

# The First Non-Muslim in Makkah and Madinah

## Orang Bukan Islam Pertama di Makkah dan Madinah

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### Abstract

This article is about Ludovico di Varthema who was the first European non-Muslim to visit Makkah and Madinah and to record his journeys as well as impressions. He became famous for three reasons. First, he joined the exclusive club of avant-garde European explorers and discoverers. Second, he was a history-maker, in that he accomplished things no other non-Muslim had ever done before. And third, he furnished the craving 16<sup>th</sup>-century European audience with an additional and priceless reference on Islam, Muslims and Islamic culture, due to which it has been considered a “literary wonder” despite its many deficiencies and errors. The article aims to set the instance of Ludovico di Varthema against the background of the medieval East-West interactions. The article’s research methodology is a blend of descriptive, thematic and content analysis. The article concludes that the case of Ludovico di Varthema was an archetype. It shows how ignorant about, and prejudiced against, Islam and Muslims the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe was. The man was a product of a circumstance and a system of thought. He experienced and chronicled his voyages not just in his personal, but also in his culture’s intellectual and psychological mould.

**Keywords:** Ludovico di Varthema; Makkah; Madinah; Hajj.

### Abstrak

Artikel ini adalah mengenai Ludovico di Varthema yang merupakan bangsa Eropah bukan Islam pertama yang melawat Makkah dan Madinah dan mencipta rekod perjalanan serta kesannya. Beliau menjadi terkenal kerana tiga sebab. Pertama, beliau menyertai kelab eksklusif penjelajah dan peneroka Eropah avant-garde. Kedua, dia adalah seorang pencipta sejarah kerana beliau melakukan perkara yang tidak pernah dilakukan oleh orang bukan Islam sebelum ini. Ketiga, beliau menjadi rujukan tambahan dan tidak ternilai kepada warga Eropah abad ke-16 mengenai Islam, orang Islam dan kebudayaan Islam yang dianggap sebagai suatu "keajaiban kesusasteraan" walaupun terdapat banyak kesilapan dan kekurangannya. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjadikan contoh Ludovico di Varthema yang berlatar belakang antara pertembungan Timur-Barat Zaman Pertengahan. Metodologi kajian artikel ini adalah gabungan analisis

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deskriptif, tematik dan analisis kandungan. Artikel itu menyimpulkan bahawa kes Ludovico di Varthema adalah sebagai satu contoh tipikal. Hal ini menunjukkan betapa jahilnya dan berprasangka buruk terhadap Islam dan umat Islam di Eropah abad ke-16. Lelaki itu adalah hasil daripada keadaan dan sistem pemikiran. Beliau mengalami dan mencatat pelayarannya itu bukan sahaja untuk peribadinya, tetapi juga dalam acuan intelektual dan psikologi budayanya.

**Kata Kunci:** Ludovico di Varthema; Makkah; Madinah; Haji.

### Introduction

It is an Islamic tenet that non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the sanctuaries (*haram*) of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. This applies more strictly to the former. In the case of the latter, however, exceptions such as the extreme necessities of trade, communication, security, etc., are applicable, albeit without non-Muslims being permitted to take up residence in the city.

This rule expectedly intrigued non-Muslims, especially those in Christendom, on account of Islam, Judaism and Christianity representing the family of Abrahamic and Semitic religions. The sentiment was created as soon as the two sides, representing complementary civilizational counterparts, came into official contact with each other and was intensifying ever since in proportion to the expansion of the contacts and the upturn in ties.

Such was the case because, innately, the forbidden things are always more enticing and more attractive. Just the fact that something is forbidden renders it irresistible to many people. The tendency is present as much in children as in adults, the difference residing merely in genus, intensity and scale. The act of exploring and vanquishing forbidden things – often secretly and at own risk – is often perceived as a form of courage and valour. It is yet regarded a “dangerous virtue” and an “honest waywardness”, for it expands horizons, creates opportunities and cultivates maturity as well as purpose.

Thus, when Satan was all out to deceive Adam and his wife in Paradise, he described the forbidden tree to them as the tree of eternity (immortality). He also promised them that by tasting the fruits of the tree, they will attain “a kingdom (power and authority) that will never waste away” (Ta Ha, 120). In the Old Testament, the forbidden tree was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It might as well have been the tree of life (Genesis, 3: 1-5).

This article discusses the case of the first European non-Muslim who visited Makkah and Madinah. The article focuses on the context, the

reasons for the feat, and the consequences. The case reveals much more about medieval East-West (Orient-Occident) relations than it at a first glance may seem.

### **Makkah and Madinah “more jealously guarded than the Holy Grail”**

The interest of Christendom in Islam and the Muslim world in general, and in Islam’s holy cities of Makkah and Madinah in particular, was at a whole new level from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. That was so thanks to the effects of the Reconquista which culminated in the fall of Granada in 1492; to the emergence and rapid spread of the Renaissance movement with an unprecedented focus on humanism (*humanitas*), science, art and exploration; and to the dawning of the Age of Discovery, or Exploration, when the seafaring European nations navigated across continents and mapped the whole world. All that was partly for the purposes of trade, exploration, discovery and adventure, and partly for the purposes of evangelization (proselytization) and potential expansionism and colonization.

The developments set the stage for the emergence of Orientalism as a Western scholarly discipline of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The discipline encompassed the study of the languages, literatures, religions, philosophies, histories, behaviours, customs, art and laws of Muslim and other Asian societies.

To a Christian in Europe, the Muslim world was at once inviting and forbidding. It was a world of opportunities, threats and mysteries. It was a known stranger and an accustomed outsider, so to speak. It furthermore was a world of paradoxes and endless enigmas. While the completion of the Reconquista was a cause for optimism, the seemingly unstoppable advances of the Ottoman Turks into the heart of Christendom from southeast was a foremost cause for concern. It significantly dampened the enthusiasm generated by the former, so much so that Martin Luther (d. 1546) thought, characterizing the outlook of many people, that perhaps nothing could prevent Europe from falling into the hands of the Ottomans. He viewed the Ottoman Muslim peril as the rod of God’s anger against unscrupulous Christians. People were increasingly preparing for a life under the Ottomans.

Despite everything, nonetheless, as the symbols and foundation of all things Islamic, the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, with their holy mosques and the other holy sites in them, remained off-limits, increasing thereby curiosity and augmenting frustration. The only ways in were dis-

guise and secrecy, putting on the line everything, including one's own safety and even life itself. Certainly, the job was not for the faint-hearted. A person needed to fully prepare himself for all contingencies, execute his plans to perfection, and – come what may - persistently look forward to good luck. Regardless, at all times a person was expected to be prepared for the prospect of never coming back. Hardly surprising, therefore, that most of such as ventured into this mission were spies, soldiers, obsessive explorers and sheer mavericks.

The situation was such that Isabel Burton - the wife of Richard Francis Burton (d. 1890), a British orientalist, explorer, geographer, writer, soldier and spy, who in 1853 had clandestinely visited the two holy cities and had “performed” the *hajj* (pilgrimage) – said in 1893 that Makkah and Madinah “are more jealously guarded than the Holy Grail”. She said so when prefacing the memorial edition of her husband's book “Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Makkah”.<sup>1</sup>

While eulogizing her husband's extraordinary pilgrimage feat, Isabel Burton wrote: “For those who may not know the import of ‘A Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Makkah’ in 1853, they will not take it amiss when I say that there are Holy Shrines of the Moslem world in the far-away Desert, where no white man, European, or Christian, could enter (save as a Moslem), or even approach, without certain death. They are more jealously guarded than the ‘Holy Grail’, and this Work narrates how this Pilgrimage was accomplished. My husband had lived as a Dervish in Sind, which greatly helped him; and he studied every separate thing until he was master of it, even apprenticing himself to a blacksmith to learn how to make horse-shoes and to shoe his own horses. It meant living with his life in his hand, amongst the strangest and wildest companions, adopting their unfamiliar manners, living for nine months in the hottest and most unhealthy climate, upon repulsive food; it meant complete and absolute isolation from everything that makes life tolerable, from all civilisation, from all his natural habits; the brain at high tension, but the mind never wavering from the role he had adopted; but he liked it, he was happy in it, he felt at home in it, and in this Book he tells you how he did it, and what he saw.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meeccah*, edited by the author's wife, Isabel Burton, memorial edition, 1893, see the “Preface to the memorial edition”.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The religious exclusivity of Makkah and Madinah often became the stuff of legend, both among Muslims and non-Muslims. It yet was shrouded in numerous hyperboles and outright misconceptions. The authoritative views of scholars were normally disregarded, because they were not pop-culturally inspirational. They were also short of excitement and the feel-good factor. Hence, Eldon Rutter – who, after genuinely embracing Islam, made a journey to Makkah and Madinah in 1925-26 - narrated in his book “The Holy Cities of Arabia” that he had been informed while in Makkah that non-Muslims cannot live in Makkah because the dogs would tear them to pieces in the streets, or God would strike them with thunderbolts from the skies. When the author asked why that was the instance, he was told because non-Muslims want to come in order to poison the Zamzam well, and thus kill all the Muslims in the city.

The same author also recounted a publicized story according to which a Christian came secretly to Makkah but God sent a thunderbolt from the skies which struck him dead. The man came as a soldier within an Ottoman contingent. He was on guard in a fort with a group of other soldiers. However, when the thunderbolt struck it was only him who was killed. “The crack in the masonry of the tower (in the fort) is there till now.” When his comrades wanted to wash him for burial, they found that he was not circumcised.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Who was Ludovico di Varthema (d. 1517)?**

The best way to describe Varthema is to say that he was the first European non-Muslim to visit Makkah and Madinah and to record his journeys as well as impressions. Thus, he was a history-maker and an inspiration to many. He provided a new source to the predominantly Christian Europe for learning about Islamdom and opened a new chapter in East-West (Orient-Occident) relations.

Varthema was an Italian traveller, adventurer and aristocrat. He might have been a soldier as well. Some even suppose that he was a mercenary in the Italian wars of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> He was born most probably in 1470 and prior to his adventures was virtually anonymous, but afterwards his reputation grew exponentially. He in the end was given a knighthood and might have lectured extensively about his travels.

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<sup>3</sup> Eldon Rutter, *The Holy Cities of Arabia*, (London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928), vol. 1 p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Fuess, *Ludovico de Varthema*, inside “Christian-Muslim Relations, A Bibliographical History”, edited by David Thomas and John Chesworth, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 405-409.

He was known as “a gentleman of the city of Rome”. Unfortunately, not much about him exists in historical sources. Most of the information concerning his case is derived from his own book, from what he tells us himself in the contexts of his narratives.<sup>5</sup>

The author recorded his travels in a book titled “The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India and Ethiopia, a.d. 1503 to 1508”. The book was written in Italian and was published in Rome in 1510, two years after the completion of the travels. It was fully translated into English with notes and an introduction, and was published as such, in 1863.

From the outset, the book was very famous and was widely read. It was quickly translated into many European languages, featuring many editions. It had seven Italian editions. It was translated into Latin in 1511, within a few months after the appearance of the original Italian edition. Four years after the Latin translation, in 1515, a German version was published, followed by a Spanish version in 1520, a French version in 1556, and one in Dutch in 1563. Some parts of the book were translated into English in 1577 and 1625-6.<sup>6</sup>

### The context

Varthema embarked on his historic travels because of certain internal and external factors. Regarding the former, he was a man who possessed an insatiable thirst for exploring and learning about foreign places. As a result of his deliberations, he wanted even more. He wanted to visit and explore those places as had been the least frequented by his fellow countrymen bent on a similar enterprise. He knew that his restlessness and ambitions were in no way to be fulfilled by conventional means of “study and conjecture” as he knew himself “to be of very slender understanding”.

But if erudition and scholarship were not his forte, he nonetheless was determined, personally and with his own eyes, “to endeavour to ascertain the situations of places, the qualities of peoples, the diversities of animals, the varieties of the fruit-bearing and odoriferous trees of Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Felix, Persia, India and Ethiopia, remembering well that the testimony of one eye-witness is worth more than ten heard-

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<sup>5</sup> Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, (London: William Heinemann, 1909), p.23. Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, translated into English by George Percy Badger, (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1863), pp. i-ii.

<sup>6</sup> Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, pp. ii-xvi.

says.”<sup>7</sup> Having then accomplished the objective of examining provinces and foreign nations, it appeared to him to communicate the things he had witnessed and experienced to other scholarly persons. Otherwise, he would essentially have done nothing if he kept the treasures associated with his voyages hidden within himself.

And that is how the book of Varthema’s travels came about. He wanted to challenge himself, satisfy his inner cravings, and to learn new things about places least explored and least known. He sought to inspire and enrich others, too, in Europe that was becoming ever more inundated in the free spirit of the Renaissance.

He wished to be a living example and a benchmark. He wanted his book to be a reference in future learning and a conduit not only of information, but also of charm and allure. The like-minded ones were meant to be excited into action thereby, and the sluggish ones to be awakened.

In short, Varthema was a restless soul, living on the edge. He was more than willing to take chances and rush in where most people feared to tread. As such, he was a Renaissance man par excellence. He was quick to underline this predilection of his when he at the beginning of his book declared that for the sake of accomplishing their desires, there have been many men who have devoted themselves to the investigation of the things of this world. There were also those who were of more perspicacious understandings and to whom the earth has not sufficed, and who for the same reason of fulfilling ambitions have begun to traverse the highest regions of Heaven with careful observations and watching.

In the interest of his own self-actualization, Varthema affirmed that although he will be somewhat closer to the former group, he nevertheless was set to follow in the footsteps of neither. He was determined to investigate “some small portion of this our terrestrial globe”, leaving alone Heaven as a burden “more suitable for the shoulders of Atlas and of Hercules.”<sup>8</sup>

As if the author was saying - demonstrating the quintessence of Renaissance humanism - that Heaven should be left to itself and to its heavenly entities, whereas the earth with man as the measure of all things should be the sole focus. Man, accordingly, is the ultimate and autonomous norm. His reason, not subservient to divine revelation, is the basis of all epistemology, ethics, legislature and rule. Heaven is not to be repu-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

diated, but is not to be looked up to either. Man can independently run his own existential business down on earth. He can be in charge of his own ontological and civilizational destinies.

With reference to the external factors due to which Varthema embarked on his legendary explorations, they were related to the most exciting times Europe was experiencing since antiquity. The Renaissance, the Age of Discovery or Exploration, and the embryonic seeds of the impending Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, were such a breath of fresh air following the intellectual darkness and sterility of the entire Middle (Dark) Ages. To be actively involved in the proceedings was such a rewarding experience. It assured “most deserved and high praise from others” and an abundant personal satisfaction.

However, everlasting prominence and fame were awarded almost exclusively to successful travellers, explorers, discoverers and geographers; that is, to those who were disposed to risk it all for the sake of providing the best for the swelling needs of the rolling and open-ended developments and trends on the continent. Varthema recognized where a ticket to distinction was, so he did not hesitate the least bit to go all out for it. He described himself as a person longing for novelty like a thirsty man longing for fresh water. To quench his thirst and realize a dream, he departed from the finite of the known to the infinite of the unknown, and from the comfort and safety of the conventional to the peril and uncertainty of the unconventional.

Those internal and external factors were combined - yet they complemented each other – in Varthema’s persona, igniting the fire of a passion that never stopped burning. His heroes must have been Christopher Columbus (d. 1506), a fellow Italian explorer who completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean, paving the way for the wide-scale European exploration and colonization of the Americas, the last voyage being carried out in 1502 which was only one year before the commencement of Varthema’s exploration feat; and Vasco da Gama (d. 1524), a Portuguese navigator and the first European to reach India by sea, opening up the sea route from Europe to the East via the Cape of Good Hope, and whose second voyage to India was completed in the same year as Varthema’s adventures had begun (in 1503). The exploits of Marco Polo (d. 1324), a celebrated Venetian (Italian) merchant, explorer and writer, must also have been there as an inspiration.



### Two questions

From Venice, Varthema firstly sailed to Egypt, whence he travelled to Syria. From Damascus, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1503 he set out on the march towards firstly Madinah, then Makkah. This route was unique in that no other European non-Muslim traveller followed suit. All of them: Joseph Pitts of Exeter in 1680, Ali Bey in 1807, Giovanni Finati in 1811, John Lewis Burckhardt in 1814, and Richard Francis Burton in 1853, arrived by the Red Sea. Instead of Syria, their base and launch platform was Egypt. In this respect, therefore, Varthema's narrative is unique. At the same time, though, it raises some additional and intriguing questions.

Two of those questions are: was there another reason behind the said journeys? And secondly, did visiting Makkah and Madinah feature in the original itinerary, or was it an impromptu decision hatched by sudden favourable circumstances?

Regarding the first question, there are those who reckon that Varthema's knowledge of military techniques was commendable, owing to which he was a mercenary in the regional wars of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1501, he left Italy for unknown reasons. Then from Venice, "he boarded a ship to Alexandria, possibly because he had heard that the Mamluks (who ruled Egypt, Syria and Hijaz) needed experts in artillery at the time and paid good salaries. From Egypt, it appears that he went to Syria, where he converted to Islam in order to enrol in the Mamluk elite forces. He would later describe this conversion as purely opportunistic and forced upon him by circumstances; in reality, he remained a Christian throughout."<sup>9</sup>

In 1503, Varthema was part of a Mamluk contingent that accompanied a *hajj* (pilgrimage) caravan. After *hajj*, in all probability until 1506, he remained in Mamluk military service. Which means that he actually never visited the countries he described in his book during that period (1503-1506). After 1506, he travelled for two more years, following which, in 1508, he returned to Italy. Varthema "may have assumed that the European public would find it difficult to accept that he had been a Mamluk soldier for five years, but during his time in the Mamluk domains, he would have gathered enough information on the Middle East to fool a 16<sup>th</sup>-century European audience with an account of travels in the region."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Albrecht Fuess, *Ludovico de Varthema*, inside "Christian-Muslim Relations, A Bibliographical History", pp. 405-409.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

In any case, this is a farfetched and highly implausible theory. It does not exceed the level of a mere conjecture, capitalizing on several methodological as well as textual loopholes in the author's book, and generally on a dearth of evidence in relation to Varthema's life pursuits. If so, Varthema would have been a downright deceiver and hypocrite. His entire case – and coveted reputation – therefore, would have hung in the balance.

Whereas in Western scholarship he is generally reputed as reliable and accurate. He also served as a corrector of exaggerations and misunderstandings. Richard Francis Burton, for example, said about him: "But all things well considered, Lodovico Bartema (Varthema), for correctness of observation and readiness of wit, stands in the foremost rank of the old Oriental travellers." Burton called the book "The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema" "quaint and interesting".<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the occasional correspondence between some of Varthema's statements and those of John Lewis Burckhardt more than three centuries later concerning the Hijaz region is so striking as to give rise to the conjecture that that enterprising Swiss traveller had perused and had benefited from the former's book either before or after his own journey into the Hijaz.<sup>12</sup>

As to the question whether visiting Makkah and Madinah featured in the original itinerary of Varthema, the likely answer is in the negative. Varthema must have known the status of Makkah and Madinah to the effect that they were inaccessible to non-Muslims, irrespective of how scanty his knowledge about Islam and Muslims might have initially been. As far as especially Christendom is concerned, such was always the two holy cities' global standing and identity. All other information and interests were closely connected to them.

But after arriving in Syria where he found many Greek Christians and which was ruled by the Mamluks, who had been "renegade Christians" purchased as slaves, Varthema must have gradually changed his mind. That was a time when the Mamluk rule in Egypt, Syria and Hijaz was in rapid decline (it totally collapsed in 1517 and the rule over the said territories passed to the Ottoman Turks). Soldiers' military discipline and moral integrity were hitting an all-time low. In many places, anarchy replaced order, and instability and uncertainty superseded safety and se-

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meeccah*, Appendix IV.

<sup>12</sup> Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, p. xxxvi.

curity. As a result, local rivalries and military conflicts were common. Even the cities of Makkah and Madinah, and the *hajj* rites, were not spared. Varthema himself recorded two skirmishes with large bands of Arabs. He ascribed the cause of the region being in an unsettled state to the prevalence of a great war between four brothers who were fighting for the lordship of the city of Makkah.

Varthema should have sensed in the volatile situation an opportunity. His being “desirous of beholding various scenes” got the better of him. He got to know that a caravan from Syria numbering 40,000 persons and 35,000 camels was about to leave for Makkah and Madinah for the purpose of *hajj*. The caravan was to be accompanied and protected by a group of Mamluk soldiers numbering sixty persons (as a comparison – parenthetically - in the *hajj* caravan from Cairo there were 64,000 camels and one hundred Mamluk soldiers).

Varthema was able to bribe a Mamluk military officer (a Christian renegade) to enrol him in the Mamluk garrison and then to recruit him as a member of the regiment that was to escort the *hajj* caravan. He labelled this relationship with the officer as “a great friendship”. It was right then and right there, without doubt, that his former military skills and experiences established themselves as most valuable. He wanted to prove himself a worthy addition. Apart from bribes, Varthema, on his part, additionally pretended to have accepted Islam, assuming the name of Yunus (Jonah). That way, there was nothing anymore that stood between him and the potential realization of the impossible.

Varthema explains: “(I) formed a great friendship with the captain of the said Mamelukes of the caravan, who was a Christian renegade, so that he clothed me like a Mameluke and gave me a good horse, and placed me in company with the other Mamelukes, and this was accomplished by means of the money and other things which I gave him, and in this manner we set ourselves on the way.”<sup>13</sup>

Varthema’s stay in Damascus for several months, prior to his departure for Makkah and Madinah, could be interpreted as part of his preparations for the accomplishment of his audacious scheme. He used that time for learning Arabic and for forging better relations with the Mamluks and also Greek Christians.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise, he had no reason whatsoever to stay several months in a single city.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Finally, when the impossible mission was accomplished in Makkah and Madinah, Varthema escaped from the caravan and the Mamluk regiment and proceeded to the port of Jeddah whence he sailed to Persia. He had spent as many as twenty days in Makkah, which was needed for the celebration of the rites of *hajj*. He needed afterwards neither the Syrian caravan nor the Mamluk regiment. He did not want to go back nor to re-travel the same road. He had to go ahead and face completely new challenges.

But it must be highlighted that the man was canny and even mischievous. In many ways, he was also a con and charlatan. He perceived all that as a form of battle for survival and as ways “the human intellect manifests itself under certain circumstances”.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, it became necessary for him to exercise that particular provision on many occasions, one of them being in connection with the plan of escaping from the caravan in Makkah.

He narrates that once in Makkah when he was out to make some purchases for his captain, he was accused by a man (a certain Mamluk as well) of being a non-Muslim. However, not only did he manage to convince instantaneously the accuser to the contrary, but also did he form a solid friendship with him. He was invited to the man’s house and was treated with great honour. Varthema later used the same man and his family’s remarkable kindness and hospitality for planning and carrying out the escape mission. He was concealed in their house in a secret place. From there, he fled. In return, Varthema had earlier induced his captain that, under his name, his new “friend” might lead out from Makkah fifteen camels laden with spices without paying any duty.

Varthema was very confident in his abilities. At the same time, however, he also displayed how desperate he was and how much he needed his friend’s help in Makkah (for being a deserter was a serious crime). When the latter asked if he could help him not to pay duty for his mini caravan and its load of spices, Varthema boastfully replied that if he would save him and offer his house as a shelter, he would enable him to carry off not fifteen but a hundred camels if he had so many, because the Mamluks enjoyed such privilege. “And when he heard this he was much pleased.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-51.

**An example of inadequate knowledge and prejudice**

George Percy Badger, the translator of “The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema” into English in 1863 and the author of the book’s generous “Introduction”, said: “Considering that our author is the first European traveller on record who visited the holy places of the Muhammedans, and taking into account how scanty must have been his previous knowledge of the history and distinctive doctrines of Islam, his description of Mee-cah and of the hajj may fairly claim to be regarded as a literary wonder. With but few exceptions, his minutest details are confirmed by later and far more learned writers, whose investigations on the whole have added comparatively little to the knowledge which we possess of the Mussulman pilgrimage through the pages of Varthema.”

Despite calling the book “a literary wonder” that possesses the accurate and confirmed “minutest details”, the same, in contrast, was a proof of Europeans’ inadequate knowledge – and lack of appreciation - of Islam and Muslims, as much in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the book was composed and published, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was fully translated into English and when the above statement has been made.

For illustrative purposes, Varthema often used the word “filthy” to describe certain aspects of Islam, Muslims and the holy cities. According to Augustus Ralli, “filthy” was the word “most often on his lips.” For instance, the black Bedouin tents were “rough and filthy”. At Madinah, the library in the Mosque of the Prophet contained the “filthy traditions and life of Mohammed and his fellows”. There were many sects and dissensions and discord “among this kind of filthy men (early Muslim generations)”. They (pilgrims) left Madinah “satisfied, or rather wearied, with the filthiness and loathsomeness of the trumperies, deceits, trifles, and hypocrisies of the religion of Mohammed”.

Astonishingly, to Augustus Ralli, the author of the book “Christians at Mecca”, such a language by no means was dishonourable, or at least inappropriate and insensitive. Rather, it was the outcome of Varthema’s wearing of “his zeal for knowledge like armour of proof against the many disagreeable impressions that assailed him.”<sup>17</sup>

Varthema at one point said that “although they say that the Moors have five or six wives, I for my part have never seen any who had more than two or three at the most.” Here, no less than practically, the author debunked somewhat a prevalent misconception in Europe about marriage in Islam. “They” certainly stood for the people he had left behind.

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<sup>17</sup> Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, p. 24.

Such a bigoted view was epitomized by the words of Martin Luther in 1528: “The third point is that Mohammed’s Koran thinks nothing of marriage, but permits everyone to take wives as he will. Therefore, it is customary among the Turks (Muslims) for one man to have ten or twenty wives and to desert or sell any of them that he will, when he will, so that in Turkey women are held immeasurably cheap and are despised; they are bought and sold like cattle.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Varthema described the desolate natural condition of both Makkah and Madinah as a curse from God. About Makkah he wrote: “You must know that, in my opinion, the curse of God has been laid upon the said city (Makkah), for the country produces neither grass nor trees, nor any one thing. And they suffer from so great a dearth of water, that if every one were to drink as much as he might wish, four qattrini (ancient Italian currency) worth of water daily would not suffice them.”<sup>19</sup>

And about Madinah, he said that “the country around the said city lies under the curse of God, for the land is barren, with the exception that about two stones’ cast, outside the city, there are about fifty or sixty feet of palm-trees in a garden (most probably in Quba’, one of the city’s suburbs), at the end of which there is a certain conduit of water, which descends at least twenty-four steps, of which water the caravan takes possession when it arrives there.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, Makkah at the same time is styled as the city that was most beautiful and very well inhabited. It contained about 6,000 families. The houses were “extremely good, like our own, and there are houses worth three or four thousand ducats each.” Concerning Madinah, however, Varthema only remarked that it contained about three hundred hearths (households), and was surrounded by walls made of earth. The houses within were constructed with stone walls.

For the author Muslims were “the Moors”, which at that time, specifically, applied to the former members of the Muslim population of al-Andalus - now Spain and Portugal - but later, by extension, applied to any Muslims. As one would expect, the name was often used in a derogatory sense. It was an evaluation and verdict. It was an ideology. To be a Moor (Muslim) was to be accursed and condemned.

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *On the War against the Turk*, (Aurora: Hope Lutheran Church, 2016), p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

In retrospect, Muslims lost all control of al-Andalus in 1492, having ruled the region since 711. By 1502, the Christian rulers tried to forcibly convert all Muslims to Christianity. However, when the initiative did not work, they imposed brutal restrictions. So much pressure was applied on the remaining Spanish Muslims that the object was to eliminate all the traces of Islam and Muslim culture in the country.

Varthema knew all that. He was a contemporary of the events. He also knew that he was behind enemy lines and that he was walking into the lion's den. But that perhaps was making the personal experience – and ultimate victory – all the more sweet. He witnessed first-hand how much people in Makkah were infuriated because of Vasco da Gama's recent massacre of a group of Indian pilgrims (about 400 of them whose ship had been looted, their possessions stolen, and then all of them locked inside the ship and burned to death) and because of the persistent Portuguese hostilities along the Malabar Coast of India which brought trade between especially southwest India and the Hijaz region to a standstill.

Varthema detected that the markets of Makkah were not supplied as much as he was expecting. He recognized that something was amiss. He inquired: "If this was the city of Mecca which was so renowned through all the world, where were the jewels and spices, and where were all the various kinds of merchandize which it was reported were brought there." The answer was given to the effect that the king of Portugal was the cause, "he being Lord of the Mare Occano (the Atlantic) and of the Persian and Arabian Gulfs."<sup>21</sup>

The tragedy of al-Andalus, in addition, was not a distant memory and some of its ensuing ramifications still reverberated. Muslims felt the weight of the ideology contained in the "Moors" appellation. Antagonism towards Christians and Europe, consequently, was more severe than ever. The *hajj* season was an annual conference of Muslims. Similarly, it was an annual gathering of a global family with global concerns, aspirations and hopes. Ideas, sentiments and general affairs were cordially exchanged. Information and news travelled faster than via any other channels and means.

Based on his personal involvements, befittingly, Varthema managed to secure more reverence and admiration from his friend and host in Makkah because he displayed his ostensible hatred of, and animosity towards, Christians (in particular those hostile and blameworthy Portu-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

guese) and because of how much ostensibly he wanted and was ready to assist those who would fight them. He said to his Makkah friend and host: “I was the most skilful maker of large mortars in the world...I assure you that, if they (those beings, i.e., Muslims, intent on fighting Christians) knew what I am capable of, they would send to find me even to Mecca.” Hearing this, the host exclaimed: “Mahomet be ever praised, who has sent us such a man to serve the Moors and God.”<sup>22</sup>

### Deriding Muslims and Islamic culture

Hence, whenever he could, Varthema did not hesitate to directly and indirectly deride Muslims and Islamic culture. Demonstrating the official – and widespread - Christian views, he depicted Islam and Muslims as a (heretical Christian or Jewish) sect. Accordingly, Prophet Muhammad was an impostor and a false prophet. His teachings were heresies. They were mere vanities. At one point, Varthema called Muslims “pagans” who come to Makkah from all parts of the world.

In the context of analysing *hajj* rituals, he also said that Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) was instructed to sacrifice his son Ishaq (Isaac), as it is a Judeo-Christian belief, rather than Isma’il (Ishmael), as it is a Muslim belief. Neither Ishmael nor Muslims (Arabs) as his progeny (Saracens and Ishmaelites) deserved such a privilege, because Ishmael was “a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (Genesis, 16:12).

As a sign of his ignorance, Varthema called Prophet Muhammad “captain”. He said that some people back home in Italy and elsewhere in Europe held that his body was suspended in the air at Makkah, which he said must be reproved. He then emphatically declared: “I say that it is not true. I have seen his sepulchre in this city, *Medinathalnabi*, in which we remained three days, and wished to see everything.”<sup>23</sup>

Varthema then wrongly reported that both ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan were also buried with the Prophet. About Abu Bakr he said was “cardinal, and wanted to be pope.” ‘Umar b. al-Khattab and ‘Uthman were captains of the Prophet, that is, the captain’s captains. The Prophet’s mosque in Madinah and the holy mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-haram*) he called “temples”. With reference to the latter, he further said that it “is a very beautiful temple, similar to the Colosseum

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 25.



of Rome, but not made of such large stones, but of burnt bricks, and it is round in the same manner.”

The Ka’bah is called “tower” or “turret”. The structure over the Zamzam well is called “tower” as well, “like one of your chapels”. The rite of *tawaf* (circumambulation) around the Ka’bah is called “the pardoning in Mecca”, and the rite of *wuquf* (standing, staying) at ‘Arafat is called “the day of Pentecost”, which is a Christian holiday as well as festival celebrating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus after his ascension.

That many people after performing *tawaf* bathed with the Zamzam water, so as to symbolically wash away their sins (to be pardoned) – which, in fact, was a religious innovation and superstition - Varthema understood and interpreted as an Islamic prescribed ritual. He said: “And those who draw the water throw three bucketsful over each person, from the crown of their heads to their feet, and all bathe, even though their dress be made of silk. And they say in this wise, that all their sins remain there after this washing.”<sup>24</sup>

To Varthema, this somehow seems to have been a big deal, most probably because the act was redolent of his Christian (Catholic) notion of indulgence, or pardon, for sins, which around that time was increasingly condemned and was a prelude to the Reformation. In passing, when Varthema died in 1517, Martin Luther was around 34 years old and his reformatory programmes, at the heart of which stood rejection of selling indulgences or pardons, were in earnest. That is perhaps the reason why the *tawaf* process, which at the end included purported physical bathing and the spiritual washing away of sins too, was called by Varthema “the pardoning in Mecca”. An entire chapter in his book is dedicated to the subject, which is likewise called (“The pardoning in Mecca”).

About the other rituals and formalities of *hajj*, such as those associated with ‘Arafat and Mina, Varthema furnished his readers only with a rudimentary and scanty overview. There is very little noteworthy there. Even so, he still managed to call attention to the fact that there were about 30,000 poor men and women. They were beggars and opportunists who “came more on account of their hunger than for the sake of the pardon.” As a proof that it was so, the author narrated that they had a great number of cucumbers, which came from Arabia Felix, “and we ate them all but the rind, which we afterwards threw away outside our tent. And about forty or fifty of the said poor people stood before our tent, and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-41.

made a great scrambling among themselves, in order to pick up the said rinds, which were full of sand.”

The same poor people would make very large holes in the earth, and would put in them camels’ dung. Thus they made little fires and warmed (cooked) a little the flesh of the sacrificial animals, after which they ate it. Varthema repeated: “By this it appeared to us that they came rather to satisfy their hunger than to wash away their sins.”<sup>25</sup>

### Unicorns in “the temple of Mecca”

Varthema amazingly spoke about two unicorns which were in an enclosed space “in another part of the said temple” (*al-masjid al-haram*). The legendary creatures were shown as “very remarkable objects (miracles), which they certainly are.” The author even reserved a chapter for the matter titling it “The chapter concerning the unicorns in the temple of Mecca, not very common in other places”.<sup>26</sup>

However, most scholars dismissed the account as a misinterpretation, misjudgement, and even a fable. That Varthema wanted to render his travels a bit more fascinating and exotic, could also be a possibility. The more extraordinary the narratives were, the better – surely - it was. In some matters, he might as well have granted himself a licence to overstate and embellish things, for the extraordinariness of his name and reputation depended on the extraordinariness of his voyages. As Richard Francis Burton remarked, some information were disfigured “with a little romancing”.

Varthema might have thought that so curious and ignorant the 16<sup>th</sup>-century European readership was that people could easily be duped into believing whatever was forthcoming from extremely outlandish and unexplored places. The Muslim holy cities were to be presented as having it all and Varthema was as much fortunate as eager to do the honours. The times were so exhilarating that the doctrine to the effect that ends justify means reigned supreme. If Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama were able to commit with impunity myriads of military and economic crimes in the name of a similar ideology, Varthema would have thought that he could do the same thing in the fields of “knowledge”, mythology and amusement. Each endeavour, indeed, connoted a segment of the novel European “holy struggle”.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

Regardless, the move was among the first seeds of Western popular culture and was simultaneously of the first steps in the direction of creating a mass appeal for it. Unicorns, therefore, should be seen as nothing but belonging to the same league as – yet preceding and heralding – Aladdin and his wonderful lamp, Ali Baba and the forty thieves, Sinbad the sailor and his fabulous voyages, and the rest of legends and imaginary characters associated with the Arabian Nights. By the way – as a small detour - the first European version of the anthology “One Thousand and One Nights” was a French translation in 1704-1717. English translations materialized in 1859, 1882 and 1885 by Edward William Lane (d. 1876), John Pane (d. 1916) and Richard Francis Burton (d. 1890) respectively.

At any rate, in consequence, Varthema put significantly his reputation and integrity on the line. No matter how much some scholars tried to mitigate the situation, his accuracy, judgments and overall credibility could easily still be questioned. Burton, for one, said that the “unicorns” “might possibly have been African antelopes, which a *lusus naturae* (a freak of nature) had deprived of their second horn. But the suspicion of fable remains.”<sup>27</sup>

George Percy Badger, the translator of Varthema’s book, moreover commented: “I was inclined, at first sight, to coincide in this (Burton’s) opinion, and to conclude that Varthema saw merely two anomalous specimens of the Oryx, by no means an uncommon quadruped on the north-east coast of Africa, judging from the quantity of its horns brought to Aden by the Somalis. On further reflection, however, I am induced to believe that the ‘unicorns’ which our traveller describes with so much exactness, and which were ‘shown as very remarkable objects (miracles)’, were living representatives of a species of the antelope family, the existence of which is very generally doubted.”<sup>28</sup>

The following is Varthema’s description of the two miraculous “unicorns”: “I will tell you how they are made. The elder is formed like a colt of thirty months old, and he has a horn in the forehead, which horn is about three braccia in length. The other unicorn is like a colt of one year old, and he has a horn of about four palmi long. The colour of the said animal resembles that of a dark bay horse, and his head resembles that of a stag; his neck is not very long, and he has some thin and short hair

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, Appendix IV.

<sup>28</sup> Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, p. 46, footnote no. 2.

which hangs on one side; his legs are slender and lean like those of a goat; the foot is a little cloven in the fore part, and long and goat-like, and there are some hairs on the hind part of the said legs. Truly this monster must be a very fierce and solitary animal. These two animals were presented to the Sultan of Mecca as the finest things that could be found in the world at the present day, and as the richest treasure ever sent by a king of Ethiopia, that is, by a Moorish king. He made this present in order to secure an alliance with the said Sultan of Mecca.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In any case, as a final point, Varthema was famous and his book well received in Europe for three reasons. Firstly, he joined the exclusive club of avant-garde explorers and discoverers. Secondly, he was a history-maker in the truest sense of the word, in that he accomplished things no other non-Muslim (Christian) had ever done before him. And thirdly, he furnished the hankering 16<sup>th</sup>-century European audience with an additional and priceless reference on Islam, Muslims and Islamic culture, by reason of which it has been regarded as accurate and trustworthy, and as “a literary wonder”, notwithstanding a great many deficiencies and out-and-out errors.

It must be admitted that all that was making a perfect sense for a medieval and early modern European cultural, together with intellectual, grasp. Varthema’s age was an age when Europe was facing serious shortage of knowledge about Islam and its peoples and culture. References were as scarce as they were fragmentary and inaccurate. The only collection that was available was composed solely for the sake of anti-Islamic polemics created by Christian polemicists and apologists, such as John of Damascus (d. 749), Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), Robert of Ketton (d. 1187), Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (d. 1320), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) and Alphonso de Spina (d. 1491).

All those were meant to agitate Christians, which was not necessarily best expressed in religious debates but in crusades against Islam and Muslims. The aim was to defeat and disgrace Muslims at all fronts, to recapture as many territories lost to them as possible, to ward them off and keep them under control as much as feasible, and, if ever viable,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-49.

force them into a state of perpetual servitude.<sup>30</sup> The followers of a heresy, an impostor and the devil deserved no better.

Robert of Ketton was the first who translated the Qur'an into Latin. It was the 'standard version' for European readers and refuters of Islam up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Luther famously worked on securing support for this Qur'an's publication, which finally came to pass in 1543 by Theodore Bibliander (d. 1564), a Swiss reformer, Christian missionary and apologist. For this first printed edition of the Qur'an in Latin, Martin Luther wrote his illustrious preface.

Not only in this preface, but also elsewhere, did Luther regularly lament Christians' limited knowledge of the "falsehood of Islam". He espoused that the condition needed to change quickly if Christians were to properly recognize the defects and weaknesses of their enemy and if they were to utterly defeat it. It was inconsequential, under the circumstances, that the said translation of the Qur'an was often condemned as completely untrustworthy and misleading. Some even described it as a paraphrase, which served to fuel the majority of medieval anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim polemics.<sup>31</sup>

It goes without saying that Varthema's book did not – and could not - deviate from the established patterns. In its own right, it served the set of predetermined goals and agendas. He was neither a Christian polemicist nor an apologist, but was a servant of a wider creed that encompassed as much Christianity as the emerging free and secular (humanist) spirit of a new Europe. To support its own cause, each side was capable of finding something in Varthema's eccentric personality and in his literary work that was as eccentric and as invigorating.

Undeniably, the man was a product of a circumstance and a thought. He composed his book not just in his personal, but also in his culture's intellectual and psychological image. For the same culture, expectedly, the book was a "literary wonder" and its author "for correctness of observation and readiness of wit" stood "in the foremost rank of the old Oriental travellers."

In his masterpiece "Orientalism", Edward Said mentioned Varthema only once, as someone who in his capacity as a renowned traveller on a par with Marco Polo (d. 1324) and Pietro Della Valle (d. 1652)

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam, A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 9-19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

contributed to the Orient, and in particular the Near Orient, being known “in the West as its great complementary opposite since antiquity.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 52.