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PLAGUE IN EARLY MODERN ISTANBUL: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HABSBURG RESIDENT AMBASSADORS, 1560S – 1590S

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Abstract. The Black Death from the mid-14th century initiated a long series of recurrences of the disease with significant effects on the affected human societies. The current article explores the awareness of the plague epidemics and the experiences made by the Habsburg diplomatic representatives in Istanbul from the mid-1560s to the early 1590s. In the early modern Ottoman empire plague was a persistent and disturbing part of life, recurring at unpredictable intervals and affecting all levels of society. The studied correspondences demonstrate the common measures the diplomats took to protect themselves and their servants in times of plague outbreaks. The letters contain sporadic descriptions of various diseases. Besides the recurring plague epidemics, the diplomats mention and describe other illnesses which also caused fevers and were recognized as highly contagious but seem to be distinguished from the plague. The epidemiological experience of the residents in Istanbul is worthy of scholarly attention since the disease descriptions preserved in diplomatic letters could play a supplementary role in the establishment of a detailed plague chronology of the Ottoman capital.

Keywords: Early modern diplomacy; Habsburg-Ottoman relations; plague epidemics; history of infectious diseases

Introduction

The infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, known as the plague, is linked to three major pandemics and many subsequent epidemics in the history of mankind¹⁾. The unpredictability of its recurrence, the high mortality rate, the quick spread among the entire population, the grotesque symptoms such as buboes and necrosis of the extremities, and the short incubation period made the disease extremely horrifying, especially in Medieval and Early Modern times²⁾. Since diseases were generally thought to be divine punishment for sin, plague epidemics questioned the collective morality of a community (Chiu 2018, 27). While studying different aspects of the early modern plague and its effects on the affected societies, the actual level of

knowledge of the infectious diseases at that time has to be considered. In early modern times, the role of rats and flies as carriers of the plague was not yet appreciated since the etiology and epidemiology of the illness have been worked out only at the end of the 19th century (Slack 1988, 435).

The Black Death from the mid-14th century initiated a long series of recurrences of the disease with significant effects on the affected human societies. The current article aims at exploring the awareness of the plague epidemics and the experiences made by the Habsburg diplomatic representatives in Istanbul from the mid-1560s to the early 1590s³). During the period under observation, eight different men were in charge of the Habsburg embassy on the Bosphorus and their reports to the Imperial court are the main primary sources for the current study⁴). The diplomatic correspondence provides valuable first-hand information about various aspects of the political and military developments in the Ottoman empire but also reveals curious observations and personal experiences of the everyday life of the diplomats, who were confronted with a different and unknown social environment and culture. At the time they were appointed as resident ambassadors most of them visited the Ottoman empire for the first time. Some, like David Ungnad, had traveled to Constantinople on previous occasions (Spuler 1739, 326). But there were also peculiar cases such as the one of Paul von Eitzing, who was appointed to fulfill a particular task and had no idea that due to unexpected circumstances he would have to remain in Istanbul in the capacity to represent the Habsburg emperor.

Historical studies of plague epidemics, in general, struggle with doubts about the reliability of the diagnoses of *Yersinia pestis* due to linguistic simplification in medieval and early modern terminology and the level of knowledge of infectious diseases. This applies to both European and Ottoman sources (White 2010, 556). On the other hand, due to many factors such as the ignorance of the native language, the descriptions of plague outbreaks, and the responses of Muslim communities in the foreigners', and especially travelers' accounts, are often categorized as stereotyped and inadequate. The exaggerated figures for plague mortality rates are rated as especially unreliable (Dols 1979, 165). The diplomatic representatives who spent several years in the Ottoman capital communicated daily with multiple members of various shifts of the Ottoman society⁵). They did so with the constant help of their dragomans (Ágoston 2007, 85; de Groot 2011: 111)⁶), but acquired knowledge about the society and life in the empire, incomparable to that of the voyagers passing through Ottoman territory. The fact that the Habsburg embassy had its residence, the so-called *Nemci han* or *German house*, in the heart of the city also contributed to the diplomats' awareness of current events and the least relatively correct dating of the outbreaks (Teply 1968)⁷). The correspondences of the imperial residents contain sporadic descriptions of various diseases. It should be acknowledged that besides the recurring plague epidemics the diplomats mention and describe other illnesses, which also caused fevers and were often deadly. They were recognized as highly contagious but seem to be distinguished from the plague. The

disease descriptions preserved in diplomatic letters could play a supplementary role by the establishment of a detailed plague chronology of the Ottoman capital.

Plague in the early modern Ottoman empire

In the early modern Ottoman empire plague was a persistent and disturbing part of life, recurring at unpredictable intervals and affecting all levels of society. The plague was present in the Ottoman world for half a millennium from the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, which makes the Ottoman epidemiological experience worthy of scholarly attention (Varlık 2014, 196 – 197). In his article *Rethinking Disease in Ottoman History* (2010) Sam White comments on the most influential studies from the late 1970s on and outlines the gap in research on diseases in the Ottoman empire of the classical age (16th – 17th centuries), which new studies from the past decade aim to fill (White 2010, 550 – 551). The knowledge of epidemic diseases that affected the Ottoman society in the early modern era has been significantly broadened through the research of Nükhet Varlık. Her studies on the Ottoman experience during the Black Death and the so-called Second Plague Pandemic illustrate how the new science of plague can be put in dialog with historical sources by integrating the results of studies in fields such as bioarchaeology, microbiology, genetics, and epidemiology into historical inquiry (Varlık 2014, 193 – 228). Recent works also seek to analyze the emotional burden plague placed on Ottoman society. Putting the uncertainties of the times of the outbreaks at the center of historical inquiry leads to a better understanding of the individual behavior of the affected (Varlık 2017, 259 – 260).

Varlık argues that a combination of factors such as the territorial and population growth of the Ottoman empire in the late 15th and the 16th century, the consolidation of its trade networks in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the contacts to the newly acquired lands in the South and North such as Egypt and the Black Sea basin, resulted in the emerging of new conditions leading to the wider spread of plague pandemics. She offers a three-phased periodization of the period of 1453 – 1600, during which the major changes occurred (Varlık 2012, 251 – 263). The second (1517 – 1570) and especially the third phase (1570 – 1600) is characterized by important features of the period to be examined in the current study. They provide the necessary knowledge of the background and surrounding circumstances for the study of the activities, experiences, and general awareness of the Imperial diplomats in times of plague epidemics in the last four decades of the 16th century.

According to Varlık, during the 16th century, the supernatural-apocalyptic perception of plagues in Ottoman society gradually gave way to a more natural-medical understanding of the same phenomenon – a new vision that should be understood in association with the rise of the early modern Ottoman state (Varlık 2013, 745). From around 1520 on, several major waves of plague struck various parts of the Ottoman dominions and especially in the major urban centers. The intervals between the different

episodes were of around three years. The Ottoman conquest and expansion during the 16th century had led to more intensified outbreaks in already affected areas as well as to eruptions in previously unaffected ones (Varlık 2013, 758). In September 1565 in one of his letters to Emperor Maximilian II (1564 – 1576) the imperial diplomat Albert de Wijs reports on a new outbreak of the plague, the great number of victims, and comments that the city of Constantinople is constantly threatened by this disease⁸). One month later, in October 1565, the resident states that the disease continues to spread by the day in and out of the city taking many lives. He says this situation should be taken care of because otherwise, he is worried, the infection will spread further and rage through the whole winter without an interruption: “*Pestis grassatur vehementissime intra et extra urbem, moriunt innumeri homines et verendum est ne hoc incendium indies latius serpat nam plerumque cum autumnali tempore scintillare incipit tota hyeme absque intermissione desaevire solet*”⁹). He albite doesn’t mention any measures taken by the Ottoman authorities or himself. Nevertheless, a letter sent to Vienna at the end of January 1566 contains a note that the plague is ceasing¹⁰). The more detailed reports of Albert de Wijs’ successors reveal that during plague outbreaks he (and presumably his servants) left Istanbul and spent some time in isolation.

The year 1570 marks the beginning of both the third phase suggested by Varlık and “the most terrible plague outbreak of the sixteenth century”, during which the presence of the plague is documented in at least one location of the Ottoman lands each year between 1570 and 1600. During that period Istanbul played a central role in the transmission of disease from one region of the empire to another (Varlık 2012, 260 – 261). The severity and tragedy of the outbreaks of the 1570s and 1580s are reflected in the letters written to the Habsburg court by its diplomats.

The Habsburg residents during plague epidemics

The diplomatic reports of the Habsburg representatives in Istanbul demonstrate the common measures they took to protect themselves and their servants in times of plague outbreaks. Besides separating the ill from the healthy and assuring medical assistance, the residents often resorted to moving out of the city and staying away at least until the infection started to cease. There were certain preconditions such as having an infected person in the household and the acquisition of the sultan’s permission to leave the capital. Diplomats often name the “*changing of air*” as a way to escape the disease. This is understandable given the belief that any infected place produced “a bad air” or “miasma”¹¹), which was considered to be a poisonous vapor or mist filled with particles from rotting organic matter that caused illnesses. The miasma theory was accepted and quite popular throughout Europe until the late 19th century when it was replaced by the germ theory (Porta et al. 2018)¹²). Just like the disease, the bad air was believed to cling to infected towns and to be transported in the clothes, bedding, and baggage of sick people. Contact with the infected led to contamination so they had to be avoided (Slack 1988, 437).

After the sudden death of Albert de Wijs in October 1569¹³⁾, in May 1570 Karl Rijm took over the post of permanent imperial representative in Istanbul and held the position until November 1574¹⁴⁾. Rijm was a former member of the council of the Spanish king Philips II (1556 – 1598) in Brussels. He was recommended for the position by the Spanish general and diplomat Fernando Álvarez de Toledo y Pimentel, known as the Grand Duke of Alba, and was the last in the series of Habsburg residents in Constantinople from the Netherlands¹⁵⁾. In the first decades after the division of the two separate branches of the Habsburg dynasty in the mid-1550s¹⁶⁾, the exchange of professional cadres between the courts in Vienna and Madrid wasn't uncommon. Mutual support between the power centers is recorded on various levels among which diplomacy stands out (Stoyanova 2020, 117 – 210). After his return to Vienna Rijm was appointed as court adviser of Maximilian II.

At the end of December 1570, Karl Rijm reports that the senior dragoman of the Imperial embassy Antonius Dege had passed away after being infected with the plague. Rijm doesn't give any details about the symptoms and the progress of the disease and turns right away to the problematic consequence of his demise, namely the search for a replacement for this most valuable servant. He uses the phrase “after he was struck by the plague” (*peste correptus*) and doesn't indicate any guesses about how the disease was transmitted¹⁷⁾.

Nine months later, at the end of September 1571, Karl Rijm gives an interesting and more detailed account of some measures taken in Istanbul, while the plague was spreading in the capital and Pera taking the life of many. Plenty of the embassy's men were ill, the diplomat himself as well, but he reported to get better. To be more in the fresh air and avoid getting infected, around the end of July, he was forced to move out of the city to a remote place, referred to as “the garden”. He reports to Vienna that he was attributed a caravanserai (*caravassaray*) as a temporary residence, but doesn't provide any further details. The fact that he reports feeling pressure to remain under quarantine for a certain period is worth stressing out. Without a doubt, the disturbing circumstances around the spreading illness stood behind his decision to move temporarily out of Istanbul, but he certainly doesn't mention any opposition to that from any Ottoman officials, as his colleagues do in the 1580s. The diplomat's secretary, Bartholomeus Hanniwal, who was suffering from severe diarrhea due to a dysentery infection and was exhausted even before the sudden outbreak of the fevers, had moved to the Franciscan monastery in Pera for the fresher air and the gardens. When talking about the beginning of the outbreak, Rijm also mentions that it was after the Habsburg courier Minquitz had left Istanbul. Since it's known that Minquitz left the Ottoman capital at the beginning of July and arrived in Vienna in mid-August¹⁸⁾, it can be assumed that in July the epidemic had already a noticeable impact on life in the city.

Rijm believed, that his secretary would get everything he needed from the monastery and get better more quickly. The diplomat even let his physician stay with him and assist him, but the disease should bring his end. Rijm doesn't mention the name of

the physician, but it is known, that the Flemish humanist physician and poet Arnold Manlius was part of Rijm's entourage from the beginning of his mission (Babinger 1965, 20 – 21; Zsuzsa Barbarics-Hermanik 2016, 115). After getting a second infection that couldn't be cured with any remedy, Hanniwal passed away on the 10 of August around 8 a.m. His demise was another great loss for the Imperial embassy after the death of Antonius Dege the previous year. Hanniwal was buried on the next day with a ceremony. Rijm invited the French ambassador and all other representatives of European catholic powers, who were also present at the burial. With the consent of the Grand vizier, he was buried in an honorable place on the land of the monastery¹⁹⁾.

The successor of Karl Rijm was the aristocrat from Carinthia David Ungnad von Sonnenegg (ca. 1530 – 1600), who held different offices in service to the Viennese court (Hönisch 1877, 169). On his first journey to the Ottoman empire in 1572, he delivered the annual tribute and return just a year after to support Rijm during peace negotiations and subsequently replace him as permanent Habsburg representative (1573 – 1578). His personality, his mission at the Porte, and his career as president of the Imperial war council (1584 – 1600) have attracted a little more attention than his predecessors', at least in Carinthia and Lower Austria (Dresser 1602; Hönisch 1877).

A case from the mid-1570s reveals that moving outside the city was a measure taken not only during plague outbreaks but also in the case of another severe illness. Going closer to nature and the fresh air was believed to help the faster recovery. On 6 July 1575, the imperial courier Hans Preyner arrived in the Ottoman capital bringing the annual tribute to the Ottoman court. In a letter to Emperor Rudolf II (1576 – 1612) dating from 11 July, he writes about the first symptoms of a disease that was going to torment him for several months. Shortly after his reception, he felt feverish and in the next few days his condition worsened dramatically. In his reports, David Ungnad speaks of a "*febris continua*" for over 24 hours and weakness²⁰⁾. The resident constantly reports on Preyner's illness and the medical care and measures taken to help him. He was diagnosed with "*Tertianam duplicem ardentem*, which tortured his stomach with a lot of phlegm and his liver with cholera". Ungnad's accounts indicate also movement disorders, resembling epileptic shocks.²¹⁾ Two physicians visited him daily – Doctor Salomon²²⁾ and another Jew named Vidal, who was the *medicus* of Ungnad's predecessor Karl Rijm. Further, Ungnad had arranged that the personal physician of sultan Selim II – known as Doctor Brodo, consulted the other two doctors. On 19 July both three physicians agreed that Preyner's life wasn't in danger, but his illness could last for several days. They attributed the weakness he felt to the many days he spent on the water on his way to Istanbul. Ungnad himself was suffering from severe stomach ache but had no fever. With the sultan's permission, he decided to move to the monastery of San Benedetto in Galata to "change the air". According to the diplomat's words, all of Preyner's men were ill, and the majority of the embassy's servants were too. Ungnad states that he had never experienced anything similar in the two years since he arrived in Istanbul, but doesn't speak of plague or another highly contagious disease, which must

have been the case, since at least 30 of his men were suffering from high fever, head and stomach ache, nausea and general weakness²³). Ungnad spent not less than three weeks at the monastery in Galata and moved back to the city in late August. At the end of the month, Preyner's condition was still bad. He was still feverish and weak and couldn't even stand up without help²⁴). In October the envoy is reported to feel slightly better, although he still had a fever once every five days²⁵). Two months later, in the middle of December 1575, he finally reached the Habsburg fortress of Komárom, carrying the prorogation of the peace agreement between Rudolf II and Murad III. Upon his arrival his condition was far from perfect. And the fact that another courier carried the agreement further, suggests that he may not have been fully recovered²⁶).

Another interesting example from the autumn of 1582 again illustrates fleeing out of the city in times of plague outbreaks as the common measure taken by the Habsburg representatives and suggests some required conditions to get the sultan's permission to do so. In the middle of October, the imperial diplomat Johann Preyner, who filled the position in the period 1581 – 1584, writes to Rudolf II about the spreading disease in Constantinople. It had reached the Safavid embassy, which was reported to lose six to seven people every day to the plague. There were even false rumors that the whole delegation had died due to the infection. Other news stated that after the sultan showed them his hospitality eight days ago, the embassy was now on recovery²⁷). Nevertheless, upon the planned departure of the Safavid delegation at the beginning of December 1582, Preyner reports that it had lost most of its members²⁸).

Two weeks later another report reveals how the outbreak of the plague affected the imperial embassy. After one of Preyner's men was infected with the plague on the 14 of October, he got permission from the sultan to move with his men to the island Chalke (today Heybeliada) to avoid the further spread of the disease. According to Preyner, the Grand vizier Sinan Pasha and the Turks, in general, didn't let him move alone outside of his embassy's residence. The diplomat reports that the island was about two miles away from the city and Albert de Wijs and Karl Rijm had also fled there from the plague. Preyner planned to stay there for as long as the infection was so severe in the city and in particular in his neighborhood, which he expected to last through the winter months as it had happened before. His residence was regularly cleaned. The diplomat doesn't hide his concern about the situation and hopes for divine help for himself and his men. He mentions the skin wounds as the first signs of the infection²⁹). He probably speaks of the sores formed from the swollen lymph nodes and lymphatic vessels in the area of the flea bite. These sores could have a diameter of up to ten centimeters, they changed color in the course of the sickness, often appearing blue or black due to internal bleeding in the lymph nodes (Benedictow et al. 2012, 65). At the end of November, the plague continued to spread, as Preyner writes to the Emperor. The situation was extremely bad in his neighborhood, so he remained in isolation outside the city and planned to return to his initial residence as soon as the infection started to cease³⁰).

Diplomatic tension and plague in the 1580s

The diplomatic correspondence from the mid-1580s is indicative of the dependencies between the state of the Habsburg-Ottoman bilateral relations and the freedom of movement and action of the imperial residents in Istanbul during plague outbreaks. Ever since the establishment of the permanent Habsburg embassy in the Ottoman capital (1547), the imperial representatives were seen as guaranties for the peacekeeping and the annual delivery of a tribute of 30,000 ducats. Archduke Ferdinand (1503 – 1564) had agreed to the payment in the treaty of 1547 (Petritsch 1979: 206, 217). The diplomats and their servants became logical targets and were even detained whenever the Holy Roman emperor fell into disgrace with the Ottoman authorities. During the second half of the 16th century, the most common reason, therefore, was the delay in providing the expected sum³¹⁾. In their letters to the imperial court, the residents often emphasize the timely arrival of the so-called *munus honorarium*³²⁾ as the most important precondition for keeping the peace³³⁾. The preserved correspondences demonstrate, various aspects of the diplomatic duties of the Habsburg missions and how the everyday life of the embassy strongly depended on the developments in the relationship between the emperor and the sultan. The behavior in times of illness and devastating pandemics becomes evident in the letters of Paul von Eitzing, who witnessed three severe plague outbreaks (1584, 1586, 1587) during his four-year mission on the Bosphorus (1584 – 1587).

Von Eitzing had brought the annual *munus honorarium* to Constantinople in the early autumn of 1583. Unexpected circumstances led to his appointment as a permanent representative of Rudolf II in Constantinople, although he did not desire to remain in the Ottoman empire. After the sudden death incident of the Viennese diplomat Friedrich Preyner in August 1583, Von Eitzing found himself pressured to stay. Since it could take up to six months for a new resident to arrive, the emperor's brother and deputy in Vienna Archduke Ernst recommended that Von Eitzing should be retained despite his reluctance³⁴⁾. He assumed it would be easier to persuade the diplomat to stay on for two or three years more after a few months in post and proved right³⁵⁾.

In the summer of 1584, a new vigorous wave of the plague hit the Ottoman capital. On 4 September the imperial resident Paul von Eitzing wrote to Rudolf II that he had lost three of his men to the plague, which took the lives of more than 120,000 people in Istanbul alone until 27 August. The diplomat doesn't name the source of this information. Given the tense situation and the fact that he was staying outside of the city in a garden on the upper side of Scutari (Üsküdar) suggests that his intelligence network may have not been able to function properly. The stated numbers were probably based on rumors and may be not fully accurate. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the diplomat's awareness of the epidemic. According to him, the majority of the population didn't flee from the infection and that was the reason for the further intense spread. He assumes that another 100,000 people would find their death due to the plague³⁶⁾. In the middle of September, von Eitzing reports that while on a mission in Alexandria, the

Kapudan Pasha (Grand Admiral) of the Ottoman fleet Uluj Ali³⁷⁾ had lost one-third of his men, after the plague infection had come to the triremes. The admiral had to send five disarmed vessels to Istanbul and left with 15 others to Modon³⁸⁾ to summon a new crew to replace the lost ones³⁹⁾. This plan didn't seem easy to achieve, since in October he was still in Modon, where, according to rumors, the plague was not less severe and he couldn't make progress, although he was expected to return to Istanbul until the end of the month. It was expected that the sultan would promote him to a vizier *Barbariae*, a position Uluj Ali had been aiming at for a long time⁴⁰⁾.

In the middle of October 1584, von Eitzing reports that the epidemic had begun to cease and he had moved back to his ordinary residence in the city. With the improvement of the situation, it was expected that the annual tribute, which has been reported to be on the way to Istanbul, would soon arrive⁴¹⁾. Heinrich von Liechtenstein, who was tasked to deliver it, reached the Ottoman capital at the end of the month. During his journey, the envoy suffered from an illness, which forced him to interrupt his voyage several times⁴²⁾. Due to his bad condition, von Liechtenstein had to remain for several months in the Ottoman empire. According to the resident, he was so weak, that it took a great effort to take him to the embassy's house. He wasn't able to travel back and was sent *consilio medicorum* to the healing baths in Bithynia⁴³⁾ for recovery over the winter⁴⁴⁾. He wasn't lucky to beat the illness and died in the middle of April 1585 on a ship in Gallipoli, shortly before his planned return journey through Venice. He was buried in a Greek church in the city⁴⁵⁾. Although the plague epidemic was still present, when writing about the envoy's disease, von Eitzing doesn't mention it as a possible cause and doesn't indicate any fear of contamination. He does though state that the physicians tried everything, but couldn't help him. Another member of Liechtenstein's embassy – Georg Hartmann, also died in Istanbul during the mission, but the information on his case is rather scarce and leaves the reason for his demise unknown⁴⁶⁾.

At the end of June 1586, the diplomat again reports on a new outbreak of the disease. According to him, the household of the vizier Ibrahim Pasha alone had over 100 victims. The whole city, Galata, and the neighboring sites were affected and it was feared and expected that this outbreak would be more severe than the one from two years ago in 1584. The sultan had a garden toward the Black sea built for him and his family and was supposed to move there in eight to ten days. Von Eitzing himself planned to move again with his remaining servants to the same garden on the upper side of Scutari, where he fled from the plague in 1584, and hide there from the vigorous infection⁴⁷⁾. About two weeks later, on 9 July, the diplomat sent an interesting report, very indicative of the dependence between his freedom of movement and the developments in 1571 – 1587 diplomatic circumstances. Grand vizier Siyavuş Pasha⁴⁸⁾ forbade him to leave the city for the garden until an expected courier from Vienna had arrived in the capital with the news that the annual tribute was on his way to Istanbul. The fear that the infection of 1586 would be more severe and dangerous than the one of 1584 challenged the diplomat's creativity as he tried to persuade the Pasha to let him leave the city. He first attempted

to do so through his men, and then with the help of an influential Jew, not mentioned by name, and also through other eminent Ottoman officials and viziers. Von Eitzing reports on using the precedence from previous years when the former Grand viziers Osman and Messik Pasha had allowed the imperial residents to live outside the city during plague outbreaks and mentions a concrete capitulation with the same purpose. Siyavuş Pasha emphasized that the sultan had urged himself several times to handle the situation with the absent currier. The grand vizier saw, therefore, no possibility to bring up the matter in front of the Padishah again before the currier's arrival. Nevertheless, the diplomat's efforts finally got him permission to move with his men to the garden. And so he did on the 1 July, while he and his servants were all still healthy. The diplomat complains, that the delay of the currier had made the sultan extremely suspicious of him and compromised his own and his men's safety⁴⁹⁾. Towards the end of July von Eitzing's letters sound even more anxious as he reports about the rising numbers of the victims and the prospects of the further spread. One of his dragomans had died in his house in Galata together with his only daughter and two servants. Another member of the diplomat's household who got sick in the garden was sent to a place in Galata for recovery but soon found his death. Von Eitzing expresses his great anxiety to lose more of his trusted servants. According to him, they all were scared because they had seen, that once infected the terrible pain and never-ceasing misery were inevitable⁵⁰⁾. In the middle of August, the situation had not changed significantly, the disease was still spreading, but no further loss of personnel is mentioned⁵¹⁾. A month later von Eitzing reports on the continuing bad conditions and many victims. The situation had worsened due to the emergence and spread of new infections which also caused a high fever. A deadly disease of the brain referred to as "*male di malzucò*" is also mentioned. To protect himself and his men von Eitzing was still in the garden but planned to return to the city by the end of the month so that he could do his work better⁵²⁾. At the end of October, the expected currier, who would announce the imminent arrival of the annual tribute, was still missing, which led to several threats. These made the diplomat feel extremely vulnerable and in danger – he constantly uses phrases like "*höchster gefahr meiner und der meinigen*", "*von den hiesigen einig' shimpf, spott unnd nachtail*", "*in höchster gefahr leibs und lebens*"⁵³⁾. Von Eitzing, who seems to have returned to the city as planned, reports on the death of another valuable servant of his, who was the fifteenth man he had lost to the plague this year. His words well illustrate his desperation and the misery of all the suffering he had witnessed. His more or less privileged position of a person who could leave the city together with his household, although not without much effort, and the vaguely and more informative description of his experience with the epidemic, suggests the presumable horror among the less privileged shifts of the Ottoman society.⁵⁴⁾

Although the situation in the capital seems to have improved in the winter months, the infection had spread to other parts of the empire. In April 1587, the diplomat reported the following news that had reached Istanbul *per aviso*: the plague was still extremely

severely spreading in the whole of Jemen reaching Jerusalem. According to Paul von Eitzing, the holy places were especially dangerous during outbreaks of diseases because of the great numbers of pilgrims and poor people. The resident mentions the Christian monks forced to leave the holy places and also gives an account of a letter he received from Christians begging for help. Von Eitzing couldn't think of anything that would help more than to bring the matter to the sultan and the grand vizier and ask for help from the Sangiack Beg of Jerusalem⁵⁵).

In August 1587, Paul von Eitzing left Constantinople. Dr. Barthomoleus Pezzen, who had delivered the annual tribute two months earlier, succeeded him as an imperial representative. A nobleman from Carinthia with a doctorate in Law, Pezzen had already spent some years in Istanbul as a secretary of the Habsburg embassy under the diplomat Joachim von Sinzendorf (1578 – 1581).

At the end of December 1587, Bartholomeus Pezzen writes about another plague outbreak in Constantinople and this one seems to have hurt the imperial embassy and its network the hardest. The first alarming sign of the most serious situation is the fact that the resident begins a series of letters with information about the illness. Although there was not that much complaining about the infection in the city, the diplomat lost three of his men in just 24 hours, others became ill, some more died and some lost their minds. Worried, the resident sent his servants to different distant places outside the city for recovery and he also spent several days in various gardens. Pezzen didn't notice any improvement in the situation and after losing one of his best men – Jacob Fürer, a nobleman from Nürnberg, who was healthy and cheerful, got ill and fell dead after a few hours, he decided to move to the monastery of Holy Peter in Galata with his few remaining healthy servants. This extremely short incubation period suggests that Jacob Fürer may have been infected with the pneumonic form of the plague, in which pathogens could be transmitted from person to person by droplet infection and the incubation period could be from only a few hours up to a full day (Benedictow et al. 2012, 65). Either alone or in conjunction with bubonic plague, the appearance of pneumonic plague always had tragic consequences, since it's considered one of the most infectious epidemic diseases with an almost inevitable fatal outcome (Dols 1979, 169). Pezzen left the city against the will of the Grand vizier and was expecting to be forcefully brought back to his residence. He was warned by a Jew, presumably a member of his network of contacts, that if the anticipated courier who would announce that the annual tribute was already on his way from Vienna to Istanbul didn't arrive in a couple of days, the imperial diplomat could expect to be brought back to his house *per forza* and even to be put under house arrest⁵⁶). In the preceding weeks, the missing *munus honorarium* had led to several menaces from the Ottoman court, and especially from the grand vizier, who even threatened with open warfare⁵⁷).

In a letter from the 5 of January 1588, Bartholomeus Pezzen gave another account of the extremely difficult situation he found himself in. Since his last report from two weeks ago, he had lost another seven people and five were infected. The rest of his

network was separated and constantly moving from one place to another. The diplomat was writing from the monastery of St. Peter in Galata, where he was currently staying. According to him, the severity of this year's plague outbreak was caused by the unusually warm weather and constant warm winds, which even in the winter months resembled the summertime. Pezzen shared his hope that the expected cold weather would alter the situation for the better. This like any other account of the plague outbreaks closes with an appeal for God's help and mercy⁵⁸⁾.

Pezzen's letter written on 20 of January 1588 mentions the continuing dangerous infection and emphasizes the diplomat's devotion to his mission and duties as an imperial representative. The report begins with a detailed narrative about the latest developments in the struggle for the Polish crown, which in the diplomat's opinion, tends to be disturbing. Despite his concerns and the still extremely dangerous situation, he decided to move back to his residence in the city to be able to better fulfill his duties in the name of the emperor and his brother Archduke Maximilian III⁵⁹⁾. He took his healthy servants with him and arranged the best possible medical care for the infected ones⁶⁰⁾. After moving back to Istanbul, the diplomat seems to have been preoccupied with the current political issues. The fact that in his following reports he doesn't mention the illness suggests that the infection didn't cause him further severe struggles and losses of men. Only at the end of April, did he report on a long-lasting illness of the Sultan and the different rumors concerning the causes. His bad condition, which required permanent medical assistance, suggested a possible plague infection⁶¹⁾. In the middle of May, the grand vizier is reported to have missed the ceremony of presenting the gifts brought together with the annual tribute due to a severe illness⁶²⁾. Both of them recovered, so the lack of more detailed accounts of their symptoms leaves the actual causes of their sickness to speculation.

At the end of September 1590, Bartholomeus Pezzen writes in a letter to Rudolf II that the strong wind from the North had weakened the plague epidemic a bit, but afterward, an unexpectedly warm wind from the South brought a new worsening of the situation which led to the loss of even more lives. The neighborhood of the embassy's residence was severely affected. The resident lost two of his servants, many were ill, but survived⁶³⁾.

In the middle of September 1592, Friedrich von Kreckwitz writes about a renegade from Portugal who was sent *per Mare* to gather news on the Christian states and in particular on the Emperor's court. He made a stop in Gallipoli where he died from the plague which was severely spreading. According to multiple trusted sources, the victims from the city and the nearby Scutari were estimated to be 80 – 90,000 people, among whom were Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Every day between 14 and 1500 people lost their lives. In the same letter, Pezzen reveals some details about the religious reaction to the plague. After it had been announced throughout the whole city, on 10 September the mufti held a public sermon on the square in front of the Hagia Sophia to beg God for help in the fight against the plague *unanimi consensu*. The diplomat was

informed by Turks, who had participated, that around 50,000 people of all ages were present at the sermon, all the viziers and many Ottoman officials too, just the Sultan was not there. On the next day another public sermon was held there to ward off the illness, but this time no viziers were present. Then on the following day, another one followed – in the mosque of Sultan Mehmed II⁶⁴.

The ruling orthodox view that the plague was the will of God explains that behavior. The acceptance of the divine origin of the disease was common not only for the Muslim Ottomans of the Early Modern period but also for the Christians. The universal recognition of repentance and prayer as the proper response against an epidemic of plague was demonstrated both privately and publicly in processions, public fasts, and sermons throughout Europe (Slack 1988, 436). Sam White cites the correspondence between the English ambassador Sir Thomas Roe and the archbishop of Canterbury, which offers a good example of the similarities between the Ottoman and the European attitudes towards the plague in the 1620s (White 2010, 554). Another parallel can be drawn to the well-documented plague procession as a response to the problem of collective sin organized by the Archbishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo, during the city's outbreak of 1576 – 1578. According to Remi Chiu, such processions held across Europe in times of plague with a unique itinerary for every city aimed to rectify the relationship between the participants and their God, who was punishing them. An interesting organizational detail is, that Borromeo separated the participants into parishes to diminish the danger of contagion across neighborhoods (Chiu 2018, 27 – 31). Pezzen doesn't mention any similar precautions during the public sermons in Istanbul that year.

At the end of November 1592, Kreckwitz reports that the plague had ceased *de pristina sua vehementia* and people were acting and moving more freely again. The infection was still taking the lives of many and the numbers of the victims were proclaimed daily. According to experienced and trusted sources of the resident, more than 100,000 people of all nations and ages died due to the plague in 1592⁶⁵.

Conclusion

The diplomatic reports of the Habsburg ambassadors in Istanbul reveal some interesting insights into their personal experiences, behavior, and struggles during the numerous plague outbreaks from the 1560s to the 1590s. The presented examples demonstrate that the information regarding the epidemics and their impact on the diplomatic relations between Vienna and Istanbul occupied an important part of the diplomatic correspondence during this period. The epidemics had an undeniable effect on the mission's functioning and scope of action which is mirrored in the letters sent to Vienna/ Prague. On one hand, the plague outbreaks took the life of many of the embassy's servants. Finding a replacement for some of the vacant positions, like that of the deceased dragomans, was especially hard. Separating the ill from the healthy, assuring medical assistance, and leaving the city to "change the air" and avoid the infection were the common measures the diplomats took. During the periods of self-

quarantine, the ambassadors reported on the developments of the situation and waited for the infection to cease before returning to their residence in Istanbul.

The correspondence with the Habsburg court remains focused on the political and diplomatic matters and doesn't tell much about the single outbreaks themselves, their wide-ranging effects, or the Ottoman perceptions. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the diplomatic reports reveals curious details such as the response to the phenomenon similar to documented practices in Western Europe. A parallel can be drawn between the public sermon Bartholomeus Pezzen writes about in 1592 and similar mass processions in Milan in the 1570s, or England in the 1620s. The reports can also be used as sources for reference when dating the recurring epidemics in Istanbul and the approximate duration. Some descriptions of the symptoms and incubation period suggest the type of plague during particular outbreaks. The diplomats rarely share information on the numbers of the victims of the plague and seldom mention their sources. Nevertheless, they often emphasize the ones that are simply rumors or count as uncertain and unreliable.

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NOTES

1. There are four possible forms of plague, that scientists differentiate in human infections – the bubonic, the septicemic, the pneumonic, and the abortive plague (Benedictow, Kacki & Wiechmann 2012, 65).
2. On the presence of epidemics in the daily life of Early Modern Europe see: KRASTEV, L., 2022. Epidemics as Everyday Life in Early Modern Europe. In: GEORGIEVA, T., SIMOVA, A. & KRASTEV, L. (Eds.) Early Modern Europe. Borders and conflicts, 145 – 153. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski [in Bulgarian].
2. The outbreak of the Long war (1593 – 1606) left the Austrian Habsburgs without a permanent resident in the Ottoman capital for over two decades until Michael Starzer was appointed in 1610 (Spuler 1936).
4. The correspondences of the Habsburg resident ambassadors with the Imperial court are preserved at the *Haus, Hof- und Staatsarchiv* in Vienna, part of the Austrian State Archives.
5. Albert de Wijs spent the longest period as a resident diplomat in Istanbul – seven years (1562 – 1569). His colleagues as follows: Karl Rijm (1570 – 1574), David Ungnad (1573 – 1578), Joachim von Sinzendorf (1578 – 1580), Johann Friedrich

Preyner (1580 – 1584), Paul von Eitzing (1584 – 1587), Dr. Bartholomeus Pezzen (1587 – 1592).

6. The terminus ‘dragoman’ refers to both the interpreters employed by the court of the Sultan and the ones serving the foreign ambassadors. Their services were of essential importance for the functioning of European diplomatic missions to the Ottoman empire, which pretty much depended on them. Dragomans were highly experienced in intercultural communication, the political situation, and the legal norms, which made them very suitable mediators between the Ottoman court and the representatives of the European powers.
7. From the diplomats’ point of view, the decision to locate the embassy’s residence near the Topkapı Palace was taken to impede the intelligence functions of the mission. It was placed in the former Greek monastery of St. John opposite the column of Constantine, which deliberately limited the scope of action of the Habsburg residents. The other European embassies were based in Galata and enjoyed much more freedom in that respect.
8. DE WIJS, Albert. 1565. *Letter to Emperor Maximilian II*. Letter. In: Türkei I, Kt. 20, Konv. 1, fol. 94. At: Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Staatenabteilungen (ÖStA/HHStA StAbt).
9. DE WIJS, Albert. 1565. *Letter to Emperor Maximilian II*. Letter. In: Türkei I, Kt. 20, Konv. 2, fol. 58. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt
10. DE WIJS, Albert. 1566. *Letter to Emperor Maximilian II*. Letter. In: Türkei I, Kt. 21, Konv. 1, fol. 103.
11. The word *μίασμα* comes from ancient Greek and means “pollution”. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
12. See: Illness Theories, Miquel Porta, John M. Last, Oxford Dictionary of Public Health, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 2018.
13. Albert de Wijs died on October 21, 1569 after a month-long illness documented by the secretary of the diplomat, Anselmus Stöckel. There is no mention that his disease was contagious. In: Türkei I, Kt. 25, Konv. 4, fols. 9 – 10. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt
14. Rijn’s personality and service in the Ottoman capital remain poorly studied. Franz Babinger’s article on Rijn and his lost Turkish diary is, therefore, of key importance (Babinger 1965).
15. Viglius Zuichemus an Maximilian II., Brüssel 1569 August 28. In: Türkei I, Kt. 25, Konv. 3, fol. 15. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt
16. After the abdication of Emperor Charles V (1555/6), the Habsburg Monarchy, ruled by the Austrian line, was formed in Central Europe as a result of the development of the previous decades (Evans, 1986). The son of Charles V, Philip II, took power over his vast territorial heritage not at once: in the Kingdom of Naples and the Duchy of Milan in 1554, a year later in the Netherlands (1555), and in 1556 in Europe and the overseas possessions of the Spanish crown.
17. RIJM, Karl. 1570. *Report*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 27, Konv. 2, fol. 241. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.

18. RIJM, Karl. 1571. *Report*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 27, Konv. 5, fols. 148 – 149. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
19. RIJM, Karl. 1571. *Report*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 27, Konv. 5, fol. 184. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
20. Ungnad, David. 1575. *Letter to Emperor Rudolf II*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 31, Konv. 5, fol. 136, 144. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
21. Ungnad, David. 1575. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 31, Konv. 5, fol. 153. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
22. Doctor Salomon was a key member of the intelligence network of the imperial embassy in Istanbul, whose advice was highly valued. A Jew from Udine, he fled to the Ottoman empire in the 1560s escaping persecution. In Istanbul, he provided several European embassies (firstly the Venetian) with medical care. This helped him grow close relationships with powerful figures, among which was the Grand vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (Arbel 1991, 111 – 112).
23. Ungnad, David. *Letter*. 1575. In: Türkei I, Kt. 31, Konv. 5, fol. 161 – 162. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
24. In: Türkei I, Kt. 31, Konv. 5, fol. 257. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
25. Ungnad, David. *Letter*. 1575. In: Türkei I, Kt. 32, Konv. 1, fol. 55. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
26. In: Türkei I, Kt. 32, Konv. 2, fol. 62. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
27. PREYNER, Johann. 1582. *Letter to Rudolf II*. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 47, Konv. 1, fol. 119. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
28. PREYNER, Johann. 1582. *Letter to Rudolf II*. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 47, Konv. 2, fol. 139. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
29. PREYNER, Johann. 1582. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 47, Konv. 1, fol. 141 – 142. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
30. PREYNER, Johann. 1582. *Letter to Rudolf II*. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 47, Konv. 2, fol. 66. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
31. In: Türkei I, Kt. 51, Konv. 1, fol. 133. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
32. The Habsburgs didn't refer to the payment as a tribute and preferred the term honorable gift or *munus honorarium* (Lat.).
33. In: Türkei I, Kt. 25, Konv. 3, fol. 24 – 25. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
34. Emperor Rudolf II needed a deputy in Vienna after moving the imperial residence to Prague in 1583. Archduke Ernst On the reign and the political propaganda of Rudolf II (Vocelka 1981).
35. ARCHDUKE ERNST. 1583. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 49, Konv. 3, fols. 169 – 177. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
36. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter to Rudolf II*. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 52, Konv. 2, fol. 42. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.

37. Uluj Ali (1519–1587) was a renegade from Calabria. Captured by corsairs in 1536, he served as a galley slave. Within a few years, he converted to Islam and became a corsair himself. Being a very able mariner he soon rose in the ranks and gained successes through bold reis on the Barbary Coast. He participated in several major sea battles and was promoted to the rank of Beylerbey of Alexandria in 1565. In 1568 he was appointed Beylerbey of Algiers and after the battle of Lepanto (1571) Selim II appointed him as Grand Admiral (Kapudan Pasha) of the Ottoman fleet from 1571 to 1587.
38. Modon is the name given by the Venetians to the Greek city of Methony (Μεθώνη), situated in south-west Peloponnese.
39. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter to Rudolf II*. Letter. Türkei I, Kt. 52, Konv. 2, fol. 112. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
40. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 52, Konv. 2, fol. 139 – 140. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
41. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 53, Konv. 2, fol. 32 – 33. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
42. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 52, Konv. 2, fol. 172 – 173. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
43. Bithynia was a province in the northwest of Asia Minor, adjoining the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus, and the Black Sea, conquered by the Ottomans between 1325 and 1333. The first Ottoman capital – Bursa, is the main city of the province, known for its hot springs.
44. EITZING, Paul von. 1584. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 53, Konv. 1, fol. 25. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
45. EITZING, Paul von. 1585. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 53, Konv. 2, fol. 87. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
46. EITZING, Paul von. 1585. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 53, Konv. 2, fol. 90. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
47. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 57, Konv. 3, fol. 149 – 150. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
48. Kanijeli Siyavuş Pasha (d. 1602) was an Ottoman statesman from the Sanjak of Bosnia. He occupied the position of grand vizier three times: from December 1582 to July 1584, from April 1586 to April 1589, and finally from April 1592 to January 1593.
49. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 57, Konv. 4, fol. 4 – 7. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
50. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 57, Konv. 4, fol. 43 – 44. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
51. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 57, Konv. 4, fol. 70. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
52. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 58, Konv. 1, fol. 56. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.

53. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 58, Konv. 2, fol. 120; Konv. 3, fol. 34. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
54. EITZING, Paul von. 1586. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 58, Konv. 1, fol. 262 – 263. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
55. EITZING, Paul von. 1587. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 60, Konv. 1, fol. 208. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
56. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1587. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 64, Konv. 2, fol. 68 – 69. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
57. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1587. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 64, Konv. 2, fol. 30 – 31. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
58. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1588. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 65, Konv. 1, fol. 28. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
59. Maximilian III (1558 – 1618) was the fourth son of Emperor Maximilian II and Maria of Spain and brother of Emperor Rudolf II. Following the death of the Polish king, Stefan Báthory Maximilian stood as a candidate for the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. His opponent was the prince of Sweden Sigismund III Vasa. After a military defeat in the War for the Polish Succession (1587 – 1588), he spent over a year in captivity and 1589 renounced his claim to the Polish crown.
60. “[...] *Dise Mir höchstbeshwerliche, zwar unerwartte Zeittungen, hab ich eben In meinen sgweristen obligen und gefahr, wegen regierender infection, davon Eur. Kayen M. zuvor mehrmalß gehorsamst melding bescheiden, haben Mich dahin getriben, daß Ich ungeacht aller gafahr, und hindangesetzt aller wichtigen bedenken In solchen fällen, damit Ich desto besser allen sachen shuldigster pflicht nach abwartten möge, daß Ich meine noch übgir kranke diener an unterschiedlichen orten, nach allen menschlichen vermögen, mit Ärzten und gueter wartung versehen, und mich mit den übrigen, Im Namen des Allmechtigen, In mein gewöhnliche herberg herein gegn Constantinopel gezogen, und so wol bei dem Obersten Bassa, Beglerbegen Graeciae, und sonst allenthalben, wa es die notturft erfordert, Er Kayen M. Wolmainende bescheidene freundtliche anerpietung, In Namen deroselben herrn Bruder, alß erwelten Polnischen Khünig, und was hieraus dem Sulthano und hieiger Porten auf alle fäll, sonderlich bei jetzbeshaffnen Persishen wesen zu shaden entstehn, und guets ervolgen möchte, durch alle mögliche dexteritet anpringen und einbilden, daneben anzaigen lassen [...]*” In: Türkei I, Kt. 65, Konv. 1, fol. 166. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
61. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1588. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 66, Konv. 1, fol. 143 – 144. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
62. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1588. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 66, Konv. 1, fol. 210. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
63. PEZZEN, Bartholomeus. 1590. *A letter to Rudolf II*. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 73, Konv. 2, fol. 243. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.

64. KRECKWITZ, Friedrich von. 1592. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 78, Konv. 3, fol. 150 – 151. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.
65. KRECKWITZ, Friedrich von. 1592. *Letter*. In: Türkei I, Kt. 79, Konv. 2, fol. 28. At: ÖStA/HHStA StAbt.

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