

Pomponius Mela's Ethical Landscape

The Greeks and Romans had an ambiguous relationship with the natural world. On the one hand, everything (including the land, its flora, and fauna) existed in service to humankind. This over-arching prejudice of ancient thought was articulated as early as Protagoras (“humanity is the measure of all things:” 80B1 DK) and codified by Aristotle’s theory of causality (*Metaphysics*. I 3, 983a24–983b1). Gods and heroes consequently tamed the land—and made it suitable for human consumption—by slaying dangerous beasts: Apollo’s Python, Bellerophon’s Chimera, Jason’s sea-monster, and Hercules’ many beasts and monstrous humanoids. Once the traveling heroes eliminated their beastly foes, they established settlements that grew and flourished: Hercules, in particular, had enforced order and the rule of law on the ancient mythscape, forging a cosmos that *could* be inhabited by human beings Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 1.41). On the other hand, nostalgia for nature came into vogue in the Hellenistic era. But that natural world has been sanitized and humanized, a place where clever shepherds could vie in competitions of learned verse about contemporary geopolitics, a place generally lacking in danger (aside from the occasional salacious shepherd or satyr: e.g., Theocritus, *Idyll* 1, 4-6; Vergil, *Eclogues*)

The Greeks also had a geometrical theory that determined where people could reasonably live: the globe was thus divided into five *klimata* (“inclinations”), parallel latitudinal zones with symmetrical climates: the uninhabitable hot zone at the equator, two temperate zones directly to north (the Greek *oikoumene*) and south (the “antichthones”), and two uninhabitable polar frigid zones (Aristotle, *Meteorology* 362a32; cf. Posidonius f49Kidd; Strabo 2.3.1-2).

Despite the geographical hypothesis that some zones are uninhabitable owing to temperature, the hot zone had long been known to be inhabited (e.g., Strabo 2.5.6). Xenophon, moreover, described the harrowing winter storms that his army encountered in Persia c. 400 BCE (*Anabasis* 4.4), and Ovid experienced first-hand the barbarous cold of the Black Sea winter (*Tristia* 3.10), both at the lower edge of the frigid zone. Nonetheless, the uninhabitability of these zones remained a literary trope (Vergil, *Georgics* 1.235; Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 1.24; Pliny 2.172).

Here we shall take a look at how Pomponius Mela describes uninhabitable territories in his *de Orbis Situ*. Distant lands in unpleasant climates either foster subhuman hybrids and giant serpents, or the presence of dangerous beasts renders the land itself unfertile and uninhabitable. Mela is explicit: “lands are pestered (*infestantur*) by a wicked-doing type of animals (*malefico genere animalium*)” (1.21, an image borrowed from Sallust, *Jugurtha* 17.6). Dangerous animals do not merely inhabit undesirable tracts, their very presence makes those lands unlivable. Such animals also bring to bear deliberate, evil intent. They are horrible and fierce (2.1, 3.43). They aggravate and vex territory (3.60, 103), and they infest land, like a plague or a disease (1.80). We shall analyze Mela’s language to investigate this narrative arc: wild animals (serpents, griffins, tigers, and others) simply make some lands irredeemable and thus impossible for humans to populate, cultivate, or tame.