

The Representation of the Orient in the Pilgrimage Diaries of the Florentine *corpus* (XIV and XV centuries). Men, Women, Costumes, Cultures between Religion and Observation.

*«I popoli sono il prodotto della storia,
non gli atomi che la compongono»*

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The ethnic-religious otherness and its perception in the narrative sources has never been a popular topic among the historians of the Middle Ages. For this reason it represents a privileged field of research, although it is complicated by an instrumental use of the Middle Ages, even recently, which results more linked to a simplified folklore - for political or entertainment purposes - rather than to a rigorous scientific research. It is precisely this representation of the *other* which has represented one of the central points of the work I have recently concluded on the representation of the Orient in the florentine pilgrimage diaries of the late Middle Ages. The *other* that I dealt with has worn, for the occasion, the shoes of the muslim men and women of the Near East who, thanks to the observations of the pilgrim writers, have been an essential part of my research. The devotional odeporic, source from which I gathered the material necessary to my research, has, for quite a long time, wrongly been considered of scarce documental value, due to the fact that was often confined to the simple narrative invention.

On the contrary, the pilgrimage diary, as it has been demonstrated, represents a complex writing tradition, in which narrative and memoir cross each other. This strongly autoptic dimension is particularly significant, as it expresses a way of perceiving and representing the Outremer. The judgment on the documental value of the pilgrimage memoir must thus be reconsidered, clarifying its specific scope. Being a composite genre, it won't be possible to find testimonies of material culture as in the notary documents, but some other, reliable information can be obtained, for instance, on the current coins or on the duties applied. Above all, the pilgrimage diaries will be precious when analysing the history of a mentality because, if on the one side they are imbued with the culture belonging to a precise social background, on the other their main feature is that of

constituting a sort of outpost in the contact with a foreign culture. In other words, the representation of the otherness present in the pilgrimage diaries will result from a balance, or, better to say, a tension, between the respect of the conventional image and the novelty represented by the experience of the otherness lived first-hand.

HERESY OR IDOLATRY

When it comes to the conventional image of the muslim world in the Western culture, it usually refers to the type of representation spread from the epic and from the crusade chronicles. In fact, since the age of the crusades – and in particular with the transfer of the biographic legend of Mahomet in the Western world, through the chronicles of Guibert de Nogent (1052-1124) – a deep transformation in the way of representing the muslim otherness started. It is important to underline that, previously to the divulgation of the features of the religious cult inspired by him, it has been the Prophet's biography to be spread in the Western world and this very legend then put the basis for the creation of a persisting idea of Islam.

Up until the crusades period the Islam, or, better, its prophet, had been read only in an heretical perspective: his beliefs were, after all, amenable to a known matrix. The prophet's mentor, a monk called Bahira, a key character in his biographic narrative, was considered an arian or nestorian heretic. Nevertheless, the theologian John Damascene (d. 749) in *De haeresibus liber* (On Heresy) had no doubts in considering the new prophet as the supporter of the overcoming of the pre-islamic idolatry. The Syrian writer noticed Mahomet's innovative nature, who was not thus considered as a pagan, but rather as the one who, even though heretic, has won over Ishmaelites' paganism¹.

It is thus clear that, since the first approach with Islam, there has been no fusion or confusion between heresy and paganism. At least, there has been none in a didactic perspective. The topic of the muslim idolatry was used by Damascene only in an apologetic approach: when the christians had been accused of idolatry for their beliefs on the nature of God, and they defended in turn

¹ «Hi [the Ishmaelites n.d.r.] idololatriae addicti cum essent, stellam matutinam adorabant, ac Venerem, quam et Chabar, quod Magnam sonat, lingua sua appellant. Usque ad Heraclii tempora palam est eos idola coluisse: inde autem ad nostram usque aetatem falsus illis exortus est vates, Mamed nomine; qui cum in libros Veteres Novique Testamenti incidisset, habitis cum Ariano quodam monacho colloquiis, propriam sectam condidit». JOANNES DAMASCENUS, *De haeresibus liber*, PG XCIV, coll. 764-766.

themselves by accusing the muslims for their adoration of Caba². However, for the Syrian theologian it was clear that Mahomet had nothing to do with idolatry. The current hypothesis was that Islam did not represent a faith different from Christianity, but rather an illicit branch of the christian confession. If the Muslims rejected the trinitarian theology and the double nature of Christ, then they could not be but followers of Arius and Nestorius³.

By the time of the first crusade, things had radically changed: Mahomet's religion was not a simple heresy anymore, but was recognised as a form of paganism. The idea of a muslim idolatry, which would have seemed ridiculous to the theologians of the previous centuries, not only was admitted but it was also considered the only valuable interpretation of Islam. The vision of the Middle Ages was the product of a progressive slipping from an initial schismatic conception to an idolatric one, as a radical negation of Christianity.⁴ As with the crusades emerged the necessity to promote it as the enemy, Islam acquired demoniac features and was conveniently represented as pagan. The monastic texts, the chronicles and the epics defined the muslims as *pagans* or *gentiles*⁵. Even though, they were mainly the crusade songs which divulged a description of the Muslim religion conformed to the models of the ancient paganism. This radically false image was part of the logic of propaganda which meet in the *chanson de geste*⁶. The epic did not introduce any novelty, as

² «Insuper nos taquam idolatras criminantur, quia crucem adoramus, quam ipsi abominantur. Ad quos dicimus, Qui sit igitur ut lapidi, qui in Chabatha vestra est, vos adfricetis, eumque complexantes deosculemini?». JOANNES DAMASCENUS, *ivi* col. 767-770.

³ The Islam, like the Arianism, denied that the Son could be of the same substance of the Father and, like the Nestorianism, refused to define Mary and the Mother of God. M. JEVOLLELLA, *Le radici islamiche dell'Europa*, Milano, Boroli, 2005, pp. 11-26.

⁴ A. D'ANCONA, *La leggenda di Maometto in Occidente*, (ed. A. BORRUSO), Roma, Sellerio, 1994. The essay by D'Ancona has already been published in «Giornale storico della letteratura italiana», VII (1889), vol. 13, pp. 199-281.

⁵ Jean Flori thinks that the writers of the time had associated this definition to all the enemies of Christianity, creating thus a sort of dualism between the Christian people and the enemies of the "true religion. In the same direction moves Todeschini as regards the alleged cruelty of the unfaithful understood as feral nature rather than human, different thus from the spirituality of the Christians, gifted with the understanding of the spiritual meanings of the world. See G. TODESCHINI, *Visibilmente crudeli. Malviventi, persone sospette e gente qualunque dal medioevo all'età moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007, especially pp. 15-19.

⁶ J. FLORI, *La caricature de l'Islam dans l'Occident médiéval. Origine et signification de quelques stéréotypes concernant l'Islam*, in «Aevum», LXVI (1992), n. 2, p. 246.

the inference to idolatry has already penetrated into Patrology far before the first crusade. However, while the Greek Church Fathers used this topic in an apologetic perspective, the *chanson de geste* made a real *topos* of it.

DEMONIC SARACENS

Apparently, when the legend spread in the Western world, there was no direct knowledge of what was elaborated about Mahomet by the Greek patristic. However, the name and the life of the founder of Islam had become the subject of folk tales, and in fact Guibert de Nogent claimed that what he was writing about was taken from oral tales which circulated at the time⁷. Differently from the other chroniclers, he did recognise that the Saracens were monotheists, that Mahomet was not their god and that they were not idolaters. As he was reporting the popular beliefs about Islam, the historian was very aware of the groundlessness of those themes, so fortunate in the Western imagination. In fact, he recognised that they were things said in mockery of Mahomet's followers, who did not think of him as a fair man and a prophet.⁸ However, it was in *Gesta Dei per Francos* that the devil appeared, for the first time, in the tradition of Mahomet, making then of Islam a weapon against the Christians. The Prophet's mentor was no longer a simple inspirator of his beliefs, as he had been with the previous writers, but he became his instigator and adviser. When the monk, «sordidissimus eremita», frustrated in his desire to be patriarch of Alexandria, began to plan a revenge he became prey of the Devil, who made of him his own instrument to act on Mahomet⁹. With the *Gesta Dei per Francos* Mahomet, from a false prophet of the heretic Christianity, became the founder of an idolatrous cult of diabolic inspiration.

The cultural environment in which was developed the elaboration of a diabolic image of the Islam was, nevertheless, the religious-monastic one, by now outside of the Christian philosophical

⁷ «Plebeia opinio est quedam fuisse, qui, si bene exprimo, Mathomus». GUIBERTUS DE NOVIGENTO, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, I, 3, in RHC IV, p. 127.

⁸ «Sed omissis iocularibus quae pro sequacium derisione dicuntur, hoc est insinuandum: quod non eum Deum, ut aliqui aestimant, opinantur; sed hominem iustum eundemque patronum, per quem leges divinae tradantur». GUIBERTUS DE NOVIGENTO, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, I, 4, in RHC IV, p. 130.

⁹ See GUIBERTUS DE NOVIGENTO, *Gesta Dei per Francos*, I, 4, in RHC IV, p. 128. M. See also: VAN ACKER, *Mahomet dans ses biographies occidentales du Moyen âge entre anti-saint et antéchrist*, (Unpublished Diss. Ghent University, Belgium, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, 1999), p. 149.

system: the work by Guibert de Nogent is already part of the chronicles of the first crusade. The image of the Islam as paganism contributed in justifying the idea and nourish the crusade ideals. If the crusade knights were the new Christian martyrs, then the Saracens could take the role of persecutors and enemies to kill¹⁰. These new enemies of Christianity came from places where the Antichrist had always nestled, from cities as Babylon and Corozaim, of biblical and patristic tradition¹¹. The very names of the Saracens present in the epic tradition often had biblical origins in reference to negative characters such as *Pilate*, *Cain*, *Goliath*, *Pharaoh*, *Lucifer* or presented a clear reference to the evil as in the case of *Mauprians*, *Malprimis*, *Fausaron*. Never as in this case it was true that *nomina sunt omina*.

It was mainly the physical appearance that referred to a clearly demonic image: the Saracens in the *chansons de geste* carried the mark of monstrosity, appearing often as deformed men, horned or as black as demons¹². In the *Chanson de Roland* the most famous among the epic books which display the war against the unfaithfuls, among the Muslims, there are, for instance: the big-headed Mycenaeans, the filthy Canaaites, and the giants of Malprose¹³. All these ranks, charged with any possible physical and moral degradation, are depicted in their abjection in a description which makes them similar to beasts where even the armour- with all its chivalric symbolism- results superfluous: «De plus feluns n'orrez parler jamais; / Durs unt les quirs ensemment cume fer, / Pur ço n'unt soign de elme ne d'osberc»¹⁴. This idea of the Saracens reflects the vision diffused at a popular level, which, however, did not coincide with the knowledge diffused in the higher clerical ranks, where the monotheistic and even Abrahamic nature of the Muslim religion could be well known and recognised. The chronicles and the epics created in relation to the first crusade were written in secular environments and the propagandistic message they carried with them was addressed to laymen and *illiterati*.

¹⁰ J. FLORI, *La caricature de l'Islam* cit., especially pp. 247-248, 256.

¹¹For the many recurrences, see RHC Occ. III, p. 929 under *Corosanum* e p. 910 *Babylonia*.

¹² For an excursus of the sources on these aspects, see M. JONES, *The conventional saracen* cit., p. 205.

¹³ «Micenes as chefs gros», *La chanson de Roland*, (ed. C. Segre), Milano, Ricciardi 1976, v. 3222; «Canelius les laiz», *ivi*, v. 3238; «Jaianz de Malprose», *ivi*, v. 3253.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, vv. 3248-3250. Translation: "Of such fellons never hear/ they have a hard leather (it really is so)/ So they do not need neither helmet nor hauberk."

THE ORIGINALITY OF THE DIARIES OF PILGRIMAGE

However, it is undeniable that, wherever the continuity between communities had favoured a direct comparison, things developed differently, despite the fact that the distrust towards Islam influenced the main part of the Western thought during all the Middle Age. Not only were they different near those osmotic borders where the Christian world faded into the *Dar al-Islam*, but also through the pilgrimage, which could become a rare opportunity for knowledge. It was the third border together with the Muslim Sicily and the three-cultured Spain. Riccoldo da Montecroce, a Dominican monk of Santa Maria Novella, whose diary of journey represents the starting point of the collection of Florentine sources contemplated in my research, describes in great detail the perfect works of the Saracens: «Sollicitudo ad studium, devocio in oracione, misericordia ad pauperes, reuerencia ad nomen Dei et prophetas et loca sancta, gravitas in moribus, affabilitas ad extraneos, concordia et amore ad suos»¹⁵.

While admitting the intention to whip the Christian habits, it is surprising the insistence of the monk on the positive aspects of the Saracens' habits, who are represented as men of many virtues: they are studious, devoted, charitable, God-fearing, modest, reliable and concordant.

«Cum maxima mansuetudine et modestia legunt et disputant»; «Tanta est eis sollicitudo in oracione et tanta deuocio, quod stupui, cum per experienciam vidi et probaui»; «Sarraceni sunt maximi elemosinarii. Habent enim in alcorano strictum mandatum, quod dant decimam»; «Reuerenciam vero maximam habent Sarraceni ad nomen Dei et prophetas et sanctos et loca sancta»; «Tanta est eis gravitas, in moribus, quod numquam videbis hominem sarracenum incedentem capite elevato vel sublimibus oculis, vel collo erecto vel pectore tenso vel navigando brachiis, sed incessu maturo, sicut perfecti religiosi et graves moribus, eciam pueri parvi»; «Affabilitatem et urbanitatem tantam servant versus extraneos, quod nos recipiebant ut angelos»; «Concordiam vero et amorem ita nutriunt ad invicem, ut vere videantur esse fratres»¹⁶.

This is in contradiction with the description of the law of the Saracens, described- and it could not be differently- as confused, obscure, mendacious, irrational and finally violent¹⁷. It is precisely in this distancing from a doctrinal perspective that the diaries of pilgrimage reveal all their innovative quality. The pilgrims are very slightly interested in the religion of Mahomet: they care

¹⁵ RICCOLDO DA MONTECROCE (1288), pp. 308-310.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 310, 312, 314, 315

¹⁷ *Ivi*, Capitula XXX-XXXVI, pp. 318-331.

much more about the concrete and tangible reality of what they can experiment during their journey, of what happens in front of them and which often lies outside the interpretative categories they acquired, forcing them in finding new paths in the interpretation of reality. In the narrative structures thought for a “Western” reader, there are still some elements of what constitutes a common system of references. But, at the same time, these tales give place to unexpected perspectives, revealing thus that even the strong architectures of a consolidated model are not always able to meet the stresses of the new ones.

Even when they write about the Islamic religiosity, the pilgrims neglect the confessional perspective by writing mostly about the ritual expression, that is those cult expressions which are rendered visible through concrete gestures. The curiosity about the material culture overcomes the attempt of a theological placement, thus moving the observer’s attention on the more ethnologic aspects. The cult expressions are described by the diarists- both lay and religious ones- simply as a part of the customs and traditions belonging to the Saracen peoples. And this is where it can be found a substantial difference between the theological interpretation of the “Saracen” as the enemy of Christianity and the changeable representation of the Muslim world which can be found in the diaries of pilgrimage.

The travelers, visiting the Holy Places, necessarily met the imagined enemy who, without his abstract nature, lost those demonic traits which preceded him. The descendants of Ismael then took up the faces that could be found in the varied world of the craftsmen, of hirers, of the guides and of the civil servants whom the pilgrims dealt with during their sojourn. The border of apocalyptic wildness was placed elsewhere: for instance, where countries and men were yet mostly unknown, as in the case of the Tartars, or of those nomadic population that placed themselves outside the urban civilisation. The one occupied the place of the theological disputes, of preaching and of politic reason; the other, less ambitious but also less obsessed, was the area of the observation, sometimes even a naive one, that the travelers developed in their contact with the Outremer.

Such a close contact alone could not transform the interpretative systems the men of the time moved within: a pilgrimage was not able to develop those experiences in a cultural contamination which derive from a continued coexistence. And yet, the very nature of these texts, so clearly characterised by mercantile roots, cannot influence the way the Eastern otherness was represented.

THE CULTS OF THE SARACENS

Considering the approach that the pilgrims had with the Muslim religious expression, it emerges that the kind of description and its construction method result from the adaptation of the cognitive structure belonging to the Western background.

Le chiese de' saraini si chiamano moschette et àno gran champanili senza campane, et quando vogliono adnuntiare la nona e' preti delle moschette vanno in su' champanili et lassù dove comincia la cupola si à di fuori un ballatoio di legname, et vanno intorno a questo ballatoio tre volte gridando a boci: *elliè nona!* Et di poi ricordano la lege di Maometto cioè cresciete et moltiplicate. Et simile fanno a tutte l'ore salvo a vespro et mattutino vi stanno tre cotanti¹⁸.

This is the description of the *adān*, the appeal to the prayer, according to the interpretation of Simone Sigoli, pilgrim in the Holy Land in 1384. Probably, what the author is recalling here is the appeal to the '*asr*', the afternoon prayer, and thus it is quite natural for him to interpret the muezzin's words in comparison with the Canonical Hours¹⁹. On the other side, the process of reinterpretation of phenomena is a cognitive mode typical of all the travelers' narrations, not only of pilgrims, when they have to describe a novelty for which a language still have to be created.

The Muslim places of worship are interpreted as churches, because in the traveler's imagination that is the place devoted to the prayer and the cult, but they carry a different name. For the same reason, the minarets are bell towers, the *ramadan* is the Lent and the *muezzin* are priests. The travelers learn a new language by learning its words through a basic dictionary which establishes

¹⁸ [The churches of the Saracens are called mosques and have big bell towers, but without bells, and when they want to announce the nones, the priests of the mosques go up the bell towers and where the dome begins there are wooden balconies, and they go around this balcony three times shouting *elliè nona* (it's the nones)! And then they remind of Mahomet's law, that is be fruitful and multiply. And similarly they do at every hour except the vesper and the matins when they do it three times]. SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), p. 78. The *adān*, the appeal to the prayer, opens with the formula «Allāh akbar», followed by the attestations of faith and by the invitation to the prayer, and then closes with the same opening sentence and with the testimony formula: «Lā ilāha illa Allāh» (there is no other God than Allah). The sound of the ritual sentence is most probably the origin of the creative interpretation by Sigoli. On the *adān*, see AL-BUHĀRĪ, *Detti e fatti del profeta dell'Islām*, (ed. V. VACCA - S. NOJA - M. VALLARO), Torino, Utet, 2003, p. 149.

¹⁹ The canonic appointments of the Muslim prayer are distributed along all the day and they are not fixed but they depend on the position of the sun, thus changing according to the season. The time slot dedicated to the afternoon prayer starts when the shadow is of the same length of the objects and ends when the sun begins to set down. See AL-BUHĀRĪ, *Detti e fatti del profeta dell'Islām* cit., pp. 142-143.

some correspondences: first they learn the form, then, in case, its content. As much as this method is insufficient in order to gain a real knowledge of the other culture, it is nevertheless the most efficient way of relating to the unusual and to explain it to a reader who, in his turn, it is not provided with the conceptual tools to understand a complex reality, so much different from his own.

All these elements represented the pieces of a representation of the Muslim world which did not yet belong to the mental landscape of the Western travelers. However, in the case of the cultural habits, while this knowledge circulated more or less widely among the cultured clerical environments, the urban social ranks, constituted by merchants, craftsmen, clerics and members of the middle-classes, must have heard only its feeble echoes. Thus, the pilgrims, being unable to draw to the scant knowledge acquired, often had to resort to a- so to say- “pre-ethnological” approach, trying to represent the Eastern world through a series of similes or contrasts between different cultures and their own.

WILD ARABS

Which was the cognition the devoted travelers had of the cultures and the ethnic groups of others? Among the authors of the Florentine diaries of pilgrimage no one make use of the term *islam* neither to refer to the cult nor to define the population which adhered to it. Once established the first great division between Christians and Saracens, the population had been defined according to their lifestyles:

Et prima sono e mamaluchi, e quali sono tutti cristiani rineghati et sono stiavi perché, come rineghano, diventano stiavi immediate et non può essere signore se prima non è stiavo (...); e figliuoli di questi mamalucchi che nascono di loro non sono stiavi et non sono mamalucchi, né sono mori, ma rimanghono liberi come sono in età. (...) Et ancora vi sono gli arabi et questi sono huomini bestiali, senza alcuna discritione o ubidientia et senza signoria; hanno loro habitationi nelle montagne, huomini di malaffare²⁰.

²⁰ [And before there are the Mamluks, who are all renegade Christians and are slaves because, as they do renounce their faith, they immediately become slaves and one cannot be lord if before he is not slave (...); and the sons of these Mamluks, who are born from them, are neither slaves nor Mamluks, nor mori, but they stay free as they come of age (...). And then there are the Arabs and these are beastly men, without any description or obedience or lordship; they live in the mountains, crooks]. MICHELE DA FIGLINE (1489), cc. 63v-64r.

The *mamelucchi* (*Mamluks*) represent the ruling class while the *arabi* (*Arabs*) are nomadic Bedouins and the *mori* (*Dark*) represent the social group of the urbanized natives²¹.

Six centuries had passed since the *Etymologiae* by Isidorus, during which the osmotic processes working at the borders between Christianity and *Saracina* had contributed to articulate more and more the image of the East. The Saracens, or, better to say, the Agarènes, appeared then like an irreducible variety of men, groups, cities, villages, nomadic tribes, stable societies, seamless²².

A more complex perception of the Muslim world influences without any doubt the representation of the enemy which emerges in the diaries of pilgrimage, which is not developed in a doctrinal perspective, but rather by assuming as a basis the standard of belonging to the *civitas*. The narrators' approach shows that those who live outside the urban civilization can be more easily ascribed to the animal nature rather than to the human one. The pilgrims elaborate the perception of the enemy through the polarities domestic-wild, urban-rustic, as he is no more an abstract theological adversary, but he acquires the features of a difficult neighbour.

The main instrument of expression of the enemy's hostility are the assaults against the pilgrims which are generally ascribed not to the Saracens but rather to the ethnic group farther away from the urban society, that is, the Bedouins. The tale by Anonimo Panciatichiano is quite significant, as he identifies the nomadic population as the perpetrator of raids and robberies: «Questo camino si è molto dottevole e pericoloso a passare, se l'uomo non vi vae bene acconpagnato per una maniera di gente che ànno nome beddovini. Li quali si riduceno quie tutto giorno per rubare e per tagliare lo

²¹ As the historians would know, for a correct etymology, the *mori* should be the Mauri, the Berbers of Spain and of Maghreb, but the Jerusalem pilgrims needed some new linguistics coordinates which evidently they invented by borrowing names from some other geographic context. Michele da Figline indirectly exemplifies this when he explains that the Mamluks do not become Mamluks themselves but neither can they be part of the *mori* group, that is, the group of the natives: «e figliuoli di questi mamalucchi (...) non sono mamalucchii, né sono mori». For translation, see note 20. Michele da Figline (1489), c. 63v. On the other hand, the more pertinent definition of arabs was not available for defining an urban population, considering that the meaning of that word was linked to the Bedouins, to the primordial populations of the Arabia Felix.

²² The attention to the Saracens, with all the perplexities related to an unknown identity, has entered into the Latin vocabulary of the Church Fathers at least since the V century. Isidorus writes about these populations in *Etymologiae* referring the vulgate interpretation according to which the Saracens would be called thus, «*corrupto nomine*» (with an altered name), as if they were the descendants of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. ISIDORUS HISPALENSIS, *Etymologiarum sive origini libri IX*, 2, 6, in PL LXXXII, col. 329.

cammino a coloro che vanno da Cesaria (...) a Giaffe»²³. Leonardo Frescobaldi, after stating that they are rude and nomadic people, describes their habits, underlining the shakiness of their shelters where men, women, adults, children, animals and persons lie in promiscuity²⁴. Comparing them with beasts is an attitude diffused among the Florentine diarists, who not only compare the canine species to these people - far beyond the epithet *chani saracini* - but also adopt linguistic stylistics in order to represent them as animals:

E quello di medesimo troviamo fra quelle montagne arabi salvatichi colle loro moglie, e aveano tanti arabi piccolini co loro che io non credevo che di così trista gente e di così misera tanti ne fusse nati. E tutti erano ignudi, maschi e femine, e tutti neri, e le cose loro erano coperte di pelli di camelli²⁵.

The choice of expressions as *salvatichi*, *arabi piccolini* and generally all the atmosphere of the description can be consistent with the description of a group of new, strange animals, in front of which the Western observer adopts a behaviour not different from when he stares at a giraffe or an elephant. The *feral* and unhuman nature of the unfaithful, then, distinguishes them from the human, and thus *spiritual*, nature of Christians²⁶.

²³ [This path is very dangerous to cross, if the man does not go well accompanied by some people named Bedouin. These ones wait here all the day to rob and to cut the road to those who go to from Caesarea (...) to Jaffa]. ANONIMO PANCIATICHIANO (sec. XIII^{ex}), pp. 163,164.

²⁴«In terra giace il padre della famiglia colla moglie e figliuoli e col bestiame e cani» [On the earth lies the father of this family with his wife and their children and the cattle and the dogs]. LIONARDO FRESCOBALDI (1384), p. 154.

²⁵ [And that same day we found in the mountains some wild Arabs with their wives, and they had so many little Arabs that I could not believe that so many could be born from such a bad and poor people. And they were all naked, men and women, and all dark-skinned, and their stuff were covered in camel skin]. NICCOLÒ DA POGGIBONSI (1346-1350), p. 129.

²⁶ See G. TODESCHINI, *Visibilmente crudeli*, pp. 15-19.

Niccolò da Poggibonsi not only qualified the *Arabs* as *salvatichi*, but also explicated that difference between *salvatichi* and *dimestichi* which remained unexpressed in the other witnesses²⁷. Poggibonsi adopted the term *dimestichi* to identify those groups of Bedouins who, settling down as peasants, had then become an important part of the rural population of Syria and Palestine²⁸. In the consideration of a pilgrim, the *arabi dimestichi* did not enjoy a higher repute, nevertheless they constituted a group which was different from the nomadic Bedouins thanks also to their activity, which put them in relation with the urbanized society of the cities.

The Mamluks aroused a totally different attitude²⁹. They were clean, well-dressed, the expression of that urbanized aristocracy which lead the government in Cairo. On the other side, the native inhabitants, defined *mori*, had their own collocation within the urban society. In the representation of the travelers, only the *Arabs* «*sanza ubidientia et sanza signoria*» (without obedience and lordship) could not enjoy the status of men.

²⁷ «Li nove dì, a ora di nona, passamo per una valle e troviamo ben cento spilonche d'arabi salvatichi. Tutti gli arabi erano vestiti di pelle di camelli pelosi, che pàrevano di coloro che piovono nello 'Nferno. (...) E lo 'nterpito disse: "Non temete, che gli arabi sono a pascere loro gregge; e queste sono le femine, che non fanno noia altrui, ma dilettaansi di vedere quello che a loro è grande novità, come di vedere persone"». [On the ninth day, at nones, we passed through a valley and we found a hundred wild Arabs. They were all wearing hairy camel skins, and they resembled those who fall down in Hell. (...) And the interpreter said "Worry not, the Arabs are pasturing the cattle; and these are the women, who do not harm none, but like to see what is a great novelty to them, in example to see people]. NICCOLÒ DA POGGIBONSI (1346-1350), p. 141.

²⁸ «Li quatordecim dì troviamo arabi dimestichi; e ivi la notte stemo, imperò che li nostri camellieri erano di quella bestiale e sciagurata gente». [On the fourteenth day we met the domestic Arabs; and we spent there the night, because our camel drivers belonged to that beastly and miserable people]. *Ibidem*.

²⁹ If on the one side with this expression was used to indicate the regular government of Cairo, in the persons of its administrators, on the other side, it could also allude to that varied category made of mercenaries and small knighthood from which the travelling parties draw in order to have an armed escort. Since the inheritance of the charges and of the feuds was not allowed, the sons of the Mamluks went back to the group of the civil population or became part of the lower orders of the army, constituted by free knights. See E. ASHTOR, *Storia economica e sociale del Vicino Oriente* cit. pp. 297-298.

ON TABLECLOTHS AND OTHER SCANDALS

The eating habits were among the most interesting discoveries for the visitors, who tried their best to describe the way of cooking, of eating, of the table manners of the Saracens. This is how Leonardo Frescobaldi described the preparation of food in Cairo and how they should be consumed:

Nella città ha moltissimi cuochi i quali cuocono fuori nelle vie così la notte come il dì, in gran caldaie di rame stagnato, bellissime e buone carni. Niuno cittadino per ricco che sia non cuoce in sua casa e tutti quelli del Paganesimo fanno così anzi mandano a comprare a questi bazari che così gli chiamano. E molte volte si pongono a mangiare nella via dove stendono un cuoio in terra e la vivanda pongono nel mezzo in uno catino e eglino intorno a sedere in terra colle gambe incrocicchiate o coccoloni e quando avessino imbrattate le mani se le leccano nettandole colla lingua come cani che così sono³⁰.

Only Gucci described, in an unusually positive tone, the habits in Damascus, where there are cooks who, according to him, «fanno cucina d'ogni ragione e cuocono bene e nettamente»³¹. However, the scandalous thing for the travelers is not that the Saracens eat all from the same dish, but the violation of that etiquette which, in Europe, established the rules of good manners. After all, for the European as well there was only one serving dish and everyone drew the food from it with his hands to eat it. The commensals of a European banquet did not have napkins- at least for most of the time- and inevitably they cleaned their greasy hands on the tablecloth. If the commensals, instead of drying their fingers, had sucked them, they would have committed an inadmissible violation of the rules of good manners³². That's why the Western people were so scandalised by the

³⁰ [In the city there are many cooks who cook outside on the road, both day and night, in very big copper cauldrons, beautiful and excellent meats. No citizen here, no matter how rich he is, prepares his own meal at home, and all those Pagans do the same, and even send someone to buy food in these bazars as they call them. And many times they stop to eat on the road, where they lay out a skin on the earth and put a basin in the centre of it and sit on the floor with crossed legs or nuzzled and when their hands are dirty they lick them and clean them with their tongue as the dogs , as they are, would do]. LEONARDO FRESCOBALDI (1384), p. 145.

³¹ [They rule the art of cookery and cook well and cleanly]. GIORGIO GUCCI (1384), p. 300.

³² As regards what during the Middle Ages were considered good manners at the table, see: O. REDON, F. SABBAN, S. SERVENTI, *A tavola nel medioevo*, Roma, Laterza, 1995² (ed. or. *La gastronomie au Moyen Age*, Paris, Stock, 1993), pp. 20-21. See also T. EHLERT, *Cucina medioevale*, Milano, Tommasi, 2002 (ed. or. *Das Kochbuch des Mittelalters*, Monaco di Baviera, Artemis & Winkler, 1995⁴), p. 18.

lack of tablecloths and by the habit of sucking greasy fingers. The tablecloth was such an important part of civilisation that, sometimes, the knights leaving for a crusade, in order to do a penance, made a vow of giving up tablecloths until their return.

Mešullam da Volterra, who is a Jew and so has his own traditions, most of all lingers onto the description of the habits of meals among the Saracens. Moreover, he presents a new attitude, which is not that of the simple observation, but rather expresses the intention of understanding the habits of the others, in order to be able, at least in part, to conform to the good manners code of the guests:

E se chiederete: «Quali sono le loro usanze? Che cosa bisogna fare?», sappiate che appena arrivati in quei luoghi ci si deve levare immediatamente le scarpe e sedersi per terra, accovacciandosi sulle gambe in modo che queste non si vedano per nessun motivo: si deve stare perfettamente accovacciati e mangiare per terra, senza fare cadere a terra neppure una briciola di pane senza raccoglierla; e non si deve mangiare sino a riempirsi di pane fino alla testa (cioè, fino ad essere pieni da scoppiare); bisogna dare qualcosa di tutto ciò che si mangia a coloro che stanno intorno, anche se non stanno mangiando con te (...); quando ti danno qualche cosa a mangiare allunga la mano con un poco umiltà. (...) È anche loro uso, quando mangiano, di sedere in circolo e di mangiare tutti da un solo piatto, il servo con il padrone, e di mettere le mani nel piatto e prendere una manciata di cibo. Non mettono innanzi a sé né tovaglia, né coltello, né sale e non si lavano mai le mani prima di mangiare. Immediatamente dopo il pasto si lavano le mani e gli avambracci, e alcuni di loro hanno una fine polvere bianca molto profumata, che in lingua araba si chiama *rahanìa*: vi mettono sopra dell'acqua e si lavano le mani con quella polvere³³.

³³ [And if you ask: “What are their habits? What should be done?”, you should know that as soon as you arrive in those places, you must take your shoes off and sit on the ground, crouching on the legs so that these cannot be seen; you should stay perfectly crouched on the ground, and not let a single crumb of bread fall to the ground without eating it; and you should not eat until you are full of bread up to your head (that is, until you are too full); you must give something of what you eat to all those who are around you, even if they do not eat with you (...): when they do give you something to eat, stretch your hand with a bit of humbleness. (...) It is also their habit, when they eat, to sit in a circle and to eat all together from the same dish, the servant with the lord, and to put the hands in the dish and grab something to eat. They do not put in front of them neither a tablecloth, nor a knife nor salt and they do not wash their hands before eating. Immediately after the meal, they wash their hands and forearms, and some of them have a thin and very scented powder, which in Arabic language is called *rahanìa*: they pour water on it and then wash their hands with it]. MEŠULLAM DA VOLTERRA (1481), pp. 67-68.

A few passages later, however, a scandalised Mešullam states: «Tanto gli ismaeliti quanto gli ebrei del luogo mangiano come maiali; essi infatti mangiano tutti in un unico piatto»³⁴, a thing that, differently, did not embarrass the other Florentine diarists at all. It is evident that the reasons of this different attitude are culturally motivated, totally relating to the background of the narrator. Most probably, what scandalises Mešullam is related to the rules of food purity, considering that, to an observant Jew it is forbidden to eat certain foods, even though they are *kosher*, if they are cooked or touched by a gentile³⁵. To a Christian European, eating from the same dish was not scandalising at all, as he was used to rules of good manners in which it was considered normal to take pieces of meat from a shared serving dish. The habits of convivial good manners in the Middle Ages included a few fundamental rules which were neglected at the Muslim tables, but the Western travelers should not have had much to feel scandalised about. In Europe, it was considered good manners to wash hands before sitting at the table, a gesture which was important mainly due to hygienic reasons, given that most of the food was taken with hands. As for liquid foods and sauces, an individual spoon was used to dip in a shared bowl. Meats and solid foods were cut in the serving dish and the pieces were then taken from the cutting board, taken with fingers and eaten. The fork was not yet known for this use, except for Italy, where it had been used since the end of XIV century, but only to eat pasta³⁶. Pier Damiani wrote about the Byzantine princess Theodora who, during her marriage banquet with the doge Domenico Selvo, commanded a “bidente d’oro” (golden fork) and ate her meat with that, instead of using her hands as prescribed by good manners³⁷. This

³⁴ [Both the Ishmaelites and the Jews of that place eat like the pigs: in fact, they all eat from the same dish]. *Ivi*, p. 81.

³⁵ A. UNTERMAN, *Dizionario di usi e leggende ebraiche*, (ed. A. FOA), Roma, Laterza 1994 (ed. or. *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 243.

³⁶ See over, note 22 of the same paragraph.

³⁷ «Dux Venetiarum Constantinopolitanae urbis civem habebat uxorem, quae nimirum tam tenere, tam delicate vivebat, et non modo superstitiosa, sed artificiosa, ut ita loquar, sese jucunditate mulcebat, ut etiam communibus se aquis dedignaretur abluere (...). Cibos quoque suos manibus non tangebatur, sed ab eunuchis ejus alimenta quaeque minutius concidebantur in frusta; quae mox illa quibusdam fuscinulis aureis atque bidentibus ori suo, liguriens, adhibebat. Ejus porro cubiculum tot thymiamatum, aromatumque generibus redolebat, ut et nobis narrare tantum dedecus feteat, et auditor forte non credat. Sed omnipotenti Deo quantum hujus feminae fuerit exosa superbia, manifesta docuit ulciscendo censura. Vibrato quippe super eam divini mucrone iudicii, corpus ejus omne computruit, ita ut membra corporis undique cuncta marcescerent, totumque cubiculum intolerabili prorsus fetore complerent». PETRUS DAMIANUS, *Institutio monialis*, caput XI in PL CXLV col. 744.

instrument, though, was not appreciated because it was considered of diabolic luxury and of scandalous refinement. The reported event had happened at the beginning of XI century, but, for a very long time, the fork had been used only by the noblest dames, because men considered using it as a sign of weakness. Only in XVI century did the individual fork become a symbol of good manners.

WOMEN IN TROUSERS

There are some elements in the habits of the Saracens, and, generally speaking, of the Eastern people, which aroused the curiosity of travelers. Among these, often represented as novelties or oddities, the style of clothes has a central role. The pilgrims try to describe the East which they get acquainted with through the accurate recording of the situations they find themselves in, in order to permit their readers to enjoy an empiric representation of that lifestyle. They were not unknown districts, as the previous odeporic literature – the various *itineraria* and *descriptiones* – contributed to define in the Western world a shared imagination of the East. But the late Middle Ages were the first opportunity in which the devoted aim of the journey added up with the ethnological description of regions and populations.

Women with trousers, dinners eaten on the road, food taken with hands, nestled position at the table and the habit of taking shoes off were behaviours which attracted the attention of the curious travelers. Some of them even tried to describe some complex events such as marriage and dowry, administrative organisation or the burial rituals but they represented events which went beyond the comprehension even of the most attentive observer. This is why in the diaries the more articulated and complex social behaviours have so little space.

Richard writes on the marvellous quality of the everyday in the diaries of pilgrimage: «Ce qui retient le plus l'attention, ce sont les “merveilles”. (...) Ces merveilles peuvent appartenir à l'ordre naturel (...). Les hommes les intéressent autant que la nature. (...) La curiosité pour les mœurs des peuples lointains est très grande»³⁸. All the various descriptions which follow and crowd each other, are animated by the desire to bring back to the Western world an image of the lifestyle of these Easterns.

³⁸ J. RICHARD, *Les récits de voyage et de pèlerinages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1981, p. 66.

Clothes are one of most interesting elements for travelers, who write about them in detail – and sometimes also with the competence derived from the mercantile profession – insisting on the fabrics, on the differences between masculine and feminine clothing and even on the differences depending on different social conditions. In the description of the clothing of Egyptian women, Frescobaldi points out the use of different kinds of veils adopted by noble and middle-class women, catching thus its specificity according to the social class they belonged to:

I loro vestimenti sono drappi il forte e ben lavorati, e di sotto tele di renso³⁹ o di lino alessandrino le più nobili; l'altre portano boccaccini⁴⁰ e corti insino al ginocchio salvo che sopra portano a modo d'uno mantello romanesco e vanno soggolate e turate per modo non si vede nulla altro che gli occhi e le più nobili portano una stamigna⁴¹ nera dinanzi agli occhi che non possono essere vedute, ma ben veggono altrui. In pie' portano uno paio di stivaletti bianchi e portano panni da gamba con gambuli insino su' talloni e alle bocche de' gambuli molti adornamenti secondo la condizione della donna: chi seta, chi oro, chi ariento, chi pietre e chi perle⁴².

According to the diary by Frescobaldi, it seems that the less noble women wore a veil which uncovered the eyes, while the aristocrats had their eyes covered in a very light fabric. This recalls the two kinds of full veil, the *niqab* and the *burqa*. The former is a piece of fabric fastened on the head which covers the face leaving just a small window for the eyes, the latter covers both the head and the body and the net in front of the eyes allows the lady who wears it to see without being seen. It is thus clear that the veil is a distinctive mark of higher social position, and in fact this element is always associated with a refined clothing⁴³.

³⁹ *Renso* or *rensa*, a very fine linen fabric usually produced in Reims.

⁴⁰ A very light canvas, in Turkish *boasī*.

⁴¹ Fabric of stamen (thin wool), hard-wearing and loose.

⁴² [Their clothes are strong and well tooled cloths, and beneath them there are canvasses of the most noble renso or linen from Alexandria; some other wear boccaccini, knee-length, except that over it they wear a mantle in the roman use, and they use a wimple and are closed so that anything but the eyes cannot be seen, and the noblest of them wear a stamigna in front of their eyes, so that they cannot be seen though they can see everything. As shoes, they wear white boots and wear cloths on their legs down to their ankles, and on their ankles they wear many decorations, according to the social position of the woman: silk, golden, silver, precious gems and pearls]. LIONARDO FRESCOBALDI (1384), p. 143.

⁴³ As regards the social role of the veil, see B. SCARCIA AMORETTI, *Un altro medioevo. Il quotidiano nell'Islam*, Bari, Laterza, 2001, pp. 48-49.

Simone Sigoli generalises unlawfully the use of this kind of veil to all the Muslim women but specifying that it is a piece of clothing adopted only outside of the domestic environment: «Ancora tutte le donne saraine, piccole et grandi, portano panni di ganba et degli anbuli fanno chalze. Et quando vanno fuori portano in capo un mantello di boccacino et chi di drappo bianco. Et vanno sì turate che di loro non si vede se non li occhi, per modo che passando la donna a llato al marito nolla conoscerebbe»⁴⁴.



Bernhard Von Breydenbach, *Peregrinationes*, Speyer, P. Drach, 1490

A detailed description of that piece of clothing is given by Mešullam da Volterra regarding the women in Alexandria: «Le donne vedono senza essere vedute, poiché portano sul viso un velo nero, con piccoli fori; esse portano in testa una mitra di fibra vegetale, con alcune pieghettature incollate e dipinte, sulla quale v'è un velo bianco che arriva loro sino alle caviglie e che copre i loro corpi sin

⁴⁴ SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), p. 73.

sopra il naso»⁴⁵.

Just after the description of the feminine clothing, Frescobaldi writes, to say the truth with less zeal, of the masculine attire: «Gli uomini vanno con panni lunghissimi e sempre senza calze o usatti⁴⁶ e senza brache e portano le loro scarpette a guisa di pianelle chiuse e in capo una melina di tela bianca di boccaccino e di bisso e i loro vestimenti bianchi o seta o di boccaccino o di lino»⁴⁷.

Simone Sigoli as well is interested in men clothing, which, nevertheless, in all the diaries, presents, more or less, the same features:

Tutti i loro vestimenti sono bianchi di boccaccino fine et chi drappi di seta bianchi fini. Et àvene assai et buon mercato. Le vestimenta loro sono lunghe insino in terra avendo le maniche larghissime et lunghe quasi come camici di preti al nostro modo. Et pochi sono i saraini che portino panni di gamba, et niuno saraino porta mai calze pure scarpette a mezzo piede. In capo portano una cappellina rossa azzata et d'intorno alla capellina una benda molto sottile lunga XXV in XXX braccia alla nostra misura. Et portano in mano I sciugatoio bianco, et chi vergato et chi llo porta cinto et chi in sulla spalla. Et la maggior parte de' saraini portano le mani di dietro per la via, et dicono ch'è bel costume⁴⁸.

Mešullam da Volterra is very intrigued by the fact that women wear trousers “instead of men”- from which it emerges that probably these ones wore skirts or tunics- and is very fascinated by the

⁴⁵ [The women see without being seen, because they wear a black veil on their face, with small holes; on the head, they wear a mitre of natural fibre, with some glued and coloured pleats, on which there is a white veil, which goes down to their ankles and covers their bodies up above their nose]. MEŠULLAM DA VOLTERRA (1481), p. 34.

⁴⁶ Half-boots.

⁴⁷ [The men always wear very long cloths, and always without tights or half-boots, and without trousers, and wear their shoes as closed slippers, and on their head they use a small apple of white linen or canvas and their white clothes are of silk, of canvas or of linen]. LIONARDO FRESCOBALDI (1384), p. 143.

⁴⁸ [All their clothes are of white fine canvas or fine silk. And there are many of them and at a good price. The clothes are long to the ground and with wide, long sleeves almost in the way of our priests. And very few are the Saracens who wear trousers, and none of them wears tights or half-length boots. On their heads they wear a spiked red hat and all around the hat they have a thin bandage long XXV in XXX arms in our measures. And they carry with them a white towel, sometimes coloured, and they carry it as a belt or on their shoulder. And most of the Saracens walks around with their hands behind their backs, and they say it is good manners]. SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), pp. 75.

richness of the decorations and of the jewels, by the use of tattoos and more generally, by the body culture radically different from the one experienced in the Western world:

Le donne là [al Cairo n.d.r.] portano i calzoni al posto degli uomini, come ad Alessandria; sui lacci dei pantaloni recano pietre preziose e perle; si fanno otto o dieci buchi nelle orecchie e vi appendono pietre preziose con un filo. I mori non portano anelli d'oro, bensì d'argento, incastonati con pietre preziose e perle. Dipingono inoltre la loro pelle di vari colori⁴⁹, che neppure l'acqua può togliere per un periodo di sei mesi, nonostante che essi vadano ogni giorno ai bagni, cioè stufe, poiché in tutto il mondo non vi sono stufe belle come al Cairo, e là essi fanno le loro bisogna⁵⁰.

It emerges the image of a refined, precious world in which the aesthetics and the care of the body play an important role for both sexes: «Le donne portano i calzoni e vanno una volta alla settimana alla stufa. Gli uomini, al contrario, non portano calzoni, e non si lavano la testa, ma la radono col rasoio, e la detergono soltanto con una spugna, leggermente inumidita d'acqua»⁵¹. The picture is conveniently completed by Sigoli, who, as a good merchant, is surprised by the amount of money the Egyptians, both men and women, spent for the purchase of perfumed essences: «Ancora ci disse il detto Simone⁵² che le donne et li huomini spendevano per dì, nel Caro inn erbe odorifere che non bastano se non un dì, bisanti tremila; che vale l'uno fiorini I - 1/4»⁵³.

⁴⁹The author is writing about the henna, a colouring powder of natural origins used in temporary tattoos on the hands and on the feet. The plant from which it derives (*lawsonia inermis*) is diffused in all the Eastern Mediterranean, and particularly in the Arab Countries.

⁵⁰ [The women in Cairo wear the trousers instead of men, like in Alexandria: on the laces of the trousers, they have precious gems and pearls; they make seven or eight holes in their ears and they hang on them precious gems with a thread. The mori do not wear golden rings, but of silver, mounted with precious gems or pearls. They also paint their skin with various colours, which not even the water can wash away for a period of six months, despite the fact that they go to the baths every day, that is, stoves, because in all the world there aren't stoves as beautiful as in Cairo, and there they do what they need]. MEŠULLAM DA VOLTERRA (1481), pp. 49-50.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 35.

⁵² Simone di Candia, a merchant part of the traveling-party.

⁵³ SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), pp. 87-88. Translation: "And then this Simone told us that women and men spent every day, in Cairo, for scented herbs which last no longer than a day, three thousands bezants, that is worth I - 1/4 florins."

NICE STREETS AND MARKETS, THE *CIVITAS* MODEL

The comparative analysis of the Florentine diaries has pointed out the recurrence of the opposition “wild/domestic” as a main key to interpret the Outremer. This polarity is adopted in order to distinguish, within the world of the Bedouins, the nomadic shepherds and those who were partially settled down. Moreover, the opposition “wild/domestic” works well to distinguish, more generally, the urban society, as a place of civilisation, from everything which is uncivilised. Eventually, this same interpretative model can be found also in the opposition “desert/garden”, within whose schemes the environment of the Outremer is represented. Order, harmony and beauty belong to the nature tamed by man, while the desert represents the place of abandonment and of dryness, where man is absent.

The pilgrims recall, among the centres of greatest impact, Damascus and Alexandria, due to their size, their tradings and their people. The beauty of their architectural structures, the ferment of their tradings, the variety of the goods were noticed. To say the truth, the urban model to which the Muslim societies in the Middle Ages aspired, had as a condition, the development of an economy focused on the market, conceived both as a productive structure and as the place where the trade activities were performed. The centrality of the market would be evident in the biggest cities: it was usually constituted by an architectural complex equipped with doors in which houses were not included. On the other hand, the complex could include mosques, caravanserais, public baths and schools.⁵⁴ Giorgio Gucci, at the end of XIV century, depicted Damascus as a very rich city, where many merchants took roots, and among them many Christians of every language. The Syrian city was represented as a place provided with great harmony, rich in pleasant gardens, equipped with solid fortifications and inhabited by a lot of people:

Questa città di Domasco, come è detto, è delle più nobili terre che sia in tutta la provincia del soldano. Havi entro gran riccheze, favisi gran fatto di mercatantia e molti cristianii quasi d’ogni lingua vi stanno, facendo mercatantia. (...) Poi ha belli e grandi giardini intorno intorno, pieni d’ogni buoni frutti; e gran piacere per continuo pigliano le donne e gli uomeni di là di stare in detti giardini, ed ivi fanno loro giuochi e loro feste. (...) Ed è detta città di muri e di fossi molto forte, ed èvi dentro a modo d’una cittadella di giro di bene uno miglio intorno intorno, che anche ha gran fossi e le mura altissime. (...) Ed ha il tuorlo de la terra, cioè bene mezza la città del murato, tuttavia di di in di le strade sì piene di gente, che istanno fermi e chi va e chi viene,

⁵⁴ B. SCARCIA AMORETTI, *Un altro medioevo. Il quotidiano nell’Islam*, Bari, Laterza, 2001, pp. 95-96.

che è a noi per lo corso dei nostri palf, ovvero per le vie delle nostre sagre. Tanto v'è pieno di gente ch'è una cosa faticosa ad ogni ora del dì per qualunque strade ire pensasi⁵⁵.

Gucci then exalts the virtues of Damascus as a productive city, extolling its silks, its linens, its goldsmith's art, its glassworks and even its confectionery. According to the Florentine traveller it seems that in whatever factory, there could be no better craftsmen than those of Damascus:

Poi in detta terra d'ogni lavorio quale si sia, di piccola istima o grande, vi si fa vantaggiato più che in veruna altra parte del mondo, come s'è drappi di seta, panni di bambagia, tele line, lavorio d'oro e d'ariento, di rame, d'ottone, d'ogni ragione, e così d'ogni ragioni confetti, e di tutte ragioni di vetro e di qualunque cosa si sia, come è detto. In quello luogo s'avanza il paese di là e di qua, e troppo gran maestri sono d'ogni lavorio⁵⁶.

The travelers were tempted not only by the precious goods from India and the refined local craftsmanship but also the gastronomy, to which Frescobaldi seems particularly sensible. It seems that Damascus was famous for its preserves- that is confectionery- made with ginger, with sugar or with honey and for a certain rosewater which Frescobaldi claims to be the best in the world⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ [This city of Damascus, as it has been said, it of the noblest territories present in the whole region of the Soldan. There is in it great wealth, and there are many trades, and many Christians, almost of every language, live there, as merchants. (...) then all around it there are beautiful gardens, rich in every good fruit; and men and women are greatly pleased of spending time in these gardens, and there they play their games and give parties. (...) And this city is well provided with walls and ditches, and inside there is, in the fashion of a small town, for a mile all around it, which also has big ditches and high walls. (...) And at the yolk of the earth, that is, in the middle of the walled city, nevertheless, from day to day, the roads are full of people, some of them stay, some others go, like in the streets of our cities for the raffle, that is, the roads during our fairs. It is so crowded that it is very difficult to go along these roads, at every hour of the day]. GIORGIO GUCCI (1384), pp. 299-300.

⁵⁶ [And then, in this place, there are the best [quality in every craft, of little or more value, and these are the best of every other part in the world, being it silken fabrics, cotton cloths, linen, gold or silver, or copper, or brass, of every kind and the same is for every kind of sweet, of every kind of glass and everything, as it has been said. In that place the country develops on one side and on the other, because in every craft there are the greatest masters]. *Ivi*, p. 300.

⁵⁷ LIONARDO FRESCOBALDI (1384), p.182.

The urban organisation of Damascus represents the perfect model of the urban civilisation, whose utmost expression emerges in the refinement of the goods, in the elegance of the shops and, last but not least, in the idea of a ferment which does not stop not even at night:

Ed èvi lavori di tanta nobiltà che sse avesse i denari nell'osso della ganba te la spezzeresti per comperare delle cose: drappi di seta, boccacini come drappi, bacini, miscerobe⁵⁸ d'ottone che paion d'oro, lavorate a intagli d'argento che sono et paiono cose dell'altro mondo. Et tengono le bottege pulite come oro et piene et chalcate di tutte mercatantie, per modo che tutta la cristianità si potrebbe per uno dì fornire di tutte mercantie volesse, tanta è la copia v'anno. Et mai non restano di lavorare et chi nollo vedesse nollo potrebbe mai credere. (...) Quasi le vie sono tutte in volte o in tetti con finestre da vedere lume. Et in sull'ave Maria s'accendono lampane di vetro al nostro modo per tutto, per modo vi si vede la notte come 'l di però che ssi dicie sono più di trentamila lampane⁵⁹.

It is true that the magniloquent descriptions of the great mercantile cities of the East are partially influenced by some sort of fascination with the exotic, due to the novelty of an almost unknown culture, but this does not spoil their documentary value and their testimonies on the vivacity of those centres.

The description of Alexandria by Simone Sigoli can be traced back to the same encomiastic quality already observed in the case of Damascus. Not only is Alexandria beautiful, but it also has lovely streets, every kind of food and every type of fruit, which are the best in the world.

Ora raconteremo della grandezza della ciptà d'Alessandria et de' loro costumi et modi et di tutte loro nobiltà. In prima dico che lla città d'Alessandria gira IIII millia ed è più lunga che larga. Et belle vie et mercatantesca, d'ogni ragione cose et d'ogni vettuvaglia; et di carne et di fructe delle buone del mondo: melagrane fini, uve bianche senza grana, et così pere et mele et susine

⁵⁸ That is aquamaniles, ewer, basins with a handle used to wash the hands. They were coupled with basins where the used water was collected.

⁵⁹ [And there are works of such noble quality that, if you had money into your legs, you would broken them to buy some things: silken cloths, canvasses like cloths, basins, brass mixing basins which look like gold, decorated with silver carving that seems things from another world. And they keep their shops clean as gold and full of all the goods, so much is its abundance. And they never stop working, and those who do not see it cannot believe it. (...) Almost all the streets are covered with domes or roofs with windows to see the light. And at the time of the Ave Maria they light some glass lanterns, in every detail similar to ours, in order to see during the night, but they say they have more than thirty-thousand lanterns]. SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), p. 94.

damosciena finissime, cocomeri molto grandi et sono ghalli dentro colle granella tra rosse et gialle. Et sono cosa di paradiso però che si fanno dove nasce il zucchero⁶⁰.

Both the Syrian and the Egyptian gastronomy seem to be appreciated by the travelers. In the tale by Sigoli the meat triumphs in its many varieties: wether – that is gelded lamb – donkey, horse, camel and many chickens and quails. Meat sold without bones, perfectly done and butchered according to the Muslim tradition, even though Sigoli does not write about the connection with the religious dictate.

Favisi bello pane bianco buona derrata: vitella grassa et bianca et buona per dannari XVIII la libbra, il castrone per denari XVI. Et àno i castroni le code tonde com'uno taglere, et pesa l'una intorno di libbre XX. Et sono grassi et bianchi avendo dentro i sugnacci ad modo di porci, et sono delle buone carni del mondo. Et quando si va per la carne al tavernaio ti darà la carne sanz'osso, però che così costumano. Ancora: se comperi la carne cotta per lo simile modo te la dae senza l'ossa. Et chuocono troppo nettamente. Et in certo luogo diputato si vende carne d'asino, di cavallo et di cammello, cotta et cruda di queste ragioni carne. Et quando andassi a comperare carne, mai non ti daranno una per un'altra. Et quando tolli polli il pollaiuolo ti sega la gola a tutti i polli⁶¹; et se tirassi loro il collo a un pollo o altro ucciello et tu fossi veduto saresti a pericolo della persona, o tu pageresti fiorini L d'oro o più et meno secondo l'amistà v'avessi. (...) Àvi quagle in quantità per tale che andando al pollaiuolo v'æe piene le ceste. Et costati l'una, viva et grassa, da denari IIII di nostra muneta. Et anche il pollaiuolo te le dà

⁶⁰ SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), p. 71. Translation: “Now I will write on the greatness of the city of Alexandria, of the habits and the manners and all of their nobilities. First, I state that the city of Alexandria has a perimeter of IIII miles and is more long than wide. It has beautiful streets and markets, provided with every kind of things and foods; and of the best meats and fruits in the world: fine pomegranates, white seedless grapes, and apples and pears and fine plums from Damascus, very big watermelons, which are yellow on the inside, with yellow and red seeds. And they come from Paradise as they are made where the sugar is born.”

⁶¹ The reference is to Muslim butchery, which provides for the slitting, presented as the most rapid and less painful process, for the animals of small-size. See *Dizionario del Corano*, (ed. MOHAMMAD ALI AMIR-MOEZZI), Milano, Mondadori, 2007 (ed. or. *Dictionnaire du Coran*, Paris, Laffont, 2007), p. 470.

pelate. Àvi di pescie marino et nostrale gran copia per denari XVI di nostra muneta. (...) Ancora vi si fa pane biscotto che pare un zucchero ad mangiare⁶².

The Western model of *civitas*, meant as the society of men, was adapted as a interpretative paradigm of the Eastern situation, so that nomadism was judged as a “moral condition” according to which those who lived outside the urban society was placed closer to the animal nature rather than to the human one. Since the Augustinian conception of history, the coming of Christianity had purified the wild- and thus uncivilised- nature from the whole earth. The utmost expression of the society of men- that is, of Christians- consisted precisely in the edification of the *civitas* to which the anti-society of those who remained outside was opposed.

In the European society of the Middle Ages, the wandering was a stigma which equalled to the mark of emargination, of social disapproval, of rejection. The lack of a *stabilitas loci*, became then a “moral condition”, more and more negative as the comparison progressed with a civilisation which placed its roots- both ethich and historic- on the condition of sedentary life. At the same time, the urban society represented the triumph of the human nature which extolls itself in the comparison with the animal nature and the uncultivated environment of the nomadic populations.

Dr.^{ssa} *Ilaria Sabbatini*

⁶² [There, you should buy plentiful of nice white bread: fat veal and white and good for XVIII deniers per pound, the gelded for XVI deniers. And the gelded have round tails, and each of them weights about XX pounds. And they are white and fat and inside have the fat, like the pigs, and are the best meats in the world. And when you buy meat, the innkeeper will give you the meat without its bones, as it is their habit. And they cook so cleanly. And in a certain special place they sell donkey, horse and camel meat, both cooked and raw. And when you buy some meat, they will never give you one instead of the other. And when you buy the chickens, the chicken-seller will cut the throat to all the chickens; and if you wring a chicken's neck, or of some other bird, and someone sees you doing it, you will run in great danger, or you will pay money or gold, more or less according to the gravity of your behaviour. (...). They have quails in so much abundance that when you go to the chicken-seller, there are baskets full of them. And one of them, fat and alive, costs III of our currency. And also the chicken-seller gives them to you without its skin. They have abundance of marine fish for XVI deniers of our currency. (...) And more, they prepare biscuit bread that tastes like sugar when you eat it]. SIMONE SIGOLI (1384), pp. 72-73, 74.

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