Islam—dressed in Turkish garb—was as big of a problem to sixteenth-century Europe as it was during the Middle Ages. Bernard Lohse even suggests that ‘the history of Luther and of the Reformation must always be seen in this larger context.’ Following Mehmet the Conqueror’s capture of Constantinople in 1453, three decades before Luther’s birth, the momentum of Turkish conquests westward escalated, reaching their climax in the last years of Luther’s life under Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent in the 1540s. The West’s response was manifold as all sorts of solutions to the impending threat were proposed by a host of authors. Catholic writers called for a united crusade to reclaim Constantinople and, occasionally, the Holy Land. Humanists and early Protestants, in addition to approving and urging defensive war strategies, began to study the Ottomans and their religion; some even optimistically hoped to instigate a missionary enterprise among them. And the radical authors of the Reformation urged a pacifist response to Ottoman imperialism with a few expressing hope in a Turkish conquest of Europe. These and other writings from the era also expressed a multitude of attitudes towards and perceptions of Islam. While there was much diversity, a general European view of the Muslim Turks can still be surmised from them. Before narrowing in on Luther’s writings, in order to establish the physical and literary context for his writings even further, this chapter will survey the major events and writings on the Turks and Islam in the late fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth century.

A new era of Ottoman expansion began when Sultan Mehmet II (1451–1481) seized Constantinople. Although the old Byzantine capital was of little strategic importance, the ideological significance of its occupation was inestimable. Seemingly fulfilling prophecies dating back to Muhammad which linked the conquest of the city to Islamic world domination, when Ottoman troops entered the city late in May of 1453 they had, in their minds, effectively established themselves as ‘heirs to the imperial tradition as the conquered city once again became the capital of an extensive empire … not merely to eastern Rome but to a worldwide empire’—in fact, a Muslim empire. And Mehmet himself was acknowledged by the Muslim world—at least the Sunnī Muslim world—to be the ‘leader of Holy War against Christianity.’ From Constantinople, referred to after the conquest by the Turks as Islambul (‘full of Islam’) but officially Istanbul, he trained his sights on the Balkans. By 1478 Mehmet’s forces had conquered nearly all of Greece and Albania and continued their expansion northwest along the southern bank of the Danube River, just short of Belgrade. Recognising the importance of Rhodes as a crusader stronghold, even into the late fifteenth century, and Rome as the centre of western Christianity, rather than pushing farther north, he sent his naval commander Gedik Ahmet Paşa on a campaign in late 1479 to besiege Rhodes while another fleet continued towards Italy, landing and capturing the south-

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4 Rhodes was the only major Aegean Island that had not been captured by the Ottomans. The Knights Hospitallers controlled it since 1306 as a ‘bastion against Islam’ (Shaw, *History*, 69). On the Turks’ perception of the significance of Rome, see Cemal Kaftaroğlu, ‘The Ottomans and Europe’, in Thomas Brady, Jr., Heiko Oberman, and James Tracy (eds.), *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 595–596.