



STRUYS, JAN JANSZON

STRUYS, JAN JANSZON, 17th-century Dutch sailor and sail maker, whose account of his various travels in Europe, Africa, and Asia, first published in 1676, has been translated into several languages. He was born about 1630 either in Wormer or Durgerdam (Struys, 1676, p. 367) in the Zaan district of the province of North Holland, north of Amsterdam. He was a sail maker by profession, who had received a good elementary education.

His first voyage from December 1647 to September 1651 took him to West Africa, Madagascar, Siam, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Japan. His second voyage, from December 1655 until the end of 1657, was to the Mediterranean, while his third and last voyage began in September 1668 and ended in late 1673. In September 1668, he and seventeen other Dutchmen, led by Captain David Butler, went to Russia to take service with the Czar Alexis I (r. 1645-76). They traveled to Riga, Novgorod, and Moscow, and Struys describes, among other things, the towns he visited, people's drinking and eating habits, their religious customs, and how they entertained themselves. They sailed a newly built ship down the Volga River via Kazan to [Astrakhan](#) (Pers. Ḥājjī Tarkān), located near the river delta at the Caspian Sea. At that time a Cossack rebellion had broken out under Stenka Razin, who attacked and sacked the town. The Dutchmen, who met Razin in person, fled during the sack of Astrakhan, which Struys described, and sailed towards [Darband](#) (Struys, the two separate letters at the end of the book). Bad weather, however, forced to land on the coast of [Daghestan](#), where they were taken prisoner and enslaved, although some of them escaped.



According to Struys's travel account, he was captured in early June 1670 and taken to [Yerevan](#), where he was sold on June 12 to a Persian, who took him to Darband. There he was resold to a man called Ḥājjī Bayām on 30 June 1670, who took him to Šamāki, where he was sold, at his own request, to the Polish ambassador [Bogdan Gurdziecki](#) on 29 October 1670. Meanwhile, two Dutchmen who had been able to escape informed the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch [East India Company](#)) staff in [Isfahan](#) about the fate of their companions. The director of the VOC in Persia (1670-71), Lucas van der Dusse, reported the situation to the governor-general in September 1671 (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1279, van der Dusse to XVII, 10/9/1671, fol. 746v). The text of the letter implies that the staff of the Dutch East India Company in Isfahan, on learning about the fate of their compatriots, had sent a petition to Shah [Solaymān](#) [r. 1666-94] (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1279, Translation of request, fol. 751). Shah Solaymān, in reaction to the petition, sent a royal command "to Boday, governor of Šamkāl" to release the ten remaining Dutch slave-prisoners (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1274, fol. 752, Translation of Shah's order, Du'l-ḥejja 1081/April-May 1671). This order finally had the desired result, although it took about six months. The reason that Struys and the other Dutchmen remained for such a long time in captivity was that the local governor did not exert himself to execute the shah's order. François de Haze (VOC director in Persia during 1671-73) reported the purchase of their release to the governor-general (Nationaal Archief, VOC 1279, de Haze to XVII [4/3/1672 + 21/3/1672], fol. 904v; Coolhaas, III, p. 775-76).

According to his own account, Struys eventually left Šamāki on 10 November 1671 and via [Ardabil](#), Soltāniya, Qazvin, Sāva, and [Kāšān](#), all of which he described, arrived in Isfahan on 19 January 1672. Here he stayed for one month and described the city, from which he departed on February 17. He arrived in [Bandar 'Abbas](#) on 28 April 1672. From there he sailed to Batavia and then returned to the Netherlands, where he arrived in October 1673. Struys must have started writing his travel account almost immediately, because, on 23 September 1675, he received permission to publish his travel accounts (*Reysen*), which were published in 1676. He states in his foreword that people urged him to write the narrative of his adventures. He may indeed have been encouraged to write his travel account by Nicolaes Witsen (merchant, scholar, burgomaster of Amsterdam) and Coenraet van Klenck (Dutch envoy to Russia in 1675), because he dedicated his book to them recalling that they had been helpful to him in the past. Struys also asked them for intercession to obtain his unpaid wages from the czar (Struys, 1676; Peters,



pp. 109-10).

His *Reysen* (Travels) were an enormous success and became a bestseller. After the first Dutch edition of 1676, there was one in 1677 (frontispiece), with new editions in 1686, 1705, 1718, 1720, 1742, 1760, and an abridged Dutch version in 1974. Soon after the first Dutch edition in 1676, the first German translation appeared in 1678 and another one in Zurich in 1679, followed by the third one in 1832. The first French translation, published in 1681, was reprinted at least 12 times, the last time in 1838. The English translation of the first voyage was published in 1682, followed by his complete travel account in 1683, which was reprinted in 1684. A Russian translation of the third voyage, only of the part that dealt with Russia, was published in 1935 (see Bibliography).

As far as the value of the translations is concerned, the most faithful rendering of the original Dutch text is the German translation, followed closely by one in the English, although it omits some items that the translator did not consider of interest to the reader. The French translations are less reliable, because parts of the text were not translated, besides translators took liberties with the text by adding material from other books (Floor).

The first Dutch edition was published jointly with the account of the shipwreck of the *Terschelling* by Frans Janszoon van der Heyden; subsequent Dutch editions do not include this additional shipwreck story until 1742. Both accounts by Struys and van der Heyden appeared together in all French editions. Both works are beautifully illustrated with fine large views of Judia (Siam), Tenedos, Padmos, Astrakhan, Isfahan, [Persepolis](#), [Shiraz](#), Gamron, Masqat, a fine plate with Tartar costumes, etc. The copper engravings were done by Johannes Kip (1653-1722) and C. Decker based on drawings done by Struys. Van der Heyden's account is embellished with beautiful engravings by D. Bosboom. The first German edition also contains the account of the shipwreck of the *Terschelling* by Frans Janszoon van der Heyden translated from the Dutch version. However, there is also a German edition of 1678 that does not include this *Terschelling* account. The English edition, which does not have the account of the shipwreck of the *Terschelling*, is also translated from the Dutch text.

It should be noted, however, that the description of the work in various catalogues is not consistent. For example, the number of plates is variously mentioned as 15, 18, 19, 20, while the original number is 19 plus a map. Some later Dutch editions (e.g., of 1713) contain only the third voyage in an abridged



format. Besides the numbering of the chapters is often incorrect (e.g., XI instead XII, XXII instead of XXV), and chapters 28, 32, 33, 34, 35 of the 1676 edition are missing in later abridged editions. Thus, the most reliable versions are the Dutch of 1676, the German of 1678, and the English of 1683.

Struys's travel account, despite its popular success, has been derided by some contemporary and modern authors, notably [George Curzon](#) (I, p. 25) and [Alfons Gabriel](#) (pp. 114-15), who maintained that the book has no merits whatsoever, because the contents had all been invented. However, none of them has provided any evidence for their opinion beyond referring to the book's inexact map of the Caspian Sea and its illustrations, most of which indeed have nothing to do with the reality in Safavid Persia. One of the more sensational plates shows a woman being flayed alive for infidelity, with her harem-mates being shown the skin as an object lesson. Although flaying did occur in Safavid Persia (e.g., see [Qomi](#), I, p. 270; [Fumani](#), p. 196), this particular story may not be necessarily true. His artistic rendering of Persepolis was in tune, however, with other drawings of these ancient ruins (e.g., [Hotz](#)). [Philippe Avril](#) (pp. 69-70) had called Struys a liar, because Struys allegedly had written that the distance between the Ararat and the Caspian Sea was 50 miles, which in reality was more than 150 miles. In fact, Struys did not know the distance and, therefore, had left it blank in his travel account. In Armenia, he claimed that he had climbed Mount Ararat, where he healed a hermit, who, in return, gave him what he was told and believed to be a piece of Noah's Ark. Although many expressed their disbelief about this story, Struys went out of his way to state to doubting friends in the strongest possible terms that the story was true (Struys, tr. Mueller, pp. 122-23).

There is no doubt that Struys, to boost the sale of his book, inserted fantastic stories into his accounts, but these are easily identified. For example, he asserted that he saw in Formosa a race of men with tails. However, otherwise the book contains a good deal of data of great interest on Safavid Persia (Struys, tr. Mueller, pp. 128, 130, 148, 154-55, 164, 181. As the English translator [John Morrison](#) observed in his Foreword, "I find him more busy in recording the circumstances at his own condition, and what befell him in remote places, than remarking the State and Quality of the Land and People" (tr. Morrison, 1864, Introduction). This is exactly what one would expect from somebody who has a limited level of education. Struys had only an elementary school education, and he had learnt a smattering of various languages, collateral in the life of a seaman who traveled around the world. Struys implies that he



had conversational knowledge of Russian, because, when he was a galley slave for some time during his second voyage in the Mediterranean, his neighbor was a Russian and he also spent some time in Russia. Struys's observations in Russia were considered reliable by Jacobus Scheltema, the foremost 19th-century Dutch scholar dealing with Russia. Moreover, for most of his stay in Persia, he was a slave with limited freedom of movement. It is therefore no surprise that he indeed described what he saw and experienced himself rather than providing a description of the government, people, etc. of Persia (Floor).

Despite these limits, Struys was able to acquire more understanding of the town he was living in than a foreigner of his status normally would have learnt. In Šamāki, where he spent almost one year, he met some people who knew the city and the country and could speak Dutch. For example, the deputy of the Polish ambassador, having lived in Amsterdam for a number of years, spoke Dutch, as well as one of the wives of Ḥājjī Bayrām, whose father was a Dutch. The fact that he had contacts with local people who spoke Dutch, as well as his later contact with VOC staff in Isfahan and Bandar 'Abbās, facilitated the acquisition of his knowledge about Safavid Persia. His personal observations when traveling in Persia and living in Šamāki added to this store of knowledge. Comparing Struys's descriptions with what is learned from other sources, would affirm that his account can certainly be relied upon and is not fictitious at all as asserted by George Curzon and others. Struys's *Reysen* indeed contains much useful and reliable information, for example, about the 'Ašurā ceremonies in Šamāki, his description of this town and Ardabil as well as his remarks about what he saw en route. Struys's travel account is certainly not the most important source of information on 17th-century Persia, but it contains quite a few interesting data that are not necessarily found elsewhere. The last part of the work is an extract of a letter by David Butler from Astrakhan on 24 September 1669, aboard a Russian vessel, followed by another letter by Butler written in Isfahan dated 6 March 1671, which in outline bears out Struys's account of the events that befell him in Russia and Persia.

Struys was able to enjoy the success of his penmanship, reflected by the translations of his *Reysen* in three languages with many reprints. He enjoyed the company of many notables and literati in the Netherlands, some of whom called him a friend. He clearly also had good contacts with Nicolaes Witsen, the burgomaster of Amsterdam. Witsen highly appreciated the various observations made by Struys, as, for instance, in his remark "A certain Jan



Jansz. Struis claims that he is able to make ships in which no water will penetrate and that only rarely become leaking,” (in Struys, tr. Mueller, p. 214) and about which he further provides details. Struys lived toward the end of his life in Ditmars County near Hamburg. He visited Amsterdam for the last time one year before his death, when on 28 May 1693 he went there to see friends. Struys was already old at that time; he returned to Ditmars and died there in 1694.

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