

Topography, Markets, and the Good End of Empire*

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With the opening of stable trade routes in the early Empire, Romans took a sustained scholarly interest in South Asian topography. The abundance and exoticism of the goods of the East provided a visual template for paradise, but, surprisingly, Roman writers ascribe prestige to indirect market transactions rather than direct military control. Distance heightened both what was desirable and forbidding about the East. I argue that the impossibility of a monopoly over the eastern luxury trade led to a rethinking of the hard and soft borders of empire: where direct control was impossible or impractical, the study of topography “confirms” that it was also undesirable. The topographers’ defense of trade directly affects their choice and use of sources, and the result is a value-laden topography of extremity that affirms several foregone conclusions, notably the centrality and primacy of the Mediterranean and its “natural” limits. For Roman encyclopedists such as Strabo and Pliny, topography shows that caravans, not campaigns, define the ideal limits of Roman power so that markets, not fortresses, become the “good end of empire.”

Roman Economy and Topography

Romans encountered India in waves of military and trade relations. The discovery of the monsoon winds by Hippalus around the first century BCE made it possible to sail from the Red Sea to India, and by the time of Augustus Roman ships were skirting the Malabar coast.¹ Overland trade persisted alongside the new route despite being comparatively arduous, and

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¹ *Periplus* 57; G.F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring: In the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 24; J. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire 29 B.C. to A.D. 641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), viii.

costly.² The maritime trade was direct—Roman vessels manned by Roman crews and insured by Roman patrons could organize a round-trip between Ocelis and Muziris in just under three months.³ The Romans trafficked the Hippalus route heavily and regularly; Strabo reports up to 120 ships leaving for India from Myos Hormos annually.⁴ The older land route (sometimes called the Incense Route) was significantly slower and consequently more expensive, handling less volume more seasonally: shipments sent along its length were subject to adulteration and theft by middlemen and bandits.⁵ Despite the grandiose claims of diplomacy (e.g., *Res gestae* 31), the Roman military could not protect trade far beyond the empire's frontiers.⁶

² E.g., the Sassanians deliberately increased export tariffs on the route in late antiquity; see T. Daryaee, "The Persian Gulf in Late Antiquity," *Journal of World History* 14 (2003): 5.

³ Pliny, *Nat.* 6.96. Though, depending on the winds, the total length of the trip could vary widely; see Yu Huan, *Weilue* 11, trans. J.E. Hill, "The Peoples of the West" (2004) online: <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html#section11>.

⁴ Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.5.12.

⁵ M.P. Fitzpatrick, "Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism," *Journal of World History* 22 (2011): 43; cf. F. Millar, *Rome, the Greek World, and the East: Volume 3. The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 294. On the adulteration of spices, see Miller, *The Spice Trade*, 58, 81; on the relative costs of the sea and land trades per shipment, see S.E. Sidebotham, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa: 30 B.C.–A.D. 217* (Brill, Leiden, 1986), 76. Caravans remained viable in part because they could leave each fall while ships had to await the monsoon winds; P.F. Bang, *The Roman Bazaar* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), 134. See also E. Heldaas Seland, "The Persian Gulf or the Red Sea?: Two Axes in Ancient Indian Ocean Trade, Where to Go and Why," *World Archaeology* 43 (2011): 398–409.

⁶ The border fortresses of the Eastern Desert of Egypt linking Berenice and the Nile Valley have been thought to constitute its striking distance on land in the region; R.B. Jackson, *At Empire's Edge: Exploring Rome's Egyptian Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 167, 202. S.E. Sidebotham and R.E. Zitterkopf detail the trade routes of the area in "Routes through the Eastern Desert of Egypt," *Expedition* 37 (1995): 39–52. By sea, *Periplus* 19 implies coast guard units patrolled as far as the north end of the Red Sea in the first century, and a centurion was posted at Leuke Kome as a customs agent; see S.E. Sidebotham, "Roman Interests in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean," in *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, ed. J. Reade (London: Kegan Paul International in association with the British Museum, 1996), 293; G.K. Young, "The Customs-Officer at the Nabataean Port of Leuke Kome ('Periplus Maris Erythraei' 19)," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 119 (1997): 266–68. On Rome's spotty oversight of Indian emporia, see M. Wheeler, *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London: Penguin, 1955), 152.

As traders plied these routes, conflicts between the “local” land route and the “express” sea route emerge. The sea promised an unmediated encounter between Rome and the East, whereas the slower land route was very much mediated by the influence and demands of the communities it passed through and depended on as way stations. The guidebooks and manuals produced by sea travelers, such as the *Periplus Maris Erythrei* and the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, maintain the distinction by defining India, much like Diogo Ribiero’s 1529 map of the New World, by its ports and trade goods. Because sea travel between the Mediterranean and India takes place on a vehicle, the experience of this route invites a stronger dichotomy between Rome and “the East,” as sailors glance the shore only from afar, from a protected rather than an embedded space. Compared to land travel, many sea narratives are less ethnographic and more commuterly. Descriptions of land travel address precisely these gaps: the caravans that trafficked the land routes to India notice climatic gradients and cultural slippages that made it harder to maintain a Rome-East, inside-outside dichotomy. Rather, the experience of the overland route made travel itself an object of inquiry which offered surprises of a different order, like Apollonius of Tyana’s discovery that cinnamon grows on trees.⁷ Metropolitan intellectuals such as Pliny and Strabo attempted to reconcile the broad strokes of the maritime tradition with the fine work of the land travelers’ observations, taking a special interest in the potential explanatory power of changes in nature and custom along the way to make sense of the shape and boundaries of the world in a way that would make sense of difference.⁸ What results is a substantial historical and scientific discourse within the Roman empire on the relationship of topography to ethnography. The writers treating these themes both cite and attempt to adjudicate

⁷ Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 3.4.

⁸ J.S. Romm sees this explanation as tantamount to conquest (*The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 99), but I see trade as a position equally supportable by the endeavor of “knowing the world.” Cf. E. Gabba, “True History and False History in Classical Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (1981): 52, who sees rising interest in the exotic (e.g., Herodotus, Ctesias) as a reflection of broadened horizons relative to a diminished polis as well as evidence of plural audiences; what he calls “middlebrow culture” (53), in contrast to the “real” and “practical” history distinction of W. Schmitthenner, “Rome and India: Aspects of Universal History during the Principate,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): 90–106.

between Hellenistic and Roman, literary and eyewitness accounts, and in doing so create a rationale for the extension of soft power far beyond the limits of Rome's striking power.

Heterotopic Historiography

If utopia is an ideal imaginary, heterotopia might be thought of as a real imaginary.⁹ India was the latter to Rome. It did not fit neatly into the “ideological necessity for a negative image of the barbarian” noted by Shaw, or Gabba's socially critical ideal of a Golden Age, but remained stubbornly, substantively, ambivalent.¹⁰ Foucault called such ambiguous places “counter-sites,” real spaces placed by culture that, in contrast to utopias, are not just sites of perfection but objects of aversion and desire, “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹¹ Utopias do not *exist*, they only signify. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are reachable, hence dual: they both exist and signify, and these perspectives remain essentially in conflict. Foucault considered the phenomenon of “emplacement”—the interpretation of space into place—to be a particular feature of medieval consciousness, but I argue it goes back much further, offering a chance to understand Roman perceptions of India beyond simple exoticism and instrumentality.¹²

Heterotopias are mirrored places: the heterotopic lens inverts and transvalues the qualities of real spaces, adapting them to the norms and

⁹ Gabba defines utopia as the site of “primitivist longings . . . combined with philosophical theories and egalitarian leanings . . . dressed up to suit contemporary taste” (“True History,” 58).

¹⁰ See B.D. Shaw, “Rebels and Outsiders,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 11: The High Empire, A.D. 70–192*, ed. A.K. Bowman et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 374–75. D.J. Mattingly considers this necessity “the main cause of the inability of Roman writers to provide a true picture of peoples outside the empire” (*Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010], 31).

¹¹ M. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–27. Cf. the “topographic other” of J.Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 236.

¹² “In the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of places. . . . It was this complete hierarchy, this opposition, this intersection of places that constituted what could very roughly be called medieval space: the space of emplacement” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22).

needs of an authoritative (metropolitan) gaze.¹³ This is subtly different than Gabba's utopian "paradoxography" in that heterotopia does not simply package "extravagant fantasy" as an ideal-world foil to the reality subject to critique, but locates an ambivalent fantasy of an Other place in the real world, just barely within its boundaries.¹⁴ For the imperial Romans India, like Germania to the late Republicans, was both a historical and a discursive space, a theater of collective memory and identity, and a real place with its own very vivid problems: where utopia derives its force from an absence of problems, heterotopia is educative both based on its virtues and vices. This mode of accessing the idea of India was made possible by barriers to entry that (in real terms) only a few vessels breached.¹⁵ It is important to note that to the extent that Roman attitudes towards India were heterotopic, any analogy between Roman accounts and British imperial attitudes is false.¹⁶ Roman discourse on the East, though exoticizing, was never orientalist in the sense of "static, despotic and irrelevant."¹⁷

¹³ "The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (ibid., 24).

¹⁴ Gabba, "True History," 59. Cf. Dio Chrysostom's utopianism: "No men live more happily than you (the Phrygians), with the exception of the Indians, for in their country, 'tis said, the rivers flow not, like yours, with water, but one river with pellucid wine, another with honey, and another with oil, and they have their springs among the hills—in the breasts, so to speak, of the earth" (*Or.* 35.434).

¹⁵ "If we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development . . . but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 27).

¹⁶ Imperial Rome being the core narrative for Britain would involve accepting Victorian progressive historiography which, accounts such as those of the New Right, to varying degrees, do; so R. Alston, "Dialogues in Imperialism: Rome, Britain and India," in *India, Greece, and Rome, 1757 to 2007*, ed. E. Hall and P. Vasunia, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Supplement 108 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2010), 54.

¹⁷ E.W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993), 168, interpreting Hegel.

Roman India was a place where fear coupled with desire, but the fulfillment of desire could mean death. Strabo (d. 24 CE), for example, tells us in India there is a tree “which has large pods, like the bean, ten fingers long and full of honey.”¹⁸ Though sweetness is a feature of utopias—lands of milk and honey—the Indian sweet is fatal, and it must be. Roman writers had an anxious attachment to the idea of India: India had desirable commodities, luxuries, but it was also a country of illusions and terrors, a place at the topographic, intellectual, and aesthetic extreme that did not fit neatly into an ideology of simple barbarism: what was good in India was never unequivocally good, but often came at an absurd price. Further, Romans never perceived Indians as without culture, simple savages to be pillaged: not only were Indian gods given an *interpretatio graeca*, but Indian philosophers were treated with a sort of holy awe after the world-famous self-immolation of Zarmenochages in the Athenian agora and the travels of Apollonius of Tyana.¹⁹

Indians were widely respected, Indian goods valued, and yet India itself was feared: an attitude most easily visible in Strabo’s consistent pairing of the delights of India with correspondent horrors. It is a place where “stones are dug up which have the color of frankincense, and are sweeter than figs or honey,” again, indices of utopia, but also where large serpents “fly about by night and let fall drops of urine or sweat, which blister the skin of the unwary with putrid sores”—the sweet is tempered with the sour and bitter.²⁰ So too in the case of the gold of India, which was legendary, the danger of obtaining it a truism. It was a much-repeated story since Hellenistic times that raw Indian gold was a precious sand formed by the rising sun. However tempting this image might be on its own, it is always conjoined in the sources with a reminder that it is guarded by ants “smaller than dogs but larger than foxes” that would eat the flesh of would-be harvesters, which is not to say that it is impossible to obtain, just obscenely risky.²¹

¹⁸ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.21.

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.73, Plutarch, *Alex.* 69 and Cassius Dio, *Hist.* 54.9. Philostratus claims Apollonius found Brahmins not only worshipping Greek gods, but “the most ancient of the Greek Gods, a statue of Athena Polias and of Apollo of Delos and of Dionysus of Limnae and another of him of Amyclae, and others of similar age” (*Vit. Apoll.* 3.14).

²⁰ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.37.

²¹ Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.90, 102; Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.37; Pliny, *Nat.* 11.36.

These sweet-and-sour couplings suggest that imperial Romans perceived India as not simply an Other place, but an amplified place, a view whose roots can be found in Herodotus' "observation" that "the extremities of the inhabited world had allotted to them by nature the fairest things, just as it was the lot of Hellas to have its seasons far more fairly tempered than other lands."²² The "middle place" of Hellas slips easily into the centrality of imperial Rome, facilitated by Rome's appropriation of Greek intellectual clichés, and the interpretive extremity that became Roman common sense regarding India built a useful ambivalence into the Mediterranean imaginary of the East. The Roman experience of the encounter was governed by the idea of extremity, which results in a rhetoric of paired oppositions: for each wonderful thing there is a(n equally?) terrible thing (there) so that desire is simultaneously, invariably, aroused and frustrated.²³ If the ends of the earth possess the fairest things, they are also intemperate; the same climate that produces wonders also produces horrors, and one who wants the former must face the latter. As long as conquest was impossible or unthinkable, a heterotopic idea of extremity recommends the status quo of market interaction as the safest mode of contact, a way for Rome to appropriate what is desirable while outsourcing the horrific, and perhaps the exaggerated accounts of danger also spoke to the incredible expense of eastern luxury goods. As Roman collecting practices visualized the relation of provinces to the empire, ambivalent accounts of the Indian trade suggested that the good end of empire was commercial, not military.²⁴

²² Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.106. Cf. Megasthenes, who called India "the greatest of all nations and the happiest in its lot" (Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.30), that is, a straightforward utopia.

²³ This is true even of Trogus' otherwise relatively colorless account of Alexander's conquest (Justinus, *Epit.* 12).

²⁴ On the collecting habits of imperial metropolitans, see M. Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850* (New York: Vintage, 2006) and K. Christian, *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). On Rome, see L.M. Stirling, *The Learned Collector: Mythological Statuettes and Classical Taste in Late Antique Gaul* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) and Bang, *The Roman Bazaar*, 290–91. On the origin of exotic collections in the Hellenistic kingdoms, see E. Dench, *Romulus' Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 284.

The eastern trade partners of Rome were civilized and affluent, strikingly unlike the northern “barbarian type.”²⁵ This is surprising because, to a certain extent, Roman writers still treated the ethnic-moral package as geographically determined, though they never produced anything like a coherent racial theory.²⁶ Yet whereas accounts of northern barbarians owed much to conflict narratives such as Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, the Roman discourse of difference regarding India was filtered through Hellenistic accounts such as Megasthenes’ and Nearchus’ *Indicas* and regularly supplemented with trade knowledge. The legend of Alexander, which would prove so influential in the medieval Middle East and South Asia, was already deeply entrenched by Roman antiquity, and though vastly outdated, the narratives that grew up around Alexander’s legacy were often preferred to the ongoing eyewitness accounts of traders.²⁷ Strabo writes, “As for the merchants who nowadays sail from Egypt via the Nile and Arabian Gulf as far as India, few have sailed as far as the Ganges, and even these are merely private individuals and are useless with regard to accounts of the places visited.”²⁸ Interestingly, Strabo does not discredit eyewitnesses based on an a priori idea of the “unchanging East,” but precisely because he perceives India to have a history such that “respectable” sources are to be preferred to the banausic. As Parker has observed, “differences of social status among the users of spatial information influenced or even created different registers of geographical thought.”²⁹ These registers affected citation practices and the

²⁵ E.g.: “Barbarians were synonymous with incivility” (T.S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 BC–AD 400* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003], 291). Cf. Strabo’s respectful treatment of the Brahmins, summarized in R.K. French, *Ancient Natural History: Histories of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 127.

²⁶ For one inventory of national stereotypes, see Julian, *Against the Galileans* 1.347ff.

²⁷ E.g., Romm calls Pliny’s Book 7 a “rough survey of Greek Indographic writings from the fourth century onwards, thrown together in the highly reductive fashion typical of the *Natural History*” (*The Edges of the Earth*, 104).

²⁸ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.4. Their dismissal may supervene on their low social and moral standing: J.H. D’Arms cites Juvenal (*Sat.* 14.205) to illustrate the high cultural sense that profiteering was incompatible with virtue (*Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981], 152), and Fitzpatrick notes, “at no time between 31 B.C.E. and the mid second century did any member of the Roman aristocracy personally sail to India to enrich themselves” (“Provincializing Rome,” 40).

²⁹ G. Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 191.

knowledge they produced in turn. Strabo relegates the insights of traders based on their lack of social status within the Roman world—there lack of aristocratic education makes them useful observers in the present, but does not give them standing to challenge the received accounts.³⁰

Roman knowledge about India was neither purely descriptive nor strongly ideological, but the result of a politics of writerly subjectivity that ranked the production of knowledge by Romans according to metropolitan standards of sensibility; true statements require correct education much more so than direct experience. Roman authors therefore portray the object of knowledge (India) in a way that establishes their authority as knowing subjects within their own intellectual milieu. Strabo's *Geography*, like Pliny's *Natural History* after it, attempts to represent the "state of the art," and the project established him as the encyclopedist of Roman geographical knowledge.³¹ Strabo claims some authority based on his wide travels, but when he does so, he treats himself explicitly as a source while maintaining a separate "objective" voice.³² When speaking as a philosopher and a scientist, Strabo stakes his authority on having the right sort of education needed to contextualize even his own observations as well as to weigh those of others.³³

Strabo is much more than an epitomizer³⁴: he establishes his objectivity and credibility by showily distancing himself from the exaggerated claims

³⁰ Explicitly in 1.1.21: "those who have written the treatises entitled Harbours and Coasting Voyages leave their investigations incomplete, if they have failed to add all at mathematical and astronomical information which properly belonged in their books." Cf. 15.1.6–8, excluding "mythical" expeditions such as those of Kyros and Semiramis. N.B.: Pliny (*Nat.* 6.96–106) uses merchants and military sources to establish current affairs in India; cf. S. Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), 37–40.

³¹ On Strabo and Pliny as the premier mediators (collectors, cataloguers, and critics) of ancient Indographic traditions, see Romm (*The Edges of the Earth*, 94–109). On encyclopedism as the demarcation of world and empire, see A. M. Riggsby, "Guides to the Wor(l)d," in *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, ed. J. König and T. Whitmarsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104.

³² "Now I shall tell what part of the land and sea I have myself visited and concerning what part I have trusted to accounts given by others by word of mouth or in writing" (Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.5.11–12).

³³ See *Geogr.* 1.1.1 for Strabo's understanding of his authorial voice.

³⁴ E.g., *Geogr.* 2.1.38, Strabo as a corrector of Eratosthenes and Hipparchus.

of previous writers who “do not describe [India] accurately, and because of their ignorance and of its remoteness magnify all things or make them more marvelous.”³⁵ Against these, he suggests there are trustworthy authorities and that hearing is potentially “much more important than sight for the purposes of science,” if the report is trustworthy.³⁶ Given the prevalence of false report, what is required is a listener with a finely tuned sense of rank, like the messenger of a general.³⁷ Strabo implies himself to be such a person, and the boundary of the fabulous is precisely where he stakes his claim to authority. Interestingly, he does not limit himself to trustworthy reports, but often indulges the reader with catalogues of wonders on a take-it-or-leave-it basis when discussing realms beyond his experience.³⁸ While he previously separated his voice qua source and encyclopedist, his lowering of the standards for the truth for reports on lands outside his experience indicates a caution, even a humility, about the capacities of his education to judge alone.³⁹ Yet when Strabo attempts to be “scientific” about the truth of his descriptions, he betrays a previous commitment to certain value judgments which he holds in common with other metropolitan topographers. A guiding motif of his *Geography* is the assumption that the further east one goes, the bigger, better, and (at the same time) worse things get. Pliny the Elder shared this intuition regarding the known world in his *Natural History* and saw it as almost infinitely extensible: if the Indians are more long-lived than the Greeks, and the Seres than the Indians, then Taprobane (Sri Lanka), which was “long regarded as another world,” should be better still.⁴⁰ Likewise, if India’s elephants are “better” than Africa’s, then it should come as no surprise that “[Taprobane’s] elephants are larger and

³⁵ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.37.

³⁶ Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.5.11.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ E.g., Indians “are long-lived and that the term of life extends to 130 years”; the Seres “attain an age more than two-hundred years; Indian elephants are better, “larger and stronger” than African elephants; and that the rivers of India are larger than those of Asia (Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.34, 37, 43). Parker assures the reader, “The two separate genera of elephants, the Indian and the African, differ considerably in appearance” (*The Making of Roman India*, 127).

³⁹ Contra Romm, who views the persistence of marvel catalogues as the failure of “Strabo’s attempt at a revisionist Indography” (*The Edges of the Earth*, 103).

⁴⁰ Pliny, *Nat.* 6.22, trans. B. Thayer, “Pliny the Elder: The Natural History,” (2006) online: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Pliny_the_Elder/

more bellicose than those of India and that it is more productive of gold and pearls of greater size than India itself.”⁴¹ A second presupposition closes the general frame of reference Pliny and Strabo shared when studying the Far East. This is not so much a thesis as a consequence of the more often stated belief that the Mediterranean is both the central and the best place on earth.

The result of this explicit commitment is an implicit aversion to purely fabulous accounts of the East. We see this particularly clearly in analyses of ethnicity. If men seemed to become more like the immortals the closer they lived to the gates of the rising sun, they were emphatically not gods. Roman writers repeatedly insist that these borderlands were inside, if barely, the known world, and suffered in equal measure to any perceived benefits.⁴² Grotesquery drives home the point: “Eudoxus informs us that in the southern parts of India the soles of men’s feet are a cubit long while those of the women are so small that they are called Struthopodes [sparrow- or ostrich-footed]. The women conceive at five years of age and do not live beyond the eighth year, “while the men can live up to 130 years unimpaired by old age.”⁴³ Aristotle’s understanding of fertility and aging was that “the female animal,” “when it is free from the mother, on account of its weakness . . . quickly approaches its maturity and old age.”⁴⁴ If this was true in the middle of the earth (where Greeks and Romans lived), then the extreme version of this rule must hold at the extremes of the earth: not only is longevity affected, but secondary sex traits as well. In the East, men are more men, and women a caricature of womanhood. On a cultural level, Easterners play something of a Cyclopan opposite to Romans.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² E.g.: “No one thinks Abaris the Hyperborean to be a god, though he had such power that he was carried along by an arrow” (Celsus apud Origen, *Cels.* 3.32, trans. H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953], 148; cf. Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.36; Porphyry, *Vit. Pyth.* 28–29).

⁴³ Pliny, *Nat.* 16.17. Cf. “In this country where Heracles’ daughter was queen, the girls are marriageable at seven years, and the men do not live longer than forty years” (Arrian, *Ind.* 8.9).

⁴⁴ A. Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 34, citing Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 775a.

⁴⁵ E.g., Indians eat when inclined rather than at mealtimes, though “[t]he contrary custom would be better for the ends of social and civil life” (Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.53), and they neither make contracts nor require securities (Aelian, *Var. hist.* 5.50.4.1). Both authors cite Megasthenes. Arrian was surprised that “all Indians are free, and no Indian at all is a slave” (*Ind.* 8.10).

Roman topographers saw the East not merely an earthly Elysium in the neighborhood of heaven, but a region within the known world, distorted in both beautiful and terrible ways, but very much subject to history and scientific analysis. Roman writers assure their readers that the extremity of the land also plays out on the bodies of its inhabitants; Mediterraneans are therefore not exempt from influence, but benefit from their moderate position to have access to the best overall quality of life. What they lack in the details (in luxuries) can be imported. Issues of economic inequality within the Mediterranean as they might affect access do not, in principle, challenge the overall phenomenon of geographic influence or the argument in favor of trade. India, Roman writers tell us, is treacherous in the extreme and visitors were liable to acquire local characteristics. The *Alexander Romance* tells us it is this fear of “going native” that turned back a third-century Christian mission to India, one member of which wrote: “But I merely reached the Akroteria of India a few years ago with the blessed Moses, the bishop of Adule, for, being distressed by the heat, which was so fierce that water which on gushing from its fountain was excessively cold began to boil when put into a vessel, I turned back when I noticed this, as I found no shelter from the burning heat.”⁴⁶

As a source, historian, scientist, philosopher, and encyclopedist, Strabo codifies the disparate strands of what was known about or imputed to the distant East into a paradigm of what could be known. The result is surprisingly undogmatic, incorporating a richness of detail drawn from luxury trade and resulting in what Almagor calls a spectrum rather than a simple dichotomy of barbarity.⁴⁷ Still, he implicitly clings to a few Roman intellectual apriorisms, the most significant of which is the organizing presupposition of the determinative value of extremity. For Strabo, “The extreme parts of the inhabited world somehow possess the most excellent products,” including “animals, both quadrupeds and birds, [that] are much larger than they are in other countries,” “an abundance of gold,” “certain wild trees there bear wool instead of fruit, that in beauty excels that of

⁴⁶ Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Hist. Alex. magn.* 3.7, cited in W.E. Clark, “The Importance of Hellenism from the Point of View of Indic-Philology II,” *Classical Philology* 15 (1920): 21.

⁴⁷ On the last distinction, see E. Almagor, “Who is a Barbarian? The Barbarians in the Ethnological and Cultural Taxonomies of Strabo,” in *Strabo’s Cultural Geography: The Making of a Kolossourgia*, ed. D. Dueck et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52.

sheep,” and “the soil producing two crops every year both of fruits and grain.”⁴⁸ Any optimistic conclusions regarding the desirability or migration, conquest or even visitation are forestalled by the more negative implications of extremity. Roman descriptions of India are therefore both empirically-driven and fitted to a value-laden map of the earth that organizes but does not subsist on observation. The latter plays upon the former to evoke a land of exaggerated fertility and corresponding danger. Metropolitan writers such as Strabo and Pliny collected the fears, fantasies, and projections of Greek and Roman antiquity and enshrined them as geography and history. Implicit in these projects is a claim to authority based on the correct interpretation of “extremity” which required a specific intellectual formation as much as superior information, and a consequence of this interpretation is the distinct sense that interaction between the Mediterranean and India is best when mediated.

The Mythology and Science of Difference

From Rome to Taprobane, natural and biological characteristics do and must change predictably and are presumed to exist in an extreme form at geographical extremes. These imperatives are at tension with one another, and the question is then how the details of sight might be reconciled with the transmitted wisdom of trustworthy report, neither of which could be omitted by the objective author. Though the Roman “conception of the art of good living” generated a constant demand for eastern commodities, Romans nevertheless maintained a culturally ambivalent relationship with the luxury trade as both useful and desirable, but also morally culpable. Medicine and seasoning food, the main uses of spices in antiquity, were seen as completely normal and necessary, and at the same time superfluous, even depraved.⁴⁹ The Mediterranean labored under lack of local spices (as opposed to herbs) and the cost of obtaining them detracted from their respectability. Theophrastus tells us, “plants grow in different places but the

⁴⁸ Strabo, *Geogr.* 3.106. On the commonplace that India did not know famine, see Strabo. *Geogr.* 15.20, citing Eratosthenes, and Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. hist.* 2.36, citing Megasthenes.

⁴⁹ See H. Huxley, “Greek Doctor and Roman Patient,” *Greece and Rome* 4 (1957): 132–38; A. Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2000).

most famous and the most fragrant come from Asia and places lying open to the sun. From Europe we have only the iris.”⁵⁰

Because of its tepid centrality, the Mediterranean had none of the commodifiable wonders of the East, whereas we are led to believe that luxuries were so common as to be without value in their native climate.⁵¹ Considering Rome’s unfavorable balance of trade with India, it seems slightly poor compensation that the middle zone of the earth “enjoys by far the best tempered climate.”⁵² But this claim is the key to understanding the nature of the Mediterranean’s soft borders and imperial Romans’ understanding of trade. The quantity and variety of eastern goods might dazzle Mediterranean sensibilities, but we are constantly reminded that the middle of the earth made its inhabitants moderate in the appropriate ways. Virgil is the pre-eminent exponent of Romans’ presumptive specialization in virtue. In the second Georgic he maintains that geographic determinism applies to the goods of civilization: there is a genius of each native soil, “nor yet can all soils bear all fruits.”⁵³ By this logic, the goods of each land exclude those of the regions with whom they trade. Though “India alone bears black ebony,” Rome has superior intangibles which have allowed it to “become the fairest thing on earth.”⁵⁴

This is not just a valorization of scarcity, but a way of controlling the significance of contact that was occurring anyway, and of rationalizing its nature and bounds. The idea of difference had to be precise in the sense of verifiable, but did not need to be at all accurate in the sense of falsifiable. That is, details about India that verified that the region did have valuable exotics coexisted with theories of climate and topography that mitigated the appeal of direct control over producer regions. What the Mediterranean lacked in goods it made up in terms of The Good, and this in turn might be exported as a civilizing mission or, less strongly, understood as grounds

⁵⁰ Theophrastus, *Hist. plant.* 9.2.2–7.3.

⁵¹ E.g.: “Arabia, whose whole harvests were spices,” therefore (must have) had “cooking fires were the wood of incense and myrrh trees” (Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures*, 183, citing the anonymous poem *Phoenix* 1–2, 31).

⁵² Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.106.

⁵³ Virgil, *Georg.* 2.177, 109.

⁵⁴ Virgil, *Georg.* 2.109, 532.

for market contact in preference to military conquest.⁵⁵ Plutarch writes: “Those whom Alexander subdued would never have become civilized unless they had been brought under submission. Egypt would not have had Alexandria, nor Mesopotamia Seleukeia, nor the Sogdians Prophthasia, nor India Boukephalia, nor Kaukasos Hellenic cities in its neighborhood.”⁵⁶ While this may seem to recommend imperium on the model of Alexander, the analogy recommends conquest less than one might think: having borne virtue, justice, and civilization east, Alexander created the preconditions for transaction, while the dangers of the land itself warn would-be imitators off anything more ambitious. Plutarch suggests, somewhat superfluously, that the Mediterranean profits less from trade with the East than the East from contact with the West. Rome obtains mere luxuries—tangible goods—through transaction, but in the process communicates the intangible Good.⁵⁷ Though the moral dilemma surrounding *luxuria* invites contrast, the difference between Rome and India to metropolitan intellectuals was not purely oppositional, but the symptom of a broader east-west continuum. This longitudinal discourse of difference does not link up neatly with the way Romans located themselves relative to Northerners and Southerners—different things were at stake—rather, it imagines a separate gradient defined by the relation of points on the ground to the course of the sun to motivate the unacceptable risks that recommend trade as the ideal relation with the East.

Received wisdom saw Easterners as peoples of the sun: “of all the peoples in Asia of which we know or about which any certain report is given, the Indians dwell furthest away towards the East and the sunrising.”⁵⁸ This proximity produces the “observed” effect that the East suffers as much as it benefits by its extremity relative to the middle of the earth and the sun’s course. The Mediterranean may suffer in material terms from its

⁵⁵ E.g.: “At once foster-child and parent of all other lands . . . Italy was chosen by the divine inspiration of the gods . . . to bestow civilization on mankind” (Pliny, *Nat.* 3.39, trans. Carey, *Pliny’s Catalogue of Culture*, 35).

⁵⁶ Plutarch, *Alex.* 15.

⁵⁷ For which embassies of Indians to Rome evidence a demand, e.g., Horace, *Carm. Saec.* 56; *Res gestae* 31; Aurelius Victor, *Epit.* 16.

⁵⁸ Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.98.

centrality, but does (and must) on balance benefit.⁵⁹ While natural historians and geographers do not rethink the centrality of the Mediterranean, they attempted to understand how center and periphery work within this worldview. This process is empirical insofar as it draws on experiential details to emplace known regions of the earth in a matrix whose horizontal boundaries were the legendary extremes of the earth, and whose vertical bounds mapped the path of the sun. In this way, it might be conceded that the extremes of the earth have more desirable goods, but are not desirable places in and of themselves. Because topography defines a place, extremity defines India not merely as a utopia ripe for conquest, but as an emporium best approached through a controlled and temporary breaching of barriers through trade.

To answer the questions of how and why local difference exists, and what makes a place the sort of place it is, Roman writers turned to the science of the sun. Strabo and Pliny attempted to understand the interactions of moisture and heat on local environments in a way that would make sense of the details borne by reports of the East. The process of solar coction therefore receives extended attention in Roman geographic accounts of the East. It is discussed as a kind of convection that bakes lands and people into what they are in proportion to the sun's inclination and intensity, providing a mechanism for geographic determinism. Solar coction is imagined to be the primary driver of regional difference, amplifying whatever it touches except when dampened by atmospheric and terrestrial moisture. The study of coction attempts to account for an already value-laden topography where space in an absolute or physical sense is paired with place relative to the sun and Rome. This is not a flat-earth geographic determinism, but a three-dimensional model that draws its predictive and explanatory power from the correlations it identifies between a limited set of relevant variables: solar heat, liquid, and gaseous water. This is not just the model of the heavenly spheres applied to the local case, but an inductive proof of the compatibility of regionality with a curved course of the sun. As such, the solar model offers a rhetoric that unifies the evidence of topography, ethnography, and

⁵⁹ E.g., Rome's "superiority in the arts, and the illustrious examples of genius which she has produced," are related to Italy's "situation, lying, as she does, midway between the East and the West, and extended in the most favourable of all positions" (Pliny, *Nat.* 37.77).

geography without holding itself to their disciplinary standards. Herodotus gives a sense of the model prior to the Roman ethnographic imperative:

Amongst these people [sc. the Indians] the sun is hottest in the morning, and not, as amongst others, at mid-day, from the time that it has risen some way, to the breaking up of market; during that time it scorches much more than at mid-day in Greece, so that, it is said, they then refresh themselves in water. Mid-day scorches other men much the same as the Indians; but as the day declines, the sun becomes to them as it is to others in the morning; and after this it becomes still colder, until sunset; then it is very cold.⁶⁰

India is other but not opposite to Greece here. At the eastern edge of the earth, India suffers from an extremely hot morning sun since it rises there first. Greece, relatively further west, experiences the same event as a more diffuse light. At midday the sun should be at a similar altitude with respect to both Greece and India, so that noon is similarly hot everywhere. In the evening, as the sun sets in the West, Greece receives the gentle heat of the declining sun while India, further away, grows cold. The model implies that peoples west of Greece experience a frigid dawn and a blazing sunset because of their proximity to the place of the setting sun.

This description is particularly interesting because it indexes the felt intensity of the sun partly to a point's location on the horizontal plane, partly to its vertical distance from the solar course, and partly to its azimuth. The sun itself is imagined to travel on a celestial meridian along which its energy is expended over the course of the day. Even if the sun were considered uniformly strong over its course, different points on earth would receive different amounts of solar heat depending on their altitude and position relative to the sun's route, which suggests that the sun, paradoxically, casts a shadow of light, the form of which some attempted to determine experimentally. Pliny describes experiments that found that the sun is "vertical" at both Hypasis (on the Beas or Vipasha River) and Syrene but that at the port of Patala "the sun rises on the right hand and shadows fall to the south," whereas "the shadows of the people living round the Tropic of Cancer fall northward at midday but westward at sunrise."⁶¹ Where the sun is vertical, objects cast no shadow. This can imply one of two things: absolute or relative center. The absolute center, or the center of the earth, receives

⁶⁰ Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.104, trans. T. Gaisford.

⁶¹ Pliny, *Nat.* 2.73, 2.8.3.

vertical light at the sun's zenith, while relative centers—places directly below the solar meridian—receive it at lesser altitude. Everywhere else to the north and south receives the sun's light at an angle. These places can literally be called benighted because there is a direct relationship between the intensity of the sun, fertility, and development. Pliny states, "We learn from Onesicritus that in those parts of India where there is no shadow the bodies of men attain a height of 5 cubits and 2 palms, and their life extends to 130 years. They do not suffer from the infirmities of old age but die as if they had lived only half their lifetime."⁶²

The metaphors of the solar path or solar chariot make the sun a small thing, an object with a shadow whose intensity is local enough to be affected by altitude and inclination.⁶³ But in what way was the sun thought to convey its intensity? What sort of contract or transmission did solar coction imply? Drawing on Eratosthenes, Strabo suggests that solar heat is a kind of conduction: "water from the sky as well as that of the rivers is warmed by the rays of the sun. . . . What is called by other nations the 'ripening' [*pepsis*] of fruits and juices is called by the Indians a 'boiling' [*hepesis*], and this tends to produce a flavor no less agreeable than that produced by fire."⁶⁴ The heat of the sun is described in terms of the smelting of ore, digestion, and cooking all at once. Solar heat is conveyed by rays and interacts with water in the air and on the earth's surface, as well as that stored in the tissues of plants and animals. The more solar heat these receive, the larger and longer-lived they become. This is made plausible by understanding solar heat to work specifically on the water content of the affected substances:

India, like Arabia and Ethiopia [produces] cinnamon and spikenard and other aromatics. It has a temperature like theirs in respect of the sun's rays, but it surpasses them in having copious supplies of water, whence the atmosphere is humid, and therefore more nutritious and productive, as is equally the case with the land and the water. On this account the land and water animals in India are found to be of a larger size than they are in other countries.⁶⁵

⁶² Pliny, *Nat.* 16.17, seemingly derived from Ctesias' *History of India*.

⁶³ This was disputed, see Pliny, *Nat.* 2.8.3.

⁶⁴ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.20. Aristotle considered *pepsis* cooking "by a thing's own natural heat," and *hepesis* cooking with heat from water; see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Aristotelian Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83.

⁶⁵ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.22.

For Strabo, the interactions of solar heat, liquid, and gaseous water are sufficient to determine local and regional characteristics. While moisture can come from either clouds or rivers, heat comes only from the sun.⁶⁶ The impartation of solar heat varies according to the angle and intensity of the sun in relation to the objects touched by its rays. Though this understanding builds additional flexibility into the action of the sun, it is the variability of water in particular that offers the necessary flexibility to accommodate details observed on the ground. The Nile, for example, was said to boil more easily than other rivers in the neighborhood of the Mediterranean because its waters flowed through many *climata* first, gathering heat as they went.⁶⁷ This is one of three ways water was thought to transport heat. It might gather heat by flowing through many climes, by lingering in a hot clime, or by evaporating from a hot clime before raining down in a cooler one. The implication that liquid water can transport the heat of the sun is a powerful explanatory tool that requires scientists to look to the details of local water systems in order to understand the aetiology of local ecology. While the broad framework is apriorist, in its application the theory of coction perforates the putative climes, weakening their determinative power.

Recognizing that humans and animals are capable of travel, to what extent does Strabo consider their phenotypic traits to be determined by their place of birth, and to what extent can they be changed by travel? Is anything preserved as innate or essential to individual species? In cattle, Strabo endorses a straightforward model of acquired characteristics; he says they change their color to resemble foreign stock when they drink local water.⁶⁸ He follows Onesicritus in specifying that it is rainwater that provides the heat that drives the acquisition of local traits. Though we have seen a pronounced fear of “going native” in some travelers’ accounts, Strabo excepts humans from the danger of change through travel; humans, for reasons that are not clear, are biologically unlike other animals. Their window of opportunity for the acquisition of local characteristics is during

⁶⁶ Though Philostratus (*Vit. Apoll.* 3.1) suggests that the Brahmins were able to extract or distill fire from the sun’s rays like water.

⁶⁷ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.23.

⁶⁸ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.24.

gestation in the womb, during which local characteristics enter the individual by “seminal impartation.”⁶⁹

Strabo’s cutoffs for the geographic determination of plant, animal, and human traits are required by the constraints of observed experience, but are otherwise somewhat poorly motivated.⁷⁰ If the reader accepts them, he is invited to combine the relevant variables—heat and water—in a way that will explain the observations. This is not an experimental, but a narrative method. In the case of humans, the displacement of difference to gestation, conception, or earlier takes the conclusions of ethnography as almost foregone. Still, Strabo attempts a consistent account. He treats the problem case of the Ethiopians—darker than Indians despite being closer to the Mediterranean on the Red Sea route—with the same variables.⁷¹ He writes, “the sun is not equidistant from all,” but that Apollo, driving his chariot “in close proximity to their borders, dyes with the dusky hues of smoke the skins of men and curls their hair, making it soft with the growthless shapes of fire.”⁷² Though Indians also receive strong solar heat, “on account of the humidity of the air their hair does not curl.”⁷³

Strabo’s commitment to a small sun and a mythological understanding of its travel allows the sun to change altitude along its path. In the legendary past, the sun might be understood to have dipped up and down to account for regional discontinuities.⁷⁴ Though a Phaethon-style narrative of human difference to some extent essentializes ethnic difference between human groups, Strabo uses myth only as the past tense of science. In doing so, he implies an essential sameness to humanity which suffers difference only contingently, as the result of a remote but identifiable event. For Hyginus this was obvious: “when he [sc. Phaethon] was carried too near the earth, everything burned in the fire that came near. . . . The Indians became black,

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Though he suggests that this sort of criticism betrays an uneducated reader rather than his own fault: “if he have not learned even the seven stars of the Great Bear, or anything else of that kind, either he will have no use for this book, or else not at present—not until he has studied those topics without which he cannot be familiar with geography” (Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.1.21).

⁷¹ On the location of Ethiopia, see *Periplus* 18.

⁷² Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.24.

⁷³ Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.1.13.

⁷⁴ Cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 2.21 for a large sun understood to be very far away.

because their blood was turned to a dark color from the heat that came near.”⁷⁵ Ovid specifies that Phaethon strayed from the course prescribed by Apollo, a road which lies “on a wide slanting curve . . . within the confines of three zones.”⁷⁶ The correct path is also vertically determined: “press not too low nor strain your course too high.”⁷⁷ Because Phaethon drove low, “The Aethiopes then turned black, so men believe, as heat summoned their blood too near the skin.”⁷⁸ In animals and plants Strabo suggests defining features are driven by ongoing climatic factors; differences in human physiology and culture he pursues on the mythological plane.⁷⁹ Humans are not substantially changeable in the present in the way cattle are, but this does not imply a racialized understanding of ethnic difference: humans *suffered* difference as the result of a cosmic event, but the quality of the difference is as small as the distance between blood and the skin, and it can be seen as overlaid on a prior, more essential sameness.

While the Saturnian age saw all races united under one king, the martial declaration of *Aen.* 8.685–688 is only possible in a Jovian age of division and difference. Still, Roman writers generally shied away from a direct endorsement of conquest and incorporation of the distant East on the model of Alexander and instead produced status quo geographies.⁸⁰ In the context of Roman encyclopedism, these works relate ethnicity to topography in a way that endorses commerce rather than conquest and attempts scientific justification of a political position which locates a *finis* of empire far beyond the formal *limes*, and by consequence maintains India as a heterotopia

⁷⁵ Hyginus, *Fab.* 154. Cf. Arrian, *Ind.* 8.6 on the Indian sources of the Nile as it may bear on the “similar” appearance of Indians, Ethiopians, and Egyptians.

⁷⁶ Ovid, *Met.* 1.750–751.

⁷⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 2.135.

⁷⁸ Ovid, *Met.* 2.235–236.

⁷⁹ Pliny attempts to reconcile the two levels: “There can be no doubt, that the Ethiopians are scorched by their vicinity to the sun’s heat, and they are born, like persons who have been burned, with the beard and hair frizzled; while, in the opposite and frozen parts of the earth, there are nations with white skins and long light hair” (*Nat.* 2.80).

⁸⁰ Even avowed imperialists, such as Horace, Vergil, and Lucan, admitted an uneasy association between India, necromancy, and toxic magical ingredients; see E.A. Pollard, “Indian Spices and Roman ‘Magic’ in Imperial and Late Antique Indomediterranea,” *Journal of World History* 24 (2013): 11–12.

rather than ideal, equal, subject or Other.⁸¹ The Roman reader is made to understand that however fascinating and enviable the East may be, “truck and barter” remain the ideal relation between the Mediterranean and the East; it is the market, rather than the direct extension of imperial power, which would in a sense be coming up against the natural laws if extended too far beyond its own zone, that allows the Mediterranean to enjoy the goods of the luxury trade while imagining an honorable end to empire.

Conclusion: Towards Utopia

It has often been observed that heaven is undertheorized relative to hell, which, while true enough for Dante and Milton, misses a robust ancient Christian discourse of heaven grounded in a very material image of India. It is not my intention here to go into the influence of Dionysiac parade on religious ideas of paradise, or the missionary history of Christians in the East, but only to note in conclusion that, though they had access to metropolitan Roman topographic and ethnographic narratives, early Christian writers worked with a significantly different conception of India. Though contemporary, early Christian writers departed from Roman intellectual “best practice” in that they tended much more towards purely utopian conceptions of the East than the tenuous line of heterotopy walked by Strabo and Pliny. Christian utopianism regarding India is singular compared to Roman Indographic ambivalence: Strabo and Pliny held a heterotopic line against the more traditionally imperialist imagination of the Augustan propagandists.⁸² In imagining paradise through the commodities of the luxury trade, Christians in some sense returned to imperialist roots by re-creating the East not merely as a depot, a low-risk outpost of soft power, but as an object of evangelical desire potentially subject to precisely the direct control Roman topographers were so leery of.

The Christians of the high empire wrote what became their canonical books at a time when Pliny estimates the empire was spending 100 million sesterces on imported goods per year. Given the apocalyptic critique of Rome as a new Babylon, the materiality of the alternative, Christian paradise, is

⁸¹ On the *limes-fines* distinction, see S. Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 83.

⁸² E.g., Sextus Propertius, *El.* 2.10 and Virgil, *Aen.* 6.2.788ff.

quite striking. Christians looked forward to the New Jerusalem as a city of jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, and other exotic luxuries even though Rome, the condemned, was defined by precisely these same goods.⁸³ If the opposition between the two cities is meant to be total, the heavenly city is still not the autarchic negative to Rome's cosmopolitan template; rather, the New Jerusalem is itself transfigured in surprisingly luxe and international fashion. This vision of heaven created a problem for theologians who saw Christianity as an intentionalist or belief-oriented religion as opposed to a consequentialist (ritual and reward-oriented) one. Yet rather than deny the appearance of heavenly luxury and insist on an ascetic vision of heaven, theologians pursued a rhetorical strategy of elaborating the heavenly hoard not as the ultimate cache of filthy lucre, but as representations to our carnal eyes of the "closeness to God" that every good Christian hoped for, as against "the outer darkness" they were to fear.⁸⁴

Christians' engagement with the wonders of India departs from the heterotopic discourse of sweet-sour pairings through which some metropolitan writers rationalized the containment of Roman military power and the simultaneous expansion of Roman markets after Augustus. In contrast, Christians' preoccupation with exotic wonders as a stock imagery of heaven created India as a utopia—possibly an Eden—amenable to missionary activity and literal, as well as figurative, incorporation.⁸⁵ With the "opening" of India by the apostle Thomas, successive missions, such as that of Frumentius, sent by Athanasius as "bishop of all India," converted and reconverted India for generations to come.

⁸³ See Rev. 21:18–21 (New Jerusalem); 18:3 (Rome). Cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 37.1.9: "The East, too, sends us crystals, there being none preferred to the Indian kind." The Christian heaven's dependence on jewel imagery alluding to India may refer to Solomon's importation of South Asian treasures to beautify his temple and court; see S.G. Darian, *The Ganges in Myth and History* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 283.

⁸⁴ E.g., John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 3 (on Rom 1:18); Augustine, *Hom. in Ps.* 48.

⁸⁵ E.g., Palladius, bishop of Helenopolis, saw the Ganges as the same river "which is called in Scripture the Phison, one of the rivers which are said to go out from Paradise" (Palladian interpolation to Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Hist. Alex. magn.* 3.7, cited in Darian, *The Ganges in Myth*, 182).