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Book Review

Ancient Geography: The Discovery of the World in Classical Greece and Rome

By Duane W. Roller (Library of Classical Studies). Pp. viii + 294, maps 12. I.B. Tauris, New York 2015. \$99. ISBN 978-1-78453-076-1 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen](#)

Roller, Professor Emeritus of Classics at Ohio State University, is well known to students of ancient geography for his translation of Strabo's *Geography* (Cambridge 2014) and his edition of the fragments of Eratosthenes' *Geography* (Princeton 2010), as well as for his work on early ancient Atlantic seafarers (*Through the Pillars of Herakles: Greco-Roman Exploration of the Atlantic* [London 2006]). In this new book, Roller offers the reader a compact and readable overview of Greek and Roman geography down to the end of the second century C.E.

The main text is divided into 10 chapters. Chapters 1–3 cover the period to the end of the classical era in Greece, chapters 4–6 deal with the age of Alexander the Great and Hellenistic geographical science, and chapters 7–10 are devoted to Roman geography. The chronological arrangement of the chapters makes for clarity of structure and ease of reference, but this comes at the price of a fragmentation that cuts across topics: the early history of Greek geographical philosophy, for instance, is divided among the first three chapters. Pytheas and Alexander have been grouped together in chapters 4–5 (84–120), though the two are only connected in so far as they were contemporaries (depending on the date of Pytheas' work "On the Ocean" [86], the one may not even have been aware of the other's existence).

As its subtitle indicates, the book is primarily concerned with geography as "discovery" of the world. In this connection, the author deserves credit for underlining the debt of early Greek geographers to their neighbors in the Levant; to the Persians, who "opened up the eastern horizon for the Greeks" (46); and especially to the Phoenicians and Carthaginians. He also discusses the impact of geographical discoveries on other branches of science, such as medicine (71) and philosophy.

Considering that many of those we are accustomed to thinking of as "geographical" writers are known to have written on history as well (e.g., Strabo and the elder Pliny) or vice versa, a more profound analysis of the relationship between geography and history might have been useful to the reader. While Herodotus (64–7), Xenophon (69–71), and Polybius (137–79) are treated at some length, Roller's discussions of Thucydides (67) and Plutarch (191–92) are disappointingly brief, while Tacitus earns only two passing references (174, 185), although in his work Tacitus often explores the interplay of geography and history, most conspicuously in the *Agricola* but also in the *Annales*.

Roller dates "The End of Ancient Geography" to the early second century C.E. (202). This follows logically from the author's evolutionary perspective and his focus on geography as "discovery of the world," and indeed it can be argued that after the mid second century C.E., when the Roman empire had reached its greatest extent, little new geographical knowledge was acquired (at least, acquired by the Romans; there is good evidence for an increasing knowledge of the West in China [193–96]). Yet even if few new discoveries were added to the geographical knowledge base, "geography" in its literal Greek sense (that is, "description of the world") continued to develop, finding ways to present existing knowledge in new formats such as the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (discussed briefly [203]), the *Periegesis of Greece* by Pausanias (not mentioned) or the geographical lexicon compiled by Stephen of Byzantium (mentioned only as a source for the work of Hecataeus [50–2]). The evolution of geography as a literary form and the trend from prose toward verse (e.g., the *Description of the Known World* by Dionysius of Alexandria; not mentioned) might also have deserved at least a brief discussion.

Given the clear structure and accessible style of Roller's text, which is complemented by maps, a short lexicon of geographical writers (206–12), an extensive bibliography, and detailed indices, this book is likely to take its place as the standard introduction for those unfamiliar with the story of ancient geography. They should be aware, however, that all information given here is not equally reliable. There is no evidence in Strabo's *Geography*—our only source for his biography—that the author belonged to the circle around Queen Pythodoris and spent his later years “either in his home town of Amaseia or her nearby capital of Caesarea” (168). Strabo was still in Rome as late as 19 C.E., when he witnessed the triumph of Germanicus (7.1.4 C292), and he identifies Sebaste (Sivas), not Caesarea (Kayseri) as Pythodoris' capital (12.3.31 C557).

Like the modern English word “mile,” the Greek term *stadion* can denote different measures of distance, varying in length depending on the context, but it does not follow that converting stades—or miles—into other units of distance is “impossible as well as misleading” (7). Both the elder Pliny (*HN* 12.53) and Strabo (7.7.4 C322) state which ratio they use when converting distances from stades into Roman miles; if need be, their conversions can be checked against the distances in real space. (On this question, see S. Potheary, “Strabo, Polybios, and the Stade,” *Phoenix* 49 [1995] 49–67 [not in the bibliography]).

That Ptolemy's topographical chapters are “at present only available in German” (6) is not true, nor that “Pliny's geographical chapters await their English editor” (6). An English version of Ptolemy's *Geography* by Stevenson has long been available (*Geography of Claudius Ptolemy* [New York 1932; paperback edition, New York 1991]) while Pliny's books on geography can be found in the Loeb Classical Library (H. Rackham, trans., *Natural History*, by Pliny [Cambridge, Mass. 1938]).

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