

Book Review

Petrus Martyr Anglerius, *Legatio Babylonica. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar von Hans Heinrich Todt, Corpus Islamo-Christianum 8* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2015), x, 450 pages. ISBN 9783447103473, Price: € 122.00.

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Scholars of Mamluk history are indebted to the late Ulrich Haarmann (1942-1999) for underscoring the value of travelogues by European pilgrims and diplomats as primary sources. In his pioneering article, “The Mamluk System of Rule in the Eyes of Western Travelers,” published posthumously in 2001 in the *Mamlūk Studies Review* (pp. 1-24), Haarmann showed that the works of Europeans who visited Egypt and Syria during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries included valuable information on the social, natural, cultural and political history of the later Mamluk period. Their writings constitute an important corpus that can help modern-day historians to supplement and scrutinize the contents of works in Near Eastern languages. This is especially the case since European authors sometimes provide information on aspects of everyday life that, while of great interest to modern-day readers, were taken for granted and therefore left uncommented by local historiographers.

While Haarmann referred to a large number of relevant sources in his article, he never intended it as an exhaustive review of the extant premodern European literature on the Mamluk Sultanate. It is thus not surprising that subsequent scholarship has pointed to other texts in European languages that are of considerable value for the study of late Mamluk history. One of these texts, the *Legatio Babylonica* by the Spanish envoy Petrus Martyr Anglerius (1457-1526), has long been available only in the Latin original and a very dated Spanish translation. It is now accessible to the broader scholarly public by means of Hans Heinrich Todt’s recent re-edition and German translation. This new publication is of outstanding quality and deserves the full attention of all scholars interested in the history of the late Mamluk period, especially since the *Legatio Babylonica* includes ample and valuable information on a period for which the corpus of Arabic sources is very limited, namely,

from the death of the Mamluk Sultan Qāyitbāy (r. 872-901/1468-1496) to the early reign of Sultan Qanṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906-922/1501-1516).

The book under review, based on the author's PhD dissertation, consists of a comprehensive Introduction (pp. 1-160), the Latin edition with parallel German translation and notes (pp. 161-365), three appendices (pp. 366-426), a bibliography (pp. 427-443), a list of figures (pp. 444-6) and an index of proper names (pp. 447-450).

The Introduction is divided into eleven subsections. In the first subsection (pp. 1-3), Todt explains why the *Legatio Babylonica* deserves a new edition, pointing *inter alia* to the value of the text as a work of Latin literature and as a unique source on the history of the Near East at the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, neither a text-critical edition of the text nor an up-to-date annotated translation had been available up to now. Todt addresses these desiderata with his publication.

Todt offers a brief albeit adequate overview of the state of research on the *Legatio Babylonica* (pp. 3-8). He then turns in the third section of the Introduction to the historical context of the text (pp. 9-24). Here, the editor provides detailed information on the conquest of the last primarily Muslim-inhabited areas of the Iberian Peninsula at the hands of the Catholic kings Isabella I and Ferdinand II and the religious policy of these Christian rulers in the years 1481-1502. These developments resulted in the forced mass conversion, expulsion, enslavement or killing of most of the remaining Muslim and Jewish population of the Iberian Peninsula.

The fourth section is dedicated to a study of the biography of the Petrus Martyr Anglerius (pp. 25-48). Born in the Italian town of Arona on the shores of the Lago Maggiore in 1457, Petrus Martyr held numerous diplomatic, educational and administrative posts at various localities in northern and central Italy, thereby using to full advantage his thorough education in the antique Latin cultural heritage which he had received in Milan and Rome. In 1487, he moved to Spain, where he joined the court society of Isabella I. Having participated in military activities against the Muslims of Granada, he became a priest in 1492 and thereafter served as a tutor to young noblemen and as the queen's personal confessor. After his return from his diplomatic embassy to Egypt, Petrus Martyr received several promotions, including that to the post of Prior of Granada in 1503. After Isabella's death in 1504, Petrus Martyr continued his service to the crown in various religious, literary, diplomatic and administrative capacities, reaching the pinnacle of his career in 1524 with his promotion to Bishop of Jamaica. Suffering from weak health, however, the newly appointed Bishop was unable to travel to his oversea diocese and died in 1526, most likely in Granada. Among his literary works, Petrus Martyr's multivolume history of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, *De Orbe Novo Decades*, has received by far the most attention, although the author is also known for his collection of letters as well as a number of other works, including the *Legatio Babylonica*.

The short fifth section (pp. 49-51) deals with the background of Petrus Martyr's mission to Egypt and the content of the account of his trip, the *Legatio Babylonica*.

In reaction to the measures taken by Isabella and Ferdinand against the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, the Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī had threatened to force European merchants to convert to Islam, to banish them from their territory or to kill them outright. Moreover, he announced his intention to destroy Christian pilgrimage sites within his realm. Isabella and Ferdinand responded by sending an envoy to Egypt to dissuade the Mamluk ruler from these plans, ensure favorable conditions for Christian pilgrims, and point out the economic and military advantages that friendly relations between Spain and the Mamluk Sultanate would have for the Muslim side. They appointed Petrus Martyr for this mission.

The *Legatio Babylonica* contains the detailed account of his undertaking. It consists of three letters. The first of these letters deals with the envoy's trip from Granada to Venice and his sojourn in this city. The second letter describes the crossing of the Mediterranean and Petrus Martyr's arrival in Alexandria. Petrus Martyr's trip to Cairo, his diplomatic activities in this city, and his return to Europe form the contents of the third and by far longest part of the work. Here, the author provides not only a detailed report of his negotiations with the Mamluk Sultan al-Ghawrī, but also informs his readers about the history and the political system of the Mamluk Sultanate as well as the natural history of Egypt and its famous sights such as the Pyramids of Giza.

The sixth section of the Introduction (pp. 52-75) includes a thorough historical reconstruction of Petrus Martyr's mission to Egypt, which lasted from August 1501 (departure from Granada) to September 1502 (return to Toledo) and included a

sojourn in Egypt of about three months between late December 1501 and late March 1502. Among other things, Todt elucidates in painstaking detail the route that the Spanish envoy took to and from Egypt.

The seventh section (pp. 76-98) is dedicated to a study of the biographies of Petrus Martyr's two most important interlocutors in Mamluk Egypt, the dragoman and low-ranking *amīr* Taghrī Birdī and Sultan al-Ghawrī. Whereas Todt's short overview of the career of the Mamluk Sultan provides hardly any new information on this well-known political figure, his discussion of Taghrī Birdī's life and background constitutes in itself a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the social history of the late Mamluk period. Among other things, Todt shows that Taghrī Birdī was most likely born in Catalonia into a Jewish family before coming to Egypt in the wake of a shipwreck. This information on Taghrī Birdī's background is of considerable importance, given that in numerous instances Petrus Martyr highlights the Mamluk dragoman's connection to the Iberian Peninsula as an important basis for their good collaboration in Egypt.

The eighth section (pp. 99-103) provides an in-depth analysis of Petrus Martyr's account of his negotiations with al-Ghawrī, paying special attention to the argumentative, rhetoric and narrative strategies featuring in this portion of the Latin text.

Continuing the focus of the preceding section, the ninth part of the Introduction (pp. 104-21) studies the literary character of the *Legatio Babylonica*. It contextualizes the text within the genre of diplomatic reports and deals with its narrative

strategies in engaging with the foreign as well as with its language and style.

The tenth section (pp. 122-157) provides detailed bibliographical information and comments on the preceding editions and translations of *Legatio Babylonica*, beginning with the Latin *editio princeps* of 1511 and ending with the Latin edition *cum* Spanish translation of 1947. Reproductions of the cover pages of all editions and translations dealt with allow the reader direct insights into the history of the text and its publications.

Introductory remarks on the translation and edition proper makes up the eleventh and final section (pp. 158-160) of the Introduction. Todt explains that text-critical annotations can be kept to a minimum, given that early prints of the work offer a generally very reliable text with few variants. The author has slightly adjusted the Latin text, however, using a more common orthography, additional punctuation marks, and chapter and paragraph breaks to make it more readable. His endnotes provide helpful information on linguistic peculiarities, uncommon names, and technical terms.

The edition and translation of the text make up the bulk of the volume. The Latin text and the corresponding German translation are presented on opposite pages, with paragraph and sentence numbers allowing for easy navigation and comparison. Petrus Martyr's eloquent Latin is, as the editor himself notes, of high linguistic quality and a considerable degree of complexity. Readers who are not thoroughly familiar with the Latin literature of the early sixteenth century will therefore often rely on Todt's translation. They can do so without the slightest reservations, given that the

translation, as an in-depth comparison of several sample passages showed, is a very precise and linguistically absolutely appropriate rendering of the Latin original. Todt deserves ample praise for this masterpiece of philological precision and stylistic beauty.

In terms of content, the sections of the text (pp. 258-271) that deal with the reign of Sultan Qāyrbāy, the chaotic period following his death and Sultan al-Ghawrī's ascension to the throne deserve special attention, given that they include numerous pieces of information not included in our Arabic standard source for this period, Muḥammad Ibn Iyās' (d. after 928/1522) *Badā'ī' al-zuhūr fī waqā'ī' al-duhūr*. Any future study of this still little understood period will have to take Petrus Martyr's statements into account, especially since the European envoy received his information from people directly involved in the events.

The first of the three appendices (pp. 366-413) deals with the Latin inscriptions Petrus Martyr mentions in his text, which are of limited interest to the non-specialist. The second appendix (pp. 413-416) discusses the historical background of the fact that Petrus Martyr refers to parts of Cairo as "Babylon," while the third one (pp. 416-425) contains editions of letters and other documents related to the envoy's mission.

Todt's thorough introduction to the text provides the reader with all information necessary. The edition itself and his translation are of very high scholarly quality, leaving little room for improvement. It should be noted, however, that Todt's book is the work of a Latinist who writes primarily with a Latinist readership in mind. Hence, the

Introduction includes several lengthy untranslated Latin quotations that not every reader will find easily accessible. Moreover, Todt's transliteration of Arabic and Turkish words and names is at times idiosyncratic (e.g., "Bajazet II." [pp. 89, 95] instead of "Bāyezīd II.") and sometimes does not comply with the rules of the German Oriental Society that the author seeks to apply (cf. p. 159).

Readers should, moreover, keep two additional points in mind which, however, cannot be fairly blamed on the editor. First, Todt did his best in his notes to compare Petrus Martyr's account of the history of the late Mamluk Sultanate to that of Ibn Iyās (which is widely available in French, German and English translations). But he was obviously unable to incorporate relevant material from other, thus far untranslated works of the Arabic historiographical tradition, such as the chronicles of Aḥmad Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 953/1546), Ibn al-Ḥimṣī (d. 934/1527) or Ibn Sibāṭ (d. in or after 926/1520). For historians of the Near East of the late middle period, even Todt's thorough annotations are no substitute for a detailed knowledge of the primary Arabic sources.

Second, Todt was unable to take into account another recent re-edition of Petrus Martyr's text published together with a (valuable) Spanish and a (highly anachronistic and problematic) Arabic translation in Madrid in 2013.¹ Although Todt's Introduction and notes are generally more detailed and comprehensive than those included in the recent Spanish edition, readers who want to make sure that they are fully familiar with the latest scholarship on Petrus Martyr and the *Legatio Babylonica* will wish to consult both recent publications.

These minor points notwithstanding, Todt's re-edition and translation of the text with the accompanying comprehensive Introduction is a philological achievement of exemplary character. Scholars interested in using Petrus Martyr's text as a source for their study of the history of the late Mamluk period could not have hoped for a better basis for their work. It is hoped that Todt's work will incite new interest in this era in general and the chaotic five-year period between Sultan Qāyṭbāy's death and Sultan al-Ghawrī's ascension in particular – a fascinating period that still awaits a detailed historical analysis.

1. Pedro Mártir de Anglería: *Una embajada española al Egipto de principios del siglo XVI: la Legatio Babilonica de Pedro Mártir de Anglería: estudio y edición trilingüe anotada en latín, español y árabe. Estudio, edición latina, notas y traducción al español de Raúl Álvarez-Moreno. Traducción al árabe de Ebtisam Shaban Mursi. Revisión de la traducción al árabe de El Sayed Ibrahim Soheim*, Madrid 2013.