

JOHANN SCHILTBERGER — A NEGLECTED GERMAN ARMENOPHILE

One of the most interesting and surprisingly factual of the multifarious travel-books of the late mediaeval period is that of Johann Schiltberger, who was captured by the Turks at the Battle of Nicopolis as a teenager, and spent some 32 years in Muslim captivity. His book is extremely interesting and informative on many counts, of course, but for us in particular because he was a great admirer of the Armenians, to whom he devotes several whole chapters of his book, as well as numerous references in other places.

Travellers' accounts of lands and peoples are of widely varying quality as historical sources, as we all know. Since most of them are written by people on the move, they tend to contain superficial or even confused opinions, and to concentrate on what is curious or striking about the people and places they have seen; in other words they usually do not give us a picture of the normal life and customs of foreign peoples. Schiltberger is in another category, obviously, since he was not a traveller in the normal sense of the word at all, but — as he reminds us in the final chapter of his work — a prisoner of the Turks and later of the Mongols, and had over three decades in which to deepen his acquaintance and knowledge of the various "ethnic groups" in the Muslim domains.

Schiltberger was born near Munich as he tells us, around 1381, of a family of the knightly class whose ancestry is traceable to the 12th Century at least. In 1394 he accompanied his feudal lord, Leinhart Richartinger in one of the Western contingents which went to assist Sigismund of Hungary (1387—1437) to push back the Turks. Unfortunately, Sigismund's proud boast that "not only would his army annihilate the Turks, but if the heavens were to fall it would support them on its lances" was not to come true. The heavens did fall, as far as the Christians of the Balkans were concerned, but the lances of

Sigismund's army were broken or thrown away in flight.

To recapitulate briefly the train of events which led up to this disaster: In 1326 the Ottoman Turks had captured Brusa and consolidated their control of Western Asia Minor. (It was from Brusa that Mehmet II. 1444—1446 and 1451—1481), brought the Armenian bishop to become the first Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople in 1461 — but that lies beyond the scope of our story.) 30 years later the Turks were settling in Thrace — in 1357 they captured Adrianople and made it their local capital. The Battle of the Maritza in 1371 delivered Bulgaria into their hands, the Battle of Kossovo in 1389 gave them Serbia; by 1390 they were at the Danube, and Byzantine control only extended over Constantinople, Thessalonica and the Peloponnese, which had gradually been recovered from the Franks. Under Emperor Manuel II. (1348—1425) W. Europe finally took action against the Turkish threat, and in response to an appeal by Pope Boniface (1389—1404) sent an army to the Balkans. This brings us back to our friend Schiltberger and the Battle of Nicopolis. This small town on the Danube (modern Nikopol) was besieged by Bayazit (1389—1402) and his army for 16 days, and on 28 September 1396 the decisive battle was fought and lost largely due to disagreements between the French, Germans and Hungarians, it would seem. Sigismund and part of his army managed to escape by boat to Constantinople — but most of the Christian soldiers were not so lucky, of course. Bayazit took a terrible revenge on the day after the battle — all grown men being slaughtered until the river ran red with their blood. It was only at the intercession of Bayazit's counsellors that the slaughter was not continued the following day, although some ten thousand had already been executed. Schiltberger, being only about 15 years old, was spared and taken with the

other captives to Adrianople and later to Gallipoli, from where they were shipped across the Dardanelles and conveyed to Brusa. Schiltberger was probably lucky that he had been wounded, since this prevented him from being sent as a gift to the ruler of one of the kingdoms of Inner Asia, as many other young captives were.

Various commentators have made much of Schiltberger's interest in Islam, and it is true that he devotes 11 chapters of his book to an exposition of Islamic custom and doctrine. However, he not only says specifically that he did not convert to Islam, but mentions attending Mass and other services frequently with the Armenians, which a convert would hardly have dared to do. Moreover, in Ch. 6 he describes how 60 Christian captives — himself amongst them — made an escape bid and vowed to die for their faith. (Fortunately, this did not prove necessary in the event, since the commander of the pursuing troops persuaded them to surrender and obtained a pardon for them.) For an ex-Muslim Schiltberger displays some confusion also — e.g. about who Ali is, and to whom the Muslims pray — in Ch. 46 he says that at the fifth service of the day they pray to Mahomet. In view of all these facts, I feel that his long section on Islam should be viewed as an attempt to explain something that was very much misunderstood in contemporary W. Europe. He also uses Islam often as a contrast to show up the faults and disunity of the Christians without direct — and doubtless dangerous — criticism.

In any case, Schiltberger gradually progressed in the service of the Turkish Sultan, and after 6 years as a runner was promoted to horseback and sent on more extensive missions. As if Fate had not been unkind enough, when Bayazit was defeated and captured by Timur (1336—1405) at Angora in 1402 Schiltberger thus passed into the service of the Mongols. This meant that he was mostly even further from the sea-coast and a chance of escape. After the death of Timur in 1405 he served several of the Mongol leader's descendants. Besides travelling in Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia, Siberia, Egypt and Palestine,

Schiltberger also visited Mahomet's tomb at Medina — and would seem to be the first recorded European traveller to do so. The German scholar Hammer compared Schiltberger — not unreasonably — with Marco Polo. Eventually the longed-for chance of escape presented itself, when Schiltberger was accompanying his last Muslim master Mantzuch (Manshuk?) through Mingrelia. With four Christian comrades he rode to the Black Sea coast, and thence into Lazistan, where they persuaded an Italian ship to take them to Constantinople. Here they were lodged in the palace of the Greek Patriarch until the Emperor sent them on a galley to the mouth of the Danube, from where Schiltberger made his way home. "Almighty God be thanked, and all those who helped me", he writes in the last section of his book.

Let us turn now, having reviewed Schiltberger's remarkable story, to see what he says about the Armenians. I should add that as much as Schiltberger admired the latter, to the same degree he detested the Greeks; in fact, some of his statements about the Greeks are so obviously false that we must consider later how this came about. In many instances I feel that he only mentions the Greeks as a foil to the Armenians, in order to make the virtues of the latter group shine even more by contrast.

Chapters 62—67 of Schiltberger's book are devoted almost entirely to the Armenians:

In Ch. 62, S. tells us that he had been "a great deal in Armenia" with Shah Rokh, the son of Timur. He says that he always lived with the Armenians because they were friendly to the Germans and treated him kindly. He claims to have learnt their language and the Lord's Prayer — which he in fact gives a rather garbled version of — in Latin transcription — at the end of his book. Only about 1/4 of the text is anywhere near correct, but this is not surprising since we do not know how many decades elapsed after S's return to Bavaria before he wrote down his memoirs for posterity. (In one place he says that the Armenians call the Germans "Nymitsch" — his memory definitely failed there.) He tells us further that there is good

pasturage in the Armenian plain, and that the country produces the best silk. There were three 'kingdoms' in Armenia, he tells us — Sis, Erzingan and Tiflis. (The Georgians might not be too happy about the last one — but of course there is still a large Armenian colony in Tiflis with its own churches, theatre, etc.)

In Ch. 63 S. tells us a lot about the religion of the Armenians, starting by stating: "The Armenians believe in the Holy Trinity.." (In Ch. 59 he had informed us that: "It is to be noted that the Greeks do not believe in the Holy Trinity" — another example of his contrasting the Armenians and the Greeks — always unfavourably to the latter — which I mentioned earlier.) I think we must explain his total hostility to the Greeks by the false hopes built up over the previous century that the Byzantines would convert to Roman Catholicism, and the bitterness which arose in W. Europe when the facts became known. As an example I would cite the Emperor John V. (1341—1354, 1355—1376, 1379—1391), who on at least two occasions — first in Hungary and later in Rome — made public submission to Rome. Naturally this had no effect at all on the mass of the Greek nation, any more than the submission made by John VIII (1425—1448) at Florence (1439) some decades later was to have. The Greek anti-unionists had always exaggerated the differences between the two churches (as was done by Rome also when it suited the policy of the moment), whereas the Armenians had wisely stressed the similarities, and acquiesced in a kind of de facto union when it suited them.

A large part of Chs. 63 and 64 plus the opening of Ch. 65 are taken up by a rather confused version of the story of St. Gregory the Illuminator, although some of the details seem to be added to "prove" that the Armenian Church was subject to Rome initially. It is curious that the editor and commentator of S's work assume that most of the Armenians at that time were Uniates, when S. distinctly says in Ch. 65 "they are now separated from the Church of Rome". There is some mention of Uniates in one area, but

nothing more general. He states that the Armenians told him that "between their religion and ours there is only a hair's breadth", while "there is a great division between the Greeks and their religion"; and also that the Armenians "willingly go to Mass in our churches, which the Greeks do not".

S. gives us many details about the religious customs of the 15th Century Armenian Church — showing a much better knowledge of Armenian and Greek usage than his learned commentators in most cases! He tells us that he often went to Mass and heard sermons in Armenian churches. He knows that a married priest must separate from his wife for 40 days after ordination, but surprisingly, for a Bavarian Catholic, he makes no adverse comments on priestly marriage. He describes the fasts kept by the Armenians in some detail, and only makes one mistake. He mentions that a fast of one week was kept before St. Sarkis' Day, and that this saint was invoked by the Armenians in battle or other necessity. He tells us about the Vigil Masses on the eves of Christmas and Easter, and knows that Christmas and Epiphany are celebrated together on the 6th of January. On the question of church ownership he again contrasts the Armenians and Greeks, stating that if any Armenian builds a church, even if he is a lord, the church belongs to the parish, whereas the Greeks treated theirs as private property. Interestingly, he says that the Armenians have only one cross in each church and no pictures — presumably a temporary measure to mollify the Muslims? He also praises the Armenian priests for reciting Matins every night, which the Greeks apparently neglected to do. Furthermore, he says that all the Armenians know the Creed and Lord's Prayer and recite them in church, whereas... the Greeks only know the Lord's Prayer. The former are also praised for their reverent behaviour: "They behave with much devotion in their churches; they do not look here and there, and do not speak, especially while they are at Mass". "They decorate their churches beautifully and have fine vestments of velvet

and of silk of all sorts of colours". He also describes the office of vardapet, explaining that they must be well-read in the Scriptures, have power to preach, and in some cases can judge even a bishop. S. also describes the funeral customs of the Armenians, apparently from first-hand observation.

Ch. 66 of his work contains a long and garbled story purporting to explain why the Greeks and Armenians are enemies — due to the treachery of the former, naturally — which seems to be based on the triumph of Thoros II

(1145—1169) over the Byzantine general Andronicus.

"The Armenians are a brave people, those that live amongst the Christians as well as those that live amongst the Infidels", S. sums up.

I hope that this brief account of S's life and work will help to rescue the name of this early Armenophile from oblivion.

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