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THE RELIABILITY OF THE *INDIKA* OF KTESIAS

Before the beginning of Indology and during its first hundred years the classical descriptions of India were a very popular area of studies, and we have plenty of books and articles from that period.¹ Afterwards the bulk of original information from India - texts, inscriptions and archaeological remains - has grown enormously and naturally drawn the interest of scholars. At the same time the prominent position of classical studies has been remarkably cut down. Only a few classical authors - e.g. Megasthenes and *Periplus maris Erythraei* - are still as popular as ever, others have nearly sunk into oblivion. This is particularly true for Ktesias, who was the physician of Artaxerxes Mnemon in the 5th century B.C. His *Indika*² is preserved for us in fragments and the abridgement made by the patriarch Photius in the ninth century. The main reason for neglect in his case is the bad reputation which he has had from the days of Aristotle. It is very common to disregard Ktesias simply as a liar, or at least as a totally uncritical and unreliable author. Some comparisons between his *Persika* and other sources point also to this conclusion.³

Be it so. Ktesias really seems to be uncritical, as can be easily noticed when reading his fragments. But he is not a liar. From Greece and Persia, India was still a very far and fabulous country and it was difficult to get reliable accounts of it even in the court of the great king, whose realm also included the Indian provinces. And Ktesias did not have modern scientific standards as his guide. Another point often forgotten is the lack of knowledge of the natural sciences in his times. Elephants and talking parrots were really wonders to Ktesias and his contemporaries. When travellers from India told of other wonders, it was easy to trust them. To a Greek person living 400 years B.C., a man with a dog's head was not greater a wonder than a living elephant with a trunk tamely

following the orders of its mahout. Both seemed equally unnatural to him, and when one was true the other may also have been true.

When we examine the accounts of Ktesias we can usually find out how he has got such fantastic stories. Some are easily recognisable as true and others have at least a kernel of truth. Sometimes we can also recognise the Indian delegation, mentioned by him, and its presents to the great king. In the 19th century his tale of elephants breaking the walls of a town was a common example of his unreliability - and moreover, the account of the wooden walls around Pāṭaliputra of that of Megasthenes. Then there were the excavations by Waddell, Spooner and Page, which exposed the remains of those very wooden walls.⁴ Of course we can also very easily substitute gates for walls. In Saṃgāmāvacarajātaka an elephant breaks the gates of Benares⁵ and in Arthaśāstra rushing forts is one of the duties of war-elephants.⁶ In later times there was a special armour placed on the forehead of elephant when doing that.⁷ It has often remained unnoticed that Ktesias was the first Greek author who knew anything about elephants, that honour is mostly given to Aristotle.⁸ Indian dogs and the enormous wealth of the country were already known to Herodotus, but from Ktesias we hear for the first time in Greek literature of talking birds and falconry.

His account of falconry is also many centuries older than the first reports from India⁹ and Central Asia, but his description of the training of falcons and eagles is essentially the same as that of Le Coq.¹⁰ Some have criticized Ktesias for these eagles but according to Le Coq eagles were still in use in Turkestan some 70 years ago. It is true, I must confess, that Ktesias speaks also of crows, but this may be due to wrong information or some forgotten experiment.

When comparing the accounts of Ktesias with the Indian sources, it must be remembered that his India is not the same country as old Jambūdvīpa or historical India. For Ktesias India was the valley of Indus and the lands immediately to the east and also to the north of it. That very country was rather remote in most old Indian literature and it was populated with many fabulous and barbarous races. That is why we have no reason to wonder, as one recent Indian writer does¹¹, that Ktesias has not described some prominent features of Aryan India, to say nothing of the trivialities of everyday life.

The marvellous East as a western τόπος was also not invented by Ktesias. In Old Egyptian literature the Near East was a place of wonders and tales,¹² but for Hecataeus and Herodotus it was already India. Ktesias was clearly fond of marvellous stories and he has preserved for us many "seamen's tales" about India. But from those remote times even seamen's tales with their kernel of truth are valuable, and those kernels have mostly come from Indian borderlands.

Notes

- 1 By Wilson, Lassen, Reinaud, McCrindle and many others.
- 2 The best edition is that of F. Jacoby, FGrH No. 688, the only translation (in English) that of McCrindle, but it is not always reliable.
- 3 For *Persika* see e.g. the studies of Krumbholz and König.
- 4 See e.g. Page, pp. 135-140.
- 5 Fausbøll No. 182.
- 6 Kauṭilya II, 32.
- 7 The so-called *tavā*, an example is in the Palace Museum of Udaipur.
- 8 Herodotus mentions the elephants by name, but gives no description of that curious animal.
- 9 With the exception of one vague mention by Pāṇini (6,3,71).
- 10 Le Coq, passim.
- 11 Viney Kumar.
- 12 Moret, p. 388.

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