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INDIA AS A MIRROR OF OTHERNESS IN THE CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL WEST

(*The establishment and development of an idea of India, of a myth called India*)

For more than thirty years, I have been writing a great deal about the contacts between ancient India and the classical world, analysing the texts of Greek and Latin authors, also looking at the archaeological evidence, and pondering how much and what kinds of contacts and knowledge there actually were. This time, however, I am not discussing the actual contacts, nor am I concerned with the reliability and factual interpretation of the accounts. Instead, I am tracing the reception of India, the idea that formed an early and long-lasting legend of India. This legend is entirely a construct of Western literature. It had very little to do with Orientalism (in the Saidian sense) as it was not really concerned with the real India and its inhabitants. Instead, this legend concerned a fabulous country called India and as such, it has long and many-sided tradition. Some of the echoes can still be heard, but its origins lie very far in the past.[1]

[1] This is a revised version of the lecture read at the University of Vienna in May 2006 and at the Finnish Institute in Athens in February 2008. A still earlier version was read at Jagellonian University in Krakow in October 2005. The early work was done under the auspices of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki. A related idea is found in a recent study (Parker 2008), tracing the idea of India among Romans in the Imperial Period. Fortunately for me, there is no overlapping in our respective studies.

India in Early Greek Literature

To understand this properly, we must start from the beginning, or better, from the prehistory of this conception. The **archaic Greek worldview** contained a curious idea about the rim of the inhabited world. It was different. When the centre was struggling under the harsh circumstances of the present iron age, a sort of ancient golden age situation was still found in distant regions. These regions were exceptionally fertile and rich in nature and had various miraculous plants, animals and human or semi-human races. For the inhabitants, life was easy there on the rim, but it was also primitive. There was no hard tilling of the soil, not even the cattle or horse nomadism of the intermediate region, just picking wild fruits the trees produced in plenty. Or, in another way of turning familiar circumstances upside down, cannibalism, often in the form of eating the dead or sick relatives. Therefore, there were also no funeral ceremonies. No houses, not even the tents or wagons of nomads, just sleeping in the shade of the trees. No religion, no elaborate rites and customs. No marriage, just promiscuity and open sex before the eyes of others. From these examples, we see that the ideas pre-modern Europe tended to ascribe to distant savages had very old roots. This is the idea we find in **Herodotus**, whose *History* also contains the first extant account of the marvels of India.[2]

In this archaic worldview, similar ideas were often ascribed to distant peoples all around the world. Similar stories were even told of the inhabitants of the freezing north and of the scorching south. However, very soon India — the India of the stories which were told about the distant region only vaguely known as the country of sunrise — became a focus of all marvels. Herodotus himself was the originator of some famous

[2] See Karttunen 1988, 1989 and 2002c. The idea was first suggested by Rossellini & Saïd 1978. Curiously, the Indian yuga system of similar worsening ages claims that the Kali Yuga, corresponding to the iron age, is only prevalent in the middle, while in outer continents, the golden conditions of the Kṛta Yuga – or at least the next best of the Treta Yuga – are found. See the recent discussion of the Yuga system in Eltsov 2008, 156ff. (esp. 162).

Indian marvels, such as the gold-digging ants,[3] but he still found plenty of marvels on every part of the rim of the world. His successors, however, show a clear tendency to move them to India.

A key figure here is **Ctesias of Cnidus**, a Greek physician of ca. 400 BCE, who wrote a monograph about India and its marvels, known to us from fragments and the summary prepared by Patriarch Photius. The Indus country was then politically connected with Achaemenid Persia and it seems likely that Ctesias, who was the court physician of the Persian king, repeated the wild stories Persians told about the lands beyond their dominions. From the remains of his *Indica*, we see that he also saw some Indians visiting the Persian court[4] and culled additional information from Bactrian merchants.

Among the Ctesianic marvels, we can name the terrible *martichora*, a beast with a human face, triple rows of teeth and which shoots poisonous quills from its tail (F 45, 15). Another famous exmple is the unicorn or one-horned Indian ass, whose horn had miraculous healing powers (F 45, 45). Both had a long afterlife in classical and medieval literature and art. Further, there is the giant worm *skôlêx* of the Indus whose carcass exuded burning liquid (F 45, 46). The gold-guarding griffins that Herodotus (3, 116 & 4, 27) had mentioned in connection with the one-eyed Arimaspi of most distant Scythia, Ctesias (F 45, 26) located in a desert north of India. In fact, these two locations are not necessarily very far from each other. Ctesias also told of many fabulous peoples, for instance, the dwarfish *Pygmaei* with their tiny cattle (but not the Homeric geranomachia motif; F 45, 21), of the dog-headed *Cynocephali* (F 45, 37 & 40ff.), of the one-footed Sciapodes (F 51), etc. These fantasies soon took on an independent literary life and are still found, e.g., in medieval art and literature.[5]

When India became the focus of wonderous stories, it also attracted a number of marvels originally located elsewhere.

[3] I have discussed this tradition in Karttunen 1989, 171ff.

[4] There are also some Indians mentioned in the cuneiform texts of Susa and Persepolis.

[5] See Karttunen 1989 on Herodotus, Ctesias and Indian marvels. In fact, many of them still survive in literature (below).

What Herodotus had placed in Arabia (flying snakes and the phoenix bird), in distant Scythia (gold-guarding griffins), and in Ethiopia (the long-living Ethiopians and the table of the sun), was later brought to India.[6] Much was contributed to through an early and long-lasting confusion between India and Ethiopia. For Homer, the **Ethiopians** were the people of the rising — and setting — sun, burned dark by the nearness of the sun, as deduced from the idea of a flat earth (*Odyssey* 1, 22–25). However, soon it was established that black people were in fact found in both Africa and India, and therefore India and Ethiopia tended to be confused. In Herodotus, we thus find Ethiopians in both Africa south of Egypt and within the confines of India.[7] For him, they were clearly two different peoples, but others soon showed the full confusion. Aeschylus (*Supplices* 284–6), for instance, located camel-riding Indians beyond Ethiopia.

In this connection, the unknown sources of the Nile were a popular topic of speculation: One school located them in India, an idea later believed by Alexander. With the idea of the Indian Ocean being a closed sea, with a land-connection between Asia and Africa, this idea was suited to the growing geographical knowledge (this landbridge is found, e.g., in Ptolemy's Geography).[8] In late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Ethiopia was commonly called India or, more particularly, defined as one of the several Indias ("that on our side").[9]

Alexander's Indian Campaign and the Mission of Megasthenes

The vague knowledge of India in the West was much improved with **Alexander** and his Indian campaigns (327–325 BCE),

[6] I have discussed the Herodotean accounts of the ἔσχατα in Karttunen 2002c.

[7] Herodotus 3, 17–25 on Ethiopians in Africa, 3, 94 and 7, 70 on Eastern Ethiopians. Ethiopians in the south were already mentioned by Hesiod, *Theog.* 984f. See Karttunen 1989, 107 & 134ff., Schneider 2004 and Albadalejo Vivero 2005, 217ff.

[8] Nearchus F 20 (Strabon 15, 1, 25) compared the Indus to the Nile and mentioned Alexander's mistake. The erroneous land-connection of Ptolemy (7, 3, 6) was eliminated in the (otherwise rather Ptolemaic) world map of Idrīsī.

[9] Οἱ καθ' ἡμας 'Ινδοί on the Red Sea coast in Socrates and Sozomenus (Dihle 1965, 38f.).

more or less covering the area of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan and, for a while, bringing it into the sphere of the immediate knowledge of Greeks. After subjugating Bactria and Sogdiana, Alexander crossed the Hindukush and came to the Indus. He proceeded to fight his way through the Pañjāb, until his tired troops declined to go further and he had to turn back at the bank of the Hyphasis (modern Beas). He built a navy and sailed down the Hydaspes (Jhelam) and the Indus to the Indus Delta and then returned to the west. This history was related by a number of its participants, their works then being used by the extant historians, Arrian and the authors of the so-called Vulgate Tradition (Diodor, Curtius, Plutarch, Justinus and the *Epitome Mettensis*). Much information was also provided by Strabo.

This was real history recounted by several eyewitness historians, but at the same time, it was also a realisation of the ancient motif of an expedition to the rim. This popular motif is found, for instance, in the stories of Odysseus, the Argonauts, Heracles, Perseus, and Aristeas of Proconnesus; there are also numerous minor examples in Herodotus.[10] Later on, a related motif was invented when several early Greek philosophers, starting with Pythagoras and Lycurgus, were accredited with purely fictitious travels in India. Such tales were often transmitted by Diogenes Laërtius, but they have their origin in the Hellenistic period, when India had obtained some new popularity as the land of wise philosophers. Even the utopian islands of Euhemerus and Jambulus were located close to India in the early Hellenistic period (and thus there is hardly any reason to try to put them on a map).[11]

After Alexander, the close relations between India and the Hellenistic world continued for a while, although the Indian satrapies of Alexander's empire were short-lived. The generals competing for Alexander's heritage emptied the eastern garrisons to get more soldiers for their wars. A poorly known

[10] See Karttunen 1988.

[11] Iambulus in Diodor 2, 55–60, Euhemerus ibid. 5, 41–46, see further the fragments of Euhemerus ed. by Winiarczyk, and Schwarz 1983 on Jambulus.

attempt by Seleucus to reclaim the eastern satrapies ended up in an agreement which left all countries south-east of the Hindukush to Candragupta Maurya. But it also led to an important diplomatic exchange between the Seleucids and the Indian Maurya Empire.

Megasthenes, the envoy of Seleucus Nicator, visited the court of Candragupta Maurya and wrote a valuable account that was much read during the following centuries, although we know it only from fragments. It is clear that much of his account was based on accurate observations of Mauryan India — certain apparent discrepancies usually come from the fact that he was describing what he saw, without knowing the theoretical and idealistic model of the (usually later) Sanskrit texts. He was also discussing and interpreting his observations from a Greek point of view, as was natural, and culling additional information from Greek literary sources such as the historians of Alexander.[12]

Although historical contacts, growing geographical knowledge, the remarkable increase in international trade, etc. are fascinating topics — I have often dealt with them — they are not relevant here. What we are now after is the establishment and development of an *idea* of India, of a myth called India. The beginnings of this myth lie with Ctesias — whose Indian marvels reappear again and again in literature — and later with the historians of Alexander and Megasthenes. They gave an account of actual events and of their own observations (for which they often gave an interpretation according to their Greek background), but they also seasoned their text with fantastic plants, animals and peoples, sometimes derived from actual Indian stories, sometimes from Ctesias and other early authors.[13] However, their real observations often contributed to the fame of India as the land of marvels: The naked philosophers practising harsh asceticism and committing suicide on pyres, the elephant with its enormous bulk and strength and its lithe trunk, the giant serpents (whose size became very soon much

[12] On Megasthenes, see, e.g., Stein 1932 and Karttunen 1997, 69ff.

[13] The gold-digging ants of Herodotus resurrect in the works of Nearchus and Megasthenes, while Aristobulus and Onesicritus told new stories of great snakes, etc.

exaggerated) and the banyan tree with its aerial roots developing into a large grove were all actual observations, but also great marvels.

The Naked Ascetics of India

Now it is time to consider the various motifs connected with this Western idea of India as the country of marvels par excellence.[14] Some of them hail from the period just described, some were added in the Roman period, in late antiquity and even in the Middle Ages. Among the earliest were the various fabulous peoples, animals and plants already mentioned above. The dog-heads, the gold-digging ants, the gold-guarding griffins, the terrible martichora (Latin *mantichora*), and the wool-bearing trees[15] became part of standard literary imagery.

One of the most important new elements of this mythical India were without doubt **the Gymnosophists**. In Taxila (skr. *Takṣaśilā*, now in Pakistan on the outskirts of Islamabad), Alexander met naked Indian ascetics, who soon became known as the Gymnosophists or naked sophists. Their stern asceticism made a lasting impression on Alexander and his companions. Standing on one foot, these ascetics calmly endured the chilling winter of the mountains and the heat of summer on the plains. Without blinking, they could face the dazzling sun — probably to the great detriment to their vision. These accounts come close enough to Indian descriptions of ascetics —enduring the extremes of heat and cold is often especially mentioned in Indian sources — so that we can take them as based on real observations.

The first account of the Taxilan ascetics was apparently Onesicritus' description of his visit to them on behalf of Alexander. Then, they were also commented upon by Nearch

[14] The still useful classic study of Indian marvels is Wittkower 1942.

[15] Herodotus (3, 106), Ctesias (F 45, 41), Theophrastus (*Hist. pl.* 4, 4, 8) and the historians of Alexander (Aristobulus F 37; Nearch F 19; Onesicroitus F 22) told more or less factually of the cotton tree, but later imagination changed it into a fabulous tree which bore sheep as fruit (see Laufer 1915).

and Megasthenes.[16] One of these ascetics, Calanus, joined Alexander's entourage and later, when he fell sick, committed spectacular suicide on a pyre, watched by the whole army and described in detail in histories.[17]

Another account, soon confused with this, told of the warlike Brahmans — Greek **Brachmanes** (Βραχμᾶνες or Βραχμάναι) — whom Alexander met in the lower Indus country. Their country, with the king Musicanus, was first subdued, but the Brachmanes soon revolted and Alexander had to fight hard to suppress the revolt (Arrian, *Anab.* 6, 15f., Curtius 8, 12, 8). Onesicritus (F 24f.) gave an account of the country of Musicanus as a sort of utopia, which later influenced Megasthenes.

An unknown Hellenistic author compiled a series of questions supposedly proposed by Alexander to these Brachmanes together with their answers. This *Discourse of Alexander with the Brachmanes* became enormously popular and there are many different versions of it in Greek and Latin, starting with one preserved in a papyrus (and briefly by Plutarch, *Alexander* 64) and ending with several Christian versions.[18]

Onesicritus, the very man who interviewed the Gymnosophists in Taxila on behalf of Alexander, was a follower of Diogenes and soon these Indian wise men were adopted by the Greeks as a model of the ascetic lifestyle. They were a favourite of the Cynics and Skeptics, then of the Stoics, and eventually adopted by Christians as a sort of precursor of an ideal of ascetic and monastic life. Of their doctrine, almost

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[16] Onesicritus F 17a in Strabo 15, 1, 63–65, briefly also F 17b in Plutarch, *Alexander* 65, then Nearch F 23 and Megasthenes F 34. See also Arrian, *Anabasis* 7, 1, 5f.

[17] On Gymnosophists, see, e.g., Karttunen 2002a. The story gets a nice touch of authenticity through Plutarch explaining that "Calanus" (Καλανός) was in fact a nickname formed from the Indian word of address, here given as καλέ. As early as 1829, A. W. von Schlegel explained this as OIA *kalyāṇam* 'luck, prosperity' used as a salutation in Indian texts (Schlegel 1829, 27). See Plutarch, *Alexander* 65, 5 and my note in Karttunen 1997, 60.

[18] The most important sources are Pap. Berol. 13044 (Wilcken 1923), Pseudo-Callisthenes and *Epitome Mettensis* 79–84. Note the Jewish theory of Tarn 1951, 424ff. who compared this tradition with the story of Ptolemy II and the 72 Jewish Elders (who then translated the *Septuaginta*) told by Pseudo-Aristeas. In any case Tarn's attempt to derive the Pāli *Milindapañha* from the same must be rejected.

nothing was known. What was related by Onesicritus, was too close to Diogenes to be taken as authentic testimony.[19]

Later literature produced some new sources, both real and fictitious, on the Gymnosophists. Flavius Philostratus in the third century wrote the *Life of* ***Apollonius of Tyana*** and included in it a legendary account of the visit of this first century Neo-Pythagorean charlatan and sage to the mountain community of the Gymnosophists in India. The account, though claimed to be based on the diary of Apollonius' companion Damis, was compiled from different sources including Ctesias, King Juba and an unknown first century account of north-west India. A number of details in the description of Taxila in the second book have acquired an explanation through archaeological excavations at the site.[20] Here Philostratus seems to have had a good source, but whether it really was the diary of Damis, we cannot say.

However, after the crossing of the Hyphasis in the third book, Apollonius arrived in the secret land of mystery where the sages were living on their holy mountain in the middle of Ctesianic marvels.[21] They were themselves great miracle workers and almost omniscient, but they spoke Greek and knew Greek gods. There is nothing Indian in this account, even their belief in transmigration is clearly Pythagorean. Apollonius became their pupil. Later on (in book 6), Apollonius is also said to have met Gymnosophists in Egypt. They claimed to be immigrants from India, but seem to belong rather to the realm of fantasy than to Roman Egypt.

Philostratus also contributed a number of new Indian marvels — probably derived from lost Greek sources — which soon became part of the marvellous Indian lore. In *V. Ap.* 3, 1ff., he also wrote, among other things (some of which are known from Ctesias) about the cinnamon tree, incense and pepper trees and holy apes, who harvest pepper for men from the inaccessible precipices, about the two kinds of dragons in India, those of the

[19] See Onesicritus F 17a (Strabo 15, 1, 63ff.) and my discussion in Karttunen 1997, 55ff.
[20] See Marshall 1951.
[21] The Indian account of Philostratus has been discussed, e.g., by Smith 1914 and Charpentier 1934.

marshes and of the mountains, and further on (3, 14ff.), about a holy spring confirming oaths, a crater of fire cleansing sins, and two jars producing rain and wind.

In the third century, the Syrian gnostic Bardesanes (Bar-Daisan) interviewed an Indian embassy on its way to Rome and collected some fresh evidence about Indian religion. It seems likely that his informant belonged to some early Śaiva sect.[22] His *Indica* was then studied by the Neo-Platonist Porphyrius and others, but unfortunately for us, only some extracts of this work have survived (*FGrH* 719). It contains some fresh marvels such as the lake of probation and the temple of an androgynous holy statue (perhaps Śiva in his Ardhanārīśvara form), but they are rarely mentioned in later literature.

In late antiquity, the India-book of Pseudo-Palladius, known under the Latin name Commonitorium Palladii,[23] rose to popularity. It is preserved in connection with the Historia Lausiaca of Bishop Palladius of Helenopolis, but was perhaps not written by him. It consists of two entirely different parts. The first part (1, 3–10) contains the 4th century voyage of a Theban Scholasticus (a lawyer) to South India, a combination of a real travel report and various narrative elements (including the fantastic account of pepper collecting in 1, 7). To this is added a long and fantastic account (1, 11–14) of the Indian race of Brachmanes and of the many wonders of their lifestyle and of the surrounding country. Here, they are a special tribe of Indians who spend their time in meditation and ascetic exercises. Their country is divided into two parts by the river Ganges where lives the fantastic tooth-monster odontotyrannos, perhaps an incarnation of the skôlêx of Ctesias. Men lived on one side of the river and women on the other side and only once in a year did they cross the river and live together.

The second part (2, 1–57) was evidently founded on lost models and occasionally ascribed to no less an author than the historian Arrianus. It contains the fictitious conversation

[22] On Bardesanes, see the contribution by Vofchuk 1999.
[23] See Derrett 1962 and Hansen 1965. There is a papyrus fragment of the second part.

of Alexander with the Brachmanes, an important element in the later tradition about Indian sages.

This work was also translated into Latin — the translation was (perhaps wrongly) ascribed to no less a person than Bishop Ambrosius of Milan — and it became very popular in the Middle Ages. Related to this is the collection of apocryphical correspondence between Alexander and Mandanis/Dindimus, the king (*sic!*) of the Brahmans, known as the *Collatio Alexandri et Dandami*.[24]

Religious Ideas Connected with India

Next we must consider how India featured in Graeco-Roman **mythology.** The claim that Dionysus and Heracles had conquered India was originally part of Macedonian propaganda on behalf of Alexander, who was supposed to have surpassed the exploits of these mythic ancestors of his, but it soon became part of standard mythology. Even before Alexander, the mythical origin of Dionysus was located in the east (in Bactria, according to Euripides, *Bacchae* 13–15), but not in India, while Heracles traditionally carried out his feats in Greece and in the far west. But later on, Dionysus especially was often given Indian attributes in literature and art. He was himself born in India, later conducted war against the Indians — in the fifth century, the Egyptian Nonnus wrote a gigantic epic on this war[25] — and taught Indians the civilized life (including viticulture). Of Heracles, it was said that he attacked India, but could not conquer the "birdless" mountain fortress Aornus, a feat then succesfully achieved by Alexander. Heracles, however, conquered the rest of India, became its king and founded a dynasty by marrying his own young daughter.

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[24] The text of the Latin *Commonitorium* is edited in Kübler 1891 and Pfister 1910. The Greek original of the *Collatio* is lost; the Latin text is found in Pfister 1910. See also Cary 1954.

[25] The *Dionysiaca* is based on a similar work by a certain Dionysius in the first century, the *Bassarica*, which is extant only in fragments. Attempts to find Indian material in Nonnus — starting as early as Wilson 1832 — have generally failed to show anything notable (see Dostálová 1967 and Schulze 1973).

In connection with Heracles, the Macedonians also placed the captivity of Prometheus on the borders of India and claimed to have found in the Hindukush the cave where he was kept prisoner and released by Heracles. The Macedonian idea of the Hindukush as the "Indian Caucasus" also caused some further confusion.

There were some further mythological motifs secondarily connected with India. As the land of sunrise in the farthest East, India was naturally understood to be the land of Helios, the sun god. In some cases, even the story of Icarus was moved from Crete to India. There were real cults of the sun god — Sūrya or Mihira (Mithras) in India — but the classical accounts of an Indian sun cult have nothing common with them. In addition, we also read some completely un-Indian accounts of a supposed cult of the moon there.[26] The confusion between India and Ethiopia was probably the reason for some authors locating even the adventures of Perseus in India.

This indianization tendency also included some popular wonders of nature. In Herodotus, the phoenix bird had belonged to Egypt, but in the Roman period, it was explained that the phoenix lived in India and only came to Egypt to die. We can easily see how this particular legend was attached to India. The phoenix bird lived five hundred years and then built a funeral pyre in order to be reborn from its flames. The parallel with the observed cases of widows and ascetics committing suicide by fire in India was apparent.[27] We also note that the tradition of locating the phoenix in India arose in the times, when Egypt was part of Roman Egypt. In Herodotus' time it was still the distant seat of many wonders, but now too many had been there and could report that phoenixes were not commonly seen.

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[26] Moon in Ctesias F 45, 17 and Fulgentius, *De nat.* 10, 41. I have discussed India in Greek mythology in Karttunen 2002b, where all these motifs are fully documented with text references.

[27] The phoenix legend unrelated to India in Herodotus 2, 73, Pliny, *N.h.* 10, 2, 4f. (here connected with Panchaea, the island of Euhemerus), and Aelian, *N.An.* 6, 58; in India in Aelius Aristeides 2, 426, Dionysius, *Ixeutica* 1, 32, Lucianus, *De morte Peregr.* 27 & *Navigium* 44, and Philostratus, *V.Ap.* 3, 49.

Alexander: From History to Legend

The Gymnosophists and Brachmanes and, in a way, even Dionysus and Heracles, were originally part of Alexander's history, but alongside this history, there soon arose the so-called **Alexander legend.** Even the history of Onesicritus had already presented Alexander as an idealized figure and given an exaggerated account of many events of his career. The Hellenistic period saw the beginning of the purely legendary version of Alexander's campaigns, subsequently known as the Alexander legend or Alexander romance. From the conqueror of the east, Alexander is turned into a world conqueror, who also subjugated Rome and Ethiopia as well as the whole of India. But the geography is utterly confused.

The work was ascribed to Callisthenes of Olynthus, the court historian of Alexander. This is just a piece of fiction. Callisthenes fell into disfavour and was already dead in 327 BCE during the Indian campaign, while the legend goes on with the story up to Alexander's death. Its earliest versions are found in Greek papyri.

In any case, since late antiquity, the most popular version of the Alexander legend was the so-called Alexander History of Pseudo-Callisthenes, known in several Greek recensions and numerous translations in European and Near Eastern languages. It starts with Alexander's birth and youth, gives a long account of his conquests, which have remarkably little to do with real history, and concludes with his death and his (of course fictitious) will.

The starting point is still historical. When Arrian (*Anab.* 7, 1, 2) stated that Alexander planned to conquer Libya and Carchedon, in Pseudo-Callisthenes, he did so (and conquered Rome too, in addition). A little later (7, 1, 4) Arrian says that Alexander would never have stopped, but always searched beyond for something unknown. In Pseudo-Callisthenes, he proceeds through many unknown lands until he reaches the edge of the earth and is ordered by the gods to turn back.

Another important text — often incorporated in Pseudo-Callisthenes' work, but also known in a separate manuscript

tradition and translations — is Alexander's (fictitious) *Letter to Aristotle on the wonders of India*.[28] It contains a great number of Indian marvels supposedly seen by Alexander during his campaign, culled from both known and unknown sources. To take a few examples, there is a river with bitter water and enormous giant reeds, the invincible odontotyrannos, giant shrews and vultures, hairy wild men and dog-heads, a rain of fire, the cave of Dionysos, which kills every intruder, and finally, the talking trees of the Sun and the Moon that predict his death to Alexander.

Other fictitious letters were supposedly written by Alexander to his mother Olympias and these, too, were incorporated in the various recensions of Pseudo-Callisthenes. Again we find a number of marvels, such as the fountain of immortality and birds with human heads and voices. Another collection of Eastern marvels was the Latin *Epistola de rebus in Oriente mirabilibus*, ascribed to the Armenian Pharasmanes (Fermes), although here the marvels are not located in India, but in Mesopotamia and Armenia. As was already mentioned, there was also a fictitious correspondence of Alexander and the Gymnosophists in circulation.

In these and in the numerous medieval versions, Alexander's eastern campaigns[29] knew no boundaries: He conquered not only India, but also Africa, China and Aethiopia, he descended to the bottom of the Ocean in a sort of diving bell and ascended to the gates of Heaven. Marvelous plants and animals and fabulous races — often drawn from Ctesias and other early authors — had prominent parts in many episodes. Thus, for example, the aerial venture was conducted in a chariot drawn by griffins. In other respects, the story was soon given an appearance familiar to the medieval audience: Alexander was a paragon of a knight, brave, pious and courteous. In some other

[28] See Feldbusch 1976 and Gunderson 1980.

[29] Not only eastern: Before them, Pseudo-Callisthenes has a long description of imaginary western campaigns which make Alexander, inter alia, the master of Rome and finally bring him to Egypt from the west. Ethiopia seems to be included both here and in connection with India, but the geography is very confused. Pfister (1959) called it "Sagengeographie".

versions (the *Commonitorium* and still more the *Collatio*) the saintly, almost Christian sages were (as sort of monks) teaching virtue to the crude and cruel warrior king Alexander. It depended on the intended audience: monastery or court.

The legend was known everywhere: The original Greek text of Pseudo-Callisthenes or the recension α is lost, but there are four extant Greek recensions based on it (β, γ, ε and λ). Of these, β is dated to the 5th century and was very popular in Byzantium. On this are based the further Greek texts and the Church Slavonic and Syriac translations. The lost Greek version δ was translated into Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian and Arabic and thus became the basis for numerous Oriental versions reaching as far as Ethiopia, Malaysia and Mongolia. An Old Spanish translation brought it to Europe. Recensions γ, ε and λ are Byzantine and there are also further versions, both prose and verse, in Late Byzantine and Early Modern Greek.

In the Latin West, the late antique text of Julius Valerius is important for the reconstruction of α. In the Middle Ages, it was mainly known in an abridged version (ca. 800, ed. Zacher). The Greek γ recension was the basis of perhaps the most popular Mediaeval Latin version, the 10th century version of Archpresbyter Leo and from this derived the metrical 12th century *Historia de preliis* (known in three recensions). Numerous vernacular versions include Alberic's popular Old French poetic version *Roman d'Alexandre* (12th century), the priest Lambrecht's Middle High German *Alexanderlied* (ca. 1140) and the Low German *Seelentrost Alexander*. A Swedish poetic version (*Konung Alexander*) that was dedicated to Bo Jonsson Grip, the governor of Finland in the 14th century, was based on the last mentioned work.

Christian Ideas about India

The medieval myth of India was also seasoned with many **Christian ideas.** The spread of Christianity in late antiquity soon caused a need to combine the classical traditions with the Bible, especially as far as geography and history were con-

cerned. In some respects, the Christian authors were in this following the Hellenistic Jewish tradition, as can be seen from the close parallels, especially in the works of Flavius Josephus.

In geography, this combination was definitely done in the early 6th century work by **Cosmas Indicopleustes**, a merchant turned monk. He had wide experience, but his approach was pious rather than scholarly. He dismissed the systems of Aristarchus and Ptolemy and returned to the Old Testament idea of the flat earth and in this system, India had an interesting position as we shall soon see. Incidentally, Cosmas's *Christian Topography* is one of the few ancient works preserved with original illustrations (some of which depict the plants and animals of India and Ethiopia). Notwithstanding his ambitious sobriquet — Indicopleustes or Indian sailor — Cosmas had never been in India, but he had met Indian merchants in Ethiopian ports and could provide some pieces of valuable information about India and Sri Lanka.[30] There is much fantasy included, but some details of contemporary history show that he really had had access to some genuine information. The book had some popularity in Byzantium, but it was never translated into Latin and thus remained unknown in Western Europe.

The vague knowledge that Ptolemy and others had had of China (Seres and Sinai) was gradually forgotten and confused with India.[31] Thus, it seemed again that India was the easternmost of the countries of the inhabited world. On the other hand, it was known from the Bible that the **Garden of Eden** was situated at the easternmost end of the world. Consequently, it seemed clear that India was the immediate neighbour of it and somehow participated in its blessings. Of the four rivers of Eden, the Phison and the Geon were identified with the Ganges or Indus and with the Nile, while the others, the Euphrates and Tigris, although quite familiar, were also explained as having their origin in the far east and reaching Mesopotamia via underground passages.[32] Some late cosmographies start from the east

[30] On Cosmas, see, e.g., Schwarz 1975 and Weerakkody 1981.

[31] Classical references to China were long ago collected by Cœdès 1910.

[32] Of course, the Nile was familiar, too, but its sources were unknown. There was the old idea that they should be found somewhere in India (see above). There were also

with Paradise, then follows *India maior*, more or less corresponding to the China of Ptolemy et al., and only then comes *India minor,* the India of classical accounts.[33] In a medieval Latin text (*Alexandri iter ad Paradisum*), the Macedonian king proceeded to the gates of Paradise.

Following the example set by Josephus, Christian historians struggled to achieve a comparative chronology, juxtaposing Biblical and profane history in a way that was then considered valid by historians up to the 18th century. Eusebius and Malalas are among the first examples. The Old Testament also implies the common origin of all peoples. Therefore, an attempt was made to derive all peoples of the known world from the sons of Noah.[34] This way even Indians became incorporated in the **genealogy of Sem,** usually as descendants of Joktan, who himself was a descendant of Sem in the fifth generation and the brother of Eber.[35] In addition to Indians, Iranians and Arabians were also counted among Joktan's offspring (by Hippolytos even the Gymnosophists as a people separate from Indians).

There were other ways India was brought into a Biblical context. According to Origen's interpretation of the Gospel story, the devil showed Jesus all the riches of Persia and India.[36] A late medieval etymology derived Brahmans (Marco Polo 3, 20 *abraiaman*) from Abraham, an idea still considered possible in the 17th century.[37] In the 14th century, the Biblical tradition was used by the Italian traveller Giovanni Marignolli (p. 244f.), when he identified a primitive eastern people (probably the Veddas of Sri Lanka) as the descendants of Cain.[38]

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numerous examples of the old confusion between India and Ethiopia. I have discussed the Paradise tradition in Karttunen 2002a.

[33] Thus, e.g., *Hodoiporia apo Edem*, Anonymus Ravennatis and other medieval sources.

[34] This tendency was long-lived. In the 17th century, the so-called 'Gothic historians' prepared fabricated genealogies in order to show how Swedes, Finns and other Nordic peoples descended from Japhet.

[35] Genesis 10:25, with Indians included by Josephus, *Ant. Iud.* 1, 147, Hippolytus, *Chron.* 175f., more generally among descendants of Sem in many authors (Malalas, Cosmas, Isidorus).

[36] Homilies on Luke (4:5-8), cf. Matthew 4:8.

[37] E.g., by Henry Lord, quoted in Yule & Burnell 1903, s.v. Brahmin.

[38] Yule & Burnell 1903, s.v. *India*, quoting Marignolli, explained that, as in Genesis, Cain went to the land of Nod, perhaps this was connected with iNDia.

The formidable tribes of **Gog and Magog** of the Old Testament[39] were now supposed to have been conquered by Alexander, who confined them behind a wall in Central Asia and thus guaranteed peace (at least more or less) for the West. Some authors combined them with the Lost Tribes of Israel (below), others with Goths, Huns, Scythians or Mongols. The tradition of Gog and Magog was also popular in the Islamic world. In a short episode in the *Qur'ān* (18:82ff.), Alexander (here called *Dhū-l Qarnain*) conquers the lands of sunset and sunrise and defeats the barbarian tribes of Jāǰūǰ and Māǰūǰ.

The mysterious gold-land of **Ophir** (Hebrew *Ōphīr*, Greek Σώφειρ or Σώφαρα), which the sea-faring Phoenicians under their king Ḥīrām visited in the service of King Solomon, seems originally to belong in South Arabia. However, the first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, located it in India and this idea was then also accepted by Christian authors.[40] In India it then remained until the age of discovery, when people started seeking — and often also finding — Ophir in many distant regions, such as Southern Africa, Peru and the Pacific Islands still known as the Solomon Islands. Together with Ophir, other distant places in the Bible, such as Havilah and Taršīš, were often located in India. Some 19th century scholars suggested Indian (Sanskrit and Tamil) etymologies for the products of Ophir mentioned in the Bible, and these have often been cited until recent times, although Clark (1920, cf. Karttunen 1989, 15ff.) long ago convincingly showed them untenable. Now we can also note that Solomon was hardly such a great king as he was reported in the – centuries later – historical books of the Old Testament. This makes an expedition as far as India very unlikely in connection with him.[41]

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[39] Genesis 10:2 (Magog and Gomer as sons of Japhet), Ezekiel 38:2f. Gog as the king of the country Magog, Apocalypse 20:8 as two peoples. They were then included in the Alexander traditions (3, 26 in γ recension, cf. Gregor 1964) and in Arabic literature (e.g., Qazwīnī). In the medieval tradition, see Gow 1998.

[40] In the Bible: I Kings 9:26–10:14, esp. 10:11, and II Chron. 8:17–9:13, esp. 9:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 8, 164, and often later (e.g. Jerome in André & Filliozat 1986, 236, 240 & 242).

[41] On Solomon see Särkiö 1994.

The fabulous Gymnosophists were not forgotten in Christian literature. On the one hand, they were useful as an example of the ascetic ideal also followed and propagated by Christian hermits and monks.[42] They were sort of "honorary Christian" as one recent author put it. In Christian versions of the Alexander legend, they preached a frugal life and asceticism to the warrior king (e.g., in the *Collatio*, see above).

There was also another way India was used in religious discussions. Christian apologetical authors resurrected old stories about the supposed Indian travels of Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Plato and Democritus, conducted in search of wisdom. They wanted to prove that Greek philosophy was only unoriginal imitation and as such, hardly worthy of being considered a serious adversary to Christian doctrine. In addition to India, the origins of Greek thought were sought in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Iran.[43]

Christianity in India

There is no doubt that the **Christian mission** reached India at a relatively early period, but the details are shrouded in legend. The first extant account goes back to Pantaenus, the teacher of Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century. Pantaenus had himself visited South India by sea and encountered there a Christian community, who used a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew as their holy book. They said that St. Bartholomew was the apostle of India, although a rival tradition connects him with Armenia.[44]

However, since the 5th century, the Indian mission was commonly ascribed to St. **Thomas**, although he was originally the apostle of Parthia and Persia.[45] This was a period when

[42] Note that one theory derives the Christian monastic idea from Manichaeism and thus ultimately from Buddhism. See Sedlar 1980, 235ff. referring to the studies of Arthur Vööbus and others.

[43] See Karttunen 2002a.

[44] See Eusebius, *Church History* 5, 10 and the seminal article by Dihle (1963).

[45] While I still prefer the existence of two different traditions, I must mention that the monk Serafim in the learned introduction (p. 17) to his Finnish translation of the Syriac *Acta Thomae* tentatively mentions the possibility of a confusion between the Syriac forms of the names Thomas and Bartholomaeus as *Mar Toma* and *Bar Tolmai.*

Indian Christians were ecclesiastically under the Persian church and it was only natural for them to also accept the Persian apostle. Stories of Thomas' mission were variously located in Edessa, in Iran, in North-West India and in South India. The most famous early version is the apocryphal *Acta Thomae,* originally written in Syriac and extant in later Greek and Syriac versions. These Acts contain a rather confused account of the mission of Thomas in North-West India, in the realm of King Gondophares. The king can be identified with the Indo-Parthian king Guduphara, who ruled in the first century in the border area of Afghanistan and Pakistan where his coins and inscriptions have been found. We shall meet him later as one of the three kings.

Despite the Acts, the Edessans still claimed Thomas as their own and proudly showed his tomb to pilgrims. But from Cosmas, we know that there was a rival tomb in South India in the early 6th century.[46]

In South India, the members of this early church (already known to Cosmas) have long been known as "Thomas Christians" and they still have their own legends of the South Indian mission of Thomas. They mainly live in Kerala, but the martyry of Thomas is located by them in Mailapur (Mylapore), now part of Chennai, on the opposite side of the peninsula. Unfortunately, thanks to the zeal of the Roman Catholic inquisition in the 17th–18th centuries, there are no old written sources preserved. They have completely forgotten Bartholomew (if they once really knew him). In the Western Acts of Saints, both Bartholomew and Thomas are mentioned as the apostles of India.

During the early Byzantine period there were some contacts between Indian Christians and the West, but these were cut off through the growing isolation of the Nestorian church from the West, soon sealed by the rise of Islam. What remained in the West, was the memory of the existence of Indian Christians,

[46] Cosmas 3, 65. A recent tradition, apparently starting in the 1950s among the Christians of Pakistan, makes Taxila the place of Thomas' martyry and now attracts many pilgrims every year. See Dar 1988.

often described in an exaggerated form. It seems that a few persons actually went off to find them. Gregory of Tours mentions one from Byzantium in the 6th century. Another came from King Alfred's England (mentioned in the *Ango-Saxon Chronicle*).[47] Even these travels became a literary motif. An early literary example is the legend of St. Macarius (below), the most recent one, the *Baudolino* of Umberto Eco.

Later on, this belief in Indian Christians was enhanced by the so-called ***Letter of Prester John*** (or *Presbyter Johannes*), a 12th century fictitious writing supposedly written by a mighty Christian king of India and addressed to the Pope or the Byzantine Emperor. In the *Letter*, this priestly potentate offered military collaboration against the Muslims and described the richness and many marvels of his realm. In the time when the original success of the crusades had waned, the *Letter* was eagerly accepted in Europe and it is known in numerous manuscripts and translations. Its genuineness seemed to be proven by the fact that it abounded with details familiar from the Alexander Romance and other fantastic sources describing Indian marvels.[48] Now we understand that it was not a parallel account, but derived from them.

According to the *Letter*, John's country comprised the three Indies. To the east, it was was bounded by Paradise, it had Amazons, Pygmies and the lost tribes of Israel among its subjects, and boasted of the tomb of the Apostle Thomas and of the many miracles ascribed to it. Naturally, the country also possessed an enormous richness of gold and precious stones. Advancing towards India in the late 15th century, the Portuguese were, among other things, eager to get these Indian Christians as their allies. The country of Prester John was sought for in India, in Central Asia and in Ethiopia, but of course, it was never found.

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[47] On these pilgrims, see Medlycott 1905, 71ff.

[48] There were several new ones, such as the *The Letter of Pharasmanes* (Lecouteux 1979) and the poem *De monstris Indiae.* Another possible source of the Prester John Letter was the fantastic Hebrew travelogue of Eldad ha-Dani (below). For the Letter itself, see, e.g., Silverberg 1972.

In this connection I must point out that **real travellers** also culled information from the fantastic literature. Its unreliable character was not so well understood in the Middle Ages. In a way, the case is not too different from a modern traveller quoting information from his guidebook or other pertinent sources. Thus, there are many elements familiar from the Alexander Romance in the account of Giovanni di Piano Carpini of his embassy to the Mongol court[49] and in that of Odorico di Pordenone of his visit to China. Marco Polo knew that the hostile inhabitants of the Andaman Islands were Cynocephali, an idea still confirmed by some early modern sailors.[50] The Dominican priest Jordanus (Jourdain Catalani de Sévérac) spent years as the missionary bishop of Quilon (now Kollam) in Kerala and wrote an account of Indian marvels (*Mirabilia descripta*). Returning from China around 1350, Giovanni di Marignolli (p. 220) claimed to have heard in Ceylon (*Seyllan*) that Paradise was only forty Italian miles away. Naturally, similar material was also amply used in the at least partly fictitious travels of John de Mandeville.

India in the Legends of Christian Saints

There was some further literary and legendary matter involved in the general conception of distant India. Thus, there is a Christian branch of the originally Ctesianic account of the dog-headed Cynocephali. This is found in the legend of **St. Christophorus**.[51] He was a dog-headed giant coming from the island of the Cynocephali, often located somewhere near India. As a true dog-head, he could only bark, instead of speaking, but then he accepted to carry the Christ Child across a river. The task revealed as extremely difficult, because, in this way, he took all the sins of the world on his shoulders. As a reward he received

[49] See Yourtchenko 1998, though he is unnecessarily deriving these details from the Mongols.

[50] Marco Polo 3, 13 with Yule's notes.

[51] The earliest Greek version of his legend is from the 5th century, in addition, there are Latin, Near Eastern and Medieval texts.

the ability to speak human language. In fact, he became a famous preacher and eventually a saint. The legend of St.Christophorus, the bearer of Christ, became very popular in the Greek Orthodox Church and there are numerous icons showing the saint with his dog's head.[52]

Another legend told of **St. Macarius**, a pious young Roman nobleman, who, wanting to remain celibate, escaped from his own wedding and went all the way to India to avoid his angry father. In India, he became a hermit and when some Christian pilgrims many years later came from Mesopotamia to India and met him there, he was completely covered by his beard and hair, his long fingernails and toenails resembled those of a leopard, in fact he very much resembled some of those Hindu ascetics whose descriptions we meet in ancient Indian texts. He gave the pilgrims a warning: This was the farthest point to the east men were allowed to proceed, just a short distance away was the iron and bronze wall that separated the Garden of Eden from the rest of the earth. But humans were not allowed to see it. Like St.Christophorus, St. Macarius has also been very popular in Greece and Russia.[53]

We must also briefly consider **St. Eustachius**. According to the legend, he was originally called Placidus, a general of Trajan and a great hunter. He was converted by Christ in the form of a stag which had a cross between his antlers. Later on, he lost his possessions, sons and wife, but was then reinstated by Trajan and in a campaign, found his wife and both sons, all intact. This was supposed to have taken place by the Hydaspes, i.e., in India. It has been noted that both parts of the legend come very close to two Buddhist narratives, the *Nigrodhamigajātaka* and the *Vessantarajātaka,* while the third part, describing the death of him and his family at the hands of Hadrian, is a pure

[52] See, e.g., Kretzenbacher 1968, 58ff. and Loeschke 1965 (with illustrations). In some cases, the head looks more like that of a horse or an ass than a dog. Less obvious is Speyer's old suggestion of a connection with the Buddhist Sutasomajātaka (see Garbe 1914, 101ff.).

[53] The original Greek legend Macarius was edited by A. Vassilieff, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina* (Moscow 1893, 135–165), but is unavailable to me. Instead, I have used the Latin version. The motif of escaping impending marriage is a common theme of legends in religions favouring asceticism and celibacy. In India, this is said, e.g., in the mediaeval Jaina legends of Saint Neminātha (Vaudeville 1965, xxf.).

Christian martyrology. The later legend of St. Hubert the Hunter, who was originally the missionary bishop of the Ardennes and died in 727 CE, adopted parts of Eustachius legend, especially the miraculous way of their conversion.[54]

Let us return for a while to the **Cynocephali**. St. Christophorus is not the only case when we meet the dog-heads and other fabulous peoples of India in Christian tradition. For some Medieval scholars, they posed a theological problem: Were those peoples humans, descendants of Adam, with an immortal soul and therefore entitled to be converted? Augustine himself gave the question a long discussion and ended up with an affirmative answer. The same opinion was given by Ratramnus of Corbie in his *Epistola de cynocephalis* in the 9th century.[55] Other were more sceptical and in medieval art, we often see dog-heads among the tormentors in hell.[56]

The Three Kings of the Epiphany

In Catholic Germany, Epiphany is known as the Dreikönigstag. Protestant Bibles correctly translate Greek *măgos* as a wise man, but there is also a very old parallel tradition substituting the sages with three kings, usually named as **Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar**. Some early versions specify Caspar as an Indian king and in fact his name does indeed go back, via Gathaspar and Gudophor, to Gondophares, the Indian king who, according to the Syriac *Acta Thomae,* was

[54] See Garbe 1914, 86ff. and Schneider 1964, both with further references. In their extant forms, both legends are rather late. That of Eustachius was related by Jacobus a Voragine (c. 1260), but may go back to an unknown Byzantine source. The Hubert version is only found in the 15th century. When I was looking for hagiographical evidence, I was hoping to be able to include St. Antony, as Flaubert in his *La tentation de Saint Antoine* has included a number of classical motifs of Indian teratology. Unfortunately, at least the version of Jacobus a Voragine passes over the actual temptations rather briefly and shows no elements related with the India legend.

[55] Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 16, 8; Ratramnus Corbeiensis, *Epistola de cynocephalis* (text in *PL* 121), cf. Kretzenbacher 1968, 41ff..

[56] This idea was probably influenced by the dog-headed Anubis. See Kretzenbacher 1968, 38ff. who also gave a full account of how the dog-heads became connected with some ideas of East European folklore.

converted by Thomas. The story is just a legend, but the king was real, a king named Gudnaphar or Guduphara ruled at the beginning of the first century in the Pakistan–Afghanistan region and is known from his coins and inscriptions. In Renaissance art, Caspar is usually depicted as African, but this only reflects the age-old confusion between India and Ethiopia. In the 16th century, many serious scholars were still calling Ethiopia India.[57]

The other two kings have nothing to do with India. Balthasar is the Belshazzar of the Old Testament, originally a Neo-Babylonian prince (Bel-šarra-usur). Melchior remains unexplained, but his name is good Hebrew, meaning the king of light, and I think he could perhaps be connected with the Iranian Mithra(s) religion.

The cult of the three kings was very familiar in the Middle Ages, with its centres in Milano and Cologne. Even in the far-off cathedral of Turku in Finland, there was an altar of the three kings and a guild for its management (*fraternitas trium regum*). It was founded in the first half of the 15th century by Bishop Magnus Tavast, who himself became a member of the guild. The last curator of the altar was Arvid Nicolai, at whose death in 1544, the office was abolished by the now Lutheran Church.[58]

A distant reflection of those kings is still seen in the traditional Finnish popular Christmas song-play *Tiernapojat* or star boys.[59] Its four standard roles are Herod, his knight, the Christmas star and the king of the 'murians' i.e., Moors (Finnish *murjaanien kuningas*) with the actor wearing black face. With the traditional confusion of India and Ethiopia, he is certainly a sort of distant reflection of Caspar. There are similar Christmas plays in Catholic Germany and Austria, too, and also there one of the actors (who are called *Sternsinger*) is blackened with soot.

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[57] E.g., Guillaume Postel (1510–81) and Conrad Gesner (1516–65).

[58] See *Chronicon Episcoporum Finlandiae* 17, 48 and 14, 64.

[59] *Tierna* is an otherwise obsolete loanword from Swedish *stjerna* 'star' compounded with *pojat* 'boys'. The standard word for star in Finnish is *tähti*, and accordingly, also *tähtipojat* is sometimes used.

India in the King Arthur Cycle

The legend of the **Holy Grail** was a favourite of Medieval European fiction. Originally, it probably had nothing to do with India, although its origins are not completely clear. But at least one later version mentions that the Grail was kept in India, in the kingdom of Prester John.[60] Wolfram von Eschenbach located the Grail rather in a European fairyland, but he also gave Parsival an Indian half-brother (Feirefiz) who later became the father of Prester John.

The Lore of the Unicorn

The idea of the **unicorn** as an Indian animal whose horn has marvellous healing properties goes back to Ctesias and Megasthenes and was often repeated in later literature. But there is also an Indian story of the one-horned young ascetic — called Ekaśṛṅga or Ṛṣyaśṛṅga, the 'one-horned' or the 'stag-horned' — who with his harsh asceticism and celibacy caused a great drought, but was finally seduced by a princess or a prostitute. The story is encountered in Buddhist narratives, in the *Mahābhārata* and in later Hindu literature,[61] and it has a very early parallel in ancient Mesopotamia, in the Enkidu episode of the Gilgamesh Epic.[62]

In early Middle Ages, the Indian story came to Europe and merged with the existing unicorn tradition. From these developed the Medieval unicorn legend of the fierce, horse-like animal which worked miracles with its horn and could only be tamed by a pure virgin. Narwhale tusks occasionally found on

[60] Albrecht, sometimes called von Scharfenberg (c. 1270), according to Rosenfeld 1953, 176 and Knefelkamp 2002, 1298.

[61] *Mahābhārata* 3, 110–113, *Rāmāyaṇa* 1, 8–10, *Padmapurāṇa, Skandapurāṇa*; Buddhist *Jātaka* 523 & 526, *Mahāvastu* 3, p. 144ff. Senart, *Avadānakalpalatā* 65. See Lüders 1897–1901.

[62] A joint paper by T. Abusch and E. Blanchard West dealing with this connection was read at the Sofia Melammu Conference in 2008, but the proceedings are still in press.

European Atlantic coasts were sold at enormous prices as unicorn horns, supposedly having miraculous medicinal effects.

The *Physiologus,* a collection of symbolical animal stories, explained the unicorn (ch. 22), as well as several other stories, as Christian allegory: The unicorn captured by a virgin is, in fact, Christ captured by virtue. The pious interpreter obviously forgot that in other versions, the hunters then came and killed the unicorn in order to get its horn.[63] In the High Middle Ages, theologians discussed, how important was actual virginity for the capture — a fascinating subject for celibates. Some suggested that it was enough that the girl was young, perhaps even a disguised boy could achieve the trick (Tzetzes, *Chil.* 5). A female author of the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen (*Physica* 8), was uncompromising: She must be a girl, she must be a virgin, not too young and not too old, and not uneducated. Rudolf von Ems added that if the girl was not a real virgin, the unicorn would sense the truth and kill her with its horn. John of San Geminiano and others also insisted that she must be naked and bound to a tree. These are just a few samples of the Medieval discussion.[64]

There are also other Indian themes in the *Physiologus*. In ch. 3, the bird called charadrius, which heals diseases when brought beside the bed of the patient, corresponds to Indian *hāridrava* bird mentioned as early as the Rigveda as a means against jaundice. The belief that deer kill serpents (ch. 30) is also known in classical Indian literature. Chapters 44, about the origin of pearls, 8, about hoopoe (but this is already in Aelian as an Indian story), 34, the tree Peridexion driving away snakes, and 46, the jewel curing snake bites, are also connected with India. The account (7) of phoenix bird living in India is taken from earlier literature.[65]

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[63] For the unicorn traditions, see Shepard 1930, on the Indian background also Schlingloff 1973, on the narwhal, Laufer 1913 & 1916). For earlier literature, see also Garbe 1914, 61ff.

[64] All these are quoted by Shepard 1930, 50ff.

[65] See Garbe 1914, 61ff. and Charpentier 1916.

The Lost Tribes of Israel

Since at least the early centuries BCE, the fate of **the lost ten tribes of Israel** has been the cause of much speculation. According to the Old Testament, they had been deported by the Assyrians, but their later fate was unknown. Soon, both Jews and Christians were trying to locate them in different countries: in Ethiopia, Arabia, Central Asia, India, or China.[66] In the late 9th century, Eldad ha-Dani, a Near Eastern Jew posing as a member of the lost tribe of Dan, gave a fantastic account of the lost tribes living in Ethiopia and Arabia, which later seems to have contributed some elements to the Letter of Prester John. In the late 12th century, the Spanish rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, in his account of India,[67] located the lost tribes there. As citizens of India, we have already met them in the Letter of Prester John.

Like Ophir, the lost tribes were later also located in many other parts of the world, for instance, in Afghanistan, Tibet, Japan, South and North America, as both Jews and Christians competed for their discovery. The search went on, up to the 20th century. In his book, Stuart Parfitt shows how Christian missionaries often had a double motivation for "finding" them: On the one hand, their work in some remote place seemed more important and gained more funds if they were converting the lost Jews. On the other hand, making people believe in their supposed Jewish ancestry the missionaries hoped to make their conversion to Christianity easier. They must have been very disappointed, indeed, when some North-East Indian tribes took them seriously and decided to take up the Judaism of their ancestors.

A person interested in literature will recognise the lost tribes, as well as many other motifs mentioned in my survey, as elements used by Umberto Eco in his *Baudolino* with great skill

[66] Parfitt 2002. The speculation was apparently started by Josephus.

[67] Usually, it is supposed that he himself visited India. I have my doubts about this, but the matter needs further study. India is very cursorily described in his account in comparison to the Near East and Persia, which he indeed had visited.

and in a fascinating, but also easily misleading, way of intertwining the real history of ideas with his own fiction.

The Buddha as a Christian Saint

I would like to conclude my survey with the curious history of **the Buddha legend in the West**. The story of the prince, who, seeing a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic monk, realises the futility of worldly power and luxury and turns to religion, is good Sunday school stuff and as such suitable to be used in many religions. This was noted by the Manichaeans in Central Asia and from the Manichaeans, it was transmitted to Muslims.[68] The role of the Buddha became split into the prince Ioasaph (through Arabic Yūdāsaf from Bodhisattva) and his teacher, the wise Barlaam (Arabic Bilauhar or Balauhar).

The Christian version (*Balavariani*) was originally composed in Georgian, probably from an Arabic version, and translated into Greek soon after 1000 CE, although wrongly ascribed to a much earlier author, John of Damas. In all versions, it is clearly stated that the events took place in India, but Thomas is never mentioned. Perhaps the orthodox Georgian author left him out on purpose, knowing how highly Thomas was regarded by the heterodox Nestorians, or perhaps Thomas just did not fit in the story. However, the logic of the conversion of India here is rather confused. In the beginning, Joasaph's pagan father is persecuting Christians in his kingdom, but later Joasaph's himself is given the honour of having first introduced the religion there.

The legend soon became popular in the West. The text was included, inter alia, in the *Speculum historiale* of Vincentius Bellovacensis and the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus a Voragine and translated into many spoken languages, while the saints, Barlaam and Joasaph, had churches dedicated to them, e.g., in

[68] Among the manuscript remains of Central Asia, there are fragments of a Manichaean version in Old Turkish. As the Buddhist model, the *Lalitavistara* or some text close to it has been suggested.

Italy, Greece and Hungary. The popularity of name Varlaam shows its success in Russia. In 1712, a Jesuit missionary in the remote Philippine Islands dealt with the theme in the Tagalog language.

It was also well known in Nordic countries. The Old Norse translation, the *Barlaams saga ok Jósafats* or the "Saga of Barlaam and Josaphat", was done in the middle of the 13th century. Around 1440, a free and much abridged (only a quarter of the original) version was made in Old Swedish (*Barlaam och Josaphat*). The only known manuscript of the work was taken with him by Laurentius Haquini, a monk of Vadstena, when he was sent with some others to found the Monastery of Naantali (Swedish Nådendal, i.e., *Vallis Gratiae*) in south-western Finland. During the Reformation, the library of the monastery was brought to Sweden and the manuscript is now in Stockholm. The text is a compilation of the Old Norse text and the short version included in the *Speculum historiale* of Vincentius Bellovacensis.

Nevertheless, the legend was easily recognisable as the story of the Bodhisattva, as was already noted by the Portuguese historian Diogo de Couto in the 17th century, although he, without the necessary historical perspective, thought the Christian legend to be the original one. When the truth came out in the 1860s, the relics were quickly hidden in the basement and a sigh of relief was heard in the church when it was realised that Barlaam and Joasaph had never actually been canonized.[69]

Conclusion

My little survey has not exhausted the medieval information about and contacts with India (cf. Gregor 1964). But the rest is

[69] The truth was first realised, independently, by Edouard de Laboulaye and Felix Liebrecht in 1860. See Lang's translation of the *Balavariani* (the popular abridged version of the Georgian text) and Peri 1959. For Nordic versions, the first information was found in a short article by K. F. Johansson (in the Swedish encyclopedia *Nordisk Familjebok* 1904, pointed out to me by Mr. Alpo Ratia), then further information culled from net sources. See especially Naumann 2001.

not part of "India" as a literary concept in classical and Christian literature. Even the Buddha legend is already on the edge as it became known in the West only in the 11th century. Soon after this appeared the first translations — Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Old Spanish — of the Arabic *Kalīla wa Dimna*, a collection of fables and narratives by Ibn al-Muqaffa' (c. 750) derived, through a lost Pahlavi version, from the Indian **Pañca-tantra**. The Latin version of John of Capua (*Directorium vitae humanae alias parabolae antiquorum sapientium*) hails from the second half of the 13th century.[70]

The **pax Mongolica** of the 13th century brought European travellers — churchmen and laymen alike — onto Asian roads and a number of travel accounts gave information based on both fresh observations and on traditional literary sources. I have already mentioned names such as Giovanni di Piano Carpini, Jordanes Catalani de Sévérac, Odorico di Pordenone, Giovanni Marignolli, and Marco Polo. But all this goes beyond my present task.

There were exotic stories told of other distant regions. In classical times, there were miraculous accounts of Africa, Ireland, Germania, and Scythia, not to mention the mysterious Thule of Pytheas. In the Middle Ages, we find a tradition locating the Cynocephali, together with the Amazons, whose husbands they have now become, in the Baltic countries instead of India. But India remained the country of marvels par excellence and traditions originally belonging to some other part of the world tended to be transferred to India (like the Egyptian phoenix bird and the Herodotean account of the long-lived Ethiopians).

Wholly separate from the real India, this mythical India forms an important element in the Western cultural heritage still met in many different contexts. In addition to those mentioned above, Chaucer has a reference to the great king Emetreus of India (*Knight's Tale* 1298, cf. Bivar 1950) and a number of

[70] The best general survey of this history is still Hertel 1914, although many further details can now be added. Another work, probably of Indian origin, although only known in Persian and in Western translation is the *Sindbādnāme* or *The Seven Wise Men of Rome*.

other references to India. The *Gesta Romanorum* has a couple of Indian narrative motifs (Kuhn 1888) and there is a Buddhist parallel for *Der arme Heinrich* of Hartmann von Aue (Meisig & Meisig 2005). The travels of Sir John Mandeville start with a more or less factual account of Palestine and Egypt, but the rest is compiled from the Alexander Romance, the Letter of Prester John and other fantastic sources. India kept its position close to Paradise in the works of John Milton, while Hans Christian Andersen based one of his fairy tales (*The Philosopher's Stone*) on a Medieval Danish version of the Alexander Romance, with the tree of the sun. *The Temptation of St. Antony* by Gustave Flaubert includes many fabulous peoples and animals.[71] Among more recent authors, I have already noted Umberto Eco. The younger generation has recently learned to know many ancient fabulous animals of India from the Harry Potter books of J. K. Rowling.

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[71] Not in the Medieval legend, however, as we have seen.

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