Introduction
What We Talk about When We Talk about Roman Geography

> Your desire to know Nile, Roman, was shared
> by tyrants Pharian and Persian and of Macedon,
> and no age is there which has not wished to grant the knowledge
> to the future – but up to now its natural power of hiding is victorious.[1]

Midway through the tenth book of Lucan's gruesome epic *The Civil War* is a long digression on the River Nile.[2] Taking the form of a learned discussion between the Egyptian priest Acoreus and the insatiable Julius Caesar, the passage sits somewhat uneasily in the narrative of the poet's final book. Caesar, having just contemplated the disembodied head of his great rival Pompey and replete from his revelry with Cleopatra, sees the long-standing mystery of the Nile as the perfect opportunity for some post-prandial intellectualizing and a stage for asserting his own imperial aspirations. As conflict with the young Ptolemy XIII looms, the dawn will return both Caesar and Lucan to the brutal realities of war, but the prospect of the Nile offers the poet and his anti-hero a brief respite. Through his contemplation of the Egyptian river, Caesar could imagine a claim to dominion even over the 'unknowable' south, a dream that was to sustain imperial exploration in the interior down to the expeditions of the Royal Geographical Society in the nineteenth century. For Lucan, the Nile offered an image through which he could demonstrate his own erudition and reiterate the principal themes of his magnum opus as it staggered towards its untimely end.

The description of the Nile in *The Civil War* must have had considerable contemporary resonance for the immediate audience of the poem. It was composed in the mid-60s CE, at a time when the rule of the emperor Nero was fluctuating between inspired cultural ambition and deranged excess. Some months before Lucan composed this passage, probably in around

[1] Luc. 10.268–271. tr. Braund (1992), 214.
[2] Luc. 10.172–331. This passage – and the epic in which it appears – are discussed in detail in Chapter 6, below.

62 or 63 CE, Nero had sponsored an expedition up the Nile, which had recently reported back with its discoveries from the heart of the Meroitic Kingdom in what is now Sudan.[3] At around the same time, Lucan's uncle, the Younger Seneca, had written his own lengthy discussion of the Nile as part of his *Natural Questions*, a book of natural philosophy ostensibly intended to instruct another courtier in the principles and practices of Stoicism.[4] These emperors, authors and their audiences would also have been familiar with a variety of other impressions of Egypt and its famous river from the city around them: statues of the personified Nile had been frequent features of the triumphal processions which marked Roman military victories in the late Republic and were to become still more familiar as static monuments within Rome over the decades that followed. Egyptian landscapes, featuring idealized and sometimes grotesque scenes of life on the banks of the river, had also recently come back into fashion as the subject of wall-painting and other domestic decoration.[5] Such motifs had been familiar in mosaics and frescoes from the later second century BCE and reached a peak at around the time when Egypt was formally annexed by Augustus in 30 BCE, but had briefly fallen out of use for a generation or two. In the reign of Nero, however, this Egyptomania seems to have recovered its popularity: by the time of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, Egyptian scenes were a very common sight on the walls of the houses of Pompeii.

Lucan's description of the Nile is remarkable for its detail and precision, not least because the sudden didactic tone of this section represents something of a break from the madcap helter-skelter of the narrative up to that point. Having been dizzied by a rapid account of the collapse of the Republic and the visceral brutalities of civil war, the audience is stopped short by a measured natural philosophical reflection on the Egyptian river. The passage discusses several different aspects of the watercourse. First, Acoreus provides a detailed description of the Nile from its murky origins in the distant interior of Africa to the Mediterranean. He then briefly recounts the attempts made by earlier tyrants to find its origins, and closes his digression with a summary of the major theories put forward to explain the summer floods of the river. Throughout this digression, the priest (or rather the poet) provides a fair approximation of contemporary thinking about the mysterious river. As we might expect, Lucan seems to have drawn quite heavily on the philosophical writing of his uncle Seneca in this part of his epic, but we may also detect echoes of earlier poets including Virgil,

[3] The expedition is discussed at 206–15 and 270–3 below. [4] See Chapter 5. [5] See Chapter 3.

Ovid and Propertius, as well as the influences of other Roman representations of Egypt, including wall paintings, triumphal displays, itinerary descriptions of tourist voyages and perhaps the reports of the Neronian explorers. Lucan's is undeniably a poetic river – an epic Nile – but is also unmistakably one which ran through Neronian Rome.

Yet there is something missing in this discussion. Lucan includes no reference within his account to the great maps of the world, often supposed to have ornamented the walls of early imperial Rome, or to the formal prose treatises which we know to have been composed at around the same time. Lucan's is among the most detailed descriptions of the Nile to have survived from the early imperial period, and yet it makes little reference to the sorts of geographical expression that have dominated modern discussions of the subject. His is a vivid reminder that Roman responses to the world could be expressed in a variety of different media and could be conceptualized in a number of ways. When inhabitants of the early empire wished to find out about the wider world, they did not have to turn to maps or dry prose geographies in order to do so; there was a variety of different lenses through which they could view the infinite variety of the now-conquered world.

Studies of ancient 'geography' – of the ways in which Greeks or Romans conceptualized the physical world around them and communicated this understanding – have tended to emphasize prose writing over poetry, itinerary records of physical journeys over imagined voyages and maps over landscape paintings and mosaics.[6] Over the last generation or so, much of this scholarship has been brilliant and ground-breaking. Various attempts have been made to chart the generic limits of different types of ancient writing on the wider world – to understand how modern concepts of 'geography', 'cartography' and 'ethnography' might map onto the textual productions of the classical Mediterranean.[7] The simple fact that no recognizable maps have survived from the classical world has stimulated extensive debates about the function of cartography within Greek and Roman society and prompted reflections on the different ways in which space might have been conceptualized in these worlds.[8] Equally importantly, those texts that have survived – works like Strabo's *Geography*, Pliny's *Natural History* or the geographical tables of Ptolemy – have been read with a sensitivity to

[6] Typical of this is the recent survey by Dueck with Brodersen (2012), which includes a short chapter on poetry and historiography, but emphasizes the technical material. Cf. Talbert (2010b) and Brodersen (2010).

[7] See esp. Janni (1984) (on cognitive assumptions); the collected papers in Prontera (2011) and the important articles of Pascal Arnaud, esp. Arnaud (1989). On changing attitudes to ethnography (and definitions of the form), see esp. Hartog (1988), Gruen (2010) and Skinner (2012).

[8] See esp. Brodersen (1995). The topic is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

their literary and political contexts.[9] The technical literature of antiquity has been radically reassessed, even over the last decade, and 'geographical' texts have certainly benefitted from these changed perspectives.[10]

Other forms of geographical and spatial expression have also inspired recent work. The painted landscapes known from the ancient world have been subject to considerable scrutiny; study of Roman wall paintings in particular have benefited from the parallel investigation of poetic topography, with significant results.[11] Detailed consideration of ancient concepts of visuality has had important implications for the study of attitudes to the wider world, and the modes of its representation – a theme that has again been explored through text as well as image.[12] More broadly, the corpus of Classical, Hellenistic and Latin literature has been assessed as a repository of geographical and ethnographic information, and as a medium for negotiating the relationship of societies to the world around them.[13] Historiography, too, has been examined as a medium for geographical information, from Herodotus down to Ammianus Marcellinus and the historians of late Antiquity.[14]

Yet for all of this diversity, there have been surprisingly few attempts to address how this material fitted together, and the study of 'ancient geography' remains a field dominated by technical and prosaic texts.[15] This demands a number of questions: How was popular understanding of the developing Roman empire shaped by wall maps, landscape paintings or the peculiar symbolism of military triumphs? And how did the spectators of such events reconcile these different media into a coherent mental image of the world as a whole? To what extent did descriptions of the world in

[9] Most obviously Dueck (2000); Naas (2002); Carey (2003); Murphy (2004). Jones (2012) provides a superb introduction to Ptolemy. On Strabo, see n.9 below.

[10] Cuomo (2007) is central within this. See also the collected papers in Taub and Doody (2009).

[11] Leach (1988) and Fitter (1995), 25–52.

[12] See for example Bartsch (2006); Elsner (2007); and the collected essays in Richlin (1992); Bergmann and Kondoleon (1999) and Fredrick (2002a).

[13] Spencer (2005) provides an excellent recent discussion. See most obviously Thomas (1982); Horsfall (1985).

[14] See esp. Clarke (1999) on the late Hellenistic period; the late Antique material is discussed in Feraco (2011) and Merrills (2005).

[15] The point is perhaps illustrated best by a counter-example. The edited collection of Geus and Thiering (2014) purports to examine 'common-sense' geography in the classical world, as distinct from the mathematical approaches of scholars like Eratosthenes. The use of recent psychological literature on spatial cognition and acquisition, particularly in Thiering (2014) recalls the methodology of Janni (1984), and is very welcome, but the project as a whole rather reifies a distinction between 'scientific' and 'experienced' responses to space. This leaves little room for examining the *interaction* of contrasting modes of spatial comprehension in different physical, social and generic contexts and among different members of society. Dan (2014) hints at the value of this in a study of Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

verse or prose draw upon a wider frame of reference that would have been familiar to their audiences? What role did visual commonplaces or poetic *topoi* play in shaping assumptions about the wider world? And how did all of these different media help to situate their expected audiences within the political hierarchies of the city and the empire? Lucan's description of the Nile is significant not only as a fragment of epic poetry, and as a reflection of Latin natural history, but as both of these things at once. His poem is a reminder of the complexities of ancient geographical understanding and a prompt to further investigation.

The present book is an attempt to investigate the political, social and cultural resonances of geographical knowledge during the later Roman Republic and early Principate. It interrogates different modes of geographical representation that were known within Roman Italy, and crucially how they related to one another. To do this it will look in particular detail at representations of the River Nile that circulated from the later-second century BCE to the end of the first century CE. It will examine the ways in which the river appeared in a range of different media from large display 'maps' to domestic landscape paintings, triumphal monuments and works of natural philosophy. It will also consider the different political resonances of each of these representative modes, not just in framing the balance of power between the imperial authority and its subordinate provinces, but also in defining hierarchical relationships at home. The study seeks to provide an original reading of some of the most important visual, textual and archaeological creations of the later Republican and early imperial periods, and to use these studies to cast new light upon the evolving geographical understanding of the societies that created them.[16]

My attention here will focus primarily on the representations of the River Nile which emerged in Roman Italy between the mid-first century BCE and the mid-first century CE. Appropriately enough, the study sometimes overspills these chronological banks. It is difficult to understand the Roman response to Egypt without some appreciation of the important Greek precedent. Some of the multiple Niles explored here are anticipated in earlier writing, and Herodotus, in particular, casts an important shadow

[16] Talbert (2010b), 269 notes the desirability of a wide-ranging study of this kind. 'I am convinced that the immense range and variety of surviving texts, images and material objects will repay fresh appraisal in a continued quest to achieve fuller, more nuanced understanding. Recovery of Roman worldview in its intriguing variety – not all of it even detected to date perhaps – remains a work in progress.' The essays in Mutschler and Mittag (2008) display the potential for looking at Roman conceptions of space through a variety of different lenses and – still better – through systematic comparison with modes of representation in Han China, but there is little focused attempt to draw these strands together.

over much of what follows.[17] Elsewhere, reference to earlier periods is more explicit: extensive attention is paid, for example, to the famous Nile mosaic from the Temple of Fortuna in Praeneste, which is generally thought to have been created and installed towards the end of the second century BCE. This mosaic is important both as the first of many Egyptian 'landscapes' known from countless domestic contexts over the next two centuries, and is also commonly invoked in discussions of Roman 'mapping': for these reasons it could scarcely be omitted. Similarly, a small number of later imperial and late antique texts are also discussed in order to illuminate points made in the main discussion. But the last century of the Roman Republic and the first of the new Empire provide an exceptionally rich body of material in themselves. These include the major works of Roman prose geography, many of which describe the Nile at some length; the principal representations of the river in military triumphs; the overwhelming majority of visual 'Nilotica' from the walls of Pompeii and Rome; two crucial works of Latin natural philosophy by Lucretius and Seneca; and several relevant works of epic and elegy (including Lucan's *Civil War*). These decades also encompass the period in which Roman power spread throughout the Mediterranean world and was consolidated in the political domination of the Principate, a period which certainly witnessed dramatic changes in Roman attitudes to the wider world and the ways in which these were expressed. This period provides us with an unrivalled range of sources for explaining the multi-faceted nature of geographical understanding in the classical world, and its sometimes fractious relationship to political power.

Roman Geography Triumphant

Modern understanding of Roman geographical thought, and particularly its political function, has been shaped to a remarkable degree by the scholarship of Claude Nicolet. Crucial here was his inspirational monograph of 1988, *L'inventaire du monde: Geographie et politique aux origines de l'empire romain.*[18] Nicolet's nuanced survey stressed the importance of geographical imagery to Roman political power from the first half of the first century BCE, but argued that it changed dramatically during the Augustan Principate. In his view, both the politics and the practices of geographical

[17] On Herodotus, see esp. Vasunia (2001). Herodotus' contemporary context is explored further at 177–8 below.

[18] Nicolet (1988). This material was subsequently delivered in English as the Jerome Lectures and published as Nicolet (1991).

description were transformed under Augustus.[19] From 27 BCE, the triumvir Octavian remodelled himself as Augustus, assumed something close to autocratic power in Rome and remade the constitutional (and physical) fabric of the state in his own image.[20] The same period witnessed an intensification of quantitative data gathering in census and cadastral surveys and the systematic reordering of the new empire: it saw the establishment of large-scale representations of world in the imperial city, and very probably marked the period in which the first descriptive prose geographies in Greek (and perhaps Latin) were composed. Given the widespread modern fascination with Augustus' ideological programme of renewal – his 'propaganda' in the common modern terminology – and the frequency with which assertions of universal imperial power appear in the poetry, monuments and even coinage of the period, the correspondence between 'Imperial' geography and 'Empire' seems clear enough.[21]

Three specific documents are granted a particular prominence in Nicolet's discussion. Augustus' *Res Gestae* was a posthumous inscription of the emperor's accomplishments that was erected outside his mausoleum in the Campus Martius and subsequently circulated around the empire.[22] The *Breviarium totius imperii* is known only from its title, but seems to have been a summary of the dispositions of the imperial army and the state of the fisc and was said to have been passed to Augustus' successor Tiberius upon his assumption of power.[23] The third text within Nicolet's study, and certainly the most important for our purposes, is the so-called 'Map of Agrippa' said to have been produced by Augustus' son-in-law and lieutenant Marcus Agrippa and erected in the Porticus Vipsania after his death.[24] Like the *Breviarium*, the Agrippa map has since been lost, and its precise form and function have been much debated (as we shall see). At the very least it seems to have included a visual component that is often assumed to have been a map of the world, as well as a written commentary of some kind. For Nicolet, this 'map' represented the heart of Augustus'

[19] The 'revolutionary' features of the period are famously delineated in Syme (1939) for politics and Wallace-Hadrill (1997) and (2008) in intellectual and cultural terms.

[20] Eck (2007) and the papers in Galinsky (2005) and Bowman, Champlin and Lintott (1996) provide good introductions to Augustus and his age.

[21] Zanker (1988) is the (now classic) discussion of Augustan 'propaganda'. And cf. also Galinsky (1996) which sets the literature of the period in a similar frame.

[22] *Res Gestae*. Suet. *Aug.* 101.4; Dio Cass. 56.33.1. Nicolet (1991), 15–27.

[23] The title is from Suet. *Aug.* 101.4; Dio Cass 56.33.2 plausibly refers to the same document. Nicolet (1991), 171–87.

[24] Nicolet (1991), 95–122. The key textual references to the 'map', and the modern scholarship surrounding it, are discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

ideological project and was a necessary cartographic gloss to the textual information presented in the other documents. It was through this work, he argues, that the princeps displayed the scale of the imperial state to an admiring city. Equally importantly, it was this map that acted as the public face of the great geographical archive of the new Empire. This was a demonstration of the authoritative knowledge of a new kind of state in the ancient Mediterranean.[25]

Recognition of the intimate relationship between political power and the production and control of knowledge had transformed the study of historical geography between the 1970s and the 1990s.[26] Scholars increasingly appreciated the importance of maps and other practices of spatial representation to the articulation of state power, and Nicolet brilliantly adapted these observations to the fissiparous world of late Republican and early imperial Rome.[27] Certain aspects of his argument seem incontrovertible: whatever form the Agrippa 'map' took, for example, there can be little doubt that it was primarily intended to celebrate the magnitude of imperial rule and thus represented something like an 'official' view of the empire. Similarly, the broad thematic correspondence of a range of different texts on episodes like the Roman conquest of Egypt, or the extension of military authority to the edges of the world, can be meaningfully viewed alongside one another to present a more or less coherent 'imperial' discourse of domination and control.[28] Roman surveyors can likewise be viewed as agents of empire, manifesting the imperial presence in occupied territory, even as they compiled knowledge about these regions.[29] If we can credit Augustus with some power in the creation of his own ideology (and surely we must), it is not too much of a stretch to see the function that geographical imagery might have played in this.

Nicolet's argument provides a bravura demonstration of the importance of power at the root of all geographical production, but somewhat

[25] Arnaud (2007–2008) 46–7 traces the intellectual antecedents of Nicolet's argument. Dion (1977) presents an earlier survey of political influences on classical geography, but focuses on the texts, rather than the context.

[26] J. B. Harley was central to this process, especially in his adaptation of the ideas of Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens to historical geography. See esp. Harley (1988) and (1989), and the collaborative *History of Cartography* project of Harley and Woodward (1987–). Andrews (2001) crisply introduces Harley's work.

[27] Nicolet is not particularly forthcoming in discussing his debts to this developing tradition of historical geography, but the broad parallels are clear enough. For roughly contemporary discussions of more modern imperial mappings, compare the important survey of Livingstone (1992) and the essays in Godlewska and Smith (1994).

[28] See for example Bellen (1991).

[29] Morris (2016) provides an important reappraisal of these processes, and the social role of the surveyors themselves.

oversimplifies the political and intellectual context from which the discourse that he identifies emerged and obscures the divergent geographies that circulated in the decades after Augustus' rule.[30] In spite of its strengths, the epistemological issues at the heart of Nicolet's reconstruction remain unstable. Two aspects are particularly problematic. The first relates to Augustus' ability to translate his political power into intellectual authority – the extent to which he was able to sanction a preferred representation of the world and exclude contrasting or dissonant readings. The second concerns the media through which he expressed this privileged geography. Nicolet understandably emphasizes the importance of the *Res Gestae*, the *Breviarium* and the Agrippa 'map' within his text, as the closest ancient analogues to the atlases, reports and tables of modern imperial bureaucracy.[31] In doing so, however, he not only frames lost works in ways that may be anachronistic, he also occludes the huge array of other texts that have survived from the period, or appropriates them into his own model.[32] Nicolet implies that Augustus created an archive from which points of data could easily be retrieved, and which other writers were compelled to use if they sought trustworthy geographical information. In fact, as we shall see, geographical authority remained contested throughout the early imperial period and existed in perpetually ambivalent relationship to the apparatus of state power. As shall be discussed, moreover, information about the wider world could be gathered, displayed and even archived in this period without any expectation of eventual retrieval or practical use.[33] These observations have important implications.

Nicolet's view of the Agrippa 'map' – and of Augustan geographical discourse more broadly – is founded on a seemingly straightforward piece of reasoning. Speaking of the importance of the 'map' to the *Res Gestae*, particularly in illuminating its long lists of obscure toponyms, he notes:

[30] Virlouvet (1988) and Purcell (1990b) provide perceptive immediate responses.

[31] Cf. Nicolet (1991), 10: 'Once listed, classified, and stored, these documents will constitute, at the center of power, an administrative memory and picture of the world that will correspond more or less to those geographic images that we have studied.'

[32] This is perhaps clearest in his identification of Ovid as 'a poet in Augustus's entourage' at Nicolet (1991), 114. Which substantially simplifies the peculiar political position of that writer. Cf. Barchiesi (1997). Ovid's ambivalent appropriation of imperial geographical motifs is further discussed at 86–91 and 244–6 below.

[33] A point hinted at in the review of Nicolet by Talbert (1989), 1351: '. . . there is a questionable acceptance that, because Roman administrators gathered a mass of information, they shared the passion of a modern bureaucracy for retrieving and analyzing it.' Virlouvet (1988) and Purcell (1990b) also highlight the anachronism behind Nicolet's assumptions. Wallace-Hadrill (2008), esp. 259–314, offers a nuanced view of how different aspects of this 'knowledge revolution' might have operated on the ground. Moatti (1997) and (1993) discuss archival practice in the Roman world.

> All these names, and especially the latter, were known to the Hellenistic geographers . . . but they were certainly less familiar to the Romans. They could not have been appreciated without some illustration.[34]

And goes on to question:

> Is it to be believed that that the emperor was resigned to speak in a void, and not to be understood by the public when he employed a rare toponym, or when he described, in a subtly rhetorical manner, the Roman Empire extending over almost the entire region bounded by the northern Ocean ("from Gades to the mouth of the Elbe") or stretching towards the southern portions of the *oikoumene*, to the "Ethiopian" border? Surely not.[35]

Nicolet argues from this 'commonsensical' reasoning that the Augustan city must have had maps of the world, because such documents would have been necessary to make sense of the extraordinary proliferation of information in circulation at the time. He enables this logical step by elsewhere asserting that spatial cognition among the Romans was essentially the same as our own.[36] Because modern scholars are so comfortable referring to maps as repositories of authoritative information, in other words, because we turn so easily to the atlas or to Google Maps to clarify a toponym or geographical concept that is unfamiliar to us, it is easy to assume that the same must have been true in the classical world. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to conceptualize how else these materials might have been understood, but we should still try.

Nicolet's conclusions have proved enormously influential, and his work has been much cited, among classicists and historians of geography alike. This is not to suggest that his arguments have gone unchallenged. In particular, the likely form and function of the Agrippa map have been much discussed, as we shall see in the next chapter.[37] Nicolet's contention that the Augustan period witnessed a particular transformation in Roman attitudes to the world has also been further nuanced, not least in the important work of Pascal Arnaud.[38] Similarly, Strabo, who appears as something of an Augustan echo chamber in Nicolet's work, is now appreciated much more fully as an author in his own right.[39] Yet Nicolet's interpretation of the

[34] Nicolet (1991), 23. [35] Nicolet (1991), 23.
[36] Nicolet (1991), 70–4, at 70: 'We should not put forward a "natural" difference between the ancient way of thinking and ours.' In response to the arguments of Janni (1984).
[37] See below, 27–38.
[38] See esp. Arnaud (2007) for a survey and García Moreno (1994) on African material. On Nicolet specifically see Purcell (1990b), 180–1.
[39] Cf. for example, Nicolet (1991), 74. Radt (2002–11) is the newest edition of the text, Roller (2014) an up-to-date English translation. Clarke (1997), (1999), 193–7, Dueck (2000), 1–30