Ptolemy *Geography* Selected Passages

Introduction and Translation by John Sheldon

Introduction.

Ptolemy (c90 -168 CE) was an Alexandrian Greek. His name Claudius Ptolemaeus indicates that he was a Roman citizen. He was an astronomer and mathematician, as well as a geographer. *Almagest*, the only comprehensive astronomical treatise to survive from ancient times is his work. Of lesser importance is the astrological *Tetrabiblos* which deals with the horoscope in Aristotelian terms. His *Geographia* is in eight books and is of fundamental significance in the study of ancient cartography and of geography in general. The first book is an outline of the principles on which he tabulates the coordinates in the rest of the work , which is basically a set of instructions for the production of maps. We do not know whether his work was actually accompanied by maps.Our earliest Ptolemaic maps are not found until the Thirteenth Century. Two of our mss. provide sixty eight examples and three, which appear to be older, contain twenty seven. The value of these is best judged by the accuracy in numbers in the co-ordinates not by the toponyms which they contain. The Alexandria where Ptolemy lived would have provided the largest repository of geographical material existing in the ancient world. This accounts for the fact that he includes in his work over eight thousand toponyms, many no doubt as obscure to him as they are to us. A comparison with Strabo reveals how much the horizons of the known world have widened. Since the early jottings of Marinus which he uses many new facts had emerged through reports of voyages, official itineraries, administrative documents and also astronomical observations. All of this was uniquely available to Ptolemy whose immense industry amassed it in his comprehensive *Geographia*. His achievement won the admiration of the ancients who appreciated the vastness of his task e.g. Marcian of Heraclea who calls him ‘last of the good Classical geographers’. While the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is a precious guide for checking Ptolemy, a comparison with Marcian in passages dealing with the same geography shows the considerable extent to which continual use has modified the textual transmission of the earlier writer. We must therefore at all times remind ourselves that what we read in the Byzantine mss. are not necessarily the *ipsissima verba* of the author in any particular instance.

Translation.

I. 11 6. He says that a certain Maes, who was also called Titianos, a Macedonian and a merchant like his father, had written down the measurements, though he himself did not go, but had sent others to the Seres.

7. It seems that he himself did not trust the stories of the merchants. He does not agree with the reckoning of Philemon, according to which he gave the longitude of the Hibernian Island as twenty days from east to west, since Philemon said that he had heard this from merchants. Marinos says that they do not think to enquire the truth since they are engrossed in their business dealings, but often they will exaggerate the distances more through pretentiousness. In this case, the fact that nothing else in the seven-month journey seemed worthy of any record or mention emphasizes their amazement at the length of time it took.

1.12 Correction to the longitude of the known earth based on evidence of travel.

1. For these reasons and on account of the fact that this journey is not contained within a single parallel, since the Stone Tower is near the parallel of Byzantium and Sera lies further south than the parallel through the Hellespont, it would seem reasonable also in this case to reduce by not less than a half the sum of 36,200 stades corresponding to the seven month period. But the half should be reduced only in rough calculation so that the distance under discussion is calculated as 18,100 stades, or 45 and a fourth degrees.

2. And it would be strange and illogical, having imposed such a reduction in the calculation for both journeys to follow this in dealing with the road from the Garamantes owing to the fact that there is the obvious objection – that is, that the different kinds of animals in the land of Agisymba cannot be transported from regions which are natural to them - but not to accept the consequence of the argument for the journey from the Stone Tower because such an objection does not happen to apply in this case, since the climate is the same throughout its whole distance whether greater or less. Just as if one, unless he were thoroughly dishonest, would not treat the matter fairly according to the method proper to philosophy.

3. From the first of the distances (I speak of that from the Euphrates to the Stone Tower) 876 schoeni must be reduced to 800 (24,000 stades) only to take account of the detours made on the journey.

4. His total distance should be trusted because he had measurement according to already calculated and well traversed parts. That, however, there were considerable detours is clear from what even Marinos reveals.

5. Marinos accepts that the road from the Euphrates crossing at Hierapolis through Mesopotamia to the Tigris and the route from there through the Garamaioi of Assyria and Media to Ecbatana and the Caspian Gates and through Parthia to Hecatompylos falls along the parallel through Rhodes. This parallel is also drawn in his map through the abovementioned lands.

6. But the road to the city of Hyrcania from Hecatompylos must veer to the north, since the city of Hyrcania lies somewhere in the middle of the parallel through Smyrna and that through the Hellespont since the parallel through Smyrna is drawn below the land of Hyrcania while that through the Hellespont is drawn through the southern regions of the Hyrcanian Sea which are a little to the north of the city of the same name.

7. Again the road from here to Antiocheia in Margiana through Areia veers first to the south, since Areia lies under the same parallel as the Caspian Gates, then to the north, since Antiocheia is situated on the parallel through the Hellespont. From this city the road extends to Bactria in the east from where it turns towards the north to the ascent of the range of the Comedoi; (the road proceeds) from that mountain range southwards as far as the ravine which opens onto the plains. He places under the Byzantine parallel the north and westernmost parts of this range, where the land rises; the regions to the south and east he places under the parallel through the Hellespont. Therefore he says that the road, abandoning the direct route to the east, bends to the south.

8. It is likely that the road from there bends north for 50 schoeni until it reaches the Stone Tower. He says that the Stone Tower awaits those who have ascended the ravine. From there the mountains running to the east join the Imaus (range) which goes from Palimbothra towards the north.

9. If to the 60 degrees, equivalent to 24,000 stades, are added the 45 and one fourth degrees (for the journey) from the Stone Tower to Sera, the result would be that the distance from the Euphrates through to Sera measured along the parallel through Rhodes would be 105° and 15´.

10. From the number of stades which he proposes between each place on the same parallel the following calculations may be made: the distance from the

meridian of the Isles of the Blest as far as the sacred Promontory of Spain is 2° 30′; between there and the mouth of the Baetis, and between the mouth of the Baetis and the Strait and Kalpe for each distance 2° 30′; between the Strait and Kalpe for each distance 2° 30′; between the Strait and Karallis in Sardinia 25 degrees; from Karallis to Lilybaeum in Sicily 4° 30′; from there to Pachynus 3º; and again from Pachynus to Taenarum in Laconia 10º; from there to Rhodes 8º 15′; from Rhodes to Issus 11º 15′; from Issus to the Euphrates 2º 30′; so that the sum total of this distance is 72º; that of the length of the known world from the meridian of the Isles of the Blest to Sera 177º 15′ by the same reckoning.

1.14 Concerning the journey from the Golden Chersonese (probably the Malay Peninsula ed.) to Kattigara (an unidentified port in southern China ed.)

1. Marinos does not set out the distance in stades from the Golden Chersonese to Kattigara; but he says that Alexander had written that the land beyond was facing south and that those sailing along its coast reach the city of Zabai in 20 days, and sailing through from Zabai to the south and somewhat more to the left one reached Kattigara in some days.

2. Marinos himself makes the stated distance longer, interpreting ‘some days’ as a substitute for ‘many days’: on account of the number involved, he says that the distance cannot be ascertained by addition. I think that this is fatuous; for what number of days is incapable of being counted, even if one were to consider the time it takes to go around the whole world. And what prevented Alexander from saying ‘many’ instead of ‘some’? In fact he said that Dioskoros related that the voyage from Rhapton to Prason was one of ‘many days’. One would with greater probability accept ‘few’ for ‘some’. We also are accustomed to describe things in this fashion.

3. But lest we seem ourselves to be attaching our own guesses about distances to numbers already established, let us treat in the same way the journey from the Golden Chersonese to Kattigara made up from the 20 days to Zabai and from there ‘some days’ to Kattigara and the journey from Aromata to Prason Promontory, made up from the same number of 20 days as the journey to Rhapta, according to Theophilos, and the other ‘many days’ to reach Prason according to Dioskoros so that like Marinos we may equate ‘some days’ with ‘many days’.

4. Since we have demonstrated by logical reasoning and from the observable data itself that Prason is situated below the parallel sited 16º 25′ to the south of

the equator, but the parallel through Aromata is 4º 15´ to the north, so that we might reasonably assign 20º 40´ to the distance from Aromata to Prason. We would reasonably place the journey from the Golden Chersonese to Zabai and from there to Kattigara as the same.

5. There is no need to reduce the distance from the Golden Chersonese to Zabai, being parallel to the equator on account of the land between facing south. We must reduce the distance from Zabai to Kattigara owing to the fact that the journey is in the south and east in order that we may discover its position parallel to the equator.

6. If owing to the uncertainty over the extent of their exaggeration we only give to those distances a half of the degrees and if from 10º 12´ from Zabai to Kattigara we subtract another third (i.e. 20º 40´ ed.) to account for the divergence, we shall have the distance from the Golden Chersonese to Kattigara approximately 17º 10´ on a course parallel to the equator. The distance from Cape Koru to the Golden Chersonese has been shown to be 34º 48´, so the entire distance from Koru to Kattigara is about 52º.

7. But the meridian which passes through the source of the Indus River is a little more to the west than the northern promontory of Taprobane, which lies opposite Koru, according to Marinos; the meridian through the Mouth of the river Baetis is a distance of 8 hours, 120º, and moreover the parallel though the Mouth of the Baetis is 5º away from that through the Isles of the Blest, so that the meridian through Koru is a little more than 125º away from that of the Isles of the Blest and that the meridian through Kattigara is a little more than 177º from that of the Isles of the Blest - in each case almost the same distance as that calculated through the parallel of Rhodes.

8. But the length of the whole as far as the capital of the Sinai should be taken as 180º, 12 hours, owing to the fact that all agree that it is to the east of Kattigara, so that approximately 72,000 stades is judged to be the length measured through the parallel of Rhodes.