

## The Strange World of Kosmas Indikopleustes

The writings of Kosmas represent the final evolution, and indeed devolution, of the Greco-Roman tradition of geographical scholarship that had existed for a thousand years (McCrinkle 1892; Wolska-Conus 1968-1973)). Kosmas was active in the sixth century AD, and probably was a native of Alexandria. He is unknown beyond the autobiographical notices in his surviving work and a few comments by Photios; these record that as a merchant he travelled on the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, and Red Sea, eventually reaching Taprobane and India, which gained him the surname Indikopleustes, or Indian Sailor. In AD 525 he was in Axum in Ethiopia. In time he abandoned his profession and became a monk, writing extensively on theology and geography. Regretfully his geographical work is lost, but there survives a single treatise, *Christian Topography*, which he wrote in the latter years of Justinian.

The *Christian Topography* is an essential work for students of ancient geography, and despite its theological grounding, it is not to be rejected. It represents the last pagan moment in the history of ancient geography, yet looks ahead to the post-antique world of theological geography (Thomson 1965: 386-9). Some of Kosmas' conclusions seem bizarre to the modern reader: for example, he sought to use biblical evidence to deny that the earth was a sphere and created an elaborately conceived universe, based on an understanding of the sacred furniture that Moses constructed in the wilderness (Lozovsky 487), dividing the world into regions inhabited before and after the Flood. Kosmas rejected any need for enquiry regarding what lay beyond the known world and encircling Ocean, despite many centuries of curiosity about that issue on the part of geographical scholars. To him, the sun was a finitely small object that

disappeared behind mountains in the north, and, needless to say, he had no interest in the heliocentric system.

Kosmas' work might be considered worthy of little consideration were it not for his access to material otherwise unknown that is essential to the history of geography. As a resident of Alexandria, he appears to be one of the last to make use of the extensive resources of the library in that city, and the *Christian Topography* presents new material on important moments in the history of geography such as the speculations of Anaximenes of Miletos and the Arctic travels of Pytheas of Massalia. Kosmas' edition of the historian Ephoros is the only one known from antiquity with a map (Irby 2012: 96). He knew such obscure sources as the Julio-Claudian poet Albinovanus Pedo. Perhaps less of interest, but intriguing nonetheless, is that he considered geographical matters peculiar to the Judeo-Christian tradition (hence the title of the work), such as the topographical issues regarding where the Israelites crossed the Red Sea.

Much of the *Christian Topography* will only interest the specialist, but in its 12 books there are many nuggets of geographical and historical scholarship that are unique and enlightening. The earlier of the two surviving manuscripts, from the eighth or ninth century AD, is illustrated, and there is evidence that these drawings were made by Kosmas himself, another valuable aspect of the work.

To be sure, Kosmas represented a rejection of a thousand years of ancient geographical thought. But the work is not without value, not only because of its preservation of material about traditional geographical thought not known elsewhere, but its role in a movement away from ancient geographical theory to a new outlook, which was to dominate western geographical theory until the first editions of geographers such

as Strabo, Pliny, and Ptolemy in the late fifteenth century returned scholarship to the level of antiquity and enabled Renaissance explorers.

### Bibliography

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