THE COLOURING EFFECT OF ATTIC STYLE AND STOICISM
IN BUSBEQUIUS'S TURKISH LETTERS

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Until this century, letters formed the most immediate contact between travellers and their relatives and friends at home. Once letters arrived, they went from hand to hand, beloved because of their personal character and light style, and also as an authentic source of information. In the seventeenth century a growing quantity of such correspondence in the vernacular was published, and it soon became an accepted literary genre. Their authors took great liberty and chose to make their letters so lengthy that they almost equalled books or diaries; in some cases they were not addressed to a particular person but to an anonymous friend.1

The inspiration for this fashion may well have come from Busbequius's four long and unaddressed Latin *Turkish Letters*,2 which describe his adventures and observations during his mission as ambassador of the Emperor Ferdinand I to the court of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent between 1554 and 1562. They rapidly won favour with the public as is witnessed by the number of reprints in Latin, and soon also in English, French, German, and other languages.3

The *Letters* are to a certain extent to be considered as 'memoirs'. Not untypically for humanists, the author wished to emphasise his own role, without becoming boastful, or self-glorifying in an irritating manner. And, indeed, the many eulogies written over the centuries show that he succeeded in leaving an unforgettable impression of his achievements. Their autobiographical aspect is the key to the contents of these letters, the way these contents were represented and why the author concluded the work with a lengthy portrait of his Master, Emperor Ferdinand I, which stretches over 14 of the 335 pages in the first complete edition of

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2 The title of the first complete edition of 1589 reads *Legationis Turcicae Epistolae Quatuor* ('Four letters about the mission to Turkey'). I refer to this edition as 'Ed. 1589'. Punctuation has been adapted to modern usage in accordance with the author’s critical edition, which will be published together with a Dutch translation by M. Goldsteen in 1994 (Hilversum). The English translations are from vol. i of Charles Thornton Forster’s & F. H. Blackburne Daniell’s *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Seigneur de Bousbecque, Knight, Imperial Ambassador* (2 vols., London, 1881; repr. Geneva, 1971), to which I refer as 'FD'.
1589. A short biographical section and a description of the circumstances in which the Turkish letters were written will lead to a discussion of the Attic style and stoic character of the letters under the influence of Lipsius’s ideas. This will help us to understand the place of the *Turkish Letters* in the literature of the last part of the sixteenth century, and also explain their meaning.

**THE LIFE OF AUGERIUS BUSBEQUIUS**

Augerius Busbequius⁴, born in Komen (Comines) in Flanders in about 1520–1521, studied law, literature, history and natural philosophy at the university of Louvain and several Italian universities. In 1552, following the example of some of his ancestors and friends, he entered the household of Ferdinand I, King of Austria, brother of the Emperor Charles V. Two years later, the king appointed him permanent ambassador to the court of Süleyman, the Ottoman sultan. It was only after some pressure from the king that he accepted this task, which many others had declined because of its danger.

Busbequius’s hopes for a favourable treaty rested mainly on the turbulent situation within Süleyman’s family. The history of these events forms one of the themes which links all four *Turkish Letters*. A brief explanation is in place as part of it will emerge later in this article. In the autumn of 1558, Bayezid, Süleyman’s younger son revolted against what would be his inevitable fate after his father’s death: after his elder brother Selim became the new sultan, he, together with all others who posed a threat to the throne, would be killed in accordance with the old customs. Collecting an army of loyal soldiers, bandits and drop-outs, Bayezid marched against his brother, but he was defeated by Selim’s and his father’s army near Konya at the beginning of June 1559. After his retreat to Amasya, he unexpectedly escaped to Persia in the summer of 1559. First the Shah pretended friendship and gave the fugitive prince a cordial reception; soon there were rumours about a future marriage between Bayezid’s and the shah’s family; but then, suddenly, Bayezid’s soldiers were slaughtered in an ambush, he and his sons taken prisoner and kept as hostages. This tragedy which would inspire many European play writers ended in the summer of 1562, when the Shah gave his consent for the murder of Bayezid and his sons in exchange for a large sum paid by Süleyman and Selim. Busbequius, visiting the sultan on the very day that the news of this crime arrived, wrote to Ferdinand that the sultan seemed as happy as other parents would be after receiving news that their children had been rescued.

Eventually, in 1562, peace was concluded between Ferdinand and Süleyman and Busbequius left Constantinople. Already one of the emperor’s counsellors, he was promoted to seneschal and chamberlain of the four younger sons of the new Emperor Maximilian II in 1567. At the same time, he became responsible for the imperial library, which, in 1576, was enriched with hundreds of Greek manuscripts he had bought in Constantinople. Though his correspondence shows a strong attachment to his fatherland, war in the Low Countries prevented his return. Moreover, the Habsburg emperors did not like to see him go.

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⁴ This biographical section is based on von Martels (op. cit. n. 3).