

AFANASY NIKITIN'S MULTILINGUAL TRAVEL ACCOUNT: TRANSLATING AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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ABSTRACT: Afanasy Nikitin's *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* [*Khozhenie za tri morya*], one of the most famous Old Russian travel accounts, was created in the second half of the fifteenth century, at the boundary of the late medieval and early modern periods. By understanding travel writing as a translation phenomenon, this paper will focus on how this merchant from Muscovite Russia translates an encounter between East and West during his seven-year journey through Persia, India, and other foreign lands, adapting linguistically to the exotic environment. Nikitin's multilingual travelogue, written in Old East Slavic and a patois of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic, reveals a complex hybrid identity manifested through the traveller's syncretic Christian-Muslim habits.

KEYWORDS: Travel Writing, Fifteenth Century, Linguistic Hybridity, Translation, Afanasy Nikitin

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on travel writing as a translation phenomenon (Bassnett, 2004, 2019; Cronin, 2000; Di Biase, 2006; Pickford, 2020; Polezzi, [2001] 2016; Sales, 2013; Thompson, 2011; Vidal Claramonte, 2012) that involves intercultural mediation between the centre and the periphery, across linguistic and geographical boundaries. In light of the manipulation of cultural differences, inherent in both translated texts and travel accounts (Bassnett, 2004, p. 75; Vidal Claramonte, 2012), it is particularly interesting to study late medieval and early modern narratives produced in Europe. At that time, Europeans were beginning to realise that the world was much bigger than they had imagined (Campbell, [1988] 1991; Thompson, 2011; Youngs, 2013), and, through contact with Otherness, interpreted unfamiliar civilisations from the perspective of their own religious and moral beliefs, translating the witnessed reality through the lens of their own culture.

Voyage Beyond Three Seas [*Khozhenie za tri morya*]¹ is one of the most famous Old Russian literary monuments reflecting this cultural dissonance between the domestic and the exotic. The text was written by Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Muscovite Russia, who described his journey through the territories belonging to present-day Iran and India (1468-1474). In his travel account, known as *khozhenie*, a genre originally related to pilgrimage narratives, Nikitin depicts an encounter between East and West, shuttling back and forth between the Orthodox system of values and the sphere of influence of other religions, such as Islam and Hinduism, and turning his voyage into a kind of antipilgrimage to a profane land (Uspenskiy, 1994). Although *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* is written in Old East Slavic, the reader regularly comes across Persian, Arabic, and Turkic words spelled in Cyrillic.

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¹ In this paper, I used two original versions published in Nikitin, A. (1986a) '*Khozhenie za tri morya* [*Voyage beyond three seas*]' and Nikitin, A. (1986b) '*Troitskiy (Ermolinskiy) izvod* [Trinity (Ermolinskiy) version]'

As he was the first Russian to visit India and provide testimony on this experience, Nikitin occupied a singular place in Soviet and post-Soviet official Russian historiography: he was considered “the pioneer cultural ambassador who established a Russian-Indian friendship” (Tillett, 1966, pp. 161–162), “Russia’s own ‘Marco Polo,’ who reached India thirty years before the Portuguese Vasco da Gama” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 246). I suggest an interdisciplinary approach that brings together history and translation studies to analyse Nikitin’s pre-colonial heterolingual travelogue, exploring how he translated the culture of the Other through foreign words and phrases, as well as descriptions of different religions.

2. Travel writing as translation

As Dora Sales (2013, p. 177) states, “*viajar implica traducir, traducir implica viajar*”.² In line with Sales’ approach, many studies from different epistemological fields analyse the similarities between translation and travel writing in order to highlight a conceptual link between these two phenomena. In the following, I will attempt to explain why “the metaphor of translation is often used as an image of travel (and vice versa)” (Polezzi, [2001] 2016, p. 1).

The first point to consider when drawing parallels between translation and travel is “the etymological link between the two activities, exemplified by the Latin roots *translatio* and *tractio* which imply movement, transportation, displacement, both on a physical and a metaphorical level” (Polezzi, [2001] 2016, p. 79). Campbell ([1988] 1991, pp. 1–2) also pays attention to etymology by pointing out that “*metaphor* itself is etymologically (and metaphorically) a ‘change of place’; its equivalent in Latin rhetoric, *translatio*, was a word often used quite literally in this sense”. In this regard, translation “takes the form of words that suggest (rather like the situation of the traveler)³ transposition: terms like translate, transfer, explain, expound, explicate, interpret, construe, and represent are strikingly close in etymological sense” (Cinquemani, 2006, p. 65).

Several researchers suggest that, in general, “travellers are shown to be translators” (Cronin, 2000, p. 4), as they translate their personal journeys into written accounts (Campbell, [1988] 1991, p. 2). As Thompson (2011, p. 62) explains:

The scenes and incidents we encounter in a travelogue necessarily come to us in a filtered form, refracted first through the perceiving consciousness of the traveller, and secondarily through the act of writing, the translation of ‘travel experience’ into ‘travel text’. [...] This translation involves at the very least a selective process whereby the writer prioritises some aspects of the travel experience over others.

Campbell ([1988] 1991, p. 6) defines travel writing as a “translation of experience into narrative and description, of the strange into the visible, of observation into the verbal construct of fact”. Di Biase (2006, p. 9) believes that the traveller “must translate in order

² Translation: “travelling implies translating, translating implies travelling”. All translations in this paper are by the author.

³ When the word *traveler* appears in a quote with one “l”, I maintain this spelling.

to make sense of foreign places and foreign people”. Meanwhile, for Polezzi ([2001] 2016, p. 77), “questions of translation can [...] be seen as complex practices involved in the construction of images and identities, and in the interaction between cultures”; and these complex translation practices are reflected in travel accounts (Vidal Claramonte, 2012, p. 55).

At the same time, as Bassnett (2004, p. 75) acknowledges, “travel writing and translation are parallel processes of textual manipulation, forms of rewriting that each in different ways contain inherently the idea of a journey, whether actual or linguistic”. Just like in the translation process, manipulation, “language, power and representation [...] are central both to the production and the reception of travel writing” (Polezzi, [2001] 2016, p. 1). In Bassnett’s (2019, p. 556) words, “translation [...] is never an innocent activity; similarly travel writing is a genre that exposes both explicit and implicit structures of power and knowledge”.

Both phenomena are examples of intercultural communication. Travel narratives “help shape the recipient culture and its various polysystems, bringing in new words to describe alien concepts” (Pickford, 2020, p. 85). I would like to recall Polezzi’s ([2001] 2016, p. 102) metaphor, which states that “the traveller is a translator of cultures”, or Bassnett’s (2019, p. 550) observation that both translator and interpreter are “mediator[s] between cultures, Janus-faced being[s] who inhabit two different worlds and whose task is to bring those worlds into contact”. And, like translation, travel writing is sometimes a dangerous tool that can lead to the creation of stereotypes: “*la traducción en ocasiones se ha utilizado para imponer exotismo y formar imágenes canónicas y estereotipadas de otras culturas, y [...] también puede ser esencial para el pensamiento fronterizo, viajero*”⁴ (Sales, 2013, p. 180).

The border-thinking issue mentioned by Sales and the “liminal geographical and/or linguistic space” (Pickford, 2020, p. 79) are also relevant to both phenomena. Thus, “the translating agent like the traveller straddles the borderline” (Cronin, 2000, p. 2), and, furthermore, “travel narratives move across language boundaries” (Pickford, 2020, p. 85). In other words, “*el viaje, como la traducción, revela la alteridad, y al tiempo nos enseña cosas de nosotros mismos, nos sitúa en un límite, en una frontera...*”⁵ (Sales, 2013, p. 178). Bassnett (2004, p. 70) identifies another interesting parallel between travel writing and translation, since both phenomena require the existence of an “original”:

Translation is a literary activity that involves the transfer of a text written in one language into another; hence, there must always be a source that exists somewhere else before translation can take place. Without that source in that other language, a translation would be a piece of original writing. Similarly, without the journey, a travel account would be simply a piece of fiction.

⁴ Translation: “translation has sometimes been used to impose exoticism and to create canonical and stereotypical images of other cultures, and [...] it can also be essential for a borderline traveller’s thinking”.

⁵ Translation: “travel, like translation, reveals otherness, and at the same time shows us things about ourselves, it puts us at a limit, at a border...”

According to Pickford (2020, p. 79), “negotiating linguistic alterity is central to both the traveller’s and translator’s experience”. The results of their writings are linked to the concept of faithfulness:

The translator as traveller, the traveller as translator: both are ambiguous and deeply suspicious figures, who ask to be trusted in their faithfulness to the reality or the words they interpret, in their reading and rendering of places, people, texts which we can only access through them. (Polezzi, [2001] 2016, p. 79).

Finally, it is important not to forget that “travellers find themselves in a foreign country and in a foreign language” (Cronin, 2000, p. 3) and have to communicate with people who do not speak their language. Therefore, “all travel (at least all travel into other countries and cultures) implies, literally, some form of translation” (Polezzi, [2001] 2016, p. 77).

In light of the above, I consider it appropriate to refer to the narrative, written by Afanasy Nikitin as a translation of his travel experience in several countries. In his testimony, the reader sees how the values of an Orthodox Christian trader meet Islam and various religions practiced in India. Likewise, Nikitin’s translation of Otherness is evident in his use of foreign words from Arabic, Turkic, or Persian, as well as his manipulation and domestication of the foreign phenomena he witnessed, as he sought to identify parallels and differences between life in India and Muscovite Russia.

3. Travel writing in the late medieval period

Given that people’s desire to travel has been a constant throughout much of history, travel writings have also existed for thousands of years (Das and Youngs, 2019; Youngs, 2013): travel can even be found “in our myths of origin, in our earliest literatures” (Campbell, [1988] 1991, p. 2). Perhaps the most important characteristic of travel writing throughout the ages has been its hybrid nature, often including letters, diaries, memoir, scientific modes and fictional forms of narrative (Das and Youngs, 2019, p. 11). Polezzi ([2001] 2016, p. 1) makes a similar point:

Travel writing is a complex genre, often defined as hybrid or heterogeneous. Just as travel crosses boundaries, cultures and languages, so travel writing produces texts which are marked by alterity, by distance, and by multiple allegiances, crossing fact and fiction, autobiography and description, ordinary life and extraordinary adventure.

Although Campbell ([1988] 1991, p. 5) calls the history of the travel book before the seventeenth century a “*prehistory*, a history of the slow assembling of the features that now identify a work as a ‘travel literature’”, travel writing was an emerging and fairly widespread genre in the Middle Ages. Despite the belief that medieval people didn’t travel much (Romano, 2020, p. xi) due to the limited encouragement of personal mobility in feudal

society (Thompson, 2011, p. 38), the medieval period produced a diverse range of texts about travel experiences.

Pilgrimage dominated medieval travel texts and was by far the most common paradigm and the most characteristic form of exotic travel in this period (Campbell, [1988] 1991; Kinoshita, 2019; Thompston, 2011; Youngs, 2013). *Peregrinatio*, or pilgrimage narratives, were first-person accounts that introduced a sense of individual experience. One possible reason for emphasising the pilgrim’s voice was perhaps to persuade the reader of the authenticity of the miraculous tales frequently found in them. This is how Thompson (2011, pp. 38–39) characterises *peregrinatio* as a genre:⁶

Typically, there is little effort to record the events of the actual journey, or the traveller’s subjective thoughts and feelings. Nor do these accounts usually evince much interest in the natural world, or in the other cultures encountered during the journey. [...] It was the education of the soul that was the text’s first concern, a homiletic agenda that often makes the medieval pilgrimage narrative little more than a compilation of passages from the Bible.

Crusade chronicles may be considered a subgenre of pilgrimage narratives, as the two had much in common. According to Davies (1992, p.14), before setting off, both crusaders and ordinary pilgrims would take steps to discharge their debts, and, at the prescribed pilgrim mass, were invested with insignia (a scrip and a staff) and had a cross marked on their garments. Indeed, several vernacular accounts of the crusades actually refer to them as “pilgrimages”: Davies (1992, pp.13–14) mentions Fulcher of Chartres’s prologue to the *Historia Hierosolymitana* (1105-06), which describes the First Crusade as a ‘pilgrimage in arms’ made by the Franks to Jerusalem ‘in honour of the Saviour’; Robert de Clari’s *Conquête de Constantinople*, which refers to the Fourth Crusade as ‘*li pelerin*’, as well as Villehardouin (ca. 1215) and Joinville (ca. 1290), who speaks of the ‘*pelerinaige de la croiz*’.

Another example of medieval travel writing can be found in missionary narratives, with one such example being William of Rubruck’s 1255 letter, addressed to the French King Louis IX, detailing his mission to the Mongol empire (Kinoshita, 2019, pp. 52-54; Campbell, 2019, p. 45). The distinction between peregrination and missionary narrative lay in their divergent interpretations of the medieval concept of *curiositas* wherein curiosity about the physical world was seen as a sinful temptation for pilgrims yet regarded as an intellectual virtue for missionaries (Howard, 1980, p. 108).⁷

Among the medieval travel texts describing journeys organised for other than spiritual purposes, Kinoshita (2019) mentions Marco Polo’s *The Travels*, a travelogue that

⁶ For further insights into the genre, please refer to: Taylor, L. J. et al., (eds.) (2009) *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*. Leiden: Brill.

⁷ As Zacher (1976, p. 4) puts it: “Generally defined, the temptation of *curiositas* referred to any morally excessive and suspect interest in observing the world, seeking novel experiences, or acquiring knowledge for its own sake. [...] *Curiositas* was a vice related to pride and sloth, and by the late Middle Ages it gradually came to be seen as a threat to pilgrimage [...]. As a form of religious worship, pilgrimage allowed men to journey through this present world visiting sacral landscapes as long as they kept their gaze permanently fixed on the invisible world beyond. It excluded from sight and undue speculation that same arena of interest *curiositas* tempted men to enter.”

has been extensively studied. Accounts of fictional journeys also existed in the Middle Ages: for example, the *Book of John Mandeville*, written in the late 1350s or early 1360s, is a first-person account by a fictional knight from England of his journey to the Holy Land.⁸

As we might expect, Latin was the dominant language of pilgrims’ and missionaries’ written accounts until the thirteenth century, when narratives in the vernacular began to appear (Youngs, 2013, p. 24). At the same time, translanguaging is also present in some medieval travel accounts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Marco Polo’s *Travels*, for example, were written in Franco-Italian, while Benjamin of Tudela’s travelogues in Hebrew were suffused with Arabic (Kinoshita, 2019).

It should be noted that there is a considerable debate in academic circles about the medieval/modern divide, as it is difficult to establish a chronological boundary between what is considered ‘late medieval’ and ‘early modern’.⁹ For this reason, it seems appropriate to speak of the second half of the fifteenth century—the period of the creation of Nikitin’s text analysed in this paper—as a hybrid period, that can be labeled both late medieval and early modern. Indeed, as we will see, *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* also occupies the borderland between medieval and modern travel accounts, as it possesses characteristics of both the spiritual *peregrinatio* and the early modern travel report written by a trader.

4. Afanasy Nikitin and his *Voyage Beyond Three Seas*: a hybrid text

According to Lurie (1986, p. 87), Afanasy Nikitin’s *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* is one of the most important works of Old Russian literature. Postnikov (2003, p. 859) states that it “stands alone in Old Russian literature as the writing of a layman bent on a commercial enterprise”. And Maxwell (2006, p. 246) adds that “although very little scholarship in English exists concerning Nikitin, most Russians [...] are well-acquainted with their compatriot”. Indeed, his name remains known in modern Russia: *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* is mandatory reading for analysis in Russian secondary schools.

Afanasy Nikitin was a merchant from Muscovite Russia, who undertook a journey through the territories of present-day Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Oman, Somalia, Turkey, Iran, and India, which he described in his *Khozhdenie za tri morya*.¹⁰ Thus, he became “the

⁸ For more on this work, see Campbell (2019, pp. 45–46), Howard (1980, pp. 53–76), Kinoshita (2019, pp. 59–61), Zacher (1976, pp. 130–157).

⁹ No general agreement has been reached on this, as “the boundaries of each [period] depend heavily on the nationality, date and preoccupations of the historians who draw them” (Hutton, 2015, p. 5). Thus, some researchers choose symbolic dates to mark the boundaries, such as the fall of Constantinople (1453), the appearance of movable type printing technology (the 1440s), or the beginning of Spanish colonisation of the Americas (1492), etc. Ellis (2015, p. 12) draws our attention to the next phenomena as artificial boundaries between the Middle Ages and the modern period: “In the realm of intellectual ideas, for instance, we think of the Renaissance and humanism. We might also classify as early modern overseas expansion and colonization which was sparked by demographic growth in Europe. Economically, we would probably also include, as a marker of modernity, inflation – the 16th-century European price rise – also fuelled by demographic growth. And in religious terms, the Reformation marked a clear watershed”.

¹⁰ In English literature I found various translations of the title: *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* (Maxwell, 2006; Shlapentokh, 2012), *The Journey Beyond Three Seas* (Postnikov, 2003), *Voyage Across Three seas* (Tillett, 1966). In this paper, I will refer to this travel narrative as *Voyage Beyond Three seas* or simply *Voyage*.

first Russian who had seen India and provided a description of the exotic land” (Shlapentokh, 2012, p. 172). As Maxwell (2006, p. 244) puts it:

This account occupies a unique place in Russian historical and literary studies because it was quite unusual for a Russian merchant to travel the distance Nikitin traveled and even more extraordinary for a merchant to document his journey. Furthermore, Nikitin recorded his personal thoughts and feelings, offering scholars a glimpse into heart and mind of a common medieval Russian.

In the nineteenth century, Sreznevsky proposed to date Nikitin’s trip to 1466–1472. In the mid-1980s, however, Semyonov demonstrated that the traveller started his journey in 1468, was in India from 1471 to 1474,¹¹ and returned to Russia in the spring of 1475. Today, researchers agree with Semyonov’s proposal (Maxwell, 2006; Postnikov, 2003).

So, what is known about Nikitin’s long trip? He departed from Tver, not even thinking of reaching India: his goal was to trade furs in the “land of Shirvan”, in the eastern Caucasus (part of present-day Azerbaijan). Nonetheless, near Astrakhan, he was attacked by Tatars and lost his goods. Nikitin then chose to venture through Persia and onward to India, aiming to recover his losses. He stayed in India for over three years and, finally, decided to return to Russia. However, he did not make it back to his hometown, as he died near Smolensk in 1475.

Another important point needs to be explained: the specificity of Nikitin’s *Voyage* from the perspective of the genre *khozhdenie* or *khozhenie* (*voyage*). According to Maletto (2005), *khozhdeniya* were travel narratives in which Russian pilgrims described their journeys in search of spiritual meaning (such as *peregrinatio*). In this context, Nikitin, a merchant and traveller to India, stands out dramatically. One might even suggest that the attribution of the *khozhdenie* genre to his manuscript is wrong. But the author himself begins his text with the following words: “Herewith I wrote about my sinful voyage beyond the three seas”¹² (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 5), he describes his experience as *khozhdeniye*. After studying Nikitin’s journal, Uspenskiy (1994) stresses that the travelogue resembles Old Russian pilgrimage writings in its compositional and genre characteristics. Since Nikitin himself refers to his work as “my sinful voyage”, Uspenskiy (1994) suggests that the journey should be understood as an anti-pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to a profane and unclean place.

I believe that the word *hybrid* is appropriate to describe Nikitin’s narrative. First of all, Nikitin’s text is hybrid in genre due to the amalgamation of autobiographical details, cultural insights, and economic information (as is often found in travel writing). At the same time, the travelogue is created in the hybrid era, between the late medieval and early modern periods, which is evident in the writing. The reason for his journey was commercial; Nikitin travelled to lands unimaginable for medieval society. However, Nikitin’s text is *khozhdenie*

¹¹ According to Maxwell (2006, p. 245), “most likely, Nikitin began writing his notes in India following a two-year stay in Persia”.

¹² Original: “Се написах свое грѣшное хождение за три моря”.

and his way of thinking portrays him as a primarily religious person with values similar to a medieval pilgrim.

The text is also linguistically hybrid: the lexicon ranges from colloquial Russian to high Church Slavic, while includes utterances in a patois of Arabic, Turkish and Persian, spelled in Cyrillic. According to Zenkovsky ([1963] 1974, p. 334), some parts of *Voyage* are written “in the ‘basic Islamic’ business dialect of the Near East in which Arabic, Turkic, and Persian words are interwoven”. Maxwell (2006, p. 258) adds the following: “Not only was this dialect the language of traders, but also of the faithful Muslims. As a merchant and as one of the faithful, Nikitin shed his Orthodox identity and increasingly wrote his account in the language of the Qur’an”.

In his prayers, Nikitin, a devout Orthodox Christian, invokes God’s name in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and Old East Slavic. Like his travel writing, his own identity seems to be hybrid. While trading in Persia and India, he wore Muslim clothing, participated in Muslim prayers, fasted on Muslim holy days, and even assumed a Muslim name. Some researchers go as far as to suggest that he converted to Islam (Lenhoff and Martin, 1989), or was in the process of doing so, having adopted new syncretic Christian-Muslim habits (Maxwell, 2006). Lurie (1986), however, argues that Nikitin remained an Orthodox Christian despite his long absence from his homeland because he always wanted to return to Muscovite Russia and actively avoided travelling to Mecca: Indeed, before making the decision to return, Nikitin laments the impossibility of traveling through Mecca:

I have trusted in you, save me, Lord! I don't know the way—where to go from Indostan [...] *[here Nikitin outlines various options, all of which are dangerous]* There is no other way. To go to Mecca means to accept the faith of the Muslims. Therefore, for the sake of faith, Christians do not go to Mecca: there they are converted to the Muslim faith.¹³ (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 14).

5. Translating an encounter between East and West

Nikitin’s writing offers a unique testimony to how Asia might have been seen “before Orientalism” (Phillips, 2014). Nevertheless, his testimony reveals signs of “prejudices and childlike naivete” (Tillett, 1966, p. 163) in its portrayal of Indian culture. For example, his first contact with India is described as follows:

And here is the land of India, and people go unclothed; [women] wander bareheaded with exposed breasts, their hair braided into a single plait. All [the women] are pregnant, giving birth every year and raising many children. The men and women, all of them, are black. Everywhere I went, a crowd would follow, marveling at the sight of a white man. [...] Women go about bareheaded with their breasts uncovered, while young boys and girls remain naked until the age of seven and do not hide their shame.¹⁴ (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 7).

¹³ Original: “Господи боже мой! На тя уповах, спаси мя, господи! Пути не знаю, иже камо пойду из Гундустана [...] *[here Nikitin outlines various options, all of which are dangerous]* А иного пути нѣтъ никуды. А на Мякку итти, ино стати в вѣру бесерменьскую, занеже кристьяне не ходят на Мякку вѣру”.

¹⁴ Original: “И тут есть Индийская страна, и люди ходят всѣ наги, а голова не покрыта, а груди голые, а власы в одну косу заплетены, а всѣ ходят брюхаты, а дѣти рождаются ж на всякый год, а детей у них много.

As we can see, Nikitin focuses primarily on the appearance of the Indians, emphasising the differences between himself as a white man and them as black. Notably, when describing Indian women, the merchant first highlights their uncovered hair and then their exposed breasts. Throughout the travelogue, he reiterates negative characteristics, amalgamating skin color with generic stereotypes: “And all of them are black, and all of them are bad, and all the women are whores”.¹⁵

However, this power asymmetry is not evident in his translations of Muslim culture, which is treated with more respect. For example, we see him not only fasting with the Muslims (Nikitin, 1986b, p. 24) but also greatly admiring their armies (Nikitin, 1986b, pp. 28–29). Maxwell (2006, p. 265) explains that Nikitin’s favourable predisposition toward Muslim cultural and religious habits is the result of Rus’ longstanding relationship and trade with Islamic people.

Although Postnikov (2003, p. 859) considers *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* a “sober and realistic narration”—and Tillett (1966, p. 163) adds that “it contains a great deal of detailed information about prices, commodities, trade routes, and travel conditions in the fifteenth century”—, the data appearing in the text should be treated with caution, since, in this period, “even the apparently faithful eyewitness accounts are not always reliable as they often include hearsay material and snippets of older myths of the Orient” (Phillips, 2014, p. 9). Therefore, it is convenient to regard Nikitin’s narrative not as “a very objective description of [Hindustan]” (Postnikov, 2003, p. 860), but rather as an interpretation, a translation of the world he encountered through the lens of his personal experience, which speaks more about the identity of its author than about a situation experienced by the merchant from Tver in the countries he visited.

So, how does Nikitin translate his experience? The description of religious practices occupies an important place in his testimony. For example, he reports that in India there is a cult devoted to the so-called *буты* (*buty*), which “are Adam and his whole kin”¹⁶ (Nikitin, 1986b, p. 23). Although it is difficult to trace the origin of the word *buty* (it may be a Persian term or etymologically derived from *Buddha*), from the context it can be understood that Nikitin is using this term to refer to deities and idols. As for the presence of Adam in Indian culture, this worship was obviously difficult to imagine in India: the reader is probably dealing with a transliteration of some god’s name or a translation of a story that reminded Nikitin of the Biblical legend. The traveller further states that “there are in all 84 faiths in India, and all believe in *buty*; people of different faiths do not drink, eat or marry those of another”¹⁷ (Nikitin, 1986b, p. 23). The merchant provides a detailed description of food and sculptures related to the *buty*, and points out that the Indian people, like Orthodox

А мужики и жонки всѣ наги, а всѣ черны. Яз куды хожу, ино за мною людей много, да дивуются бѣлому человѣку. [...] А жонки ходят головане покрыта, а сосцы голы; а паропки да девочки ходят наги до семи лѣт, сором не покрыт”.

¹⁵ Original: “А все черныя, а все злодѣи, а жонки все бляди”.

¹⁶ Original: “есть Адамъ и род его весь”.

¹⁷ Original: “вѣръ въ Индѣи всѣх 80 и 4 вѣры, а все вѣрують в бута; а вѣра с вѣрою ни пиеть, ни ясть, ни женится”.

Christians, face the East when they pray. Despite these similarities, however, he regards the religion of the Hindus as perverse, seeking solace instead in the “familiar monotheism of Islam” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 260).

As Phillips (2014, p. 11) explains, “the perception of the Christian faith as true and all others as erroneous led travelers frequently to make pejorative comments on the ‘idolatrous’ or otherwise faulty religious traditions of Asian cultures”. It should also be added that Nikitin does not label Muslims as infidels or robbers; this distinction is reserved only for Hindus. In general, he attributes sexual promiscuity to Indians and exaggerates certain facets of their daily life, such as the affection of Indian women for white European men. In turn, he pays particular respect to Muslims.

According to Maxwell (2006), the Russian merchant embraced Islam not only for commercial reasons but also to satisfy his religious needs. Throughout the text, he prays several times in creolised Arabic. He refuses to accept the polytheistic beliefs prevalent in the Hindu community and becomes a quasi-convert to Islam: “Nikitin assimilated into Islamic culture easily because their monotheistic beliefs paralleled his Christian faith. His genuine spiritual conviction that the ‘one God’ of the Muslims was the same as the Orthodox Christians” (Maxwell, 2006, p. 263).

In addition to the inclusion of Arabic prayers, which gave rise to such speculation about his religious orientation, words in languages like Persian, Arabic and even Turkic frequently appear in this account. After analysing the source, I have come to the conclusion that they have been adopted for three main reasons.

First of all, I believe that Nikitin utilizes Russian words or phrases and promptly supplies their translations—thus creating linguistic doublets—to infuse an exotic essence into his writing.¹⁸ Nikitin simply transliterates the foreign words and phrases into Old East Slavic; he does not use any other alphabet instead of the Cyrillic one. However, it is important to note that the transliterated words were not familiar to his compatriots in Russia. Instead, they could understand the text thanks to the Russian words he provides alongside the exotic ones. It is a linguistic device through which the author translates an ‘alien’ feeling of his stay in distant lands.

Secondly, he may also be using foreign languages to encode information that he regards as private, as when he provides a description of how to hire an Indian prostitute in a patois that mixes various Oriental languages and dialects (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 10). He describes in extensive detail the physical characteristics of the prostitutes and offers a price list. It is likely that Nikitin considers this information intimate and encodes it through his

¹⁸ For example, the use of the word *more* (*more*), a Russian word meaning ‘sea’, is immediately followed by its literal translation into Persian, *дорѣя* (*doria*) (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 5). *Дорѣя* (*doria*) is a transcription of *درد*, which means ‘sea’ in Persian. On the other hand, in the sentence “*Качма – ‘do not run!’* [Качма — не бѣгайте]” (Nikitin, 1986a, p. 6), *качма* (*kachma*) means ‘do not run’ in Tatar, so the second part of the phrase again is its literal translation. Finally, in the sentence “The wine is made from big nuts—Indian *kozi* [Вино же у нихъ чинятъ в великы орѣсех — *кози* гундустаньскаа]” (Nikitin, 1986b, p. 20), the author preserves the words *великы орѣсех* (*big nuts* in Russian), as well as *Indian kozi* (*gouz-i* is the Persian term for nuts), while referring to coconuts. Again, *kozi* (*кози*) is a literal translation of *орѣсех*.

multilingual statement. At the same time, a passage in which the merchant accuses the Russian rulers of fighting against each other (Nikitin, 1986b, p. 27) is also written in a patois. Perhaps by writing this political statement in a non-Old East Slavic language, Nikitin wants to avoid getting into trouble if he returns to Russia.

Finally, in many cases, the merchant uses foreign words that convey an object or a phenomenon belonging to the exotic culture, for which there may be no ready translation in his own language. These include terms for clothing (фота – *fota*, turban), food (кичирисъ – *kitchari*, a traditional Indian dish), ships (тавы – *tavy*, Indian ships), etc, and also political offices, such as султан (*sultan*), which are also described with non-Old East Slavic words, although the trader occasionally draws parallels between Russian and Indian rulers by domesticating the terms. It should also be noted that Nikitin also uses vulgar Russian words for Indian women, such as бляди (*whores*), and when referring to the maritime trade, he uses naval slang (Lenhoff and Martin, 1989, pp. 339–340), again showing the traveller’s linguistic adaptation to the situation in which he finds himself.

6. Conclusions

Afanasy Nikitin’s *Voyage Beyond Three Seas* stands as a peculiar example of late medieval travel writing. During his ventures in distant exotic lands, this fifteenth-century Russian trader is immersed in a rich tapestry of languages, cultures, and religions. His insights and observations can be understood as translations or interpretations shaped by the perspective of a medieval individual with religious inclinations. Simultaneously, he expresses genuine fascination with unknown territories while fervently critiquing societies different from his own. The term ‘translation’ accurately encapsulates Nikitin’s experience: not only is his text a translation of his voyage, but throughout his journey, he exists within the realm of translation, consistently navigating the intricacies of communication across various linguistic and cultural borders.

While Nikitin’s account is filled with information about his economic endeavors and the cultures he encountered—particularly the exotic culture of India—, his primary focus lies in the exploration of various religious aspects, ranging from Orthodox Christianity to the various religious practices found in India. In this sense, its genre, *khozhenie*, originally associated with pilgrimage narratives, is particularly significant. If the text had been composed centuries later, it might have included more diverse details about the countries Nikitin visited, their inhabitants, and the natural environment, delving further into the forbidden *curiositas* that was discouraged in medieval *peregrinatio*. Nevertheless, the account does offer insights into life in India and, notably, provides economic information, connecting it to the early modern travelogue genre. This period saw an increased awareness of trade, conquest, and colonization opportunities, resulting in a stronger emphasis on empirical enquiry and eye-witness observation, thereby shifting the focus of travel writing towards detailed reporting. In sum, representative of medieval culture, Nikitin’s text also demonstrates certain characteristics that would foreshadow travel writings from the early modern era.

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Savchenkova, M. – Afanasy Nikitin's multilingual travel account
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