

Strabo the Feminist

One of the more unusual aspects of the *Geography* of Strabo is its attention to women of power. The work is a major source for women scholars, literary figures and political leaders, some of whom are known nowhere else. Those cited in the *Geography* include not only royal women, but a city founder, a topographer who did field work, and a philosopher. Many of these are from Strabo's own era of the latter first century BC and early first century AD, but include such interesting figures from earlier times as the poet Sappho, whom Strabo called "an extraordinary person" (13.2.3; references to Strabo are from Radt, 2002-2011), Queen Amastris of Herakleia (12.3.10), who was the niece of Darius I of Persia and a city founder, and Arete of Kyrene, the head of the Kyrenaian school of philosophy in the early fourth century BC (17.3.22), who trained her son, Aristippos, to carry on the tradition.

Some of these women are quite familiar, but Strabo added new dimensions to knowledge of their careers. Most notably, he provided the first extant historical account of the death of Cleopatra VII, based on an eye-witness report, and making the compelling suggestion that she died by poison, not by an asp bite (17.1.10).

Yet a number of these women are hardly, if at all, known outside Strabo's *Geography*. His account provides an insight both into the emergence of scholarly, literary, and royal women in the Hellenistic period, who can often be ignored by other sources. For example, Hestiaia of Alexandria (13.1.36) wrote a treatise on the location of Troy and seems to have included fieldwork in her research (Pomeroy 1990: 61, 72). Moreover, she had geological training, and studied the effects of affluvia in the

Troad. Her date is vague (probably third century BC) but nevertheless she is one of the very first topographical scholars known.

Equally obscure, yet fascinating, and also known only through Strabo, was Queen Aba of Olbe (14.5.10), a temple state in southern Anatolia. She was a dependent of Cleopatra VII and like her was one of the few women to rule alone in classical antiquity, without a male guardian (Roller 2010: 83). The little information about her career provides a unique perspective into the politics of mid-first century BC Anatolia.

Many other women of importance are scattered through the pages of the *Geography*: Strabo's detailed account of the royal line of Halikarnassos, with its abundance of women rulers (14.2.16-17), is a case in point. It remains to ask why Strabo should have such an interest in women of power and ability, when the historical record generally pays them little attention. The answer does not seem difficult. Scattered through the *Geography* (10.4.10, 11.2.18, 12.3.33) are numerous biographical details in which Strabo recounts his ancestry back through four generations to the mid-second century BC. Many of the people he names were distinguished, including the secretary of Mithridates VI, a major military tactician, a priest at Pontic Komana, and the governor of Colchis. But what is curious is that all these famous ancestors were in his mother's line, and, moreover, in the line of his mother's mother. Strabo cites nearly a dozen ancestors, but not a single one from his father's family or from those of his grandfathers. In addition, his father is never named, certainly a rarity in Greek genealogical writing. Thus Strabo was dependent on his mother, and his mother's mother, for understanding his distinguished ancestral history. What this exactly means in terms of internal dynamics within the Strabo family can never be known, but it does show that Strabo was probably

exposed at an early age to a woman's view of history, again something essentially unprecedented.

Moreover, there was the matter of Pythodoris of Pontos. Strabo grew up hearing from his mother and his grandmother about his famous family, and then spent his later career--the years that he was writing the *Geography*--in the service of one of the most famous women of the era, Queen Pythodoris (Sullivan 1990: 323-5). She may have been a granddaughter of Mark Antony, and inherited the Pontic kingdom around 8 BC. Strabo had been born in Pontos, and probably retired there in the early first century AD, completing the *Geography* under Pythodoris' patronage. He wrote eulogistically about her (13.29-31, 37), and both queen and geographer shared a common interest and involvement in the destiny of Pontos. Thus Strabo spent an essential part of his career in the company of a dynamic woman, and this affected his writing of the *Geography*.

Bibliography

- Pomeroy, Sarah B., 1990: *Women In Hellenistic Egypt From Alexander to Cleopatra* (Detroit).
- Radt, Stefan B., 2002-2011: *Strabons Geographika* (Göttingen).
- Roller, Duane W., 2010: *Cleopatra: A Biography* (Oxford).
- Sullivan, Richard D., 1990: *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome* (Toronto).