Migration Matters
The Longer View

Doubtless migration has been a constant factor in human history. However, with the advent of the modern nation state and the construction of “minorities,” migration has become, in post-colonial times especially, a political football. By contrast, in medieval times migration often took the form of large uncontrolled movements of tribal nomads. An illustrative example from the fourteenth century involves reference to the very people that inspired the above work on migration, that is, Turks and at least one Moroccan. The Moroccan Ibn Battuta spent fifteen months in 1332–33 journeying through Anatolia, a region he calls the Land of the Turks, while acknowledging its former Christian origins. Ibn Battuta observes, “there are still large numbers of Christians in Anatolia living under the protection of the Muslims, these latter being Turkmen to whom jizya and other taxes are paid.” The first migrations of Turkish pastoralists from Inner Asia had begun to pass through Transoxiana into Persia in the eleventh century. Led by the clan of Seljuks, who were already Sunni Muslims, they entered Baghdad in 1055, ousting the Caliph’s Shia rivals, the Buyids. Several branches of Seljuks came to dominate the Middle East, last opening the way to the Anatolian interior by roundly defeating the Byzantine army in 1071. Further penetration of Turkmen groups led to the creation of rival principalities chiefly in the central Anatolian plateau. Byzantine hopes of ever recovering Anatolia effectively ended a century later. The rise of Mongol power in the Middle East, their destruction of Baghdad, and the annihilation of the Caliphate in 1258 drove further waves of Turks together with Persians westward into Anatolia. By the time of Ibn Battuta’s journey through the region, Anatolian society had been undergoing ethnic and religious transformation for nearly two and a half centuries. The Flemish Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (Willem van Rubroeck) passing through the region in 1253 estimated Muslims to comprise only ten percent of the population. Twenty years later, Marco Polo labelling Anatolia “Turkey,” said it was inhabited by three races: Turkmen, a primitive people who worshipped Muhammad; then Greeks and Armenians who mingled with the Turkmen in villages and towns.

Ibn Battuta’s account provides many further details. He was overwhelmed by the kindness of the Turkish inhabitants and notes that women were unveiled. The associations of akhis, formed from members of the various trades, impressed him owing to the generous hospitality and lodging for strangers provided. Their network of hospices provided a degree of cohesion in new urban settings as the akhi leaders helped protect local populations from injustices. Together the akhis and other Sufi leaders provided leadership for Turkish migrants by mediating disputes among tribal factions.

Ibn Battuta’s Anatolian account contains his only description of a Christian community. He describes the great city of Antalia where each community of foreign Christian merchants, Byzantine Greeks, Jews, and Muslims occupied separate walled quarters. He marvelled at the famous cotton fabrics of Ladhiq (now Denizli) made by Christian women artisans while equally fine fabrics were produced in Arzanjan (Erzincan) whose population was mainly Armenian. He had travelled on a Genoese boat from Syria to Anatolia and took another Greek vessel across the Black Sea to the Crimean side where he hired wagons from Turkmen of Christian faith.

Nonetheless, his account leaves the strong impression that the demographics in Anatolia had reached critical mass favouring the Turkicization and Islamization of the population. The political end-game was played out more than a century later. Naturally unaware of that future, Ibn Battuta had enjoyed the hospitality of the sultan of Bursa and his wife. He cannily describes this ruler as the “greatest of the Turkmen kings.” This was Orhan Bey, son of Osman whose descendants in 1453 captured Constantinople, the jewel in the crown of then flourishing Ottoman dynasty and the cornerstone of the even greater Empire to come.

The editors of the Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart (Munich, 2007) coined the phrase homo migrans to describe the phenomenon of human migration. This collaboration of German and Dutch historians was prompted by the current debate in their respective countries over Moroccan and Turkish immigration. This massive volume, however, covers only the past three centuries of migration including both to and from Europe.

The Longer View

ISIM REVIEW 22 / AUTUMN 2008

53