

Rome and the Indian Ocean: The Classical World in a Global Context (HPAH7008)

UNIT 2 Task booklet – An ancient Columbus?



World map based on ideas of Posidonius – drawn in 1628 by Petrus Bertius and Melchior Tarvernier

For this task you will explore two literary traditions surrounding the supposed “discovery” of the monsoon winds by the Greeks which enabled sailors to make annual voyages from west to east (south-western monsoon) and east to west (north-eastern). The first literary tradition concerns Eudoxus of Cyzicus, who is credited by Posidonius (recorded by Strabo) as being the first Greek to make successful use of the monsoons after a ship-wrecked Indian sailor was picked up by the Ptolemies in the Red Sea. The second, vaguer, tradition concerns a Hippalos who is said by Pliny the Elder and the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* to have discovered the means by which sailors could travel over open water to India. The narratives about these two men are given below; you should read these in conjunction with modern scholarship (see Moodle) discussing these traditions when considering the following questions:

Questions:

- 1) What are the difficulties in trying to determine the veracity of these two discovery traditions?
- 2) Why do you think two different traditions developed?
- 3) Is one more credible than the other?
- 4) Can we infer anything about historical developments from these narratives?

Post any thoughts you wish to the Unit 2 forum

See also the Moodle page for relevant scholarship:

Tchernia, A. (1997) ‘Winds and Coins: From the Supposed Discovery of the Monsoon to the Denarii of Tiberius’, in *Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India* (De Romanis, F. and Tchernia, A. eds.), Manohar: 250-276.

Habicht, C. (2013) ‘Eudoxus of Cyzicus and Ptolemaic Exploration’, in *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile* (Buraseis, K., Stefanou, M. and Thompson, D. eds.), CUP: 197-206.

Literary Traditions

Strabo *Geography* 2.3.3-5 – Trans. Jones (1917) – adapted slightly.

“In giving the names of those who are said to have circumnavigated Libya Posidonius says that Herodotus believes that certain men commissioned by Neco accomplished the circumnavigation of Libya; and adds that Heracleides of Pontus in one of his Dialogues makes a certain Magus who had come to the court of Gelo assert that he had circumnavigated Libya. And, after stating that these reports are unsupported by testimony, he tells the story of a certain Eudoxus of Cyzicus, a sacred ambassador and peace herald at the festival of Persephone. Eudoxus, the story goes, came to Egypt in the reign of Euergetes the Second; and he became associated with the king and the king's ministers, and particularly in connection with the voyages up the Nile; for he was a man inclined to admire the peculiarities of regions and was also not uninformed about them. Now it so happened, the story continues, that a certain Indian was brought to the king by the coast-guards of the recess of the Red Sea, who said that they had found him half-dead and alone on a stranded ship, but that they did not know who he was or where he came from, since they did not understand his language; and the king gave the Indian into the charge of men who would teach him Greek; and when the Indian had learned Greek, he related that on his voyage from India he by a strange mischance mistook his course and reached Egypt in safety, but only after having lost all his companions by starvation; and when his story was doubted, he promised to act as guide on the trip to India for the men who had been previously selected by the King; and of this party Eudoxus, also, became a member.

So Eudoxus sailed away with presents; and he returned with a cargo of perfumes and precious stones (some of which the rivers bring down with the sands, while others are fortified by digging, being solidified from a liquid state, just as our crystals are). But Eudoxus was wholly deceived in his expectations, for Euergetes took from him his entire cargo. And after the death of Euergetes, his wife, Cleopatra, succeeded him on the throne; and so Eudoxus was again sent out, by her also, and this time with a larger outfit. But on his return voyage he was driven off his course by the winds to the south of Ethiopia, and being driven to certain places he appeased the people by sharing with them bread, wine, and dried figs (for they had no share of such things), and in return therefor he received a supply of fresh water and the guidance of pilots, and he also made a list of some of their words. And he found an end of a wooden prow that had come from a wrecked ship and had a horse carved on it; and when he learned that this piece of wreckage belonged to some voyagers who had been sailing from the west, he took it with him when he turned back upon his homeward voyage. And when he arrived safely in Egypt, inasmuch as Cleopatra no longer reigned but her son in her stead, he was again deprived of everything, for it was discovered that he had stolen much property. But he brought the figure-head to the market-place and showed it to the shipmasters, and learned from them that it was a figure-head from Gades; for he was told that whereas the merchants of Gades fit out large ships, the poor men fit out small ships which they call "horses" from the devices on the prows of their ships, and that they sail with these small ships on fishing voyages around the coast of Maurusia as far as the river Lixus; but some of the shipmasters, indeed, recognized the figure-head as having belonged to one of the ships that had sailed rather too far beyond the Lixus River [a river following into the Atlantic on the western coast of Morocco] and had not returned home safely.

And from the above-mentioned fact Eudoxus conjectured that the circumnavigation of Libya [i.e., Africa] was possible, went home, placed all his property on a ship, and put out to sea. First he put in at Dicaearchia, then at Massilia, and then at the successive points along the coast until he came to Gades; and everywhere noisily proclaiming his scheme and making money by trafficking, he built a great ship and also two tow-boats like those used by pirates; and he put music-girls on board, and physicians, and other artisans, and finally set sail on the high sea on the way to India, favoured by constant western breezes. But since his companions became tired of the voyage, he sailed with a fair wind towards the land; though he did it against his will, for he feared the ebb and flow of the tides. And, indeed, what he feared actually came to pass: the ship ran aground, — though so gently that it was not broken up all at once, and they succeeded in bringing safely to land the cargo and also most of the ship's timbers' and from these timbers he constructed a third boat about as large as a ship of fifty oars; and he continued his voyage, until he came to people who spoke the same words that he had made a list of on the former occasion; and forthwith he learnt this, at least, that the men in that region belonged to the same nation as those other Ethiopians, and also that they were neighbours to the kingdom of Bogus.

Accordingly, he abandoned the voyage to India and turned back; and on the voyage along the coast, he espied and made note of an island that was well-watered and well-wooded but uninhabited. And when he reached Maurusia safely he disposed of his boats, travelled on foot to the court of Bogus, and advised him to take up this expedition on his own account; but the friends of Bogus prevailed to the contrary, inspiring in him the fear that Maurusia might in consequence be easily exposed to hostile intrigue if the way thither had once been pointed out to outsiders who wished to attack it. And when Eudoxus heard that he was being sent out, ostensibly, on the expedition as proposed by him, but in reality was going to be placed out on some desert island, he fled to the territory that was under Roman dominion, and thence crossed over to Iberia. And again he built a round ship and a long ship of fifty oars, his purpose being to keep to the open sea with his long ship and to explore the coast with the round ship. He put on board agricultural implements, seeds, and carpenters, and again set out with a view to the same circumnavigation; his intention being, in case the voyage should be delayed, to spend the winter on the island he had previously observed, to sow the seed, reap the harvest therefrom, and then finish the voyage which he had decided upon at the outset.

"Now I," says Posidonius, "have traced the story of Eudoxus to this point, but what happened afterwards probably the people of Gades and Iberia know." So from all these indications he says it is shown that the ocean flows in a circle round the inhabited world: "For him no fetters of continent encompass; but he pours forth his waters boundlessly, and nothing ever sullies their purity." Now Posidonius is a wonderful fellow in all this; for although he considers as unsupported by testimony the story of the voyage of the Magus, which Heracleides told, and of the voyage even of the emissaries of Neco, of which Herodotus gives an account, he puts down as real evidence this Bergaeian story [the term derives from Antiphanes of Berge, whose account of the distant north was seen as so ridiculous, that his name became a byword for a fantastical tall tale] though he either invented it himself or accepted it from others who were its inventors. For, in the first place, what plausibility is there in the "strange mischance" which the Indian tells about? Why, the Red Sea is like a river in its narrowness [a reference to the Bab el-Mandeb], and it is about fifteen thousand stadia long up to its mouth, which, in its turn, is narrow throughout its entire length; and so it is not likely that the Indians who were voyaging outside this gulf were pushed out of their course into it by mistake (for its narrowness at its

mouth would have shown their mistake), nor, if they sailed into the gulf on purpose, did they any longer have the excuse that they mistook their course or encountered inconstant winds. And how can it be that they permitted all their number to die of starvation with the exception of one man? And if he survived, how could he single-handed have guided the ship, which was not a small one, since at all events it could sail over open seas of so great extent? And how strange his speedy mastery of the Greek language, which enabled him to convince the king that he was competent to act as pilot of the expedition? And how strange Euergetes' scarcity of competent pilots, since the sea in that region was already known to many men? And as for that peace herald and sacred ambassador of the people of Cyzicus, how came he to abandon his native city and go sailing to India? And how did he come to be entrusted with so great an office? And although on his return everything was taken away from him, contrary to his expectation, and he was in disgrace, how did he come to be entrusted with a still greater equipment of presents? And when he returned from this second voyage and was driven out of his course to Ethiopia, why did he write down those lists of words, and why did he enquire from what source the beak of that fishing-vessel had been cast ashore? For the discovery that this bit of wreckage had belonged to men who sailed from the west could have signified nothing, since he himself was to sail from the west on his homeward voyage. And so, again, upon his return to Alexandria, when it was discovered that he had stolen much property, how is it that he was not punished, and that he even went about interviewing shipmasters, at the same time showing them the figure-head of the ship? And wasn't the man that recognized the figure-head a wonderful fellow? And wasn't the man that believed him a still more wonderful fellow — the man who on the strength of a hope of that sort returned to his homeland, and then changed his home to the regions beyond the Pillars [i.e., beyond the Straits of Gibraltar]? But it would not even have been permitted him to put to sea from Alexandria without a passport, least of all after he had stolen property belonging to the king. Neither could he have sailed out of the harbour secretly, since not only the harbour, but also all the other ways of issue from the city had always been kept closed under just as strong guard as I know is still kept up to this day (for I have lived a long time in Alexandria) — though at the present time, under Roman control, the watch is considerably relaxed: but under the kings, the guards were much more strict. And, again, when Eudoxus had sailed away to Gades, and in royal style had built himself ships and continued on his voyage, after his vessel had been wrecked, how could he have built a third boat in the desert? And how is it, when once more he put out to sea and found that those western Ethiopians spoke the same language as the eastern Ethiopians, that he was not eager to accomplish the rest of his voyage (inasmuch as he was so foolish in his eagerness for travels abroad, and since he had a good hope that the unexplored remainder of his voyage was but small) — but instead gave up all this and conceived a longing for the expedition that was to be carried out through the aid of Bogus? And how did he come to learn about the plot that was secretly framed against him? And what advantage could this have been to Bogus — I mean his causing the disappearance of the man when he might have dismissed him in other ways? But even if the man learned about the plot, how could he have made his escape to places of safety? For, although there is nothing impossible in any escapes of that sort, yet every one of them is difficult and rarely made even with a streak of good luck; but Eudoxus is always attended by good luck, although he is placed in jeopardies one after another. And, again, after he had escaped from Bogus, why was he not afraid to sail once more along the coast of Libya when he had an outfit large enough to colonise an island?

Now, really, all this does not fall short of the fabrications of Pytheas, Euhemerus and Antiphanes. Those men, however, we can pardon for their fabrications — since they follow precisely this as their business — just as we pardon jugglers; but who could pardon Posidonius, master of demonstration and philosopher, whom we may almost call the claimant for first honours. So much, at least, is not well done by Posidonius.”

Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.26.100 – Trans. Bostock and Riley (1855) – adapted slightly.

“In later times it has been considered a well-ascertained fact that the voyage from Syagrus, the Promontory of Arabia, to Patale, reckoned at thirteen hundred and thirty-five [Roman] miles, can be performed most advantageously with the aid of a westerly wind, which is there known by the name of Hippalus.”

(6.26.104)

“To those who are bound for India, Ocelis [on the western coast of modern day Yemen] is the best place for embarkation. If the wind, called Hippalus, happens to be blowing, it is possible to arrive in forty days at the nearest emporium of India, Muziris by name. This, however, is not a very desirable place for disembarkation, on account of the pirates which frequent its vicinity, where they occupy a place called Nitrias; nor, in fact, is it very rich in articles of merchandize.”

***Periplus Maris Erythraei* 57** – Trans. Casson (1989).

“The whole coastal route just described from Kanē and Eudaimōn Arabia [both on the southern coast of modern day Yemen], men formerly used to sail over in smaller vessels, following the curves of the bays. The ship captain Hippalos, by plotting the location of the ports of trade and the configuration of the sea, was the first to discover the route over open water. . . . In this locale the winds we call “etesian” blow seasonally from the direction of the ocean, and so a southwesterly makes its appearance from the direction in the Indian Sea [an allusion to the Summer Monsoon winds], but it is called after the name of the one who first discovered the way across. Because of this, right up to the present, some leave directly from Kanē and some from the Promontory of Spices, and whoever are bound for Limyrikē [Malabar coast] hold out with the wind on the quarter for most of the way, but whoever are bound for Barygaza and whoever for Skythia only three days and no more, and carried along (?) the rest of the run on their own proper course, away from the shore on the high seas, over the [? Ocean] off the land, they bypass the aforementioned bays.”

Appendix I: Key Maps and Locations



Eastern Desert region

The Eastern Desert is a hyper-arid region located to the East of the Nile River and broadly extends from the Suez down into modern Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its current climate has been established since the Holocene epoch and is characterized by limited and irregular rainfall with occasional flash-floods. In the mountains of this region various gold and precious gem mines were worked by the Ptolemies (the extraction of precious materials had, in fact, been well-established in the Pharaonic period); the Romans continued this activity to some extent in the earlier imperial period, and also extracted major granodiorite and porphyry hardstones from the sites of Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus. Various indigenous nomadic groups inhabited the Eastern Desert, sometimes coming into conflict with those intrusive populations who were travelling through the region, extracting mineral resources, or living at the small fortlets that lined strategic crossing points.



The *Erythra Thalassa*

The term *Erythra Thalassa* quite literally means the Red Sea, but often it was used more broadly to refer to the wider western Indian Ocean (Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea), sometimes including the Persian Gulf. The Red Sea proper (covering an area of some 438,000 km²) is a

very large semi-enclosed body of water which has only one natural outlet at the Bab-el-Mandeb – at this point the distance between the coast of Africa and the coast of Arabia is 30 km at its narrowest. It was via the Red Sea that merchants from the Mediterranean world under the Ptolemies and later the Romans were able to directly trade in the Indian Ocean.

Appendix II: The Ptolemies the *Erythra Thalassa*: Key Dates

- 323 BC** – Ptolemy I Soter takes over as Satrap of Egypt.
- 321 BC** – Perdiccas invades Egypt including with a force of Indian elephants; it is possible that Ptolemy I seizes these elephants after the death of Perdiccas (Diodorus Siculus 18.33-36).
- 312 BC** – defeat of Demetrius (son of Antigonus the One-Eyed) at Gaza and the capture by Ptolemy I of 42 Indian elephants.
- 301 BC** – After Ipsos Ptolemy I seized (again) part of Koile Syria and captured part of south-east Asia Minor.
- 285-246 BC** – reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (sole ruler from 283 BC); starts the systematic hunting for elephants along the Red Sea coast of Africa.
- c.246-243** – an inscription set up near the port of Adulis (in modern Eritrea) which was later recorded by Cosmas Indicopleustes (a sixth century AD Christian traveller); inscription commemorates both the capture of ‘Trog[l]odytic’ and ‘Aithiopian’ elephants in East Africa, and also the capture from the Seleucids of Indian elephants that had been stationed in Asia Minor and Thrace.
- 217 BC** – failure of Ptolemy IV’s Africa (Forest) elephants against the larger Indian elephants of Antiochus III at the battle of Raphia, although Ptolemy IV wins the battle overall.
- 205-186 BC** – major uprising in southern Egypt (The Great Revolt of the Egyptians), almost certain that no elephant hunting activity was carried on by the Ptolemies in this period.
- 188 BC** – Treaty of Apamea signed between the Romans and Antiochus III, technically forbidding the Seleucids from possessing an elephant corps.
- 163 or 162 BC** – Gnaeus Octavius hamstrung the Seleucid elephant corps at Apamea (Polyb. 31.2.11; App. Syr. 46).
- 150 BC** – A papyrus document dating to this year records a multi-ethnic expedition to the “Aromatics-bearing-land” (*SB* 7169); this is probably referring to Somalia.
- 145 BC** – Ptolemy VI Philometor dies in Syria; he had invaded with a force of forest elephants which were subsequently captured by the Seleucid Demetrius II.
- Mid-late second century BC** – likely cessation of Ptolemaic hunting activities by this point due to several factors, including the over-hunting of coastal elephant populations and lack of Seleucid elephant corps necessitating the need to maintain a rival force.
- 130 BC** – an inscription dated to this year reveals a Ptolemaic official known as Sōterichos, a subordinate of Paōs the *Strategos* of Thebes, who was in charge of overseeing the mines in the Eastern Desert, shipping in the Red Sea and security of caravans transporting aromatics across the Eastern Desert.
- c.116 [or] 110/09 [or] 74/73 BC** – an inscription most likely dating to around late second to early first century BC reveals the existence of an official who held the office of overseer

of the Erythraean and Indian Seas (note the specific identification of Indian as distinct from Red Sea); suggests that this office must have existed at least around this period if not earlier.

c.117/16-107 BC – first and second voyages to India conducted by Eudoxus of Cyzicus under the auspices of the Ptolemaic court.

62 BC – an inscription reveals that a powerful official called Kallimachos held the office of overseer of the Erythraean and Indian Seas.

30 BC – Octavian (who takes the title Augustus in 27 BC) annexes Egypt as his own personal property; Mediterranean world more or less unified.