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Richard Calis, The Discovery of Ottoman Greece: Knowledge, Encounter, and Belief in the Mediterranean World of Martin Crusius

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Richard Calis,
*THE DISCOVERY OF OTTOMAN GREECE:
KNOWLEDGE, ENCOUNTER, AND BELIEF IN THE
MEDITERRANEAN WORLD OF MARTIN CRUSIUS*
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025, 320 pages.

Philipp Melanchthon's phrase "Graecia transvolavit Alpes" is an indicative demonstration of how the development of Greek studies contributed to shaping northern Europe's religious, cultural and intellectual framework.¹ Generally, the reappropriation of Hellenism, facilitated by the advent of print culture, rendered Greek antiquity and language integral parts of a nuanced European religious and cultural identity.² But what

about the reception of Ottoman Greece? With this question in mind, Richard Calis' monograph reveals the dichotomous nature of Hellenism's reception within Lutheran circles by examining Martin Crusius' insightful accounts regarding the contrast between idealising Greek antiquity and viewing Ottoman Greece's language and spirituality negatively. In this sense, the volume appears to provide evidence for the limited scope of the secondary material concerning the

¹ Charles Nauert, "Rethinking "Christian Humanism," in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 155–56; Federica Ciccolella, "Graecia trasvolavit Alpes," in *When Greece Flew across the Alps*, ed. Federica Ciccolella (Leiden: Brill, 2021), viii.

² Indicative works that provide a detailed contextual account concerning the transformative power of Greek antiquity's spiritual, intellectual and cultural perception during the Renaissance and Reformation

are: Asaph Ben-Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Federica Ciccolella, ed., *When Greece Flew across the Alps* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Natasha Constantinidou and Han Lamers, eds., *Receptions of Hellenism in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Johanna Akujävi and Kristiina Savin, eds., *Reading, Writing, Translating: Greek in Early Modern Schools, Universities, and Beyond* (Lund: Lund University, 2024).

reception of Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians.³

The book examines Crusius' unique endeavours, specifically his intention to engage with Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians from areas under Ottoman political control. Interestingly, it offers an insightful contextualisation of Crusius' early ethnographical *modus operandi*, intending to crystallise the doctrinal and cultural frameworks of Hellenism. With this in mind, it artfully demonstrates the pivotal role of his household, which functioned as an ethnographical laboratory, where Crusius' intellectual distinctiveness took shape and which was perceived as a vital space of epistemic production. Hence, it provides an

overview of how his spiritual and critical assessments reflected interconfessional and cross-cultural exchange in an era when Lutheran scholars sought to disseminate their message across the globe.

The first two chapters give an overview of Crusius' initial interactions with the Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities of Constantinople and the development of his intellectual background. Notably, the author describes how the extensive correspondence between Lutheran scholars in Tübingen (1576–1581) and Patriarch Jeremias II concerning the Augsburg Confession influenced Crusius' later perceptions of Orthodox Christian theology. In particular, Jeremias' view of the Reformation's confession of faith as dangerously innovative caused a shift in the doctrinal aspirations of Lutheran scholars. In the wake of this shift, Crusius appeared to have changed his intellectual methods and spiritual arguments, since the aim of Lutheran scholars was to proselytise Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire. This led to the articulation of a fundamental dichotomy concerning the reception of Hellenism. Lutheran scholars tended to reappropriate ancient Greek as an important element for moral and religious edification while simultaneously adopting a pejorative stance towards Orthodox Christianity.

This simultaneous respect for and criticism of the Greek world's spiritual and cultural heritage determined Crusius' ethnographical research and his discussions with Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians between 1579 and 1606, as described in the next two chapters. Crusius valued tête-à-tête dialogue, grounding his scholarly activities in the hospitality he extended to Greek Orthodox

³ Nassia Yakovaki, *Ευρώπη μέσω Ελλάδας: Μία καμπή στην ευρωπαϊκή αυτοσυνείδηση* [Europe through Greece: A turning point in European self-consciousness] (Athens: Estia, 2006); Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Richard Calis, "The Lutheran Experience in the Ottoman Middle East: Stephan Gerlach (1546–1612) and the History of Lutheran Accommodation," *English Historical Review* 139, no. 596 (2024): 94–125; Jane Grogan, *Beyond Greece and Rome: Reading the Ancient Near East in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Richard Calis, "Reconstructing the Ottoman Greek World: Early Modern Ethnography in the Household of Martin Crusius," *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2019): 148–93; Molly Greene, "Beyond the Northern Invasion: The Mediterranean in the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present* 174, no. 1 (2002): 42–71.

visitors in his household. Calis interprets these interactions as significant in the formation of Western ideas regarding life under Ottoman political dominance. His casual conversations with guests, including clergy, pilgrims and merchants, transformed into scholarly insights, revealing key aspects of Greek life in the Ottoman Empire. Specifically, Crusius' detailed notebooks provide remarkable records about his interlocutors' origins, physical features and requests. Of particular interest was *ζητεία*, that is, the efforts of Greek Orthodox to seek material aid following Sultan Selim II's 1569 confiscation of church properties.

Additionally, Crusius' visitors shared stories of persecution, slavery and captivity under Ottoman rule, which he appeared to have critically evaluated, interpreting them as clichéd accounts based on real experiences but meant to evoke sympathy. In that sense, the volume offers a detailed account of Crusius' scholarly conclusions to conceive his interlocutors' performative and deceptive tactics to fit the perception of Eastern Christian victimhood. The study of the vernacular Greek language was also a key aspect of Crusius' ethnographical project, as he seems to have dismissed it as *Barbaro-Graeca* in his university lectures, even though he was the first to integrate it into an academic discipline in the German university curriculum. Consequently, this "household ethnography" reveals significant aspects of trust, storytelling and religious exchange within the early modern context, contributing to the development of early modern ethnographic knowledge.

Crusius' enduring interest in Greek Orthodox Christian texts showed that his studies were part of broader cultural, po-

litical and material contexts, as discussed in the fifth chapter. Specifically, Crusius depended on his connections within the intellectual community of the Republic of Letters, hoping to acquire manuscripts, books and insights into Greek Orthodox life under Ottoman rule. These interactions often occurred in informal settings such as households and universities, where social interaction and academic work helped develop his ethnographic knowledge. His personal diary provides a detailed overview of his extensive collection of Greek manuscripts and artifacts, along with careful analyses based on codicological accuracy and ethnographic insight. Thus, the monograph emphasises that understanding Tübingen's role within the network of the Republic of Letters is crucial to demonstrating that Crusius' scholarly achievements were closely linked to the social and academic environment that supported them.

The last two chapters focus on *Turcograecia* (1584), Crusius' major work and a milestone in early modern ethnographic scholarship, reflecting his spiritual and intellectual ethos, as skilfully demonstrated through his interactions with Greek-speaking interlocutors. It represents one of the most detailed portrayals of Greek life by including translations and commentaries of original Greek sources in Latin, that is, letters, chronicles and vernacular texts. In particular, *Turcograecia*'s eight books allowed the reader to gain a comprehensive image of the political, ecclesiastical, social, linguistic and educational dimensions of the Greek Orthodox *modus vivendi* in the Ottoman Empire. Although the work presents a nuanced account of early modern Hellenism's aspects, Crusius argued that it was

a civilisation in decline. His assertion that “Greece had been Turkified” showed his frustration, as inspired by the primary indicators of the linguistic impurity and religious flaws of the Ottoman Greek world. It also contextualises early modern philhellenism’s dichotomy of exalting ancient Greece while degrading its Ottoman-era descendants by exemplifying a form of orientalism based on interaction rather than domination. Within this framework, *Turcograecia* represents his attempt to create a unique form of ethnographic knowledge, aimed at countering the religious corruption of the Ottoman Greek world by promoting the Lutheran confessional message. Thus, *Turcograecia* stands as a pioneering ethnographic work, embodying knowledge-making mechanisms that reflect a culturally interconnected Mediterranean and continental world.

Consequently, the author’s discussion of Crusius effectively highlights the complex interconfessional dynamics of the sixteenth-century religious landscape. Specifically, his focus on Crusius’ intellectual output reveals Lutheranism’s fluctuating theological views on the oft-overlooked relationship with Orthodox Christianity concerning the true identity of the church. However, this monograph faces several challenges. Notably, Crusius’ ethnographical approach was not based on extensive expeditions; instead, it relied on his critical evaluation of material culture, such as letters and manuscripts as well as discussions with Greek-speaking interlocutors. This lack of direct contact with the field seemed to influence the nature of his early modern knowledge creation, especially since he mainly depended on observations that, influenced by his spiritual background,

tend to exoticise the cultural and religious characteristics of Ottoman Greece. Therefore, his ethnographic work reflected challenges related to the biases through which this knowledge was processed and presented in written form.

In that sense, this assessment positions the Greek-speaking interlocutors’ accounts of Crusius as sources requiring constant circumspection and reconsideration. This becomes especially evident since, on the one hand, they were presented to him to elicit empathy and, on the other, were edited to fit with Lutheran perceptions of Orthodox theological beliefs. In addition, another element that warrants caution is Calis’ stimulating intention to interpret Crusius’ archive, intending to reconstruct a typical scholar’s intellectual activities in that global age. Particularly, as initially mentioned in the introduction, the author’s thought-provoking suggestion to render Crusius’ story a prism through which wider processes of Mediterranean religious exchange, scholarly practices and ethnographic interests can be assessed within the relationship between global and local is fraught with challenges. In other words, this global microhistory is challenging because it is difficult to measure the extent to which Crusius’ ethnographic archive could reflect a representative cosmology for all Lutheran scholars.

Although Crusius’ personal library comprises extensive accounts of his Greek Orthodox interlocutors’ emotions, experiences, as well as their spiritual and cultural background, it is challenging to appropriate the results of his inquiries, as well as the nature of his scholarly profile, as archetypal traits to map similar *modi operandi* on a global scale. The treatment of an individual scholar’s written heritage as rep-

representative of wider global patterns risks overgeneralisation. Moreover, it is worth noting that even though Greek-speaking interlocutors' testimonies, as ethnographically interpreted by Crusius, represent an important side of their cultural and spiritual habitus, they cannot be rendered as determining indicators of the usual Greek experience. This is particularly evident in his archive, in which Crusius' observations and remarks, based on his religious cosmology, make the usual Greek experience difficult to crystallize. Nonetheless, Crusius' archive may reflect a unique case study as a basis for future endeavours, intending to illuminate the nature of an early modern ethnography's trajectory to produce narratives based on delving intellectually into the assessment of human experience. Interestingly, his archive could be seen as a crucial threshold into Lutheran perceptions of the "other", especially since it genuinely marks an intellectual activity that relied on its author's curiosity, interpretive patterns and reflective suppositions.

In light of the above, the book makes a unique contribution to the understudied history of Greece under Ottoman rule. In particular, the produced knowledge from Crusius' interlocutors enriches the field of Mediterranean studies, illuminating the important impact of the Greek Orthodox world in an era of interreligious disputes and cultural exchange. The author's heavy reliance on Crusius' nine-volume diary and nearly 700 items from his personal library helps reconstruct key aspects of early modern Hellenism, especially since it offers a broader description and critical evaluation of Ottoman Greek material, intellectual and spiritual culture. It also provides answers to important historical questions about his intellectual and eth-

nographic work. In particular, questions about his motivation, his interlocutors, his methods and how he explained his ideas effectively turn his hometown of Tübingen into a space of cross-cultural exchange and interfaith dialogue. In this way, Crusius' research activities greatly contribute, as an initial standpoint, to understanding how philhellenism and orientalism were intertwined in sixteenth-century Europe.

In addition, this monograph holds a contributory position within the historiographical spectrum of early modern European history, too, as expressed by the extension of geographical mobility, colonial expansion and intercultural exchange. By rendering Martin Crusius' intellectual journey as the central case study, Calis seeks to answer questions on historiographical and disciplinary narratives regarding Ottoman Greece. In doing so, he reveals that Crusius' depictions of the Greek world, as demonstrated in detail by *Turcograecia*, reflect a comprehensive context of epistemological and scholarly assessment based on dialogue, textual inquiry and the testimony of Greek interlocutors. In that sense, even though Crusius' written heritage mirrors some challenges and ambiguities, it provides a reappraisal of how human experiences are perceived and subsequently classified within early modern European intellectual frameworks. Consequently, the volume takes a cross-cultural perspective, emphasising the uniqueness of this case study within the field of the global history of Hellenism by offering a detailed articulation of Crusius' early modern ethnographical and spiritual inquiries.

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