

Ptolemy, Geography Book 6

Middle East, Central and North Asia, China. Part 1. Text and English/German Translations

Bearbeitet von
Helmut Humbach, Susanne Ziegler

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I. Introduction

1. Theory and Practice

Ptolemy expounded the theoretical fundamentals of his geographical insights in Books 1 and 2.1 of his *Geography*. Book 1 deals with the map of the world, whereas Book 2.1 discusses the maps of the single countries. A Latin translation of them as well as of the entire Greek text of Books 1 to 6 was given by Friedrich Wilhelm Wilberg in his edition of the *Geography*. A German translation was produced by Hans v. Mžik in collaboration with Friedrich Höpfner. From a wider angle the subject was taken up again by the mathematician J. Lennart Berggren and the classical philologist Alexander Jones. Their inspiring work with its thorough introduction and numerous critical remarks makes the access to Ptolemy's theory easier for a much larger public than has been possible hitherto.

We will not try to accompany Ptolemy into his highly sophisticated mathematical and astronomical scholarship, as we aim especially to provide a tool for future philological and linguistic investigations into the historical background of his findings by analysing the geographical and ethnographical names he recorded. Thus the maps in this volume are intended for facilitating further research, both philological and historical. Applying a simplified cylindrical projection by equaling 1° longitude to 1° latitude, we dispensed with Ptolemy's conical one. Admittedly this procedure has to put up with a slight distortion of the maps of the single countries, but it clarifies the relations between the maps and the coordinates entered there. We consider it necessary, though, to give an appropriate number of manuscript variants on the maps and above all in the indexes, hoping to stimulate our readers to reflect on textual criticism and to also make them aware of the frequent corruptions typical of a long and complicated manuscript tradition.

2. The Silk Road

Special attention must be drawn to Berggren and Jones's Appendix C (p. 150-152). Its topic is the Silk Road, a well-known trade route, whose description covers large part of Ptolemy's subdivision of the length of the inhabited earth of 180° into three main sections. In view of the textual complexity they are summed up as follows:

(1) The first main section extends from the Islands of the Blest (Makarōn Nēsoi), Ptolemy's westernmost point, to the passage of the Euphratēs next to Hierapolis (1.11.2).¹

(2) The second main section extends from the Euphratēs to the Stone Tower (Lithinos Pyrgos) (1.11.3), from which the mountains go off to the east and join up with the Imaon mountain range (1.12.8).² This section consists of two subsections:

(2A) from the Euphratēs through Mesopotamia to the Tigris, and thence through the Assyrian Garamaioi and Mēdia to Ekbatana and the Kaspian Gates (Kaspiai Pylai) and to Hekatonpylos in Parthia (1.12.5),

(2B) from Hekatonpylos to the Stone Tower, subdivided into (2Ba) from Hekatonpylos over Hyrkania Mētropolis, Areia, Antiocheia Margianē, and Baktra to the ascent of the mountain range of the Kōmēdai, from there to the gorge that follows on the plains, and (2Bb) further on to the Stone Tower (1.12.6-8).

(3) The third main section extends from the Stone Tower to Sēra Mētropolis (1.12.9).³

3. Ptolemy's Reliability

Taking into account the reliability of Ptolemy's description of Europe and the Mediterranean, scholars dealing with the problems of the historical geography of the eastern lands generally attribute the same degree of reliability to Ptolemy's presentation of the countries in Book 6. Many attempts have been made to identify single data of the pertaining passages of the *Geography* with geographical reality, a perspective from which the present work started as well. Yet it soon became evident that the majority of the data collected in Book 6 must not be taken literally, as was assumed by most scholars, particularly in numerous articles on the geographical and ethnographical names published in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Those articles are often contradictory, let alone André Berthelot, whose otherwise meritorious work is obscured by an all too literal interpretation of Ptolemy's data. Concerning the reliability of certain details, doubts are expressed occasionally by the respective authors, yet they failed to draw general conclusions.

¹ More exactly: Zeugma.

² On our maps R^{tab}O^{tab}K^{tab}U^{tab}, the Stone Tower (Lithinos Pyrgos) is not depicted as a watch tower, as it is usually understood by scholars, but it is a mountain, see particularly R^{tab}, where it is explicitly denoted as such (oros); on K^{tab}U^{tab} it branches off W-ward from the junction of the Imaon mountain range with the Askatankas mountain range. Later on it was depicted as a pagoda.

³ Sēra Mētropolis is usually identified with modern Xi'an. Berggren and Jones, *Ptolemy's Geography*, p. 152, leave this problem unsolved, hinting at "Lo-Yang [Luoyang] (the Chinese capital at this period) or a less remote provincial city, a question on which it is perhaps pointless to speculate."

It is necessary to realize that the coordinates in the text only exceptionally originate from astronomical or other kinds of survey, and the farther the description proceeds to the East, the more it becomes hypothetical or even imaginative and fanciful.

The paucity of information on the distant eastern countries is evidenced by the multiplication of names containing the element *Pars*^o, which is related to the modern name of the Pashto language and that of its speakers, the Pashtūns or Pathāns in Afghanistan and the NW frontier province of Pākistān. Whereas their proper place is in → 6.18 Paropanisadai, Ptolemy has them spread to the neighboring countries, viz., → 6.17 Areia, → 6.20 Arachōsia, → 6.21 Gedrōsia, a dispersion which is of no historical importance but of mere cartographical nature.

The use of the maps, of which $R^{tab} O^{tab} K^{tab} U^{tab}$ are relevant from the point of view of textual criticism, requires great caution. There is reason to believe that map-makers entered the names of peoples and regions often in an extremely subjective manner, mostly because of the space available, be it to avoid overloading or to fill blanks.

As to the literary sources, it seems strange that Ptolemy did not appropriately rely on the Alexander historians such as Arrianus, who might have prevented him from making two distant cities of Zari(a)spa and Baktra Mētropolis in → 6.11 Baktrianē, nor on the itineraries of the expedition undertaken to → 6.7 Arabia Eudaimōn by Aelius Gallus, obviously the Praefectus Aegypti ca. 26-24 B.C.

While the entries on Ptolemy's map of the world appear to be largely based on that of his predecessor Marinus of Tyros, the maps of the single countries seem to have been compiled from material of quite an inhomogeneous character, e.g., from pre-maps of different quality and different scale, which were mechanically projected onto one and the same scale.

In consequence it happens that an identical geographical object is listed more than once, as is Kōphanta in → 6.8 Karmania, also more or less divergently as Daroakana/Tarbakana in → 6.18 Paropanisadai, or with different names like Areia polis and Alexandreia Areiōn in → 6.17 Areia, or is even attributed to different countries as the couple Badara and Musarna in → 6.8 Karmania and → 6.21 Gedrōsia.

Duplications of that kind must be distinguished from name doublets, twin names, and twin variants. The term "name doublet" is employed when two or more geographical or ethnographical items are given the same name, as is the case with the various cities of Alexandria, of which Book 6 has two in → 6.12 Sogdianē, one in → 6.17 Areia, and one in → 6.20 Arachōsia. The term "twin name" applies to cities having two different names such

as Kabura in → 6.18 Paropanisadai, which is also called Ortospana; “twin variants” denote two basically different readings in the manuscript tradition, e.g., Parsytai/Parautoi in → 6.17 Areia, with each of the readings making sense.

It can be taken for granted that in other instances, though rarely perceivable, Ptolemy’s data result from harmonizing divergent information. Two notable examples are offered by his hydrography of Central Asia. His somewhat mysterious mention of a lake called Ōxeianē in → 6.12 Sogdianē is the first hint at the Aral Sea that reached the western world. It might have stimulated Ptolemy to revise the Eratosthenian view of the rivers Ōxos and Iaxartēs (Amū Daryā and Syr Daryā) discharging into the Hyrkanian (Caspian) Sea, but he subordinated his discovery, whose source we do not know, to geographical tradition, combining both in a fanciful way. Modern Lake Hāmūn-e Hilmand (at the border between Īrān and Afghanistan) has undergone a reduction of size similar to that of the Aral Sea, being represented in Ptolemy’s work by a water body (limnē) called Arachōtos Spring (Arachōtos Krēnē) in → 6.20 Arachōsia.

