

Unexpected Exposures to Multilingualism in the Late Middle Ages: A Global Perspective by Travelogue

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Der Niederrheinische Orientbericht, Georgius of
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Received: October 3, 2021 Accepted: October 9, 2021 Published: October 9, 2021

doi:10.5296/ijch.v9i1.19078

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijch.v9i1.19078>

Abstract

Whereas previous scholars interested in multilingualism have tried to identify specific textual sources for evidence confirming that phenomenon, this article takes a different approach and examines three late medieval texts (in Latin and German) where the narrator travels around many countries in the Middle East, either enjoying the freedom to do so, or forced because he had been captured by the Ottomans and sold into slavery. Even though the authors do not reveal much at all about the linguistic situation for them personally, the textual framework clearly signals that they spent a long time in complex and difficult language conditions. Although we are not told much at all about multilingualism here, the indirect conclusions allow us to confirm the extensive presence of numerous multilingual speakers, including the three authors.

Keywords: Multilingualism in the Middle Ages, *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*, Georgius of Hungary, Johann Schiltberger, slavery; Middle East, travel

1. Multilingualism in the Middle Ages: The Historical-Linguistic Background

There is no doubt that the European Middle Ages were characterized by multilingualism, at

least among the intellectual elites. Those were often at least bi-, if not even trilingual, as the situation in England, above all, demonstrates most poignantly. The clerics spoke, of course, Latin, Anglo-Norman, and also had a command of their mother-tongue, Anglo-Saxon, or then Middle English. The nobility conversed mostly in Anglo-Norman, but might have understood some of the languages spoken by the rural population, which was primarily limited to its own vernacular (Fenster and Collette, ed., 2017). The Jewish population all over the continent – they were expelled from England in 1290 – was also highly educated and spoke a variety of languages, depending on the location, both Yiddish and Hebrew, and/or one of the vernaculars. At the universities of Toledo in Castile and of Salerno, Southern Italy, Arab, Jewish, and Christian scholars collaborated in major translation projects which essentially launched The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. Concomitantly, dialects were still very strongly in use, and yet the members of the courts across Europe also practiced their standard languages, either Middle High German, Old French, or Spanish, etc.

While courtly literature was mostly determined by a sophisticated language, the majority of the rural population employed its own dialects, which differed extensively from each other. The Middle High German didactic poet Hugo von Trimberg, for instance, formulated in his massive narrative poem *Der Renner* (ca. 1300; The Runner) a detailed description of the various dialects spoken in the various parts of the Holy Roman Empire:

Swâben ir wörter spalent,
Die Franken ein teil si valtent,
Die Beier si zezerrant,
Die Düringe si ûf sperrent,
Die Sahren si bezückerent,
Die Rînliute si verdrückerent....

(Hugo von Trimberg 1970, vv. 22265–70, p. 220; cf. Weigand
2000)

Like a modern linguist, the poet tried to specify the characteristic features of the various dialects spoken in the Holy Roman Empire, although it might not be possible to translate the concrete meaning of his verbs. At any rate, as we can observe, as much as there were standard, courtly languages, as much there were dialects; so at least bilingualism was a very common situation, especially when an individual attempted to rise from a lower social class to an upper class.

The use of courtly words, the integration of foreign phrases, and the subsequent eloquence were all regarded as critically important in order to meet the social expectations and to perform accordingly, even though the aristocracy made every possible effort to exclude the peasants from their circles, as is dramatically illustrated in Wernher the Gardener's *Helmbrecht* (ca. 1260/1270) where the young protagonist miserably fails in claiming a higher social status and is badly crushed (tried, punished, and later lynched). In some countries such

as medieval Hungary, however, which in the course of time also included territories on the Balkans, many different languages existed side by side, almost harmoniously in relatively peaceful communication with each other, as János M. Bak has highlighted (Bak 2016; Prokopovych, Bethke, and Scheer, ed., 2019). Even though not really multilingual, the situation in the rest of Europe was complex as well, with Latin being the dominant language of the elites, and the various vernaculars spoken by the rest of the population. For the pan-European aristocracy, French was the most widely spread mode of communication, but many poets successfully endeavored to translate from the French sources into their own vernacular, such as Middle Dutch and Middle High German. Best known is the case of Heinrich von Veldeke (ca. 1150–1190) who immigrated from the Limbourg language area to German courts and soon began to compose only in the standard language in use there, such as in his *Eneit* (Andersen, Del Duca, and Pasques, ed., 2020), the earliest courtly romance in Middle High German.

2. Concrete Examples of Multilingualism Among the Aristocracy

In general terms, most members of noble families were competent speakers of various languages because they needed to address their diverse groups of subjects in their native tongues; most famously, perhaps, Emperor Charles IV (1316–1378) of the House of Luxemburg.¹ Particularly aristocratic women were often required to learn a foreign language, especially when they married far away from home, such as Anne of Bohemia (1366–1394) (Thomas 2015).² or Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken (1395–1456).³ Simultaneously, many of the major poets writing for these courtly audiences, were obviously fluent in a number of languages since they easily adopted literary works from their predecessors or contemporaries, either translating or remodeling them, such as Hartmann von Aue, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Gottfried von Strassburg in medieval Germany, or Marie de France in England, or Scandinavian poets rendering the *Nibelungenlied* into Old Norse. Similarly, merchants traveled all over Europe and far beyond its boundaries to the north, east, and south and were thus required to learn at least basic linguistic elements to cope in the foreign worlds, as beautifully illustrated by the merchant protagonist in Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gerhart* (ca. 1225). Not only does he reach truly distant lands in the Middle East, he also traverses the entire Mediterranean and finally arrives in Morocco never facing any language difficulties. There he converses with the Muslim Castellan Stranmûr in French, while he resorts to English to communicate with the English lords kept by Stranmûr in his prison and later when he visits England where he can settle the internecine strife by suggesting Prince Willehalm as the natural successor to his father's throne (Classen, trans.; Classen, "The Transnational," 2016). As a side note, Willehalm marries a Norwegian princess Erene, and there are

¹ As to Charles IV, see, for instance, Seibt, 1978. Much research on the emperor has appeared since then.

² This linguistic bridge also served to carry many new religious ideas to England, which then promoted the development of Wyclif's ideas. See Van Dussen 2012.

³ See the valuable contributions to Haubrichs and Herrmann, ed., 2002. Recent scholars have tried, however, to question Elisabeth's linguistic abilities and hence her authorship regarding the four novels attributed to her; see the introduction by Bastert and von Bloh, ed., 2018, esp. XVII–XVIII, XXVII–XVIII. They argue even more explicitly against Elisabeth as translator/author in the previous editions of her work. Though not focusing on linguistic aspects, see the contributions to Zey, Cafilisch, and Goridis, ed., 2015, concerning aristocratic women's roles in late medieval society.

subsequently direct political and personal contacts between Norway and England, while the protagonist, Gêhart, whom everyone appreciates greatly for his selfless support and help on an individual and national level, originates from Cologne, Germany.

We also know of unique cases of multilingualism in romances such as Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210) or in the satirical-didactic poem *Helmbrecht* by Wernher the Gardener (ca. 1270). The South-Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (ca. 1376/77–1445) prided himself several times in his various songs of knowing up to ten different languages, and we could cite other contemporaries who were similarly sophisticated in linguistic terms, such as John Gower (ca. 1330–1408) (Classen, “Multilingualism,” 2016; Classen, “Multilingualism and Multiculturalism,” 2018–2019). The French Dauphin Charles d’Orléans (1394–1465), captured by the English after the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, had to spend twenty-five years in imprisonment. During that long period, he acquired a high level of linguistic competence in Middle English and thus became one of the leading English poets of his time (Charles d’Orleans 1994; Charles d’Orleans 2010). In fact, much of medieval culture would have to be studied through the lens of translations because the individual authors (philosophers, theologians, poets, etc.) all learned from each other and thus created a huge intellectual network, which also included Arabic and Hebrew scholars irrespective of the religious tensions with Christianity (Copeland 1991; Griffin and Purcell, ed., 2018; Beer 2019; and Milliaressi and Berner, ed., 2021, for broader perspectives).

3. Recent Research

The issue itself, multilingualism, has already been explored from various perspectives, such as by the contributors to *Mehrsprachigkeit im Mittelalter*, edited by Michael Baldzuhn and Christine Putzo (2011), and to *Multilingualism in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Communication and Miscommunication in the Premodern World*, edited by Albrecht Classen (2016). Multilingualism in the French-speaking countries during the Middle Ages is the topic by the contributors to *Medieval Multilingualism*, edited by Christopher Kleinhenz and Keith Busby (2010). The linguistic conditions of England are the focus of the contributors to *Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain*, edited by D. A. Trotter (2010) and to *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain*, edited by Judith A. Jefferson (2013; cf. also Elizabeth M. Tyler, ed., 2011).

Insofar as the evidence for multilingualism is mostly if not entirely, extant only in written sources, which were created by the intellectuals, we primarily gain insight into the social and linguistic conditions of that class and its educational background. Of course, the rural population, i.e., ca. 92–95%, was little mobile and probably spoke only their own language/s or dialects (Traxel 2015). By contrast, anyone who had to travel for his/her business or for political reasons, normally acquired additional linguistic competence, and this also in the Middle Ages (Hsy 2013).

4. Multilingualism Past and Present

Multilingualism in the Middle Ages normally reflects a higher level of education, which would not be simply the same in the modern world, especially outside of Europe. We know of

many societies in Africa, Asia, or the Americas today where various languages are at operation across the entire population, all of which enjoying more or less the same status. The situation in South Africa proves to be perfect example for this quite common phenomenon (Makalela 2020). In most medieval societies, however, we can observe a more hegemonic relationship between Latin and the vernaculars, as far as power structures and institutions were concerned (the Church, the court, the university, etc.). However, once we move into the world of the merchant, such as within the Hanseatic League, the situation proves to have been quite different, since the knowledge of various languages was of extreme importance for the business activities all over northern Europe. German merchant apprentices normally had to spend a year or more abroad to learn English, Russian, Norwegian, Icelandic, Polish, French, or Estonian, and we can assume that young men from the other side made the same effort to acquire sufficient knowledge of German since the main markets were in northern Germany (Hammel-Kiesow 2009: 94–95).

Altogether, we can thus already conclude that multilingualism has always been a major phenomenon, and so also in the Middle Ages, at least among the educated circles. Despite significant differences between the Middle Ages and us today also in that regard, multilingualism has always been a characteristic feature of the intellectual elite and the mercantile world, most of their members being strongly committed to studying foreign languages and to profit from that linguistic knowledge for their own purposes in political, scientific, medical, literary, economic, and artistic terms. Those with the highest level of linguistic abilities were hence merchants, diplomats, poets, artists, and rulers. Clerics were mostly bilingual and could cope with Latin easily wherever they went all over Europe. The rural population, by contrast, has almost always been monolingual.

5. Exposure to Multilingualism while Abroad

Most scholars focused on pre-modern multilingualism have consistently engaged with literary, political, or didactic texts where the presence of various languages in direct exchange with each other matters noticeably. In a vast number of cases, however, we are not told much about linguistic problems since the royalties or knights simply traverse many countries and engage with various courts, demonstrating complete linguistic ease. Most romances or heroic epics do not share much information about conflicts with communication, or the narrators do not say anything about the use of foreign languages, with Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gerhârt* being a remarkable exception (see above). Tristan, as mentioned before, proves to be a polyglot at any rate, but he is the only one to develop such amazing competence. Multilingualism is of no concern in the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370) or in any of Chaucer's works, such as in his "The Knight's Tale" in the *Canterbury Tales*. Marie de France never touches on the issue with languages in any of her *lais* (ca. 1190), and we would be hard pressed to identify multilingualism anywhere in the huge corpus of *fabliaux* or *mæren*, *novelle* or *facetiae*. In the fictional world of medieval literature, most protagonists simply move from one country to another and interact with their hosts, but we are hardly ever informed about linguistic challenges. One remarkable exception proves to be the pre-courtly verse narrative *Herzog Ernst* (ms. A: ca. 1180/1190; ms. B: ca. 1220/1230) where the hero, once he has arrived in the world of the monsters, has to spend a whole year

learning the new language before he becomes fully integrated at court (*Herzog Ernst*, 2019, vv. 4629–31). It was highly popular far into the late Middle Ages because of the adventures experienced by the protagonist, which also include dramatic encounters with various monster races who all speak different languages.

But there is much historical information about medieval travelers, including pilgrims, who either went abroad in large groups and so did not face any linguistic challenges, or hired a translator, such as Felix Fabri (1441–1502; cf. Classen, ed., 2018). The English mystic author Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–after 1438) went on major pilgrimages throughout her life, and reflected a number of times on her inability to communicate with her social environment. She knew neither German nor Arab, and yet, each time she found herself in a complicated and even dangerous situation in the respective country, she succeeded mysteriously to reach out and find help. On her many trips, she reached Norway, Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Holy Land, but she never revealed any interest or ability to learn a foreign language (Kempe; cf. Classen, “Multilingualism,” 2016, 36–37).

6. Powerful Evidence *ex negativo*

Since our evidence of multilingualism, though certainly commonly in existence, is fairly meager, we need to probe further also for indirect evidence. For this purpose, here I intend to discuss three sources which are actually not concerned with foreign languages, but are critically predicated, though quietly, on the author’s ultimate ability to gain a certain degree of multilingualism. First, I will examine the testimony of the anonymous author of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*, then I will then turn to the amazing reports about their enslavement both by Georgius of Hungaria and Johann Schiltberger. Intriguingly, in none of those three cases do we encounter any specific discussion of languages or their plurality, but the very silence by the authors might allow us to reach deeper insights into multilingualism present there, after all since the narrators operated successfully in many different countries east of Europe.

This was similarly the case with Marco Polo (1254–1324), who appears to have enjoyed a fairly easy time with respect to communicative challenges during his decades of travels in the eastern world and who tells us surprisingly little about his strategies to cope with the many foreign languages he encountered. The narrator emphasizes in passing (40): “I assure you for a fact that before he had been very long at the Great Khan’s court he had mastered four languages with their modes of writing.” At a later moment, we hear of Messer Maffeo and Messer Marco studying the books of a newly found people so as to learn something about their religion. Their purpose was to translate the essential texts into another (Italian?) language (235). And a little later, the narrator includes this noteworthy comment about a linguistic challenge at a different location: “The inhabitants of this city have their own distinctive speech. You must understand, however, that throughout the province of Mani one language and one form of writing is current; but there are local differences speech, as there are among laymen between Lombards, Provençals, Frenchmen, etc., but such that in Manzi the people of every district can understand the others’ idiom” (239).

The one major exception to the rule of monolingual pilgrims seems to have been the Lower

Rhenish knight and author Arnold von Harff (1471–1505; Arnold von Harff, 2007) who did not only provide extensive reports about his experiences in the Middle East, but who also created remarkable word lists for a number of major languages which he had encountered during his travels (Slovenian: 93; Albanian: 94; Greek: 104; Arabic: 135; Hebrew: 205–06; Turkish: 224; etc.). But we cannot really identify this phenomenon as multilingualism because with these lists Arnold only reflected on the various languages in the individual countries which he had traversed. However, he himself obviously learned basic words in each one of them, so he would qualify as a multilingualist/polyglot after all.

7. *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*

The absence of comments on diverse languages in distant lands does not mean at all that medieval authors were ignorant of linguistic challenges and successful strategies to overcome them. Negative evidence might shed useful light on the issue of multilingualism as well, as we can observe in the case of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* (Brall-Tuchel, ed.; cf. also Micklin, ed.). Composed around the middle of the fourteenth century, this Low Rhenish travelogue provides a wealth of information about the world of the Middle East and beyond, combining it with the standard monster lore commonly associated with it. It has not been possible to identify the anonymous author exactly, but he might have been a member of the merchant class or of the lower nobility; possibly, he could have been a Jewish merchant as well. The author spent twelve years abroad (ca. 1336/37 to ca. 1350) and collected much data, which finds its expression especially in his extensive remarks on the local fauna and flora. The account is thus determined both by astoundingly accurate and realistic elements and by fantasy and imagination.

The *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* is more or less an informative and almost encyclopedic narrative, not specifically determined by pilgrimage interests or commercial motives. Instead, here we learn about the various political entities in the entire world of eastern Europe and the Middle East: Georgia, Greece, Armenia, and the mysterious king of the Prester John. Further, the author engages with the differences between Heathens⁴ and Christians, the Jews living in the Holy Land, the culture and religion of the Muslims, the Arabic culture, political and military aspects, the Turks, the Tartars (Mongols), the Caliph of Baghdad, Babylon, the court of the Mongols (the Khan), and the Persians.

The second part addresses climate and vegetation, the people's clothing, appearance, and customs, exotic animals, birds, plants, and fruit. While the author certainly drew from a wide range of well-known sources, including the Bible and various other travelogues, he could obviously rely on many personal observations (Brincken, 999). Brall-Tuchel underscores, for instance, immediacy of the observations and the realistic evaluation of the damages, destructions, and harm caused by the announcement of a crusade (Brall-Tuchel, ed., trans., 23; cf. also Classen, "Global History," forthcoming). For our purposes, however, the most interesting aspect of the entire account proves to be just that what the author never addresses, languages. The very lacuna speaks volumes about his linguistic abilities and those of his

⁴ Here I capitalize the term because it stands in for 'Muslims.' 'Heathens' is, of course, a pejorative term, a negative projection from the Christian perspective.

social environment in the Middle East. We might even suspect that the author did not feel any need to address linguistic challenges because he originated from the world of Rhenish commercialism and mercantile activism where multilingualism was a common feature of daily life and did not need to be dealt with explicitly. Merchants have always accommodated themselves to the market situation where many languages were spoken, but they did not see a need to comment much on the linguistic demands imposed on them due to the foreign conditions. So, how about this anonymous author and his approach to languages?

As becomes obvious right from the start, he wants to inform us about as many details as possible and as they would be of interest to a curious audience back home. Still deeply determined by his own faith, the author evaluates the level of ‘correctness’ among the representatives of the various Christian churches and reaches the conclusion: “All those Christians who live in these countries are very different from each other; none of them has the same faith; they are called Latins, Surians (?), Indians, Nubians, Armenians, Greeks, Georgians, Nestorians, Jacobites, Maronites, Copts, Abessinians, Maronians, and Soldinians” (32; here and below, my own translation). It remains difficult to imagine how he could have learned enough details from all those different groups if he did not have at least some basic language skills to understand the various teachings, irrespective of the fact that the author culled some of his information from a variety of sources, such as when he turns to the mythical Prester John in India and the geophysical conditions of that kingdom (32–42).

Addressing the situation in Greece, the anonymous has much to say about the political structure and the religious organization there, but we are not told anything about how he communicated with the ordinary people. Of course, he could have simply copied the relevant passages from older sources and claimed that information for himself. We learn much about military operations, political moves, the weapons commonly used, the fauna and flora of various regions, and we are given important explanations about the Jewish faith (66–68).

Did the author actually communicate with the Jews in the Holy Land? Or is this all a reflection of his studying of written sources? For instance: Further, in that land there are Jews who are called Sadducees who follow only some of the books of Moses. They do not believe in the resurrection of the dead, as the other Jews do. There are not many of them, and yet they do not want to join the Jews or the Samaritans” (68), which is based in part on Mark 12:18 and John 11:47–50.

The author has many details about the Muslim culture to report, as he discusses the various customs and rituals very specifically, which indicates his personal familiarity with them. But the anonymous does not remain an outside observer; instead, he relates also what the meaning of those rituals were, how the gender relationship was within Islamic society, what the lay people inquire from the hermits about the afterlife and the imminent future (78). While most of his comments are neutral, he also points out that despite the strong religious fervor demonstrated broadly, there are “vil andere tuysscher als wail als hie in deseme lande” (78; many deceivers, just as many as in our country).

Surprisingly, we also learn much about the pilgrimage to Mecca and the prayer rituals and religious performances in that holy site (78–80), although Christians were normally not

allowed access to that city. The author summarizes many details and thus leaves the impression as if he had made the trip to Mecca himself, which would not have been possible for him without some basic understanding of Arabic. But again, there are no comments about language as such, although the account proves to be very specific.

The author does not ignore to discuss the efforts by Christian merchants to reach the Muslim markets and to gain the permission to offer and sell their wares (84). He notes that they tend to make much money and operate very successfully there, and yet he does not inform us at all how they communicated with the authorities. Those, however, were completely in control and did not allow any of the merchants to depart again without having received the permission to do so (“ain urloff,” 84). Without being explicit enough for us to probe the linguistic situation further, we can clearly recognize that the entire commercial exchange was predicated on intensive oral and written communication. Similarly, the author reports about regular diplomatic exchanges, with the European diplomats being received very respectfully (84). There are, as usual, no words about the language barrier, but the less the account reveals about the means of verbal exchanges, the more we can assume that both sides were in command of some shared languages, which made them all members of the same multilingual community.

One of the least expected multilingual frameworks appears to be the taverns in the Arabic world where they offer good water instead of wine. The author relates that the Muslim guests enjoy their time by drinking water and eating strawberries. They tend to break out into songs which deal with “springenden burnen als hie van der mynnen” (84; welling fountains, similar to our songs about courtly love). Those taverns hardly know of any conflicts because if someone tries to initiate a fight with another person, another person orders him to keep quiet in the name of the Sultan, whereupon no one is allowed to speak a word (84). Of course, the author might have heard about all this from some sources, but it is more likely that he reflected here his own eyewitness experience, which in turn implies that he spent much time in the various towns with the local population. That, however, would have required a considerable degree of linguistic competence.

In general, the author notes that the Christians and Muslims living in the various cities tolerated each other out of fear of severe legal consequences and punishments: “want dat gerichte is da alze hart und strenge” (86; since the laws are very harsh and strict). As to the rural population, he also demonstrates respect, though he does not hold back with his opinion that the people there are ignorant and simple-minded (86). They know nothing to report about except what they themselves have heard and learned from their predecessors (86), a remark which signals that the author might have had some oral exchanges with them, obviously in Arabic.

By contrast, when the Sultan called for a courtly assembly, “Christians, Jews, and Heathens speaking all languages of the world came together, and they all sang, one after the other, a song of praise on God and on the Sultan” (92). The Sultan listened to all those presentations and then responded, thanking them and God for the honor paid to him. Then “he begged all to pray on his behalf to God” (92). Although we do not learn at all what languages were used in

that situation, the author clearly emphasizes that most attendees were multilingual speakers, with the Sultan possibly best educated in various languages. While the focus rests on the various Muslim and other princes, the author also points out that the Christian knights and merchants were granted their own dinner table (94). Again, we do not know how they all communicated, but the ease with which each visitor to the assembly adjusted and was well received confirms, at least indirectly, a high degree of multilingualism.

While each group appears to have its own seating arrangement, the subsequent personal exchanges between the Sultan and the guests reveal how much communication took place, with the Sultan inquiring with each individual about his own conditions back home and responding to their questions. Finally, once the festivities have come to an end, the Sultan “bat sy alle dat sy got vur in beden und dat sy anderwerff myt leve moisten zo samen komen” (98; begged them all to pray to God on his behalf and that they all would reunite in love at a later point in time).

The chapter on the Sultan’s wedding, which took place with countless guests from many different countries, underscores this impression even further: “krysten, iuden und heiden couflude ind pilgarine geistlich und were<l>tlich und yeckerlich moiste dantzen achter der stat” (100; Christians, Jews, and Heathens, merchants and pilgrims, clerics and lay people, and everyone had to dance behind the city). Apparently, the author was so accustomed to the presence of many different languages and yet also the use of at not more than two or three languages commonly shared for communicative purposes that he did not feel any particular need to remark on this phenomenon of multilingualism, which clearly surfaces in front of our eyes although the narrative does not address it as such in explicit terms. The material world occupies the author above all, whereas he does not reveal any interest in the presence of many different languages. Those, however, must have existed without any doubt. After all, when the author refers to the Sultan’s library, he emphasizes that all the Christian and Jewish books and texts were present, in Arabic translation (110).

The anonymous subsequently turns to the Turks and the Tartars (Mongols), and there he adds a curious passage worthy of our attention. Whereas before the report had not centered on the different languages spoken everywhere, here in Mongolia, the Franciscans and Dominicans, but also the Augustinians and Carmelite are said to pursue the strategy to buy orphaned children who know “all languages as they are used” (128). Those polyglots in turn become the language teachers for the monks:

also dat alle de broder alle sprache wail konnen. Ind de brodere lerent de kindere alle pretgate und we sy alle dinck verantwoord worden sollen dat hant sy alle in boich geschreven dat lerent sy de kinder en buyssen als ir paster noster and werdent etzlichen alze vrome lude ind sint dem orden altze nutze. (128)

[so that the friars can speak all those languages well. And the friars teach the children to preach and how they are to answer questions. They have written them down in books, teaching the children that material as their *Pater Noster* and some of them become very pious people and are very useful for the Order.]

We are not informed about much else, but this passage is a great example of how hard the missionaries tried to acquire linguistic competence in those distant lands so that they could achieve their goal of preaching to the people and converting them to Christianity. We could actually fast-forward from here and study the history of Jesuit missionaries globally since the sixteenth century because it was one of the standard tasks for the Jesuits to learn the local languages so that they could reach out to the heathen population (Classen 2013: 151–52). Arnold, however, does not go much further into details and leaves us wondering about the author's own linguistic abilities, which must have been impressive considering his engagement with so many different cultures and peoples.

His reports also pertain to the Mongols and the Khan, and here, as well as in the *Travels* by Marco Polo, linguistic hurdles never seem to exist; instead, there is an open conversation between the Christian friars and the Mongol ruler, although the anonymous writer at one point suddenly includes a reference to a translator (140) who rendered the friars' Latin phrases of "Benedicite" and "Gratias" into the Tartar language. The Khan found those words so important and pleasing that he had them written down and used them himself, along with his entire court, wherever he went.

But we have also to consider that the account intended to project the marvels and wonders of the eastern world to satisfy western curiosity, and it would have been unworthy for the mighty ruler if he had not had sufficient translators at his court to communicate with all foreigners visiting him. We do not know where those translators came from, how they might have learned the foreign languages, but the account is specific enough to assume that the exchanges between the Christians and the Mongols must have worked sufficiently. We can thus claim that forms of multilingualism commonly existed at many courts all over the eastern world, particularly because there are hardly any comments on the differences of languages in a highly plurilingual framework.

Remarkably, the author is only interested in religious features, clothing, and physical abnormalities, apart from natural conditions, and he does not examine linguistic issues as something that might have had any significance for himself and his audience. The very absence of statements on multilingualism, framed with numerous situations in which certainly numerous languages were used within the same social context, clearly mirrors that multilingualism was of no major concern, even though it certainly existed. There is even a chapter on Persia which pilgrims and merchants had to cross to reach India; here we learn about significant military conflicts in that process, but nothing about communication problems (148) (Classen, forthcoming).

8. Georgius of Hungaria

Forced exposure to multilingualism emerges primarily in cases of enslavement, which was a destiny more commonly suffered by people in the pre-modern age than we might have assumed (Barker 2019; Classen 2021). The poor individuals were abducted from their homeland, their culture, their social environment, their family, and hence also from their language. Studying enslavement and the institution of slavery through a medieval lens brings to light many crucial aspects which were later becoming almost standard in the modern age.

While slavery existed mostly in the Mediterranean – but by all means not only there since we hear of slaves who lived as far north as Iceland or as far west as Ireland – the full development of early modern slavery is closely associated with the Atlantic trade since the sixteenth century.

Georgius of Hungary (ca. 1422/23–1502) was one of those sad victims of Turkish enslavement (Classen 2003). He was born around 1422/1423 in Siebenbürgen (Transylvania, today Romania), probably in Rumes/Romos, and grew up speaking either Hungarian or German, or more probably both. In 1437 he moved to Mühlbach (today: Sebeş, northwest of Sibiu) to attend a Dominican school, but soon enough that city was besieged by the Turks, and the young man was one of the last defenders of a tower unrealistically hoping to set up a successful resistance against the overwhelming hostile army. When the enemy finally set fire to the tower, the small band of Christian soldiers still alive fell into their hands, and they were all put into chains and soon sold as slaves on the slave market of Edirne (today: south of the border to Bulgaria). Shortly thereafter, still driven by his youthful desire for freedom, Georgius twice attempted to escape, yet he was caught each time, then condemned to being heavily chained, as he reports in vivid terms, calling his account an “*infelicitatis historiam*” (148; history of misfortune). A series of further attempts followed, but obviously all to no avail. Then there is a gap in his account, and we find him again in the house of a lord who treated him very well and where Georgius stayed for the next fifteen years. Finally, however, despite the relatively comfortable life that he had enjoyed with his last master, he escaped again, then for the eighth and final time, then being able to leave the Ottoman Empire without being captured and taken back. The slave thus managed to get home and to return to the realm of Christianity. The years between 1439 and 1443 remain a blank page in his account, perhaps because he later felt so ashamed of his succumbing to the ‘temptation’ of the Muslim faith and wanted to draw a veil of silence over them (Georgius de Hungaria 1993; Schwob 2001).

His last lord seems to have been a kind man, older in age, married, and with a child. He had offered Georgius a *pactum libertatis* (contract for freedom), which promised him the liberation after a certain time in return for a specific amount of money. Georgius was apparently accepted into the family, took his meals with them, and enjoyed free time during which he eventually turned much attention to the study of the Muslim faith. The author also had a pleasant, almost motherly relationship with his lord’s wife, and it seems rather surprising that Georgius at the end abandoned all that and fled for good, returning to Europe.

This kind master had allowed him to travel because Georgius had deceptively claimed to seek further religious instructions from some dervish. The author first aimed for Pera, north of Constantinople, and then he traveled to the island of Chios, where he joined the Dominican order. Subsequently he turned to Rome where he lived for the rest of his life and where he also composed the treatise about his life as a slave, about his trials and tribulations during his imprisonment, his punishments, his temptations by the other religion, about his rediscovery of the Christian faith, and his long-term endurance while surviving his time of enslavement (Classen 2003; Classen 2012).

Georgius's narrative account, first printed in 1481, was a considerable success on the early modern book market and experienced extensive popularity far into the sixteenth century (Georgius de Hungaria, 52–72). Even Martin Luther and Sebastian Franck were enthusiastic readers, which does not come as a real surprise considering the profound fear by the Europeans of the steady attacks by the Ottomans on the Balkan, in Poland, and even Austria (Guthmüller and Kühlmann, ed. 2000).⁵

Georgius explains in the introduction that he wrote his treatise as a warning to all those who like him might fall into the Turks' hands and then would be forced to live among them for a long time and would thus eventually could lose their Christian faith and turn to Islam. Deeply troubled by his own near failure to maintain his 'true' faith, his narrative serves to highlight the 'evil' nature of the Turks, to explain their lifestyle, and their customs, which then would make it easier for the readers, if they might become enslaved themselves, to defend themselves better in spiritual terms. He expresses his horror about the ignorance of countless Christians who do not want to believe his information about the enemy and could thus easily become prey of the Islamic teachings (146–46).

As Georgius's autobiographical account indicates, he had learned much about the history of Islam and about the rise of the Ottomans to the leading power in the eastern Mediterranean. The author surely drew from various sources in Latin which he must have found later after his escape from slavery and when he had sat down to compose his texts. Details, however, escape us, and we can certainly rely on his eyewitness account and the fact that he probably learned much about Islam from his last Turkish owner, apparently a rather pious man (Georgius, ed. Klockow, 44–45).

Georgius describes in most moving terms the misery of the slaves who have no freedom left and are simply treated as chattel (200–02). But there were also some Turkish slave owners who were willing to sign a contract with their slaves according to which they would enjoy the opportunity eventually to pay off their own price and thus regain their freedom (204–06). It remains unclear how the slaves would have been able to understand the arrangement, which leads us directly to the core issue of relevance here. Georgius does not talk about how he learned Turkish, but the details of his comments about his own situation indicate that he managed to do so, though it remains unclear to what extent.

The author laments especially about those people who might have regained their freedom but who then decided to stay in Turkey because they had married or because a move might have been too complicated (208). We can thus assume that Georgius really referred to an extensive adaptation process, which must have taken place also in terms of languages. In other words, here we face the case of enforced multilingualism. After some time, perhaps several years, the slave's linguistic ability must have improved considerably, otherwise religious conversion would not have been possible.

In particular, Georgius examines the situation on the Balkan where the Turks controlled most

⁵ For a detailed list of all available print copies, see <http://www.mirabileweb.it/title/de-moribus-conditionibus-et-nequitia-turcorum-geor-title/19202>; cf. also the excellent bibliographical overview at <http://www.geschichtsquellen.de/werk/4950>; cf. also Classen 2015.

territories at least superficially. Due to the excessive poverty of the rural population, many had moved to Turkish cities where soon enough the Balkan language(s) gained in dominance and was understood everywhere, even at the courts. Turkish itself became a minority language because of those immigrants, who also had made their way up the social ladder at the court (208–10). On the other hand, as we are told, the Turks established entire military units, the famous Janissaries, who were recruited from the young population in the Balkans, which ultimately formed the backbone of the Ottoman army. Little wonder that hence Turkish became the *lingua franca* among those soldier (210–12) (Goodwin 1994; Nicolle 2008).

Georgius does not engage with the linguistic issues and emphasizes, instead, primarily the military discipline and effectiveness of that unit, but the absolute cohesion and subordination was possible only because of a unified linguistic code, which is implied here, though not discussed in detail (210–12). For the author, the existence of those soldiers was clear proof of the grave danger their souls were in since they had submitted entirely under the ‘false’ faith of the Muslims (214) (Conermann and Sen, ed., 2020).

Indeed, for Georgius, the conversion to Islam was of the greatest concern, as he reflected upon it extensively, identifying it as the most dangerous threat to the Christians under Ottoman rule (216). A conversion, however, would not have been possible without sufficient linguistic competence on the part of the convert, and since so many took that step for a variety of reasons, we can assume that the linguistic hurdle must have been fairly low. The more the author expresses his horror about the vast numbers of ‘victims’ who had turned against Christianity and had embraced Islam, the more we can draw the conclusion that the adoption of Turkish as the *lingua franca* in the Ottoman Empire was an easy step taken by many slaves, such as our author. However, Georgius himself hardly reflects on that aspect and focuses, instead, on the theological challenge resulting from the entire situation.

Most difficult for Georgius to cope with appears to have been the Turks’ very modest appearance and behavior, whether in the military or in civil society, whether in public or in private (220–26), with the Sultan being a true role model for all of his people. The author goes into many other details that confirm the positive impression which he had gained from the Turks at large, and he himself appears to have adapted considerably to his condition as a slave. In fact, as he admits with deep shame, he himself had been close to accept a Turkish identity out of extensive respect for their lived cultural values. His careful study of his social environment must have also implied a high level of linguistic sophistication on his part. He includes, for instance, quite regularly some Turkish phrases (234, 238, 242, etc.), demonstrating his deeper understanding of that language.

Involuntarily, adopting to his difficult conditions as a slave, Georgius had turned into a multilingual speaker, combining Rumanian and German as his original languages (or only one of them) with Turkish, which was later coupled with Latin in which his narrative was composed. As much as he tries his hardest to reject Islam and to demonstrate that the Christian faith was the only true one, he provides considerable information about the specifics of Islam, such as the creed, quoting even the crucial statement in the original Turkish: “Layllaha hillalach mehemet ercullach” (254), which he then translates into Latin,

though here he drew from some expert commentators since he did not want to err in theological issues. Of course, he identifies the Muslims as victims of a grave error (254), but he engages with their entire belief system at great length and reveals thereby his considerable knowledge of Turkish (256–270). Ultimately, however, he then holds back and refuses to go into further details because “I am disgusted and ashamed to report what I have seen or heard of their faith” (270).

In other words, after an unspecified time he had become competent enough to study the Qur’an and to understanding the basic Islamic rituals and ceremonies. His familiarity went so far that he could present in his account numerous examples of Muslim ‘monks’ or ‘hermits’ who had achieved miraculous degrees of self-control and ‘sanctity’ which made them insensitive to external pain or feelings of hunger and thirst (272–74). What matters for us, however, is not the range of religious-cultural information conveyed in this report, but the author’s knowledge of key words for religious practices and ceremonies (278). He himself had learned many of the verses and poems formulated by those dervishes because they “confirmed more the Christian than the Turkish [Muslim] religion” (280). Altogether, Georgius actually admits how much he himself had been tempted to follow their paths as the ideal passage to God, if he had then not recognized that the dervishes were really servants of the devil (284–86).

The further we enter into Georgius’s account, the more we are informed about essential aspects of the Muslim faith and its faithful. The author thereby demonstrates continually that he had become a fluent speaker of Turkish (e.g. 286) who had many conversations with the wife of his master and the latter from whom he learned much about their belief in miracles, for instance. It does not matter for us that he related their stories about the workings of some Muslim saints ultimately to demonstrate the false nature of that religion: “signis et prodigiis mendacibus” (286; deceiving signs and wonders). Against his best intentions, the various accounts come across as highly believable, but the important aspect here consists of the fact that Georgius communicated so intensively with his two owners, which was possible only because of his good knowledge of Turkish. Many times, the author dismisses Islam as nothing but a “dyabolica secta” (310; diabolic sect), and yet he hardly reveals how he had managed to learn Turkish good enough to acquire the level of fluency necessary for such deep conversations about faith and religion. It is finally worth noting that Georgius also reflects on the other Christian slaves and differentiates them into three groups. The first group simply stays with their faith and never bothers to learn anything about Islam (346). The second consists of those who curiously study the Turkish customs and habits and easily adjust to them without understanding the danger for their own Christian faith (348). The third group comprises those Christian slaves who are interested in the Turkish culture, but cannot comprehend it sufficiently, which means that they ultimately accept Islam as the only true religion (348–50). Georgius thus indicates that many of the slaves ultimately acquire extensive knowledge of Turkish to engage with the Islamic faith, either rejecting or accepting it for themselves.

Our author, however, obviously went beyond the approaches pursued by all three groups and studied Islam at great length (354–60), which made it possible for him to relate many special

details within Islam to his Christian audience, although his own true goal was, as he outlines explicitly, to warn them about the dangerous and seductive power of that ‘sect,’ as he systematically calls Islam, and to build preventative measures to protect oneself against the ‘fake’ allure of that religion. All that he could only achieve because he was a polyglot and had mastered Turkish, above all, and this so well that he could study even esoteric aspects of the Muslim faith. Unfortunately, we can reach this conclusion only through deduction, but the overall account contains sufficient indirect evidence to confirm its validity.

This observation is of considerable importance for the history of multilingualism in the Middle Ages at large because this allows us to reflect on numerous other texts as well in which we learn about imprisonment, enslavement, but then mercantile travel, pilgrimage, and warfare. One of those intriguing reports was produced by Johann Schiltberger, to whom I turn last to reflect further on the presence of multilingualism, perhaps unexpected and even enforced, but certainly in existence in many parts of our world.

9. Johann Schiltberger

Ca. one generation earlier than Georgius of Hungary, Johann Schiltberger (1381–ca. 1440) suffered a similar destiny, but he was primarily used as a slave in military service and thus was moved around in all kinds of directions, taking him as far as modern-day Kazakhstan and Egypt (Schiltberger 1897; Schiltberger 2000; Schiltberger 2008; here I rely on the 2008 translation into German). Despite his youth (sixteen years of age), he participated in the battle of Nicopolis and barely survived the defeat at the hands of the Ottomans (Sept. 25, 1396). While most of the other Christian captives were executed, Schiltberger, now just due to his youth, was spared and recruited as a soldier.

During his thirty or so years as a slave, Schiltberger was passed on to various different rulers, such as to the infamous Tamerlane (1336–1405), but it did not seem to have matter to him particularly, as he leaves no personal comments in his report about such transitions. Instead, the author presents many gruesome details about slaughter, executions, military operations, political structures, and cultural aspects, while we hear very little about the slave himself. Schiltberger proudly informs that he had seen many different countries, always serving one Muslim ruler or the other, but we cannot tell whether he enjoyed these experiences or not. For most of his account, Schiltberger operates as an eyewitness of the major events he was involved with, and this basically as a chronicler, hardly reflecting on his own situation as a slave (Classen 2021: 71–74). The many details contained in the author’s account can be passed over here since he normally pursues a chronicler’s perspective, instead of dealing with his personal conditions. But the circumstances indicate that he quickly adapted to his new life serving as a runner in front of the king, and this for six years (27). Only at the end of that period he was also given a horse as a sign of trust and respect for him, which also implies that he could communicate decently well with his masters.

At one point, Schiltberger and a larger group of other Christian slaves decided to attempt an escape, but they were soon followed by a larger military unit which confronted them. Both sides then negotiated with each other, and since the Turkish captain had promised them to guarantee their lives, they submitted themselves to him (34–35). Indeed, they were not

executed, but thrown into a prison for nine months, after which they were released upon the request of Mirmirsiriamon, the king's son's, and once they had pledged never to flee again, they were released, received horses, and an improved salary (35–36).

All those exchanges and events must have been carried out in Turkish, although the author does not relate anything about their linguistic skills. But Schiltberger and his companions apparently regained the king's favor and were allowed to join his military forces as a trusted unit, which again indicates that they could communicate in Turkish, unless they had access to a translator, which seems unlikely considering their low social status. Of course, there might have been a court translator, but the author does not provide any indication; instead, after all those conflicts had been settled, he turns to the military and political history about which he reports as a sort of eyewitness. Schiltberger occasionally emphasizes his own role (66), but he does not let us know how he himself had learned about those events, whether through personal experiences or through oral reports from others, or through written documents. Whatever the circumstances might have been, however, although the author says virtually nothing about his linguistic skills, the astounding details of his report underscore his direct access to Turkish or other languages. When he states that he had been present at specific events (79), we cannot conclude that he had been able to communicate with the local population, but it would seem improbable to assume that he would not have acquired basic language skills even there. Undoubtedly, this author proudly lists the many different countries where he had been, but he does not say anything about the way how he had engaged with the people (80–84).

The argument *ex nihilo*, however, seems to be operative and convincing; the less Schiltberger comments (if he ever does so) on his communication skills, the more he obviously must have succeeded in talking with the local population. Neither he nor any of his companions knew any Latin, and the Turkish contemporaries would certainly not have known German. When the author hence relates their exchanges with some individuals in a specific region concerning a mysterious castle associated with a peculiar sparrow hawk (86; for the literary motif, see Classen, 2020), we may assume that they all must have relied on some shared language or languages to convey the relevant information.

At the same time, Schiltberger could also refer to Arabic and Persian as languages spoken in Baghdad (92), but then he does not reveal whether he could understand either one. All we can gather from his account is that he insists repeatedly on having visited many different countries, such as those controlled by Timur (1336–1405; here p. 93), founder of the Timurid Empire, and Tartary, i.e., the Mongol Empire (94–97).

One tiny comment about his lack of knowledge about the St. Catherine monastery on Mount Sinai (104) allows us to gain more authentication of his report. Insofar as he was nothing but a soldier and lacked freedom, he was regularly ordered to move to certain locations, but he was then not allowed to go on touristic excursions, such as when he was stationed near Jerusalem (108). However, he learned many details about that site from many different people (104), though he does not share in what language they might have communicated with him. Schiltberger also discusses the Muslim faith at length, yet without telling us in what

language he might have read the Qur'an or studied the Muslim customs and rituals. His observations, to be sure, prove to be quite accurate and specific and confirm his considerable knowledge.

Both with regard to the Islamic and the Greek-Orthodox faith, the author knows key words and phrases in the original (137 and 149 respectively), and even includes an entire chapter dedicated to the various languages spoken in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Syria, and various other countries (150–51). Only when we finally reach the chapter dedicated to Armenia, where Schiltberger spent a considerable amount of time, do we hear that he had received specific language instructions. Since the Armenians favored the Germans, they took care of this slave and helped him to learn their tongue (154). He mentions this, however, only in passing, similar to the situation in the fictional account of *Herzog Ernst* from the late twelfth century (see above). Instead, the narrative focus then quickly switches again and emphasizes religious aspects, monsters, cultural customs, and military conflicts, such as between the Armenians and the Greeks.

The conclusion of Schiltberger's account also sheds interesting light on the prevalence of multilingualism. Johann and four other Christians – their identity or origin is not revealed – finally recognize an opportunity to escape and to get home to Europe. The only aspect shared among those five men is their religion, but we do not know in what language they communicated. When they seek help from a ship, they are first tested and must quote the *Pater noster* and the Christian creed – again, we are not told in what language. The voyage on the Black Sea is riddled with many dangers, but they eventually reach Constantinople, where they got off the ship and are interviewed by the emperor, probably in Greek. They relate their entire history to him, maybe in Greek, maybe via a translator, and then can stay there for three months, during which Schiltberger apparently talked much with the local citizens (181), which again must have been in Greek. Out of fear that they would be recognized as former slaves, he and his companions were allowed to walk around only under the protection of a group of servants (183).

The report concludes with a brief itinerary all the way through the Balkans, to southern Poland and then down to southern Germany, to Freising, where he spent the rest of his life (184). How he managed the many different languages which he certainly encountered during the route, we can only fathom, but after decades in slavery, during which he had traveled around constantly, he must have achieved an enormous level of multilingualism which empowered him to communicate sufficiently also in the various European countries. Although Schiltberger informs us lamentably little about his language skills, he obviously managed to operate successfully under many different linguistic conditions.

10. Conclusion

Multilingualism was very much present in the Middle Ages, as both historical and literary accounts confirm. Sometimes, this phenomenon is addressed directly, as in the case of *Herzog Ernst* or of Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*. In many other cases, the presence of various languages at the same time and in the same location is not mentioned at all, but clearly visible behind the narrative horizon. This finds its best confirmation in those three

accounts discussed above, the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht*, Georgius of Hungary's life report about his time as a slave in the Ottoman Empire, and Johann Schiltberger's description of this thirty years of captivity as a slave. The anonymous author of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* enjoyed a very different experience, obviously free to roam around and collect data about the Middle East. Nevertheless, all three texts share the common denominator that the narrator moved around many countries, encountered numerous languages, and apparently coped well enough to survive for a long time before the return home to Europe.

Multilingualism lurks everywhere, though the authors hardly addressed it explicitly. In all of three texts do we gain insights into massive movements of individuals, either freely or under duress as slaves, across wide swaths of land and cultures. We are not given detailed information about how the authors managed to cope with the many different languages, especially since they were not wealthy aristocrats or urban citizens and so did not have access to paid translators. The very absence of data underscores, however, that we can draw extensively from those texts where multilingualism is not addressed explicitly. The less the three authors talk about their own linguistic abilities, the more we can assume that they must have acquired considerable communicative skills especially in language areas far outside of the Indo-European language group.

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