

The Sultan, the Duke and the Leopard The Embassy of Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan to Sultan Barqûq

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Introduction

Before the age of imperialism reversed the relations between Europe and the Middle East, the East was both feared and admired by Europeans. As Franz Babinger, the eminent specialist of these relations in the later Middle Ages observed, in the past little attention has been paid to the relations between European princes and oriental courts. By his studies he contributed much to the increase of interest in this phenomenon.² In the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Europe was changing, states were developing, bureaucracy was growing and princes were looking for new ways to obtain and show legitimacy. Conspicuous spending, love of art and learning and excessive cruelty were the characteristics that, since Burckhardt, are usually associated with Renaissance princes. Could it be that they turned their eyes to the East and found inspiration in the customs and manners of Eastern rulers? In Italy, the East was very close, just across the Adriatic the Turkish armies advanced and were threatening Hungary. Developing trade relations of the great seaports with the Mamlûk state in the eastern Mediterranean made contacts more frequent and pilgrimage easier.

The embassy

The Sienese merchant Bertrando de Mignanelli spent long years in Cairo and Damascus. In 1416 he was back in Europe and attended the Council of Constance, "the first international conference for humanists" as it has been described.³ On the request of his friends, and to do something useful during the long idle hours of the long drawn out negotiations, I presume, he wrote a biography of the Mamlûk sultan Barqûq, which he called *Ascensus Barcoch*.⁴ I found there the following report about an event in which he himself was involved. I quote it in the English translation by Fischel:

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² Franz Babinger, "Relazioni visconteo-sforzesche con la Corte Ottomana durante el secolo XV", in *Atti del Convegno di Studi su "La Lombardia e l'Oriente"* (Milano, 1963), pp. 8 - 30; p. 9.

³ *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1999), s.v. Constance, Council of, p. 108; Michael Richard Buck (ed.), *Ulrichs von Richental Chronik des Constanzer Concils 1414 bis 1418* [Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart Bd. 158] (Tübingen, 1882); for a study of the council see Louise Ropes Loomis, *The Council of Constance. The Unification of the Church* (London and New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1961).

⁴ W.J. Fischel, "Ascensus Barcoch. A Latin biography of the Mamlûk sultan Barqûq of Egypt (D. 1399) written by B. de Mignanelli in 1416", *Arabica. Revue d'études arabes*, 6 (1959): 57-74, 152-172. Why Fischel changed Beltramo, as he called himself, into Bertrando, he did not explain.

"At that time, the distinguished Duke of Milan sent to the Sultan his preacher, Master James of the Cross. He was visiting in Damascus with some horses and dogs and other gifts for the Sultan, who welcomed him in my presence happily and graciously. The Sultan in turn sent to the Duke some leopards which pleased him very much. He valued the Duke's friendship highly and sent a gracious letter in reply to him. At the Sultan's request, I translated that letter from Arabic into our own Latin, just as I had previously translated the scribe's letter in Arabic; I was then living in Damascus and I came to know the whole court on account of this correspondence. I shall not outline the letters, lest it become wearisome, but it is true that the Duke's purpose was to befriend the Sultan, as he was advised to do by Brother Gerard of Toulouse, of the guardian monastery of Holy Mount Sion, in order more easily to get permission to rebuild the Church of Bethlehem in which Christ was born. For, // the Duke, of happy memory, wished to repair that most holy church without sparing any expense. He gave a long explanation in favor of permission to do this, but in vain, because in the absence of his former ambassador he could not ask for the permission."

De Mignanelli later managed to obtain the permission, but when he returned to Italy the Duke had just died. He kept the document carefully guarded in his house in Siena in the hope that someone might make use of it.⁵

The meeting with the ambassador in Damascus and the exchange of letters must have taken place in the year 1394, when Barqûq was in Syria to organize the resistance against the invasion of Tamerlane; on December 13 he was back in Cairo.⁶ With the Duke of Milan Giangaleazzo Visconti is meant, who got the title Duke only in May 1395 (and was crowned in September). But as De Mignanelli wrote his report in 1416, when the title of Duke was in common use, it is understandable that he overlooked this detail. Fischel did not publish the original Latin text of the *Ascensus Barcoch*, fortunately this part of it is quoted in Latin by Golubovich⁷, which allows to correct several mistakes Fischel made in his translation. Master James of the Cross he called preacher, but the Latin has "orator" and that means ambassador.⁸ In his introduction to this text and also in his introduction to the *Vita Tamerlani* by the same author, however, Fischel calls him Jacob de Croze, and correctly describes him as ambassador.⁹ "Master Gerard of Toulouse, of the guardian monastery of Holy Mount Sion" should be "Master Gerard of

⁵ Fischel, *Ascensus Barcoch*, 169-170.

⁶ Fischel, *Ascensus Barcoch*, 170 n.1.

⁷ Padre Girolamo Golubovich O.F.M., *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell' Oriente Francese* (Firenze, 1927), Vol. V (1346 - 1400), p. 303; based on Iorga's publication of fragments in: N. Iorga, *Notes et Extraits pour servir à l'histoire des Croisades au XVe siècle*, Vol. II (Paris, 1899), pp. 529-542.

⁸ That was even the case in classical Latin. See also Gigliola Soldi Rondinini, *Saggi di storia e storiografia visconteo-sforzesche*, (Bologna, Capelli, 1984), p. 66.

⁹ W.J. Fischel, "A new Latin source on Tamerlane's conquest of Damascus (1400/1401) (B. de Mignanelli's "Vita Tamerlani" 1416) Translated into English with an Introduction and a Commentary", *Oriens*, 9 (1956): 201-232; 207, and id., *Ascensus Barcoch*, 60.

Toulouse, guardian of the monastery of Holy Mount Sion". About the leopards, "pardi" in Latin, we come to speak later.

The facts

I searched the Mamlûk chronicles of Ibn Iyâs and Ibn Taghrî Birdî for a report of this embassy, but in vain. Babinger also concluded the total silence of the Arabic sources, in his case for the time of Giangaleazzo's successors.¹⁰ Bernardino Corio did not mention the embassy in his *Storia di Milano*.¹¹ The two biographies of Giangaleazzo Visconti missed it.¹² Golubovich is the only one who records it, but he is no independent source as his story is based on the *Ascensus Barcoch*. But from the documents he published concerning Gerard Chauvet, guardian of Mount Sion, the background of the embassy can be reconstructed.¹³

We must go back to 1365, the attack on Alexandria by King Peter of Cyprus.¹⁴ The reaction of the Mamlûk sultan against the Christians in the Holy Land was violent, all the Friars of Jerusalem and other holy places died during their imprisonment.¹⁵ It took several years before new brothers took their vacant places, and the churches and monastic houses were then in bad repair. In 1392 Henry of Lancaster, the later king Henry IV, visited Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and on returning to England he was accompanied by the French friar Gerard Chauvet (or Gerardo Calveti in Italian), the guardian of Mount Sion, probably in function since 1387. Gerard Chauvet toured the courts of France and England to ask help for the restauration of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, his last visit was to the court of Giangaleazzo Visconti in Pavia, who was known as a liberal supporter of the needy.¹⁶ Giangaleazzo showed his interest and sent his own ambassador Giacomo della Croce with Chauvet to ask sultan Barqûq's consent to repair the church in Bethlehem. About this ambassador nothing more is known at present than that he belonged to

¹⁰ Babinger, "Relazioni visconteo-sforzesche", 10.

¹¹ Bernardo Corio, *Storia di Milano*, ed. by Anna Morisi Guerra, volumes I-II (Torino, 1978).

¹² D.M. Bueno de Mesquita, *Giangaleazzo Visconti Duke of Milan (1351 - 1402). A study in the political career of an Italian despot* (Cambridge, Cam. Univ. Press, 1941); E.R. Chamberlin, *The Count of Virtue. Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan* (London, 1965).

¹³ Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 266-278.

¹⁴ Jo Van Steenberghe, "The Alexandrian Crusade (1365) and the Mamlûk Sources. Reassessment of the *Kitâb al-ilmâm* of an-Nuwayrî al-Iskandarânî", in *East and West in the Crusader States. Context - Contacts - Confrontations III, Acta of the congress held at Hernen Castle in September 2000* ed. Krijnie Ciggar and Herman Teule. [Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 125] (Leuven, Peeters, 2003), pp. 125-137

¹⁵ Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 113-116.

¹⁶ When the Byzantine emperor Manuel Paleologus (a few years later) arrived in rags in Europe, it was Giangaleazzo who provided him with decent clothes appropriate to his high rank in which he could present himself at the European courts. Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, volumes I-III (Harmondsworth, 1965) (1st ed. 1951 - 1954), III: 462-463.

Giangaleazzo's intimates.¹⁷ The consent was not immediately obtained, as De Mignanelli recorded, but in 1399 Giangaleazzo sent 1500 ducats to the guardian Chauvet, not knowing that he had died in the meantime, for the repair of the church in Bethlehem.¹⁸ Most interesting aspect of the embassy is the exchange of presents. Giangaleazzo knew the way to the hearts of rulers, and did not make the mistake of Spanish kings, like Juan II of Aragon who only sent a letter about this question¹⁹, and the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella who sent their ambassador Pedro Mártir in 1501 emptyhanded to ask a favor of the sultan of Babylon.²⁰

The hunting leopards or cheetahs in art

It seems that Giangaleazzo was very fond of the animals that Fischel (and many other authors) called leopards, but that are better described as hunting leopards or cheetahs. They became associated with him as a kind of totem-animal. Not on his coat-of-arms, that shows the viper with a small human body in his mouth. The cheetahs that Barqûq sent him were not the first ones that Giangaleazzo owned, a Mantuan ambassador to his court in 1391 tells in a letter that he passed the place where the Count of Virtue (by which title he was known before he became duke) kept those animals.²¹ His castle in Pavia had extended gardens and also a kind of zoo.²² How he had obtained them has not been recorded, probably through the Ottoman court. His son, in an unpublished letter to the Ottoman sultan in 1421 in which he asked for cheetahs, reminds him of the old friendship between his house and the Ottoman sultans.²³ These attractive and beloved animals left traces in European art, in unexpected places. Raymond van Uytven, in his book on men and animals in the Middle Ages, signalled "leopards" that are part of the scenery in two miniatures (f. 51v and 52r) depicting the Adoration of the Magi in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, painted by the Limbourg Brothers between 1411 and 1416. He suggested that these animals, because they wore collars, might have belonged to a zoo, maybe that of Giangaleazzo Visconti, brother-in-law of the Duc de Berry.²⁴ But they are not the only examples. In the magnificent copy of the *Livre du chevalier errant*, written by Thomas III, marquis of Saluzzo, and illuminated in Paris by an anonymous artist,

¹⁷ Bueno de Mesquita, *Giangualeazzo Visconti*, 37.

¹⁸ Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 269. Chauvet had died on December 23, 1398. This information comes from letters that Ruggero Contarini wrote to his brother Giovanni, student in Oxford.

¹⁹ Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 310-312.

²⁰ Pedro Mártir, *Legatio Babylonica*, in: Petrus Martyr, *Opera*, facs. ed. (Graz, 1966).

²¹ Bueno de Mesquita, *Giangualeazzo Visconti*, 42-43

²² Otto Pächt, "Early Italian nature studies and the early calendar landscape", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 13 (1950): 13-47; 21. Chamberlin, *The Count of Virtue*, 121.

²³ Babinger, "Relazioni visconteo-sforzesche", 10. About the problems to keep the animals alive when shipping them to Europe, Margaret Wade Labarge, *Medieval Travellers. The Rich and the Restless* (London, 2005) (1st ed. 1982), p. 148.

²⁴ Raymond van Uytven, *De Papegaai van de paus. Mens en dier in de Middeleeuwen* (Leuven, Davidsfonds/Zwolle Waanders, 2003), pp. 269-270.

known as the Master of the Cité des Dames de Christine de Pisan, around 1403-1405, there is a miniature of Oriental kings with a cheetah sitting on the brim of a carpet.²⁵ This animal looks very much like the cheetahs that we find in the margins of various books that once were commissioned by or belonged to the Visconti family and can be considered as a kind of ex-libris.²⁶ A few of them I will present, found accidentally in books and on postcards, just to give an idea. For a complete list, all the books that once belonged to the Visconti should have to be studied. The first cheetah I present shows up in the magnificent *Visconti Hours*, now in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, in a paradisaical setting surrounding the miniature of the Creation of Eve. The artist selected to design the illumination of the *Hours* had been Giovannino de'Grassi, but as he died before the work was completed, this miniature is from the hand of Belbello da Pavia.²⁷ The next one is in the *Hours of Isabelle of Castile*, after having been in the possession of various owners now in the Dutch Royal Library, but it certainly originated in Milan.²⁸ Two cheetahs guard the Coronation of Giangaleazzo Visconti in a missal illustrated by Anovela da Imbonate now in the S.Ambrogio in Milan, and presented to that church as a souvenir of the coronation.²⁹ The last one is a cheetah watching the adoring oriental kings in the so-called *Bodmer Hours*, illuminated by Michelino da Besozzo, ca 1410 (or

²⁵ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Fr. 12599, fol.162 r. Illustrated in: , *Europe und der Orient 800 - 1900* ed. Gereon Sieverinck and Hendrik Budde (Berlin, Bertelsmann, 1989) (Catalogue of exhibition): 5/13, pp. 638-9, fig. 733; also in: *Paris 1400. Les arts sous Charles VI* (Paris, Fayard, 2004) (Catalogue of exhibition), Cat. 131, pp. 221-222. For a synopsis of the *Livre du Chevalier errant*, of which no modern hardcopy edition is available thusfar, only a dissertation on microfiches by Marvin J. Ward (1986), see Robert Fajen, *Die Lanze und die Feder. Untersuchungen zum Livre du Chevalier errant von Thomas III., Markgraf von Saluzzo* [Imagines Medii Aevi 15] (Wiesbaden, 2003). Although a highly allegoric work in the style fashionable in that age, it contains many references to contemporary events and princes, pp. 929-51 contains the career of Giangaleazzo Visconti.

²⁶ Robert W. Scheller, *Exemplum. Model-Book Drawings and the Practice of Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (ca. 900 - ca. 1450)* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam Univ. Press, 1995), p. 291 n. 28.

²⁷ Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. Landau-Finlay 22 f. 46 v. See for illustration Marcel Thomas, *The Golden Age. Manuscript Painting at the Time of Jean, Duc de Berry* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1979), plate 4.

²⁸ Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, hs. 76 F 6 (AA 263), f. 16 v. See A.W. Byvanck, "Aanteekeningen over handschriften met miniaturen, VI: Een Italiaansch handschrift der Koninklijke Bibliotheek", *Oudheidkundig Jaarboek*, 3de serie van het *Bulletin van den Nederlandschen Oudheidkundigen Bond*, 7 (1927): 1-12.

²⁹ Messale dell'incoronazione di Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Biblioteca della Basilica di S.Ambrogio, Ms. 6 f. 8r. See for illustration Emma Pirani, *Gothic Illuminated Manuscripts* (London etc, Hamlyn,1966) (original Italian: Milan, Fratelli Fabbri Editori, 1966).

1420 according to others). Of this book only a fragment survives, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.³⁰

Not only in illuminated manuscripts, however, but also on panels and in fresco's we find the same type of cheetahs. In 1423, Gentile da Fabriano, who originated in Umbria but travelled far and wide and was certainly influenced by North-Italian art, painted an altarpiece with an Adoration of the Magi, now in the Uffizi in Florence, where two cheetahs appear sitting on the back of horses behind the riders.³¹ The interesting point here is the difference in patterns on their fur, one with round spots, the other chequered. That might indicate various places of origin.³² The same phenomenon can be observed on the fresco of the oriental kings on their way to Bethlehem by Benozzo Gozzoli in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence (painted in 1459). Here, the cheetahs are twice pictured: in the foreground, one of them sitting behind the rider on horseback, the other chequered one held at a leash and standing behind the horse; and also in the background, in a hunting scene.³³

Much debated is the question how the Limbourg Brothers and the Master of the Cité des Dames de Christine de Pisan, working in Paris, were able to picture the cheetahs. That they were drawn by them from life can be excluded, as they were much too small compared to the human beings in the same scene, which nobody thusfar seems to have noticed. The animals in the margins of the illuminated books are isolated figures without relation to humans or other animals.³⁴ So, if these artists did not draw from life, how did they get hold of the necessary models?³⁵ The present consensus is, that painters in

³⁰ Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 944, f. 6 v, reproduced in Colin Eisler and Patricia Corbett, *The Prayerbook of Michelino da Besozzo* (New York, 1981). Further data in Thomas, *The Golden Age*, plate 3 (f. 75 v, St.Luke) and *Illuminated Manuscripts. Treasures of the Pierpont Morgan Library New York* (New York/London, Abbeville Press, 1998), p. 98 (f. 80 v, St.Martin Dividing His Cloak). Very characteristic for the style of Michelino da Besozzo are the borders of green curly foliage with various small flowers.

³¹ It is a detail in the background of the adoration itself.

³² Scheller, *Exemplum*, 289 n.16 comments on this difference. A.J.Elen, *Italian Late-Medieval and Renaissance Drawing-Books from Giovannino de'Grassi to Palma Giovane. A codicological approach* (Leiden, 1995), fig. 3 shows drawings of differently patterned cheetahs from the model-book of Giovannino de'Grassi; chapter 4.1 discusses the relations between painting and book illumination.

³³ " Benozzo Gozzoli ca. 1420 - 1497", *Openbaar Kunstbezit / Kunstschrift* Issue 2010/4, p. 31, King Melchior, on the westwall of the chapel.

³⁴ I want to thank Dr. Hanisch for making this remark. At the lecture I showed pictures, at this point a photograph of a boy in a wheelchair playing with a cheetah, to demonstrate the relation of cheetahs with humans. Unintended, it also demonstrated the size of the animal compared to a human being.

³⁵ I found on the internet a notice that Giangaleazzo Visconti presented the Burgundian court with a "leopard", without mention of the source; see www.christusrex.org, Duc de Berry, *Très Riches Heures*, fol. 52r. The Burgundian court was in Dijon, not in Paris, and there is no proof that any of the artists visited that court and saw that animal.

Lombardia, Northern Italy, were the first to make very naturalistic drawings of animals and influenced artists in France.³⁶ Giovannino de'Grassi is considered to be the initiator of this style, he has left a sketchbook, now in Bergamo, with drawings of birds and several kinds of animals, cheetahs and dogs among others.³⁷ In the works of the Limbourg Brothers are scenes resembling drawings in this sketchbook, as do the cheetahs in the margin of the illustrated books. However, the transmission of models is a very tricky subject.³⁸ The question is: where did the Limbourg Brothers and the Master of the Cité des Dames de Christine de Pisan see these models? The most recent author who discussed the problem denies the possibility that the Limbourg Brothers visited Italy, an idea formerly adhered to by no less an authority than Meiss.³⁹ But if they did not travel, then the models must have reached them in another way. A possibility is through contacts with artists who had visited Northern Italy. Giovannino de'Grassi (died in 1398) was involved in the construction of the Cathedral in Milan and also in the designing of the *Visconti Hours*. Other artists were employed for work at the Cathedral, among them a promising but somewhat obscure painter from Bruges, Jacques Coene, who later moved to Paris. He is a possible candidate, he could have had copies of those drawings.⁴⁰ The Limbourg Brothers and the Master of the Cité des Dames de Christine de Pisan might

³⁶ An anonymous webpage: *The history of style*, Web Gallery of Art, (<http://www.wga.hu/tours/gothic/history.html>, 8) offers a useful survey of the developments around 1400. Important articles and books about this subject: Pächt, "Early Italian nature studies" (1950); Millard Meiss, *French painting in the Time of Jean de Berry: the Limbourgs and their Contemporaries*, volumes I-II (London, 1967, 2nd ed. 1969; New York, 1974); Jonathan G. Alexander, "The Limbourg brothers and Italian Art. A new source", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 46 (1983): 425 - 435; 431 n.15; *Paris 1400* (2004); Victor M. Schmidt, "De Gebroeders Van Limburg en de Italiaanse kunst", in *De Gebroeders Van Limburg* (Catalogue of exhibition in museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen, 2005), pp. 179-188; H.Th. Colenbrander, "Op zoek naar de gebroeders Limburg. De *Très Riches Heures* in het Musée Condé in Chantilly; Het *Wapenboek Gelre* in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I in Brussel en Jan Maelwael en zijn neefjes Polequin, Jehannequin en Herman van Limburg", PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006 (on CDROM; in hardcopy without the illustrations and without indexes).

³⁷ Scheller, *Exemplum*, Cat. no. 26, de' Grassi, 276-291; it is difficult to distinguish his work from Pisanello's in the complicated Pisanello Corpus, Cat. no. 33, 341-356; 347. Pächt, "Early Italian nature studies" 17: "Giovannino de' Grassi can rightly claim to have been among the first artists who introduced an inductive method of pictorial representation."

³⁸ A discussion about these difficulties in the Introduction to Scheller, *Exemplum*.

³⁹ Schmidt, "De Gebroeders Van Limburg", 179.

⁴⁰ Not much is known about this artist, sometimes considered to be identical with the Master of the Heures du Maréchal Boucicaut. See Meiss, *French painting* (ed. 1969), I 64; *Paris 1400*, 205, 263; Gigliola Soldi Rondinini, "La fabbrica del Duomo come espressione dello spirito religioso della società milanese (Fine sec. XIV-sec XV)", in *Saggi di storia e storiografia visconteo-sforzesche* (Bologna, Capelli, 1984), pp. 49-64; mentions him (p. 61) as one of the cooperators. He worked from 1399 to 1404 in Milan, and moved then to Paris.

have been in contact with him and seen and used his copies. The way the illuminators were organised is not quite clear, but it is obvious that in Paris existed ateliers where several artists worked together and exchanged models.⁴¹ It is hard to distinguish individual work, hence the many provisional names, like Master of the Cité des Dames de Christine de Pisan. The idea of copyright was still in its infancy.⁴²

Giangaleazzo Visconti

Cheetahs were associated with oriental kings, and with the Adoration of the Magi in particular. But at the European courts they were, I presume, associated also with Giangaleazzo Visconti. A few lines must be dedicated to his career, to make understandable what he might have been after with his embassy to sultan Barquq.

Giangaleazzo Visconti was born in 1351. His father Galeazzo and his uncle Bernabò shared the rule of Milan at that time. As Giangaleazzo grew up, he became fond of reading classical authors and of collecting beautiful books. He got ample time to prepare for his future role, only in 1378, when his father had died, he took over his part in the rule and shared that with his uncle. His father had made use of the French court's desperate need of money (caused by the enormous sum that had to be paid to ransom the French king Jean II from English captivity) to arrange the marriage of Giangaleazzo with the king's daughter Isabelle de Valois, at the cost of a huge dowry. This earned Giangaleazzo also the hereditary title of Comte de Vertue (Conte de Virtù, Count of Virtue), a small French county. In 1385 Giangaleazzo managed to monopolize the power by ambushing and capturing his old uncle, who died after a few months in prison. That was a scandal that shook Europe, Chaucer mentioned it in his *Monk's tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*. Giangaleazzo reorganised the state and worked very hard to expand his territory, town by town. Finally, he had most of northern and middle Italy under control, but his position as vicount of the German Empire was not hereditary, the title could be revoked by the emperor at any moment. Compared with the King of Naples, the pope in the papal States, the doge of Venice, the rulers of Florence, his position was inferior and needed to be upgraded. He tried first to negotiate with the French king, after he had managed, also by paying a large dowry, to marry his daughter Valentina to the Duc d'Orléans, the French king's brother. But the French monarchy was unstable by the fits of madness of the king, and the irresponsible behaviour of his brother as regent. So finally he directed his attention to Wenceslaus, king of the Romans and elected emperor, but also a weak prince given to all kinds of licentiousness (but as a great patron of arts and collector of illuminated manuscripts on an equal footing with the Duc de Berry, uncle to the French king and the Duc d'Orléans, and Giangaleazzo himself). Giangaleazzo offered him 100.000 ducats to pay for the expenses of travelling to Italy for the coronation, and received the hereditary title Duke of Milan in return. That happened in May 1395,

⁴¹ Elen, *Drawing-Books*, listed four sketchbooks with related models of animals (Cat. 3, 6, 7 and 23), and remarked: "...model drawings were exchanged between workshops and were widely copied". (Cat. 7, p. 176).

⁴² Scheller, *Exemplum*, 79 n.217.

Giangualeazzo's coronation took place in September that year.⁴³ Wenceslaus never got crowned, he lost his position in 1400, partly because of this scandalous gift to the Visconti's. Giangualeazzo continued fighting Florence, with Venice he was always on neutral terms. While preparing the final attack on Florence, he died unexpectedly in 1402, victim of a fever.⁴⁴ A miniature in *Gian Galeazzo Viscontis Funeral Eulogy*, by Pietro de Castelletto, testifies of his love for the Orient. Folio 1 pictures his apotheosis, and it is striking that the large initial is decorated with borders of fake-Arabic letters.⁴⁵

Relation with Sultan Barqûq

So, when Giangualeazzo listened to the appeal of Gerard Chauvet in 1394, in the middle of these schemes to obtain a more stable and higher title, he might have thought that befriending sultan Barqûq might enhance his status. He might even a moment have thought that there was a possibility to earn the title King of Jerusalem by protecting Christians in the Holy Land, inspired by the difficulties around the succession of the king of Naples, the rightful claimer of the title. The King of Aragon obviously has had the same in mind when he sent a letter to sultan Barqûq in 1395, mentioned earlier.⁴⁶ But more realistic is to think that the passion for hunting was what motivated Giangualeazzo. Access to a potential source of cheetahs was of course tempting. He had certainly heard stories about this sultan, he might have been struck by similarities in their lives, for instance by the way Barqûq had eliminated his co-ruler Baraka.⁴⁷ These stories circulated in Europe even before De Mignanelli recorded them in his *Ascensus Barcoch*.⁴⁸ Being a builder himself, involved in the work on the Cathedral and the construction of his castle in Pavia, tales of Barqûq's mausoleum might have influenced his project to build the Carthusian Monastery in Pavia, the Certosa, which also served as mausoleum for the Visconti family.

⁴³ He commemorated his coronation by the gift of a luxurious missal to the Basilica di S. Ambrogio in Milan, as mentioned before.

⁴⁴ And not from the pest, as some have stated. Bueno de Mezquita, *Giangualeazzo Visconti*, 297; Chamberlin, *The Count of Virtue*, 216.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *The Golden Age*, plate 5. The marginal decoration resembles very much the illumination by Michelino da Besozzo of the Bodmer Hours in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

⁴⁶ Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 310-312.

⁴⁷ That had happened in 1380/782, Ibn Khaldûn, *Kitâb al-ʿIbar*, volumes I-VII (Cairo, Bulâq, ca. 1867), V: 469; idem (Bayrût, 1966-1968), V: 1002.

⁴⁸ *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384 by Frescobaldi*, Gucci & Sigoli. Transl. from the Italian by Th. Bellorini O.F.M and E. Hoade O.F.M. [Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum nr. 6] (Jerusalem, 1948). Extracts had earlier been published in Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-Bibliografica*, V: 245-249.

The accusation of Froissart

His contemporaries were also aware of Giangaleazzo's love for the Orient. The most sensational example is Froissart's accusation that Giangaleazzo Visconti betrayed the French and caused the disastrous defeat in 1396 of the crusader army in Nicopolis (in present-day Bulgaria) at the hands of Sultan Bajazet. Giangaleazzo did not take part in this crusade, his relations with the French were strained at the time after the failure of the negotiations about a title, as we have seen. Jean Froissart, one of the major sources for the history of Europe in the later Middle Ages, devoted many pages of his *Chroniques* to the crusade of 1396, that ended in the annihilation of a great number of the noblest French knights. Modern historians consider this disaster as the outcome of a combination of French rash ill-prepared attack and skilful Turkish manoeuvring, but Froissart has another explanation. This is his version:

"While the Turkish Sultan Bajazet was in Cairo to win the support of the Sultan of Babylon, he was informed by a Turkish messenger that a great Christian army had gathered before Nicopolis. He told this to the sultan of Babylon, and added: 'It is four months since I heard of this expedition, from my good friend the Duke of Milan, who at the same time sent me twelve hawks and gerfalcons, the finest I ever saw. With these presents, he wrote me the names and surnames of the barons of France who were coming to make war to me; adding, that if I could capture those named in his letter [follows a list in the French original, not in the English translation], their ransoms would be worth to me more than a million of florins.' The Duke of Milan advised to be careful: '..for they are all men of such ability and resolution, that the meanest would not fly, to avoid death. They have undertaken this expedition (he writes) solely through valour, to do some deeds of arms that may gain them renown.' Froissart comments: "What Bajazet had told the sultan of Babylon respecting the information he had received from the Duke of Milan must surprise everyone. It was supposed that he had been baptised and was regenerated in our faith, and yet he had sought the friendship and alliance of an infidel king, an enemy to our religion, and had every year sent him presents of hounds and hawks, or the finest linen cloth that could be procured at Rheims, Cambrai, or in Holland, which is very agreeable to the Saracens, who have none but what comes from our country. Bajazet, in return, made him rich gifts of cloth of gold and precious stones, of which they have abundance (..)".⁴⁹

To Froissart it was clear: the French had two enemies, the Turks and the Duke of Milan, Giangaleazzo Visconti, whom he accuses of no less than high treason. But was it true? Babinger, when reporting this accusation of a secret correspondence between Bajazet and Giangaleazzo, thought it plausible. Giangaleazzo's son later reminded

⁴⁹ *Oeuvres de Froissart* publiées avec les variantes des divers manuscrits par M. le baron Kervyn de Lettenhove, volumes I-XXV (Bruxelles, 1870 - 1875), XV: 251-254; Jean Froissart, *Chronicles of England, France, Spain and the adjoining Countries* (..) Translated from the French Editions (..) by Thomas Johnes, volumes I-II (London and New York, 1868). I quoted the English translation, Vol. II, 604. The English version is abridged compared to the French original. Chamberlin, *The Count of Virtue*, 170 mentions this anecdote, as does Babinger, "Relazioni visconteo-sforzesche", 10-11.

Bajazet's successor in a letter of the old relations between their families, as told before.⁵⁰ And to be honest, as the annihilation of the French army postponed the feared invasion of the French into Italy, Giangaleazzo had a motive. The story of the meeting between Bajazet and the sultan of Babylon, sultan Barqûq at that time, is fiction, it has as far as I know never taken place, and even if it had, how could Froissart have known what they had been talking about? The accusation fits in the first place an anti-Visconti plot at the French royal court, directed by queen Isabella of Bavaria who had Visconti blood herself (being a granddaughter of Bernabò Visconti) against her sister-in-law Valentina Visconti, Giangaleazzo's daughter and wife of the king's brother the Duc d'Orléans. Froissart reported that the court accused Valentina of sorcery, of having had a hand in the incurable fits of madness of the king and to have tried to poison the dauphin. Hence she was banished from the court.

Conclusion

Froissart, a faithful servant of the French king, reveals to us that there existed a widespread web of rumours and slander concerning Giangaleazzo Visconti, most of which escapes us today. But they were the cause of his bad reputation in European historiography. Most of the sources, French or Florentine, are inimical. The two biographies of Giangaleazzo tried to do him more justice, but the fact that his archives have been destroyed by the repeated French invasions into the country - the irony of history is, that they were the outcome of Valentina Visconti's marriage contract - makes it difficult to know the truth. The report of the embassy to sultan Barqûq is the only hard evidence available thusfar about Giangaleazzo's relation with the East. He had to find a style of behaviour in a difficult situation: the French monarchy in disorder by the madness of the king and the rule of an irresponsible regent, the Empire split by the behaviour of a licentious elect, the papacy divided, the Turks threatening Europe. He did that very skillfully. That he looked East for inspiration is at least not inconceivable.

⁵⁰ Babinger, "Relazioni visconteo-sforzesche", 10-11.