

MANDEVILLE'S TRAVELS, ALPHABETS, AND THE JEWS

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It is no exaggeration to speak of “linguistic-editorial maze” in referring to *Mandeville's Travels*¹ (henceforth, *Travels*), that immensely popular, late-medieval predecessor of Murray's, Bradshaw's or Baedeker's guidebooks: a somewhat bold anachronism, undeniably, yet not entirely unjustified, especially as far as the first part of the *Travels* is concerned, which purports to escort the reader on a “traditional” pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But once Palestine has been reached and described, the first-person narrator-traveller, instead of accompanying his readers on a return journey, or simply taking leave of them, resumes his journey eastward to explore ever vaster, ever more fantastic lands, thus allowing his account steadily to grow in stature and scope, as well as sheer fascination, from book of travels to “book of marvels”, and eventually to *Imago Mundi* and *Speculum naturale*.² Since its first appearance, shortly after the middle of the fourteenth century, the *Travels* went through countless incarnations; numerous offshoots followed in the next two hundred years or so, which became known, directly or indirectly, to explorers and cartographers, from Columbus to Mercator, from the self-styled “unlettered” («*omo senza lettere*») scientist and artist, Leonardo da Vinci, to authors such as Ariosto, Tasso, Cervantes, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and with him all the greatest English writers. Not that the fame of Mandeville's work was confined to the intellectual elites: «abridged and epitomized for widely differing audiences»,³ its popularity transcended social boundaries, as famously exemplified by the decisive role played by the *Travels* in the intellectual formation of Domenico Scandella called Menocchio,⁴ the “heretical” miller from sixteenth-century Friuli whose personality and tragic life events have been magisterially reconstructed by Carlo Ginzburg in his *Cheese and the Worms*.⁵

¹ Or, more correctly, *The Book of John Mandeville*, as persuasively argued by I.M. HIGGINS, *Writing East. The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1997, pp. 64-65. Among the rich critical literature on the *Travels*, M.C. SEYMOUR, *Sir John Mandeville*, Variorum, Aldershot – Brookfield, VT 1993 may still be useful as an agile introduction, especially to its complex historical and textual problems. Indispensable readings are now C. DELUZ, *Le Livre de Jehan de Mandeville. Une “géographie” au XIV^e siècle*, Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve 1988 (despite an insufficient, rather disorganized general index), as well as the detailed analysis of Mandeville's «multitext» offered by HIGGINS, *Writing East*. Higgins's use of the notion of «variance» is explicitly drawn from B. CERQUIGLINI, *Éloge de la variante. Histoire critique de la philologie*, Seuil, Paris 1989.

² Most modern Mandeville scholars, with very few exceptions, preliminarily admit to feeling embarrassed, sometimes even dismayed at dealing with a work which, whilst being «the most widely read European book of travels in the late medieval and early modern period [...] its era's secular best-seller», remains nevertheless «not easy to define. Its origins are shrouded in controversy and uncertainty. And its reputation has suffered extreme ups and downs» (B. BRAUDE, *Mandeville's Jews among Others*, in B.F. LE BEAU and M. MOR [eds], *Pilgrims & Travelers to the Holy Land*, Creighton University Press, Omaha, NE 1996, pp. 133-168: 135).

³ M.C. SEYMOUR (ed.), *Mandeville's Travels*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1967, p. xiii.

⁴ Who would have known the Italian version of the *Travels* thanks to one of the «ten incunable editions», or, more probably, «thirteen editions of 16c., mostly printed at Venice» then in circulation. See SEYMOUR, *Sir John Mandeville*, p. 55.

⁵ C. GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Einaudi, Torino 1976 (English tr. *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore - Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Henley 1980). To this ground-breaking study I shall return at the conclusion of this paper.

The *Travels*' lost "original" (always an elusive, and delusive, notion, that of "originality", sometimes hopelessly so, already with ancient authors)⁶ spawned over two hundred and fifty testimonial manuscripts in ten different languages: French, English, Latin, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Czech, followed a little later by Danish and Irish. Add to these about sixty printed texts, including incunables and sixteenth-century editions,⁷ and the image of the labyrinth begins to take shape. Furthermore, there are several redactions of each linguistic version, and each of these redactions incorporates quite different textual traditions. Of the four principal Middle English prose versions of the *Travels* – commonly referred to as the "Defective", the "Cotton", the "Egerton", and the much shorter "Bodley"⁸ – I will concentrate on the so-called "Cotton" version, handed down to us in a *codex unicus* dating back to the first quarter of the fifteenth century (B.L. MS Cotton Titus C. xvi)⁹ – of the four I have mentioned, the clearest, most concise and most readable,¹⁰ and therefore the version most often referred to, though not necessarily the most authoritative.

The date of the *Travels* is uncertain: the oldest extant manuscript, in French (Paris, BnF, nouv. acq. franç. 4515), is itself a copy dated 1371, while other French versions point to 1357 as the date of composition. The language used in the lost "original" has been hotly debated, as has the identity of the shadowy author, still a mystery to this day. The present scholarly consensus indicates French as the original language, rather than English or Latin, long supported by many in the past, beginning with the narrating voice itself,¹¹ common to all the principal versions and redactions. In fact, the narrator claims to have translated his account, first from the original Latin into French, and then from French into English, for the benefit of his fellow Englishmen. But what kind of French, one may well ask, given that three such versions are extant in which the linguistic features of "French" vary significantly according to the manuscript's regional provenance? The answer is probably the Middle French of the so-called "Continental" version,¹² contemporary with the "Insular", i.e. Anglo-Norman, version (probably derived from

⁶ See L. CANFORA, *Il copista come autore* (2002), Sellerio, Palermo 2019, aptly quoting on p. 12, in Italian translation, a passage from G.C. LEWIS, *The Hellenics of Xenophon and their Division into Books*, published, according to Canfora's footnote, in «Philological Museum» 2 (1833), pp. 1-44. Lewis's article of that title, in fact, appeared years later in a different journal, «The Classical Museum» 2 (1845), pp. 1-44, with the quoted passage on pp. 3-4. G.C.L[ewis] had indeed previously contributed to «The Philological Museum» 2 (1833), pp. 241-244, with a translation from the German of L. Dindorf's «remarks» *On the Title of Xenophon's Greek History*, which did not contain that passage.

⁷ As regards the complex transmission of the text and the different versions and translations of the *Travels* throughout Europe see the tables in HIGGINS, *Writing East*, pp. 22-3.

⁸ The so-called "Metrical" version of the *Travels*, in English couplets, derived from a Latin translation, is of no particular significance for our purposes here.

⁹ In our time, "Cotton" is available in a largely outdated diplomatic edition (P. HAMELIUS [ed.], *Mandeville's Travels / translated from the French of Jean d'Outremeuse* edited from MS Cotton Titus C. XVI, in the British Museum, 2 vols., Oxford University Press, London 1919-1923), and in the critical edition by M.C. SEYMOUR (see above, n. 3; unless otherwise noted, my quotations from the text of the *Travels*, with page references, will be from this edition).

¹⁰ Despite Seymour's reservations: see *ibid.*, p. xix.

¹¹ The traveller-narrator's *persona* whom I refer to as "Mandeville".

¹² A proper critical edition of the "Continental" is still lacking. The text is reproduced in M. LETTS (ed.), *Mandeville's Travels. Texts and Translations*, 2 vols, Hakluyt Society, London 1953. We do, however, have a reliable critical edition of the "Insular": JEAN DE MANDEVILLE, *Le Livre des merveilles du monde*, éd. critique par CHRISTIANE DELUZ, Éditions du CNRS, Paris 2000. From the French "Continental" were derived the manuscripts and early printed editions of the Italian version (see above, n. 4), amongst which one in "ancient Tuscan"; there is a nineteenth century edition of the text as handed down in MS. Magl. XXXV. 221 in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence: *I viaggi di Gio. da Mandavilla: volgarizzamento antico toscano ora ridotto a buona lezione coll'aiuto di due testi a penna / per cura di FRANCESCO ZAMBRINI*, presso Gaetano Romagnoli, 2 vols, Bologna 1870 (facsimile reprint, Arnoldo Forni, Bologna 1968). To anticipate observations I will return on towards the conclusion of these pages (see below n. 49), the *Travels* were then absent from the Italian scene up to the early

the former, and which is, directly or indirectly, the basis of all successive translations into English and Latin produced in England), as well as to a third version, usually referred to as the Liège text.

Finally, to return to the author, almost all these different versions share “Mandeville”’s own claim that he is, in fact, Sir John Mandeville, an English knight from St. Albans, who left his native land round about the middle of the fourteenth century to travel the world. This self-identification, long accepted as authentic, has since been called into question. This is not the place to attempt to unpick this intricate problem; suffice it to say that the current opinion largely agrees that the alleged Sir John Mandeville, knight from St. Albans, «was probably not a knight, not named Mandeville, not English, and perhaps never traveled much at all», as two recent editors neatly put it,¹³ his principal itinerary being “autour de sa chambre”, his staging posts the books of his well-furnished library – although any one of his claims may eventually turn out to contain some element of truth.¹⁴ If Sir John Mandeville, strictly speaking, only exists on the written page as the fictive creation of an unknown author about whose identity we can only conjecture, it would then stand to reason to ascribe the *Travels* to the category of “apocryphal” books, with “Mandeville”, its traveller-narrator, functioning as a reality device, not unlike, say, “Lazarillo de Tormes”/*Lazarillo de Tormes*, or any one of Fernando Pessoa’s myriad heteronyms.

The *Travels* – a periegesis of the whole known or imagined late medieval world – is basically a compilation of practically all the principal encyclopaedic sources and oriental travel books of its time. Amongst these, two occupy a particularly relevant position: the *Liber de Quibusdam Ultramarinis Partibus* by the German Dominican, Wilhelm von Boldensele (1336), and, for the part concerning the Far East, the *Relatio* by the Franciscan missionary, Odoric of Pordenone (1330). Other sources include the *Speculum historiale* by Vincent de Beauvais and, through him, Johannes de Plano Carpini, not to mention Brunetto Latini’s *Livre dou Tresor*, Jacques de Vitry, the *Legenda aurea*, the *Letter of Prester John*, the Alexander romances, the *Flos Historiarum terre Orientis* by the Armenian monk, Hayton of Corycus, and others of varying degrees of importance.¹⁵ After a preface which presents the work, as already noted, as a guide for those intending to undertake the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the narration itself begins with a description of Constantinople and the principal routes leading to the city: there follows a long section about Egypt (to the lack of which section, due, probably, to the loss of a quire in the copy-text, the Middle-English “Defective” version owes its name), followed by a detailed description of the Holy Land. Thereafter, these relatively well-known places give way to more exotic regions,¹⁶ such as,

1980s, when the gap was filled by a translation of the English “Cotton” (JOHN MANDEVILLE, *Viaggi ovvero trattato delle cose più meravigliose e più notabili che si trovano al mondo*, ed. E. BARISONE, il Saggiatore, Milano 1982).

¹³ T. KOHANSKY and C.D. BENSON (eds), *The Book of John Mandeville*, Medieval Institute Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 2007, Introd.; I quote from the on-line edition available at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/kohanski-and-benson-the-book-of-john-mandeville-introduction> (no page numbering; accessed January 2019). Kohansky and Benson, however, based their text on a manuscript (London, B. L. MS Royal 17 C. xxxvii) which differs from the one previously used by Seymour (Oxford, Queen’s College, MS 383) for his critical edition of the “Defective” (M.C. SEYMOUR [ed.], *The Defective Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002).

¹⁴ Exasperating as it may seem, the only legitimate conclusion to be drawn at present is that «the author was a Benedictine and probably studied at Paris» (*ibid.*, p. 165); thus Seymour prudently backtracks on the hypotheses put forward in his earlier *Sir John Mandeville*, pp. 23-4.

¹⁵ Little credit is now accorded to the theory that the author, or compiler of the *Travels* had direct knowledge of Marco Polo’s *Milione*: see DELUZ, *Le Livre*, pp. 51-52. In her study (see in particular pp. 57-58 and 421-498), Deluz provides the most complete account to date of all identifiable Mandeville sources.

¹⁶ On a subject of such vast dimensions, I will limit myself to citing two classic essays by J. LE GOFF: *L’Occident médiéval et l’Océan indien: un horizon onirique* [1970], in ID., *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident*, Gallimard, Paris 1977, pp. 280-298 (English tr., *The Medieval West and the Indian Ocean. An Oneiric Horizon*, in ID., *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 1980, pp. 189-200), and *Le merveilleux dans l’Occident médiéval* [1978], in ID., *L’imaginaire médiéval*, Gallimard, Paris 1985, pp. 151-187 (English tr., *The Marvelous in the Medieval West*, in ID., *The Medieval Imagination*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, pp. 27-44). See also, more recently, G.

to mention but the most important, Armenia, the land of the Amazons, Ethiopia, and, always moving “into the sun”, India, Cathay, the court of the Great Khan, Persia, Chaldea, the land of Prester John, then Ceylon, Tibet, with the supposed traveller and eyewitness arriving, at last, a hair’s breadth from the Garden of Eden – without, alas, actually setting foot inside. In the end, having traversed and circum-navigated the entire oecumene, both real and imaginary, “Mandeville” returns to England, his averred homeland and place of departure, there to rest his tired, aching bones.

Throughout all these wanderings – these, too, *ambages pulcerrime*, to borrow Dante’s evocative phrase¹⁷ – one feature emerges with surprising regularity: “Mandeville”’s unflagging interest in what are for him two fundamentals of identity of the various peoples he meets on his way: the languages they speak, and the religions they practise. As far as language is concerned, however, the interest of the author focuses on a single, rather odd aspect, no trace of which is to be found in the sources, although the practice was not entirely unknown to the travel-guide writers of the time: I refer to the description and reproduction of the alphabets in use with the principal populations with whom “Mandeville” alleges to have come into contact.¹⁸ In the aforementioned French manuscript, the most abounding in these alphabets, there are six, namely, in order of appearance, Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Saracen (Arabic), Persian, and Chaldean; of these, the Middle-English “Cotton” version comprises the first four.¹⁹ The descriptions contained in the *Travels* give the names of the single letters (for example, for the Greek, the words, “alpha, beta, gamma” etc.), followed usually, but not always, by drawings of the letters. In several cases, placed above each symbol are key-letters: the letters, that is, of the Latin, or European, common alphabet, to which the various symbols are supposed to correspond. The problem is that, as a whole, these alphabets appear to be hopelessly corrupted, part of the reason being no doubt that they reflect the fatigues of generations of scribes, many of whom were understandably reluctant to take much trouble in copying whole sequences of unfamiliar, and sometimes decidedly weird squiggles.²⁰ Whatever the reason, none of the manuscripts representing the core of the *Travels* tradition – including the “Continental” and “Insular” redactions in their various forms and derivations, and containing, as we have seen, six alphabets at the most – presents *all* the names of letters *and* their corresponding symbols belonging in each of the alphabets mentioned. In each and every text, that is, something is missing, but no two texts show the same omissions: in other words, omit the same letters. Furthermore, although the names of the letters are, in general, consistent and plausibly recognizable in the various versions and

ZAGANELLI, *Il meraviglioso geografico medievale. Per una ridefinizione*, in F. SALVESTRINI (ed.), *Monaci e pellegrini nell’Europa medievale. Viaggi, sperimentazioni, conflitti e forme di mediazione*, Edizioni Polistampa, Firenze 2014, pp. 57-72.

¹⁷ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, x, 2, where the phrase famously refers to the adventures of King Arthur and his Knights.

¹⁸ Or, at least, to those reasonably “close” – from Greece to Persia and Chaldea, via Egypt and the Saracen dominions including the Holy Land and the Jews living there – to the experience of the alleged traveller, Sir John Mandeville, his literary sources and his reading public: curiously, no further afield. According to Higgins, «That the author invented not a single alphabet for any of the still farther eastern peoples said to be literate [...] may have to do with a desire to minimize some forms of difference, since many [...] far-eastern sections are devoted to revealing fundamental homologies in radically different religious practices» (*Writing East*, p. 81). However, as the textual tradition gradually moves away from its core, new alphabets start to proliferate (amongst which the wildly luxuriant “Pentexoire”, allegedly in use in the land of Prester John), in one case even adding up to fifteen, as can be found in a Low-German version.

¹⁹ Collections of alphabets, often of dubious authenticity, that the compiler of the *Travels* may have known had been around since the late eighth century. See E. SEEBOLD, *Mandevilles Alphabete und die mittelalterlichen Alphabetsammlungen*, «Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur» 120 (1998), pp. 435-449. However, it cannot be proved that these are actual sources for the *Travels*. See below, n. 21.

²⁰ As Seymour sums up, «Because of the difficulty of transcribing the forms and the strangeness of the names, scribes often confused and then omitted part or all of the forms and characters. [...] Such erosion was a continuous progress over many scribal traditions, and in many manuscripts blank spaces are left to mark the omissions» (M.C. SEYMOUR [ed.], *The Egerton Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. xx).

manuscripts, the characters themselves, where extant, are often unintelligible – at times, because they are outright fakes («colorful, spectacularly inaccurate, and useless» alphabets, in the words of Stephen Greenblatt).²¹ It has been pointed out²² that, of the six alphabets mentioned, the Greek appears corrupted, but at least genuinely Greek; the Egyptian, too, is corrupted, but is a real Coptic alphabet; the Saracen/Arabic is imaginary not only in the names of the letters, but in the actual characters themselves, which are none other than runes set out in the order of the Latin, rather than Runic, alphabet; the Persian is the same as the Chaldean, and the characters appear to be derived from the Nestorian-Syriac alphabet (that is to say, as in the case of the Coptic/Egyptian, the alphabet of the *Christian* inhabitants of the area, as opposed to that of the vast “heathen” majority). This leaves us with the Hebrew alphabet, which “Mandeville” introduces towards the end of his description of the Holy Land – at the time once again in the hands of the Saracens – and especially of the northern region of Samaria, home, so he tells us, to many Jews, subject, like the Christians, to special taxation (the *jyzia*, a “fee for protection”), and obliged to wear yellow turbans (while the Saracens wear white ones, the Christians blue and the Samaritans red). Should anyone be interested in knowing the kind of “letters” used by these Jews, says “Mandeville” in presenting their alphabet, «thei ben suche and the names ben as thei clepen hem written abouen in manere of here abc» (p. 79). In the Cotton MS, however, as fig. 1 below makes partly visible, the key-letters are indeed in superscript, but “written above” the twenty-two letter-names of the alef-bet, rather than above the characters that follow the names. But while most of the names bear a close enough resemblance to the real ones, the characters themselves, cut down to eleven in number, appear instead not so much corrupted as completely fanciful.²³

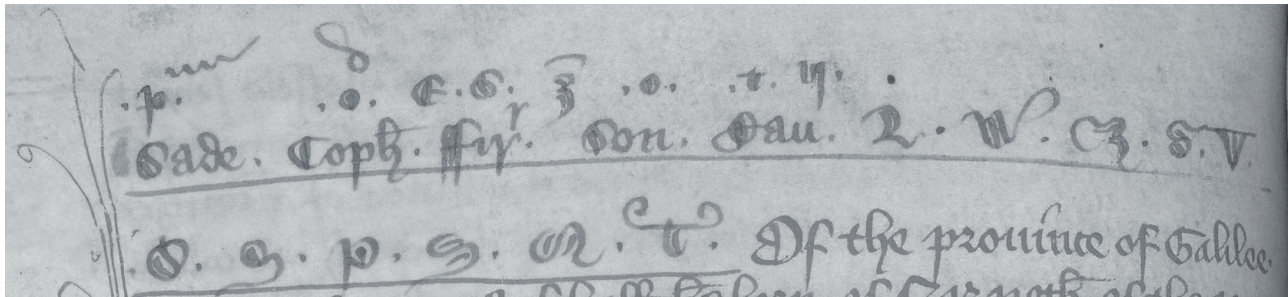


Fig. 1: British Library MS Cotton Titus C. xvi, f. 49v, detail. (© British Library Board)

²¹ S. GREENBLATT, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, p. 91.

²² For what follows I have drawn on the detailed, albeit inevitably dated, examination of the alphabets in M. LETTS, *Sir John Mandeville. The Man and his Book*, The Batchworth Press, London 1949, pp. 151-160. Letts posits that the author used one or more sources, themselves untraceable, but leading back to a single “family” which may in some way be identified (see *ibid.*, p. 154).

²³ With the possible exception of the first character – an alef, presumably – in this abridged set. To my knowledge, the Hebrew alphabet of the Cotton MS, distributed over the two bottom lines of f. 49r, and the two top ones of f. 49v (see Plates 5 and 6), has never been reproduced before. I am grateful to the British Library Board for their kind permission to reproduce it here.

One might consider such a bizarre presentation as a *unicum*, attributable to the redactor, or to the lost exemplar of the Cotton MS, or to one or other of the amanuenses involved. But comparison with the corresponding passage in the parallel English “Egerton” text, also found in a unique manuscript (London, B. L. MS Egerton 1982), shows in this case a complete, though no less arbitrary set of the characters forming the Hebrew alphabet:²⁴

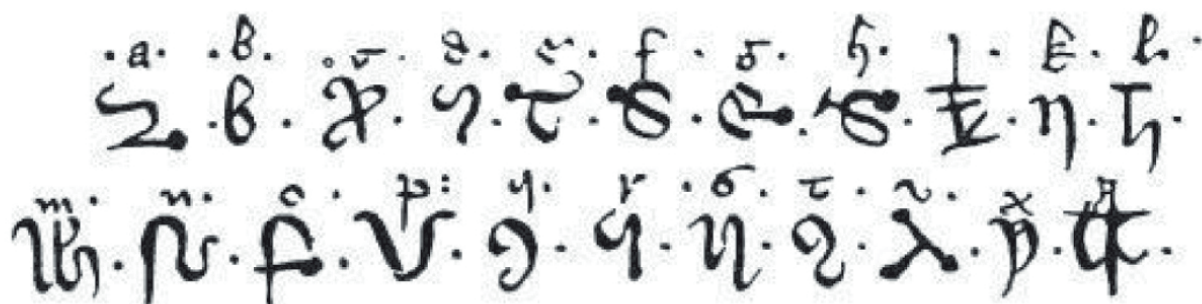


Fig. 2. British Library MS Egerton 1982, f. 45, detail.

Most of these characters bear no resemblance to any known documented version of the Hebrew alphabet, thus demonstrating the lack, or loss, of even the most superficial familiarity with this “alien” tongue, at least in its written form. As tends to happen in travel literature through the ages, the author/narrator makes up for what he does not know by inventing. Corroboration or contradiction might be sought in the context of the other English versions of the *Travels*. For example, the English *editio princeps* of the *Travels* is represented by an incunable, undated but ascribable to 1496, from the London printing shop of Richard Pynson; it is based on one of the several manuscripts, subsequently lost, of the “Defective” redaction, and includes, amongst others, the Hebrew alphabet, which looks like this:²⁵



Fig. 3. Richard Pynson, British Library G 6713, sig. d3v, detail.

²⁴ A reproduction of f. 45 is to be found on the frontispiece of SEYMOUR (ed.), *The Egerton Version*. The would-be Hebrew characters from the “Defective” are almost identical with those of the “Egerton”: see, on the antiporte of SEYMOUR (ed.), *The Defective Version*, the photograph of f. 55r of the Oxford MS already mentioned as providing the basis of this edition. I have therefore not included them in the present paper. The shorter “Bodley” version omits all mention, let alone representation, of alphabets. See M.C. SEYMOUR (ed.), *The Bodley Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, Oxford University Press, London - New York - Toronto 1963.

²⁵ See T. KOHANSKY (ed.), *The Book of John Mandeville. An Edition of the Pynson Text with Commentary on the Defective Version*, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, AZ 2001, p. 32. I have been unable to consult the earlier facsimile edition of the incunable: M.C. SEYMOUR (ed.), *A facsimile of the Pynson incunable*, Exeter University Press, Exeter 1980.

Looking at this alphabet in its original typographical context, that is, the 1496 London incunable that comprises the Pynson text of the *Travels*, it appears obvious that the printer, probably puzzled by a series of incomprehensible symbols, simply assigned to the Hebrew alef-bet, quite at random, the characters used for “normal” English capitals.²⁶

Of all the testimonies containing a more or less complete series of alphabets, the best, in the sense of least corrupted, as well as being the oldest, is the aforementioned exemplar of the French “Continental” tradition, the Paris “nouv. acq. franç. 4515”, by scholarly consensus now reputed to be the closest to the unknown author’s lost holograph. Just *how* close remains, for now, impossible to say. This manuscript was produced in the shop of the famous amanuensis, Raoulet d’Orléans, having been commissioned by Gervaise Chrétien, chief physician to the royal court, who wished to donate it to his sovereign, Charles V of Valois (r. 1364-80). The uniqueness of this manuscript lies in the fact that it alone, of more than two hundred and fifty of the most varied provenance, comprises, not one, but two Hebrew alphabets. The first is placed, as is customary, at the end of the description of Samaria and its inhabitants, but, while the names of the letters are reasonably close to those of the real alef-bet, the symbols are just as, if not more puzzling than the others we have seen so far:²⁷

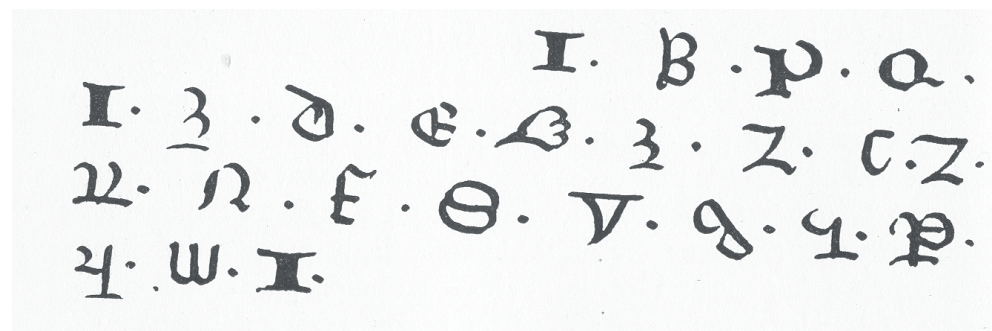


Fig. 4a. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, nouv. acq. fr. 4515, f. 33r, detail.

However, the unreliability and obscurity of these characters, shared by the whole tradition, led the copyist of this manuscript (it matters little whether Raoulet himself, or some expert Hebraist and calligraphist) to add, «tacked on at the very end of the text but integral to the production of the manuscript»²⁸ (f. 96v), another, neatly traced alef-bet using the square script of the time. This addition was preceded by a rubric, which, in translation, reads: «Hereafter follow the letters of the Hebrews, and they are truer than those written before in the body of the book».²⁹ The scribe, yet, not content with having provided a “true” Hebrew alphabet, adds, in equally clear Hebrew lettering, a quotation from the Bible, the *incipit* of Psalm I: «Ashrei ha’ish asher lo halach ba’atzat r’shaim», literally, «Blessed is he who is not wont to go the way advised by the wicked», which the Latin of the Vulgate famously rendered as «Beatus vir qui non abiit in consilio impiorum»:

²⁶ It cannot be ruled out that Pynson’s lost exemplar was itself already missing these characters, which Pynson then supplied to the best of his ability.

²⁷ In dealing with the Paris BNF nouv. acq. fr. 4515 MS, I have drawn closely on M. KUPFER, “... *lectres ... plus vrayes*”: *Hebrew Script and Jewish Witness in the Mandeville Manuscript of Charles V*, «Speculum» 83 (2008), pp. 58-111.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁹ The original, as transcribed *ibid.*, p. 61, reads «Ci apres sensuiuent les lectres des hebreius, et sont plus vrayes que celles qui sont escriptes devant ou corps du liure». Kupfer’s rendering of «escriptes devant ou corps du liure» as «written before *or in* the body of the book» (p. 61; my italics) is plainly mistaken. Already in Old French, as later in Middle French, *ou* is not only the conjunction “or”, but also a contraction of prep. *en* (“in”) with def. art. *le* (“the”). See, e.g., <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf>, s.v. EN, prép. (accessed Feb. 2020).

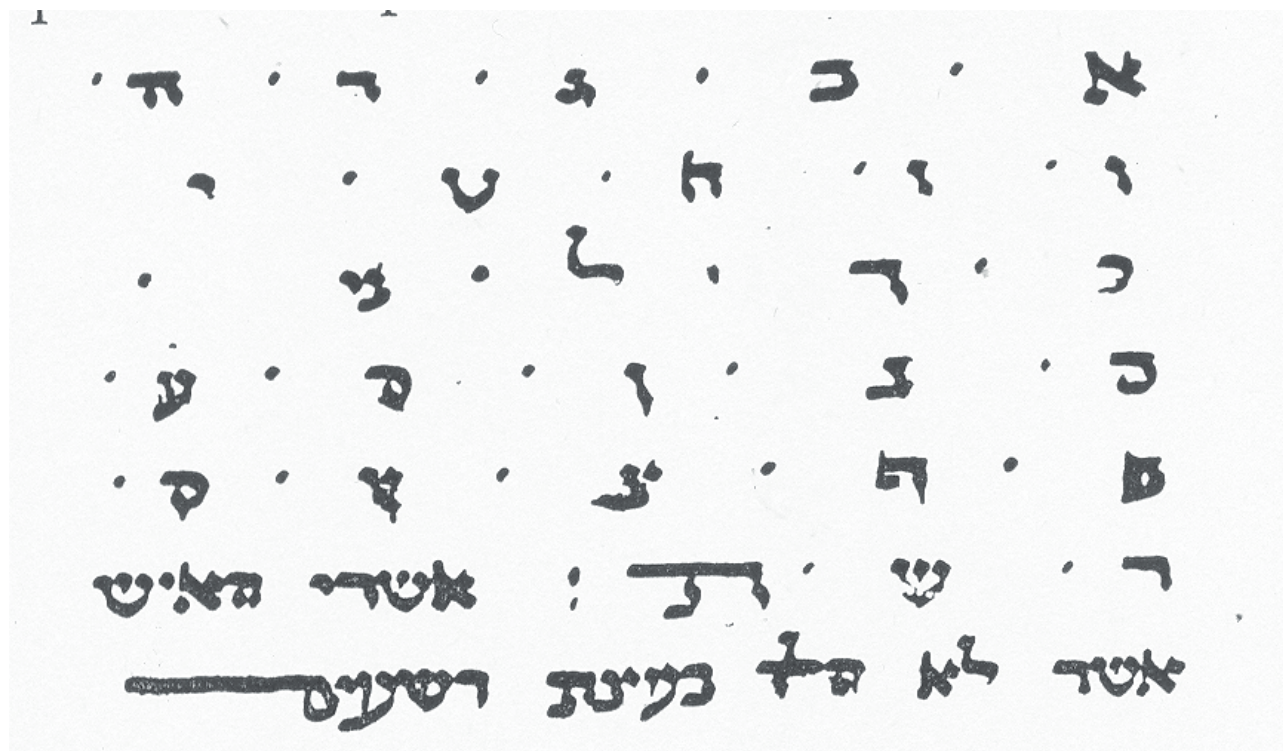


Fig. 4b. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, nouv. acq. fr. 4515, f. 96v, detail.

Experts in Hebrew paleography tend to recognize in this extraordinary addition – i.e., the combination of alphabet and quotation – not so much the hand of a native speaker, or *writer*, of Hebrew, but rather that of a seasoned calligrapher able to reproduce firmly and unwaveringly examples of elegant square script, in which, nonetheless, are still discernible certain features typical of Christian copyists of the late thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries.³⁰ The disorientation of the scribe when faced with the earlier set of hieroglyphics, and this last minute “rectification” do, however, suggest that at this particular point of time and space a certain degree of knowledge of, if not of familiarity with, the Hebrew language and its culture still existed in that part of France, whereas in England that acquaintance, never very widespread, had slipped into oblivion after the definitive expulsion of the Jews in 1290. We might join Marcia Kupfer in questioning the significance of that quotation from Psalm 1.1 tacked onto the end of a French version of the *Travels*, commissioned by a court physician and intended as a gift to Charles V. Kupfer has argued persuasively that it is not merely a show of calligraphic skill, but an indirect indication of support for the monarch’s plan to legalize the presence of Jews in the kingdom of France; a strategy pragmatically driven by political/financial motivations – albeit one doomed to fail in the event – but, at the same time, conveniently compatible with the classic Augustinian thesis of the Jewish people’s «testimonial function».³¹ It should be remembered that already about 1359, during his first regency, the then Dauphin and Duke of Normandy had consented to the Jews’ return to the realm after their expulsion in 1306 and the vicissitudes that followed.³² Their presence there was to continue until their definitive banishment in 1394. In light of this, I would venture to salvage the hypothesis – originally put

³⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 61, 65, 73.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³² See *ibid.*, p. 77.

forward by Josephine Bennett, seconded by Christiane Deluz,³³ but now largely rejected – which posits an insular rather than continental provenance for the lost French original of the *Travels*, or, at least, of the antigraph that constitutes the immediate source of the oldest surviving codex, the aforementioned BnF 4515. It appears not unreasonable to suggest that in 1371 an expert French copyist, sufficiently familiar with Hebrew script, and able at least to produce an acceptable imitation of it, might have been bold enough to make a last-ditch attempt to remedy the “botched job” turned out by his colleagues on the other side of the Channel, who had long lost all memory of the Hebrew alphabet and its characters.

However that may be, the benevolence undeniably perceptible in the French manuscript's appendix towards the Hebrew language and culture, and by extension towards the Jews as a people, stands in sharp contrast with the hostility to the Jews which pervades the *Travels*, especially evident in both the “Continental” and “Insular” versions, as well as in all the texts deriving from these two.³⁴ Too numerous to be cited here are the occasions, particularly copious in the description of the Holy Land, on which “Mandeville” trots out the thousand-year-old, commonplace charges of deicide, of hatred of the Virgin Mary, and of Jewish contempt towards all manifestations of Christianity. Nothing new there, one might say. But there is much more than this.

I have already pointed out “Mandeville”'s persistent interest in the beliefs and religious customs of the peoples he encounters. While the author-narrator's *persona*, right from the preface to his work, presents himself as a Christian addressing his fellow-believers and spurring them on to the *reconquista* of the holy places, he at the same time deplores the contemporary falling off in faith and increase in sinfulness leading to the spiritual decline, not only of the common people, but also, and more critically, of the political and religious leaders of the world he lives in. The lament for this deplorable state of affairs increases in earnestness as his admiration grows for the other, more or less exotic religions with which he comes in contact, amongst which Islam, famously, has pride of place. “Mandeville” concedes that Muslims are indeed “infidels”, thus destined, sooner or later, to lose possession of the Holy Land; all the same, they are to be praised and respected for their rock-steady faith, which, he maintains, has many points in common with Christian beliefs, and for their sincere religiousness. He even uses the Sultan of the Saracens, with whom he claims to have had a lengthy conversation, as a mouthpiece for a robust condemnation of the moral and spiritual decadence of the Church of Rome: a proper invective, to which the author adds a detailed, sympathetic exposition of the teachings of the Prophet. More generally, the *Travels* has often been seen as “universalist” in its attitude towards practically all non-Christian religions, although it must be stressed that its “universalism” is definitely “Christian universalism”.³⁵ The affinities of this or that religion with Roman Christianity, or at least the supposedly shared “universal” values, are invariably pointed out. This becomes more and more apparent as the traveller ventures further and further *in partibus infidelium*, from Persia to India and on to the resplendent Kingdom of the Great Khan, not to mention the legendary Asian empire of the Christian-Nestorian Prester John, or the inhabitants of “Lamary” (Sumatra), who live, naked, in their unspoiled Eden, their only peccadillo consisting in the practice of cannibalism. As a final example, we can recall the traveller's fervent admiration for the inhabitants of an island, Bragman,³⁶ the epitome of “natural” religion itself: although unbaptized, and therefore “imperfect”, «of kyndely lawe thei ben fulle of alle vertue. And thei eschewen alle vices and alle malices and alle synnes [...] ne thei don to no man otherwise than thei wolde that other men dide to hem. And in this poynt thei fullefyllen the x. commandementes of God, and yif no charge of aveer ne of ricchess» (p. 211). All these, in varying degrees, “virtuous heathens”, the book seems to say, are eligible for eternal salvation, even *extra Ecclesiam*. In conclusion, no people and no religion – from

³³ J.W. BENNETT, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville*, PMLA Monograph Series XIX, New York 1954; DELUZ, *Le Livre*, p. 26.

³⁴ See HIGGINS, *Writing East*, pp. 187-189.

³⁵ Iain Higgins is but the latest of a number of scholars who have stressed this concept, pointing out that, in the *Travels*, many heathens are depicted «as models of devotion [...] in effect incorporating them into the fold of a [...] universal Christendom of Simple faith and devout practice» (*ibid.*, p. 123).

³⁶ Possibly, the “followers of Brahman”, rather than the “worshippers of Brahma”.

the geographically closest, Islam, to the most distant and exotic ones – constitutes a real threat to Western Christianity, imperilled though the latter is. This otherwise idyllic scenario, however, is vitiated by one glaring exception: the Jews.

In the extra-European geography of *Mandeville's Travels*, the Holy Land, Jerusalem and neighbouring regions are not, as might be imagined, the only places where Jews are to be found. Actually, we next come across the Jews not physically, as real, flesh-and-bone individuals, but rather in the form of recollections of crimes they are purported to have committed: “Mandeville” arrives in Borneo, and, after describing the island of Java, informs the reader, in chapter XXI, of the existence of another island called “Pathen”, where one can find trees that provide bread and honey. But in Pathen grows also another, dangerously poisonous tree, and with this poison, we are told, «the Iewes had let seche of on of here frendes for to enpoysone alle Cristiantee, as I haue herd hem seye in here confession before here dyenge. But, thanked be allemyghty God, thei fayleden of hire purpos, but alleweys thei maken gret mortalitee of poeple» (pp. 139-140). Later on, chapter XXIX of the *Travels* contains a description of the Far East “beyond the land of Cathay”, a region where, according to “Mandeville”, are to be found the «mountaynes of Caspye» (p. 192) – presumably the Caucasus mountains – and, enclosed in a vast basin within them, «Gog and Magog». In this late medieval text is thus effectively witnessed the merging of legendary and traditional materials, originally of diverse provenance, reworked by the imagination of both the learned and the common people, from as far back as the early sixth century BCE – the age of composition, that is, of the *Book of Ezekiel* where, in chapters 38-39, we read of the prophet’s vision of Prince (*rosh*) «Gog of the land of Magog» leading his armies to punish Israel, only to be repulsed by the Almighty, now reconciled once more with his chosen people. In the Hebrew tradition the formula “Gog of Magog” soon becomes “Gog and Magog”, figuring greatly in apocalyptic literature and subsequently in the New Testament canon. Already in the first century CE, however, the Romanized Jewish historian, Josephus, identified this legendary people as the Scythians,³⁷ thus forming a link with the corpus of stories telling of the deeds of Alexander the Great; the Macedonian conqueror is said to have “imprisoned” that wicked nation deep in the “Caspian mountains” (the Caucasus). This corpus of tales, via the Syriac Pseudo-Methodius (seventh century), was to be subjected to various re-elaborations in the course of the early, middle and late medieval period both in Latin and in the various vernaculars, resulting in texts such as the verse *Roman d’Alexandre*, the *Roman de toute Chevalerie*, the Middle English *King Alisaunder*, the thirteenth-century prose *Roman d’Alexandre*,³⁸ all leading up to the *Travels*. While the latter work contains significant additions to the aforesaid tradition, such as the Queen of the Amazons, here presented as guardian of the “tribe” imprisoned between towering mountains and, on one side, by the vast Caspian Sea, a new, and decisive element had already been introduced in this story during the second half of the twelfth century. Following Petrus Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*,³⁹ in fact, Gog and Magog – the apocalyptic hordes led by Satan in the battle at the end of days – are now often identified (a

³⁷ «Magog founded the Magogians [...] who by the Greeks are called Scythians» (JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities*, Vol. I, Transl. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, London – Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1930, pp. 59-61).

³⁸ It is worth remembering yet again the enormous popularity enjoyed in the Middle Ages by literary works dealing with the deeds of Alexander the Great: see, at least, G. CARY, *The Medieval Alexander*, 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1967, and P. BOITANI, C. BOLOGNA, A. CIPOLLA, M. LIBORIO (eds), *Alessandro nel Medioevo occidentale*, Introd. by P. DRONKE, Mondadori, Milano 1997 (in Italian).

³⁹ In chapter five (*De reclusionem decem tribuum, et morte Alexandri*) of his presentation of the *Book of Esther*, PETRUS COMESTOR (*Historia Scholastica*, in MIGNE, *PL*, CXC VIII, 1498) outlines a legend derived from the patristic literature of the fifth century. In his *Historiae adversus paganos*, composed between 417 and 418, Paulus Orosius (*fl.* 390-420) gives Alexander’s name and date of birth (356 BCE.) juxtaposing it, by purely chronological coincidence, with the war waged in Egypt by Artaxerxes III Ochus, following which the Persian king – not Alexander, as believed by succeeding generations – «plurimos Judæorum in transmigrationem egit, atque in Hyrcania ad Caspium mare habitare præcepit: quos ibi usque in hodiernum diem amplissimis generis sui incrementis consistere, atque exinde quandoque erupturos, opinio est» (PAULI OROSII *Historiarum libri septem*, in MIGNE, *PL*, XXXI, 811).

few sceptics notwithstanding, amongst whom Vincent de Beauvais) with the fabled Lost Tribes of Israel.⁴⁰ Is, then, the author of the *Travels* suggesting that the world is now safeguarded against the Jewish threat by both nature and a man – Alexander, conqueror of the whole world, a heathen, yet inspired and farseeing – who does everything in his power to neutralize them, with the aid of God Himself, who answers to the Macedonian king's plea for help even though it comes from a heathen? The answer, it would appear, is yes: in the same chapter XXIX, “Mandeville” argues that even if Gog and Magog were to attempt an escape through the “open” side, crossing the Caspian Sea in whatever vessels they could lay their hands on, they would find, on the other side, a desert stretching as far as Persia, populated by dragons and venomous snakes. And even if they should succeed in fleeing from that perilous valley – we now come to the first of several cracks in the scenario, since, in spite of all the difficulties, «often it hath befallen that summe of the Iewes han gon vp the mountaynes and aualed down to the valeyes» (p. 193) – how would they get by, given that «thei conen no langage but only hire owne, that no man knoweth but thei» (p. 192)?⁴¹ The Hebrew language, then, functions as a powerful factor of – reciprocal – distancing and exclusion, and, at the same time, as a warranty of protection for the rest of the world, meaning “us Christians”, against a deadly threat. Yet, “Mandeville”'s redundant repetition of the same concept in almost the same words only moments later betrays significant anxiety and fear: even if a few Jews – again, as «often it hath befallen» – were to escape the eagle eye of the Amazon guards and find their way out of their mountain prison, «thei conen no maner of langage but Ebrew, so that thei can not speke to the peple» (p. 193).

In the Christian perspective, however, the Jewish threat continues to loom large: that same language of theirs, made of incomprehensible sounds and esoteric symbols, used by Gog and Magog at the head of the army of the Antichrist, can also play a different role and become, not an obstacle to communication with the rest of the world, but a means of recognition between fellow members of a scattered body, a private code to be used by Jews to communicate with a “fifth column”, the other Jews that habitually live within Christian communities. The point is that, although the Jews «han no propre lond of hir owne for to dwelle inne in alle the world, but only that lond betwene the mountaynes» (p. 192), for which they are obliged to pay a tribute to the Queen of the Amazons, to boot, and therefore are not, strictly speaking, a “nation” with a geographically defined territory of its own, yet they do possess a national identity of a sort, and it is precisely this strange, arcane language that vouchsafes for it. Thus, on one side, the “enemy at the gate”, represented by the lost tribes of Israel/Gog and Magog, lurking on the borders of the West, on the other the tribes of the Dispersion, the enemy within, ever present in our midst, both use the Hebrew language they have in common to weave their plot to overcome and finally destroy Christianity. “Mandeville” is relentless on this: although the Jews are unable to communicate with “us Christians”, yet «men seyn thei schulle gon out in the tyme of Antecrist, and that thei schulle maken gret slaughter of Cristene men» (p. 193). This is the reason why every Jew, no matter where he may live, lays great store on learning Hebrew: in the hope, that is, that, when the other fellow-Jews (meaning Gog and Magog) emerge from wherever they are hiding or lie imprisoned, they will be able to understand them and lead them “into Cristendom” in order to destroy the Christians. The Jews aver that their prophets have foretold it all: «thei of Caspye schulle gon out and spreden thorghout alle the world, and [that] the Cristene men schulle ben vnder hire subieccoun als longe as thei han ben in

⁴⁰ On the Gog-Magog legend, see A.R. ANDERSON, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations*, Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge, MA 1932, and the more recent I. MICHAEL, *Typological Problems in Medieval Alexander Literature. The Enclosure of Gog and Magog*, in P. NOBLE, L. POLAK, C. ISAZ (eds), *The Medieval Alexander Legend and Romance Epic*, Kraus International, Millwood, NY 1982, pp. 131-47. On the gradual identification with the “Lost Tribes” of Israel, see A. C. GOW, *The Red Jews. Antisemitism in the Apocalyptic Age, 1200-1600*, Brill, Leiden 2005. See also Z. B.-D. BENITE, *The Ten Lost Tribes. A World History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

⁴¹ «a people | Who scarcely understood a word», according to the Quran's parallel version of the Gog-Magog legend in Surah 18 (*The Cave*), 83-101 (93). I quote from the classic Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, first published in 1934: *The Holy Qur-an. Text, Translation & Commentary*, 3rd ed., Shaik Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore 1938 (p. 754).

subieccoun of hem» (p. 193). It might be objected that though prophesized in Scripture and therefore inexorably destined to be fulfilled, this final onslaught is shifted to some vague future, «at the time of the Antichrist». Let us remember, however, that “apocalypse” is “revelation”, a category unrelated of itself to any specific chronology, and revelation of future events is only one of its many facets; it stands to reason that the “future”, precisely because unspecifiable, might even be tomorrow; and anyway, the spiritual and moral decadence of the day that so perturbed “Mandeville” is an unequivocal sign of the presence of the Antichrist in our midst.

At the root of all this there clearly lies a delirious conspiracy theory based on the Hebrew language as an indispensable tool with which to bring to fruition a plan long harboured by its speakers, the Jews: the rout and total destruction of Christians and Christian civilization.⁴² We are dealing with a typical mental mechanism of reality inversion, a paranoid projection of deep-seated anxieties described at length in psychology textbooks: a “chimerical” delirium – to use Gavin Langmuir’s enlightening metaphor⁴³ – re-elaborated, and molded throughout the ages, incessantly changing but always the same at the core, feeding into folk tales, and, more tragically, inspiring and justifying discriminatory and persecutory policies and practices of which documented history, along most of its chronological extension, and everyday chronicles alike make us painfully aware.

In pointing out the pervasive anti-Jewishness underlying *Mandeville’s Travels*, to which even DeLuz’s massive 1988 study *Le livre de Jehan de Mandeville* dedicates not one single word, I do not claim to be breaking entirely new ground. Especially from the 1960s onwards, and to the present day, a steadily growing number of scholarly works have taken notice of, and variously commented upon, this disturbing trait of the *Travels*, to which criticism was once largely indifferent. Greenblatt’s 1991 censure, expressed in “soft” tones, has not fallen on deaf ears.⁴⁴ Since then, other critics and scholars have spoken out, less diplomatically, on this feature of the *Travels*. Higgins, for example, speaks of «most extreme anti-Jewish propaganda» and of «almost paranoid anti-Jewishness»,⁴⁵ while Braude stigmatizes the «anti-Jewish shadow», and the «disturbing character» of the author’s particularly hostile attitude towards the Jews,⁴⁶ nor does he refrain from using adjectives like «blood-curdling» and «horrifying».⁴⁷ Not unexpectedly, this renewed attention has been particularly evident in, albeit not exclusive to, the Anglophone academic world.⁴⁸ By way of contrast, a survey of the sporadic Italian contributions to Mandeville scholarship, at least as regards the English versions, may further highlight how deeply, over time, sensibilities have changed in regard of this issue. I have already referred to the late Italian scholar Ermanno Barisone’s impeccable 1982 translation of the “Cotton” text of the *Travels*,⁴⁹ accompanied by an excellent intro-

⁴² Referring to the story of escape of the tribes of Israel and their aim at world domination as put forward in the *Travels*, Braude points out that «language is the very essence of the plot» (Mandeville’s *Jews*, p. 147).

⁴³ In a 1987 paper which was later collected in, and provided the general title to, G.I. LANGMUIR, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1990, pp. 311-352; see in particular p. 328.

⁴⁴ Greenblatt maintains that “Mandeville”’s attitude in this respect seems to contradict «the tolerance that is so impressively articulated elsewhere in Mandeville’s travels», whereas towards the Jews he is «surprisingly ungenerous» (*Marvelous Possessions*, p. 50).

⁴⁵ HIGGINS, *Writing East*, pp. 81, 187.

⁴⁶ BRAUDE, *Mandeville’s Jews among Others*, pp. 139, 141, 150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 146.

⁴⁸ Several other critics have written on the subject, some fleetingly, some at greater length, like F. GRADY, *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2005, or as in the doctoral thesis (unpublished) by R. PATTERSON, *Mandeville’s Intolerance. The Contest for Souls and Sacred Sites in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Washington University in Saint Louis, MO 2009), in particular pp. 71-130 (available on-line, <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd/272>, accessed January 2019), which abounds in expressions like «disdain of Jews» (p. 71), «appalling treatment» (p. 72), «blatant demonization» (p. 73).

⁴⁹ See above, p. 58 n. 12, Within Italy, this translation was followed by yet more silence. Slightly more activity has instead been registered in the romance area with regard to the Middle French version: see M. DI FEBBO, *Jean de Mandeville sulle tracce di Alessandro: dal Roman d’Alexandre al Livre des merveilles du monde*, in A. PIOLETTI,

duction, which shines for clarity of style and completeness of information (in light of the data available at the time), but where no mention is made, for example, of the presence/absence of alphabets in the various versions and redactions, “Cotton” itself included. This may be forgivable in an edition not primarily aimed at a specialist readership; what is perhaps less easily comprehensible is the editor-cum-translator’s total silence regarding the indisputable anti-Jewishness of the *Travels*, though Barisone did point out, quite rightly, that we are dealing with a work «that tips the geographical and moral axis of medieval Europe towards [an] East [...] pervaded by a profound sense of *tolerance*», unlike the world of «the European Middle Ages, catholic and feudal, when compared to Oriental civilizations: both those totally alien to Christianity [...] and the Christian but non-Catholic ones». A work, that is, «precursor of humanistic ethnography»,⁵⁰ in which «rationalism and religion merge [...] in an extraordinary example of open-mindedness».⁵¹ Barisone, nonetheless, was in good company. As we have seen,⁵² only a few years earlier, in 1976, Carlo Ginzburg had examined at length in his *Cheese and the Worms* – abundantly cited and quoted by the later scholar – the importance of the *Travels* in the intellectual growth of Domenico Scandella, the Friulian miller. Admittedly, the Italian historian’s seminal study had much wider implications, but, even if the *Travels* was not the primary object of his enquiry, the place it occupied in Menocchio’s universe was shown to be far from negligibly peripheral.⁵³ Yet, Ginzburg, too, eluded the issue of the anti-Jewishness that quite visibly runs through that work. This omission is all the more surprising in a meticulous investigation repeatedly foregrounding concepts such as “rationality” and, even more to the point, “tolerance”, with reference to some of the books on which Domenico Scandella based his somewhat chaotic formation.⁵⁴ Whatever reasons Ginzburg may have had then, what the inquiring historian did not expose – the rumbling burden of anti-Jewishness of the *Travels*, strange oxymoronic bedfellow of Mandeville’s «boundless tolerance»⁵⁵ – is implicitly questioned and contradicted by the very target of the enquiry, Menocchio himself. While the miller had been deeply impressed by the code of tolerance of the *Travels*, as he had time and again admitted both verbally and in writing during his second trial of July 1599,⁵⁶ he was anything but a passive reader, as Ginzburg has shown: rather, he «mulled over and elaborated on his readings, outside any preexistent framework»⁵⁷ – the *Travels* not excepted, we may add. Hence, Menocchio’s critique of the anti-Jewish prejudice so pervasive in that book; an implicit and

S. RAPISARDA (eds), *Forme letterarie del Medioevo romanzo: testo, interpretazione e storia*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2016, pp. 173-187; EAD., *Re e regine d’Oriente: utopie e distopie del potere nel Livre des merveilles dou monde di Jean de Mandeville*, in G. MASCHERPA, G. STRINNA (eds), *Predicatori, mercanti, pellegrini. L’Occidente medievale e lo sguardo letterario sull’Altro tra l’Europa e il Levante*, Universitas Studiorum, Mantova 2018, pp. 119-142.

⁵⁰ «Un’opera che sbilancia l’asse geografico e morale dell’Europa medievale verso un Oriente [...] pervaso da un profondo senso di tolleranza [...] medioevo europeo, cattolico e feudale, posto a confronto con le civiltà orientali: sia con quelle totalmente estranee al cristianesimo [...] sia con quelle cristiane ma non cattoliche [...] opera antesignana d’una etnografia umanistica» (BARISONE [ed.], John Mandeville, *Viaggi*, p. xv; my italics. Translations in text of this, and of the following quotation below are mine).

⁵¹ «Razionalismo e religiosità si fondono [...] con una straordinaria apertura di mente» (*ibid.*, p. xvi).

⁵² See above, p. 57.

⁵³ «There were some texts that really had meant a lot to Menocchio: and first among them [...] the *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville» (GINZBURG, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 41).

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, in particular pp. 47-51, where “tolerance/toleration” occur at least nine times. Nor has “Mandeville”’s anti-Jewish bias ever been successively acknowledged in the various paratextual additions – such as introductions, prefaces, postfaces, and the like – to the numerous new translations, editions or reprints of Ginzburg’s influential study that have seen the light since its first appearance, including its most recent Italian reprint (Adelphi, Milano 2019).

⁵⁵ *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 48.

⁵⁶ In his own words, in the Italian (or, rather, Friulian dialect’s) original, «*tuto travaliato*» (GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi*, p. 49), «sorely troubled». Domenico Scandella’s first trial had been held fifteen years earlier, between February and May 1584. See *The Cheese and the Worms*, pp. 42, 88.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

oblique correction, however, in that it emerges, not in direct reference to the *Travels*, but in the course of a subsequent interrogation, when, in reply to the accusations levelled at him by the inquisitor, the Franciscan Gerolamo Asteo, concerning Menocchio's allegedly uncertain Christian faith, the miller rebuts by relating a different story with a rich traditional background: the legend of the three rings.⁵⁸ Menocchio had become acquainted with a version of this parable via another book that, next to the *Travels*, left an equally indelible mark on his personal construction of the concept of "tolerance": the *Decameron*, namely the third story of the first day. The protagonist of this *novella*, the sage Jew, Melchizedec, cleverly avoids the snare that the Sultan Saladin had prepared for him by falling back on the legend of the three rings in order to affirm the equal truth and dignity of the three faiths: the Jewish, the Christian and the Saracen. To the inquisitor's questions, Menocchio first replies by paraphrasing Boccaccio's story, saying «Likewise, God the Father has several children, whom he loves, such as Christians, Turks, *and Jews* and to each of them he has given the will to live by his own law, and we do not know which is the right one»;⁵⁹ then, later in the interrogatory, hard-pressed by the inquisitor's insistence, he obstinately asserts that «the majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to heretics, to Turks, *and to Jews*; and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner».⁶⁰ We know how things turned out for proud, unrepentant Menocchio.⁶¹

In conclusion, while the anti-Jewishness of *Mandeville's Travels* has often received, if only in recent times, the attention it deserves, a more exhaustive, in-depth investigation is still desirable than could be sketched here into the two sides of the Hebrew language as presented in that book: at first just an alphabet, almost a curio for the travelling ethnographer, in terms not dissimilar to other, even more exotic ones; then, an actual language for communication, but a language that is mysterious and threatening, incomprehensible outside the diabolical circle of its native speakers, and warped into becoming the vehicle for an imaginary fiendish plot aimed at the destruction of Christianity and the enslavement of the world.

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⁵⁸ On this legend, best known to modernity through G.E. Lessing's dramatization *Nathan der Weise*, of 1779, see now I. SHAGRIR, *The parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history*, «Journal of Medieval History» 23 (1997), pp. 163-177, who argues for its non-Western, Islamic origins.

⁵⁹ *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. 49; here, and in the next quotation, my italics.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶¹ Domenico Scandella, incarcerated for the last time, was eventually burnt at the stake by order of the Holy Office, as the sources tell us, sometime between the last days of 1599 and early January 1600. See *ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

SUMMARY

The peculiar interest in languages and religions shown by the unknown author of the immensely popular *Mandeville's Travels* (third quarter of the 14th century ?) is witnessed, as far as language is concerned, by the descriptions and reproductions of the – often fictitious – alphabets of the principal populations allegedly encountered by the traveller-narrator, including, in particular, the imaginary, undecipherable Hebrew alphabet comprised in BL MS Cotton Titus C. xvi. As regards non-Christian religions, the only exception to Mandeville's empathically "universalist" approach is its unremitting hostility towards the Jews which takes shape in the evergreen chimera of the Jewish conspiracy aimed at the enslavement and annihilation of Christianity. In *Mandeville's Travels*, Hebrew turns into a cipher, a diabolical code allowing secret communication between the external enemy on the march from the Orient to conquer the world – the Jews identified by pseudo-historical traditions with the satanic hordes of Gog Magog –, and the internal enemy, the "fifth column" represented by the Jews living among Christians.

KEYWORDS: *Mandeville's Travels*, Jews in; Alphabets, imaginary; Antisemitism, medieval.

