



Azerbaijan in the account of the trip to the East by Felice De Vecchi (1841-1842)

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Doi: 10.2478/gssfj-2018-0012

Abstract

The article aims to illustrate how Azerbaijan appeared in the eyes of an Italian who, in the first half of the nineteenth century, had the opportunity to visit it during a trip to Constantinople. Between 1841 and 1842, Felice De Vecchi, a wealthy Milanese passionate about painting and travel, embarked on a journey, together with his naturalist friend Gaetano Osculati, to Constantinople and then, through Persia, visited India. He kept a diary of that journey, only recently found in its almost totality, dedicating an entire chapter to Azerbaijan, the "land of fires". From his account, rich in anthropological and pictorial notations, emerges a very well-defined sketch that does not hide the wonder of those who meet housing situations and customs far from their country of origin. In order not to lose the most emotional component contained in De Vecchi's writing, the frequent quotations of passages from the diary are presented in the English translation, followed by the original text in nineteenth-century Italian.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, journey, geographical history*

Between April 2, 1841 and July 21, 1842, a Milanese aristocrat, Felice De Vecchi (1816-1862) (Figure 1), together with his naturalist friend and entomologist, Gaetano Osculati¹ (Figure 2), undertook a long journey through the territories of the Near East via the Danube and the Black Sea, which would take him to Constantinople. From there he crossed Turkey and, following the ancient caravan routes, crossed Persia from North to South, reaching India and finally returning home via Egypt.

¹ Osculati also wrote a brief account of this journey: *Note di un viaggio nella Persia ed Indie Orientali negli anni 1841-1842*, Tipografia Luca Corbetta, Monza 1844

* Part of this paper was presented at the *International Panel Discussion "Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas: 25 years of Italian-Azerbaijan relationships"* held in Genoa on May 12th 2017.



Figure 1: Felice De Vecchi



Figure 2: Gaetano Osculati

Of this experience, born from the desire to satisfy an innate curiosity and the exotic fascination for the East, then very fashionable², he wrote a detailed and tasty report full of information, anecdotes and impressions, which was published only for its first part (from the Danube to Turkey) in 1847 and 1854 (two editions identical in content), with the titles *Newspaper of Caravan and Excursion along the theatre of the current war, from the Danube to the Caucasian Regions, or trip to Armenia, Persia and Arabia*³. But a few years ago, a young scholar, Alice Bitto, who had done her degree thesis on this traveller, in the Vidiserti house of Rho, the ancient residence of F. De Vecchi, as well as wicker baskets full of sheets, strange objects,

² See the considerations of A. BRILLI, *Il viaggio in Oriente, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009*.

³ According to a prospectus compiled by De Vecchi himself, these two parts should have been followed by a third relating to the remaining part of the journey until the arrival in Bombay, of which, however, there are only a few isolated pieces left.

papers, drawings, paintings (Figure 3) and books, found the complete manuscript of this report and the rich private archive, editing the full edition of this manuscript entitled "Journal of a caravan", also enriched by valuable drawings of its author, which she published with a rich set of notes and a glossary, which greatly facilitate its reading and its contextualization also entrusted to a valuable introduction⁴.



Figure 3: Painting inspired by the journey

This complete edition consists of two volumes, the second of which contains the part of the manuscript hitherto unpublished, ranging from the fifth to the eighth chapter. The fifth chapter interests us here because it is dedicated to the description of Persian Azerbaijan, the north-western region of present-day Iran, in which De Vecchi came from Armenia after having seen and described Mount Ararat and having reached Karaklissa (Black Church). It was the land called Media by the ancients (in fact, it cites Strabo) and at its time Adgerbeigian, that is, land of fire, which, according to tradition, drew its origin from the pelvis, because "there is no land more than this reminiscent of volcanic tears, and traces of remote combustion" [*“non v’ha terreno che più di questo ricordi squarciamenti vulcanici, e tracce di remota combustion”*](p. 14)⁵.

De Vecchi remembers and illustrates the main geographical and environmental characteristics, the rural areas and the urban centres, the economic, political and social reality, as well as the cultural characteristics of this territory, which boasts of being among the first Italians to have visited after Marco Polo, Giosafat Babaro and Pietro della Valle, sometimes recalling testimonies of scholars and other travellers and different authors of the classical tradition (among the Greeks: Herodotus, Xenophon, Aristotle, Polybio, Posidonius, Plutarch, Arriano, but especially Strabo; among the Romans: Cornelius Neupheus, Pomponius Mela, Plinius the Elder,

⁴ See F. De Vecchi, *Giornale di carovana. Brano di un viaggio nell’Armenia, Persia, Arabia e Indostan*, fatto negli anni 1841-42, Luni Editrice, Milan, 2016 (two volumes).

⁵ The parts we indicate at the end of this and subsequent quotations refer to the second volume of the edition edited by Alice Bitto.

Tacitus, Aulus Gellius, Justin, Quintus Curtius, Julius Maternus and Ammianus Marcellinus).

On the basis of his diary, we will outline the itinerary he followed, recalling his most significant descriptions and impressions in order to highlight the importance of his report. We learn that after Karaklissa, De Vecchi and his fellow caravans continued on horseback to reach the village of Arandidali ("a wretched relic of a burnt city", [*una sciagurata reliquia d'una città incendiata*"]) p. 15), made up of "a group of low, filthy cases of lava, with a door, a window, a dormer window, a squat and unbalanced door, which does not enter where you think you can stand on the person" [*un gruppo di luride casipole di lava, bassissime, cui è porta, finestra, abbaino, una tozza e sbilenca porticina, che non entri ove ti prenda il pensiero di tenerti ritto sulla persona*"] (p. 15). Along the way they continued to find, as they had done before (for example from Trebisonda to Tabriz), traces of fortresses built by the Genoese to ensure their commercial activity with Persia and India from the assaults of the Kurds.

After leaving Arandidali, they arrived, through a harsh valley, at Zivah, "a disgraceful camp of fourteen dens humbly placed around a public bakery, monstrous and colossal pyramid of mud, like the dirty courtesans around them" [*sciagurato accampamento di 14 tane poste in giro umilmente ad un pubblico forno, mostruosa e colossale piramide di fango, come le lerce cortigiane che gli stavano dattorno*"] (p. 16), where they managed to avoid an assault by the Kurds. The next stops were the "large village of Koralich" [*grossa borgata di Koralich*"] (p. 20), surrounded by many swamps, "which led into a spacious valley, with some footprint of greenery" [*che immetteva in una valle spaziosa, con qualche orma di verde*"] (pp. 20-21), where a horde of about two hundred Kurds was camped, of whom De Vecchi illustrates the origin, characteristics and behaviour, on the basis of some information he had been given by "a certain Mr. Bertoni, an Akim Basci (Protomedician) of the royal prince and of the supreme judge of all Christians, whom he had known in Tabriz" [*un certo Signor Bertoni, un Akim Basci (Protomedico) del principe reale e del giudice supremo di tutti i cristiani, che aveva conosciuto a Tabriz*"]. For example, he recalls that "they do not use wine, and the ban is so strict that those who break it want to be subject to a sufficiently brutal punishment. They suspend it by the feet at a tree and let him extinguish for several hours; if there is a relapse, they aggravate that punishment with the addition of blows of a stick" [*non fanno uso di vino, ed il divieto è così rigoroso che chi lo rompe vuolsi che venga soggetto ad un castigo bastantemente brutale. Lo sospendono per i piedi ad un albero e ve lo lasciano spenzolare parecchie ore; se vi è ricaduta aggravano quel castigo con un'aggiunta di colpi di bastone*"] (p. 57).

Passed through Isciatti and Aljsceen, arrived in Zorava, "which is populous and picturesque is unfolded by its modest farmsteads along the green slope of a hill" [*che popolosa e pittoresca si spiega co' suoi modesti casolari lungo il verde pendio d'una collina*"] (p. 26), before leaving for the city of Khoi, situated on the edge of a plain cheered up "by pleasant countryside, by an affair of pleasant and green pastures" [*da campagne ridenti, da una vicenda d'ameni e verdi pascoli*"], where "between the blonde of the ears, the plants of cotton, flax, castor-oil, tobacco, the intricate indulgence of the large

watermelon plantations sprang up like many pawns of a variegated chessboard the thick houses, which gave the appearance of simple and industrious life" [*tramezzo al biondeggjar delle spighe, alle piante di cotone, di lino, di ricino, di tabacco, allo intricato sbizzarrire dell'ampie poponaje spuntavano come tante pedine d'un variegato scacchiere gli spessi casali, che davano sembianze di vita semplice ed operosa*] (p. 27) (describes a plough, "of a form that elsewhere I have never seen" [*d'una forma che altrove non ho mai visto*], p. 28). "An enchanted oasis", where "birds hovered with feathers vaguely mottled by the no longer intense warble and insects with very bright colours and peregrines" [*Un'oasi incantata... aleggiavano uccelli dalle penne vagamente screziate dal non più intenso gorgheggio ed insetti dai colori vivissimi e peregrini*] (p. 28), for which the entomologist following them "went to the broth" [*andava in brodetto*] (p. 28).

In Khoi they have the opportunity to visit the caravanserai, which describes in detail: "There is nothing that reminds us of our clean shops (...): but weeds close to the walls or through the streets; so you feel like walking in a labyrinth; they were creaking under a mountain of manufactures stacked as God wants; all trivial stuff and strange in form and use; strange at least for us, people of Europe" [*Quivi nulla che ricordi le nostre pulite botteghe (...): ma pancacce rasenti le pareti o traverso le vie; sicché ti pare di camminare in un labirinto; erano desse cigolanti sotto un monte di manifatture accatastate come Dio vuole; tutta roba di trivio e strana per forma ed uso; strana almanco per noi, gente d'Europa*] (p. 33). After leaving Khoi, they reached the village of Seyd-Agi, after having crossed "a stream on the banks of the river that had been cut off and had a deep bed that devolved yellowish water to the precipice" [*un torrente di riva trarupate e di letto profondo che devolve un'acqua gialliccia a precipizio*] (p. 36), and then, after having passed a summit, they explained from the source to their eyes "a melancholic but solemn landscape: one of those severe and sumptuous scenes that at one time represented the old Asian land, almost a reward for the traveller who drew from far to visit it" [*un paesaggio malinconico ma solenne: una di quelle scene severe e sontuose ad un tempo che rappresenta la vecchia terra asiatica, quasi compenso al viaggiatore che trasse da lungi a visitarla*] (p. 38). On the left you could see the Taurus chain that crossed Azerbaijan for a long time ("steep slopes of ferritic tint, with fantastic contours that melted far away in a vaporous sky", [*pendici trarupate.... dalla tinta ferrigna, dai contorni fantastici che fondevansi lontano lontano in un cielo vaporoso*] p. 38) and surrounded the lake of Urumiah (Urmia), with its bluish waters.

The next stops were Almah Serai and Tssudgi, "a pile of ruins", who "attest to the violence of the Turkish, when at the turn of the last century stretched out the devastating hand even in the heart of Persia" [*un ammasso di ruderi*].... "attestano la violenza del turco, allorché sul volgere dello scorso secolo protese la mano devastatrice sin nel centro della Persia" (p. 41), and then Bok, "a jumble of burrows" [*un'accozzaglia di tane*] (p. 41), from where they reached the shores of the lake "where the countryside, a bit cultivated, died in a soda, a whole tangle of ferns, mixed with a few rare heads of withered oleanders, which tickled their cheeks with the leaves cloaked in salt" [*dove la campagna un po' coltivata more in una sodaglia, tutta un intrico di felci, tramiste a qualche raro*

cespo d'oleandri appassiti che ne vellicavano le guance con le foglie ingemmate di sale"] (p. 42). Back in Bok, they penetrated "into an elevated and imposing plain", passing through villages surrounded by "more or less fig plantation, watermelons, tscenar, pomegranate trees" ["*in una piana elevata ed imponente*".... "*da più o meno ficaje, da poponi, da tscenar, da alberi da melograno*"] (p. 42). 45), until reaching the oasis of Dyzagabil, where to the astonished traveller appear "gardens and nuggets, crowded with olive trees, sown with castor-oil, cotton, saffron, swallowed with reeds, rich in fruits of every kind", even if the inhabitants live in "certain huts..., no taller than five feet, moulded with mud and crushed straw" ["*giardini ed ortaglie, gremite d'olivi, seminate di ricino, di cotone, di zafferano, inghirlandate di pampini, ricche di frutti d'ogni specie*"..... "*certe casupole..., non più alte di cinque piedi, plasmate di fango e di paglia trita*"] (p. 46). They then arrived in Siseh, "a semi-shortened caravanserai in which a large number of henchmen turn upside down and are therefore disorderly planted" ["*un kervanserai semidiruto cui rigirano alquanti covili quinci e quindi scompigliatamente piantati*"] (p. 47), and then in Karameliu, a valley floor "clinging to the iron-yellowed rocks, furrowed everywhere by innumerable cracks and volcanic tears" ["*abbarcato all'ingiro da rocche gigantesche e di color ferrigno, solcato per ogni dove da innumeri crepacci e squarciamenti vulcanici*"] (p. 49), which they could have crossed with a pair of small boots made in Sciraz, "real desert ships, with upper woven with canape, with soles in wild boar leather, pyramid-shaped glue, massive big shoes" ["*vere navicelle del deserto, col tomajo intrecciato di canape, co' suoli in pelle di cinghiale, colla punta piramidale, calzari badiali e massicci*"] (p. 50). Near Maiian, a suburb of Tabriz, the village changed colour and appearance and appeared "covered with lush vegetation": "There was fruit for those fields as if it were hailed; figs, peaches, olives, plums, apples were all one forest" ["*rivestito d'una lussureggiante vegetazione*": "*Frutta ce n'era per quei campi come se fosse grandinato; fichi, peschi, olivi, susini, meli, erano tutto un sol bosco*"] (p. 50). Between the suburbs of Maiian and Ekmavâr, which formed a whole with Tabriz, they crossed the Agy, "whose beneficial waters, which started in a hundred rivulets, move to irrigate a quantity of vegetables, celebrated for their very special fruits. The bridge over it is reinforced by huge slabs of black marble that once covered the sepulchres" ["*le cui acque benefiche, partite in cento rigagnoli muovono ad irrigare una quantità d'ortaglie, celebrate per isquisitissime frutta. Il ponte che lo cavalca è rinforzato da immani lastre di marmo nero che altra volta coperchiavano avelli*"] (p. 51). When he arrived in Tabriz, De Vecchi was able to benefit from a bath that described in detail as well as the following (massih) restorative massage, at the end of which "you feel - remember - the pores disserted, dilate the buckles, so that a bit 'for exhaustion, a bit' for well-being you realize you go into raptures and you want to sleep" ["*ti senti -ricorda - i pori dissertati, dilate le fibbre; sicché un po' per sfinimento, un po' per benessere t'accorgi d'andare in visibilio e ti prende voglia di dormire*"] (p. 53). In the following days, before leaving for Tehran, they have the opportunity to visit Tabriz, where at that time was held a meeting of the Lazzarist missionaries, and of which, at the beginning of the sixth chapter of his diary, as well as the cafes and the

bazaar (descriptions that indulge in an exoticism then very fashionable)), De Vecchi recalls in particular "the splendid leftover of a Mosque, which at the time of Marco Polo, after that of Soltaniyeh built in the same time had no rival in size and magnificence" and that it seemed impossible for him to "escape the eyes of other travelers, who (...) show that they have forgotten or not seen it" [*“lo splendido avanzo di una Moschea, che ai tempi di Marco Polo, dopo quella di Soltaniyeh fabbricata nell’istesso tempo non aveva rivale in grandezza ed in magnificenza”* *“scappata all’occhio di altri viaggiatori, che (...) dan mostra d’averla dimenticata o non vista”*] (pp. 63-64): the mosque of Chah Kod dabende, built, according to tradition, in the 14th century by Chah Mogos Mohammed, son of Tamaspe, a blind king⁶.

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⁶ On De Vecchi, his biography and his journey, see also the essay by A. BITTO, Felice De Vecchi: una sguardo dimenticato sull’Oriente, in *Miscellanea di Storia delle esplorazioni*, XXXVIII, 2013, pp. 107-151.