

# Stereotypes, Memories and Experiences: Journeys and Travellers in the Medieval Mediterranean

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During the Middle Ages there was great mobility in the Mediterranean, though often restricted to the two extremes of the social scale: the most privileged and the most deprived, almost always men in both cases. There were endless categories of travellers who, as in the case of pilgrims, were more likely to leave accounts of their personal journey and experience, so that today each religion has its myths or iconic travellers. These journeys were very often fraught with natural and human dangers, which gave rise to a series of widespread rituals and advice. Other groups, such as merchants, rarely left accounts of their experiences. Most travellers were guided by curiosity and the desire to see the world, although the concept of tourism was still a long way off.

## Stereotypes, Extremes and Exclusions

In late May 1397, King Martin the Humane landed on Barcelona beach to be received and enter the city, for the first time, as sovereign of the Crown of Aragon.<sup>1</sup> He disembarked from a galley that had brought him from Sicily via Avignon, crossing a wooden bridge, duly decorated, which had been built for the occasion. The commemorative festivities of a royal entrance awaited him.

At the same time, any slave (male or female) like those who, for a few decades, had been increasing the city population, could also disembark in Barcelona, but in very different conditions: after having undertaken a long and arduous journey from the eastern Mediterranean, mercantile supply point for Eurasian and Balkan slave labour; or having been captured somewhere in the western Mediterranean simply because they were Muslim and had the misfortune to encounter a Christian ship. In any case, their arrival would

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have taken place in a completely unknown environment in terms of language, customs and religion, hundreds or thousands of kilometres from their place of origin, after having been brutally uprooted from their own everyday life, without knowing what the future held for them, and completely lacking in references, friendships and contacts.

In the medieval Mediterranean there was much more mobility than the stereotypes about the Middle Ages have sometimes suggested. Certainly, journeys (especially those by sea) could not be within the reach nor were they part of the mental universe of the vast majority of the population. But this does not mean that there was no mobility, although mobility would often be restricted to the two extremes of the social scale: the most privileged and the most deprived. And, fundamentally, to men.

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The possible categories of medieval travellers are endless: merchants, pilgrims, knights, warriors, mercenaries, sailors, diplomats, ambassadors, artisans, artists, secular and regular clerics, students, intellectuals, monarchs, princes and nobles with their itinerant courts and retinues... and the marginalised, poor, beggars, prisoners of war, slaves and captives, along with all kinds of socially excluded people who travelled voluntarily or by force. Or, with varying fortunes, they even could emigrate in search of a better life or work, or driven by wars and famines.

Nevertheless, these are categories rarely referred to women. And, when they did, they were almost without exception reflected from a male point of view or conditioned by male

categories, whatever the religion and geographical origin.

If women did travel they were usually, at one extreme, queens, princesses or nobles leaving the paternal home to move to their husband's. And, at the most, women taking their vows and moving to enter a convent, but always protected by their family nucleus or environment of security and control.

At the other extreme was the forced journey of slaves and of socially neglected and deprived women, such as prostitutes, often foreigners, who worked in the brothels of the ports and maritime cities and were at the service of sailors, or could be transported with combatants and mercenaries.

It was not socially accepted for women to travel on their own because it implied transgression and also tended to be hidden and unrecorded, both in narrative and documentary sources: Egeria and her journey to the Holy Land, in the 4th century, is an exception.

## Icons: Jews, Muslims and Christians

Of course, each religion of the Mediterranean Middle Ages has its own myths or iconic travellers: the Navarre-born Jew Benjamin of Tudela, in the second half of the 12th century; the Tangier-born Ibn Battuta, considered the Muslim medieval traveller par excellence, in the 14th century; and Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who lived between the 13th and 14th centuries. They are myths that emanate, of course, from narrative records that, directly or indirectly, they left us in writing.

As a result of the diaspora, the culture of travel can be considered consubstantial to the Jewish people. Everyone knows that, during the Middle Ages, the Jewish communities were very dynamic, and their members not only engaged in international trade but also travelled both for training and to go on a pilgrimage to



Jaffa Port, where the Christian pilgrims disembark on the way to the Holy Land (in *Berhard von Breydenbach and his Journey to the Holy Land. A Bibliography*, London, J & J. Leighton, 1911).

Jerusalem. Consequently, Jews regulated the situations that prevented them from complying with the precepts of the law, legislating, for example, on movements on the Shabbat, the protection or camouflage of their identity during journeys to avoid risks, or long family absences.

The story of Benjamin of Tudela, who travelled the entire Mediterranean and went as far as Jerusalem, Damascus, Mosul and Baghdad, appears to be a simple itinerary. But he was interested, albeit succinctly, in the socioeconomic, political and religious situation of the fellow religious communities he visited, as well as in the political relations between the Christian and Islamic worlds. He also contrasted the respect that the Jews enjoyed in Islamic lands with the oppression that they suffered in Christian Europe. And, in the end, he is representative

and offers an overall image of the 12th century Hebrew and Mediterranean communities.

As the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the precepts of Islam, the journey is also inherent in the Islamic religion and civilisation. In addition, just as with the Jews, it was also considered appropriate and necessary for scholars of Islamic law to travel for an educational tour of the main cities of *dar al-islam*, where they could be instructed by the great masters. In fact, the written travel genre par excellence, the *Rihla*, appears among Muslims from the 12th century, thanks to the Andalusians and Maghrebians who wanted to leave an account of their journeys of learning and pilgrimage to the East.

Ibn Yubayr, born in Valencia in the mid-12th century, is considered the greatest representative of the *Rihla*. He crossed the Medi-

terranean to Alexandria, and visited Mecca, Baghdad, Syria and the Holy Land. However, his text focuses primarily on historical and biographical references, without mentioning what he saw or the customs of the places he visited.

In contrast, Ibn Battuta's account is much more vibrant. Not only because he collects much more varied information but because it includes all kinds of anecdotes, myths, legends, curiosities and personal experiences. His story shows him as a man of average culture, insightful and observant, but at the same time a strict and puritanical Muslim, with many prejudices and always standing on ceremony. Regarded, for a long time and from an absolutely Eurocentric point of view, as "the Muslim Marco Polo", Ibn Battuta travelled almost uninterrupted for three decades, and in addition to crossing the Mediterranean and going, logically, to Mecca, his travels covered much of the African world (he crossed the Sahara and entered Black Africa as far as Sijilmasa, Mali and Niger) and the Eurasian world (Iraq, Iran, Tanzania, Yemen, Qatar, Bahrain, Afghanistan, India, Maldives, Ceylon, Sumatra, China...). He left his memories in writing later, with the help of his secretary, Ibn Yuzavy. And although his travels went beyond the limits of the Mediterranean and the Islamic world, they offer a representative view of it in the eyes of a 14th century Muslim.

Although Marco Polo has become the iconic medieval Christian traveller, his memoirs have little or nothing of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean Sea. He was Mediterranean, yes, because of his origins, as a Venetian whose family had commercial interests in Constantinople and the Black Sea, which were the gateway to Asia for his father and his uncle, first, and later for his own journey and stay of two decades among the Mongols. However, if, after his return, Marco Polo ended up leaving his memories and life experience in writing, it was precisely because he was

Mediterranean. Captured by the Genoese in a naval battle against Venice in the Adriatic, he was imprisoned in Genoa for a year. During his time in prison, he met Rustichello da Pisa, a writer of Arthurian novels and with a French cultural background, to whom he narrated or dictated his memoirs. But his story is not that of a merchant but of an explorer or adventurer interested in describing the strange and distant countries he encountered, thinking of those who would never visit them.

## Memories and Experiences of Mediterranean Christian Pilgrimage

In the medieval Christian Mediterranean, the travel narratives that fill the 14th and 15th centuries with memories and personal experiences are, fundamentally, those of the European Christian pilgrims who visited the three great poles of Christian pilgrimage: Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and the Holy Land.

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Although the routes that led to Santiago de Compostela from the European continent were fundamentally land routes, pilgrims from the Mediterranean arc used to arrive by sea to Barcelona and, passing through Montserrat, then headed by land to Lleida and Saragossa, from where they would connect with the land route that ran through the north of the peninsula.

Depending on the place of origin of the pilgrims, Rome, logically, could also be reached by land or via the Mediterranean. However, for Europeans, travel to the Holy Land had to be undertaken by sea because, to visit the Holy

Places, pilgrims inevitably had to cross the Mediterranean.

The relative randomness of the pilgrimage to many of the sanctuaries of the Christian West, where one could go or arrive “along the way” depending on geographical proximity or within the framework of much broader routes, can in no way be extended, therefore, to the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. To go the Holy Land one had to travel deliberately. To get there, one had to sail, and face not only the high cost of the journey but also its length and danger. Not only because of the risks and problems inherent to sailing for people who were not accustomed to it and who were probably doing it for the first time, but also because the journey forced them to travel through lands that were under Muslim rule and, depending on the route, even to cross the Sinai desert, whose hardships were another added risk for travellers who, of course, were not only not accustomed but were completely unaware of them.

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Unlike what happened on the Way of Saint James or the route to Rome, where pilgrims made the journey individually or, in current terms, “independently”, in the Late Middle Ages, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land became a kind of “organised journey”, regulated down to the smallest detail, and that left little room for improvisation. When, in the middle of the 14th century, the Western Christian states managed to persuade the Mamluk Empire to authorise their presence in Jerusalem and the Franciscans were officially granted the right to settle in the Holy Places to reactivate Christian worship, pilgrimages evolved towards their high point, although in a way completely overseen by the Friars Minor.

In addition to the spiritual supervision of the pilgrims through the Holy Land, where the itineraries, rituals and liturgical manifestations associated with each of the places to be visited were very fixed, the Franciscans, once they landed there, also took on the logistical organisation. They facilitated travel, accommodation and food, and acted as guides and translators.

Most of the pilgrims embarked in Venice, aboard galleys that took them to the port of Jaffa, which was the usual point of disembarkation. From there began the route that led to Jerusalem and its surroundings, where the path of the captivity, crucifixion and burial of Christ was reconstructed; the River Jordan, where Saint John the Baptist was baptised; and Bethlehem, Jesus’ birthplace. Afterwards, they went back to Jaffa to begin their return to Venice.

The tour of the Holy Land lasted about fifteen or twenty days, but, with the return journey to Venice, it lasted between four and six months, to which they had to add the travel times to and from the pilgrims’ place of origin. Therefore, for a visit to the Holy Places of a couple of weeks, the journey could easily last eight or ten months.

Those who ventured to visit the Sinai could land at Alexandria, pass through Cairo, and circle the Sinai Peninsula and the Red Sea; or go from Gaza, after having already visited the Holy Places. Then, on the desert crossing, the emulation of the Passion of Christ ceased to be rhetorical. More than a few pilgrims lost their lives there because of its harshness and inclement weather.

For help with the itineraries and rituals, the pilgrims could have religious liturgical guides to explain the meaning of each place visited, the indulgences and pardons to which they were entitled, and the prayers that had to be spoken. They were anonymous and timeless manuals, without personal implications, which were passed on, without significant modifications, from generation to generation. But many

pilgrims also wanted to leave a written record of their own personal travel experience, and they developed narratives in the first person recounting the circumstances and particularities of their own journeys.

## Survival

Beyond their spiritual and mental preparation, those who crossed the Mediterranean were aware of the natural and human dangers they could face. The threat of storms, winds, shipwrecks and diseases was no less than that of pirates and corsairs. For this reason, many of the pilgrims made a will before setting out on their journey.

For people unaccustomed to travel, a tradition developed of practical advice about the material issues and conditions under which travel should be undertaken.

Traditionally, the most advisable season to travel was spring, since the day was getting longer, temperatures becoming milder and the sea calmer. Conditioned by the weather, the length of the sailing stages was random and unpredictable. They might not touch land for many days and, even when they did, they might not be able to obtain provisions and water. In addition, on board the ships they had to survive in a very small and often uncomfortable and dirty space.

If they did not make another type of agreement with the captain, travellers had to carry and manage their own food, in addition to the utensils needed to cook and eat it. It was best to travel with a locked trunk to keep everything safe and prevent theft. It was also a good idea to buy a cot or mattress to be able to sleep in a minimum of comfort, and they needed a chamber pot, wax for lighting and basic medication.

Obviously, fresh food could not be taken because it spoiled quickly and could cause health problems. Basically, it was best to take dry cake

or bread toasted, to make it last longer; dry products but not salty, so that they did not make create too much thirst; oil, cheese, rice and nuts; wine in moderate quantities, and often more for medicinal use than to drink; some live animals; and sugar and sweets, which could help replace energy after fainting. And water.

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In the travel narratives, the accounts of spoiled food and water are constant, both on board the ships and on the desert crossing, because of their similarities in terms of difficulties of supply: mouldy biscuit riddled with worms; dense, putrid water that gives off a stench so unbearable that it cannot even be disguised with sugar, syrup or spices, but must be drunk because it is all that is available; water that has gone bad inside the leather skins that were supposed to preserve it takes on the taste of the leather and the fat with which the leather had been tanned, and also has to be drunk full of hair; wine soured and undrinkable, or with the taste of glue, so thick that it can be cut with a knife and cannot even be taken as medicine...

Even so, there were also methods for trying to desalinate seawater, such as repeatedly filtering it with sand, or boiling it in a pot, with a clean cloth over it to catch the steam and then drain it.

Logically, the main problem for travellers who were not used to sailing was seasickness and vomiting. To try to avoid this, it was advisable to prepare the body by eating less and, if possible, starting the journey on an empty



Cover of the book by Roser Salicrú *Tripulacions i vaixells a la Mediterrània medieval. Fonts i perspectives comparades des de la Corona d'Aragó*, Barcelona, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2019.

stomach, in addition to using anti-nausea remedies, such as quince, pomegranate and capers. Since salt causes the stomach mouth to close, if sufficient resources were available, wine mixed with sea water could be taken preventively and, if not, salt water directly. But, ideally, the first day, which was the most critical, should be spent without eating or drinking, avoiding looking at the sea and lying down.

Although, to avoid the dirt, it was recommended to be outdoors whenever possible, and in the highest place possible, it was also important to protect oneself from heat and sunstroke, covering the head and preventing the sun from burning the body.

From the mid-14th century, the ships began to have medical help: the barbers. In addition to

treating sores and diseases, they also performed the hygienic task of cutting hair and beards. But the barbers were trained on the job, not university-educated, and, although many have been documented with their instruments and manuals, they worked in very precarious conditions and, sometimes, their training might not have been adequate. In his account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Roberto da San Severino refers to a barber who, according to him, “knew as much about curing illnesses and fever as a donkey about playing the guitar.” He had an ointment that he gave to everyone who had a fever, regardless of what the cause of the fever was and the patient’s constitution.

The spread of medical practice did not prevent magic and beliefs from also influencing travel medicine, as in many other areas of life and knowledge of the time and in the prevention of all kinds of phenomena, risks and dangers. In the case of sea voyages, remedies could be recommended to ward off storms, such as eating lettuce, or carrying stones or animals with special properties. Medical textbooks also included spells and prayers. And it seems that lists circulated among the sailors that indicated the days when changes in sea conditions were likely, from calm to stormy.

Although it may seem contradictory, in personal accounts, the insistence on the difficulties of the journey is directly related to successfully overcoming those obstacles, because, otherwise, those memories would not have reached us. For this reason, although it cannot always be said that the authors magnify the dangers and incidents, they do have a tendency to record their own heroic deeds. As texts written to be read by third parties and designed to tell a story, overcoming dangers can be used as a literary device, lending more value to the experience itself. But we must not lose sight of the fact that what stand out are the exceptional episodes, not the everyday monotony, which, by itself, did not arouse any interest.



## Merchants, Knights... and Change of Era

Unlike the pilgrims, the groups most accustomed to crossing the Mediterranean, such as merchants, have rarely left written accounts of their memories and personal experiences. What the merchants had within their reach, and what was useful and necessary for them and their factors, both for their practical use and for the training of novices, were the “merchandise manuals”. They were compilations of information, on the countries and ports or commercial places of interest, as well as on the empirical and functional knowledge necessary for carrying out their tasks, with details of customs, taxes, measurements, prices, product quality, vocabulary, distances and routes, state of the roads, mathematical operations, moral advice, and so on.

As in the case of Marco Polo, the merchants only left a written record of their journey in those cases where they combined their possible commercial trips with more general voyages: when they acted as pilgrims or when they experienced incidents that they later considered worth telling. The examples of Anselm Adorno, a Flemish merchant of Genoese origin living in Bruges, who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, would be illustrative, or that of the also Flemish Eustache de la Fosse, who was captured by some Portuguese sailors during a trade trip to the coast of Guinea and imprisoned in Alcácer do Sal, from where he later managed to escape. These are late examples, that point

to the last quarter of the 15th century and connect, in some way, with the already more “mundane” or polyhedral dimension of the long journeys – overland, unless they visited the Holy Land – that many North European nobles, knights or patricians followed, at the same time, throughout Europe, leaving written accounts of their impressions and experiences. Emblematic examples of this are the accounts by Georg von Ehingen, Nikolas von Popplau, Leo von Rozmital, Hyeronimus Münzer, Arnold von Harff, and so on.

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Although, for the Middle Ages, the concept of tourism is an anachronism, many of them travelled driven, fundamentally, as expressed in their safe conducts and letters of recommendation as well as their own writings, by curiosity, their desire to see the world, visit countries and courts and devote themselves to courtly pleasures, participate in jousts and tournaments. Evidently, they could not help but visit the shrines that came their way as “tourist spots” of the day. But their spirit was far removed from that of medieval travellers and pilgrims, as were their stereotypes, memories and experiences. Even in the case of “true” pilgrims to the Holy Land, like Bernhard von Breydenbach, canon and dean of Mainz Cathedral, in 1483-1484: it is another time and another mentality.