

LEBANON IN THE TRAVELS OF SIR JOOS OF GHISTELE (1482-1483)

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11

Sir Joos of Ghistele was one of the most important late medieval West European travellers. Not that he travelled extensively, but he left behind a most fascinating report on his journeys. Because he has not received adequate appreciation from scholars, not to mention the greater public to whom he is largely unknown, this article aims to illuminate some of his exploits. Of course, the scope of this contribution will be limited to his travels through the Lebanon.

Short biography ¹

Joos of Ghistele was born in Gent (county of Flanders, then part of the Burgundian Netherlands) in 1446. He was the single son of Gerard of Ghistele, lord of Axel and Moere, and Isabel de Wilde, lady of Maelstede, Renesse and Cruyningen. In 1441 his father had been alderman of the highest municipal authority of Gent, the so called 'Keure'. In 1449 he was called to the important office of Grand Bailiff by Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, but there would be no peace for the newly promoted Gerard. The Gent townsmen revolted against the new taxation levied by the duke and Gerard was soon chased out of town. On October the 8th the assembled Gent craft-guilds declared his lifelong banishment and Gerard and his family, including five year old Joos, retired to the castle of Moere. Due to services rendered by his father, the duke of Burgundy added young Joos to the train of the count of Charolais, later to be Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Joos accompanied his new lord on the campaign against the city of Liège in 1465 and after the battle of Brusthem (1467) he was knighted. In 1477, after the disaster of Nancy where Charles the Bold was killed, Joos was elected to the office of first alderman of the 'Keure'. On November 15th 1481, Joos was 35 then, he left his hometown to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, accompanied by his cousin George of Ghistele, bailiff of Biervliet, John of Vaernewijck of Gent, George Palinc of Ypres and John of Quishout, chaplain of Joos of Ghistele. The usual duration of a pilgrimage was 6 to 9 months and his fellow travellers indeed returned home after that period. Joos and his chaplain however would be gone for about three years. One year after his return he was elected into the city council of Gent as first

1 Biographical and background information has been taken from (in chronological order): SCHAYES, A.G.B., "Notice sur un Ouvrage Flamand, rare et curieux, intitulé: Voyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele...", in *Messenger des sciences historiques de Belgique*, 1836, p. 1-30; DE SAINT-GENOIS, J., "Josse van Ghistele", in *Les voyageurs belges du XIII^e au XVII^e siècle*. Bruxelles, s.d. [1847], p. 155-192; M.X., "Le voyage en Orient de Josse van Ghistele", in *Revue Générale*, Bruxelles, 1883, t. 37, p. 723-764, t. 38, p. 46-91, 193-210; DIELEMAN, P., *De groote reiziger Mer Joos van Ghistele*. Middelburg, 1932; DELEN, A.J.J., "Joos van Ghistele et son voyage en Orient en 1481-1485", in *Bulletin de la Société royale de Géographie d'Anvers*, 1934, p. 209-228; VAN DE WALLE, B., "Une version manuscrite du célèbre voyage de Josse de Ghistelles en Orient (1481-1485)", in *Chronique d'Egypte*, XIV, 1939, p. 245-257; BAUWENS, J. & VERPLANCKE, L., "Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele" du 14 novembre 1481 au 28 juin 1485", in *Revue de l'Institut des Belles Lettres arabes à Tunis*, 1967, p. 151-173; VIAENE, A., "De uitvaart van "de grote voyagier" ridder Joos van Ghistele. Axel 24 september 1516", in *Biekorf*, 1970, p. 306-307; VANBERGEN, M., "Mer Joos van Ghistele, de grote reiziger", in *Ghendtsche Tijdinghen*, 1979, p. 343-345; BEJCZY, I., "Boekenwijsheid en persoonlijke beleving in een laat-middeleeuws reisverhaal. Jan van Mandeville overtroffen: Tvoyage van Joos van Ghistele", in *Literatuur*, 1993, p. 146-153; GASPAR, R.J.G.A.A. (ed.), *Ambrosius Zeebout. Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele*. Hilversum, 1998.

alderman of the 'Keure' again. Between 1492 and 1494 he would occupy a public office for the last time. He became Grand Bailiff of Gent, the highest possible office, just like his father before him. These were tumultuous times for the Flemish cities. From 1487 to 1492 they rose to challenge the Burgundian authority. After the victory of centralism Joos of

Ghistele became Grand Bailiff on August 12th 1492. As a loyal servant of the Burgundians he remained in office until 1494 and afterwards acquired the title of private counsellor and chamberlain of Maximilian of Austria. Probably this was an honorary title because he only acts as sheriff of the Hulst and Axel craft-guilds from then on. Joos of Ghistele died on September 21st 1516 and he was buried in the family vault in Zuiddorpe church.

THE JOURNEY

The course of Joos' voyage was largely influenced by coincidence. It started initially as a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the convent of St Catherine in the Sinai desert but soon the travel plans became much more ambitious. Having read a book at Cologne (Germany) on the country of the mysterious Prester John, Joos of Ghistele decided not to limit his journey to the traditional pilgrimage destinations, but to press on for the lands of this imaginary figure, where, so it was believed, lay the tomb of St Thomas ². Joos and his companions travelled via Bavaria, Austria, Lombardy and Tuscany to Rome. From there they continued to Venice, where they embarked for Jerusalem. After halting in several cities on the Dalmatian coast, on Corfoe and in Beirut, they arrived at Jerusalem. Having visited the traditional sites, all of his companions but his chaplain returned to Flanders. Joos was determined to find the lands of Prester John and continued to Cairo and Alexandria. On the Red Sea they embarked for Aden, where Joos hoped to find a connection to Abyssinia. The ship sailed by the way of Soeakin to Aden but once it arrived there, Joos got into trouble and was arrested and locked up. A bail of one hundred ducats had to be paid for his release, but the authorities forbade him to continue his journey to Abyssinia. He satisfied himself by visiting the land around Aden and returned to Alexandria, where he hoped to find a ship for Persia. That way he reckoned he could skirt his difficulties on the Jemen coast and reach

Abyssinia from Persia. So in Alexandria he embarked for Antioch but a storm and a detour via Cypre saw him arrive at Tripoli. Passing through Beirut again he arrived at Aleppo, where he met a merchant from Tabriz who was prepared to take him to Persia. Finally arrived at Tabriz, a city which he admired and enjoyed very much, he heard that once every ten years the lands of Prester John were victim to the plague and coincidentally this year it was exactly ten years ago the plague had ravaged the lands. So Joos decided not to insist any further and returned back to Aleppo and Tripoli where he embarked for Cypre. Thanks to this final attempt to reach the lands of Prester John we have quite a good description of Syria, Southern Turkey and Northern Persia, a region which was rarely frequented by westerners in those days. As Joos tries to visit Constantinople on his way home and the trip is cancelled because of military activities in the region, he goes to Crete where he rests for a while. At Corfou he encounters a strayed ship on its way to the Barbary coast and decides to go aboard and make a final detour before going home. After visiting the North-African coastal region he finally makes his way home via Genoa.

Joos had been away for more than three years, visiting lands further away than his well known travellers-contemporaries like Bernhard von Breydenbach and Felix Fabri did. Apart from the 'normal' hardships on a voyage like this, he encountered quite some setbacks: a storm on the Adriatic Sea, an attempt on his life on the road from Gaza to Cairo, his arrest at Perim (Aden), again an even heavier storm between Alexandria and the Syrian coast, an attempted robbery at Beirut, an incredibly tough journey to Tabriz, a naval battle on the southwestern shore of Turkey, once again a storm between Malta and Tripolis and last but not least an almost fatal storm on the Tyrrhenean Sea which drove his ship into Genoa harbour.

THE MANUSCRIPT

Joos of Ghistele's travel notes were adapted and revised by Ambrosius Zeebout. The manuscript dates from around 1500, when it was released ³. We don't know anything about Ambrosius Zeebout. The latest hypothesis is that he was a Carmelite in one of Gent's many monasteries. It is

clear that the manuscript is a compilation of Joos' travel notes, mixed with information found in other travel itineraries but also in the Bible, Patristic texts, Bible comments, apocryphal texts, the *Corpus Juris Canonici* and medieval, classical and humanistic historical

works. The result is quite an impressive piece of work, a mixture of epic and didactics. In the 16th century the manuscript was published a first time, but it was not until recently, in 1998, that a modern edition of the manuscript appeared, complete with annotations and comments ⁴.

THE LEBANON

The first visit to **Beirut** took place when Joos and his travel companions were on their way to Jerusalem. Beirut is described as a city with lots of houses and people with a surrounding area of pastures and orchards, predominantly of pomegranates, oranges, limes, olives, figs and almonds. The air is said to be so pure that sick merchants from Damascus, Aleppo or Tripoli come to recover here. Also are mentioned two or three houses owned by Venetian merchants and one by Genoans ⁵. It is in one of those Venetian owned houses, notably that of Giacomo Gabriellis, that Joos' party was staying. They had letters of recommendation from other Venetian merchants.

The following day Joos' party wanted to continue the voyage but rumours about the unsafety of the

main road to Jerusalem made them change their minds. So they were forced to stay longer in Beirut and now they sought accommodation in the St Francis monastery, which was very much deteriorated from the outside, but very comfortable inside ⁶. The monastery church was very small but with a basement you could reach by descending twenty one steps and there was an attic. To maintain the monastery all christian vessels who put in at Beirut were to donate one ducate and just half a ducate for the smaller vessels. This was supplemented by alms of christian merchants, bequests and donations ⁷. Also in the countryside around Beirut there stood a beautiful church dedicated to St Barbara, which had now become a mosque. None of the muslims dared to climb the stairs leading to the tower to call for prayer. Apparently people broke their arms or legs trying to do so ⁸.

To get to Jerusalem Joos and his company decided to sail. They hired a local boat (a 'grijp' as he calls it or a light double masted ship) and took to the sea. Unfortunately they had only covered four miles when a storm broke and they were forced to flee into a small harbour called 'Choram' ⁹. Here they waited for two days ¹⁰. Observing the inland Joos of Ghistele remarks that Mount Lebanon is overgrown with vineyards and orchards owned by the christian sects who populate the area, in contrast to the covering of cypress, cedar and oak in King Solomons days ¹¹.

Then they continued their journey and arrived at **Sidon**, a reasonably populated town according to

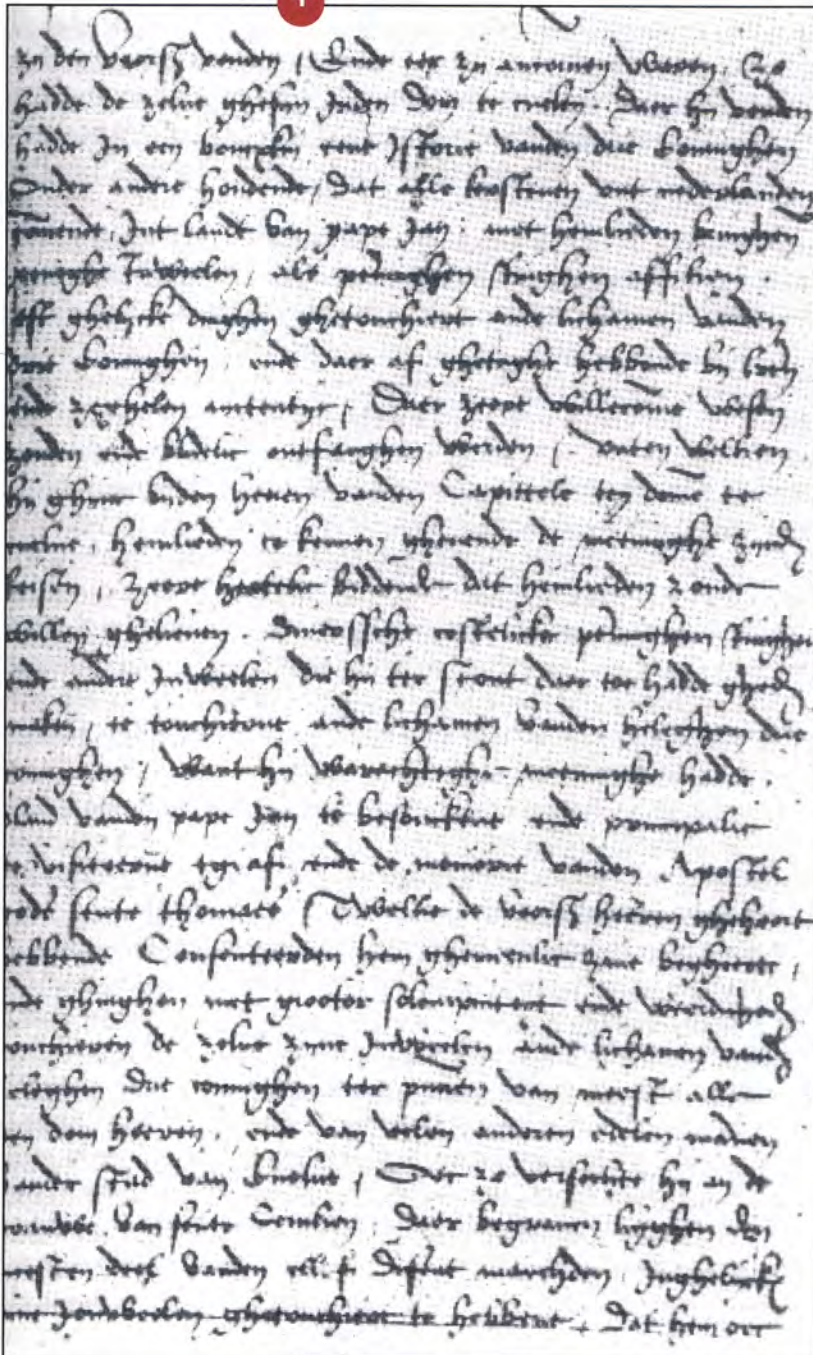
- 2 The booklet he read at Cologne was probably John of Hildesheims *Historia Trium Regum*, in which the lands of Prester John are located in 'India Tertia'. 'India Tertia' was, from the 13th century onwards, believed to be the region which is now called Ethiopia, see GASPARD, p. LIV.
- 3 This oldest version was written between 1488 and 1500 and is kept by the Egyptological Foundation Queen Elisabeth in Brussels, library nr. 55.473.
- 4 By GASPARD (see above: note 1) who used the eldest manuscript and it is this version we also have used for this article. The part on Joos' travels through Egypt had already been introduced and edited by BAUWENS-PREAUX R., "Voyage en Egypte de Joost van Ghistele, 1482-1483", in *Collection des voyageurs occidentaux en Egypte*, vol. 16, Cairo, 1976.
- 5 Book II, chapter 8, folio 60 r°.
- 6 Book II, chapter 8, folio 60 v°.
- 7 Book II, chapter 8, folio 61 r°.
- 8 Book II, chapter 8, folio 62 r°.
- 9 Possibly Naimeh, see GASPARD, p. 153.
- 10 Book II, chapter 9, folio 63 r°.
- 11 Book II, chapter 9, folio 64 r°.

Joos. He mentions the existence of two watchtowers and the residence of an admiral of the sultan ¹². Apparently they didn't stop here for long and they sailed further.

Continuing past Sarafendi ¹³, two miles from Sidon and under its authority, once an episcopal residency but now practically deserted

feeding a system of irrigation channels. It is not clear whether these channels were still used or whether they were destroyed. The statement that the lord of Tyre had to pay one hundred thousand ducats every year to the sultan, raised from the profits the irrigation system was providing, is of course exaggerated ¹⁵.

Finally they arrived at Jerusalem and after visiting the holy places the party broke up and Joos of Ghistele and his chaplain continued their voyage. Following the adventures on the Red Sea, around Aden and in Egypt, Joos lands on Cypre. From there he embarks once again for Tripoli but before reaching the city he lands on the Syrian shore near **Tartus** ('Tortosa'). Tartus is surrounded by "fat lands excellent for animals to graze in" and by lots of beautiful orchards and wells ¹⁶. From Tartus they continued to **Tripoli** and Joos mentions the perilous way to enter its harbour. He compares it to the port of Sluis (county of Flanders, now a city in Zeeland Flanders), which was Bruges' harbour in the Middle Ages ¹⁷. Adjoining Tripoli harbour there had been a part of the city in earlier days, but it had often been ravaged by christians so that its muslim population decided to build another city about two miles inland. This town was well populated (Joos compares it to Courtrai in the county of Flanders). In the harbour stood quite a lot of warehouses and six or seven fortified towers with their feet in the sea, mutually linked by vaulted bridges. Also there were quite some war engins present ¹⁸. According to Joos this Tripoli was the most beautiful of all cities carrying that name, with its fresh air, its orchards and its trade vessels carrying merchants from all over the region ¹⁹. He also mentions explicitly the wells (over three hundred) providing every house and orchard with fresh water. The most important well was the Fons Ortorum in the centre of the city ²⁰. Most of the streets are paved and spanned and there are drainage canals. The city lies near Mount Lebanon where the river



and only populated by peasants, they passed the mouth of the Litâni River and arrived at **Tyre** ¹⁴. Unfortunately nothing noteworthy is said about this town but elaborations on its history and the fact that there are three wells south of the town

Abrana (Kadisha) takes its rise ²¹. It flows right across town and is abounding in fish but sometimes it floods and causes a lot of damage.

Having paused a while in Tripoli, Joos and his companion prepared for the trip to Damascus. Unfortunately they heard of the insecurity of the mountains (because of the presence of 'Madianites'²²) and they decided to hire camels and donkeys to go to Beirut again

along the coast, which would take them two days to reach. After one mile they arrived in a small village where they spotted five or six wells of fresh water rising from the sea, medicinally used by doctors in Tripoli²³. Continuing along the coast they passed villages of maronite christians, also up-country there were a number of maronite villages, populated by as much as ten thousand armed men. Their chief was called the 'machademo', an ottoman functionary who was actually a secret christian leader²⁴. While performing their religious duties, there would always be someone keeping guard. Joos visited this leader and his community and asked them why they did not overtly professed their religious beliefs. As these villages were kept as hereditary fiefdoms and could not be alienated by the sultan, there was only one condition : the chief had to be a muslim and that was precisely what had been going on for generations²⁵. The chief's parents had been chiefs and were in secret christians and so were his grandparents. If he would reveal his beliefs, the land would be taken from the community and his descendants disinherited²⁶.

About two miles further along the coast they arrived at 'Anefin oft Nifin' (probably Enfeh), formerly a fortress, and soon afterwards at 'Botron' (Batrun), which used to be a beautiful town but was now a pretty little village with natural riches of vines, olive trees and good seafish²⁷. Further along the coast, some six miles from Beirut, there's Gibelet (Jubail) which had a lovely old church converted into a mosque. Then they arrived at the mouth of a small river, the Nahr el-Kalb, which derives its name from the statue of a dog standing along it²⁸. Continuing they passed the river where Saint George's dragon allegedly lived and having crossed the bridge they arrived in **Beirut** for the second time on this journey. In Beirut they stayed at the house of a Venetian merchant again, this time it was Aloiso Dolfini. The same night they were besieged there by a bunch of fifty crooks armed with boughs and swords. Joos states they were Arabs, Turkmen and some bedouins. They had attacked the residence of a certain Ludovico Justiniano first and had wounded him badly. They had also robbed that place completely but by doing so had alarmed the Dolfini residence. So when the group of robbers started their attack, Joos and his companions threw stones and rocks from the roof. The assailants did not dare to approach the house any further and this continued until dawn²⁹. The following morning, having assured himself that the coast was clear, Joos departed for Damascus. He took to the mountains and encountered several small Druze villages. They ate pork and drank wine and considered themselves to be relatives of the christians³⁰.

12 Book II, chapter 9, folio 63 v°.

13 The former Sarepta Sydonie.

14 Book II, chapter 9, folio 65 r°.

15 Book II, chapter 9, folio 68 r°.

16 Book VI, chapter 2, folio 277 r°.

17 The Zwin-area had already begun to silt up in the fourteenth century and by 1500 marine traffic on this sealink was as good as impossible.

18 Book VI, chapter 2, folio 277 v°.

19 Also Tripoli in northern Africa (now Libya) and in Turkey, about 60 miles west of Trabzon (now Tirebolu).

20 Book VI, chapter 2, folio 278 r°.

21 Book VI, chapter 2, folio 278 v°: the Abrana river is the Nahr Kadisha or Abû 'Ali.

22 According to GASPARD these "Madianites" were Druze because they believed in the return of El Hakim as the Mahdi and also, they hated christians. It is difficult to say whether this is true or not, but it rather seems that the Druze were not so hostile to christians as GASPARD thinks they were. In previous centuries they occasionally assisted the crusaders. This seems to be confirmed by Joos' encounter with them later on.

23 Book VI, chapter 3, folio 279 v°.

24 "Machademo" is derived from the Arabic "mukaddam", which means leader or chief.

25 Book VI, chapter 3, folio 280 r°.

26 Book VI, chapter 3, folio 280 v°.

27 Book VI, chapter 4, folio 281 r°.

28 Book VI, chapter 4, folio 281 v°.

29 Book VI, chapter 4, folio 282 r°.

30 The description of this mountainous journey is to be found on folio's 283 r°, 283 v° and 284 r°.

starting point for the journey to Tebriz in Persia .

To end, it would be interesting to look briefly into Joos' motives. Religious motives seem obvious as his pilgrimage to the Holy Land was exemplary. Joos and his companions visited all the usual sites. Perhaps the quest for the lands of Prester John can be explained by the alleged presence of Saint Thomas' tomb in Abyssinia. It is clear anyway that Joos systematically searched for the relics of christian culture in a predominant muslim world. Apart from these obvious religious motives it is remarkable how he had a unique eye for details on a multitude of topics like ethnography, religion, politics, history and natural history. Apart from the scope of his travels, this is also why his travel account is so valuable and original.

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Met Gratie ende Privilegie's an hier iaren.

31 Joos was in the Beka valley in between Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. The ancient city he encountered could be Chalcis. It is also called Selemersedis.