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**FROM THE ISLES OF THE BLESSED TO TAPROBANE.  
THE ISLANDS AT THE EASTERN AND WESTERN EDGE OF  
THE INHABITED WORLD  
(PLIN. *NAT. HIST.* VI, 81–91; 198–205)**

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„amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet,  
freed from tyranny and wars that would never end”<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* By analysing Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* and placing it in the broader context of ancient knowledge, I describe the knowledge and myths about the islands of the western and eastern edges of the known world in antiquity, with particular reference to Pliny's subjective ideas.

*Keywords:* Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, Taprobane, *Fortunatae insulae*

The world of the islands on the western and eastern edge of the *oikumene* has long been a subject of interest and is depicted in many literary works. The remote, mysterious island seems to have been evoked in every age and culture to conjure an image of an idealised world. In the imagination of the man who wants to escape the troubles of his time, the remote island is seen as the scene of an ancient world of more pristine morals, where peace, tranquillity, and justice reign, and where otherwise unattainable happiness is achieved.

Pliny, in Book VI of his *Naturalis Historia*, writes of the islands off the west coast of Africa (Plin. VI, 198–205), and of the ‘Pillars of Hercules’ (Plin. VI, 199), the mountains bordering the Strait of Gibraltar, which for the Romans symbolised the boundary between the civilised world (*mare nostrum*) and the unknown, dangerous ocean. Among the authors cited in his work are Ephorus,<sup>2</sup> Eudoxus, Timosthenes<sup>3</sup> and Clitarchus, who mentioned and described a number of islands in this area. This includes the island of Cerne<sup>4</sup> in the Aethiops

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<sup>1</sup> Plut. *Sert.* 9. „When Sertorius heard this tale, he was seized with an amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet, freed from tyranny and wars that would never end.” Trans. Perrin, B.

<sup>2</sup> Ephorus: FGrHist 70 F 172.

<sup>3</sup> Timosthenes: cf. Plin. VI, 15.

Ocean,<sup>5</sup> the extent and distance from the mainland of which are not known by these authors, who only mention that it was inhabited by Aethiops (i.e. dark-skinned) tribes (Plin. VI, 198).<sup>6</sup> Polybius and Cornelius Nepos, on the other hand, give more precise information about the island of Cerne, describing its size and its location opposite the Atlas Mountains, as well as the island of Atlantis, which is well known from mythical tradition, having sunk as a result of a natural disaster (Plin. VI, 199).

On the west coast of Africa, the geographical point of reference is a peninsula, Hesperu Ceras, or 'Horn of the West,'<sup>7</sup> mentioned by the Carthaginian general Hanno<sup>8</sup> (Pliny VI, 200) in his *periplus* of the 5th century BC. Opposite the peninsula, two days' sail from the mainland, are the Gorgados Islands,<sup>9</sup> inhabited by the Gorgons, whom Hanno met in person. These are not mythological creatures, the daughters of the gods, Medusa and her sisters, but shaggy-haired creatures that some researchers have even associated with the later discovered West African gorillas. Hanno took the skins of two gorgons from the island and kept them in Carthage, in the temple of Iuno, as described by Pliny, or perhaps more accurately Tanit or Astarte. The skins were admired for three hundred and fifty years, as they remained until the Roman conquest of Carthage in 146 BC (Plin. VI, 200). According to Statius Sebosus,<sup>10</sup> the islands of the Hesperides were 40 days' sail from the Gorgados, then the islands of Mauretania, the latter were visited by Iuba<sup>11</sup> personally (Plin. VI, 201).

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4 Not to be mistaken for Ilha do Cerne (Swan Island, now Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean off the southeast coast of Africa (east of Madagascar), discovered by the Portuguese for Europe in the early sixteenth century.

5 The name of the ocean off the west coast of central Africa.

6 The land of the Aethiopians, Aethiopia (Aithiopia) is the territory of ancient Nubia, now Sudan. In a broader sense, the Aethiopians were the name given in antiquity to all the dark-skinned people who lived along the southern coast of Asia, the upper Nile and inland Africa. Pliny writes, based on ancient tradition, that the land of the Aethiops stretched as far as the west coast of Africa.

7 Its identification is disputed, but it is probably the present-day Cape Verde peninsula; not the same as the peninsula extending northeast of present-day Tunisia, also called the Horn of the West, now Cape Bon.

8 Hanno: a Carthaginian general of noble birth (fifth century BC) who was sent to explore the north-west coast of Africa with a fleet of 60 ships and 30,000 men according to his *periplus*. He sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar, founded or repopulated seven colonies along the African coast of present-day Morocco. Hanno met a variety of indigenous peoples on his journey and received a wide range of welcomes. The purpose of Hanno's journey may have been to secure the West African gold route. *Periplus* is only preserved in Greek manuscripts. The original version, written in Punic, has been lost, and the Greek translation is an abridged 101-line version.

9 Its identification is disputed, but it is probably identical with the present-day Cape Verde Islands.

10 Statius Sebosus: a Greek geographer who composed around 100 BC; cf. Plin. VI, 183.

11 Iuba: Iuba II, son of King Iuba of Mauretania. He became a prisoner of Caesar at Zama, who sent him to Rome and gave him a thorough education. He later betrothed him to Cleopatra

Beyond these islands, according to Pliny, lay the Isles of the Blessed (*Fortunatae Insulae*), also known as the Fortunate Islands (Plin. VI, 202–205), whose identification is not clear from various ancient records, but whose description and location are most closely related to the present Canary Islands. In ancient myths, the Islands of the Blessed were considered to be the westernmost part of the world, where the chariot of the sun ends its journey, where there is eternal spring and prosperity. The islands were associated with the concept of Elysium, a utopian place in the Greek underworld, believed to be located in the western ocean at the edge of the known world. The Isles of the Blessed have been a topos in literature since the time of Homer (*Od.* IV, 561–569),<sup>12</sup> and are also mentioned by Pliny, Statius Sebosus, Iuba, Plutarch, Florus, Flavius Philostratus, Ptolemy and Lucian. Homer places the Elysium on the edge of the world, „where life glides on in immortal ease for mortal man; no snow, no winter onslaught, never a downpour there but night and day the Ocean River sends up breezes, singing winds of the West refreshing all mankind.”<sup>13</sup> Plutarch writes similarly in his *Life of Sertorius*: „They enjoy moderate rains at long intervals, and winds which for the most part are soft and precipitate dews, so that the islands not only have a rich soil which is excellent for plowing and planting, but also produce a natural fruit that is plentiful and wholesome enough to feed, without toil or trouble, a leisured folk. Moreover, an air that is salubrious, owing to the climate and the moderate changes in the seasons, prevails on the islands. For the north and east winds which blow out from our part of the world plunge into fathomless space, and, owing to the distance, dissipate themselves and lose their power before they reach the islands; while the south and west winds that envelope the islands from the sea sometimes bring in their train soft and intermittent showers, but for the most part cool them with moist breezes and gently nourish the soil.”<sup>14</sup> Lucian also highlights the sweet, fragrant air, the softly blowing breezes, the eternal spring and the abundant fruit of the Isles of the Blessed (Lucian. *VH* 2). Statius Sebosus states the number and location of the islands, namely Iunonia, Pluvialia, Capraria, Invallis and Planasia (Plin. VI, 202). According to Iuba (Plin. VI, 203), the Isles of the Blessed lie 625 miles south-west of the Purple Islands (*insulae Purpureae*).<sup>15</sup> The first island is Om-

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Selene, daughter of Antony and Cleopatra, and in 25 he restored him to his father's succession, giving him Mauretania as a gift. Iuba was an eminent writer of geographical and historical works. His works were used by Plutarch, Appianus and Dio Cassius. Cf. Plut. *Ant.* 87. *Caes.* 55.

12 The myth of the Golden Age, which also has a very rich literary tradition in antiquity, is also connected with the Isles of the Blessed.

13 Homer. *Od.* IV, 565–568. Trans. Fagles, R.

14 Plut. *Sert.* 8–9. Trans. Perrin, B.

15 Purple Islands: lat. *insulae Purpureae*; a group of islands mentioned only here; perhaps present-day Madeira.

bria,<sup>16</sup> next to there is Lunonia, where there is a stone sanctuary; then Capraria,<sup>17</sup> full of giant lizards; and Ninguaría,<sup>18</sup> where perpetual snow covers a mountain peak; and Canaria,<sup>19</sup> named after the large dogs that live there. The islands abound in fruit, honey and birds (Plin. VI, 203–205). Pliny quotes the above authors at length in his work, and concludes his account of the Isles of the Blessed with a surprising remark: „Harm comes to [the islands] from rotting carcasses of sea-monsters that are constantly washed up there.”<sup>20</sup> (Plin. VI, 205). This remark certainly indicates that for Pliny the Isles of the Blessed no longer represent a distant, mystical, idealized world, but a somewhat familiar, albeit distant, but nevertheless accessible, realistic archipelago. This remark about the unpleasantly decomposing carcasses of sea monsters, also fabulous but perhaps considered real in Pliny’s time, drastically counterpoints earlier ideas of Elysian harmony. With this sentence, Pliny breaks with the idealised image of the Isles of the Blessed.

In Book VI of his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny had already used the topos of a mystical, idealised island at the edge of the known world, but in a peculiar way he thought of this island as being on the eastern edge of the known world.<sup>21</sup> This is certainly because envoys came from Taprobane<sup>22</sup> in the time of Pliny, reporting of the island’s fabulous wealth, abundant crops, prosperity, as well as a just and good king. In Book VI, Pliny, in his description of Asia, abruptly breaks off from a dry list of geographical places and peoples: we will leave this for now and return to it later, in order to arrive as soon as possible at the island of Taprobane, and we will do so “*festinante animo*,” in a hurry, with a sense of urgency; „as will the four satrapies in brief shortly. But now our attention hurries on to Taprobane island.”<sup>23</sup> (Plin. VI, 79). This unusual, emotional remark also shows that Pliny attaches a special importance to the island. Franz Ferdin-

16 This is the Greek name of Pluvialia, mentioned in Pliny VI, 202.

17 Capraria’s identification is disputed. Giant lizards inhabit the island of El Hierro, now part of the Canary Islands. Most of the giant lizard species were exterminated by the natives and are now threatened by feral cats and rats on the island. One species has survived, the 0.6m-long El Hierro giant lizard (*Gallotia simonyi*).

18 Ninguaría is probably identical with present-day Tenerife, because of the 3,715-metres snow-capped El Teide.

19 Canaria: its name comes from the Latin *canis*, dog; today it is Grand Canaria. According to Alzola, these dogs could have been “sea dogs,” i.e. seals, Alzola 1989, 13. The canary bird takes its name from the islands.

20 Trans. Turner, B. — Talbert, R. J. A. *Infestari eas beluis, quae expellantur adsidue, putrescentibus*.

21 Iambulos, a third-century BC Greek author, also placed his utopian island in the far East.

22 An ancient name for the island of Sri Lanka (until 1972 Ceylon). For Taprobane see also: Herrmann 1932, Boisselier 1979, De Romanis 1997, Weerakkody 1997, Faller 2000, Weisshaar 2001, Schwarz 1974, Székely 2011, Székely 2018.

23 Trans. Turner, B. — Talbert, R. J. A. *quattuor satrapiae mox paulo, ad Taprobanen insulam festinante animo*.

and Schwarz, examining the structure of the chapter, points out that the detail on Taprobane is central to the description of India and, with its 10 chapters, is the most extensive among the descriptions.<sup>24</sup>

The geographers of the Greco-Roman world thought of the area far to the south-east of India as a separate continent in the southern hemisphere. To counterbalance the mass of the northern continent, they considered it necessary to have a ‘companion continent,’ and called it the “land of the Antichthones.” This is mentioned by Cicero;<sup>25</sup> Pomponius Mela;<sup>26</sup> Pliny;<sup>27</sup> and Solinus in the third century.<sup>28</sup> According to Pliny, Taprobane had been considered, as early as the period of Alexander the Great’s campaigns, to be an island instead of being a continent of the southern hemisphere. The Roman circumnavigation of the island, however, was only carried out later, at the time of Ptolemy in the second century.<sup>29</sup>

The first western descriptions of Taprobane have come down to us from authors who never visited the area. Their accounts are therefore understandably quite varied and contain several fabulous elements. The authors give different accounts of the location of Taprobane, its distance from India, and its size. According to Nearchus, the constellations of Ursa Minor and Ursa Major disappear in the southern part of India. Megasthenes agrees with this view,<sup>30</sup> but Eratosthenes rejects it, and, with reference to Daimachus’ records, states that the constellation of Ursa Minor is always visible to the inhabitants of the island, who live 3000 *stadia*<sup>31</sup> south of Meroe.<sup>32</sup> According to Eratosthenes, Meroe lies at the same latitude as southern India.<sup>33</sup> Strabo disagrees with these opinions and considers Daimachus in particular to be rather unreliable.<sup>34</sup> Pliny also writes that the North Star is not visible on Taprobane,<sup>35</sup> so sailors there cannot use the stars to find their way.<sup>36</sup> These data from earlier authors on Taprobane are not correct, as the island is still in the northern hemisphere, and the constel-

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24 Schwarz 1974 *JAH*, 21–48.

25 Cic. *Tusc.* 1, 68.

26 Mela 3, 70.

27 Plin. VI, 24, 81.

28 Solin. 53, 1.

29 Warmington 1974, 63; 120.

30 Cf. Strab. II, 1, 20.

31 The *stadium/stadion* is a Greek length measurement that varied in length from era to era, author to author, and area to area. The Romans, including Pliny, used it as 185 metres.

32 Meroe was a city on the Nile in Upper Nubia, capital of the Aethiopian kingdom after Napata; see also Plin. V, 53; VI, 177.

33 Strab. II, 5, 35–36. cf. Diehle 1978, 567.

34 Strab. II, 1, 9.

35 The North Star is the brightest star in the constellation of Ursa Minor.

36 Plin. VI, 24, 83.

lations of Ursa Minor and Ursa Major, as well as the North Star are visible from there.<sup>37</sup>

Ancient geographers also differ on the distance between India and Taprobane. The fact that different authors have identified different reference points makes this difficult to determine. Onesicritus claims that it takes 20 days to travel from the lower Indus to the island of Taprobane.<sup>38</sup> Megasthenes confirms this figure, while Eratosthenes specifies the duration of the journey as seven days.<sup>39</sup> Pliny quotes both opinions side by side and adds that at the time of Eratosthenes new types of ships were built, which made the journey from India to Taprobane easier and shorter.<sup>40</sup>

Ancient authors estimated the size of the island to be larger than it actually was.<sup>41</sup> Eratosthenes surmised that its north-south extent was 7,000 *stadia*, three times its actual size; while its east-west extent amounted to 5,000 *stadia*, four times its actual size.<sup>42</sup> Strabo writes that the area of Taprobane is no smaller than that of Britain.<sup>43</sup> Ptolemy described Taprobane as fourteen times larger than it actually was.<sup>44</sup> Second-century Arrian, in his book on India, relies on Nearchus and Megasthenes, but does not mention Taprobane at all. His contemporary, Ptolemy, gives a detailed geographic description of the island, also listing its products: rice, ginger, honey, beryl, sapphire, gold, silver and other ores, as well as tigers and elephants.<sup>45</sup> Except for tigers, the list appears to be reliable.<sup>46</sup> Strabo, who lived at the age of Augustus, reports that Taprobane often sends ivory, turtle shells and other products to the Indian market.<sup>47</sup> In Strabo's era, Western merchants purchased Taprobane's goods in the southern Indian markets.<sup>48</sup> Ptolemy, however, already reports about Roman merchants who traded directly with the island and even circumnavigated it. The author's enthu-

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37 Rosenberger 1996, 5–6.

38 Strab. XV, 1, 15. cf. Schwarz 1976.

39 Cf. Strab. XV, 1, 14.

40 Plin. VI, 24, 82.

41 The accounts on Taprobane persistently exaggerate to an enormous extent the dimensions of that island, McCrindle 1979, XXI.

42 Taprobane, in fact, is 432 kilometres long and 224 kilometres wide. According to several researchers, some of the descriptions on Taprobane, such as the size of the island and its distance from India, may point to a larger island in the southern hemisphere, perhaps Sumatra.

43 Strab. II, 5, 32.

44 Warmington 1974, 118.

45 Ptol. VII, 4, 1.

46 Warmington 1974, 118. For trade see also: Charlesworth 1926, Miller 1969, Dihle 1978, Raschke 1978, Casson 1984, Begley 1991, Cimino 1994, Bopearachchi 1998, Young 2001, Székely 2008, Székely 2010.

47 Strab. II, 1, 14.

48 From the Tamil and Malabar markets on the Indian shores.

siastic prediction that Taprobane would soon become the commercial hub of the Indian Ocean was only fulfilled later, in the fifth–sixth centuries.<sup>49</sup>

Among Latin authors, Ovid is the first to mention Taprobane's name in his *Epistulae ex Ponto*.<sup>50</sup> Pomponius Mela, writing under the emperors Caligula and Claudius, in his work *De chorographia*, vaguely notes that Taprobane is either a large island or a part of another continent. The author claims that the area is inhabited, and that, traditionally, no one has ever walked around it, and therefore, contrary to the majority opinion, he prefers the latter idea.<sup>51</sup> Pliny is the first Roman author to write in detail about the island,<sup>52</sup> and later authors use his work as a primary source. Pliny describes the people of Taprobane as industrious, temperate, not keeping slaves, never raising the price of grain, and never entering litigation.<sup>53</sup> Their average age is 100 years, their trade is honest, and their goods are worth their true value. Their chosen king is old, gentle, and childless. If a successor should be born, the current king is dethroned and another ruler is chosen, lest the kingdom become hereditary.<sup>54</sup> In Pliny's imagination, Taprobane appears as a merry island, an ideal state where the problems found in Rome do not exist, where the island's society appears to offer an antithesis of Roman society. One of Pliny's main aims is to contrast the simple life and justice of the people of Taprobane with the evils of his time. Pliny condemns the luxuries that had become commonplace among the noble and wealthy classes of the Roman Empire, the desire for special and expensive oriental products, and the senseless spending, in a sharply worded condemnation; not only in this description, but also in other parts of his *Naturalis Historia*, whenever he sees an opportunity to make personal comments.<sup>55</sup>

Ampelius, of Hadrian's time, mentions Taprobane in the east and Britannia in the west as among the most famous islands.<sup>56</sup> The most important source for Solinus' *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* is Pliny but he also used the work of Mela. Solinus, in an attempt to be reader-friendly, engages in interpretative explanations to Pliny's concise sentences, but he also makes significant errors

49 Darley 2017, 65; Cobb 2018, 4–5.

50 Ovid. *Pont.* 1, 5, 79–80: *Quid tibi, si calidae, prosit, laudare Syenae / aut ubi Taprobanen Indica tingit aqua.*

51 Mela 3, 70: *Taprobane aut grandis admodum insula aut prima pars orbis alterius. Id parcius dicitur, sed quia habitatur nec quisquam circum eam isse traditur, prope verum est.*

52 Plin. VI, 24, 81–91.

53 Possible sources of the Golden Age motifs used by Pliny: Hesiod. *Erga* 106–201; Arat. *Phainomena* 96–136; Verg. *Ecl.* 4, 37–45; Verg. *Georg.* I, 121–146; II, 536–540; Verg. *Aen.* VIII, 314–325; Hor. *Epod.* 16, 41–62; Hor. *Carm. Saec.* 57–60; Ovid. *Metam.* I, 89–150; Ovid. *Fasti* I, 185–254; Calp. *Ecl.* 1, 33–73.

54 See Starr 1956, 27–30; Székely 2005, 3–14; Székely 2011, 81–91.

55 Cf. Gesztelyi 1991, 215–226.

56 Ampelius 6, 12: *Clarissimae insulae.... in Oceano ad Orientem Taprobane, ad Occidentem Britannia.*

while doing so.<sup>57</sup> According to Avienus of the fourth century, Taprobane is inhabited by hideous elephants.<sup>58</sup> Martianus Capella, in his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, describes the island in more detail, drawing mainly on the works of Pliny and Solinus.<sup>59</sup> The sixth-century Palladius writes that the people of the island of Taprobane, known as ‘the Blessed Ones,’ live remarkably long lives, up to 150 years, thanks to the incredibly pleasant climate and the mysteriousness of the divine will.<sup>60</sup> Iordanes, a historian of Gothic origin, heard of the existence of ten strongly fortified cities on Taprobane.<sup>61</sup> In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville, a major seventh-century author, describes the island in two of his texts. Once, he describes it as being famous for its precious stones and elephants; while elsewhere he defines its geographical location and size.<sup>62</sup> He also quotes Pliny, stating that the island is divided by a river and that the whole area is full of pearls and precious stones. He mentions that one part of Taprobane is inhabited by wild animals and elephants, the other by humans, and that the island has two summers and two winters per year.

From the above, we can conclude that the little-known mystical island at the edge of the inhabited world has been a popular topos since Homer’s time, where people live in bliss, carefree, in harmony with nature, fulfilling the desires of humanity. Pliny, in his summary of the works of the ancient *auctores*, also quotes them, but in his geographical description of the world he places this idealised world on the island of Taprobane, on the eastern edge of the oikumene, rather than on the western edge. The authors who wrote in Latin followed Pliny up to Isidore of Seville, who wrote in the seventh century and also created a work that strives for completeness.

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57 Solin. 53, 1–23.

58 Avienus: *Descriptio orbis terrae* 777: *insula Taprobane gignit taetros elephantos*.

59 Mart. Cap. 6, 696–699.

60 Palladius *Comm.* 5: *Inter quos cum consuetudinem magnam per diutinum tempus habuisset, voluit etiam ad illam insulam quae Taprobane vocatur accedere, in qua illi quibus Beatorum nomen est vivunt aetate longissima. Nam usque ad centum et quinquaginta annorum perveniunt senectutem, propter incredibilem aurarum temperiem et incomprehensibilem divini iudicii voluntatem.*

61 Iord. *Get.* 6: *Taprobanem quoque, in qua (excepto oppida vel possessiones) decem munitissimas urbes decoramus.*

62 Isid. *Orig.* XIV, 3, 5: *insulam quoque Taprobanen gemmis et elephantis refertam. Isid. Orig. XIV, 6, 12: Taprobane insula Indiae subiacens ad Eurum, ex qua Oceanus Indicus incipit, patens in longitudine octingentis septuaginta quinque milibus passuum, in latitudine sescenta viginti quinque milia stadiorum. Scinditur amne interfluo, tota margaritis repleta et gemmis; pars eius bestiis et elephantis repleta est, partem vero homines tenent. In hac insula dicunt in uno anno duas esse aestates et duas hiemes et bis floribus vernare locum.*



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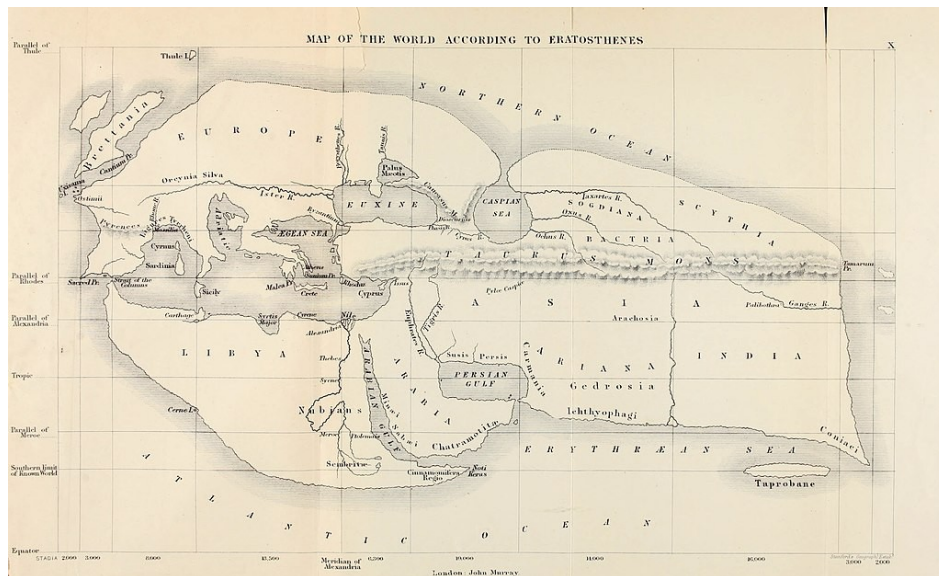
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