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The Travel Accounts We Don't Write About. Eastern European Ways of Mapping the World

Abstract: Eastern European travel accounts seem to represent an exotic, less analyzed space of discourse where some clichés (such as *oriental*, *Balkan*) are supposed to cover the lack of interest Europe had upon it over the decades.[1] This paper focuses on the Eastern way of experiencing voyages and how these account for a depiction of the European realm. For this purpose, we shall analyze some discourse recurrences which reveal the search of otherness, but also a fascinating imprinted legacy of the Byzantine culture upon the space.
Keywords: Eastern Europe; Travel Literature; Real and Imaginary Geography; Spatiality; Byzantinology.

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Immersion in the Byzantine Culture

Travel writings are known for their embodying of the different kinds of meaning and experience in various cultures. Many a time, while approaching travel discourses, we notice various ways in which the geographical space is presented to us, the readers, never without relating this exhibition to ideologically oriented ideas and meanings for us to disclose. In considering the image of Europe, one needs to bear in mind both the Latin West and the Eastern Oriental paradigms of geography, both expressing a particular sense of political, cultural and religious identity.

It is important, when discussing European travels and writings, to take into discussion the vision they have imparted upon the continent's geography throughout the centuries. Beginning with the medieval period and particularly later on, in the Renaissance period, the image of Eastern Europe was thought to be a "meta-geographical notion" representing "the politically divided world of Latin Christendom *vis-á-vis* the rising Ottoman Empire and, to a lesser degree, the schismatic Christian East."[2] On the other

hand, the image of Europe's Eastern part was thought, until the first half of the fifteenth century, to be outlined by the imperial city of Constantinople, the main point from where to consider spatial references and to determine the underlying cardinal directions within and beyond the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire. The capital city was thus a crucially important factor impacting the Byzantines' understanding of Eastern and Western locations over time.

These means of approaching spatiality prevailed through what Dimiter Angelov termed as "popular geography," "a living tradition of the people," to such an extent that the accuracy of academic geographical works and resources submitted under the influence of the large amount of spatial notions engendered by common people. It was equally the case when, in the fifteenth century, the increasing threats of the Ottomans near the territory of Byzantium generated a specific court rhetoric which magnified the imperial halo of the Constantinople, in a disjointed empire already resembling a "city-state" extremely exposed to Ottoman's menaces.[3]

When discussing the influence of Byzantine travel representations on Eastern travel tradition, some scholars acknowledge not much evidence on Byzantine writing's authority and efficiency in being essentially relevant for Eastern writings development, but quite on the contrary, the idea of a so-called "scarcity" has been uttered.[4] Nevertheless, a great deal of evidence concerning epistolary, autobiographical, hagiographic and novelistic writings which approach the topic of travelling, all dating from the Byzantine period, has been conveyed,[5] its models being supposedly spread towards West.

It's also worth mentioning the language complexity of the writings which mirrors a multi-ethnic and multilingual basis of this culture: besides Greek, which gradually came to be thought of as the main language of the state and administration to the detriment of Latin, there were other languages that, I suggest, had a certain role in forging the writing style of travel discourses, particularly Armenian, in the eastern Anatolian regions, Syrian and other Semitic languages, in the regions to the south.[6] The main spatial recurrence continued to be Constantinople out of whose areal there is not much evidence after the middle of the seventh century, apart from the urban centers where families could afford to pay for private teachers. Yet it is much more the case of monasteries, where the main range of writings was as much biblical as it was patristic. In fact, the institutions of the Church intended to provide a favorable context for education, pursuing to a certain degree the model of the Ancient Greek *paideia*.[7]

Along with the treasures that crusaders brought from Byzantium to Western Europe, Byzantine culture became a fountainhead from which essential human values first formulated by the Greco-Roman antiquity were spread towards the Occident. Paul Lemerle[8] attributed to the Byzantine history the merits of preserving and transmitting not only the written creation of ancient Greece, but also the basis of the University and Law school.

However, before the conquest of Constantinople by the crusaders (1204), besides navigation and commerce as influential means through which the two different cultures interfered, it is worth mentioning the cultural interchange occasioned by the

arrival of the Byzantine empress Theophano to Rome to marry Otto II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, in the tenth century. Her noble origin (being *purpura natus*) together with the influential status she had as wife of the German emperor generated a context in which adoption and imitation of Byzantine specificities were reinforced. She was renowned for the luxury, the religious *devotionalia*, both she and her people, companions or connections within the various embassies she joined forces with, brought with them, especially iconographic items, but also for making use of the Byzantine institutions in order to strengthen her self-contained and far-reaching position, after the death of the emperor.[9] Therefore, the Eastern presence in Western spaces, either for diplomatic or commercial purposes, imprinted at that time a particular Byzantine element in many places. However, the image of the Eastern space started to change in Western eyes after the conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottomans.

When drawing on Byzantine literature and imaginary, one can observe the indisputable recurrence of the image of Constantinople as a magnificent and holy ruler over between Europe and Asia. In the twelfth century, some Russian pilgrim writings offered a great deal of evidence of the miraculous radiance of the capital city, which was approached as a holy place to be visited by Christians, their voyages consisting solely of "a walk through the city."[10] A similar perspective could be perceived in the reports of the ambassadors describing their voyages replete with details strange world, even hostile, compared to that of Byzantium,[11] although their displacement was within the boundaries of the empire.

The correspondence of civil and ecclesiastic functionaries displaced far from Constantinople gives us the impression that their transfer in the province means for them a voyage which resembles a contrived exile.[12]

To some extent, the experience of enduring a particular unfamiliar space felt as unsecure and uneasy might be described after the pattern of existing exile writings, which used to recount the obstacles and long-lasting duration of the voyages, insisting on the dangers and the soreness of the roamed spaces:

> Apart from the actually traveling literature, every chronicle or correspondence which speaks of the journey introduces us into that particular world in which the individual enters a land that is foreign to him. There is a shift from a known world, governed by norms, into an unknown world, often felt as hostile. In the journey, everything that we knew is diluted and transformed as far as to give free rein to the imaginary.[13]

Later Boundaries of Eastern Europe

Before the late eighteenth century, the way in which Eastern Europe was perceived was anything but coherent; the aspects most likely responsible for shaping a divergent understanding of the region were related to differences of social and historical context, and also to the two religious counterparts of Christianity, the Western Church on one side (both Catholic and Protestant) and the Eastern Orthodox Church, on the other. The dissemination of

travel writings beyond the confines of Eastern Europe generated different representations of its boundaries.[14] The Enlightened Europe's aim were "near-Utopian"[15] societies, which were compared to the Eastern model of civilization; the inconsistency resulted from their mirroring generating a superior attitude of the West regarding East, which was considered backward and barbaric in relation to the modernity and cultivation required in Europe:

> What is novel is the notion of a degree of Europeanness, or the process of becoming "more" European. [...] The term "European" often seems to float free of geography; a compliment paid to a people, policy or political regime the traveler was familiar with or approved.[16]

For this reason, Eastern travelers in Europe often perceived and represented themselves as bearers of a world that required changes and needed to comply with the European standards formulated by the West. The contrast was painful especially for the Greeks, who perceived themselves as direct descendants of both of the Ancient and Byzantine tradition. The letter from Paris to Smyrna of Adamantios Korais to Protopsaltis Dimitrios Lotos is a notable one in this regard

> Anyone would be astonished at these things, but for a Greek who knows that two thousand years ago in Athens his ancestors had reached an equal (if not higher) level of learning, this astonishment is mingled with melancholy when he reflects that such blessings no longer exist in today's Greece

but have instead been replaced by a thousand evils.[17]

Basically, the imperial claims and politics of both Ottomans and Russians endangered the national characteristics of the peoples from the East. As a result, they insisted on defining their national specificity very thoroughly, in opposition to Ottoman authority, and singled out a whole series of scenes from their own homelands.[18] Regardless of their struggles for creating a specific identity, they were still perceived from an outward superficial perspective as simply parts of the heterogeneous Eastern Europe suffering the inevitability of Turk's oriental influence, whose art legacy though finds its roots to a large extent in the Byzantine particularities.

Ultimately, the research carried out about mapping Eastern Europe provides us with insights into the inconsistency of such a laborious approach in the seventeenth century, at least if considering *New Introduction to Geography* of 1695, which localize Muscovy both in Europe and Asia, its dissonance being further confused until the late eighteenth century and motivated by the lack of awareness concerning the demarcation between the two continents.[19] According to Larry Wolff, "the essence of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century was still its resistance to precise geographical location and description."[20] Due to Russian political expansion, Ukraine, Polish and Russian spaces were among the worst mapped and least generally known in Western Europe. With no assistance forthcoming from Constantinople, the most serious resistance in front of the cartographical endeavours of Western Europe towards East was the Ottoman Empire.

All these circumstances strengthened the enlightened image of Eastern Europe emerging from darkness.[21]

The same uneasiness occurred when situating Constantinople on the map. Because of its transcontinental position, it was perceived as both a European and an Asiatic city. Nevertheless, because of the wide-spread Ottoman influence, it could not be considered culturally European albeit its commercial and historical center lies on the European side. This particular aspect is stressed in Liuben Karavelov's description of the city of Plovdiv in 1868, which had to be seen "just as you should see all other Asiatic cities (even Constantinople) – from a distance."[22] For if one gets closer, their oriental and picturesque halo perishes and they become places of hybridity and degeneration caused by Ottoman influence.

> I was completely enraptured by the location and the picturesque quality of the buildings, by the magnificence of the river Maritsa […] reflecting the city buildings in its waters, making a copy of another city. But as we entered the city everything changed, everything looked different, everything vanished.[23]

It seems that the true boundaries between eastern original were delineated by places from the countryside, where the encounter with original landscapes and unfeigned otherness could be experienced. The Greek writer Dimitrios Vikelas, in the late nineteenth century, invites his friend to visit the beauties of Greece before being altered by civilization, initially considered as corrupting (for instance, the

initiatives of establishing a railway system are deplored by one of his English friend). At second glance though, the appreciative tone regarding natural genuineness divert to the denouncement of backwardness.[24]

A Voyage to the Orient

Most of the Romanian diplomats and intellectuals of the nineteenth century travelling to the Orient were referring mostly to sea voyages and to the city of Constantinople in their correspondence, memories and travel accounts. A contribution less familiar and less mentioned in the history of the Romanian nineteenth century travel writings belongs to the clergyman Alexandru Mironescu, who set off his journey to Constantinople in 1885. Visiting the Ecumenical Patriarchy and the city's surroundings, accompanied by officials from the legation, the Romanian bishop, besides exalting religious importance draw on the historical background of his homeland, with all its shortcomings related to Ottoman intrusion.

> The place was very delightful; in all parts one could discover the traces of a skilled hand for arranging and embellishing; one could say that it is a small paradise embalmed with the smell of various flowers and surrounded with many lemons laden with fruits.[25]
> …we arrived at the seven Towers, where we had a layover pretty good to better see these walls in which resounded many sighs from Romanian chests and which witnessed the execution of many Romanian boyars and rulers.[26]

Mironescu pictures an image of an old Constantinople gathering many people and various nationalities, with beggars in places whose architecture recalls the lost imperial magnificence, buildings representing royal palaces in which only nightingales are still welcomed to shelter and mosques in effect very similar to the old byzantine churches asserting Ottoman presence.

Eventually, the Eastern European space suffering different geographical changes generated various perspectives of approaching Eastern Europe, of which some are more reliable and better known than others. In the course of time, we see how physical boundaries of the Eastern region were often found under political dynamics. Every sequence of space kept in its memories many cultural backgrounds waiting to be retrieved above the logic of centre and periphery, whose incongruence consists in the multilayered centers established especially when travelling. Ultimately, the heterogeneity of Eastern Europe could be perceived as micro-homogenous fields which draw on mental spaces and cultural identities. As regards the Byzantine representations found in Eastern travel accounts, be they concerning diplomatic affairs, maritime trade or pilgrimages and sightseeing in Constantinople, they might embody one of those micro-homogenous perspectives worth a further research.

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NOTES

1. Alex Drace-Francis points out the lack of discussion about Eastern Europe in some important works on this topic i.e. in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* and *Literature of Travel and Exploration: an Encyclopedia*. Wendy Bracewell, Alex Drace-Francis (eds.), *Under Eastern Eyes. A Comparative*

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2. Dimiter Angelov, "Asia and Europe Commonly Called East and West: Constantinople and Geographical Imagination in Byzantium," in Sahar Bazzaz, Yota Batsaki, Dimiter Angelov (eds.), *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*, Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies Hellenic Studies Series 56, 2013, [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_BazzazS_etal_eds.Imperial_Geographies.2013]. [Accesed at 11.01.2017]

3. *Ibid.*

4. Drace-Francis, *Under Eastern Eyes*, p. 10.

5. M. E. Mullett, "On Peril on the Sea: Travel Genres and the Unexpected," in Ruth J. Macrides (ed.), *Travel in the Byzantine World. Papers from the Thirty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000*, Aldershot, Ashgate Variorum, 2002, pp. 259-284.

6. Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon, Robin Cormack (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 21.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

8. Paul Lemerle, "Byzance et les origines de notre civilization," in Agostino Pertusi (ed.), *Venezia e l'Oriente fra tardo medioevo e rinasciamento*, Florence, Sansoni, 1966.

9. Krijnie Nelly Ciggar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: The West and Byzantium, 962-1204: Cultural and Political Relations*, Leiden-New York-Koln, E. J. Brill, 1996, p. 209.

10. Elisabeth Malamut, "Voyages et literature voyageuse a Byzance," in Alain Dierkens, Jean-Marie Sansterre (eds.), *Voyages et voyageurs a Byzance et en Occident du VIe au XIe siecle: actes du colloque international (5-7 mai 1994)*, Geneve, Librarie Droz, 2000, p.191.

11. *Ibid.*, p.195.

12. "La correspondance des fonctionnaires civils et ecclésiastiques mutés hors de Constantinople nous donne l'impression que leur transfert en province est pour eux un voyage qui s'apparente á un exil force," Elisabeth Malamut, "Voyages et literature voyageuse a Byzance," p. 205.

13. "En dehors de la littérature voyageuse proprement dit, toute chronique ou correspondance, qui parle du voyage nous introduit dans ce monde particulier où l'individu pénètre dans un terre, qui lui est étrangère. Il y a basculement d'un monde connu, régi par des normes, dans un monde inconnu, souvent ressenti comme hostile. Dans le voyage, tout ce que l'on connaissait se dilue et se transforme jusqu'à laisser libre cours à l'imaginaire," *ibid*, pp. 204-205.

14. Wendy Bracewell, "The Limits of Europe in East European Travel Writing," in Wendy Bracewell, Alex Drace-Francis (eds.), *Under Eastern Eyes*, pp. 65-67.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

16. *Ibid*, p. 92, 94.

17. Adamantios Korais, "Letter from Paris to Smyrna," in Wendy Bracewell, *Orientations. An Anthology of East European Travel Writing, ca. 1550-2000*, Budapest-New York, Central European University Press, 2009, p. 91.

18. Cf. Wendy Bracewell, "*Domopis:* Travels Through the Homeland," in Wendy Bracewell, *Orientations*, pp. 129-144.

19. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 151-152.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

22. Liuben Karavelov, "Plovdiv," in Wendy Bracewell, *Orientations*, p. 238.

23. *Ibid.*

24. "But it is to be hoped that civilization will eventually take hold here as well," Dimitrios Vikelas, "Come to Greece," in Wendy Bracewell, *Orientations*, p. 249.

25. "Locul era fórte desfătător; în tóte părţile se putea descoperi urmele unei mâni ghibace în a aranja şi înfrumuseţa; se putea zice că este un mic paradis îmbălsămat cu mirosul a fel de flori, şi încunjurat cu

numeroşi lămâi încărcaţi cu fructe," Alexandru Mironescu, "Călětorie în Orient," in *Biserica Orthodoxă Română: jurnal periodicu eclesiasticu*, Bucureşti, Desbaterile S-tului Sinod, 1889-1890, p. 524.

26. "[A]m ajuns la cele şapte Turnuri, unde am făcut un popas, bunişor pentru a vedea mai bine aceste ziduri în care au rěsunat multe suspine eşite din piepturi româneşti şi cari au fost marture la uciderea multor boeri şi domnu români," *ibid.*, p. 603.