

PERO TAFUR: A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SPANIARD

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Travellers' tales have been a popular branch of literature for centuries and the fifteenth century is particularly rich in its assortment of observant, adventurous travellers who were eager to share their impressions and opinions with a wider public. Such men were not purveyors of the fabulous, at least not in regard to what they themselves saw. They did pass on some very tall stories derived from other travellers they met, but this was not with the intention of fooling their audience. Rather, they themselves had seen so many things which struck them as beyond belief that it was easy to accept credulously the possible wonders of a still unexplored world.

Pero Tafur, the fifteenth-century Spaniard whose *Travels and Adventures*¹ provide a fascinating picture of travel during the 1430's, was only one of a miscellaneous collection of well-to-do and literate travellers who explored Europe and the Middle East in the sixty years before the fall of Constantinople. They included a wide variety of men. There was Henry of Derby, later King Henry IV of England, who travelled as a pilgrim in the Holy Land and a crusader in Prussia, whose household accounts provide interesting detail on the ways he spent his time.² More modest knights like the Englishman Sir Thomas Swinburne and the Gascon Nompars de Caumont wrote brief descriptions of their pilgrimages to the Holy Land.³ A number of ambassadors were required to report on their missions to their lords: Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, the Castilian

who went to the court of Tamerlane the Great for the king of Castile in 1403; the Burgundians, Gillebert de Lannoy and Bertrandon de La Broquière, who carried out missions for Duke Philip the Good as reconnaissance for a possible crusade.⁴ A French royal herald, Gilles Le Bouvier, adopted a more geographical approach when he compiled his *Livre de la Description des Pays*, covering much of Europe and the Near and Middle East.⁵ With such a medley of contemporary travel accounts to draw on, two questions arise. Is there particular interest and value in what Tafur reports and where does he fit in among his fellow travellers?

The first question is the most easily answered. Tafur's travels from 1435 to 1439 are indeed of special interest and value. For one thing, he was the last European to describe Constantinople and its remnants of empire before the final Turkish onslaught and the conquest of 1453. Secondly, unlike the other travellers mentioned, Tafur devoted much of his attention and his notable powers of observation to the great commercial centres of both Europe and the Near East. We know relatively little about him except that he was a Castilian, almost certainly from Cordoba, and a young man of about twenty-five when he embarked on his journey. He travelled extensively through Italy and the Holy Land, to Constantinople and Caffa, and to Cyprus, Egypt, and Sinai. Back in Europe he explored more briefly Burgundy and Flanders, Germany and Austria, going as far as Prague and Buda. The original manuscript of his travels has disappeared and we know of it only through a single eighteenth-century copy in Madrid. It has not been widely known, even in Spain, though it appeared in an English translation in 1926. Nevertheless, it is a notable addition to the fifteenth-century travel literature. Like Bertrandon de La Broquière, who made an immediate oral report to the duke of Burgundy on his return but then waited twenty years before writing up the account of his travels, Tafur delayed to middle life the compilation of his adventures. The vividness of his descriptions and the precise detail of his observation suggest that he, like La Broquière, kept a brief diary on which he could draw as an aid to memory when he came to describe what was undoubtedly the most exciting time of his life. Even in those days when men relied so much more on a tenacious and well-exercised memory, such an aid to recollection would seem to have been almost essential.

Tafur described vividly what caught his eye or piqued his curiosity. By judicious use of his status and connections he arranged to meet many of the leading figures of his day, including Pope Eugenius IV, John VIII the Greek emperor, the king of Cyprus, and that engaging storyteller, the Venetian

Nicolo Conti. There can be little question that the young Tafur thoroughly enjoyed the excitement and pomp of his travels. Certainly he made every effort to present himself in the most favourable light wherever he went so that he could mingle with the higher ranks of society. However, it would appear that Tafur was a representative of a different class from the other noble travellers of his day. He appears to have belonged to the upper level of the growing and influential merchant class, with its claim to be part of the lesser nobility, or what England at that time would have called the gentry.

It is abundantly clear that Tafur was not part of the great nobility of Castile, and the likelihood that he was a member of the urban oligarchy is reinforced by the record of his position among the twenty-four *regidores* of Cordoba in 1479.⁶ As well, the probability of his connection to the rich mercantile establishment in Andalusia is suggested by many of his comments in the *Travels and Adventures*, as well as by the attitudes he displays. Such a situation was not incompatible with claims to noble status as it was perceived in fifteenth-century Spain. By that time Seville and Cordoba were already profiting from a great era of expansion. The clearing of Moorish naval power from the Straits of Gibraltar had encouraged the continued growth of commercial activity by Spanish merchants. They voyaged up and down the Atlantic coast to France, England and the Low Countries where, in Bruges especially, Castilians had established a strong place in that city's commercial life.⁷ As well, by the time Tafur went on his travels, Castile was even looking into the open Atlantic and claiming the possession of the Canaries. In fact, the mercantile interests and the prestige of the great urban leaders made the social situation of Seville and Cordoba a paler image of the great merchant empires of Venice and Genoa.

In the fifteenth-century successful merchants involved in foreign trade and wholesale distribution could be regarded as gentlemen, for wealth was honoured as well as birth, and such merchants could afford to live like gentlemen and claim distinguished relatives. For example, Tafur sent his book to Don Fernando de Guzman, commander of the knightly Order of Calatrava, who was a kinsman, with the ingenuous statement that he knew he liked such writings as refreshment (20). In his prologue addressed to Don Fernando, Tafur provides a rather elastic definition of nobility. "Virtue itself is the chief and surest foundation of nobility," Tafur wrote, "A man may be called noble so long as he follows the customs of his predecessors" (19).

Nobles defined in this way did not fit the older pattern of the feudal nobleman as he was perceived in England and France, with their emphasis on the need for noble birth, wealth from lands and rents, and obligation for military service. In any case, Tafur was able to claim royal patronage because of the peculiarly strong position of the great Andalusian cities in a time of unrest. Seville and Cordoba, which had become part of Castile in the thirteenth-century reconquest, were independent lords in their own right and answerable only to the king. The Castilian kings, especially Juan II who was beset with constant struggles against rebellious great nobles, were happy to conciliate the cities. They consulted them on military and financial questions, since the cities had strong forces of both cavalry and infantry which they could put in the field when necessary.⁸ Such a policy helps to explain Tafur's frequent references to King Juan, and also to explain the royal letter he carried and which led to his being designated the ambassador of the king of Cyprus to the sultan of Egypt (64-67).

What are some of the hints in Tafur's account of his travels that suggest his merchant connections? First, it is obvious that Tafur was well-to-do, or, more properly, as he was only twenty-five when he set off, that his family was wealthy and was able to continue supplying him with money during those four years. Pero also tells us of the bills of exchange he had on various merchants and correspondents in quite a number of the towns he visited, a fact which implies considerable familiarity with mercantile practice as well as adequate funds. Then too, some of the attitudes displayed in his story suggest the personality of one with keen commercial interests and a fellow feeling for merchants of what he considers equal rank. For example, Tafur developed a great friendship with the Morosinis in Venice on whom he had bills of exchange and who took him into their household at the beginning of his travels (32-33). Other Venetian friends helped him when he fell afoul of the doge and council over the shipload he had imported from Caffa, contrary to the laws of Venice. They intervened so successfully that he was exempted and even allowed to re-export his goods to Spain (57-58). One element of Tafur's merchandise would have shocked the northern Europeans of his day, for he had invested in three slaves during his visit to the great slave-market at Caffa. He arranged to have the slaves shipped back to Spain with his other goods, a procedure which seemed normal to him as Cordoba maintained a lively tradition of slaves used as artisans and domestics until nearly 1500.⁹ Slaves were still sold there in the fifteenth-century and Tafur's slaves were still a part of his household when he wrote his book (132f., 173).

Since Tafur appears so anxious to exploit his contacts wherever he landed, it is interesting to note that many of them were relatively unimportant people and fellow-countrymen, whom he used as stepping-stones. A few examples suggest his usual way of proceeding. When he first came to Pera, the foreign quarter and harbour directly across the Golden Horn from Constantinople, Tafur had dealings with a ship captain from Seville. When he wished to see the Greek emperor he was careful to make the acquaintance of one of the emperor's interpreters, who was originally from Castile. This multi-talented man was reputed to have gained his position because he sang Castilian romances to the emperor to the accompaniment of the lute (115, 117). Later, in his journey through Germany, he used the Castilians he encountered in Nuremberg (probably also merchants) to find him a place in the entourage of Kaspar Schlick, the vice-chancellor of the emperor, who was on his way to his master in Bohemia. The scheme worked well, for Tafur caught up the emperor-designate, Albert of Austria, at Breslau three days before Christmas. The Castilian was invited to join in the court's holiday festivities, which he obviously enjoyed thoroughly, especially when he was introduced by Albert to a choice of ladies for dancing partners. It was on this courtly occasion that Tafur made his one, rather uninterested reference to the tourneys which were a daily feature -- a surprising lack of interest in the most typical and best-loved noble pursuit (210-17).

Apart from the personal characteristics that appear to connect Tafur to the merchant class, he also displayed wherever he went an informed interest in markets and technology which is quite unprecedented in the travel literature. His descriptions of Bruges and Antwerp, one almost past the peak of its commercial importance and the other just beginning to challenge the older centre, are illuminating and underline at least one of the reasons for the growing success of Antwerp. Tafur describes with care the canal system with its sluice gates, which linked Bruges to its port Sluis two and a half leagues away. Ships had to be brought up at high tide, loaded and then returned on the ebb, but in Antwerp the river was so good for navigation that ships could be fastened directly to the city walls. He also detailed with enthusiasm the many goods that could be bought from all parts of the world if only one had the money. While in Antwerp he added useful details about how the great fair was carried on, with goldsmiths' work being displayed in the Dominican convent, Arras cloths in the church of St. John, and the pictures for sale at the Franciscans. The great horse market was just outside a city gate near the stables (197-204). He portrays the market at Caffa equally vividly and

usefully, for that great city on the Black Sea was in the last decades of its major importance as the hinge for trade between Europe and the Middle and Far East. Fortunately Tafur was a very curious man with a wide range of interests, so he not only details the nature of the slave market, with the representatives of the sultan of Egypt searching for suitable subjects for the sultan's mamelukes, but also reports on the catching of sturgeon, how caviar was prepared, and what it tasted like (132-37).

Above all, Tafur was extremely informative on mid-fifteenth-century Venice, which he saw with rose-coloured glasses. He was much impressed by the doge's palace and also by the fact that much of it was open to anyone. Like tourists of other centuries, he did the rounds of San Marco, the Piazza and the Campanile. He was delighted by its cleanliness for walking, since it was so well-paved that there was no mud in winter or dust in summer. He also joined in the age-old complaint -- the city is cleaned by the tide, but still smells! There is one particularly vivid and detailed description, which we probably owe to Tafur's familiarity with the great Venetian merchant families, and that is his splendid account of Venice's Arsenal and the assembly line method practised there to equip the galleys. The lagoon flowed into the Arsenal, and on either side of the water was a great street, lined with buildings whose windows opened out. The galley was towed past, and the cordage, the balistas and mortars, the arms, the bread, and everything necessary were handed out from the appropriate windows. By the time the ship got to the end of the street all the men required were on board, with the complement of oars, and the galley was equipped from end to end. The line worked so fast that Tafur saw ten galleys arranged in this fashion in six hours (165, 167-68, 170).

Tafur's book holds our attention with its acute observation, vivid turn of phrase, and all-embracing curiosity. Certain personal characteristics are also evident. His religious practice was, for example, purely formalistic. Although supposedly a pilgrim in the Holy Land -- an emotional experience for many of his contemporaries -- Tafur was noticeably a secular traveller. He was more interested in a side trip to the desert with a Moor than the usual pilgrim circuit and was particularly proud of being smuggled, dressed in borrowed Moslem clothes, into the mosque which had been made from the Temple of Solomon (59, 61). On the other hand, he has little to say of the Holy Sepulchre, except to record that he had dubbed three gentlemen knights and that they had all hung their arms up in the usual place (61-62). When in

Rome, before he left for the Holy Land, he had little attention for the churches but was more impressed by the city's antique ruins, an attitude that suggests the coming Renaissance. In fact, Tafur was disgusted that no one in Rome could inform him about them, although they obviously knew all about the taverns and houses of ill-fame (43). The Castilian himself had a singularly quick eye for the ladies, including the one who became his travel companion for a while after he had made her acquaintance in the baths near Basle (185-86). Certainly this cannot be described as suitable noble behaviour, given the bad reputation of the fifteenth-century baths.

There are only two places where Tafur's narrative allows him to assume more than the position of an individual traveller. The first, which gave him rather higher status, was his journey to Egypt as an ambassador for the king of Cyprus. Since 1192 Cyprus had been established as a separate kingdom, ruled by members of the Lusignan family. With its splendid Christian harbour close to the Moslem controlled coast, which was convenient for the ships of both pilgrims and merchants, the little island kingdom was relatively rich and, by this time, rather decadent. Although still officially independent, the growing Moslem strength meant that the weak king of Cyprus was forced to pay tribute to the sultan of Egypt. When Tafur had discovered in Jerusalem that the convoy headed for the monastery of St. Catherine of Mount Sinai, which the Spaniard was anxious to visit, had already departed, the guardian of the Franciscan convent where Tafur was staying advised him to go to Cyprus. The guardian felt that if Tafur made the acquaintance of the king's brother, Cardinal Hugh of Lusignan, he could probably get a safe-conduct to Egypt and reach Sinai from there. Tafur acted on this useful advice and one suspects that the guardian also wrote to Cyprus, for the morning after Tafur's arrival he was sought out by a squire of the late king's sister. She interrogated him fairly thoroughly and, when she was satisfied, had him take up lodgings in her palace. She also introduced him to her nephew the king and to the cardinal, whereupon Tafur pulled out his useful letter from King Juan. His standing was further improved by a meeting with the admiral of Cyprus, a powerful official who came originally from Castile. The cardinal was happy to find a convenient, and not too expensive, emissary and quickly arranged that Tafur should be sent to the sultan of Egypt as Cyprus's ambassador.

The trip had certain fringe benefits for the young man, as he was sent off in a ship with eighteen rowers, accompanied by the king's own interpreter, and, as Tafur says smugly, "as well provisioned as for the king's own

household" (68). Landing first at Damietta, it took his party seven days to make the trip upriver to Cairo. There he stayed in the house of the sultan's chief interpreter and delivered the king's letters to the sultan. Tafur wrote a vivid description of the occasion with the sultan on a splendid black horse, whose saddle was ornamented with four large rubies. As well, the horse trappings were of white damask with pearl borders and the steed even had golden horseshoes (74-75). After his business had been done, Tafur stayed a month in Cairo, was pleased to see seven elephants and a giraffe, and finally got the licence which allowed him to make the long fifteen-day journey across the desert to Mount Sinai by camel. The monastery itself did not really interest him -- there is even some doubt whether he personally went there -- but he was totally fascinated when he met a huge caravan coming from the East, laden with its exotic freight of precious stones, spices, and perfumes. It divided there, with half going to Cairo and Alexandria and the other half to Damascus and Beirut. Tafur's return trip was enlivened by the vivid tales of Nicolo Conti, the far-ranging Venetian. Conti spoke truthfully of the suttee he had seen practised in India and he knew of the sacred white elephant of Siam, but he was happy to pass along the fabulous inventions of Prester John (77-96). As Tafur made his way back through Cairo, on his way to Alexandria for his return trip to Cyprus, he was again impressed by its great market with the large numbers of traders, beasts, and providers of services, such as cooks, water-sellers, and barbers (100-101). Arriving at Cyprus to report to the king, Tafur reports with ingenuous satisfaction that he was received with great honour. Even though he had to stay in an inn overnight so it could all be properly arranged, the courtiers provided that coveted mediaeval mark of prestige -- they came out of the city to meet him. The king rewarded him with some fine cloth, generous provisions for his trip to Rhodes, and a perhaps inconvenient leopard (103-104).

Tafur sailed from Rhodes on what proved to be an eventful voyage to Constantinople. His ship was not only pursued by Genoese and forced to take refuge in Chios, but it then dragged its anchor in a storm and was stove in by the underwater remains of a wrecked carrack. The passengers clung to the wreckage and were finally saved (110-11). Storms at sea and possible shipwreck were among the greatest terrors for mediaeval men and poor Tafur encountered another, even more horrifying storm on his return trip. The panic-stricken passengers practically despaired of their lives and set to vowing pilgrimages to the most favoured shrines (152). The ship finally made safe harbour in Crete, though its sails had been torn to shreds. That

experience left even the ebullient Tafur with a strong disinclination to re-embark on any ship. He admitted that his terror had been so great that "had I been on the mainland I would never have put to sea again" (153).

When Tafur finally arrived safely in Constantinople he managed by the good offices of the emperor's Castilian interpreter to be introduced to the emperor, an occasion for which he dressed himself in his best clothes and wore King Juan's device. The young man's recent embassy to Egypt for the king of Cyprus would have somewhat improved his social status and provided him with useful current information for the emperor, who wanted news about the Christian lands. In return, Tafur was given the privilege of joining the emperor in the hunt. He stayed long enough in the city to watch the emperor, led by a most splendid procession, embarking on Venetian galleys for a visit to the pope, from whom the unfortunate Byzantine ruler hoped to obtain military support against the encircling Turks. Soon after Tafur went off on an excursion to Adrianople to make first-hand acquaintance with the Turks. Like most Europeans of his day, he admired the Turks and found them "a noble people" (128). He then crossed the Black Sea to visit Trebizond and Caffa. On his return to Constantinople Tafur spent two months of extended sight-seeing. He gave a detailed description of the great imperial city, emphasizing its great monuments, the magnificence of its mosaics, and the abundance of its relics. He was impressed with its splendid circuit of walls, patrolled by a night watch of fully armed horsemen. The palace, he thought, had once been magnificent but was now badly kept and the city itself was poor and sparsely populated, though the harbour was still full of ships (117-25, 139-49). His judgments on Constantinople and the remaining shreds of Greek and Genoese power at Trebizond and Caffa are particularly interesting since they were arrived at barely fifteen years before the Turks were to overrun Constantinople. The Castilian could recognize the fundamental weakness of Greek rule which put unjustified confidence in the great walls of Constantinople -- what might in more recent terms be described as the Maginot Line delusion.

Tafur finally returned to Venice two years after his departure for the East. He then turned north, calling at Ferrara where he again encountered the Greek emperor and the pope and described to them his journey to Trebizond and Caffa. His commercial enthusiasm was again aroused by Milan, where he was fascinated by the work of the many varieties of craftsmen. He found it a city without rival in Christendom for its size, abundance, and number of inhabitants, and reported approvingly how strictly the Milanese enforced the

requirement of providing a certificate that one had come from a plague-free region before being allowed entry (179-80). Once more, as with his descriptions of Bruges and Antwerp, and of how gold was panned outside Basle (186), Tafur was most acute in his observations on matters of commercial and technical interest. The great clock at Strasbourg caught his eye too, and he pronounced it "the finest I have ever seen" (187). Not only did he describe with great care the exact method of transporting travellers across the dangerous snows of the St. Gotthard Pass, he is also the first to report that fire-arms were used to dislodge snow and prevent avalanches (182-83).

The final part of his trip through southern Germany, Austria, and Bohemia before returning to Italy to catch a ship to Spain is rather more perfunctorily chronicled. His account trails off, though the splendid hospital accommodation in Florence for both men and women does arouse his enthusiasm (227-28). The return by ship from Venice is only briefly described, and the text breaks off quite suddenly as he was reaching Sardinia, about half-way back to Spain. It reminds one of the typical travel diary, so fully and excitedly written up on the outward trip, but which becomes more and more perfunctory as home seems ever closer and exhaustion overtakes enthusiasm. Tafur disappears from view off the coast of Sardinia, but his *Travels and Adventures* continue to provide those who come across them with the refreshment which he diplomatically hoped they would give his distinguished kinsman, Don Fernando de Guzman. Even from these brief citations Tafur's account can be seen as a lively and informative glimpse of a Mediterranean world hovering on the brink of change, vividly reported by a young representative of the rising merchant gentry.

Ottawa

NOTES

¹ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures 1435-1439*, trans. and ed. M. Letts (London 1926). Page references to this text are given in the parenthetical numbers in the body of the paper.

² Henry of Derby, *Expeditions to Prussia and the Holy Land made by Henry, Earl of Derby*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (London 1854).

³ Thomas Swinburne, "Voyage en Terre Sainte d'un Maire de Bordeaux au XIV^e siècle," *Archives d'Orient Latin* 2 (1884) 378-88. Nompars de Caumont, *Le Voyage d'Oulremer de Nompars, seigneur de Caumont*, ed. P.S. Noble (Oxford 1975).

⁴ Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, *The Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo to the Court of Timour at Samarkand, A.D. 1403-6*, trans. with notes by C.R. Markham (London 1859). Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Oeuvres*, ed. Ch. Potvin (Louvain 1878). Bertrand de La Broquière, *Le Voyage d'Oulremer de Bertrand de La Broquière*, ed. Ch. Schaefer (Paris 1892).

⁵ Gilles Le Bouvier, dit Berry, *Le Livre de la Description des Pays*, ed. E.T. Hamy (Paris 1908).

⁶ *Travels and Adventures*, intro., 21.

⁷ A. MacKay, *Spain in the Middle Ages* (London 1977) 128f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158f.

⁹ J. Heers, *Esclaves et Domestiques au Moyen Âge* (Paris 1981) 111.