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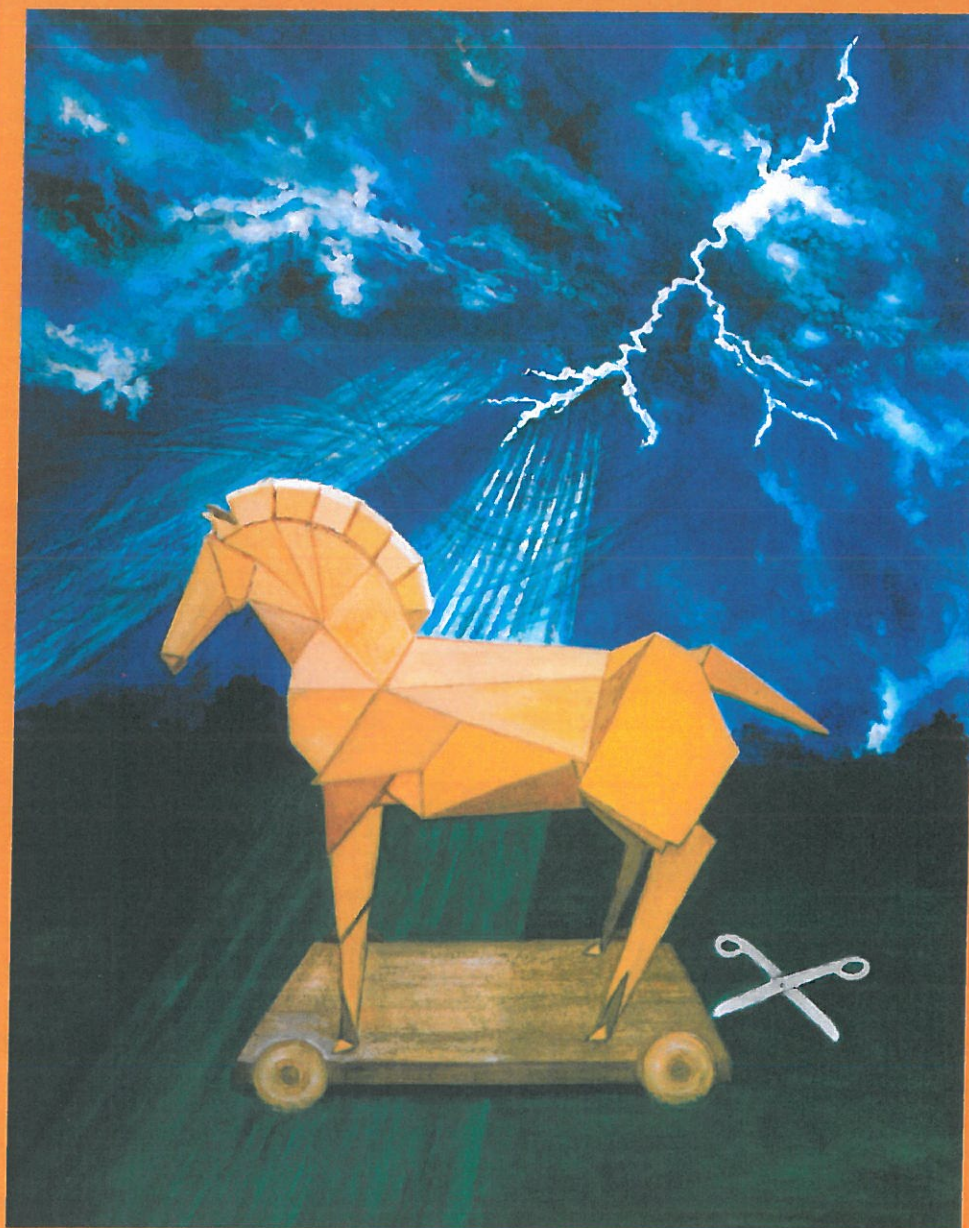
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A manticore: one of many beasts suspected of lurking in India (detail from a bestiary (Royal 12 F xiii, f. 24v), digitized and held by the British Library).

INDIAN DREAMS

Matthew Cobb

explores India in the early Greek imagination

In 327 BC, Alexander the Great led a Graeco-Macedonian army over the Hindu Kush into the Indus Valley (largely in modern Pakistan). He was not wholly entering *terra incognita*, as the Greeks had had some notion of India since at least the late Archaic period. However, many of their ideas were fantastical to say the least. Stories abounded of gold-digging ants the size of foxes, men with dogs' heads, and the savage manticore – a creature with the head of a man, body of a lion and tail of a scorpion. What Alexander's soldiers must have thought when they were entering India we can only imagine.

Indeed, the Greek ideas about India which had developed over the preceding two centuries are highly thought-provoking today.

The earliest known traveller to India who wrote in Greek is the somewhat shady figure Scylax of Caryanda. Herodotus tells us that Scylax was ordered by the Great King Darius of Persia to explore the Indus region. Having navigated the river and reached its mouth, he sailed westwards until he arrived at the Red Sea (*Histories* 4.44.1–3). This undertaking was a prelude to the king's invasion of the Indus Valley region in the penultimate decade of the sixth century BC.

Although Scylax's report of his adventures does not survive, snippets of information are recorded by subsequent Greek and Roman authors. Whether his account contained detailed geographic and ethnographic information we cannot say for sure, as most of the later writers chose to focus instead on his comments on Big-Headed men, One-Eyed men and the *skiapodes* – a people who could use a singular large foot to shade themselves. It was for such comments that he was sometimes mocked by later writers (see, for instance, Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 3.47). Scylax was, however, taken seriously enough

in the Classical period to be mentioned by Herodotus. Aristotle, too, makes reference to him as a source of authority when discussing kingship in India (*Politics* 1332b21–27).

As far as we know, no other early Greek travellers to India left written accounts of their personal observations until the time of Alexander the Great. Lack of direct contact did not, however, stop people from discussing India. In the early fifth century BC, Hecataeus of Miletus wrote his *Journey around the World*, which sought to describe Europe, Asia and Africa. The work does not survive, but some fragments make reference to several ethnic-cultural groups within India.

Herodotus also provides a short ethnographic description of India in his report on Darius the Great's reorganization of the Persian Empire (*Histories* 3.97–106). The latter account focuses not so much on the bizarre races of men who inhabited Scylax's India, but on cultural habits, ways of life and the gold resources that interested the Persians. These men lived at the eastern edges of the earth next to a great wasteland (*Histories* 4.40.2). Their lifestyles presented alternate extremes – some being pacifists who killed no living creature, others being cannibals who ate their sick friends before their flesh could rot.

Perhaps the most significant work of Classical Indography (writings on India) was the *Indica* of Ctesias, written most likely in the early fourth century BC. Its themes, known from comments and summaries by later authors, included geography, ethnography, botany, zoology and descriptions of precious gems. Many of the creatures Ctesias described, such as griffins, unicorns and the aforementioned mantichore, persisted in the ancient and medieval imagination (as wonderfully represented in various manuscript illustrations).

The weird and wonderful descriptions we get in these accounts raise a number of interesting questions. Are these reports completely fanciful and simply products of the Greek

imagination? Or is it possible that some of these accounts convey grains of truth that became garbled in transmission? If so, what were the sources of information? To take the latter two questions first, a few attempts have been made to offer rationalizing explanations for some of these creatures. It has been suggested that the gold-digging ants, which Herodotus describes as burrowing into the ground, unearthing golden flakes as they went, were in fact Himalayan marmots. One struggles to imagine these animals murderously pursuing camel-riding men who had dared to approach their warrens!

A more plausible approach may be to consider the potential influence of Sanskrit oral (and subsequently literary) traditions and Persian artwork on the development of Greek ideas about India. For example, the long-eared people mentioned by Ctesias also appear in the Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*. Ctesias himself spent a number of years as a physician to the family of the Persian king Artaxerxes II Memnon (r. 405/4–359/8 BC) after being taken as a prisoner of war (Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 2.32.4). Whilst there, he claims to have seen Indian 'things' and met Indian people. His vivid descriptions of the colours of certain creatures also suggest that he may have been describing painted images he had seen. It is in fact clear that Ctesias did encounter (or hear accurate reports of) some genuine creatures from India, as he described the Indian elephant and the *bittakos* (parrot). From the perspective of a Greek living in the Mediterranean world with little experience outside his or her immediate homeland, would Ctesias' tales about griffins seem any more fantastical than his report on birds that could imitate human speech?

As we can see in the case of Ctesias' *Indica*, it was not always necessary for Greeks to travel to India in order to meet Indians or hear reports about its peoples. The

Persian Empire, which spanned the western coast of Asia Minor to the Indus Valley region, could often act as a useful cultural intermediary and transmitter of information.

Herodotus, for example, states that his account of the gold-digging ants derives from the Persians (*Histories* 3.105.1). This intermediary role is also revealed in an important anecdote about cultural relativism. Herodotus recounts how groups of Greeks, who were present in the court of Darius the Great, were asked how much money it would take for them to eat the dead bodies of their parents (rather than cremate them as was common Greek practice), to which they responded in horror. These Greeks, after being taken aside and provided with interpreters, watched as Darius asked a group of Indians called the Callataie (who traditionally ate the flesh of their departed parents) how much money it would take for them to burn their parents' bodies in accordance with Greek custom, to which they responded in horror (*Histories* 3.38).

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It is easy to see how a mixture of second-hand reports, oral traditions (from India and elsewhere), artwork and the observation of objects and animals derived from India might colour the writings of men like Ctesias. However, this alone does not account fully for Greek perceptions of India. It is also worth thinking about how these descriptions of India fitted (or were made to fit) into ideas about the known or inhabited world (*oikoumenē*) as the Greeks understood it.



Himalayan marmot, or 'gold-digging ant'?

It was commonly held among the Greeks that the further one got towards the outer boundaries of the earth, the more extreme and fecund nature became (for example Herodotus *Histories* 3.106). In Archaic poetry, it was supposed that at the outer limits of the great River Ocean, which surrounded the world, the division between the four elements started to break down. It is not difficult to see how such views of the nature of the world and its outer regions might reinforce the perceived oddity of places like India as the Greeks of the Archaic and Classical periods understood it.

Ideas about India were not simply confined to the accounts of travellers, geographers and historians, but expressed themselves in wider culture, too, including dramatic performances. Aeschylus mentions Indian women riding camels and living near the Aethiopians (another group perceived as being at the margins of the known world) in *The Suppliant Women* (284–86). Sophocles refers to Indian gold in the *Antigone* (1038–39). The ambiguity and blurring of boundaries with other groups at the 'outer edges' of the world, particularly the Aethiopians, reinforces the impression that Greek ideas about India were far from precise.

Later authors liked to imagine that famous men from Classical Greece met Indians, whether by travelling to India or by Indians coming to the Greek world. Diogenes Laertius, a third-century AD biographer of philosophers, reports that the famous Democritus of Abdera (ca. 460–370 BC), inventor of the atomic theory, travelled to meet Indian philosophers (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 9.7.35). Eusebius, a fourth-century AD Christian writer, relates that Pythagoras studied under the Brahmins. He also repeats the claim that an Indian met Socrates in Athens, enquired of his philosophy, and mocked him for attempting to understand the human without comprehending the divine (*Praeparatio evangelica* 10.4, 11.3). Whether there is any truth to such claims remains an open question, though a healthy dose of scepticism is probably warranted.

To return to where we started, Alexander's expedition to India and the accounts of the men who accompanied him would have a profound impact on Greek – and later Roman – ideas about India – as would the subsequent account of Megasthenes, an ambassador to the court of the Mauryan king Chandragupta (late fourth century BC). To the Greeks of the Hellenistic period, India became a more complex place with well-developed social hierarchies, customs and a more concrete place in mythical-historical terms. It was known for its justice and for naked philosophers who could push themselves to physical extremes.

'Their lifestyles presented alternate extremes – some being pacifists who killed no living creature, others being cannibals who ate their sick friends before their flesh could rot'

The more fantastical ideas of Herodotus and Ctesias never completely disappeared, but were sometimes displaced to the margins of India and mocked by satirists like Lucian (*A True Story* 1.1–3, 2.31 – mid second century AD). Indeed, such ideas continued to have an afterlife in Medieval European perceptions of the East. Even today, the concepts spread by these Greek writers remain part of our culture, from the unicorn which appears on some pound coins, to the use of griffins in films such as *The Spiderwick Chronicles*.

SUGGESTED READING

- Kosmin, P.J. (2014) *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire*. Harvard University Press
 Nichols, A. (2011) *Ctesias on India: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Bristol Classical Press
 Parker, G. (2008) *The Making of Roman India*. Cambridge University Press
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