

Greek Reading: Society in Nature

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Table of contents

Preface	3
1 Introduction to Strabo	4
1.1 Strabo: introduction	4
1.2 Reading	4
2 Strabo 1.1	5
2.1 Reading selection 1	5
2.1.1 Selections from Strabo book 1, chapter 1	5

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 εὑρεῖν τινα ποῦ Ὀδυσσεὺς
πεπλάνηται, ὅταν εὔρη τὸν σκυτέα τὸν
συρράψαντα τὸν τῶν ἀνέμων ἄσκον.

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, εἵπερ ἄλλην τινά, καὶ τὴν γεωγραφικὴν, ἣν νῦν **προηγήμεθα** ἐπισκοπεῖν.

ὅτι δ' οὐ φαύλως νομίζομεν ἐκ πολλῶν **δῆλον**: οἱ τε γὰρ πρῶτοι θαρρήσαντες αὐτῆς ἄψασθαι τοιοῦτοί τινες ὑπῆρξαν, **Ὅμηρός** τε καὶ **Ἀναξίμανδρος** ὁ Μιλήσιος καὶ **Ἑκαταῖος**, ὁ πολίτης αὐτοῦ, καθὼς καὶ **Ἐρατοσθένης** φησί: καὶ **Δημόκριτος** δὲ καὶ **Εὐδόξος** καὶ **Δικαίαρχος** καὶ **Ἔφορος** καὶ ἄλλοι πλείους: ἔτι δὲ οἱ μετὰ τούτους, **Ἐρατοσθένης** τε καὶ **Πολύβιος** καὶ **Ποσειδώνιος**, ἄνδρες φιλόσοφοι.

ἢ τε πολυμάθεια, δι' ἧς μόνης ἐφικέσθαι τοῦδε τοῦ ἔργου **δυνατόν**, **οὐκ ἄλλου τινός ἐστιν ἢ** τοῦ τὰ θεῖα καὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια ἐπιβλέποντος, ὧν περ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιστήμην φασίν.

ὥς δ' αὐτως καὶ **ἡ ὠφέλεια** 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 ζώων καὶ φυτῶν καὶ καρπῶν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα ἰδεῖν παρ' ἐκάστοις ἔστι, **τὸν αὐτὸν ὑπογράφει ἄνδρα**, τὸν φροντίζοντα τῆς περὶ τὸν βίον τέχνης καὶ εὐδαιμονίας.

αναλαμβάνοντες δὲ **καθ' ἕκαστον ἐπισκοπῶμεν** τῶν εἰρημένων ἔτι μᾶλλον.

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

δῆλον δῆλον (ἐστί understood). The subject is the entire clause introduced by ὅτι. **Ὅμηρός... Ἀναξίμανδρος... Ἑκαταῖος... Δημόκριτος... Εὐδόξος... Δικαίαρχος... Ἔφορος... 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 ἢ** “is (a characteristic) of no other person than...”

ἡ ὠφέλεια... 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' ἕκαστον “Item by item”, “in more detail”. **ἐπισκοπῶμεν** from ἐπισκοπέω; the indicative would be ἐπισκοποῦμεν. What mood is this?

καὶ πρῶτον ὅτι ὀρθῶς ὑπειλήφμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς καὶ οἱ
 πρὸ ἡμῶν, ὧν ἐστὶ καὶ Ἰππαρχος, ἀρχηγέτην εἶναι **τῆς**
γεωγραφικῆς ἐμπειρίας Ὁμηρον, 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,

ἀφ’ ἧς οὐ μόνον περὶ τὰς πράξεις ἐσπούδασεν
 ἐκεῖνος, **ὅπως** ὅτι πλείστας **γνοίη καὶ παραδώσει**
 τοῖς ὕστερον ἐσομένοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ περὶ τοὺς
 τόπους τοὺς τε καθ’ ἕκαστα καὶ τοὺς κατὰ σύμπασαν
τὴν οἰκουμένην γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν:

οὐ γὰρ **ἂν** μέχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων αὐτῆς περάτων
ἀφίκετο τῇ μνήμῃ κύκλῳ περιῶν.

ὀρθῶς ὑπειλήφμεν ὀρθῶς 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 con-
 ceded that geography has both practical benefits as
 well as purely scientific ones, so Strabo can turn
 to the founder of *geographic experience*, Homer.
ὃς 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 present-
 ness, 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 add that he is equally supreme
 in his practical knowledge (ἐμπειρία). Note that par-
 allel attributive expressions with κατὰ (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’ ἧς The subordination deepens with another rel-
 ative clause. Antecedent of ἧς is ἐμπειρία. **ὅπως...**
γνοίη καὶ παραδώσει Textbooks may tell you that
 ὅπως + optative is normal for purpose expressions af-
 ter 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 histo-
 riography.) **τὴν οἰκουμένην γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν**
 The proper concern of geography is with the part of
 the globe that humans inhabit.

ἂν... ἀφίκετο Aorist indicative from ἀφικνέομαι;
 apodosis of a past contrafactual condition.

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

Strabo 1.1.11:

νυνὶ δὲ ὅτι μὲν Ὅμηρος τῆς γεωγραφίας ἥρξεν, **ἀρκείτω** τὰ λεχθέντα. **φανεροὶ** δὲ καὶ οἱ ἐπακολουθήσαντες αὐτῷ ἄνδρες **ἀξιόλογοι καὶ οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας**, ὧν τοὺς πρώτους μεθ' Ὁμήρον δύο φησὶν Ἑρατοσθένης, Ἀναξίμανδρόν τε Θαλοῦ γεγονότα γνώριμον καὶ πολίτην καὶ Ἑκαταῖον τὸν Μιλήσιον: **τὸν μὲν** οὖν ἐκδοῦναι πρῶτον γεωγραφικὸν πῖνακα, **τὸν δὲ** Ἑκαταῖον καταλιπεῖν **γράμμα**, πιστούμενον ἐκείνου εἶναι ἐκ τῆς ἄλλης αὐτοῦ **γραφῆς**.

περίκλυστον... ἀπέφαιεν αὐτήν Indirect statement; understand εἶναι. The first topic geographers must address is the shape of the inhabited earth's forms. **ἀνίσχοντα ποιεῖ τὸν ἥλιον... δυόμενον... ὡς δ' αὐτως καὶ τὰ ἄστρα καὶ τοὺς ἀστέρας λελουμένους... λέγει**

ἀρκείτω 3rd person imperative. Neuter plural subjects (τὰ λεχθέντα) always take a singular finite form. **φανεροὶ... ἀξιόλογοι καὶ οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας** Understand εἰσίν. Homer's immediate followers are conspicuously notable philosophers. ἀξιόλογος ("worth recording") is an echo of Herotodus; οἰκεῖοι φιλοσοφίας "members of the house of philosophy". **τὸν μὲν... τὸν δὲ** Anaximander and Thales are also 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 **γραφῆ** 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 ἄλλης γραφῆς) after Anaximander.