

BALKAN TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF HABSBURG AMBASSADORS FROM THE 16TH CENTURY

БАЛКАНСКИ ПЪТНИ ОТЧЕТИ НА ПОСЛАНИЦИ НА ХАБСБУРГИТЕ ОТ XVI В.

Антиосманските планове на Хабсбургите от XVI в. никога не пропускали течението на Дунав, Балканите и Черно море. Превземането на Константинопол и контролът над Проливите – първопричината за тези планове – се оказали утопия. Но отвъд военния провал германският свят все повече и повече насочвал вниманието си и опознавал един силен и безмилостен противник, който през XVI в. бил все още слабо разпознаваем като такъв.

В настоящата статия ще се опитаме да представим разпространените в Свещената римска империя представи за Балканите като част от Османската империя. В началото следва да очертаем две нива на анализ: първото – официалната пропаганда, която останала до край негативна спрямо най-опасния за империята враг, и второто – от случайната информация, политически нецензурираните истории и произтичащите от слухове и инсинуации неверни впечатления, породени от липсата на достатъчна информираност, до относително обективните описания, типични за научното любопитство, доминиращо през епохата на Ренесанса.

Освен повече или по-малко враждебната пропаганда и книжните знания за историята на Османската империя директният контакт с действителността се осъществявал чрез посланиците на Хабсбургите и техните служители.

В заключение може да се каже, че през XVI в. германският свят е успял да преодолее мисловната бариера, отделяща го от Османската империя и започнал по-добре да долавя разликата между Балканския регион и неговите жители, от една страна, и турската мюсюлманска цивилизация, от друга.

Ключови думи: Свещена Римска империя, западни пътешественици, пътни отчети, Балканите, Османска империя.

The anti-Ottoman plans woven in the 16th century, by the House of Austria never overlooked the Danube course, the Balkans and the Black Sea. The conquest of Constantinople and the control over the Straits, as the first reason which animated all these plans, proved to be utopian. But, beyond the military fail, the German world became more and more interested and better acquainted with a fierce rival, which, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was barely known.

We try below to present the circulation of knowledge in the Holy Roman Empire about the Balkan world (as part of the Ottoman Empire). At the beginning

we must define two levels of analysis: first is the official propaganda which remained obstinately hostile to the most feared enemy of the Empire; and second is the spontaneous information, politically uncensored stories, evolving from poorly founded rumours and incorrect impressions, due to a lack of information, to a relatively objective description, specific for the scientific curiosity, which defined the Renaissance era.

Among the publications that had prepared German public opinion fighting the Turks, the largest spreads were the so-called *Neue Zeitung*. In the language of the time they designated “the braking news of the moment”, and these were the ancestors of modern press. The earliest edition is from 1502, which evoked for readers of the German Empire the confrontation between Hungary, Venice and the Ottoman Empire in the battle for Mytilene. The *Neue Zeitungen* tried to impress in any way German public opinion, frightening it in order to convince of the need of anti-Ottoman fight. Therefore Ottomans are constantly portrayed as some pagans, worse than devils.

Beyond the propaganda, more or less hostile, and the bookish information about the history of the Ottoman Empire, the direct contact with the reality was made by the ambassadors of the House of Austria and their companionship.

In 1530 the first extraordinary ambassador, sent by Ferdinand of Austria in order to convince the Sultan to withdraw his military and political support for John Zapolya, king of Hungary, was Niklas Jurisic (Jurischitz). Description of the trip was made, however, by Benedict Curipešič (Curipeschtiz), a Slovenian, hired as a “lateinische tulmetsch” – a Latin interpreter.

Ambassador suite left Vienna on 12 August 1530, crossed Hungary on the Danube by ship and arrived in Bosnia on 12 September. There the ruler of the province, Murat, welcomed the ambassador, waiting for him with 100 horses in rich harness and making him “a receipt so beautiful and honourable” in a small border village, called Khanatza. Despite the attention that Murat Pasha gave to the ambassador’s suite, Curipešič did not overlook the plight of Christians in the territories occupied by the Ottomans.

In his introduction the author points out that just few Westerners understood the danger posed by “the enemies of the Christian faith, who, in a few years, imposed by force, on so many Christian kingdoms, an intolerable tyranny ... preparing for new conquests throughout Christendom, and especially over the German nation”. These achievements, considered Curipešič, were not entirely attributable to the Ottomans – they were due “most often to the human stupidity and several times to the divine punishment”. The “tyranny of the Turks” was the punishment deserved by the Christians, who didn’t show any mercy and compassion for their brothers of faith, fallen into the hands of conquerors. Curipešič considered that the real help was only in the hands of all Christians, who should unite their forces to drive out the Turks from the Balkans, defending their wives and children, their lives and their property.

Similar thoughts had the Slovenian, meeting the convoys of children sent to Constantinople, the “tribute of blood”, due by the Christian people for the Sultan’s

janissary troops. Those children were the “most beautiful, healthier and most intelligent boys, between 7 and 10 years”.

The embassy interpreter, a Slovak by origin, came easily to talk to the people of Bosnia and he noted with regret that there all the people had lost hope and confidence that the imperial armies, “their brothers of faith”, would come to drive out the Ottomans, because the Christians “made peace with the Turks”.

In 1564, Jakob Betzek arrived in the Ottoman Empire in a favourable moment of peace negotiations, and therefore he was delighted by the Ottoman realities. Things changed gradually over the last decades of the sixteenth century. The relative calm in the Habsburg-Ottoman relations installed after the Treaty of Adrianople (1568), allowed an increasing number of German travellers to come to the Ottoman Empire, attracted by scientific curiosity, desiring to know and understand another civilization with a different culture and religion. They were also attracted by the charm of travelling and the lure of the Orient, which ceased to be a forbidden territory for the Westerners and, also, ceased to be a terror region of “a burning hell”. All these travellers took the classical way, already well known. They embarked at Vienna, navigated down the Danube to Komaron where they entered the Ottoman Empire. The travelling continued on the river, southwards to Belgrade. This was an occasion to note geographical information, very important strategic issues in ethnographic, religious, and everyday life aspects. All these travellers noted the poverty of the population of Serbia, ill-clothed, ill-fed, living mainly in villages and having interdiction to carry weapons. From Belgrade the trip followed the course of the Morava and Drava rivers up to Ниљ, where passengers would go ashore to Sofia, crossing the Balkans. The observations upon Bulgaria (as an Ottoman province) converged to a picture of prosperity which is reflected in all traveller’s descriptions. In 1530 Curipešić considered Bulgaria a beautiful country, fertile, well populated with many cattle. Everywhere he noticed an abundance of products. About religion he noted that people “follow St. Paul as the Serbs” and were schismatics, but feared sin. Very important for a traveller was the fact that he had “received the highest reverence and hospitality in their homes”. Prosperity which characterized Bulgaria before the Ottoman conquest, could still be sized up. All people, men, women and children, wore rich silk-embroidered silk clothes. Women and girls were adorned with silver earrings and bracelets and had tresses from the top of their head down to their heels, knitted with coloured ribbons.

Similar stories wrote Reinhold Lubenau, the pharmacist of the imperial diplomatic mission of 1587. He left one of the most extensive descriptions of the Balkan Black Sea area. In the first moment, Lubenau made his way eastwards, just from pure curiosity, and therefore he kept an objective eye over the realities encountered.

The first impression was that Sofia was “lying in an extremely pleasant” location. Lubenau noted that although the buildings were modest, the town was a

great trading and crafts centre. There the most famous fur mantles in the Ottoman Empire were produced and the merchants from Ragusa had their own trading district, in the centre of the town, near the main mosque and the public baths. Lubenau was amazed that those merchants were so at home in an Ottoman town, walking around the streets “as in their own city”. The people from Ragusa had warehouses and stores and sold linen drapery, spices, silk, and if there was “any lack of merchandise they brought (soon) from Dubrovnik”.

The access road to the capital of the Ottoman Empire (Constantinople) ran through Bulgaria from South-East to North-West, and all travellers were required to pass through ancient *Philippopoli* (Plovdiv). In 1572 the future imperial ambassador, David Ungnad, noticed the historical importance of the city, founded by Philip II, the Macedonian. Everywhere he faced Roman ruins. Lubenau – in turn – insisted more on the description of the town, mentioning the presence of gold mines, very rich in the ancient times. He has written that in this town the *Philippics* were coined, the gold currency of the Macedonian Empire in the 4th century BC. Lubenau also gave interesting information about the operating mine. He noted that in those mines, alongside the Bulgarian workers, German specialists could be found. He has not mentioned if they worked with a contract (probably brought from Hungary, after 1541) or were ordinary prisoners, taken from mining areas in the German Empire. However, from these experts the Bulgarians had taken the German names of some tools as Stempel, Hammer, Zitrezang, Schmeltz, Oven. We can also mention Lubenau’s familiar writing style, which helps to reconstitute the image of the time. He noted that on the ruins of the ancient royal palace “many noblemen and gentlemen have written their names” and so did he. (“I carved my name there with a knife”).

The next stop of the journey through the Empire ended at Adrianople (Edirne), the town built by Hadrian and located not far from the Black Sea coast. The same Lubenau was pleased to note that behind the impressive fortifications lay a town with beautiful houses and palaces. In the artisans’ district linen drapery, silk and brocade were produced. Everywhere expensive goods abounded: pearls, gems, sable, tiger and panther fur, swords, daggers and horse harness (adorned with silver and precious stones and gold). Food was also appreciated by the German traveller. He liked compote, cooled with ice (“made just for Mount Olympus”), figs, raisins, peanuts, almonds, dates and “many other things that can not even be mentioned”.

In 1606, during the negotiations that concluded “the long war” with the *Peace of Zsitva-Török*, Habsburg envoys described the same reality. Maximilian Brandstteter, embassy secretary, led by Adam Freiherr von Herberstein, left his description in the manuscript, called *Itinerarium oder Raisebeschreibung*. The author believed that Adrianople was as big as Prague. Traces of Roman towers were preserved in the town fortifications. Within these walls he found prosperous commercial activity. There were 12,000 merchants. Hebrews and Greeks were at home in the town, and he saw a large number of Orthodox churches while the

Ottomans had only two mosques but there daily a muezzin called. In turn, the Christian church bells stood silent forever.

The journey through Greece in 1530, occasioned to the Latin interpreter of the ambassador, the mentioned Curipešič, numerous remarks which indicate a state of mind concerning the political situation in the Balkans. Curipešič saw the large number of Christian churches in Greece, but he notes that the Greeks had schismatic holidays and priests whose teaching they followed “without much conviction”, thought he. Also the Greeks wore “Turkish” clothes and it was difficult to recognize a Greek among the Turks. Some of them admitted that “their lack of faith brought their misfortune”. (“If we have endured so much is our fault because we have accepted the tyranny of the Turkish mad dog”).

In 1564–1565, Jakob Betzek considered Greece as a land with a large number of inhabitants who did their work without any trouble from the Turks. For the Westerners a sign of prosperity was, first of all, the number of jewels worn by the ordinary people. About Greeks Betzek noted that women wore all kind of gold jewels, adorned with pearls, (bracelets, earrings, necklaces, even foot bracelets). All over the Balkans travellers mentioned a large number of gypsies, settled near the towns, dealing especially with smith’s work.

In conclusion, it could be asserted that in the 16th century the German world had overcome the mental barrier concerning the Ottoman Empire and better knowledge made the difference between the Balkan region and its inhabitants and the Turkish Muslim civilization.

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