Exposed to All the Currents of the Mediterranean—A Sixteenth-Century Venetian Rabbi on Muslim History

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The Western perception of Islam as a belligerent religion owes many of its stereotypes not only to the Crusades, but also to the early modern rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe. Heated debates about the “Turkish menace” dominated European political discourse until the (second) Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, as documented by the innumerable Turcica that circulated both swiftly and widely thanks to revolutionary advances in printing. Sixteenth-century Christian authors provided their eager readers with constantly updated versions of Ottoman history, as did some of their Jewish contemporaries. Probably the first Jew to make the Ottomans the major subject matter of his work was Elijah Capsali of Candia in Venetian Crete, who in 1523 completed a Hebrew chronicle titled Seder Eliyahu Zuta (“Minor Order of Elijah”).

There was little that was new in Capsali’s way of writing history. Even though the Candiote rabbi occasionally makes use of contemporary rhetorical devices, his writing style has more in common with that of medieval Jewish chronicles, which ultimately go back to biblical and rabbinic literature, than with humanist historiography. What is unprecedented in this Jewish chronicler’s work is

*This article is an expanded version of a paper presented at the 36th annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Chicago, December 19–21, 2004. I also reconsider and develop some of the ideas outlined in my shorter article, “Das ambivalente Isambild eines venezianischen Juden des 16. Jahrhunderts: Capsalis Osmanische Chronik,” Judaica 58, no.1 (2002): 2–17. The translations of Biblical verses are based on TANAKH, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), but are often modified to accommodate the way these quotes are used within the context of Capsali’s work. All other translations are mine.

1. While the manuscripts have no headline, this title occurs toward the end of the prologue, see Seder Eliyahu Zuta (hereafter SEZ), according to the critical edition Seder Eliyahu zuta le-rabbi Eliyahu Capsali, ed. Aryeh Shmuelevitz, Shlomo Simonsohn, and Meir Benayahu, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1975–83), 1:20. Capsali’s title alludes to B. Ketuvot, 106a; it is also a captatio benevolentiae, as it can be read too as “Order of the Minor Elijah.” Not until three and a half centuries after the completion of the manuscript were excerpts of SEZ published by Moses Lattes, Likutim shonim misefer divre Eliyahu (Padua, 1869). The first complete edition did not appear until 1975.

2. Sixteenth-century Jewish historiography in general has been the subject of lively scholarly debate. In a provocative and highly readable survey, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi relates this literature to the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula (gerush Sefarad), a traumatic experience which—according
his subject matter, or to be more precise, the extent to which he writes on non-Jewish history. His lengthy and detailed account of Muslim history in general and Ottoman history in particular have no parallel in earlier Jewish literature—and only a few among later Jewish historians.3 What is also striking about Seder ’Eliyahu Zuta is the contrast between the polemical tone of the introductory chapters on the early history of Islam and the idealized portrayal of the Ottomans, Venice’s primary Mediterranean rivals, in the chapters that follow. It is these ambivalences and juxtapositions—medieval writing style and early modern subject matter; distinctively Rabbinic worldviews and contemporary Venetian perspectives; polemical debates on the origins of Islam and idealized admiration of the current rulers of the Islamic world—that make Capsali such a fascinating figure of study.

3. Three decades later, in 1554, Joseph ha-Kohen (1496—after 1577) of Genoa would publish his Sefer divre ha-yamim le-malkhe Zarefat u-vet Ottoman ha-Togar (“Chronicle of the Kings of France and of the Kings of ’Othmân the Turk”); for a recent study, see Martin Jacobs, “Joseph ha-Kohen, Paolo Giovio, and Sixteenth-Century Historiography,” in Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early-Modern Italy, ed. David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 67–85; idem, Islamische Geschichte, 82–108, 185–220 (including additional bibliography). Another Hebrew chronicle comparable to Capsali’s is Yosef Sambari’s Sefer divre Yosef (“Book of Joseph’s Words”), written in Cairo in 1673; it contains a history of the Jews in Islamic lands, including an extensive framework on Muslim history; see the critical edition by Shimon Shtober, Sefer divre Yosef le-rabbi Yosef ben rabbi Yizhqa Sambari (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994) (including an introduction); Jacob Lassner, The Middle East Remembered: Forged Identities, Competing Narratives, Contested Spaces (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), 341–85; Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 109–27, 221–258; for Shtober’s articles on Sambari, see below notes 88 and 105.
Elijah Capsali\(^4\) (c. 1485–1555) was born in Candia (present-day Iraklion), the capital of Crete, which in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade (1204) had been incorporated into the Venetian Empire (it would remain under the banner of St. Mark until the Ottoman conquest of 1669).\(^5\) By Capsali’s time, Candia had become a thriving hub of Venetian trade and commerce in the eastern Mediterranean. Although the Jewish community in Candia profited greatly from this commercial prosperity, their legal status was, like that of the native Greek Orthodox population (regarded as schismatic by the Roman Catholics), far below that of the Venetian colonialists (to say the least). Unlike the Greeks, the Jews of Candia (and other Cretan towns such as Chania) were confined to a segregated quarter of the city called Zudecca (i.e., Giudecca) in the Venetian dialect, and were forced to wear a yellow badge when in public. Despite these discriminatory restrictions, however, Jews had one significant advantage over other non-Latin local communities in the Venetian colonies: they enjoyed their own communal organization and institutions, the autonomy of which saw little interference by the authorities apart from the fact that the condestabulo (i.e., contestabile, “responsible”), the civil head of the Jewish community of Candia, had to be approved by the signoria. The reason for this was obvious: the Jewish representatives were “responsible” for the payment of the collective taxes.

Up to the time of Capsali—to be exact, until 1541—Venetian legislation officially excluded Jews from participation in international trade. Still, they were not alone in being excluded since all foreigners, as well as most of the population of the Venetian Empire, were barred from the commerce flowing through the lagoon city; the Levant trade was regarded as the sole prerogative of Venetian patricians and upper-class citizens.\(^6\) Since the fourteenth century, however, there had been mention of Cretan Jews in the sources about the commercial intercourse between Venice and the eastern Mediterranean.\(^7\) This was because the legal status and eco-

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\(^4\) The name Capsali appears to be of Greek origin (Kapsali); for the etymology, see Meir Ben-nayahu’s, *Rabbi Eliyahu Qapsali ‘ish Qandiah* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1983), 11.


nomic activity of the Jews from Crete differed in many respects from that of their coreligionists in the metropolis or the Venetian terra firma. While the city of Venice did not issue a charter legalizing the residency of Jews until 1513, and only in 1541 granted Jewish merchants (who were Ottoman subjects) the right to reside in the città lagonare, the Jewish communities of Crete had roots going back to Byzantine times. Moreover, they actively participated in the regional trade that was not considered the exclusive domain of Venetian citizens. The multilingual talents of the Cretan Jews, many of whom were equally fluent in Greek and Italian (as well as in Hebrew) made them ideal middlemen in the commercial exchange of the eastern Mediterranean. In addition, they enjoyed preferential business relations with Jewish merchants living under Ottoman rule.

Although Capsali’s interest in Ottoman affairs was certainly a result of his living in one of the major port cities through which flowed much of the Levant trade, the multicultural atmosphere of a commercial hub does not fully explain why he wrote Seder ‘El’iyahu Zuta. By composing a chronicle of the Ottomans he not only picked a fashionable topic but also a typical genre of contemporary Italian literature. However, as he never mentions—or admits—to having read any non-Jewish literature (see following discussion), one may easily underestimate the extent to which he was acquainted with the Italian cultural trends of his time.

Elijah Capsali was first exposed to Italian influences during his youth in Venetian-ruled Candia. His father, Rabbi Elkanah Capsali, served as condestabu-


9. It was only in 1509 that Jews—in this case refugees from the armies of the League of Cambrai—were admitted to Venice; the first, so-called “new” ghetto was established in 1516. For a recent study, see Benjamin Ravid, “The Venetian Government and the Jews,” in Davis and Ravid, Jews of Early Modern Venice, 3–30; idem, “On Sufferance and Not as of Right: The Status of the Jewish Communities in Early Modern Venice,” in The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World, David Malkiel (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003 [Italia, Suppl. 1]), 17–61.

10. Although the decree restricted the residence of so-called Levantini to limited periods, it subsequently led to the permanent establishment of the “old ghetto” (ghetto vecchio) in Venice; see Benjamin Ravid, “The Establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio of Venice: Background and Reappraisal,” in Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem, 1975), 267–76; Minna Rozen, “Strangers in a Strange Land: The Extraterritorial Status of Jews in Italy and the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries,” in Ottoman and Turkish Jewry: Community and Leadership, ed. Aron Rodrigue (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1992), 123–66, esp. 128–34. The admission of Ottoman Jewish traders to Venice in 1541 was intended to revive Venetian prospects in the Levantine trade, which had suffered significantly as a result of changing economic conditions and the Venetian-Ottoman war of 1537–40. See Benjamin D. Cooperman, “Venetian Policy towards Levantine Jews in Its Broader Italian Context,” in Cozzi, Ebrei e Venezia, 65–84.


12. Cf. n. 115.
and as such was familiar with the Venetian authorities.13 While the Capsalis had Romaniote (Greek-Jewish) roots, Elijah was related through his mother to the Ashkenazic Delmedigos, who despite residing in Candia maintained strong ties with Italy and were well known for their great erudition, both Talmudic and philosophical.14

Capsali’s Italian “acculturation” was later furthered by his own studies on the Venetian mainland. In 1508, he went to Padua where, like his father before him, he studied at the famous yeshivah of Judah Minz.15 Nine years later, he would incorporate some of his experiences in Padua into his first historical work, Sipure Venezia (“Stories of Venice”), also known as Divre ha-yamim le-malkhut Venezia (“Chronicle of the Venetian Empire”),16 a title that echoes Venetian municipal chronicles.17 In adapting an Italian genre of historiography to Jewish tradition, Capsali made a remarkable cultural transfer, which he was to repeat again in his Ottoman chronicle. Though Capsali was primarily concerned with chronicling the history of the yeshivot in Northern Italy,18 he opened his Sipure Venezia with a survey of Venetian history from its legendary origins to the year 1516. In so doing, he echoed the widespread “myth of Venice,” aspects of which were articulated by such sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jewish intellectuals as Isaac Abravanel, David de Pomis, and, most notably, Simone Luzzatto.19

When in 1509 the League of Cambrai overran the Venetian mainland, Capsali fled Padua to Venice, which for the first time was allowing Jews to stay in the city.20 Not long afterwards, however, he returned to Candia where from 1518 he served as rabbi and was appointed several times as the civil representative—condestabulo—of the Jews to the Venetian authorities, once again following in the

13. In this position, Elkanah Capsali oversaw the relief work for Jewish refugees after the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula; see Capsali’s description in chapter 73 of SEZ, 1:218.
14. See Benayahu, Qapsali, 17. On the most famous scion of the family, Elijah Delmedigo, see n. 25.
18. For more details, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 80–82.
footsteps of his father. During the plague of 1523 he was one of the officials in charge of the quarantine regulations. When the epidemic got completely out of control and the authorities imposed a curfew on the Zudecca, Capsali was confined to his house for more than three months. It was during this time that Capsali wrote his Ottoman chronicle “in order to expel the fear of the bitterness of death and to focus the mind on other things, ‘that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste’ (Genesis 47:19).”

Capsali’s dramatic account of the circumstances in which he composed his chronicle, however, accords with contemporary literary conventions, and may have been intended primarily as an apologia auctoris for writing such a detailed account of non-Jewish history. In any case, Capsali seems to have felt the need to justify his choice of subject matter, since even as he writes about non-Jewish history, he explicitly rejects “non-Jewish wisdom” (hokhmot nokhriyot). Although Capsali made use of certain themes and stylistic devices of contemporary Italian literature, he was no Jewish “Renaissance man.” Unlike his elder relative, Elijah Delmedigo (c. 1460–97), Capsali rejected Aristotelian metaphysics and in so doing reflects the gradual shift among some Jewish thinkers from scholastic philosophy towards the study of the Kabbalah, the beginnings of which can be traced back in Candia to the second half of the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, in tackling a popular topic of Italian historiography, Capsali could not help but absorb a certain amount of “foreign wisdom.”

We come now to the central question posed by this study: Why and for what audience would a conservative-minded rabbi living in a Venetian colony compose a detailed chronicle of Muslim history? Given that he wrote his Seder 'Eliyahu Zuta in highly stylized Hebrew, interspersed with innumerable allusions to the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature, the work must have been intended for a traditionally trained Jewish audience. But what benefit could a pious Jew be expected to derive

21. SEZ, ch. 165, 2:107; see Benayahu, Qapsali, 121.
23. The closest parallel is Boccaccio, who linked the composition of his Decameron to the Florentine plague of 1348 (although he was out of town at this time); see Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron, Filocolo, Ameto, Fiammetta, ed. E. Bianchi, C. Salinari, and N. Spegno (Milano, Naples, n.d.), Novella 1, 7–9; for more details, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 79–80.
24. Capsali complains that “almost all of our contemporaries are inclined towards non-Jewish wisdom (hokhmot nokhriyot),” (see SEZ, chap. 138, 1:376) thereby alluding to the rabbinic advice not to teach ones son “Greek wisdom” (hokhmah yevanit, B. Sota, 49a).
from an Ottoman chronicle—albeit clad in a Jewish garb? In a kind of a *prologus de ratione operis* (to use the contemporary Latin terminology) in which he outlines his authorial “intentions” (Hebrew: *sibbot kavvanati*), Capsali responds to just such anticipated objections and argues for the usefulness of his work. In prefacing his work with a detailed exposition of how and why he came to write it, which is, as Bonfil has noted, a common feature of medieval Christian chronicles, Capsali betrays the extent to which he has incorporated “foreign wisdom” into his thinking.

Capsali informs us that the first *ratio* (i.e., *Sibbah*) of his work is:

That man may learn wisdom and understanding in hearing the stories . . . that we will tell of the kings of gentiles and the Turks (*Togarmim*), and especially of the wisdom of the great king, Sultan Selīm, whose like has never been among the kings of the gentiles. Certainly, “The wise man, hearing them, will gain more wisdom; the discerning man will learn to be adroit” (Proverbs 1:5).

The desire to teach his readers “wisdom and understanding” recalls the classical definition of history as *magistra vitae* (Cicero). In depicting Sultan Selīm I (1512–20), under whom the Ottoman Empire had vastly extended in size, as an unparalleled example of wise leadership, Capsali follows the common use in contemporary non-Jewish historiography of the lives of certain “illustrious men” as moral *exempla*. In so doing, however, the rabbi of Candia was not expressing his agreement with the ideals of humanist historiography; Capsali had little in common with the secular tendencies of contemporary Italian historians such as Paolo Giovio (1486–1552), to mention one of the most prominent names. That Capsali’s understanding of history followed instead the “medieval” tradition is documented by the way he articulates the second *ratio* of his work:

The second reason is that “all the peoples of the earth shall know” (Joshua 4:24) “that the Lord alone is God” (Deuteronomy 4:35.39) and “that there is divine justice on earth” (Psalm 58:12). For whoever will read my stories, my...
words and my deliberations, will fear (God) and will accept the yoke of heaven on himself. Then all this (Jewish) people will know that “the eyes of the Lord are scanning the whole earth” (Zachariah 4:10), “observing the bad and the good” (Proverbs 15:3), “so as to repay every man according to his ways, and with the proper fruit of his deeds” (Jeremiah 32:19), and that He watches (mashgiah) over the nations to overthrow one people and to raise another one.32

In the spirit of medieval historiography, both Christian and Jewish, Capsali regarded it the task of the historian to teach his readers to fear God and strengthen their belief in divine providence (hashgaḥah). According to Capsali, the history of non-Jewish peoples, their rulers and their wars, provided evidence for the claim “that there is divine justice on earth” (Psalm 58:12), and he interpreted this history according to Biblical patterns according to which the fall and rise of empires follows a divine master plan:

Peruse the chapters of this book . . . , have a look at its stories, pay attention and see that in His wisdom and understanding the Lord . . . has made these Turks a strong and mighty people, “He blessed their efforts and spread their possessions in the land” (cf. Job 1:10). The Lord brought them from a distant land and blessed them exceptionally. The Turk is the “rod of” His “anger” and the “staff of” His “fury” is in their (i.e., the Turks’) “hand” (cf. Isaiah 10:5), so that he may strike with his hand the nations, people, and noble states, whose measure has been filled. “For the Lord is an all-knowing God; by Him actions are measured” (1 Samuel 2:3).33

For Capsali, the migration of the Turks and their rise to empire followed the biblical model of Isaiah 10:5–11: just as the rise of Assyria was a rebuke to the Biblical kingdom of Israel, so were the Turks empowered to punish Christianity. The fact that Capsali replaced “Israel” with Christendom hints at the Christian origin of this typology: after the conquest of Constantinople by Mehemet II (1453), Christian exegetes often associated Isaiah 10:5 with the Turks, although the sin they regarded as having provoked this severe punishment differed depending on their particular religious affiliation. Roman Catholics, for example, saw the fall of Byzantium as a divine verdict on the Greek Orthodox “schismatics” and warned Protestant “heretics” of an even more severe punishment.34 Capsali translated this Christian interpretation into a Jewish context. In his view, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople was Christianity’s punishment for the injustice the Jews had suffered under its rule, just as the fall of the Byzantine Empire could be attributed to the persecution of Judaism by the malkhut Yavan, “the kingdom of Greece.” More-

32. Prologue to SEZ, 1:10.
33. Ibid.
over, in calling Byzantium “the kingdom of Greece” he evokes the memory of the forced program of Hellenization by the ancient Seleucids that led to the Maccabean revolts of the second century BCE, an event that had a lasting impact on the Jewish perception of “the Greeks”:

On the 19th day of April of the year 1453 of the Christian calendar . . . “came the days of punishment, came the days of requital (shilum)” (Hosea 9:7), and peace (shalom) departed from him (i.e., the Byzantine Emperor); since the Lord inspired Sultan Mehemet to succeed him (i.e., the Byzantine Emperor as the ruler of Constantinople). For, the measure of the wicked kingdom of Greece (malkhut Yavan) was full, because of all the evil they had inflicted on Judah and Israel since they (that is, the “Greeks”) had become a people. Then the Lord spoke to Himself: . . . “I will blow upon” Constantinople, “with the fire of my wrath” (Ezekiel 21:36) and consume it. “I will march against it and set it on fire” (Isaiah 27:4). Because of the evil that the Greeks inflicted on my people, on my nation, I will give it (i.e., Constantinople) into the hand of the executor of my ban and will pour out my wrath over them.35

To further legitimate the historical mission he associated with the Turks, Capsali opens his account of Ottoman history with a dream ascribed to the eponymous founder of the Ottoman dynasty, ʿOthmān I (c. 1300–24):36

In those days, ʿOthmān had an important and powerful dream: The Lord let ʿOthmān see that from his head a small tree began to grow, and it became taller until finally it became a very tall and majestic tree that “produced branches and sent out boughs” (Ezekiel 17:6) . . . In the morning, ʿOthmān was agitated and sent for his friends, advisors, and relatives and told them his dream. They told him: This certainly means that an empire will arise from your loins and will ascend to heaven and to the stars.37

The dream vision recounted here echoes one of the famous founding legends of the Ottoman Empire, well known from official Ottoman chronicles, where it occurs in several versions.38 This legend projects the imperial ambitions of the sultans back into the time of their origins and depicts their rise as part of a divine plan that was already revealed to the dynasty’s founder. According to the Ottoman ver-

35. SEZ, ch. 11, 1:65; for more details, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 153–54.
36. Capsali, however, gives no dates for his reign. Indeed, the first date that is mentioned in his chronicle is 1453—the conquest of Constantinople.
37. SEZ, ch. 5, 1:42.
sion, however, it was not from 'Othman’s head but from his navel or loins that this great tree grew. This discrepancy would suggest that the Jewish chronicler did not depend on an Ottoman source: apart from the fact that he probably could not read Turkish, his many historical errors\(^{39}\) indicate that Capsali did not make use of Ottoman historiography.\(^{40}\)

It is likely that Capsali was drawn to this well-known Ottoman founding legend because it employed literary motifs that could be also found in the Hebrew Bible: for example, Ezekiel 31:3–9, uses the tree metaphor for the Assyrian Empire, and in Daniel 4 Nebuchadnezzar’s dream vision contains imagery that is very similar to that of the Ottoman foundation myth.\(^{41}\) In other words, this famous Ottoman legend fit extremely well into Capsali’s view of history, according to which all future historical events are already predicted, if indirectly, in the Hebrew Bible.

The belief in the divine origin of monarchical power is certainly not unique, and can be found in many cultures and religions. Capsali, however, goes so far as to claim the divine investiture of the Ottomans for a specific historical mission. To strengthen his point, he even allows himself an excursus into the mythical domain with the description of a heavenly assembly on the New Year,\(^{42}\) at which God reveals His plans for the Ottomans to the host of angels:

> And the angels and the entire heavenly host responded: Praised be the name of the Lord of the world, “who changes times and seasons, removes kings and installs kings” (Daniel 2:21).

> At the same time, “a voice came down from heaven: It has been decreed” (Daniel 4:28), 'Othma¯n, that a strong, mighty and noble empire will be given to you, that will collect taxes on the land and divide the sea . . . ; it “will be as

\(^{39}\) For example, Capsali reverses the order of Murād I (1360–89) and Bāyāzīd I (1389–1403), see Jacobs, *Islamische Geschichte*, 146–49.

\(^{40}\) It is also doubtful that Capsali was familiar with any Ottoman chronicle written in Hebrew, as his spelling of Turkish names usually follows the Italian rendering. In contrast, compare the text of the Oxford manuscript (*Hebrew E 63*) that gives quite an exact Hebrew transcription of the Ottoman-Turkish text (*tevârı̇kh-i a̱l-i osmān*) of the so-called *Anonymous Chronicles* (Friedrich Giese [ed.], *Die Altosmanischen Anonymen Chroniken* [Breslau, 1922]). This ms. was first noted by Adolf Neubauer in his *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (vol. 2 [Oxford, 1906], col. 357, no. 2866), and later identified by Franz Babinger, “Eine Altosmanische Anonyme Chronik in Hebräischer Umschrift,” *Archiv Orientální* 4 (1932): 108–11 (including a facsimile). Babinger dates the Sephardic script of the ms. to the sixteenth century.

\(^{41}\) Daniel 4:7–9: “In the visions of my mind in bed I saw a tree of great height in the midst of the earth; the tree grew and became mighty; its top reached heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant; there was food for all in it. Beneath it the beasts of the field found shade, and the birds of the sky dwelt on its branches; all creatures fed on it.” It is probable that the Ottoman legend indirectly echoes the biblical motif. On dreams in the Islamic context, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Die Träume des Kalifen: Träume und ihre Deutung in der islamischen Kultur* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1998); on dreams as literary means of legitimation, see Leah Kinberg, “Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadīths in Classical Islam: A Comparison of Two Ways of Legitimation,” *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 279–300.

\(^{42}\) In the context of Capsali’s chronicle, this element of fiction is differentiated from the historical narrative by its use of Aramaic, including allusions to the book of Daniel, the Targum, and the Zohar.
strong as iron; just as iron crushes and shatters everything—and like iron that
smashes—so will it crush and smash all these” (Daniel 2:40).43

The biblical quotes that Capsali uses in this passage show that he identified
‘Othmân’s dynasty with the “iron” or “fourth kingdom” of the vision of Daniel,
the last world kingdom before the redemption. Medieval Jewish and Christian ex-
gegetes alike often associated this “iron” kingdom with Rome or the rule of Chris-
tendom. In identifying it with the Ottomans, Capsali was, however, following the
precedent set by the twelfth-century Jewish exegete Abraham ʿIbn ʿEzra who, hav-
ing lived under both Christian and Muslim rule, held that Christendom (malkhut
ʿEdom) was only the “third,” that is, penultimate, empire44 and that the last king-
dom of world history was the Islamic empire (malkhut Yishmāʿel).45

In 1523, the year Capsali completed his chronicle (almost four hundred years
after ʿIbn ʿEzra), the Ottoman Empire would certainly seem to fit Daniel’s de-
scription of the “iron kingdom” extremely well: it had already conquered much of
the Islamic world and expanded far into southeastern and central Europe. In fact,
Capsali provides a detailed description in Seder ʿEliyahu Zuta of one of the most
important Ottoman wars of expansion, the campaign of Selīm I against the Mamlu-
ks (1516–17) that subjected Syria, Palestine, and Egypt to the Sublime Porte.46
According to Capsali, it was God Himself who inspired Selīm I to wage war against
the Mamluk sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (1501–16):

In the year (5)276 (after the creation, i.e., 1516 CE), the Lord called Selīm,
the king of kings . . . and inspired him to destroy . . . the kingdom of the sul-
tan who rules the kingdom of Egypt (i.e., the Mamluk sultan). . . .47

And later, the text continues the same biblical style:

And the Lord spoke to Himself: ‘Behold, I summon my servant Selīm to set
up his throne in Egypt; “and he will gain control over treasures of gold and sil-
ver and over all the precious things of Egypt” (Daniel 11:43).48

43. SEZ, ch. 6, 1:43.
44. In order to achieve this goal, ʿIbn ʿEzra had to unite “Greece” and “Rome” into one empire; see ʿIbn ʿEzra’s commentary to Daniel 2:39, The Short Commentary on Daniel: A Critical Edition (He-
brew), ed. A. Mondshine (M.A. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1977), 12,7–9: “The third em-
pire is a western empire, i.e., the empire of Greece (Yavan) and of the Kittim. For Kittim was among
the sons of Yavan, as it is written: ‘The descendants of Yavan are Elisha und Tarshish und Kittim’ (Gen-
esis 10:4), and Rome is Kittim,” cf. Gerson D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,”
in Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard Universi-
ty, 1967), 46–48, and ibid., note 96; Yosef Yahalom, “The Transition of Kingdoms in Eretz Israel (Pale-
tine) as Conceived by Poets and Homilists” (Hebrew), Shalem 6 (1992): 1–22, esp. 12.
45. See ʿIbn ʿEzra, Short Commentary on Daniel, ed. Mondshine, 13,5: “The fourth empire is
the malkhut Yishmaʿel.”
46. See Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 171–76.
47. SEZ, ch. 109, 1:312–13.
48. SEZ, ch. 109, 1:314.
Using yet another quote from Daniel, Capsali then equates Selim I with the prophesied “king of the north,” who “at the time of the end” (Daniel 11:40) would conquer Palestine and Egypt.

Capsali went much further than Ibn Ezra, who had simply identified the malkhut Yishmael with the “fourth kingdom” without engaging in any specific historical detail. And unlike his predecessor, the sixteenth-century chronicler combined this exegesis with a promise of messianic redemption, as evidenced by his interpretation of Isaiah 19:1: “Mounted on a swift cloud, the Lord will come to Egypt; Egypt’s idols shall tremble before Him.” Reading this verse allegorically, Capsali equates the “swift cloud” with Selim I and then goes on to explain the second half of the biblical quote as follows:

The meaning (kavanah) herein is that after Sultan Selim has ruled in Egypt “the idols shall vanish completely” (Isaiah 2:18). The idols that are there (i.e., in Egypt) will be destroyed, and this will happen in the time of redemption; (. . .) for soon, speedily, our true messiah will come . . . .

Since the time of the expulsion from Spain (gerush Sefarad), the Lord has undoubtedly begun to ingather the exiles of Israel and he will ingather the dispersed people of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

For Capsali, Selim’s I campaign against the Mamluks was a prelude to the ingathering of the exiles and the coming of the messiah. By making a connection between the Ottoman conquest of Syria-Palestine and the gerush Sefarad, he was able to interpret the expansion of Ottoman rule over the Middle East as the paving of the way for the repatriation of the Jews to the Land of Israel. Thus, he includes in his chapters on the reign of Bayazid II (1481–1512), the contemporary of the Spanish expulsion, a lengthy section on the history of the Jews of Spain (sippur Sefarad), and even claims to quote a “copy” (patshegen) of the original expulsion edict “signed with the name of the king and the queen,” that is, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Capsali’s quotation is so different from its known Spanish versions, however, that it is doubtful that he had access to any such official document. Rather, his information was based in part on the works of Abravanel, and in part on the oral histories of Sephardic refugees coming through

49. SEZ, ch. 134, 1:366. To this aim, he makes use of gimatria, arguing that the Hebrew word for “swift” (QL = 130) has the same numerical value as the name Selim. This, however, makes it necessary for him to claim that Selim is spelled Samekh, Lamed, Mem (= 130) “in Turkish,” while Capsali usually transcribes the name with the letters Sin, Lamed, Yud, Mem (= 380).

50. SEZ, ch. 134, 1:367.

51. SEZ, ch. 68, 1:206–07.


Crete, to some of whom Capsali himself gave shelter. Despite this demonstrable lack of accuracy, however, Capsali’s chronicle has often been taken to be a reliable account of the Iberian expulsions. In any case, its highly stylized and tendentious character should caution against using Seder ’Eliyahu Zuta as a primary source of history, whether Jewish or Ottoman.

By inserting the story of the expulsion of the Iberian Jews into his description of Bâyazîd II’s reign, Capsali creates the impression that the two were directly related to each other. Actually, as Henry Kamen shows in his critical reassessment of the Sephardic migration, most Iberian exiles first went to geographically closer places of refuge such as Provence or Italy, and only when expelled from these places did they migrate to the East. Therefore there was often a gap of one or more generations between the Iberian expulsions and the arrival of the sefaradim in the realm of the sultans.

Moreover, the account of Capsali according to which Bâyazîd II explicitly invited the Jews to settle in his reign cannot be substantiated by any extant document. Capsali’s wording of this “invitation” is a literary creation made up of biblical allusions and modeled on the edict of Cyrus according to Ezra 1:1:

“Had not the Lord of Hosts left us some survivors” (Isaiah 1:9), and let us find mercy with Sultan Bâyazîd, the king of Turkey,—so that he received the Jews with friendship and issued “a proclamation throughout his realm by word of mouth and in writing as follows” (Ezra 1:1): ‘Whosoever wishes to dwell in My kingdom and My realm may gladly come and shall not delay’—(if that had not happened) “We should be like Sodom, another Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:9).59

By linking the Iberian expulsion(s) with the reign of Bâyazîd II, Capsali gives the impression that there was a linear development from one to the other, a

54. See the prologue to SEZ, 1:11.
57. For more details and bibliography, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 11–18.
58. See ibid., 165–66.
59. SEZ, ch. 83, 1:239.
line that he then extends to include Selim I’s conquest of Syria-Palestine, which (in Capsali’s view) established the political conditions for a return of the Jews to the Land of Israel.

In his glorification of Selim I, by whose conquests the empire had been vastly increased in size, Capsali goes so far as to compare him with Alexander the Great and other world rulers of antiquity:

If heaven had enabled him to live a little longer . . . , he would have ruled the world as did Cyrus, Darius, Alexander the Macedon, and other kings, who ruled from one end of the world to the other. But heaven did not help him, and in the prime of his life he left his army to others (to lead).60

In comparing Selim I to Alexander, Capsali is echoing contemporary Christian authors such as Teodoro Spandugino, who often make the same analogy. In his collection of short biographies of the Ottoman sultans (Paris, 1519),61 which in many ways bears some similarity to Capsali’s chronicle, Spandugino claims that the sultan “constantly read the works and deeds of Alexander the Macedon and aspired to surpass him in fame and celebrity.”62 As was typical in sixteenth-century historiography, Spandugino depicted the sultan as an educated monarch who studied the ancient classics in order to derive from them exempla useful for his own political strategy.

As Capsali stresses, it was only his premature death that prevented Selim I from ruling “from one end of the world to the other.” But why then did “heaven not help” Selim I, given that his campaign against the Mamluks was for the divine purpose of enabling the ingathering of the exiled Jews? Capsali draws on theological arguments to explain this problem, arguing that because Selim had grown haughty and bloodthirsty as a result of his military successes, he was unfit to rule during the time of redemption. For this reason, the coming of the messiah had been postponed until the reign of Selim I’s son Suleyman I.63 This kind of argumentation clearly echoes the narrative of the biblical Chronicles, according to which Solomon (the eponym of Suleyman) was allowed to build the Temple, an honor denied his father, David, who had become “a man of battles and bloodshed” (1 Chronicles 28:3).64

As Capsali completed Seder Eliyahu Zuta in 1523, the last chapters of his chronicle only cover the first years of Suleyman I’s (1520–66) reign: it concludes

60. SEZ, ch. 93, 1:266.
63. See SEZ, ch. 145, 1:997–98.
64. For more details, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 177–78.
with a detailed description of the fall of Rhodes in 1522, which he saw as an important step towards the final Ottoman victory over Christendom (“Rome”). A closer look at this description can help us understand more fully his theological interpretation of history and his sources of information.

Capsali describes the landing of the Ottoman troops on the island of Rhodes from the perspective of the Knights of St. John—whom he calls *Rhodiani*—thereby hinting at the source of his information:

> It happened on the 25th of Giugno 1522, on the holy day of the *Rhodiani*, the feast of *San Giovanni*—who among all the saints is the one whom the *Rhodiani* have elevated over themselves: they depicted him on their banner (which flew) above their troops. On the evening of the aforementioned feast, in the twentieth hour, the *Rhodiani* lifted up their eyes and, behold, they saw a convoy of ships that filled the sea.

Our chronicler calls attention to the fact that the Ottoman entry into the city of Rhodes, which had been evacuated by the Knights after a long siege, took place on the “feast of the Christians (*goyim*) called *natale* (*N*ZL), which is the birthday of their god.” That Capsali viewed Christianity as a form of idolatry is evidenced by his expressions of joy over the pillage of the Church of St. John:

> Then the Turks entered the prayer house of *San Giovanni* and smashed all the idols of the Christians (*zalme ha-goyim*) and crushed them. They also exhumed all the corpses of the Grand Masters (of St. John) that were therein and dismembered them. They emptied the building of all that was in it, and took everything out, sparing neither gold nor silver.

Then came the king (Süleymān), who stood in the city square, the aforementioned prayer house behind him, and prostrated before the God of Heaven, who had given his enemies into his hands.

The difference in Capsali’s attitudes towards Christianity and Islam expressed here is quite striking: while he regards the religious practices of the Order of St. John as idolatrous, he portrays the sultan as a pious man thanking the God of Heaven (that is, the God of the Jews) for granting him victory. The rabbi’s partiality stands out even more when compared to another contemporary account, *The War of Rhodes (La Guerra di Rhodi)* by Jacques Fontaine (Iacopo Fontano), which relates how after his victory, Süleymān converted the church of *San Giovanni*

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68. *SEZ*, ch. 161, 2:44.
Battista into a mosque, which he calls tempio di Maometh. Like Capsali, Fontaine also reports that the sultan took away “the relics of the Saints” and ordered the Grand Masters’ tombs to be opened. In contrast to the Jewish chronicler, who portrays the Muslim ruler as a believer in the “God of Heaven,” Fontaine betrays his ignorance of Islam when he claims that the sultan “prayed to Maometh, whom the barbarians believe to have been sent by God in Heaven as the most perfect prophet of all times.”

Capsali no doubt felt confirmed in his pro-Ottoman attitude by the fact that after their victory, the conquerors liberated Jews (and Turks) who had been enslaved by the Knights on their Mediterranean raids:

On this day, all the Turkish slaves on Rhodes were rescued, for the king (i.e., the sultan) had come to an agreement with the Rhodiani not to kill them (on their withdrawal). There were also many enslaved Jews on Rhodes who were saved by the Lord’s compassion. Also all the Jews who had apostatized, whether voluntarily or forcibly, on occasion of (their) expulsion from Rhodes returned to their former religion. They reopened the synagogue that the Christians (goyim) had closed, and entering it, gave thanks, praised the Lord and “sang hymns to the Lord the God of Israel” (Judges 5:3).

In Fontaine’s chronicle, there is also mention of the fact that the Ottomans allowed Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity to “return to the Law of Moses.” For Capsali, this provided still more proof that the Ottoman conquest was in the interest of the Jews. He was aware, however, of the possible repercussions the fall of Rhodes might have on Venetian Crete. Thus he notes that the Knights of St. John had sent a ship (for which he uses the loanword fusta) to ask the help of Gabriele da Martinengo, who was in Candia executing a Venetian commission to strengthen the city’s fortifications. He also knew that a Venetian fleet had sailed to Candia under the command of the capitagno general Domenico Trevezan to protect Crete against a possible Ottoman attack on the Venetian outpost. It may seem surprising that Capsali—who served as the Jewish representative to the Venetian authorities—would not only criticize Martinengo for agreeing to come to the aid of the Knights of St. John, but even more disturbingly, voice such enthusiasm over the fall of Rhodes. His jubilant tone is even more problematic given the fact that some of the Knights had brought the plague with them when they pulled out of Rhodes and took refuge in Candia. It is against this gloomy backdrop that Capsali dares to celebrate the fall of Rhodes in rhymed prose, com-

69. Guerra di Rhodi, in Sansovino, Historia, 262b.
70. SEZ, ch. 161, 2:45.
71. Fontaine, Guerra di Rhodi, in Sansovino, Historia, 262b–263a (defective pagination). In the following, however, Fontaine claims that “the slaves were forced to sacrifice to Maometh” (sic!).
72. SEZ, ch. 159, 2:38; the name is spelled Martilengo. According to Marino Sanuto, Martinengo served in Candia as “governor of the infantry” (governador di le fantarie) in 1521; see, I Diarii, vol. 30, ed. F. Stefani (repr. Bologna, 1969/70), 372.
73. SEZ, chap. 159, 2:39; Capsali’s spelling reflects the Venetian pronunciation “Domenego.”
paring the conquest to a lawful “wedding” of a “bride” (Rhodes) and “groom” (Süleymān I).75

The only explanation for Capsali’s panegyrics on the Ottomans is that he believed the coming of the messiah to be imminent. Thus, at the beginning of his chapters on Süleymān, he writes:

He is the tenth king (sultan) of the Turks, and “the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 27:32). “In his days Judah shall be delivered and Israel (shall dwell secure” [Jeremiah 23:6]) “and a redeemer shall come to Zion” (Isaiah 59:20).76

Capsali’s conviction that the coming of the messiah was imminent was based on the speculations of the Sephardic Kabbalist Abraham ben ‘Eli’ezr ha-Levi, who had predicted that the messiah would appear in the Jewish year 5290 (1529/30).77 At the conclusion of his chronicle, Capsali even expresses the wish not only that he will be able to witness personally the redemption, but that he will also be in the position to make a written account of it (sic!):

“One thing I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek” (Psalm 27:4): As we were allowed to write an account of these events, so we may be allowed to write about all the good (things to come), that the Lord has foretold through his servants, the prophets, for the Lord has spoken good (tidings) for Israel. “Let our eyes gaze on Zion” (Micah 4:11) and on the rebuilding of Ariel. May all Israel take part in the ingathering of the exiles and in the coming of the messiah . . . .78

We do not know Capsali’s reaction to the disappointment of his expectations whether he simply postponed his hopes or was totally disillusioned. As he neither updated his chronicle nor revised the computation of the year of redemption, one may assume the latter.

CAPSALI AS A CHRONICLER OF MUSLIM HISTORY

Seder ‘Eliyahu Zuta does more than simply try to convince its readers that the Ottoman dynasty was raised by God to repatriate the Jews in the mid-sixteenth century. A closer look at the material assembled by Capsali leads to the conclusion that, notwithstanding its theologically motivated view on history (a standpoint

75. These allegorical pieces have been added to SEZ as ch. 162–64, 2:46–106. SEZ, ch. 163, 2:67–86, deals with the handing over of the Dodecanese islands that Capsali calls the “numerous daughters” of Rhodes.
76. SEZ, ch. 148, 2:7.
78. SEZ, ch. 148, 2:7.
shared by many contemporary Christian historiographers), his work has to be regarded as a serious attempt at writing historiography. His use of the stylistic devices of contemporary Italian writing on the Ottomans shows that his messianic expectations were not the sole reason behind his turn to historiography.

Capsali, like Spandugino and other sixteenth-century Italian writers on the Ottomans, authored short biographical portraits of the sultans, from the eponymous founder of the dynasty up to the sultan ruling at the time of his writing. Like other Italian writers of that genre, he enriched these biographical sketches with battle accounts, descriptions of weapons, stories about dynastic intrigues and life in the harem, as well as many other details which he thought to be either informative or entertaining. Another indication of Capsali’s historiographical ambitions is his decision to open his Ottoman chronicle with an historical overview of the origins of Islam. A close reading of these introductory chapters reveals that in his attempt to write a “serious” chronicle according to contemporary models, Capsali sometimes ended up contradicting his own agenda, as exemplified by his chapters on early Islam.

Capsali’s knowledge of the origins of Islam was based on earlier Jewish and Christian polemical traditions. The Christian background of much of his material is best illustrated by the version of the life of Muḥammad that he offers his readers:

Many say that Muḥammad was a Christian (goy), one of the important men or princes of Rome, one of the distinguished cardinals (GRDYNYL) of the Pope (papa). When the Romans saw that he was a courageous and successful warrior, they sent him out to roam about and wander in the Land of the East in order to subject it to their rule (literally: “hands”). And they took an oath and swore that if he succeeded in this, they would make him Pope on his return.


81. Spelled here MMYT like the Latin Mahumet, yet another indication of the Christian origin of Capsali’s material. The editor’s claim (SEZ, ch. 4, 1:36 n. 37) that Capsali follows the Turkish usage is misleading, as—contrary to modern Turkish—Ottoman Turkish would read Meḥemed.

82. SEZ, ch. 4, 1:38.
Muhammad, having subjected “the entire East to the Romans,” returned victorious to Rome only to find that the Romans had no intention of keeping their promise to make him Pope. It was for this reason that Muhammad went back to the cities he had conquered in the East and became their ruler.

This explanation of the origins of Islam can be traced back to widely circulated legends, according to which Muhammad was influenced by Christian teachers—legends that went so far as to suggest the fantastical idea that he had started out as an ambitious Catholic cardinal.\textsuperscript{83} The story first emerges at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth century in the Italian versions of Brunetto Latini’s \textit{Teso\-ro}\textsuperscript{84} and in a collection of legends about Mu\-hammad known under the title \textit{Liber Nicolay}.\textsuperscript{85}

In depicting Islam as nothing more than a Christian apostasy, Capsali is echoing a viewpoint characteristic of medieval Western polemics against Islam. His interest in this version, however, was primarily that it questioned the revealed character of Islam. We see this as well in some of the other stories he tells about Muhammad being a charlatan and impostor:

Muhammad decided to establish a new religion in the world in order to be seen as important by the uneducated masses (\textit{Am ha-arez}) and to abrogate the religions that had been in existence prior to him. He was a very shrewd man who knew to deviously obtain the confidence of people: he was very cunning “and wherever he turned he worsted” (things) [1 Samuel 14:47]).

In any event, he took a dove and “guided” it “in knowledge and showed” it “the path of wisdom” (Isaiah 40:14). When Muhammad was sitting in front of the people and the princes, the dove flew (to him) and came to whisper in his ears in the presence of all the people . . . . And all who saw it were stunned and asked him: “What is that?” And he replied to them: “(Word of him who hears God’s speech), who beholds visions from the Almighty” (Numbers 24:4).\textsuperscript{86}

According to this story, Muhammad had trained a dove to make it appear that it was whispering divine words into his ears. The legend questions the revealed character of Islam and is obviously using Christian imagery, where the dove serves as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{83} This motif would appear to go back to the Christian legend, according to which one of Muhammad’s advisors was a monk, who is often called Bahir’a (on the Bahir’a legend, see notes 109, 112, and 113). In one version of this legend, it is said that Muhammad’s advisor was a heretical hermit who wanted to become Patriarch of Alexandria but was rejected for his unorthodox views. This motif of the ambitious heretic is later transposed onto Muhammad himself who, in a Latin context, is represented as a cardinal rather than a hermit.

\textsuperscript{84} According to both versions of the \textit{Teso\-ro}, the original name of the cardinal was Pela(s)gio; see the quotes in Alessandro d’Ancona, “La leggenda di Maometto in occidente,” in \textit{Studi di critica e storia letteraria di Alessandro d’Ancona}, vol. 2 (Bologna, 1912), 165–306, esp. 168–69.


\textsuperscript{86} \textit{SEZ}, ch. 4, 1:36
The same motif occurs in the *Liber Nicolay* as well as in the *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais (died 1264), which contains an extensive collection of polemic texts against Islam (book 23, chapters 39–67). Vincent himself refers to an anonymous *libellus de Machometi fallacis* (“Booklet on Muḥammad’s Deceptions”) said to have circulated *in partibus transmarinis* (“in the oversea territories”), as the Levant was called by the Crusaders. It is in this booklet that Vincent claims to have found the following version of the legend of the trained dove:

As he (Muḥammad) was speaking to the people, a dove that was nearby and that he had surreptitiously trained to this purpose, came and landed on his shoulder and, pecking at the grain that was hidden in (Muḥammad’s) ears, appeared to be prompting with him words of the Law.

While Capsali’s way of weaving his text out of biblical quotes and allusions tends to obscure the meaning, here, the alleged trick finds a kind of rationalistic explanation: the dove is pecking grains of wheat tucked away in Muḥammad’s ears.

Whereas the above-quoted legends are of Christian origin, Capsali also drew from Jewish polemics against Islam. The following paragraph from *Seder ḪEliyahu Zuta* is based on Jacob of Venice’s letter against the apostate Pablo Christiani (dating from the thirteenth century):

“Muḥammad did many things like this; but the miracles he performed were created (by) optical illusions, and he would perform these great wonders by means of deceit and trickery.” In this way was most of the East deceived by his trickery . . . ; and they believed that he was a prophet of God and His messenger and that he had been sent by the spirit of God and His power.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint any one particular source for Capsali’s polemical traditions of Christian origin, one can assume that these traditions would

87. See the Latin text in Mancini, “Studio della leggenda,” 343.
91. Up to this point, Capsali is quoting Jacob of Venice; cf. *Iggeret vikkuah,* ed. Kobak, 13.
have been known to him as part of his Venetian cultural background. As the rise of Venice had been closely linked to the Crusades,93 and the Fourth Crusade served Venice as a welcome pretext to expand its commercial activities and colonies in the eastern Mediterranean, much of the Crusader tradition was preserved in the Venetian Empire. Even after the fall of the Crusader states in the Levant, Venice continued to provide for the transportation of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land.94 Thus, much of the Christian polemics against Islam that had originated in *partibus transmarinis*, polemics such as the *libellus de Machometti fallacis* quoted by Vincent of Beauvais, lived on in the parts of the eastern Mediterranean ruled by Venice.

In this milieu, Capsali will have also learned of Christian traditions regarding the composition of the Qurʾān, as we can see from the following story from the life of Muḥammad that Capsali includes in the *Seder 'Eliyahu Zuta*:

A) And he (Muḥammad) ordered his friend ʿAlī to write down his laws and instructions (*torotav*); he would dictate them and ʿAlī would write them in a book with ink, while *Turzemān* would be “standing at his right to admonish him (*lesišno*)” (Zechariah 3:1); “thereby daubing with plaster the flimsy wall that he was building” (Ezekiel 13:10). In this way was brought to completion the work produced by Muḥammad that they call *ilfur ʿān* (i.e., al-Qurʾān).95

B) In this book, he (i.e., Muḥammad) proclaimed the unity of God in complete unity (*yiḥed ha’el be-takhlit ha-yiḥud*). He collected from here and there all the verses that speak about the unity of God in the twenty-four books (of the Hebrew Bible) and transferred them into it (the Qurʾān) in their (own) writing and their (own) language.

C) However, this man Muḥammad did not know how to write. And so, when he wanted to write something, he would not sign in his own handwriting but would dip his whole hand with its five fingers into ink and would make a print instead of his signature as a sign for the people of Ishmael.96

The tradition according to which Muḥammad was illiterate is well known from Islamic sources, especially from the biographical (ṣīra) and exegetical liter-


95. The spelling *ilfur ʿān* is probably a corruption of Latin *alchoranus*.

96. *SEZ*, ch. 4, 1:37.
In Islam, Muḥammad’s illiteracy served as an affirmation of the belief that the Qurān was not authored by a man but rather revealed by God. In contrast, Christian polemics used this tradition to question the originality of the Qurān by depicting Muḥammad as an ignoramus who plagiarized the Bible under the influence of Jewish or Christian advisers. Similarly, Capsali attributes leading roles in the composition of the Qurān to two companions of Muḥammad called ʿAlī and Turzemān(i), whom he characterizes in the following way:

D) He (Muḥammad) was joined by two men, who were “clever at doing wrong, but unable to do right” (Jeremiah 4:22); one was called ʿAlī and the other one Turzemān. ʿAlī was very clever, and some say that he was (originally) a Jew who had been baptized.

Already in the early Judeo-Arabic Qisṣat ašḥāb Muḥammad (“Story of Muḥammad’s Friends”) preserved in the Cairo Genizah there is mention of ten wise Jewish men who accepted Islam “to prevent evil from Israel” and composed the Qurān on Muḥammad’s behalf; however, this tradition was unknown to the Candite rabbi. That Capsali depended on Jewish traditions originating from Christian lands is substantiated by the fact that ʿAlī (ʿĪb n ʿAbī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet) is here said to be a baptized Jew. According to this polemical tradition, ʿAlī’s (alleged) apostasy is the explanation for his bad influence on Muḥammad.

The second companion, Turzemān(i), is probably to be identified with ʿUthmān bin al-ʿAffān, under whose caliphate (644–56 CE) the official version of the Qurān was promulgated. This would explain Capsali’s use of Zechariah 3:1, according to which Turzemān’s job was to supervise ʿAlī’s writing, which is compared to a “flimsy wall” that needs to be plastered. Capsali, however, was not interested in a historical critique of the Qurān, but in making a polemical statement. As a closer look at the quoted verse reveals, the “admonitioner” mentioned in Zechariah 3:1 “standing at his right to admonish him (lesitin)” is none other but satan. In equating ʿUthmān with Satan, Capsali is declaring the Qurān to be Satanic verses; and later in the text, he refers to Muḥammad as the “companion of
(the archdemon) Ashmadai.102 Despite these polemical undertones, Capsali does acknowledge the monotheistic character of Islam,103 a concession made by Christian polemicists as well.104 However, he explains away the uniqueness of the Qur’anic proclamations of the One God with his claim that all of the relevant verses were actually compiled from different parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Capsali also retells a polemical version of the Bahirä-legend,105 another tradition about the life of Muhammed that goes back to the classical biographical literature (sīra) of Islam and that had an extensive afterlife in Christian anti-Islamic polemics:

A) In the chronicle (sefer divre ha-yamim) of Muhammed, the deceiver and companion of Ashmadai,106 it is written, that Abu Bakr and Hayya were among the supporters of Muhammed’s covenant and religion and among those who observed his commandments and his teaching (torah).

B) Abu Bakr was of Jewish origin, the son of the exilarch (rosh ha-golah). When he saw that Muhammed was rising higher and higher (in the ranks) he began to fear that (Muhammed) might come to hate him and remove him from his (own) high rank and “drag the dignity” of his office “in the dust” (Psalm 89:40). And so he took off his clean clothes and put on dirty ones, adopted the “conduct of sinful men” (Numbers 32:14), and joined Muhammed and his friends, going wherever (Muhammed) went and listening to his speeches.

C) This man Hayya who was a Christian (nozri) became Muhammed’s advisor and bosom companion, joining him in his bedroom and on his bed. Because of this, Muhammed’s friends became envious of him ( . . . ) and plotted to slay him with the sword.107

The story goes on to relate how Muhammed’s Christian friend arranges a banquet in the course of which everyone falls asleep except Abu Bakr, who takes


103. Capsali echoes here Maimonides’ wording in his response to the proselyte Ovadya; see Teshuvot ha-Rambam, ed. Jehoshua Blau, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1986), 726, No. 448: “These Muslims (Yishma’elim) are no idolaters at all . . . and they proclaim the unity of God (mevahedim la’el . . . yihud) . . . properly.”

104. See Daniel, Islam and the West, 60–62.


106. Here again, Capsali quotes the polemical letter of Jacob of Venice, see Iggeret vikkuaḥ, ed. Kobak, 13.

Muḥammad’s sword and kills Hayya. The next morning, Muḥammad wakes from a drunken sleep to discover that his friend has been murdered, and, seeing the blood on his own sword, believes that he himself was the one who killed him. Heartbroken, he then issues a decree prohibiting the drinking of alcohol.

While it is correct that Abū Bakr was among the first supporters of Muḥammad, nowhere in the Muslim tradition is he described as having been the son of an exilarch (rosh ha-golah, i.e., the representative of the Jews in Babylonia).108 The story that ʿAlī and Abū Bakr were Jews who had converted to Islam, however, is to be found in the Judeo-Arabic tradition originating from the Lands of Islam109—although, again, Capsali could not have been aware of this. Although he refers to a “chronicle (sefer divre ha-yamim) of Muḥammad,” the source of his banquet story is the polemical letter by Jacob of Venice mentioned above.110 It is from this source as well that he took the name Hayya;111 however, there is no question that this figure is to be identified with Bahīrā, about whom there are many legends in both Islamic and Christian sources. According to Muslim tradition, Bahīrā was a Christian monk who had recognized Muḥammad’s future mission when the prophet was still a youth.112 Whereas in Islamic tradition Bahīrā serves as a Christian witness to the authenticity of Muḥammad’s prophethood, in Christian polemical literature he is a Christian heretic who exerts considerable influence on Muḥammad and the composition of the Qurān.113

The story that connects the Islamic prohibition of alcohol to the murder of Bahīrā can be traced back to the Crusader states of the Levant, from which it was brought to the West in the thirteenth century by William of Tripoli.114 It would therefore have been familiar to Jacob of Venice, whose polemical letter, as we have


109. See Moshe Gil, “The Story of Bahīrā and Its Jewish Versions” (Hebrew) in Hebrew and Arabic Studies in Honour of Joshua Blau (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, 1993), 193–210, according to whom the Judeo-Arabic Bahīrā tradition can be traced back to Saʿādyah Gaʿon; see also the selected sources translated by Shtober, “Reshit ha-Islam,” 347–52.

110. This source has been identified by Shtober, “Reshit ha-Islam,” 332, where he refers to Capsali as a source of Sambari’s work.


seen, was Capsali’s source. Here again we get an idea how Outremer traditions became known to the author of Seder Eliyahu Zuta.

Although (so far) it has not been possible to identify a specific non-Jewish source used by Capsali, the legends he included into his account on the origins of Islam point at Crusader traditions that were still accessible in the Venetian Empire of the sixteenth century. His depiction of Ottoman history, which to some extent resembles Spandugino’s account, has to be understood in the context of the contemporary Venetian-Ottoman rivalry. However, it is still an open question whether Capsali drew on written sources for his descriptions of the dynastic and military history of the Ottomans, given that he himself, like a good classical historian, firmly believed that oral sources constituted the most reliable material of historiography:

Amongst the tribes of Israel, I firmly announced that my tongue will tell the truth: In all the stories I will tell, I will not take the path of liars. Behold, I have received the stories (sippurim) about the kings of Turkey from the mouth of venerable (zekenim) and knowledgeable Turks.116

Like Spandugino, who claimed to have entered into conversation with “two gentlemen who were close to Bāyāzīd II,” Capsali, however, does not disclose the names of his informants, the “venerable and knowledgeable Turks”—a fact that may cause the modern reader to question his honesty. Yet, in the case of his account of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, Capsali does mention a specific eyewitness:

For the stories of Egypt (sippure Miẓrayim), I relied on the testimony of many beloved and honorable (people) who were there at that time, especially on the trustworthy and most courageous Rabbi Yizḥaq al-Ḥakīm who was there during the period of the war, from its inception until the end . . . . I wrote with ink in a book what he related to me . . . . 119

Capsali also tells us that he learned about the “war of Constantinople” from his father’s uncle, Moses Capsali.120 Born in Candia about 1410, Moses Capsali must have settled in Constantinople sometime around 1445, after which he served

115. According to Bonfil (“Jewish Attitudes,” 19–20, and 30), Capsali made use of stories contained in written sources but purposefully attributed them to oral eyewitnesses, especially Jews, in order to “Judaize” his subject matter. However, Bonfil makes no suggestion which sources Capsali might have used. For a detailed discussion of this, see Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 72–80.

116. Prologue to SEZ, 1:11.


118. See n. 115.

119. Prologue to SEZ, 1:11. Shmuelevitz, “Capsali,” 340 (cf. SEZ, 1:11 n. 114), assumes that he was a physician (as suggested by his Arabic surname, al-Ḥakīm) or merchant, who accompanied the sultan throughout his campaign through Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Judging from Capsali’s words, however, it seems more likely that, because of the war, he had to remain the whole time in Egypt.

120. Prologue to SEZ, 1:11.
as the rabbi of the city’s Jewish community both before and after the Ottoman conquest of 1453. Given the generational gap, however, Elijah Capsali could only have learned about his great-uncle’s life from his father, Elkanah. Family pride, moreover, led him to exaggerate Moses Capsali’s standing at the Ottoman court, a fact that puts into questions the reliability of the relevant sections. In any case, Capsali’s repeated reference to Doges and other Venetian dignitaries as well as his use of Italian loanwords would indicate that he probably drew on Venetian knowledge of Ottoman affairs. This is not surprising, given that Crete was one of the main hubs of Venetian-Ottoman intercourse.

In Candia and other major centers of the eastern Mediterranean, the Maritime Republic maintained a network of permanent representatives (baili) and consuls, all of whom reported back to and kept in constant touch with the government of the Serenissima. Capsali explicitly mentions the bailo Antonio Giustiniani, who in 1513 had traveled to Istanbul to renew Venetian-Ottoman agreements after Selim I’s accession (1512). On his way back, Giustiniani stopped over in Candia where Capsali had the chance to listen to the bailo’s report. Capsali also refers to the Venetian emissary Marco Minio, who passed through Candia on his way to Constantinople where, after the fall of Belgrad (1521), he was sent to renew the peace agreement between the Ottomans and Venice. Capsali’s acquaintance with these diplomats can be explained by his position as condestabulo, which made it necessary for him to be in close contact with the Venetian authorities.

Given that there are very few historical dates in Seder ’Eliyahu Zuta—the first date mentioned is that of the beginning of the siege of Constantinople—it is unlikely that he had access to any comprehensive account of Ottoman history. He may have read a short commentario on the origin of the Turks (but if so, he omitted certain dates and other details in his own account) or a few of the battle descriptions (avvisi) that circulated widely in the form of leaflets. It seems much

121. On the basis of Seder ’Eliyahu Zuta, previous scholarship assumed that Moses Capsali was the first “Chief Rabbi” of the Ottoman Empire, a claim that can no longer be supported; see Joseph (R.) Hacker, “The Chief Rabbinate in the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th Centuries” (Hebrew), Zion 49 (1984): 225–63; on Capsali’s portrait of his great-uncle, see also Jacobs, Islamische Geschichte, 138, 156–57, 163–64.

122. For examples, see ibid., 144, 159–61, 169, and 174.


126. Some of the succeeding chapters have a date according to the Christian calendar others according to the Jewish computation “after the creation”; this may hint at Capsali’s respective sources of information.

127. On Giovio’s Commentario (which was certainly unknown to Capsali), see n. 31. On the difference between the two genres of historiography, the short commentario and the more elaborate historia, see A. Pirnát, “Gattungen der humanistischen Geschichtsschreibung: Historia et Commentarii,” in Geschichtsbewußtsein und Geschichtsschreibung in der Renaissance, ed. August Buck, Tibor Klaniczai, and S.K. Németh (Budapest, Leiden: Brill, 1989), 57–64.
more likely that his major source of information was diplomatic reports, stories told by Jewish merchants, and other oral accounts that were readily available in the port city of Candia.

**Conclusions**

As the previous discussion has shown, Capsali is a figure not easily categorized. Serving as a rabbi on the island of Crete, which was then a Venetian outpost in the eastern Mediterranean, he was exposed to multiple influences. By upbringing, he was both multilingual (fluent in Greek, Italian, and Hebrew at least) and multicultural (his family was of Romaniote origin, he studied at a famous Ashkenazi yeshivah in Padua, and he corresponded with Sephardic rabbis in Egypt128). Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of his historical work is the fact that although Crete (as most of the Venetian overseas territories) lay within the area of Ottoman expansion, Capsali glorified the Ottoman conquests—an even bolder partisanship when keeping in mind that he was also serving as the representative of the Cretan Jews to the Venetian authorities. A closer look at Capsali’s chronicle reveals that his work is full of contradictions and ambiguities. On the one hand, he was deeply rooted in the cultural and social world of the Venetian Empire; on the other, he wrote eulogies on the Ottomans, Venice’s primary Mediterranean rival.

This partisanship was certainly not without any risk given that Capsali composed his work after the fall of Rhodes (1522), when an Ottoman attack on Crete seemed to be imminent.129 Whereas Capsali had expressed his admiration for Venice in an earlier chronicle he had written, his later (intellectual) siding with the enemy may reflect the lack of integration Jews experienced under a government that subjected them to residential segregation and other restrictions.130 The demographic pressure created in the Jewish segregated area during the plague of 1523 had been disastrous, a fact that may well have contributed to Capsali’s readiness to place all his hopes in the rival of the Maritime Republic.

Despite his idealization of the sultans, however, Capsali did not hesitate to adopt polemical traditions about the rise of Islam that are of Christian origin and can be traced back to the Crusader states of the Levant. To some extent, this can be explained by his historiographical ambition: like certain Christian writers of his time, Capsali felt that it was necessary to introduce his chronicle of Ottoman history with an account of the origins of Islam. This made even more sense to him


given that he regarded Muhammad and the Ottomans as representatives of one and the same empire, the *malkhut Yishmael*.

The highly polemical tone of Capsali’s chapters on early Islam is partly to be explained by the material he used. Moreover, a sixteenth-century rabbi could not be expected to take a sympathetic approach to Muhammad’s prophetic claim. Last but not least, the Jewish chronicler did not have to adopt a positive attitude towards Islam—or to “turn Turk” as Christian polemicists would have put it—since his primary aim was to show that the Ottomans were being *used* by God to defeat Christendom. As we have seen, Capsali determined, on the basis of Isaiah 10:5–11, that although Assyria had been chosen as God’s “rod of anger,” there was nothing positive to say about Assyria’s religion. In the same way, he interpreted the visions of Daniel as prophetic proof that the Ottomans were in fact the “fourth” empire, whose sole purpose was to overthrow the rule of Christianity and to set the stage for the return of the Jewish exiles to their land.

Ambiguity marks not only Capsali’s attitude towards Islam, but his historiographical approach as well. In choosing to write about the history of the Ottomans, he was selecting one of the most fashionable topics of sixteenth-century Italian historiography, a fact that in itself reflects the author’s awareness of contemporary trends. In addition, his treatment of primarily non-Jewish history can be said to have opened up new horizons in Jewish literature. However, neither Capsali’s views on history nor his writing style had very much in common with contemporary humanist historiography. Although he occasionally makes use of contemporary rhetorical devices, in most of his text, he models himself after medieval chronicles, which ultimately go back to biblical and rabbinic literary patterns. In his detailed accounts of the Ottoman conquests, he combines a keen interest in contemporary events with his rabbinic training in reading scriptures as a key to the understanding of history.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Capsali was unusual in his continued reliance on the stylistic devices of religiously founded historiography. In fact, there were quite a few Christian chronicles composed in *cinquecento*-Italy that continued in form and concept the medieval tradition.\(^{131}\) When it came to descriptions of the Turks or Islam, there was a general tendency to reappropriate clichés going back to the time of the Crusades, and causal explanations for momentous events such as the fall of Constantinople quite frequently reverted to God’s wrath.

Like many of his Christian contemporaries, Capsali was obliged to a religion-defined worldview; yet, in expanding the historical horizon to include other peoples and cultures he followed an impulse characteristic of early modern times. Capsali’s ambivalent attitude towards Islam—oscillating between polemics against the “false” prophet Muhammad and panegyrics to the Ottoman sultans—mirrors the ambiguous situation of a Jewish author living at an eastern outpost of the Christian world and facing the Muslim world on the other shore.

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