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MERCHANTS' ITINERARIES IN PERSIA AND
CENTRAL ASIA, 1558-1570s**

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THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY ANNUAL LECTURE 2022

**ECHOING CITIES IN MUSCOVY COMPANY MERCHANTS'
ITINERARIES IN PERSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA, 1558–1570s**

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Delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Hakluyt Society
15 June 2022

The first echo that I would like to acknowledge at the start of this talk is that of last year's Hakluyt Society lecture by Janet Hartley on 'The Volga: The River as Frontier', which dealt with geographical frontiers as what unites and divides empires and people. Her proleptic lecture, which was delivered before the current times of trouble in the territories of the former Soviet Empire, has been inspirational to me. My talk also draws its examples from the same region of the world, although I study an earlier period. Janet Hartley's lecture ended on what she called an 'uneasy balance', that of a divided history on a shared territory.¹ The presentist ring of both her talk and mine are neither accidental nor anecdotal in addressing a mechanism of history which has an obstinate way of repeating its lessons as long as we have not listened and/or did not learn from them.

One of the recurrent tropes in travel writings left by the so-called 'Age of Discoveries' is that of the *tabula rasa* or blank page of visited land. The trope implies that land is unquestionably available to receive both the impress of the traveller's visit out there and that of the geographer or compiler back home, who would interpret and reorient the experience of contact for a targeted readership. An example of that trope is found in the 'Preface to the Reader' of the first of the major travel compendia produced in early modern England, that is to say Richard Eden's *The Decades of the newe worlde* (1555):

But these simple gentiles lyuing only after the lawe of nature, may well bee likened to a smoothe and bare table vn painted, or a white paper vn written, vpon the which yow may at the first paynte or wryte what yow lyst, as yow can not vpon tables already paynted, vnlesse yow rase or blot owt the fyrste formes.²

The trope is of course largely a fallacy, even in the case of the so-called 'New' World and its inhabitants. In effect, the blank page of history for the traveller or geographer is always already the 'rase[d] or blot[ted] owt' page of history and belief for those whose lands and persons got 'discovered' in the process. Likewise,

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¹ Hartley, 'The Volga: The River as Frontier', p. 16.

² Archer, *Old Worlds*, p. 17.





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Eden's own volume is a highly mediated discovery for his readers, starting with the obvious fact that the work is primarily a translation of Peter Martyr's *Decades* on the Iberian explorations and conquests over the preceding half-century. But even when Eden addresses material other than the New World accounts, such as that related to Russia, which the English explorers and traders had been the first western Europeans to reach by way of the north two years before the volume came out, we do not get 'a smoothe and bare table' receiving a first impress. The English experience, however praised it is by Eden for its heroism and novelty, is still felt to need the filter of a prior European perspective to process it. In this specific case, that filter corresponds to the authoritative description of Russia prevalent in the period, Holy Roman Ambassador Sigismund von Herberstein's *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* (1549). All in all, the luring prospect of the blank page to write discoveries upon does not materialize massively in Eden's volume, and nor will it in subsequent English travel compendia, from Richard Eden and Richard Willes's *History of Traueyle* (1577) to Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589) and Samuel Purchas's *Pilgrimage*. All these collections deal with translating, reordering and editing not just second-hand and foreign material, but even first-hand and English material. In so doing, the compilers regularly 'rase or blot owt' and re-inscribe over, as and when their agendas demand it, even when that agenda – as in the case of Hakluyt – is about asserting the primacy of English discoveries and presence.

Addressing similar phenomena of erasures and blots on early modern maps of the New World, John Brian Harley famously theorized them along the lines of an aural rather than a visual approach to representing otherness, calling them 'cartographic silences'.³ The method allowed him to take stock of literary tools of rhetoric for a historical investigation into the mechanisms of territorial dispossession and cultural reappropriation in a colonial context. Being a literary historian by training, I can only be sensitive to his method as I equally undertake my theorization through the means of an acoustic reference, that of the 'echo' in what John Archer calls the 'para-colonial' context of English contacts with Russia and territories further south in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴ Where Harley's reflection resulted in a 'typology of silences', I venture to offer a 'typology of echoes'.⁵ For the sake of clarity and concision in this lecture, I will base my examples on my current corpus of study, which is the travel accounts left by the merchants of the English Muscovy Company in their experience of territories down the Volga, around and beyond the Caspian Sea from the late 1550s onward. I will deal with the form in which these accounts appear in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589; 1598–1600) and some cartographic derivatives of those accounts, since this is the material I edit and

³ Harley, 'Silences and Secrecy', p. 57.

⁴ Archer, *Old Worlds*, p. 17.

⁵ Harley, 'Silences and Secrecy', p. 57.





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footnote for the ongoing Oxford University Press edition of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*.

Before leaving Harley, I will borrow one last tool from him, which is his idea of maps generating 'a discourse of promise'.⁶ This is where I start my attempt at typology, by addressing the echo as first a *promise* in early modern travel accounts, before pondering on the echo as *survival* in the same accounts. Future and past will be the two directions to which I will open both categories in my talk.

Defined quite simply, the echo is the bouncing back of sound on a surface, which makes us hear that sound again, sometimes as a faint, repeated dying-out, and sometimes as an amplified reverberation. As Joan-Pau Rubiés reminds us, the Renaissance genre of cosmography, or description of the world, in which travel collections originate, is about tuning and adjusting material within a frame of reception, since works classified under that heading, he explains, 'amounted to the integration of new accounts of observations in distant lands into a system of knowledge initially dominated by classical sources.'⁷ In other words, what gives credit and stature to travellers' testimonies is their capacity to echo or amplify a humanist framework of ancient references, from Ptolemaic geography to Herodotian history. The authority of classically inflected *historia* is clearly part of the background of English travel collections. This is reflected, Rubiés notes, in the very title of Richard Eden and Richard Willes's *The History of Trauayle in the West and East Indies* (1577), which is Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*' predecessor in digesting the travels of the Muscovy Company merchants. It is one thing for the Company explorers and agents to have broken through the frozen north to open a diplomatic and commercial route into the Russia of Ivan the Terrible, or to have flown the flag of Saint George over the Caspian Sea in the first ever English foray into Central Asia,⁸ but another thing for the readers of those exploits back home if they do not situate the corresponding territories anywhere in their mental geography. Should they not be guided in their reading, the heroic exploit in Hakluyt's narrative would largely be lost on them.

Daring and impressive though it was, Company agent Anthony Jenkinson's expedition across the stormy Caspian Sea and through bandit-infested caravan routes to Bukhara, the major market city of Central Asia, would not have meant much for the early modern reader if the city merely appeared on Hakluyt's title-page as 'Boghar', which was the English distortion of the name of that city and the form under which it appeared in Jenkinson's account. What gives the name its heroic ring and makes Jenkinson's expedition sound like a reactivated version

⁶ Harley, 'Silences and Secrecy', p. 66.

⁷ Rubiés, 'From the "History of Trauayle" to the History of Travel Collections', pp. 26–7.

⁸ The achievement is put forward as early as Hakluyt's opening dedication to Francis Walsingham: 'theyr banners [...] scene in the Caspian sea', Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 2.





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of the Alexandrian romance is the succession of ancient echoes on Hakluyt's title-page leading to and amplifying the destination: '*Media, Persia, Boghar in Bactria*'. Offering an echo chamber of ancient and modern geographical reference points, Hakluyt's title-page both traces a new itinerary and simultaneously antiquates and romanticizes it:

The second [book], comprehending the worthy discoveries of the English towards the North and Northeast by Sea, as of *Lapland, Scriksinia, Corelia*, the Baie of *S. Nicholas*, the isles of *Colgoiue, Vaigats*, and *Nova Zembla* toward the great riuer *Ob*, with the mightie Empire of *Russia*, the *Caspian Sea, Georgia, Armenia, Media, Persia, Boghar in Bactria*, & diuers kingdoms of *Tartaria*.⁹

The promise of the echo, reviving ancient glory in those modern merchants, is what elevates their statuses to the point of making them worthy of sharing the title-page with Francis Drake's circumnavigation with which Hakluyt closes his list. The second edition of *Principal Navigations* subsequently adds to the glory of their achievement and its antiquation by putting that set of voyages first on the title-page and dealing with the Muscovy Company material in the first volume, giving it the same dignity as the 'many notable monuments and testimonies of the ancient forren trades, and of the warrelike and other shipping of this realm of England in former ages.'¹⁰

Choices such as these clearly belong to Hakluyt the editor, rather than the Company captains or agents whose accounts he compiled. If I carry on with the example of '*Boghar in Bactria*', it is dealt with in an account in which the narrative and voice belong to the travelling Company agent, while the paratext resonating with it is the ideological space of the editor. An example of this paratexting comes as early as the title given to the item: 'The voyage of M. Anthony Jenkinson, made from the citie of *Mosco in Russia*, to the citie of *Boghar in Bactria*, in the yere 1558: written by himselfe to the Merchants of London of the Moscouie companie.'¹¹ Right from the start, the title condenses the account by telescoping its extremes in geography and history: from contemporary Moscow to the ancient Bactria of an Achaemenid satrapy and *Alexandria Eschate*, the furthest city famously founded by the Macedonian conqueror in Central Asia. The account itself covers at much greater length the various stations of the journey that were in fact far more important to the travelling Company agent and his mission: the journey down the Volga and across the Caspian Sea, as well as the state of the country in its immediate post-war, famine and plague predicaments. The former Tatar khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan which Jenkinson was going through had just been subjugated by the Russian armies of Ivan the Terrible, in 1552 and 1556 respectively. But the merchant's agenda is different from that of the compiler. Within the account itself, the

⁹ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), title-page.

¹⁰ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1598), title-page.

¹¹ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 347.





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Company agent seldom uses the term 'Bactria', but when he does (or if he does, since the original manuscript is no longer extant), Hakluyt the editor makes sure he echoes the reference with a marginal note. This is what happens with the climactic passage of Jenkinson's arrival in Bukhara: 'So vpon the 23 day of December wee arriued at the citie of *Boghar* in the lande of *Bactria*.' This gets clearly flagged with the marginal note: 'Boghar a citie of Bactria'.¹²

Elsewhere in the collection, we come across curious references to antiquity, at times surprising us as being downright digressive on the itinerary of a merchant. An extreme example of that phenomenon is what happens with the account of a journey by another Company merchant, Geoffrey Duckett. He travels into Safavid Persia a few years later, in 1568, by way of Shirvan and Shamakhy, two cities which are now in the republic of Azerbaijan. The merchant aims for Kashan, a major Persian centre for silk trade located in the northern part of the present-day province of Isfahan. Along the way, almost matter-of-factly, we come across what looks like a scoop:

In the way of his trauell hee passed through *Persipolis*, sometime the royall seate of the Emperours of Persia, but now altogether ruined and defaced, whereof remayne to be seene at this day two gates onely that are distant one from the other the space of 12. miles, and some few pinnacles in the mountaines and conueiances for fresh water.¹³

This curious side remark is arguably the first claim by an English voyager to have visited Persepolis, and the claim sounds even more odd by reason of its improbability. Indeed, the actual Persepolis, located in what is now Fars province, is a full five hundred kilometres south of Kashan. There is no way, or indeed no reason, for a traveller journeying from Shamakhy to Kashan to get to Persepolis *en route*, especially if the whole journey is supposed to have taken just four days, as the account unrealistically claims, despite the one thousand kilometres of actual distance between Shamakhy and Kashan: '*Cashan*, beyng about foure dayes iourney from Shamachie'.¹⁴ So, what could have happened here? One of two options, we may conjecture. The first is that the agent writing the report mistook another site for Persepolis because he expected to see it when going into the antique land of Persia. This is a hypothesis I develop more at length elsewhere.¹⁵ The second option is that we may be in presence of an instance of editorial intervention on the part of Hakluyt. He could well have discreetly inserted a Persepolis reference in the midst of an account which has otherwise nothing to do with ancient Persia, but is all about trade routes and commodities in Safavid market towns. This hypothesis is supported by Lindsay Allen, all the more convincingly as she notes that the Persepolis passage is absent

¹² Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 355.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

¹⁴ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 420.

¹⁵ Niayesh, 'Reterritorializing Persepolis', pp. 118–20.





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from a British Library manuscript related to the travel of Geoffrey Ducket. ‘One might suspect Hakluyt of some creative editing in the interests of publicity’, she writes.¹⁶ She notes that the huge theatrical success of Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* strutting through the streets of a Persepolis could have contributed to the popularity of the location just before Hakluyt published his compendium. Capitalising on the stage conquests of *Tamburlaine* and conjuring up by the same token the classical exploits of Alexander submitting the Persians and sacking Persepolis, Hakluyt could have used promising echoes like these to elevate the enterprises of Muscovy Company merchants to the rank of world conquerors and empire-makers like Alexander and Timur. This is, after all, what the whole ideological project of *Principal Navigations* is about: a project of empire-thinking as a prelude to empire-building for an English nation which lays claim to antiquity by getting rhetorically constructed and classically dignified.

‘The humanist paradigm, nationally modified’ is the characteristic Rubiés puts forward to summarize what he calls the ‘English moment’ in the genealogy of early modern travel collections.¹⁷ But while classical echoes help build that English moment in writing, a different set of echoes can also be heard in the Muscovy Company merchants’ accounts as they physically progress through territories down the Volga. Indeed, as Janet Hartley detailed in her lecture last year, those territories were over that very period getting brutally conquered, rebuilt and rapidly relabelled by the armies of Ivan the Terrible. ‘An obvious way to control a non-Russian frontier region is to make it more Russian,’ Hartley reminded us, an adage which painfully resonates with our time as we currently follow such news as the razing and blotting out in Donetsk and Luhansk.¹⁸ Hartley explained how the conquest of Tatar strongholds by Ivan’s armies in the 1550s went hand in hand with the rapid razing of walls and mosques and the immediate building of Orthodox cathedrals and kremlins in the former khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan.¹⁹ Jenkinson’s account of his journey keeps ample trace of this perturbed human geography. This is the ‘ras[ing] or blot[ting] owt’ of the Eden quote with which I started, or the ‘silencing’ process Harley theorized in the maps he studied. As modern readers equipped with postcolonial theoretical tools in approaching archives,²⁰ we do not simply hear the promise of Western classical echoes of Persepolis and *Alexandria Eschate* as we turn the pages of Hakluyt’s volume. We also read, through the Company agent’s dutiful record, echoes of actual destructions of Tatar cities and their replacement by

¹⁶ Allen, ‘Chilminar *olim* Persepolis’, note 56, p. 322. The reference is to Ducket BL MSS 48151, b. ff. 170–171.

¹⁷ Rubiés, ‘From the “History of Trauayle” to the History of Travel Collections’, p. 30.

¹⁸ Hartley, ‘The Volga: The River as Frontier’, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁰ I think in particular of such strategies as Antoinette Burton’s reading of archives ‘against the grain’ (‘Foreword’, in Chaudhuri, Katz and Perry, *Contesting Archives*, p. viii).





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Russian ones. Jenkinson is ideally placed to observe and report on these even if this is not his primary objective, since he and his companions precisely follow the train of the Russian captain sent out by Moscow as the newly appointed governor of Astrakhan. The latter sails down the Volga to take his post with, Jenkinson tells us, '500 great boates vnder his conduct, some laden with victualles, souldiers, and munition.'²¹

Accordingly, we get both the Russian and Tatar sides of the destruction and reconstruction, with the Tatar contribution possibly supplied by the likes of the 'Tatar Tolmach' or interpreter mentioned by Jenkinson as a member of his party as he left Moscow.²² A passage such as the following description of Kazan gives us a fleeting echo of the timber and earth Tatar city as it would have stood prior to the conquest and before the construction of the freestone Russian version still in the making at the time of Jenkinson's visit:

Cazan is a fayre towne, after the Russe or Tartar fashion, with a strong castle, situated vpon a high hill, and was walled round about with timber and earth, but now the Emperour of *Russia* hath giuen order to plucke downe the olde walles, and to build them againe of free stone.²³

If views such as the above may have been witnessed by Jenkinson himself while one set of buildings was razed and another was erected, his testimony at other times can only rely on what he heard rather than what he saw. An apt example is his description of the so-called 'island of merchants' outside Kazan, passed by as he and his party were continuing their southward journey:

...[we] passed by an Island called the Island of merchants, because it was wont to be a place where all merchants, as well Russes and Cazanits, as Nagayans and Crymmes, and diuers other nations did resort to keepe mart for buying and selling, but now it is forsaken, and standeth without any such resort thither, or at *Cazan*, or at any place about it.²⁴

In his study of modern musical forms, Peter Doyle reminds us how musicians' conscious strategies for commonly channelling the echo – what he calls 'harnessing' it – can help 'sound events to last longer' so as to provide 'a residual participatory possibility' for an earlier melody at the heart of a new one.²⁵ I submit that archival echoes such as the ones we have seen do just the same, helping what is physically no longer there to survive in textual memory and complicate or nuance our reception of a primary, official record insisting on total domination of voices and full conquest of spaces. Jenkinson's testimony as much as Hakluyt's edited version of it, and even maps based on the account, teem with

²¹ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 348.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 347.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

²⁴ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 348.

²⁵ Doyle, *Echo and Reverb*, pp. 38, 42, 40.



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Fig. 1. Abraham Ortelius, 'Russiae, Moscoviae et Tartariae Descriptio Auctore Antonio Ienkensono Anglo edita Londini 1562 & dedicata illustriss D. Henrico Sydneco Wallie presidi.', in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, Antwerp, 1570. © Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.



Fig. 2. Close-up of part of map shown in Figure 1. © Barry Lawrence Ruderman Antique Maps Inc.

geographical echoes of competing Russian and Tatar cities and histories. The most extreme example in this respect is the passage of Jenkinson's arrival in a newly conquered Astrakhan, where it becomes particularly difficult to tell old from new, ruin from stronghold, Tatar from Russian:

The 14. day of July passing by an olde castle, which was Olde *Astracan*, and leauing it vpon our right hand, we arriued at New *Astracan*, which this Emperour of *Russia* conquered five yeeres past [...]. The towne of *Astracan* is situated in an Island vpon a hill, hauing a castle within the same, walled about with earth and timber, neither fayre nor strong. [...] This *Astracan* is the furthest holde that this Emperour of *Russia* hath conquered of the Tartars towards the *Caspian* sea, which hee keepeth very strong, sending thither euery yeere prouision of men, and victualles, and timber to builde the castle.²⁶

Published in Abraham Ortelius's, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, first issued in 1570, the visual rendering based on Jenkinson's textual account gives us an idea of the confusion entailed by the English agent's juxtaposed and contradictory impressions of several Astrakhans.²⁷ In Ortelius's cartographic version, Astrakhan is all but a silenced Tatar memory. On the contrary, it resonates and

²⁶ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), pp. 349–50.

²⁷ English version: Ortelius, *The Theatre of the Whole World*, 'Rvssiae, Moscoviae et Tartariae Descriptio', fols. 104–5.



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proliferates as a whole array of alternative identities in the midst of war and ruin. It appears as a political territory written large on the map, the geographical contours of an island, and a linguistic ‘contact zone’²⁸ between Russian and Tatar roots in ‘stara Astracan’ (‘old Astrakhan’) and ‘noua Astracan’ (‘new Astrakhan’).

Before referring to an acoustic phenomenon, let us remember that Echo is a mythological figure. She represents the paradoxical idea of a survival in space in the midst of physical annihilation. Indeed, the story of the Greek nymph who gives the phenomenon its name is that of a supplement to the main story of Narcissus. In the story, she pines and dies away, unnoticed by the unresponsive protagonist. What she leaves behind, though, is a voice without a body. True, as Doyle admits in unpacking the connotations going with the figure, in her disembodied form, she is ‘incapable of initiating speech’ and of existing autonomously, but she is nevertheless capable of responding and modifying meaning.²⁹ I contend that archives of our razed cities and their histories work in a similar manner, surviving in residual form in accounts within which they resonate and call for reactivation.

To conclude, as Antoinette Burton and the authors of *Contesting Archives* soberingly remind us, archives cannot be expected to be full records of the past, but are only fragments of it standing in dispute.³⁰ Being not ‘merely a repository of information’, but ‘a site for the production of knowledge’,³¹ archives lend themselves to multiple options for entering them, and invite engagement with the multiple voices resonating in them. In this lecture, I have tried to address some of the more mediated among those voices, which I have theorized as echoes of two different types in early modern travel compendia: echoes as promises of a classical and humanist past reactivated within an empire-thinking and empire-building project and setting a programme for its future development, and echoes as survivals of an alternative past, non-Western and non-classical, which complicates and renders less univocal this reading of history and the programme it seeks to set for the future. As editors of complex, orchestral texts of the type that we find in Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* and other empire-building travel compilations in the period, we have a duty to fine-tune our listening skills so as to pick up not just the one, but also the other set of echoes while keeping a critical mind, aware of the limits and the possibilities that they both offer for a fuller – albeit always necessarily biased and incomplete – recovery of the past.

²⁸ I borrow the phrase from Mary Louise Pratt’s theorization of the notion in ‘Arts of the Contact Zone’.

²⁹ Doyle, *Echo and Reverb*, p. 138.

³⁰ Burton, in Chaudhuri et al., *Contested Archives*, p. vii.

³¹ Chaudhuri et al., *Contested Archives*, p. xiii.





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