

## Levantine & Arabian Travels: European and American Experiences (Part 1)\*

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**Abstract:** *European and American travel experiences in the Levant and Arabia serve, in the last analysis, as a treatise on the psychology of human quest rather than mere records of individual itineraries. During the Crusades, this quest was prompted by the desire for religious fulfillment augmented by the innate European craving for the mysterious and the exotic. The Renaissance evinced a consuming curiosity about Islam's holy cities in Arabia; a curiosity that had been fuelled by the Crusader wars against the Muslim enemy. European travel to Arabia, across the centuries up to the nineteenth, was a hazardous adventure into a mysterious and forbidden land; an adventure which whetted European craving for travel. By the nineteenth century, Levantine and Arabian travel had developed into a science in which experts – Egyptologists, and other archaeologists, Arabists, sociologists, and Biblical scholars practiced their respective fields of specialization. The early twentieth century saw the rise of a new type of travel-writer; that of the archaeologist/political officer, whose activities, for the first time since the Middle Ages, were part and parcel of British imperial interests. Arabian travel, in the traditional sense, came to an end in the 1950's, with the completion of the exploration of the Empty Quarter. European and American travel experiences in the Levant and Arabia, as surveyed in this article, being a prototype of a treatise on quest psychology, serve, hopefully, to invite yet further research on the psychology of quest.*

### 1. Introduction

European and American travel experiences in the Levant and Arabia serve, in the last analysis, as a treatise on the psychology of human quest rather than mere records of individual itineraries. During the Crusades, this quest was prompted by the desire for religious fulfillment augmented by the innate European craving for the mysterious and the exotic. The Renaissance evinced a consuming curiosity about Islam's holy cities in Arabia; a curiosity that had been fuelled by the Crusader wars against the Muslim enemy. European travel to Arabia, across the centuries up to the nineteenth, was a hazardous adventure into a mysterious and forbidden land; an adventure which whetted European craving for travel.

In the sixteenth century, however, England's trade agreement with the Ottoman Empire opened up the Levant to Englishmen as it was never opened up before. The English Levant Company gave rise to a class of trader-travelers who became the forerunners of English travelers in following two centuries. By the nineteenth century, Levantine and Arabian travel had developed into a science in which experts—Egyptologists, and other archaeologists, Arabists, sociologists, and Biblical scholars practiced their respective fields of specialization. In that century European interest in the Levant had crossed the Atlantic with a vengeance. Some 150 American travelers published accounts of their travels in the Levant. The early twentieth century saw the rise of a new type of travel-writer; that of the archaeologist/political officer, whose activities, for the first time since the Middle Ages, were part and parcel of British imperial interests. Arabian travel, in the traditional sense, came to an end in the 1950's, with the completion of the exploration of the Empty Quarter.

European and American travel experiences in the Levant and Arabia, as surveyed in this article, being a prototype of a treatise on quest psychology, serve, hopefully, to invite yet further research on the psychology of quest. Quest psychology would be an invaluable factor when researching such topical and contemporary quests as those of marine and space exploration.

## **2. Medieval Travel**

Despite the large number of medieval travellers, the amount of actual travel writing about the Levant is very limited until the mid-fourteenth century. The most significant of such travel writings are those of Gerald of Wales, at the end of the twelfth, and of Sire de Joinville, friend and biographer of Louis IX of France in the thirteenth century, both of whom make delightful reading through their personal, human style (Labarge, 1982: xiv). The waves of the Crusades of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries took great numbers of men and women on the land journey to Constantinople on the sea voyage across the Mediterranean, all motivated by the passion for the long-range pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Medieval Eastern travel was also conducted for utilitarian purposes: to establish diplomatic contacts with Asian potentates and to explore venues for lucrative trade. Large numbers of Europeans were involved, directly

and indirectly, with Eastern trade. As Margaret Wade Labarge (ibid:1) points out,

The constantly expanding network of long-distance trade and the creation of European trading posts all through the Mediterranean and up into the Black Sea meant that few localities in Europe lacked direct contact with individuals who had personally traveled considerable distances.

Italians were prominent among medieval Europeans who traveled for trade, or to establish diplomatic contacts with Asian potentates. John of Plano Carpini, an elderly Franciscan friar, was sent by Pope Innocent IV in 1245 as ambassador to the conquering Mongols, who were directly threatening the Levant, and it was feared Europe, and, in a two-year journey, Carpini started from Poland, crossed thousands of miles of Asian steppes to the headquarters of the Great Khan at Karakorum, south of lake Baikal in Outer Mongolia (ibid:2). Louis IX of France sent another Franciscan friar, Guillaume de Roubrouck, to Karakorum in 1253 (Latham, 1958). Carpini's report on his Mongol Embassy was included in *Speculum*, a thirteenth century compendium of history compiled by Vincent of Beauvais, a Dominican closely linked to the Court of Louis IX of France. *Speculum* was widely available in the medieval libraries of European nobility and royalty, lay lords, ecclesiastics, and university scholars. Thus Carpini's report was circulated among a wide audience. The regions of the world were known to Europeans in the fourteenth century through Bartholomew's book, *On the Properties of Things*, which included regions and provinces of the world alphabetically listed.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest medieval traveller, an Italian, was Marco Polo. His account of the Assassins and the "Old Man of the Mountain" endowed the Levant with an aura of fabulous, exotic mystery which mere pilgrimages to the Holy Land seemed tame by comparison. The term "Assassin" was applied originally to certain members of the Ismaili sect of Shi'ite Islam, who at the time of the Crusades occupied hill fortresses in Syria and who rid themselves of their adversaries by assassination. The term "Assassin" is derived from the Arabic "Hashishiyun", Hasheesh-takers (or drug-takers, in the modern sense). Those selected by Assassin Grand-Masters for assassination missions, took hasheesh to turn them into volitionless tools ready for any deed. Islamic and other Eastern sources refer to them as "Malahida" (heretics).<sup>2</sup> Marco Polo, had arrived in Persia by sea in 1294 and traveled through Persia before arriving in Venice in 1295.<sup>3</sup> "I will tell you", Marco Polo begins his description of the Persian

Assassins”, about a country called “Mulehet”. Marco then narrates how the Assassin Grand-Masters created the closest possible replica of the Islamic Paradise. The assassins, says Polo, if the Grand master was “minded to dispatch them to Paradise... they were to go accordingly and kill such-and-such a man”. Polo continues:

If they died on the mission, they would go there (to Paradise) all the sooner. Those who received such a command obeyed it with a right good will, more readily than anything else they might have been called on to do....Thus it happened that no one ever escaped when the Sheikh of the Mountain desired his death. (Latham, 1958: 42)

The Persian assassins secured a firm foothold in Syria, and the term “assassin” and “the old man of the mountain” entered European languages through the Crusades. A certain Abu Tahir, a goldsmith, was sent by the Persian Grand-Master to Syria as an emissary and won many followers in Aleppo. In 1105–1106, he assassinated the governor of the Town of Apamia (Hamat) but did not become its master as the Crusaders soon took it over. Another Persian envoy of the assassins, Bahram, obtained a large following and took over the Syrian port town of Baniyas in 1126, which surrendered three years later to the Crusades (cf. the entry “Assassins” in *Encyclopedia of Islam* ). The Assassins often entered into friendly relations with the Christians, and mutual interest between Crusaders and Assassins led eventually into an alliance.<sup>4</sup> The chief of the Syrian Assassins was called Shaikh al-Djabal, translated by the Crusaders as “Le Vieux de la Montagne” (The Old Man of the Mountain)<sup>5</sup>. The term “Assassin”, by entering European languages, gave the Levant an entirely new dimension, so antithetical to the religious one of its being the region of the Holy Land, of pilgrimage, of the cradle of ancient civilization. The Levant also seemed as a region of alien, barbarous fascination, and which attracted travellers throughout the following centuries bent on penetrating and unraveling its mysteries.

*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a popular medieval book on travel, was one of the first to introduce the Levant as an exotic region. Mandeville introduces himself in the book as a medieval knight, born at St. Albans in England, who went to the Holy Land in 1322, though the actual author has never been identified. Written first in French, translated into Latin and then English, it spread rapidly through Western Europe. The Holy Land had attracted a vast number of pilgrims, and Mandeville, as Margaret Wade Labarge (1982) points out, found a number of earlier

descriptions of it when writing about Palestine. He borrowed from the histories of Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre in the early thirteenth century, and the Armenian historian Hayton (d. early fourteenth century). Mandeville also made use of a report by William of Boldensale, a Dominican from Minden in Westphalia for Cardinal Talleyrand-Perigord, a friend of Petrarch. The Dominican visited Constantinople, Egypt, Syria as well as the Holy Land, and his report to the Cardinal, presented in 1336, was widely popular, with translations surviving in many European languages (ibid:5). Boldensale gave a map-like description of these countries without personal, or miraculous, additions, and his sober report was a more useful source than others on which Mandeville drew.

The German Ludolph Von Suchem's distinction as a medieval traveller to the Holy Land lies in his insistence on the veracity of his accounts. His journey covered the years 1336-1341, and its account was based on previous "histories" such as that of Boldensale. Gilles Le Bouvier, Herald of Charles VII of France, was a traveller from the age of sixteen to sixty, and covered much of Europe, the Middle East, Constantinople, Armenia and the Black Sea, his travels were described in his *Description of Countries* (ibid: 6-9).

Medieval interest in travel to the Levant, and the Orient, was greatly enhanced by the medieval version of cartography. Ever since the days of Alexander the Great, the Western world had some knowledge of the Levant and the Orient. In the sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes (Voyager to India), an Alexandrian, visited the Malabar coast and reached Taprobane (Sri Lanka). His *Christian Topography* provided a wealth of geographical and commercial details on Taprobane's importance (cf. Vasiliev, 1970:116)<sup>6</sup>. In the seventh century, a Byzantine writer, Theophylactus Simocatta, showed some knowledge of the Chinese Empire derived from envoys who had come to the imperial court at Constantinople from a Turkish Kingdom in central Asia (Latham, 1958:viii). Such scattered pieces of information on the East as originally given by Cosmas and Simocatta grew with accretions of information about the East acquired over the following centuries. Medieval interest in cartography displayed itself in world maps which graced the halls and libraries of kings and nobles. Today, the world would be unrecognizable from such "maps" which were, as Labarge (1982:9-10) puts it, almost as "illustrated romances rather than matter-of-fact guides to lead travellers from one place to another". The world map "mappa Mundi" of 1300 displayed in Hereford Cathedral puts Jerusalem at the

World's center, and Ceylon is at the foot of the Arabian Peninsula. Yet fourteenth century cartography developed by leaps and bounds. Marino Sanudo *Secrets for Crusaders*, a copy of which was presented to Pope John XXII in 1321, dealing with the history of the Crusades, with suggestions for further reconquests was best known for the maps with which it was generously illustrated, and marks a major step forward in serious map-making. Sanudo's maps were created by Pietro Vesconte, a Genoese, whose careful map of Palestine was distinguished by a grid of squares covering the whole surface area, "making it perhaps the earliest map that accurately identifies the geography of a particular country" (ibid:16). Vesconte, one of the greatest cartographers of his time, also improved charts, portolans, used by mariners sailing in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and by the mid fifteenth century royal courts and important households had considerable access to new maps which were changing the look of the world (ibid: 13, 14). Such new maps also greatly facilitated access to the Levant with the especial emphasis laid on the accurate geographical representation of the Holy Land.

### 3. Renaissance Travellers to the Levant and Arabia

The Renaissance, the re-birth of learning, reflected itself in motives prompting Europeans to travel to the Levant and Arabia. "If any man shall demand of me the cause of my voyage," wrote Lodovico Varthema in his itinerary, "certainly I can show no better reason than the ardent desire of knowledge, which has moved many a man to see the world and the miracles of God therein" (Freeth & winstone, 1958: 19). There is no record of Varthema's birth or death, and all that is known of him is that he came from Bologna but preferred the designation "Gentleman of Rome". His journey covered five years, 1503-1508, and took him to Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Persia and the Indies. He learnt languages as he wanted, adopted alien customs with ease "and embraced loyalties and religious faiths as readily as he cast them aside" (ibid: 21). Beirut, Tripoli, Aleppo, Damascus; Levantine cities bustling with verve and colour aroused his wonder. "It is incredible, and passes all belief, how fair the city of Damascus is," he wrote. The streets were lined with red and white roses, "the prettiest I have ever seen" (ibid, p.22). Mecca, the forbidden city, whose secrets were mysteries to the Western world was on his mind. He joined the Hajj (pilgrimage) caravan from Damascus. Having purchased a horse, dressed himself in Syrian clothing, and adopting the name of "Younis" to see him through, Varthema left with the caravan

from Damascus on April 8th 1503. At Medina, Varthema gives the first European eye-witness account of its Great Mosque: "it is square and a hundred paces in length and fourscore in breadth. The entry to it is by two gates (ibid: 28). His caravan entered Mecca on May 18th. He found Mecca "very fair" containing 6,000 houses as well constructed as those in his native Rome. (ibid: 32). Varthema was the first non-Muslim to enter Mecca, recording his observation of it in great detail; and what he recorded was to stand the test of examination over more than four centuries (ibid: 35). At Jidda he took ship to Persia, but at Aden, after a fight, Varthema was put in irons for 55 days. Feigning madness, he was left to the tender mercies of the Sultana, who paid him nocturnal visits, armed with delicacies and endearments: "Come hither, Younis, thou art hungry; thou art my husband, my sons, my knights.. come, let me take off your shirt" (ibid: 38).

Varthema's discoveries in Arabia were original and unprecedented. He was the first to discover the Jewish settlement of Khaibar, and the mountain of the Jews in eastern Hijaz, findings that had to wait three centuries to be confirmed; the first to describe the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the first explorer of inner Yemen (ibid: 38). Back in Europe, Varthema received the order of chivalry in Lisbon, and on Nov. 5th 1508 he gave a warmly applauded lecture in Venice. The first edition of his *Itinerario* was published in 1510, followed by a Milan edition in 1519. Yet he disappeared from view after the publication of his *Itinerary*.

From the second decade of the sixteenth century to the second of the seventeenth, several dubious accounts of Europeans reaching Mecca appear. In the *Commentaries of Albuquerque*, there is a reference to one Gregorio de Quandra, who it is claimed, visited Mecca in 1513 accompanied by a Moor and said to have proclaimed himself there as a Christian. (ibid:42). Pierre Bergeron, in his *Voyage Fameux*, mentions Vincent Leblanc, of Marseilles, as visiting Mecca in 1568. Father Eugene Roger, in his *Description de la Terre-Sainte* (1649) tells of a Venetian convert to Islam sent to Mecca by the Governor of Cairo, and whose observations were substantial enough to suggest that he did make the pilgrimage, and Roger claimed first hand knowledge of the nameless Venetian. But, the first, fully authenticated visit to the Hijaz after Varthema was that of Johann Wild of Nuremburg whose journey to Mecca began exactly a century after that of "The Gentleman of Rome". Enlisted as an escort of the Hajj Caravan, he left it on the return journey, sailed to Abyssinia and from there to Yemen. Returning to Europe in 1511, he

published his account two years later in Nuremburg. The account documented, in frightful detail, the dangers of Arabian travel (ibid: 43). But it remained unknown till recent times.

English travel to the Levant began in the late sixteenth century with a “memorandum of understanding” between England and the Ottoman Empire. Queen Elizabeth was so fascinated by things Islamic or Ottoman that she requested from her ambassador in Istanbul some Turkish clothes; like her father, Henry VIII, she wanted to dress in the Oriental fashion. The Sultan returned the good will: In 1579 an Ottoman ambassador arrived with a letter to Queen Elizabeth in which the Sultan offered “unrestricted commerce in his country to Englishmen. Four years later, another Ambassador arrived bringing with him presents that enhanced the Levant’s exoticism: lions, Turkish scimitars, horses, and unicorn horns” (Matar, 1997:74)<sup>7</sup>. The mutual good will was based, and enhanced, by mutual interests: The Sultan needed English lead and tin from Cornish mines to develop his armaments Industry (Palliser, 1860). It was in Elizabeth’s interest to see the Turkish Fleet rearmed to pose as much a threat as possible to Spain in its Mediterranean home waters so as to draw Spain's fleet away from the Atlantic. Another reason for Anglo–Ottoman agreement was to solve the ongoing problem of captives from both sides. To quote Matar (1997:64) on this matter,

In order to confront external danger to her realm and to improve her nations trade, the Queen ingratiated herself with the Sublime Porte by making sure that Muslim slaves in Spanish galleys were released by English sailors as was the case under Sir Walter Raleigh, who released one hundred Turks and Moors in 1581.

English captives on the Barbary coasts posed a problem throughout the seventeenth century. In October 1637, a Moroccan ambassador, Alkaid Jaurar bin Abdella, came to England with presents which included 366 British captives, 350 having been ransomed by King Charles I himself, and sixteen released free of charge by the Moroccan ruler as a sign of goodwill (ibid:76).

As a result of this “memorandum of understanding” between England and the Ottoman Empire, large numbers of English merchants began to trade in the Levant from their base in Aleppo; selling English “Kersey” cloth and purchasing Turkish rugs, damask (from Damascus,) and Muslin (from Mosul, in northern Mesopotamia). Queen Elizabeth sought to establish



an overland route to India through Syria, the Tigris–Euphrates rivers, and then on to the Persian Gulf. For this purpose she commissioned a merchant–traveller, Ralph Fitch, gave him a letter to the Ruler of Cambrai (present day Bombay) and ordered him to reach India through this overland route. Fitch embarked in 1583 from London on board “The Tiger” a famous ship plying from London to Tripoli, and mentioned in *Macbeth* (Act I, Scene III)–“Her husband’s to Aleppo gone/ Master o’ the Tiger”. From Tripoli on the Syrian coast, Fitch proceeded to Aleppo, then to Birjik on the Euphrates; sailing down to Falluja, overland to Baghdad, then down again on the Tigris to Basra (May–July 1583), arriving at Hurmuz, on the Persian Gulf on Sept. 5th. He shipped to Goa “with an hundred and fourteen horses and about two hundred men”, arriving there 29th November, he was “presently put into a fayre strong prison till 22nd Dec. In prison, Fitch met “two padres”, an Englishman, Thomas Stevens, and a Fleming “Padre Marco of the order of S. Paul”...who did sue for us into the viceroy and other officers and stood us in as much stead as our lives and goods were worth” .

Fitch eventually escaped from Goa in April 1584, and traveled to the Court of the Great Moghul at Agra. Through east Bengal he sailed for Burma (Nov. 1586) and to Malacca in 1588. His homeward trip took him back to Bengal, round the Indian coast to Goa, then to Hormuz, up the Persian Gulf to Basra, up the Tigris from Basra to Mosul, across to Birjik on the Euphrates, then to Aleppo, and to Tripoli on the Mediterranean Coast. He reappeared in London on April 29th 1591. Ralph Fitch’s main contribution to specifically Levantine travel was that he established “The Euphrates valley route” to Mesopotamia, as outlined in Fitch’s Tripoli–Basra itinerary mentioned above. The Euphrates route was followed faithfully by travellers to Mesopotamia from Syria till late in the nineteenth century, the only exception being that when arriving at Falluja on the Euphrates, nineteenth century travellers followed the line of telegraph poles to Baghdad, whereas Fitch had to hire a guide to lead him to Baghdad from Falluja ( Hakluyt, 1965:212-213).<sup>8</sup>

English travellers began to frequent the Levant, in increasing numbers, in the 1580’s after the establishment of the Levant Company. “The Levant company”, established in 1581, wielded significant influence, and Anglo–Ottoman trade contacts played an essential role in English writing about the Levant for over two centuries, ensuring that a number of Englishmen were settled for long periods in the Levant, and some produced accounts of the countries in which they lived. Consulates, and homes of English/

(later British) Residents offered travellers somewhere to stay, and as Robin Fedden (1958:7-8) pointed out, "they were vital staging posts in unfriendly and unknown lands, and they made it possible for Englishmen to visit the eastern Levant with a certain security, and in ever-increasing numbers, from the last decades of the sixteenth century. The writings of Englishmen who followed in the footsteps of the Levant company were largely unremarkable, but with time their writings acquired increasing significance. At a late date, in 1695, the Company appointed Henry Maundrell as their chaplain in Aleppo who left a valuable account of his travels: *A Journey From Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter AD 1697*. (Oxford, 1703). Otherwise accounts of "Levant company" travellers tend to be stolid and vapid. "Danger, daring and enterprise do not survive in the pedestrian accounts of their journeys, and their credulous description of wonders in Constantinople, Cairo and Jerusalem". Such accounts were marked by unconcern for the people amongst whom they traveled and showed not even "a superficial understanding of the great Empire and society through which they precariously moved. Islam was hostile and the hostility was amply returned (ibid:8). Some, however, like John Sanderson, provided information of some significance about the nature, extent and value of Levantine trade.<sup>9</sup> Fynes Moryson's *An Itinerary* (1617) could be seen as a guide book with some interesting details on the topography of certain areas. The adventures of the Scotsman William Lithgow (1582-1645), who was in the Levant in 1612 and claimed to have covered thirty thousand miles on foot in Europe, Asia and Africa also fails to arouse enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> In short, as Fedden (1958:8) concludes, these early British writers on the Levant have little general appeal today and 'their travel accounts are no longer easy reading'.

An upgrading in the quality of early British Levant writing is represented by Sir Henry Blount, who visited the Levant in 1634 and displayed a new mood and approach. He attempts impartiality when examining religion and manners in the Ottoman dominions, seeking to discover whether their might not be "an other kind of civilitie, different from ours, but no less pretending". His *Voyage into the Levant* (1636) is still readable, a prototype of the more sophisticated travellers who visited Cairo and Constantinople (ibid:8). George Sandys (1578-1644) also marked an edge of sophistication above "Levant Company" writing. Setting out for the Levant in 1610, the account of his travels *Relation of a Journey Begun in An Dom, 1610* (1615) went into nine editions in fifty years, showing a respect for accuracy uncommon among contemporary travelers, and a preoccupation with archaeology which obsessed later travellers. His

observations, set within a geographical and historical framework and laced with quotations from the classics, set an example of an advanced format of travel writing that was followed by successions of British travellers in the Levant and Arabia for the next 150 years (ibidL:9). His style in describing the desert and the Bedouin, one of a methodical rhythm, influenced, and was brought to perfection, by the greatest English traveller in Arabia some two and a half centuries later, Charles Doughty.

The late seventeenth century saw “the outcast traveler”, such as the Englishman Joseph Pitts. At the age of fifteen, in 1678, he was on the vessel *Speedwell* bound for New Foundland, and on the return journey was seized by Barbary corsairs off the coast of Spain and sold into slavery, and was bought by a man who forced him to become a Muslim. As a convert to Islam, he frequented the mosques in Algiers, observing the faithful at prayer, recording details, the sermons of the Imam, and the responses of the congregation. His master, being executed for rebellion, Pitts was sold to another, a kindly old man who took Pitts with him on the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Pitts, a careful recorder of his observations, noted everything he saw: Eating habits in Egypt, the drunken sailors, whores plying their trade. At Mecca he reported, in much greater detail than his predecessor Varthema, the proceedings of the Hajj: He numbered the gates of the Caaba at forty-two, whereas Varthema had estimated their number at ninety to a hundred. (Freeth & Winstone, 1978: 50). Everyday, for two months, Pitts and his wealthy master wandered around Mecca with Pitts making mental notes of its buildings, its population, and its religious rites. The Hajj over, the two men took the return caravan to Medina. Pitts’ description of the second Islamic holy city bears out most of Varthema’s observations. His master, fulfilling a pledge, released him from captivity upon their safe arrival in Egypt. There he met a fellow countryman from his native Exeter, passing on to him a letter and presents to his family, a Turkish pipe for his father and a silk purse for his mother. He also met another west countryman, Eliot, a fellow apprentice during their boyhood. Through his friends, he was put aboard a ship bound for Leghorn. But on his arrival in England he was pressed into the army, and protesting his long ordeal as a captivity, he was rewarded with imprisonment. One of the acquaintances Pitts made in the Levant was Sir William Faulkner of the Smyrna Company. Faulkner interceded for him with the Admiralty, and the young man from Exeter was allowed to go home, where he wrote his *True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammadans*, published in Exeter in 1704. Nowhere in

the narrative did Pitts give the dates of his wandering except the date of departure from England, 1678 (ibid: 60).

#### 4. Eighteenth Century Travellers

The writings of eighteenth century English travellers in the Levant did not possess lasting merit. The writers were mainly concerned, as Fedden (1958) points out, with conveying a quantity of miscellaneous information – philosophical, historical, geographical – and in the format established by Sandys, but with much lesser effect (ibid:12). With the Earl of Sandwich's visit (1738–9), the Levant becomes an extension of the aristocratic Grand Tour. The traveling gentleman, in the eighteenth century, replaced the traveller; the Levant was becoming accessible and safe with the decline of Ottoman and the rise of European power. Most of eighteenth century writing was of a casual and repetitive nature, and thus most eighteenth century travellers are now unreadable, with three exceptions.

First, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, wife of the British ambassador in Constantinople arrived at the Ottoman Capital in 1717. She was determined to view the area from a vantage point other than the conventional one. The Levant, she said, was “seldom visited but by merchants, who mind but their own affairs, or travellers, who make too short a stay to be able to report anything of their own knowledge.... They can give no better idea of the ways here than a French refugee lodging in Greek Street, could write of the Court of England” (quoted in Nasir, 1982:24). Lady Mary was directly admitted to the Sultan's Harem, a privilege not enjoyed by previous or later travellers, saw for herself a way of life that was a living embodiment of the Arabian Nights. Writing to her sister who remarked that her descriptions were far too much like the ‘Nights’, Lady Mary wrote: “you forget dear sister, those very tales were written by an author of this country and ... are a real representation of the manners here” (ibid:4). The picture she draws of Turkish upper-class life is unsurpassed in originality; fresh, frank, attractive. She was the first to appreciate that the harem was not a prison, but an active female community, each member occupied with her own line of useful work which included, among numerous others, jam-making, and account-keeping. Perhaps her most outstanding claims to regard is her acceptance of the Levantine means of inoculation for small-pox, which brought her contemporary ridicule and abuse ( Fedden, 1958:12-13).

Robert Wood was, on the other hand, a memorable eighteenth century traveller with a rare contribution to make. His impressive large- folio volumes *The Ruins of Palmyra* (1753) and *The Ruins of Balbec* (1757) first revealed to the West the precise nature of Roman and Palmyrene architecture in Syria. His careful measured drawings of ancient Levantine building gave him prominence in England and influenced the architectural taste of the period (ibid: 13). His two publications moved Horace Walpole to write:

of all works that distinguish this age, none perhaps excel these beautiful editions of Baalbek and Palmyra. The pomp of the buildings has not a nobler air than the simplicity of the narration ( Searight, 1969:58-59).

A third eighteenth-century traveler of distinction is Richard Pococke, a wealthy clergyman who visited Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Cyprus between 1737 and 1740. His *Description of the East* is the fullest and most authoritative English travel-book on the Levant in the eighteenth century. Pococke possessed 'industry, catholic tastes, a balanced judgment, a scrupulous regard for truth and... superior learning and industry' (Fedden,1958: 13). In Egypt, he produced careful drawings of Egyptian antiquities. In the three years he spent studying the Levant (1737-40), he produced detailed and sober reports on almost every aspect of Levantine life: government, justice, religion, trade, manners, customs, dress, Muslim architecture, climate, and natural history. But perhaps the most illuminating information he imparted, and which was made use of by later travellers, was his character assessment of the Bedouin Arabs. He often met Arabs who threatened his life upon non payment of ransom, but discovered that they were bluffing and, if handled properly, a traveller could successfully call their bluff (Nasir,1982: 45). Traveling with a caravan, Arabs stopped them and demanded money. He knew how to treat them. "I treated them with coffee", he wrote, "made them my friends, and refused to pay anything". He cautions travellers not to give money under threat. (ibid: 45). Pococke's contribution was that he laid the basis for a comprehensive and objective genre of travel writing in the Levant which was built upon by Levantine and Arabian travellers in the following centuries.

Lesser known writers, albeit of some limited significance, were the doctor-travellers. Charles Perry, was a doctor who journeyed in the Levant in 1739/40, and wrote *View of the Levant* (London, 1743), "Sick

and surfeited of the Pyramids”, as he put it, he ventured into the Egyptian interior and discovered to his wonder, that Arabs knew how to cure “stone-and-gravel” illness (gall-stones); by blowing in the urethra to extract the stones and gravel from the bladder. Another doctor who worked with the Levant Company was Alexander Russell. In his book *Natural History of Aleppo* (London, 1743), he described the local flora, fauna, and the plague which ravaged Aleppo. Russell was the first Englishman to study Levantine society and give a detailed classification of its social strata: there were in Aleppo Osmanlis (directly involved in the service of the Porte); Turks, Agas, (landowners) and Arabs whose two principal sects were “Sonnites” and “Shi’ites”. There are “Bashaws”–Pashas, governors and military commanders; “Effendees”, the learned men. Russell looked hard for a copy of *The Arabian Nights*, “a scarce book in Aleppo” and after much inquiry, he wrote, “I found only two volumes, containing two hundred and eighty nights” (Nasir, 1982: 47, 48).

With the increasing flow of travellers to Egypt, and an equally increasing flow of travel writing issuing from it, there was mounting curiosity in England as to where the Nile flowed FROM. To unravel this mystery, James Bruce, who studied Arabic at an early age in the Levant, and later appointed British consul in Algiers, and from there planned an exploration of the source of the Nile. From Algiers he traveled along the North African coast. Arriving in Cairo in 1768 dressed as a Dervish, he sympathized with the “natives” who never failed, despite their deplorable lot, to put on “a cheerful face before a stranger”, and found their rulers the “Beys” an abomination; “a more tyrannical and oppressive set of miscreants is not on earth, than are the members of the government in Cairo” (ibid: 49). He traveled to Ethiopia via upper Egypt, little known at that date to the outside world. He describes all kinds of flora and fauna, including an eagle “about six feet ten inches from wing to wing”. The village inhabitants, he found, were sickly and dirty with “a yellow, unhealthy appearance”. The women “are little better coloured than a corpse, and look older at sixteen than many English women at sixty”. (ibid: 49). But Bruce’s claims to fame lie in his claims to have discovered the source of the Nile. He claimed that its source was Lake Tana in Ethiopia. His itinerary was compiled in his book *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (London, 1790).

By 1800, there had appeared some forty published accounts of Egypt, and more of Constantinople; a testimony to the popularity of Levantine travel in England. So popular was the Levant, and such was the demand for

Levantine travel writing, that several entirely fictitious travel books appeared by persons who never have been to the Levant, or some that showed scant respect for truth; banking on the reader's credulity. Aaron Hill in his *Account of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1709) dedicated to Queen Anne, tells how the author descended into the Great Pyramid and of his emergence by a subterranean passage in the head of the Sphinx half a Nile away (Fedden, 1958: 10). Such dishonesties easily led to the publication of wholly fictitious travel accounts such as *The Travels and Adventures of Edward Brown* (London, 1739) and *The Travels of the late Charles Thompson, Esq* (London, 1744).<sup>11</sup>

Last, but by no means least, of eighteenth century travellers to Arabia was Carsten Niebuhr. (1733–1815). The first aspect of his significance was that he was not a lone traveller, but a member of a five-man scientific expedition brought together under the patronage of King Frederick V of Denmark. The expedition consisted of: Von Haven, a Danish linguist; Forsskal, a Swedish biologist; Niebuhr a Frisian mathematician and surveyor; Kramer, a Danish physician; and Baurenfeind, a German illustrator (Brent, 1977: 51). It was the first European scientific expedition to explore Arabia under Royal Patronage. The composition of the expedition did not prove to be auspicious. The professional skills of its members were thought to be complementary. It turned out that their characters were not. Serious differences arose between them throughout the duration of the expedition. Trouble erupted between Von Haven and the rest of the team, especially with Forsskal. The first was domineering, ambitious, complicated but incompetent in his field. The second was touchy but more competent than Von Haven in his own field of linguistics. (ibid:52). Niebuhr's real stature arose from these disagreements. His resourcefulness, innovation, and fortitude made him stand out among the squabblers. In summer 1762, Niebuhr traveled to the Sinai Peninsula with Von Haven, who wanted to trace the wanderings of the Israelites through the wilderness. But through argument with Arab guides, and lack of resolution, Von Haven achieved nothing. It was Niebuhr who, by making friends with an Arab camel man with whom Von Haven had quarreled, was taken to "Djebel al-Mokateb" (The Mount of Inscriptions) to copy out inscriptions there. In October 1762, at Jidda, Niebuhr made friends with local Arabs by letting them examine his instruments. In February 1763, in the Yemen, Niebuhr began long mapping expeditions in the wilderness (ibid: 54). As a traveller, he worked scientifically:

He used as his instruments a pocket compass, his watch, and a donkey. The compass fixed the direction of the routes he took. The watch and the donkey calculated distances. He worked out the animal's average speed— 1750 double paces each half hour, then converted that into distances reached from one location to another. Simple mathematics converts time into donkey's paces, and these into miles (ibid: 54).

Month after month, he would march out in this and that direction, labouring at his charts between journeys till he had completed a map of Yemen which would serve travellers for more than a century. (ibid:54). Niebuhr had physical stamina, and endurance; indispensable requisites for an explorer. When the expedition finally left Arabia on August 21st 1763, Von Haven had died on May 25th of that year. Kramer, Baurenfeind, and the Swedish servant Berggren were all seriously ill and had to be brought aboard ship in Mocha on stretchers.

A main aspect of significance of Niebuhr as a scientist-explorer is that he reflects the eighteenth century's preoccupation with causality—the effect of physical, on human nature. This was an old concept, first dealt with by Hippocrates in his *Airs, Waters and Places* ( cf. Singer,1922). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, causality was an ongoing philosophical and scientific epistemological debate regarding the origins and growth of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> In the eighteenth century Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count Buffon in Vol I of his thirty-six volume *Histoire Naturelle, General et Particuliere* writes of the influence of climate: “in proportion as the air, food, and water are gross the inhabitants are clumsy, less active and vigorous”<sup>13</sup> . Niebuhr, subscribing to climatic causality, and writing immediately under the heading of chapter III of his main travel book *Travels through Arabia and other Countries* “Of the character of the Arabs”

climate, government and education, are, undoubtedly, the great agents which form and modify the character of nations. To the first of these the Arabs owe their vivacity; and their laziness and gives them a spirit of duplicity; the third is the cause of that formal gravity which influences the faculties of their mind, as well as their carriage and exterior aspect (Ibid,p. 194).

Buffon, in comparing “the peasants who live on hilly grounds” to those who live “in the neighbouring valleys” finds “that the former are active, nimble well-shaped and lively” while the latter are less active and vigorous (Buffon, 90, 91). Similarity, Niebuhr writes:



The inhabitants of Yemen, living in a mild climate and an agreeable air have more animation than those of Hedsjas (Hijaz) and Arabia Petraea, whose imagination receives a more gloomy cast from the continental prospect of barren deserts and bare rocks ( Niebuhr, Travels, p. 195).

“The vindictive spirit of the Arabs” Niebuhr observes “is common to them with the other inhabitants of hot climates” (p. 197). The Arab and the European outlooks on childhood couldn't be more different: The Arabs “strive as much to hasten the age of maturity as (the Europeans to retard it.... The Arabs are never children; but many Europeans continue children all their life....!” (Ibid, p.194).

### Notes

\* Part II of this study covers the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and will appear in *IJAES*, Vol. 5 (2004)

1. Bartholomew was an English Franciscan who taught in Paris. His book, written in Latin, was translated into several languages and was rented out by Paris booksellers to students. The lords of Berkeley in Gloucestershire, England, commissioned their chaplain, John Trevisa, at the end of the fourteenth century to make an English translation for the Castle Library (Wade, p.3).
2. The history of the Assassins commences with the first Assassin Grand-Master, Hassan b. Sabbah taking over the hill fortress of Alamut in 1009–1010. His followers then took possession of a large number of hill-fortresses throughout Persia, getting rid of the most dangerous of their opponents by assassination. The last Assassin Grand-Master, Rukn ad Din perished in 1256 when the Mogul Khan Hulagu took Alamut. *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leyden: E.J.Brill, and London: Luzac & Co, 1913), pp. 491, 92 on “Assassins”.
3. Arhun, Khan of Persia, sent ambassadors to the Great Khan, (Kublai Khan,) whose court was at Shungtu near Peking to obtain the hand of a seventeen year old maiden. The overland route being unsafe, Marco Polo accompanied the maiden and her envoys in a splendid squadron of ships fitted out by Kublai Khan, and which sailed from Cathay in 1292. John Masefield, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: 1946), viii, ix.
4. With Crusader help, the Syrian Assassins conquered Hisn (fort) al-Masyad (Masyaf) and other north Syrian fortresses such as Kahf, Kadmus, cUllaika and al-Khawabi, (Ibid)
5. This term does not denote the Persian Grand-Master, the Universal Chief of the Assassins
6. See Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 1324–1453* (1970), p. 116. Vasiliev gives a short bibliography on Cosmas on p. 116.

7. See also H. B Rosedale Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company (London), and Bernard Harris "A portrait of a Moor" in Shakespeare Survey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 89–97.
8. Hakluyt collected letters sent by Fitch to Leonard Poore soon after they were received (Ibid, xxxiv). See also J. Horton- Ryley, Ralph Fitch: England's Pioneer to India (1899).
9. See John Sanderson, The Travels of John Sanderson in the Levant. ed. W. Foster, (Glasgow: Hakluyt Society, 1930). Second Series, no. lxxvii.
10. Lithgow was more of a "walker" than a traveller as such. He walked from London to Edinburgh in 1627. See William Lithgow in Dictionary of National Biography (1909 ed.).
11. A Catalogue of printed editions of travellers' accounts in England up to 1700 was published by F. Bowers and R.B. Davis. See Bulletin of the New York Public Library, Vol 54, 1950.
12. Nativists, notably Descartes and Kant argued that human beings are created in the image of God and are born with a good nature and worldly knowledge. Empiricists, notably George Berkeley and John Locke argued that human nature and knowledge are not innate but develop out of experience. Thus one school contended that behaviour emerges, maintains itself, or changes because of endogenous forces— forces arising from within the individual. According to this view, individuals are seen as dynamic, and change is seen as qualitative. The second school contended that behaviour emerges, maintains itself, or changes, because of exogenous forces —those arising from outside the individual. A third school argues that development takes place through the interaction, over time, of endogenous, and exogenous influences. On this subject see the excellent article "The Development of Human Behaviour", Encyclopedia Britannica (1990 ed.) vol 14, pp. 708–710.
13. The first fifteen volumes of Buffon's work were published in the period (1749–1767), seven volumes in (1774–89), nine vols (on birds) (1770–83) and five vols on minerals (1783–88).

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