

# **THE BOOK OF JOHN MANDEVILLE AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EASTERN (CONSTANTINOPLE) AND WESTERN CHRISTIANITY ACCORDING TO HIS ACCOUNTS OF JOURNEY**

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## **Abstract**

*The Book of John Mandeville has tended to be neglected by modern teachers and scholars, yet this intriguing and copious work has much to offer the student of medieval literature, history, and culture. The Book of John Mandeville was a contemporary bestseller, providing readers with exotic information about locales from Constantinople to China and about the social and religious practices of peoples such as the Greeks, Muslims, and Brahmins. The Book first appeared in the middle of the fourteenth century and by the next century could be found in an extraordinary range of European languages: not only Latin, French, German, English, and Italian, but also Czech, Danish, and Irish. Its wide readership is also attested by the two hundred and fifty to three hundred medieval manuscripts that still survive today. One scholar even insists that “few literate men in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could have avoided coming across the Travels at some time.”*

*In this study, detailed informations have been provided about the all adventures of Mandeville's book and it has been tried to be pictured the Constantinople of XIVth century with his eyewitness. And also in this study, withal, we have revealed that the Greeks' life styles and religious rituals were more different than European Christianity and that was criticised indignantly by the other European Christian peoples in Mandeville's book.*

**Key Words:** John Mandeville, Constantinople, Anatolia, Middle Age, Turks

## Introduction

The author of the *Book* identifies himself as Sir John Mandeville, an English knight from St. Albans, and declares that he will present the many amazing sights, creatures, and customs he observed during his more than thirty years of travel. Although *The Book of John Mandeville* was suspected by some early readers of containing the exaggerations and inventions often associated with travelers<sup>1</sup>, the reputations of both the work and its creator were relatively secure until the discovery in the nineteenth century that much of its material was not only unreliable but had been lifted wholesale from others. Add to this the mounting evidence that the *Book* had been originally composed in French rather than English, and soon instead of being celebrated as the first great English traveler or as the father of English prose, the *Mandeville*-author was being roundly denounced as a plagiarist and impostor. In his magisterial 1889 edition of the work, George Warner notes Henry Yule's very public denunciation in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*<sup>2</sup> (in an entry titled "Mandeville, Jehan de" expressly to draw attention to the French character of the supposed author). Warner credits Yule with having "disposed once for all of Mandeville's pretensions to be regarded, at least to any extent, as an authentic and veracious traveller," and goes on to say that he himself has "endeavoured to complete and press home the indictment by . . . tracing every passage, so far as possible, to its actual source in some earlier writer."<sup>3</sup> As Warner's indignation mounts, his usually judicious tone at times becomes increasingly prosecutorial: he charges the author with "fraud and mendacity" and with possessing a "blunted moral sense which saw nothing reprehensible in an elaborate literary imposture."<sup>4</sup> Since Warner, some have tried to rehabilitate Mandeville in various ways (by noting the different ideas of authenticity in the Middle Ages, for example, or by regarding him as a writer of fiction rather than history), and others continue to believe that he may not have lied about his national origin<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the general scholarly consensus today is that "Sir John Mandeville, knight of St. Albans" was probably not a knight, not named Mandeville, not English, and perhaps never traveled much at all, except among the volumes of a well-stocked library — though any of these claims might yet prove to be true. The general stigma of falsehood and imposture that has since surrounded the book, compounded by a generic complexity that makes it difficult to define or categorize (it is not genuine history or anthropology, of course, but not really literature or theology in the usual sense) has led to its absence from the central canons of medieval writing<sup>6</sup>.

### *Of the City of Constantinople, and of the Faith of Greeks*

At Constantinople lieth Saint Anne, our Lady's mother, whom Saint Helen let bring from Jerusalem. And there lieth also the body of John Chrisostome, that was Archbishop of Constantinople. And there lieth also Saint Luke the Evangelist : for his bones were brought from

<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Letts, *Sir John Mandeville: The Man and His Book*. London: Batchworth Press, 1949, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Mandeville> (DA 11.11.2017)

<sup>3</sup>For further information see *The Buke of John Maundeuill, being the travels of Sir John Mandeville, knight, 1322–1356: A hitherto unpublished version, from the unique copy (Egerton MS 1982) in the British Museum*. Ed. George F. Warner. Printed for the Roxburghe Club. Westminster: Nichols & Sons, 1889.

<sup>4</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, ed. Tamarah Kohanski-C. David Benson, Medieval Enstitute Publications, Michigan 2007, p.vi.

<sup>5</sup>*The Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels*. Ed. M. C. Seymour. EETS o.s. 319. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 26-37.

<sup>6</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, ed. Tamarah Kohanski-C. David Benson, p.xx1-xx11.

Bethany, where he was buried. And many other relics be there. And there is the vessel of stone, as it were of marble, that men clepe enydros, that evermore droppeth water, and filleth himself every year, till that it go over above, without that that men take from within.

Constantinople is a full fair city, and a good, and well walled ; and it is three-cornered. And there is an arm of the sea Hellespont : and some men call it the Mouth of Constantinople; and some men call it the Brace of Saint George : and that arm closeth the two parts of the city. And upward to the sea, upon the water, was wont to be the great city of Troy, in a full fair plain : but that city was destroyed by them of Greece, and little appeareth thereof, because it is so long sith it was destroyed.

About Greece there be many isles, as Calliste, Calcas, Oertige, Tesbria, Mynia, Flaxon, Melo, Carpate, and Lemnos. And in this isle is the mount Athos, that passeth the clouds. And there be many diverse languages and many countries, that be obedient to the emperor ; that is to say, Turcople, Pyncynard, Comange, and many other, as Thrace and Macedonia, of the which Alexander was king. In this country was Aristotle born, in a city that men clepe Stagyra, a little from the city of Thrace. And at Stagyra lieth Aristotle ; and there is an altar upon his tomb. And there make men great feasts for him every year, as though he were a saint. And at his altar they holden their great councils and their assemblies, and they hope, that through inspiration of God and of him, they shall have the better council<sup>7</sup>.

In this country be right high hills, toward the end of Macedonia. And there is a great hill, that men clepe Olympus, that departeth Macedonia and Thrace. And it is so high, that it passeth the clouds. And there is another hill, that is clept Athos, that is so high, that the shadow of him reacheth to Lemne, that is an isle ; and it is seventysix mile between. And above at the cop of the hill is the air so clear, that men may find no wind there, and therefore may no beast live there, so is the air dry.

And men say in these countries, that philosophers some time went upon these hills, and held to their nose a sponge moisted with water, for to have air ; for the air above was so dry. And above, in the dust and in the powder of those hills, they wrote letters and figures with their fingers. And at the year's end they came again, and found the same letters and figures, the which they had written the year before, without any default. And therefore it seemeth well, that these hills pass the clouds and join to the pure air.

At Constantinople is the palace of the emperor, right fair and well-dight : and therein is a fair place for joustings, or for other plays and desports. And it is made with stages, and hath degrees about, that every man may well see, and none grieve other. And under these stages be stables well vaulted for the emperor's horses ; and all the pillars be of marble.

And within the Church of Saint Sophia, an emperor sometime would have buried the body of his father, when he was dead. And, as they made the grave, they found a body in the earth, and upon the body lay a fine plate of gold; and thereon was written, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, letters that said thus; *Jesu Chrisius nascetur de Virgine Maria, et ego credo in eum* ; that is to say, ' Jesu Christ shall be born of the Virgin Mary, and I trow in him.' And the date when it was laid in the earth, was two thousand year before our Lord was born. And yet is the plate of gold in the treasury of the church. And men say, that it was Hermogenes the wise man.

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<sup>7</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, lines 192-208.

And if all it so be, that men of Greece be Christian yet they vary from our faith. For they say, that the Holy Ghost may not come of the Son ; but all only of the Father. And they are not obedient to the Church of Rome, ne to the Pope. And they say that their Patriarch hath as much power over the sea, as the Pope hath on this side the sea. And therefore Pope John xxii sent letters to them, how Christian faith should be all one ; and that they should be obedient to the Pope, that is God's Vicar on earth, to whom God gave his plein power for to bind and to assoil, and therefore they should be obedient to him.

And they sent again diverse answers ; and among others they said thus : *Potentiam tuam summam circa tuos subjectos^ firmiter credimus. Superbiam tuam summam tolerare non possumus. Avaritiam tuam summam satiare non intendimus. Dominus tecum ; quia Dominus nobiscum est.* That is to say : ' We trow well, that thy power is great upon thy subjects. We may not suffer thine high pride. We be not in purpose to fulfil thy great covetise. Lord be with thee ; for our Lord is with us. Farewell.' And other answer might he not have of them<sup>8</sup>.

And also they make their sacrament of the altar of Therf bread, for our Lord made it of such bread, when he made his Maundy. And on the Shere-Thursday make they their Therf bread, in token of the Maundy, and dry it at the sun, and keep it all the year, and give it to sick men, instead of God's body. And they make but one unction, when they christen children. And they anoint not the sick men. And they say that there is no Purgatory, and that souls shall not have neither joy ne pain till the day of doom. And they say that fornication is no sin deadly, but a thing that is kindly, and that men and women should not wed but once, and whoso weddeth oftener than once, their children be bastards and gotten in sin. And their priests also be wedded.

And they say also that usury is no deadly sin. And they sell benefices of Holy Church. And so do men in other places : God amend it when his will is! And that is great sclandre, for now is simony king crowned in Holy Church : God amend it for his mercy !

And they say, that in Lent, men shall not fast, ne sing Mass, but on the Saturday and on the Sunday. And they fast not on the Saturday, no time of the year, but it be Christmas Even or Easter Even. And they suffer not the Latins to sing at their altars ; and if they do, by any adventure, anon they wash the altar with holy water. And they say that there should be but one Mass said at one altar upon one day.

And they say also that our Lord ne ate never meat ; but he made token of eating. And also they say, that we sin deadly in shaving our beards, for the beard is token of a man, and gift of our Lord. And they say that we sin deadly in eating of beasts that were forbidden in the Old Testament, and of the old Law, as swine, hares and other beasts, that chew not their cud. And they say that we sin, when we eat flesh on the days before Ash Wednesday, and of that that we eat flesh the Wednesday, and eggs and cheese upon the Fridays. And they accurse all those that abstain them to eat flesh the Saturday.

Also the Emperour of Constantinople maketh the patriarch, the archbishops and the bishops ; and giveth the dignities and the benefices of churches and depriveth them that be unworthy, when he findeth any cause. And so is he lord both temporal and spiritual in his country.

And if ye will wit of their A.B.C. what letters they be, here ye may see them, with the names that they clepe them there amongst them: Alpha, Betha, Gama, Deltha, e longe, e brevis,

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<sup>8</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, lines 203-248.

Epilmon, Thetha, Iota, Kapda, Lapda, Mi, Ni, Xi, o brevis, Pi, Coph, Ro, Summa, Tau, Vi, Fy, Chi, Psi, Othomega, Diacosyn.

And all be it that these things touch not to one way, nevertheless they touch to that, that I have hight you, to shew you a part of customs and manners, and diversities of countries. And for this is the first country that is discordant in faith and in belief, and varieth from our faith, on this half the sea, therefore I have set it here, that ye may know the diversity that is between our faith and theirs. For many men have great liking, to hear speak of strange things of diverse countries<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Book proper opens with a description of Constantinople and the routes by which to go there. In addition to discussion of Jesus' Cross and Crown (lines 109–97), which characteristically emphasizes not the devotional but the material (the physical composition of each relic and where the authentic pieces are currently located), Sir John, as he will throughout, details the practices of the local religion, here Greek Orthodox, especially as it differs from, and is even critical of, Roman Catholicism (see especially lines 234–79). Dramatic contrasts in subject matter, such as the description of St. John the Evangelist's tomb at Ephesus (lines 288–98) followed by a story of a woman changed into a dragon who can return to human shape only with a knight's kiss (lines 304–41), enliven the *Book*<sup>10</sup>.

Sir John then gives various routes to Jerusalem and outlines the sights along their ways. He describes different routes to reach particular destinations but never gives his own itinerary because, especially in the first part, he claims to have undertaken many journeys and also because, as we have seen, the work is a compendium of the travels of others. After a large section about Egypt, which is missing in the version here edited, the work tells about the Holy Land itself. Important surrounding sites are recorded, such as Bethlehem (lines 534–83), but it is Jerusalem that is described in most detail, especially those places associated with major Jewish figures such as David and with the life and death of Christ (see lines 611–79, 686–91, 692–96, 818–27, 833–41, 857–60, 865–85). At times, the account reads very much like a guide for travelers: we are told of the spatial relationship of one building to another and specific points of their individual architecture. Sir John emphasizes that Jerusalem is now controlled by Muslims (lines 699–701, 730–34), and he records a long conversation that he had with their Sultan, who details the many moral failings of contemporary Christians that have caused God to deprive them of the Holy Land (lines 1295–1318)<sup>11</sup>.

Although Jerusalem may be at the center of the world and the ultimate aim of religious pilgrims, it cannot hold such an insatiable traveler as Sir John. He is soon away to more remote and exotic climes and cultures. After passing through Armenia (lines 1406–48), he continues further east through the land of Job (lines 1461–73), the country of the Amazons (lines 1476–93), and Ethiopia (lines 1496–1505), some of whose people have only one foot, which, in addition to propelling them quickly, serves to shade their bodies from the sun. Sir John eventually reaches the lands around India with their various and exotic religions — some

<sup>9</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, lines 249–279.

<sup>10</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, ed. Tamarah Kohanski-C.David Benson, p.xxv.

<sup>11</sup>While Mandeville's *Book* often "feels" like a guide for travelers, this is somewhat deceptive because much of its information, taken from older sources, is quite out of date.

worship snakes (lines 1586–87) and others allow themselves to be crushed under the wheels of a chariot bearing their idol (lines 1655–59). After a discussion of the roundness of the world (lines 1687–1778) and mention of additional marvels, such as men and women with heads like dogs (lines 1854–68) or others with both male and female genitals (lines 1892–95), Sir John arrives in China and describes the almost unimaginable wealth, luxury, and pomp at the court of the Great Khan with a full account of the realm's particular laws and customs (lines 1968–2017, 2100 ff.). As he continues on, Sir John encounters additional strange beings and practices, and, after a warning about the dangers that Jews will pose at the time of the Antichrist (lines 2366–82), he describes Prester John (an emperor and a priest), who though allied with the Khan is a Christian, but not a Catholic (lines 2392 ff.). Near the end of his Book, Sir John describes a kind of ideal society: that of the Brahmins and Synoplians, who even though they lack Christian revelation follow its essential precepts by natural law and whose faith, simple life, and love and charity toward one another make them beloved of God (lines 2573–2637). After observing gold-digging ants in Ceylon, passing by but not being able to visit the Earthly Paradise (lines 2681–2706), and describing the Tibetan practice by which a son honors his dead father by offering his body to birds and the flesh of his head to special friends (lines 2763–83), Sir John, having circumnavigated the earth, returns home to England to rest in his old age<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>The Book of Jhon Mandeville, ed. Tamarah Kohanski-C.David Benson, p.xxvii.

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