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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mehmed the Conqueror between *Sulh-i Kull* and *Prisca Theologia*

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Abstract

This article presents a new interpretation of the reign of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) as refracted through the twin historical lenses of Mughal South Asia and the Renaissance Mediterranean. On the one hand, it argues that Mehmed, despite his current reputation as a conquering hero of Islam, in fact aspired to a model of sovereignty analogous to Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull*, and with a common point of origin in the conceptual worlds of post-Mongol Iran and Timurid central Asia. On the other hand, it also draws from the historiography of the Italian Renaissance to interpret Mehmed's cultural politics as being simultaneously inspired by a particular thread of Renaissance philosophy, the *Prisca Theologia*, which in many ways served as the Ottoman equivalent of Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull*.

Keywords: Ottoman history; post-Mongol history; connected history of philosophy; occult science; George Amiroutzes

Introduction

In March 2019, in the final days of campaigning for Istanbul's fiercely contested mayoral election, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced a plan to convert the city's most famous architectural monument, the Hagia Sophia, into a mosque. The plan, a reversal of the symbolic 1934 declaration of the structure as a national museum by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, would return it to a status it had previously enjoyed since 1453, when Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror first converted it from a

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church into a mosque. For supporters of President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, opposed to the secular foundations of Turkish Kemalism, the message was clear: a victory in Istanbul's municipal elections would complete the modern reconquest of the city for Sunni Islam, restoring it to the status of a great Islamic metropolis originally envisioned by Sultan Mehmed. To drive this point home, Erdoğan repeated a wordplay on the city's name that itself dates back to the fifteenth century, declaring: 'This place won't go back to being *Constantinople.* Instead, you will know it as *Islam-Bol*' (literally 'Full of Islam').[1]

Although the election did not end in a victory for the government's candidate, public debate over the building only intensified in the months that followed. Finally, on 10 July 2020, Turkey's High Court ruled that the 1934 decree making the Hagia Sophia a museum had violated Sultan Mehmed's designation of the structure as a *waqf* or pious endowment—an irrevocable status which the state had no power to alter.[2] Paving the way for the building's immediate reconversion to a mosque, the ruling provoked jubilation from some quarters, outrage from others, and has since become a touchstone, both within Turkey and internationally, for a host of interrelated debates over national sovereignty, religious freedom, minority rights, and the politics of UNESCO, among others.[3] For this article, however, the primary interest of the case lies elsewhere: as an illustration of the space occupied by Mehmed the Conqueror in the contemporary Turkish political imaginary, and how starkly it contrasts with the one occupied, in contemporary India and Pakistan, by the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, the main focus of this special issue of *Modern Asian Studies*. Quite unlike Akbar, who is remembered as an idiosyncratic ruler with an uncomfortable penchant for religious heterodoxy—or worse, outright apostasy—Mehmed is today routinely and unproblematically celebrated as a model of Muslim piety and a founding father of the Turkish nation.[4]

Nevertheless, this article will argue that, modern reputations notwithstanding, the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) shares a set of deep, historically rooted affinities with that of Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605)—much deeper, in fact, than the more frequently compared reigns of Akbar and his (roughly) Ottoman contemporary Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566). For while Suleyman, particularly in his latter decades, was a ruler who profoundly invested in Sunni legalism to legitimize his reign, Mehmed projected

[1] Reported in *Takvim*, 27 March 2019. https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2019/03/26/ayasofya-cami-olacak-mi-ibadete-acilacak-mi-baskan-erdogandan-son-dakika-aciklamasi, [accessed 19 July 2021].

[2] Later the same day, Erdoğan celebrated the decision in a speech, in which he recited a poem originally composed by Sultan Mehmed upon his first visit to the building: https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/120583/-insanligin-ortak-mirasi-olan-ayasofya-yeni-statusuyle-herkesi-kucaklamaya-cok-daha-samimi-cok-daha-ozgun-sekilde-devam-edecektir-, [accessed 19 July 2021].

[3] See the recent dedicated roundtable in *The Journal of Ottoman and Turkish Studies* 8/1 (Spring 2021).

[4] On this phenomenon, see Yağmur Karakaya, 'Imperial Daydreaming: Disentangling Contemporary Ottoman Nostalgia in Turkey', PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 2020, pp. 104–162.

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an altogether different kind of sovereignty: one not only unbounded by Islamic law per se, but which aspired to transcend the distinctions between discrete religions (or 'laws') in the traditional, communitarian sense. As such, Mehmed's reign presents the closest approximation, in an Ottoman guise, to Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull* or 'Universal Peace', described in Azfar Moin's framework article in this special issue as an attempt at 'suspending the laws of biblical monotheism' and to embody instead a kind of cosmic sovereignty, ultimately derived from the model of Genghis Khan.

Admittedly, to associate this model of rulership with any Ottoman sultan may, on the surface, seem a radical assertion. But it is, in fact, largely in keeping with what scholars, in various ways, have long argued about Mehmed's reign. We are, after all, speaking here of a ruler who methodically, and in flagrant violation of Islamic law, confiscated the sacrosanct landholdings of as many as 20,000 Muslim religious endowments (a deep irony, in light of the ruling by the Turkish High Court outlined above);[5] who, just days after his celebrated conquest of Constantinople, arrested and then executed the highest-ranking Muslim jurist in his empire;[6] and who, in his final years, promulgated a legal code, the *Kanun-nāme*, so blithely unconcerned with the juridic standards of the *Shari'ah* that it required, among other things, that his own descendants systematically murder one another.[7] By comparison, Akbar's most frequently noted transgressions of Islamic law—his failure to collect the poll tax from non-Muslim subjects and his numerous marriages to Hindu women—seem like petty misdemeanours.

At the same time, Mehmed shared Akbar's reputation among contemporaries as an extravagant patron of art and learning, and as a formidable intellectual presence in his own right. And in this respect, too, the Sultan displayed, throughout his life, the same proclivity to undermine and confuse the boundaries between religious traditions, rather than to reinforce them.[8] As such, in a striking precursor to Akbar's famed *ʿIbādat Khāna*, one of Mehmed's signature courtly pastimes was to bring together men of learning from different religions, as well as from opposing traditions within Islam, and to collectively challenge them to debates on various doctrinal and philosophical questions.[9]

[5] Oktay Özel, 'Limits of the Almighty: Mehmed II's "Land Reform" Revisited', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42/2 (1999), p. 226.

[6] Théoharis Stavrides, *The Sultan of Vezirs: The Life and Times of the Ottoman Grand Vezir Mahmud Pasha, 1453–1474* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 52–56.

[7] Colin Imber, *Warfare, Law and Pseudo-History* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 2011), pp. 174–178.

[8] See Gülru Necipoğlu, 'Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople', *Muqarnas* 29 (2012), pp. 1–81; Anna Aksoy, 'Mehmed II as a Patron of Greek Philosophy: Latin and Byzantine Perspectives', in Anna Contadini and Claire Norton (eds), *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World* (Farnham: Asghate, 2016), pp. 246–256; and Julian Raby, 'A Sultan of Paradox: Mehmed the Conqueror as a Patron of the Arts', *Oxford Art Journal* 5/1 (1982), pp. 3–8.

[9] See, for example, Astérios Argyriou and George Lagarrigue, 'George Amiroutzès et son *Dialogue sur la foi du Christ tenu avec le Sultan des Turcs*', *Byzantinische Forschungen* 11 (1987), pp. 29–222. On a famous 'debate' between Muslim scholars, see Efe Murat Balıkçıoğlu, 'A Coherence of the Incoherences: Graeco-Arabic Philosophy and the Fifteenth-Century Ottoman Synthesis of Philosophy with Sharia', PhD thesis, Harvard University, May 2019.

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In order to enhance the coherence of such debates, Mehmed also—again anticipating Akbar—eagerly sponsored the translation of religious and philosophical texts from non-Muslim languages. These included, to list just a few of the more unusual works translated under his sponsorship, a prayer to Zeus by the Neopagan philosopher Gemistos Pletho (on whom more below), a Syriac version of the biblical Book of Daniel, and a commentary on the Nicene Creed by the Orthodox patriarch Maxim III.[10] Alongside these scholarly interests, Mehmed even reproduced Akbar's well-known devotional enthusiasm for Mary and Jesus, collecting, throughout his reign, icons of Christ and the Madonna, and even sacred relics to which he is rumoured to have prayed when in private.[11]

In their ensemble, this long list of similarities between Mehmed's and Akbar's cultural politics amounts to far more than a case of casual resemblance. Instead, they are evidence that the two rulers, despite the thousands of kilometres and more than a hundred years separating their reigns, both aspired to a model of sovereignty with a common point of origin in the conceptual world of post-Mongol Iran and Timurid central Asia. Indeed, if the influence of this Mongol/Timurid legacy is now more generally recognized with respect to Akbar, it was Mehmed who stood comparatively closer to it, both chronologically and experientially, to the extent that his reign even briefly overlapped with that of Timur's son, Shah Rukh. One result of this, as recent research has shown with increasing clarity, is that scholarly life at Mehmed's court was deeply informed by the Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean, Letterist, and Monist currents sweeping the larger post-Timurid world of the fifteenth century—the same currents that would eventually provide the philosophical underpinnings of Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull*.[12]

Meanwhile, alongside this direct historical interconnectivity, the two sovereigns also shared a series of structural parallels in the practical dynamics of rulership. For, like Akbar—and *unlike* later Ottoman sultans, particularly

[10] See Gülru Necipoğlu, 'The Spatial Organization of Knowledge in the Ottoman Palace Library: An Encyclopedic Collection and Its Inventory', in Gülru Necipoğlu, Cemal Kafadar and Cornell H. Fleischer (eds), *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library, 1502/3–1503/4* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 1–78. For a comparative case at Akbar's court, see Audrey Truschke, 'The Mughal Book of War: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit Mahabharata', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31/2 (2011), pp. 506–520.

[11] Julian Raby, 'Mehmet the Conqueror's Greek Scriptorium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983), p. 23.

[12] Scholarly understanding of this topic has greatly benefited from the recent, collaborative study of an early sixteenth-century inventory of the enormous (5,000+ volume) manuscript collection of Mehmed's Library (cited above as Necipoğlu et al., *Treasures of Knowledge*). See also İhsan Fazlıoğlu, 'Türk Felsefe-Bilim Tarihinin Seyir Defteri (Bir Önsöz)', *Dîvân İlmî Araştırmalar* 18 (2005/1), pp. 1–57. On the Timurid model of mystical kingship and its intellectual legacy, see A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); İlker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAli Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Matthew Melvin-Koushki, 'Early Modern Islamicate Empire: New Forms of Religiopolitical Legitimacy', in Armando Salvatore et al. (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2018), pp. 353–379.

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after the Ottoman conquest of the Arab lands in the sixteenth century—Mehmed ruled over a state in which Muslims comprised only a minority of the population. Also like Akbar—and again, *unlike* Mehmed's successors from later centuries of Ottoman history—Mehmed's imperial ambitions were such that he frequently found himself at odds with the two most influential Muslim constituencies of his realm: the freewheeling *gazi* horsemen of his army, who opposed his ambition to create a centralized, hierarchical empire, and the Ottoman *ʿulema* or judicial elite, who hoped to subordinate Mehmed to their own authority as interpreters of 'holy law'.[13] As a result, Mehmed shared with Akbar a strong incentive to triangulate between his various Muslim and non-Muslim subjects, and to develop a model of sovereignty that elevated him 'above the fray', adjudicating between his subject communities and setting the terms for their mutual interrelations while maintaining maximum autonomy for himself.

A different point of reference: The legacy of Rome

Naturally, these many points of convergence between Mehmed and Akbar's reigns need to be balanced against other areas in which they differed fundamentally. Perhaps the most obvious is that Mehmed had, to put it mildly, a notably more ambivalent relationship to the memory of Timur. For while this mighty steppe conqueror was, for Akbar, an exalted (if distant) dynastic founder, Mehmed remembered him quite differently: as a foreign invader who had humiliated in battle, captured, and finally killed Mehmed's own great-grandfather, Bayezid I, a trauma from which the Ottoman state had only narrowly avoided permanent dismemberment.[14] In consequence, despite the undeniable cachet of the Tumurid model of rulership in the Ottoman lands of the fifteenth century, it was neither credible nor even desirable for Mehmed, or indeed any member of the Ottoman dynasty, to assume the Timurid dynastic mantle in the same direct way that Akbar eventually would. At best, Mehmed could only claim to have a charisma that was somehow cosmologically equivalent to Timur's, not through any form of Timurid dynastic inheritance, but rather because his own conquests, his own qualities as a ruler, and his own record of intellectual patronage made the comparison self-evident.[15]

Meanwhile, a second, and equally important, point of divergence originates in the long pre-history of Mehmed's territorial domains, which by the fifteenth century had already been ruled from Constantinople for more than a thousand

[13] On Mehmed's antagonistic relationship with the frontier *gazis*, see Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 138–150. On his relationship to the Ottoman *ʿulema*, see Abdurrahman Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 59–82.

[14] See Dimitris Kastritsis, *The Sons of Bayezid: Empire Building and Representation in the Ottoman Civil War, 1402–13* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

[15] Giancarlo Casale, 'From Parallels to Intersections: A Commentary on Moin's Marlowe (in Three Acts)', *Fragments* 3 (2014), pp. 22–29.

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years as the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) empire—a sharp contrast to the patchwork of territories that, in the case of the Mughal state, were essentially unified for the first time by the Mughals themselves. In consequence, and particularly in light of the Ottomans' troubled dynastic relationship to Timur, it was natural for Mehmed to view the legacy of Rome as an alternative model of a universal empire (or 'charter civilization' in the terminology of Victor Liebermann[16]) that was both more immediate and more accessible than the Timurid one. And yet, this alternative Roman model was by no means an empty vessel that Mehmed could simply appropriate and shape to his sovereign will. Rather, to call oneself 'Roman emperor' was to invoke a sophisticated and multivalent idiom of rulership and cosmic order that had been elaborated over the course of millennia and that, in consequence, held rather specific—albeit contradictory—implications regarding the relationship between sovereignty and religious law.

To understand how, it is necessary first to go back to the original age of Roman imperium in pre-Christian antiquity. In this first iteration of empire, which in some ways anticipated the early Mongols, the Romans established a form of state legitimacy in the absence of a 'Mosaic distinction', in the sense that it was completely separate from any concept of 'true belief'.[17] Instead, Rome took an ecumenical view towards the spirituality of its subject peoples, tolerating virtually any form of worship provided that its practitioners agreed to *also* worship before the cult of the emperor. Revealingly, the one notable exception to this rule was found in the Abrahamic monotheists—first Jews, and later Christians—who frequently faced persecution by the state precisely because they refused to worship the emperor alongside their own God.[18]

But then, in the year 313 CE, the tables were abruptly turned on this pluralistic tradition when Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306–337) issued an edict declaring Christianity to be the favoured cult of the empire. Shortly thereafter, in 324, Constantine chose the city of Byzantium—which he renamed 'Constantinople', after himself—to be the new capital of his empire's eastern, and more heavily Christian, half. More or less simultaneously, he also organized an ecumenical church council, the Council of Nicaea, to doctrinally define the official version of Christianity to be endorsed by the Roman state. Finally, in 337, Constantine himself famously converted to Nicene Christianity on his deathbed, setting the stage for Roman rule to become ever more deeply intertwined with this new state religion. With various twists and turns over the next few decades, this process was essentially completed by Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395), who began his reign by making adherence to Nicene

[16] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels. Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830. Vol. 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. x–xiv.

[17] See Azfar Moin's framework article in this special issue for a fuller discussion of the 'Mosaic distinction'. More generally, see Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[18] On this general dynamic, see Guy Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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Christianity a *requirement* for every subject of the empire. In his own edict, issued in 380, Theodosius denounced the followers of all other faiths, including heterodox versions of Christianity, as 'demented madmen' (*dementes vesanos*) and ordered that such individuals be branded as heretics and punished as criminals.[19]

Thus, over the course of roughly half a century, the Roman empire was transformed from a pagan state comparatively indifferent to its subjects' religious beliefs (although ruled by an emperor who was himself god-like), to one legitimized by the emperor's ability to impose a specific, doctrinally defined state religion on all of his subjects. This was an astonishing about-face, and one with lasting consequences.[20] More than a thousand years later, it left Mehmed the Conqueror with the very concrete problem of how, as the new master of Constantinople, to authentically embody Roman sovereignty in a way that broke free of its association with Nicene Christianity—the religion of the majority of Mehmed's subjects, but not of Mehmed himself.

It bears emphasizing that this 'Roman problem' set Mehmed apart from his sovereign Muslim neighbours to the south, in the Mamluk sultanate, and to the east, in post-Timurid Iran. In both these realms, non-Muslim populations were confessionally fragmented, demographically outnumbered, and politically marginalized, to the extent that their relationship to the religion of the ruler was a largely irrelevant question. By comparison, the situation in South Asia, where Muslims found themselves in the minority, again presents a closer parallel. But even here, the challenge of contracting sacred oaths with polytheists, highlighted by Azfar Moin in his framework article in this special issue, was really of a different order from anything faced by Mehmed, since 'polytheism' per se had been eradicated from the Mediterranean alongside Roman Christianization.

Thus, if Mehmed wished to convincingly claim the mantle of Rome, he would find no direct models for doing so in the contemporary Muslim world. On the other hand, it turns out that Mehmed's conquest of Constantinople coincided with—and, to some extent, provoked—a sweeping re-evaluation of monotheism and its relationship to the pagan origins of the Roman imperium in the Christian half of the Mediterranean. In fact, the question of Rome's 'rebirth' in a form that transcended doctrinal Christianity could be described as an essential driver of the movement that today we call the 'Italian Renaissance', whose deep web of connections to Ottoman history and to the larger history of the post-Mongol Islamic world historians have only begun to consider. In the pages below, I would therefore like to draw from Renaissance history to present a new interpretation of Mehmed's cultural politics as being deeply inflected by a particular thread of Renaissance philosophy: the *Prisca Theologia,* which in many ways served as the Ottoman equivalent of Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull.*

[19] Charles Freeman, *AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State* (New York: Abrams Press, 2009).

[20] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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Prisca Theologia and the philosophy of *renovatio/tajdīd*

Stated simply, the *Prisca Theologia* was the most exuberant philosophical branch of Renaissance humanism, an intellectual movement dedicated to reforming society through the systematic recovery, study, and emulation of various forms of knowledge from the world of pre-Christian antiquity. As such, Renaissance humanism was an extremely complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which took many divergent, and even opposing, forms.[21] At its most pedantic, it involved the exacting study of grammar and style in classical Latin and Greek, a project which held only tangential relevance for cultural politics at the Ottoman court.[22] But alongside these narrow, philological interests ran other, parallel strands of humanism that focused on more eclectic and mysterious forms of ancient learning, including astrology, alchemy, Hermetic magic, and the science of letters, and it is these strands that formed the basis of the *Prisca Theologia*.

Motivating the revival of these various forms of occult knowledge were two interrelated assumptions central to Renaissance thought: first, that the contemporary world had fallen into a state of almost unbearable corruption; and second, that the ancients had access to a kind of transformative, occult wisdom that could be used to restore the world to something closer to its original state of perfection. Hence, through the study of, say, astrology, it was possible to bring order to the chaotic unfolding of world events (the 'microcosm') by mastering the complex mathematic rules that governed the perfection of the celestial realm (the 'macrocosm').[23] Similarly, through alchemy, one might transform matter that had been reduced to a degraded state (that is, lead) back to its original and elevated form (that is, gold).[24] More generally, by using all of the various sciences that the ancients had at their disposal, one could imagine a transformation of society as a whole or, in other words, a return to a 'Golden Age'—an aspiration that perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the Renaissance, and which was expressed through the Latin term *renovatio* or 'renewal'.[25]

Traditionally, the intellectual fount of this movement is understood to have been Florence's Platonic Academy during the latter fifteenth century, where Marsilio Ficino developed his magic and astronomy-infused version of Neoplatonic philosophy and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola composed his celebrated 'Oration on the Dignity of Man' while exploring the mysteries of

[21] For a general introduction, see Charles Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also Eugenio Garin, *L'Umanesimo Italiano: Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Roma: Laterza, 1994).

[22] Patrick Barker, *Italian Renaissance Humanism in the Mirror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[23] Robert Westman, *The Copernican Question: Prognostication, Skepticism, and the Celestial Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[24] Ralph Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest: Science, Religion and the Secrets of the New World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

[25] See the introductory chapter in Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Christian Kabbalah.[26] Recently, however, a growing body of scholarship has proposed a reframing of the intellectual ferment of Renaissance Florence within the context of a more general revival of Neoplatonic and occultist thought originating earlier and much farther to the east, in the post-Mongol Persianate world—a subject to which we shall return in the pages below.[27] More immediately, the genesis of Florence's Platonic Academy can also be linked, by means of a well-established political narrative, to the growing power of the Ottoman state during a slightly earlier period of the fifteenth century.

This Ottoman connection is clearly illustrated through the figure of George Gemistos Pletho (*circa* 1360–1452), a native of Constantinople who came to Italy only briefly, between 1438 and 1439, but is widely credited with reintroducing Platonic philosophy to Renaissance Florence during his short stay. At the same time, Pletho also shocked his contemporaries by advocating a restoration of pre-Christian paganism as the ultimate path to societal and spiritual reform—a truly radical position whose sincerity continues to be debated by historians today.[28] For our purposes, however, what is most important about Pletho's defence of Platonic philosophy is the fact that he did so at the Council of Florence, a grand ecumenical council comprising the Orthodox and Latin churches, organized by Pope Eugenius IV in 1439 and one of the most intense moments of public debate over the meaning of *renovatio* in Renaissance Italy.

At heart, the Council of Florence was a papal attempt to 'renew' the Christian community by ending the great, centuries-old schism between the Latin and Orthodox churches, and reasserting the universal ecclesiastical authority that Constantine the Great had supposedly granted the Roman pontiffs. The problem, however, was that this authority had been perennially contested by both the emperors and the clergy of Constantinople, who claimed that, because their city had been founded by Constantine as the 'New Rome', their own claim to the legacy of Roman universality was equal to the Pope's. In some sense, then, the disagreement addressed at the Council of Florence was as old as the Roman church itself. What was unique to the early fifteenth century, however, was that, because of the growing power of the Ottoman state, Constantinople now faced the prospect of impending conquest, giving the Latin popes a new source of leverage. Thus, when Pope Eugenius convened the Council (whose opening sessions were held in Ferrara, before an outbreak of the plague forced a move to Florence), he made the attendance of the Byzantine delegation—and their eventual acceptance of papal authority—a pre-

[26] See James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 3–80.

[27] For example, Mathew Melvin Koushki, 'Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd in the Renaissances of Western Early Modernity', *Philological Encounters* 3 (2018), pp. 193–249.

[28] For recent, contrasting interpretations, see Niketas Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Vojtěch Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium between Hellenism and Orthodoxy* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

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condition for his help in organizing a military crusade to save Constantinople from Ottoman conquest.[29]

Now, without getting too lost in the details, there are two additional points to emphasize about the Council and its outcome. The first is that, at least temporarily, Pope Eugenius's strategy worked: the Byzantine delegation *did* recognize the Union of Churches according to his terms, and he *did* organize an anti-Ottoman crusade. But his strong-arm tactics also caused considerable ill will among the Byzantine delegates, in a way that allows Gemistos Pletho's advocacy of Platonic ('pagan') philosophy to be understood as a voice of protest against the Pope's intellectual bullying.[30] To put the matter as simply as possible, by asserting that the roots of true belief were to be found in the wisdom of an earlier time, predating Christianity and expressed in a language other than Latin, Pletho asserted an intellectual basis for Eastern spirituality that the Pope's Latin theologians were unequipped to contest.[31] Thus, in a very real sense, the *Prisca Theologia*—and, more generally, the Renaissance dialectic between humanism and scholasticism—can be understood as the outcome of a debate, intensified by the rising power of the Ottoman state, over where Roman authority actually resided: in the old Rome of the Latin West or in Constantinople, the New Rome of the East.[32]

From this starting point, a chain of events was set in motion that would directly intersect with the early career of Mehmed the Conqueror. Specifically, the arrival in Ottoman territory of the Pope's crusading army, in 1444, exactly coincided with Mehmed's enthronement as Ottoman sultan—at the tender age of just 12—after his father, Sultan Murad II, unexpectedly announced his abdication. The reasons for this decision remain unclear, but because of the military threat posed by the crusaders, Murad then temporarily took back command of his armies from his inexperienced son. The result was a resounding Ottoman victory at the Battle of Varna, but embarrassment for Mehmed who had failed to lead his own troops in battle. Then, through the intrigues of Çandarlı Halil Pasha, the grand vizier and highest-ranking jurist of the Ottoman state, the weakened teenaged Sultan was toppled from power and formally replaced by his father, regaining the throne only upon the latter's death in 1451. Even then, Mehmed remained under the shadow of Çandarlı Halil, being too weak to remove him as grand vizier. Ultimately, this led Mehmed to besiege Constantinople, a risky gamble to gain autonomy from Çandarlı

[29] In English, the standard account is still Joseph Gills, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

[30] For a socio-economic analysis of the pro- and anti-union Byzantine factions, see Nevra Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins: Politics and Society in the Late Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 208–220.

[31] Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism*, pp. 294–314.

[32] Note that Pletho's 'On the Differences between Plato and Aristotle', his opening attack on Western scholasticism, was composed in the same year (1439) that Lorenzo Valla exposed the so-called 'Donation of Constantine', which supposedly gave temporal rule to the Roman pontiffs, as a forgery. See Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, (ed. and trans.) G.W. Bowersock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

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Halil, who openly opposed the siege—and whom Mehmed executed immediately after the conquest.[33]

The take away from this admittedly complicated story is that, when Mehmed suddenly found himself on the throne in Constantinople in 1453, after such a tumultuous early reign, he had every reason to expect that the challenges to his rule—from both without and within—were only beginning. In consequence, he had an urgent need for a new and more expansive model of sovereignty that would consolidate his hold over the city by capitalizing on the charisma gained from its conquest. And among the possible alternatives, the *Prisca Theologia* presented itself as a particularly powerful option. On the one hand, its philosophy of *renovatio* provided Mehmed with a way to portray his conquest as a *renewal* of Constantinople's status as an imperial capital, rendering Mehmed (and *not* the Pope) the embodiment of Roman imperium and refuge of its Christian inhabitants, without himself being a Christian.[34] At the same time, by claiming to restore an ancient synthesis of empire and sacred wisdom that predated *both* Islam and Christianity, Mehmed could establish a basis for imperial power that lay beyond the authority of Muslim jurists in the mould of Çandarlı Halil, who had forced him from the throne as a boy and opposed his conquests as a man.

Just as importantly, the *Prisca Theologia* presented a model of a cosmically sanctioned imperium that was *already*, in a fundamental sense, a fusion of the theological and philosophical currents of post-Mongol Islam and the Christian Mediterranean, and therefore just as legible to Mehmed's Muslim (and Jewish) subjects as it was to Christians. This is particularly apparent in the concept of *tajdīd*, or 'renewal'—in other words, the exact Arabic equivalent of *renovatio*—which, beginning in the fourteenth century, became a fundamental component of the Neoplatonic revival that swept the Islamic world. Although the concept has an older history in Islamic thought, in its post-Mongol guise it was distinguished by a new political inflection, 'renewal' being achieved through the agency of the *mujaddid* or 'renewer', understood as a millennial emperor-sage who restores the world to its original pristine order. As in the case of its Renaissance equivalent, access to this pristine order was closely associated with the science of letters, astrology, alchemy, and other occult forms of knowledge. And, quite significantly, it was typically imagined, in its uncorrupted form, to have long predated doctrinal monotheism, originating in the antediluvian wisdom of Hermes or, for adherents of the Illuminationist school of Suhrawardi, with the 'original sage' Zoroaster, whose wisdom was preserved in the writings of Plato.[35]

[33] Stavrides, *Sultan of Vezirs*, pp. 52–56.

[34] Note that multiple leading Renaissance figures, including the humanist philosopher George of Trabizond as well as Pope Pius II, addressed letters to Mehmed suggesting that he embrace Christianity in order to fulfil his destiny as Roman emperor. See John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Study of his Rhetoric and Logic* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), pp. 131–133.

[35] Melvin-Koushki, 'Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light', *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā*' 24 (2016), pp. 42–113; Cornell Fleischer, 'A Mediterranean Apocalypse: Prophecies of Empire in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (2018), pp. 18–90.

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That such ideas circulated widely in early Ottoman Anatolia is directly reflected in the thought world of none other than Gemistos Pletho, the radical Neopagan philosopher already discussed above. In particular, Pletho's magnum opus of utopian political theory, *The Laws* (Greek: *Nomoi*), displays striking similarities to the political theosophy of Suhrawardi, even to the extent of claiming to revive, through Plato and the *Chaldean Oracles*, the original philosophy of Zoroaster. At present, scholarship remains divided on the question of whether, by what means, and to what extent these similarities can be attributed to the direct influence of Islamicate philosophy on Pletho's thought.[36] But what can be said with certainty is that, to residents of post-conquest Constantinople, a connection between Pletho and the Neoplatonic ferment of the contemporary Persianate world seemed obvious.

So much, at least, can be surmised from the judgement of Gennadios Scholarios, yet another Byzantine attendee of the Council of Florence whom Mehmed named patriarch of Constantinople shortly after his conquest of the city. In 1454, Scholarios came into possession of the only complete copy of Pletho's *Laws* and, based on its contents, posthumously declared Pletho an apostate, ordering his text publicly burned. In justifying this extreme act, Scholarios explained that, as a young man, Pletho had travelled 'to the court of the Barbarians', by which he presumably meant the court of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I (r.1389–1402) or possibly one of his sons, and while there had become the student of a certain Elissaeus, a scholar who was 'ostensibly a Jew but in fact a Hellenist…paying little regard to Moses or the beliefs and observances which the Jews received from him'. According to Scholarios, it was this Elissaeus, an 'adherent of Averroes' and a translator of Arabic and Persian philosophical texts, who had first exposed Pletho to 'the doctrines of Zoroaster and others', thereby leading him into apostasy.[37]

It is worth noting that Scholarios, a traditionalist deeply anxious about the threat posed by the *Prisca Theologia* to the integrity of Greek Orthodox Christianity, had been a lifelong adversary of Gemistos Pletho, locking horns with him in an acerbic exchange of letters and polemical pamphlets that lasted for decades.[38] But it was only after Mehmed's conquest of Constantinople, when something akin to Pletho's cosmology was in the process of being adopted as the official cosmic order of Mehmed's empire, that the philosopher's ideas appeared dangerous enough to Scholarios to incite physical violence. And so, with this incendiary background in mind, let us now turn to some concrete examples of what an Ottoman cultural politics of *Prisca Theologia* could actually look like, beginning with the same monument that introduced this article—the Hagia Sophia.

[36] For a recent reconsideration of this question, see Niketas Sinniossoglou, 'Sect and Utopia in Shifting Empires: Plethon, Elissaios, Bedreddin', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 16/1 (2012), pp. 38–55.

[37] Hladký, *Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, pp. 191–192.

[38] See Marie-Hélène Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400-vers 1472): un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparition de l'empire Byzantin* (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 2008).

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The 'Mosque of Holy Wisdom'

If one imagines, alongside latter-day Turkish politicians, that before the conquest of Constantinople the Hagia Sophia was simply a church—albeit a very grand one—then it naturally follows that its subsequent conversion from church to mosque was intended as a straightforward expression of Islam's victory over Christianity. But the Hagia Sophia was, in reality, much more than a church. Rather, it was a towering imperial monument that, some 900 years before Sultan Mehmed's birth, was built by the emperor Justinian the Great (r. 527–565) to symbolize Rome's reconstitution as a Christianized synthesis of pagan *imperium* and Solomonic kingship.

Indeed, much like Mehmed himself, Justinian had been a state-builder of almost limitless ambition, actively styling himself a 'second Constantine' while systematically reconquering Italy, North Africa, and other regions of the western Mediterranean long lost to Roman rule and doing battle with the Persian empire to the east. To reflect these ambitions, Justinian's great cathedral was assembled from precious materials gathered from the far corners of his reconstituted empire, and was self-consciously presented as being so magnificent that it surpassed the long-destroyed Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Unlike Solomon's temple, however, the Hagia Sophia was designed as a great vaulted dome—a dome so large that, from the inside, it seemed to encompass the sky itself (see Figure 1). As such, its form reproduced, in an appropriately Christian reincarnation, the universal aspirations originally embodied in the Pantheon, the great pagan temple of Augustinian Rome which, before the Hagia Sophia, had stood as the largest dome in the world.[39]

Now, we have plenty of evidence to demonstrate that Sultan Mehmed was well aware of this symbolic history. Shortly after his conquest of Constantinople, for example, he commissioned a Turkish translation of the *Patras*, a Byzantine chronicle with detailed information about the early history of the city and its monuments.[40] Thereafter, this translation circulated widely enough that its contents were eventually, during the reign of Mehmed's son Bayezid II, incorporated into a panegyric Persian-language world history by Idris-i Bidlisi, in a section that specifically compared Justinian, the building's 'first founder', with Mehmed, its 'Second Renewer' (*Mujaddid-i Ṯānī*).[41] Directly invoking the Zoroastrian origins of 'original wisdom' as imagined by the *Prisca Theologia*, the same text even asserted that *before* the construction of the Hagia Sophia, there was already an earlier house of worship, 'in the shape of a turtle', that for many centuries had served as a 'temple of Fire Worshipers'.[42]

[39] On the symbolism of the Hagia Sophia with specific reference to the Ottoman period, see Stephane Yerasimos, *Légendes d'Empire: La fondation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie dans les traditions turques* (Paris: IFEA, 1990).

[40] Çiğdem Kafesçioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounters, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010), p. 173.

[41] Idris-i Bidlisī, *Heşt Behişt, VII. Ketībe: Fatih Sultan Mehmed Devri, 1451–1481*, (ed. and trans.) Muhammed İbrahim Yıldırım (Ankara: Türk Tarihi Kurum, 2013), p. 114.

[42] Ibid., p. 118.

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Figure 1. The Hagia Sophia. *Source:* Photo by the author.

Meanwhile, there were other aspects of Hagia Sophia's history that would have been self-evident from visual elements of the building itself, such as the famous tenth-century 'Vestibule Mosaic' located over its southwest entrance. In this famous image, Madonna and Child are depicted on a throne, flanked by two other figures: the Emperor Constantine to the right, presenting Christ with a model of the city he founded, and the Emperor Justinian to the left, holding a model of the Hagia Sophia (see Figure 2).[43]

According to the modern mythology surrounding the Hagia Sophia's 'conversion', Sultan Mehmed—as a God-fearing, pious Muslim—is assumed to have been horrified by such images, and to have immediately ordered them whitewashed when he declared the building a mosque. But as Gülru Necipoğlu has shown, this was not the case: Mehmed left this image intact, and in so doing left explicit the connection between the structure's past and his own project of imperial renewal. Moreover, visitors to the building, including those who came to pray as Muslims, would have been greeted not only by this particular mosaic as they entered, but, once inside, by even more powerful images of Christian piety, including the Virgin and Christ adorning the apse above its central altar, and Christ Pankrator at the summit of the main dome.[44] This last image, in fact, seems to have had a particularly powerful effect on Mehmed's long-serving official Tursun Beg, who would later record his astonishment at the human face that emerged 'from tiny tiles of gold

[43] On Hagia Sophia's mosaics, Natalia Teteriatnikov, *Justinian Mosaics of the Hagia Sophia and their Aftermath* (Cambridge, MA: Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 2017).

[44] Gülru Necipoğlu, 'The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium', in Robert Mark and Ahmet Çakmak (eds), *Hagia Sophia: From the Age of Justinian to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 211–213.

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Figure 2. The 'Vestibule Mosaic', Hagia Sophia's southwest entrance. Constantine (right) presents the city of Constantinople to Christ, and Justinian (left) presents him with the Hagia Sophia. *Source:* Photo by the author.

and colored glass' and that 'seemed to return one's gaze from whatever direction one looked at it'.[45]

If the idea that a pious Muslim would enter such a structure—and willingly bow down before such images in prayer—is shocking to modern sensibilities, it is important to stress that the same was true for at least a considerable subsection of Mehmed's own Muslim subjects.[46] But this is precisely why it is inadequate to imagine that Mehmed was simply following a script as a 'Muslim ruler'. Instead, he was writing his own script as the new emperor of 'New Rome'—a script deeply informed by the desire for philosophical and spiritual *renovatio/tajdīd*, and according to which Mehmed himself, as a 'cosmic sovereign', served as conduit between the world of men (the microcosm) and the divine (the macrocosm). In this vein, the same Tursun Beg, already quoted above, described Mehmed's initial visit to the Hagia Sophia—his first public act after conquering Constantinople—as a transcendent moment in which Mehmed, as 'Universal Sovereign' (*Pādişāh-ı Jahān*), first looked up at 'the marvelous artefacts and astounding talismans on the dome's concave surface' and then insisted on climbing to the top of the dome 'like the Spirit of God rising to the fourth celestial sphere [that is, like Jesus rising to the sphere occupied by

[45] Tursun Beg, *Tārīh-i Ebu'l-Feth*, (ed.) Mertol Tulum (Istanbul: Fetih Cemiyeti Yayınları, 1977), p. 64.

[46] This sentiment is conveyed, in a backhanded way, even by Idris-i Bidlisi, who explains—unconvincingly—that Mehmed later built his own mosque since 'it was impossible to properly perform one's daily prayers in the ancient houses of worship of the city, as they had no *mihrab* and were filled with crosses, crucifixes, and other assorted images'. Bidlisī, *Heşt Behişt*, p. 73.

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the Sun]', in order to view from on-high the 'degradation and squalor' that lay below.[47]

Taken together, what all this evidence points to is something quite distinct from a desire to simply 'convert' the Hagia Sophia. Rather, Mehmed's intention was clearly to appropriate and 'embody' the sacred power of this ancient monument as an expression of his own sovereignty. A final indication of this impulse can be seen in his use of its name: '*Hagia Sophia*' or 'Holy Wisdom'. Featuring the same Greek word from which 'philosophy' is derived, the name would have invoked, for a learned contemporary Greek speaker, the blending of gnosis and ancient wisdom that was central the *Prisca Theologia*. And, virtually uniquely in the long history of churches repurposed as Ottoman mosques, upon its 'conversion' this name was not changed but rather incorporated into the name by which the structure is still known today: the *Āyā Ṣofya Jāmiʿi*, meaning the 'Mosque of Holy Wisdom' or even 'Assemblage of Holy Wisdom'. Through this eclectic mixture of Greek, Arabic, and Turkish, Mehmed gave new life, in a superficially Muslim guise, to this ancient structure.[48] But in doing so, as we shall see in more detail below, he also signalled his endorsement of an understanding of Islam ultimately rooted not in scripture but in 'wisdom'—in other words, in the same epistemology of 'reason' ('*aql*) and 'verification' (*taḥqīq*) that were also the conceptual cornerstones of Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull.*

The emperor's philosopher

When comparing the cultural politics of Mehmed the Conqueror and Akbar the Great, one of the greatest challenges for the historian is the lack of a figure at the Ottoman court who was equivalent to Ebu'l-Fazl, a sort of designated bureaucrat-philosopher who set down, in his monumental *ʿAin-i Akbarī*, the official cosmology of Akbar's reign. It is, in fact, largely thanks to Ebu'l-Fazl that we are today able to describe and holistically interpret the *Sulh-i Kull*, particularly with regard to its delicate interrelationship between sacred rulership, rational epistemology, and the politics of 'Universal Peace' between members of different religious communities. By contrast, no analogous attempts to systematically interpret Mehmed's years on the throne were undertaken—at least by Muslim authors—until well after his death, first during the reign of his ostentatiously pious son Bayezid II, remembered by posterity as 'the Saint', and later during the era of Ottoman 'Sunnitization' that began in the latter sixteenth century (the same general period during which the mosaics of the Hagia Sophia seem to have been whitewashed).[49] Even Mehmed's *Kanun-nāme* or 'Law Book', a text that might have provided something akin

[47] Tursun Beg, *Tārīh-i Ebu'l-Feth*, p. 64. Note also that on p. 75 Tursun Beg refers to Mehmed's renovations of the building as '*tajdīd*'.

[48] Kafesçioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul*, p. 20.

[49] On the historiography of Bayezid's reign, see Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 90–117. On Ottoman 'Sunnitization', see Derin Terzioğlu, 'How to Conceptualize Ottoman Sunnitization: A Historiographical Discussion', *Turcica* 44 (2012–13), pp. 301–338.

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to an unadorned, legalistic version of the *ʿAin-i Akbarī*, today survives only in heavily interpolated versions from the late sixteenth century or later, leaving many unanswered questions about what they actually preserve from the reign of Mehmed himself.[50]

On the other hand, there is at least one source from Mehmed's reign that preserves an elaborate 'philosophical profile' of the Sultan of a much different kind, in this case from the pen of one of the more remarkable (and understudied) figures in the history of Renaissance thought, George Amiroutzes. Originally from the independent Byzantine kingdom of Trabizond in the eastern Black Sea—a realm with long-standing cultural and dynastic ties to Timurid and post-Timurid Iran—Amiroutzes entered the stream of Italian Renaissance history when, alongside the aforementioned Gemistos Pletho and Gennadios Scholarios, he travelled from his home to attend the Council of Florence in 1438–39. There, in the intense public debates over the Union of the Churches, he established such a formidable reputation for learning that he was referred to by many of his Greek and Italian contemporaries as simply 'the Philosopher'.[51] After the Council, he returned to his native Trabizond until, some eight years after the fall of Constantinople in 1461, it too was besieged by Mehmed's armies. Using his political connections—he was the first cousin of Mahmud Pasha, the Sultan's grand vizier[52]—Amiroutzes negotiated the city's surrender, after which he was brought into the Sultan's personal entourage. Eventually, he became something akin to a private philosophy tutor to Sultan Mehmed, who was said to 'admire him more than anyone else' and to 'honor him with frequent audiences and conversations, questioning him on the teachings of the ancients and on philosophical problems'.[53]

Amiroutzes has left a fascinating personal record of some of these exchanges, composed in the form of a dialogue between himself ('Philosophus') and the Sultan ('Rex') which he describes as a composite of several actual conversations.[54] These exchanges are eclectic and wide-ranging, but one of their most surprising features is that they show Mehmed repeatedly challenging Amiroutzes to demonstrate that his Christian faith is 'in conformity with common notions' (*cummunibus sit consona notionibus*), a challenge that Amiroutzes at first tries to dodge by claiming that the foundation of faith can only be based in scripture. Mehmed, however, categorically rejects this argument, asserting that 'Gentiles, Jews, Christians and Muslims all have their own holy scripture, so if they all believe that these define the truth without recourse to philosophy, they will all be sure that their own faith is correct'.[55]

[50] Imber, *Warfare*, pp. 174–178. Also Marinos Sariyannis, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought up to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), p. 214.

[51] John Monfasani, *George Amiroutzes: The Philosopher and his Tractates* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), p. 7.

[52] Mahmud Pasha was a *kul*, or Christian slave forcibly converted to Islam as a child—a favoured class in Mehmed's political system (as described below).

[53] Kritovoulos of Imbros, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, (trans.) Charles T. Riggs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 177.

[54] Argyriou and Lagarrigue, '*Dialogue sur la foi*', pp. 29–222. The dialogue, originally Greek, survives in a sixteenth-century Latin translation.

[55] Ibid., pp. 100–101.

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In essence, this amounted to an explicit sultanic demand for justification through rational inquiry rather than through scripture—in other words, an endorsement of *ʿaql* (reason) over *naql* (transmission) and *taḥqīq* (verification) over *taqlid* (imitation). As a number of contributors to this special issue have reiterated, this turn towards *ʿaql* and *taḥqīq*, widespread in the post-Mongol Islamic world, was an epistemological necessity, given the Mongol practice of treating all religions as equally valid so long as they supported the sovereign. That said, in the context of the fifteenth-century Mediterranean, where Mongol influence was felt only indirectly, it is extremely rare to find a statement of this principle in such a bold, unvarnished form. Ottoman Muslim authors, for example, despite Mehmed's intense personal interest in the subject, approached the question only tentatively and indirectly, and much the same could be said of contemporary debates about faith and reason in Renaissance Italy.[56] In consequence, it is highly significant that the recorded instance in which Mehmed most clearly enunciated his own ideas on the subject appears in the context of a philosophical discussion with a non-Muslim. And it is equally significant that, in the very next passage of his dialogue with Amiroutzes, Mehmed goes on to explicitly connect this epistemology to a theory of social order, explaining that without a rational basis in 'common notions' which transcend individual scriptural communities, 'many doors will be opened to impious men who act against the truth, since according to their reasoning all affirmations about God, regardless of what they are, will be equally true'.

The obvious solution to this problem—a self-serving one from Mehmed's perspective—is for all religious communities to be collectively ruled by an illuminated 'philosopher-king', standing *super partes* and dispensing justice through divinely inspired wisdom. And although Amiroutzes does not directly address this possibility in his 'Dialogue', it is precisely to this image of Mehmed that he appeals in a separate collection of texts, a series of panegyric poems to the Sultan steeped in the symbolic language of Neoplatonic *renovatio/tajdīd*.[57] In one of these, titled 'On the Return of My Great Master, the Philosopher', the City of Constantinople, personified as an old woman, addresses Mehmed directly while welcoming him as 'the Sun returning after winter'. At the poem's lyric climax, the City hails him as the 'Ruler of the Romans and King of the Greeks' and thanks him for 'having made me, an old crone, as beautiful as a young lady / hiding my wrinkles and covering my face with blush / and dressing me in golden fabrics, just as a queen should be'.[58] Then, in a separate

[56] On *taḥqīq* among Muslim scholars at Mehmed's court, see Balıkçıoğlu, 'A Coherence of the Incoherences', pp. 457–464. See Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism*, for a similar argument about the Italian Renaissance.

[57] On Amiroutzes's poetry, see B. Janssens and P. Van Deun, 'George Amiroutzes and His Poetical Oeuvre', in B. Janssens, B. Roosen and P. Van Deun (eds), *Philomathestatos: Studies in Greek and Byzantine Texts Presented to Jacques Noret for his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Peeters: Leuven, 2004), pp. 297–324; also Anna Akasoy, 'A Baghdad Court in Constantinople/Istanbul', *Das Mittelalter* 10/2 (2005), pp. 136–147.

[58] For the original Greek text of this poem, see Janssens and Van Deun, 'George Amiroutzes and His Poetical Oeuvre', pp.317–318. The above text is from poem 7, lines 21–23. I thank Konstantinos Poulios very much for translating Amiroutzes's poems from Greek to English for this article.

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poem, Amiroutzes directly invokes 'wisdom' (*Sophia*) as the fount of Mehmed's power and the key to his project of imperial and spiritual renewal. Speaking directly to the Sultan, he writes:

> Hail to you, who have befriended wisdom's depths
> And expanded your domain's lengths.
> Hail to you, who through your power have set aflame the sun of wisdom
> And through wisdom have expanded your domains...
> Hail, o Ruler of the whole earth,
> Hail to you, who have bestowed grace to all.[59]

Although in some ways typical of Renaissance panegyrics, these verses are a good deal more innovative and transgressive than they appear at first glance. To begin with, their reference to a universal 'Sun King', who 'bestows grace to all', perceptibly recalls the 'royal splendor' (*kayān khurāh*) said to emanate through the 'sublime ruler' in the Illuminationist metaphysics of Suhrawardi. Meanwhile, beneath the poem's metaphoric veneer, there is an even more radical message embedded in its lyric foundation. Quite shockingly, its verses are composed according to the structure of an Akathist, a type of hymn reserved in Orthodox Christian liturgy for a saint, the Blessed Virgin, or a person of the Holy Trinity, and which, alongside the Gospel, is the only type of recitation that must be listened to while standing.[60]

Thus, if some among Mehmed's Muslim subjects were scandalized at the idea of bowing down before Madonna and Child in 'the Mosque of Holy Wisdom'—whose celestial dome Mehmed ascended 'like the Spirit of God'—his Christian subjects would have been no less scandalized at hearing the name of the Virgin replaced by Mehmed himself in a liturgical hymn. Placed together, these mutually reinforcing acts of transgression suggest a desire to blur the distinctions between Islam and Christianity so completely that their differences are subsumed within Mehmed's own person, bringing him tantalizingly close to the antique Roman model of the 'God-like emperor'—but also to the Mongol model of the 'Universal Sovereign' that would eventually evolve into the *Sulh-i Kull.*

Mehmed and the *Imago Mundi*

Alongside speculative philosophy and rational theology, subjects for which Mehmed displayed a lifelong passion, cartography was another of his most enduring intellectual interests. Too often, however, this interest has been narrowly interpreted by historians as a reflection of Mehmed's worldly ambitions of conquest, based on the assumption that maps—rather like the artillery so successfully adopted for Mehmed's army—would have had practical usefulness

[59] Ibid., pp. 315–316. The lines cited here are from poem 3, lines 17–20 and 25–26. Again, my thanks to K. Poulios for this translation.

[60] Because of this, the poem's modern editors describe it as '*flatterie révoltante et sacrilege*'. Argyriou and Lagarrigue, '*Dialogue sur la foi*', p. 48.

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for his military campaigns.[61] Missing from this interpretation is cartography's intimate relationship to both sacred cosmology and to ideas of universal empire, which undoubtedly drove Mehmed's interest in the ancient world's most celebrated technical guide to the science of mapping: Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia*.

Ptolemy's treatise, famously translated from Greek into Latin by a team of humanists in Florence in the early fifteenth century, today holds a place of privilege in the history of Renaissance science for having reintroduced to the Latin west the principle—unknown since Roman antiquity—of 'mathematical projection' upon which virtually all modern mapping is based.[62] For fifteenth-century readers, however, the content of the *Geographia* was inseparable from two other, better known, works by Ptolemy with a much more complicated relationship to modern science: the *Almagest*, on the principles of geocentric astronomy, and the *Tetrabiblios*, on astrological prognostication.[63] Unlike the *Geographia*, both of these works were revered as authoritative classics in both the Muslim east and the Latin west throughout the Middle Ages, and circulated widely thanks to very early translations from Greek to Arabic (in the eighth and ninth centuries) and then from Arabic to Latin (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries). Adding still another layer of complexity, premodern readers of the *Geographia* lacked the modern understanding of Ptolemy as a scholar who lived in Egyptian Alexandria in the second century CE. Instead, Ptolemy was widely believed—by readers in both Arabic and Latin—to have lived in the third century BCE, shortly after Egypt's conquest by Alexander the Great, and to have *ruled* Egypt as an early member of the Ptolemaic dynasty.[64]

As a result, when Florentine humanists first translated the contents of the *Geographia* from Greek into Latin, they believed it to be the work of an ancient philosopher-king from the same dynasty of Greek-speaking rulers that had built the Library of Alexandria. In consequence, they understood its system of 'cartographic projection' to be a form of antediluvian knowledge, inseparable from the arts of alchemy and astrology, which revealed the so-called *Imago Mundi*, a perfect representation of the world as it would appear not from any human vantage point, but from God's.[65] This image, when combined with the geographical tables that accompanied Ptolemy's technical instructions, allowed for a mathematical—and at the same time magical—reconstruction of the

[61] Recently, innovative work has begun to chance this perception. See Karen Pinto, 'The Maps Are the Message: Mehmet II's Patronage of an "Ottoman Cluster"', *Imago Mundi* 63/2 (2011), pp. 155–179; Sean Roberts, *Printing a Mediterranean World: Florence, Constantinople, and the Renaissance of Geography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[62] Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters*, (trans., ed. and introduction by J. Lennart Berggren and Alexander Jones) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[63] Gautier Dalché, 'The Reception of Ptolemy's *Geography* (End of the Fourteenth to Beginning of the Sixteenth Century)', in David Woodward (ed.), *The History of Cartography. Vol 3: Cartography in the European Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 285–364.

[64] Ibid., pp. 290, 318.

[65] Ibid., pp. 322–324.

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world in the precise form it had assumed during the lost 'golden age' of antiquity.[66] Indeed, even the basic Ptolemaic vocabulary of cartographic 'projection' was inextricably related to the technical terminology of alchemy—'projection' being the process, through contact with the 'Philosopher's Stone', by which a debased substance (such as lead) could be transmuted into its pure form (typically gold).[67]

It should be noted that, much like *renovatio* and its Arabic equivalent *tajdīd*, the principle of alchemical 'projection' (Arabic: *ṭarḥ*) was similarly part of a shared political and scientific discourse common to the Mediterranean and Persianate worlds.[68] That said, there are reasons to believe that the *Geographia* would have held particular relevance for readers in post-conquest Istanbul, in part because of the physical presence in the city of the Hagia Sophia. As discussed above, this monument was essentially designed as a three-dimensional map of the perfect cosmos: its structure bringing together the heavens (an all-encompassing dome) and the earth (materials assembled from the far corners of the ancient word), joined by the unifying aegis of the Roman emperor. As such, Ptolemy's *Geographia* was an obvious cartographic corollary of the Hagia Sophia: a pristine vision of the inhabitable earth unified under God's benevolent eye, and made accessible through the mysterious numerological system of an ancient sage/emperor.[69]

All of this is clearly reflected in contemporary descriptions of Mehmed's interest in Ptolemy's text, and his decision to ask his personal tutor in Greek philosophy, George Amiroutzes, to use its mathematical system to create a very large-scale map of the world 'brought together into a united whole, so as to be more easily understood in the mind'.[70] Amiroutzes did this with the help of his son, a convert to Islam and a translator at Mehmed's court, who filled out its captions and annotations in Arabic. The result was a work with which the Sultan was 'delighted…admiring the wisdom and ingenuity of Ptolemy, and still more that of the man who had so well exhibited this to him',[71] prompting him to commission Amiroutzes and son with translating the full text of the *Geographia* into Arabic.

This book-length translation, completed with a full suite of regional maps, includes an introductory preface that conveys both a clear sense of the work's

[66] On the technical elements of Ptolemy's system, see Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Geography*, pp. 1–57.

[67] Umberto Eco, *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (Milano: Biompiani, 1990), pp. 71–85.

[68] On Ottoman alchemy, see Tuna Artun, 'Hearts of Gold and Silver: The Production of Alchemical Knowledge in the Early Modern Ottoman World', PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2013, especially pp. 70–83. On the Mughal case, see Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, pp. 141–150.

[69] On the intersection of astrology and Mehmed's interest in the *Geographia*, see Maria Mavroudi, 'Translations from Greek into Arabic at the Court of Mehmed the Conqueror', in Ayla Odekan, Nevra Necipoğlu and Engin Akyürek (eds), *The Byzantine Court: Sources of Power and Culture* (Istanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2013), pp. 195–207. On astrology at the Ottoman court, see Ahmet Tunç Şen, 'Reading the Stars at the Ottoman Court: Bayezid II (r.1481–1512) and His Celestial Interests', *Arabica* 64 (2017), pp. 557–608.

[70] Kritovoulos, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, p. 209.

[71] Ibid.

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cosmic significance and its connection to Mehmed's sovereign ambitions. It begins:

> Praise to the one [Allah] who placed in the heavens the constellations, and put in them lights and the illuminated moon. And who created an order and a well-structured system according to the desire of the celestial spheres. And who placed, for he whom he has made Sultan on earth, the celestial realm, the source for understanding the conditions of the lower realm.[72]

A few lines later, the text goes on to praise Mehmed himself as:

> the most high king and exalted sultan, the depth of the sciences, the utmost of wisdom, the one who makes apparent the hidden truths of the maxims of the learned, who calls forth, through his determination, their forgotten nuances, who brings the taste of these truths to the mouth of whoever seeks them, and who reveals their gems and hidden pearls.[73]

Finally, it extols Ptolemy, reminding readers of his credentials as 'the paragon of the sages of mathematics and the reformer of the masters of geography'.[74]

The same passage then goes on to remind readers that Ptolemy is 'called Claudius in the language of the Romans' (*fī lisān al-Rūmīyan*), a gloss that provides a window into the wider politics of translation surrounding the text. Intriguingly, in a surviving rough draft of the translation, completed without maps, both Ptolemy and the original language of his text are described differently as 'Greek' (*lisān al-yūnānī*), corresponding to the vocabulary normally used when referring to ancient Greek in Arabic philosophical literature.[75] The change to 'Roman' in the fine copy presented to the Sultan therefore suggests a deliberate change of register, intended to highlight the linguistic continuity between ancient Greek learning and the language of the Byzantines (who also spoke Greek, but considered themselves to be 'Romans').[76]

Meanwhile, an issue closely related to the 'Roman-ness' of the text involves the decision to translate from 'Roman' into Arabic. This was a less than obvious choice from the Sultan's perspective, since Mehmed's native language was Turkish, not Arabic, and he may have had at least some knowledge of Greek as well.[77] To translate the text into Arabic, therefore, suggests that the translation was primarily intended not for the Sultan's personal benefit, but for the inter-confessional, polyglot community of scholars from places like Cairo, Tabriz, and Samarkand assembled at his court, for whom Arabic could serve

[72] Istanbul, Süleymaniye Ktp., Ayasofya 2610, fol. 3.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., fol. 1a.

[76] On 'Roman' identity in Byzantium, see Gill Page, *Being Byzantine: Greek Identity before the Ottomans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); also Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[77] On Mehmed's knowledge of Greek, see Raby, 'Sultan of Paradox', p. 4.

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as a common medium of communication.[78] Indeed, a revealing anecdote from Amiroutzes's 'dialogue' confirms this: when pressed by Mehmed to defend a claim about the Old Testament, Amiroutzes is warned to speak carefully, since Jacob of Gaeta (a well-known Jewish convert to Islam) was present for the discussion, but also because the text of the Old Testament itself 'has already been translated for us into Arabic'.[79]

And yet, it is important to emphasize that Mehmed was no modern cosmopolitan, benignly interested in promoting intercultural dialogue for its own sake. Instead, like Akbar, he aimed to position himself as a centre of authority that stood above the scriptural and intellectual traditions of the opposing groups at his court. And within this context, translating Ptolemy's *Geographia* into Arabic, the ultimate vehicle of scriptural authority in Islam, was, at least potentially, a highly provocative act, in many respects directly comparable to Akbar's support for the translation into Persian of non-Muslim religious texts such as the *Mahabharata*.[80]

The reason is that Ptolemy, as mentioned above, was already a foundational author in the Perso-Arabic intellectual tradition, whose *Almagest* and *Tetrabiblios* had for centuries been widely available in Arabic translation, forming the basis of a rich literature of commentary and debate. But because the full text of the *Geographia* had not been previously translated into Arabic, the astral sciences in Islam—and for that matter, in the medieval Latin west as well—had developed in the absence of terrestrial mapping.[81] However, during the fifteenth century, a group of pathbreaking Christian cosmographers (including George Amiroutzes, in addition to European figures like Regiomontanus and Nicolas of Cusa) were at the forefront of developing a new kind of cartographic astral science, which used mathematical projection to develop a self-reinforcing and progressively more accurate understanding of terrestrial coordinates in relation to astral observation.[82] The *Geographia* provided the mathematical key to this process, and by making this text (from the pen of an ancient philosopher-king with an unrivalled intellectual authority among Muslim scholars) available in Arabic for the first time, Mehmed opened a path to radically reforming the understanding of space, time, and authority in the Perso-Arabic tradition—through a return to its ancient, pre-Islamic, 'Roman' origins.

[78] The text itself says that Mehmed, in requesting the translation of Ptolemy, ordered 'engagement (*al-ṣaġl*) with the most noble of languages in terms of context, and the deepest of them in terms of significance, and the most excellent in terms of eloquence, the clear and most refined Arabic language'.

[79] Argyriou and Lagarrigue, '*Dialogue sur la foi*', p. 156. It is interesting to note that, in this context, 'translation' is in fact described as 'conversion': *Sunt enim et apud nos in arabicum idioma conversi.*

[80] Truschke, 'Mughal Book of War', pp. 506–520. Also see Pye's article in this special issue.

[81] See Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Geography*, pp. 47–49. On the general history of mapping in Islam, see Karen Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[82] Dalché, 'Reception of Ptolemy', pp. 337–342.

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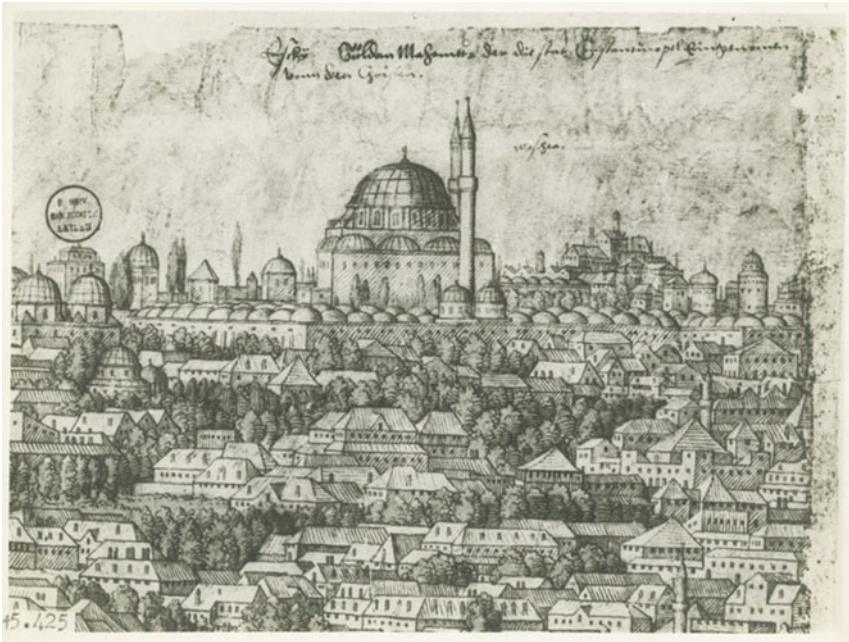

Figure 3. The Conqueror's Complex, Istanbul. Drawing by Melchior Lorck, *circa* 1559 (detail). *Source:* Universiteitsbibliotheek, Leiden, Netherlands, BPL 1758, BL. 13. Open Access.

Embodying Rome: Mehmed's 'Conqueror's Complex'

With all of this in mind, let us now turn to the single greatest work of cultural and architectural patronage of Mehmed's reign: the *Fātih Külliyesi* or 'Conqueror's Complex'. Begun in 1463, and completed in 1470, this massive architectural complex is the most concrete expression of the Sultan's ambitions for a 'Roman' reformation of Islam's legal and educational institutions. Much of it no longer exists as originally conceived, as its central structure was destroyed by an earthquake in 1766 and it was subsequently rebuilt according to a different design. But from surviving drawings and descriptions, it is known to have included, in addition to a mosque and eight madrasas, a library, a hammam, a hospital, a dispensary, a soup kitchen, and a caravanserai (see Figure 3).[83] All of these were charitable institutions that offered their services completely free of charge and, with the exception of the madrasas, were accessible to all regardless of their religious affiliation—a feature that rarely failed to impress non-Muslim visitors to the city.[84]

[83] Kafesçioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul*, pp. 66–86.

[84] For a Christian view, see Theodoro Spandugino Catacuscino, *I commentari di Theodoro Spandugino Cantacuscino gentilhuomo costantinopolitano, dell'origine de principi Turchi, & de' costumi di quella natione* (Firenze: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1551), pp. 65, 185. For a Jewish view, see Francesca

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All of these components were incorporated into a centrally planned, symmetrical design that, as in the case of the Hagia Sophia, was conceptualized as a three-dimensional map. Thus, at the centre of the Complex was the vaulted dome of its mosque which, situated as it was at one of the highest points of the city, offered a clear vantage point over both Asia (across the Bosporus) and Europe (across the Golden Horn). This central dome was then flanked by two identical rows of madrasas on either side, those to the northeast named the 'Black Sea Madrasas' and those to the southwest, the 'Mediterranean Madrasas', in accordance with the physical orientation of the complex to each of these bodies of water. As a whole, the Complex's design thus embodied in a direct way the Sultan's well-known titular claim, following his conquest of Constantinople, to be ruler of 'The Two Continents (i.e. Europe and Asia) and the "Two Seas" (the Black Sea and the Mediterranean)'. But because 'the sea', based on Quranic usage, served in both Arabic and Persian as a metaphor for knowledge, the design also reflected the merging of divergent forms of understanding: the contrasting traditions of 'east' and 'west', the visible (*ẓāhir*) and the unseen (*bāṭin*), reason (*ʿaql*) and tradition (*naql*), and so forth.[85] As such, the design reproduced a central element of what has been labelled 'Timurid imperial metaphysics', elaborated by early fifteenth-century authors such as Ibn Turka and Yazdi, who defined the ideal 'philosopher-king' (*al-sulṭān al-faylasūf*) as he who stands at the 'confluence of opposites' (*jamʿ al-aḍdād*) thereby resolving the visible world's apparent contradictions and collapsing the distinction between microcosm and macrocosm.[86]

In the case of Mehmed's complex, however, this Timurid model was imbued with additional meaning by being situated at a physical location of unparalleled symbolism for the spiritual and imperial history of Roman Constantinople: the site of the ancient Church of the Holy Apostles, a structure originally commissioned by Constantine the Great to house the physical remains of several apostles, whose skulls were brought from various distant locales specifically for the project.[87] By the standards of the early fourth century CE, this would have constituted a highly provocative act, since pre-Christian Romans had a powerful sacred taboo against the presence of graves or human remains within their city limits. Thus, from its inception,

Valentina Diana, 'Il *Seder Eliyyahu Zuṭa* (1523) di Elia Capsali di Candia. Traduzione e Commento del Libro I', PhD thesis, Università di Bologna, 2020, p. 367.

[85] On the Illuminationist ideal of bringing together the 'two seas' of physical knowledge and transcendental gnosis, see, for example, Mustakim Arıcı, 'Osmanlı İlim Dünyasında İşrâkî Bir Zümreden Söz Etmek Mümkün mü? Osmanlı Ulemasının İşrâkîlik Tasavvuru Üzerine Bir Tahlil', *Nazariyat* 4 (2018), pp. 31–34.

[86] Matthew Melvin-Koushki, 'Imperial Talismanic Love: Ibn Turka's Debate of Feast and Fight (1426) as Philosophical Romance and Lettrist Mirror for Timurid Princes', *Der Islam* 96/1 (2019), pp. 42–86. Intriguingly, Melvin-Koushki proposes *jamʿ al-aḍdād* as equivalent to the Latin *coincidentia oppositorum*, following the terminology of the roughly contemporary European humanist Nicholas of Cusa.

[87] Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 39–72.

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the structure was closely connected to the project of creating a 'New Rome' sanctified by monotheism—a message further reinforced by Constantine's choice to build his own mausoleum at the same site. Accordingly, the Church of the Holy Apostles continued, after his death, to be the favoured burial site for subsequent emperors, a tradition only interrupted in 1204, when a Western crusading army conquered the city, despoiled its relics and imperial graves, and left the site in ruins.[88] In this sense, perhaps even more powerfully than Mehmed's appropriation of the Hagia Sophia, the 'Conqueror's Complex' was a monument to the city's *renovatio* under his aegis: an ancient, sacred site, sanctified with the bodies of saints and emperors and later defiled by invaders from the West, now restored to its former glorious condition.

Finally, lest there be any lingering doubts about Mehmed's intentions, he also included his own mausoleum within the site. Like the central mosque, this structure, too, no longer exists in its original form, having been destroyed in the same eighteenth-century earthquake. But it is described by contemporary observers at some length, and it is clear from their description that it was something substantially more ostentatious than a traditional Ottoman dynastic tomb. According to the Jewish chronicler Elia Capsali, for example, whose great-uncle Moses Capsali was an important figure at Mehmed's court, it was 'fashioned with marble and precious stones, such as no other sovereign had ever built. Inside they laid his sarcophagus, on top of which they placed his turban and two torches, one at his head and the other at his feet. These burn night and day, such that his tomb is illuminated by an eternal light that is never extinguished.'[89]

While certainly not on the scale of the great monumental mausolea of the Timurids and, later, the Mughals, this structure nevertheless had the unmistakable flavour of an 'imperial shrine' imbued with the symbolism of a trans-confessional cosmic sovereign—something without precedent in the burial traditions of Mehmed's own ancestors.[90] Moreover, the choice to place such a mausoleum within a 'cartographic' complex—which simultaneously functioned as an institution of higher learning—invites an even more powerful reading of its purpose in line with the Timurid 'confluence of opposites' outlined above. Specifically, the location of Mehmed's tomb between the 'two seas' of its twin rows of madrasas directly recalls the 'middle gate' (*al-bāb al-awsaṭ*) of Jabirian alchemy. As recently described by Tuna Artun, the 'middle gate' was an operation used to create the 'elixir' (*al-iksīr*' or 'Philosopher's Stone' in the Western tradition), whose physical touch transmuted ordinary metals

[88] At the time of the Ottoman conquest, the church itself was still standing in a dilapidated condition, and briefly served as the seat of the Ottoman patriarch.

[89] Diana, 'Il *Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*', p. 367. For a similar description, see Spandugino, *I commentari*, p. 69. Spandugino also notes that the Arabic inscription adorning the tomb included the note: 'It was his intention to conquer Rhodes and surpass the magnificence of Italy' (*Mens erat bellare Rhodum et superare superbam Italiam*).

[90] See also Gülru Necipoğlu, 'Dynastic Imprints on the Cityscape: The Collective Message of Imperial Funerary Mosque Complexes in Istanbul', in J-L. Bacqué-Grammont et al. (eds), *Cimitières et traditions funéraires dans le monde Islamique* (Ankara: Türk Tarihi Kurumu, 1996), pp. 23–36.

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into gold and ordinary men into perfect individuals. In an explicitly cartographic mode, this operation brought together 'the western mercury' (*az-zibaḳ al-gharbī*) with 'the eastern mercury' (*az-zibak al-sharqī*), and then introduced the final component necessary to cultivate the elixir: a specially prepared 'body' (*jasad*), which 'dies' and then, through the agency of alchemical 'projection', is reborn as a 'new body' (*al-jasad al-jadīd*)'.[91]

As will be obvious, these details map onto the physical plan of Mehmed's complex with precision, suggesting a deliberately 'alchemical' logic in its design according to which Mehmed himself, at the moment of his death, would become its transformative 'body'. But this would serve as merely the final culmination of a much longer process of 'embodiment' or, more specifically, of the power of the sovereign body to elevate and to purify both his realm and his subjects, which was already present much earlier in his reign.

A Muslim Rome, or a Roman Islam?

Perhaps the most basic manifestation of this transformative sovereign power, although rarely conceptualized as such in modern scholarship, is the *Kapıkulları* system, in other words, Mehmed's systematic recruitment of personal household slaves to create a new military elite for his empire. In a palpable way, these sultanic slaves (or *kuls*), accumulated through a combination of Christian prisoners of war and the *devşirme* levies of Mehmed's own Christian subjects, were the real 'Romans' of Mehmed's realm: elevated, by means of a version of alchemical transmutation, to a perfected state through their intimate relationship to the sovereign. In other words, much as the Hagia Sophia was 'renewed', through Mehmed's agency, to something more perfect—and more 'Roman'—than either an ordinary church or an ordinary mosque, so too were Mehmed's *kuls* elevated to something superior to either the protected Christians or to the free Muslims of his realm.

We have an unusually explicit enunciation of this principle in the highly appropriate medium of the first Sultani gold coin issued under Mehmed, one which, quite surprisingly, did not include the standard *shahada* or Islamic attestation of the faith. However, it did include the title 'Striker of Gold' (*Ḍārib al-naḍr*), alongside Mehmed's designation as 'Sultan of the Two Continents and Great Khan of the Two Seas'.[92] Similarly, the aforementioned Tursun Beg, a loyal servant to the Sultan (although himself not a slave), clearly had the same principle in mind when, in the introduction to his *Book of the Conqueror*, he described Mehmed's decision to appoint him as palace accounts secretary as 'confirmation that, thanks to the Elixer, bronze changes to gold'—a formulation he repeated twice, first in Persian and then in Turkish.[93]

Within the same context, it is also important to remember what this *kul* system replaced: a long-standing monopoly of the Ottoman grand vizierate by a

[91] Artun, 'Hearts of Gold and Silver', p. 81.

[92] R. E. Darley Doran, 'Othmānlı—Numismatics', *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn, (eds) P. Bearan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), consulted online 3 July 2020. I thank Azfar Moin for this observation.

[93] Beg, *Tārīh-i Ebu'l-Feth*, pp. 5–6.

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single family of Muslim legal scholars, the Çandarlı.[94] Prior to Mehmed's enthronement, as briefly discussed earlier, this family had retained an almost uninterrupted 100-year reign atop the Ottoman machinery of government. But after the conquest of Constantinople and with the execution of Çandarlı Halil, Mehmed began to choose his viziers almost exclusively from the ranks of his palace slaves—the most powerful of all being Mahmud Angelović, George Amiroutzes's first cousin. Contemporaneously, to ensure the permanence of this change, Mehmed adopted a parallel strategy designed to undermine the institutional independence of the *ʿulema*: by prodigiously funding the construction of new madrasas, but at the same time directly dictating both the staffing and the internal operations not only of these institutions, but of the *Shari'ah* courts as well. Over time, this became a standard and accepted practice, such that the entire Ottoman madrasa and legal system—previously characterized by its almost total autonomy from sultanic interference—was transformed into a new bureaucracy directly controlled by the sultan, and with a system of ranks, titles, and salaries that mirrored the organization of the Ottoman military.[95]

In a very real sense, the completion of Mehmed's architectural complex in 1471 was the culmination of this process, its eight madrasas immediately becoming the most important institutions of higher learning in the history of the Ottoman state.[96] But significantly, rather than choosing a homegrown Ottoman scholar to run it, Mehmed appointed Ali Qushchi of Samarkand, a mathematician and astronomer who had trained as a young man at the celebrated observatory of Timur's grandson, Ulug Beg. Equally significantly, Qushchi's appearance in Istanbul, some time around the year 1470, was part of a much larger influx of Persian-speaking scholars from the Timurid and post-Timurid world, whom the Sultan actively recruited and whom he seems to have systematically preferred over home-grown Ottoman scholars as he filled out the ranks of his new imperial madrasas.[97]

Such a preference was hardly accidental. As new arrivals from the Timurid east, these scholars brought with them an understanding of their role markedly different from the one until then operative in the Islamic Mediterranean. Institutionally, they were products of a system, typical of post-Mongol Iran and central Asia, that routinely subordinated the madrasa to political control.[98] And occupationally, rather than 'lords of the law' with an independent authority derived from knowledge of scripture, they were instead 'ritual specialists', whose role depended, ultimately, on the sovereign

[94] Stavrides, *Sultan of Vezirs*, pp. 52–56.

[95] Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultans*, pp. 59–82.

[96] See A. Süheyl Ünver, *Fatih, Külliyesi Ve Zamani İlim Hayati* (İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1946).

[97] See İhsan Fazlıoğlu, 'Osmanlı Felsefe-Biliminin Arkaplanı: Semerkand Matematik-Astronomi Okulu', *Dîvân İlmî Araştırmalar* 14/1 (2003), pp. 1–66.

[98] Said Amir Arjomand, 'The Law, Agency, and Policy in Medieval Islamic Society: Development of the Institutions of Learning from the Tenth to the Fifteenth Century', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999), pp. 263–293.

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himself and the celestial forces that he channelled.[99] Undoubtedly, it was to communicate precisely this principle that Mehmed, when appointing the two 'military judges' (*ḳāżıʿasker*) of Europe and Asia, the highest-ranking magistrates in his realm, insisted on an investiture ceremony in which the judge 'touched the sovereign's beard, as a sign of the great liberty delegated to him in dispensing justice'.[100]

Stated simply, there was, in prior Ottoman history, no precedent for such a model of sovereign power, which originated in the pre-Islamic pagan traditions of the central Asian Khanate. But as Mehmed surely knew well, there *was* something like a precedent in the history of his own imperial capital, founded by Constantine the Great on the principle that the Roman church would be perpetually subordinate to the authority of the Roman emperor. And in this respect, to return to where this article began, Mehmed's mosque and madrasa complex, built on the exact spot that Constantine had once chosen for his eternal resting place, was the perfect corollary to the Hagia Sophia. The latter, an ancient church believed to be built on the site of an even more ancient fire temple and now 'renewed' as a mosque, was an incontrovertible symbol of 'Muslim Rome'. But the former, an institution of Islamic learning built around a sovereign tomb, was instead an expression of a 'Roman Islam', a religion whose intellectual traditions and legal institutions could be 'renewed' only through their subordination to the authority of Constantinople's new emperor.

Conclusion

Among the comparatively few contemporary accounts of Mehmed the Conqueror's reign, arguably the most provocative is the memoir of Giovanni Maria Angiolello, a native of Italy's Veneto region who was captured by Mehmed's armies as a youth and spent over a decade as a *kul* or palace slave in the Ottoman royal household. Of particular note in Angiolello's account is a passage—frequently referenced by modern scholars but rarely quoted in full—in which, after Mehmed's death, Angiolello overheard his son and successor Sultan Bayezid II speaking about his father's religious beliefs: 'And Bayezid said that his father (*padre*) was rather his master (*padrone*), and that he did not believe in Muhammed. And this seems, in effect, to have been true, for which everyone says that Mehmed did not believe in any faith at all.'[101]

As an escaped slave, writing in Italian after safely returning to his homeland, and reporting the opinion of the late Sultan's disgruntled son, there are certainly reasons to question Angiolello's reliability. But a clearer idea of what he might have meant is provided by another collection of sources, a

[99] A. Azfar Moin, 'The "Ulema" as Ritual Specialists: Cosmic Knowledge and Political Rituals', in Salvatore et al. (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, pp. 377–392.

[100] The quote is from the contemporary memoirs of Giovan Maria Angiolello (discussed below), a palace slave in Mehmed's service. See Angiolello, *Il Sultano e il Profeta*, (ed.) Jeannine Guérin Dalle Mese (Milano: Serra e Riva, 1985), p. 122.

[101] Ibid., p. 153.

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series of apocryphal Turkish-language chronicles that began to circulate in the years immediately after the Sultan's death. These harshly criticized Mehmed—although through allegory, and anonymously—by comparing him to the legendary pre-Islamic founders of Constantinople, whose vainglory, idolatry, and disdain for God's law had brought their people to ruin.[102]

Such ideas, and the fact that they could be expressed openly, were symptomatic of a wider political context in which the new sultan Bayezid II sought to capitalize on simmering resentment against Mehmed's autocratic rule after a 30-year reign by presenting himself as a ruler more respectful of the pre-existing, traditionalist order. To this end, Bayezid restored a measure of autonomy to religious institutions. He gave back most of the properties seized by Mehmed from pious *waqf* endowments. He sold off or gave away Mehmed's collection of Christian relics. For a time, he even brought back a member of the Çandarlı family as grand vizier. And, more ominously, he oversaw a handful of high-profile heresy trials, including that of Molla Lutfi, Mehmed's librarian and a student of Ali Qushchi, who in 1495 was executed for 'denying the prophet'.

Then, toward the end of his reign, Bayezid began to sponsor a number of retrospective histories presenting his father, along with the rest of his ancestors, as 'holy warriors' singularly dedicated to the expansion of Islam.[103] And so, alongside the overturning of Mehmed's policies, the process of sanitizing the memory of Mehmed's reign had begun. From this starting point, an admittedly long and winding road stretches out across time, eventually leading to the modern political myth of Mehmed with which this article began. Looking back from that final destination, it is a challenge to catch even a shadowy glimpse of the original Mehmed, hidden as he is behind the two sharp turns of Sunni Islam and the nation-state—and behind them the gentler curves of Ottoman dynastic historiography. Fortunately, when viewed from the less cluttered—and mutually reinforcing—historical vantage points of South Asia and the Renaissance Mediterranean, it is still possible to see the radical complexity of his reign in something closer to three dimensions.

Competing interests. None.

[102] Necdet Öztürk (ed.), *Anonim Osmanlı Kroniği: Osmanlı Tarihi 1299–1512* (Istanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2015).

[103] For a brief overview of Bayezid's cultural politics, see Cemal Kafadar, 'Between Amasya and Istanbul: Bayezid II, His Librarian, and the Textual Turn of the Late Fifteenth Century', in Necipoğlu et al., *Treasures of Knowledge*, pp. 79–154.

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