

Much has been written about the logistics of medieval travel and the inevitable hardships encountered along the way. Historians have studied how medieval armies traversing hostile territory faced the challenge of maintaining supply lines, pilgrims enroute to shrines could encounter bandits, and craftspeople or entertainers needed to find work or sell their wares along the way in order to survive. The mechanisms of travel have also been well documented, including common modes of travel on land and sea, the infrastructure needed to facilitate travel, as well as the hospitality industry which emerged as a result, with inns and hospitals offering food and shelter to weary travelers along the way.¹ What tends to be missing from these reviews is a deeper study of how medieval authors chose to portray a particular journey in their narratives and why they documented what they did regarding the event.²

To uncover the motivation for documenting travel in the Middle Ages, it is important to consider both the subject and the intended audience of the work. Early medieval authors often wrote for the posterity of others, capturing the great deeds of nobility and religious leaders or momentous occasions. In other works, as with personal letters, authors wrote with a more personal tone, especially when the intended audience was a friend or close colleague. As the

¹ For a more comprehensive overview of these topics, see Paul Newman, *Travel and trade in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011) or John Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

² Another interesting aspect of medieval travel writing that has been studied are the ramifications which came about as a result of how travel to Asia was depicted in the Middle Ages. In *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), Mary Campbell writes that the tone and language used by some medieval writers gave rise to the eventual conquest, or attempt thereof, of the peoples being written about. Campbell does not argue that this was the intended outcome by medieval authors, but more the inevitable result of generations of readers intrigued and enticed to follow in the author's footsteps and seek their own fame and fortune.

Middle Ages continued, authors began writing more autobiographically, but in every case under review herein, they were writing to communicate with others.

Travel can be difficult to communicate to someone unfamiliar with the sights and sounds of the journey. A majority of the audiences, especially in the early Middle Ages, were unlikely to ever have experienced the same journey themselves, nor were they likely to undertake the trip in the future. It has been estimated that a majority of people in the Middle Ages spent most, if not all, of their lives within twenty miles of their home.³ This would have influenced medieval authors to re-create a journey through their words to help their audience to feel as though they had also experienced the trip. However, the lack of accountability through corroboration of the details by the audience also gave the author license to create, or at least relay without question, fanciful tales from far off lands that they could likely not be chastised for when passing off as true, as will be seen in a later Middle Ages example.

Religious inspiration was a common theme of writers in the Middle Ages, and pilgrimage was a frequent reason for travel. A partial account of such a trip to the Holy Land in the fourth century known as “Egeria’s Travels” provides a glimpse into the mindset of such a pilgrim.⁴ Attributed to a nun named Egeria, the middle section of a document she wrote survives, describing the sights and individuals she met during her three-year journey. The beginning of the document has been lost, so the intended audience is not explicitly stated, but she frequently addresses her “sisters”, who could be fellow nuns or other such contemporaries. It is unclear

³ *Travel and trade*, p. 3.

⁴ John Wilkinson translates what remains of the document along with related works from an author known only as ‘The Pilgrim of Bordeaux’ and other authors unknown. See J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 1999) pp. 107-164 for the translation of Egeria’s document.

where exactly Egeria set out from, but it is believed to have been in Spain.⁵ It also was not her first trip overseas, given her mention of being familiar with one area “from my first visit to Egypt”.⁶ The length of time she spent on these trips and the fact that she had undertaken at least one other similar journey earlier in her life lend credibility to establishing her as a skilled traveler in this period.

In the portion that survived, Egeria does not complain or display any aggravation about the journey in her writings. When ascending Mount Nebo in Jordan, she only admits that it was “hard going” in some of the steeper sections where they had to dismount their donkey transport.⁷ Her focus is on the sights and experiences she had on the trip, with very little mention of food or lodging along the way. She notes the helpful monks, bishops and other clergy who assist her along the way, providing information at waypoints and recommendations for additional religious sites in the regions. Clearly Egeria wants to leave a positive impression on her readers and inspire others to undertake a similar journey or at the very least, feel inspired and rejuvenated in their faith through her experiences.

One interesting item that she comments on more than once is the quality of the water they access on the trip. She describes wells with “crystal clear drinking water”, a valley with “good water”, a river that looked as “a great river of silver”, and so forth.⁸ Water is a common theme in Christian writing, as so many significant Biblical events relate to it; baptisms, the flood, Jesus walks on water, and more. She does point out locations where certain water-related Biblical events were said to have occurred where she comes across them, but otherwise she is not overtly

⁵ A Spanish hermit wrote about her travels in the seventh century and some feel she may have originated from the same area based on his work. In addition, in the surviving portion of her work, Egeria compares the Red Sea to the ocean she was familiar with in her home region; this may have been the Atlantic Ocean. See *Egeria*, p. 1.

⁶ *Egeria*, p. 115.

⁷ *Egeria*, p.121.

⁸ Various locations referencing water can be found in *Egeria*, pp. 112, 113, 127, 128, 135, 137, and 139.

drawing parallels between her encounters with water and any particular religious teaching or event. It is possible the inclusion of so many comments on water were practical over spiritual in her intentions. This would be another way to entice readers to visit the area, as ample sources of fresh drinking water would reassure weary travelers they could be sustained along the way.

Another example of a religious medieval literary work in which travel is prominently featured outside of pilgrimage is in the *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals of the Order of Friars Minor*. This chronicle is a history of the Franciscan Order leadership from St. Francis to the time of the Great Schism in 1378 and has been attributed to brother Arnald of Sarrant in the fourteenth century.⁹ The work contains dozens of examples of journeys made by members of the Order throughout Europe for nearly two hundred years. Arnald is writing to capture the history of the Order, whose guiding principles included living in poverty and preaching to others.

The audience for his book were intended to be future members of the Order and the journeys he captured include lessons designed to keep members on the right path and continue the work of the Order. Many of the travel stories Arnald chose to include tell of ways in which members of the Order were tempted by the devil and worked to overcome it or otherwise learned a lesson from the encounter. In one story, a trio of friars were traveling through England and a demon came upon them and chastised members of the Order who were not pious.¹⁰ In another

⁹ Arnald of Sarrant, *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals of the Order of Friars Minor*, Section 1 trans. by Noel Muscat (Malta: TAU Franciscan Communications, 2010) p. 3.

¹⁰ The demon compares the friars to a pot filled with pieces of meat. He says those which are crude settle to the bottom of the pot and are useless, vain members which ascend proudly evaporate into smoke, but those which are “cooked through holy humility and obedience and chastity...become good-tasting for God and for men” *Chronicle*, pp. 427-428. Given that the moral of the story is to live humbly and chaste, it is an interesting allegory to attribute to a demon and more of a lesson that would have come from the church directly. Encountering a demon on the road, however, is more likely to be retained in the minds of the traveling friars, which explains its inclusion in the *Chronicle*.

tale, friars traveling through France are given shelter for the night by a knight's wife and through their visit, the knight is saved from hell when he dies that same evening.¹¹

Either tale could have been relayed without the inclusion of the travel details, but the journey is part of the experience Arnald has elected to portray in his work. He includes the travel details in order to give support to future members who will face hardships during their own journeys. He is preparing them to face their own demons along the way and helping them see how the devil can be identified and dealt with. The story of the knight also tells members why it is important for them to travel, so they can save the souls of people who have not come to them first.

Religious individuals did not only travel for pilgrimage or proselytizing, however, and not every journey was as fulfilling as Egeria or Arnald would have their readers believe. Liutprand, the Bishop of Cremona in modern-day Northern Italy, had quite a different experience on his journey to Constantinople in 968. Liutprand was an envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great, sent to broker peace with the eastern empire and negotiate a marriage to Otto's son, ruling alongside his father as Otto II. Modern travelers who find themselves in less-than-ideal accommodations away from home can sympathize with Liutprand's tribulations, which for 120 days, included being housed in a spacious dwelling but "uncovered, neither keeping out the cold nor warding off the heat" and being so far from the palace that their "breath was taken away when we walked there". In addition to poor lodgings, the wine was "undrinkable," and the house did not have access to water.¹²

¹¹ *Chronicle*, p. 508.

¹² *Liutprand of Cremona: Report of his Mission to Constantinople*, trans. by Ernest F. Henderson in 'Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages'. (London: George Bell, 1910) pp. 440-477, p. 443. Internet History Sourcebooks Project. January 1996. Accessed 22 December, 2022. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/liudprand1.asp>

Compared to the works by Egeria and Arnald, there is a clear difference in the intended audience here, as Liutprand's experience was captured in a letter he wrote directly to Otto. Liutprand was counting on the fact that Otto personally would be reading it, and he clearly wanted Otto to fully understand what he had gone through on his Lord's behalf. Liutprand frequently refers to his hardships throughout the document, which shows that he felt comfortable enough with his relationship with Otto to complain about his circumstances repeatedly. It also suggests he may not have expected others to be reading it, or else he may have tempered his grievances regarding his hosts. Unfortunately, his 968 excursion was not successful, and a marriage contract was not finalized. However, despite the cruel treatment he so thoroughly reported on his first voyage, he returned to Constantinople to continue negotiations again in 971, which ultimately were successful.¹³ The fact that he returned could suggest that the conditions were not as bad as he had alluded to, or it could be an indication of the dedication Liutprand felt towards Otto in his willingness to subject himself to such deprivations again.

The differences in the writing and tone by these various religious figures show how the impact of audience (public versus private) and objective (spiritual versus political) can influence how the medieval author would depict travel in their work. In other examples from the Middle Ages, the purpose of the journey was not as important as how it was portrayed in the document. Often, medieval authors crafted the way they captured travel details to either revere or degrade the individual being written about.

In Einhard's "*Vita Karoli Magni*" on the life of Charlemagne, he recounts that Charlemagne would frequently ride horses for exercise, showing that travel was not just a means

¹³ During his second visit, Liutprand was able to broker a marriage between Otto II and the Byzantine princess Theophanu. See *The Complete Works of Liutprand of Cremona*, trans. by Paolo Squatriti (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp 30-31.

for him to get around his realm or to wage war, but it was a manifestation of his energy and vitality.¹⁴ By contrast, Einhard noted that the previous ruling family, the Merovingians, had lost their power and stature, and ruled as Kings in name only. To exemplify his point, Einhard notes that Childeric III would “ride in a cart, drawn by a yoke of oxen driven, peasant-fashion, by a Ploughman”.¹⁵ The imagery he creates with this phrasing is certainly not one of a respected, regal individual, and the author is making a clear delineation between the lowly Merovingian ruler compared to the vivacious Carolingian one.

In another example of a medieval writer using travel as an illustration of the greatness of a king, Henry of Huntington writes that William the Conqueror was such a strong ruler that “a young girl, laden with gold, could travel unharmed” throughout England.¹⁶ It is a small detail within his work, but the implication is clearly that William has a strong grip on the country and bandits would not dare to accost travelers under his rule. Henry penned his work some decades after the conquest, however, so the tale is not as much a contemporary observation as it is a wistful look back by the author to what he likely perceived as better times. The implication is that travel at the time Henry was writing had become dangerous again and the country was not as secure as it once had been. Similar to Einhard, Henry has found a way to glorify one ruler while disparaging another, though more subtlety in deference of the current ruler.

For other works, details were captured not only for implications of what travel meant but to commemorate the outcome the journey facilitated. For example, in the thirteenth century work *Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, author Snorri Sturluson chose to include the tale of Thorod

¹⁴ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. by Samuel Epes Turner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), p. 17.

¹⁵ *Charlemagne*, p. 57.

¹⁶ Henry of Huntington, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. by Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 407.

Snorrason, an Icelandic man in the court of King Olaf of Norway in 1027.¹⁷ During an attempted tax collection expedition, Thorod meets legendary Norse figure Arnliot Gelline, whom he later introduces to King Olaf. Arnliot allies with Olaf and later dies in battle defending him. Thorod's trip is entertaining, including a close call with a man-eating witch which Arnliot saves him from, but its inclusion in the *Chronicle* serves a bigger purpose by establishing a connection between Olaf and a legendary figure in Norse mythology.¹⁸ Sturluson documented the tale of this journey nearly two centuries after it would have taken place, but he felt it was consequential enough to include in his history of the Norse kings to show how important King, now Saint by the time Sturluson was writing, Olaf was.

It is not surprising to find Norse accounts of travel, as the Vikings were prolific journeymen in the Middle Ages. One such traveler, Ohthere of Norway, recounted some of his experiences to King Alfred in England towards the end of the ninth century and an unnamed scribe in the King's court captured the information.¹⁹ Ohthere told of how he navigated the waters around Denmark, Norway and other regions, and what he encountered along the way.

Modern author John Romano, in his work compiling travel depictions in the Middle Ages, regarded Ohthere's account as economic travel writing, as Ohthere provides information about where to hunt certain animals which he was interested in trading with the English.

However, there is another motive to the work which bears discussion. The author who captured

¹⁷ Olaf, later canonized for his conversion of Norway to Christianity, wanted to collect taxes from a border region between Norway and Sweden. However, he was not able to find willing representatives to make the journey given that the last group of tax collectors had lost their lives when the town revolted and aligned themselves with the Swedish crown rather than pay the tax. Thorod volunteered to lead the expedition for Olaf as a means to have some freedom outside the court and Olaf agreed. Upon arriving in the region and announcing his intentions, Thorod met with similar resistance to the earlier tax collectors and was imprisoned in a cellar. He escaped and took refuge in a home where he met Arnliot Gelline, who helps him survive his return journey to Olaf.

¹⁸ Sturluson's version of Thorod's story can be found in S. Sturluson, *The Heimskringla: A History of The Norse Kings, Vol II.* trans. by Samuel Laing, ed. by Rasmus Anderson (London: Norroena Society, 1907), pp. 504-512.

¹⁹ A modern translation of the work by Janet Bailey is detailed by John Romano, *Medieval Travel and Travelers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), pp. 115-117

the information was no doubt doing so on the King Alfred's behalf and the content he chose to record would have been helpful to Alfred and future English kings. Vikings had been raiding, invading, and inhabiting parts of the British Isles for nearly a century by this time, so it is no wonder that Alfred was interested to hear more about the people and the land where these assailants originated from. The details captured by this author would help future rulers to better understand their enemy as well as know how to reach their shores should there ever be a need. Sturluson's tale of Arnliot meeting King Olaf was a literary tactic to build credibility and status for the king, while the documentation of Ohthere's information was practical and tactical. In this way we see how medieval documentation about travel can also be intended for informational and strategic purposes by future audiences.

As literature began to change through the years, there was a shift from documenting great deeds and capturing lessons for future generations to a more personal narrative and authors began writing about their own journeys. The medieval bestseller *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* from the later Middle Ages is a perfect example of this as a collection of personal experiences and not those of a ruler or otherwise notable figure. Mandeville claimed to be a knight who traveled from England to Jerusalem and the Far East starting in 1322 and continued for more than thirty years. It is now believed that Mandeville was a pseudonym, and his travels are actually a compilation of others' experiences.²⁰ Whatever the source, the work was wildly popular; a hundred years after its original publication its popularity persisted, with more than

²⁰ M. C. Seymour, 'Sir John Mandeville', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/17928> [Accessed 23 December, 2022]. For this essay, *Travels* will be discussed as though Mandeville is documenting first-hand experiences as is presented in his work, though many scholars feel this was not the case. To avoid constant disclaimers of noting that the unknown true author "supposedly" or "allegedly" experienced the details he writes about, it will be reviewed at face-value except where otherwise stated.

seventy editions in eight different languages printed throughout the century following the invention of the printing press and even today, nearly 300 manuscripts survive.²¹

Mandeville professes the reason for his work is to help those “that will and are in purpose for to visit the Holy City of Jerusalem and the holy places that are thereabout”.²² It is questionable, however, how much he actually cared to satisfy this objective, as his directions for reaching the Holy Land are brief. For example, Chapter One is entitled “To teach you the way out of England and to Constantinople” but he covers the breadth of it in roughly six hundred words.²³ Mandeville justifies this by saying if he listed all of the towns, cities, and castles a pilgrim would pass it would be “too long a tale”.²⁴ It is more likely Mandeville did not actually expect the reader to undertake the journey, as he is more focused on the details of what sights and experiences he had along the way. Other details Mandeville chose to include range from practical, he offers both land and sea routes to Jerusalem, to fanciful, particularly in the second half of the book when he details islands in the Far East where the inhabitants vary from giants to dwarves or have horses’ feet.²⁵

While the focus of writing in the twelfth century may have shifted towards writing about the individual, a medieval author’s need to build credibility in their work was not ignored. Mandeville achieves this by balancing out the references to places he visited by mentioning places he did not visit on his travels, such as the desert of India “where Alexander spake [sic] to

²¹ John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, from the 1923 Cotton Manuscript version trans. and ed. by A. W. Pollard (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006), p. 14. Mandeville was ahead of the curve of a new genre of literature that was emerging by the end of his century: fictional travel novels. *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography* ed. by Katheryn Lynch (London: Routledge, 2002) is a collection of essays looking at Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and other works like Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* as another evolution of medieval authors writing about travel.

²² *Travels*, p. 28.

²³ In the English translation of *Travels*. Even with editorial license to condense or otherwise translate words or phrases in a more abbreviated way, it is a very short chapter compared to others in the book.

²⁴ *Travels*, p. 30.

²⁵ See chapter 22 of *Travels* for the most outrageous descriptions of various islanders, pp 197-209.

the trees of the sun and of the moon” because the journey would be too dangerous.²⁶ By admitting there were places he did not visit in the region, it has the effect of lending credibility to the places he says he did visit. Essentially, he wanted the reader to rationalize that he must be telling the truth throughout the book otherwise he would have said he visited every place he included. If this subliminal literary tool was not effective, Mandeville closes the book with a declaration that he has remitted the work to the pope in Rome and “my book was proved true...affirmed and proved by our holy father, in manner and form as I have said”.²⁷ Few of his Christian, God-fearing audience would have wanted to disagree with such a statement from the pope.

The popularity of the book would certainly have been attributed to the breadth of subjects and locations covered within. Mandeville himself admits this, when he writes “men have a great liking, to hear speak of strange things of diverse countries”.²⁸ The book was published following multiple crusades, so while not many readers were likely to have personally journeyed to the Holy Land, they would be familiar with the trip and naturally curious to hear more about these exotic lands and people.²⁹ The narrative style employed jumps from one topic to the next in fairly rapid succession, which not only allows for a wide range of sights and experiences to be captured, but it also helped Mandeville avoid going too far in depth on any one topic or location.

It is clear his audience are Christian readers, as evidenced by his validation by the pope and the fact that it was eventually published in French, English, Latin, Czech, Danish, Flemish, German, Irish and Spanish – all primarily Christian countries which would have been involved at

²⁶ *Travels*, p. 69.

²⁷ *Travels*, p. 288.

²⁸ *Travels*, p. 42.

²⁹ To read more about the potential identity of Mandeville and the growing appetite for exotic subject matter in fourteenth-century England, see W. Mark Ormrod, ‘John Mandeville, Edward III, and the King of Inde’, *The Chaucer Review*, 46(3) (2012), pp. 314-339.

some level in one or more of the Crusades. It is interesting, however, that his interactions with Muslims are not portrayed as negative nor is it his intention to degrade or demean them. More often than not, his dealings with Muslims are used to amplify his own stature and vanity. In one example, Mandeville is allowed entrance to the Temple of the Lord near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. At the time of his visit, the temple was held by Muslims who would “suffer no Christian man [nor] Jews to come therein...but I came in there and in other places there I would, for I had letters of the [Sultan] with his great seal, and commonly other men have but his signet.”³⁰ Mandeville does not explain how he came to obtain such a letter from the Sultan, which again supports the notion that the true aim of the book was not to help pilgrims visit the Holy Land. It would seem as though Mandeville’s intentions were not unlike Einhard’s or Sturluson’s, but instead of idolizing a leader, he was bragging about himself.

In another example of personal aggrandizement, Mandeville relays a conversation he had with the Sultan in private after the Sultan “let void out of his chamber all manner of men, lords and others, for he would speak with me in counsel” to ask about the manner of governance in England. Mandeville certainly portrays himself as an ambassador of sorts between the regions, which further adds intrigue to the suggestion that the author chose to publish under a pseudonym as he would not have been able to receive any personal accolades or rewards. The alternative, publishing under his real name and admitting the travels were a compilation from others would not have been as sensational as believing one person experienced all these events in their

³⁰ *Travels*, p. 96.

lifetime, so perhaps the author chose anonymity and wider circulation of his book over greater personal acknowledgement but with tempered impact.³¹

From Egeria's motivational narrative to Mandeville's fantastical one, medieval authors recorded journeys in order to strengthen religious faith, to glorify kings, and to inform or entertain their audiences. Travel was used literally and figuratively to transport the audience to faraway lands in body and spirit and often to teach a lesson or provide guidance along the way. Authors would depict these excursions in a variety of ways depending on the audience and purpose for the document, from Liutprand's tribulations in a personal letter directed to one reader or King Alfred's scribe capturing details of an enemy's lands in court documents for future rulers to benefit from. Throughout the Middle Ages, authors across a variety of backgrounds and motivations captured narratives about travel which endure today and show how the world could be wider to medieval people than they were able to experience directly themselves.

³¹ The mystery of Mandeville continues to fascinate today and works by Ormrod and others work to uncover the true identity of the author, or prove John Mandeville was genuine, or show what other sources were used to create the compilation of his *Travels* from (see Andrew Fleck, "Here, There and In between: Representing Difference in the "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville", *Studied in Philology* Vol 97, No 4 (Autumn, 2000) pp 379-400). One contemporary author went so far as to use Mandeville's book as an actual guide, following in his footsteps to Constantinople to Jerusalem, see Giles Milton, *The Riddle and the Knight: In Search of Sir John Mandeville* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002).

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