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INDEX

Christer Bruun	Water for the Castra Praetoria. What were the Severan <i>operamina</i> ?	7
Siegfried Jäkel	Kritische Beobachtungen zum Programm einer Literatur-Pädagogik in Plutarchs Schrift <i>De audiendis poetis</i>	19
Mika Kajava	<i>Varus</i> and <i>Varia</i>	37
Klaus Karttunen	The Country of Fabulous Beasts and Naked Philosophers. India in Classical and Medieval Literature	43
Saara Lilja	Sunbathing in Antiquity	53
Bengt Löfstedt	Zu Bedas Evangelienkommentaren	61
Olivier Masson	Quelques noms grecs récents en -μάτιος	73
Teivas Oksala	T. S. Eliot's Conception of Virgil and Virgilian Scholarship	79
H.K. Riikonen	Petronius and Modern Fiction. Some Comparative Notes	87
Olli Salomies	Weitere republikanische Inschriften.	105
Timo Sironen	Osservazioni sulle grafie per le occlusive aspirate d'origine greca nell'osco	109
Heikki Solin	Analecta epigraphica CXIII—CXX.	119
E.M. Steinby	Il lato orientale del Foro Romano. Proposte di lettura	139
Leena Talvio	Sulla figura della Fortuna nel Sogno del Faraone.	185
Rolf Westman	Unbeachteter epikureischer Bericht bei Plutarch (<i>Qu. conviv.</i> 5, 1).	195
De novis libris iudicia.		203
Index librorum in hoc volumine recensorum		243
Libri nobis missi.		245

The Country of Fabulous Beasts and Naked Philosophers India in Classical and Medieval Literature*

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In the last stage of his temptation St. Antonius saw various fantastic peoples and animals, namely mouthless, sideless and headless peoples, pygmies, shadowfoots and dogheads, the animals sadhuzag, martikhoras, katoblepas, basilisk, griffon and unicorn and some sea monsters. These and many others are often met in literature and art and they represent an old tradition — India seen through classical literature and filtered through the Middle Ages — although Flaubert did not connect them with India. The seamen's tales of many centuries have contributed a little, but the picture of India remained very much the same until relatively recent times. Folklore was full of all kind of fantasies derived originally from classical literature, and scholars anyway considered the classical authors the only worthy object of study. In the early 18th century Adriaan Reland wrote a dissertation on the ancient Indian language using the words cited as Indian by Megasthenes and others as his only material — and giving most of them New Persian etymologies.¹ In the 16th century Henri Estienne, himself a famous classical scholar, wrote with contempt of the modern merchants, who certainly sailed to India, but were analphabetic and

* This article is a revised version of a paper read at the XXXII International Congress for Asian and North African Studies in Hamburg, 25—30 August 1986.

¹ H. Relandus, *Dissertatio de veteris lingua Indiae (Dissertationes selectae I)*, Trajecti ad Rhenum 1706, 209—232.

destitute of any learning and thus unworthy to be placed beside classical authors when dealing with India.²

India was the country of superlatives and marvels. Vasco da Gama set sail to the very same country where Philostratus had let his Apollonius wander, and it was a long time before he and his successors could have any influence on the popular and learned opinion of India. And when Columbus found his own India at the other end of the world he had no difficulty in ascertaining from his "Indian" informants that there were dogheads and amazons in some more remote parts.³

The common picture of India in the Middle Ages and later was derived from rather few authors. Although there would have been relatively reliable and competent sources, the compilers of the encyclopaedical works of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages preferred to draw from those very authors who told the most incredible tales. The place justly belonging to Megasthenes with his outstanding experience and to the critical historians of Alexander the Great was thus usurped by Ctesias, the father of the dogheads and the terrible martichora, and by authors of the so-called Alexander Romance who transferred Alexander from history to the realm of legend. In this respect it is unimportant that many Ctesianic tales can be shown to be ultimately derived from real India⁴ — in later literature they could never provide a real picture of this faraway land. In Classical times the Alexander historians and Megasthenes were the main source of knowledge on India and the result was not wholly mistaken,⁵ although it little by little became antiquated. But the Middle Ages preferred to see India as the home of all marvels, appropriate fame for the country reputedly situated next to the Garden of Eden.

The Middle Ages are a kind of filter which sometimes distorts our image of classical antiquity. Thus we know that there was much

² De Ctesia Historico Antiquissimo Disquisitio, cited in extenso by Baehr in his Ctesias edition 1824, 25ff.

³ B. Laufer, Columbus and Cathay, JAOS 51 (1931) 87—103.

⁴ See e.g. my short account in *Studia Orientalia* 50 (1981) 105—107 and a forthcoming article *The Indica of Ctesias and its Critics*, in *Demetrios Galanos Commemoration Vol.* (appearing in India in 1988).

⁵ In spite of the strong *interpretatio Graeca* and many marvels found even in Megasthenes.

information available on India but too little of the exact nature of it. Ctesias collected information from Persian sources, Alexander's companions wrote of what they saw during his Indian campaign, several Hellenistic ambassadors to the Maurya court wrote on their missions. Later a brisk trade was established between India and the Roman empire, and several Indian embassies to the West are attested. There was even a copious literature on India in Greek and Latin, but with one exception it has disappeared and we have now only more or less meagre and unrepresentative fragments to cope with. Our knowledge is mostly derived from short mentions in other kinds of literature and some geographical compilations. In the troubled times of the early Middle Ages nobody cared to copy Megasthenes' text, and when the extant classical literature began later to be systematically collected there was not a single manuscript left of this important work. In a way the scales were balanced because the same lot was fated also to Ctesias, but of his work we have at least a (not too good) summary made by the patriarch Photius before the final loss of the work.

Yet the unrepresentativeness of the extant sources is no ground for too bold hypotheses. The picture of India conveyed by them is so one-sided that it cannot be based on any chances of textual transmission. We get much information on Indian animals and plants — fact and fancy alike — and climate and natural conditions have been described quite well. There are many ethnographical accounts, again both fact and fancy, but mostly originating in Indian rather than Greek fancy. Classical geographers were remarkably accurate with the names and the locations of Indian rivers, mountains and towns. But the rich and old culture of India got very little attention. The abundant Indian literature meets with silence. Only one short mention can possibly (and very vaguely) allude to Sanskrit epics. We find nothing about Indian science. Thanks to Megasthenes there is at least one description of the Maurya state and its administration, but even here we often run into the difficulty of discerning genuine Indian information from Greek interpretation.⁶

⁶ See B. Timmer, *Megasthenes en de indische maatschappij*, Amsterdam 1930, and especially A. Zambrini, *Gli Indiká di Megastene*, *ASNP* 3, 12, 1 (1982) 71—149 and 3, 15, 3 (1985) 781—853.

Greek interpretation is a still more important feature in the descriptions of Indian religion and philosophy. In a way the Greeks were rather interested in them, but only in a very subjective way. The ascetic mode of life of the Indian philosophers aroused admiration, but their actual doctrines were mostly replaced with more familiar ones. Megasthenes described Indian gods with Greek names — following the accepted method of Greek ethnography — basing his identifications on superficial similarities, so superficial that the real Indian counterparts of his Heracles and Dionysus are still a matter of controversy. The Buddha is mentioned by name only by the Christian authors of late antiquity.

All this is due to the self-sufficiency and egocentrism of classical culture. Even Megasthenes had little interest and objectivity to understand Indian culture as such. In this respect the Indians themselves were similar and the picture of the West in Sanskrit literature is still more meagre.⁷ Another purely western feature was the idealization of faraway peoples, who were reputedly long-living and healthy, righteous, wise and happy. The noble savage of Rousseau was common in classical ethnography and reflected each author's own ideal as much as his later kinsman.

Alexander and his companions met some Indian ascetics and it is easy to recognize Indian features in their description. But unfortunately the most important description was written by Onesicritus, known already in his time as a rather subjective writer. He was a pupil of the cynic Diogenes and accordingly he painted the Indian ascetics as representatives of cynic philosophical ideals.⁸ These gymnosophists or naked philosophers then became popular in classical literature, but there was very little genuinely Indian in them besides the ascetic way of living. They were a favourite of cynical literature, often dealt with in other philosophical literature and later adopted by Christian writers. Two spectacular suicides by Indian ascetics at the stake — that of Calanus in front of Alexander and that of Zarmanochegas in Athens in the first century B.C. — were further causes of admiration and so India little by little became the country of wise

⁷ There is not much to add to the survey of S. Lévi, *La Grèce et l'Inde d'après les documents indiens*, REG 4 (1891) 24—45.

⁸ See e.g. T.S. Brown, *Onesicritus. A Study in Hellenistic Historiography*, Berkeley — Los Angeles 1949, 38ff.

philosophers, whose wisdom was sought by Apollonius, Plotinus, Mani and many others.

The hot controversy about possible Buddhist influences in Christianity is stilled. The differences are evident, and really striking similarities too few, to justify bold theories. The early church seems to have been rather indifferent to India, with the exception of possible missionary interest. Only the rise of anchoritism and monasticism led Christian authors to adopt Indian philosophers as an example of the ascetic ideal.⁹ The theme was conveniently connected with Alexander, whose more and more legendary career became so popular in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The literature on Alexander and the Brahmins became abundant.¹⁰

The first centuries were a period of religious agitation especially in the Near East. Mystery religions, Gnosticism, Judaic and Christian sects, Manichaeism and many others were all part of it and many details are still obscure. India is mentioned sometimes in this connection but the real origins are mostly in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Iran. With the exception of a couple of striking similarities, little Indian influence can be shown, even the much discussed case of Indian influences in Neoplatonism is all but clear, although not to be neglected.¹¹ One Christian sectarian, Bardesanes of Edessa was well-informed about India and even wrote a book on the country. Both Indian and the classical sources mention some Indian — mostly Buddhist — ascetics travelling in the West and vice versa. In Christian literature we find the curious story on the origins of Manichaeism. A Palestinian, Scythianus, was trading in India and learned Indian philosophy there. Back in Egypt he founded a sect and was later succeeded by his disciple Terebinthus. This Terebinthus proclaimed to have been born of a virgin and took a new name — the Buddha. His writings reputedly became the core of Manichaean doctrines.¹² But Mani himself was not in need of an apocryphical Egyptian

⁹ See the able summary of this question in J.W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek World*, Totowa NJ 1980, 235ff.

¹⁰ See e.g. L. Cracco Ruggini, *Sulla cristianizzazione della cultura pagana: il mito greco e latino di Alessandro dall'età antonina al medioevo*, *Athenaeum* 43 (1965) 3—80.

¹¹ A summary of this question in Sedlar, *op.cit.* 199ff.

¹² From Christian authors cited by Priaulx, *JRAS* 20 (1863) 269f.

Buddha to get Indian ingredients into his syncretic doctrine. He spent one whole year in India, recognized the Buddha as one of his predecessors and probably adopted some — if not many — Indian elements into his creed. Later, in Central Asia the Manichaeans could even give Mahayanist garb to their religious propaganda. It is possible that Indian influence has penetrated to Christian monachism through Manichaeism.¹³

There are many other examples of Indian fame as the country of philosophy. Late tradition ascribed Indian travels to Pythagoras, Democritus and several other early philosophers, and Philostratus described at great length those of Apollonius of Tyana. Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonist philosophy, tried to go to India but was prevented from it by a war between Rome and Persia.¹⁴ The Theban Scholasticus did go there and brought some new elements to the Brahmin tradition.¹⁵ Patristic authors discussed Indian philosophy, often approving its ascetic and unworldly ideals, but naturally criticizing some of its doctrines, or what were thought to be its doctrines because the real contents of Indian thinking were not known at all.¹⁶

The medieval picture of India came from many sources.¹⁷ What was more or less real information was mostly from Pliny, often through the agency of Solinus. The geographers of late antiquity contributed their share, mostly by selecting from the more detailed information of their predecessors.¹⁸ The only new feature in their India was its situation next to the Garden of Eden. The Ganges had been identified with the Phison, one of the rivers of Eden, by Josephus and later the idea became universal in Christian geography.¹⁹ Paradise itself was situated either in easternmost

¹³ See Sedlar, *op. cit.* 208ff. and especially 251.

¹⁴ Porph. Plot. 3.

¹⁵ See Derrett, *The Theban Scholasticus and Malabar*, JAOS 82 (1962) 21—31.

¹⁶ For a critical summary of these questions see the relevant chapters in Sedlar's book.

¹⁷ The only general survey of the medieval idea of India is H. Gregor, *Das Indienbild des Abendlandes (bis zum Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts)*, Wien 1964.

¹⁸ For the ancient and medieval geography of India in the West see F.L. Pullé, *La cartografia antica dell'India*, Firenze 1901.

¹⁹ S.G. Darian, *The Ganges and the Rivers of Eden*, *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 31 (1977) 42—54.

Asia or next to Taprobane, which actually was sometimes considered the eastern end of the world.²⁰

The idea of India as the country of superlatives, marvels and monsters originated from the earliest Greek authors on India, such as Herodotus and Ctesias. Their information was filtered through Pliny, Solinus and other compilers. Through them the marvels of India became a common feature in medieval literature. They abound in geographies, encyclopaedies and bestiaries and especially in the various versions of the Alexander legend. Physiologus with its many recensions gave them a Christian duty, which the martichora, the dogheads and many others often fulfil in medieval art too.²¹ Later they found their way into the early natural histories and were slow to cede their right to a real existence in some distant corner of India or Central Asia.²² A speaking parrot and an elephant were still such great wonders in the 16th century that even scholars hesitated to deny other wonders. Perhaps the most famous of all Indian marvels, although often not connected with India, was the unicorn, originally a Ctesianic description of the Indian rhinoceros, now a symbolic image of Christ, whose existence was “proved” by narwhal and walrus

²⁰ For the eastern end of the world a reference — there are many throughout medieval literature — can be taken from the western end. Thus Taprobane as the eastern end of the world was well-known in ancient Irish literature, e.g. in the Troy legend and the texts dependent on it. See K. Meyer, *Ein mittellirisches Gedicht auf Brendan den Meerfahrer*, SPAW 1912:1, 436ff., verse four and notes on p. 442. For Paradise and India see e.g. verses 8—11 in the geographical poem of MacCosse, *ferlegind of Ros Ailithir*, edited by T. Olden in *Proc. of the Royal Irish Academy* 2:II, Dublin 1879—88, 219—252.

²¹ As general surveys see F. Pfister, *Von den Wundern des Morgenlandes*, *Deutsches Jb. f. Volkskunde* 1 (1955) 127—146 (this and other relevant papers of Pfister are republished in his *Kleine Schriften zur Alexanderroman*, Meisenheim am Glan 1976), and R. Wittkower, *Marvels of the East*, *JWI* 5 (1942) 149—197. On the Indian elements in *Physiologus* see J. Charpentier, *Kleine Bemerkungen zum Physiologus*, *Festschr. E. Kuhn* 1916, 280—293, on martichora G.J.M. Bartelink, *Het fabeldier, martichoras of mantichora*, *Hermeneus* 4 (1972) 169—174.

²² E.g. in C. Gesner's famous *Historia animalium*. I have checked only *Liber primus De Quadrupedibus viuiparis*, ed. secunda, Francoforti 1603.

ivory.²³ Another central motive was the fabulous people of the dogheads, again originally described by Ctesias.²⁴ In classical tradition they are still closely connected with Ctesias, but in the Middle Ages they were connected with various, especially East European, folklore motifs. The Langobards reputedly had dogheads in their army — probably some masked berserk band of soldiers — and Adam of Bremen knew them to be living somewhere east of the Baltic Sea, perhaps in the same region where there were later curious trials against reputed werewolves. The intruding hordes of Mongolian and Turcic peoples were given the name dogheads in many places of Eastern Europe from Finland to the Balkans. The most famous doghead, however, is St. Christophorus, whose legend originated in late antiquity.

The wise philosophers of India lived through medieval literature as an ascetic ideal and moral teachers who mostly explained higher, spiritual values to the warrior Alexander. The hero is often Dandamis, the ascetic whom Onesicritus met and asked in vain to come before Alexander. Now he is closely connected with Alexander who comes himself to discuss with him, and then has a long correspondence with him. These and other spurious letters by Alexander and persons connected with him²⁵ were as important an element in medieval India literature as the Dandamis-book and the Alexander Romance itself.²⁶ The same material could be used for other purposes too as in the *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi* (4th or 5th century), where the Brahmin ascetics did win the argument. Here Alexander is apparently serving anti-monastic propaganda.²⁷ In the

²³ See B. Laufer's articles on walrus and narwhal ivory, *T'oung Pao* 14 (1913) 315—370 and 17 (1916) 350—389. The unicorn itself was very popular in medieval art and legend and there is a vast literature on it.

²⁴ See L. Kretzenbacher, *Kynokephale Dämonen südosteuropäischer Volksdichtung*, München 1968, and my article in *Arctos* 18 (1984) 31—36 with some further references.

²⁵ The most important is the letter of Alexander to Aristotle.

²⁶ On the origins of the legend see Sedlar's summary, *op. cit.* 68ff. More fully Cracco Ruggini, *op. cit.*, Pfister, *op. cit.*, G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, Cambridge 1956, and many others. A different point of view, the Brahmin country as a social utopy, is given by Kirsch, *Das Reich des Dindimus*, *WZHalle* 24:3 (1975) 71—75.

²⁷ Sedlar, *op. cit.* 73f.

Middle Ages Alexander was often described as a model of chivalry virtues. His conquests, with all those marvels, made entertaining reading.

The legend of an Indian mission by the apostle Thomas or by Bartholomew originated in late antiquity on account of the real mission in India, though it probably took place later than is suggested in the legend.²⁸ The legend and the general awareness of Christians living in India lasted through the Middle Ages until the real Indian Christians were found again.

These were the main elements of the medieval picture of India. Mostly they originated in antiquity, and the Middle Ages had very little to add. It is true that the Buddha legend arrived in Europe during the Middle Ages and became popular as the legend of Barlaam and Joasaph. But the real origin of the legend was noticed only in the 17th century and shown definitely after the middle of the 19th century. Originally it seems to have come through a Manichaeian source and there are several versions of it in Near Eastern languages. The Greek version ascribed to St. John of Damascus was actually made c. 1000 A.D. from a Georgian version and soon became very popular. It was translated into Latin and into several Slavic, Romance and German languages. The central figures have got much worship and there are even relics of them, but canonized saints they are not.²⁹

The famous Indian collection of fables, the Pañcatantra spread in the same way through successive translations and arrived eventually in Europe.³⁰ Through Arabs, Europe learnt something of Indian science. But all this did not contribute much to the picture of India, because it was

²⁸ See especially Dihle, *Neues zur Thomas-Tradition*, *JbAC* 6 (1963) 54—70 (now republished in his *Antike und Orient*, Heidelberg 1984, 61ff.). What I said in my article *On the contacts of South India with the Western World in ancient times*, in Parpola and Hansen (ed.), *South Asian Religion and Society*, London 1986, 189—204, on this question (195ff.) must be modified according to Dihle, whose important contribution I did not know of when I wrote this article in 1981.

²⁹ See e.g. D.M. Lang, *The Life of the Blessed Iodasaph*, *BSOAS* 20 (1957) 389—407. On the relics and worship see Rawlinson, *Barlaam and Josaphat*, *JRAS*, Bombay Branch 24 (1914—16) 96—101.

³⁰ See J. Hertel, *Pañcatantra, seine Geschichte un seine Verbreitung*, Leipzig 1914.

often not known to be Indian. Byzantium had at least Cosmas and even some subsequent contacts,³¹ but in the West India was and remained the country known to the ancients, a picture where the thousand years from c. 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. were contaminated into one whole without any more recent source of information. These came only in the days of Marco Polo and Friar Jordanus, but even their eye-witness accounts had very little influence on the picture. Mostly it was not understood to be antiquated, that the real India, that distant, but existent country, was the same no more, if it ever had been. This picture was given more or less intact to the Renaissance and even subsequent centuries, although more attention was now given to original ancient sources as far as they had been preserved. In the dawn of Indology in the 18th century the classical authors were still the main source on India and only slowly were they superseded by Sanskrit sources. Later studies have concentrated on the classical authors and many attempts have been made to ascertain how far their accounts corresponded to the ancient Indian reality. What is spurious is often dismissed as such. But just this imaginative India has its own place in western cultural history, in art, literature and even folklore, and as such it deserves our attention.

³¹ See N. Pigulewskaja, *Byzanz auf den Wegen nach Indien*. Aus der Geschichte des byzantinischen Handels mit dem Orient vom 4. bis 6. Jahrhundert, Berlin 1969. The subsequent period is still waiting a competent discussion.