

# 1

## Writing a Book about India

In India everything is done differently from the rest of the world. This will never change.

—BABUR (CITED IN DALRYMPLE 1998, 173)

Everyone who wrote about India preferred the marvellous to the true.

—STRABO 15.1.28

Hindus differ from us [Muslims] in everything which other nations have in common.

—AL-BIRUNI (SACHAU 1910, 17)

India is the inner state of every man.

—BILL AITKEN 1992, 194

### Drawing aside the Curtain

An outsider writing a book about India faces a formidable problem, which is even greater today than it was for Megasthenes. Centuries, indeed millennia, of familiarity, or should one rather say unfamiliarity, with India have erected a series of curtains through which it is difficult to peer clearly. As great a writer as Carlo Levi confessed that he found India ‘impossible to describe.’<sup>1</sup> Every age has had its own picture of India, always from the vantage point of an observer who finds what he observes essentially alien. Yet the otherness of India exerts a pull, a fascination, which naturally results in a particularly

1. Levi 2007, 19.

strong distortion of reality to fit what the observer thinks he sees, wishes to see, or believes he ought to see. In order to understand how Greeks such as Megasthenes saw India, it is necessary to peel back these curtains or at least to be aware of the distorting, pixillating effect each separate one has on our field of vision.

I draw back, or at least identify, the curtains one by one, starting with the most recent.<sup>2</sup> I don't know what your mental picture of India is, but there are a few things I was aware of before visiting the country. As I grew up in the sixties India came into my consciousness when the Beatles went there, bringing back an aura of joss-sticks and sitar music that infested our teenage rooms. A never-forgotten experience was a Ravi Shankar concert in Coventry Cathedral (I came away with the great man's signature on a record sleeve), at which, after about a quarter of an hour, a friend leaned over to me and asked, 'Has he finished tuning up yet?' Growing maturity made me conscious of major political figures and events, and a general picture developed of a vast, crowded, untidy country, full of intellectuals and mystics, and bathed in startlingly brilliant colours.

This view of India can be traced as early as the 1930s. The central character of W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* sought enlightenment (and acquired the skills of hypnosis) in India. A modern-day saint and mystic, after visiting the Elephanta caves and seeing the colossal heads of Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, he 'suddenly became aware of an intense conviction that India had something to give me that I had to have'. He enters a period of study with a swami given to such pronouncements as 'By meditation on the formless one I found rest in the Absolute'.<sup>3</sup>

Anita Desai's novel *Return to Ithaca* traces the experience of two lost Westerners trying to find meaning and their 'true selves' in India.<sup>4</sup> Amrit Lal Vegad describes meeting a young French couple on an island in the Narmada: 'what magical thread had drawn the young Frenchman and his wife across the seven seas to this deserted island in the Narmada? The hunger for beauty? Solitary

2. I find myself drawing inspiration from Sam Miller's book *A Strange Kind of Paradise* (2014), on the history of foreign responses to India, which proceeds in the normal chronological order from past to present. William Dalrymple's numerous writings on India also present an admirable model of how to look at India squarely and without blinkers.

3. Maugham 1944, 253.

4. 'to discover her true self', 199; 'she didn't care to have the real India', 271; 'her soul is waiting for her in India', 272.

meditation? Or an intense desire to escape the rat race of the West and immerse themselves in the peace of the East?’<sup>5</sup> Even Indians can fall for the clichés about ‘escaping the West’, as depicted in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novel *English, August*, where the disquiet of the protagonist caught up in the need for a career still allows him to satirise the Englishman for whom it is all too easy: ‘John Avery ... had sensed a country through the books and films of other climes, and had been moved to take a passage, only to be a little bewildered, and perhaps feel a little foolish.’<sup>6</sup> Even *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* presents an India which catalyses spiritual change in all the characters.

Other writers become simply impatient with India. Arthur Koestler in 1960 devoted a journey to investigating the most extreme forms of mystical battiness, and judged all Indian thought by that measure. A tone of contempt suffuses his book. ‘The genuine mystic is entitled to state experiences and affirm convictions which contradict logic, science and common sense. But he is not entitled to borrow words which have a precise meaning in science and philosophy and roll them around in a game of Wonderland croquet with mobile hoops.’<sup>7</sup> V. S. Naipaul seems to see nothing in India but human shit and tedious bureaucracy.<sup>8</sup> Allen Ginsberg ignores the bureaucracy but substitutes photographs of mutilated limbs which for him apparently represent the essence of India.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly more examples could be brought in to illustrate these and related reactions.

My studies of Alexander the Great increased my awareness of India, but only from the point of view of its would-be conqueror. This book is an attempt to see not just what Alexander saw, but also what his more studious companions had more time to see. Onesicritus, Megasthenes, Nearchus and the rest acquired a dubious reputation in antiquity as ‘liars’, as did their predecessors Herodotus and Ctesias, because no one in the Greek world could believe what they reported. This book aims to recover their observations and to test them against what we can know from an Indian point of view, as well as to identify the patterns in the curtains that prevented them too from seeing India clearly. They may, I hope, emerge as better reporters of what their informants told them than curmudgeons like Strabo took them for.

5. Vegad 2008, 117.

6. Chatterjee 1988, 229.

7. Koestler 1960, 49–50.

8. Naipaul 1964.

9. Ginsberg 1970/1996.

Certain number two, for a British writer, must be the complex of attitudes associated with British imperial rule in India, which ended in 1947 (four years before I was born). It can be quite startling now to read the comments of some nineteenth-century writers, including major intellectuals like Thomas Macaulay and James Mill, on India as they saw it: the country was not fit for self-government, and so on. Even great thinkers like Hegel and Marx were blind to the qualities of India, defining the country as a place without history, because of its immersion in an immemorial 'oriental' stasis. It is true that historical works in India are hard to find: the distinguished scholar F. E. Pargiter wrote, quoting his predecessor Arthur A. Macdonell, 'Ancient India has bequeathed to us no historical works. "History is the one weak spot in Indian literature. It is, in fact, non-existent"'<sup>10</sup> Hegel went a step further and made a value judgment out of this fact. 'India has no history at all, at least no known history', he wrote; 'what we call its history is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society'.<sup>11</sup> Even Louis Dumont, author of the classic *Homo Hierarchicus*, doubts whether there is a history of India, a country and people immutable and indifferent to time.<sup>12</sup> Carlo Levi, more philosophically, saw India as a land of 'time without action': 'What I have seen, with its infinite brilliant and multiform faces, is nothing more than the tiniest fragment of a boundless, limitless reality. Time flows as slowly as the sacred rivers that coil back on themselves in these grasslands.'<sup>13</sup>

Such expressions of bafflement are by no means always as hostile as Hegel's comment sounds. But many of them are. Edward Said has collected plenty of examples of such attitudes, to which he gave the unfortunate descriptor 'Orientalism', in a casual insult to many scholars who are proud to call themselves orientalists.<sup>14</sup> Others found Indian art no better than the work of 'savages'; blinded by the classical ideal of Greek art, Sir George Birdwood wrote in 1910, à propos a Javanese statue of Buddha,

This senseless similitude, by its immemorial fixed pose, is nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its

10. Pargiter 1922, 2.

11. See Miller 2014, 260.

12. Dumont 1980, 195.

13. Levi 2007, 75. A more optimistic view of Indian historical writing is developed at length in Thapar 2013b.

14. Said 1978; Irwin 2006.

thumbs, knees and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionate purity and serenity of soul.<sup>15</sup>

The ‘boiled suet pudding’ school of criticism had repercussions not only among his own people but among Indians of a nationalist bent. Even a serious art historian like Percy Gardner could write, ‘The art of Asoka is a mature art; in some respects more mature than the Greek art of the time, though of course far inferior to it, at least in our eyes.’<sup>16</sup> This sort of thing, and the concomitant enthusiasm for Gandhara because of its patent influence from Greek artistic style, has enraged some Indian scholars, who throw out the baby with the bathwater and reject more than just the idea that any tradition other than Indian was involved in the development of Indian art. I have myself been told by a guide at Khajuraho that the temple as an architectural form was an exclusively Indian invention, going back several thousand years. (In fact the temples at Mamallipuram are generally agreed to be the earliest such structures in India, and they date from the ninth century CE. I would of course agree that they show no influence from the Greek temples of sixteen centuries before that date.) Hindu nationalism increasingly rejects not only Western scholarship on Hinduism,<sup>17</sup> but that on all aspects of Indian history, to which it prefers a strange construct known as ‘Non-Jonesian Indology’.<sup>18</sup>

Such an approach denigrates the other main strand of nineteenth-century work on India, namely the extraordinary, dedicated and brilliant labours of those Western scholars (often amateurs) who recovered Indian history and created the disciplines of archaeology and philology in India. Nor should one forget the explorers, the botanists and naturalists, like Joseph Hooker, even if he did react to the flora of Ceylon with the reflection that ‘all one longs for is the bracing air, and far more wholesome, though less attractive, beauties of an English country scene.’<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that these men were working – on the ground, in India – simultaneously with those who, in distant Europe, came out with easy platitudes about suet puddings.

In India, too, of course, there were plenty who saw the brown race that surrounded them as other, beyond the pale socially, intellectually and morally.

15. Quoted in Smith 1962, 3. On Birdwood, see Bryant and Weber 2017, 16–20.

16. Quoted in Smith 1962, 16.

17. Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus* (2009) was banned in India.

18. Pal 2002; this book contains many interesting assertions including that Bagoas is really Chanakya, and that Palibothra is mentioned in the Persepolis tablets.

19. See Arnold 2005, 142.

Their attitudes have been explored in classic works of literature such as Forster's *A Passage to India* and Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. A considerably more nuanced view is presented by Rudyard Kipling, who, at the end of a day's work on the *Lahore Gazette*, liked nothing better than to 'step down into the brown crowd' and disappear for an evening to immerse himself in the life that most Westerners never saw. The view that saw everything in India as 'heathen' exasperated him.<sup>20</sup> Kipling's view of India is complex and multi-faceted; a recent book distinguishes two strands in his stories about India, those that show a real sympathy and empathy, and those that pander to the jingoistic tastes of his readership.<sup>21</sup> With his evidently warm feelings for 'the flat, red India of palm-tree, palmyra-palm, and rice', Kipling held the view that an army of Indians, led by British public schoolboys, could easily defeat a southern European army:<sup>22</sup> lucky for Alexander that the British public school had not been invented in his day. Not a few found that the classics not only 'helped them cope' but were actually useful in India: Lord Dufferin remarked that they contained 'all that is worth knowing if you ever have to govern India.'<sup>23</sup> Kipling himself became a thoroughgoing jingo as he got older, but he had left India by that time. The masterpiece of the 'sympathetic' Kipling is *Kim*. I have found it illuminating to juxtapose Kipling and Megasthenes in approaching the latter's work, as will be seen. Kipling once told the Irish writer John Stewart Collis that the British 'did not travel to create empires but, like all islanders, to explore more of the world.'<sup>24</sup> Alexander might have half-understood that view.

### *The German Romantics*

India has a special place in German romantic thought, though I can offer no more than a few pointers here.<sup>25</sup> Romantic poets and philosophers devoured the first Western translations of Indian texts, Anquetil du Perron's *Upaniṣads* and others, making of them what they could to develop a philosophy of their

20. Kipling 1987, 88.

21. Sergeant 2013.

22. Gilmour 2002, 99 and 178.

23. Hagerman 2013, 163–5. Also the important study by Vasunia 2013, esp. ch. 1.

24. Quoted in *Times Literary Supplement* 12 August 2016, 16; cf. Collis 1937, 126: 'wherever these men pitched their tents there was safety ... so for safety's sake more and more natives gathered round them. Finally the tiny circle of their influence spread over the whole country, and the English found themselves in possession of a continent.'

25. See Willson 1964; Sedlar 1982.

own. Their work represented a sharp break from that of late classicism. Goethe (1749–1832) regarded the gods as ‘Indian monstrosities’,<sup>26</sup> though he did touch on Indian themes a couple of times, notably in ‘Der Gott und die Bajadere’. C. M. Wieland gave an Indian setting to his novel *Agathodaimon*, in which the protagonists encounter the great sage Apollonius of Tyana and arrive at an opinion shared by many scholars before and since, that Apollonius’ alleged companion Damis had made up most of what he wrote about India. ‘So dumpf und idiotisch Damis war, so wäre doch zu wünschen, wir hätten sein Buch noch gerade so von Wort zu Wort wie ers geschrieben.’<sup>27</sup>

The first great enthusiast for India was J. G. Herder (1755–1803), who thought that India represented ‘the childhood of the human race’; Friedrich Schlegel thought ancient India was a ‘Golden Age’.<sup>28</sup> Herder’s enthusiasm for *Śakuntala* (translated by Georg Forster in 1789) was shared by Schiller, who thought it better than the Greek drama. Herder was fascinated by ideas of metempsychosis and wrote three ‘Dialogues’ on the subject; he also studied the visual arts with enthusiasm. Schlegel’s brother August Wilhelm was one of the great scholars of the age, and in the 1820s and 1830s his *Indische Bibliothek* brought texts and information about India to any German reader who might be interested. Later in the century two more scholars made an impact on Indian studies. Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866) was not only a scholar but a poet; though best known as a source of some marvellous settings by Gustav Mahler, his *Weisheit der Brahmanen* is an attempt to convey a philosophy, loosely based on Indian ideas, in German verse. Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858) may be best remembered as the object of the passion of young Karoline von Günderode (1780–1806), who failed to draw him away from his ageing wife and expressed her sympathy with the Indian practice of sati (widow-burning), and her love for Creuzer, in a moving poem, ‘Die malabarischen Witwen’, and subsequently by taking her own life in the Rhineland town of Bingen.

The culmination of German interest in India is Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who was much influenced by the idea of Brāhman as an immanent deity; his theory of the Will has much in common with Brahmanism.<sup>29</sup> All these studies no doubt fed directly into the later Western idea of the mystic East.

26. *West-östlicher Diwan* 195. Cf. Sedlar 1982, 40; Willson 1964, 63.

27. Wieland, *Werke* 5.857. See ch. 16 below for further discussion.

28. Sedlar 1982, 35–6.

29. Sedlar 1982.

### *Traders*

Before the imperial rulers came the great commercial exploiters, who could see nothing in India but goods to make them wealthy. The East India Company laid the foundations of the British Raj; before them, the Portuguese led by Vasco da Gama in 1497 conducted a voyage of discovery described by João de Barros as a mission to ‘conquistar e conservar’, but which also had the purpose of cutting out the Arabs from the India trade, and of converting the natives to Christianity, a religion to which they were understood to be already close. On arrival in Calicut the men took a Vasihna temple, which is accurately described, for a Christian church.<sup>30</sup> Luís de Camões’s epic poem *Os Lusíadas*, about Gama’s voyage, begins and ends with Alexander:

You in such manner through the world shall spread,  
That Alexander shall in you repose,  
Without envying the Maeonian lyre.<sup>31</sup>

The Portuguese king Dom Manuel liked to be told that in this ‘conquest’ of India he had excelled Alexander.<sup>32</sup>

India as a source of wealth was a constant cynosure in the early modern period, as it had been in the Roman empire, when Pliny complained that the spice trade served no purpose except to encourage luxurious tastes in formerly hardy Romans. Putting pepper on your food was a direct index of moral decline. Horace Walpole took a similar line to Pliny, describing England as ‘a sink of Indian wealth’.<sup>33</sup> Most of the traders did not write much about it, so their contribution to intellectual formations is limited; but they contribute to the sense of otherness, of India as a source of amazing wealth. Now, one of the first words that springs to mind in regard to India’s population is the opposite, ‘poverty’.<sup>34</sup>

If traders did not write about India, there were others who did; a great range of early modern writers is collected in the survey by Pompa Banerjee, from 1500–1723.<sup>35</sup> Many of them were diplomats dealing not only with the

30. Subrahmanyam 1998, 131–3, cf. 162–3, 194

31. Camões, *Os Lusíadas* 10.156, tr. Richard Fanshawe. References to Alexander thus both open the poem (at 1.3) and close it. See also 7.54.

32. Subrahmanyam 1998, 188 and 194.

33. William Dalrymple, *The Guardian* 4 March 2015, 27.

34. Miller 2014, 35.

35. Banerjee 2003, with a list at 251–4.

Abbasid court in Persia but with the Mughals in India. They include such famous names as Pietro della Valle, Thomas Coryat,<sup>36</sup> Peter Mundy, Thomas Herbert and many others, most of them interested especially in religious matters.

### *Muslim Visitors*

Whoever comes from Iran to India imagines  
That in India gold is scattered like stars in the evening sky.

—ASHRAF MAZANDARANI, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY<sup>37</sup>

Several centuries of Muslim rule have also drawn a veil between us and the perception of the India that the ancients knew. An earlier conqueror of most of India, the first Mughal emperor Babur (1483–1530), crossed the Indus into Hindustan in December 1525. He did not like India much, though he learnt, and wrote down, quite a lot about it, especially its climate and natural history. His description of Hindustan runs to some twenty-five pages. ‘It is a strange country’, he writes. ‘Compared to ours, it is another world. Its mountains, rivers, forests and wildernesses, its villages and provinces, animals and plants, peoples and languages, even its rain and winds are altogether different.’<sup>38</sup> His descriptions of animals, birds and plants are detailed and accurate: he has observed the rhinoceros, elephant and monkey (in Begram he and his companions ‘watched a rhinoceros with delight’);<sup>39</sup> the peacock, parrot and partridge; the mango (not so good as the melons of Samarkand), myrobalan and citron (the sweet kind is ‘sickeningly sweet and unsuitable for eating, though the peel is good for marmalade’, while the Bajaur kind is ‘nicely sour’).<sup>40</sup> He is informed about divisions of time, weights and measures. But ‘I always thought one of the chief faults of Hindustan was that there was no running water.’<sup>41</sup> Any Persian worth his salt wants a garden around him, a *chahar-bagh* with geometric rills and pools. Babur found it hard to discover a site for one.<sup>42</sup>

36. See Moraes and Srivatsa 2003.

37. Quoted in Dale 2004.

38. Thackston 2002, 332.

39. *Ibid.*, 312.

40. *Ibid.*, 348.

41. *Ibid.*, 363.

42. Dalrymple 1993 remarks on the contrast of Persian formal gardens and the Indian ‘neglect’ of nature.

‘There was no really suitable place near Agra, but there was nothing to do but work with the space we had.’ And so, ‘in unpleasant and inharmonious India, marvellously regular and geometric gardens were introduced.’<sup>43</sup> In the end,

I deeply desired the riches of this Indian land;  
What is the profit since this land oppresses me?<sup>44</sup>

E. M. Forster sketches the essence of his response:

His description of Hindustan is unfavourable, and has often been quoted with gusto by Anglo-Indians. ‘The people’, he complains, ‘are not handsome, have no idea of the charms of friendly society, of frankly mixing together, or of familiar intercourse . . . no good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazaars, no baths or colleges, no candles, no torches, not a candlestick’ . . . Nothing in his life was Indian, except, possibly, the leaving of it.<sup>45</sup>

Beside his son Humayun’s bed of sickness, Babur watched and prayed until he ‘bore away’ the sickness from his son, and passed away in his stead. For Forster, Babur is a lesser conqueror than Alexander, who is ‘mystic and grandiose’, despite Babur’s love of detail which far exceeds anything we find in the descriptions written by Alexander’s entourage.

The great Arab traveller Ibn Battutah (1304–68) spent thirty years in motion, from 1325 to 1354, and arrived in India in September 1333. A network of Arabic-speaking contacts enabled him to travel in comfort and security, and his descriptions are matter-of-fact and vivid. The king of Delhi is ‘never without some poor man enriched or some living man executed.’<sup>46</sup> Much of his account is about life, but he does go wandering alone and is taken prisoner by ‘the blacks’, an ordeal which ends only when he encounters another Muslim who is able to release him. He feels safe only in Muslim company. He does, however, have interesting reports on the wildlife, notably the rhinoceros, and on the custom of widow-burning.<sup>47</sup>

About the same time, Hamd Allah Mustawfi of Qazvin (b. 1281, fl. 1330–40), composed his *Nuzhat al-Qulub*, an extensive account of the known

43. Thackston 2002, 363–4.

44. Written on 28 December 1528; quoted in Dale 2004.

45. Forster 1940, 291.

46. Ibn Battuta 1929, 197.

47. Mackintosh-Smith 2002, 151 and 158–9.

world. It contains a long and interesting description of Persia, but a much briefer account of India. He makes use of Indian scholarship since he writes, ‘The Indian Sages divide the habitable world into squares, these laid out three by three.’<sup>48</sup> Thus:

Bāyab Greeks & Franks	Ūtar Turks	Aysan Cathay/Khotan
Basjim Egypt, Berbers	Madwaysh Iran	Būrb China
Nayrit Copts, Berbers	Dakshin Arabia	Agnī Hindus

The diagram seems to betray some Persian influence since it places Iran at the centre, but is tolerably accurate geographically. Mustawfi’s account of Hind occupies a mere two pages,<sup>49</sup> giving little more than the remark that it is hot and a list of major localities from the Delhi Sultanate to Ceylon and Coromandel.

Around the same time, Amir Khusraw of Delhi – ‘the parrot of India’ – in his *Nuh Sipihr* (‘Nine Spheres’) of 1318, poured out his enthusiasm for India. He regarded the country as much superior to Babur’s beloved Khorasan, and gives seven arguments for its superiority over all other lands: it is a natural paradise since its climate is benign and it blossoms with flowers and fruits all year round; the Indians excel even the Greeks in science and philosophy, though in divinity they are inferior to the Muslims; they can speak all languages of the world; people come from all over the world to study in India, while no Indian ever feels the need to go abroad for study; *Kalila and Dimna* was composed in India; chess was invented in India; its music is better than anyone else’s, and it has the best poets, including one Amir Khusraw!<sup>50</sup>

Only a few years before this, another Arab writer known as al-Qazvini (d. 1283), purveyed a very different view of India. Writing in an entirely fabulous tradition, for him India is a ‘land of wonders’.<sup>51</sup> He shares the tradition about the wonders of India that medieval Europe, likewise, inherited from Pliny’s

48. Le Strange (ed.) 1919, 921–2.

49. Ibid., 255–6.

50. Mirza 1935, 182–4.

51. Berlekamp 2011, 170–4.

account of the monstrous races and from his late antique successors, Solinus, the *Physiologus*, and the Latin *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle about India*.<sup>52</sup> This is the focus of his interest and there is no attempt to write a description of India as it actually existed in his time. This is perhaps the more surprising since he makes use of what is definitely a travel account, the book of Buzurg ibn Shahriyar (see below), and shows no awareness of the scholarly work of al-Biruni (though, to be fair, that is not the kind of book he was trying to write).

Al-Biruni (973–1048) justly has the reputation of being the greatest writer on India of all time.<sup>53</sup> His book, *al-Hind*, in which he describes the country in which he spent many years as the companion of an earlier conqueror, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (d. 1030), emphasises the importance of eye-witnesses in describing the features of India. His introduction is philosophical; he is a great scholar who quotes Greek philosophers and other writers constantly, as well as Arabic authorities; he regards Indian science as on a similar level to that of ancient Greece; and he learned and liked the language;<sup>54</sup> yet even he has little good to say about the people to whom his book of more than six hundred pages is devoted.

We can only say, folly is an illness for which there is no medicine, and the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. [With Indians holding such views, who needs westerners to descant on ‘otherness’?] They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner.

Still, his view is that, even if one does not like the Indians, one should still understand them, and make more of an effort than, according to him, previous Arab writers have done.<sup>55</sup> He is anything but colonialist.<sup>56</sup>

Captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyar’s *The Wonders of India* (tenth century), one of the most delightful books from the oriental Middle Ages, takes us back into

52. On the latter, Stoneman 2011. In general, Wittkower 1942; Friedman 1981; Baltrušaitis 1981.

53. We still depend on the complete translation by Edward Sachau 1910. On al-Biruni’s achievement, see Miquel 1967, 223–7.

54. Starr 2013, 35–79.

55. *Ibid.*, 361–2.

56. Miller 2014, 86.

a world of fabulous tales and amazing phenomena. It consists of ‘what was told me at Basra by Abou Mohammed el-Hosein . . . who was at Mansoura in the year 288’; so the author makes no claim to have witnessed the things he recounts. Not all of them belong strictly to India. Many of them clearly derive from Greek sources including the Alexander legends, such as the account of the gold-digging ants in the country of the Zindj, the island of women where the sun rises and sets, the Valley of Diamonds (situated in Kashmir), and various anecdotes about Indian ascetics, some of which sound plausible, some less so. Indian ascetics are said to pluck their hair, to go about naked and covered in ashes, and to drink from human skulls— which is perfectly true — while two others are said to have immersed themselves in pits of smouldering dung and continued to play draughts until they burned to death — which sounds scarcely possible.<sup>57</sup> He reports on diviners in India, and enchanters who can cast spells on crocodiles to make them harmless, as well as on a tree on every leaf of which the name of God is written. He reports that ‘[t]heft, among the Indians, is a very serious offence’ for which the penalty is death,<sup>58</sup> which at least chimes with earlier reports on the justice of the Indians (see chapter 8 below). His book concludes with the famous story of the merchant of Basra and his escape from an island by hanging onto the feet of a giant bird, which is also incorporated in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Buzurg’s book is a collection of travellers’ tales which hardly expects to be taken quite seriously. Not all of its stories are set in India, but India certainly functions as a location for the amazing.

### *The Western Middle Ages*

Writers like Ibn Battutah and al-Biruni probably did not penetrate the consciousness of the West before the nineteenth century. From the tenth century onwards in the West the prevalent view of India was formed by the various Alexander-texts, and these lay at the root of the observations of both the fictional traveller, Sir John Mandeville (ca. 1356), and that very real traveller, Marco Polo (1254–1324). The latter’s journey back from his long sojourn in Cathay brought him to the East Indies, to Ceylon and to parts of India, where he reports on the nudity of the inhabitants — so that it is impossible to find a tailor there — on the Diamond Valley of Mutfli, on the Brahmans, of whom

57. Buzurg ibn Shahriyar 1928, 132–3 and 125.

58. *Ibid.*, 137–8.

his account contains a good deal that is accurate, and on several other Indian kingdoms.<sup>59</sup> Polo's is one of the great books of the world, and his account of India is never less than intriguing; but it cannot be said to be a sober description of reality. (I leave aside the revisionist argument that Polo never went to any of the places he describes.)<sup>60</sup> Forster's strictures went further: 'It is not a first-rate book, for the reason that its author is interested in novelties, to the exclusion of human beings. Herodotus was interested in both, and he is a great traveller in consequence. Marco Polo is only a little traveller . . . He could not differentiate between men and make them come alive, and the East that he evoked is only a land of strange customs. . . . The East will not reveal itself wholly through a mind of this type, and we have to wait two hundred years more before we can see it in its full splendour, in the autobiography of the Emperor Babur.'<sup>61</sup>

Sir John Mandeville's *Travels* (1356) has been an immensely popular book, but no one has ever taken it for literal truth. His stories of India are taken from the Alexander legends, and Alexander's encounter with the 'Brahmans'; he reprises the story of the gold-digging ants which began its long journey in Herodotus; and he mentions the four rivers that flow out of Paradise (though of that land 'I cannot speak properly, for I have not been there' – unlike Alexander, according to one medieval account).<sup>62</sup>

'You should know that India is divided into three parts, that is to say, India the Greater, which is a mountainous and hot land; India the Lesser, to the south, a temperate land; and the third part, to the north, so cold that, because of the great cold and continual frost, water congeals into crystal. On the rocks of crystal good diamonds grow . . . they are so hard that no metal can polish or split them.'<sup>63</sup> (The confusion about India's relation to the equator goes back to the report of Megasthenes that in southern India the shadows fell to the south.)<sup>64</sup> Mandeville goes on to describe the river Indus: 'eels of thirty feet [9 m] long are found in that river. The people who dwell near the river are an ugly colour, yellow and green'. He revisits the old Arab tale that ships in this region are made with wooden pegs, not nails, because the magnetic rocks

59. Polo, ed. Yule and Cordier 1903, 331–406.

60. Wood 1995.

61. Forster 1940, 286–7.

62. 'Alexander the Great's Journey to Paradise', in Stoneman 2011.

63. Mandeville 1983, 118.

64. Str. 2.1.19 = Daimachos *FGrH* 716 F 3.

would pull out all the nails.<sup>65</sup> He then describes the island of Thana, whose king 'was once so great and powerful that he fought against Alexander the Great'. The identity of this island is obscure (modern Thana is a town near Mumbai), but the varied religions of the island lead the author on to a disquisition on 'idols – images made in the likeness of whatever a man wishes', such as animals with three heads, of a man, a horse and an ox, which is perhaps a distorted recollection of statues of the four-headed Brahma, or of gods with many arms. Further on is the land of pepper trees, and then the Fountain of Youth near the city of Polumbum, whose water runs direct from the Earthly Paradise. (Though the Fountain of Youth is a popular theme in medieval art,<sup>66</sup> it seems here to have become mingled with the Water of Life of the Alexander legends.) The reverence for the ox is reported in a somewhat confused form, and the account concludes with a description of sati, of St Thomas's mission in India and of the rites of Jagannath. Some of the same themes reappear in Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia imperialia*,<sup>67</sup> in which India is merely a Land of Wonders.

If we compare Mandeville's account with the portrayal of India on the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, we find several of the same features. The shape of India is entirely lost in this representation, perhaps in order to fit it into the circular frame of the map as a whole: Taprobane (Sri Lanka) is located to the west of India on the map though the accompanying text explicitly states that it lies to the east of India (and has two summers and two winters per year, and many elephants and dragons). India is defined by the series of rivers known from the Alexander historians: Indus, Hydaspes, Acesines, Pasma(?) and Hypanis, directly beyond which is a depiction of Adam and Eve being expelled from Eden into a land of Giants. 'This side' (west) of the Pasma are a drawing of the altars of Alexander, a citation of Solinus' description of the parrot and a fine depiction of an elephant with a turret on its back. Pygmies and wyverns appear, as well as the Averion bird. Midway down the course of the Indus is the Corcina people, 'who live on a mountain whose shadow falls to the north in winter and to the south in summer'<sup>68</sup> (i.e., it is on the equator). Still nearer its mouth is the city of 'Pobbrota' (i.e., Palibothra) 'a powerful people, whose king

65. Mandeville 1983, 120; Hourani 1995; Lakhnavi and Bilgrami 2007, 220–4.

66. Stoneman 2008, 153 and plate 28.

67. Mandeville 1983, 122–5; Gervase *Otia imp.* 2.185–91.

68. Cf. Plin. *NH* 2.184 on Mount Maleus.

can muster an army of 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry and 8,000 elephants.' To the left (north) the Ganges runs eastwards and to its north is a fine Sciapod and a citation from Solinus about the people who live on smells alone. The sources for this section, clearly, are a combination of Solinus and the Alexander legends.

Some years before Mandeville, about the time that the *Mappa Mundi* was being drawn, the Italian poet Fazio degli Uberti (1305 or 1309 to after 1367) composed *Il Dittamondo*, an attempt to do for the known world what Dante had done for the world beyond. Fazio, inspired by an allegorical vision of Virtue, sets off in the company of the Roman 'geographer' Solinus (playing the role of Dante's Virgil) to visit the whole of the known world. Taking Solinus as a guide was not a good start, for that author, writing probably soon after 200 CE, had selected many of the least likely bits of Pliny and compiled them into an account of the world that concentrated on the fabulous. India is one of the first places Fazio visits:

India è grande, ricca e 'l più in pace;  
Dal mezzodí e suso in oriente  
Sopra il mare Oceano tutta giace.

Indus la chiude e serra di ponente  
Monte Caucaso di ver settentrione:  
Queste son le confine dirittamente.

Ed ivi d'animali e di persone  
Tante son novità, che spesso piange  
Quale va solo per quella regione.

Idaspen, Sigoton, Ipano e Gange  
Bagnan la terra e con grossa radice  
Maleo vi par, che 'n su molto alto tange.

Sotto scilocco, da quella pendice,  
La isola si trova Taprobana,  
Che quasi un altro mondo la si dice.<sup>69</sup>

Fazio revisits India in his account of Alexander, a passage which seems to place the Jews in India.<sup>70</sup> He briefly mentions the oracular trees and emphasises

69. *Il Dittamondo* 1.8.46–59.

70. *Ibid.* 4.2.85–99.

that a New World lies beyond. He alludes to Alexander's death by poisoning, with the comment 'Oh, mundo cieco, quanto se' fallace!'.<sup>71</sup>

For each of these witnesses, India is a place whose importance is defined by its appearance in the career of Alexander, and described by exotica from Solinus. Alexander's voyage of discovery not only opened up a new world of knowledge to the Greeks, but also imposed a veil of cliché on the vision of medieval writers. A few stereotypes come to define what the Greeks had tried to explore. We may think we do better now, but we must beware of our own sets of clichés.

### *Chinese Pilgrims*

Before all these visitors from the west came those from the east, pilgrims and historians from China. Both Faxian (ca. 400 CE) and Xuanzang (602–64 CE) were interested in discovering the roots of Buddhism and collecting valuable Sanskrit Buddhist texts to bring back to their own nation. Xuanzang achieved fame as the hero, under the name Tripitaka, of the great Chinese novel variously known as *Monkey* and *Journey to the West*.<sup>72</sup> He spent fourteen years (630–44) on pilgrimage to India and back, travelling from Pataliputra as far as Gandhara, Pushkalavati and Takshasila,<sup>73</sup> and composed a detailed and dispassionate description of India and its people's beliefs and customs, which at many points is a valuable enhancement and corroboration of Megasthenes; for example, 'they swear on oath and keep their promise'.<sup>74</sup> An earlier Chinese visitor, Faxian in 400 CE, is also factual, and contains much hard detail in his description of Pataliputra; but he is sometimes prone to gullibility, as when he informs his readers that the royal palace of Pataliputra was built by King Aśoka with the assistance of demons, who piled up the stones for him.<sup>75</sup> The great historian Sima-Qian (Ssu-ma Ch'ien, fl. 108–90 BCE) is an important source for contemporary events in Bactria but does not touch on the subcontinent as such.

71. Ibid. 4.2.105.

72. Beal 1884; Devahuti 2001. For a historical account of Xuanzang, see Waley 1952, and more recently the lively Wriggins 2004.

73. See ch. 6 below for more detail.

74. Devahuti 2001, 132; Miller 2014, 66.

75. Beal 1884, lv. See further discussion in ch. 6 below.

### *The Classical Accounts of India*

Our reverse chronological journey now brings us to the Romans and Greeks. Leaving aside for the moment the account of the *Life of the Brahmins* (*De gentibus Indiae et de Bragmanibus*; hereafter *De Bragmanibus*) by the fifth-century author Palladius of Helenopolis, and the interest of the third-century philosopher Plotinus in Indian philosophy, to both of which we shall return, as well as the staccato fourth-century description of Marcianus of Heraclea, which is a bald listing of points that might have been read off the relevant page of an atlas (in fact he epitomises the once important but now completely lost Artemidorus, ca. 150 BCE), the first notable writer to give an extended discourse about India is the second-century Philostratus, in his life of the sage and wonder-worker Apollonius of Tyana, who lived in the reign of Nero and into that of Domitian. Much of Philostratus' book is devoted to a narrative of Apollonius' travels in India and his encounter with fictional kings and philosophers. It makes use of earlier travel accounts but is determinedly fabulous in its approach, picking up some local colour and circumstantial details from the *Alexander Romance* and Alexander historians and focusing largely on philosophical conversations held by Apollonius in India. Philostratus' view of India is comparable in many respects to the mid-twentieth-century image of an exotic land, full of strange animals and a population devoted entirely to philosophical contemplation. It is much debated whether his book can be used as evidence for anything regarding India.<sup>76</sup> (See chapter 16 below.)

Slightly earlier than Philostratus is Arrian (ca. 86–160 CE), whose history of Alexander is the major source for his career and for ancient knowledge of India. As much of what he writes is based on sources contemporary with Alexander, and his description of India relies on no author later than Megasthenes (ca. 350–290 BCE),<sup>77</sup> it makes sense to consider him below among the representatives of the Greek view prevailing in Alexander's time.

Philostratus was preceded by the encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder (23/4–79 CE), whose Indian chapters preserve much from earlier writers, and who was in turn excerpted by the later Roman writer Solinus. Solinus wrote, probably about 200 CE, a *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, a collection of geographical facts about parts of the known world, almost all lifted from Pliny and Pomponius Mela, whose book delineated the order of the lands and seas in the time

76. Smith 1914; Charpentier 1934; Bäbler and Nesselrath 2016.

77. Dihle 1964; Schwarz 1975.

of the emperor Claudius. Pliny is an important witness though sometimes uncritical, and his method means that different treatments of a topic occur at different places in his book, under different headings, and often with different and incompatible information. At book 6, 64–79 he provides a long litany of the peoples of India, apparently based on the Alexander historians and Megasthenes. He also cites Artemidorus (ca. 150–100 BCE), whose eleven books of *Geographoumena* are lost. The latter's itinerary seems to have been rather strange: he travelled down the Ganges, around the coast, and then successively down and up the Indus to the borders of the subcontinent at Kabul.<sup>78</sup> Pliny's is not a book about India, but an encyclopaedia, informed by a doctrinaire position on the decline of Roman morals as a result of luxury, exemplified in the trade with India.<sup>79</sup> However, his Indian place names can almost all be identified with Sanskrit originals,<sup>80</sup> and most are also in the classical sources, including Ptolemy; some that are now unidentifiable may derive from a source we cannot define – for example on the leaf-wearers, whose existence need not be doubted.<sup>81</sup>

Important but of less moment for the formation of a comprehensive view of India are the guides for traders: the *Parthian Stations* of Isidore of Charax (first century CE),<sup>82</sup> the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythraean [Red] Sea* (also first century CE)<sup>83</sup> and its predecessor Agatharchides' *On the Erythraean Sea* (second century BCE);<sup>84</sup> also the *Description of the World* by the poet Dionysius Periegetes (first century CE),<sup>85</sup> which gives a brief but colourful account of India. Eudoxus' account (120–110 BCE) is all but lost. Eudoxus of Cyzicus was sent by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II of Egypt with a stranded Indian guide to find the sea-route to India; 'he returned with a cargo of perfumes and precious stones ... but Eudoxus was wholly deceived in his expectations, for Euergetes took from him his entire cargo.'<sup>86</sup> In the first

78. For Artemidorus, see *GGM* 1.556.31, and esp. 574ff.; Strabo 14.1.26; Settis 2008, 54–63.

79. Plin. *NH* 12. 83–4, 6.101; Beagon 1992, 191. Such complaints were echoed by nineteenth-century critics of the British activities in India, such as Edmund Burke in 1848: 'what, then, shall become of us, if Bengal, if the Ganges, pour in a new tide of corruption?' See Hagerman 2013, 114–16.

80. André and Filliozat 1980, 87–111.

81. Forsyth 1871, 15.

82. Schoff 1914.

83. Casson (ed. and tr.) 1989: *Periplus Maris Erythraei* [hereafter *Periplus*].

84. Burstein (ed.) 1989. (Citations of Agatharchides below refer to this edition.)

85. Lightfoot 2014.

86. Str. 2.3.4.

century BCE Apollodorus of Artemita wrote a *Parthica* which contained a good deal about India and was used as a source by Pompeius Trogus,<sup>87</sup> as well as Strabo. None of these Roman-period writers, except Pliny, is substantial enough to pose any kind of veil to be drawn aside.

## The Greek View of India

### *Predecessors of Alexander*

Our journey back in time brings us now to the writers who will be the subject of this study: the Greek writers around Alexander and of the generation or two that followed. Sadly, these are mostly in a very fragmentary state, and what we have of them consists only of quotations or paraphrases made by later classical writers, notably the geographer Strabo, the historian Diodorus (both writing in the late first century BCE) and the encyclopaedist Pliny (about a hundred years later). These authors, important though they are, can be considered only in the context of the authors whose ‘fragments’ they transmit, since none of them was setting out to write a book about India as such.<sup>88</sup> Strabo had an uncharitable view of all of them, often unfairly, as we shall see.<sup>89</sup> Felix Jacoby’s collection of the ‘Fragments of the Greek Historians’ (*FGrH*) assembles the fragments of sixteen writers on India (plus some further fragments which he regarded as dubiously attributable and relegated to an *Anhang*), to which should be added the relevant Alexander historians, Aristobulus, Onesicritus and Nearchus, and the *Alexander Romance*. Chief among them is Megasthenes, a younger contemporary of Alexander who spent time in the Maurya capital of Pataliputra. Megasthenes will be the lynchpin of this book, for he was the authority for all the later classical accounts of India.<sup>90</sup>

Here at last, do we have writers with an unmediated view of India? No, because even they were conditioned by the accounts of Scylax and Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and of Ctesias in the fourth, and furthermore Strabo, on whom we rely for our knowledge of much of their work, complained that

87. *FGrH* 779; Tarn 1951, 45ff.; Dihle 1960.

88. On Strabo: Roller 2014 (translation) and his forthcoming commentary. On Diodorus: Sacks 1990; Sulimani 2011; Muntz 2012 is valuable in disentangling what is what in his extensive use of Megasthenes. On Pliny: Beagon 1992 is a valuable overview of the author’s aims and assumptions in his *Natural History*.

89. Str. 2.1.9, 15.1.28.

90. Dihle 1960.

all those who wrote about India preferred the marvellous to the true.<sup>91</sup> So here now, we must reverse our chronological telescope: instead of examining the veils and false perspectives that inhibit our own view of India, we must start to consider the clichés and stereotypes that were in place when the first Greek travellers to India began to compose their accounts.

### *Scylax of Caryanda*

Neither Herodotus nor Ctesias had been, or claimed to have been, to India. Herodotus certainly, and Ctesias probably, knew that their chief predecessor in writing about India was the Carian author Scylax of Caryanda.<sup>92</sup> Caryanda is close to Myndus on the north shore of the Bodrum peninsula,<sup>93</sup> a bare nineteen miles (31 km) from Herodotus' home in Halicarnassus, but Herodotus does not seem to have known the text of Scylax's work but only that he had made a voyage, on the orders of the Persian king Darius I, in about 515 BCE, to Asia.

As to Asia, most of it was discovered by Darius. There is a river Indos, which of all rivers comes second in producing crocodiles. Darius, desiring to know where this Indos issues into the sea, sent ships manned by Scylax, a man of Caryanda, and others in whose word he trusted; these set out from the city Caspatyrus and the Pactyic country, and sailed down the river towards the east and the sunrise till they came to the sea; and voyaging over the sea westwards, they came in the thirtieth month to that place whence the Egyptian king sent the Phoenicians aforementioned to sail round Libya. After this circumnavigation Darius subdued the Indians and made use of this sea. Thus was discovered that Asia, saving the parts towards the rising sun, was in other respects like Libya.<sup>94</sup>

91. Str. 15.1.28 and cf. 2.1.9. In fact Strabo proves the limitation of his own understanding of India, which he regards as small and homogeneous, not observing that differing reports may come from regions far removed from one another. Still, his aim is a noble one. Abolfazi Beyhaqi (995–1077) also remarks that 'most people are so constituted that they prefer the absurd and the impossible', and finds his mission in ferreting out the truth. See Starr 2013, 349.

92. *FGrH* 709. Essential reading are the three studies by Panchenko, 1998; 2002; 2003.

93. Cf. Str. 14.2.20. The site, and Scylax's voyage, are vividly evoked in Kamila Shamsie's novel *A God in Every Stone* (Shamsie 2014); but if Panchenko is right, Scylax never went to Peshawar, where most of the action is located. See below. Scylax is probably the same man as Scylax of Myndus, a ship's captain who was a friend of Aristagoras and was mistreated by the Persian Megabates: Hdt. 5.33.

94. Hdt. 4.44. Hdt. 3.98–116 are presumably derived from Hecataeus' summary of Scylax.

Some later writers seem to have been familiar with Scylax's book. Philostratus and Tzetzes<sup>95</sup> mentioned that he described Troglodytes, pygmies, men with enormous ears and sciapods, one-eyed people and those who used their ears as blankets when asleep. The same wondrous peoples appear in the ancient Persian text the *Videvdad*, presumably from the same source that Scylax used.<sup>96</sup> Athenaeus indicates an interest in rivers and plants, including the artichoke (*kynara*),<sup>97</sup> while Aristotle tells us that, according to his book, there was 'a great difference between the kings and those they ruled'.<sup>98</sup>

It is generally assumed that Scylax's voyage was down the Indus and around Arabia to a Red Sea port,<sup>99</sup> in which case his starting point of Caspatyrus should be Peshawar in Gandhara. But there is an obvious problem, which is that Herodotus clearly states that he followed the river in an easterly direction and then sailed westwards around India. (However, even Cleitarchus thought that the Ganges flowed north to south.)<sup>100</sup> Dimitri Panchenko has argued persuasively that *ho Indos potamos* in Herodotus need mean no more than 'the Indian river', and that the Ganges is meant. No sentence quoted from Scylax actually names the Indus: Hecataeus is the first to use the name.<sup>101</sup> There are of course crocodiles in both rivers – the gharial in the Ganges, the mugger crocodile in the Indus. Besides the eastward direction of the Ganges, a strong point in favour of Panchenko's view is the fact that Megasthenes stated that none of the tributaries of the Ganges is inferior to the Maeander, 'where the Maeander is navigable'.<sup>102</sup> We do not know where Megasthenes came from, but as Scylax grew up close to the Maeander it is highly likely that this comparison originated with Scylax, as it would be of little relevance for an author writing for the Macedonian King Seleucus in Babylon.<sup>103</sup> The report in One-

95. *FGrH* 709 F 7.

96. *Videvdad* 2.5: see Stoneman 2015, 53.

97. Scylax Ff 3 and 4 = Athen. 2.82 (70a–d).

98. Arist. *Pol.* 1332b12 = F 5. Parker 2008, 20 for the artichoke.

99. E.g., Jona Lendering, 'Scylax of Caryanda', [www.livius.org](http://www.livius.org).

100. Kienast 1965, 185.

101. Milns 1989, 356. Hecataeus' words (*FGrH* 1 F 299) are 'among them people live on the Indus [Indian] river, the Opiai; there is a royal garrison; as far as that (are) the Opiai, from there on is sandy desert as far as the Indoi'. Herzfeld 1968, 282, argues the sandy desert is the Thar desert, which lies east of the Indus, and that the Opiai must therefore be in Sind (cf. Plin. *NH* 6.21; McCrindle 1927, 112): therefore Scylax is reporting on the Indus, not the Ganges. But the fact that he reports this information does not prove that this is the route he followed.

102. *FGrH* 715 F 9.

103. Panchenko 1998, 222–3. Panchenko's additional argument, that the reference in Aelian *NA* 12.41 to islands as big as Lesbos in the Ganges (ὁ παρά τοῖς Ἰνδοῖς ῥέων) should be set

sicritus that Taprobane (Sri Lanka) is twenty days' sail from the mainland may come from Scylax,<sup>104</sup> since it is true only if the mainland starting point is the mouth of the Ganges.<sup>105</sup> A further point is that, if Scylax had sailed to the mouth of the Indus, and Alexander knew of his voyage, the latter could not possibly have arrived in India thinking, as he did, that the Indus was connected to the Nile.<sup>106</sup>

But if Scylax sailed down the Ganges, not the Indus, where is Caspatyrus? The identification with Peshawar was always uncertain and it is unusual to find no resemblance between an Indian and a Greek name: the Indian name for Peshawar was Purushapura.<sup>107</sup> An alternative spelling is Caspapyrus (in Hecataeus), which would seem to incorporate the Sanskrit ending *-pura*, meaning 'city', though other Indian names in *-pura* retain their feminine gender in Greek. Herodotus locates the city in Pactyice, Hecataeus in Gandarike. Pactyice is probably connected with the modern name Pathan, while Gandarike, though it sounds like Gandhara (where the Indus rises) is commonly attached to a people living in the eastern Punjab or on the Middle Ganges, where they sometimes bear the name Gangaridae.<sup>108</sup> (Their king was Xandrames or Aggrammes and they lived 'on the far bank of the Ganges'.) Panchenko canvassed the possibility that Caspapyrus is Pataliputra (which is on the south bank of the Ganges), but later discounted it, proposing instead, tentatively, the city of Hastinapura, capital of the Kurus or Kauravas and location of the action

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alongside a similar statement in Hdt. 1.202 about the Araxes, and that 'Araxes' for Herodotus was simply a Persian word for 'river' and here refers to the Ganges, is imponderable. However, Herodotus does say that the people who live near this Araxes (which he locates in Scythia) 'have discovered a kind of plant whose fruit they use when they meet in groups. They light a bonfire, sit around it, and sniff the smoke rising from the burning fruit they have thrown on to the fire. The fruit is the equivalent there to wine in Greece; they get intoxicated from the smoke'. This sounds rather like the use of soma in Brahmanic rituals of Vedic times, and may explain the accounts in Greek writers of peoples in India who have no mouths and live on smells, for Brahmans too are supposed to do no more than inhale the smoke from sacrifices. See ch. 10 below.

104. *FGrH* 134 F 12.

105. As stated by Pliny, *NH* 6.82. The argument is that of Panchenko 1998, 225.

106. Bosworth's attempt (1993, 416–17) to explain away this problem – the Indus had more than one mouth – does not persuade me. But his emphasis on the importance of geographical theory for Alexander is valuable.

107. Beal 1884, 1.97: Xuanzang calls it 'Fo-lu-sha' (*ibid.*, xxxii). Singh 2009, 389 accepts that Purushapura could be Caspapyrus, as does Naqvi 2011, 120.

108. Str. 15.1.30; Curt. 9.2.3; *Tabula Peutingeriana* 'Gandari Indi'; Panchenko 1998, 233–4. Also Sircar 1947/1971 on Gandaridae on the river Beas.

of the *Mahābhārata*.<sup>109</sup> The identification is not compelling – Hastinapura (Elephant City), or Hasanpur, is not on the Ganges but sixty miles (100 km) north-west of Delhi, close to Meerut – but nor is it crucial to the argument. However, other identifications have been canvassed. Toynbee proposed Multan,<sup>110</sup> and there is a resemblance of names with Kuśapura on the river Gumati, a western tributary of the Indus. I would like to propose yet another identification: Keśavapura, a district of Mathura on the Jumna/Yamuna.<sup>111</sup> The latter was Cunningham's candidate for Cleisobora, though Lassen made Cleisobora 'Krishnapura' and identified it with Agra. Mathura was a major crossroads as early as the sixth century BCE.<sup>112</sup> The resemblance of names is close, and if Cleisobora really represents Krishnapura the alternative name makes sense, since Mathura in later times (and still today) became celebrated as the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa. Keśava is a name of Viṣṇu, of whom Kṛṣṇa is one of the avatars, and it is likely that the name Keśava pre-existed the individuation of the Hindu gods as we know them.

If it was the Ganges that Scylax sailed down, the consequences are momentous. At the end of the sixth century BCE, a Greek in Persian service had already travelled to the east coast of India and circumnavigated the subcontinent. A further implication may be that Persian control in the reign of Darius extended right along the Ganges; this is hard to believe, and certainly did not last long, but the Achaemenid influence on the architecture of Pataliputra is unmistakable. No other Greek went so far, not even Alexander; and Herodotus and Ctesias had far hazier views of the country than this intrepid explorer achieved.

### *Herodotus of Halicarnassus and Ctesias of Cnidus*

Herodotus mainly provides a list of tribes, sprinkled with delightful details.<sup>113</sup> He is impressed by the large numbers of the Indians, and is the first author to tell the unforgettable account of the giant ants that dig up the gold dust guarded by griffins, which reappears in every subsequent writer and has exercised the ingenuity of scholars to fathom what is really being described. He

109. Panchenko 2003, 293. In the *Mbh*. [= *Mahābhārata*] 12.39.1ff., Hastinapura is depicted as a city of great bejewelled mansions, overflowing with women.

110. Toynbee 1961, 171.

111. Law 1954, 107. It is also known as Keśavadeva: Thapar 1989, 15.

112. Eck 2012, 350; Srinivasan 1989.

113. Hdt. 3.94, 3.97–106, 7.65 and 7.86.

mentions the expedition of Scylax of Caryanda (4.44) but without any detail of what he said about it.<sup>114</sup>

Ctesias has a lot more to say about India;<sup>115</sup> in fact he wrote a whole book about it, in which he makes clear that his information comes from Indian visitors to the Persian court, where he worked as a doctor for seventeen years. (He returned to Greece in 398 BC.) Several times he refers to acquiring information from Bactrian merchants. (Bactrians and Indians are said to have reached the Black Sea according to Pseudo-Scymnus, writing in the second century BCE.)<sup>116</sup> One of the latter explained to him the miraculous properties of the *pantarbe* stone, which Ctesias seems to have fallen for, even though he was able to handle one;<sup>117</sup> and a Bactrian also gave him information about the silver mines of Bactria (which must include Tajikistan as well as north-east Afghanistan).<sup>118</sup> Bactrians spoke an Iranian language which was presumably intelligible to people at the Persian court, but they may have known no more Sanskrit/Prakrit than was necessary to buy the goods they imported from India at a market.

Ctesias probably had access to no written sources at all, and certainly in the case of India it is debatable whether there were writings to draw on. The emergence of writing in India is a controversial matter, but some indications suggest that it existed by the middle of the fifth century BCE.<sup>119</sup> The evidence is somewhat contradictory. The Buddha (d. 405) certainly did not make use of writing.<sup>120</sup> The first physical evidence for writing comes from some Brāhmī

114. Ibid. 4.44.

115. Ctesias, ed. Lenfant 2004, tr. Nichols 2011. The articles of Bigwood restore a good deal of Ctesias' credit.

116. Ps.-Scymnus 930–4 in Diller 1952, 165–76 (173). 'There is a Greek city of the Milesians called Phasis; it is said that sixty peoples, with different languages, descend on it, among whom it is said that barbarians from India and Bactria turn up here.'

117. There may be a connection with topaz, described by Agatharchides (F 84a).

118. Ctes. F 45 paras. 6 and 26; Nichols 2011, 24–5.

119. Goyal, in Falk 1993, 295, suggests that writing may have been in use as early as 483 BCE. Kant 2000, 107 goes so far as to say that writing was 'common by the sixth century BC'. Suggestions that writing is referred to in the Vedas may be rejected. RV [= *Rg Veda*] 1.164.39 does not refer to 'letters' but to 'syllables'; RV 10.71.4, referring to the goddess Vac (voice) whom man has never seen, and the 'blessed sign' of verse 2 of the same passage do not indicate script but 'marks of friendship'. *Mahābhārata* 13.23 states that the Vedas are not to be reduced to writing: there is no difficulty in supposing that writing was in use by the time the text of the *Mahābhārata* reached something like its present form.

120. Gombrich 2013, xiii, though he believes that numerals may have been in use.

graffiti on pottery associated with fifth-century BCE levels at Anuradhapura,<sup>121</sup> but thereafter there is nothing until the inscriptions of Aśoka in the third century BCE, which make use of both Brāhmī (left to right, sometimes thought to be derived from the Indus ‘script’ – if it is a script) and Kharoṣṭhī (right to left), which is based on Aramaic and is used in the region west of the Sutlej. Of the Greek writers, Nearchus, writing in the 320s BCE, states, in Strabo’s words, ‘that they write missives on linen cloth that is very closely woven, though the other writers say that they make no use of written characters.’<sup>122</sup> The remark occurs in a discussion of the Macedonian impact on Indian handicrafts, such as the making of sponges and the forging of strigils, so may imply that this is another instance of copying western skills. Quintus Curtius Rufus, too, refers to Indians writing on bark, or bast.<sup>123</sup> Megasthenes, by contrast, perhaps two decades later, states categorically that the Indians did not use writing: ‘a people who have no written laws, but are ignorant of writing, and must therefore in all the business of life trust to memory.’<sup>124</sup> But in another place, according to Strabo, Megasthenes recorded that at the Great Synod at the beginning of the New Year, ‘the philosophers, one and all, come together at the gates of the king; and whatever each man has drawn up in writing or observed as useful with reference to the prosperity of either fruits or living beings or concerning the government, he brings forward in public.’<sup>125</sup> But the verb here translated ‘draw up in writing’, συντάττειν, may not mean that. It is used by Polybius to refer to ‘composing’ a history, but its more general meaning is to compile or collect; so Megasthenes need not be saying that the philosophers brought written documents to the court; perhaps they brought, or told about, for example, new kinds of animal feed.

The passage has been used to corroborate the story that the grammarian Pāṇini travelled to Pataliputra to present his ‘book’ to the Nanda king. Pāṇini was certainly aware of writing. He uses the word for ‘script’, *lipi*,<sup>126</sup> and we are also told that several schools of rishis had proposed different forms of letters at some time prior to Pāṇini.<sup>127</sup> But Pāṇini’s references to script may have

121. Coningham, Allchin, Batt and Lucy 1996.

122. Str. 15.1.67 = Nearch. F 23.

123. Curt. 8.9.15; Falk 1993, 296 and 310. Other materials that have been used for writing include palm leaves and birch bark, referred to by al-Biruni: Naqvi 2011, 79.

124. Str. 15.1.53 = F 27 Schw = F 32 J.

125. Str. 15.1.39 = F 33 Schw = F 19 J.

126. Pāṇini, *Aṣṭadhyāyī* 3.2.21

127. Agrawala 1953, 16 and 20–1.

been based on familiarity with Greek writing (he refers only to *yavana lipi*), or with the Aramaic used for administrative purposes in the neighbouring Persian empire until its fall to Alexander in 330 BCE. Much depends on the date of Pāṇini. Thapar places him in the mid-fifth century BCE, and believes that writing may have been in limited use for communication with the Achaemenid bureaucracy, while Habib and Jha represent a perhaps commoner view that has him working around 350, shortly before Megasthenes but a generation or two after Ctesias.<sup>128</sup> Agrawala marshals strong arguments for a mid-fifth-century date, as follows.<sup>129</sup>

1. Pāṇini's reference to Yavanas (Greeks) does not entail that he is familiar with the events of Alexander's invasion, for Greeks were familiar in the empire of Darius I.
2. Pāṇini also refers to Parsus (Persians) who were not politically active after Alexander.
3. An argument that Agrawala rejects is Pāṇini's reference to a federation of the Kṣudrakas and Malvas, who were at loggerheads during Alexander's invasion and may only later have federated. However, Curtius refers to the two peoples squabbling over a choice of leader, implying that a federation already existed, though it was friable.
4. Pāṇini is also associated with Nanda kings, especially Mahānanda, who belongs to the mid-fifth century. The Nandas were overthrown by the Mauryas soon after Alexander's arrival in India.
5. A strong argument is from astronomy: the beginning of the year is determined by the rising of Sravishta from 1372 to 401 BCE, and this is the marker that Pāṇini uses; after 401 it was the rising of Sravana. In sum, there are good reasons for assigning a fifth-century date to Pāṇini.

The contradiction between the reports of Nearchus and Megasthenes is easily resolved by the consideration that the two authors are writing about regions distant from one another, Nearchus about the Punjab and Megasthenes about Magadha. It is easy to suppose that writing was more familiar in a region that had been ruled by Persia than in the Ganges plain.

But even if Pāṇini lived in the fifth century, and was familiar with and made use of writing, and he and others like him had written physical books, they

128. Thapar 2002, 163; Habib and Jha 2004, 146–9. See also Gombrich 2013, 17; Goyal 2006, *passim*.

129. Agrawala 1953, 455–74.

were no doubt few in number; they may not have reached Persia from India within the fifty years or less between their putative composition and Ctesias' time of writing; and there is no evidence that Ctesias, or any member of the Persian court, understood, let alone read, Sanskrit.

Oral literature did make some impact on Ctesias.<sup>130</sup> Early forms of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* were in circulation. The Vedas and the Brahmanāṇas and Purāṇas had taken shape, and the Upaniṣads were in process of formation. Some of Ctesias' stories of fabulous peoples, which were repeated by Megasthenes, had their origin, as we shall see, in Sanskrit traditions. The wondrous pool Silas may be an equivalent, by metathesis of l and r, of Sanskrit *saras* 'pool, water'; but Salila is also one of the 108 names of the Ganges. Magic springs feature several times in Ctesias, and *Mahābhārata* 3.80–155 is a long account of the sacred fords (*tirthas*) of India, and there are hot and cold springs at Yamunotri.<sup>131</sup> It appears that Aristotle made use of Ctesias' description of the elephant, and that the information he gained therefrom was of good quality.<sup>132</sup> Ctesias never mentions Scylax, but he may have made use of his report.<sup>133</sup>

The information Ctesias gives is often very circumstantial, and associated with precise numbers and quantities. Though some scholars have suggested that this circumstantiality is a ploy to create verisimilitude and a scientific appearance, or an arch joke,<sup>134</sup> more detailed study of his work has led to an improved assessment of his qualities. In general, Ctesias reported well what he was told, and his information is no more unreliable than much that is in Herodotus.<sup>135</sup>

These Greek writers were the source material for a variety of other writers in antiquity, who have further filtered what we know of the originals. Strabo was often polemical and could be more caustic than necessary about the failings

130. Nichols 2011, 22.

131. Haberman 2006, 46.

132. See Romm 1989; Bigwood 1993a. Nichols 2011, 96 finds Ctesias' information good on this point.

133. On Scylax, see Shipley 2011, 4–6; Panchenko 1998 and 2003.

134. Gómez Espelosín 1994 takes the former view, Auburger 1995 the latter. In antiquity, Lucian (*VH* 1.3) wrote that Ctesias described what he had never seen nor heard from any truthful witness.

135. Ruffing 2011, who provides a useful doxography of earlier views; Almagor 2012. Earlier scholars used such phrases as 'mass of absurdities' (Bunbury) and 'worthless' (Jacoby): Milns 1989, 358.

of his predecessors, giving Megasthenes a notably bad name. Diodorus is a writer who has elicited much scorn from modern scholars as an unintelligent and uncritical compiler, though recent work suggests that his procedures are more complex than simply copying out one author for a bit, then putting him aside and copying out another.<sup>136</sup> The historian Arrian, writing in the second century CE, is generally regarded as the most sober and reliable account of Alexander's campaign, and his excerpting of Megasthenes and other writers as trustworthy. More juicy morsels are found in Aelian, a writer of miscellanies about animal behaviour (the Persian king's amours are unfavourably compared to the marital constancy of the wrasse, an ungainly fish) and also random facts from history. Other outliers include writers with specific agendas, such as Clement of Alexandria. All in all, dealing with the classical writers involves peeling back some further curtains, not just of prejudice and particular interests, but those occasioned by the multiple layers of reporting and repeating of earlier accounts.

One might hope to set against the Greek writers of the fourth and later centuries BCE the testimony of their Indian contemporaries, as well as of Greeks who had become assimilated, like Heliodorus who erected a column in honour of Viṣṇu at Besnagar in the later second century BCE (see chapter 13 below). However, there are few such to draw on. The dating of Indian literature is notoriously problematic. The *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya has often been regarded as a genuine work of Kautilya who was the chief adviser to the Maurya emperor Candragupta (or Chandragupta), in which case it would be a valuable counterpoise to the description of Megasthenes. However, the position has been assailed from all sides. Otto Stein thought that the many resemblances between Kautilya and Megasthenes were more apparent than real. Present scholarship would not agree, but there is an influential argument that the *Arthaśāstra*, though it may contain fourth-century material, is itself a work of compilation dating in its present form from many centuries later.<sup>137</sup>

Some of the Dharmaśāstras may also contain fourth-century material, though their dating too is problematic.<sup>138</sup> The most imposing of these, *The Laws of Manu* (*Manusmṛiti*), though later, seems to codify many kinds of immemorial Indian customs.<sup>139</sup> Elements of the *Mahābhārata* certainly go back

136. Muntz 2012.

137. Stein 1921; Trautmann 1971. The matter is discussed more fully in ch. 6 below.

138. Olivelle 1999.

139. Doniger and Smith 1991; Olivelle 2004.

to the fourth century BCE, though its ‘composition’ belongs to the early centuries CE.<sup>140</sup> The *Kāma Sūtra* of Vatsyayana was probably written in the third century CE. It is not usually regarded as a book of historical information, but in fact it has a great deal to say about social as well as marital life.<sup>141</sup> Like the other works mentioned, it shows an interest in codification of custom, which is what Megasthenes was also engaged upon.

A rare fixed point is constituted by the inscriptions of Aśoka, which are firmly situated in the third century BCE. They are a remarkable document of a ‘philosopher king’. (See further, chapter 13 below.) Aśoka even went to the trouble of having a version of his edict about the *dharma* inscribed in Greek for those living in his western dominions around Kandahar.<sup>142</sup>

Of historical works there is, indeed, a paucity. The epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* only reached their present form maybe as late as the sixth century CE. The play, *The Rakśasa’s Ring* by Visakhadatta, which is about the minister Kautilya and has done much to create the tralatician picture of that statesman as a Machiavellian crook, belongs to no earlier than the late fourth century CE. The only Sanskrit work to mention Alexander is the *Harṣacarīta* of Bāna, which mentions him only in passing as an inferior comparand for the great victories about to be achieved by the hero King Harṣa: Harṣa lived in the seventh century CE (he was also a patron of Xuanzang) and the work was probably written in his lifetime or soon after.

As will be seen in the following chapter, useful historical information can be gleaned from works with a different purpose such as those by the grammarians Pāṇini and Patañjali. The Purāṇas, Brahmanical accounts of ancient India written in prophetic form in the future tense, contain some illuminating passages,<sup>143</sup> as do the Sri Lankan chronicles the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa*.

Only the great religious works may predate the Greek writers: the *Rg Veda*, the Upaniṣads and some of the writings attributed to the Buddha. The Jātakas, stories of the Buddha’s previous births, probably began to be compiled soon after his death, while the *Life of the Buddha* by Aśvaghoṣa probably belongs to the second century CE. While Megasthenes must have understood some Sanskrit, he is probably unique in this among the Greek writers, and in any case he cannot have consulted any written texts, since he says there were

140. Parpola 2015, 299; Prakash 1964.

141. Doniger 2016.

142. On Aśoka, Bloch 1950/2007; Allen 2012.

143. Pargiter (ed. and tr.) 1913; 1922.

none. I believe that Megasthenes did hear some of the stories from the *Rg Veda*,<sup>144</sup> and probably had some of them explained to him by Brahman informants; but he will not have found it easy to recall accurately everything that he heard.

## Conclusion

Three main points emerge from this discussion.

1. Our own presumptions about India make it hard for us to see writers like Nearchus, Onesicritus and Megasthenes clearly, or to see India with their eyes.
2. Many of the authors who have formed our preconceptions can, often, be used as corroborative detail for what is in the classical authors. Among the most valuable are Xuanzang, al-Biruni, Babur and even Mandeville. But we must beware of the danger that we are looking for what they have taught us to expect.
3. Could our central authors – Nearchus, Onesicritus and Megasthenes – see India clearly, or did they look for what Ctesias and Scylax had taught them to expect? Because the earlier authors are lost to us this is very difficult to estimate. With this in mind, one should always test them against other available sources and their likely Indian informants.

Thus armed with protective self-awareness, we embark on the march into India.

144. See on Heracles and his daughter ch. 7 below.