

The purpose of my research trip to Budapest and Vienna was to investigate eleven manuscripts held in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest and the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. The manuscripts are copies of an apocryphal letter purporting to be written by a Turkish emir, Umur of Aydin (d.1348), to Pope Clement VI (r.1342-52), known as the *Epistola Morbosani*. The letters, although purportedly written by a Turkish ruler, were actually produced and circulated by many different people, especially Venice's rivals, such as the Genoese and Florentines. They survive in over eighty Latin, Italian and German versions dating from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. My study of them fits into my wider research into how fictional correspondence was used as a means of propaganda, and how Islamic rulers were used by Christian propagandists as a mouthpiece to denigrate enemies and rivals within Christendom.

The letters were first written and circulated at the time of the Crusade of Smyrna (1343-51), which was launched against the Aydin Turks and spearheaded by Venice. The purpose of the letters was to criticise the Venetian participation in this Crusade by stating that the Venetians had wrongly seized territories in the Aegean and thus had no right to defend their empire, and also by claiming that the Turks – the targets of the Crusade – were descendants of the Trojans and thus bound to the Italians (but not the Venetians!) by ties of blood, making a crusade against them illegitimate. In addition, the letters attack the legitimacy of Venice's maritime empire, by criticising her rulership of colonies overseas and her exploitation of subject populations. They end on a ominous note with a threat from Umur of Aydin that he will ally his fleets with the Ottomans and sail up the Adriatic to attack Venice, unless the Republic withdraw from the crusade.

In later years many other copies of these letters were made and circulated, with the date, name of the pope and other details changed in accordance to current events. The copies I viewed in Budapest and Vienna were produced in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Some versions that I consulted (Budapest Clmae 210, Clmae 228, Vienna 3121, 3479, 3520, 3609) were fairly standard copies of earlier Latin versions of the letter, especially those held in the Vatican and Florence. They mostly date from the fifteenth century and were copied into codices which contain other documents referring to correspondence with Eastern rulers and other writings about the Orient. These kinds of codices were not unusual and I imagine that the letter was copied into them for its entertainment value and because of its depictions of Turkish rulers, Trojans and crusaders, all of which were popular themes in humanist literary circles in the fifteenth century.

Some of the other variants were, however, more unusual. One letter, for example, was written at the back of a codex (Clmae 170) in a different hand from the rest of the documents and in a darker ink. It was annotated and contained corrections, suggesting that it may have been used as some form of teaching aid. In another codex (Vienna 4498) the letter was preceded by a more famous apocryphal letter, that from the fictional Egyptian sultan Balthazar to Pope Clement V and the Pope's response. These letters are similar to the *Epistola Morbosani* in theme and content although interesting this is the only known example of them being copied together in the same codex.¹ Another example, dating from around 1455, was written in German in a fairly high-status manuscript (Vienna 4205). Interestingly all of the other documents in this codex were written by the same scribe in Latin. This suggests that the letter was either translated into German, or that the scribe only had access to a German version; a useful piece of information for exploring the German variants of the letter.

The most interesting versions were Budapest Clmae 440 and Vienna 4764. The former was written between 1371-88, which makes it one of the rarer earlier versions of the letter. The codex is well presented with illuminations and gold-leaf decorations, suggesting it was of fairly high-status. The *Epistola Morbosani* appears in this codex as an insertion into the *History* of Archbishop Thomas

¹ W. Wattenbach, 'Fausse correspondance du sultan avec Clément V', *Archives de l'Orient latin* 2 (1884), 297-303.

of Split, after a chapter recounting the defeat of King Vukašin Mrnjavčević of Serbia by the Turks at the Battle of Maritsa in 1371. This is an especially good example of how the letter was associated with other events pertaining to the expansion of the Turks in the eastern Mediterranean and Europe. The second was written in the 1460s, but addressed to Pope Eugenius IV and dated 1444. It contains two intriguing insertions at the beginning and end of the letter stating that it was written at the time of the defeat of King Władysław III of Poland and Cardinal John Cesarani at the Battle of Varna (1444) and of a great Venetian victory over the Turks. The scribe seems to be confused here as there was no victory over the Turks at this time, but nevertheless, it is another good example of how this letter – and other fictional correspondence between Islamic rulers and the West – was used in the later medieval and early Renaissance periods.

Studying the manuscript variants of these letters has therefore helped me to better understand the different socio-economic backgrounds in which the letters were written and re-circulated, thus enabling me to better address their importance as a piece of anti-Venetian propaganda and their use as a source for contemporary attitudes towards the Turks. Once I have studied them all, I hope to produce a critical edition of the letters. A Medium Aevum travel bursary has greatly aided me in this endeavour.