

Lost in literature: the misuse of western sources and perspectives [Part III]

To complete [this series](#) I need to mention the alleged Greco-Roman connections to the Indian Ocean. Southeast Asia's relationship to the Indo-Roman trade connections was at the centre of colonial period studies. Greco-Roman easterly expansions captured the imagination of early modern European scholars in Asia; it also reaffirmed the Eurocentric mindset in the Western origin of development in Asia. Scholarly fascination with the Mediterranean presence in the Indian Ocean created a Eurocentric focus around traders in the Indian Ocean. Scholars such as H.P. Ray in *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Early Maritime Links of South Asia* and R. Gurukkal argued extensively on the roles of Indo-Arab trade facilitating the distribution of Greco-Roman material in the Indian Ocean. If we take into account limits of Mediterranean shipbuilding technology and the lack of density in actual Greco-Roman artefacts in the region, by contrast to those that originated from the Arab world and the western Indian Ocean, it may be worth reassessing the Bay of Bengal interaction as one primarily of Indo-Arab trade rather than Indo-Roman trade.

The Greco-Roman sources we often use when referring to contacts with Southeast Asia, from Ptolemy's *Geographia* to Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, are often conflicting and filled with literary exaggerations. Strabo, whose knowledge extended only to parts of western South India, where most Indo-Arab-Roman interactions occurred, was perhaps the truest to detail. If we reposition the idea of Asia, particularly of India, in the Greco-Roman world, we find that the political-geographical space of the East served as a metaphor for opulence and ethereal philosophy to Greek and Latin writers. Classical sources about India, particularly area beyond Sri Lanka, took liberties with details. Pliny often used India as a literary device to display contrast with the Mediterranean world regarding political power, culture, governance, and morality. He had been known to criticise Roman obsession with products from the East; from his disapproval of silk on ladies to spices on Roman plates. Let me be clear that I am not arguing that these sources are not useful; on the contrary, they provide some of the most insightful social and maritime records on the interactions between the Mediterranean world and India. What I am arguing against is the use of classical sources on India beyond the Ganges, or what scholars have come to identify as

Southeast Asia. Mediterranean explorers from before the 4th century CE relied on secondhand accounts of the regions around the Ganges, and even more so for the region beyond.

Can we directly translate the Greek and Roman terms *Aurea Chersonesus* and *Chrysos* as *Suvarnabhumi*? The answer is similar to the usage of *Suvarnabhumi* as a literary function in religious texts. The concept of the Far East as a treasure trove of unimaginable wealth is not new in Mediterranean literature. *Chrysos* as a golden island or land appears in multiple Greco-Roman narratives, mainly as a mythical location that tested the virtues of heroes and men. India as mapped by Greco-Roman scholars was a representation of the 'cosmological' realm in Greek thought. Many locations in India were abstract for scholars in the Mediterranean sea. The east was the home of Dionysus, the god of passion and excess. Throughout the history of Greco-Roman scholarship, representing the East in a detailed and specific fashion was not of much scholarly interest. The Mediterranean world was content with having its spices delivered regardless of whether it was from India or Southeast Asia. Businesses in the Indian Ocean relied on Indian Ocean traders, who paid taxes at Berenike and Myos Homos.

Even when the sources themselves try to capture geographical content, a certain degree of ethnocentrism emerged in the Greco-Roman views of the Indian Ocean world. From India to Southeast Asia, the Greek sources rationalised the geography they encountered through the Greek view of the *oikoumene*. India emerged out of Alexander's expedition to the east, but the Alexandrian scholars defined India by rationalising the satraps and the proximate landscape around the Northwestern South Asian peninsular. They were not too keen on details. Arrian's *Anabasis* criticised Ptolemy for his obsession with describing attacks, sieges, and conquests of new territories, rather than the hydrographical features of the landscape. Veronica Bucciattini in her work looking at *Geographical Description and Historical Narrative in the Tradition on Alexander's Expedition* described the dawn of encounter, which proponents of Indo-Roman trade have stressed as revolutionary, as lacking when it comes to the treatment of hydrographical features. The individual authors were busy inserting "geographical description in works meant to tell *their own* history of Alexander." In many ways, uncovering of the unknown probably caused a ripple through the Greek scholarship more than it did the Indian Ocean world. We owe most of the world map of *Eratosthenes* to Strabo, who lived in a time when universal geographical knowledge was part of empire-building. Nevertheless, as a source the Greek account and framework on "India beyond the Ganges" may not provide anything more than a reflection of the Greek and Roman cartographic philosophy of the world.

To conclude this series, should we keep matching sites to *Suvarnabhumi*? Perhaps, to study the local folklore and spread of intangible heritage such as stories and locations associated to it. Should we continue our attempt to manifest it into ancient sites or geography? That can probably best be avoided.