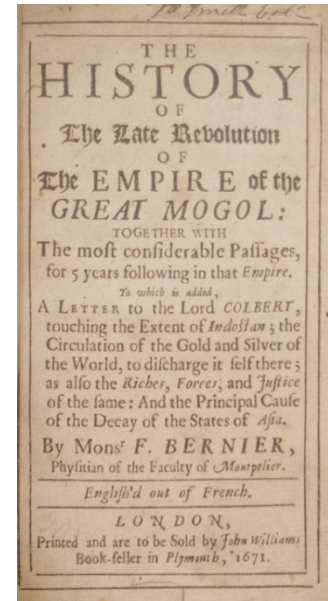


## ‘What news have you of the Great Mogul?’

The first of a series of occasional essays on our newly launched website. It relates to *The History of The Late Revolution of The Empire of the Great Mogol...* by François Bernier, one of the most important travel accounts of the seventeenth century. We have a very good copy – the first edition in English published in 1671. Catalogue description is at foot of the essay, as well as contributors’ biographies.



British fascination with India had long been excited before its territories became the ‘jewel in the crown’ of the Victorian Empire. Indeed, European interest in accessing the trans-South and South-East Asian spice trade was one of the prime motivations for New World exploration. The subsequent discovery and popularisation of eastern and western maritime routes via the Straits of Magellan and the Cape of Storms/Good Hope eventually opened up new opportunities for the expansion of Europe’s mercantile, proselyte, diplomatic, and territorial interests in South Asia. Insofar as the acquisition of information was an important means of understanding and exploiting these new interests, the French physician, philosopher and traveller, François Bernier (1620-1688), played a significant role.

A native of Anjou, born in Joué into a peasant family of tenant-farmers, Bernier’s intellectual development was encouraged under the close tutelage of the empiricist Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), who later employed his protégé as secretary, facilitating his entrée into a glittering circle of *libertins érudits*, which included influential figures such as Gabriel Naude, La Mothe le Vayer, Molière, and Cyrano de Bergerac<sup>1</sup>. In 1652, following his qualification from the Faculté de Montpellier as physician, an accelerated award which carried the proviso not to practice in France, Bernier journeyed to the Levant, only to return almost immediately to the ailing Gissendi, tending to him until his death from a respiratory disease in 1655.

Subsequently returning to the Levant and Egypt, Bernier now resolved to embark on a more protracted journey beyond, to seek his fortune and further his philosophical and scientific interests. With hopes of establishing himself in Ethiopia frustrated, his arrival at the India port city of Surat in early 1659, marked the beginning of his eight-year long adventures in and around the Taimurid/Mughal Empire, returning to Marseilles and later Paris in 1669.

The assembly of his recollections into his *Memoires du sieur Bernier sur l’empire du grand Mogul* (Paris, 1670-1; first English translation, 1671) was intended to satisfy rising demands for the most current details on the state of South Asian politics, society, and religion. A correspondent with the “cold and dry” statesman, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–1683), whose multiple executive roles at Versailles included the responsibility for establishing the French counterpart to the English and Dutch East India Companies, Bernier made special efforts to include relevant economic data to aid specifically French trade. Like his contemporary, the Italian mercenary and self-taught physician, Niccolao

<sup>1</sup> Lens, L. de. “Notice Sommaire sur François Bernier,” *Dictionnaire historique, géographique et biographique de l’Anjou*, 21e livraison, Novembre, 1872.

Manucci (1639-1717) — who travelled in South Asia to be employed by similar local dignitaries, and also wrote an account of his adventures, entitled *Storia do Mogor* — Bernier's work was published during his lifetime, with, however, the French state's explicit support, as shown by the addition of a dedication to Louis XIV.

Its frequent reissue in contemporary and posthumous editions and numerous translations further ensured its perennial popularity beyond the sphere of Francophone literary culture, to the extent that its impact can be detected in pan-European approaches to Islamic civilisations more generally —informing comparative sections of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, for instance, influencing Marx and Engels in their characterisation of Asiatic despotism and modes of production — while aiding the formation of a specifically British rhetorical and intellectual discourse before and after the rise of colonialism in South Asia. On 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1853, for example, Marx wrote to Engels that on the subject of eastern cities “one could hardly find anything more brilliant, comprehensive, or striking than...old Bernier.”<sup>2</sup>



'The Emperor Sháh Jahán... contemporary painting by a Delhi Artist...' Frontispiece to F. Bernier's *Travels in the Mogul Empire A.D. 1656 – 1668*. Edition based on Irving Brock's translation. A. Constable (ed). London 1891.

Bernier retained his close intellectual ties to Gassendism throughout his life. Following his return from his travels, his literary activity intensified with publications in defence of Gassendi's works and their reconciliation with the rationalist philosophy of Descartes, the contents of which whilst not always endearing him to the state, were of great interest to both to the *érudits* and further afield. Indeed, his subsequent visit to London in 1685, and return to Paris via the Netherlands in 1688 — the year of his death — reflect the broadening engagement with the international community of scholars and *salonnières* of his day.

In addition to his philosophic and topographical texts, Bernier is also of import as an early contributor to the disciplinary development of ethnography and anthropology, specifically in relation to the ideological roots of modern racial theory. In April 1684, Bernier published an anonymous article in the journal of the French Academy of Science, the *Journal des sçavans*. This brief discourse, entitled “A New Division of the Earth, according to the Different Species or Races of Men Who Inhabit It,”<sup>3</sup> represented a seismic shift from the seventeenth century notion of race as non-inevitable familial lineage (the term *noblesse de race*, for example, indicating the oldest aristocratic families in France), to a conception of race as a complex of fixed, physically-defined differentiations between broad human groups. As such, it is arguably the first presentation of a formal attempt to classify mankind into races, Bernier writing that

Until now, geographers have divided the earth only by the different countries and regions which are found there. What I have noted about men during my long and frequent voyages gave me the idea of dividing it differently. For even

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Tom Bethell, *The Noblest Triumph: Property and Prosperity Through the Ages* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 234-5.

<sup>3</sup> The original French title is “Nouvelle Division De La Terre, par les differentes Especies ou Races d'hommes qui l'habitent, envoyée par un fameux voyageur à M. l'Abbé de la \*\*\*\* à peu près en ces termes.”

though men almost always differ from each other in the external form of the body and principally the face, according to the various regions of the earth they inhabit, so that those who have traveled extensively can often without error distinguish by these features each nation in particular, I have noticed that there are mostly four or five species or races of men so noticeably different from each other that they can serve as a justifiable basis for a new division of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Although no work of Bernier's has survived or has been attributed to him in the '*langue orientale*,' he, nonetheless, speaks of his familiarity with South Asian languages and literature; occasionally mentioning his reading of poetry extolling Kashmir's scenic beauty, his conversations with local intellectuals, and the reproduction of excerpts from battle cries and monologues in their original language (although, not always accurately). In his memoirs, he also discusses translations produced for his master and protector Danishmand Khan Shafia Yaz'd (died circa 1670/1081 A.H.), with whom he enjoyed a vibrant scholarly relationship, which continued after his return to France. Bernier writes of "explaining to my Agah [master] the recent discoveries of Harveus and Pecquet in anatomy...[and] discoursing on the philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes, which I translated to him in Persian (for this was my principal employment for five or six years)." Indeed, Danishmand Khan's interest in European sciences (*'ilm-i ahl-i farang*) was such that he apparently secured a promise from the departing Bernier to send him "the books from *ferngistan* [Europe]."<sup>5</sup>

However, mentioning the use of a local chronicle in his opening description of the Taimurid State, it is questionable whether such usage ever constituted anything more than perhaps a cursory reading of excerpts, or that the chronicle itself was the authoritative official record of the previous reign (especially, the *Padshah namah* of Shaikh 'Abd ul-Hamid-e Lahauri (died 1654/1064 A.H.) and Muhammad-Varis (died 1680/1091 A.H.). Instead, we find Bernier's scepticism of the Taimurid State manifesting itself in the amount of coverage and credence given to gossip and anecdotal evidence, seldom supported with official documentation (particularly ordinances).

This admixture of the authoritative and specious necessarily conveys an antigovernmental critique that is simultaneously partial to the succession of 'Alam-gir I (died 1707/1118 A.H.) over his other hopeful brothers, whilst condemning the host civilisation for its example of autocratic monarchy, religious practices, social stratification, and sexuality, in particular. Nevertheless, Bernier's account continues to hold value as it offers readers a window onto not just a period of crisis in one of South Asia's mightiest empires, but also a potent illustration of pre-modern European attitudes to the Oriental 'other;' always endeavouring to seek its riches, but reluctant to concede its inherent value.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation by Pierre H. Boulle in his essay "François Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race," published in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion of seventeenth-century Persianate scholarly interaction with European science and philosophy, see Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

### Catalogue description

[Bernier, François](#), *The History of The Late Revolution of The Empire of the Great Mogol; together with the most considerable Passages, for 5 years following in that Empire.*  
First edition in English, London 1671.

Engraved folding map (often missing). Contemporary calf, expertly rebacked. pp. (xvi), 258, 176, 102, (i – publisher's advertisement). 8vo. (2 volumes in one).

£1600 [BK000265](#)

### Contributors

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