

OBSERVATIONS OF THE MARVELLOUS IN STRABO'S *GEOGRAPHIKA* – THE USE OF THE UNREAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORLD IN ANTIQ- UITY*

Aim and purpose of the *Geographika*

The preserved works of Strabo of Amaseia (ca. 63 BC-ca. 24 AD) belong to those rare scriptures, which allow a reconstruction of the Greco-Roman perception of the Augustan *Ecumene* and its surroundings from a geographical viewpoint.¹ The focus lies not only on mathematical measurements of the earth, as in early scientific analyses concerning the invention of solutions for geographical problems like the earth's structure and circumference in Anaximandros and Hekateios of Miletus, Eudoxos of Knidos or Eratosthenes.² Nor is it the intention of the author to present his own knowledge only as a form of higher art, as we can observe in the scriptures of poetic-didactical writers like Pseudo-Skymnos or Dionysios of Alexandria.³ On the contrary, Strabo tries to educate his readership, which consisted mostly of interested laymen in the field of abstract geography, by presenting current, useful and reasonable knowledge written in prose. Simultaneously, he did not address frequent travelers, merchants, legates or messengers in the first place, who were used to deploy *Periegeseis*, *Periodoi*, *Periploi* or *Itineraria* with their mainly practical focusing to reach their destinations.⁴ As Strabo points out, his works are especially designed for people with political power, for example important statesmen of the Roman Empire:

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¹ Strabo uses the term *Ecumene* to define the territory of the Roman Empire together with its hegemonic claims and ambitions to rule all over the known world. See Engels (2007: 125).

² Podossinov (2003: 90-91); Engels (1998: 73-81).

³ Podossinov (2003: 91); Schindler (2000: 163-164).

⁴ Podossinov (2003: 90). But one has to note, that Strabo emphasizes the value of astronomy, physics and geometry for the study of geography, see Strab. Geogr. II,5,1-4.

In short, this book of mine should be generally useful – useful alike to the statesman and to the public at large – as was my work on History. [...]. And so, after I had written my Historical Sketches, which have been useful, I suppose, for moral and political philosophy, I determined to write the present treatise also; for this work itself is based on the same plan, and is addressed to the same class of readers, and particularly to men of exalted stations in life. Furthermore, just as in my Historical Sketches only the incidents in the lives of distinguished men are recorded, while deeds that are petty and ignoble are omitted, so in this work also I must leave untouched what is petty and inconspicuous, and devote my attention to what is noble and great, and to what contains the practically useful, or memorable, or entertaining.

(Strab. Geogr. I. 1,22-23)⁵

Strabo's aim lies in instructing his readers in an entertaining way through scientific literature so that they knew what the world was composed of, how it operated and what sort of folks occupied its regions.⁶ Only then they would be able to make the right political decisions for the state.⁷ Therefore, geographical lore was justly a part of practical philosophy, it was a necessary component of a proper and happy life as an important and well educated communal leader.⁸

Strabo constructs in his cultural geography a well classified and ordered catalogue of the significant knowledge concerning the description of the world.⁹ What will be presented by the author — after his own critical investigations — claims consequently to belong to the realm of true facts.¹⁰ But this imposes the following questions: How was the geographer able to deal with marvellous and amazing stories

⁵ Translated by Jones, Geography I: 47: “ἀπλῶς δὲ κοινὸν εἶναι τὸ σύγγραμμα τοῦτο δεῖ καὶ πολιτικὸν καὶ δημωφελὲς ὁμοίως ὥσπερ τὴν τῆς ἱστορίας γραφήν. [...]. διόπερ ἡμεῖς πεπονηκότες ὑπομνήματα ἱστορικὰ χρήσιμα, ὡς ὑπολαμβάνομεν, εἰς τὴν ἠθικὴν καὶ πολιτικὴν φιλοσοφίαν, ἐγνωμένον προσθεῖναι καὶ τήνδε τὴν σύνταξιν: ὁμοειδῆς γὰρ καὶ αὕτη, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς αὐτοὺς ἄνδρας, καὶ μάλιστα τοὺς ἐν ταῖς ὑπεροχαῖς. ἔτι δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον, ὄνπερ ἐκεῖ τὰ περὶ τοὺς ἐπιφανεῖς ἄνδρας καὶ βίους τυγχάνει μνήμης, τὰ δὲ μικρὰ καὶ ἄδοξα παραλείπεται, κἀνταῦθα δεῖ τὰ μικρὰ καὶ τὰ ἀφανῆ παραπέμπειν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἐνδόξοις καὶ μεγάλοις καὶ ἐν οἷς τὸ πραγματικὸν καὶ εὐμνημόνευτον καὶ ἡδὺ διατρίβειν.”

⁶ Engels (1998: 94).

⁷ It is also important to note, that Strabo saw important connections between geography and history, since the landscape shapes the peoples, who live in it, and will be shaped by men by forms of acculturation as by-product of civilisation.

⁸ Strab. Geogr. I. 1,1. See also Biraschi (1984: 131-136) and Brodersen (1995:15).

⁹ This can be observed by analysing the structure of the description of every region of the world. Strabo always starts with a brief geometrical survey of the land, followed by a description of its climate and its fertility. After this, he pictures the flora and fauna of the region, together with its peoples. Lastly, there is also a short description of anomalies and oddities in the area. He thereby also combined elements of the *Periplus* and *Periodos* literature in form and content.

¹⁰ Strab. Geogr. I. 1,22-23.

apparently beyond belief or the boundaries of scientific theories of the time? What did he do about mythical stories and how did he react to the marvels of nature, which were never seen by his readership and therefore in a genuine way unreal? This will be of great importance, since the marvellous in the world represents always those elements, which are not yet understood and therefore stand in contrast to an established knowledge concerning the structure of the world and the society who lives according to this lore.

The use of myth in the *Geographika*

To understand Strabo's conception and use of myth, one has to differentiate between three different levels. First, Strabo makes a clear difference between his own works, which are in his eyes mostly historical, and the scriptures by other writers that contain mythical or false and fictitious elements.¹¹ Strabo had to deal with the scriptures of previous geographers¹² to be taken seriously as a geographical writer and in order to take a proper stand in scientific discussions.¹³ By examining the diversity in the narration of different stories and using his own good judgment, he was able to spot those parts, which were purely fictional and therefore not to be believed in. This is especially true for the works of Megasthenes, who described different mythical peoples in India as for example the *Ocypodes*, who ran as fast as horses, the *Exnotocoetae*, who had ears that extended to their feet or the *Monommati*, who were

¹¹ Strab. Geogr. XI. 5,3. It is also noteworthy that myths had once a certain educational function in ancient societies, but that they are rendered useless by philosophical thinking according to Strab. Geogr. I,2,8.

¹² For example the works of Anaximander, Hekataios, Eratosthenes, Hipparchos or Megasthenes.

¹³ Jacob (1986: 35-41); Engels (1998: 77-80); Podossinov (2003: 91); Engels (2007: 127).

equipped with dog's ears.¹⁴ In dealing with such myth-tellers in a critical way, Strabo is able to cast himself in a good light in the eyes of his readership.

Secondly, certain myths contain an explanation for specific conditions of the world and the role of human societies in it. This is especially true for mythical stories of foundations of *poleis* in the Augustan Ecumene and the practice of religion in those cities.¹⁵ Such stories are not by themselves fictitious; they play an important role as a cultural reference of personal identity of the inhabitants and structure their lives inside the Greco-Roman culture. Concurrently, they help to shape the landscape and to include it into human society by linking it to history. They explain how certain phenomena of the present emerged from the past and serve to name important locations.¹⁶

Lastly, there exist some special myths, for example in Homer's epics, in which certain allegorical truths concerning geographical knowledge are hidden. In Strabo's eyes Homer was the first true geographer.¹⁷ Therefore, it was a worthy task to associate his works with probably the most prominent bard of the Greco-Roman culture.¹⁸ It would be the duty of the skilful expert to decipher those stories to retain exciting knowledge concerning the description of the world.¹⁹ At the same time, Strabo was

¹⁴ Strab. Geogr. XV. 1,57.

¹⁵ It is therefore not very surprising that this form of myth is wildly utilised by Strabo. Almost every city inside the Ecumene has its own myth concerning its founding or its cultic rituals. Cf. also Engels (1998: 93-94).

¹⁶ Cf. for example Strab. Geogr. IV, 4,6 (Cult of Dionysos on an island near Gaul, inhabited by the women of the Samnitae); Strab. Geogr. V. 3,12 (Description of the temple of the Arician); Strab. Geogr. XIV. 1,44 (Description of the Plutonium on the road between Tralleis and Nysa); Strab. Geogr. XIII. 4,14 (Description of the Plutonium First near Hierapolis) or Strab. Geogr, VI. 3,9 (Cult of Diomedes carried out by the inhabitants of Argyrippa).

¹⁷ Strab. Geogr. I. 1,2.

¹⁸ For example Strab. Geogr. I. 2,7; Podossinov (2003: 92). This can also be observed in large sections of the first book of the *Geographika* in which Strabo defends Homer's standing against the intellectual assaults of former geographers.

¹⁹ Cf. for example Strab. Geogr. I. 1,6.

able to join the ranks of those *exegetes*, who could read Homer's epics in the right way.²⁰

Paradoxography - Encountering the marvellous in nature

Strabo employs terms like *ἄπιστος*, *θαυμάσιος* or *παράδοξος*, traditionally used in Paradoxography, for exclusively telling marvellous facts about nature.²¹ He also points out that all amazing stories about nature are connected to the epistemic horizon of a person. Amazing objects, which are interesting for certain people, could already be a part of everyday life for others. The most important thing in such cases is the mechanism of explaining the marvellous object by the use of empirical methods.²²

In the *Geographika* there are descriptions of abnormally fertile landscapes in the east of the world outside the Augustan Ecumene, for example in Armenia, Hyrcania, Bactriana, India or Margiana.²³ Without great effort, wheat, grain, wine or olives grow in abundance, since the climate and the soil constitute an important advantage of location.²⁴ Further, there also exist descriptions of amazing natural spectacles.²⁵ One of the most interesting concerns the so-called Stony Plain in the southern part of Gaul:

It is called Stony Plain from the fact that it is full of stones as large as you can hold in your hand, although from beneath the stones there is a growth of wild herbage which affords abundant pasturage for cattle. In the middle of the plain stand water and salt

²⁰ Cf. also Biraschi (1984: 136-143).

²¹ This is also the main reason why the so called Seven Wonders of the World are not included in such stories concerning the paradoxical and the marvellous: they were creations of men.

²² Strab. Geogr. I. 3,16.

²³ Strab. Geogr. XII. 7,3 or Strab. Geogr. II. 1,14. It is important to note that Strabo never visited these regions himself. He reuses descriptions of former geographers after his own critical investigations.

²⁴ But this may also be a reason why in these places a developed civilisation compared to the Greco-Roman culture is often not found. Peoples were never pressed to invent techniques, boost crops, or organise society to maximize the chances of survival.

²⁵ Strab. Geogr. XI. 7,5.

springs, and also lumps of salt. Now although the whole of the country which lies beyond, as well as this, is exposed to the winds, the Black North, a violent and chilly wind, descends upon this plain with exceptional severity; at any rate, it is said that some of the stones are swept and rolled along, and that by the blasts the people are dashed from their vehicles and stripped both of weapons and clothing.

(Strab. Geogr. IV. 1,7)²⁶

The marvellous character of the plain results from the fact that one is not able to understand how these stones got there in the first place. There is no explanation known of everyday life to understand the phenomenon. Consequently, the place is also surrounded by different myths.²⁷ But Strabo tries to understand the wondrous by applying certain explicative theories of Aristotle and Poseidonios:

Now Aristotle says that the stones, after being vomited to the surface by those earthquakes that are called “Brastae” rolled together into the hollow places of the districts. But Poseidonius says that, since it was a lake, it solidified while the waves were dashing, and because of this was parted into a number of stones – as are the river-rocks and the pebbles on the sea-shore; and by reason of the similarity of origin, the former, like the latter are both smooth and equal in size. And an account of the cause has been given by both men.

(Strab. Geogr. IV.1,7)²⁸

Both theorists offer a reasonable explanation for the phenomenon. The amazement, which bewilders the observer when he looks for the first time at the Stony Plain, therefore plays an important role in gathering and constructing new knowledge according to the standards of early scientific systems. This reminds of the classical function of astonishment according to Plato and Aristotle in the generation of knowledge and the development of philosophy in general.²⁹

²⁶ Translated by Jones, Geography II: 185-187: “καλεῖται δὲ Λιθῶδες ἀπὸ τοῦ συμβεβηκότος. μεστὸν γὰρ ἐστὶ λίθων χειροπληθῶν ὑποπεφυκυῖαν ἐχόντων αὐτοῖς ἄγρωσιν, ἀφ’ ἧς ἄφθονοι νομαὶ βοσκήμασιν εἰσιν: ἐν μέσῳ δ’ ὕδατα καὶ ἀλυκίδες συνίστανται καὶ ἄλες. ἅπαντα μὲν οὖν καὶ ἡ ὑπερκειμένη χώρα προσήνεμός ἐστι, διαφερόντως δ’ εἰς τὸ πεδῖον τοῦτο τὸ μελαμβόρειον καταγίγει πνεῦμα βίαιον καὶ φρικῶδες: φασὶ γοῦν σύρεσθαι καὶ κυλινδεῖσθαι τῶν λίθων ἐνίους, καταφλάσθαι δὲ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀπὸ τῶν ὀχημάτων καὶ γυμνοῦσθαι καὶ ὄπλων καὶ ἐσθήτος ὑπὸ τῆς ἐμπνοῆς.”

²⁷ Strab. Geogr. IV. 1,7.

²⁸ Translated by Jones, Geography IV: 249-251: “Ἀριστοτέλης μὲν οὖν φησιν ὑπὸ σεισμῶν τῶν καλουμένων βραστῶν ἐκπεσόντας τοὺς λίθους εἰς τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν συνολισθεῖν εἰς τὰ κοῖλα τῶν χωρίων. Ποσειδώνιος δὲ λίμνην οὖσαν παγήναι μετὰ κλυδασμοῦ, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο εἰς πλείονας μερισθῆναι λίθους, καθάπερ τοὺς ποταμίους κάκληκας καὶ τὰς ψήφους τὰς αἰγιαλίτιδας, ὁμοίους δὲ καὶ λείους καὶ ἰσομεγέθεις πρὸς τῇ ὁμοιότητι: καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἀποδεδῶκασιν ἀμφοτέρω. πιθανὸς μὲν οὖν ὁ παρ’ ἀμφοῖν λόγος.”

²⁹ Platon Theait. 115d; Arist. Metaph. 982b.

Ethnography - Stories of foreign worlds

In Strabo's works, ethnographic excurses serve as a form of contrast medium to identify the culture of the Augustan Ecumene.³⁰ According to Engels (2007: 124-127), Strabo tried to adapt the viewpoint of the historical writings of Polybios in which the Roman Empire was destined to rule all over the world. When Strabo describes different peoples living in the world, he classifies them therefore in three different categories:³¹ First, the inhabitants of the Ecumene live in a well ordered society in cities, towns and villages and are able to live a fulfilled life, because they follow the rules implied by practical reason.³² Second, next to the Augustan empire, there existed a number of advanced civilisations.³³ Those cultures were able to create an independent way of life according to their customs and are to be praised in the points in which they are consistent with Roman practices.³⁴ But because of certain almost barbaric faults in character or in custom,³⁵ it will be the fate of such folks to be part of the expanding Greco-Roman culture in the future.³⁶ Finally, the rest of the world is divided

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of ethnographic details in Strabo's works cf. especially Vliet 1984: 35-38.

³¹ This classification is based on the use of practical reason of different peoples. A high degree of this reason leads to a prosperous civilisation because every member of such a society would not just exist for and by himself, but in and for a reasonable collective so that the life of the individual and of all members of society would be well ordered and happy. Barbaric tribes on the other hand would never be able to construct a firm, sane and solid culture because everyone would just live for themselves in an egoistic manner, see also Vliet 1984: 61-66; 68-75.

³² This is true for almost every region inside the Ecumene, see for example also the status of certain Gallic tribes in Strab. Geogr. IV,1,12.

³³ For example the Parthians, the Persians, the Indians or the Egyptians.

³⁴ Cf. for example the modest lifestyle of Indian people in Strab. Geogr. XV,1,53.

³⁵ This becomes clear, if one examines for example Strabo's description of Egyptian temples in Strab., Geogr. XVII,1,28. Even though these impressive buildings are admired by the author, he criticises their bulky size and barbaric architecture.

³⁶ Engels 2007: 127.

between different barbaric tribes without further cultural accomplishments.³⁷ Further still, their customs are not just bewildering but also mostly repelling:

But the ocean-coast on the north has none on account of the cold, and, for the most part, the rest of the ocean-coast has none on account of the slovenly character of the people and the fact that they live on a low moral plane – that is, they have regard, not for rational living, but rather for satisfying their physical needs and bestial instincts – unless someone thinks those men have regard for rational living who bathe with urine which they have aged in cisterns, and wash their teeth with it, both they and their wives, as the Cantabrians and the neighbouring peoples are said to do.

(Strab. Geogr. III. 4,16-17)³⁸

In this case, Strabo does not indulge in myths, but in stereotypes and *topoi*. He constructs a fantastic and partially disgusting image of barbaric tribes especially of the Celts not just to enlighten his readers, but also to entertain them and to convince them of the superiority of the Greco-Roman civilisation. The barbarians therefore serve as a medium of contrast, they are what the inhabitants of the Roman Empire are not *et vice versa*.

Besides such descriptions, Strabo includes also some mythical tribes in a rather hesitant way, like the *Troglodytae* or the Amazons. Even though he is often sceptical about the existence of these peoples because he has never seen an actual proof of their existence, he includes their stories in his writings since every other geographer dealt with them. It was therefore expected that he attended to the same task:

But as regards the Amazons, the same stories are told now as in early times, though they are marvellous and beyond belief. For instance, who could believe that an army of women, or a city, or a tribe, could ever be organised without men, and not only be organised, but even make inroads upon the territory of other people, and not only overpower the peoples near them to the extent of advancing as far as what is now Ionia, but even send an expedition across the sea as far as Attica?

(Strab. Geogr. XI. 5,3)³⁹

³⁷ Cf. for example certain folks in Iberia in Strab., Geogr. III,4,16. Those peoples also include the Lusitanians, the Massagetae, the Bactrians, the Armenians, most of the tribes in *Germania*, the Scythians, the Getae, the Dacians and the Arabs.

³⁸ Translated by Jones, Geography II: 107-113: "τῶν ἐκτὸς ἢ μὲν παρωκεανῆτις ἢ πρόσβορρος ἀμοιρεῖ διὰ τὰ ψύχη, ἢ δ' ἄλλη τὸ πλέον διὰ τὴν ὀλιγωρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὸ μὴ πρὸς διαγωγὴν ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον πρὸς ἀνάγκην καὶ ὄρμην θηριώδη μετὰ ἔθους φαύλου ζῆν: εἰ μὴ τις οἶεται πρὸς διαγωγὴν ζῆν τοὺς οὕρω λουομένους ἐν δεξαμεναῖς παλαιουμένω, καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας σημηχομένους καὶ αὐτοὺς καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας αὐτῶν, καθάπερ τοὺς Καντάβρους φασὶ καὶ τοὺς ὀμόρους αὐτοῖς."

Again, the Amazons serve as a barbaric tribe, as a fictitious medium of contrast to Roman society and illustrate the role of the two genders in it. In their case, it is the tough landscape in form of the Taurus Mountains, which affects their inhabitants so much that even women become brutal warriors in a world mostly controlled by men.⁴⁰

Summary

The understanding of the use of marvellous stories in Strabo's *Geographika* is interesting on at least three levels: By analysing his relation to myths, one can see how (1) he deals with fictional stories of former geographers, (2) how he reads the ancient epics of Homer and (3) how he comprehends the myths of the Augustan Ecumene as part of its cultural identity. In understanding his concept of the marvellous in nature, one gets a clearer idea which phenomena amazed the geographer and his contemporaries in his research and descriptions of the world and how he tried to explain them. Lastly, the discourse around foreign peoples helps the author to define the identity of the Ecumene and to speak of other social and cultural worlds in the termini of his own culture. Therefore, the modern reader gets a deeper understanding of the development, distribution and handling of an ancient discourse of knowledge and the mechanisms, which were important to explain certain marvellous phenomena in the world. Due to the writing on marvellous accounts, Strabo was able to grasp aspects of foreign and unknown parts of the world and to deliver them to his readership in form of his own works and language.

³⁹ Translated by Jones, *Geography V*: 235-237: "ἴδιον δέ τι συμβέβηκε τῷ λόγῳ τῷ περὶ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων: οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοι τὸ μυθῶδες καὶ τὸ ἱστορικὸν διωρισμένον ἔχουσι: τὰ γὰρ παλαιὰ καὶ ψευδῆ καὶ τερατώδη μῦθοι καλοῦνται, ἢ δ' ἱστορία βούλεται ἀληθές, ἂν τε παλαιὸν ἂν τε νέον, καὶ τὸ τερατώδες ἢ οὐκ ἔχει ἢ σπάνιον: περὶ δὲ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων τὰ αὐτὰ λέγεται καὶ νῦν καὶ πάλαι, τερατώδη τε ὄντα καὶ πίστεως πόρρω. τίς γὰρ ἂν πιστεύσειεν, ὡς γυναικῶν στρατὸς ἢ πόλις ἢ ἔθνος συσταίη ἂν ποτε χωρὶς ἀνδρῶν; καὶ οὐ μόνον γε συσταίη, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐφόδους ποιήσαιτο ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλλοτρίαν καὶ κρατήσειεν οὐ τῶν ἐγγύς μόνον ὥστε καὶ μέχρι τῆς νῦν Ἰωνίας προελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ διαπόντιον στείλαιτο στρατείαν μέχρι τῆς Ἀπικῆς;"

⁴⁰ Cf. also Vliet (1984: 58-61).

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