

## *Periplus Maris Erythraei* ‘Circumnavigation of the Red Sea’

### Introduction and Translation by John Sheldon

#### Introduction.

The author of this work composed in the middle of the First Century CE seems from internal evidence to be an Egyptian Greek who had made some of the journeys which he describes. The language is the normal *koine* of the period. There is a lost work of Egyptian geography entitled *On the Erythraean Sea* which was written by Agatharchides of Cnidus. It is quoted in Photius Codex 250, <sup>1</sup>as well as Diodorus 3 12-48 and Strabo 16 4 5-20. For text of fragments see Burstein (ed. and trans.) *Agatharchides of Cnidus On the Erythraean Sea* (Hakluyt Society 1989). The ‘Red Sea’ has its usual meaning of ‘Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean’ found in early geography. *Periplus* lit. ‘circumnavigation’ was the standard title for treatises on sea routes and as such rarely contain much information about places inland. Fragments of similar works will be found along with this text in Müller *Geographi Graeci Minores* vol 1 Didot (Paris 1855; reprinted (Hildesheim 1965). The earliest ms. (Tenth Century), which wrongly ascribes authorship to Arrian, has an interesting history. It originally belonged to the Heidelberg Library to which it was restored in 1816 after being taken to Rome during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648 CE) and from there to Paris by Napoleon. The first published edition by Froben (1533) was done from a corrupt copy and needed substantial correction when the Heidelberg ms. became available for collation. Schoff *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* trans. and ed. (London 1912) pp 7-15 was the first proper attempt to site the work historically and is the basis for all later scholarship on the *Periplus*. The work comprises sixty six chapters, most of which are simply substantial paragraphs. It contains lists of the goods traded, some of which are of uncertain interpretation. The importance of the *Periplus* lies in the fact that it is the earliest evidence we have in western literature for countries situated to the east of the mouths of the Ganges. Useful editions are Huntingford, G.W.B. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (London 1980) and Casson, L. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (text and commentary) (Princeton University Press 1989).

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<sup>1</sup> p13 ‘the chance survival in Constantinople of a copy of the work until the 9<sup>th</sup> Century when it was abridged by the distinguished classical scholar and Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, permitted his role as a source for most of surviving Classical accounts of Nubia and the Red Sea basin’

**Greek Text.** Ed. Fabricius (Leipzig, 1883)

60. Τῶν δὲ τοπικῶν ἐμπορίων τε καὶ ὄρμων, εἰς οὓς οἷ τε ἀπὸ τῆς Λιμυρικῆς καὶ ἀπὸ ἄρκτου πλέοντες κατὰγονται, ἐπισημότερα καὶ κατὰ τὸ ἐξῆς κείμενά ἐστιν ἐμπόρια Καμάρα καὶ Πωδούκη καὶ Σώπατμα, ἐν οἷς τοπικὰ μὲν ἐστὶ πλοῖα μέχρι Λιμυρικῆς παραλεγόμενα τὴν γῆν, ἕτερα δ' ἐκ μονοξύλων πλοίων μεγίστων κατεξευγμένα, λεγόμενα σάγγαρα· τὰ δ' εἰς τὴν Χρυσὴν καὶ εἰς τὸν Γάγγην διαίροντα κολάνδια ὄντα μέγιστα.

63. Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα, εἰς τὴν ἀνατολὴν πλεόντων καὶ τὸν ὠκεανὸν ἐν δεξιοῖς ἐχόντων, εὐώνυμα δὲ τὰ λοιπὰ μέρη ἔξωθεν παραπλεόντων, ὁ Γάγγης ἀπαντὸ καὶ ἡ περὶ αὐτὴν ἐσχάτη δῆς ἀνατολῆς ἡπειρος, ἡ Χρυσή. Ποταμὸς δ' ἐστὶν αὐτὸς ὁ Γάγγης λεγόμενος μέγιστος τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἰνδικήν, ἀπόβασιν δ' καὶ ἀνάβασιν τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχων τῷ Νείλῳ, κατὰ ὃν καὶ ἐμπόριόν ἐστιν ὁμώνυμον τῷ ποταμῷ, ὁ Γάγγης, διὰ οὗ φέρεται τό τε μαλάβαθρον καὶ ἡ Γαγγητικὴ νάρδος καὶ πιρικὸν καὶ σινδόνες αἱ διαφορώταται, αἱ Γαγγητικαὶ λεγόμεναι. Λέγεται δὲ καὶ χρυσορυχεῖα περὶ τούτους τοὺς τόπους εἶναι, νόμισμά τε χρυσοῦ, ὁ λεγόμενος κάλτις. Κατ' αὐτὸν δὲ τὸν ποταμὸν νῆσός ἐστιν ὠκεάνειος, ἐσχάτη τῶν πρὸς τὴν ἀνατολὴν μερῶν τῆς οἰκουμένης, ὑπὸ αὐτὸν

**Translation.**

60. Of the places of commerce and anchorages into which those sailing from Limyric and the north land their ships the most famous are the adjacent markets of Kamara, Podouka and Sopatma in which there are local vessels which sail along the coast as far as Limyric; there are others called sangara which are tied together from very large craft made from a single log – as for those which sail to Chryse and to the Ganges the largest are the kolandia.

63. After that (the east coast of India) if one sails to the east, having the ocean on one's right and passes the remaining parts outside on the left, the Ganges is reached and Chryse, the easternmost land. The River Ganges is said to be the greatest of those in India and has the same ebb and flow as the Nile; on it there is also a market named Ganges the same as the river through which malabathron is transported, as well as Gangetic nard, mother-of-pearl and excellent linen materials called Gangetic. There are said to be goldmines around these parts and a gold currency called Kaltis. In the river area there is an island of the ocean, the furthestmost of the eastern parts of the inhabited world, lying below the place of the

ἀνέχοντα τὸν ἥλιον, καλουμένη  
Χρυσή, χελώνην ἔχουσα πάντων  
τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν τόπων  
ἀρίστην.

64. Μετὰ δὲ ταύτην τὴν χώραν ὑπὸ  
αὐτὸν ἤδη τὸν βορέαν, ἔξωθεν εἰς  
[Σηρῶν] τινὰ τόπον ἀποληγούσης  
τῆς θαλάσσης, κείται ἐν αὐτοῖς πόλις  
μεσόγειος μεγίστη, λεγομένη Θίμαι,  
ἀπὸ ἧς τό τ' ἔριον καὶ τὸ νῆμα καὶ τὸ  
ὀθόνιον τὸ Σηρικὸν εἰς τὰ  
Βαρύγαζα διὰ Βάκτρων πεζῆ  
φέρεται καὶ εἰς τὴν Λιμυρικὴν πάλιν  
διὰ τοῦ Γάγγου ποταμοῦ. Εἰς δὲ τὴν  
χώραν ταύτην οὐκ ἔστιν εὐχερῶς  
ἐπελθεῖν· σπανίως γὰρ ἀπὸ αὐτῆς  
τινες οὐ πολλοὶ ἔρχονται. Κείται δὲ  
ὁ τόπος ὑπὸ αὐτὴν τὴν μικρὰν  
ἄρκτον, λέγεται δὲ συνορίζειν δις  
ἀπεστραμμένοις μέρεσι τοῦ Πόντου  
καὶ τῆς Κασπίας θαλάσσης, κατὰ ἣν  
ἢ παρακειμένη λίμνη Μαιῶδ εἰς τὸν  
ὠκεανὸν συναναστομοῦται.

65. Κατὰ ἔτος δὲ παραγίνεται ἐπὶ  
τὴν συνορίαν τὴν Θινῶν ἔθνος τι, τῷ  
μὲν σώματι κολοβοὶ καὶ σφόδρα  
πλατυπρόσωποι, ἐννοίαις δὲ λῶστοι·  
αὐτοὺς δὲ λέγεσθαί φασι Βησάτας,  
παρομοίους ἀνημέροις.  
Παραγίνονται σὺν γυναιξὶ καὶ  
τέκνοις, βαστάζοντες φορτία  
μεγάλα καὶ ταρπόνας ὠμαμπελίνοις  
παραπλησίας, εἶτα ἐπιμένουσιν ἐπὶ  
τινα χρόνον ἐν δῆ συνορίᾳ τε αὐτῶν  
καὶ τῶν Θινῶν καὶ ἐορτάζουσιν ἐπὶ  
τινας ἡμέρας, ὑποστρώσαντες  
ἑαυτοῖς τὰς ταρπόνας, καὶ  
ἀπαίρουσιν εἰς τὰ ἴδια, εἰς τοὺς  
ἐσωτέρους τόπους. Οἱ δ' ἐγχώριοι

sun's rising, called Chryse,  
which produces the best  
tortoise-shell of all places in the  
Red (Sea) (i.e. the Indian  
Ocean).

64. After that place, lying  
already in the same north region  
where the sea comes to an end  
into some place outside (Seres),  
there lies a very large inland city  
called Thinai from which cotton  
and textiles and silk are  
transported on foot to Baryzaga  
through Bactria and back to  
Limyric through the Ganges  
River. It is no simple matter to  
enter that place, for few and far  
between are those who come  
back from there. The place lies  
beneath the Small Bear and is  
said to have its border with  
opposite parts of Pontus and the  
Caspian Sea beside which the  
adjoining Lake Maeotis  
debouches with it into the  
ocean.

65. Each year a certain race  
stunted and with very broad  
foreheads but superior intellect  
arrives in the neighbouring  
region of Thinai. They say that  
they are called Besatai and are  
very like the savages. They  
arrive with their women and  
children carrying in their hands  
large crates and baskets very  
similar in colour to that of fresh  
vine leaves; then they stay in a  
certain place on their border and  
that of the Thinai and hold a  
feast for some days and they use  
the crates as bedding for  
themselves and set off for their

ταῦτα δοκεύοντες τότε  
παραγίνονται ἐπὶ τούτους τοὺς  
τόπους καὶ συλλέγουσι τὰ ἐγίνων  
ὑποστρώματα καὶ ἐξινιάσαντες  
καλάμους τοὺς λεγομένους πέτρους  
ἐπὶ λεπτὸν ἐπιδιπλώσαντες τὰ φύλλα  
καὶ σφαιροειδῆ ποιοῦντες διείρουσι  
ταῖς ἀπὸ τῶν καλάμων ἴναις. Γίνεται  
δὲ γένη τρία· ἐκ μὲν τοῦ μείζονος  
φύλλου τὸ ἀδρόσφαιρον  
μαλάβαθρον λεγόμενον, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ  
ὑποδεεστέρου τὸ μεσόσφαιρον, ἐκ  
δὲ τοῦ μικροτέρου τὸ μικρόσφαιρον.  
Ἐνθεν τὰ τρία μέρη τοῦ  
μαλαβάθρου πάντοτε φέρεται εἰς  
τὴν Ἰνδικὴν ὑπὸ δῶν  
κατεργαζομένων αὐτά.

66. Τὰ δὲ μετὰ τοὺς τόπους τούτους  
εἴτε διὰ ὑπερβολὰς χειμῶνων τε καὶ  
πάγους μεγίστου δύσβατα εἴτε καὶ  
θεῖα τινὶ δυνάμει θεῶν ἀνερεύνητά  
ἐστιν.

own lands in the interior. Neighbouring people waiting for this moment then approach this locality and collect the bedding of the others and after removing the stalks which they call 'petroi' and rolling up the leaves very tightly making them into balls they bind them together with the fibres from the reeds. There are three kinds: from the larger leaf, the so-called 'thick-balled malabathrum'; from the smaller leaf the 'middle-balled' and from the leaf which is smaller still the 'small-balled malabathrum'. This is the origin of the three types of malabathrum which are at all times carried by their manufacturers into India.

66. The regions beyond these have not been explored, being difficult of access either owing to the extreme cold of the winters and intense frosts or through some supernatural power