

IRENE BUENO

**CRUSADE, HISTORY, AND EXOTIC FASCINATION: THE
RECEPTION OF *LA FLOR DES ESTOIRES DE LA TERRE
D'ORIENT* BY HET'UM'S OF KOŔYKOS IN THE LATER
MIDDLE AGES**

The refined illuminations hosted in the first folio of various elegant manuscripts portray the Armenian monk and statesman Het'um of Koŕykos presenting his book to Pope Clement V in 1307¹. At the time, the papal court was based in Poitiers, before its move to Avignon. The text composed for the Pope was *La flor des estoires de la terre d'Orient*, a lengthy treatise in four parts concerning the Eastern lands and populations. According to the colophon, Het'um dictated it in Middle French to Nicolas Falcon, who translated it into Latin soon thereafter (the Latin title being *Flos historiarum terrae Orientis*), thus providing from the outset a bilingual circulation of the work². The arrival of the Armenian Het'um at Poitiers brought to the Papal court a new, detailed, and well-organized body of knowledge regarding the lands lying between China (Catay) and the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, shortly afterwards, the text started circulating far beyond Papal circles, and soon became one of the texts about the East most widely known in Western Europe.

La flor des estoires is organized into four parts. According to Charles Kohler, the first three parts, which deliver one of the most complete accounts of the Eastern lands produced during the Middle Ages, were originally written in French. Conversely, the fourth was written in Latin directly at the request of the pope, being conceived as a stand-alone treatise³. Book 1 is a geographic-ethnographic survey of

¹ For example, see mss Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 12201, fol. 1r; and BnF, fr. 1255, fol. 1r. On Het'um the Historian, see **Claude Mutafian**, "Héthoum de Korykos historien arménien", *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes*, 1 (1996), pp. 157-176.

² The best available modern edition of these two versions is still the one by **Charles Kohler** and published in *Recueil des historiens des croisades. Documents arméniens*, vol. II (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1906), pp. xxiii-cxlii (Introduction); pp. 111-253 (French text); and pp. 255-363 (Latin text) (hereafter, *RHCDA*).

³ See *RHCDA*, pp. xxiii-cxlii.

fourteen regions of Asia. Book 2 is a survey of Arab and Turkish dynasties from the time of Mohammed through the thirteenth century. Book 3 is much longer and offers a detailed history of the rise of the Mongols from the time of Gengis Khan to the early fourteenth century. Conversely, the fourth book offers advice to the pope on how to organize a new crusade to the Holy Land, in which Het‘um focuses on military techniques, coalitions, and strategies of warfare⁴. His aim is to encourage an alliance among Latins, Armenians, and Mongols against the Mamluks of Egypt, which explains why he combines digressions on Oriental ethnography and Mongol history within a traditional *tractatus de pas-sagio*. Indeed, through rewriting Mongol histories, the author seeks to portray the Tartars as noble people and excellent warriors, even close to Christianity, in order to support his idea of a Mongol-Christian coalition⁵.

While originally written for the Pope, *La flor* soon circulated beyond the walls of the Pontifical city, becoming enormously popular, particularly in France, Italy, and Flanders. The wide circulation of this text is attested by over fifty extant manuscript copies, in both French and Latin, and by a dozen early modern editions – in Latin, French, Italian, Dutch, German, and Spanish (and a later translation into Armenian too)⁶.

Despite such a rich tradition, the question of the reception of *La flor* has so far been neglected. In this paper I will focus on Het‘um’s medieval audiences, enquiring into how this work was used and understood by

⁴ Book 1 is in *RHCDA* at pp. 121-135 (French text) and pp. 261-273 (Latin text); Book 2 at pp. 136-146 (French) and pp. 274-82 (Latin); Book 3 is at pp. 147-219 (French) and pp. 283-339 (Latin); Book 4 is at pp. 220-253 (French) and pp. 340-363 (Latin).

⁵ For the context and details of Het‘um’s crusading programme, see **Antony Leopold**, *How to Recover the Holy Land. The Crusade Proposals of the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 129-130; **Sylvia Schein**, *‘Fideles Crucis’: the Papacy, the West, and the Recovery of the Holy Land, 1274-1314* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 181-218; **Angus D. Stewart**, “Alliance with the Tartars: the Armenian Kingdom, the Mongols and the Latins,” in *La Méditerranée des Arméniens, XII^e–XV^e siècle*, ed. **Claude Mutafian** (Paris: Geuthner, 2014), pp. 207-229; **Idem**, “The Armenian Kingdom and the Near East: Het‘um of Korykos and the *Flor des Estoires de la terre d’Orient*,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, ed. **U. Vermeulen, K. d’Hulster** and **J. van Steenbergen** (Leuven: Peeters), pp. 525-548.

⁶ For a list and description of the manuscripts see *RHCDA*, pp. lxxxv-cxxx. This list is however likely to grow after a more accurate survey. I can point out, for example, two further manuscripts containing Het‘um, preserved in the Netherlands and absent from Kohler’s inventory: Den Haag, Meermann Museum, 10: B30 3, fols. 100r-122v (in Latin); and Haarlem, Stadsbibliotheek, B 187 C 11 2, fols. 114r-151v (in French).

later readers; how it interacted with their own cultural context; and with which purpose it was read. Indeed, because of its multi-layered character, *La flor* was open to a multiplicity of readings, which of course do not necessarily exclude each other. By presenting some of the results of ongoing research, I will classify these readings thematically (crusade; history; geography; ethnography; and literature *des merveilles*), referring to a selection of anthological manuscripts produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I will not deal with early prints of *La flor*, leaving aside useful sources for the identification of Het‘um’s readership, such as prefaces to the readers.

A survey of about forty extant anthological collections including *La flor* illustrates that very soon after its compilation in 1307, the work was no longer read in the first place as a crusading treatise. If this work had a specific military preoccupation at the time of its compilation, prior to the council of Vienne (1311-1312), its arguments in favor of an expedition to Armenia or Cyprus soon lost their timeliness. Even an author such as the Venetian Marino Sanudo Torsello, who included material from Het‘um’s work in his own crusading treatise - the *Liber secretorum fidelium Crucis*, submitted to Pope John XXII in 1321 - proved to be more interested in Het‘um’s historiographical contribution than in his crusading plan⁷. A significant exception to the diminished impact of *La flor* as a military tract is represented by its use by the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani (ca. 1276-1348), who still used Het‘um’s somehow outdated crusading project for his *Cronica*⁸. Aside from this, Het‘um is included in a few anthologies of works relating - at least in part - to the recovery of the Holy Land. One, for example, is a late fourteenth-century copy preserved in the British Library, containing Het‘um (at fols. 69r-87v, in French) along with works concerning the recuperation of the Holy Land, such as *Li Charboclois d’armes* by Roger Stanegrave, *Le livre de la Terre sainte* by William of Tyre, the *De statu Terrae Sanctae* by Aymar the Monk, and Egesippus’ *Description de la Terre Sainte*. In addition, it

⁷ **Marino Sanudo Torsello**, *Liber secretorum fidelium crucis super Terrae Sanctae recuperatione et conservatione...* (Hanoviae, 1611; facsimile reprint: Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1972), pp. 235-238.

⁸ On the reception of Het‘um’s crusading project by Giovanni Villani see **Luca Mantelli**, “Speranze armene, utopia toscana: le proposte *de recuperatione Terrae Sanctae* di Hayton (Hethum) di Korykos nello specchio della *Nuova Cronica* di Giovanni Villani”, in *Atti del Seminario Internazionale “I Mongoli in Armenia: storia e immaginario”*, ed. **Marco Bais** and **Anna Sirinian** = *Bazmavep*, 168 (2010), pp. 639-662.

also includes John of Piano Carpine and Marco Polo⁹. Similar is the focus of a fifteenth-century volume preserved in Vienna. Along with Het'um (in Latin, fols. 77r-131v), this anthology includes works of various genres, among which are a few works related to the Holy Land: the *Libellus de locis sanctis* by Theoderich of Würzburg, the *Hodoeporicon ad Terram Sanctam*, by Wilhelm von Boldensele, and the *Gesta Godefridi de Bouillon et aliorum* by Fulcher of Chartres¹⁰.

In another series of manuscripts, which will be discussed below, *La flor* was bound together with various texts, including a description of Oriental Europe, as well as a crusading treatise, such as the *Memoria Terrae Sanctae*. In this case, the selection criteria confirm a special, even if not exclusive, focus on the recovery of the Holy Land.

Conversely, this focus shifts substantially in another series of anthologies. Indeed, the composition of most anthological manuscripts suggests that, during the first centuries of its existence, *La flor* was read primarily for entertainment or edification. The fact that it was often bound to historical writings attests to the fact that late medieval readers especially appreciated its value as a source of historical information. Het'um's survey of Mongol history was in fact a unique contribution, based on sources that Westerners did not have access to. These sources were threefold: the direct experience of the author; stories reported by his uncle, the King of Armenia; and unspecified Mongol histories¹¹. Because of the novelty of this material in the West, Het'um became one of the major points of reference used to gain knowledge about Oriental history. His historical treatment of the Mongols was thus a primary source for various other works compiled in the fourteenth century, such as Paolino Venetus' *Chronologia* and *Satyrica ystoria* and Jean le Long's *Chronica S. Bertini*. At the same time, Het'um was also aware of the work of Western historians, such as Martin of Poland, which he uses extensively for his *Patmut'iw'n Xronikon*, written in Armenian, thus promoting the circulation of historical information both eastward and westward¹².

The reception of *La flor* as a key historiographical work is testified to by a dozen compilations, in which Het'um is bound together with

⁹ London, British Library, Cotton Otho D V.

¹⁰ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 3529.

¹¹ Het'um himself gives an account on his sources: see *RHCDA*, p. 213 (French) and p. 334 (Latin).

¹² Edition in V. A. Hakobyan, *Manr žamanakagrut'yunner, XIII-XVIII*. ("Minor chronicles") (Erevan, 1956), vol. II, pp. 37-80.

other historical works, ranging from origins, and legendary histories to contemporary chronicles. Despite its specific focus on the Mongol Empire, Het'um became a part of anthologies that were comprised not only of oriental histories, but also ancient history, national histories, and genealogies.

This is the case, for example, with an anthology preserved in Paris and copied in the late fourteenth century, which contains the *Historia Britonum*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a *Vita Caroli Magni*, a *Universal chronicle* from the origin of the world until 1199; and a work on crusading history, such as the *Historia Francorum*, by Raymond of Aguilers¹³.

The Haarlem copy (late fifteenth century) is even more heterogeneous: Het'um is grouped along with ancient authors such as Suetonius and Ausonius. Regardless of any chronological coherence, the selection criteria confirm that *La flor* was regarded primarily as a historical text, to be bound with classical historiographers¹⁴. Similarly, the copy preserved in The Hague contains three texts, bound together in the fifteenth century, and grouped because of their common genre: the *Chronica pontificum et imperatorum* by Martin of Poland; the *Chronicon sive gesta pontificum Traiectensium et principum Hollandiae*; and the *Flos historiarum terrae Orientis*¹⁵.

A third group of manuscripts reveals that Het'um was also appreciated as a source of geographical information, because of the descriptions of topography, landscape, climate, agriculture, and fauna of fourteen Asiatic regions offered in Book 1. Accordingly, six anthologies bind *La flor* (sometimes selecting only Book 1) together with geographical or cosmographical works, including Ptolemy's *Cosmography* (in two manuscripts), the *Liber provinciarum ecclesiae Romanae* (in three manuscripts), an important anonymous treatise of geography (in one manuscript), and a treatise about the Cycladic islands (in one manuscript).

Other readers, too, were particularly interested in Book 1 and in Het'um's contribution to Eastern geography and ethnography. A family of five manuscripts give Het'um along with a few other works concerning the East, including the already mentioned crusading treatise *Memo-ria Terrae Sanctae*, as well as the *Descriptio Europae orientalis*¹⁶. This is

¹³ Paris, BnF, lat., 6041A.

¹⁴ Haarlem, Stadsbibliotheek, 187 C 11 2.

¹⁵ The Hague, Meermann Museum, 10 B 30.

¹⁶ Edition in **Olgierd Górka**, *Anonymi Descriptio Europae Orientalis: imperium Constantinopolitanum, Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ruthenia, Ungaria, Polonia, Bohemia, anno MCCCVIII exarata* (Cracow: Sumptibus Academiae Litterarum, 1916).

an account of Eastern Europe and the Byzantine Empire, which was written in the early fourteenth century, soon after *La flor*, probably for King Charles of Valois. The author is an anonymous friar who spent a few years preaching in these territories. He states openly that he seeks to describe those Eastern regions that were not treated by Het'um, thereby offering unique testimonies on medieval Albania, Serbia, Poland, Hungary, and Constantinople. He complements Het'um's first Book, describing the geography of the Eastern European regions, their administration, politics, customs, and economy. In this way, *La flor* and the *Descriptio* complement each other perfectly, providing Western readers with a detailed account of that vast region, extending from the coastlines of the Adriatic Sea to Cathay. The anonymous *Descriptio* is preserved in five manuscripts and in all of them it is joined to Het'um of Kořykos. Combined together, the two works thus perfectly responded to the purpose of collecting and systematizing empirical information about all the Oriental regions.

Finally, other anthologies were designed to systematize knowledge about the East, but with a different scope. Six manuscripts belonging to two different families contain a translation of various texts into French, undertaken by Jean le Long in around 1351¹⁷. These texts comprise treatises and travel reports on the East (by Het'um, Riccoldo da Monte Croce, Oderic of Pordenone, Willelm of Boldensele, John of Cori). The manuscript tradition of these texts translated by Jean le Long proves that they were meant as a whole: in the late fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries they were systematically copied together, as if they were part of a unique, monumental *summa* concerning the Oriental lands. These collections seem to be aimed especially at entertainment. Indeed, they were designed to satisfy a literary fascination and curiosity for exotic lands and populations, especially among the laity. In fact, the transmission of these texts in the vernacular and the material characteristics of the codices indicate that they were meant to be available for a lay and wealthy audience. It is worth recalling, in particular, the famous *Livre des merveilles*, a true masterpiece of the art of book decoration, which

¹⁷ For a modern edition of Le Long's translation, see *Die Geschichte der Mongolen des Hethum von Korykos (1307) in der Rückübersetzung durch Jean le Long, "Traitez des estas et des conditions de quatorze royaumes de Aise" (1351)*, ed. Sven Dörper (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1998).

contains 265 refined illuminations and was first owned by the duke of Burgundy, Jean Sans Peur¹⁸.

Designed originally as a crusade treatise, during the second half of the fourteenth century *La flor* thus followed different trajectories. As shown by this rapid survey of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century anthologies including Het'um, the readers approached the text, variously, as a historical, geographical, or ethnographical treatise, and as an entertaining report about fabulous lands. As remarked by various early modern editors, *La flor* was not a work of genius. Yet, regardless of its questionable literary merits, the work soon became very popular. We can explain this success in various ways. First, the multi-layered feature of *La flor* and the different information contained in its four books met the expectations of different audiences. Secondly, the circulation of *La flor* was encouraged by the fact that since the time of its redaction, it was immediately available in Latin and French, allowing for wider dissemination beyond learned audiences. The cultural context of its early reception was characterized, on the one hand, by an increase in lay reading, the rise of general levels of literacy, and the wider availability of books, and, on the other hand, by increasing curiosity about the Asian continent, as well as through the development of new literary genres, looking at the oriental lands from perspectives that do not rely only on missions and crusades.

Yet, another reason for Het'um's success was the still substantial poverty of late medieval documentation about the Asiatic regions in the West. Only a few recent treatises provided systematic information on the Oriental regions, such as the reports by Marco Polo, Oderic of Pordenone, John Mandeville, and Riccoldo of Montecroce. Next to these authors, Het'um offered a different, and much appreciated contribution: he looks at the Near and Far East from the perspective of an Armenian man, compiling in French (and being translated into Latin) for a Western audience. His treatment relies on new sources, unknown in the West, and was perceived as particularly reliable, for it was based on Het'um's direct testimony.

Certainly, the political project designed by the Armenian monk had a short life. Indeed, his crusading plan was tied to a specific time: namely, in around the year 1307. It is obvious that only a few years later the work was already outdated. Nonetheless, the value of *La flor* as a way of

¹⁸ Paris, BnF, fr. 2810.

finding information and satisfying one's curiosity about the East was to be appreciated for a long time: there was material enough, in the four books, to satisfy the changing expectations of changing audiences.

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Խաչակրաց արշավանք, պատմություն և էկզոտիկ գրավչություն. Հեթում Կոռիկոսցու «Արևելքի պատմությունների ծաղկաբաղ»-ի տարածումը միջնադարում

1307 թ. Կղեմես է պապին ներկայացված Հեթումի «Արևելքի պատմությունների ծաղկաբաղ»-ը շուտով դարձավ Արևելքին նվիրված Արևմտյան եվրոպայում տարածված բնագրերից մեկը: Այս երկի ակտիվ շրջանառությունն ու երկարակեցությունը միջնադարում հաստատում են բազմաթիվ ձեռագիր ընդօրինակությունները և վաղ նոր ժամանակների թարգմանությունները: «Ծաղկաբաղ»-ի բազմաշերտ բնույթն է եղել տարբեր տիպի խառը հավաքածուներում նրա ընդգրկման պատճառը: Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում է, թե ինչպես է ժամանակի ընթացքում փոխվել «Ծաղկաբաղ»-ի ընկալումը: Ձեռագրերի մի ընտրանու կազմն ու նյութերի բնույթը ցույց են տալիս, որ եթե Հեթումի ժամանակակիցները բնագիրն օգտագործել են նոր խաչակրաց արշավանքներ կազմակերպելու նպատակով, հետագա ընթերցողին հետաքրքրել են Արևելքի պատմության ու ազգագրության մասին նրա պարունակած տեղեկությունները: ԺԵ և ԺԶ դարերում «Ծաղկաբաղ»-ի տարածման բնույթը կրկին փոխվեց: Խաչակրաց արշավանքների օգտին բերվող փաստարկները կորցրել էին գրավչությունն ու ժամանակավրեպ էին դարձել, և վաղ նոր ժամանակների ընթերցողները Հեթումի երկին դիմում էին գեղարվեստական հաճույք ստանալու և էկզոտիկ երկրների ու ժողովուրդների հանդեպ իրենց հետաքրքրասիրությունը բավարարելու համար: Այսպիսով Հեթումն է Արևմուտք բերել Արևելքի մասին գիտելիքների այդ նոր ու երկարակյաց շտեմարանը, որն ընկալվել և մեկնաբանվել է փոփոխվող տեսանկյուններից: