters of the Florentine merchant and agent Giovanni Di Francesco Maringhi addressed to the Florentine firms he represented and to his agents in various Ottoman trade centres provide a clear picture of the network of trade extended by Florentines. He represented the Florentine firms of Venturi, Medici, Galilei and Michelozzi. Maringhi's business headquarters was in Pera and he had salaried agents in Bursa, Gallipoli, Edirne and Sofia who bought and sold for him.⁵² One of his agents, Risalti, who knew Turkish, made regular trips between Florence, Pera and Bursa and back to carry goods and information. Maringhi's main business was the exchange of Iranian silk for Florentine panni (bolts of woolen cloth) on the Bursa market.⁵³ This was true for the whole Ottoman-Florentine trade in general. However, like any credible Florentine merchant, he was also involved in the trade of every commodity, including Ankara camlets, silk cloth and furs, as well as pepper wax, Chinese rhubarb, musk, spices, coarse woolens and flax of Alexandria, among other items.⁵⁴ These objects of trade will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

The origin of such objects notwithstanding, it is important to note that places like Bursa provided a space for these items to be bought or exchanged for other good, creating cross-cultural commercial exchange and contact between Florence and the rest of the Levant, especially with the Ottoman Turks themselves. Maringhi's

⁴⁸ Borsook 1973, p. 163.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.164.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 163.

⁵² Richards 1932, p. 147.

⁵³ Inalcik 1994, p. 234.

⁵⁴ Richards 1932, pp. 185-201.

career can be viewed as an example of other Florentines who were active in the Ottoman Empire, for example, members of the Medici family, Francesco, Giovanni and Raffaello, who were trading at Pera, Bursa and Edirne.⁵⁵ Records kept at the Bursa court of the *kadi* (religious judge or municipal commissioner in Islamic states) give greater insight of the actual transactions and disputes of the Italian merchants and agents in the city. In 1478, a Florentine agent by the name of Piero bartered Western cloth valued at 207,920 akca or 4,000 ducats to four Muslim merchants for raw silk and cloth.⁵⁶

This also raises to question an assumption which has been common in academic research up till recently - that Muslim Turkish subjects of the empire were unable or unwilling to embark on long distance cross-cultural travel for the purpose of trade or otherwise. It was assumed that they played only a passive role in an international commerce dominated by Europeans and their non-Muslim Ottoman compatriots such as the Jews and Armenians⁵⁷. This is not necessarily true. Byzantine historian Dukas, writes for instance, that, when Bayezid I (1389 – 1402) pressed the Byzantine authorities for allowing a *kadi* to reside in Constantinople, one of his arguments was that Ottoman (obviously Muslim) merchants needed to refer to *Sharia* for the purpose of disputes.⁵⁸ If the presence of Ottoman Muslim merchants in a region that was considered *Dar al-Harb* or House of War, was occurring as early as the 1300s, there can be little doubt that during the commercially intense period following the fall of Constantinople, Muslim Turk merchants were travelling out to other parts of Europe. This renders the explanation provided by Daniel Goffman in *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, blaming the lack of Muslim merchants in Europe on their inability to travel out of the House of Islam, lands controlled by Islamic governments, to the House of War, lands controlled by non-Islamic governments, null and void. In relation to the second half of the fifteenth century, Inalcik's studies on the surviving Bursa *Kadi* registers demonstrate a commercial dynamism of this Ottoman town within the Levantine trade network. Muslim merchants – Turkish, Arab, Persian – constitute the dominant element in Bursa, dealing with visiting European merchants or travelers such as Bernardo and Bonsignore, as well as sending their own agents or family members to distant countries.⁵⁹ In fact, direct exports for Florentine woolen to the Levant almost halted in the 1520s. This was because, even though Florentine cloth firms continued to

⁵⁵ Richards 1932. p. 55.

⁵⁶ Inalcik 1994, p. 235.

⁵⁷ Goffman, 2002, p. 90.

⁵⁸ Kafadar 1986, p. 98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 100.

produce “for the Levant”, they did not send their produce to Ottoman towns through their own agents anymore, but sold them to Ottoman merchants visiting Ancona or Florence.⁶⁰ It has been argued that the detonation of Bursan silk trade due to Ottoman-Persia wars under Selim I (1512-20) rendered travel to the Ottoman Empire less attractive for Florentines, who, therefore, preferred to host Ottoman merchants.⁶¹ The movement of Ottoman Turks to Florence in the early 1500s does open up the possibility of them travelling to Florence during the late 1400s when Florence was commercially and politically actively engaged with the Ottoman Empire. After all, the notary contracts and customs registers of Ancona, an Italian city along the Adriatic sea, from 1479 to 1551 show that not only were eastern goods exchanged for western goods but the goods were exchanged by eastern and western individuals meeting face-to-face.⁶²

Such interactions indicate how symbiotic the relations between the Ottomans and Italians were and the manner in which they came to almost converge in certain arenas. These intersections of character and purpose are most apparent in the economic sphere, in which trade within the Mediterranean basin served to bring the two worlds together. Although Christian states such as Venice and Florence were eager to sustain and develop commercial relations because the Ottoman Empire distributed the desired goods of the Levant and Asia, it was the Ottoman’s dealing of the non-Muslims in an Islamic society, which truly impacted this link. The Ottomans handled the ‘others’ less violently than their Christian counterparts, by enforcing a theoretical Muslim superiority, signified by a head-tax upon non-Muslims and certain often symbolic restrictions while simultaneously practicing a ‘nearly absolute but effective disregard in which the various religions and ethnicities, and aliens within the empire co-existed and comingled virtually at will’.⁶³ This is clearly evidenced by the details of the aforementioned correspondences of the Florentine travelers and merchants.

As noted in the introduction, fear of Islam as a political and ideological adversary inevitably generated distorted stereotypes. However, it has to be noted that these ideas were also based on direct observation: through the study of Arabic texts, however imperfectly understood, and through experience.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, even those who feared and despised the Ottomans were compelled to acknowledge their

⁶⁰ Kafdar 1986, pp. 102-103 Cf. R. de Roover, ‘A Florentine Firm of Cloth Manufacturers’, *Speculum* 16, 1941

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Goffman 2002, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Contadini 1999, p. 2.

feats. The janissaries, Turkish administration, justice and other institutions were praised especially by those who had seen them first hand. The individual Turk was admired for his honest, courage, frugality and sense of humor. Though the character and ability of Sultan Mehmet II himself was widely disputed in the West, he has been acknowledged as the foremost ruler of his day.⁶⁵

There is a dearth of information, specifically during this period in Ottoman history, on the views of the Turks regarding the 'Franks' - the term used in early Ottoman writings which appeared to refer to the Italians, and especially, the Venetians whom they encountered in their military expansion.⁶⁶ Given that any cultural interest and hospitality on the part of the Sultan and Sublime Porte can be reasoned as largely motivated by an economic and political agenda, it is still interesting to note that Mehmet II regularly employed Greeks, Jews and Latin Christians for political, diplomatic and military purposes. His diplomatic alliance with Lorenzo Medici, leading statesman of Florence, which will be further examined in chapter four, certainly emphasizes his regard for non-Muslims. Perhaps this attitude stemmed from a certain respect and interest in the classical history of Christendom in spite of their antithetical religious beliefs. Possibly this consideration was prevalent among his advisors and statesmen in spite of their frequent use of the word 'infidel', even in letters addressed to the leaders of the various Christian state.⁶⁷ Presumably, further examination of Turkish archival sources could provide greater insight into perspectives from the Ottoman side of the cultural and religious divide between themselves and their Italian counterparts during this time. Nonetheless, the convergence fostered by interactions through travel and mercantile activity, as detailed in this chapter, is definitely worth taking into consideration, especially in the examination of the exchange of goods in the next chapter.

⁶⁵ Schwoebel 1965, p. 169-170.

⁶⁶ Lewis 1982, p. 159.

⁶⁷ Lewis 1982, p. 60.

Chapter 3: Objects of Trade

The exchange of commodities across physical and cultural boundaries creates an infrastructure based on a system of supply and demand, which also stimulates a certain degree of cultural convergence, be it in the form of contact, influence or competition. During the fifteenth century, the demand in Italy for luxury textiles and household furnishings grew at an accelerated rate, driven by the urban elite's desire for public display and the private enjoyment of their steadily accumulating wealth.⁶⁸ To satisfy local consumers, Italians expanded their already sophisticated silk production and quickly developed their glass and ceramic industries.⁶⁹ More importantly, in 1421, the Florentine Signoria decided to embark on building a state galley system to rival that of Venice. It appointed six *consoli di mare* to oversee the construction of the galleys and increased the number of consuls in the following year because of their added responsibility to encourage and develop the arts, emphasizing the inextricable link between industrial development and export trade.⁷⁰ This link is the basis of cultural convergence on a commercial level. By the turn of the 14th and 15th century, both Florence and Italy were beginning to manufacture products of high quality inspired by Islamic models that proved to be a challenge to oriental prototypes.⁷¹ In fact, Florentine craftsmen were in a position to present as gifts to princes in the Near East the kind of objects that had once been the glory of Islamic craftsmanship.⁷²

Silk was one such commodity. Exchange of woolen cloth for raw silk in Bursa was the basis of Florentine prosperity. In the period 1400-1630, Bursa was the international market for raw silk from Iran and also the emporium of Western fine woolen cloth for the whole of Asia. Western cloth bales arriving at Constantinople and Pera from Italy were then transported to Bursa. Besides, the re-export to Iran, a significant part of the imports were, of course, purchases by the local merchants for shipment all over the Ottoman Empire.⁷³ Greater purchases of silk encouraged increased production of wool because of the high profit involved in bartering them.

Florentine agent and merchant, Giovanni Di Francesco Maringhi noted that it was a better business to barter silk with woolen cloth than to sell directly to drapers in

⁶⁸ Goldthwaite 1993, pp. 13-20.

⁶⁹ Mack 2002, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Cf. *Istorie fiorentine*, ed. Scipione Ammirato il Giovane, 6: 420-421, 432-433.

⁷¹ In this paper, the term 'oriental' will simply be used to refer to the Levantine origins of the products, not the perceptions of the buyers or sellers.

⁷² Spallanzani 2007, p. 1.

⁷³ Inalcik 1994, p. 237.

Bursa.⁷⁴ Besides, due to the high ratio of gold and silver at the Bursa market and the difficulty of bringing gold from Florence via Ragusa, bartering was always the better option. Demand was high in the Ottoman market. The 260 *panni* sent by Venturi & Co., a Florentine wool firm, in the course of three years was consumed in one year and Maringhi urged the firms to supply him annually with at least 500 to 600 bolts of cloth. Woolen cloths made in Turkey could not compete in quality with those of Florence. Hence, every shipment sold quickly, prices rising constantly.⁷⁵ In fact using woolen cloths to barter for other goods was quite common as well. Around 1470, Benedetto Dei claimed that his fellow Florentines were in a more favorable position than the Venetians in Alexandria, for while the latter had to pay for spices in cash, the former could barter their cloths for the oriental goods in Bursa.⁷⁶ Bartering silk bales with woolen cloth was a well-established practice in Florence too.

The silk trade between Bursa and Florence was also a very profitable business. According to the account book of Guanti, a merchant based in Florence, between 1484 and 1488 the total weight of raw silk sold in Florence under his name amounted to 4,795 pounds costing 6.022 'large' florins.⁷⁷ Presumably, this demand for raw silks was due to the international demand for luxury silks. Italian city-states such as Florence, with their expertise and infrastructure of later medieval Italian weaving centres, were far more developed in textiles than in other decorative arts.⁷⁸ Additionally, the developmental surge of the fourteenth century was mainly incited by competition with contemporary imports from the Levant. The novelty of central Asian textiles and their availability enhanced their appeal to Italian merchants and consumers alike. The unprecedented range of central Asian textile patterns, offering new Chinese and reinterpreted Islamic designs stimulated the Italian industry creatively.⁷⁹ In this manner, the textile trade between Italy and the Levant, spurred by demand for such luxury items, influenced development and international success of Italian textiles.

The biggest consumers of Italian luxury textiles, besides the domestic Italian market, were the Ottomans. The Ottoman court in Constantinople recognised the quality of Florentine craftsmanship. There was a continual flow of Florentine and Venetian silks to Constantinople, with the result that the first sultans wore clothes

⁷⁴ Richards 1932, p. 81.

⁷⁵ Inalcik 1994, p. 238.

⁷⁶ Inalcik 1960, p. 137.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 237.

⁷⁸ Mack 2002, p. 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

made of Italian textiles.⁸⁰ Display of Italian textiles was seen to be consistent with the imperial image projected by Mehmet II and even Suleyman I (1520-66). Manuscript illuminations show that Italian style textiles were worn at both their courts.⁸¹ Many of the royal kaftans in patterned silk that have been preserved over time and placed on display at the Topkapi Saraya are made from Italian fabrics.



Fig. 3.1 Ceremonial Kaftan, Topkapi Saraya, c.1500

In the later years of Bayezid II (1481-1512), an effort was made to boost the Ottoman textile industry in order to rival that of Italy. By 1502, there were at least thousand looms in Bursa producing luxury fabrics of a great variety, indicating tremendous capital investment.⁸²

The development of domestic and regional markets in both Italy and the Ottoman Empire due to demand created by the convergence of cultural tastes is clear. In addition to luxury silks, traditional Islamic honorific garments and carpets also had an impact in Italy. Though the Italian industry made no known effort to imitate or compete with these items of trade, their significant role in Italian paintings

⁸⁰ Spallanzani 2007, p.1.

⁸¹ Mack 2002, p. 175.

⁸² Ibid, p. 176.

reflect a certain status in material culture, specifically in the case of carpets. Carpets were depicted in domestic settings increasingly after 1475, exactly when there was a tremendous surge in demand for luxurious household furnishings as such objects from the Levant became a symbol of fine taste and high culture.⁸³

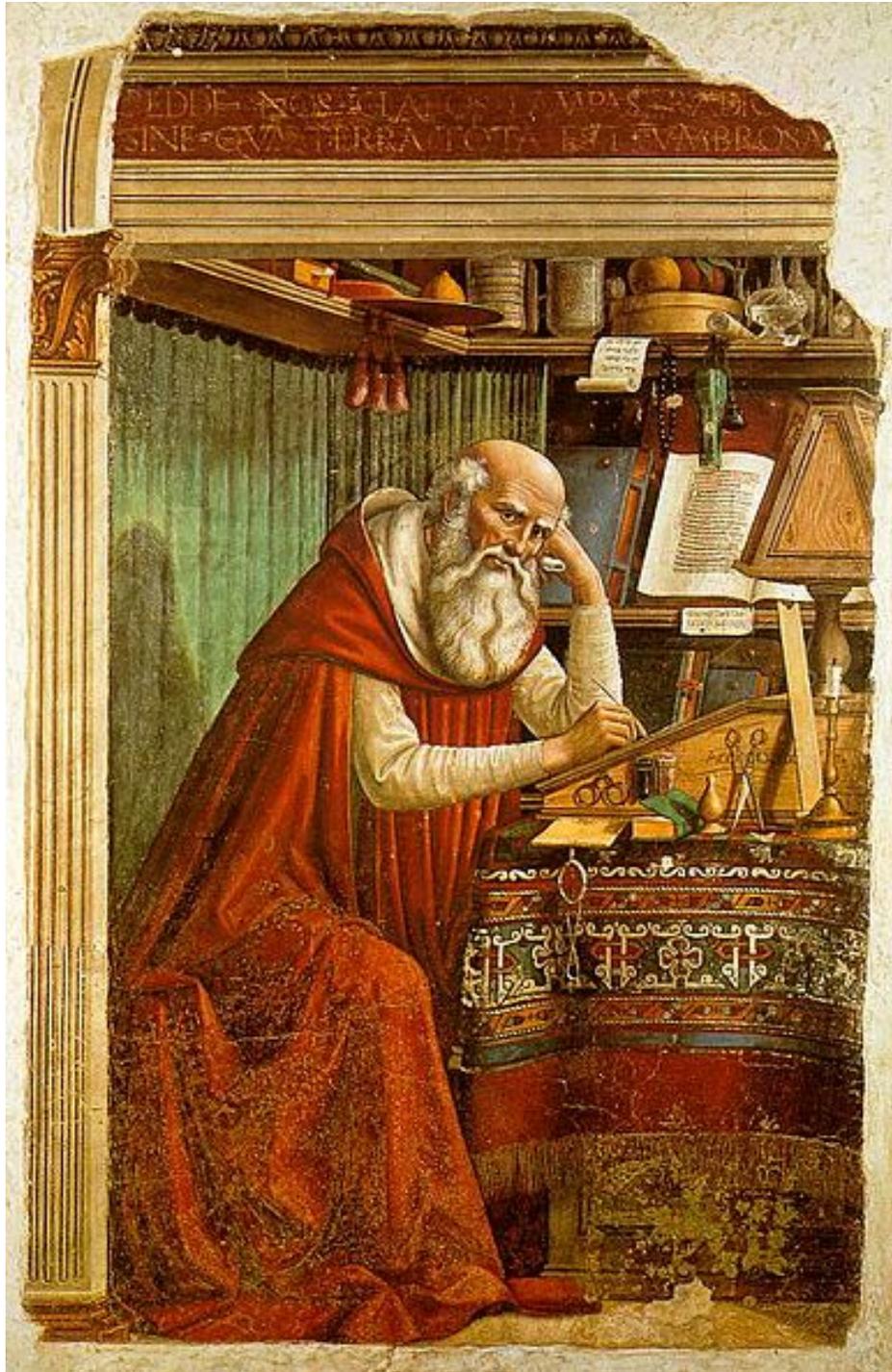


Fig 3.2 Ghirlandaio, *Saint Jerome*, c.1480, Florence, Chiesa di Ognissanti

Rosamund Mack charts this history in *Bazaar to Piazza, Islamic Trade and Italian Art* as well as their migration from being used on the floor to the tabletop.

⁸³ Mack 2002, p. 76.

Carpets were shown to be 'signifiers of status'.⁸⁴ A fine table carpet in a portrait indicates the sitter's affluence, making it a recurring feature in such portraits. The symbolic idea behind these carpets is important to note. Besides being luxury goods and a sign of wealth, carpets, just as other objects in such portraits, reflect a particular interest and even being part of a larger collection.⁸⁵ Italian humanist Sabba da Castiglione discusses those who decorate their rooms with 'new, fantastic and bizarre but ingenious things from the Levant', including '*tapetti turchesi*', praising these ornaments as a show of inventiveness and cultured taste.⁸⁶ In Domenico Ghirlandaio's portrayal of Saint Jerome, he is shown in his study with a fine Turkish carpet on the tabletop. Its pattern is described by Ghirlandaio, as an example of the type of 'new and rare thing...from Turkey'.⁸⁷

Rarity was a 'criterion that Eastern objects, and carpets in particular' could easily meet'.⁸⁸ In fact, the importance of carpets as an import from the East and its status as a luxury item was possibly largely due to the fact that they were difficult to come by. In a letter sent from Constantinople in 1473, Florentine agent and merchant, Carlo Baroncelli informed Lorenzo de' Medici about the shipment of a rug to be used as a table covering, commenting apologetically that it was not beautiful, adding that 'we are far away from the place where they produce these things, and it takes time to have them made with a coat-of-arms'.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the Oriental rug market in Florence was complex. There were many variables on both the supply and the demand sides. On the demand side, the clientele was numerous and diverse, public and private. These clients could acquire rugs directly from merchant-banking companies or from the shops of mercers, second hand dealers or linen drapers who bought them from importing commercial companies. These importers had no difficulty in transmitting orders to Florentine merchants in the Levant.⁹⁰

The process of importing the rugs were rather well-documented, giving a good idea of the exact route charted by these items, the exchange of goods involved and how specific goods were moved across physical boundaries. The company of Lorenzo and Filippo Strozzi, both wool manufacturers in Florence, signed a contract with Alessandro Giugni who was about to embark on a trip to the Ottoman Empire. The parties agreed that in the port of Ancona, Giugni would pick up 13 bales of

⁸⁴ Ruvoldt 2006, p. 651.

⁸⁵ Ruvoldt 2006, p. 652.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 653. Cf. Sabba, *Ricordi*, 119v.

⁸⁷ Ruvoldt 2006, p. 648. Cf. Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo*, 1584, Vol. 1, 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 654.

⁸⁹ Spallanzani 2007, p. 31.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

woolen cloth for a total of 52 bolts from the local Strozzi correspondent, Niccolo Lippi.⁹¹

Located along the Adriatic route, Ancona was an important place of transit, unlike Venice, which was an international market place where the importer could sell items such as rugs directly rather than forward them to other destinations.⁹² In fact, the most significant boost to Ancona's popularity was during the Ottoman-Venetian hostilities (1499-1503). The merchants of Ragusa and Florence obtained customs duty reductions from Ancona in 1499 to 1500.⁹³ Within Italy, Florentine-Pisan hostilities forced Florentine merchants to look for alternative connections to the east. This was followed by a change in the eastern Mediterranean trade routes from all-sea communications between Italian ports and the Levant to cross-Balkan caravans and short cross-Adriatic sea voyages.⁹⁴ Thus, Ancona came to play an important role in the movement of goods between Florence and the Ottoman Empire - there was a resident community of Florentine merchants in Ancona who accepted consignment of imported goods and organised overland shipment to Florence.⁹⁵

After leaving Ancona, Guigni would sell the woolen cloth as soon as he arrived at his destination, using the revenue from the sale to buy some local products not specified in the contract. After the sale of the cloth in the Levant, Guigni proceeded to arrange for the required purchases. He worked through other Florentine merchants who, acting as intermediaries in Bursa, bought 20 bolts of camlets and 3 rugs. The latter cost 260 aspri each, the equivalent of about 5.2 florins.⁹⁶ The goods were then sent overland to Adrianople via Constantinople. Guigni carried out this entire operation. At Adrianople he paid a series of charges and then delivered the goods to a certain Mauro Ceffini. Ceffini, then carried them on horseback to Ragusa, a trip that presented numerous obstacles including snow on a mountain passage they had to shovel. At Ragusa, Ceffini embarked with the merchandise on a ship going to Ancona and from there he travelled overland to Florence. In March 1506, the goods reached the customs house in Florence and were sent on, finally, to the Strozzi warehouse.⁹⁷

Besides the overland route, two account books kept on board of a Florentine state gallery give precise references to the merchandise taken on at Constantinople

⁹¹ Spallanzani 2007, p. 24.

⁹² Ibid, pp. 17-18.

⁹³ Kafadar 1975, p. 101.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Kafdar 1975, pp. 17-18.

⁹⁶ Spallanzani 2007, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

and then unloaded at the end of the voyage at Porto Pisano on 17 April 1477. There nine bales of rugs were cosigned to minor local companies, and they handled delivery to the final destination, most being major firms, including the Salviati, Ristori, and Pazzi, as well as specific individuals, one of whom was Francesco Sassetti, a partner of the Medici.⁹⁸

By the second half of the fifteenth century, the Medici themselves were the most notable buyers of rugs. Lorenzo de' Medici bought many rugs during his lifetime. By the time of his death in 1492, Lorenzo owned almost 70 rugs. Thirty-nine of these were in the palace in Via Larga and the rest in various country villas, no fewer than twelve being in the Villa at Careggi.⁹⁹ Merchant banking companies also contributed to the demand for rugs. They purchased them for the execution of a specific order from a correspondent or even for one of the partners, for shipment to Florence to satisfy general local demand and for resale in other markets. In addition, they also bought rugs for their own use in the furnishing of their business quarters.¹⁰⁰ These places, whether in Florence or abroad, could be quite large, comprising a warehouse, a workspace to accommodate a large staff suitable for receiving clients as well as a residential space. Many of these companies, especially the ones that had offices in important cities, paid careful attention to the furnishings of their headquarters. An example is the palace of the Medici bank in Bruges, the Hotel Bladelin.¹⁰¹ Other prestigious buyers of carpets and rugs, both of Turkish and Levantine origin, were state and ecclesiastical institutions. The inventory of Palazzo Vecchio mentions 28 rugs.¹⁰² They were used for official ceremonious purposes. In 1461, when Florentine galleys were sailing direct to Constantinople, the commune made the decoration of public buildings with carpets an official policy.¹⁰³ Artistic sources and inventories also show demand of such rugs by churches and confraternities. Account books from the 1490s belonging to Tommaso Di Donato, a linen draper records a transaction for a used rug sold to a religious institution, the confraternity of St. Sebastian.¹⁰⁴ These carpets were presumably used in religious ceremonies.¹⁰⁵ In Domenico Ghirlandaio's paintings at the Sassetti chapel, a rug is depicted in the confirmation of Franciscan Rule, shown laid out on the steps and

⁹⁸ Spallanzani 2007, p. 20.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 34-35.

¹⁰¹ Spallanzani 2007, pp. 34-35. Cf. R. De Roover, *Il Banco Medici Dale Origini Al Declino (1397-1494)*, p. 493

¹⁰² Spallanzani 2007, pp. 38-39.

¹⁰³ Mack 2002, p. 76.

¹⁰⁴ Spallanzani 2007, p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 38-39.

beneath the chair of the Pope. Turkish carpets are also portrayed in various other religious scenes on the chapel walls such as *The Test of Fire*.



Fig. 3.3 Ghirlandaio, Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule, c.1482-1485, Sasseti Chapel, Santa Trinita



Fig. 3.4 Ghirlandaio, The Test of Fire, c. 1482-1485, Sasseti Chapel, Santa Trinita

Much of the demands for carpets came from members of great patrician families, such as the Medici, Strozzi, Gondi, Martelli and Capponi who have left records of their commissions and purchases.¹⁰⁶ Men of modest status like wool workers, wool washers also bought oriental rugs from the likes of the wool firm of Carlo Ginori.¹⁰⁷ Tommaso di Donato also loaned out rugs to persons of all classes, from patricians to a notary at the Bishop's place.¹⁰⁸

The appreciation Florentines have for rugs manifests itself in the knowledge of their origins and in the fairly sophisticated language used to describe them – *domaschini, caierini, a ruote, a compassi* etc. For example, Filippo Strozzi who made numerous purchases over different occasions clearly was a competent judge of rugs and quite able to make very specific choices about what he wanted. On one occasion he bought two rugs from Bursa in the Florentine market and on another, he refused two rugs because he specifically required them to be tightly woven.¹⁰⁹ Amongst inventory records detailing the presence of rugs in private homes, in the 1402 inventory of the house of Lottieri Di Nerone Di Nigi the rugs are labeled as 'Turkish', implying a knowledge of their origins or at least awareness that the carpets came from the Ottoman Empire rather the Levant in general.¹¹⁰

Turkish carpets are ideal objects of commerce to examine with respect to objects of limited supply creating a greater demand in the Florentine-Ottoman commercial market. Where the movement of silk and cloth across physical cross-cultural boundaries incited competition and influence on both sides, carpets became a luxury item based on a cultural convergence of taste which had little to do with the intended use of such rugs by its Turkish producers – these rugs were often used for prayers or on the floor - and more to do with its perceived notions of rarity and beauty by its Italian buyers.

Besides textiles and carpets, spices also featured in the commercial exchange between Florence and the Ottoman Empire. Bursa was an important transit center for spices from India and Arabia in the fifteenth century. Maringhi experimented with pepper exports from Bursa to Florence but his shipment did not sell well.¹¹¹ Typical Ottoman exports included rhubarb, wax, musk, mohair, pepper, Bursa silk cloth, drugs, and occasionally fish roe, wool, cotton, fine cotton cloth, hides

¹⁰⁶ Spallanzani 2007, pp. 38-39.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Spallanzani 2007, p. 26

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 38-39.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 29.

¹¹¹ Richards 1932, pp. 82, 108.

and furs. Rhubarb brought high profits in Florence. Bursa silk brocaded were greatly admired but exports were in limited amounts.¹¹²

Nonetheless, compared to other Italian maritime states such as Venice and Genoa and even other Christian powers such as France, Florence's trade with the eastern Mediterranean was limited in its scope – the city had a small market for imported spices and could export only textiles and ceramics in quantity.¹¹³ Despite the demand for luxury items such as carpets, market size was still too small to compete with the likes of Venice. However, the main purpose in outlining Florentine trade relations with the Ottoman Empire is to draw attention to the cross-cultural interactions as well as convergence it created, rather than its success as a competitor in the maritime trade arena of fifteenth century Italy. The route to Florence was a last link in a long chain that stretched from the centers of production in the Levant to the market in places like Bursa and Constantinople where the merchandise was sold to Florentines.¹¹⁴ The concept of cultural convergence is clear in the mesh of tastes and ideas created by the passage of goods and people along this route between the Ottoman Empire and Florence.

¹¹² Richards 1932, p. 168.

¹¹³ Ashtor 1992, p. 312.

¹¹⁴ Spallanzani 2007, p. 12-13.

Chapter Four: Diplomatic Exchange

Commerce did not function as a stand-alone. Agents like Maringhi kept in close touch with the Ottoman government through the Florentine consul in Constantinople because the political atmosphere was always of prime importance for trade in the Levant.¹¹⁵ The Levantine trade was a single branch of international trade, which provided the greatest prospects of profit and accumulation of capital. The protections costs formed a significant part of the cost of trade amongst Ottoman trading partners – hence, the presence of consular institutions in the Ottoman Empire.¹¹⁶

The origins of consuls (known variously as *eminis* or *baili*) may have been rooted in the protection of trading interests but it soon led to residential ambassadors, a concept still used in modern day diplomatic practices. One of the main roles of the resident ambassador involved keeping a steady stream of foreign political information flowing to his home government. Long before 1400, statesmen and policy-makers in Italian city-states began to understand the value of such information. At that point of time, news usually came from two sources - the consuls of their merchant communities abroad and from the resident foreign agents of their bankers.¹¹⁷ From the 12th century onward, Italian merchants began to cluster in colonies in the major commercial cities of the Levant and to organize themselves under the jurisdiction of consuls. The consuls were often elected by the members of the community and were primarily judges or arbiters of disputes among its members and the official representatives of its interests before the local authorities.¹¹⁸ Initially, the home governments of the colonists participated in the organization of their mercantile colonies overseas and sent out officers with various titles to supervise and direct it. Later on, the consuls were given a more official standing. They were appointed by the governments of their native cities and were directly responsible to them. In a sense they represented not just the interests of Florentine merchants at Adrianople or Constantinople but the whole power and dignity of Florence.¹¹⁹

The Ottoman government itself considered the foreign merchant communities as *millets* or *taifes*, autonomous groups or assemblies organized under a deputy or consul. Consuls received diplomas from the Sultan, which confirmed the privileges of these colonies and promised to enforce the decisions of the consuls with the

¹¹⁵ Richards 1932, p. 167.

¹¹⁶ Steensgaard 1967, p. 180.

¹¹⁷ Mattingly 1955, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68

cooperation of the Ottoman authorities. This arrangement originated from the basic Ottoman notion of capitulation. They did not permit European merchant communities to establish themselves as independent colonies and never recognized territorial rights. Even the later resident ambassadors at the Porte were regarded simply as representatives of their respective *millets*.¹²⁰

Strictly speaking, consuls were not diplomats. Their status depended not on the general principles of international law but on special treaties with the powers on whose territory they were but they did carry out some of the services later performed by resident ambassadors.¹²¹ Although any really important message or negotiation would be entrusted to a special embassy, consuls did, at times, deliver messages on behalf of their governments to the local authorities or reigning princes. They also negotiated on behalf of the governments. In some places they had positions assigned to them at public functions. The consuls of some Republics, like Genoa and Venice, were expected to report regularly news of political and of commercial interest, especially in the case of the Ottoman Empire.¹²²

In fact, the earliest resident ambassadors within the Italian peninsula simply confirmed and maintained alliances but the Ottoman appointees also endeavored to collect information about and predict the actions of a foreign and dangerous nemesis.¹²³ An example is Janus Lascaris, Greek exile, scholar, diplomat and anti-Turkish publicist who during his stay in Florence attracted the attention of Lorenzo de' Medici who appointed him director of his library. While in Lorenzo's service, Lascaris made two journeys to the Levant during the years 1489-1492. In a document written many years later, the Greek scholar recalled that he had been provided with the title of ambassador and armed with credentials addressed to the sultan Bayezid II.¹²⁴ Charged with collecting books for the Medici library he visited Corfu, Salonika, Mt. Athos, Constantinople and Pera. Lascaris revealed, however, that he had also been instructed to observe and report on the state of the Ottoman military and that while traveling through the lands of the Turk, he was to take note of all things, which had any bearing on the proposed crusade.¹²⁵ At times resident envoys in Constantinople aided in toning down myths about the invincible 'terrible

¹²⁰ Inalcik 1994, p. 190.

¹²¹ Mattingly, p. 68.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Goffman 2002, p.186.

¹²⁴ Schwoebel 1967, p. 161.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Turks' formed during years of enmity and warfare. This was replaced by concrete and realistic details about Ottoman society.¹²⁶

The requirement that Italian states understand the Ottoman system coupled with the ability of Ottoman society to accommodate Christian settlements determined that from the very beginning the empire was at the heart of the new diplomacy. In fact, the formulating of some of the fundamental elements of the modern world's diplomatic system – permanent missions, extraterritoriality and reciprocity - drew upon the experiences of the consuls of Florentine, Genoese and Venetian settlements in the domain.¹²⁷ This developing diplomatic system also involved cultural missions, artistic contacts and diplomatic gifts. Thus, diplomatic exchange involved the movement of consuls and ambassadors as well as artists and art objects across physical boundaries. Diplomatic gifts were an internationally accepted form of princely tribute during the fifteenth century. In 1487, when Mamluk Sultan Qaitbay's ambassadors arrived in Florence, they gave Lorenzo de' Medici 'finer porcelain than seen hitherto'.¹²⁸ By sending porcelain to Italian tastemakers, the Mamluks were promoting a costly new product, which was beginning to arrive in their territory from China in sufficient amount for export purposes.¹²⁹ In this manner, diplomatic gifts played a role promoting trade in profitable luxury exports. In fact, not all Ottoman carpets which reached Europe were items of trade. Some, assuredly the highest quality, were direct diplomatic gifts. For example, in 1464, Mehmet II sent Ferrante, King of Naples as many as a hundred carpets, together with cordovan leathers and a tent.¹³⁰ The Sultan also sent exotic animals such as a giraffe to Lorenzo de' Medici.¹³¹ The interesting aspect of the objects involved in a diplomatic exchange is that its underlying context can reveal the tension of opposites as well as the points of convergence in such interactions. As an object involved in a similar diplomatic exchange, Bertoldo di Giovanni's portrait medal of Sultan Mehmet II, can provide an in-depth look into the nature of cross-cultural relations between Florence and the Ottoman Empire, through an examination of the context of its commissioning as well as its iconography.

¹²⁶ Goffman 2002, p. 186. Also see Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq 'Observations on the Turks' in *Portable Renaissance Reader* (YEAR)

¹²⁷ Goffman 2002, p. 186.

¹²⁸ Mack 2002, p. 23.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 23.

¹³⁰ Raby 1986, p. 35.

¹³¹ Borsook 1973, p. 160.

The medal was said to be commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici as a token of appreciation to the Sultan for his help in capturing one of the individuals involved in the Pazzi Conspiracy. On 26 April 1478, during High Mass, an assassination attempt was carried out by members of the Pazzi family on the Medici brothers. Giuliano de Medici dies while Lorenzo escaped with his life. One of the conspirators, Bernardo Bandini de' Baroncelli fled to Constantinople where he was caught and returned to Lorenzo on the Sultan's orders. Lorenzo's notes indicate that on May 11, 1480, he sent the sultan a letter thanking him for the gift of a saddle. According to Emil Jacobs, the medal would have been sent along with this letter.¹³² The medal being sent as a gift of gratitude for the aforementioned capture of Bandini is arguable. Nonetheless, it can definitely be considered a diplomatic gift. Like all diplomatic gifts, the medal was intended to legitimize and reinforce the alliance between the Ottoman Empire and Florence through flattery and acknowledgement of power.



Fig. 4.1 Bertoldo, Medal of Sultan Mohammed II, c. 1480, National Gallery of Scotland

The obverse side contains the image of the Sultan as inspired by Bellini's portrait. He is facing left, bearded and wearing a turban. Bertoldo has added an element absent in Bellini's image – a medal suspended from a cord around the sultan's neck with the symbol of a crescent engraved on it. The crescent was a Byzantine symbol adopted by the Turks upon their takeover of Constantinople. Portraying the sultan wearing the symbol associated with his most powerful conquest is presumably a form of flattery. The image on the reverse of the medal is even more telling in its flattering political allusions. On a pedestal rising from the depicted chariot, there is a nude young male who is assumed to be a stand-in for the Sultan.

¹³² Brotton 2003, p. 50. Cf. Emil Jacobs, *Die Mehemmed-Medaille des Bertoldo*, 1927

He is wearing a turban and triumphantly wielding a statuette of a nude male while holding onto a rope encircling three nude women standing in the rear of the chariot. In the Renaissance, nude female was a generally used metaphor for land, with territorial conquest being given the sexual connotation of possessing a woman.¹³³ In this case, the three female nudes stood for conquered territories Asia, Trebizond and Magna Graecia, which were



Fig. 4.2 Bellini, Sultan Mohammed II, c. 1507, London, The National Gallery

¹³³ Woods-Marsden 2000, p. 49.

also referred to in the inscription on the obverse of the medal describing Mehmet as emperor of aforementioned territories. Interestingly, Magna Graecia was the ancient name for the Greek cities on the Southern Italian coast. It was well known that Mehmet has set his sights on those cities, which were part of the Aragonese kingdom of Naples. It was also widely suspected that Lorenzo was attempting to encourage him in this endeavour.¹³⁴

Barbinger, however, argues that the classical sense of Magna Graecia as South Italy was no longer used in the Quattrocento.¹³⁵ Although its use may not have been frequent, it does occur in the Italianised form *Grecia Grande* in a poem written about 1460, perhaps by the Tuscan Michele Racchele, exhorting Ferdinand of Naples against the Turks and it would have been known to anyone familiar with classical history.¹³⁶ His second argument was against the notion that Lorenzo had been given warning of the attack on Southern Italy since it did not seem likely for the Sultan to provide information about his intended campaigns.¹³⁷ This was not the case when he sent a letter to Venice on 17 February 1480 requesting aid for the commander of the Otranto expedition, Gedik Ahmed Pasha.¹³⁸ His aim was to secure Venetian neutrality, which he achieved. The arrival of an envoy from Sublime Porte to Florence around the same time as this communication with Venice does imply that the Mehmet II intended for the Florentines to engage Ferdinand's Northern flank while the Ottomans landed on the South.¹³⁹ Lorenzo's awareness of Mehmet's military agenda as well as the medal's iconography provide evidence for its role in the diplomatic maneuvering which took place between Florence and the Ottoman Empire. However, in order to better understand Lorenzo de' Medici's motivations for doing so, a look at the political circumstances leading up to and surrounding the commissioning of the medal is required.

On April 9 1445, Venice and Milan signed the peace of Lordi which ended the war of Milanese succession. On August 30 of the same year, Florence, Venice and Milan concluded the treaty of Venice, the basic instrument of the Most Holy League, the first general peace in Italy. In January of the following year, Alfonso of Naples was the last to adhere to the agreement, which bound all signatories to consult

¹³⁴ Scher 1994, p. 128.

¹³⁵ Raby 1987, p. 182. Cf. Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 182.

¹³⁷ Raby 1987, p. 182. Cf. Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and his Time*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 182.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*.

before concluding treaties and in case of threatened attack.¹⁴⁰ Pope Nicholas played a defining role during negotiations of this grand alliance and pacification of Italy. There is no doubt that the fall of Constantinople and the Turkish threat together with the fear of impending French intervention in Italy strengthened the Pope's interference in bringing about the settlement.¹⁴¹

Until 1471, Florence and Naples were allied together as part of the tripartite alliance formed by Milan's Francesco Sforza and Cosimo de' Medici. In fact, Cosimo was King of Naples Ferrante's primary financial backer in his war against the Angevins in 1458-65.¹⁴² By the 1470s, however, the political climate in Italy was a lot more tensed and conflicted. Ferrante sought to strengthen his friendship with the Pope, following the collapse of a short-lived alliance (19 April 1471) created in the wake of the fall of the Venetian base at Negroponte (1470).¹⁴³ Ferrante's alliance with Sixtus IV made Florence and Naples enemies. In his effort to impose control over the papal state, Sixtus IV, inspired deep suspicion on the part of Lorenzo de' Medici and the Florentines.¹⁴⁴ Ferrante's territorial ambitions in Tuscany as well as rivalry with Florence for the influence of Emilia-Romagna created hostilities between the King and Lorenzo. Thus, the partnership between Ferrante and the pope came to be built around a shared antagonism towards Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence, making Rome the center for the planning that led to the Pazzi Conspiracy.¹⁴⁵ In recently discovered and deciphered correspondence by Marcello Simonetta, it has been revealed that Federico da Montefeltro, Ferrante's chief *condottiere*, was among the ringleaders of the Pazzi Conspiracy and Ferrante's papal ambassador Anello was aware of Federico's plans to move against Florence in the wake of the conspiracy.¹⁴⁶ This increases the probability that Ferrante himself was an active participant in the planning. Furthermore, a month before the events of the Conspiracy, Ferrante, Sixtus IV and the Pope's nephew, Girolamo Riario, signed a new three-way pact intended to undermine Lorenzo de' Medici's position in Florence.¹⁴⁷ The Pazzi conspiracy, the Assassination of Guiliano de Medici, and the attack on Lorenzo himself led to outright war between Florence and Sixtus in 1478. Almost two years of fighting followed. The Pope placed Florence under interdict, forbidding Mass and Communion, due to the execution of the archbishop who was involved in the

¹⁴⁰ Schwoebel 1967, p. 32.

¹⁴¹ Mattingly 1964, pp. 74-76.

¹⁴² Dover 2005, p. 76.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁴ Bentley 1987, p. 28.

¹⁴⁵ Dover 2005, p. 71.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴⁷ Dover 2005, p. 72.

conspiracy. Sixtus also enlisted the traditional Papal military arm, the Neapolitan army to attack Florence.¹⁴⁸ Ferrante's eldest son, Alfonso, duke of Calabria and later King Alfonso II, led the Neapolitan army in Tuscany. In the autumn of 1479 he might even have seriously menaced Florence itself.¹⁴⁹

It is apparent that the political situation in Italy provided sufficient impetus for Lorenzo de Medici to use his alliance with the Sultan to advance his agenda to secure Florence territorially and politically. This does not imply that Sultan Mehmet II was an unsuspecting pawn in this power play. Having conquered Constantinople at the age of twenty-one, the Sultan was at the cusp of his territorial ambitions which included lands within Christendom. As a catalyst to the crusading efforts of the fifteenth century, Mehmet and his army posed a great threat to Christendom but this did not prevent an 'Ottoman incorporation into the European politician infrastructure'.¹⁵⁰ The Ottoman Empire was very much a player in the political power struggles which took place in Italy. Between autumn 1478 and the spring of 1479, the Sultan concluded a peace treaty with Venice, which ended 16 years of conflict. As his relations with Venice improved, those with Naples soured. His contact with Florence had been good and the chance for closer ties came with Florence's war with Naples, especially in the aftermath of the Pazzi conspiracy. On 11 July 1479, Antonio Bernardi de' Medici was named as Florentine envoy to the "Grand Turk" and a few days later he was briefed to thank the Sultan for arresting the Pazzi conspirator, for all his kindness to Florence and to ask him for the return of the assassin. In mid August Antonio arrived in Istanbul and stayed there till November.¹⁵¹ Lorenzo de Medici travelled personally to Naples in December of that year and spent almost four months in negotiations with Ferrate. On 13 March 1480, peace was agreed between Naples and Florence. The conversation between the two statesmen also resulted in an agreement to make a joint effort to limit the expansion of Venice and the papacy.¹⁵²

Some time before 24 March 1480, the Sublime Porte sent an envoy to Florence with a request for artisans. This envoy brought gifts for Lorenzo de Medici, and asked the Florentine Signoria in return to supply master intaglio craftsmen, carpenters, intarsia artists and bronze sculptors.¹⁵³ Initiation of such cultural missions and artistic contact was a well-used means of reinforcing diplomatic ties on the part

¹⁴⁸ Scher 1994, p. 128.

¹⁴⁹ Bentley 1987, p. 28.

¹⁵⁰ Goffman 2002, p. 142

¹⁵¹ Raby 1987, p. 179.

¹⁵² Bentley 1987, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵³ Raby 1987, p. 183.

of the Sultan. The craftsmen, according to Benedetto Dei, were selected, organized and expedited by a younger member of the Martelli bank, Benedetto d'Antonio di Leonardo.¹⁵⁴ The duration of the artists' stay in Constantinople and what they were commissioned to produce is not known. The Florentine Signoria sent an envoy to the Sultan with a letter thanking him for returning Bernardo Bandini on 11 May 1480. At the same time, Lorenzo de' Medici sent a letter to the Sultan, thanking him for the gift of a saddle. The presumption, as mentioned earlier, is that the medal was also sent to the Sultan at this point of diplomatic exchange. The nature of these diplomatic interactions between Florence and the Ottoman Empire shows how close their relations were during this time. The timing also emphasizes the possibility of the role Florence may have played in the Ottoman attack on Otranto.

In that same year, the Ottoman Empire launched two attacks against Europe. From late May to August of that year an army of sixty thousand led by Mesih Pasha besieged the island of Rhodes, which was successfully defended by the Knights of Saint John (also known as Hospitallers).¹⁵⁵ People of Christendom took heart from the notable victory, but their triumph was cut short by news of another event closer to home – just as the siege of Rhodes was lifted, another Turkish force landed on the shores of southern Italy.¹⁵⁶ On 18 July 1480, Mehmet ordered a second assault aimed at the Kingdom of Naples. Gedik Ahmed Pasha and a force of approximately eighteen thousand landed on the shores of Apulia and headed towards Otranto. After the citizens of Otranto rejected the Pasha's offer to surrender the city and be spared their lives, a furious assault began. King Ferrante was in Aversa, near Naples – the opposite corner of his kingdom. His son, Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, was besieging Siena in Tuscany. Both made hurried preparations to relieve the city, but they could not arrive soon enough. Ill equipped to withstand a siege of any strength, Otranto fell to the Turks on 11 August. Alfonso arrived after the city had been taken but his army was routed.¹⁵⁷

The shock of Otranto marked the beginning of the final stage of Ferrante's reign. Other Italian states had become nervous about the prospect of Ferrante becoming the arbiter of Italian politics and welcomed the 'bloody nose that the Turkish landings had delivered to the king'.¹⁵⁸ A Venetian ambassador even remarked that it had stopped Ferrante from becoming king of Italy. Hence, Ferrante had to relieve Otranto the following year with virtually no external military assistance.

¹⁵⁴ Raby 1987, p.183.

¹⁵⁵ Imber 2002, pp. 247-249.

¹⁵⁶ Bisaha 2006, p. 157.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 157-158.

¹⁵⁸ Dover 2005, pp. 61-62.

With little funds, he had to pawn almost all of the queen's jewellery to finance the operation.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly enough, Lorenzo de Medici, who had become Naples' most important ally after the reconciliation, provided cash to fund Otranto's recapture - but only after Ferrante had agreed to restore a number of the Tuscan territories occupied in the recent war.¹⁶⁰

This final development in the aforementioned sequence of interactions and conflict between Florence, Naples and the Ottoman Empire provide contextual evidence for the role played by the medal as a means of encouraging the Sultan's military ambitions. There is a possibility Lorenzo was aware of Ferrante's fiscal limitations, either during his stay in Naples or through his ambassadors, and might have decided to use this knowledge to the advantage of Florence. Perhaps an agreement of peace with Ferrante was not good enough for Lorenzo de Medici who also wanted to regain the Tuscan territories lost to Naples. The exchange of gifts and envoys with the Ottoman Empire coupled with the commissioning of the medal following the Neapolitan-Florentine peace agreement does imply a concerted effort on the part of Florence to enforce diplomatic ties with the Sublime Porte. Under the cover of diplomatic exchange, Lorenzo could have encouraged the Sultan's military agenda, knowing fully well the pressure such an invasion would create with Naples as well as the leverage it would grant him to negotiate for acquisition of the lost territories. Such astute analysis and in-depth manipulation was definitely possible amongst Lorenzo and his agents, as proven by their extensive diplomatic correspondence during this time. It is important to understand that Lorenzo de Medici may have been the face of the diplomatic maneuvering which took place between Florence and other Italian city-states as well as the Ottoman Empire but he did not work alone. Lorenzo's ambassadors and personal secretaries, made up of his most trusted confidants and associates, worked together as a form of '*bogetta*' or workshop for foreign affairs, analysing every piece of news they received, consulting regularly among themselves, through exchange of detailed letters or in the Florentine councils of state.¹⁶¹ This degree of attention and sensitivity in making political judgment was presumably heightened by the underlying fact that militarily and financially Florence was not as strong as her more powerful neighbours Milan, Naples and possibly even Venice. In foreign affairs, Lorenzo was less of a boss and more of a middleman.¹⁶² He was forced to show respect to other Italian city-states

¹⁵⁹ Dover 2005, p. 61-62.

¹⁶⁰ Dover 2005, p. 76.

¹⁶¹ Bullard 1992, p. 273.

¹⁶² Ibid.

like Naples, as shown by his personal visit to negotiate with Ferrante for peace despite the latter's involvement in the Pazzi Conspiracy. Hence, Lorenzo and the Florentines realized the importance of information gleaned from prudent, hard headed political analysis and its use in making decisions and as leverage against other states of the Italian Peninsula.¹⁶³

Given this insight into the diplomatic machinations of Lorenzo de Medici, it makes sense that an object such as a medal would provide the ideal means of putting forward his intended message to the Sultan in a manner of great discretion and subterfuge. The iconography of the medal itself certainly provides evidence to support this idea. The reverse side of the medal contains the image of a throne with flames on the chariot side. This chair is known as the Siege Perilous. This is especially significant because Alfonso V, King of Naples and Ferrante's father made extensive use of the symbol of the Siege Perilous.¹⁶⁴ In Arthurian romance, a permanently vacant seat at the



Fig. 4.3 Triumphal Procession showing King Alfonso seated on Siege Perilous, c. 1452, Triumphal Arch, Castelnuovo, Naples

round table, the Siege Perilous, was destined to be occupied by a particular Arthurian knight who would later complete the quest for the Holy Grail. In early 13th

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Rosenberg 1990, pp. 14-15.

century French prose romance, Lancelot's son Galahad, known for his physical beauty, his invincible prowess. Since Galahad was not consumed by the leaping flames that usually occupied the chair or horribly wounded by invisible hands, he was recognized as the hero of the Grail Quest.¹⁶⁵ Alfonso's accomplishments were likened by his contemporaries to a second Galahad. "No one (else) was worthy of sitting in this Siege Perilous except the lord who subjugated this kingdom (of Naples)", wrote a Spanish observer of the triumphal procession of Alfonso's entry.¹⁶⁶ He is even portrayed seated on the Siege Perilous on the Triumphal Arch at the Castelnuovo in Naples, indicating that like Galahad he had managed to displace the flames from his throne to the ground in front.¹⁶⁷ This allusion on the medal to Neapolitan territory was presumably obvious to a contemporary viewer of the time, specifically individuals familiar with the use of such symbols and its associations with specific statesmen and princes. Such medieval symbols associated with Christian virtue and chivalry were widely used by rulers to represent themselves and their territories. The same way the Byzantine symbol of the crescent was associated with Mehmet II, the Siege Perilous was perceived in relation to Alfonso V and by extension his territories.

Hence, the iconography of the medal adds to the idea put forward by the circumstances surrounding the commissioning of the medal – Lorenzo de Medici quite possibly did have a hand in the attack of Otranto. More importantly, the medal highlights the overarching theme of this paper which is the textured nature of cross-cultural relations as well as the points of convergence it creates, specifically in relation to the political agenda of Florence and the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁶⁵ Rosenberg 1990, pp. 14-15

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Woods-Marsden 2000, p. 49.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Florence and the Ottoman Empire represent two civilizations in a symbiotic relationship which seemed to almost converge in some areas – such intersections are most visible in the political and economic sphere, operating through the exchange of goods such as silk, carpets, art objects and the movement of travelers, merchants, envoys and artists. This does not mean that a chasm did not exist at the ideological or societal level. There was rarely a point of ‘enduring rapprochement between the Christian and Islamic world views’.¹⁶⁸

Within Christendom, there were proponents of the conciliatory approach with regards to Islam. John of Segovia and Nicholas of Cusa questioned the aggressive papal initiatives such as crusade and also the ideological foundations underlying such initiatives. They believed in an extensive textual study of the Qur’an leading to a clear understanding and respect of the text so as to acknowledge the Muslim belief during the intended process of converting the Turks to Christianity.¹⁶⁹ Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) wrote a tract titled *De Pace Fidei*, a dialogue between seventeen wise men from different world religions, among them an Arab and Turk.¹⁷⁰ Nicholas Cusanus advanced the concept that God sent many prophets to many nations but that over time certain customs were incorporated into the message and accepted as truths. These customs made religions differ, but their essential belief in God is the same.¹⁷¹ According to Southern, ‘he tried to embrace what was good in the religions of all peoples and to see them through the details to the inner core of truth and unity’.¹⁷² Yet Nicholas measured ‘what was good’ according to Christian standards, mainly the acceptance of Christ, the Trinity, and the authority of the Church and strongly believed that true religious unity could only be attained by following the basic elements of Christian doctrine.¹⁷³ Essentially, his ideas were based on the premise that ‘incompatible beliefs stem from surmountable differences in perception rather than willful heresy, stubbornness or impiety’.¹⁷⁴

However, given the climate of these years, both John of Segovia and Cusanus had very few followers despite their understanding of the need for war to halt the Turkish advance. Their relatively pacifist approach was out of place during a

¹⁶⁸ Goffman 2002, p. 7.

¹⁶⁹ Bisaha 2004, pp. 144-145.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 146.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Southern 1962, p. 92.

¹⁷³ Bisaha 2004, p. 146. Cf. Nicholas Cusanus, *Unity and Reform*, ed. John Patrick Dolan, p. 188.

¹⁷⁴ Bisaha 2004, p. 146.

time where every public speech had to contain defaming rhetoric against the Turks and their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, a host of common interests and agenda seemed to be able to counterbalance this doctrinal abyss. Commerce and politics provided the means to do so, creating bridges and encouraging contact. Contact is defined as 'encounters between culture and ethnicities, conflicts between political goals or economic interests, mixtures between creeds and mentalities, equilibrium between opposing tendencies, and, most of all, a constant process of brokerage and mediation between actual or potential rival forces – east and west, center and periphery, Islam and Christianity, state and society, modernity and tradition, the elite and the masses'.¹⁷⁵

In fact, cultural convergence in which the Ottomans integrated non-Muslims into the economic life of the community is best articulated along commercial and political frontiers, where Ottoman warriors simultaneously engaged in conflict with Byzantine, Venetian and Hapsburg forces while fraternizing with fellow Christian inhabitants.¹⁷⁶ From the beginning, Ottoman society was made up of immigrants, uprooted people, pastoralists in search of pastures, jobless soldiers or landless peasants, youths seeking their fortunes and a new life on the frontier. An early popular Ottoman chronicler stated that 'These ottomans sympathize with uprooted strangers (*garibs*)'¹⁷⁷ Clearly Ottomans believed that prosperity and expansion of state revenues were primarily dependent on human energy and skills. Moreover, the Ottomans always welcomed refugees. Tens of thousands of Jews expelled from Spain, Portugal and Italy came and founded prosperous communities in towns under the protection of the Ottoman sultans during and after 1492. Groups of Moriscos expelled from Andalusia in the sixteenth century were settled in the heart of Galata.¹⁷⁸

This migrant mentality and frontier culture was probably at the heart of Sultan Mehmet's tendency to employ people, regardless of their origin, creed or original allegiance. He was able to work with them and use them for political, diplomatic and military purposes. In fact, this was said to be one of the sultan's greatest gifts.¹⁷⁹ An example is a former Rhodian nobleman Anthony Meligalas, who not only provided the Sultan with a great amount of technical information about the city but also encouraged him to attack the island.¹⁸⁰ Another was Demetrius Sophianos, who after

¹⁷⁵ Eldem 1999, p. 138.

¹⁷⁶ Goffman 2002, p. 10

¹⁷⁷ Inalcik 1994, p. 31.

¹⁷⁸ Inalcik 1994, p. 31.

¹⁷⁹ Schwoebel 1967, p. 127.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 127.

the fall of Negroponte, renounced Christianity in favor of Islam and entered the service of the Turks.¹⁸¹ Obviously, this was violently condemned by the Latin narrators of that time. Yet it is interesting to note that while in the Ottoman world there were thousands of renegades from Christendom, one almost never discovered in Christian Europe converts from Islam during this period.¹⁸² More than saying anything about the religion itself, this speaks for the level of tolerance and openness in the socio-religious dynamic of the Ottoman Muslim culture.

Nonetheless, just like their Christian counterparts, Muslim Turks were not beyond using rhetoric which mirrored that of Italian humanists describing the Turks' culture as one of darkness, against the glory of (Western) freedom and thought.¹⁸³ Sixteenth century Ottoman historian Sa'd ed Din writes about the conquest of Constantinople: 'The temples of misbelievers were turned into mosques of the pious, and rays of light of Islam drove away the hosts of darkness from that place so long the abode of the despicable infidels, and the streaks of the dawn of the Faith dispelled the lurid blackness of oppression, for the word, irresistible as destiny, of the fortunate sultan became supreme in the governance of this new dominion.'¹⁸⁴ Further research and intense archival perusal is required to fully grasp the juxtaposing perspectives and opinions held by Ottomans, particularly statesmen of the Sublime Porte, following the takeover of Constantinople. This was a crucial time for the Ottoman Empire as it was legitimizing its status amongst both Muslim and Christian powers through maritime and overland trade, military attacks and cultural missions. Considering that this was occurring during the Renaissance only serves to increase the importance of the Ottoman Empire's role in shaping certain fundamental aspects of this historical period. Chapter three and four showed the impact Ottoman Empire had on the development of the textile industry and modern diplomacy respectively.

In fact, a definite area of interest for further scholarship with regards to the Ottoman Empire during the Renaissance is cultural diplomacy. Artists and arts were an important means by which the Ottoman Empire communicated with other powers in Christendom – this is clearly exemplified by the arrival of a Turkish envoy in Florence requesting for artisans in 1479. It is also quite possibly the reason why Lorenzo used the medal, a commemorative art object, as a diplomatic gift for the Sultan. This emphasis on artistic contact continued even after the reign of Mehmet II,

¹⁸¹ Schwoebel 1967, p. 127.

¹⁸² Goffman 2002, p. 7.

¹⁸³ Bisaha 2006, p. 74.

¹⁸⁴ Lewis 1963, p. 9.

when Sultan Bayezid II requested for both Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo to prepare designs for a bridge across the Golden Horn in Constantinople.¹⁸⁵

However, it is essential, when examining the relations and interactions between the Ottoman Empire and an undeniably Christian West, to understand the cross-cultural premise underlying it. This requires the analysis of the literal movement of objects and people across physical borders, which in turn reveals the intangible metaphorical movements of ideas, beliefs, perspectives, biases and intentions. This paper aimed to do exactly this while simultaneously highlighting the conflicting and converging nature of cross-cultural exchange through details of various commercial and cultural exchanges involving both people and objects, coming to coalesce with Bertoldo's medal and the role it plays in fifteenth century Florentine-Ottoman relations.

As mentioned earlier, Venice has been given much attention for its role in the Levant in recent academic work but Florence is just as fascinating - cultural convergence in the face of intolerance and antipathy in Florence makes it an interesting study for cross-cultural relations. For example, as Greek learning became an important part of Florentine humanism, ancient philosophers and their Arab commentators enjoyed increasing popularity and respect, specifically among Neoplatonists such as Marsilio Ficino (1433-99). He drew heavily on Arab philosophers, physicians and astrologers in his studies. Ficino's *De Vita*, for example is full of favorable references to Arab Muslim scholars such as Abu Mashar and Avicenna.¹⁸⁶ His friend and colleague Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) freely cited Arab sources in his works. Pico's interest in Arab scholarship may have been connected to his studies in scholasticism.¹⁸⁷ Arab learning intrigued Pico to such an extent that he tried to learn Arabic so as to be able to read philosophical texts and even the Qur'an in the original language. Pico also read the Qu'ran in Latin, a copy that he borrowed from Ficino.¹⁸⁸

Like Nicholas of Cusa, this interest Ficino and Pico shared for Arab learning did not reflect an acceptance of Islam. According to Kristeller, Ficino's thought and writings does point to the concept of universal truth but when it came to defending Christianity from the charges of Islam, he was not beyond using medieval polemic against Muhammad and his followers.¹⁸⁹ Ficino also portrayed the Turks as 'savage

¹⁸⁵ Contadini 1999, p. 16.

¹⁸⁶ Bisaha 2004, p. 171.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Cf. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, 205-6.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. Cf. Chiam Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, 3-4.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. Cf. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, 204.

beasts' and 'barbarians' which was typical rhetoric of his time. Furthermore, he blamed the Turks for the decline of Greek studies and the suppression of learned men of Greece.¹⁹⁰

It is safe to say that the historiography of Ottoman relations with the rest of Christendom does predominantly feature religion. This is especially so because in the 15th century, the European identity was not yet created. People from Italy, France and Spain, when viewing themselves externally to their own states or principalities, saw themselves as part of Christendom. In fact the use of 'Europe' in this paper is mainly as a term which collectively addresses Italy and all the other major powers of Christendom in the fifteenth century – it does not refer to the identity it has become in modern times. Religion was a contributing factor to identity in the fifteenth century.

Moreover, Christian merchants and envoys did not consider commercial activities and diplomatic maneuvering, which involved fraternizing with Muslims from the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the Levant, acts of secularity. Lorenzo did not ally himself with the Sultan against Naples and Pope Sixtus IV as an act of a non-believer. In a clever paradox, religion had *everything* and *nothing* to do with such cross-cultural interactions. Like Ficino and Pico who were more than willing to spend hours scouring through Islamic religious texts such as the Qu'ran, Florentines saw nothing remotely blasphemous about using Islamic prayer rugs manufactured by the Ottomans for their own Christian religious ceremonies as depicted in various paintings such as those in the Sassetti family chapel. Yet, as clearly indicated throughout this paper, such cultural convergence does not reflect empathy, acceptance or lack of conflict and that is the quintessential characteristic of cross-cultural relations. Exchange based on such relations is akin to building a bridge made of glass; seemingly strong due to its basis in mutually beneficial commercial and political interests but terribly difficult to maintain because of its tendency to shatter at the slightest tension of opposing factors such as religion.

¹⁹⁰ Bisaha 2004, p. 75.

Appendix 1: Chronology

Ottoman Empire		Florence
Death of Osman, founder of the Ottoman Dynasty	1326	
Ottomans ally with Byzantine Empire and begin establishing a foothold in Europe	1345-52	
	1348 Black Death	
	1362-63	Second wave of plague in Italy
	1378	Revolt of the Ciompi
	1384	Florence takes control of Arezzo
Battle of Kosovo	1389	
Ottoman forces defeat crusade of Nicopolis	1396	
	1406	Florence captures Pisa
	1417	Great Schism ends with election of Pope Martin V
Murad II ascends to throne	1420	The Papacy returns to Rome
First Ottoman siege of Constantinople	1422	Florentine purchase of Livorno

Ottoman Empire at war with Venice	1423-30	
	1425	Alliance between Venice and Florence against Milan
	1433	Expulsion of Cosimo de Medici from Florence and exile spent in Venice
	1434	Return of Cosimo de Medici to Florence and exile of anti-Medici faction
	1435-41	War between Milan and Venice
	1438-9	Council of Ferrara-Florence designed to unify Eastern Orthodox and Western Latin Churches
	1442	Conquest of Naples by Alfonso of Aragon against Anjou rival
Murad II abdicates in favor of his son Mohammed II	1444	
Murad II's second accession to the throne	1446	Venice signs peace treaty with Mohammed II
Mohammed II's second accession to the throne	1451	

29 May Ottoman conquest of Constantinople	1453	Pope Nicholas V declares crusade
	1454	Peace of Lodi established between Milan, Naples, Florence Venice and the papacy
Ottoman Turks conquer Athens	1456-8	
	1458	Ascension of Pope Pius II
		Ascension of Ferrante to Neapolitan throne
	1459-60	Congress of Mantua
Bosnia annexed by Ottoman Empire	1463	
Venice at war with Ottoman Empire	1463-79	
Ottoman conquest of the Venetian colony of Negroponte	1470	
	1478	26 April Pazzi Conspiracy - Death of Guiliano de' Medici and Assassination attempt on Lorenzo de' Medici
		War declared by Papacy and Naples against Florence
Ottoman's attempt to invade Rhodes successfully defended by Knights of St. John	1480	13 March Peace agreed between Naples and Florence
11 August Otranto in southern Italy falling to Ottoman invaders		

Death of Mohammed II	1481	
Acession of Bayezid II		
	1482-4	War of Ferrara Alliance between Pope Sixtus IV and Venice against Naples, Florence, Milan and Ferrara (War ends with Peace of Bagnolo)
	1492	8 April Death of Lorenzo de' Medici
	1494	Uprising against Medici incited by Girolamo Savonarola
Venice at war with Ottoman Empire	1499-1503	

Appendix 2: Glossary

Dar al-Islam: abode of Islam which are lands controlled by Islamic governments

Dar al-Harb: abode of war which are lands controlled by non-Islamic governments

Kadi: religious judge or municipal commissioner in Islamic states

Shariah: Islamic law, usually based on the Quran

Sublime Porte: a translation of the turkish *kapi* or *dergah-i-ali*, which originally indicated the place where the sultan heard legal suits and engaged in law making activities, eventually became a common way to describe the ottoman government.

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