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Giovanni Antonio Menavino

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Giovanni Antonio Menavino

DATE OF BIRTH Approximately 1492
 PLACE OF BIRTH Voltri, near Genoa
 DATE OF DEATH Unknown; mid-16th century
 PLACE OF DEATH Unknown

BIOGRAPHY

Giovanni Menavino is known for his work *I cinque libri della legge, religione, et vita de' Turchi*, also entitled *Trattato dei costumi dei Turchi*, published in 1548 in Venice and Florence, and based on a manuscript of 1519, *De rebus et moribus Turcarum*. All we know of Menavino's life comes from this account, and it does not reveal much about him. The date of his birth is not given, but since he informs his readers that he was 12 years old when he was captured by pirates in the Mediterranean Sea in 1504, the year of his birth must have been about 1492.

He was accompanying his father, a Genoese merchant, on a voyage from Genoa to Venice, when near Corsica three pirate galleys attacked their ship. Menavino was captured and, together with two other boys, he was presented as a gift to Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512), whom he served as an *icoglan* (a personal page or attendant) from 1504 until 1512. After the death of Bayezid, Menavino served his son Selim I (1512-20) until he managed to flee during a battle (probably the battle of Chaldiran between the Ottomans and Safavids) and return to Italy. He tells his readers at the end that ten years had passed without seeing his family, so the date of his return must have been 1514.

Nothing certain is known about him after his return to Italy, but he must have gone to Rome around 1519, since there is a manuscript titled *De rebus et moribus Turcarum* at the Biblioteca Corsiniana, which contains in the dedication to Pope Leo X passages that confirm his presence in Rome, where he says he has been *transferito et presentato*. The manuscript consists of five books, and the contents are almost identical with Menavino's *I cinque libri delle legge, religion, et vita de' Turchi* published in 1548. Umberto Torretta, the only modern reader of Menavino who mentions this 1519 manuscript (apart from Paul Kristeller, who first located it), says it is in Latin, though despite its Latin title it is, in fact, in Italian. Torretta also erroneously claims that it was translated into Italian

by Lodovico Domenichi. (It is not yet established that this manuscript was written by Menavino himself, and is not a copy.) Torretta suggests that Menavino may have gone to Rome to ask the pope for re-conversion and that he brought his account as a gift (Torretta, *Giovanni Antonio Menavino*, p. 17). He surmises that Menavino may have experienced some kind of expulsion or marginalisation in his native village and had to leave, not unlike others in similar circumstances (Torretta, *Giovanni Antonio Menavino*, p. 25). However, Menavino himself does not mention any of these circumstances either in his dedication to the pope or in his account.

In both the 1548 printed versions, the dedication is not to Pope Leo X but to the French king, to whom Menavino expresses his gratitude for being in his service. If this dedication is authentic, he must have worked at the French court for a certain period.

In 1548, more than 30 years after his return from Constantinople, Menavino's *Cinque libri* was published in both Venice and Florence, with the title *Trattato de costumi et vita de Turchi*. In Venice it was printed with two works by another former Christian slave at the Turkish court, the Croatian Bartolomeo Georgewic, whose *Prophetia de Mahometani, et la miseria de' prigionii, de' Christiani, che vivono sotto il Gran Turco, et altre cose turchesche, non piu vedute* was translated by Ludovico Domenichi. There is no indication that Menavino was still alive at this time: the publisher's preface to the Venice edition, dated 20 April 1548, states that the publisher, or rather his 'corrector' Apollonio Campano, author of the preface, has come across this book by chance and that he has not been in contact with its author. He expresses the hope that the author will be grateful to him for publishing it *ovunque si trovi* ('wherever he is').

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

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 Nicolas de Nicolay, *Navigations et pérégrinations orientales*, Lyons, 1567

Secondary

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

I cinque libri delle legge, religione, et vita de' turchi: et della corte, et alcune guerre del Gran Turco, 'Five books about the laws, religion and life of the Turks, and the court and every war of the Grand Turk'
Trattato dei costumi dei Turchi, 'Treatise on the customs of the Turks'

DATE 1548

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Italian

DESCRIPTION

While Menavino dedicated the first manuscript version of his account to Pope Leo X in 1519, he dedicated the printed edition of 1548 to the 'most Christian King of France', expressing his gratitude for the king's goodness and for being in his service. Menavino claims that the occasion is the king's decision 'that can never be praised enough', to declare war against 'our common enemy, the Turk'. Since Henry II was king of France from 1547 to 1559, it would appear that he was the addressee of Menavino's work. However, the dedication is undated, and it cannot be known whether Menavino had Francis I or Henry II in mind.

The dedication is unusual, since most writings on the Turks in this period were dedicated to the Emperor Charles V, who was far more involved than the French in battles against the Turks. Furthermore, Genoa, Menavino's home town, had established an alliance with Spain in 1528. Since the beginning of the 16th century France had made alliances with the Ottomans, and neither Francis I nor his son Henry II fought against the Turks. Francis I took the first steps to establish an alliance with the Ottomans in the 1520s, concluding an alliance in 1536 with Süleyman the Magnificent, 'the first non-ideological diplomatic alliance of its kind between a Christian and non-Christian empire' (R. Kann, *A history of the Habsburg Empire*, Berkeley CA, 1974, p. 62). His son, Henry II,

made alliances with Sultan Sulieman in 1551. Why then dedicate a book like this to the French king?

The dedication could be an example of wishful thinking. Or maybe Menavino wrote it in one of the few short periods in which Christians could hope that Francis I would change his mind and cancel his alliance with the Turks, around 1524, for instance, when Francis, in his search for allies in central Europe to fight against Charles V, signed a Franco-Polish alliance with Sigismund I at a point when the Poles were being attacked by the Ottomans. (This alliance was cancelled the following year.) Or, more likely, Menavino could have written it between 1538 and 1542, when the French-Ottoman alliance was put on hold for a while because Francis I and Charles V had made peace through the Truce of Nice, and Francis officially changed alliances. In the truce, Charles and Francis made an agreement to ally against the Ottomans in order to expel them from Hungary. Open conflict between Charles and Francis, as well as Franco-Ottoman collaboration, would resume in 1542.

Furthermore, there seems to be an ambiguity between the message of the dedication on the one hand, and the contents of the rest of the work on the other: the dedication expresses the intention to support the anti-Ottoman battle, and praises the king's plan of a crusade against 'the tyrant', while the tone of the rest of the work is not particularly aggressive or condemnatory. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that Menavino does not refrain from sometimes expressing the superiority of Christianity and the need to combat the Ottomans.

The contrast between dedication and text, together with the question of the addressee, could be interpreted as signs that the dedication was not authentic. The possibilities are that it could have been written either by Menavino himself at an earlier time, as suggested above, or by the publisher.

If the new dedication was written by Menavino himself, it could also be a simple sign of pragmatism. In 1519, he had dedicated his work to the pope because he needed his protection and favours (maybe to witness his formal conversion), but in the 1520s or 1530s he might have needed to gain the favour of the French king. Formica suggests a more political interpretation: that Menavino might have had anti-imperialist opinions, and therefore indirectly wanted to criticise the Spanish Empire by dedicating his work to the French king and writing quite mildly about the Turks (*Lo specchio turco*, p. 56). She claims that it was no coincidence that the book was printed in Venice and Florence, since they were the

most dynamic places and the most culturally open, even towards Reformation ideas (Formica, *Lo specchio turco*, p. 54). But her arguments are not strong enough, being based on questionable interpretations of brief passages in the work.

In his preface to the 1548 edition, A. Campano claims that he has found an old, lacerated almost unreadable book that he has corrected and made more presentable. He mentions the text as a book *dell'altrui stampe*, i.e. from another printing house, as if it was a *printed* book he had found. If so, it cannot be the manuscript dated 1519 and dedicated to the pope. The formulation is mysterious since the only other printed edition of Menavino's book is from the same year, printed in Florence, and it is difficult to imagine that it would have been reduced to such a worn condition in only a few months (that is, if it was printed before the Venice edition, which is not at all certain). Campano could have made up the whole story in order to legitimise the edition of a book that had already been published earlier in the same year by a Florentine publisher. Otherwise there is no explanation for this circumstance.

The five books of *I cinque libri* each contain an introduction followed by a number of chapters, ranging from 23 to 36, of uneven length, from a few lines to a couple of pages. The first book (23 chapters) is about Turkish everyday life and laws (*della vita, et legge turchesca*). The introduction is the longest part of the work and describes the capture of Menavino and his father, and his arrival at the sultan's palace. (Genoese merchants had purchased and liberated his father, who had returned to Constantinople to find his son.) At court, Bayezid II took an immediate liking to Menavino. He spoke to him in Italian, and praised Christians (in particular the Tuscans) for their wit and for the education they gave their children. He decided to keep him as an *icoglan*, and sent him to the Seraglio school together with four of his grandchildren. There he studied Islam and learned both written and spoken Turkish.

Menavino gives a detailed account of Islam and rarely compares Islam and Christianity, though when he does he highlights the similarities between the two religions rather than the differences. Generally speaking, he is more interested in cultural differences than in religious ones, although he does mention some paradoxes, such as the rule that forbids killing but permits an exception if the killing is 'either against the unfaithful or part of a just war in defence of the lords', or the rule against lust that is ignored because all Turks practise sodomy.

The second book (23 chapters) is about churches, hospitals, the religion of the Turks and their way of managing justice (*delle chiese, hospitali, et religione de Turchi et modo di ministrar giustitia*). Menavino describes the size and design of mosques, and explains how the sick – even the leprous – are taken care of in hospitals 'with great diligence (as if they were in their own homes)'. He presents the various kinds of religious functionaries (chs 3-13), and gives a description of the pilgrimage to Mecca (chs 14-16) that is very rare among European accounts of Islam. The description is so rich in detail that Menavino must have participated in the pilgrimage himself. He describes the significance of the wind directions, topographical features and the risk of bandits, and refers to the advice in the travel guides to take care around Cairo and Medina because of the risk of assault. Menavino also explains the Turks' view of Judgment Day, life after death, paradise and hell. Islam, he says, does not make any distinction between Christians, Jews and Muslims; what matters is only how one has behaved and whether one has been faithful or not.

The third book (26 chapters) is about life and rules in the sultan's Seraglio (*del vivere et ordini del Serraglio del Gran Turco*). The introduction is long and noteworthy because it contains a rare reference to clichés about Turks as uncivilised compared with Christians. Menavino compares Muslims to wild plants growing in distant stony desert places, and Christians to fruit trees tended in secure gardens. 'But if you remove these wild plants from uncultivated wastes and plant them elsewhere, that is if the Muslims converted and returned to the Christian faith, they would begin to bear sweet fruits as well.'

Menavino describes the food and drinking habits of the Turks, and he often spices up his account with anecdotes and proverbs. He describes their clothing in detail, and explains that the men do not have hair because Muḥammad declared that long hair deprives men of their strength. He describes women's hair with admiration, together with their shoes and veiled faces.

Menavino moves on to a detailed description of the Seraglio (chs 9-26), outlining its buildings and gardens, and the various slaves who attend on the sultan. He himself belonged to the group who were closest to the sultan and were responsible for looking after his private rooms and protecting him during the night. All slaves were sons of Christians except for the eunuchs, who were often Indian, and they were governed by strict rules until the age of 25, when they could expect to be given a responsibility somewhere in the empire. A Christian who had converted

to Islam could advance to any important position, and even end as the vizier. When Menavino escaped at the age of 22 in 1513, he was close to the point of advancing.

The fourth book is about the soldiers in the pay of the sultan, their captains and the courtiers (*delle genti d'arme salariata dal Gran Turco & suoi capitani et gentil'huomini*). Menavino mentions the great numbers of Christian slaves taken by the Great Turk and converted to the Muslim 'superstition', and says he would like to see someone have the courage to destroy a society based on such wrong and punish the Ottomans for their cruelties. He describes the administrative positions at court, the Janissaries, the ambassadors and the Seraglio of the women with its 25 houses. The women of the Seraglio are always Christians who have been taken prisoner. There are usually 200 of them.

The fifth book describes the armies of Greece and Anatolia, and the fighting between the Turkish lords (*dell'essercito delle Grecia et Natolia, et delle battaglie fatte tra i signori della Turchia*). Instead of recounting general histories on the Turks, as many other European authors did, Menavino chooses to write only about events that took place while he lived at court. Among other things, he relates Selim's takeover of power from Bayezid, and the parricide committed by Selim, who bribed Bayezid's Jewish doctor to poison him: 'The Turks do not care whether they wash their hands in their own blood or in water if they strive for the realm as sultan Selim did.' In the last chapter of this book Menavino relates his escape and his return home.

SIGNIFICANCE

Menavino's account is unique: he represents a group of Christian captives who were very close to the Ottoman sultan. Only a few similar works are known, the earliest being Johannes Schiltberger's *Reisebuch*, published in 1476 but recounting experiences from the period 1396-1427, and then of a simple servant who was not given access to the inner parts of the palace. Menavino's account is much more intimate, being written from the perspective both of a Christian boy on his arrival and of a Muslim after what must have been a conversion during his ten-year stay in the Seraglio.

The book was widely read and had a great significance for future depictions of the Ottoman world. Paolo Giovio mentions his conversations with Menavino in his *Historiae* (1550, Book 14), and refers to Menavino's observation about the possible poisoning of Bayezid by his son Selim (Torretta, *Giovanni Antonio Menavino*, p. 16). Giovio also mentions that Menavino had dedicated his book to Pope Leo X.

Nicolas de Nicolay, the French traveller, soldier, artist and royal cartographer, also mentions Menavino's book and was inspired by it in his account of travels in Turkey, *Navigations et pérégrinations orientales* (published in 1567). The anonymous *Viaje de Turquia* also seems to have been inspired by it (Formica, *Lo specchio turco*, p. 55 n. 129). Among modern scholars, Bisaha places Menavino (with Paulo Giovio and Andrea Cambini) within a growing tendency from the beginning of the 16th century to view the Turks 'from a less biased perspective' and to see 'beyond the barbarian stereotype to know their enemy' (*Creating East and West*, p. 178). Inalcik mentions Menavino as a source on the Seraglio (*The Ottoman Empire*, p. 79) although, as Dalzell sees it, he neglects Menavino's 'chief importance to any study of the Christian contacts with Islam'. Finally, Höfert uses Menavino as an example of a new epistemological pattern of ethnographic knowledge of the Turks after 1453: a tendency to treat the thing, 'la cosa', 'res', that is to use empirical observations and objectification (Höfert, 'The order of things', pp. 52-54).

It has been established that Menavino's book is the Italian source behind an English text from the 19th century that describes the lunatic asylum in Constantinople (Peloso, 'Hospital care of madness in Turkish sixteenth century'). In that period in Europe, the insane were mostly taken care of in their families or left to themselves.

Menavino excuses himself for being 'not much orderly and coarse', and says that he is not a 'learned writer' but a 'faithful interpreter or rather a true narrator of the things he has seen and learned'. His style is concrete and objective: he only tells what he has seen with his own eyes, he says, and he distinguishes himself by not inventing anything and instead showing knowledge from within – as Gölner remarks: 'Der geschichtliche Wert seines Werkes ist durch seinen sachlichen, von allen Phrasen freien Stil gekennzeichnet' (Gölner, *Turcica*, p. 413). However, even though his account is based on his personal experiences, he never gives prominence to himself and does not share his feelings or inner thoughts.

Unlike other depictions of Ottoman society, such as Spandugino's or Georgewic's, but similar to those of Giovio and Cambini, who try to depict less stereotypical aspects of the Ottoman Empire, Menavino's perspective is not purely European or critical towards Islam – he speaks of *Turchi* or *Maometthani* rather than heretics or barbarians. He has gained a deep knowledge of the Islamic religion and he often chooses to underscore the similarities with Christianity rather than the differences. He does not just repeat stereotypes about Islam as a corrupt or heretical religion, nor does he consider Muḥammad a false prophet, and instead

of characterising Islam as violent or sensual, he depicts it as merciful. It is thus difficult to understand why Bareggi characterises the work as only 'a text of fashion in which the author in various ways shows the superiority of the westerners and assigns the Christian defeat to the divine wrath' (Bareggi, *Il mestiere di scrivere*, p. 71). At the end of his text Menavino does mention divine wrath in order to explain the Ottoman defeat at the battle of Chaldiran (wrongly perceived by Menavino as a lost battle), but in this context he does not include reflections on Christian-Turkish conflicts at all.

One could argue that he clearly rejects the Ottomans when he chooses to escape, even at great risk to his life and even though he may have had a good chance of making a career in the Ottoman administration or military. However, it must also be considered that Menavino belonged to Bayezid, whom he supported during the conflict with Selim, and whose violent death he witnessed. For this reason his life may very well have been in danger after these dramatic events, and under Selim his career opportunities may not have been the same as under Bayezid.

MANUSCRIPTS

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EDITIONS & TRANSLATIONS

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Chronicorum Turcicorum, in quibus Turcorum Origo, Principes Imperatores, Bella, Prælia, Cædes, Victoriæ, rei que militaris Ratio & cætera huic pertinentia... exponuntur, Francofurti: Phil. Lonicerus, 1584

De Mahometanis Turcorum legibus, religione, vita, tum etiam de aulae Turcicae apparatus... Quibus accedit narratio de Baiazethis filiorum cladibus, Italico Idiomate a Johanne Antonio Moenavino..., Francofurti ad Moenum: apud Joannem Feyrabend, 1578

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Giovanni Antonio Von dem Mahometischen Glauben, vol. 2, fols 1-88, Frankfurt am Main: [Paul Reffeler.], 1572 (German trans.)

Türkische Historien, von der Türcken Ankunfft, Regierung, Königen, vnd Keysern, Kriegen... vnd Sigen, wider Christen vnd Heiden... item von der Türcken Religion vnd Gesetz..., Frankfurt am Main, 1563 (VD16 D 1382) (German trans.)

I costumi, et la vita de Turchi, di Gio. Antonio Menavino Genovese da Vultri. Con una prophetia, & altre cose Turchesche, tradotte per M. Ludovico Domenichi, Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1551

I cinque libri delle legge, religione, et vita de' turchi: et della corte, et alcune guerre del Gran Turco: di Giovanantonio Menavino Genovese da Vultri. Oltre ciò, una prophetia de' Mahomettani, et la miseria de' prigionieri, de' Christiani, che vivono sotto il Gran Turco, et altre cose Turchesche, non piu vedute: tradotte da M. Lodovico Domenichi, Venice: Vincenzo Valgrisi, 1548 (with a preface by Appolonio Campano)

Trattato de costumi et vita de Turchi composto per Giouan Antonio Menauino Genouese da Vultri, Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1548

STUDIES

Torretta, Giovanni Antonio Menavino

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- N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West. Renaissance humanists and Ottoman Turks*, Philadelphia PA, 2004, p. 178
- A. Höfert, 'The order of things and the discourse of the Turkish threat. The conceptualisation of Islam in the rise of Occidental anthropology in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', in A. Höfert and A. Salvatore (eds), *Between Europe and Islam. Shaping modernity in a transcultural space*, Brussels, 2000, 39-64
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Pia Schwarz Lausten

Jacob Mantino

Jacob Mantino ben Samuel

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown
 PLACE OF BIRTH Unknown
 DATE OF DEATH 1549
 PLACE OF DEATH Damascus

BIOGRAPHY

Coming from a Jewish home and remaining faithful to his Jewish faith throughout his life, Jacob Mantino worked for Christian patrons, taught in Christian institutions and translated philosophical and medical texts into Latin for the advancement of these subjects among his Christian, Latin-reading, audience. His key role was in providing clear and up-to-date translations of the works of Averroes and Avicenna, the principal Arabic/Islamic authorities on philosophy and medicine. He made these from Hebrew translations of the Arabic originals.

Mantino's parents originated from Tortosa in Spain, where he himself may have been born. He states that he studied medicine and possibly the arts at the University of Padua. He practised as a doctor in Bologna, and became an intimate of Pope Leo X, to whom he dedicated a translation of Averroes's Middle Commentary on Aristotle's *On animals* in 1521. In the same year, he dedicated his translation of the Compendium (Epitome) of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to another patron, Ercole Gonzaga, Bishop of Mantua. This marks the beginning of a lifetime devoted to the translation of Averroes (both his philosophical commentaries and his medical work, the *Colliget*) and Avicenna.

At the time of the Fall of Rome (1527), Mantino moved to Verona, where he continued to be held in high esteem. The new pope, Clement VII, consulted him about Henry VIII's appeal to Rome concerning the legality of his marriage to Catherine, to which Mantino quoted the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud to claim that the divorce was wrong.

Mantino returned to Rome to be the personal physician to Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese; 1534-49). At the same time, he played an important role in the Jewish community there, and taught at La Sapienza University.