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978-1-108-05455-3 - The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq; Seigneur of Bousbecque, Knight, Imperial Ambassador: Volume 1

Edited by Charles Thornton Foster and F.H. Blackburne Daniell

Excerpt

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## LIFE OF BUSBECQ.

*Introductory.*

THE days are now past when students were content to take their history at second hand, and there is therefore the less reason to apologise for introducing to the reader, in an English dress, the letters of one who was an eyewitness and actor in some of the most important events in the sixteenth century.

Several of the most striking passages in Robertson's *History of Charles V.* are taken from Busbecq; De Thou has borrowed largely from his letters; and the pages of Gibbon, Coxe, Von Hammer, Ranke, Creasy, and Motley, testify to the value of information derived from this source. It must not, however, be supposed that all that is historically valuable in his writings has found a place in the works of modern authors. On the contrary, the evidence which Busbecq furnishes has often been forgotten or ignored.

A remarkable instance of this neglect is to be found in Prescott's account of the capture of Djerbé,<sup>1</sup> or Gelves, by the Turks. The historian of Philip II. has made up this part of his narrative from the conflicting and vainglorious accounts of Spanish writers, and does not even allude to the plain, unvarnished tale which

<sup>1</sup> See Prescott, *Philip II.*, book iv. chap. i.

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Busbecq tells—a tale which he must have heard from the lips of the commander of the Christian forces, his friend Don Alvaro de Sandé, and which he had abundant opportunities of verifying from other sources.

The revival of the Eastern Question has drawn attention in France<sup>1</sup> to the career and policy of one who was so successful as an ambassador at Constantinople, and the life of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq has been the subject of two treatises at least since 1860, while a far more important work dealing with our author's life is about to issue from the press. Of this last we have been allowed to see the proof-sheets, and we take this opportunity of expressing our obligation to the author, Monsieur Jean Dalle, Maire de Bousbecque. His book is a perfect storehouse of local information, and must prove invaluable to any future historian of the Flemings. It is entitled *Histoire de Bousbecque*.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries hardly any author was so popular as Busbecq. More than twenty editions<sup>2</sup> of his letters were published in the literary capitals of Europe—Antwerp, Paris, Bâle, Frankfort, Hanau, Munich, Louvain, Leipsic, London, Oxford and Glasgow. His merits as a recorder of contemporary history are briefly sketched by a writer of that period, who thus describes his despatches to Rodolph: 'C'est un portrait au naturel des affaires de France sous le règne de Henri III. Il raconte les choses avec une naïveté si grande qu'elles semblent se passer à nos yeux. On ne trouve point ailleurs tant de faits historiques en si peu de discours. Les grands

<sup>1</sup> The Society of Sciences, Agriculture, and Arts at Lille has for several years been offering a prize for an essay on Busbecq's life.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, *List of Editions*.

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mouvements, comme la conspiration d'Anvers, et les petites intrigues de la cour y sont également bien marquées. Les attitudes (pour ainsi dire) dans lesquelles il met Henri III., la Reine Mere, le duc d'Alençon, le roi de Navarre, la reine Marguerite, le duc de Guise, le duc d'Espèron, et les autres Courtisans ou Favoris de ce tems-là, nous les montrent du côté qui nous en découvre, à coup seur, le fort et le foible, le bon et le mauvais.'<sup>1</sup>

All who have studied the letters of Busbecq will endorse this opinion; nor is it possible for anyone even superficially acquainted with his writings, not to recognise the work of a man who combined the rarest powers of observation with the greatest industry and the greatest honesty.

He was eminently what is called 'a many-sided man'; nothing is above him, nothing beneath him. His political information is important to the soberest of historians, his gossiping details would gladden a Macaulay; the Imperial Library at Vienna is rich with manuscripts and coins of his collection. To him scholars owe the first copy of the famous Monumentum Ancyranum. We cannot turn to our gardens without seeing the flowers of Busbecq around us—the lilac, the tulip, the syringa. So much was the first of these associated with the man who first introduced it to the West, that Bernardin de Saint Pierre proposed to change its name from lilac to Busbequia. Throughout his letters will be found hints for the architect, the physician, the philologist, and the statesman; he has stories to charm a child, and tales to make a grey-beard weep.

<sup>1</sup> *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Littérature*, vol. i. p. 48, edition of 1702. The author is Noel d'Argonne, who wrote under the assumed name of de Vigneul-Marville.

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Of his careful and scientific investigations it is almost unnecessary to cite examples. Never having seen a camelopard, and finding that one had been buried at Constantinople, he had the animal dug up, and a careful examination made of its shape and capabilities. On his second journey to Constantinople he took a draughtsman with him, to sketch any curious plants and animals he might find. He sent his physician to Lemnos to make investigations with regard to Lemnian earth—a medicine famous in those days; while he despatched an apothecary of Pera to the Lake of Nicomedia to gather acorus<sup>1</sup> for his friend Mattioli, the celebrated botanist.

While furnishing information of the highest value, Busbecq never assumes the air of a pedant. He tells his story in a frank and genial way, not unlike that of the modern newspaper correspondent. If to combine amusement and instruction is the highest art in this branch of literature, he would have been invaluable as a member of the staff of some great newspaper. Among books, Kinglake's *Eothen* is perhaps the nearest parallel to Busbecq's Turkish letters; the former is more finished in style—Busbecq evidently did not retouch his first rough draft—but it does not contain one tithe of the information. Such is the author for whom we venture to ask the attention of the English reader.

Even to those who can read the elegant Latin in which he wrote, it is hoped that the notes and articles appended may be found interesting and useful. They have been gleaned from many different quarters, and to a great extent from books inaccessible to the ordinary student. This is specially the case with the *Sketch of Hungarian History during the Reign of*

<sup>1</sup> The sweet or aromatic flag.

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*Solyman.* In no modern writer were we able to find more than scattered hints and allusions to the history of Hungary during this important epoch, when it formed the battle-field on which the Christian and the Mussulman were deciding the destinies of Europe.

The object of Busbecq's mission was to stay, by the arts of diplomacy, the advance of the Asiatic conqueror, to neutralise in the cabinet the defeats of Essek and Mohacz. In this policy he was to a great extent successful. He gained time; and in such a case time is everything. What he says of Ferdinand is eminently true of himself.<sup>1</sup>

There are victories of which the world hears much—great battles, conquered provinces, armies sent beneath the yoke—but there is also the quiet work of the diplomatist, of which the world hears little. In the eyes of those who measure such work aright, not even the hero of Lepanto or the liberator of Vienna will hold a higher place among the champions of Christendom than Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq.

*Removal of the Rubbish.*

For the rebuilding of a house, it is absolutely necessary to remove the rubbish with which the site is encumbered. Unfortunately, the process is equally necessary in writing the life of Busbecq. There is rubbish of ancient date and rubbish of modern date, which cannot be ignored and must be removed. With regard to one story, a writer of the present time is specially bound to protest. It is to be found in the treatise of Monsieur Rouzière, entitled, *Notice sur Auger de Busbecq, Ambassadeur du Roi Ferdinand 1<sup>er</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> See Fourth Turkish letter *ad finem*.

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There is the more need for warning the reader against it, because Monsieur Rouzière ushers in his narrative with a long tirade against similar inventions. 'He is not,' he tells us, 'a professor of history, or one of those knights of the quill who wander from town to town discovering documents which, like the Sleeping Beauty, are waiting for the champion who is to break the enchanter's spell.' Monsieur Rouzière is specially bitter against 'un Américain qui vient de mourir en parcourant l'Europe pour faire des découvertes historiques, et qui à l'Escorial avait fait la trouvaille d'une relation sur la mort de don Carlos écrite par son valet-de-chambre.' With this preamble, he introduces his readers to the following story, which is simply a romance of his own creation :

'When Charles V. came to Flanders for the purpose of installing his sister Mary, Queen of Hungary, in the government, he visited Comines, in company with Gilles Ghiselin, Seigneur of Bousbecque, father of the Ambassador. As they were entering the town, the Seigneur, entreating Charles to wait for a few moments, knocked at the door of a house, which, though unpretentious, had a dignity of its own. Out of it issued a boy with sparkling eyes; so interesting was his appearance, that the words, 'O! what a lovely child!' burst from the emperor's lips. The Seigneur bade the boy kneel down. 'Ogier,' said he, 'look well at your lord; when you are older you will serve him as faithfully as your father and grandfather.' He then informed the emperor that, not having any legitimate children, he had allowed all his love to centre on this offshoot, who, he fondly hoped, would one day be admitted into his family.'

Monsieur Rouzière is certainly not fortunate in his

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story ;<sup>1</sup> the Seigneur's name was George<sup>2</sup> and not Gilles, and he had, moreover, three legitimate children. A house at Comines is shown as the scene of this event, but from inquiries made on the spot, we have ascertained that there is no tradition connecting it with Busbecq earlier than the publication of Monsieur Rouzière's treatise in 1860. He is a lively and amusing writer. It is the more to be regretted that he has not regarded the line which separates biography from romance.

Monsieur Huysmans, the well-known French artist, has also laid the foundation of several errors in the striking picture which has been purchased by the Belgian Government, and now adorns the Hôtel de Ville of Belgian Comines. Its artistic merits make one regret the more that he did not select one of the many dramatic events in Busbecq's life, instead of giving us a scene which not only is not recorded, but never could have happened. In the first place, the date 1555 is wrong ; in no case could the scene have taken place earlier than 1556. Secondly, Monsieur Huysmans has been led into error by a loose translation in the French version of Busbecq's letters by

<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Rouzière being a complete stranger to the neighbourhood, Monsieur Jean Dalle, the present Maire of Bousbecque, acted as his cicerone. Before going away, Monsieur Rouzière selected an old house in Comines to which he attached his legend ; this house is now shown as the birthplace of the Ambassador, on the authority of a man who could have had no acquaintance with the traditions of the place. On the other hand, Monsieur Dalle's family have resided in the neighbourhood from time immemorial, and Monsieur Dalle himself has for the last twenty years taken the keenest interest in the subject. He tells us that there is not the slightest evidence connecting the house with Busbecq, and that no one ever heard of the story till after the publication of Monsieur Rouzière's brochure in 1860.

<sup>2</sup> That the name of Busbecq's father was George—and not, as usually supposed, Gilles (Ægidius)—is established by the deed of legitimation, a copy of which is given in the Appendix.

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the Abbé de Foy. For some time Busbecq was confined to his house by the Turkish authorities. De Foy, in speaking of this curtailment of his liberty, uses the expression 'une étroite prison' (whence, by the way, some have supposed that Busbecq was confined in the Seven Towers). Monsieur Huysmans, led astray by this phrase, and imagining that the Ambassador was confined in a prison, straightway concluded that if he was imprisoned he must have been *arrested*. On this he grounded the subject of his work, 'Soliman fait arrêter Busbecq, diplomate Flamand, Constantinople, 1555.' There is also a striking error in the persons represented in the picture. When Busbecq first arrived at Constantinople Roostem was in disgrace, and Achmet held the post of chief Vizier. The latter had only consented to accept the seal of office on condition that the Sultan undertook never to remove him. The Sultan kept his word. When it was convenient to reinstate Roostem, he did not deprive Achmet of the seal of office, but of *his life*. The execution of Achmet is one of the most striking scenes recorded by Busbecq. Unfortunately, Monsieur Huysmans had not studied his subject sufficiently, for in his picture Roostem is in office, and Achmet stands by as a subordinate.

As to errors of a less recent date, they are, for the most part, such as an intelligent reader of Busbecq's letters may correct for himself. For instance, it is not hard to prove that the author of the life prefixed to the Elzevir edition is wrong in stating that Busbecq's father died before the Ambassador went to England, when we find that he had an interview with him after his return from our island. Neither is there much danger of the veriest tiro being led astray by De Foy's suggestion that, when Busbecq came to England for



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the marriage of Philip and Mary, he had long conversations with Henry VIII., who tried to induce him to enter his service. There is, however, danger in Howaert's<sup>1</sup> statement that Busbecq accompanied the younger sons of Maximilian to Spain, and introduced them to Philip. The story is not impossible in itself, nor is it even improbable. But there is this suspicious circumstance about it; those who mention it do not seem to be aware that Busbecq did accompany the two elder sons of Maximilian, Rodolph and Ernest, to Spain in the capacity of '*Écuyer trenchant*.' This latter fact is established on the best of authorities, namely, the Patent of knighthood issued by the Emperor Ferdinand to Busbecq, a copy<sup>2</sup> of which we have, through the kindness of a friend, been enabled to procure from the archives of Vienna.

That Busbecq accompanied the four younger Archdukes to Spain is perhaps doubtful, and still more doubtful is the story grafted on to it by later hands, namely, that Busbecq pleaded the cause of the Netherlands before Philip II., obtained the recall of Alva and the substitution of Requesens in his place. No facts could be more interesting if they should but prove to be true; unfortunately they are at present without authority.

*Bousbecque and its Seigneurs.*

It is from the seigneurie of Bousbecque that Ogier<sup>3</sup> Ghiselin takes the name by which he is best known, Busbecq (Latin, Busbequius).

<sup>1</sup> See letter to Boisschot, appended to the Elzevir edition of Busbecq's letters from France.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, *Patent of knighthood*.

<sup>3</sup> Ogier is the name of an old Norse hero, who figures prominently in the Carolingian epic cycle. Jean Molinet says of some Burgundian

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Properly of course his name is identical with that of the seignury, but, by common consent, the Ambassador is known as Busbecq, while the name of the place, after numerous variations—Bosbeke, Busbeke, Bousbeke, &c., has settled down into the form Bousbecque.<sup>1</sup>

It will be necessary therefore to speak of the man by one name and the place by another.

The geographical position of Bousbecque has an important bearing on the biography of the Ambassador; as the place is not marked in English maps, a plan of the district is given in this volume showing the relative positions of Bousbecque, Comines, Wervicq, Halluin, &c. It will be seen that Bousbecque lies on the river Lys, about two miles from Comines. In the times with which we shall have to deal, it formed part of the County of Flanders; it is now part of the French frontier, and is included in the Département du Nord.

The neighbourhood of Bousbecque has a history extending to early times, for close to it stands Wervicq, marking with its name the Roman station of Viroviacum; in Bousbecque itself Roman paving-stones have been dug out on the road now known as the 'Chemin des Oblaers;' whence it may be assumed that the road mentioned in the itinerary of Antoninus, as running from Tournay to Wervicq, passed through Bousbecque.

The depth of the river Lys, which is an affluent of the Scheldt, exposed the neighbouring country to the attacks of the Northmen; the hardy pirates sailed up the stream, and built their castles and forts on the

archers, who displayed great courage at a critical moment, 'Et n'y avoit celui d'entre eux qui ne monstrast mine d'estre ung petit Ogier.' (Molinet, chap. xxx.) It was Latinised into Augerius, hence some write Auger.

<sup>1</sup> Bousbecque takes its name from a tributary of the Lys, which is still called Becque des bois.