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ISBN (hardback) 9789004307520

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# The Mughal Padshah. A Jesuit Treatise on Emperor Jahangir's Court and Household

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JORGE FLORES (ED. & TRANSL.)

In 1610 or 1611, the Portuguese Jesuit Jerónimo Xavier drafts a brief treatise on the mughal court at the time of emperor (*padshah*) Jahangir; this testimony, entitled *Tratado da Corte e Caza de Iamguir Pachá Rey dos Mogores*, is the fruit of his long stay of about twenty years at the court of Agra, where he went as leader of the third Portuguese Jesuit mission in India. Jorge Flores, specialist on Portuguese India, here provides us with the edition of the original text (which is handwritten and remained unpublished until our days), as well as with the English translation, preceded by a short foreword and especially by a long introduction. This extensive introduction is in fact a real study allowing the reader to contextualize the document and to understand its contents, particularly through the use of letters sent by the Jesuit Father to his superiors.

In spite of its brevity (19 folios) and its minor echo in other works, this text is interesting in many respects.

- First of all, it is part of the tradition of ethnographical observation, which was particularly developed in the Hispanics within the framework of their explorations, but which goes back to Hérodote and Tacitus,

including the chroniclers of the Crusades, Marco Polo and especially the Mendicant friars who explored Asia in the 13th century; and we know that the Portuguese Jesuits were pioneers of the ethnographical method, of which the text under scrutiny gives testimony.

- Secondly, focused on the life at court, this treaty begins a comparative reflection about the political power, bringing together the rich political reflections raised by Humanism; in this respect, it is necessary to underline that the religious concern to convert to Christianity the peoples of the new worlds is particularly discreet for the author. If his faith contributes to a certain ethnocentrism, it does not decisively direct his attention in choosing subjects of observation—and it is possible that the brief mention about converted Christians, added after the explicit of the treatise, is an addition by the copyist.
- Finally, the description itself, which covers only about ten printed pages, is followed by a long list (of about twenty pages) of the income of the Emperor's children and captains; this rather dry passage may disappoint readers expecting exoticism, but it confers to this text an additional function, namely that of showing to what extent financial data, from an early date, became a key element of political information—the subject is already approached in the chapter “Dos tizouros, e rendas que este Rey tem” (edition pp. 138-140/ translation pp. 98-101), and it implicitly underlies the entire treatise.

The introduction is divided into two parts, analyzing at first the textual tradition (two ‘original’ versions, in Portuguese and in Spanish, the first one being the most complete, without forgetting two abridged versions), the reception of the text, the identity of the author—which is subject to

debate—and the cultural and political context of the relations between the Portuguese installed in Goa and the Mughal Empire. In a second step, the introduction examines the author's work of observation and reflection, in particular his use of quantified data. In this second part, which interests us most, Jorge Flores stresses that the author of the treatise is not merely a casual observer, but also an actor at Jahangir's court and that he therefore also plays an important role of cultural transmitter. He could do so thanks to his mastery of the Persian language, mixing in his writing especially the Latin and Arab-Persian literary traditions of the 'mirrors of the princes'.

Jerónimo Xavier was part of and confronted with an incredibly cosmopolitan world of which the reader can now catch a glimpse and which contrasts with the rigor and the exclusivism of the religious positions—a phenomenon also familiar from today's globalized world. Cultural and linguistic diversity is manifest in Xavier's text itself, which is a testimony in Portuguese, by a member of a fundamentally 'Roman' Religious order, about an Indian dynasty of Persian cultural tradition and Arabic religious tradition,

The rich historiography which studied the reign of Jahangir since 1922 allows the editor to raise and highlight the numerous gaps in the information delivered by the Jesuit author: the cultural life and the religious policy of the emperor, as well as his personality, are untold. But he is maybe a little bit severe in qualifying the text as a "static text, deprived of motion and of a sense of spatial and chronological exchange" (p. 48). After all, it is obvious that this treaty is a technical report, of utilitarian purpose, and not a travel account or an exhaustive inventory of the world, or even less a history of the Mughal Empire—to answer the criticism of a lack of temporal depth. The author focuses on the center of power (the town and the palace), the prince's family (including the *ḥarīm*, source of the 'Orientalist' fascination of the 'Westerners'), the nature and practice of political power, in particular

the ceremonial of court, here giving an 'Orientalist' image of 'the Asian tyranny'. But the Jesuit's main focus of interest is clearly the financial organization of the Mughal State.

In fact, it is mostly the need to measure that is consubstantial with power in its bureaucratic form (and J. Flores on this occasion justly quotes J. Goody's *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*); yet, the easiest and finest means of quantifying wealth/power is money. This is the motivation behind the (apparent) financial obsession of the entire text, which, in the final part ("Revenues of the Sons of Jahangir, *padshah* King of the Mughals, and of his Captains" pp. 105-129), downright transforms into a long account roll.

Jorge Flores suggests that the author did not necessarily collect this information himself but could have easily taken it from Abu-I Fazl's *A'in-i akbari*, which was written only a few years earlier (in 1595), and that, as far the accounting section proper of the treatise is concerned, the information could have been found in a fiscal roll of the Mughal chancellery.

The work of presentation done by the editor is excellent, among others things because it confronts the treatise with numerous contemporary texts of the same kind, drafted in diverse languages (by Thomas Roe, Francisco Pelsaert, Sebastião Manrique...). We can only regret that, beyond relevant but limited remarks (for example on the rarity of the words in local language or on Jerónimo Xavier's interest for the local fauna), he did not synthesize some essential aspects of the text itself, especially the method of presentation and the author's anthropological conceptions, which make all the interest of this exoticism's literature—beyond its factual information.

In contrast to the views advocated by the *linguistic turn*, representations should certainly not be a historian's only object of study. But it is obvious that the (highly constructed) scholarly texts that place at their core moral values as keys to interpreting the world, must be subject to cultural

interpretations—even when they are, as this one, halfway between empirical inventory and ethnographical systematization and are not obviously intended to satisfy readers' wish for exoticism.

The author of this review is not qualified to judge exactly the quality of the English translation, which seems excellent; it is true that the original text is drafted in a clear language, without literary ornament, adapted well to the author's objective, which is to transmit precise and accessible knowledge—in brief, a language designed for teaching. Some differences which the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese language preserves compared with the current standard (for example "*pella menham sedo*", p. 135, § 28, for '*pela manhã cedo*') do not prevent a Portuguese speaker from reading the text. For an English speaking reader, the translation is not less necessary there.

This translation raises the usual problem of adequately reproducing in the target language (English) the idioms of the source language (Portuguese). This issue is aggravated here by the gap between Latin languages and Germanic ones. For example, it is necessary to translate simply by 'inside the Palace' (p. 95) the delicious idiomatic expression '*de sua porta a dentro*'. But the closeness of the Indo-European languages and the intermediation of French between English and the Latin languages during the Middle Ages often allow for a perfect literal translation, as it is the case with the expression of the total sums, for which Portuguese says '*montão todos*' and English 'all amount to' (and French '*le tout se monte à*').

All in all, it is an excellent publication. The study which precedes the edition/translation is very rich in erudite information and will do the greatest services to historians of Mughal India and the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. As for the edition: it is impeccable. And together with the excellent English translation it makes accessible to a wide public a testimony fascinating,

in spite of its formal aridity, about the contacts between peoples and civilizations.

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