

*The Transculturality of Virtue in the Early Modern Mediterranean: A Case Study in Florentine-Ottoman Relations*¹

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Introduction

Italian-Ottoman relations during the era of Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1449–1451 and 1453–1481) have long attained an exemplary status in studies on the early modern Mediterranean. The particularly diverse cultural interests of the conqueror of Constantinople, his unique position as a ruler ‘between East and West,’ and his patronage of Italian artists excellently demonstrate the interconnected nature of the basin.² In the last years, the decade-long mythologisation of Mehmed II has already given way to a systematisation of his political, cultural, and intellectual agendas, and the actors that helped shape it, thanks in large part to numerous insights from Ottoman studies.³ Regarding the intellectual dimension of the Ottoman court, new research has confirmed and refined previous theses on a heterogeneous culture that is highly capable of adaptation and connection.⁴ The Sultan engaged with the world outside his empire on his own terms but with a great capacity for understanding the

¹ For comments on this article, I am grateful to the other authors in this thematic section, particularly Leonie Wolters and Daniel Kolland. I am also indebted to Frederik Schröer, as well as two thorough and kind anonymous peer-reviewers. Additionally, I would like to extend my thanks to Alexandra Holmes for doing the language editing on all our articles and to the team of *Cromohs*, especially to Emanuele Giusti for copyediting our articles with great care.

² FRANZ BABINGER, *Mehmed der Eroberer und seine Zeit* (München: F. Bruckmann, 1959); HALIL İNALCIK, ‘Mehmed the Conqueror (1432-1481) and his Time,’ *Speculum* 35, no. 3 (1960): 408–27; NESLIHAN ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER and ULRICH REHM, eds, *Sultan Mehmet II. Eroberer Konstantinopels – Patron der Künste* (Köln: Böhlau, 2009); JOHN FREELY, *The Grand Turk: Sultan Mehmet II - Conqueror of Constantinople, Master of an Empire and Lord of Two Seas* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); JULIAN RABY, ‘A Sultan of Paradox: Mehmed the Conqueror as a Patron of the Arts,’ *Oxford Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (1982): 3–8; Caroline Campbell and ALAN CHONG, eds, *Bellini and The East. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 14 December 2005 – 26 March 2006; London, National Gallery of Art, 12 April – 25 June 2006*, exhibition catalogue (London: National Gallery Company, 2005).

³ HALIL İNALCIK, *Fatih Sultan Mehmed Han: İki Karanın Sultanı, İki Denizin Hakanı, Kayser-i Rum* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2019); GÜLRÜ NECİPOĞLU, ‘Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II’s Constantinople,’ *Muqarnas* 29 (2012): 1–81; ÇİĞDEM KAFESİOĞLU, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009); CEMAL KAFADAR, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴ HUSEYİN YILMAZ, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); CHRISTOPHER MARKIEWICZ, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); MARINOS SARIYANNIS, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought up to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); OSCAR AGUIRRE-MANDUJANO, *Occasions for Poetry: Imagination and Literary Language in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming).

legitimising regimes around him. As a consequence, studies of Renaissance Italy must re-evaluate their sources in this new light. This requires methodological decisions on approaching a critical reading of Italian sources while seriously considering Italian engagement with the Ottoman Empire.

As a case in point, I aim to connect this task with the theme of the thematic section, ‘Analytical Concepts for Transcultural Settings,’ in two ways. Firstly, I intend to provide a specific example of how Renaissance humanism and the intellectual culture of the Ottoman court came together and mutually influenced each other through the actions of individuals. For this, I choose the previously understudied political communication between early Medici Florence and the court of Mehmed II. As I will show, conceptions of virtue ethics played a central role here by construing political actions as ethical conduct. The feasibility of such interaction was significantly based on the indirectly shared heritage of virtue ethics from classical antiquity, manifested through different genealogies for Italians and Ottomans. Secondly, I believe the concept of transculturality can be useful in describing and understanding early modern Mediterranean culture in general, and specifically between the Italian city-states and the Ottoman court. Although the term transculturality has been historically employed in various contexts, its theoretical and empirical foundations are still in need of concrete studies. Based on my analysis in this article, I propose understanding transculturality not as a permanent condition but as a process actively propelled by the actors involved, creating a state of cultural in-betweenness observable by historians.

Incorporating global intellectual history as an analytical framework proves particularly practical here, as it enables us to comprehend the linguistic, political, philosophical, and rhetorical bases on which the actors themselves captured, articulated, and negotiated their Mediterranean encounters. By doing so, we can prevent transculturality from becoming an anachronistic approach, allowing us to imbue the concept with meaning directly derived from the actors’ own perspectives and understandings.⁵

This shift is crucial because, until recently, there was no intellectual dimension to the history of early Ottoman-Italian encounters. In many instances, the historiography focused either on Renaissance Italian perceptions of Ottoman culture and warfare,⁶ or highlighted the role of practices, material cultures, and aesthetic cultures

⁵ See the *Introduction* to this thematic section by SEBASTIAN CONRAD and myself, see also: WOLFGANG WELSCH, *Transkulturalität: Realität – Geschichte – Aufgabe* (Wien: new academic press, 2017).

⁶ ALMUT HÖFERT, *Den Feind Beschreiben: ‘Türkengefahr’ und europäisches Wissen über das Osmanische Reich 1450-1600* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2003); NANCY BISAHA, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); MARGARET MESERVE, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); MUSTAFA SOYKUT, *Italian Perceptions of the Ottomans* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011).

in diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchanges.⁷ Intellectual entanglements were considered only when they illuminated these aspects. Moreover, a methodological Eurocentrism often dominated in interpretation.⁸ The intellectual culture of Italian humanism is and has long been researched in greater detail than contemporary thought and ideas in the early Ottoman Empire and its sources. This research often fetishised the idea of the Renaissance and thus imposed a specific temporality on the Ottomans, making them appear to imitate a humanist understanding of the world they inhabited and therefore a latecomer to developments taking place elsewhere. The reign of Mehmed II marked a political, ideological, and intellectual turning point for the Ottomans, but it was not oriented towards Renaissance humanism. Instead, Mehmed II centralised the Ottoman Empire and adapted its political philosophy accordingly, moving from the aspiration to be *primus inter pares* in a tribal federation towards rulership modelled on other more universalist examples in the Islamic world, guided by Arabic and Persian philosophies.⁹ Remarkably, Mehmed II's court became 'a dynamic seedbed of intellectual change and scientific investigation,' where 'scholars could posit numerous and disparate doctrinal positions, each referencing particular texts, through which the scholars gave their own syntheses based on their own unique perspectives.'¹⁰ An intellectual elite grew at the imperial court, crossing the paths of academia and politics in their careers, which opened up rich possibilities for engaging with the world around them. Although this article is based on Florentine materials and consequently focuses on Italian actors, I acknowledge the growing body of publications on the intellectual culture of the early modern Ottoman Empire. Incorporating them at the actor level is beyond the scope of this current work, yet their potential to enrich and refine future research remains significant.

The Florentines felt this Ottoman sea-change and they profited from it. A handful of galleys every year sailed between Florence and Constantinople carrying goods, with Florence maintaining a consul in Constantinople, presenting gifts to the Sultan, and forging anti-Venetian alliances. Admittedly, the Florentines represented a minor actor in the Italian peninsula to Mehmed II. Yet, Florentine-Ottoman relations have received disproportionately little attention in research compared to, for

⁷ CLAIRE NORTON and ANNA CONTADINI, eds, *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World* (London: Routledge, 2013); ZOLTÁN BIEDERMANN, ANNE GERRITSEN, and GIORGIO RIELLO, eds, *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); TIMOTHY MCCALL and SEAN ROBERTS, 'Art and the Material Culture of Diplomacy,' in *Italian Renaissance Diplomacy: A Sourcebook*, eds MONICA AZZOLINI and ISABELLA LAZZARINI (Toronto: Brepols, 2017), 214–33.

⁸ ULRICH BECK and EDGAR GRANDE, 'Jenseits des methodologischen Nationalismus: Außereuropäische und europäische Variationen der Zweiten Moderne,' *Soziale Welt* 61, no. 3–4 (2010): 187–216.

⁹ HÜSEYİN YILMAZ, 'Books on Ethics and Politics: The Art of Governing Oneself and Others at the Ottoman Court,' in *Treasure of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library*, eds GÜLRÜ NECİPOĞLU, CEMAL KAFADAR, and CORNELL H. FLEISCHER (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 509–26; YILMAZ, *Caliphate Redefined*.

¹⁰ EFE MURAT BALIKÇIOĞLU, *Verifying the Truth on Their Own Terms. Ottoman Philosophical Culture and the Court Debate Between Zeyrek (d. 903/1497-98 [?]) and Hocaşade (d. 893/1488)* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2023), 3–4.

example, Venice.¹¹ While the question of how the Florentines could establish such a stable connection to the Ottoman court is yet to be answered, taking the intellectual dimension into account allows for a unique insight: during the reign of Sultan Mehmed II, those humanists in charge of the Florentine chancellery and the Ottoman court engaged in a debate about what constituted virtuous rule. This debate was conducted not only as one would imagine—through comprehensive treatises by scholars, extensive correspondence, or even a purposeful discussion—but also took place in the rhetorical framework (itself shaped by the debate) for diplomatic and political communication. Although there were crucial differences between Ottoman and Florentine conceptions of virtue, what united them was a mutual recognition of the importance of ethical leadership, personal conduct, and the pursuit of wisdom in governance. The shared acknowledgement of these values facilitated interactions and negotiations, allowing each to recognise a form of virtuous conduct in the other, even when expressed through different cultural lenses.

In the following, I will present three arguments in three steps, which together are intended to provide a revisionist impulse to studies of early modern Mediterranean intellectual culture. Initially, I will delve into the distinct nature of virtue ethics and its place in fifteenth-century Florence and the Ottoman Empire. It is crucial to recognise that virtue ethics represented merely one facet of a vast intellectual landscape but was particularly pertinent within diplomatic communications for framing and legitimising mutual claims. This is because, within both Italian and Ottoman political thought, the ideal of virtuousness as a demand was intrinsically linked to virtuousness as a duty. Secondly, through letters from the Florentine state archives, I will demonstrate how virtue emerged as the linchpin of Florentine-Ottoman political dialogue. These correspondences and the humanists who penned them illustrate the subtlety with which Italians and Ottomans could engage with each other and negotiate their needs with refined precision. In the final step, I will integrate these insights and examine them through the lens of transculturality. In doing so, I will reference Thomas E. Burman's concept of 'deep intellectual unity',¹² which moves beyond the simple binary of similarity and divergence, and argue that the essence of the Florentine-Ottoman relationship lies in the shared reinvigoration of a Mediterranean legacy. Ultimately, I aim to outline implications for further explorations of Mediterranean transculturality through the prism of Italian-Ottoman relations.

¹¹ ERIC R. DURSTELER, 'On Renaissance Bazaars and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts,' *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 5 (2011): 413–34; E. NATALIE ROTHMAN, *Brokering Empire: Trans-imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); ERIC R. DURSTELER, *Venetians in Constantinople* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

¹² THOMAS E. BURMAN, 'The Four Seas of Medieval Mediterranean Intellectual History,' in *Interfaith Relationships and Perceptions of the Other in the Medieval Mediterranean: Essays in Memory of Olivia Remie Constable*, eds SARAH C. DAVIS-SECORD, BELÉN VICÉNS, and ROBIN J. E. VOSE (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 15–48.

The Nature of Virtue

In the late Middle Ages and the dawn of the early modern period, Italian, Greek, and Ottoman thinkers redefined virtue as one of several key political ideas. Though the exact interpretation of virtue varied by context, it consistently emphasised the moral qualities of the soul. These qualities were seen as essential for ethical leadership, personal integrity, and wise governance. My examination of virtue's transcultural dimensions begins with the pivotal moment of Constantinople's fall in 1453—a watershed event that prompted a spectrum of interpretations. For instance, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), the politically dominant figure in Florence, discussed the occurrence with his humanist friends and advisers, Poggio Bracciolini and Matteo Palmieri. They found it regrettable but predictable, believing that great empires fall when their time comes and that 'peoples of virtue [*virtus*] take the lead and aim to guide their destiny [and they will] emerge victorious from every battle.'¹³ Cosimo undoubtedly considered himself among the virtuous, but in this case, he likely had Sultan Mehmed II in mind, whose virtue many observers thought surpassed that of the late Byzantine empire. The history written for the Ottoman Sultan by the Greek historian Kritovoulos of Imbros (c.1400–c.1460) notes that Mehmed was distinguished and destined for success by his ἀρετή—virtue. Kritovoulos also explained a special intention in his writing: to make the Sultan's qualities known not just to an Ottoman audience but also to a Greek-speaking one, a significant endeavour since a considerable portion of Mehmed II's subjects were now Greek.¹⁴ But, indeed, the addition of virtue was not unique to Kritovoulos: Ottoman writers such as Tursun Bey, too, used it to describe the Sultan, adding to our lexicon *fazilet* (virtue, broadly speaking) and *adalet* (the central virtue of justice).¹⁵ Virtue was evidently a widespread currency of appraisal, but did all those mentioned really speak of the same concept? No, and yet, yes.

Each reference to virtue represents a specific concept, not only linguistically but also culturally.¹⁶ Cosimo was undoubtedly influenced by the vigorous debates among Florentine humanists, which I will discuss further below. As suggested by the Latin root 'vir,' *virtus* carries a semantic reference to manliness (and by extension, creative power),¹⁷ that in Cosimo's time was additionally influenced by older Greek and Latin conceptions linking virtue predominantly to excellence of character and intelligence. While Kritovoulos would have agreed with this, he modelled his writing

¹³ Bryn Mawr College Library, MS 47 [POGGIO BRACCIOLINI, *Miseria Humanae Conditionis*], 2v–3r.

¹⁴ KRITOVOULOS OF IMBROS, *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, Eng. transl. CHARLES T. RIGGS (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 3–4; Kritovoulos use of virtue/ἀρετή happens also in the form of ἐνἀρετῃ, the introduction's Greek text can be found in: KRITOVOULOS OF IMBROS, *Critobuli Imbriotae Historiae*, Eng. transl. DIETHER REINSCH (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983), 3–7.

¹⁵ MARINOS SARIYANNIS, 'The Princely Virtues as Presented in Ottoman Political and Moral Literature,' *Turcica* 43 (2011): 121–44.

¹⁶ MARGRIT PERNAU and DOMINIC SACHSENMEIER, 'History of Concepts and Global History,' in *Global Conceptual History: A Reader*, eds PERNAU and SACHSENMEIER (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1–28.

¹⁷ SILKE SCHWANDT, *Virtus. Zur Semantik eines politischen Konzepts im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2014).

on an ancient Greek prototype, Arrian's *The Anabasis of Alexander*, evoking an ἀρετή concept closely linked to the superiority (aristos/ἄριστος) of one person. On the other hand, Tursun Bey, in his history of Mehmed II, *Tarih-i Ebu'l Feth*, was one of the first to compile virtue ethical debates from various Islamic sources into one comprehensive Ottoman political treatise, including both classical Islamic and contemporary courtly discussions; these emphasised virtue as fulfilling one's duties to Allah and to one's subjects through honesty, justice, compassion, humility, and patience.¹⁸ Taken together, the meaning of virtue was far from universal. Yet, had the authors engaged in a direct conversation, they would have agreed on several commonalities. This includes the conviction that virtue was a concept that connected the ethical and political realms. And it includes the authorities who had previously discussed virtue in these terms. Plato (*Aflaton*) and Aristotle (*Aristu*) would have been relevant names for all, even though they might have placed different weight on them historically, philosophically, and in significance. That many contemporary interpretations of virtue were based on interpretations that, among others, drew upon these ancient Greeks, was generally undisputed, even if the extent to which any text or idea discussed truly stemmed from the Greek philosophers might not have always been evident to contemporaries.¹⁹

Consequently, a connection persisted in political thought between soulcraft and statecraft across various locations and languages around the Mediterranean. This means that the actors shaping political thought not only attributed special importance to the character and judgement of rulers but also viewed the emphasis, education, learning, and practice of moral and intellectual virtues as a particularly crucial part of any political enterprise.

The exploration of this intellectual connection, even though not necessarily evident to every participant, reveals significant historical insights. It prompts an examination of how diverse Mediterranean actors engaged with this shared intellectual heritage upon encountering each other. Did they use, from their perspective, the same concepts as within their usual sphere? Or did they adapt these for a possibly different audience? Can we, therefore, discern intellectual currents across the sea, possibly influences, a dialogue, or should the old notion of the divided sea maintain its validity?

Turning our attention to Italy, we immediately encounter an analytical challenge in this endeavour. In terms of virtue, the Italian context has been far more thoroughly researched than the Ottoman, with virtue long being known as a central

¹⁸ KENEN INAN, 'On the Sources of Tursun Bey's Tarih-i Ebu'l Feth,' in *The Ottoman Empire. Myths, Realities and 'Black Holes'*, eds EUGENIA KERMELI and OKTAY ÖZEL (Piscataway Township: Gorgias Press, 2012), 75–110.

¹⁹ HÜSEYİN YILMAZ, 'Books on Ethics and Politics.'

concept of Italian humanism.²⁰ Just a few years ago, James Hankins published a voluminous monograph on the *Virtue Politics* of Italian humanists. Contrary to classical streams of humanism research, he argued that the cornerstone of political stability and legitimacy for Renaissance humanists was virtue. Nobility, more than being hereditary, was evident in a ruler's actions, which were determined by his virtues; conveniently, something the humanists could teach him.²¹ Hankins' work was generally met with enthusiasm, but among the criticisms raised was that Hankins did not sufficiently investigate the significance of the social and professional standing of humanists, as well as their relationships with powerful patrons, in the formulation of their political theories. This oversight led to an incomplete analysis of the interactions between humanist thinkers and their socio-political environment.²² But it is this environment that allows me to bring Italians and Ottomans closer together.

In Florence, as other studies have shown, virtue was indeed a thoroughly practical matter, largely because it was ideologically closely linked to political legitimacy. The fulfilment of the cardinal virtues (or the pursuit of religious virtues) was not only part of a government's representative repertoire; they were also meant to be exemplified in practice. Thus, the treatises of well-known humanists like Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and many others contain implicit suggestions on how rulers could embody virtue.²³ In doing so, these humanists admired the Roman Republic and drew a connection between the virtuousness of the rulers and the stability of the social order in the city and state. But humanists were not mere passive observers of daily events; they were themselves part of the political machinery. As political subordinates, they promoted, demanded, adapted, and legitimised local politics. In Florence, this latter relationship is particularly evident because many chancellors of the Republic were also prominent humanists who were expected to use their skills for the internal and external legitimisation of the Republic or its respective governments.²⁴ It was these humanists, who were so convinced that virtue was the answer to the question of good and stable political relations, who would also be responsible for the shaping of the Florentine-Ottoman communication.

In the introduction, I mention that the dominance of Renaissance humanism in the study of Ottoman-Italian relations often led to the assumption that Mehmed II was an eclectic admirer of the same. It is important to briefly discuss that this assumption carries a strong teleological component. Italian humanism is rightfully

²⁰ JOHN G. A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

²¹ JAMES HANKINS, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

²² HANAN YORAN, 'Virtue Politics and its Limits: A Review Essay,' *The Historian* 84, no. 1 (2022): 49–68.

²³ GARY IANZITI, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012); LAWRENCE ROTHFIELD, *The Measure of Man: Liberty, Virtue, and Beauty in the Florentine Renaissance* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

²⁴ ROBERT D. BLACK, *Benedetto Accolti and the Florentine Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

closely associated with the project of the rebirth of antiquity and, as such, occupies an important place in the narrative of European history. Did the Ottomans, then, need the humanists to discover antiquity for themselves? This question alone is problematic because it essentially incorporates the Ottomans into a humanistic version of history, rather than striving to understand the Ottoman perception of the world and its history on its own terms. For some time, Western scholars argued that Mehmed II was an exception among Ottoman sultans to explicitly highlight his seemingly European orientation.²⁵ Current Ottoman studies vehemently contradict this view, and a focus on virtue ethics can show us why.²⁶

Let us begin with a general observation: unlike the political dwarf of Renaissance Florence, the Ottoman Empire was an empire expanding across two continents, encountering various traditions of political legitimisation. Due to the complex nature of the sources, the political-philosophical appearance of the empire can change depending on the angle from which it is viewed. In this regard, it is certainly worthwhile to keep in mind Christopher Markiewicz's observation that the empire was part of a series of successor states to the Mongols, Chinghissid Ilkhanates, and lastly Timurids, who struggled for means, ways, and ideas to legitimise their rule, utilising the ideas of sovereignty held by their predecessors and promoted by their neighbours. Markiewicz, through the example of the scholar Idrīs-i Bidlisī, portrays an era in which the Islamic world and its history of ideas were more dynamic and intertwined than long assumed. Bidlisī worked on and brought ideas about kingship, the universe, and faith to competing Islamic courts.²⁷ How central Bidlisī was to Ottoman political thought remains a matter of debate,²⁸ but he serves as an entry point into the intellectual climate at the court of Mehmed II during what Hüseyin Yılmaz calls the 'Age of Excitement.' Yılmaz clarifies that Mehmed II's reign represents a kind of intermediary step between the somewhat indecisive early Ottomans, politically reliant on tribal alliances, and the more clearly ideologically defined Ottomans of the sixteenth century, inclined intellectually to Sufism and mysticism. He helps us understand the texture of this transitional phase by pointing out that at and around the court, there were 'juridical, Sufistic, administrative, and philosophical' perspectives discussing rule and its legitimisation. Consequently, we encounter a series of changing concepts like *dawla* to *devlet* (state), sultanate, caliphate, or virtue—each undergoing a multidimensional shift in meaning.²⁹ This shift in meaning was driven by many scholars, who developed, in competition with each

²⁵ BABINGER, *Mehmed der Eroberer*; RABY, 'A Sultan of Paradox.'

²⁶ METIN MUSTAFA, *The Ottoman Renaissance and the Early Modern World, 1400-1699* (Sydney: Centre for Ottoman Renaissance and Civilisation, 2022).

²⁷ CHRISTOPHER MARKIEWICZ, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam. Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁸ ALI ANOOSHAHR, 'The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty by Christopher Markiewicz (review),' *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 8, no. 2 (2021): 361–63.

²⁹ YILMAZ, *Caliphate Redefined*, esp. 95.

other, a vast repertoire into which the Sultan intervened, and orchestrated through patronage and commissions of classical Islamic treatises.³⁰

From this intellectually rich starting point, one should not be misled; Mehmed II faced legitimacy challenges that required ideological openness but also made sultanic centralisation indispensable. I suspect that virtue ethics played a mediating role in this. Initially, Ottoman rulers had referred to the cardinal virtues, which were meant to distinguish them as *primus inter pares* among other tribes and demonstrate a predominantly secular leadership.³¹ Under Mehmed II's rule, the Ghazi warriors, who had previously supported the empire, were increasingly pushed back in favour of an imperial elite that was inclined to Arabic and then Persian traditions.³² With this elite came more sophisticated traditions of virtue, portraying the Sultan as a dispenser of virtues to the world. This is exemplified by the systematisation of Tursun Bey, even if it was completed only after Mehmed II's death. Tursun was the first Ottoman author to explain the concept of *nizâm-ı alem* (order of the world), in which the Sultan is given the role of a perpetual organiser who preserves the world from chaos. In this vision, virtues are a foundation; on one hand, the Sultan's own, which he radiates into the world with the help of his viziers, and on the other hand, those of his subjects, which he awakens and leads to flourish. Gottfried Hagen has pointed out that *nizâm-ı alem* should neither be understood as descriptive ('realistic') nor as a counter-image ('idealistic'). Instead, he proposes that *nizâm-ı alem* designates a permanent discourse of legitimacy, to which anyone speaking 'about' and 'to' it contributed.³³ Or, as Mehmed II's vizier Sinan Pasha wrote in his *Ma'ârifnâme*, 'every place has an order that comes with it, and so every province needs a law that befits it.' The order of the world (*cibânın nizâmı ve alem intizâmı*) is best secured when mutual protection and respect are instigated among people that naturally differ, and virtue was the basis for that.³⁴

Tursun Bey certainly does not reflect 'the' ideology of Mehmed II, but he can help us understand an important point: In communications with various old, new, and potential subjects, and in the succession struggle for legitimacy claims in the East and West, virtue ethics offered Mehmed II a potentially universal language that still promised him ideological coherence and control.

This angle reveals two significant insights. First, virtue was not only an integral part of political philosophy and the political language in both Florence and the

³⁰ ABDURRAHMAN ATÇIL, *Scholars and Sultans in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); BALIKÇIOĞLU, *Verifying the Truth on Their Own Terms*.

³¹ KAREN BARKEY, *Empire of Difference. The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³² This point will be challenged or refined by the forthcoming work of AGUIRRE-MANDUJANO, *Occasions for Poetry*.

³³ GOTTFRIED HAGEN, 'Legitimacy and World Order,' in: *Legitimizing the Order: Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*, eds MAURUS REINKOWSKI and HAKAN KARATEKE (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 55–83.

³⁴ Quot. in SARIYANNIS, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought up to the Nineteenth Century*, 54–55.

Ottoman Empire but also facilitated the articulation of the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Moreover, it allowed individuals engaged in each region's intellectual culture to influence this dynamic. However, this overlap does not shed new light on Renaissance humanism or the Ottoman perspective. The political relevance of virtue ethics across borders, and its potential to permeate discourses both geographically and culturally, can only be discerned by carefully observing and contextualising how the actors employed it with each other and navigated the possibilities it gave them.

Florence, the Ottoman Court, and the Quest for Virtue

Following the fall of Constantinople and throughout the thirty-year reign of Mehmed II, the Republic of Florence maintained favourable relations with the Ottoman court. While neither party viewed the other as indispensable in terms of trade, extensive correspondence found in the Florentine state archives attests to a robust and carefully cultivated relationship between them. This association was not without risks for the Florentines. Other Italian states and the papacy called into question the republic's Christian allegiance during periods characterised by papal calls for crusades and the lengthy Venetian-Ottoman War (1463–1479). Excessively pursuing either of these alliances could result in the Sultan's disfavour and jeopardise Florentine merchants and ships in the Bosphorus.³⁵ Existing studies have examined specific aspects of this relationship, including Florentine chancellor Benedetto Accolti's anti-Ottoman politics, the *El Gran Turco* print presented to the Sultan by Florentine merchants, and the portrait medal of Mehmed II commissioned by the Medici and crafted by Florentine artist Bertoldo di Giovanni.³⁶ But these studies often overlook the Ottoman perspective and fail to establish a comprehensive framework that transcends a purely political and economic interpretation of Florentine interests.³⁷

Part of the reason for this overlook lies in the political orientation that can be found among many Italian and Florentine humanists. Driven by the need to explain their present, but also by sheer political necessity and a degree of fear, many were proponents of the idea of launching an anti-Ottoman crusade.³⁸ Accordingly, in many of their public writings, humanists portrayed the Ottomans as a barbaric, or at least dangerous, people from the East, who could only be civilised to a limited

³⁵ MIKAIL ACIPINAR, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve Floransa: Akdeniz'de Diplomasi, Ticaret ve Korsanlık 1453-1599* (Istanbul: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2016).

³⁶ ROBERT D. BLACK, *Benedetto Accolti and the Florentine Renaissance*; ALBERTO SAVIELLO, 'El Gran Turco als 'maskierter' Tyrann. Ein Topos druckgraphischer Darstellungen osmanischer Sultane im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert,' in *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift Exchange and Artistic Transfer*, eds CATARINA SCHMIDT ARCANGELI and GERHARD WOLF (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 217–30; EMIL JACOBS, 'Die Mehmed-Medaille des Bertoldo,' *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 48 (1927): 1–17.

³⁷ A notable exception is LORENZO TANZINI, 'Il Magnifico e il Turco. Elementi politici, economici e culturali nelle relazioni tra Firenze e Impero Ottomano al tempo di Lorenzo de' Medici,' *RiMe. Rivista dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea* 4 (2010): 282–89.

³⁸ JAMES HANKINS, 'Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 49 (1995): 111–207.

extent.³⁹ There is no doubt that humanists spoke differently in public within the Italian peninsula than they did in diplomatic contacts with the Ottoman court. In a remarkable study that takes Renaissance Florence as its starting point, Sean Roberts points out this contradiction.⁴⁰ At the core of his research is Francesco Berlinghieri's famous print work, the *Geographia*, a contemporary interpretation of Ptolemy. This book, made possible by the contributions of emigrants from Ottoman territories, circulated among Italian elites and was even chosen as a gift for the Ottoman court. Intellectually and materially, Roberts argues, the book represents a shared Mediterranean interest in luxury goods, past knowledge, and intellectual sophistication. Yet, Roberts cautions against the notion of speaking about a 'transcultural Renaissance'; the anti-Ottoman ideological divides, he says, were too deep, not only among the humanists but even within the *Geographia* itself. This observation is helpful here, since Roberts seems to confuse transculturality as an analytical concept with the notion of a culturally and politically harmonious Mediterranean. But as I show now, in their letters to the Ottomans, the same humanists who advocated for crusade engaged deeply with the Ottoman mindset, fostering transcultural virtue, in fact.

This perspective begins with Cosimo's adviser, Poggio Bracciolini. In the fateful years from 1453 to 1458, Bracciolini was the Florentine chancellor. Undoubtedly, his most important task was to provide the Republic with a degree of continuity amid the frequently changing political waters.⁴¹ Another of his tasks was to give the Republic its voice, representatively, but also diplomatically. The Florentines might have been surprised but, probably also because the Venetians initially fell out of favour with Mehmed II, the Sultan seemed willing to greet Florentine merchants in Constantinople and strengthen their previously weak position in the city.⁴² The community was modest, numbering less than fifty individuals, yet the opportunity was significantly beneficial.⁴³ The first preserved communication that Bracciolini's chancellery had with the Ottoman court humbly accepted this honour. A letter from 1455 conveyed the Florentines' appreciation for the benevolence [*benivolentia*] they received from the Sultan. Bracciolini had chosen the word carefully. He followed fellow humanist Leonardo Bruni in studying its meaning in ancient texts, and these led him to assert that benevolence should serve as the foundation of any communal or political relationship, if it relied upon the virtue of the superior.⁴⁴ Indeed, to

³⁹ MESERVE, *Empires of Islam*; SOYKUT, *Italian Perceptions of the Ottomans*.

⁴⁰ SEAN ROBERTS, *Printing A Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴¹ WILLIAM SHEPERD, *The Life of Poggio Bracciolini* (Liverpool: Green and Longman, 1837).

⁴² HALIL İNALCIK, 'Ottoman Galata, 1453-1553,' in *Première rencontre internationale sur l'Empire Ottoman et la Turquie Moderne. Recherches sur la ville ottomane: le cas du quartier de Galata*, ed. EDHEM ELDEM (Istanbul-Paris: IFEA-Isis, 1991), 17–116.

⁴³ Francesco Pagnini del Ventura quotes a lost page of Benedetto Dei in FRANCESCO PAGNINI DEL VENTURA, *Della decima e di varie altre gravexçe* (Florence: s.n., 1765), vol. 1, book 2, 203.

⁴⁴ OUTI MERISALO, 'The *Historiae Florentini Populi* by Poggio Bracciolini. Genesis and Fortune of an Alternative History of Florence,' in *Poggio Bracciolini and the Re(dis)covery of Antiquity: Textual and Material Traditions*, eds ROBERTA RICCI and ERIC L. PUMORY (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2020), 25–40.

Bracciolini, benevolence could insert reciprocity even in hierarchal relationships.⁴⁵ The following words thus assured the Sultan that the hierarchy was clear, since ‘[we praise your benevolence], not as much as your illustrious virtue deserves, but as much as we are able to give thanks to Your Highness.’ It is speculation to think here about the semantics that benevolence opened in Bracciolini’s mind, but, if he followed Bruni closely, he saw benevolence and virtue fostering a meaningful relationship between a ruler and his subjects, that would allow all parties involved to develop their own virtue further. The Florentines made it clear that they were subjects, for they signed their letter ‘*tam civibus quam subditis*’—meaning ‘both citizens and subjects.’⁴⁶

How would Mehmed II have interpreted this message; did he even receive or understand it? It is not known who exactly received the early letters from Florence or how they made their way to the court (at that time in Bursa). However, the mechanisms surrounding Mehmed II suggest that the letter was understood with nuance, albeit possibly with different cultural emphases. While the Sultan did not speak Latin, both recent and older studies show that the Ottoman court’s communication was facilitated by the presence of multilingual staff. These individuals often served in the practical administrative service of the Sublime Porte and were also engaged intellectually through translations or their own works. It remains uncertain whether the letter was first translated into Greek and then for Mehmed II. Nonetheless, it can be experimentally read against the backdrop of one of the more prominent classical works at Mehmed II’s court, Nizām al-Mulk’s *Siyasat-Nama*.⁴⁷ Al-Mulk, whose name can be read as ‘orderer of the king,’ also left a significant impression on Tursun Bey. For al-Mulk, the central task of the Sultan and his viziers was to prevent the world from drifting into chaos, for which purpose he let his virtue (*faẓīlet*) radiate into society. Within this grand mission, al-Mulk also provided very practical advice: the Sultan should be generous (*sebâvet*), as he was, after all, the ‘head of the household of the world.’ This generosity also allowed him to maintain a closer bond and balance among rival groups; a notion that we also find directly in Tursun Bey’s discussion of the royal virtues.⁴⁸ As distant descendants of the Aristotelian discussion of *philia*/benevolence (φιλία/εὐνοία), the meanings of *benivolentia* and *sebâvet* are by no means identical. Yet both virtue concepts refer to the social function of hierarchical benevolence to foster a communal and political bond among people. It is therefore

⁴⁵ As he argues in POGGIO BRACCIOLINI, *Historiae de Varietate Fortunae* (Paris: Typis Antonii Urbani Coustelier, 1723), epistola XXXVI, 248–50.

⁴⁶ The letters I refer to are in the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze* [ASFi]. This one is in Signori, Missive, 39, 171r–72v. The quot. is ‘[...] de quo agimus non quantas meretur vestra inclita virtus, sed quantas possumus gratias Celsitudini vestre.’

⁴⁷ SARIYANNIS, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought up to the Nineteenth Century*, 45–46; NIZAM AL-MULK, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The Siyar al Muluk or Siyasat-nama of Nizām al-Mulk*, Eng. transl. HUBERT DARKE (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁴⁸ TURSUN BEY, *Târîh-i Ebû'l-feth*, ed. MERTOL TULUM (Istanbul: Fetih Cemiyeti, 1977), 18–21.

significant that the Florentine message would have been understood on a deeper level of meaning, which set the tone for communication to come.

But the Florentines did not just rely on Mehmed II's translation apparatus to make themselves understood. While subsequent letters concerning trade also invoked the Sultan's benevolence and virtue,⁴⁹ a copy of Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People* was sent to the Ottoman court, clearly outlining the political visions of the Florentine Republic. The backstory of this unusual gift likely includes Cosimo de Medici making some domestic enemies, leading to Poggio Bracciolini's chancellorship not being renewed.⁵⁰ His successor, Benedetto Accolti, was a proponent of a new crusade idea and thus at least less reliable in communications with the Ottomans.⁵¹ However, the merchants needed to strengthen their position in Constantinople and would eventually require permanent representation, a consul, as they also informed Cosimo.⁵² In 1458, a record from the Florentine authority responsible for overseas trade, the *Consoli del Mare*, notes 'to make a gift to the Turk,' which was to cost around 150 ducats.⁵³ The representative and political dimension of this gift suggests that it was Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*, found in the register of the Topkapı Sarayı as *Risālatun fī bayāni madīnati Fulūrindīn*.⁵⁴ There, the book was used for learning about the customs of various places, an important tool for Mehmed II in aiding him to cautiously integrate them into his empire. Accordingly, the palace library was a place where the administrative forces of the site could further their education.⁵⁵ Through Bruni's book, they could learn about the intentions the Florentines pursued using virtue ethics. Bruni's main theme in the book was civic harmony, and the belief that virtue was key to achieving it. Bruni, a skilled translator of Aristotle, was also a political pragmatist. He candidly admits in his work that Florence was not free from internal conflicts, but emphasises that the virtue of its citizens and mutual goodwill could always ensure the flourishing of the republic. For Bruni, virtue could create unity across class and political boundaries and maintain order; a fitting attitude to also convey to the Ottomans. It suggested not

⁴⁹ ASFi, Signori, Missive I Cancelleria, 42, fol. 92v: 'benivolentia persequatur [...] in iuriis tutos ac secures et quam famam de virtutibus vestris accipimus.'

⁵⁰ ASFi, Signori, Consulte e Pratiche, 54, fol. 49v–50r.

⁵¹ ROBERT BLACK, *Benedetto Accolti & the Florentine Renaissance*, esp. Chapter 9 'Accolti's history of the first crusade and the Turkish Menace,' 224–85.

⁵² ASFi, Mediceo Avanti il Principato, 137, fol. 76: '[...] un consolo sia perhonore della nostra Signoria e de merchantanti [...].'

⁵³ ASFi, Consoli del Mare, 3, fol. 115v: 'Item, che si faccia un' presente al Turco.'

⁵⁴ This can be found in the Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3–1503/4), Ms. Török F. 59, 201 that has been edited as *Treasure of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library*, eds GÜLRÜ NECİPOĞLU, CEMAL KAFADAR, and CORNELL H. FLEISCHER (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 139.

⁵⁵ See the elaborations on Topkapı Sarayı in EMINE FETVACI, *Picturing History at the Ottoman court* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 13.

that partnership must be conflict-free, but that a virtuous community would ultimately be resilient through a perpetual willingness to uphold virtue.⁵⁶

In 1461, shortly after the book likely reached Constantinople, the Florentines were granted the right to establish a consul there.⁵⁷ This consul would soon need to call upon the ideal of virtuous solidarity. In 1463, he received news from Florence that the political situation in Italy prevented the dispatch of galleys to Constantinople, greatly displeasing the Sultan.⁵⁸ As a reaction, the Sultan demanded tributes from the captain and crew of a Florentine galley who happened to be in the harbour and he required Florentine merchant Carlo Martelli to submit to him, offer praises, and organise an official celebration of his recent victories.⁵⁹ The celebration, as Benedetto Dei recorded in his diary, was intended to symbolise mutual benevolence but also unmistakably demanded submission.⁶⁰

Considering this incident, the Florentines sought to mend their relationship with the Sultan. An idea emerged when Benedetto Dei learned of Mehmed II's search for a portraitist. The Florentines decided to present the Sultan with a set of fine prints exploring the relationship between rule and virtue.⁶¹ Among these prints was an engraved portrait depicting a long-bearded man dressed in luxurious attire, reminiscent of a Byzantine emperor, particularly when compared to Pisanello's portrait medal of John VIII Paleologus.⁶² This engraving bore an inscription in a somewhat uncertain handwriting, identifying the figure as *El Gran Turco*, the Grand Turk, or the Sultan (Ill. 1). The print seemed to imply the Sultan's transition to a new Byzantine emperor.⁶³ However, this transition came with new expectations, as depicted in a further print, the *Trionfo della Fama*.⁶⁴ Both prints complemented each other, with the *Trionfo* depicting a triumphal chariot bearing the newly conquered territories and a hero walking alongside it.

⁵⁶ IANZITI, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy*; see also LEONARDO BRUNI, *History of the Florentine People*, Eng. transl. JAMES HANKINS and CANON D. G. W. BRADLEY, 3 vols. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006–2007), vol. 1, book 4, 26–40.

⁵⁷ RICHARD A. GOLDTHWAITE, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 184.

⁵⁸ ASFi, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, Missive e Responsive, 77, n. p.

⁵⁹ 'E mando' al chonsole de' Fiorentini a dire e a chomandare che tutti i fiorentini faciessino fuohi e festa, chome suoi amici e benvolenti.' Quot. in BENEDETTO DEI, *La cronica dall'anno 1400 all'anno 1500*, ed. ROBERTO BARDUCCI (Florence: Francesco Papafava, 1984), 161.

⁶⁰ DEI, *La cronica dall'anno 1400 all'anno 1500*, 161–62; discussed in FRANZ BABINGER, *Lorenzo de' Medici e la corte ottomana* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1963), 311.

⁶¹ Most of these prints have been put into *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi*, inv. H. 2153. The print is fol. 144r. For the origin of the print in Florence see DAVID LANDAU and PETER MARSHALL, *The Renaissance Print, 1470-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 91–94; Julian Raby, 'Mehmed II Fatih and the Faith Album,' *Islamic Art* 1 (1981): 42–49.

⁶² JULIAN RABY, 'Pride and Prejudice: Mehmed the Conqueror and the Italian Portrait Medal,' *Studies in the History of Art* 21 (1987): 171–94.

⁶³ For the identification of the elements and a more detailed description see NECİPOĞLU, 'Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation,' 19.

⁶⁴ Images of this print can be found in NECİPOĞLU, 'Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation,' 20.



Figure 1. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Engraving *El Gran Turco*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. © Kupferstichkabinett, Jörg P. Anders, CC BY-SA.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Please note that this image does not show the exact sheet given to Mehmed II, but a copy from the same printing plate.

The *Trionfo* symbolised a victory of virtue over fortune, but it also marked a decisive moment of transition, requiring the hero to act even more virtuously to preserve his fame.⁶⁶ Africa, Europe, and Asia were depicted as conquered territories, signifying the Sultan's responsibility for these regions. The book *Fiore di virtù*, popular in Florence, further specified the scene with the triumphal chariot as an embodiment of the virtue of humility. The successful conquest, as depicted in the book, represented a triumph of virtue and a test of virtue, demanding a demonstration of modesty, grace, and benevolence.⁶⁷ Therefore, *El Gran Turco* transcended a mere portrait and instead affirmed legitimate rulership contingent on virtuous governance, providing an elegant expression of the Florentines' willingness and expectations towards Mehmed II.

In the subsequent years, virtue ethics served as a refined method for the Florentines to communicate their needs and desires to the Ottoman court. In 1465, Bartolomeo Scala assumed the position of Florentine chancellor, and he was closely connected to the members of the Florentine Platonic academy. Scala advocated integrating the novel Neoplatonist currents into political communication.⁶⁸ While virtue ethics had already assigned significant importance to the soul, Neoplatonism further emphasised its role in perception, comprehension, translation, and the creation of ideal forms, perceiving the virtues as a necessary path for the individual to find the One, or God.⁶⁹ Neoplatonism found great popularity among Florentine humanists, partly due to the patronage of the Medici family, and its influence was not unnoticed at the Ottoman court either. Mehmed II had the works of Plethon, a proponent of Neoplatonism, translated.⁷⁰ On the other hand, it is important to recognise that Mehmed II's patronage cannot be neatly categorised into just Neoplatonic and Aristotelian. Even as mystical concepts, which appeared open to Neoplatonism, gained prominence during his reign, the emphasis was on mastering the discourse rather than committing to a specific philosophical tradition.⁷¹ This is highlighted by Mehmed II's dialogues with the Greek scholar Amiroutzes.⁷² While these

⁶⁶ For the *Trionfi* see ALDO S. BERNARDO, *Petrarch, Laura, and the Triumphs* (New York: State University Press, 1974); for an English translation see <https://petrarch.petersadlon.com/trionfi.html> (accessed 5 May 2021).

⁶⁷ Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Magl. A. 6.44 [*Fiore di virtù*], 32r.

⁶⁸ ALISON BROWN, *The Medici in Florence: The Exercise and Language of Power* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1992); ALISON BROWN, *Bartolomeo Scala, 1430-1497, Chancellor of Florence: The Humanist as Bureaucrat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁶⁹ STÉPHANE TOUSSAINT, "My Friend Ficino": Art History and Neoplatonism: From Intellectual to Material Beauty,' *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 59, no. 2 (2017): 147–73; SOPHIA HOWLETT, *Marsilio Ficino and His World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷⁰ MARIA MAVROUDI, 'Translations from Greek into Arabic at the Court of Mehmed the Conqueror,' in *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture*, eds AYLA ÖDEKAN, NEVRA NECİPOĞLU, and ENGIN AKYÜREK (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2013), 195–207; MARIA MAVROUDI, 'Ελληνική φιλοσοφία στην αυλή του Μωάμεθ Β [Greek Philosophy at the Court of Mehmed II],' *Byzantina* 33 (2014): 151–82.

⁷¹ ANNA AKASOY, 'The Adaptation of Byzantine Knowledge at the Ottoman Court after the Conquest of Constantinople,' *Trivium* 8 (2011): 43–56; ANNA AKASOY, 'Plethon's Nomoi: A Contribution to Polytheism in Late Byzantine Times and its Reception in the Islamic World,' *Mirabilia* 2 (2002): 224–35.

⁷² GEORGE AMIROUTZES, *The Philosopher, or On Faith*, Eng. transl. JOHN MONFASANI (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

Neoplatonic interests and acquisitions were primarily driven by the Ottoman desire to expand knowledge and communication skills, they provided fertile ground for Bartolomeo Scala's letters and the soul became a prominent topic in Ottoman-Florentine exchange.

One such letter, dating back to 1467, was composed during a time when a plague decimated the number of Florentine merchants in Constantinople. With usually three galleys arriving in the Ottoman capital every year, an interruption of the traffic meant Florence faced economic disturbances.⁷³ Scala's task was to persuade the Sultan to protect the goods of the deceased Florentines abroad. The letter highlights that among all the princes, they trusted only Mehmed II to uphold justice, as his famed justice extended throughout the world constantly.⁷⁴ This emphasised the Sultan's role as a ruler continuously expanding his realm through virtue. Furthermore, the letter invoked a Neoplatonist motif, expressing the Florentines' enduring gratitude and vowing that their souls would never forget the Sultan's benevolence if he granted them this favour, writing that 'Our immortal gratitude is yours, and never shall our souls forget, if you do us this benefit.'⁷⁵

This connection drawn by Scala between immortality and the soul introduced a new dimension, presenting actions in relation to virtue beyond the immediate moment as part of a larger, timeless project. Subsequent formulations in other letters from the following years echoed this theme (the extent to which Marsilio Ficino's ideas influenced political communication through Scala's work remains an area for detailed exploration). For example, a letter to the Sultan in 1469, dealing with the transfer of power from Pierfrancesco de Medici to Lorenzo de Medici, concluded '[Our] soul, assuredly matched, to cherish and elevate your empire's Majesty, will forever be present.'⁷⁶ Although the Ottoman response letters have not been preserved, the Florentine correspondence frequently alludes to them. For instance, in one case, the Florentines express their sentiment about Mehmed II's last letter, stating, that 'the gracefulness of your last letter has put us in awe.' Additionally, it is alleged that Mehmed II's message was characterised by 'great erudition [in the *studia humanitas*] and showed every wisdom [*sapientiae*].'⁷⁷

Virtue ethics shaped the Florentine-Ottoman relationship by imbuing their political actions with profound ethical meanings. During Lorenzo de Medici's lifetime, this virtue-based communication reached its peak, demonstrating an

⁷³ ASFi, Consoli del Mare, 7, fol. 65v.

⁷⁴ This letter is printed in GIUSEPPE MUELLER, *Documenti sulle relazioni delle città Toscane coll'Oriente Cristiano e coi Turchi fino all'anno MDXXXI* (Florence: M. Cellini e C., 1879), 206–207.

⁷⁵ '[...] immortalles gratias, neque sit aliqua unquam oblivion tale ex animis nostris beneficium deletura.'

⁷⁶ ASFi, Signori, Minutari, 9, 87r: 'Animus certe par ad redamandum te et colendam Maiestatem imperii tui nunquam deerit.'

⁷⁷ ASFi, Signori, Minutari, 10, 532v-533r: 'Gratissimae litterae tuae extiterunt nobis, plenissimae omnis humanitatis et omnis sapientiae [...].'

exceptional capacity on the side of the Florentines to convey subtleties and translate them into practical political actions. In April 1478, the Pazzi Conspiracy shook Florence. It involved various Italian powers in an assassination attempt that injured Lorenzo de Medici and claimed the life of his brother Giuliano. Although Lorenzo managed to maintain his power, the situation remained precarious; to assert himself, all conspirators had to be captured and condemned.⁷⁸ One of the assassins, Bernardo Bandini Baroncelli, sought refuge in Constantinople with his relatives. To address this peculiar situation and to persuade Mehmed II to deliver Baroncelli to Florence, the Florentines chose Antonio de Medici, Lorenzo's nephew, as the Orator at the Sultan's court, providing him with concrete instructions.⁷⁹

Notably, the letter assigned a smaller role to traditional diplomatic rituals and instead emphasised the way Antonio was to deliver certain messages. His instructions specified that he should portray the assassin as a 'turbatore,' a disturber of the established order, appealing to the qualities of the Sultan, whose 'marvellous virtue and justice' Antonio was to praise.⁸⁰ Additionally, Antonio was to highlight the Sultan's role as a dispenser of justice between the people and God and promise that the Florentines will praise 'his mind of His most excellent Majesty towards us and even more so towards God and His Justice.'⁸¹ Following Antonio's oration, Mehmed II handed over Baroncelli. This act was acknowledged by the Florentines, who already had Antonio say that they believed 'the good and righteous will raise his justice to the heavens: we certainly, to whom this great demonstration belongs even more.'⁸²

This example is particularly intriguing because, more specifically than before, it uses virtue as a framework to describe shared fields of action. The assassin is depicted as a 'turbatore,' disrupting not only the Florentine but also the Ottoman order. To preserve the common order, and for the benefit of his Florentine subjects, the Sultan intervenes by delivering the prisoner. In a multiperspective interpretation, the relationship between virtue and order thus becomes simultaneously a manifestation of Florentine Neoplatonism and an expression of the Ottoman *nizam-i alem*.

It is only a marginal note in this brief article, but the letter of thanks sent by the Florentines to the Sultan was accompanied by a medal that materialised rhetorical elements previously used by the Florentines, as well as the virtuous connection between Florentines and Ottomans. Bertoldo di Giovanni, one of the Medici's favoured artists, created this medal at the request of Lorenzo de Medici. As a

⁷⁸ LAURO MARTINES, *April Blood. Florence and the Plot Against the Medici* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003).

⁷⁹ ASFi, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, 20, 66v–68r.

⁸⁰ ASFi, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, 20, 66v–68r: '[...] piu maravigliosa virtù et exemplo che questa iustitia et dimonstratione [...].'

⁸¹ ASFi, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, 20, 66v–68r: '[...] la mente della excellentissima Maesta sua verso di noi et molto maggiormente verso di Dio et della sua Iustitia.'

⁸² ASFi, Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, 20, 66v–68r: 'Tucti e buoni inalzeranno in cielo la sua iustitia: noi certamenta, a cui più apartiene questa tanta dimonstratione [...].'

medium, the Renaissance portrait medal was intended to convey the virtue of the depicted individual.⁸³ As such, it was used as a token of esteemed friendship between rulers and also within humanistic circles. In addition to a portrait of the Sultan, this specimen contains a complex representation of Mehmed II and his qualities. As a reference to the shared interest in Neoplatonism, the ruler is depicted holding his own ascending soul in hand. We know with certainty that this refers to the Ficinian transmigration of souls because the artist used the same motif in a depiction of that at the Medici Villa *Poggio a Caiano*.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the medal shows Mehmed II riding a triumphal chariot on which three women are inscribed with the names of his most important conquests GRETIE / TRAPESVNTY / ASIE [Greece / Trebizond / Asia] (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Bertoldo di Giovanni, Portrait Medal of *Mehmed II. Fatih*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett. © Münzkabinett, Karsten Dahmen, CC BY-SA.⁸⁵

The medal thereby embodies elements from both Antonio de Medici's oration and the letter that followed Baroncelli's extradition, which reads 'You, supreme and greatest emperor, have greatly contributed to your most excellent glory, by showing all that you delight not less in the splendour of justice and virtue than in the glory of commanding and conquering.'⁸⁶ The medal therefore immortalises Mehmed II's virtuous soul, encapsulating the Neoplatonic element. Through the conqueror's

⁸³ BIRGIT BLASS-SIMMEN, 'The Medal's Contract. On the Emergence of the Portrait Medal in the Quattrocento,' in *Inventing Faces: Rhetorics of Portraiture between Renaissance and Modernism*, eds MONA KÖRTE, RUBEN REBMANN, JUDITH ELISABETH WEISS, and STEFAN WEPPELMANN (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013), 29–43.

⁸⁴ A depiction of this *Allegoria della Notte o della Morte e i Carri del Sole o dell' Anima* can be found in the online catalogue of Le Gallerie degli Uffizi: <https://catalogo.uffizi.it/it/29/ricerca/detailiccd/1414418/> (accessed 14 March 2024).

⁸⁵ Please note that this image does probably not show the exact medal given to Mehmed II, but one of several copies.

⁸⁶ 'Tu quoque, summe et maxime imperator, non parum excellentissimae gloriae tuae consuluisti, qui demonstravisti omnibus, non minus delectari te iustitiae et virtutis splendore quam imperandi et vincendi gloria' (letter to 'Magno Turcho' from 11 May 1480, quoted in MUELLER, *Documenti*, 230).

triumphant chariot, it also revisits earlier components of Florentine-Ottoman communication and underscores the interrelation among virtue, conquest, and justice. In the medal, I see a material ode not only to the virtue of the Sultan, but also to the virtuous nature of the Florentine-Ottoman relationship.

What then does this intellectual portrayal of Florentine-Ottoman relations, defined by a focus on virtue ethics, reveal? The pivotal role of virtue ethics as a bridge between distinct cultural and intellectual traditions stands out. The interaction between Florentine humanists and the Ottoman court, especially through the medium of carefully crafted communications and symbolic gifts, underscores a transcultural dialogue rooted in a profound appreciation for the virtues that guide just rulership. This dialogue extended beyond mere political alliances, touching on deep philosophical currents that influenced both realms; the philosophical sophistication allowed for political nuance. The Ficinian concept of soul transmigration, subtly inscribed in the gift to Mehmed II, alongside the narrative of virtuous governance depicted through Bruni's *History* and the rich correspondence, illustrate a shared intellectual endeavour to understand and implement the ideals of virtue in governance. Practically, virtue ethics provided Florentines and Ottomans a framework to ethically reinterpret political actions, enhancing the stability of their relationship by fostering a shared sense of unity and purpose.

The Transculturality of Virtue and Transculturality in the Mediterranean

Through this prism, the Florentine-Ottoman relationship adds to our understanding of Mediterranean transculturality through the capabilities, awareness, and willingness of the actors to discover, reveal, and develop shared intellectual structures to endow their actions and encounters with meaning. Thus, transculturality becomes an activity, a potential that must be continuously activated to maintain its significance.⁸⁷ Although virtue ethics was available to Italians and Ottomans as a more or less fragmentary reservoir from the beginning (if there is such a thing) of their dialogue, it only unfolded its utility in use, and even then, piece by piece, through cautious approaching, probing, and (as in the case of Neoplatonism) collaborative enhancement. This endeavour does not downplay the conflicts that repeatedly disrupted various connections at sea, nor does it gloss over the crusading ideals of some humanists or the realpolitik backdrop, the sheer political and economic necessity for the Florentines to engage with and, in some ways, adapt to the Ottomans; transculturality is not about portraying an overly rosy picture. As an analytical concept, it helps us better understand the multidimensionality of Mediterranean relational networks without imposing cultural boundaries where none exist.

How might this change our perspective on the shared nature of early modern Mediterranean culture? In the following, I aim to nuance my findings by referencing

⁸⁷ MARGRIT PERNAU and LUC WODZICKI, 'Entanglements, Political Communication, and Shared Temporal Layers,' *Cromobs: Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 21 (2018): 1–17.

other recent studies on Italian-Ottoman relations that have come to form a vignette for the exploration of the Mediterranean basin as a whole.⁸⁸ My reflections are also shaped by exchanges with members of the COST Action ‘People in Motion,’ a network led by Giovanni Tarantino that has significantly advanced Mediterranean studies in recent years.⁸⁹

In a standout essay written over a decade ago, Eric R. Dursteler notes that while the diversity of modern research has revealed the potential to look beyond the long-assumed cultural dichotomy of a divided vs. a shared Mediterranean, the necessary conceptual work is still pending.⁹⁰ Refined, transculturality might be one helpful approach in that. Although researchers frequently use transculturality to describe elements, phenomena, themes, and even texts and other forms of expression that conventional connections, encounters, and narratives between cultures fail to account for, the analytical definition of transculturality remains highly ambiguous.⁹¹ Gerrit Jasper Schenk suggests that ‘transculturality can [...] not just be understood as the entanglement of simultaneous but spatially separate cultures, but also of cultures separated by time but existing in the same area.’⁹² For the Mediterranean region, Schenk’s definition proves particularly useful, as it adds to the notion of encounter the notion of time, or, historical layers that the actors use whether they are aware of it or not.⁹³

This idea is reflected in Thomas E. Burman’s concept of Mediterranean deep intellectual unity.⁹⁴ To be sure, Burman himself was inspired by Olivia Remie Constable’s work on the development and spread of the *funduq* as a Mediterranean model for hospitality. Constable argues that inns descended from or related to the *funduq* could be found throughout the entire Mediterranean region in the late Middle Ages, and travellers would recognise them, lending a sense of cohesion to the region.⁹⁵ As I understand it, Burman’s concept of deep intellectual unity embraces this sense of resemblance. For intellectual culture, it emphasises the recognition value of the familiar in the unfamiliar; combining the primacy of communication and

⁸⁸ FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, ‘Renaissance Italy and the Muslim Mediterranean in Recent Historical Work,’ *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 1 (2019): 127–55.

⁸⁹ For more information see the webpage of the COST Action People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement across the Mediterranean (1492-1923), <https://www.peopleinmotion-costaction.org/> (accessed 09 May 2024).

⁹⁰ ERIC R. DURSTELER, ‘On Bazaars and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts,’ *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 5 (2011): 413–34.

⁹¹ WOLFGANG WELSCH, *Transkulturalität*, 12; MARY LOUISE PRATT, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone,’ *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

⁹² GERITT JASPER SCHENK, ‘Historical Disaster Experiences: First Steps toward a Comparative and Transcultural History of Disasters across Asia and Europe in the Preindustrial Era,’ in *Historical Disaster Experiences: Towards a Comparative and Transcultural History of Disasters across Asia and Europe*, ed. GERITT JASPER SCHENK (New York: Springer, 2017), 11.

⁹³ PERNAU and WODZICKI, ‘Entanglements, Political Communication, and Shared Temporal Layers.’

⁹⁴ THOMAS E. BURMAN, ‘The Four Seas of Medieval Mediterranean Intellectual History.’

⁹⁵ OLIVIA REMIE CONSTABLE, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

understanding with the history of somewhat related words, concepts, ideas, and stories, as well as their expressions such as texts, poems, or books, or even ‘classics.’ In short, deep intellectual unity explores the emergence, occurrence, and use of common reference points across the sea. As a result, it improves our understanding of Mediterranean culture by suggesting our actors not as an end point but as the constant makers of this unity, and therefore as active agents, or co-creators even, in our own historiographical project. Virtue might well provide a case study for this endeavour, but it adds an important nuance: reconfiguring the conventional spatial boundaries of Italian and Ottoman intellectual histories does not mean writing them into one history. It means taking the potential for interconnectedness seriously and developing it together with the actors.

From this vantage point, I now use the case of virtue ethics to reflect on the potential of writing a transcultural intellectual history of the Mediterranean on three levels: contemporary consciousness, material culture, and actors. While the notion of contemporary consciousness might initially appear to be somewhat cumbersome, its examination—particularly the awareness and mutual acknowledgement among actors of their shared intellectual frameworks and the synchronous moment they collectively navigate—is paramount. The Renaissance occupies a teleologically pivotal role within European historical narratives, akin to the Enlightenment, and scholars, including Walter G. Andrews, with the noblest of intentions, endeavoured to unearth an Ottoman Renaissance.⁹⁶ Current studies reveal that due to numerous intersections, there exists a tangible risk of obfuscating critical facets of Ottoman culture, or more specifically, its cultural policy, by the mere identification of such intersections.⁹⁷ Therefore, contemporary consciousness directs us researchers away from the pursuit of common epochal descriptions (e.g., early modern)⁹⁸ towards the voices of actors themselves, and instead involves recognising how they interpreted the interplay of cultural, philosophical, and ethical ideas that both connected and distinguished their societies, emphasising the active ongoing process of creating and interpreting shared meanings within their historical context.

A notable example of such a study has recently been presented by Giancarlo Casale, who offers a novel interpretation of Mehmed II’s intellectual agenda of sovereignty. Casale argues that Mehmed II, contrary to his predominant reputation of presenting himself as an Islamic conquering hero, aspired to a model of sovereignty similar to Akbar’s *Sulh-i Kull*, with a common origin in the conceptual

⁹⁶ WALTER G. ANDREWS, ‘Suppressed Renaissance. Q: When Is a Renaissance Not a Renaissance? A: When It Is the Ottoman Renaissance!’ in *Other Renaissances*, eds BRENDA DEEN SCHILDGEN, GANG ZHOU, and SANDER GILMAN (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 17–34; NESLIHAN ASUTAY-EFFENBERGER and ULRICH REHM, eds, *Sultan Mehmed II. Eroberer Konstantinopels – Patron der Künste* (Köln: Böhlau, 2009).

⁹⁷ See next paragraph.

⁹⁸ SAID ALI YAYCIOGLU, ‘Ottoman Early Modern,’ *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 7, no. 1 (2020): 70–73; SEBASTIAN CONRAD, ‘Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,’ *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 999–1027.

worlds of post-Mongol Iran and Central Asia of the Timurids. But Casale also draws parallels to the historiography of the Italian Renaissance to interpret Mehmed II's cultural policy as being inspired by a particular current of Renaissance philosophy, the *Prisca Theologia*, which served in many ways as the Ottoman equivalent of Akbar's *Sulh-i Kull*.⁹⁹ The intellectual framing enabled by *Prisca Theologia* was very much in the awareness of many Italian humanists, and especially Neoplatonists like Plethon, who worked in both Italy and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁰ While Mehmed II sought legitimacy that appealed to diverse groups, humanists saw what they could see, and researchers followed suit. Instead of searching for common epochs, we should be aware of how the cultural positioning of our actors might already be shaped by transcultural flows. Renaissance humanists absorbed and further developed the virtue discourses taken from the Ottomans, even benefiting from their knowledge; yet, the Ottomans have not found their place in the intellectual history of the Renaissance. Mehmed II, in turn, benefited from the currents of Italian humanists in developing his idea of sovereignty, but he carefully integrated these into a broader concept of rulership. Reading such clusters of transculturality through the lens of the actors as contemporary consciousness allows us a more nuanced understanding of intense cultural exchange, since it foregrounds the meaning that actors give in clusters the researchers excavate.

Similar thoughts have already been expressed for a history of material culture. Overlooking many moments of material encounters between Ottomans and Renaissance Italy, Claire Norton and Anna Contadini suggested searching for aesthetic meta-frameworks that would make it possible to decipher, reread, and thus apply the 'common language of expressing legitimacy and authority' formulated between Ottomans and Italians.¹⁰¹ That this would not be possible without a deeper understanding of intellectual cultures had already been shown by Gülrü Necipoğlu and, in a certain sense, Çiğdem Kafescioğlu.¹⁰² Necipoğlu spoke of a 'visual cosmopolitanism' through which Mehmed II absorbed Timurid, Persian, Arabic, and Byzantine influences. Discussing this 'crossroads of cultures' perspective on the Ottomans, not only in terms of their entanglement of intellectual and material elements but also regarding their geographical expansion into the Mediterranean, remains an important desideratum for future research. However, if we understand individual pieces like the print *El Gran Turco* or the medal by Bertoldo di Giovanni as part of a larger discourse—and here it could be many discourses, among which virtue ethics is only

⁹⁹ GIANCARLO CASALE, 'Mehmed the Conqueror between *Sulh-i Kull* and *Prisca Theologia*,' *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (2022): 840–69.

¹⁰⁰ LÁSZLÓ BENE, 'Constructing Pagan Platonism: Plethon's Theory of Fate and the Ancient Philosophical Tradition,' in *Georg Gemistos Plethon. The Byzantine and the Latin Renaissance*, eds JOZEF MATULA and PAUL RICHARD BLUM (Olmütz: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2014), 41–71.

¹⁰¹ CLAIRE NORTON, 'Blurring the Boundaries,' in *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World*, eds NORTON and CONTADINI (London: Routledge, 2013), 3–22.

¹⁰² ÇIĞDEM KAFESCIOĞLU, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul. Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

one—it becomes evident that the aesthetic culture was not, simply speaking, designed towards commonalities and yet culturally distinct, but often involved the conscious, strategic, and nuanced negotiation of an in-between space, which can only be understood as part of complex exchange processes and as an actor-based attempt at intellectual transculturation.

This brings us to the final point, namely the role and transculturality of the actors themselves. Actors are a vague term; I understand them to be the people who actively engaged in transculturality; who created, negotiated, or even resisted it. The early modern Mediterranean was full of people who moved between cultures, even when living a stationary life. Whether they were connected by family, engaged in trade, or lived off their intellectual capacities; whether they painstakingly opened up other cultures and languages or, like many Greeks, were already born between cultures and could capitalise on it.¹⁰³ Studies by E. Nathalie Rothman and Eric R. Dursteler have impressively shown how such ‘transimperial’ subjects—to use Rothman’s term—moved not between but simultaneously within multiple cultures, adapting the rules of these cultures to their own rules, whether they were skillfully translating dragomans, negotiating trading fees as brokers, or Greek philosophers seeking employment either at the Ottoman or an Italian court.¹⁰⁴ It is a temptation in my consideration of virtue ethics to extend the concept of a transimperial subject further, at least experimentally. Can a Florentine humanist who, without leaving Florence and without a deep understanding of Ottoman legitimacy culture, inscribes himself into that Ottoman discourse of virtue, be a transimperial subject? Or is an Ottoman scholar who engages with Florentine Neoplatonism not equally partaking in and shaping two discourses? The Mediterranean enables forms of intellectual affiliation and resemblances that are not immediately apparent to either the actors or the researchers; indeed, that neither the actors nor we might fully grasp in their entire complexity. But, by their referencing, discovering, utilising, and modifying, the actors create transculturality by endowing it with relevance. And this relevance can also become visible to researchers.

Taken together, these three aspects, in the context of Mediterranean transculturality, highlight a factor emphasised particularly by Thomas E. Burman: while shared historical reference points—such as virtue ethics—provide a significant common foundation for actors, the concept of deep intellectual unity can only be fully grasped if we acknowledge and take the actors seriously as continual creators of this unity. This entails respecting their contemporary self-perceptions and avoiding the

¹⁰³ EMRAH SAFA GÜRKAN, ‘Mediating Boundaries: Mediterranean Go-Betweens and Cross-Confessional Diplomacy in Constantinople, 1560-1600,’ *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, no. 2–3 (2015): 107–28.

¹⁰⁴ ROTHMAN, *Brokering Empire: Trans-imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*; ERIC R. DURSTELER, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); E. NATHALIE ROTHMAN, *The Dragoman Renaissance: Diplomatic Interpreters and the Routes of Orientalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

imposition of assumed overlaps upon them. It also requires us to earnestly consider material culture as an integral part of intellectual culture (and vice versa). From this vantage point, it becomes evident that transculturality should transcend a mere ‘neither, nor’ framework. Transculturality represents a constructive and creative process of negotiating cultural boundaries, even when these boundaries are not fully recognised by the actors involved.

Conclusion

In this article, I suggested the use of transculturality as an analytical concept to better understand the history of Florentine-Ottoman relations. As the example of virtue ethics has revealed, it is helpful to think of transculturality not as a state, but as an actor-driven process of creating a form of cultural in-betweenness. Two insights are particularly important to me, as they highlight what Mediterranean transculturality entails. Firstly, that the actors do not necessarily know when they are leaving their familiar cultural terrain, because many of the cultural boundaries that seem obvious to us are fluid for them. And secondly, following from this, that we as historians must be very careful in our analytical statements about the nature, shaping, and change of Mediterranean culture. Burman’s concept of intellectual unity can be helpful in connecting these two points, as it reminds us equally of the resemblances perceived by our actors, as well as the larger structures that may underlie these resemblances, which we as historians can and should unearth. The example of the Florentines and the Ottomans illustrates how the shared ‘heritage’ of virtue ethics, while following its own traditions—which need not be neglected or abandoned—similarly allowed the actors to approach each other and empathise with their respective intellectual cultures and thus their political and social dimensions. In this process, the transculturality of virtue ethics was actively created through successful communication. The Florentines utilised their conceptions of virtue up to nuanced Neoplatonism just as successfully as the Ottomans understood it as part of the *nizam-ı alem*.

The concept of transculturality presented in the article also offers a valuable analytical framework for understanding the broader complexities of Mediterranean history. The Mediterranean stands out as a unique contact zone in history¹⁰⁵ due to its deep-rooted influence on Western historical consciousness.¹⁰⁶ Mediterranean history is grappling with this heritage;¹⁰⁷ that is why an approach from intellectual history may help to clarify some of the pressing problems students of the region face. Transculturality invites us to critically evaluate to what extent seemingly common terms, concepts, and ideas, as well as texts, sources, and lineages, form part of a

¹⁰⁵ DAVID ABULAFIA, ‘Mediterraneans,’ in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. WILLIAM V. HARRIS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64–93; DAVID ABULAFIA, ‘Mediterranean History as Global History,’ *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011): 220–28.

¹⁰⁶ GEORGE STAUTH and MARCUS OTTO, *Méditerranée. Skizzen zu Mittelmeer, Islam und Theorie der Moderne* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ MATTHEW D’AURIA and FERNANDO GALLO, eds, *Mediterranean Europe(s). Rethinking Europe from its Southern Shores* (London: Routledge, 2022).

shared Mediterranean repertoire, but also to what extent the actors themselves create and claim this repertoire ad hoc. This challenges conventional understandings of cultural boundaries and interactions within the Mediterranean basin, with several implications for the broader field. While research has long aimed to redefine cultural interactions not as something that happens between cultural blocks but rather between people, understanding the myriad ways in which people engage with the broader backbones of culture is something that an approach from intellectual history can help us understand. In fact, this study elevates the role of intellectual exchange in shaping Mediterranean history by suggesting that the co-construction and development of political and philosophical ideas and concepts played a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding and respect, potentially leading to more stable and cooperative relationships between different societies. Therefore, by highlighting the intellectual contributions of the Ottoman Empire to Renaissance humanism and vice versa, it is worth challenging anew Eurocentric narratives that have traditionally dominated Mediterranean history. The call for a more inclusive approach that recognises the contributions of non-European cultures to the development of shared intellectual traditions and the shaping of the Mediterranean world is not new. Yet, finding new ways and concepts, such as transculturality, to approach this methodologically is a task with which we can only proceed when experts from different regions read each other's work and take the task of integration seriously.