

Between Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism: Travel Writing, Cultural Translation, and Identity Construction in Early Modern European Encounters with the Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

The period from approximately 1450 to 1800, known as the early modern era, was marked by significant interactions between European explorers and the Ottoman Empire through avenues such as diplomacy, commerce, pilgrimage, conflict, and intellectual exploration. During this time, travel writing became an essential medium for Europeans to recount their journeys, interpret unfamiliar cultural customs, and explore the distinctions between "self" and "other." This article delves into how European travel narratives of the early modern period concerning the Ottoman Empire managed the interplay between cosmopolitanism and nascent nationalism. It posits that travel writing served as a platform for cultural translation, where identities were formed, challenged, and redefined through cross-cultural interactions. These writings simultaneously bolstered national ideologies while nurturing cosmopolitan attitudes characterized by curiosity, admiration, and hybridity. By examining travel accounts from individuals like Jean de Thévenot, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, and Guillaume Postel, alongside contemporary scholarship on translation, Orientalism, and early modern cosmopolitanism, the study illustrates that European depictions of the Ottoman world cannot be simply categorized as either admiration or hostility. Instead, they present a range of viewpoints influenced by trade,

diplomacy, religion, and intellectual exchange. Travel narratives, disseminated through translation networks, not only spread knowledge about Ottoman society but also transformed the travelers' own cultural self-perceptions. The article utilizes an interdisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis, intellectual history, and translation studies, to explore how travel texts mediated cultural differences. It reveals that these narratives fulfilled three interconnected roles: (1) facilitating cultural translation between Ottoman and European societies; (2) shaping the identities of both the traveler and the nation; and (3) balancing cosmopolitan and nationalist tendencies within imperial and proto-national contexts. Ultimately, the article asserts that early modern travel writing was instrumental in shaping European views of the Ottoman Empire and in defining a hybrid intellectual space where cosmopolitan openness and nationalist awareness coexisted in a productive tension.

Keywords

Cosmopolitanism; Nationalism; Travel Writing in the Early Modern Period; Ottoman Empire; Cultural Translation; Formation of Identity; Orientalism; Intercultural Interactions; European Literature; History of the Early Modern Era

1. Introduction

The early modern period was characterized by significant intercultural interactions between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, spurred by diplomatic endeavors, trade growth, religious journeys, and intellectual curiosity. Travel writing became a crucial literary form that documented these interactions, providing European readers with detailed descriptions of Ottoman cities, traditions, governance, and social life. These accounts were instrumental in forming European perceptions of the Ottoman realm and mirrored broader shifts in European intellectual thought.

This article examines the interplay between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in early modern European travel literature concerning the Ottoman Empire. It delves into how travel narratives acted as tools of cultural translation, bridging different civilizational perspectives while simultaneously crafting new identities for both the traveler and the imagined national community. The study posits that these texts inhabit a middle ground between admiration and apprehension, openness and exclusion, universality and particularism.

In the early modern era, cosmopolitanism did not necessarily mean abandoning national identity but often coexisted with the rise of national consciousness. The resurgence of the term "cosmopolite" in early modern Europe—employed, for example, by the polymath Guillaume Postel to describe his universalist perspective on the Ottoman world—illustrates the intellectual milieu where cross-cultural dialogue and universal humanism were increasingly discussed.

Simultaneously, the formation of centralized states and confessional identities in Europe gave rise to new forms of nationalism that influenced how travelers perceived and depicted foreign cultures. Consequently, travel writing became a discursive space where the tension between cosmopolitan openness and national particularism was negotiated and expressed.

During this era, the Ottoman Empire held a distinctive position in the European imagination. As both a formidable political adversary and a complex cultural interlocutor, it served as a reflection through which Europeans articulated their own values, fears, and ambitions. Early modern travel accounts show that encounters with the Ottoman world did not merely reinforce stereotypes of otherness; instead, they often highlighted admiration for Ottoman administrative efficiency, urban planning, and social tolerance, complicating simplistic narratives of civilizational opposition.

By examining these narratives through the lenses of cultural translation and identity formation, this article seeks to address the following research questions:

How did early modern European travel writing navigate between cosmopolitan curiosity and emerging nationalist ideologies?

In what ways did travel narratives serve as acts of cultural translation between European and Ottoman societies?

How did these texts contribute to the formation of both individual and collective identities?

To explore these questions, the article places travel writing within the broader historical contexts of imperial expansion, religious

conflict, and the exchange of knowledge across the Mediterranean. It contends that travel narratives were not merely descriptive accounts but complex interpretive frameworks that influenced cross-cultural perceptions and intellectual exchange.



Figure 1

Map of Early Modern European Travel Routes to the Ottoman Empire (1450–1800)

This figure should illustrate major routes from Western Europe (France, England, Venice, Habsburg territories) to key Ottoman centers such as Constantinople (Istanbul), Aleppo, Cairo, and Jerusalem.

Purpose: To contextualize geographical mobility and networks of intercultural exchange.

Recent scholarship on early modern travel writing has increasingly highlighted the varied and intricate nature of European interactions with the Ottoman world. Research into seventeenth-century travel narratives reveals that travelers approached the Ottoman Empire with diverse viewpoints influenced by their professions, objectives, and national origins. The diaries of travelers like Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Jean Thévenot, and Laurent d'Arvieux offer a wealth of political, social, and cultural insights that shed light on early modern cross-cultural interactions.

Instead of presenting a single European viewpoint, these accounts exhibit a range of interpretive frameworks, from mercantile pragmatism to ethnographic interest. This diversity challenges earlier historical assumptions that European depictions of the Ottoman Empire were consistently hostile or orientalist.

The travel writing genre itself served as a versatile literary form, accommodating personal reflection, ethnographic description, diplomatic reporting, and moral commentary. This hybridity allowed travel narratives to effectively convey knowledge about the Ottoman world to European audiences.

Furthermore, recent studies underscore the connection between travel writing and historiography, illustrating how travelogues influenced historical understanding of the Ottoman Empire. These texts not only documented observations but also contributed to the creation of narratives about cultural differences, gender roles, and political systems.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Travel Writing and the Ottoman Empire

2.2 Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern European Thought

The notion of cosmopolitanism has been extensively explored in the realm of intellectual history, particularly as a hallmark of early modern Europe's interaction with the broader world. The rise of empires, multilingual communities, and expanding trade routes facilitated novel forms of cross-cultural engagement, challenging strict concepts of identity. Literary and intellectual outputs from this era illustrate how imperial interactions gave rise to hybrid cultural expressions and cosmopolitan attitudes that went beyond national borders.

It is important to note that early modern cosmopolitanism differed from contemporary liberal cosmopolitanism; it often existed alongside imperial aspirations and religious universalism. Travelers to the Ottoman Empire frequently adopted a cosmopolitan stance, portraying themselves as part of a larger human community while also framing their experiences within national and religious contexts.

Guillaume Postel's identification as a "cosmopolite" serves as a prime example of this intellectual perspective. His writings on Ottoman society promoted interfaith dialogue and universal harmony, indicating that engagement with the Ottoman realm could cultivate a sense of global interconnectedness rather than purely adversarial relations.

Therefore, cosmopolitanism in early modern travel literature should be viewed not as a complete alternative to nationalism but as a dynamic process influenced by cross-cultural interactions.

Table 1

Key Early Modern European Travelers to the Ottoman Empire

Traveler	Nationality	Period	Major Work	Perspective
Jean de Thévenot	French	1660s	<i>Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant</i>	Scientific and ethnographic curiosity
Jean-Baptiste Tavernier	French	17th century	<i>Six Voyages</i>	Mercantile and observational
Guillaume Postel	French	16th century	<i>De la République des Turcs</i>	Cosmopolitan universalism
English Levant Company merchants	English	16th – 17th century	Various journals	Commercial and diplomatic
Habsburg envoys	Austrian/German	16th – 17th century	Diplomatic reports	Political and strategic

Purpose: To highlight diversity in travel perspectives and motivations.

2.3 Cultural Translation and Cross-Cultural Mediation

The idea of cultural translation has gained prominence in recent studies of travel literature. Travel accounts did more than just depict foreign cultures; they translated unfamiliar customs into concepts that European audiences could understand. This involved both interpreting and altering, as travelers chose, highlighted, and occasionally misrepresented elements of Ottoman society to fit European norms.

Translation networks were vital in spreading travel accounts across different languages and nations. Starting from the Enlightenment, these narratives were often rewritten and modified in translation, gaining new political and ideological significance for various audiences. These translated works acted as knowledge intermediaries, influencing European views of the Ottoman Empire and helping to create common narratives about the East. Cultural translation thus occurred on several levels: linguistic translation of texts, interpretive translation of customs, and ideological translation of political systems.

Moreover, cultural translation was not a one-way process. Ottoman authors also crafted travel narratives that interacted with European societies, highlighting the mutual nature of cross-cultural interactions. For example, the extensive *Seyahatnâme* by Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi provides detailed accounts of different regions and peoples, offering an Ottoman viewpoint on cultural diversity and social life.

This two-way exchange emphasizes the need to see early modern travel writing as part of a shared Mediterranean intellectual environment rather than solely a European narrative.

2.4 Nationalism and Identity Formation

The emergence of early modern nationalism offers a vital lens for interpreting travel literature concerning the Ottoman Empire. While fully developed modern nationalism appeared later, early modern Europe already exhibited proto-national feelings through the strengthening of state authority, the unification of languages, and religious conflicts. Travel accounts often played a role in this development by contrasting national identity with foreign cultures. Accounts of Ottoman political systems, religious customs, and societal norms were commonly employed to express European ideas of civility, freedom, and Christian identity. Nonetheless, these comparisons were not uniformly negative; some travelers praised the Ottoman Empire's administrative effectiveness and religious tolerance, countering the stereotype of tyrannical oriental rule. Recent research into early modern German literature indicates that interactions with the Ottoman world softened strict "us versus them" divisions and encouraged more sophisticated views on cultural differences. This implies that travel writing served a dual purpose: it both reinforced emerging national identities and unsettled them by introducing alternative social and political frameworks.

2.5 Travel Writing, Otherness, and Orientalism

The concept of "otherness" plays a pivotal role in the historiography of European travel literature concerning the Ottoman Empire. Earlier studies, shaped by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, highlighted how travel accounts contributed to portraying the East as exotic and inferior. Although this viewpoint still holds sway, newer research has brought attention to the ambivalence and diversity in early modern

depictions. Travel narratives from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries exhibit a range of perspectives on the Ottoman Empire, from hostility and fear to curiosity and admiration. These writings delved into topics like gender roles, fashion, religious customs, and political systems, illustrating the intricate balance between fascination and difference. This ambivalence highlights the importance of moving past binary interpretations and viewing travel writing as a dynamic arena for cultural negotiation.

2.6 Synthesis: Cosmopolitanism versus Nationalism?

The literature discussed earlier suggests that early modern European travel accounts of the Ottoman Empire cannot be fully comprehended by viewing them solely through the perspectives of cosmopolitanism or nationalism. Rather, these accounts reflect a dynamic interplay between a universal curiosity and the formation of distinct identities. Travelers often portrayed themselves as cosmopolitan observers who could transcend national borders, yet their writings also played a role in shaping national identities through comparison and differentiation. Cultural translation acted as the bridge that allowed this tension to be managed, enabling travelers to interpret foreign customs while reshaping their own cultural perspectives. Consequently, the main argument derived from the literature is that travel writing served as a hybrid discursive arena where cosmopolitan and nationalist tendencies coexisted and interacted. This understanding provides the theoretical basis for the current study.

5. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis, intellectual history, translation studies, and comparative cultural analysis. Its objective is to investigate the role of early modern European travel literature on the Ottoman Empire in bridging cosmopolitan and nationalist narratives, serving as a platform for cultural translation and the formation of identity.

5.1 Research Design

- The study adopts a historical-textual methodology, concentrating on detailed analyses of selected travel narratives from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. These narratives are explored not just as descriptive records but as interpretive cultural artifacts influenced by the ideological and intellectual milieu of early modern Europe. The research investigates how these accounts:
- Convey Ottoman cultural practices to European readers
- Navigate identities across national, religious, and civilizational lines
- Illustrate the tensions between cosmopolitan openness and the rise of nationalist awareness
- The study incorporates three analytical frameworks:
- **Cosmopolitanism Theory:** To evaluate openness to cultural diversity and universal humanist views.
- **National Identity Formation:** To explore how travel writing contributed to early national discourse.
- **Cultural Translation Theory:** To analyze how travelers interpreted and redefined Ottoman cultural practices.

5.2 Corpus Selection

The main collection is composed of travel narratives from European visitors who explored Ottoman lands from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. This includes:

Reports from diplomatic envoys and traders

Pilgrimage stories to Jerusalem and the Levant

Scientific and ethnographic travel diaries

These writings were chosen for their historical impact, textual depth, and thematic significance in cross-cultural interactions with the Ottoman realm.

5.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds through four stages:

1. **Contextualization: Placing each text in its specific historical, political, and intellectual setting.**
2. **Thematic Coding: Detecting recurring themes like governance, religion, urban life, gender dynamics, and trade.**
3. **Comparative Interpretation: Analyzing how representations differ across various national contexts and travel purposes.**
4. **Conceptual Mapping: Assessing the intersection and development of cosmopolitan and nationalist discourses within the narratives.**

Table 2

Analytical Framework for Interpreting Travel Narratives

Analytical Dimension	Description	Key Indicators
Cosmopolitanism	Openness to foreign cultures	Admiration, universalism, hybridity
Nationalism	Assertion of national superiority or identity	Comparison, moral judgement, political critique
Cultural Translation	Interpretation of unfamiliar customs	Analogies, explanations, reinterpretation
Identity Construction	Self-definition through encounter	Self-reflection, boundary-making

Purpose: To provide a structured conceptual model for textual interpretation.

6. Analysis

This section examines the way early modern European travel literature concerning the Ottoman Empire managed the conflict between a cosmopolitan interest and the rise of nationalist ideologies, serving both as a tool for cultural translation and as a means of shaping identity.

6.1 Travel Writing as Cultural Translation

Travel writing was instrumental in making Ottoman cultural practices understandable to European readers. As travelers encountered unfamiliar social hierarchies, religious

traditions, and political systems, their accounts sought to clarify these differences by using analogies rooted in European contexts.

The portrayal of Ottoman urban life often highlights this effort to translate cultures. Cities like Constantinople (Istanbul) were described as cosmopolitan hubs, marked by ethnic variety, lively markets, and intricate administrative systems. Travelers frequently admired the effectiveness of Ottoman administration and the notable religious tolerance extended to different communities, which contradicted the common European view of Ottoman tyranny.

However, cultural translation also involved selective interpretation. Travelers often categorized Ottoman customs within familiar frameworks, occasionally simplifying or misrepresenting them to fit European expectations. This indicates that cultural translation was influenced by ideological and epistemological biases, rather than being an impartial process.

6.2 Cosmopolitan Curiosity and Intellectual Exchange

A notable aspect of early modern travel narratives is their cosmopolitan outlook. Numerous travelers viewed the Ottoman Empire not just as a political adversary but as a wellspring of knowledge, intellectual intrigue, and cultural allure. These narratives frequently underscored common human experiences that went beyond cultural boundaries. Travelers recorded daily activities like trade discussions, hospitality customs, and social engagements, focusing on commonalities rather than stark differences. Such insights encouraged a feeling of interconnectedness across the wider Mediterranean region. The cosmopolitan aspect is especially apparent in travelers who promoted

cross-cultural dialogue and intellectual interaction. Their writings convey a conviction that encountering diverse societies could expand moral and intellectual perspectives, challenging narrow-minded beliefs about European dominance.

6.3 National Identity and Comparative Representation

Although travel narratives exhibited a cosmopolitan openness, they also played a role in shaping emerging national identities. By comparing European and Ottoman societies, these narratives often helped define European values and political ideals. Travelers frequently used the Ottoman Empire as a point of reference to critique or validate their own national institutions, contrasting Ottoman governance with European political systems. For example, discussions about the centralization of Ottoman administration were sometimes employed to reflect on European debates concerning absolutism and governance. In a similar vein, religious comparisons were crucial in constructing identities. While some travelers appreciated certain aspects of Ottoman religious tolerance, others highlighted the differences between Islamic and Christian practices to strengthen confessional identities. These comparisons illustrate how travel writing served as a discursive platform where national and religious identities were expressed through interactions with cultural differences.

6.4 Hybrid Identity Formation

Encounters across different cultures frequently led travelers to develop mixed identities. Interaction with Ottoman society often disrupted established ideas of cultural superiority, leading to introspection regarding European traditions and beliefs. During their travels, some individuals incorporated aspects of Ottoman clothing, language, or manners, highlighting the adaptable nature of identity in cross-cultural

settings. These changes were not necessarily signs of cultural assimilation but rather practical and symbolic adjustments of identity in unfamiliar surroundings. This blending of cultures highlights the intricate relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Travelers were able to retain their national identity while participating in cultural exchange and adaptation, demonstrating the flexible boundaries of identity formation in the early modern period.

Conceptual Model: Interaction Between Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in Travel Writing

The diagram ought to depict intersecting circles that symbolize:

Cosmopolitan Curiosity

National Identity Formation

Cultural Translation

The area where they overlap signifies Hybrid Identity Construction. *Purpose:* To visualize the central theoretical argument of the study.

7. Discussion

The study indicates that early modern European travel accounts of the Ottoman Empire cannot be fully comprehended using simple dichotomies like admiration versus hostility or cosmopolitanism versus nationalism. Rather, these writings illustrate a complex interaction between an acceptance of cultural diversity and the strengthening of nascent national identities.

7.1 Travel Writing as a Discursive Mediator

Travel narratives served as intermediaries between European and Ottoman cultures, bridging cultural gaps while also influencing European self-perception. This dual function highlights the significance of travel writing as a medium for intellectual and cultural interaction, beyond just ethnographic documentation. Writing these narratives involved a negotiation of identity. Travelers crafted stories that combined an interest in foreign traditions with claims of cultural uniqueness, illustrating the intricate psychological and ideological aspects of cross-cultural interactions.

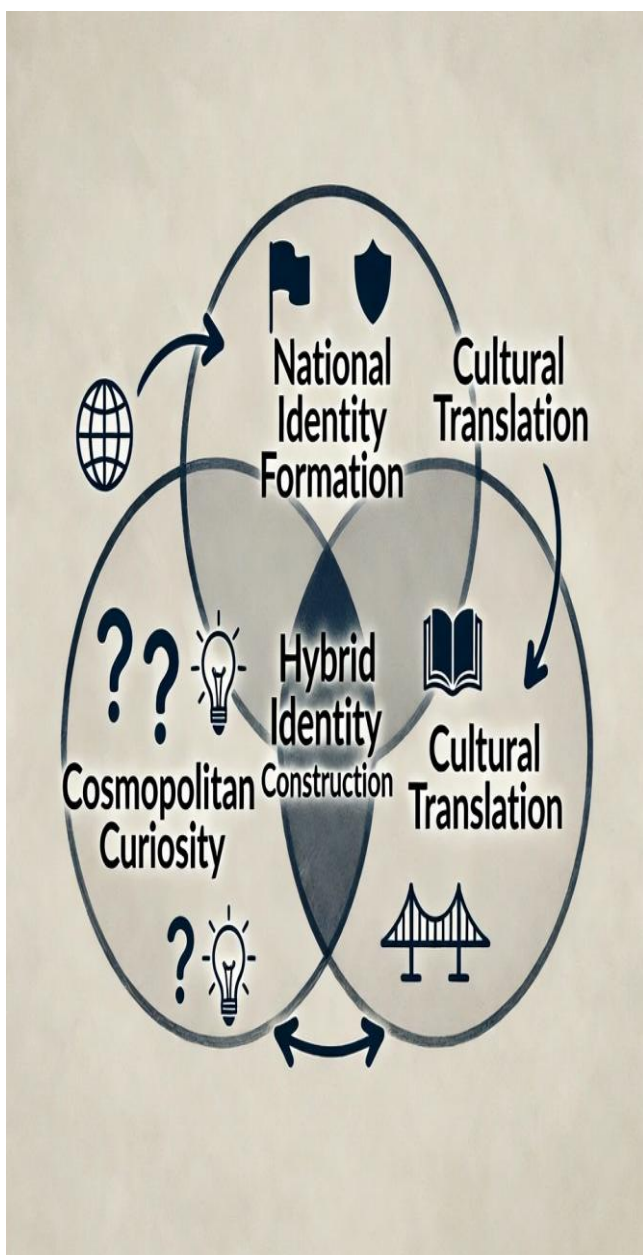


Figure 2

7.2 Cosmopolitanism within Imperial Contexts

Travel writing's cosmopolitan outlook was intricately linked to the larger framework of imperial growth and worldwide connections. The Ottoman Empire, with its vast and varied territories, provided European travelers with direct encounters with multicultural living, leading them to ponder universal human principles and common social customs. Nevertheless, this cosmopolitanism was not entirely free from power dynamics. The views of travelers were influenced by diplomatic, commercial, and religious motives, affecting their interpretations of Ottoman society. Consequently, cosmopolitan openness existed alongside implicit hierarchies and unequal relationships of knowledge and power.

7.3 Proto-Nationalism and Comparative Identity

Travel writing played a role in the slow development of early national awareness in Europe. Travelers highlighted unique cultural and political identities by contrasting European and Ottoman societies, which anticipated future nationalist narratives. The Ottoman Empire served as both a competitor and a benchmark, allowing Europeans to establish their values by contrasting them with those of others. This illustrates that national identity emerged not in isolation but through ongoing interaction with different cultures.

7.4 Cultural Translation as Identity Negotiation

The idea of cultural translation offers an essential perspective for grasping the dual role of travel writing. Travelers, by converting unknown customs into known conceptual frameworks, also re-evaluated their own cultural beliefs. This mutual process underscores the interactive nature of cross-cultural interactions. Instead of

just depicting the Ottoman world, travel accounts altered European intellectual viewpoints, encouraging fresh forms of cultural self-awareness and critical thinking.

Table 3

Comparative Features of Cosmopolitan and Nationalist Discourses in Travel Writing

Feature	Cosmopolitan Discourse	Nationalist Discourse
View of Ottoman Society	Curiosity and admiration	Comparison and differentiation
Representation of Culture	Emphasis on shared humanity	Assertion of cultural distinctiveness
Identity Perspective	Hybrid and fluid	Fixed and bounded
Function of Travel Writing	Cross-cultural mediation	Nation-building discourse

Purpose: To synthesize analytical findings in comparative form.

8. Conclusion

This research has explored the role of early modern European travel literature on the Ottoman Empire in balancing cosmopolitanism with nationalism through cultural translation and identity formation. By situating travel accounts within their historical and intellectual frameworks, the study has shown that these writings served as active platforms for cross-cultural dialogue rather than mere portrayals of foreignness.

The results indicate that early modern travel literature encapsulated a fruitful tension between a universal curiosity and the formation of specific identities. Travelers engaged with the Ottoman realm with a blend of admiration, intrigue, critique, and comparison, highlighting the intricacies of intercultural interaction during a time characterized by growing global ties and the rise of national awareness.

Travel narratives fulfilled three interconnected roles: initially, they interpreted Ottoman cultural customs for European readers; secondly, they aided in shaping national and religious identities through comparative depictions; and thirdly, they encouraged hybrid identities formed through direct intercultural interactions. These roles demonstrate that cosmopolitanism and nationalism were intertwined intellectual movements that influenced early modern European thought, rather than being mutually exclusive.

The research also highlights the importance of cultural translation as a crucial process through which cross-cultural interactions impacted identity formation. By explaining unfamiliar traditions using familiar concepts, travelers both bridged cultural differences and expanded their own intellectual perspectives.

In essence, early modern European travel literature concerning the Ottoman Empire should be viewed as part of a shared Mediterranean intellectual domain marked by dialogue, exchange, and mutual influence. These accounts show that interactions with the Ottoman world significantly influenced European ideas of culture, identity, and global interconnectedness. Acknowledging this complexity provides a more nuanced perspective on early modern cross-cultural relations and challenges simplistic

interpretations based solely on opposition or domination.

Future studies might build on this research by including Ottoman travel narratives and archival diplomatic correspondence to further highlight the reciprocal nature of cultural exchange. Such interdisciplinary methods will continue to enhance our understanding of how travel writing contributed to the development of early modern global awareness at the intersection of cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

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