

Transcript of Podcast 083: Hanno The Navigator – A case study of Instagram v Reality

{intro music – jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

We've had 11 days of 2024 and, let's be honest, there's an argument to suggest this might be as good as it gets. I don't necessarily agree with that, but sometimes it's hard to envisage an alternative. Because, you know, the world is a dumpster fire, metaphorically and literally.

I do wonder if you listen to this podcast because it cheers you up, or you listen because it matches your mood. Actually I suspect you listen because you know me and you want to boost my download numbers, because you're nice like that. Thank you. You rock.

My recent housekeeping isn't much to note. Well, I was going to say New Year was as exciting as I suggested it would be in my last episode, but to be fair from where I live I can see across a wide vista of Greater Manchester and there was a large array of fireworks from just before midnight until about ten minutes afterwards. I'd've stayed on my balcony watching it but it started raining not long after the moment itself. At the time I was also on a voicechat on Discord with my Tickle Community, and my internet connection crashed at the same time. Ah, nostalgia.

So far this year I have ranted to my therapist about my day job, though not for the reasons most people would rant to their therapist about their day job. It's a bit of a running joke or theme between me and Laura about our respective jobs being at either end of the spectrum of work/life balance. Also this year I have drunk beer, volunteered at Parkrun twice (including once in the highly-coveted 'tail walker' role, the first time I ever have; it's always popular because it gives you both a volunteer credit and a running credit), drunk more beer, and booked tickets for my next travel adventure, which, as spoken about in my last episode, is to the Caucasus region for the Traverse conference. And more beer. I am aware Georgia is noted for its wine. However, me.

I will say that trip is causing slightly more admin hassle than it ought, but such is the way sometimes. I have, however, rescheduled my trip up to Glasgow to get my hair recoloured, well re-touched, to the weekend before, so I have a much more pleasant flight the week after, and not one taken off the back of an overnight coach. Because most flights arrive around 4am and nobody would take an overnight flight the night after an overnight coach, right? *{pause}* Asking for a friend, obviously.

I mean, that's pretty much it to be honest. It's not been a terribly notable last two weeks. I'm imagining the next two will be more interesting. But don't hold your breath. To be fair there are a couple of things I haven't yet put on my new calendar, but that's because it keeps falling off the kitchen cupboard.

{section separation jingle}

And so to the second part of 'let's make a podcast that's going to cause more unfollowers than followers'. Mind you, let's be honest, I've had several podcast episodes like that, and nothing untoward has happened. Maybe I should be more controversial. That said, despite being quite political, despite being openly Queer (in both sexual and gender orientation), despite being definitively left-wing in some of the things I've said and beliefs I've held, the most flak I've ever had was saying pizza was boring. Travel Twitter is a weird place. And honestly, if you're going to unfollow me after this episode, it's more likely to be more because the whole thing might come across as rambling and disjointed. Long-term listeners, however, will not be at all surprised.

Anyway. I was going to do a whole podcast on 'ancient and mediaeval Travel Bloggers you need to know about', but I realised it would require far too much research in the time I had available. That's going to be something more for April, after several Saturdays in the library while Laura makes notes about far more

interesting and useful stuff. But, with that as my base idea, I realised something about what might arguably have been the very first person to write about travel, whose writings have survived to the present day, even in scraps.

The problem with early writers in the Ancient World is partly 'how much is fact versus how much is fiction', but mainly 'it wasn't them whose writings are the ones that have survived'. Everyone is obviously aware of Odysseus, who famously took ten years to get home from the Trojan war back to Ithaca. He didn't write an account of that voyage; Homer did, and Homer was writing a couple of hundred years after Odysseus lived, if indeed he did live at all and wasn't just a figment of Homer's imagination. But even if he did exist, it is approximately 1,130km (700 miles) from Troy to Ithaca if you walk overland. On my Hike Across Great Britain I did that, pro rata, in 42 days. Including rest days. I have Questions. Not as many questions as how it took Moses 40 years to get from Egypt to a point between Amman and Jerusalem at the north end of the Dead Sea, given there was literally only one way you *can* go without going 'oh, there's the sea', *and* the Sinai Peninsula isn't very big, but it seems whenever there are Gods involved, time becomes nebulous.

Anyway. The only way it could possibly have taken Odysseus ten years to get from Troy to Ithaca is if he took a detour via Kiribati. And even then. I'm not calling The Odyssey a Travel Blog.

I'll probably repeat that bit verbatim when I come to making my podcast about early travel writers. I'm sure you'll have forgotten I said that. I certainly will have done.

When I do that podcast, I'll probably have found earlier examples anyway, but for the purposes of *this* podcast, the first writing about a trip that was written at the time, by one of the people who travelled *on* the trip, that we have extant evidence for, seems to be that of someone called Hanno The Navigator. Which is one of those names applied to someone with hindsight because of what they did.

Now, in fairness, we know very little about ... him? I'm going to assume it's a him out of historical misogyny, but, regardless. All we know of him and his voyage is a translation of the original into Greek, some centuries after his voyage, but it seems pretty certain it *is* a translation from an original text which has been long lost to history. It's not great, and there are issues with this, but interestingly we know some of those 'issues' would have been present in the original text, and it's *that* which prompted the idea for this pod.

We know very little about Hanno, or his voyage, for reasons we'll come onto in a short while, but a very brief summary: Hanno was a Carthaginian of some note, Carthage remember being in modern-day Tunisia, on the south side of the mid-Mediterranean, who was able to command a number of ships - his writings say 60, with 30,000 people, but his writings are, shall we say, 'suspect' - and sail westwards around the coast of Africa.

All we know for certain is he passed modern-day Essaouira, in central Morocco, reached 'a river' (which, geographically, could be the Gambia), came upon an island with people he ran away from (there's a lot of islands around Guinea Bissau, amongst other places in that area), until coming across 'a land of many flames', where they reach another island and are scared off by people the translator describes as 'Gorillai'.

As an aside, researching Hanno's voyage was the first time I knew the origin of the word 'gorilla'. It's an ancient Greek word meaning 'hairy'; it was only in the 19th Century it came to be applied to a species of ape. A species notable for being hairy. So references to a tribe of 'gorillai' in West Africa is not as racist as it sounds - Hanno describes them as being very hairy and very fierce, to the extent it was almost impossible to communicate with them and his party had to kill a couple in self-defence. As a secondary side note, when I was plotting my career break in 2014, one of my work colleagues at the time, who had ancestry from Sierra Leone, which is further along the coast from the Gambia River, told me that if I went there, I'd stand out, not just because I'm pinker than the average pig, but also because of my body hair; the average Sierra Leonian has a smooth body. I don't know a lot about the hirsuteness of the average West African, but if Hanno came upon an island of very hairy people, that might suggest his travels took him quite a distance. Or, for some reason *{pause}*, the dominant people have changed over the centuries.

Of course it's always possible that they were, actually, what we might now call 'gorillas'. They would have been present at the time around the areas Hanno describes as being 'flamey'. He apparently skinned three and took the skins back to Carthage, suggesting he at least found them 'unusual' enough to note, although there's no apparent surviving indication whether the rest of the Carthaginians did.

Anyway. There are two main problems with the account of Hanno's voyage. The first is, although it's his own words, the version we've got is, as I say, one that has passed through a translator or two (from Carthaginian into Ancient Greek into English), and therefore we've got someone else's interpretation of words. And while

translations are usually more-or-less accurate, they do miss out on the sense or mood sometimes, and also some words are hard to translate properly with nuance, or even at all. Doubly so when the version we've got is itself a translation from a translation. This is why there are several competing versions of the Christian Bible, by the way. You've got to wonder about a divine being who canonically didn't like humanity all speaking the same language yet didn't realise this prevented their own words not being understood correctly. Zeus wouldn't have done that. He'd've been too busy.

It's also incomplete. It finishes pretty abruptly after his meeting with the Gorillai. Now we don't know if that's because the original itself was unfinished, although clearly Hanno himself returned successfully otherwise we wouldn't have his first hand account in the first place, or if the translator into the Greek only had access to an incomplete copy or manuscript. Either way, we only have half the story. But I guess that's still better than no story.

The other main problem is that what we have is vague. "A river" with little description. "An island" without really giving indications of size or location relative to the coast (although given the vessels at the time in his fleet, it's unlikely he reached Cabo Verde and almost impossible for him to have made it to Madeira). And "a land of many flames" without any indication what these flames *were*. Modern scholars have suggested a volcano, but if you sail around the coast of West Africa, the first active volcanoes you come across are as far away as Cameroon which, while possible, would make it an incredibly groundbreaking voyage with a fleet of that apparent size and you'd've thought it'd've been recorded more in history. Equally those 'flames' could be more metaphoric, say, trees or shrubs with vibrant red leaves, or simply a land made up of people whose culture revolved around bonfires. We will never know, and especially through two translators.

Of course for us, geography could have changed over time - rivers have diverted considerably within recorded history, volcanoes could have stopped erupting and even disappeared into the sea, entire peoples could have relocated (and, given the part of the world he went to, it's not unreasonable to say entire peoples could have *been* relocated). So for us it's much harder to track his voyage because of time.

But for his contemporaries, his writing seems to be equally vague. And this is where we start to be able to pull relevance for Travel Bloggers. There's a feeling that Hanno's vagueness was, in fact, deliberate. There's a belief what he was doing was writing in such a way to protect information, to almost gatekeep his voyage, and also to make himself and his voyage appear in as good a light as possible. That is to say, what he published may have been different to what he told those in power.

I mean, consider this. We don't know who Hanno The Navigator was. Clearly he had to have been someone of high renown, otherwise he wouldn't have had the finance or the authority to command such a voyage. He wasn't a solo barefoot backpacker quibbling about spending a couple more obols than necessary; this was someone for whom money and planning was not a problem. He was also going to have been quite educated. He almost certainly knew people in high places, if indeed he himself wasn't someone in a high place - there's a suggestion he was a noble, an important minister, or perhaps the son of the king himself.

And this is quite important if, rather than seeing him as a full-time travel blogger, you think of it as a work-trip and what he was doing was a voyage of trade and diplomacy more than of adventure and exploration. His original remit seems to have been 'to found some new cities along the coast', but having done that, he's quite quiet on the remainder of his mission. So almost like a spy mission, what he published would have been what he wanted people to see, while the truth he told in private to those in the high circles he mixed with. In terms of trade and possible conquest, the Carthaginians wouldn't have wanted other neighbouring empires to know what they were up to, and what they'd found. For all we know, his return journey was full of interesting trade agreements and he went back to Carthage with several shipments of cashew nuts. And gold, if he made it down that far to Ghana, which used to be called The Gold Coast for self-evident reasons; certainly the Carthaginian authorities wouldn't want other empires to know about that.

And what about the size of his fleet? That's an awful lot of people and resource to be taking on a voyage into the largely unknown - why did he say he had 60 ships and 30,000 people? What story was he trying to tell here; that the Carthaginians were a substantial empire and thus warning off threats? A show of strength? A show of personal authority? Maybe he did have that big a fleet - but note to invade the island of Britain some 500 years later, Emperor Claudius is known to have taken no more than four legions, and possibly even just the one; if each legion contained between 3,500 to 5,000 men, that means to conquer a new province, Claudius took no more than two-thirds of Hanno's alleged contingent.

The problem we have is we don't know any of this. Because no-one wrote anything down that survived. What is clear though is that Hanno's account is very much written to not be an accurate travel blog, but rather to be a version of the truth that would appeal to his audiences without revealing too much detail. In much the same way a Travel Blogger might tell the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth, about their adventures in some sun-kissed tropical paradise in their blogs and Instagram feeds, and only their close friends would know how they spent 3 days stuck in their leaky cabin during a rainstorm that knocked out the electrics, and on day two they got bit by a mosquito that caused a mild infection.

But at least they weren't attacked by gorillas.

{section separation jingle}

This may sound like an odd thing to say, but I really appreciate selfies. Not of me, I may add, though I'm definitely more comfortable with that than I was just a few years ago, thanks in part to therapy but also to people like Seanna from the YouTube channel Seanna's World who went through similar angst at a similar time and encouraged me to shed some of my misconceptions; she was the first person who saw me on an Instagram Story, for instance. And I appreciate her very much, so thank you.

But what I mean here is, in general, I really like the concept of selfies. I think people should take as many of them as they can. Not because of the reason I just stated, by the way, though definitely being comfortable with who you are is good for your mental health. But rather, because as a social historian, they really allow future social historians to get a better picture of who people were, how they lived, what they got up to, what the fashions were, etc, and also to give context to words. It's one thing reading a description of a group of people, or a style, or a place, but it's quite another to see it in context. There's only so much that words can tell you, and, of course as we've heard, it's so easy to leave things out of a narrative, even if only for reasons of space or time. Sometimes even the little things could be important for future historians - if no-one mentions a trend for, say, black finger rings, and then archaeologists find a few in a thousand years, they might place undue importance on them. Or no importance whatsoever. Or assign the incorrect meaning to them. I mention black finger rings specifically because it's something future archaeologists may not have context for - it's, amongst other things, an asexuality trinket - a way for Aces to display their sexuality in a subtle but knowing way. Would someone in 3024 know about that?

That said, I also really love blogs, and by connection any kind of personal diary, or personal letters, for the same conceptual reason. They're a way for history to know what everyday life was like. They're a way to humanise history, to show what people did, what hobbies they had, what they ate, what the trends were, and, importantly, what they thought about their lives and the places they lived.

One of the problems with history, historically, as it were, is that, compared to the number of people who've lived, not much has actually survived. And the further back in time you go, the less that's known about an increasing majority of people. Part of this is because it's only recently that we've decided that things are worth recording, worth saving, in any kind of physical form, and oral histories have a tendency to suffer from degradation with repeated retellings. Part of this is also because, uhm, the people who tended to keep the records had a habit of being a bit elitist and classist about them; the tale of Maisie, daughter of Steve, from Kirkby-in-Ashfield are deemed less important than the tale of, say, William Cavendish-Bentinck, Duke of Portland, son of William (because as we've heard in my podcast about the Wars of the Roses, nobility tended to use surprisingly few first names) and owner of Kirby-in-Ashfield. Consequently, we know a lot about who ruled the country but very little, relatively speaking, about who they ruled, certainly not more than at general group dynamic level.

This has issues with the way we're taught history, the way we learn it. If all we have to go on is what has survived, is what was written by the people who kept those records, then we have a very skewed vision of the past. There's two factors here that are problematic.

Firstly, obviously, as I said earlier, everyone has a bias. If the people recording history are only interested in certain topics, or certain types of people, then all we learn is seen through their eyes. A trend of wearing daisy earrings amongst a small subset of the upper-middle-classes in the 1780s might get much more importance than it really deserved, yet an actual trend amongst the populace of Shoreditch would barely raise even a footnote.

It also means that you end up learning from only one angle. Most subjects are subjective, and you can't get a holistic view of them unless you look at them from several angles and multiple viewpoints, or biases. The one

that seems to ripple in English History is 'Richard III - victim of history, or child-killer', and people will come to blows about that one. But for other topics, certainly when I was studying history at school, there was surprisingly little we were taught, or proffered, that was in any way different to the mainstream historical view. Bear in mind the people recording information that later became history were white upper-middle-class men, talking mainly about what was happening to white upper-middle-class men, and doing so in a way that was promoting the ideals and benefits of white upper-middle-class men. Where there were arguments and debate tended to be more about who they were, and what sort of white upper-middle-class men they were, rather than the benefits and malefits of what they actually did.

Case in point: The South Sea Bubble. This was an economic crash in 1720, caused when investors in a company (the South Sea Company) lost confidence in it, selling their shares and causing a collapse in its share price. When it crashed, a huge number of investors lost their savings and went bust, and caused a significant shrinkage of the British economy. The Company in question was itself created in part to consolidate the National Debt of Great Britain, and thus it was in the government's interests to keep it afloat. The aim of the company was to have dominated trade in the Southern Pacific Ocean and ensured British economic dominance in a region mostly controlled at the time by Spain & Portugal; one reason for its crash was an inability to follow through on its promises. Mainly because of war. The main reason for its crash though was because a small number of people, especially at the highest level, were party to information about expected returns and government debt, and used this knowledge to manipulate the share price to give themselves maximum profits. Insider-dealing. It's interesting to see that people have always acted thus, and such things still happen today, with similar consequences.

History lessons in England tell us what the company did, how the company operated, and argues at length about who was right, who was wrong, and what could have been done to prevent the crash from happening. What history lessons in England briefly gloss over is what the Company actually did. Dominating trade in the South Pacific in the 1710s? Are we talking spices? Are we talking tobacco or fruit? Are we talk... we're talking slaves, clearly and obviously; the entire point of the Company was to control the slave trade to the Pacific Islands and South America. Surprisingly, or not, that part of it isn't discussed in length as much. It's taught from an economic history perspective, rather than a social history one, and you always have to bear things like that in mind when thinking about history.

The UK abolished the slave trade, did you know that? And that we've done more to help global decolonisation than any other country?

Without a knowledge of context, anything you're taught, anything you're told, becomes only a half-truth, one that needs further explanation to make sense, but without which simply becomes little more than an oft-repeated factoid; a factoid being "creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority" (Norman Mailer, 1973, so older than you think). The UK as a whole has a vibe of a country that doesn't learn about its own history very well, because all we're taught is 'here's a list of kings, oh, and a couple of Queens; here's a list of wars we fought in (but only domestically or in Europe); we controlled the world, don't ask how, nor what we did there; we invented the industrial revolution; world war two; Ireland? We barely know her'.

Secondly, and this is a much more minor point, it means that learning history itself is, whisper it loudly, actually kinda boring. Social history is limited to generic 'the people were unhappy and rioted'; to get into the more interesting detail requires studying at Masters level, often not even Bachelor Degree. It's seen as a very bookish subject with people who are generally unrelatable, and the whole thing vibes as very much a transactional subject around facts and figures rather than something actually useful. Obviously at more advanced levels the use is in how you learn rather than what you learn, it's about critical thinking, researching resource material, balancing sources, understanding bias, and coming to your own independent conclusions, but when the subject matter itself is as dry as 'the economic industrialisation of the USA in the 1860s', you understand why I quit University more-or-less after my first year of my degree course.

And, as an aside, while I'm ranting, part of the problem is you can only learn about what's available. There's so much interesting stuff in history, by definition, but if there isn't a lecturer present who knows about the development of football in Glasgow in the late 1800s, or the changing style of cuisines in London's East End over the last 200 years, then you ain't gonna get a chance to study it until you're doing a Masters. Until then it's endless books about World War Two and surprisingly little about the British Empire.

We're also very bad at keeping records, historically. As you heard in my podcast on the Cathcart Circle, the Scottish Football Association was is the second oldest in the world, and yet we know very little about its

creation because the records of it were lost. In addition, as I explained earlier, *what* gets written down might well not itself be complete, or have too many unwritten assumptions that everyone at the time knows but which are lost without context.

So, the more selfies people take, the more blogs people write, the more context we have, (then) the more literal information we have, which means the more rounded our understanding of our own history is, so we've got a much better idea who we were and what we did.

In an ideal world.

{section separation jingle}

Now. There is a caveat to selfies, and blogs, and one which you might already have guessed. It's the same issue as befalls our knowledge of Hanno the Navigator, and the same issue that arises when we look at the way we study history. We are all biased, we all have an agenda, and we all, either by accident or by design, tend to want to record things to show the 'best' version of reality rather than reality as a whole.

It may be a cliché, but the term 'Instagram versus Reality' is very much applicable when it comes to looking at a place, a society, and a past. Just as in the past people writing about their mates won't actively put themselves on the wrong side of history (as my French ex-Fiancee used to half-joke; 'most people joined the French Resistance in 1946'), so it is with travel bloggers today. Remember that every picture on every travel blog or Instagram feed, every video on YouTube and TikTok, has been created and edited in such a way to be the best representation of the reality, rather than the most accurate one. It's not 'lying', but it is promoting a particular view and representation, one which must be compared and contrasted with other sources. I do it myself; I'm not always barefoot but you'd never believe that from the selfies I take. This is on purpose; I have a brand image to cultivate!!

What I'm talking about here by the way is how a place is represented; I'm not talking about actual editing of pictures and videos to change the views. And while it feels a little cheating to digitally remove a person from the shot, I don't think that matters as much, since you can just wait for an empty space; it just might be that emptiness only happens at 3.57am and only the truly dedicated have time for that. And in any case, no picture or video is ever going to accurately replicate what a human sees, because technology and eyes work in different ways. The very act of taking a picture means what you end up with is an edited view of a place, that can't be seen in exactly the same way by humans, because the processes used by the camera will change the view, the light, the colours, the textures.

The best example of this is the Northern Lights, which look far better on camera than to the naked eye, not because of any jiggery-pokery on behalf of the photographer, but simply because of the way our brains and eyes work.

Unless you digitally change the image in such a way that the view represented is not actually possible, like, I don't know, removing an entire backdrop, then there's nothing inherently wrong with editing. Even making the sky purple, or, more prosaically, turning an image into black/white to emphasise things, that itself tells a story and could be argued to be 'artistic representation', as long as what the view is of, is possible. And anyway, it's clear that neither of those things *are* possible, so they're not something that ought to affect the way we see the photo in comparison with real life. This is Earth, not an exoplanet with different conditions. And even then, pictures of space are very likely to have been taken in black & white (with filters applied) and then coloured in post-processing, for all kinds of reasons but mostly to do with science. Mars is more of an orange than a red, and even that's only a few cm thick, and Venus is ... too dim at the surface to make out properly because of the clouds blocking the sun but if you could stand on it it'd probably look a bit brown-ish. And then you'd die. Because Venus is quite a hostile environment for life. As opposed to the UK. But that's a story for a different podcast.

But with regard to (mis)representation, let's take, for example, the famous Train Street in Hanoi. So many travellers have been there, so many people have taken pictures and video there, so many bloggers and journalists have written about it, that we have a very definite view of what the place looks like and how it feels.

In case you're not aware, there is a street in Hanoi, in Vietnam, where there is a single-track railway that runs right next to a series of cafes. You can sit next to the track and watch the train travel past, and many videos have been taken of tables actually on the tracks that are packed away when the train comes through. And it all looks like an interesting intersection between chaos and methodical planning.

I'm not saying this view is a lie. What I am saying is there's a certain 'this is not the whole truth' about the common representations, compounded by a slight feeling that people still think it's 2016, or at least want to present a view that everything is still as it was in 2016. There's very much 'Instagram v Reality' vibes about it.

The main issue is actually getting there in the first place – and this is what the pictures and videos don't show. Firstly, while there are indeed a line of cafes along the railway line, you're not actually permitted to visit them. You can't, obviously, walk along the track from the nearby level crossing, but also you can't go into them from the street. From the road they're a line of houses, set back from the road and up an embankment, which is fenced off and patrolled by police/security, who don't let you in.

Note also the cafes themselves are often not really cafes; rather, many of them are people's houses and they've opened up their back room to allow people to sit on what is effectively their back porchway.

This combination means the only way of getting to them is to be approached by a cafe owner or tout, who lurk by the level crossing, and have them sneak you in. It may look pretty blatant as you nip between the fences on the street, but there's a whole process here that we are not a party to.

The other thing to note is your time there seems to be limited anyway; every so often security pass by and tell the cafe owners that they shouldn't be doing this and everyone has to leave. This means the whole thing is a very iffy process with no guarantee of actually seeing anything. Trains don't pass that frequently; there's maybe 3 or 4 a day, so you may get there, go to a cafe, and not see anything other than the incremental empty beer bottles on your table, before you're unceremoniously kicked out.

The reason for all this palaver seems to be for good reason – too many tourists were walking on the railway line to get to the cafes directly and it became a huge safety hazard. Again, that's something that the pics and videos don't show; the idea of just being able to stand on the tracks and take a selfie seems to be very well engrained. I'm not saying you can't do this, as you often have to walk on the tracks to get to the cafe, yes, it's just that you're not supposed to, you can get told off for it, and when you're sat you're very much supposed to just stay sat.

The thing is, I think most bloggers know this by now? And yet, and yet, it's less common to find anything other than the traditional view, even today. We seem to still be, as a culture, trying to sell an extreme form of the reality rather than a demonstration of what the most likely or average trip there would get you. This means that although we know it's an inaccurate representation of what you'd find if you go there, that won't be recorded, so all future historians will have to go on is the content we produce, not the unwritten backstory. In the same way that contemporaries of Hanno knew what he did and where he went and what he saw, but because they didn't write any of that down, possibly intentionally, we're none the wiser. The problem with obfuscating is no-one in the future knows what you meant. And that causes problems for historians. Future generations won't know what we know; that this is not the whole truth.

But does it matter? That's a very good question. Take this opportunity to pause, take a drink, and have a think about what stories you're telling when you post a picture, video, or other media to the likes of Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or Tumblr.

{section separation jingle}

As we heard earlier, Hanno The Navigator was very bad at giving precise detail about where he went, and this may have been intentional. But Travel Bloggers do this today, especially on Instagram, and in part their intent is the same – to ensure no-one else can follow them.

Hanno The Navigator did not geotag. He did not give enough information about the islands he visited for even people back then to identify them (not that they would have had the resources to do so), never mind us now. His lack of specific detail means we don't know where he went and what he saw; we can't recreate his route, which is why we don't even know how far round West Africa he went (the most limited view is everything he saw was available in modern-day Morocco, although that doesn't explain the land of fire, and the Canary islands were already known about at the time).

He may have been doing it to protect trade deals; modern travel bloggers will often (or at least often claim) to be doing it to stop places being overrun with tourists. Which is a noble cause, to be honest, but I do have two flaws with this train of thought.

One is that this is how places get lost. It might not seem like that's a possibility today, what with Google Earth and similar tools that can map the whole planet from above, with a side of street-level detail. But certainly if you're going somewhere less attested and less visited, the chance of you remembering where it was or being able to piece together how you got there is slim. I know I'm not the most observant bard in the universe but there's a picture I used to use as my brand image, of me standing barefoot on a dusty orange road somewhere in Ghana. I do not know where that image was taken. I can tell you it was within a short moto ride out of Tamale, in the centre of the country, but I wouldn't be able to tell you in which direction, and nor is that information included in the image. Although the road passes villages which are well-known locally, none of them had identification signposts, because why would anyone need them – the only people who go there already know where they are.

And if that sounds weird, consider the last time someone stopped to ask you directions to a particular road. Not a main road, maybe a side road, but one you walk down every day. Would you know the name of that road? Would you feel you needed to know the name of that road? It's likely you just know you need to turn right at the Royal Oak pub in order to get from your house to the local supermarket.

So anyone looking at my blog in a hundred years time might well see that image but not be able to place it – it becomes, like Hanno's islands, 'lost'.

Historically, this has happened to entire cities. Often because no-one at the time thought to identify them in enough detail. One of the most famous was Troy itself, which was deemed almost mythical for millennia because no-one had any record of its location, and the only evidence of its existence was in books written so long ago as to be deemed to depict fantasy and legend more than fact – people searching for it were deemed as probably mad until archaeological digs almost certainly recovered it in the late 1800s. And there are cities we absolutely know exist, that we have detailed written records for, that we can't find. Abaskun was a seaport on the Caspian Sea in what is now Iran, Thinis was a major centre in pre-unified Egypt, heck we don't even know where Akkad was and that was the capital of an entire major empire at one point. Now in some cases it's clear the reason we can't find a place is because it's now in the sea (as is likely the case for Abaskun), but sometimes we don't even know where to start looking because our knowledge is as vague as Hanno's island with the gorilla.

My other thought about places in the travel blogger age is more the opposite though. The fact is, wherever you are on Planet Earth right now, wherever you next set foot, no matter how distant or remote that place feels, you are not the first person to know that place exists. Everywhere you are likely to go, everywhere you are likely to have been, people will be going there on a daily basis. You might think you're protecting somewhere from the advances of tourism by not telling people where they are, but honestly, if someone has a strong enough desire, they'll find it anyway.

The reason some places aren't visited or well-known is not because no-one knows about them, it's because they're hard to get to, and there's equivalent places closer. The only thing stopping them from visiting this luscious waterfall you're very protective of might be that it's through a hard-to-see gap in the trees a little way down a side path, reachable after hiking through dense woodland for two hours, then through a ford, a three hour moto ride from a small town in a lesser-visited country in West Africa.

And this includes places closer-to-home, by the way, or at least, easier-to-access. Everyone visits Stonehenge, but almost no-one goes to Callanish, which is very similar except that it's not an easy coach ride from London through some flat countryside on a main road. Getting to the island of Harris-and-Lewis is an adventure in itself, which the majority of people won't be that interested in because there's a much easier alternative, even though it's much easier getting there than, say, Benin.

And Benin is a good case in point, actually. I rave about Benin. I think it's one of the best countries I've been to, and that more people should go. I mean, sure, if it got flooded with tourists it might have trouble coping, but then so does Venice. But my point here is that, I could do the exact opposite of hiding information; I could plaster Benin's charms, joys, and experiences from every billboard from here to London; I could give the precise geolocation coordinates (to the nearest meter) for each and every one of Benin's must-sees, alongside pictures at different angles, and post to every magazine, web forum, and social media site in the world. I could give people exact instructions on how to get to each of them that I visited, down to where to stand to pick up a moto.

I could do all of that. And it would make absolutely no difference. People know Benin exists, and yet nothing I would say would convince them to visit. Because there are quicker, easier, and cheaper trips they'll take

instead, or they'll go 'oh that looks pretty, that looks really pretty, by the way I've booked two weeks in Benidorm'.

Benidorm doesn't need Geotagging.

{section separation jingle}

There's a meme, possibly originating on Tumblr, which states that in 1746, the first Polish dictionary defined a 'horse' as follows: 'everyone knows what a horse is'. I don't know how accurate this fact is, I mean it comes from Tumblr so it's almost certainly more of a factoid; Wikipedia suggests the first Polish dictionaries were actually bilingual translation dictionaries from the 15th Century, while the first monolingual dictionary in Polish with definitions dates from the early 1800s, but regardless of its veracity, the subsequent comment trail raises a very important point about history and knowledge.

Similarly, there are tales of Georgian and Victorian table sets having vessels to store oil, vinegar, salt, pepper, and ... something else which we no longer have or do, and no-one seems to know now what it was for. Again, this is quite shaky (so to speak) ground - some have suggested mustard, others paprika or other spice, someone online suggested 'it's the Victorians, it was probably cocaine', while others have stated the whole thing's not actually true at all and there was no 'third condiment' - but the very argument's existence raises this same point.

Sometimes, the mundane is so mundane that we don't think to make a note of it.

I have long raved about Hometown Travel, about the idea of going outside your house and literally just seeing what's on your doorstep. About walking down streets you go everyday, but trying to view them through the eyes of a tourist or first-time visitor. But specifically with regards to this conversation, people travel all around the world to take pictures of spectacular views and impressive buildings, of themselves in awesome places, of the unusual (to them, anyway), and that's absolutely brilliant, but the reverse is rarely true. Even if they live in a major international megapolis, it's likely they live in a part of it that fewer tourists are venturing. London is one of the most visited cities in the world, but as I've noted on three episodes of my podcast a couple of years ago, most of London is relatively untouched by the hand of tourism. People visit Kensington; they do not visit Redbridge. I mean, with reason, as I also pointed out on those pods, but the point is, if we don't record something, no matter how familiar, no matter how much we see them everyday, one day it will be lost and there'll be no record of it. Internet forums and groups filled with 'old and lost photos of [place x]' are popular and common, but compared with the size of the area, the number of actual pictures is quite low. One person, once, in November 1908, may have taken a camera and photographed a railway station, and that's the only record of that place covering a period of 90 years. And that photo might have a background detail of something, maybe a house decoration, maybe something about someone's clothing, that might have been perfectly common in 1908 but which we simply don't know what it was, or why it was there. Because no-one thought to mention it.

This is especially true of small objects and of lifestyle culture and custom. I keep seeing promoted posts on Facebook of those 'if you can name 13 of these 30 objects, you're old' and they're things like mechanical manual pencil sharpeners with the crank that you turn, and metallic shopping lists with small switches to flick when you need them or have bought them. In some decades, there'll be no-one alive who'll ever have used one. Now in the current age, there's a lot more likelihood that such things themselves will have been recorded, but even so, there's no guarantee anyone has written instructions on how to use them or anything. Despite things like the pencil sharpeners being in every school classroom once upon a time. Things become so ubiquitous that they become invisible, not worth mentioning. Then once they're gone, they're very much gone.

It may be also that an object or custom exists in a sub-culture that isn't big enough to write about in the first place, at least not notably so. Wikipedia has an article on Friendship Books. I'm actually impressed since that's exactly the sort of sub-culture item that wouldn't be mentioned in many sources at all. They were small booklets, often post-it notes stapled together or pieces of flowery paper folded up, people wrote their name, address, and some hobbies on them, then sent them to friends, who'd do the same and send them to their friends, and so on, creating a kind of 6 degrees of separation network. The idea being people would use them to find other friends to write to, pen-pals; you'd write your deets in the hope that someone several people later in the chain would see what you'd written and go 'oh, they seem interesting, let's write to them'. But because they were almost exclusively the preserve of teenage girls in the 1980s and 1990s, they're not something that turns up in mass-media very often. Plus, given their very flimsy and transitory nature, it's very likely none will survive long into the future. Indeed I wonder how many even still exist now, given the Internet exists and it's

much easier to send an e-mail than a written letter. But it means if someone finds an article in 2124 that mentions them, will they even know what they are, never mind will they understand the context and the backstory; not just the what but also the why?

This can also occur at a much bigger scale too. Stonehenge is a pile of stones in a field. There is, obviously, much more to it than that, but in terms of what we actually *know*, it is a pile of stones in a field. We can guess, with strong educated guesses; we can recreate and go 'oh this is plausible'; we can identify themes and little tidbits that give a sense of what they were doing and go 'well the most likely reason is this'; but we don't actually *know* for sure the *what*, nor do we know a lot about *who* built it, and especially not the *why*. For all we know it could have just been a historical version of Grand Designs, or even one huge practical joke.

We don't know because the people who built it didn't leave instructions or context. They built it because for them it seemed the right thing to do, it made sense at the time, and therefore it didn't *need* instructions because everyone knew what it was for and how to use it. The mundane was not recorded, and all we're left with is a pile of stones in a field.

Everyone knows what a horse *is*, but will the humans of the 37th century?

{section separation jingle}

There is so much in history that we now know to be wrong, that we previously thought we knew. Some of it was because of misinterpretation of historical records, some of it because the people writing the historical records had their own bias and interpretations, and a lot of it because we simply didn't have all the historical records in the first place to provide context.

Like. Viking helmets did not have horns (this seems to have been an invention of the 1870s, because someone decided in a production of the opera "Ring of the Nibelungen" that they 'looked cool'). The Roman Empire was hugely multicultural - there is, for instance, recorded evidence of legionnaires from Syria posted to the Antonine Wall in Scotland, which will never not amuse me ('Where the feck did the sun go?'). The pyramids were built by contracted labour not slaves. Or at least, not Pharaohic slaves. I am fully aware customer service call centres exist. But sometimes the truth is either less convenient, more boring, simply too common to bother recording, or awkward to do so in the moment. Why would anyone at the time care what a Viking Helmet looked like, outside of the Quartermaster? So why would anyone think to record it? And if you're on the receiving end of a Viking invasion, your first concern is to, well your first concern is to get the feck out of there but regardless, it's not going to be 'oh, that man wielding that axe has an interesting helmet, let me just write that down on this fancy parchment'. The axe, by the way, was single-headed, never double-headed, even if it looks 'cooler' that way. Single-headed axes means you can use the rest of the material to make another axe.

But, under normal circumstances, at least, the more records we have, the better, since the more accurate overall our knowledge of the past, and indeed the present, will be. Especially if history is written by those with the loudest voices or the most powerful guns; this is why journalists are targeted in war (an average of 80 killed per year over the last 20 years; the invasion of Gaza will likely make this go up), and one reason why coups target the media first. There's almost certainly another podcast episode in that concept, one that goes deeper into the politics of blogging and journalism; this is not it.

But this is another reason we need to blog more, take more photographs, record more video, publish more stuff. Even if only 23 people ever come across it, it exists, and that's 23 more people who will see your version of the truth to compare with everyone else's.

Think also though about whether we have a duty to report things accurately. What are we hoping to achieve by our posts? What story do we want to tell our audiences? Does it matter if we hide the truth if it's inconvenient? Does it matter if we don't explain every mundane thing in our lives? What do you think people in a hundred, a thousand years, will think of us? Of you? And if you think they won't know, remember, we have far more information at our fingertips now than we've ever had before, and this will only increase - fears of a digital 'dark age', where we lose access to information because it's in an old or unsupported format, aside. Maybe in a thousand years people will read translations of your blog and go 'oh wow, that was an interesting journey' and try to follow it on their contemporary maps. Which may not work. Because no-one knows where the Maldives were.

I'd've said Kiribati, but to be honest, even today not many people know where that is.

{end pod jingle}

Well, that's all for this pod. Join me again next year for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, take a selfie, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}