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CONFRONTI

*La Caduta di Costantinopoli (1453), Alfonso il Magnanimo
e il sogno dell'Umanesimo.*

1. Linee dominanti

*The Fall of Constantinople (1453), Alfonso the Magnanimous,
and the Dream of Humanism.*

1. Dominant Lines

GIANCARLO CASALE

*The 'Humanist Dream' between Alfonsine Naples
and Constantinople under Mehmed the Conqueror*

Abstract: *This article explores, from an Ottoman Studies perspective, several surprising points of overlap between the humanistic production sponsored by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror and by his contemporary, Alfonso the Magnanimous of Naples. It focuses specifically on the connections between Ptolemaic astronomy, Aristotelianism, and the figure of Alexander the Great, as well as on each sovereign's ambition to found a «New Rome» that would incorporate the territory of the other. To this end, the article first presents an overview of the humanistic intellectual patronage practiced at the Ottoman court following the conquest of Constantinople, and then turns to a parallel consideration of Alfonso's court in Naples. It concludes with an examination of the relevant writings of George of Trebizond, a unique figure who was employed at Alfonso's court when he first learned of the fall of Constantinople, and later travelled to the Ottoman capital in the hopes of securing a position in Mehmed's service.*

Keywords: *Mehmed the Conqueror, Alexander the Great in Islam, George Amiroutzes, George of Trebizond.*

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giancarlo.casale@uni.eu

Introduction

Following his conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmed II initiated a series of multifaceted political and cultural engagements with the various states of the Italian peninsula. In some cases, such as his interactions with Florence or Rimini, these involved quite friendly exchanges of gifts, favours, and expertise.¹

¹ On relations with Florence, see A. R. Acquino, *La diplomazia fiorentina di fronte al Turco al tempo di Cosimo de' Medici*, «Nuova Rivista Storica», 108/3 (2024), pp. 1011-32. On Rimini, A.G. Cevizli, *Mehmed II, Malatesta, and Matteo de' Pasti: A match of mutual benefit between the 'Terrible Turk' and a 'Citizen of Hell'*, «Renaissance Studies», 31/1 (February 2017), pp.43-65.

Other relationships, such as with Venice or the Papal States, were much more contentious.² But in virtually all instances, the language of Humanism provided an important medium of political and cultural communication³.

The Kingdom of Naples was no exception to this rule. In fact, there are good reasons to argue that, of all the Italian states of Mehmed's era, Naples occupied, after Rome itself, the largest place in the Sultan's political and cultural ambitions. With this in mind, and within the context of this special issue dedicated to humanism at the court of Alfonso the Magnificent after 1453, this article proposes a new framework for understanding Alfonsine literary patronage as part of a competitive trans-Mediterranean dialogue that, in certain key respects, intersected with Sultan Mehmed's own use of the language and symbols of Renaissance humanism.

In order to fully appreciate this dialogue, it is necessary to first put aside the facile characterization of Sultan Mehmed as a «holy warrior» (*gâzi*), singularly motivated by a lust for conquest in the name of Islam. As recent scholarship has shown, this is far removed from the public self-fashioning that the Sultan himself strove to project, and also poorly describes Mehmed's reign from a practical standpoint. Instead, the image of Mehmed as *gâzi*, is now understood to have been consolidated only after his death, death, largely through the encouragement of his ostentatiously pious son and successor, Sultan Bayezid II (r.1481-1512)⁴. And when questioned in private, even Bayezid acknowledged a very different

² On Mehmed's relations with Pius II (discussed further below), N. Bisaha, *Pope Pius II's Letter to Sultan Mehmed II: A Reexamination*, «Crusades», 1 (2002), pp.183-200. On Venice, F. Babinger, *Maometto il Conquistatore e gli umanisti d'Italia*, in *Venezia e l'Oriente fra tardo medioevo e Rinascimento*, cur. A. Pertusi, Firenze 1966, pp. 433-449.

³ See, for example, G. Necipoğlu, *Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople*, «Muqarnas», 29/1(2012), pp. 1-81. J. Raby, *Sultan of Paradox: Mehmed the Conqueror as a Patron of the Arts*, «The Oxford Art Journal», 5/1 (1982), pp. 1-8.

⁴ On this question, see C. Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: the Construction of the Ottoman State*, Berkeley 1995.

reality, at one point going so far as to admit that his father «did not believe in Mohammed»⁵.

Such a statement, incongruous though it may seem with respect to subsequent historical memory, accurately reflects a central ambition of Mehmed's reign: that of not merely conquering Constantinople, but overseeing its rebirth as the capital of a new and magnificent empire. The challenge, for Mehmed, was that to achieve this ambition, he needed to find a way to maintain the loyalty of his Muslim soldiers, while simultaneously legitimizing his rule in the eyes of his Christian subjects, who after 1453 constituted the demographic majority in his empire. Mehmed's solution, in the realm of political symbolism, was to present himself as something more than an ordinary Muslim ruler, by crafting a new language of sovereignty that combined elements of Islamic rule with Constantinople's imperial history as the *New Rome* and even older ideas of sacred kingship that predated both Christianity and Islam⁶. As we shall discuss below, both Ptolemaic astronomy and the figure of Alexander the Great were fundamental components of this project, while also serving as the most obvious points of intersection between Mehmed's cultural politics and the humanistic patronage of his rival to the west, Alfonso the Magnificent.

Part I: The View from Istanbul

The cultural aspects of Sultan Mehmed's project of legitimation were highly complex, and therefore difficult to summarize in the limited space available here⁷. One factor that is crucial to grasp at

⁵ The quote is from Giovanni Maria Angiolello, who served in Bayezid's entourage and later wrote an account of his experiences. G. M. Angiolello, *Il Sultano e il Profeta*, cur. J. Guérin Dalle Mese, Milano 1985, p. 122.

⁶ For a fuller elaboration of these ideas, see G. Casale, *Mehmed the Conqueror between Sullî-i Kull and Prisca Theologia*, «Modern Asian Studies», 56/3 (2022), pp. 840-869.

⁷ For a treatment from the perspective of art and architecture, C. Kafesçioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital*, Philadelphia 2009. Also Necipoğlu, *Visual Cosmopolitanism* cit., pp. 1-81.

the outset, however, is the extent to which, in a fifteenth-century Ottoman context, Islam, Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, and the legacy of the Roman empire were already linked together in a tangled web of mutual associations, most of which are today largely obscure, and therefore can be fully appreciated only through a thorough reconstruction.

Let us begin with Claudius Ptolemy. In the quattrocento, scholars were still very far from the modern understanding of this ancient figure, today understood to have been a Roman-era author of scientific textbooks active in the 2nd century AD. Instead, among both Muslim and Christian men of letters of the era, Ptolemy was believed to have been a relative of the Hellenistic ruler Ptolemy I (d. 282 BCE), and therefore a prince who was also a contemporary of Alexander the Great. In consequence, the Ptolemaic corpus was broadly understood as a compendium of technical knowledge about the cosmos and its relationship to earthly rulership directly connected to the reign of Alexander and to the time in which he lived⁸.

Meanwhile, particularly among Muslims, Alexander himself was understood through a kaleidoscope of intersecting literary and historical lenses, most of which were very far removed from the historical figure known today from Hellenistic sources⁹. In Islamic mystical traditions, for example, Alexander was a «perfect man» (*Insān-i Kāmil*), that is, a model ruler of Neoplatonic perfection for whom Aristotle served as Sufi master¹⁰. In astrological literature, he was the first «Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction» (*Sāhib-Qirān*), a celestial emperor destined by the stars for world

⁸ G. Dalché, *The Reception of Ptolemy's Geography (End of the Fourteenth to Beginning of the Sixteenth Century)*, in *The History of Cartography*, III, *Cartography in the European Renaissance*, cur. D. Woodward, Chicago 2007, pp. 285-364.

⁹ For an introduction to the vast literature on this subject, see, R. Stoneman, *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*, Groningen 2012. For medieval and Renaissance Europe, *L'historiographie médiévale d'Alexandre le Grand*, cur. C. Gaullier-Bougassas, Turnhout 2011.

¹⁰ Richard Stoneman, *The Persian Alexander (2): Amir Khusraw and the Philosophical View of Alexander*, in *A History of Alexander the Great in World Culture*, cur. R. Stoneman, Cambridge 2022, pp. 288-307.

dominion¹¹. And in the pages of the Qur'an, Alexander appears as «He of the Two Horns», (*Dhū'l-Qarnayn*), a conqueror and a prophet who built a wall of iron to protect civilization from Gog and Magog, the invaders of the apocalypse¹².

Finally, and of particular relevance for Ottoman *literati*, Alexander was a hero of Persian epic poetry, most importantly the medieval classics by Firdausī (940-1020 CE), Nizāmī (1141-1209 CE), and Amīr Khusrau (1253-1325 CE)¹³. Because these Persian literary adaptations were composed more than a thousand years after the historical Alexander had lived, they referred to him (anachronistically, from our perspective) as Alexander «the Roman» (*Iskender-i Rūmī*), a term reflecting the association, by the medieval period, of the Greek-speaking lands of the eastern Mediterranean with Byzantium (and therefore «Rome»). Further complicating this picture, over time the Persians also began to refer to the Turks who gradually occupied Byzantine lands also as *Rūmī*, a moniker which the Ottomans eventually embraced for themselves¹⁴. As a result, from quite early in their dynasty's history Ottoman sultans began to claim a special relationship with Alexander as fellow «Romans», to the extent that the very first Turkish-language chronicle of the Ottoman dynasty, composed in the early fifteenth century by Ahmedi, began as a Turkish-language adaptation, in rhyming verse, of the story of Alexander¹⁵.

¹¹ C. N. Singh, *Chann, Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction: Origins of the Şahib-qirān*, «Iran and the Caucasus», 13 (2009), 93-109.

¹² K. van Bladel, *The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102*, in *The Quran in its Historical Context*, cur. G. S. Reynolds, London 2008, 175-203.

¹³ M. Casari, *The Alexander Legend in Persian Literature*, in *A History of Persian Literature*, III, *Persian Poetry in the Classical Era, 800-1500*, cur. M. Ashtiani, London 2023, 378-542.

¹⁴ C. Kafadar, *A Rome of One's Own: Reflections on Cultural Geography and Identity in the Lands of Rūm*, «Muqarnas», 24 (2007), pp. 7-25.

¹⁵ K. Silay, *Origins of the Ottoman Dynasty: A Philological Exploration of Its Earliest Account*, New York 2024. D. Kastritsis, *The Alexander Romance and the Rise of the Ottoman Empire*, in *Islamic Literature and Intellectual Life in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century Anatolia*, eds. A. C. S. Peacock, S. N. Yıldız, Würzburg 2016, pp. 243-282.

Following his conquest of Constantinople, Sultan Mehmed waste no time in actively engaging, through his cultural patronage, with all of these intersecting images of Alexander, including their concomitant association with Rome. For example, a review of a surviving inventory of his extensive manuscript library (today largely dispersed), reveals, as expected, many copies of the Persian epics, as well as their early Ottoman adaptation by Ahmedî¹⁶. But alongside these literary classics, the Sultan's library also included a wide selection of other titles, in Arabic and Turkish as well as Persian, on an expansive range of topics related to Alexander's legacy: on history, astrology and prognostication, talismans and other esoterica, and advice literature (typically presented in the form an imagined dialogue between Aristotle and Alexander)¹⁷. Equally important, the same inventory also includes titles of previously unavailable works newly translated from classical editions, for example the *Tarjumah-i Iskandarnamah min al-Rūmī ilā al-Turkī fī al-tawārikh* (*The Book of Alexander, Translated from Greek to Turkish, on History*)¹⁸. This was most likely a translation of Arrian's *Anabasis*, of which Mehmed also commissioned a manuscript in the original Greek (still extant in the Topkapı Palace library)¹⁹.

Meanwhile, alongside the collecting, cataloguing, and translating of these various pre-existing texts, an additional component of Mehmed's cultural patronage involved intentionally mixing the various textual traditions related to Alexander, in a manner that was designed to showcase, and to amplify, his mercurial nature as simultaneously Greek/Roman/Muslim. A case in point is the so-called *Trebizond Alexander Romance*, a richly illustrated fourteenth-century Greek manuscript that came into Mehmed's possession after his conquest of the city of Trebizond in 1461²⁰. The manu-

¹⁶ For this inventory, see *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library, 1502/3-1503/4*, eds. G. Necipoglu, C. Kafadar, C. H. Fleischer, Leiden 2019.

¹⁷ *Treasures of Knowledge* cit., pp. 102, 127, 138, 203.

¹⁸ *Treasures of Knowledge* cit., p. 127.

¹⁹ J. Raby, *Mehmed the Conqueror's Greek Scriptorium*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 37 (1983), pp. 15–34.

²⁰ Venezia, Istituto Ellenico, Cod. Gr. 5.

script is today considered the best-preserved exemplar from the entire Byzantine era of the *Romance of Alexander*, a text with a history dating back to late antiquity, and which served (in Persian adaptation) as the original inspiration for the Persian epics. This specific manuscript, today preserved in the Hellenic Institute in Venice, is famous for its large number of visually striking illustrations (over 250). These have long attracted the interest of art historians²¹, but, as recently demonstrated by Dimtri Kastritsis, these illustrations are noteworthy also for their accompanying captions in Ottoman Turkish, which were presumably inserted for the Sultan's benefit after the manuscript came into his possession. Collectively, these are extensive enough to allow the illustrations to be read separately from the Greek text as a sort of Turkish-language «graphic novel,» with significant differences from the original. Most notably, in the Turkish version, Alexander is not primarily a conqueror of father «the East». Instead, after being hailed by the people of Byzantium (*Rûm t̃āifesī*), he heads west to campaign in Italy, where he eventually reaches Rome and is acclaimed as ruler by both its «nobles» (*begz̃ādele*) and its «head priests» (*baş keşīsleri*)²². In addition, throughout the many stages of his adventures, he is perpetually accompanied by his «vizier» Aristotle, whose name is repeatedly inserted to identify him with various figures in paintings even when there is no mention of him at all in the original text.

Thus, through this creative readaption through text and image, the story of Alexander «the Roman» was reshaped to perfectly fit the political ambitions of a Sultan who hoped, following his conquest of «the New Rome», to turn towards then west for a new round of conquest. Moreover, the choice to communicate this new narrative through a linguistic adaptation from Greek to Turkish was itself as significant as the story, since an essential aspect of

²¹ Recent studies include N. S. Trahoulia, *The Venice Alexander Romance: Pictorial Narrative and the Art of Telling Stories*, in *History and Literature in Byzantium*, cur. R. Macrides, Surrey UK 2010, pp. 145-165.

²² D. Kastritsis, *The Trebizond Alexander Romance (Venice Hellenic Institute Codex GR. 5): The Ottoman Fate of a Fourteenth-Century Illustrated Byzantine Manuscript*, «Journal of Turkish Studies», 36 (December 2011), pp. 103-1310.

Alexander's universality was precisely his «translatability», a quality that made him a recognizable figure across languages, confessional communities, and literary traditions²³. As such, the translation from Greek into Turkish of the life story of a figure already familiar in Islamic traditions served as a powerful vehicle to convince Mehmed's Muslim subjects that, as Alexander of the Age (*İskandar al-zamān*), he was now predestined to march on Rome and unify the eastern and western halves of the Roman empire²⁴. On the other hand, in order to fulfill these ambitions, it was also essential that this message also reach Christians: both those that were already his subjects, and those that, following his anticipated invasion of Italy, would become so in the future. And for this, he would need a different kind of cultural patronage, based not in Turkish but in Greek.

Part II: Empire and Translation

The centrality of Greek for Mehmed's self-presentation as Muslim/Roman/Alexander is, in retrospect, an easily overlooked element of his patronage. This is because of the hegemonic rise, during the decades after Mehmed's death, of Turkish as the language of the Ottoman court²⁵. But this Turkophone future would have been very difficult to predict while Mehmed remained on the throne, as his own preferences were anything but Turco-centric. With regard to dynastic history, for example, it is noteworthy that no chronicles at all related to Mehmed's reign were composed in Turkish until the reign of his son Bayezid²⁶. Instead, the earliest chronicle composed specifically for Sultan Mehmed was in Greek:

²³ See S. F. Ng, *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance*, Oxford 2019.

²⁴ On resistance to this idea among Mehmed's Turkish-speaking subjects, expressed in writing only after his death, see S. Yerasimos, *La fondation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie dans les traditions turques*, Paris 1990.

²⁵ C. Woodhead, *Ottoman languages*, in *The Ottoman world*, cur. C. Woodhead, London 2012, pp. 143-158.

²⁶ Tursun Beg, *La Conquista di Costantinopoli*, ed. J. L. Bacqué-Grammont, M. Bernardini, trans. L. Berardi, Milano 2007.

the *History* of Kritovoulos of Imbros, a former Byzantine official who, post conquest, the Sultan named as the Ottoman governor of his home island²⁷.

Suggestively, Kritovoulos began this work by declaring the need to write an account of Mehmed's deeds since «they are in no way inferior to those of Alexander of Macedon». Even more suggestively, he explained that it was necessary to write this history specifically in Greek «so that these things will become the common pride and wonder, not of Greeks alone, but also of all the western nations [...] once they are translated into the language of those peoples who are Philhellenes and are learned in such matters»²⁸. In other words, Kritovoulos composed his chronicle with not only a Greek but a Latin audience in mind, anticipating that it would be translated by Italian humanists. With this in mind, he also praised Mehmed as a «philhellene», who studied Greek philosophy in translation, and even made a special point, after conquering Athens, «to see the Acropolis itself, and the places where those heroes had carried on the government and accomplished those things [...] reconstructing the structure's ancient plans in his mind»²⁹. More subversively, Kritovoulos also described Mehmed's visit to what he believed to be the ruins of Troy, where, «shaking his head a little», he quipped: «God has now reserved for me, after so many years, the right to avenge this city and its inhabitants»³⁰. To a reader familiar with ancient history, and therefore aware that the Romans claimed descent from Troy, the implication of this quotation would be clear: if Mehmed was as a descendant of Troy, it was he, rather than the Byzantines, who was the “real” Roman, meaning that he had justly conquered Constantinople from its “Greek” usurpers. Intriguingly, there is evidence that this Homeric context was important enough to Kritovoulos that it also went beyond the text of his *History*. In the Topkapı Palace library, there is a copy of the *Illiad*, in the original Greek, still preserved in the

²⁷ Kritovoulos, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. C. T. Riggs, Princeton NJ 1954.

²⁸ Kritovoulos, *History* cit., pp. 3-4.

²⁹ Kritovoulos, *History* cit., p. 136.

³⁰ Kritovoulos, *History* cit., p. 181.

manuscript collection, its handwriting and binding indicating that it was prepared for the Sultan, along with the *Anabasis*, as a companion to Kritovoulos's history³¹.

At the same, Kritovoulos's writing is also attentive to the contemporary cultural reality of the Ottoman capital, mentioning, at various points in his narrative, the activities of Greek intellectuals in post-conquest Constantinople. This was a group with highly varied backgrounds, and with divergent relationships to the new Ottoman regime (ranging from the conservative scholastic Gennadios Scholarios, named by Mehmed as patriarch of the Orthodox Church, to the Herodotean historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles, a harsh critic of the Sultan and a former student of Scholarios's intellectual rival Gemistos Pletho)³². Among those with direct ties to the Ottoman court, the most prominent was certainly George Amiroutzes, a lay philosopher from Trebizond who, like both Gennadios and Gemistos Plethon, had previously traveled to Italy to attend the Council of Florence in the 1430s³³.

Amiroutzes was a relative latecomer to Mehmed's court, entering the sultan's service only after Mehmed conquered his native city of Trebizond in 1461, nearly a decade after the fall of Constantinople. But he arrived at court with an unusually deep web of connections, being the first cousin of Mahmoud Pasha, a Greek convert to Islam who was the Sultan's longest serving grand vizier³⁴. Through a combination of this family connection and his own reputation for learning, Amiroutzes rapidly became a fixture at Mehmed's court, where he was known simply as «the philosopher», and served as a sort of personal philosophy tutor to the Sultan. His resulting conversations with the Ottoman ruler are the

³¹ Raby, *Mehmed the Conqueror's Greek Scriptorium* cit., pp. 20-21.

³² On Gennadios, see M. H. Blanchet, *Georges-Gennadios Scholarios (vers 1400 - vers 1472): Un intellectuel orthodoxe face à la disparation de l'empire byzantine*, Paris 2008. On Chalkokondyles, A. Kaldellis, *A New Herodotos: Laonikos Chalkokondyles on the Ottoman Empire, the Fall of Byzantium, and the Emergence of the West*, Cambridge Mass. 2014.

³³ J. Monfasani, *George Amiroutzes: The Philosopher and his Tractates*, Leuven 2011, pp. 1-50.

³⁴ T. Stavrides, *The Sultan of Vezirs: The Life and Times of the Ottoman Grand Vezir Mahmud Pasha Angelovic, 1453-1474*, Leiden 2001.

subject of his most famous surviving work, *A Dialogue on Faith*, which records, in composite form, a series of real exchanges held with Mehmed on the relationship between faith and reason, among other topics. Perhaps their most striking passage is one in which the Sultan challenges Amiroutzes to defend his beliefs as a Christian, insisting that he do so not with recourse to scripture but rather through reference to «common notions», since scripture is inadequate for a world ruler who must govern peoples «with an infinity of laws»³⁵.

Another important part of Amiroutzes work for the Sultan involved collaboration with the philosopher's son, Basilios, who trained as a translator at the palace (possibly while being held captive), and at some point converted to Islam, taking the name Mehmed Bey. Little else is known about his personal biography, but among his surviving works is a translation from Greek to Arabic of the *Chaldean Oracles*, some translated excerpts from Gemistos Pletho's *Laws*, and the translation of an exegesis of the Nicene Crede penned for the Sultan by Scholarios. In 1465, at the Sultan's request, Amiroutzes and his son also worked together on a massive, wall-sized projection of the *imago mundi* with captions in Arabic, apparently achieved by following Ptolemy's system of cartographic projection outlined in the first chapter of his *Geographia*. Basilios (Mehmed Bey) was then commissioned by the Sultan to complete a full Arabic translation of the *Geographia*'s text, complete with maps³⁶.

For both practical and technical reasons, this translation counted as a significant accomplishment, and was held in high regard by the Sultan. Ptolemy's other major works, the *Almagest* (on practical astronomy) and *Tetrabiblos* (on astrological prognostication) were long known to Muslim scholars, having been translated into Arabic already under the Abbasid caliphs in the 9th century

³⁵ A. Argyriou, G. Lagarrigue, *Georges Amiroutzès et son 'Dialogue sur la Foi au Christ Tenu avec le Sultan des Turcs*, «Byzantinische Forschungen» 11 (1987), pp. 100-101 (with ed. of the text).

³⁶ M. Mavroudi, *Translations from Greek into Arabic at the Court of Mehmed the Conqueror*, in *The Byzantine Court: Sources of Power and Culture*, eds. A. Odekan, N. Necipoğlu, E. Akyürek, Istanbul 2013, pp. 195-207.

(and first introduced into Latin starting in the twelfth century through these Arabic translations). By contrast, the *Geographia* had never before been available in Arabic, making this translation a showcase of Sultan Mehmed's agency, in a manner analogous to contemporary patrons in Renaissance Italy, in recovering lost knowledge from antiquity – in this case, through the writings of an author believed to be a contemporary of Alexander the Great, and long recognized among learned Muslims as a great scientific authority³⁷. To highlight this, the text's introduction hails Mehmed as «the most high king and exalted sultan, the depth of the sciences, the utmost of wisdom, the one who makes apparent the hidden truths of the maxims of the learned, who calls forth, through his determination, their forgotten nuances, who brings the taste of these truths to the mouth of whoever seeks them, and who reveals their gems and hidden pearls»³⁸.

As a well-known collector of maps, Mehmed also had a particular interest in the *Geographia* as the first and only ancient to explain the principle of cartographic projection, a mathematical system for representing the inhabitable world from a single “perfect” vantage point, as it could otherwise be seen only be God³⁹. According to Kritovoulos, when the Sultan first gazed on the large-scale world map that Amiroutzes and his son had managed to recreate through Ptolemy's instructions, he was «delighted [...] admiring the wisdom and ingenuity of Ptolemy, and still more that of the man who had so well exhibited this to him»⁴⁰. Thereafter, the sultan was apparently inspired to such a degree that he had elements of Ptolemaic geography incorporated into the most significant architectural project of his reign, the *Fatih Külliyesi* mosque and madrasa complex. As I have described elsewhere, this set of buildings was designed as an instrument for projecting Ottoman

³⁷ J. L. Berggren, A. Jones, *Ptolemy's Geography: An Annotated Translation of the Theoretical Chapters*, Princeton 2020, pp. 47-49.

³⁸ Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Ayasofya 2610, fol. 3.

³⁹ This cartographic interest, particularly in the text and maps of the *Geographia*, was also known to Western humanists. See S. Roberts, *Printing the Mediterranean World*, Cambridge Ma. 2013.

⁴⁰ Kritovoulos, *History* cit., p. 209.

Romanitas through the language of architecture, and was intentionally built on the ruins of the Church of the Apostles, a sacred site originally erected by Constantine, but later defiled during the Latin conquest of the city. As such, it was a powerful symbol of the city's rebirth through Mehmed's agency, and with it, of his eventual destiny to reunite both halves of the Roman empire under his rule. For this purpose, the entire complex was built on the plan of an «alchemical map», which, through contact with the body of the Sultan, could metaphorically transform lead to gold by joining the *mercury of the east* with the *mercury of the west* – the basic elements of Jabirian alchemy⁴¹. Adding to the mystique of this fusion of east and west, part of the structure's central courtyard may even have been realized by the Florentine architect Filarete, based on principles first introduced in his 1461 *Libro Architetonico* in which he designed an ideal city, supposedly based on plans discovered in a long-lost «golden book» from antiquity⁴².

Part III: The View from Naples

Having now outlined, however briefly, the basic contours of Mehmed's project of legitimation following the conquest of Constantinople, we are ready to turn west and explore possible parallels, and in some cases direct connections, between his humanistic program and that of Alfonso the Magnanimous in Naples, another sovereign who used patronage to craft a self-image that creatively combined the heritage of Rome and Alexander the Great.

Of the two, it was the Roman element to emerge first, as an important element of Alfonso's self-fashioning comparatively early in his reign – before Mehmed (a much younger man) came power – during his prolonged struggle with the Angevine dynasty to secure the crown of Naples. In this struggle, as the contender with the weaker dynastic claim, Alfonso leaned heavily on human-

⁴¹ Casale, *Mehmed the Conqueror* cit., 863-866.

⁴² K. Hayes, *Filarete's Journey to the East*, in *Oriental, Occidental: Geography, Identity, Space*, Proceedings of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture Annual Conference, 2001, eds. S. Bozdoğan, Ü. B. Copur, pp. 168-171.

istic patronage to present himself as a «virtuous» monarch, who embodied the spirit of ancient Roman emperors through his learning, wisdom, and appreciation of antique values, and who was therefore more legitimate than his Angevin rivals to reign in Italy (the original seat of the Roman empire)⁴³. In terms of public image-making, the climax of this first phase in Afonso's reign can be pinpointed to February 1443, when, after securing a definitive victory against René D'Anjou, he celebrated with a spectacular "triumphal procession", explicitly planned in the antique style of a victorious Roman general⁴⁴.

Thereafter, with his reign in Naples established, Alfonso's attentions gradually moved from Italy towards an incipient «eastern policy». In the later 1440s, he began to entertain his first vague invitations to participate in a crusade, and in 1451, with his intervention in Albania, he became militarily involved on the opposite side of the Adriatic, raising for the first time the possibility of an open confrontation with the Ottomans⁴⁵. Accordingly, during these years, Alfonso's claims to a Roman heritage also evolved beyond Italy, focusing more on a potential role as a bona fide trans-Mediterranean emperor, poised to join together his kingdoms in Italy and Spain with new conquests in the east.

With the fall of Constantinople, these ambitions inevitably became more concrete, until by August 1455, in an address to his council, Alfonso formally announced his intention (in reality, never realized) to lead a crusade to liberate the former Byzantine capital from the Ottoman yoke. This event was then duly memorialized by Antonio Panormita, the leading intellectual of Alfonso's court, who completed his monumental history of Alfonso's reign, the *Alfonsi Regis Dicta aut Facta Memoratu Digna* in the

⁴³ For a general introduction, see F. Delle Donne, *Alfonso il Magnanimo e l'Invenzione dell'Umanesimo Monarchico: Ideologia e strategie di legittimazione alla corte aragonese di Napoli*, Roma 2015.

⁴⁴ This event and the relevant sources are described in detail in the editor's introduction to Antonio Panormita, *Alfonsi Regis Dicta aut Facta Memoratu Digna*, ed. F. Delle Donne, Firenze 2024, pp. 44-56.

⁴⁵ A. Ryder, *The Eastern Policy of Alfonso the Magnanimous*, «Atti della Accademia Pontaniana», 28 (1979), pp. 7-25.

months immediately following this oration. Poignantly, he did so by pairing a description of Alfonso's 1443 triumphal procession in Naples with a chapter dedicated to his *Oratio in expeditionem contra Theucros*, thereby portraying the liberation of Constantinople as the logical conclusion of the process that Alfonso had begun, as a virtuous Roman *imperator*, with his Neapolitan triumph in 1443⁴⁶. In effect, Alfonso's public image had begun to crystalize into a mirror image of Mehmed's: each sovereign now destined to unite Rome, but one by marching west, and the other east.

Against this backdrop, it hardly seems a coincidence that Alfonso, as he embraced this «eastern policy», also began to make Alexander the Great an alternative model for his reign, and the basis for a new image as a *rex sapiens*. Predictably, this shift in direction, from west to east, and in emphasis, from Rome to Alexander, also involved a shift from Latin to Greek with respect to Alfonso's intellectual patronage, to the extent that, in the years after 1450, the Alfonsine court grew into a preeminent center of Greek translation⁴⁷. As recently shown by Gabriella Macchiarelli, an important milestone in this evolution was Cardinal Bessarion's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, presented to the Alfonso in 1451⁴⁸. In his dedicatory preface, Bessarion deployed an anecdote from Plutarch to draw a favourable comparison between Alfonso and Alexander, lauding the king for his superior intellectual magnanimity and dedication to wisdom, while at the same time implicitly placing himself (Bessarion) in the role of Aristotle to Alfonso's Alexander. Bessarion also noted that the *Metaphysics*, while known to the Romans, had been translated into Latin only imperfectly in antiquity – thereby presenting Alfonso with a chance, through his support of a more complete translation from Greek, to surpass the wisdom of ancient Rome (thereby present-

⁴⁶ Delle Donne, *Introduzione* to Panormita, *Dicta aut Facta* cit., pp. 8-10.

⁴⁷ See the contribution to this volume by G. Macchiarelli, *Da nuovo Alessandro a rex theologus. Teodoro Gaza e la rappresentazione di Alfonso il Magnanimo nelle prefatorie alle traduzioni dal Greco*.

⁴⁸ G. Macchiarelli, *L'immagine di Alfonso il Magnanimo nella prefatoria di Bessarione alla traduzione della Metafisica di Aristotele*, «CESURA - Rivista», 2 (2023), pp. 66-67.

ing an interesting parallel to the language used, a few years later, to describe the translation of Ptolemy's *Geographia* into Arabic for Sultan Mehmed).

After 1451, the Alfonsine court rapidly became home to a considerable number of Greek humanists, including Theodorus Gaza, Nicolò Sagundino and George of Trebizond, all of whom, like Bessarion, continued to use their translations to portray Alfonso as a ruler in the model of Alexander the Great. Particularly after 1453, such comparisons also became increasingly inflected with Crusader rhetoric, through references to Alexander's fame as "conqueror of the East." What is equally striking, however, is the extent to which Alfonso, through this comparison to Alexander, could also be placed in a direct competitive relationship with Mehmed – not only as a military rival, but as a *rex sapiens*.

A case in point is Niccolò Sagundino's 1454 oration to Alfonso, a text which in some ways directly anticipated Alfonso's own *Oratio in expeditionem contra Theucros* of the following year, by urging the sovereign to take up arms against Mehmed. At the same time, it also provided a detailed profile of Alfonso's rival, including his reputation as a patron of learning and a student of classical history. According to Sagundino, in a quote well known to Ottomanists:

[The Sultan] keeps in his company two competent physicians, one Latin and the other Greek: He is on very familiar terms with them, and under their guidance has sought to learn ancient history, concerning himself not only with the affairs of the Spartans and Athenians, and the Romans and Carthaginians, and the other principle kings and princes, but has even chosen especially to imitate Alexander the Macedonian and Gaius Caesar, whose recorded deeds he has had translated into his own language, and which he is most delighted to read and listen to⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ N. Sagundino, *Orazione al re Alfonso V d'Aragona*, in *La caduta di Costantinopoli*, II, *L'eco nel mondo*, ed. A. Pertusi, Milano 1976, p. 133. For a detailed recent study of Sagundino, see *Ad serenissimum principem et invictissimum regem Alphonsum Nicolai Sagundini oratio*, ed. C. Caselli, Roma 2012, pp. IX-LXX.

To this formidable portrait of humanistic learning, Sagundino then added a more alarming detail about the Sultan's intellectual pursuits: From his study of «various prophecies», Mehmed had convinced himself that, like Alexander, his conquests had been «granted by the sky», and that his true destiny was therefore to conquer Rome, «as if, having taken the daughter by force, he may now take the mother as well»⁵⁰.

As we have already had occasion to discuss in a preceding section, this portrayal was very much grounded in facts: Mehmed did have an interest in both classical history and prognostication, he did style himself a *New Alexander*, and he did believe it was his destiny to conquer Rome. Of the two «competent physicians» mentioned in the above passage, it is even possible to identify the Sultan's Latin instructor: in all likelihood, his Jewish physician Jacopo da Gaeta, known to have been in the Sultan's service since at least 1452, and who is later recorded, in 1465, ordering a Latin translation of Avicenna from an acquaintance in Ragusa⁵¹. For his part, Sagundino would have been in a position to know such details first hand, having travelled to Constantinople and back already in the year since the city's capture. In any case, if his intention in sharing this portrait of Mehmed with Alonso was a stratagem to spur the king's ambition to vie with him as an intellectual patron – and in particular as a student of history – then the stratagem seems to have worked. In the same year that Sagundino wrote his oration, for example, through the intercession of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Alfonso was gifted the autograph copy of Pier Paolo Vergerio's Latin translation of the *Anabasis*. Finding the translation inadequate, he then commissioned a new translation from his official court historian, Bartolomeo Facio, completed with the help of Theodorus Gaza and Sagundino himself⁵².

As discussed by Gabriella Macchiarelli, Gaza represents an interesting case in his own right for the use of translation to compare Alfonso with Alexander. In the preface to his Latin transla-

⁵⁰ Pertusi, *Caduta di Costantinopoli* cit., II, p. 135.

⁵¹ J. Raby, *Cyriacus of Ancona and the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II*, «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», 43 (1980), pp. 242-246.

⁵² Macchiarelli, *Da nuovo Alessandro* cit.

tion of Giovanni Crisostomo's *De incomprehensibili Dei natura*, Gaza hailed Alfonso as not only a *rex sapiens*, but a *rex theologus*, a sovereign who had dedicated himself so deeply to studying the nature of God that he had developed a more profound understanding of theology than any other ruler. In particular, Gaza judged him «far more learned in matters of the divine than it is possible, based on the sources at our disposal, to ascribe to Alexander»⁵³. And with this idea of the *rex theologus* – and the possibility that Mehmed, alongside Alfonso, also aspired to fulfil this role – let us now turn to the most prolific and also the most enigmatic of the Greek humanists at Alfonso's court, who also provides the single most direct connection between the humanistic cultures of Naples and Constantinople: George of Trebizond.

Part IV: A Direct Link

By almost any measure, George of Trebizond (1396-1473) ranks among humanism's most difficult figures to define, with a personal biography as complicated and contradictory as his intellectual legacy. Originally from Venetian Crete (and not, as his name might suggest, from Trebizond), George moved to Italy as a young man and spent much of his life as a peripatetic scholar, driven by his volatile personality to relocate even more frequently than was typical of an itinerant scholar of the age. For the purposes of the present essay, there are two phases of his many movements that deserve particular attention: The first, between 1452 and 1455, when George found himself in Naples, and the second, a decade later, when he travelled to Constantinople⁵⁴.

In Naples, George arrived in the spring of 1452, at the highpoint of Alfonso's patronage of Greek scholars, where he distinguished himself for his particular expertise in astral science and the Ptolemaic corpus. His most important translation completed for Alfonso (alongside the *Thesaurus* di Cirillo di Alessandria, a

⁵³ Macchiarelli, *Da nuovo Alessandro* cit.

⁵⁴ For a comprehensive biography, see J. Monfasani, *George of Trebizond: A Study of his Rhetoric and Logic*, Leiden 1976.

Christological text), was the *Centiloquium*, a collection of astrological aphorisms attributed (falsely) to Ptolemy, and with a wide circulation in the Islamic world (where it was known through a medieval Arabic adaptation)⁵⁵. As already discussed, for contemporary readers this Ptolemaic attribution would have immediately invoked an association with Alexander the Great, and particularly with the idea that Alexander was a celestial sovereign predestined by the stars for rulership. Thus, it was presumably with similar celestial connotations in mind that George eventually rededicated to Alfonso, in 1456, his entire astrological corpus, including Ptolemy's *Almagest* and his own commentary on that text, the *Isagoge*⁵⁶. In keeping with the same Alexandrine theme, he also rededicated to Alfonso his translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

And yet, while it is certainly the case that George's work on these texts clearly fit into the larger courtly project, characteristic of those years, of presenting Alfonso as a *New Alexander*, it is also true that George's special emphasis on the nexus of Alexander, Aristotle and astral science were also reflections of something else: the intersection of his most deeply held intellectual commitments with his unusually rancorous professional life. To summarize: When George came to Naples in 1452, he had done so not by choice, but by compulsion, following an acrimonious dispute with Poggio Bracciolini, Gaza, and other members of Cardinal Bessarion's circle that had culminated in his banishment from Rome. At the center of this dispute, which at one point devolved into physical violence, was a series of attacks by members of this group on George's abilities as a translator and, in particular, his translation of two specific texts: the Aristotelian *Problemata*, and Ptolemy's *Almagest*. To avenge himself, George began to stake out a philosophical position as a partisan of Aristotle and an intractable opponent of Plato, eventually to the point of denouncing the Platonic leanings of Bessarion and his followers as pagan beliefs wholly incompatible with Christianity. This is a position that he

⁵⁵ Monfasani, *George of Trebizond* cit., pp. 148-150. On the Arabic version of the *Centiloquium*, see K. von Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, Oxford 2009.

⁵⁶ Monfasani, *George of Trebizond* cit., p. 149.

would fully elaborate only later, in his famous 1457 *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*. But it is significant that his initial development of these ideas was already in a text written for King Alfonso during his sojourn in Naples⁵⁷.

Against this contentious background, at least one motivation for George of Trebizond to support Alfonso as the *New Alexander* was his hope that, by embracing this role, the king would necessarily also become a partisan of Aristotle (Alexander's teacher), and therefore a natural ally to George as he opposed his insidious Platonic enemies. But if this was indeed his aspiration, it was one he held in vain. Instead, George's time in Naples was spent watching the influence of figures like Gaza, and Bessarion himself, only increase, leaving him progressively more isolated, and more in need of a new Aristotelian champion. And then, in the midst of this disappointment, news reached Naples of the fall of Constantinople. Within a matter of weeks, George drafted and sent his first letter to Sultan Mehmed, *On the Truth of the Faith of the Christians*⁵⁸.

Trebizond's letter, which he composed in Greek, was in fact one of several written to Mehmed by prominent intellectuals following Constantinople's fall, including by Gennadios Scholarios (subsequently named patriarch of Constantinople by Mehmed himself), and eventually also Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pius II⁵⁹. Like them, George began by congratulating Mehmed on his victory, and urging him to convert to Christianity. But he then went considerably farther than any of his contemporaries, by expressing what seemed to be genuine enthusiasm for Mehmed's prospects as a universal ruler, to the extent that, in a text written while still employed at Alfonso's court, and fresh with the news of the fall of Constantinople, George seemed to transfer *tout court* his aspirations for a *New Alexander* from Alfonso to Mehmed – in-

⁵⁷ *Vindicatio Aristotelis: Two Works of George of Trebizond in the Plato-Aristotle Controversy of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. and trans. J. Monfasani, Chicago 2021.

⁵⁸ Pertusi, *Caduta di Costantinopoli* cit., II, pp. 68-79.

⁵⁹ For Gennadios' letter, see A. Papadakis, *Gennadius II and Mehmet the Conqueror*, «Byzantion», 42 (1972), pp. 88-106.

cluding his hope that Mehmed, in his guise as an Aristotelian, might save Christianity from itself.

Fascinatingly, in making this case, George used arguments that paralleled those used by his arch rival Theodorus Gaza in relation to Alfonso. In his translation of Crisostomo's *De incomprehensibili Dei natura*, discussed above, Gaza had hailed Alfonso as a *rex theologus*, explaining that the king, through his deep study of divine matters, had surpassed even Alexander in wisdom and understanding. In a similar vein, Trebizond now compared Mehmed to another, more Christian figure from antiquity, the Emperor Constantine, providing a list of reasons why Mehmed, too, surpassed his antique model. While first mentioning Mehmed's physical fitness (Constantine was a leper), and his nobility (Constantine was an upstart), it was above all the young Sultan's training in philosophy from a young age that set him apart, since Constantine «never occupied himself with philosophy at all before he began to investigate problems related to Christ»⁶⁰. As a result, while Mehmed, by right of conquest, had already established himself as the new «emperor of the Romans», his training in philosophy presented him with the chance to fulfil an even greater destiny: to «unite heaven and earth» by creating, as *rex theologus*, a new, single faith that could reconcile Christianity and Islam.

Naturally, in proposing this possibility to the Sultan, George also presented himself as an expert capable of guiding Mehmed on this path, to the extent that his letter can be read as a sort of open job application for a position at the Sultan's court. To this end, he offered to compose for Mehmed a history of his reign «so that your name might be forever exalted, even more than that of Alexander the Macedonian»⁶¹. Acknowledging Mehmed's interest in translations, he added that he had intentionally composed his letter in simple language so that it could be easily rendered into «the splendid and brilliant language of the Turks», and expressing hope that, once translated, it would be «of a certain utility» also for Mehmed's Muslim subjects. He then concluded his letter with

⁶⁰ Pertusi, *Caduta di Costantinopoli* cit., II, p. 77.

⁶¹ Pertusi, *Caduta di Costantinopoli* cit., II, p. 73.

the words: «I have dared to write to your most admirable excellency with the wish that I might be able to see you as king of all the earthly world and of the heavens, something that I am certain will come to pass if you will only investigate and philosophize on the questions related to Christ»⁶².

Part V: Back to Constantinople

George's letter to the Sultan leaves little doubt that, almost as soon as he heard of Constantinople's fall, George had begun to actively imagine himself in Mehmed's service. It is possible, though unconfirmed, that he may even have asked Afonso to send him to the Ottoman capital directly from Naples. After Afonso's death, he is known to have repeatedly made the same request of King Ferrante, even of Pius II as the pontiff was actively organizing a crusade⁶³. But in the end, George would finally manage to travel to the Bosphorus only after Pius's death, in 1465. Ostensibly, he did so as a secret envoy for the new pope, Paul II. In reality, he began openly scheming for a position at the Ottoman court even before reaching the Bosphorus⁶⁴.

When he left Italy for Constantinople, in fact, George brought with him two of the same texts that he had earlier dedicated to Alfonso, the *Almagest* and his own commentary on it, the *Isagoge*. Upon his arrival, he composed a new Greek-language introduction for both texts for presentation to the Sultan, explain his motives thus:

I arrived in Constantinople, O best emperor of emperors and autocrat of autocrats, for no other reason than to talk with Your Highness and to demonstrate the zeal I have for the praise of your power, thinking that there is nothing better in the present life than to serve a wise emperor and one who philosophizes about the greatest matters. For in addition to your other manly virtues which befit an emperor, Your Mightiness is also said to study Aristotle. Your nature thus exceeds all other kings to such a degree that you are able to

⁶² Pertusi, *Caduta di Costantinopoli* cit., vol. II, p. 79.

⁶³ Monfasani, *George of Trebizond* cit., p. 184.

⁶⁴ Monfasani, *George of Trebizond* cit., p. 185.

unite with extraordinary perfection the two extreme opposite goods of human nature, I mean the loftiness of rulership and the profundity of philosophy⁶⁵.

By plan or by good fortune, George reached the Ottoman capital at an auspicious moment for his designs, his visit coinciding with one of the few intervals in the Sultan's reign in which he took a long break from campaigning to remain in the city, fully dedicating himself to patronage. As such, the mid 1460s served as the high-water mark for the activities of the Greek intellectuals at the Ottoman court discussed earlier, including Kritovoulos of Imbros, Gennadios Scholarios, and George Amiroutzes. It seems likely, in fact, that George of Trebizond was in touch with members of this group in advance of his arrival (he likely first met both Scholarios and Amiroutzes decades earlier, at the Council of Florence). He certainly met with Amiroutzes during his stay, naming him, in his dedicatory preface to the Sultan, as «a friend» who advised him in preparing his text.

George also briefly described the content of his conversations with Amiroutzes, during which the two men discussed in detail Ptolemy's *Almagest* and the need for a revised set of astronomical tables to apply its principles. This is a suggestive detail because, like Trebizond, Amiroutzes too had a strong background in mathematics and computational astronomy, to the extent that the wall-sized Ptolemaic world map that he completed for the Sultan in the same year (1465) was probably meant as a tool of astronomical observation⁶⁶. Accordingly, in the preface to his own Latin translation of the *Almagest* presented to the Sultan, Trebizond openly lobbied for the construction of an imperial astronomical observatory, describing this as the ultimate glory of Mehmed's reign,

⁶⁵ *Collectanea Trapezuntiana: Texts, Documents, and Bibliographies of George of Trebizond*, ed. J. Monfasani, Binghamton NY 1984 (Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies), pp. 281-282. Note that I have diverged from Monfasani's translation of *basileus* as king, rather than emperor.

⁶⁶ M. Mavroudi, *Translations from Greek into Arabic at the Court of Mehmed the Conqueror*, in *The Byzantine Court* cit., pp. 195-207.

«since it would need many men, and wise ones, whom only a king would be able to assemble»⁶⁷.

Had the Sultan built such an observatory, it would have been an obvious place for George, with his technical expertise in Ptolemaic mathematics, to find employment in Mehmed's service. Unfortunately, the proposed observatory was never built, and after a stay of roughly eight months, George left the Ottoman capital without ever having obtained an audience with the Sultan. Disappointed, but determined to return again as soon as circumstances permitted, he composed still another text for Mehmed during the voyage back to Italy, *On the Eternal Glory of the Autocrat*, in which he reiterated many of the points first laid out in his letter from Naples in 1454. This time, however, he developed much fuller arguments about the possibility of reconciling Christianity and Islam through Aristotle⁶⁸. Intriguingly, he also presented these arguments partially in the form of a dialogue, with propositions from Trebizond and imagined responses from Mehmed – in all likelihood, another outcome of his collaboration with Amiroutzes, who may have shared some of his own *Dialogue on Faith*, then still a work in progress⁶⁹.

In the end, however, rather than preparing the way for George's eventual return to Constantinople, *On the Eternal Glory of the Autocrat* would instead ensure that he would never do so. Upon returning to Rome, his nemesis Cardinal Bessarion ordered his papers seized, and once the contents of this text were learned, he was arrested and imprisoned, spending several months in Castel Sant'Angelo. To his jailors' surprise, however, this experience seems to have only intensified George's convictions with respect to the Sultan, prompting him to rededicate his *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis* to Mehmed, and to compose a final missive to the Sultan, *On the Divinity of Manuel*, in which he outlined an expanded understanding of Mehmed's prophetic mission. Hailing the sultan as «the enemy of clerics», and giving him the new

⁶⁷ *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, ed. Monfasani cit., p. 282

⁶⁸ *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, ed. Monfasani cit., p. 486.

⁶⁹ George Amiroutzes, *The Philosopher, or On Faith*, ed. and trans. J. Monfasani, Washington 2021.

name of Emanuel «in the same manner that popes assume new names at their accession», he affirmed the Sultan's destiny to conquer Rome and restore true belief, now that the city had been spiritually overthrown by «pagans». In George's words:

Now, there has also occurred in Rome the apostasy from Christ to Plato at the instigation of Cardinal Bessarion, who is honored as pious by Pope Paul and by his own people because he lives his life according to Plato, and who is held in reverence by the Venetians and by King Ferrante of Naples as a saint and a wise man, or rather one should say, as an apostle and evangelist of Plato himself⁷⁰.

It is unclear exactly when George wrote these words: possibly in 1467, while still detained in Castel Sant'Angelo, or possibly after his release, in 1469⁷¹. In either case, his final missive to the Sultan provides a clear road signpost pointing back to Naples, the starting point of his long journey to Constantinople. Thus, for George, even at this moment late in life the two cities remained inextricably linked: his enduring aspirations for Mehmed as the New Alexander still paired with his disappointment over the earlier, unfulfilled potential of Alfonsine Naples – now, in his view, reduced to a den of pagan unbelief.

Conclusion

In Renaissance scholarship, there is a long tradition of dismissing George of Trebizond's writings to and about Mehmed the Conqueror as the ravings of a man who, weakened by rancor and old age, was no longer fully in control of his sanity (an accusation, in truth, first lodged when George was still alive)⁷². But in recent years, scholars of Ottoman Studies have assembled a growing

⁷⁰ *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, ed. Monfasani cit., pp. 566-567.

⁷¹ *Collectanea Trapezuntiana*, ed. Monfasani cit., p. 564.

⁷² See, for example, A. Mercati, *Le Due Lettere di Giorgio da Trebisonda a Maometto II*, «Orientalia Christiana Periodica», 9 (1943), p. 78. Also J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden 1990, p. 156. The charge of insanity was first publicly lodged by Niccolò Perotti, a disciple of Bessarion, in his text *Refutatio deliramentorum Georgii Trapezuntii Cretensis*. See Monfasani, *George of Trebizond* cit., p. 227.

body of evidence demonstrating that many of Trebizond's ideas reflect those actively promoted by Mehmed himself – particularly with regard to his ambition to found a New Rome by forging, through intellectual patronage, a new relationship between sovereignty, reason, faith and the law.

Within the limited space of this essay, we have been able to touch on these aspects of Mehmed's reign, and to compare them with that of Alfonso the Magnanimous, only superficially. But in lieu of a more detailed discussion, perhaps the most fitting way to conclude is by recalling that, as Mehmed approached the end of his life, his mind, like George's, returned to the Kingdom of Naples, or more specifically, to Otranto: the Sultan's last conquest, but what he imagined as the unavoidable first step on his predestined march to Rome.