Under Suleiman I (1520 CE – 1566 CE), the Ottoman Empire reached its greatest territorial extent and perhaps its “golden age” in terms of culture and economy. A helpful window into the life of this most powerful of Muslim gunpowder states comes from the writings of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, a Flemish nobleman who served as a diplomat for the Austrian Empire, which then felt under great threat from Ottoman expansion into central Europe. For six years in the mid-sixteenth century, Busbecq represented Austria in the Ottoman Empire, from which he sent a stream of letters to a friend. The excerpts found below present his view of the Ottoman royal court and his reflections on Ottoman military power.

QUESTIONS FOR PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS:

- What does Busbecq’s first meeting Suleiman reveal about the sultan’s attitudes toward Europeans?
- What sources of Ottoman political authority are present in Busbecq’s account?
- How did Busbecq define the differences between the Ottoman Empire and Austria? What do you think he hoped to accomplish by highlighting these differences?
- Shortly after Suleiman’s reign, the Ottoman Empire began to enter a period of decline. What in Busbecq’s account points to future problems for the Ottoman state?
- How do you think Busbecq’s outsider status shaped his perceptions of Ottoman political and military life? To what extent does his role as a foreigner enhance or undermine the usefulness of his account for historians?

On his [Sultan Suleiman I’s] arrival we were admitted to an audience; but the manner and spirit in which he listened to our address, our arguments, and our message, was by no means favourable. The Sultan was seated on a very low ottoman, not more than a foot from the ground, which was covered with a quantity of costly rugs and cushions of exquisite workmanship; near him lay his bow and arrows. His air, as I said, was by no means gracious, and his face wore a stern, though dignified, expression. On entering we were separately conducted into the royal presence by the chamberlains [attendants], who grasped our arms. This has been the Turkish fashion of admitting people to the Sovereign ever since a Croat [a person from Croatia], in order to avenge the death of his master…asked [Sultan] Amurath for an audience, and took advantage of it to slay him.After having gone through a pretense of kissing his hand, we were conducted backwards to the wall opposite his seat, care being taken that we should never turn our backs on him…

The Sultan’s hall was crowded with people, among whom were several officers of high rank. Besides these there were all the troopers of the Imperial guard and a large force of Janissaries; but there was not in all that great assembly a single man who owed his position to aught save his valor and his merit. No distinction is attached to birth among the Turks; the deference [respect] to be paid to a man is measured by the position he holds in the public service. There is no fighting for precedence; a man’s place is marked out by the duties he discharges. In making his appointments the Sultan pays no regard to any pretensions on the score of wealth or rank, nor does he take into consideration recommendations or popularity; he considers each case on its own merits, and examines carefully into the character, ability, and disposition of the man whose promotion is in question. It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should only be assigned to the competent. Each man in Turkey carries in his own hand his ancestry and his position in life, which he may make or mar as he will. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal….

Among the Turks, therefore, honors, high posts, and judgeships are the rewards of great ability and good service. If a man be dishonest, or lazy, or careless, he remains at the bottom of the ladder, an object of contempt; for such qualities there are no honors in Turkey! This is the reason that they are successful in
their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are
daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are
not our ideas, with us [Austrians] there is no opening
left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the
prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the
public service....

Take your stand by my side, and look at the sea of
turbaned heads, each wrapped in twisted folds of the
whitest silk; look at those marvelously handsome
dresses of every kind and every color; time would fail
me to tell how all around is glittering with gold, with
silver, with purple, with silk, and with velvet; words
cannot convey an adequate idea of that strange and
wondrous sight: it was the most beautiful spectacle I
ever saw.

With all this luxury great simplicity and economy are
combined; every man’s dress, whatever his position
may be, is of the same pattern; no fringes or useless
points are sewn on, as is the case with us, appendages
which cost a great deal of money, and are worn out in
three days.... I was greatly struck with the silence and
order that prevailed in this great crowd. There were no
cries, no hum of voices, the usual accompaniments of a
motley gathering, neither was there any jostling;
without the slightest disturbance each man took his
proper place according to his rank.

On leaving the assembly we had a fresh treat in the
sight of the household cavalry returning to their
quarters; the men were mounted on splendid horses,
excellently groomed, and gorgeously accoutered
[outfitted]. And so we left the royal presence, taking
with us but little hope of a successful issue to our
embassy.

The Turkish monarch going to war takes with him over
40,000 camels and nearly as many baggage mules, of
which a great part, when he is invading Persia, are
loaded with rice and other kinds of grain. These mules
and camels also serve to carry tents and armour, and
likewise tools and munitions for the campaign.... The
invading army carefully abstains from encroaching on
its magazines [supplies] at the outset; as they are well
aware that, when the season for campaigning draws to
a close, they will have to retreat over districts wasted
by the enemy, or scraped as bare by countless hordes
of men and droves of baggage animals, as if they had
been devastated by locusts; accordingly they reserve
their stores as much as possible for this emergency.
Then the Sultan’s magazines are opened, and a ration
just sufficient to sustain life is daily weighed out to the
Janissaries and other troops of the royal household.
The rest of the army are badly off, unless they have
provided some supplies at their own expense.

From this you will see that it is the patience, self-
denial, and thrift of the Turkish soldier that enable him
to face the most trying circumstances, and come safely
out of the dangers that surround him. What a contrast
to our men! Christian soldiers on a campaign refuse to
put up with their ordinary food, and call for thrushes,
beccaficos [small bird], and such like dainty dishes! If
these are not supplied they grow mutinous and work
their own ruin; and, if they are supplied, they are
ruined all the same. For each man is his own worst
enemy, and has no foe more deadly than his own
intemperance, which is sure to kill him, if the enemy be
not quick. It makes me shudder to think of what the
result of a struggle between such different systems
must be; one of us must prevail and the other be
destroyed, at any rate we cannot both exist in safety.
On their side is the vast wealth of their empire,
unimpaired resources, experience and practice in arms,
a veteran soldiery, an uninterrupted series of victories,
readiness to endure hardships, union, order, discipline,
thrift, and watchfulness. On ours are found an empty
exchequer [treasury], luxurious habits, exhausted
resources, broken spirits, a raw and insubordinate
soldiery, and greedy generals; there is no regard for
discipline, license runs riot, the men indulge in
drunkenness and debauchery, and, worst of all, the
enemy are accustomed to victory, the men indulge in
Persia, whose position on his rear forces the invader to
take precautions. The fear of Persia gives us a respite,
but it is only for a time. When he has secured himself
in that quarter, he will fall upon us with all the
resources of the East. How ill prepared we are to meet
such an attack it is not for me to say.

The sons of Turkish Sultans are in the most wretched
position in the world, for, as soon as one of them
succeeds his father, the rest are doomed to certain
death. The Turk can endure no rival to the throne, and,
indeed, the conduct of the Janissaries renders it
impossible for the new Sultan to spare his brothers; for
if one of them survives, the Janissaries are forever
asking largesses. If these are refused, forthwith the cry
is heard, ‘Long live the brother!’ ‘God preserve the
brother!’ — a tolerably broad hint that they intend to
place him on the throne. So that the Turkish Sultans are
compelled to celebrate their succession by imbruing
[staining] their hands in the blood of their nearest
relatives.