


Article

Frontier, Identity Constructions and Environment. Water as an Essential Condition for Viewing the Muslim *Other* in the Journey to the Iberian Peninsula by the Physician Hieronymus Münzer (1494-1495)

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ABSTRACT

Between 1494 and 1495, the German physician Hieronymus Münzer travelled to the Iberian Peninsula, which resulted in an extensive written testimony traditionally known as *Itinerarium*. The main focus of this northern traveller's observations is not the human element, as several authors have already pointed out. In fact, he focuses his attention especially on the economic element (products, goods, trade, etc.) and, by association, the territories and places where this element takes place. However, he also unquestionably develops evaluative perspectives of the Iberian human landscape, in its most diverse expressions. We sought to reflect precisely upon one of the components of the human sphere the northern traveller contacted – the Muslims –, with special consideration for the resulting identity constructions and alterity exercises, which, in our perspective, are often closely associated with the central issue of water and, consequently, with the territories/places visited and the intrinsic frontiers. We looked for the answer to, what we consider, a paramount and truly original question: to what extent does water assume a "centrality" in this northern European doctor's view of the *Other*, specifically the Muslim, in the context of direct observation and first-hand experience.

Keywords: frontier; identity constructions; water; Iberian Peninsula; muslims.

RESUMO

Entre 1494 e 1495, o médico alemão Hieronymus Münzer protagonizou uma viagem rumo à Península Ibérica, da qual resultou um extenso testemunho escrito tradicionalmente conhecido por *Itinerarium*. O principal foco do olhar deste viajante setentrional não é, efectivamente, o elemento humano, como já diversos autores salientaram. De facto, ele concentra a sua atenção muito especialmente no elemento económico (produtos, mercadorias, comércio, etc.) e, por indexação, nos territórios e lugares onde esse elemento acontece. Todavia, podemos igualmente considerar como inquestionável que desenvolve olhares avaliadores sobre a paisagem humana ibérica, nas suas mais diversas expressões. Pretende-se, nas páginas que se seguem, reflectir precisamente sobre uma das componentes do horizonte humano que o viajante setentrional contactou – os muçulmanos –, com especial consideração para as construções identitárias e os exercícios de alteridade daí resultantes, os quais, em nossa perspectiva, não raras vezes apresentam-se em íntima associação com a questão nuclear da água e, conseqüentemente, com os territórios/lugares visitados e as fronteiras intrínsecas. Procura-se, pois, a resposta para



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uma interrogação que consideramos primordial e deveras original: até que ponto se verifica no testemunho deste médico do Norte da Europa uma “centralidade” da água no olhar desenvolvido sobre o *Outro*, neste caso específico, o muçulmano, em contexto de observação directa e experiência em primeira mão.

Palavras-chave: fronteira; construções identitárias; água; Península Ibérica; muçulmanos.

Introduction

In 1494, escaping the epidemic that devastated Nuremberg, the German physician Hieronymus Münzer (1437/47-1508)¹ decided to travel throughout the Iberian Peninsula, which occurred between September 17 of that year and February 9 of the following year. This journey of almost five months resulted in one of the most impressive travel texts on the Iberian Peninsula written by a European from beyond the Pyrenees.

Over the following pages and based on a combination of historical hermeneutics with data from Cultural Anthropology, our focus will be on the representations of identity and alterity relating to Muslims included in Münzer's travel narration, with an analysis centred on the element “water” and, by association, the “frontier” – such that these exercises on identity/alterity arise in close connection with the territories/places visited and, consequently, we considered the physical landscape in our examination, especially in its dimension of *cultural landscape*².

In methodological terms, we must first explore the potential of the concept of identity³. In fact, the reflection that we will develop is based on the application of the concept of identity – considered as the set of specific characteristics that differentiate something, animate or inanimate, either among similar things or against a diverse spectrum⁴ – to the study of an aspect we consider unavoidable in the medieval world⁵: the practice of travel. This method is advantageous for a deeper understanding of the historical phenomenon that constituted Münzer's journey to the Iberian Peninsula between 1494 and 1495.

This choice is based on the premise that identities are the entities that define communities⁶. On the other hand, the ontological concept of identity assumes here a dynamic anthropological meaning, that is, it is assumed as diverse – there are different identities – and is applied as a permanently developing process, since the contexts under study, those that provide meanings, are not static in themselves. In addition, one must keep in mind an essential principle: beyond its physical/geographical uniqueness *per se*, a space is always a cultural and symbolic construction – moulded by the hand of all those who inhabit or circulate throughout the space, revealing itself at every moment as a subject that is simultaneously product and producer of identity(s).

However, specifying an identity representation only makes sense if one also conceives diversity in the process, since «identity asserts itself in the face of difference.» (Camacho, 2003, 55) This is the «traditional» question of *ego* and *alter-ego*. Using the realm of Islamic communities as a reference, Münzer provides us with several paradigmatic examples in his narrative that support this thesis, namely

¹ Regarding Münzer's date of birth, see the biography written by Goldschmidt in 1938.

² In exploring the *physical landscape*, one must consider two dimensions: the *natural landscape* and the *cultural landscape*. The first relates to what originates from nature, without human interference, and, therefore, includes the physical-natural components of the observed landscape, such as the vegetation, soil, contours of the terrain, aspects of climate and hydrography. The second dimension, the *cultural landscape*, presents itself as what has undergone transformation because of human intervention. When considering the cultural landscape, particularly in the present work, we will take into account the constructions related to the management, use and distribution of water, regardless of the intended purposes of such buildings, for example, sanitation, food security, economic production or religious-ritualistic ends.

³ In a broad and therefore multidisciplinary sense, the methodological relevance of the concept of identity for the study of the medieval worldview is unequivocal.

⁴ Cf. BAUMAN 2005.

⁵ See FORTES 2013.

⁶ Cf. WOODWARD 1997; CASTELLS 2008, *passim*.



when he discusses the Saracen houses in Granada and presents their differences with the Christian dwellings. The nuclear role played by the element water in this whole process is noteworthy:

The houses of the Saracens [in Granada] are mostly so small – with small rooms, dirty on the outside, very clean inside – that it is hardly credible. Almost all have water pipes and cisterns. The pipes and aqueducts are usually two: some for clear drinking water; others for removing dirt, feces, etc. The Saracens understand this perfectly. In every street, there are channels for dirty water, such that a house without pipes, given its limitations, can discard its filth in those channels during the night. Sewers are rare and yet men are very clean. In the land of Christians, one house occupies more space than four-five Saracen houses. Inside they are so intricate and complex, you'd think there were swallow nests. This is why Granada is said to have more than one hundred thousand houses, as I well believe. The shops and houses are closed with simple wooden doors and nails, as is customary in Egypt and Africa, for all Saracens agree both in customs and in rituals, utensils, dwellings and other things. (Münzer 1991, 109 and 111)

If human identity is, at its deepest essence, associated with an *I*, we can never forget that this *I* only exists to the extent that there is an *Other*. It thus becomes impossible to talk about identity without talking about alterity⁷. In the source in question, although evoking various human groups, such as the Jews, the slaves⁸ and the various Iberian Christian communities⁹ – which always present differences between them, although they profess the same creed – the example presented as a model is that of Muslims, where the function of water is noteworthy in composing their identity constructions and in relation to alterity exercises following the contacts:

Leaving Guadix (...) we pass through large baths of healthy and very clear water. Entering the underground gallery, we saw many Saracens bathing. I tried the water and found it good, warm and sweet. I liked the place, carefully built, because Saracens like the baths extraordinarily. (Münzer 1991, 87)

1. Brief contextualization

Münzer came from a wealthy family, also called Monetarius, and received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Pavia in 1479. The following year he moved to Nuremberg¹⁰, where he practiced his profession until 1483, the year when the plague ravaged the city, forcing him to travel to Italy – where he lived from September 1483 to January 1484. He lived several months in Rome, a city that made a pleasant impression on him, both for its cultural environment and for the hospitality of the Roman people. He returned to Nuremberg where he remained until 1494, when another outbreak of plague forced him to leave the city again, this time accompanied by three friends, all German merchants: Anton Herwart of Augsburg; Kaspar Fischer and Nikolaus Wolkenstein of Nuremberg. The destination was the Iberian Peninsula, but a hypothesis one must strongly consider is that of a probable diplomatic mission in the service of Emperor Maximilian I (1508-1519)¹¹.

The delegation departed from Nuremberg on August 2nd and, after crossing Switzerland and southern France, arrived in Perpignan on September 17th. Over the next five months, they travelled throughout the different Iberian Kingdoms, and then returned to Germany. Münzer died in Nuremberg in 1508.

In addition to participating in the construction of the famous globe by Martín Behaim (1459-1507) – his compatriot and well-known cosmographer –, Münzer collaborated with Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514) in the preparation of the geographical component of the equally famous *Nuremberg Chronicle* (*Liber Chronicarum*)¹², from 1493, in which he published one of the first printed maps of Germany.

⁷ CAMACHO 2003. For the theme of alterity, see also HARTOG 2014, *passim*; MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA 2015, *passim*; SEIXO 2000.

⁸ In this specific case, the natives of the Canary Islands.

⁹ Portuguese, Castilians, Valencians, Catalans, Aragonese, Biscayans, Sevillians, Cordovans, Asturians...

¹⁰ That same year of 1480, he married Dorothea Kieffhaber, daughter of Ulrich Kieffhaber, one of the most powerful men in the city. See MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA 2015b.

¹¹ See POHLE 2017, 29 (n.52) and 58-60; *idem* 2019, 248 (n.19).

¹² Today also known as *Schedel'schen Weltchronik*.



2. The *Itinerarium*

Entitled, in its complete formulation, *Itinerarium suae Peregrinatio Excellentissimi viri, artium ac utriusque medicine doctoris, Hieroni monetarii de Feltkirchen, Civis Nurembergensis*¹³, the text by Hieronymus Münzer focuses on a terrestrial itinerary through Germany, Switzerland, France, Spain and Portugal. For the present study, we are exclusively interested in the component of the document relating to *Iberia* and its Muslim communities.

The *Itinerarium* represents not only the vision held in Germany of Iberian living, but above all an educated German's contact and experience *in loco* with several regions and cities that distinguish the Iberian Peninsula, as well as with its human communities. In this kaleidoscopic look, there are ethnographic and anthropological references of rare value, but also, and above all, diverse identity constructions about the places visited and the peoples contacted. This last perception is not limited to Christians – a typical example occurs in relation to the Muslims of recently conquered Granada, who were closely observed by the Germanic traveller and to whom he attributed vast passages of his text. In fact, Münzer's observations had to be judicious, given that he performed a multifaceted set of functions during his journey, from (unofficial) Ambassador to doctor, pilgrim, geographer, cosmographer, cartographer and even as mere curious traveller.

As is characteristic of much of the medieval travel texts, comparison is the discursive resource most used by the traveller to highlight the more surprising and exciting aspects in the people and places contacted and experienced. There are recurrent examples of urban centres, whose inclusion did not depend on the size of the cities in question. The benchmarks for comparison are often Nuremberg, Ulm and Nördlingen, but also Milan, Cologne, Naples, Frankfurt, among others.

Given the frequency of occurrence, architectural buildings are preferred comparative instruments for the author, in particular the palaces and mosques, with special emphasis on aspects of interior decoration. A typical example is the Alcázar of Granada called Alhambra¹⁴. In an important part of these cases, references to water occupy a place of prominence.

With regard to the human component, in several circumstances, there is a noteworthy exercise of equivalence between Muslims and Christians¹⁵, including on specific aspects such as ritualistic religious practice¹⁶. Here too the “water” factor stands out, but as a differentiating element, for it was frequently used by Muslims in contrast to Christians – in the cases mentioned.

From this element, we come to another basic aspect in the document under analysis and that is in tune with the defining profile of the community we intend to examine: in the eyes of this northern traveller, not all places have the same weight. In fact, the urban world and its people bear an unequivocal centrality in his perception of the Iberian cultural landscape – which is another distinctive mark of travel texts, particularly late-medieval texts. Naturally, the regions surrounding the cities, that is, the suburbs, which economically support the cities, also received the author's attention, both for what they produce, and for the quality of their soil and, central aspect, for the water they possess and manage.

¹³ Although the original work was lost, a copy of the manuscript, written between 1502 and 1506 by Hartmann Schedel, has survived. Re-discovered in 1845, the Schedel copy is now held in the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*, in Munich, with the call number BSB, *C1m* 431, Fol. 96-274v. In the present study, we have closely followed the following edition: MÜNZER 1991. Of note, in relation to the component of the Münzer document concerning Portugal, the Portuguese translation carried out by VASCONCELOS 1930, 541-569. Also to be taken into account is the recent edition of HERBERS 2020.

¹⁴ MÜNZER 1991, 91 and 103.

¹⁵ «Epidemics do not bother the Saracens as much as the Christians in Spain, which I attribute to their sobriety.» MÜNZER 1991, 287. See other emblematic examples in *ibidem*, 109 and 111.

¹⁶ «[in Zaragoza's Muslim quarter] they sing the psalms and prophetic prayers in their towers and mosques, and they pray like us.»; «Standing by the door, we followed the ceremonies [of the Muslims of the city of Albaicín], saw their high priest, who, sitting on a high station, preached for almost half an hour.»; «Then, signalled by one of their voices or that of the priests, they stood, neatly bowed their heads and prayed; after, following an new signal, all together, they fell to the ground and kissed it, and, like our monks in the chapters, lay flat on the ground.» *Ibidem*, 103.



3. The human landscape in the worldview conveyed by Hieronymus Münzer.

The main focus of Hieronymus Münzer's observation is not the human element, as several authors have already pointed out¹⁷. In fact, he focuses his attention especially on the economic element (products, goods, trade, etc.) and, by association, the territories and places where this element takes place.

However, we can also assume as unquestionable that, throughout his account, Münzer develops considerable evaluations of the Iberian human landscape, in its most diverse expressions, including in terms of gender and homosexuality itself. Indeed, references are made to different peoples, social conditions/groups and religious beliefs, using, in the case of Muslims, different designations to name the same human community: moriscos, saracens, mohammedans, moors and even pagans. He establishes several levels of antithetical perception within this framework¹⁸. From these confrontations and in general, Christians come out favoured and acclaimed – regardless of their origin, they constitute the true foundation of the author's evaluation of the *Other*.

To a greater or lesser extent, Münzer evaluates all the evoked human elements. Evaluations at times of sympathy, admiration and even approximation, and other times of contempt and distance. Notably, emotions are presented, in effect, as a constant *complement* to the perceptions he developed in terms of the Iberian human landscape. They function as a kind of additive, of a sensory nature, more or less affective, which bases and sustains his evaluation:

The first view presented [to the king of Spain upon entering Granada] was all the Christians with the chains, who many years ago were locked in those very harsh dungeons (...). Oh! You would have seen then the many applause and tears of joy! It is impossible to describe this view. Climbing the Alhambra, in its smallest tower overlooking the city, they first unfurled the Christian banner (...) intoning aloud the *Vexilla Regis*. A bell, hastily placed there, began to ring. When the Saracens heard it, some mourned their misfortunes, others were admired as they had never seen a bell or heard its ringing. (Münzer, 1991, 117)

Regardless of how he evokes them, the followers of Islam who inhabited the Iberian soil after the Christian *Reconquista* was completed (only two years before his trip), fall within this typical framework of evaluation, that is, evocations related to them are often accompanied by emotional expressiveness:

We also saw there [in the city of Almeria¹⁹] an aqueduct, which in great abundance leads water to the city, a mile away from a living spring. Then, as we approached the city, oh, what beautiful gardens we saw, with their fences, baths, towers, and channels built in the moorish style, there is nothing better! (...) Oh, how beautiful these gardens must have been in the heyday of the Saracens, who are very skilled in the exquisite arrangement of the gardens, fruits and plumbing, that if one has not seen it, one can hardly believe it! (Münzer 1991, 73 and 81)

As we can see, the topic of water distribution is present in these examples, side by side with elements such as the gardens, or *huertos*. And, with expressed emotion, regarding both the past and his present, the author highlights Muslim excellence in the interconnected manner with which they manage the soil, water and agricultural production (fruits, vegetables, vegetable gardens, orchards, etc.).

Naturally, the emotions evoked here and their crescendo throughout the entire text in relation to Muslim culture and civilization – particularly with regard to their rare capacity for water management, building construction, rural labour and artisanal work in general – are associated with the sensory reference of the author/traveller: «Toledo is one of the most illustrious cities of Spain. (...) Oh, what firm walls it has, erected by the Saracens, and how fortified it is by nature and art!» (*Ibidem*, 247) And it is precisely the sensory content that

¹⁷ BRANCO 1989; POHLE 2019; MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA 2015b; LUIS MOLINA 2013.

¹⁸ See LOPES 2011; HORTA 1991.

¹⁹ Münzer was in this city not long after its conquest by the Christians, which took place at the end of December 1489.



allows us to recognize the author's emotion – the physical manifestation of emotion is not limited to the physical alone, as we can also find emotional expression, namely, at the linguistic level. Münzer provides precious examples of this throughout his testimony²⁰:

We saw there [The alcázar of Granada called the Alhambra] countless palaces, paved with white marble; beautiful gardens, adorned with lemon trees and myrtles, with marble pools; also four rooms full of weapons, spears, crossbows, swords, armour and arrows; sumptuous bedrooms and rooms; in each palace, many fountains of white marble, much larger than the one next to St. Augustine, overflowing with living water; a vaulted bath – Oh, how wonderful! –, and outside, the alcoves; so many high marble columns, there is nothing better; in the centre of one of the palaces, a large marble basin, which rests on thirteen lions also sculpted in very white marble, water coming out of their mouths as if from a canal. There were many marble slabs, fifteen feet long by seven or eight feet wide, and equally many square pieces, of ten and eleven feet. I do not believe there is anything similar in all of Europe. Everything is so superb, magnificent and exquisitely built, in so many different materials, that one would believe it to be a paradise. I can't give a detailed account of everything. (...) In the palaces, there is so much beauty, with the artful water pipes directed everywhere, there is nothing more admirable. Through a very high hill, running water is carried by a channel and distributed throughout the fortress. (...) All the palaces and rooms, at the top level, have superb cofferings and ceilings, made of gold, lapis lazuli, ivory and cypress, in so many varied ways, one can neither write nor explain. I believe there is no grander city [Granada] in all of Europe or in Africa. (Münzer 1991, 93, 95 and 97)

The natural physician from Feldkirch (Vozelberg), in Tyrol, present-day Austria, made various identity constructions, including regarding individual figures, which he evaluated objectively and unequivocally. However, upon operating such constructions, he exposed, at every step, at every evaluating judgment, at every simple glance, his own identity. In this sense, his writing is a fruitful source of points of view and examinations of the *Other* but also of himself, to the extent that he exposes himself by observing and describing those outside him.

A good example is his focused attention on water and its relationship with society and the environment itself. This concern clearly reflects the primordial place in his mind occupied by the relationship of human communities with water (not least, because he is a doctor by training). This concern stands out sharply in his exercises of identity/alterity with the Muslim communities, but also emerges with Christian communities: «[in Barcelona, in the *Monastery of the Friars Minor*] They have a large garden, watered by a donkey, that with a few buckets continuously draws water from a well, which is then scattered throughout the garden by means of a few channels.» (*Ibidem*, 15); «[the little-known *Monastery of Montserrat*] Has (...) cisterns of very cold water, which is rarely or never lacking and that runs through copper tubes, like wine from the cask.» (*Ibidem*, 25);

[in the city of Perpignan] Truly, a careful observer would think it a paradise. A wisely planned aqueduct, with the greatest ease, irrigated those gardens with very sweet water from a river that passed in front of the farm. An hour would not be enough to list those delights. We've never seen similar orchards. The Knight's servants assured us that all foreigners who arrived there had never seen anything like it. (*Ibidem*, 5)

Curiously, regarding this specific topic – water and the techniques to control it – Münzer's frame of reference for evaluation is, more often than not, the Muslim culture/civilization, not the other way around, «Oh, how beautiful these gardens must have been in the heyday of the Saracens, who are very skilled in the exquisite arrangement of the gardens, fruits and plumbing, that if one has not seen it, one can hardly believe it!». (*Ibidem*, 73 and 81) In other words, in terms of the relationship between humans-water, that is, humans-environment, the Muslim culture and tradition function in various circumstances of his journey throughout the southern Iberian Peninsula as his ethnic-cultural point of reference.

²⁰ Regarding Münzer's expressions of emotion to the social environment, see among others, KEMPER, 1993; TOOBY and COSMIDES, 1990.



In another aspect, the author's testimony also leads us to conclude that, although his native cultural and civilizational baggage also influences his assessments regarding Muslims – we need only consider the issue of religious difference –, the final assessment is much more strongly based on his experience of first-hand contacts (therefore *in loco*) and emotions arising therefrom, than informed and shaped by prior patterns (*Ibidem*, 93, 95 and 97):

Leaving Guadix (...) we pass through large baths of healthy and very clear water. Entering the underground gallery, we saw many Saracens bathing. I tried the water and found it good, warm and sweet. I liked the place, carefully built, because Saracens like the baths extraordinarily. (*Ibidem*, 87);

Seville has much more drinking water, from other ducts. Among them, it has an aqueduct with three hundred and ninety arches, some of which are duplicated because of irregularities and depressions in the terrain. This water, I repeat, is very useful for irrigating gardens, cleaning squares, houses and other tasks. (*Ibidem*, 153);

Among other things, there was a grandiose mosque, whose orchard and three outbuildings still survive. The length of the entire mosque was two hundred and fifty steps and its width one hundred and ninety. The length of the garden is today one hundred and forty steps of mine. In the centre, there is a beautiful fountain, where the Mohammedans wash. With the destruction of the fountain, they put a better one in its place. Written over the pipes, are these verses: His Royal Majesty, after defeating the moors, graced me with this water, when it was already destroyed. Presently, this water irrigates the entire garden, which has many citron trees, lemon trees, orange trees, cypress and palm trees. (*Ibidem*, 155)

In large part, and despite the apparent contradiction, this state of affairs may even substantiate the idea that, in several moments of his testimony concerning the association between human communities and the element *water*, Münzer's reference for comparison is, in fact, the Muslim legacy and knowledge, ancient and contemporary:

We finally arrive at Alhama castle, which is very strong and located on top of a mountain. Nearby, we saw some beautiful thermal baths, of pure and hot water, which when I tried it, gave me no other flavour than that sweet water. The king of Granada built such a noble marble building with three superb upper arcades, and with windows in the roof, which are admirable. (*Ibidem*, 139);

The alcázar of Seville was raised from its foundations by King Alfonso, the author of the Astronomical Tables, and whose father, Fernando, freed Seville from the hands of the moors. This alcázar is huge, and no less than the fortress of the Alhambra of Granada. It is built in the same style, with its courtyards, rooms, chambers and water pipes, decorated with gold, ivory and marbles, although its slabs are not so large. Its exterior configuration is different from that of Granada, because it is located on a plain; but it has six or ten gardens, between large and small, with lemon trees, cider trees, orange trees, myrtle trees and running water, beyond description. The King's son, future sovereign, was born in this alcázar and we saw the room where his birth took place. (*Ibidem*, 161)

Other relevant examples of the author's *exposition of observations* on Muslims – *revealing himself* while *seeing the Other* – relate to women and marriage, but also religiosity itself: «They marry up to four women, which they repudiate for the smallest reason. (...) In this, they proceed like beasts. The honourable Saracens are content with only one woman and are ashamed to have many» (*Ibidem*, 129 and 131); «for they worship God primarily in the light and in the element of fire, believing – as is true – that he is light of light and that everything has been created by him.» (*Ibidem*, 89 and 91)

4. The Iberian Muslims and water

In his account of the human groups he encounters during his journey through the Iberian Peninsula, the author's assessment is clearly constrained by the fact that, although quite travelled (namely through Italian lands), he originates from central Europe, that is, he



is used to contacting Jews, for example, about whom he clearly has *a priori* judgements according to his cultural standards, but he is not accustomed to contacting, so intensely and constantly, other typologies of the *Other*, such as Muslims.

Münzer writes about the vision-encounter of the Muslim *Other*, emphasizing, above all, the religious disagreement in his contacts, as well as the natural pride in the perseverance of Iberian Christians in their fight against the Muslim, who for centuries had unduly occupied Iberia. In fact, although cultural differences occupy a prominent place, the nuclear framework of evaluation is, unequivocally, the religious differences, which are fundamentally strengthened by the historical observation of a centuries-old struggle materialized in the concept of crusade-like character, the *Reconquista* (*Ibidem*, 31 and 69).

The application of the classifying binomial *Christian/non-Christian* (in this specific case, equating the *non-Christian* with the figure of the *Muslim*) is the result of the subjective and interpretative view of the *I*, hence, of course, its relativity.

Examining the meanings of alterity present in the *Itinerarium* regarding the Muslim *Other*, therefore, based on this binomial, among other approaches, we will keep in mind the model of analysis developed by Tzvetan Todorov²¹, which has three fundamental axes: the axiological dimension (where a value judgement is presented, such as, whether the *Other* is good or bad, if *I* approves the *Other* or not); the praxiological dimension (where there is an approximation or distancing from the *Other* – in this case, there are three possibilities: the *I* adheres to the values of the *Other* by identifying with it; inversely, the *I* imposes his own values on the *Other*, in order to make him the *Same*; or, a neutrality or indifference between the *I* and the *Other*); and, finally, the epistemic dimension (where the *I* knows, to a greater or lesser degree, the *Other* or simply ignores its identity)²². Although this model has its application par excellence in the framework of the Europeans' relationship with the *New World* (America), given its operational flexibility it can be applied to diverse chronologies and spaces, such as the late Middle Ages and the space of the *Old Continent*. As we will verify, in Münzer's testimony, almost all the variants are applicable, although, it should be noted, according to the travel context and without any specific pattern – that is, the places of departure/arrival²³.

Although an important part of the Iberian territories through which he circulated had not been under Christian political-military sovereignty for long – the Kingdom of Granada is an extreme example – and, as we indicated, he was not accustomed to such intense and constant contact with the Muslim *Other*, Münzer's view of the latter is essentially analytical, which implies a certain degree of knowledge (although certainly indirect and aprioristic), as well as openness and even relative acceptance.

There are several examples of the permanence, rather than survival, of Islamic culture in the now Christian territory. These are cases of unquestionable interculturality, as when the author, in the city of Barcelona, was reunited with other German merchants and «attended, to our pleasure, musicians with different types of instruments. There were choirs and dances in Moorish style. *What* else? I think a baron or count in Germany could not do this.» (Münzer 1991, 19) Note the emotion Münzer expressed here in relation to the whole circumstance, to the extent that he mentions that in Germany itself, he could never enjoy such an experience, even in the house of a Count or Baron. But other types of context also indicate conviviality, as when Münzer, in the city of Zaragoza, states he had the opportunity to «speak closely with one of their priests, who kindly answered each of my questions.» (*Ibidem*, 297); or when, in Granada, he emphasized that «also the nobles and the rich Saracens in Granada have magnificent and notable houses, with atriums, gardens, running water and other things.» (*Ibidem*, 111)

Münzer conducts a genuine radiography of the Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula, particularly in southern Spain, with special attention to territories such as Granada and Aragon; and always from various angles: «[the Muslims] are sincere, righteous, and quite loyal» (*Ibidem*, 85); «Saracens are very fond of gardens, and are so resourceful in planting and watering, that there is nothing better. They are also a people content with little, living for the most part of the fruits they grow, which is abundant all year long. They do not drink wine; but, instead, they prepare a lot of raisins, which they call *bautzas*.» (*Ibidem*, 105 and 107)

²¹ TODOROV, 2019, 269-293; *Idem*, 1990, 227.

²² About the model of analysis proposed by Tzvetan Todorov, see VIEIRA, 2008, 35-36.

²³ As Todorov points out, «there exist relations and affinities between these three levels, but no rigorous implication; hence, we cannot reduce them to one another, nor anticipate one starting from the other.» TODOROV, 2019, 270.



However, closely related with the vast majority of these perspectives/evaluations, *water* stands out and assumes an undeniable centrality to the author in his classification and subsequent evaluation of this Iberian *Other*, the Muslim.

Note that he indicates how healthy, strong and well-proportioned they are (which allows them to withstand the toughest jobs) (*Ibidem*, 299), living very soberly, drinking only water. Such that diseases do not affect them as much as they do Christians. Thus in the evaluation of the *Other*, the author establishes a direct relationship between health/vivacity and water consumption – in our perspective, this constitutes the most expressive and emblematic relationship in the alterity of the Muslim communities developed by Münzer in his testimony, with the element *water* as its axis. Of course, this observation is influenced by the fact that Münzer is a doctor:

We come to a small village, named Arcos, where all are Saracens, except the alcalde. We stayed in a Saracen's house, who treated us very well, for our money. There, we saw many Saracens attending a wedding, singing according to their custom, and some very beautiful girls. They live very soberly; they drink nothing but water, and they are very healthy. Epidemics do not bother the Saracens as much as the Christians in Spain, which I attribute to their sobriety. (*Ibidem*, 287)

Also note the following section, regarding his passage through the village of Alhama, located outside Murcia:

There is [a village] on the mountain, an admirable castle called Alhama. There we find baths with hot and clear water – where we washed –, of great benefit for dropsy, colic and other diseases. (...) The water at the height of the town and castle is cold and sweet, and in sufficient quantity for the whole village and livestock. On the slopes, on the other hand, the water is warm and provides beautiful baths, as I described above. I bathed for an hour, and having copiously provoked sweat, for eight days I experienced the well-being of the body and my strength. (*Ibidem*, 67 and 69)

But the same relational process by the author also occurs when establishing a triangle between character, inclination to work in the field, and water: «[the] Saracens (...) are frugal in food and drink nothing but water. They are mainly devoted to cultivating the land and fields. (...) They are sincere, righteous, and quite loyal.» (*Ibidem*, 85)

Even in the indirect references presented previously (the various angles of approach), i.e. those that do not clearly evoke *water*, the truth is that the latter is intrinsic to the discourse, assuming a structural weight in how the author develops his *gaze*, in the broad and all-encompassing sense, in relation to the Muslim *Other*. Identity construction and, when it takes place, alterity always implies this element.

There are other moments we also consider important to identify the weight of the element *water* in the author's development of alterities in relation to the Muslim communities of the southern Iberian Peninsula. These occur in passages of his testimony relating to their ritualistic practices, as well as in the excerpts related to the question of the figure and position of women in Islamic society. Although not expressed directly, the importance of water is almost *subliminal* in both issues.

Regarding the former, the most complex case, the Northern European traveller navigates between condemnation – as in his opinion, Muslims follow the error, «they observe the law of the false prophet Muhammad scrupulously and with the utmost devotion» (*Ibidem*, 125) –, and, at the same time, admiration and even appreciation, precisely because of the devout and sincere way with which they follow the precepts in which they believe:

They strictly comply with the law of alms and fasting, from one hour before the morning skylight vanishes until the evening dusk. They also stipulate prayers, of which they are very observant. (...) They hold the Virgin Mary, Saint Catherine, and Saint John in great veneration, and they attribute these names to their children. (...) Their Saturday is our Friday. After prayers, they return to work, saying that idleness is the cause of all evil, and that God commanded us to live with sweat and work. They are extraordinary lovers of justice; they are accurate when weighing; and avoid lies. (*Ibidem*, 125-127)



Condemnation, that is a negative view, is based on Muslims observing the law of the false prophet Muhammad (C. 571-632), which Münzer classifies on the same level as the heretic Arius (256-336) due to the proximity of their doctrines²⁴ (*Ibidem*, 125). For the northern traveller there is therefore a clear doctrinal parallel between Islamism and Arianism²⁵.

This correspondence and affinity, therefore, underpins the falsity of Muhammad's message and, after all, of Muhammad himself (as occurred with Arius). Münzer completes this conception with an incisive note, antithetical to the compliments he made earlier, that Muslims «hold pleasure as their only end.» (*Ibidem*, 127) This association with hedonism²⁶ – although paradoxical when confronted with the praise already given to Muslims for their rare capacity for work and for assuming idleness as the cause of all ills – increases the negative perception of Muslims as a community.

At this point, one must underline that Münzer observes and evaluates, but does not judge in the sense of hostility and absolute negativity/condemnation, that is, we are not facing the radical elimination of the *Other* from the intellectual horizon. Although he does not share their religious principles – «they observe the law of the false prophet Muhammad» (*Ibidem*, 125) –, he accepts differences without needing to demean or «destroy» them, rather often admiring them with open eyes and mind, as we will see next. Nor can we include him in the class of Northern European travellers, who, passing through the Iberian Peninsula, observed and came in direct contact not only with what remained of the oldest Muslim presence, but also with the *mudejars*²⁷, yet were shocked (in the sense of it being an incomprehensible reality) with the conviviality, that is, coexistence side by side without apparent problems and difficulties. Particularly in Castile, Aragon, Catalonia and the kingdom of Valencia²⁸.

Regarding the positivity attributed to Muslims, therefore in the polar opposite in terms of appraisal and evaluative judgement, he emphasizes that their priests (imams) when they climb the minarets and, turning around, shout

God is great and omnipotent, and Muhammad his Messenger and precursor (...), they also recite many other prayers, in which they proclaim the glory of God, in their own way, and naturally have such wonderful intonations and pauses, that no one can easily learn them. (...) When they meet in the mosques, they stand, orderly and barefoot, having washed their feet, hands, eyes, anus and testicles. At a sign from the priest, they first bow their heads, beating their chest; then they prostrate themselves on the ground and pray, and finally they rise again. They do this three times, and believing they have been absolved of their sins in this way, they return to their work. They are very devout in their worship of God according to their customs. (*Ibidem*, 127-129)

Here, the author evokes the Muslim practice of ablution²⁹, that is, the ritual of purification by means of water. He does so incisively, as it is a crucial moment of Islamic religious practice and symbolism.

²⁴ At the First Council of Nicaea, in 325, Arius was condemned as a heretic and his doctrine as *antitrinitarian* heresy.

²⁵ Arianism was an Antitrinitarian Christological view held by the followers of Arius, a Christian presbyter from Alexandria in the early days of the primitive Church, who denied the existence of consubstantiality between Jesus and God the father, that is, that they were equal.

²⁶ Philosophical-moral theory or doctrine that arose in Ancient Greece, which states that pleasure is the supreme good of human life.

²⁷ The term Mudejar refers to the Iberian Muslims who remained in the territory conquered by the Christians, and under their political control, during the long process of the so-called *Reconquista*, developed throughout the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula. These Muslims were allowed to continue practising their religion, use their language and maintain their customs. During the early modern age, they were forced to convert to Christianity, and went on to call themselves *moriscos*.

²⁸ See SALICRÚ I LLUCH, 2010. Here, moreover, we move away from the vision of Fátima Roldán Castro, who insists on the thesis of a radical negativization of the Muslim *Other* by Münzer. Cf. ROLDÁN CASTRO, 1994.

²⁹ The term ablution derives from the Latin *ablutio*, which means "washing". This rite is present in many religions, among which Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Ablution is a rite of purification, with symbols, acts and diverse meanings in various situations. They relate to rites of preparation for sacrifice. Ablutions are done with water, leaves (branches), sand or blood.



Regarding the second topic, that of women, we highlight a passage from Münzer's text referring to the clothing of Muslims in general, where he emphasizes that he found no man who wore pants – curious ethnographic observation, revealing the author's insight –, with the exception of some pilgrims who wore them up to the knees, «held with knots in the back» (*Ibidem*, 129), so that at the time of prayer and ablutions they could be easily removed. But, soon after, he refers to women specifically, starting his examination precisely by the question of clothing, more specifically pants, establishing at this point a singular parallelism with the Christian monks, and then focusing on the tunic they wear to cover the body, and the veil that covers their face (*Ibidem*). Here too, and once again in the framework of ritual practice, water is invoked as an inescapable vector.

Displaying a curiosity that defines an intellectual character, Münzer questioned one of the Muslim «priests» in Zaragoza about the condition of women in Islamic Society. (*Ibidem*, 297)

When such an emotional state transpires, which does not always happen, one of the main pillars of Münzer's tolerance and admiration for Muslims is the extraordinarily positive way in which he sees this community's relationship with work. In fact, there are many examples of this throughout the *Itinerarium*. «[on the way to Valencia] there are many villages of Saracens of the religion of Muhammad, whom the princes tolerate because they are hardworking and diligent in agriculture and do not drink wine. They provide a large tribute.» (*Ibidem*, 33); «[in Alicante] whole ships with dried raisins, very well prepared by the Saracens, are sent throughout Europe to England, France, Germany, Italy, etc.» (*Ibidem*, 49); «[Granada] is full of places – we call villas – and Saracens dedicated to cultivating the land.» (*Ibidem*, 107 and 299);

Saracens are very strong and well-proportioned men, and endure the hardest jobs. They are especially devoted to manual labour and crafts. They are blacksmiths, potters, masons, carpenters, millers and wine and oil pressers, etc. (...) they are very diligent in cultivating the land. (...) They are very careful in the irrigation of the fields and the cultivation of the land, frugal in food and very rich in secret. (*Ibidem*, 299)

This also occurs in the artistic realm: «[in Granada] when we were there, we saw many Saracens already decorating and restoring the paintings and other things with their own finesse.» (*Ibidem*, 99)

In fact, ingenuity, talent, dexterity, skill and inventiveness, in combination with a rare capacity for exertion and dedication to work, are attributes the traveller associated with this Iberian human community, which was decisive to building his perception of that community – this phenomenon's exponent takes place in the description of his visit through the Iberian *Alcázar* from Granada, called *Alhambra* (*Ibidem*, 93, 95 and 97). Note that, throughout this portrait, Münzer pays careful attention to the topics of management, distribution and use of water, a superior good in the southern Iberian Peninsula, with a decisive contribution from Muslims, both in the past – which he praises at various times – and in the present, already under Christian rule:

[In Almería] large and beautiful orchards, with aqueducts, irrigation and canals, in the style of the Saracens. Most houses have wells or ditches of fresh water, high or low, and pools of stone, plaster and other materials, to conserve water, because the Saracens are very resourceful in building aqueducts. (*Ibidem*, 79);

Running from the very high mountains, through two valleys, in the middle of which is the Alhambra hill, are two large rivers and others somewhat smaller, from other canyons, with which all Granada is watered by means of pipes arranged with admirable ingenuity. (*Ibidem*, 107)

Referring to water, the traveller points out, once again, hygiene and the religious ritual – «in the centre [of the Almería mosque there is] a living fountain, where, according to their rites, they washed and then entered the temple» (*Ibidem*, 75);

Outside that mosque [in Granada], there is a building, and at its centre a very long font of marble, of twenty steps, where they wash before entering the mosque. In the surroundings, there are small buildings, with water pipes for their toilets and sewers, which are an opening on the ground, a cubit long and a hand wide. Under it, there is running water. There is also a small font for urinating. Everything is built so carefully and neatly, causing admiration. There is also an excellent well with drinking water. (*Ibidem*, 91)



This passage of the text is essential, as it evokes the issue of hygiene and how carefully and ingeniously Muslims dealt with an issue that raised serious problems at the time, one related to the spread of epidemics in urban centres – this issue is so pertinent that, for example, one need only look at how it is dealt with in contemporary Portuguese municipal laws, particularly in Lisbon. Notably, the author had already evoked this problem in another passage related to the Saracen houses in Granada and their differences compared to Christian dwellings:

The houses of the Saracens [in Granada] (...) Almost all have water pipes and cisterns. The pipes and aqueducts are usually two: some for clear drinking water; others for removing dirt, faeces, etc. The Saracens understand this perfectly. In every street, there are channels for dirty water, such that a house without pipes given its limitations, can discard its filth in those channels during the night. Sewers are rare and yet men are very clean. (*Ibidem*, 109 and 111)

«The men are very clean» is *per se* a sufficient evaluative observation to determine the unparalleled value of water in this society, as well as its concern with the environment and its relationship with the human community.

But, as we have already indicated, Münzer's gaze does not only contemplate rapprochement, positive admiration and acquiescence. Given the religious divergence and intrinsic practices, some estrangement is necessarily present in several themes/situations, and an aspect to keep in mind, none of them involves the theme of water or the environment. Reasons for the estrangement are the woman's condition, the very message of Muhammad, that is, the heart of Islamic religiosity, the conspiratorial and treasonable acts (*Ibidem*, 111 e 113), the fact that Granada at the time it was under Islamic authority served as a refuge for Christian criminals (*Ibidem*, 117), the assaults on travellers on Iberian soil (*Ibidem*, 65), the capture (at night) of Christians by Muslims from North Africa (*Ibidem*, 141) and, finally, the fact that there were Christian captives during the Muslim domination of the Iberian Peninsula (*Ibidem*, 93, 117, 149 and 151) – to underline that this last cause implies not only estrangement, but also condemnation (naturally, the author's cultural pattern of reference works here as a mechanism that prevents him from claiming that the same was happening on the Christian side).

The same phenomenon of estrangement still stands out in a pertinent reference, during the author's passage through the realm of valence: «The Saracens have a place of their own surrounded by a wall, like the Jews of Regensburg.» (*Ibidem*, 59)

6. Final Notes

Hieronymus Münzer presents the reader of his testimony with an account – fruit of his insight, dedication, curiosity and thirst for the new and original – written by someone (in this case, very likely an ambassador) who saw, lived and felt the events he described, as well as the places and people he contacted. Notably, the traveller's attitude is not to merely annotate, but sometimes involves questioning.

Münzer describes reality with singular enthusiasm, while still presenting data relating to this territory of great ethnographic interest. And always indicating that the emphasis on *seeing* and *first-hand experience* gave prominence to empirical observation in his description, leading to knowledge, based on and accumulated by experience – in his approach to the surrounding reality, one can identify the prominence of observation as a practice of knowledge. For this reason, his gaze is an unequivocal source of curiosity facing the image offered by the Muslim *Other*.

The *Itinerarium* is a genuine manifesto of the Iberian potential, where several identity constructions/representations stand out, namely in terms of the human landscape, and where the representation of the followers of Islam deserves particular emphasis. On this issue, we consider certain historiographical schools, which down-play alterity in Münzer's testimony, to be outdated. In effect, the human landscape and the question of the *Other* do not receive "slight" attention. On the contrary, as Granada's description proves so decidedly. Few records are as rich in potential for the study of identity and alterity as this long moment of Münzer's narrative.

Additionally, the (sincere and emotional) tolerance/acceptance and admiration with the number of mosques he found in the Iberian Peninsula³⁰, as well as with the number of Muslims living there – see, for example, Madrid (*Ibidem*, 261), Granada (*Ibidem*, 89 and 105),

³⁰ «Going up to the tower [of the city of Albaicin, in the kingdom of Granada], I counted such a number of mosques, it is hard to believe.» (*Ibidem*, 103).



Zaragoza (*Ibidem*, 297 and 299) or even Lisbon (*Ibidem*, 173) –, would be enough to demonstrate the relevance of human identity/alterity in the work of the Nuremberg doctor.

Such constructions are always elaborated from what he sees and in confrontation with what he knows, that is, his ethnic-cultural referential framework. Note, this is grounded upon an accentuated emotional framework, which amplifies his identity representations to a variable extent.

Overall, as we have fully demonstrated, Münzer's view of the Iberian Muslims is positive and, in some cases, even quite favourable, reaching admiration and praise, attributes that arise accompanied by strong emotional expressiveness. However, he never recognises the religious superiority of the Mohammedan faith, which he refers to as full of foundational errors. The point is that, although the Iberian Muslims were ultimately conquered and subject to Christian authority, the northern traveller unequivocally recognizes their place in the Iberian Society of the time. In other words, he does not even raise the possibility of this social framework not existing in the Iberian worldview, as tragically would happen in the future, and much of this *point of view* and this value judgement (as mentioned, positive to the point of admiration and exaltation) directly depends on the centuries-old relationship of Muslims with water in the Iberian Peninsula (and not only), in its most diverse aspects: management, technical development, distribution, use and consumption.

It is true that sometimes Münzer distances himself from the Muslim *Other*. But there is never an ethnocentric process that anthropologically denies difference, that is, he never forces a clear and definitive conviction of superiority. All the more so when the element *water* is evoked, intimately associated with an unequivocal Islamic superiority, past and present. Superiority in terms of knowledge, technique (construction of canals, aqueducts, cisterns, fountains and plumbing systems), management and, of course, functional applications to everyday life. Among other references to cities and places, the description of the Alhambra in Granada is sufficient to fully demonstrate this fact.

The validity of this premise transpires in the author's genuine fascination with the Islamic presence, past and present, particularly with the specific and characteristic – one might say exclusive – ways the Muslim community interacts with water, a precious treasure in that chronology and specific area of the Iberian Peninsula (in the south, where water scarcity is most noticeable and can cause major problems to the survival and flourishing of human communities: «Granada also has high mountains, plains, valleys, which given the shortage of water, cannot be irrigated and are not habitable.» [*Ibidem*, 107]). This is the basis for one of the most relevant expressions of the clearly utilitarian and didactic character of *Itinerarium*.

In his discourse, the German traveller presents a particularly suggestive tone and style – “warm” and guided by a constant colour –, which humanizes the report as a whole. Descriptions are never arid, cold or devoid of feeling. Instead, they are full of shapes, aromas, colours, attributes, virtues and merits. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the reader, whoever he is, becomes enthusiastic with the narrative, which assumes, we insist, an unequivocal utilitarian and didactic dimension, resulting simultaneously from a great pragmatic objectivity: what is of interest in the chosen places and which human groups stand out. And here, Muslims and the problem of water use deserve prominence (foremost given the natural association of using water to cultivate the land – an area where Muslims stand out: «They are very careful in the irrigation of the fields and cultivation of the land»)(*Ibidem*, 299)

Moreover, this document contains a genuine environmental concern, precisely through the issue of *water* and its proper management and use. This attitude of the author combined with the fact that it is not common to find for the medieval period, in travel literature, such a declared and intense relationship between a human community and such a flagrant element of the environment – and even less presented and described in such an impressive form by someone “ontologically” different – makes the *Itinerarium* a document of rare value both in terms of Cultural Anthropology and in terms of the History of the Environment.

Naturally, the examination of identity constructions and alterity exercises in a source as rich as the *Itinerarium* always involves several factors, namely religious. Without neglecting the contribution of these other elements, we sought to explore the central role played by the element of water in this broad and complex process, specifically assessing the Muslim *Other*. From the methodological point of view, always taking into account the interrelated presence of three fundamental concepts for the development of the proposed analysis: frontier, water and human community.



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