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AN ENGLISHMAN IN-BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: ROBERT BARGRAVE'S TRAVEL THROUGH EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE, 1652-1653

Abstract

The article discusses a journey of a young Englishman Robert Bargrave (1628-1661), who in the early 1650s travelled from Constantinople to England. The travel diary recording this journey reflects Bargrave's keen interest in the customs, everyday life and languages as well as natural conditions and economy of the places he visited and shows that he tried to place it in a wider context. As a result, closer analysis of this text gives us an excellent opportunity to examine the picture of East-Central Europe as seen by a mid-seventeenth century Englishman and the way he perceived it in relation to both the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe.

Key words: East-Central Europe, England, travels, Bargrave Robert

Słowa kluczowe: Europa Środkowo-wschodnia, Anglia, podróże, Robert Bargrave

As surprising as it may seem, recent research indicates that seventeenth-century Englishmen were not much less familiar with the Ottoman Empire, as a symbol of “the East”, than they were with “the West”¹. The main reason for this situation was the unprecedented intensification of commercial and diplomatic contacts between England and Turkey dating back to the 1580s, interactions that caused the English public to become more interested in the world of Islam and, in particular, in the Ottoman Empire². As a result, the number

¹ Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 184-190.

² About the beginnings of diplomatic relations between England and Turkey: Arthur Leon Horniker, ‘William Harborne and the beginning of Anglo-Turkish commercial and diplomatic relations’, *Journal of Modern History*, 14 (1942), 289-316; Susan Skilliter, *William Harborne and the Trade with Turkey 1578-1582. A documentary study of the first Anglo-Ottoman relations* (London: British Academy, 1977).

of English diplomats, merchants and travellers visiting this remote country grew, as did the number of accounts and news reports circulating in England³.

These visitors wrote a variety of different texts, such as travel accounts, histories, general descriptions, and so forth, in which they depicted Turkey's political and religious life as well as the customs of its inhabitants, and offered their personal observations. Quite often they also recalled the experience of their journeys to and from the Ottoman Empire. This was usually by sea, with short stops in Italy or on the Greek Islands and/or Mainland⁴. Very few of those who described their journeys decided to travel overland, let alone use this opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the region⁵. This is the main reason why there is limited opportunity for the historians to analyse how early modern English travellers reacted in situations when they could have experienced, over a short period of time, various state systems and cultures: the Western, the Eastern and the one referred to today as "eastern European".⁶

This paper discusses just one of the rare texts documenting this kind of an encounter – a detailed record of a journey from Constantinople to England written by Robert Bargrave, a young Englishman who left Turkey in September 1652, after having lived there for

³ Gerald MacLean, *The Rise of Oriental Travel. English Visitors to the Ottoman Empire, 1580-1720* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), especially chapters 1-8 and 11-13; idem, *Looking East. English Writing and the Ottoman Empire before 1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Daniel Goffman, *Britons in the Ottoman Empire, 1642-1660* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1998). Among these authors one can mention, for instance, Henry Cavendish, Thomas Dallam, Sir Henry Blount, Sir Thomas Roe, Peter Mundy, Edward Brown and John Covel.

⁴ See for example: William Biddulph, *The trauels of certaine Englishmen into Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythinia, Thracia, and to the Blacke Sea. And into Syria, Cilicia, Pisidia, Mesopotamia, Damascus, Canaan, Galile, Samaria, Iudea, Palestina, Ierusalem, Iericho, and to the Red Sea: and to sundry other places. Begunne in the yeare of iubile 1600. and by some of them finished in this yeere 1608. The others not yet returned. Very profitable to the help of trauellers, and no lesse delightfull to all persons who take pleasure to heare of the manners, gouernement, religion, and customes of forraine and heathen countries* (London: W. Aspley, 1609), 4-15.

⁵ One of them was William Harborn, the first English ambassador to Constantinople. One work mentioning, as there is an account of his journey preserved, was Henry Cavendish, member of one of leading aristocratic families of the Tudor era, Harold Hulme (ed), 'Mr. Harrie Cavendish his Journey Toand From Constantinople 1589 Fox, His Servant', *Camden Series, Miscellany* (London: Royal Society, 1940), vol. 17, 1-29. In spite of the limited numbers of visitors, when compared to those going to France or the Netherlands, it is obvious that Eastern and Central Europe was relatively familiar territory to British travelers, David Worthington, *British and Irish Experiences and Impressions of Central Europe, c. 1560–1688* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 44. Moreover, the British reading public in the seventeenth century was also in a position to access a variety of information on the region. Anna Kalinowska, "Kingdome differing from other in Europe..." *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów w siedemnastowiecznych tekstach anglojęzycznych*, *Studia Historyczne*, 60 (2017), 25-45.

⁶ On the borders and the term East and Central Europe, as well for literature, see: Worthington, *British and Irish Experiences and Impressions...*, *op. cit.*, XII f. Of course the most famous work on the subject is still Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), although the awareness of differences between various parts of the continent in the pre-Enlightenment era is obvious.

five years, and travelled through Bulgaria, Romania, Poland-Lithuania, Prussia, Germany and the Low Countries, before reaching the English Downs in mid-March 1653⁷.

Bargrave's diary is a perfect illustration of why the accounts of overland journeys through East-Central Europe may be of such great interest, as it shows that they can be used to reconstruct the way in which early modern travellers mapped these territories and how they compared them with both Western Europe and Turkey. In other words, it gives us a unique opportunity to understand travellers' views about the differences between the East and the West, and where they placed the border between these two areas.

Bargrave was a member of a well-established Kentish royalist family with links to the royal court. His father worked for Sir Henry Wotton during his mission in Venice, and later as personal chaplain to the Prince of Wales and the Dean of the Canterbury Cathedral. Born in 1628, Bargrave was educated at Oxford; however, unlike many of his relatives, he decided to look for a career as a merchant, rather than a clergyman.

In 1647, he sailed from England bound for Constantinople, where he was apprenticed to James Modyford, a member of the Levant Company. After returning to England in early 1653, Bargrave married and subsequently fathered a child, but in late 1654 he went abroad again on business – this time, to Spain and Italy. He returned to London by way of Austria, Germany and the Netherlands in early 1656 and spent the next few years working in the City and, later, as a secretary to Heneage Finch, the Earl of Winchilsea.

After the Restoration, Finch was named the English ambassador to the Sublime Port and likely used his position to advance Bargrave's career, who was soon offered the post of Secretary of the Levant Company. As Secretary, Bargrave and his family had to relocate to Constantinople, which they did in late 1660. Unfortunately, it turned out to be his last journey, as he died in Smyrna in February 1661⁸.

During each of his journeys, Bargrave kept a personal diary, although it seems possible that it was available to his family and friends, which was common practice in the seventeenth century). The diary is preserved in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Although Bargrave's account was known to some researchers dealing with early modern travel accounts, they were not published until the 1990s.⁹

As stressed by one researcher, Bargrave was 'a keen and responsible traveller, reporting in detail according to the best Renaissance prescription for such works, but more than

⁷ Robert Bargrave, *The Travel Diary of Robert Bargrave Levant Merchant, 1647-1656*, ed. Michael G. Brennan (London: Hakluyt Society, 1999).

⁸ Michael G. Brennan, 'Bargrave, Robert (1628–1661)', first published 2004; online edn, Jan 2008.

⁹ Edition by Michael G. Brennan quoted above. Some parts of the diary were either published (e.g. fragments dealing with Romania were edited by Frantz Babinger, *Robert Bargrave, un voyageur anglais dans les pays roumains du temps de Basile Lupu (1652)* (Bucarest: Academia Română, 1936), 1-50 or used by historians writing on early modern travels such as John Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad, 1604-1667* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1989), 152-4, 268-70.

many such diarists he also tells a good story'¹⁰. Having read his diary, it is very difficult to contradict this opinion. While Bargrave's style is not very elaborate, his narration is very agreeable, especially when it comes to describing his encounters with people he met along the way and the experiences he found amazing, touching or interesting. It is also quite obvious that Bargrave tried to combine professional activities with the pleasures of travelling. For example, while he fulfilled his duties as his master's assistant, he also looked for every opportunity to find out as much as he could about the people he met and places he visited and describe them to his potential readers.

What is relevant for our purposes is understanding what elements affected both Bargrave's assessment of, and the way he compared East-Central Europe with the Western European countries and the Ottoman Empire in his diary. When we look at the diary more deliberately, one of its outstanding features is the way in which Bargrave's descriptions of the regions through which he travelled changed as he journeyed westward. Of course, this could be ascribed to the fact that Bargrave developed as both a traveller and a writer, but one may also argue that this could be related to his subjective perception of the world and his reactions to being exposed to new conditions.

Bargrave had been living in Constantinople for five years, which gave him ample opportunity to become familiar with the Ottoman Empire. In spite of some unfortunate events, including a short incarceration, he seems to have had a relatively positive experience. Upon his departure from Turkey, he described it as a place where 'the Aire is so good, the weather so Temperat, provisions so cheap, & Travellers by Custom so Charitable, as scarce any Country can equall'¹¹. Bargrave was impressed by the natural beauty of the land, its fertility, richness of food and animals, as well as its infrastructure – roads, bridges, houses, fountains and inns (khans)¹². There was, however, one serious downside – the people's mentality and attitude, a kind of mental fearfulness that bordered on slavery. This was, in his opinion, the reason why the locals disregarded the remains of Antiquity that were preserved in their towns and villages¹³. In contrast, observations of such relics were typical of early modern travellers' and writers' descriptions of foreign countries, and Bargrave's opinions are very much in keeping with that tradition¹⁴.

Bargrave was also unable to hide his dislike and disappointment while writing about the conditions and inhabitants of provinces populated by Christians. The very first remarks

¹⁰ Germaine Warkentin, 'The Travel Diary of Robert Bargrave Levant Merchant 1647-1656', ed. by Michael G. Brennan, *The Library*, 7th series 2 (2001), 190.

¹¹ Bargrave, 134.

¹² Bargrave, 126-127.

¹³ Bargrave, 126.

¹⁴ Anna Kalinowska, 'Exploring Peripheries Through Similarities and Differences. Comparisons between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey in the English Chorographic Publication of the Late 16th and the 17th c.', *Przegląd Historyczny*, CXL, z. 4 (2020), 815-825.

about these areas were at best unfavourable; he stressed the great contrast between the fertile and beautiful Plains in Thrace and the poor areas and the rugged scenery he found in Bulgaria, and it took him some time before he was able to find some positive aspects. He was by no means less critical of the people.

The poore Bulgares – he wrote – (as the rest of the Grand Signors Christian Subjects in generall) have surrendered up their Courage with their Liberties, so that 2 or 3 Turkes in a Village, oppress & command them all, rather like Spaniels then Men¹⁵.

In Dobrudja, Bargrave deplored the fact that the area was almost wild due to the small number of inhabitants and complained about their character and the local conditions¹⁶.

These feelings must have played a key role in how he defined the borders of the Christian world, as they are different than the physical borders of the Ottoman Empire or its provinces. Bargrave declared that he found himself to be on Christian territory not when his stay in Turkey ended, directly before crossing this country's border, but much later, only after he had reached the opposite bank of the Dniester River¹⁷. The space located between the Danube and the Dniester seems, from his point of view, to belong more to the Ottoman world. Bargrave is very explicit in this opinion, describing Moldavia as 'being but farmed from the Turkes'¹⁸.

This opinion was not altered even by the fact that he had had an opportunity to meet the country's ruler, Basile Lupu, as well as witness religious ceremonies in his chapel and visit his court. Bargrave seemed to be very unimpressed with the Lupu's residence, which he described as 'a Stone building, rather great than goodly; having neither Majesty, uniformitie, nor apt Adornments for a Princes Palace'. Moreover, the music he heard during the service in the local church intrigued him as being 'sung musically, but in a way rather like the Turkish'¹⁹. The only thing he appreciated on his tour seems to have been the duke's stables and horses, which were supposed to be much more beautiful and significantly better than those owned by either English or Tuscan rulers²⁰.

¹⁵ Bargrave, 128-9.

¹⁶ Bargrave, 131.

¹⁷ Cf. Božena Radiměřská, 'Evropa "na východ od Rýna" na mentální mapě anglicky píšícího cestovatele sedmnáctého století' (Trans-Rhenic Europe on the Mental Map of the Seventeenth Century English Traveller), *Cesky lid etnologicky casopis*, 95 (2008), 63-84.

¹⁸ Bargrave, 141. The only positive comments in Bargrave's description of Galatz is his favourable impression of the abundance and low price of fish and the quality of bread. He was, however, much less enthusiastic about the locals' table manners. *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁹ Bargrave, 136. Bargrave was a keen musician and paid a great deal of attention to everything related to music. For more information about his observations on music during his journey from Turkey to England, see: Michael Tilmouth, 'Music on the Travels of an English Merchant: Robert Bargrave (1628-61)', *Music & Letters*, 53 (1972), 154-155.

²⁰ Bargrave, 137, 139.

This negative attitude is less pronounced in Bargrave's description of his experience in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. There are, of course, many things he complains about or is irritated by, including poor roads and sleeping conditions and the especially unpleasant weather and severe cold, but these are typical of foreigners travelling through Poland during the winter season²¹. Bargrave's opinions, however, are neither as strong or disdainful as in the case of the territories he had visited earlier. Rather, there is an air of neutral disbelief, as when he describes his experiences in Lvov, where 'whoredom, drunkenness & Murder, [are] rather freely permitted then punished', or as in case of the freedoms enjoyed by the Jews²².

Moreover, Bargrave did like some features of the country, which he compared to the city, with 'the Tounes resembling Palaces, the Rhoads the Streets, & the Villages the meaner Buildings', and enjoyed its natural beauty, especially its forests²³. He also provides a detailed description of Zamość, especially of its most important buildings (i.e. palace of the Zamoyski family, Academy and the *very handsome & uniforme* town square, as well as fortifications), all of which suggest that he did find it quite impressive²⁴. In other cases he was, however, far less impressed. He did not like Chelmno, a sentiment he shared with other British visitors, even though he stayed there with members of the Scottish diaspora²⁵.

The journey through the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was made difficult by an outbreak of the plague, which often made finding decent accommodation and food nearly impossible. It also affected the diary's contents, since Bargrave, in trying to avoid infected areas, was forced to leave two major cities, Lublin and Warsaw, behind. As a result, he was only able to see and describe small towns or villages like Błonie or Gostynin in central Poland, and even these were in a state of calamity²⁶. The heart-tearing descriptions of whole villages decimated by the plague are the most emotional fragments of this part of the Bargrave's diary and there is no doubt that they had an impact on him personally and on the way he perceived Poland, as he and his companions lived in constant fear of infection²⁷.

One of the most striking elements in his description of Poland-Lithuania is the fact that Bargrave appears not to pay any attention to the issue of religion. In some cases he signified

²¹ Peter Mundy's remarks about weather conditions during the Polish winter sound almost identical. Cf. Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy In Europe And Asia, 1608-1667, v. 4: Travels In Europe*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple (London: Hakluyt Society, 1925), 97-8.

²² Bargrave, 142-3, 146.

²³ Bargrave, 146, 148, 150.

²⁴ Bargrave, 147.

²⁵ Peter Paul Bajer, 'Illustri Genere ex Scotia: Scottish Settlement in Chelmno, 16th to 18th Centuries', *Studia Historyczne* 4/58 (2015), 438.

²⁶ Bargrave, 147-149.

²⁷ Bargrave, 147: [in Bełżyce] *scarce: 20: persons remaind alive; whereof one Family was Scotts; the wife lying then sick, the husband howerly expecting his Call, & all theyir Children allready dead.*

when the town or village he described was populated mostly by Protestants (as in the case of Belżyce, where he found a Scottish colony), but in his diary there is nothing to be found about the relations between different confessions or any possible tensions between the Catholics, Protestants and members of the Orthodox Church. He also showed no prejudice against “popery”. To the contrary, during the whole journey he had regular contacts with the Roman Catholic clergy²⁸, including the Jesuits, visited Catholic shrines (which he appreciated for their beauty), and even informed his readers in detail about the “miraculous” crucifixes he saw in Lvov – something one would not expect from an English Protestant in the mid-1650s. This can only be explained by the influence of Bargrave’s late father, Isaac, who, although an Anglican clergyman, presented a relatively tolerant temperament towards English Catholics²⁹. This is especially interesting when compared to the opinion of another English traveller to Turkey, Sir Henry Blount, who called the Poles ‘in name a Christian, yet a Sect, which for Idolatry, and many other points, wee much abhorred’³⁰.

Significantly, the section of the diary dealing with Poland-Lithuania contains quite surprising inaccuracies, which seem to confirm that Bargrave had to recall some events or details from memory³¹. This includes the story of his meeting with one ‘Coritski’, a ‘great Commander of the Polish Army’, who, according to Bargrave, was married to one of Basile Lupu’s daughters and had visited England. If these details are correct, the person Bargrave actually met was duke Janusz Radziwiłł, a leading Polish-Lithuanian magnate who was married to Maria Lupu. Why Bargrave confused his name, especially as the duke was a person of great prominence and both he and his family were well known even in England, cannot be explained³².

The final weeks of the journey, especially from the moment Bargrave and his companions reached Prussia, seem to have been the time when he could and really did start to enjoy his travels again. His descriptions of Thorn and Dantzik are much like those left by

²⁸ One of the most surprising encounters with Catholic clergy was a conversation Bargrave had with a Dominican monk, who offered to arrange a date for Bargrave with ‘a faire Polish Lady’, Bargrave, 144.

²⁹ Bargrave, 10.

³⁰ Henry Blount, *A voyage into the Levant a brief relation of a journey lately performed by Mr. Henry Blunt gentleman, from England by the way of Venice, into Dalmatia, Sclavonia, Bosna, Hungary, Macedonia, Thessaly, Thrace, Rhodes and Egypt, unto Gran Cairo: with particular observations concerning the moderne condition of the Turks, and other people under that empire* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1650), 28.

³¹ Unfortunately, Michael G. Brennan, who edited the text, did not provide additional comments.

³² Radziwiłł’s visit to England has been preserved in the notebook of John Finet, Master of Ceremonies of the English court, cf. *Ceremonies of Charles I. The note books of John Finet 1628-1641*, ed. Albert Joseph Loomie, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 134-137; for his marriage to Maria Lupu and his contacts with Moldavia see: Henryk Wisner, *Janusz Radziwiłł, 1612-1655* (Warszawa: Mada, 2000), 71-75. This is, however, one of very few inaccuracies that occurred in the diary, as generally Bargrave tends to be very cautious about the information he gives. Cf. Colin Imber’s review of the diary published in *English Historical Review*, 115 (2000), 973.

other tourists of this period and more stereotypical of his own work. His narrative here is similar to that found in the earlier parts of his diary, in which he described the first leg of his journey in meticulous detail, and contrasts sharply with his spare entries describing central Poland³³.

At the same time his opinions are, unlike those about places such as Bulgaria and Moldavia, clearly positive. Apart from the information that the bridge over the Vistula was in a poor condition, it is really difficult to find any unfavourable comments in his description of Thorn or Dantzik. Instead, he expresses his regret that his short stay in the first of these cities 'rende [him] unable to give so exact account of this place as I desired'³⁴. Dantzik, one of the main commercial centres in the Baltic region, seems to have attracted his special attention. He depicted in detail its major buildings and fortifications (in which foreigners typically showed a great deal of interest³⁵), as well as various curiosities, political systems (he compared Dantzik's Senate to the English House of Lords), and the events he witnessed, such as a wedding and reception³⁶. This could have been the result of his long stay in Dantzik (nearly six weeks), but his memories about the place and admiration were still vivid when he reached Lubeck and deemed the two cities comparable³⁷. It does not mean, however, that while still in Dantzik he showed any special appreciation for the works of arts he found there. As pointed out by Agnieszka White, Bargrave presented a very typical approach – for example, when he concentrated more on the general impression of Memling's *The Last Judgment* than its artistic value³⁸.

Similarly, when he describes Germany and the Netherlands Bargrave shows no sign of the bewilderment so often present in earlier portions of his diary. He also takes for granted that his readers are already familiar with Amsterdam, so he decides to skip the detailed description of the city as 'being knowen to so many', and shares with them only a list of the places he visited during his stay and some more general remarks³⁹.

What caused this change in attitude and in his way of describing places he visited and how can they be analysed? It is possible that for Bargrave, although he was not explicit about it, Prussia and Dantzik, as well as the German and Dutch cities he passed through during the final leg of his journey, seemed to belong to the territory he grew up in and

³³ Bargrave, 159-60.

³⁴ Bargrave, 149.

³⁵ Marcin Szumny, Maciej Badowicz, Radosław Kubus, "Ta forteca jest tarczą wolności Gdańszczanów". Twierdza Wisłoujście w wybranych relacjach z XVII w., *Argumenta Historica* 6 (2019), 49-62, on Bargrave's opinions especially p. 55.

³⁶ Bargrave, 152.

³⁷ Bargrave, 158.

³⁸ Agnieszka White, 'Angielskie i polskie miasta we wspomnieniach siedemnastowiecznych peregrynatów z obu krajów', *Terminus*, 11 (2009), 154.

³⁹ Bargrave, 165.

considered familiar. The evident change in the tone of his diary shows that during his journey he crossed not only the border between the world of Islam and Christianity, but also a boundary between his comfort zone and something he had not really understood, even though he had had an opportunity to experience it himself. These were two completely different lines: the first clearly drawn, even if not compatible with real political or religious divisions. The other was of a more imprecise and psychological nature.

As it happens, the space located between them in modern terms can be described as East-Central Europe. For Bargrave, naming this space seemed to be unnecessary, but his diary clearly shows that even if he felt that it was different from 'the West', in his opinion it could not at any rate be credited as belonging to 'the East'.

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