

Une itinérance prophétique: "Le voyage en Perse" d'Ambrogio Contarini (1474–1477). Pascal Vuillemin.

Bibliothèque d'histoire médiévale 16. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016. 226 pp. €32.

In this two-part publication, historian Pascal Vuillemin offers the first modern and annotated French translation of Ambrogio Contarini's travel account to Persia and the eastern edges of Europe, preceded by an engaged and thoroughly documented essay. The narrative details the Venetian ambassador's perilous 1474 journey to meet the then-ruler of Persia, Usun Hasan. The goal of the diplomatic mission was to strengthen an anti-Ottoman alliance with the Republic of Venice that would culminate in a joint military campaign against the common enemy. To this end, as Vuillemin demonstrates, the Venetian government had carefully planned both the material and discursive aspects of the enterprise, from the itinerary to the messages that were to be delivered.

However, by the time the ambassador had arrived in Persia, Usun Hasan's preoccupations had shifted to matters of internal turmoil, and as a result the king was reluctant to make the steady commitment Contarini was trying to secure. Much to the ambassador's frustration, the ruler's tepid reassurance of cooperation would mark not only the political failure of the mission, but the beginning of a series of unexpected ordeals. In a dramatic turn of events, Contarini's return to Venice would morph into a nightmarish three-year long odyssey or, as Vuillemin puts it, an escalation of sufferings akin to the stations of the cross.

After his departure from Tabriz, Contarini's narrative thus follows an adventurous thread that grows more dramatic as the path to Venice increasingly diverges from the itinerary originally planned. Met with the news of the Turkish conquest of Caffa, his party is forced to reroute eastward from the Black Sea to the shores of Azerbaijan and subsequently tackle the hazardous sailing of the Caspian Sea. A shipwreck and the celebration of Easter Sunday among the reeds of an uninhabited island precede the travelers' unwelcoming arrival in the lands of the Tartars. What follows is another exhausting crossing that will take them further north to Moscow through the immense deserts, treacherous fords, and impenetrable forests of the Volga region. Repeated robberies, extreme weather conditions, deadly disease, hostile interactions, and a foiled enslavement dot this part of the itinerary, exacerbating Contarini's anguish and despair. Yet, rather than shaking the traveler's faith, these events, increasingly perceived as part of an unfolding providential scheme, appear to strengthen his belief in personal divine protection.

Should the adventurous plot of Contarini's travels alone not entice the curiosity of scholars and history lovers, Pascal Vuillemin's essay makes a strong case about the unique features of this 550-year-old account. In his view, the subjective experience of the narrator emerges here in a way that far exceeds the standards followed by

ambassadors and secretaries at the time, which were mostly concerned with informative and stylistic goals. Against these two stances, which respectively shift away from and filter the narrator's presence, Contarini casts his unfettered voice and bodily presence as the material testimony of his travails. While he is aware of the value of his firsthand strategic knowledge about regions unfamiliar to the Venetians, Contarini's embodied gaze accounts for an experience that is above all a perspective of anthropological and environmental significance. Uninterested in literary artifice—a feature condemned by future readers—the ambassador's writing, as Vuillemin notes, is nonetheless the result of a considered reformulation free from daily contingencies and questioning. This becomes apparent in light of the unusual choice Contarini made to print his account, once he ascertained that no sensitive information would be divulged to the large public.

According to Vuillemin, the motive of the rewriting and publication of a text originally intended for the archives lies in the unexpected turn of events that transformed the itinerary in an *itinérance* and invested Contarini with a higher mission: that of using his prophetic voice to facilitate the triumph of Christianity over current religious divisions. In support of his subtle reading, the historian persuasively unearths an underlying textual pattern of providential signs, messianic declarations, and symbolic episodes, which he illuminates through an investigation of the devotional practices and millenarian discourses Contarini would have been exposed to. In his conclusion, Vuillemin wonders whether an “optical illusion” (114) has caused previous scholars to miss all these references, or whether, on the contrary, it may have misguided his own interpretation, which some readers may think was pushed a bit far. Whichever may be true, Vuillemin's translation and commentary of Contarini's travels succeed in their goal of revamping an exceptional though unjustly neglected travelogue, while providing an admirable and grounded piece of cultural history.

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Katharina von Medici: Frankreichs verkannte Königin. Klaus Malettke.
Paderborn: Brill, 2020. viii + 404 pp. €77.57.

Catherine of Medici (1519–89), queen of France, is certainly one of the most famous, yet controversial, women of the Renaissance. Her faith is linked with one of the darkest chapters in the history of France: the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. Even today, not all the facts that led to this massacre have been clarified, which adds to the ambiguity of Catherine's role in the events leading up to this mass murder and has given rise to “black and hagiographic legends” (1), as Malettke puts it, which have overshadowed her biography to date. This complex and unsatisfactory situation stands at the beginning of this