

Jakob Christmann's (d. 1613) Ottoman letter of 1589 to the Turkish Paulus aka Paul Willich

Hülya Çelik

Author:

Junior Professor, Institut für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft, Ruhr-University
Bochum

h.celik@rub.de

ORCID: [0000-0001-5219-460X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5219-460X)

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Context

The letter presented here¹ from the Heidelberg university professor and orientalist Jakob Christmann (1554-1613)² was discovered in the letter collection of the librarian Sebastian Tegnagel (d. 1636). The addressee is “the Turkish Paulus”, i.e. Paul Willich, a Turk named Süleymān from Edirne who was captured in Veszprém around 1565. Süleymān or the Turkish Paul was in the service of Prince Joachim Friedrich,³ who was then the administrator of Magdeburg, where the Turkish Paul was also baptized and converted to Lutheranism.⁴ What is known about Paul Willich is mostly recorded by Bartholomaeus Radtmann (1560-1602) in his Arabic grammar (*Introductio in linguam Arabicam*) published in 1588, for which Paul Willich was an important informant.⁵

The content of the presented letter reflects a polemical view of Islam that was still common around 1600 among European orientalists and is also related to confessional differences within 16th-/17th-century European Christianity. Keeping in mind that Christmann himself was a Calvinist and that Paul Willich, whom Christmann probably never met, converted in Magdeburg where Lutheranism dominated, and Calvinists were only tolerated, helps to understand the contents of the letter more properly. In Calvinist manner Christmann refers to the Son of God, i.e. Jesus, and to a specific verse in the Qur'an (7:28). Significant is also the address “*yā Polus*” or “O Paulus” which can or rather should be read as a reference to the conversion of Paul in the New Testament.

¹ I thank Chiara Petrolini for bringing this letter to my attention and Claudia Römer for her help and comments at an earlier stage of this publication. The codex in which the letter is incorporated is digitized and available at <http://data.onb.ac.at/dtl/3864270>, the digital catalogue entry is available at <http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/AC14253496>.

² I also do thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for the reference to another important manuscript in connection with Jakob Christmann, namely his Turkish grammar titled *Jacobi Christmanni Institutiones Arabicae et Turcicae linguae* and preserved in University of Groningen Library, Special Collections, MS 169 (online: <https://dbc.rug.nl/digital/collection/manuscripts/id/36450/rec/2>). A comparison of the current micro-edition with the mentioned source is still pending, but would exceed the limits of this publication. For further information on Christmann see Gabriele Dörfinger, “Christmann, Jakob (1554-16.6.1613)” in *Homo Heidelbergensis mathematicus* (2015), pp. 1-31 (online available at <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/20136>).

³ Johannes Schultze, “Joachim Friedrich”, in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 10 (1974), pp. 438-439.

⁴ Robert Jones, *Learning Arabic in Renaissance Europe (1505-1624)*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, pp. 54-56.

⁵ I thank the reviewer for bringing this work of Radtmann to my attention. For a digitized print see <https://digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10163749?page=52>.

When it became known in the *Republic of Letters* that Sebastian Tegnagel, the second court librarian in Vienna, employed a Turkish captive and copyist, Dervîş İbrâhîm, Christmann also sent a copy of his letter (originally dated 1589) to Tegnagel, among other things to obtain an assessment of his own knowledge of Ottoman.⁶ Even though the letter contains numerous errors from the point of view of standard Ottoman Turkish, it is only incomprehensible in a few places and is written in a simple style that is typical of a premodern learner of Turkish. Christmann's letter begins and ends in a style appropriate to Ottoman letter-writing culture.

Transcription⁷

ÖNB, Cod. 9737t, fol. 261v

*Bu kitâb Polus Türki hazretine // gelsün ki zâhiddür ve ki cev-merddür // maḳâmnda hâla⁸
yâ kırandaş⁹ ve sultânum //*

Haḳḳ te 'âlâ sizün 'ilmüñüz ve 'amelüñüz ve cev-merdligüñüz artura //

*bilgil kim Muḥammedün müsülmânlı 'i¹⁰ ulu ve gereklü olmaz zîra¹¹ Ḳur'ânda yalan söyler
// kengel ider¹² çok güldürür dünyâ sevgisine gidiricedür [?] bes anuñ-içün 'âlimler //
eyidüb-dururlar kengel çok etmek çok güldürür¹³ ve çok gülmek göñül aldurur ve daḳı //
göñülde kîn bağladur ve kişünñ ḥürmetin burar¹⁴ hem-daḳı peygamber Muḥammed //*

⁶ Jones refers to another letter of Christmann in the letter collection of Tegnagel, which is about Paul Willich, namely Cod. 9737r, fol. 160r, whereas Jones does not read “Turkish Paul” (“*ad Paulum Turcam*”), but something else, namely “*ad Praelum Turcum*”; cf. Jones, *Learning Arabic*, p. 56, fn. 38. Cod. 9737r is also digitized and available at <http://data.onb.ac.at/dtl/7445499>, the digital catalogue entry is available at <http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/AC13957619>.

⁷ Since Christmann's Ottoman has many errors, I have refrained from inserting an exclamation mark or a [sic] after each error but have put the expected correct spelling in the footnote. The Arabic lines have many errors but these obvious errors have not been marked as such.

⁸ For *hâla*.

⁹ Obviously for *karındaş*.

¹⁰ Instead the 'ayn one would expect a *ḡayn*.

¹¹ Ms.: *r-y-r-h*. Here and later obviously for *zîrâ*.

¹² Cf. *Tarama Sözlüğü online*, s.v. *kengel* and Redhouse, s.v. *gengel*: joke, fun.

¹³ This expression seems to be a then known saying.

¹⁴ As *burmak* (as well as modern *burmak*) would mean among other things “to crook, to turn, to be in pain”, it is probable that Christmann forgot a dot and meant *bozmaḳ* (“to corrupt”) according to which I have translated this passage.

müsülmānlara haber viridi sevindiler bunları azdurdı bil-ki tengri te 'ālā kendü oğlunda //
*Yesū 'el-mesih¹⁵ imānı bildürdi ve selāmi viribidi¹⁶ anuñ öldüğünde çapu acdı // uçmağa **
'İvaz olsun saña gökde yā Polus ki Şeytānuñ yoylın¹⁷ // urduñ ve kesdüñ¹⁸ incilüñ nūrı
*almaduñ ol nūr kāfirler ve münāfıklar¹⁹ göñlünde // yoğdur * cev-merdsiz ve 'ālimsiz zīra*
tevbe itmek tengriden yaña dönmezdür // bilürsin kim tengri te 'ālā bu gökleri ve bu yirleri
ve bu maqām dünyānuñ²⁰ yaradmuşdur // ammā 'ilmüñ ululuğdur kim Yesū 'el-mesih ibnu
llāh bize pādişāhdur ve inna l-arzi [!] // li-llāhi yūrituhā man yaşā' u min 'ibādihi wa-l-
'ākibatu li-l-muttaķina²¹ ma 'anisi²² budur kim // yir yüzi tengri te 'ālānuñdur kullarına
*kime kim dilerse vere āhıret // tengri te 'ālādan korğub²³ buyruğun dutanlaruñdur * çok*
yazmak vaqt olmaz // ve dağı bilgil-kim ol yaramaz²⁴ zīra her söz kim kişi söyler anuñ
göñlünde // bir şüret kalur ve dağı kişiler olur kim görklü 'ibādet gösterürler // sözlerinde
ne düzdüğü kitāblarında ammā hiç kimse[ye] hayr idemezler //
senüñ 'ibādetine meşğül oluram //
Ya 'qūb Qrīstmān mutakallim bi-lisān // 'ibrī wa- 'arabī bi-madīnat Haydalbarq yawm //
z²⁵ Nīsān sanat alf hams-mi'a // tis' wa-tamānīn wa-naħnu nađkur hunā mā warad //
tawārīħ an-Naşārā (?) li-llāh al-ħamd

¹⁵ The Christian-Arabic designation of Jesus.

¹⁶ Or *viribdi*, nevertheless one would expect either *virib/virüb* or the finite form *viridi*.

¹⁷ For *yolin*.

¹⁸ See *Tarama Sözlüğü online*, s.v. *yol kesmek* “*yol almak, katımesafe etmek*”.

¹⁹ Ms.: *münākıklar*.

²⁰ For *dünyā maqāmını*?

²¹ Q 7:128.

²² For *ma 'nāsı*.

²³ Ms.: the dots of both *kāf* are missing.

²⁴ Ms.: the dot of the letter *zā* is missing.

²⁵ Probably to signal the number 7.

Translation

This letter should refer to the Turkish Paulus, who is pious and generous and still in his position (or residence).

My dear brother and sultan, may God the Exalted increase your knowledge and your deeds and your bounty.

Know that Muhammad's muslimship is neither great nor necessary because he tells lies and trifles in the Qur'an, makes merry, and pushes for the love of worldly things. Therefore the educated say 'trifles bring much laughter and laughter pleases, but it also brings enmity into the heart and corrupts a person's piety. And the prophet Muhammed preached to the Muslims, they enjoyed themselves and he seduced them. Know that God the Exalted made known the faith in his own son, Jesus the Messiah, and gave salvation, and when he died he opened the doors to paradise. He shall take your place in heaven, o Paulus, you who have taken the devil's path. You have not received the light of the gospel, that light is not in the hearts of the unbelievers and the hypocrites. You are generous and knowing, but to repent means to turn to God. You know that God the Exalted created these heavens and these lands and this world. But your knowledge is haughtiness because the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah, is our king and "the earth belongs to God—He gives it as their own to whichever of His servants He chooses—and the happy future belongs to those who are mindful of Him."²⁶ That means that the earth belongs to God the Exalted, and he gives from his subjects to whom he wishes. The hereafter (or the end) belongs to those who fear God the Exalted and obey his commandments. There is no time to write much and know that this is bad. For every word that a person says leaves an image in his heart and there are people who show holy²⁷ worship in their words and in what they write in their books, but they do not bless anyone with it.

I am engaged with praying for you.

²⁶ Translation from *The Qur'an. A New Translation* by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 102.

²⁷ *Görklü* can also be read as *gereklü*, which would mean "the necessary worship/devotion".

Jakob Christmann, professor of Hebrew and Arabic in the city of Heidelberg. The 7th of April, 1589. And we mention here that the date is given according to the Christian calendar.²⁸ Thank God.²⁹

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²⁸ Actually I interpreted this passage as if Christmann was waiting for a chronicle titled *Tawārīḥ an-Naṣārā* but was not able to find a match. I would like to thank the reviewer once again for pointing out that Christmann may simply be stating that the date he gave has been rendered according to the Christian calendar.

²⁹ I thank Lorenz Nigst for his help with the Arabic lines of this letter. A very similar passage to “*wanaḥnu naḍkur hunā mā warad tawārīḥ an-Naṣārā (?)*” is to be found in the book *Historia Saracenicæ, qua res gestæ Muslimorum* (p. 11) by the Dutch orientalist Thomas Erpenius (d. 1624) but published posthumously in 1625 in Leiden. See a digitized version at <http://data.onb.ac.at/rep/107F4EF3>.

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