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STARS, SIGNS, AND TEARS:

Turkish Threats, Politics, and Apocalyptic Historiography in Sebastian Brant



By Peter Madsen

Towards the end of Brant's immensely successful Narrenschiff (1494), the Turkish question turns out to be crucial to the organization of the book, as it is to Brant's entire intellectual activity, from shorter poems published as leaflets to the most extensive treatment in his history of Jerusalem. In Narrenschiff he writes about "Moors, Turks and Heathens" doing the Devil's work, and about the Moors and the Turks as a decisive threat against Christianity. "Endchrist" is knocking at the door. His view of the historical situation is impregnated by the apocalyptic tradition.

Interpreting Strange Occurrences

Wednesday 7 November 1492 a meteorite of roughly 130 kg landed in a wheat field near Ensisheim in Alsace. According to a chronicle many people saw it as "ein Zeichen seltzam wunder" – a singularly miraculous sign.¹ The scholars had no inkling; a similar stone does not appear out of thin air, it must consequently be taken as a supernatural phenomenon. Furthermore, the event was unique, and no account or sighting of a similar thing had ever been reported. The impact was heard far away and was so deafening that people thought houses had collapsed. In addition, the stone was buried half man deep in the earth. Several contemporary reactions agreed on the divine nature of the meteorite as a sign from God.² The printing press made it possible to report the incident everywhere, and there was a common interest in and concern with awe-inspiring phenomena, such as meteorites, visions of three suns, Siamese twins, or pigs with eight legs, phenomena that were widely regarded as ominous.

Sebastian Brant subjected a number of these incidents and occurrences to poetic elaboration in printed flyers.³ Before the end of the month of the meteoric impact, he published a flyer, an *Einblattdruck*, with the heading *Uon*

¹ Cf. Wuttke 1976, the said chronicle is reprinted 147–148; in his epilogue to Pauls Hertz' edition of *Flugblätter des Sebastian Brant* 1915, Franz Schulz writes, that the description is drawn from a protocol of the town of Ensisheim, 1589.

² Wuttke 1976, 147.

³ About Brant's interpretations in general, cf. Wuttke 1974.

den donnerstein gefallen jm xcij iar (About the meteorite landed in the year 1492): *vor Ensisheim*. Similar sheets are approximately in A2 format.⁴ Below the headline a woodcut across the sheet illustrates the meteorite’s impact. Beneath follows another title: *De fulgetra anni xcij. Sebastianus Brant* and 22 Latin couplets facing a German version, albeit not a direct translation. Brant mentions other remarkable phenomena, but the most notable is the meteorite, an event he cannot explain in a scientific way. A similar occurrence is mentioned by Anaxagoras, and people close to the site of the impact did actually hear it – this way of linking evidence from antique references and contemporary records is a common feature in the writings of Brant and other humanist intellectuals. Whatever happened with this meteoric impact, do believe me, Brant implores his readers, it “manifests a momentous ill-boding omen for the future. I pray that it may haunt our evil enemy”.⁵ Contrary to the Latin text, the German version does not mention any difficulties of scientific interpretation (perhaps because that was primarily a matter of interest to a Latin reading public), and Brant here directly identifies the evil enemy as the French. At the bottom of the sheet finally a poem to “*Maximilianum. Romischen kuning*”, calling Maximilian (I.) to confront the enemy courageously: He must grasp the spokes of the Wheel of Fortune, luck will stand by him, Austria, Burgundy, and the German Nation will be on his side. “The stone is sent to you by God, / God himself is telling you in your country: / stand up and defend yourself”.⁶ Thus conveying God’s call for a defensive war, Brant’s interpretation of the meteorite’s “heinous thunderbolt” (*grusam donnerschlag*) endorses already extant war preparations and endows them with divine assistance.

The Latin poem about the Ensisheim-meteorite was reprinted in Brant’s collection of poems *Varia Carmina* in 1498, with an additional poem about the meteorite composed in 1493, the year after the flyer.⁷ There are no extant copies of the original version of this second poem, just a duplicate and the reprint in *Varia Carmina*; the printing medium of the original publication is unknown. After the amazing meteorite, great events indeed followed, but the full import of the apparition had yet to be seen. Brant thought that the huge weight of the meteorite signaled some huge event, something momentous. Here again Maximilian enters the picture. He is asked to bring his reputation on a par with the meteoric thunder. Yet the foes to fight are not the French – in the meantime they were defeated – but the Turks. Thus, Brant thematizes

⁴ Cf. Hertz 1915, with a selection of facsimile-prints rendered in the original format.

⁵ Quoted from Wuttke 1976, 151.

⁶ “der stein ist dir gesant / Dich mant gott in dim eigen lant / Das dü dich zu stellen solt zu wer”.

⁷ Cf. Wuttke 1976, 157 ff., on which the following description draws.

a commitment that pervades the entire body of his work: the relation to the Ottoman Empire, and the preconditions for a victorious struggle against its expansion and against the Muslim (Mamluk) rule of Jerusalem. The perspective is twofold: on one hand the idea of crusade, on the other the necessity of consensus in the Holy Roman Empire as well as unanimity in a broader European sphere under the leadership of Maximilian.⁸

Brant gained reputation as a skilled interpreter of extraordinary phenomena, consequently a pig born in Alsace with one head and one heart but two snouts, two tongues, four ears, and eight feet was immediately brought the twenty-two kilometers to Basel for Brant's consideration.⁹ His interpretation is, as Dieter Wuttke notes, based on "a combination of augurship, mythological visionary power, Bible-oriented prophecy and field observation".¹⁰ In a salient moment of his intricate considerations he establishes the pig's relation to dirt and its fondness for stinky environments, which leads him to identify dirt with Turks:

Of the Turks it is rightly said / their nature is akin to the sow's / The sow is an awfully unclean animal / seeking all its beauty in dirt / as does the Turk's unclean crowd / living in all sorts of dirt.¹¹

The conclusion is close at hand:

Who could deny that the meaning of the sow was the people of Mohammed, full of swinish lust, only seeking the earthly goods, loving them and living in luxuriance under the yoke of dirt?¹²

The emphatic manifestation of the Muslim in this pig heralds, evidently, Turkish defeat, since the pig quickly died. Brant sees the pig as an omen of the coming of the Antichrist: "The sow is the brother of the Turk / She is truly

⁸ The entire field has recently been researched and described in detail in a number of publications, that have been important for the present essay; most recent is Mertens 2010, further cf. Schillinger 2008, Niederberger 2005 – her excellent article draws on her Inaugural-Dissertation (2004), by far the most exhaustive treatment of our theme, and Schünicke 2002. These publications have rich bibliographies concerning the general historical and cultural context. On the question of the crusades, see recently Housley 2012. The classic description, in the perspective of cultural history, of relations to the Ottoman Empire in the period, is Schwoebel 1967. In recent research excellent pioneering accounts are presented in contributions to Guthmüller & Kühlmann 2000.

⁹ Also on this event and Brant's reading of it, cf. Wuttke 1994.

¹⁰ Wuttke 1994, 107.

¹¹ Cit. Niederberger 2005, 185: "Als Turcken, die man halt billich / Das ir wesen der Su syg glich, / Eyn Su ist eyn wu(e)st unreyn thier / Die in unflat su(o)cht all ir zier, / als du(o)t der Türcken unreyn Schar / Jn allem unflat leben gar."

¹² Wuttke 1994, 111: "Hinc Mahumetanam spurcamque libidine gentem / Hac designatam quis negat esse Sue? / Quae terrena sibi dumtaxat quaerit amatque / Et luxu vivit spurciciaque iugi".

like Antichrist.”¹³ But only God knows the due date, he could decide “that the little ship stays on keel”¹⁴, a formulation that brings *The Ship of Fools* to mind.¹⁵

With the *Donnerstein*-flyer and similar publications Sebastian Brant is operating as a humanist activist exploiting new forms of publication in his support of Maximilian and his policies. The development of the printing press and movable types initiated by Gutenberg half a century earlier rapidly became crucial for interventions in the sphere of political-ideological public opinion.¹⁶ Brant’s flyers were an early example of the amalgamation of texts and xylographic illustrations. The immediate appeal of the image is followed by a textual bifurcation, which suggests two – overlapping – types of readers: a learned public schooled in Latin and a wider public using the vernacular. Even the illiterates could be reached by way of a combination of illustration and oral reading of or comment on Brant’s texts. Brant represented the new intelligentsia, which emerged in relation to the establishing of a number of new universities, and for a time he was active in Basel as a professor of Roman as well as canonical law (and poetics).¹⁷ Most of his writings were in Latin, contrary to his greatest success *The Ship of Fools*, widely known in all of Europe primarily due to his student Jacob Locher’s Latin version. The humanist Latin tradition from Petrarch and onwards is present in Brant’s texts not only in his extensive writings in Latin, but also in the many allusions and

¹³ Wuttke 1994, 112: “Die Su der Türcken bruder ist / Wol würd verglicht sie dem endkrist.” The history of the ideas of AntiChrist (Endkrist) is highly complicated, yet generally speaking AntiChrist is a manifestation of evil, doing Satan’s work, often also depicted as deceptive, pretending to represent the true belief. In particular, in times of crisis historical characters (like Nero), institutions (e.g. the Catholic Church in the Lutheran view), or even ethnic groups (in the Middle Ages often Jews, in Brant’s time – as in Luther’s – Turks) are identified as ‘AntiChrist’, i.e. as opposing and threatening true Christianity. Furthermore, the supposed appearance of AntiChrist may herald a final apocalyptic confrontation and thus ‘Endtime’, of which there are numerous scenarios, generally including the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgement, often also a decisive role of a ‘Final Emperor’ (EndKaiser). The sources of these apocalyptic and eschatological scenarios are manifold, important are in particular a few indications in the Gospels, the Johannine Letters and in Saint Paul, as well as not least the Revelation, and in the Old Testament Daniel’s Book, yet also prophetic traditions, among them the impact of the 7th century so called Pseudo-Methodius (see below). Daniel’s Book and Pseudo-Methodius are also important outlets for visions of historical epochs, *translatio imperii*, that point to the Roman Empire as the last, visions that are implicated in interpretations and actualizations of John’s Revelation. On various versions of AntiChrist and Endtime cf. McGinn 2000 and his anthology with historical introduction (1979).

¹⁴ Wuttke 1994, 112: “Do mit das schyfflin vff recht blib”.

¹⁵ Section 99.

¹⁶ About Brant in Schilling 2008.

¹⁷ Cf. Müllers excellent article 1980. On German humanism cf. Helmuth 2007. On Brant in general, cf. Wilhelmi 2002; there is a somewhat older monograph by Zeydel 1967.

references to ancient, especially Roman, analogies, and on a more comprehensive level – like in Petrarch – as the dream of a new power emulating the Roman in its heyday. It was Maximilian I, who was crowned king in 1486 and later became Roman Emperor in 1508, Brant had in mind as the new powerful Roman emperor. This notion he argued in both Latin and German, through flyers and other types of his own publications as well as by active participation in the thriving publishing activity in Basel and elsewhere. Brant partook in a number of publications, also by providing them with introductory poems. Among these publications were the works of Augustine and Petrarch, major protagonists of the ecclesiastical and the humanist traditions respectively. In 1496 he co-published Petrarch's Latin works. After his time at the University of Basel, he moved into public administration as a senior official in Strasbourg (Strassburg, at that time German).

Sebastian Brant's spheres of activity thus include academia and publishing – not least as a public author – as well as political activity related to Maximilian I, whose policies he supported through his production. He was not only Germany's first author with a wide European circulation, but also one of the first bestselling authors on a European level. Both Brant and his translator Locher stress the importance of the new printing technique for publishing and circulation. In his own Latin praise poem to the publisher John Bergmann von Olpe in Basel, his main collaborator, Brant acknowledges:

what in the past could barely be written in a thousand days by one, / art
now helps to handle in a single day. / Earlier the libraries of scholars
were sparse [...]. / In earlier days many a town had at most a few books,
/ today we find books even in modest homes. [...] And all of this is
thanks to the art and work of German printers.

Neither Italy nor France have inventions that can compare to the German printing technique: "Tell us, if you still call Germans barbarians".¹⁸

Brant's propaganda-texts again and again merge campaigning for the struggle against the Turks and other Muslims with promotion of a strengthening of the emperor in his own realm, where he is weakened by the reluctance of local princes *vis-à-vis* centralization, and on the European level where his project is undermined by the particularistic interests of the individual states and cities. In the additional poem about the Ensisheim meteorite mentioned above as well as in other texts Brant refers to the first Crusade as well as to Charlemagne's (purely legendary) pilgrimage to

¹⁸ From "Preislied von S. Brant an Herrn Johannes Bergmann von Olpe über den Vorzug der kürzlich von Deutschen erfundenen Druckerkunst" (Eulogy for Mr. Johannes Bergmann from Olpe, about the excellence of the art of printing that was newly invented by the Germans), translated from German version in Knape 2005, 22–23 (after Schnur 1966).

Jerusalem. Arguments and assurances are thus taken from natural phenomena, both extraordinary (like the meteorite) and ordinary (like significant constellations), as well as from past and present history, and even if the political analysis refers to real events it is organized with a view of furthering the aims of the campaign at hand. This is also the case in a poem he added to his collection of poems, *Varia Carmina*, in some of its prints.¹⁹ Once again he calls on Maximilian to fight against the Turks, noticing that when they hear of his coming, they will be overcome by fear and trembling, since they are very well aware of Charlemagne, Godfrey, i.e. the protagonist of the first crusade, Constantine, and Justinian (272–273).

Apocalyptic Vision of History

Remarkably, in Brant's interpretation of the deformed pig, the Turks are linked to Antichrist and thus to a final stage in world history, where the battle will be between Christian forces and the satanic forces incarnated in Antichrist. The integration of the confrontation with the Turks in the Christian historical perspective allots them a pivotal role. In the framework of a history of salvation, every major current event will have its place in a historical pattern leading towards judgement and salvation of the righteous. A variety of versions of this pattern were in use, but Brant's interest turned towards the apocalyptic. For him the pivotal turning around would occur in the not very distant future, and the confrontation with the Ottoman Empire had, in Brant's view, an essential role in the turn. In the poem just mentioned, which was added to the later versions of *Varia Carmina*, he enumerates the list of heroes of the past referring to prophetic writings in the apocalyptic tradition:

Likewise, they [the Turks] predict from their writings, that it will not last long before Mohammed's name will go under. This is also sung by our prophets and the eminent writings of Saint Bridget and Saint Methodius and other eminent texts.²⁰

He is hinting particularly at Daniel, but also at other prophetic writings of the Old Testament, along with the Revelation, as well as later references.

Brant's commitment to the apocalyptic tradition is particularly manifest in his reprint in 1498 of a text which includes a version of *Methodius* with an application in relation to contemporary history. The document commonly referred to as *Pseudo-Methodius*, a prophetic tract from the seventh century (about 692), was originally presented as authored by Methodius of Olympus,

¹⁹ Cf. Ludwig 1997.

²⁰ Quoted in Ludwig 1997, 272: "Vaticinatur item scriptis: multum nec abesse / Ab Mahumaetani nominis intritu: / Id quod nostri etiam vates: sacraeque Brigittae: et / Methodii: atque alia scripta propata canunt." (23–26).

the fourth century church father. Thus, antedating the predictions, the text pretended to foresee the Muslim expansion in the seventh century several centuries before the event, and it presented further predictions of what the future would hold in store. What made *Pseudo-Methodius* especially interesting to Brant and his contemporaries were predictions about the Muslim – at the time of writing ‘Sarazen’, at Brant’s time: Turkish – expansion followed by Christian supremacy, and about the end times. The document had been printed in Cologne in 1475, but Brant decided to re-publish a version established by Wolfgang Aytinger, a Dominican from Augsburg. The first edition of this version appeared in 1496 including not only the *Pseudo-Methodius* but also Aytinger’s contemporary application *Tractatus super Methodium*. When Brant in 1498 reprinted *Methodius* in Basel, again including Aytinger’s *Tractatus*, he not only added his own preface, but also numerous illustrations, fully in line with the approach used in his own single sheet prints. The intention was to make the publication, which was in Latin, appealing to a plurality of readers and to bring several communicative options in play.²¹ As Brant stressed in the preface: “[...] I enter into the popular sphere. I have arranged for engraved pictures, in order to make this prediction in the spirit of prophecy more easily accessible to many.”²² Referring to Gregory the Great, he notes that what text is to readers, pictures are to those who cannot read, “in the picture, those who do not know letters are able to read.”²³

The combination of text and image is, in principle, the same as he practiced in the single sheet prints. Furthermore, the illustrations to Aytinger’s *Methodius* were colored (green, yellow and several shades of red).²⁴ It was obviously a successful publication, since in 1516 six editions of this work had been printed.

The title indicates an angelical source to Methodius’ revelations while in prison. The angelical apparition, depicted in a woodcut taking up most of the title page, addresses Methodius, who is looking out of the window from his prison cell. With a book in the hand the angel is looking at Methodius seemingly conveying what the book says. Since the prophecies of the *Pseudo-Methodius* were based on extensive interpretations of relatively short

²¹ The edition is available online via the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel; the Aytinger edition is summarized and commented on in detail in Zoepfl 1935. On Brant and Aytinger, cf. in particular Ludwig 1997, 275–99, but also Niederberger 2004, 201–211; on text and illustration, cf. Green 2012, on Brant and Pseudo-Methodius 92–94. The outset for the discussion of Aytinger and Brant here is primarily Zoepfl and Ludwig, but also Niederberger.

²² Translated by Green 2012, 93.

²³ Id.

²⁴ This regards the copy at the Herzog August Bibliothek.

passages of the Bible, it is lies at hand to assume that the illustration aims at depicting how the angel is communicating a divinely inspired prophetic reading of the Bible to Methodius. The caption on the version used by Brant indicates briefly the content of the prophecy:

the divine revelations made by the holy angels about the beginning of the world and the extinction of various kingdoms and the deeds of the last king of the Romans and the future triumph over the Turks and the liberation of the Christians and the suppression of the Saracens, about the Restoration of the Church and the universal peace, with authentic comments regarding the relevant citations about the prophecies and about the completion of the earthly Saeculum.²⁵

The comments mentioned here are Aytinger’s *marginalia*; they were also included in Brant’s 1498 edition. The work, as the quoted caption indicates, is nothing less than a history of the world from creation to universal peace, yet with a special focus on the relationship between Christianity and Turks, as in other Latin writings from the same time that, like Aytinger’s edition of 1496, were printed in Ausburg, such as the *Destructio Turciae* from 1498 and *De futuris Christianorum triumphis in Turcos et Saracenos* from 1499.²⁶ Aytinger may have been involved in the publication of both of these contemporary writings.

The prophesy of *Pseudo-Methodius* presents the Seventh Century Muslim conquest of the Holy Land as willed by God as a punishment for the Christians’ sinful behavior (this Old Testament motive was in fact a common interpretation at the time, as it turned out later on to be repeatedly). But the prophecy points towards a future Christian victory over the Muslims. As a justification of the publication Brant wrote in his preface that prediction of this victory over the Turks as imminent could be deducted from the Methodius-text, likewise Aytinger elaborated in his commentary in detail a computation of the date of the Turkish defeat, which he believed would take place 56 years after the fall of Constantinople.²⁷ The prophecy said that the last king or emperor would bring about the ultimate defeat of the Muslims; the year calculated by Aytinger (1509) would consequently point to a contemporary king – possibly Maximilian – corresponding to Brant’s

²⁵ Ludwig 277: “revelationes divinas a sanctis angelis factas de principio mundi et eradicatione variorum regnorum atque ultimi regis romanorum gestis et futuro triumpho in turcos atque de liberatione christianorum ac oppressione sarracenorum, de restauratione ecclesie et universali pace cum autenticis concordantiis prophetiarum deque consumatione seculi hic annotat[is].”

²⁶ A passage from Annus 1480, of which there are several later prints.

²⁷ That Aytinger’s calculations were not unique appears from a decree from the Fifth Lateran Council in 1516 condemning “all attempts to fix the time of Antichrist’s coming and the end of the world” (McGinn 2000, 189).

frequent call for the Emperor to shoulder the role as leader of a decisive confrontation with the Turks.²⁸

Brant did not believe that a similar precise estimate was possible, yet he was, as he wrote in the preface, convinced not only that the defeat of the Turks was a divine revelation (as in *Pseudo-Methodius*), but also that astrological calculations pointed in the same direction. Although not everything that is handed down in such prophecies is to be believed, he reasoned, realizing that much of what had been predicted actually *had* happened, there was no reason to doubt “that also what still remains, will follow, for as Gregory says, the certainty of the coming things are based on the previous having occurred.”²⁹ He concludes his preface with an explicit reference to Maximilian,

May the Supreme God [...] hasten the completion, and especially under the leadership of our invincible and most Christian King Maximilian and his most fortunate inspiration, may his kingdom and dominion, life and happiness increase and be protected by divine grace.³⁰

Pseudo-Methodius writes about the final victory over the “Ismaelians”, i.e. Arab Muslims:

Swiftly then the king of the Greeks or the Roman king arises over the Ismaelians in great anger and he is like a man who rises from sleep, having drunk wine and looking dead to the people, and he brings his sword and destruction.³¹

It is a contemporary version of this king Aytinger is looking for: “Judging by the blessed Methodius’ words, it is a certain German king, given that the Roman Empire is now in Germany, whose head is the Roman king.”³² Aytinger had two additional candidates, but Brant did stick to Maximilian.

In the apocalyptic tradition Daniel’s Book and The Revelation have been subjected to numerous interpretations.³³ The origin is Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue, whose “head was pure gold, its chest and arms were silver, its belly and thighs bronze, the legs iron, its feet partly iron and partly clay” (2:32–33). Daniel suggests, that the dream predicts the coming of three kingdoms following Nebuchadnezzar’s, after which “the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, [...] it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.” (2.44)

²⁸ For details about the context of and background for Aytinger’s publication cf. Reeves 1961, in particular 341–348.

²⁹ Ludwig 1997, 282.

³⁰ Ludwig 1997, 283.

³¹ Ludwig 1997, 288.

³² Ludwig 1997, 289.

³³ Cf. – besides McGinn 1979 and 2000 – Delgado et al. 2003, Aytinger and Brant are not mentioned in this otherwise comprehensive book.

In interpretations of this prediction, the idea of *translatio imperii* is crucial.³⁴ Following St. Jerome's pivotal interpretation (c. 407), the four kingdoms were identified as respectively the Babylonian, the Persian, Alexander's kingdom and the Roman Empire – with Maximilian at its head, as Brant saw it.³⁵ Later in Daniel, in a vision of his own, four animals are mentioned, of which the fourth has ten horns, and then, an additional horn, a little horn, crops up among them, uprooting three of the other horns (7.2–12). Again, it seems that four kingdoms are at stake, but the last of them, the Roman, seems to split into ten, among which an eleventh pushes forward, interpreted by Jerome as Antichrist.³⁶

When Jacob Locher in 1498 published his Latin translation of *The Ship of Fools*, Brant supplied the publication with a nearly 600 verses long poem, *De corrupto ordine vivendi pereuntibus* (*About those who will perish from their corrupt ways of living*).³⁷ Here he follows the successive kingdoms and incorporates his own time in the interpretative pattern. The overarching issue is the question of order, *ordo*, in which a hierarchical arrangement of levels is crucial. The first violation of order was Lucifer's revolt, followed by the transgression of God's prohibition by Adam and Eve. Brant delineates the sequence of the various kingdoms but concentrates on the Roman Empire and its history in relation to his own time. With Emperor Constantine the unity of political power and religion was established. Yet this order was later disrupted by conflicts between Pope and Emperor. According to Brant only political power sanctioned by the Pope is legitimate, and Charlemagne's imperial coronation (in the year 800) institutes the legitimacy of the Holy Roman Emperor, while the schismatic relationship with Rome made the Byzantine Empire illegitimate. The Turkish conquest of Constantinople finishes off the eastern empire bringing it under Muslim rule in 1453.

The seven centuries from the imperial coronation of Charlemagne in 800 to Brant's own time made the Holy Roman Empire the longest lasting of all kingdoms. To Brant the Germans are thus obviously God's chosen people. But Maximilian's position is unstable, inwardly and outwardly. Brant notes how the position of the stars in the near future, i.e. in 1503, will be ominous – not necessarily signaling imminent ruin, but certainly a warning of the necessity of counteracting the precarious prospects:

³⁴ Cf. Goez 1958.

³⁵ Cf. Schillinger 2003.

³⁶ Schillinger 2003, 8.

³⁷ Brant 1998, 321–338. What follows is based on Schillinger 2003.

It is fitting to be subjected to this illustrious, pious and magnanimous king. [...] Certainly, adverse stars and fatal omens threaten us. But may the cruel stars twinkle; these stars will be overcome, if only we respect the order, and the less eminent members remain subject to their leader.³⁸

Then it will be possible to triumph over the Turks and reconquer the Holy Land, as Brant has it in *The Ship of Fools*: “The noble Maximilian, / He merits well the Roman crown. / They’ll surely come into his hand, / The Holy Earth, the Promised Land.”³⁹ The translation of imperial power within the Roman Empire has, in the eyes of Brant, reached Austria, “all of the earth is submitted to Austria”, and under Austrian leadership the victory over the Turks can be achieved: “The Turk, the heathen, all of the earth will come under your power, rule and crown”, as he wrote in 1502.⁴⁰ This conceptual pattern situates Maximilian as the final emperor who will defeat Antichrist in Turkish guise. Although Brant does not share Aytinger’s belief in predictive accuracy in establishing the time of the decisive victory, his apocalyptic view of history agrees with Aytinger’s as far as the role of the Turks is concerned.

The most elaborated version of this view is his book on Jerusalem, *De origine et conversatione bonorum regum et laude civitatis Hierosolymae cum exhortatione eiusdem recuperandae* (About the good kings’ ancestry and life and the praise of the city of Jerusalem with an exhortation to reclaim it) published in 1495.⁴¹ As the title indicates, the historical presentation is linked to a call for crusade. Whereas he at other occasions relied on Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon as models for Maximilian, here he enacts a reverse actualization: in his rendering of Urban II’s call for crusade (1095) he, rather surprisingly, yet emulating the Italian humanist Flavio Biondo, lets Urban refer to the Turks as Brant’s own contemporaries. In a certain way, though, this approach is consistent with the entire interpretative tradition of taking the ancient texts as statements about the present. The situation is threatening, and

³⁸ De Corrupto ordine... 522–533: “Quod tam praeclaro: iustoque: pioque, subesse / Vos decuit Regi: magnanimoque viro: [...] Astra licet nobis contraria multa minentur: / Dira simul: quamvis sydera saeva micent: / Sydera vincemus: maneamus in ordine saltem: / Et capiti subsint, membra minora, suo.” Cit. Schillinger 2003, 25.

³⁹ Citations in English from *The Ship of Fools* follow Zeydel’s translation (Brant 1962), here 320–321. The most recent standard edition of the German text is Knape’s (Brant 2005), with an excellent, detailed introduction and bibliography (11–99), this edition is the source of quotations from the original text. Here: “Der edel fürst Maximilian / Wol würdig ist der Römischen kron / Dem kumbt on zwifel jnn sin handt / Die heilig erd / vnd das globte landt.” (99.160–2).

⁴⁰ “All erd ist ostrych underthon”, “Turck, heiden, all ertrich wird gon / Under din gwalt, gebott, und kron”, Brants flyer from 1502 *Zu eren romscher kuniglicher maiestat von der vereyn der kunigen und anschlag an die turchen*. Cit. in Niederberger 2004, 240–241.

⁴¹ Cf. in particular Niederberger 2004, as well as Niederberger 2005, Schillinger 2008, and Mertens 2010.

in Brant's text Urban II stresses, how Constantinople no longer stands between the Turks and Europe:

Until now even in the most distant parts of Europe, the Empire, from Constantinople to the north, has been a bolt and like a wall that checked all major devastating avalanches of the Turks and Saracens, preventing them from burying among themselves first the Hungarians, the Poles, the Bohemians, and even the Germans and then the remaining Christians.⁴²

In the long poetic epilogue, Brant added to Locher's Latin 1497 version of *The Ship of Fools*, he similarly wrote:

While we still are taking counsel, the Turk has left his Greek coasts and robs Illyria and Pannonia, and hardly has he taken possession of the Danube, he will attack the banks of the Rhine and prepare the destruction of the Germans. Then, it is to be feared, we will see that he will make off with the scepter of the kingdom to some place, and the end of our empire will be near.⁴³

What appears from reports on the Turk's behavior during the conquest of Constantinople is a message to the rest of Europe of what is in store, if the Turks are not fought back. They invaded the city in the cruelest way and defiled it, according to Brant's book on Jerusalem – as well as other sources, of course, among them descriptions used by Brant. The emperor's head was cut off and carried around on a spear. Deceived by fraudulent promises defenseless nobles were mowed down, and the common man was sent away into slavery in Asia. Women were prostituted and nuns raped. Finally, the Turks profaned the sacred symbols, the cross was dragged in the mire, and Hagia Sophia devoted to Mohammedan dirt.⁴⁴ The term *dirt*, along with cruelty and unbridled lust, will explicitly and implicitly become a common theme, as in the interpretation of the deformed pig.

The aforementioned poetic epilogue – which was added to *Varia Carmina* – assures that God has not rejected us completely. As soon as we are cleansed of our sins, he readily will stand by our side. However, the Turk, can he be defeated? Apart from the reference to cruelty and falsehood, Brant, in line with much earlier literature about the Turks, also evokes other characteristic features: the Turks are hedonistic and lazy; they are feminized and therefore

⁴² Mertens 2010, 188–189, on Flavio Biondo see Mertens 2000.

⁴³ Ibid. 193: “Dum nos consulimus, Thureus sua littora Graeca / Post habet Illyricos Pannoniasque rapit, / Quique Istrum prius obtinuit, mox littera adibit / Rheni et Germanis inferet exitium. / Inde alio (timor est) regni traducere sceptrum / Cernemus nostrum et deficere imperium.”

⁴⁴ Schillinger 2008, 176.

vulnerable, despite their obvious military strength.⁴⁵ The Germans in contrast are highly virtuous fighters. Brant furthermore validates his plea through references to the Old Testament, calling Maximilian not only to fight the Turks in a European perspective, but also from the specific Christian viewpoint as the savior of Jerusalem. As elsewhere in Brant's *œuvre*, Maximilian here is presented as capable to realize the final defeat of the Turks, and, in an apocalyptic perspective, mantle the role as Pseudo-Methodius' 'Final Emperor', the savior of Christian world order.⁴⁶ Maintaining the idea of crusade, the dream of a rebirth of Roman culture and virtues, as well as a restoration of Roman imperial power, Brant is in line with the Christian humanist tradition from Petrarch to Piccolomini⁴⁷, yet specific aspects of his work are the centrality of the apocalyptic tradition in his ideas of crusade and as an aspect of his humanistic approach to history, focusing not only on history as history of salvation, but also interpreting his own time as on the verge of a world-historical critical change pointing towards the last days.

From Folly to Sin – The Ship of Fools

His best-known work, *The Ship of Fools*, unfolds within this interpretative horizon. Yet only towards the end of the book this thematic cluster becomes explicit, the work is presented and set out as more general popular instruction. In his *vorred* (preface) Brant thus presents his purpose as follows:

For profit and salutary instruction, admonition and pursuit of wisdom, reason and good manners: also, for contempt and punishment of folly, blindness, error and stupidity of all stations and kinds of men: with special zeal, earnestness, and labor compiled in Basel by Sebastian Brant, doctor in both laws.⁴⁸

Despite the many books, not least the Bible, that are available for the salvation of the soul, the world lives “in darksome night, / In blinded sinfulness persisting, / While every street sees fools existing / Who know but folly”.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Niederberger 2004, 191-192.

⁴⁶ On this theme cf. Möhring 2000.

⁴⁷ On the attitude of humanistic tradition to the Turks cf. Hankins 1995, 111–201, and Bisaha 2004, on Petrarch and the Turks, see in more detail Bisaha 2001, as well as Lausten 2016 and Madsen 2016, on Piccolomini (Pius II) cf. also Cotta-Schönberg 2015 and 2016.

⁴⁸ Zeydel 57. Knape 107: “Zu nutz vnd heylsamer ler / verma= // nung vnd ervolgung der wussheit / ver= // nunfft vnd guter sytten: Ouch zu ver= // achtung vnd straff der narheyt / blint= // heyt yrرسال vnd dorheit / aller stât / vnd // geschlecht der menschen: mit besun= // derem flyss vnd arbeyt / gesamlet // zu Basel: durch Sebastianum Brant. // in beyden rechten doctor.”

⁴⁹ Id.: “in vinstreer nacht / Und dut in sünden blint verharren / All strassen / gassen / sint voll narren” (*vorred* 8–10).

Brant devised, therefore, to bring all the fools aboard a ship of fools, however, one is not enough. The book’s descriptions must be a mirror for fools (like *Mirrors for Princes* are to princes). The book offers a general view of world affairs: “The world’s whole course in one brief look – / Are reasons why to buy this book”.⁵⁰

In the first half of the original print, the length of the individual chapters typically allows each book-spread to accommodate an illustration, the header and the text itself, and additionally above the illustration a very short motto. Such a spread was similar in character to Brant’s illustrated flyers. Further on in *The Ship of Fools*, though, the size of the texts in some parts go beyond this layout.

Brant covers a lot of ground, as also his language operates in several registers, including everyday usage. With turns of phrase and proverbial formulations he succinctly makes his point. Throughout this work, Brant accumulates a broad and dramatic picture of his own time, focusing on follies, idiocies and sinful behavior. Teaching goes hand in hand with everyday realism, and the vividness of the description of common life was not the least important reason for the enormous success of *The Ship of Fools*. Yet also the many woodcuts, accompanying each part of the work, contributed to the popularity, as the re-use of the images from this book in other publications suggests.

Brant’s German text was published in 1494.⁵¹ In 1495, 1499, 1506, and 1509 he released new versions (all identical to the first in Basel), in 1512 a second edition was printed (in Strasbourg). However, a number of unauthorized versions were brought to the market, at least six in Brant’s lifetime, some more or less close to the original text, others modified in various ways. Also, after his death *The Ship of Fools* was printed in a variety of versions, now without woodcuts, and not always very true to the original, numerous versions were grossly distorted. In total 29 editions of a relatively untouched version have been registered, most of them published within 125 years after the first edition, i.e. until 1618, at the beginning of the 30 Years War. Thereafter interest in the work decreased radically. But it was, as mentioned above, first and foremost the relatively free, Latin version prepared by Brant’s student Jacob Locher with the author’s participation in 1497 (also published in Basel), that furthered the work’s notable international success. Almost all translations from the fifteenth and sixteenth century are entirely or partly based on Locher’s version, which in the same year was printed in a new

⁵⁰ “Hie findt man der welt gantzen louff / Diss buchlin wurt gut zu dem kouff” (*vorred* 53–54).

⁵¹ The history of the publication and the translations is described in detail by Zeydel and by Knape in their editions of the book, see also Müller’s instructive article (2010).

edition, and a third the following year – an edition was published in Paris also in 1498. Reprints were published in Strasbourg, Augsburg and Nuremberg, in a total of eight versions. Translations into French, Dutch, Flemish, and English followed the Latin version; a Low German version was based on Brant's German text. All in all, it is no exaggeration to take *The Ship of Fools* as a bestseller, probably the greatest German literary success before Goethe's *Werther*.⁵² In Germany the book acquired the status of a sort of layman's Bible, and it is significant that Brant's friend Geiler von Kaiserberg in 1498–1499 delivered 142 highly influential sermons on the book from the pulpit of the Cathedral of Strasbourg. A version of these sermons was published in Latin in 1510, shortly after Geiler von Keiserberg's death – with woodcuts from *The Ship of Fools*. A German version of these sermons, again with woodcuts, appeared in 1520.⁵³

Brant's overriding concern was to make the readers aware of their own weaknesses and, as a first step, to appeal to their reason in order to lead them towards wisdom, and to further the insight that a flawed use of reason could lead to folly. Ultimately, though, he appealed to their religious consciousness – from the religious viewpoint foolishness is sinful. He did thus merge the ancient ideal of the wise man with Christian ethos. It is important to mobilize reason against human folly, yet *lumen naturale* and *sapientia* are crucial terms not only in ancient but also in Christian tradition.⁵⁴ This basic learning corresponds to the didactic nature of the book: the various chapters demonstrate, overwhelmingly, how common sense is seldom used, while foolishness – and thus sin – abound.

In the preface to his Latin translation of *The Ship of Fools*, Jacob Locher compared Brant's work to Dante's *Comedy* and noted that it could have been given the title Divine Satire. As Dante's work, *The Ship of Fools* presents a catalogue of offenses, yet also Dante's multilayered correlation of meanings can be a key to Brant's satire.⁵⁵ The songs or sections are, on the surface, *satirical depictions* of contemporary ways of life, a colorful depiction of the time and its folly, its weaknesses. But, *second*, highlighting the weaknesses is a sign of the work's *moralizing* character, as well as of Brant's dedication to encourage the awareness of and recovery from these weaknesses. An additional and *third* dimension is Brant's *humanism*. His frame of reference participates in many respects in contemporary intellectual efforts to promote ancient culture, in particular Roman virtues. While satire and moralizing in

⁵² After Brant's success with *The Ship of Fools*, the literature about folly multiplied during the sixteenth century, see Könniker 1966.

⁵³ Cf. Israel 2010, in particular 61–64, with numerous bibliographical references.

⁵⁴ Knape 2005, 65–70.

⁵⁵ As Peter Skrine argues (1969).

principle relate to a wide audience of his time, the humanist level and his stress on the *ideal of wisdom in the Roman sense* appeal primarily to his contemporary educated peers. The *fourth* and highest level of significance, the *religious* frame of interpretation, underscores the limitations of humanism. The Christian interpretative horizon is, ultimately, crucial: what an extrinsic reading may take as variegated follies and human weaknesses are, *from the Christian point of view*, sins that ultimately will lead to Hell, if they are not overcome, whereas the Christian way leads to Heaven and salvation. The image of the ship is thus linked to the broader image of a journey and its existential risks. This dimension had, of course, a special appeal in the context of a notion of the imminence of the end time.⁵⁶

The frame of reference is thus, together with ancient culture, the Bible and the Christian tradition, whereas Brant's realism provides substance and linguistic expression from daily life of his own time. To the reader, who is familiar with both Christian and ancient tradition and with contemporary daily life, this multiplicity of frames of reference and the array of sources of linguistic formulations turn the work into a kind of collage. This corresponds to the humanists' textual endeavor to include or allude to ancient material; just as in a Christian milieu it was important to keep the Bible and other traditional Christian elements in mind. As an application of this principle Brant supplied Locher's Latin translation with marginal notes referring to Christian as well as ancient sources.

The last (112.) song may seem to bring the work's conclusive remarks asserting ideal ancient wisdom. Here the poem *Vir bonus*, attributed to Vergil, is to a considerable degree merged into the text. In his very brief postscript Brant repeats the characterization of his work as it was stated in the preface.⁵⁷ Neither in the preface, nor in the postscript the religious dimension is underscored, but it is significant that the great model of wisdom, Odysseus ("By wisdom sage, by counsel shrewd"), may use his wisdom to dodge many dangers, but it will, eventually, as Brant unfolds his fate, fall short: "[...] misfortune came again / When by his son the man was slain / While knocking at his rightful door, / His prudence could not help him more."⁵⁸ A different kind of wisdom is needed. "We err in dark obscurity", but "The Lord has given us the light / Of wisdom, making all things bright. / To darkness wisdom

⁵⁶ Cf. Delumeau 1978, in particular 262–272.

⁵⁷ Zeydel 366, Knape 511.

⁵⁸ "Der wise rat gab / vnd gut anschlag [...] Vnd wust von vil unglück zu sagen / Wart doch von sym sun dot geschlagen / Als er kloppfft an synr eygen tur / Do künd wissheit nit helffen" (108.73, 94–97).

puts an end / If but to wisdom we attend.”⁵⁹ The light of faith, shining in the darkness of this world, is a kind of wisdom that is entirely different from the one concerning, exclusively, worldly matters. Faith is the general framework, within which humanist virtues obtain their actual value as parts of opposition to foolery, perceived as sin. From this point of view the variegated immediate folly of everyday life is a strong challenge to Christianity.

But Christianity is also a religion of hope. Salvation does not only depend on human efforts in fighting sin, it is also the result of divine grace. It seems like the poem's image of Odysseus who, having eschewed all sorts of dangers with wisdom and cunning, stands at the door to his desired goal and there encounters death, should be read allegorically as an emblem of earthly wisdom's limitation – the door as an image of heaven's gate.

Although the work, as a whole, does not use the image of the ship in a coherent fashion (occasionally there is more than one ship), in the second part there is a more consistent use of the motif, and from an allegorical interpretative angle the depiction of the motley crowd on board the ship of fools attains important significance. To sum up the main aspects of the image of the ship: *first*, worldly life is considered a kind of seafaring, threatened on the moral level by many dangers, *second*, persisting in acts of folly can increase the dangers, while awareness of foolishness – wisdom as represented by Odysseus – can be of help in need, and, *third*, wisdom is from a humanist perspective, a tool for navigation, but, *fourth*, the image of the ship is, crucially, to be interpreted on a Christian-allegorical level. The church, the Christian community, is seen as a ship (as the church building itself is): a ship to salvation. In the Christian allegory the ship's mast is the cross to which Christ is fastened and by which the ship may lead to salvation (in the *Odyssey* one of Odysseus' wise acts was to let himself be tied to the mast to avoid acting on temptation, but in his case, faith was lacking – this partial analogy may be an underlying allegorical point). This implied view of the church as a ship has a consolatory dimension in contrast to the enumeration of all the dangers, navigation on life's sea holds for mankind, led, as it is, by the multitude of follies and with only limited hope of overcoming them. Christianity represents hope of a different kind.

Tears

Such hope is all the more needed as there is reason to fear that the end of time is closing in, and here the Turkish danger enters the picture. “The time comes, that it comes is clear, / The Antichrist is very near [...] We do approach the

⁵⁹ “Vnd wir irren jn vinstern schyn / So hat got geben vns das leicht / Der wissheit / dar von man gesicht / Die macht der vinsterniss eyn end / Wann wir sie nemen recht für hend.” (107.58–62).

Judgment Day.”⁶⁰ Not all fools belong within the Christian framework; among the excluded are “Turks, pagans, Saracens – in brief / All those who have no true belief”.⁶¹ The followers of Islam, Moors and, in particular, Turks, are the topic of the longest song in the work, number 99, where, again, the tears well up at the thought of the decline of Christianity and Christendom.

Brant is here in line with Piccolomini and so many others, who after the fall of Constantinople deplored the infighting of the European rulers and their lack of commitment to defense and struggle against the Turks, yet his formulations are also in line with Petrarch:

When I regard neglect and shame / Which everywhere appears the same
/ Of prince and lord, of city, land, / No wonder then the tears do stand /
In these mine eyes and flow so free / That one should see disgracefully
/ The faith of Christians ebb, recede.⁶²

Heresy has weakened faith,

And then Mohammed shamefully / Abused its noble sanctity / With
heresy and bad intent. / Our faith was strong in th’Orient, / It ruled all
of Asia, / In Moorish lands and Africa. / But now for us these lands are
gone, / ‘Twould even grieve the hardest stone.⁶³

Faith has been eradicated in Asia Minor and Greece as well as in “Greater Turkey”. Yet that is not all: “In Europe we’ve been forced to see / The loss but very recently / Of kingdoms, even empires two / And mighty lands and cities true, / Constantinople, Trapezunt” etc.⁶⁴ Brant carefully lists a number of countries and cities lost in South-Eastern and Central Europe.

So strong the Turks have grown to be / They hold the ocean not alone,
/ The Danube too is now their own. / They make their inroads when
they will, / Bishoprics, Churches suffer ill, / Now they attack Apulia, /
Tomorrow e’en Sicilia, / And next to it is Italy, / Wherefore a victim

⁶⁰ “Die zyt die kumt / es kumt die zyt / jch vorcht der endkrist sy nit wyt [...] Es nah sich vast / dem jungsten tag.” 103.92–93, 147.

⁶¹ “Saracenen / Türcken / Heyden // All die vom glauben sint gescheyden” (98.9–10).

⁶² “Wann ich gedenck sümmiss / und schand // So man yetz spurt / jn allem land // Von fürsten / herren / landen / stett // Wer wunder nit / ob ich schon hett / Myn ougen gantz der zahern voll // Das man so schwächlich sehen soll // Den krysten glauben nemen ab.” (99.1–7)

⁶³ “Dar noch der schändlich Machamet // Jnn mer / vnd mer verwüestet het // Vnd den mit sym jrnsal geschänt // Der vor was gross jnn Orient // Vnd was gloubig alles Asia // Der Moren landt / vnd Affrica // Jetz hant dar jnn / wir gantz nüt me // Es mocht eym hertten steyn thun we” (99.15–22).

⁶⁴ “On das man in Europa sytt / Verloren hat / jnn kurzer zyt // Zwey keyserthum / vil künig rich // Vil mechtig land / vnd stett des glich // Constantinopel / Trapezunt” (99.31–35). The two empires are the Byzantine Empire and the Byzantine Empire founded by the dynasty of the Komnenos in Trapezunt, after the crusaders’ conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

Rome may be / And Lombardy and Romance land, We have the archfoe
close at hand, / We perish sleeping one and all [...].⁶⁵

This is the perspective. Otranto in Apulia was – albeit briefly – conquered by the Turks in 1480–81, and an attack on Rome seemed imminent: “The wolf has come into the stall”.⁶⁶ Brant was by no means alone in the awareness of and preoccupation with imminent threats. Yet internal disagreement and conflict at the European level lead to a completely meaningless shedding of Christian blood, while nobody realized the enormity of the approaching external danger. “We’re like the oxen famed in tale / Who watched the rest without avail / Until the wolf consumed them all.”⁶⁷ “For Europe’s gates are open wide, / The foe encircles every side, / With sleep or rest he’s not content, / On Christian blood alone he’s bent.”⁶⁸

Brant also shares Renaissance humanism’s recurring dream of the rebirth of the Roman Empire: “Would God you’d be augmented soon”.⁶⁹ Saracens have taken the Holy Land and the conquests of the Turks are so many that it is no use to count. The future of the Roman Empire depends on the German Empire, and the Roman emperor is German. But in the German realm as well, the situation is bad, despite the fact that “The Germans once were highly praised / And so illustrious were their fame, / The Reich was theirs and took their name”.⁷⁰ On this background Brant summons “you lords, you states and kings” – “If you’ll support the ship of state / It will not sink but bear its freight”.⁷¹

This is an example of how a short allusion to the image of the ship links it to the crucial historical questions of the revival of the Holy Roman Empire. From the pessimistic view of Christian losses, the Turks’ onrush, and the misery of the European powers as well as of the Roman Empire, he now turns the attention to his own heroic figure, Maximilian:

⁶⁵ “Jetz sind die Türcken also starck // Das sie nit hant das mer alleyn // Sunder die Tunow ist jr gemeyn / vnd dunt eyn jnnbruch / wann sie went // Vil bystum / kyrchen sint geschent / Jetz griff er an Apuliam // Dar noch gar bald Siciliam // Jtalia die stost dar an // So würt er dann an Rom ouch gan // An Lonbardy / vnd welsche landt // Den vyndt den hant wir an der handt // Vnd went doch schloffend / sterben all.” (99.50–61)

⁶⁶ Der wolff ist worlich jnn dem stall (99.62).

⁶⁷ “Vnd gschicht vns / als den ochsen gschah // Do eyner dem andern zu sach // Biss das der wolff sie all zerreiss” (99.75–77).

⁶⁸ “Die porten Europe offen syndt // Zu allen sitten ist der vyndt // Der nit schloffen noch ruwen dut // Jn düst allein / noch Christen blut” (99.91–94).

⁶⁹ “Well got / das du ouch grossest dich” (99.111).

⁷⁰ “Der tütschen lob was hochgeert // Vnd hatt erworben durch solch rum // Das man jnn gab das keyserthum” (99.140–142).

⁷¹ “Jr herren / künig / land – Wellent dem Romschen rich zu stan / So mag das schiff noch vff recht gan” (99.151, 153–54).

The noble Maximilian, / He merits well the Roman crown. / They'll surely come into his hand, / The holy Earth, the Promised Land. / He'll undertake it any day / If he can trust in you and may.⁷²

Much Christian land has been lost, however there is still much left, there is enough of it to subjugate the whole world if only all stand together, says Brant in his exhortation, again invoking the image of the ship:

You rule the land and every place / Awake, renounce all black disgrace,
/ Be not the sailor in the deep / Who midst his duty fall asleep / While
the storm clouds gathered dark; / Or like a dog that does not bark, / Or
like a guard that watches ne'er / And shirking duty shows no care. /
Arise and end your dream and see: / The axe is truly in the tree. / O
God, give all our rulers sense / To seek Thy honor so immense / And
not their own avail and greed.⁷³

The image in Pseudo-Methodius of the last emperor to be awakened from his sleep is, perhaps, implied here. Brant urges all the estates not to behave like an in-fighting crew:

Who disagree and battle too / When they are out upon the deep / And
wind and storm the sailcloth sweep. / Ere on a course they can agree /
Their worthy ship a wreck may be. / If you have ears then list to me; /
Our ship is swaying frightfully.

And Christ is, at this point, directly connected to the image of the ship: "If Christ does not watch o'er us right / We soon will be in the darkest night."⁷⁴ Princes, chosen by God to lead, must be careful not to be tainted by shame if they do not do what's right for their rank – "The frivolous who pay no heed / I'll give a fool's cap. That's their meed."⁷⁵ The attitude is double, simultaneously appealing to the princes and hoping for support from God and

⁷² "Der edel fürst Maximilian // Wol würdig ist der Romschen kron / Dem kumbt on zwifwl jnn sin handt / Die heilig erd / vnd das globte landt // Vnd wurt sin anfang thun all tag // Wann er alleyn üch trüwen mag" (99.159.164).

⁷³ "Jr sind regyerer doch der land // Wachen 7 vnd dunt von üch all schand // Das man üch nit dem schiffman glich // Der vff dem mer flisst schliffes sich // So das er das vngewetter sicht // Oder eym hund der bollet nicht / Oder eym wachter der nit wacht // Vnd vff syn hutt hatt gantz keyn acht / Stont vff / vnd wachen von dem troum // Worlich / die axt stat an dem boum // Ach gott gib vbsern houbtern jn // Das sie suv'chen die ere dyn // Vnd nit yeder syn nutz alleyn" (99.175–187).

⁷⁴ "Die vneynss sint / vnd hant eyn stritt // Wann sie sint mitten vff dem mer // Jnn wynd / vnd vngewitter ser // Vnd ee sie werden eyns der fur // So nymt die Galee eynb gruntrur // Wer oren hab / derr merck vnd hor // Das schifflin schwancket vff dem mer // Wann Christus yetz nit selber wacht / Es it bald worden vmb vns nacht" (99.194–200, 201–202).

⁷⁵ "Vnd wer nit an myn wort gedenck // Die narren kappen / ich jm schenck" (99.213–214).

from Christ.⁷⁶ The song (98) on the decline of faith and first and first and foremost the next song (99) on the relation between the Turks and Europe, between Islam and Christianity, are crucial to the overall thematic structure of *The Ship of Fools*.

Despite its apparently loose structure, it can, following concepts of classical rhetoric, be construed as providing, until song 67, a kind of *narratio*, being in this case a presentation of a number of examples, followed by a *probatio* (67–97), a sort of corroboration or assertion of the major themes, at the background of the previous songs. Here, then, is the song about the decline of faith as well as the song that provides an extensive account of the situation of Europe and the advancing Turkish forces – an overall historical view, whereas the previous songs primarily focused on individual weaknesses and follies. The account of the relation to the Turks is fundamental; it is the focal point for an appreciation of not only past but also future history. The tale is no longer about individual follies; it’s about the fate of Europe. The theme of folly encompasses each and every prince and any ruler who does not mantle his historic mission, he will get the fools cape. On the religious level, too, this section is crucial, not only because it is about a religious confrontation, but mainly because it ultimately is an appeal to and an expression of hope in Christ. The rest of the work will largely revolve around the relation between wisdom and faith, a kind of *peroratio*, especially the song 108, as discussed above.⁷⁷ Also, the structure of the song 99 as such can be read in the light of rhetorical norms. Piccolomini’s speech *Constantinopolitana clades* at the Diet of Frankfurt in 1454 begins stating the justice (*iustitia*) of war, goes on to affirm its usefulness (*utilitas*) and to a consideration of the conditions for successful warfare (*facilitas*).⁷⁸ Brant in a similar way first (17–55) observes how the Turks have deprived Christianity and then Europe of so many areas – herein lies the *justice* of going to war against the Turks; it is *useful* to prevent further conquests (56–70), and finally he argues the *feasibility* of war (71–150); yet here he differs from Piccolomini, who in *Constantinopolitana clades* did mention the disagreement between the princes, but did not, like

⁷⁶ In Matthew 14.24–33 the disciples are in a boat, far out on the lake Genezareth (“tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary,” cf. Brant: “Das Schifflein schwanket auf dem Meere”), during the night Jesus comes to their help, walking on water. The association of a ship, a wavy sea and the help of Christ is one of the major sources of the Christian theological elaboration of the image of the ship, extensively discussed by Skrine 1969, 581ff.

⁷⁷ Concerning the rhetorical sequence, Skrine 1969, 586 & 592, refers to Gaier 1966, for whom “das Narrenschiff [erscheint] als eine grosse bruchlose Einheit, als Einheit im grossen Entwurfe geplant und mit Genauigkeit ausgeführt” (Skrine cit. 586). Müller 2010 articulates a certain scepticism regarding Geier’s position, 30, note 3.

⁷⁸ Cotta-Schönberg 2015. On Piccolomini (as Pope: Pius II): Bisaha 2004 and Cotta-Schönberg 2016.

Brant, embark on a lengthy display of those problems, a kind of castigatory sermon, before coming up with the solution.

Brant’s vision of history was probably related to Petrarch’s idea, that a renewed Roman Empire, i.e. a Christian Roman Empire, would bring those areas back to Europe that were at his time (as well as at Brant’s own time) under Muslim rule, including the liberation of Jerusalem (then under Mamluk rule). As Petrarch wrote in *De vita solitaria*:

Oh, would it [the Roman Empire] be there today too! Then the entire Africa would not be under the delusion, or Persia, Syria, Egypt, nearly the whole of Asia, and, even worse, most of Europe. For that Roman Empire of the Antiquity was only, as respected authors affirm, lacking a small part of the Orient, whereas, painfully, we are lacking all except a modest part of the Occident.⁷⁹

Evoking a passage from Augustine that underscored the presence of the Christian sacrament “in all the populated countries”, Petrarch exclaims: “This short sentence brings us to tears, and it can easily bring the enormity of our turpitude to mind.” (179) Similarly, Piccolomini, in his speech about the fall of Constantinople, underscores the nexus of geography, religion and power, when he enumerates the defeats of Christianity, pointing out that

Often our forefathers experienced setbacks in Asia and Africa, that is to say in other regions, but we, today, have been smitten and struck in Europe itself, in our fatherland, in our own home and seat.⁸⁰

Sebastian Brant is in line with both Petrarch and Piccolomini when he, in the last part of his *De origine*, cry out: “The unbridled Turks, the inhospitable reign of the Sultan and the Scythian and Tartar dogs surround us”, followed by a prayer:

Almighty Creator, if you are moved by any prayers, look upon us, and if only we deserve your mercy, then help us and free us from all of this. I ensure you, supreme Father, that I have just written these things shedding tears and with wet cheeks.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Petrarca 2004. Petrarch wrote the first version in 1346, working on the text until 1366, and adding a supplement in 1371.

⁸⁰ Cotta-Schönberg’s translation 24; Latin text *ibid.* 23: “Retroactis namque temporibus in Asia atque in Africa, hoc est in alienis terris, vulnerati fuimus: nunc vero in Europa, id est in patria, in domo propria, in sede nostra percussi caesique sumus.”

⁸¹ “Hinc Thurci infreni cingunt et inhospita regna Soldani atque Scytae Tartareusque canis. [...] Omnipotens genitor, precibus si flecteris ullis, aspice nos, hoc tantum et si pietate meremur. Da deinde auxilium pater atque haec omnia leva. Testor enim te summe pater, nos nuper abortis scripsisse haec lacrymis, cum madisque genis.” Cit. Niederberger 2005, 188–189.

Tears and crying are not only an outcome of individual inner emotional states and their external manifestation. As in Brant's formulations, tears are in the Bible at numerous occasions intimately related to prayer.⁸² In apocalyptic terms, The Revelation provides an answer to the numerous tearful lamentations in the Old Testament: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes" (21.4). Revelation is here echoing Isaiah's prophecy: "He will swallow up death forever; Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces" (25.8). Brant's approach to contemporary history is colored by apocalyptic visions as well as articulations of experiences of loss, not least of Constantinople, yet also of Jerusalem. His tears are most likely also related to Old Testament lamentations of the loss of Jerusalem as his vision is related to Old Testament prophecies as well as to New Testament visions of the last days. The loss of Jerusalem – and other areas listed in *Ship of Fools* – is imaginarily compensated by an apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem and the defeat of the satanic forces, which in Brant's version corresponds to the imminent defeat of the Turks by Christian forces under Maximilian's command.

The accounts of Turkish oppression during the conquest of Constantinople recall the description of the miseries of Jerusalem in *Lamentations*, where the city "cries and cries at night with tears on the cheeks." (1.1–2) Virgins and young men are taken away as prisoners (1.18), priests killed in the "sanctuary of the Lord" (2:20):

Women have been ravished in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah.
Princes have been hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect.
Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood.
(5.11–13).

Brant's articulations of the experience of the current Turkish threat are based not only on an apocalyptic version of the tradition of *translatio imperii* that takes Austria as the contemporary stage of the Roman Empire and Maximilian as incarnating the Last Emperor but also on an appropriation of the biblical tradition of the duality of lament and hope as well as on the recurrent Old Testament theme of torment as the Lord's scourge for the shortcomings of the tormented. To Brant the Turks are thus agents in the unfolding of a history of salvation with a view of an apocalyptic turn in the battle between Christians and Turks, yet nonetheless it is experienced as a history of loss. It is at the background of this biblical setting the introduction to section 99 of *The Ship of Fools* as quoted above should be understood – and that goes for his entire *œuvre*:

⁸² Cf. Lutz 1999, 43–45, and Friis Hvidberg 1962.

When I regard neglect and shame/ Which everywhere appears the same
/ Of prince and lord, of city, land, / No wonder then the tears do stand /
In these mine eyes and flow so free / That one should see disgracefully
/ The Faith of Christians ebb, recede.⁸³

⁸³ "Wann ich gedenck sümmiss / vnd schand // So man yetz spurt / jn allem land // Von fürsten / herren / landen / stett // Wer wunder nit / ob ich schon hett // Myn ougen gantz der zahern voll // Dass man so schmachlich sehen soll // Den krysten glouben nemen ab".

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