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THE SLAVE TRADE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY KHANATE OF KHOREZM KHIVA REPRESENTATIONS IN BRITISH TRAVEL AND DIPLOMATIC SOURCES

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Abstract: This thesis examines nineteenth-century English-language accounts of the slave trade in the Khanate of Khorezm. It compares Alexander Burnes's regional travel account, James Abbott's Khiva mission, an India Office report concerning Richmond Shakespear, and Ármin Vámbéry's account of his 1863 journey. Close reading distinguishes eyewitness descriptions, second-hand estimates and diplomatic reports. Travel writing emphasizes Turkmen raids, Persian captives, ransom and unfree labour; the 1840 correspondence concentrates on the release of Russian prisoners during a crisis with Russia. The comparison shows that these records document both coercion within the khanate and the selective interests of their authors. Contemporary estimates, including Vámbéry's figure of about 40,000 Persian slaves, cannot be treated as verified census data. The thesis concludes that British sources are most useful when their dates, locations and purposes are compared and their claims are checked against other regional evidence.

Keywords: Khorezm, Khiva, slave trade, Persian captives, Turkmen raids, British diplomacy, travel literature.

Introduction

In the nineteenth century the Khanate of Khorezm linked the lower Amu Darya oasis with routes extending toward Khorasan, the Caspian Sea and other Central Asian centres. British writers usually called the polity "Khiva," after its capital. Captives taken in raids along the Iranian frontier could pass through Turkmen networks into households, rural labour and markets. Their histories cannot be reconstructed from a single bazaar scene. Jeff Eden's research stresses that exchange took place through dispersed networks, while formal abolition did not necessarily end coercion immediately. The British encounter with the subject intensified during Russia's unsuccessful expedition against Khiva in 1839–1840. Russian authorities invoked the captivity of their subjects among the reasons for intervention. British representatives considered the release of those people a way to reduce the prospect of a Russian military foothold. Thus a statement about captives might be humanitarian testimony, a report on a negotiation, or an argument about imperial power. This thesis asks what British travel and diplomatic texts reveal about the trade, which captives they make visible, and what their silences prevent historians from concluding.

Materials and Methods

The selected corpus comprises Burnes's Travels into Bokhara (1834), Abbott's two-volume Narrative of a Journey from Heraut to Khiva (1843), the India Office enclosure "Intelligence from Heraut" (1840), and Vámbéry's Travels in Central Asia (1864). Burnes's description of a slave bazaar concerns Bukhara and is used only to establish regional context; it must not be presented as an eyewitness account of Khiva. Abbott wrote as a British envoy involved in negotiations during the Russian expedition. The India Office enclosure reports information received from Lieutenant Richmond Campbell Shakespear. Vámbéry was Hungarian, but his book appeared in London in English and became part of the same travel literature. The method is qualitative source comparison. Each statement is assigned to its

author, date and location, then classified as observation, reported information or diplomatic claim. Passages are compared around five themes: capture, circulation, work, ransom and emancipation. This design does not produce new statistics. It tests the scope of what the surviving texts can establish and uses later historical scholarship to expose gaps in the colonial and travel archive.

Results and Analysis

Burnes described the Bukhara market as a place where enslaved people brought chiefly from Persia by Turkmen suppliers were displayed for sale. The passage indicates the regional connection between frontier raids and urban exchange, but Bukhara is not Khiva. Its greatest value for this topic is to show how a British observer made the trade legible to readers before the Khivan diplomatic crisis. As Eden demonstrates, visible market transactions represented only one part of a wider geography that also involved transfers outside bazaars. Abbott arrived in Khiva during the winter of 1839–1840, when a Russian expedition threatened the khanate. His narrative places the fate of Russian prisoners within court politics and efforts to prevent intervention. According to the Library of Congress account of his mission, Abbott did not initially secure their release; he did obtain agreement to proposals for British representation and mediation before leaving for Russia. An unsuccessful first request and a later release should therefore not be compressed into one event. The October 1840 India Office enclosure preserves Todd's report of Shakespear's letters received up to 2 August. Todd stated that the khan had released all the Russian prisoners and that Shakespear intended to accompany them to Orenburg. This confirms what British officials reported about a specific group at a particular moment. It does not provide an inventory of every captive in Khorezm. Nor does it establish the abolition of Persian enslavement. The choice of "Russian prisoners" as the central category reflects the immediate diplomatic objective. Vámbéry offers a later perspective. On the Turkmen route he recounts how a young Iranian captive asked him to write to family members so they could raise money for his ransom. This short encounter makes visible a captive's attempt to act through correspondence, but also the dependence of redemption on family resources and a reliable messenger. In his later account of Khorezm's population, Vámbéry estimated that approximately 40,000 Persians remained enslaved and also mentioned freed people and children born into captive households. The rounded figure has no stated method of enumeration. It is evidence of perceived scale, not a verified census. These sources produce three overlapping pictures. The travel account highlights raiding routes and the sale of Persians. Diplomatic writing singles out Russians whose captivity bore directly on international relations. Vámbéry's discussion of ransom, manumission and descendants suggests that legal release did not instantly erase the social effects of captivity. Each picture is historically useful, but each answers a narrower question than the general label "slave trade" might imply.

Comparison also prevents a misleading inference about the geography of Khorezmian slavery. A captive seized in the Iranian borderlands might be moved through Turkmen camps before arriving in the oasis; the city of Khiva was one possible point of exchange, not a complete map of the trade. Burnes's Bukhara scene illustrates a connected but distinct market. Vámbéry's report of a domestic captive reveals an encounter away from an urban bazaar. Together they suggest that the movement and use of people must be studied across sites of capture, transit and labour.

Discussion

A source's purpose shaped its field of vision. Burnes could describe a public market but could not see every private transaction or rural workplace. Abbott and Shakespear encountered a court whose response to Russian demands mattered urgently to Britain. Their

documents consequently identify a diplomatic outcome more precisely than they describe the daily lives of Persian captives. Vámbéry relates an individual request for help, then generalizes about the conditions of thousands of people. The two forms of testimony should be read at different levels of certainty. The dates also matter. Burnes wrote before the 1840 episode; Abbott and Shakespear reported during it; Vámbéry travelled more than two decades later. Treating all three moments as one stable condition would conceal political and social change. The Russian conquest of Khiva in 1873 introduced formal antislavery measures, yet Eden argues that coercive practices were not necessarily ended by decree alone [1]. This later development is context for the thesis, rather than an outcome observed by the earlier authors. Finally, terms such as "slave," "prisoner," "freed person" and "house-born" need careful handling. They appear in sources produced for different audiences and do not automatically refer to identical legal or social conditions. Hopkins's comparative study shows why forced labour in early nineteenth-century Central Asia must be located within its specific institutions [6]. A fuller account would read Persian captivity narratives, Khorezmian chronicles and Russian documentation beside the English sources, with particular attention to women and children, who are less audible in this small corpus.

The central limit is not merely the small size of the corpus. Its authors were unevenly placed within the social world they described. An envoy could learn what the khan agreed to communicate, while a traveller depended on guides, hosts, translators and the ability to move safely. Enslaved people rarely controlled the final form in which their statements appeared in English. The young Iranian's request recorded by Vámbéry is unusually direct, yet his name, later fate and family response are unknown. This uncertainty should be stated rather than filled with an invented outcome.

Conclusion

British travel and diplomatic accounts establish that captivity in nineteenth-century Khorezm was connected to Turkmen raids, Persian displacement, labour and ransom, while the release of Russian prisoners became a distinct diplomatic issue in 1840. Their value lies in dated observations and reports, not in a complete demographic record. The thesis finds that source genre explains much of the difference in representation: travellers made individuals and markets visible; officials recorded the captives most relevant to negotiations. Keeping these categories apart produces a more defensible history of slavery in Khorezm and a clearer agenda for multilingual archival research.

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