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Exploring Luigi Bonelli's (1865–1947) Personal Archive: The Turkologist's Workshop and Transnational Networks

Abstract

This article explores the personal archive of Luigi Bonelli, the first Italian professor of Turkish language and a foundational figure in Italian Turkology. Preserved at the Library of the Pontifical Antonianum Institute in Rome and only recently arranged and catalogued, the Fondo Bonelli contains correspondence, teaching materials, research notes, drafts, and documents relating to Bonelli's long career at the Regio Istituto Orientale in Naples. The article examines the archive as a privileged entry point into Bonelli's scholarly workshop and into his distinctive method of linguistic inquiry, based on correspondence, conversation, and direct encounters with native speakers. Particular attention is devoted to his Ottoman Turkish correspondence, which reveals patterns of mobility, exchange, and presence of Ottoman subjects in Naples and Italy between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By reconstructing the history of the archive's acquisition after Bonelli's death, and by connecting the Fondo Bonelli with other archival fragments preserved in Italy, the article contributes to a broader understanding of Italian Turkology, Orientalist networks, and the circulation of knowledge across the Mediterranean.

Keywords: Luigi Bonelli, Italian Turkology, Italian-Turkish relations, Naples, Paul Mulla, Transnational Orientalist networks

1. Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian academic world witnessed an important innovation: for the first time, a chair of Turkish language was established. This development took place during a crucial phase in the institutionalisation and expansion of Oriental studies in Italy, a process that, moreover, closely paralleled what was occurring in other European countries.[1] Only a few years earlier, for example, in 1887, Turkish language instruction had been introduced at the *Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen* in Berlin, itself following the example of the *École des Langues Orientales* in Paris and the *Kaiserlich-königliche Akademie*

1 On the institutionalisation of Oriental studies in Italy, and of Turkology in particular, especially as part of the broader process of the nationalisation of higher education after Italian unification, see Bossaert 2021 and 2023. More generally on Oriental studies in Italy, see also Mastrangelo 2021; the research carried out by Alice Crisanti, especially her study on the establishment of the Scuola Orientale (1903–1904) within the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Rome (Crisanti 2021); and the collective volume by Bruno Lo Cunto, Alice Crisanti, and Valentina Bella Lanza 2024.

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für orientalische Sprachen in Vienna.[2] In Italy, the chair was established at the *Regio Istituto Orientale* in Naples, the successor institution to the *Collegio de' Cinesi*, a religious institution founded by the priest Matteo Ripa for the training of young Chinese missionaries.[3] The introduction of Turkish language teaching had already appeared among the aims of the institute following its first post-Unification transformation into the *Regio Collegio Asiatico* in 1878, whose purpose was 'to initiate and perfect in linguistic studies those young Italians and foreigners who intend to devote themselves to Catholic missions, consulates, commerce, scientific exploration, teaching in the regions of Asia, and other similar pursuits.' Yet it was only after the important reform of 1888 and the consequent transformation into the *Regio Istituto Orientale* that instruction in 'vernacular Turkish' actually began to be offered. In effect, university-level teaching of Turkish in Italy commenced in 1890. The position was initially held by Stefan Jasigian, an Armenian from Trabzon, formerly a dragoman and already experienced in teaching at Italian schools within the Ottoman Empire.[4] He later became *assistente indigeno*—effectively a native-language instructor responsible for practical exercises—when, following a new institutional regulation requiring Italian citizenship, the chair of Turkish was assigned to Luigi Bonelli. Thus, in 1891, upon returning from a one-year stay in Constantinople, Bonelli became the first *Italian* professor of Turkish in Italy and, in effect, the founder of Turkology understood as an Italian scientific and academic discipline.[5] As Ettore Rossi wrote in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, it was thanks to him that 'in Italy Turkological studies were elevated to the rank of a science.'[6] From the moment he took office on 1 January 1892, Bonelli taught Turkish language until his retirement upon reaching the age limit in 1935, although in practice he remained active at the *Regio Istituto Orientale* until his death in January 1947, serving in various additional capacities. He also acted as director of the institute for a three-year term (1914–1916).[7]

2 Kreiser 2020.

3 Fatica 2005.

4 I owe this information on Stefan Jasigian to Marie Bossaert, who reconstructed the origins of Turkology through research conducted also in the Historical Archive of the Orientale; see Bossaert 2021, 184. In her research, she demonstrates how, in Italy as elsewhere in Europe, figures such as Jasigian—people from the Middle East and Asia teaching at universities – were effectively downgraded and confined to subordinate positions such as 'language assistants,' with no possibility of further academic advancement, as part of a broader process of the nationalisation of university faculties and the 'subalternisation of non-European scholars' (p. 185). More specifically on Armenians teaching in Italy and on the particular case of Stefan Jasigian, see also Bossaert 2013 and 2017.

5 Ettore Rossi wrote: 'Italian scholars of Turkish subjects recognise in Luigi Bonelli the initiator of the scientific orientation of Turkology in Italy' (Rossi 1947, 13).

6 Rossi 1935.

7 Information concerning the biography and works of Luigi Bonelli can be found in Bombaci 1947 and 1969; Rossi 1947; and Şakiroğlu 1992. Numerous documents relating to the positions held by Bonelli and to his career at the Regio Istituto Orientale are preserved in the Archivio Storico dell'Università di Napoli L'Orientale (hereafter ASUNO) and in the Bonelli Archive (FB) preserved at the Pontifical Antonianum University (hereafter PAA).

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Luigi Bonelli is generally recognised as the initiator and first internationally acknowledged representative of a discipline that, in Italy for much of the twentieth century, revolved essentially around only a few other names in an almost linear and genealogical trajectory: Ettore Rossi (1894–1955), Alessio Bombaci (1914–1979), and Aldo Gallotta (1941–1997).[8] The latter two taught in Naples, always at the *Istituto Orientale*, while Ettore Rossi – another outstanding figure in Turkology – spent his entire academic career in Rome. Marie Bossaert has devoted extensive and excellent research to reconstructing the origins and early development of Italian Turkology, and consequently to the figure and important role of Luigi Bonelli.[9] This article focuses in particular on his documentary legacy, namely the scholar's personal archive, a collection that has so far remained little explored and which I have recently arranged and catalogued for the first time.[10] From the history of the archive itself to the analysis of a specific section—its correspondence with the scholar—the article seeks to shed light on transnational networks of interaction across different political and social spheres, which also offer insights into relations between the Ottoman Empire/Turkey and Italy.

2. The Bonelli Archive

Bonelli's personal archive (*Fondo Bonelli*, hereafter FB) is preserved at the Library of the Pontifical Antonianum Institute, an educational and scholarly institution promoted by the Order of Friars Minor and based in Rome.

The personal archive was acquired as an integral part of Luigi Bonelli's private library: 'a collection of more than one thousand printed volumes and manuscript papers, consisting almost entirely of books in Oriental languages and literatures: Persian, Turkish, and Arabic. The remainder of the collection consists largely of works of modern foreign languages and literatures.'[11] This description accompanied the registration of the library with the former Royal Bibliographical Superintendency for the provinces of Campania and Calabria, together with the declaration of particular interest, an administrative act recognising the collection's value and subjecting it to legal protection. However, despite the obligatory institutional procedures, no trace survives of the inventory of the private library, nor does there currently exist within the Antonianum Library a separate and

8 The state of Turkology during the first half of the twentieth century was the subject of a number of descriptive surveys written—apart from Bausani, the distinguished Islamologist and Persianist—by the Turkologists themselves. See Bausani 1950; Bonelli 1940; Carretto 1979; and Rossi 1934; 1935.

9 Bossaert 2013; 2017; 2021; 2023.

10 The arrangement and cataloguing of the archive were carried out within the framework of the project *ReDigiOr – Recovering and Digitalizing the UniOr Cultural Heritage and Its Entangled Histories: the Bonelli Archive*, funded through a university research grant (2023–2026), and were made possible thanks to the fruitful collaboration of the Library of the Pontifical Antonianum University, whose director, Dr De Bellis, is gratefully acknowledged here.

11 Registered communication addressed to the author from the Archival and Bibliographical Superintendency of Lazio, protocol no. 28.34.07/76/2026.

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identifiable book collection, since the volumes were never marked and were subsequently redistributed according to other organisational criteria.[12] Only after lengthy research in the library archives was it possible to reconstruct the extent of the collection. To date, Bonelli's library has never been studied, and nothing is known about the consultation or use of its volumes. The very existence of the collection had effectively been forgotten owing to at least two factors: first, the fact that it was a specialist Orientalist collection housed within a library with no particular focus on Oriental studies and which, as the library of the university of the Friars Minor, specialised primarily in theological studies and studies relating to the Franciscan order; and second, the dispersal of the volumes across different sections of the library.[13]

The fate of the personal archive itself was different, although it too remained little explored and, for decades, uncatalogued and simply organised in boxes.

The Bonelli Archive consists of a highly varied archive of personal papers including drafts of published and unpublished works, research material, teaching material, documents relating to Bonelli's activities at the Oriental Institute, and finally—and most substantially—an enormous body of correspondence. This includes exchanges with Italian and foreign institutions, with various colleagues and important figures of the emerging Italian Orientalist milieu, private correspondence with foreign Orientalists, and also with numerous Ottomans.

The archive still remains organised into four boxes containing highly diverse folders, whose original titles accurately reflect the variety of materials preserved within them:

FB_5(1): Bonelli. Documenti Istituto Orientale. Corrispondenza varia. Varia. Necrologia. Corrispond. dizion. turco-italiano

FB_6(2): Bonelli. Corrispondenza turca. La dottrina dei babi. Notizie sull'Afganistan. Prediche maltesi

FB_7(3): Recueil de firmans Imp. Othomans adresses al'Egypte (Stampato). Grammatica turca per italiani. Grammatica turca per tedeschi. Documenti fam. Buonocore.

FB_8(4): Corrispondenza varia; Corrispondenza Ettore Rossi.[14]

12 Research on this matter proved rather complex because, during the course of the twentieth century, responsibility for the historical archives of the Italian bibliographical superintendencies was transferred to different institutions, resulting in the relocation of the archives themselves, many of which remain either uncatalogued or dispersed. Only after an extensive and challenging search through the library's historical archive, it was nevertheless possible to trace documentation relating to the correspondence exchanged between Mrs. Buonocore, Bonelli's widow, the Antonianum Library, the Istituto Universitario Orientale, and the Superintendencies of the two Italian regions concerned, Campania (for Naples) and Lazio (for Rome), though not the list of volumes itself.

13 These considerations are based on extensive conversations with the library director; studies of the library drawing on primary sources from its archives and on secondary literature (Oliger 1950; Novelli 1999); and a series of cross-checks and analyses of its holdings and catalogue records.

14 The titles of the boxes correspond to the original ones assigned by the Library. However, according to the Library's own organisation, the archive would appear to consist of nine boxes, as indicated in the online catalogue. URL: https://oseegenius-ant.urbe.it/ant/

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So far, the collection has provided research material to only a very small number of scholars. Above all, it was Giacomo Carretto—a refined scholar of Turkey, less well known because he worked outside the academic sphere, albeit within one of Italy's major centres for Oriental studies, the Istituto per l'Oriente in Rome—who first worked on Bonelli's unpublished materials and surviving documentation, thereby effectively leaving traces of the archive's very existence. Thus, in an article retracing the state of Turkology in Italy, he examined several of Bonelli's manuscripts found in the collection.[15]

Further references appear in a contribution critically and perceptively exploring the history of Italian Orientalism and its links with the country's political and colonial history, significantly entitled ''Sapere' e 'potere': l'Istituto per l'Oriente 1921-1943,' (Knowledge and Power: the Istituto per l'Oriente 1921–1943) which refers to several documents preserved in the FB, particularly correspondence with Ettore Rossi.[16] These traces later proved useful to other scholars. Maria Petrelli, following Carretto's lead, examined the collection and focused in particular on certain documents, including Bonelli's manuscript entitled *La Dottrina dei Babi*.[17] Marie Bossaert likewise found her encounter with the Italian scholar particularly significant, consulting the Bonelli Collection among other sources in her research on the origins of Italian Turkology during the period from Italian Unification (1861) to the Italo-Turkish War of 1911.[18]

It is therefore above all to Carretto that we owe the first use of these documents and, above all, the clues that allowed this collection to be rediscovered, since, as already noted, it remained without an inventory until very recently. Given the history accompanying both the archive and the library, there was a real risk that this heritage, although preserved, would remain static and ignored by scholars. Yet, at the same time, the history of the acquisition of this collection offers stimulating perspectives for enriching and deepening the study of the origins of Italian and European Orientalism, as well as the importance of the circulation of information, networks of intellectual relations, and the porosity between academic, diplomatic, religious, and military milieus between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

resource?uri=173694&v=l&dcnr=8 (last accessed 1 April 2026). Research on the acquisition discussed in this article has shown that the first four boxes, as well as the ninth, bear no relation to Luigi Bonelli.

15 Carretto 1979.

16 Carretto 1983, 218.

17 Petrelli 2011a, 2011b. The manuscript was later largely incorporated into one of the Turkologist's earliest publications: Bonelli, 1894. The original manuscript, entitled *La dottrina dei babi*, is preserved in his archive: Pontifical Antonianum University (PAA), Fondo Bonelli (FB), box 6, folder 2.

18 This refers to a doctoral dissertation that I have not, however, had the opportunity to consult: Bossaert, Marie. 2016. 'Connaître les Turcs et l'Empire ottoman en Italie : construction et usages des savoirs sur l'Orient de l'Unité à la guerre italo-turque'. PhD dissertation, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. Bossaert does, however, mention her encounter with Carretto in Bernardini and Bossaert 2018, 289–90.

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3. The Acquisition of the Archive

The Antonianum Library acquired the archive only a few months after Luigi Bonelli's death, following negotiations that were neither particularly complicated nor especially prolonged, though nonetheless of some interest.

Luigi Bonelli died on 26 January 1947 at the age of eighty-one. It had been a long life devoted to the study and research of Turkological questions—though not exclusively so, given the breadth of his more typical Orientalist interests, ranging from Maltese to Persian—especially linguistic ones, and for more than half a century closely tied to the *Regio Istituto Orientale*. Elderly and weakened by health problems and financial difficulties, at the beginning of 1946 he was appointed section director (Balkan area), a position confirmed in October of the same year, and just one month before his death he was still entrusted with teaching *iranico* for the academic year 1946–1947.[19] After his death, however, his library was not acquired by the university, despite repeated attempts by his wife and a number of vague promises.[20] Bonelli's library appears to have been the professor's only asset of real value: registered as a 'library of notable interest' with the Superintendency, it necessarily contained works of considerable significance and prestige.[21] By Bonelli's own wishes, the inheritance passed to Antonietta Buonocore, his long-time housekeeper and someone he regarded as family, whom he married only three days before his death, very likely in order to provide her with some guarantee of subsistence, especially as she herself was already elderly and infirm.[22] Evidence both of this intention and of Bonelli's awareness of the value of the library as a patrimony worth preserving lies in the decision to inventory the entire book collection, a task entrusted to Alessio Bombaci, Bonelli's pupil and successor to the chair of Turkish at the *Istituto Orientale*.[23]

It was by virtue of this legitimate bond that Buonocore submitted requests for financial assistance to the university and also attempted to sell the library to it, though without success.[24] Less than a year after Bonelli's death, the library was acquired by the Pontifical

19 ASUNO, Fasc. Bonelli, respectively 25 February 1946; 26 October 1946; and 13 December 1946. Only Bonelli's very latest assignments are mentioned here. In fact, after he had to retire upon reaching the age limit, apart from teaching Turkish, he never stopped teaching and serving the Oriental Institute. Before becoming co-head of the Balkan section, he had already headed the Iranian-Turkic section, the Eastern European languages section, and the North-Central Asian languages section.

20 ASUNO, Fasc. Bonelli.

21 Bibliographical Superintendency for Campania and Calabria, Register of outgoing correspondence, Pontifical Antonianum Athenaeum, Library Archive. PAA, AB, II.1, 4.

22 Marriage certificate, ASUNO; on the testamentary provisions, see the letter from the Turkologist's brother, Giuseppe Bonelli, who learned of them with regret: PAA, AB, Letter from G. Bonelli to the Antonianum, 8 November 1947, f. 316.

23 *ibid*.

24 ASUNO. On the use of archival patrimonialisation by women linked through family ties to scholars, see Antonelli 2025, where the author investigates women's roles in shaping scientific archives through the management of family legacies in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France.

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Antonianum Institute and transferred in its entirety to Rome. Since the transfer from one Italian region to another required authorisation from the Superintendency because of the declaration of notable interest, this authorisation was duly granted, and this is precisely what occurred within the space of a few weeks.[25]

It is worth examining the circumstances and motivations that led the Franciscan fathers to acquire the library of the deceased Turkologist, since this provides valuable insights into Bonelli's networks of relationships, the reputation and authority he had acquired, and new evidence for broader research on Orientalism in Italy and Europe.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Library of the Pontifical Antonianum Athenaeum was in a phase of expansion, having recently acquired its present premises, and the friars intended to transform it into the most important Antonian centre of studies.[26] It therefore needed to expand its holdings and was interested in acquiring new collections.

This interest was intercepted by Paul Mulla, who proposed the acquisition and acted as intermediary in the negotiations between the Antonianum Institute and Bonelli's widow. Unlike the Franciscan fathers, who had no particular reason to acquire the library of an Orientalist scholar, Paul Mulla clearly recognised the value of Luigi Bonelli's books and papers. Paul Mulla (1881–1959), born Ali Mehmet Mulla Zadé, was a former Ottoman subject from Crete who would become an important figure in relations between Islam and Christianity. Born into a wealthy Turkish family, he pursued his studies in France from adolescence onwards, at Aix-en-Provence, where his encounter with the philosopher Maurice Blondel—who became both mentor and guide—led him to convert to Catholicism. Ordained priest in 1911, he became a papal chaplain and adviser to Pius XI, especially regarding missions in the Islamic East, and from 1924 to 1959 he taught at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, where he lectured on Islamology as well as Arabic, Greek, and Turkish.[27] He was also closely connected with the Orientalist milieu, beginning with Louis Massignon, with whom he maintained an extensive correspondence.[28] He was furthermore deeply familiar with, and held in high regard, the work of Hungarian Turkologists, especially Ignác Goldziher and Ármin Vámbéry, both of whom had, moreover, been among Luigi Bonelli's teachers in 1891, before the latter departed for Constantinople.[29] It was Paul Mulla who managed the negotiations with Bonelli's widow; he supplied the catalogue (now lost) to the friar in charge of the Antonianum Library and suggested purchasing the entire collection, proposing a compromise sum between the two parties:

> à condition qu'elle [Bonelli's widow] vous cède, en outre de tous les livres mentionnés dans les listes communiquées par elle, toutes les autres publications (brochures, revues,

25 PAA, Archivio della Biblioteca (AB), II.1: Communication of the Soprintendenza Bibliografica for Campania and Calabria, 22 October 1947, fol. 305; request of the Soprintendenza Bibliografica for Lazio and Umbria, 24 November 1947, fol. 324; letter from the librarian P. Cesario Van Hulst to the Soprintendenza Bibliografica for Lazio and Umbria, 3 December 1947, fol. 326.

26 Oliger 1950, 291.

27 Poggi 2012.

28 Borrmans 2012.

29 Bossaert 2021, 189.

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livres, etc.) non cataloguées qu'elle m'a écrit faire encore partie du fonds laissé par son mari.[30]

Within only a few months, between September and December 1947, the negotiations were concluded and the transfer completed. Yet despite the obligatory institutional procedures, no trace survives of the inventory of the private library, which Bombaci prepared, nor does the Antonianum Library today preserve a distinct and identifiable book collection, since the volumes were never marked and were subsequently redistributed according to other organisational criteria.

4. Paul Mulla, an Ottoman in Rome

Despite the crucial role he played in mediating the acquisition and transfer of the library from Naples to Rome Paul Mulla remains a relatively understudied figure within the history of Italian Orientalism. Yet during the first half of the twentieth century, he emerges as an important intermediary in the circulation of information, knowledge, and publications between first the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey, on the one hand, and Italy and France on the other. Owing to his family ties, the social milieu to which he belonged, and the position he occupied, he travelled frequently to his country of origin, particularly Constantinople/ Istanbul, and although resident in Rome, where he taught, he also spent long periods in France. In 1913 he acquired French citizenship and also served in the French army during the First World War; however, it was thanks to his knowledge of Oriental languages—Turkish, Greek, Arabic, and Persian—that he was employed in Beirut as interpreter for the French Army of the Levant. Like every member of the Ottoman elite, Paul Mulla was polyglot; members of his family, as well as Mulla himself, had lived or were living abroad (in Germany, the United States, and France), were active in the world of Turkish education, from the French school Notre Dame de Sion to Ankara University; one of them, in Paris, became Inspector of Turkish Students in Western Europe in the early 1930s.[31] He was also actively involved, in the early 1930s, in the project promoted by Hungarian Jesuits to establish a scientific institute in Turkey, a project that also involved several Turkologists.[32] Mulla maintained connections, acquaintances, and relationships across different spheres, including diplomacy as well as academia. His correspondence with Louis Massignon—whom he met while serving with the French army in Beirut and with whom he consults regarding the program of his courses—reveals that he was in contact with Giuseppe Gabrieli, librarian of the Caetani Foundation, and with Ignazio Di Matteo, who taught Arabic at the University of Rome; that he closely followed the publi-

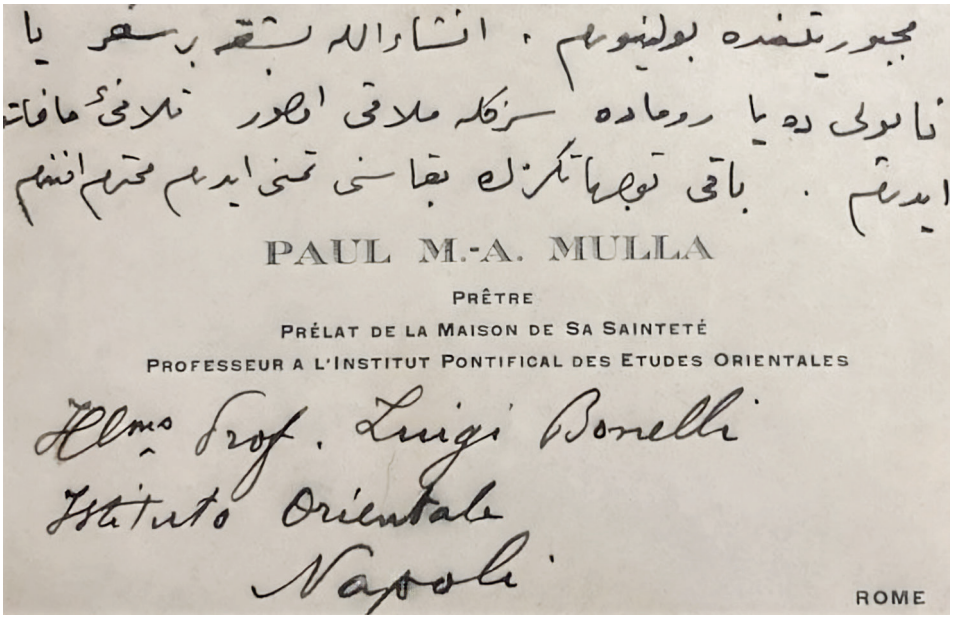
30 'Provided that she [Mrs Bonelli] transfers to you, in addition to all the books listed in the catalogues communicated by her, all the other uncatalogued publications (pamphlets, journals, books, etc.) which, as she wrote to me, still form part of the collection left by her husband' (PAA, AB, II.1, Letter from Paul Mulla to Fr Cesario Van Hulst, Paris, 31 July 1947, f. 301).

31 Most of this information can also be gleaned from his correspondence to Louis Massignon. For example. Borrmans 2012, 299; 329–30.

32 Molnár 2016.

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Figure 1. Paul Mulla's visiting card



cations of Leone Caetani and Michelangelo Guidi; and that he remained well informed about developments within Italian Orientalism.[33] It is therefore hardly surprising that he also knew and maintained relations with Luigi Bonelli.

Among the materials preserved in the FB is one of Mulla's visiting cards bearing a brief handwritten message in which he regrets not having found Bonelli and expresses the hope of meeting the professor somewhere between Rome and Naples (see fig. 1).[34] We do not know the date of this message, but we do know that in 1924 the prelate had contacted the professor in Naples in order to promote the appointment of a young Cretan, Joseph Saki Medih, as *assistente indigeno* of Turkish language. The position was not assigned to him, despite the fact that '*le professeur Bonelli le désirait*,' because preference was given to the '*plus ancienne et plus appuyée*' candidacy of the person already holding the position, an Albanian of Muslim origin who had likewise converted to Christianity.[35]

On other occasions too, Paul Mulla drew upon his own channels and networks, as well as upon the trust placed in him both as a prelate and, by birth, as an excellent connoisseur

33 Note that among his students at the PIO was also Alessandro Bausani, who would learn Turkish from him. Poggi 2012, 79.

34 PAA, FB, b. 6, f.1, n.d. The visiting card bears the affiliation to the Pontifical Oriental Institute (PIO), where Paul Mulla had been appointed from the academic year 1926–1927 onwards.

35 Borrmans 2012, 292. This was most probably Abeidin Feizi, who had taken up the position upon Jasigian's retirement in 1917 and whose post was already being contested in 1922 by a Turkish candidate who, in this case too, was supported by Bonelli. See also Bossaert 2013, 120.

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of Ottoman culture and the Turkish language, in order to mediate, connect, and support individuals arriving from Turkey in Italy or France.[36]

While the role of religious figures in the world of Oriental studies is well known and acknowledged—indeed, the Oriental Institute of Naples itself originated as an institution with a missionary vocation—the figure of Paul Mulla is especially striking because, as an Ottoman, he moved between different relational networks, acted within a transnational space, activated channels according to circumstance, and promoted not only the circulation of knowledge and expertise but also the exchange of contacts. In this sense, and to return to the Bonelli Archive, by promoting its acquisition by the Pontifical Antonianum Institute, he thus contributed—albeit perhaps unintentionally—to the preservation and enhancement of a valuable heritage for the history of Italian Turkology.

Paul Mulla may therefore be understood within that broader and more complex framework of relationships involved in the production and development of knowledge concerning the Ottoman world and Turkey in Italy, to which Ottoman actors themselves contributed significantly, as Bossaert has already shown,[37] and of which Luigi Bonelli himself formed an integral part. The picture is thereby enriched with new and significant elements.

5. Joseph Saki Medih, Ottomans in Italy, and Bonelli's Correspondence

Paul Mulla acted as an intermediary within networks of relationships particularly on behalf of individuals close to the clerical world to which he himself belonged, as well as others engaged in philosophical studies promoting interreligious dialogue, and in several cases, he supported Muslims who had converted to Catholicism. Joseph Saki Medih himself, the unsuccessful candidate for the position of Turkish lecturer in Naples, had converted in Rome in 1924. Yet when he presented himself as a possible lecturer in Turkish, he had already known Bonelli for several years.

Among the Ottoman-language correspondence constituting a substantial part of the personal archive (more than five hundred sheets) are the letters of Saki Medih, who most probably adopted the name Joseph after his baptism. According to Paul Mulla's account, after completing secondary school in Izmir, Saki Medih had begun studying law in Constantinople when Turkey entered the war. Mobilised into the Ottoman army, he later returned to Crete following the armistice and, like many Cretan Muslims, obtained the status of Italian 'colonial subject,' particularly since one of his uncles lived in Tripolitania.[38]

36 As, for example, when he recounts that Nihat Cemal, in 1938, thanks to the intervention of Massignon and the mediation of Jean Deny, succeeded in passing the difficult October examination and subsequently went to the University of Aix-Marseille to prepare for his examination in French literature. Or again when, in 1949, he introduced by letter Mehmet Kaplan, a *doçent* recommended to him by the conservative intellectual Nurettin Topçu, who had been awarded a one-year scholarship in France. Borrmans 2016, 327 and 349.

37 Especially Bossaert 2013 and 2017.

38 Although it deals primarily with Rhodes, for a deeper understanding of Italian Fascist colonial rule over the Greek islands, see Guidi, especially the section 'The Post-Ottoman Mediterranean and Fascist Colonialism' (Guidi 2022, 18–21).

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Having arrived in Rome in either 1922 or 1923, Paul Mulla recounts, he was introduced to Isaias Papadopoulos, assessor of the Oriental Congregation, who became his catechist.[39] Medih, as he signed his letters to Bonelli, was already writing to him in 1921 from Rome, inviting him to visit him at the *Café National*, which he frequented regularly.[40] The correspondence continued over the following years and, although Bonelli's draft replies have not survived, it is reasonable to assume that the two men certainly met.

As early as 1922 Medih informed Bonelli of his wish to pursue an academic career and of the initiatives he had already undertaken in that direction, asking in return whether the assistant then employed was Albanian.[41] Saki Medih sent Bonelli a poetic portrait of a Bektashi dervish and, in 1924—perhaps disappointed after not being admitted to the Oriental Institute—attempted to greet the professor while passing through Naples on his journey to Benghazi after obtaining a passport.[42] Two years later, in 1926, he was still relying on Bonelli for support, including financial assistance. It is therefore entirely possible that Saki Medih had entered into contact with Bonelli before Paul Mulla's mediation. In any case, we may reasonably infer that both men—Bonelli and Paul Mulla—were in contact and shared the commitment and desire to 'assist young Turks who are truly needy and genuinely deserving,' as Paul Mulla wrote while warning the Italian turkologist against possible deceptions.[43]

Luigi Bonelli maintained an extensive correspondence in Ottoman Turkish with numerous individuals residing not only within the Ottoman Empire but also in Italy and elsewhere. Even the illustrations and postmarks on the postcards he received during the first three decades of the twentieth century trace an ideal itinerary stretching from Naples, Rome, Florence, and Geneva to Istanbul, Salonica, Paris, Cairo, Pleven, Cambridge, and even New York—and then once again back to Naples.

Everyone wrote to him in Ottoman Turkish, even after the language reform, evidently out of habit, and only in a few cases does one encounter correspondence in modern Turkish. The correspondence itself is highly varied: there are letters and postcards sent by students, either to submit exercises or simply to maintain contact with the professor after

39 Borrmans 2016, 292.

40 PAA, FB, b. 6, f. 1. Letter from Saki Medih to Bonelli, 21 October 1921 (21 Teşrin-i Evvel 1921).

41 PAA, FB, b. 6, f. 1. Letter from Saki Medih to Bonelli, Rome, 1924.

42 PAA, FB, b. 6, f. 1. Postcard from Saki Mehdi, Rome, 4 April 1924

43 PAA, FB, b. 6, f. 2. In the letter, unfortunately undated, Paul Mulla writes: '[…] Should you in future deem it appropriate to grant him further assistance and, for example, provide him with a railway ticket to Savona, I expressly ask you to charge only half of the amount you will spend. I am convinced that, if you give him too much money, we shall soon be exposed to even more serious acts of sabotage. And I consider it a more important and urgent duty to assist other young Turks who are truly needy and genuinely deserving, rather than accustoming this man to organising frauds. I have long continued to ask myself how such a thing is possible. In short, I have set forth my modest opinion. Nevertheless, I entrust the final decision to your sense of justice and have the honour of expressing to you, Sir, the sentiments of respect that I hold towards your person.' We do not know whether, in this case, Paul Mulla was referring to Saki Medih or to someone else.

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leaving the city. Others turned to Bonelli in order to learn Turkish, such as Giuseppina Zito, headmistress of the school in Cefalù, who was studying Turkish in order to correspond with a friend held prisoner in Kirk Kilisse.[44] Others supplied Bonelli with newspapers and journals on which he could work. Still others were Ottomans temporarily passing through Naples or Italy who evidently regarded him as an important point of reference, such as Bescir Gherrim, a law student whom we find in the 1920s, and at least until 1944, serving as lecturer in Arabic and Arabic dialects at the Oriental Institute.[45]

6. Naples, a Mediterranean Port

From this correspondence—which constitutes only one, albeit substantial, part of the archive—it is possible to grasp the importance of the city of Naples as a place of Ottoman transit and presence. Relations between Naples and the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century remain largely unexplored, and the Bonelli Archive certainly invites further investigation, as it preserves traces not only of temporary presences but also of more stable communities integrated into the urban fabric.

While the *Regio Istituto Orientale* was undoubtedly one of the reasons why individuals from the Ottoman Empire arrived and remained in Naples between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is equally important to consider the significance of the city's port, directly connected not only with Constantinople/Istanbul but also with Alexandria, Tripoli, and many other Mediterranean cities. Owing to its port facilities, Naples occupied a strategic position both for the navy and for the armaments industry. Isaac Yessoua Bey, secretary-general of the Turkish consulate in 1928 and one of Bonelli's correspondents—though it is unclear precisely when, probably after the closure of the vice-consulate in 1932—worked at the Italian torpedo factory, one of the country's most important industrial establishments.[46] Likewise, not far from the city, in the town of Capua, there was an important command centre of the Royal Air Force Academy, where Bonelli also came to teach Persian.[47]

Naples was also a centre of emigration towards the American continent, to which Armenians fleeing persecution would depart, but it was equally a point of departure for the Ottoman Empire, attracting workers, musicians, Italians seeking employment, and individuals leaving the country for political reasons; finally, it was also a place of arrival. The city hosted an important consular office located close to the port. Even the Turkish

44 PAA, FB, b. 8, f. 2. Letter from Giuseppina Zito on school letterhead, Cefalù 1913.

45 PAA, FB, b. Visiting card; and several documents in ASUNO, f. Bonelli. See for example: Delibera n. 568, Incarichi di insegnamento per l'anno accademico 1928-29 (Teaching Appointments for the Academic Year 1928–29), 15 September 1928.

46 PAA, FB, b. 6, f. 1.

47 ASUNO, f. Bonelli, Regia Accademia Aeronautica, Ufficio Comando. 'Richiesta insegnante di lingua persiana' (Royal Air Force Academy, Command Office, 'Request for a Persian Language Instructor') 26 March 1928. The archive contains several other documents attesting to Luigi Bonelli's teaching activity.

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ambassador of the new Republic, Fuad Bey, who took office in 1923, landed in Naples before proceeding to Rome.[48]

Several years earlier, during the two-year period of the Italo-Ottoman conflict (also known as the Italo-Turkish War, 1911–1912), Italians expelled from the Ottoman Empire also arrived in the city, namely Italian residents of the Empire who were forced to leave as a consequence of the restrictive measures adopted by the Ottoman authorities in response to Italian military operations in the Libyan provinces.[49] As early as November 1911, the Naples police headquarters authorised Bonelli to confer with them.[50] This may perhaps have been an initiative of the security authorities themselves. During this period, in fact, Bonelli received numerous requests because of his linguistic expertise, particularly from the command of the military division in Naples and directly from Tripoli.[51] Yet while he appears to have responded somewhat reluctantly to the latter requests, the opportunity to meet and speak with the 'Ottoman expellees' clearly aroused Bonelli's interest. This undoubtedly had much to do with his fascination for spoken language and with his own method of work.

7. Fieldwork on One's Doorstep

Luigi Bonelli displayed a marked preference for spoken language. As Bombaci wrote in his obituary, 'languages fascinated him in their living reality: to master them fully, to explore them in their most hidden corners, to grasp their subtleties and nuances. In this he achieved a truly rare perfection.'[52] Bonelli appears to have been deeply struck by the difference between the language studied in books and the spoken language when he travelled for the first—and only—time to Constantinople, as emerges from a letter he wrote to his mentor Emilio Teza later recovered by Bossaert.[53] He devoted then a substantial part of his scholarly production to spoken language and vocabulary. Rossi himself emphasised Bonelli's 'predilection for lexicology and phraseology.'[54] As he explained, having known him well:

> Even his conversation on Oriental subjects was always embellished with expressions, locutions, idioms, and sometimes Turkish or Persian riddles in prose and verse, which an exceptionally tenacious memory and extraordinary linguistic acumen rendered

48 Archivio Storico di Napoli (ASNA), Prefettura di Napoli, Gabinetto, II serie, fs. 140, f.lo 3, 26 August 1923.

49 De Lorentiis 2017.

50 PAA, FB, b. 8, f. 2, Confidential communication from the Royal Police Headquarters (*Regia Questura*) of the city and district of Naples, 9 November 1911.

51 PAA, FB, b. 8, f. 2. See, for example, the letter from Cocchia, 27 September 1911; the letter from Giacalone, Command of the Military Division of Naples, 27 September 1911; and the letter from Eugenio Griffini, Command of the Tripoli Garrison, 18 February 1912.

52 Bombaci 1947, 53.

53 Bossaert 2021, 189.

54 Rossi 1947, 164.

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> simple and familiar to him. Turkish phrases and proverbs frequently adorned his correspondence.[55]

Luigi Bonelli did not travel extensively and, after his first stay in Constantinople, he never returned to Turkey, not even when invited to do so. After taking up his position in Naples, apart from a brief period in Tripoli in 1912 and the time spent in Cairo between 1931 and 1932, where he worked on the compilation of Ottoman *regesta*, he travelled only within Italy, to Rome, Florence, and Venice, along the route leading back to northern Italy, his native region.[56] Yet he nevertheless found ways of keeping himself informed and updated. As already noted, he did so through collaboration with the language assistant Jasigian, with whom he also co-authored the grammar *Il turco parlato* and whom he acknowledged with gratitude on several occasions in his published works.[57] He further immersed himself in an extensive correspondence in Turkish, attempted to stay informed through journals and newspapers sent to him, and finally seized every opportunity to meet and converse with Ottoman Turkish speakers residing in Naples.

In an illustration depicting him—which remains, so far, the only known portrait of him—published in the journal Albania issued in Naples in 1921, the caption reads: 'At the Umberto I Café in the Naples Gallery. Professor Bonelli looking for a Turk…' (see fig. 2).[58] Rossi likewise confirms this:

> He had not spent long periods in Turkish territory. In some of his works he mentions only a journey to Constantinople in 1890–91; yet, beyond the knowledge of written language already mentioned, he spoke Turkish with richness of expression, precision, and an accent perfectly Turkish, like an Ottoman Turk from Constantinople itself, astonishing even the Turks. In addition to his work on texts and his prodigious memory, what aided him in this achievement was the enthusiasm with which he sought out Turkish speakers wherever he happened to be – in Naples, Rome, or elsewhere: consuls, merchants, travellers, and students with whom he spent long hours in conversation.[59]

55 Rossi 1947, 164. 'Anche la sua conversazione su temi orientalistici era sempre infiorata di modi di dire, locuzioni, idiotismi e talvolta indovinelli turchi o persiani in prosa e in poesia che una memoria tenacissima e uno straordinario acume linguistico gli rendevano semplici e familiari. Di frasi e proverbi turchi si ornava spesso la sua corrispondenza.'

56 As regards the Ottoman registers, see Bonelli 1935; also his working typescript: PAA, FB, b.7, f. 2.

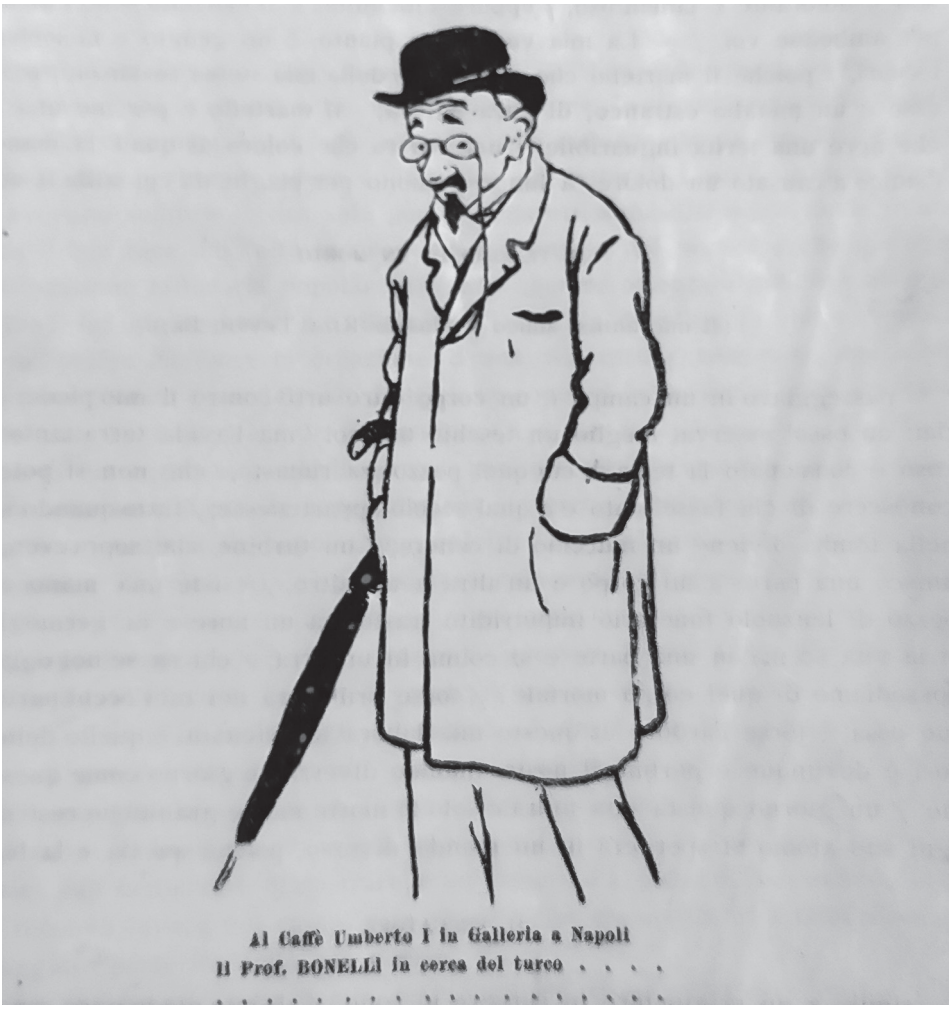
57 Bossaert 2013, 85 e Ead. 2021, 185; Bonelli 1900; 1902; Bonelli and Jasigian 1910.

58 PAA, FB, b.5, f. 19. A copy of the journal is preserved in the Bonelli Archive. The illustration appears at the end of Luigi Bonelli's contribution 'On the Turkish Nationalist Poet Mehmed Emin'. The journal was intended for a general readership. A marginal note indicates that the piece had already been published, with annotations, in the *Annuario del R. Istituto Orientale di Napoli* (1919–20), Naples, 39–45.

59 Rossi 1947, 165. 'Non aveva soggiornato a lungo in territorio turco. In qualcuno dei suoi lavori menziona soltanto un viaggio a Costantinopoli nel 1890-1891; eppure, oltre ad avere la conoscenza che abbiamo detto della lingua scritta, parlava il turco con dovizia di eloquio, proprietà ed accento perfettamente turchi, come un turco ʿoṯmānlï di Costantinopoli, destando lo stupore dei

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Figure 2. Luigi Bonelli . At the Umberto I Café in the Naples Gallery. Professor Bonelli looking for a Turk…



Returning, then, to the communication issued by the Naples police headquarters in 1911, this particular interest of his must already have been well known even to the police authorities, to the point that they specified:

> Turchi stessi. Oltre all'esercizio sui testi e alla forte memoria lo soccorrevano in questo successo l'entusiasmo con cui cercava a Napoli o a Roma o ovunque si trovasse gente parlante turco: consoli, commercianti, viaggiatori, studenti coi quali passava lunghe ore in conversazione.'

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> with the enclosed pass, you, who so kindly make yourself available, may also hear the wishes of the Ottoman subjects expelled and residing in this city, and thus you will have occasion frequently to speak the language you teach at the Real Istituto Orientale.[60]

Bonelli was not deterred even by practical or bureaucratic difficulties and undertook elaborate procedures in order to obtain permission to speak with Ottomans residing in the city. Thus, in 1914 he obtained authorisation to 'confer with the Ottoman subjects Vassif Mustafà [sic] and Costantara held under guard at the police lodging house.'[61] In 1917 he requested that the Director of the Istituto Orientale exert pressure on the Ministry of the Interior so that he might be authorised to enter the House of Emigrants (*Casa degli Emigranti*) because several 'Levantine emigrants' were residing there. It is particularly revealing to read how Guido Amedeo Vitale explained the motivations of his colleague:

> Professor Bonelli, professor in Turkish at this R. Istituto, has repeatedly attempted to gain admission to the House of Emigrants in Naples for the purpose of seeking out people born in the East and practising Oriental languages with them. Owing to special restrictive provisions currently regulating the admission of outsiders into the House of Emigrants, Professor Bonelli's wish has not thus far been granted, despite my personal efforts. I therefore ask the Royal Ministry, if it deems it appropriate, to approach the Ministry of the Interior in order to emphasise Professor Luigi Bonelli's highly commendable aims and to obtain for him a permanent pass granting free entry to the House of Emigrants in Naples.[62]

The pass was not granted because, for prophylactic reasons, 'the Levantine emigrants must remain absolutely segregated in quarantine.'[63] Bonelli nevertheless found other ways of meeting 'people born in the East' (*gente nata in Oriente*). In 1918 he obtained permission from the Army Corps Command in Naples to speak with the Turkish major Abdoullah Rıza Bey, a prisoner of war. He attempted to meet him while the latter was in the

60 PAA, FB, b. 8, f. 2, 9 November 1911.

61 PAA, FB, b. 8, f. 2, (Royal Police Headquarters of the city and district of Naples), 8 February 1914.

62 ACS, MPI, DGIS, b. 2379, fasc. 17. Direttore del Regio Istituto Orientale al Ministero delle Colonie, Direzione generale affair politici (Director of the Regio Istituto Orientale to the Ministry of the Colonies, General Directorate for Political Affairs), 21 May 1917. 'Il prof. Bonelli insegnante di Turco in questo R. Istituto, ha tentato a parecchie riprese di venire ammesso nella Casa degli Emigranti in Napoli allo scopo di ricercarvi gente nata in Oriente e far con esse pratica di lingue Orientali. In forza di speciali disposizioni restrittive che regolano attualmente la ammissione di esterni nella casa degli Emigranti, il desiderio del prof. Bonelli non poté finora essere esaudito, malgrado i miei personali ufficii. Prego perciò il R. Ministero, se ne verrà come spero la convenienza di voler rivolgersi al Ministero dell'interno per far presenti gli scopi altamente apprezzabili del prof. Luigi Bonelli e ottenere che la Direzione della Casa degli Emigranti in Napoli gli rilasci una tessera permanente di libera entrata.'

63 ACS, MPI, DGIS, b. 2379, fasc. 17. Royal Commissariat for Emigration to the Ministry of the Colonies, General Directorate for Political Affairs, 20 June 1917.

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military hospital in Naples, since he was stationed on the nearby island of Ischia. Bonelli indeed preserved two direct messages from the major.[64]

Bonelli's insistence and perseverance were not even diminished by a couple of incidents involving the police. Only a few years earlier, while frequenting disreputable taverns and 'conversing in Turkish with Orientals,' he had been summoned to the police headquarters, interrogated, and forced to wait for hours while his identity was verified.[65] Bonelli complained that he lacked an identification card attesting his status as university professor and protested against the unpleasant incidents and harassment by the police, yet he did not give up.[66] After all, this was his way of continuing his education, keeping himself updated, and studying the language. It was his method of work: in effect, a form of fieldwork taking advantage of the intense mobility of people characteristic of that period and of the lively environment of Naples.

He probably developed this approach in his youth, at the beginning of his career, during his stay in Malta in 1894 as part of a mission promoted by the linguist Graziadio Ascoli, one of his earliest mentors. The Bonelli Archive preserves not only the working materials later incorporated into several publications but also an extensive correspondence, dense with notes and annotations, with one of his contacts on the island, with whom he discussed expressions, sayings, and linguistic formulas.[67] He thus elaborated a method that he fully applied to spoken Turkish but also extended to other contexts. It may reasonably be assumed, for instance, that his interaction with twenty-seven Afghan pilots hosted at the aeronautical academy near Naples in 1928, to whom Bonelli taught Italian through Persian, contributed to his later publication on the vernacular Persian of Kābul, published just one year later his teaching.[68] While he eventually published collections of Maltese proverbs and Persian proverbial expressions—drafts of the latter are preserved in the FB[69]—only archival traces remain of both his collection of German *Witze*, intended to bear the title *Aneddoti, motti, proverbi etc. tedeschi con note dichiarative*, and his *Grammatica turca per tedeschi (Turkish Grammars for Germans)*.[70]

64 PAA, FB, b. 6, f.1. Two visiting cards of Abdoullah Rıza Bey, *Major de l'Armée Ottomane*, bearing two notes addressed to Bonelli. Undated.

65 ACS, MPI, DGIS, b. 2379, fasc. 17. Prefettura di Napoli n°8575, 23 August 1915; Ministero delle Colonie, 13 August 1915;

66 ACS, MPI, DGIS, b. 2379, fasc. 17. Letter from Bonelli to the Ministry of the Colonies, 5 August 1915.

67 PAA, FB, b.8, f. 3.

68 Bonelli 1929.

69 PAA, FB, b. 5, f. 6. For the respective publications, see Bonelli 1897; 1941.

70 For the publications, see respectively Bonelli 1897 and 1941. On the German proverbs, see ASUNIOR, Luigi Bonelli file. On the Turkish grammar intended for German speakers, see FB 7, box 7.4.

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8. Conclusions

Luigi Bonelli conversed and corresponded in Ottoman Turkish, ordered books and journals, and maintained contact with an extensive network of Orientalists with whom he exchanged publications and scholarly opinions. All this is documented by the materials preserved in his personal archive. It suffices here to mention only a few of the scholars with whom the Italian professor maintained contact: Gyula Németh in Hungary, Helmut Scheel and Franz Babinger in Germany, Leonidas Bogdanov in Saint Petersburg, Georg Morgenstierne in Oslo, and Johannes Heinrich Mordtmann in Constantinople.[71] It is likewise possible to reconstruct how Bonelli, book after book, kept himself informed and continued studying while gradually building his personal library. The purchase invoices preserved in the archive originate primarily from Constantinople, but also from Salonica, Paris, and Tabriz, confirming the important role played by Armenian booksellers in the market.

Ordering and cataloguing the documents provides privileged access to what was once Luigi Bonelli's private study: the workshop of a Turkologist. It opens an intimate space of work and study, revealing the backstage of the research and everyday life of a scholar who lived through decades of transformation, from Liberal Italy to the Fascist regime and into the early Republican years. The reorganization of the archive also offers a guiding thread through other archival fragments preserved in Italy, as has been shown, in the Central State Archive, the State Archive of Naples, and the university archives. Individual documents find correspondences elsewhere and within the Bonelli collection itself, thereby acquiring new meaning and helping to reconstruct a more complex and articulated picture.

In this contribution, particular emphasis has been placed on reconstructing the history of the archive and of its transfer to Rome because this history—previously entirely unknown and painstakingly reconstructed—reveals networks of relationships and connections not only between different spheres, such as secular and ecclesiastical institutions of knowledge, but also between the Ottoman Empire/Turkey and Italy, if not Europe more broadly.

For the same reason, this article has also explored part of the Ottoman correspondence preserved by Bonelli, since it encourages further investigation into forms of mobility across the Mediterranean that transcended the national borders then taking shape and the rigid identity categories associated with citizenship. This correspondence also invites reflection on the circulation of knowledge itself. And on this question—namely, how knowledge circulates and how scholarly expertise is produced—Luigi Bonelli's personal archive still has much to offer.

71 On Johannes Heinrich Mordtmann, see the contribution by Yavuz Köse in the present issue.

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