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Exploring peripheries through similarities and differences. Comparisons between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey in English chorographic publications of the late 16th and the 17th century

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In 1685 Moses Pitt, a London bookseller and printer, went bankrupt. This was not an unusual development — printing and selling books had never been the most profitable venture — but there was one very evident reason for the failure of his business: the collapse of the plan to publish *The English Atlas*, a monumental, multi-volume set of books richly illustrated with maps and providing its readers with detailed knowledge of the contemporary world. Unfortunately, out of the planned eleven volumes only four were ever produced and delivered to the subscribers. Had Pitt been able to continue his work just a bit longer, the readers would have been given a chance to find out what the Oxford scholars he worked with had to say about three countries which, despite striking differences, were all viewed by the English public as being to a lesser or greater extent peripheral: Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey. One can only regret that this never happened in the end: the project was abandoned just before the volume describing the Ottoman Empire was to have been published.¹

At first glance, it may seem unreasonable to look for similarities between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire. However, in the context of England's relations with all three countries in the late 16th and the 17th century, and attempts to determine how the English may have seen the outside world, this may well be, in fact, a rational step. This is because due to their geographical remoteness all three countries had been outside the traditional circle of England's main international partners, yet

¹ FEOLA, MANDELBROTE 2013, pp. 341–342.

England did establish some kind of a relationship and rather regular links with them. This meant that the English were certainly aware of the existence of all three states, and they functioned on the Englishmen's mental map. Moreover, England's contacts with each of these countries were only initially linked primarily to economic matters. With time international politics gradually became more and more important. This evolution resulted in a surge of interest in Poland, Turkey and Russia and provided a significantly broader context in which they were presented in the emerging English public sphere.²

At the same time, the 17th century was a period of significant changes in reading strategies, education and circulation of information in England. This stimulated interest not only in domestic events, but also in the outside world.³ There is no doubt that in England there existed conditions necessary to provide the wider public with quite detailed — though often based on well-established stereotypes — information about each of the three countries in question: the level of literacy was growing and so was the book and news market; information was becoming more easily available and accessible due to expanding international news networks.

Thus, contrary to what some historians have claimed, it was not a period in which the knowledge of e.g. Muscovy or Poland-Lithuania deteriorated dramatically, especially in comparison with the previous century.⁴

What is more, it is clear that all three states fell under the same, albeit broad, category of countries: huge, not very well-explored, but always identified as having their own specific characteristics of an eastern state, located beyond (Turkey), on (Muscovy), or close to, but still within, the border (Poland-Lithuania) of that part of the continent that constituted for the English (and the British in general) a rather familiar point of reference in their relationship with the outside world.⁵

If Muscovy, Turkey and Poland-Lithuania were treated quite similarly, were they presented in a similar fashion as well? What features were highlighted in the descriptions of all three countries? How did the English authors approach the key differences, how did they perceive possible similarities, and what determined the final overall assessment of each country?

Some methodological clarification is needed first. In research into the perception or level of knowledge of other countries in England, so far different types of sources have been treated in an equal way, often being assigned — regardless of their genre or reach — an identical role in creating the image of Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy or Turkey. Meanwhile, correspondence, diplomatic reports, memoirs, and other ego-documents — Patrick Gordon's famous diary being the most striking example — very often were not available at all or were available to a very limited group

² LAKE, PINKUS 2006, pp. 270–292.

³ PARKER 1990, pp. 6–7; GILLIES, MASON VAUGHAN 1998, p. 11f.

⁴ ZINS 2002, p. 258; ANDERSON 1954, p. 140.

⁵ WORTHINGTON 2012, p. 44.

of readers. It is thus clear that different types of texts, and even specific works, may have been very important for building the image of foreign countries in the eyes of certain groups of readers, but had very limited or no influence on the way these countries were perceived by representatives of other groups. It is hard not to notice, for example, that travelogues or other eyewitness accounts of Poland, Muscovy or Turkey — used so willingly by researchers trying to recreate this image — may have determined how a wider audience perceived these countries in very different degrees.

First of all, only some of them were published in print, which gave access to them to a wider audience.⁶ In the case of Muscovy and Turkey it is important to note that some such texts appeared in Richard Hakluyt's *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation*.⁷ In addition, English readers had at their disposal a number of works by authors like Giles Fletcher the Older, William Biddulph or Henry Blount, who focused entirely on those states.⁸ However, in the case of Poland-Lithuania in the 17th century only the works of the Englishman Fynes Moryson, the Scot William Lithgow and the Irishman Bernard Connor appeared in book form. Significantly, Moryson's book was published only once, in 1617;⁹ Lithgow's touched upon issues relating to Poland-Lithuania to a very limited extent,¹⁰ and Connor's was not published until in 1698.¹¹

Secondly, very often even authors who had an opportunity to get to know the realities of other countries not only presented their own experiences and observations, but also referred to earlier works from which they had borrowed some information on the history, geography, customs, etc. of the countries they described¹² — a common phenomenon at that time. However, the problem is even wider. Also in the case of other types of sources, which are usually indicated as key in building the English people's ideas about other countries, it is often forgotten that they were aimed at or available only to specific groups, for example, only to those with adequate education and knowledge of languages.¹³

What types of texts seem to be most useful in determining what the English reading public may have known about the world and how this may have translated into ideas about the countries we are interested in? It seems justified to pay more attention to the types of sources which, based on our knowledge of the information and reading systems in England, can be considered as accessible for a large number of readers from

⁶ GAMES 2008, p. 42.

⁷ JANSSON, BUSHKOWITCH, ROGOZIN 1994, pp. 30–37.

⁸ FLETCHER 1643; BIDDULPH 1608; BLOUNT 1636.

⁹ MORYSON 1617.

¹⁰ Cf. LITHGOW 1632, pp. 401–403.

¹¹ CONNOR 1698.

¹² PARKER 1999, p. 7.

¹³ More on this issue see KALINOWSKA 2017, pp. 26–29.

different social and professional groups. These will certainly be — and they are going to be the basis for the following reflections — chronographic sources, i.e. combining geographical description with historical narrative and other elements,¹⁴ but in this case only those describing or referring to all three countries in question within the main body of the text. This way it will be possible to compare directly how their authors approached the similarities and differences between the three countries on various levels.

Obviously, any findings based on an analysis of such sources will still be at high risk of error and very difficult to verify, but the approach proposed here seems appropriate in so far as it is known that publications of this type were the main source of information about other countries for the seventeenth-century readers.¹⁵ It is important to remember, however, that the authors of these works used a very similar set of earlier sources and borrowed from each other, and thus repeated the same information. This is evidenced by the example of Peter Heylyn, who admitted to quoting a number of English authors like George Abbot, Thomas Blundeville, Robert Stafford and Edward Grimeston, as well as foreign writers: Giovanni Antonio Magini, Giovanni Botero, Marcin Kromer, Sebastian Münster, Adrianus Saravia, Abraham Ortelius, Johanes Thomas Fregius and most probably Guillame Postel.¹⁶

If we take into account common sources and mutual borrowings of certain facts, we will be justified in saying that we are dealing with a certain knowledge base of Muscovy, Turkey and Poland-Lithuania, from which the author of each new text cherry-picked while writing his piece. It can be thus expected that this contributed to the emergence of a certain general image of the countries in question, of their inhabitants and their functioning, differing only in certain details. But what elements did this image usually include?

One of them was clearly geographical location. Obviously, all the countries were described as being located in the east and neighbouring on other countries seen as distant or lesser-known. Poland-Lithuania was identified as a country with a vast area and numerous provinces,¹⁷ but clearly still a part of Europe. George Abbot wrote that it “lies on the East-side of Germany, between Russia and Germany”.¹⁸ For Abbot, Muscovy was located east of Sweden, but he stressed — as did Strafford later on — that a large part of the Muscovite state stretched across Asia.¹⁹ This was repeated by Clarke and Fage. In their opinion, Muscovy was “the last country in Europe towards the East, and part of it stands in Asia”.²⁰ Their opinion was also shared by Meriton.²¹

¹⁴ VINE 2017, p. 417.

¹⁵ SHAPIRO 2003, pp. 84–85.

¹⁶ HEYLYN 1639, pp. 19–23.

¹⁷ MORDEN 1680, p. 113.

¹⁸ ABBOT 1608, p. 70.

¹⁹ ABBOT 1599, pp. 57–58; STAFFORD 1618, p. 28.

²⁰ CLARKE 1657, pp. 81, 84; FAGE 1667, p. 61.

²¹ MERITON 1679, p.109.

It is thus clear that Russia was considered to be a European state, but its presence in Asia — in geographical terms — was strongly emphasised as well.

The situation was quite different with regard to Turkey. Some of the authors described it as a great empire encompassing territories on three continents (“Body of this huge Empire is like a Monster”),²² but some decided to refer to its individual parts in a historical context, using names of historical provinces. Sometimes, as in the case of Abbot and Morden, individual parts of the empire — European, Asian and African — were simply described separately.²³

The authors usually argued, or suggested, that the size and geographical location obviously influenced all the countries’ potential and their political realities. In the case of Poland-Lithuania, a large size of the state and its composite nature were regularly emphasised. Peter Heylyn wrote — and this was later repeated by Robert Morden — that “[Poland] is an aggregate Body, consisting of many distinct Provinces, United into one Estate, of which Poland, being the Chief, hath given the name of the rest”.²⁴ Some works — e.g. those by Pitt, Gabriel Richardson or Samuel Clarke — discussed only the main parts of the state, e.g. Wielkopolska, but sometimes they focused on individual provinces, providing their shorter or longer descriptions. Surprisingly, very seldom was the prominent role of Lithuania as one of the two main components of the state stressed or even acknowledged.²⁵

Almost always attention was paid to Poland-Lithuania’s very favourable natural conditions: abundance of raw materials, and climate, which — even though sometimes cold — was conducive to agriculture, especially production of grain. Similarly, authors almost always emphasised the bravery, good appearance, military abilities and language skills of its inhabitants (some authors even described them as “much addicted to the Latine tongue”).²⁶

In reports on Muscovy similar elements were usually stressed. It was quite common for authors to write about the country’s extremely cold climate, especially in the north,²⁷ but also about the fact that in the summer the natural conditions were almost ideal: “the wood [...] and Meadows so green, and well grown, such variety of Flowers, such melody of Birds that you Cannot travel in a more pleasant country”.²⁸ An abundance of furs and other natural resources was mentioned as well. Heylyn pointed out that the state, in spite of its size, had a relatively small population,²⁹ but according to Abbot it was well populated.³⁰ Moreover, the capital city itself, with

²² FAGE 1667, p. 86.

²³ ABBOT 1608, pp. 74–91; MORDEN 1680, p. 123.

²⁴ HEYLYN 1669, p. 139; MORDEN 1680, p. 113.

²⁵ MIRECKA 2014, p. 48f.

²⁶ CLARKE 1657, p. 155; MORDEN 1680, p. 114.

²⁷ CLARKE 1657, p. 152.

²⁸ CLARKE 1657, p. 152; MORDEN 1680, p. 119.

²⁹ HEYLYN 1639, p. 356.

³⁰ ABBOT 1608, p. 68.

its 41,500 houses, was apparently larger than London,³¹ and could be compared in terms of size, but also inconvenience for the inhabitants, with Cairo.³² What may be regarded as surprising are negative opinions about the Russians themselves.³³ Terms such as “base, contentious, Ignorant and superstitious”,³⁴ “naturally cunning and dangerous”³⁵ or “great lyers, treacherous” [Morden] were the norm, as were descriptions of cases of drunkenness, violence or incomprehensible customs. “Naturally ingenious enough, yet not addicted to Arts or Sciences, but to Traffick and Husbandry” is one of the most flattering opinions one can find.³⁶ It was also repeatedly mentioned that Russians did tend to bury their dead in a vertical position.³⁷

Because of the size of the Ottoman Empire, more detailed descriptions usually focused specifically on its individual parts,³⁸ but the overall assessment was mostly positive: the Empire with its capital “in the stately and Imperiall City of Constantinople controlled the chiefest and most fruitful parts of the three first known parts of the World...the large and spacious empire abounding with all sorts of temporal blessings”.³⁹ The authors also emphasised the country’s military⁴⁰ and trade potential, thanks to which no other ruler could surpass the sultan in terms of wealth and power.⁴¹ His Ottoman subjects were described as a very diverse group, fully committed to (and dominated by) their lord, ready to give their lives for him and for their religion.

These two elements defined Turkey in a way that made it an interesting point of reference for the English authors’ presentation of the other two countries. The Ottoman Empire was presented as a state in which the sultan held absolute and unlimited power, and stood above the law; he was a ruler for whom the only limitation could be religious laws.⁴² It was Islam, that lay behind his power and guaranteed his position, as it was the element unifying his subjects in the fight against external enemies.⁴³ Therefore, as Clarke wrote, the weakening of religious zeal resulted in the relaxation of military discipline and the weakening of the state.⁴⁴ The tsar, too, was presented as a ruler with absolute authority (“after the manner

³¹ CLARKE 1657, pp. 151–152.

³² GAINSFORD 1618, p. 46.

³³ ANDERSON 1954, pp. 145–147.

³⁴ MERITON 1679, p. 109; STAFFORD 1618, p. 29.

³⁵ GAINSFORD 1618, p. 48.

³⁶ MORDEN 1680, p. 119.

³⁷ CLARKE 1657, p. 84.

³⁸ HEYLYN 1639, p. 386f.

³⁹ CLARKE 1657, pp. 166–167.

⁴⁰ LITHGOW 1632, p. 187.

⁴¹ GAINSFORD 1618, pp. 27–28.

⁴² MORDEN 1680, p. 259.

⁴³ MERITON 1679, p. 129.

⁴⁴ CLARKE 1657, pp. 168–169.

of the Eastern Countries”).⁴⁵ Fage went even further, stating that “The Emperour is the only Tyrant for Government, in Europe, and the people more absolute slaves than in Turkey”.⁴⁶ Peter Heylyn simply stated that the Tsar and the sultan were “the most absolute Princes in the world”,⁴⁷ and Abbot, mentioning the reign of Ivan the Terrible, compared him to Nero and Caligula.⁴⁸

The monarch’s position in Muscovy also had a lot of to do with the country’s social and religious situation, as he was able to completely subdue the nobility, who in turn treated lower social groups like slaves or animals. The peasants lived “in miserable subjection to the Nobles, and they again in as great slavery to the Duke or Emperor”,⁴⁹ while the (Greek) Orthodox Church cultivated superstitions and made the people more susceptible to the situation. Various authors also stated that the Russians apparently believed that only the “Holy Ghost and the Tsar know everything”.⁵⁰ The social relations in Poland-Lithuania looked similar in one respect: the nobles also were to treat their subjects like slaves. But the relations between the nobility and the ruler could not have been more different than in Muscovy or Turkey. Since the Polish throne was elective and not hereditary, the king “was like a King of Bees, like a Royal Shadow can do no harm to his Subject”.⁵¹ At the same time some authors claimed that, unlike elsewhere, all kinds of confessions were accepted in Poland-Lithuania, and the state was, in fact, truly a multi-confessional one. “If a man hath lost his religion, let him go seek it in Poland, and he shall find it there, or else let him make account that its vanished out of the world” Clarke famously repeated after Heylyn.⁵²

Did this picture change significantly between the end of the 16th and the end of the 17th century? Only to a certain extent. Elements such as geographical information and the overall assessment of the social situation remained practically unchanged. The basic difference can be seen in the degree of detail in the descriptions. What may have caused this? The readers’ expectations certainly must have played a role. We should bear in mind that since the first half of the 17th century we are dealing with a rapid development of the public sphere in England. The high level of literacy and increasing political involvement resulted in a greater interest in events, both within and outside the country; general geographic and historical knowledge was needed, or even necessary, to interpret them correctly. This in turn meant greater expectations towards the authors of works that were to provide the reading public with

⁴⁵ CLARKE 1657, p. 153.

⁴⁶ FAGE 1667, p. 62.

⁴⁷ HEYLYN 1639, p. 351.

⁴⁸ ABBOT 1608, p. 61.

⁴⁹ FAGE 1667, p. 109.

⁵⁰ STAFFORD 1618, p. 29; HEYLYN 1639, p. 343.

⁵¹ MORDEN 1680, p. 114.

⁵² CLARKE 1657, p. 156.

this knowledge. There was also the very practical question of access to sources — those who wrote in the second half of the 17th century simply had more material at their disposal than Abbot or Stafford, who created their works in the late 16th or at the very beginning of the 17th century.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? First of all, there is no doubt that knowledge of Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire in England could not have been as limited as it has sometimes been claimed. Moreover, this knowledge was accessible not only to readers interested in a particular country, who reached for detailed descriptions devoted exclusively to that country — e.g. travel accounts or texts on expeditions to the Levant or Russia — but also to those who were using more general publications. This group was probably large enough for us to be able to say, that to quite a large part of the English reading public the three countries were fairly well known. At the same time, the way they were described was often based on specific stereotypes. Readers could learn that all three countries covered vast areas (two controlled territories on more than one continent), had numerous natural resources, and their climate and customs were very different from those of Western Europe, but also that there were key religious, geographical and political differences between them. However, in the descriptions of seemingly very different countries there were still some common elements: the position of the ruler in Turkey and Muscovy was considered identical; social relations in Poland-Lithuania and Russia were similar, although the political systems of the two countries could not have been more different. Turkey and Muscovy were dominated by one religion, while in Poland different confessions were tolerated (although Catholicism seemed to be increasingly dominant). All in all, it can be argued that the location of Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey on the mental map of the seventeenth-century reading Englishman, had to be quite similar: far to the east, certainly beyond his evident or natural comfort zone, but not far enough to stop him from wanting to learn something more about each of these countries.

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**Exploring peripheries through similarities and differences.
Comparisons between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey in English
chorographic publications of the late 16th and the 17th century**

The paper deals with the way English geographical and historical texts may have influenced the perception of three eastern states with which England maintained relations in the late 16th and early 17th centuries: Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy and Turkey. All three — irrespective of their geographical distance and peripheral locations — became important for England in the late 16th century because of their economic and political potential. This resulted in a surge of interest in Poland, Turkey and Russia, and provided a significantly broader context in which they were presented in the emerging English public sphere. The focus of the article is on answering the questions whether the fundamental political and confessional differences between the three states had a significant impact on the way they were presented by English authors of chorographic publications, how peripheral they were considered to be — in comparison to other political entities on the continent — and whether there the differences and the similarities discussed in these texts were the good indication of their specificity.

