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Mamluk Cairo through the eyes of the Italian traveler Niccolò Poggibonsi

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Abstract: Cairo has been a frequent subject of European travelogues, particularly during the Mamluk era. These travelers were known for their meticulous documentation of the city's customs, traditions, and other aspects of life. The account of Cairo by the Italian traveler Niccolò Poggibonsi stands out as one of the most reliable historical sources of the late Middle Ages. This research aims to highlight Poggibonsi's travelogue about Egypt, specifically Cairo, by presenting its details and assessing his success in recording his observations. The study will not only focus on the specifics of this journey but will also analyze and trace its development through the writings of several contemporary European travelers. Although Poggibonsi's time in Cairo was relatively short compared to his broader four-year journey through the East, his travels and observations represent a significant new chapter in understanding Cairo during the early Mamluk period,

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specifically in the latter half of the 14th century CE/8th century AH. Niccolò ultimately succeeded in giving us an account of a journey he witnessed with his own eyes before writing it down with his pen.

Keywords: Niccolò Poggibonsi , traveler , Cairo, Mamluk.

الملخص:

نالت مدينة القاهرة نصيباً كبيراً من كتابات الرحالة الأوروبيين، خاصة في عهد دولة المماليك؛ لا سيما وقد اعتاد هؤلاء الرحالة على تسجيل ما شاهدوه وما لفت أنظارهم من عادات وتقاليد وغيرها من الأمور. وكان ما سجله الرحالة الإيطالي نيقولو بوجيبونسي عن القاهرة بمثابة سجلٍ من أوثق المصادر التاريخية في أواخر العصور الوسطى؛ ومن ثمَّ يهدف البحث إلى إبراز ما سجله نيقولو عن رحلته إلى مصر، وتحديداً عن مدينة القاهرة، من خلال عرض تفاصيلها وتسليط الضوء على مدى نجاحه في تدوين ما شاهده. ولن ترتكز الدراسة على معرفة تفاصيل تلك الرحلة فحسب، بل سنقوم بالرصد التحليلي لها وتتبعها من خلال العديد من كتابات الرحالة الأوروبيين المعاصرين له. وعلى الرغم من أن جولة نيقولو داخل القاهرة شملت فترة زمنية وجيزة بالمقارنة برحلته في بلاد الشرق بشكل عام -والتي امتدت أربعة أعوام- إلا أن رحلته تلك وما سجله عن مشاهداته فيها تعد صفحة جديدة ومهمة عن أحوال القاهرة في عهد دولة المماليك الأولى، وتحديداً في أواخر النصف الأول من القرن الرابع عشر الميلادي/ الثامن الهجري. لقد نجح نيقولو في النهاية في أن يخرج لنا سرداً لرحلة شاهدها بعينيه قبل أن يسطرها بقلمه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نيقولو بوجيبونسي؛ الرحال؛ القاهرة ؛ المماليك.

1. Introduction

Cairo has been a frequent subject of European travelogues, particularly during the Mamluk era. These travelers were known for their meticulous documentation of the city's customs, traditions, and other aspects of life. The account of Cairo by the Italian traveler Niccolò Poggibonsi stands out as one of the most reliable historical sources of the late Middle Ages.

Based on the foregoing, the researcher chose the journey of the Italian monk Niccolò, which begins approximately four

years ago (1346-1350 AD / 747-751 AH), disappearing from regions such as Cyprus and most of the important cities in the East, and from there to Cairo, which was mentioned in his account. He then immediately sought the non-European West, within his classification under the title he published A Voyage beyond the Seas [1]

In truth, his journey has not received sufficient attention in historical studies, as historical literature lacks a dedicated research study that explains and analyzes his visit to the city of Cairo, except for a few pages in writings that generally discuss the visits of European travelers, especially Italians, to the Levant and Egypt in the late Middle Ages, such as those authored by John Kenneth Hyde, Ulrich Haarmann, and Diana Webb[2]. These constitute scant ideas about Niccolò's work, which is full of diverse ideas and topics

Consequently, the research aims to highlight what Niccolò recorded about his journey to Egypt, specifically about the city of Cairo, by presenting its details and shedding light on the extent of his success in writing what he witnessed. The study will not only focus on knowing the details of that journey, but will also undertake an analytical monitoring and tracing of it through the writings of many European travelers contemporary to Niccolò who came to Egypt, such as: the Irishman Simon Fitzsimons (1322 AD/722 AH), the German Ludolph Suchim (1336-1341 AD/736-742 AH), the Italian Jacques de Vérone (1335 AD/736 AH), the Englishman John Mandeville (1346-1347 AD/747-748 AH),

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(1) Niccolò da Poggibonsi*, A Voyage beyond the Seas (1346-1350)*, Publications
of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 2 pt. 2, trans. Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem, 1945), p.1.

(2) ohn Kenneth, H., *Italian Pilgrim Literature in the Late Middle Ages,*"Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library 72(1990), ,pp.21-23 ; Ulrich Haarmann,*The Mamluk System of Rule in the Eyes of Western Travelers,*in M. S. R,vol.5,(University of Chicago,2001),pp.9-10;Diana Webb,Medieval *European Pilgrimage, c.700 - c.1500 ,*(New york,2002),p.68.

and others. As well as what was recorded in later journeys that came to Egypt after Niccolò's departure, such as the journey of the Italian Lionardo Frescobaldi (1384 AD/787 AH), in addition to the writings of many other travelers. By comparing these with what Niccolò mentioned in his journey, the study gains added importance and momentum to arrive at a clear conception of the conditions of Egypt during the era of the first Mamluk state, specifically in the late first half of the fourteenth century AD/eighth century AH, in the view of European travelers.

The methodology employed in this study is the scientific method, based on description and analysis, while adhering to the chronological and thematic order of the research material. The study also utilizes a comparative approach, by comparing Niccolò's writings with those of other travelers. Before delving into these details, we see it most appropriate to give a brief overview of Niccolò's life and personality, as well as the itinerary of his journey to the Islamic East, which may have influenced his ideas and, consequently, what he recorded about his journey to Egypt during that period.

2. Niccolò's Journey to the East :

We infer Niccolò's life from what he mentioned about himself within his work. Despite the scarcity of information he provided about his life prior to his journey to the East, especially concerning his date of birth, he mentioned that he was of Italian origin, born at the beginning of the fourteenth century AD into a middle-class family. He was born and lived in a small town located in the region of Tuscany called Poggibonsi and was known accordingly as Niccolò. It seems that monastic life appealed to him, as he mentioned that at the beginning of the fourteenth century AD/eighth century AH, he joined, while young, one of the monasteries of the Franciscan order. Over time, he became one of its most famous monks in the Italian peninsula. According to his indication, he succeeded in persuading seven of his friar friends to accompany him on a journey to the East, to visit the holy places in the Levant and Egypt, as well as—in his

words—to discover new places worth seeing.[1] He and his companions left their city of Poggibonsi to begin their journey in the early days of March 1345 AD/746 AH.[2] It is likely that there may have been some confusion on Robert's part regarding the aforementioned date, as according to the sequence of events and the dates he himself provided for the journey's itinerary later, it becomes clear to us that the correct year of his departure is 1346 AD/747 AH, not 1345 AD/746 AH.

In any case, Niccolò arrived in the city of Venice, and from there to the island of Cyprus aboard a ship, then reached the Levant in February 1347 AD/Shawwal 749 AH, where he visited several cities, including the city of Jerusalem, where he performed the usual pilgrimage rites. [3] He then soon visited many cities in the Levant, including Damascus, Baghdad, and others, on a tour that lasted nearly a year and a half. Finally, he decided to head by sea towards Egyptian territory, explaining that he had heard much about Egypt's greatness and splendor. He indicated that from that moment he decided to complete a visit to all its regions and would not return to his homeland until after achieving that and recording what he saw with his own eyes and touched with his own hands, and he might ask others sometimes if compelled to do so hands, and he might ask others sometimes if compelled to do so[4].

It is known about the European travelers contemporary to Niccolò who came to Egypt at the beginning of the 14th century AD/8th century AH, such as Jacopo da Verona, Ludolf of Suchem, and John Mandeville, that they headed to Egypt by land after visiting the holy places in the Levant. [5] Therefore, Niccolò's

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(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.1,p.2.
(2) Ibid, pp.1-2 .
(3) Ibid pp.6-8.
(4) Ibid, p.81
(5)Jacques de V'eron a,Liber Peregrinations, 'edit'e.par.Reinhold Rohricht,dans.R.O.L,t.iii,Paris,1995,pp.155-302,p.225.

decision to travel to Egypt by sea was the first of its kind in the late Middle Ages.

In any case, Niccolò and his companions departed from the port of Beirut heading to the city of Alexandria, which he mentioned is about eight hundred miles from Beirut.[1] He spent several days in the city, after which he hired a small boat heading south via the Nile River. He saw a number of small villages located on the riverbank, and finally, he and his companions reached a small port on the Nile north of Cairo where they anchored easily. They entered that area overlooking the port, which was characterized by an abundance of houses and where goods arriving by sailboats via the Nile River to be transported to Cairo were spread about. It is likely that this area, whose name Niccolò did not mention, is Boulac - located north of Cairo - which was later referred to by many European travelers afterward, including, for example, the Italian Lionardo Frescobaldi[2]. Credit is due to Niccolò for being the first among the European travelers who came to Egypt to point out the importance of the port of Bulaq for the movement of internal trade in Egypt.

3. Niccolò's Observations in Cairo :

Niccolòthen moved on to talk about Cairo, explaining that he first found a district on the outskirts of the city[3], the majority of whose residents were Christians, noting that they preferred to live close together. He was hosted there by a Greek Christian who accommodated him in his home. If we rely on what was later indicated by one of Niccolò's compatriots, the Italian traveler Nicolas de Martoni (1394-1395 AD/796-797 AH), who stated that it was arranged for him to stay in the house of a European consul, while it was later learned that the Mamluk authorities had entrusted a Genoese individual with the responsibility of hosting European pilgrims in his residence, according to what was mentioned by an anonymous European traveler in the early 15th century AD, then we can say that it

(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage , ch.163,p.83.
(2)Lionardo Frescobaldi,Visit to the Holy Places, p.44
(3)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.171,p.87

was possible for Europeans visiting Egypt in Niccolò's time to stay anywhere they wished in Cairo. However, by the late 14th century AD, the situation changed and became subject to decisions imposed by the Mamluk authorities in this matter.

Niccolò began his talk about Cairo by saying, "No matter how much I speak of its greatness and beauty, I will not give it its due in speech."[1] He mentioned that it was vast in area, with the city's perimeter being nearly thirty-two miles, densely populated, its streets very narrow to the point that in some places a person could not walk freely and quickly, and that it had many houses inhabited by numerous city residents. On the other hand, his contemporaries like Jacopo da Verona indicated that it stretched lengthwise for more than five miles with a width exceeding approximately two miles, and contained many houses built of mudbrick, while Ludolf estimated its area to be seven times that of the city of Paris.[2] Amid his talk about Cairo, Niccolò did not fail to mention the city of Babylon, describing it as a beautiful area that was the capital of Egypt in ancient history, and now exists on the outskirts of Cairo, with the distance between them estimated at about half a mile. Niccolò believed that Babylon and Cairo together constituted the largest cities on earth, and the name of the ruler of Egypt was derived from its name, so he came to be called the Sultan of Babylon.[3]

Notably, Niccolò agrees with his contemporaries Ludolf of Suchem, Jacopo da Verona, and John Mandeville in describing the seat of the Mamluk Sultan in Cairo as a formidable castle situated on a high, heavily fortified hill, distinguished by beauty, impregnability, high walls, and towers crowded with guards. Meanwhile, we find many European travelers who came to Egypt later were more detailed in describing the structures and internal fittings contained within the citadel, the protocols for receiving foreign ambassadors, and even details relating to the appearance and clothing of the Mamluk sultans. Researchers

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(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage , ch.172,p87.
(2) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.174,p87
(3) Jacques de V'erona,Liber Peregrinations,p.240 ;
Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.319.

explain the success of these later travelers in displaying such details so well by the fact that Niccolò and his aforementioned contemporary travelers did not meet any of the Mamluk sultans during their visit to Egypt, unlike those who came after them who, due to their work, met a number of Mamluk sultans since the beginning of the 15th century AD.

Niccolò soon moved on to discuss Egyptian society. He indicated that in Cairo there were about three thousand four hundred mosques, built by Egyptians to practice their religious rites. These mosques were characterized by having high towers, but no bells. Instead, at specific times, a Muslim would ascend the mosque's tower and call out in a loud voice—in his words—with phrases of profound sorrow, during which life in the city would pause. These are details not mentioned by his European traveler contemporaries until the 15th century AD/9th century AH when some referred to this matter, such as Bernard de Breydenbach (1483 AD/888 AH) who stated that Muslim mosques are distinguished by their lofty minarets[1], while Joos Van Ghistele (1482-1483 AD/887-888 AH) estimated the number of mosques in Cairo at ten thousand, distinguished by their beauty and splendid construction.[2] While Niccolò contented himself with a single phrase about the existence of Muslim cemeteries in Babylon, Jacopo da Verona was more detailed than him in this regard, describing them as vast cemeteries containing exquisite marble tombs and distinctive stones, which received attention from the Mamluk authorities.[3] Niccolò did not forget to add that according to Islamic law, the Muslims of Egypt do not eat pork, and likewise for wines, which are not found in Egyptian markets.[4]

As for the population elements in Egyptian society, Niccolò mentioned that in addition to the previously mentioned Muslims and Christians, he also found Jews, Greeks, Nubians, Turks, Bedouins, Berbers, and some Latin Christians, foremost

(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.176,p.89.
(2)Bernard de Breydenbach,Les Saintes P'er'egrinations,p.55.
(3)Joos Van Ghistele,Le Voyage,p.193.
(4)Jacques de V'erona,Liber Peregrinations,p.241

among them the Venetians, who were greatly concerned with commercial work. One could distinguish between these groups through their accents, clothing, and certain distinctive badges worn by each group.[1]

As for the numbers of Christians present in Cairo, he indicated they reached thirty thousand, the same number that Jacopo da Verona had mentioned a few years before Niccolò's arrival, while Ludolf of Suchem mentioned a figure very far from his contemporaries: only four thousand.[2] Niccolò, like his other contemporaries in his time, did not mention many details concerning the Jews and their conditions in Egypt.

It is worth noting that there is an important point clarified by Niccolò, namely his talk about the existence of a large community of Ethiopian Christians in Cairo. He explained that they were distinguished from other non-Muslim communities in Egypt by the fact that they did not pay the jizya to the Sultan, and they were even allowed to carry the cross openly in the city's streets during the day. They were distinguished by their black skin. He expressed his lack of conviction regarding some Christian rites they performed, among which was that they baptized with hot iron by placing a distinctive mark on their foreheads. However, he soon clarified that the reason for their distinction from other dhimmis (non-Muslim protected people) was that the Sultan did not allow us Latins to meet with any of these people for fear that we would negotiate with them and facilitate our contact with Prester John in order to ally together to wage war against the Sultan's territories. Since Niccolò had previously referred to one of the legends that spread for a not insignificant period during the Middle Ages, namely the legend of Prester John[3], then we can say that the idea of establishing a European alliance with Ethiopian Christians tickled the imagination of Europeans on one side, while the Mamluk

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(1) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.180,p.9.
(2) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.181,p.91
(3)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage , ch.257,p.126.

Sultans tried to take all possible measures to prevent this from happening on the other.

Niccolò mentions that about three miles north of Cairo there is a suburb called Mathalia—meaning Matariya—which is considered the first place where the Holy Family rested before entering Old Egypt. When they felt thirsty and found no water, the infant Jesus struck the ground with his feet, and a spring of water gushed forth by God's command, from which all the Holy Family drank. Now at this place, Christians bathe, and he also saw Egyptian Muslims there blessing themselves with that water[1].

In any case, Niccolò continued his talk by saying that the Mamluk Sultans had built a waterwheel ("saqiya") over the aforementioned well, operated by a pair of oxen all day long, and when they tired, they would put another pair in their place. On Saturday evening, the oxen would stop in a divine miracle until sunrise on Monday. As a result, a garden sprang up beside the well containing many balsam trees, which he was told do not grow anywhere else in the world except in this place. If anyone tried to cultivate it with water other than from this well, it would wither. Its importance lay in the blessed oil extracted from it, which cures many diseases, and therefore all Egyptians of all beliefs use it. This oil is also used for anointment. From this standpoint, the garden received special attention from the Mamluk Sultans, who placed strong guards on it, both guards and by constantly reinforcing its walls, as it represented wealth for the Sultans[2].

In fact, Niccolò's European traveler contemporaries like Simon and Ludolf spoke briefly about that garden of Matariya compared to what Niccolò mentioned. Indeed, John Mandeville was incorrect when he mentioned that the garden was an open

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(1) Otto of Freising, The Two Cities, the Chronicles of Universal History to the Year of 1146, trans. Charles Christoph Mierow (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 443-44;CF.also: Adam Knobler, Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration (Leiden-Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 5-31.

(2)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.185,p.93.

place visited by people at any time without guard, which does not agree with what all European travelers who visited this place in the late Middle Ages mentioned. [1]Then, based on what Al-'Umari (d. 745 AH/1349 AD) mentioned regarding the balsam trees in Matariya and the importance of balsam oil for the Mamluk Sultans and all Egyptians in that period[2], Niccolò thereby surpassed all his European traveler contemporaries. Of course, his mention that Egyptians of all beliefs share in using this blessed oil is evidence of the good relations that united the various segments of Egyptian society in that era.

In any case, Niccolò explained that about three miles from Babylon there are the Pharaonic granaries, which Joseph (peace be upon him) ordered to be built during the period known as the years of plenty. They were built from large stones placed in a wonderful manner, and their number was estimated at seven. A person coming from Alexandria could see some of them. They were designed in the shape of a diamond, and the place inside them was very dark, indeed very gloomy. He measured the width of one of them and found it to be 48 feet, but he could not measure the height due to the difficulty of the task.[3]

Undobtedly, those granaries referred to by Niccolò are the Egyptian pyramids. In this, he agrees with his European traveler contemporaries such as: Simon and Ludolf of Suchem and John Mandeville, who described them as granaries built by our master Joseph to store grain. Although Mandeville differed from them by saying that he found phrases written on their walls in several languages, some known and others unknown[4], Niccolò distinguished himself from his contemporaries by saying that

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(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage , ch.186,p.93.
Regarding balsam, Marcus, M., The Balsam of Matariyya : an exploration of Medieval Panacea, in B.S.O.A.S, univ. London, Vol. 66, No. 2, 2003.

(3) Ibn Fadlallah al-Umari (d. 745 AH / 1349 AD): Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar (The First Mamluk State), edited and studied by Dorothea Krawulsky, Beirut, 1986,p.68.

(3) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch193,pp.96-97.

(4) Fitzsimons,S., Itinerary,p.377; John Mandeville,The Travels,p.35 Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.321.

they are about three miles from Babylon and that he tried to measure them himself to show the reader how large they are.

Amid this wealth of what Niccolò narrates about his observations in Egypt, we find him trying to prove his skill in knowing Egypt's geography. He mentions that the land of Egypt is flat, bordered by the sea to the north, dark-skinned peoples to the south, a vast desert to the west, while if we head east we first reach the Red Sea, then the lands of Syria and the Holy Land.[1] This is while Ludolf described Egypt as surrounded by desert on three sides, and the fourth side was the Greek Sea.[2] Thus, Niccolò tried as much as he could to define the borders of Egyptian territory in that period.

Of course, Niccolò did not neglect to talk about the Nile River, describing it as one of the rivers flowing from Paradise, the main source of water for Egyptians, extending from the land of Ethiopia in the south, cutting through Egyptian lands. Evidence of its importance is the reference to it in the Bible and the Old Testament, adding that the river's width in some areas reaches three miles, and it contains many islands.[3] Meanwhile, Jacopo da Verona contented himself with saying that the river flows from Paradise, while Ludolf mentions that it is wider than the Rhine and runs in a straight line through Egyptian lands. Indeed, Simon let his imagination go so far as to say that the Nile extends south to the land of India.[4]

Continuing his talk about the Nile River, Niccolò added that since this river is the main source of water for Egyptians, it had its effect on their interest in agricultural activity. He explained that "the river floods twice every year until it covers all the land. The first time in mid-March and lasts for several days, during which the land becomes black muddy soil. At that time, the farmers sow wheat seeds by hand, then they use hoes to dig that land to a depth of at least two spans. After a short time, that land sprouts and becomes ears of grain. With the coming of July,

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(1) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage , ch.178,pp.90.
(2)Ludolph Von Suchem's., *Description of the Holy Land,*p
(3) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.179,p.90.
(4)Fitzsimons,S., Itinerary.p.379.

the Egyptians harvest what they planted. The same thing is repeated in mid-August, and the farmers plant, in addition to wheat, many crops including: beans, broad beans, cucumbers, and numerous vegetables and fruits.[1]" Ludolf distinguished himself from Niccolò by referring to the existence of what is known as the Nilometer, containing marks to determine the water level in the river. Undoubtedly, Niccolò preceded other European travelers in talking in such detail about how Egyptians cultivated their land, and reaching information of utmost importance to Europeans about agriculture, which is one of the most prominent features of Egyptian civilization throughout history.

In another place, Niccolò points out that wood and iron are scarce in Egypt, and that Egyptians rely on what Venetian merchants bring to the country.[2] Although his contemporary Ludolf of Suchem indicates that Egyptian lands have many types of wood available[3], Niccolò may be correct in what he referred to, as it was known that Egypt did not have a large supply of wood during the Mamluk period, hence it was expensive and was imported from abroad[4].

As for the animals Niccolò saw in Egypt, he found in Cairo a market where many animals were bought and sold. Elephants garnered the interest of travelers of this era. Niccolò mentions that he saw one of the Venetian merchants buying an elephant for an amount of thirty-six florins. It was, in his words, a wonder of the age: the head large, the eyes small and red, the tusks long, the nose long, the ears like wings, the tail small, the feet round, and it carried a wooden castle on its back that could carry about thirty men. He found its length to be thirteen spans from his

(1) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.180,pp.90-91.
(2) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.180,p. 91.
(3)Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.313
(4)Al-Maqrizi: Al-Khitat, Vol. 1, pp. 205-206.

hand, after measuring it himself.[1] In this, he was more detailed than what Ludolf of Suchem and Jacopo da Verona mentioned.[2]

Niccolò continued his talk, saying he saw a giraffe with a body colored like a net, the hind legs very short while the forelegs long, and a neck reaching the length of the ceiling. He found monkeys of distinctive shapes, as well as parrots of multiple colors, and many types of goats.[3] Meanwhile, Niccolò omitted talking about the crocodiles of the Nile and how they were among the distinctive things in Egypt, known for their enormity and strength—a subject which Ludolf of Suchem elaborated on in his description.[4]

Since Niccolò had previously indicated that sailboats were among the most important means of internal transport via the Nile River, he did not fail to clarify and point out the means of land transport in Egypt. He mentions that in Cairo alone there are about sixty thousand donkeys used by Egyptians for moving around Cairo's streets, while he found about eleven thousand camels used for carrying luggage.[5] Meanwhile, Jacopo da Verona contented himself with referring to those land transport means without specifying their number.[6]

On the way from Cairo to Babylon, Niccolò found many wonderful churches. After walking for one mile, he found the church of St. Martin containing his body. While he indicates that

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(1) both Jacopo da Verona and Ludolph von Suchem merely stated that the elephant was among the wonders to be seen in the markets of Cairo. See:
Jacques de V'erona,Liber Peregrinations,p.239. Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.329.

(2) Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage ch.181,p. 91.

(3)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.183-184,p. 92

(4) Ludolph von Suchem elaborated on the description of the Nile crocodile labeling it an "evil beast" characterized by the strength and speed with which it pounces on its prey. He explained that those living near the river, in the presence of a crocodile, find their lives in constant danger. See Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,pp.329-330

(5)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.176,p.86

(6)Jacques de V'erona,Liber Peregrinations,p.241

Nubian clergy were in charge of that church, we find Frescobaldi, who visited it about forty years after Niccolò, mentions that it was in the possession of Greek clergy.[1] Since it is known—as Al-Maqrizi indicates—that most Egyptian churches in that area were subject to the Jacobites due to them being the majority among Christians in Egypt, in addition to a small number of churches subject to the Melkites, Armenians, Nestorians, and Georgians[2], from this it becomes clear to us that Niccolò was the first to point out the existence of Egyptian churches under the possession of Nubian Christians in Egypt.

When he walked on the main street in Babylon, he found another mile away the church of St. Michael, distinguished by its spaciousness and beauty and under the possession of Greek Christians.[3] At a distance of two bowshots, he found a monastery with a beautiful church called the church of the Virgin Mary or the Cave (De La-Cave), where he found a picture of Mary said to have been painted by St. Luke, and that beneath the church altar is the cave where Mary hid with her child Jesus and stayed for seven years, fleeing from Nazareth to Egypt for fear of the Roman ruler Herod. He found in the place an altar and in the middle the well from which the Virgin drank. Niccolò, like most European travelers who visited this place in the Middle Ages, whether his contemporaries like Fitzsimons or John Mandeville, or those who came after him like the German Arnold von Harff (1497-1499 AD/902-905 AH), was mistaken in saying that the Holy Family stayed in Egypt for seven years[4], since according to what the historian Josephus mentioned, that

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(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.187,p.94; Lionardo Frescobaldi,Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, p.51

(2)Al-Maqrizi: Al-Khitat, Vol. 4, p. 423.

(3)Niccolò clarifies the matter by stating that these camels can endure thirst for long periods, and were it not for them, no one would be able to travel easily to Saint Catherine's Monastery. See Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.189,p.95

(4)Fitzsimons,S., Itinerary,p. 380; John Mandeville,The Travels,p.23; Arnold von Harff,The Pilgrimage,p.49

Herod died in 4 AD[1], and based on what is stated in the Gospel of Matthew, that the Virgin and Jesus remained in Egypt until the death of Herod, which means that the period the Holy Family spent in Egypt does not exceed four years.

Near the previous place, Niccolò mentions that he found another beautiful church, that of Notre-Dame De La Colonne or the "One with the Stairs,"[2] where he ascended stairs that numbered thirty rock steps and found the column known as the Column of the Lady Virgin Mary.[3] Based on what Joos Van Ghistele—who came in the late 15th century—mentioned, his talk was more detailed than Niccolò's about that church, and in his indication that the number of those stairs was only twenty-nine steps[4], it is then likely that one of those steps was damaged after Niccolò's visit to the place.

He soon visited the church of Sainte Barbe, where he found the altar behind the chanters, and at a wall height of four feet, he found a box containing the body of Saint Barbara. Visitors were allowed to touch her body provided they were barefoot.[5] Meanwhile, Ludolf had referred to the church but with other information, including that the Mamluk Sultan had ordered the necessity of preserving the saint's body[6], while Joos Van Ghistele confirmed Niccolò's words about the church[7], which Al-Maqrizi identified as being located in the Harat al-Rum (Quarter of the Greeks) in the Babylon area.[8]

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(1)Matthew 2:13-15. Also:Josephus, The Jewish War,trans.G.A.Williamson,Penguin,1974,p.402.

(2)Abu al-Makarim (d. first half of the 13th century AD / 7th century AH): *History of Churches and Monasteries in the 12th Century*, prepared by Bishop Samuel, 4 volumes, Al-Naam for Printing and Supplies, Cairo, 1999,vol.4,p.43.

(3)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.191,p.96

(4)Joos Van Ghistele,Le Voyage en Egypt,p.54

(5)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.192,p.96..

(6)Land,p.321. Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy

(7)Joos Van Ghistele,Le Voyage en Egypt,p.50

(8)Al-Maqrizi: Al-Khitat, Vol. 4, p. 424

In any case, according to Niccolò's account, after finishing the visit to the aforementioned churches, he and his companions decided to visit the holy places in the east of the country, the visit to which—in his words—is not complete for Egypt except by going to the Monastery of St. Catherine. Indeed, he returned to Cairo and had to make some preparations for that visit. Initially, he hired an interpreter to be his companion on that visit, and through him he obtained a safe-conduct from the Sultan to see the Christian shrines in the Monastery of St. Catherine and its surroundings. He paid twenty silver dirhams to obtain this safe-conduct.[1] If we know that the Irishman Simon Fitzsimons succeeded in persuading the interpreter to mediate with the Sultan to obtain the safe-conduct free of charge, which he succeeded in, while the Italian Lionardo Frescobaldi—who came three decades after Niccolò —had to pay seven ducats[2] to obtain that permission[3], then from Niccolò's talk and comparison with later European travelers, we can surmise that there was no fixed, specified amount imposed on Europeans wishing to obtain the aforementioned safe-conduct.

Amid those arrangements, Niccolò met some non-Egyptian Christians wishing to accompany him to the Monastery of St. Catherine, indicating they were of different nationalities: two from England, three from Constantinople, and another from Syria. Soon their interpreter came and informed them that the next step was to send for the desert Arabs to bring some camels to carry them and their luggage to their destination. Niccolò clarified that those camels differed from those he had previously indicated were among the means of transport in Cairo, known as the Babylonian camels, as the required camels were of the type that endures the hardships of travel to distant

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(1)Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.197,p.98

(2)Rubbert, L. B., " Venetian Money Market 1150 – 1229", in S. M, XIII, (1971), P. 44. Al-Qalqashandi (d. 821 AH / 1418 AD) Ahmad ibn Ali ibn Ahmad Abdullah: Subh al-A'sha fi Sina'at al-Insha, four volumes, Cairo, 1913,vol.3,pp.236-237.

(3)Fitzsimons,S., Itinerary,p.390; Lionardo Frescobaldi, Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt,Sinai ,p.52.

places, known as desert camels. Because they were wild, they were forbidden from entering Cairo, and thus they remained outside the city about a mile away. Their Bedouin owners were summoned, and an agreement was made with them on the costs of the journey, which amounted to sixty dirhams for each camel from Babylon to the Monastery of St. Catherine.[1] In the same context, Simon Fitzsimons indicated that if one of these camels infiltrated Cairo, the authorities would take it and its Bedouin owners would be imprisoned[2], while Ludolf of Suchem contented himself with saying they were camels that endure travel hardship.[3] Thus, Niccolò was among the first European travelers to talk about the types of camels used for travel in Egyptian territories.

Niccolò continues his speech, indicating that the anticipated journey to St. Catherine would take twenty-two days, and that Babylon is the starting point because there is a market there containing much of what a person needs for that journey in terms of food, drink, and other things. Indeed, he bought from it all the supplies he needed, as did his companions.[4] Despite the exaggeration Niccolò included in estimating the duration of the journey, as it was known that the duration ranged between twelve to fifteen days, according to what his contemporaries Ludolf and John Mandeville mentioned[5], and despite Frescobaldi being more detailed than him in talking about the importance of supplying and purchasing the necessities for that journey[6], Niccolò distinguished himself from them by

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(1)Niccolò indicates that he found an arm of a lady in that church, which he was told belonged to St. Margaret. See:Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.197,p.98.

(2)Fitzsimons,S., Itinerary,p.40.

(3)Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.335

(4)Niccolò purchased quantities of bread, meat, eggs, and cheese, as well as waterskins for storing water. See: Niccolò da Poggibonsi, A Voyage, ch.199,p.99

(5)38. P. John Mandeville,The Travels, Ludolph Von Suchem's, Description of the Holy Land,p.334.

(6)Lionardo Frescobaldi,Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt,Sinai pp.52-53.

mentioning the importance of the journey starting from Babylon rather than Cairo.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear to us that Niccolò's coming to the East was not solely for the purpose of pilgrimage and visiting the Holy Land, but also, as he stated at the beginning of his narrative, out of a desire to discover new places worth seeing. This was clearly evident from the moment his feet touched the ground in the city of Cairo, which also revealed his love for adventure and discovery. His journey included places not closely related to the rituals of pilgrimage and the holy sites that typically attract Western European Christians, especially if they were men of the clergy. Rather, we found that for the majority of his journey, he dealt with what he encountered through the lens of a traveler eager to learn about new things.

Conclusion

Among the places unrelated to religious aspects—which were included in his journey in Egypt during some of its stages—was his visit to the Pyramids, which serves as an excellent example. Niccolò, like his contemporaries, called them the "Pharaonic Granaries." However, Niccolò distinguished himself by stating that they were about three miles from Babylon and that he tried to measure them himself to show the reader how large they were. He did not neglect to talk about the wonders of the animals and birds he saw in Egypt, providing more detail than his contemporaries. In contrast, Niccolò omitted any mention of the Nile crocodiles and how they were among the distinctive features of Egypt, known for their size and strength—a subject that both Jacopo da Verona and Ludolph von Suchem described in detail.

It is worth noting that Niccolò recorded for us many social aspects he encountered in Egypt, after his keen eye penetrated to see precise truths in Egyptian society. He pointed to the elements of the population in society, mentioning that in addition to the previously mentioned Muslims and Christians, he also found Jews, Greeks, Nubians, Turks, Bedouins, and Berbers. There were also some Latin

Christians, chief among them the Venetians, who were heavily involved in commercial work. One could distinguish between these groups by their dialects, clothing, and certain insignia worn by each group. He did not forget to mention that all Egyptians, regardless of their beliefs, shared in the use of the blessed oil extracted from balsam trees found in the Matariya area, which indicates the good relations that united the various segments of Egyptian society in that era.

Among the observations with political and military significance is what Niccolò mentioned about the legend of Prester John. In essence, it indicates that the idea of establishing a European alliance with Ethiopian Christians tickled the imagination of Europeans on one hand, while the Mamluk sultans tried to take all possible measures to prevent this from happening on the other.

Among the matters Niccolò summarized in his account was his discussion of the Sultan's Citadel in Cairo and the appearance and clothing of the Mamluk sultans. This has been interpreted by the researcher as indicating that Niccolò and his contemporary travelers did not meet any of the Mamluk sultans during their visit to Egypt, unlike those who came after them and who, by virtue of their work—as ambassadors in addition to being travelers—met with a number of Mamluk sultans from the beginning of the fifteenth century AD.

Of course, Niccolò did not neglect to talk about the Nile River, describing it as one of the rivers flowing from Paradise, the main source of water for the Egyptians, extending from the lands of Ethiopia in the south, traversing Egyptian territory. Proof of its importance is its mention in the Bible and the Old Testament. Although he did not dwell long on talking about Rosetta, the information he provided about it is of particular importance regarding the geographical and economic aspects of that city.

Elsewhere, Niccolò points out that wood and iron are scarce in Egypt, and that Egyptians rely on what Venetian merchants bring to the country. He notes that sailing vessels are among the most important means of internal transport via the Nile River. As for land transport, he mentions that in

Cairo alone there are about sixty thousand donkeys used by Egyptians for moving through Cairo's streets, while there are nearly eleven thousand camels used for carrying luggage. Credit is due to Niccolò for being the first among European travelers who came to Egypt to point out the importance of the Bulaq port for internal trade movement in Egypt.

Undoubtedly, Niccolò, primarily as a man of religion, showed notable interest in observing and recording every religious site and phenomenon he witnessed. The traveler set his sights on visiting the most prominent Egyptian Christian holy sites—even though they were associated with the heritage of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christians, such as churches and monasteries—despite being a Catholic clergyman. He pointed to many churches he saw himself in Cairo, and Niccolò was the first to indicate the existence of Egyptian churches under the possession of Nubian Christians in Egypt.

Regarding Muslims, he mentioned that in Cairo there are about three thousand four hundred mosques, built by Egyptians for practicing their religious rites. These mosques are distinguished by their high minarets, but they have no bells. Instead, at specific times, a Muslim ascends to the mosque's minaret and calls out loudly—in his words—with phrases of intense sorrow, during which life in the city stops. These are details not mentioned by his contemporary European travelers, until someone in the fifteenth century pointed this out.

Although Niccolò's journey within Cairo comprised a brief period compared to his journey in the East in general, which lasted four years, his journey and what he recorded of his observations there represent a new and important page on the conditions of Cairo during the era of the first Mamluk state, specifically in the late first half of the fourteenth century AD/eighth century AH. Niccolò ultimately succeeded in producing a narrative of a journey he saw with his own eyes before narrating it with his pen.

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