

Giulio Colesanti, Laura Lulli (Eds.)
Submerged Literature in Ancient Greek Culture
Case Studies

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Edited by Giulio Colesanti
and Laura Lulli

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Contents

Giulio Colesanti, Laura Lulli

Introductory Notes — 1

Giovanni Cerri

A Scholarch Denied: Leucippus, Founder of Ancient Atomism — 11

Heinz-Günther Nesselrath

Sopater of Paphus and the Phlyax Plays — 25

S. Douglas Olson

Reading the New Erechtheid Casualty List from Marathon — 41

Stefano Jedrkiewicz

**To Produce Poetry in Order to Submerge it: Socrates' Aesopic Experience
(Plat. *Phaedo* 60 b1–61 b7) — 67**

Livio Sbardella

**The Muse Looks Down: Theocritus and the Hellenistic Aesthetic of the
'Submerged' — 81**

Federico De Romanis

**An Exceptional Survivor and Its Submerged Background: The *Periplus Maris
Erythraei* and the Indian Ocean Travelogue Tradition — 97**

Giusto Traina

**Traditions on Armenia in Submerged Greek Literature: Preliminary
Considerations — 111**

Enzo Lippolis

Sacred Texts and Consecrated Texts — 125

Sergio Ribichini

**Covered by Silence: Hidden Texts and Secret Rites in the Ancient Mystery
Cults — 161**

Franco Ferrari

Orphics at Olbia? — 177

Amneris Roselli

**The Gynaecological and Nosological Treatises of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*:
the Tip of an Iceberg — 187**

Matteo D'Acunto

**Dance in Attic and Argive Geometric Pottery: Figurative Imagery and Ritual
Contexts — 205**

Bruno D'Agostino

Potters and Painters in Archaic Corinth: *Schemata* and Images — 243

Luca Cerchiai

Ariadne and Her Companions — 259

Lucio Del Corso

**A Tale of Mummies, Drinking Parties, and Cultic Practices: Submerged Texts
and the Papyrological Evidence — 269**

Raffaele Luiselli

The Circulation and Transmission of Greek Adespota in Roman Egypt — 289

Michele Napolitano

***La cathédrale engloutie*. Greek Music from the Perspective
of the Submerged — 311**

Angelo Meriani

The Submerged Musicology of Ancient Greece — 325

Eleonora Rocconi

Traces of Folk Music in Ancient Greek Drama — 339

Index Nominum — 353

Index Rerum Notabilium — 366

Index Locorum — 377

Editors and Contributors — 389

Federico De Romanis

An Exceptional Survivor and Its Submerged Background: The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and the Indian Ocean Travelogue Tradition

Written in the mid-first century CE, and transmitted by the ninth century CE *Codex Palatinus Graecus* 398 (ff. 40^v–54^v)¹ under the claimed authorship of Arrian of Nicomedia, the περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης (*Periplus Maris Erythraei*) is the only work of its kind that has managed to reach modern readers. Nevertheless, this singular survivor offers a glimpse into a rich travelogue literature that had a far-reaching influence. Through a consideration of its construction and readership, the aim of this paper is to provide a sense of the lost literary tradition that gave rise to this work.

1 A Peculiar *Periplus*

The temptation to attribute the distinctive character of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* merely to the professional expertise of its author may be as strong as it is deceptive. As soon as it is presumed self-evident that the work must be ascribed to ‘a merchant who, after sailing the routes the *Periplus* describes and trading in the products it lists, decided to write a handbook on the subject’,² the awkwardness of having to explain its peculiarities evaporates. It disappears into the speculative haze surrounding an author about whom nothing is known and everything is imaginable – not least because he says nothing about himself.³

1 One of the codices of the so-called ‘philosophical collection’: Marcotte 2000, LXXXVIII–C; 2007. The text is also in the leaves preserved in Brit. Mus. Add. Ms. 1931 (ff. 9^r–12^r) of the *Vatopedinus* 655, which is, for that part, a fourteenth century apograph of the Heidelberg codex: Marcotte 2000, C–CIX.

2 Casson 1989, 8.

3 A couple of verbs in the first person plural describing standard sailing procedures in the Red Sea (*PME* 20) mark him as an insider of the Red Sea seafarers’ community, possibly a κυβερνήτης. His comparisons with the ‘trees among us in Egypt’ (*PME* 29) and with Alexandria’s trading activities (*PME* 26) show that he is writing from Egypt for a public who may be familiar with the province, though not necessarily Egyptian, as the rough correspondence between Egyptian and Roman months (*PME* 6, 14, 39, 49, 56) demonstrates (Arnaud 2012,

With paradoxical circularity, the content and structure of the work is explained by the experience of the author, and the author's experience is in turn inferred from the content of the work.

Yet the fact that the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* never refers to his own personal travels, but rather gives a most systematic account of the coastlines of the Indian Ocean, strongly recommends against taking the information collected in the work as the simple outcome of his voyages. Indeed, this work stands apart from proper travelogues such as the accounts of Diogenes, Dioscorus and Theophilus, who related their own navigations along the East African coast south of Cape Guardafui,⁴ or of Alexander, who recounted his own exploration of Indochina.⁵ As a matter of fact, the gap between these reports and the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* epitomizes the distinction drawn by Ptolemy between the 'tradition of people with scientific training who have toured individual countries' and the ἱστορία περιοδική, which organizes into a comprehensive picture the partial data supplied by the travelogue tradition.⁶

Specific reports on single voyages were written (and read by, for instance, Marinus of Tyre and Ptolemy) because they related to maritime spaces that were very rarely, if ever, visited by ships or seamen coming from Roman Egypt. They offered a first-hand description of geographic realities that were only very indirectly, if ever, known. In contrast, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* describes coasts and emporia that were regularly visited by merchants from Egypt. Although its author may well have personally sailed along *some* of the sea-routes of the Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα, the work aspired to be a comprehensive picture of the coasts and islands of that maritime space: it would have been awkward had it been presented as the synthesis of autoptic information shared by thousands of Egyptian seamen and merchants.

By assuming narrower notions of what or how a περίπλους should be, scholars have often been led to emphasize the perceived deviations within the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* from those ideal canons.⁷ However, it should be noted

31–34). His mention of the Nabataean king Malichos (*PME* 19) dates the work to a year between 40 and 70 CE.

⁴ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 9. 1–3, 14. 2–3.

⁵ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 14. 1–2.

⁶ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 2. 2 [...] τῆς τοιαύτης μεθόδου τὸ προηγούμενον ἔστιν ἱστορία περιοδική, τὴν πλείστην περιποιοῦσα γνώσιν ἐκ παραδόσεως τῶν μετ' ἐπιστάσεως θεωρητικῆς τὰς κατὰ μέρος χώρας περιελθόντων, κτλ.

⁷ Casson 1989, 8; González Ponce 1992, 240; Marcotte 2012, 13–14; Arnaud 2012, 27.

that the author himself defines a substantial portion of his work as a *περίπλους*⁸ and that he decided to give an account of the African and Asian coastlines of the Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα, despite the fact that Egyptian sailors generally headed to a single destination by sailing over open water.

En route to India, Egyptian traders of the mid-first century CE used to stop only in the South Arabian ports of Ocelis, Eudaemon Arabia (Aden) or Cane.⁹ Once out of sight of land after passing Cape Guardafui, they arrived, after several weeks of navigation, at either Barbarikon/Minnagar, Barygaza or one of the Limyrike emporia.¹⁰ Similarly, traders bound for Adulis or Muza would sail directly to their destinations without intermediate stops. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that conspicuous points and intermediate anchorages are rarely recorded, or that nautical instructions are provided only with reference to sea-route destinations.¹¹ This manner of sailing would not produce information immediately adaptable to a periplographic account; rather, it yields data that are easily reported in accounts organized according to sea routes over open water (διάπλοι). A good example of such accounts is offered by Pliny's paragraphs dedicated to the navigations towards India where the description of three different sea routes makes it impossible to calculate the distance between the three different Indian destinations, let alone get a comprehensive picture of the west coast of India.¹² The continuous, if sometimes less accurate, description by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* of the entire west coast of India, with the specification of the distances between its emporia, implies the reworking of a considerable quantity of reports, deliberately collected and studied in order to elaborate a *περίπλους* – something which can be added to an Alexandrian literary tradition that stretches from Timosthenes' *περὶ λιμένων* up to the *σταδιασμός ἦτοι περίπλους τῆς μεγάλης θαλάσσης*.

It has been argued that the decision to describe first the African (1–18) and then the Asian (19–63) coast – each account starting from the Red Sea – would depend on an evolution of the periplographic genre, which would have progressively lost its practical purpose and nautical content.¹³ One may wonder, however, whether the author had any other option, in order to construct a clear

⁸ *PME* 57, quoted below, n. 14. The word *παράπλους* is used for navigations of shorter legs: *PME* 20, 41, 51.

⁹ *PME* 25–27; Plin., *Nat. Hist.* 6. 104.

¹⁰ *PME* 57.

¹¹ The most detailed information relates to Barygaza (*PME* 41–44).

¹² Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 6. 100–106.

¹³ González Ponce 1992.

picture for his prospective readers. A strict adherence to the ‘unidirectionality principle’ – for instance, by describing the Asian coasts the other way round, from China to Arabia – would have generated a report that was of little use to Egyptian seamen.

What is indeed peculiar – and what makes the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* really distinctive – is the almost obsessive attention paid to the commodities exported and imported at each emporion (a point to which we will return).

2 Domestic and exotic informants

The process of converting the empirical observations of sailors into geographical data requires an intellectual reworking of the source material, something of which the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* was well aware. It is worth recalling how he imagined the κυβερνήτης Hippalos discovering the way to sail from Arabia to India across the open sea: ‘The ancients used to sail the whole described coastline from Cane and Eudaimon Arabia with smaller ships and sticking to the shores of the gulfs. By studying the location of the emporia and the extent of the sea, the ship captain Hippalos was the first to discover an open sea route’.¹⁴ This version of the discovery of the open sea route to India is a fictional reconstruction, prompted by the name ὕπυλος given to the southwestern monsoon.¹⁵ Still, the implications of the aetiological myth are remarkable insofar as they emphasize the intellectual effort (κατανοήσας) that led to defining the spatial relations between the Arabian and Indian emporia as well as the span of the Arabian Sea.¹⁶ In the author’s reconstruction, those sea routes to India emerged from a fusion of navigational practice, which provided data obtained by cabotage navigation, and geographic speculation, which projected those data onto a two-dimensional map. In other words, the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* did just the opposite of what Hippalos would have done: where the latter would have projected the linear sequence of the emporia from Arabia to South India onto a two-dimensional surface, the former reassembled along two coastlines the emporia that were reached by open sea navigation.

¹⁴ *PME* 57 τοῦτον δὲ ὄλον τὸν εἰρημένον περίπλου ἀπὸ Κανῆς καὶ τῆς Εὐδαίμονος Ἀραβίας οἱ μὲν (πρότεροι) μικροτέρους πλοίοις περικολπίζοντες ἔπλεον, πρῶτος δὲ Ἴππαλος κυβερνήτης, κατανοήσας τὴν θέσιν τῶν ἐμπορίων καὶ τὸ σχῆμα τῆς θαλάσσης, τὸν διὰ πελάγους ἐξεῦρε πλοῦν κτλ.

¹⁵ Mazzarino 1982–1987; De Romanis 1997.

¹⁶ Tchernia 1995, 994–995; Marcotte 2012, 16.

In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* distances between points on the East African and Arabian coasts are quantified either in number of *stadiai* – most often in multiples of 400 or 600¹⁷ – or in *dromoi*. Since they all represent the translation of navigation days into spatial terms, the different criteria used for these conversions reveal different sorts of informants.¹⁸ The *stadiai* distances came from mariners whose ships had roughly calculable sailing speeds – either 400 or 600 *stadiai* a day. The *dromoi* distances came from informants whose ships did not have an easily measurable sailing speed. When all the estimated distances are put on the map (see next page), it becomes clear that the sailing speed of the very large ships that would leave from Berenice was estimated at 400 *stadiai* per day and that their travels were used to define the distances from Berenice to Malao and from Opone to Tabai on the African coast, and from Ocelis to Cane on the Arabian coast.¹⁹ By contrast, the smaller vessels leaving from Myos Hormos would have provided the timings for the Myos Hormos–Berenice and Myos Hormos–Muza distances, both of which are based on a sailing day estimated at 600 *stadiai*.²⁰ Estimated in *dromoi* were the distances along the East African coast from Malao to Opone and from Tabai to Rhapta, across the Red Sea from Myos Hormos to Leuke Kome, and in the Persian Gulf from its entrance to Omana.²¹

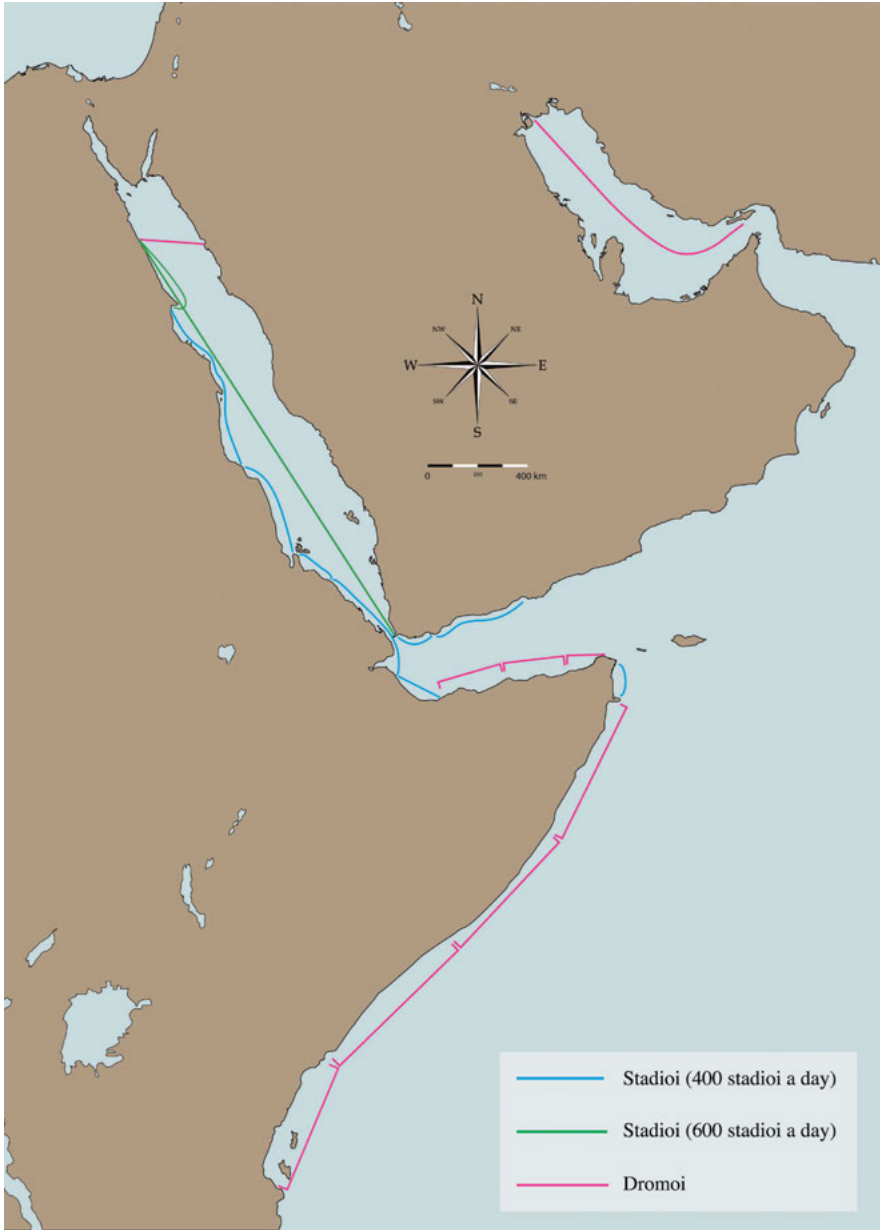
17 Apart from shorter distances (200, 20, 300, 60), the exceptions are a few distances related to the South Arabian coast east of Syagros (Syagros Gulf–Moscha limen: 500 *stadiai* [32], Moscha limen–Asich 1,500 *stadiai* [33], and, probably consistent with these, Islands of Zenobios–Island of Sarapis 2,000 *stadiai* [33]) and one to the west coast of India (*paraplus* from Barygaza–Limyrike, 7,000 *stadiai* [51]).

18 Arnaud 2012, 44–45.

19 Berenice–Ptolemais, 4,000 *stadiai* (3); Ptolemais–Oreine Island, 2,800 *stadiai* (4); Oreine Island–Obsidian Bay, 800 *stadiai* (5); Obsidian Bay–Avalites, 4,000 *stadiai* (7); Avalites–Malao, 800 *stadiai* (8); Tabai–Opone: 400 *stadiai* (13); Ocelis–Eudaemon Arabia, 1,200 *stadiai* (26); Eudaemon Arabia–Cane: 2,000 (27). The distance Ptolemais–Oreine Island is worked out from the distance Ptolemais–Adulis minus the distance Oreine Island–Adulis (3,000 and 200 *stadiai* respectively: *PME* 4).

20 Myos Hormos–Berenice: 1,800 *stadiai* (1); Berenice–Muza 12,000 *stadiai* (21); crossing of the Syagros Gulf, 600 (32); crossing of the straits of the Persian Gulf, 600 (35); *paraplus* Barbarikon–Astakapra 3,000 (41).

21 Two *dromoi* from Malao to Moundou (9), 2 or 3 from Moundou to Mosyllon (10) and 2 again up to promontory Elephas (11). From Opone up to Rhapta the distances are all in δρόμοι: 6 (15), 6 again (15), then 7 ἡμερήσιοι (15), then 2 δρόμοι νυχθήμεροι (15) and again 2 δρόμοι (16). In the Red Sea, 2 or 3 *dromoi* is the distance from Myos Hormos to Leuke Kome (19). Six *dromoi* separate the entrance of the Persian Gulf from Omana (36).



Estimated distances in the Periplus Maris Erythraei (Map by Salvatore Medaglia)

While the distances measured in *stadioi* can be traced back to Egyptian sailors from Myos Hormos (600 *stadioi* a day) or Berenice (400 *stadioi* a day), the distances measured in *dromoi* must have come from Arab sailors in Muza and Cane, who either sailed those routes in very small boats or knew about them from local seamen. In fact, it may be noted that:

- a. Special trade relations between Muza/Cane and the East African emporia are recorded by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, sometimes with the specification that they are carried out with very small ships (σχεδία, σκάφαι and ἐφόλκια).²²
- b. The sea between Leuke Kome and Myos Hormos was probably sailed only occasionally by those South Arabian πλοία οὐ μεγάλα that visited Leuke Kome.²³
- c. The sea between the entrance of the Persian Gulf and Omana was habitually sailed by the ἐντόπια ῥαπτὰ πλοίαρῖα called μαδαράτε.²⁴
- d. For information about the East African coastline beyond Cape Guardafui both Marinus and Ptolemy refer to reports of merchants from South Arabia,²⁵ who provide distances in terms (of fractions) of sailing days.²⁶ It is unlikely that the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* had informants from a different background.
- e. In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* the northern Somali coast is defined by the phrase τὸ πέραν,²⁷ ‘the other side’; its emporia are categorized as τὰ (τοῦ) πέραν ἐμπόρῖα;²⁸ and its frankincense branded as περατικὸς.²⁹ Such qualifications make sense only from a South Arabian point of view, and thus must have been conceived and circulated by South Arabian merchants.
- f. Epigraphic evidence attests to the presence of Hellenized South Arabian merchants in the Egyptian emporia. The informants for the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Marinus and Ptolemy must have been figures like

²² *PME* 7, 16, 21, 27.

²³ *PME* 19.

²⁴ *PME* 36.

²⁵ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 7. 6 οἱ δ’ εἰς τὴν Ἀζανίαν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἀναγόμενοι; 17. 5: παρὰ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀραβίας τῆς Εὐδαίμονος διαπεραιουμένων ἐμπόρων ἐπὶ τὰ Ἀρώματα καὶ τὴν Ἀζανίαν καὶ τὰ Ῥάπτα.

²⁶ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 17. 5 makes clear that a διάστημα is half a νυκθήμερον.

²⁷ *PME* 7, 14, 24, 27, 30. For the meaning of the formula (and the reading τὰ ἀπὸ τοῦ πέραν (καὶ) Ἄδουλι at *PME* 24), see De Romanis 2009.

²⁸ *PME* 7, 14.

²⁹ *PME* 8, 10, 11.

Hermeros son of Athenion, Ἀδανείτης Ἐρυθραῖος ἔμπορος, who, at Coptos under Vespasian, erected a dedication to Isis and Hera.³⁰

3 Indian Ocean literature and imperial culture

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is therefore the consolidation of the information that circulated in Alexandria and Coptos, when the former emerged as the greatest emporium of the oecumene and the whole of Egypt acted as the ‘port of India’.³¹

The accounts of the merchants returning (or arriving) from the Indian Ocean emporia aroused varying degrees of interest among outsiders, depending on the periods and personalities involved. It is improbable that Juba’s narrative of the voyage of Alexander’s fleet was followed by any information about later commercial sea-routes.³² Strabo deliberately refrained from producing a fresh ἱστορία τῶν τόπων based on the reports of the few merchants who had sailed from Egypt up to the Ganges delta.³³ It is uncertain whether Seneca, who spent a long period in Egypt under Tiberius, made any use of the accounts of the Alexandrian merchants while composing his *de situ Indiae*.³⁴ By contrast, in his encyclopaedic work, Pliny was able to incorporate a description of how the trade route to South India functioned in a year between 48/49 and 51/52 CE.³⁵ His statement that it was exactly during that time that reliable information became

30 *IPortes* 65 (9 August 70 CE). Hermeros was already active as an Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα merchant in 57 CE: *OPetrie* 287 = *OPetrMus* 184.

31 Strab. 17. 1. 13; Dio Chrys. 32. 36; Flav. Joseph. *Bell. Iud.* 2. 385. Information about sailing and trade is accumulated and renewed by default in the great emporia. Cf the simile in Cic. *Mur.* 4, where Cicero compares himself (outgoing consul) and his client (incoming consul) to those sailors who meet in the ports and exchange information about weather, pirates and places.

32 De Romanis 1997 and 2014. *Contra* Desanges 2012. For Juba’s interest on the feasibility of an Atlantic sea route to Arabia and India, see Roller 2003, 242–243.

33 Strab. 15. 1. 4 καὶ οἱ νῦν δὲ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου πλέοντες ἐμπορικοὶ τῷ Νεῖλῳ καὶ τῷ Ἀραβίῳ κόλπῳ μέχρι τῆς Ἰνδικῆς σπάνιοι μὲν καὶ περιπεπλευκάσι μέχρι τοῦ Γάγγου, καὶ οὗτοι δ’ ἰδιῶται καὶ οὐδὲν πρὸς ἱστορίαν τῶν τόπων χρήσιμοι. This passage does not favour a mid-first century BCE chronology for Sosandros (see *infra*).

34 *FGrHist* 644 F 2–3. Pliny’s claim at *Nat. Hist.* 6. 105 makes it unlikely that he wrote about the South Indian emporia.

35 De Romanis 1988.

available signals a peak in curiosity on the subject in a period not too distant from the composition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.³⁶

Indian Ocean traders and travellers from Alexandria continued to report on their voyages up to Cosmas Indicopleustes. A few generations after the composition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, this kind of ‘literature’ would provide the spectacular amount of data that would make possible to the geographical reconstructions of Marinus and Ptolemy.³⁷ All these works are lost to us. Even the names of their ‘authors’ remain unknown.³⁸ Apart from Ptolemy’s toponymies and Cosmas’ accounts, we have only faint echoes in the exotic venue of an Egyptian popular farce,³⁹ in an ethnographic comparison by Pausanias,⁴⁰ in several of Philostratus’ mythhistories,⁴¹ and in Olympiodorus’ scientific demonstrations.⁴² The persistence of this kind of literary production raises the question: why, out of this body of literature, is the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* the sole survivor?

Recent studies by Didier Marcotte have made significant contributions to explaining the survival of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.⁴³ In particular, Marcotte has observed that the corpus of texts copied in the Heidelberg manuscript is characterized both by an overwhelming preponderance of geographical writings and by a telling presence of works (not all geographical) either attributed to or quoted by Arrian of Nicomedia. His suggestion is that a copy of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* may have been kept in the same library that preserved at least some of Arrian’s works. Moreover, on the basis of a significant lexical coincidence, he has plausibly argued for a direct use of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* by such an avid reader, editor, epitomist and author of *periploi* as Marcianus of Heraclea.⁴⁴

Marcianus never mentions a περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης of Arrian. Instead, in the prefatory letter of his *Epitome of Menippus*, he quotes as an excel-

³⁶ Cf Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 6. 101 *nec pigebit totum cursum ab Aegypto exponere, nunc primum certa notitia patescente.*

³⁷ Ptolem. *Geogr.* 1. 17. 3 [...] παρά τε τῶν ἐντεῦθεν εἰσπλευσάντων καὶ χρόνον πλεῖστον ἐπελθόντων τοὺς τόπους καὶ παρά τῶν ἐκεῖθεν ἀφικομένων πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

³⁸ Among the few exceptions (see *supra* nn. 4, 5) is also Pantaenus (Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 5. 10. 3; Hieron. *Vir. ill.* 36; *epist.* 125. 4).

³⁹ De Romanis 2002.

⁴⁰ Paus. 3. 12. 4.

⁴¹ De Romanis 2015.

⁴² Olympiod. in *Aristotelis meteora commentaria* 163.

⁴³ Marcotte 2000, 2007 and 2012.

⁴⁴ Marcotte 2012, 19–20.

lent periplographer an otherwise unknown Σώσανδρος ὁ κυβερνήτης, and ascribes to him a work labelled as τὰ κατὰ τὴν Ἰνδικὴν.⁴⁵ Sosandros' characterization as a κυβερνήτης connects his work to the intellectual reworkings of nautical information about India which the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* exemplifies. It does not, however, clarify whether he was, for instance, a contemporary of the ἀρχικυβερνήτης Onesicritus or an epigone of the mythical κυβερνήτης Hippalos.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the probability that Marcianus read the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* raises the questions of whether he knew of two *periploi* of India – one read and quoted, the other praised – and whether Sosandros may be identified as the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. The circumstance that Sosandros is not mentioned by anyone other than Marcianus favours the hypothesis that he is much later than Onesicritus and is one and the same as the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.⁴⁷

At any rate, Marcotte's brilliant hypothesis provides a probable explanation for both the curious assemblage of the *Codex Palatinus Graecus* 398 and the survival of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* from the second century CE on. It remains to be explained how in the second century CE someone – whether Arrian or otherwise – came to own a copy of a work written in Alexandria in the mid-first century CE, which was soon superseded by similar texts available to Marinus of Tyre and Ptolemy.

First and foremost, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* was written for (and read by) an audience of Alexandrian merchants, financiers and prospective Indian Ocean sailors. The fastidious indexing of all the items both exported to and imported from each of the emporia of the Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα,⁴⁸ together with the

45 Marcian. *Epitome Periplus Menippeus* 2 (GGM 1. 565 = FGrHist 714 T 1): γράφω δὲ ταῦτα πολλοῖς μὲν ἐντυχῶν περιπλοῖς, πολὺν δὲ περὶ τὴν τούτων εἶδησιν ἀναλώσας χρόνον [...] οἱ γὰρ διήδοκοντες ταῦτα μετὰ λόγων ἐξητακέναί, Τιμοσθένης ὁ Ῥόδιος ἐστίν, ἀρχικυβερνήτης τοῦ δευτέρου Πτολεμαίου γεγονώς, καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνον Ἐρατοσθένης, ὃν Βῆτα ἐκάλεσαν οἱ τοῦ Μουσείου προστάντες, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις Πυθέας τε ὁ Μασσαλιώτης καὶ Ἰσίδωρος ὁ Χαρακηνὸς καὶ Σώσανδρος ὁ κυβερνήτης (ὁ) τὰ κατὰ τὴν Ἰνδικὴν γράψας κτλ.

46 For the first hypothesis, Karttunen 1989, 91 n. 200.

47 The reasons for dating Sosandros to the 1st century BCE (Klotz 1927, 1145) or any time before Menippus of Pergamon (e.g. FGrHist 714; J. Engels BNJ 714), which would preclude identifying him as the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, remain unclear to me. The hypothesis that his work about India was used by Menippus in his τῆς ἐντὸς θαλάσσης περίπλους seems to me unlikely. Of course, if Sosandros were the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, we should deduce that the text acquired its false authorship only after Marcianus read it.

48 *PME passim*. The accuracy of these lists may have been helped by the fiscal declarations submitted to the quarter-tax customs house in Alexandria, an example of which is the text partially preserved in the PVindob G 40822 verso.

specification of the most appropriate departure times for each sea route – expressed in terms of both Roman and (fixed) Alexandrian calendars⁴⁹ – clearly demonstrates that the text was meant to be a guide book for the cosmopolitan business community of Alexandria and Coptos. Moreover, the kinds of data specified therein – distances between emporia, landing places, anchorages and landmarks; signs of coming storms or of coastal proximity; sea tides and shallow waters – all show that it was also intended to be read by prospective Indian Ocean mariners. Despite the differences from other *periploi*, the reading of it could nonetheless be recommended to anyone entering the profession of *πρωρεύς* or *κυβερνήτης Ἐρυθραϊκός*.

However, all this would suggest only a local and chronologically limited readership that would not justify *per se* its inclusion in Arrian's library or, at any rate, its inclusion in the *Codex Palatinus Graecus* 398. If the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* enjoyed not only a wider but also a more socially diversified public than many subsequent comparable texts, such a circumstance may be attributed to the singularity of the period in which it appeared – years that were marked by a dramatic expansion of the money supply,⁵⁰ a rampant increase in luxuries for the aristocracies⁵¹ and an impressive growth in the India trade.

In such a context, a text like the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* could generate interest that was not solely professional. Its laborious periplographic reconstruction produced a geography of the commodities that were significant for the self-characterization of Julio-Claudian society, insofar as a commodity's ranking within the hierarchy of socio-economic values was determined as much by its geographic origin as by its intrinsic qualities.⁵² Indeed, a closer consideration of the text shows that the geographic space encompassed by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is determined not so much by the navigations of the ships sailing from Egypt as by the provenance of the commodities imported via the Ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα. The primacy of the commodities helps explain why the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* includes a description of the poorly known areas from which malabathron and silk came⁵³ and why the long terrestrial routes of African ivory, Himalayan nard and Deccanese onyx are outlined.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *PME* 6, 14, 39, 49, 56.

⁵⁰ De Romanis 2012.

⁵¹ *Tac. Ann.* 3. 55.

⁵² E.g., *Sen. Cons. ad Helv. matr.* 10. 5 [...] *pretiosos* [sc. *cibos*] *autem non eximius sapor aut aliqua faucium dulcedo, sed raritas et difficultas parandi facit.*

⁵³ *PME* 64, 65.

⁵⁴ *PME* 4, 48–49, 50–51.

It is not unusual for mercantile cultures to base their perceptions and representations of the world on their import trade.⁵⁵ With its detailed provenance of Indian Ocean commodities, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* helped shape perceptions of the world in the late Julio-Claudian period. The profound impact of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and similar literature on contemporary culture can also be perceived in texts whose interests are not directly related to the Indian Ocean sea routes and their commodities. A passage from John's *Revelation*, for instance, represents a world whose hierarchical order is defined by a centripetal movement toward 'Babylon' (= Rome) of the precious merchandises.⁵⁶ All that wealth is analytically inventoried with lists of commodities that recall those of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. What is perhaps even more significant is that 'the merchants of the earth' and the ship captains figure as the most vocal mourners of the ruin of 'Babylon' and the end of her imported luxuries.⁵⁷ The converging interests of shipmasters and traders which inspired the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* could not be pointed out more incisively.

On the other hand, the quest for the most exotic of commodities also pushed out the boundaries of the unexplored parts of the world.⁵⁸ The author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* uses the adjective ἀνερευνήτος, 'unexplored', twice. The first time is at the end of the African section where, after the very last emporia of Azania, the 'uninvestigated Ocean' (ὠκεανὸς ἀνερευνήτος) is said to turn west, stretching along the corresponding parts of Aethiopia, Libya and Africa, to join the western sea.⁵⁹ The second time occurs at the end of the Asian section: after Θῖνα, the remote city whence silk is sent both to Bactria and the Ganges valley, there are places still unexplored 'because either of the violence of storms, the thickness of ice and the impervious places, or for some divine power of the gods'.⁶⁰ Besides conveying a new perception of the world, the

55 Ezekiel's chapter 27 and Hermippus' *Phormophoroi* fragment (PCG V fr. 65) – for archaic Tyre and classical Athens, respectively – offer parallel examples.

56 *Apoc.* 18. 11–13. The comparison with the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* would be even more captivating, if, despite Irenaeus' chronology, the *Revelation* were to be assigned to a period prior to 70 CE: Robinson 1976, 221–253.

57 *Apoc.* 18. 13 καὶ οἱ ἔμποροι τῆς γῆς κλαίουσιν καὶ πενθοῦσιν ἐπ' αὐτήν, ὅτι τὸν γόμον αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς ἀγοράζει οὐκέτι; 18. 18 καὶ πᾶς κυβερνήτης καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἐπὶ τόπον πλέων καὶ ναῦται καὶ ὅσοι τὴν θάλασσαν ἐργάζονται ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔστησαν καὶ ἔκραζον βλέποντες τὸν καπνὸν τῆς πυρώσεως αὐτῆς λέγοντες, τίς ὁμοία τῇ πόλει τῇ μεγάλῃ.

58 *Apoc.* 18. 23 ὅτι οἱ ἔμποροὶ σου ἦσαν οἱ μεγιστάνες τῆς γῆς, ὅτι ἐν τῇ φαρμακείᾳ σου ἐπλανήθησαν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη.

59 *PME* 18.

60 *PME* 66.

awareness of the geographical extent of the luxury trade emboldened optimistic expectations. Seneca – who was born in a city of Atlantic Spain, dwelt for fifteen years in Egypt and witnessed throughout his life the splendour of the India trade – could speculate about the width of the Ocean between Spain and India and predict the discovery of all the unknown parts of the world. His *Medea*'s famous chorus, of which Christopher Columbus was so fond, reflects the sense that a favourable wind caught by a lucky κυβερνήτης could change forever the relations between the human race and its planet.⁶¹

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⁶¹ Sen. *Med.* 301–379.

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