

Introduction

On a journey from the eastern Mediterranean to India, the Greek sage Apollonius of Tyana encountered a Roman official at the town of Zeugma on the Euphrates:

When they entered Mesopotamia, the tax-collector in charge of Zeugma led them to the notice-board and asked them what they were exporting. Apollonius answered, 'I am taking moderation, righteousness, virtue, self-control, courage and discipline,' thereby mentioning several feminine nouns. The tax-collector, already contemplating his own gain, said, 'Then you must declare these female slaves.' Apollonius answered, 'That is not possible, for these are not female slaves I'm taking out, but so many royal ladies.' (1.20)¹

The setting is significant: Zeugma ('bridge'), corresponding to modern Balkis in Syria, lies at a strategic position straddling the east Roman colonies of Seleucia and Apamea, and thereby controlled a major east–west trade route.² More significant for our purposes, however, is the characterisation of the pious sage. Add to this the comical misunderstanding whereby his philosophical quest appears as a commercial venture, and thus subject to tax – at least in the eyes of a rapacious official. Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, the hagiography of this polytheist holy man, was written in the third century AD, but it purports to tell of a journey undertaken in the first century AD. It is, in an important sense, the world of Philostratus, around

¹ παριόντας δὲ αὐτοὺς ἔς τὴν μέσην τῶν ποταμῶν ὁ τελώνης ὁ ἐπιβεβλημένος τῷ Ζεύγματι πρὸς τὸ πινάκιον ἦγε καὶ ἡρώτα, ὃ τι ἀπάγοιεν, ὃ δὲ Ἀπολλώνιος ἀπάγω, ἔφη, σωφροσύνην δικαιοσύνην ἀρετὴν ἐγκράτειαν ἀνδρείαν ἀσκησιν, πολλὰ καὶ οὕτω θήλεα εἶρας ὀνόματα. ὃ δ' ἦδη βλέπων τὸ ἑαυτοῦ κέρδος ἀπόγραψαι οὖν ἔφη τὰς δούλας. ὃ δὲ οὐκ ἔξεστιν, εἶπεν, οὐ γὰρ δούλας ἀπάγω ταύτας, ἀλλὰ δεσποίνας.

² Anthony Comfort, Catherine Abadie-Reynal and Rifat Ergeç, 'Crossing the Euphrates in antiquity: Zeugma seen from space', *Anatolian Studies* 50 (2000), 99–126; Anthony Comfort and Rifat Ergeç, 'Following the Euphrates in antiquity: north–south routes around Zeugma', *Anatolian Studies* 51 (2001), 19–49. Recent dam-building has necessitated rescue excavation and attracted much attention: see esp. David Kennedy *et al.*, *The twin towns of Zeugma on the Euphrates: rescue work and historical studies* (Portsmouth, RI: JRA supplement 27, 1998), with C. S. Lightfoot, 'Trying to rescue Zeugma', *JRA* 14 (2001), 643–8.

AD 222–35, that most clearly emerges from the text. Yet it would be wrong to overlook the dramatic setting: Apollonius was, according to this account and others, an eminent figure of the first century AD. Journeys such as his inform *The making of Roman India*, not so much for their own historicity as for the images of India with which they are connected.

India emerges in Philostratus' work as a place of special knowledge, its religious specialists themselves the objects of pilgrimage. There are many indications that Apollonius, in this guise, is re-enacting Alexander's expedition that reached as far as the Indus valley before his troops forced him to return (327–325 BC). For it was with Alexander's invasion that this image of India entered Greek thinking; his interview with Indian sages inspired several accounts from the earliest Alexander histories into the Middle Ages. But the implicit contrast between the military expedition and the holy man's quest could not be more pointed, as the anecdote of Apollonius shows. It is mainly in connection with Alexander that we encounter the mythical figures of Dionysus and Heracles – themselves pan-Mediterranean travellers *par excellence* but in several accounts linked with India. In one way or another, the memory of Alexander will be a key motif throughout this book.³

Apollonius is not the only person who is supposed to have travelled from the Mediterranean to India in the first century AD. The apostle Thomas travelled from Jerusalem to India as a missionary, sent by Jesus. Here he preached a message of bodily purity and enacted various miracles until dying a martyr's death at the behest of an Indian ruler. This story, recounted in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, a Syriac text composed in the early third century AD, was translated into Greek, Latin and many other languages, and widely diffused in late antiquity.

Both Apollonius and Thomas travel along routes that correspond demonstrably with networks of commodity exchange. One particularly valuable witness to the long-distance exchange is the anonymously written *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. This text, which dates to the years AD 40–70, is a sea-captain's manual, without literary embellishment, listing specific commodities, ports and other practical matters related to sea-borne trade between Egypt, via the Red Sea, following the seasonal monsoon winds

³ W. J. Aerts, 'Alexander the Great and ancient travel stories', in *Travel fact and travel fiction*, ed. Zweder von Martels (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 30–8, esp. 35 n. 24 on those mythical travellers; cf. François Hartog, *Memories of Odysseus: frontier tales from ancient Greece* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). It is as well to bear in mind, from a classicist's point of view, the comment of Diana Spencer, *The Roman Alexander: reading a cultural myth* (University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. xv: 'The Alexander we know and reinterpret is himself a "Roman" construct, a product of Roman sensibilities and worldview; it was the Romans who made him "the Great".'

south of the Arabian peninsula to India. Yet even this text, functional rather than literary, refers to ‘evidence of Alexander’s expedition’ (ch. 41).

These three travellers – Apollonius the sage, Thomas the apostle and the anonymous *Periplus* author – seem, at first glance, readily open to investigation for the concrete details of their journeys. Notably different motives took them to India, and indeed it is tempting to define travellers by their motives.⁴ Yet, in the first two cases, when we consider the time-lapse between event and account, it soon becomes clear that such investigation cannot proceed without due consideration of the textual complexities involved. The emphasis here will be more on travel texts than travellers themselves. Armchair travellers are no less important in this study, for it is particularly on their account that imagination comes to the forefront.

It is in the imaginative realm that the goal of this book is most readily articulated: to analyse the literary presentation of India in texts of the Roman empire. What visions of India do they harbour?⁵ Consideration of these texts will be, in part, in relation to different kinds of physical travel, of lived practice, that linked India and the Mediterranean. For current purposes, the historicity of actual journeys is of some consequence, but less so than the responses they inspire. In this respect we will need to inquire where, on a modern map, these visions would be located, even as we consider mental maps.

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What, then, did India mean to Romans of the empire? The book-ends framing this study are Augustus on the one hand and Cosmas Indicopleustes and Isidore of Seville on the other, roughly the late first century BC and early seventh AD. Its aims are to sketch the features of this ‘Roman India’ and to account for them by analysing the processes that brought them into being. It focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on Greek and Latin literary texts.

The term ‘Roman India’ is unexpected, even paradoxical. No Roman commander ever conquered India, though many were conscious of someone who had done so, in their view: Alexander III of Macedon. At least one emperor, Trajan (reigned AD 98–117), entertained fantasies of emulating

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *On human diversity: nationalism, racism and exoticism in French thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 341–52; compare the framework sketched Roxanne L. Euben, ‘The comparative politics of travel’, *Parallax* 9.4 (2003), 18–28.

⁵ Some of the Latin texts under discussion have been translated and annotated by Jacques André and Jean Fillionat, *L’Inde vue de Rome* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1986). Greek texts have fared less well, but note Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *The classical accounts of India* (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1960).

him.⁶ Most importantly, India gained a place in Roman minds as the ultimate exotic, a sense consciously expressed in artifacts and historical texts but also, even more tellingly perhaps, in passing references in a wide variety of texts. It is this range of exotic imaginings that the book adumbrates.

The work falls into three parts. The first, 'Creation of a discourse', lends time-depth by presenting the earliest relevant texts and identifying the processes that gave rise to Roman Indography. It analyses material up to the late Republic, with special attention to the figure of Alexander. Certainly his expedition generated an enormous amount of geographic, ethnographic and other natural historical writing in the Hellenistic world. Foremost among these are the account of the naval commander, Nearchus, which underlies Arrian's *Indica* (second century AD). Megasthenes' *Indica* comes from less than a generation after Alexander's campaign, and follows directly in its wake.⁷ Now accounts by Megasthenes, Nearchus and others linked with Alexander's campaign survive merely in fragments embedded in later works; here it is necessary to recreate the original works to the extent possible, and with a critical awareness of their fragmentary character.⁸

The centrality of Alexander notwithstanding, it is important to scratch below the surface in identifying the origins of this process. Special prominence in this chapter goes to the Achaemenid empire as the source of Greek Indography.⁹ The most substantial pre-Alexander writers on India, namely Herodotus and Ctesias (mid- and late-fifth century BC respectively), discuss India in the context of Achaemenid Persia, of which it was a satrapy or province. This opening chapter explores, in part, the impact of Achaemenid India on the making of Hellenistic (and beyond that Roman) Indography. Indeed, it can be argued, Alexander's military achievement can be seen as a performance of Persian kingship, in its fullest geographic extent. It would be wrong, by this reckoning, to take at face value the prominence later writers attribute to Alexander in this regard.¹⁰

⁶ Dio Cassius, *Roman history* 68.29.1: cf. Chapter 5, section I.5 below.

⁷ Albrecht Dihle, in an important article, has shown that the figure of Alexander lent a degree of authority to these early Hellenistic accounts of India – with the result that a canon of Indography was formed at an early stage, to the exclusion of information that later came to hand: 'The conception of India in Hellenistic and Roman literature', *PCPhS* 10 (1964), 15–23, reprinted in *Antike und Orient. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1984), pp. 89–97. Indeed, Dihle's wide-ranging work is central to most aspects of the current project; however, with the partial exception of an encyclopaedia article ('Indien', *RAC*), he has not ventured an overview of the topics discussed here.

⁸ Especially useful in this respect is Glenn W. Most (ed.), *Collecting fragments – Fragmente sammeln* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1997).

⁹ This has previously been suggested, e.g., R. D. Milns, 'Greek writers on India before Alexander,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 35 (1989), 353–63, but its implications hardly explored.

¹⁰ Spencer, *Roman Alexander*, emphasises the variety of responses, though restricting her purview to Latin texts up to Trajan. Words of caution against overestimating the role of Alexander among

Against this background, Part II, 'Features of a discourse', moves the focus to the imperial period as it puts India in a context of Roman ethnography and geography. What are the features of India as it appears in writers such as Strabo, Pliny the elder and Arrian? How do these features compare with the profile of other lands, e.g., Egypt, Arabia and China? This inquiry rests mostly on literary sources (Chapter 2).¹¹ Several of these writers may be linked with the Second Sophistic, to use the modern term for a cultural movement of Greek speakers under Roman rule (around AD 60–230).¹² The literature of this period is characterised by the importance of rhetoric – particularly as practised by professional orators or 'sophists' – and by nostalgia for the classical Greek past that preceded Roman domination. Less familiar than the literary texts but no less significant is a group of images representing India, including the Great Hunt mosaic at Piazza Armerina (early fourth century AD), which deserve investigation of their own (Chapter 3).¹³

Part III, 'Contexts of a discourse', constitutes the most direct answer to the central question of this book. Following the description of Roman Indograpy above, this substantial section offers three specific lines of analysis. First (Chapter 4), India was the source of commodities, including spices, fabrics and precious stones. Anxieties about *luxuria* inform many of the literary texts. While it is not possible to present all archaeological and documentary evidence for Roman trade with South Asia, it is necessary and feasible to outline the kinds of objects exchanged, routes and personnel, and in particular, to indicate ways in which these informed Roman ideas about India.

Second (Chapter 5), India constituted the end of empire, and, by implication, the end of the earth. When Augustus spoke in the *Res gestae*

Roman commanders and rulers come from Peter Green, 'Caesar and Alexander: *aemulatio, imitatio, comparatio*', *AJAH* 3 (1978), 1–26; and E. S. Gruen, 'Rome and the myth of Alexander', in *Ancient history in a modern university*, ed. T. W. Hillard et al. (North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University, 1998), pp. 178–91.

¹¹ Indographic texts are analysed within traditions of Hellenistic ethnography by James S. Romm, *The edges of the earth in ancient thought* (Princeton University Press, 1992), chapter 3. There is now a fundamental new discussion of Strabo by Katherine Clarke, *Between geography and history* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), pp. 193–336; notable also is Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural history: the empire in the encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹² Amid of the earth and fast-growing bibliography, note especially the surveys of Graham Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: a cultural phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Simon Swain, *Hellenism and empire: language, classicism and power in the Greek world, AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

¹³ The only synthesis available of these artifacts is by Hans Graeven, 'Darstellung der Inder in antiken Kunstweken', *JDAI(B)* 15 (1900), 195–218; see now also C. R. Whittaker, 'Sex on the frontiers', in a volume that bears on many of the interests addressed here: *Rome and its frontiers: the dynamics of empire* (London: Routledge, 2004).

(AD 14) of Indian ambassadors coming from India, 'which no Roman ruler had ever seen before', he was implying Roman rule over the farthest expanse of land – something that emerges from the context of that inscription. The hyperbolic language of Augustan poetry, suggesting Roman military dominance as far as India, deserves comparison here. Over time, this elision of *orbis terrarum* and empire takes on a different character, when for example the Christian geographies of Orosius and Isidore present India as marking the end of God's kingdom. (Such Christian conceptions of India from late antiquity show a high degree of continuity with maps of the later Middle Ages, e.g., the thirteenth-century Ebstorf world map, where ethnographic traditions are visually represented.) The focus on changing geographies of India thus provides an opportunity to trace changing conceptions of empire between Augustus and the early Middle Ages.¹⁴

Third (Chapter 6), India was a source of special knowledge. This was embodied especially in the 'naked philosophers' (*Gymnosophistae*), who featured in accounts of Alexander's expedition (e.g., Arrian's *Anabasis* and Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, both of the second century AD). Alexander's interview with the 'naked philosophers' forms the basis of this vision of India. It was by no means limited to historiography, since it became a central theme in the Alexander legend in its many other forms. In particular, this chapter suggests why India continued to appeal, over several centuries, as a source of wisdom (*sophia*). Apollonius of Tyana, the philosophic holy man of the first century AD whose life is described in Philostratus' hagiography of him (late second or early third century AD), is one significant traveller to India, invoking as he does the memory of Pythagoras and archaic Greek traditions about eastern wisdom. Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* is very much a text of the Second Sophistic. Another, rather different traveller is the apostle Thomas, also linked with the first century AD: the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* present an India that is the ultimate target of Christian mission. The purpose of visiting India could thus be either to learn or to teach, and here Apollonius is a figure of special complexity.¹⁵

By way of conclusion, there follows an attempt to bring together these various strands. This fourth part is entitled 'Intersections of a discourse'. If different Roman Indias have emerged from the foregoing discussion, it is

¹⁴ Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, *Kartographische Quellen* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1988); N. Lozovsky, *The earth is our book: geographical knowledge in the Latin West ca. 400–1000* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹⁵ John Elsner, 'Hagiographic geography: travel and allegory in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*', *JHS* 117 (1997), 22–37; more generally, Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien wisdom: the limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

necessary to look into the ways in which they were realised in lived practice, and how they related to each other. It will be clear by now that there were different registers of geographic and topographic knowledge, some more scholarly and scientific (e.g., Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography*, second century AD), others more popular and generalized (e.g. the *Alexander Romance*, third century AD), yet others practical (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, mid-first century AD). But to what extent do they constitute a single, integrated Roman conception of India? To what extent are Roman ideas about India extrapolations of their ideas about western Asia? What conclusions emerge about the nature and place of the exotic in Roman imperial culture? In particular, this epilogue is an opportunity to evaluate the memory of Alexander as a unifying figure for Roman discourses about India: in various ways, it plays a part in ideas about India as a place of commodities, empire or wisdom.

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The present work is a history of representations that is concerned with social context. As such, it is emphatically not a study of 'contacts' between India and the Mediterranean. (Whether it would be possible to write such a book is doubtful, though some studies do at least point in that direction.)¹⁶ By the same token, this is not a book about the 'influence' of India on the Mediterranean world or vice versa.¹⁷ Rather, the approach adopted here is to identify Roman responses to India, analysed with reference to the concept of discourse. Responses, in this sense, place the focus squarely in the Mediterranean, without claiming to speak in equal measure for all the cultural traditions spanned. The concept of a discourse thus refers to representations, conceived in terms of power relations within Roman society.¹⁸ In this way India provides a vantage point from which to examine

¹⁶ For one attempt, see Jean W. Sedlar, *India and the Greek world* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), which focuses on philosophy. A multi-volume project by Klaus Karttunen traces common features between South Asian and Greco-Roman literary traditions: thus far *India in early Greek literature* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1989) and *India and the Hellenistic world* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1997) have appeared. Especially valuable is Himanshu Prabha Ray's *The archaeology of seafaring in ancient South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Comparison between Buddhism and Christianity has usually been considered in terms of influence one way or the other: Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: nativity stories and Indian traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 1–17, reviews earlier scholarship. Such 'influence-research' is defended by J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'An Indian metaphor in St. John's Gospel', *JRAS*, series III. 9 (1999), 271–86, esp. 271–3. In the sphere of material culture, see now the massive work of Warwick Ball, *Rome in the east: the transformation of an empire* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1995). For a more recent survey, Paul A. Bové, 'Discourse', in *Critical terms for literary study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 50–65.

Roman worldviews. To focus on Roman responses rather than contacts or influence is perhaps to err on the side of caution. But the limitations bring with them a major advantage, namely, that it is thereby possible to avoid an essentialised view of timeless India. It is the contexts of Indography that we seek especially to understand. In examining Roman thinking, it is as much the *why* as the *how* that will concern us.

In so far as this study is concerned with empire as a context of knowledge, it shares an aim with a highly influential and controversial study of representations of eastern lands and peoples: Edward Said's *Orientalism*.¹⁹ Said's insistence on the constructed quality of the 'Orient', on the political implications of scholarship, has become an orthodoxy of sorts, despite the prodigious critique it has received.²⁰ In principle, I share that sense. Hence the emphasis on the political and generic contexts of Indography discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 below. However, I do not imagine that Said's model of orientalism applies without further ado to this very different period of history – one that is separated from modern colonialism by the Industrial Revolution, and is thereby part of very different technological systems, and a different economy of knowledge. It would be unfortunate if lip-service to Said denied our temporal framework the measure of specificity due to any period of historical inquiry. Roman thinking about India may have had a very powerful context of empire, as Chapters 1 and 4 variously explore; but that does not mean that the conditions of Roman contact with India resembled those of British imperialism. It is certainly possible and even necessary to draw comparisons between modern and premodern versions of orientalism, but it would be much better for those to proceed from the material itself, appropriately delimited and contextualised, rather than a priori. To this question of comparison we shall return in individual chapters and in the conclusion. The paradigm of Said's *Orientalism* continues to be an important one, providing a critical problem rather than an easy formula.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); in a 1995 reprint, Said responds to his critics.

²⁰ For a recent dossier, Alexander Lyon Macfie (ed.), *Orientalism: a reader* (New York University Press, 2000). Among discussions of its relevance to the ancient Mediterranean, Phiroze Vasunia, 'Hellenism and empire: reading Edward Said', *Parallax* 9 (2003), 88–97, offers a spirited defence, while several Roman historians and archaeologists are favourably inclined: *Dialogues in Roman imperialism: power, discourse and discrepant experience in the Roman empire*, ed. D. J. Mattingly (Portsmouth, RI: JRA, 1997). Note also M. J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic scenes and the Roman views of Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

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PART I

Creation of a discourse

CHAPTER I

Achaemenid India and Alexander

By way of introducing the book as a whole, this chapter strives to outline the features of Greek Indography, from the earliest texts up to the late Hellenistic world of the first century BC, and as far as possible to account for those features. What were the historical moments at which these ideas were formulated, and what were their sources? An earlier rendition of this story offers a three-part chronology: (1) Greek writings from Asia Minor from the later sixth to the early fourth century BC; (2) works based on Alexander's campaign, which brought thousands of Greek troops to the Indus Valley around 327–325 BC; and (3) writing produced by Greek ambassadors sent by Hellenistic states in the third century.¹ This periodisation provides a plausible starting point, but one that we shall reconsider in the course of the chapter. Even though several scholars have perceived continuity over time, the importance of Alexander's campaign in the production of images is a familiar fact, so familiar indeed that we may well ask to what extent it tends to be overstated.² This question can only be considered by sifting through Greek accounts before and after the campaign. One of the tasks of this chapter is thus to assess the campaign as an ethnographic moment, that is to say, as a defining point in the generation of knowledge about India and its inhabitants. Throughout these pages we shall be attentive to the contexts in which India is mentioned, whether in its own right, as part of a larger schema, or as a passing reference.

¹ E. R. Bevan, 'India in early Greek and Latin literature', in *The Cambridge history of India*, ed. E. J. Rapson, rev. Indian repr. edn (Delhi: Chand, 1962), vol. I, pp. 351–83, at 353.

² On the question of continuity and change, see especially Dihle, 'Conception'; elsewhere, Dihle has emphasised the role of Poseidonius in that continuity (*Antike und Orient*, pp. 21–6). Also Klaus Karttunen, 'The country of fabulous beasts and naked philosophers: India in classical and medieval literature', *Arctos* 21 (1987), 43–52.