Wandering through the small, dark streets of Florence in the summer of 1547, we might have come across a remarkable sight. In the full sunlight of the square in front of the Santa Maria Novella, we would observe a crowd of people, hear the rolling of drums, and in front of the church we would perceive an exotic man, the centre of all the attention. This man was a Turk. He had come to Florence to perform his tricks, to make some money and to add to his fame. The Turk was a lucky man; instead of being driven away by the city’s authorities, Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici himself invited him to stay in order to entertain the Florentine people. The piazza Santa Maria Novella was assigned to him as a temporary stage. The Duke’s choice for this particular square is remarkable, considering the fact that in the church, in the Sala del Papa, the Accademia Fiorentina used to hold its weekly, public, Sunday lecture. Why would Cosimo cross the functioning of the Academy, the official organ of his own cultural politics? I would say that his choice was one of strategic convenience.

The annals of the Florentine Academy (henceforth Annali) point out how the presence of the Turk influenced the meetings. On Sunday May the 8th it was recorded that the Turk first appeared within the city: “he did things” (“faceva cose”) near the Duke’s palace on the other side of the Arno, the Palazzo Pitti. Since the potential public for the academic lectures massively turned out to see him perform, the academicians decided to postpone the lecture to the next week. Ten days later matters had not improved, however. On May the 18th the Annali record that Cosimo decided to assign the square in front of the Santa Maria Novella to the Turk, and that public lecturing had

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2 Annali, vol. I, fol. 43.
become virtually impossible; the tumult of the drums and the crowd was so overwhelming that any speaker would be inaudible.\textsuperscript{3} At some moment between these two accounts, Cosimo seized the opportunity to transfer the Turk to the other side of town, with the deliberate intent to disturb academic life. This objective is implicitly exposed by the \textit{Annali}. In the second comment on the Turk, his skills are referred to as “his marvellous, almost supernatural, arts” ("le sue meravigliose Arti quasi sopra natura"), instead of the more patronizing “things” of the previous record. This shift to a more adulatory description in a way legitimizes the transfer. Furthermore, the secretary stipulates that there is no harm in the fact that lecturing cannot proceed, since the Academy is waiting for the outcome of reforms anyway.\textsuperscript{4} The apologetic tone of the records is immediately striking. Especially the fact that ducal intervention is mentioned at all—let alone justified—in the \textit{Annali}, is highly exceptional. Usually, the \textit{Annali} do not chronicle events of Florentine city life, not even if these affected the Academy’s functioning. The fact that it does happen here, in such an explicit manner, is telling.

The diplomatic description in the \textit{Annali} is not the only reason to be suspicious about the disturbance caused by the Turk. The moment in which he was sent to the \textit{piazza} is even more significant. As the \textit{Annali} reveal, the Academy was in the midst of a period of academic reform. In March of that same year the academicians had appointed a commission of nine reformers to drastically reorganise academic practice.\textsuperscript{5} And though these reforms had been gradually prepared for in the previous years, the changes within the Fiorentina were accompanied by disorder during the gatherings and polemics among the academicians. Cosimo’s interference arose from discontent with this publicly exposed controversy. In the juggling Turk he thus saw a welcome possibility to bring academic debate to a halt, and to create a lull during which the reformers could work without turmoil.

The \textit{Annali} of the Fiorentina do not mention this internal struggle over the orientation of the Academy. On the contrary, the reference to the Turk’s presence reveals that in some cases the minutes provide us with only a partial rendering of the events. It is documented, however, in other sources, both of a documentary and literary kind, as will be

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Annali}, vol. I, fol. 43.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Annali}, vol. I, fol. 43.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Annali}, vol. I, fols. 40v–41.