

## PLINY'S INFLUENCE ON LATER LATIN NOTICES OF SRI LANKA

Pliny's *Natural History* provided the basis for a number of later handbooks dealing with natural science, geography, and other branches of learning. Not surprisingly, some of the geographical sections of such works included accounts of Taprobane paraphrased or summarized ultimately from Pliny's well-known description which, in addition to what was known from earlier writers, also incorporated information which Pliny claims to have gathered from envoys who came from that island during the reign of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54)<sup>1</sup>. As sources for history these accounts have no independent value, but they are of some interest as an indication of the influence exerted by Pliny and the manner in which the ancients understood his sometimes terse and obscure narrative.

Of these the most comprehensive account comes from C. Julius Solinus styled polyhistor. His *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, written probably around the middle of the third century, is almost entirely based on Pliny and Pomponius Mela, and was the chief medium through which later writers learned of the geographical and other details contained in Pliny's *Natural History*<sup>2</sup>. The fifty third chapter is devoted to Taprobane, and here Solinus reproduces most of Pliny's account, but with constant "improvements" of diction and arrangement.

Solinus begins by paraphrasing Pliny's references to Taprobane, originally considered to be another world, inhabited by the Antichthones, and proceeds direct to the achievements of Alexander. This is followed by a statement to the effect that Onesicritus, sent as commander of the Macedonian fleet, informed us of details about this land and its general conditions<sup>3</sup>. It was perhaps this statement that prompted some writers such as Gosselin, to believe that Onesicritus was actually sent to Taprobane by Alexander<sup>4</sup>; but as Solinus's account is based on Pliny, that interpretation cannot be regarded as a matter of historical fact. There is no suggestion in Pliny or anywhere else that Onesicritus reached the island.

Pliny had reproduced information from Onesicritus, Megasthenes, and Eratosthenes, citing each writer in turn and defining clearly what each one had said.

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1. Pliny *Natural History* vi. 81-91 [ed. Andre and Filliozat, Paris (1980)]; cf D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Sri Lanka's Diplomatic Mission to Rome, First Century A.D." *Palma II: Classical Association of Ceylon 1935-1985* pp. 67-80.
  2. Cf. Solinus, ed. Mommsen, pp. xviii-iv; H. Walter: "Caius Julius Solinus und seine Vorlagen" *Classics et Mediaevalis XXIV* (1963) pp. 86-157.
  3. Solinus: 53. 2.
  4. Cf. Tennent: *Ceylon*, London (1959) vol. I. p. 525 n. 1.

Solinus mentions only Onesicritus by name, and thus by implication attributes all the information that follows to this writer. He is careless not only in the handling of his sources but even in citing them. Thus Onesicritus is made responsible both for the dimensions of the island, which, according to Pliny, came from Eratosthenes, as well as for a garbled version of the statements of Megasthenes, so that we are told that the island is divided by a river flowing in-between, that part of it was filled with wild beasts and elephants larger than those of India, while the other part is occupied by men, and that it abounds in pearls and all sorts of gems. In the corresponding passage of Pliny there is no mention of gems. The reference is obviously transported from a later passage in Pliny<sup>5</sup>, where it is said that pearls and gems are esteemed in Taprobane<sup>6</sup>. Solinus makes no mention of the name Palaeogoni which, according to Pliny, was assigned to the inhabitants by Megasthenes. Instead he contents himself by saying that men inhabit one part of the island.

Pliny had also clearly distinguished between what he had learned from ancient writers and what he had learned from the ambassadors from Taprobane<sup>7</sup>; but this distinction is not observed by Solinus. He mixes both kinds of information and rearranges the account so that passages dealing with closely related subjects are brought together. For instance, after giving Pliny's own comments<sup>8</sup> that there is no observation of stars in navigation and that the Great Bear is not visible, Solinus adds that the Pleiades never appear, that the moon is seen from the eighth to the sixteenth only, that Canopus a large bright star, shines there, that the sun rises on the right and sets on the left, details which are taken from the account of the ambassadors in Pliny<sup>9</sup>. Solinus then goes back to the original account and narrates how shore-sighting birds are used instead of the observation of stars for navigational purposes.

Like Pliny, Solinus also tells us that the arrival of the ambassadors was the result of the accidental landing in Taprobane of a freedman of Annius Plocamus. In the account of how the freedman reached the island, Solinus differs from Pliny in one respect with a precision which is based merely on his own interpretation. According to Pliny, the freedman was sailing "round Arabia" when he was snatched by winds from

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<sup>5</sup>. Cf. Pliny: vi. 89.

<sup>6</sup>. Solinus returns to the subject of pearls in his concluding remarks about Taprobane (53. 23), where he says that the largest pearls are gathered there in the greatest number; and this leads him to the long description of the pearl - oysters, which is borrowed from the ninth book of Pliny.

<sup>7</sup>. Pliny: vi. 84.

<sup>8</sup>. Pliny: vi. 63.

<sup>9</sup>. Pliny: vi. 87.

the north and blown beyond Carmania. But Solinus says that he was sailing to Arabia (*Arabiam petenta*). It may also be pointed out that all the manuscripts of Solinus give Thracia as the name of the chief delegate from Taprobane.

The number of the governors (*rectores*) who are given to the king of Taprobane by his people is given by Solinus as 40, not 30 which is what Pliny's text has. This error, like the variation in the chief ambassador's name, may charitably be regarded as one of those scribal errors for which the author himself need not be held responsible. Mommsen made the obvious corrections for which we have the authority of Pliny.

The extent to which Solinus could mangle his sources is revealed by the manner in which he handles Pliny's account of the relations between the people of Taprobane and the "Chinese" (*Seres*)<sup>10</sup>. Pliny had said that the Seres are seen beyond the Hemodi mountains (the Himalayas) and are known to the people of Taprobane through commerce. In Solinus, however, the people of Taprobane can see the coast of the Seres from their own mountain ranges. Again, according to Pliny, the ambassadors described the Seres as taller than normal, with red hair, blue eyes, and harsh voices. Solinus transfers this description to the people of Taprobane itself, and omits any reference to the silent barter which, Pliny tells us, was carried on with the Seres by visiting merchants. Conspicuously absent also from Solinus's account is the puzzling passage in which Pliny reports of a great lake called Megisba in the interior of the island, with two rivers flowing from it, and the city of Palaesimundu with its population of 200,000. Some of the details regarding sea-faring and the construction of boats are also omitted.

There is, however, one statement in Solinus for which no parallel can be found from Pliny or any other writer he is known to have utilized. Solinus says that the greater part of this island is scorched with heat and consists of vast deserts, a statement to be repeated *ad nauseam* by his successors<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps Solinus has referred to Taprobane a description given originally concerning some other region of India. However, it is evident that concurrent with the notion of immense productivity and richness associated with Taprobane, there was in the Roman empire another report which pictured the island as being parched with heat and extending in vast bare plains. Dionysius Periegetes had sung of Taprobane as lying under blazing Cancer and this poem was rendered into Latin in a highly coloured rhetorical version by Avienus, who emphasizes both the heat and size<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps Solinus also had heard of this report, although it is equally possible that the geographical proximity of the island to India

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<sup>10</sup>. On the problem of their identification see my essay "Niligentior Notitia: the Old and the New in Pliny's Description of Sri Lanka" in *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* vol. XVIII (1991-1992) p.152-170

<sup>11</sup>. Solinus: 53. 21.

<sup>12</sup>. Cf. also Priscian, 779-781.

inspired this description of its extremes of climate.

There are instances where Solinus has adapted his source to suit the cultural background of the Roman audience of his time. Thus, where Pliny says that the man condemned to death has the right of appeal (*appellatio*) to the people, Solinus uses the traditional, specifically Roman, expression "*provocare ad populum*". Again, where Pliny says that the king's dress is that of Father Liber, Solinus develops the idea by saying that the king wears the *syрма* as we see Dionysus dressed, the *syрма* being a robe and train worn by actors and so no stranger to their patron God Dionysus, and equally familiar to the Roman theatre-goer. Again, regarding the fondness of the people of Taprobane for tiger and elephant hunts, he says that they do not hunt common spoils "*plebeias praedas*", an idea taken from the Roman hunting games. Thus, while Pliny had reported the statements of the delegates with very little comment but with some moralizing, Solinus has introduced cultural analogies from Roman life, but with a minimum of uplifting discourse.

Meanwhile the political and idealizing tendencies that are so clearly detectable in Pliny's reporting of the narrative of the delegates from Sri Lanka appear to find an echo, though from a considerable distance, in a late collection of biographies. However here the ideal conditions are transferred back to Rome, albeit as a dream hardly realizable even in the distant future.

"Flavius Vopiscus" was one of the contributors to the collection of biographies of Roman emperors known as the *Historia Augusta*, generally thought to date from the last years of the fourth century A.D. He refers to the people of Taprobane in his account of the emperor Tacitus<sup>13</sup>. Describing the events that allegedly took place around A.D. 275, he relates how the soothsayers predicted that in a thousand years there would arise a Roman emperor who will give judges to the Parthians and the Persians, keep the Franks and the Alamanni under Roman law, leave no barbarian in the whole of Africa, place a governor over the Taprobani, (*qui Taprobanis praesidem imponat*), send a proconsul to Ireland (?), judge all the Sarmatians, possess the entire earth surrounded by the ocean, all her nations having been conquered, and then restore power to the senate and live under the old laws; he himself will live for 120 years and die without an heir.

The passage, given in the form of a prophecy, represents some of the ideas held by certain elements of Roman society, in line with the literary interests of the time. The references to the restoration of power to the senate and to the projected conquest of Ireland are Tacitean in origin: those to the king dying without heir after attaining such an advanced age echo Pliny in his account of Taprobane, and the use of the term "proconsul" is deliberately anachronistic. Such references back to the first century A.D. gain point when it is remembered that, according to "Vopiscus", the emperor Tacitus

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<sup>13</sup>. "Vopiscus": *Historia Augusta*: Tacitus, xv. 2.

claimed a family connection with the historian.

As Syme has observed<sup>14</sup>, this is the work of an elaborate hoaxer. This vision of the recovery of past glories and the resurrection of Roman imperial power by the elimination of competitors, old and new, is presented with tongue in cheek. The ideas are those current in the propaganda of the fourth century, with the epic tones of imperial panegyric echoed here, but whereas the stock stuff of such rhetoric had for centuries brought India and Britain into the reckoning, "Vopiscus" here goes even further afield - to Taprobane and to Ireland. He has taken one more step along this well-trodden path and has moved to the ends of the earth, before revealing that this is no more than wishful thinking, impossible of fulfillment in a thousand years.

Early in the fifth century, Martianus Capella included in his *Disciplinae* a brief survey of geography, for which he appears to have consulted both Pliny and Solinus<sup>15</sup>. The ground plan is in the main borrowed from Pliny, but the contents are, for the most part, taken from the summary account of Solinus. Capella's debt to both these sources is manifest in his description of Taprobane.

For instance, the information which Pliny derived from Onesicritus, Megasthenes, and Eratosthenes is presented in the correct order, and not mixed together as in Solinus, although Capella does not mention these authors by name. On the other hand, the astronomical details and the facts concerning life on the island are presented in the order followed by Solinus. There is no mention of the journey of the freedman or the arrival of ambassadors from Taprobane. Capella also follows the error of Solinus in attributing the description of the Seres to the inhabitants of Taprobane, but he introduces from Pliny the description of silent barter which Solinus had left out of his account; the result, however, is that this trade is now represented as being carried on in Taprobane rather than among the Seres.

Capella's attempts to abridge his sources have sometimes led him into error. In reporting the visit of envoys from Taprobane to Rome, Pliny says that at Rome they were surprised to find the sun rising on their left and setting on their right, rather than the other way round. Capella, having made no mention of the arrival of the

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<sup>14</sup>. R. Syme: *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta* Oxford (1988) pp. 140-1.

<sup>15</sup>. The *Disciplinae* is an allegorical work written in the style of the Menippean satires, i.e. in a mixture of prose and verse. In it the seven liberal arts are represented as bridesmaids at the wedding of Mercury and Philologia. The summary of geography is spoken by Geometry.

ambassadors, has the sun rising on the left in Taprobane.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere abridgement has robbed statements of their precision. Pliny and Solinus had said that, according to the reckoning of Roman ships, Taprobane was seven days distant from the Prasii, whereas Capella simply notes that the island is seven days from India, which may be a very different matter altogether.

On one point Capella contradicts his sources directly. According to Pliny and Solinus a delinquent king of Taprobane, although condemned to death, was not executed, but banished from human contact. Capella however says that the king has his throat cut.

Capella does not mention any of the cultural analogies which Solinus had introduced into Pliny's account. In this he is on the whole closer in spirit to Pliny than to Solinus in his account of Taprobane, but this is probably the accidental result of the need for extreme curtailment. Although he may not have been conscious of it, Capella, by his compression and his handling of his sources, has enhanced the idealized concept of Taprobane, turning it into the land where things are on a scale which verges upon the marvelous. It is a vast land, with the largest elephants and pearls, with men larger than anywhere else and living longer than anybody else; and this element of the marvelous becomes a persistent part of the later tradition concerning the island.

In the seventh century, Isidorus of Seville in his encyclopedic work *Etymologiae* (or *Origines*) included a very brief notice of Taprobane which derives from Pliny through Solinus. At xiv. 3. 5, Taprobane is said to be full of gems and elephants, and in xiv. 6, 12, he correctly observes that Taprobane is situated below India towards the east. But, like Pliny and Solinus, he relegates the island to the confines of the world, when he says that the Indian Ocean begins from that island, thus restating a view already expressed by Orosius and Jordanes. According to Isidorus the island is 875 miles long and 625 miles broad. As Dicuil will observe, he has simply converted the information which Pliny had given in Greek measurement into the more familiar Roman miles, and so adapted it to the understanding of his readers. Like Solinus, Isidorus says that the island is divided by a river, that it is entirely filled with gems and pearls, and that one part is full of beasts and elephants, while the other part is occupied by men.

We also hear from him another fable which we have not met with before, namely that the island has two summers and two winters and springs. This is a statement concerning India to be found in Pliny, Solinus and Martianus Capella<sup>17</sup>, which Isidorus has here transferred to Taprobane.

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<sup>16</sup>. Solinus had rationalized Pliny's statement to describe the phenomena they had reported as observable in Taprobane, and had the sun there rising on the right. Capella has transferred Pliny's statement from Rome direct to Taprobane.

<sup>17</sup>. Pliny: vi. 58; Solinus: 52. 1; Capella: vi. 694.

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Later in the direct line of descent was Dicuil, the Frankish geographer who published in A.D. 825 a survey of the world, *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, which was almost entirely based on Pliny and Solinus; his account of Taprobane<sup>18</sup> being largely borrowed from Solinus, does go further afield, however, for his information since, besides citing the dimensions as given by Isidorus, he quotes the relevant lines from Priscian's version of the *Periegesis*, with comments suited to the learning of his time.

Thus, the influence of Pliny's account of Taprobane, through intermediaries like Solinus, went down by a line of descent well into the middle ages, to be supplemented by the occasional scraps of borrowed information, which can be traced in the stereotyped lists of place names which are the materials of scholarship for the geographers and philosophers of a later day. His influence was not restricted to Latin texts, but spread also into writings in the vernacular languages. The account of Taprobane in the imaginary travels of Sir John Mandeville, for instance, goes back ultimately to the descriptions of Pliny and Solinus, but of these sources not one can be regarded as contributing to or expanding the store of learning which Pliny had bequeathed.

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<sup>18</sup>. Dicuil: vii. 26-33.