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**Living on the Edge:  
India in the Greek Mind before Alexander the Great**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Classical and Medieval Studies  
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by

Zofia Ahmad  
Lewiston, Maine  
March 20, 2019

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# Introduction

Creature 1: “It’s so small. With a head like a horse, but a body like a camel. It swims like a twig, very slowly. It swims like a twig, and eats only teeny tiny things. These things are just like flies to us. When a tiny being appears — thwup! It eats it right away.”

Creature 2: “It’s a big hunk of meat, and slimy like a brain. Not one bone. Long tentacles like hoses. Like human arms, but longer. And on each one, there’s a suction cup. It grabs a person and draws him in. Then you’ve got to bite it between the eyes. If you’re off by just a hair, it’s over. You’re dinner.” - Asa, in *Tulpan*.

These quotes come from a scene in the movie *Tulpan*, set in the Kazakh steppe. In the scene, Asa, just returned back from a stint in the Russian navy, is trying to convince with the parents of his intended that he is a suitable husband for their daughter. While one might logically assume that he is describing fantastical creatures in order to impress them, Asa is, in fact, describing real animals: the sea horse and the octopus. Asa is exhibiting the natural solution to a problem that we face on an ongoing basis: how does one describe a being to someone who is wholly unfamiliar with it? When the original object and the audience exist in two spaces as far away from one another as the ocean and the dust-blown Kazakh steppe that *Tulpan* is set in, descriptions like Asa’s are the result. This one isolated moment in the film provides a hint of the complex nuances that are involved in the transmission of information about one place to another, far-off location.

In this thesis, I explore these ideas within a context somewhat different from the contemporary Kazakh steppe: that of contact between Ancient India and Greece in the Axial age. Specifically, I attempt to add to the growing body of scholarship on the connections between

seemingly-disparate ancient communities by discussing the extent of pre-Alexandrian contacts between the Greek and Indian worlds. Modern scholarship on connections between ancient peoples continually finds that relationships between seemingly disparate communities were deeper than is usually believed.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I attempt to add to this body of literature by Ultimately, I argue that Greek and Indian individuals were regularly interacting with one another, and that these interactions had a significant and lasting impact on both cultures. Pre-Alexandrian Greek descriptions of India not only influenced the way Greeks defined their place in the world but also led to the creation of myths that remain an important part of Western Culture today.

In the first chapter I give a comprehensive overview of contact between Greek and Indian individuals. In the second, I discuss how these interactions led to the development of the Greek conception of India and the importance of the role that India played within Greek geography and culture. In the third, I analyze the descriptions of Indian ‘marvels’ that define the Greek writings about India in order to determine how these myths and exaggerations may best be used by modern scholars. Building off of this discussion of credibility and truth, in the fourth chapter I consider Ctesias and the degree to which his *Indica* is a useful account of its subject.

For the purposes of this thesis I will be defining India as the entirety of the Indian subcontinent, from the Gandhara region (which encompassed parts of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) in the west to the Ganges river delta in the east. While the technical boundaries of ‘India’ have changed with the rise and fall of various empires and polities, this definition roughly corresponds to the cultural extent of Vedic India.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the depth of the networks between ancient peoples, and the cultural fusion that resulted from these connections, see: Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*. Malkin, *A Small Greek World*. Haywood, *Ancient Greece and the Near East*. Parker, “Porous Connections.” Sinopoli, Parker, and University of Michigan., *Ancient India in Its Wider World*.

## Historical Background

In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great's army defeated Darius III's Persian army at the Battle of Gaugamela. While Darius himself managed to escape, the loss effectively transferred control of the Achaemenid Empire to Alexander and thus had a profound impact on that part of the world.<sup>2</sup> The Achaemenid Empire, founded in ca. 550 B.C., had stretched from modern-day Greece to Pakistan, making it one of the largest empires in history. Having won control of the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great tracked down Darius and continued east towards India. After a troop mutiny, Alexander and his army made their way down the Indus River to the Indian Ocean, and then traveled back towards the Mediterranean. Alexander died in June of 323 B.C. in Babylon, but his invasions of the Achaemenid Empire and India mark the beginning of an era of unprecedented contact between Greek and Indian civilization.

The movements of Alexander the Great and his army were the first large scale, direct contact between the two regions. The scholars and scientists that Alexander brought with him produced a large corpus of works about Persia and India. Centuries later these works would still be depended upon by Greco-Roman scholars searching for information on India, and they thus had a profound impact on the Mediterranean perception of both India and Asia as a whole. As such, scholarship on the relationship between the Greek world and Ancient India tends to focus on Alexander and his compatriots. However contact between the Indian subcontinent and Mediterranean regions dates back centuries before Alexander.

Perhaps the clearest connection between Ancient Greece and India is their shared link to the speakers of Indo-European. These peoples were the linguistic forefathers of the Indo-European language family that includes Greek, Latin and Sanskrit along with English, German,

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<sup>2</sup> Ray and Potts, *Memory as History*.

Hindi, French, Gaelic and a plethora of other modern and ancient languages. The original ‘Indo-European’ language was likely never actually spoken, and there is no scholarly consensus on where the speakers of Indo-European may have originated.<sup>3</sup> During the second millennium B.C., they left their homeland(s) in a series of small-group migrations.<sup>4</sup> They settled throughout Eurasia, intermingling with local populations and thus beginning the creation of several languages that today make up the Indo-European language family. Among the many different places the speakers of Indo-European settled are Greece and India. In Greece, it is thought that they settled through conquest, and it was believed until recently that they entered India similarly by invading the Harappan civilization.<sup>5</sup>

The Harappan civilization in India flourished from ca. 2600 to ca. 1750 B.C.<sup>6</sup> A cosmopolitan society, there is a wealth of evidence for trade-based contact between the Harappan civilization and prominent West Asian cities such as Ur and Susa.<sup>7</sup> While the reasons behind the collapse of the Harappan civilization are still uncertain, archaeological evidence indicates a definite period of decline rather than a sudden end.<sup>8</sup>

After the disappearance of the Harappan Civilization, a culture known as the Cemetery H culture appears in the region.<sup>9</sup> The traits of this culture are distinct from their predecessors, however it is unclear whether this indicates new arrivals or simply new traits among the peoples already living in the region.<sup>10</sup> These new peoples were once linked to Aryan invaders (who are in turn linked to a group of Indo-Europeans coming into India through Iran) said to have brought

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<sup>3</sup> Orrieux, Schmitt Pantel, and Orrieux, *A History of Ancient Greece*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Thapar, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Thapar, p. 80. However, Chakrabarti argues for a chronological scope of 2700 – ca. 1300 B.C. due to the discovery two round seals with the Indus script found at Failaka (p. 199).

<sup>7</sup> Basham, *A Cultural History of India*, p. 18. Chakrabarti, *India*, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Chakrabarti, p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> Thapar, p. 86

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



about the fall of the Harappan Civilization, however there is little archaeological evidence for any such large-scale invasion.<sup>11</sup> Instead of this conquestary theory, it seems likely that Indo-Aryan peoples filtered into the region through small-scale migrations.<sup>12</sup>

Over the next several hundred years, Vedic culture started to take shape. Roughly, the Vedic period is defined as ca. 1500-500 B.C. The end of the Vedic period comes with the birth of Buddha, tentatively dated to the sixth century B.C. Some textual evidence exists for this period, however the dating for these sources remains uncertain and none of them can be cross-referenced to what little archaeological evidence survives from this period. The major textual evidence for the period comes in the form of the Vedas, a collection of hymns, ritual texts, and philosophical treatises that make up the main Hindu scriptures.<sup>13</sup> The four earliest Vedas consist of the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, and *Atharva Veda* (with the *Rig Veda* being the oldest and the *Atharva Veda* being the most recent).<sup>14</sup> The Vedas paint a picture of a society that was highly nomadic in nature, with their economic production revolving around animal husbandry.

Buddha's birth seems to correspond to an increasing urbanization of North India. Archaeologically, this is supported by the advent of Northern Black Polished ware (NBP), a distinctive type of pottery that comes into the archaeological record during this time period.<sup>15</sup> This period is generally called the Mahajanapada period, and ends with the start of the Mauryan period at the end of the fourth century B.C. The term 'Mahajanapada' (essentially meaning 'great kingdom') comes from two Sanskrit words: 'Maha,' meaning 'great,' and 'janapada,' meaning 'foothold of a tribe.' The Buddhist and Jaina scriptures that arise around this point indicate a

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<sup>11</sup> Thapar, p. 87

<sup>12</sup> For in-depth coverage of the debate around the Aryan migrations, see: Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*.

<sup>13</sup> Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Chakrabarti, *India*.

high degree of political consolidation into these Mahajanapadas. It seems likely that definite geographical and political territories emerged prior to the birth of Buddha. During Buddha's time period there were four great kingdoms in North India (preeminent among the other mahajanapadas): Kosala, Vatsa, Avanti and Magadha. Gandhara also seems to have been initially independent, but was absorbed into the Achaemenid Empire by Darius I (ca. 520-518 B.C.). While Vedic culture was more highly concentrated in the north, it did have an impact on the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent as well.

Greek history up until the sixth century B.C. is similarly obscure. The Bronze Age Minoan civilization lasted from about 2800 to 1450 B.C.<sup>16</sup> Around 2000 B.C. the Palace Civilization (i.e., palace-oriented social, political and economic organization) developed and started to flourish.<sup>17</sup> While centered on Crete, Minoan pottery has been found throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>18</sup> Whether this implies a real political presence extending beyond the island or merely diffusion through trade, the Minoans were certainly in contact with the Near Eastern and Egyptian civilizations.

The Mycenaean civilization flourished from ca. 1600-1100 B.C. Similarly to the Minoans, evidence of trade-oriented Mycenaean presence can be found throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>19</sup> After the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, however, writing disappears from the archaeological record for several centuries.<sup>20</sup> It has been suggested that the minimal material evidence from this time period can be explained by a turn to herding as a method of subsistence, and thus a disinclination to permanent structures. In the ninth and eighth

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<sup>16</sup> Orrieux, C. & Pantel, P.S., 1999, p. 12

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

centuries, evidence indicates the repopulation of the countryside. In addition, temples and alphabetic writing both appear ca. 800. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were set down in writing ca. 750-700 B.C., although they likely existed in oral form centuries earlier.

Throughout this time period, there is evidence for Greek migration from the Greek peninsula throughout the Mediterranean. This starts in the end of the eleventh century, with evidence for migrations from the mainland to the coasts of Asia minor.<sup>21</sup> From 775-675 B.C. most of the migrations seem concentrated towards Sicily and Southern Italy ('Magna Graecia'), but from 675-600 there is increasing evidence for migrations to the Black Sea and the South of Egypt, among other locations along the eastern Mediterranean coast.<sup>22</sup> Some of the causes behind these migrations included a need for cultivable land, as well as possible local causes (such as family rivalries etc.).<sup>23</sup>

Given the fractured political definitions of India and Greece during this time period and the nature of the existent sources, 'state-to-state' cultural influence is impossible to define with any certainty. Instead, this thesis focuses on contact and relationships between individuals identified as 'Greek' or 'Indian.' In some cases individuals explicitly describe themselves with a particular identity; however for most cases these distinctions are assumed by other agents. For the purposes of this thesis, those who are described by others as 'Indian' or 'Greek' are taken as such. Those who spent the early portions of their lives in a region within the Greek sphere of influence are described as 'Greek,' and those who are said to be from areas within the Indian region (as defined earlier) are likewise described as 'Indian.'

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<sup>21</sup> Orrieux, C. & Pantel, P.S. 1999, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45-46.

## Greek Textual Evidence

Prior to Alexander's expedition to India, we know of only five Greek sources that discussed India: Scylax of Carynda, Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus, Ctesias and Aristotle. Of these, only the accounts of Herodotus and Aristotle survive in full. In addition to these five, Aeschylus also mentions Indians in his work, *The Suppliants*. While we know little about the socio-political context of these sources and the details of their accounts, the fragments that do remain do provide a useful insight into the Greek conception of India, as well as the sources of information and points of contact from which their views were formed. From these narratives, India takes vague shape as a far-off land teeming with mammoth flora and fauna, awash with magical springs, inhabited by semi-human species, and scattered with exotic marvels. Just as the land itself inhabited the region between civilization and chaos in Greek meteorology, its features occupy the space between myth and reality.

Scylax of Carynda was an Ionian Greek in the service of Darius I of Persia, and the only Greek we know of who actually visited India prior to Alexander. Sometime in the late sixth century B.C., Darius asked him to scout out the region between Arabia and the Indus River.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Scylax's account of these travels survives only in fragments, and these raise some doubts about his actual path. Herodotus writes that Scylax and his companions sailed east towards the rising sun until they reached the ocean, and then traveled for thirty months until he reached Egypt.<sup>25</sup> This cannot be correct due to the south-westerly direction of the Indus, however some have posited that Scylax sailed eastwards down a tributary river before entering the Indus.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, Herodotus continues to write that Darius I conquered India after this

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<sup>24</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> *Histories* 4.44

<sup>26</sup> Milns, "Greek Writers on India Before Alexander", 354.

scouting trip. This pattern of events seems to be corroborated by inscriptions excavated at the Suez,<sup>27</sup> as well as by textual evidence among Indian sources. From the fragments remaining, Scylax's writings on India appear to have been dominated by tales of marvels.<sup>28</sup> While he seems to have been respected by later authors such as Strabo,<sup>29</sup> his accounts of India would have been rendered fairly obsolete and outdated by the later experiences of Alexander the Great and Megasthenes (a Greek ambassador sent by Seleucus I Nicator to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya in the late fourth century B.C.). The references that survive to Scylax are vague and sparse.<sup>30</sup>

Hecataeus of Miletus was an early Greek historian and geographer living from ca. 560-480 B.C. who wrote several books of which only a few fragments remain.<sup>31</sup> Of these fragments, only eight mention India, and these are largely just a catalogue of place names preserved by Stephanus of Byzantium.<sup>32</sup> Hecataeus was the first Greek that we know of to create a map of the world that had a terrestrial focus, and was thus the first to place India in the concept of a wider world.<sup>33</sup>

Herodotus was an ancient Greek historian who was born in Halicarnassus (which was then located on the fringes of the Persian Empire), around 484 B.C. He is famous for his work *The Histories*, which describes the Greco-Persian wars. Despite his colloquial fame, relatively little is known about his personal life.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence for Herodotus traveling as far as India, however he may have spent time in Scythia.<sup>35</sup> Herodotus' sources are a topic of fierce

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<sup>27</sup> Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Herodotus and Romm, *Histories*, p. 4.

debate among scholars; however it does seem that he had access to reliable Persian sources (particularly among those living in Asia Minor) in addition to his Greek sources.<sup>36</sup>

Herodotus defines India as the area surrounding the Indus Valley, and describes it as the easternmost portion of the oikoumene.<sup>37</sup> He mentions Indians briefly multiple times throughout his *Histories*, with most of the descriptions concentrated in Book 3. This book includes accounts of Indian gold (and how it was collected), some brief ethnographic descriptions of tribes living around the Indus, some geographical information, and a description of the military equipment used by Indians fighting for King Darius. It is important to remember that Herodotus was not writing a general geographical work or ethnography but rather a history of the Persian War. While he does digress into longer descriptions of various groups of people, he generally only does so about those who were involved in the war. The exceptions to this are significant in their deviation from his main subject. In the case of the gold-digging ants (and, indeed, much of the material regarding India in general), it seems that much of this information is included because of Herodotus's fascination with the material, rather than historical diligence.

There were Indians fighting among King Darius' forces, which is how the reader is introduced to them. The groups mentioned are hardly representative of the entire Indian region, even as narrowly as Herodotus defines it. He defines Indian space by the borders of Persian political control. Indeed, when describing Indians who live further south, he writes that "all these Indians live far away in the south ... and were never subject to King Darius."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Munson, "Who Are Herodotus' Persians?" For more on the topic, Baragwanath and Bakker, *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus*, and Fehling, Howie, and Fehling, *Herodotus and His "Sources."* Unless otherwise stated, I am using the 2014 translation of Herodotus' *Histories* by James Romm and Pamela Mensch.

<sup>37</sup> *Histories* 4.40.

<sup>38</sup> *Histories* 3.101.

The next surviving account of India comes from Ctesias of Cnidus, who was a Greek living in the late fifth century B.C. Ctesias spent a portion of his life serving as a physician for King Artaxerxes of Persia. It is uncertain precisely when and where he wrote his *Indica*, but it survives only in fragments and has been subject to intense criticism from both modern and ancient scholars.<sup>39</sup> This disdain seems to be largely due to the fantastical accounts that dominate the surviving fragments, such as those of men with ears large enough to sleep in and the Martichora — a man-eating beast that shoots darts from its tail.<sup>40</sup> Ctesias' works were clearly read and used as sources by later writers, even while he was criticized by them.<sup>41</sup> This trend has continued; however there has been a growing inclination among modern scholars to reevaluate the credibility of his work.<sup>42</sup>

The next source for information about India is Aristotle. Despite Aristotle's colloquial fame, relatively little is known about his life. He studied in Athens under Plato until ca. 348 B.C. Beginning in about 343 he tutored Alexander the Great in Macedon. Given that Aristotle was not writing specifically about India, his works mention India a fair amount compared to previous authors, particularly his works about animals. The obscurity of the details of Aristotle's life make it difficult to know exactly where his information was coming from. Some sources indicate that Alexander sent biological specimens back to Aristotle, and yet others write that, at some point towards the tail end of Alexander's life, the relationship between Alexander and Aristotle seems to have cooled. The two are not mutually exclusive, but given that Aristotle died fairly soon after returning from India it is hard to tell how much information Aristotle received before his

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<sup>39</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, *Ctesias*, pp. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.4.2, Aristotle, *HA* II.1, 501a 24-26.

<sup>42</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, *Ctesias*. Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, *Ctesias' "History of Persia."* Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*. Unless otherwise stated, I am using the 2011 translation of Ctesias' *Indica* by Andrew Nichols and following his identification of Ctesias' fragments.

relationship with Alexander came to an end. Furthermore, it is unclear if Aristotle was writing before or after Alexander and his troops invaded India. Thus, while we cannot exclude the possibility that much of his information about India was influenced by Alexander's experiences in the east it is also likely that Aristotle derived much of his knowledge from previous writings about India or from other fourth century sources that we do not know about. Aristotle mentions several distinctly Indian animals in his various works on animals, and also mentions pepper (an item only associated with India in the ancient period) in *Poetics*.<sup>43</sup>

## Indian Textual Evidence

The Indian sources on the subject are few and far between. None of the textual evidence from the time period at hand is explicitly and accurately historical or geographical in nature, but historical and geographical information can be extrapolated from texts such as the Vedas, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. However, these sources were likely originally composed in an oral form before being put down in writing,<sup>44</sup> so dating the events and information contained within these texts is particularly difficult. The Sanskrit word 'yavana,' which was used to describe the Greeks in the ancient period, stems from the Prakrit word 'yona,' which in turn comes from the Persian word for the Ionian Greeks, 'yauna'.<sup>45</sup> The word eventually would expand to mean any foreigner, however it first referred to Ionian Greeks the Indians first came into contact with.<sup>46</sup> While the term comes up in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,<sup>47</sup> it is

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<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a12-14.

<sup>44</sup> Embree, Hay, and De Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*.

<sup>45</sup> Ray, "The Yavana Presence in Ancient India," p. 312.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 312-13.



difficult to date this usage given the fluid nature of the texts. The first datable usage of the word in Indian writings comes in the fourth or third century B.C.<sup>48</sup>

Most of these texts focus on events based in India and the surrounding regions. While they cover historical topics and have historical value, they are not ‘histories,’ in the same sense that Herodotus’ *Histories* is. Furthermore, the pre-Alexandrian references to India indicate that India, as both a concept and as a place, was more important to Greece than the Greeks were to Indians. As will be discussed later, India played a significant part in the Greek conception of world geography, and represented the eastern edge of the inhabited world. It became a powerful representation of the far-off and exotic. Greece does not seem to have played a similarly important role in the Indian conception of their world, thus it is natural that Indian sources would not explicitly mention Greeks until Greek communities *did* become relevant to their lives.<sup>49</sup>

The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are both Sanskrit epics, and are among the longest literary works in world history. The *Mahabharata* is, for example, eight times longer than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.<sup>50</sup> Each epic contains not only the plot of the main story, but also a plethora of folktales and origination stories. Both are based on ancient Vedic oral traditions, the chronology of which is difficult to define, and stand as a record of cultural virtues and values.<sup>51</sup> The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are still an important part of Indian culture today, akin to *Journey to the West* in China, and are thought to represent ancient Indian history. The *Mahabharata*, for example, is thought of within India as ‘*itihas*,’ which translates literally to ‘so indeed it was.’ While it is tempting to think of these epics as ancient, it is important to recognize

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<sup>48</sup> Karttunen, “Yavana.”

<sup>49</sup> In the wake of Alexander’s conquests, his ‘empire’ was divided by his successors. One section eventually became the Seleucid Empire, which directly bordered Mauryan India. Around this time period the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms were formed, with a great deal of Indo-Greek cultural fusion and exchange taking place. At this point the Greeks would have become a much more significant part of (North) Indian culture and life.

<sup>50</sup> Slavitt and Jr, *Mahabharata*.

<sup>51</sup> Narayan and Kampar, *The Ramayana*.

that the narratives have lived and evolved through different cultural spaces through various historical periods, and are thus impossible to pin down to one particular place and time.<sup>52</sup>

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of a civil war between the Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas over the inheritance of their ancestral realm.<sup>53</sup> The two feud between the two sets of cousins eventually culminates in a series of battles at Kurukshetra (near Delhi) in which all of the Kauravas and nearly all of the Pandava's army die. The five Pandava brothers renounce their kingdom and climb through the Himalayas to heaven along with their wife, Draupadi. One by one they die until only Yudhishtira (the eldest) is left. Ultimately, after passing a test from Yama, the god of death, Yudhishtira is united with his brothers and Draupadi in heaven. In addition to the main plot of the story, the epic contains a plethora of other important Hindu myths. The epic was first transcribed by brahmans in the fifth century BC, but is based on a much older oral tradition.<sup>54</sup> Additions were made to the text until ca. AD 500, so it is difficult to date the material to one particular time period. Tradition holds that the *Mahabharata* was dictated to Vyasa, a powerful sage (or *Rishi*), by the god Ganesh.<sup>55</sup>

The *Ramayana* tells the tale of Rama, a prince from Ayodhya, and his wife Sita. Rama, both the perfect prince and the perfect man, is exiled as a result of his conspiring stepmother's influence on his father. Sita accompanies Rama into the forest and is eventually abducted by the evil Ravana, who takes her to his palace in Lanka (which is sometimes associated with Sri Lanka). Rama, with the help of the monkey god Hanuman, invades Lanka and kills Ravana. As Sita has potentially been defiled by Ravana, Rama insists that she go through a trial by fire. Sita is refused (saved) by the fire god Agni, and thus Rama again accepts her as his wife. They return

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<sup>52</sup> Bandlamudi, *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture*.

<sup>53</sup> Slavitt and Jr, *Mahabharata*.

<sup>54</sup> Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*.

to Ayodhya and Rama takes his rightful place as king (his father had died during his banishment). Later, suspicions again arise of Sita's purity and Rama banishes her to the forest where she stays with the sage Valmiki and bears twins. Some versions of the story hold that Rama accepted her back after his sons were born. According to tradition, Valmiki composes the *Ramayana* after hearing her tale. The textual form of the story that survives today is a compilation of material dating between 500 BC and AD 200.<sup>56</sup>

The *Jatakas* are another body of folktales that include information related to the Vedic period. The *Jatakas* are a collection of 547 myths and legends about the various previous lives of the Buddha.<sup>57</sup> The average date of the *Jatakas* is said to be about 400 BC, with the content that they cover centuries older.<sup>58</sup> Like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the dating of these is uncertain but the *Jataka*'s are a useful source for general information about possible trade routes, movement patterns and merchant organization during the Vedic period. Some of the stories mention ancient merchant guilds and trade partnerships, with one notable example describing a trade caravan of 500 wagons.<sup>59</sup>

Given the difficulties in dating the Indian sources, and the possibly mythical nature of their contents, I will mostly be using them to provide a framework within which to think of the cultures and societies throughout the period, rather than as evidence for specific points of contact. Using these to supplement the Greek writings about India, I consider the construction of the Greek narratives about India. I argue that contact between the two regions was consistent long before Alexander, even if the scale of the interactions was less than it was after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. During the period at hand, India developed an important role both in

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<sup>56</sup> Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*.

<sup>57</sup> Bowie, "The Historical Vicissitudes of the Vessantara Jataka in Mainland Southeast Asia."

<sup>58</sup> Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*.

<sup>59</sup> Chandra, p. 65.

Greek geography and also in the Greek construction of their cosmological identity. Furthermore, even those writings about India that contain fantastical stories we believe to be ‘untrue’ are important as historical sources both for their insight into the nuances of information transmission across the trans-Persian networks and also for the impact that they had on Greek, Roman and Western thought.

# Evidence for Contact

This thesis focuses on the Archaic and Classical periods, however delineations of history by time are never clean cut. As such, this chapter will begin with an overview of contact prior to the period at hand in order to contextualize the evidence and the probable patterns of movement between the two regions. Then, I will first look at the evidence for ‘known’ points of direct contact between Greek and Indian individuals (i.e., those points of contact that are explicitly substantiated by the surviving evidence) before discussing Persia’s role as a conduit for people and information between the two regions. I conclude by considering the role that Egypt may have played in similarly facilitating trade between India and the Mediterranean. I define ‘contact’ to include both interactions that occurred between Greek and Indian individuals, as well as interactions between Greek individuals and representations of Indian cultures (or vice versa). A representation could include a tale transmitted secondhand through a non-Indian trader, or even a physical good that originated in India and was viewed or handled by a Greek individual.

I argue that, while there are only a handful of documented direct interactions between Greek and Indian individuals, textual and material evidence indicate that Greek and Indian individuals were frequently moving through the same spaces in Persia and thus indirect contact between the two groups was inevitably occurring more often than we have evidence for. Most of these encounters would have been between merchants and other individuals who would not be likely to relate the experience in a form that would survive long enough to be accessible to us today. In addition to physical interactions, trade routes would have played an essential role in the transmission of both cultural and geographical knowledge, both through the grapevine of verbal interactions among traders as well as through the physical goods that were transported along

them. All of these forms of contact were heavily facilitated by Achaemenid court affairs and the trans-Persian trading networks.

## Pre-Archaic Contact

It is important to recognize that contact between the peoples of the Indian subcontinent and Mediterranean regions did not originate with the Greek and Vedic cultures that are the main focus of this study. Archaeological evidence indicates a high degree of contact between the regions as far back as the Harappan civilization. Seals from the Harappan civilization have been found as far away as Mesopotamia, and it has been suggested that Mediterranean individuals were actually living in some Harappan cities.<sup>60</sup> Contact between the two regions seems to have decreased in the period following the collapse of the Harappan civilization, however it likely did not disappear entirely. After the decline of the Harappan civilization, the rise of Vedic culture began with the migration of one group of Indo-European-speaking peoples into India. This migration is especially significant in the context of this study as both Greek and Indian languages share Indo-European roots.

While the exact circumstances of these migrations of the speakers of Indo-European from Central Asia to the Mediterranean and Indian regions are highly debated among scholars, the group that moved into Northern India seems to have taken steps to maintain their connections with Central Asian regions. Later Indian sources indicate that these peoples expanded the trade routes that they themselves used when they first traveled down into the Indus region.<sup>61</sup> The *Jatakas* mention the existence of a trade relationship with Babylonia,<sup>62</sup> and also include tales of merchant guilds. As mentioned above, one notable story includes a 500-wagon trade

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<sup>60</sup> Basham, *A Cultural History of India*, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Chandra, p. 42-43.

<sup>62</sup> Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World from the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome*, p. 4-5.

partnership.<sup>63</sup> While the chronology of these is unclear due to the nature of the compilation, the migration into India is dated between ca. 1800-1500 B.C. If the stories in the *Jatakas* are accurate and these peoples traveled down trade routes that they later expanded to facilitate trade, the trade routes must have been essentially continuously present in a usable fashion from the Harappan period onwards. While we have no direct evidence of contact during this time, goods from, and information about, the two regions probably traveled much further than their traders did.

Given the indirect nature of the contact, it is difficult to determine at what point India as a discrete entity entered the Greek consciousness. Prior to Scylax in the late sixth century B.C., there is no evidence for direct contact between the Greeks and Indians. However, as discussed above, archaeological and textual evidence indicate an environment that makes contact between the two peoples prior to Scylax likely. Of the surviving Greek works, those of Homer and Hesiod are the first to possibly reference India.

Homer and Hesiod both mention groups of people that would later be associated specifically with India, however the lack of corroborating evidence makes it impossible to determine whether Homer and Hesiod would have also connected these peoples with India (as opposed to some other, also-distant location outside of the Greek world). Homer does mention ‘Eastern Europeans,’<sup>64</sup> but it is unlikely that this represents exact knowledge of India. It is possible that Homer may have heard of India in a vague way through ‘the grapevine’ of trading connections; however it is more likely to have been either an extension of Greek geographical stereotypes about the outer edges of the earth or an incidence of the recurring Greek tendency to associate Libya (Africa) and Asia together rather than to have been based on any ethnographical

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<sup>63</sup> Chandra, p. 65.

<sup>64</sup> *Odyssey* I.22-4.

knowledge of Asian peoples, let alone Indians specifically.<sup>65</sup> Homer also mentions a group of Pygmies in the *Iliad* (Ctesias later describes a group of Pygmies in connection with India), but the context within which they are mentioned does not provide any indication as to where Homer believed them to be located.<sup>66</sup> The Pygmies are also associated with the southernmost regions of Libya in other Greek writings, so it is possible that Ctesias and Homer are talking about two completely different groups of people. Hesiod's fragments also include mentions of Pygmies, and he mentions Makrokephaloi and Cynocephali (two groups that would later be associated with India), but again none of these mentions are explicitly tied to a particular region so it is difficult to tell whether they are meant to be associated specifically with India or more generally with the outer edges of the oikoumene.<sup>67</sup>

## Textual Evidence of Contact

India is mentioned in the works of Scylax, Hecataeus, Aeschylus, Herodotus, Ctesias and Aristotle.<sup>68</sup> There are no explicit mentions of the Greeks in Indian sources prior to Alexander, so this section will focus on Greek evidence for contact between the two regions. Many Indian texts do discuss trade routes that would have been shared with the Greeks, and these sources will be discussed later in this chapter in the context of trade and Persia's role in the transference of information between the two regions.

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<sup>65</sup> Milns, "Greek Writers on India Before Alexander," p. 353.

<sup>66</sup> Hom. *Iliad* iii.5.

<sup>67</sup> *Oxyrhynchus Papyri 1358 fr. 2 Chase of the Harpies Fragment 40A*. The oikoumene directly translates as 'the inhabited world,' however the term carried various connotations which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>68</sup> Hippocrates does mention pepper, which could only have originated from India, however he does not mention India by name so it is possible that this is an example of a good outstripping the geographical information attached to it.



With Scylax comes the first explicit evidence of contact between Ancient Greece and India. According to Herodotus, Scylax was an Ionian sea-captain of the late sixth century B.C. sent by Darius to find where the Indus river ran into the sea.<sup>69</sup> Herodotus writes that Scylax and his companions embarked from the city of Caspatyrus in Pactyica and sailed downstream in an easterly direction to the sea.<sup>70</sup> They then turned west and reached the top of the Red Sea after a period of thirty months.<sup>71</sup> This voyage is dated to be around 519 B.C, and made the Achaemenid conquest of 'Hindush' possible.<sup>72</sup>

As the Indus runs in a south-westerly direction, it is impossible to actually sail east down the Indus as Herodotus says Scylax's expedition did. Due to this obvious contradiction and the paucity of evidence, many scholars doubted the veracity of the tale prior to discovery of Suez inscriptions that seem to confirm Scylax's journey and Darius' subsequent control over the region.<sup>73</sup> It has been suggested that Scylax and his companions may very well have started at a tributary of the Indus and initially sailed east *towards* the Indus before continuing downstream to the Indian Ocean.<sup>74</sup>

The exact details of the trip are vague, and the mentions of Scylax after Herodotus are scarce enough that even writers as early as Aristotle may have only had access to second-hand accounts of his report.<sup>75</sup> From the fragments that survive, Scylax's work seems to have covered the peoples who lived around the Indian land.<sup>76</sup> The fragments mention the Skiapods (shadow-feet), Otoliknoi (fan-ears), Monophthalmoi (single-eyed ones), and the Makrokephaloi (big-

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<sup>69</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 4.44.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Parker, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Milns, *Greek Writers*, p. 354.

<sup>75</sup> Parker, 2008, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7.629-30.

headed ones).<sup>77</sup> Scylax claimed that the marvels he wrote of were true, but crucially he does not claim to have seen them himself. It is possible that Scylax was instead reporting what he heard either from local peoples or from intermediaries and translators.<sup>78</sup> Many of his anthropomorphic descriptions match folklore from ancient Indian epics and myths,<sup>79</sup> reinforcing this possibility.

While the thought of Scylax believing these descriptions might seem foolish to a modern audience, stories of this nature may not have seemed out of place within the Greek geographical world view. In an article on the Greek writers who discussed India, R.D. Milns writes, “why should a Greek not believe what he may well have been told in good faith by natives of the country, who themselves probably accepted the truth of stories of wonders far off on the confines of their own land.”<sup>80</sup> As will be discussed later, the edges of the earth are often portrayed in Greek sources as populated by fantastical peoples and mythical creatures. For Greeks with this preconceived set of expectations, the tales coming from Scylax might have seemed natural.

Scylax is particularly notable as the first Greek individual to mention India, however it is impossible to derive any concrete information from the surviving fragments beyond the fact that Scylax was physically present in the Indus region and that some Indian folklore was communicated to him (not necessarily by Indian individuals).

The next mention of India in a Greek source comes with Hecataeus. Hecataeus’ main work was entitled, *Periodes Ges* ( ‘description of the world’), and India is mentioned in eight of the remaining fragments. Despite the title of the work, there is no evidence that he traveled much

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<sup>77</sup> Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7.629-40 and Philostratus *Life of Apollinus* 3.47.

<sup>78</sup> It is worth reiterating that the topic of translation is not mentioned at any point in the work. It is reasonable to assume that they must have had some way of communicating with at least some of the people’s they encountered, but it is impossible to know what form this may have taken.

<sup>79</sup> Milns, p. 354. The details of the connections between these (and other) fantastical Indian groups and Indian folklore and mythology will be discussed in-depth in the third chapter.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

further east than Ionia,<sup>81</sup> so his information would have been second-hand at best. While the fragments from Hecataeus seem to be distinct from those of Scylax at face value, some similarities between the two has been used to suggest that his work may have been based primarily on Scylax's work and merely supplemented with Persian accounts.<sup>82</sup> For example, Hecataeus mentions the plant *kynara*, which also comes up in the remaining fragments of Scylax,<sup>83</sup> and *Kaspapyrus*, the city from which Scylax set out down the Indus from.<sup>84</sup>

If the fragments are representative of the works, Scylax and Hecataeus seem to have had very different tones and intents. The fragments of Hecataeus that survive on India are purely factual in nature, naming only peoples and cities, with none of the marvels that populate the writings of Scylax and the later writings of Ctesias. While it has been suggested that this could represent a growing rationalism in historical writing,<sup>85</sup> Hecataeus does later mention Sciapodes ('Shadow-foots' — people with feet large enough to use as sunshades) in connection with the Aethiopians so it is equally possible that the surviving fragments are not representative of his work as a whole.<sup>86</sup> Based on the fragments that survive, he seems to have been the first to call the river and region 'Indus' and 'India,' respectively.<sup>87</sup> Hecataeus' work was incredibly important for the development of the Greek conception of the world, and thus was similarly significant in the development of the construction of *India's* place in the physical structure of the world.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Milns, p. 355.

<sup>82</sup> Milns, p. 355.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World from the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome*, p. 16, 20-21.

<sup>85</sup> Parker, 2008, p. 19.

<sup>86</sup> Milns, p. 356. Hecataeus F.298: Σκιάποδες, ἔθνος Αἰθιοπικόν, ὡς ἔκ' ἐν περιγῇ σει Αἰγύπτου

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Milns, p. 355.

The next Greek mention of India comes in Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*: "I hear, too, that there are nomad women in India, near neighbours to the Ethiopians, who saddle their way across country on camels that run like horses."<sup>89</sup> The dating of *Suppliants* is debated, but it is generally placed between 490-460 B.C.<sup>90</sup> The description is vague and does not necessitate any developed conception about India or Asiatic geography. It is however, highly significant for the explicit mention of India in a non-geographically oriented work. If the play was indeed produced towards the later end of the accepted range, it is possible that Aeschylus may have heard about Indians from soldiers that fought the army of Xerxes.<sup>91</sup>

If there were Indian soldiers among the survivors of the battle of Plataea, it is also possible that Aeschylus might have actually seen Indians that had been enslaved.<sup>92</sup> Herodotus notes that from the original Persian force (which included Indians) there were only 3,000 survivors.<sup>93</sup> However, while he writes that concubines and women associated with the Persian army were distributed to various Greeks as part of the spoils from the battle, he does not mention any soldiers being taken as slaves.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to this description, Herodotus mentions Indians briefly multiple times throughout his *Histories*, with most of the descriptions concentrated in Book 3. When referring to India, Herodotus is referring generally to the area immediately surrounding the Indus valley. He defines India as the easternmost region of the oikoumene.<sup>95</sup> Overall, his descriptions of India are dominated by accounts of Indian gold (and how it was collected),<sup>96</sup> a couple ethnographic

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<sup>89</sup> Henderson, "AESCHYLUS, *Suppliants*," p. 322-323(Lines 284-286). Greek: Ἰνδὰς τ' ἀκούω νομάδας ἵπποβάμοσιν εἶναι καμήλοις ἀστραβιζούσας χθόνα παρ' Αἰθίοψιν ἀστυγειτονουμένας

<sup>90</sup> Milns, p. 356.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> Herodotus 9.70.5.

<sup>94</sup> Herodotus 9.81.1-2.

<sup>95</sup> Herodotus 4.40.

<sup>96</sup> Herodotus 3.94, 98, 102-106.

descriptions of tribes living around the Indus,<sup>97</sup> and some description of the natural features and the military equipment of the Indians fighting for King Darius.<sup>98</sup> As mentioned previously, Herodotus was not writing a general geographical work or ethnography but rather a history of the Persian war. Herodotus seems to have had some knowledge of Indians beyond Persian control, however coverage of them is brief. As will be discussed further in the second and third chapters of this thesis, these descriptions about India are so intertwined with Herodotus' broader arguments about the most distant lands that it is difficult to tell how much of his narrative about India is sculpted in order to play into these themes and how much is a representative recapitulation of the information he had about the region.

Ultimately, of the surviving works, Herodotus' seems to represent a significant increase in Greek knowledge about India, even if some of the included information was exaggerated. Herodotus describes the land of India itself as one of great plenty, suggesting that perhaps the extremities of the oikoumene were blessed with greater production than other regions.<sup>99</sup> He describes the Indian animals as greater than those anywhere else (except for their horses, which were reportedly surpassed by a Median breed), their great production of gold and their tree-growing-wool (cotton) that was finer and more beautiful than sheep's wool.<sup>100</sup>

However, while the pre-Ctesian surviving textual evidence indicates an increase in knowledge as time progresses, this does not necessarily reflect an increase in contact and access to information about India. As mentioned above, both Scylax and Hecataeus mention the *kynara* plant, and Milns uses this to argue that Hecataeus used Scylax when writing his *Periodes Ges*.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Herodotus, 3.38, 98-102.

<sup>98</sup> Herodotus, 7.65, 70, 86, 187.

<sup>99</sup> Herodotus, 3.106.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Milns, p. 356.

Herodotus himself mentions Scylax, but Milns argues that Herodotus' information might have been based purely on Hecataeus, and that he may have never actually read Scylax at first hand.<sup>102</sup> Herodotus himself did supplement his account with accounts from oral sources;<sup>103</sup> however it is possible that, if Hecataeus' information was sourced entirely from Scylax, these sources represent the only growth in available information between Scylax and Herodotus.

This changes with the writings of Ctesias, who almost certainly had contact with Indian individuals while he was serving in the Persian court. He explicitly mentions seeing a group of Indian traders, and also describes interacting with goods and animals of Indian origin (such as a gem called the '*pantarba*' and parrots).<sup>104</sup> From the fragments of Ctesias, it seems that his evidence can be divided into two categories; that which he claims to have seen firsthand, and that which he does not. Of the former category most of what he writes is remarkably accurate, even by contemporary standards. The latter category is a muddled mix of truth, myth, hyperbole and fabrication. The reliability of Ctesias will be discussed in-depth in the final chapter of this thesis; however most of what remains of his *Indica* seems to have at least been based in what he would have heard from Persians, and from Bactrian and Indian traders. Given the ensuing complexity of his work, it becomes particularly important to differentiate between the body of information about India that was available to the Greeks, and the factual accuracy of this information. Information about India that was not technically correct in the scientific sense did continue to have an impact on European perceptions of India, as well as Western folklore. Two significant examples of this that will be discussed later are the Unicorn and Manticore, both of which have their roots in Ctesias' *Indica*.

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<sup>102</sup> Milns, p. 356.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Ctesias F45.6-7. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

Although his works were criticized heavily by other ancient authors, he had a significant impact on the way that India was conceived of for the next several centuries.<sup>105</sup> Ctesias continued to be used and cited for centuries after Alexander. Thus, his writings represent a dramatic increase in the body of information available to the Greeks about India and were important in the development of the Western conception of India, even if the information within his *Indica* was not strictly accurate.

The writings of Aristotle represent a possible growth of the amount of available information about India, however it is difficult to tell whether this growth is due to the reports of Alexander et al., or due to new sources of information. Aristotle differs from Ctesias in two ways. First, Aristotle explicitly contradicts Ctesias on the topic of Indian elephants.<sup>106</sup> It's possible either that this represents access to parts of Ctesias that do not survive today, or that his information comes from the reports of those associated with Alexander, or (less likely) that he drew from an entirely separate source. In addition, the two authors use slightly different transliterations for the parrot ( 'Psittake' or 'Sittakos' in Aristotle, versus 'Bittakos' in Ctesias).<sup>107</sup> This could be a transcription mistake or choice, or Aristotle may have heard of the parrot from a different source (either one associated Alexander or an entirely separate source).

## Persia

The advent of the Achaemenid Empire with the rule of Cyrus had a massive impact on contact between Greece and India, particularly after his conquest of Lydia in 547. Over the next

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<sup>105</sup> In addition to the fact that he continues to be cited by authors such as Strabo even after Alexander, his writings are the Western root of the unicorn and mantichore. Furthermore, along with Herodotus, his writings play into the Medieval perception of the East as a land of riches and luxury. This will be discussed further in a later chapter.

<sup>106</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 97, Aristotle *de gen. an.* 2.2 p. 736a2.

<sup>107</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 97.

several centuries, Persia acted as an important conduit for peoples and information from India to the Mediterranean. While few individuals probably traversed the entire distance between India and Greece,<sup>108</sup> the sources from the period indicate that both Greeks and Indians were present relatively often in Persian courts and along trans-Persian trading routes.<sup>109</sup>

As noted above, Gandhara became a part of the Achaemenid Empire soon after 519 B.C. While Persian control of parts of India may have been somewhat short-lived, the Indus region had close ties to the empire throughout its existence. The routes between India and various parts of Central Asia and the Middle East are well documented in both Indian sources as well as in Persian ones.<sup>110</sup> Perhaps the most well-known connection between the two is evidenced by Herodotus' previously discussed description of the Indian soldiers fighting for Xerxes in the battle of Plataea.<sup>111</sup> According to the surviving evidence, these soldiers were the only Indian individuals to travel to the Mediterranean in this time period.

The evidence for Greek individuals in Persia is more plentiful and more concrete. While the degree to which Greek individuals were assimilated into court hierarchy is debatable, Greeks were a common feature at the Persian court.<sup>112</sup> Greek individuals within the court served in roles such as interpreter (Melon at the court of Darius III), negotiator (Phalinos at the court of Artaxerxes II), concubine (Aspasia of Phocaea, also at the court of Artaxerxes II), and physicians (Democedes of Croton at the court of Darius I, Apollonides of Cnidus at the court of Artaxerxes

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<sup>108</sup> Scylax remains the only known individual who physically traveled from Greece to India before Alexander. With the (notable) exception of the Indians fighting in the Persian army of Xerxes, there is no indication that any Indian individuals traveled to Greece before Alexander either.

<sup>109</sup> Srivastava, *Trade and Commerce in Ancient India, from the Earliest Times to c. A.D. 300*. Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*. Chapekar, *Ancient India and Iran*.

<sup>110</sup> Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*. Srivastava, *Trade and Commerce in Ancient India, from the Earliest Times to c. A.D. 300*.

<sup>111</sup> Milns, p. 356.

<sup>112</sup> Brosius, "Greeks and the Persian Court," p. 69.



I, and, of course, Ctesias of Cnidus at the court of Artaxerxes II).<sup>113</sup> In addition to those working in court positions, Greeks worked as builders, craftsmen, military and naval commanders, engineers, artists, mercenaries, and even, in one case, as an oracle reader (Onomacritos at the court of Xerxes).<sup>114</sup> These individuals would have spent years living in Persia, regardless of the degree to which they were assimilated into the court structure. In addition to these more permanently established individuals, there were likely also Greek ambassadors and dignitaries who cycled in and out of the Persian capitals.<sup>115</sup>

The writings of Ctesias indicate that Indians were definitely present in the Persian court as traders at the very least.<sup>116</sup> In the surviving fragments of his *Indica*, Ctesias claims to have seen a group of Indians in the Persian court, as well as an Indian Mahout with an elephant. He also writes of seeing, and interacting with, an Indian parrot and various material goods that originated from India, but these are not necessarily associated with the presence of Indian individuals. Ctesias' eyewitness accounts are further supported by Indian sources mentioning Indian merchants in Babylon.<sup>117</sup> It is possible that Indian individuals also served as officials in the Persian court, or as artisans, laborers and soldiers like the Greeks discussed above, however we do not have evidence for this beyond the Indian soldiers fighting for Xerxes. From the evidence that does survive, the Indian presence in the Persian court itself seems to have been transitory and largely consisting of traders selling goods or ambassadors bringing tribute.

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<sup>113</sup> Brosius, p. 70-72.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>116</sup> Ctesias F45.19. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>117</sup> Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World from the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome*, p. 7.

## Egypt

Given the major role that Persia evidently played as a conduit between the two regions and the peoples that populated them, the role of Egypt in the transmission of information through the Indian Ocean is an important question. The Indians certainly had the naval ability to travel across the Indian Ocean — there are several mentions both in the *Jataka*’s as well as in the Rig Veda of large ships and long voyages at sea.<sup>118</sup> It seems that Indian traders traveled as far as Bab-el Mandeb at the southern entrance of the Red Sea; however Arab and Egyptian traders would have dominated the transport of goods further north through Egypt.<sup>119</sup> While there were certainly major Greek colonies in places such as Naukratis, the evidence from the region does not indicate the same type of broad involvement in local affairs that the evidence from Persia does. While there is evidence for cultural exchange and connections between the Greeks living in Egypt and the local Egyptians, the extent of these interactions would have been limited by the strictures of the economies within which they operated. For example, the Pharaoh Amasis explicitly restricted Greek economic activities and settlement to Naukratis.<sup>120</sup> Sappho’s brother Charaxus was said to have visited Egypt, but he is famed for his relationship with Doricha, a courtesan from Naukratis, rather than any type of connection with Egyptian individuals.<sup>121</sup> However, there are a few indications that contact and fusion between the Egyptians and Greeks went deeper than this type of policy would imply.

The tomb of Siamun in the Siwa Oasis (dated between 664-343 B.C.) includes a painting of a man with a Greek hairstyle but wearing Egyptian dress. His wife seems to be Egyptian,

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<sup>118</sup> Rawlinson, p. 4-7.

<sup>119</sup> Chandra, p. 61.

<sup>120</sup> Moyer, p. 56.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

while their son is depicted wearing a Greek chlamys.<sup>122</sup> The Siwa Oasis is outside of the major Egyptian-Greek settlements, but was famed as a cult center before Alexander.<sup>123</sup> There is evidence for Greek presence further south; however, with the famous Psammetichus graffiti at Abu Simbel. Written originally in Greek in the sixth century B.C., the graffiti says:

"When King Psammetichus (i.e., Psamtik II) came to Elephantine, this was written by those who sailed with Psammetichus the son of Theocles, and they came beyond Kerkis as far as the river permits. Those who spoke foreign tongues were led by Potasimto, the Egyptians by Amasis."<sup>124</sup>

This graffiti provides clear evidence for Greek presence in at least one instance, but also temptingly implies that Greek mercenaries (and perhaps Greek individuals in the service of Egyptian Pharaohs) may have at least traveled (if not spent significant time) throughout Egypt rather than just in the upper regions. It would make logical sense for Egypt to have played a similar role to Persia, and the possibility that Greeks and Indians met in Egypt should not be discounted, but there is no evidence to support any large-scale facilitation of contact. What is more probable is that the Egyptian traders from Bab-el Mandeb or other Arabian ports may have passed second-hand information about India to the Greeks established in India. Cultural information might have traveled to the Greeks in this way, and Indian goods probably did.

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<sup>122</sup> Moyer, p. 55.

<sup>123</sup> For more on the Siwa Oasis, see: Goldschmidt, "Siwa Oasis."

<sup>124</sup> Moyer, p. 55. Moyer mentions that Greek and Carian individuals also scratched their names on the monument.

# India in the Greek Mind

The written sources about India that survive are particularly significant not just for their content but also for what their very existence implies about the importance of their subject. Given the distance between India and Greece, and the now-established fact that much of the contact, both direct and secondary between Greeks and Indians was occurring not in the Mediterranean region but in the also-distant lands of Persia, it is remarkable that as many writings about India have been preserved from this time period. Some of this may, of course, be due to chance, but a close reading of the surviving fragments indicate that India was particularly significant to the Greeks and their development of geographical and cartographic knowledge. Even as the definition of India itself evolved, it appears to have played an important role in the Greek conception of oikoumene. India represented the eastern boundary of the inhabited world for the Greeks, and thus was crucial to their understanding of both the scale of the world as a whole as well as their own place within the oikoumene.

## Geography Pre-Herodotus

While Herodotus is the first extant Greek author to write about the entirety of the known world,<sup>125</sup> geographical information is contained within texts as early as Homer. Although Homer probably never traveled beyond the eastern Aegean, his comprehension of the earth included the Greek heartland, Anatolia, the Levant, Egypt and some of Africa to its west, the upper Nile, Sicily, and southern Italy, with some idea of an encircling ocean and perhaps its tides.<sup>126</sup> As

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<sup>125</sup> Roller, *Ancient Geography*, p. 65.

<sup>126</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 22.

such, it is demonstrative of Greek knowledge of the eighth century B.C.<sup>127</sup> The idea of a circular oikoumene — like a shield — with Ocean encircling it would become standard amongst Greek geographers, with the notable exception of Herodotus.<sup>128</sup> Over the next several centuries, Greek knowledge gradually extended out towards in search of the borders between the oikoumene and Ocean. However, the regions east of Greece remained largely obscure.

In 546 B.C. Cyrus the Great took control of Lydia. The newfound pertinence of Persia to the Greeks resulted in an increased awareness of the eastern regions of the oikoumene.<sup>129</sup> Scylax's report, written soon after Lydia became a satrapy of the Persian Empire, is the first time India comes onto the Greek stage. However, as his report is said to have been written specifically for Darius, it is unclear how accessible the information contained within it would have been to Greek geographers of the time.<sup>130</sup> It remains unclear exactly what position Scylax held within the expedition sent by Darius — it is possible that his report was, in fact, aimed at a larger Greek audience. This would perhaps explain the fantastical element it seems to have included. Regardless of the intended audience of the report, the fragments of Scylax's report include very little concrete geographical information, bringing into question how geographically useful the report actually was.

While Hecataeus represents Asia poorly he was aware of India, indicating that the report of Scylax may have penetrated at least as far as Miletus by the time of his *Periodes Ges*.<sup>131</sup> His account of India is limited to the names of peoples and cities, some of which also appear in the fragments of Scylax's report. How India fit into Hecataeus' conception of continents within the

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<sup>127</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 22.

<sup>128</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, p. 33-34. Instead, Herodotus placed 'empty' lands at the edges of the oikoumene.

<sup>129</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 46.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

oikoumene is unclear — he does not seem to have any conception of Libya (Africa) as a third continent, and the extant fragments do not provide enough material to recreate a cohesive theory of continents.<sup>132</sup> How much the works of Scylax and Hecataeus affected the ‘Greek’ worldview is difficult to determine. As discussed previously, it is unclear whether their writings were accessible to the general populace.

The fact that India is mentioned in Aeschylus implies that the idea of its existence had reached Greece proper by at least the mid-fifth century B.C. and was colloquial enough for ‘India’ to be mentioned in a play with no extenuating explanation.<sup>133</sup> However, as mentioned previously, this information is equally likely to have come from Indian involvement in the Persian Wars as it is to have been sourced from Scylax or Hecataeus. Aeschylus seems to have no factual knowledge about India beyond its existence. Instead, he writes of roving Indian maids who camp near Aethiopia. The reference to Aethiopia could either refer to Aethiopians in Africa (signifying a warped conception of the spatial relationship between the two continents), however there are previous mentions of ‘Asian Aethiopians’ located somewhat vaguely to the east of the Persian Empire.<sup>134</sup>

The context within which India is named is particularly telling of the Greek conception of India during this time period. The mention comes in the midst of a speech by King Argos that begins with the lines: “What you say, strangers, is unbelievable for me to hear,/ that this group of yours is of Argive descent.”<sup>135</sup> India is used here as a marker of otherness, with their distinctions

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<sup>132</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 51. By the time Herodotus was writing, the existence of the third continent of Libya (in addition to the aforementioned Europe and Asia) was taken for granted by Greek geographers. For more on the construction on continents, see: Dueck and Brodersen, *Geography in Classical Antiquity*. Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*.

<sup>133</sup> Herodotus, too, provides no extenuating description of who the Indians are in his first mention of them (*Histories* 3.38).

<sup>134</sup> Herodotus 3.94.

<sup>135</sup> Aeschylus *Suppliants* 277-78. Greek: ἄπιστα μυθεῖσθ’, ὃ ξέναι, κλυεῖν ἐμοί, ὅπως τόδ’ ὑμῖν ἐστὶν Ἀργεῖον γένος.

from the ‘known’ society superseding any quality that might be associated with the India in particular. This idea of India, and Asia more broadly, as a metric through which to define Greekness seems to have been a somewhat common phenomenon in Greek cartography as well. Herodotus ridicules mapmakers for depicting the oikoumene as symmetrically round with Asia and Europe the same size,<sup>136</sup> thus implying the existence of an Archaic conceptualization of Asia as a landmass in physical opposition to Europe with one balancing the other as a sort of continental scale system. The idea of two symmetrical landmasses also suggests the a degree of mutual definition by opposition — the size of one must necessarily define the size of the other, giving an increased urgency to determining the physical extent of distant regions. While this concept seems to have been rendered obsolete with the conception of Libya as the third continent, the use of distant places (particularly boundary regions such as India) to define Greek identity as well as the physical scope of the oikoumene continued through the next several centuries.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, Herodotus portrays Asia and Africa as twin landmasses counterbalanced in opposition to the normative Europe.<sup>138</sup>

## Geography of Boundaries in Herodotus

*Histories* is significant geographically not just because it is the first extant work to cover the entirety of the known world,<sup>139</sup> or for Herodotus’ own cartographical contributions, but also because it serves as a repository of major geographical sources that may not have survived otherwise. Herodotus claims to report every rumor he heard, even if he knew it to be false.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Herodotus 4.36.2

<sup>137</sup> This idea will be discussed further both later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 3.

<sup>138</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, p. 82.

<sup>139</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 65.

<sup>140</sup> Herodotus 2.33, 4.49.

While it is obviously impossible to ascertain the truth of this statement, he *does* include many sources that are inconsistent with his own conception of the workings of the world. In his *Histories* he extended, commented upon, and developed the topographical and geographical knowledge of the previous centuries.<sup>141</sup> This is particularly important because it means that *Histories* is a representation of the state of geographical knowledge at the time as well as a mechanism through which several important sources have survived. For example, Herodotus dismisses the story of Hanno's circumnavigation of Africa based on the very fact that proves the voyage did indeed take place: the position of the sun.<sup>142</sup> His placement of India within his broader conception of the work is thus particularly valuable both in its own right and for its influence on later Greeks, but also serves as a reflection of how India may have been understood by Herodotus' contemporaries.

Herodotus, like many of his contemporaries, had a particular fascination with the boundary lands on the edge of the oikoumene, and with what lay beyond these liminal regions. As the eastern boundary of the known world,<sup>143</sup> India was thus a clear source of interest for him. It is difficult to ascertain to what degree Herodotus' information was based on the previous works of Scylax and Hecataeus versus new sources that Herodotus encountered himself, however his account of India is certainly more detailed than Scylax and Hecataeus' seem to have been. Intriguingly, despite the prevailing theory of the oikoumene being bordered directly by Ocean, Herodotus generally places 'empty,' or 'deserted' lands — 'eremoi' — as boundaries between Ocean and the inhabited world.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 64-65.

<sup>142</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 66.

<sup>143</sup> Herodotus 3.106.

<sup>144</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 35.



To the south (below Libya) he places a desert, and he similarly writes that the region east of India was sand.<sup>145</sup> He does write of excursions into the portion of this desert immediately bordering the Indians,<sup>146</sup> however elsewhere says that “as far as India, Asia is an inhabited land; but thereafter, all to the east is desolate (‘ereme’), nor can anyone say what kind of land is there.”<sup>147</sup> It is clear from his writing that, while there is some certainty of the edges of the rest of the world this surety does not exist where India is concerned. Unlimited spaces inspire a certain cognitive discomfort, and the Greek geographers generally placed an emphasis on defining these spaces to the best of their abilities.<sup>148</sup> Given the Greek belief in the Phoenician circumnavigation of Libya, the fact that India was the only remaining direction in which a terminal boundary had not yet been attained,<sup>149</sup> and Herodotus’ tendency to specifically point out the various different features that construct the boundaries of the oikoumene,<sup>150</sup> this lack of knowledge would have been particularly unsettling.

The feeling of mystery associated with the physical scope of India was not particular to Herodotus himself — throughout Greek history forays into India are given a uniquely mystical cachet, as though the leaders of these expeditions are not just exploring the larger-than-life edges of the earth but also pushing forward into the unknown and expanding the boundaries of human knowledge.<sup>151</sup> This sentiment can be seen particularly in the descriptions of the campaigns of Semiramis and Alexander the Great. Alexander’s march to the Hyphasis is described not only as a heroic military venture, but also as a “daring assault on the terrors of distant space.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Herodotus 3.98.2.

<sup>146</sup> Herodotus 3.102-105.

<sup>147</sup> Herodotus 4.40

<sup>148</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>149</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 83.

<sup>150</sup> Herodotus 4.40.

<sup>151</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 83.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

The idea of India as the eastern boundary of the world would become crucial not just for the purpose of the definition of the directional limits of the oikoumene, but also for measuring the scale of the oikoumene as a whole. Because India was defined as the eastern edge of the world, changes in the described boundaries of India simultaneously represented the changing scope of the oikoumene. This definition did evolve through later centuries, however the idea of India in the east and the Pillars of Hercules in the west became the standard limits for geographers attempting to calculate the size of the earth. Plato uses these markers to define the inhabited portion of the world,<sup>153</sup> and Aristotle, when discussing the measurements of the world, uses India and the Pillars of Heracles to define the distance from east to west.<sup>154</sup>

Even as the understanding of the earth itself changed, this definition seems to have remained constant. The Pythagoreans suggested that the world was a sphere, and while this was not fully accepted even as late as the Hellenistic period, it did provide a starting point for considering the broader conception of the world beyond the oikoumene.<sup>155</sup> Still, even within this broader scope, India was considered important as the eastern boundary of the inhabited world. A couple of centuries after Pythagoras, Eudoxus follows this convention and may even have been the first to propose that one could reach India by sailing west from the pillars of Heracles.<sup>156</sup>

However, despite these major developments in the understanding of the scope of the world, the precise definitions of the eastern limits of India remained unclear even as late as Strabo in the late first century B.C.<sup>157</sup> It seems apparent from the underlying tension in these writings surrounding the explicit definitions of these liminal regions that delineation was

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<sup>153</sup> Roller, 2015, 74. Also, Plato *Phaidon* 58 (109-10); *Timaios* 63a. He does mention peoples in places beyond these known limits — the people existing in these boundaries will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>154</sup> Aristotle, *Meteorology* II.5.

<sup>155</sup> Roller, 2015, p. 71.

<sup>156</sup> Roller 2015, p. 75.

<sup>157</sup> Strabo *Geography* XV.I.12

important not just for the purpose of advancing scientific knowledge but also more urgently as a way to define the positioning of Greece within the oikoumene. As will be further discussed later, the positioning of India as the least-known, most distant, boundary of the world gave it a certain weight as a counterbalance through which to define the Greek identity, both spatially and otherwise. These definitions of the limits of nature and humanity were used to provide a framework within which to define the Greek society, culture and civilization.

## Life and Climate in Herodotus

Just as the understanding of India as the physical eastern limit of the world held important implications for Greek cartographers and their understanding of the spatial relativity of the oikoumene, the relationships discussed by Herodotus (and addressed in the works of many other ancient geographers) between geography and the various different life forms living in these boundary lands had important implications again for the Greek understanding of their own humanity, as well as broader definitions of nature and anthropology. Through the discussion of the biological excess the Greeks found to exist in boundary lands such as India is developed a theory of climate determinism that inextricably linked the Greek understanding of climates and their own identity.

The India Herodotus writes of, like that of Scylax and Hecataeus, is the region surrounding the Indus river. He seems to view the Indians as a vague assortment of different peoples that were not necessarily united through cultural ties, let alone political ones, and it is possible that the term ‘Indian’ as he uses it simply refers to the physical region around the Indus river, rather than any type of cohesive national or cultural identity in the way that the term ‘Greek’ might have. Herodotus focuses his descriptions on those Indians under Persian political

control, and organizes the space in relation to the boundaries of the Achaemenid empire.<sup>158</sup> This is likely due to a combination of the purpose of his work as Persian-centered, and the nature of the sources he was using. India is described as the most populated nation in the world.<sup>159</sup>

The first description of Indians comes early in Book 3 when Herodotus tells the following story: King Darius asked members of the Callatae tribe of Indians (among whom it was reportedly customary to eat one's parents) how much he would have to pay them to cremate their parents, and then asked a group of Greeks how much he would have to pay them to eat their parents. Both groups reacted with absolute horror, implying that no amount of money could induce them to commit such an atrocity.<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, Herodotus uses this account of cannibalism not to differentiate the Indians from the Greek world, but rather as a unifying factor between two very different groups of humans — “custom is king of all.”<sup>161</sup> This is particularly significant both within the context of Herodotus' later descriptions of the Indians as well as in comparison to the accounts of Indian peoples found in other Greek works.<sup>162</sup>

The attitude of the Callatae regarding death, while far from the mainstream Greek attitude, is a curiously common feature amongst the non-Persian Indians described by Herodotus. A group called the Padei (also eaters of raw flesh) kill their elderly and sick and then consume their bodies,<sup>163</sup> while another group (that, in contrast to the Padei, do not kill or eat any organism) go into desert when sick and let themselves expire.<sup>164</sup> In light of the previous comparison between the Callatae and Greeks and the factual manner with which these peoples

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<sup>158</sup> Herodotus 3.94, 101.

<sup>159</sup> Herodotus 3.94

<sup>160</sup> Herodotus 3.38

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> The anatomically bizarre descriptions of Indian peoples will be discussed in the next chapter. The works of Scylax, Hecataeus and Ctesias all feature peoples who are anatomically distinct from the ‘natural’ human form.

<sup>163</sup> Herodotus 3.99.

<sup>164</sup> Herodotus 3.100.

are described, it seems a reasonable extension of Herodotus' previous commentary to assume that these peoples were not thought of by Herodotus as less than human or intellectually distinct from the Greeks.

Despite the implied humanistic parallels, those groups of people outside of Persian control (and thus, necessarily, those truly living on the boundary between the 'oikoumene' and the 'eremoi') are described as more raw and organically 'natural' than those who are closer to the civilized Persian world. While Herodotus passes no explicitly negative judgement on these peoples, they are described as eating raw flesh, fish or grains, wearing/using simple and natural materials, and having intercourse like cattle.<sup>165</sup> In contrast, those Indians who live close to the Bactrians are described as 'warlike,' and are noted to be the ones who procure gold through a complicated procedure involving camels and gold-digging ants.<sup>166</sup> These descriptions create an implicit continuum of civilization as one progresses from the complex and ordered social structure of the Achaemenid Empire to the edges of the oikoumene and to the eremoi beyond.<sup>167</sup>

Throughout Herodotus' main digression about Indian peoples, they are compared or positioned next to the Ethiopians. Both groups of people are described as black skinned and black semened,<sup>168</sup> and the Asian Ethiopians are located in the same physical region as the Indians are. The Indians who are described as being similar to the Ethiopians are also described as the most animalistic of all the Indians Herodotus discusses, in addition to the oddness of their

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<sup>165</sup> Herodotus 3.98-101.

<sup>166</sup> These ants and the concept of Indian gold will be discussed further both later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 3.

<sup>167</sup> It is important to note that the description of a people as eaters of raw flesh is not necessarily unique to the borders of the oikoumene — for example, he locates a group of 'man-eaters' as neighbors to the Scythians (*Histories* 4.102.2). It is difficult to tell in such instances if the name holds the literal connotation or would merely have been viewed as the name of the people it describes. With regards to the Indians specifically, these rustic descriptions might partially stem from the lack of complex information available about these peoples.

<sup>168</sup> Herodotus 3.101.

customs, Herodotus particularly notes that they copulate in the open as cattle do.<sup>169</sup> Herodotus notes that the Ethiopians and their neighbors use the same seed as the Callantiae,<sup>170</sup> indicating that they might be in geographically similar locations. It is interesting to note that, while the idea of Eastern/Asian Aethiopians comes up as early as Homer,<sup>171</sup> their definition is obscure and some have taken these references to be a possible early reference to Indian peoples due to the similarity in physical defining characteristics between the two groups. If this is the case, the parallels drawn between the two groups in Herodotus could be symptomatic of the growing understanding of the delineation between the two groups of peoples. This comparison between the Ethiopians and Indians may also be a case of using a subject his audience would have been relatively more familiar with in order to describe the foreignness of the Indians. Either way, the parallels drawn are significant due both to the ambiguous relativity of their respective locations within the broader world and to the relationship alluded to by Herodotus and many others between climactic features and spatial positioning, and somatic, cultural and geographic features.<sup>172</sup>

Parmenides of Elea (active in the early fifth century B.C.), was among the first to consider scientifically the nature of the whole earth: five zones, two arctic, two temperate, and a ‘burned’ zone.<sup>173</sup> The term ‘burned’ is significant as Aethiopians literally means ‘burned’ ones, implying the perceived connection between darker skin colors and physical origination. Furthermore, according to Strabo, Theodectes argued that the cause behind the black complexion and ‘woolly’ hair of the Aethiopians is caused by close proximity to the chariot of the sun.

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<sup>169</sup> Herodotus 3.101.

<sup>170</sup> Herodotus 3.97.

<sup>171</sup> Milns, p. 353, *Odyssey* 1.22-4.

<sup>172</sup> The relationship between boundary regions and cultural identity will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>173</sup> Roller, 2015, 73-74.

Strabo debates the relative merits of Theodectes' argument and that of Onesicritus, one of Alexander's compatriots, who argued that the darker complexion was due to the waters rather than the sun. Strabo ultimately decides that the best theory is that of those who believe that the coloration results from close proximity to the sun drying out the skin.<sup>174</sup> Strabo's discussion indicates that these ideas were still very much present through the time period discussed within this thesis.

Along with this broader climate theory, Herodotus also explicitly states that the edges of the earth are both more prosperous and generally more abundant than the other, interior, regions of the earth. He does not offer a scientific rationale for why this may be true, but rather seems to suggest a degree of randomness to this fortune — when describing India, he writes “The most outlying nations of the world have somehow drawn the finest things as their lot, exactly as Greece has drawn the possession of far the best seasons.”<sup>175</sup>

Herodotus uses this concept to explain and justify the abundance he finds in India both with regards to the size of all living creatures and the abundance of wealth/quality of natural resources, writing:

“As I have lately said, India lies at the world's most distant eastern limit; and in India all living creatures four-footed and flying are much bigger than those of other lands, except the horses, which are smaller than the Median horses called Nesaeans; moreover, the gold there, whether dug from the earth or brought down by rivers or got as I have described, is very abundant. There, too, wool more beautiful and excellent than the wool of sheep grows on wild trees; these trees supply the Indians with clothing.”<sup>176</sup>

In many ways the size of the animals relative to other, more interior lands implies a similar continuum to the nature of the peoples in India, as discussed earlier. While other authors populated the edges of the earth with marvels and mythical creatures (as will be discussed in the next chapter), Herodotus emphasizes the greater size of the animals of India. It is interesting that

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<sup>174</sup> Strabo XV.24

<sup>175</sup> Herodotus 3.106.

<sup>176</sup> Herodotus 3.106.

here he does not draw the parallel to other boundary lands — the size of all Indian creatures (with the exception of the horse) is said to be larger than *all* other lands, implying that there is a uniqueness to the abundance of India that stretches beyond his previous statement that the outlying regions have the finest things. The roots of this distinction are somewhat ambiguous but the exoticism of India as a boundary land would have been exacerbated by the inability of Herodotus to pin down what exactly lay beyond the India that he knew of. Just as there is a primitive sense within the descriptions of the peoples furthest from the Persian Empire, so too this description of living creatures as larger than elsewhere implies a sense of untamed wildness that exists on the fringes of the eastern unknown. It is important to recognize that these particular descriptions seem written with the intention of evoking awe and wonder rather than fear.

In addition to these extremes about living creatures, Ctesias and Herodotus both exaggerate the temperature and climate of India. Herodotus writes of both cold and hot extremes, whereas Ctesias writes that India was very hot all over, and that the sun appears 10 times larger in India than it does anywhere else in the world.<sup>177</sup> He also writes that there was a sea in India, as big as the Mediterranean, that was so hot near the surface that all fish lived below the top level.<sup>178</sup> The exaggerations of temperature and sizes are in keeping with the trend of depicting distant lands as places of extremes and overabundance. Most of these *are* exaggerations of ‘true’ features of the region,<sup>179</sup> bringing up the critical question of the influences behind these exaggerations. It is clearly apparent that the role of India as an eastern boundary had a significant impact on the way the Greeks conceived of the oikoumene, however it is also important to consider how these geographically-based preconceived notions of boundary lands, and Asia as a

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<sup>177</sup> Ctesias F45.12. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>178</sup> Ctesias F45.13. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>179</sup> The Himalayas of course can get quite cold, while other parts of India can also reach extremely hot temperatures.



continent, may have influenced writings about India. At the very least it is possible that authors selectively chose to include only those pieces of information that fit into their preconceptions about boundary lands, and India specifically. This may have been done either subconsciously or consciously. The potentiality of these competing influences will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Finally, the emphasis that Herodotus places on the sheer abundance of the Indian region plays an important role in making India directly relevant to cultures that are described as more complex. Based on the descriptions of the peoples alone, Indians come together as a sort of idealized version of proto-humanity, unmarred by greed and other human flaws. While there are groups of Indians described that functioned within a societal structure similar to Greeks themselves, most of the literature focuses on those that diverged significantly from what the Greeks were familiar with. The reported abundance of natural resources, and the emphasis on the monetary significance of these (gold, high-quality wool, etc.) makes India an object of fascination beyond the rustic idealism that it would otherwise hold. The Indian peoples are not described by Herodotus as a particularly complex society, however the wealth that they possess automatically makes them significant to the Greeks for reasons beyond pure scientific curiosity. These accounts of wealth and gold, combined with the evolving theories about the spatial relationships between Europe and India, would go on to become the foundation for the later Western conception of the 'Orient' and the riches to be found in the East. Meanwhile, the fantastical creatures and objects that populated the texts of pre-Alexandrian writings about India played a similarly defining role with regards to both Greek identity and mythology as well as the development of European and contemporary Western Culture.

# Marvels

If there is one word that summarizes the content of pre-Alexandrian literature about India, it is marvels. With the notable exception of Hecataeus,<sup>180</sup> the accounts of Scylax, Herodotus and Ctesias are dominated by accounts of the marvelous. Even Aristotle includes sections on animals such as the One-horned Ass and the Martichora, though he seems to have approached these subject with more critical rigor than any of the previous sources. This representation of India as an exotic region filled with marvels is consistent with the broader trends of Greek geographical literature about boundaries and the edges of the *oikoumene*, as discussed in the previous chapter.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will be defining marvels as any creature, object, place or phenomena that would have evoked wonder or astonishment in either ancient authors *or* contemporary scholars. While I have chosen to analyze these marvels from the worldview that the authors themselves would have held as much as is possible, some of the material that seems to have been taken as fact by ancient authors deserves to be discussed in dialogue with the other marvels. Although marvels appear in the writings of both Herodotus and Scylax, the bulk of the Indian marvels survive through the fragments of Ctesias.

In this chapter, I will first analyze the marvels associated with India before discussing the how these marvels relate to our understanding of contact between the two regions and the Greek conception of India. I sort the marvels into two main categories: those about wealth, and those exoticizing the peoples and creatures within India. Many of those mentioned in connection with India are also mentioned in connection with various other boundary/obscure regions — these will be referred to as ‘stock marvels.’ Other marvels are unique to writings about India, such as

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<sup>180</sup> The fragments of Hecataeus that mention India essentially lists names of places and peoples.

the One-Horned Ass and the Martichora. I argue that ‘stock marvels’ contain valuable information about the Greek conception of boundary lands, while a careful analysis of marvels specific to India can lend insights into our understanding of the transference of information that resulted from the points of contact discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. In addition, I argue that the marvels discussed in pre-Alexandrian writings on India had a significant impact on both the Greco-Roman and later European conception of India and the ‘Orient’ as well as on Western mythology and folklore.

## Wealth

The vast majority of pre-Alexandrian mentions of marvelous places and things come from the fragments of Ctesias. The fragments of Scylax and Hecataeus are limited to peoples and city names, and while Herodotus does certainly describe India as a land of abundance and variety, most of the extremes he discusses are connected to the peoples he is describing rather than particular places or objects. It is notable that nearly all of the marvels that are connected to India involve extreme wealth, particularly in the form of precious metals or rich substances such as wine and honey.

Of the non-living marvels mentioned by Ctesias, the plethora of magical springs are the most striking. Ctesias seems to have been mildly obsessed with these springs — descriptions of ten survive in his fragments, including one that filled with liquid gold throughout the year (this could then be drawn off and hardened into solid gold) and had a layer of iron at the bottom from which two magical swords mentioned above were forged.<sup>181</sup> Other springs included one which

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<sup>181</sup> Ctesias F45.9. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4. These swords will be discussed further in the next chapter.

contained a substance that was used by the king as a truth serum,<sup>182</sup> and one that repelled every person and thing that was thrown into it, except iron, gold, and bronze.<sup>183</sup>

In terms of lakes and rivers, he describes one in the region of the pygmies that was covered with a film of oil which was retrieved by skimming the surface with small cups.<sup>184</sup> This oil was then used by the Indians (in addition to sesame oil and walnut oil). He also describes a river named the *Hyparchos*, which he translated as ‘bringing all good things.’<sup>185</sup> He writes that, at the source of the river, trees dripped sap into the river for thirty days in every year. This sap then hardened into amber and was carried down the river, again only for thirty days in the year.<sup>186</sup> He also describes a river of honey that flowed from a rock.<sup>187</sup>

Precious metals (mainly gold, but also silver to a lesser extent) play an important part in the narratives of Herodotus and Ctesias. Herodotus’ focus on Indian gold is particularly notable — a large portion of the words spent on India are devoted to describing the Indian method for collecting gold. He also writes that India paid the largest tribute to the Persians out of any satrap, implying a staggering amount of wealth. Herodotus describes a thrilling race involving Indians on camels stealing the gold from gold-digging ants (ants that literally dug gold up from the earth), and using the camels to escape vicious pursuit from these gold-digging ants.<sup>188</sup> Ctesias, on the contrary, writes that gold was not found in rivers but rather in large mountains that were difficult to access due to the presence of griffins.<sup>189</sup> He further writes that there was an

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<sup>182</sup> Ctesias F45.31. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, F45.49. This spring was called “‘Ballade’ in Indian, which in Greek means ‘useful.’” The water was described as cold and sweet, with healing powers.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, F45.25.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, F45.36.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, F45.29.

<sup>188</sup> Herodotus 3.105

<sup>189</sup> Ctesias F45.26. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

abundance of silver in India, although the mines in Bactria were deeper.<sup>190</sup> The location for these griffins does roughly correspond to the same region that Herodotus describes the gold-digging ants inhabiting.<sup>191</sup>

The stories about gold are particularly notable as early mentions of what would later become almost an obsession with Indian wealth in the western traditions. However, it is important not to project this fascination with gold back onto the writings of Ctesias and Herodotus. Herodotus would likely have had very few sources about India, and his account can just as easily be read as a fascination with the exoticism of the story rather than with the gold itself. While the story of gold-guarding griffins seems extraordinary in isolation, it fades into normalcy in the context of Ctesias' other writings. Rather than necessarily representing a fascination with gold specifically, the stories of gold can also be read as a small part of the broader portrayal of India as exotic, marvelous and *more* in every way imaginable.

The marvels in this category tend to broadly emphasize the idea that India was overflowing in gold and precious materials. Ctesias' springs are particularly reminiscent of the idea of a land flowing in milk and honey — his India literally flows not only with honey, but also with gold and oil. The general exaggeration and characterization of India as a land of plenty is certainly consistent with the ideas discussed in the previous chapter, but there is a new specificity in the focus in both Herodotus and Ctesias on gold and the abundant natural resources to be found in India.

It is important to also recognize that, while it is possible that Herodotus and Ctesias (and, indeed, other ancient writers) were actively shaping their writings in order to depict India in this

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<sup>190</sup> Ctesias F45.26. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.. It seems likely that this particular comparison was sourced from a Bactrian trader biased towards their own region.

<sup>191</sup> The relationships between the gold-digging ants and Griffins will be discussed later in this chapter. The roots of these stories about gold have been heavily debated, with several proposed candidates for the gold-digging ants.

way, it is also possible that Herodotus and Ctesias genuinely believed that the laws of nature that shaped their own lived reality warped at the outer edges of the oikoumene and thus were more inclined to believe and report stories that played into this preconceived conception of the region. Certainly, Greek myths and legends had long fostered the notion that people living in the liminal spaces of the oikoumene could be monstrous or deformed in comparison to those living within the oikoumene.<sup>192</sup> When discussing India in particular, Herodotus seems to view the abundance of the region as part of his overall conception of the natural order associated with different regions of the oikoumene — he notes that the distant edges of the world had received the best lots.<sup>193</sup> Among the Greeks as a whole, this concept was also supplemented by the common phrase “Libya always brings forth some new thing.”<sup>194</sup>

## Exoticism

In addition to these tales of fabulous wealth and gold, the vast majority of living creatures associated with India are described in fantastical terms. This applies both to peoples and animals. With the notable exception of the Griffins, the animals mentioned are all unique to India — that is, they are not ‘stock marvels.’ The same cannot be said for peoples. Many of the exotic groups of peoples either are located by other authors in several different boundary-type regions or share defining characteristics with other groups that are also scattered around the edges of the oikoumene. In addition to this critical difference, the animals and peoples serve very different purposes within the literature. The peoples are exoticized, but often in a way that makes them seem more ‘creature’ than ‘human.’ Some of these groups do have their basis in Indian folklore

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<sup>192</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 85.

<sup>193</sup> Herodotus 3.106.

<sup>194</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 88, Gen. Animal. 746b7-13.

and mythology, but for the most part (related to the concept of ‘stock marvels’) these peoples seemed to be used more by the authors to construct a sense of self using the Indian ‘other,’ rather than as a specific feature of India. The animals, on the other hand, are generally portrayed in a way that would inspire wonder and awe in the reader on account of their size or mythical abilities. While many have their basis in actual animals that existed within India, the details used to describe them are specifically fantastical and unusual, and play into the recurring theme of the edges of the earth existing on the boundary between myth and reality, just as they existed on the boundary between the inhabited world and either Ocean or Herodotus’ ‘empty spaces.’

## Peoples

There are several anatomically strange peoples mentioned in connection with India throughout the literature, possibly dating even further back than explicit mentions of India. Many of these can be connected both with tropes of Archaic geographical literature about boundary regions as well as with Indian folklore and mythology, creating a confusing mix of potential sources that is difficult to entangle. Similarly to the relationship between Indian sources and preconceived notions about the edges of the oikoumene that was discussed in terms of geography, the accounts of peoples in India seems to be both based in ‘truth’ as well as sculpted to convey particular moral lessons about Greek identity and humanity as a whole.

Hesiod (writing ca. 700 B.C.) and Homer both mention groups of peoples that are later associated with India. None of these are explicitly associated with a particular region so it is difficult to tell whether they would have been understood to be implicitly associated with India or more generally with the outer edges of the oikoumene. Hesiod’s fragments include Pygmies,

Makrokephaloi (big-heads) and the Cynocephali (half-dog people),<sup>195</sup> while Homer alludes to the battle between Pygmies and Cranes.<sup>196</sup>

The Pygmies are a particularly interesting case as there is historical and ethnographical evidence for various different populations of Pygmies existing both in Africa and in India that may correspond to ancient descriptions of Pygmies in those locations. Ctesias would later write about a group of Indian Pygmies at length, but it is unclear whether he is referring to a specific group of Pygmies, one of many groups of Pygmies, or simply a group of peoples that were Pygmy-like.<sup>197</sup> The Pygmies are also associated with the southernmost regions of Libya in other Greek writings, so it is possible that Ctesias and Homer are talking about two completely different groups of people. It is also possible that these earlier mentions of peoples may have influenced the later writings of Ctesias to place these previously ambiguously located peoples in India, based either on a rumor of a similar group located in India, or through pure whimsy.

In addition to the Pygmies several other seemingly-marvelous groups of peoples located by Greek authors in India have potential connections to historical fact through Indian folklore and mythology, indicating that most of these groups were not entirely fabricated by authors. Scylax is the first to mention one of these groups of people specifically in connection with India. Included in his fragments are the Skiapods (shadow-feet), Otoliknoi (winnowing fan-ears), Monophthalmoi (single eyes), Henotiknoi (single-child-bearers), Ektrapeloi (monstrous creatures), and the Makrokephaloi (big-heads).<sup>198</sup> Many of these groups are also mentioned later by Ctesias.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 1358 fr. 2 *Chase of the Harpies* Fragment 40A

<sup>196</sup> Homer *Iliad*, iii.2.

<sup>197</sup> Nichols suggests that he may be obliquely referring to a race or population of dwarves that lived separately from the main body of the Indians Ctesias describes.

<sup>198</sup> Tzetzes *Chiliades* 7.629-39, Philostratus VA 3.47=F7A, Parker, p. 17.

<sup>199</sup> Hecataeus' fragments, in contrast to these other groups of peoples consists only of places and clan names rather than any fantastical descriptions of peoples. He does mention the Callatae, who (as discussed previously) are later



Not all of these necessarily have direct connections to Indian folklore, however all bear striking similarities to *Rakshasas*. *Rakshasas* were demon-like figures who played a major part in Indian folklore, particularly in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Individual demons had many different types of defining characteristics, but two particularly relevant ones were named Kabandha and Hidimba. Kabandha had a headless torso, with a singular eye positioned in the center of his chest.<sup>200</sup> Hidimba was a famous cannibal who threatened to eat the Pauravas in the *Mahabharata*.<sup>201</sup>

These connections certainly do not necessitate a direct relationship between the Greek mentions of these fantastical peoples and Indian folklore, however the parallels are extremely thought-provoking.<sup>202</sup> Especially given the depth and scope of the trade networks discussed in the first chapter, it is probable that these types of cultural beliefs traveled along these routes even just as a trader's tale of an exotic, far-off land.<sup>203</sup> Furthermore, for individuals like Scylax and Ctesias, who were possibly interacting with Indian individuals through translators, it is easy to see how a description of these common features of Indian mythology might have been interpreted as fact. Indeed, one must not discount the idea that Indian individuals themselves may

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described by Herodotus as a group of peoples who customarily eat their dead. Otherwise, the peoples mentioned in his work do not generally appear within the other works from this time period. These include the Cynaram and Gandaroi. These groups are both particularly significant with the benefit of hindsight. The Gandhara region would later become an important place of cultural fusion between Indians, Greeks and Bactrians with the Indo-Greek and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms about half a millennia after Hecataeus was writing. During his time period the Gandharans are one of the important groups that show up in the Indian literary sources about this period. While the Cynaram are not necessarily directly related to the Cynocephaloi, the linguistic similarities in the roots are a thought-provoking coincidence.

<sup>200</sup> Vālmiki, *Balakanda*, p. 34-37, 124.

<sup>201</sup> Mahabharata Book I: Adi Parva, Section 154.

<sup>202</sup> In addition to these folklore roots, the peoples with large ears may also be connected to ancient Indian cultural traditions and values. Stretched ears are associated with the Buddha — according to legend, Siddhartha wore heavy gold earrings while he was a prince, and after he reached enlightenment he took his earrings out as part of his renouncement of wealth. To symbolize this disavowment of material possessions, Buddha is often portrayed even in contemporary times as having stretched ears. Large ears are also associated with compassion, which is another explanation for Buddha's ears. However, visual depictions of Buddha are not made until the Gandharan period centuries after Scylax so it is not possible for these tales to come from visual depictions of Buddha.

<sup>203</sup> It is even tentatively possible that the descriptions of these peoples may have traveled further than the identifying location they originated from, thus reaching Greece even before knowledge of India itself did.

have believed that these particular beings existed within the fabric of their world and thus portrayed these stories as real features of the Indian landscape.

The final notable group mentioned in connection to India are the Cynocephaloi (dog-headed peoples). Ctesias them in great detail,<sup>204</sup> however they are mentioned by several other ancient authors (and, indeed, feature in many medieval myths as well). He describes them as having the head of a dog, with clothes sourced from wild animals, and as communicating through barks rather than through human speech (although they were able to understand the speech of other Indians). Their claws and teeth were similar to dogs, and they lived in caves rather than in houses. He writes that the Indians called them the Kalystrioi (which he translates as dog-headed people), and that they sent annual tribute to the king of the Indians.<sup>205</sup>

These details are significant as an exhibitory example of peoples who existed between ‘animal’ and ‘man,’ and yet are described without negative judgement. Indeed, the Cynocephaloi are described as ‘*dikaioi*.’ The direct translation of ‘*Dikaioi*’ is ‘just;’ however it is generally associated with a state of supreme moral perfection.<sup>206</sup> The Cynocephaloi are one of the few groups of people mentioned in connection with India that does seem to fall solidly into the ‘stock marvel’ category — they are mentioned in a plethora of other circumstances and places, both in the ancient time period as well as throughout medieval European history and even in some Chinese stories.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Ctesias’ descriptions of fantastical peoples are remarkable for the sheer amount of detail that seems to have accompanied their descriptions. The reliability of Ctesias will be discussed at length in the next chapter, however these elaborate descriptions that do not seem to be even loosely based in any known evidence/body of folklore form one of the most persuasive arguments against his credibility.

<sup>205</sup> Ctesias F45.37, 40-43. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>206</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 80.

<sup>207</sup> The Cynocephaloi come up in connection with the Argonauts, as well as in medieval writings (such as in those of Paul the Deacon).

These descriptions of Indian peoples, particularly the exoticized groups, are in many ways are reminiscent of the 'Noble Savage' as an idealized person or group of peoples who exist within a primitive utopia-like construct and symbolize the innate goodness of humanity in contrast to the corruption of 'known' societies. Of course, the trope of a noble savage has existed for millenia and was not first created in the context of the imperialism it is often connected to. For example, the figure of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh perfectly embodies the concept. Enkidu is literally created from clay as a counterbalance to the cruel king of Uruk, Gilgamesh. The two ultimately become friends, with the innate, natural goodness of Enkidu balancing out Gilgamesh's human flaws. Enkidu is one example of the many forms the trope can take, with others used to indirectly justify imperialist regimes and policies, point out flaws within 'our' own society or to advance a conservative argument regarding the corrosive effects of technology and other forms of 'progress.'<sup>208</sup>

The pre-Alexandrian descriptions of India are made slightly more complex than the typical example in that there *are* civilized Indians interacting with, and, indeed, ruling over these exoticized groups. The Indians are not just described as pure, they are described as *ethically superior*. It is possible that the clear presence of a social structure based on kingship, tributary systems and defined social classes might have positively influenced the Greek perception of the Indians as whole, however the Greeks do discuss other peoples inhabiting boundary regions as similarly superior.<sup>209</sup>

In his book *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, James Romm argues that the furthest reaches of the earth were at once attached to the oikoumene while simultaneously also

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<sup>208</sup> Where 'our' is generally understood to refer to the society or culture with which the author and audience identify.

<sup>209</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 50-55.

being distinct from it.<sup>210</sup> In a subversion of ethnocentrism (a construct of space within which the center of the world has the most advantageous features), these edges were privileged over the Greek ‘center’ in some aspects (such as Herodotus’ description of the edges of the earth having drawn the best lots).<sup>211</sup> Thus, while the main regions in the oikoumene might have extended outwards in rings of progressively more primitive social development, the extreme distance of the outermost groups gave them a unique ethical prerogative.<sup>212</sup> For example, both the Callatae in Herodotus and the Cynocephaloi in Ctesias are described as being disdainful of what would have been considered normative human behavior — the Callatae react with disgust to the idea of *not* eating their dead, while the Cynocephaloi consider it shameful to fornicate in any way other than on all fours like dogs.<sup>213</sup> These groups are given a moral superiority that transcends and inverts the normative sense of Greek moral superiority.<sup>214</sup> Some of these eastern liminal peoples were used by figures such as Iambulus and Euhemerus to teach Greeks about their own failings.<sup>215</sup> As Romm writes, Herodotus developed upon the concept alluded to in Homer, namely that these peoples stood “at the limit not only of geographic space but also of human perfection, against the flawed and unstable mortals of the oikoumene.”<sup>216</sup>

## Animals

There are many animals mentioned in connection to India, most of which have their roots in the historical reality of the region. The first mention of animals comes with Herodotus, somewhat obliquely, in the form of the gold-digging ants. He does not mention them beyond the

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

<sup>213</sup> Herodotus 3.38, Ctesias and Nichols, F45.42. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>214</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 80.

<sup>215</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 48. go back and find primary citations

<sup>216</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 60.

facts that they dug gold up from the ground and viciously pursued those who tried to take this gold. These ants are possibly connected with the Himalayan Marmot, which does dig burrows through soil that contain gold. There is some recent evidence that people living in the region used to collect gold from the dust thrown up by marmot burrows. Within this context — Herodotus’ depiction of a camel chase seems unnecessarily dramatic — Marmots are certainly not a creature that would reasonably inspire fear in the hearts of camels or humans. It is possible that the viciousness of these creatures was spread purposefully by those who collected the gold in order to protect their access to it. However, there are more significant parallels to be drawn between Herodotus’ description of these ‘ants’ and other, similar myths relating to gold.

Placed in a location similar to Herodotus’ gold-digging ants, Ctesias describes Griffins who fiercely guarded gold-filled burrows. Both of these stories also bear striking similarities to the stories of the feud between the Arimaspians (in the north) and their mortal enemies — the Griffins.<sup>217</sup> The Arimaspians would subtly steal the gold that these Griffins unearthed when digging their burrows, and were subsequently viciously pursued by the Griffins in retaliation. Herodotus, while describing ‘ants’ rather than Griffins, uses this trope five times for various different pairs of distant peoples and animals.<sup>218</sup> The recurring nature of both the trope as well as the gold-guarding Griffins in particular, combined with the lack of any reason to associate these tales specifically with India, implies that these stories fall more into the category of ‘stock marvel’ rather than stories sourced from India.

In addition to these Griffins, Ctesias’ descriptions of animals are both intrinsically remarkable as well as extremely influential on later authors. Ctesias mentions many other

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<sup>217</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 69.

<sup>218</sup> Romm, 1992, p. 69.

animals that fall into the ‘marvels’ category: an Indian ‘worm,’<sup>219</sup> Dikairon (small bird whose excrement was deadly if drunk),<sup>220</sup> lion-fighting dogs,<sup>221</sup> large and colorful roosters,<sup>222</sup> and monkeys with long tails.<sup>223</sup> In addition to these, there are four animals characteristic of Greek descriptions of India that are worth discussing at greater length: the Parrot, Elephant, Martichora (related to the Manticore) and One-Horned Ass (related to the Unicorn).

The parrot and elephant are particularly interesting in that they are common knowledge to modern societies but aspects of Ctesias’ description of each were regarded as marvelous to ancient authors. The idea of a talking bird that could learn Greek was understandably remarkable, and lends insight into how an author struggling to describe an unfamiliar animal might create a mythical-sounding characterization. The Indian Elephant is a similar case — while Greeks were familiar with elephants through Africa, Ctesias’ claims that the Indians used Elephants to break down fortifications were met with disbelief.<sup>224</sup> This description of elephants was previously used to undermine Ctesias’ credibility, but recent evidence has shown this to be a plausibly accurate representation of the role of elephants in Indian warfare.<sup>225</sup> Both the parrot and elephant provide perfect examples of the importance of taking into account the Greek worldview when discussing the marvels associated with India. The existence of each was ultimately understood to be true, however the debates over their mythical attributes shed light on how ancient authors determined the reality of animals living in lands physically beyond their conception.

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<sup>219</sup> Ctesias F45.46. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4. It is still unclear exactly what he is referring to here — the possible explanations behind many of these animals will be discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>220</sup> Ctesias F45.34. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>221</sup> Ctesias F45.10. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>222</sup> Ctesias F45bβ. Aelian *NA* 16.2.

<sup>223</sup> Ctesias F45.7. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>224</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 96.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.* Multiple Indian sources (such as the Samgamavacarajataka and the Arthashastra) mention the use of elephants to break down gates and fortifications.

The Martichora is another interesting case — by description alone it would generally be regarded as a mythical creature by both contemporary and ancient scholars, however there is reason to believe that it may originally have been based on the (decidedly real) tiger. It was described by Ctesias as being the size of a lion with a human face, red coloration, human ears, and a tail like a scorpion with a stinger capable of firing fatal stingers at people.<sup>226</sup> Critically, it is also described as a man-eater. Indeed, the term ‘Martichora’ is believed to trace back to the Old Persian roots *martiya-* (‘man’) *x<sup>v</sup>ar* (‘consume’) — together, they would translate roughly to ‘man-eater.’<sup>227</sup> Ctesias claims stingers grow back after being fired, and that the Indians hunt their (the Martichora’s) young before they develop and smash their tails so they never grow a stinger.

Aristotle does mention the Martichora in his *History of Animals*, however he seems doubtful of its existence — he prefaces his description of the animal with the phrase ‘if Ctesias can be believed.’<sup>228</sup> This is particularly interesting in comparison to Aristotle’s accounts of the parrot and one-horned ass, because for all three Ctesias is the only pre-Aristotelian source that we have evidence for. Aristotle may just have found the descriptions of the parrot and one-horned ass more believable, or he may have had supplementary evidence from Alexander’s time in India, or he may have had access to sources that we do not. It is impossible to tell for sure.

Ctesias’ description of the Martichora, with the benefit of modern hindsight, seems to correspond to a tiger. The roots of the name imply that Ctesias’ source was likely a Persian individual, possibly a translator.<sup>229</sup> Ctesias claims to have seen one in the Persian court,<sup>230</sup> which

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<sup>226</sup> Ctesias F45dβ. Aelian NA 4.21.

<sup>227</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 104.

<sup>228</sup> Aristotle HA II.1, 501a 24-26.

<sup>229</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 104.

<sup>230</sup> Ctesias F45dβ. Aelian NA 4.21.

at first seems unreasonable as no creature matching his description exists. However, given the story that Indians smashed the Martichora's tails so that they never grew a stinger, the tiger does seem like a possible candidate. Certainly, Ctesias' description of the creature bears an uncanny resemblance to the description of the seahorse by Asa from the beginning of this chapter. Tigers have a dermal protrusion at the end of their tails that could have been conceived of as the beginnings of a 'stinger,' and their molars have three lobes which may have given rise to the belief that the Martichora had three rows of teeth.<sup>231</sup> Indeed, Pausanias writes in his *Description of Greece* that he believes that the Martichora referred to the tiger, and that the tales of three rows of teeth and tail stingers were made up by the Indians because of their great fear of the animal.<sup>232</sup> It has also been suggested that Ctesias may have been influenced by the Persian tendency to depict real animals as having mythical powers in their art.<sup>233</sup>

Ctesias is the first to mention the creature among Greek writers, but it would go on to be codified in European folklore and mythology as the Manticore.<sup>234</sup> Given that the existence of the Martichora was initially greeted with disbelief, the continuation of its relevance has interesting implications for the impact of these marvels. It raises the recurring question of belief — to what degree did ancient authors actually believe that these creatures and phenomena existed, or were they just playing to a marvel-hungry audience? Would scholars have interpreted these marvels differently than other Greeks? Of course it is impossible to know the answers to these questions for sure, but the continued references to animals such as the Martichora imply that it is unfair to simplify these stories down to pure fabrication on the part of the authors.

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<sup>231</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 104.

<sup>232</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.21.4.

<sup>233</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 105.

<sup>234</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 8.30, Ctesias and Nichols, p. 105.



The last significant animal discussed in connection with India is the One-Horned Ass.<sup>235</sup> It is first mentioned by Ctesias, and intriguingly Aristotle seems to take the existence of the one-horned ass as fact. It is unclear whether he is writing before or after Alexander's time in India, so it is possible that he had a supplementary source for it (in addition to Ctesias). It is important to note that, even if Ctesias was his only source for it, a one-horned ass would likely not have seemed especially extraordinary to Aristotle. The conception of a unicorn as a magical creature is so ingrained in our minds that the mention of any one-horned creature automatically seems mythical to us. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the idea of an ass with one horn rather than two would have been an easy pill to swallow, particularly as its range lay on the outer edges of his conception of the world.

Ironically, the one-horned ass was probably one of the most believable animals of those thought to live in India — compared to a bird that could talk like a human, elephants that could tear down entire walls, and Manticores that shot stingers out of their tails like arrows, an ass with only one horn would have seemed perfectly ordinary. The One-Horned Ass is remarkable to us now in that it *wasn't* considered a marvel by ancient Greek authors. Again, this brings up questions of how the Greek worldview would have interacted with these stories, and how individuals might have interpreted and believed them differently.

If there is a connection between the One-Horned Ass and Indian folklore, mythology or historical landscape, it is not as clearly apparent as those of the parrot, elephant and Martichora. There is some limited archaeological evidence that the conception of creature like a unicorn existed in the Harappan civilization, however it is not clear that there is a significant enough cultural connection between Vedic India and the Harappan Civilization for this symbology to

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<sup>235</sup> Ctesias F45.45. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

have persisted.<sup>236</sup> It is also possible that the unicorn may be related to an actual animal from India.<sup>237</sup>

Ultimately, the descriptions of the animals discussed in connection with India bear remarkable similarities to Asa's descriptions of the Sea Horse and Octopus. Most seem to have their roots in real animals that would have existed within India, with the exception of the gold-digging ants and Ctesias' Griffins. It is likely that the majority of the fantastical nature of these descriptions comes from a combination of Indian (or Bactrian) mythology and attempts to describe a foreign creature to a Greek audience.

## Using Marvels as Historical Evidence

The marvels that populate the writings about Indian (both pre-Alexandrian and post) are highly significant to modern scholarship in three different ways. First, the nuggets of 'truth' behind many of these marvels has implications for our understanding of the transference of information through the points of contact outlined in Chapter one. Second, these marvels dominated the available information about India and as such provide the bulk of information on which to base our understanding of the Pre-Alexandrian conception of India as a physical place. Finally, the impact of these marvels on European peoples stretches far past the Greek period and a deeper analysis of them is thus important in order to inform our understanding of the roots of Western culture.

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<sup>236</sup> The degree of continuity between Harappan culture and later Vedic cultures is highly debated. For more on the topic, see: Chakrabarti, *India*.

<sup>237</sup> Lavers, p. 7- 27. While the Rhino has been suggested as a possible candidate, Lavers points out similarities to the following Central Asian animals: the Chiru, the Kiang (a wild ass), and the Yak. He argues that most tales of the One-Horned Ass converge in their similarities to the Chiru. He believes it to be likely that the animal was conceived of by Himalayan peoples (based on the Chiru), and the idea was then transported fully-formed by traders to Persia.

Regardless of our conception of the ‘reality’ of these marvels, the fact that they had an impact on the Greek perception of India is indisputable. The previous chapter focuses on conception in terms of spatial location, but the marvels discussed in this chapter would have formed the basis for the Greek understanding of what India might actually look like as a place. Even if a Greek individual didn’t believe everything they read in Herodotus and Ctesias, the fact remains that the majority of the information available about India seems to have been focused on precious metals, fantastical creatures and strange peoples. This image would have supplemented the broader conception of India as the eastern limit of the world in order to portray a land that existed on the boundary myth and reality. The focus on gold gives the descriptions of India a certain allure, while the detailed descriptions of peoples and animals lend a certain tangibility to the stories. Given the distance between Greece and India, and the lack of factual knowledge about the region, the fact that there was enough information from these descriptions to conceivably create a mental image of India and Indians is remarkable.

What is perhaps even more fascinating is the durability of the pre-Alexandrian tales of marvels. As Strabo writes before delving into his account of India, even after a veritable army of Greek scholars traveled to India with Alexander the Greek accounts of India all contradicted one another and contained stories of inconceivable marvels.<sup>238</sup> While one would assume that these vague accounts of monstrous peoples and creatures would be rendered irrelevant by Alexandrian accounts of the region, writers like Strabo were still forced to use the writings of Scylax, Hecataeus, Herodotus and Ctesias to inform their own writings about India. The writings of Alexander’s followers and the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes certainly dramatically increased Greek access to accurate information about India, however the pre-Alexandrian

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<sup>238</sup> Strabo *Geography* 15.1.2

writings were not truly supplanted until the Imperial period when frequent trade between the two regions resulted in much more detailed and accurate information about India. The very survival of even fragments of the marvels found in the pre-Alexandrian accounts is a testimony to the fact that they were still referenced for centuries after Alexander.

This influence existed contemporaneously during the Greek period, but also continued to have an effect through to the current day. These writings are the beginning of the exotic representation of India that would continue for centuries after the marvels themselves had been disproven. Creatures such as the one-horned ass and martichora became institutionalized in Western folklore as the Unicorn and Manticore, while tales of gold and abundance laid the foundation for the lust for Indian wealth that spurred figures like Columbus to attempt to conquer the east.

# Ctesias

Ctesias may be one of the most maligned writers of the ancient period. He was criticized by authors ranging from Aelian ('if indeed Ctesias' testimony constitutes sufficient proof in such matters')<sup>239</sup> to Aristotle ('Ctesias tells us — although he is not trustworthy — there are neither...')<sup>240</sup> to Arrian ('Ctesias — if, indeed, anyone finds Ctesias reliable as evidence')<sup>241</sup> to Antigonus of Carystus ('Because he (Ctesias) tells a lot of lies, we have omitted the extract').<sup>242</sup> The reception of Ctesias is widely varied even amongst modern scholars. Modern interpretations of his work range from generous<sup>243</sup> to derisive,<sup>244</sup> and everywhere in between.<sup>245</sup> Over the past half-century, the way that Ctesias is read and understood has been re-evaluated as our understanding of the subjects he covered has evolved. Many of his stories previously dismissed as outright fabrications are now understood to be either accurate depictions of reality or exaggerations of actual peoples, animals, places and cultures. The fragments of Ctesias' *Indica* make up the bulk of the surviving pre-Alexandrian writings about India, and are also possibly the most complex and confusing of the genre. As such, a discussion of the credibility of the *Indica* and the ways in which it might be useful to modern scholars is necessary in order to thoroughly analyze the subject at hand.

Any evaluation of Ctesias' credibility as a source necessitates some discussion of his longer work, the *Persica*.<sup>246</sup> Like the *Indica*, the *Persica* is preserved in fragments. Ctesias seems

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<sup>239</sup> Aelian, *NA*, 4.21.

<sup>240</sup> Aristotle *HA* 8.28, 606a8.

<sup>241</sup> Antigonus of Carystus *Collection of Miraculous Stories* 15 [cf. Fragment 36]

<sup>242</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 5.4.2.

<sup>243</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, Lavers.

<sup>244</sup> Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History*, p. 106. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, p. 7. Braun, "Xenophon's Dangerous Liasons." Allen, *The Persian Empire*. Rawlinson, *Intercourse between India and the Western World from the Earliest Times to the Fall of Rome*, p. 26.

<sup>245</sup> Parker, 2008, Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, Romm, 1992.

<sup>246</sup> For more on the *Persica*, see the following: Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010. Waters, *Ctesias' Persica and Its Near Eastern Context*. Ctesias and Lenfant, *La Perse*.

to have used Persian sources when writing the *Persica*,<sup>247</sup> and thus the work may provide some insight into how the Persians themselves viewed their past.<sup>248</sup> In their translation of the work, Llewellyn-Jones and Robson argue that the *Persica* can be read as a serious history at points; however, Ctesias has a “bigger agenda than straightforward ‘history’ writing [and his] ‘history’ needs to be treated in a different way from that which modern scholarship regards as ‘serious history.’”<sup>249</sup> Llewellyn-Jones and Robson are part of a growing body of scholars who have argued that, while the contents read more like a gossip rag, this dramatic rendering of the Persian court might actually be a fairly realistic portrayal of Ctesias’ experience navigating the intrigues of the Persian royal family.<sup>250</sup> In terms of the *Indica*, however, scholars are noticeably harsher.

## The ‘Truth’ Behind the *Indica*

In order to discuss the validity of Ctesias’ writings, I have divided the marvels from the *Indica* into three categories: those that are based on a ‘real’ and physical aspect of ancient India, those that are based in eastern mythology (often Indian, but sometimes Bactrian or Persian), and those that do not seem to be based in any form of truth whatsoever. Although there is some overlap between these categories, they provide a useful framework within which to assess the types of sources Ctesias drew on when writing the *Indica*. When discussing the source, it is important to keep in mind that it survives only in fragments that do not necessarily provide an accurate representation of the *Indica* as a whole. None of the fragments give any indication of Ctesias’ purpose in writing the work, and Photius explicitly says that Ctesias elaborated on

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<sup>247</sup> Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, p.53.

<sup>248</sup> Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, p. 61-62. Murray, “Herodotus and Oral History,” p. 42.

<sup>249</sup> Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, p. 4.

<sup>250</sup> Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, p. 81.

Indian customs and social structure even though none of this discussion is represented amongst the surviving pieces of the work. Furthermore, even though Ctesias lived in the Persian court for several years, India would still have been a far off and distant land to him. As such, it is possible that he would have been predisposed to believe stories about fantastical creatures, places, plants and peoples that were told by his sources from the Persian court. It is important to be mindful of the differences between our modern conception of reality and his.

### Marvels Based in ‘Fact’

The most convincing argument for Ctesias’ credibility as a source is the fact that every piece of information that he claims to have personally seen or experienced can be corroborated with other evidence that we know to be true.<sup>251</sup> For example, Ctesias writes of seeing Indians with light skin in the Persian court (correctly contradicting Herodotus and previous writers who describe Indians as uniformly dark-skinned).<sup>252</sup> The Elephant, Parrot and Martichora have been discussed at length previously. The Elephant and Parrot certainly correspond to ‘true’ aspects of ancient India, and, if the Martichora was a tiger (as seems likely), it fits into this category as well. In addition to these eye-witness reports, there are several animals mentioned in the fragments of the *Indica* that also correspond to definitive aspects of India at this time. Most notable amongst these are the Indian dogs (also mentioned by Herodotus),<sup>253</sup> roosters,<sup>254</sup> and

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<sup>251</sup> The one possible exception to this is his description of the Martichora. Even in this instance, it seems likely that the gaps between his words and ‘reality’ stems more from his attempting to describe a creature unfamiliar to the Greeks by likening its various features to body parts and colors that the Greeks would have been already familiar with.

<sup>252</sup> Ctesias F45.19. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>253</sup> Ctesias F45.10. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4. The dogs are mentioned frequently and were somewhat famous in Greek literature about India. There is an account of the prowess of these dogs against lions being demonstrated to Alexander while he was in India. There is also a description in the *Ramayana* of huge fighting dogs, and in both ancient and modern literature Indian dogs are said to have fought both tigers and lions.

<sup>254</sup> Ctesias F45bβ. Aelian *NA* 16.2. Ctesias describes huge roosters that have a colorful comb ‘like a crown of flowers,’ tail feathers that are flat rather than protruding, and feathers that are gold and dark green. Aside from the unusual size and the misleading comparison to a crown of flowers, this is a fairly realistic description of the roosters seen in India today.

monkeys.<sup>255</sup> In addition, Ctesias mentions two swords that had the ability to ward off clouds, hail and hurricanes.<sup>256</sup> Ctesias claims to have seen the Artaxerxes perform this feat two times, and further says that both of the swords were gifted to him — one by Artaxerxes himself, and one by his mother Parysatis.<sup>257</sup> While it is unlikely that these swords actually held meteorological powers, Ctesias seems to be alluding to a ritual power associated with the emperor.<sup>258</sup>

Furthermore, there are several instances in which Ctesias describes events, cultures, places and things that might reasonably have been real — even if we lack corroborating evidence for them, these are features that might plausibly fit into the gaps in the historical record for this period. The Martichora, again is an example of this, as are the Pygmies. Another thought-provoking example is the mention of a sun and moon cult likely existing near the Thar Desert. According to the fragments, Ctesias mentions a holy place in ‘the uninhabitable region’ where the Indians worshipped Helios and Selene.<sup>259</sup> Sun-worship is known to have been a part of both Persian and Indian cultures, so it is very possible that Ctesias is referring to an actual cult that worshipped the sun and moon.<sup>260</sup> Furthermore, Nichols writes that Ctesias’ location for the holy place is very close to Multan, which would later become a famous center of the sun cult.<sup>261</sup>

The Pygmies are another example of a marvel that has clear connections to peoples we know to be true. As mentioned earlier, Ctesias discusses the Pygmies at considerable length. While the Pygmies are mentioned elsewhere in connection with Libya, the sheer amount of detail

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<sup>255</sup> Ctesias F45.7. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4. Ctesias mentions monkeys with tails four cubits in length. These have been associated with the langur (which still lives in India today). These monkeys play a prominent place in Indian mythology as they are seen as a descendent of Hanuman, the monkey warrior from the *Ramayana* who assisted Rama in defeating Ravana.

<sup>256</sup> Ctesias F45.9. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 100.

<sup>259</sup> Ctesias F45.17. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>260</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 106.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*



that Ctesias gives differentiates his account from others. He describes them as short (averaging about one and a half cubits in height), very black, stubby and ugly with long hair and beards that adults used to cover themselves in lieu of clothes. They are explicitly described as being a part of the broader Indian political structure that characterizes Ctesias' account of the peoples of India — he writes that they spoke the same language as the rest of the Indians and followed the same laws. He further writes that three thousand pygmies accompanied the king of the Indians, as they were reputedly excellent bowmen.<sup>262</sup> As discussed earlier, there are two possible roots for these descriptions: either Ctesias' Pygmies are related to the group associated with Libya, or his description is related to information about an actual group of Pygmies living in India.

## Plausible Marvels

While those in the previous category have clear connections to what we know about Ancient India, Bactria and Persia, several of the marvels mentioned by Ctesias have links obscure enough that it is uncertain whether the similarities between Ctesias' writings and the Indian sources are coincidental or not. Of these, the one-horned ass is the most notable. The origin of the conception of Ctesias' one-horned ass has been a topic of debate.<sup>263</sup> He describes the creature as an extremely swift wild ass the size of a horse or slightly bigger, with a white body, crimson head, blue eyes and a horn in the middle of their forehead.<sup>264</sup> As discussed previously, some believe that the creature is based on a combination of several animals.<sup>265</sup> It is also possible that the idea of a one-horned ass comes from within India itself. A ceramic seal

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<sup>262</sup> Ctesias F45.23. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>263</sup> Lavers, p. 7.

<sup>264</sup> Ctesias F45.45. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>265</sup> Lavers, p. 7.

from the Harappan Civilization has been found that has an intricately carved, one-horned antelope-like creature on it.<sup>266</sup> There is no hard evidence for religious continuity between the Harappan Civilization and the later Vedic cultures, so it is irresponsible to assume that this is anything more than a coincidence, however it *is* a striking one. At the very least, contrary to what is often assumed, Ctesias is certainly not the oldest remaining evidence for the conception of a unicorn-like creature.

With regards to Ctesias' griffins, it has been suggested that these tales are related to Persian and Bactrian folklore about griffins as guardian creatures in addition to the connections discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>267</sup> As mentioned previously, Ctesias' describes griffins who either guarded the gold, or fought those who entered the regions the gold was in in order to protect their young.<sup>268</sup> Griffins frequently appeared in iconography from the Persian region (and these in particular are reminiscent of Persian tales of guardian griffins with mountainous lairs)<sup>269</sup> so it is possible that this description is heavily influenced by the Persian setting Ctesias was writing within. The location for these griffins, again, roughly corresponds to the same region that Herodotus describes the gold-digging ants inhabiting, and the similarities between these griffins of Ctesias and the gold-digging ants of Herodotus are provocative.

Furthermore, some of the marvels within the *Indica* seem to have been retellings of exaggerations on the part of the traders selling particular objects. For example, Ctesias mentions the *Pantarba*, which was a gemstone that belonged to a Bactrian dealer. Ctesias writes that, after the stone was thrown into a river, it was retrieved "clinging together 477 gems and precious

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<sup>266</sup> "The Unicorn Seal."

<sup>267</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 113-14.

<sup>268</sup> Ctesias F45h. Aelian *NH* 4.27.

<sup>269</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 113-114.

stones.”<sup>270</sup> In this instance, it seems likely that this tale was made up by the Bactrian dealer himself in order to inflate the value of his goods. The *Pantarba* is mentioned in other ancient sources, but there is no plausible explanation for its ability to attract precious materials.<sup>271</sup> None of the fantastical springs and lakes mentioned by Ctesias can be convincingly connected with ‘real’ places, but some could be interpreted as exaggerations of stories about springs with healing properties and others may have parallels in Indian folklore. It is impossible to tell if these stories were made up by Ctesias or if they have their roots in the words of his sources. It is possible that, like the *pantarba*, some of these stories were also made by traders to make their goods (such as oil, perhaps) seem more exotic and valuable.

The snakes mentioned in India are an interesting bridge between this category of ‘plausible marvels’ and those that are derivative of Indian, Bactrian and Persian mythology and folklore. Ctesias explicitly mentions only one snake in connection with India.<sup>272</sup> The snake, according to Ctesias, had a crimson body and a bright white head and lived in the ‘burning region.’ The snake was short, with no teeth, and didn’t bite. The fragments differ on how the snake’s venom worked, but generally agree that it ‘vomited’ its venom, either making the entire region or all of a man’s limbs rot. It was said to produce two fluids when hung by its tail, each forming a different type of venom.<sup>273</sup> This description of hanging an animal upside down in order to get oil or venom is one that is recurring in Ctesias.

There is at least one snake in India that has the ability to spit venom — the Monocled Cobra (*Naja Kaouthia*) — however the location and appearance of the snake Ctesias mentions does not overlap with the Monocled Cobra’s habitat and description at all. The Monocled Cobra

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<sup>270</sup> Ctesias F45.6. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>271</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 95.

<sup>272</sup> His ‘worm’ has also been associated with snakes, as will be discussed later.

<sup>273</sup> Ctesias F45.33. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

tends to live in fairly wet regions in the north-eastern regions of India, and has a base color ranging between various shades of brown to black.<sup>274</sup> The size is reminiscent of the Saw-Scaled Viper (*Echis carinatus*), which is common across India, however again the coloring is distinctly different from the brown of the saw-scaled viper.

A possible implicit mention of a snake comes with Ctesias' worm, which has been a matter of debate amongst scholars.<sup>275</sup> The Indus was often mentioned in ancient literature in connection to crocodiles, and the worm has been interpreted as a fantastical depiction of one, however Nichols interprets his writings as a lyrical version of a serpent influenced by Indian beliefs.<sup>276</sup> Nichols further writes that, when saying that the Indus lacked other animals, Ctesias' use of the term 'wild animal' ('θηρίον') implies that he is only referring to a lack of other types of *beasts* in the river rather than a lack of fish.<sup>277</sup>

## Fabrications

Perhaps the most significant discrepancy between what we know to be true about ancient India and Ctesias' account of it are his descriptions of Indian peoples. In the writings of Scylax, Hecataeus and Herodotus, the groups of peoples mentioned seem to be clearly distinct from one another, even though they are all considered 'Indians.' Ctesias goes into much more detail about each of the groups he discusses, and seems to have a completely different perception of the political structure of the region. The style of Ctesias' fragments implies that he conceived of the

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<sup>274</sup> Wuster, p. 25-26.

<sup>275</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 94.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 98, following Ctesias and Lenfant, *La Perse*, p. 171 n. 780.

Indian people as a cohesive political unit, with several subgroups that are characterized by unique anatomical or behavioral features (or both). For example, according to Photius, Ctesias wrote ‘at length’ about the “just nature of the Indians, the high regard they have for their king, and their disdain for death.”<sup>278</sup> The words ‘their king’ clearly imply a unified group ruled by one individual. He repeatedly refers to this ‘king of the Indians,’ and describes groups such as the Pygmies and Cynocephaloi serving or paying tribute to the king.<sup>279</sup>

As discussed previously, the representations of Indian peoples within Herodotus and Ctesias present a clear discrepancy in the way each viewed the political unification of the region. Herodotus explicitly states that ‘India’ is made up of several distinct nations, none speaking the same language, some nomadic and some not. He does differentiate between Indians living under Persian control (presumably in the Gandhara region) and those living further south. Ctesias, on the other hands, repeatedly refers to ‘the king of the Indians’ and talks of them as a just people (in the singular). He does mention exotic groups within the Indians — most notably the dog-headed people and the Pygmies — but each of these seems to be subservient in some way to the Indian King who is the political ruler of all of India in his conception of the region.

There are some possible explanations for the differences between the ‘true’ history of the region and Ctesias’ framework for the Indian political organization. While Photius implies that Ctesias wrote explicitly about the Indians as a group, none of this discussion survives to date so it is difficult to know how much of his actual anthropological and ethnographic content is represented in the fragments that remain. The fragments remaining do not explicitly differentiate between those living under Persian control and those living further east or south, so it is possible that he is just referring to the part of India that would have been under Persian control at his time,

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<sup>278</sup> Ctesias F45.30. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>279</sup> Ctesias F45.23, 41. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

and thus perhaps talking about a single people under a single ruler. Another possibility is that his portrayal of India was influenced more heavily by the major epic myths (such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) than contemporary information. This makes more sense if we take his descriptions of strange peoples to be based on figures from Indian folklore and mythology.

However none of the explanations for this mistake are very convincing, particularly in the light of Herodotus' earlier, and much more accurate, description. There would certainly have been Indians in the Persian court at times (Ctesias himself mentions seeing groups of them) and, as demonstrated by the earlier discussion of the sources behind his marvels, there was clearly a great deal of fairly accurate information available to Ctesias — nearly all of the information that is found in his *Indica* is at worst an exaggeration of a myth or story that could have conceivably come from India. Logically, based solely on proximity and access Ctesias ought to have information that was at least as accurate as Herodotus', if not more. Ctesias' conception of the political organization of the region stands out as one of the few major inaccuracies that cannot be explained either by exaggeration or accidental misinformation. It is worth noting that Ctesias did explicitly set himself up in opposition to Herodotus at points, so Herodotus' perspective may have also had an impact on his portrayal of the region, but again it seems unlikely that Ctesias would have completely fabricated a political system for India rather than exaggerating the details (as he seems to be doing for the Pygmies or Roosters, for example).

In addition to these structural discrepancies, the sheer amount of seemingly-unfounded detail that Ctesias provides indicates that, even if the peoples he describes were based on fragments of Indian folklore and mythology, most of what he writes about them is fabricated. For example, Ctesias describes one tribe of people who lived 'in the mountains where the [Indian] reed grows' in which women gave birth only once, and the ageing of hair is reversed — every

individual has white hair for the first thirty years of their life, at which point the hair began to turn black. He describes these individuals as having eight fingers on each hand and eight toes on each foot, and being very warlike in nature (he reports that 5,000 of them served the Indian king as archers and javelin men). Furthermore, he describes them as having ears that were big enough to cover half of their arms and their entire back at the same time.<sup>280</sup> He also describes a group that did not work, eat grain or drink water; instead they tended flocks and drunk only milk. They had no anus or bowel movements, and would chew a root that prevented milk from solidifying within their bodies.<sup>281</sup> The description of the women as only giving birth once in their life is reminiscent of Scylax's Henotiknoi, which may indicate that Ctesias was influenced by Scylax.

While it is possible to disentangle pieces of these descriptions that could plausibly reflect aspects of the cultures of some Indian peoples, none of these connections are concrete or reliable. The groups Ctesias describes are not necessarily 'stock marvels,' however they do have characteristics in common with other boundary peoples. For example, the extended life of the Cynocephaloi is similar to Greek descriptions of the age span of the Ethiopians.<sup>282</sup> These ethnographies of peoples, may also be the beginning of a new type of 'stock marvel' recurrently associated specifically with India by Greek writers.

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<sup>280</sup> Ctesias F45.50. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>281</sup> Ctesias F45.44. Phot. *Bibl.* 72 p.45a21-50a4.

<sup>282</sup> For more on the Ethiopians, see Romm 2012 p. 50-53.

## The Verdict on Ctesias

The blurriness of the lines between myth and reality seem starkly apparent to the modern audience, but it is difficult to tell where the line would have been for Ctesias, if there was a line at all. It is also possible that the myths were believed by those who passed information on to Ctesias, and that they thus presented those stories as pure fact. Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly what Ctesias' conceptions of India and boundary lands were and, by extension, how much of his writings he actually believed himself. It is important to be careful of making assumptions of credibility based on our modern frameworks of reality. The dangers in this can be seen clearly in the juxtaposition between the ancient critical reception of Ctesias' writings about Elephants and his writings about the One-Horned Ass. Ctesias' statement that he had himself seen an elephant uproot a palm tree and that elephants were used to break down fortifications during times of war was dismissed as a lie (even though we now know this to be fairly realistic),<sup>283</sup> while his claim of the existence of the One-Horned Ass is treated as realistic.<sup>284</sup> In contrast, most people today would find the story about the elephant unremarkable, but would immediately dismiss any claims of reality associated with the One-Horned Ass — largely because of the contemporary conceptions of a unicorn and the body of mythology about unicorns, both of which are ironically based on Ctesias' description of the One-Horned Ass.

The question of what exactly Ctesias believed to be 'true' is one that is not asked as often as it should be. Most authors, both ancient and modern, assume some degree of homogeneity in the belief structures of individuals roughly contemporaneous to one another. Just as assuming that everyone who attends even a single Christian church believes in the same conception of God is mistaken, so too is arguing that there are phenomena that Ctesias would have known to be

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<sup>283</sup> Ctesias and Nichols, p. 96.

<sup>284</sup> Aristotle, *HA* 499b18-20.



false. To a modern scholar it seems clear that Persian depictions of hybrid animal forms are purely artistic license rather than a serious depiction of reality. But evaluating Ctesias based on modern frameworks of reality is both unfair and misguided.

By forcing his account to fit into what we know of the ‘reality’ of ancient India, we miss nuances of the fragments that can tell us more about the flow of information between India and the Persian (and subsequently Greek) world. The connections to Indian and Bactrian folklore indicate that some cultural knowledge was carried along these routes, while the mentions of Indian goods and traders in the Persian court also provide an insight into the role that physical goods played in transmitting geographic information about the lands from which they originated. Furthermore, it is also a mistake to try to construct Ctesias’ belief structure based on our knowledge of other Greeks. Even if he had a ‘Greek’ conception of what was possible according to the laws of nature, it seems likely that his perspective would have shifted as he lived within the Persian court and was exposed both to their conceptions of the world as well as to peoples who had physically been to India. This access to people who had traveled as far as India must have affected the way Ctesias viewed these more distant regions of the world. Of course, the fact that some of what Ctesias wrote was met with clear disbelief from other Greeks but has proven to be true thousands of years later also indicates that, at least in some instances, this increased access allowed Ctesias to know to be true what would never be fully accepted within the mainstream Greek conception of the world.

However, even with this closer proximity and sometimes-direct contact with Indians, India would have still remained a fairly abstract concept for him given the great distance between his location and the regions he was writing about. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Greek mental representation of the world — if, indeed, such a thing existed in the ancient

consciousness — would have been increasingly blurry along the edges. Ctesias was clearly writing into a broader narrative of far-off exoticism, and it is difficult to tell to what degree he believed this genre to be true. It seems likely that he would have already been somewhat primed to believe or report tales of magical springs, eternal fires and strange peoples. This does not necessarily mean that Ctesias was faithfully recording the truth as he knew it, however the question of belief is an important one to consider, largely because it is impossible to answer for certain and yet plays a significant role in our ability to determine the degree to which Ctesias exaggerated, or fabricated, his writings.

However, despite the very real exaggerations that are contained within the fragments of the *Indica*, most of the content that survives is actually fairly close to what we know of the historical reality of India. Much of the rest seem to be based on a mixture of trader's exaggerations, Indo-Bactrian folklore, and Persian iconography. There are four main parties who appear to have contributed to the formation of the material in Ctesias' *Indica*: the Indians physically living in India,<sup>285</sup> the merchants, travelers and Persian officials who were physically crossing the space between north-western India and the Persian court, the Persians, and Ctesias himself. Given that our knowledge of both Ctesias' *Indica* and the historical reality of India during this time are fragmentary, it is impossible to determine where along the path of transmission information was exaggerated and fabricated.

The most substantive dissonance between what we believe to be true about ancient India and Ctesias' depiction of it is Ctesias' allusions to the 'king of the Indians.' As discussed above, this could only be reconciled with the reality of the region if Ctesias was only referring to one

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<sup>285</sup> It is important to note that the same issues of distance that would have existed between the Persian court and the Gandhara region would also have affected the accuracy of information that the north-western Indians had about other groups further west and south. There is no reason to assume that the Indians in the Persian Empire would have had accurate information about other peoples, particularly those further south.

group of Indians, however the size of the geographical region he seems to be covering spans more than just one mahajanapada and the Persians would clearly have known of more than just one of the Indian polities. If not for Herodotus' more accurate conception, this issue might be plausibly dismissed by citing the physical and ideological distance between Ctesias and India, but as it stands this raises a major concern for Ctesias' credibility. This misrepresentation is fairly subtle and does not seem to be purposeful, but does raise serious questions about the accuracy of Ctesias' sources and the way he is represented in the *Indica's* fragments.

Arguably, the fragments that survive tell us as much about the authors writing them as they do about Ctesias' *Indica*. With the exception of the summary found in Photius, the fragments are short and generally used by the author to prove a specific point. As such, even if the words are paraphrased faithfully from Ctesias, these shorter selections are more closely related to the argument the secondary author was making rather than Ctesias' point of view. By the nature of the fragments that do survive, we do not have any clear idea of how Ctesias himself framed the *Indica*, or how he chose his sources. We also do not know whether the fantastical fragments that do survive are representative of the scope of his work as a whole. The one source that might have provided some of this context — the *epitome* written by the Byzantine monk Photius — is sadly lacking on the subject. Ctesias is certainly guilty on some level of transmitting tales that he may or may not have believed, but so too are the authors who listed the marvels he describes while simultaneously criticizing Ctesias for the 'lies' he tells.

Indeed, the very survival of the pieces that remain is significant. Preservation of ancient sources was purposeful, not passive, so the parts that survive must have been important to the individuals who referenced or copied them. While it is evident that Ctesias would have been an important source for those writing about India prior to Alexander's military extravaganza, he

continues to be cited even after the wealth of eye-witness accounts that circulated in the years after Alexander's death. Alexander's military expedition through the East inaugurated a new age of cultural fusion and contact between India and the Mediterranean Greek world. However, the major sources from this time period seem to have been contradictory and confusing. Indeed, Strabo includes a lengthy disclaimer about these sources in his *Geography*:

Wherefore they do not give out the same accounts of the same things, even though they have written these accounts as though their statements had been carefully confirmed. And some of them were both on the same expedition together and made their sojourns together, like those who helped Alexander to subdue Asia; yet they all frequently contradict one another. But if they differ thus about what was seen, what must we think of what they report from hearsay?<sup>286</sup>

This lack of reliable sources might explain some of the continued relevance of Ctesias' *Indica*,<sup>287</sup> however, by the end of the Julio-Claudian period the fables of India should have been debunked due to the frequency of trade and increased contact between the two regions. The increase in factual knowledge about India can be seen in Pliny's *Natural History*, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, and in Ptolemy's *Geographia*. Despite this, the marvels of Ctesias and other pre-Alexandrian authors continued to influence later authors. Indeed, some of the marvels that Ctesias mentions would become core features of the Western body of folklore and myth (such as

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<sup>286</sup> Henderson, "STRABO, Geography," p. 3-5 (XV.I.2). Greek: διόπερ οὐδὲ τὰ αὐτὰ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν ἐξαγγέλλουσι, καὶ ταῦτα συγγράψαντες ὡς ἂν πεφροντισμένως ἐξ η̅τασμένα, τινὲς δ' αὐτῶν καὶ συστρατεύσαντες ἀλλήλοις καὶ συνεπιδημήσαντες, καθάπερ οἱ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ συγκαταστρεψάμενοι τὴν Ἀσίαν: ἀλλ' ἕκαστος ἐκάστῳ τὰναντία λέγει πολλάκις. ὅπου δὲ καὶ περὶ τῶν ὁραθέντων οὕτω διαφέρονται, τί δεῖ νομίζειν περὶ τῶν ἐξ ἀκοῆς.

<sup>287</sup> The question of why Scylax fades so completely into obscurity even as Ctesias survives is also an important one. Strabo refers to him as an 'ancient' source, implying that his account might not have survived to be incorporated in the post-Alexandrian writings.

the Unicorn and Manticore). Even through Ctesias' ancient reputation as a liar, his stories clearly held an allure that led authors to inadvertently preserve portions of his work even while disparaging them.

It bears reiterating that what we have of the *Indica* is incomplete and may not be representative of the work as a whole. Photius mentions that Ctesias describes the manners and customs of the Indians, but then neglects to tell us *what* Ctesias says on the topic. It is possible to glean some understanding of the wording of Ctesias' *Indica* based on overlapping fragments, but overall it is hard to tell what the structure of the work was. Crucially, the introduction of his work does not survive at all, and it is thus impossible to tell what the *telos* of his work was. The fragments imply that Ctesias presented all of his information as fact, but we do not have any information on why he wrote his *Indica*, or who the intended audience of it was. It does seem to have been read fairly broadly, and there is no indication that it was a political or official source in any way.

So was Ctesias a liar or a did he diligently report information as he came by it? Given the information that we do have, it seems most likely that Ctesias was an imperfect narrator who exaggerated or expanded some of the stories that he had been told in order to play into the Greek conception of the exotic nature of distant lands. I would argue that these exaggerations were not intentionally designed to deceive his audience, but were rather of the form that one might use when telling a friend a particularly entertaining story from one's childhood. Furthermore, while these stories were certainly exaggerated at some point in the transmission process between India and the fragments that survive today, we cannot necessarily ascribe these exaggerations to Ctesias himself. As discussed previously, some myths may have come to Ctesias' knowledge already formed and traders may have elaborated upon these tales even further. Finally, regardless

of the degree to which we believe Ctesias, it is undeniable that his writings had a profound impact on Greek, Roman and Western culture and conceptions of the East. Thus, in addition to the information that a careful reading of the *Indica* provides about the networks interlinking India and the Greek world, the *Indica* is also crucial to our understanding of the development of concepts such as Orientalism and Exoticism.

# Conclusion

No society or group of people, no matter how tightly defined, can truly exist or be described entirely outside of its connections with others. For a conglomerate as transient and diverse as the Greeks, this is especially true. The Greeks held a great deal of curiosity about the scope (and, crucially, the limits) of the world, and their engagement with the exploration of the outer reaches of the *oikoumene* as they understood it was certainly a defining aspect of their history, both before and after Alexander. The Greek interactions with India discussed in Chapter 1 are not just important for our understanding of the relationship between the Mediterranean and India, but also have significant implications about the transmission of knowledge through various different types of contact between peoples.

Furthermore, as I have argued throughout this thesis, India was the eastern limit of the Greeks' known world and, fostered by a tangible desire to define the seemingly limitless extent of the earth, it accordingly played a particularly significant role in the construction of Greek geography and identity. Distorted by long distances and many layers of transmission, many 'true' aspects of Ancient Indian history, culture and society became crucial aspects of the Greek understanding of the workings of the world within which they existed. This worked both ways however — just as reports of India influenced Greek conceptions of the outer reaches of the *oikoumene*, Greeks consciously, and almost mercenarily, promoted a narrative of India that fit into broader facets of Greek ideology. India was used not only to construct and supplement the Greek understanding of the edges of the *oikoumene*, but also functioned as a metric against which the Greeks defined themselves.

The discussion of the various points of contact between the two regions, combined with the later analysis about the ‘truthfulness’ of the surviving textual accounts of India, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the networks that existed during this time period (both in terms of simple existence as well as scope) and the role that they played in the movement and prehension of knowledge across space and time. I argue that the surviving descriptions of India from this period, while often featuring not-insignificant amounts of exaggeration and selective reporting to support an overarching argument or worldview, have some logical, but important, implications.

First, both trade and traders clearly played a significant role in the transmission of information. The writings of Ctesias indicate that, while there were sometimes Indians in the Persian court, Indian goods often traveled further than the ‘original’ Indian traders from whence the goods were procured. These goods carried pieces of information about India that may seem trivial to us but were clearly significant both to Ctesias and to enough writers from later periods that these mentions from the original reports have survived long enough for me to analyze them in my thesis.

Second, the inclusion of things such as the One-Horned Ass, the Martichora, the Elephant, and some of the exotic groups of peoples in the surviving reports indicate that these paths of transmission preserved not just evidence for the *existence* of goods, peoples and animals within the Indian region, but also information related to the more intangible facets of Indian life and culture (even if they were not necessarily understood by the Greeks as such). In some cases this conveyance of cultural knowledge seems to be tied directly to the movement of objects along these trade routes. For example, Ctesias’ tales of the Martichora and the destructive capabilities of the Indian Elephant are both associated with his claims that he personally saw



both animals. In other cases, particularly those related to peoples, these stories must have arisen out of conversations with Persian sources, or traders from the regions closer to India (such as Bactria).

While India was certainly not the first ‘other’ the Greeks interacted with, the survival of these accounts of the fantastical wealth and exotic creatures associated with India indicates that these descriptions carried a persistent allure for later generations. The broader theories that shaped the way India was understood by the Greeks were simultaneously constructed around the stories about India that traveled to Persia and the Mediterranean. Thus India, and the literature about it, had a significant impact on the way the Greeks (and their western successors) interpreted and interacted with the concept of the ‘other.’ Indeed, it has even been argued that Ctesias’ was the first proponent of Orientalism.<sup>288</sup>

While there are certainly elements of Orientalist ideas in the fragments of Ctesias that remain, that does not necessitate the *Indica* itself having an Orientalist underpinning. It is perhaps more likely that the fragments that survive were preserved and framed by writers influenced by concepts of Orientalism within their societies. Thus, the marvels found in Ctesias’ writings might rather be a product of the curiosity and fascination that comes with stories of a space as distant as India would have been to him rather than an essentializing of the Indian culture and peoples.

All of the information discussed in this thesis comes purely from moments of proven contact, but, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is likely that there were many more points of contact between the two regions than we have sources for. The fact that Aeschylus, writing before Herodotus, was able to mention India with no descriptive context in his *The Suppliants* indicates

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<sup>288</sup> Sancisi-Weerdenburg, “Decadence in the Empire or Decadence in the Sources? From Source to Synthesis: Ctesias,” p.43-44.

that the term ‘Indians’ held some degree of recognition amongst his audience, even if only as a group of distant peoples. Given the sources that we do have, this information must have been disseminated through paths outside of those explicitly mentioned. It is likely that trade routes and traders played a major role in the spread of this knowledge, however it is also probable that Greeks who spent time in Persian cities or royal courts may also have gained knowledge about India and transported it back to Greece in the way that Ctesias seems to have done. It is unlikely that these types of contact between individuals would have distinct impacts on ‘Greek’ knowledge and thought as a whole — more likely, each point of contact might have a small ripple effect amongst the personal networks of those effected. Many of these interactions might not have been transcribed, and, even if they were set down in writing, most would have been lost to time.

The importance behind these points of contact for contemporary scholarship is that they allow us to re-evaluate the framework within which we understand connections between societies during this time period. While there has been an increasing amount of work persuasively arguing for the importance of the close relationship between Greece and Egypt on Greek thought and philosophy,<sup>289</sup> similar connections drawn between Indian and Greek philosophy are met with skepticism due to lack of proven *direct, physical* contact between philosophers and India (or vice versa between Indian sages and Greece).<sup>290</sup> However, as discussed throughout this thesis, important facets of cultural and geographical knowledge did travel through trade networks far beyond the people and places from which they originated. This has important implications for our consideration of the impact of Indian thought systems on the

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<sup>289</sup> Moyer, *Egypt and the Limits of Hellenism*. Kingsley, “From Pythagoras to the Turba Philosophorum.”

<sup>290</sup> Westbrook, Peter (04/30/2001). "Pythagoras the Mystic: The Greek rishi who taught reincarnation, vegetarianism and more." *Hinduism today* (0896-0801)

teachings of Pythagoras, for example. While it is highly unlikely that Pythagoras ever physically came close to India, the remarkable similarities between Indian scripture and Pythagorean teachings of reincarnation, vegetarianism and the human relationship to the Divine have been commented on by many.<sup>291</sup> The feasibility of the Pythagorean connection (either direct or indirect) to Egypt should not be discounted,<sup>292</sup> however it is also possible that Pythagoras had indirect contact with Indian teachings *through* Persian scholars and sufis who would have certainly been familiar with Indian beliefs.<sup>293</sup> Parallels have also been drawn between Platonic ideals and Vedic-Upanishadic philosophies and social hierarchies.<sup>294</sup> Ultimately, these threads of connections are important more for the overall picture they paint of the networks spanning India and the Mediterranean rather than for any argumentation about ‘proof’ of influence between the two cultures.

The period discussed within this thesis is not one for which there is an abundance of evidence on any topic, let alone that of the connections between the Greeks and a land they were barely aware of. However, the combination of explicit and implicit evidence about interactions between the Greeks and Indians indicates that trade networks and the movements of individuals into and through Persia led to a consistent flow of information, goods, and peoples that connected lands as physically distant as India and Greece. Rather than thinking of these points of contact as isolated and unlikely unless proven otherwise, we ought to revise the framework within which we understand contact between the two regions in order to allow for the impact that these networks had on cosmology, culture and identity throughout the ancient world.

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<sup>291</sup> *The Classical Review* 2, no. 10 (1888): 321. Pollet and Eggermont, *India and the Ancient World*, p. 142.

<sup>292</sup> Kingsley, “From Pythagoras to the Turba Philosophorum.”

<sup>293</sup> Westbrook, p. 44.

<sup>294</sup> Pollet and Eggermont, *India and the Ancient World*, p. 142. They further write that Eusebius (*Praep. Evang.* XI 3) considered it possible that Socrates had met with Indian philosophers, and write that “we may think of a philosophical trend not unknown to Aristotle himself by whom certain elements could have been conveyed to Alexander.”

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