3
Pope Pius II and the Crusade

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On 13 August 1464, Pope Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) received communion and addressed his cardinals for the last time, exhorting them to carry on with the work he had begun. ‘Woe unto you, woe unto you, if you desert God’s work,’ he warned, before dying in his sleep a few hours later.1 On the surface Pius’s death was like that of many popes before and after him. But the circumstances were neither peaceful nor ordinary: he died not in one of the papal residences, but far from home at the port of Ancona whence he had intended to embark upon the crusade he had summoned and organized. It seemed a strange, unexpected end for a man who had spent most of his life as a humanist, poet and bureaucrat. Known for his clear-headed political insights and wry humour, Aeneas was never a soldier, nor was he a theologian or saintly figure. He enjoyed a long career as a valued secretary and diplomat who travelled across Europe with or on behalf of his superiors. Refusing to take holy orders for many years, he entered the Church only after he had reached middle age, sired two illegitimate children and written some provocative love poetry and prose. Added to all of this, he was old and very ill when he took up his final journey. Why, when so many other popes were content to summon a crusade, did Pius feel compelled to participate in one? This essay will attempt to explain what personal factors led him to Ancona as well as the religious and political currents that helped point him down that path. Pius’s death at Ancona may always seem bizarre, colourful and, to some, uncharacteristically noble for the age, but it can teach us a good deal about fifteenth-century Europe and Pius’s life.2

It may well be argued that Pius’s decision to accompany his crusade was the natural, if extreme, culmination of a lifelong obsession with holy war and a hatred for the Ottoman Turks.3 He had called attention
to the Turkish threat as early as 1436 at the Council of Basel. Aeneas also repeatedly lobbied for crusade in letters before and especially after the fall of Constantinople on 29 May 1453. He urged Popes Nicholas V and Calixtus III and Emperor Frederick III among others to organize or lead a crusade to the East. As pope, one of his first official acts was to organize a European-wide conference at Mantua with the sole purpose of orchestrating a large-scale crusade. If he could find a way to bring divided Europeans together, he believed, and put a large enough army in the field, the Turks could be crushed or at the very least halted. When all his hard work did not succeed in making the crusade a reality, he sought to initiate the process by going (or at least threatening to go) himself.

But was it a natural progression or did Aeneas’s views of the Turks and crusade change over time, especially after his election to the papacy? A good place to begin answering this question is a consideration of a few works written before he became pope. Responses to the fall of Constantinople offer examples of some of his most passionate rhetoric. At this point, Aeneas was bishop of Trieste and Siena, but still serving as secretary to Frederick III. Deeply disturbed by the conquest of the Byzantine capital, Aeneas wrote letters to Nicholas V and Nicholas of Cusa in which he expresses righteous indignation at the abuses of fellow Christians and their shrines, and calls for action in defence of the Christian faith and Europe. Equal space, however, is given to the siege’s impact on learning and culture. Repeating tales to the pope of the destruction of countless books in the siege, Aeneas laments the event as ‘a second death of Homer and Plato’. He goes on at great length in his letter to Cusanus about these losses. What sort of men, he wonders, would attack learning? Xerxes and Darius ‘waged war on men, not letters’, and the ancient Romans held Greek learning in high regard despite their conquest of the land. But under the Turks, he asserts, Greek learning is sure to perish. For Aeneas, as for many other humanists, tales of the Turks’ brutal sack of so rich a city, particularly its libraries, conjured up parallels of the fifth-century sacking of Rome and the subsequent ‘Dark Ages’.

As with most humanists, the fall of Constantinople greatly increased Aeneas’s interest in and commitment to crusade. He did not have to wait long to put his eloquence to work in this cause. Over the next two years he was charged by Frederick III to deliver orations on his behalf at the diets of Regensburg (Ratisbon), Frankfurt and Wiener Neustadt, where crusade plans were discussed. His orations from Regensburg and Frankfurt were circulated, and one of them was printed. Here Aeneas