

# STRABO AND HIS SOURCES ON INDIA

by  
ILDIKÓ PUSKÁS

The Prae-Alexandrian India-knowledge was determined by Herodotus and Ctesias: both of them gave a description based on hearsay therefore elements of reality and mythic-epic knowledge were abundantly amalgamated in their accounts. Two main points were common with them: India was at the edge of the *oikumene* and she was the land of miraculous things (people, animals, plants) and of fabulous wealth.<sup>1</sup>

When Alexander decided to conquer India he had surely kept both these aspects in mind. Invited men of knowledge – "of high attainments in literature and science"<sup>2</sup> – to accompany him with the purpose of assisting him in war affairs and of verifying the current knowledge<sup>3</sup> as well as the facts about the fantastic wealth of the land around the Indus<sup>4</sup> which gave the major share of the Achaemenian treasure-income.<sup>5</sup> If we are likely to believe to biographers, Alexander was not personally so much interested in securing that wealth (except that it was the source for paying and remunerate his companions and soldiers<sup>6</sup>), he was rather keen in being the master of the lands to the Ocean at sunrise.<sup>7</sup> Upsetting his ambitions and plans was the actual cause for Alexander's despair on his army's refusal to continue the campaign. This was the first

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Herodotus, Hist. III. 94 ff. IV.40.

<sup>2</sup>J.W. McCrindle. The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great as described by Arrian, Q. Curtius, Diodoros, Plutarch and Justin. Westminster 1896. (Rpr. by Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, New Delhi.) p.6.

<sup>3</sup>This was interpreted already by A.v. Humboldt in his Kosmos as a "scientific expedition". Cf. A.V. Humboldt, Kosmos. Hung. transl. by Zs. Fülöp. Bp. s.a. p.209.

Alexander must have been the first in history "to employ" men of science in a military expedition. Later this occurred a few times with no less ambitious military leaders: Maḥmūd the Ghaznavid took along Al-Bīrūnī; Napoleon a number of scholars. (Cf. P.M. Holt, Egypt and the Fertile Crescent 1516–1922. A Political History. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, New York 1966. p.156.)

The most outstanding person of Alexander's companions was certainly Callisthenes, a nephew and student of Aristoteles, who was killed before the expedition reached India. Cf. Q. Curtius Rufus, Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis libri qui supersunt, VIII. 8., Plutarch, Alexander c.52–55.

<sup>4</sup>According to Q. Curtius Rufus (Op.cit. VIII, 5, 2ff.) Alexander to match the luxurious outfit of the Indian soldiers, whom he taught to wear golden and ivory armoury, ordered to cover the shields with silver, to harness the horses with golden curbs, to decorate the breast-plates with gold and silver.

<sup>5</sup>Herodotus, Hist. III. 94ff.

<sup>6</sup>Q. Curtius Rufus, op. cit. 9.2.

<sup>7</sup>Loc. cit. and op. cit. 8.8.

occasion when Alexander had to face a different from his own will; yet this alone was certainly not the only reason that Alexander decided for the retreat: informations about the vast army beyond the Ganges<sup>8</sup> were an unexpected and annoying news as at the time of planning the campaign it was thought that beyond the river there was desert to the Ocean.<sup>9</sup>

The posterity, however, in respect of India had not judged Alexander after his unsuccessful campaign but after his undeniable service in discovering India for the West: the meagre informations by Hecataeus, Herodotus, Ctesias and Scylax were now replaced by rich material based on autopsy of the participants of the campaign. The vast literature produced by them has not survived except in quotations by later authors.<sup>10</sup>

It would not seem farfetched to believe that this phase marked a qualitative change in India-knowledge for the Mediterranean world. However, the true breakthrough was achieved by – and this qualifies another new phase – Megasthenes the ambassador to Candragupta Maurya. His *Indica*, although it shared the fate of the companions' writings, was a real landmark in India-knowledge and, possibly, the most often quoted work on India.<sup>11</sup> To Candragupta's son the Seleucids sent another diplomat – Deimachus who wrote two books for which he was later accused by Strabo with "fabricatorship".<sup>12</sup>

This, nevertheless, did not prevent Strabo or other later authors from citing these works, and in particular Megasthenes', extensively. The "rehabilitation" of Megasthenes has already started in the last century when V. de Saint-Martin, Ch. Lassen, E.A. Schwanbeck and J.W. McCrindle published their relevant works.<sup>13</sup> More recent research has consequently proved that Megasthenes was an honest and true author and the inaccuracies met in his work are mainly due to not understanding the peculiar to

<sup>8</sup>E.g. Plut. Alex. c.62., Q. Curtius Rufus op. cit. 9.2.

<sup>9</sup>It was only in India that Alexander got proper informations about the territories beyond the desert, cf. Q. Curtius Rufus op.cit. 9.2.

<sup>10</sup>McCrindle gives a full list of them. (*J.W. McCrindle, The Invasion of India*, p. 7ff.) He also remarks: "It is to be regretted that the works in which these writers recorded their Indian experiences have all, without exception, perished."

<sup>11</sup>V. fragments collected in *E.A. Schwanbeck's Megasthenis Indika*, Bonn 1946; *C. Müller's Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum I-V*, Paris 1841–51, 1870, 2nd vol. pp.397-439.

Translation and commentary: *J.W. McCrindle, Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, being a translation of the fragments of the *Indika* of Megasthenes collected by dr. Schwanbeck, and of the first part of the *Indika* of Arrian. Calcutta-Bombay-London 1877.

<sup>12</sup>Strabo, *Geographica*, 2.1.9.: "all who have written about India have proved themselves, for the most part, fabricators, but preeminently so Deimachus; the next in order is Megasthenes; and then, Onesicritus, and Nearchus, and other such writers, who begin to speak the truth, though with faltering voice. I, too, had the privilege of noting this fact extensively when I was writing the "Deeds of Alexander". But especially do Deimachus and Megasthenes deserve to be distrusted." Translation here and elsewhere is quoted from *The Geography of Strabo* in eight volumes, transl. by H.L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 1917 (Repr. 1960<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>13</sup>*V. de Saint-Martin, Étude sur la géographie grecque et latine de l'Inde*. Paris 1857; *Ch. Lassen, Indische Alterumskunde*, I-IV. Leipzig 1858–1861; *E.A. Schwanbeck*, op.cit. *J.W. McCrindle*, op.cit. *Idem: Ancient India as described in Classical Literature*. Westminster 1901; also: *The Invasion...* 1896.

Greeks Indian things for which both distortions and incorrect quotations frequently occurred.<sup>14</sup>

Reserves on Strabo's side are only partly a consequence of the above said. He was not always in a position to judge whether Megasthenes or others were accurate, – it was his attitude towards the subject what has greatly changed: since Megasthenes' time a new discipline came into existence, the scientific geography,<sup>15</sup> Strabo, however felt himself a true inheritor as much of the historiographic as of the geographic traditions. His earlier, unfortunately lost work to which he refers to in his *Geographica* was in fact a historical one.<sup>16</sup> The *Geography* was written with great ambition: "Now just as in judging of the merits of colossal statues we do not examine each individual part with minute care, but rather consider the general effect and endeavour to see if the statue as a whole is pleasing, so should this book of mine be judged. For it, too, is a colossal work, in that it deals with the facts about large things only, and wholes, except some petty thing may stir the interest of the studious or practical man. I have said much to show that the present work is a serious one, and one worthy of philosopher". (Italics are mine. – I.P.<sup>17</sup>)

Strabo is well aware of the merits of others' works but also of his chances: "I assume that a large portion of the work still remains to be done" – he writes (I.2.1.), and feels that even small addition to the work of predecessors justifies his undertaking. What is more important in judging his achievement towards his subject, it is his conscious attitude regarding the historical processes leading to a wider horizon for geographical studies. In this he is following Eratosthenes who had observed that the campaign of Alexander has added much to the knowledge of geographers, – likewise – adds Strabo – "the spread of the empires of the Romans and of Parthians has presented to geographers of to-day a considerable addition to our knowledge of geography."<sup>18</sup>

How many years Strabo devoted to his work is not possible to decide, nor is sure the date when he first published it. Jones' view, however, seems plausible that this must have happened in 7 B.C. when Strabo "fifty-six or fifty-seven years old... was still in full possession of all his physical and mental powers."<sup>19</sup>

Analysing alone Book XV of the *Geographica* it is likely to support a similar conclusion. The India-chapter of Strabo's work shows a knowledge adequate to the turn of our era and it certainly lacks the new knowledge of the first century A.D. which is

<sup>14</sup>E.g. G.M. Bongard-Levin "Drevneindijskie rājā-sabhā i pariśad v >Indike< Megasthena. In: Problemi vostokovedeniya, No. 2. (1959). B. 158-161. Idem: "Indika" Megasthena u nadpisi Ashoki. Dokladi Delegatsii SSSR, Moskva 1960. p. 17. I. Puskás, "Megasthenes and Indian Society of his Time" The Mysore Orientalist XIV (1984) pp. 182-188.

<sup>15</sup>Although Strabo takes Homer as the first geographer, the highest he places the real geographers whom he, nevertheless, criticizes as well. Cf. Geogr. I.2.1. Hecataeus represented yet a different type of geographers, which might be called cartographer to distinguish from the later ones.

<sup>16</sup>Strabo, Geogr. I.1. 22-23. See also H.L. Jones' footnote on vol. I. p.46- 47.

<sup>17</sup>Strabo, Geogr. I.1.23.

<sup>18</sup>Op.cit. I.2.1. Also: M. Dubois, Examen de la Géographie de Strabon. Paris, Armand Colin et C<sup>ie</sup>, 1891. p. 240ff.

<sup>19</sup>Jones' Introduction to The Geography of Strabo, LCL, Cambridge, Mass. 1960. p.XXVI. See also pages 20-21.

already there with the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and with Pliny's *Natural History*. This deserves a closer analysis.

The *Geographica*, as we have it, consists of seventeen books. To cover the *oikumene* Strabo has chosen the following principle: from general problems of the geography (including a general description of the earth – Books I-II) he turns to the westernmost regions of Europe, step by step nearing Rome (Books II-VII.). Hellas and the related territories come with three books to which – after an excursion to Asia (Books XI-XII.), – the Books (XII-XIV.) on Greek islands and the coastal regions of Asia Minor may be safely added. From a mere logical point the reader would have expected the completion of the Greek world and the rest of Asia, but Strabo for some reasons chose the other way round: after Cyprus comes India from where the description follows a southern route back to Asia Minor – as India has still been considered the easternmost region of the *oikumene* – and then to Africa.

This structure is somewhat repeated in the Book XV itself. A general geographic introduction enumerates both the sources and problems in their interpretation. Listing the authors whom Strabo followed either directly or polemically we get a somewhat surprising enumeration: Nearchus, Megasthenes, Eratosthenes, Patrocles, Ctesias, Onesicritus, Deimachus, Aristobulus, Megillus, Artemidorus, Anacharsis, Craterus, Democritus, Cleitarchus, Hipparchus, Nicolaus Damascenus (more or less in the order of the first occurrence).

The list itself offers a number of implications. If we believed Strabo, the first author on India was Anacharsis the Scythian who flourished around 530 B.C. He was a prince, philosopher and traveller whom the Athenians esteemed as one of the Seven Wise Men; he was Solon's friend, and was killed in his native land accused with following "foreign" cults.<sup>20</sup> The letters and poems under his name, however, are of later period. Was he, could he be an authority on India? This causal mention cannot serve as a proof. The nature of the information assigned to him does not help to decide: "according to Anacharsis, it [India] also has no flutes, or any other musical instruments except cymbals and drums and castanets, which are possessed by the jugglers."<sup>21</sup> This cannot be refuted or confirmed on the ground of Indian sources, we have no contemporary data, unless we think that the roots of the flute-playing Krsna-motif go back as far as the 7/6 centuries B.C. The word *venu* certainly occurs in the *Mahābhārata*, and flute playing is common in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*. It is rather natural to presuppose that flute was known to the Indians (the name of the flute is etymologically connected with the root meaning 'bamboo', 'reed'); if the quotation has, however, anything to do with Anacharsis and the reality, we can only think that Anacharsis might have come across wandering jugglers who had all the enumerated instruments but flute. The next sentence by Strabo may hint that Anacharsis wrote also about "herbs and roots both curative and poisonous, and likewise... plants of many colours."<sup>22</sup> This phrase, however, seems to be valid only if the previous motif with the jugglers was also true: and the jugglers were

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Herod. Hist. IV.76-77. Also: Plutarch, Solon 5; Cicero, Disp. Tusc. V.32. 90 etc.

<sup>21</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.22.

<sup>22</sup>Loc.cit.

wandering medicine-men. What was surely a practice was that wandering mendicants, bards, magicians, snake charmers travelled from village to village playing and singing stories about Kṛṣṇa's life.<sup>23</sup>

There are philological considerations as well. In the sentence quoted for the medicine-men the Greek word *houtós* seems to refer to Aristobulus as McCrindle takes it, and not to Anacharsis as Jones does.<sup>24</sup> Another problem may be raised regarding the musical instruments, too. The passage ascribed to Anacharsis may be a mere modification of what is being elsewhere in the *Geographica*: "they say that the Sydracae are descendants of Dionysus, judging from the vine in their country and from their costly processions, since the kings not only make their expeditions out of their country in Bacchic fashion, but also accompany all other processions with a beating of drums and with flowered robes, a custom which is prevalent among the rest of the Indians."<sup>25</sup> The same idea reoccurs: "Megasthenes says that those who inhabit the mountains hymn the praises of Dionysus... and that the custom of wearing linen garments, mitres, and gay-coloured garments, and for the king to be attended by gong-carriers and drum-beaters on his departures from the palace, are also Dionysiac".<sup>26</sup> In both these cases Strabo takes his information from Megasthenes. And to Megasthenes refers Arrian: "He [Dionysus] also taught them to reverence various gods, but especially of course himself, with clashing of cymbals and beating of drums; he instructed them to dance in the Satyric fashion... even against Alexander the Indians came to battle to the sound of cymbals and drums."<sup>27</sup> It cannot be attempted here to decide how far these words really go back to Megasthenes, – I am though almost sure that Megasthenes took over the idea of calling the Indian gods by Greek names and identifying Indian religious ceremonies with Bacchic ones, partly for the sake of his readers, partly out of referring to his sources, i.e. the Alexandrian writers. Here Aristobulus is the prime candidate, – none the less this idea requires a closer view. In any case it fits well into Megasthenes' technique: quoting-referring earlier writers Megasthenes comments, verifies or rejects their views. Later writers, quoting him, in most of the cases cite only those parts from the *Indica* which seem to be "genuine" informations, but these, extracted from the context lose a great part of their information-content. All this might well account for taking Anacharsis an arbitrary insertion. This might be further supported from the same *caput* where vine and wine are mentioned (with reference to Aristobulus) – then follows the reference to Anacharsis and the musical instruments.<sup>28</sup>

Two more cases could be mentioned to reveal Strabo's "technique" in choosing his sources. Herodotus does not appear by name in the Book XV. of the *Geography*, although

<sup>23</sup>A.L. Basham (ed.) A Cultural History of India. Oxford 1975. p.236.

<sup>24</sup>It is certainly faulty to ascribe this to Onesicritus as J. Földy does in its Hungarian translation. Strabón, *Geógraphika*, Bp. 1977. p.906., n. 11.

<sup>25</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.1.8.

<sup>26</sup>Op.cit. XV.1.58.

<sup>27</sup>Arrian, *Indica*, 7. 6-8.5. Arrian, *History of Alexander and Indica*, with an English translation by P.A. Brunt. I- II. LCL, Cambridge, Mass. 1983, when quoted in English.

<sup>28</sup>In fact mentioning vine/wine and musical instruments regarding India has become a *topos*. The credit for its invention goes, most likely, as already mentioned, to Aristobulus, then come Megasthenes, Strabo, Arrian. It reappears with Polyaeus, *Strategemata* I.1.1-3.

one would rightly expect it as he was the first to give a coherent description of India.<sup>29</sup> Two reasons may explain this. Strabo had a much richer material authenticated by autopsy, and Herodotus he did not respect as a geographer, rather criticised him in many ways. There are, however, at least two motifs which, indirectly though, go for certain back to Herodotus. One of the motives is the motive of the gold-digging ants.<sup>30</sup> The country where these creatures live is not properly described as the authors are ignorant, says Strabo.<sup>31</sup> He refers them again quoting Nearchus and Megasthenes<sup>32</sup> – and this description is an abridgement of that by Herodotus with neglectable modifications; other versions, with the gold-guarding griffins are certainly of later origin. Strabo, not even for the sake of the fascinating story makes the information coherent about the gold and the Indians. Following Herodotus he repeats the common-place that the Indians did not know smelting therefore they handed over the gold-dust to traders. A few pages later – now following Megasthenes – Strabo knows of the gold ornaments used by the Indians decorating their animals (elephants, horses, oxen) at the time of religious processions when they wear dresses spangled with gold, and use golden vessels.<sup>33</sup> For the author is irrelevant that referring to Onesicritus he denied that Indians "use gold or silver, although they have mines."<sup>34</sup> Too much of contradictions – the best was not to harmonize the different informations, rather leave each of them in different context.

That Strabo deliberately omitted Herodotus' name could be seen from yet another passage. This also throws light to the technique of quoting Megasthenes when he polemizes with his predecessors.<sup>35</sup> Herodotus was the first to mention the Indians practicing intercourse openly, to write about reeds large enough for boats etc.<sup>36</sup> Strabo's reference is again only to Megasthenes.<sup>37</sup>

It remains a wonder how Democritus comes among the sources on India<sup>38</sup> even though only about the river Silas. There is no indication that anybody prior to Megasthenes mentioned that peculiar river. Moreover, at the time of Democritus India was thought to end not far beyond the Indus – there was nobody then to think of even the Ganges still less about any tributary of it. The text must be corrupted, – it could hardly be ironical for which there is no reason evidence.

Ctesias of Cnidus was once popular author on the account of his *Persian History*, and his book on India, but he was from the very beginning suspected of exaggerations and inaccuracies and that he made concessions to curiosities. Many of his statements, stories were checked, verified or corrected by those who visited India in the 3/2

<sup>29</sup>First he was if we dismiss the data on Anacharsis, as we may rightly do. A few decades before Herodotus Hecataeus composed his world-map to which he must have used the report by Scylax of Caryanda who, on the command of Darius, surveyed the Indus river. Herodotus had drawn upon both of them.

<sup>30</sup>I. Puskás, "On an Ethnographic Topos in the Classical Literature. (The Gold-digging Ants)" In: *Annales Univ. Scient. Budapest, Sectio Classica* T. V-VI.1977/78 pp.73- 87.

<sup>31</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.1.37.

<sup>32</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.44.

<sup>33</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.69, also I.54.

<sup>34</sup>Op. cit. I.34.

<sup>35</sup>See above

<sup>36</sup>Herod., *Hist.* III.98ff.

<sup>37</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.1.56.

<sup>38</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.38.

centuries B.C., hence when cited later, authors used him as a counterexample. Strabo refers to him as one of those who "told in guise of history what they had never seen, nor even heard"<sup>39</sup> and when he comes to concrete data on India he merely mentions that "Ctesias says that India is not smaller than the rest of Asia"<sup>40</sup>, giving no comment just enumerating contradicting views – for the matter in question he had already expressed his opinion in Book II.<sup>41</sup>

Out of the authors who took part in Alexander's campaign Strabo chose Nearchus, Onesicritus, Aristobulus and Craterus. It may not be without significance to note that while he quoted Nearchus nearly 25 times (and alone in the Book XV.1. more than ten times), he was still accusing the fleet admiral with "fabricatorship".<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the issues on which Strabo accepts Nearchus' opinion are very important ones and do touch geographic, ethnographic and even zoological observations. The nature of Nearchus' data shows that the admiral was though interested in everything (how they capture the wild elephants,<sup>43</sup> what reptiles live there, the size and viciousness of the snakes,<sup>44</sup> and, of course, people,<sup>45</sup> the cotton<sup>46</sup> etc.) he was most interested in problems related to navigation: the size of India,<sup>47</sup> the course and the nature of the rivers,<sup>48</sup> the rains<sup>49</sup> sea animals,<sup>50</sup> and, obviously, the position of certain stars.<sup>51</sup> As far as Strabo is concerned he gives way to his doubts occasionally but he cannot escape referring to Nearchus as certain informations occur only at him, or with him they seem more plausible. This is the case with the description of the Indian skill in handicrafts,<sup>52</sup> the cotton and its use (which, however, was first mentioned by Herodotus<sup>53</sup>), even its two kinds, and he is the first to mention the sugar-cane<sup>54</sup> (about which later authors will write more, especially Aelian in the *History of Animals*; the author of the *Periplus* knows even the indigenous name of that sweet substance pressed from it), or that fig<sup>55</sup> which is likely to be the *Ficus Religiosa's* fruit the consumption of which was forbidden already by Buddha on account of its intoxicating effect.

Like Nearchus, Strabo has also criticised Onesicritus who had accompanied Nearchus on the voyage back from India. Onesicritus had written a biography of Alexander, but what is more important, he gave a description of all the lands and people they

<sup>39</sup>Op. cit. XI.6.3. Also I.2.35.

<sup>40</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.12.

<sup>41</sup>Op. cit. II.114ff.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. note 12.

<sup>43</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.43.

<sup>44</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.45.

<sup>45</sup>XV.1.66-67.

<sup>46</sup>XV.1.20.

<sup>47</sup>XV.1.12.

<sup>48</sup>XV.1.16., 18., 33.

<sup>49</sup>XV.1.18.

<sup>50</sup>XV.2.12-13.

<sup>51</sup>II.1.20.

<sup>52</sup>XV.1.67.

<sup>53</sup>Herod., Hist. II.106.

<sup>54</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.20.

<sup>55</sup>Loc. cit.

marched through with Alexander. It is not surprising therefore that Strabo could use Onesicritus' statements as a sort of complementation to Nearchus. One may wonder how the difference came about (e.g. in judging the size of India) when both of them (and that way Aristobulus and Craterus also) followed the same route, shared similar experiences. Two things might be taken into consideration: the two persons had different education<sup>56</sup> and different posts in the army.<sup>57</sup> These things could well have been responsible for the differences in their impressions and experiences gathered on the one hand, and it may not be too farfetched to suppose that there was much parallelism, too, in the writings of these two men and of the other companions, on the other hand. For the latter things it was sufficient to refer only one of the authors. In the same time the personal abilities, talent and interest could create wellshaped differences in the description of the same things. It seems, for instance, that the land of Musicanus was best described by Onesicritus and also the story with the sophists as it was him whom Alexander sent to deplore the truth about them. It may be significant that Onesicritus found worth noting that there was slavery on the land of Musicanus which statement gains its importance through the comparison with that of Megasthenes who says that "no Indian uses slaves".<sup>58</sup> The story of the sophists may be taken as one of those parallelisms which occurs with more than one of the companion-writers. Since Onesicritus was himself sent to the "naked Philosophers", it is naturally him who gives the most vivid description both regarding their appearance and behaviour and the words of Mandanis. This is in fact a remarkable achievement: through three interpreters<sup>59</sup> he could still convey the essence of their conversation. It may also not be without significance that quoting Onesicritus the word Brachmanes does not occur, while Nearchus, who seems that he learnt more from Calanus, does use the Indian term and so does Megasthenes who, of course, knows of other "sophists", too.<sup>60</sup>

Aristobulus may serve a still better example for the parallelisms mentioned. With slight variations he also describes his impressions on the land of India visited by them, on the peculiarities of her flora and fauna, and in most of the cases he does not miss the chance to compare everything with that of Aegypt. Novel things he writes about Taxila:<sup>61</sup> the poor people unable to marry their daughters, according to the customs, take them to the market-place and sell them to those who are pleased with the sight of the girls' bodily beauty. There he came to know about a few other customs: polygamy, burning of wives on funeral pyre and also displaying the corps to vultures (which is, by the way, a typical Zoroastrian practice; a proof of the presence of Zarathuštra's followers in Taxila. The "international" character of Taxila is evident from the archaeological remnants, too.) A very Indian practice was also observed by Aristobulus

<sup>56</sup>Onesicritus was a pupil of Diogenes hence a follower of the Cynic School. Cf. Geogr. XV.1.65.

<sup>57</sup>Except for the way back: "The fleet he (Alexander) gave over to Nearchus and Onesicritus, the latter his master pilot..." Strabo, Geogr. XV.2.4.

<sup>58</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.54.

<sup>59</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.64.

<sup>60</sup>XV.1.59.

<sup>61</sup>XV.1.62.

in Taxila.<sup>62</sup> two sophists, both Brachmanes have led a life typical of yogis. (There is no verbal reference to yoga anywhere, of course.) Strabo is right in feeling that these Brahmanas are different from those described by either Nearchus or by Megasthenes; for later research this description shows the two types of yogic practice, the temporary adherence by vow and the life-time devotion – in the example of the younger man.

Why Strabo accepts Aristobulus more reliable than e.g. Nearchus or Onesicritus, it is difficult to judge. Perhaps, because he has once discredited Nearchus, hence he had to vote for Aristobulus when on similar issues the latter expressed different views.<sup>63</sup> Or, was Aristobulus more objective than others? According to the tradition he compiled his work at age of eighty-eighty-four.<sup>64</sup> Did he use others' writings with special criticism? Has his old age anything to do with the credibility assigned to him? No doubt, both Plutarch and Arrian used him extensively. These questions are to be examined in a different work.

Craterus was one of the favourite companions of Alexander. He commissioned him leading a division of the army via land route<sup>65</sup> and join him in Carmania.<sup>66</sup> Soon after Alexander's death he lost his life in a battle with Eumenes. He is quoted by Strabo for a letter attributed to him and addressed to his mother, Aristopatra. In this letter he stated that Alexander reached the Ganges, and he, too saw that river. It is not for this false information but for the uncredibility of data given by Craterus is the reason for Strabo's rejection of this communication. This exaggeration, that is Alexander reaching as far as the Ganges – became a *topos* later when the Alexander-myths became stronger than the real facts; this is how and why it could reappear with Plutarch and also with the author of the *Periplus*.

Cleitarchus adds much too little to others' informations except for one field: That is the description of the Indian fauna<sup>67</sup> in which Strabo is so little interested. He takes one excerpt<sup>68</sup> to the story of the king's procession – which may be though a religious festival. For the details of the description Strabo advises to read Cleitarchus himself. Earlier, in Book II. he has a valuable reference to the saltrocks of India taken from Cleitarchus, who was almost the only professional historian among those who had accompanied Alexander with aim and commitment to commemorate properly they saw.

If Strabo's attitude towards the companion-writers may be called as "critical distance keeping" (apart from Aristobulus) then the same applies even more to those authors who having spent several years in the Mauryan court as diplomats wrote their accounts based on personal impressions and observations.

Chronologically Megasthenes was the first as he was accredited to Candragupta

<sup>62</sup>XV.1.61.

<sup>63</sup>XV.1.18.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. *J.W. McCrindle*, *Ancient India in Classical Literature*, p.21. n.4.

<sup>65</sup>"The second division he sent forward through the interior under the command of Craterus, who at the same time was to subdue Ariana and also to advance to the same region with Alexander was directing his march." Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.2.4.

<sup>66</sup>Op. cit. XV.2.11.

<sup>67</sup>This has been abundantly used by Aelian, *Hist. Anim.* XVII.2., 22., 23., 25. etc.

<sup>68</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.1.69.

Maurya's court, while Deimachus was posted to Candragupta's successor, Alitrochades.<sup>69</sup>

The passage (*Geogr.* II.1.9.) had already been quoted where Strabo accused writers on India with untruthworthiness, unreliability, there he puts Deimachus to the first place and next to him Megasthenes. He gives more emphasis to this statement repeating a few lines later that "especially do Deimachus and Megasthenes deserve to be distrusted".<sup>70</sup> This is an understandable contradiction as regarding India Strabo quotes most often Megasthenes and Nearchus, both of whom are judged by him very negatively. Their negative judgement is based only partly on what they wrote, rather more on other considerations as, for instance, Eratosthenes' views and data (with whom he has similar problems), and certainly on the urge to say new and reliable informations in his *Geographica*, for which he cannot find other or better sources. The contradiction could be solved only realizing Strabo's ambitions and the fact that in the case of India having no autopsy he was left with his own judgement to decide between informations, the information-value of which was uncontrollable for him. A Greek with a traditional Hellenistic education inherited only the openness for discovering and integrating the outer circles of the *oikumene* but certainly not the view of understanding other cultures "from inside". Hence, when he comes across a totally different system (social, philosophical, religious etc.) with different value-hierarchy, he is very selective. On the one hand he drops a number of informations as they do not fit into his world, on the other one he tries to comment or confront with others' views those informations which deserve the attention of the readers of his time.

This attitude may well account for the fragmentary yet uniform character of Megasthenes quotations throughout the classical literature: whoever is citing the *Indica*, is taking the same points worth building into his work, i.e. location, size and boundaries of India, its rivers, flora and fauna, society and customs, religions, philosophy and peculiarities. This is certainly a logical approach and it must coincide with Megasthenes' intention to introduce all these topics to the readers, but his informations, data deprived of context which in fact must have been the vehicle of genuine informations and a testimony of a knowledge which sprung from two sources: what he, Megasthenes experienced while living in India, and what was written about India, Indian things before he got his mission, – lost much of much of their special value.

The technique of describing a country or people did not change much since Herodotus laid down the principles of such a work, except that geographers put more emphasis on geographic matters and historians on human aspects which included both events and ethnographic data. Megasthenes himself must have followed the same principles but being well acquainted with earlier descriptions he was adopting a comparative method: while giving his own account he was always confronting his

<sup>69</sup>Op. cit. II.1.9. We know yet another ambassador, Dionysius who was sent to Pataliputra by Ptolemaeus Philadelphus, but he does not occur with Strabo. Pliny refers to him: *Nat. Hist.* VI.17. In Solinus' rendering Dionysius had the commission "to put the truth to the test by personal inspection" and he wrote as much as Megasthenes. Cf. *McCrinkle*, *Megasthenes*, p.14.

<sup>70</sup>Many more passages confirm this, cf. *Geogr.* II.1.4., 7., also where Strabo repeats the description of the "fabulous races" e.g. XV.1.57.

observations with the earlier ones. Whether he went as far as formulating his criticism or consensus, it is difficult to decide. If he was as personal as that, these moments must have been dropped just like – as we had already shown – the reference description of "fabulous races" which became a *topos*, are always referred to without indicating its actual source, the Mahābhārata.<sup>72</sup> In the case of depicting the Indian society (of the Mauryan times) Megasthenes was using the original Indian terms in form of *calque*, neglected this aspect.<sup>73</sup> (Following the practice of the Alexandrian predecessors, for explaining the Indian religions he used Greek god-names: Dionysus, Heracles, Zeus). This led to total misunderstanding so much as both Strabo and others declared on this basis that the Indians worshipped these particular gods.<sup>74</sup> It is not explicitly ascribed to Megasthenes that "the Indians worship Zeus and the Ganges River and the local deities"<sup>75</sup> but from the above said it follows rather obviously that it could be Megasthenes (or at most Deimachus) who could afford such a statement. Megasthenes witnessed a peculiar situation in the history of the Indian religions: the Hinduism was not yet fullfledged (though Brāhmanism reached its eclipse), the germ of the *Gītā* was *in statu nascendi*, Buddhism and Jainism freely flourished just like many philosophic schools (like yoga, sāmkhya etc).<sup>76</sup> For the Hellenistic world to follow and understand this complicated system would have been impossible – Megasthenes being well aware of this coined the equivalisms otherwise in accordance with the Hellenistic (and earlier) practice. Strabo himself knew that it were the companion-writers who, out of flattering compiled such stories,<sup>77</sup> still it gives the story into Megasthenes' mouth.<sup>78</sup> It is difficult to say what identifications Megasthenes thought of for Dionysus, Heracles or Zeus,<sup>79</sup> because he must have been influenced by the earlier authors, but only he (or Deimachus) could report the cult of the River Gaṅgā as of a deity or mention the local deities, the

<sup>71</sup>The story of the gold-digging ants is one of the best examples. Had not had Megasthenes corrected Herodotus on the gold-digging ants we would not find such statements as "Megasthenes is nearer the truth when he says that the rivers carry down gold-dust and that part of it is paid as a tax to the king." Geogr. XV.1.57. Or: "they say that some of the ants mine gold have wings; and that gold-dust is brought down by the rivers..." Compare these with XV.1.37., 44.

<sup>72</sup>J. Puskás, "Mahābhārata-motifs in Classical Greek and Latin Sources." In: Sanskrit and World Culture, Schr. Or. 18, pp.258-262. Berlin 1986.

<sup>73</sup>G.M. Bongard-Levin, "Indika" Megasthenes i nadpisi Ashoki" (In Russian). XXV: Mezndunarodnyy Kongress Vostokovedov, Doklad delegatsii, Moscow 9160. p.18. Idem: "Drevneindiskie rāja-sabha i parisad v "Indike" Megasthenes." In: Problemy vostokovedeniya No.2., 1959. pp.159-161.

<sup>74</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.58. For monographs on the topic see: A. Dahlquist, Megasthenes and Indian Religion. Delhi-Varanasi-Patna, MLB, repr. 1977. (1862<sup>1</sup> Uppsala); A. Daniélou, Shiva and Dionysus. The Omnipresent Gods of Transcendence and Ecstasy. Transl. by K.P. Hurry. New York, Inner Traditions International, 1984 (French ed. by Fayard, 1979.)

<sup>75</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.69.

<sup>76</sup>J. Puskás, "Indian Religions in Classical Sources". Paper presented at XXXII. ICANAS, Hamburg, 1986. (Forthcoming)

<sup>77</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.9.

<sup>78</sup>See the excerpts by Schwanbeck and McCrindle. They, however, do not pay much attention to the sources of Megasthenes.

<sup>79</sup>The relevant literature is very rich: McCrindle, Dahlquist, Daniélou, op. cit.

devatās. This is why it seems possible to add one more fragment to Megasthenes' work, who, indeed, in the eyes of the posterity proved to be a trustworthy author.<sup>80</sup>

Since there is not much to the credit of Deimachus, we may suppose that his work did not come up to the *Indica's* standard. Succeeding Megasthenes Deimachus may have not even been in position to read his predecessor's work, or if he could, he could certainly not supersede that. No doubt, Strabo's negative attitude towards him<sup>81</sup> is not a proof in this respect, but so is the fact that no new information can be counted into his credit.

Out of Strabo's sources on India four outstanding geographers should be mentioned. Strabo's attitude to all of them is rather critical: he intends to sum up all the knowledge collected by his predecessors and he would also like to synthesize that on a higher level.

Patrocles, in Strabo's eyes, is trustworthy, but as Hipparchus discredits this trustworthiness, Strabo does not use much of Patrocles' work regarding India. Patrocles, as an admiral was commissioned to explore the Caspian Sea and the rivers Oxus and Iaxartes – with this he gained a considerable reputation while his idea that one may reach Hyrcania sailing around India – although repeated by some authors<sup>82</sup> – can not hold good in Strabo's time when, albeit in a limited way, *Seres* were already known.<sup>83</sup>

Eratosthenes, as it had already been observed, for Strabo was the example to follow and to criticize. Since there is no evidence that Eratosthenes ever travelled to Asia, his India-knowledge must have been based on earlier works. Judging from the topics he touched regarding India we may safely assume that Eratosthenes used both the companion-writers' and the ambassador-writers' accounts. He, perhaps, did not go as far as Strabo in piecing together the different informations (for instance on rains) but with a logic of an excellent scientist must have chosen the most probable versions. In details, especially regarding the trans-Indus territories he relied upon Megasthenes; with Deimachus he had serious objections.<sup>84</sup>

Strabo extends his criticism to Hipparchus as well, although in certain matters accepts his corrections regarding Eratosthenes.<sup>85</sup> Although Patrocles had been positively referred to by Strabo, Hipparchus judged him negatively. It seems, indeed, that Hipparchus was a theoretician and he was truly interested only in purely geographic matters and not in things which characterize the accounts on India (and even the *Geographica*): ethnographic descriptions. This is why Hipparchus is not directly referred to in Book XV.

The case with Artemidorus of Ephesus is somewhat different. He is colouring his work with many non-geographic data, but not so much about India. Strabo quotes his estimates on distances between Asia Minor and India, and, openly criticizing for, his

<sup>80</sup>J. Puskás, "Megasthenes and the Indian Society of his Time". *The Mysore Orientalist* XIV (1984) pp. 182-88.

<sup>81</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* II.1.4.

<sup>82</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XI.11.6., Pliny *Nat. Hist.* VI.17.

<sup>83</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XI.11.1. Also XV.1.34. XV.1.37. These passages are about their 100- 200 years long lifespan.

<sup>84</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* II.1.19.

<sup>85</sup>See for instance, Strabo, *Geogr.* Book II.

description of the Ganges and things around it.<sup>86</sup> It may be wondered why Strabo turns to Artemidorus in this matter when all the important things had already been mentioned by him, e.g. the length of the river<sup>87</sup> beyond Palibothra, its position in India's hydrological map,<sup>88</sup> its width and depth, the city of Palibothra on its bank.<sup>89</sup> Out of the excerpts relating to the Ganges it seems evident that the only reason could be for citing Artemidorus here (albeit the whole *caput* is thematically unnecessary here) that he mentions the tributary Oedanes by name.<sup>90</sup> One would at first glance think that Artemidorus had a new source of information, but a closer watch convinces that he used only Megasthenes, and, perhaps, if it existed, the false letter of Craterus. Alexander and his army has never seen the Ganges. In fact they came to know about it only after crossing the Indus and its tributaries. Even their informants may have not seen that river personally but they had all the reasons for exaggerations which certainly proved an effective means in discouraging Alexander's army threatening both with the river and the big empire alongside. Until Megasthenes' *Indica* there was not a trustworthy description of the Ganges and even after him much remained for speculation out of which Strabo could not escape.

There is one reference to a certain Megillus<sup>91</sup> – who, surprisingly, seems to know that "rice is sown before the rains, but requires irrigation and transplanting".<sup>92</sup> Nothing is known of him, the information itself is valuable.

Strabo gives a few hints that his knowledge regarding India is up-to-date. He refers to fleets visiting India and bringing rich merchandise from there<sup>93</sup> and embassies arriving from India.<sup>94</sup> In the latter case he quotes Nicolaus Damascenus who met Indian ambassadors being sent by a certain Porus who was the sovereign of 600 kings and who offered his friendship and cooperation to Augustus. Details of this information are of good value, although some bear too much resemblance to the behaviour of that Calanus who joined Alexander, or accord with Megasthenes' description of the Brach-

<sup>86</sup>"And he goes on to mention certain other things, but in such a confused and careless manner that they are not to be considered." Geogr. XV.1.72.

<sup>87</sup>As if the information would go to Eratosthenes' credit. In fact it goes to Megasthenes. Geogr. XV. 1.11.

<sup>88</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.13.

<sup>89</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.35- 36.

<sup>90</sup>McCrimble identifies it with the Brahmaputra which is mentioned by Ptolemy and the Periplus on different but somewhat similar names. Cf. McCrimble, *Ancient India in Classical Literature*, p.77.

<sup>91</sup>Strabo, Geogr. XV.1.18.

<sup>92</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>93</sup>This is a very important reference: "Again, since the Romans have recently invaded Arabia Felix with an army, of which Aelius Gallus, my friend and companion, was the commander, and since the merchants of Alexandria are already sailing with fleets by way of the Nile and on the Arabian Gulf as far as India, these regions also have become far better known to us of to-day than to our predecessors. At any rate, when Gallus was prefect in Egypt, I accompanied him and ascended to Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Aethiopia, and I learnt that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake to voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise." Strabo, Geogr. II.5.12. Also: "... and now all the Indian merchandise, as well as the Arabian and such of Aethiopian as is brought down by the Arabian Gulf, is carried to Coptus, which is the emporium for such cargoes." Geogr. XV.1.45.

<sup>94</sup>Op. cit. XV.1.73.

manes and Garmanes,<sup>95</sup> and even partly with Onesicritus.<sup>96</sup> We have no reason to believe that the case happened that way. Moreover, the tomb-inscription of one of the members of the diplomatic mission bears testimony not only of the case but contains also two very important informations: the name of the person and of his provenance. For the name Zarmanochegas McCrindle offered the explanation<sup>97</sup> as Śramanācārya. The first part of the word is certainly a deformation of the word sramana/samana like the Garmanes/Sarmanes which also occur with Strabo,<sup>98</sup> and refer to Buddhist monks. As far as the second part of the word is concerned – that remains to be verified. Bargaosa, rightly identified by earlier Indologists as Bhrgukaccha or Bhrgukṣetra<sup>99</sup> (also as Bharukaccha or Broach) was once a very important port at the mouth of the Narbadā river. Its importance grew with the time and its high time were the first-second centuries when Roman ships regularly arrived at. Strabo, through Nicolaus Damascenus, conveys the earliest data on it; the *Periplus* gives a detailed description of it. Even though fleets were reaching Indian ports about the time of the writing of the *Geographica*, their missions were neither regular nor safe because the monsun-phenomenon was not yet known to the Roman sailors<sup>100</sup> hence for certain purposes the landroutes were preferred. The embassy in question was likely taking the traditional caravan-route, – the hardships proved to be too severe and most of the members of the mission died on route, lastly before Rome, that particular Zarmanochegas. The gifts they carried were typically such things which remained throughout desired items of India either by means of exchange or by way of gifts.<sup>101</sup> The figure of the Hermes is certainly interesting, dwarfs or freaks were in many ancient culture revered. The letter offering friendship and cooperation is also of importance: it was written on parchment with Greek letters. This writing material is certainly atypical for India, as they used palmleaf, birchbark or cloth<sup>102</sup> and it may show that Porus in question was a ruler somewhere in Western India where Greek colony and tradition survived.

When this embassy visited Augustus? To determine it exactly may not be possible. It is almost sure that there were embassies in the years 25 B.C. and 20 B.C., and certainly afterwards as Augustus himself stated that in 14 A.B. in his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*,

<sup>95</sup>XV.1.58ff.

<sup>96</sup>XV.1.65.

<sup>97</sup>McCrindle, *Ancient India in Classical Literature*, p.78.

<sup>98</sup>Strabo, *Geogr.* XV.1.59.

<sup>99</sup>Cf. McCrindle, *Ancient India in Classical Literature*, pp.78-79.

<sup>100</sup>Which must have been discovered around the middle of the first century A.D. as both Pliny and the *Periplus* already know of it. Cf. *I. Puskás*, "Trade contacts between India, and the Roman Empire". In: *G. Pollet* (ed.) *India and the Ancient World. History, Trade, and Culture Before, A.D. 650*. OLA 25, Leuven 1987. pp.141-156.

<sup>101</sup>See the list of the trade- and gift-items of the *Periplus*.

<sup>102</sup>Strabo (*Geogr.* XV.1.53.) following Megasthenes says that the Indians "have no knowledge of written letter" – but this statement does not follow from the previous sentence that the Indians "use unwritten laws" which was nearly the case, although several law codices existed but if they were written at all they served the teaching of specialists. At the king's court wellversed brahmins were employed as advisers. This is a false insertion either by Strabo or by someone else, as already Nearchus noticed that "They write missives on linen cloth that is very closely woven," to which Strabo adds (XV.1.67.) that "though the other writers say that they make no use of written characters" – himself hesitating on the matter.

31: "Ad me ex India regum legationes *saepe* (Italics are mine – I.P.) missae sunt non visae ante id tempus apud quemquam Romanorum ducem." About such embassies to Augustus remember later authors, too: Suetonius, L. Annaeus Florus, Dio Cassius, Aurelius Victor, Paulus Orosius, and other to later Caesars.<sup>103</sup>

Piecing together the evidences, including the fact that Strabo himself states that he also saw that Hermes which was brought by the embassy lead by that particular Zarmanochegas, we may be right to think that the event took place soon after 20 B.C. either in Samos where Augustus met this embassy,<sup>104</sup> or in Rome as Pais and Jones<sup>105</sup> suppose that after his five years stay in Egypt he returned to Rome. In 20 B.C. when Augustus was in Samos, Strabo was still in Egypt, but soon he left that country. This is why he could mention buildings erected in Rome after that date. Traditionally four/five visits to Rome are ascribed to Strabo: in 44, 35, 31, 29 and 7 B.C. From the above it is clear that between 29 and 7 B.C. he must have been once again in Rome, probably in 20/19 B.C.

It seems plausible to think that first he collected material to his work in Rome during his stay(s) in 35- 31 B.C., then at Alexandria, between 25-20 B.C., but he settled to write the *Geography* only at home, in Amasia. The first version must have been completed by his last visit to Rome (7 B.C.), but certainly not taken there as his work remained unknown to Romans, even to Pliny.<sup>106</sup> After this visit to Rome Strabo had revised his work, – most likely not only once: first he added the new data, observations and news he came across personally, and later whenever he got news in Amasia (for instance, Tiberius succeeding Augustus etc.) which he accepted trustworthy. That isolation, however, did not help in recording the events of the first quarter of a century of our era.

The analysis of the Book XV alone throws much light both upon Strabo's method, sources and his work, even to his personal life, and upon the India-knowledge of Augustus' time. A more detailed research will, hopefully, further deepen our knowledge.

<sup>103</sup>Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum: Divus Augustus*, II.XXI-3. L.A. Florus, *Epitome de Tito Livio* II. XXXIV.62. Dio Cassius, *Historia Romana* IX.58. Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 1-9. Paulus Orosius, *Historia adversus paganos*, VI.12. For these and later embassies data are collected in *R.M. Cimino-F. Scialpi*, *India and Italy. A catalogue for exhibition organized in collaboration with the Archaeological Survey of India and the ICCR. Ismeo-Rome 1974.* p.8ff.

<sup>104</sup>Dio Cassius, IX.58.

<sup>105</sup>*H.L. Jones* in the Introduction to *The Geography of Strabo*, p.XXIVff.

<sup>106</sup>*Op. cit.* p.XXV.