

Greek Reading: Society in Nature

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2026-01-28

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Preface

This site hosts some reading selections and notes for a Greek and Latin reading group in the spring semester of 2026 at the college of the Holy Cross.

1 Introduction to Strabo

1.1 Strabo: introduction

We begin with selections from the *Geography* of Strabo of Amasia (a town in Asia Minor). Strabo composed his *magnum opus* in 17 books at around the time of the Emperor Augustus, at the end of the first century BCE and beginning of the first century CE. As was customary with scholarly (and especially with scientific) treatises, Strabo's programmatic introduction begins by defining the subject matter of his discipline, along with major topics and goals of its study, then systematically reviews the work of his predecessors, especially where, in Strabo's view, they need correcting. This occupies the first two books of the *Geography*. Books 3 through 17 then give a description of the inhabited world, moving systematically in a great clockwise sweep from Spain in the west, eastward across Europe and into northern Asia, before finally coming westward back across southern Asia and Africa to the Atlantic coast.

Perhaps surprisingly to a modern reader, a central question running throughout Strabo's first two books is whether Homer should be considered a scientific geographer. In the Hellenistic period, the Greek study of geography had been revolutionized, not only by expanded geographic knowledge, but also by the application of scientific mathematical methods. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (in northern Africa) in particular had used geometric calculations to estimate the circumference of the Earth in the third century BCE, and arrived at a figure that would not be rivaled in its accuracy for 2000 years.

Eratosthenes clearly believed that the work of his own generation inaugurated a new scientific kind of study (in Greek, an ἐπιστήμη). His disdain for the view that Homer was the starting point of all knowledge is best illustrated in a memorable one-liner reported by Strabo himself (Strabo 1.2.15):

φησὶ τότ' ἂν εύρειν τίνα ποῦ Ὀδυσσεὺς
πεπλάνηται, ὅταν εὕρῃ τὸν σκυτέα τὸν
συρράψαντα τὸν τῶν ἀνέμων ἄσκόν.

He (*Eratosthenes*) says that a person would find where Odysseus wandered when he finds the leather worker who stitched together the bag of the winds.

Strabo energetically presents the counter argument. (In fact, most of book 2 is given over to a critique of Eratosthenes' views.) The result is unique in ancient literature: an extended discussion of how to read poetic texts as scholarly works, presented in prose that assiduously adheres to the vocabulary and syntax of contemporary technical writing.

1.2 Reading

The Scaife Library has translations and a Greek text of Strabo [here](#).

2 Strabo 1.1

2.1 Reading selection 1

Strabo defines geography as a both a pragmatic and scholarly study, and names Homer as its point of origin.

2.1.1 Selections from Strabo book 1, chapter 1

Strabo 1.1.1-1.1.3

τῆς τοῦ φιλοσόφου πραγματείας εἶναι νομίζομεν,
εἴπερ ἄλλην τινά, καὶ τὴν γεωγραφικήν, ἣν νῦν
προηρήμεθα ἐπισκοπεῖν.

ὅτι δ' οὐ φαύλως νομίζομεν ἐκ πολλῶν **δῆλον**: οἵ τε
γὰρ πρῶτοι θαρρήσαντες αὐτῆς ἄψασθαι τοιοῦτοι
τινες ὑπῆρχαν, **Ομηρός** τε καὶ **Αναξίμανδρος** ὁ
Μιλήσιος καὶ **Εκαταῖος**, ὁ πολίτης αὐτοῦ, καθὼς
καὶ **Ἐρατοσθένης** φησί: καὶ **Δημόκριτος** δὲ καὶ
Εῦδοξος καὶ **Δικαίαρχος** καὶ **Ἐφορος** καὶ ἄλλοι
πλείους: ἔτι δὲ οἱ μετὰ τούτους, **Ἐρατοσθένης** τε καὶ
Πολύβιος καὶ **Ποσειδώνιος**, ἀνδρες φιλόσοφοι.

ἡ τε πολυμάθεια, δι’ ἣς μόνης ἐφικέσθαι τοῦδε τοῦ
ἔργου **δυνατόν**, οὐκ ἄλλου τινός ἐστιν ἡ τοῦ τὰ
θεῖα καὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια ἐπιβλέποντος, ὥνπερ τὴν
φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιστήμην φασίν.

ώς δ’ αὕτως καὶ ἡ **ώφελεια** ποικίλη τις οὖσα, ἡ μὲν
πρὸς τὰ πολιτικὰ καὶ τὰς ἡγεμονικὰς πράξεις, ἡ δὲ
πρὸς ἐπιστήμην τῶν τε οὐρανίων καὶ τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς καὶ
θαλάττης ζῷων καὶ φυτῶν καὶ καρπῶν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων
ὅσα ιδεῖν παρ’ ἐκάστοις ἐστι, **τὸν αὐτὸν ὑπογράφει**
ἄνδρα, τὸν φροντίζοντα τῆς περὶ τὸν βίον τέχνης καὶ
εὐδαιμονίας.

αναλαβόντες δὲ **καθ’ ἔκαστον** ἐπισκοπῶμεν τῶν
εἰρημένων ἔτι μᾶλλον.

τῆς τοῦ φιλοσόφου πραγματείας πραγματείᾳ routinely describes the activity of the scholar; for Strabo, that person is a *φιλόσοφος*. **προηρήμεθα** from προαιρέω (imperfect tense).

δῆλον δῆλον (ἐστί understood). The subject is the entire clause introduced by ὅτι. **Ομηρός...** **Αναξίμανδρος...** **Εκαταῖος...** **Δημόκριτος...** **Εῦδοξος...** **Δικαίαρχος...** **Ἐφορος...** **Ἐρατοσθένης...** **Πολύβιος...** **Ποσειδώνιος** a chronologically ordered list of all the major geographers before Strabo – all of them φιλόσοφοι. Strabo will review each in turn in books 1 and 2.

δυνατόν δυνατόν (ἐστί understood) **οὐκ ἄλλου τινός ἐστιν ἡ** “is (a characteristic) of no other person than...”

ἡ ώφελεια... τὸν αὐτὸν ὑπογράφει ἄνδρα The main subject-verb-object construction expands on the preceding idea: not only is *πολυμάθεια* characteristic of the philosopher; its usefulness for practical as well as scientific ends “outlines” or “sketches” the same man. **ἄνδρα** Strabo sees philosophy as a gendered pursuit.

καθ’ ἔκαστον “Item by item”, “in more detail”. **ἐπισκοπῶμεν** from ἐπισκοπέω; the indicative would be ἐπισκοποῦμεν. What mood is this?

καὶ πρῶτον ὅτι ὁρθῶς ὑπειλήφαμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς καὶ οἱ πρὸ ἡμῶν, ὃν ἔστι καὶ Ἰππαρχος, ἀρχιγέτην εἶναι τῆς γεωγραφικῆς ἐμπειρίας Ὄμηρον, ὃς οὐ μόνον ἐν τῇ κατὰ τὴν ποίησιν ἀρετῇ πάντας ὑπερβέβληται τοὺς πάλαι καὶ τοὺς ὕστερον, ἀλλὰ σχεδόν τι καὶ τῇ κατὰ τὸν βίον ἐμπειρίᾳ τὸν πολιτικόν,

ὁρθῶς ὑπειλήφαμεν ὁρθῶς is scholarly Greek: it refers to a correct conclusion. (The noun κατόρθωσις is a correction of an error.) ὑπολαμβάνω (perfect active) is a normal verb to mean “taking a position” in a debate. Here it introduces an indirect statement.

τῆς γεωγραφικῆς ἐμπειρίας The reader has conceded that geography has both practical benefits as well as purely scientific ones, so Strabo can turn to the founder of *geographic experience*, Homer.

ὅς οὐ μόνον... ὑπερβέβληται Scientific Greek prose can be as challenging as English; this is a massive relative clause. Its verb is ὑπερβέβληται from ὑπερβάλλω. Strabo uses the perfect because references to texts always emphasize their presentness, with either the present tense (“Homer says...”) or as here “Homer has surpassed...” (and the Greek perfect makes clear that we feel the present effect of that excellence). τῇ κατὰ τὸν βίον ἐμπειρίᾳ τῇ ἐμπειρίᾳ is parallel to τῇ ἀρετῇ: no one would contest that Homer surpasses all others in the ἀρετῇ of his poetry; Strabo adds that he is equally supreme in his practical knowledge (ἐμπειρία). Note that parallel attributive expressions with κατά (excellence in poetry paralleled by experience in life). τὸν πολιτικόν is in attributive position with τὸν βίον. The word order is not the most common. Is Strabo (playfully?) being just a little poetic in his expression?

ἀφ' ᾧς οὐ μόνον περὶ τὰς πράξεις ἐσπούδασεν ἐκεῖνος, ὅπως ὅτι πλείστας γνοίη καὶ παραδώσει τοῖς ὕστερον ἐσομένοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ περὶ τοὺς τόπους τούς τε καθ' ἔκαστα καὶ τοὺς κατὰ σύμπασαν τὴν οἰκουμένην γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν:

ἀφ' ᾧς The subordination deepens with another relative clause. Antecedent of ᾧς is ἐμπειρίᾳ. ὅπως... γνοίη καὶ παραδώσει Textbooks may tell you that ὅπως + optative is normal for purpose expressions after a past-time verb (secondary sequence), and ὅπως + future indicative for primary sequence verbs, but Strabo uses both here. Homer paid serious attention to (human) actions in order to know and understand them (optative γνοίη, a clear echo of the opening lines of the *Odyssey*); he also strove to transmit these deeds to those still to come. The indicative suggests a more vivid, present image or stronger effort. Homer is an epic poet and historian. (Consult Prof. Joseph on the interaction of these genres in Latin poetry and historiography.) τὴν οἰκουμένην γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν

The proper concern of geography is with the part of the globe that humans inhabit.
ἄν... ἀφίκετο Aorist indicative from ἀφικνέομαι; apodosis of a past contrafactual condition.

οὐ γάρ ἄν μέχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων αὐτῆς περάτων ἀφίκετο τῇ μνήμῃ κύκλῳ περιουών.

καὶ πρῶτον μὲν τῷ ὠκεανῷ **περίκλυστον**, ὥσπερ
ἔστιν, ἀπέφαινεν αὐτήν: ἔπειτα δὲ τῶν χωρίων
τὰ μὲν ὡνόμαζε τὰ δὲ ὑπηνίττετο τεκμηρίοις
τισί, Λιβύην μὲν καὶ Αἰθιοπίαν καὶ Σιδονίους καὶ
Ἐρεμβούς, οὓς εἰκὸς λέγειν Τρωγλοδύτας Ἀραβας,
ρήτως λέγων, τοὺς δὲ πρὸς ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς καὶ
δύσεσιν αἰνιττόμενος ἐκ τοῦ τῷ ὠκεανῷ κλύζεσθαι:
ἐντεῦθεν γάρ **ἀνίσχοντα** ποιεῖ τὸν ἥλιον καὶ
δυόμενον εἰς τοῦτον, ὡς δ' αὐτῶς καὶ τὰ ἄστρα καὶ
τοὺς ἀστέρας λελουμένους ἐξ ὠκεανοῦ λέγει.

Strabo 1.1.11:

νυνὶ δὲ ὅτι μὲν Ὁμηρος τῆς γεωγραφίας ἥρξεν,
ἀρκείτω τὰ λεχθέντα. **φανεροί** δὲ καὶ οἱ
ἐπακολουθήσαντες αὐτῷ ἄνδρες **ἀξιόλογοι** καὶ
οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας, ὃν τοὺς πρώτους μεθ' Ὁμηρον
δύο φησὶν Ερατοσθένης, Ἀναξίμανδρὸν τε Θαλοῦ
γεγονότα γνώριμον καὶ πολίτην καὶ Ἐκαταῖον
τὸν Μιλήσιον: **τὸν μὲν** οὖν ἐκδοῦναι πρῶτον
γεωγραφικὸν πίνακα, **τὸν δὲ** Ἐκαταῖον καταλιπεῖν
γράμμα, πιστούμενον ἐκείνου εἶναι ἐκ τῆς ἄλλης
αὐτοῦ **γραφῆς**.

περίκλυστον... ἀπέφαινεν αὐτήν Indirect state-
ment; understand εἶναι. The first topic geographers
must address is the shape of the inhabited earth's
forms. **ἀνίσχοντα ποιεῖ τὸν ἥλιον... δυόμενον...**
ώς δ' αὐτῶς καὶ τὰ ἄστρα καὶ τοὺς ἀστέρας
λελουμένους... λέγει

ἀρκείτω 3rd person imperative. Neuter plural
subjects (τὰ λεχθέντα) always take a singular finite
form. **φανεροί...** **ἀξιόλογοι καὶ οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας**
Understand εἰσίν. Homer's immediate followers
are conspicuously notable philosophers. **ἀξιόλογος**
("worth recording") is an echo of Herodotus; **οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας** "members of the house of philosophy".
τὸν μὲν... τὸν δὲ Anaximander and Thales are also
are the first scholars to tackle the most fundamental
jobs of geographic study: creating a graphic model
of the earth as a map, and describing the earth in a
textual treatise. **γράμμα** γράμμα and **γραφή** both
derive from **γράφω**, "mark, draw a line." γράμμα
here refers to a textual document; γραφή is a
drawing, or map. A treatise (γράμμα) is attributed
to Hecataeus because of its resemblance to his
second or subsequent map (τῆς ὄλλης γραφῆς) after
Anaximander.