

Chapter 3

VULNERABLE MEDIEVAL IBERIAN TRAVELLERS: BENJAMIN OF TUDELA'S *SEFER HA-MASSA'OT*, PERO TAFUR'S *ANDANÇAS E VIAJES*, AND AHMAD AL-WAZZAN'S *LIBRO DE LA COSMOGROPHIA ET GEOGRAPHIA DE AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores both the actual (or physical) and figurative vulnerabilities expressed and enacted by three early modern Iberian travellers: one Jewish (Benjamin of Tudela, twelfth century, died in 1173), one Christian (Pero Tafur, 1410–1484), and one Muslim (al-Hassan al-Wazzan, known as Leo Africanus, 1486/88–1554?) who engaged in long voyages throughout Europe, Asia and the Maghreb and wrote in detail about their experiences. In these three writers, vulnerability is inextricably connected not only to their travels but also to their geographical origins and their particular historical circumstances.

Keywords: Benjamin of Tudela, *Sefer ha-Massa'ot*, Pero Tafur, vulnerability, Iberian travelers, Leo Africanus, *Geography of Africa*, Ahmad al-Wazzan

ON THE MARGINS of what doubly constitutes the fourteenth century known world and its physical or pictorial rendering, the magnificent Cresques or Catalan Atlas,¹ the attentive viewer can set eyes on a fragile vessel displaying an Aragonese flag, whose sail is strongly swollen by a favourable wind. One of its four occupants is Jaume Ferrer or Ferrar, a sailor-merchant very actively involved in trade during the period who is

I I refer the reader to the introductory essay for more information about the Catalan Atlas and the Majorcan Jewish cartographic school. According to Gabriel Llompart the map of Abraham and Jehuda Cresques from 1375 is based in part on a previous map by Angeli Dulcert signed in Majorca in 1339. Llompart has found documentary evidence of the cartographer Dulcert in Majorca around 1340. He concludes that both Dulcert and the sailor Jaume Ferrer were possibly Genoese immigrants to Mallorca (Gabriel Llompart, "La Identitat de Jaume Ferrer, El Navegant (1346)," *Memòries de L'Acadèmia Mallorquina d'Estudis Genealògics, Heràldics i Històrics* 10 (2000): 7–20.

now, presumably, in search of gold. The rubric displayed right below the illumination describes it thus: "The ship of Jaume Ferrer departed for the River of Gold on the 10th of August of 1350, feast of St. Lawrence."

Poised precariously at the edge of our field of vision, right above the line where the parchment and, thus, the world ends² this miniature manages to manifestly allude to Jaume Ferrer's mysterious vanishing from the historical record since neither the intrepid traveller nor his "coca" (merchant trading vessel) came back from the trip. The illumination serves to tellingly illustrate the dangers and vicissitudes of travelling and exploring in the early modern period.

The Mediterranean was a world in constant motion during that era and the *motif* of travel was ubiquitous in the medieval and early modern imaginary³ but travel was also a very unpredictable and dangerous endeavour, which could render the traveller vulnerable to violence, abuse, warfare and misfortune, among other perils.⁴ This chapter explores the actual (or physical) as well as the imagined and figurative vulnerabilities expressed and enacted by three early modern Iberian travellers who, unlike Jaume Ferrer, were able to return and tell the tale: one Jewish (Benjamin of Tudela, died in 1173), one Christian (Pero Tafur, 1410–1484), and one Muslim (al-Hassan al-Wazzan, known as Leo Africanus, 1486/88–1554?) who engaged in long voyages throughout Europe and Asia and wrote in detail about their experiences: what happened to them in their contacts with others, what they witnessed, what they heard and what they interpreted based on their particular assumptions and their personal background. Vulnerability in these three writers is inextricably connected not only to their travels, but to their particular historical circumstances.

These three travellers share some commonalities: they were all born and raised in the Iberian Peninsula during the extended period of the so-called *convivencia* between the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism; they travelled to what

2 This is the place which medieval people considered *terra incognita*, or what Mary B. Campbell defines as "the limits of geographical knowledge – on the borders of the map" (Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 50).

3 Two of the most popular medieval books were, as a matter of fact, travel accounts: Marco Polo's account of his travels and the fictional book known as the *Book of John of Mandeville*, which was believed to be an actual eyewitness account. Both texts were favoured by readers for their exciting retelling of perilous and arduous voyages to faraway lands and their description of marvellous and exotic creatures and races, unknown to Westerners.

4 All these dangers, naturally, engendered a certain degree of fear in prospective travellers. This fear was minimized or exacerbated depending on the particular historical context and it distressed all Mediterranean travellers, and not only Christians fearful of Muslim pirates, as it is often held. Nabil Matar, for example, affirms that in the seventeenth century fear of the Christians' ruthless piracy and religious persecution "was a powerful deterrent to travel into the lands of Christians." *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xxvii.

we have geographically conceptualized in this collection (see the Introduction) as the “East;”⁵ they wrote a travel narrative that detailed their adventures and their contacts with other cultures and, lastly, they all experienced vulnerability.

In reading these travel narratives three types of vulnerability can be articulated: physical, cultural, and transformative vulnerability. A physical vulnerability is the one most widely understood and universally experienced; it is caused by aspects totally beyond the traveller’s control: on one hand, the vicissitudes caused by the elements (storms at sea, and general perils of the road faced by travellers) and, on the other hand, physical illness or impairing accidents that compromise the mobility of the traveller. Our travellers experienced all of these hardships; Tafur, for instance, was ill in Genoa, was wounded by an arrow in battle, was pursued by Genoese and Muslims at sea, and endured frightful storms which ended in a shipwreck at the island of Chios; the latter experience was so harrowing that he pronounced that “had I been on the mainland I would never have put to sea again.”

As for the second type, cultural vulnerability is experienced when the subject is faced with unknown cultures that act, feel, eat and speak differently than the traveller. This cultural contact causes an “unsettling” of the set of beliefs each traveller stores. Such set of beliefs or ideology are directly influenced by what is often termed as “civil society,” particularly in the formulation of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. In his *Prison Notebooks* he distinguishes between “civil society” (school, church, cultural media), the mechanism of domination which functions through “consensus” and “political society” (government, army, police, courts, prisons) which functions through “force.”⁶

Gramsci illustrated the concept of ideology as an array of representations or mental images of reality that are unconsciously extrapolated by any subject from a given culture’s legal, religious and economic systems, as well as art and other forms of community expression. For Gramsci, this concept of the world also included codes for social behaviour and action.⁷ A traveller had acquired those set of values and conducts by

5 It is worth noting that, when the terms “East” and “West” appear in Hebrew (*mizrah* and *ma’arav*) and in Arabic (*mashriq* and *maghrib*) in these texts, they are not employed in the sense of our modern Occident versus Orient dichotomy. The Christian Pero Tafur, on the other hand, uses in his account the terms “Oriente” and “Poniente.” My own use in this chapter of such disputed terms as “East” and “West” could be interpreted as an acritical move that only serves to perpetuate colonialist and Orientalist dichotomies which did not exist at the time of our travellers. Nothing is further from my intention, however, so I refer the reader to the introduction for a discussion of the contested nature of the categories “East” and “West” and my own stance in that debate. I am, thus, resorting to such contingent names in my argumentation solely on account of their usefulness as geographical markers and taxonomic labels.

6 Asli Daldal, “Power and Ideology in Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci: A Comparative Analysis,” *Review of History and Political Science* 2 (2014): 149–67, at 157.

7 Antonio Gramsci discusses these issues when speaking, not of civil society *per se*, but about ideology and about hegemony. While Antonio Gramsci was not the first person to speak about

consent⁸ with his society and now is faced with the realization that in order to fit in the new foreign environment or to achieve *episteme* he must also “consent” or be permeable to acquiring a different set of values and to behaving in an alien manner. This constitutes a sort of double vulnerability since a failure to achieve this permeability can bring about not only a rejection by the other culture but, perhaps, even a retaliation that could cause the first type of physical or violent vulnerability.

Lastly, the traveller in contact with this “Other” is vulnerable as well in another sense: as he/she is exposed to a different way of living the traveller engages in a transformative move by gazing back to his own set of beliefs and behaviour but this time more critically and subversively, which, in turn, “wounds” his world, in the etymological sense of “vulnerare” (in Latin “vulnus” means wound); that is, he hurts, injures his world, makes it *vulnerable*, not as perfect and wholesome and satisfactory anymore.

This type of vulnerability is, however, not a negative trait.⁹ In fact, the capacity to be vulnerable is inherent in human embodiment. To be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering; this susceptibility is an ontological condition of our humanity, “a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the heart of our concept of social and state responsibility” as legal theorist Martha Fineman points out.¹⁰ But as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre underscore, our corporeal vulnerability is also linked to the inherent sociality of human life: “as embodied, social beings, we are both vulnerable to the actions of others and

hegemony, he was the one who broadened the idea of hegemony. Previously other philosophers and political theorists declared that hegemony was established to gain political power but Gramsci was the first thinker to articulate the idea that hegemony is an essential element for a ruling class of people to maintain its authority and power. As Roger Simon affirms: “The starting point of hegemony is that a class and its representatives exercise power over subordinate classes by means of a combination of coercion and persuasion.” Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 22. When a given group's ideology was pervasive then that ideology had “hegemony.” Travellers are, by nature of their transfer from a familiar to an unfamiliar terrain (both physically and culturally) constantly exposed to diverse ideologies and to the instability of shifting hegemonies.

8 This consent is illustrated in Gramsci's definition of the state as “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules.” Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Wishart, 1980), 244; Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65.

9 In fact, feminist theorists have pioneered a move to cease conceptualizing vulnerability as precariousness. They, together with other scholars studying marginalized and subaltern groups, contend that recognizing the vulnerabilities suffered historically by such groups should not imply a theorization of such marginal constituencies as weak or inferior. These scholars envision vulnerability instead as “a space for engagement and resistance emerging from a sense of fundamental openness” (as formulated in the Modern Language Association 2014 Presidential theme, entitled “Vulnerable Times”).

10 Martha A. Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition,” *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 20 (2008): 1–23, at 8.

dependent on the care and support of other people.”¹¹ Vulnerability and dependency are, thus, intertwined and nowhere is this link more salient than in travel narratives.

Descriptions of travel to unfamiliar lands and “eastern journeys” that precisely enact the types of vulnerabilities defined above have, for centuries, held a great appeal for European readers in general and Iberian readers in particular, and much before the Age of Discovery and the marvellous travels of the Spanish *conquistadores*, as attested by the number of medieval texts that illustrate the topic.¹² As it was discussed in the Introduction, every traveller’s personal *rihla* transforms him or her as much as every traveller transforms the worlds with which he or she comes in contact. Every travel brings us close to *episteme*. The same process can be surmised from the reading of Benjamin of Tudela, Pero Tafur, and al-Wazzan’s narratives. My analysis of these three Iberian travellers’ texts seek to illuminate the different manifestations of epistemological discovery rendered through travel and its inherent contradictions. Moreover, the justification for analyzing these three particular travellers lies in two factors: first, they each epitomize one of the three monotheistic religions sharing a cultural space in the Iberian Peninsula during the medieval period and secondly, they were raised and acculturated in the unique *milieu* that has been defined by historians as the society of “convivencia.”¹³

After intense Visigothic religious intransigence, the Muslim dominance of the Iberian Peninsula ushered in a period of relative religious and social tolerance. Thus, relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims were largely peaceable. The experience of comparatively co-operative relationships during a time of intense diversity of thought and behaviour facilitated the integration and acculturation, if not toleration, of cultures throughout Muslim al-Andalus. That these three travellers who happen to exhibit

11 Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

12 Some of the Iberian travel narratives are literary fictions which narrate such travels while others are various historical travellers’ eyewitness accounts or ambassadorial reports. In the first group we can mention the *Libro del conocimiento del mundo* and three texts from the first half of the thirteenth century: the *Libro de Apolonio*, the *Vida de madona Santa María Egipciaqua*, and the *Libre dels tres reys d’Orient*. In the second group we can list Benjamin de Tudela’s *Sefer ha-Masa’ot* or *Itinerary*, Ramon Muntaner’s *Chronicle*, Ruy Clavijo’s *Embajada a Tamorlan*, the famous *Catalan Atlas* by Abraham Cresques and the *Andanças e viajes* de Pero Tafur. See the article by Mathew Desing in this volume (Chapter 4) for a detailed discussion of the three thirteenth-century Iberian texts. I refer the reader to his article as well for an assessment on the scholarly literature on travel in the Iberian Peninsula.

13 It could be argued that this factor is debatable in the case of al-Wazzan, since although he was born in Granada, he grew up and received his education in Fez, Morocco. However, I include him here because he visibly grew up in a community in Fez where he was surrounded by exiles who had fled Granada at various times in the recent past and who steadfastly clung to their Iberian (or “andalusi”) heritage. Thus, his upbringing was very much influenced by his family and his neighbours’ past in Granada and the constant nostalgia at their loss of their ancestral land.

marks of an unaffected and respectful openness towards other cultures originate from the Iberian Peninsula during that historical period is surely not fortuitous. Perhaps the suggestion could be brought forth that Benjamin of Tudela, Pero Tarfur and al-Wazzan are, at least, better disposed ethnographers than the crusaders that Oleb Grab discusses because they came from an Iberian cultural environment where they had already experienced interaction with other cultures and religions. Be that as it may, these three travellers tender to the reader a tangible account of how individuals from the three competing monotheistic religions confronted and resolved the vulnerabilities encountered through their travels.¹⁴

The first of these Iberian travellers, Rabbi Benjamin ben Jonah (1130–1173) of Tudela in Navarre was the most famous of Jewish travellers: “reckoned one of the greatest travellers that ever lived,” in the words of Purchas, who published an English translation of his *Sefer ha-Massa’ot* (*The Book of Travels*), usually called *Itinerary*, in 1625.¹⁵ In 1119, the Christian kingdom of Navarre captured Tudela (Arabic: al-Tutīlā), which had been ruled by Muslims since the eighth century. This relatively recent change of power enables us to assume that Benjamin had enjoyed a hybrid cultural background. In fact, the co-existence of different cultures in the city is reflected on Tudela’s reputation for generating or stimulating important medieval writers such as al-A’mā al-Tuṭīlī, a famous classical poet¹⁶ or Robert Ketton, the English scholar who first translated the Qur’an into Latin and who became a canon of Tudela in 1157.¹⁷

14 Since these three travellers have been widely studied there exists a sizable amount of scholarship devoted to their experiences and, furthermore, in the case of Benjamin and al-Wazzan there is a vast body of literature on them in Arabic and Hebrew. In the interest of time and space and given the fact that my discussion here focuses solely on the issue of vulnerability as related to these three travellers, my use of critical references will not be exhaustive.

15 Benjamin of Tudela, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages*, trans. Marcus Nathan Adler, with an introduction by Michael A. Signer, Marcus Nathan Adler, and A. Asher (Malibu: Joseph Simon, 1983), “Introduction,” xv.

16 Abu ‘l-abbās (or abū dja‘far) aḥmad b. ‘abd allāh b. hurayra al-‘utbī (or al-ḳaysī), “the blind man of Tudela” was a Hispano-Arabic poet (d. 525/1130–1131). His fame derives from being one of the great masters of *muwaṣṣṣḥah* poetry. Manuscripts of his *dīwān*, containing classical poetry, are to be found in London and Cairo (S. M. Stern, “al-A’mā al-Tuṭīlī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0574).

17 Charles J. Bishko, *Spanish and Portuguese Monastic History 600–1300*, 167, <http://libro.uca.edu/monastic/monastic12.htm>; *Bibl. Clun.* 1109; Charles H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 120. Peter the Venerable commissioned translations of several Islamic texts during his travels (around 1142–1143) *circa Iberum*, as he puts it, in his *Liber de miraculis* (*Patrologia Latina* 189, 650). Robert Ketton, who was in charge of translating the Qur’an, was one of the members of a team of translators employed by Peter the Venerable, the others being Herman of Dalmatia, Master Peter of Toledo and a Muslim “called Mohammed.” The encounter and the commissioning of the translations most likely took place, as Lacarra suggests, in the vicinity of the monastery of Santa María de Nájera, on the road from Toledo to Pamplona (José M. Lacarra, “Una aparición de ultratumba en Estella,” *Príncipe de Viana*

The city of Tudela on the banks of the river Ebro had great strategic value at the beginning of the ninth century. The town had become the power base of the Banu Qasi family, local magnates converted to Islam who managed to stay independent of the emirs by establishing alliances with the kings of Pamplona. Their power, however, waned at the beginning of the tenth century and Tudela fell under the influence of the rising caliphate of Córdoba. From then on, the Muslims used the city as a base to fight against the expanding Christian kingdom of Navarre. When Alfonso el Batallador conquered Tudela in 1119, three different religious communities had been co-existing there (the Muslims, the Mozarabs, and the Jews) but after the Christian victory, community interactions appear to have been severely strained and, while Jews continued to live inside the walls, Muslims were forced to reside outside the town walls.

This is the intellectual, political and social framework into which Benjamin of Tudela was born in 1130. Little is known about his life and occupations before his travels, and the scant information we have of him can only be surmised from his travelogue. Cecil Roth has suggested that he might have been a gem merchant since he often shows an interest not only in mercantile exchanges in general, but in the coral trade in particular.¹⁸ Benjamin's journey has also been categorized as a religious pilgrimage¹⁹ or as a trip undertaken with the objective of locating and describing hospitable Jewish communities on the road to Israel.²⁰ Marcus Nathan Adler argues that Benjamin's travels "were too extensive to be those of a mere merchant" and,

inasmuch as the hitherto prosperous Jewish communities, along the Rhine and the route to Palestine, had been dispersed by the fanaticism aroused by the Crusaders, and as, even in the Caliphate of Cordova, his coreligionists were being bitterly persecuted, it is probable that Benjamin's object was to discover where his expatriated brethren might find asylum.²¹

He finished the travels he describes in 1173:

The said Rabbi Benjamin set forth from Tudela, his native city, and passed through many remote countries, as is related in his book. In every place which he entered he made a record of all that he saw or was told of by trustworthy persons—matters not previously heard in the land of Sepharad (Spain).²²

5 (1944): 173–84). See also James A. Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

18 Cecil Roth, "Benjamin (Ben Jonah) of Tudela," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 4:535–38.

19 Joseph Shatzmiller, "Jews, Pilgrimage, and the Christian Cult of Saints: Benjamin of Tudela and His Contemporaries," in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History*, ed. Walter A. Goffart and Alexander C. Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 337–47, at 338.

20 Shatzmiller, "Jews, Pilgrimage," 347.

21 Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 43.

22 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 55.

In spite of the fact that his is one of the earliest travel accounts, Benjamin of Tudela's work has not been extensively studied. Perhaps due to the fact that the account was written in Hebrew the text, while very well known by Jewish scholars, has attracted little attention among other scholars. This state of affairs is unfortunate because this account, while not as colourful as Marco Polo's or John of Mandeville's, is highly relevant for two reasons: first, it describes the East from a non-Christian perspective; and, secondly, it provides a reversed paradigm to the binary discussed in the Introduction with regard to pilgrimage literature.

It was stated there that the paradigm of the medieval "Christian pilgrim" stemmed from ancient myths such as Apollonius of Tyre and Odysseus, and that their journey became a metaphor for the spiritual progress of his readers' lives. Additionally, Elsner and Rubiés argued that from these myths two patterns of travel as pilgrimage in the Christian tradition developed: visiting the Holy Land and the veneration of sacred relics. Benjamin de Tudela's journey and the tale that emanates from it embryonically share the same traits but its manifestation has shed all Christian underpinnings.

Benjamin's travel is a pilgrimage also since his desire is to visit the biblical land of Israel and all the sacred *loci* of Judaism. In that sense his account is not very different from the Christian pilgrim Egeria's account.²³ He lists the names of the towns he visits and describes holy places that are relevant to the Jewish religion, for example, the grave of Esther and Mordecai in Media.²⁴ But, unlike Egeria, Benjamin refers as well to the importance of some of the sites he visits to Muslims and Christians. His two other interests in his travel account seem to be more pragmatic: on one hand, he attentively describes the various mercantile products that can be found in each city, for instance, spices; on the other hand, he documents every Jewish community he comes in contact with and he lists the numbers of Jews inhabiting every city he visits as well as the names of some of the most illustrious members of the Jewish community.²⁵

23 Egeria's *Itinerarium Egeriae* (*Travels of Egeria*) (referred to also as either *Peregrinatio Aetheriae* (*The Pilgrimage of Aetheria*) or *Peregrinatio ad Loca Sancta* (*Pilgrimage to the Holy Lands*)) is one of the earliest extant pilgrimage travelogues to the Holy Land. Egeria visited the most important destinations of pilgrimage in the eastern Mediterranean between 381 and 384 CE (although some scholars dispute that dating). Not much is known about the identity of Egeria. It is believed she most likely lived in the western part of the Roman Empire, perhaps in the region of Gallaecia (Galicia, in modern Spain) although some scholars argue that she could have been from the southern region of modern France. Another interesting pilgrim to the Holy Land who left an account of his travels during the same period as Benjamin, was Daniel of Kiev (possibly Daniel, Bishop of Suriev in Ukraine from 1115 CE to 1122 CE). He travelled in the early twelfth century from his monastery in Ukraine to Constantinople and the Holy Land; his account is the first extant travelogue written in Russian (Charles Raymond Beazley, "Daniel of Kiev," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 7:808).

24 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 113.

25 In one particular instance, he even describes a Jewish polity located in the Horn of Africa which will turn out to be spurious: "The country is mountainous. There are many Israelites here and they are not under the yoke of the Gentiles, but possess cities and castles on the summits of the mountains." In fact, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymas has persuasively suggested that Benjamin was

On closer scrutiny, however, the latter task can be defined as a pilgrimage as well. Benjamin's careful accounting of the Jewish communities goes beyond a mere arithmetical compilation. He is not only looking for these communities as a temporary and personal refuge from danger and starvation during his travels; he is also registering how strong these communities are and how they are faring in their particular social environment and political configuration as if Benjamin were considering a permanent relocation for himself or for his community back in Sepharad (Spain). Consequently, travelling through Europe and the East Benjamin of Tudela faces a double vulnerability: as a lone traveller and as a lone Jewish traveller. His mission, which appears to be rooted on an epistemological desire to acquire knowledge of the world, is also one that confronts vulnerability head on since his aim is to explore the situation of Jewish communities abroad and these communities are constantly assailed by danger and the threat of violence, destruction or exile. One appreciates a certain degree of urgency in the way he attempts to document as dispassionately as possible the constant liminality and precariousness of Jewish communities. This, for instance, is how he describes the situation of his Jewish brethren in Constantinople:

No Jews live in the city, for they have been placed behind an inlet of the sea. An arm of the sea of Marmora shuts them in on the one side, and they are unable to go out except by way of the sea, when they want to do business with the inhabitants [...] No Jew there is allowed to ride on horseback. The one exception is R. Solomon Hamitsri, who is the king's physician, and through whom the Jews enjoy considerable alleviation of their oppression. For their condition is very low, and there is much hatred against them, which is fostered by tanners, who throw out their dirty water in the streets before the doors of the Jewish houses and defile the Jews' quarter. So the Greeks hate the Jews, good and bad alike, and subject them to great oppression, and beat them in the streets, and in every way threaten them with rigor. Yet the Jews are rich and good, kindly and charitable, and bear their lot with cheerfulness.²⁶

On the other hand, the city of Bagdad, a much more welcoming environment for the Jews, is clearly contrasted to Constantinople: "In Bagdad there are about 40,000 Jews and they dwell in security, prosperity and honour under the great Caliph, and amongst them are great sages, the heads of Academies engaged in the study of the law."²⁷

probably referring not to a Jewish kingdom of Ethiopia, which some scholars have equated to the Falasha, but to an Ethiopian Christian community, which exhibited various traits that linked it to Judaism, including the legend of a reigning Solomonic dynasty ("Desperately Seeking the Jewish Kingdom of Ethiopia: Benjamin of Tudela and the Horn of Africa (12th Century)," *Speculum* 88 (2013): 383–404, at 399–400).

²⁶ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 72; *Jewish Travelers*, ed. Elkan Nathan (Adler: RoutledgeCurzon, 1930; repr. 2005), 41.

²⁷ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 99. Benjamin's extolling depiction of the city markedly contrasts, in fact, with another Iberian traveller's account, that of the Muslim Ibn Jubayr, who in 1184 decries the decline of the city which he likens to "an effaced ruin, a remain washed out, or the statue of

In fact, Benjamin devotes many more pages to the description of the main city of Islam and its caliph than to any other city through his travels. He begins by introducing the Abbasid caliph al-Mustanjid²⁸ (1124–1170, caliph [Khalifa] from 1160 to 1170) who, in addition to being the temporal ruler of Bagdad was also, as a descendant of the prophet Muhammad (Hebrew: ha-meshuga', "the madman"), the amir al-mu'minin, or Commander of the Faithful and thus had nominal religious authority over all Muslims from Spain to India. Very aptly, Benjamin states that "he occupies a similar position to that held by the pope over the Christians."²⁹

In addition, Benjamin declares that "he is kind unto Israel, and many belonging to the people of Israel are his attendants: he knows all languages and is well versed in the law of Israel. He reads and writes the holy language (Hebrew)". He also describes the caliph (hafiz) as a "great king," "a benevolent man," or "a righteous man."³⁰ To illustrate his benevolence Benjamin explains that the caliph built a hospital to take care of the sick poor and another for demented people, where "they chain each of them in iron chains until their reason becomes restored to them."³¹ According to Benjamin of Tudela, the patients at these institutions are maintained at the caliph's expense and the caliph does it out of charity.³¹

This flattering characterization markedly contrasts, notwithstanding, with the Jewish traveller's own account of the caliph's brutality and tyrannical rule which, curiously, mirrors the previous comment about chaining the demented patients. Thus, the caliph does not extend his munificence and charitable compassion to his relatives, whom he keeps under chains:

Each of his brothers and the members of his family has an abode in his palace, but they are all fettered in chains of iron, and guards are placed over each of their houses so that they may not rise against the great Caliph. For once it happened to a predecessor that his brothers rose up against him and proclaimed one of themselves as Caliph; then it was decreed that all members of his family should be bound, that they might not rise up against the ruling Caliph.³²

a ghost." (Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr, being the Chronicles of a Mediaeval Spanish Moor Concerning His Journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the Holy Cities of Arabia*, trans. Ronald J. C. Broadhurst (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 226).

28 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 98. Martin Jacobs, however, rightly argues that Benjamin's assertion is anachronistic when related to the twelfth century since "the Abbasid caliphate had appreciably declined since the 8th century and their supremacy over the entire Muslim community (Arabic: *umma*) was called into question by rival caliphates" (*Reorienting the East: Jewish Travelers to the Medieval Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 126). Despite this, Jacobs notes that from Benjamin's perspective the Abbasid Baghdad he encounters is "the capital of the Islamic world" (126).

29 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 96, 98, and 99.

30 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 98.

31 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 98–99.

32 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 96–97.

Benjamin goes on to add that, in spite of their captivity, they are maintained in great luxury and they all “eat and drink and rejoice all the days of their life.”³³ An oblique parallel between the living arrangements of the demented people and the caliph’s family can be discerned. The implication is, thus, that the caliph is an all-powerful figure who capriciously arbitrates the fate and welfare of his subjects, allowing them to adore him but treating them like little children, as can be seen in the Tudelan’s description of the caliph’s procession through the streets during El-id-bed Ramazan, the only time of the year when he deigns to come out from his palace and let his subjects see him and kiss his robe.³⁴

Benjamin of Tudela, however, finishes his ambiguous description of the caliph with the unequivocal affirmation that “all his actions are for good,”³⁵ the reason becoming apparent as we progress to the next paragraph (cited above), which states that the Jews dwell in security and prosperity under this caliph. The reader understands now that the caliph’s possible shortcomings are altogether compensated by the benevolent way in which he treats his Jewish subjects. Furthermore, this section continues explaining, in an unusually long passage, the role, at the caliph’s court, of Daniel, the “Head of the Captivity of all Israel” or exilarch, that is the chief sovereign of the Jewish community under the caliphate.

Our Jewish traveller makes it a point to contrast the singular yearly visit that the caliph bestows upon his subjects to the visit he receives from the Jewish exilarch every five days, underscoring the high place the Jewish authority holds in the caliph’s court. As Benjamin describes and Michael Signer summarizes in his introduction to the text, the exilarch was formally invested with authority and had to be saluted by both Muslims and Jews:

A triumphal march through the streets of Baghdad each Thursday precedes his meeting with the caliph at the royal palace. This pomp and glory demonstrates to Benjamin’s satisfaction that the biblical prophecy, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff between his feet; so that tribute shall come to him and the homage of peoples be his” (Gen. 49:10). The Head of the Exile, like the Caliph, is a man of property, and bestows charity and benevolence upon his people.³⁶

Benjamin’s magnified and always laudatory sketches of the Jewish communities he encounters, in general, and of the exilarch of Bagdad’s excelling attributes, in particular, would seem to evidence an Orientalist perspective, as Edward Said would argue:

Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. The scientist, the

33 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 97.

34 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 96–97.

35 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 99.

36 Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 99–102 and 25.

scholar, the missionary, the soldier [...] was in, or thought about the Orient because *he could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part.³⁷

This statement, however, presupposes that the Westerner's intellectual apprehending of what he was seeing operated under an umbrella of Western hegemony over the "Orient."

This, nevertheless, is not the case with Benjamin of Tudela, a vulnerable, marginalized and non-hegemonic subject himself.³⁸ His account instead, demonstrates that he is able to document, define and distinguish between a beneficial and a prejudicial predicament for the Jews by comparing what he saw through his travels with his own circumstances, with the reality that he knew. He does not need to "create" or invent a discourse to describe what he sees (unlike what the New World Spanish *conquistadores* would have to resort to later in the sixteenth century to express the unknown). He can avail himself of what he has already seen in his own Western and, in Christian eyes, supposedly superior, hegemonic world. Consequently, Benjamin's eyewitness account of the East does, in fact, transport the reader's gaze back to the West, where Jews also live in repressive communities such as that of Constantinople. The account renders an incriminatory and obvious conclusion: Jews suffer under Christian rule, while they thrive under Muslim rule.

As if to make this realization even more patent to the reader Benjamin spins a narrative that emphasizes the point. It is an interesting sort of, as Martin Jacobs affirms, "medieval science-fiction thriller" in which a Christian saboteur causes irreparable damage to the glass mirror mounted on top of the famous and legendary Alexandria lighthouse or "Pharos" and which served as a sort of sophisticated telescope.³⁹

It happened once, many years after the death of Alexander, that a ship came from the land of Greece, and the name of the captain was Theodoros, a Greek of great cleverness. The Greeks at the time were under the yoke of Egypt. The captain brought great gifts in silver and gold and garments of silk to the King of Egypt, and he moored his ship in front of the lighthouse, as was the custom

³⁷ Edward W. Said, "Orientalism," in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Edward W. Said, Moustafa Bayoumi, and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 73–74.

³⁸ In addition to not enjoying a "positional superiority" and being a non-hegemonic subject, Benjamin most certainly observed the East through a different lens than an European Christian. Martin Jacobs claims that Jewish travellers, in fact, even challenged the idea of Europe or the West as home and the Middle East as exile and they deliberately "reoriented the East and decentered Europe" in their accounts (*Reorienting the East*, 3).

³⁹ Alexander of Macedon erected the large tower or lighthouse called in Arabic *Manar al Iskandriyyah*: "On top of the tower there is a glass mirror. Any ships that attempted to attack or molest the city, coming from Greece or from the Western Lands, could be seen by means of this mirror of glass at a distance of twenty days' journey, and the inhabitants could thereupon put themselves on their guard" (Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 133). Ibn Jubayr admiringly refers to the tower as well in his *rihla* (*The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, trans. Roland J. C. Broadhurst (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 33).

of all merchants. Every day the guardian of the lighthouse and his servants had their meals with him, until the captain came to be on such friendly terms with the keeper that he could go in and out at all times. And one day he gave a banquet, and caused the keeper and all his servants to drink a great deal of wine. When they were all asleep, the captain and his servants arose and broke the mirror and departed that very night [...] Ever since then, the men of the King of Egypt have been unable to prevail over the Greeks.⁴⁰

This tale, which Benjamin probably learned or heard from oral sources, is undoubtedly intended to explain why the lighthouse fell into disuse. It also, presents, however, a polemical bent against Christianity since it is a Byzantine spy who destroyed the mirror for the purpose of ending Muslim domination over the Mediterranean. Thus, Benjamin of Tudela seems “to identify with Muslim anxieties over potential Byzantine expansion. Whatever the source, in the context of the *Massa’ot*, the story allows him to depict Christianity as a barbaric force that destroyed one of the great wonders of Antiquity. Similar to his chapter on Bagdad mentioned earlier, Benjamin’s account of Alexandria bolsters his hypothesis that the Islamic world is culturally superior to Christendom,”⁴¹ and thus Muslim hegemony is preferable to Christian hegemony.

This *excursus* on the destruction of the lighthouse can be chiasmatically compared to Benjamin’s impressions when he visits Rome. He indirectly alludes to a monument that evokes very painful memories for him and for his co-religionists: the Arch of Titus, which commemorates the second destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.⁴² Benjamin does not mention the arch itself but his selection of the details he describes show that the image of the Arch is foremost in his mind. Benjamin refers to Titus with a sort of incriminating comment (that he was ill-treated by the senators because it took Titus three years to take Jerusalem instead of two)⁴³ which has the effect of undermining Titus and glorifying instead the fierce Jewish resistance in that battle. In addition, Benjamin injects haphazardly in his narration several clear references to the destruction depicted in the actual arch:

In the church of St. John in the Lateran there are two bronze columns taken from the Temple, the handiwork of King Solomon, each column being engraved “Solomon the son of David”. The Jews of Rome told me that every year upon the

⁴⁰ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 133.

⁴¹ Jacobs, *Reorienting the East*, 145–46.

⁴² The Arch of Titus is a Roman honorific arch erected by Domitian in ca. 81 CE on the Via Sacra in the Forum in Rome. It commemorates the victories of his father Vespasian and brother Titus in the Jewish War in Judea (70–71 CE) when the city of Jerusalem was sacked, and the vast riches of its temple looted. The sculptural relief in the arch shows Titus’s 71 CE victory triumph procession as it passes through the Porta Triumphalis to the Forum with the participants carrying booty from the Temple of Jerusalem after the sacking of the city. The loot includes a menorah, silver trumpets, and the Table of Shew bread (Paul Artus, *Art and Architecture of the Roman Empire* (Tauranga: Bellona Books, 2006), 45–48).

⁴³ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 63.

9th of Av they found the columns exuding moisture like water. There is also a cave where Titus the son of Vespasianus stored the Temple vessels which he brought from Jerusalem.⁴⁴

For centuries, Jews have refused to walk under it and thus to give honour to Titus, the destroyer of Jerusalem. Consequently, Benjamin most likely did not walk under the arch while he visited Rome and he purposefully does not directly allude to it in his travelogue, but clearly describes instead the details that evoke the arch itself as well as the dishonour it represents for the Jews, including the explicit reference to the date of 9th Av (Tisha b'Av), considered by the Jews as a day of ignominy since it marks not one but several historical calamities, namely, the first and second destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 as well as the date when Jews were no longer allowed to remain in the country after their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

Therefore, in this case the monument is not destroyed or in the process of being destroyed as was the case with the Alexandrian lighthouse; on the contrary, it is the arch itself that infinitely reenacts and dramatizes another destruction of an equally legendary monument, the Temple of Jerusalem. The messages to derive from the reference to the monuments, however, do coincide: a beacon of civilization behaves in a very uncivilized way. In one case, a Christian Greek tries to destroy a symbol of an enlightened pagan civilization (Ptolemaic Alexandria) now controlled by Muslims; in the other case, the Roman legions destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in one of the most barbaric wars in antiquity.⁴⁵ Benjamin is tacitly contesting the concept of "civilization" and underscoring the fact that the Jews are always defenceless and vulnerable when facing such misguided imperialistic and fanatic forces.

More than two centuries after Benjamin of Tudela's pilgrimage, another Iberian traveller, Pero Tafur, would journey to the East and write an account of his experiences there. The *Andanças e viaje de Pero Tafur por diversas partes del mundo avidos* (*Travels and voyages of Pero Tafur through various parts of the world*),⁴⁶ probably composed around 1457, is an autobiographical account of the extensive journeys undertaken by the narrator between 1437 and 1439.⁴⁷ Born in Cordoba between 1405 and 1410, and raised in the

⁴⁴ Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 64.

⁴⁵ Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (Prentice Hall: Biblical Archeology Society, 2011); see also Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, 7 vols. (Bury St. Edmunds: Loeb Classical Library, 1927); or the more recent edition *The Jewish War: Revised Edition*, ed. Betty Radice and E. Mary Smallwood, trans. G. A. Williamson (London: Penguin Classics, 1981).

⁴⁶ There is only one extant eighteenth-century manuscript of this text, currently housed at the Biblioteca Universitaria de Salamanca (Ms. 1985). The first modern edition of the manuscript was prepared in 1874 by Marcos Jiménez de la Espada: *Andanças e viajes de Pero Tafur por diversas partes del mundo avidos (1435-1439)* (Madrid: Colección de Libros Españoles Raros y Curiosos, VIII, 1874).

⁴⁷ E. Michael Gerli, "Pero Tafur," in *Medieval Iberia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. E. Michael Gerli (New York: Routledge, 2003), 767.

household of the master of the chivalric Order of Calatrava,⁴⁸ this Andalusian adventurer produces an account remarkable for the number and geographical scope of the areas visited and the vivacious, often touristic style of the author's detailed commentary. Pero Tafur's travel account departs from earlier travelogues which relied on "zoomorphic and anthropomorphic fantasies of Classical *auctoritas*"⁴⁹ and it has been categorized as pragmatic and realistic⁵⁰ while the Andalusian traveller has been described as an unprejudiced eyewitness.⁵¹

Margaret W. Labarge suggests that Tafur must have been a member of the urban oligarchy (she adduces as evidence his position among the "venticuatro" or City Hall *regidores* of Córdoba in 1479).⁵² Given his keen and frequent observations about markets, exchange commodities, trading caravans and technology it is quite probable that he was from a merchant family, and a wealthy one no doubt since his family was prosperous enough to indulge his taste for travel and adventure. The narrator himself repeatedly alludes to the bill of exchanges he carries and to his interactions with merchants and correspondents anywhere he goes and we know, for instance, that he stayed with the Morosinis in Venice at the outset of his travels.

Tafur provides a wealth of information regarding local customs, politics, commerce, and industry, but he does not do so detachedly; on the contrary, he actively seeks to engage with this "alien other" with whom he is confronted through his travels and exhibits a great eagerness to interact with locals. His contacts include not only prominent personages and dignitaries but also humbler folk. Additionally, he reveals an interest in natural history, paying particular attention to phenomena considered exotic from the European perspective: "A combination of religious pilgrimage, business trip, social promenade, and sightseeing excursion, his narrative expresses both inquisitive ethnographic curiosity and touristic fervor with regard to both European and non-European places and peoples."⁵³ Thus, he not merely opens up to "vulnerability" but he gladly embraces it as well.

Pero Tafur's stimulus in writing about his travels could be what he sees as a terrible blow for Christendom, the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. *Andanças e viajes*

48 M. A. Pérez Priego, "Introducción," in *Viajes medievales* (Madrid: Fundación José Antonio de Castro, 2006), xx; see also J. Rubio Tovar, *Libros españoles de viajes medievales* (Madrid: Taurus, 1986).

49 Karen M. Daly, "Here there Be No Dragons: *Maravilla* in Two Fifteenth-Century Spanish *libros de viajes*," *Notandum* 29 (2012): 25–34, at 26.

50 Miguel Angel Priego, "Maravillas en los libros de viajes medievales," *Compás de Letras* 7 (1995): 65–78, at 69.

51 Francisco López Estrada, "Viajeros españoles en Asia: la embajada de Enrique III a Tamorlán (1403–1406)," *Revista Universidad Complutense* 3 (1981): 227–46.

52 Margaret Wade Labarge, "Pero Tafur: A Fifteenth-Century Spaniard," *Florilegium* 5 (1983): 237–46. Sofía Carrizo Rueda (*Poética del relato de viajes* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1997): 111–12) and Filomena Liberatori ("Ideale caballeresco e mercantilismo nelle 'Andanças' di Pero Tafur," *Studi di Iberistica* 9 (1987): 109–38, at 138) also examine Tafur's links to the mercantile class.

53 Michael Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity in Medieval Spanish Travel Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 109.

endeavours to recover the link between Western Christendom and the East so forcibly severed by the Ottoman Turks' victory and in order to do so he hyperbolically describes and exalts all those places that he visited during his travels and that are now lost to Christians. His strategy is to mend the fissure by recreating the lost world, by presenting as whole what was broken but, paradoxically, by doing so he starkly exposes the vulnerability of the Christian world and Tafur's own vulnerability.

After all, Tafur is deemed to be the last European traveller to visit and describe Constantinople before the Ottomans' conquest.⁵⁴ Thus, his detailed descriptions of Constantinople, Caffa and Trebizond nostalgically and elegiacally conjure up a magnificent but lost world, which is, nevertheless, already imagined or fashioned in his writing as a decaying world. Despite the fact that he admits to being quite enthralled with the magnificent encircling walls and the marvellous monuments of the city, Tafur also reveals that he was already well aware of the weaknesses and the deterioration of Constantinople during his visit. He mentions the depopulation of the city and the state of general poverty and wretchedness observed in the remaining inhabitants' clothes as well as in their incessant wailing, and the visible state of disarray and neglect of the imperial palace:

La cibdad es mal poblada e han mengua de buenas gentes de armas [...] La casa del emperador muestra aver sido magnífica, pero agora no está así, que ella e la cibdad bien parece el mal que han pasado e pasan de cada día [...] La gente no bien vestidos, mas triste e pobre, mostrando el mal que tienen [...] Continuamente están dando aullidos como de llanto e por toda la cibdad.⁵⁵

[The city is severely depopulated and they lack good men of arms [...] The emperor's palace shows traces of having been magnificent but it is no longer so, and in both the palace and the city it is apparent how badly they have fared [...] People are not only badly dressed but they are sad and poor, clearly showing their anguish [...] They are constantly howling and crying all over the city.]

Even when describing his wonderment at the magnificence of Hagia Sofia, Tafur obliquely alludes, through the pointed use of the imperfect verbal tense in Spanish, to that vanished, more splendidous time: "la qual [Hagia Sofia] es tan grande que dizen que, quando Constantinopla prosperava, avie en ella seis mil clérigos."⁵⁶ (It is indeed so big that they claim that, when Constantinople used to be prosperous, there used to be six thousand priests in charge of it.)

Furthermore, in his travel account he contrasts several times the Byzantine city and its citizens' malaise to the magnificence and orderliness observed among their rivals, the Turks. Tafur is clearly mesmerized by the power and magnificence of the enemy. When the Byzantine emperor asks Tafur to accompany him to Italy as a member of his

⁵⁴ Karen M. Daly, "Here Be No Dragons," 33.

⁵⁵ Pero Tafur, *Andanças e viajes de Pero Tafur in Viajes medievales*, 211–379, at 296 and 313; my translation.

⁵⁶ Pero Tafur, 308.

entourage for a strategically important meeting with the pope, Tafur declines and sets out instead to visit the Turkish headquarters at Adrianople and see the Grand Turk, Murat II (r. 1421–1444).

In addition, he refers to the Turks as “a noble people” (noble gente en quien se falla mucha verdad)⁵⁷ and generally esteems their abilities more than the Byzantines. On one instance, he sees the Ottoman army marching by the mighty walls of Constantinople and the Spanish traveller comments that it was a wonder to behold. He unapologetically praises their elegance, their weapons, liveries and horses and he further adds that he has no doubt that the Turks would have won the battle, had they attacked the city on that day.⁵⁸ His *admiratio* of the Turks and other Muslims from a Christian, detached and contrary position will metamorphose into a symbolic arrogation and performative stance at one point in the narrative where Pero Tafur dresses in Muslim garb in order to be able to penetrate, disguised and undeterred, into the Temple of Solomon or Mosque of Omar, at the time a site prohibited to Christians on pain of death:

E aquella noche yo rogué a un moro renegado, que fue natural de Portugal, que le daría dos ducados e me metiese aquella noche a ver el templo de Salomón. E fizolo así, e a una ora de la noche yo entré con él vestido de su ropa e vi todo el templo, el cual es una sola nave toda de oro mosaico labrada, e el suelo e paredes de muy fermosas losas blancas [...] Si yo allí fuera conocido por cristiano, luego fuera muerto.

[And that night I implored a Moorish renegade, a native of Portugal, to sneak me into the Temple of Solomon in exchange for two ducats, and he did. I entered with him dressed in his clothing and saw all of the temple, which consists of one nave, all decorated with gold mosaic work and the floors and walls made of beautiful white flagstones [...] Had I been recognized as a Christian there, I would have been killed.]⁵⁹

By this seemingly innocuous (although defiant and highly dangerous) act of cross-dressing the Westerner has come closer to becoming the “alien other” himself.

In this unprejudiced or “vulnerable” spirit, Pero Tafur highlights through his travels the peaceful co-existence of the many different nationalities and denominations of his fellow pilgrims, including Catholics, Greeks, Jacobites, Armenians, Indians and Copts.⁶⁰ Evincing an open-mindedness akin to that expressed by Mandeville in the *Marvels*, he

⁵⁷ Pero Tafur, 300.

⁵⁸ “Yo ove en dicha de verlo [the Turk] en el campo, e ver su manera como andan en el campo é en la guerra e sus armas e cavallos e atavios; bien creo si con la gente del Poniente se fallasen, non avrie en ellos registengia no porque de la persona no son Buenos, mas falléceles mucho de los necesario a la guerra” (Pero Tafur, *Andanças e viajes por diversas partes del mundo avidos (1435–1439)* (Madrid: Imprenta de Miguel Ginesta, 1874) 184; Perez-Priego, *Viajes medievales*, 315.

⁵⁹ Pero Tafur (2006), 251. English translation of passage taken from Shayne Aaron Legassie’s *The Medieval Invention of Travel* (Chicago: Universty of Chicago Press, 2017), 206.

⁶⁰ Michael Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*, 246; Pero Tafur, 303.

remarks, in a passage describing a visit to Bethlehem, that even the Muslims are capable of piety: “Alli los moros fecieron tanta reverencia como nosotros” (There the Moors showed as much reverence as we do).⁶¹ Later, in the long digression conveying his friend Niccolo de’ Conti’s account of his travels, the Eastern Christians ruled by Prester John are described as being as Catholic and devoutly Christian as one could want, save for their absolute ignorance of the church of Rome.⁶²

Nevertheless, his forbearance is challenged when he finds himself in need of describing the Black Sea trading city of Kaffa. Tafur now criticizes and loathes the practices he beholds (“Tanta es la bestialidad e deformidad de aquesta gente” (These people’s bestiality and deformity is enormous))⁶³ but he also excuses at times and, to a certain degree, he gives in and assimilates and, eventually, no matter how briefly, adopts the other culture’s behaviour. He notes the city’s extreme exoticism, describing its profusion of things “muy estrañas a los de nuestra nación” (quite alien to those of our nation); the great diversity of its population, including Christians, both Catholic and Greek, and members of all the world’s nations. The town’s polyglot inhabitants constantly engage in “grandes travesuras” (great abuses) such as fathers selling sons or brothers selling sisters.⁶⁴

Tafur also indicates a certain degree of amazement and voyeuristic pleasure in his eyewitness account of the distasteful procedures of the great slave market of Kaffa. Surprisingly, however, he then engages in the distasteful activity himself, “prefiguring the flirtation with going native that is one of modern tourism’s favorite constructed scenarios.”⁶⁵ Here, in the world’s greatest slave market, a papal bull is cited encouraging Christians to purchase Christian slaves of all nations,⁶⁶ for fear that they fall into Muslim hands and renounce their faith. Pero Tafur buys two female slaves and one male, informing his readers that they remain with him yet, years later in Córdoba. Showing sympathy for the slaves on the block, he describes the market’s harsh procedures, whereby all slaves, males and females alike, are made to strip down to the skin, then paraded naked before prospective buyers. His subsequent hyperbolic reiteration of the astonishing diversity and strangeness of this foreign environment can be read, according to Michael Harney, “as an exculpatory disclaimer regarding his fleeting involvement in alien ways, among a motley horde of races people [sic] with whom he has nothing in common.”⁶⁷

61 Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures, 1435–1439*, ed. and trans. Malcolm Lett (London: Routledge, 1926), 248. Although “moro” [Moor] actually originated from the Latin word for “black” (*maurus*) and referred to inhabitants of Mauretania in North Africa (the actual Mahgreb), Pero Tafur uses the term “Moor” in his account indistinctly to refer to all Muslims, as was the usage among inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula during the medieval and early modern period.

62 Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, 274.

63 Tafur, *Andanças e viajes*, 2006, 169.

64 Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*, 303.

65 Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*, 303.

66 Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*, 110.

67 Harney, *Race, Caste, and Indigeneity*, 304.

Ciertamente si no fuera por los ginoveses que alli estan, no parece que los otros no tienen parte con nuestra naturaleza tantas e tan diversas naciones e tantos trajes en el vestir e en el comer e en el uso de las mujeres, que acaeçie en la posada donde estavamos traernos las moças virgenes por un açumbre de vino, de que ellos han carestia, e de toda fruta e aun de pan, aunque alli en la cibdad se falla porque lo llevan los mercaderes, pero caro e por esto se fazen los furtos.

[If it were not for the Genovese, no one here looks close to our nature since there are people from all nations and so much variety in the clothes and the food and the way with women, as for example when we were at the inn and they would bring to us some virgin maidens and offered them to us in exchange for some wine, which they lacked, as well as fruit and even bread, even though one can find those things in the city because the merchants bring them but they are expensive and for this reason people steal.]

And he follows with an anecdote to describe perhaps the most alien or strange of all the groups he is encountering, the Tartars, who are tough, bellicose and strong and since they are constantly ready to fight and mounted on their horses they put their meat between the side of the horse and the seat and that is how they cook their meat.⁶⁸ Tafur is visibly fascinated with the Tartars, so much so that he actively tries to arrange to travel further into their country: “Yo trabajé cuanto pude por ir por la Tartaria, pero fui aconsejado que no lo devia fazer, porque no sería seguro de las gentes que andan por los campos, sueltos, sin obediencia de sennor”⁶⁹ (I tried very hard to arrange for travel to the Tartar lands but they advised me not to do it because I would be in danger from the people roaming the countryside, bereft of obeisance to any lord). Here Tafur would like to know more about other cultures but the fear of physical vulnerability on the road dissuades him from his plan to travel. Other times, however, he seems to wish to encounter such dangers as when he wishes that the Turks had attacked so that he could have fought them,⁷⁰ and goes so far as to express a yearning for religious persecution. For instance, in Pero Tafur’s second-hand report of the experiences of the Italian traveller Niccolò de Conti, whose long sojourn in the East is summarized by our Spanish traveller in an extensive digression, Tafur asserts: “Yo dispuesto estava para rescebir el martirio”⁷¹ (I was very willing to endure martyrdom).

Thus, by the end of his voyage Tafur had not only experienced physical vulnerabilities (which included a shipwreck and an arrow wound to the foot) but had also been transformed (“wounded”) by the Eastern cultures with which he had come in contact and his beliefs had been unsettled. Furthermore, his gaze back to his own culture revealed that the West or “Poniente,” as he calls it, had lost its ascendancy in all spheres

68 “E bien que yo quisiera, aunque teniamos pocas gentes, que nos provara a fazer alguna fuerça.” Pero Tafur, 304.

69 Pero Tafur, 305.

70 Pero Tafur, 315.

71 Pero Tafur, 269.

(commercially, socially, politically, and militarily) and that Christian polities were more vulnerable than the ones in the East.

In the “Prologue” to his travel account Pero Tafur had explained the purpose of his journey:

Es visitar tierras estrañas, porque de tal visitación razonablemente se pueden conseguir provechos cercanos a lo que proeza require, así engrandeciendo los fijosdalgo sus corazones donde sin ser primero conocidos los intervienen trabajos y priesas, como deseando mostrar por obras quién fueron sus antecesores, quando solamente por propias façañas puede ser de ellos conocedora la gente estrangera.

[From the practice of travelling into foreign lands a man may reasonably hope to attain proficiency in that which prowess demands. Thus *hidalgos* (knights) may grow stout-hearted where, being unknown, they are beset by hardship and peril, striving to show themselves worthy of their ancestors, and by their own deeds to make their virtues known to strangers.]⁷²

Pero Tafur’s written account of his adventures are exemplary not only of the physical “hardships I have suffered in various parts of the world,” as he tellingly puts it,⁷³ but of the other types of vulnerabilities outlined above. Little did he realize that through the process of transformation effected by the “practice of travelling” he was, in fact, acting as a Muslim and unknowingly following a Muslim mandate, which inspired people to travel and achieve knowledge of themselves and others.

Our third Iberian traveller experienced a similar but reversed and coerced transformation. He was named at birth al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyātī or al-Fāsī, but he became better known among Christian Europeans as Leo Africanus. He was a Berber diplomat and author born in Granada, best known for writing the *Cosmographia* [sic] e *Geographia de Affrica*, which describes the geography of the Maghreb and the Nile Valley.⁷⁴ At the time of its publication, the book was deemed the most authoritative treatise on the subject of the geography of Africa among the learned in Europe, and it continued to be so at least until the modern exploration of Africa.⁷⁵

Although the writer Amin Maalouf paints a wonderfully detailed picture of the eponymous hero in his 1986 *Leo Africanus* novel, only sparse details are known about al-Hassan al-Wazzan’s life. Natalie Zemon-Davies’s compelling study *Trickster Travels: A*

⁷² Pero Tafur, ed. Pérez Priego, 2006, 215; Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, 19.

⁷³ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, 20.

⁷⁴ Al-Hassan al Wazzan/Leo Africanus, *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica*, MS V.E. 953, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Rome.

⁷⁵ Pekka Masonen, “Leo Africanus: the Man with Many Names,” *Al-Andalus Magreb* 8–9 (2001): 115–43; Dietrich Rauchenberger, *Johannes Leo der Afrikaner: seine Beschreibung des Raumes zwischen Nil und Niger nach dem Urtext*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 27–28. Rauchenberger suggests that Sebastiano del Piombo’s 1520 portrait of an anonymous humanist probably depicts Leo Africanus (78–79).

Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds does an excellent job at filling in the substantial gaps in our knowledge of Leo Africanus's life, motivations and interests but much remains speculative.⁷⁶ Akin to Pero Tafur, Leo did lead, however, an adventurous and perilous existence. As his translator John Pory claims, Leo escaped from "so manie thousands of imminent dangers."⁷⁷ During his travels through the Atlas Mountains he endured a severe snowstorm which killed all his caravan companions, and some Arab horsemen attempted to rob him by stripping him in the cold. While travelling in Nubian lands his caravan's guide lost his way in the desert and they wandered for ten days with very little water. Moreover, not only did he suffer kidnapping and enslavement by pirates, imprisonment in Rome and a subsequent forced conversion to Christianity, but he had also experienced the fate of an exile when he and his family fled from Granada right before or soon after the fall of the city to the Christian armies of the Catholic monarchs in 1492.

In spite of the fact that many scholars proposed 1491 as the date of his birth, it is more likely that al-Wazzan was born later, between 1494 and 1495, in the city of Granada. He came from a privileged background. It appears that his father owned lands and the family must have been well to do judging by the distinguished position his exiled relatives occupied in Morocco: his uncle was an ambassador. Al-Wazzan did not live long in Granada although he always proudly attached the demonym "al-Gharnati" (the Granadan) to his name.⁷⁸ His family moved to Fez probably only a few years after he was born. The actual reason for the move is unknown, although it has been frequently reasoned that they must have been escaping religious persecution by the new Christian rulers of Granada. Around those years, however, the predicament of the Muslim population had not become desperate yet. In fact, one of the conditions of the surrender of Granada was the granting of religious freedom for the Muslims. Unlike what had happened with the Jews in 1492, the Muslims of Granada had apparently received very tolerant and benign terms of surrender from the Catholic kings.⁷⁹

Notwithstanding, even if al-Wazzan's family had predicted what was to come, perhaps their departure can be better explicated by remembering the Islamic mandate to emigrate from infidel lands. Islamic law required Muslims to break ties with idolatry by

76 Natalie Zemon Davies, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006). Davies herself admits to it and envisions her book's hypotheses as an invitation to the reader "to follow a plausible life story from materials of the time" (13). I refer the reader to her book for extensive information about most of what is known about Leo Africanus, including bibliographical references. For the purposes of my study I will concentrate solely on the issue of vulnerability.

77 Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa, written in Arabicke and Italian by John Leo, a More borne in Granada and brought up in Barbarie*, trans. and collected by J. Pory (London: George Bishop, 1600).

78 As a matter of fact, even after he converted to Catholicism and was baptized by Pope Leo X, al-Wazzan chose as his new name Yuhanna al-Asad al-Gharnati, which translates as John the Lion of Granada.

79 This state of affairs, however, would dramatically change just a few years later when the Catholic kings reneged on their earlier promises and forced all Granadan Muslims to convert.

moving from the lands of Christians or *Dar al-Harb* (territory of war).⁸⁰ It is, therefore, very likely that Leo's parents simply followed the example set by most members of the highest echelon of Granadan society, including the defeated king, Boabdil, who himself emigrated to Morocco in 1493.

Thus, although forced conversions did not start until 1499 when the archbishop of Toledo, Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros, was sent to Granada to substitute the more tolerant Hernando de Talavera, many of the richest and most influential Muslims had already left and resettled across the Strait of Gibraltar. They were no doubt escaping what many saw as inevitable, which tragically and promptly came to pass in 1502, when those Muslims left in Granada who had refused to convert to Christianity were finally deported to North Africa in 1502, after their unsuccessful revolt.⁸¹

In Fez, young al-Hasan Ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan received a good education at the reputable Islamic university of al-Qarawiyyin. While studying, he worked for two years as a secretary in the "bimaristan"⁸² of Fez, a hospital for sick foreigners and poor combined with a lunatic asylum. Then after becoming a *faqih* he initiated his life of adventure by travelling first with his uncle the ambassador in some of his missions, and later on his own on a variety of commercial and diplomatic expeditions. His life of travels, nevertheless, was abruptly truncated when the ship in which he was sailing back to Fez from Cairo was seized by Spanish pirate Pedro Cabrera y Bobadilla in 1518. The ruthless captor must have appreciated the value of this diplomat and scholar because he sent al-Wazzan to Rome to be presented as a gift to Pope Leo X. The Moroccan diplomat spent more than a year (1518–1519) in Rome as a prisoner in Castel Sant'Angelo.

80 See a more thorough explanation of this obligation in the chapters by Gould (Chapter 1) and Sorrentino (Chapter 2) in this volume. *Dar al-harb* "denotes the territory bordering on dar al-Islam (territory of Islam) whose leaders are called up to convert to Islam" (John L. Esposito, *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 62). While a highly contested term, according to the majority of jurists "an Islamic territory taken by non-Muslims" (such as the case of Granada in 1492) "becomes *dar al-harb* when Islamic law is replaced" (62). Tahanawi defined it as "an area in which the writ of the infidel ruler runs" (cited in "Dar al-Islam and dar al-harb in Modern Indian Muslim Thought" in *Dar al-Islam / dar al-harb: Territories, Peoples, Identities*, ed. Giovanna Calasso (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 344). See also in same edited volume the article by Maribel Fierro and Luis Molina, "Some Notes on *dar al-harb* in Early al-Andalus," 205–34.

81 The final expulsion of the remaining converted Muslims or *Moriscos* did not take place until 1609, during the reign of Philip III.

82 A "bimaristan" was "in medieval Islam, a hospital; in modern usage, this Persian appellation is applied especially to a mental hospital. One of the greatest and original institutional achievements of classical Islamic society, the *bimaristan* provided a wide range of services, sometimes without fee, and also functioned as a medical research and teaching school. The first *bimaristan* was established in Baghdad under Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809). Among the most illustrious were the twelfth-century Aduḍi hospital in Baghdad and the Mansuri hospital in Cairo, completed in 1284." ([www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e352](https://doi.org/10.1017/CH-9781942401605)). The institution where al-Wazzan worked reminds us of the hospital created by the caliph of Baghdad and described by Benjamin in his travelogue.

Pope Leo X, however, had shrewdly recognized the benefits that could derive from al-Wazzan's presence in Rome.⁸³ On one hand, the captive was not only a seasoned diplomat privy to advantageous information about the church's enemies but also an erudite Muslim scholar who could prove useful in deciphering Arabic documents and in instructing Christians on Muslim culture, language and attitudes. Conversely, there was considerable symbolic value to be earned by holding al-Wazzan captive as an archetype of the defeated and humiliated enemy and, later on, by exhibiting al-Wazzan not only as the vanquished enemy but also as an enemy divested of its Muslim ways, now donning Christian attire by virtue of al-Wazzan's conversion to Christianity. In an elaborate and ostentatious ceremony, Pope Leo X himself baptized al-Wazzan in the Basilica of St. Peter in 1520. Pope Leo X's manoeuvres in his treatment of his slave embody well the process of establishing hegemony as outlined by Gramsci: he has managed through coercion (the threat of slavery or death) and persuasion (appealing to al-Wazzan's interest in learning and intellectual sophistication) to exert his power over his vulnerable subordinate and to bring about his conversion. The diplomat/slave now turned Christian took the Latin name Johannes Leo de Medicis (Giovanni Leone in Italian), presumably in honour of his benefactor. In Arabic, however, he chose to append to the translation of his name a reference to his native Granada, in itself an act of resistance: Yuhanna al-Asad al-Gharnati (John the Lion of Granada).

He was, thus, very much a traveller between two worlds, Christian and Muslim, and he was quite aware of the fact that his position as a bridge between the two was quite unstable and dangerous. Our diplomat, however, cleverly understood as well that in order to escape this estate of constant vulnerability and survive one must adapt and assimilate. He illustrates this lesson in the *Geographia* when narrating a tale perhaps recast from the *Kalila wa Dimna* or from the *Kitab al-Hayawan*, that of the amphibious bird which can opportunistically change allegiance or identity. When the king of the birds appears demanding his taxes, the bird declares itself a fish; when the king of the fish wants tribute, the amphibious creature declares he is a bird again. While depicting the virtues and vices of the Africans, al-Wazzan feels remorseful about criticizing the people from the lands where he was brought up, thus appearing ungrateful. It is as he reflects on this dilemma of his task as a truthful historian that al-Wazzan announces that he will do like the bird: "For mine owne part when I heare the Africans evill spoken of I will affirme my self to be one of Granada; and when I perceive the nation of Granada to be discommended then I will professe my selfe to be an African."⁸⁴

Hence, al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus's unconventional *rihla*,⁸⁵ the *Geographia*, is very illustrative of his precarious and ambiguous position between two inimical worlds and of the erosion of his cultural and religious identity through the contact with the Western world, while living in *Dar al-Harb*, the Land of War. First, the *Libro de Cosmographia*

⁸³ Pope Leo X, born Giovanni di Medici, was the second son of Lorenzo, il Magnifico, and he was a highly learned man, educated in humanistic studies and a significant patron of the arts.

⁸⁴ Africanus, *A Geographical Historie*, 190.

⁸⁵ Unconventional in the sense that it is not *sensu strictu* a travel account or *rihla* but can be conceptualized as such.

et *Geographia de Affrica* does not follow the established patterns of an Arabic travel account since al-Wazzan's adventures "as recounted in his *Geography* are not consecutive, as in a *rihla*. They weave in and out of his narrative," as Natalie Zemon-Davies rightly notes.⁸⁶ Secondly, he did not write it in his native language, Arabic, but in a language, Italian, which he had imperfectly learned while in prison and through his new life in Italy. And lastly his cultural and linguistic identity was further eroded in the process of dissemination and publication of his work. Al-Hasan Ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan finished his book in 1526 but in 1550 the Venetian Giovanni Battista Ramusio published it and modified it considerably.⁸⁷ In addition to changing the syntax and vocabulary to fit into a more elevated language, Ramusio rearranged materials, omitted many sections of the book, particularly those that alluded to aspects of Islam or Muslim culture, and modified al-Wazzan's use of the third person (more akin to Arabic modes of discourse) by inserting the pronoun "I" and first-person verbs wherever al-Wazzan had consciously, detachedly and humbly referred to himself in the third person.⁸⁸

A further vulnerability made tangible by the *Geographia* and explicitly acknowledged by Leo Africanus within his discourse is his inadequacy in his task as a historian:⁸⁹ "Whereas in his book of biographies, he concealed his vulnerability, in the *Geography* he confesses to it—'I haven't seen a history book for ten years'—⁹⁰ and explains that he must rely on his 'weak memory' "⁹¹ since he has no access to many of the authoritative sources (Arabic manuscripts not abounding in Rome at the time) he needs as references for his work. This vulnerability can also operate, however, as a formulaic *captatio benevolentia* to forestall any possible objections arising from his actual, intended Christian readers but also among his foreseeable future Muslim readers with regard to the content and tone of his descriptions. Al-Wazzan had to write taking care "to placate the Christians while not defaming Islam."⁹² By putting on a mask of inability and humility he succeeds in appeasing both worlds and, in the process, he learns to discern the deficiencies and the merits of the lands of the Christians and the land of Islam. It is because of this acquired knowledge that he neither fully rejects nor fully embraces one or the other in his enigmatic *Geographia*.

⁸⁶ Davies, *Trickster Travels*, 103.

⁸⁷ Giovanni Battista Ramusio, ed. *Primo volume et Seconda edition delle Navigationi et Viaggi ... nelle quale si contengono La Descrittione dell' Africa* (Venice: Giunti, 1554).

⁸⁸ Natalie Zemon-Davies suggests that al-Wazzan used the third person and fashioned himself as "el Compositore" to gain distance, "distance from Italian life and from his life as a Muslim in the Maghreb; a provisional distance, allowing him to play the Christian for time, to reflect on his Muslim identity, and then, when ready, return safe and sound to North Africa" (*Trickster Travels*, 232).

⁸⁹ To be exact, however, al-Wazzan did not identify himself as a historian *per se* but as a composer or compiler.

⁹⁰ The editor Giovanni Battista Ramusio certainly considered this a vulnerability since he omitted this admission from his refashioning of al-Wazzan's *Geographia* (Ramusio, *La descrizione dell'Africa*, f. 2r, 39–40).

⁹¹ Davies, *Trickster Travels*, 105.

⁹² Davies, *Trickster Travels*, 266.

It is exceedingly ironic that this journey that began for him as a child fleeing a Granada which had forcibly become a *bilad al-nasara* (lands of the Christians) brought him back, albeit in a circumvented way, to the *dar al-harb*, “the house of war,” usually seen as Christian territory. The result of his travels was, thus, not an epistemological triumph but a surrendering to a different type of epistemological certainty: that he was terribly vulnerable and that in order for him to survive he had to divest himself of his culture and religion and convert to the faith of the same people that had caused his first vulnerability and his first exile. Al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus’s *Libro de la Cosmographia et Geographia de Affrica* is also perhaps not only a way for him to enlighten Christians about this culture he had to leave behind but also a strategy for him to remain tied to it now that he has been coerced to abjure it.

While I cannot do justice here to these three fascinating travel accounts I can offer some overarching conclusions as a way to bring attention to all these texts and their peculiarities. Each of them has a different purpose and focuses on different narrative strategies and different travel and commercial experiences but one can still infer, despite the disparity of exemplars, that there are many points of convergence between these documents.

The instances of exchanges depicted in the narratives of Benjamin of Tudela, Pero Tafur and al-Wazzan elucidate and demonstrate the validity of the theoretical model proposed by Brian Catlos, as discussed in the introductory essay. This comparative project has sought to illuminate the processes by which these early Iberian travellers established fruitful and pragmatic ties with their neighbours and hosts for the purpose of religious and intellectual fulfillment and commercial and political expansion. Homi Bhabha would have us believe that our vision will always be slightly distorted and unsettling because the subjects studied by our travel narrative authors are always concealed behind a mask of “sly civility,” as he puts it,⁹³ but I would add that this distortion occurs more pointedly because our travelling authors/narrators’ gazes are not only informed by their own belief systems and prejudices but also because their contact with new cultures forces them to gaze back at those belief systems or ideologies, to critique them and expose them as not as absolute, fixed and unyielding as first thought and certainly not as blameless or infallible.

Travel and the epistemological and ethnographic learning of other cultures which travelling provides makes us very vulnerable, it always erodes the stability and the identity of the traveller and encounters among peoples from different cultures are always both congenial and treacherous. As travellers in search of *episteme* we are indeed vulnerable but never victims if we are open to vulnerability and thus, transformation.

93 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 93.

