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The so-called confusion between India and Ethiopia: the eastern and southern edges of the inhabited world from the Greco-Roman perspective

In 1681 the celebrated German orientalist Hiob Ludolf published his *Historia Aethiopica*¹. At the end of the first chapter, in which the various names given to Ethiopians in classical antiquity were quickly reviewed, the author concluded: *quae nominum diversitas ... haud exiguam confusionem peperit*. This is probably the first appearance of a term coined by Ludolf to define a phenomenon which occasionally raises difficulties for classicists and historians, for it may hinder our understanding of ancient texts: the confusion of India and Ethiopia.² Here are some examples: “Caesarion, who was said to be Cleopatra's son (...), was sent by his mother, with much treasure, into India, by way of Ethiopia” (Plut. *Ant.* 81.2; transl. B. Perrin), but we do not know where to locate this “India”: in east Africa or in India proper? The spice called κιννάμωμον / *cinnamomum* remains partly mysterious, since ancient documents are unclear: according to Herodotus (III 107) it was obtained in Arabia, while other authorities attributed it to Ethiopia (Str. II 1.13) or India (Theophr. *Hist. pl.* IV 4.13). The reports of Semiramis' feats are affected by a persistent confusion: did the queen defeat Indians (Ampelius, *Liber memorialis* XI.3), Ethiopians (Diod. Sic. III 3.1) or both of them (Diod. Sic. II 14.3-2)?

In fact, it was not until the 19th century that the confusion was seriously investigated. In particular Schwanbeck, the publisher of Megasthenes' *Indika*, was the first who scrutinizing Greek and Latin literature listed the data related to “Libya” (= Ethiopia) which had been transferred in India, and vice versa. He also offered the first real explanations for this “amazing confusion” (*mira quaedam confusio*)³. Schwanbeck – as most scholars still do⁴ – associated this phenomenon with the gaps and inaccuracies of Greco-Roman knowledge. In reality, as will be explained after a short description of the confusion of India and Ethiopia (section 1), this extensive and variable phenomenon is not fundamentally a matter of ignorance and error: on the contrary it reflects how the Greco-Romans perceived the southern and eastern fringes of the *oikoumenê* (section 2). There are many reasons why the Mediterranean constantly tended to bring India and Ethiopia together, the most important of which will be presented in the section 3.

N.b.: although, as the reader will see, the word “confusion” is to some extent inappropriate, I will often use it in quotes for the sake of convenience.

<A> Describing the “confusion”

 The themes

A comprehensive inventory of the “confusions” would obviously exceed the limits of this paper. The following sample, however, suffices to get an idea of their number and variety.

Let us examine, to begin with, the question of spatial divisions and designations, i.e. the presence of Ethiopians in the East and the expansion of India in east Africa respectively. In the *Odyssey* (*Od.* I 23-24), Homer praises “the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain, the farthestmost of men, some where Hyperion sets and some where he rises”. We can neither clearly identify these Αἰθιοπῆες (“Burnt-faces”) nor determine to what extent they were real peoples, especially with regard to the

¹Ludolf chapitre 1.

²E.g., Goldenberg 211; Snowden 11; Dihle 37; Fiaccadori; Mayerson 170. The “confusion” between India and Ethiopia survived partially in medieval times (Wittkower ; Richard).

³Schwanbeck 2.

⁴E.g., Sidebotham 41.

“eastern Ethiopians”.⁵ It has been rightly doubted since ancient times (Str. II 3.8) that Homer was aware of India. On the other hand, the idea that the eastern end of the *oikoumenê* was occupied by “Burnt-Faces” was undoubtedly fixed among the Greeks by the Poet. That is why in the 5th century B.C.E., following the extent of the Greek geographical horizon, some Ethiopian tribes were almost naturally located by the Greeks in the East. For instance the 17th Persian *nomos* comprised the “Ethiopians of Asia” (a Baloch tribe?), who “were not different in appearance from the others⁶, only in speech and hair” (Hdt. III 94; VII 70); transl. Godley). Herodotus (VII 70) pointed out a strange Indian tribe who “have intercourse openly like cattle” and “are all black-skinned, like the Ethiopians”. In the Roman imperial period Pomponius Mela (III 67) compared the southern Indians with Ethiopians; Ptolemy (*Geog.* VII 3.1) reported that a tribe of *Ikhtyophagoi Aithiopes* dwelt somewhere in Trans-Gangetic India etc.

In the opposite direction the name “India” was applied to some parts of east Africa. Whether this “confusion” was already present in Ctesias’ work, in the early 4th century B.C.E., cannot be clearly established⁷. In contrast, this phenomenon is indisputably attested at the time when the maritime trade with India steadily expanded, following the exploration of the Red Sea by the Ptolemies and above all the annexation of Egypt by Rome (30 B.C.E.). Various pieces of evidence going back the 1st-2nd century C.E. clearly show that certain areas of east Africa were called “India” (e.g. Pliny [infra, p.xx] ; Plut. *Ant.* 81.2; Ael. *NA* XII.32 ; XVI.33 ; Hyg. *Fab.* 133). Such representation of space, including from then on south Arabia, is more and more documented from the 3rd century onwards. For instance in the late third century C.E. Constantius was praised for subduing the Ethiopians (= Nubians) and “Indians” (= Blemmyes⁸)(*Pan. Lat.* V 5); Eusebius (*Vit. Const.* IV 7) claimed that Constantine the Great received Ethiopian, Blemmye and “Indian” (= Ḥimyarite) ambassadors; how the “Indian” (= Axumite) king embraced Christianity is related by Rufinus of Aquileia (*Historia Ecclesiastica* I 9-10).

Many “confusions” between India and Ethiopia also appear in texts dealing with or alluding to lands, peoples, animals, plants etc., of which I would like to give several significant examples. Let us begin, e.g., with rivers which take a major part when countries are depicted: as early as the 5th century B.C.E. the Nile – a river belonging to Egypt and Ethiopia as well – and Indus were brought together, as both of them were home to crocodiles (Hdt. IV 44). The comparison was carried further when Alexander and his friends discovered India and observed the Punjab rivers flooding because of the monsoon rainfalls: they strongly emphasized the parallel with the Nile spreading in the Egyptian plain every summer (e.g. Str. XV 1.13 = Eratosth. *Berger* III B 12; 16 = Nearchus *FGrH* 133 F17; 18 = Aristobulus *FGrH* 139 F35). To take another example, from the Greco-Roman point of view, India and Ethiopia received much solar heat thanks to their position in the *oikoumenê*. Of course, Alexander and his companions noted that the atmosphere was more humid in India than Ethiopia (e.g. Str. XV 1.24), which could explain why, unlike the Ethiopians, the Indians have smooth hair (e.g. Arr. *Ind.* VI 9). In reality, however, the fundamental idea that both India and Ethiopia enjoyed an exceptionally warm climate – as proved by the skin color of their inhabitants (infra, p. XX) – was not contradicted by such details. Other “confusions” were related to peoples’ νομοί (customs, way of life). While exploring Gedrosia⁹ and the Red Sea¹⁰, the Greeks came across tribes whose livelihood was based on fish (*Ikhtyophagoi*). Such reports led some authorities to the conclusion that the whole Erythraean Sea – an area shared by India, Arabia and Ethiopia – was occupied by Fish Eaters (e.g. Str. II 2.3 = Posidonius *Theiler* 13¹¹).

⁵ The Ethiopians neighbouring Egypt were probably known to Homer (e.g. *Od.* 4, 81-85).

⁶ The Ethiopians of Nubia.

⁷ Schneider p. xx

⁸ A nomadic Nubian tribe.

⁹ Nearchus in 325 B.C.E.

¹⁰ For the purpose of elephant hunting in the 3rd century B.C.E.

¹¹ Posidonius regarded all *Ikhtyophagoi* groups as characteristic peoples of the “zones under the tropics” (ὑπὸ τοῖς τροπικοῖς).

A large number of “confusions” between India and Ethiopia involve animals, the most emblematic of which are of course elephants. That they lived in Libya (=Africa) and India was known to Greeks in early times (Hdt. III 114; Diod. Sic. II 16.2-4 = Ctes. *FGrH* 688 F1b §16-19). As for Ethiopian elephants, they became especially famous from the time when Ptolemy II and his successors had them captured and trained for war (e.g., *OGI* 54). Even if Indian elephants were thought to be bigger and stronger than African ones (e.g., Pol. V 84.5), never were two species distinguished, which implies that elephants were considered as common to India and Ethiopia. Besides this celebrated creature other animals contributed to India and Ethiopia being brought together: parrots, “Indian” bulls, giant snakes, tigers, *kynokephaloi* etc. Some plants remarkable from the Mediterranean point of view were the attributed to India or Ethiopia or even both countries (e.g. the giant reed [bamboo] : Tzetz. *Chil.* VII 731-33 = Ctes. *FGrH* 688 F45c ; Helioid. *Aeth.* X 4.6 ; Str. XVII 3.5). Most confusions, in fact, are related to spices and aromatics imported for the Mediterranean consumption. This situation is a vexing issue for those who study Greece and Rome’s eastern trade, such as S. Sidebotham : “Diodorus Siculus, Vergil, Propertius, Ovid, Strabo, Pliny, Seneca, Statius, Athenaeus and others were mistaken about the origin of some of the produce imported from the East, especially incense, spices and ebony”. Among the most significant mistakes and confusions the author points out those related to myrrh (Plin. XII 71), *zingiberi* – ginger? – (Stat. *Silv.* IV 5 30-32; V 3.42-43), *cinnamomum* – cinnamon? – (Stat. *Silv.* IV 5.30-32; V 3.42-43)¹².

This sample would not be representative if I omitted the παράδοξα or *mirabilia*, which are taken into account in almost all descriptions of the *oikoumenê* : such features, indeed, equally contributed to characterize peoples and countries. It is important, however, to distinguish between two types of παράδοξα: on the one hand natural phenomena which could be observed (Greek: ὄψις, αὐτοψία) and as far as possible rationally explained; on the other hand hearsay (e.g., Str. XVII 2.1) and to some extent fanciful accounts. As for the first category, beside those which have been mentioned above (the summer flood of the Nile, the giant reeds, the Fish Eaters etc.) there are, e.g., the Erythrean Sea mangroves (Str. XVI 3.6-7 = Eratosth. *Berger* III B 39) or the “wool bearing trees” (= cotton: e.g., Verg. *G.* II 120; Hdt. III 106). The second category comprises a series of peculiar peoples and animals. Let us quote, e.g., the Pygmies mentioned by Homer (*Il.* III 4-6) : Ctesias (*FGrH* 688 F45 §21-24) located them in India ; Aristotle (*Hist. an.* VIII 12, 597a) reported that they dwelt close to the spring of the river Nile; according to Philostratus (*V A VI* 1) they lived in both India and Ethiopia. There are also the Sciapodes, protecting themselves from the burning sun with their enormous foot (e.g. Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F51a; Philostr. *V A VI* 25), the Dog-Headed people (Gell. *NA IX* 4.9; Plin. *HN VI* 195; Phil. *V A VI* 1) etc. Among the fabulous animals let us point on the gold-digging ants (e.g., Hdt. III 102; Soph. F26 Nauck), the *krokottas* (e.g., *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 50; Plin. *HN VIII* 72), phoenix (e.g., Achilles Tatius, III 25; Lucian. *Navig.* 44) etc. To close this short review it is worth mentioning the Indian / Ethiopian *pantarba* (a stone attracting gemstones: Helioid. *Aeth.* VIII 11, 2) or the Indian / Ethiopian fountain which makes people tell the truth (e.g., Dio Chrys. *Or.* XXXV 22 ; Antig. *Car.* 160).

Now that, as I hope, the reader has got an adequate overview of this ample phenomenon, let us examine it from a diachronic perspective.

 A short history of the “confusion” between India and Ethiopia

The numerous gaps in Greek and Latin texts do not allow us to build an accurate history of the “confusion”. However it remains possible to grasp the main developments of this very ancient phenomenon, which, as will be seen, took constantly new forms and never diminished.

¹² Sidebotham 39-41.

As Schwanbeck rightly stated, the “double” Ethiopians of the *Odyssey* mark the very beginning of the “confusion”, in Homer’s geographical frame from which India was absent. As soon as, however, the *res Indicae* formed part of the Greek knowledge – viz. in the 6th century B.C.E. –, the phenomenon appears clearly. For instance, the Sciapodes which were located in India by Scylax (Tzet. *Chil.* VII 621-629) lived in Ethiopia according to Hecataeus (Steph. Byz. s.v. Σκιάποδες). In the mid-5th century, as the above quoted Herodotus’ passages show, the foundations of the phenomenon – i.e. a series of major themes (skin-color, eastern Ethiopians, emblematic animals) – had been laid. India and Ethiopia were also brought together in tragedy (Esch. *Suppl.* 283-286; also *Pr.* 808-9), which proves that such a perception of space was already quite disseminated. In the early-4th century Ctesias certainly brought the “confusion” a step further (e.g., the Pygmies are located in India [supra, p. XX]; the *martikhoras* is reported in India (Arist. *Hist. an.* II 1, 501a24-b1 = Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F45d and Ethiopia as well (Plin. *HN* VIII 75 = Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F45d). Because of such texts Ctesias was more than once blamed for writing fairy tales. In my opinion, he just made his contribution to a tendency that preceded him.

Alexander’s expedition in Asia was unquestionably a turning point: the knowledge of the inhabited world was dramatically enhanced. A series of novel parallels between India and Ethiopia appear, which were supported by observation (ὄψις) and rationally argued. Alexander’s companions, indeed, brought methodically India and Ethiopia (together with Egypt). They emphasized the similarities between the two areas – they seemed to them more noticeable than the differences (Str. XV 1.19) – particularly with regard to climate (ἄρηρ [e.g., Str. XV 1.13 = Onesicritus, *FGrH* 134 F7] and the summer flooding of the rivers – the Indian monsoon rainfalls drew the Macedonians to the conclusion that the Nile’s flood was equally caused by summer rains, which was the answer to a major geographical problem (Str. XV 1.19 = Aristobulus *FGrH* 139 F35). Despite the difference in terms of humidity¹³, India and Ethiopia/Egypt basically shared the same ἄρηρ: that is why these lands were extraordinarily fertile, and were home to dark-skinned people, remarkable animals and marvelous plants.

From Alexander’s time to the 2nd century B.C.E. more and more was known about peoples and places in the eastern and southern edges of the *oikoumenê*. Interestingly this increasing amount of knowledge gave rise to new parallels between India and Ethiopia, whenever the Mediterranean discovered the existence of animals, plants or people that seemed comparable to them. For instance, the presence of *Ikththyophagoi* tribes in the southern Red Sea, beside the Gedrosian ones, led Agatharchides to the conclusion that Fish Eaters lived on the whole Erythraean Sea (Diod. Sic. III 14.1 = Agatharchides *GGMI* p. 129). The explorers sent by Nero observed “parrots”¹⁴ in Ethiopia, which species was characteristic of India (Plin. *HN* VI 184). Most remarkable is the case of some Hellenistic scholars who used the analogy between India and Ethiopia in their commentaries on Homeric poems: who, e.g., where the Ἐρεμβοί visited by Menelas (*Od.* IV 84: “and I came to the Ethiopians and the Sidonians and the *Eremboi*”). Most grammarians identified them with Arabs or Ethiopians. Crates of Mallus, however, correcting the word Ἐρεμβοί and replacing it with Ἐρεμνοί (= “black/dark people”) claimed that Menelas had sailed on the Ocean as far as India (Str. I 2.31; XVI 4.27). In other words, the “confusion” was even present in scholarly debates.

In the late Hellenistic period and Early Principate, the maritime commerce between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean countries expanded considerably. As a consequence the southern and eastern extremities of the inhabited world became more familiar to the Greco-Romans. The geographical knowledge that we found in the *Periplus maris Erythraei* and Ptolemy’s

¹³ This difference was supposed to explain why “the Indian do not have woolly hair” (Str. XV 1.24; transl. H. L. Jones).

¹⁴ See the additional remark, infra, p. XX.

Geography benefited from the trade exchanges pushing merchants as far as *Rhapta*, *Mouziris*, *Ganges* and the Silk producing country. Pliny, describing the Indian Ocean routes quotes Juba (approx. 50 B.C.E. – C.E. 23) stating that *Lepte Acra* (in the vicinity of Berenice [Egypt]) was also called *promuntorium Indorum* (“promuntory of Indians”; Plin. *HN* VI 175 [= Juba *FGrH* 275 F35]): this is one of the earliest cases of the name “India” being applied to an African area. Such alteration in the Mediterranean representation of space seems to appear also in Virgil’s poems – which implies that it had probably spread out –: he mentions “Indians” who are likely to be Ethiopians (*G.* IV 293; *Aen.* VIII 705-706). Be that as it may, there is little doubt that here we witness a major development in the history of the “confusion”.

The expansion of India is more and more attested from the 3rd century C.E. to the end of antiquity. That is why find in some authors dating back to this time expressions such as *India major* (*Expositio totius mundi*, 17); “the Indians nicknamed fortunate” (Ἰνδοῖς τοῖς καλουμένοις Εὐδαίμοσιν [Epiph. *Index apostolorum*, p. 110]); *India citerior* (Rufinus Aquileiensis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I 9). By using such epithets they helped the reader identify the area they were talking about: Axum, Himyar, India proper etc. Of course some authors still used the “traditional” spatial designations¹⁵; it seems, however, that this new representation of the eastern and southern part of the *oikoumenê* had become common (infra, p.xx). Therefore it is not surprising that some *realia* and *mirabilia* belonging to Ethiopia happened to be referred to as “Indian”. For instance, Cassius Dio (LXXVII 1.4) points out an Indian κροκόττας (hyena?), whereas this animal was mostly attributed to Ethiopia; Philostratus (*VA* II 22) claims that black color was not needed to represent an “Indian”, for the artist had just to draw ... a flat nose and curly hair. Besides this, we find in this period’s texts several parallels between India and Ethiopia that were absent from previous documents (e.g., Palladius, *De gentibus Indiae*, I 4; Porphyrius, *Contra christ.* fragm. 69; Himer. *Or.* XIV 26; Nonnus, *Dion.* XLIII 165). Some scholars, considering the numerous parallels between India and Ethiopia in the late antiquity, thought that this phenomenon reflected the increasing deterioration of Greco-Roman geographical knowledge¹⁶. This historical overview shows in contrary that the “confusion” was deeply rooted in Greco-Roman knowledge from the beginnings.

 Appendix: not only India and Ethiopia, but also Arabia, Libya, Mauretania etc.

At this stage one could imagine that this phenomenon related exclusively to Indian and Ethiopia. Actually Persia, Libya, Egypt, Mauretania etc. were occasionally included. For instance elephants characterize also Libya and Taprobane (Plin. *HN* VIII 32); the *Mauri* were sometimes considered as “western Ethiopians” (Manilius, *Astron.* IV 727-728) as appears in the following lines (Juv. VI 336-339): *sed omnes / nouerunt Mauri atque Indi¹⁷ quae psalteria penem / majorem quam sunt duo Caesaris Anticatones / illuc <intulerit>* (“But every Moor and every Indian knows how Clodius forced his way into a place ...”; transl. G. G. Ramsay); Eratosthenes reports that “The extreme parts towards the south (i.e. of Arabia), and opposite to Ethiopia, are watered by summer showers, and are sowed twice, like the land in India (Str. XVI 4.2 = Eratosth. Berger III B 48). In the mid-5th century B.C.E. Herodotus (III 106) had already written that “The most outlying nations of the world (ἔσχατὰ τῆς οἰκουμένης, viz. India, Arabia, Ethiopia) have somehow drawn the finest things as their lot”. The most significant text, however, is provided by the philosopher Posidonius (Diod. Sic. II 51-53 = Posid. F78 Theiler) stating that countries well exposed to sun (i.e. not only India and Ethiopia, but also Arabia, Libya and Egypt) all produce remarkable animals, colorful birds and extraordinary gemstones.

¹⁵ Amm. Marc. XXII 15.2; XXIII 6.70; Procop. I 20.

¹⁶ “Warmington, speaking of the so-called trade with ‘Indians’ following the fourth century, states that it ‘was in reality trade with the Ethiopians (...) and the ignorance now shown about India was truly prodigious.’” (Mayerson).

¹⁷ Such association of India and Ethiopia was a literary way to say “in the whole world”.

India and Ethiopia, however, are the predominant poles of the “confusion”, for they appear much more than any other country in our evidence. In particular it was quite common to pair India with Ethiopia (e.g., Theophr. *Hist Pl.* IX 15.2; Plin. *HN* VII 21; X 13; X136; XIX 15; Lucan. X 117-120; Lucian. *Syr. D.* 16; Dio Chrys. *Or.* XI 49 etc.), to such an extent that it may have become a common place (Achilles Tatius IV 5). As a matter of fact India and Ethiopia were brought together by ancient and prestigious authorities (Aeschylus, Herodotus). This, undoubtedly, explains why the couple India / Ethiopia constantly predominates in this phenomenon.

<A> Defining the “confusion”

The documentary evidence, however varied it may seem, does not enable us to accurately characterize the confusion between India and Ethiopia. We can at least set out the most evident features of this lasting and protean phenomenon.

 Does the confusion reflect a lack of knowledge?

The borders of today’s India and Ethiopia – as those of any modern state – are linear and strictly defined. It may, therefore, be surprising to see India and Ethiopia being mixed up in antiquity. This is certainly the reason why the term “confusion” has commonly been applied to this phenomenon: this word, like several other expressions which appear in academic studies (e.g. “imprécision” ; “interchange”¹⁸) have generally negative connotations : it is, more or less explicitly, said that the knowledge related to these parts of the *oikoumenê* was to some extent affected by ignorance, error or inaccuracy.¹⁹ In reality this opinion needs reconsideration.

Let us take Strabo (I 2.24-28) as a guide to address the issue. In a long debate about the Ethiopians of the *Odyssey*, he defends Homer against those who blamed the Poet for his lack of geographical knowledge (τὴν πολλὴν ἄγνοϊαν). Strabo does not deny that the “ancient authorities” (τὴν τῶν ἀρχαίων Ἑλλήνων) were not as well informed as than their successors, but he objects that the designations used by them were in accordance with their level of geographical knowledge. Accordingly they would call “Ethiopians” all peoples living in the southern part of the inhabited world. Later, however, at a time when geographical knowledge had been improved, the name “Ethiopians” would only apply to the tribes living south of Egypt. In other words, Strabo refuses to reject ancient designations under the pretext that they are wrong; instead he argues that they must be put in context to be properly understood. Similarly, it is worth scrutinizing the context in which the parallels of India and Ethiopia were produced.

Let us begin with the question of the spatial expansions of Ethiopia and India respectively. Even after the limits of Ethiopia had been more or less accurately defined (e.g., Str. XVII 3.1), there was no contradiction in thinking that *Aithiopes* (= black-skinned people) were present outside Ethiopia proper. In other words claiming that Ethiopians were present in India was certainly not unreasonable (e.g., Them. *Orat.* 349c). As for “African Indias”, they are closely related with the growth of Indian Ocean trade which was accompanied by a new experience and perception of space. The Indian expansion towards Africa reflects actually a new way of organizing the Indian Ocean area in terms of geography. It is a case of alteration in spatial designation, which is hardly a matter of geographical ignorance: the Greco-Romans who called the Axumites “Indians” instead of “Ethiopians” did the same as us who use the name “Ethiopia” instead of “Abyssinia”. In other words when, for instance, Aelian (*NA* XVII 40) points out “Indian *Rhizophagoi*” – a notoriously Ethiopian tribe (Diod. Sic. III 23.2 = Agatharchides, *GGM* I p. 141) – he is likely to update his

¹⁸ For instance Snowden 11; André 157-158 ; Goldenberg 211. See also French 144; 147: “Stories about Libya were almost equal to those from India in their exoticism”. More neutral expressions in Albaladejo Vivero 11 ; Dihle 142.

¹⁹ E.g., Schwanbeck ; Warmington 139-140 ; Mayerson 170 ; André 162.

geographical knowledge instead of making a mistake.²⁰

About the numerous parallels between India and Ethiopia concerning the *realia* (animals, plants, climate etc.), it could be argued that these “confusions” reveal the gaps of ancient science, for such parallels are to be linked to the vagueness of their knowledge. This view is irrelevant in many cases. For instance, how could the Greco-Romans differentiate Ethiopian myrrh (e.g., Plin. *HN* XII 51 [*Commiphora spp*]) from the Indian quality (Plin. *HN* XII 71 [*Balsamodendron spp* ?]), considering that they could observe only raw material ? They also lacked the means and concepts (e.g., taxonomy) on which modern science is based, which implies that, e.g., defining two different species of rhinoceros was simply impossible. Most of above mentioned parallels, in my opinion, relate to *realia* that were objectively similar from the Greco-Roman point of view; therefore they seem not to reflect their inaccuracy or ignorance.

At this point I would like to make an additional observation. Today biodiversity has become a popular concept. On the contrary, in ancient descriptions of the eastern and southern parts of the *oikoumenê*, much attention was devoted to similarities that could be recognized in these areas, and certainly they counted more than differences. As it is clear in the reports of Alexander’s companions, the ὁμοιότης (“resemblance”) helped build on an organized coherent depiction of the world; it was not called into question by some differences (ἐναντιότης) of which they were aware: for instance, the presence of dark-skinned people or elephants in both regions prevailed over the differences concerning the color of the skin or the size of elephants²¹. That the ὁμοιότης between India and Ethiopia came sometimes to be used as a heuristic tool seems to corroborate this assumption : it is well known that Alexander thought for a while that he had discovered the Nile’s source after he had observed Nilotic animals and plants in the river Indus (infra, p. xx).

Let us now consider the “confusions” involving *realia* and *mirabilia* which at a first glance seem really to be mistakes. As a matter of fact they may have another interpretation provided they are put in context. For instance Ptolemy (*Geogr.* IV 8.2) points out an Ethiopian tiger, but this name is very likely to apply to an animal which is not the tiger proper. The so-called Indians who worship Hammon were certainly some neighbours of Egypt (Lucan. IX 517-519) ; the “Indian” καμηλοπαρδάλεις (=giraffes) which Pausanias claimed he saw (εἶδον) had obviously been imported from east Africa, called by the author “India” As for the various myths and *mirabilia* shared by India and Ethiopia, they were not definitely rooted in one of these countries. Therefore the notions of ignorance and inaccuracy are hardly relevant to analyze such “confusions”

It would be silly, however, to deny that a certain number of “confusions” are unquestionably mistakes. For instance when Pliny (*HN* VI 174) locates *Barygaza* in Ethiopia, he is wrong, whatever the reason may be; there is little doubt that Hesychius (s.v. ὀρίνδη) mixes up data when he states that rice grows in Ethiopia. However these cases of mistakes do not undermine the main point: as proved by most of the extant evidence, the confusion between India and Ethiopia do not primarily result from a lack of knowledge, accuracy or interest: as a matter of fact I hardly imagine how a phenomenon lasting more than ten centuries and taking continuously new forms could rest on such bases. That said, let us try to provide a more positive definition of the “confusion”.

 The confusion as a form of knowledge

To characterize this phenomenon in a few words, I would say that regarding a certain number of data, the Mediterranean did not, or refused to draw a strict boundary line between the southern edge

²⁰ A number of occurrences show an awareness of the alterations of geographical names (e.g., *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 61; Amm. Marc. XXII 15.2; Cosmas Indicopleustes, III 66).

²¹ Schneider

of the *oikoumenê* and the eastern one. By corollary, concerning many other subjects, India and Ethiopia were clearly distinguished and were not mixed up. For example I have found no “confusion” involving historical characters (e.g., the Indian King Poros, the Brahman Kalanos or the Ethiopian ruler Tearchon). Similarly a respectable number of *realia* and *mirabilia* were clearly – and rightly – attributed to India or Ethiopia and not mixed up, e.g., most toponyms and *nomoi*, some imported commodities (e.g., *malobathron*, pepper), various animals and plants etc.

As for these various data which bring India and Ethiopia together, it must be stressed that they are present in a wide range of texts some of which were written by the prestigious authors. I have mentioned above Aeschylus (tragedy); Herodotus (history); Strabo and Ptolemy (geography / chorography); Ctesias and Aelianus (specialized monographs); Crates (philology). Many cases of “confusions”, however, appear in philosophy (Arist. *Soph. el.* V 1-20, 167a ; Plut. *De tuenda sanitate praecepta*, 20); poetry (Ov. *Met.* IV 605-606); discourses and novels (Philostr. *V A VI* 1 – no doubt an author who offered a most sophisticated parallel between India and Ethiopia – ; Himer. *Or.* XVII 4; Them. *Or.* XXVII 337c) not to mention various other treatises (e.g., Theophr. *Caus. pl.* III 3.3; Sen. *Q. Nat.* V 18.2 ; Diog. Laert. IX 35). The “confusion” is also attested in epigraphy, which proves that to some extent this phenomenon belonged to “popular geography knowledge”²². Considering this situation, the “confusion” between India and Ethiopia ought to be defined as a form of knowledge instead of a lack of knowledge. To say it in other words, what we call “confusion” is a significant component of the Greco-Roman depiction and perception of the eastern and southern edges of the world.

This is in my opinion corroborated by the fact that the “confusion” was not only absorbed but also renewed by Christian culture (*interpretatio Christiana*). Christian authors were aware of India and Ethiopia as described in the pagan tradition. That is why we find in Patristic literature allusions to, e.g., Pygmies, giant snakes, *cinnamomum*, black-colored people etc. which do not vary from their non-Christian counterparts²³. In addition they generally adopted the spatial designations of their time. That is why when reporting the conversion of Axum or commenting on the location of Saba, they used the name “India” to point out African or Arabian areas (Rufinus Aquileiensis, *supra*, p.xx; Origen. *Migne PG XII* 1524; Epiph. *De XII gemmis*, 19-21). Christian speculations were also the source of several original “confusions”. For instance Philostorgius (*Historia ecclesiastica* III 11) argued that the Paradise lay in the east by claiming that the most extraordinary animals and plants in the world were produced in Arabia, India and Ethiopia. Let us also mention the commentary of *Gen.* 2, 11-13 (the four rivers flowing from the Paradise) which led some authors to more or less explicitly assert that the Egyptian / Ethiopian *Geon* (= the Nile) originated in eastern Ethiopia (e.g., Origen. *Migne PG XII* 100).

 Were the Greco-Roman aware of the so-called confusion?

Schwanbeck thought that some ancient authors had – in vain – attempted to explain the “confusion”²⁴. His opinion was based on a text borrowed from Strabo (XVII 3.7) in which the geographer echoed an opinion of anonymous scholars about western Ethiopians: those claimed that the Ethiopians of *Maurousia* descended from Indians who had accompanied Heracles – the question of autochtony and emigration (ἀποικία) is a common topic in ancient ethnography –. I have personally detected no trace of explanation in this excerpt. Schwanbeck, however, raised a much interesting issue: were the Greco-Romans aware of this phenomenon? If so, how was it expressed by them?

²² Bernand 143-7; Drew-Bear

²³ Schneider xx xxxxx

²⁴ Schwanbeck 1846 : “Quam confusionem ipsi veteres iam studuerunt explicare, sed satis male.”

As for the first question the answer seems to be quite clear: almost all texts in which a “confusion” between India and Ethiopia appears do not show any awareness of this problem, as if it was completely ignored. Let us develop this point with a couple of examples. Diodorus quotes Ctesias (Diod. Sic. II 14. 4 = Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F1b) about waters in Ethiopia which make tell the truth. As a reader of the *Indika*, he obviously knew that a fountain having a similar property existed in India according to the same Ctesias (Photius, *Bibliotheca*, 47a3-10 = Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F45 §31). Diodorus doubts the reality of such a marvel but does not comment on this coincidence. Pliny mentions a series of strange tribes in India and Ethiopia respectively (e.g., Dog-Headed people [*HN* VI 195 ; VII 23 = Megasthenes, *FGrH* 715 Fxx]; *Himantopodes* [*HN* V 44 ; VII 25 = Megasthenes, *FGrH* 715 F29]). Again these coincidences do give rise to any observation. Finally while “the perception of India becomes dimmer and dimmer” according to modern scholars²⁵, there is absolutely no commentary about the numerous cases of African Indians in ancient texts, to the best of my knowledge.

There are however some parallels between India and Ethiopia which are followed by a short commentary. This is not, in reality, connected with the problem that we call “confusion”. Arrian (*Anab.* VI 1.2-5), for instance, related how Alexander believed that he had discovered the Nile’s source until he abandoned this theory. Arrian blamed the king for his precipitation, for he attempted to solve a major geographical with little evidence (supra, pxx), but he did not regard the proximity of India and Ethiopia as an issue. To take another example, Aristotle (*Gen. an.* II 2, 736a10) corrected Herodotus’ statement (III 101) that Indians and Ethiopians had skin and sperm equally black: the sperm is white, claims the philosopher. The point is that Aristotle who paid attention to the factual rightness was apparently indifferent to the parallel between Indians and Ethiopians, as though it did not pose problem.

More remarkable is the following text (Plin. *HN* XII 17-20) devoted to ebony. Pliny’s report begins with the question of the production area. Two sources were at his disposal: Virgil (India) and Herodotus (Ethiopia). There is no doubt that Pliny perceived the contradiction between these authorities. Nonetheless the coexistence of, or the conflict between the two theories caused him no apparent difficulties: “One of those peculiar to India (*unam e peculiaribus Indiae*), the ebony, is spoken of in glowing terms by Virgil, who states that it does not grow in any other country (*nusquam alibi nasci professus*). Herodotus, however, prefers it to be ascribed to Ethiopia (*Herodotus eam Aethiopiae intellegi maluit*), stating that the Ethiopians used to pay as tribute to the Kings of Persia every three years a hundred logs of ebony, together with gold and ivory.” (tr. H. Rackham)

Must we, therefore, conclude that the Greco-Romans were completely unaware of what we call “confusion”? I do not think so. A few authors show an awareness of the proximity of India and Ethiopia, but this concept was used to enhance knowledge. I have explained above how the ὁμοιότης of Ethiopia (with Egypt) and India helped Alexander’s companions convert a huge amount of fresh data and observations into a coherent geographical system. I have also mentioned the interpretation of the voyages of Menelas by Crates. Here is another significant example. In his commentary of Virgil’s *Georgica* (*G.* II 116 : *sola India nigrum / fert hebenum*) Servius focuses on the adjective *sola* : how could Virgil write that “only India” produced ebony, while it was common knowledge that this material was also imported from east Africa ? The answer is as follows: *sed Indiam omnem plagam Aethiopiae accipiamus* (“India means the whole Aithiopia”). Servius obviously knew that in his time the name “India” often covered some areas of Africa: this fact – a “confusion” from our point of view – enabled him to resolve a tricky question in a satisfactory way. In short, unlike us, the Greco-Romans did not consider the “confusion” as a problem or a barrier.

²⁵ Mayerson 170.

In conclusion, there is a gap between ancient and modern representation of space: the proximity of India and Ethiopia seems bizarre to us. This is the reason why our approach tends to be based on the criteria of rightness and accuracy which is not satisfactory. Things, however, become completely different if we regard the so-called confusion as a form of knowledge. This explains, in particular, what appeared as a tricky issue to some scholars: in spite of the huge improvements in both cartography and knowledge of the *oikoumenê* (especially between Alexander's time and the late 2nd century C.E.) the "confusion" never stopped developing and renewing itself.

This leads us now to the last part of this inquiry: what were the origins and bases of this phenomenon? Could such a representation of space and people be formed?

<A> Understanding the confusion

It is a much complex combination of various and intricate factors that led to India and Ethiopia being brought together or mixed up. For purpose of clarity this section will be limited to a short review of the most important ones.

B <People>

Let us consider the three following examples: according to Posidonius, Homer divided the Αἰθιοπῆες into two groups for the reason that Indians (= the eastern Αἰθιοπῆες) were more "well grown" (εὐερνεστέρους) than Ethiopians (Str. II 3.7 = Posid. F13 Theiler); Philostratus (V A III 20) echoes a tradition saying that the Ethiopians living south of Egypt were originally an Indian people (γένος Ἰνδικόν); Juno, in Seneca's *Hercules furiosus* (37-38), alludes to the regions "where the Sun, as he brings back, and where, as he dismisses, colours both Ethiopian races with neighbouring torch" (transl. F. J. Miller). These excerpts all share the implicit idea that Indians and Ethiopians had the same skin color. The dark color of these people (and also of some Libyan tribes e.g., Str. XVII 3.7) represented, from the Mediterranean point of view, a remarkable character (e.g. Plin. *HN* VII 6) which justified the parallel established between them. In other words, this physical feature contributed to bring Indians and Ethiopians together, in contrast to the rest of human beings, as if they formed an "ethnic community".

It may rightly be objected that much more information about these people had been supplied since Alexander the Great's time. It had been recognized, in particular, that they did not have the same skin color: Indians were reported to be less "burnt" than Ethiopians. Some authorities also distinguished the dark skinned southern Indians from the Northern ones having a skin less colored (Str. II 3, 7; Arr. *Anab.* V 4.4; Str. XV 1.13; Manilius, *Astr.* IV 725). On the basis of such assertions several modern scholars asserted that the adjectives pointing to a skin colour not black to the highest degree (e.g., *coloratus*, *decolor*) were attributed to Indians only; in contrast, *niger* or *fuscus* would specifically apply to Ethiopians²⁶.

This in reality does not call into question the idea of an "ethnic community". First, as for the lexical argument, it is only relevant to Latin adjectives, since there is no difference in Greek (μέλας describes both Indians and Ethiopians). In addition we can see *fuscus* and *niger* being connected to Indians in a number of Latin texts (e.g., Hor. *Sat.* II 8.14; Ov. *Ars am.* I 53; Hyg. *Fab.* 154). Now what about the chromatic shades mentioned in several ancient documents? Such observations do not contradict the fundamental idea of the skin color similarity which prevailed in all antiquity: Indians and Ethiopians, despite this difference, were all regarded as being different from the rest of mankind because of their dark color (Arr. *Anab.* V 4.4; *Indica* VI 9): being exposed to extremely

²⁶ Snowden 3; André 125-6.

intense solar radiations, their skin (or their blood: Hyg. *Fab.* 154) would go black like nowhere in earth (i.e., it was not just a tan). To say it in other words, their skin color made Indians and Ethiopians exceptional, as were some animals and plants living in their countries. This idea was explicitly expressed by Philostratus in the 3rd century C.E. (*V A VI* 1): “They (sc. India and Ethiopia”) are also the haunts of animals not found elsewhere, and of black men – a feature not found in other continents – and we meet in them with races of pigmies and of people who bark instead of talking, and other wonders of the kind.”

 Space

Many cases of "confusions" result from, or are allowed by certain Greco-Roman particular representations of space. For instance, it was generally agreed that Asia was separated from Libya by the Nile instead of the Red Sea (Arabian Gulf; e.g., Str.XVII 3.1). As a consequence, Ethiopia stretching out east of the Nil belonged to the same continent as India. There is also the division into “climates” (*klimata*), i.e. a series of land strips parallel to equator. The Hellenistic geographers tended to pair India and Ethiopia when defining the southern *klimata*: Meroe was located at the same latitude as the southern end of India, the *Kinnomômophoros* (north Somalia) at the same latitude as Taprobane (eg., Str. II 1.4). As for the proximity of India and Ethiopia that appears in Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*, we cannot ascertain which spatial conception supported it: this case of "confusion" may be connected with the idea that the Erythraean sea was an enclosed body of water (Str. I 3.1 = Damastes of Sigeum, *FGrH* 5 F8).

The idea of a maritime unity probably took also an important part in the development of the “confusion”. From the Greco-Roman perspective, the Red Sea and the Arabo-Persian Gulf were nothing but the extremities of the sea generally called Erythraean sea and also Indian Sea²⁷. Such conception implied that Ethiopia and India shared the same maritime space: that is why we hear of half-mythic rulers defeating successively Ethiopia, Arabia and India by means of war ships (e.g., Diod. Sic. I 55.1-2 [Sesostris]). Most important, the idea of maritime unity contributed to the process by which India and Ethiopia were connected or even identified. Let us consider the two following cases.

- Some authors equally considered India, Ethiopia as well as Arabia as “countries of the Erythraean Sea”. Indeed various creatures and productions of these areas are referred to as “Erythraean”, e.g.: myrrh (Plin. *HN* XII 70); gemstones and pearls (ps.-Lucianus, *Amores*, 41; Mart. V 37.5); ivory (Mart. XIII 100); “bull”, i.e. probably rhinoceros (Ael. *NA* II 20).
- As the sea connecting the Mediterranean world to the Indian trade, the Erythraean Sea tended to be considered as an “Indian sea” (e.g., *OGI* 186; Sen. *Q Nat.* IVa 2.4). As a result several nations dwelling on, or close to the *Indikê thalassa / mare Indicum* (Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Himyarites ...) could easily be referred to as “Indian”.

The growth of the direct maritime trade between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean countries – following the discovery of the monsoon routes by the Greeks under Ptolemy VIII’s reign²⁸ seems to have had another consequence: India and Ethiopia could be perceived as neighbor countries, despite the body of water lying between them. This in fact was the result of a “hodological” perception of space: to merchants and seamen sailing down the Red Sea up to, e.g., *Mouziris*, India came directly after Egypt and Ethiopia, which could give rise to the idea of their contiguity (Joseph. *BJ* II 16.4; Lucian. *Salt.* 19).

At last it is worth stressing the role of the Homeric division of Ethiopia. As we have seen, the couple India / Ethiopia replaced the couple western Ethiopians / eastern Ethiopians. However the

²⁷ Schneider p.xx-xx.

²⁸ Eudoxus of Cyzicus (Str. II 3.4) is often credited with the first usage of monsoon routes.

representation of space embedded in these lines, viz. the symmetry of opposites, was not eliminated by the improvements of geography. Such perception certainly contributed to maintain the “confusion”, since the Greco-Romans tended to pair India and Ethiopia as symmetrical countries. The most significant example goes back to the 3rd century C.E.: “Ethiopia covers the western wing of the entire earth under the sun, just as India does the eastern wing (...). We have a proof of the similarity of the two countries in the spices which are found in them, also in the fact that the lion and the elephant are captured and confined in both the one and the other etc.” (Philostr. *VA VI* 1).

 Nature

Among the important questions related to *physiologia*, I will concentrate on the most important one, viz. the climate, which largely contributed to the dynamic of the confusion. Indeed the sun was thought to be the most important of the principles regulating climate. Due to their southern and eastern location in the *oikoumenê*, Indians and Ethiopians were believed to receive much more heat than other countries – which explained, as stated above, the so particular color of their skin. As a matter of fact, the main component of climate (τὴν τοῦ περιέχοντος κρᾶσιν) was solar heat which impacted on the whole environment (Str. II 3.1): the sun affected not only living beings (τὰς τῶν ζώων καὶ φυτῶν συστάσεις) but also the mineral world (see supra, p. XX, Diodorus, about gemstones). As a consequence it was commonly agreed (e.g., supra, p. xx, Philostratus) that India and Ethiopia (as well as Arabia) produced similar animals, plants, aromatics etc. Even *mirabilia* were to some extent concerned by this conception, as we are told by Pliny (*HN VI* 187 = Posidonius?): “It is by no means surprising that the outermost districts of this region (viz. Ethiopia) produce animal and human monstrosities (*animalium hominumque monstrosificas effigies*), considering the capacity of the mobile element of fire to mould their bodies and carve their outlines.” (transl. H. Rackham)

We know, however, that Alexander’s companions (e.g., Aristobulus, Onesicritus) took the view that India, having a larger amount of humidity, was more fertile than Ethiopia. That is why Onesicritus stated that Indian animals, either terrestrial or aquatic, were bigger than Ethiopian ones (Str. XVI 1.22 = Onesicritus, *FGrH* 134 F22). However this difference is of less importance, in comparison with solar radiation, because, according to the same Onesicritus, only solar heat enables India and Ethiopia to breed exceptional creatures and produce (along with Arabia) *kinnamômon*, nard and other aromatics products.

Additional remark: the idea that animals and plants were similar in India and Ethiopia was all the more easy to accept as they were not accurately named. In particular, animals of different species (in the modern meaning of the word) were commonly given a same name, however different they may be: all Psittaciformes were equally called *psittacus* / ψίττακος; the rhinoceros and an unidentified species of buffalo were both referred to as ταῦρος (Ael. *NA II* 20; Str. XVI 4.16); it is very likely that the name *cinnamomum* points out more than one kind of aromatics etc. Arrianus (*Ind. XV* 1-3) was aware of this issue, as shows the following excerpt: “The Indians regard the tiger as much stronger than the elephant (...). The Indians record that the tiger is in size as great as the larger horse (...). Those, however, which we see and call tigers, are dappled jackals, but larger jackals”²⁹. Parallels between India and Ethiopia were necessarily made easier in such conditions.

I hope this short paper has shed some light on a noticeable aspect of how the Greco-Romans represented the southern and eastern edges of the inhabited world. Even if there are cases of error and vagueness, I think it important to analyze the so-called confusion in such way in order to properly assess the value of the ancient descriptions of these regions. This phenomenon shows to some extent that from the Mediterranean perspective the eastern and southern parts of the inhabited

²⁹ See also the ΤΙΓΡΙΣ represented on the Palestrina mosaic.

world³⁰ had a lot in common : unlike other peripheral areas, the countries bordered by the Erythrean sea were seen as forming a coherent whole. This phenomenon may express in its own way the idea of the unity of the Indian Ocean which today supports various studies in global history³¹.

³⁰ Cosmas Indicopleustes, Π 29 : τὸ νότιον καὶ ἀνατολικώτερον μέρος τῆς γῆς.

³¹ See in particular Beaujard's *opus magnum*.