The mysterious place named Suri on Afanasij Nikitin’s return journey through India

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1. In four previous papers, we traced the fascinating journey by Russian 15th century merchant Afanasij Nikitin from Tver’ to India and back (1468–1474/75). Three of the papers (KEMPGEN 2008, 2009a, 2009b) were devoted to his route through India itself several stops of which had not been identified before. The fourth paper (KEMPGEN 2010) was devoted to his journey through Persia; in it, we identified the first stop Afanasij Nikitin made (or was forced to make) after crossing the Caspian Sea, Čebokar / Čapakur. All of these papers are part of a larger on-going project to publish a diplomatic edition of Afanasij Nikitin’s text.¹

In the present paper, we will offer an identification for one of the two stops on his return journey through India, from Aland to Konkan coastal port Dabhol, that hitherto remained a mystery, namely Suri/Sur’, and offer a hypothesis for Kynarjas/Narjas.

Beer from Tver’, Afanasij’s home town

2. Because all of the aforementioned papers were published in German, we will first quickly sum up our findings so far before turning to the newly discovered stop on his journey.

2.1. In the first paper, the author tried to lay out a meaningful way for Afanasij Nikitin to travel from Chaul (Čivil’), the harbour on India’s West Coast, to Junnar on the Deccan plateau. On that route, the starting point and the final destination were well-known (Chaul and Junnar). Of the two intermediate stops, Pali and Umri, only the first one had been identified before – the village Pali. Because Junnar is situated on the Deccan (a gigantic plateau of volcanic origin with steep borders) and because a mountain range called “Western Ghats” had to

¹ The project page is at http://www.uni-bamberg.de/slavling/leistungen/forschung/projekte/afanasij-nikitin/. It offers all papers published so far for download.

be crossed, there is only a limited number of connecting routes from the major coastal towns to inland regions, in medieval times even more so.\(^2\) Thus, instead of searching similar sounding place names somewhere in India and then laying the route through these stops, old trading and travel routes were examined, the history and importance of cities along the way were taken into account to identify which place it is that he could have stayed. Of course, wherever Afanasij also mentions travelling times or the duration of his stays in certain areas can be calculated by other means, such information was also be taken into account.

“А изъ Чювилъ пошли есмь сухом до Пали 8 дни, до индѣйсѣ глъ горы. А о Пали до Оумри 10 дни, то есть городъ индѣйскій. А о Оумри до Чюнери 6 дни…” (*Troickij spisok*, l. 372ob)

On that inward journey from the coast to Junnar, and going forward from Pali (which took him 8 days to reach), there is really only one route that makes sense for a merchant travelling in group, as Afanasij most probably did. From Pali, this route would take the direction first north and then east to modern Pune, and just before reaching it, turning north for the onward journey to Junnar. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that Afanasij mentions the place where he turned north before reaching Pune on his way. The duration of 10 days also supports this assumption. (The journey further to Junnar would take him an additional 6 days.)

Afanasij makes special mention of the place name Umri because for him this sounds like “die!” (imperative) in Russian. The logical place where one would turn north to Junnar after having reached the Deccan plateau would be Pimpri-Chinchwad (near Pune), also called Bhosari because it was an important trading post. Linguistically, there is, however, only a light association with toponyms (place names) in Pimpri-Chinchwad. However, when studying Afanasij’s route, i.e. the routes of caravans he joined going from city to city, it becomes clear that all of his intermediate stops were cities boasting important markets or having old temples and thus attracting pilgrims. Once such important temple in Pimpri-Chinchwad bears the name of priest Morya Gosavi who died one hundred years before Afanasij reached that town. The best guess that we could come up with was that Afanasij misheard or misunderstood the name Morya and made Umri the place name out of that.\(^3\) Remember that at this point, he was travelling in India for less than three weeks. Regardless of all linguistic considerations we consider the city Pimpri-Chinchwad to be the missing link on Afanasij’s journey to Junnar.


As for Junnar itself, we drew special attention to the fact that Afanasij calls the fortress (or city?) to lie “on a stoney island” while ‘in reality’ it doesn’t. As it turns out, Afanasij Nikitin might tell us two different things here in these two sentences, and not describe one situation, as has mostly been assumed. First, even today geographers sometimes call the remarkably steep rocks characteristic for the Deccan plateau “islands”, and the old temples of Junnar indeed reside on such a rock formation. First fortifications on the rock (today called Shivneri


\(^3\) Today, there is also a park named Moraya Raj Park nearby.
In the article, we argued that on a plausible route from Aland to the Dabhol where crossing the mountain range of the Western Ghats was again necessary, the old city of Pandharpur could be identified as Kamendrij. The linguistic reasoning behind this was that Pandharpur is also known as Chandrabhaga, and Kamendrij is a sufficiently close rendition of Chandrabhaga. Pandharpur also meets other requirements for a route Afanasij Nikitin would have taken – lying at just the right distance from his starting point is one of them, being an old city and hosting many pilgrims (even today) is another. However, the rest of the place names Afanasij mentions could not be explained then: Narjas/Kynarjas and Suri (Sur’) remained mysterious for the time being. We will return to them below to offer a (partly) solution. In the light of our new findings, the route through Satara and Khumbharli Ghat which we assumed to be the “default route” to the coast can now be revisited.

2.2. In the second paper, we tried to reconstruct the return journey that Afanasij undertook from Aland back to the coast. The description of this part of his journey is very brief, essentially mentioning only place names: Kamendrij – Narjas/Kynarjas – Suri (Sur’) – Dabyl’ – Alandi, none of which had properly identified before. This is Afanasij’s full (laconic) account of his return journey to the coast, essentially only three lines of text:

“А в Кельбергу поиою до Куроули […]. И тоох бых 5 мъс[аб]евъ, а втолууды ж[e] поиою Калики, и тоу же бозарь велмь великъ. А втолуды поиою Конакельберга, а в ванабергъ поиою ших Алдиноу. А в ших Алдина поиою Каминдри, а в Камендръ к Нарису, а в Кынарасу к Соури. А в Соури поиою к Дабили, пристанище велика г моря Индийскаго. Дабыл же есть град велмь великъ…” (Troickij spisok l. 390ob)

In the mountain, we described the steep slope to the surface of the Deccan plateau itself, reaching it at a point called Nane Gath (near Ghatghar). This path was part of an old trading route and a toll post. Today it is still known as a tourist attraction in the region, being some kilometres away from Junnar. What is not completely clear in Afanasij Nikitin’s text is whether the “mountain” that he refers to in his second sentence is identical to the “island” mentioned in the first sentence, or not.

See the excellent photographs on https://www.flickr.com/photos/ruturaj_v/ to get a very good impression of what Junnar looks like, see http://myodysseys.com/Trips/Maharashtra/Junnar/Junnar.html.

See the paper by KULKAMI (2014) which takes the Alandi – Pandharpur pilgrimage as one of its examples.
2.3 In the third paper, we tackled to the problem of properly reconstructing the round-trip that Afanasij made in India, from and to Bidar, a capital and large marketplace. From the place-names that he mentions in his travelogue, Aland (Shah Aludin) and Gulbarga (Kolubern, Kel’berg; officially called Kalaburagi today) were always clear, while Kulonger (Kulongir) wasn’t – and thus the reconstruction of Afanasij’s round-trip missed an important element.

We could show that the place Afanasij Nikitin calls Kulonger can be identified with Kalyani (since 1956: Basavakalyan). Kulon- is Afanasij’s rendition of Kalyani, while -ger is a typical second part of a compound places names in Sanskrit, the same as either Slavic gor’a ‘hill’ or as Slavic gar’d ‘fort, town’. Identifying Kulonger with Kalyani (Basavakalyan of course also includes this name as the second part of its name) made it possible to fully reconstruct and understand the ‘round-trip’ that Afanasij undertook. This paper also included a new map of his complete journey through India. Below is the section showing the round-trip.

3. On his journey back to the Indian coast, one of the three stops that Afanasij Nikitin mentions is Suri (or Sur’) – see the original text cited above. Until now, no town or place had been found by that name that could match the order of the stops on the journey. It was noted, however, that suri means ‘sun’ in Sanskrit – and thus probably influenced Afanasij when mishearing or misspelling or falsely remembering an actual place name. ‘Sun’, it can assumed, is a word any traveller in India will surely come across, even if not speaking Hindi. In our earlier article, we already assumed that Suri must be located in the area of Satara, the region’s largest town.

While revisiting some of the web sources we used for our previous papers on Afanasij’s travel through India, we found a new map which presented the solution – see the edited map below.

It corroborates our assumption.

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7 Source for the original map: http://www.konkanyatra.com/images/konkan-road-map.png.
The route from Surur to coastal port Dabhol

This map shows a place named Surur 36km north of Satara. Linguistically, there can be no doubt that Afanasij’s place Suri / Sur’ can be identified with Surur. Further investigation reveals that Surur is a village, not a city – one possible explanation why it has been overlooked before. On Google Earth or maps it will only show up when zooming in close to the ground. On Wikimapia it can also be found; it is being described with the following line: “Surur is very Historic Village, also called Wai phata/ mahabaleshwar phata”. Below (see next page) is the section from Wikimapia showing this village.

Why would Afanasij Nikitin mention a small place like Surur when a nearby city (Satara) is much larger and would be a natural stop on his journey? The answer is, we think, already included in the road map shown above: Mentioning Surur makes sense (apart from remembering it because of its similarity to the word for ‘sun’) only if taken as the place where the company of merchants travelling together would turn West instead of going further South first. The Western direction would have led the caravan to the old city of Mahabaleshwar (known to exist since the 13th century) and further on to Poladpur, crossing the mountain range of the Western Ghats. From Poladpur, the route would have led to Khed and (probably) Dapoli.

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8 See http://wikimapia.org/16412558/Surur.
9 On his whole “Journey beyond three Seas”, there is another instance where Afanasij mentions an otherwise unknown and unimportant village as a place where he spend some time, and not a well-known city: this is Çebokar at the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. In another paper, we were able to identify Çebokar with the village Chubukanda (written ‘Tschubukende’ in German sources) near Güz (see KEMPGEN 2010).
10 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabaleshwar for more information.
before reaching the port Dabhol from the north. This newly reconstructed route (see blue line in the map) essentially only differs from our previously assumed route in that it reaches the coast using the next mountain pass to the north. The village Surur is part of both routes – it simply wasn’t recognized as Afanasij’s Suri before.

4. After Suri has successfully identified as Surur, the question of course remain which city would then correspond to Kynarjas/Narjas on the way between Pandharpur (= Kamindrej) and Surur (= Suri). Our best guess is that this would be Phaltan (see the map on the next page) which offers itself in this function. Phaltan was the capital of an independent state in medieval times and as such a natural stop for any travellers, the more so for merchants travelling in some sort of caravan.\textsuperscript{11} However, we could not find any name in conjunction with this

\textsuperscript{11} See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaltan for more information.
city, its buildings or surroundings that even remotely resembles the place name Narjas (or Kynarjas) as given by Afanasij (resp. the scribes that copied his travel notes).

It is obvious that any route between Pandharpur and Dabhol (totalling ca. 350 km) would include Phaltan as an intermediate stop (as, in fact, our previous reconstruction of this route also did), and we are fully convinced that Phaltan can be considered a good candidate for Kynarjas/Narjas, although no ‘proof’ can be offered for this identification.

![Route from Pandharpur via Phaltan to Dabhol](image)

5. Following below are the relevant travelling distances\(^{12}\) between the stops on Afanasij’s journey back to the coast (with stops corresponding to places mentioned by Afanasij in bold type):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contemporary place names</th>
<th>Places mentioned by Afanasij Nikitin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pandharpur – Phaltan: 106 km</td>
<td>Kamindrej</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaltan – Lonand: 30 km</td>
<td>Narjas/Kynarjas (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonand – Surur: 34 km</td>
<td>Suri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surur – Mahabaleshwar: 44 km</td>
<td>Suri / Sur’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahabaleshwar – Poladpur: 41 km</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poladpur – Khed: 40 km</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khed – Dapoli: 27 km</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dapoli – Dabhol: 28 km</td>
<td>Dabul’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. With the newly-discovered Suri / Surur and its sole merit to be named as a stop on Afanasij’s journey as being the location where the journey turned West to cross the mountain range, the last section of his Indian journey can now be revised to reflect our new findings. Below, we present the appropriate section from SEMENOV’s map (see SEMENOV 1980). He is able to draw a straight line only from Aland to Dabhol, because none of the intermediate stops had been identified.

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\(^{12}\) All distances calculated using [http://www.distancesbetween.com](http://www.distancesbetween.com).
Lastly, we would also like to present the reader with an updated version of our complete reconstruction of Afanasij’s journey through India. Only the last segment has changed, everything else is identical to the original version published in KEMPGEN (2009a, 164).
‘Suri’ on Afanasij Nikitin’s journey through India

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Afanasij Nikitin


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