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Thème : ***L'Humanisme dans les Provinces Unies au 16<sup>ème</sup> siècle***  
***Humanism in the Low Countries during the 16th Century***

***The lecture will focus on three authors : the iconic humanist and scholar Erasmus, the mannerist love poet Janus Secundus and the diplomat and scholar Augerius Busbequius (Ogier de Busbecq).***

***With excerpts in Latin and French and English translation from « Laus Stultitiae », Praise of Folly (Erasmus) ; « Basia », Kisses (Janus Secundus) and « Turcicae epistolae », Turkish Letters and « « Epistulae ad Rudolphum II Imperatorem e Gallia scriptae », Letters written from France to the Emperor Rudolph II.***

### **Introduction**

Of all the European languages, except Greek, Latin can boast the longest history which spans a period of some twenty five centuries. Ever since the first Latin words were cut on stone in about 600 B.C. down to the present day, a great variety of documents (in the Vatican f.i .) as well as scientific (Newtons *Principa mathematica* and Spinoza's *Ethica*) and literary works has been published in the old Roman's language.

This long and fascinating history can roughly be divided into three main periods.

The first period covers the centuries when Latin was the living language of the Roman people (let's say roughly till 500 after J.C.)

After the dissolution of the Roman world Latin survived by the pens of learned men in western and Central Europe.

Although in these so called Middle Ages they spoke at home many and widely different languages and dialects, they maintained Latin a common means of international communication and higher civilisation in general.

So, while Latin was dying on people's lips, it began a new life in the Roman Church, in monasteries al over Europe and among the educated classes.

The third period starts around 1300 in Italy with the dawn of Humanism, after a « millennium tenebrarum ». Humanism was first a reaction agains late medievel Latin, perceived as ugly, abstruse against the corrupted style of medieval latin and above all the obscure jargon of late scholastic philosophy.

Scholars wanted to return to the sources of classical latin – ad fontes ! -

They were exceedingly proud of the unique greatness of the literary works of their ancient Roman ancestors and among the ecclesiastical and political decay of their country they advocated a return to the glory that was Rome and a closer observation of the ancient norms in matters of Latin language and literature.

Such they believed was the only means of reasserting Italy's moral and cultural preeminence since no transalpine 'barbarian' would ever be able to compete with them in the perfect mastery of latin. Innovation, progress was thus realised by returning to the past !

*Studia humanitatis* were not only a joy forever, but above all the pillar of formation and education, *Bildung*.

We may know Petrarch and Boccaccio as writers in Italian, but it's tragically ironic that they wanted to be known as writers in Latin. Petrarch called his Italian poems « nugae », trifles.

He thought his being crowned as *poeta laureatus* (1341) on the Capitol in Rome, among the cows, as one of the major events of his life.

From the fifteenth century onwards, 'humanist' latin would spread all over Europe except the areas under Turkish rule. Eventually it would be transplanted onto the American continent and occasionally among native Africans and Asians.

Greek language and literature would also return to Western Europe in the course of the fifteenth century : Petrarch still considered himself an « *elementarius graius* » He had a codex of Homer but could not read it.

Only after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 a lot of Greek scholars fled to the west.

One could say that around 1500 with Erasmus the humanist has become also a scholar, a philologist. Just think about his critical edition of the New Testament and the founding of the *Collegium trilingue* In Leuven.

Finally it's good to make some distinctions.

Humanism is not quite the same as Neolatin literature.

Let us say that humanism ranges from 1300 - 1600, and Neolatin literature from 1300 till today.

To give you an idea : all remaining literature of antiquity fits into one bookcase.

For medieval literature you would need a huge room butnd to store neolatin literature one would need a whole building.

Humanism is not the same as « Renaissance », which is in fact a nineteenth century concept, forged by Burckhardt and Michelet to denominate a revolution in European art from ca. 1450 till ca. 1600 in which artists and architects would return to models and forms from antiquity, putting man in the center of things.

## **Humanism in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century.**

The Low Countries in the first half of the sixteenth century ranged from actual Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and a part of northern France.

Politically the Low Countries consisted of nearly twenty principalities more or less united under Burgundian (fifteenth century) and Hapsburg rule (beginning sixteenth century)

We can speak about a rich European region with economic prosperity and cultural flourishing at the crossroads between the German empire, France, Greta Britain and the Baltic area.

A European area where, together with the north of Italy, urbanisation started.

Just think about cities as Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp : the center of European capitalism around 1550.

Remember its intellectual capital : university of Leuven, founded in 1425 and its *collegium trilingue* (1517).

The Reformation swept from the south to the north of the Low Countries in the course of the 16th century : 1562 (first public sermon in Boeschepe, now in France) ; 1566 (beginning of the iconoclastic revolt in Steenvoorde, now in France) ; 1575 (founding of the protestant university of Leyden (famous scholars : Lipsius, Scaliger, Heinsius) ; 1585 (fall of Antwerp, taken by the Spanish).

## Erasmus

Iconic humanist, writer and scholar : portrait of Holbein as a sitting and writing intellectual, homo studiosus.

Writing ? « Le geste essentiel de toute son existence » Alphonse Roersch

Work ?

Satire : In praise of Folly

*Adagia* : tremendous collection of annotated proverbs and sayings, some of which were developed into real essays

*Colloquia* : witty and serious dialogues

Critical edition of the New Testament

Translations from Greek tragedies (Euripides) into Latin

He mastered Latin so well that he started to live in it.

Only on his death bed he would have returned to his mother tongue.

## Laus stultitiae sive Moriae encomium

**In praise of Folly**

**Eloge de la folie**

Peut-on inventer un chef-d'œuvre sur la croupe d'un cheval ? Érasme a conçu *L'Éloge de la folie* dans les Alpes, au cours de son retour d'Italie en 1509. Le livre a été écrit dans le cadre stimulant de la famille de Thomas More à Londres, mais sans l'aide de la bibliothèque d'Érasme, qui n'était pas encore arrivée.

Érasme avait passé trois ans en Italie, avec des sentiments mitigés.

Dès qu'il eut passé les montagnes, il obtint sa bulle de docteur en théologie à Turin. À Bologne, il assiste à l'entrée triomphale du pape Jules II.

Autant d'années d'incubation pour son *Éloge*. Le pays ne répond pas aux grandes espérances qu'il avait nourries. Trop de bellicisme, une Église qui affiche trop de pouvoir, d'ostentation et de superbe, des humanistes italiens qui toisent de haut les « barbares » venus du Nord, alors qu'Érasme savait très bien que ses connaissances du latin et du grec n'avaient rien à leur envier, bien au contraire. Quant aux nouveautés transalpines en matière d'architecture et de

sculpture, Érasme n'en avait cure. La peinture aussi le laissait indifférent. Cet humaniste pur-sang n'était pas un homme de la Renaissance. Il n'avait d'yeux que pour les livres. Heureusement, il y avait à Venise l'éditeur Aldus Manutius, pour publier sa mine d'or de connaissances sur l'Antiquité classique, les *Adages*.

Et le voilà de nouveau juché sur la croupe d'un cheval. Il sait maintenant avec certitude que l'Église a besoin d'une réformation et que le pape Jules II n'ira pas au paradis. Et à présent, ce ne sont plus des poèmes qui fermentent en lui, mais de nouvelles « niaiseries », des *nugae* :

Peitho, la déesse de la Persuasion, lui susurre une *declamatio*. La déclamation est un vaste exercice en formation rhétorique. Celle d'Érasme appartient au *genus demonstrativum*, la rhétorique de circonstance ou cérémonielle. Le genre s'emploie d'usage au cours de fêtes, commémorations et enterrements, où l'on attend souvent une *laudatio* (louange). Mais la *vituperatio* (la diatribe) appartient au genre, elle aussi. La *declamatio* est un tour de force rhétorique pour virtuoses. Dans l'Antiquité, des sophistes itinérants allaient de ville en ville tenir ces discours ronflants devant un public qui les écoutait avec enthousiasme et ferveur chanter les louanges de la mouche ou de la calvitie.

Dans le cas d'Érasme c'est *Stultitia*, Dame Sottise, qui monte en chaire pour faire l'éloge de la Folie. *Stultitiae Laus* signifie en effet tant l'Éloge dit par la Folie elle-même que l'Éloge de la Folie. Ainsi, Érasme fait d'une pierre deux coups : son discours tient tout à la fois de la *laudatio* et de la *vituperatio*. Qui plus est, en le mettant dans la bouche de la Folie elle-même – et l'auteur hors d'atteinte – il la rend fondamentalement équivoque et énigmatique. À la vérité, Érasme jongle avec deux conceptions de la Folie dans cet ouvrage : d'une part, démasquant la soi-disant sagesse, il dévoile sa réelle sottise et la fustige : de l'autre, louant la salutaire sottise, un ingrédient indispensable à l'existence, il va jusqu'à la porter au rang de seule et véritable sagesse.

La déclamation se termine par une ode passionnée à l'extase mystique, une forme d'égarement qui est une préfiguration de la béatitude céleste, réservée à un petit nombre de chrétiens. D'après Paul, Dieu avait rendu folle la sagesse du monde et l'annonce d'un Christ crucifié était une folie (*Mooria*) pour les païens (1 Corinthiens 1 : 18-25). Mais *Stultitia* ne serait pas *Stultitia*, si elle ne se dérobaît pas au dernier moment à toute interprétation équivoque : « Je vois que vous attendez un épilogue, mais vous avez vraiment perdu l'esprit si vous croyez que je me souviens encore de ce que j'ai dit, alors que j'ai déversé un tel fatras de paroles. Voici un dicton antique : "*Je hais le compagnon de beuveries qui a de la mémoire*". En voici un nouveau : "*Je hais l'auditeur qui a de la mémoire*". Eh bien, portez-vous bien, applaudissez, vivez, buvez, très illustres initiés de Moria.» Fin.

Et elle descend de la chaire, laissant ses auditeurs – et nos lecteurs – ébahis, tels que Hans Holbein le Jeune les avait représentés dans son dessin en marge du célèbre exemplaire de Bâle de 1515. Insaisissable tant qu'elle parle, sa tarentelle de mots envoûte encore longtemps. Jusqu'à ce que le charme se rompe.

Nous l'avons compris : dans la tradition rhétorique avec sa longue histoire, l'indignation qu'Érasme a éprouvée en Italie a trouvé une forme unique en son genre et l'a ciselée de main de maître au profit et surtout au grand plaisir d'esprits érudits. L'ouvrage est une carte d'échantillons d'intertextualité (tout l'acquis des *Adages* y repasse en dansant), ou l'*imitatio* (imitation de la forme et du contenu des modèles) et l'*aemulatio* (la rivalité avec les mêmes modèles), comme le prescrit la littérature antique. L'effet thérapeutique de l'écriture,

quoiqu'involontaire, était bienvenu. Pour ma part, je soupçonne qu'il a même été effrayé par les réactions violentes qu'a suscitées ce livre – il avait dû le voir comme un divertimento – car il se répandit dès lors en excuses pour ce petit ouvrage de circonstance. Il serait sans doute fort embarrassé de savoir que ce livre est quasiment le seul que l'on associe encore à son nom, de nos jours.

### « Érasme ? Il ne fait qu'écrire »

Dans un diagramme de l'humaniste français Charles de Bouelles, datant du début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle et portant sur la place de l'homme dans le monde, la paresse ou la lenteur, *accidia*, figure au niveau d'existence le plus bas : celui de la pierre. L'homme qui est à ce niveau, n'arrive même pas à vivre (comme une plante), à sentir (comme un animal), et encore moins à comprendre (comme un être humain) : il ne fait qu'exister comme un corps minéral, une pierre. Le diagramme le représente par une figure assise, recroquevillée avec la tête sur les genoux.

L'ambiguïté du diagramme se situe dans le fait que l'homme parfait, *homo studiosus*, l'« intellectuel », disons, est aussi une figure assise. Il est installé devant un pupitre et armé de la plume : un lecteur, un copiste et exégète, un copieur et plagiaire, un commentateur. L'icône de l'intellectuel classique est l'Érasme écrivant tel que Holbein l'a peint. « Le geste essentiel de toute son existence » disait Alphonse Roersch. Un siècle après Érasme, Pascal écrivait que tout le malheur des hommes venait d'une seule chose, qui était de ne pas savoir demeurer au repos, dans une chambre.

L'Europe a toujours connu la tension entre les partisans de la vie contemplative (*vita contemplativa*) et les apôtres de la *vita activa*. Le contemplatif s'est entre autres retranché derrière les murs des cloîtres et plus tard, des universités. Il s'exclut littéralement et figurativement, il se met en marge, mais il se sait supérieur. Là est sa revanche.

Érasme ne se réfugia pas dans un cloître ou une université mais dans... une imprimerie. C'était sa ligne extérieure avec le monde. Il fut l'un des premiers publicistes à se servir de la presse comme d'une arme et à lui valoir sa célébrité. Mais celle-ci se retourna contre lui comme un boomerang, car dans le monde réel, on lui demandait de pratiquer des choix univoques, dont il n'était pas capable. « *Tantum scribit* », entendait-on dire avec déception et mépris du côté protestant : il ne fait qu'écrire. Érasme était destiné à corriger et compléter sans fin des épreuves, et non à clouer des pamphlets aux portes des églises ou à se révolter contre un empereur.

Dans le Museum Plantin-Moretus d'Anvers, on le voit assis près de la presse, même si, au mur, pend un index de livres interdits imprimé par Plantin, auquel figurent son *Moria* (= *Éloge*) et ses *Colloquia*. Mais c'était déjà aux temps de la Contre-Réforme.

### La palinodie d'Huizinga

Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) entretient une relation ambivalente avec son grand compatriote. Il admire le personnage, mais n'affiche que peu de sympathie pour l'homme et ses « petits côtés ». « Il a fait son travail, et ne parlera plus au monde », dit-il lapidairement dans la biographie de 1924. Le comparer aux autres grands du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle ne tourne pas à l'avantage de l'humaniste : « Érasme paraît parfois être l'homme qui n'était pas assez fort pour son temps. En ce fougueux seizième siècle, c'est la force du chêne d'un Luther, l'acuité d'acier

d'un Calvin, la ferveur d'un Loyola qui étaient nécessaires, pas la douceur de velours d'Érasme. » Érasme est trop délicat, trop peu héroïque au goût d'Huizinga. Loyola ne sentit-il pas sa dévotion se refroidir, dit-on, à la lecture de l'*Enchiridion militis christiani*, (le Manuel du Soldat chrétien) d'Érasme ?

Douze ans plus tard, en 1936, Huizinga rectifie quelque peu le tir au sujet d'Érasme. Dans le discours qu'il prononce au congrès Érasme de Bâle, à l'occasion de la célébration du quatrième centenaire de la mort de l'humaniste, il dit que les temps ont changé : on hait la paix, la modération et la tolérance et c'est pourquoi Érasme, l'esprit érasmien auquel l'héroïque est étranger, est plus actuel que jamais, sa nécessité est celle d'un remède. L'époque a besoin d'Érasme, parce qu'elle a besoin de mansuétude et de raffinement. Dans la troisième édition révisée de la biographie, parue la même année, Huizinga ajoute d'ailleurs une note au commentaire cité plus haut – « il a fait son travail et ne parlera plus au monde » : « Ainsi le semblait-il en 1924, lorsque ses mots ont été écrits. Le monde, bien qu'il lise toujours aussi peu qu'auparavant les écrits d'Érasme, s'avérerait avoir à nouveau et de toute urgence besoin du discours de son esprit. » Dans son étude critique de la culture *In de schaduw van morgen* (1935) Huizinga avait entre-temps développé sa critique sur le « *hemd-en-hand-heroïsme* » (l'héroïsme des chemises brunes, des mains levées) des années trente. Bien qu'il restât dans la ligne de « la force du chêne » « l'acuité de l'acier », « la faveur » « l'héroïsme véritable », il comprenait maintenant qu'ils étaient montés en graine. « Ne serait-ce que comme calmant, un ajout de quelques gouttes d'Érasme ne ferait pas de mal », dit-il. La formule étonne et montre une fois encore que Huizinga demeure ambigu au sujet d'Érasme : sa douceur a beau être à nouveau nécessaire, sa « cérébralité placide » continue à le déranger.

Quant à l'admiration d'Huizinga pour l'*Éloge*, le chef-d'œuvre de l'écrivain et penseur, elle demeure inchangée. L'anti-intellectualisme de l'*Éloge* est d'après lui d'une tout autre sorte que celui des années trente : il s'ancre dans ce monde, il embrasse la vie, mais il augure une sphère (plus haute, spirituelle) « dans laquelle l'intellectualisme et son contraire se fondront ». Un équilibre précaire, que visait sans doute Huizinga lui-même. L'anti-intellectualisme de l'*Éloge* se dissout tandis que *De cultus des levens* (le culte de la vie), comme s'intitule un chapitre des *Schaduw*, fonce aveuglément devant lui dans les années trente, entraînant un autre chapitre, *De verzaking van het kennisideaal* (le reniement de l'idéal de la connaissance) dans sa course folle.

### **Icône**

Érasme n'est plus qu'une icône de tolérance et de civilisation, que l'on peut utiliser dans le *city (et country) marketing*, un terme générique vide, où l'on peut fourrer tout ce qui est positif. Il n'en va naturellement pas des valeurs elles-mêmes, mais du simple fait qu'elles sont tombées dans le domaine public, et n'appartiennent plus spécifiquement à Érasme.

En son temps, il était surtout une icône du style clair et élégant, de la latinité et de l'érudition. Un homme civilisé était à ses yeux aussi un lettré, qui apprenait à parler et à écrire comme il sied en savourant les auteurs grecs et romains. Son choix radical du latin l'a finalement mis hors-jeu. Il ne s'adresse plus à nous, parce que peu d'entre nous le comprennent encore, et moins encore sont familiers du monde dans lequel son esprit vivait : celui de l'Antiquité et des *bonae litterae* (les belles-lettres), évangélisé par la foi chrétienne avec les *sacrae litterae* (la bible et les Pères de l'Église). Pour contrer la langue et la logique absconses du Moyen Âge les humanistes voulaient retourner à la luminosité du latin et aux codes rhétoriques de l'Antiquité. C'est aux sources que l'eau était pure. Ils étaient en premier lieu des philologues au sens plein du mot : des gardiens et des amants du mot, correct, lumineux, élégant et approprié. Penser clairement suivait d'une traite.

En ce sens, Érasme tenait sans doute ses *Adagia* et son édition critique du Nouveau Testament grec pour ses œuvres les plus importantes. Les *Adagia*, un trésor de proverbes, sentences, citations, petits essais etc., étaient le livre clé du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle parce qu'il actualisait l'Antiquité et mettait la sagesse classique à la disposition de tout un chacun. L'édition critique de 1516 fut la première publication imprimée du Nouveau Testament. Érasme était d'avis qu'une lecture philologique fiable de la bible ferait sonner plus haut et plus clair la Parole vivante. Son édition tint bon jusqu'au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

## JANUS SECUNDUS

Janus Secundus was born as Jan Everaerts in The Hague in 1511. His father Nicolaes Everaerts was a well known jurist and friend of Erasmus.

In 1528 his family moved to Mechelen, where Secundus wrote his first book of elegies.

In 1532 he went to Bourges with his brother Marius to study law. This Marius and his brother Grudius had studied at the Collegium Trilingue in Leuven, instituted by Erasmus in 1517 where the three sacred languages of the Bible (Hebrew, Greek and Latin) were taught according to modern philological principles. The ancient, well respected and conservative faculty of Theology didn't like that.

In 1533 Secundus went to join his brother Grudius at the Spanish court of Charles V. There he spent two years working as secretary to the Archbishop of Toledo.

He returned to the Netherlands because of illness, and died at the abbey Saint-Amand close to Valenciennes in september 1536 – in the same year of Erasmus - at the age of twenty-four.

Secundus was a prolific writer, and in his short life - he produced several books of elegies, epigrams, odes, verse epistles and epithalamia, as well as some prose writings (epistles and itineraria).

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His fame as a love poet lasted all over Europe to the 18<sup>th</sup> century

His most famous work, though, was the *Liber Basiorum* (*Book of Kisses*, first complete edition 1541), a short collection consisting of nineteen poems in various metres, in which the poet explores the theme of the kiss.

The 'Basia' are really extended imitations of Catullus (in particular poems 5 and 7) and some poems from the *Anthologia Graeca*, a collection of poems, mostly epigrams, that span the classical and Byzantine periods of Greek literature.

The Basia show variations on various themes and topoi: the 'arithmetic' of kissing; kisses as nourishment or cure; kisses that wound or bring death; and the exchange of souls through kissing.

To begin with the last theme. The topos goes back to an epigram in the *Anthologia Graeca*, ascribed to Plato (V, 78)

**Tèn psuchèn Agathoona philoon epi cheilessin eschon  
èlthe gar hè tlèmoon hoos diabèsomenè**

“Kissing Agathon, I had my soul upon my lips; for it rose, poor wretch, as though to cross over.”

A looser translation reads:

“Kissing Agathon, I found my soul at my lips. Poor thing! It went there, hoping--to slip across.”

“Mon âme, quand je donnais un baiser à Agathon, était sur mes lèvres ; elle y venait, la malheureuse, comme pour s'envoler.”

Agathon, an author of tragedies of which none survived, is portrayed by Plato as a handsome young man, well dressed, of polished manners. He figures in the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue with a mannerist speech in praise of love.

Although the authenticity of this epigram was accepted for many centuries, it was probably not composed for Agathon, nor was it composed by Plato. Its form is that of the Hellenistic erotic epigram, which did not become popular until after 300 BC.

### *Basium III*

*Da mihi suaviolum, dicebam, blanda puella;  
libasti labris mox mea labra tuis.  
Inde, velut presso qui territus angue resultat,  
ora repente meo vellis ab ore procul.  
Non hoc suaviolum dare, Lux mea, sed dare tantum  
est desiderium flebile suavioli.*

*Give me a little kiss, sweet girl, I was saying;  
and soon you are tasting my lips with your lips.  
But then, like someone jumping back terrified after stepping on a snake,  
your mouth you wish suddenly far from my mouth.  
This is not to give a little kiss, my light, but to give the desire  
and deplorable absence of one.  
“One Kiss, enchanting Maid!” (I cry'd;) -  
One little Kiss! and then adieu!  
Your lips, with luscious crimson dyed,  
To mine with trembling rapture flew.  
But quick those lips my lips forsake,  
With wanton, tantalizing jest;  
So starts some rustic from the snake  
Beneath his heedless footstep prest.  
Is this to grant the wish'd-for Kiss? -  
Ah, no, my Love! – 'tis but to fire  
The bosom with a transient bliss,  
Inflaming unallay'd desire.*

John Nott (1812)

### *Basium XVII*

*Qualem purpureo diffundit mane colorem  
quae rosa nocturnis roribus immaduit;  
matutina rubent Dominae sic oscula nostrae,  
basilos, longa nocte, rigata meis:  
quae circum facies niveo candore coronat,  
virginis ut violam cum tenet alba manus.  
Tale novum seris cerasum sub floribus ardet*



*aestatemque et ver cum semel arbor habet.  
Me miserum! Quare cum flagrantissima iungis  
oscula, de thalamo cogor abire tuo?  
O, saltem labris serva hunc, formosa, ruborem,  
dum tibi me referet noctis opaca quies.  
Si tamen interea cuiusquam basia carpent,  
Illa meis fiant pallidiora genis.*

## Baiser XVII

Cette même pourpre que le matin dépose  
Sur la rose humide de rosée nocturne  
Rosit aussi la bouche de ma maîtresse au matin,  
Mouillée toute une longue nuit de mes baisers.  
La candeur de neige de son visage la couronne  
Comme une vierge tenant une violette dans sa main blanche,  
Comme une première cerise brille sous les fleurs tardives  
Lorsqu'été et printemps voisinent dans l'arbre.  
Pauvre de moi ! Pourquoi faut-il, alors qu'avec **violence tu livres**  
Ta bouche, que je doive m'éloigner de ton lit ?  
Veille, ma belle, à garder sur tes lèvres ce rose  
Jusqu'à ce que le calme obscur de la nuit me rende à toi ;  
Si pourtant elles devaient d'ici là cueillir les baisers d'un autre  
Qu'elles en deviennent plus pâles que mes joues.

## Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq

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Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522 in Comines – October 28, 1592; Latin: Augerius Gislenius Busbequius; sometimes Augier Ghislain de Busbecq) was a 16th-century Flemish writer, herbalist and diplomat in the employ of three generations of Austrian monarchs.

He served as ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople and in 1581 published a book about his time there, *Itinera Constantinopolitanum et Amasianum*, re-published in 1595 under the title of *Turcicae epistolae* or "Turkish Letters".

### Early years

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He was the illegitimate son of the *Seigneur de Busbecq*, Georges Ghiselin, and his mistress Catherine Hespel, and was later legitimated. He grew up at Busbecq Castle (in present-day Bousbecque, Nord, France), studying in Wervik and Comines - at the time, all part of Spanish West Flanders, a province of the Holy Roman Empire.

His intellectual gifts led him to advanced studies at the Latin-language University of Leuven, where he registered in 1536 under the name *Ogier Ghislain de Comines*. From there, he went on to study at a number of well-known universities in northern Italy, including taking classes from Giovanni Battista Egnazio in Venice.

Busbecq, like his father and grandfather, chose a career of public service. He entered into the service of the Austrian monarch Ferdinand I in approximately 1552. In 1554, he was sent to England for the marriage in Winchester of the English queen Mary Tudor to Philip II of Spain.

## At the Ottoman court

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In 1554 and again in 1556, Ferdinand named him ambassador to the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent in Constantinople.

His task for much of the time he was in Constantinople was the negotiation of a border treaty between his employer (the future Holy Roman Emperor) and the Sultan over the disputed territory of Transsylvania. He had no success in this mission while Rustem Pasha was the Sultan's vizier, but ultimately reached an accord with his successor Semiz Ali Pasha.

During his stay in Constantinople, he wrote his best known work, the *Turkish Letters*, a compendium of personal correspondence to his friend, and fellow Hungarian diplomat, Nicholas Michault, in Flanders and some of the world's first travel literature. These letters describe his adventures in Ottoman politics and remain one of the principal primary sources for students of the 16th-century Ottoman court. He also wrote in enormous detail about the plant and animal life he encountered in Turkey. His letters also contain the only surviving word list of Crimean Gothic, a Germanic dialect spoken in some isolated regions of the Crimean at the time.

Busbecq discovered an almost complete copy of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, an account of Roman emperor Augustus' life and accomplishments, at the Monumentum Ancyranum in Ancyra. He identified its origin from his reading of Suetonius and published a copy of parts of it in his *Turkish Letters*.

He was an avid collector, acquiring valuable manuscripts, rare coins and curios of various kinds. Among the best known of his discoveries was a 6th-century copy of Dioscorides' *De Materia Medica*, a compendium of medicinal herbs. The emperor purchased it after Busbecq's recommendation; the manuscript is now known as the Vienna Dioscorides.

His passion for herbalism led him to send Turkish tulip bulbs to his friend Charles de l'Écluse (Clusius, born in Arras, created in Leyden the hortus botanicus), who acclimatized them to life in the Low Countries. Less than a century later tulip mania was sweeping the United Provinces and ruining its financial markets. Busbecq has also been credited with introducing the lilac to Europe (though this is debated)<sup>1</sup> as well as the Angora goat.

## Life after Turkey

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He returned from Turkey in 1562 and became a counsellor at the court of Emperor Ferdinand in Vienna and tutor to his grandchildren, the sons of future Emperor Maximilian II. Busbecq ended his career as the guardian of Elisabeth of Austria, Maximilian's daughter and widow of French king Charles IX. He continued to serve the Austrian monarchy, observing the development of the French Wars of Religion on behalf of Rudolf II. Finally, in 1592 and nearing the end of his life, he chose to leave his residence in Mantes outside of Paris for his native West Flanders, but was assaulted and robbed by members of the Catholic League near Rouen. He died a few days later. His body is buried in the castle chapel at Saint-Germain-sous-Cailly, and his heart was embalmed and sent to the family tomb in Bousbecque.

## Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq:

### *The Turkish Letters, 1555-1562*

*Busbecq, a Fleming, was the ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor at the Sublime Porte (the Turkish Sultan's court in Constantinople) from 1555-62. His letters provide important foreign accounts of the Ottoman state. Because Busbecq was trying to bring about reform at home, he did not dwell on the very real problems with Ottoman government.*

At Buda (seized by the Ottomans in 1541, L.D.) I made my first acquaintance with the Janissaries; this is the name by which the Turks call the infantry of the royal guard. The Turkish state has 12,000 of these troops when the corps is at its full strength. They are scattered through every part of the empire, either to garrison the forts against the enemy, or to protect the Christians and Jews from the violence of the mob. There is no district with any considerable amount of population, no borough or city, which has not a detachment of Janissaries to protect the Christians, Jews, and other helpless people from outrage and wrong. A garrison of Janissaries is always stationed in the citadel of Buda. The dress of these men consists of a robe reaching down to the ankles, while, to cover their heads, they employ a cowl which, by their account, was originally a cloak sleeve, part of which contains the head, while the remainder hangs down and flaps against the neck. On their forehead is placed a silver gilt cone of considerable height, studded with stones of no great value.

These Janissaries generally came to me in pairs. When they were admitted to my dining room they first made a bow, and then came quickly up to me, all but running, and touched my dress or hand, as if they intended to kiss it. After this they would thrust into my hand a nosegay of the hyacinth or narcissus; then they would run back to the door almost as quickly as they came, taking care not to turn their backs, for this, according to their code, would be a serious breach of etiquette. After reaching the door, they would stand respectfully with their arms crossed, and their eyes bent on the ground, looking more like monks than warriors. On receiving a few small coins (which was what they wanted) they bowed again, thanked me in loud tones, and went off blessing me for my kindness. To tell you the truth, if I had not been told beforehand that they were Janissaries, I should, without hesitation, have taken them for members of some order of Turkish monks, or brethren of some Moslem college. Yet these are the famous Janissaries, whose approach inspires terror everywhere.

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over 400 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of which a great part are loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules and camels also serve to carry tents and armour, and likewise tools and munitions for the campaign. . . . The invading army carefully abstains from encroaching on its magazines at the outset; as they are well aware that when the season for campaigning draws to a close, they will have to retreat over districts wasted by the enemy, or scraped bare by countless hordes of men and droves of hungry animals, as if they had been devastated by locusts; accordingly they reserve their stores as much as possible for this emergency. Then the Sultan's magazines are opened, and a ration just sufficient to sustain life is daily weighed out to the Janissaries and other troops of the royal household. The rest of the army is badly off, unless they have provided some supplies at their own expense. . . . On such occasions they take out a few spoonfuls of flour and put them into water, adding some butter, and seasoning the mess with salt and spices; these ingredients are boiled, and a large bowl of gruel is thus obtained. Of this they eat once or twice a day, according to the quantity they have, without any bread, unless they have brought some biscuit with them.... Sometimes they have recourse to horseflesh; dead horses are of course plentiful in their great hosts, and such beasts as are in good condition when they die furnish a meal not to be despised by famished soldiers.

From this you will see that it is the patience, self-denial and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him to face the most trying circumstances and come safely out of the dangers that surround him. What a contrast to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to put up with their ordinary food, and call for thrushes, becaficos [a small bird esteemed a dainty, as it feeds on figs and grapes], and suchlike dainty dishes! ... It makes me shudder to think of what the result of a struggle between such different systems must be; one of us must prevail and the other be destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist in safety. On their side is the vast wealth of their empire, unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms, a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victories, readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline, thrift

and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty exchequer, luxurious habits, exhausted resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate soldiery, and greedy quarrels; there is no regard for discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in drunkenness and debauchery, and worst of all, the enemy are accustomed to victory, we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result must be? The only obstacle is Persia, whose position on his rear forces the invader to take precautions. The fear of Persia gives us a respite, but it is only for a time.

No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man's place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity, he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal; arguing that high qualities do not descend from a father to his son or heir, any more than a talent for music, mathematics, or the like; and that the mind does not derive its origin from the father, so that the son should necessarily be like the father in character, our emanates from heaven, and is thence infused into the human body. Among the Turks, therefore, honours, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great ability and good service. If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honours in Turkey!

This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.

Source:

From C. T. Forster and F. H. B. Daniel, eds., *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, vol. I (London: Kegan Paul, 1881), pp, 86-88, 153-155, 219-222, 287-290, 293.