

## THE EARLIEST GREEK NOTICES OF SRI LANKA

The notices, which are the subject of this paper, were all written during the Hellenistic or Alexandrian period of Greek literature, which extends from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. to the commencement of the Roman principate in 27 B.C. The original works which contained the references are no longer extant, and they are known to us only as fragments quoted by later authors. Of the six writers discussed below, only Onesicritus and Megasthenes had first-hand experience of most of the regions they described. The others were men of science and scholarship, who may be taken as typical representatives of the intellectual atmosphere of the age. The fragments thus give us some idea of the impact made by Sri Lanka (or Taprobane, as the Greeks called it)<sup>1</sup> on educated circles of the Hellenistic world.

### I

The Elder Pliny tells us that it was the age and achievements of Alexander the Great that revealed the insular nature of Taprobane, which had for a long time been thought of as the first part of another world, being called the "Land of the Antichthonos".<sup>2</sup> The *antichthon*, or counter-earth, was originally imagined by the later Pythagoreans to be a celestial body different from the earth, but afterwards came to be regarded as part of this earth itself. However, (with the doubtful exception of a passage from Pomponius Mela, to be discussed below)

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1. A. Herrmann, "Taprobane, die Insel Ceylon" Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften* vol. IV Stuttgart (1932) p. 2260-2272.
  2. Plin. *N.H.* vi. 81.

Pliny is the earliest authority who connects the *antichthones* with Taprobane. He does not, however, name anyone as having held or taught this view.

Thus, as far as we can ascertain, the first Greek to write about Taprobane was Onesicritus of Astypaleia, whom Pliny describes as a commander of Alexander's fleet, and who afterwards wrote a romance history of Alexander. His book fell into discredit among the ancients owing to the manner in which he allegedly interwove fact and fiction. Modern opinion has been, on the whole, more favourable; but it is impossible to arrive at a fair judgment owing to the disappearance of his work. The fragments on Taprobane are preserved by Strabo and Pliny.

Strabo restricts his use of Onesicritus to digressions on the occasions when he diverges from the source he is following at the time. In his account of Taprobane, which is one of these digressions, he quotes Onesicritus as follows:<sup>3</sup>

"Concerning Taprobane Onesicritus says that it is five thousand stades in size, without defining its length or breadth; that it is twenty days' voyage distant from the mainland; but that ships sail badly since their sailing gear is inefficient and they are built without belly bolts on both sides; that there are also other islands between it and India though that island is the southernmost; that amphibious creatures exist around it, some similar to oxen, others to horses, and others to other land animals.

Pliny quotes Onesicritus as follows:<sup>4</sup>

"Taprobane, under the name of the land of the *antichthones*, was for a long time considered to be another world. The age and achievements of Alexander the Great proved clearly that it was an island. Onesicritus, a commander of his fleet,

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3. Plin. *N.H.* vi. 81.

4. Jacoby, *F.Gr.H.* no. 134, fr. 12 (Strabo xv.1.15).

wrote that bigger and more war-like elephants are produced there than in India."

Onesicritus's information concerns the size and location of Taprobane as well as the conditions of navigation and the fauna in the neighbouring waters. Strabo's quotation appears to incorporate material from mariners' accounts and disregards altogether the internal condition of the island. Pliny, on the other hand, with the notice of elephants, concentrates attention, however briefly, on the situation in the island itself, about which too Onesicritus had heard somehow.

The report of Onesicritus has been unduly discredited by some modern commentators on account of several reasons. First of all, critics have been too ready to accept the verdict of the ancients, (including Strabo himself), who considered Onesicritus as an inventor of fables, without allowing for the fact that he depended to a great extent on hearsay and was frequently at the mercy of interpreters. His personal knowledge of India extended only as far south as the Indus delta, and his inquiries concerning lands further away were doubtlessly elicited from his informers' answers, the vagueness and mysterious character of which would only have been enhanced in translation. For, the interpreters would not only have perpetuated misunderstandings but also facilitated the tendency to express unfamiliar ideas in terms of the way of thinking already familiar to the Greeks and readily understood by them. Moreover, the practice of recording marvellous details, even when one did not believe in them, was common among ancient geographers and historians, and Onesicritus would himself have found these marvels quite in place in the type of idealised romantic historiography that he practised.

Secondly, the text of Strabo's *Geography* is poorly preserved just at the point where it gives Onesicritus' fragment concerning Taprobane, and in attempting to restore this corrupt text, external ideas have been read into it and unnecessary complications introduced.

Thirdly, this earliest extant notice of Taprobane has been compared with later accounts, and the comparison has often led to confusion. Ideas which Onesicritus never intended have been imputed to him, and what has been thus imputed has generally turned out to be inferior to the information in the two genuine fragments.

Onesicritus gives the size of Taprobane as 5,000 stades. He has therefore been accused of exaggeration and of perpetuating an error which persisted till recent times. But the exaggerating may not have originated with him. For, it has been shown<sup>5</sup> that the ancient Indians also had exaggerated notions concerning the size of Lanka, and that these notions were apparently accepted by the Buddhist writers themselves, who accounted for the present size of the island by episodes in which the sea encroached on vast areas of the land.

According to Strabo, Onesicritus gave the size (μέγας) without specifying length or breadth. Strabo is thinking as a geographer and expects to know the length and breadth of the island. But what matters to a sailor is the *periplus* and it is not improbable that what Onesicritus has recorded is the circumference of the island. If this is so, the exaggeration will not appear to be much greater than the actual measurements.<sup>6</sup>

We must also remember that Greek navigators at this time did not have precision instruments to indicate the direction and speed of their vessels. Instead, they had to rely on the sun, stars and wind.<sup>7</sup> In measuring distances at sea, therefore, they were liable to make frequent mistakes. Pythias, for instance, had over-estimated the size of Britain,<sup>8</sup> while Herodotus, in the preceding century, had greatly exaggerated the size of the Black Sea and under-estimated that of the Bosphorus;<sup>9</sup> and both these writers had some personal experience of the regions they described. Need we wonder, therefore, if Onesicritus, who

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5. J.E. Tennent, *Ceylon* 4th ed. London (1860) vol. I, p.6.

6. It may be observed in passing that the Island of the Sun, described by Iambulus, was said to be 5,000 stades in circumference (Diod. ii. 55-60). T.S. Brown, *Onesicritus: A Study In Hellenistic Historiography* U.S.A. (1949) p. 76, has noted that this is one of several points in which the account of Iambulus reminds one of the writings of Onesicritus.

7. W.W. Hyde *Ancient Greek Mariners* New York (1947) p. 317.

8. Cf. Diod. Sic. v.24.

9. Hdt. iv. 85.



did not reach Taprobane, should have exaggerated its size? Writers of succeeding generations, far from correcting his errors, increased them. These writers were mostly scholars who had no first-hand experience of the east, but merely borrowed their material from earlier sources, adapting it to their own pre-conceived geographical notions.

According to Onesicritus Taprobane was a distance of twenty days' journey from the mainland. This remark has caused some scholars to doubt the identity of Onesicritus' Taprobane with Sri Lanka. A. Herrmann<sup>10</sup> thinks that the description was originally intended for Iabadiu (modern Sumatra), whose central point, according to him, is actually twenty days' journey from the southern tip of India. Herrmann therefore concludes that someone, who revised Onesicritus subsequently, has transferred the description to Taprobane. We must realise, however, that there is nothing in the text of Strabo to suggest that the starting point assumed by Onesicritus was the southern end of India. It should rather be placed in the western part of northern India, probably at the Indus delta, which was the southernmost point personally reached by Onesicritus. Herrmann's suggestion is therefore unacceptable. The journey described must be from the Indus to Taprobane. The twenty days might be an exaggeration, but it must have been prompted or supported by the poor sailing conditions, which the writer goes on to describe.

It is now generally accepted that the Indians, who migrated to Sri Lanka in early times, came from the western as well as the eastern parts of north India. Those who came from the eastern parts certainly maintained regular and intimate contacts with their former land, and there can be no doubt that, at least in the earlier period, their western counterparts did the same. That mariners from Sri Lanka continued to make voyages to the western part of India is evident from the early Brahmi inscription from Maligatanna in the Kurunegala district, in which a mariner by the name of Maha-Asoka describes himself as having gone to Bhojakataka. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana aptly correlates this evidence with the report of Onesicritus, pointing out that Onesicritus had apparently noticed certain sailing vessels used on the route from

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10. A. Herrmann, *loc.cit.* The claims of Sri Lanka to be the "Taprobane" of Onesicritus have been defended by F.F. Schwarz, 'Onesikritos und Megasthenes uber Tambapannidipa' *Grazer Beitrage* vol. V (1976) p. 234-263.

Sindh to Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> On the whole there is nothing to prevent us from assuming that there was a regular intercourse between Sri Lanka and the Indus Valley, and that Onesicritus had heard of voyages between these regions as being accomplished in twenty days.

As for Sumatra, one cannot believe, in the absence of positive evidence, that there was any regular contact at this date between that land and the Indus region. We do not hear of Iabadiu in extant Greek literature before Ptolemy, who wrote during the mid second century A.D. Even the Indian notions of Suvannabhumi (usually identified with Burma or Malaya) are not earlier than the beginning of the third century B.C., and it is very unlikely that information could have reached a Greek of the time of Alexander the Great sojourning in India. In fact the ignorance that pervades all classical authors other than Ptolemy concerning regions east of India is impressive, and there appears to be no need to bring in Sumatra at this early stage of Greek knowledge concerning the East.

Another reason why Herrmann believes that this description should apply to Sumatra is that Onesicritus speaks of other islands between India and Taprobane. But such a deduction need not follow, once we allow that Onesicritus is thinking of the route beginning at the Indus. We may compare Pliny's notice several islands lying between the Indus and Taprobane. Pliny is here compiling from earlier material, and some of his information may well go back to Onesicritus himself. We may also compare the similar list of islands in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, where the author is probably speaking from personal experience, be it his own or of others.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the ships employed in this journey, Onesicritus says that they sail badly, since their sailing gear is inefficient and they are built without belly-bolts on both sides ( ἄλλα κακοπλοεῖν τὰς ναῦς, Φαῦλος μὲν ἰστιοπεποιημένος, κατασκευασμένος δὲ ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἐγκοιλῶν μετρῶν χωρὶς) This is one instance where attempts at restoration of the text have

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11. S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon* vol. I Colombo (1970) p. 76; R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 'Seaways to Sieldiba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-Colonial Sri Lanka', Paper read at the Asian Studies Seminar, University of Peradeniya, 1985, p. 3.
12. Plin vi.80; *Periplus* 53. Cf. Schwarz, *op.cit.* p. 246, n.35.

resulted in confusion and misinterpretation. A parallel was drawn between the text of Onesicritus, as preserved by Strabo, and Pliny's account of navigation in the neighbourhood of Taprobane.<sup>13</sup> Pliny's words were used to interpret Strabo's supposedly obscure and disturbed text. By inserting the word *πρωμῆς* after *κατασκευασμένως* Onesicritus was made to say that the ships navigate badly, not only because the rigging is defective, but also because they are equipped at both ends with prows.<sup>14</sup>

Pierre Paris,<sup>15</sup> who rejects the above emendation, thinks that Pliny and Strabo are referring to two different regions, and consequently to two different kinds of boat. According to him, Pliny is probably referring to the double-ended boats found on the coast of India and Sri Lanka, especially around the Gulf of Mannar. These are the canoes with a single lateral float, known in Sinhala as *οπη*. Strabo, on the other hand, is talking of a different kind of boat. Paris takes the *εγκοιλια μετρο* to be the lateral floats of the boat, which are some distance from the hull and separated (*χωρῆς*). Boats of this kind, with two lateral floats, are found at present only in Indonesia; however - so argues Paris - the Indonesians had to use their own boats in migrating to Madagascar and eastern Africa, probably passing by Sri Lanka. Paris therefore assumes that we have in Onesicritus a piece of important information from which one can at least conclude that, at the time of Alexander, the seas to the south of India were frequented by boats with double outriggers.

It is, however, possible to understand this passage satisfactorily without introducing new words into the text or having recourse to a hypothesis concerning the possible presence of Indonesian type boats in the vicinity of Sri Lanka. A careful examination of the Greek text will show that the function of the

13. Cp. Strab. xv.1.15 with Plin.vi.82

14. Müller and Dubner ed., *Strabonis Geographia*, Paris (1831) *index variae lectionis* p. 1032-3, quoted by P. Paris "Note on Two Passages of Strabo and Pliny Relating to Taprobane" (English Version) *Ceylon Historical Journal* vol. 1.4 (1951) p. 297-301.

15. Paris *op.cit.* p. 299.

two participles ἴσθιοπεποιηένσας and κατασκευασμένσας is to be regarded as casual and not as purely descriptive. Onesicritus is not describing the boats, but giving the reason for their poor sailing. According to him, the ships sail badly for two reasons: (1) they are poorly rigged; and (2) they are built without εγκοῖλια μέτρα i.e. "belly-bolts", presumably bolts or nails used for fastening the boat together. What we have here, I think, is an early reference to the practice of fastening boats without the use of nails.

The practice is mentioned again in a work of the late fifth century A.D. entitled *On The Nations Of India And The Brahmins* attributed to "Palladius". But in the work it is connected with the famous legend of the magnet stone which attracts and destroys ships:16

"And since the magnet stone, which attracts iron, is found in those islands that are called the Maniolai, any ship that approaches with iron nails is kept there by the nature of the stone and cannot pass on. Characteristically, the ships that sail across to that great island (*sc.* Taprobane) are equipped, not with iron but with wooden pegs."

Procopius, the Byzantine historian of the sixth century A.D., also refers to this practice as being current in the Indian Ocean, but he dismisses the legend in favour of a more rational explanation:17

"The ships in the Indian Ocean do not have their planks fixed together to one another by iron going straight through them. They are lashed together by nooses or ropes. The reason is not, as most people believe, that there are certain rocks there that attract iron to them, but it is a fact that the Indians or Ethiopians have neither iron nor anything suitable for this purpose."

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16. Palladius *De Gentibus Indiae Et Bragmanibus* 1.4 (ed Berghoff.)

17. Procop. *Pers.* i.19.23-5. The idea of constructing ships without iron is, of course, not peculiar to the Indian seas. Archaeology reveals examples in pre-historic Britain. Cf. also Hom. *Od.* v.28.

Among more recent descriptions we may cite the one given by Hornell of the now obsolete Sri Lankan *dōni*.<sup>18</sup> He represents it as being of about fifty tons burden, two-masted, with single outrigger float. Iron was not employed in the construction, but planks were sewn together with coir yarn, caulked and made tight with leaves between the edges. The ends of these boats were similar, (approximating, no doubt, to what the Greeks would call a prow). These crafts worked in the west coast daily and had their outriggers always on the port side only so as to make use of the alternation of land and sea breezes - running northwards along the coast before the afternoon sea breeze and travelling south before the night land breeze. They were regularly used during the northeast monsoon, from September onwards, until the onset of the next southwest monsoon, when they were withdrawn, perforce for an annual overhaul.

Some of these details remind us strongly of Pliny's description of navigation in the vicinity of Taprobane:

"The sea in-between is shallow, not more than six paces deep, but in certain channels so deep that no anchors touch the bottom. For this reason ships have prows at either end, so that they do not need to turn about in the narrows of the channels. Their capacity is about 3,000 amphorae. There is no observation of the stars in navigation - The Great Bear is not visible. They take birds with them, which they send out fairly frequently, and follow their path as they seek land. Their sailing season is not more than four months in the year. They chiefly avoid the hundred days from the solstice, that sea being wintry at the time."

As Gunawardana has observed,<sup>19</sup> Hornell was probably right in identifying the ships that Pliny described with a type of vessel closely similar to the outrigger vessels found in Sri Lanka. Could it not be that Onesicritus, in Strabo's quotation, is also describing vessels of a type used in the neighbourhood of Sri Lanka?

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18. J. Hornell, "The Fishing Craft of India and Ceylon" *Mariner's Mirror* vol. XXIX (1943) p. 43-46.

19. Gunawardana, *op.cit.* p. 4.

The statement of Onesicritus, with regard to which his account of Taprobane has been chiefly discredited, is that amphibious creatures breed around the island, some similar to bulls, others to horses and yet others to other land animals. On the one hand commentators have themselves invested this description with an air of the fabulous by taking the Greek word κῆρυξ in the extreme sense as signifying "monsters", whereas the word could have a less frightening meaning. On the other hand this statement has been compared with a passage in Aelian's *Historia Animalium*,<sup>20</sup> and what Aelian said has been unduly attributed to Onesicritus. Now, although Aelian borrows frequently from earlier writers, he re-creates their information in his own manner. One cannot miss the exaggerated style of the story-teller and rhetorician. Thus he is not a reliable witness regarding the content of his sources.

"For they assert that the sea, which surrounds the circuit of their island, breeds a multitude past numbering of fishes and monsters, and moreover, that they have the heads of lions and leopards and wolves and rams, and - even more wonderful to relate - that there are some which have the forms of satyrs with the faces of women; and these have spines attached in place of hair."

Onesicritus's assertion that bigger and more war-like elephants than those of India are produced in Taprobane,<sup>21</sup> appears also to have been borrowed by Aelian<sup>22</sup> who expands it in his usual redundant and verbose manner when he says that "these elephants of the island are more powerful and bigger than those of the mainland, and may be judged naturally cleverer in every way."

The observation of Onesicritus regarding the size of the elephants is erroneous, and results from the ignorance prevalent

20. Ael. *De Nat. Anim.* xvi.13; Tennent (*op.cit.* p. 528, n.3) was of the opinion that the informants of Onesicritus may have been influenced by the sea-creature known as the dugong, said to be numerous on the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka around Mannar.

21. Plin. vi. 81.

22. Ael. *loc.cit.*

in the ancient world regarding the relative size of African and Indian elephants. We know that Curtius Rufus believed that the elephants of India were bigger than those of Africa,<sup>23</sup> and Pliny himself notes that India produced the largest elephants.<sup>24</sup> It was only natural to believe that the furthest places yielded the best of things - *omne ignotum pro magnifico est*, says Tacitus. Now, as Taprobane was even further than India, it would not surprise us to find Onesicritus believing that the elephants there were bigger than even those of India.

As for their skill in warfare, the indigenous tradition of subsequent periods is in complete agreement with Onesicritus. The chronicles of the island testify to many valiant deeds performed by war-elephants, and to their phenomenal strength and skill in fighting. The classic example that comes readily to mind is that of Kandula, the state and war-elephant of Dutthagamini (2nd century B.C.).<sup>25</sup>

23. Curtius Rufus viii.9.17.

24. Plin. viii.21.

25. Schwarz *op.cit.* p. 248. Schwarz would also trace back to Onesicritus the statement in Strabo (ii.1.14) that "we have strong assurance Taprobane is a large island in the open sea, which lies off India to the south", as well as the same writer's statement (ii.5.32) "In this southern sea off the coast of India lies an island, Taprobane, which is not less than Britain." The insularity of Taprobane was known from the time of Alexander the Great (cf. Plin. vi.81), and one may justly assume that Onesicritus could have been responsible for revealing it to the readers of the west. But one cannot be so certain regarding the comparison with Britain; for, although Pytheas of Massalia, who made the famous voyage up the west coast of Europe to Britain, Jutland, the Orkneys and Shetlands, was a contemporary of both Alexander the Great and Onesicritus, the earliest comparison of the two islands occurs only in the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De Mundo* (393.14), which cannot be earlier than the first century B.C.



When due allowances has been made for the limitations of his age, one need have no reservations regarding the reliability of Onesicritus's information concerning Taprobane. With him there are no traces of the fabulous wealth and utopian existence that was ascribed to the island by certain later writers. In actual fact he says nothing at all about the people of the land and their way of life. But the few simple facts that he mentions lead us to conclude that at this date the island was known as such to the people of western India, that voyages were being made between it and the sub-continent, and that reasonable information, however limited, was forthcoming from it.

Onesicritus himself could have obtained this information while he was in northwestern India.<sup>26</sup> We know that he was sent to Taxila by Alexander the Great in order to discourse with the Indian wise men. Apart from being a well known centre of learning, Taxila was also a prosperous trading city of international renown. So too was the Indus delta, whence Onesicritus and the Greeks set sail for Persia. Either of these places could have supplied him with information about Taprobane. But even though he did not reach the island, he shared with other early Greek writers a privilege enjoyed by few of their successors, namely, that of being able to gather knowledge about Taprobane in regions closely associated with it. Northern India remained firmly inside the Greek orbit, and from it Onesicritus and others learned the details which have survived.

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26. According to Tennent, (*op.cit.* p. 525, n.1), Gosselin believed that Onesicritus had visited Taprobane during a second voyage, which he was ordered to accomplish. There is no ancient authority to support what is obviously a mere assumption on Gosselin's part. It is true that Onesicritus mentions the sailing distance and the conditions of navigation, but this information could have been obtained easily without his having made the journey himself. It is also true that Solinus (53.2) represents Onesicritus as having been sent (*missus*) as admiral to the Macedonia fleet (presumably by Alexander), and as having informed us of the size, products, and life of the country, i.e. Taprobane. This might have implied the possibility of his having visited the island, had it not been known that Solinus's material is borrowed and paraphrased almost entirely from Pliny. Thus, any divergence, here as elsewhere, must be ascribed to Solinus's own misinterpretation of his source rather than to consultation of any independent material.



## II

The next Greek writer to notice Taprobane was Megasthenes, whom Seleucus Nicator sent as ambassador to the Maurya emperor, Chandragupta. His book became the basis for subsequent works on India by Greek authors. Residence at Pataliputra enabled Megasthenes to get information concerning the eastern and southern parts of India, which was not available to the companions of Alexander the Great.

His fragment on Taprobane is preserved by Pliny:<sup>27</sup>

"Megasthenes wrote that it is divided by a river, that the inhabitants are called Palaeogoni, and that they are more productive of gold and large pearls than the Indians."

Unlike Onesicritus, Megasthenes is interested in the interior of the island, its geography, people and products. Moreover, as with Onesicritus, the tendency is once again to make comparisons with India in the matter of products, and in both writers Sri Lanka emerges as the better producer.

His statement that Taprobane is divided by a river has been taken by some to mean that the island is separated from the mainland of India by a river.<sup>28</sup> But what Megasthenes meant was doubtlessly that the island was divided by a river running through it. It is now generally agreed that what we have here is an early reference to the Mahaveli Ganga (Maha Valuka Ganga);<sup>29</sup> the principal river of the island, which, rising in the central province and flowing first in a northerly and then in a northeasterly direction, not only divides the land geographically, but has acted politically as the border between the principal kingdoms of Rajarata and Ruhuna. In the *Mahavamsa* it is frequently known as Maha-Ganga or simply Ganga, i.e. "the great river" or "the river". According to the pious traditions preserved in the chronicles, it was the Buddha himself who made its valley safe and suitable for

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27. Jacoby, *F.Gr.H.* no. 715, fr. 26 (Plin. vi.81); Schwanbeck, who was the first to collect and edit the fragments of Megasthenes, included under this fragment a quotation from Solinus (53.3). This is really a garbled version of the passage from Pliny, and has been justly left out by both Müller and Jacoby, who edited the fragments subsequently.

28. See, for example, J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian* 2nd ed. Calcutta (1960) p.62-63.

29. Tennent, *op.cit.* p. 528; Schwarz, *op.cit.* p. 254.

human habitation after driving away the Yakkhas who once infested it. 30

Megasthenes informs us that the inhabitants of Taprobane were called Palaeogoni (παλαιόγονοί). Almost all commentators have taken this to be a Greek adaptation of some Indian term, although Lassen at first saw in it a reference to the legend that the island was originally inhabited by Rakshasas or giants who were sons of the progenitors of the world.<sup>31</sup>

Schwanbeck<sup>32</sup> disagrees with Lassen, arguing that by this unusual term Megasthenes meant to name the nation and not to describe it. He further points out that Megasthenes was not in the habit of translating names, but rather rendered them according to sound, with some degrees of paronomasia. Starting from Lassen's own derivation of Palaesimundus (*sic*) from Skt. *pāli-simanta* i.e. "head of the sacred doctrine (of Buddha)" Schwanbeck derived Palaeogoni from *Pāli-jana*, i.e. "men of the sacred doctrine". Moreover, it was to Chandragupta that Megasthenes came as envoy; and although Buddhism may have been known in Sri Lanka during Chandragupta's reign, it was not formally established until the time of Asoka. Therefore, the term *Pāli-jana* in this sense would not have been appropriate for the people of Sri Lanka at that time.

Lassen accepted the derivation from *Pāli-janas*, but preferred to explain it as "the village dwellers"<sup>33</sup> supporting this interpretation with the statement of Eratosthenes (see 3 below) that the island had no cities but 700 villages. But it is obvious that, in this sense, the term would not be adequately distinct to be used as the name of a nation.

30 *Mahavamsa*, i. 20 f.

31. C. Lassen, *Dissertatio De Insula Taprobane Veteribus Cognita*, (Bonn) 1946, p.9.

32. E.A. Schwanbeck, *Megasthenia Indica*, Bonn (1846) n. *ad loc.*

33. Lassen *Indische Altertumskunde*, Leipzig and London (1858 - 1874) vol. II.i, p. 696.

Tennent saw in this term a hellenised form of *Pāli-putra*, where *Pāli*, according to him, referred to the Prasi, or inhabitants of Magada.<sup>34</sup> C. Rasanayagam<sup>35</sup> maintained that the word (which he spells as 'Palaigonoi' is a corruption of *Palai-nagoi*, from Tamil *Palaya-Nagar*, i.e. "ancient Nagas". Goldstucker, starting from Raychaudri's identification of *Pāra-samudra* in the *Arthashastra* with the Palaesimundu of Pliny and Ptolemy, has derived Palaigonoi from *Para-jana*, i.e. "people on the other side", "people across the sea".<sup>36</sup>

All these theories, with varying degrees of plausibility, derive from Oriental philology, mainly by the stretching of the imagination to absurd lengths. But there can be no doubt that *Palaiogonoi* is a Greek word. It occurs in Greek texts which refer to Athens and implies the tradition that the Athenians were autochthonous.<sup>37</sup> Taken in this sense, the Palaionoi of Megasthenes must bear some reference to the aborigines. The difficulty here is that the term would then cover only the prehistoric races of the island and not the inhabitants at the time of Megasthenes. These inhabitants, moreover, being colonists from northern India, would have hardly presented the aborigines as the inhabitants of the land. This is a problem which is still in need of clarification.

34. Tennent, *op.cit.* p. 528.

35. C. Rasanayagam *Ancient Jaffna*, Madras (1926) p. 105.

36. Goldstucker, quoted in J.W. McCrindle *Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy* 2nd ed. Calcutta (1927) p. 253.

37. The Athenian comic poet, Plato (c. 400 B.C.) wrote in his lost play *Xantriae* or *Cecropes* (fr. 90: Bolthe, p. 91) Th. Kock ed. *Comicorum Atticorum Fr.* vol. I, Lipsae (1880) p.625): "Hail, you gathering of ancient-born men, spectators wise in all things" (χαῖρε, παλαιόγων ἀνδρῶν θεατῶν εὐλογοε παντόσοφῶν). An epigram in the Planudean Anthology (295 Dubner) about the birthplace of Homer says: "Nor yet was it the city of the ancient-born Cecropides, for he was not a product of the earth." (Οὐδὲ τὸ Κεκροπιδῶν ἄστὶ παλαιογῶν Ὅδ' γὰρ ἐφυ χθονὸς ἔκγονον). When Pliny (vi.81) says *incolasque palaeogonos appellari*, we are not obliged to take it as a proper name. *Appellari* (unlike *nominari*) merely gives a new predicate to the subject.

Of course, when Pliny says *incolasque palaeogones appellari* there is no imperative suggestion of a proper name. *Appellari* (unlike *nominari*) merely gives a new predicate to the subject. It could be that Megasthenes simply meant that the inhabitants of the island are of very great antiquity, a fact amply corroborated by modern archaeology and anthropology. The Greek word *palaiogonoi* (παλαιόγονοί) can also mean "full of years"; and Megasthenes's use of this term might have helped to foster the tradition of longevity associated with Taprobane throughout classical antiquity, culminating in the Makrobioi<sup>37a</sup> with a life-span of 150 years.

Megasthenes says that Taprobane produced more gold and large pearls than India. He thus initiates the association of the island with gold, which is repeated in Ptolemy and some minor Greek geographers.<sup>38</sup> Pliny also speaks of the high esteem accorded to gold, although he does not speak of its production in the island, except when he quotes Megasthenes.<sup>39</sup> Stories about the fabulous wealth of Lanka were circulated abroad from very early times. For the historic period the chronicles testify to the immense quantities of gold and silver lavished on edifices, statues and ceremonies. Even after making allowance for the exaggerations characteristic of the epic tradition, the quantities involved must have been very large. Imported metal, including foreign coins, may have constituted part of it, but what part we do not know; and the chronicles do in fact mention instances when gold was found locally, e.g. in the neighbourhood of Acaravittigama and other places close to Anuradhapura.<sup>40</sup> Thus, with regard to the ensuing period, local and foreign sources are in agreement on this matter. One can therefore assume that Megasthenes's statements about the gold in Taprobane had some basis in fact, even though his notion of its quantity, particularly in relation to that of India, must have been exaggerated.

The pearls of Taprobane, which too Megasthenes is the first to mention, are noticed again by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* as well as by Pliny,<sup>41</sup> who says that the island was the chief pearl-producer. Oriental literature also refers to

37a Palladius, *loc.cit.*

38. Ptol. vii.4.1.

39. Plin. vi.89.

40. *Mahavamsa* xxviii. 13-15 and 20.

41. *Periplus M.E.* 61; Plin. ix. 58.

pearls as an export of Lanka. The *Mahabharata* narrates how the king of the Sinhala sent to king Yadhistira "the best of seaborne gems and pearls"; white pearls, together with gems, figure prominently also among the presents sent by Vijaya to the king of Madura, and by Devanampiyatissa to Asoka.<sup>42</sup> It should be mentioned in particular that Megasthenes uses the epithet "large" for the pearls of Taprobane. Here too he is corroborated by the chronicles, which report the discovery of pearls of the size of Myrobalan fruits during the reigns of Devanampiyatissa (3rd century B.C.) and Dutthagamini (2nd century B.C.), not long after the time of Megasthenes.<sup>43</sup>

Bindusara, the successor of Chandragupta, is known to have extended his military power to South India, and the presence of Asoka edicts in the deep south of the sub-continent is proof that this region remained within the Maurya sphere of influence during his reign. But the notices of the Pandyas in Megasthenes indicate that Maurya interest in this region goes right back to the first emperor himself. In view of the geographical proximity and close relations between Sri Lanka and the south Indian kingdoms, it is not difficult to imagine how information about the island might have reached the Maurya court, and Megasthenes, along this route.

Moreover, there are good reasons for believing that the island also maintained close relations directly with the Mauryas at this time. Half a century later, the king of Sri Lanka sent envoys to Asoka with gifts, and received in return the royal consecration as well as the establishment of Buddhism. The account of these events preserved in the chronicles suggests that the two countries had maintained close relations over a considerable period.<sup>44</sup> Yet, the remaining fragments of Megasthenes's work do not show that he had heard about the island in great detail at the Maurya court. It would appear that the attention of Chandragupta and hence of Megasthenes, was concentrated elsewhere.

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42. *Mahabharata* Sabha-parva, p. 146 (tr. Prathap Chandra Roy); *Mahavamsa* vii. 49, xi. 16.

43. *Mahavamsa*, vii. 49, xi. 14-15 and xviii.33.

44.. Cf. especially *Mahavamsa* xi. 19.

## III

Both Onesicritus and Megasthenes had personal experience of at least part of India. But the Hellenistic writers who followed them were chiefly men of science and letters without firsthand knowledge of the East. They depended on earlier writers, mostly the companions of Alexander the Great, and also Megasthenes, whose works were now on the way to becoming "classics" on the subject of India. Accordingly, the notices of Taprobane found in these later writers are largely derivative and possess little of independent value.

The one exception is Eratosthenes of Cyrene (267-196 B.C.), the Alexandrian scholar, among whose geographical fragments there are notices of Taprobane containing some fresh information. The fragments are preserved by Strabo and Pliny.

Strabo writes as follows:<sup>45</sup>

"They say that Taprobane is an island in the ocean seven days' sail distant towards the south from the southernmost portions of India around the Koniakoi; that its length is about eight-thousand stades in the direction of Aethiopia; and that it has elephants too. Such then are the statements of Eratosthenes".

Pliny informs us<sup>46</sup> that

"Eratosthenes also gave the measurement (sc. of Taprobane) as 7,000 stades in length, 5000 in breadth, and said that it has no cities but 700 villages".

The same information is repeated by Aelian<sup>47</sup> without mentioning Eratosthenes by name. But Aelian gives the number of villages as 750.

As with Onesicritus, so too with Eratosthenes we notice a difference of spirit between the two fragments. Not only are they mutually exclusive, but they also disagree on the dimensions of the island. The quotation from Strabo has a maritime ring about it, in this case too, while Pliny's quotation is more geographical.

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45. Strab. xv.1.14.

46. Plin. vi.81.

47. *loc.cit.* On the strength of this passage C. Mayhoff in his Teubner edition of Pliny emends dcc to dccl.

Already in Eratosthenes one can see the beginnings of these errors or misconceptions, which were to permeate almost all Greek and Roman accounts of Taprobane. He placed the island too far to the south by assuming that it was seven days sail distant from the southernmost part of India. He appears to have been followed in this by Hipparchus,<sup>48</sup> who made the last parallel of the inhabited world run past the southern extremity of Taprobane. Even Ptolemy, who was better informed about the island in other respects, made it extend for two degrees beyond the equator.

Eratosthenes also over-estimated the size of the island and, moreover, represented it as extending in the direction of Aethiopia. This last error is repeated even by a writer with navigational experience such as the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, who says that the southern part of Taprobane extended westwards and almost touched the opposite shore of Azania.<sup>49</sup>

Eratosthenes represents the island as lying in an east-west direction. This error too was repeated by subsequent writers such as Artemidorus and Pliny, and found visual expression in the Peutinger Table. It was finally corrected by Ptolemy.

When Pliny, in the continuation of the above passage, refers to the distance from the Prasian nation (i.e. Prachya Desa or Magada) to Taprobane as having been reduced from twenty days to seven, some have seen here an application of information from Eratosthenes to update a statement of Onesicritus. But it must be remembered that, whereas Onesicritus' point of departure must be sought somewhere in north-western India, and that of Eratosthenes in the south, neither author refers to the Prasii. Moreover, Pliny does not mean that the journey was actually made in seven days, but rather that it was re-estimated at seven days according to the speed of Roman ships, considering that the original distance of twenty days applied to reed boats of the type used on the Nile. The identity of the figures must therefore be the result of a coincidence.

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48. *Periplus M.E.* 61.

49. *Thuc.* i.5.

Eratosthenes makes only a passing reference to the elephants of Taprobane, but he was evidently more interested in the social organization within the island. Pliny represents him as saying that there are no cities in Taprobane but 700 villages. Pliny, as well as Aelian, who repeats the statement, here apply a fundamental distinction of Roman social organization and local administration. For the Romans, a village (*vicius*) was a civilian habitation, which had not yet developed to the urban stage. In Caesar it is the recognized pattern of habitation for northern barbarians. Aelian's Greek equivalent, *kome* (κωμή), signifies an unwallled village as opposed to a fortified city *polis* (πόλις). Thus, in Thucydides<sup>50</sup> we hear of cities that were unwallled and settled in scattered villages. What is meant here is a city in the form of scattered villages. As an example from historic times we may cite Mantinaea with its four villages. Our problem is whether a similar distinction between city and village was maintained in early Sri Lanka. A negative answer would have explained Eratosthenes's observation sufficiently.

W. Rahula has pointed out that, although the Pali canonical texts maintain a clear distinction between *gama* (village) and *nagara* (town), these terms are used indiscriminately in the *Mahavamsa* for village, city, or town.<sup>51</sup> Thus *Vijitam nagaram* is included among the villages founded by the ministers of Vijaya, while *Kalahanagara* is called a village (*gama*).<sup>52</sup> The principal city of the Rohana kingdom was always known as Mahagama, and as late as the second century A.D. Ptolemy, who described the king's residence as a *polis*, still transcribed its name as *Anourogrammon*.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, *Upatissagama* was sometimes called *Upatissanagara*.<sup>54</sup>

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50. Thuc. i.5.

51. W. Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* Colombo (1956) p.14 f., quoting the *Digha Nikaya* (ii.p.53) "At that time two chief ministers of Magadha were building a city (*nagaram*) in the Patali village (*Pataligame*).

52. *Mahavamsa* vii. 31-35 and x.42.

53. Ptol.vii.4.10.

54. Cp. *Mahavamsa* vii.44 with *Dipavamsa* ix. 36.



However, in general the word *gāna* was used for "village". This form of settlement, usually associated with irrigation tanks and administered by a headman (*gamika*) and village council, was typical of the historic period of ancient Sri Lanka; but the chronicles attribute great antiquity to it. Thus in the *Mahavamsa* we read:

"Ten years after his consecration did Pandukabhaya, the ruler of Lanka, establish the village boundaries of the whole of the island of Lanka."

Had the informants of Eratosthenes transferred to Taprobane the organizational structure familiar to them in Egypt, when they spoke of the 700 villages of Taprobane, or were they familiar with the actual situation? After all, the *Mahavamsa* says that this same Pandukabhaya set apart a section of Anuradhapura for the dwelling place of the Yonas. It is conceivable that during his reign (377-307 B.C.) Greeks from northwestern India might have made their way to Sri Lanka in some numbers. But there is some dispute concerning the received text. Some mss. of the commentary give a variant reading, which, if adopted, would only indicate that Pandukabhaya "fixed the common ground". Thus, the reference to the Yonas, which at first appears conclusive, is more open to question. However, if one retains the manuscript reading, (which appears stronger than the variant), then the establishment of a foreign quarter in the capital at this early date implies a very prompt reaction on the part of Sri Lanka to the new conditions brought about by Greek penetration into northwestern India after Alexander the Great, and an equally prompt penetration by these Greeks into regions further afield.

At Alexandria, Eratosthenes no doubt had access to the writings of the companions of Alexander the Great and of the various Greek envoys to India such as Deimachus, Dionysius and Megasthenes. However, during his lifetime (267-196 B.C.) the explorations of the Ptolemies were largely restricted to the Red Sea and the Ethiopian regions to the west and south. Thus his chances of

obtaining current reports about India or Sri Lanka from contemporary explorers was small. If Strabo is correct,<sup>56</sup> it was not until the reign of Euergetes II (after 146 B.C.) that a Greek named Eudoxus succeeded in reaching India by sea.

However, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Eratosthenes benefited from the improved communications between East and West, which resulted from the internal unity and external prestige achieved by the Maurya empire. From its inception this empire was in touch with the Greek kingdoms of the west. Seleucus was represented by Megasthenes, Antiochus I by Deimachus of Plataea, and Ptolemy Philadelphus by Dionysius; and all these envoys committed their experiences to writing.

The second and thirteenth Rock Edicts of Asoka reveal that he was in touch with the Greek kingdoms of Syria, Egypt, Macedonia and Cyrene; and the mention of their rulers by name proves beyond doubt that, at this date, the term Yona signified "Greek". The edicts testify to the presence of Greeks even within Asoka's own empire, a fact confirmed by the discovery of two inscriptions from Kandahara in 1958 and 1964.<sup>57</sup> The first of these is an edict in Aramaic and Greek, while the second is a Greek version of the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th, possibly a fragment of a complete Greek version of the fourteen edicts probably engraved on a wall. These inscriptions present Asoka's doctrine in the current style of the Greek language, employing the vocabulary of the literary tradition, particularly of philosophy, religion, and ethics. The style of composition and even the lettering conform to the usage current throughout the Hellenistic world. There are no marks of degeneracy, isolation or barbarization. The inscriptions reveal the unity of Greek civilization in the Hellenistic period reaching its furthest geographical limits in the east. The public of Kandahar, for whom they were intended, must have included cultured and intelligent Greeks, familiar with the Greek philosophical and literary language and thought of the time. The discovery at Ai-Khanoum of a copy of the Delphic Maxims brought thither by one Kineas, having gone to Delphi for this purpose, proves that these Greeks of the East

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56. Strab. ii. 3.4.

57. D. Schlumberger and L. Robert, and A. Dupont-Sommer 'Une bilingue Greco-Arameen d'Asoka', *Journal Asiatique* vol. CCXLVI (1958) p. 1-48; E. Benveniste, "Edit d'Asoka en traduction Grecque" *Journal Asiatique* vol. CCLII (1964) p. 137-157.

were in touch with the main centres of Greek civilization.<sup>58</sup>

Thus Eratosthenes, who was a contemporary of Asoka, must have been in a position to augment his knowledge of the East with aural or written reports of those who travelled between East and West as merchants, envoys, or missionaries. Through these sources he must have also heard about Sri Lanka, which figured so prominently in the missionary activities of Asoka.

The opinion of Hipparchus of Bithynia (c.190 - c. 126 B.C.) regarding Taprobane appears to be preserved in the geographical work of Pomponius Mela:<sup>59</sup>

"Taprobane is either a very big island or, as is said by Hipparchus, the first part of another world; and since it is inhabited and no one is reported to have sailed around it, he is probably right."

The text of this passage is in poor condition, and even after restoration gives rise to ambiguities in interpretation. In particular, it is doubtful whether one should attribute both alternatives to Hipparchus, or else, only the second opinion. Moreover, if one were to accept the reading *id percus dicitur* suggested by Ranstrand, it would leave out the name of Hipparchus altogether, and make both alternatives those of Mela himself.

D.R. Dicks,<sup>60</sup> attributing both alternatives to Hipparchus, observes: "It would seem that Hipparchus did not feel justified in basing a definite decision on the vague and contradictory evidence that was available, and so left the question open."

However, a careful consideration of Mela's text, as we have it, leads us to conclude the Hipparchus concentrated simply upon the "other world" theory, and that Mela himself is responsible for contrasting it with the alternative theory which regarded Taprobane as an island. He approved of Hipparchus's opinion, citing the known fact that Taprobane was inhabited and that there was no

58. P. Bernard, "Ai-chanum on the Oxus: a Hellenistic city in Central Asia", *P.B.A.* LIII (1967) p. 71-95.
59. *Taprobane aut grandis admodum insula aut prima pars orbis alterius, ut Hipparcho dicitur, et quia habitatur nequisquam circum eam esse traditur, prope verum est.* Mela iii.7,70.
60. D.R. Dicks, *The Geographical Fragments of Hipparchus*, London (1960) p.115-116.

record of its having been circumnavigated. Mela, in his disbelief of the insularity of Taprobane, appears to be an odd-man-out in his time, (early first century A.D.), since this fact was believed by writers of even earlier times, including Onesicritus, Eratosthenes, Artemidorus, Strabo and Ovid. In fact the insularity of Taprobane should have been known to Hipparchus himself, since, as Pliny informs us, it was established as a fact by the age and exploits of Alexander the Great.

Pliny's text might lead us to assume that the view that Taprobane was another world dates back to a time before Alexander the Great. But Schwarz 61 has pointed out that the *Antichthones* were identified with the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere only in late Hellenistic times and that Pliny in fact seeks to correct the late Hellenistic view that Taprobane was part of another hemisphere with the earlier and more accurate knowledge that it was an island, citing facts which were made known during and after the campaigns of Alexander.

Even so, it is difficult to see how Hipparchus could have thought of Taprobane as part of a different world, since, according to Strabo,<sup>62</sup> the most southerly of Hipparchus's parallels passed through Taprobane, thus placing it on the same latitude as the Cinnamon Country, i.e. Somaliland.

The geographer Artemidorus of Ephesus (fl. 104 B.C.) also mentioned Taprobane in his writings, and evidently described it in some detail. Pliny records his description in the following manner:<sup>63</sup>

"Artemidorus says that in the island of Taprobane people live a very long life without any bodily weakness."

Here we have the earliest definite association of Taprobane with the ideal conditions of utopian life in the Golden Age, and, in particular, with the concept of longevity. Perhaps this concept was already implied by the term *Falaeogoni* (φαλαίονον),

61. Schwarz, *op.cit.* p. 247.

62. Strab. ii. 5.35.

63. Plin. vii.2.30.

which Megasthenes applied to the inhabitants of the country. This association was to be repeated frequently by Greek and Latin writers.<sup>64</sup> The Hellenistic ideas of Utopia are not only implicit here, but also receive a definite location, anticipating the vague generalities of the Christian Paradise.

Artemidorus's figures for the size of the island are quoted by the lexicographer Stephanus of Byzantium as 7,000 stades' sailing distance in length and 5,000 in breadth.<sup>65</sup> The text of Stephanus gives 500 for the breadth. This is obviously a mistake, and Forbiger has emended it to 5,000 in order to bring the account into line with the accepted tradition, since the figures, when thus restored, would correspond to those given by Pliny as the dimensions of the island according to Eratosthenes. Artemidorus apparently decided to follow Eratosthenes in this matter.

A fellow townsman of Artemidorus also noticed Taprobane in his writings. This was Alexander of Ephesus, who was nicknamed Lychnus. He too lived during the first century B.C., and, following the prevailing tradition in the Hellenistic age, wrote poems on astronomy and geography. Cicero mentions him in two letters to Atticus, both belonging to 59 B.C.,<sup>66</sup> describing him as a negligent fellow and not a good poet but, in spite of all that, one who knows something and is not altogether useless. It may be thus assumed that through him Taprobane was brought once more to the notice of educated Romans. His poems were also known to Dionysius Periegetes.

His fragments on Taprobane are preserved by Stephanus of Byzantium and Eustathius. In fact, they are two versions of the same fragment. Stephanus quotes it in its original verse form:<sup>67</sup>

"A four-sided island, sea-crowned Taprobane, rearer  
of beasts, is full of fine-nosed elephants."

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64. Plin. vi.91; Agathem. ii.25 (Muller); Palladius, *loc.cit.*

65. Steph.Byz. s.v. "Taprobane".

66. Cic. *Ad Atticum* ii.18.7 and 20.6.

67. Steph. Byz. *loc.cit.*

Eustathius, the 12th century bishop of Thessalonica, gives a prose paraphrase of the same lines in his commentary on the *Periegesis* of Dionysius.<sup>68</sup>

"Taprobane ... is four-sided, rearer of beasts, full of fine-nosed elephants, as Alexander, nick-named Lychnus, says."

Alexander has only a vague notion about the island. He is either misinformed here about its shape, or he has adapted it so that it could be accommodated in the form of his verse. His interest is concentrated mainly on the elephants of Taprobane, which seem to have become a commonplace by this time. His knowledge about them probably derives, in the last resort, from Onesicritus. To the same source, perhaps, must be traced the notice of wild beasts. These creatures seem to derive from the amphibians of Onesicritus rather than from any independent source.

The extant writings on Taprobane, which mostly belong to the Roman period, reveal the influence of two traditions working side by side - that of the theoretical geographer on the one hand, and that of the didactic moralist on the other. The two Ephesian writers just mentioned exemplify these influences from an even earlier age. However, neither of them adds very much to the basic knowledge coming from the age of discovery and embodied in Onesicritus, Megasthenes, and Eratosthenes. The literary tradition had already diverged from the practical by the time of Eratosthenes, so that he marks the culmination of Hellenistic knowledge on the subject. Taprobane had to be "re-discovered" by the Romans.

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68. Eustath. *Comm. in Dion. Perieg.* 591.