

Pedro Mártir's visit to the sultan of Egypt, 1501 - 1502¹

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My interest in Pedro Mártir was aroused, a couple of years ago, when I tried to establish when the Morisco's begged their fellow Muslims abroad for help against the intolerance of the Spanish government by sending them a moving poem.³ In the recent discussion a link has been supposed between this poem and the mission of Pedro Mártir to the sultan of Egypt in 1501-1502.⁴ The story of this mission was based on 19th-century works by Washington Irving and William Prescott.⁵ They in their turn used the 16th-century chronicle of Santa Cruz, known to contain transcripts of many period documents.⁶ And Santa Cruz, in this case, inserted a very abridged version of Pedro Mártir's *Legatio Babylonica*, his report about this mission, printed for the first time in Sevilla in 1511.⁷ In this article I want to discuss the historical reliability of the letters and the report Pedro Mártir wrote about his mission, and consequently the mission itself, because they are almost the only source. The *Legatio Babylonica* has without discussion been accepted as the true story of a successful action to prevent the sultan's revenge on the Christians in his realm as a reprisal for the treatment of the Spanish Muslims and at the same time to obtain safe and unhampered access for pilgrims to Jerusalem, and permission to repair monuments in the Holy Land (until 1517 under the supervision of the sultan of Egypt).

Short biography

Pedro Mártir was born between 1455 and 1459 in a noble but impoverished Milanese family.⁸ He was trained, as usual in his social class, in the courtly arts. In Rome, from 1477 to 1487, he was thoroughly instructed in the humanities, Latin in the first place. The Spanish ambassador Íñigo López de Mendoza met him there, developed a liking for the young scholar and persuaded him to join his company when he returned to Spain. What Mártir wanted to do there was first and for all to fight the enemies of Christ. He was present at the siege of Baza (1489) and was an eyewitness of the surrender of Granada. It is not

¹ This is a revised version of the paper read at the 13th Colloquium in Leuven, 12-14 May 2004.

² Author's name of Th.M.Koornwinder-Wijntjes.

³ James T. Monroe, 'A curious Morisco appeal to the Ottoman Empire', in: *Al-Andalus* 31 (1966) 281-303.

⁴ L.P.Harvey, 'The Morisco's and their International Relations', in: *L'Expulsió dels Moriscos*. Barcelona 1994, 135-139 (Congres held in 1990); idem, 'The political, social and cultural history of the Morisco's', in: *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*. Brill, Leiden etc, 1994, 201-234. That the appeal was also directed to the Mamluk sultan has been shown by Sjoerd van Koningsveld and Gerard Wiegers, 'Islam in Spain during the early sixteenth century. The views of the four chief judges in Cairo (Introduction, translation and Arabic text)', in: *Orientations. Poetry, Politics and Polemics. Cultural transfer between the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa*. Ed. by Otto Zwartjes, Geert Jan van Gelder and Ed de Moor. Amsterdam - Atlanta, GA, 1996, 133-152.; idem, 'An appeal of the Morisco's to the Mamluk Sultan and its counterpart to the Ottoman court: textual analysis, context, and wider historical background', in: *Al-Qantara* 20/1 (1999) 161-189.

⁵ Washington Irving, *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada by Fray Antonio Agapide*. Introduction by Earl N. Harbert; text edited by Miriam J. Shillingburg. Boston 1988 (Original edition in 1829), 231; William H. Prescott, *History of the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic*. London, new and revised edition 1841 (first edition 1837), 286-8

⁶ Alonso de Santa Cruz, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, ed. Juan de Mata Carriazo. 2 vols., Sevilla 1951; Cap. LXV, Vol. I, 267-73. This chronicle was written around 1550.

⁷ Petrus Martyr de Angleria, *Opera. Legatio Babylonica; De Orbe Novo Decades Octo; Opus Epistolarum*. Facs. ed. Graz 1966. Intr. Erich Woldan.

⁸ Jean-Hippolyte Mariéjol, *Un lettré italien à la cour d'Espagne. Pierre Martyr d'Anghiera. Sa vie et son oeuvre*. Paris 1887 (Diss.).

sure whether he actually took part in the fighting, even though he boasted that he more liked to wave a spear than to plough paper.⁹ Anyhow, after the end of the war he took holy orders and soon got a position at the court of the Catholic Monarchs teaching Latin to the young promising nobles. The standard of Latin was very low in Spain, Mártir worked hard to ameliorate it. He lived until 1526 without ever again leaving Spain after his adventurous journey to Egypt. He is still best remembered as the chronicler of the history of the New World, a term he invented.

Reports

In August 1501 the Catholic Monarchs (los reyes católicos), Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castilia, sent Pedro Mártir to Egypt with instructions to obtain from the sultan respect for the privileges of the clergy living in Jerusalem, permission to repair damaged buildings in the Holy Land, and protection of the pilgrims. He was also ordered to defend the way they treated the Muslims in Spain, if he got questions about it.¹⁰ It was arranged that he should use a Venetian fleet sailing to Alexandria, and he carried a secret message to be delivered to the Venetian Senate. During his journey Mártir wrote letters home as often as he found a possibility to send them. All the letters are written in Latin, the ones addressed to his sovereigns on Isabella's explicit request, and the ones addressed to his mentor the count of Tendilla, Íñigo López de Mendoza, and the archbishop of Granada, Hernando de Talavera (they received usually one letter addressed to them both) and to his pupil Pedro Fajardo because this was the language they always used. All his letters have been printed in his posthumous *Opus Epistolarum* in 1530.¹¹ The letters were rather short, when he had spare time he worked on a more elaborate version on the basis of which he published in 1511 the *Legatio Babylonica*. He was asked to do so by Cisneros, the powerful Franciscan friar and statesman (who had been the queen's confessor). In 1516, after the death of king Ferdinand, Cisneros was even regent of Spain until the arrival of the heir to the throne Charles V (Charles I in Spain), as Mártir mentions in the dedication to pope Leo X of a second revised and nicer printed edition published that year. This article is based on a comparison between the letters and the editions of the *Legatio*, a lucky coincidence gave me access to both editions.¹² As far as I know this has never been performed before, although García added (in notes to his edition of the *Legatio*) translations of the relevant parts of the letters, but without analysis and omitting other topics.

Mártir's journey according to his letters

⁹ Facsimile-edition Graz 1966, Ep. 73.

¹⁰ *Biblioteca "Reyes Católicos"; Documentos y textos*, ed. A. de la Torre y L. Suárez Fernández. T. VI: *Documentos sobre Relaciones Internacionales de los Reyes Católicos*, ed. Antonio de la Torre. Barcelona 1966; 266-270 instructions for Mártir, but not the message for the Senate.

¹¹ Facsimile-edition Graz 1966, Ep. 220-239. Spanish translation: *Epistolario de Pedro Mártir de Anglería*, in: *Colección de Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España*, T. IX-XII; ed. y trad. de J. Lopez de Toro. Madrid 1953-1957, IX 221-231, X 232-240. References are first to the Latin original in the facsimile-edition, then to the Spanish translation with volume and number. The editor of the translation corrected the numbering of the letters where mistakes had occurred, hence the difference. The request of the queen in Ep.229/XI 230.

¹² The 1511 edition, dedicated to Cisneros, has been used in the bilingual edition: *Una embajada de los Reyes Católicos a Egipto según la "Legatio Babylonica" y el "Opus Epistolarum"*, trad., prólogo y notas de Luis García y García, Valladolid 1947; the 1966 facsimile-edition used the 1516 edition, dedicated to pope Leo X. In Ep. 234/X 235 Mártir explains to his sovereigns that a part of Cairo is called Babylon, thereafter the name of the book.

In the summer of 1501 Mártir was told to prepare himself for a long journey abroad, only later his destination was revealed: Venice first, and then he was to cross the sea to pay a visit to the sultan of Egypt. The purpose of the mission was kept secret, but in a letter written before his journey he mentioned the Alpujarra revolt, the forced conversion of many Muslims as a result, and the fear of a possible retaliation on the Christians under the domination of the sultan.¹³

In August Mártir departed from Granada and travelled north with his servants. In the north of Spain an outbreak of plague made that he could not enter Barcelona but had to stay in a suburb where he lost his trusted servants, whether they died or only were too ill to continue is not clear. The same problem in southern France, he avoided Narbonne and in Avignon he had to negotiate for permission to cross the Rhône. Thereafter he must have taken the coastway into Italy. In Padua he sold his horses and took the boat to Venice. He arrived there on 30 September. The last fleet to Egypt of the season - from October 1st, sailing was prohibited - was on the point of departure. Most of the ships had already left the harbour, but one was still waiting for him, after messengers had announced his arrival. Venice had just lost its doge and was in the process of electing a successor. Nevertheless the Senate agreed to receive Mártir and to listen to his message. He bought the necessary equipment and preferred to hire a fast ship, rather than to make use of the overburdened ship waiting for the last cargo, to sail to the fleet anchored in Pola, across the Adriatic. On that short trip on 2 October he had a narrow escape from being shipwrecked. The fleet had to wait more than a week for the storm to subside. Finally they sailed and had a very rough time in the Adriatic. Nearly three months later, on the evening of 23 December, they reached Alexandria. In better weather the transfer could be done in less than three weeks. In Alexandria Mártir resided with the Catalan consul and sent an urgent message to Cairo to ask the sultan's permission and freeconduct to visit him. The sultan took his time, Mártir profited from the delay to look around in the old city. He used his sparetime also to write at length about what he had experienced during his journey.

Finally the permission arrived, and two courtiers (he complained that they never left their eyes off him) accompanied Mártir first overland to the Nile, and then to Cairo on a Nileboat, the landroad being too dangerous for foreigners. He presented the demands of the Catholic Monarchs to the sultan and got all their wishes granted. He returned to Alexandria as he came, and on 5 March he despatched short letters to his correspondents, including the king and queen, making use of a fast sailing light ship that he not trusted for his own transportation. He reported in one line to his sovereigns that his mission had been successful, not giving any details nor dates of his visit, but he promised them the complete story in a lengthier letter, if he found a possibility to send it. That letter, if it existed, is not in the *Opus Epistolarum*. In the letters to his other correspondents he did not even mention his visit to the sultan. The earlier letters about the hardships of sailing and his description of Alexandria are very detailed, so it is a deception that he was not more explicit about the main task he had had to accomplish. The ships that brought him to Alexandria were still waiting in the harbour. It had not been possible to buy enough cargo (as a result of the Portuguese raids in the Red Sea, but he did not mention that) and they had been ordered by the governor to stay until after the arrival of a shipload of pepper. Mártir described then with many details the Venetian trading system. And in a letter to his pupil Pedro Fajardo he elaborated on the events in Persia, where the Safavids were in the process of seizing power. The journey back took slightly more than the normal thirty days, he left Alexandria on 22 April, and arrived in Venice on 31 May, as he reported in his next letters, written 3 June .

The journey according to the *Legatio Babylonica*

The *Legatio*, published ten years (and many events in Spain) later, offers a more detailed description of the parts of the journey that are missing in the letters. It is a handsome small publication, divided into three books containing the letters he wrote to the Catholic Monarchs. The first two, rather short ones, contain more or less the same information as the letters discussed in the foregoing section, but offer as

¹³ Ep. 220/IX 221.

an extra a minute description of the way a doge was elected¹⁴ and a selection of the Roman inscriptions he collected in Pola during his forced stay there.¹⁵ The third letter, dated 2 April, is very much longer and very different from the other two. In this form it probably is not the letter that Mártir had promised his monarchs to write when still in Alexandria, that letter, if written, might never have been sent and only been used as basis for the writing of the *Legatio* and therefor not included in the *Opus Epistolarum*.

The delay in Alexandria to get the sultan's permission was not due, the *Legatio* says, to the sultan's fear of a revolt (as he pretended) but was in reality caused by the complaints of Mauritanian (North-African) envoys and angry Moors about the treatment the Muslims in Spain were given, and by rumours that Mártir did not bring any gifts and had no retinue. When this was reported to him, Mártir sent the Franciscan friars, in whose company he had travelled (this is the first time he mentions associates in the journey!), to the sultan. They delivered a speech to him wherein they argued that the rumour that Mártir had no retinue was not true, but that he brought no gifts was correct. The sultan should consider that as an honour, the Catholic Monarchs considered gifts as bribery. The friars obtained in this way permission for Mártir to visit the sultan. So he travelled to Cairo, escorted by two courtiers and all the merchants he could find in Alexandria to reach the pretended number of his followers. They arrived on 31 Januari in Bulâq, had to pass the night on board, and the next day (1 Februari) they were welcomed by the dragoman, a convert of Spanish origin named Tangaribardinus (Taghrî Birdî), and lodged in his house.¹⁶ Mártir asked to be admitted to the sultan as soon as possible, being afraid that the Venetian ships would have left when he came back to Alexandria, in which case he expected difficulties in finding other means of transportation. So the next day (2 Februari, a Wednesday) he was received by the sultan in a formal audience. The sultan allowed him to come nearer than most visitors and he was not forced to prostrate himself and to kiss the ground. The meeting was restricted to formalities and the exchange of the usual polite phrases without real content, through the intermediary of Tangrî Birdî, who proved still to be able to speak his mothertongue well. The sultan seemed to be of a friendly disposition towards Mártir, and for the next Sunday a further meeting was arranged.

This visit is the occasion to include a description of the castle of Cairo, which Mártir compares with the Alhambra, and of the person of the sultan, Cambsou Gaurus (Qânsûh al-Ghawrî). He describes the way the Mamluks dress and especially their strange and cumbersome headcoverings are for him a source of amazement.¹⁷ The gap between the first and the second audience is filled with a long detailed discourse on the recent history of Egypt, and the way this sultan al-Ghawrî ascended to the throne, less than a year ago.¹⁸

But the Mauritanian envoys and other slanderers did not miss the opportunity to spread rumours among the Mamluks about their sultan being a friend of the Christians and almost started a riot. The sultan, thus threatened, ordered Taghrî Birdî to escort Mártir during the night out of Cairo and back to where he came from. From this point the dates are confused and sometimes contradictory. On Friday or Saturday, maybe the two dates given must be understood to mean Fridaynight, Taghrî Birdî, under the impression of the threats to his person, took this message to Mártir. Mártir, who considered Taghrî Birdî as still being secretly Christian and as friendly disposed towards his former sovereigns, flew into a passion and delivered a very harsh speech to convince him of the infinit power of the Catholic Monarchs and the danger to the sultan of their strategic presence in southern Italy. Taghrî Birdî,

¹⁴ A schematic figure of these elections circulated in Europe, see an example intitulated: In questo modo si elegge Il Serenissimo di Venezia, in: Dirk Horrington, *San Marco NV. Elf eeuwen welvaart en stabiel bestuur in Venetië*. Bilthoven 1971.

¹⁵ These inscriptions are only printed in the facsimile-edition of the *Legatio*, not in García's edition. Among the inscriptions is the following riddle: Aenigma in quodam tumulo. Pater.Cum Filia. Frater & Soror. Socer & Nurus. Hic.Tantum.Duo.lacent. Translation: Riddle on a tomb: Father with daughter, brother and sister, father-in-law and daughter-in-law: here only two persons are lying.

¹⁶ His biography in *Legatio* ed. García L. 93-95, S. 92-24.

¹⁷ *Legatio* ed. García L. 103-107, S. 104-108.

¹⁸ *Legatio* ed. García L. 109-141, S. 110-142.

impressed by those words, persuaded the sultan to receive Mártir again, and then a private audience was arranged, early the next Sunday morning (6 Februari). The sultan was eager to discuss the conversion of Spanish Muslims, Mártir thereupon delivered a long speech. He had come to Egypt to ask permission for restoration of dilapidated buildings in the Holy Land, and to obtain safe access to the holy places for pilgrims and repression of the abuses they were confronted with, not to justify the behaviour of his monarchs. But concerning the historical relations between the Muslims and the Christians in Spain, the Muslims had unjustly conquered the land, and the reconquest was lawful. Muslims who of their own will - the Christian religion did not permit forced conversion - repented and asked for baptism were forgiven their earlier (even armed) resistance, received support and could live in peace, those who wanted to remain Muslim could leave the country unhampered, but those who committed crimes had to be severely punished in order to set a discouraging example. The sultan should not pay attention to what vile Jews and lawless neophytes said.

This being said, Mártir came with a proposal. He offered to spread rumours about a treaty of friendship between the Catholic Monarchs and the sultan if the sultan consented to the demands of his sovereigns. Such a faked friendship could be of profit against the revolting Mamluk soldiers and even save the sultan's precarious rule.¹⁹ Taghrî Birdî translated the whole speech, and used the same facial expressions and gestures as Mártir himself, he remarked. The sultan let himself be convinced and was willing to concede what the Catholic Monarchs asked for.

The next day (Monday 7 Februari) the sultan obtained the consent of his court and sent official scribes to the house of Taghrî Birdî. The Franciscan friars, invited by Mártir's emissaries, arrived to discuss the demands and to help with the redaction of the necessary documents. Here, Mártir is more explicit about what he considered as the motivation of his embassy: to calm the wrath of the barbarians (his opinion about the inhabitants of the Orient cannot be said to have been very flattering), who threaten to extinguish, in reprisal of the behaviour of the Catholic Monarchs, all the Christians in the East. It is also clear that he did not carry an exactly formulated proposal of what the monarchs wanted from the sultan.

His mission being accomplished, Mártir did some sightseeing. He was escorted by Taghrî Birdî and his usual courtiers through vast meadows full of horses and camels and strewn with farms to the pyramids at Gizah. He saw only two pyramids, and the sphinx, and reported a visit to the interior of the tallest pyramid by some of the servants.²⁰ He noticed the remains of Memphis at a distance.²¹ This visit must have been on Tuesday 8 Februari, not on 6 or 7 as he also stated. The next day he celebrated the beginning of Lent, Wednesday 9 Februari²², with a visit to Matariya, the place where Mary and the infant Christ took their refuge when on the flight for King Herod. The place was famous for Balsam trees, but these had been cut a few years earlier. He quoted several stories about the cause of this regrettable loss.²³ The guardian of the Franciscans celebrated mass at an improvised altar, and then they had a picnic, the Christians eating fish, the Muslims meat. Mártir also drank lots of water from the Nile and savoured it, although he was told to be careful with water and fish. This brought him to the subject of the Nile and a long exposé of the danger of crocodiles.

Mártir had to spend another two weeks in Cairo, without giving a reason for this delay, (surprising, seen his earlier expressed anxiety to return as soon as possible to Alexandria), neither reporting how he

¹⁹ *Legatio* ed. García L. 147-163, S. 150-168.

²⁰ *Legatio* ed. García L. 169-179, S. 174-184. The visit to the pyramids poses many questions. Why does he mention only two pyramids, the third one, Mycerinos, being indeed smaller but not to be overlooked? Why does he say the entrances were on the south-eastern side when he could see that they were facing north? Does an Italian not know the difference between limestone and marble? See also Mariéjol, *op.cit.*, 67 n.2.

²¹ The distance he reports to Memphis is far too great.

²² He says: *mercurii die sexto ydus februarii*, which is a contradiction. *Caput Jejunii* fell on Wednesday 9 Februari in 1502, *die sexto ydus februarii* is Tuesday 8 Februari.

²³ But he missed how it really came to pass, they fell victim to the fighting for the throne, see Mariéjol, *op.cit.*, 69. *Legatio* ed. García L. 179-189, S. 184-194.

spent the time. He took his leave from the sultan in a final audience where he was given a very expensive robe decorated with Arabic letters and doubled with ermine as a present. He had made that robe into a liturgical garment, as is known from his last will.²⁴ He was escorted back to the house of Taghrî Birdî by way of the city of the dead, normally forbidden for Christians.²⁵ He left Cairo on 27 Februari and was back in Alexandria on 4 March. About his return journey he was very brief, and he ended the *Legatio* with a fiery admonition to his sovereigns not to hesitate in fighting the Muslims.

Some additional data

A good story, this *Legatio Babylonica*, well told with an eloquent pen. The first doubts arose by a remark of Ahmad Darrâj in his book on the relations between the Mamluks and the Franks. He did not find any document dated 1502 concerning the treatment of pilgrims in the Holy Land. The first documents he discovered concerning pilgrims and Jerusalem issued by Qânsûh al-Ghawrî dated from 18 months after Mártir had left Egypt.²⁶ Of course, it is possible that a document has not survived the vicissitudes of history. But once suspicion having been raised, many more questions occurred. Why in the first place did the Catholic Monarchs make use of an inexperienced scholar for such a delicate mission? Why did he not bring gifts for the sultan, common diplomatic practice in those days? Who were the friars that came out of the blue when he was in trouble in Alexandria and rescued his mission? Why was he so taciturn in his letters about his experiences in Cairo, and why was the third letter to his sovereigns not in the *Opus Epistolarum*? And, not unimportant, what was the reason to publish his *Legatio Babylonica* almost ten years later and what was its purpose?

Fortunately, some data have been preserved about this mission that can help to solve some at least of these questions. The credentials that Mártir carried to legitimize him as ambassador of the Catholic Monarchs have been published, wherein he is presented invariably as instructor of the young nobles of the court.²⁷ One of these letters was directed to Taghrî Birdî, who was reminded of his Spanish past and the good relations he always had had with the Catholic Monarchs, and was asked to take care of Mártir. Further general instructions about his conversations with Tangrî Birdî and the sultan were given to Mártir, with a clear statement of the purpose of the mission. For details concerning the holy places he had to rely on the guardian of (the Franciscan monastery of) Montesion, or, in his absence, on the friars that accompanied him or on the residents of Montesion.

The name of this anonymous guardian of the Franciscans, that is not found in the letters nor in the *Legatio* nor in the instruction, has been revealed by Mariéjol, Mártir's biographer, in his rendering of the episode in Matariya: his name is Fray Mauro Hispano.²⁸ Mariéjol omitted to give his source, but an article by García Oro on Fray Mauro solved that problem²⁹: a letter that Mártir wrote in 1507 to Fray

²⁴ Mariéjol, *op.cit.*, 70 n.1.

²⁵ The sightseeing tour through the city of the dead was more a way to avoid the mob than a special favour. From Ibn Iyâs, who by the way did not mention the visit of the ambassador of such mighty monarchs, it is known that the city was in turmoil at that moment. See: *Die Chronik des Ibn Ijâs*. In Gemeinschaft mit Moritz Sobernheim herausgegeben von Paul Kahle und Muhammed Mustafa. Vol. IV, Istanbul 1931, 23-26.

²⁶ Ahmad Darrâj, *Al-mamâlik wa-l-firandj fî l-qarn al-tâsif al-hijrî - al-khâmis 'ashr al-milâdî*. Cairo 1961, 131.

²⁷ These documents are all dated 8 August 1501, see: *Documentos sobre Relaciones Internacionales de los Reyes Católicos*, 266-270, docs. 29-33. A day earlier, 7 August, he was paid 375 maravedi's to cover his travel costs, see: Miguel-Angel Ladero Quesada, *Los Mudéjares de Castilla en tiempo de Isabel I*. Valladolid 1969, Expenses related to revolts and conversion of the mudéjars of Granada, document 151, 351.

²⁸ Mariéjol, *op.cit.*, 69.

²⁹ José García Oro, 'Fray Mauro Hispano O.F.M. (1504 - 1506): Un portavoz del "Soldán de Babilonia" en Europa', in: *Homenaje al Prof. Darío Cabanelas Rodríguez, O.F.M., con motivo de su LXX aniversario*, I, Granada 1987, 345 - 354.

Mauro, then returned to Spain after his period as guardian of the Franciscans in Jerusalem.³⁰ In that letter he remembered their joint stay in Cairo, and he anticipated on the pleasure to meet again the comrade with whom he survived heavy storms and very great perils. That Fray Mauro even served as his interpreter at court, as García Oro says, cannot be deducted from those few lines, he was only helping with the redaction of the necessary documents according to the *Legatio*.

How the mission really went: a theory

So, after this discovery, and since careful reading of the story of the visit to Cairo had shown that the dates showed inaccuracy, and that at many places the insertion of anecdotal or encyclopaedic material overshadowed the reported event, I came to the following theory about Mártir's mission.

There are two key figures involved in the mission, besides Mártir himself: Fray Mauro and Taghrî Birdî, both professionals who (in my opinion) actually carried out the negotiations.³¹ The story should perhaps start with Mártir's presence at the siege of Baza in 1489. During that siege, two Franciscan friars, sent as ambassadors by the sultan of Egypt, came to see the Catholic Monarchs.³² This was a current practice, when an Egyptian sultan wanted to contact western powers, he always made use of the Franciscans as representatives of the pope in the East. The message they delivered: stop harassing the Muslims, or the sultan will take reprisals against the Christians in his realm, was comparable to the fear Mártir expressed, as was the answer they got: the monarchs are in their right, peaceful people suffer no harm, was the same as he brought to the sultan. That Mártir had contact with them is likely, he would not have missed the opportunity to get information on Jerusalem and the East. So when after the Alpujarra-revolt the idea came up to send an ambassador to the sultan, it was not illogical to think of Pedro Mártir as the one to do the job. He might even have obtained some knowledge of the Arabic language, having lived in Granada.

The instruction proves that he did not travel alone, but was accompanied by monks (rreligiosos), bearded Franciscan friars he stated in the *Legatio*.³³ For his Italian mission his background was vital, he knew the people and the customs. His message to Venice, although its content has not been preserved, is rather obvious: Spain and France quarreled over the execution of the partition of the kingdom of Naples, and both tried to get Venice at their side, or at least to prevent La Serenissima to join sides with the other.³⁴ Maybe he also had to convince the Senate that his mission to Egypt was no threat to

³⁰ Ep. 337/X 338.

³¹ Ch. Schefer, *Le Voyage d'Outremer de Jean Thénauud (..) suivi de La Relation de l'Ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d'Egypte, 1512*. Paris 1884, Introduction; E. Combe, 'Pierre Martyr d'Anghiera et le drogman du sultan Ghauri', in: *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University*, 2 (1944) 106-113; John Wansborough, 'A Mamluk Ambassador to Venice in 913/1507', in: *BSOAS* 26 (1963) 503 - 530; Maria Pia Pedani, 'The Mamluk Documents of the Venetian State Archives: Historical Survey', in: *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 20-21 (2002-3) 133-146; Frédéric Bauden, 'The Mamluk Documents of the Venetian State Archives: Handlist', in: *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 20-21 (2002-3) 147-156; biography of Taghrî Birdî in the *Legatio*, ed. García L. 93-95, S. 90-94.

³² Most extensively related in *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos por su secretario Fernando del Pulgar*. Versión inédita, edición y estudio Juan de Mata Carriazo, volumen primero, Madrid 1943, 395-398. Also a short notice in *Memorias del Reinado de los Reyes Católicos que escribía el bachiller Andres Bernaldez*. Edición y estudio por Manuel Gomez-Moreno y Juan de M.Carriazo, Madrid 1962, 208. The names of these ambassadors were Alfonso de Luzcano and Francisco de la Aguila, of Spanish birth, not Antonio Milliano as mentioned by Darrâj based on an older Spanish book. See: Rachel Arié, *L'Espagne musulmane au temps des Nasrides (1232 - 1492)*. (Paris 1973); 1990 2nd., 172-174, 174 n. 1.

³³ *Legatio* ed. García L. 83, S. 80.

³⁴ For the international relations at the time and the partition of Naples: Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella*. Translated and Edited by Benjamin Keen. New Brunswick 1961 (original edition in 1892); J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469-1716*. New York 1966; Henry Kamen, *Spain 1469-1714. A society of conflict*. New York 1986; idem, 'The Habsburg Lands : Iberia', in: *Handbook of European*

Venice, at that moment at war with Turkey. When he had returned to Venice and stayed there some time before continuing his journey to Spain, he tried again to play a role, based on his family relations and his acquaintances, as he told in the letters he wrote home during that period.

In June 1501 Fray Mauro had been chosen as guardian of the Franciscans of Montesion at a meeting of the Franciscan Order in Urbino.³⁵ It is conceivable that he was still in Italy, waiting for transportation to Jerusalem via Alexandria in order to present himself to the sultan of Egypt, taking into account the role of the guardian of Montesion as representative of the pope in the East³⁶, and that Mártir joined him in Venice. That the Venetians kept their fleet waiting, breaking their own laws, is easier to understand if they were doing that for such an authority as Fray Mauro. Why should they bother for Mártir, the representative of monarchs with whom they were not even allied? Mártir mentioned in his letter to Fray Mauro, not only the time they spent together in Cairo, but the storms and perils they had faced together. That could have been meant as a metaphore, but also literally with a view to the difficult journey to Alexandria. García Oro seems to hint at that possibility.

Mártir arrived at a very unfortunate moment in Alexandria. He ascribed the reluctance of the sultan to receive him to the calumnies spread by the Mauritanian envoys, on the instigation of people that had fled from Granada (those people could have made use of the poem mentioned earlier, but there is absolutely nothing to prove that supposition). The fact is that the sultan had only recently (in April 1501), after a series of short turbulent reigns and much internal fighting, as Mártir himself later explained, ascended to the throne, and that his power was far from undisputed. So his reluctance mirrored the reality and was no pretext.

The friars helped him then to get access to the sultan by defending his mission. The speech which they delivered - as recorded and most probably invented by Mártir - was an example of the rhetorical figure of conversion: the defense of what was bad as good and vice versa.³⁷ Mártir was accused of the diplomatic blunder of not bringing gifts to the sultan, but that was to be considered an honour, not an affront. That Mártir did not bring gifts for the sultan might be explained by the nature of his mission: he traveled with friars, he was not a professional ambassador but a teacher with an ecclesiastical background. His concern was the restauration of the holy places and the safety of the pilgrims to Jerusalem in the first place, as stated in his instruction. That the French king, the rival of the Spanish monarchs, had been given the title 'king of Jerusalem' in the partition of Naples the year before might have been an impetus for them to act as protectors of the Holy Land and to ask support from the sultan, but that is only a guess, not supported by the letters.

The two courtiers who were sent to accompany Mártir to the sultan, escorted him during his stay in Cairo and brought him back to Alexandria probably acted not only with a view to his safety, as contended. He has more likely been placed under observation of some sort, for obvious reasons. Part of Taghrí Birdí's work at the court of the sultan was the supervision of the foreigners, he provided lodging and support to them (and had them pay for it quite substantially). The letter that the Catholic Monarchs directed to him shows that they were aware of his important rôle, they trusted that he would bring the mission to its desired purpose. He arranged the first audience, no more than a formal meeting that gave Mártir the opportunity to get an impression of the sultan. The real work had to be done at the next audience, the one that was cancelled after heavy threats towards the sultan and Taghrí Birdí. The speech by which Mártir persuaded Taghrí Birdí to go back to the sultan and arrange a new meeting was meant to give an impression of the military capacity of the people of Spain and the uselessness of resistance against its power.

The instruction for the conversation with the sultan was clear: the purpose of the meeting was to get permission for the restauration of ruined sacred places, and protection for pilgrims of all nations. If

History 1400-1600. Brill, Leiden etc. 1994. Vol. I 467-498; Luis Suárez Fernández, 'El reparto de Nápoles', in: R. Menendez Pidal, *Historia de España*, Madrid 1969, Vol XVII:2, Cap. VIII, 523-562.

³⁵ See García Oro, *op.cit.*

³⁶ Ep.337/X 338, also in the *Legatio* ed. García L. 185-187, S. 190-192.

³⁷ Geert Jan van Gelder, 'De verfraaiing van het Ielijke en de verleijsing van het fraaie', in *Sharqiyyât* 13/2 (2001), 123-107.

the sultan did not mention the treatment of the Muslims in Spain, Mártir was to keep silent on the subject. But if not, he was instructed to put forward the usual arguments: the Catholic Monarchs had a right to reconquer their stolen land, peaceful Muslims had nothing to fear but criminals were to be punished. The revolt of the Albaycin, Huejar and the Alpujarras had to be suppressed, but many Muslims had asked to be baptised, surrendering in this way to God's will.

In his speech at the private audience on Sunday morning - if that really took place, since the time of Mandeville's travels a secret audience was more or less a *topos*, to be found in several other contemporary travel accounts³⁸ - Mártir followed these instructions more or less, but he stressed that there was no obligation for his sovereigns to defend their behaviour. He did not go into the details of the insurrections, the invectives against the Jews and the lawless neophytes were his own idea, as was the fake treaty of friendship. In the second edition of the *Legatio* he is slightly less explicit about this strategem. What Taghrî Birdî really said Mártir did not know, of course, but it turned out to have been successful. The sequel, with the scribes and the friars discussing the documents was conform the instruction to that effect, the friars were experienced and knew what they wanted. Whether or not Fray Mauro had accompanied Mártir on his voyage, here he certainly was present, and it must have been his task to be Mártir's mentor, and not the other way round, as García Oro suggested.

Darrâj expected to find documents dated Februari 1502, but did not find them. Santa Cruz seems to suggest indeed that Mártir obtained written documents. But is that justified? My guess is that Mártir obtained an oral promise of the confirmation of the privileges for the pilgrims that were given earlier (and also later), after Taghrî Birdî's intervention by using less offensive language at the private audience, or that Taghrî Birdî was the one who had a private conversation with the sultan to that effect. Mártir did after all not claim to have carried documents home, when he left the scribes at Taghrî Birdî's house to make his excursions, they were writing petitions to the sultan. The documents dating from 16 and 31 October 1503 that Darrâj found were perhaps the written confirmations of that oral promise.³⁹ The delay might be explained by the fact that in 1502 the sultan was not yet in the position to issue documents of this nature, but in 1503 his power had been consolidated. In the summer of 1503 he asked Fray Mauro to undertake a diplomatic mission to the pope, and to the monarchs of Spain and the king of Portugal. To give him a substantial argument that showed the sultan's good intentions, the sultan might have issued the promised documents. Fray Mauro spent in 1504 about eight months in Spain, and was witness to the confusion after queen Isabella's death. At that time he might have met Mártir again, and told him that his work had finally been concluded with written documents. So when Mártir wrote the *Legatio Babylonica* he had a certain right to the claim that he had obtained those privileges.

Mariéjol emphasized in his biography, that Mártir's mission had been to prepare the sultan for the coming decree about the prohibition of the profession of Islam in Castilia in 1502. It is, however, not so sure that the Catholic Monarchs had that decree already in mind when they sent Mártir to Egypt in August 1501. The written instruction for Mártir (unknown to Mariéjol) does not contain this point. The way Mártir referred to his mission, in the *Legatio* as in later statements, makes clear that he had a vision concerning his task and what he had accomplished that differs from what can be proven. It might have been based on oral instructions that have not survived. After all, what had been reached was nothing more than the confirmation of the usual privileges. Mariéjol was right in his observation that Mártir's claim that he had saved the religious freedom and life of the Christians in the East was exaggerated. That his boasting on a doubtful success has been the reason why his first diplomatic mission also has

³⁸ *The travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Translated with an introduction by C.W.R.D. Moseley. Penguin Classics, London 1983.

³⁹ Darrâj, *op. cit.*, 131. For an example of such a document, see: Hans Ernst, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden des Sinai-klosters*. Wiesbaden 1960, 228-231, document LXV (86), issued on 16 Muharram 912/8 June 1506 by Qânsûh al-Ghawrî. For such a document issued by this same sultan in 919/1513, inscribed on a marble plate in the Holy Sepulchre Church, see: Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*, in: *Mémoires publiés par les membres de L'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale de Caire*, Vols. XLIII - XLIV, Cairo 1922-1925; Vol. XLIII, Jérusalem Ville, 378-402.

been his last one is his contention, the reason is not known, nor is the reason why his monarchs chose him for the task.

The real value of Mártir's mission for the Catholic Monarchs certainly was the report about the situation in Cairo after several years of civil war, the character of the new sultan, the situation in the Red Sea, the difficulties of the spice trade, and the rumours about what happened in Persia. The Safavids were a threat to both the sultans of Turkey and Egypt, and thus a potential ally, as the French were not slow to realise. These years were to prove of cardinal importance for the development of the international relations.

The nature of the *Legatio Babylonica*

The final question is: what was Mártir's intention when he composed the *Legatio Babylonica*. He decided to do that at a moment when Queen Isabella, for whom he wrote his letters in the first place and who certainly had listened attentively to his adventures, had long been dead and could no longer criticize his work. Fray Mauro, with whom he probably had been in contact in 1504 and certainly in 1507, might have provided more details about Egypt. Cisneros was interested in his stories, their anti-islamic tendency could serve his crusade-project.

Entertainment and instruction might have been Mártir's purpose in preparing the *Legatio Babylonica*. His intended public could have been his pupils, always complaining about the lack of interesting reading material. For them he wrote an attractive story that, besides being an exercise in Latin (even including the above in note 15 cited riddle), contained the official version of the history of the relations between Christians and Muslims in Spain, a demonstration of rhetorical practices, information on the election of a new doge, a short history of Egypt in the last decades, a report about the inspection of the interior of a pyramid and horrorstories about crocodiles into the bargain. He might have added material from books he had access to, as was not unusual⁴⁰, for instance from the recent Spanish edition of the travels of Breydenbach.⁴¹ Publishers, in those early years of printing books, desperately needed copy, the market was willing for stories from exotic countries, like his own reports on the discovery of America and the people that lived there. As entertaining travelstory rather than as historybook, this *Legatio Babylonica* deserves a modern edition and a translation in an accessible language.⁴²

⁴⁰ Robert Brunschvig, *Deux Récits de Voyage inédits en Afrique du Nord au XVe siècle. 'Abdalbâsit b. Halil et Adorne*. Paris 1936; Appendice: Le voyage de Van Ghistele en Berbérie; Ambrosius Zeebout, *Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele*, ed. R.J.G.A.A.Gaspar. Hilversum 1998. A more general approach to the subject in Xenja von Ertzdorff (ed), *Beschreibung der Welt. Zur Poetik der Reise- und Länderberichte*. Vorträge eines interdisziplinären Symposiums vom 8. bis 13. Juni 1998 an der Justus-Liebig- Universität Giessen. Amsterdam - Atlanta 2000.

⁴¹ Hugh Wm. Davies, *Bernard von Breydenbach and his journey to the Holy Land 1483-4. Bibliography*. Utrecht 1968 reprint. In 1498 a Spanish edition had appeared in Zaragoza, with the original illustrations. There is no modern edition of Breydenbach's book, but all the illustrations are in this bibliography.

⁴² The *Legatio Babylonica* was missing in Fernand Vanhemelrijck, *Kruis en wassende maan. Pelgrimstochten naar het Heilig Land [en Egypte in de late middeleeuwen]*. Leuven 1994.