

The topic of imprisonment in medieval literature.

With an emphasis on Johann Schiltberger's account about his 30-year enslavement in the East

ABSTRACT

One of the dramatic, if not traumatic, experiences in life has always been enslavement and imprisonment, that is, the loss of personal freedom, and this for many different reasons. Curiously, medieval literature does not seem to address this topic extensively, at least at first sight, and research has paid rather little attention to this issue. A close analysis, however, demonstrates quickly that the theme of imprisonment was of significant concern throughout the Middle Ages, probably because the loss of individual freedom happened more often than not and could also affect members of the nobility. There were many cases of imprisonment as a result of criminal activities, sometimes also committed by knights or noble ladies. Worst, however, was the experience of those who were taken as captives after a battle and then were enslaved. This article provides a first framework for the study of this large topic in pre-modern literature and so-called ego-documents and then focuses on a most dramatic example, the report by the long-term slave Johannes Schiltberger.

KEYWORDS: Imprisonment, slavery, loss of freedom, medieval prisoners, Johannes

Schiltberger

There are many opportunities to investigate imprisonment and slavery as they occurred in the Middle Ages, although the focus of most literary authors normally did not rest on such

experiences, at least at first sight. However, all of medieval philosophy and beyond was deeply influenced by Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* (ca. 525), written in prison a few months before the author was stoned to death as punishment for his alleged state treason. Boethius does not consider imprisonment in the first place, but all of his reflections are predicated on the full awareness that his life is coming to an end as the result of unjustified execution and that he is thus facing final questions of a fundamental kind. This experience set into motion a long-term discourse closely associated with imprisonment and slavery throughout the Middle Ages and well beyond closely associated with the questions regarding fortune and happiness (Marenbon, ed., 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to consider, first, some exceptions to the general rule that medieval poets did not fully address this issue, and then, second, to turn to a most dramatic case from the fifteenth century in which an individual was enslaved for thirty years. This then will open our eyes toward a relatively broad discourse on the narrative treatment of imprisonment and slavery throughout the Middle Ages (Lawn 1977; Dunbabin 2002).

In Rudolf von Ems's Middle High German romance *Der guote Gerhard* (ca. 1220), certainly a most unusual courtly narrative, we learn of an entire company of young English noblemen and a bevy of noble ladies along with their mistress, the Norwegian princess, who linger in the prison of the Moroccan castellan Stranmûr waiting to be ransomed after they have fallen into the Muslims' hands due to unfortunate circumstances during their voyage from Norway to England. The princess had been supposed to marry the successor to the English throne, William, but a

mighty storm had destroyed most of their ships and had pushed them far away from each other.

However, Morocco seems too far away from Christian Europe for the castellan to achieve the goal of getting highly paid for the release of the prisoners, until the protagonist of this romance, the Good Gerhard, a Cologne merchant on his return voyage from the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean, appears by accident, who then learns of the miserable situation those prisoners suffer from, and until he is eventually willing to barter all of his merchandise for those poor people (Rudolf von Ems, *Der guote Gerhard*, trans. A. Classen, 2016). Even if only briefly, the poet made a significant effort to convey a sense of the misery which those victims had to experience, both physically (the men are chained) and mentally.

The famous female character in the quasi heroic epic, *Kudrun* (ca. 1230/40), has to endure ten years in imprisonment before she is liberated by her brother and his men. She had been kidnapped by the young King Hartmut of Normandy after she had been engaged with King Herwig of Seelant, but despite all the mistreatment, Kudrun never submits and holds out against all evil methods especially by Hartmut's mother Gerlint, who basically forces her to work like a slave (*Kudrun*, trans. McConnell 1992). If she accepted Hartmut as her husband, all suffering would be over, but the protagonist resists all temptations and demonstrates thus her heroic qualities, although later, after she has regained her freedom and can marry her fiancé, she overcomes all previous enmity and works as an amazing peace-weaver, not harboring real grudges against her former kidnapper.

One of the most famous prisoners of war, Charles d'Orléans, was taken by the English after the devastating battle of Agincourts in 1415 and had to await his release from imprisonment, certainly a rather luxurious experience considering the respectful treatment that he received due to his status as the French dauphin, for twenty-five years during which he rose to

being one of the best late medieval English poets (*Poetry of Charles d'Orléans* 2010).

In a somewhat different context, we hear repeatedly of rapist knights, such as in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" (ca. 1390-1400), who are in great danger of being executed for their evil deeds until fortunate circumstances free them from this terrible destiny (Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, 2012). We learn of a similar situation already in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205; see the exchanges between Gawain and Urjans, Book X, chapters 523-29) (Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, 1980), and could easily extend this list considering also Spanish, French, and Italian examples.

Moreover, in the ninth story told on the tenth day in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1350), for instance, the protagonist is taken prisoner after the crusading army has been defeated by Saladin, although those two men later recognize each other, which leads to the prisoner's freedom and the renewal of the friendship between the two men (Boccaccio) (trans. G. H. McWilliam 1972/1995). Our challenge now consists of correlating these literary projections of imprisonment with historical documents, and those certainly exist.

Medieval society of course knew of prisons, prisoners, and executions, and so it does not come as a surprise that poets sometimes refer to those cases as well. Most commonly, however, we must rely on historical documents that mirror the situation for prisoners of war, either in crusades, or in other military campaigns, even though those victims normally did not write about their experiences (Classen and Scarborough, ed., 2012). There are two major exceptions to this; first, Georgius (George) of Hungary (1422/23–1502), who was taken as a slave to the Ottoman Empire and who had no other choice but to survive in the new environment and to adapt as much

as possible (George of Hungary 2015; Classen 2003). This account about his long-term experiences has proven to be a highly valuable ego-document informing us about the way how at least one European perceived the Islamic, that is, Ottoman, culture first-hand during the early fifteenth century (Classen, 2012).

Similarly, the autobiographical narrative by Johann/Hans Schiltberger (1380–ca. 1440; for editions of his text, see 1548, 1879, 2000, 2008) takes us far into the Middle East because he served many different masters after having been taken as a slave following the battle of Nicopolis in 1396, in which King Sigismund of Hungary, the later German king (1411–1433) and emperor (1433–1437), was defeated by a superior Ottoman force under Sultan Bayezid.¹ Both authors reflect on their involuntary imprisonment and enslavement serving as mercenaries under the Ottomans. While I have investigated Georgius’s writings already on several occasions, Schiltberger deserves more attention than heretofore, especially within the Anglophone context.

The goal of this paper thus consists of investigating the unique contribution by Johann Schiltberger who was forcefully taken out of his familiar environment and involuntarily had the opportunity to travel throughout the Ottoman empire and beyond, to ‘visit’ many lands in the Middle East and even in Central and Northern Asia, and to pass through the Holy Land and Egypt (Classen, ed., 2013). Here we face the report by a long-term prisoner and extraordinary ‘traveler,’ which allows us to contextualize the discourse on freedom and imprisonment further.

His narrative account about his experiences has already been discussed by some scholars

¹. This has been discussed by historians many times; see, for instance, Nicolle (1999); Bárány (2010). The best and most detailed account, however, proves to be the anonymous article online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Nicopolis (last accessed on Feb. 9, 2020).

interested in the cultural-historical information contained in it (*The bondage and travels of Johann Schiltberger* 1879; *Johann Schiltbergers Irrfahrt durch den Orient* 2000; Langmantel, *Hans Schiltbergers Reisebuch* 1885),² and considering his origin in Bavaria, Germany, where he returned home at the end, makes him to an excellent, almost unique testimony of simultaneously two, if not more, different worlds characterized by opposite languages, religions, and cultures. However, he hardly mentions Germany or Hungary, except that he departed from Bavaria, served in the army, and finally was taken prisoner. And, at the end, he also briefly outlines his way back home, but again, there he does not go into any particular details.

Much ink has been spilled on the concrete cultural-historical information related by Schiltberger, who moved around the entire Middle East, serving one lord after the other, depending on the military conditions he found himself under as a slave. And yet, we know very little about his own personal perspective or his reaction to his status as a slave. The purpose here is to examine his perceptions of both worlds as a basis for future global medieval and early modern studies, and this through his lens as a prisoner (Amer 2015). He left behind an account that we could identify as an ‘ego-document,’ a term now quite popular amongst historians, in which he passes in review his own destiny and the many changing sceneries of the world where he had to live for more than three decades. His *Reisebuch*, however, is less an autobiographical self-presentation than an account of the history from the turn of the fourteenth-century in the

². The translator Tremmel relies on the edition by Valentin Langmantel, *Hans Schiltbergers Reisebuch*, which is based on the Munich (formerly Nuremberg) manuscript (Staatsbibliothek, Cod. I, 1603; online at: https://archive.org/stream/bub_gb_V7ALAAAIAAJ/bub_gb_V7ALAAAIAAJ_djvu.txt; last accessed on Feb. 9, 2020), and he intervenes fairly little into the text. See Schiewer (1992).

Ottoman Empire and neighboring countries culled from a variety of sources, along with his own eye-witnessing (Schiewer 1990, 677). Schiltberger thus laid the foundation for an early global perspective, inviting his audience to pay more attention to the world which we would call the Middle and Central East.

This great advantage for scholars working on the issue of the global Middle Ages is quickly eclipsed by the considerable disadvantage that this author refrained to a large extent from reflecting on his personal destiny and what it meant for him to live for several decades as a slave in the East. Nevertheless, we must not forget the fact that he reported from the perspective of a slave who managed to escape only decades after he had been captured as a young man (Bleuler, ed., 2016).

Johann/Hans Schiltberger was born around 1380 in Hollern near Lohhof north of Munich. Already as a youth, he joined military service in 1394, probably as a squire for the nobleman Lienhart Richartinger. Two years later, he was involved in the devastating battle of Nicopolis on September 28, 1396, in which he was badly wounded and taken as a prisoner. After having recovered, he was assigned diverse military duties as a slave, both as a runner and as a servant. He experienced many sudden changes in his life as a slave, but it took him more than thirty years finally to escape and to return to Europe in 1427. Having regained his freedom again, he then joined the service as a chamberlain of the Bavarian Duke Albrecht III and composed his treatise, probably encouraged to do so by his patron who probably delighted in having such an unusual person among his entourage (Ruge 2012).³

³. Ruge (2012), offers a good introduction, with an extensive bibliography, but the article online at wikipedia.de is still considerably more detailed and offers much more information:

This *Reisebuch* quickly gained popularity, as the ten surviving manuscripts indicate,⁴ along with numerous printed incunabula from 1460 (Augsburg) onwards, and a total of ten new printed editions in the sixteenth century.⁵ In fact, Schiltberger's travelogue continued to appeal to the various audiences even during the following decades, as documented by the new prints in 1605, 1650, 1659, and 1678.⁶ Considering the numerous modern editions and translations of this text since the late nineteenth century, we can be certain that this author's experiences intrigued countless readers both in west and east, probably because here we encounter an early global 'traveler' who was moved around much as a slave and soldier, traversing many Middle Eastern areas where normally no European ever set foot in, and this at a time when most people had very little understanding or knowledge of the more exotic world to the east and the south.

Schiltberger was a fairly simple man, without much sophisticated education, and consequently he never drew on any of the traditional stereotypes of the mysterious East with its alleged monsters or Orientalist features, despite his partial reliance on John Mandeville's *Travels* (Mittman, with Dendle, 2013). As a slave, servant, and soldier, he probably did not have extensive time available for intensive studies, so it does not come as a surprise that some of the https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Schiltberger (last accessed on Feb. 9, 2020). See also Schiewer (1990), who offers a much more critical evaluation than Ruge.

⁴. The only accurate and latest update about these manuscripts can be found at <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/3859> (last accessed on Feb. 9, 2020).

⁵. For the sixteenth-century prints, see the VD16; for the one seventeenth-century print (1605), see the VD17, both online.

⁶. For this information, I have consulted the catalog Worldcat, which actually goes beyond what the VD17 offers.

information provided here was drawn from other sources or are easily identifiable as inaccurate, if not plain wrong (Tremmel, trans. and ed., 2000, 11–13). The problem here, however, does not rest so much with Schiltberger himself, but with modern research that has proven too eager in drawing from his report for specific information about what parts of that world of the Caucasus, modern-day Iraq and Iran, and regions north of that where the Mongols ruled, were thus described for the first time in the history of the European Middle Ages (Weithmann 2005).

While previous scholars have engaged mostly with the specific details listed by Schiltberger, and compared those with the information in other chronicles and maps, thus culling this report like a quarry for valuable factual data, my approach focuses more on the author's mental framework, on his concept of the eastern world, on his attitude about the various rulers and their people where he had to serve as a slave, and, ultimately, on the question to what extent we could read this slavery report through the lens of (inter)cultural history. However, as traumatic his experience in slavery must have been, we are not given many details regarding his personal feelings about his miserable condition. While medieval poets emphasized mostly the emotional dimension of imprisonment (history of mentality), Schiltberger concentrated primarily on his experiences as a slave soldier in pragmatic terms.

The prologue itself indicates what appear to be the most important components for the author himself, and where he cannot guarantee full veracity. He specifies clearly when he left Bavaria and when he returned home, more than thirty years later. However, he admits frankly that he could not study everything with all the necessary erudition because he had been nothing but a slave and did not have many opportunities to examine the world around him as precisely as he would have liked to. Consequently, the names of mountains, rivers, countries, and capitals that he mentions are those that he had heard from his social environment ('nach den sprachen der

land,' 51; in the languages as spoken in the various countries), but they might not correspond with those used in Europe, or in the learned context; Tremmel 2000, 17).

Subsequently, Schiltberger quickly turns to a historical outline of his personal destiny and how he survived the battle of Nicopolis although he had been taken prisoner and was subsequently supposed to be executed, like his other companions. However, his youth – he was barely sixteen years of age – preserved him his life, whereas he had to witness a massive slaughter of the other prisoners (24–25). The author regularly pursues a military perspective and describes the events as he experienced them in light of the various battles and their outcomes, but in that process, he also injects much information about the vast world of the Ottoman empire and the neighboring kingdoms and sultanates. Even during the early phase of his imprisonment, he mentions that the sultan sent groups of prisoners to the various allies in Hungary, Babylon, Persia, Tartary, Armenia, while he himself was taken to Turkey (26–27), where he was to serve as a runner, meaning that he had to run in front of the sultan wherever he went, a ritual which underscored the latter's fame.

Schiltberger relates in great detail the subsequent war campaigns by Sultan Bayezid against opponents within his own territory, but he also mixes in comments about his own life and that of his fellow slaves who once tried to escape but were captured again and subsequently had to suffer a nine-month prison term (33–36). To entertain his audience, the author suddenly includes a miraculous account of a battle of water snakes against forest snakes (36–38), but he also remarks on various cities inhabited by Christians or by Muslims (38). The major focus, however, rests on the military events involving various Turkish and Tartar rulers who combatted each other. Only rarely does Schiltberger inject himself, and then only when there is an occasion

to reflect on his own, mostly just minor role within the larger political and military context (47). His real interest rests on providing details about the actual sizes of the various armies, the battle sites, the directions a fleeing party took, the outcome of the battles, the slaughter of the defeated, and the performance of the rulers or kings, such as Tamerlane (1336–1405, also known as Amir Timur), the ferocious and highly feared founder of the Timurid empire of Central Asia, which eventually extended both to the Mediterranean and to Mongolia (Arabshah 1936/2018; Sela 2011).

Although not demonstrating any particular religiosity, Schiltberger goes later into considerable details about the foundation of Islam (122–36), the rules set up by Mohamed, the way how the Muslims should treat the Christians (136), and what the Muslims know and think about Christianity in general. He certainly stuck to his own Christian faith, as he reveals at the end following his escape, but he seems to have hid it well throughout those more than thirty years of captivity. In particular, he points out that the Muslims believe that they enjoy so much military success because the Christians had lost their spiritual ideals, no longer practiced justice, and were subject to their own greed and violence, not following any of their own religious commands, and were victims of countless vices (140–3). In fact, the author observes with amazement how much the Muslims closely follow their own rules and strive to practice justice among themselves, treating even the poorest people with respect and avoiding inflationary prices in their trade deals (139). We can recognize pretty much the same tenor in the report by Georgius of Hungary who was full of praise of the Muslim lords and the Ottoman culture, whereas he could only deprecate his Christian homelands. In fact, Georgius would have almost turned into a Muslim himself, but he later rescinded all those overtures and recovered his Christian faith, as he emphasizes in his account.

Even though not as learned as many of his contemporaries who began to explore the Islamic world more seriously, Schiltberger's narrative deserves our respect for its straightforward, maybe naive, but certainly open-minded approach to Islam and its cultural practices.⁷ He does not even castigate or criticize Muslims, and instead seems to imply that their general condemnation of the Christians could be approved since those would not observe their own laws and rules and would perform unjustly and deceptively in their daily lives. In fact, he goes so far as to repeat the Muslims' charge against the Christians that they would think only in material terms and displayed horrible greed and egoism (143).

Subsequently, Schiltberger also discusses the religion of the Greek-Orthodox and its cultural ramification, paying considerable respect to their practices and standards, even in their everyday life. Following, he examines the world of the Armenians whom he had met for a long time while serving under one of Tamurlane's sons (154–61), and also reflects upon their religion (56–61), although here much anecdotal and legendary information enters the picture. For instance, he relates a story about a dragon and a unicorn that caused great damage to the people of Rome, but the King of the Armenians eventually succeeded in killing both and thus in liberating the Romans from that danger (161–62). This then leads over to a lengthy discussion of the Armenians' religious practices (163–75), which differ to some extent from those observed by the Catholics, but neither here nor in the section pertaining to Islam or the Greek-Orthodox Church do we notice any particular judgments because Schiltberger does not evaluate in any specific ways the various religions and only comments on differences in ceremonies and rituals. However, in this section he also offers some quasi-historical explanations why the Armenians

⁷. For the learned tradition, see Bisaha (2004), 55, who briefly mentions Schiltberger, but she does not engage with his work at all, to which she refers only indirectly.

hate the Greeks (betrayal and murder). Yet, even here he concludes with very positive remarks about the former, calling them loyal, intelligent, skillful, and more sophisticated in their textile work than the Muslims (174–75). In comparison, in the section pertaining to the Greeks, Schiltberger refrains from any comments and only describes mostly objectively what he has learned about their faith and their culture.

From these historical reflections Schiltberger turns to his own experiences in traversing the vast distances from Bavaria to the Middle East and provides us with a kind of narrative world map, similar to a *mappa mundi*, mixing the geographic data with comments about pilgrimage sites, people's customs and appearances, listings of the local city names, and references to saints and relics (80–84). This is followed by a quasi-fictional interlude that deserves considerably more attention than I can afford in the present context. Here the author relates what he has learned about the 'sperwer burg' (96; the castle of the sparrow hawk; Tremmel 2000, 84; cf. Hellmut 2009; Classen 2020), which quickly proves to be directly related to a major theme in the famous *Melusine* novel first composed in French by Jean d'Arras in 1393 (Jean d'Arras 2012), later in German by Thüring von Ringoltingen (1456; ed. Müller, ed., 1990). Visitors can discover a castle situated in the mountains where a beautiful virgin lives, along with her sparrow hawk. Any man who would manage to stay there for three days and three nights without falling asleep would be granted by the virgin anything his heart might desire as long as it would be honorable. In the case of the opposite, she would disgrace him and his entire family (84). Those who would fail in the first place and fall asleep would become prisoners for life in that castle. It is quite likely that Schiltberger recognized here a literary mirror of his own destiny, not being able to gain his freedom back through any ransom or fortunate circumstances.

Even though this *Reisebuch* often seems to resemble more a chronicler's account, based

on a variety of sources, we can trust the author that he must have traveled around much during his more than thirty years of enslavement and military service. This explains again why we should rather call it an ego-document than an autobiography because his own destiny and life as a slave does not assume center position, even though it constitutes the framework for the entire narrative. He follows, however, his own experiences as a soldier and reflects on the individual battles and rulers as far as all that refers to him at least indirectly. So, for instance, he emphasizes at the beginning of the fourth chapter that after Tamurlane's death he himself was handed over to one of the deceased ruler's sons (67). Following the extensive discussion of the subsequent events, Schiltberger concludes that the outcome of all of the conflicts among the mighty ones meant that he was assigned to one of the rulers (68), but he himself never reports of any personal injuries or other consequences for himself.

Schiltberger never informs us about the way how he communicated in the various languages with so many different people whom he encountered during those thirty-two years. However, he obviously survived, and managed to talk with his companions, officers, merchants, and many others either by way of translators or by a basic lingua franca understood in many areas of the Middle East. He did not forget his German, though, and could easily readjust, as far as that was possible, to the courtly life in Bavaria after his return home. He also maintained his Christian faith, as he demonstrated it at the end on his flight through the mountains to the Black Sea together with four other men. When the entire group of five former slaves were found by sailors, they had to recite the *Pater noster* as proof that they were still Christians, and only then were they allowed to travel on the ship to Constantinople, thereupon further northwest back to his home country (177–80).

As reticent as Schiltberger was regarding his own destiny during his thirty-two years as a slave, as revealing the entire account proves to be concerning his complete lack of freedom. He never seems to have had contacts with the outside world, and apart from his first and last attempt to flee, he never undertook any other effort. The only explanation that he provided for their decision finally to escape consists of the reference to their proximity to the Black Sea, which would facilitate their escape (177). Otherwise, throughout the entire text, the author never enters any personal reflections and simply outlines the major military and political events that forced him to move from one country to another.

However, we should not read this account in the narrow sense as an ego-document; it hardly provides autobiographical data. Instead, Schiltberger offers amazing insights into the world of the entire Middle East, covering much of the historical events, the major religions, some anthropological details, and geographical aspects. All this can be identified as an early attempt to open European perspectives toward other parts of the globe and to encourage the readers to pay respect to non-Christian cultures. Here we observe, after all, a truly non-Eurocentric perspective, simply because the author had been forcefully taken from his own world and then spent ca. three decades in the Ottoman Empire and other countries.

He obviously copied extensively from older sources, but the various parts of his account are always held together convincingly by the short references to his own involvement, even if only as a marginal witness on the side of the major actions and battles. Although he was kept as a slave for such a long time, he hardly comments on any kind of personal suffering. Schiltberger has nothing negative to say about any of his lords, and rather neutrally remarks on the various rulers, armies, geographic locations, and the religions. He was pleased to encounter some Christian communities even far away from the European continent, but he does not care about

the traditional conflicts between Islam, for instance, and Christianity. His audiences could obviously learn much about the Ottoman empire, the rule of Tamerlane, and the various sultans.

Conclusion

This *Reisebuch* takes the readers on a long journey from the Balkans to modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, and a variety of lands in Central Asia. Particularly because Schiltberger refrained so noticeably from judging the other cultures and religions, his narrative built innovative bridges to the world in the East, openly inviting his audience to accept Muslims, Tartars, Mongols, and Persians, for instance, as neighbors to Christian Europeans. Altogether, this makes his account to one of the best written sources for what we would call, at least rather tentatively, the Global Middle Ages, and this through the lens of a slave who was forced to fight on behalf of his lords because he lacked all freedom. We would have to consider that there were certainly thousands of other prisoners of war, if not many more, although only few of them probably turned to writing. We can assume that those slaves originated from many different countries, cultures, languages, and religions, so we might find similar ego-documents in future archival research.

Granted, Schiltberger does not suggest that it might have been easy for Italian, Spanish, German, or French merchants to travel to the Middle East, considering the unstable military and political situations. But it was not impossible at all for many of them to traverse vast stretches of land in order to reach exotic markets, as many contemporary literary accounts, chronicles, and travelogues confirm (Halm 2001)—see the example of the Good Gerhard in Rudolf von Ems's eponymous romance.

Due to his low status as a slave, however, our author lacked in freedom and was simply physically moved wherever his lords needed troops. For that reason, Schiltberger witnessed many countries, cultures, and people to the east and the north where hardly any European had ever set foot in before him. Involuntarily, hence, this author thereby laid the foundation for the concept of the Global Middle Ages insofar as he provided new perspectives, information, and data about the Middle East that had been unknown before. While he certainly longed for freedom and his return home to Bavaria, he obviously adapted well to his new environment and coped successfully over three decades despite the huge differences in languages, foodstuff, clothing, cultural habits, and political structures.

With the help of this *Reisebuch* we face the excellent opportunity to approach traditional Medieval and Early Modern Studies in a new light and perceive it more than before in terms of the emerging field of the Global Middle Ages and Early Modern Period.⁸ Granted, Schiltberger did not voluntarily embark on his vast journeys throughout the Middle East, but his account is not determined by a sense of bitterness, by complaints, or by deep anger, as one might expect from a former captive. Although a Catholic Christian himself, he does not voice any explicit

⁸. See the contributions to *Past and Present* 238, supplement 13 (2018): *The Global Middle Ages*; <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty036> (last accessed on Feb. 9, 2020). Their approaches are mostly historical, and literary texts do not play a significant role here, not to mention Schiltberger.

criticism of the Greek Orthodox Christians and the Muslims. Instead, he delights in entertaining his audiences with reports about the various events that he had witnessed, at least from the sideline, and finds it highly interesting, as we may deduce from the second half of his report, to examine the specifics of the Greek-Orthodox, Armenian, and Islamic faith without falling back into the traditional European stereotypes of condemning outright anyone who adheres to a non-Christian religion.

Of course, he was more than relieved finally to return home after thirty-two years of slavery, but that did not hinder him from presenting a picture of the foreign world in rather objective colors. He expected from his readers, as we may say, that they welcomed the data about the Ottoman Empire, the Mongols, and the Egyptians, for instance, as valuable even for the minimally educated European of the fifteenth century. Involuntarily, because of his enslavement, this Bavarian soldier and writer made it possible for his readers to recognize how much the neighboring countries east and southeast of Europe were of relevance for the west, and that even the different religions practiced there were not simply anathema to Christians who faced much self-criticism at any rate throughout the late Middle Ages. In short, this travelogue emerges as a significant document about a growing intellectual curiosity about lands far to the east of Europe, and it signals that the conditions there were not as alien as one might have expected. The history of the various empires outside of the Christian realm thus emerged as relevant and fascinating for Europeans as well, which thus opened preliminary perspectives toward a more global awareness. We can be certain that in the wake of many wars involving representative armies of both religion, countless individuals were imprisoned or enslaved, but not many actually wrote about their experiences, which makes Schiltberger's account particularly

valuable.

In addition, here we face the great opportunity to peek into an individual's mind who had to spend his life as a slave and mercenary for more than thirty years, even though he proves to be rather reticent about his personal experiences. This can then be nicely complemented with the numerous accounts about imprisonment in a variety of medieval literary texts, though we hardly encounter any really similar cases of individuals lingering away in prisons for more than a year (see, however, Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gerhard*). With the help of this new lens, we can suddenly open a new layer of meaning in much of medieval literature, both secular and religious, both heroic and courtly, and discover that the issue of individual freedom was actually highly appreciated in face of the dire consequence of imprisonment and enslavement as the consequence of war. Future research might want to investigate to what extent psychological investigations might help us to refine and deepen the results of our analysis.

But where do we go from here? Schiltberger's testimony can certainly contribute to a better understanding to what extent it was possible already in the fifteenth century to develop a global perspective. After all, as little as the author actually tells us specifics about his destiny as a slave, especially about his mistreatment, abuse, punishments, and suffering, we can be certain that he lived the life of a slave and had no freedom whatsoever to decide on his own existence. It remains unclear why he does not reflect more in detail about his personal experiences, whereas his account proves to be highly informative about the eastern world as far as he was able to witness it in his role as a mercenary and runner for the various Ottoman and other rulers.

What matters for us in the present context, however, is the fact that the author was a slave for more than thirty years and used this personal situation as a fundamental selling point of his

account. The focus rests mostly on the factual, historical, political, and geographical aspects, but all that information becomes accessible here only because Schiltberger was forced to move around in so many different areas and could combine his eye witness account with the data he collected from a variety of sources.

Previous scholarship used to be content with the observation that the late Middle Ages witnessed a growing interest in travelogues covering journeys extending far into the Middle East and beyond. There is, in fact, a whole discourse predicated on those perspectives, beginning with *Herzog Ernst* (ms. B, ca. 1220), *Reinfried von Braunschweig* (ca. 1280), Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur* (ca. 1290), the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* (ca. 1350), then the poetry by Oswald von Wolkenstein (d. 1445), and finally the anonymous *Fortunatus* (printed in 1509), here limiting ourselves to German-language sources. All this combined might allow us to move forward and begin to explore Global Studies also in the pre-modern world (Walther, ed., 2011). Schiltberger, however, was obviously so successful with his account both because of his unique background as a slave for more than thirty years and because of his awareness and understanding of many countries and kingdoms in the Middle East, wherever he was sent as a mercenary.

Even though the personal dimension is fairly little developed, his *Reisebuch* was so successful because it was determined by the author's clear sense of lack of personal freedom and yet his many opportunities to travel through vast territories even far east of the Holy Land. Although Schiltberger certainly drew from many different sources when composing his *Reisebuch* well after his return home, including John Mandeville's *Travels* (Mandeville 1983/2005), it is not comparable with traditional travelogues or travel literature because he as a

former slave went through rather unique experiences in comparison with many contemporary authors and evaluated the eastern world without significant strategies to compare them with the situation in western Europe (Classen 2020).

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