

ALEXANDER BURNES' TRAVELS INTO BOKHARA

Mannobjonova Sharofatoy

Independent researcher

Abstract. This thesis examines Alexander Burnes' Travels into Bokhara as an important nineteenth-century travel narrative and historical source on Central Asia. Published in 1834, the work records Burnes' journey from India through Afghanistan and the territories north of the Hindu Kush to Bukhara, followed by his return through the Caspian region and Persia. The article analyzes the circumstances in which the journey was undertaken, the structure and thematic range of the book, and Burnes' observations concerning Bukhara, Afghanistan, the Oxus region, trade routes, political institutions, social life, geography, and intercultural relations.

Keywords: Alexander Burnes, Travels into Bokhara, Bukhara, Central Asia, travel writing, British India.

INTRODUCTION

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Central Asia remained a region about which European governments possessed limited and uneven information. The political situation in Afghanistan, the khanates of Central Asia, the routes leading toward the Oxus, the commercial connections between India and the north, and the gradual expansion of the Russian Empire attracted increasing attention in British India. It was in this context that Alexander Burnes undertook one of the best-known British journeys through the region.

Burnes was an officer of the East India Company who had acquired knowledge of Hindustani and Persian and developed a strong interest in geography, languages, politics, and travel. In 1832 he set out toward Bukhara with a small party.

MAIN PART

One of the most important features of Travels into Bokhara is its combination of personal narrative and systematic description. Burnes does not simply record where he travelled. He also observes landscapes, roads, rivers, mountain passes, settlements, markets, rulers, military forces, religious practices, commercial activity, and relations between different communities. This gives the work a hybrid character: part travel diary, part geographical survey, part political report, and part ethnographic description.

The journey itself was demanding. Burnes and his companions travelled through territories where European visitors were uncommon and where their political identity could create suspicion. The Cambridge edition notes that they travelled in local dress and adjusted their public identities according to circumstances [1]. Such conditions influenced the structure of Burnes' observations. His accounts repeatedly pay attention to personal safety, local hospitality, the availability of transport, the behavior of officials, the character of roads, and the information supplied by merchants and other travellers.

The road to Bukhara passed through Afghanistan, and this part of the narrative is especially important because it illustrates the close connection between geography and politics in Burnes' writing. Kabul was not treated merely as a city of cultural interest. It was also understood as a major point linking India with Central Asia. Burnes observed political authorities, commercial activity, communications, and the strategic significance of the region. Later British policy toward Afghanistan would make such information increasingly valuable.

The passage across the Hindu Kush gave Burnes an opportunity to describe difficult terrain and the communities living along important routes. He then travelled toward Kunduz and Balkh before proceeding to Bukhara. The table of contents of the first volume itself shows the geographical sequence of the narrative: Lahore, the Punjab, Peshawar, Kabul, the Hindu Kush, Kunduz, Balkh, and finally Bukhara [1]. This arrangement reflects more than chronology. It gradually constructs for the reader a mental map of the region between British India and Central Asia.

Bukhara occupies a central place in the work. Burnes devoted several chapters of the first volume to the city and to his stay there, while the second volume expanded the analysis into a broader account of the kingdom of Bukhara, its history, geography, political power, and commerce [1]. Cambridge's modern reprint preserves chapters specifically entitled "Bokhara," "An Account of the Kingdom of Bokhara," "Sketch of the History of Bokhara," and "On the Political and Military Power of Bokhara."

This structure demonstrates that Bukhara was not merely the destination of an adventurous journey. Burnes regarded it as an important political and commercial center requiring systematic description. His interest in markets, trade, routes, merchants, and commodities was particularly significant. Bukhara had long functioned as an important node linking different parts of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Persia, India, and regions further north. Burnes' attention to commerce therefore had both descriptive and strategic value.

The second volume of *Travels into Bokhara* includes a separate section on the commerce of Central Asia [1]. This reveals one of the central concerns of British geographical writing in the period: economic information was inseparable from political knowledge. A route could be evaluated according to distance, physical difficulty, commercial potential, and strategic importance. The movement of merchants could provide information about places beyond the traveller's own route. Markets could reveal connections between states that were geographically distant but economically linked.

Burnes also paid considerable attention to the Oxus, or Amu Darya. The river had geographical, historical, and political importance. In the second volume, he included discussion of the Oxus and the Sea of Aral, the valley of the river, and surrounding territories [1]. Such observations contributed to nineteenth-century European attempts to improve geographical knowledge of Central Asia.

The geographical sections are especially important because maps of the region available to British officials were still incomplete. Travel narratives such as Burnes'

were therefore used not merely as literary texts but also as sources of geographical information. Routes, approximate distances, rivers, mountain systems, settlements, and commercial roads were valuable for cartographers and political officials.

Another notable feature of the work is Burnes' interest in history. Rather than limiting himself to contemporary observation, he attempted to place the regions he visited within a historical framework. His second volume contains historical sketches of the countries between India and the Caspian Sea, including Bukhara [1]. This reflects a characteristic habit of nineteenth-century travel writing: classical and medieval historical references were often used to interpret contemporary geography.

Burnes' interest in Alexander the Great is particularly visible. He frequently compared routes and places with descriptions in ancient sources, attempting to connect the geography he observed with the campaigns of Alexander. This historical-geographical method gave his narrative an additional scholarly dimension, although some identifications made by nineteenth-century travellers would later be reconsidered as historical geography became more precise.

Cultural observation constitutes another important dimension of the work. Burnes described clothing, customs, religious life, marketplaces, modes of hospitality, social behavior, and relations among different ethnic and linguistic communities. Such descriptions are valuable because they preserve the impressions of an eyewitness. Yet they require careful interpretation. Burnes was a British traveller writing for a nineteenth-century British readership. His descriptions therefore sometimes reflect the categories, assumptions, and political attitudes of his own society.

This limitation is important when using *Travels into Bokhara* as a historical source. A travel account is never a neutral photograph of reality. The traveller decides what to observe, what to record, what to compare, and what to omit. Burnes was especially interested in political stability, military strength, trade routes, transport, and relations with neighboring powers because these issues were important to British India.

CONCLUSION

Alexander Burnes' Travels into Bokhara is one of the notable British travel accounts of early nineteenth-century Central Asia. Based on journeys undertaken in 1831–1833 and first published in 1834, the three-volume work combines personal narrative with geographical, historical, political, commercial, and cultural description [1]. Its importance extends far beyond the story of one traveller.

The work provides valuable information about routes between India and Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Hindu Kush, Balkh, Bukhara, the Oxus region, trade networks, local political structures, and social life.

REFERENCES

1. Burnes, A. Travels into Bokhara: Being the Account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia; Also, Narrative of a Voyage on the Indus, from the Sea to Lahore, with Presents from the King of Great Britain. 3 vols. — London: John Murray, 1834. Modern reprint: Cambridge University Press, 2014–2015.
2. British Library. Travels into Bokhara, Lt Alexander Burnes. India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/R/12/LIB/125–125B. — London: John Murray edition, 1835.
3. Yapp, M. E. Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran, and Afghanistan, 1798–1850. — Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
4. Hopkirk, P. The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia. — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991 [first published 1990].
5. Ingram, E. Britain's Persian Connection, 1798–1828: Prelude to the Great Game in Asia. — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.