

Article

The Image of the Ottoman Empire in the Memoirs of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw: A Cultural and Diplomatic Perspective

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Abstract

The memoirs of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw are among the most significant Western sources portraying the Ottoman Empire in the late 16th century. Sent on a diplomatic mission and later taken captive, Wratislaw offers a dual image of the Empire: as a powerful, well-organised state and as a despotic regime evoking fear. His account reveals two contrasting perceptions of the Ottoman court and administration. While their rigid authoritarianism challenged Western admiration for Ottoman governance, it also reinforced existing notions of Oriental despotism. The shifting diplomatic conduct and hostile treatment of the Bohemian delegation further shaped the Ottomans as unreliable and deceptive in Western eyes. Culturally, Wratislaw presents the Ottomans as “the other civilization,” highlighting differences in religion, lifestyle, and social structure. Yet he also acknowledges their hospitality, generosity, and religious tolerance. This study examines how Wratislaw’s personal experiences reflect broader Western imaginations of the Ottoman world. It argues that cultural and diplomatic encounters shaped a complex and often ambivalent image, influenced by both structural dynamics and individual perspectives. Positioned at the intersection of historical sociology and imagology, the article contributes to the understanding of cross-cultural perception in early modern diplomacy.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; Ottoman image in the West; diplomatic relations; cultural encounters; imagology

1. Introduction

The 16th century was the period when the Ottoman Empire was at its strongest, both in terms of territorial expansion and its political and military power. The expansionist approach that extended deep into the heart of Europe greatly contributed to the formation of the Ottoman image in Europe. Moreover, travellers’ memoirs were among the textual sites where the Ottoman image was articulated and negotiated in early modern Europe. One such text is the memoir of the Bohemian nobleman Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw, which articulates recurring representational motifs about the Ottoman world (Wratislaw 2013). Wratislaw arrived in Ottoman lands as a member of a diplomatic delegation; however, due to political developments, he was taken captive and thus experienced Ottoman society from the dual perspective of both a free envoy and a prisoner (Brummett 2014). Unlike most travellers who wrote about the Ottomans—almost all of whom were adults—Wratislaw was an adolescent, caught between childhood and youth. He could not yet be considered an adult. Born in 1576, Wratislaw was only 15 years old when he embarked on his journey



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in 1591. He was not yet mature. When Wratislaw's captivity ended and he returned to his homeland, he was 20 years old. This means that his narrative retrospectively frames his adolescence (15–20) through experiences associated with Ottoman authority and captivity. This experience led him to produce a complex and ambivalent representation of the Ottomans, combining admiration with criticism.

This point, although shaped by Wratislaw's subjective perspective, nevertheless provides valuable insight into the structural weaknesses of the Ottoman Empire as it entered a period of stagnation. While acknowledging the splendour of the empire, Wratislaw also underscores the administrative disorder, the prevalence of bribery, and the arbitrary conduct of high-ranking officials. In this sense, his memoirs can be interpreted as a narrative of decline and internal decay. For these reasons, Wratislaw's account can be read as distinct in tone and framing compared with many contemporary travellers' narratives.

Shortly after his release, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Wratislaw composed his memoirs in Bohemian (Czesko-Slavonic/Czech) and dated the writing to 1599. The memoirs remained in manuscript form until 1777, when it was first printed in Prague by Pelzel, and a second edition appeared in 1807 (Kramerus). The first English edition, which constitutes the primary corpus of this article, was published in London in 1862 (Bell and Daldy) as a literal translation from the Bohemian original. Later, a print was made by Wratislaw z Mitrovic in 1876, and another Turkish print was made in 1981 (Wratislaw z Mitrovic 1876; Wratislaw 1981). These successive editions demonstrate the sustained scholarly interest in his account, although little is known about the work's reception in his own time. In recent scholarship, however, studies such as those of Brummett (2014), Birnbaum (1991), and Szabari (2016) have examined Wratislaw's memoirs within the broader framework of early modern European travel writing and the construction of Ottoman images. In Wratislaw's accounts, the Ottoman Empire is considered not merely as a political entity but also through its cultural and social dimensions. His observations within the Ottoman court, in dungeons, and among the general populace provide crucial material for analysing how his text constructs representations of the Ottoman Empire for Western readers. This study examines which representational motifs Wratislaw's memoir foregrounds and how these motifs align with or diverge from patterns found in Western travel and diplomatic writing. The focus of this analysis will be the first English edition of his work, published in 1862. This study uses the 1862 English edition as its primary text. This edition is the most accessible and most frequently cited version in English academic writing. Therefore, this version stands out distinctly from other versions. Fixed page numbers have been provided in our study. As the aim of the study is to examine the discursive motifs of the text rather than its philological ones, the use of the 19th-century translation is sufficient for this article. To reduce the period bias of the translation, some important passages have been compared with the 1876 German and 1981 Turkish translations.

This article does not reconstruct the memoirs' reception exhaustively; instead, it focuses on representational motifs in the 1862 English edition while briefly noting key milestones of textual transmission (manuscript → 1777 → 1862) to clarify what can—and cannot—be claimed about 'impact'. Rather, its purpose is to determine which representational motifs in his memoirs contributed to the formation and dissemination of an "Ottoman image" within Western literature. The more specific objective is to identify and analyse the representational patterns in the 1862 English edition, not to quantify its overall social influence.

In this regard, the following questions will be addressed:

- Which stereotypes regarding the Ottomans are reflected in Wratislaw's accounts?
- How was the image of the Ottoman Empire in the West shaped within the context of diplomatic and cultural encounters?

- How can the contradiction between the glorification of the Ottomans as a powerful state and the criticism of them as an oppressive regime be explained?
- How were observations about Ottoman society influenced by the experiences of Western diplomatic missions?

In light of these questions, Wratislaw's accounts will be analysed within the framework of diplomatic contexts and cultural encounters that shaped Western perceptions of the Ottomans. This study will employ the method of imagology to examine how the image of the Ottoman Empire was constructed in Wratislaw's narratives (Laurušaitė 2018). The representation of the Ottoman Empire in the West will be interpreted in light of the experiences of diplomatic missions and the political conjuncture of the period.

2. Theoretical Framework and Method

The study will analyse how the memoirs of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw constructed the image of the Ottoman Empire through the lens of imagology. In this case, a combination of literary and historical analysis will be used. Imagology is a set of theories which combines elements of different disciplines, uses literature, history and sociology to study how people and nations imagine each other (Beller and Leerssen 2007). This approach treats travelogues and diplomatic documents as sites where observers textually construct another society through recurring motifs and evaluative framing (Ewertowski 2020). In this study, imagology is applied through thematic coding and comparative close reading. The main units of analysis are the recurring motifs in Wratislaw's narrative. Themes such as discipline and order, bribery and corruption, and hygiene and bathhouse culture constitute the core structure of the study. Each theme is examined in terms of evaluative framing and linguistic markers of othering, such as references to "barbarism," "superstition," or "cruelty." The analysis also takes into account the observer's positionality as a decisive factor in shaping perception. Whether the narrator was a captive, diplomat, merchant, or cleric makes a significant difference. Therefore, Wratislaw's text is interpreted in relation to other contemporary accounts, with differences in representation considered within the broader historical and cultural contexts of late sixteenth-century diplomacy. The academic contribution of this study can be stated as follows: it addresses the textual reproduction, reinforcement, or modification of existing Western metaphors about the Ottomans (such as the frequently mentioned themes of discipline, despotism, hygiene, and bribery). Therefore, this is a discursive contribution, not a claim related to population-level persuasion, as seen in the frequency of motifs, evaluative framing, and intertextual coherence with other early modern narratives.

2.1. Imagology: Key Concepts

The word 'imagology' comes from the Latin words *imago* meaning 'image' and *logos*, meaning 'study or science.' (Wirth 2017). As an interdisciplinary field, it examines how cultural representations are constructed, formed, and modified, particularly through comparative literature and related approaches (Lynch 1985; Beller and Leerssen 2007, pp. 5–10). Imagology seeks to explain how perceptions of one culture toward another are produced and how they contribute to shared histories and collective memory (Beller and Leerssen 2007, pp. 10–11). The concept of "image" varies across disciplines: in psychology it refers to cognitive structures, whereas in art and literature it concerns individual and group representations (Blažević 2012, pp. 107–8). Rousseau and Pichois similarly define an image as a representation that can function simultaneously as subject, object, cognition, and feeling (Ilie 1976, pp. 375–89). For this reason, imagology extends beyond literature, encompassing history, sociology, anthropology, and political science (J. T. Leerssen 2007, pp. 17–32).

Many historiographical sources are shaped by cultural bias and ideological perspective and cannot be treated as entirely objective (J. T. Leerssen 2007, pp. 17–20). Imagology therefore functions as a critical method for identifying how such texts construct perceptions of others (Beller and Leerssen 2007, p. 18). Diplomatic documents, travellers' writings, and military reports are especially important for tracing how one society perceives another (J. Leerssen 2022; Alpay 2020; Emirkadı 2021). In Ottoman-related writing of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Western texts often oscillate between portraying the empire as powerful and splendid or as barbaric and despotic; imagological analysis asks how these images were produced and in which political and social contexts (Beller and Leerssen 2007, pp. 109–22; Kuran-Burçoğlu 2003, pp. 21–42). Accordingly, accounts by Wratislaw, Busbecq, and other travellers should be read not only as individual observations but also as products of their historical and cultural settings.

Imagology is closely tied to social identity and otherness, since historical texts frequently reflect the gap between self-definition and external perception (Renan [1882] 1990). It thus helps explain how representational patterns persist and how cultural images are shaped within international relations over time (J. Leerssen 2016, p. 87). In this sense, imagology treats historical narratives and fiction not merely as reports but as tools that formulate and reinforce particular impressions (Beller and Leerssen 2007, p. 1).

2.2. Historical and Diplomatic Context

The late 16th century was a period marked by intensified diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and European states, during which political and military balances were in constant flux (Faroghi 2004; Imber 2009). Throughout this century, the Ottomans engaged in large-scale wars across Europe. As a result of these conflicts, they established a complex diplomatic network with the Habsburgs, Venice, France, Spain, England, and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Grygorieva 2021; Radway 2017). Ottoman diplomacy was shaped as much by its expansionist policies as by its efforts to exploit inter-European rivalries to establish strategic alliances (Hurewitz 1961). The Habsburg Monarchy was the Ottomans' foremost adversary in Europe at the time (Faroghi 2004; Tracy 2015; Bridge 2005). The Ottoman–Habsburg rivalry was particularly intense over the territory of Hungary and led to prolonged wars. This rivalry became particularly evident along the Hungarian–Croatian frontier. Fortified strongholds such as Győr, Komárno, and Sisak became focal points of military clashes, and struggles over their control constituted a central feature of the period. Although the late sixteenth century represented the peak of Ottoman expansion, this advance entered a phase of stagnation at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Ágoston 2009; Pálffy 2000). The Hungarian–Croatian border region thus served not only as the stage for prolonged Ottoman–Habsburg hostility but also as the area where the balance of power gradually began to shift in favour of the Ottomans. Continuous fortress warfare, raids, and local uprisings revealed the intensity of this enmity, making the region one of the most unstable areas in Central Europe (Fodor 2019).

The conflicts, which began during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent, continued into the late 16th century under the rule of Ottoman sultans Selim II, Murad III, and Mehmed III (Tracy 2015). The Long Turkish War (1593–1606), which began in 1593 and lasted until 1606, was one of the most significant turning points in Ottoman–Habsburg relations during this period (Kolçak 2024). A key factor behind the conflict between the two powers was the Ottoman ambition to strengthen their dominance over Hungary. Over the course of the 16th century, the Ottomans seized large parts of Hungarian territory and founded the Budin Eyalet (Dávid 1994). Nevertheless, fortress disputes along the Ottoman–Habsburg frontier, coupled with the Habsburgs' intermittent support for rebellions against Ottoman authority, destabilised the region's political and military equilibrium.

Although the Ottoman Empire sought to preserve peace through diplomatic missions to Vienna, the Habsburgs resolved to persist in their opposition. Consequently, diplomacy failed, and armed conflict became unavoidable (Baş 2023). The Republic of Venice was also a significant actor in Ottoman diplomatic relations. In order to safeguard its commercial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, Venice generally pursued a policy of peace with the Ottomans, maintaining relations through trade agreements and the exchange of envoys. Various treaties signed with the Ottoman sultans allowed Venice to preserve its economic presence within Ottoman territories. However, the growing Ottoman military power in Western Europe occasionally compelled Venice to join anti-Ottoman coalitions.

France was one of the European states that developed the closest diplomatic relations with the Ottomans in the late 16th century (Hurewitz 1961; Jensen 1985; Göçek 1987). The Ottoman–French alliance began during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent and continued under the rule of Murad III and Mehmed III. The alliance, which was initiated when King Francis I of France sought assistance from the Ottomans, enabled the Ottoman Empire to shift the political balance in Europe in its favour (Michalewicz 2020; Piccirillo 2009; Isom-Verhaaren 2004). The Ottomans granted France “capitulations,” providing the country with extensive economic and commercial privileges. During this period, French merchants gained a privileged status within Ottoman territories and were permitted to trade freely in Ottoman ports. Towards the end of the 16th century, England also became another European power to establish direct diplomatic contact with the Ottomans. Ottoman–English relations notably flourished during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. England viewed the Ottoman presence in the Mediterranean as a counterbalance to the Habsburgs and sought to foster favourable relations with the Empire. In the 1580s, agreements were signed granting English merchants the right to trade in Ottoman ports, and English envoys were sent to Istanbul. By forging an alliance with the Ottomans, the English aimed both to weaken the Habsburgs and to benefit more extensively from Ottoman markets (Hurewitz 1961; Talbot 2017). During this period of time, the diplomatic relations of the Ottoman Empire and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth became increasingly important. As Poland shared a direct border with the Ottomans, tensions occasionally arose between the two powers (Prazmowska 2010; Beltkiewicz 2012). The Ottomans sought to exert pressure on Poland through the Crimean Khanate but largely avoided large-scale direct wars, preferring instead to manage relations through diplomatic means. Ottoman–Polish relations were primarily shaped by the ongoing border conflicts between the Crimean Tatars and Poland (Wasiucionek 2016). By the late 16th century, Ottoman diplomacy sought to protect its interests in the West by combining military strength with a strategic use of interstate competition (Mercan 2017). The Ottomans carefully observed the shifting balance of power in Europe, aiming to undermine their adversaries through calculated alliances (Gürkan 2012). The Ottoman court engaged foreign envoys in diplomatic negotiations and, when needed, resorted to peace agreements to reduce the burdens of warfare.

An important feature of Ottoman diplomacy in this period was the distinctive experiences of foreign ambassadors within the Ottoman court (Sowerby and Markiewicz 2021; Yurdusev 2004). The Ottoman administration took great care to receive foreign envoys with splendour, using these occasions to showcase the Empire’s power. However, when diplomatic relations became strained or the Ottomans perceived a threat, it was not uncommon for foreign envoys to be placed under arrest or even imprisoned (Smiley 2018; Gürkan 2012; Baş 2023). In the memoirs of Wratislav and other Western diplomats, one finds elaborate accounts of Ottoman diplomatic ceremonies and the experiences of foreign delegations within the imperial court (Baş 2023). By the late 16th century, the Ottoman Empire continued to engage with the major European powers through both warfare and diplomacy. Ongoing wars with the Habsburgs, commercial treaties with Venice, alliance

initiatives with France and England, and border tensions with Poland all demonstrate the varied diplomatic strategies the Ottomans employed to maintain their influence in the West. Ottoman diplomacy mastered the art of exploiting rivalries among European powers and remained a key factor in shaping the balance of power across the continent.

2.3. Analytical Strategy and Comparative Design

In this study, four analytical techniques were employed: thematic coding, comparative close reading, framing analysis, and intertextual alignment.

- Thematic coding: Passages in [Wratislaw \(1862\)](#) were coded individually for recurring motifs (discipline/order; bribery/corruption; hygiene/bathhouse; captivity/violence; court protocol).
- Comparative close reading: The evaluative language Wratislaw used to frame these motifs (e.g., “ruthless,” “barbaric”) was compared with that of his contemporaries (Busbecq, Tavernier, Nicolay, Dernschwam). Word choices and stances (negative/positive/ambivalent) were examined.
- Framing analysis: In addition, the analysis identified linguistic markers of othering (e.g., “superstition,” “cruelty”) and the narrator’s positionality (captive vs. diplomat/merchant/cleric).
- Intertextual alignment index (qualitative): We noted when Wratislaw echoed or diverged from commonplaces in other travelogues in order to indicate discursive reinforcement or modulation.

Beyond these four analytical techniques, metrics such as readership, citation counts, or patterns of diffusion are not included within the scope of the present study. Such measures fall outside its boundaries.

2.4. Scope, Sources, and Chronology

The purpose of this study is not to determine when Wratislaw’s memoirs first began to influence public opinion. Rather, its textual basis is the 1862 English edition of the memoirs. This edition is taken as the point of reference for analysing how the Ottomans of the late sixteenth century were portrayed in the text. The aim is twofold: first, to examine how the 1862 edition depicts the Ottoman Empire during the period in which the events took place; and second, to show how these depictions correspond with or diverge from other contemporary Western sources.

3. Historical Background: The 1591 Embassy and Captivity

In 1591, the diplomatic contact with Europe and the Ottoman Empire was very active ([Kolçak 2024](#)). Emperor Rudolf II ordered a diplomatic delegation, with Frederic Kregwitz at the helm, to further relations with Sultan Murad III of the Ottoman Empire while also maintaining peace ([Emirlioğlu 2015](#); [Fichtner 2008](#)). Accompanying this delegation was a young nobleman, Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw. His mission case was influenced by the family support he received and the times he lived in. The embassy left Vienna on 2 September 1591 for its first diplomatic mission, using the Danube River as its route towards the Turkish lands ([Wratislaw 1862](#), p. 7). Their initial destination was the town of Comorn, which, in modern times, is referred to as Komárno and was held by the Ottomans at that time. The delegation remained here momentarily whilst waiting for an answer from Mehmed Bey, an Ottoman commander. The waiting stage in diplomacy serves as a classic archetype of the Ottoman Empire’s dealings and paperwork of that period ([Wratislaw 1862](#), p. 8).

Wratislaw’s arrival in Ottoman lands coincided with the peak period of the intense Ottoman–Habsburg relations in the late sixteenth century. In 1591, Holy Roman Emperor

Rudolf II sought to maintain peace with the Ottomans. To this end, he organised a diplomatic mission to the Ottomans in order to resolve the border conflicts in Hungary through diplomacy. The mission was headed by Frederic Kregwitz, and Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw, a 15-year-old Bohemian nobleman, joined the delegation with the support of his family. Thus, Wratislaw was introduced to diplomacy at a young age and would later prove his political strength in the years to come. However, tensions in Ottoman–Habsburg relations persisted during this journey. Consequently, the diplomatic initiatives failed. When the delegation arrived in Istanbul, they were deemed untrustworthy by the Ottoman authorities and arrested (Emiralioglu 2015; Fichtner 2008).

Wratislaw and the other envoys were imprisoned in the old fortress known as the Yedikule Dungeon in Istanbul. Today, this fortress is one of the best-known sites for tourism. At that time, it was among the most notorious Ottoman prisons where foreign envoys were usually held. In his memoirs, Wratislaw describes the dungeon as a dark, airless, filthy place dominated by hunger. This is a highly accurate portrayal. In his recollections of imprisonment, he states that he was chained, frequently tortured, and deprived of basic needs. After being held in captivity for nearly three years (1591–1593/94), Wratislaw was eventually released and returned to his homeland. In 1599, he wrote his memoirs in which he recounted this experience in detail. He depicted the Ottomans both as a powerful state and as a despotic, barbaric regime. This harsh experience of captivity left a deep mark on his observations and intensified the negative evaluative framing through which the Ottomans are represented in his narrative (Wratislaw 1862; Brummett 2014; Matar 2014).

The next part of the journey for the delegation was the Grand Citadel which they reached on 4 September. Today's Esztergom was part of the Ottoman Empire during that period (Wratislaw 1862, p. 10). Here, the Baron noticed the first important contacts Ottomans made while within the boundaries of the empire. During these meetings, Baron Wratislaw noticed the discipline of the Ottoman military and the local administration's enforcement of diplomacy. Those encounters helped him understand the Ottoman administration and military frameworks better. The administrative and military structures of the Ottomans were intricately linked. Wratislaw's diplomatic travels and notes offer a representational repertoire of the empire that can be analysed alongside other early modern accounts. Despite his young age, Wratislaw's experiences during the mission became a notable narrative case through which diplomatic and cultural motifs about the Ottomans can be studied.

The 16th century represents a highly critical period in the diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and the European powers. Ottoman–Habsburg relations constituted a central battleground within both European and Ottoman political spheres. Frequent diplomatic tensions arose between these two major powers, tensions that occasionally escalated into open warfare. In 1591, Emperor Rudolf II, seeking to strengthen diplomatic ties with Sultan Murad III and to maintain peace, commissioned a special diplomatic delegation under the leadership of Frederic Kregwitz (Emiralioglu 2015; Fichtner 2008).

4. Captivity and Its Impact on Perceptions

Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw's experiences in the Ottoman Empire were not limited to a diplomatic mission but also turned into a profound tragedy during his period of captivity. Following diplomatic tensions with Ottoman authorities, Frederic Kregwitz and the members of the Habsburg delegation were detained and later imprisoned in Istanbul. His majesty's ambassadorial contingent was tucked aside, and so was Kregwitz himself. He was later captured along with Wratislaw, during which he faced severe hardship. In all their time spent in captivity, Wratislaw and his companions were subjected to dire treatment, and their situation was no better than that. Their experience, no matter how seemingly

superficial, showed deeply embedded injuries. The treatment of the prisoners, coupled with the harshness they faced from the soldiers, was terrible and it definitely contributed to Wratishlaw's already negative impression of the people and society of the Ottomans.

Presented with Orthodoxy like rigid faith, this time of imprisonment changed Wratishlaw's view on Turkish people substantially. Along the lines of assumption and expectation, this triggered the prejudice along which he had already formed a picture of Ottoman civilization. As this perspective consolidates, the narrative voice becomes increasingly critical of Ottoman society and governance, foregrounding coercion and mistrust as interpretive frames. These accounts can be read as textual constructions shaped by political tension and personal experience, rather than as neutral records.

5. The Image of the Ottomans in Wratishlaw's Memoirs

Wratishlaw stabilises cruelty as a collective attribute through repeated violence lexicon; for instance, he recounts that someone was "ordered... to receive 1000 blows with a stick" (Wratishlaw 1862, p. 136). The analytical point is not whether violence occurred, but how the memoir's lexical patterning turns an episode into an image of an entire system. This is othering through repetition and evaluative language, not merely event-reporting. The mistreatment and harsh conditions he endured during his captivity played a significant role in shaping his perceptions of the Ottomans. Wratishlaw associated Ottoman society with barbarism due to the brutality he experienced as a prisoner, and this perception is reflected in his late accounts.

5.1. Positive Images (*Admiration and Recognition*)

- Respect for Writings in Arabic Script in the Ottoman Empire (Wratishlaw 1862, pp. 78–80): Wratishlaw records Ottoman reverence for written paper, noting that "if they see a little paper lying on the ground, they immediately take it up" (Wratishlaw 1862, p. 78). He presents this as a culturally embedded respect for script as sacred material culture. At the same time, the phrasing allows a contrastive European reading in which reverence is easily recoded as "superstition," revealing how othering can operate through evaluative framing. Believing that papers containing Arabic writing should not be discarded, the Ottomans collected and preserved them. This sensitivity extended beyond religious texts and was a reflection of the general importance attributed to written knowledge. While Europeans often regarded this as excessive fastidiousness or superstition, for Ottoman culture, this attitude was directly linked to the view of Arabic script as a sacred trust.
- Hospitality and Accommodation Facilities in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 29–30): The Ottoman State built caravanserais and guesthouses for travellers and foreign merchants, developing an open and welcoming hospitality culture towards people from different backgrounds. These facilities offered free accommodation and allowed travellers of various faiths to benefit from Ottoman hospitality. This welcoming attitude was particularly surprising for travellers and envoys from Europe, many of whom praised Ottoman hospitality in their accounts. He explicitly marks Ottoman hospitality as unexpectedly inclusive, stressing that such places are open "be he Christian or be he Jew... for they are open for the convenience of all alike" (Wratishlaw 1862, p. 29). This moment briefly suspends hostile othering and shifts the narrative into an ethics-of-encounter register. Methodologically, it shows how the memoir can produce an ambivalent image: admiration appears even inside a generally conflictual narrative.
- Ottoman Cuisine and Dining Etiquette (ibid., pp. 62–64, 116–18): Wratishlaw describes court dining as a disciplined spectacle, observing that "First came about 200 cup-bearers, dressed almost uniformly in red silk dresses" (Wratishlaw 1862, p. 62). The

descriptive density functions as implicit admiration, even when the narrator elsewhere treats Ottoman practices as “strange.” In imagological terms, the scene shows how order and magnificence can be registered positively while still remaining a marker of cultural distance. The meticulous preparation of meals at court, the rituals observed during meal service, and the orderly presentation of dishes demonstrated the Ottomans’ sense of organisation and refinement. The transportation of the sultan’s meals in silence and discipline highlighted the importance of order within the Ottoman bureaucracy and court life. Although Wratislaw found Ottoman cuisine unusual and interesting, the advancement of the Ottoman culinary culture was undeniable.

- Discipline and Strength of the Ottoman Army (*ibid.*, pp. 54–56, 115–18): Wratislaw repeatedly foregrounds disciplined silence as a key Ottoman trait, stating that people stood “in a very cleanly and quiet manner... everything is done in silence” ([Wratislaw 1862](#), p. 58). This is then easily converted into a threat narrative: competence becomes menace once framed as authoritarian control. Analytically, this is a core imagological move—the same observation (order) is re-coded as fear (despotism) depending on the narrator’s stance. The Janissaries and Sipahis were professional soldiers who acted with loyalty to the sultan and the state. The army’s silent and disciplined movements during campaigns demonstrated its efficiency and organisation. Wratislaw describes the Ottoman military order as both admirable and a threat to Europe, noting that its discipline and warrior spirit were key elements in the empire’s longevity.
- Organisation and Protocol within the Ottoman Court (*ibid.*, pp. 58–64, 176–79): He depicts court protocol as a performance of hierarchy and discipline, remarking that attendants stood “in a very cleanly and quiet manner... everything is done in silence” ([Wratislaw 1862](#), p. 58). The court appears as a carefully choreographed system, which can invite admiration for efficiency and control. Yet later episodes can reframe this same hierarchy as arbitrariness—supporting the memoir’s dual image of order versus despotism. The process of envoys meeting with the grand vizier and other officials before appearing before the sultan revealed the hierarchical and disciplined nature of the Ottoman administrative system. The ceremonies in which the sultan received envoys demonstrated how organised and rule-bound the Ottomans were in international relations. This order reflected the seriousness and systematic nature of Ottoman statesmanship and governance.
- Horse Care and Animal Affection in the Ottoman Empire (*ibid.*, pp. 74–75): Wratislaw’s descriptions of animal care operate as visual evidence of courtly wealth; he notes that horses were “rubbed over... with a certain oil... or with butter” ([Wratislaw 1862](#), p. 74). These material details function rhetorically like a proof of splendour. At the same time, splendour can be moralised—fascination and critique coexist—so luxury becomes both admiration and a marker of ‘other’ consumption. The special feeding and care of the sultan’s horses, including grooming with oils, showed that horses were seen not just as transportation but as symbols of status and prestige. Horsemanship remained a highly developed tradition in Ottoman society and contributed to the success of Ottoman cavalry on the battlefield.
- Clothing and Luxury Consumption Culture in the Ottoman Empire (*ibid.*, pp. 62–64, 115–18): The gold-embroidered kaftans and garments adorned with precious stones worn by Ottoman courtiers were observed with admiration by Europeans. The splendid attire of the sultans and officials symbolised the wealth and power of the state. European envoys found the lavish clothing of the Ottoman ruling class both surprising and impressive, reinforcing the perception of the Ottoman court as one of great luxury.

5.2. Negative Images

- Prevalence of Bribery and Bureaucratic Corruption in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 54–56, 115–18): Wratislaw frames governance through transactional pressure, reporting that an official “ought to give the pasha about 1000 dollars” (Wratislaw 1862, p. 56). Rather than presenting bribery as a single anecdote, he uses it as rhetorical proof that authority operates via purchase and patronage. In the article’s analysis, this should be read as narrative framing that supports a moral-decay image of administration. Observing that bribery had become embedded within Ottoman bureaucracy, Wratislaw emphasises that envoys could not resolve matters without offering “gifts”—effectively bribes—to Ottoman officials. He recounts an example in which an Ottoman beylerbey demanded 200 gold coins from an envoy, portraying this as evidence of the corruption among Ottoman administrators.
- Forced Conversion and Attitudes Towards Christians (ibid., pp. 54–56, 78–80): Wratislaw narrates conversion via an individual life-story and then generalises it into a broader vulnerability frame, noting of a high official that he “was formerly a Christian, and was taken prisoner when twelve years old” (Wratislaw 1862, p. 54). The memoir’s logic moves from personal example to collective pattern. Methodologically, this is precisely where positionality matters: the narrator’s diplomatic/captive anxieties shape how a case becomes a general image. Wratislaw criticises the Ottomans’ conversion policy, noting that many Ottoman pashas were originally Christians who had been captured and converted. For example, Cykula Pasha, who was taken prisoner at the age of 12 and converted to Islam to save his father, is presented as an example of Ottoman oppression of Christian populations. Non-Muslims are described as being referred to as irreligious or without faith.
- Strict Discipline and Warrior Spirit in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 54–56, 115–18): The Ottoman army is described as having a strict and authoritarian structure. Wratislaw observed the Ottomans’ cruelty towards prisoners of war, noting that most captives were killed rather than spared. He recounts that during the capture of fortresses, Christian defenders were frequently slaughtered. Wratislaw also describes Ottoman soldiers burning prisoners alive and dismembering corpses.
- Inhumane Conditions in Ottoman Prisons (ibid., pp. 136–38, 176–99): Wratislaw’s experiences in Ottoman prisons were horrific. He builds a sensory register of punishment and bodily degradation, stating that a victim was “ordered... to receive 1000 blows with a stick” (Wratislaw 1862, p. 136). Such details convert personal suffering into an image of governance: violence appears not as an exception but as an administrative style. Analytically, the passage should be treated as system-level inference produced by narrative emphasis, not as neutral description. Ottoman officials mistreated prisoners, frequently whipping them and failing to meet their basic needs. Wratislaw also reports that executions were common and that arbitrary killings were widespread in Ottoman prisons.
- Hygiene and Cleanliness Culture in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 62–64, 116–18): Ottoman hygiene and cleanliness habits were considerably more advanced than those in Europe. The culture of the hammam, in particular, ensured that people bathed regularly, providing significant health benefits. The regular cleaning of water and daily washing of the pools in Ottoman baths to maintain hygiene standards was a practice rarely observed in Europe at the time. Although Europeans considered this habit unnecessarily meticulous, the Ottomans’ emphasis on personal hygiene represented a highly progressive approach to public health. Wratislaw implies in his memoirs that this was a waste and claims it had little effect on healthy living.

- Weaknesses in the Ottoman Administrative System (ibid., pp. 54–56, 78–80): Wratislaw notes that the Ottoman administrative system was absolutist and despotic, with officials entirely dependent on the sultan. He explains that when a vizier was dismissed, all his possessions were confiscated, and his children were denied any inheritance. The sultan's absolute authority created an atmosphere of constant fear and distrust among Ottoman officials.
- Frequent Plague Outbreaks and Public Health Issues in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 115–18, 136–38): Wratislaw observed frequent major plague outbreaks in Ottoman territories, criticising the state's inadequate response. Wratislaw's plague statements should be treated as rhetorical framing rather than verified demography: the figure is used to argue governmental inadequacy and urban vulnerability (Wratislaw 1862, pp. 115–18). In the revised article, it is signalled explicitly that the study reads this as a narrative strategy—how numbers are mobilised to support a moral or political judgement—rather than as a statistical claim being validated.
- Slavery and Forced Labour in the Ottoman Empire (ibid., pp. 136–38, 176–99): Slavery was a widespread institution in the Ottoman Empire, and according to Wratislaw, slaves were treated with great cruelty. He describes how prisoners of war were chained and forced to work under brutal conditions as galley slaves. Wratislaw recounts that captives were worked for days without food, denied rest, and savagely beaten if they resisted. Punishments such as cutting off ears, noses, or thumbs were used to prevent escapes.
- Moral State and Ignorance of Ottoman Society (ibid., pp. 78–80, 115–18): Wratislaw suggests that Ottoman society was generally superstitious and poorly educated. He criticises their belief that roses were created from the Prophet Muhammad's sweat and their excessive reverence for paper. He claims that the Ottomans were unaware of scientific advancements and lagged behind Europe's education system. Despite the widespread use of the printing press in Europe, he argues that the Ottoman written culture remained underdeveloped.
- Tendencies Towards Barbarism in the Ottoman Army and State (ibid., pp. 54–56, 115–18, 136–38, 176–99): Wratislaw accuses Ottoman soldiers of extreme brutality during warfare, claiming that civilians in conquered cities were also attacked without mercy. He describes Christian defenders as frequently being killed and prisoners subjected to torture. Wratislaw alleges that Ottoman soldiers dismembered enemy corpses and sometimes displayed the severed limbs of those they had killed.
- Arbitrary Executions and Oppression in Ottoman Rule (ibid., pp. 176–99): Wratislaw writes that in the Ottoman system, individuals who displeased the sultan or his pashas could be executed on the spot. Regardless of loyalty or years of service, officials could be dismissed and killed at the sultan's whim. He recounts an instance where a pasha was strangled immediately after being dismissed, presenting this as evidence of the arbitrary nature of Ottoman governance.

6. A Comparative Perspective: Wratislaw and Other Western Travellers

In the 16th century, alongside Wratislaw, there were several notable travellers whose works have been widely studied and who focused on key aspects of life in Ottoman cities, such as state organisation and daily life. Figures such as Hans Dernschwam (1494–1568), a German humanist and merchant who travelled through Istanbul and Anatolia in 1553–1555 and whose *Tagebuch* provides rich detail on economy and society; Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (1522–1592), Habsburg ambassador in Istanbul between 1555 and 1562 and author of the *Turkish Letters* (1581, Lat.; Eng. trans. 1694); Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689), a French merchant-traveller who visited the Ottoman domains between the 1630s and 1660s

and published *Les six voyages* (1676–77); Nicolay de Nicolay (1517–1583), royal geographer of France who resided in Istanbul in 1551–1552 and depicted Ottoman dress, customs, and social life in his illustrated *Navigations* (Nicolay 1567); Salomon Schweigger (1551–1622), a Protestant chaplain in Istanbul from 1578 to 1581 who published his account in 1608; Cornelius de Bruyn (1652–1727/28), a Dutch painter–traveller who toured Ottoman territories, especially Istanbul and Anatolia, between 1674 and 1685 and illustrated them in *Reizen* (1698); and Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), an Italian nobleman who visited Ottoman lands in 1614–1615 and recorded his observations in extensive letters, all produced significant accounts of the Ottoman Empire. To avoid repetition and strengthen the comparative claim, this section juxtaposes representative quotations (Wratislaw vs. selected travellers) for each theme and then explains how similar motifs are re-framed differently depending on authorial positionality (diplomat/merchant/captive). (Birnbaum 1991; İnce 2008; Busbecq 1968; Weber 1953; Tavernier 1712; Hadice Turhan Sultan 2011; Szabari 2016; Anbar 2017; Walsh 2012; Gurney 1986).

Additionally, the original works of these travellers have been examined within this scope. These works are (Dernschwam 1923; Busbecq 1968; Nicolay 1567; Schweigger 1608; Tavernier 1712; De Bruyn 1698; Della Valle 1650–1663):

- Hans Dernschwam, *Tagebuch einer Reise nach Konstantinopel und Kleinasien* (1553–1555), ed. Franz Babinger (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1923).
- Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople, 1554–1562*, ed. Edward Seymour Forster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).
- Nicolas de Nicolay, *Les navigations, peregrinations et voyages faicts en la Turquie* (Paris, 1567; English references from Ternaux-Compans edition, Paris: 1825).
- Salomon Schweigger, *Ein neue Reyssbeschreibung auß Teutschland nach Constantinopel und Jerusalem* (Nuremberg: Abraham Wagenmann, 1608).
- Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (Paris: 1676–77; 2nd ed. 1712).
- Cornelis de Bruyn, *Reizen door de vermaardste deelen van Klein Asia* (Delft: Hendrik van Krooneveld, 1698).
- Pietro della Valle, *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il pellegrino* (Rome: 1650–1663).

Before undertaking a detailed comparison between the accounts of Wratislaw and those of other travellers, it is important to consider the contexts from which these narratives emerged. Wratislaw, as a young captive, wrote from a perspective shaped by imprisonment and suffering. Busbecq, an experienced diplomat engaged in delicate negotiations and already familiar with the Ottomans, approached them from a diplomatic standpoint. Tavernier, as a merchant, focused more on trade, culture, and urban life, with particular emphasis on the commercial relations between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Schweigger, a Protestant chaplain, frequently reflected his religious convictions in his writings and interpreted Ottoman society from a religious perspective. Nicolay, serving as a royal geographer, observed Ottoman society with the eye of a scholar, paying particular attention to clothing, customs, and social life. These different personal experiences form the basis of the variations in the depictions of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, the narratives of these travellers diverge from those of Wratislaw and help to explain why his observations appear far harsher in comparison.

- Ottoman Discipline and Order: All travellers acknowledged that the Ottoman Empire possessed a highly disciplined bureaucracy and a strong centralised administration. The silent and orderly manoeuvres of the Ottoman army were closely associated with the strict hierarchical structure of the Ottoman state. In Wratislaw’s account, the Ottoman army is perceived as a major threat to Europe, with Ottoman soldiers

described as being raised in a culture of ruthlessness. He also observes that at every level of the military hierarchy, from the highest ranks to the lowest, mistakes could result in the risk of execution. This perspective is also reflected in Busbecq's writings, where he notes that the Ottoman army exhibited flawless discipline and that the Janissaries were better trained than European soldiers (Williams 2017). Tavernier, on the other hand, noted that while the Ottoman administration and army operated meticulously and in an orderly fashion, they occasionally exhibited authoritarian tendencies (Saab 2009). Salomon Schweigger remarked that military discipline was excessively strict, yet this strictness contributed to maintaining effective order within the system (Williams 2021). This comparison reveals that the same motif of discipline was interpreted in divergent ways: for Wratislaw it signified danger and oppression, whereas for Busbecq it represented competence and institutional strength.

When examining the common stereotypes shared by travellers, the Ottoman Empire is often depicted as a strict, disciplined, and well-governed state, yet one that posed a potential threat to Europe. Moreover, despite the military system being considered somewhat outdated, it was frequently described as superior to many European armies.

- **The Prevalence of Bribery in the Ottoman Empire:** In many of these texts, the prevalence of bribery and corruption within the Ottoman administration is emphasised. It is often stated that officials would not carry out their duties without receiving bribes. In Wratislaw's account, Ottoman officials are portrayed as entirely dependent on bribery, leading to the depiction of a corrupt state structure. He identifies bribery as the main factor contributing to the deterioration of the disciplined institutions. Wratislaw further claims that corruption had penetrated every level of the state, entirely eroding public trust in the ruling elite.

Busbecq, while also acknowledging the existence of bribery, does not focus on it as heavily in his writings. Unlike Wratislaw, Busbecq argues that although Ottoman officials did engage in bribery, it was not an element that entirely undermined the functioning of the Ottoman state apparatus (Busbecq 1968). Dernschwam shares a similar view with Wratislaw, arguing that bribery was an integral part of the Ottoman system. However, he also notes that such practices were common in certain European states as well (Birnbaum 1991). Cornelius de Bruyn, on the other hand, described the situation in the Ottoman Empire as a form of decay in every sense (Hayden 2012). Travellers interpreted bribery differently depending on their position and perspective.

When looking at the common stereotypes shared by travellers, the Ottoman bureaucracy is portrayed as a corrupt system driven by bribery, yet one that remains effective. In addition, it is frequently noted that bribery was present at every level of the state.

- **Hygiene and Bathhouse Culture in the Ottoman Empire:** It has been emphasised that the Ottomans placed greater importance on personal hygiene than Europeans and that the culture of public bathhouses (hammams) was widespread. However, some European travellers regarded this habit as excessive fastidiousness or unnecessary luxury. According to Wratislaw, the Ottomans' bathing habits were exaggerated, and he viewed their water consumption as wasteful. He considered their hygiene practices a cultural custom that went to extremes. Nevertheless, he also noted that despite these practices, plague outbreaks could not be prevented, and the Ottoman healthcare system remained underdeveloped. Busbecq (Peychev 2015) and Tavernier (Akkeş 2017), in contrast, viewed the hammams more positively than Wratislaw. They wrote that Ottoman bathhouses were far more advanced compared to those in Europe and contributed positively to public health. Nicolay, meanwhile, did not regard the hammams merely as places for washing. He highlighted their role as spaces integrated

into social and commercial life. He noted that women used hammams for socialising, while men frequented them to strengthen business relationships (Holmberg 2007, p. 45). These contrasting perspectives demonstrate how the same practice could be described either as excessive and wasteful or as advanced and socially integrative. The differing evaluations emphasise how travellers' personal backgrounds and cultural biases shaped the construction of the Ottoman image in Western narratives. The common stereotype suggests that the Ottomans were notably more advanced than Europeans, particularly in matters of bathing. This is a point acknowledged by Wratislaw as well as other travellers. However, it appears that many of them were uncertain about the necessity of such frequent bathing.

- **Slavery and the Condition of Captives in the Ottoman Empire:** Slavery was a widespread practice in the Ottoman Empire, and prisoners of war were often subjected to forced labour. The perception of the Ottoman slavery system varied significantly among travellers. This divergence can be attributed to the fact that the institution of slavery in Europe differed greatly from country to country. According to Wratislaw, the harsh treatment of slaves in the Ottoman Empire is a key theme in his memoirs. He claimed that the Ottomans treated war captives with cruelty, forcing them into labour under poor conditions. Wratislaw recounts that captives were starved, flogged, and made to work in extremely harsh environments. Busbecq (1968), on the other hand, argued that the Ottoman system of slavery differed from its European counterparts, noting that some slaves had the opportunity to rise within the ranks. Similarly, Tavernier contended that slaves in the Ottoman Empire possessed certain rights and that many were treated well (Moussa 2019).

When looking at the common stereotype regarding slavery, it is evident that, despite Wratislaw's distinct narrative, slavery was regarded as an important institution in the Ottoman state. While the Ottoman system was harsh, it did offer some slaves the possibility of social advancement.

- **The Brutality of the Ottoman Army and Its Conquest Policy:** The fact that the Ottoman army was composed of Janissaries, trained solely for war, had a strong impact on travellers. It is emphasised that this army system was very powerful and that it acted extremely harshly and cruelly during battles. It is reported that the Ottomans mistreated prisoners of war in the territories they conquered. It is also stated that cities were mercilessly looted. Wratislaw's comment on this matter is that Ottoman soldiers dismembered enemy corpses and used savage methods of warfare. He portrayed the Ottoman army as a completely ruthless and plundering force. According to Busbecq (Aksan 2005) and Tavernier (Artan 2021), however, the Ottoman army was disciplined and well-organised, although they acknowledged that it sometimes behaved harshly in battle (Tavim 2013). They also stated that the army moved very quickly. Nicolay agreed with Busbecq and Tavernier, stating that Ottoman soldiers were more disciplined than European armies, but could sometimes be cruel. Pietro Della Valle, unlike Wratislaw, did not describe Ottoman soldiers as barbaric, but rather as part of a strong army (Schüller and Brentjes 2006).

The common stereotype among travellers is that the Ottoman army was disciplined but could at times be excessively harsh and cruel. The merciless looting of captured cities and attacks on non-combatant civilians is a view commonly shared by the travellers.

In Table 1, Wratislaw's impressions as well as those of other travellers like Busbecq, Tavernier, Nicolay, and Dernschwam are analysed and compared. Differences in opinion are provided under the subheadings of "Discipline and Administration," "Army and Warrior Identity," "Bureaucracy," "Cleanliness and Hygiene Culture," "Religious Oppression and

Forceful Conversion,” Prisoners and Captives,” and “Palace and Diplomatic Protocol.” While Wratislaw sees the Ottomans as a cruel and tyrannical oppressor, the other travellers tend to admire their discipline, even though at times noting unsparing and arbitrary practices. These include their attitude toward hygiene and cleanliness, the devshirme system, the imprisoning of captives, and the extent to which palace protocol is observed.

Table 1. Common Themes in Wratislaw’s and Other Travellers’ Perceptions of the Ottoman Empire.

Theme	Wratislaw (1862): Short Quotation + Page	Busbecq/Tavernier/Nicolay: Short Quotation + Page	Analytical Note (Alignment/Divergence)
Discipline & Administration	“searched each of us ... and ... conducted into his presence one by one.” (p. 62)	Busbecq: “every thing was done in an orderly fashion, and in complete silence.” (p. 166)	Alignment (order/discipline): Both encode authority as regulated procedure. Divergence (moral framing): Wratislaw’s scene stresses coercive control; Busbecq reads the same order as ritual discipline.
Ottoman Army & Warrior Identity	“The Turkish army ... do not go far on the first day ... the second ... about four or five German miles.” (p. 118)	Busbecq: “The Spahis ... ride up ... in single file, at a foot’s pace.” (p. 177)	Alignment (performative discipline): Both emphasise regulated movement/display. Divergence (tone): Wratislaw frames logistics pragmatically; Busbecq frames military order as spectacle and capacity.
Bribery & Bureaucracy	“we distributed ... dollars and ducats ... before we could get the letters ...” (p. 115)	Tavernier: “There resides a Basha, who must be brib’d with a small Present ...” (p. 102)	Alignment (transactional logic): In both, access/permission is tied to money/gifts. Divergence (scope): Wratislaw presents it as systemic gatekeeping; Tavernier frames it as route-level constraint.
Hygiene & Cleanliness Culture	“Care is taken to keep them clean ... with attendance and comfort for a moderate sum ...” (p. 12)	Busbecq: “But the Turks, being very fond of baths, ...” (p. 151)	Alignment (advanced practice vs. Europe implied): Both mark bathing as culturally prominent. Divergence (evaluation): Wratislaw adds architectural/comfort detail; Busbecq foregrounds habit/preference more than infrastructure.
Religion & Forced Conversion	“kidnap young Christians ... and turn them into Turks ...” (p. 54)	Nicolay: “Azamoglans are children ... leuied ... of the Christians.” (p. 69)	Alignment (coercion/appropriation): Both texts link state power to Christian youths. Divergence (focus): Wratislaw moralises conversion explicitly; Nicolay presents it as an institutional levy/category.
Prisons & Captives	“they ... fastened fetters and chains upon me ... and led me back to my prison ...” (p. 130)	Busbecq: “I ... was thrown into prison ... the guard posted at my lodgings ...” (p. 111)	Alignment (deprivation): Both concretize captivity through confinement and control. Divergence (register): Wratislaw uses bodily restraint detail; Busbecq frames threat/news and political risk.
Court & Diplomatic Protocol	“conducted ... one by one ... the Vizier ... kissed his hand ...” (p. 62)	Busbecq: “stood motionless, with their hands crossed upon their breast ...” (p. 194)	Alignment (ritualised hierarchy): Both code court encounter as staged ceremony. Divergence (evidence type): Wratislaw stresses procedural sequencing; Busbecq stresses disciplined stillness as proof of court control.

In Table 2, the positive characteristics of the centralised and coherent structure of Ottoman administration and bureaucracy, the orderly and disciplined military, the profound palace protocol, and the standards of dress and cleanliness are presented. Negative impressions such as bribery, arbitrary rule, severe militarism, lavish spending and unwarranted, compelled work of prisoners, and harsh conditions of imprisonment also found their way into the table. Thus, the dual attitude of the Ottomans is captured where both praise and critic is mixed. In Table 3, Wratislaw's views are compared with those of other travellers. The table also highlights his sweeping generalisations about Ottoman governance, the military and its conquest-oriented identity, bribery and bureaucracy, social life, religion and religious tolerance, as well as the Ottoman attitude towards the West. While Wratislaw outlines that the Ottomans were an utterly despotic, conquest-driven society keen on forcible death and religion conversion, other travellers remark that the society, though deeply stratified and disciplined, was riddled with arbitrariness and bribery. Most authors sail through accepting that the society was developed socioculturally, while maintaining to reasonable imagine positing to the threat posed to Europe. The theme of discipline was framed differently: Wratislaw saw it as ruthless, Busbecq as flawless training, and Schweigger as strict but necessary. This reflects another nuance, showing how the same observation could be interpreted negatively, positively, or ambivalently depending on the author's stance. Comparisons between Wratislaw's memoirs and the accounts of other travellers describing the Ottoman Empire have been repeated in many areas. For example, common stereotypes such as discipline, bribery and military power are repeated in all accounts. However, as can be seen in the tables, the style and interpretation of these themes differ according to each traveller's background and experience. Wratislaw's captivity explains his harsher judgement, while diplomats such as Busbecq or merchants such as Tavernier balanced their criticism by appreciating the empire's strengths. This demonstrates that the representation of the Ottomans was not uniform but depended on the observer's position.

When examining the perspectives of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw and other travellers, it becomes clear that there are not many significant differences. While Wratislaw often describes the Ottomans as a "barbaric and ruthless empire," travellers such as Busbecq, Tavernier, and Nicolay also acknowledged that the Ottoman Empire was disciplined, hygienic, culturally rich, and militarily strong (Rodogno 2011). This distinction may stem from the fact that Wratislaw was taken captive in Ottoman territory and subjected to mistreatment (Matar 2014). This could have led him to develop a more negative perception of the Ottomans. Even in aspects that might generally be perceived positively, such as the bathhouse culture, Wratislaw offers criticism, interpreting it as unnecessary and wasteful. Nevertheless, both Wratislaw and the other travellers frequently repeat the following stereotypes:

- The Ottoman state is disciplined but oppressive.
- The Ottoman bureaucracy is driven by bribery but remains strong.
- The Ottoman army is perfectly disciplined but excessively harsh.
- The Ottomans are more advanced than Europeans in hygiene, though this is seen as excessive fastidiousness.
- Ottoman slaves are treated poorly, but some can rise through the ranks.

These recurring motifs suggest that European texts often framed the Ottomans as both admirable and fearsome, though the valence and rhetoric vary by authorial position.

Table 2. Positive and Negative Images of the Ottoman Empire.

Category	Positive Images	Negative Images
Administration and Bureaucracy	The Ottoman Empire is a centralised, powerful, and well-structured state.	The Ottoman administration is marked by bribery and arbitrary executions.
Military Power	The Ottoman army is organised, disciplined, and superior compared to European forces.	Ottoman soldiers are ruthless and focused on conquest.
Court and Diplomacy	There is a perfect hierarchy and protocol within the Ottoman court.	Ottoman diplomacy is unreliable, and envoys frequently suffer mistreatment.
Cultural Life and Clothing	Ottoman clothing is luxurious and magnificent.	The Ottomans live in extravagance and are excessively fond of ostentation.
Cleanliness and Hygiene	The Ottomans place great importance on hygiene, and the bathhouse culture is well developed.	Ottoman hygiene practices are seen as unnecessary fastidiousness and excessive habits.
Captives and Slavery	Ottoman slaves could possess certain rights and might rise to high positions.	Ottoman captives are forced into labour and subjected to inhumane conditions.

Table 3. Representational Motifs and Stereotypical Framings in Wratislaw's and Other Travellers' Views.

Motif/Topic	Wratislaw's View	Other Travellers' View
The Ottoman State and Governance	A completely despotic regime governed through arbitrary executions and oppression.	A disciplined and strong state structure, though occasionally authoritarian.
The Ottoman Army and Conquest Mentality	A ruthless, conquest-focused army that tortures prisoners of war.	Disciplined, well-trained, and well-organised, but harsh in some battles.
Bribery and Bureaucracy	The state operates entirely on bribery; everything can be bought with money.	Bribery is common, but the bureaucracy still functions effectively.
Social Life in the Ottoman Empire	The Ottoman people are ignorant and governed by superstition.	Ottoman society is more orderly and culturally advanced compared to Europe.
Religion and Religious Tolerance	Forced conversion is widespread, and Christians are oppressed.	The Ottoman administration is tolerant of other religions, though the devshirme system is present.
The Ottoman View of the West	The Ottomans are a hostile empire trying to conquer Europe.	The Ottomans are powerful but may not pose a constant threat to Europe.

7. Conclusions

Wratislaw's memoirs, like those of other contemporary travellers, participate in the discursive repertoire through which Western texts represented the Ottoman Empire in the late sixteenth century. The observations he made during his time in Ottoman territories contributed to a dual perception of admiration and fear. This perception led him to portray the Ottomans as both an admirable power and a frightening despotic regime. However, the narrative does not present neutral observation; it is structured by personal experience, especially the experience of captivity, which shapes lexical choices, evaluative framing, and generalisation. The mistreatment he faced in Ottoman prisons led him to characterise the Ottomans as a barbaric power, reinforcing the Western narrative of the "threatening East." This portrayal aligns with recurring motifs in early modern European writing about the Ottomans and is legible within broader Western representational traditions.

Travellers of the period such as Busbecq, Tavernier, Nicolay, and Dernschwam presented a more positive view of the Ottomans. These travellers acknowledged the strengths of the Empire, including its disciplined army, its understanding of hygiene, and its administrative structure. However, they also criticised its weaknesses, such as the prevalence of bribery, the absolutist nature of its governance, and the instability in the management of the country. Wratislaw, on the other hand, while partially acknowledging some of these strengths, portrayed the Ottomans more as a threat and enemy to the West. Unlike these other travellers, his narratives reflect a harsher tone. This attitude demonstrates that Western perceptions of the Ottoman Empire were shaped not only by political and military relations but also by individual accounts.

This study has shown that Wratislaw's memoirs articulate a particularly vivid dual image (organised power vs. arbitrary cruelty) within Western travel and diplomatic writing, without claiming to measure diffusion or readership. His accounts reflect both admiration for the discipline and order of the Empire, and fear of its perceived despotism and brutality. In comparison with other travellers such as Busbecq, Tavernier, Nicolay, and Dernschwam, Wratislaw's descriptions appear much harsher, a difference largely attributable to his captivity and the hardships he endured. In conclusion, Wratislaw's narrative reinforces a harsh and threatening framing through captivity-based scenes, while the comparative material shows that other travellers often frame similar motifs more ambivalently. However, these portrayals reflect narrator positionality: captivity functions as a filter that amplifies fear, coercion, and mistrust as dominant interpretive frames. The word 'imagology' comes from the Latin words *imago*. From an imagological perspective, this dual image of admiration and fear becomes particularly visible, as the method highlights how cultural representations are constructed through both individual experience and broader historical context.

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