10.B Graeco-Roman Indography

I Introduction

India entered the intellectual horizon of the Greeks in the course of the Persian period.¹ As early as the late sixth century, Skylax from Karyanda in Asia Minor was called into service by the Persian king Darius who wished to gather information about the country he intended to conquer.² Circumnavigation (*periplous*) and ‘leading around’ (*periegesis*) were the means by which such knowledge was gathered, generating numerous treatises under these titles, though only a fraction of them is transmitted. Their origin in circumnavigation and travel explains why these treatises were not just ethnographies, but paid attention to geography, distances, and conditions of travel.

Ethno-geographical writing developed certain patterns that over centuries remained relatively unchanged, despite the fact that the relationship of the Mediterranean to distant worlds changed through conquest and trade.³ One typical feature was concerned with contact zones. Although many ethnographers had never traveled to the countries they described, the regions that they explored were adjacent to familiar political spaces. Second, despite the very different nature of the contact zones, and the contacts Greeks and Romans had with them, ethno-geographical writing shared a canon of common themes. Regardless of whether the people and countries observed were befriended or inimical, praised or abhorred, there were expectations regarding a catalog of features to be treated. These included descriptions of the land, rivers, climate, plants, and animals, together with the land’s agrarian and mineral wealth, the origins of people, their appearance, size and political institutions (including the political rule of women). We also find comments on the nature and size of cities, housing styles, dress, sexual habits, marriage customs, funerary rites, religion, education, weapons, and methods of warfare. The repetition of themes becomes apparent when one considers what was not described unless it was exception, paradoxical, or noteworthy: public architecture, administration, agricultural and crafts, urban development, and other observations that economic historians would like to have.

Third, not only were similar themes covered, but similar observations made: certain tribes built no temples or made no images of their gods, fought particularly fiercely, had strange but functional physiologies that fitted their strange lives, or did

¹ For the following, Karttunen 1989; Romm 1992; Parker 2008; Roller 2016; Stonemann 2019; and the contributions to the volumes in Wiesehöfer 2011 and Wiesehöfer, Brinkhaus, and Bichler 2016.

² Herodotus (Hdt.) 4. 44; Romm 1992, 84–94.

³ Murphey 2004, 78–79; and in greater detail, Parker 2008, 69–120.

things exactly opposite to the usual practice. Typical of the narratological method of ethno-geographical writers was also the desire to give each town, tribe, or river a proper name, which has led to much debate about their location and identification with archaeological sites.⁴ And finally, from its inception, ethno-geographical writing engaged with its own tradition. Predecessors were praised or blamed for their accurate or inaccurate observations, their credulity or exaggeration, or their opinion and judgements.⁵ This has brought down to us large numbers of ethnographic fragments that have not been transmitted independently.⁶ But despite the critical engagement of later authors with the veracity of empirical detail, there was no apparent progress made toward more tenable, less exotic facts about the countries described. Change of emphasis and critical comments were related to changing self-perceptions, changing expectations of the audiences, and the changing rhetoric of conveying authoritative knowledge. But they were not what we might expect to be steps toward critical evaluation of empirical data.

However, the campaigns of Alexander and the ethnographies written in its aftermath created a revised vision of India.⁷ Nearchos and Onesikritos, Alexander's naval commanders, and Aristoboulos, Alexander's military engineer, reported first-hand observations that included new regions. Taprobane (Sri Lanka), for example, was not known to the Greeks before the Hellenistic period.⁸ Megasthenes, moreover, who was probably a native of Asia Minor and sent to the court of the Mauryan king Chandragupta by Seleukos I in the late fourth century, established the Ganges, rather than the Indus, as the biggest river of India.⁹ Also, he was the first one who proposed that there was an inhabited world beyond India.¹⁰ Yet there were continuities that linked Hellenistic Indography to its former tradition. India was vast, now covering one third of the entire world.¹¹ It had the largest and largest number of rivers.¹² It was particularly fertile, and some fruits grew by themselves;¹³ there were

4 Parker 2008, 120.

5 Karttunen 1989, 121.

6 Parker 2016, 99. The Roman Alexander historian Arrian (second century CE) built his *Indika* on Eratosthenes, Megasthenes, and Nearchos (Wirth and von Hinüber 1985, 1077).

7 Karttunen 1989, 90; Stoneman 2019, 129–288. The fragments and of the most important representatives of the Hellenistic ethnographic tradition can be found with translations and commentaries in Brill's *New Jacoby* (BNJ) 133 (Nearchos); BNJ 134 (Onesikritos); BNJ 715 (Megasthenes); BNJ 716 (Daimachos); and BNJ 241 (Eratosthenes).

8 Commentary *ad* BNJ 716 (Daimachos) F 2b; cf. Roller 2016, 125.

9 The date of the journeys and the date of Megasthenes's *Indika* are controversial. Roller *ad* BNJ 715 (Megasthenes) argues for a time before 312/11; Kosmin (2014, 261–271) following an earlier consensus, suggests that a date close to the end of the fourth century BCE is more likely.

10 Kosmin 2014, 38–41; for the world beyond Roller 2016, 126 with reference to *seres* (silk people), not necessarily to be identified with China, mentioned in the fragments of Megasthenes.

11 Arrian *Anabasis* (Arr. *Anab.*) 5. 6. 2.

12 Arr. *Indika* (Ind.) 5. 2–3.

13 Diodoros (Diod.) 2. 36. 5.

large gold resources;¹⁴ and the people of Taprobane, now a new edge of the world, had strange social habits and a different rhythm of life.¹⁵

II Roman Indography

Megasthenes was one of the main authorities for authors writing about India during the Roman Empire.¹⁶ Extensive portions have survived in Strabo, Arrian, and Diodoros, while Pliny the Elder used some of his material in his relatively brief survey of the subcontinent.¹⁷ Joining together fragments and quotes from previous Indographies, they do not provide much more than a renegotiation of previous information with the intention of making them serve Roman imperial ends. In Roman eyes India was both an ‘other’ and part of the extended Roman Empire, a view that was legitimized by the conquests of Alexander.¹⁸ Among its surprising otherness was the fact that, despite its fertility and wealth, it never expanded like the Roman Empire. Yet the reliance of the Roman authors on their predecessors was so extensive that their texts have been regarded just a mosaic of fragments joined together by critical comments on their veracity and authority.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there are some new emphases and a greater openness to information derived from commercial travel.²⁰ Strabo was still reluctant to add such information to his geography, while Claudius Ptolemy, writing 150 years later, made direct reference to the observations of merchants. A clear indication that the geographer included such information is that he mentions local products and articles of trade in those parts of his geographical catalog delineating the coasts of the Indian Ocean beyond the Ganges and Taprobane up to the Bay of Bengal.²¹ Pliny incorporated Roman trade with India into his scathing attack on the destructive force of luxury, money, and profit that runs through his work: In no year did India absorb less than 50 million sesterces from ‘our empire’ (*imperium nostrum*), sending back merchandise to be sold at a hundred times its costs. It was therefore, he says, that the total route from Egypt to India was worth describing.²² Thus in order to

¹⁴ Arr. *Ind.* 15. 6.

¹⁵ Strabo (Strab.) 15. 1. 57; Arr. *Ind.* 9. 1–8; Pliny *Naturalis historia* (Plin. *HN*) 7. 2. 29 = BNJ 715 F 13a–d.

¹⁶ Strab. 15. 1; Arr. *Ind.*; Diod. 2. 35–42; Plin. *HN* 6. 21–24; Karttunen 1989, 96–102; Parker 2008, 42–48; Kosmin 2014, 31–53; Roller 2016; Ruffing 2016; Wiesehöfer, Brinkhaus, and Bichler 2016.

¹⁷ Parker 2008; Dandrow 2017.

¹⁸ Whittaker 1998.

¹⁹ Parker 2008, 113–116.

²⁰ Parker 2008, 118.

²¹ Ptolemy *Geographia* (Ptol. *Geog.*) 2. 1, with Berggreen and Jones 2000, 27; Parker 2008, 310.

²² Plin. *HN* 6. 101; cf. 12. 84 (including imports from Arabia), and Tacitus *Annales* (Tac. *Ann.*) 3. 53 on Emperor Tiberius exporting money to India to buy gemstones; Parker 2002 and von Reden 2010, 188–198, for the connection between money, gold, and luxury in Pliny’s work.

identify new developments in the intimations of India, we need to turn to the most extraordinary surviving text about the subcontinent, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* ('Circumnavigation of the Erythrian Sea').

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*PME*) was written in the second half of the first century CE by an anonymous writer whose identity or profession is not revealed by the author himself.²³ Since he uses the Egyptian calendar and has his journey start in Egypt, his origin from Egypt is undisputable. He very likely belonged to the Greek-speaking class of Graeco-Egyptians living a fairly prosperous and culturally Greek oriented life in either Alexandria or some metropolis in the Nile valley. The diversity of his observations and a good acquaintance with the navigation of the Erythrean Sea – spanning from the Red Sea via the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean – renders it likely that the author gathered his information from firsthand observation.

In plain language, the *PME* describes the routes of trade from Myos Hormos in the northern part of the Red Sea, down the African coast up to a place called Rapta, back to the southern Arabian coast from where the route crosses over to the southern Iranian coast, and southward along the Indian coastline. It passes the southern tip of the subcontinent and the northern coast of Sri Lanka, then turning north along the eastern Indian coast up to the mouth of the Ganges. Descriptions of the markets contain details of what could be imported and exported, as well as referring to legal and social conditions in the markets frequented. Yet such details become more cursory as the journey moves farther north along the coast of India, and may no longer have been based on personal observation. Strange peoples enter the text in the final sections, such as the Kirradai who are "wild men" with flattened noses, or the Bargysoi, "horse faces," who are said to be cannibals.²⁴ The journey stops at the border of Thina (probably a Greek rendition of the Sanskrit version of China),²⁵ the regions beyond which "because of the extremes of storm, bitter cold, and difficult terrain, and also because of some divine power of the gods" are no longer explored.²⁶

The narrative procedure of listing places and distances of travel suggest the author's familiarity with *periplous* literature. His interest in flora, fauna, large rivers, foreign tribes, and wondrous, huge animals reveal that he was familiar with the conventions of the ethno-geographic genre and with previous literary descriptions of India.²⁷ The hinterland behind Dachinabades, for example, "contains many barren areas, great mountains, and wild animals of all kinds – leopards, tigers, ele-

²³ Text, translation and commentary in Casson 1989, from which all subsequent translations are taken with minor adaptations. Sections 38–66, that is, almost half of the treatise deal with Indian harbors.

²⁴ *PME* 62.

²⁵ Casson 1989 commentary *ad* 64. 21.

²⁶ *PME* 63.

²⁷ Ruffing 2017.

phants, enormous serpents, hyenas, and a great many kinds of monkeys as well as a great many populous tribes up to the Ganges.”²⁸ And vessels coming from Bakare, a little farther south, “get an indication that they are approaching land from the snakes that emerge to meet them; these are also black in color, but shorter and with dragon-shaped head and blood-red eyes.”²⁹ Itineraries, commodities, and markets are the major concern of the author, but navigation is difficult in many places,³⁰ and the account of India is interlaced with intimations of danger, warfare, and past conquest. Thus, at the very beginning of navigation into the Indian region, one reads:

Immediately after the gulf of Bakare is the gulf of Barygaza and the coast of the region of Ariake, the beginning both of Manbano’s realm and of all India ... The metropolis of the region is Minnegara, from which great quantities of cloth are brought to Barygaza. In the area there are still preserved to this very day signs of Alexander’s expedition, ancient shrines and the foundations of encampments, and huge wells.³¹

And he carries on:

Inland of Barygaza there are numerous peoples: the Aratrarioi, Arachusioi, Gandaraioi, and the peoples of Proklais in whose area Bekephalos Alexandria is located. And beyond these is a very warlike people, the Bactrians, under a king ... Alexander setting out from these parts penetrated as far as the Ganges but did not get to Limyrike [Kerala] and the South of India. Because of this, there are to be found on the market in Barygaza even today old *drachms* engraved with the inscriptions, in Greek letters, of Apollodotos and Menander, rulers who came after Alexander.³²

The backdrop given to the local harbor towns is not strictly necessary for understanding trade in India. It places the pursuit of commercial exchange into ethnographical as well as imperial memories and the ruins of conquest.

The *Periplus* tells us much about the nature of trade along the Indian coast. Scholars have put the names of the ports and their suggested distances on a map. Inventories of the goods brought to and taken from each locality can be made: textiles, garments, unguents, metals glassware, pearls, ivory, nard, dyes, spices, slaves, and so on. We learn about sailing seasons, and the connection of harbors via rivers to the hinterland. Individual harbors are described as either controlled by a local king, open to foreigners, or reserved for local trade. Yet most importantly, the image conveyed by the *Periplus* is one of local trade networks in which commodities, both local and more valuable, are imported and exported by a large number of traders of many origins. Harbors are connected with the hinterland by various

²⁸ PME 50.

²⁹ PME 55.

³⁰ E.g., PME 38, 40, 43, 45, 46.

³¹ PME 41. For Barygaza, see ch. 3, map 1, this volume.

³² PME 47.

means, and both the people filling the harbors, and the kings controlling their hinterland, tend to be described as cooperative rather than hostile. In these observations lies the greatest potential of the *Periplus* as a historical source for Indo-Roman trade. But this source is still permeated by the idea that Roman power, through the conquests of Alexander, reached as far as the edges of the world.

III Conclusion

Though Graeco-Roman Indography is easily accessible to modern minds in many places, it provides both problematic and instructive evidence for trans-imperial relationships in the period covered in this volume. Like any literary genre, it followed particular conventions and themes that authenticated the texts, their observations, and their generic origin. From the earliest writings of Skylax to Pliny and beyond, ethno-geographical treatises were literary texts, above all serving Greek and Roman interests, self-reflection, entertainment, and imagination. Marvelous and paradoxical features were not only essential ingredients of the genre, but literary devices for distancing lands and people as well as fitting them into a cosmological, geographical, and imperial world order. In this function, Greek and Roman writing about India cannot be taken as source for Indian history, even less so for its deeper economic structures. Trade and the consumption of Indian goods increased Indian presence in Rome from the time of Augustus onwards. Yet, except for the *PME*, it caused little factual change in the Indographic genre whose essential features remained indebted to its Hellenistic predecessors. However, the concepts through which Indo-Roman relationships were conveyed to Roman audiences were no longer just exploration, conquest, and dominance by civilization, but in addition money and trade. A new moralizing voice gained force in the discourse about Roman imperial relationships with the distant periphery. India had ceased to be an unproblematic ‘other’ at the edge of the inhabited world. Quite on the contrary, the desire of the Roman elite for Indian luxuries, combined with the Indian craving for Roman money, had, according to Pliny, the potential of destroying the whole empire.

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