

Book of the Month

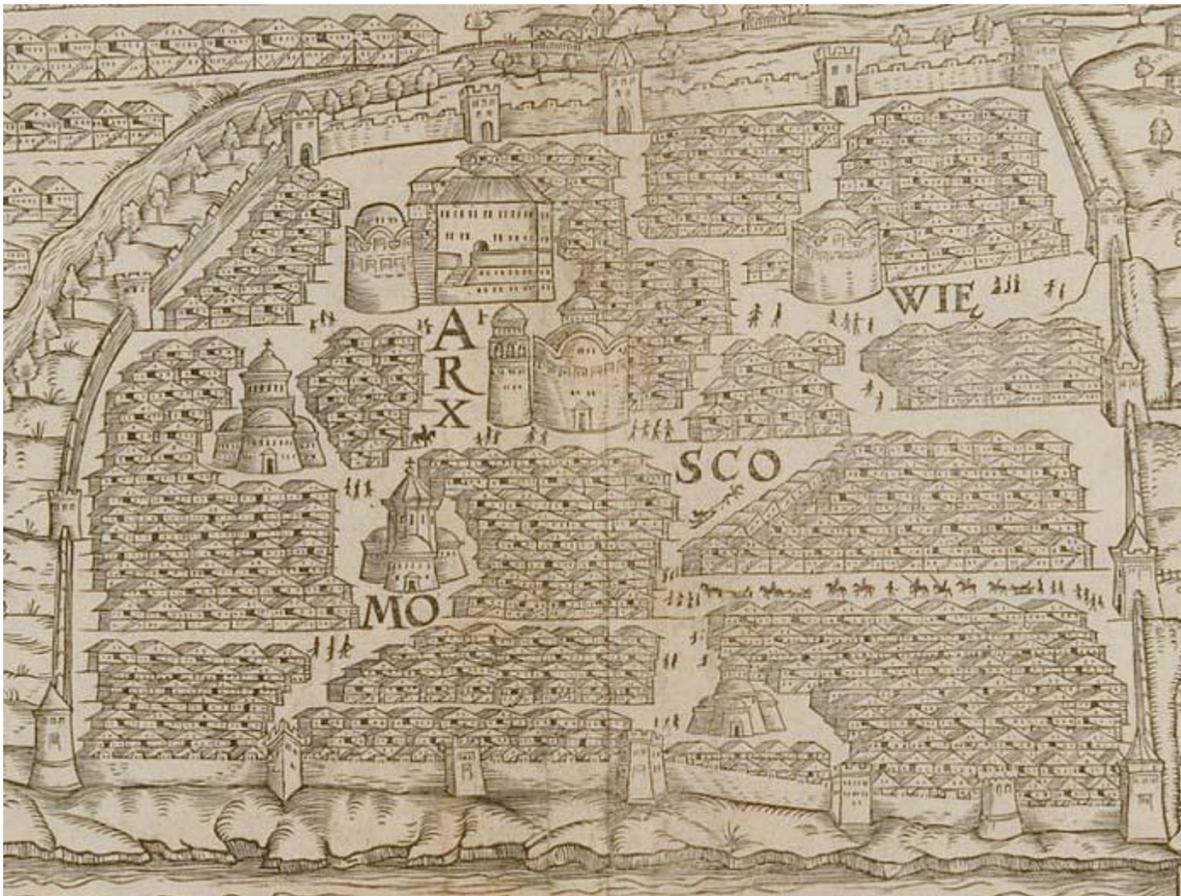
August 2007

Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii



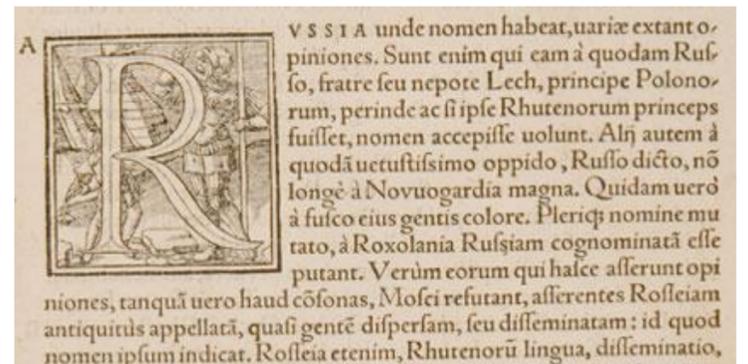
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Our August book of the month is considered to be the first authentic account of Russia written by a western traveller. Accompanied by some fine illustrations, Sigismund von Herberstein's Rerum Moscoviticarum Comentarii ('Description of Moscow and Muscovy') remains a significant source for understanding the geography, politics, religion and social conditions of sixteenth century Russia. It is also an interesting record of contemporary western impressions of that country.



"The name of the capital of the Russians in Scythia, whose princes' power and territory stretches far and wide, is Moscow (Moskau) in German and Russian, but in Latin it is Moscovia." (Grundy, p15)  
Engraving showing the city of Moscow in the state of Muscovy.

Sigismund von Herberstein made two visits to Russia. In 1517-18 he travelled as a diplomatic envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I. He returned in 1526-27 as an ambassador of Ferdinand I, King of Bohemia and Hungary. His combined visits amounted to a period of sixteen months during which he was able to see "... the land and city of Moscow and much of their manners and customs... Thus I can bear witness not merely from hearsay but as one who has seen partly for himself..." (Translation by J B C Grundy: 1969, p15)



Illustrated capital R for Russia in the opening lines of the main text.

The first edition of Herberstein's book, written in humanistic latin, was printed in Vienna in 1549. A second edition appeared two years later, followed by a third edition in 1556. The attractive full and double-page engravings included in the first edition are also present in this third edition, held in the Special Collections department. They include illustrations of Moscow and the surrounding region, examples of clothing and livestock and a portrait of Grand-Duke (sometimes translated as Prince) Vasiliï III.

## Moscow

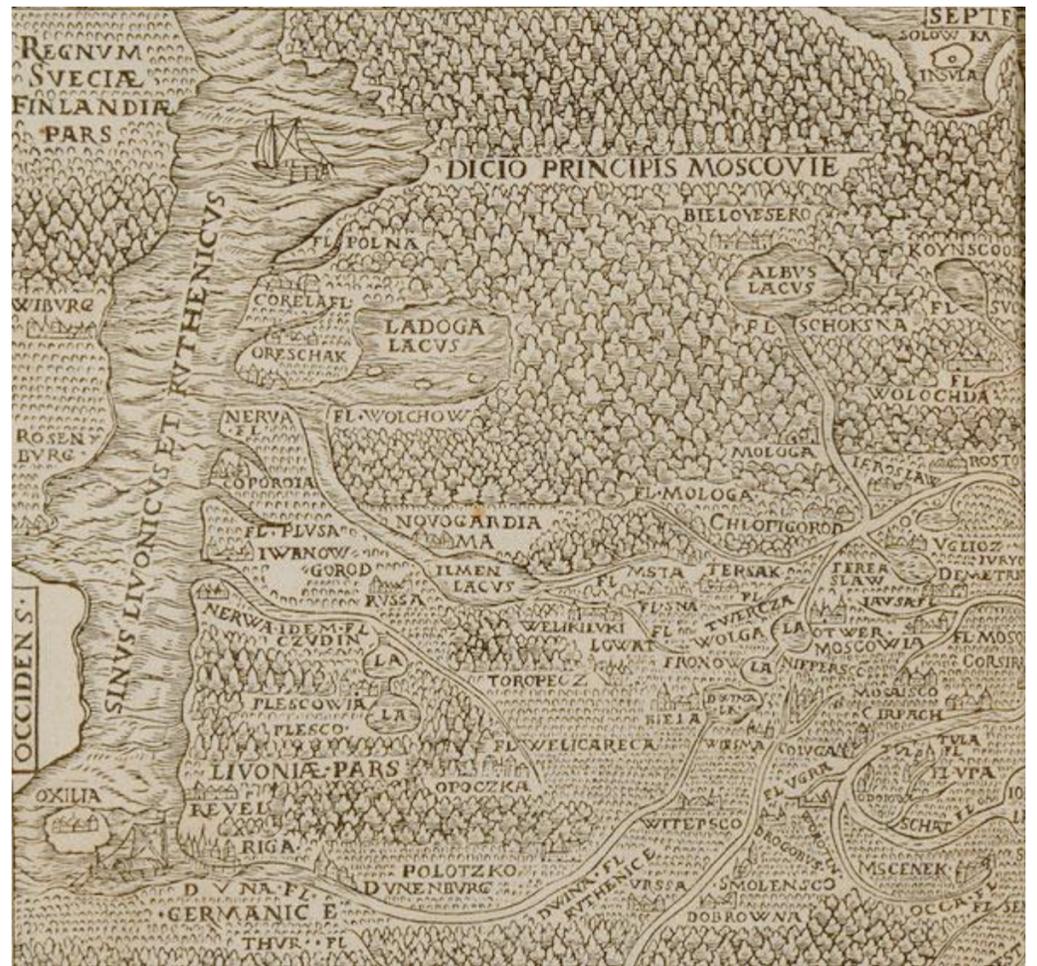
"Moscow is very large and appears even larger from a distance. It is built entirely of wood. For this reason the artisans, most of whom have fire at hand, are all outside the town and there is a long row of buildings beyond it. In between lie large squares ... the Prince had had the houses counted six years ago [probably 1520] and found there were forty-one thousand five hundred of them."

Herberstein refers to the dwelling place of the Grand-Duke as a 'castle'. However, he also says that ". it could be called a townlet, for many walled apartments of the Grand-duke's lie within. ... There are two fine churches here ... those of Our Lady and St Michael, as well as other churches of which two, at the time that we were there, were being walled." (Grundy, pp20-21) Here, Herberstein is referring to some of the palaces and churches which make up the present-day Moscow Kremlin, parts of which date from a period of extensive construction in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

## Muscovy

Herberstein described Russian territory as extending, on the western side, from close to the Carpathian mountains and following the River Tyras or Dniester down to the Black Sea. To the east, beyond the Volga river and towards the north as far as "...the countries in obedience to the King of Sweden and even to Finland..." By the 1530s the principality of Muscovy, centred on the city of Moscow, was emerging as the dominant power in the region. "There are now three princes of the Russians. The first is the Prince of Moscow, lord of most of the realm; the second is the Grand-duke of Lithuania; and the third is the King of Poland."

After Moscow, Herberstein goes on to describe other settlements "... as far as I could learn of them by thorough inquiry and travel." (Grundy, pp17-19). He discusses the composition of towns, building materials used, local trade and produce, the tribal names of the inhabitants and the proximity of rivers, forests and mountains.



Map of Muscovy (detail) showing the western part of the region. Moscow ('Moscovia') is towards the right-hand side, just over half way down.



Map of Muscovy



Map of Muscovy (detail) highlighting rivers and lakes

## Money, Trade and Commerce

One of the reasons for Moscow's ascendancy was that it was at the centre of a number of trade networks. This brought prosperity, not least through customs duties and tolls on commercial traffic. "The chief goods carried to Moscow are silver, woollen cloth, articles of silk or gold or silver, pearls, jewels, gold thread... The goods taken out of Moscow, especially to Germany, are furs and wax. To Lithuania and Turkey they send leather, skins, coarse furs and also fine ones. Thither too they send great white teeth, called fish teeth, which come from a beast living in the sea which they call morsh (walrus)."

"Their coins are not round but oblong, some of them cut with many corners. The one called the muscovite is known everywhere as a denge. It carries more than one relief, the oldest being that with a rose on one side and a horseman on the other ... Six dengen make one altyn, twenty go to a grivna ... two hundred to a rouble ... Novgorod coins have on one side a figure seated upon a throne, and someone bowing before it ... they equal two Moscow dengen." (Grundy, p82-4)



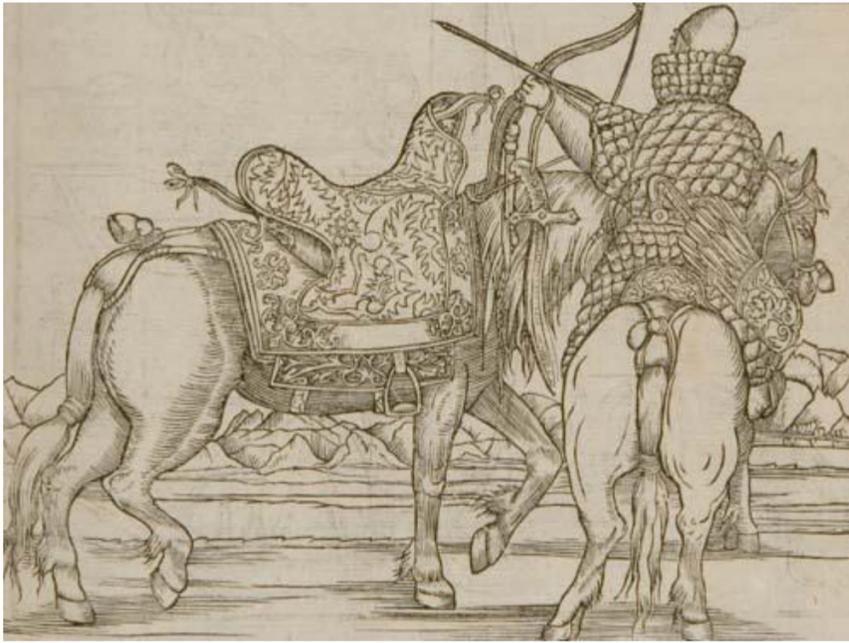
Illustration of a wild ox

## Agriculture

Herberstein was not impressed with the fertility of the region around Moscow, blaming crop failures on the combination of sandy soil and extremes of heat and cold. In contrast, the area around the river Don was described as having an abundance of fish, fruit and game so that "...travellers need only salt and fire to support them." (Grundy p82)



Illustration of a bison



Muscovite mounted archer with a recurved composite bow; a powerful weapon.

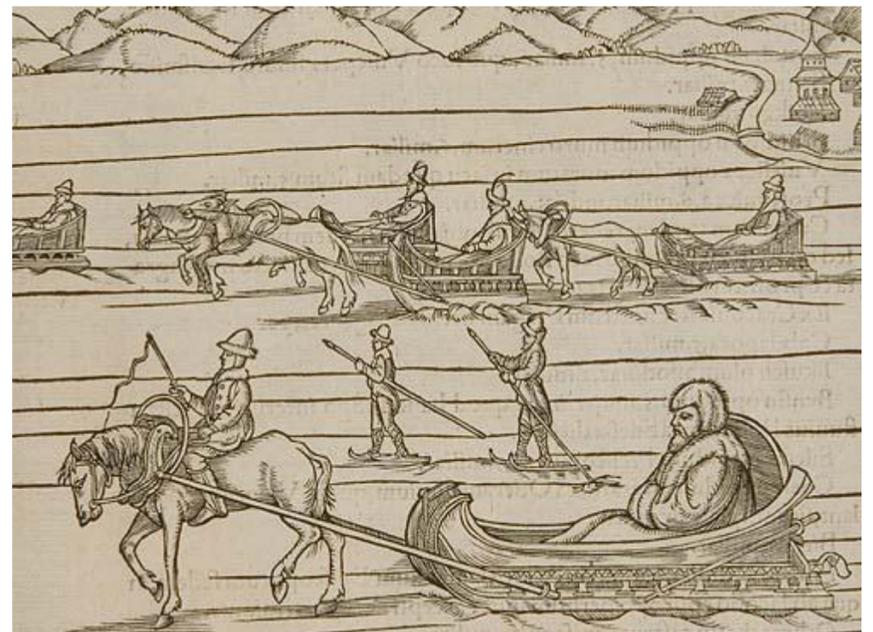
### The Army

Herberstein states that a force of 20,000 men was kept guarding the frontiers of Muscovy against the Tatars. He describes their horses as small, "... close-haired, unshod with a simple bit. ... Saddles are also small and made so that the rider can turn right round to either side to allow of shooting with the bow." (Grundy, p76) This is clearly illustrated in the engraving of a muscovite mounted archer. His weapon is described in the Cambridge History of Russia as the steppe recurved composite bow which, "...delivered an arrow more powerfully and at a greater distance than either the crossbow or the English longbow, and was superior to any firearm before the nineteenth century in terms of range, accuracy and rate of fire." (p218)

### Daily life

"Their normal clothing is of a single pattern; long, tight coats with narrow sleeves... Down the front are buttons done up on the right, which distinguishes them from the Tartars who wear similar coats buttoned on the left. Their knee-boots are usually red, with small nails in the soles and some in the point in front; at the raised heels the boots have studs which serve as spurs. Their shirts all have high capes of various hues and usually fitted with gilded buttons, as many as their wearer can afford, or with pearls at the side to hold the cape together." (Grundy, p41)

Some parts of the Russian terrain and climate required particular clothing such as snow shoes ('nartyn'). Herberstein describes the shoe as "... a piece of wood shaped like a board and a handsbreadth wide; it is about two long ells in length and turned up a little in front; in the middle the sides are turned up and between these rims are holes for binding the feet to it. When the snow grows hard a man may cover a great distance in a day. He holds a very short pike in his hand with which he may guide and assist himself..." (Grundy, p86)



The two figures in the centre of this scene appear to be wearing 'nartyn', or snow shoes, as described by Herberstein.

### Treatment of Foreign Embassies

Unsurprisingly, Herberstein includes in his book some detailed accounts of how he was received in Russia. This may have been partly intended as guidance for others undertaking similar journeys. On his first mission, a mutual desire to maintain the prestige of their respective masters meant that he and the envoy sent to meet him spent some time in "pompous talk" before either would dismount from their horses. This was followed by a slow journey by road during which Herberstein suspected that he and his colleagues were being purposely delayed. One evening, when his escort had stopped and set up camp, he decided to continue his journey. This resulted in a minor diplomatic incident. "There was a general stampede, the envoy and his camp being upon a mound in front of us ... some of them came riding after us, bidding us remain with entreaties and sometimes threats ... 'Sigismund, what are you about, riding about a foreign lord's land at your pleasure?'" (Grundy, pp53-6).



Detail of border of map of Muscovy

Serious consequences were avoided however and Herberstein and his party appear to have been well provided for. "There is a general ordinance laying down for [those] who come upon a mission how much bread, meat, fish, salt, pepper, onions, oats, hay, litter, brandy and other drink shall be allotted each day, reckoned from the number of persons and horses; the same also with wood for kitchen and stoves ... They gave enough of everything ...", the exception being the provision of fresh fish. When it was known that Herberstein had been sending and paying for supplies himself, the Muscovites took offence, "...saying that I brought shame upon their master." A difference in custom had led to a misunderstanding which was, however, soon resolved. Subsequently, fresh fish was provided on every fast day. (Grundy, p59)

At the Grand-Duke's court

Herberstein eventually arrived in Moscow and was granted an audience with the Grand-Duke. He and his party were taken to the kremlin, where a large crowd had been gathered. On the stairs by St Michael's Church which led to the Grand-Duke's quarters they were greeted by a succession of envoys, nobles and councillors who accompanied them into the audience chamber. Herberstein believed there were two reasons for the large number of people present, a common feature of many diplomatic missions past and present: "so that foreigners may note the size of the crowd and the mightiness of its lord and also so that vassals may note the respect in which the master is held, being visited by such great potentates in the persons of their respected ambassadors." (Grundy, p61)

After an official greeting and presentation of gifts the ambassadors were invited to eat. During the meal the Grand-Duke sent pieces of bread down the table to various individuals, including the ambassadors, as a mark of his favour, or salt as a sign of affection. According to Herberstein he would also take a drink and then summon an ambassador, inviting him to drink from the same cup. On one occasion he addressed Herberstein, asking, "...if I had clipped my beard, expressed in the single word: 'Bril?'"

He describes these exchanges as friendly enough but clearly, Herberstein found some of his ambassadorial duties very tiring. "Banquets last very long; some kept me until after one o'clock in the morning ... I disliked and still dislike tipping and could only get out of this by pretending to be drunk or saying I was too sleepy to go on and had had my fill." (Grundy, pp66-67)



Grand-Duke Vasili III (1479-1533) who ruled Muscovy from 1505 until his death.

Herberstein was born in 1486, in what is now Slovenia, and was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. He was knighted by Maximilian I in 1514, received his first diplomatic appointment in 1515 and undertook many more missions during the following thirty-eight years. Aside from his visits to Russia, he went to Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Poland, Bohemia and Hungary. His work frequently involved arduous and dangerous journeys.

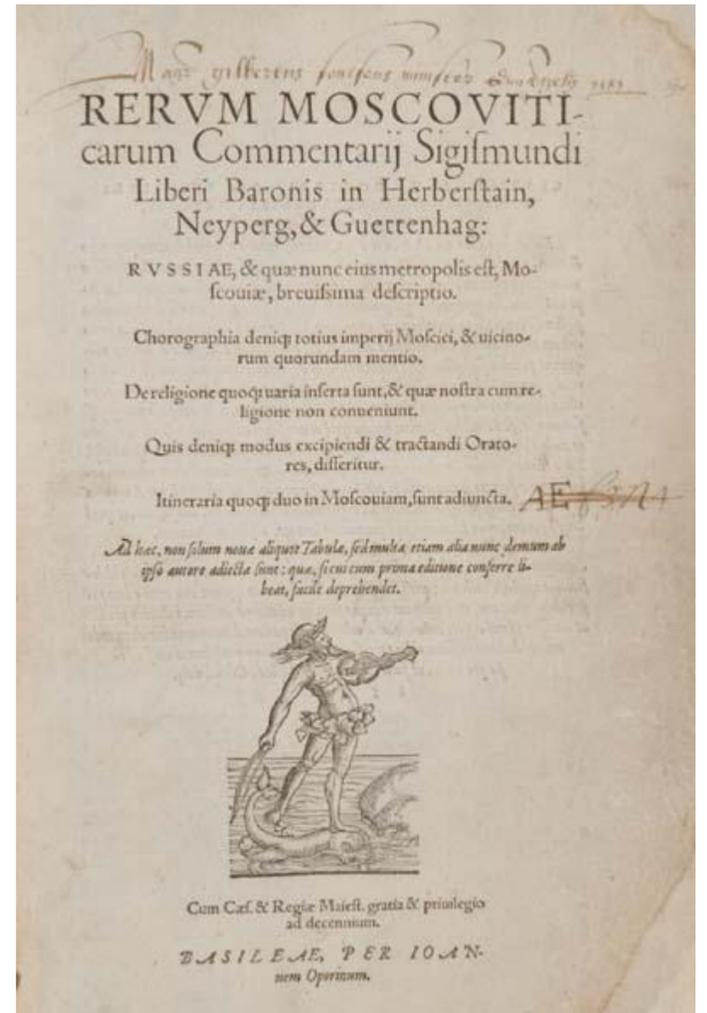
The initial success of his publication about Moscow and Muscovy was largely down to "...the novelty of what he was describing." Its enduring appeal, beyond his lifetime and after the appearance of similar works by other authors, was due to the breadth and liveliness of his account. Following the third edition of 1556 there were eight more Latin editions and others in Italian, Polish, English, Dutch and French. In 1557 the author's own German version was published.

Sixteenth century references to Herberstein's work included these lines from a verse letter 'To Parker' by the poet and translator, George Turberville (1543/4-c1597):

". if you list to know the Russes well,  
To Sigismundus' book repair, who all the truth can tell."



Herberstein coat of arms



Title page of the third edition of Herberstein's book