

# The Caspian Sea as Intertext: from the Old Russian Literary Tradition to Modern Mass Media (Reception, Concepts, Emotions)

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## Abstract

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The article reveals cognitive and discursive potential of the Caspian Sea portrayal in the Russian literary tradition and modern Internet journalism. The research is based on individual works of Russian writers written in different genres, as well as works of domestic journalists, representing an unconventional reception of the picture of the world framed around the Caspian Sea. The paper draws conclusions about the ambivalent meaning of the image of the Caspian Sea, its mythological semantics; it shows the intertextual nature of the image of the Caspian Sea which generates ideas relevant for the author's reality; it defines the main constitutive concepts creating the worldview characteristic of the Caspian region; and it reveals the spectrum of emotions expressing the individual author's perception of the image of the Caspian Sea.

## Keywords

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Caspian Sea; Intertextuality; Art Space; Worldview; Reception; Concepts; Emotiveness



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## Каспий как интертекст: от древнерусской литературной традиции к современным массмедиа (рецепция, концепты, эмоции)

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### Аннотация

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Статья раскрывает когнитивно-дискурсивный потенциал художественного образа Каспийского моря в русской литературной традиции и современной интернет-публицистике. Материалом для исследования послужили отдельные произведения русских писателей, написанные в различных жанрах, а также произведения отечественных журналистов, представляющие неординарную рецепцию картины мира, оформленную вокруг Каспийского моря. В работе сделаны выводы об амбивалентном значении образа Каспия, его мифологической семантике; показана интертекстуальная природа образа Каспийского моря, порождающего актуальные для авторской реальности смыслы; обозначены основные конституентные концепты, создающие картину мира Каспийского региона; выявлен спектр эмоций, выражающих индивидуально-авторскую рецепцию образа Каспия.

### Ключевые слова

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Каспийское море; интертекстуальность; художественное пространство; мировоззрение; рецепция; концепты; эмотивность



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## **Philological Approaches to the Study of the Image of the Caspian Sea**

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One of the research priorities in the modern philological science is the study of spaces, represented in the texts of different genres (Enikeev, 2019). Spatial realities act as generators of peculiar supertexts, concentrated around specific topoi, intertextually linked by virtue of typological commonality (Menchikov, 2020). The Caspian Sea can definitely be considered such topos, as it unites a vast region from Astrakhan to Iran in a single supertext. Active interest in the study of space arose in the late 19th century in Western European humanities (Mahovich, 2020; Prasolova & Haustova, 2020).

### **The History of the Philological Study of Artistic Space**

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The study of real space is due to the intensive development of urbanism. Initially associated with the physical image of the city including its unique architecture, the perception of space over time had become more complex in connection with the appeal to the symbolism of the topos, its semiotics, intertextuality, and thus attracted the interest of many representatives of humanities (Tanina et al., 2020).

At the turn of the XIX-XX centuries, thus, there were changes in perception of the image of space and its definition as one of the concept-forming vector notions in the system of spatial coordinates of civilization in general and human life in particular.

The works by R. Barthes became the most important theoretical and methodological reference point for the study of the space phenomenon. The French semiotician introduced the notion of textual codes, significant for philology, that were interpreted as structure-forming and sense-forming elements of an urban text which included certain dominants and connotations constituting a work of fiction (Ladov, 2010).

Russian literary criticism of the 20th century produced a fairly extensive number of scientific studies covering various aspects of the study of urban space, like foreign scholarship did: from general theoretical positions (“The Image of the City in Culture: Metaphysical and Mystical Aspects” by S. Gurin and others) to specific loci (“Facts and Myth of St.Petersburg” by N. Antsiferov, “St.Petersburg’s Text of Russian Literature” by V. Toporov, “St.Petersburg’s Symbolism and the Problems of the City’s Semiotics” by Y. Lotman etc.) (Toporov, 1995).

### **Supertext as Cultural Reality**

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The emergence of a large number of scientific works on the intertextual nature of space is characterized by the ambivalence of the image. On the one hand, it allows for a spectral consideration of the image of space. Thus, domestic litera-



ture studies specify the diversity of the concept of space: some scientists (M. Grebneva) characterize its local features; some specify its provinciality (N. Detkova); others consider space in the framework of hypertext with its inherent generality, heterogeneity, complexity, antinomy, spatial fixation and the ability to generate new texts (Y. Lotman, V. Toporov, M. Vizel). There are a number of works defining space as the basis of the supertext (N. Mednis, N. Kupina, G. Bitenskaya) (Petrova, 2012).

Under the supertext of the Caspian region we understand a set of statements, limited locally and in time, united through contents and situation, characterized by an integral modal setting, quite certain positions of the addresser, with special criteria of traditional / creative; realistic / symbolic. In this regard, the concepts of “local text”, “supertext” and “hypertext” are generic in relation to the term “artistic space” (Rotmistrova, 2010).

### **The Artistic Concept of the Caspian Sea in the Russian Literature**

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Space is a fundamental concept of everyday life and scientific knowledge. The diversity of understanding of the phenomenon of space extends from the geographical order to typological spaces (including artistic space), ethnic fields, creative myth and geopoetics.

Geographical space has become one of the important fragments of the artistic world-image representing a verbally fixed scheme of perception, conceptualization and systematization of reality which is a verbalized representation of the geographical data. As a fundamental category of philosophy, sociology, natural science, ethnopsychology and other sciences, space is a relevant object of linguistic research: “Space is one of the first realities of being that is perceived and differentiated by man. It is organized around man putting themselves in the centre of macro- and microcosm.” (Lotman, 2000).

According to many thinkers (historians, culture experts, philosophers, literary scholars, writers, linguists), the so-called “geographical factor” strongly determines the culture, psychology and mentality of an ethnos. Y. Lotman, exploring the concept “geographical space” introduced by himself, wrote about geographical space belonging to one of the forms of spatial construction of the world in human consciousness, about its close connection with the common world-image: “Having emerged in certain historical conditions, it (geographical space) gets different contours, depending on the nature of general models of the world, which it is a part of” (Lotman, 2000).

Thus, the artistic concept of the Caspian Sea in the focus of modern scientific ideas is a complex of images, motifs, stories which embodies the author's model of the real image of the sea as a specific cultural phenomenon (Pritchins, 2021).

## **The Generative Potential of the Image of the Caspian Sea in the Literary Discourse**

The first source of quite yet unspecific ideas about the Caspian Sea was “the Tale of Bygone Years” by the monk Nestor: “There flows the Volga to the East and falls through seventy mouths into the sea of Khvalis. Therefore, from Rus, one can sail along the Volga to the Bulgarians and the Khvalis, and travel eastwards to Sim’s inheritance” (Author’s translation). As one can see from the cited quotation, the course of the Volga in the reception of the scribe is equated to the unit of oriental interpretation, the geographical image of the Volga reveals the outer world of Sim – the son of biblical Noah to the ancient Russian author. The delta of the Volga is thus mythologized, revealing the world of the mysterious East to the medieval man.

Personal involvement with the Caspian Sea and concretization of the image became possible in the era of geographical discoveries. The Volga Lowlands and the Caspian Sea were displayed in a famous literary landmark – “A Journey Beyond the Three Seas” by Athanasius Nikitin. This work is not only the most important historical document, but also fascinating reading for all those who have dreamt of travelling. At the beginning of the reading process of this literary landmark, the medieval reader was carried away to the lower Volga region which in those distant times was still wild and dangerous, where a possible robbery awaited the caravan of ships. The delta and the Caspian Sea appear in “A Journey Beyond the Three Seas” in the amalgam of the following intentions: the lowland as a direction leading to danger; foreignness of the population; the border of Orthodox Russia; the space of the Muslim world; an imperative for the behaviour of the local population, etc. The semantics of the Caspian image is enriched with the meaning of other-worldliness. The mysterious East turns out to be hostile.

By the middle of the 17th century, the Volga-Caspian waterway and Astrakhan as one of its imminent points, having a favourable geographical location, had been one of the new routes of pilgrimages to the Christian East and merchant crossings to Asian countries. In the geographical consciousness of those setting out on a long journey, Astrakhan and the Volga delta had always been a place for temporary stay. In the symbolic perception of space, the image of Astrakhan corresponded with the notion of the border and was a point of cognitive transition between antinomic worlds – Christianity and Islam, West and East, holiness and sin – which naturally determined a change in the travellers’ discursive behaviour, enrichment of their perceptions, generation of associations and cognitive metaphors.

In the world model, the “Russian land” became similar to home as an ordered, mastered space, while the area or territory of foreign countries was correlated in the perception of travellers with the notion of “chaos”. In such a symbolic model of the world, Astrakhan was considered a “boundary” territory, a unique topos between “cosmos” and “chaos”.



In crisis-related historical moments in understanding the geographical symbolism of the location of Russian cities, the idea that through a city located on the border, such as Astrakhan, the malicious forces of “chaos” could penetrate, was most visibly actualized. It was with this apocalyptic attitude that Moscow residents expected the return of Stepan Razin from Persia. In accordance with such an ingrained notion, residents of Moscow and other cities perceived Razin's temporary stay in the lower Volga city.

The phenomenon of the perception of Astrakhan was originally generated by the atmosphere of instability of the historical context. In the descriptions of journeys (or “walks”, as they used to be called) Astrakhan was presented as a traversed leeway on the way to other, distant geographical points – India, Persia, etc. In the genre of walking, an image of space seen in motion, was formed. Here it is not only the physical factor of movement that is essential, omitting the architectural details discernible only with close examination, but also the specificity of the psychological background of perception. The cultural archetype of the road, apart from the will of the travelers themselves, affects their consciousness, increasing the ability to see and feel, tuning to the possibility of new, unforeseen impressions, events, meetings. Such features of perception determine the narrator's enumerative intonation, the panoramic vision of the spatial “horizontal” (Vogler, 2015).

Over time, the new intentionality filled the image of the Caspian Sea; however, some of the meanings remained in many variations, constituent for the studied supertext whose centre was man discovering the semiotics of that space.

In the poetry of the 18th century, the comprehension of a personality as a unique individual in all the richness of his own tastes and predilections, the understanding of human life as full of accidents, acquired philosophical features. For example, the poems by G. Derzhavin discuss the place and purpose of man on earth, the problems of life and death. These themes are reflected in the ode “To the return of Count V. Zubov from Persia through the Caucasus Mountains, 1797”. (Native literature, 2021) A. Pushkin rightly wrote that in his “..excellent ode to Count Zubov the former first depicted wild pictures of the Caucasus in the following verses...” (Native literature, 2021) but, let us add, of the Volga-Caspian as well. This was first noticed by N. Gogol, who commented on the relevant verses as follows: “Here, it seemed, a visual image of the Caspian elder was to be created, but it was lost in some spiritual invisible outline: the ear hears the only rumble of the roaring sea, and along with the grey hairs of the elder do the hairs on the head of the reader rise, who is struck by the harsh grandeur of the picture.” (Native literature, 2021) G. Derzhavin compared the Caspian Sea to Neptune, and the poet inhabited the lands around the Caspian Sea with snakes. It should be noted that Russian folk plots mention the Caspian Sea whose surroundings are inhabited with snakes. In the poem by N. Gumilev the countries beyond the Caspian Sea are the residence of the fabulous Snake Gorynych. (Native literature, 2021) These coin-

cidences are explained by the intertextuality of the image of the Caspian Sea (Sova, 2020).

The examples of “journeys” by J. Mandeville, S. Herberstein, H. Tectandre, J. Mergeret, A. Olearius, J. Struys, J. Bell, J. Reitenfels, P. Fleming, J. Potocki and others prove that these works reflect a differently-minded perception of the Volga, the nature and the city of Astrakhan. The authors of the “journeys” strove to be objective, accurate, they intended to describe what they had seen as fully as possible, but in doing so, of course, they were guided by their own impressions. This kind of intention lies at the heart of the “travel” genre.

In the nineteenth century, the territory of the Volga-Caspian was a zone of industrial growth. This social dynamic was also reflected on the pages of Russian literature, for example, in the novel “Three Countries of the World” by N. Nekrasov and A. Panaeva. The main character of the work was an enterprising young nobleman Kayutin, who turned to industrial activity. An important tendency in the evolution of portraying the Caspian Sea should be noted: in Russian literature it became an integral part of Russian geographical and state reality, and the centre of attraction of the Caspian Sea to Russia was Astrakhan: “Astrakhan province was not rich in settled population. And at the same time a whole third of it fell on the governmental city which served as the centre of all fishing on the Caspian Sea, occupying many thousands of hands. Working people flocked here for hiring from the upper provinces, ships were built and fishing materials, provisions, salt were procured; there, finally, was a storage port of all the catch of the Caspian Sea” (Native literature, 2021). The reception of the image of the Caspian Sea became more realistic, factual, filled with the meaning of the state strategy.

The representation of the Caspian locus does not exclude some factual errors, possible even in educational and scientific discourse which gives an idea of the physical geography of Russia. Some certain examples prove that the Volga-Caspian is in some contexts an “empty sign”. For example, the seventh, revised edition of the geography textbook for the preparatory course was published in St. Petersburg in 1861. The author of the “Notebook of Universal Geography” (that was the name of this textbook), Matvei Timaev (1796-1858) was careless in presenting scientific material and made many mistakes. N. Chernyshevsky, an attentive critic of Nekrasov's *Sovremennik* magazine, ironically noted the following fact of a gross scientific error: “It is curious to know what seas are located within the borders of European Russia. Here they are: ‘Seas. In the north is the Arctic Ocean. In the west is the Baltic Sea. In the south it is the Black Sea and its gulf, the Sea of Azov. The Baltic Sea serves mainly as a way of communication with other nations’”. Well, but where is the Caspian Sea? It seems that the Caspian Sea does not appear between European Russia and Persia “according to the latest geography” which corrected the seventh edition of “the Notebook”. But it is a pity: this sea supplied us with good fish”. (Native literature, 2021) (Author’s translation).



The geographical shape of Russia as a result of M. Timayev's exposition, as can be seen from the fragment, turned out to be falsified.

N. Chernyshevsky could not help pointing out the strategic importance of the Caspian Sea which yet deserves much attention even beyond the near-Caspian countries in order to preserve peace in this region and to activate mutually beneficial economic relations. It is believed that in the near future Astrakhan will consolidate its status as the Caspian capital of the Russian Federation, and this circumstance will entail mental changes in the representation of this area and its administrative centre.

Thus, the structure of the text space becomes a model of real geography, evaluated from the individual author's positions and, at the same time, reflecting the focus of the actual receptive tradition. Cognitive and discursive potential of the Caspian Sea portrayal acquires internal syntagmatics, becoming the language of spatial modelling of the region.

### **Cognitive and discursive potential of the portrayal of the Caspian Sea**

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Philological analysis of space interprets the Caspian Sea as a set of objects and states with super meaning. In this regard, considering this water space as intertext, the recipients (travelers, writers, readers, researchers) from different (but in some ways common) ideological positions use the language of modelling spatial relations, which turns out to be one of the main means of comprehending the reality (Menchikov, 2020). For the Caspian Sea intertext the most important parameters are as follows: "near – far", "open – closed", "bounded – not bounded", "discrete – continuous" and many others. These parameters of worldview modelling turn out to be the material for building cultural models with absolutely non-spatial contents and get the corresponding meaning: "valuable – invaluable", "good – bad", "native – alien", "accessible – inaccessible", etc.

The spatial structure of texts about the Caspian Sea, expressing at the same time the spatial intensions of a more general type (the work of a particular writer, a particular trend in literature, a particular national or regional culture), not only represents a variant of the general system, but also in a certain way it conflicts with the latter, de-automating its language. As we have seen from the above examples, each recipient adds his own units of meaning to the image.

Along with the notion "top – bottom" (Mahovich, 2020), the essential feature which organizes the spatial structure of the Volga-Caspian intertext, is the opposition "closed – open". Closed space, being interpreted in the texts in the form of various everyday spatial images: home, city, homeland, endowed with certain attributes: "native", "warm", "safe", – opposes the open "outer" space and its attributes: "alien", "hostile", "cold". We note that, in the 21st century, opposite interpretations of the Caspian Sea are quite possible.



## **The Caspian Sea in the Oriental Discourse of contemporary National Journalism**

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The West and the East are not so much geographical concepts as cultural constructs, channelling the journalistic discourse which is addressed to the correlation of the main civilization strategies. Orientalism in contemporary Russian journalism appears to be a separate “imaginative practice” based on the cognitive and discursive abilities of contemporary publicists who textualize the authorial position, through the category of emotionality as well.

The cognitive and discursive practices of publicist representation of the East are based on the generalization of current events, classification, comparison of the two cultures, and the structural analysis of political conflicts. Emotivity plays an important role in the implementation of the processes of speech thinking, and it requires further analysis as emotive constructions are characterized by a high frequency of use in journalism – the most important sphere of influence on the reader. They also have a significant pragmatic potential, the ability to convey a wide range of communicative meanings and intentions causing a prompt response from the recipient (for example, comments on an article, a blog).

### **The Caspian Sea as a Construct of Actual Meanings: Research Results**

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As is known, the most important topological feature of space is the border. The border divides all space (including a text) into two mutually non-crossing subspaces. Its main property is impenetrability. The way in which the world, and the artistic world in particular, are divided by the boundary is one of the essential characteristics of our view of reality. This may be a division into natives and strangers, the living and the dead, the poor and the rich. The important thing is that the boundary that divides space into two parts must be permeable, and the internal structure of each subspace must be different (Toporov, 1995).

The image of the Caspian Sea acquires a peculiar interpretation in contemporary world. It should be considered that the perception of the Caspian Sea is determined in some way by the involvement of the reader. On this way, the reader gains a sense of place, and through it, a sense of inseparable spiritual belonging to the native space (Vogler, 2015). The Caspian Sea belongs to those super-saturated realities that are inconceivable without the whole behind them and, therefore, are already inseparable from myth and the entire sphere of the symbolic.

The Caspian Sea is the most important part of the world of contemporary Caspian man living in the amplitude of its action which forms the geographical, political, cultural and literary representations of the individual, which creates the preconditions for entering the global culture (Ladov, 2010). Perceiving the Caspian Sea as a “text”, considering texts as the expression of ideas belonging to persons from different time and different space about the world and themselves,



relating them to the cultural and thinking experience of the present, reconstructing the past and modelling the present, one understands oneself better today, which is especially important in the “digital” era, when nations and states are becoming closer to each other (Markelov, 2021).

## Authors' Contributions

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This article contributes to the illumination of the problem of the reception of the artistic space of the Caspian Sea as an intertextual reality.

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