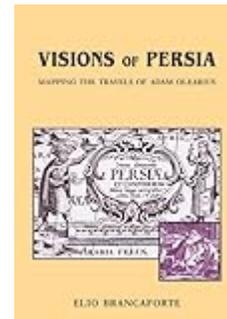




**Elio Brancaforte.** *Visions of Persia: Mapping the Travels of Adam Olearius.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. xxiv + 238 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01254-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01221-9.



**Reviewed by** Kersten Horn (Department of Anthropology and Languages, University of Missouri-St. Louis)

**Published on** H-German (October, 2005)

## The Interplay between Maps, Illustrations, and Texts in the Work of Adam Olearius

Elio Brancaforte's monograph *Visions of Persia: Mapping the Travels of Adam Olearius* is, in essence, his 2001 dissertation. He provides close readings of frontispieces and maps in conjunction with texts by the German author, artist, cartographer, and traveler Adam Olearius.

The story of Adam Olearius is a fascinating one: he was chosen as the official secretary to chronicle the journey of a delegation from the northern German duchy of Holstein-Gottorf to Persia, where it was to secure silk trading rights from Shah Safi I. The journey via Moscow (where the Tsar's approval for passage of ships carrying the silk needed to be purchased) took place between 1633 and 1639. Though ultimately unsuccessful, as the plan for the trade route was abandoned before it was ever put into practice, it did produce a richly illustrated travel account, *Offt Begehrte Beschreibung der Newen Orientalischen Rejse* by Olearius (1647). With the help of a Persian scholar named Hakwirdi, who had defected to Holstein-Gottorf, Olearius also wrote a German version of *Gulistān* (1258 CE) by the Persian poet Sa'di, called *Persianischer Rosenthal* (1654). In addition, Olearius drafted the engravings of the frontispieces and illustrations that ac-

companied both texts, and finally made a map of Persia that, for the first time, showed the Caspian Sea in its correct proportions. For these texts and images, Brancaforte offers close readings, arguing that the images and texts have to be considered together to provide a full account of what Olearius sought to describe.

Brancaforte, in describing Olearius's travel narrative, remarks that "one section might deal with the adventures that befell the expedition (such as a shipwreck, or imminent attacks by Cossacks or Tatars) and the next section would discuss a region's flora and fauna, and the past and present history of the peoples who are encountered" (p. 11). The loose arrangement of large parts of Brancaforte's book seems to mirror that of his subject. Chapters give the impression of having been conceived individually (perhaps as articles or conference papers), and readers expecting a methodical narrative or thread of argument may therefore find the book wanting in that regard.

Thus, the first chapter briefly enumerates classical and contemporary descriptions of Persia before outlining the Holstein-Gottorf mission, introducing Olearius's

travel account, discussing the accompanying illustrations and concluding by pointing to Olearius's activities after his return to Gottorf. The second chapter investigates the genre of the frontispiece before introducing other frontispieces in the designing of which Olearius was involved. This material is followed by a brief discussion of the broadsheet and the early modern costume book as illustrated media used to transmit information about foreign peoples, cultures, and customs. Finally, Brancaforte provides readings of Olearius's frontispieces for the two editions of his travel accounts. Chapter 3 explores Olearius's *Persianischer Rosenthal*. By showing how individual figures depicted on the frontispiece represent corresponding themes in the text, Brancaforte illustrates the correlation between frontispiece and text. Since the frontispiece shows a lion skin used as a curtain displaying the book's title and the name of its author, Brancaforte also investigates the symbolism of the lion in Persian history. Finally, Rubens's frontispieces and the travel accounts of Dutchman Jan Janszoon Struy are discussed to establish the practice of flaying as a motif employed in early modern depictions of the Orient.

The strongest, most interesting and, at 74 pages, the most substantial chapter of the book (chapter 4) deals with Olearius as cartographer. In this role, Olearius was without a doubt an innovator. By relying on his own observations, incorporating local knowledge as well as Persian and Arabic sources during his journey, he is the first European cartographer to display the proportions of the Caspian Sea correctly, breaking with a tradition of incorrect depictions that harked back to Ptolemy's *Geographia*. Brancaforte makes out the cartographer Olearius (quite convincingly, I might add) to be an intellectual hybrid: on the one hand, still beholden to the intellectual traditions of early modern scholarship, which legitimized itself by citing classical and biblical sources; on the other hand, venturing into empiricism and inductive reasoning, which would become guideposts of scholarship with the Enlightenment. In the end, it was usually the latter impulses that won out. Olearius defended his novel depiction of the Caspian Sea against criticism by noting that other writers were merely perpetuating the erroneous shape put forth by Dionysius of Alexandria, while his first-hand observations and reports by local people supported his rectified version. By remarking that "[i]f one person makes a mistake, all others do too" (p. 151), Olearius points out the fundamental flaw underlying the medieval and early modern tradition in which scholars rely on antecessors rather than empirical evidence. Brancaforte points out that Islamic cartography

seems to have largely suffered from the same problem and that updated Persian maps were likely not available during Olearius's sojourn there, even though texts with exact measurements and proportions were available in Persia as early as the tenth century CE. Olearius's depiction of the Caspian Sea in his map, as Brancaforte demonstrates, was therefore truly innovative.

The concluding chapter returns to one of the engravings that furnish the *Vermehrte Neue Reysebeschreibung* (the second edition of Olearius's travel account), as well as a drawing by J  rgen Ovens of Frederick Duke of Holstein-Gottorf's reception of the Persian ambassador. Here, Brancaforte focuses on those illustrations that depict encounters between Europeans and Persians, again suggesting that the illustrations have to be considered together with the texts describing the same events in order for the reader to understand their implications fully.

One shortcoming of this study, to my mind, is the contextual void in which much of Olearius's illustrative and narrative work is contemplated in large parts of the book. To be sure, precursors of Olearius in these areas are discussed at length. Brancaforte for the most part falls short, however, in relating these precursors to Olearius's work. How did existing work influence—either to be emulated or to be refuted—that of Olearius? How did his travel accounts reflect or reject medieval and early modern traditions and topoi of depicting Muslims in general, and Persians in particular? Attempts to situate Olearius in the context of an intellectual tradition and shared assumptions are few, remain largely chronological rather than analytical, and convey the impression of conjecture due to their cursory nature. Two examples may help illustrate my point. With regard to the account of Olearius's description of Persian sexual libertinism, Brancaforte notes that "as a devout German Protestant, [Olearius] cannot help but attack Persian character traits, especially those dealing with religion, morality, and sexual behavior" and goes on to quote Olearius as writing that "[w]ith regard to sexual conduct, Persian males are abnormal. They are too sexually promiscuous (not only do they take many wives, they also frequent brothels); they are perverse as well, since the greatest sin, sodomy, is rampant among them" (p. 15). Given that Olearius is praised elsewhere for possessing the "critical attitude of a seventeenth-century scientist, whose own experiences and scholarly observations make the correction of faulty source material imperative" (p. 12), the reader would have wished that Olearius's "observations" in this instance had been placed in the context of the longstanding European topos of Muslim sexual profligacy. Even where

references to possible sources are extant, connections are incidental at best. Despite a five-page excursus on Peter Paul Rubens in chapter 3, the strongest argument put forth in support of the thesis that his work may have been a source of inspiration for Olearius's frontispiece is the remark that Rubens "was celebrated for his innovative frontispieces" and "was well-known to the artists and engravers who worked at the Gottorf court" (p. 97). It would have served Brancaforte's argument well to show parallels between Rubens's and Olearius's frontispieces more explicitly and in more detail.

Brancaforte appears to have made relatively few

changes from his dissertation in this book. Those already familiar with the dissertation, however, will be delighted by the excellent quality in which the illustrations are reproduced here, making both the maps and frontispieces a pleasure to look at. The fact that English translations are provided for almost all German and Latin quotations increase the book's accessibility to a wider potential audience. In Olearius, Brancaforte has chosen an interesting subject, and I look forward to his further work beyond the dissertation. There is much more that we would like to learn about the maps, texts and travels of Adam Olearius.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Kersten Horn. Review of Brancaforte, Elio, *Visions of Persia: Mapping the Travels of Adam Olearius*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11204>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).