Review of The edges of the earth in ancient thought: geography, exploration, and fiction, by J. Romm

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Reviewed by T. Corey Brennan, Bryn Mawr College.

"Nearly all geography, in antiquity, can be read as a form of literature." So James R [omm], in his introduction to a stimulating new book on how the Greeks and Romans attempted to describe the lands (both real and imagined) which lay beyond the fringes of their civilizations. R. has set out to show the formation and development of a geographic literary tradition on the PEI/RATA GH=S. His study ranges widely, from Homer through Seneca, Tacitus and Lucian, and beyond (there is an Epilogue on Renaissance discovery literature). They are all here: fabulous Ethiopians, Hyperboreans, Antipodes, one-eyed Arimaspeians, Dog-heads, Shade-feet, even Deinias of Arcadia, the lunar explorer (that is, in Antonius Diogenes' novel, *Wonders beyond Thule*). The result is an immensely engaging and erudite work, packed full of provocative insights, which deserves a much wider audience than simply specialists in the field.

To put it briefly, ancient Greek (and, consequently, Roman) notions about the boundaries of the earth came from all sorts of sources: geometry, natural philosophy, traveler's tales, and -- most important of all -- epic poetry. There were few opportunities for serious scientific observation and reporting, and even first-hand accounts could be contaminated by excessive emphasis on the paradoxical and marvellous. The Persian king Darius I sent Scylax of Caryanda to the far east for 30 months, the first Greek to visit India (Hdt. IV 44). What he came back with (to judge from a late summary of his alleged "log") was a long list of peoples with freakish abnormalities. For R., Scylax was consciously writing for a Greek audience, within an already established literary genre. The influence of this tradition would prove hard to escape. Even Strabo, almost five centuries later, found it difficult not to let his description of India (Book XV) degenerate into a catalogue of unexplained (and unexplainable) paradoxes.

Other geographical areas and issues had their own literary traditions. Take the actual "boundaries of the earth." Homer had a vast and formless Ocean bound the circle of lands. Later authors went a few steps further, and described the river itself as "a murky or undifferentiated welter of elements," much like the cosmic apeiron (p. 22). Herodotus vigorously rejected the concept of an Ocean, since no reliable informant had ever confirmed its existence (III 15). Anxious to preserve the distinction between historical and mythical geography (just as, I would add, historical and mythical time), Herodotus "divides his conceptual map into an inner and an outer space based not on the physical boundary between earth and sea ... but on the presence of human inhabitants and the resulting availability of eyewitness information" (p. 37). That inner space is the OI)KOUME/NH (sc. GH=). Herodotus' bold new construct met a mixed reception. The Alexandrian literary critics vociferously agreed that Ocean was a wholly fictional place, even using "Oceanic" as a by-word for a "class of [travel] tales which were mostly or entirely invented" (p. 183). But for centuries, the Stoics -- even
Strabo -- staunchly defended Homer's Ocean; Ptolemy (2nd century A.D.) still felt the need to argue against it.

Herodotus was not all that interested in what might extend beyond the OI)KOUMÉ/NH. Plenty of later writers made up for him. The Greek tradition of fabulous islands outside the Pillars of Heracles gradually developed into the Atlantis myth of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* ("pseudogeography in the service of philosophy," p. 126). And once the notion of a spherical earth divided into climatic zones found acceptance, geographers started postulating an alternate, habitable world to the south of the equator. In the third century B.C., the Stoic Crates of Malles actually put forward a model of four worlds, a north-south pair in each of the two hemispheres. Crates (significantly) felt the need to adduce some Homeric passages as evidence. His hypothesis had a long life. Thanks to Cicero, who picked up on it in the *Somnium Scipionis*, "Crates' four-world scheme ... was canonized for later antiquity and the Middle Ages" (p. 130).

Once postulated, "other worlds" naturally cried out for conquest. Roman writers of the early Empire made much of an alleged plan of Alexander the Great to campaign beyond the OI)KOUMÉ/NH with his Macedonian army. Many seem to have felt it was the duty of Imperial Rome to carry "forward the goals left unfulfilled by the dying Alexander" (p. 139). Hence the interest, during the period of Rome's greatest expansion, in the "mysteries" of the headwaters of the Nile, Taprobane (Sri Lanka), the North Sea coast, and Ultima Thule. Thule ('ultima' first in the preem to the *Georgics*) became a particularly potent symbol, and not just of future far-flung imperialism. "Only in a place outside the *oikoumene* and therefore outside the cycles of history could Augustan society make a true new beginning, without fear of repeating the errors of the past." That was Vergil's view, argues R. (p. 160). But others (Horace in *Epode* 16; Seneca in the *Medea*) were quite pessimistic whether redemption by exploration and conquest was indeed possible. (I would say the pessimists were right.)

There is a lot more in *The Edges of the Earth*. R. treats the origins and development of ethnologic satire, a form of social criticism where idealized peoples are made to mock more "advanced" Mediterranean culture; stylistic aspects of the genre of paradoxography (where R. makes good use of Mary Campbell's recent work on medieval travel literature); the Hellenistic fabulist Antiphanes of Berga and the limits of ancient credulity; scholarship in antiquity on Odysseus' voyages; "fictions of exploration" in the Greek novel, and much else. One of the great virtues of R.'s book is that it manages to cover all this ground in five compact chapters (plus Epilogue), without coming off as diffuse or superficial. R. tells his story well, interspersing detailed argumentation -- on often quite specific points -- with some deeply enjoyable "plot summaries" from his geographic writers. All the Greek and Latin is translated. The book is properly sourced, and no reader will go away at a loss for more to study. Segues from topic to topic, and chapter to chapter, do not seem particularly contrived. All this without the aid (thankfully) of a "grand thesis."

How does he do it? For a start, R. disclaims any ambition to exhaust his subject of the "edges of the earth" (p. 7). What he does actually offer is a (selective) overview of what antique geographic literature has to say about his chosen topic, grabbing on to a particular issue with great tenacity when he has something original to offer, but sometimes content to skip over the problems when he may not.

For instance, R. undervalues Posidonius. A Syrian Greek who emulated Herodotus' conscientious approach, Posidonius' writings of the early first century B.C. established him as the first great geographer and ethnographer of the Roman period. We know that
he was specifically interested in the "ends of the earth," particularly those of the west. (Seeking to verify a story that one could hear the sun hiss in the Atlantic as it set, Posidonius claimed he watched and listened for 30 consecutive days at Cadiz, before concluding that it did not -- Strabo III 1.5 = Edelstein and Kidd F 119.) R. tells us a bit about how Strabo reacted to Posidonius' treatise PERI 
*W)KEANOU= (pp. 198-199), but that is all we get. This is a pity. One would never guess from R.'s obiter dicta that Posidonius was in fact a central player in several of the debates this book describes (e.g., the questions of a circular Ocean and of a second inhabited world).

Another example. In his chapter "Ultima Thule and Beyond," R. describes Pliny's Taprobane (NH VI 81-91) simply as "a land 'banished by nature outside the world' and hence free of the vices that plague other countries" (p. 133 n. 30). One would like R. to have said more. Most striking, Taprobane is an integral part of the tradition of "ethnologic satire" which R. delineates, in this case, specifically aimed at Rome. Pliny relates that there "nobody kept a slave, everybody got up at sunrise and nobody took a siesta in the middle of the day; their buildings were only of moderate height; the price of grain was never inflated; there were no lawcourts and no litigation ... [and] the king was elected by the people on the grounds of age and gentleness of disposition and as having no children, and if he afterwards had a child, he was deposed, to prevent the monarchy from becoming hereditary." (One wonders what the emperor Vespasian and his son Titus thought of that last part!).

Nor are all of R.'s judgements on individual authors entirely trustworthy. Consider Ctesias. A Greek doctor to the Persian royal family at the beginning of the fourth century BC., Ctesias wrote an ill-informed but very interesting treatise on India. He had never seen the place: all his information is from traders passing through the Persian court. One does not have to look far for the incredible in Ctesias. Photius' summary of his Indika gives a long account of the KunokephaloI, a dog-headed tribe, 120,000 strong, who cannot talk, but understand what is said to them. R. asserts, "Ctesias seems not to have looked down on the Dog-heads as mentally or culturally deficient creatures ... just after being compared to dogs, the Dog-heads are also described as "just" (dikaioi) -- an adjective which in Greek ethnography connotes a state of supreme moral perfection. Far from confirming the supremacy of man over the "sub"-human Ctesias seems instead to have used the Dog-heads to call that supremacy into question." An intriguing argument -- if the reader has never looked at the Indika epitome. There problems arise. In plain truth, Ctesias calls practically everything that moves in India 'dikaios' (as Photius himself noticed -- ch. 14 init.; cf. 8 and 11). Ctesias (cf. 17) mentions even a bird which Indians dub the dikairon, whose name he explains to mean -- lest his audience miss the etymology -- the same as Greek DI/KAION, i.e. "just." (This bird's moral excellence seems to have been extrapolated from its magical dung, which Indian royals used for euthanasia.) Speaking of birds, Ctesias also tells of one which talks like a human in the Indian language, and can speak Greek as well, if you teach it -- called the parrot (ch. 3). Does this feathered creature too call into question the supremacy of man? Or rather, does the parrot not reinforce the sub-humanity of the Dog-heads, who can only listen? The point of my niggling is that R. does not always bother to explore fully the issues he raises.

More than a few of Ctesias' readers must have denied indignantly that such a thing as a parrot could possibly exist. That was the trouble. Ctesias, his informants and his audience lacked the breadth of organized experience which would allow them to distinguish the merely strange and unfamiliar (the parrot) from the fanciful and plainly fictitious (the DI/KH-bird). But of course they enjoyed hearing about both. Natural curiosity created a niche for a massive literature. R. does a superb job in showing exactly how ancient authors, starting with Homer, exploited the universal (and of
course unavoidable) ignorance about the "edges of the earth," whether it be for aesthetic, moral, philosophical or entertainment purposes. Taken cumulatively, these writings cast a powerful spell. Alexander's admiral Nearchus was convinced he saw the hides of the fabled gold-digging ants on his visit to India ("they were like leopard skins," he reports *ap. Strabo* XV 1.44). And it was not only the ancient imagination which succumbed. As Edith Hall has reminded us, eighteen centuries later Christopher Columbus in his journal entered rumors of "men with one eye, and others with dogs' noses who ate men."

It is not easy to trace how some of these strange notions emerged and then subsequently developed, sometimes even spawning literary sub-genres. In *The Edges of the Earth* R. successfully sorts out for us some of the most complex traditions of ancient geographic literature; and he deserves high marks for doing it in such an intelligent, original and attractive manner.