



a.i.e.s.e.e.

11th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES
SOFIA, 31 AUGUST – 4 SEPTEMBER 2015



**SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE IN THE 15TH CENTURY – PART OF EUROPE OR
NO? ASPECTS OF SIMILARITY AND DIVERSITY (BASED ON WESTERN
TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS)**

Ivayla Popova

(Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski)

Based on the information provided by western travellers who had visited Southeastern Europe during the 15th century, we shall scrutinize several basic issues that elucidate their views about this region as both an integral part of the European continent and the opposite, as a part of the European mainland loosely connected with the west European civilisation from cultural, historical and political point of view. The basic sub-topics are:

- The heritage of the Antiquity and the Balkans
- The local Balkan populace
- The Ottomans

We shall pay special attention to the texts written by Marianno di Nanni from Siena (1431), Gabriele Capodilista (1458), Santo Brasca (1480), Conrad Grünemberg (1486), Pietro Casola (1494), as well as to the intriguing data provided by Bernardo Michelozzi and Bonsignore Bonsignori (1497 - 1498), Felix Fabri, (1480 and 1483-1484), Bernard von Breidenbach (1483-1484), Arnold von Harff (1496 – 1499).

What do their texts pay special attention to? As far as the historical data provided by the western travellers are concerned, they are not very abundant and are prevalingly connected with well-preserved buildings of the classical and late antiquity. For instance, Marianno di Nanni and Arnold von Harff are deeply impressed by the amphitheater they saw in Pula, which they found to be quite similar to the Roman Colosseum¹. On his turn Felix Fabri

¹ Mariano da Siena, *Viaggio fatto al Santo Sepolcro 1431. In appendice Viaggio di Gaspare di Bartolomeo*, ed. Paolo Pirillo, Pisa, 1991, 76; *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harf von Cöln durch Italien, Syrien*,

remarks that Modon (Methone) is a very ancient city and is mentioned by Thucydides in his History². Bonsignori and Michelozzi are aware of the fact that Philippopolis was founded by Philip of Macedon and that its environments were a very ancient country³. The two Florentine clerics also underscore that the plain around Adrianople was rich with low hill – remains of ancient settlements or antique tombs: *cittá grande, piena et notabile in una bellissima pianura, che dicono andava insino in sul Danubio, et è piena di moniticelli alti x o xii passi, tutti facti a posta li quali sono di sepulture di signori antichi e di romani, insino al tempo di Julio...*⁴ According to Bonsignori, Adrianople could be even compared with Florence.

Bonsignori and Michelozzi also provide us a fine and intriguing description of the ancient remains available in what had once been the Hippodrome of Constantinople. Roaming across the Hippodrome Michelozzi copied some Greek inscriptions and translated them into Latin, while Bonsignori was greatly impressed by the well-known snake-shaped bronze column and the fifty feet high Egyptian obelisk whose marble base was commissioned by the emperor Theodosius. Bonsignori's text reads: *nel mezzo del ippodromo sopradetto, erano molte colonne, sonvi due agiglie, cioè obelischi, uno murato di pietre che si vede era coperto di piastre di rame, l'altro di granite con le base di marmo bianco con due epigrammi greci...Sonvi anchora tre serpi di bronzo, volti insieme con mirabile arte, che da alto fanno con la testa et parte di busto chome un nocetto et sono alte circa vi braccia*⁵.

Intriguing information about the coastal cities of the Adriatic and the cities along the basic Balkan transport routes – Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Adrianople (Edirne), and Constantinople - can be found in the accounts of many western travellers. For instance, Pietro Casola is impressed by the steep and paved but yet narrow and dark streets of Curzola (Corčula), which were anything but convenient for walking along them⁶. Casola also points out that the houses in Curzola are beautiful and modern - built with white stone and decorated with sculptures⁷. Felix Fabri describes Curzola as a small but densely populated city, well-fortified and

Aegypten, Arabien, Aethiopien, Nubien, Palästina, die Türkei, Frankreich und Spanien wie er sie in den Jahren 1496 bis 1499 vollendet, beschrieben und durch Zeichnungen erläutert hat. Nach den ältesten Handschriften und mit deren 47 Bildern in Holzschnitt, ed. Dr. E. Von Groote. Köln, 1860, 63; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, transl. M. Letts, London, 1946, 75.

² Fratris Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Aegypti Peregrinationem*, I– III, ed. C. D. Hassler, Stuttgart, 1843–1849, vol. III, 338.

³ E. Borsook, The Travels of Bernardo Michelozzi and Bonsignore Bonsignori in the Levant (1497–1498), *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 36, 1973, 145–197, especially 156 and note 69 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93).

⁴ Borsook, *The Travels*, 158, no. 72 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93).

⁵ Borsook, *The Travels*, 160, no. 87 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93).

⁶ *Viaggio a Gerusalemme a Pietro Casola*, ed. Anna Paoletti, Alessandria, 2001, 262.

⁷ *Ibid.*

conveniently situated on the coast⁸. According to Casola, among the other Dalmatian cities only Zara (Zadar) featured cobbled streets: *It is in a plain, and not very large, but it is bright and clean, and has some beautiful buildings... All the city is paved with little hard pebbles in such a way that many of our Milanese could not walk about there very comfortably*⁹. Speaking of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) many travellers state that it was a delight to roam among the beautiful houses of this city. However, all of them are prevalently impressed by the city's massive fortifications, the sturdy aqueduct and the water supply of the town which, based on what Santo Brasca and Pietro Casola say, was so abundant that, aside from watering the entire town, it was sufficient to power nine water-mills and two public fountains - each of them with multiple nozzles. Nevertheless, Casola remarks that in Dubrovnik there were also many cisterns collecting the rain water and the water kept in them was better in quality if compared with that coming from the aqueduct. Santo Brasca offers the reader a fine description of Dubrovnik's ramparts and aqueduct: *Ragusa is a noble town, very beautiful and not badly fortified. It is built on a huge rock with the shape of a seashell and one can easily see that there are lofty hills on both sides of the rocky seashell, while in the middle between them there is a leveled district facing the sea whose furious waves incessantly erode its two rocky ends. From the part of the mainland Ragusa's fortifications are very strong and imposing. Their thickness is about 24 feet and they feature many carefully built round towers. The most impressing amongst those towers is the one built at the protruding outer corner of the ramparts. It controls the entire district along the ramparts and makes their defense much easier. Its height is about 18 braze. Close to it one can see an aqueduct which supplies all the water the city needs and powers nine water mills. At the convergence of the aqueduct's conduits there is a round cistern, a really beautiful one. Above it there is a fountain with eleven spouts through which water pours incessantly. On the top of this structure there are fourteen more spouts, which are so well made and adorned that describing it with words cannot help the reader to imagine their real beauty. The water in the aforesaid aqueduct comes from the high distant mountain some 7 miles away from the city*¹⁰.

The descriptions of Constantinople, and especially those of the Church of the Holy Wisdom of God – St. Sophia – left by the travellers who had visited the city, are rather picturesque.

⁸ Felix Fabri, *Galeere und Karawane: Pilgerreise ins Heilige Land, zum Sinai und nach Ägypten 1483*, transl. Herbert Wiegandt and Herbert Kraus, Stuttgart–Vienna–Bern, 1996, 19.

⁹ *Viaggio a Gerusalemme a Pietro Casola*, 118–119.

¹⁰ *Viaggio in Terrasanta di Santo Brasca 1480 con l'Itinerario di Gabriele Capodilista 1458*, ed. Anna Laura Momigliano Lepschy, Milano, 1966, 43–158 and especially 57.

Bonsignore di Bonsignori writes on this subject: “*El tempio famoso di Sancta Sophia hoggi principale moschea del turco el quale ha cinque navi, et tutto coperto di musaico, solo nel frontespitio dove si vede era un Dio Padre, ora è inbianchato et scriptevi lettere turchesche...*”¹¹ His account can be complemented with the data provided by Arnold von Harff: *It is indescribably beautiful and splendid church, which was built by Christians. Above, below and on the sides it is all of marble, adorned with rare pictures in gold and mosaic work, but all the altars with the pictures of the saints are entirely destroyed and broken in pieces ...*¹²

Bonsignori, Michelozzi, and von Harff also tell impressive stories about Christian churches turned into stables or menageries. According to them, near the Hippodrome stood the former church of St. Marc which had been converted into a zoo with stalls for exotic beast which were greatly admired by Michelozzi and Bonsignore. “*Trovai in una bellissima chiesa che è sopra lo ipodromo ... essere facte stalle per fiere. Eravi una giraffa, ma non era si bella chome quella che già mando il Soldano a Firenze, eranvi certi leoni et certi pardi incatenati, et sotto le volte di decta chiesa dui grandi elephantanti*”¹³. Arnold von Harff even speaks of ten lions fettered with chains, two elephants, and two gazelles kept in a former Christian church¹⁴. The data that the western travellers provide for the population of the Balkan region are of special interest. Most pilgrims point out that in its majority the populace is of Slavic ethnic origin and Slavic-speaking. Yet, there are intriguing accounts that refer to other minority groups. For instance, Felix Fabri, Arnold von Harff, and Bernard von Breidenbach tell us about a large Jewish colony in the Venetian port of Modon (Methone), as well as about an enclave of gypsies in its suburbs. These authors comment the basic profession of these Egyptians (as they label the gypsies) – that of the smith – emphasizing that they are living in a stunning poverty and misery. There are several picturesque descriptions of this minority, but here we shall discuss only those of F. Fabri and Dietrich von Schachten.

Felix Fabri’s text on this subject reads: *Ab extra est suburbium, et ad partem suburbii ad clivum montis sunt multae domunculae parvae et tuguriola stupa et calamis et sarmentis factae et luto compactae et est quasi villula, inhabitantquae illam Zigari illi, qui per orbem vagantur de quibus supra dictum est. Et omne forum equorum, porcorum et quidquid*

¹¹ Borsook, *The Travels*, 160, no. 92 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93).

¹² *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 208; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 243–244.

¹³ Borsook, *The Travels*, 160, no. 90 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93).

¹⁴ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 206; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 242.

*tumultuosum estq agitur in illo loco extra urbem, et in urbe est quies et pax, et negotiationes quietae in ea tractantur*¹⁵.

Another German who provides interesting details about Modon and its population is Dietrich von Schachten, who in 1491 travelled to the Holy Land: *At Modon outside the city on the hill by the wall there are many miserable little huts, where the Gypsies, so-called in Germany, dwell; very poor people and generally all smiths. They sit on the ground for their work and have a pit made in the earth in which they keep the fire and if the men or women have a pair of bellows in their hands, they are quite content, and blow with the bellows, a miserably poor thing that is beyond description, and make a great number of nails and very well.*

As we already remarked, the greater part of the pilgrims describing Modon are Germans. The Milanese churchman Pietro Casola is an exception to this rule. He had left us a detailed description of the city walls and the other defensive construction, of the local Jewish community¹⁶, of the wine and the agricultural production of the region, of the silk producing industry, and of the holy relics which were abundant in Modon: *On Thursday, the 26th of June, we remained at Modone...After dinner, ... I went with certain companions to see the aforesaid city of Modone a little better. There is a large suburb, also walled. It seems to me that the greater part of the silk industry is carried on in the said suburb; certainly many **Jews**, both men and women, live there, who work in silk. They are very dirty people in every way and full of very bad smells. Their society did not please me; I speak, however, of those outside the city. Turning back, I entered the city, where I did not see either houses or palaces worthy of description; for its size it has many houses, and they are close together. I think there are few inhabitants, for in the finest and widest street there, the houses appeared to be shut up for the most part, and when I stood in the market place I did not see many people. Those I saw, besides that they are Greeks -- for they also belong to the Morea -- are thin and ugly to look at.*

Only three of the aforementioned western authors refer to the presence of both gypsies and Jews. They are Arnold von Harff, George Lengeran and the Anonymous German nobleman. Fortunately, there are several such picturesque descriptions of the defensive structures of Modon, of its artillery, its relics, and of its two easily noticeable social and ethnic groups of specific local Balkan population, as well as of the way these groups were making their living. One of these descriptions belongs to the German knight Arnold von Harff: *Item, this town*

¹⁵ Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae*, III, 338.

¹⁶ On the Jewish community in Modon see S. Bowman, *The Jews of Byzantium 1204–1453*, Alabama, 1985, 85 and 87, document no. 130.

Modon is very strong. It is subject to the Venetians, and the land belonging to it is called Morea which lies near to Turkey. Item here they speak the Greek language and keep St. Paul's belief. ... Item we went further beyond the gate into the dirt suburb in which is a very long street inhabited solely by Jews, whose women-folk do beautiful work in silk, making girdles, hoods, veils and face coverings some of which I bought. Item; we proceeded through the suburb, which is inhabited by many poor black naked people who live in little houses roofed with reeds, some three hundred families. They are called Gypsies: we call them heathen people from Egypt who travel about in our countries. These people follow all kinds of trade, such as shoemaking, cobbling and smithery. It was strange to see the anvil on the ground at which a man sat like a tailor in our country. By him, also on the ground, sat his housewife spinning, so that the fire was between them. Beside them were two small leather sacks like a bagpipe half buried in the ground by the fire. As the woman sat spinning she raised one of the sacks from the ground from time to time and pressed it down again. This forced wind through the earth into the fire so that the smith could work. Item; these people come from a country called Gyppe, which lies about forty miles from the town of Modon.

Von Harff also gives us interesting details concerning the population of Constantinople and the taxes it used to pay by the end of the 15th century: *Item they took me further into long streets in which none live but Jews. The men are said to number 36 000, of whom each has to pay three ducats a year as tribute to the Turkich Emperor. There live also in the town many Christians Greek paying tribute to the Turkish Emperor*¹⁷.

Bonsignori and Michelozzi describe the population of the mountains in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. A letter written by Bonsignori notifies us that “*Nelle montagne siamo stati giorni sei, che dua habiamo bevuto aqua per non havere trovato onde havere vino, et messer Bernardo dua sere se non andò a llecto sansa cena per non bere aqua. Carne assai habbiamo trovata: uno castrone per cinque aspri, pippioni per 2 aspri, 15 uova per uno aspro, e manchatoci el pane che togliamo a Raugia, habiamo mangiato stiacciate non lièvite, cotte sotto la brace, che cosi usano questi huomini, se si possono chiamare huomini, chè a me paro più sia conveniente chiamarli bruti, senza religione alchuna, nè sanno se si sono di Dio o del Diavolo*”¹⁸.

¹⁷ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 209; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 244–245.

¹⁸ Borsook, *The Travels*, 156, no. 67 (BNCF, MSS Magl. XIII, 93). As far as The Morlachs (Mavrovlachi) of the West are concerned, <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org> (accessed on June 8, 1025) states the following: “These are already mentioned as *Nigri Latini* by the presbyter of Dioclea in the old Dalmatian littoral and the mountains of what is now Montenegro, Herzegovina and North Albania. Other colonies extended through a great part of the old Serbian interior, where is a region still called *Stara Vlačia* or “Old Walachia”. The great commercial staple

Ottomans

The German knight Arnold von Harff has composed a comprehensive and quite intriguing description of the customs of the Ottoman Turks, the new lords of Constantinople. His text indicates that he was impressed by the huge and well armed Ottoman navy. Von Harff was invited to Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid II (1481 - 1512) and initially was seriously concerned that he might be captured¹⁹. He was received by the sultan in a high hall where the sultan was surrounded by probably 200 of his men: *I was forced to prostrate myself three times on the ground and kiss it as the German knight has instructed me. Then I came and stood before this mighty lord, some seven paces from him. He caused me to be asked, through the German knight about the many matters concerning which he desired to have the latest news I answered in all matters as he desired*²⁰. Having been asked by the sultan about his identity, about his intentions and about the reasons of his visit to the Ottoman Empire, the German replied in the following way: *He caused me to be asked also who I was, where I was going, and what I was doing in that country. I replied that I was from Venice and followed our trade since the Venetians were at that time in favour with the Turkish Emperor*²¹. Bayazid II proposed to Arnold von Harff to enter his service with a monthly payment of 200 ducats, without converting to Islam. The German knight kindly declined and asked the sultan for a letter of recommendation enabling him to travel to Venice by land. Bayazid immediately ordered his servants to satisfy his request²². Moreover, the sultan expressed his sympathy to him with several precious gifts and ordered that Harff should be given a guided tour around the city²³.

Harff's companion to Constantinople was one Frank Kasan (most probably Hasan), a German who had converted to Islam. It was Kasan who first of all showed to Harff the palace of the sultan²⁴: *item the German knight conducted me through the palace so that I could see the*

of the east Adriatic shores, the republic of Ragusa, seems in its origin to have been a Ruman settlement, and many Vlach traces survived in its later dialect... In the 14th century the Mavrovlachi or Morlachs extended themselves towards the Croatian borders, and a large part of maritime Croatia and northern Dalmatia began to be known as *Morlacchia*. A *Major Vlachia* was formed about the triple frontier of Bosnia, Croatia and Dalmatia, and a "Little Walachia" as far north as Požega. The Morlachs have now become Slavonized".

¹⁹ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 204; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 239.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 205; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 239.

²² *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 205; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 240.

²³ Arnold von Harff received a large, probably as big as two eggs of a hen, piece of quartz with a diamond and a white linen scarf with golden edges decorated with floral motives. This was the distinctive mark of the so-called *saloftar* knights, for all the knights of the sultan bore such scarves around their heads. Cf. *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 205; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 240.

²⁴ Most probably this was the Top Kapı palace whose central part was constructed prior to 1464. See X. Иналджък, *Османската империя: Класическият период 1300–1600*, София 2002, 80.

*Emperor's household, court and all his arrangements and I will describe something of what I saw. Item this palace is very large and splendid beyond the measures. There follows a detailed description of the Top Kapı palace. Von Harff paid special attention to the servants of the sultan. He underscores that the sultan had at his disposal 200 000 mercenaries, 32 000 infantry, 600 knights, most of them former Christians who had converted to Islam, 700 bodyguards and 800 young boys: Further he educated always at his court seven or eight hundred young boys, who are captured in all the Christian countries. These he trains to be his knights called **Saloftar**²⁵ and gives them provisions, each according to his establishment. He has also some four hundred doorkeepers or porters who keep the people and the gates, and see that they are locked. He had also stablemen, cooks, waiters, bakers, huntsmen, fishermen, ordnance masters and keepers and maintainers of game more than 1 100 of them.²⁶*

The German knight also describes the attitude of the Ottoman Turks to their wives, speaking at length about the *harem* and its guardians: *Not far from this castle we came to a palace called Women's garden in which the old Turkish Emperor had a hundred and one legal wives living. It was told me however that the present Turkish Emperor has only seventy-two lawful wives, not all of whom live in the palace, but some of them live there, others at Adrianople, Philipopolis and Wruskabalna /Kiustendil/. This women's palace was very finely and pleasantly built, and in it every woman has her own apartment and servants, and in the center of the palace is a very beautiful and pleasant garden with rare trees and fruits, in which they all may go together, and all their windows and doors open on to the garden, but there is only one door through which they must all enter, so closely are they guarded. Their house-guardians and servants are all eunuchs and the bulk are renegade Christians. They go about in their gold dresses, and are all stout and fat like bear casks, so that they can do no harm²⁷.*

Von Harff also discusses the garments of the Turkish ladies, their customs and some specific Ottoman habits in the sphere of the hygiene: *he Turkish women go about the streets with the face covered with a transparent black net, so that they can see everyone plainly, but one cannot distinguish their faces. It is also a custom in Turkey that women and maidens wear breeches to the knee, some made of leather, some of silk, some of linen cloth, and when a man wishes to sleep with his wife she goes before midday to the bath, and the husband after*

²⁵ Most probably this is a corrupt form of the word *silihtar*. The *silihtars* formed the personal guard of the sultan and their commander was the so-called *silihtar ağa* – the dignitary who carried the sword of the sultan. Cf. Иналджък, *Османската империя*, 83.

²⁶ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 206; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 241.

²⁷ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 207; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 242. On the sultan's *harem* see Иналджък, *Османската империя*, 88–89.

midday, and he gives the wife three aspers as bath-money, as much as three old crown shillings.

Item the Turks are Mahometans and keep to the law in all things, as I have described before concerning the heathen²⁸.

In his travel notes Arnold von Harff also included a description of the notorious Ottoman prisons and of the punishments imposed on the culprits, regardless if they were eminent people, i.e. aristocrats who had committed a crime against the sultan, or common criminals: *There was scarcely a day while I was there but five or six were executed upon or beneath it, one being hanged, another transfixted or quartered or beheaded, since the Turkish Emperor executes strong justice throughout all his lands, so that nun may kill another under penalty of life and goods, I saw also often great lords and others who were flogged with sharp rods through their limbs between skin and flesh²⁹.*

The German knight sometimes speaks in his capacity of a person acquainted with the philological problems. He underscores that the Ottoman Turks have a language of their own which is quite different from the Greek, the Slavic and the Albanian: *...some words of which I have retained as described below...³⁰*

Recapitulating we must stress that what we summarized above was only a fraction of the intriguing stories which could be found in the accounts of the western pilgrims who had traveled along the Adriatic coast of the Balkan Peninsula and across its landlocked districts during the 14th -15th century. All these texts – diaries, itineraries, and all other kinds of traveler’s notes - offer us a plethora of fascinating descriptions referring to impressing natural landmarks, as well as to localities and settlements situated in Istria, Dalmatia, and across the Balkans mainland. The western travelers never concealed their vivid interest in everything they encountered, so they paid special attention even to the most insignificant details of the local customs, costumes, habitual occupations, religious practices, and architectural achievements, as well as to the historical and legendary background of the Balkan population. It is exactly this last element which is of paramount importance to us when we study and analyze the western interpretation of what happened in the eastern Mediterranean during the 15th century and the irreversible decline of Christian Byzantium whose place in European history was immediately occupied by the ascending power of the Ottoman Turks.

²⁸ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 208; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 244.

²⁹ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 208; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 243.

³⁰ *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff*, 209–210; *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, 244–245.

Summarizing the data we discussed above we could reasonably support the view that, as a whole, the western travelers perceive the Balkans, their population and their historical heritage as an intrinsic part of Europe and its civilization. For them the Ottoman Turks are totally unfamiliar and extremely different, not only because of their religion but also because of their customs, language and culture. However, notwithstanding these differences, the Ottomans are considered to have some valuable achievements, mainly military techniques and approaches which from the western point of view are worth of being admired in many aspects.