

Cosmas Indicopleustes *Christian Topography*

Introduction and Translation by John Sheldon

Introduction.

Cosmas was an Alexandrian Egyptian Greek of the Sixth Century and a traveller to 'India' who later became a monk. His *Christian Topography* in twelve books aims to refute the view prevalent among pagans that the earth was a sphere; for Cosmas the world is shaped like the tabernacle built by Moses to house the Ark of the Covenant. Written about 550 CE the *Christian Topography* contained some of the earliest and most famous maps. There are copies of these in extant mss. of his work, the earliest of which is dated to the Ninth Century. Photius (cod.36) is the first author to cite him and his name looks like an invention punning on κόσμος 'world'. Sir Henry Yule in his monumental *Cathay and the Way Thither vol 1* (London 1915) p 27 has some harsh words for him: 'Altogether the book is a memorable example of that mischievous process of loading Christian truth with a dead-weight of false science, which has had so many followers.' He does however, say on p 28 that 'Cosmas had a very correct idea of the position of China, as lying on the extreme eastern coast of Asia.'

Translation.

II (137) ... furthermore many men desiring copious knowledge and experience, on the assumption that paradise existed on this earth, were not hesitating to push their research into the affairs of people here. For if some for the sake of lamentable trade did not hesitate to cross to those lands in search of silk in most distant places, how would they have hesitated to travel there to observe the same 'paradise'? This land of silk is in the most remote part of all India; it is on the left-hand side for those entering the Indian Ocean, far removed from the gulf of Persia and from the island called among the Indians Seledipa, but among the Greeks Taprobane (i.e. Ceylon ed.). Called Tzinitza (possibly Chinastan *vel sim.* ed.) it is in turn surrounded by the Ocean on its left side, just as the land of the barbarians is surrounded by it on its right side. The Indian philosophers called Brahmans assert that if you were to stretch a cord from Tzinitza it will pass through Persia until it reaches Roman territory; this is the midpoint of the world according to measurement – and perhaps they speak the truth. It is very far to the left, since in a short time consignments of silk from the people there reach Persia conveyed in relays by other peoples through this land; while the route by

sea is much further from Persia. The distance covered by someone in Tzinitza coming to the left and travelling back from Taprobane and beyond is the same as is covered by the Persian Gulf in Persia. After that the Indian Sea covers comparable distances starting from its beginning outside the Persian Gulf as far as Taprobane and beyond. Therefore one taking the road from Tzinitza to Persia cuts off much distance. Thus it is that an abundance of silk is always found in Persia: beyond Tzinitza there is no navigation and habitation.

Anyone who measures by a stretched cord the distance of the earth's magnitude from Tzinitza to the West will find 400 stages more or less, each one being 30 miles. This is how it should be measured: from Tzinitza to the start of Persia, all Iouuia and India and the land of the Bactrians comprise at least 150 stages; if this is not exactly so, there are more rather than less...

IX (331) From the interior regions, I speak of Tzinitza and other trading posts, it (Taprobane) gets its silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood and whatever else according to country ... and for the rest there is Tzinitza which contributes silk – further inland from this there is no other country, for the Ocean surrounds it on the eastern side.