

Demystifying oriental alterities: Pedro Teixeira and the Early Modern scientificity regarding the Past

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Abstract

Long before the physical and linguistic rediscovery of Oriental Antiquity, during the 19th-century, echoes of its cultures reverberated in Europe, through the knowledge of the Classics and the Old Testament. The Early Modern travellers, who crossed the lands of the Near and Middle East, tried to accommodate those venerable echoes into what they experienced *in loco*, which more regularly than expected was dissonant. This process constitutes an early form of reception of Antiquity, which broke the frontiers of time. Pedro Teixeira, amongst others, left his impressions regarding present, but more particularly, regarding past Oriental alterities, in an intertwined analysis of both his cultural framework and the local data he came across with. By doing so, he challenged the frontiers of knowledge of his time. Moreover, his thorough analysis displays a scientificity that seldom is manifested in merchants and soldiers, as he was. Thus, we propose to examine his travel accounts, hoping to highlight a case-study of the Portuguese contribution to the deconstruction of some misconceptions about the Oriental alterity.

Keywords: Pedro Teixeira, Oriental Antiquity, Portuguese Orientalism, Reception Studies.

1. Western accounts of Oriental Antiquity in Early Modern times

When challenged to participate in this multidisciplinary debate on frontiers and revolutions of knowledge, inevitably we thought about the impact that the archaeological and linguistic rediscovery of ancient Mesopotamia had in the 19th-century. The identification of ancient cities referred in the Old Testament, such as Nineveh, or the translations of literary works, such as the *Epic of Gilgameš*, which contained episodes that paralleled the ones described on the Bible (like the Deluge), defied and transformed the notions transmitted by the biblical account. From then on, a different *corpus* displaying a metaphysical discourse that contributed to the edification of the Western monotheistic identities was available for new and exciting studies. This revolution was initiated long before when European travellers crossed the Near and Middle Oriental regions looking for material evidence of their sacred written text.

Since late Antiquity and throughout the Middle and Early Modern times, there were several travel accounts written by Judeo, Islamic and Christian agents who were drawn to this area, searching for the origins of their own cultural and religious identities¹. Given the Portuguese presence in the Orient, from the late 15th-century on, it was only logical that Portuguese travellers left a solid imprint on the Early Modern knowledge produced about the Oriental *otherness*, both present and past. By describing what they observed and experienced *in loco*, when crossing Persia, Mesopotamia and Palestine coming from the Portuguese State of India, several Portuguese travellers were pioneers in the

identification of data about Oriental Antiquity, thus defying the *status quo* of knowledge of their time.

Additionally, and given that the rediscovery of Mesopotamia was not only part but also prompted the 19th-century Orientalism, one can address these early Western accounts as previous forms of this movement. A closer look into the impressions these travellers wrote down allows identifying ways of perceiving and accommodating these alterities in the Western mental frameworks. This subject matter is not new, particularly regarding the so-called Portuguese Orientalism of the 16th and 17th centuries, as shown by Sousa Viterbo, Gerson da Cunha and Sampaio Bruno, in the late decades of the 19th-century. During the first half of the 20th-century, the importance and the richness of these Early Modern accounts on the Orient was not adequately addressed by academia². This scenario has changed, mostly with studies focused on the way coetaneous Oriental alterities were perceived by Portuguese agents in the Portuguese State of India (see, for instance, Thomaz, 1996; Curto, 1997; Rodrigues and Hespanha, 1999; Xavier and Županov, 2015).

Regarding references made to Antiquity, Nunes Carreira (1980, 1998) was a forerunner on this kind of intertwined analysis. Recently, Rui Loureiro and Vasco Resende (2011) coordinated a four-volume critical edition of Don García de Silva y Figueroa's account about the time he spent in Persia as ambassador, during 1616-1624. Lately, we have been interested in revisiting this subject matter from a Reception Studies' perspective. That is why we decided to present a case-study of a Portuguese Early Modern traveller, who at his time challenged some established canons: Pedro Teixeira, a soldier and merchant.

2. The scientific spirit of Pedro Teixeira

Before undertaking the journey that took him to the region between the Tigris and Euphrates (1604-1605), Pedro Teixeira had already crossed the faraway lands of Malacca,

Borneo and Manila, crossing the Pacific, and wandering through Acapulco, Havana and Bermuda³. This first voyage already reveals a curious mind, which hungered to be in contact with different realities. Moreover, it might explain his profound sensibility and attention to local costumes and languages, which would be fully revealed in the production of his "Relaciones" (1610), the account he wrote about his trip through the Near and Middle East.

Teixeira started his career as a soldier, but soon developed a commercial activity, which increased during the years he spent in the Portuguese State of India⁴. At the end of the 16th-century, possibly due to these activities, he undertook long voyages and was able to publish his accounts. Contrary to the costume in practice, his *opus* was not sponsored by the Crown or by the aristocracy but paid at his expenses.



Fig. 1: Frontispiece of the original Pedro Teixeira's *opus*, published in Antwerp in 1610 (Teixeira, 1610).

A man of the world, this Portuguese traveller first published his "Relaciones" in Antwerp, where he lived once he returned from the Orient. This international vision, as it would be called today, can also be identified in the language he preferred to use, Castellano, which he thought to be more communicable (Teixeira, p. iii), and thus allowed his accounts to reach a far vaster audience. Though the use of Castellano could be understood as logical, given that Teixeira published his book during the Iberian Union (1580-1640), the fact is that this choice differentiated him from others. Several contemporaneous writers who also issued their own travel narratives on the same region, such as D. Álvaro da Costa, Frei Gaspar de S. Bernardino, Nicolau de Orta Rebelo, and António de Gouveia⁵, did it in Portuguese, thus preventing their accounts from achieving a higher impact. Curiously or not, Teixeira's account was the only one soon to be translated into Latin (1633), and later into French (1681), and English (1715) (Fuente del Pilar, 2005: 641).

A very interesting aspect of "Relaciones" is the reason that Teixeira presents to produce it. In the introduction, which he addresses to the reader, the author declares that since his youth he had been curious about History, and frequently found himself puzzled by the disaccords amongst reputable Greek and Latin scholars (Teixeira, 1610: 2). It should be recalled how the Western European scholarly tradition, throughout time, bestowed to the Classic authors a profound historiographic authority, only comparable (or even surpassed) by the biblical redactor. The Classical texts were considered as crucial sources to be consulted by the European travellers to help to accommodate and to understand the visual and oral references they came in contact with throughout their journeys.

Teixeira's perplexity grew stronger when he met some Persians of "no vulgar science and knowledge" (Teixeira, p. ii), who disputed the information he had on Persian history, particularly regarding its ancient kings. Following the advice of those inhabitants, Teixeira looked for the chronicle of Mīr-Khvānd, a 15th-century Persian historian, to

have access to more detailed information. The first part of his *opus* focused on the kings of Persia, was thus based on this work, along with the testimonies of local people⁶.

Denying an intention of disputing venerable opinions, Teixeira wisely declares that his purpose is to display "what the Persians had in their memory and it is considered as truth by their own accounts", attributing credit to agents that inhabited the land and somehow witnessed the events (Teixeira, 1610: 2v).

Moreover, Teixeira states that by dedicating his accounts to the readers, he hopes that they bear in mind that he intended to record what he witnessed *in loco*, cautiously warning that if any doubt should arise, they should try to verify the possibility of what he described, given that "many people can write about a Region, Kingdom, or Province, given many can see it, but just a few can observe it and inquire about it" (Teixeira, 1610: 4v).

Though Teixeira's account does not directly quote Classical texts, such as the ones written by Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Flavius Josephus, or Pliny, as other fellow travellers of his time did, the fact is that he paid particular attention to the oral and written narratives of the region⁷. Moreover, Teixeira was a fine linguist, with knowledge in Persian, Arabic and other Eastern dialects. This feature allowed him to make vital associations between the toponymy of the ancient sites of Mesopotamia and Syria and the contemporary toponyms attributed by its inhabitants, thus contributing to mitigate some misconceptions about the Orient and its Antiquity.

As we will see, it is to him that academia owes the first detachment from the general Western idea that the biblical Babel corresponded to Baghdad. With this recognition, Teixeira defied a consolidated notion, which was only confirmed in 1899, with the archaeological works on the territory by a German expedition.

This Portuguese traveller reveals, consequently, an inquisitive mind, combining the curiosity and attraction for a mystical Oriental alterity, with a scientific approach, via careful observation of the local references

and memory.

3. Teixeira's annotations on ancient Mesopotamia

Let us now focus on the third part of "Relaciones", where Teixeira describes his travel from India to Italy. Apparently, when he departed from Goa to Hormuz, on the 9th of April 1604, he already had the will to focus his return journey in the Mesopotamian region. At the time, the more common itinerary was the route from Hormuz to Bandar Abbas where the travellers could visit the ruins of the Persian Empire. Instead, Teixeira crossed the Gulf and headed straight to Basra, preferring to concentrate his time in the land between the rivers.



Fig. 2: The main itinerary of Pedro Teixeira in the Middle East (1604-1605). Map made by the authors.

There, he joined a caravan of one hundred and fifty camels, ninety-five donkeys and twelve horses, and initiated his long journey.

The city of Mashad Ali (modern Najaf) was the first major destiny, where the caravan rested for some days. Then, it travelled to Mashad Husayn (modern Karbala), which allowed the travellers to spot, along the way, the tomb of Prophet Ezekiel. Attentive to local traditions, Teixeira carefully noted that Muslims and Jews called this prophet "Ezkhel", but regardless of this small linguistic difference, the three monotheistic faiths were joined in his worship, due to his holiness and miraculous deeds (Teixeira, 1610: 102). This first reference is vital for the argument on the location of Babylon that Teixeira delineates further ahead, given that according to Ez 3:15,

Ezekiel joined the exiled population of Judah, during Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

At the time, many Europeans speculated about the exact location of Babylon, following the same dilemma ancient and venerable authors had. For instance, Frei Gaspar de S. Bernardino, who travelled throughout this region around the same time as Teixeira, stated that "Babylon, as I have said, was built between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates", following the words of Saint Jerome (Bernardino, 1953: 199). The legendary immense area of the city (*circa* three days long) helped to consolidate his notion. Some decades before, Mestre Afonso, a surgeon at the service of the Portuguese viceroy, who crossed the Middle East amidst the 16th-century, did not doubt that Babylon was on the Tigris and that the river flowed through the city (Baião, 1923: 220). Teixeira would distinguish himself from these and other Europeans, by presenting a solid argument based on his own experience, as we will see.

Leaving Karbala, the caravan headed to Baghdad, a logical decision given the cosmopolitanism aura of the city. The beauty of its towers and mosques, allied with its exotic smells, noises, and diversity, drawn Westerners who looked to experience some of the fascinating Oriental mysticism.

The caravan stopped again to rest, on the 3rd of October 1604, at the place of Musayyib, a village on the left bank of the Euphrates. Here, Teixeira made some interesting observations. Downstream Musayyib, he wrote, was located "Héla" (i.e. Al-Hillah) "an ancient place where the exiled offspring of Israel wept on their way to Babylon". From there, Teixeira states, the caravan followed north "with the place of ancient Babylon at our right, where there were not many vestiges or people like it was prophesized to be." (1610: 111).

These two references allude to his expected knowledge of the Old Testament, as a European. As it is well known, Psalm 137 displays the desolation of the captives of Judah, who wept by the rivers of Babylon, referring to the exilic episode. On the other hand, several biblical prophets announced the fall and destruction of Nebuchadnezzar's

capital. Accordingly, there could not be abounding vestiges of this ancient city, given that, by the will of the biblical god “she [Babylon] will not be inhabited but will be completely desolate” (Jr. 50, 13).

To the monotheistic reader of “Relaciones”, it was thus evident that Babylon could not be far, somewhere along the Euphrates.

After describing his impressions on the magnificent Bagdad, where the caravan arrived one day later, Teixeira concludes assertively: “This city of Bagdad is commonly confused with Babylon, by reason, I suppose, of the neighbourhood of its ancient site, no more than a good day’s march; but to see the difference, it is enough to know that Babylon stood on the Euphrates, and Bagdad is on the Tigris” (1610: 124-125).

Because no great vestiges could have survived the wrath of the biblical God, Teixeira’s logical reasoning led him to find a possible identification amongst the local toponym. Once again, the author’s linguistic knowledge and attention to local traditions allowed him to associate the word Babel correctly “yet bearing that name amongst those nations” (Teixeira, 1610: 126) with ancient Babylon.

The intertwined knowledge of Old Testament, with the *in loco* observance of geography and toponymy, left no doubts in Teixeira’s mind that Babylon could not have corresponded to Bagdad. To convince further his reader, he adds that according to the local chronicles, Bagdad was only founded in the year 145 of Hegira (763 AD), long after the demise of Babylonia.

We do not know precisely where Teixeira thought ancient Babylon was situated (possible 2 leagues to the right of Musayib, and thus further north to the precise location of the site), but he was correct in his assertion that it was located in the left bank of the Euphrates, and absolutely sure in noticing the survival of the ancient site’s denomination Babel. Tell Babil, which was only excavated by Koldewey and his team in 1899, derives from the ancient name *Bābīlim*, in Akkadian, which means “God’s gate”.

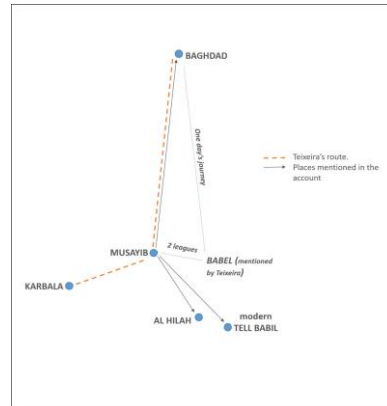


Fig. 3: The deductions of Pedro Teixeira about the location of ancient Babel/Babylon. Map made by the authors.

Though Teixeira did not identify the exact location of Babylon, his logical interpretation, which led him to other correct assumptions, should be highlighted. Teixeira was the first Westerner to identify the ancient ziggurat of Dūr-Kurigalzu (modern Aqar-Qūf) correctly, deconstructing the general notion that these ruins corresponded to the Tower of Nimrod (that is, the Tower of Babel). Since this site was near Bagdad, as Teixeira observed, and given that Bagdad was thought to be Babylon, its remains were commonly associated to the Etemenanki (the original name of the ziggurat of Babylon).

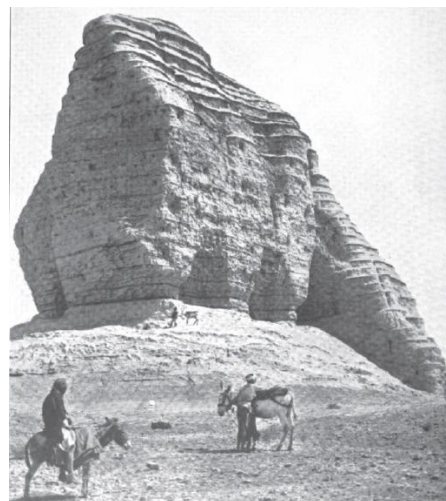


Fig. 4: The ruins of the ziggurat of ‘Aqar Qūf, ancient Dūr-Kurigalzu (Rogers, 1915: 439).

From Baghdad, Teixeira headed to Anah, Taybah, and then to Aleppo. Near the last city, he stopped at Urfa, modern Şanlıurfa, which he identified with “the place where the Chaldeans tried to burn Abraham”, thus calling it Ur (1810:186)⁸. At present, the correct location of the biblical patriarch’s homeland is still disputable. It might be the Sumerian ancient city of Ur or somewhere in the region of modern Turkey. Thus, Teixeira identification of episodes surrounding the *persona* of Abraham with the town of Urfa/Şanlıurfa is not at all misplaced.

Arriving at the island of Cyprus, Teixeira embarked on a ship to Venice, where he landed in July 1605. Little is known of his life after this journey, apart from his later presence in Antwerp, where he published his book and probably died.

4. Final Remarks

We cannot ascertain if the well-known European travellers of the 17th-century, such as the Italian Pietro della Vale or the Spanish García de Silva y Figueroa had access to the account of Pedro Teixeira. However, the translation of “Relaciones” into other languages, as stated before, can suggest a broader impact of his work.

This *opus* advocates thorough attention to linguistic and geographic details. Moreover, it recognises the importance of knowing and considering local traditions and memory when observing alterities, a feature that modern historical sciences correctly support.

Therefore, even if we cannot fully ascertain the diffusion of “Relaciones”, we may argue that Teixeira took a different historiographic approach, defying and revolutionising conceptions of his time using a pioneer scientific analysis.

Today, Teixeira’s work comes to life again, offering the possibility for new studies, which will be able to highlight the role of the Early Modern Portuguese travellers on the Westerner improvement of knowledge about

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¹ To name just a few of these travellers, evoking the ones from the Iberian Peninsula: the Christian nun Egeria (4th-century), the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, and the muslim Idrissi (both from the 12th-century) (Fenollós, 2011: 31-32; Invernizzi: 2005).

² For instance, António de Gouveia, a Portuguese diplomat, was the first European to identify the cuneiform writing, a fact that is commonly ignored by European and American archaeologists, but was highlighted by the famous Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer (1963: 9). Gouveia's interpretation preceded Pietro della Valle's, to whom is commonly attributed this recognition.

³ This journey took place between 1597 and 1601.

⁴ Born into a possible Jewish northern Portuguese family, Teixeira soon established himself in Lisbon, following a military career (Carreira, 1980: 101). In 1586, after he embarked to the Orient, he lived in several cities such as Goa, Kochi, and Mazandaran

(Fuente del Pilar, 2005: 632),

⁵ These travelers crossed the Near and Middle Eastern regions in several trips on the first years of the 17th-century: D. Álvaro da Costa between 1610 and 1611; Frei Gaspar de S. Bernardino and Nicolau de Orta Rebelo participated in the same journey in the years of 1605 and 1607; and António de Gouveia travelled between 1609 and 1610.

⁶ "Relaciones" is divided in three parts: a section to the kings of Persia, other to the kings of Hormuz, and the last devoted to its Itinerary.

⁷ The travel accounts written by clergymen, like Frei Gaspar de São Bernardino, were more inclined to have these kind of Classical references, probably due to their scholarly formation.

⁸ Mestre Afonso had already payed special attention to this city, linking it to the Old Testament tradition, by stating that the legendary king Nemrod founded it (Baião 1923: 240).