

III. ANCIENT DIPLOMACY: MEGASTHENES

Alexander's eastern campaigns had definitely brought India within the sphere of interest of the Hellenistic monarchs who succeeded him. Our sources are few, and we do not know many details, but it seems that in the late fourth and third centuries B.C. there was a great deal of exchange on the diplomatic level. After the treaty between Seleucus and Candragupta was sealed we know of two Seleucid and one Ptolemaic mission to India, of exchange of letters and gifts between Indian and Seleucid monarchs, and of Indian (more or, perhaps, less) religious missions sent to all important Hellenistic rulers. Certainly there was more activity than this on both sides, but there is no record of it in our scanty sources.

Thus Megasthenes was not the only Hellenistic ambassador to India, but by comparison with him the others (Daimachus and Dionysius) are very shadowy figures. There were probably others, too, whose missions are not recorded in our meagre evidence. In this chapter we shall concentrate on Megasthenes, and the others will be briefly dealt with in the context of historical contacts, in chapter VI.¹

At the beginning of modern research on Megasthenes it was common to ascribe everything containing intimate knowledge of India beyond the Indus valley to Megasthenes. Thus Lassen (1852 and 1874) often repeated the assertion that Megasthenes was the *only* Greek author who ever had the opportunity to observe Indians in the heart of their country. Although we cannot without further evidence ascribe to Daimachus much influence in later literature, his mere existence is enough to show that Megasthenes was not the only Greek author to visit India, and probably there were still other sources of information.² Nevertheless, Megasthenes is without doubt the most valuable classical source on India.

¹ To consider Megasthenes now, though the history of Seleucid eastern relations comes only in chapter VI, is perhaps confusing chronologically. But as the historians of Alexander *and* Megasthenes were the main sources on India during all of classical antiquity, it seems reasonable to discuss these sources first, and only then continue with history, which must then be carried on to a much later period than Megasthenes' mission.

² I cannot accept Bevan's claim (1922, 359) that Daimachus and Dionysius must have been unimportant and devoid of fresh information, because they were so rarely cited. Dionysius is such a shadowy figure that we can say hardly anything about him, but for Daimachus the point is that he was criticized by Eratosthenes. But this was the case with Megasthenes, too. It is possible that the other ambassadors wrote much shorter accounts than Megasthenes, or perhaps they were inferior to him by the literary standards of the time. This was enough to assign him to oblivion, but says nothing of the real value of their observations.

1. Megasthenes: the Man and his Mission

We know very little about Megasthenes' origins. At least he seems to have been Greek. The name is good Greek and of a common type (cf. Androsthenes, Demosthenes).³ A supposed Persian origin is entirely apocryphical.⁴ However, attempts to define more closely his place of origin (in Asia Minor) have been unsuccessful.⁵ Furthermore, the character of his relation to Seleucus is wholly unknown. Before his mission he stayed in Arachosia with Sibyrtius⁶ and therefore already knew the East.

The summit of Megasthenes' career was clearly his visit to Candragupta Maurya. Of his later life we know nothing, though he lived long enough to be able to write his account. Concerning his mission there is the old question whether it was one long embassy or several shorter visits.⁷ Reference has sometimes been made to the Indian climate and its notorious unhealthiness for Europeans as an argument for several short missions instead of one long one.⁸ But even if we suppose that missionaries, who often spent their entire adult life in their chosen field, belong to a different species from us ordinary mortals, colonial history knows of many Britons who remained thirty or forty years in India. And

³ There were a few other people named Megasthenes, though the name is rare. See Stein 1932, 230.

⁴ Metasthenes of Annius da Viterbo, see Schwanbeck 1846, 58, note 51, McCrindle 1877, 14, note.

⁵ Reuss 1906, commenting on Witkowski 1899 (not seen by me). See also Stein 1920, 7 & 1932, 230f., Timmer 1930, 9.

⁶ On Sibyrtius see e.g. Arrianus, *Anab.* 6, 27, 1 (formerly satrap of Carmania, now appointed the new satrap of Arachosia, Gedrosia and the Oreitae), for Megasthenes living with (and probably serving under) him *ibid.* 5, 6, 2 (T 2a), further Curtius 9, 10, 20. See Berve 1926, Brown 1957, 13ff., and VI.1 below. It is even possible, though not very likely, that Megasthenes was sent to India by Sibyrtius and not by Seleucus (cf. Brown 1955, 18 & 1957, 15). As is so often the case, some early scholars stated their unfounded impressions as established facts. So we can read such a statement as we find in McCrindle 1896, 407: "Seleukos sent as his ambassador to the Indian court *his friend and companion* Megasthenes. This was a fortunate choice, for *while there* Megasthenes... composed a work on India" (Italics mine).

⁷ According to Schwanbeck, several visits were first proposed by Robertson 1791, but I have only found the very opposite of this in his work. In any case several visits were supported by Müller 1878, 398, Lassen 1874, 668, Timmer 1930, 6, Brown 1957, 15, Schwarz 1966a, 72, 1968, 227 & 1970, 284. A long visit with several audiences by Schwanbeck 1846, 23 (followed by McCrindle 1877, 17f.). In spite of Schwanbeck, Robertson 1819 (1794), 34 spoke of "several years' residence". With little evidence Stein (1932, 231f.) even suggested the exact time for this long mission (303–292 in Pāṭaliputra) commencing after the agreement between Seleucus and Candragupta and lasting until the early rule of Bindusāra, when he was supposedly released by Daimachus. Such an idea of a permanent embassy with the new ambassador releasing his predecessor seems completely modern. A long time is also suggested by Wecker 1916, 1293, ten years by Dihle 1974, 5, and many years by Bongard-Levin 1986, 175 and Arora 1991b, 100.

⁸ Schwarz 1970, 284, note 101. He points out that "sogar G. Bühler musste aus diesen Gründen das Land vorzeitig verlassen". I fail to see what makes an Indologist like Bühler so special (*sogar*) in comparison to Megasthenes, but in any case *his* health was broken by the unbearable climate only after he had stayed some 15 years in India. Stein 1932, 232, combines long residence with failing health supposing that Daimachus was sent to release Megasthenes when he could no longer stand the climate.

as to that, Megasthenes did not come from cold Europe. He might have been born in Greece (and some 2,000 years later his compatriot, Demetrios Galanos, lived nearly fifty years in India, and he was not the only Greek there), but most of his life he seems to have spent in countries which are as hot as India. Nevertheless, though this allows the long mission,⁹ it does not exclude the possibility of several brief visits.

An analysis of the pertinent locus in Arrianus' *Anabasis*¹⁰ does not provide a definite answer, either. The Greek verb ἀφικνέομαι 'to meet' does not explain whether in the meantime Megasthenes returned to the West or whether he stayed in Pāṭaliputra (or even travelled in India). And even one mission of a few months' duration might have contained several audiences. We can only say that the idea of a permanent embassy was rather strange in the period in question and in the ancient world in general,¹¹ and therefore several short visits or one mission of a few months seems much more likely.

Megasthenes certainly visited Pāṭaliputra (T 2c), and the camp of Candragupta (F 34),¹² but according to Arrianus (T 2b), he did not see much else. Of the Northwest he was naturally well informed. He also knew Mathura, but the entire South was known only from hearsay. There is no reason to suppose that he ever proceeded further to the east than Pāṭaliputra.

The curious passage in Arrianus mentions the "great(er)" Porus, who was also visited by Megasthenes, in addition to Candragupta.¹³ It is too easy to dismiss it as an "error" or interpolation.¹⁴ Schwanbeck emended Πώρω to Πώρου, thus making Candragupta the greater monarch, and he has been followed by many scholars.¹⁵ Others have tried to preserve the manuscript reading.¹⁶ As such, a reference to Porus' greatness might be understood as paying homage to Alexander, which can also hail from Arrianus, who, as a historian of Alexander, naturally thought that Porus was the greatest of all Indian kings, while Megasthenes had perhaps plainly advertised that he had met Porus, too. However, in both cases the sentence is grammatically difficult to construe.

⁹ This supposed long mission has led some scholars to think that he must have learnt the language and thus have been able to give reliable first-hand information about Indian society. It is enough to refer to Brown's interesting ideas (1955) about the role of interpreters in Megasthenes.

¹⁰ *Anab.* 5, 6, 2, end of T 2a πολλάκις δὲ λέγει ἀφικέσθαι παρὰ Σανδράκοτον τὸν Ἰνδῶν βασιλέα, for T 2b (*Ind.* 5, 3) see below.

¹¹ Emphasizing this, Olshausen 1979, 291ff., pointed out that Megasthenes is in fact the only case in the Hellenistic period where a permanent embassy has been commonly suggested. Noting that Arrianus' words allow both several visits to India and a single mission (though not one of many years) with several audiences, he further remarks that, instead of πολλάκις ἀφικέσθαι 'having met many times', the Greek can as well be construed as πολλάκις λέγει 'he mentions several times (in his book that he met Candragupta)'.

¹² See Schwanbeck 1846, 21 (with McCrindle 1877, 16f.), also Karttunen 1989a, 98 (Eggermont 1986 shown to be wrong).

¹³ Arrianus, *Ind.* 5, 3 (T 2b) συγγενέσθαι γὰρ Σανδρακότῳ λέγει, τῷ μεγίστῳ βασιλεῖ Ἰνδῶν, καὶ Πώρω ἔτι τούτῳ μείζονι.

¹⁴ Error Derrett 1969, 1151, interpolation Lassen 1827, 43f. and Timmer 1930, 5f.

¹⁵ Schwanbeck 1846, 22, accepted in the text by Müller 1878, Chantraine 1927, Roos (and following him Brunt 1983), and Jacoby (*FGrH*).

¹⁶ See McCrindle 1877, 15, Rawlinson 1926, 40, Stein 1932, 234, Brown 1957, 12f., and Olshausen 1979, 310f.

We know very little of Megasthenes' life, and too often scholars have been carried away by hypothetical assumptions. Let us take one more, but here of course we may consider it no more than a mere possibility. What if Megasthenes really visited India only once and that this mission lasted, say, one year? In one year one can certainly learn enough of a country to be able to write everything contained in his fragments, enough to fill a work of three or four books. Let us further suppose that he was sent there soon after the contract was ratified between Seleucus and Candragupta in c. 305 B.C.¹⁷ If he was fifty at the time, not too high an age for a royal envoy and future author, he would have been twenty at the beginning of Alexander's wars. He could have served all the time in Alexander's army and also met Porus then. The sources do not mention him as Alexander's companion, but he did not write a history of Alexander, and perhaps he had been in a subordinate position. He might have been an officer in the troops left by Alexander in India. Or he might also have been with Sibyrtius from the very beginning of his rule in Arachosia and met Porus during a visit to the neighbouring Indian satrapies. Or perhaps all this speculation is erroneous, but still we should not be too certain that Megasthenes had not seen the great Porus with his own eyes.¹⁸

It is really irritating that we know so few facts concerning the embassy of Megasthenes. This has led some scholars to draw unwarranted conclusions from wholly inadequate evidence. Thus, for instance, it was quite plausible as a hypothesis to suggest that the Philostratean account of the conditions needed in order to become a philosopher in India goes back ultimately to Megasthenes.¹⁹ But this was not enough for Breloer, who supposed that what was told of Apollonius must refer to Megasthenes, and so concluded that Megasthenes, rather than of Apollonius, "sich vier Monate in dem Kloster des Candragupta (!) in den Aravalli-Bergen aufgehalten hat".²⁰ Such fantasy we certainly cannot follow.

Megasthenes is known only from the single work written by him. It was entitled the *Indica*, and probably consisted of four books.²¹ In it we meet once again the special philological problems connected with a fragmentarily preserved text.²² Even if we accept

¹⁷ Many have taken this for granted, but though it is rather likely, it is by no means certain. Seleucus could have had other ambassadors, too. We know only of Megasthenes, but he is not known because he was an ambassador (at least in the broad sense of the word), but because he wrote a book. The same holds true in the case of Daimachus, too.

¹⁸ One can only wonder how Timmer (1930, 5) knew that "Megasthenes behoorde niet tot de metgezellen van Alexander". He saw more of India than did Alexander's companions (Arrianus, *Ind.* 5, 3), true, but that was later on and says nothing about his early career. She goes on to claim that Porus died so soon after Alexander, in 317 B.C., that Megasthenes could hardly have seen him. While six years is rather a short time in ancient history we must ask whether it really was too short for Megasthenes to make the relatively short trip from Arachosia to the Pañjab (or even for Porus to visit the satrap of Arachosia)? Such a visit by Megasthenes has been suggested by Brown 1957, 14f.

¹⁹ *Vita Ap.* 2, 30, see Breloer 1939.

²⁰ Breloer 1939, 293, exclamation mark mine. Cf. Derrett 1969.

²¹ Books two (F 2), three (F 3), and four (F 1) have been quoted by number, and it is unlikely that there would have been more. An emendation (accepted by Jacoby in his text) changes the reference to the fourth book to the first, which would leave us with only three. See also Stein 1932, 235.

²² See chapter I above, further Karttunen 1989a and 1989b on Hecataeus and Ctesias.

Megasthenes as the more or less trustworthy author he apparently was, he certainly selected, presented and interpreted his material in a way he thought would be more interesting to his Greek audience. Most certainly he was not thinking of scholars working in a changed world more than two millennia later, and therefore it is only natural that he left out much that we would find indispensable.²³

The fragments have been edited three times. Schwanbeck 1846 contains the first systematic collection, accompanied by a good (and now hopelessly antiquated) commentary. Müller 1878 was more or less following Schwanbeck, though he left out many of Schwanbeck's "incerta". For a classical scholar these have been completely antiquated by Felix Jacoby's edition in the *FGrH* 715, but unfortunately it is little known among Indologists. The only translation of the fragments, in addition to Müller's (1878) Latin version, is McCrindle 1877, based on Schwanbeck's text. Useful for Megasthenes are further the editions and commentaries of Arrianus' *Indica* by Chantraine (1927) and by von Hinüber (1985). The grandiose plan of the *FGrH* remained unfinished, the commentary part never reaching Megasthenes.

The collection of 34 more or less certain fragments of Megasthenes (some of them in several versions) in Jacoby shows his importance as a source on India. Megasthenes was one of the main authorities for chapter 15, 1 of Strabo, who collated him with historians of Alexander. Arrianus did not even trouble himself in collating many sources, but was mainly content with Megasthenes in the first part of his *Indica*.²⁴ Nevertheless, Strabo is a better source for Megasthenes, too.

Jacoby's edition contains only fragments in the strict sense of the word. Passages without reference are generally left out. In some cases earlier editions ascribed to our author some quite uncertain passages. It is also interesting to surmise how much Megasthenian material is found in such passages where references are missing, but the source was clearly some early Hellenistic author on India. Diodorus' so-called epitome (F 4 printed by Jacoby in smaller case) contains much authentic material from Megasthenes (the seven "castes" for instance), but not solely from him.²⁵ Some passages are clearly contradictory to what is known of Megasthenes' work from confirmed fragments, and at least some cases can be traced back to Onesicritus.²⁶

The *Indica* of Curtius 8, 9 seems to contain much from Megasthenes. It consists of a geographical account (8, 9, 5 Ganges is the greatest of Asian rivers), and of accounts of Indian nature (12-19), of customs (20ff.), where much is said of the Indian king and his habits (23-30), and of Indian philosophers (31-37). It contains several points in common

²³ Cf. Brown 1955.

²⁴ Cf. Brunt 1984, 447 for the possibility of some further Megasthenian material in the *Indica*.

²⁵ The traditional idea of Diodorus always depending on just one source was introduced to Indology by Schwanbeck 1846, 57. Diodorus was uncritical and liked to have one good source at a time, but many 19th-century scholars took this too strictly.

²⁶ See Timmer 1930, 19ff., and Stein 1932, 267ff. Being ignorant of studies about Diodorus and his use of sources Majumdar 1958, 274, went too far and suggested that Diodorus compiled from many different sources. As examples of Diodorus' passages hardly coming from Megasthenes we may point out 2, 35, 1 – the Indus being the largest of rivers – and 2, 37, 3 – Alexander reaching the Ganges.

with Megasthenes, and even a reference to him in the passage explaining how the king received ambassadors, something known to few but Megasthenes. Nevertheless, Megasthenes was not the only source; for instance, the repeated mention of the Indian propensity to wine-drinking is hardly derived from him.²⁷

With Pliny it is often rather difficult to say what were his sources. With his wide reading and apparently good memory he often combined information culled from many authors in a single passage. His sources he often gave in general lists, and when they are also in the text, they are not always reliable. Pliny's account in *N. H.* 6, 21, 63 – 23, 80²⁸ contains some Megasthenian material (including one genuine fragment, F 7b in 6, 22, 69), but certainly not everything is from him. There is one fragment from Baeto (F 4) included (also in 6, 22, 69), and the small periplus from the mouth of the Ganges to that of the Indus in 6, 23, 72 is hardly from Megasthenes. Among certain remains of Megasthenes and other Hellenistic literature on India there is nothing similar to it. Unlike many other authors of the Roman period, Pliny occasionally used contemporary information, and a coastal account like this could well belong to the time of direct trade.²⁹

Another account included by Schwanbeck (1846) among uncertain fragments (fr. 59) of Megasthenes is found in Aelianus' *N. An.* 16, 2–22. There are some real arguments on behalf of a Megasthenian origin, such as the frequent reference to the Prasians (and to Brahmans).³⁰

The study of Megasthenian fragments commenced in the middle of the 19th century, too, by Schwanbeck (1846) who accompanied his edition with a full commentary on the fragments.³¹ He was soon followed by his teacher Lassen,³² while McCrindle (1877) was content with rather scanty notes. The leading scholar in this field before the Second World War was Otto Stein. His first attempt, a comparison of Megasthenes and the *Arthaśāstra* (Stein 1920: his dissertation), was rather controversial, and accordingly received some harsh criticism, but the long *RE* article on Megasthenes (Stein 1932) is much better (despite Breloer's constant criticism³³) and has remained a standard text ever since.

²⁷ Megasthenes F 32 stated the opposite. This propensity is also mentioned in other sources connected with Alexander's campaign (see e.g. Chares F 19ab, in Athenaeus and Plutarch, about the Indian drinking contest following Calanus' death). It is perhaps possible to explain such accounts as referring to the traditions connecting India with the wine-god Dionysus, but we must also note that in the *Kaṇaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* the Northwesterners are severely rebuked for their unorthodox habits, including hard drinking (see Karttunen 1989a, 216ff.).

²⁸ This was the old, uncertain fragment 56 of Schwanbeck, who gave his grounds for inclusion in Schwanbeck 1846, 51ff. From him it was taken by McCrindle 1877, but it was omitted by Müller 1878 and, of course, not included in Jacoby's collection. Cf. Timmer 1930, 13ff., and Stein 1932, 219ff.

²⁹ The *Periplus* can well be mentioned as a parallel, but of course there is no direct contact such as was suggested by some early scholars.

³⁰ Timmer 1930, 11f. argued that even in those passages of Aelianus where Megasthenes is named as the source he was only used indirectly.

³¹ Cf. Zambrini 1982, 73ff.

³² Lassen 1852 (also Benfey 1844 and Lassen 1844), revised in Lassen 1874.

³³ See e.g. Breloer 1934 and 1935. On Stein see also Zambrini 1982, 90ff.

Another major contribution was Barbara Timmer's lengthy dissertation (1930) about Indian society in Megasthenes, but because of the language (it is written in Dutch) it has gained much less attention than it deserves. Actually few books seem to have been quoted by so many without being read.³⁴ Somewhat more open to criticism are several contributions by Bernhard Breloer.³⁵

Dahlgvist's unfortunate attempt to study Indian religion in Megasthenes was severely, but quite deservedly criticized.³⁶ More favourable references to it by Schwarz (1970, 295) and especially by Derrett (1969) fail to show his supposed merits. Though partly overdone and in details open to criticism, Majumdar's attempts (1958) to take a more critical standpoint vis-à-vis the Schwanbeck-McCrindle tradition than was usual among Indian historians was refreshing, and Sethna's rejoinder (1960), though pointing out several weak points in Majumdar's approach, merely falls back into old ways.³⁷ Fresh air on the Indian side was brought by Goyal (1985), and Arora (1982ab etc.) is always interesting because of his linguistic competence, rare among Indian scholars. Other important contributions are those by Derrett and Schwarz.³⁸ We must also not forget the Polish "school" of Skurzak and Sachse.³⁹

Most of the scholars mentioned above were Indologists, and can more or less be seen as representative of an Indian viewpoint.⁴⁰ On the other hand, there is also a Classical viewpoint in studies on Megasthenes. After all he was a Greek author writing to a Greek audience, a fact we should never forget. This was already somewhat emphasized by Bunbury and by Otto Stein,⁴¹ but its main proponents have been Truesdell S. Brown and Oswyn Murray,⁴² who endeavoured to give literary perspective to Megasthenes'

³⁴ There is a German summary, though rather long (pp. 304–313), and only a few (Brown, at least) seem to have read anything more. The account of Zambrini 1982, 82ff. is based on this German summary.

³⁵ Breloer 1928, 1929, 1934, 1935, & 1939. I have occasionally referred to him, though I think that Brunt's harsh judgement (1984, 443) has much in it: "The works... by Breloer may be neglected with special advantage: they are marked by unwarranted assumptions, and disregard and distortion of A[rrian]'s meaning." See also Zambrini 1982, 86ff.

³⁶ Dahlgvist 1962 with reviews by Buddruss 1965, Hartman 1965 and Kuiper 1969. A new harsh criticism was presented by Goyal (1985, 124ff.), who, however, had not read the above-mentioned reviews and seemed to think that Western scholars had accepted his theories without criticism.

³⁷ There was also a Surrejoinder by Majumdar 1960b (see also Majumdar 1960a, 461ff.). Sethna's view has been defended by Goyal 1985, 74ff., who arrives at the astonishing conclusion (p. 78) that "the suspicion of some scholars that Megasthenes was guilty of some form of *interpretatio graeca* is not justified." As this is explained with reference to parallels found in Indian literature, one must ask whether he really understood what *interpretatio graeca* means.

³⁸ Derrett 1968a, 1969, Schwarz 1968 & 1970. It must be regretted that Derrett (1969) in his general account of Megasthenes written for a widely-read standard work such as the *Kleine Pauly*, a five-volume encyclopaedia of classical antiquity, presents Dahlgvist's ideas as conclusive, though it was already then quite clear that the majority of Indologists did not accept them at all.

³⁹ Skurzak 1948, 1954, 1960, 1963 & 1979; and Sachse 1975, 1979, 1981 & 1982.

⁴⁰ Every generalisation is, of course, somewhat exaggerated. Although himself an Indologist and considering Megasthenes mostly from an Indian viewpoint, Stein (1932) made a good attempt to take into account the classical viewpoint, too.

⁴¹ Bunbury 1879, Stein 1932.

⁴² Brown 1955, 1957 & 1973, and Murray 1970 & 1972.

work. To Murray we owe the idea of the importance of the book about Egypt by Hecataeus of Abdera. A new and somewhat different approach has been proposed in several studies by A. Zambrini (1982, 1983, 1985), who emphasized the position of Megasthenes as a Seleucid officer and as part of Greek literary and ethnographic tradition.

2. Literary Conventions and Traditions vs. Observation on the Spot

As was hinted at in the preceding chapter, the extreme positions of pure Indology and pure Greek philology are incapable of giving us a proper understanding of Megasthenes. He was in India, kept his eyes open and listened to such people as he was able to converse with (again we meet the problem of unseen interpreters). But in order to understand him and his work (in fact, its remains) we must always keep in mind his Greek background, too.

The extant fragments of Megasthenes testify sufficiently to observations made on the spot. Only in India could he probably have obtained information such as that in India there were two crops per year, that the Ganges is twice as great as the Indus (which in the West was then generally thought to be the greatest of all rivers), that in the lowlands houses were built of wood, in the mountains of brick. Consider his elaborate accounts of the city of Pāṭaliputra (III.4 below), of the life-style and position of the Brahmans and ascetics, of Indian animals and especially of the method of hunting and training elephants in India (V.3 below). In the Hellenistic period, when the Western kings had their armies of elephants, the last-mentioned subject was certainly of interest to readers, but such a detailed (and correct) knowledge could only be obtained actually in the country.

Nevertheless, we must regard Megasthenes as a Greek author writing to a Greek audience. He belonged to the tradition of Greek ethnography aptly analyzed by Zambrini.⁴³ Thus we must always take into account Megasthenes' dependence on his predecessors, especially on the historians of Alexander the Great. Parallels are easily found with such authors as Nearchus, Onesicritus,⁴⁴ and Aristobulus. Megasthenes drew from them, but also criticized them (e.g. in his version of the Calanus story). On another level he was probably influenced by such works as the description of Egypt by Hecataeus of Abdera. It is also interesting to note that apparently Megasthenian material was included by Pliny in his account of contemporary Taprobane in the first century A.D., although this account was supposedly based on what the Taprobanian ambassadors had themselves told of their island.

⁴³ Zambrini 1982, also Brown 1955, 1957 & 1973, and Murray 1970 & 1972, 207f. (on Hecataeus of Abdera).

⁴⁴ On Onesicritus and Megasthenes see Brown 1949, 156f., note 53.

Of course, it was a common and accepted custom to add literary reminiscences to a work seemingly founded on the author's own experience (cf. II.4 above on Nearchus). It is also quite possible that Megasthenes did this quite openly, quoting the opinions of his predecessors by name. As he was the first one of the few Westerners to visit Mauryan India, we often tend to take his work as a pure report of his own observations. But Megasthenes could hardly have seen that such a book would be asked of him in the distant future. He never thought that his book would be *the* book, the only authoritative source on India for centuries. In his time India and the Hellenistic West were relatively close and he could not have imagined that they would soon drift apart.

Let us take a closer look at a few points where the tendency towards idealization and dependence on Alexander's historians seems rather likely. The relation between Megasthenes and Onesicritus was already noted by Strabo (15, 1, 34), who, however, criticized the earlier author for presenting as peculiarities of the country of Musicanus things other authors report as common to all India.

It was claimed by Megasthenes that there were no slaves in India.⁴⁵ Onesicritus had earlier said exactly the same of the country of Musicanus, where young men were used instead in the same way as the Aphamiotae in Crete and the Helots in Sparta.⁴⁶ It was one of the 'right things' or 'perfections' (κατορθώματα) of this idealized country. Arrianus (himself or quoting Megasthenes), however, emphasizes that the absence of slavery in India is real, while the Spartans kept Helots as slaves.⁴⁷ The country of Musicanus was a utopia, about which there is little to be said; this certainly was not true of India in general, although the number of slaves was always limited, mainly to household slaves, and there was never anything comparable to the Western slave economy. After an analysis of Dharma literature and especially of the *Arthaśāstra*, scholars have emphasized that the Indian system contained several different categories of slaves, some of which were only temporary. Slaves were entitled to inheritance and, to some extent, their own income, and had the right of redeeming themselves. In theory, an Ārya was never to be a slave, though in practice at least temporary slavery was accepted.⁴⁸ But like the country of Musicanus in

⁴⁵ Megasthenes F 32 & 33, in Strabo 15, 1, 54 & 59; F 16 in Arrianus *Indica* 10, 8f., also Diodorus 2, 39 (part of uncertain F 4 of Megasthenes).

⁴⁶ Onesicritus F 24f. in Strabo 15, 1, 34 & 54. In the latter passage Strabo notes the discrepancy between Onesicritus and Megasthenes. For readers not familiar with Greek I must point out that in the Loeb edition of Strabo Jones translates the Onesicritus passage wrongly, though there is the possibility that a couple of words were left out during setting and not noticed in proof-reading ("Onesicritus declares that [*the absence of*] slavery is peculiar to the Indians in the country of Musicanus. The crime is perpetuated by Robinson (1953, 162), who gives the translation of Jones apparently without checking the original text (as pointed out by T. S. Brown in a review of Robinson in *AJPh* 76, 1955).

⁴⁷ This has been interpreted as a criticism of Onesicritus, or of the Greek system of slavery in general, by Timmer 1930, 274ff. (followed by Thapar 1963, 90).

⁴⁸ It is not really necessary here to go into the details of differences between scholars. While Stein 1920, 109ff. hesitatingly suggested that the company of Brahmins had led Megasthenes to generalize the prohibition of keeping Āryans as slaves, Breloer, 1929, 209ff. (referring to his *Kauṭalīya Studien* 2, 11ff.), emphasized the juridical difference between δοῦλος and dāsa. In Greek eyes, he claimed, a dāsa would have seemed freer than a Helot and therefore could not be classified as unfree. Timmer 1930, 274ff. referred to Breloer, but also stressed the principal freedom of all

Onesicritus, the India of Megasthenes was also to some extent idealized. After Megasthenes, Pliny in the first century A.D. stated that in Taprobane there were no slaves.

There were no written laws in India.⁴⁹ To this Megasthenes combined a related claim: that there was no writing at all. Nearchus assured his readers of the existence of unwritten laws in the Northwest, but in the same passage he also mentioned that closely-woven linen cloth was used for writing.⁵⁰ However, what was known in Northwest India was not necessarily known in Māgadha. Supposed references to writing in other fragments of Megasthenes are easily explained otherwise.⁵¹ Nineteen centuries later we find an echo in the account of Sir Thomas Roe (the English ambassador at Jahangir's court): "Laws they have none written. The kyngs judgment bynds who sits and gives sentence with much patience once weakly both in capital and criminal causes."⁵² It is hard to say when Dharmaśāstras were actually written down, but a long time after this it still happened that they were learnt by heart, and manuscripts were not generally used.⁵³

The crucial words have been commonly, and quite rightly, translated as indicating that Indians did not know writing.⁵⁴ Derrett and Arora have claimed that, as Greek γράμματα 'writing, written characters' can occasionally mean 'written laws', this should also be the meaning here.⁵⁵ This is methodologically wrong. We cannot interpret our texts

Āryans. The lenience of Indian slavery has also been suggested as an explanation by Thapar 1963, 89ff., Derrett 1969, 1152, Sharma 1978 (in an otherwise rather misleading article, where he calls Kauṭilya a "law-giver" who is supposed to have introduced innovations into the Indian social system), Skurzak 1979, 74, Arora 1982b, 478f., and many others. Referring to Onesicritus, Chanana 1960 suggested that Megasthenes, too, spoke of one particular region, and pointed out that the women surrounding the Indian king in F 32 were purchased from their fathers. Lassen 1874, 718, is antiquated (he equates śūdras with dāsas), but his reference to the situation of Sparta (with Helotes) is right and has been followed by many. In the same way Rawlinson 1926, 58, and Dziech 1951, 73ff. thought that the Śūdras and the Caṇḍālas should have been mentioned as slaves in India, but lowcastes and outcastes are something different and have nothing to do with our Megasthenes passage.

49 Megasthenes F 32 in Strabo 15, 1, 53. A summary of various opinions of scholars is given by Falk 1993, 291ff. In addition, we may note that Lassen 1874, 723f. (1852, 718f.) simply supposed that Strabo had misunderstood Megasthenes' meaning, while Stein 1920, 69ff. emphasized the idealizing tendency of Megasthenes, on the one hand, and the Brahman repulsion towards writing, on the other.

50 Nearchus F 23 in Strabo 15, 1, 67. The well-known Northwest Indian method of writing on birch bark (*bhūrjapatra*) is mentioned by Curtius 8, 9, 15.

51 ὅ τι ἂν αὐτῶν ἕκαστος συντάξῃ in F 19b in Strabo 15, 1, 39 is translated by Jones as "whatever each man has drawn up in writing", but συντάσσω can as well refer to oral composition. McCrindle (1901), too, here used the word writing. On the question of milestones see Stein 1920, and Falk 1993, 290f. Unwritten milestones were still used in India in the Mughal period (Hinüber 1990, 19f.). For supposed written calendars and horoscopes see Falk 1993, 294f.

52 Cited by Mukherjee 1968, 9.

53 This aspect, that laws were unwritten or that written texts were not employed at court, has been emphasized by many scholars. See e.g. McCrindle 1901, 56, note 1, Timmer 1930, 244f. Rocher 1957 rightly noted that Megasthenes probably had attended court sessions and noted the absence of law books, but then offers the rather questionable argument that ἀπὸ μνήμης is a translation of OIA *smṛtau*, 'tradition', explained as 'memory'.

54 Schwanbeck etc., Wecker 1916, 1309, and others.

55 Derrett 1968a, 780f. & 1969, 1153, and Arora 1992, 90ff.

by selecting only the special meaning which happens to suit the conclusion we are aiming at. That this particular interpretation is wrong is shown by Strabo. After citing Nearchus to the effect that Indians do write letters on closely-woven linen cloth⁵⁶ he adds that other authors deny the use of writing in India, himself using here the very word *γράμματα*.⁵⁷ By this he was most likely referring to Megasthenes, and Arora fails to show any reason to suppose that Strabo wrongly interpreted the passage. In fact, he does not comment on Strabo's words at all.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that according to several recent studies⁵⁸ Megasthenes might have been right. The question of the origins of writing in India, however, is discussed in chapter VI.2 below. At present it is enough to note that, although the absence of writing is not mentioned in Onesicritus' fragments about the country of Musicanus, the fragments are not complete and such a feature would have been rather natural in a Cynic utopia.⁵⁹

In addition to unwritten laws, there were said to be no lawsuits and litigation about pledges and deposits in India. This is a typical feature in an utopian interpretation of India, and it is often mentioned in later sources without direct reference to Megasthenes.⁶⁰ Here again Onesicritus on the country of Musicanus offers a precedent, and again, Pliny says the same of Taprobane. But it can be also noted that to the litigious Greeks the Indian reality might have seem ideal enough.⁶¹

The claim that there was no usury in India probably also goes back to Megasthenes, although it is not found among his certain fragments. The account is found in Aelianus (*V. H.* 4, 1) and Nicolaus Damascenus (in Stobaeus). A reference is not given, but both authors certainly knew Megasthenes.⁶²

Royal processions and hunting expeditions were held with much pomp and Bacchalian traits in India.⁶³ This can be well compared with Strabo's account, which goes back to some historian of Alexander, and not to Megasthenes as was supposed by some early scholars.⁶⁴ Here he states that the Oxydracai have pompous processions, set out their military expeditions in the Bacchic manner, and that their king comes out from the palace flaunting himself in flowered robes and attended by musicians beating drums. Strabo's next words – "a custom which prevails among other Indians"⁶⁵ – might well

⁵⁶ Nearchus F 23 (in Strabo) ἐπιστολάς δὲ γράφειν ἐν σινόσι λίαν κεκροτημέναις.

⁵⁷ Strabo 15, 1, 67 τῶν ἄλλων γράμμασιν αὐτοῦς μὴ χρῆσθαι φαιμένω.

⁵⁸ Goyal 1985, Hinüber 1990, Falk 1993.

⁵⁹ It has been suggested by Brown 1949, 157, note 53.

⁶⁰ Megasthenes F 32 in Strabo 15, 1, 53, then e.g. Nicolaus Damascenus F 103y (in Stobaeus).

⁶¹ The passage has been discussed by Derrett 1968a, 776ff., who emphasizes that Indian evidence too tends to the interpretation that questions of pledges and deposits were not brought to the king's court, but were settled in the guild.

⁶² See e.g. Breloer 1929, 212ff. & 227ff. (referring to his *Kauṣṭhīya Studien* 2, 1928, 70ff.), Thapar 1963, 78f., and Derrett 1968a, 776ff. & 1969, 1153.

⁶³ Megasthenes F 32 from Strabo 15, 1, 55.

⁶⁴ Strabo 15, 1, 8, derived from Megasthenes e.g. by Schwanbeck 1846 and McCrindle 1877, 110. Further accounts of Indian processions are found in Strabo 15, 1, 69, and Curtius 8, 9, 23ff. & 29.

⁶⁵ ὅπερ ἐπιπολάζει καὶ παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις Ἴνδοις (in Strabo 15, 1, 8).

refer to Megasthenes. Another account, ascribing Bacchic customs to military expeditions in India, is found in Arrianus.⁶⁶ With the tradition of the supposed Indian campaigns of Dionysus, the Greeks were probably keen to interpret things as “Bacchic”.

A further parallel is perhaps to be found in the passage where Megasthenes assured his readers that all Indians greatly esteem personal beauty, and love to adorn themselves. Among historians of Alexander, the same was told of the country of Sopeithes in the Pañjab, according to Onesicritus.⁶⁷

Breloer⁶⁸ proposed his “Taxilan polity” account as a supposed fragment of Megasthenes, but perhaps this once again goes back to Onesicritus (?). This account of Pliny’s contains only six castes, instead of the seven of Megasthenes (see III.3 below).

There are also several fabulous stories ascribed to Megasthenes,⁶⁹ with clear links to earlier authors such as Herodotus and Ctesias.⁷⁰ Much labour has been devoted to attempts to explain why our always so reliable Megasthenes (how could he fail to be reliable?) could have written such things. In addition to other explanations (see e.g. McCrindle 1877) we can add one more. What about false tales told deliberately to a curious foreigner more or less by way of a joke? This is known to have happened to modern anthropologists.

Use of Greek literary sources is, however, only part of the picture. To Megasthenes, as a Greek author, it was natural to use *interpretatio Graeca* and Greek literary conventions. According to a famous scholar of ancient history, for Greeks Greek thinking was the natural and true way of thinking and ascription of a capability to think Greek meant acknowledgement of being civilized. During the Hellenistic period some traces of an attempt to understand others can be seen, but in most cases it fell down for lack of linguistic ability.⁷¹ As to Megasthenes, a clear tendency towards idealization can be traced in his fragments. Here we must keep in mind that idealizing is no equivalent for making things up. It has been shown by myself many times⁷² that even Ctesias was not as bad as his reputation, and in any case Megasthenes seems to have been rather realistic in most parts of his account, as far as is known to us. However, in the third century B.C. modern criteria of objectivity did not exist, and we may well believe that Megasthenes tried his best. This so-called idealizing tendency is sometimes condemned too easily. Some of its aspects are in fact rather easy to understand. In a foreign country, there were points which for a Greek observer seemed worthy of being taken up, which for him, with his Greek

⁶⁶ *Indica* 5, 9 & 7, 8f. (this latter Megasthenes F 12).

⁶⁷ Megasthenes F 32 from Strabo 15, 1, 54; Onesicritus F 21 in Strabo 15, 1, 30. Cf. Arora 1982b, 480.

⁶⁸ Breloer 1934, 150ff. and 1935, 41ff. on Pliny 6, 22, 66.

⁶⁹ F 27a & 27b from Strabo 2, 1, 9 and 15, 1 57; F 28–29 & 13d in Pliny 7, 22–29; F 30 in Plutarch, *Moralia* 938c (*De facie in orbe lunae*). Derrett 1969, 1151f. On the Astomi, cf. McCrindle 1877, 74ff. notes & 1901, 60ff. notes, Hosten 1912, and Adler 1933.

⁷⁰ On these see Karttunen 1989a, where some questions related with Megasthenes (Pygmaei) are also discussed. Further Brown 1955, 29ff., and Arora 1991b, 86ff.

⁷¹ Momigliano 1975, 130f. & 148f.

⁷² Karttunen 1981, 1984, 1985, 1989a and 1991. See also Bigwood 1989.

background, seemed admirable. Slight exaggeration would not be strange here, but even the most scrupulous observation might easily contain misunderstanding.

Examples are easily found. Megasthenes followed the common habit of identifying foreign gods with familiar Greek ones. For various officials of city government he used Greek names often related to Greek society.⁷³ His account of the “seven castes” of India (III.3 below) is clearly influenced by his Greek background. Often the explanations he gives for Indian customs reveal a Greek observer thinking in a Greek way and writing for a Greek audience. Generally we can claim that, though we do not know what was included and what left out in his work, he had to select his material, and naturally he took what he found interesting and what he knew would interest his readers. All this does not make him unreliable, or a liar (Strabo), and Derrett’s apology (1969) seems somewhat overstated.

We may also mention here two passages of Megasthenes apparently in disagreement. In Strabo (15, 1, 54 = F 32) we read that in India tombs were simple and mounds over them small, but according to Arrianus (*Ind.* 10, 1 = F 15), in India there should be no monuments at all for the dead, because it is sufficient to preserve them in one’s memory. The latter shows exactly the kind of argument Greek readers were accustomed to hear.

There are interesting parallels for idealization and *interpretatio Graeca* in later history. In the 17th and 18th centuries the Jesuit missionaries and the Sinophiles in the West described China as the ideal Confucian state it was also supposed to be (but in fact never was) from the viewpoint of Chinese Confucians themselves. Some – both Westerners and Chinese themselves – really believed that the state ideal worked, that the defects were only minor shortcomings unavoidable in a big empire.⁷⁴ A more recent parallel is the great gulf between official (idealized) opinion and reality in the former U.S.S.R. There were both Western admirers visiting the country and local believers, and both were certain that the system worked very well despite some “minor” shortcomings.

As another parallel for the *interpretatio Graeca* we may quote early Europaeen travel accounts and their way of explaining foreign religions. Whether it was Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, it was always customary to describe their “churches”, “masses”, “priests” and “bishops” etc., all in terms of the Christian religion, which offered the only model then understood for such description.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, Megasthenes was on the spot and wrote down what he saw. His evidence can be used for India, but then much care and criticism is needed. This is also

⁷³ The functions of these officials have caused much discussion and even controversy. See e.g. Stein 1920 and Breloer 1935.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Dawson 1967.

⁷⁵ Years ago I saw a questionnaire published in the 1840s in order to provide help for those attempting research in Indian religions. The questions were still so much influenced by Christian ideas and by the Bible that it was certainly impossible to gain any objective idea with their aid. For instance, a great deal of effort was to be spent in ascertaining whether there would be any equivalents for O.T. legends. For the Greeks this meant that every foreign god they came to know was identified with one Greek god or another, often from quite superficial similarities. When Megasthenes went to India, he already knew from histories of Alexander that the main gods of India were Heracles and Dionysus, and he went on searching for traces of their cult and mythology. See Karttunen 1989a, 210ff.

seen in the different ways his Indian account has been interpreted among the proponents of the observer theory. According to Stein and Breloer (and probably also Timmer), he derived most of his knowledge from Brahmans. But according to Skurzak, Megasthenes reported mostly on conditions in Magadha (Skurzak seems here to ignore all that points to the Northwest and to historians of Alexander), a country which in many respects was still rather unorthodox (cf. the Vrātyas). This might to an extent be true and explain some points where Megasthenes disagrees with Indian evidence and no explanation from his Greek viewpoint offers itself.

3. Castes or something else: Megasthenes on Indian society

The Megasthenian account of a sevenfold division of Indian society is an old and vexed question. The only way to tackle it again seems to be to collect and evaluate all the competing opinions and theories proposed by scholars. The original account of Megasthenes is found in three fragments preserved in, in Arrianus, and in Strabo.⁷⁶ A parallel list, though containing only six castes, is found in Pliny.⁷⁷ Now, what were these classes of philosophers, farmers, shepherds and hunters, artisans and tradesmen, warriors, inspectors, and advisers and councillors (σύνεδρῶν)⁷⁸ of the king? We shall commence our discussion by surveying the great number of opinions of earlier scholars, starting with Schwanbeck.

Schwanbeck (1846, 41f., note 39) was content to show that the classes of Megasthenes can be somehow arranged under the fivefold division (he called it fourfold, but

⁷⁶ In Diodorus 2, 40f. (F 4), calling the classes *merê* (μέρη), in Arrianus, *Indica* 11f. (F 19a) using the word *genea* (γένεα), and in Strabo 15, 1, 39–49 (F 19b), again as *merê*. Of these words μέρος signifies 'part, division', while γένος is 'clan, race'.

⁷⁷ Pliny, *N. H.* 6, 22, 66 (with Solinus 52). Breloer 1934, 154ff., calling it "Taxilan polity", emphasized the difference in number, derived this from Onesicritus and suggested that it was the model of Megasthenes' account. The account, however, has nothing to do with Taxila. Before and afterwards Pliny talks of the Ganges and of eastern peoples. Carelessness in quotation is so typical of Pliny that the difference in numbers of classes is hardly very significant, and the special mention of elephant hunting and uses of elephants in connection with the classes shows that Pliny, too, must ultimately have derived information from Megasthenes. In Strabo the account of elephant hunting is inserted into the account of seven classes; in Arrianus and Diodorus it is given immediately after it. The Plinian account was accepted as the uncertain fragment LVI by Schwanbeck 1846 (and with him McCrindle 1877); recently its Megasthenian origin has been pointed out e.g. by André & Filliozat 1980.

⁷⁸ Members of the royal pariśad, cf. Bongard-Levin 1959 & 1963.

mentions the untouchables as one division, containing Megasthenes' third class).⁷⁹ The second and sixth classes thus contained members of two varṇas. This explanation, of course, said nothing about Megasthenes' intention.

Lassen (1852, 710ff. and again 1874, 715ff.) saw little difficulty in accepting Megasthenes' account as exact information. For him it was important that such recognizably Indian customs as endogamy and occupational exclusivism were rightly accounted. Noting further that a preference for agriculture in comparison to cattle-herding corresponds well to the Indian situation, he thought that the puzzling number of seven, instead of four, was then a secondary problem. His attempt to find parallels for various occupations mentioned in our account in the lists of mixed castes in the *Dharmaśāstra* (mainly Manu) is, though successful, not very useful for the interpretation of Megasthenes. These lists, in a much higher degree than the varṇa theory itself, were pure theory, and in their extant form clearly later than Megasthenes. They also contain a great number of occupations never mentioned by Megasthenes. On the other hand, Lassen's remarks on endogamy, on occupational exclusivism, and on the preference of agriculture over animal husbandry are important and seem to show that some kind of real observation of the Indian social system by Megasthenes lies behind our account.

McCrintle commented on the passage on three occasions in three different ways. In 1877 he referred to Talboys Wheeler, comparing the classes with the seven Herodotean castes in Egypt.⁸⁰ In another note in 1877 he referred to Elphinstone, claiming that Megasthenes had been "confounding some distinctions occasioned by civil employment with those arising from that division," scil. in the varṇas. In 1901 he claimed that Megasthenes had described occupational classes as they existed in practice, without noting the theoretical varṇa system.⁸¹

Bunbury (1879, 561) thought that Megasthenes had spoken of the varṇas, but confusingly inserted some occupational classes into the system, while Rhys Davids (1903, 263ff.) supposed that Megasthenes had merely misunderstood the caste society, as an uninformed foreigner might easily do. A similar view, varṇas mixed with professional groups and sub-castes by a foreign observer, was suggested by Rawlinson (1926, 50ff.). Wecker (1916, 1306f.) claimed that Megasthenes had, we do not know why, divided some of the four varṇas into two and thus obtained his total of seven.

An entirely new viewpoint, though hardly noted in scholarly literature, was presented by Kanakasabhai (1904 = 1966, 113ff.). Writing on South India and working with Tamil

⁷⁹ In India the system of *four* varṇas (Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra) was always accepted in theory, but in addition to these four the fifth class (Caṇḍāla) seems always to have existed in practice.

⁸⁰ Herodotus 2, 164. A relationship between Herodotus and Megasthenes was suggested as early as Meiners 1789 (unavailable to me). But while the number seven makes this important, the individual classes, priests, warriors, cowherds, swineherds, tradesmen, interpreters, and pilots, are quite dissimilar to the Megasthenian classes. Another account of Egypt, found in Diodorus 1, 73ff., and probably founded on Hecataeus of Abdera, lists only six classes, consisting of priests, kings and warriors as the ruling classes, and of herdsmen, husbandmen and artisans. As Diodorus further claims a craft-exclusiveness for them, his account comes much nearer to Megasthenes than to that of Herodotus.

⁸¹ McCrintle 1877, 44; 1877, 85; 1901, 47 note 2.

sources he compared the Megasthenian account to an ancient Tamil division consisting of sages (*arivar*), farmers (*ulavar*, rather 'landed gentry'), shepherds and hunters (*ayar* and *vedduvar*), then artisans, soldiers, and at the lowest level fishermen and scavengers (*valayar* and *pulayar*). He pointed out that five of these exactly correspond to the Megasthenian classes and suggested that Megasthenes might erroneously have inserted two professional groups as his two last classes. But even if this system is valid for ancient Tamil Nadu, it could hardly have prevailed in the Maurya empire.⁸²

Stein (1920, 119ff.) pointed out that the account could be based on Megasthenes' own observation of Indian society, as it appeared to his eyes, without any relation to Indian traditions, or to the Egyptian castes, which are entirely different. This opinion he repeated also in Stein 1932, 323.

Bevan (1922), too, considered that the Megasthenian account had little to do with the four varṇas. Perhaps he had noted that the society was divided into "functional castes which did not intermarry, and then made his own list of various occupations as they presented themselves to his eye." As Megasthenes had also confused Brahmans and Sannyāsis as being in the same class, and at the same time divided Brahmans between different classes, he could hardly have relied on an Indian informant.⁸³

Breloer discussed this question in his *Kauṭaliya Studien 2* in 1928 and again in Breloer 1934.⁸⁴ His conclusion is given on p. 145 of the latter study: Exact "castes" – and the Portuguese word is not very good for describing Indian reality – are not so important here. The main points in our account are observation of family law (endogamy) and the social constraint of remaining in one career, with the well-known exceptions of alternative careers allowed to Brahmans and of ascetism allowed to everyone. On individual "castes" see 147ff., where Breloer derives the system from his "Taxilan polity", supposedly written by Onesicritus and elaborated by Megasthenes into the form of his own account (154ff.). As always, one gets the impression that Breloer read far too much and far too delicate distinctions into his sources.

Timmer (1930, 53ff. and summary 305ff.) devoted a lengthy discussion to the problem, with the result that the Megasthenian classes are occupational divisions to some extent comparable to the varṇas (and not to jātis or guilds). However, Megasthenes had misunderstood the varṇa system, and perhaps he was influenced by the Indian statement that a state has seven parts.

In 1951 Nilakanta Sastri⁸⁵ also pointed out that the mention of endogamy and craft-exclusiveness seems to show that Indian varṇas were intended, but he supposed that Megasthenes either did not know the Indian theory of four varṇas or wanted to modify his account according to the Egyptian system of Herodotus. In his rather confused discussion, repeated in several articles, Dziech (1949, 1950, 1951, 1953) emphasized the

⁸² It is not clear even for the South. Nilakanta Sastri 1976, 131, refers to another division in the *Puranānūru*, consisting of four classes only.

⁸³ Bevan 1922, 367f., supported by Sethna 1960, 246.

⁸⁴ I have not seen the earlier study, but Breloer 1934, 132ff., seems to cover all his arguments.

⁸⁵ I have used the second edition, see Nilakanta Sastri 1967, 113ff. (especially 116).

connection between γένος and jāti, but accepted some influence from the varṇa system, too.

In his classic work on Indian cultural history Basham (1954, 147f.) used a somewhat vague, but rather reasonable approach. Admitting that the sevenfold division is “certainly false”, he accepted that Megasthenes had observed endogamous and craft-exclusive classes in India. This, to quote Basham’s words, “gives evidence to show that in Mauryan times class divisions were already hardening. Even in the Gupta period, however, the regulations were by no means rigid.”

In his criticism of Megasthenes, Majumdar (1958, 276) stated that “on a few basic facts, he has reared up a structure which is mostly inaccurate and misleading,” and again (in 1960, 250) that Megasthenes had interpreted crafts as castes, and did not see real castes at all. In his rejoinder to Majumdar, Sethna (1960, 246, referring to Bevan 1922) saw Megasthenes’ account consisting of observations on the main occupations seen in Pātaliputra.

Derrett (1968b, 172) found Megasthenes’ sevenfold division not particularly surprising: Later sources on India, too, had different numbers for social classes in India.⁸⁶ Referring to the later situation in India he further (172ff.) pointed out that the fourfold division with its occupational definitions was just a theory, and no more. The Vaiśyas had lost their original function of agriculturalists and formed a heterogenous group of mercantile professions. The Śūdras, formally servants of the higher classes, had adopted agriculture. The Kṣatriyas were only represented by ruling families, who in fact had widely differing origins;⁸⁷ as a separate class they had ceased to exist, which was also reflected in the legend of Paraśurāma killing the Kṣatriyas. Many Brahmans had gone over to different professions. In Derrett 1969, 1152f. he concluded: “There is no trace of Indian theory in Megasthenes, his μέρος is thus not a “caste”.”

Romila Thapar has on several occasions discussed the problem of the Megasthenian “castes”. The first time (Thapar 1963, 57) she attempted a combination of information and observation. Supposing that “the system must have been explained to him by local Brahmans” she pointed out that his seven classes could hardly be endogamous and restricted to their professions. Noting that the Megasthenian classes seem more economic than social she suggested that, perhaps writing several years afterwards, Megasthenes confused his own observations with Indian theory. Possibly he was also influenced by the Egyptian castes. In addition, she mentions the possibility that in his original book Megasthenes could have been closer to the truth, so that our excerpts give a somewhat confused picture.

In Thapar 1966, 79, she briefly pointed out that “clearly he was confusing caste with occupation,” but also that “the caste system did not work in the smooth manner envisaged by the Brahman theoreticians.” Twenty years later (Thapar 1987, 33ff.) she concluded, for

⁸⁶ According to Derrett, al-Biruni gives 16, Ibn Khurdadbeh 7, and Kalhaṇa 64 castes. The seven castes of Ibn Khurdadbeh, as quoted by Chaube 1969, 221ff. (where there is also a similar account by Idrisi), include the four varṇas and caṇḍālas, but the kṣatriya varṇa is divided into two, and musicians and acrobats are counted as a separate class.

⁸⁷ So already the Nandas and the Mauryas.

instance, that Megasthenes “drew on some observation” and that “clearly the definition is in terms other than *varṇa* and is most likely *jāti*” (p. 55). One is bound to ask, however, whether we are really entitled to talk of *jātis* three hundred years B.C.

Referring to Stein and Breloer, Schwarz (1970, 293f.) emphasized that Megasthenes was not here interested in Indian theories, but gave an account of society as he had himself observed it in India. Brown (1973, 146f.), perhaps wisely, did not attempt an explanation.

Humbach (1980) strongly emphasized the degree Megasthenes was bound to Greek literary models, with somewhat anachronistic notions of unreliability, copying and invention. Allowing him some direct observations of the Indian social system (endogamy and craft-exclusiveness) he supposed that the Greek author had arrived at his seven classes by elaborating the Egyptian system of Herodotus. The problem remains, however, that the two systems are too different for us to show any real relationship between Herodotus and Megasthenes.⁸⁸

An entirely new explanation has been suggested by Falk (1982 and slightly revised 1991), who explains the Megasthenian “castes” as fiscal groups, with parallels in the *Arthaśāstra*. His starting-point is Breloer 1934, who claims that the classes are grouped according to their services and taxes due to the state.⁸⁹ This grouping, however, is only an idea of Breloer’s, not confirmed in the sources. Even if it is correct, the *Arthaśāstra* parallels are not very close, but it is of course a possibility that both Megasthenes and the *Arthaśāstra* ultimately reflect the Mauryan fiscal system.

Arora (1982a, 138 and 1982b, 474) claims that, whilst some features (such as craft-exclusiveness and endogamy) originated in actual observation of the *varṇas*, they were confused with actual professions or occupations. When writing his account Megasthenes also constantly had the seven Herodotean castes of Egypt in mind (perhaps through Hecataeus of Abdera), and this probably influenced his description.

Hinüber (1985, 1115ff.), briefly rejecting Falk (1982), refers approvingly to Breloer (1934) and Humbach (1980), and mentions a sevenfold division from Buddhist canonical sources, which, however, entirely differs from the Megasthenian classes. He points out that the accounts in the *Suttanipāta* (650ff.) and in the *Arthaśāstra* (2, 35, 4), though not identical with Megasthenes, show divisions differing from the traditional *varṇas* and of-

⁸⁸ The criticism by Falk (1991, 49f.) is somewhat too harsh. To claim that Megasthenes was a “man with literary pretensions” is not the same as to think it was “customary with the Greeks to send poets on political missions”. As we have seen in the case of Nearchus, it went in the opposite direction, among educated Greeks it often happened that practical men of politics and even generals showed literary pretensions when they started writing. Even Onesicritus with his great literary pretensions must have had a practical side to have executed successfully the rather demanding tasks Alexander entrusted to him. At the same time, it is not so rare to see even poets in public and diplomatic duties, in ancient Greece as well as in the modern world, though most certainly not every poet is qualified.

⁸⁹ Falk here briefly refers to a similar idea suggested by Van Buitenen in an article not available to me (“The Seven Castes of Megasthenes”, D. Sinor (ed.), *American Oriental Society Middle West Branch Semi-Centennial Volume*. Bloomington 1969, 228–232), where the seven were combined into three groups: first the philosophers, who were exempt of taxes and of state service, secondly the second, third and fourth groups as tax-payers, and then the rest, who were paid by the government.

fering at least partial correspondence to Megasthenes. These can, according to Hinüber, perhaps point to some degree of Indian information in Megasthenes, and the rest could be again derived from the model of the Egyptian castes.

Zambrini (1985, 802ff.) again emphasized the Greek background and referred to the political ideas of Plato and Aristoteles. It would have been natural for Megasthenes to search for a strict social division in a country he was giving an utopian interpretation. In this, the Egypt of Hecataeus of Abdera was probably a parallel case well known to Megasthenes.

Now it is time to see if we can add anything to this mess. Certainly no new hypothesis to compete with the old ones.

Admitting that the number seven is somewhat problematic, it must be noted that it is not at all that clear which number we should (or would like to) have instead of seven. Scholars who claimed that Megasthenes was transmitting Indian theory as he had heard it from Brahmins,⁹⁰ can hold to the number four, of course, but with his seven "castes" Megasthenes was clearly not transmitting orthodox Brahman theory. Even those scholars, however, who took Megasthenes' account as based on his own observations (perhaps seasoned with some Greek interpretation), were still clinging to this fourfold division of Indian varṇas. But there were four varṇas only in theory; the real number, even if we discard the great number of the somewhat problematic mixed castes as stated in the Dharmaśāstras, was of course five. The Caṇḍālas did exist, though Brahman literature detested their existence and even denied it in the formal system.⁹¹ But a keen observer certainly noted their existence, and if he then heard of the fourfold division, he could use his head and, noting its inaccuracy, form his opinion entirely on the basis of what he saw. It seems clear that the account of Megasthenes was based on observations made in India, but the way he presented and interpreted his observations may well have been influenced by Greek ideas, perhaps by Hecataeus of Abdera.

⁹⁰ An analogous case can be seen with the Jesuits, who in their idealized 17th-century accounts of China gave Confucian theory as Chinese reality. In both cases it may be noted that Indian Brahmins as well as Chinese Confucian scholars themselves more or less believed that this theory was the actual truth, and what was incompatible with it was only an anomaly.

⁹¹ There are further points where practice may have differed from theory. Thus the Kṣatriya varṇa was, in theory, the only one entitled to kingship and the profession of soldier. Though strongly imposed by theory, even Indian sources admit that all varṇas initiated dynasties (which were then considered to be Kṣatriyas, but the real origin was not always forgotten). The large armies of the Mauryas and other early dynasties could hardly have consisted solely of Kṣatriyas. Both Indian and Western sources confirm that in the Northwest the Brahmins carried arms (Karttunen 1989a, 227f.).

4. India according to Megasthenes

It is not possible to give here a full account of all that we know of Megasthenes' work. A modern and critical commentary of his fragments still remains a desideratum. Nevertheless, there are several further issues which we should not pass over here without a word, and in this chapter my intention is to take some of them under consideration. In addition, the Megasthenian account of Indian philosophers has been discussed in chapter II.5 above, in connection with Alexander's campaign and the naked ascetics of Taxila, and to his accounts of Indian geography, flora and fauna we shall return in chapters IV–V below.

An exceptionally interesting fragment describes Pāṭaliputra, the Mauryan capital, with its palaces and wooden fortifications.⁹² Although there is some confusion, the Erannoas and the Sonus being described as different rivers, there is hardly any doubt that Pali(m)bothra (for the name see chapter II.3 above) at the confluence of the Ganges and the Erannoas in the country of the Prasii was the OIA Pāṭaliputra at the confluence of the Ganges and the Son in the neighbourhood of modern Patna in the Prācyā land.⁹³ The archaeological evidence for wooden structures is interesting, though not accepted by all.⁹⁴ A century earlier Ctesias (F 45, 7 with 45b) had mentioned Indian elephants breaking walls, which were presumably made of wood. The *Arthaśāstra* 2, 3, 8f. warns against wooden fortifications because of the danger of fire, but this only shows that wooden fortifications were known and employed. Here again we have a parallel in earlier Greek literature, in the Herodotean account (4, 108) of the wooden walls of Gelonus, the capital of the Budini (living somewhere beyond Scythia).

Wooden architecture is mentioned again in F 17 (in Arrianus, *Indica* 10, 2f.), where it is stated that Indian cities in general were wooden near the rivers, but on higher places built of brick and stone. This is perhaps not acceptable as such and may be a generalization from a few observed cases.⁹⁵ According to Erdosy (1985), the development of urbanization in the Ganges Valley started with fortified administrative centres c. 600 B.C., but reached the full urban stage only with the Mauryas c. 300 B.C. Of stone or brick architecture there is little evidence in the Mauryan period, the (rather meagre) excavated remains are wooden.

Since Schwanbeck it has been customary to derive all information connected with Palibothra, the Prasii and the Mauryas from Megasthenes. While this is not so certain

⁹² F 18a in Arrianus, *Ind.* 10, 5, and F 18b in Strabo 15, 1, 36, further in Diodorus 2, 39 (F 4), also briefly mentioned in another passage of Arrianus' *Indica* (2, 9)

⁹³ It was first identified by Rennell in the late 18th century (as Patna). See Schlingloff 1969, 30ff.

⁹⁴ See Waddell 1903 and Vogel 1930 on archaeological evidence, for criticism e.g. Kangle 1965, 69f. (without knowing Vogel 1930). For early finds, see McCrindle 1901, 42, note 3. Further Tucci 1959, Wheeler 1968, Schlingloff 1969, 29ff., Schwarz 1970, 289ff.

⁹⁵ Cf. Stein 1920, 42ff. and Hinüber 1985, 1113f.

(especially Daimachus cannot completely be left out as a possibility), we most probably have here to do with information ultimately going back to Hellenistic times. Thus Pliny 6, 22, 68 briefly mentions Palibothra, inhabited by Palibothri in the country of the Prasii. Stephanus of Byzantium s.v. Palimbothra (cf. Karttunen 1989b) called the inhabitants Palimbothreni, with a Greek suffix, without stating his source. In another passage of his geographical dictionary Euphorio (Stephanus s.v. Morieis) in the third century B.C. is quoted as stating that the Morieis (Maurya? here a people) live in wooden houses. Ptolemy (7, 1, 73) briefly mentioned Palibothra as a royal city.

We can here quickly pass over Megasthenes' account of Indian religions, i.e. of Dionysus and Heracles worshipped in India (F 11–14). I have discussed their identification in my earlier study,⁹⁶ and cannot presently add much new. As we have seen (in II.3 above), originally the tradition was created during Alexander's campaigns. It was a Greek idea, concerned with the incipient deification and with the supposed mythical ancestry of Alexander and had little to do with Indian religions. The mythology of Heracles and Dionysus had always contained the element of travel, although India was probably never mentioned before Alexander came near it. When he came to India, Megasthenes already "knew" that precisely these gods were worshipped in India.⁹⁷ With this knowledge he tried to identify the cults he saw. Examples from elsewhere show that for the Greek identification of a foreign god quite superficial similarities were often enough.

It is not wholly clear, however, that Megasthenes always made the same identifications in the Mauryan empire as the Macedonians did in the Northwest. If his Heracles was Krishna, as seems likely from the reference to the Suraseni and Methora (evidently Mathurā),⁹⁸ it still does not follow from this that we should suppose the existence of a cult of Krishna in Alexander's Northwest. The northwestern Heracles might have been a local god (cf. Tucci 1977), and what Megasthenes gave was thus a new account. A part of it was probably the statement that Heracles was autochthonous in India (e.g. in Arrianus, *Anabasis* 8, 4, where it is opposed to the earlier view that the hero came from outside India).

We may also note here a wholly different account of Indian religion, again with a fair amount of *interpretatio Graeca*. It is preserved by Strabo,⁹⁹ and unfortunately given without a reference. One would here like to hear the voice of Daimachus, otherwise so poorly preserved, but later in the same passage Cleitarchus is referred to, and our account may also hail from him.¹⁰⁰ In this account, Indians worship Zeus Ombrios (the rain-

⁹⁶ Karttunen 1989a, 210ff. (to references add Brunt 1984, 435ff.).

⁹⁷ McCrindle 1901, XXI, thus errs badly when he states that "Megasthenes seems to have been the first who began the practice of connecting or identifying the mythic gods or heroes of Indian tradition with the mythic heroes of Greek poetry." And this was written after he had translated the accounts of Alexander's Indian campaigns in McCrindle 1896! In McCrindle 1877, 111f. note, he quoted the correct opinion from Schwanbeck 1846, 43.

⁹⁸ F 13a in Arrianus, *Indica* 8, 5.

⁹⁹ Strabo 15, 1, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Lassen 1874, 702f. did not hesitate in ascribing this, too, to Megasthenes, "da kein anderer so mit diesem Gegenstand vertraut gewesen ist". Of course, Daimachus was, and some companions of

giver, perhaps Indra), the River Ganges and the indigenous deities of the country. The latter were thus not identified with Greek gods.

This is perhaps meant to be a criticism of the notion of Dionysus and Heracles being the major gods in India. That it was criticized, we know for instance from Strabo (15, 1, 6f.) and Arrianus (*Ind.* 7f.), who both had their doubts. The stories about the Indian campaigns of these two were first related when Alexander was still in Afghanistan, and are mentioned by most authors writing on his campaigns. It is thus impossible that Cleitarchus, or whoever is the author of our passage did not know them. The mention of the Ganges by name shows that this anonymous fragment cannot belong to the era before Alexander.

With religion is connected Megasthenes' account of Indian chronology, from Dionysus to Heracles and from Heracles to Candragupta, containing 6,042 years and 153 kings.¹⁰¹ Nothing really similar to it is found in Indian sources (despite Stein's attempt), but nevertheless I find the general style of his account curiously reminiscent of similar accounts in the Purāṇas. While our Purāṇas are of a much later date, it is likely that there were some kind of Purāṇas or Purāṇa-like accounts even in the days of Megasthenes.¹⁰² They might have contained something which, after possible misunderstanding due to interpreters and *interpretatio Graeca* on the part of Megasthenes himself, was the origin of this account. Probably we shall never know.

On everyday customs, such as dress and ornaments, eating habits, sexual life etc. much is said in F 32.¹⁰³ That there are no monuments for the dead in India is rightly claimed in F 15 (Arrianus, *Indica* 10). This is a typical example of a real detail keenly observed because it fits in so well with the idealizing tendency. The songs sung in honour of the dead can be compared with the śrāddha ceremonies.¹⁰⁴

Megasthenes also wrote an account of the Indian king and the women around him.¹⁰⁵ The Greeks saw in them a custom established by Dionysus (cf. Diodorus 2, 38). Later they seem to have been preferably Greek women. The *Periplus* (49) assures us of the trade of western slave girls at Barygaza; they were meant to become royal concubines. In the *Mahābhārata* the Śūdras of Bharukaccha brought to Yudhiṣṭhira "a hundred thousand slave girls from Kārpāsika (?), dark, slender, and long-haired, decked with

Alexander, too, could have been familiar enough. In the account there is nothing which is related to the remains of Megasthenes.

¹⁰¹ F 12 in Arrianus, *Ind.* 7f. on Dionysus and his successors, F 13a in Arrianus, *Ind.* 9, 9 (cf. F 13b in Pliny 6, 23, 76) on Heracles, and especially F 14 in Arrianus *Ind.* 9. See Benfey 1844, Lassen 1844 (and briefly 1874, 700ff. and 736ff.), Wecker 1916, 1305f., Stein 1932, 309f., Hinüber 1985, 1106f.

¹⁰² Rocher 1986.

¹⁰³ F 32 in Strabo 15, 1, 53–56, cf. notes in McCrindle 1901, 56ff. Eating habits are again discussed in F 2 (Athenaeus 4, p. 153). On dress, cf. also Nearchus F 11 in Arrianus, *Indica* 16, 1f.; on marriage, Nearchus F 11 in Arrianus, *Indica* 17, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Hinüber 1985, 1113.

¹⁰⁵ F 32 in Strabo 15, 1, 55. Cf. Curtius 8, 9, 29f. See further Wecker 1916, 1316, Rawlinson 1926, 47f., Thapar 1963, 88, and Schwarz 1966a, 73.

golden ornaments.”¹⁰⁶ Manu (7, 219) mentions royal women who serve the king in his toilet and fan him, but on another occasion (7, 125) prescribes them daily wages.¹⁰⁷ In Sanskrit plays, beginning with Bhāsa (probably in the first century A.D.), we occasionally meet Yavanīs in the royal entourage.¹⁰⁸ The Jaina canonical list of slave girls also includes Joṇīs (Yavanīs) among them.¹⁰⁹ Female bodyguards and attendant slaves of a king were also mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* (1, 21, 1 & 13f.), though their nationality is not specified, and McCrindle (1877, 71f. in a note) cites one mediaeval and one modern example of a king surrounded by women. As early as the second century B.C. Eudoxus of Cyzicus took, among other things, some flute-girls on board for his third (unsuccessful) voyage to India,¹¹⁰ and in the monologue farce *Pādatāḍitaka* a long-haired and long-nailed Greek courtesan (Yavanī) is met on a night street of Pāṭaliputra. Though beautiful, she is repulsive to the Viṭa because of her broken dialect.¹¹¹

We know for certain that Megasthenes visited Pāṭaliputra, the capital of the first major empire in India. He certainly met Brahmans, and perhaps also derived information from them (e.g. on ancient chronology).¹¹² This has led some scholars to attempt to reconcile his fragments with orthodox Brahmanical culture and its literary remains. For this period these remains are so meagre and so one-sided that it is not too difficult to explain away discrepancies, on the one hand as defects in our source material on the Indian side, and, on the other hand, as misunderstanding and Greek interpretation on the part of Megasthenes.

¹⁰⁶ *Mbh* 2, 47, 7

śataṃ dāsīśahasrāṇaṃ kārṇāsikanivāsinaṃ |
śyāmās tanvyo dīrghakeśyo hemābharaṇabhūṣitāḥ ||
śūdrā... bharukacchanivāsinaḥ...

¹⁰⁷ Manu 7, 125:

parīkṣitāḥ striyaś cainaṃ vyajanodakadhūpanaiḥ |
veśābharaṇasaṃśuddhaḥ sprśeyuḥ susamāhitāḥ ||

Manu 7, 219:

rājā karmasu (v.l. rājakarmasu) yuktānaṃ strīṇāṃ preṣyajanasya ca |
pratyahaṃ kalpayed vṛttiṃ sthānakarmānurūpataḥ ||

To the latter Kullūka notes *dāsyādīnām*. Cf. Lassen 1874, 719.

¹⁰⁸ Keith 1924, 61. In the *Śakuntalā* (act 2, prelude) they serve not only in the palace, but also in the royal hunting expedition. So also in Megasthenes (noted by Lassen 1874, 720). Both in the *Śakuntalā* (act 6) and in the *Vikramorvaśīya* (act 5) a Yavanī brings his bow to the king. The above-mentioned *Periplus* passage has been compared to Kālidāsa's plays by Weber 1890, 910f., but his further arguments were rather far-fetched.

¹⁰⁹ Found in the *Uvavāya* and the *Jambuddīvapaṇṇatti*. The *Viyāhapaṇṇatti* version of the list does not mention the Joṇīs here. See e.g. Weber 1883, 302, 380 and 412.

¹¹⁰ Poseidonius F 28 in Strabo 2, 3, 4; first noted in this connection by Tarn 1951, 374.

¹¹¹ Ed. Ghosh, p. 109f. (after verse 110), translation 156f. The sentence describing her speech runs:

ko hi nāma tāni vānarīniṣkūjitopamāni cūtkārabhūyīṣṭhāni apratyabhijñeyavyaṇjanāni kiñcit
kareṇāntarāni pradeśinīlālanamātrasūcitāni svayaṃ veśayavanīkathitāni śroṣyati |

'For who will listen to the Yavana courtesan's words which are like the chattering of a monkey, full of shrill sounds and of indistinguishable consonants, and which are interspersed with the (occasional) display of the forefingers?' (Ghosh).

¹¹² Information given by the Brahmans is expressly mentioned by Aelianus, *N. An.* 16, 4 & 16, 20, in passages probably going back to Megasthenes.

However, the little we know of Mauryan India generally does not point to an essentially Brahmanical civilization. On the contrary, there is strong evidence of a distinct tendency towards heterodoxy even within the ruling family. Aśoka practised, or at least conspicuously patronized, Buddhism. His father (or his son Daśaratha) presented caves to the Ājīvikas. The Jainas claim Candragupta as their own. The (urban) society as described in Buddhist and Jaina sources probably offers a much better basis for comparison with the Maurya period than that of Brahmanical literature. In addition, we hear of several sectarian groups which have disappeared without leaving us any direct sources.¹¹³

But this is not all. Even Herodotus in the fifth century knew that “there are many nations of Indians, and they do not speak the same language as each other; some of them are nomads, and others not.”¹¹⁴ In Indian sources, too, we often meet people belonging to a different society than the major religious traditions mentioned above.

Our Indian sources, as meagre as they are, tell of various tribal groups existing side by side, and often more or less as part of the same society, with Indo-Aryans. The Vedas tell of the Vrātyas, living in ancient Māgadha (Bihar) and observing highly unorthodox customs. Māgadha, the country of heterodox doctrines, which in Brahmanism was not always accepted as part of the Āryāvarta, was the original country of both Buddhism and Jainism, and was also the centre of Mauryan power. Therefore, attempts to find traits of Māgadhan unorthodoxy in Megasthenes are methodologically acceptable, though not particularly convincing in their results.¹¹⁵

Pāṇini listed several tribal peoples, and the *Arthaśāstra* assigns them some important roles in society. Still the *Arthaśāstra* as well as our other Sanskrit sources tend to see absolute monarchy as the only acceptable form of government. But this was only theory. We know, for instance, that many Gaṇas or tribal states in the north and northwest were oligarchies. They must have differed considerably from the Brahman ideal.¹¹⁶

We have already noted that the *Arthaśāstra* is no mirror of the Maurya empire. This text gives a theoretical reconstruction of an ideal state written down centuries later than Megasthenes and the early Mauryas. On its evidence the Maurya empire has often been described as a strictly centralized monolith, but when the *Arthaśāstra* is left out, other evidence seems to support a much looser system for the Mauryan empire, which perhaps rarely interfered in already existing forms of local government. At a later period, however, we can only suppose a more Aryanized society. And still even the society described in the

¹¹³ Think what our idea of Buddhism would be if it were derived solely from Jaina sources or *vice versa*. The Ājīvikas are mainly known from their accounts, and the picture is poor enough.

¹¹⁴ Herodotus 3, 98.

¹¹⁵ For instance Skurzak *passim*, Dahlquist 1962 on a Muṇḍa heros, not to speak of the fantastic conjectures proposed by Jain in his introduction to the reprint of McCrindle 1877 (in 1972).

¹¹⁶ Karttunen 1989a, 225ff. On the importance of these oligarchies, which often and inaccurately (in fact following the example of Megasthenes) have been called republics, in the Maurya state see Arora 1991c. However, the interpretation of Arora 1992, 87ff., claiming that Megasthenes could have used the Greek word πόλις for large Janapada states, cannot be accepted. A Greek πόλις was a self-governing, more or less independent state, true, but it was always a city state; the word was normally not applied to other kinds of state formations. For Indian Janapada states a much better parallel could have been found in Aetolia etc., but they were not called πόλεις.

Arthaśāstra, more or less idealized as it was, was not entirely the strictly centralized and uniform state it has often been understood as being. There were various and diverging elements included in it. All the more wrong would it be to see the Maurya empire as a uniform society.

If we take seriously the testimony given by Megasthenes (cf. Arora 1991c), it was not like this. Different kinds of government were employed in the empire. There were self-governing cities, there were vassal kings and princes and tribes, there were various classes, and all had different relations to the central government.

5. The Shadowy Successor of Megasthenes

It remains for us to say a few words about Daimachus,¹¹⁷ before we leave Hellenistic diplomacy and proceed to science. Only five fragments (though one in three different passages) remain of his account of India, and these mostly going back to Eratosthenes, who only quoted Daimachus to emphasize his poor opinion of him. This was perhaps a reason for the fact that so little remains of the work, but we remember that his opinion of Megasthenes was equally poor. That Megasthenes was found more attractive among Greek readers probably depended more on his literary merits than on his veracity.

The otherwise rather uninteresting F 1 in Harpocration's Lexicon reveals that he came from Plataea in Middle Greece, and Strabo (Eratosthenes) knows that he was sent as an envoy to Palimbothra to Amitrochates, the son of Sandrokottus (cf. VI.1 below). Our meagre fragments at least make it clear that he wrote a work variously called the *Ἰνδικά* and *Περὶ Ἰνδικῆς*. The fragments deal with the size and form of India (FF 2–3), with fabulous peoples (F 5),¹¹⁸ and briefly mention a kind of a bowl-stand (F 1) and a yellow pigeon (F 4).

An attempt to find out more about Daimachus has been made by Schwarz (1969), but it remains in many respects conjectural. While it is true that the meagre statement of Strabo does not force us to conclude that he was sent by Seleucus, he fails to show how it entitled him to say that he was sent by Antiochus. A connection between Antiochus and Amitrochates indicated in Hegesander's famous account of their correspondence that there is no reason to suppose that this account came originally from Daimachus. We have no extant histories of the early Seleucids, but in these a reference to India was certainly not a rarity.

Then there is the question of other works written by our Daimachus. While Schwarz rightly distinguished him from the earlier historian, also called Daimachus of Plataea, he

¹¹⁷ Occasionally also given in the Ionian form Deimachus.

¹¹⁸ This account of Strabo's is identical with Megasthenes' F 27 and it is impossible to say what was actually said by Daimachus.

did not hesitate to ascribe two further works mentioned under the name Daimachus, the *Περὶ εὐσεβείας* and the *Πολιορκητικά*, to our author. While it is true that the Indian concept of dharma was actually translated as *εὐσέβεια* in the Greek edict of Aśoka, *εὐσέβεια* as such was a central concept in the Greek world. It was often discussed without any reference to India and there is no evidence to show that it was also discussed with such a reference.¹¹⁹ And while it is quite possible that the envoy to the Maurya court was impressed with Indian skill in siege technology, we do not know that he wrote anything about it. The extant works of Poliorcetics never refer to the Mauryas; India is only mentioned in connection with Alexander's campaigns. From Pliny we know that Indian steel was considered famous, but as most classical references to steel have nothing to do with India, one such reference among the few (actually two) fragments of Daimachus' *Πολιορκητικά* certainly does not point to India.

¹¹⁹ That the *Περὶ εὐσεβείας* should have discussed Indian thought has also been suggested by Bongard-Levin 1986, 174f.