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Tracing the source of the Sparrow-Hawk Castle legend from John Mandeville's *Travels*

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Abstract. The plot of the Sparrow Hawk Castle, the fairy and the cursed Armenian king was first used by John Mandeville in his *Travels,* which became a source for Johann Schiltberger's *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger: a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396–1427,* Jean of Arras's chivalric novel *Mélusine*, and Couldrette's *The Romans of Partenay, Or of Lusignen: Otherwise Known as the Tale of Melusine.* This article aims to identify the historical location of the castle-fortress and to uncover the source of its legend.

Keywords: John Mandeville, Wilbrand of Oldenburg, travelogue, sparrow-hawk's castle, legend, source, location of the castle

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Научная статья
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Поиски претекста легенды о ястребином замке, представленной в травелоге Джона Мандевиля

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Аннотация. Сюжет о ястребином замке, ее владетельнице и проклятом армянском царе впервые использовал Джон Мандевиль в «Путешествии по морю и по суше». Его текст стал источником для «Путешествия по Европе, Азии и Африке» Иоганна Шильтбергера. Эта история выступила одной из ведущих сюжетных линий рыцарского романа Жана из Арраса «Мелюзина», а также романа Кулдретта «Книга о Лузиньянах, или Мелюзина». В статье ставится задача уточнить локус, в котором размещается замок-крепость и совершается действие, и определить претекст легенды.

Ключевые слова: Джон Мандевиль, Вильбранд Ольденбургский, травелог, ястребиный замок, легенда, претекст, локализация замка.

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On September 29, 1322, the English traveler John Mandeville embarked on a long journey around the world, visiting numerous distant countries, including Armenia, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, India, Mesopotamia, Persia, Chaldea, Greece, Tartary and others. His travelogue, filled with impressions of these Eastern regions, wondrous tales, and personal adventures, was first written in French and Latin. Later, to make this book comprehensible and accessible to "the people of his nation," as he stated, he translated it from French into English. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* enjoyed unprecedented popularity in Europe, where it was devoured

with such avidity by contemporary readers that it overshadowed numerous factual descriptions of Eastern travels. Mandeville's work, a compilation of fictional wanderings liberally embellished with legends and traditions situated within a historical-political context, pioneered a new genre of travel writing, defined by its overt fictionalization and a marked convergence with the conventions of the chivalric romance.

This article examines the Armenian episode in Mandeville's *Travels*, focusing on the legend of the Sparrow-Hawk Castle in Greater Armenia. The narrative recounts how an Armenian king, through his own folly, provoked a curse from the castle's fairy mistress, resulting in the loss of his kingdom.

Although the plot of "the curse that fell on the Armenian king" is the legend's core (a motif analyzed in our prior work "The motif of a king, cursed by a fairy, and a sparrow-hawk: a comparative analysis"), the present study requires a brief summary of the Armenian narrative as it appears in Mandeville's *Travels*.

According to the original text, when the travelers reached Trapezund...

> from thence men go through Little Armenia. And in that country is an old castle that stands upon a rock; the which is clept the castle of the Sparrow-hawk, that is *beyond the city of Layays beside the town of Pharsipee* (the italics is ours – **the authors**), that belongeth to the lordship of Cruk, that is a rich lord and a good Christian man; where men find a sparrow-hawk upon a perch right fair and right well made, and a fair lady of faerie that keepeth it. And who that will watch that sparrow-hawk seven days and seven nights, and, as some men say, three days and three nights, without company and without sleep, that fair lady shall give him, when he hath done, the first wish that he will wish of earthly things; and that hath been proved often-times.
>
> And one time befell, that a King of Armenia, that was a worthy knight and doughty man, and a noble prince, watched that hawk some time. And at the end of seven days and seven nights the lady came to him and bade him wish, for he had well deserved it. And he answered that he was great lord enough, and well in peace, and had enough of worldly riches; and therefore, he would wish none other thing, but the body of that fair lady, to have it at his will. And she answered him, that he knew not what he asked, and said that he was a fool to desire that he might not have; for she said that he should not ask but earthly thing, for she was none earthly thing, but a ghostly thing. And the king said that he ne would ask none other thing. And the lady answered; "Sith that I may not withdraw you from your lewd corage, I shall give you without wishing, and to all them that shall come of you. Sir King! ye shall have war without peace, and always to the

> nine degree, ye shall be in subjection of your enemies, and ye shall be needy of all goods." And never since, neither the King of Armenia nor the country were never in peace; ne they had never sith plenty of goods; and they have been sithen always under tribute of the Saracens [1. P. 98–99].

The location of the Sparrow Hawk Castle and the origins of its associated legend have attracted significant scholarly attention. First recorded by Mandeville and later adapted by travelers and writers like Johann Schiltberger, Jean of Arras, and Couldrette (in his *Melusine*), the tale has prompted scholars to investigate its origins and to pinpoint the real-world locus of the castle where the plot unfolds.

This analysis begins by examining the possible location of the sparrow-hawk's castle. While the name initially appears to be a fictional invention, with no historical and geographical meaning, a closer study reveals its potential connection to Armenian toponymy derived from the words for 'hawk' or 'falcon'. This link is supported by several historical sources. The Florentine traveler and merchant Balducci Pegolotti, in his famous 14th-century work *The Practice of Trade*, documents a station named Piana di Falconieri – "Valley of the Falconers" – on the Ayas-Tabriz route. The Armenian historian Yakov Manandyan in his book *About Trade and Cities of Armenia in Connection with World Trade of Ancient Times* explains that "ancient Armenian sources mention a place called "Bazudzor"[1] or "Falcon Valley," which can be compared to Piana di Falconieri" [2. P. 295]. Further reinforcing this connection, historian Georgy Mikaelyan claims that "the root *baze* (ֆալկոն) denoted a number of localities in Armenia, near the Armenian-Iranian border" [3. P. 359]. Most notably, a castle named Bazeberd (Բազեբերդ [bazeberd], Բազեի բերդ [bazeji berd], Ցնաբերդ [tsnaberd] [4. P. 544] – literally "Falcon Castle" – existed in Cilician Armenia near the surroundings of Bardzrberd. It is thus highly plausible that these falcon-related toponyms, particularly Bazeberd, were known to European writers like John Mandeville. By naming his fictional landmark the "sparrow-hawk's castle," Mandeville may have been drawing upon this real-world geographical lexicon, thereby giving it geographical concreteness.

[1] [bazudzor] is translated from Armenian as a 'valley of falcon'.

According to Mandeville's account, the castle is situated near Layas (Layazzo, Ayas) and the town of Pharispee (see the italicized part in the citation above). The localization of this area, however, is a subject of scholarly disagreement. One significant identification comes from the renowned Armenian poet and ethnologist Ghevond Alishan, who argues that the site is Partzerpert (Բարձրբերդ – [bardzrberd]), located to the east of Molevon[1] and to the northwest of Sis [5. P. 156–158].

Walter Xavier, in his work *Before the Great Discoveries: The Image of the Earth in the 14th Century: Mandeville's Travels*, proposes a location between Ayas and Korikos [6. P. 338]. A different hypothesis, found in the English commentary on Johann Schiltberger's *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger: a native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396–1427*, equates the Sparrow Hawk Castle (Castel d'Epervier) with the "Maiden's Castle" (Kiz-Kalesi [Kyz-Kalesi]) [7. P. 149]. This identification is based on the account of traveler William Francis Ainsworth, who, in his book *Travels and Researches in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, and Armenia*, described seeing an "ancient Kiz-Kalesi" near Kerasun, not far from the road from Kastamuni to Boyabad. As he stated, "…we observed before us the dismantled walls and crumbling fragments of a castle, which occupied the summit of a nearly insulated rock. This place is known to the natives by the name of Kiz Kalehsi (the Virgin's Castle), a name not uncommon in the East, and significative of 'unconquered'." [8. P. 87].

Phillip Bruun, the Russian translator of Schiltberger's *Travels*, proposes a location "near Greek Kerasun (*kureson*), between Samsun and Trebizond" [9. Comment 59]. In contrast, Matthew of Edessa situates the fortress of Barzrberd a day's walk north of Sis [10. P. 477], a placement later echoed by Victor Langlois, a well-known French historian, archeologist and orientalist, specializing in the Middle Ages, "The Bardzberd fortress is located at the distance of one day away from Sis" [11. P. 498].

One of the names of Partzerpert (Բարձրբերդ – [bardzrberd]) is Farsipeh (Փարսիպե – [farsipe]), which corresponds to the city Pharispee, mentioned by Mandeville. This provides direct evidence confirming Ghevond Alishan's hypothesis that Mandeville was referring to Partzerpert [12. P. 631], which in English means 'a high fortress'.

[1] Molevon is a fortress in the Mountainous Cilicia.

While the geographical reference is thus clarified, the literary source of the legend remains more elusive. Researchers have established that Schiltberger relied on a German translation of Mandeville's *Travels* for his version of the hawk and the Armenian king. Another medievist, Albrecht Klassen, further specifies that this was likely the translation by Michel Welser, produced between 1393 and 1399 [13; 14. P. 10]. The ultimate source that Mandeville himself drew upon, however, has yet to be definitively identified, despite scholarly attempts to trace the source for his narrative or the *pretext*.

Thus, Christiane Deluz, a scholar of Mandeville's work, points to an ancient Armenian legend recorded by the German traveler Wilbrand of Oldenburg, the bishop of Paderborn and Utrecht [15. P. 218–219]. Wilbrand, the envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV, (before 1180–1230) and at that time the envoy of Duke Leopold VI of Austria, accompanied by the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights Order Hermann von Salza, journeyed to Cilician Armenia in 1211–1212. His detailed itinerary describes a route through Alexandretta, Mamistra, Tarsus – where he was received by King Levon I – and Adana, before arriving in Sis for the Epiphany celebrations in January 1212 [16. P. 60]. His account provides detailed description of the journey through the Cilician Armenia, giving thorough information about the roads and the location of the castles, particularly on the strongholds of military orders like the Teutonic Knights [16. P. 60]. He did not ignore Greater Armenia, where "Noah's ark rested on the mountains" ("in cuius montibus arca Noe post diluuium requievit") [17. P. 175].

Wilbrand enriched his travelogue with local folklore, including a legend about a "mountain of adventures" (montem de aventuris) near the fortress of Thila (Tilus) in Plain Cilicia[1]– Tilij [tilij][2]. In Arabic sources this fortress

[1] Tila, Tila Berd [tila berd] – a fortress in Plain Cilicia [4. P. 450].

[2] The castle-fortress was first mentioned as "Til" during the First Crusade in the late 11th century. In 1137, it was captured by the Byzantine Emperor John II Comnenus during his campaign through Cilicia. The Armenian Baron Thoros II captured and garrisoned the castle in 1151. In May of 1154, the Byzantine Emperor invited Masud I, the Sultan of Konya, to attack Toprakkale, but the Sultan failed to dislodge the Armenian garrison, which was assisted by Frankish knights. It was recaptured by the Byzantine forces under the leadership of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Comnenus. Sometime before 1170, it came under Armenian control again. In 1185, Toprakkale Castle was

is mentioned as al-Tini (al-Tīnī) or Hisn al-tinat (Ḥiṣn al-Tīnāt / Ṯīnāt), in Latin ones – as Canamella[1] or (Caramella, Caramela) [19. P. 230]. In the year 647 of the Armenian chronology (1198), on the 6th of January, on the day of Epiphany (Theophany or Baptism of Our Lord Jesus), when Levon was crowned king of the Cilician Armenia under the auspices of the Roman church and the German emperor, among the princes – the owners of the fortresses – there was Robert, the ruler of Til (Tilus). By the time of Wilbrand's visit in 1211–1212, however, judging by the *Chronicle* of Smbat Gundstable, the fortress was under the control of Choslin (Joslin) [20. P. 116, 123].

According to Wilbrand of Oldenburg's itinerary, the coastal fortress of Canamella was situated near Mamistere, north of Alexandretta. His account states, "Then, leaving the black fortress of the king on the right and passing a certain fort called Canamella, we approached Mamistere ("Deinde relinquentes ad dextram castrum regis nigrum et transeuntes castellum quoddam, Canamellam uidelicet, uenimus Mamistere")" [17. P. 175]. The narrative then continues with

> Having returned to Kanamella, which I had spoken about above «we came to Thila and visited the beautiful castle of a nobleman. The castle is located on a beautiful mountain, which they call the mountain of adventure. For, as we have heard from a reliable story, luck and success undoubtedly await the one whoever, after six weeks of fasting and days of repentance, climbs the mentioned mountain. ("Abhinc reuertentes uersus Canamellam, de qua supra dixi, venimus ad Thilam, quod est castrum ualde bonum cuiusdam nobilis. Iuxta illud situs est quidam mons satis amenus, quem **montem de aventuris** appellant. Sicut enim ex ueridica relatione audiuimus, quicunque sex septimanis ieiunauerit et penitencialibus illis diebus peractis communicaueri, et sic ieiunus dictum montem intrauerit, procul dubio boni euentus et fortunati sibi occurrunt") [17. P. 179–180].

given to the Principality of Antioch as ransom for the return of Baron Ruben. Bohemond III, the Prince of Antioch, became the new master of the castle. Nine years later, it was again in the hands of the Armenians. In the first half of the 13th century, the castle was known as "Tila" and was considered to be an impressive fortified complex, also known as the Royal Black Castle [18].

[1] Canamella consists of two words: canna, which in Latin means 'reed', and mella that is 'honey'. Apparently, sugar cane was cultivated in this area [5. P. 475].

A question arises then. Who told this legend to the bishop of Utrecht? Since he especially emphasizes that he does not doubt the authenticity of the story, it est., the provider of the information is worthy of trust, and we can assume that the narrator of the story was a highborn, noble person, most likely a representative of a knightly order. This hypothesis is also supported by the fact that in 1214 Levon II gave the port of Canamella to the Knight Hospitallers for two years, in exchange for the money he had borrowed from them [21. P. 76; 5. P. 475]. The further fate of the port is connected with the Knight Templars[1].

Further elaborating on the "mountain of adventures," Oldenburg's *Itinerarium terrae sanctae* recounts his encounter with an Antioch knight. The knight claimed that, after completing the required ceremony (six weeks of fasting and days of repentance), he discovered a napkin[2] that provided all necessary sustenance for his family and guests. The knight added that it would be great happiness if such a miracle could happen to those in need ("Quod multorum compertum experimento. Inter que illud pro magno reputo, quod quidam miles, quem et nos uidimus in Antiochia, illic huiusmodi casu inuenit quoddam manutergium, quod sue familie et hospitibus, quotquot uocare consueuit, omnia necessaria in uictualibus ministrauit, ita ut in mensa et super parata inuenirentur. Utimam eciam huiusmodi minister hodie uite succurreret indigencie") [17. P. 180].

The legend included by Wilbrand of Oldenburg in the itinerary is of a local nature, because it is tied to a specific area – a mountain near the Thila fortress – "the mountain of adventures." In fact, it is largely through the work of Wilbrand of Oldenburg that this Armenian legend, extant in 13th-century Cilician Armenia, was recorded and preserved for posterity.

[1] In 1266, when the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt and Syria Al–Malik al–Zahir Rukn al–Din Baybars al–Bunduqdari (more known as Baibars) captured the fortress, it was in the possession of the Templars [19. P. 374–375].

[2] In Russian folklore, it is called a self-assembling tablecloth. – See the Index of Aarne Thomson (D1472.1.8. – Magic table-cloth supplies food and drink. (Cf. D1153.1.)) [22] and Comparative Index of motifs by Andreev (# 563 – Чудесные дары: человек получает скатерть-самобранку) [23].

Can the legend recorded by Wilbrand of Oldenburg – whose authenticity he himself affirmed – be considered the "archetypal matrix" for Mandeville's tale of the sparrow-hawk's castle? The answer is ambiguous. It is plausible that Mandeville, likely drawing upon a version of this widely-circulated Cilician legend, adopted its core "test–reward" motif. However, he significantly elaborates upon this foundation, enriching the semantic core with additional narrative layers and complicating its structure. Mandeville reframes the plot according to the scheme of a chivalric adventure novel. Furthermore, his narrative is not devoid of historicity by anchoring the action within a specific historical timeframe.

A comparison of the Mandeville and Oldenburg versions reveals both a shared foundation and significant divergence.

1. The narratives are united by a common plot structure centered on the "test–reward" motif. As Oldenburg states, "luck and success undoubtedly await the one whoever, after six weeks of fasting and days of repentance, climbs the mentioned mountain." Mandeville's version features a similar ordeal: the fairy will fulfill the first request for any earthly thing of the one who "seven days and seven nights, (and as some men say, three days and three nights) without company and without sleep" will entertain the sparrow-hawk.

2. Furthermore, both authors set their tales at a specific, symbolic location: a fortress or castle upon a mountain. Oldenburg locates the legend at the "mountain of adventures," while Mandeville describes a castle on a rock inhabited by a beautiful maiden with a falcon (a sparrow-hawk). Thus, a similar set of core motifs is evident. However, the parallels end here. A crucial element in Mandeville's composition – the violation of a taboo – is entirely absent from Oldenburg's legend. Mandeville's narrative tension hinges on the Armenian king's transgression against the fairy's condition that he wish only for "any earthly thing."

Thus, this study has traced the literary lineage of the legend of the Sparrow Hawk Castle and the cursed Armenian king from its appearance in John Mandeville's *Travels* to its subsequent adaptations in Johann Schiltberger's *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger: a native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396–1427* and the romances of *Mélusine* by Jean of Arras and *The Romans of Paternay, or of Lusignen: Othervise Known as the Tale of Melusine* by Couldrette [26; 27]). It has also proposed a geographical locus for the Sparrow Hawk Castle-Fortress itself.

While future discoveries may yield further evidence, the analysis underscores the need for continued elaboration and analysis of Mandeville's original narrative of the sparrow-hawk and the fairy.

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