Writing the Unfamiliar: Persian Voices, European Travellers, and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Early Modern Iran

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Abstract

This essay examines how Persian knowledge was transformed as it entered early modern European travel writing. Focusing on the accounts of Jean Chardin and Engelbert Kaempfer, it asks how encounters with Safavid and post-Safavid Iran became authoritative textual knowledge for European readers. Rather than treating travel narratives as transparent records of observation, the essay approaches them as products of mediation, translation, selection, and publication. It argues that the knowledge attributed to individual travellers often depended on wider networks of local interlocutors, interpreters, and informants whose contributions were not always equally visible in the published text. Translation made unfamiliar practices and concepts accessible across linguistic boundaries, but it could also compress culturally specific meanings and detach information from the circumstances in which it was produced. By distinguishing the preservation of information from the preservation of cultural context, the essay highlights a central tension in the historical archive: travel writing enabled knowledge about Iran to circulate across geographical and temporal boundaries while transforming the encounters from which that knowledge emerged. Reading these accounts as records of mediated encounters offers a framework for examining both their historical value and the limits of their authority.

I. Introduction

Travel writing has long occupied an ambiguous position between record and interpretation. A traveller appears, at first glance, to be a witness: someone who encounters unfamiliar places, observes foreign customs, and records what he has seen for readers who have never experienced those worlds themselves. Yet travel accounts do more than preserve encounters. They transform them into narratives, and in doing so they determine what can be recognized as knowledge about the people and places encountered. The act of travelling therefore involves not only movement across geographical space but also a process of selection, translation, interpretation, and circulation through which particular forms of knowledge acquire authority.

This problem becomes especially significant in early modern European encounters with Safavid and post-Safavid Iran. European travellers who visited or wrote about Persia produced some of the most influential accounts through which Iranian geography, political institutions, religious practices, social customs, material culture, and everyday life became legible to European readers. Their writings are invaluable historical sources precisely because they preserve observations that might otherwise have been lost. At the same time, however, these accounts were never transparent records of an already-existing reality. What appeared

in European books as knowledge of Persia was shaped by the circumstances of encounter, the travellers' purposes, their relationships with interpreters and local informants, the conceptual categories available to them, and the demands of translation and publication.

This essay therefore asks a question that is slightly different from the conventional question of what European travellers discovered about Persia: what happened to Persian knowledge when it entered European systems of travel writing? The distinction is important. To describe a traveller as an observer is to emphasize the acquisition of information; to examine travel writing as a process of knowledge production is to ask how information was selected, mediated, translated, and ultimately granted epistemic authority. The latter perspective shifts attention from discovery to transformation.

The accounts of travellers such as Jean Chardin and Engelbert Kaempfer are particularly productive for examining this transformation. Their writings contain detailed observations of Iran and remain important sources for the study of early modern Persian society. Yet their accounts were produced through encounters involving multiple actors: travellers, hosts, interpreters, merchants, officials, scholars, servants, and other local informants. Knowledge recorded under the name of a European traveller could therefore emerge from a much more complex social process than the finished text suggests. The published narrative may identify a single author, while the knowledge within it may have passed through numerous voices before becoming part of a European textual archive.

II. Who Gets to Describe the World?

To travel is to encounter difference, but to write about travel is to establish a particular relationship between difference and knowledge. The traveller does not merely move through a foreign landscape; he occupies a position from which that landscape can be observed, described, compared, and interpreted for an absent audience. This position is particularly significant in early modern travel writing because the published account could become the primary means by which knowledge of a distant society would be accessible to readers who had never encountered the society directly. The traveller's authority consequently extended beyond the journey itself. It could determine which observations were preserved, which explanations were accepted, and which aspects of an unfamiliar society became representative in the eyes of subsequent readers.

This does not mean that early modern travellers consciously invented the worlds they described. Their accounts frequently contain remarkably detailed observations of geography, architecture, political institutions, commerce, religion, agriculture, food, dress, and everyday practices. Their value as historical documents is precisely connected to this empirical richness. Yet empirical observation does not eliminate mediation. A traveller always observes from somewhere: from a particular linguistic position, cultural background, social status, religious framework, political context, and set of expectations about what is worth recording. The resulting text therefore represents both the encountered world and the conditions under which that world became observable to the traveller.

The problem can be illustrated by the apparently simple distinction between seeing and knowing. A traveller may see a religious ceremony, hear an explanation of a local custom, or encounter a political institution. But the transformation of that experience into

knowledge requires additional steps. The traveller must decide what he has witnessed, determine how it relates to categories familiar to his intended audience, identify terminology with which to describe it, and establish whether the information is sufficiently credible to be included in the final account. If the traveller relies on an interpreter or informant, another layer of mediation enters the process. The final description may therefore be several interpretive stages removed from the original encounter.

The situation becomes particularly important when the object of description is not a physical landscape but a cultural practice. Geography can sometimes be represented through measurements, maps, distances, and coordinates, but cultural knowledge is embedded in language and social context. A description of a city may record its streets, buildings, markets, and distances with considerable precision. A description of a ritual, belief, proverb, myth, or local custom presents a different problem. Such phenomena derive part of their meaning from the communities that practise, transmit, and interpret them. Removing them from those contexts and placing them within a foreign textual system necessarily changes the conditions under which they are understood.

This process had important consequences for representations of Iran. European readers encountering descriptions of Persia did not encounter Iranian society directly; they encountered a textual construction assembled through journeys, conversations, translations, comparisons, and editorial decisions. A city described by a European traveller became not simply a place that the traveller had visited but an object of knowledge available to readers elsewhere. A religious practice became an example of a category. A local custom became evidence for a broader claim about Persian society. A conversation with an informant could become a statement about an entire population.

The danger of such generalization is not that every observation becomes false. Rather, the scale of the claim can change as information moves through the process of representation. An observation about one person can become an observation about a community; an account of one locality can become a description of a country; an interpretation offered by one informant can become an apparently objective statement in the published text. Travel writing therefore involves a continual movement between the particular and the general. This movement also helps explain why travel accounts can be simultaneously valuable and problematic historical sources. Their limitations are not simply errors to be corrected before the texts can be used as evidence.

III. Persia as Encounter rather than Object

The distinction between encountering a society and representing it becomes particularly visible in the European travel literature on early modern Persia. Among the most substantial examples are the writings of Jean Chardin and Engelbert Kaempfer, whose works demonstrate both the empirical ambitions of early modern travel writing and the complex processes through which encounters were transformed into textual knowledge. Chardin's *Voyages de monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, published in

an expanded form in Amsterdam in 1711,[1] did not present Persia merely as a sequence of places visited by an individual traveller. Its volumes included descriptions of Persian geography, government, religion, sciences, arts, and the city of Isfahan, transforming the experience of travel into an extensive account of Persian society.



Kaempfer's *Amoenitates Exoticae*, published in 1712, reveals a related but distinct approach. Its title itself describes the work as a collection of relations, observations, and descriptions concerning Persia and other parts of Asia, gathered during journeys through the East.[2] The work was consequently conceived not merely as a personal narrative but as a repository of information collected through travel. Kaempfer's own preface is particularly revealing. He describes returning from the East not principally with commercial goods but with written materials containing the 'exotic knowledge' he had laboriously gathered across different regions.[3] The metaphor is significant: travel becomes a process of acquisition, and

[1] Jean Chardin, *Voyages de Monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, Amsterdam: Jean-Louis de Lorme, 1711.

[2] Engelbert Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum Exoticarum Politico-Physico-Medicarum Fasciculi V*, Lemgo: Henricus Wilhelmus Meyerus, 1712, title page.

[3] Kaempfer, *Amoenitates Exoticae*, 'Praefatio'.

knowledge becomes something that can be collected, transported, arranged, and eventually deposited within a European textual world.

This conception of travel as the acquisition of knowledge was central to the epistemic authority of the early modern traveller. The traveller's movement through geographical space generated an apparently privileged relationship to information. To have been there was to possess a form of experiential authority unavailable to those who had remained at home. Yet Kaempfer's own description of his materials already suggests that experience alone was insufficient. What he carried home was not simply the world he had encountered, but notes, observations, descriptions, and written records through which those encounters could subsequently be reconstructed for readers elsewhere.

The difference is subtle but fundamental. A journey produces experiences; a travel book produces an ordered account of those experiences. Between the two lies a process of selection. The traveller decides what deserves to be recorded, how observations should be classified, which explanations should be retained, and how disparate experiences can be organized into a coherent description. The published work therefore represents not the totality of the encounter but a curated remainder of it.

Chardin's work illustrates this transformation particularly clearly. The structure of the 1711 *Voyages* moves beyond the chronological form of a simple journey. Alongside accounts of movement are extended descriptions of Persian political, religious, intellectual, and social life. Yet this transformation should not be understood simply as a distortion of an original reality. The systematic quality of such works is precisely what makes them historically valuable. Chardin's descriptions preserve information about seventeenth-century Iran that would otherwise be considerably more difficult to reconstruct. Likewise, Kaempfer's observations constitute a substantial record of the places, practices, and natural phenomena he encountered during his travels. Their importance lies partly in the density of their observations.

The problem, therefore, is not whether these travellers were 'accurate' or 'inaccurate' in some absolute sense. Such a distinction can obscure the more interesting historical question: how did an encounter acquire the form of knowledge? The answer cannot be located exclusively in the traveller's act of observation. It must also be sought in the networks through which information became available to him, the languages through which it was communicated, the categories through which it was interpreted, and the textual conventions through which it was eventually presented.

The very breadth of Chardin's account makes this issue particularly important. To describe the government, religion, sciences, arts, and customs of an entire society requires access to forms of knowledge that cannot be obtained through visual observation alone. A traveller may personally observe a building, a road, a marketplace, or a ceremony. But institutions, historical traditions, beliefs, political structures, and social meanings require explanation. Such knowledge necessarily involves interaction with other people. The apparently individual voice of the published traveller thus stands at the end of a process that is potentially collective.

Kaempfer's work offers a complementary perspective because its language of collection makes this process unusually explicit. He presents his written materials as things gathered through journeys across Asia and brought back from the East. The metaphor of collection is useful because it reminds us that knowledge does not simply travel with the traveller. It is extracted from particular circumstances and reorganized for another context. A piece of information encountered in a Persian setting becomes, once incorporated into a European book, part of a new system of classification and circulation.

The process can be described as a movement through three stages: encounter, textualization, and circulation. First, the traveller encounters a person, place, practice, object, or explanation. Second, the encounter is transformed into written language. Third, that written representation travels independently of the original context in which the information was produced. It is this third stage that allows a local encounter to become part of a much wider geography of knowledge.

Persia, therefore, should not be understood merely as the object toward which the European traveller directed his gaze. It was also the social environment within which knowledge was produced through encounters. The traveller entered an already existing world of languages, institutions, memories, practices, and systems of knowledge. What emerged from the encounter was not a simple transfer of information from Persia to Europe, but a transformation in which information was reorganized as it crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries.

This perspective also complicates the familiar opposition between European observer and Persian subject. The encounter was rarely so symmetrical or so simple. European travellers possessed particular forms of mobility and access, while local actors possessed forms of linguistic, geographical, political, and cultural knowledge on which travellers depended. The published text could obscure this dependence by concentrating authority in the figure of the author. Reconstructing the encounter behind the text allows us to see the travel account instead as the product of an unequal but interconnected field of knowledge.

The significance of early modern Persian travel writing consequently lies in a tension. The texts preserve encounters that would otherwise be inaccessible, yet the preservation itself transforms those encounters. They make knowledge durable by making it textual, but textualization can separate knowledge from the circumstances that originally gave it meaning. They enable information to circulate across geographical boundaries, but circulation can also detach information from the voices and contexts through which it was produced.

The history of travel writing is therefore not only a history of movement across geographical space. It is also a history of the movement of knowledge. Chardin and Kaempfer demonstrate how a traveller could transform encounters in Persia into texts that travelled much farther than the traveller himself. Understanding that transformation requires us to look beyond the authority of the finished book and back toward the encounters, intermediaries, and interpretive processes that made the book possible. In this sense, Persia was not simply described by European travellers. It was encountered, interpreted, translated, organized, and circulated through their writings.

IV. Translation as Transformation

If travel converts geographical movement into textual knowledge, translation determines how much of that knowledge can cross the boundary between cultures. Early modern encounters with Persia were rarely encounters between two completely transparent linguistic worlds. Travellers had to negotiate unfamiliar languages, specialized terminology, social conventions, and concepts whose meanings could not always be reproduced through a direct linguistic equivalent. Translation was therefore not simply a technical stage that followed observation. It was one of the mechanisms through which observation became knowledge in the first place.

The translator's role in this process may be explicit or concealed. In some encounters, travellers depended upon people who could communicate across languages; in others, travellers possessed varying degrees of linguistic competence themselves. The final published account, however, does not necessarily preserve the entire chain through which a statement travelled. The reader encounters the finished sentence rather than the conversation, negotiation, correction, hesitation, or ambiguity that may have preceded it. Translation consequently leaves a peculiar historical trace: its product remains visible, while much of its process disappears.

This creates an important methodological problem for historians. When a travel account provides an apparently precise translation of a Persian concept, the historian may be tempted to treat the translated term as evidence of what the Persian concept 'was'. Yet the translation may reveal as much about the traveller's conceptual framework as about the original term. The choice of an equivalent can tell us what distinctions the traveller considered important, what categories his readers were expected to understand, and what aspects of the source concept could not easily be accommodated within the target language.

Chardin's extensive descriptions of Persian society demonstrate the scale of this problem. His project involved far more than recording physical observations. He described political organization, religious beliefs, social customs, intellectual life, commerce, and everyday practices. Such subjects could not be communicated without linguistic and conceptual mediation. The more abstract the object of description became, the more dependent the account became upon interpretation. A building could be measured; a political institution required explanation. A garment could be described visually; the social meaning attached to it required contextual knowledge. A religious practice could be observed; its significance required access to the conceptual world of those who practised it.

The difference between description and interpretation therefore becomes increasingly important as travel writing moves from material objects toward cultural meaning. A traveller can state that a particular ceremony occurred at a particular time and place. But to explain why it occurred, what participants believed they were doing, and what meanings the ceremony carried requires forms of knowledge that cannot be obtained from observation alone. Information must be supplied, interpreted, and translated. The travel narrative thus becomes dependent upon voices that may ultimately disappear behind the traveller's prose.

This is one reason why apparently minor linguistic choices can have substantial historical consequences. Suppose a local informant uses a culturally specific term and explains it through several related ideas. The traveller may select one European word as the

closest approximation. That word then appears in the published account as if it were a transparent equivalent. Future readers may rely upon the European term without returning to the original context. Over time, the translation can become more familiar than the source concept itself. What began as an interpretive approximation can acquire the status of an established category.

Translation therefore creates what might be called epistemic compression. A culturally dense concept is compressed into a form that can travel efficiently across linguistic boundaries. The process enables circulation, but circulation is achieved partly through reduction. Meanings that depend upon context may be shortened; distinctions within the source culture may become less visible; ambiguity may be replaced with a more definite term because definiteness is easier to communicate. Yet epistemic compression should not be understood exclusively as a failure. Without some degree of compression, cross-cultural communication would often be impossible. Travel writing depended upon the ability to transform unfamiliar experiences into communicable forms. The historian's task is therefore not to demand an impossible form of perfect translation, but to identify what kinds of transformation occurred when translation became necessary.

This distinction is particularly useful when examining early modern European representations of Persia. The objective should not be to determine whether a European traveller 'correctly' translated Persian culture according to modern standards. Such a test risks imposing another external framework upon the historical material. Instead, the question should be: what did a particular translation make possible for its readers, and what did it make difficult to perceive?

The first part of this question concerns circulation. Translation allowed knowledge gathered in Persian settings to enter European intellectual networks. A reader who could not access Persian sources could nevertheless encounter descriptions of Persian institutions, practices, and beliefs. Travel writing therefore expanded the geographical range of knowledge. It connected local encounters to distant readers and allowed information to survive beyond the lifespan of the original interaction.

The second part concerns loss. The same translation that made a concept portable could separate it from the social world in which it had meaning. A local term embedded within oral practice could become an entry in a European text. A ritual embedded within communal memory could become a description of 'custom'. A complex social institution could be reduced to a familiar administrative category. The result was not necessarily false information. It was information transformed by the conditions of its circulation.

This tension between accessibility and loss is central to the epistemic history of travel. Translation makes encounters portable. Portability, however, changes the nature of what is being transported. Knowledge that originally existed within relationships between people becomes knowledge that can be stored within a book. A statement that depended upon the presence of a particular speaker becomes an apparently independent proposition. An explanation tied to a specific place becomes information available to readers far removed from that place.

The implications extend beyond the specific case of early modern Persia. Travel writing offers a general example of how cultural knowledge becomes detached from the

contexts in which it is produced. The movement from encounter to publication is simultaneously a movement from situated knowledge to archival knowledge. The archive preserves, but it also categorizes. It protects information from disappearance while determining the form in which future generations will encounter it. For this reason, translation should be treated not as an invisible technical operation but as a historical event. It is one of the moments at which cultural knowledge changes its status. A Persian term translated into a European language does not simply acquire a new word. It enters a new conceptual environment. A local explanation incorporated into a travel narrative does not merely gain a wider audience. It acquires a new relationship to authority, authorship, and evidence.

The central paradox is therefore clear. Translation makes cultural knowledge more durable by making it more portable, but portability can weaken the relationship between knowledge and the cultural practices that produced it. The early modern travel account is consequently both a vehicle of preservation and an instrument of transformation. Recognizing this paradox allows us to read Chardin, Kaempfer, and related travel accounts more productively. Their writings should neither be dismissed as culturally biased representations nor treated as transparent repositories of Persian reality.

V. The Persian Voice

If translation transformed the knowledge produced through travel, the next question is whose knowledge was being translated. The published travel account often appears to have a single centre of authority: the traveller whose name appears on the title page. Yet the production of knowledge during a journey was rarely so individual. Travellers depended upon people who possessed forms of knowledge that they themselves could not have acquired through observation alone. In Persia, these included interpreters, merchants, guides, officials, scholars, servants, religious authorities, and ordinary residents whose explanations made unfamiliar institutions and practices intelligible. The traveller could therefore be the author of an account without being the sole producer of the knowledge from which that account was constructed.

This does not necessarily mean that local contributors were deliberately erased. The disappearance of their voices can also result from the structure of publication itself. A travel narrative has limited space, and readers expect a coherent account rather than a transcript of every conversation through which information was obtained. The author consequently compresses multiple encounters into statements that can be incorporated into a continuous narrative. A conversation becomes a sentence. Several informants may become ‘the Persians’ or ‘the inhabitants’. A complex disagreement can become a general observation. The process is editorial as well as epistemic.

The problem can be seen in the difference between a statement about a culture and a statement made by someone within that culture. These are not epistemically identical. When an informant explains a practice, the explanation is situated: it belongs to a particular speaker, moment, relationship, and context. Once the traveller incorporates that explanation into a general description, the statement may lose its situated character. The original speaker disappears, while the proposition remains.

The traveller's selection of what counted as credible knowledge therefore becomes significant. Some local information could be presented as factual observation. Other material might be described as superstition, popular belief, hearsay, or curiosity. These labels did not merely describe the content; they positioned it within a hierarchy of knowledge. A traveller could preserve a local narrative while simultaneously marking it as something less authoritative than European scientific or historical explanation.

This process illustrates an important asymmetry in cross-cultural knowledge production. The local speaker may possess knowledge of the community, its language, its traditions, and its environment, but the traveller often possesses the power to determine how that knowledge will appear in a text intended for distant readers. The question is therefore not only who knows, but who has the authority to classify knowledge as knowledge.

Such classification can be subtle. A traveller may reproduce a local explanation but introduce it with a phrase such as 'the inhabitants believe', 'the Persians say', or 'it is commonly reported'. These formulations attribute the statement to a collective population while simultaneously creating distance between the author and the claim. The local voice becomes visible as an object of description but remains separated from the authoritative voice of the narrator.

The grammatical structure is revealing. The traveller says, in effect, 'they believe', while the reader is invited to understand 'I report what they believe'. The first statement belongs to the community; the second establishes the traveller as the mediator through whom that belief becomes available to European readers. The community therefore becomes the source of the content, while the traveller becomes the source of the authoritative text.

The problem becomes even more complex when the traveller relies upon several layers of mediation. A local person may explain a practice in Persian; an interpreter may communicate it in another language; the traveller may make notes in a third; and the final account may be published in a fourth linguistic context or translated again for a new readership. At each stage, meaning can be clarified, altered, condensed, or reorganized. By the time the information reaches the final reader, its distance from the original encounter may be considerable.

This does not mean that every unnamed informant should be imagined as a suppressed intellectual author. Such a claim would itself risk replacing one historical simplification with another. The evidence does not always allow us to reconstruct individual contributions with certainty. The more defensible argument is structural: travel writing depended upon forms of local knowledge that were not always represented with the same degree of authorial visibility as the traveller's own observations.

Recognizing this structure allows us to read travel accounts differently. Instead of asking only whether Chardin or Kaempfer accurately described Persian society, we can ask what kinds of collaboration their texts required and how those collaborations were represented. Which observations could the traveller make alone? Which required explanation? Which terms required translation? Which claims were presented as personal observations, and which were attributed to collective groups? Where does the text acknowledge uncertainty, and where does it convert local testimony into general knowledge?

These questions return us to the central problem of this essay: what happens when Persian knowledge enters European systems of travel writing? One answer is that it becomes more durable and more widely accessible. Another is that its mode of authority changes. Knowledge that was once situated within a community can become evidence within a European text. The process therefore involves both preservation and displacement.

The Persian voice is consequently not absent from early modern European travel writing. It is present, but often indirectly. It survives through descriptions, translated terms, reported conversations, observations of customs, and accounts of local beliefs. What is less consistently preserved is the full context in which those voices spoke. Reading these texts critically does not require removing the traveller from the narrative. It requires recognizing that the traveller's voice was one voice within a larger field of interaction.

The most productive reading of early modern travel writing is therefore neither to accept the traveller as an entirely autonomous observer nor to dismiss him as a simple instrument of cultural distortion. The traveller occupied an intermediary position. He collected, interpreted, translated, selected, and circulated knowledge that emerged through encounters with people whose own forms of knowledge made the journey possible. The historical task is to reconstruct that relationship as far as the evidence allows.

VI. Encounter and the Making of Difference

The transformation of local knowledge into a European travel account did not end with translation. Once an unfamiliar practice, belief, institution, or social custom had been rendered into written language, it also had to be positioned within a framework that allowed European readers to understand it. This process often involved comparison. The unfamiliar was explained through the familiar, and cultural difference became intelligible by being measured against categories already available to the reader. Travel writing therefore did not merely transmit information about other societies; it also participated in defining what counted as familiar, foreign, ordinary, strange, rational, or unusual.

Comparison was an essential feature of early modern travel writing because travellers were writing for readers who had not shared their experiences. A description of an unfamiliar institution could become meaningful when compared with a European equivalent. A religious practice could be explained through categories familiar to Christian readers. Political institutions could be assessed through European expectations about government and authority. Social customs could be described according to whether they resembled or departed from practices known to the reader. Such comparisons made distant societies legible, but they also introduced a potential asymmetry: the unfamiliar society became the object being measured, while the reader's own categories remained largely invisible as the standard of measurement.

This asymmetry does not mean that every European traveller consciously intended to present Persian society as inferior. The process was often much more ordinary and subtle. Writers needed concepts that their readers could understand. Comparison was therefore a practical method of communication. Yet a method designed to make difference intelligible could also transform the meaning of that difference. Once a Persian practice was described as analogous to, or different from, a European practice, the comparison became part of how

readers understood the Persian practice itself. The problem is particularly evident when a traveller moves from describing an individual observation to making a general statement about a population. An unfamiliar custom encountered in one location may become evidence of 'Persian' behaviour more broadly. A conversation with one individual may be presented as evidence of a wider social attitude. A local practice may become representative of a nation. The movement from the particular to the general is therefore one of the most consequential transformations within travel writing.

Such generalization can occur even when the original observation is accurate. The difficulty lies not necessarily in the truth of the observation but in the scale at which it is applied. A traveller may accurately report that a particular group followed a certain practice. The historical problem begins when the practice becomes evidence for what an entire population supposedly believes or does. Travel writing can thus transform situated knowledge into cultural typology.

The geographical dimension of this process is important. Travel writing transformed distance into textual proximity. A reader in Europe could encounter a description of a Persian city without travelling there. Yet textual proximity did not eliminate cultural distance. Instead, it created a new form of relationship in which the distant society became available for observation through the traveller's narrative. The reader could 'see' Persia through a mediated text.

The language of strangeness is particularly revealing. To describe something as strange is not simply to state that it differs from one's own experience. It establishes a relationship between an observer and an observed object. The observer occupies the position of familiarity, while the observed practice occupies the position of difference. In this sense, 'strangeness' is relational rather than intrinsic. A practice is strange because it is strange to someone.

Comparison could therefore produce both understanding and misunderstanding. It allowed readers to approach unfamiliar practices through familiar concepts, but the analogy could also conceal important differences. If two institutions were described as equivalent, readers might overlook the different historical structures that gave them meaning. If a religious practice was classified under a familiar European category, its specifically Persian context could become less visible.

The same applies to folklore and local narratives. A story encountered in a particular community may be classified by a traveller as a 'superstition', 'fable', 'legend', or 'custom'. Each term carries assumptions about the status of the narrative. The choice of category therefore affects how the reader is likely to interpret it. A story classified as a historical tradition is positioned differently from one described as a superstition, even if the underlying narrative is the same.

This is where the authority of classification becomes particularly important. The traveller does not merely report that people tell a story. He can also determine how the story is framed for readers. Is it evidence of local history? Religious belief? Popular imagination? Folklore? Error? Curiosity? The answer influences whether the reader treats the material as knowledge, belief, entertainment, or evidence of cultural difference.

Yet the traveller's classifications should also be understood within the intellectual context of the period. It would be anachronistic to expect early modern writers to employ contemporary concepts of cultural relativism or anthropology. Their categories belonged to their own intellectual worlds. The purpose of historical analysis is not to judge them for failing to possess concepts that had not yet developed, but to understand what their categories allowed them to see and what they made more difficult to perceive.

The most useful approach is consequently neither naïve trust nor total scepticism. Instead, travel writing should be read as evidence of both the world encountered and the processes through which that world was made intelligible to distant readers. The text tells us something about Persia, but it also tells us something about the categories through which European readers were invited to understand Persia.

This double function is what makes early modern travel writing such a rich historical source. It records encounters across geographical and cultural boundaries while simultaneously revealing how those encounters were incorporated into systems of knowledge. The traveller did not simply bring Persia back to Europe. He brought back a particular interpretation of Persia – one shaped by observation, language, comparison, classification, and the expectations of his audience.

The production of cultural difference is thus also a production of historical memory. What survives in the archive is not simply that an encounter occurred, but a particular textual version of what that encounter meant. Reading travel writing critically requires attention to both levels: the historical encounter that generated the account and the representational process that gave the encounter its enduring form. In the case of early modern Persia, this means asking not only how European travellers described Iranian society, but how their descriptions taught distant readers what kinds of differences to notice. The significance of travel writing lies partly in this pedagogical function. It did not simply tell readers that Persia was different. It provided categories through which that difference could be recognized, named, and remembered.

Travel writing, then, participated in the making of difference precisely because it attempted to make difference intelligible. Its representations were shaped by the practical problem of communicating across cultures, but the solutions to that problem were never neutral. Every comparison established a relationship; every classification established a category; every translation established an equivalence or non-equivalence. The encounter entered the archive not as an untouched record of experience, but as a structured interpretation of cultural difference.

VII. The Traveller's Authority and the European Archive

The authority of early modern travel writing did not depend solely on whether a traveller had witnessed an event personally. It also depended on what happened to an observation after the journey had ended. Once encounters were recorded, translated, organized, and published, knowledge that had emerged from a particular place and moment could circulate far beyond the circumstances in which it had been produced. A traveller's temporary encounter could therefore acquire a much longer historical life through the printed book. The significance of

travel writing lies partly in this transformation: an experience situated in one locality became knowledge available to readers who had never encountered that locality themselves.

This process gave the traveller a distinctive position between experience and authority. The traveller could present information as the result of direct observation, while the printed account allowed that observation to become a source for others. The authority of the text was consequently not limited to the credibility of the individual traveller. It was reinforced by the durability and portability of the written record. A description of a Persian city, religious practice, political institution, or social custom could be removed from the context of the original encounter and inserted into new discussions about Persia. What had initially been an observation thus became a piece of knowledge capable of being reused.

Chardin's writings illustrate the importance of this process. His extensive account of Persia brought together observations concerning geography, political organization, religion, customs, cities, commerce, and everyday life. The breadth of the work meant that individual encounters did not remain isolated episodes of travel. They were incorporated into a larger description of Persian society. The traveller consequently appeared not simply as someone who had been present, but as someone capable of assembling diverse forms of information into an intelligible account. The authority of the narrative emerged partly from this act of organization. Kaempfer's work similarly demonstrates how travel could be transformed into a broader project of collecting and transmitting knowledge. His observations were not preserved merely as private memories of movement through unfamiliar territories. They were written, arranged, and circulated as information about places, peoples, practices, and natural phenomena. The printed text therefore separated knowledge from the immediate circumstances of its production. Readers encountered Persia not through the local people who had originally supplied information, nor through the physical experience of travelling there, but through a textual representation assembled by the traveller.

This transformation also affected the visibility of local knowledge. The information contained in a travel account might have depended heavily on conversations with residents, interpreters, merchants, officials, religious figures, or other intermediaries. Yet the final publication could attribute the coherence of that knowledge primarily to the traveller. The European reader encountered a named author, while the network of people through whom information had been obtained often remained in the background. Authorship and knowledge production were therefore not necessarily identical. A traveller could become the recognized author of knowledge that had emerged through a much wider social process.

The European archive consequently preserved encounters unevenly. What survived was not simply what had happened in Persia, but what had been selected for recording and what subsequently proved useful, readable, or reusable within European systems of knowledge. Some forms of knowledge were particularly well suited to textual transmission: descriptions, classifications, geographical information, political observations, lists of customs, and accounts of religious practices. Other forms were more difficult to preserve. The tone of a storyteller's voice, the circumstances of an oral exchange, the social relationship between speaker and listener, or the performance through which a tradition acquired meaning could disappear even when its informational content survived.

VIII. Conclusion

Early modern travel writing was more than a record of movement between places. It was a process through which encounters were transformed into knowledge. European travellers in Iran observed unfamiliar environments, interacted with local communities, gathered information, relied on interpreters and intermediaries, and translated their experiences into written accounts. Once published, these accounts allowed knowledge produced through particular encounters to circulate beyond the places and people from which it had originated. The journey therefore did not end when the traveller returned home. In many cases, its most lasting effects began with the publication and circulation of the account.

The examples of Chardin and Kaempfer demonstrate the complexity of this process. Their writings preserved substantial information about Persia, but that information did not enter European intellectual circulation unchanged. Observation was shaped by selection; local knowledge was mediated through interpersonal encounters; unfamiliar practices were interpreted through comparison; and oral or situated forms of knowledge were converted into written descriptions. Translation was therefore not simply a linguistic operation. It was also a transformation of context, meaning, and authority.

This process also complicates the distinction between the traveller as observer and the local population as observed. The knowledge contained in travel accounts was often produced through interactions with people whose contributions were essential but whose identities and perspectives were not always preserved in the final text. The traveller became the visible author of a body of knowledge that could have depended upon a much larger network of Persian interlocutors. Recognizing this distinction makes it possible to read travel accounts not only as descriptions of cultural difference, but also as records of unequal processes of knowledge production.

The central question of this essay has therefore not been whether European travellers represented Persia accurately or inaccurately. Such a distinction is too limited to explain the historical importance of their writings. A more productive question is what happened to Persian knowledge when it entered European systems of travel writing. The answer is that it became portable. Information gathered through local encounters could be detached from its original setting, organized within a European-authored narrative, published for distant readers, and subsequently preserved as textual knowledge. In that process, some aspects of the original encounter became more visible, while others became difficult or impossible to recover.

Travel writing should consequently be understood as an archive of transformed encounters. Its value lies not only in what it tells us about the societies travellers visited, but also in what it reveals about the historical mechanisms through which cultural knowledge was selected, classified, translated, and circulated. Reading these texts critically does not require dismissing them as unreliable. On the contrary, their mediated character is precisely what makes them historically valuable. They allow us to examine not only what Europeans encountered in Iran, but how encounters themselves became evidence.

This perspective also changes how the European archive can be approached. Rather than treating the archive as a transparent repository of the past, we can examine the processes through which particular experiences became preservable knowledge. A story that was once

told orally, a practice witnessed by a traveller, or an explanation provided by a local interlocutor could acquire a very different existence once it had been incorporated into a printed account. What survives in the archive is therefore neither the encounter itself nor an untouched representation of it. It is the result of a chain of mediation connecting experience, memory, conversation, translation, writing, publication, and later reading.

The study of early modern travel writing thus offers a broader lesson about cultural memory. Preservation is never simply a matter of keeping information intact. To preserve something is also to determine the form in which it will remain accessible. When knowledge moves from oral interaction to written record, from local context to distant readership, or from lived practice to archival description, it acquires new possibilities of survival while also losing aspects of its original context. The history of travel writing is, in this sense, also a history of what cultural encounters allow us to remember and what they make difficult to recover. The traveller, then, was neither simply a neutral witness nor an isolated inventor of knowledge. The traveller occupied a position within a larger network of encounters through which knowledge was gathered, transformed, and circulated. Understanding that network allows us to move beyond the simple opposition between truth and distortion. The more important historical question is how knowledge travelled, how authority was constructed, and how encounters between cultures were converted into texts that could outlive the people and circumstances that produced them.

Early modern travel writing therefore deserves to be read not merely as literature about distant places, but as an active historical process of knowledge-making. Its pages preserve traces of encounters between European travellers and Persian communities, yet they also preserve the transformations that those encounters underwent before becoming part of the written archive. To recover the history of cultural encounter is consequently to read both what the traveller recorded and what the process of recording made invisible.

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