TERRA INCOGNITA

By J. R. BACON

IT was not till the sixth century B.C. that geography was recognized by the Greeks as a distinct branch of study. But Strabo was right in regarding Homer as the first Greek geographer, inasmuch as the Homeric poems provide the earliest literary evidence about the content of the Greek world. From Homer onwards the known world was continually enlarging its boundaries, and by the end of the Roman period very little, except the New World discovered by Columbus and his contemporaries, remained unknown. The progress of geographical knowledge may be divided into four stages—Homeric, Ionian, Hellenistic, Roman—in each of which the acquisition of data led on to an attempt at systematization, when the information provided by travellers was used as material for scientific theory. This process was unconscious in the Homeric stage, but deliberate in the others. Thus in the Ionian age the spread of colonization enabled Anaximander to make the first map and Hecataeus to write his Περίοδος Γῆς, the first systematic account of the world; these in their turn produced Herodotus, who brought to geography and ethnography the rudiments of a critical standpoint (ὀφείλω λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα, πείθεσθαί γε μὲν οὐ παντάπασιν ὀφείλω, vii. 152). In the Hellenistic and Roman ages the factors were not so much colonial as military and mercantile. Hellenistic knowledge of the world was enlarged by the campaigns of Alexander and by the enterprises of Alexandrian traders, which the scholars of Alexandria, notably Eratosthenes, the first truly critical geographer, turned to scientific use: similarly the progress of the Roman arms and the expansion of Roman trade brought grist to the mill of Strabo and Ptolemy, the most careful, respectively, of descriptive and scientific geographers. In the period which follows these, no longer ancient but medieval, the wheel comes full circle in a new Homeric stage of feudalism and fable, and starts its revolution once more; the next stage, the renascence Age of Discovery, is Ionia again on a larger scale.

For the Greeks in their beginnings, as for any unlettered

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people, all the world was originally Terra Incognita, except the microcosm in which each individual, or each group, lived. But the *Odyssey* is sufficient evidence that, before the beginnings of Greek literature, that little world was furnished with a border of marvels. These were partly the product of imagination, but they may well have owed no less to hearsay, in which Greek geography was rooted from the time when it began to deserve the name. Strabo, who took his subject seriously, was ready to defend hearsay as evidence: 'To pretend that those only can know who have themselves seen is to deprive hearing of all confidence, which, after all, is a better servant of knowledge than sight itself' (ii. 5). It was not likely that his distant forerunners would be hypercritical of their information. They were, indeed, uncritically tenacious, and clung to a tradition once accepted with all the fidelity of a Fundamentalist to the Old Testament. When, for instance, widened experience made it plain that the horizon was not in fact the shore of encircling Ocean, they did not deny the existence of this feature, but allowed it to recede into the less familiar distance. They were not unique in this process of reasoning. When Whittington had seen London he was aware that its streets were not paved with gold, but that did not prevent him from believing the same of Cathay, nor his descendants from seeking El Dorado beyond the Spanish main. And the process may continue so long as any region remains unknown. It is the line of argument pursued by Strabo when he answered the sceptics who denied the possibility of sailing round the north coast of Europe from the Elbe to the Caspian (a possibility whose more instructed equivalent still challenged the adventurers of the Elizabethan age): 'Those who have returned from the attempt', he says, 'do not say they have been prevented from continuing the voyage by any opposing continent, for the sea remained perfectly open, but through want of resolution and the scarcity of provisions' (I. i.).

This removal of uncertified features into the distance can be seen in many stories which we class as mythology, but which ranked for their earlier hearers as history or geography. The voyage of the Argonauts would seem to have been originally a

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penetration of Greeks into the Euxine; it became almost a circumnavigation of Europe. In the same way Prometheus was removed from Scythia to the Caucasus, and thence to the Indian Caucasus, the Hindu Kush. Acheron progressed from Argolis or Thesprotia via Campania to the Far North, where it appears in the Orphic Argonautica.[1] But though the marvellous retreated it did not surrender. If the successive maps in e.g. Bunbury's *History of Ancient Geography* are passed in review, development and change are visible in the business part of the map, but the border is strangely constant—Rhipaean mountains, Hyperboreans, Aithiopes, Arimaspians, or at least their acknowledged neighbours, were never dislodged from their ultimate strongholds.

This persistence may be due less to real conviction than to the adoption of earlier accounts wholesale by uncritical writers of ages much later. For example, Pomponius Mela, writing in the first century A.D., takes much of his information about Scythia straight from Herodotus without any change; he follows Herodotus on Arabia too, though he might have used later authorities such as Agatharchides. Pliny also borrows without discrimination. But it is not only in uncritical writers that the stories persist: Ptolemy, scientific in method and accurate, is often seen taking pains to reconcile and combine his real information with old traditional fables.

Some traditions are recognizable as early as Homer. In the Homeric age the world actually known to the Greeks was very small: Thrace or Macedonia seems to have bounded it on the north, on the south hundred-gated Thebes in Egypt, all the wealth of which Achilles would not have accepted in placation of his wrath, probably the Adriatic on the west, the western end of the Euxine, if not the Propontis, on the east. Beyond the borders of the known world flowed, as round the Shield of Achilles, the circling stream of Ocean, on whose shores dwelt the Laestrygonians, μυρίοι, οὐκ ἄνδρεσσιν ἐοικότες, ἀλλὰ Γίγασιν (κ. 120) the Cimmerians, ἠέρι καὶ νεφέλῃ κεκαλυμμένοι (λ. 15) whose long nights suggest the dark north; on the south were the Pygmies, on whom the cranes bring slaughter and death

[1] Cf. J. A. K. Thomson, *Studies in the Odyssey*, pp. 104 ff. on Teiresias.

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(Γ. 6) (Homer does not name the south, but this is implied by the detail that the cranes fly thither in the winter); and on the east and west by the Aithiopes,

τοὶ διχθὰ δεδαίαται, ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν,
οἱ μὲν δυσομένου Ὑπερίονος, οἱ δ' ἀνιόντος (α. 23, 24)

whom the gods love and visit.

By the next age the Aithiopes of the west have, so far as Greek geography is concerned, shared the fortune of those whom the gods love and have died young. Those on the east have moved southward and supplanted the Pygmies on the southern shore of Ocean. By that time the eastern limit of the supposed Ocean, the Euxine, was known, and the symbol of the end of the world became the rivers Phasis and Tanais. The boundaries of the known world had in many ways become less nebulous, and were defined as the Rhipaean mountains on the north, Phasis and Tanais on the east, southward the Nile, and to the west the Pillars of Heracles. The reality of the last four is undisputed and their position constant; for the first, the Rhipaean mountains, the Carpathians seem the strongest of many competitors, but they shift and recede with time. The Pillars of Heracles were a final boundary because experience had now shown that the Ocean did indeed lie beyond them. It did not reveal itself immediately beyond the others; so there was still room for the boundary peoples, Hyperboreans joining the Cimmerians beyond the Rhipaean mountains, Pygmies and Aithiopes beyond the Nile, beyond Tanais and Phasis Indians and others.

One of the great achievements of the Ionian natural philosophy was the disengaging of scientific geography from myth, and by the end of the sixth century in geography, as in literature, the line between poetry and prose had been drawn. Poetry assumed the chief responsibility for mythology, while geography was assigned to the province of prose. From this point onwards the marvellous element in geography may be divided into two classes: first a definitely mythological class where what was perhaps originally a mere item of geographical information has become incorporated in story, often so successfully as to have assumed an almost impenetrable disguise. Under this

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head come the stories of marvellous journeys, like those of Perseus, Io, Heracles, and the Argonauts, and stories concealing some physical geography, as with Atlas, Typhon, Enceladus, and Niobe. The other is a more mundane class, where the item remains a detached piece of information, not incorporated in myth: the fourth book of Herodotus, with its gold-digging ants, gryphon-hunted Arimaspians, &c., provides a number in which Herodotus himself could hardly believe. The distinction between these two classes is much the same as that drawn (e.g. by Professor Chadwick in *The Homeric Age*) between epic and 'epic material'; and the border line between them is roughly that between the Homeric and Ionian ages of ancient geography. By the latter, the Greeks have passed out of the mythopoeic stage.

Marvellous peoples, Cimmerians, Aithiopians, Hyperboreans, Arimaspians, stand midway between the two divisions. They have affinities with the mythological class inasmuch as they belong to the province of poetry. The first two appear in Homer, the Hyperboreans in Pindar; the Arimaspians had an epic to themselves—the Arimaspeia of Aristeas of Proconnesus. At the same time they approach the second class in that they remain incidental—their story has no plot and they are not the centre of story, only on the fringe.

The Arimaspians have a further interest because they furnish a very good example of fact masquerading as incredible marvel. Herodotus describes them as one-eyed horsemen, neighbours of the Issedonians in the East who spent their time purloining the guarded gold of Central Asia and suffering the pursuit 'o'er hill and moory dale' of the guardian gryphons. In all probability they were the Huns (cf. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, pp. 113, 114). The description of them as 'one-eyed' has been taken to refer to some kind of characteristic cap, but Professor Minns explains it more convincingly as reflecting on their intelligence, citing another Asiatic tribe of whom it was said proverbially that they had one eye and one hand, meaning that they were slow of perception and clumsy. The origin of the gryphons may lie in the fabulous monsters, dragons and such, with which oriental stuffs were patterned, and so bespeak

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the great trade-route across Central Asia which linked Europe with the Far East.

It is possible to cite many other cases where what looks like fiction may well be some garbled form of fact. There is, for instance, the belief that the river Ister (the Danube) flowed both into the Euxine Sea and into the Adriatic. This is ridiculous enough, especially when it is used as a short cut for a penteconter, as by the Argonauts in Apollonius Rhodius; but it has a basis of fact. Strabo here has the rights of the case when he speaks (vii. 5, § 2) of merchandise being carried from the Euxine to the Adriatic via the Save. It is the record of a truth though not the truth itself. The same is true of another combination of rivers in the Argonautica (iv. 627 ff.)—the great system which comprises the Eridanus, the Rhone, and the Rhine: they combine to make real trade-routes, though one single ship could not, like Argo, navigate the whole system. Or again, Ptolemy reports a rumour, which he does not himself believe, that there were mountains far up the Nile which, though near the equator, had their summits always covered with snow. Modern exploration has revealed that there are such mountains, not just where Ptolemy heard of them, but even nearer the equator, Mts. Kenya and Kilimanjaro. The latter has hardly emerged from the regions of marvel even now: in January 1928 the correspondence colums of *The Times* contained a series of letters, showing that it is still open to doubt whether it is these eternal snows or real buried treasure which is the 'silver on Kilimanjaro' of native tradition.

Some stories anciently held incredible not only can be shown to be based upon truth but actually themselves provide the proofs which establish their credit. Such is a detail in the Periplus of Hanno, a Carthaginian who sailed about 500 B.C. on an expedition which aimed at the circumnavigation of Africa. It seems to have accomplished the exploration of the west coast as far south as Sherboro' Sound, just beyond Sierra Leone. The record of it is preserved in a Greek treatise believed to be a genuine translation of the original account in Punic. In the course of this Hanno mentions that he saw, at what proved to be the southern limit of his voyage, hairy men

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and women of vast stature and gigantic strength. He, or his Greek translators, identified these with the Gorgons. He caught two of the females who (more deadly than the male) remained and fought while their husbands fled. He brought home the hairy skins of these captives and dedicated them in the Temple of Juno at Carthage where, according to Pliny (*N.H.* VI. xxxi. 220) they were to be seen until the destruction of that city by the Romans; but despite this ocular evidence, no one believed his account of them. Nevertheless the very description of the hairy females proves the reality of his visit to their home; he was wrong only in his identification of them; they were, as readers of *Puck of Pook's Hill* will have guessed, *non Angli sed angeli*—not Gorgons but gorillas.

Another example of the same kind of vindication, which is too long to follow out here, is Dr. Nansen's support of Pytheas of Massalia in his description of Thule, on which Strabo pours scorn (ii. 4), 'where neither earth water nor air exist, but a sort of concretion of all these, resembling marine sponge'. This, equivalent probably to the 'mare pigrum et prope immotum' mentioned by Tacitus in the *Germania* (45), is interpreted by Nansen as the ice-sludge in the arctic seas (*In Northern Mists*, vol. i, pp. 66, 67).

With these vindications in mind, it is possible to doubt whether Homer's boundary peoples were entirely fictitious. The Pygmies are readily acceptable, whether or no they fight with the cranes. It has been suggested that the long nights of the Cimmerians really reflect hearsay acquaintance with the Land of the Midnight Sun. It seems to me very possible that the Aithiopes might be the Phoenicians, who brought silver and tin to the Homeric world from their west port of Tarshish, which was beyond the Greek world even in the sixth century (cf. Pindar, *Nem.* iv. 69; Hdt. iv. 152), and who commanded the eastern goldfields before the Greeks penetrated thither, probably giving rise to the legend of Egyptians in Colchis (Hdt. ii. 104). The land of the Hyperboreans is very debatable ground: they have been located in China, in India, in Scandinavia, and, most recently, in the Danube valley. Herodotus terminates his account of them thus (iv. 36): 'Thus much, however, is clear; if

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there are Hyperboreans there must also be Hypernotians. For my own part I cannot but laugh when I see numbers of people drawing maps of the world without having any reason to guide them.' May it not be argued that this absence of symmetrical tradition is a point in the Hyperboreans' favour? They, like other incredible denizens of the unknown world, may contain, muffled but perceptible, like the pea beneath the dozen mattresses that proved the true princess, a rumour of reality. One reality, and that an important one, the ancient geographers must be allowed: the old world was, and still is, encircled by the Ocean stream: it was more distant and less circular than they believed at first, but, cosmographically, they were right about it.

On a Recent Addition to our Landed Gentry

Sir 'Arry, though lately created a knight,
Is unable to order his 'h's' aright.
He expounds the wise views of a 'man of haffairs'
Or explains ''ow 'e 'ates haristocracy's hairs'.
(To his mother, née 'Awkins, he owes, I expect,
This unpleasant, invincible vocal defect.)
His victims had looked for a respite at least
While Sir 'Arry is occupied 'doin' the Heast'.
But alas for our hopes!—you've not heard the news?—What!
Sir 'Arry finds 'Hindia 'ellishly 'ot'.

Adapted from CATULLUS 84.

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