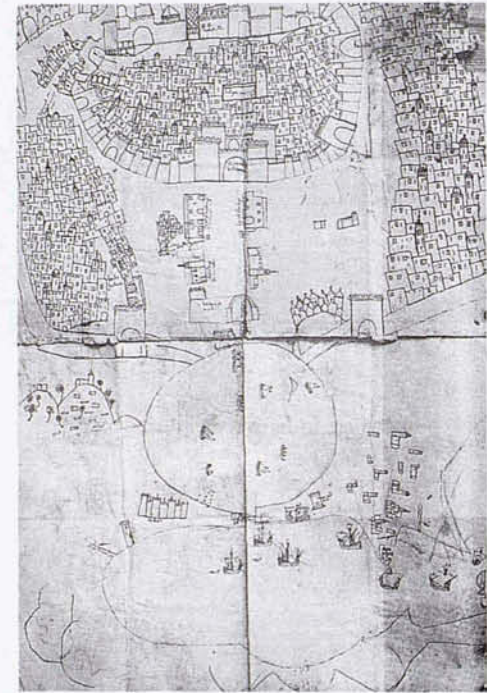


ANSELM TURMEDA: THE IRONY OF A UNIVERSAL CATALAN



TUHFA, WORK WRITTEN IN ARABIC IN 1420



MAP OF TUNISIA DRAWN BY A CATALAN IN THE XVIIth CENTURY

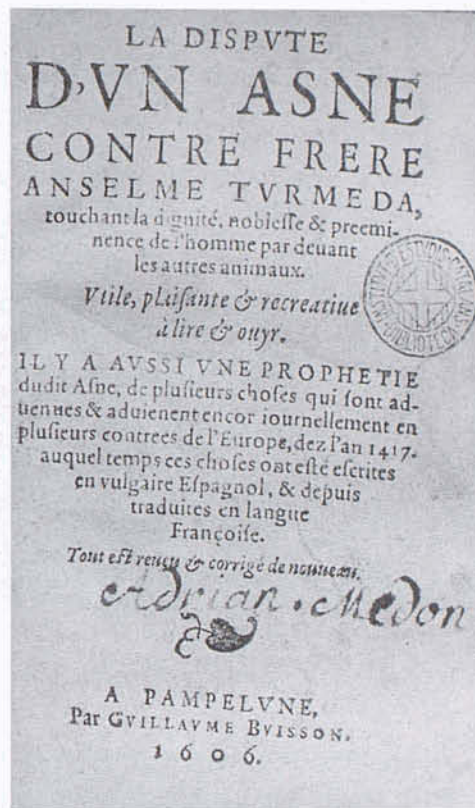
THE WORK OF ANSELM TURMEDA, BORN IN MALLORCA IN THE MID-FOURTEENTH CENTURY, IS AN APOLOGY OF SCEPTICISM AND THE CRITICAL SENSE AND STEMS FROM AVERROIST PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING. THE RELATIVISM IT CONVEYS IS PERFECTLY IN TUNE WITH THE SATIRICAL LITERATURE OF HIS TIME.

In the history of the Catalan literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the figure of Anselm Turmeda (Mallorca 1352, Tunis between 1425 and 1430) stands out for the singularity of his work and the enigmatic nature of his life. His written production belongs to the sphere of the religious and moral literature of the end of the Middle Ages, exemplified in such authors as Francesc Eiximenis, Sant Vicent Ferrer, Felip de Malla and Ramon de Perellós, amongst others. Anselm Turmeda's contradictory testimony stands out amongst them as the most representative example of the change in mentality that took place during this period –in other words, of the collapse of feudal civilization and the birth of a new, dynamic and bourgeois society.

Anselm Turmeda's biography illustrates the development of a restless man who was always on the go. As a young man he studied physics and astronomy at the University of Lleida. At the age of twenty he joined the Franciscan order and travelled to Bologna and Paris to study Theology. Subsequently, in 1387, he apostatized from Christianity and converted to Islam. He took the Arab name of Abdallah, which means "servant of God". He married in Tunis and for the rest of his life remained faithful to the canons of the Muslim religion, occupying posts of some social influence. Even today, his grave in Tunis is publicly venerated by the Muslim faithful.

Duplicity is the most significant feature of the life of Turmeda and one we also find in his work. Appropriately, his written production has two sides to it: the Christian side, during the first part of his life, and the Muslim side, during the second stage, in Tunis.

In the Christian perspective, we can single out the *Llibre dels bons amonestaments* (1398), written in verse. The book is a collection of good advice in rhyme, which Turmeda bases, curiously, on the principles and morals of Christianity. On the other hand, the work contains notes that have clearly



anti-monastic and somewhat immoral undertones. This ironic and sarcastic tone towards the Church and the customs of the time can be found everywhere in his work. Within this Christian perspective we also find the *Cobles de la divisió del regne de Mallorques* (1389) which is an allegorical poem with political and civic undertones.

Turmeda's most important work is *La disputa de l'Ass i el frere Anselm* (1418). It is a text of a philosophical and theological nature in which Turmeda compares the virtues or faculties of men and those of beasts. The Ass, helped by other animals, the flea and the louse, undoes Anselm's arguments about the supposed superiority of human beings in the order of creation. According to the Ass, animals are superior to man in their instincts and senses, and also as regards their wisdom and lack of vanity.

The book has an eminently critical and controversial tone with a consistent charge of scepticism towards the dogmas of the Church and the authority of the hierarchy.

The author cleverly places us in an uncertain situation in which argument and counter-argument aim to demonstrate the inefficacy of human reason before certain enigmas of existence such as, for example, the immortality of the soul and the supreme dignity of the human individual, in this way leading us to moral relativism and religious scepticism, the message throughout Turmeda's production.

In the Muslim perspective we can single out the work written in Arabic in 1420 entitled *Tuhfa*. This work is an autobiographical text of great literary value. In it he reveals his Mahometan convictions and makes a resounding criticism of "the followers of the cross" –that is, the Christians.

In short, Turmeda reveals a twofold attitude throughout his work, an almost extreme duplicity, unique in the history of Catalan literature. This strange physiognomy of his work and some enigmas as to his life are still the object of study and research in Catalonia today.

Turmeda's true feelings about the Christian and Muslim religions are still a mystery to us. His work shows an ironic eclecticism that favours non-commitment, that keeps its real religious convictions hidden. Turmeda's scepticism, a typical product of Averroist philosophical thinking, and the relativism it conveys, are perfectly in tune with the ironic and satirical literature of his time, as we find, for example, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

To sum up, the work of this universal Catalan, born in Mallorca in the mid-fourteenth century, is an apology of scepticism and the critical sense. This is why it has a very special meaning today and can be instructive and educational, and bring a measure of relativism to the crisis of ideologies and the decline of rational discourse in the West. ■