This essay reconsiders the so-called *Conquest of Trebizond* cassone, attributed to Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 1). Such lavish and ornate wedding chests were commissioned and decorated for patrician brides in fifteenth-century Tuscany. They stored the linens, undergarments, and other personal items that accompanied a bride when she took up residence with her husband and his extended family. The painters of the *Trebizond* cassone, who ran a successful business in Florence, left behind a shop book that details their activities from 1446 to 1463. The document lists names of patrons and the prices they paid, but it does not shed light on how or why particular subjects for paintings were chosen. Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono specialized in representations of ancient history and literature, including subjects drawn from Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, as well as contemporary works by Giovanni Boccaccio and Petrarch. While the shop did treat conventional East–West confrontations such as the Trojan War, Cimon and Xerxes, and Alexander and Darius, the *Trebizond* chest is unique because it represents a contemporary event set on the Renaissance boundary between Europe and Asia.

The front panel of the *Trebizond* cassone features, at the left, a partial view of “GO[N]STANTINOPOLI,” or Constantinople; opposite, we see Pera and the tower of Galata. Another larger, walled city on the horizon to the right once bore an inscription identifying it as “TREBIZOND[A],” the independent empire located on the Black Sea that was ruled by the Byzantine Greek Komnenoi family. Throughout the panel, soldiers wearing gold and white turbans do battle with soldiers in janissary caps, which vary in color—red, white, or gold—some featuring aigrettes. The only figure in Western dress is a man on horseback wearing a dark, bell-shaped hat, who motions to the two men seated on the triumphal chariot at the right side of the composition. The short sides of the chest, or testate, feature a bird, caltrops, and banderoles with a faded inscription (fig. 2). A stylized pomegranate pattern decorates the interior surface of the lid, as well as the back panel of the chest.

Scholars concur that this panel features one of the rare representations of a contemporary event in fifteenth-century domestic painting, but they disagree about which battle it shows; neither the battle nor the protagonists have ever been securely identified. The earliest scholarly discussions of the cassone put it in the context of Ottoman expansion: it was regarded as a representation of either the fall of Constantinople in 1453 or the 1461 fall of Trebizond. In 1913, Werner Weisbach argued that the picture showed Mehmed II (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) seated on the triumphal chariot with the defeated Byzantine Greeks of Trebizond kneeling before him. He associated the imagery with humanist interest in Greece and with crusade propaganda. Weisbach identified the Greeks by the high conical caps, while he thought that the Turks wore turbans. He carefully transcribed the inscriptions identifying famous monuments in Constantinople, but he did not mention any naming individual figures. Paul Schubring followed suit in 1915, assuming that the conqueror must be Mehmed II, who defeated David Komnenos, the emperor of Trebizond (r. 1460–61). In her 1974 monograph on Apollonio di Giovanni, Ellen Callmann essentially accepted Weisbach’s identification of the scene as the fall of Trebizond to the Ottomans but, given the complexity of the histor-
Fig. 1. Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono, *Conquest of Trebizond (sic)* cassone, ca. 1460. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913. (Photo: courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York)
ists and other proponents of crusade. The inclusion of Timur in Pisanello’s fresco of S. George and the Princess at Sant’Anastasia in Verona, for example, has been linked to the Council of Ferrara/Florence and to crusade propaganda. Around 1430, the Florentine artist Masolino included Timur in his now-lost fresco cycle for the Orsini Palace in Rome; likewise, in his description of the imaginary Sforzinda Palace, circa 1465, the architect Filarete envisioned a fresco cycle of “Famous Men” that culminated with the figure of Timur.

Timur’s reputation as a powerful opponent of the Ottomans appealed to the popular imagination in Christian Europe. Nevertheless, the incongruous conflation on the cassone panel of Ankara, the site of Timur’s 1402 victory, and Trebizond remains unresolved. Why would Florentine viewers looking at this painting recall a battle that had taken place more than fifty years earlier, and in another location? An additional element complicates the identification of the conqueror as Timur: there is a second, nearly identical figure seated on the triumphal chariot (fig. 4). Patricia Lurati has suggested that this man could be Timur’s captive prisoner, Bayezid I. But he is shown comfortably seated, without chains or restraints, and he wears the same kind of turban as Timur. Nor does this unfettered, sumptuously dressed companion resemble the bound captives or clowns who often appear in cassone paintings, sitting below a con-
quire riding in a triumphal chariot. Any successful interpretation of the Trebizon panel has to provide a convincing identity for this subsidiary figure.

Such problems indicate the need for a fresh interpretation. To begin with, scholars have been too hasty to link the painting with the Ottoman takeover of the last remnant of the Byzantine Empire. As Paribeni argues, if this were a depiction of the fall of 1461, “we would expect a greater involvement of Trebizond in the military operations, with images, for example, of the defenders spread out along the ramparts and the attackers using various means to breach the walls of the besieged city....”16 Since Trebizond is shown intact, lacking signs of occupation such as soldiers, flags, or banners, the panel must depict a moment before the Ottoman conquest. This essay will argue that the Trebizond cassone represents a conflict not between Byzantine Greeks and Turks but rather between Turks (shown with their characteristic janissary caps) and their rivals the Turkmens (shown wearing turbans).17 The political machinations and shifting alliances in Europe and the Black Sea region in the late 1450s provide the basis for this interpretation of the wedding chest created by Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono.

TREBIZOND

The cassone painters and their patron could have obtained various kinds of information about Trebizond from travelers’ accounts, maps, and commercial regulations, as well as from humanist texts. The patron of the Trebizond cassone may have had access, for example, to the narrative of Ruy González de Clavijo, a Spanish
traveler who described the city of Trebizond around 1403 as follows:

On the highest part of the rocks is a very strong castle. On this side the city is very strong, but on the other side it is on open ground; but it has a good wall...the most beautiful part is a street near the sea, which is in one of these suburbs, where they sell all the things required in the city. On the shore there are two castles with strong walls and towers, one belonging to the Venetians and the other to the Genoese [fig. 5].

The encomium that Cardinal Bessarion (d. 1472) wrote to the city of Trebizond, dated to before 1439, is more detailed than Clavijo’s terse description:

The dwelling of the emperors is set up in the present acropolis and is itself no less than an acropolis, surpassing as it does all other buildings by the strength of its walls and the variety, size and beauty of its construction. Its west wall is common to the acropolis and the palace, and serves the same purpose to both up to a height of two storeys; from there upward, it extends for the sake of the palace alone and towers above the wall of the acropolis by almost the same measure that the latter rises above the ground. The walls facing in other directions, being adequate in point of height, thickness and other respects, extend all the way down and, while they take away more than half of the acropolis, they add this area to the palace, and are themselves sufficient to resist the oncoming enemy and to guard safely those that may be inside. They afford entrance by means of two gates and one postern, and for the rest are securely constructed so as to exclude and ward off attackers.

The layout depicted on the Trebizond cassone agrees in general with Bessarion’s description of the site and the topography of the city (fig. 6). We can see the fortifications on the acropolis, which offered excellent defense to the Trapezuntines, as well as the many trading ships offshore that brought the city its wealth. The view presented on the chest includes the twin-towered southern approach to the citadel, as well as three gates. Yet most art historians dismiss this depiction of Trebizond as a generic city view based on other works by Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono. The cassone painters did employ some stock motifs, such as buildings based on the Pantheon in Rome and the Florentine Baptistery, but they nevertheless included crenellated walls, bastions, and polygonal buildings that closely resemble some of the extant remains of Byzantine Trebizond.

Similar features may be found in a slightly later representation of the city from a Greek lectionary commissioned by the Trapezuntine bishop Alexius Celadenus (d. 1517); the city view appears in the lower-right register of the title page, opposite “New Rome,” or Constantinople, on the left (fig. 7). Although they doubt the accuracy of the view of Trebizond, Callmann, Pope-Hennessy, Christiansen, and Paribeni each note the faithful representation of Constantinople; they link this city view to a map by the Florentine Cristoforo Buondelmonti (figs. 8 and 9). Only Lurati objects that the Buondelmonti maps present aerial views, while the cities depicted on the cassone panel are seen from only slightly above or at

Fig. 5. Map of “The Citadel of Medieval Trabzon.” (Photo: courtesy of Armenica.org)
The patron might well have been interested in the commercial relations that Trebizond had established in the fourteenth century with the rival trading cities of Genoa and Venice. The Genoese were allowed to settle in the suburb of Daphnous, to the east of Trebizond, and, as Clavijo noted, from 1349 on they occupied the fortress of Leontokastron, which overlooked the harbor. The Venetians were later granted similar privileges, including “a site for a church, dwellings, and warehouses.” The European merchants operating in Trebizond could be competitive and even adversarial. The Genoese were particularly demanding commercial partners, and spiteful when crossed; they occasionally interfered in local conflicts. From the 1420s through the 1450s they were at odds with the Komnenian emperors over not only tariffs but also a huge sum of money that Emperor John IV (r. 1429–60) owed to the Genoese Bank of St. George at Caffa in the Crimea. John, in turn, suspected the Genoese of conspiring with Mehmed II.

By 1460, John’s successor, David Komnenos, decided to approach the Florentines, newcomers to the Black Sea port, with an attractive set of trade concessions. Trebizond would provide a warehouse with residential quarters and a chapel for the consul, who was to monitor Florentine transactions. The port duty was set at only 2% and the Florentines were granted an exemption from the exit tax; no charges were to be levied against unsold merchandise. The Florentines were also
free to keep male and female slaves for their own use. The emperor guaranteed safe conduct to all Florentine merchants and ships, and promised to give six months' notice for any changes in his policies. The terms of the agreement were presented on December 14th and 15th of that year by “Michele degli Alighieri,” a Florentine merchant residing in Trebizond who acted as David Komnenos's ambassador. Representatives of the Commune of Florence, including Piero de' Medici, gathered at Santa Croce to hear the details and to draft an enthusiastic response. When Trebizond fell the following year, the contract became void; however, Florence continued to send ships to Trebizond under agreements with the Ottomans.

The Florentines could also draw on firsthand accounts of Trebizond's history from the Greek scholars who had emigrated to Italy, such as Manuel Chrysoloras (d. 1415), George of Trebizond (d. 1486), Cardinal Bessarion, and John Argyropoulos (d. 1486). Among the key facts about the city would have been Trebizond's foundation in 756 B.C. and its dramatic expansion after the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, when the Byzantine emperor sought refuge on the littoral of the Black Sea. Even after the reestablishment of Constantinople in 1261, the Komnenoi of Trebizond experienced a stormy relationship with the rival Byzantine Palaiologan dynasty on the Bosphorus, since each claimed the title of "Emperor and Autocrat of the Romans." Trapezuntine politics were infamous for their factionalism, corruption, and palace coups. Besides jockeying for position with Constantinople within the Byzantine hierarchy, Trebizond also had to deal with other threats to its autonomy. In the early thirteenth century, the Seljuks of Rum (Anatolia) subjugated Trebizond, and the Komnenian emperors were obliged to pay an annual tribute to their new masters. After the conquest of Baghdad in 1258, Trebizond briefly became a vassal of the Mongols. Moreover, the city periodically faced attacks by its Christian neighbors, as well as by the Islamic Turkmen dynasties.

**TURKMENS**

The Turkmens, a group of peoples of East Turkic stock, were distantly related to the Ottoman Turks but po-
In the 1460s, for example, Paola Strozzi, of the Ferrarese branch of the Florentine family, married Zarabinus Turchus. The humanist Ludovico Carbone delivered an epitaphalium in which he praised the groom by connecting his family name to the homonymous Ottoman Turks, and thence to the noble Trojans, their purported ancestors. But humanist historiography combined seamlessly with mercantile self-interest. Some Florentines may have imaginatively identified Turks with Trojans, but they also paid lip service to the idea of crusade, even while they hoped to expand their trade in the Black Sea region.

Politically independent; they saw themselves as indirect successors to the Timurids. The Turkmens comprised fifty clans, divided into two federations, the Black Sheep (Karakuuyunlu) and the White Sheep (Akkuuyunlu). The power base of the White Sheep was initially centered in Mesopotamia, with the court located at Diyarbakir; in the 1460s, the capital moved to the more prestigious city of Tabriz. The territory controlled by the White Sheep eventually included portions of present-day Anatolia, Armenia, Iraq, and Iran. Observing that the Turkmen prince Uzun Hasan (d. 1478) had married the Trapezuntine princess Theodora Komnena in 1458, Callman hypothesized a link between this wedding and the Trebizond cassone. Paribeni has recently returned to this fruitful suggestion. Callmann thought that Uzun Hasan (who appears in fifteenth-century Italian sources as, alternately, Usan Cassan, Assambech, Assambei, Zoncassano, and the “Re di Persia”) was an “important ally” of Mehmed II, who nonetheless lost his estates as the sultan consolidated his territory along the coast of the Black Sea. She associated the representation of the fall of Trebizond not with crusade propaganda, as Weisbach had initially suggested, but rather with a Turcophile enthusiasm. Western sympathy with the Ottoman Turks, she pointed out, was “...abetted by the humanists who called the Turks Teucri (Trojans) and saw in their sack of the Greek capital just retribution for the sack of Troy by the Greeks...the Fall of Trebizond is brought into the orbit of Apollonio [di Giovanni]’s oc-

Fig. 10. Detail of the Trebizond cassone (fig. 1): Rumeli Hisar. (Photo: courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York)

Fig. 11. Venetian?, Drawing of Rumeli Hisar, ca. 1453. Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, Codex 641. (Photo: courtesy of the Archivio Storico Civico-Biblioteca Trivulziana)
Callmann was right to look for connections to marriage, the single most appropriate theme for a fifteenth-century Florentine wedding chest. She was also right to link the Trebizond cassone with Uzun Hasan, though in fact the connections are deeper and even more closely tied to historical events of the 1450s than either she or Paribeni have realized. Turks and Turkmens, though easily lumped together from a historical and geographical distance, were actually in fierce competition with one another over territorial dominion. Rather than being an ally of Mehmed II, the “Grand Turk,” Uzun Hasan, called the “Little Turk,” was a lifelong rival, who repeatedly attempted to ally with Western powers in order to block Ottoman expansion in Anatolia. Rather than recording a climactic defeat as all previous scholars have supposed, the Trebizond cassone instead depicted auspicious events in which a powerful son-in-law, Uzun Hasan, protected the interests of his wife’s family, the Komnenoi.

SETTING THE SCENE

In 1456, two years before the wedding of Theodora Komnena and Uzun Hasan, an outbreak of plague rendered Trebizond weak and vulnerable to attack. Threats emerged from the Turkmens, the Safavid Shaykh Junayd (d. 1460), and, most seriously, the Ottoman governor of nearby Amasya. As the governor’s troops approached the suburbs of the plague-stricken city, Junayd withdrew and took refuge with Uzun Hasan. John IV Komnenos, frightened by the show of Ottoman strength, agreed to a tribute of 3,000 gold pieces, to be paid annually by the emperor of Trebizond to the sultan in Istanbul. John apparently hoped that the tribute would postpone further incursions into his territory. But as he watched Trapezuntine autonomy begin to erode, he also began to negotiate with Uzun Hasan for military protection. The marriage of the Turkmen leader to his daughter, Theodora, was intended to cement the alliance.

The Komnenoi and the Turkmens enjoyed limited coexistence in this period; the nomadic tribes had authority over the grazing lands in the countryside, while the Greeks controlled the urban center and commerce. Theodora’s marriage to Uzun Hasan of the White Sheep was not exceptional. In fact, the Komnenoi had a longstanding policy of marrying their daughters to Turkmen husbands; at least eight such marriages were celebrated during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These marriages resulted in mutual benefits: the Turkmens gained some control over their northwestern border and access to sea trade, while the ruling family of Trebizond was increasingly able to depend on Turkmen allies for defense against the Ottomans.

For his part, Uzun Hasan was faced with power struggles and factions within the White Sheep clans. To solidify his position, he had his sister, Khadija, marry Shaykh Junayd and thereby forged an alliance with him. Then, in 1457, he defeated his elder brother, Jahangir, the former leader of the White Sheep, established himself in Diyarbakir, in northern Mesopotamia, and became the dominant leader of the federation. In 1458, once the White Sheep had been unified and Uzun Hasan’s ascendancy was assured, the emperor of Trebizond presided over the Turkmen leader’s marriage to his daughter, Theodora. At that time, Uzun Hasan agreed to join an anti-Ottoman coalition with the Komnenoi and other Anatolian and Caucasian powers, including Georgia, Mingrelia, Sinop, and Karaman, forming the so-called Asiatic League.

The bridal procession to Diyarbakir included a party of noble ladies as well as priests. Theodora joined Uzun Hasan’s three Muslim wives, already in residence. She was allowed to remain a Christian and to maintain a chapel and a chaplain. This concession to Theodora’s faith was perhaps not surprising, given that Uzun Hasan’s own mother was rumored to have been a Christian, and several of his relatives had likewise married Christian brides. A later fifteenth-century traveler, Zorzi of Flanders, wrote that Theodora gave Uzun Hasan a chain with a crucifix to wear for protection in battle. Zorzi went on to say that out of love for his wife, or perhaps by divine grace, Uzun Hasan took the crucifix and enjoyed great prosperity. By 1470, as Zorzi’s account attests, the rumor that Uzun Hasan had secretly converted to the Christian faith was circulating in Europe. A Venetian ballad, dating to 1477, claims that Uzun Hasan became a Christian like his allies who fought the Grand Turk and that his golden flags featured images of the Virgin Mary.

After his marriage to Theodora Komnena, Uzun Hasan considered Trebizond a vassal state of the White
The Turkmen victories of 1459–60 at Melet and Koylu Hisar help us to read the imagery of the Trebizond cassone (fig. 1). The battle occurs not in Trebizond itself but to the south and west of the city, in the general direction of the disputed principality on the Ottoman border. An early version of the name, “Koyunlu Hisar,” or Sheep Fortress, attests to the association of the White Sheep with this site.47

The White Sheep attack on Koylu Hisar in the autumn of 1459 was initially successful, but Mehmed’s troops later regrouped. In 1460, Uzun Hasan personally led the charge to retake the border fortress. According to John E. Woods, he “scattered the besiegers and pursued them as far west as their base in Sivas. The Akkuyulu sources deemed this riposte a great success, resulting in the capture of many Ottoman prisoners and much booty.”48 Although in hindsight we might dismiss the struggle over Koylu Hisar as a mere border skirmish, it was one of the most significant engagements between Turkmen and Ottoman forces from the time of Uzun Hasan’s marriage in 1458 until the fall of Trebizond in 1461.49 The immediate result was a truce. For the time being, Mehmed II acceded to Uzun Hasan’s claims to the vassalage of Trebizond, although he was already planning a siege for the following year.

The Turkmen victories of 1459–60 at Melet and Koylu Hisar help us to read the imagery of the Trebizond cassone (fig. 1). The battle occurs not in Trebizond itself but to the south and west of the city, in the general direction of the disputed principality on the Ottoman border. In the foreground, Ottoman troops enter the scene from the west, while the Turkmens are shown arriving from the east. Fallen soldiers from both armies appear in the mid-foreground of the composition. But at the right, turban-wearing Turkmens are shown subduing Ottoman Turks wearing janissary caps. The White Sheep soldiers bind the arms of their adversaries and force them to kneel before the approaching triumphal chariot (fig. 12). The adjacent figure on horseback, who gestures towards the defeated Ottoman soldiers, should be identified as David Komnenos, emperor of Trebizond; his outstretched right arm points in the same direction as the seated triumphantor’s baton (fig. 4).50
The emperor seems to serve the function described by Leon Battista Alberti in his *De pictura* (1435):

I like there to be someone in the ‘historia’ who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look, or with ferocious expression and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or some remarkable secret, or by his gestures invites you to laugh or to weep with them.51

The man seated on the lower tier of the triumphal chariot represents the Turkmen leader Uzun Hasan, whose success against the Ottomans up to that point augured the future victories of the Asiatic League.52 His counterpart on the chariot is shown in a higher position, literally and figuratively superior; this is Timur, appearing anachronistically as a reminder of the defeat of the Ottomans in 1402. The juxtaposition of the two military leaders on the chariot and their similarity in dress and gesture provide a visual corollary to Uzun Hasan’s claim to be the legitimate successor of the Timurids.53 At the Council of Mantua in 1459, for example, the humanist Francesco Filelfo delivered an oration in which he “claimed that Christ himself had sent Timur, at the head of a mighty army from the East, to rescue the Byzantine Greeks.”54 On that same occasion, Cardinal Bessarion appealed to European leaders to undertake a crusade and save the Byzantine Greeks from Ottoman aggression.55 A Turkmen ambassador to Venice in 1464 purportedly emphasized the link between Uzun Hasan’s ancestry and his political mission:

The ambassador representing Uzun Hasan recalled how Tamberlan (whom he called the grandfather of his lord) once captured Baisit, father of that Mehmed who reigns today…and he said that he reminded them of Tamberlan’s victory in order to inform the Signoria of his lord’s hostility to the Turk….56

Based on the reports that the Genoese merchant Jacopo de Promontorio de Campis wrote around 1475, Paribeni argues that “Uzun Hasan constructed his own image according to the myth of the legendary Mongol leader; both he and his descendants shared the epithet, ‘new Tamerlane’....”57 The *Trebizond* panel should be understood, then, as introducing the fused histories of Timur and Uzun Hasan, familiar from chronicles and diplomatic relations, into the Florentine visual idiom.

Uzun Hasan’s earliest serious challenge to Mehmed II, at Koylu Hisar in 1459–1460, was a celebrated event, making its way into European sources as well as into the chronicles of the White Sheep. In a letter to the Duke of Burgundy dated April 22, 1460, the emperor of Trebizond explained,

I have given [Theodora] as wife to Assambech [i.e. Hasan Beg]...I have done this to secure him and make him faithful to us in the [Asiatic] league which we made together; and so that he should persevere in fighting against the Turk, who holds Constantinople. And now the alliance has begun operations and has captured in battle many of the Turk’s lands and fortresses which lay on his borders, and now he has retired into his own country.58

The emperor goes on to enumerate the troops and ships at the disposal of the alliance: Uzun Hasan is said to have 50,000 men ready to march. This letter was most likely ghostwritten by Michele Alighieri, the same merchant who presented the details of the Trebizond trade contract to the Florentine Signoria in December 1460, as discussed earlier:59 the letter refers to him in inflated terms, as “Michael de Algeory, baron and ambassador.” But despite such exaggerations of rank, the reference in the letter to the Ottoman loss of land and fortresses can only refer to the recent struggle over Melet and Koylu Hisar. And Alighieri would have had ample opportunity to spread information about the Turkmen victories and Trebizond’s fraught situation as he traveled, from 1460 to 1462, between Burgundy, Florence, Rome, Milan, and Bologna, as part of an embassy representing the Asiatic League.60

**PATRONAGE**

A Florentine patron of the *Trebizond* cassone could easily have seen in Uzun Hasan a *bona fide* champion of Christianity, a heroic defender of the last bastion of the Byzantine Empire, a valiant general and a loyal son-in-law. Such an idealized image would have appealed to those Florentine patrician merchants who by 1460 hoped that the Asiatic League might help curb Ottoman expansion while nevertheless protecting trade in the Levant. The dual objectives of faith and profit led
to a certain ambivalence: on the one hand, the Florentines shared a general anxiety that conflict with the Ottomans would eventually move into Europe, yet the city’s bankers were reluctant to underwrite the expense of another papal crusade. Throughout their pontificates, Popes Calixtus III (r. 1455–58) and Pius II (r. 1458–64) tirelessly promoted crusade against the Ottomans. One of their peripheral strategies involved keeping Mehmed II’s supposed stepbrother, Celepino—also known as Il Turchetto, Bajezid Osman, and Calixtus Ottomanus—as a pampered hostage in Ancona.61 By encouraging Celepino’s imperial aspirations, the popes hoped to play him off against the sultan. In return for papal protection, in 1456 Celepino dutifully converted to Christianity. In 1459, Pius II took this crusade “mascot” to the Council of Mantua, where he must have made an impression on all the delegates, including Bessarion, Filelfo, and those from Florence. Yet Florentine public opinion remained deeply divided about contributing funds and participating in the crusade effort. Between 1457 and 1460, prior to the fall of Trebizond, Florentine support for a papal crusade was at its lowest point.62

Given this context, it seems likely that the Trebizond wedding chest was made for a merchant involved in international trade who hoped to turn a profit on Florentine state galleys bound for the Black Sea. Two such galleys left in August of 1459 and returned in midsummer the following year; one ship ventured beyond Constantinople, making the first official Florentine visit to Trebizond. Five hundred Florentines, including two hundred patricians, were on board, and the value of the goods carried was estimated at one hundred thousand florins.63 The presence of these galleys in Ottoman waters probably accounts for Florentine reluctance to join the crusade proposed by Pope Pius II at the Council of Mantua.64 The potential for profit in the Black Sea region as well as the hope of gaining political advantages over Venice effectively stalled Florentine participation in the pope’s crusade plans.

Any of the Florentine patricians who made the voyage to Trebizond might have heard of the exploits of Uzun Hasan and the Turkmen victories at Melet and Koylu Hisar. And the men who sailed in 1459 returned to Florence well in advance of the arrival of the above-mentioned embassy of the Asiatic League, which brought with it Michele Alighieri, his letter from David Komnenos to the Duke of Burgundy, and the formal trade agreement from the emperor of Trebizond. Given the proximity of these events, we can safely assume the presence of many interested and well-informed potential patrons for the Trebizond cassone in the years 1459–60. It is harder to speculate about the intended female audience for the wedding chest, but perhaps the contemporary Florentine bride who received it could imagine herself, like Theodora Komnena, as the link between powerful men whose deeds make history. Some brides, like those from the Acciaioli family—the Dukes of Athens until 1458—might have identified even more closely with the subject matter, as it echoed their own immediate histories. Stories involving female intermediaries between rival or enemy men often appear on Florentine wedding chests. In cassone paintings featuring Hippolyta, Camilla, Dido, the Sabine women, Lucretia, or Virginia, for example, the women bring about a resolution to conflicts between men, either by their marriages or by their own stoic deaths.65 The private, domestic lives of brides might, by association with such famous figures from myth and history, be shown to have an impact on public, political events and institutions.

Despite the earliest known provenance of the Trebizond chest from the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, we cannot be certain that the original commission came from a member of that family. The Strozzi represent just one possibility among the many wealthy patricians who might have commissioned this lavishly decorated cassone from the workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono. Even the birds that appear on the testa, usually said to be Strozzi devices, might be construed as falcons, hawks, or even eagles, birds prominent in the heraldry of not only the Guelph party in Florence and the Komnenoi of Trebizond, but also the Genoese merchants resident in the Black Sea region (fig. 2).66 If the birds on the Trebizond cassone do refer to the Strozzi family, they present a much more simplified version of the falcon than the family customarily used.

At least three different possible Strozzi patrons can be identified in the bottega book from the shop of Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono. Callmann suggested that the chest was commissioned in 1462 for the marriage of Caterina Strozzi and Jacopo degli Spini in 1465.67 Paribeni argues that Caterina’s uncle, Vanni,
rather than her father, Benedetto, must have commissioned the chest: Vanni Strozzi contributed to the financial backing for a galley to the Black Sea and Trebizond in 1462 and again in 1468. More recently, Lurati has suggested that Filippo Strozzi, exiled in Naples and familiar with international trade and Black Sea politics, commissioned the chest for his marriage in 1466 to Fiammetta degli Adimari. Lurati argues that the triumph of Timur on the Trebizond chest echoes Filippo’s triumphant return to Florence from his Neapolitan exile. To date, no new documentary evidence has come to light that would confirm any of these recent attempts to identify the patron of the Trebizond wedding chest.

The scene depicted on the Trebizond cassone should no longer be confused with the Ottoman takeover of the city in 1461. Its subject matter must predate this event, which would have rendered meaningless the auspicious aspects of Uzun Hasan’s story. Changes in Florentine foreign policy make it very unlikely that the wedding chest was commissioned much after 1460, when Florence shifted its policy toward Mehmed II and Venice fell out of favor with the sultan. Callmann reminds us that “in fact, in 1461 the Venetians were ousted from their houses in Constantinople and these were given to the Florentines.” By 1463, the conflict between Venice and the Ottomans had blossomed into a full-fledged war. From 1464 until his death in 1478, Uzun Hasan embraced Venice rather than Florence as his major European ally. He saw the Venetian Republic as the best source of the weapons he needed to confront the sultan’s armies. But even Uzun Hasan’s alliance with the Serenissima, the pope, and Naples did not prevent the Ottomans from attaining a decisive victory over the Turkmens at Bashkent in August 1473. The climactic battle was commemorated in an anonymous sixteenth-century Ottoman miniature painting showing Turkmen captives along with beheaded victims in the foreground, including Uzun Hasan’s own son, Zeynal (fig. 13).

Some months before the defeat at Bashkent, Uzun Hasan appeared as a heroic figure in the Italian popular imagination. He was featured in a Carnival play performed at the residence of Cardinal Riario in Rome in March of 1473. The festivities included a lavish banquet, a battle that ended with the defeat of the Turks and their conversion to Christianity, and a duel fought between the captain of the “Macedonians” (understood as Uzun Hasan) and that of the Turks. The play concluded with Mehmed II being taken captive and confined in the Cardinal’s palace. Such theater spectacle allowed for a triumphantly happy ending that was not attainable on the battlefield. And as we have already seen, Uzun Hasan’s legendary deeds in battle were still being celebrated in a Venetian ballad circa 1477. But in contrast to the ongoing interest in Uzun Hasan on
the part of the Romans and the Venetians, the Florentines gave a chilly reception to an embassy that the Turkmen leader sent to them in 1475.77

The particular confluence of circumstances in the late 1450s to 1460 that led to the production of the Trebizond cassone by Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Giovanni was so short-lived and volatile that the subject never again found its way into Florentine painting. Despite the fall of Constantinople, the Signoria had sent an official letter to Mehmed II in 1455 thanking him for his good treatment of Florentine merchants in Ottoman territory and asking for free access to all cities within his dominion.78 By 1459, Florence had strengthened the administration of the Consoli del Mare and sent a state galley to the Black Sea. It was also on the verge of receiving its first formal trade contract from the Byzantine emperor of Trebizond. The Trebizond cassone should be understood in relation to this pivotal moment in Florentine foreign policy and Ottoman expansion, when alliances were fluid, business concerns trumped plans for crusade, and Mehmed II’s ultimate triumph in the region was still in the future. The battle between the Turkmen and the Ottomans may have had only momentary relevance for Florentine viewers. The cassone painting nevertheless suggests a complex and nuanced understanding of the region, its history, and its various inhabitants.

Although Bessarion’s encomium on Trebizond did not directly influence the creation of the Florentine wedding chest, both works employed a dual temporal scheme, juxtaposing past and present. Bessarion describes the painted interior of the imperial palace:

All round, on the walls, is painted the choir of the emperors, both those who have ruled our land and their ancestors; also painted there are the dangers our city has undergone and those who in attacking it have done so to their own detriment.79

The cassone similarly recalls Timur’s 1402 victory at Ankara while depicting the Turkmen victories of 1459–60. The Trapezuntine frescoes and the cassone panel each focus on the theme of legitimate succession. So too each serves an apotropaic function: by depicting victories in the past and present, these painted histories discourage future attacks and presage a triumphant future. The Trebizond wedding chest is a “composite enterprise,” representing contemporary events viewed through humanist rhetoric. As Margaret Meserve explains, “the critical analysis of literal ‘facts’ was central, but could never take place at the expense of the larger moral or political point of the work.”80 The Trebizond cassone produced by Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono likewise drew on the literal fact of Uzun Hasan’s momentary success to make larger claims about the triumph of Christian faith, politics, and profit.

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NOTES

Author’s note: The European Painting Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York kindly allowed me access to the curatorial files relating to the Trebizond cassone in the fall of 2003. My colleagues at Tufts University, Eva Hoffman and Beatrice Manz, encouraged my work on this topic, while a number of individuals provided assistance: James G. Harper, Karen Leal, Christina Maranci, Margaret Meserve, Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, Gülru Necipoğlu, Jeffrey Ravel, Elizabeth Rodini, Stefan Wololojyan, John E. Woods, and an anonymous reviewer for Muqarnas. David Roxburgh helped me to obtain a photograph from the Topkapi Palace Museum Library. This project benefited from a Faculty Research Award and a Mellon-funded sabbatical at Harvard University in 2009–10 provided additional support for my current book project.

sance, 2 vols. (Leipzig: K. W. Hiersemann, 1915–23), 1:283. Conservation of the Trebizond chest at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has recently revealed that the various panels were not originally part of the same piece of furniture: see entry number 56 by Deborah Krohn in Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, ed. Andrea Bayer (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 129–33. This finding throws into question the provenance and presumed patronage of the chest.

2. Domestic painting has been the subject of several recent exhibitions: The Triumph of Marriage: Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance, curated by Cristelle Baskins and Alan Chong, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, 2008; Love and

3. The bottega book now exists only in a seventeenth-century copy. While it may include errors or omissions, it is nevertheless an important source of information.


7. Schubring, Cassoni, 283.


10. The inscription was so faint that Weisbach made no mention of it when he published the chest. See entry no. 56 by Krohn, in Bayer, Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, 130.


13. Reinhard Steiner, “Tamerlan—der ‘Zorn Gottes’ als Georgsritter? Legende und historische Anspie lung in Pisanellos Georgsfresko in der Chiesa di Sant’Antanastasia zu Verona,” Pantheon 54 (1996): 26–37. Steiner refers to images of Timur wearing a turban, dressed in armor, and carrying a scimitar in some fifteenth-century illustrated histories: see, for example, the Crespi chronicle (Milan), a Venetian chronicle (Turin), and the Corsini chronicle (Rome).

Islam e Occidente a confronto (Florence: Museo Stibbert, 1998).


28. See Miller, Trebizond, 35–37, for the vengeance taken on Trebizond by a fourteenth-century Genoese noble named Megollo Lercari.

29. Miller, Trebizond, 93.


33. Miller, Trebizond, 27.


42. Woods, The Aqquyunlu, 242, definitively rejects the idea that Sara Hatun was Christian. On Uzun Hasan’s supposed Christianity, see Meserve, Empires of Islam, 226.


45. Babinger, Mehem the Conqueror, 190; Woods, The Aqquyunlu, 89–90.


47. Babinger, Mehem the Conqueror, 192; Woods, The Aqquyunlu, 89–90.


49. Steven Runciman, The Fall of Constantinople, 1453 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 174, notes that Mehmed stopped to take possession of Koylu Hisar prior to the final push for Trebizond; see also Woods, The Aqquyunlu, 90.

50. He is identified as David Komnenos by Callmann, Apollonio di Giovanni, 49, as well as by Rosamund Mack, Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 156.


52. In an earlier, unpublished version of this essay, I proposed that the subsidiary figure was Uzun Hasan’s defeated brother, Jahangir. The entry by Krohn in Bayer, Art and Love, 133, refers to that preliminary work, which I have now revised.


54. Meserve, “From Samarkand to Scythia,” 33; Meserve, Empires of Islam, 216.


56. Meserve, Empires of Islam, 226.


65. These mytho-historical figures are the subjects of my first book; see Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender*.


78. Müller, *Documenti*, 182.
