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Commentario de le cose de' Turchi (review)

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(Review)

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later interventions from editors and translators deformed it, was of a down-to-earth Africa, blessed by the civilizing influence of the Prophet's religion.

Alas, as Davis points out herself, this reconstruction is highly conjectural and relies on a meager body of evidence: the manuscript of the *Description*, some unfinished works, and a few indirect references by contemporaries. In response to these silences and lacunae, Davis employs her trademark imaginative history to perfection. She proposes a "plausible life story from materials of the time" (13), strewn with learned guesses and speculations. For example, Davis is convinced that al-Hasan al-Wazzan had a wife (and possibly children) in Fez before being captured, and she even invites us to imagine what their house may have looked like — all on the basis of indirect inferences from general practices in North African society. The style might irritate those uneasy with conditional and speculative phrases, yet it seems that in al-Hasan al-Wazzan's case there is really no other methodological choice, and Davis always lets the reader understand where the evidence is firm and where her imagination has filled in the gaps. Davis's relentless efforts to carve more and more into the rock of historical context are remarkable, although more attention should have been paid to two themes that are central to current research on the early modern Mediterranean: captivity and travel. Davis is naturally more comfortable in Europe, where she masterfully marshals languages, archives, and basic concepts. In her brave foray — almost a mirror-image of her protagonist's attempt to make sense of Christian Europe — into the twice-removed world of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century North Africa, Davis depends on translated editions of primary sources and on an extensive survey of modern scholarship. For specialists, her digressions on Islamic legal and scholarly traditions might seem too broad, often invoking authors and cases from places and periods very remote from the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. To Europeanists and general readers, however, Davis opens a window onto a rich, complex, and civilized world, thus echoing the message delivered by al-Hasan al-Wazzan in the sixteenth century. In our days, as ideas of holy war and civilization clashes gather momentum, Davis's nuanced — and plausible — portrait of a man between worlds is more than welcome.

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Paolo Giovio. *Commentario de le cose de' Turchi*.

Quaderni di Schede Umanistiche 10. Ed. Lara Michelacci. Bologna: CLUEB, 2005. 190 pp. illus. bibl. €18. ISBN: 88-491-2570-4.

Paolo Giovio wrote his *Commentario de le cose de' Turchi* for Emperor Charles V in the wake of the devastating Ottoman victory at Mohacs in 1526. The text was completed in 1530, first published at Rome in 1532, translated into Latin, German, and other vernaculars, and reprinted in numerous editions both in Italy and north of the Alps, often accompanied by other compilations of Turkish history or contemporary reportage. The text is short, lively, and readable, being written (as

Giovio explains in his preface) without “tediosi proemi” (71) or flowery Tuscan verbiage. Hoping to reach the widest possible audience, Giovio wrote instead in the “semplice lingua comune a tutta Italia” (71), a stylistic choice which made the *Commentario* one of the most influential texts in the vast corpus of sixteenth-century *Turcica*. Later, Giovio himself reused material from the *Commentario* in his *Elogia*, where his capsule biographies of Ottoman sultans are paired with striking engraved portraits of the rulers in profile — an act of prudent recycling which carried the fruits of his researches to an even wider readership.

The text of the *Commentario* is closely related both to the *Elogia* and to Giovio’s later (and longer) *Historiarum sui temporis libri XLV* but, unlike these works, the *Commentario* has yet to be published in a modern edition, making its appearance here especially welcome. Taken from the Roman edition of Antonio Blado, the text covers the history of the Ottoman dynasty from its origins under Osman to the most recent exploits of Süleyman the Magnificent, followed by thoughtful observations on the current state of Turkish military, political, and bureaucratic organization. Giovio’s ostensible purpose was to encourage Charles to lead a new crusade against this impressive and formidable enemy, but his historical and anthropological instincts quickly led him to a consideration of the *cose de’ Turchi* for their own intrinsic interest.

Giovio came by his information from a variety of sources. He read through a substantial library of humanist histories of the Turks, echoes of which resound throughout his text. Moreover, unlike many of his predecessors, Giovio also paid attention to other kinds of expertise. He read carefully the account of the escaped captive Gian Maria Angiolello (98) and interrogated various veterans of Turkish campaigns (“ho odito dire da uomini degni di fede quali si trovorno in questa battaglia,” 134). His informants also included illustrious captains like Giovan Paolo Manfron and Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, and the Venetian ambassador Luigi Mocenigo and Doge Andrea Gritti. His work thus points to a fascinating moment in the history of European history-writing, when longstanding traditions of universal history and formulaic ethnography butted up against newer and increasingly influential forms of eyewitness reportage. Proceeding sultan by sultan — a format that reflects the influence of Plutarchan biography and the imperial histories of ancient Rome, as well as more recent impulses of antiquarian *collezionismo* — Giovio’s *Commentario* presents, somewhat paradoxically, both a clarion call to crusade and a sort of textual museum of Ottoman oddities. In the process, the author manages both to address traditional anxieties about the Turkish menace and to satisfy certain newer, and rather milder, forms of interest in the remote past and exotic present of the Islamic East.

The editor thoroughly sets the text in its varied contexts in a substantial and eloquent introduction, which treats the history of the text and its composition, various literary themes (for example, “la nostalgia dell’altro”), and the impact of the *Commentario* on later European scholarship on the Turks. Below the text itself, extensive notes identify the events and personalities in Ottoman history to which Giovio refers. The apparatus is less thorough when it comes to explaining how the

historian came by his information. Despite a brief discussion of Giovio's use of written sources in the introduction, there is no note, for instance, to indicate that the opening two-and-a-half sentences of the *Commentario* are more or less a direct quotation of Niccolo Sagundino's 1456 treatise *De origine Turcarum*. Other instances of his borrowing from earlier humanist historians, including Flavio Biondo and Filippo Buonaccorsi, might also have been documented in the text itself, where they could shed light on Giovio's methods of reading and compilation.

These few points aside, however, this is an attractive and useful edition of an important text which deserves to be better known by students of Italian humanism, Renaissance history-writing, and European relations with the Islamic East.

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Arnaud Tripet. *Écrivez-moi de Rome. . . : Le mythe romain au fil du temps*. Études et essais sur la Renaissance 68. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2006. 538 pp. index. illus. tpls. bibl. €51. ISBN: 2-7453-1386-X.

Arnaud Tripet's book ranges widely across literary representations of Rome from antiquity to the present, analyzing major texts, from Virgil and Horace to Alberto Moravia and Michel Butor, as symptomatic expressions of contemporary attitudes toward the Eternal City. As might be expected from the author of earlier studies on Petrarch, Montaigne, and humanism, the book's dominant chapters address Renaissance views of Rome. They do so in an engaging, idiosyncratic way. Possessing enormous erudition that spans Western culture, Tripet dispenses with the usual trappings of scholarly footnotes in favor of a (highly) selective bibliography appended to the end of the volume. He likewise dispenses with any effort to pursue a single thesis as he offers, in separate chapters, variously detailed readings of complex lyric, narrative, and dramatic texts. These readings provide intelligent, supple, consistently illuminating insights into each author's evolving relationship with the highly charged, highly mobile myth of Rome. The sum, it turns out, equals the best of its parts, and they are many.

Tripet's consideration of the Renaissance begins with a chapter on authors at the beginning and near the end of the period: Petrarch and Montaigne. Both writers sought a retreat from public life: Petrarch at Vacluse and Arquà, where he contemplated ancient values as a refuge from, and a solution to, clerical abuses in papal Avignon; Montaigne at his chateau on the Dordogne, where he greeted many of these ancient values with skepticism but allowed his sense of their historical distance to clarify his response to the crisis of the French Wars of Religion. The next chapter offers the book's lengthiest treatment of a single author with its focus on Du Bellay's *Antiquités de Rome* and *Les Regrets*. Perhaps for its detailed focus, I value it as the highlight of the volume. Tripet makes a genuine contribution toward explicating many unappreciated subtleties of Du Bellay's poetry, as he analyzes the tensions that it sustains between suggesting visual images of past and present Rome, while yet offering a sophisticated critique of the latter through