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Migration Matters The Longer View

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Migration Matters

The Longer View

Doubtless migration has been a constant factor in human history. However, with the advent of the modern nation state and the construction of “minorities,” migration has become, in post-colonial times especially, a political football. By contrast, in medieval times migration often took the form of large uncontrolled movements of tribal nomads. An illustrative example from the fourteenth century involves reference to the very people that inspired the above work on migration, that is, Turks and at least one Moroccan. The Moroccan Ibn Battuta spent fifteen months in 1332–33 journeying through Anatolia, a region he calls the Land of the Turks, while acknowledging its former Christian origins. Ibn Battuta observes, “there are still large numbers of Christians in Anatolia living under the protection of the Muslims, these latter being Turkmens to whom *jizya* and other taxes are paid.”

The first migrations of Turkish nomadic pastoralists from Inner Asia had begun to pass through Transoxania into Persia in the eleventh century. Led by the clan of Seljuks, who were already Sunni Muslims, they entered Baghdad in 1055, ousting the Caliph’s Shia rivals, the Buyids. Several branches of Seljuks came to dominate the Middle East opening the way to the Anatolian interior by roundly defeating the Byzantine army in 1071. Further penetration of Turkmen groups led to the creation of rival principalities chiefly in the central Anatolian plateau. Byzantine hopes of ever recovering Anatolia effectively ended a century later. The rise of Mongol power in the Middle East, their destruction of Baghdad, and the annihilation of the Caliphate in 1258 drove further waves of Turks together with Persians westward into Anatolia. By the time of Ibn Battuta’s journey through the region, Anatolian society had been undergoing ethnic and religious transformation for nearly two and a half centuries. The Flemish Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (Willem van Rubroeck) passing through the region in 1253 estimated Muslims to comprise only ten percent of the population. Twenty years later, Marco Polo labelling Anatolia “Turkey,” said it was inhabited by three races: Turkmen, a primitive people who worshipped Muhammad; then Greeks and Armenians who mingled with the Turkmen in villages and towns.

Ibn Battuta’s account provides many further details. He was overwhelmed by the kindness of the Turkish inhabitants and notes that women were unveiled. The associations of *akhis*, formed from members of the various trades, impressed him owing to the generous hospitality and lodging for strangers provided. Their network of hospices provided a degree of cohesion in new urban settings as the *akhi* leaders helped protect local populations from injustices. Together the *akhis* and other Sufi leaders provided leadership for Turkish migrants by mediating disputes among tribal factions.

Ibn Battuta’s Anatolian account contains his only description of a Christian community. He describes the great city of Antalia where each com-

The editors of the *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2007) coined the phrase *homo migrans* to describe the phenomenon of human migration. This collaboration of German and Dutch historians was prompted by the current debate in their respective countries over Moroccan and Turkish immigration. This massive volume, however, covers only the past three centuries of migration including both to and from Europe.



FROM ALT-STAMBULER HOF- UND VOLKSLEBEN, F. TAESCHNER (ED.) (HANNOVER: LAFAIRE, 1925)

munity of foreign Christian merchants, Byzantine Greeks, Jews, and Muslims occupied separate walled quarters. He marvelled at the famous cotton fabrics of Ladhiq (now Denizli) made by Christian women artisans while equally fine fabrics were produced in Arzanjan (Erzincan) whose population was mainly Armenian. He had travelled on a Genoese boat from Syria to Anatolia and took another Greek vessel across the Black Sea to the Crimean side where he hired wagons from Turkmen of Christian faith.

Nonetheless, his account leaves the strong impression that the demographics in Anatolia had reached critical mass favouring the Turkicization and Islamization of the population. The political end-game was played out more than a century later. Naturally unaware of that future, Ibn Battuta had enjoyed the hospitality of the sultan of Bursa and his wife. He cannily describes this ruler as the “greatest of the Turkmen kings.” This was Orhan Bey, son of Osman whose descendants in 1453 captured Constantinople, the

jewel in the crown of then flourishing Ottoman dynasty and the cornerstone of the even greater Empire to come.

The editors of the *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa* caution against drawing easy lessons from modern migration movements. Are there any to be learned from a medieval movement as described above? It is certain mobility and displacement are part of the human condition, reflected in the concept of *homo migrans*. It then matters that both sides of the equation – immigration and emigration – or, expressed differently, the push and pull factors of migration are considered. Turkish migration into medieval Anatolia went unchecked but resulted in one of the world’s most formidable empires, succeeding its dying Byzantine predecessor. If, however, modern European governments are today genuinely concerned about Muslim immigration, they individually and through the European Union could do far more than they have ever attempted (or imagined) in assisting the development, in every sense, of Muslim countries so that the push factors of economic deprivation and political repression are reduced to a point where Muslim citizens of these countries are less attracted by the pull of European societies. European politicians who advocate draconian immigration policies directed mainly against Muslims, need to acknowledge that the bulk of the populations of their own countries originated, in some distant past, from somewhere else. Migration does matter but only the immigration side of the phenomenon raises political passions. On the longer view, migration in both its aspects is basically a neutral value in history.

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Miniature from
an Ottoman
album

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