The Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam holds a large, unique painting that offers a detailed overview of the ruins of the ancient city of Palmyra in modern-day Syria (Fig. 6). It is the first image of these magnificent ruins that was known to Europeans. Originally, the painting belonged to Gisbert Cuper (1644–1716), a Dutch politician and antiquarian scholar who received it straight from the Middle East from Coenraad Calckberner, Dutch Consul in Aleppo (Fig. 7). From 1688 onwards, Cuper was in contact with Calckberner. They exchanged political news, but also—and to a larger extent—antiquarian information. The mutual allegiance between two professionals in politics who shared a fascination for antiquity as well—not at all uncommon in early modern Europe, as this essay will show—poses many questions about hierarchy and friendship in agency. What were, for example, the gains for both sender and receiver of letters, and were they equally distributed? Status is an important factor in relations of exchange, but did his political status influence Cuper’s cultural exchanges as well? And, on a practical level, how were his separate ‘professions’ interrelated? Moreover, as a representative of and participant in both the Republic of Letters and the Dutch Republic, Cuper played different roles: those of patron (or maecenas), client and agent. In many cases where he can be seen as patron or client, either granting a favor or receiving one, he was actually an agent, working as an intermediary between two parties. Therefore, these different terms will be used interchangeably in this essay, according to how the subjects perceived themselves; in fact, these terms all refer to Cuper’s agency in different situations.

1 Palmyra is nowadays listed as a world heritage site by UNESCO.
Both as a scholar and a politician, Gisbert Cuper maintained a large network of correspondence. Besides Calcikberner in Aleppo—on whom more at the end of this essay—there are many others to choose from, for Cuper exchanged letters with diplomats in Stockholm, Cologne, Vienna, Regensburg, Madrid, London, Brunswick, Lüneburg, Constantinople and Smyrna. In this essay, his correspondence with a selection of them will be exemplified. To start with, the next paragraph will introduce Cuper and sketch his career, in order to understand how he could, and why it was important to him to, simultaneously be an agent both in matters of politics and antiquarianism.

Gisbert Cuper was born on 28 September 1644 in the town of Hemmen in the Dutch province of Gelderland. He studied at the university in Nijmegen,2 where he read rhetoric, philosophy, mathematics, history, law and theology under the supervision of Rector Johannes Schultingh (died 1666).3 In 1665, Cuper enrolled at Leiden University, where he studied under the supervision of the great philologist Johannes Fredericus Gronovius (1611–1671). Gronovius was soon impressed by the young Cuper, as can be witnessed by a flattering letter he wrote in 1666, recommending his pupil as successor to the deceased Schultingh in Nijmegen. Gronovius described Cuper as a young man who was gifted by nature with talent and diligence, and who was learned far beyond his years.4

When Cuper did not get the position in Nijmegen, he went on a grand tour of France and Italy, the usual way for adolescents of his social standing to conclude their studies. He stayed in Paris for a long time, but never reached the ultimate goal of his journey: Rome. His travels were interrupted because in 1668 he was appointed professor of history and eloquence at the Athenaeum Illustre of the city of Deventer in the eastern part of the Dutch Republic (the province of Overijssel).5

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2 Between 1656 and 1679 a university was located in the city of Nijmegen: Bots/Kerkhof 2001.
3 Veenendaal 1950, p. viii.
4 Veenendaal 1950, p. viii: ‘Civem habetis Gisbertum Cuperum, iuvenem singularibus indolis industriaeque dotibus praeditum, eruditione vero multum antecedentem ac praevieniensem annos suos’, (‘You will have the citizen Gisbert Cuper, a young man who is gifted with extraordinary talent, inborn diligence and who truly anticipates and surpasses his years’).
5 At an Athenaeum Illustre students followed largely the same educational program as at a university. They could not, however, finish their studies there, since only universities had the right to give degrees.