

Title of the paper: Mediterranean Travel Writing
from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the notion of travel writing in the Mediterranean through the exploration of some eminent travel writers of Arab and European origins who marked Mediterranean literature from the Middle Ages to the present.

Key words: travel writing- Mediterranean-travel writers.

ملخص

تفحص هذه الورقة فكرة كتابة السفر في البحر الأبيض المتوسط من خلال استكشاف بعض كتاب لسفر البارزين من أصول عربية وأوروبية تميزوا بأدب البحر الأبيض المتوسط من العصور الوسطى حتى الوقت الحاضر
الكلمات مفتاحية : كتابة السفر - البحر المتوسط - كتاب السفر

The Mediterranean has always been described as the crossroad of cultures and civilisations characterised by unpredictable alliances and tensions between the self and the other, tradition and modernity, Christianity and Islam evolving in a context of exploration, trade, pilgrimage, migrations, and imperial expansion.

In this context of mobility, Mediterranean travel writers of both sides of the Mediterranean reported through outdoor literature, guide books, nature writings, and travel memoirs their experiences of the trips they undertook in the so called “other world”.

Travel writing is a literary genre also called travel literature. “All travel writing-because it is writing-is made in the sense of being constructed” said Peter Hulme, but “travel writing cannot be made up without losing its designation” (quoted by Tim Youngs in *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, 2013). Travel literature in fact records the experiences of travellers in some quite interesting places and under some circumstances. It is typically characterised by vivid descriptions, examples, and illustrations, maps, diagrams, and background. In his *Travel Writing* (2011), Carl Thompson suggests that

To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. Possibly this journey is epic in scale, taking the traveller to the other side of the world or across a continent, or up a mountain; possibly, it is more modest in scope, and takes place within the limits of the traveller’s own country or region, or even just their immediate locality. Either

way, to begin any journey or, indeed, simply to set foot beyond one's own front door, is quickly to encounter difference and otherness. (Thompson, 9)

He further adds that journey is always associated to alterity, difference, similarity, and otherness. In his own words:

All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed alterity. Or, more precisely, since there are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity. (Thompson, 9).

Thompson further refers to travel writing as an expression which implies a movement leading to discovery, exploration, identity, connection and disparity between the self and the other. Similarly, travel refers to "the negotiation between self and other brought about by movement in space" (Thompson, 9). In this context of similarity and difference Arab and Muslim travelers embarked on the discovery of the other in the same way as the Europeans did of the world (s) that was different from their own.

In the Middle Ages, Muslim travelers embarked on a world tour known in the Arabic language as *rihla* as surveyors, emissaries, educators, and adventurers, by foot, by horse, individually or in groups, by caravans, or by boat. Abu Hatim (277/890 CE) from Rayy was a well known travel writer. In the travelogue transmitted by his son he reported "The first time I travelled I did it for seven years. I walked far more than one thousand parasangs [5700 kilometers] before I stopped counting. After I left to Bahryn. I walked to Egypt from which I left on foot to Syria [...] I did all this when I was not yet twenty years old".

Other travelers accomplished a grand tour on camels particularly in those vast Islamic territories of the Sahara and the largest deserts where the camel was the best means of transportation at that time. Nasir-i-Khusru, during his mid-eleventh century trip to pilgrimage to Mecca explained the hardships of the trip before one could reach destination.

Other travel writers undertook the voyage by sea though it was the most feared means of transportation at that time. Very few regions had maritime traditions like the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Arden (El Andalus). The Iraqi traveler and encyclopedist Masudi (d.345/956) reported his first experience with sailors from Ottomans crossing the Gulf of Arden on his way to Zanzibar. He stated:

I sailed on this sea leaving Sinjar, capital of Oman in the company of Sirafian captains [from Siraf, the main harbor of the Persian Gulf] including Muh B.Zaydabud and Jawhar B. Ahmed also called Ibn Sira who later perished with his entire crew... I may have sailed on many a sea, the China Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Casbian Sea, the

Red Sea, and the Sea of Yemen. Yet, I have known none more perilous than the Sea of Zanzibar. (The Meadows of Gold, I, 94)

Another Palestinian traveler, Muqaddasi, also described the hostility of the sea towards Muslims as he claimed. While crossing the Mediterranean Sea he stated: "It is difficult, tumultuous sea that continually roars" (Ahsan al Taqasim, 43).

These descriptions about the sea in medieval times were reported most of the time by the travelers themselves particularly the most enlightened ones. Yet, it took a very long time for those travelers to finally decide to write about their travel experiences. This was to last until the ninth century though the earliest travel description is traced back to 851 in the work of an Iraqi merchant who described his trips to India and China.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, Europeans were also interested in the discovery what they called the other world. One among the best known European travel writers was Théophile Gautier known in history as "le Bon Théo". He was born on August 31, 1811 in Tarbes, Hautes Pyrenees. He was a poet, novelist, critic, and journalist who had an eminent impact on French literature in the transitional period between Romanticism to Aestheticism and Naturalism by the end of the nineteenth century.

Gautier first studied painting but soon became interested in poetry. His first poems appeared as early as 1830. His *Albertus* was published in 1832, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* appeared in 1835, and *La Comedie de la Mort* was edited in 1838.

Despite his interest in poetry, Gautier spent a great part of his life as a contributor to various journals which gave him the chance to travel. Indeed, Gautier was well traveled. He went to Spain, Italy, Russia, Egypt, and Algeria. Art and travel influenced to a high extent Gautier's creative works and journalism. His best travel art collections include *Espana* (1843) and *Voyage en Espagne* (1845) after his trips to Spain. Nonetheless, the most influential trip which had a deep impact on Gautier's writings began by the 1845 when he set off for French North Africa in the so called Maghreb. His *Loin de Paris* (1865) was a series of journalistic musings which deeply expressed Gautier's fascination about a world that was completely different from his own.

Gautier's various trips to Spain, Algeria (namely Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and the vast Sahara), and later to Turkey could but positively affect

his themes and imagery of his literary creations. His plays *La Juive de Constantine* (1846), *Pierrot en Espagne* (1847), and the musical entertainment *Le Sélam* (1850) remain the best travel collections which highly mark Gautier's exotic and orientalist images the Europeans had about the "other" world in the nineteenth century.

During the Middle Ages and early modern times, people on both sides of the Mediterranean seemed to have been highly attracted by travel and travel writing. The latter was at times undertaken for religious and spiritual motives, other times for trade and economic ends other times, or for mere *curiositas* in the world that was different from theirs. In either way, this paved the way for the emergence of a significant literary genre called travel literature. And though the Muslims dominated travel and travel literature during the Middle Ages for both religious and economic purposes, European explorers, adventurers, merchants, and missionaries started by the eve of the modern times to take a leading role in travel with the purpose to explore and discover the world that was beyond their homelands. Nowadays, travel literature has developed to meet the needs globalization is bringing about.

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