Strabo's Mediterranean

The very idea of 'Strabo's Mediterranean' presupposes that such an area formed a conceptual unit, which could be delineated and described as a subject in its own right. The notion of Mediterranean unity has undergone extensive and intensive scholarly scrutiny in recent decades in the wake of Braudel (Braudel 1949). The plethora of works in modern scholarship, which take the Mediterranean, its history, ecology, and economy as a coherent theme implies, on the one hand, that Mediterranean unity can be assumed.[1] As Malkin notes, in the light of Braudel's work the notion of Mediterranean paradigms increases in relevance, with old categories of centre and periphery more helpfully replaced by notions of 'reciprocal and dynamic networks' (Malkin 2003a). However, much of the debate over recent decades revolves around the tension between unity and fragmentation, with the notion of Pan-Mediterranean unity modified by Horden and Purcell's micro-regions (Horden and Purcell 2000),[2] and lent added complexity by Malkin's vision of networks criss-crossing like a web across the sea (Malkin 2003b, 56; Malkin 2011 *passim*).

The assumption that Mediterranean unity was a correspondingly significant geographical concept in the ancient world is easily made.[3] Rickman's bold statement that 'there can be no doubt whatever that the Mediterranean Sea was of the greatest importance to the world of Rome and its Empire' (Rickman 2003, 132), rests on a teleological narrative of small-scale seas, named after their neighbouring lands, being superseded in the period of Roman imperialism by a Mediterranean that included the whole span from the Pontic across to and even beyond the Straits of Gibraltar (Rickman 2003, 133). But it is not clear that the first of these elements ever gave way to the second, or whether the two visions and two realities always coexisted.

The capacity of modern scholars to write about the Mediterranean stands at first glance in stark contrast to the lack of a devoted treatment in Strabo's *Geography* beyond the relatively sparse outline which precedes his embarkation upon the detailed

[1] See, however, Woolf 2003, 126-43, for the idea that the Mediterranean does not lend itself to interpretation through *every* prism, best suiting a secular rather than a religious narrative.

[2] Nevertheless, the overall proposition of the work is that a distinctive Mediterranean history can be written, 'diversity within unity' encapsulating the primary vision.

[3] But the analysis of the Aegean by Ceccarelli 2012 offers insight into the constantly contested and shifting traditions concerning this particular sea.

description of the world known to Rome. Even then, it is markedly only the coastline which receives treatment, leaving the vast majority of the Mediterranean as the silent but central character in Strabo's work, both literally and metaphorically.[4] One might explain this gap by reference to Strabo's own declared focus on the *inhabited* world (2.5.34), that is inevitably a land-based geographical description, but nonetheless there remains a sense in which the Mediterranean constitutes the unmentioned shape which is recognised only through the delineation of its surrounds.[5]

The purpose of this chapter is to consider what can be reconstructed of Strabo's Mediterranean in the absence of any extended explicit description; how geographically distinct from other seas it is, and how distinctive, even unique, in character; whether it is a positively, negatively, or ambiguously portrayed space.

The power of the periplus: sea as the definer of the land

> For he [sc. Ephorus] decides on the sea as a kind of guide (ἡγεμονικόν τι τὴν θάλατταν) in his description of places … so it is proper that I too, following the natural character of the regions, should make the sea my counsellor (σύμβουλον). (Strabo, *Geography* 8.1.3)

The dominance of the sea in articulating not only the space of Strabo's world, but also his literary description, is reinforced throughout the work. The acknowledgement of the sea's physical impact on the shape of the land is reiterated in the claim that the 'sea more than anything else defines the contours of the land and gives it its shape' (2.5.17). According to our opening quote in this section, the sea also defines the subject of geography, but here the relationship appears to be reciprocal, since, as Strabo remarks, 'it is geography which describes continents and seas' (1.1.16). Nevertheless, the power of the sea to define the surrounding lands and as the medium through which they are located and described in the literary account is a recurring theme in the *Geography*, whether it be the promontories of Europe (2.4.8), the orientation of Sicily by the various seas which are faced by different capes and coasts

[4] Ceccarelli 2012, 28, also notes the focus on the Mediterranean shores at the expense of the centre. This may be linked to the Braudelian sense of mini-seas (29) defined by adjacent lands and legends, a process resisted by the central body of water. But Abulafia 2003, 10, insists that any definition of the Mediterranean should involve not only the coastline but also activity that takes place *across* the sea.

[5] See Dueck 2010, 247, for the importance of geometrical shapes in Strabo's creation of a 'verbal cartography'. See also Dueck 2005. But is this concept applicable also to Strabo's Mediterranean?

(6.2.1), or the corresponding placing of Cyprus within its surrounding seas - the Issic gulf, the Pamphylian sea, the Egyptian sea and so on (14.6.1).[6]

Not all such orientations involve the main body of the Mediterranean. Strabo's description of some of the German tribes is located in a land bounded by the Rhine and Tanais rivers, and the Pontic sea and Lake Maeotis (7.4.8).[7] The use of a wide range of seas to define an area is particularly evident in Strabo's description of the northern sweep of Asia, which is bounded on the West by the River Tanais, Lake Maeotis as far as Bosporus and the bit of Euxine which ends at Colchis, then on the North by the Ocean as far as the mouth of the Caspian sea, on the East by the Caspian as far as the outflow of the rivers Cyrus and Araxes, and on the South by the country which stretches from the outlet of the Cyrus to Colchis: the total distance being about 3000 stades 'from sea to sea' (11.1.5). Thus the seas in Strabo's world allow him to map out large-scale geographical space and to place different lands against a watery backcloth. On a grand scale, the entire Mediterranean is presented as the shaper of whole continents, acting as the briny equivalent of the Taurus mountains which divide the continent of Asia from West to East. So too, the sea inside the Pillars, mostly in a straight line with these mountains, 'has proved convenient in forming the two continents of Europe and Libya, it being the noteworthy boundary between the two' (11.1.4).

But the maritime focus is perhaps most persistently realised in the privileged perspective offered in the *Geography* to the linear *periplus*. For Strabo, the linearity of the sea-board offers advantages as a guiding principle: 'the places along it are well-known and the sea more readily suggests an order of places' (9.2.21).[8] Some of this thinking may be inherited from Strabo's sources. As he states on the division of Ethiopia, he will draw on 'all those who have made coasting voyages on the Ocean along the shore of Libya, whether they started from the Red Sea or from the Pillars of Heracles' (1.2.26). Similarly the authors of *periplus* texts are mentioned alongside Homer and works on harbours as the sources for Strabo's account of Greece (8.1.1).

[6] The use of seas to orientate regions is especially marked in southern Asia: Ariana (15.2.1), Syria (16.1.1; 16.2.1), and Arabia Felix (16.3.1).

[7] Strabo moves on imminently to Greece, Macedonia, Epirus and all the tribes above them whose countries reach to the Ister (Danube), and to the seas on either side, the Adriatic and Pontic (7.5.1).

[8] See also 9.1.1-2 for an interesting statement of how the *periplus* as organizing structure could be compatible with more geometrical approaches to delineating space.

The *periplus* perspective comes through repeatedly in the actual content of Strabo's treatment of the Mediterranean, in which he allows sea-journeys to calibrate the coast of Spain (3.1.9),[9] identifies the last section of Iberia to be described as 'the coast of our sea [sc. the Mediterranean] from the Pillars to the Pyrenees' (3.4.1), and sums up 'the character of the whole sea-board from the Pillars up to the boundary of Iberia and Celtica' (3.4.10).

This approach is also evident in the adoption of the traveller's perspective. Time and again Strabo encourages his reader to imagine him or herself into the position of the voyager with phrases such as 'as you sail along the coast…'.[10] Indeed, the experience of real, practical travel is strongly built into Strabo's description with the regular mention of good harbours,[11] or, in the case of the Illyrian sea-board, a contrast drawn between the rich array of harbours along that coast, in contrast to the harbourless East coast of Italy opposite (7.5.10). Even the rugged Laconian coast offers anchoring places and harbours (8.6.1).

The explicit acknowledgement of the sea's dramatic impact on the shape of both the land and its description is modified by the heavily land-dominated nature of even this maritime perspective, articulated as it is by coastal voyages, which form part of land-based descriptions. These complementary influences of sea on land and land on sea lead to a sense that, although Strabo's seas, including the Mediterranean, do occupy two-dimensional space in the mental map of the *Geography*, nevertheless it is the interface between land and sea, the *façade maritime*, which most interests him. It is striking in this regard that islands in Strabo's account are almost invariably incorporated within the *periplus* description of the coast. The principle applies to both small islands, such as the five which are built into the account of the coast from

[9] See 6.1.4 for another example of calibration according to the coastline. The coastal territory of the Brettii in southern Italy is said to be 1350 stades.

[10] 5.2.8. Similar formulations are to be found at 7.4.2, 7.4.5, 8.5.1, 12.3.2, 14.3.1.

[11] For variable harbours, see 3.4.8: few harbours between the Pillars and Tarraco and fine ones thereafter to Emporium; 6.3.1: importance of excellent harbours to Taras, although eclipsed by the harbour at Brundisium (6.3.6); 10.1.7: best sailing routes and harbours between Asia and Attica; 14.1.6: four excellent harbours at Miletus, one of which is large enough to house a fleet; 14.1.14: harbour at Samos, with its naval station; 14.2.15: two harbours at Cnidos, with room for twenty ships; 17.1.6: detailed description of the Great harbour at Alexandria, beautifully enclosed by an embankment and by nature (τῷ τε χώματι καὶ τῇ φύσει).

Nisaea to Attica (9.1.1), and much larger ones such as Euboea (10.1.1).[12] Islands are gathered up in groups and treated as adjuncts to the nearest coast. On this basis, Strabo explains that he will include the Sporades with Crete and the Cyclades because that is consistent with the organizing principle (λόγος) of his work (10.5.14), but that he will include in his description of Asia the islands closest to it - Cyprus, Rhodes, Cos, Samos, Chios, Lesbos and Tenedos. In spite of the limitations of the *periplus* perspective, which omits key locations such as the city of Samos because it is not visible from the sea (8.3.20), nevertheless it provides Strabo with a reliable guiding thread along which to gather up the various off-shore islands, before turning to the hinterland. Here we have an explicit acknowledgement that the world of the Mediterranean is to be parcelled up and assigned to nearby coasts, rather than given a coherent and unified treatment in its own right.

Bridging the inner and outer seas: the influence of Posidonius

> I began my description by going over all the western parts of Europe comprised between the inner and the outer sea (8.1.1).

In spite of Strabo's close focus on the Mediterranean as the seat of civilization, nevertheless it is worth noting the strong presence of the outer Ocean, especially in the first two books of his work. Although, as we have seen, the Mediterranean is used explicitly later in the *Geography* to delineate the majority of the lands that Strabo will describe, the first definitions to be offered in the *Geography* rely on the outer Ocean as the demarcator of the inhabited world as an island (1.1.3; 1.1.8). The outer Ocean as delineator of the world is important for Strabo in proving or disproving major geographical conundrums, such as whether or not Ethiopia is divided. In order to answer this question, Strabo adduces 'all those who have made coasting voyages on the Ocean along the shore of Libya, whether they started from the Red Sea or from the Pillars of Heracles' (1.2.26). Similarly, the northern limits of Strabo's world are delimited by the Ocean. He divides his treatment of continental Europe into a northern and southern section, divided by the river Ister, and defines the northern one as that comprising the peoples between the Borysthenes and Tanaïs and mouth of Lake Maeotis, extending as far as the Ocean and washed by the Pontic sea (7.1.1).

[12] Sicily comprises an extreme case, in so far as it is so close to Italy that it is almost part of that land (6.2.7: ὡσανεὶ γὰρ μέρος τι τῆς Ἰταλίας ἐστὶν ἡ νῆσος).

This horizontal division of Europe into lands above the Ister and those below it also alludes to the complementary nature of the outer and inner seas in marking out both the inhabited world and Strabo's account. It is knowledge of *both* the outer and inner seas, by which Strabo means the Mediterranean, that entitles Homer to be known as the first geographer, according to Strabo (1.1.11),[13] cemented by the claim that 'geography describes continents and seas, not only the seas inside the limits of the whole inhabited world, but also those outside these limits' (1.1.16). As the opening quote in this section implies, Strabo's business is effectively sandwiched between the inner and outer seas, the former Mediterranean sea comprising a dramatic gulf of the latter.

The close relationship between the outer and inner seas in Strabo's world is most evident at the point where the two meet, the 'point at which the Atlantic breaks into the sea-board and forms a strait by the Pillars of Heracles' where, 'when you sail from our sea into the outer sea' (3.1.7), a mountain appears on the right. The area of the straits of Gibraltar is poised between two worlds, as is neatly brought home by Strabo's comment that here they fit out the most and the largest merchant vessels 'both for our sea and for the outer sea' (3.5.3). The area is supremely maritime, to the extent that the locals 'inhabit the sea more' [sc. than the land] (πλέον οἰκοῦντες τὴν θάλατταν). Indeed, the whole area of Iberia and Gaul is characterized for Strabo by its role as a barrier, or link, between the outer and inner Oceans. As Strabo notes, the narrowest part of Celtica and Iberia is that between the Mediterranean and the Ocean (3.1.3). Here the worlds of the two seas come closest together, and this is reinforced when Strabo moves on to his description of Transalpine Celtica, a region which fits entirely within the range of the Rhine on the East, the Ocean to the North, the Mediterranean to the South, and Pyrenees to the West, the link between the outer and inner seas (4.1.1). Furthermore, the river network of Gaul, flowing variously into the Ocean and the Mediterranean, offers another real and conceptual thread to bring together these two key seas. Strabo uses this passage, among others, to assert the superiority of the Mediterranean over the outer Ocean, noting that the fineness of the river Rhodanus is due partly to the fact that it flows into the Mediterranean, 'which is

[13] Intriguingly, when Strabo relates Homer's knowledge of the Mediterranean at 1.1.10, he follows the coastline round in an anti-clockwise direction, in direct antithesis to his own practice in the *Geography* and to that of every extant *periplus* writer.

better than the outer sea' (4.1.2). He does, however, go on to note that the region is blessed by its connections to *both* seas (4.1.14: τήν τ᾽ ἐκτὸς ὁμοίως καὶ τὴν ἐντός), a natural disposition which is so beneficial as to constitute evidence for the workings of providence, since the regions are set out not by chance but 'according to a calculated plan' (μετὰ λογισμοῦ τινος).

It seems that the close relationship between and complementarity of the inner and outer seas in Strabo's account is likely to reflect, at least in part, Posidonius' works - one *On the Ocean* and one a history focused on the Mediterranean world (Clarke 1999, 129-92). Clearly Strabo devotes most attention to the Mediterranean, as the seat of greatest civilization, and articulates his description as a *periplus* of that sea, but his Mediterranean must take its place in the wider context of a geography driven by Homer's encircling Ocean. It is to the unity of the seas that we now turn.

Asserting the unity of the seas

> Again, the men of Homer's day, in general, regarded the Pontic Sea as a kind of second Oceanus, and they thought that those who voyaged thither got beyond the limits of the inhabited world just as much as those who voyaged far beyond the pillars of Heracles (1.2.10).

The ambiguity over whether the Pontic Sea might actually link up to the Outer Ocean, as opposed to being a closed off-shoot of the Mediterranean, leads us into the intriguing question of to what degree and in what ways the various seas were one united body of water, a question with implications for the coherence and potential uniqueness of Strabo's Mediterranean.[14]

The interconnectedness of the seas naturally has a place in the context of debates concerning sea-levels, which form one major theme of the early, more scientific, books of the *Geography*. Fear over the disastrous consequences of joining up differing sea-levels is twice mentioned as the reason for Sesostris' canal being abandoned as an engineering project.[15] The unity of the seas was clearly a significant preoccupation of Strabo's predecessors. Hipparchus was adamant that the outer Ocean, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean all stood at the same level (1.3.13).

[14] See Geus 2003, 238, for the capacity of Alexander's travels to establish the *inland* nature of the Caspian sea, rather than its being an inlet of the outer Ocean.

[15] At 1.2.31 we are told that Sesostris abandoned the project of a canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean because the level of the latter was too high. The story recurs at 17.1.25 in a different version. Now there were fears that the Red Sea was higher than Egypt so that a canal would result in Egypt being flooded.

Meanwhile, Eratosthenes engaged with the ideas of Strato of Lampsacus, who argued that the seas were originally separate, but spilled over from the Pontus to the Propontis, then Mediterranean and out into the Atlantic (1.3.4). This notion of interlocking seas seems to appeal to Strabo, as he develops it himself elsewhere, applying his own theory of silting and consequent overflow not only to smaller seas, but also to the whole Mediterranean in relation to the outer Ocean (1.3.7). As Strabo goes on to assert, the whole Mediterranean became flooded by rivers, overflowed, and united at a single sea-level with the Atlantic.

The interconnectedness of seas sits in uncomfortable juxtaposition with the geographical unity of the Mediterranean itself, and although Strabo dismisses as incredible Theopompus' claim that the Adriatic and Aegean seas are physically connected by an underground passageway,[16] the pattern of overarching unity comprising a patchwork of contiguous seas continues in microcosm at the level of the Mediterranean itself. The tension is clear. Strabo does occasionally treat the Mediterranean as a unit that can be conceptualized, visualized, and measured, noting, for example, that the distance from the Galatic Gulf to Libya is five thousand stades, comprising the greatest width of the sea (2.5.8). But he also makes clear that the Mediterranean around Greece is not a single sea, but comprises the Aegean, the Myrtoan, Cretan and Libyan seas, as far as the Sicilian sea, which fills out the Ambracian, Corinthian and Crisaean gulfs (7.7.4).[17] We are not so far here with these micro-seas that make up the Mediterranean from the model of micro-regions advocated by Horden and Purcell in preference to a monolithic unit.

Strabo's *Geography* evokes a Mediterranean that is simultaneously a small part of a set of interconnected seas that span the known world, and capable of being further fragmented into still smaller seas. Certain similarities exist between maritime environments, wherever they are, and we have seen some particular links between the Mediterranean and other seas, especially the outer Ocean. But are there any distinctively Mediterranean traits to be found in Strabo's description? Or is it either

[16] 7.5.9. At 11.7.4 Strabo dismisses another tale of seas connected by an underground passage, this time the Caspian and Lake Maeotis, as a fiction of the Alexander historians.

[17] Thus, from a maritime perspective, the unity of Greece can be divided up into areas adjacent to respective seas, a process which may pull against the more coherent cultural unity of Greece, driven by its Homeric heritage. See Scott 2013, 147 and *passim*.

too similar to other seas, or too varied within its own shores, for such a unity to be anything other than a modern scholarly invention, retrojected onto a text which does not embody such a concept?

Strabo's Mediterranean: the perfect enterprise zone

> But all the foreign trade of the country [sc. Turdetania] is carried on with Italy and Rome, since the voyage as far as the Pillars is good, except, perhaps, for a certain difficulty in passing the strait, and also the voyage on the high seas of Our Sea (καὶ τὸν πελάγιον τὸν ἐν τῇ καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς). For the sea-routes all pass through a zone of fair weather, particularly if the sailor keeps to the high seas; and this fact is advantageous to the merchant-freighters. And further, the winds on the high seas are regular. Added to that, too, is the present peace, because all piracy has been broken up, and hence the sailors feel wholly at ease (3.2.5).

The busy and mobile Mediterranean which emerges from modern scholarship (Horden and Purcell 2000), is strongly evident in Strabo's *Geography* too. He builds up a picture of active Mediterranean sea-faring from the earliest times (1.3.2), citing the Dioscuri as 'guardians of the sea', noting the famous maritime supremacy of Minos, and the extensive voyages of the Phoenicians. Closer to home, Strabo notes that many colonies were founded on the coast outside Greece, and of course southern Italy would be settled in large part by cross-Mediterranean travellers. Strabo notes explicitly the foundation of Metapontum by Pylians sailing from Troy (6.1.15), but his wider interest in the phase of early foundations is predicated on intensive Mediterranean mobility, now poignantly recreated in a modern-day frenzy of migration. For the Rhodians, there was a history of Mediterranean sea-faring which stretched back many years before the establishment of the Olympic games (14.2.10).

Even once the age of mass migration is over, as the opening passage for this section indicates, Strabo claims that the peace of his own times and the ideal sailing conditions, even away from the coast, create an environment in which travel and trade flourish. The claim to ideal sailing conditions is inevitably compromised at particular danger-points, such as the location of Charybdis, into whose monstrous depth ships may be easily drawn and smashed to pieces (6.2.3). However, as Strabo observes when cataloguing the dangers of the Great and Little Syrtis of North Africa, man's disposition to take risks means that he will try anything in the world, especially coastal voyages (17.3.20). The pages of Strabo's *Geography* offer ample illustration

that complex, successful, and manifold economic transactions might justifiably be seen as a, perhaps even the, defining characteristic of the Mediterranean world.

For Strabo, not only is the Mediterranean the medium for transporting produce from one part of Rome's empire to another, but it is also productive in its own right. With notable exceptions, such as the production of murex dye in Tyre (16.2.23), the fruits of the sea are naturally dominated by fish and fish-products. Malaca neatly illustrates the potential for a place to be both a hub in the trade network and a producer in its own right, with major fish-salting establishments (3.4.2), and indeed the Mediterranean coast of Spain is particularly rich in such activity.[18] But the existence of similar fish-salting plants on the opposing, North African shore, suggests that the exploitation of fish is a unifying factor of the Mediterranean (17.3.18). The superbly productive maritime environment of the Pontic Sea, which must be considered part of Strabo's Mediterranean world as technically an arm of the Aegean (2.5.24),[19] reinforces the unity of the Mediterranean through this characteristic.[20] The city of Sinope, so beautifully equipped by both nature and human foresight (καὶ φύσει καὶ προνοίᾳ), is ideally located on the neck of a peninsula for its harbours, roads and 'wonderful pelamydes-fisheries' (πηλαμυδεῖα θαυμαστά) on both sides of the isthmus (12.3.11), and the neighbouring city of Pharnacia is described as excellent for catching pelamydes and dolphins (12.3.19).

Interestingly, the notion of the Mediterranean as the sea-food production-capital of the world, is challenged by Strabo's account of the Atlantic sea-board of Spain, which produces excellent oysters and mussels (3.2.7). Strabo here draws a direct comparison between the produce of the Mediterranean and the superior conger-eels and tunny-fish to be found outside the Pillars.[21] Furthermore, while the productive sea naturally carries positive connotations, there are indications that exploiting its riches may be less of a choice and more of a necessity, forced upon

[18] See 3.1.8 for Menlaria with its establishments for salting fish, followed by the city of Belon with its emporia and fish-salting plants.

[19] See, however, 1.2.10 for ambiguity over exactly how the Pontic sea fitted into the wider picture. Men in Homer's day regarded the Pontic Sea as a second Oceanus and believed that they could get beyond the limits of the inhabited world there, just as if they went outside the Pillars of Heracles.

[20] But see Abulafia 2003, 16, arguing that the Pontic was distinct from other 'small' seas that made up the Mediterranean, such as the Adriatic.

[21] See also 3.4.16 where Strabo notes the equivalence (though not superiority) of the Atlantic coast of Iberia in producing classic Mediterranean produce such as olives, grapes, and figs.

those whose hinterland is deficient. Along the coastline of southern Italy, to the South of Poseidonia, the inhabitants need to pay attention to exploiting the sea (θαλαττουργεῖν) and salting fish, because of the poverty of the soil (6.1.1), and similarly there are parts of the eastern Mediterranean where the people gain most of their livelihood from the sea, due to the poverty of the land (14.2.21). The supposition in both these passages that the sea might play second-best to exploitation of the land, is echoed in the more extreme formulation applied in reverse to the Golden Age conditions of Albania in Asia Minor, where the land is so fertile that the people 'have no need of a sea' (11.4.3: οὐδὲν δεῖ θαλάττης). The idea that one only turns to the sea 'if necessary' sits interestingly alongside the positive correlation drawn by Strabo between approaching the sea (πλησιάζειν τῇ θαλάττῃ) and increasing levels of civilization (13.1.25).

Nevertheless, the positive commercial aspects of the Mediterranean and its coastline are integral to Strabo's work. The tone is set right at the start of the descriptive books, where Strabo's Iberian peninsula is strongly characterised by its commercial links, which are predominantly maritime. As Strabo notes, there are many cities in Turdetania, but the best known of them are on rivers, estuaries and the sea 'because of their commercial links' (3.2.1); and, of these, the most famous and powerful are Corduba and Gades because of their alliance with Rome and their 'maritime commerce'. Here links to the sea and trade clearly define prosperity. Some cities flourish simply by virtue of being perfectly poised to act as a channel or interface between inland and maritime worlds, such as New Carthage, an important emporium 'of imports from the sea for the inhabitants of the interior and of exports from the interior for all outside world' (3.4.6: τῶν μὲν ἐκ θαλάττης τοῖς ἐν τῇ μεσογαίᾳ, τῶν δ᾽ ἐκεῖθεν τοῖς ἔξω πᾶσιν), or Corinth, the master of two harbours, one of which leads straight to Asia, the other to Italy (8.6.20).

All shores of the Mediterranean are punctuated by magnificent commercial centres, not least Alexandria, which is perfectly situated for commerce by both land and sea, and surpasses even Rome in this respect to take the title of 'the greatest emporium of the inhabited world' (17.1.13: μέγιστον ἐμπόριον τῆς οἰκουμένης). Ephesus conversely overcomes the natural disadvantage of a silting harbour to become the largest emporium in Asia on the Mediterranean side of the Taurus (14.1.24). The expectation, even assumption, that any maritime city would naturally exploit its position to its commercial advantage is perhaps best illustrated by Cyme,

the largest and best of the Aeolian cities. In spite of its advantages, it was, according to Strabo, ridiculed for its stupidity since it does not sell tolls to the harbour until three hundred years after its foundation, thus earning a reputation for having learned too late that it was a city by the sea (13.3.6: ὡς ὀψὲ ᾐσθημένων, ὅτι ἐπὶ θαλάττῃ πόλιν οἰκοῖεν).

Strabo's interest in harbours as facilitators of commercial enterprise extends also to other forms of exploitation and control. Luna, with its amazing harbour is described as 'just the kind of place that would naturally become the naval base of a people who were masters of so great a sea for so long a time' (5.2.5: θαλαττοκρατησάντων ἀνθρώπων τοσαύτης μὲν θαλάττης, τουσοῦτον δὲ χρόνον).[22] Thus, Luna combines the commercial advantage of being perfectly placed for the transport of Carrara marble to Rome from the quarries just above the harbour, with a more clearly thalassocratic function.[23] Another supremely maritime city to use its position and excellent harbours to advantage on multiple fronts is Rhodes town, which is so far superior to all others in harbours, roads, walls and other improvements that no other city can be spoken of as better or even equal to it. In particular, it was excellent in the administration of naval affairs, 'by which it held mastery of the sea for a long time and overthrew piracy' (14.2.5), as well as becoming a friend of Rome.

The role of maritime cities in promoting or controlling piracy is clearly relevant to the creation of an enterprise zone, as indicated by the opening passage of this section. Being in control of the sea entails a responsibility to put down pirates and make the sea navigable for trade, travel, and recreation. In certain respects, the problem of piracy unites the Mediterranean with other seas in Strabo's world. The northern tribe of the Cimbri are described as 'piratical and wandering' (7.2.2: λῃστρικοὶ ὄντες καὶ πλάνητες);[24] and the mostly harbourless and mountainless northern coast of Asia is inhabited by the Achaei, Zygi and Heniochi, who live 'by robberies at sea' (11.2.12). But this was a problem no less applicable to the east coast of Sicily, where Strabo notes that there used to be such fear of the Tyrrhenian pirates that no one would sail to Sicily for commerce (6.2.2) until the tenth generation after the Trojan war. Similarly the whole region of Cilicia Tracheia was naturally well

[22] This superiority is still recognized in the fact that Spezia enjoys one of the best harbours in the world and houses the Italian navy.
[23] For Strabo's wider interest in thalassocracy, see 10.4.8: Minos as the first thalassocrat.
[24] See also 7.4.2 and 7.5.6.

suited to piracy by land and sea (14.5.6: εὐφυοῦς γὰρ ὄντος τοῦ τόπου πρὸς ληστήρια καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλατταν).[25]

However, as 3.2.5 above reminds us, although the Mediterranean may have been naturally ripe for piracy no less than was any other sea, its inhabitants had chosen to overcome those natural inclinations and to transform this area into a zone of civilization, commerce, and the unimpeded movement of people. This transformation was played out in miniature in the town of Antium on the Campanian coast. In the past, the people of Antium used to take part in acts of piracy with the Tyrrhenians, but, following complaints from Alexander and Demetrios Poliorcetes, the people changed their habits and the town was effectively given over to Roman rulers 'for their leisure and relief from cares of state' (5.3.5) with the result that many very expensive residences had been built in the city. The transformation from pirate base to a centre of leisure and luxury may carry somewhat dubious moral connotations, but the economic benefits were clear for all to see.

The coherent Mediterranean: a unique environment?

> And far greater in extent here [sc. in the Mediterranean] than there [in the outer Ocean] is the known portion, and the temperate portion, and the portion inhabited by well-governed cities and nations. Again, we wish to know about those parts of the world where tradition places more deeds of action, political constitutions, arts, and everything else that contributes to practical wisdom; and our needs draw us to those places with which commercial and social intercourse is attainable; and these are the places that are under government, or rather under good government. Now, as I have said, our Interior Sea has a great advantage in all these respects; and so with it I must begin my description. (2.5.18)

Although certain continuities between different maritime environments can be detected in Strabo's *Geography*, the rationale for starting the description with the Mediterranean basin, namely that it is privileged in terms of political, social and cultural sophistication, suggests that it might bear distinctive and desirable characteristics.

Strabo contrasts the produce, lifestyle or climate of the Mediterranean with those enjoyed by the outer Ocean.[26] His depiction of the northern Oceanic peoples

[25] This offers an interesting variation on more positive topos of natural disposition which appears elsewhere in Strabo's work. See 6.2.4: Syracuse flourishing because of the fertility of the soil and the natural excellence of its harbours; 6.4.1: Rome's natural inclination to hegemony due to its location; 17.1.6: the Great harbour at Alexandria, where natural predisposition and human enterprise combine.

involves a nomadic, meagre livelihood derived from shepherding flocks, in sharp contrast to the settled Mediterranean lifestyle (7.1.3). His Germans on the Ocean coast remain mysterious to the degree that Strabo does not know whether they extend right along the shore (7.2.4), nor indeed does he know any of the peoples who live above Pontus, nor how far they are from the Atlantic, nor whether they border it. Just as the northern Ocean may seem alien to Mediterranean eyes,[27] so too does the southern Ocean along the coast of India, Persia, and Arabia, evoke a different maritime world from that of the inner sea. Along the coast of Ariana on voyages to India, huge whales can be found (15.2.13), and the sea-board of Persis is hot, sandy, and barren, producing only dates, a very different crop from those which characterise the Mediterranean basin (15.3.1).

By contrast, both the content and the form of Strabo's description of the Mediterranean do betray some coherence. We have already seen the particular excellence, if not monopoly, enjoyed by the Mediterranean in productivity and commerce, which may be seen as defining characteristics.[28] Certain geographical phenomena seem also to characterise the Mediterranean sea-board, not least the interesting instances when the *façade maritime* becomes a blurred rather than clearly demarcated meeting point between land and sea.[29] Floodtides offer temporary transformation of land into sea at high tide, as on the shoreline of Pamphylia (14.3.9).

A region particularly prone to this blurring of land and sea is north-east Italy. Here the city of Patavium is reached by an inland voyage from the sea by river (5.1.7), which runs through the marshlands. The largest city in the marshes is, according to Strabo, Ravenna, an extraordinary place built entirely of wood and traversed by rivers, which the inhabitants use bridges and ferries to cross. The

[26] Occasional gradations of this distinction are evident. See 3.4.16 on Iberian production of olives, grapes, and fig-trees. The Mediterranean coast is rich in these, according to Strabo, as is the Atlantic coast, but not the northern Ocean coast. The Mediterranean is not on this account unique in producing these goods, with the Atlantic acting as an intermediary in the progress to the barrenness of the northern Ocean.

[27] See also 4.4.2 for the blanket statement that those who live to the North and on the Ocean coast are more warlike.

[28] Here, the proposition of Purcell 2003, 13 that there is nothing unique about the Mediterranean, but rather an intensity of particular features, is helpful.

[29] Sometimes this blurring of land and water is due to particular climatic conditions. In the region around the mouth of Lake Maeotis, the frozen waterway from Panticapaeum to Phanagoria is crossed by wagons so that is both ice and roadway (7.3.18).

maritime nature of this inland city is reinforced by the infusion into Ravenna at high tide of 'no small portion of the sea' (οὐ μικρὸν τῆς θαλάττης μέρος), which then carries filth away from the city. This sea-water cleansing system draws from Strabo a comparison with Alexandria in Egypt, where in summer the dangerous emissions from Lake Maerotis are rinsed out by the Nile floods. The Nile floods, which 'make land into sea' (17.1.4: πελαγίζει), turn Egypt into a semi-marine environment which bears certain similarities to the lands around the northern Adriatic.[30] The parallel is reinforced by Strabo's description of Venetia (5.1.5), which he claims is strongly affected by the behaviour of the sea, and resembles Lower Egypt, with its intersecting channels and dikes, lagoons, lands that can be sailed across, and wonderful river voyages to the cities, especially up the Padus. Strabo's frame of comparison for Venetia does not, however, remain restricted to the Mediterranean basin. The ebb and flow tides here are said to be similar to those of the Ocean, and indeed the sea off Venetia sits apart from the rest of the Mediterranean in its close resemblance to the Ocean itself: 'Here are almost the only parts of our sea that behave like the Ocean' (5.1.5: μόνα γὰρ ταῦτα τὰ μέρη σχεδόν τι τῆς καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς θαλάττης ὁμοιοπαθεῖ τῷ ὠκεανῷ). The Mediterranean may bear certain common characteristics, but it cannot be said to stand in isolation from the other seas of Strabo's world, as his comments on the unity of the seas would endorse.

Nevertheless, in spite of these links, the broad superiority of the Mediterranean runs as a theme through the work and implies coherence of concept and reality, which lifts it above the other seas to which it is physically linked. Within the river system of Gaul, for example, which flows into both the Ocean and the Mediterranean, the Rhodanus is particularly fine because it connects with the Mediterranean, which is 'better than the outer sea' (4.1.2). The location of the Mediterranean at the heart of the temperate zone again naturally predisposes it to be superior, since, 'in general the extremities of the world outside the temperate zone are necessarily defective and inferior to the temperate part' (17.2.1). The idea that the Mediterranean Sea is the common factor in areas of superior prosperity comes across clearly in Strabo's account of Libya. The continent as a whole is inferior to Europe because so much of it is desert, but the entire *coast* opposite Europe between the Nile and the Pillars of Heracles, especially the part settled by Carthaginians, is settled and

[30] See Herodotus 2.97 for Egypt in flood as a sea, with the cities like islands in the Aegean.

prosperous (17.3.1). Those expert sailors, the Phoenicians, who did extend their reach to Iberia beyond the Pillars of Heracles, nevertheless made the Mediterranean basin the basis of their success,[31] and, as Strabo asserts, even to his day, 'the best part of continental Europe and the adjacent islands are occupied by Phoenicians', as well as all the areas of Libya that men can live in without a nomadic lifestyle (17.3.15). From this dominion they not only raised their city to be a rival of Rome (πόλιν τε ἀντίπαλον τῇ Ῥώμῃ) but also waged three great wars. Again, the notion that the Mediterranean shoreline generates the ideal conditions for not only settlement and prosperity, but also hegemony, comes through clearly. As the designation of the Phoenician city of Carthage as a rival to Rome indicates, no city would succeed better in exploiting the advantages of the Mediterranean than Rome itself. At the very end of his work, where Strabo outlines the world of Roman dominion, having spent so many books describing the larger world that Rome knew, he makes plain quite how focused Rome's empire is on the *paralia* of the Mediterranean, particularly in Libya and Asia where the coast constitutes almost the full extent of Roman power (17.3.24). The superiority of the Mediterranean for aspiring ruling powers is clear.

The Corrupt(ed) Sea: immorality and effluence

> At the tides the city receives no small portion of the sea, so that, since the filth is all washed out by these tides as well as the rivers, the city is relieved of foul air. (5.1.7)

The downside of the highly effective tidal cleaning system enjoyed by Ravenna is clearly that it turns the Adriatic into an open-sewer. The same must have been true on an even grander scale for the Tyrrhenian sea, into which flowed the waters of the Tiber, carrying all the filth (5.3.8: τὰ λύματα) from the sewer-system of the imperial capital. The notion of the superior, civilized, hegemonic Mediterranean as a cess-pit opens up the possibility of finding yet another angle on this sea in the pages of the *Geography*. While it might be anachronistic to raise the question of marine pollution as opposed to the health-benefits for humans of washing waste out to sea,

[31] Although see Strabo's interesting comment on the extreme fertility of Maurusia (Morocco), where nevertheless the inhabitants choose to be nomadic (17.3.7), telling against the idea that the Mediterranean climate necessarily lends itself to a settled lifestyle.

nevertheless the association of the Mediterranean with disease rather than with prosperity recurs in Strabo's account of Latium, which he describes as blessed with fertility and highly productive, except for a few districts on the sea-board, which are 'marshy and sickly' (5.3.5).

Alongside physical degradation sits immorality. The decline of maritime cities, especially in Italy, from centres of ship-building and commercial productivity into centres of luxurious living, characterises the entire western coast of Italy. Rather ambiguously, as noted above, the town of Antium in Campania has ceased from participating in piracy with the Tyrrhenians and become a leisure-base for the Roman élite, with the result that many very expensive homes have been built in the city (5.3.5). If exchanging piracy for luxury might not seem a morally clear-cut transaction, then the example of Pisa makes the point with less ambiguity. Pisa, according to Strabo, is famed for its fertility, its stone-quarries, and its ship-timber. The last of these was formerly used to counter the perils on the sea (5.2.5: πρὸς τοὺς κατὰ θάλατταν κινδύνους), but now was primarily used for buildings at Rome and for the construction of luxury-villas, 'now that that people are devising palaces of Persian magnificence' (βασίλεια κατασκευαζομένων Περσικά). The subversion of timber from being used to protect the kind of Mediterranean mobility described above to being used for luxurious living is given further negative charge by the mention of Persian despotism.

Let us return to the notion of 'Strabo's Mediterranean', and how it sits within the conceptual framework offered by modern scholarship. As this chapter has progressed, two interpretations of the term have emerged, generating two rather different answers to the question of whether the Mediterranean remains a silent 'gap' or a noisy presence in the *Geography*. As a conceptual tool for mapping out the world known to the Romans in literary form, the Mediterranean exists as the perimeter rim to a largely unmentioned void. The *façade maritime*, the critical interface between sea and land, guides the shape and direction of the account, but very little attention is paid to setting out and describing the geographical space occupied by the Mediterranean. This is absolutely in line with the periplus tradition which strongly influenced the organization of Strabo's work. In literary terms, having rejected the more geometrical approach of the scientific geographers after his introductory books, Strabo's preference was, as he indicates explicitly, a periegesis predominantly concerned with

the Mediterranean. As those who had gone before and would come after in this genre,[32] the Mediterranean was very much a unity, strictly topped and tailed by the Pillars of Heracles; but it was a linear unity, guided by and focused on the shore. Nevertheless, the reality evoked by Strabo's description stretches far beyond the *paralia*. It is the world of Malkin's networks and of Horden and Purcell's intense commercial activity.[33] Strabo's *Geography* does not explicitly describe but implies and alludes to a world of commercial and cultural maritime mobility, which owes its intensity to the benefits of the *pax Augusta*. Neither hints at Persian opulence nor sewer-outlets can dent the overwhelmingly positive and upbeat evocation of this undescribed part of Strabo's world.

[32] See ancient Scylax with Shipley 2011, Scymnus in Müller 1885, and modern Newby 1985, Theroux 1995, Palin 1997 examples of the genre.

[33] Thus, although Purcell 2003, 17, correctly dismisses as wrong the superficially appealing idea of the Mediterranean as the 'hole in the middle of a doughnut' in relation to the real business of the Mediterranean, nevertheless it *does* function as something of a void in terms of Strabo's description.

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