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### A Travel Account in the Works of Mediaeval Arabic Writers

Mediaeval Arabic literature contains numerous geographical descriptions<sup>1</sup> and travel accounts (*riḥla*).<sup>2</sup> Highly diversified, such works are often difficult to classify. Particularly arbitrary and random were attempts to analyze travel accounts as a literary genre. A literary work was ascribed to this genre on the sole basis of one element of the meaning, that is the very fact of the writer's journey, all other elements being totally discarded. But just these elements taken together make up the structure of the work as a specimen of a given genre.

Although the travel account is one of the oldest literary genres, its essence was not defined until the 1960s. Two studies are here of special value: Z. Klatik's *Über die Poetik der Reisebeschreibung* [in: "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich", Łódź 1969, nr 11, 2, pp. 126-152], the best theoretical monograph on the subject, and Cz. Niedzielski's *O teoretyczno-literackich tradycjach prozy dokumentalnej (podróż-powieść-reportaż)* [On Theoretical and Literary Traditions in Documentary Prose (travel-novel-report)], Toruń 1965. According to Z. Klatik, the very fact of a journey is not sufficient to define the text which contains it as a travel account. Some other requirements should be met, including the "internal resources" of a writer, by which Cz. Niedzielski means such traits characteristic of creative writing as the ability to report observations, to give utterance to feelings and to express the writer's self. Other characteristics of a literary travel

<sup>1</sup> T. Lewicki, *Ze studiów nad źródłami arabskimi*. Poznań 1952.

T. Lewicki, *Świat słowiański w oczach pisarzy arabskich*. Poznań 1949.

T. Lewicki, *Źródła arabskie do dziejów Słowiańszczyzny*. Wrocław-Kraków 1956, t. I.

<sup>2</sup> M. Kowalska, *Średniowieczna arabska literatura podróżnicza*. Warszawa-Kraków 1973.

account are: 1) documentary nature and authenticity of the work, 2) author's narrative with the narrator being most frequently an observer or a participant of the events, 3) plot reduced to a minimum, 4) descriptive-narrative type of prose, where the description is one of the best developed vehicles through which the writer expresses his attitude towards the world. An ideal travel account must also be subdivided into three main parts: the journey to the place of destination, stay there and return home.

Ibn Faḍlān's work meets all the above requirements. It is the earliest travel account in the Arabic travel literature which has been preserved to the present day in an almost unaltered form. It was known in Europe as early as the beginning of the 19th century from quotations contained in *Muḡam al-buldān* of Yāqūt, and in 1923 its incomplete manuscript (no ending) was found in Mashhad. The work was published almost simultaneously by A.Z. Validi Togan (Leipzig 1939) and A.P. Kovalevskiy with I.J. Kračkovskiy as editor (Moscow-Leningrad 1939).

The travel account, which Ibn Faḍlān himself calls *Kitāb* and Yāgūt terms *Risāla*, concerns an embassy sent by al-Muqtadir, caliph from Bagdad, to Almiš, the king of the Bulgars of the Volga, in 921-922. The course of the journey makes the compositional frame of the work. It falls into three parts: the way there, the stay in the country of destination and the coming back. Unfortunately enough, the final part has not survived, but we can assume that it was written if only in a schematic way. Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla* contains highly valuable information concerning the political and economic situation of the country and social, political and cultural relations between the *Huwārizmians*, *Oğuzes* *Pečenegs*, *Bašgirds*, *Bulgars* and *Rūses*. But, in the first place, the author provides a description of different objects and phenomena along with his own impressions. He also discusses some exciting events that had happened during the journey. In some most dramatic instances he openly talks of his feelings a phenomenon somewhat unusual in Mediaeval Arabic writing. His travel account is very interesting from the literary point of view because of its free unrestrained narrative and its vivacious language with sparkles of humour. Ibn Faḍlān also makes use of dialogues, and from time to time he addresses the reader directly in the second person, which lends his suggestive narrative greater spontaneity and artlessness. There is no doubt that the writer's intention was to share his experiences with others, which, combined with his literary talent, remarkable gift of storytelling and observation, produced a colourful literary description of his journey rather than a formal report which he must have been commissioned by the caliph.<sup>3</sup>

The next author of a travel account to be discussed here is Ibn Ġubayr. He lived in Spain in 1145-1217. At that time Andalusia was under the rule of Almohads, a Muslim dynasty of Berberian origin, whose seat was in Morocco.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-35.

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A poet and a prose-writer, Ibn Ġubayr was the secretary of the Almohad governor in Granada. In February 1183, he set off on a pilgrimage to Mecca. On his coming back to Granada in April 1185, he wrote an account of his journey. His *Rihla* is the first of the type to be devised and produced as a literary work, that is as a text belonging to documentary prose but meant to be read not merely for the sake of information but also for its artistic and stylistic merits. This is the first and one of the best literary travel accounts in Arabic literature, used as a model by many later writers. The composition of the *Rihla* is, in fact, natural, what means that the time of the narration corresponds to the chronological sequence of actual events, or, in other words, it corresponds to the course of the journey. Ibn Ġubayr displayed an exceptional fascination with his times. He presented a vivid description of Egypt and Syria at the time when both the countries were fighting the Crusaders. He showed a keen interest in the material and spiritual culture of his co-religionists from Sicily. Much attention was devoted to the Norman court and the reign of King William II (1166–1189), who was almost completely overlooked by European writers. His *Rihla* abounds in geographical, political and sociological data including the information on the navigation on the Mediterranean Sea. The story falls into chapters corresponding to the successive months of the Islamic calendar which is the evidence that the story was based on a notebook kept during the journey; in fact, he made entries there every 10–15 days. Descriptive parts of the *Rihla* are disproportionately large in relation to the sections devoted to the journey proper: there is an obvious domination of description, especially the description of numerous towns and buildings, over the rest of the work. These descriptions reveal the writer's unusual sensitivity to beauty. He was also unsurpassed in rendering the dynamism of events, the authenticity of impressions and feelings. All this is best manifested in the account of the sea-voyage and in the passage describing how their ship was wrecked in the Strait of Messina. The writer was lucky to survive the accident. The *Rihla* also betrays the author's sentimentality and inclination to exaltation. On the whole, it should be emphasized that his writing strengthened the position of travel account as a literary genre in Arabic literature.<sup>4</sup>

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–1368 or 1377) is regarded as the greatest exponent of the Mediaeval Arabic travel literature. Setting off on a pilgrimage from Tanger to Mecca in 1325, he did not expect that his wanderings would last for 24 years. Chronologically and geographically, his journey could be subdivided into four stages. The first is his trip to Mecca, the last — his coming back to Morocco. The second and third stages describe his main wanderings. Driven by curiosity, he travelled as far as the Pacific in the East, to what today is Mozambique in the South and, allegedly, to the land of the Bulgars in the mouth of the Kama i.e. the point where it joins the Volga River.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 104–112.

The account of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's journey was written down by Ibn Ġuzayy (he was the secretary of Abū Inān, a ruler from the Marīnid dynasty), to whom it was dictated by the author. Fortunately enough, it was only at the very beginning that Ibn Ġuzayy included into his text some excerpts from Ibn Ġubayr's *Rihla*, the exquisite style of which suited him much better than the narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa with its lively and natural but simple language. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla* is not homogeneous. Its earlier parts contain many more features typical of a travel account, displaying correspondence between the time of the narration and that of the journey. Further parts of the text look more like a notebook and become more conversational in style: they describe Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's life in India and on the islands of the Indian Ocean. This part is no longer a travelogue, for during the years described there the writer was a resident of that part of the world. Objective time is no more important. The composition is fairly loose. The type of narrative is a typically spontaneous chain of stories and anecdotes, linked together through loose associations. What emerges as a result is a kaleidoscopic panorama of the country and its inhabitants, rather chaotic but breathing authenticity. In the parts describing the journey the narrative is reduced in favour of description, and the plot is largely fragmented into units of time and space corresponding to the individual stages of the journey. Yet the description is always accompanied by an anecdote, the storytelling often taking the upper hand over description. Mentioning a particular place is frequently a mere starting point for a story devoted to one of the local personages. But when considered as an entity, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's work manifests an obvious hierarchical supremacy of the account of the journey itself over all other elements of the composition. For him, the most important subject matter are people and not the things and phenomena that make up the background for the events described.<sup>5</sup>

From among the numerous authors of Mediaeval Arabic travel accounts, I have chosen three most representative ones in order to illustrate the structure of the genre and to demonstrate the cognitive value and literary merits of their works.

The years 1517–1798 (from the occupation of Egypt by the Ottoman Turks up to the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon) are the time of lethargy, of the decline of Arabic literature, culture, etc. But it should be noted that the travel literature was a praiseworthy exception. Those hard times saw the appearance of interesting and valuable travel accounts, to cite "An Account of the Embassy of Ḥasan Ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥaymī from Yemen to Abyssinia". It is a literary travel description whose structure is strongly reminiscent of that of Ibn Faḍlān's *Risāla*. On July 4th, 1647, al-Ḥaymī as ambassador left Ṣahār, the residence of Al-Mutawakkil, imam of Zaydites in Yemen, travelled by land, then crossed the Red Sea and travelled through Eastern Africa, across the regions inhabited by the Galla, Falaša

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 118–132.

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<sup>7</sup> M. Kowalska, *I*  
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and Amhara tribes as far as Gondar, the town chosen for the capital of Abyssinia by its king Fāsiladas (1632–1667). Their stay in Abyssinia lasted from March to December 1648. In his account, Al-Haymī produced a vivid description of the capital with the royal castle built of stone and, stressing its riches and splendor and focussing especially on the audience granted to them by the king. There is also a lively description of their return home. In March 1649, al-Haymī was back to the residence of the Imām.

Demonstrating his high literary capabilities, al-Haymī showed at the same time a lack of precision in handling geographical information. He omitted names of some towns, regions, mountains, and rivers, what makes it more difficult to trace the route of the embassy. He also skipped the names of many people whom he had met during his journey. One can also blame him from a subjective interpretation of some of the events described. His narration is conducted in the first person plural, but in some cases he exposes his "self", using the phrase "So I tell you", which is equal to addressing his words directly to the reader. Al-Haymī's work is highly appreciated by the Arabists. They stress the significance of the historical, geographical and ethnographic data related by him as well as of the information from such domains as culture and religion. However, they avoid assessing his work as a literary production.<sup>6</sup>

Among the outstanding travel accounts mention is due to *Rihla Makāriyūs* describing the journey of the Antiochian Patriarch Makarios from Aleppo to Moscow in 1652–1659. The account was written by his son Paul from Aleppo. The *Rihla* can be subdivided into three parts corresponding to the three basic stages of the journey. Part one — trip to Moscow, part two — stay in Moscow, and part three — return home. The most important elements of part one include the way from Aleppo to Constantinople and a fairly long stay there; the trip from the Bosphorus<sup>7</sup> via Moldavia and a stay in Iasi; the journey across the Ukraine and a stay in Kiev; the trip across Russia and a stay in Kolomna. This part is the most extensive one. It contains a detailed description of the route of the travel where mention is made of the numerous towns and places visited by the Patriarch Makarios and his retinue on the way to Moscow.

The stay in Moscow is also presented with great thoroughness. Paul describes the Kremlin, monasteries and churches, streets, houses and markets, the life at the Moscow court and that of simple folks.

The third part is short, accentuating merely the most important points on the way home which followed exactly the same route. The structural peculiarity of the account consists in the following: each of the three main stages of the journey

<sup>6</sup> M. Kowalska, *Der Gesandtschaftsbericht des Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥaymī*, (Mitte des 17. Jahrhunderts). Textanalyse. "Folia Orientalia", Kraków 1991, T. XXVIII, pp. 41–50.

<sup>7</sup> M. Kowalska, *Bosporus, Schwarzes Meer und Dobrudscha um die Mitte des 17. Jh. Im Bericht des arabischen Reisenden Pauls, des Sohnes von Makarios aus Aleppo*. "Folia Orientalia". Kraków 1988, T. XXV, pp. 181–194.

contains a number of shorter stretches, within which a certain scheme is applied — going to the halting place, staying there, setting off on the road again, with this stretch of the road being at the same time the way leading to the next halting place.

The account of Makarios's travel is a literary work written in the form of a travel notebook. It possesses all necessary requisites of this literary genre: documentary nature and authenticity; author's narrative, in which the writer is both an observer and a participant in the events; central position of the narrator in the hierarchy of structural elements; plot reduced to a minimum; descriptive-narrative type of prose, with the description prevailing over the narrative and being the vehicle through which the narrator expresses his attitude to the world. In this *Rihla* the writer uses two planes of narration. One comprises all the events taking place at the present moment, while the other is confined to the past. The narrative is conducted in the first person plural, it is in a few cases only that Paul makes use of the first person singular. The most valuable are descriptions based on his own experience as an eye-witness, less successful are his excursions into history in which he relies on "second-hand" sources.

I have chosen a fragment from the *Rihla* describing that part of the journey which leads through the Ukraine, the land which has been closely connected with Poland since the 14th century, as a subject for my paper: *The Ukraine in the middle of the 17th century in the account of an Arabic traveller, Paul, the son of Makarios from Aleppo*. Of particular interest are his accounts concerning the details of every-day life in the Ukraine, descriptions of towns and villages, monuments of Polish culture, especially of ecclesiastic and secular architecture (Kalinowski Palace in Mańkówka, the one that probably belonged to the Dedkowicz-Trypolski family in Trypole, and many others).<sup>8</sup>

Between the 16th and the 18th century travel accounts were not lacking either, but they were primarily descriptions of pilgrimages to Mecca or trips to Istanbul, the capital of the Turkish state, and as such were rated as colourless and of little value.

Many of the great Mediaeval travellers went down in history as eminent geographers. These are, in the first place, exponents of the classical school of geography founded by al-Balḥī (d. 934) such as al-Iṣṭaḥrī (d. in 951), Ibn Ḥawqal (d. c. 988) and al-Muqaddasī (d. c. 1000). Setting themselves both scientific and practical tasks, these writers focussed all their attention on the reality they were describing, and what emerged as a result of their long journeys was not travel accounts, but geographical treatises and *the Atlas of Islam*, based on their personal experience, observations and items of information gathered from oral and written sources. The title of al-Iṣṭaḥrī and Ibn Ḥawqal's

<sup>8</sup> M. Kowalska, *Ukraina w połowie XVII w. w relacji arabskiego podróżnika Pawła, syna Makarego z Aleppo*. Warszawa 1986.

work is *Kiṭāb* (J.H. Kramm entitled it *Kiṭā* 1939).

Al-Muqaddasī's preface into which during the journey *taqāsīm fī ma* (Climates)<sup>9</sup>, with predecessors — the book is both a many elements

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning — regi

work is *Kiṭāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms) (J.H. Krammers, the publisher of the second edition of Ibn Ḥawqal's book, entitled it *Kiṭāb sūrat al-arḍ* — The Book of the Face of the Earth. Leiden 1938–1939).

Al-Muqaddasī spent twenty years of his life in travelling. Judging by the preface into which the author included several stories describing his adventures during the journey, one could expect that the whole work, entitled *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm* (The Best Division of Information for Studying Climates)<sup>9</sup>, would be a travel account. However, the writer did not betray his predecessors — representatives of the classical school of Arabic geographers. His book is both a scientific treatise and a literary work, and, although it contains many elements of a travel account, it cannot be classed as such.

Opinions also vary as to *Murūḡ ad-dahab wa ma'ādin al-ḡawāhīr* (The Golden Meadows and Precious Stones Mines), the book by al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956). Some orientalists define it as a work on history and geography, others as a travel account, and others still as *adab* in style. Its author is regarded as a man of letters, a writer propagating scientific knowledge, and also a precursor of journalists and globetrotters.

I believe that knowing the structure of a travel account, one will find it easier to ascribe the given text to a particular literary genre.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning — region, province.