

# DID NICHOLAS OF CUSA TALK WITH MUSLIMS? REVISITING CUSANUS' SOURCES FOR THE *CRIBRATIO ALKORANI* AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE\*

Maarten Halff

Independent researcher

## Abstract

While Cusanus' literary sources for his engagement with Islam have been closely studied, questions about possible personal encounters with Muslims, and the role of non-literary sources in developing his concept of interreligious dialogue, remain largely unaddressed. This paper presents original archival research to identify the only person whom Cusanus mentions in the *Cribratio Alkorani* by name as an oral source about Muslim beliefs – an Italian merchant active in Constantinople at the time of Cusanus' visit in 1437. In doing so, it casts new light on Cusanus' treatises on Islam and on his interaction with Muslims.

## Keywords

Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus); *Cribratio Alkorani*; Balthasar Lupari; Christian-Muslim relations; Italian merchants in Constantinople; Cristoforo Garatone; silk industry; Venice; Bologna

Sometime in 1461 or 1462,<sup>1</sup> perhaps while studying a Latin translation of the Qur'an, Nicholas of Cusa's thoughts drifted back to conversations he had

---

\* An earlier, shorter version of this essay was presented at the Gettysburg symposium of the American Cusanus Society, on 29 September 2018. The paper may not have been written had it not been for Gerald Christianson and Nancy Bisaha. I am deeply grateful to each for their advice and encouragement, and the generosity with which these were given. They both are, of course, free of any responsibility for remaining flaws. I thank the two anonymous reviewers of the draft manuscript for their very thoughtful comments, which helped me strengthen the paper. I also thank the staff of

had some 25 years earlier in Constantinople. These were not debates with famous Greek scholars, church leaders or members of the Byzantine imperial court with whom he crossed paths. Instead, Cusanus was thinking of his discussions with an Italian merchant. The two had spoken more than once about Islam and Muslims. Their conversations must have been of profound importance to Cusanus. In his prologue to the *Cribratio Alkorani*, his scrutiny of the Qur'an in which he set out to apply a method of *pia interpretatio*, or «pious interpretation», to Muslim doctrines, Cusanus made a point of explaining in some detail that:

At that time there was in Constantinople a merchant, Balthasar de Luparis, who, seeing that I was concerned about the aforesaid matters, told me the following: that one of the most learned and most eminent of the Turks, having been secretly instructed at Pera in the Gospel of St. John, proposed going to the Pope — together with twelve [other] eminent men — and becoming fully instructed [by the Pope] if I would secretly provide them with transportation.<sup>2</sup>

Cusanus verified the story with the resident friars in Pera, the Genoese-administered town on the opposite shore of the Golden Horn from Constantinople. Satisfied that the information was correct, he made arrangements for the requested transportation. In the meantime, however, the «Turk», who, Cusanus adds, was in charge of the hospitals in Constantinople, reportedly died of the plague before he could set sail to Italy, and nothing else came of the matter. But there was more for Cusanus to say: «Lord Balthasar, who presently is a soldier in Bologna, quite often recounted to me that all their

---

the *Archivio di Stato di Bologna* and of the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* for kind assistance provided during my research.

<sup>1</sup> 1460-1461 has traditionally been accepted as the period in which Cusanus wrote the *Cribratio Alkorani*. The completion date should now be adjusted to 1462, based on the identification, by José Martínez Gázquez, of glosses by Cusanus in the margins of a Latin translation of the Qur'an. Cusanus presumably used this manuscript in the writing of the *Cribratio*, and his glosses includes this note: «Sunt nunc 1462». See: Martínez Gázquez, J., «Las glosas de Nicolás de Cusa al *Alchoranus Latinus* en el ms. Vat. lat. 4071. Nuevos datos para la *Cribratio Alkorani*», in *Niccolò Cusano. L'uomo, i libri, l'opera. Atti del LII Convegno storico internazionale. Todi, 11-14 ottobre 2015*, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 2016, pp. 473-492, here p. 474. Martínez Gázquez also presented his findings at the Gettysburg symposium of September 2018; his revised article, «'Eum mori oportetbat' en las glosas de Nicolás de Cusa al *Alkoranus Latinus* (Vat. Lat. 4071)», appears in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> From Jasper Hopkins' English translation of the *Cribratio Alkorani*: Hopkins, J. (ed.), *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, Minneapolis, Arthur J. Banning Press, 1994, here p. 76.

learned [men] loved the Gospel exceedingly and preferred it to their book of law».<sup>3</sup>

Who was this Balthasar Lupari, and why would Cusanus cite an unknown merchant as a source in an analysis of the Qur'an? Scholarship has not paid much attention to this remarkable passage – one of the very few autobiographical details Cusanus left about his journey to Constantinople. Beyond snippets of information gleaned from records relating to the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1439), Balthasar Lupari has hardly been studied. As a result, his significance for Cusanus' understanding of Muslim beliefs has remained almost completely unexamined.

This paper offers findings from original archival research to construct a picture of Lupari's life and career, including his experience in Constantinople. It brings to light, for the first time, a crucial source of information for Cusanus' writings on Islam. These findings show that, to complement his extensive readings about the Qur'an, Cusanus did not rely on Greek scholars with whom he may have crossed paths or on conversations with Muslims, but on a secular, mundane Italian source.

### An overlooked source

We know from the published collections of sources on the Council of Ferrara-Florence,<sup>4</sup> as well as the studies by Joseph Gill,<sup>5</sup> that Balthasar Lupari was given an important role in the preparations for the council of union of the Catholic and Greek churches: Pope Eugenius IV appointed him, as well as a Michele Zeno or Zono, to raise and administer the cash needed to bring the Greek emperor and his large entourage to Italy. The relevant papal letter refers to him as a citizen of Venice.<sup>6</sup> In an accompanying safe-conduct for his mission, Eugenius calls him a citizen of Bologna.<sup>7</sup> The editors of the *Acta*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> For example, Cecconi, E., *Studi storici sul concilio di Firenze*, vol. I (Antecedenti del concilio), Firenze, 1869, docs. CXLI and CXLII. See also E. Meuthen et al. (eds.), *Acta Cusana. Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*, vol. I/2, Hamburg, 1983, nos. 78, 295a and 332, and footnotes there; also Mercati, G., *Scritti d'Isidoro, il cardinale ruteno*, Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1926.

<sup>5</sup> Gill, J., *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959, pp. 79 and 101; Gill, J., «The Cost of the Council of Florence», in J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and Other Essays*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1964, pp. 186-203, with reference to Lupari on p. 188. See now also the extensive study by Sebastian Kolditz, fn.13 below.

<sup>6</sup> Cecconi, *Studi storici*, op. cit., doc. CXLI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. CXLII. Also in Meuthen et al., *Acta Cusana*, op. cit., vol. I/2, no. 78.

*Cusana* concluded that he was a «Venetian banker from Bologna»<sup>8</sup> – without resolving the apparent discrepancy – and that he was «clearly highly educated».<sup>9</sup>

Within Cusanus scholarship, and scholarship dealing with the history of Western dialogue with Islam, research on his identity has not moved beyond this point. Jasper Hopkins, for example, in his translation of the *Cribratio* – the only English translation available – adds no explanatory footnotes to the paragraph cited above.<sup>10</sup> A 2013 Spanish translation of the *Cribratio* by Victor Sanz Santacruz provides only a brief annotation to Lupari by drawing on the established knowledge already gathered in the *Acta Cusana*.<sup>11</sup> Within scholarship in French, a 2017 comparative study of 15<sup>th</sup> century thinkers on Christian-Muslim dialogue by Tristan Vigliano suggests that Lupari must have been something of an *aventurier* and that Cusanus may have been too gullible. But Vigliano does not point to sources from which to draw such conclusions with certainty.<sup>12</sup> The recent research by Sebastian Kolditz on the Council of Ferrara-Florence, which closely examines Balthasar Lupari's role in the financial aspects of the preparations for the Council, has to my knowledge not yet been taken into account in published work on Cusanus.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Meuthen et al., *Acta Cusana*, op. cit., vol. I/2, no. 295a, fn. 6, and index to vol. I, sv. *Lupari*. Similarly, Crowder refers to Eugenius' «papal bankers», albeit without mentioning Lupari by name: Crowder, C.M.D., *Unity, Heresy and Reform 1378-1460. The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism*, London, The Camelot Press, 1977, pp. 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Meuthen et al., *Acta Cusana*, op. cit., vol. I/2, no. 332, fn. 4. The Heidelberg critical edition of the *Cribratio* refers back to the *Acta Cusana*, and describes Lupari, again, as «argentario, viro doctissimo»: Nicholas Cusanus, *Cribratio Alkorani*, ed. L. Hagemann, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia. Iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis*, Leipzig and Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1986, vol. VIII, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., p. 76. See also the literature referred to in fn. 52 below in relation to the question whether Cusanus spoke with Muslims; none of the essays or works cited there discuss Lupari.

<sup>11</sup> Sanz Santacruz, V., *Nicolás de Cusa. Examen del Corán. Estudio preliminar, traducción y notas de Víctor Sanz Santacruz*, Pamplona, EUNSA, 2013, p. 77 fn. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Vigliano, T., *Parler aux Musulmans. Quatre Intellectuels Face à l'Islam à l'Orée de la Renaissance*, Genève, Droz, 2017, p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> See Kolditz, S., *Johannes VIII. Palaiologos und das Konzil von Ferrara-Florenz (1438/39)*, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 2014, pp. 248-250 and 253-256. I learned of the information on Lupari gathered by Kolditz after the presentation of this paper at the Gettysburg symposium. Kolditz briefly mentions the episode with the «Turkish» physician recounted by Cusanus (p. 256). But his focus is on the Council of Ferrara-Florence and its preparations, not Cusanus or his engagement with Muslims. Kolditz draws on many, but not all, of the archival resources that I have used in the present essay. He reaches similar conclusions

Beyond Cusanus studies, the episode has been noted in essays on Byzantine medicine and on the plague in the Middle Ages, without, however, giving attention to Balthasar Lupari.<sup>14</sup> In one of his detailed works on the silk industry in late medieval and early modern Italy, Luca Molà identified an archival reference to a person who was probably Balthasar's father, Venturino Lupari,<sup>15</sup> but no other Lupari appears in his studies.

In addition to the limited research into the identity of Balthasar Lupari, there has also been very little discussion of the role he played as an oral source on Muslim beliefs— in contrast to the extensive literature on Cusanus' written sources on the Qur'an and Islam.<sup>16</sup> No more than perhaps three studies have evaluated the importance of Lupari from this perspective: Georges Anawati briefly retold the episode of the «Turkish» converts in the preface of the *Cribratio*. He judged its veracity as relayed by Lupari to be suspicious, but he reached that conclusion without examining primary source material.<sup>17</sup> Tristan Vigliano, in his aforementioned study, briefly weighed the relevance of Lupari as an oral source and, like Anawati, questioned his credibility.<sup>18</sup> In another recent study, Davide Scotto duly highlighted the episode, underlining its specificity and its literary importance in the *Cribratio* as a recollection of an actual event. But Scotto included no information about Lupari beyond that given by Cusanus himself, and does not go further in assessing Lupari as a source of knowledge for Cusanus.<sup>19</sup>

---

in regard to the connection to Venice and Pope Eugenius IV, and Lupari's activities in Constantinople, see below.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Miller, T.S., *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Baltimore and London, 1997, p. xvii; Congourdeau, M.H., «La Peste Noire à Constantinople de 1388 à 1466», *Medicina nei secoli*, 11/2 (1999), pp. 149-163; Congourdeau, M.H., «Medical Art, Erudition, and Practice in the Byzantine Capital», in B. Pitarakis (ed.), *Life is Short, Art Long: The Art of Healing in Byzantium / Hayat Kisa, Sana Uzun: Bizans'ta Sifa Sanati* [exhibition catalogue], Istanbul, Ege Yayınları, 2015, pp. 90-103.

<sup>15</sup> Molà, L., *La Comunità dei lucchesi a Venezia. Immigrazione e industria della seta nel tardo medioevo*, Venezia, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1994, pp. 249-250: presence of a Venturino Lupari in Bruges, as agent of a Venice-based Lucchese trading company.

<sup>16</sup> See fn. 95 through 107 below.

<sup>17</sup> Anawati, G.C., «Nicolas de Cues et le problème de l'Islam», in *Nicolò Cusano agli inizi del mondo moderno (Atti del Congresso internazionale in occasione del V Centenario della morte di Nicolò Cusano. Bressanone, 6-10 settembre 1964)*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1970, pp. 141-173, here pp. 154-155.

<sup>18</sup> Vigliano, *Parler aux Musulmans*, op. cit., p.180 and p. 192.

<sup>19</sup> Scotto, D., «Sulla soglia della *Cribratio*. Riflessi dell'Islam nell'esperienza di Niccolò Cusano», *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 45/ 2 (2009), pp. 225-282, here pp. 243-244.

### The Lupari roots: from Lucca to Bologna

From records in the State Archives of Bologna and the State Archives of Venice, as well as from other contemporary sources and 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of Bologna, I have been able to establish a fuller picture of Lupari's life and career.

Balthasar's father Venturino was a silk merchant, from a family of silk entrepreneurs, or *setaioli*, whose ancestor Luparo Lupari had fled Lucca and settled in Bologna in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> The influx of political refugees at the time from the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict in Lucca, including presumably the Luparis, contributed directly to the rise of silk production in Bologna.<sup>21</sup> Key to Bologna's success was the abundance of waterways and streams, which helped power the throwing mills used in silk production: the mills were a technical invention of the Lucchesi in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup>

In 1393, Venturino was granted permission in Bologna to marry Gioanna, daughter of Gianni di Rapondi of Lucca.<sup>23</sup> Balthasar was probably Venturino's second son, and certainly not his first, as various notarial acts suggest that

<sup>20</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> century Bologna chronicler Cherubino Ghirardacci notes: «Luparo Lupari Signore di Menabbio, Liniano, Cusole, & Vico Pancelloro Castelli, già Consigliero di Castruccio da Lucca, essendosi con esso lui sdegnato, perche gli addimandò certa somma di denari prestatigli, fù di maniera da Castruccio perseguitato, che con li'figliuoli, & la familia venne ad habitare in Bologna», see Ghirardacci, Ch., *Della Historia di Bologna, Parte Prima*, Bologna, 1596, p. 574. See also: Dolfi, P.S., *Cronologia delle famiglie nobili di Bologna con le loro insegne, e nel fine di cimieri*, 1670, pp. 482-483. Similarly, the 18<sup>th</sup> century history of properties and cadasters in Bologna by Giuseppe Guidicini refers to members of the Lupari line, and their role in the silk industry: Guidicini, G., *Cose notabili della città di Bologna, ossia Storia cronologica de suoi stabili sacri, pubblici e private*, Vol. II, Bologna, 1869, pp. 329-330.

<sup>21</sup> Molà, L., *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 2000, p. 15, lists Bologna as one of five classic centers of Italian silk production. See also his essay: Molà, L., «The Italian Silk Industry in the Renaissance» in S. Rauch (ed.), *Le mariegole delle arti dei tessitori di seta: i veluderi (1347-1474) e i samitari (1370-1475)*, Venezia, Il Comitato Editore, pp. LII-LXXXV. Furthermore, Righi, L., «Produzione di seta e trasferimenti tecnologici tra legislazione e frodi: il caso di Bologna dal XIV al XVI secolo», *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Vol. 174 (2016), pp. 639-668.

<sup>22</sup> See Molà, L., «The Italian Silk Industry in the Renaissance», p. LXVIII-LXIX. Also Lopez, R.S., «The Trade of Medieval Europe: The South», in M.M. Postan and E. Miller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. II, *Trade and Industry in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 306-401, here p. 370.

<sup>23</sup> Archivio di Stato di Bologna (hereafter ASBo), Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 48, 6 February 1393.

one brother, Gasparo Lupari, was older. The earliest mention of Balthasar in the Bologna archives is a record of a purchase of three slaves by Balthasar in 1411.<sup>24</sup> From these references, it may be reasonable to conclude that Balthasar Lupari was born in approximately 1394, making him only a few years older than Cusanus. Records of the silk merchants' guild in Bologna indicate that by 1420 at the latest, Balthasar, like his father, had entered the silk business.<sup>25</sup> There are no records of activities on his part in Bologna between the second half of 1428<sup>26</sup> and 1440, suggesting he may not have been resident. From 1440, the references in Bologna pick up again, particular showing him, in particular, as a frequent member of city councils, including of the «Council of 120» in 1440<sup>27</sup>, and of the *Anziani*, one of the key civic magistracies, at various times from the mid-1440s.<sup>28</sup> The last documents in the Bologna archives that refer to Balthasar are from 1462,<sup>29</sup> from which I conclude that he died in or shortly after that year. I have not come across any archival evidence that Balthasar Lupari had children.

### Traveler to the East

Archival and other primary sources show that Balthasar Lupari was a frequent visitor of Constantinople – quite possibly a longer-term resident at times – and that he was integrated into the commercial fabric of the city. A contemporary notarial record in the Bologna archives refers to a purchase of

---

<sup>24</sup> ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 48, no. 43, 18 September 1411. Also discussed further below.

<sup>25</sup> Two references to Balthasar Lupari for 1420 in ASBo, Miscellanea delle Corporazioni d'Arte, A) *Arte della Seta*, no. 1, 9 January 1420, and *ibid.*, 3 December 1420.

<sup>26</sup> The latest references to Balthasar Lupari that I found in the records of the silk guild are for the year 1427: ASBo, Miscellanea delle Corporazioni d'Arte, A) *Arte della Seta*, no. 1, 23 February 1427, and *ibid.*, 6 March, 2 April and 23 July 1427. Kolditz points to records of commercial transactions involving Balthasar – and suggesting that he was in Bologna – as late as April 1428, see Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op. cit., p. 249, fn. 400.

<sup>27</sup> Dolfi, P. S., *Cronologia delle famiglie nobili*, op. cit., p. 482.

<sup>28</sup> In the periods May and June 1445, January and February 1448, May and June 1452, March and April 1453, and March and April 1455, see ASBo, Comune Governo, *Consigli ed ufficiali*, Magistrature ed ambascerie, no. 67, c.76, Estrazioni di Anziani, Gonfalonieri del Popolo e Massari delle Arti.

<sup>29</sup> This includes a document setting out arrangements among Balthasar and a younger brother of his, as well as three nephews, regarding their silk company: ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 53, c. 45, 29 July 1462.

three slaves by Balthasar, effected in Pera, as early as 1411.<sup>30</sup> A subsequent purchase of a slave is recorded for 1426 from a citizen of Caffa, the Genoese colony on the Black Sea, although the location of the transaction is not clearly indicated.<sup>31</sup> Another attests to a possibly longer stay in Constantinople on business in 1430 and possibly 1431, at least long enough to receive correspondence from a Venetian commercial partner in Tana.<sup>32</sup> Lupari's presence in Constantinople is also clearly substantiated by transactions recorded for the years 1438 and 1439 in the detailed commercial accounts – the *Libro dei conti* – of the Venetian merchant Giacomo Badoer, who resided in the city from 1436 to 1440.<sup>33</sup> The events described in the preface to the *Cribratio*, too, suggest a person intricately connected to the city and its inhabitants, moving around in networks of not just merchants but also of professionals – such as here, a physician.

Balthasar Lupari was educated and literate, as he is referred to in a number of the records as *ser* and occasionally *misser*, pointing to a notarial training.<sup>34</sup> But did he speak foreign languages? The episode in the *Cribratio* leaves significant room for doubt as to how, and in what language, Lupari would have conversed with the eminent «Turk» of the story – if indeed it had been unaided by any interpreter. This is in part because it cannot be concluded with sufficient certainty whether Cusanus used the term «Turk» here as an indicator of birth identity (that is, a person of the Turkish nation, and hence a Turkish speaker, but not necessarily an Ottoman: it could also

---

<sup>30</sup> See the above-mentioned record of a purchase of three slaves from Lisabeta Borghi of Pera, fn. 24 above.

<sup>31</sup> ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 49, 10 October 1426.

<sup>32</sup> ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 50, no. 1, 14 March 1431. “[...] Cum ut rectiller prudens vir s(er) baldisara lupari q(uondam) d(omi)ni venturini h(ab)itator venetiar(um) in (con)trata sancti Augustini de anno d(omi)ni 1430 existens in constantinopolim ip(s)e h(ab)uit et recipit una(m) l(e)ttaram familiarem. a nobile viro s(er) francisco (con)tarino [etc].”

<sup>33</sup> Giacomo Badoer, *Libro dei conti*, ed. V. Dorini and T. Bertelè, *Il libro dei conti di Giacomo Badoer (Costantinopoli 1436-1440)*, Rome, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1956. Entries for Lupari in Badoer's accounts on pp. 587, 590, 715, 730, 738, 739 and 764. See also Bertelè, G. (ed.), *Il libro dei conti di Giacomo Badoer (Costantinopoli 1436-1440). Complemento e indici*, Pavoda, Eshedra, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> His autograph can also be identified: a 1449 agreement on the division of Venturino Lupari's properties among his male heirs, drawn up in Italian, is signed by each party to the agreement in the first person (including «Io Baldissera Luppari [etc.]») and each in a different hand, from which I conclude that Balthasar signed it himself. ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 52, 16 August 1449.

have been a Karaman or Seljuk Turk, for example), or an indicator of political allegiance (a subject of the Ottoman state, but not necessarily a Turkish-speaker), or simply as a synonym for a person of Muslim faith. There are surprisingly few instances in the *Cribratio* in which Cusanus directly refers to Muslims as a group: when at all, he most often speaks of «Arabs», or those «following the law of the Arabs», or «followers of Muhammad» - a usage which could suggest that «Turk» was not a primarily religious identifier in the prologue.<sup>35</sup> In his *De pace fidei*, too, Cusanus appears to use the term «Turk» - as well as all the labels of other participants in the dialogue - as a marker of nationality rather than primarily of belief. Thus, a Turk appears in the discussion of *De pace fidei* in addition to a Persian and an Arab, while Cusanus makes a number of speakers refer to Islam as the «sect of the Arabs».<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, in a letter he wrote about dialogue with Muslims to the Spanish theologian John of Segovia in December 1454, discussed further below, Cusanus does seem to use the term «Turks» as indicator of religion, for example when he refers to them along with «Jews» in the very same sentence.<sup>37</sup> All that one can say with adequate certainty is that, irrespective of his nationality and language, the «Turk» in Cusanus' prologue of the *Cribratio* was understood by Lupari and Cusanus to be a person of Muslim faith.

There are no indications that knowledge of Turkish or Arabic was a prevalent skill among Italian officials or merchants in the East before 1453. Frequent interaction could, of course, have provided an opportunity to learn. As discussed further below, primary sources clearly attest to the presence of both Turks and persons with Muslim names in Constantinople in the period around 1437. Some merchants and other travelers may have made an effort to learn. The Burgundian Bertrandon de la Broquière, for example, travelling by land from Damascus with a group of Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca to the Ottoman capital Bursa in 1432, drew up a «Tartar»-Italian glossary with the help of a Jewish trader from Caffa. This turned out to be of little use in interacting with his Turkish companions, who then began teaching him to speak their language. At the end of the journey, he says, he was able to express in Turkish «everything necessary for myself and my horse».<sup>38</sup> The

---

<sup>35</sup> Cusanus, *Cribratio Alkorani*, in Hopkins (ed.), *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., for example: p. 86 («followers of Muhammad»), p. 87 («Arab believer»), p. 88 («among both Arabs and Christians»).

<sup>36</sup> Cusanus, *De pace fidei*, in Hopkins (ed.), *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., pp. 40-41 (an Arab), pp. 49-55 (a Persian), p. 58 (a Turk). Religious identifiers: p. 47 («Arabs and Jews deny the Trinity») and p. 55 («the sect of the Arabs»).

<sup>37</sup> See below.

<sup>38</sup> Schefer, C.H.A (ed.), *Le voyage d'outremer de Bertrandon de la Brocquière*, [i.e., add accent grave for correct French spelling] Paris, E. Leroux, 1892. English translation in

development of language skills often appears related to the length of residence abroad. For example, during his ten-year captivity in Turkish hands, from 1472 to 1482, the Venetian Giovanni Maria Angiolello learned Turkish and other languages, and was later dispatched as Venetian envoy to the East based on his linguistic skills and local knowledge.<sup>39</sup> In an anonymous account by another Venetian of a journey from Aleppo to Tabriz in 1498, the author highlights his long experience in the East and his knowledge of foreign languages.<sup>40</sup> The Dominican friar Riccoldo da Montecroce became proficient in Arabic during his years of residence in Baghdad in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, and he was able to read the Qur'an in its original language.<sup>41</sup>

There were also occasional efforts to register and pass on acquired knowledge. The so-called *Codex Cumanicus*, believed to have been compiled in Genoa at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, provides terms that would have been of use to merchants and missionaries in Latin, Persian and Cumanic, a Turkish language spoken along the northern, western and eastern coasts of the Black Sea.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, an early 15<sup>th</sup> century naval manual, the so-called *Book of Michael of Rhodes* – a mariner in Venetian service who was on the very convoy that brought Cusanus to Constantinople in 1437 – is entirely silent on foreign phrases or languages.<sup>43</sup> And even in the century after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Venetian resident representatives there

---

Wright, T. (ed.), *Early Travels in Palestine*, London, 1848, p. 283-382, here pp. 305-306. A more recent English translation in Kline, G.R. (ed.), *The Voyage d'outremer by Bertrandon de la Broquière*, New York, Peter Lang, 1988. For the importance of de la Broquière in the history of Western interaction with Muslims see Tolan, J., «Bertrandon de la Broquière» in D. Thomas and A. Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, Vol 5 (1350-1500), Leiden, Brill, 2013, pp. 443-46.

<sup>39</sup> Pinto, O., «Viaggiatori veneti in Oriente (secoli XIII-XVI)», in A. Pertusi (ed.), *Venezia e l'Oriente fra tardo Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Venezia, Sansoni, 1966, pp. 396-397

<sup>40</sup> Mentioned in Howard, D., «Archival Evidence in the Study of Cross-Cultural Artistic Connections», in G. Ortalli and A. Sopracasa (eds.), *Rapporti mediterranei, pratiche documentarie, presenze veneziane: le reti economiche e culturali (XIV- XVI secolo)*, Venezia, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2017, p. 278

<sup>41</sup> See George-Trvtković, R., *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq. Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012, and further works cited below.

<sup>42</sup> Lopez and Raymond (eds.), *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, op. cit., p. 342, and excerpts on pp. 346-348. See also the entry by Peter Golden on Cumans in Friedman, J.B., and Mossler Figg, K., (eds.), *Trade, Travel and Exploration in the Middle Ages. An Encyclopedia*, New York, Garland Publishing, 2000, pp. 143-144.

<sup>43</sup> Long, P.O., McGee, D., and Stahl, A., (eds.), *The Book of Michael of Rhodes. A Fifteenth Century Maritime Manuscript*, Cambridge, MA, – London, MIT Press, 2009.

continued to rely on interpreters and translators, often Catholic residents of Pera who were subjects of the Ottomans.<sup>44</sup>

It is possible that the «eminent Turk» of Cusanus' episode may have been conversant in Greek (or even a Greek by birth, and Muslim by faith): after all, he is said to have had a supervisory function with respect to the hospitals in the Byzantine capital.<sup>45</sup> There is a hint in Venetian records that Ottoman officials began to rely on Greek as the language of diplomacy in the years before the conquest of Constantinople. In 1431, the Venetian resident representative in Negroponte reported that he was increasingly receiving documents in Greek, not only from the local Greek authorities, but also from Turkish officials; furthermore, he wrote, Byzantine and Turkish ambassadors were presenting their petitions to him in Greek – although it is not said whether these were oral presentations.<sup>46</sup> On the part of Venetians, too, knowledge of Greek was a highly prized skill for administrative officials who were sent on assignment to Constantinople or to the Venetian possessions in formerly Byzantine territories.<sup>47</sup> This may also have been the case among the Venetian merchant class to which Lupari belonged.

These few selected references give some indication of the linguistic context in which Balthasar Lupari worked, but they can do no more than open the possibility that he would have spoken with Muslims in Constantinople in their own language, whichever language that was. There is no concrete evidence that he indeed acquired foreign language skills on his travels to Constantinople.

---

<sup>44</sup> Dursteler, E.R., *Venetians in Constantinople. Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 35 and 145. Dursteler notes two cases in which a Venetian official learned Turkish, *Ibid.*, p. 35 and 46, but both are from the 16th century, and Dursteler underlines their exceptional nature.

<sup>45</sup> On Byzantine hospitals, including the passage from the *Cribratio*, see the studies cited in footnote 14 above.

<sup>46</sup> Thiriet, F. *Régestes des Délibérations du Sénat de Venise concernant la Romanie*, Paris and Den Haag, Mouton, 1961, vol. III, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> The extracts from Venetian state records compiled by Freddy Thiriet contain a number of examples of persons being selected for state functions in the East for their Greek language skills and local knowledge, see Thiriet, F. (ed.), *Délibérations des Assemblées Vénitiennes concernant la Romanie*, Paris Den Haag, Mouton, 1971, vol. II, for example: p. 141 (no. 1226, selection of chancellor for Coron in 1417); p. 144, (no. 1243, chancellor for Modon in 1420); p. 166 (no. 1345, chancellor for Modon in 1434)

### Knight of Bologna

Another critical finding for the study of the *Cribratio* and Lupari's significance for Cusanus is that Lupari was knighted in January 1452, along with a few other citizens of Bologna, by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III, during a brief stop in the city.<sup>48</sup> At the time of his stay in Bologna, Frederick III was on his way to Siena for his marriage to Leonora of Portugal, and subsequently to Rome, where he was crowned emperor by Eugenius IV.<sup>49</sup> The Bologna chronicles give no explicit indication why Balthasar Lupari was given this distinction. Nevertheless, a closer look at the other seven persons who were knighted by Frederick III on the same day sheds possible light. The list included Giovanni, son of Annibale Bentivoglio, the former *signore* of Bologna who had been assassinated in 1445.<sup>50</sup> Giovanni – later known as Giovanni II when he became sole ruler of the city in 1463 – was nine years old at the time of his knighting, which became the start of his political career.<sup>51</sup> A further indicator of a possible political alignment of Balthasar with the powerful Bentivoglio family arises from the fact – as noted above – that, starting in 1428, no references to Balthasar can be found in the Bologna archives for a period of some 12 years. This coincides with the expulsion from Bologna, in 1429, of Antongaleazzo Bentivoglio, father of Annibale, along with some 80 *bentivoleschi*.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Balthasar's service in the city council of the *Anziani* started in 1445,<sup>53</sup> that is, only after Annibale Bentivoglio's return to the city in 1443.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever Lupari was being recognized for, the distinction was clearly considered an important one, as archival references to him carry the title

<sup>48</sup> See Ghirardacci, Ch., *Della historia di Bologna, Parte Terza*, Vol. 1. For this third part of Ghirardacci's chronicle, I have relied on the manuscript copy in the Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Berol. Ms. Ital. Fol. 168 (1734). On folio 585v: grand entry of Emperor Frederick III into Bologna on the evening of 25 January 1452. On f. 585v - 586r: Lupari and seven others are knighted by the emperor the next day. The chronicle by Dolfi also refers briefly to Lupari's knighting in 1452: Dolfi, *Cronologia delle famiglie nobili*, op. cit., pp. 482-483.

<sup>49</sup> Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the later Pope Pius II, gave a first-hand account of these imperial events, see Meserve, M. and Simonetta, M. (eds.), *Pius II Commentaries*, Vol. 1, chapter 23, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, pp. 112-117.

<sup>50</sup> For the tumultuous politics of Bologna in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, see Duranti, T., «*Libertas*, Oligarchy, Papacy: Government in the Quattrocento», in S.R. Blanshei (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 276.

<sup>51</sup> Duranti, «*Libertas*, Oligarchy, Papacy», op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 262-264 and 269.

<sup>53</sup> See above, fn. 28.

<sup>54</sup> Duranti, «*Libertas*, Oligarchy, Papacy», op. cit., p. 272.

*miles* starting immediately after this date.<sup>55</sup> This is also the term that Cusanus used to refer to him in his prologue («Lord Balthasar, who is now a *miles* in Bologna»)<sup>56</sup> I believe that modern studies of the *Cribratio* have overlooked the correct meaning of the key term *miles*. In Italy, this had evolved from a military term in classical Latin, to a chivalric, honorific connotation in the high and late Middle Ages.<sup>57</sup> In the Bologna of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, knighting was an important tool of political patronage; members were referred to as *milites*.<sup>58</sup> In other words the term *miles* in the *Cribratio* should be translated as «knight», not «soldier». In addition to the well-established pattern of usage of the term in this period, the reading of *miles* as an honorific term is further supported, in the specific case of Lupari, by the aforementioned direct evidence in the chronicles of his knighting, by the fact that Cusanus refers to him as *domus*, and by the absence of any indication in the records that Lupari had a military career.

Cusanus reference to Lupari's status as a knight – and the fact that it was Emperor Frederick III who knighted him – acquires further significance when one recalls that Cusanus addressed the *Cribratio* to Pope Pius II. Aeneas Sylvius

---

<sup>55</sup> Cf. the notation of Lupari's membership of the *Anziani* in May and June of 1452, «d. Baldassar d. Luporis miles», with that of his earlier tenure in January and February 1448, «d. Baldasar d. Luporis» (i.e., no title), both in ASBo, Comune Governo, *Consigli ed ufficiali*, Magistrature ed ambascerie, no. 67, c.76, Estrazioni di Anziani, Gonfalonieri del Popolo e Massari delle Arti. Dolfi, *Cronologia dell famiglie nobile*, op. cit, p. 482-483, writes that Balthasar's brothers Francesco, Marco and Bartolomeo were also knighted on this occasion. None of the other chronicles refer to his brothers in this context and, in contrast to Balthasar, I found no reference in guild or civic records that these other brothers ever carried the title *miles*.

<sup>56</sup> Cusanus, *Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., 3, line 10.

<sup>57</sup> On the etymology of the word *miles*, see Bönninger, L., *Die Ritterwürde in Mittelitalien zwischen Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995. Like Hopkins in his English translation (Hopkins, *Cribratio*, op. cit, reproduced at the beginning of this paper), other modern translations of the *Cribratio* in other western European languages and related commentaries that I have consulted have also overlooked this aspect and give *miles* a military meaning, e.g., in French, Anawati calls him a *militaire*, Anawati, «Nicolas de Cues et le problème de l'Islam», op. cit.; the term «im Heeresdienst» is used in the German translation of the *Cribratio* in L. Gabriel and W. Dupré (eds.), *Nikolaus von Kues. Die Philosophisch-Theologischen Schriften*, Wien, Herder, 1989; a recent Italian essay of 2009 speaks of Lupari being «impiegato come militare», see Scotto, «Sulla soglia della *Cribratio*», op. cit.; and one finds *soldado* in the Spanish 2013 translation by Sanz Santacruz, *Examen del Corán*, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Gardi, A., «Making of an Oligarchy: The Ruling Classes of Bologna», in Blanshei (ed.), *Companion to Bologna*, op. cit., pp. 310-354. In particular, *Ibid.*, p.321: at least 54 knights created between 1446 and 1506.

Piccolomini, as the later Pius II had previously been known, had been in the service of Frederick III for many years, starting as secretary in the imperial chancery in 1442, and rising to become a councilor to the emperor, for whom he undertook a number of high-level diplomatic missions.<sup>59</sup> In 1452, Piccolomini, then bishop of Siena, accompanied the emperor as part of his innermost circle on his journey through Italy, as he had played a key role in arranging for Frederick III's marriage to Leonora of Portugal – events which Piccolomini described in his autobiographical *Commentaries*. From his own account, we know that Piccolomini was not in Bologna at the time of Lupari's knighting, which occurred at the beginning of the emperor's itinerary through Italy. Piccolomini was part of the official welcoming party for the emperor's bride, waiting for her arrival in Siena and in the port of Talamone, then under Sieneese control, while Frederick was traveling south from his residence in Austria, via Ferrara and Florence.<sup>60</sup>

Neither in his *Commentaries* nor in his other writings does Piccolomini refer to the honors bestowed in Bologna in 1452, or indeed on Lupari. And Cusanus gives no indication in the *Cribratio* that Pius II would have known or remembered Lupari – or that Cusanus would have been aware of an acquaintance between the two. Nevertheless, the allusion to a person's knighting by the emperor is likely to have been a marker of credibility and importance for Pius II, given his previous service with Frederick. Piccolomini himself was no stranger to referring to a person's status to appeal to a reader's trust. In relaying a curious story about a «battle of ants» near Bologna, for example, Piccolomini emphasized that the source who had reported it to him was credible because «he said he witnessed it» and because he was «an expert in both fields of law who was then representing [...] the Bishop of Siena in the papal army».<sup>61</sup>

This new interpretation of the term *miles* provides evidence that Cusanus had received news of Lupari after January 1452. We know that Cusanus, on his way from Bruneck to Rome in May 1460, so some months before he completed the *Cribratio*, passed by Bologna.<sup>62</sup> Lupari was still alive, as the archival record

---

<sup>59</sup> The literature on Pius II/Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini is extensive. I have relied on the biographical introduction in Izbicki, T.M., Christianson, G., and Krey, P., (intro. and transl.), *Reject Aeneas, Accept Pius. Selected Letters of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II)*, Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2006, in particular pp. 26-49 for the years c. 1442-1453.

<sup>60</sup> Meserve and Simonetta (eds.), *Pius II Commentaries*, vol. 1, pp. 103-111.

<sup>61</sup> Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, *Europe (c.1400-1458)*, trans. R. Brown, intro. and annot. N. Bisaha, Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2013, p 239.

<sup>62</sup> Meuthen, E., *Die Letzten Jahre des Nikolaus von Kues. Biografische Untersuchungen nach neuen Quellen*, Köln and Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958, reconstructs Cusanus'

shows. Cusanus seems not to have entered the city itself, staying instead in a small town just outside of Bologna, possibly even for two nights on an otherwise-rapid march southwards. Could an encounter with his old companion from Constantinople have refreshed Cusanus' memories of their conversations about Muslims? This is a tantalizing possibility, but cannot be proven on the basis of the evidence available.

### Merchant of Venice, man of the Pope

A further notable point that emerges from the archives is Balthasar's connection – and that of some of his brothers – to Venice and to Pope Eugenius IV, i.e., the Venetian Gabriele Condulmer. Eugenius' letter commissioning Lupari refers to him as a Venetian resident or citizen, as do a few of the archival sources.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Venetian records provide direct evidence that Balthasar and his brothers were granted Venetian citizenship in 1430, a status typically bestowed after a lengthy and continuous residence and the payment of taxes.<sup>64</sup> The Luparis were given the fullest citizenship status in the Venetian system, that of *cittadini originarii*, i.e., citizens by birth, who were entitled to participation in international maritime trade, a privilege otherwise reserved for Venetian patricians. The records indicate that citizenship was granted to the Luparis, based on their «devotion to Venice», but offer no further details. There are, nevertheless, records of a number of transactions indicating that Balthasar and some of his brothers were commercially active in the city throughout the 1430s.<sup>65</sup>

---

journey to Rome in detail, here: pp. 58-59, 215-216 and 315; Vansteenberghe, E., *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401-1464). L'Action - La Pensée*, Paris, 1920, p. 198 fn. 1, citing a dated letter from Cusanus to Simon von Wehlen in *Codex Cusanus 221*, p. 210.

<sup>63</sup> Cecconi, *Studi storici*, op. cit., doc. CXLI.

<sup>64</sup> For the decision granting the privilege: Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Cassiere della bolla Ducale, *Grazie*, reg. 22, f.44r, and ASV, Senato, Privilegi, reg. 2, f. 33r. These sources were identified through the online *Cives Veneciarum* database of Venetian citizenship privileges, established under the supervision of Reinhold Mueller. The entry for the Luparis is as follows: Gaspar et Franciscus et Baldesar et Bartholomeus et Marcus, fratres, Lupari qd Venturini, *Cives Veneciarum*, <http://www.civesveneciarum.net/dettaglio.php?id=1249>, versione 56/2017-02-01, accessed on 23 November 2018. For a detailed study of migration and citizenship issues in Venice up to 1500, based also on this database, see Mueller, R., *Immigrazione e cittadinanza nella Venezia medievale*, Roma, Viella, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Among other transactions notarized in Venice, see: ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Notai, b. 148 (Vettore Pomino), 1433-1438, f. 7v, dated 27 July 1434, commission for Balthasar Lupari as agent for Giovanni Soranzo; ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Notai, b. 148,

In February 1434, Balthasar and his brother purchased a house in Venice for a modest sum of 200 ducats, at the heart of a Lucchese quarter of the city, near the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo.<sup>66</sup> This house was still part of the family property in 1449, when the brothers drew up an agreement in Bologna dividing the various possessions.<sup>67</sup> The location of their house, amidst the Lucchese community of Venice, offers a further indication of the family's commercial activities: the silk trade in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century relied on a triangular network between Lucca, Bologna and Venice, with a dominant role played by the Lucchesi.<sup>68</sup> There may have been more than one family property in the city at some point, as Balthasar is identified in a record of 1431 as a resident of a different *contrada* in Venice, that of Sant'Agostino.<sup>69</sup>

Pope Eugenius IV, in both his commission and the safe-conduct for Lupari's mission to Constantinople in 1437, also referred to Balthasar as a *familiaris* – a member of his household.<sup>70</sup> I have not yet been able to determine how or when Lupari entered the pope's circle. Eugenius may have known the Luparis from their work and residence in Venice. The connection could have been a commercial one. We know that Gabriele Condulmer was active in the business of the family at an early age.<sup>71</sup> And there are records in Venetian archives of joint ventures between a Marco Condulmer (whose relationship to Gabriele has not yet been established) and merchants of the small, cohesive

---

1433-1438, f.33v, dated 26 July 1436, a trade partnership involving Francesco Lupari, a younger brother of Balthasar, and Antonio Serafino; ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Notai, b. 148, 1439-1442, f.30r, purchase of a slave by Gasparo Lupari, March 1440.

<sup>66</sup> ASV, Cancelleria inferiore, Notai, b. 149 (Vettore Pomino), 1433-1438, f.1r. Balthasar Lupari and his brother Francesco are present. The document is dated 22 February 1433, i.e., 1434, as in the Venetian reckoning the calendar year was considered to start in March.

<sup>67</sup> See the aforementioned agreement of 1449 among the male heirs of Venturino Lupari on the division of his estate: ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 52, 16 August 1449.

<sup>68</sup> See Molà, L., *La Comunità dei lucchesi*, op. cit., in particular pp. 221-236. Older but still relevant is Bini, T., *I lucchesi a Venezia. Alcuni studi sopra i secoli XIII e XIV*, Lucca, Felice Bertini, 1853. On the location of the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo and its role in the life of the Lucchese community in Venice, see the cited works by Molà, *La Comunità dei lucchesi*, op. cit., p. 74 and pp.106-107, and Bini, *I lucchesi a Venezia*, op. cit., p. 178 and pp. 202-205.

<sup>69</sup> See fn. 32 above.

<sup>70</sup> Cecconi, *Studi storici*, op. cit., docs. CXXI and CXXII.

<sup>71</sup> For Gabriele Condulmer's early commercial activities, see Mueller, R.C., «Sull'establishment bancario veneziano. Il banchiere davanti a Dio (secoli XIV-XV)», in G. Borelli (ed.), *Mercanti e vita economica nella Repubblica Veneta (secoli XIII-XVIII)*, vol. I, Verona, Banca Popolare di Verona, 1985, pp. 47-106.

Luchese community in Venice at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>72</sup> Gabriele Condulmer could also have crossed paths with the Luparis during his time as papal governor of Bologna in 1423,<sup>73</sup> or later, during his two-year residence in Bologna starting in 1436, after his flight from Rome.<sup>74</sup> Alternatively, the connection could have been established in Constantinople through the Trevisan Cristoforo Garatone, bishop of Corone and nuncio on the same papal delegation in 1437 of which Lupari formed part. Garatone had worked as chancellor to the Venetian representative in Constantinople in the 1420s, and had become Eugenius' main negotiator with the Greeks, serving as his nuncio to Emperor John VIII Paleologos and the Greek Patriarch on three occasions prior to 1437.<sup>75</sup>

Eugenius' commission of July 1437 to raise, in Constantinople and elsewhere, the necessary funds to bring the Greeks to Italy, was addressed to both Balthasar Lupari and a Michele Zeno, or rather Zono.<sup>76</sup> The commission includes specific references to the costs of the galleys needed for the transport, and of the archers for the defense of Constantinople. Recent research has provided important new insights into the role of Lupari and, in particular, Michele Zono in the myriad transactions in Constantinople, and the recorded costs of the Council of Ferrara-Florence overall.<sup>77</sup> While the

---

<sup>72</sup> Molà, *La Comunità dei lucchesi*, op. cit., p. 238n and p. 258.

<sup>73</sup> On his time as governor of Bologna in 1423, then still as Gabriele Condulmer, Cardinal of San Clemente, see Gill, J., *Eugenius IV. Pope of Christian Union*, Westminster, MD The Newman Press, 1961, pp. 33-34.

<sup>74</sup> For Eugenius' whereabouts in these years, see: Diener, H. and B. Schwarz, «Das Itinerar Papst Eugens IV. (1431-1447)», *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 82 (2002), pp. 193-230, here pp. 216-217 and p. 226. Also: Gill, J., *Eugenius IV*, op. cit., p. 83. Eugenius was still residing in Bologna when he received Cusanus and the other minority representatives from the Council of Basel in May 1437 and dispatched his delegation to Constantinople: Bond, H.L., «Nicholas of Cusa from Constantinople to 'Learned Ignorance': The Historical Matrix for the Formation of the *De docta ignorantia*», in: G. Christianson and T.M. Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church: Essays in Memory of Chandler McCuskey Brooks for the American Cusanus Society*, Leiden, Brill, 1996, pp. 135-163, here p. 138-139; Gill, *The Council of Florence*, op. cit., p. 77-78.

<sup>75</sup> The principal study on Garatone is Pesce, L., «Cristoforo Garatone trevigiano, nunzio di Eugenio IV», *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 28 (1974), pp. 23-93.

<sup>76</sup> Ceconi, *Studi storici*, doc. CXLI; Hofmann, *Epistolae*, no. 77. Kolditz has shown to the family name should be read as Zono, see Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op. cit., p. 246.

<sup>77</sup> Kolditz has followed the money in the archival records in great depth, including the roles of Zono and Lupari as evidenced in notarial acts, account books and legal proceedings from after 1437, see Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op. cit., in particular pp.244-254, thereby expanding on the earlier study by Gill, J., "The Cost of the Council of Florence",

financial intricacies in Venice and Constantinople, and thereafter in Ferrara and Florence, are still not fully understood, it is clear that the two men were not bankers in any modern sense. Instead, the records show a diversity of transactions in which they sometimes put up some amounts of money themselves, but more frequently acted as middlemen between various Venetian lenders in Constantinople and the papal treasury, through the use of letters of exchange.<sup>78</sup> Their use would have required trusted, personal contacts in Constantinople. And indeed, for Michele Zono, too, previous experience in Constantinople and access to an influential, international network there can be established from archival records in Venice.<sup>79</sup> Striking about the profiles of both men, in addition to their experience in the East and their roots in Venice and Venetian affairs, is that Eugenius gave such critical roles in the geopolitics of their day to non-patricians.

The relationship between Eugenius and Lupari and his brothers did not come to an end with the mission in 1437. In 1445, Eugenius granted Balthasar the honorific title of *comes palatinus*, or palatine count, possibly on account of his services in connection with the Council of Florence.<sup>80</sup> His older brother Gasparo, too, was appointed by Eugenius to this honorific order in the same year, for unspecified services and «loyalty to the church in difficult times».<sup>81</sup>

Overall, the Luparis appear to have been successful businessmen, originally of non-patrician stock. Various male members of the family were active in both commercial life, in Bologna and in Venice, and in Bologna's city

in J. Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and other Essays*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1964, pp. 186-203.

<sup>78</sup> Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op cit., p. 254. Eugenius' commission of 7 July 1437 referred to such letters of exchange.

<sup>79</sup> A discussion of material with respect to Michele Zono and his significance to Eugenius IV goes beyond the aims of this paper, and will be addressed in a separate essay. Briefly, evidence of Zono's residence in Constantinople before 1437: a transaction in Constantinople dated July 1426 recorded by Francesco Filelfo (!), apparently still affiliated with the chancery of the Venetian *bailo* at the time: ASV, Duca di Candia, b.1, fasc.13, f.19v. And in 1431, Michele Zono was one of the four witnesses on the Venetian side to the extension, prepared and signed in Constantinople, of the state treaty between the Venetian Doge and the Byzantine emperor, see Thomas, G., (ed.), *Diplomatarium Veneto-Levantinum*, vol. II, Venezia, 1899, p. 346.

<sup>80</sup> Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op. cit., p. 256 and fn. 429, citing a register in the Vatican relating to Eugenius, ASVat, Reg. Vat. 382, fol. The family archive in Bologna does not appear to contain a copy of this act.

<sup>81</sup> ASBo, Comune Governo, *Feudi e cittadinanza*, no. 428, 23 May 1445. A copy of a document prepared by none less than Flavio Biondo. I am grateful to John Monfasani for his help in interpreting this manuscript.

politics and civic institutions.<sup>82</sup> They invested earnings in real estate, and by the time of Balthasar's father's death, before the middle of the century, the family boasted a number of properties, including houses, mills and warehouses.<sup>83</sup> But there is no indication of extreme wealth, or of being professional bankers. The original family house in Bologna,<sup>84</sup> which can still be seen today, shows no signs of overstated opulence.<sup>85</sup> The evidence for the political importance of Balthasar and other male members of the family is also difficult to assess. On the one hand, their names emerge only occasionally in the Bologna chronicles, in minor roles. On the other hand, Balthasar had played a key part in an international undertaking of the utmost importance to the pope, and was considered part of his household. The honorific titles granted to Balthasar and his brother Gasparo also suggest political activities that were of sufficient importance to be recognized at the highest level. Their younger brothers, Francesco and Marco, too, were given the title of *comites palatinos* as early as December 1437, by Frederick's predecessor as Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, an indication of rising status can be seen in the marriage, at an unknown date, of a niece of Balthasar to Tommaso Tebaldi, a prominent member of Bolognese nobility and a trusted member of the inner circle of Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> In addition to Balthasar's membership of the city's «Council of 120» and the «Anziani», cited above, fn. 27 and 28, his older brother Gasparo was a member of the council of the «Anziani» in 1429, see Dolfi, *Cronologia*, op. cit., p. 484. The archival records in Bologna contain a few additional examples of the civic engagement of Venturino's sons.

<sup>83</sup> As evidenced by the already mentioned 1449 agreement among the surviving (male) descendants of Venturino on the division of the latter's properties: ASBo, Archivio Malvezzi-Lupari, Serie III, *Istrumenti e Scritture Lupari*, b. 52, 16 August 1449. Notarial acts in the family archive point to numerous purchases of real estate over the years by the Lupari brothers.

<sup>84</sup> Acquired after the death of their father by one of Balthasar's brothers, according to the above-mentioned 1449 agreement. See also the above-mentioned entry, fn. 20, for «Via del Luzzo» in Guidicini, G., *Cose notabili*, op. cit., pp. 329-330.

<sup>85</sup> The house, at Via dal Luzzo no. 4, in the medieval heart of the city, carries a modern plaque designating it as «Casa Lupari» and noting its completion in 1449 at the behest of Venturino Lupari.

<sup>86</sup> Kolditz, *Johannes VIII.*, op. cit., p. 250 and fn. 406, citing a document from the family archive in Bologna.

<sup>87</sup> In a letter dated 4 April 1456 from Jacopo Lupari – son of Gasparo Lupari, Balthasar's oldest brother – to Giovanni de Medici, son of Cosimo the Elder, Jacopo refers to Tommaso di Tebaldi of Bologna as «mio cognato», see Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Mediceo avanti il Principato*, filza 9, f. 202r. I thank Marcello Simonetta for this reference. Lodovico Frati notes from other sources that another son of Gasparo, Filippo

### Balthasar Lupari as model and as source for Cusanus

To sum up so far: in his introduction to a treatise on the Qur'an, Cusanus invoked more than one conversation he had had with a merchant, who had since been knighted; a commercially successful and well-travelled trader, who seems to have risen to some prominence in the politics of his day in Bologna; with roots in Venice and connections to at least one prominent family there (without being born into a noble family himself); and a frequent visitor to Constantinople, residing there or frequently visiting between approximately 1430 and 1440, and connected to its multicultural mercantile and professional networks, including Muslims.

I would like to suggest that this profile – now that it has been more fully established through the archival research presented here – has echoes in the letter that Cusanus wrote to John of Segovia in December 1454.<sup>88</sup> In this letter, Cusanus gave thought on how to effectively hold the kind of conversations with Muslims about which Segovia had written to him.<sup>89</sup> Cusanus suggested that such an initiative ought to be led by secular leaders rather than priests, because the Turks would prefer speaking to laymen. An important role would be played by Christians living in Muslim-held territories, who were familiar with Muslim rituals and beliefs, and willing to engage with them on matters of faith. Merchants, too, could play a role in bringing such people together. While Cusanus explicitly refers to Christians in Cairo, Alexandria and Caffa –

---

Lupari (i.e., brother of Jacopo) is also referred to as a brother in law of Tommaso di Tebaldi, see Frati, L., «Due umanisti bolognesi alla Corte ducale di Milano», *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Serie V, Vol. 43, no. 254 (1909), pp. 359-374, here p. 364. Frati concludes, based on further evidence he cites, that the relationship was probably referred to as such because a sister of Filippo (and of Jacopo) Lupari was married to Tommaso, but he does not note the evidence from the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

<sup>88</sup> Nicholas Cusanus, *Epistola ad Ioannem de Segobia*, ed. R. Klibansky and H. Bascour, *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia. Iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis*, Leipzig and Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1959, vol. VII, pp. 93-102. I have relied on the translations in W.A. Euler and T. Kerger (eds.), (eds.), *Cusanus und der Islam*, Trier, Paulinus, 2010, pp. 65-77; and in Sanz Santacruz, V., *Nicolás de Cusa. La Paz de Fe. Carta a Juan de Segovia*, Pamplona, EUNSA, 1996, pp. 91-98.

<sup>89</sup> Discussions of their correspondence in Euler, W.A. and Stammkötter, F.B., «Johannes von Segovia und Nikolaus von Kues im Gespräch über den Islam», in Euler and Kerger (eds.), *Cusanus und der Islam*, op. cit., pp. 49-63; Wolf, A.M., *Juan de Segovia and the Fight for Peace. Christians and Muslims in the Fifteenth Century*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2014, pp. 136-139; Mann, J.D., «Juan de Segovia on the Superiority of Christians over Muslims: *Liber de magna auctoritate episcoporum in concilio generali 10.6*», in I.A. Levy, R. George-Tvrtković and D. Duclow (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam: Polemic Dialogue in the Late Middle Ages*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2014, pp. 145-159.

and not Constantinople – Lupari may well have stood model: as a layman who had resided in the East, who had interacted with Muslims as business partners, and who was familiar with the beliefs of Muslims. Someone, in short, who could be of practical value in laying the groundwork for interfaith engagement.

Furthermore, with a better understanding of who Lupari was, I believe that Cusanus' goal in citing him in the *Cribratio* – and in relaying with remarkable detail the «converted Turk episode»<sup>90</sup> – also becomes clearer. By emphasizing his informant's identity, and by including the specifics of an actual exchange, Cusanus wanted to underline that the information he provides was obtained from a credible source, invoking both his source's experience of living in the East alongside Muslims and his subsequent elevated status.<sup>91</sup> Cusanus thus presented us with what he saw as evidence of the viability of the agenda at the very heart of the *Cribratio* and of the correspondence with John of Segovia: that learned Muslims could «be taken by the hand» to realize that the Truth of the Gospel can be found even within the Qur'an; that there were in fact already wise Muslims who had done so; furthermore, that learned Muslims secretly read the Gospel and preferred it to the Qur'an. This claim appears one more time later in the text,<sup>92</sup> and it seems reasonable to assume that Cusanus was drawing on the information obtained from Lupari, as none of his other cited sources make a similar assertion.

It is notable that Cusanus turned to a non-written source to make such a point. After all, for proof of the viability of persuading Muslims, Cusanus could have pointed to a written authority in his possession: William of Tripoli's *De Machometo et de libro legis Sarracenorum*, of around 1270. The manuscript, now in the British Library (MS Add. 19952) was once part of Cusanus' collection, as confirmed, among other things, by his marginal notes. James Biechler observed that since the author of the manuscript «seemed to write from personal experience, it reinforced Cusanus' belief that many people were Muslims not out of conviction but because of coercion, that Islam bears witness to some fundamental Christian truths and that many Muslims could

---

<sup>90</sup> Note, however, that Cusanus does not use the word «conversion» anywhere in this context. I believe this is consistent with his premise that the truth of Christianity is already contained in the Qur'an, i.e., the attainment of that truth is not a matter of changing faiths, but of properly «sifting» and interpreting the Qur'an's words.

<sup>91</sup> Note also Cusanus' statement in the prologue, for additional credibility no doubt, that he sought and obtained confirmation from «the brothers» that Lupari's story was true: Cusanus, *Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., 3, lines 7 – 8. For reasons to be set out in a separate paper, I interpret this to be a reference to the Dominicans rather than the Franciscans whom he had also met with.

<sup>92</sup> Cusanus, *Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., 37, lines 5 – 7.

easily be persuaded of the truth of Christianity if it were presented in rational form».<sup>93</sup>

Cusanus' reliance on a person rather than a text in this particular part of the *Cribratio* must, therefore, be taken as something of significance. «Even if I am about to present a theological treatise based on my reading of the Qur'an and other writings» – Cusanus seems to be saying – «this is by no means just a hypothetical, textual undertaking». Cusanus' aim in invoking an oral source contrasts, therefore, in two respects from the other elements of the preface to the *Cribratio*. The latter seem designed to establish in the reader's mind the sophistication of his knowledge of the Qur'an, his efforts to understand its contents, his erudition. These passages, placed immediately before and after the episode involving Lupari, are all about books and manuscripts. Ever the bibliophile, Cusanus records how he obtains them in Basel, finds more in Constantinople, speaks to Franciscans about the contents of the Qur'an, asks about writings by Greeks, gives encouragement to write a book against Islam, then finds some more books, and so on. With Lupari, in contrast, Cusanus is able to present a witness to the fact that Muslims could be brought to embrace Christianity – living proof for the convictions that Cusanus had arrived at through reading his texts. Not only is Cusanus alternating textual and oral sources here: his prologue also oscillates, to use the terminology of Thomas Burman, between philology and polemic.<sup>94</sup>

### Conversations with Muslims

Why did Cusanus not mention, in the *Cribratio*, any conversations with Muslims he may have had himself? Is it because he simply never spoke to a Muslim? The question has not yet been considered in depth. Scholars face a major challenge in that so little is known of Cusanus' activities in Constantinople, and that Cusanus left only fragments of information about his time there. This obstacle was, perhaps, part of the reason why significant

---

<sup>93</sup> Biechler, J.E., «Three Manuscripts on Islam from the Library of Nicholas of Cusa», *Manuscripta*, 27 (1983), pp. 91-100. A remarkable conclusion found in one version of the work – that «by simple preaching of God and without philosophical arguments, [Muslims] will, like simple sheep, seek the baptism of Christ and enter the flock of God. This said and wrote he, who by the instigation of God has already baptized more than a thousand» – has been shown to be an unwarranted addition of a contemporary compiler. See Jensen, K.V., «William of Tripoli (fl. late 1200s)» in Friedman and Mossler Figg (eds.), *Trade, Travel and Exploration in the Middle Ages*, op. cit., pp. 648-49, and the literature cited there.

<sup>94</sup> Burman, T.E., *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, pp. 186ff.

biographies like those of Edmond Vansteenbergh<sup>95</sup> and Erich Meuthen,<sup>96</sup> the collection of biographical notices by Morimichi Watanabe,<sup>97</sup> as well as the respective essays on Cusanus' engagement with Islam by Thomas Izbicki<sup>98</sup> and James Biechler<sup>99</sup> did not address the issue of actual encounters with Muslims.<sup>100</sup> Other scholars have suggested answers, but also grappled with the very limited evidence. Pauline Moffit Watts, for example, referred to «the indications that Cusanus' views on non-Christian others, in contrast to Lull, were formed mainly through readings, and exchanges with other Christian theologians», but did not highlight what these indications might be.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Rita George-Tvrtković noted that he had «little if any exposure to non-Christians» during his brief time in Constantinople, but did not elaborate.<sup>102</sup> Nancy Bisaha, in contrast, assumed that Cusanus and John of Segovia had both «come in extended contact with Muslims, providing them ample opportunity to discuss matters of faith and to form positive impressions of the so-called Infidel on a first-hand basis», and pointed, in support of this conclusion, to Cusanus having spent time in Constantinople, but not to actual encounters.<sup>103</sup> Most recently, John Monfasani wondered where Cusanus might

---

<sup>95</sup> Vansteenbergh, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues*, op. cit.

<sup>96</sup> Meuthen, E., *Nicholas of Cusa. A Sketch for a Biography*, Washington, DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> See the entry on Islam in Watanabe, M., *Nicholas of Cusa – A Companion to his Life and Times*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 51-56.

<sup>98</sup> Izbicki, T.M., «The Possibility of Dialogue with Islam in the Fifteenth Century», in G. Christianson and T.M. Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, Leiden, Brill, 1991, pp. 175-183.

<sup>99</sup> Biechler, J.E., «A New Face Toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia» in Christianson and Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, op. cit., pp. 185-202.

<sup>100</sup> I have also consulted Costigliolo, M., *The Western Perception of Islam between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Work of Nicholas of Cusa*, Eugene, OR, Pickwick Publications, 2017, as well as the essays in I.C. Levy, R. George-Tvrtković, R., and D.F. Duclow (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam*, op. cit., and those in Euler and Kerger (eds.), *Cusanus und der Islam*, op. cit., all with similar results, further confirming that the question remains to be explored.

<sup>101</sup> Moffit Watts, P., «Talking to Spiritual Others: Ramon Llull, Nicholas of Cusa, Diego Valades», in Christianson and Izbicki (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom*, op. cit., pp. 203-218

<sup>102</sup> George-Tvrtković, R., «After the Fall: Riccoldo da Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa on Religious Diversity», *Theological Studies*, 73 (2012), pp. 641-662, here p. 646.

<sup>103</sup> Bisaha, N., *Creating East and West. Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 147.

have had opportunity to hold religious debates with Turks, and allowed Constantinople as a possibility, as well as other larger cities.<sup>104</sup>

Cusanus' reticence on this matter certainly stands in sharp contrast to others who had written about their experience in speaking with Muslims, and whose work he knew, in particular John of Segovia,<sup>105</sup> Ramon Llull,<sup>106</sup> and Riccoldo da Montecroce.<sup>107</sup> It would clearly have been possible for Cusanus to interact with Muslims in Constantinople.<sup>108</sup> He could also have done so later, in other cosmopolitan European cities such as Venice,<sup>109</sup> but Constantinople

---

<sup>104</sup> Monfasani, J., «Cusanus, the Greeks and Islam», in T.M. Izbicki, J. Alexander and D.F. Duclow (eds.), *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition: Essays in Honor of Gerald Christianson*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, pp. 90-112.

<sup>105</sup> See now in particular Wolf, *Juan de Segovia and the Fight for Peace*, op. cit., in particular pp. 61-94 and pp. 175-222, on the subject of his engagement with, and conversion of, Muslims.

<sup>106</sup> Among the extensive literature on Ramon Llull's engagement with Islam, and Cusanus' engagement with Llull's writings, see in particular the essays in Bidese, E., Fidora, A., and Renner, P., (eds.), *Ramon Llull und Nikolaus von Kues: Eine Begegnung im Zeichen der Toleranz – Raimondo Lullo e Nicolò Cusano: Un incontro nel segno della tolleranza: Akten des Internationalen Kongresses zu Ramon Llull und Nikolaus von Kues (Brixen und Bozen, 25.-27. November 2004)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2005.

<sup>107</sup> See, foremost, George-Trvtković, R., *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq. Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012.

<sup>108</sup> For the presence of Turks and possibly Muslims of other origin see, in addition to the sources cited further below, the discussion and some additional evidence in Necipoğlu, N., *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins. Politics and Society in the Late Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 200-209. Necipoğlu does not discuss the evidence presented by the prologue to the *Cribratio* itself, in that a Turkish physician was «in charge» of the Byzantine hospitals. Also: Harris, J., «Constantinople as City-State, c.1360-1453», in J. Harris, C. Holmes and E. Russell (eds.), *Byzantines, Latins, and Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean World after 1150*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 119-140, here p. 124. Matschke, K. P., «Some Merchant Families in Constantinople before, during and after the Fall of the City 1453», in *Balkan Studies* 38/2 (1997), pp. 219-38; and Necipoğlu, N., «Ottoman Merchants in Constantinople during the First Half of the Fifteenth Century», in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1992), pp. 158-169. Reinert, S.W., «The Muslim Presence in Constantinople, 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Some Preliminary Observations», in H. Ahrweiler and A. E. Laiou (eds.), *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks, 1997, pp.125-150, provides an overview but no additional evidence for the period in question beyond that gathered by Necipoğlu.

<sup>109</sup> Within the rich scholarship around minorities in Venice, research on the long-term presence of Muslims in the city before 1453 is scant. See, among many other studies, Imhaus, B., *Le minoranze orientali a Venezia 1300-1510*, Roma, Il Veltro, 1997, and

seems the most likely place to have offered opportunities for dialogue, as there is clear evidence for the presence of Muslims in the decades before the fall of Constantinople in 1453. For one, Cusanus could have drawn on Lupari's connections, including the central ones indicated in the *Cribratio*, who are key to Cusanus' message, i.e., the group of «Turks» who Lupari claimed wanted to become Christians. The account book of Giacomo Badoer for his family company's activities in Constantinople<sup>110</sup> also illustrates the kind of international milieu that Lupari and, therefore, Cusanus, by only one degree of separation, moved in. Badoer's trading partners included a number of resident merchants with Muslim names.<sup>111</sup>

Other contemporary sources also show that the presence of Turkish Muslims in the city in the 1420s and 30s was continual and significant. The Burgundian Bertrandon de la Broquière, reporting on a stay in 1433 – so only four years before Cusanus – mentions that there was a Turkish official based in Constantinople, with similar autonomous jurisdiction to that of the Venetian *bailo*, who looked after the interests of Turkish merchants in the city.<sup>112</sup> This Turkish official was presumably an Ottoman *kadi*.<sup>113</sup> Johann Schiltberger, a former German soldier taken captive by Ottoman forces who found refuge in Constantinople in 1427, was warned by his Greek hosts not to leave the house, for fear that he might be recognized by «the Infidels» in the city and brought before the emperor, who would then have been bound to surrender him to them.<sup>114</sup>

---

Ravid, B.C.I., «Venice and its Minorities», in E. Dursteler (ed.), *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400-1797*, Leiden, Brill, 2013. Any Muslims in Venice before 1453 are likely to have been either Ottoman or Mameluk emissaries on a brief visit, or workers and slaves.

<sup>110</sup> Badoer, *Libro dei conti*, op. cit.

<sup>111</sup> See, in particular, Necipoğlu, *Byzantium between the Ottomans and the Latins*, op. cit., pp. 200-209; and Matschke, «Some Merchant Families», op. cit. Turkish or other Muslim merchants in Constantinople are identified in the indices to Badoer's *Libro dei conti* prepared by Bertelè, *Badoer. Complemento e indici*, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> The *Voyage d'outremer* by Bertrandon de la Broquière, translation in Wright, *Early Travels in Palestine*, op. cit., p. 341.

<sup>113</sup> See Matschke, K.P., «The Late Byzantine Urban Economy, Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries» in A.E. Laiou (ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, Washington, DC., Dumbarton Oaks, 2002, vol. 2, pp. 463-495, here p. 478.

<sup>114</sup> Buchan Telfer, J. (ed.), *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger, a native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396-1427*, London, Hakluyt Society 1879, p. 81. Bertrandon de la Broquière also noted the norm by which the Greek emperor was obliged to return Christian slaves seeking refuge in Constantinople to their Turkish owners.

Nowhere, in all his written work, does Cusanus explicitly state that he spoke to Muslims. Cusanus' clearest allusion to what may be his own interaction with Muslims is in the letter to John of Segovia of December 1454. And even here there is ambivalence. He says that in «[his] experience» it is not difficult to persuade Jews and Turks, i.e., Muslims, of the Trinity.<sup>115</sup> Frustratingly for scholars, he does not clarify what this «experience» may have consisted of. Is this from an actual instance, or more than one, in which Cusanus personally convinced a Muslim? Or is it a coy reference to having heard about such an exchange from others, veiled by a vague turn of phrase so as to leave his reader with a particular impression? All this ambiguity is quite different from the assertive tone he used in *Sermo I*, delivered much earlier, in 1430, when he portrays himself actively debating and convincing learned Jews (not Muslims) of the truth of the Trinity.<sup>116</sup> Subsequent phrases in the letter to Segovia of 1454, in which Cusanus discusses engagement with Muslims on aspects other than the Trinity, sound even more tentative, for example when he writes: «it seems this is how one could convince them».<sup>117</sup> This does not sound typical of someone who has had an actual conversation, at least not on these topics.

There is a further detail in the letter to Segovia that suggests – although it does not prove – that Cusanus did not have effective examples from his own experience to offer. Cusanus mentions that he asked certain «others» whether one could deduce from the Qur'an whether it is conceivable that anyone might be considered above Christ. These interlocutors told him that this could not be, since Christ was the highest Son of God.<sup>118</sup> From the text itself, it is possible that Cusanus was referring to Muslims. It seems possible in the context. But it seems odd, if the goal was to persuade Segovia that the agenda of conversion they were discussing was feasible, not to state this more explicitly if it had been the case. And ultimately these <others> cited by Cusanus could only have been Muslims if something truly vital had been lost in translation about their views of Jesus (and it is admittedly not the only instance in which Cusanus writes of his erroneous belief that Muslims accepted the concept of a son of God).

---

<sup>115</sup> Cusanus, *Epistola ad Ioannem Segobiam*, op. cit., 98, lines 4-5: «Expertus sum tam apud Iudaeos quam ipsos Teucros non esse difficile persuadere trinitatem in unitate substantiae».

<sup>116</sup> German translation in Müller, T., *Der Junge Cusanus. Ein Aufbruch in das 15. Jahrhundert*, Trier, Paulinus, 2014, pp. 136-150, here p.141. Müller points to two slightly variant readings of this sentence in different manuscripts: p. 181 fn.583.

<sup>117</sup> Cusanus, *Epistola ad Ioannem Segobiam*, op. cit., p. 99, lines 8-9: «Et visum est mihi tali modo posse persuaderi ipsis».

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98, lines 19-21.

Neither does Cusanus' earlier work touching on interreligious dialogue, the *De pace fidei*, written shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, offer much of a foothold to find evidence of an actual experience. Numerous scholars have pointed to its fictional, aspirational nature.<sup>119</sup> The interlocutors in the staged dialogue, including the Arab, the Turk and the Persian, rather unrealistically follow, and let themselves be persuaded by, the reasoning provided by the Christian «Word». Cusanus' discussion of Muslim rituals – both in *De pace fidei* and in the *Cribratio* – remains on the surface, and does not point to information gathered first-hand.<sup>120</sup> In this light, then, Cusanus' assertion in *De pace fidei* that Muslims are *facilius* – more easily – converted should perhaps not, in the absence of evidence for concrete instances, be taken as a reflection of actual experience.<sup>121</sup>

On balance, the evidence that Cusanus presents for any real dialogue is rather thin and garbled – to the point that it seems deliberately obfuscated. Perhaps he had some conversations with Turks or other Muslims, either in Constantinople or – less likely – elsewhere. Clearly the scant evidence does not allow us to rule it out altogether, and one may recall that Cusanus' interest in Islam and the Qur'an predated his journey to Constantinople.<sup>122</sup> The conversations he recorded as having taken place in Constantinople – those with Lupari, but also with the Dominicans and Franciscans – show that already then he was actively gathering material. But it is precisely the eagerness to collect information, fed by the opportunity to do so while in Constantinople, that stands in such contrast to the lack of insight he gives us about any encounters with Muslims. Ultimately, Cusanus' ambiguity – if not silence – on the matter strongly suggests that if a conversation with a Muslim ever took place, he must have concluded that it was simply not adequate for what he wanted to demonstrate in the *Cribratio*. And so, when Cusanus was considering, sometime in 1461 or 1462, how to demonstrate that Muslims could be

---

<sup>119</sup> Most recently, for example, John Monfasani referred to PDF as *De pace fidei* to «a thought experiment, and not an especially successful one», see Monfasani, J., «Cusanus, the Greeks and Islam», op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>120</sup> Rita George-Trvrtković, in comparing Cusanus' *De pace fidei* to the work of Riccoldo da Montecroce, draws attention to Cusanus' confidence in the persuasive power of dialogue in light of Riccoldo's far more complex attitude; the latter's skepticism, in contrast to Cusanus, no doubt reflecting actual interreligious encounter, which sometimes leads to increased understanding, but sometimes does not: George-Trvrtković, R., «After the Fall: Riccoldo da Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa on Religious Diversity», *Theological Studies*, 73 (2012), p. 661.

<sup>121</sup> On this assertion by Cusanus, see also Euler, W.A., «A Critical Survey of Cusanus' Writings on Islam», in Levy, George-Trvrtković and Duclow, *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>122</sup> Biechler, «Three Manuscripts on Islam», op. cit.

persuaded of the central teachings of Christianity, the most compelling experience that came to mind was from a conversation, held more than two decades before, with an Italian merchant in Constantinople, who was now a knight in Bologna.

### Conversations with others in Constantinople?

Balthasar Lupari is the only oral source in Constantinople whom Cusanus mentions by name in the *Cribratio*. But from his prologue we know that Cusanus also spoke with members of the Franciscan and Dominicans orders based in Pera, although these remain unnamed.<sup>123</sup> The respective friars resident in Constantinople or Pera in 1437 have not yet been identified through other sources.<sup>124, 125</sup> The library at the Franciscan convent, according to Cusanus, held a copy of the Qur'an in Arabic. Cusanus asked the friars to explain certain points to him from the text, strongly suggesting they were able to read it in the original language. At the Dominican house, Cusanus also inquired about the Qur'an, and was shown a Latin translation, similar to the translation

---

<sup>123</sup> All references hereafter to the *Cribratio* are from: Hopkins, *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, op. cit., p. 75-76. The text suggests that the Franciscan convent was in Constantinople, not in Pera. This would be of note to late Byzantine topography, as there is currently no confirmation of a Franciscan convent in Constantinople itself as late as the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, see Janin, R., *La Géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. Première partie: le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Oecuménique*. vol. 3, *Les Églises et les monastères*, Paris, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1969. pp. 577-578. Nevertheless, for other possible references to a Franciscan house in Constantinople at that time, see Paribeni, A., «Iconografia, committenza, topografia di Costantinopoli: sul cassone di Apollonio di Giovanni con la 'Conquista di Trebisonda'», *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, 56 (III Serie, XXIV), 2001, pp. 255-303.

<sup>124</sup> Relevant studies on the convents include Loenertz, R. «Les établissements dominicains de Péra-Constantinople (Origines et fondations)», *Échos d'Orient*, vol. 34, no. 179, 1935, pp. 332-349; Matteucci, G., *Un glorioso convento francescano sulle rive del Bosforo: il S. Francesco di Galata in Costantinopoli, c. 1230-1697*, Roma, Studi Francescani, 1967; Tsougarakis, N.I., *The Latin Religious Orders in Medieval Greece, 1204-1500*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> It is possible that at the time of Cusanus' visit, Nicholas of Ferrara, the vicar general of the Dominican Society of Pilgrim Brothers, who had been charged by Pope Eugenius IV in June 1437 with reforming the convent, would have been present, as his instructions were issued at the same time as those to the papal legation, which Cusanus accompanied as representative of the Council of Basel minority faction, and which left for Constantinople shortly thereafter, see Hofmann, G. (ed.), *Epistolae Pontificiae ad Concilium Florentinum Spectantes*, vol. I, part 1, Roma, Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1940, no. 73, 2 July 1437.

that he had left in Basel. Furthermore, he asked the Dominicans whether «any of the Greeks had written against these foolish errors», that is, in his opinion, Islam. He was referred to the work of the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century Greek Father John of Damascus.<sup>126</sup> Finally, he asked for confirmation of the story of the group of Turkish (or Muslim) men who wanted to travel to Rome, as relayed to him by Lupari. The Dominicans corroborated the account, no doubt because they had been involved in the Christian education or even conversion of these Turks. If he made other inquiries with the friars, or if he was given further insights by them into the Qur'an or Muslim practices, Cusanus does not explicitly say so in the *Cribratio*.

The absence of references to Greek works other than that of John of Damascus, or to information about Muslims that he could have otherwise obtained from Greek sources, is also remarkable. The Dominican convent in Pera was known for its contacts with Greek scholars.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, as member of a high-level delegation sent by Pope Eugenius IV to the Byzantine court, Cusanus would have had numerous opportunities to speak with Greek scholars and to consult Greek texts (perhaps with the aid of a translator).<sup>128</sup> For centuries, the Byzantine empire had been on the forefront of Christianity's military, commercial, intellectual and religious engagement with the Muslim world. The Greeks had engaged with various dynasties of Persian, Arab and Turkish nations, including the Abbasids, Fatimids, Seljuks, Timurids, Mamelukes, and Ottomans. Furthermore, the notion of dialogue between Christians and Muslims was well established in Byzantine writing by the time Cusanus was in Constantinople, and not just as a purely literary device: conversations about faith had actually taken place. Gregory Palamas, for example, writing in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, gave a firsthand account of his debates with Muslims in the presence of the Ottoman sultan after his capture by Turks in 1354.<sup>129</sup> As represented by Palamas, the discussion touched on a number of differences between Christian and Muslim beliefs, including the Christian concept of the Trinity, and the Muslim practice of circumcision. Emperor Manuel II Paleologos, the father of John VIII, emperor at the time of

---

<sup>126</sup> This was a reference to what was known in the West as *De haeresibus*, written in the late 7<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>127</sup> Tsougarakis, *Latin Religious Orders*, op. cit., p. 189.

<sup>128</sup> For the most recent contribution on the question of whether Cusanus was proficient in Greek, at least in his later years, see Monfasani, J. «Nicholas of Cusa, the Byzantines and the Greek Language», in M. Thurner (ed.), *Nicolaus Cusanus zwischen Deutschland und Italien*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2002, pp. 215-252.

<sup>129</sup> Excerpts in Geanakoplos, D.J., *Byzantium. Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 385-386. Discussed in Pahlitzsch, J., «Gregory Palamas», in Thomas and Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations*, op. cit., pp. 101-108.

Cusanus' mission in 1437, had written a *Dialogue with a Persian*, drawing on conversations he had held with an Islamic scholar in 1391 and, like Palamas' work, also touching on Christian and Muslim teachings, as well as Muslim practices.<sup>130</sup> Of a more literary, fictitious nature was the *Dialogue with a Muslim* written by the monk Joseph Bryennius between 1420 and 1431, in which he presented an affirmation of Christian faith against the backdrop of Muslim expansion. The tone is conversational, rather than polemic, suggesting perhaps that Bryennius believed that dialogue between Christians and Muslims was possible.<sup>131</sup>

It is striking that these and other works were not known to the friars in Pera, or that Cusanus did not otherwise obtain access to them during his time in Constantinople. Given the seemingly comprehensive discussion in the prologue of how he gathered his information for the *Cribratio*, the virtual absence of Greek sources from the text points, perhaps, to at least one conclusion: that Cusanus did not raise his interest in Islam with any of his Greek interlocutors.

### Conclusion

This article has identified a crucial source of information for Cusanus' views on Muslims and their beliefs. In addition to his literary sources and discussions with Latin friars in Constantinople, Cusanus relied not on conversations with Muslims or Greek scholars, but on a merchant of Venice who has eluded historical attention so far. Balthasar Lupari's experience in Constantinople substituted for Cusanus' own lack of a meaningful exchange with Muslims. In addition, he served as an inspiration for Cusanus' idea that laymen could play a critical role in interreligious dialog. With Pope Pius II, and presumably also a wider readership, in mind, Cusanus presented the testimony of Lupari in his *Cribratio* as a way to demonstrate the viability of his agenda and to burnish his credibility as a commentator on Islamic beliefs.

Maarten Halff  
maarten\_halfff@hotmail.com

---

<sup>130</sup> Todt, K.P., «Manuel II Palaeologus», in Thomas and Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations*, op. cit., pp. 314-325.

<sup>131</sup> Salzmann, M., «Joseph Bryennius», in Thomas and Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations*, op. cit., pp. 334-338.