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Cover Page Footnote
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The Medieval Canon and the Renaissance Image of the Turk:
A Brief Historiography of Pre-Modern European Conceptions of the Muslim World

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To say that the history of the relationship between Western civilization and the Muslim world is one marked largely by mutual misunderstanding, distrust, and even animosity and strife is regrettably all too accurate. One need only look to such events as the Crusades of the Middle Ages or the Turkish invasion and conquest of southeastern Europe during the Renaissance for the most poignant illustrations of the great cultural gulf that, in many respects, is still evident today and will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. Arguably, much (if not all) of the misunderstanding, distrust, and conflicts between these two worlds either resulted from or were exacerbated by the cultural impressions, or images, through which one civilization viewed and judged the other.

Within the context of this struggle between Western civilization and the Muslim world, historian Norman Daniel provides an apt description of the concept of the image: “By misapprehension and misrepresentation an idea of the beliefs and practices of one society can pass into the accepted myths of another society in a form so distorted that its relation to the original facts is sometimes barely discernible.”¹ Most historians would probably agree with this definition. The question of the very nature and characteristics of these conflicting images, however, is a different matter altogether. As the European image studies of Nancy Bisaha, Norman Daniel, and Robert Schwoebel indicate, there is more debate than consensus among scholars. While a historiographic examination of both the Muslim and European perceptions is ideal, the scope of this study will focus solely on the debate regarding the latter.

Perhaps “European images” is a more appropriate term, since Bisaha, Daniel, and Schwoebel ultimately present three very different images. The most obvious distinction is that of periodization. While Daniel explores the medieval conception of Islam, Bisaha and Schwoebel analyze the European attitude towards the Ottoman Turks during the Renaissance. Though Bisaha and Schwoebel both examine the same era, their respective studies are far from uniform. Yet despite their differences, there are also various points of convergence between these three images. This study will compare and contrast these three images and, where appropriate, incorporate the interpretations of additional scholars.

This essay is guided by four common themes shared by at least two or more works. The first analyzes the debate concerning whether or not the European conception of Islam during the Renaissance was merely a continuation of the medieval image or an innovative break from the past. The second theme examines the nature and legacy of Renaissance theories of Turkish origins. The third explores the influence of travelers’ accounts and experiences in shaping

Europe’s image of Islam and “the Turk.” The last theme considers the merits of two interpretations which suggest that either the medieval European conception of Islam or the Renaissance image of the Turk have continued to influence Western thought to the present. Collectively, these four themes not only highlight areas of convergence between interpretations, but ultimately demonstrate that the abstract complexity of the pre-modern European image of Islam precludes authors of the subject from reaching a general consensus.

**Renaissance Image of the Turk: Continuity versus Discontinuity from the Medieval Canon**

Like the great debate over whether the Renaissance was a genuine break from the medieval past or a mere extension, historians have presented conflicting interpretations regarding the continuity or discontinuity of the Renaissance image of the Turk from that of the Middle Ages towards Islam and its adherents. Norman Daniel argues that the various conceptions of Islam widely held in Medieval Europe (what he collectively refers to as the “Medieval canon”) were forged during the twelfth, thirteenth, and early fourteenth centuries. By the beginning of the Renaissance in the mid-fourteenth century, this canon was well rooted in European thought.²

What exactly was this medieval canon? Daniel limits the scope of his study solely to the religious aspect of this phenomenon.³ Within this framework a wide array of views emerged, informed by both fact and fiction. Naturally, Muhammad’s credibility as a divine prophet was called into question. His birth and childhood in pagan Arabia, the manner of his death, and the perception that he was a devious, sexually promiscuous marauder were all asserted as proof that Muhammad was a fraud. The notion that Islam was an inherently violent religion was yet another fundamental view of this collective canon. A less prevalent, but enduring, trend that emerged was the method of some Europeans to commend certain Muslim practices for the sole purpose of admonishing the behavior and actions of their Christian contemporaries.⁴ These are but a few examples of the medieval canon.

Daniel asserts that there was little deviation from medieval precedent during the Renaissance and examines the writings of leading humanist figures like Pope Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) and Polydore Vergil to support his claim.⁵ While recognizing that Pius II’s famous and enigmatic letter to Sultan Mehmed II (discussed in further detail later in this essay) reflects Piccolomini’s classical learning, Daniel charges that it lacks creativity. Rather, Pius II’s letter serves as a “remarkable [sic] short, and useful, compendium of the anti-Islamic polemic of the past.”⁶

Similar to Daniel, Schwoebel notes in his preface that Europeans deemed the Ottoman threat as the latest development in the age-old conflict between the Islamic East and the Christian West. In grappling with what they perceived as the latest assault upon Christendom, Schwoebel argues that Renaissance Europeans turned to medieval literature regarding Islam in order to fathom and assess their struggle with the formidable Ottoman Turks.⁷ Schwoebel maintains that, “Even under the pressure of momentous change [Europeans] clung tenaciously to established categories and adapted a large body of new information to the forms of thought and expression

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⁴ Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 274-76.
developed in the anti-Moslem and crusading literature of the Middle Ages.” Yet Schwoebel also recognizes that dramatic developments such as the fall of Constantinople and subsequent Turkish advances into Europe, the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press, the voyages of Christopher Columbus, and the onset of the Protestant Reformation, forced Europeans to challenge some of their most basic assumptions and traditions, which were ultimately either revised or reconfirmed.9

Schwoebel’s remarks in his preface seem to provide a more tempered interpretation of medieval influences on Renaissance conceptions of the Turks than Daniel’s. Yet later in his work, Schwoebel insists that the medieval image of Islam was transferred upon the Renaissance conception of the Turks, “even after the main lines of the medieval world view had crumbled.”10 It comes as no surprise that Schwoebel notes that conservative supporters of the Catholic Church and chivalry perpetuated the medieval call for crusade against the Muslims and adhered to the same conception of Islam as those in the preceding age had. Yet Schwoebel argues that this applies even to the humanists, for whom the examples of antiquity “failed” them.11 Schwoebel even quotes Daniel’s evaluation of the medieval polemicists’ conception of Islam and applies it to the Quattrocento European image of the Turk.12

However, Schwoebel also acknowledges that there were several exceptions, in particular the countless orations delivered by humanists calling for crusade merely to satisfy their patrons. Giovanni Mario Filelfo’s Amyris is particularly instructive. Originally written as a tribute to Mehmed II, Othman Lillo Ferducci claimed that Filelfo did so with the hope of finding favor in the eyes of the sultan. Schwoebel argues that if Ferducci is correct in his assessment, then this casts doubt on the laudatory nature of Filelfo’s work. Filelfo’s sincerity is further discredited by the fact that he later revised the Amyris by incorporating an additional book, in which he called for a crusade against the Turks and devoted it to the duke of Milan, Galeazzo Mario Sforza.13 In a more general sense Schwoebel best describes the perfunctory nature of the humanist’s call for crusade:

At diplomatic congresses, the reception of ambassadors, the elevation of a pope, the marriage of a prince, or almost any public occasion an orator trained in the new rhetoric might step forward and deliver an Exhoratio ad bellum contra barbaros. One gets the impression that the composition of an oration against the Turks was ‘the thing to do’ and that every self-respecting man of letters kept several in his Opere whether or not he had delivered them.14

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8 Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, ix-x.
9 Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, x.
12 “There was a Christian picture in which the details (even under the pressure of facts) were abandoned as little as possible, and in which the general outline was never abandoned. There were shades of difference, but only within a common framework. All the corrections that were made in the interests of an increasing accuracy were only a defence of what had newly been realised to be vulnerable, a shoring up of a weakened structure. Christian opinion was an erection which could not be demolished, even to be rebuilt,” in Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 260. Reproduced in Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, 147.
Far from denying that medieval influences shaped the Renaissance image of the Turk, Nancy Bisaha devotes an entire chapter in her book to analyzing the various ways in which humanists looked to the Middle Ages for guidance. Though humanists may have borrowed from medieval works and themes, Bisaha argues that what they produced was scarcely a regurgitation of the Middle Ages.\(^{15}\)

According to Bisaha, Petrarch was the first humanist to show an interest in crusading against Islam. Though Petrarch rarely wrote about the Turks (it was not until later in the fourteenth century that Europeans began to feel threatened by the rising might of the Ottoman Empire), his ingenious approach to the distinctly medieval concept of crusade is worth noting. Though he incorporated old polemical themes in defining Islam and Mohammad, Petrarch’s *De vita solitaria* is distinguished from earlier crusading literature because of its inclusion of pagan and classical figures like Julius Caesar, who served as examples for the author’s Christian contemporaries.\(^{16}\) Bisaha astutely observes that, “By invoking the example of Caesar, Petrarch attempts to infuse the crusading ideal with the unflinching sense of duty associated with classical warriors.”\(^{17}\)

Another medieval model employed by many humanists for the cause of crusade was Charlemagne. Bisaha concurs with Gerardo C. A. Ciarambino’s assessment that the efforts of Quattrocento humanists to craft contemporary tales to resemble Charlemagne’s campaigns against the Saracens was made in order to juxtapose their own contemporary cause against the Ottoman Turks with that of the Frankish ruler. Many myths regarding Charlemagne, founded less on historical fact than fiction, proliferated throughout the period. Charlemagne became the subject of several local legends in Italy.\(^{18}\)

A particularly pervasive myth invoked by several medieval and Renaissance writers was Charlemagne’s fabled crusade in the East. According to this legend, Charlemagne personally led a successful campaign in the Levant and liberated Jerusalem centuries before the first of the Crusades. One of the more unique humanist treatments of Charlemagne’s supposed Levantine crusade can be found in Ugolino Verino’s *Carlias*. Though the characters are distinctly medieval, Bisaha notes that Verino’s decision to write his work in the style of epic poetry was an odd choice for a Quattrocento Florentine humanist. Yet Bisaha maintains that *Carlias* was modeled after Virgil’s *Aeneid*, blending classical prose with medieval elements.\(^{19}\) “While Petrarch clothed Julius Caesar in crusader costume,” Bisaha notes, “Verino has inversely adorned a figure of chivalry and holy war with classical speech and virtues.”\(^{20}\)

As demonstrated by her analysis of Petrarch’s *De vita solitaria* and the Charlemagne legend, Bisaha clearly acknowledges that medieval influences can be found in humanist writings. Far from interpreting the Renaissance image of the Turk as a mere extension of the preceding age’s conception of Islam, Bisaha observes that humanists readily turned to antiquity (as in all other cases) for direction in their struggle against the Ottoman Empire, innovatively adapting classical sources to their contemporary conflict against the Turkish invaders.\(^{21}\) Bisaha recognizes that her interpretation is in direct contrast to the assessments of Daniel and Schwoebel, but


\(^{17}\) Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 21.


\(^{19}\) Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 30-40.


\(^{21}\) Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 43-44.
maintains that the innovative contribution of the humanists to the western conception of the Turk should not be “underappreciated or dismissed as old wine in new bottles.”

Perhaps the lynchpin of Bisaha’s entire argument that the Renaissance image of the Turk represents a genuine break from the medieval conception of Islam is the notion of “the new barbarian.” Bisaha argues that the humanist embrace of classical rhetoric gradually secularized the Renaissance discourse regarding the Turks. This is not to suggest that religious terminology was wholly abandoned. Yet with their reliance on classical authors, humanists adopted and incorporated many of the concepts and rhetoric of antiquity that had long fallen out of favor over the course of the Middle Ages into their own writings. Humanists came to perceive the Ottomans as more than infidels. Before the court of humanist opinion, the judgment of the Turk was based not solely on religious difference alone, but on broader cultural and political considerations as well. Thus, as part of this classical revival Bisaha maintains that the ancient cultural concepts of barbarism and the East/West dichotomy were reestablished in Western thought.

Noting that the idea of the barbarian was perhaps the first Western perception of cultural distinction, Bisaha briefly traces its evolution from its origin in ancient Greece through the early Christian era. With the renewed interest in ancient texts, humanists were no longer restricted to the religious and chivalric motifs of medieval writers, but could now define their conflict with the Ottomans in cultural and political terms. Bisaha argues that in the aftermath of the momentous fall of Constantinople, 1453 witnessed a “crystallization” of the humanist rhetoric regarding the Turks. As the “new barbarians,” the Turks were no longer just the enemy of Christianity, but of civilization.

According to Bisaha, the fact that the term “barbarian” became synonymous with “Turk” during the Renaissance is critical because the pejorative was rarely applied to Muslims during the Middle Ages. In fact, she observes that the rhetoric surrounding the Turk underwent a dramatic transformation in the mid-fifteenth century. After the fall of Constantinople, the medieval catchphrases of “infidel” and “enemies of the faith” were replaced by the classically-inspired “barbarian.” In supporting her claim, Bisaha maintains that the writings of Poggio Bracciolini from 1444 through 1456 bear witness to this shift. By the end of the century, humanists had expanded this concept of the “new barbarian” to encompass all Muslims.

As with the concept of barbarism, the East/West dichotomy has roots in ancient Greece as well. As a result of the Persian Wars, the Greeks perceived the East as the political and cultural antithesis of their own civilization. This concept, however, was obscured by the spread of Christianity. It was not until the High Middle Ages that the theoretical East/West division reemerged. Bisaha argues that by the Renaissance, this notion was still a rather nascent one before its transformation at the hands of the humanists. Bisaha asserts that, “More than any other humanist, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II) defined and gave force to the concepts of West and East, Europe and Asia.” Perhaps Pope Pius II’s most significant contribution was his innovative use of the term “European” as an adjective. Efforts like these sharpened the

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22 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 44.
23 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 8-9; 43-44.
24 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 45-50; 93.
26 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 72-73, 93.
27 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 83-84.
28 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 86.
East/West divide as a cultural European identity began to emerge, if only in hostility to the Turks and the rest of the antithetical East.29

The argument could be made that Bisaha exaggerates the extent to which a secular rhetoric displaced the religious discourse concerning Islam and the Turks. One could merely point to some of the quotes reproduced in Schwobel’s work to demonstrate that the dogmatic terminology of the Medieval era endured. The German Franciscan friar Paul Walter, for instance, berated the Turks as, “those dogs and enemies of the sacrament.”30 In recalling the precarious situation his company found themselves in on a particular pilgrimage voyage (their ship was on the verge of sinking in the midst of inclement weather), an anonymous chaplain explained that they feared that they would have no other ports to take refuge at except those in “Turkey or Barbary, into the hands of the Infidels and extreme enemes of our Cristen fayth.”31

It should come as no surprise that Paul Walter and the anonymous chaplain referenced by Schwobel castigated the Turks in traditional fashion. If Schwobel’s citations were limited to ecclesiastical figures alone, then that distinction might actually reinforce Bisaha’s notion of the humanists’ pivotal role in transforming the Western image of the Turk. However, Schwobel also cites humanists Janus Lascaris and Aldo Manuzio, both of whom refer to the Turks as “infidels.”32

As already stated, Bisaha does not deny that medieval influences can be seen in various humanist writings. But while traces of the medieval past can be detected, Bisaha is correct to assert that the humanists provided their own contributions in remaking the European image of Islam. Bisaha’s examination of Pope Pius II’s letter to Sultan Mehmed II provides an excellent illustration. While acknowledging that this letter provides evidence of the enduring influence of the medieval polemic concerning Islam throughout the Renaissance, Bisaha by no means concurs with Daniel’s assessment. 33 Where Daniel sees a lack of creativity, she recognizes instances of innovation. More than a mere reflection of his classical learning, she notes that it contains perhaps his most audacious expression of European supremacy, in both military and cultural terms.34

You will not fight against women if you invade Italy, Hungary, or other occidental areas; matters are decided with the sword here. Not with Asian stakes does a Chalibean cuirass cover chests.35

Here, Piccolomini employs misogynistic rhetoric to underscore his assertion that Western Europe could not be subjugated to Ottoman rule like the East. This is further emphasized by his insinuation that European weaponry (the sword) was more advanced and sophisticated than crude Asian “stakes” or spears. While noting that the actual intention of this letter remains a mystery, Bisaha observes that a possible aim may have been to “offer Europeans a bold vision of their cultural and religious superiority over Asia.”36

29 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 86.
30 Schwobel, The Shadow of the Crescent, 179.
31 Schwobel, The Shadow of the Crescent, 186.
33 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 152.
34 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 86.
36 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 86-87. The letter is all the more enigmatic in that no proof exists that it
Indeed, Pope Pius II’s provocative remarks may have been intended to create a sense of mutual solidarity and trust between Europeans in the hopes that a united front would materialize and halt any further Ottoman penetration of the continent. Bisaha observes that in exalting the robustness of the liberal arts in Europe while simultaneously mocking the condition of Eastern education, Pius II further emphasizes the supposed preeminence of the West. Pius II’s use of the word “Asian” and his insinuation of Western superiority over the East provide examples of the emerging East/West dichotomy conceived by humanists during the Renaissance.

The fact that Norman Daniel and Nancy Bisaha consult the same source to defend their conflicting interpretations regarding the continuity/discontinuity debate over the Renaissance image of the Turk is significant. As both a pontiff and a humanist, perhaps Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini represents a conflation of both interpretations. The frequent classical references notwithstanding, Pius II’s Epistola ad Mahomatem II appears to confirm Daniel’s assessment that the letter serves as a “compendium of the anti-Islamic polemic of the past.” Indeed, the language employed by the defender of the faith is hardly secular. Yet the aforementioned examples provided by Bisaha demonstrate that his letter was not just another medieval polemic. Embedded in Piccolomini’s letter are examples of the humanist innovation to dichotomize East and West in cultural terms.

Renaissance Debate over the Origin of the Turks: Then and Now

It is important to note that the Renaissance image of the Turk was by no means monolithic. Nor did humanists always agree regarding the very nature of their adversary. One of the most instructive cases revolves around the debate over the origins of the Turks. The early humanist Coluccio Salutati proposed in his writings that the Turks were descendants of the ancient Trojans. Salutati was not the first individual to claim the Trojans as the progenitors of a particular people. Indeed, this practice had a history dating back to medieval scholarship. Yet Bisaha observes that his laudatory assessment of the Turks mirrors the classical notion of “the noble savage.” In antiquity, the noble savage (frequently Scythian or Germanic) was romanticized by some classical writers as untainted by the corrosive effects of civilization. Unlike classical authors writing about the “barbarians” of their day, however, Salutati recognized Ottoman institutions characteristic of advanced societies. By designating the revered Trojans as the ancestors of the Turks, Salutati juxtaposes the latter with the Romans, who were also considered heirs of the Trojans.

While most of his contemporaries held the Ottomans in contempt, Salutati expressed a remarkable sense of objectivity. Bisaha notes that Salutati’s writings demonstrate not only respect, but even admiration of the Turks. Indeed, this is evident in his examination of Ottoman military prowess and devotion to Islam. Above all, what is particularly intriguing is Salutati’s profession that Turkish culture resembles that of the ancient Romans. According to Bisaha, Salutati was suggesting that the ethos of the ancient Romans was more inherent in the Ottomans than in contemporary Italians. Bisaha concludes that, “To some degree Salutati seems to have

was ever translated into Greek or Turkish or even dispatched. For a detailed analysis of the letter’s credibility as a conversion piece or possible ulterior motives, see same work, 147-152.

37 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 86.
38 Daniel, Islam and the West, 279.
39 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 54-58.
40 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 56-58.
admired the Turks who embodied Roman virtus and made Christendom look quibbling, weak, and divided.”

According to Bisaha, Salutati’s conception of the Turks had little, if any, influence during the early decades of the Quattrocento. Through much of this time period, humanists eagerly sought to discredit the Trojan origin theory and supplant it with the notion that the Scythians (barbarians of antiquity) were the authentic progenitors of the Turks. At the forefront of this crusade was none other than Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini. Bisaha argues that humanists of Piccolomini’s persuasion vehemently advanced their theory for two reasons. If conventionalized, the Trojan origin myth would provide the Turks with an honorable lineage and ultimately humanize them. Secondly, constructing a vilified conception of the Turk as the basest of barbarians reinforced the humanist perception of Western civilization’s superiority. In fact, Bisaha maintains that, “humanists found the rhetoric of Christian versus infidel insufficient to the task of setting Europeans apart from the Turks and inciting a warlike mentality.” Furthermore, Bisaha asserts that once the concept of the “new barbarian” took hold in European thought, it did not remain confined to the Ottoman Turks alone. As early as the mid-fifteenth century, the image was being applied to Muslims in general.

Bisaha is not the only scholar to examine the Renaissance debate concerning Turkish origin. In an article that predates the publication of Bisaha’s study, Michael J. Heath waded deeply into this subject. Overall, Heath’s examination is a detailed analysis of the rather arcane ethnogenic debates that were held over the question of Turkish origin. According to Heath, Renaissance scholars preferred to consult “secular” sources from antiquity and the Middle Ages rather than the Table of Nations found in the book of Genesis. In tracing the evolution of the Renaissance debate revolving around this question of Turkish origin, Michael J. Heath argues that the Trojan theory was rejected in favor of the Scythians. While acknowledging that there were exceptions (namely Erasmus), Heath contends that this newly accepted Scythian origin theory provided the apologia for Europeans to wage war against this new generation of barbarians. In concluding his article, Heath states:

It is clear that during the Renaissance investigations of the Turks’ pedigree were not often undertaken in a spirit of disinterested scientific inquiry, but rather to discredit them and to suggest the insecure foundation of their power, while underlining the part played by Christian negligence and impiety in their startling success. It was not unusual for ethnogeny to be applied to political causes, and in this case the resources of both humanism and historiography were employed in the defense of Renaissance Christendom against its deadliest foe [emphasis added].

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41 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 58.
42 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 58; 75; 90.
43 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 77.
44 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 77-78.
45 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 78.
Just as humanists could not agree on the ancestry of the Ottomans, the respective analyses of Bisaha and Heath demonstrate a lack of consensus among scholars over the nature and legacy of this Renaissance development. To be sure, their interpretations are not completely antithetical. Like Bisaha, Heath relies on Pope Pius II’s role to demonstrate the theoretical shift from a Trojan to Scythian ancestry of the Turks in Renaissance thought.\(^5^0\) Furthermore, Bisaha appears to concur with Heath’s assessment that humanists applied secular means to crafting their image of the Turks. Nor would she disagree with Heath’s conclusion as quoted above, excepting that which is italicized. Yet, despite these points of agreement, their interpretations are far from congruous.

While Bisaha argues that the Piccolomini camp used secular means to achieve a secular end (shift from Christian/Infidel rhetoric to civilized/uncivilized dichotomy), Heath suggests that those secular means were used to shore up religious unity among Europeans against the Ottoman Turks. Even if Heath means “Renaissance Christendom” in a broadly cultural sense analogous to that described by Bisaha, they are arriving at very different conclusions, regardless. For Heath, these means served the practical purpose of uniting Europeans against the incursions of the Turks. The ramifications of Bisaha’s interpretation are far greater. Beyond the immediate necessity of military defense, Piccolomini and other humanists were also developing an innovative conception of the world and their civilization’s relation to it.

Heath presents an unequivocal interpretation in which virtually all Renaissance scholars accepted the notion of a Scythian lineage, hastily relegating the Trojan theory to obscurity. Thus, very little attention is actually devoted to the hypothesis of Trojan ancestry. While Bisaha places great emphasis on Salutati’s contribution to this debate, Heath fails to mention him at all. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Heath also neglects to recognize that there were a number of later humanists who also likened the Turks to the Trojans. Bisaha, however, makes no such oversight. Indeed, she acknowledges these humanists of the late Quattrocento and early sixteenth century (namely, Giovanni Mario Filelfo).\(^5^1\) By incorporating Salutati and later humanists who were not of Piccolomini’s persuasion, Bisaha provides a more accurate, as well as complex, analysis. Indeed, her examination of the debate over the origins of the Turks, more than Heath’s, clearly demonstrates that the Renaissance image of the Turk was far from monolithic.

**Influence of Travelers in Shaping Europe’s Conception of Islam and “the Turk”**

The Renaissance image of the Turk was not homogenous because it was a collective cultural phenomenon. Europeans from all walks of life were influenced by and contributed to this image. Regrettably, Schwoebel is all too correct in stating that, “the sources available to the historian of ideas and attitudes in the Renaissance are still largely from the pens of an intellectual elite.”\(^5^2\) Though the thoughts and expressions of the inarticulate are generally beyond the historian’s reach, those sources that remain reveal, if only partially, how individual perspectives and experience collectively forged this multifarious image.

Among the most unique (as well as diverse) perspectives are those of the travelers who journeyed to the Ottoman Empire during the Renaissance era. In her study of sixteenth century antiquarians who traveled to Constantinople, Amanda Wunder examines the writings and works of five antiquarians: Augier Ghislain de Busbecq, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Pierre Gilles,

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51 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 58.
Melchior Lorck, and Nicholas de Nicolay. Wunder notes that popular literature throughout the Renaissance was conceived largely by Europeans who had no direct contact with the Turks they disparaged. Thus travelers’ accounts are significant because their authors wrote from actual experience and interaction with the Turkish people.\(^5\) Yet, through examining the works of these five individuals, Wunder comes to the conclusion that the “sixteenth-century traveling antiquarians both built on and complicated—but ultimately failed to topple—the stereotypical rendering of the Turk as a barbaric warrior that was prevalent in Europe at the time.”\(^6\)

Whereas the previous historians examined have argued that the European image of Islam and the Turk was influenced by religious and broad cultural and political factors, Wunder contributes to this debate by suggesting that the antiquarianism of the sixteenth century added another layer to an already complex image of the Turk. She argues that for Europeans of the Renaissance, an appreciation of antiquity (particularly ancient remains) was a mark of sophistication and was often employed as a yardstick by which to measure the Ottoman Turks.\(^7\) With this peculiar gauge in mind, Wunder contends that the travel literature and other works produced by antiquarians who journeyed to Constantinople either bolstered the conventional image portrayed in popular literature or laid the foundation for the Orientalist conception of the Ottomans that predominated European thought in the centuries to come.\(^8\)

The writings of Augier Ghislain de Busbecq and Pierre Gilles represent the former tendency. After 1453, many traveling antiquarians like Busbecq and Gilles described the surviving relics as being defiled under Islamic rule. Gilles in particular was appalled by the frequent destruction or defacement of antiquities that occurred at the hands of the Turks. Though deterioration and demolition of many of the ancient city’s remains was a chronic problem prior to the Ottoman conquest, travelers like Busbecq and Gilles placed sole blame for the dismal condition of Constantinople’s antiquities at the feet of its Muslim inhabitants. Thus, many antiquarians interpreted the Turkish disregard for these relics as evidence of the cultural gulf that separated the East from the West.\(^9\)

Wunder’s examination of the works of antiquarian artists Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Melchior Lorck represent the subtle shift towards Orientalism. Particularly instructive for the purposes of this study is Wunder’s analysis of Lorck’s portraits. While Bisaha has painstakingly demonstrated that many humanists used classical writings to distinguish Europeans from the “new barbarians,” Wunder suggests that this Renaissance contemporary creatively placed his Turkish subjects in antiquity.

No less a lover of classical relics than his contemporary antiquarians, Lorck stands apart for showing a keen interest in the Islamic architecture of Constantinople. The woodcut reproductions that compose his *Well-Engraved and Cut Figures* provide a diverse glimpse of sixteenth century life in the Ottoman capital. Though he produced portraits of the sultan, Lorck also created images of inhabitants from all walks of life. Wunder draws attention to his portraits of unidentified Turkish individuals amid the relics of a bygone age. In one particular image of a Turkish woman, Wunder observes that a mosque and an obelisk can be seen on either side of the

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subject in the background. Noting that the obelisks were one of the city’s most renowned symbols, Wunder astutely observes that:

Through this exotic antiquarian imagery, the Turk was granted a place in Constantinople through an association with its antiquities, and, at the same time, Lorck’s Turk receded even further back in time and space to become all the more distant and distinct from the European viewing audience. The Turk was transfigured into an object as ancient, mysterious, and hieroglyphic as the obelisk itself.

Bisaha also provides a brief assessment of travel literature authors. As a more generalized overview compared to Wunder’s focus on antiquarianism, it comes as no surprise that their examinations are incongruent; yet neither are they antithetical. To a point, there is convergence between both analyses. Both Bisaha and Wunder highlight the more negative aspects and judgments contained in Busbecq’s *Turkish Letters*. In addition, both scholars concur that travelers reinforced the existing stereotypes, though Bisaha also suggests that travelers generated additional notions such as the “lascivious and cruel Turk.”

Unlike Bisaha, however, Wunder did not limit her analysis to the written word alone. Her examination of antiquarian artists provides a more nuanced understanding of the perception of those who journeyed to Constantinople. Bisaha and Wunder’s conflicting evaluations of Nicholas Nicolay’s *Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages Made into Turkey* best demonstrate where the point of convergence ends between their respective analyses of Renaissance travel literature. In examining Nicolay’s drawings, Wunder notes that the images of everyday life portray a very humanized side of the Turks. Yet judging by Nicolay’s written account alone, Bisaha labels Nicolay’s work as hostile for his derogatory comments regarding Turkish practices foreign to his own. If weighed in its entirety, perhaps Nicolay’s work represents the antagonism between the persistent preconceived notions held by many of these travelers and the reality before them.

Their respective emphases on humanists and antiquarians limit Bisaha and Wunder to evaluating the impact of a small elite on the Western conception of the Turks. Yet this select group does not account for all who journeyed to the Ottoman Empire. Once again, Schwoebel’s study proves instructive. Schwoebel observes that the accounts of Europeans who encountered the Ottomans during their pilgrimages to the Holy Land throughout the era significantly molded the Renaissance image of the Turk. Though many did not or could not record their experiences, Schwoebel logically suggests that these pilgrims shared their experiences orally with members of

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60 Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, 180-181.
64 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 181.
their communities upon their return. While noting that such accounts are most likely inaccurate Schwoebel observes that:

[T]ales transmitted in this manner constituted a significant share of the common stock of Europe’s knowledge of the East; and in a society still largely illiterate they weighed heavily in the formation of western attitudes toward the Ottoman Turks. For countless common folk the returned pilgrim served as the single, direct link with the mysterious and frightening world of the Levant.

Schwoebel’s theory that the western image of the Turk was greatly shaped by the oral dissemination of countless pilgrimage tales among the illiterate masses throughout the Renaissance appears to slightly undermine Bisaha and Wunder’s emphasis of the role of travel literature in shaping that image. Although not necessarily a product of this oral culture, popular literature was undoubtedly influenced by this phenomenon. Given the history and nature of European pilgrimages to the Holy Land, perhaps it is not too unreasonable to suggest that in shaping the western image of the Turk, these unrecorded accounts collectively provided a lingering medieval influence upon Christendom’s conception of the Ottomans.

Clearly Bisaha, Schwoebel, and Wunder arrive at different conclusions in their respective examinations of the traveler’s influence in molding the Renaissance image of the Turk. If any convergence exists between all three interpretations, it is that each attempts to explain the impact of direct contact on the same phenomenon. As to be expected, Daniel’s interpretation differs altogether from those of Bisaha, Schwoebel, and Wunder. Rather, Daniel argues that travelers’ accounts of the seventeenth century demonstrate the enduring influence of the medieval image of Islam. So much so that he declares:

It is astonishing how even the details of their criticisms were repetitions passed down over centuries. The present writer [Daniel] many years ago prepared a statement of Islamic belief from the accounts of seventeenth-century travelers, and, although he did so in conditions which separated that work from the work on the Middle Ages with which this present book is concerned, the descriptions of the Christian attitudes of the two periods correspond so minutely as to astound the reader of both.

The Islamic rejection of the concept of the Trinity, the notion that Islam was originally a split from Christendom, and the perception of Islam as a religion of cruelty are a few examples provided by Daniel as proof of the continuity of the medieval canon in seventeenth century European thought.

The Medieval Canon or the Renaissance Turk?: Competing Images in the Modern West

That Daniel points to literature from the early modern era, not the Renaissance, to support his claim is striking and deserves further attention. The fact that he turns to sources from a period

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succeeding both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is significant for its implications and raises several thought provoking questions as well. If the medieval canon is still prevalent in seventeenth century European thought, as Daniel clearly implies, then what of the Renaissance image of the Turk? Do Bisaha or Schwoebel make a similar argument regarding the latter? If so, then how long are either of these competing images purported to have survived past their respective ages? Most provocative of all, are either one still present today?

Bisaha argues that from this Renaissance image emerged two distinct “legacies” or “impulses,” one being positive and the other negative. Nurtured by humanism, Bisaha claims that both can be witnessed to this day: “By simultaneously fashioning both a chauvinistic sense of ‘Western civilization’ and a more relativistic approach to other societies, humanists would shape early modern and modern perceptions of not only the Muslim East but also other non-Western cultures.”

According to Bisaha, the less prevalent of the two legacies is the positive or “relativistic” impulse. She observes that select writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries further developed the relativistic approach of their humanist predecessors before them. Perhaps the most instructive example for the purposes of this study is Bisaha’s examination of Niccolò Machiavelli. Much like his contemporaries, Machiavelli was disturbed by the Turkish victories of his day. Yet in his examinations of Ottoman governance, Machiavelli also demonstrated that he could view the Turks with impartiality. Bisaha notes that in The Prince, for instance, Machiavelli does not castigate but commends the Turks for having the prudence to colonize the Balkans, thereby consolidating their rule over the region. Furthermore, Machiavelli’s commentary regarding the Turks in The Discourses on Livy demonstrates a recognition and admiration for the powerful empire they commanded. In light of these considerations, Bisaha concludes that, “In this respect Machiavelli echoes Salutati: the worth of a nation depends more on the character of its people and the level of their success than on their bloodline or even religion.”

Bisaha’s brilliant but brief assessment of Machiavelli’s relativist view of the Turks deserves further examination. First and foremost, it should be noted that Machiavelli was in many ways a product of his age. Even he demonstrates how ingrained the cultural gulf had become between the Europeans and Ottomans by the sixteenth century when he casually referred to the Turks as “the infidels.” Arguably, the choice of term cogently demonstrates the lingering medieval influence on the European image of the Turk.

Yet his inclusion of the Ottoman Turk, a non-European ruler, in his manual on princely rule also clearly demonstrates a radical break from the medieval past as well. The concept of “the prince,” as it was understood by thinkers of the Renaissance, was a particularly nebulous one by modern standards. Robert M. Adams appropriately describes the Renaissance concept of “the prince” as a “catchall term” that could refer to the doge of Venice, the papacy, the king of Naples, the Visconti of Milan, or even the mercenary soldier Francesco Sforza. As broad as this conception clearly was, the argument could be made that Machiavelli expanded it by

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69 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 174.
70 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 174.
71 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 177.
72 Bisaha, Creating East and West, 177-178.
conceptualizing “the Turk,” or the Ottoman sultan, within this eclectic notion of the Renaissance prince. Thus, the Florentine’s relativist outlook allowed him to break free from the confines of a Eurocentric definition of princely authority to encompass all rulers, European and Eastern alike.

While this may seem farfetched given the great cultural gulf that existed between the Europeans and the Turks, one need only reflect on the remarkable objectivity that Machiavelli demonstrates throughout the pages of *The Prince*, particularly in his comparison between the Ottoman sultanate and the French monarchy in book four (notably devoid of any polemic against the former). If this is not proof enough of a relativist impulse in Machiavelli’s writings, it should also be remembered that Machiavelli even likened the caliphate to the papacy by observing that their respective “princes” were elected to their offices, making neither state a hereditary monarchy (since authority was not passed down from father to son) or a “new” monarchy (as these elected rulers did not establish new regimes, but presided over aged and well-established states).

Regrettably, Bisaha provides no examples of the perpetuation of this relativist impulse beyond the early modern era. The same cannot be said for the negative legacy. It is important to note that Bisaha is not implying that all manifestations of Western chauvinism are derived from Renaissance humanism. She simply provides a few examples that she believes demonstrate the lasting impact of this negative legacy. Throughout the nineteenth century, for example, Bisaha notes that the Western world continued to perceive the Turks as uncivilized barbarians. To support her claim, she cites the excoriating rhetoric of British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone’s *Bulgarian Horrors*.

Regarding whether or not the Renaissance discourse of barbarism remains a fixture of modern Western thought towards the Muslim world, Bisaha suggests that the perception of cultural supremacy exhibited by the orientalist scholars is identical to their humanist predecessors. Ultimately, Bisaha contends that an interconnection between the humanist dialogue regarding the Turks and modern Western civilization’s perceptions of Islam, Turkey, and the East exists. To stress this connection, she asserts that this “discourse was all too easily revived in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, with comments from leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi regarding the ‘superiority of Western civilization.’”

In tracing the continuity of the Renaissance image of the Turk, Bisaha presents a dualistic legacy, in which the negative impulse dominates Western thought. Otherwise, the Western world is relatively undivided in its opposition to the East. Yet Bisaha does not address how this image withstood the divisive effects of the Protestant Reformation intact, while Europe divided along religious lines. Though she acknowledges that Martin Luther equated the papacy with the Ottomans, little more is said on the subject. Yet the following excerpt from Daniel J. Vitkus’ analysis of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* suggests that the Renaissance image of the Turk underwent a radical transformation as a result of the Reformation:

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76 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 56. The text is misleading as Machiavelli does not actually mention the caliphate, but erroneously refers to it as “the sultan.” See footnote no. 2.
77 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 184.
78 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 185-86.
79 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 186.
80 Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 175.
English Protestant texts, both popular and learned, conflated the political/external and the demonic/internal enemies, associating both the Pope and the Ottoman sultan with Satan or the Antichrist.\(^{81}\)

Norman Daniel provides a brief overview of the continuity of the medieval image of Islam from 1350 through the 1950s, in which he demonstrates this endurance through specific examples from various eras.\(^{82}\) Yet he does not present this perpetual image as static or unchanging. Indeed, Daniel observes that, “A feature of the period of transition from mediaeval to more modern times was the retention of old material while new was added.”\(^{83}\) Rather, he presents a gradual evolution, in which traces of the mature medieval image can still be seen as late as the twentieth century in the writings of prominent Europeans such as Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and Thomas Carlyle.\(^{84}\)

Unlike Bisaha, Daniel does address the Protestant Reformation and more when tracing the enduring influence of the medieval image of Islam in Western thought well into the twentieth century. He confidently asserts that, “The strength of this integral group, or series, of opinions, what we may call this established canon, proved to be so great as to survive the break-up of European ideological unity, both the division into Catholic and Protestant, and the growth of agnosticism and atheism.”\(^{85}\) A bold claim to be sure.

Daniel asserts that the Protestant reformers viewed Islam largely in the same light as their medieval forerunners had. If anything, he contends that Martin Luther was more dogmatic than those before him in this respect, if for no other reason than the martial threat the Ottoman Turks posed to Europe during his own time. Though Luther often equated Catholicism with the Antichrist, Daniel notes that the Reformation leader exclusively applied the apocalyptic prophecy found in Revelation 13:7 (“he shall make war against the saints”) to the Ottomans, not the papacy.\(^{86}\)

Daniel pays special attention to the words of the Russian Academician Mitin, whom he noted was both a scientist and atheist. In a speech given in 1957, Mitin made remarks that Daniel interprets as evidence of the lingering influence of the medieval canon. Indeed, Daniel concludes from the speech that Mitin desired the ideological deconstruction of Islam. In examining the excerpts Daniel cites from Mitin’s speech, the reader must admit that, at the very least, Mitin employs a conspicuously chauvinistic rhetoric dressed in sophistication. Yet Daniel recognizes that Mitin’s address is not synonymous to the medieval polemic. Indeed, it would be anachronistic to suggest otherwise. Mitin’s observation of the interplay between religion and nationalism in the Muslim East demonstrates the great distance between the twentieth century and the Middle Ages. Nationalism was a concept that medieval Christians did not have to contend with as people in the modern world do. Nevertheless, Daniel concludes that the point on which the “atheist Russian” and Medieval Christian world views are most comparable is that both examined Islam for the explicit purpose of discovering how to eradicate it.\(^{87}\)


\(^{82}\) Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 275-76.


It is interesting to note that Daniel is not the only one to make a Cold War connection. In his preface, Schwoebel observes that other authors have likened the conflict between the Ottoman Turks and Renaissance Europeans to the Cold War. He also concedes that there are “remarkable parallels” between the two confrontations. In both cases, he observes that antagonists believed that they were locked in a conflict for survival, yet commercial activities were conducted between antagonists regardless of the larger cultural confrontation.\(^{88}\)

Schwoebel, however, cautions the reader from reading too much into these parallels. “Such striking similarities,” he argues, “must not obscure the essential differences between the two conflicts.”\(^{89}\) He then notes the differences of governing systems as an example of the pitfall of likening one distinct time period to another.\(^{90}\) It is evident from his remarks that Schwoebel, unlike either Bisaha or Daniel, does not detect a perpetual continuation of the Western image of the Turk from the Renaissance to the present.

Certainly Daniel and Bisaha’s respective interpretations concerning the perpetuity of the medieval canon and the Renaissance image of the Turk to the present are intriguing for their implications. Yet neither adequately illustrate that their competing images have indeed continued to the present. To be fair, both authors acknowledge that their studies do not include a thorough examination of the continuity of their respective subjects.\(^{91}\) Nevertheless, when a historian raises so provocative a theory (as these two authors clearly have), it is not unreasonable to expect a more substantial, if not necessarily exhaustive, explanation.

Bisaha, for instance, provides very few examples in her brief epilogue devoted to the subject. Most of her examples (indeed her only examples in the case of the positive legacy) are from the early modern period. The only modern illustrations provided, though thought provoking, are not compelling. While Daniel presents several examples, they are largely given cursory examination.\(^{92}\) Nevertheless, both of these historians challenge scholars to reassess the legacies of the medieval and Renaissance conceptions of Islam and the Turk. In depth studies on these respective theories of image continuity are clearly in order.

### Conclusion

In light of all that has been considered, it seems that Nancy Bisaha’s assessment that the pre-modern European conception of “the Turk” and other Muslim peoples underwent a significant shift over the course of the Renaissance (especially in the aftermath of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople) is closer to the truth than Norman Daniel’s theory (which is also shared by Schwoebel) that a collective “Medieval canon” of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries remained virtually intact and firmly lodged in European thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with only slight variation and evolution occurring. Most convincing are the facts that Daniel limited his image study solely to the religious aspect of this phenomenon and that Bisaha has brilliantly demonstrated that a general shift in European rhetoric from the Turk as an “infidel” to a “barbarian” did indeed occur during the period of her examination. Yet, as demonstrated above, Bisaha’s work is far from exhaustive.

\(^{88}\) Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, ix.
\(^{89}\) Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, ix.
\(^{90}\) Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent*, ix.
\(^{92}\) To Daniel’s credit, he does provide two considerable bibliographies (B and C) of sources produced after 1350.
If any historiographic conclusion can be drawn from the conflicting interpretations described above, it is that no general consensus exists between these scholarly works concerning the exact nature and characteristics of the pre-modern European image of Islam. Nor can there be. Any attempt to apply sweeping generalizations (as evidenced by Michael J. Heath’s examination) proves futile. As best demonstrated by the Turkish origin debates among Renaissance scholars or the diverse contributions of travelers in molding the Western conception of the Turk, the European image (whether from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance) was far from monolithic.

That Daniel’s medieval canon sharply contrasts with the Renaissance image of the Turk is to be expected. A cultural conception is not static, but malleable. For this reason then, a perception is transformed over time by new developments and circumstances. But as the works of Bisaha, Schwoebel, and Wunder clearly demonstrate, neither is a monolithic image held by contemporaries within any given time period. For a cultural image is above all a collective phenomenon, composed of all the various intellectual and ideological perceptions within that culture.

As stated previously, Europeans from all walks of life were influenced by and contributed to this image. It should come as no surprise then that conflicting points of view (as demonstrated by the dispute among humanists regarding Turkish origin, for example) produced this multifarious conception of the Turk. Thus, the Renaissance image of the Turk was essentially a cultural amalgamation inherently fraught with contradictory views as numerous as the participants who forged it.

In examining such a vast, complex, and conflicting abstraction as the European image of Islam, it is inevitable that these historians arrived at very different conclusions. Each scholar was forced to limit their scope and approach their subject from a particular angle. By limiting his scope to the religious aspect of the European image, Daniel (unlike Bisaha) failed to appreciate the humanist innovation contained in Pope Pius II’s letter to Mehmed. Bisaha’s focus on literature prevented her from assessing the impact that traveling artists or, perhaps more importantly, returning pilgrims had in molding this image. While the four themes explored in this essay do indeed highlight areas of convergence between all of these interpretations, they also demonstrate that the pre-modern European image of Islam precludes any scholarly consensus. If the historiographic analysis of these few works presented here are any indication, inclusion of additional pre-modern European image studies would ultimately further confound and enrich our understanding of this complex phenomenon.