

content (carpet of flowers, window, bedchamber seen through a doorway behind the Virgin, etc.) and instead a Dominican Saint, Peter Martyr is shown at one side worshipping the Annunciate Virgin as an exemplar for how the monks were to pray. Angelico used the natural light of the cloister to cause the Virgin to cast a shadow on the wall behind her. The painting, except for Peter Martyr, is entirely composed of "sunrise" pale colors, "like looking at nature reflected in a pearl." The conversation between Mary and the angel appears to have been finished and the two gaze lovingly at each other.

Most amazing of all, Fra Angelico left the underdrawing in the figure of the Virgin purposefully visible. In coaxing such beauty from the paint itself, instead of the fashionable use of expensive colors ground from semiprecious stones (as he himself often used for altarpieces), Fra Angelico not only obeyed the condition of poverty of the Dominican Observance, but heralded the outlook of a Leonardo da Vinci, who insisted on the principle that beauty in painting is created exclusively by the mind of the painter, operating through his hand.

Now in paper: classic study of 'The Turk'

by Nora Hamerman

Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time

by Franz Babinger; edited by William C. Hickman, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim
Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992
508 pages, paperbound, \$19.95

Franz Babinger's *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time* is the definitive scholarly biography of the Ottoman emperor who conquered Constantinople in 1453. Babinger was a German Orientologist who knew the Turkish language and had delved deeply into the original documents. He died in 1967 while in the midst of preparing the Italian edition of this, his most important book, without supplying the footnotes for which he had provided numbers but not references. The Princeton 1978 edition, which just became available in paperback, does have footnotes which were supplied posthumously by the editors and translator.

Babinger's account, first published in German in 1953, has been criticized by Turkish scholars, for its failure to take into account many original sources, yet there is no comparable study of this scope available in English, and so it remains

the best starting-point for anyone wishing to understand what was the Ottoman Empire of the 15th century, and why western Europeans saw it as such a threat.

Babinger was not anti-Turkish. With considerable irony he points out that there were western "Christian" rulers, such as Ferrante of Naples, whose arbitrary and brutal cruelty rivaled in style (if not in scale) that of Mehmed II and other Turkish rulers. While Mehmed II was regarded as the devil incarnate in the West, in Turkey he was (and is to this day) considered a great national hero. Babinger notes that many of the peoples subjected by the Ottomans were at least initially, no worse off than they had been under the Byzantines, and in some cases, slightly better off.

Most important, perhaps, he also documents in overwhelming detail the evidence that Genoa and Venice, the two oligarchical and nominally Christian "republics" of the Italian peninsula which ruled overseas empires in the eastern Mediterranean and traded with the Orient, were largely responsible, along with the decadent Byzantine Empire itself, for assuring the advance of the Ottoman power over that region. (Babinger does not explicitly draw that conclusion, but it is inescapable from the facts he reports.)

Reading the history of the Ottoman advances with a map of the Balkans in mind, one cannot help but sadly reflect on the historical roots of the present-day carnage in former Yugoslavia in the wars of "religion" which were conducted cold-bloodedly at the behest of Venetian, Genoese, and yes, also Florentine banking-houses. It may be necessary to underline the point, since to this day, confessional dividing-lines are being manipulated in the Balkans especially to justify genocide—especially against Bosnians of the Muslim faith, and especially by the British, who later dismantled the decaying Ottoman Empire with false righteous indignation, the better to construct their own evil empire.

Oppressive and inhuman regime

The culpability of these western bankers, and the outrage later expressed against them by Pope Pius II, the close friend of Nicolaus of Cusa, is underscored when one confronts the hideous oppressiveness of the Ottoman Turkish system, which took over most of the backward traits of the Byzantine despotism, and added its own inhuman practices. Some examples:

- The fratricide law. Mehmed II the Conqueror, in 1451, two years before the fall of Constantinople, celebrated his accession to power by killing all of his brothers (a considerable number, because of the practice of multiple wives and concubines, who were mostly Christian or of other non-Muslim faiths). This inaugurated the law by which all threats to the succession by rival brothers were snuffed out by the new sultan on the day of taking power. (p. 65)

- Ritual human sacrifice. This was, of course, not Muslim tradition, but it did belong to ancient Turkish religious practices, pre-dating their conversion to Islam. Mehmed's

father Murad in 1446, sacrificed 600 Greek prisoners to the shades of his father, Mehmed I. (p. 49) Babinger reports that this occurred while Murad was conquering northern Greece, "no doubt with the help of *western* instructors, who had so well mastered the use of artillery, that most frightful of western inventions, that the walls of the Greek cities and castles could not resist them for long" (emphasis added).

- Rape of children. Mehmed himself was a notorious pedophile, who took advantage of the Janissary system to keep himself in a steady supply of young boys. The outside service of the emperor consisted of 340 boys of Christian origin, who had been kidnapped in the course of campaigns and raids, all under control of a white eunuch, and all under the age of 18. The inner services was directed by a black eunuch who oversaw 300 girls and women in the *serai*, who were also all of Christian origin.

- The slave army. Every five years, each subject territory was commanded to yield up its boys 10-15 years of age, of whom the strongest and brightest were taken to Constantinople and never saw their families again. Converted to Islam and taught Turkish, they became servants at the court, and eventually most ended up as members of the elite Janissary corps, a corps of troops loyal to the sultan that lived a spartan existence under enforced conditions of celibacy. This mode of recruitment was necessitated because of the enormous death toll of the sultan's incessant military campaigns.

Regarding slavery, Turkish historian Halil Inalcik, otherwise one of Babinger's critics, confirms Babinger's description and goes further in details. Of the population of Constantinople by 1500 (according to Inalcik's "Servile Labor in the Ottoman Empire," in *Studies in Ottoman Social and Economic History*, London, 1985) 20% were slaves of the sultan or other grandees, which can be compared to the slave component of Venice, the major western European slaving state, at about 3% in the same era. As Inalcik puts it: "Slavery . . . was an institution of vital significance for Ottoman society. Not only the state organization but also various segments of the economy—the silk industry, *ciftlik* agriculture, distant trade, as well as the extended household-type family of the upper class—all rested upon slavery. It must be emphasized however that all were dependent on a regular large-scale supply of slaves from outside, since slavery in a Muslim society could maintain itself only with importation. Islamic jurisprudence recognized only one category of slaves—those born in slavery or captured in war."

- The drive to conquest. Babinger states: "According to Muslim law, the world is divided into war territory (*dar al-harb*) and territory under Muslim rule (*dar al-islam*). 'War territory' comprised all non-Muslim countries whose subjection was ordained by the Koran, in other words, the Muslims' permanent theater of war. Theoretically, the Mohammedan state was permanently at war with the entire non-Muslim world; its foremost aim was to wage holy war (*Jihad*) and transform the non-Muslim world into Muslim territory. This

view put the state under obligation to organize its Muslim population on a war footing and to develop its army to the utmost. Accordingly, military needs determined the regional divisions of the Ottoman Empire, which in many respects resembled the *provinciae* of Republican Rome. The function of the Ottoman regional governors has rightly been likened to that of the satraps in the late Persian Empire or of the Roman proconsuls."

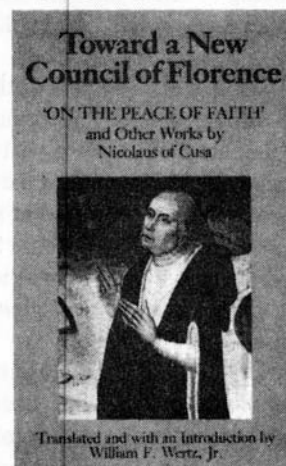
This can hardly be the *only* way to interpret the Koran, but it was put into practice by the 15th-century sultans, and it so decimated the Turkish population *itself*, that the Ottoman army and imperial bureaucracy could only be replenished by the aforementioned practices of enslavement. It is this realization of the human toll against *all* peoples of that time, which ought to make one appreciate most the ecumenical and political-military efforts of Nicolaus of Cusa and Pope Pius II. They, and their allies, believed that a failure to defuse the Turkish threat endangered the new civilization they were attempting to launch, which today we call the Renaissance. While Babinger does not pronounce himself on that issue—indeed, he charges that Pius II really yearned to be the master of the largest empire in the world—the array of information in this thick volume is enough to persuade any objective observer that any attempt to understand the 15th century which does not deal with the inadequacies of western responses to "the Turk," will be drifting far from historical reality.

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The Schiller Institute has just released this new book of translations of seminal writings of the 15th-century Roman Catholic Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, who, through his work and writings, contributed more than anyone else to the launching of the European Golden Renaissance. The title of the book, *Toward a New Council of Florence*, expresses our purpose in publishing it: to spark a new Renaissance today.

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