

Everyday Life on the Road on the Example of “Embassy to Tamerlane” (1403–1406): A Study on the Intercultural Relations

My intention was not to write a classic historical book, although this can never be entirely avoided when researching a topic that originated in the past, but to write a book which would be a source of knowledge about the cultural aspects of everyday life on the road, including all cross cultural relations that result from the meeting that follows the journey, i.e. a broad cultural perspective based on the Castilian travel narrative entitled *Embassy to Tamerlane* (*Embajada a Tamorlán*).

Embassy to Tamerlane, a monument of Castilian travel literature and the oldest Spanish travel narrative, describes the course of the diplomatic mission (1403–1406) sent by King of Castile and León Henry III (1390–1406) to East to report on the situation there and – if possible – to meet Tamerlane personally. Its participants travelled through Constantinople, Trebizond, Erzincan, Erzurum, Tabriz, Sultania and Tehran, and finally arrived in Samarkand where they were brought before the Chagatay leader. We can only speculate about the effects of King Henry III's diplomatic mission, as we do not know exactly what his ambassadors achieved. However, *Embassy to Tamerlane* plays an important role from a different point of view; it is an excellent travel narrative which contains detailed descriptions of everyday life on the road, observations, travellers' cognitive processes and their contacts with other cultures and religions, which is related to such anthropological and cultural issues as cultural change, the clash of cultures, acculturation, and – using contemporary language – intercultural communication. *Embassy to Tamerlane* – as a travel narrative – retains the chronological order and the descriptive style typical of a chronicle, and, as its title indicates, the leading role travelling plays in it. The Castilian ambassadors, like their numerous predecessors, experienced *passage*, the ethnologically understood “passage”, a unique experience of personal contact with a different civilization.

The most important impulse for writing this book was the desire – present in, I am convinced, all cultural (and not only) scientists – to take up a research area that was not analysed in Polish subject literature before. I believe that this initiative is justified by virtual absence of a broader view of *Embassy to Tamerlane* in Polish. Although in contemporary Polish scientific reflection on cross-cultural relations the subject of travel enjoys great popularity, this particular narrative that is of interest to me is poorly recognized in our science and also rarely referred to in world historiography. Moreover, in view of the fact that the subject was addressed in national literature in a superficial manner only, it seemed important to me to show this important journey from the point of view of everyday life on the road and against the background of cross-civilizational (cross-cultural) relations between the West and the East at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries based on the context of the journey. The very issue of cross-cultural exchange became the greatest inspiration for my further scientific enquires. Another argument supporting the choice of this topic is the fact that *Embassy to Tamerlane* is a very realistic text and, compared to similar texts of its predecessors, devoid of fantasising.

The basic source material used while writing this book was already mentioned travel narrative entitled *Embassy to Tamerlane*. From a methodological point of view, it is considered to be the best (the most reliable) and most detailed source material regarding Tamerlane's country; of course, from the point of view of "Western" science. For cultural historians, the narrative offers an extremely vivid depiction of everyday life of both the court and the inhabitants of the Chagatay empire. Art historians, on the other hand, will find in it detailed descriptions of architectural objects, while historians interested in economic aspects – information on Latin commercial activity in Central Asia. Over time, however, the representatives of these undoubtedly important fields were joined by anthropologists, ethnographers, ethnologists and, finally, cultural scientists, who also found something of interest in this chronicle.

Although the Castilian mission to Tamerlane was, by definition, a diplomatic mission, the chronicle does not provide much information on the diplomatic activity of the ambassadors. The author of the narrative focused on the description of everyday life, customs and culture of the inhabitants of the areas they visited, religions, architectural objects, etc. The narrative contains detailed information on customs, people, clothing, food and court ceremonies not only in Samarkand but also in other smaller courts and cities visited by the Castilians. The outstanding Polish historian Marian Małowist noted that *Embassy to Tamerlane* is not a political (diplomatic) text, but a cultural one.

The form of narration makes the chronicle an extremely valuable source material in at least four aspects. Firstly, as a source of information about everyday

life on the road, especially about the cultural cognitive aspects experienced by the representatives of the Latin civilisation entering a culturally different area. Secondly, as a consequence of the previous point, the chronicle is a testimony to the late medieval clash of two different, heterogeneous cultures. Thirdly, it is also an image of Europeans' stay at Tamerlane's Turkish-Mongolian court in the environment that was foreign to them in terms of cultural, moral, legal, economic and religious aspects. Fourthly, *Embassy to Tamerlane* is written in a realistic form of narration, and the details included in the text surpass the ones found in Persian chronicles from that period.

My analyses of the text revealed a complex multifaceted and interdisciplinary picture, which led me to formulating several research objectives (problems).

(1) Multifaceted presentation of various aspects of everyday life on the road, with a particular emphasis on everyday reality during a journey, hardships, dangers, etc.

(2) Presentation of the specificity of the clash of civilizations on the basis of the visit the representatives of one culture paid to representatives of another culture.

(3) Demonstration how the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* interacted with the local population. Did he – like Christopher Columbus – treat it as a part of nature or did he interact with it culturally? How did the ethnological *passage*, the experience of personal contact with a different culture, take place? Did the Castilian ambassadors notice manifestations of “culture” in inhabitants of the foreign areas they visited?

(4) Answering the question whether *Embassy to Tamerlane* is an objective work. Already at this point I can put forward the thesis that this narrative is an example of literature from the field of *symbolic anthropology*, which can be juxtaposed with phantasmagorical literature, so common in the Middle Ages.

(5) Answering the questions who the author of the narrative was and what his qualifications and knowledge about the world were.

(6) Indicating whether *Embassy to Tamerlane* has the characteristics of an ethnographic journey description and whether the mission of the Castilian ambassadors was an ethnographic journey.

(7) Answering the question whether the Castilians, as representatives of the Spanish civilisation, a distinct civilizational project which had emerged on the verge of two great civilizations (Latin and Muslim), showed greater interest and tolerance towards different, foreign culture and religion. This question can be juxtaposed with earlier narratives, e.g. the ones written by John of Pian de Carpine or William of Rubruck during their journeys to Asia. In this context, it is worth looking at the exceptional interest of the author of the chronicle in architecture.

(8) Showing the author of the narrative's cognitive processes.

(9) Tracing the route and places visited by the Castilian ambassadors, referring to the achievements of contemporary geography.

(10) Determining whether *Embassy to Tamerlane* had an impact on the political (as a result of a diplomatic mission) and cultural situation in Western Europe, by bringing knowledge, also ethnographic, of Central Asia.

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, conclusions, bibliography and a geographical and personal index.

The first three chapters offer an introduction to history, customs and geography of the period. In the first chapter I present the medieval imagery based on the cultural and geographical heritage of antiquity. In this chapter I also focus on issues related to the theory of civilization and culture in humanistic studies. In this way I define the basic concepts which I use later in the book. Chapter II contains a historical and cultural introduction to the era into which the analysed narrative is embedded. I present the origins and the most important elements of the Latin civilization in opposition to the Central Asian culture, in particular to the Turanian civilization identified by Feliks Koneczny. In this chapter I also outline Tamerlane's rise to power and describe his empire. Chapter III presents a relatively detailed account of journeys undertaken in the period 1245–1353 by the predecessors of the ambassadors described in *Embassy to Tamerlane*. Here I focus not only on the chronological presentation of individual accounts, but also on the cultural impact of these journeys.

The next three chapters deal with the text of *Embassy to Tamerlane*. Not only do I present the account of the mission – almost day after day – but I also analyse the text in detail. In these chapters I address a wide range of different problems, such as an encounter with otherness, being in a foreign world and reacting to an alien environment. More precisely, Chapter IV reviews historical and cultural studies devoted to the analysed text, its cultural and historical significance and the first part of the journey. Chapter V reports everyday life on the road on in a meticulous way. In this chapter I also analyse the ambassadors' description of Constantinople, their route from Trebizond to the border of the Chagatay empire, and point to the absence of fantastic descriptions in the text. Chapter VI investigates the reaction of the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* to the reality he described and the encounter with a foreign culture. In this chapter I present the ambassadors' stay in the capital of Tamerlane's empire, especially in the context of their presence at his court and their perception of the surroundings.

The most important results of my studies are presented below.

(1) My findings point to the fact that *Embassy to Tamerlane* is an example of a multifaceted presentation of cultural aspects of everyday life on the road. The author of the narrative describes hardships and dangers accompanying typical

travellers of that time, including the ones connected with the route, weather conditions, conflicts, dangers on the roads and illnesses. He was interested in almost everything. His descriptions are accurate both in case of architecture and mundane elements, such as all kinds of crops, e.g. next to a beautifully decorated mosque he notices vineyards, melons, fruit tree groves and cotton plantations. The author treats the city in a special way: as an object of description and not only as a point on the map or a stage of the journey. His descriptions are based on as direct and personal experience as possible; whenever information comes from a source other than his own personal experience, it is indicated in the text. He was interested not only in what people ate and drank, but also in how they did it. It was an in-depth observation aimed at presenting the new culture in the broadest possible image.

(2) I also argue that *Embassy to Tamerlane* is undoubtedly an objective work and an example of literature from the field of symbolic anthropology, which can be juxtaposed with phantasmagorical literature, so common in the Middle Ages. *Embassy to Tamerlane* is a text that retains a high degree of objectivity and, in comparison to other medieval travel books, reveals its author's great concern to recreate the reality in an objective manner.

Firstly, *Embassy to Tamerlane* systematically records the times of the day in which sequences of events took place, e.g. places visited, areas traversed, etc. The author of chronicle consequently sticks to chronology in his narration. His precision is so great that he even justifies a longer stay in one place, e.g. because of the wind or bad weather, which made it impossible to leave the port. When the ambassadors had to stay longer for reasons connected with their diplomatic mission, the author also explained it; e.g. they had to stay in one place for eight days because they waited to meet Tamerlane's grandchild. The author tries to record every stay, even if he forgets or does not know (is not able to do so) how to write the name of the place where they stopped for the night.

Secondly, the description of objects and architectural structures is done with the use of precise definitions and measurements, e.g. by measuring the distance with the measure of fingers, hands, shots from arches, leagues and miles. While describing known objects, such as sacral architecture, the author skilfully touched upon issues related to the construction of temples.

Thirdly, the realism of the narrative is extraordinary in comparison with earlier travel accounts. Of course, the diplomatic mission was sent to Tamerlane by King Henry III who wanted a detailed picture of the situation in the East. It could be said that such an idea should guide most diplomatic missions, but it was not the rule. Already in the prologue to *Embassy to Tamerlane*, in which the author lists the territories under Tamerlane's control (its aim was to impress European rulers), we can notice his objectivity in presenting the

political situation. What is important, the author's objectivity in describing the surroundings continues during his journey and applies even to the most prosaic descriptions. Rodrigo Vizcaíno points out that the chronicler describes both populated and uninhabited islands, and with similar interest draws attention to pastures for cattle and to people living in a given area.

Fourthly, the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* uses foreign (local) terminology to describe elements that are foreign and unknown to him. It happens when he is unable to give them any name or make a relevant comparison.

Fifthly, the descriptions of exotic animals, such as giraffes and elephants, are very reliable and realistic. They do not have the fantastic attributes that previous authors often added to various animals.

The sixth important argument is the absence of references made by the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* to traditional fantastic characters and events that are so typical of medieval travel literature. It should be remembered that from the perspective of the representatives of Latin civilization, the East was an unknown space, *terra incognita*, or the area full of imaginary peoples, animals and lands. The author focuses on what he sees himself: he describes and admires numerous relics he sees in the churches of Constantinople, he commends Tamerlane's court, especially his tents and architecture, he appreciates the magnificent jewellery worn by his wives. If descriptions of miracles do appear in the text, they are quoted as other people's statements.

(3) The next result of my analyses of the chronicle is demonstration that the author's objectivity also stemmed from the fact that he was a representative of the subgroup of the Latin civilization – i.e. the Spanish civilization, according to Jan Kieniewicz – which functioned at the cultural and religious crossroads of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. It can, therefore, be assumed that the representatives of the Spanish civilisation, in this case the Castilians, admittedly belonging to *christianitas latina*, but with greater experience in multicultural coexistence resulting from their history, were more open to cultural differences.

In his theory of the "clash of civilizations", Samuel Huntington considered religion the central element defining a civilization, especially the Latin civilization, and it was against this religious and cultural background, rather than ideological one, that he based his deliberations on the cause of most conflicts in the future. The theory of the clash of civilizations or cultures is also used to study the past, including the Middle Ages. Applying Huntington's theory to the account of the journey presented in *Embassy to Tamerlane*, we can notice certain subjective judgments of his author.

Firstly, we can notice narrator's personal opinions, resulting, in my opinion, from the clash of civilizations (e.g. the Latin and Byzantine civilizations), when

he writes about issues verging on identity, such as religion or the foundations of religion.

In this way – describing a certain practice in an objective manner but evaluating it subjectively – he talks about religious practices of the Greeks and Armenians, whom he considers zealous in their faith, but practicing the wrong religion (i.e. Catholicism). One should also pay attention to the references to the relationship between the Latin civilisation and the civilisation of Islam. Of course, in the chronicle the centre of gravity is situated on the side of the Castilian author and his companions, i.e. on the side of the representatives of the Latin civilisation or, more precisely, the Spanish civilisation. We learn about the Islam civilization from the author's reports on Muslims. Consequently, the reception of these descriptions to a large extent depends on the degree of reliability of the Latin chronicler, who is very objective in this respect.

Secondly, when the author writes about trade stalls in Samarkand, he remarks that they are so great that you cannot see similar stalls anywhere, but, he adds, of course, except for the land of Christians, which will always be superior to him, also in the area of civilizational achievements.

Thirdly, in his reflections on the clash of civilisations, Samuel Huntington mentioned the concentration on oneself and one's common heritage; in his opinion, every civilisation perceives itself as the "hub of the universe". The chronicler of the Castilian mission also did so: he deliberately overdramatized Tamerlane's poor health, thus justifying the fact that he did not respond to Henry III's letters. After all, in the opinion of his ambassadors, this king was one of the most important rulers of the Latin civilisation. However, objectively speaking, the ambassadors did not receive any answer most probably because Tamerlane was not interested in Western affairs on the eve of his embarking on an important expedition to China.

(4) My analyses of the chronicle, the results of which are presented on the pages of the book, lead to certain conclusions concerning the authorship of the narrative. Contrary to popular belief ascribing *Embassy to Tamerlane* to Ruy González de Clavijo, in my opinion, the chronicle was written by one of his companions, the Dominican Alonso Páez de Santa María.

Firstly, in order to indicate a particular day, the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* uses a calendar based on liturgical celebrations: days are recorded with reference to the day of the liturgical calendar, such as St. John's Day. The times are also often given in relation to the schedule of the liturgical day, e.g. in the hour of Evening Prayer. The structure of the text reveals the spirit of religiosity and piety that accompanies the author of the text and other ambassadors. At the same time, the text shows restraint from all sins that could be harmful to the mission.

Secondly, the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* reflects in the chronicle the civilizational and cultural environment from which he originated – the world of medieval Catholicism. The chronicler knows the Bible well and places references to it in various places of the text, e.g. following tradition, he writes that Paradise is in Armenia and Noah's Ark is on top of a high mountain.

Thirdly, the text reveals the author's interest in the sacral spaces when he describes the cities, especially Constantinople, where he displays extensive knowledge of the saints and relics associated with them.

Fourthly, the religious dispute which took place in Trebizond, where the author of the chronicle – in my opinion, this could only be Alonso Páez de Santa María – objectively describes the differences between the Latin (Catholic) Church and the Greek (Orthodox) and Armenian Churches.

Fifthly, in moments of fear, such as during the storm, the author described how the crew of the ship on which the Castilian mission was travelling prayed to God to save them, and nothing bad happened to them as a result. This testifies to the author's deep faith, which, of course, does not mean that a lay person could not have written the chronicle, but, by adding all the above arguments, and the knowledge and fondness of sacred buildings visible in descriptions, especially of the capital of Byzantium, it is most likely that the narrative was written by Alonso Páez de Santa María. Ruy González de Clavijo was the head of the mission, but the Dominican, I think, wrote the chronicle.

This style used in descriptions makes the thesis that Clavijo was the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* highly unlikely. Judging by the author's perception of the world and his expertise at the foundations of religion and culture, it is most likely that it is the Dominican Alfonso Páez de Santa María who wrote the narrative describing the mission to Tamerlane. This thesis explains the editorial form of the chronicle, its content and the lack of immoral and inappropriate descriptions.

(5) Another finding of my analyses demonstration that the author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* did not intend to gather specific information; he participated in a mission whose aim was to pass the King of Castile's letter to Tamerlane. As a result, his descriptions are less schematic and the analysis of phenomena and objects he considered interesting and worth recording is more extensive. This makes the author a better and more insightful observer than most travellers of his time. Was he an ethnographer who tried to obtain information on communities he did not know before? He tried to record almost all the things the ambassadors encountered during their journey. Therefore, it is exactly as Hanna Dziechcińska emphasized: a social requirement that a trip you make should be described is embedded in the description a traveller creates¹. It was very

1 H. Dziechcińska, *O staropolskich dziennikach podróży*, Warszawa 1991, p. 19.

important, because such a description paved the way for the next travellers. In *Embassy to Tamerlane* we will not find his author's complains about the cruelty of the Chagatay and Tamerlane. This way, he avoided stereotyping, which was extremely rare among medieval authors of travel literature. He tried to compare his observations with facts known to him – he compared Constantinople and Pera, which he saw for the first time, to Seville and nearby Triana. He also compared Samarkand to Seville, saying that it is as large that this Castilian city. Looking at the structure of the narrative, which I have already mentioned, it is coherent and the story is ordered by subsequent events during the journey. It is in these successive events that descriptions of the local population were woven – including dishes, ways of preparing and eating them, costumes, court ceremonies of foreign rulers – which gives the whole text and the journey ethnographic significance. At the same time, the author thinks about various phenomena in a surprisingly mature way and tries to understand them.

(6) The basic element of journey descriptions is the extra-linguistic reality, so the cognitive function is the most important element. The author, who is both a narrator and a protagonist, however, is not a central element of the description of the journey. Sometimes such a description, interspersed with a number of the author's experiences which become the most prominent part of the narrative, can very easily transform into an autobiographical work. The author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* obtains most information through direct contact with the inhabitants of the areas he visits, and separates the information obtained personally from the information he gains from hearsay. He reveals himself as an insightful observer with highly selective attention, and, at the same time, tries not to come out as an ordinary person with his weaknesses. Nevertheless, the chronicle indicates that he likes to eat well and is not a teetotaller. Referring to Dariusz Rott's study, it should be emphasized that in volatile, non-stereotypical and extreme situations the demand for information increases considerably². The author of *Embassy to Tamerlane* also displays similar behaviour, providing detailed accounts of the dread of the situation, e.g. during the storm at sea.

(7) My analyses and interpretations of *Embassy to Tamerlane* lead to the conclusion that the narrative did not exert an impact on the political (as a result of a diplomatic mission) and cultural situation in Western Europe, by bringing knowledge, also ethnographic, of Central Asia. There are four reasons why the chronicle did not have a long-term influence on contemporary politics and culture.

Firstly, Tamerlane died at the beginning of 1405 in the midst of preparations for the invasion of China. His death was a fundamental breakthrough in the

2 D. Rott, *Daniel Vetter i jego „Opisanie wyspy Islandyji”*, Katowice 1993, pp. 15, 17, 20.

history of his empire. Power was transferred to the hands of military commanders, the country was in chaos and quickly became the arena of internal succession battles, which, with time, led to the disintegration of this vast empire.

Secondly, in 1406, a year after Tamerlane's death, King Henry III of Castile also died, and his son John, who was an infant at that time, became the King. These events resulted in termination of contacts between Castile and Central Asia, and more precisely Tamerlane's empire or his successors. Although another diplomatic mission might have been sent East, which is highly unlikely, but not impossible, I believe that after the death of Henry III (and probably also earlier during his lifetime, he did not manage to organize another expedition), the idea of maintaining relations with Tamerlane and East (Asia) was abandoned at the Castilian court, mostly due to the age of the heir to the throne and other important matters related to this issue.

Thirdly, the closure of eastern trade routes caused by the collapse of Constantinople in 1453 was also the reason for the lack of further interest in the East.

Fourthly, the lack of fantastic elements, histories and descriptions in *Embassy to Tamerlane* aroused little interest among its contemporary readers, who were more eager to read Marco Polo's account. Conventional, medieval set of miracles and fantasy was not used by the author of the narrative. This very objectivity and realism of the chronicle, which is now among its greatest advantages, became its greatest drawback at the time. *Embassy to Tamerlane* contains the descriptions of real life and the lands and territories visited by the author instead of figments of his imagination, which makes this narrative a kind of a bridge between the early medieval, fantastic travel accounts and later texts related to the discovery of the New World.