A CONFUSION OF INDIAS: ASIAN INDIA AND AFRICAN INDIA IN THE BYZANTINE SOURCES

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The late Byzantine references to “India” are examined and their relation to geographical and social “reality” is assayed.

It is known, but unfortunately not well known, that after the fourth century the perception of what region and what people were meant by the terms 'Ivōīa and 'Ivōī vary considerably in the Byzantine documents.1 Was it subcontinental India, or Ethiopia/Axum, or was it south Arabia? There is no hint of the existence of more than one India in articles subsumed under that name in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, in the Greek lexica of Liddell and Scott and Lampe, and in the new Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium; and barely more than a hint in Pauly-Wissowa’s Realeencyclopädie.2 Historians, dealing with commerce between Rome and the East, however, are aware of several Indians. Warming-ton, speaking of the so-called trade with “Indians” following the fourth century, states that “it was in reality trade with the Ethiopians and even under Justinian in the sixth century Byzantine subjects visited not India so much as Arabia and Axumite realms (particularly Adulis) and the ignorance now shown about India was truly prodigious.”3 As a general statement, Warming-ton is on the mark, but there remains a confusion in determining specifically what India is meant—Ethiopian, Arabian, or subcontinental India. Not all sources or all scholars agree. Take for example the article “India” in the new Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, where it is stated that “according to Philostorgios, Constantine (sic) dispatched a certain Theophilos to India, where he found some Christian followers of the apostle Bartholomew.”4 As will be shown below, Theophilus the Indian was sent by Constantius to perform his missionary work among the Homeres in Arabia Felix.

The perception of a geographical India in South Asia was preserved by several writers, notably by Ammi-anus Marcellinus (c. 330–395) and by Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–post 565). Both writers, engaging in geographical digressions popular among classicizing historians, show a fairly sound knowledge of the location of subcontinental India: Ammianus especially in bk. 23, Procopius in Wars 1.19. Procopius, however, in Buildings 6.1.6 reverts to the conventional association of his age in connecting India with Ethiopia when he states that “the Nile River, flowing out of India into Egypt, divides that land into two parts as far as the sea” (Loeb trans.).

Subcontinental India receives more than a digression in A Christian Topography, the work of an anonymous Alexandrian merchant and aspiring theologian who, centuries later, was given the name of Cosmas and the sous-briet of Indicopleustes.5 Although there is agreement that Cosmas knew the Red Sea trading region at first-hand, the present consensus is that he never visited India.6 From whatever source Cosmas received his information, and to whatever extent his geography is interlarded with theological and cosmological speculation, the India he describes is a large region that includes

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2 Pauly’s Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissen-


India proper, Ceylon, and parts of China. He relates (2.30) that after having sailed several gulf's, he came to
"Inner India (εἰς ἑστερέαν Ἰνδίαν)." The phrase "Inner
India" recurs several times in association with specific
Far Eastern regions and products. The silk country, he
states (2.45), is in "Inner(most) India (ἐν τῇ ἑστερῇ
πάντως Ἰνδίᾳ)," it is called Tzinitza (= China), and is far
beyond the island called by the Indians Serendivia and by
the Greeks Taprobane (= Ceylon). Other citations of In-
ner India appear in connection with a church on Tap-
robane (3.65), "an island of Inner India where one finds
the Indian Sea"; and with products from Barbaria (East
Africa), which Cosmas says (2.49) are shipped by sea to
Adulis, to the Homerites (south Arabia), to Inner India,
and to Persia. Cosmas also knows of two well-known
sites on the west coast of India (3.65): Male (Malabar)
and Kalliana (Kalyan); and he considers (11.16) that
Sindu is on "the frontier of India (ἀρχῇ τῆς Ἰνδίκης),"
where the river Indus forms the boundary between Persia
and India.

As one goes back in time to the fourth century, the
perception of India proper becomes dimmer and dim-
mer. An account, attributed to Palladius (c. 360–
c. 430), of the voyage of an anonymous Theban schol-
asticus to India, dated variously between 360 and 500,
has had a long and complex textual history, since ap-
pended to it was a version of Arrian's second-century
work on India. In the form of a letter from the Theban,
the account records a voyage from Axum and Adulis in
eastern Africa with the intention of reaching Ceylon.
Precisely where the Theban made landfall is uncertain,
but it is generally agreed that he reached western or
the Garden of Eden through the mundane world. The
Expositio mundi et gentium and the Itinerary from the
Paradise of Eden to the Country of the Romans (Οὖσα χώρα ἡ
tαυτῶν Ἰνδών)." Derrett, an editor of a critical text of
Palladius, apparently believing that the writer used the
word India uniformly to denote India proper, interprets
the remark to mean that there was a
small community of Indian exporters at Axum that was
ruled over by a petty Indian princeling.9 In this in-
stance, it is far more likely that the writer was using
the word Indian in the common usage of the time to
mean an Axumite (i.e., Ethiopian) ruler.10

There remain two mid-fourth-century texts, one pa-
gan and the other Christian, both probably derived
from a common source, that preserve a trace of several
Indias; they represent itineraries from the land of the
Blessed Ones (?) and the Garden of Eden through
of Gen. 2.10–12, Great India (Ἰνδία ἡ μεγάλη) is reached in
219 stages and 21 months (or a total of 349 stages).

7 The comparative and superlative of ἑνδον and εἰςω, and
their Latin equivalents, were used rather frequently by writers
in late antiquity to modify place-names and regions, such as
deserts and frontiers (limites), to express a relationship of dis-
stance within the geographical locality. The translation of the
comparative with the word 'inner' and like words in other lan-
guages offers some difficulty in interpretation since it is often
taken to mean 'closer' or 'nearer' as if it were the opposite of
'outer'. (The use of the word 'inner' with limes has been the
cause of considerable misunderstanding because it was taken
in its common acceptance.) In a geographical context, these
comparatives mean 'further out', 'far removed', 'more remote'.
Only rarely does one find 'outer', the opposite of 'inner' with
the meaning of 'closer' or 'nearer'. (See P. Mayerson, "A Note
on the Roman Limes: 'Inner' versus 'Outer'," Israel Explora-
[1986]: 44–45.) With respect to Cosmas' Inner India, Wanda-
Conus 1:301 has put to rest the views of McCrindle and Win-
stedt who have argued that Inner India represents Ethiopia
and/or south Arabia. Bury, who also opts for Ethiopia or south
Arabia, believes that 'Inner' might be an error for 'Outer' (A
History of the Later Roman Empire [London: Macmillan,
1923], 2:320, n. 5). To add to the confusion, there will be other
regions, as will be noted, that have been designated Inner or
Innermost India: Ethiopia/Axum and south Arabia.

8 J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The History of 'Palladius' on the
Races of India and the Brahmans," Classica et Mediaevalia
21 (1960): 77; J. Desanges, "D'Axoum à l'Assam, aux portes
de la Chine: Le Voyage du 'Scholasticus de Thebes' (entre 360

9 Derrett, op. cit., 109, par. 4. Also, "The Theban Scholas-

10 See also G. C. Hansen, "Alexander und die Brahmanen,"

11 Expositio totius mundi et gentium, ed. J. Rougé, SC 124
One needs an additional 7 months (210 stages) to reach Axum and another 7 to arrive at Little India (Ivíola ή μικρά). Unlike the Expositio, there is no added information to assist in distinguishing which India is meant; hence, we can only surmise that Great India is India proper and that Little India is south Arabia.

If the above is a representative group of Byzantine written sources, it is clear that the perception of what and where subcontinental India was in late antiquity was at best ill informed and fragmentary, certainly not to be compared with Hellenistic and Roman material that culminated in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of the first century A.D. It simply appears that the region was generally lost to sight. There is barely an indication of an historical event, of the kind that Ammianus reports (22.7.13) when east came west, but none of west going east, save, perhaps, peripatetic Christian monks. However, the fact that the sources, Cosmas excepted, mention other Indias indicates some intention to alert the reader to the distinction between them. The two Indias that were popularly known at this time and that were touched by historical events were Ethiopia and south Arabia. That there were two is a further complication.

The triumph of Christianity in the years between Constantine and Theodosius stirred the missionary zeal of individuals to convert the non-believers beyond the borders of the Empire. A tradition had sprung up that the apostles of Jesus—Thomas, Matthew, and Bartholomew—had been dispatched to distant regions to bring the word of God to the heathens, and, as reported by the ecclesiastical historians, “India” was one of the regions designated for missionary endeavors. However, there was no agreement among the historians as to who was sent where and what India was meant, although Rufinus, Gelasius, and Socrates had in mind Ethiopia or some geographical location within the large generalized region known as Ethiopia, whereas to Philestorgius, India was south Arabia.

According to Rufinus (c. 345–410), Matthew had been assigned Ethiopia, and Bartholomew, “Nearer India (citerior India), that was adjacent to it (i.e., Ethiopia). In the middle between Nearer India and Parthia, but at a considerable distance deeper within (longo interior tractu) lies Further India (ulterior India).” Rufinus goes on to report the romantic story of Frumentius, who as a younger accompanied a philosopher on an anthropological mission into Further India, survived a number of ordeals, spread the Christian faith, and ultimately was ordained Bishop of India by Athanasius of Alexandria.

Socrates (c. 380–c. 450), who follows Rufinus in many of the details regarding the evangelization of Ethiopia, reports that Matthew had been assigned Ethiopia, and Bartholomew “to that part of India bordering on Ethiopia . . .” However, it was only during the reign of Constantine that “Inner India (Ἰνωίαν τόν ἐνδοτέρα)” became Christianized. He explains his reason for using ἐνδοτέρα so as to designate the more remote or interior region of Ethiopia that had no contact with Christian civilization. There follows the story of Frumentius’ adventures and his missionary work.

Gelasius Cyzicus (fl. 475), who also tells the story of Frumentius, starts his versions with a different view of the work of the early apostles: “Though Matthew preached to the Parthians, and Thomas to the Indians of Great India, yet to the far-off Indians or Parthia and their neighboring nations, the doctrine of Christ was not well-known to them.” He then proceeds with the familiar story of Frumentius’ experiences in “Innermost India (ἐνδοτάτην Ἰνωίαν).” Gelasius also gives an account of those who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. He states that Alexander of Alexandria represented all those churches in Egypt, Libya, the Pentapolis, and their neighborhoods “up to the districts of India.”

Athanasius (c. 295–373), bishop of Alexandria, makes clear that the remote region penetrated by Frumentius in the late fourth century—the Further India of Rufinus, the Inner India of Socrates, and the Innermost India of Gelasius—was Axum, which according to the Periplus was an eight-day journey from the Ethiopian port of Adulis. In Athanasius’ Apol. ad Const., Frumentius is twice cited as bishop of Axum (τῆς Αἰθιούπερος). There is still to be considered the Nearer India of Rufinus. Earlier, Eusebius (H.E. 5.9) had told of the philosopher Pantaenus (d. c. 211) who had followed in the footsteps of Bartholomew and was sent to the East, “as far as India”—a statement that Rufinus, in translating Eusebius, found necessary to localize by the addition of a comparative: i.e., ad Indiam citeriorem. Similarly, the so-called Sophronius (post-sixth century), who translated the thumbnail sketch of Pantaenus by Jerome (De vir. ill. 36), in which he states that Pantaenus found disciples of Bartholomew in India,

12 Ibid., 59, 350–52.
elaborates on the word India by stating that the apostle "preached to the Indians who are called Fortunate (Ἰνδότις τῶις καλουμένωις Ἑβδαμίουσι)"; that is, Arabia Felix. It is therefore more than likely that Rufinus' Nearer India and the India that Pantaenus was reputed to have visited was south Arabia.

These oblique references to an India in south Arabia are brought more sharply into focus in the work of the Arian historian Philostorgius (c. 368–430/40) who describes the mission of Theophilus "the Indian" following the initial labors of the apostle Bartholomew in "Innermost India." Theophilus, we are told, was born on the island of Divus and spent many years among the Romans, when, c. 356, Constantius placed him at the head of an embassy "to those Indians formerly called Sabaeans but now called Homerites...to a region called by the Greeks Arabia Magna and Arabia Felix." Theophilus performed a number of miracles among the people and converted the ruler who built churches at Tapharum (Zafar), Adane (Aden), and at the Persian trading site near the mouth of the Persian Sea.

A century or so after these ecclesiastical historians, John Malalas (c. 491–578) presents us with some 36 citations of the word India and Indians. They come, as it were, as a kind of climax to the geographical haziness associated with these two words. One must keep in mind, however, Momigliano's cautionary remarks to the effect that Malalas may be uncritical, confused and childish, yet, "he preserves many otherwise unknown facts and is of special importance for his own time." I pass over with little comment 12 of Malalas' citations in the early books of the Dindorf (Bonn) edition: 3 having to do with ethnic descendants of Noah's son Shem (14:5.11.14); 6 concerning heroes such as Tithonus who brought Indian troops, and Memnon who is consistently called emperor of the Indians (126:10.14.16; 128:14.17.18; cf. Od. 4.88); and 2 citations concerning Alexander the Great's conquest of India and being captivated by a certain widow Kandakte who ruled over "Inner India" and whom Alexander took to Ethiopia (194:14–17; 197:11; Realeencyclopaide, X:1858).

Malalas has no more to say about India and Indians until the reign of Justinian and his own lifetime. The remaining citations, with several important exceptions, deal exclusively with the struggle between the Axumites and the Himyartes, a struggle between African India and Asian India. From Malalas' perspective, the two groups are quite separate—Axum and the inner kingdoms associated with it being Indian, whereas the Homerites (Himyartes), prior to their defeat, are not. However, when the Axumites defeat the Homerites, the two regions become one India.

Malalas reports that Andas, a pagan who was to become a Christian, ruled over the Axumite Indians at the beginning of Justinian's reign (429:14). He then describes the geographical and commercial relationship between Axum and south Arabia (433:6–11): "The king of the Axumites is further inland (ἐνδύστερος) than the Homerites, but the king of the Homerites is near Egypt. Roman traders travel through the land of the Homerites to Axum and to the inner (ἐνδύστερος) kingdoms of the Indians. There are several kingdoms of Ethiopians and Indians; three of the Indians and four of the Ethiopians, the latter being near the sea toward the eastern regions."

Malalas goes on to report that Dimnas, king of the Homerites, murdered Roman traders who were Christian, claiming that they had mistreated and killed Jews of his realm. The Axumite king Andas, unhappy at the subsequent loss of trade, declared war against the Homerites, and swore that if he were victorious, he would become a Christian. As a result of his victory, he converted and asked Justinian to have all the lands of India (πᾶσαν τῆν Ἰνδικὴν γῆν) Christianized and come under Roman rule (434:10). Indian ambassadors selected a bishop and clergy and brought them back to the land of India (434:14, 18).

Malalas completes his version of the Axumite struggle against the Homerites with the introduction of Eleseboas, the well-known king who waged war in south Arabia against Dhu-Nuwas, and the attempts made by Justinian to enlist his aid against Persian commercial interests in the regions under Eleseboas' control. Eleseboas is cited as the Indian king who fought with the king of the Amerite (= Homerite) Indians (457:3–4), and having defeated him, made a member of his family king of the Amerite Indians so that the Amerite kingdom would be under his control (457:6–7). Justinian's envoy approached Indian terri-
tory (i.e., Axum) by way of the Nile and the Indian (Red) Sea (459:9–10), where he met with Eleseboas, whom Malalas consistently calls king of the Indians (457:13–14; 458:7, 16, 22). Justinian's envoy asks Eleseboas not to conduct business with the Persians but to carry on trade through the territory of the Amerite Indians which he had subjugated (458:14–16). The king declared war on the Persians and sent out Saracen Indians to attack Persian territory on behalf of the Persians (458:18–19). The episode concludes with Eleseboas sending Justinian a letter and gifts by means of an Indian ambassador (459:3).

The mention of "Saracen Indians"—a most unusual, if not unique, characterization of Saracens—is significant in light of the remaining citations of Malalas concerning India. In 528, a serious disagreement arose between the duas Diomedes and the Saracen phylarch Arethas who took fright and "went to the inner frontier to Indian territory (εἰς τὸ ἐννότερον λίμιτον ἐκ τά Ἰνδικά)" (434:20–23). Learning of this, Alamundarus (al-Mundhir), the Persian Saracen, overtook Arethas, captured and killed him (434:22–23; 435:1). When Mundhir was pursued by a large Roman force intent upon avenging the murder of Arethas, he too "fled with his forces to India (εἰς τά Ἰνδικά μέρη)" (438:8–10).

At this point an observation has to be made as to the location of this "inner frontier" and of the region to which both Arethas and Mundhir fled. Since India, as Malalas perceives it, is clearly located in the land of the Himyarites or in the regions surrounding Axum, the inner frontier cannot be, as this writer once thought, to the east of where Arethas and Mundhir operated during their service to Rome and Persia. The inner frontier to which both Saracens fled for safety must be the land of the Himyarites, the homeland of Kindite Arethas and Lakhmid Mundhir, far removed from Roman territory and Roman military forces.24

With this in mind, we turn to Malalas' final citation on India, which is concerned with the violent confrontation between the Romans and the Samaritans. The Romans, having quelled the rebellion with the help of their Saracen phylarch, allowed the latter to take 20,000 young men and women as booty and sell them in the lands of the Persians and the Indians (447:11–12). Once more, the direction in which the Samaritan prisoners were taken was not to the east, but to the south, to the "India" of the Saracens, to the land of the Himyarites.25

There are yet other citations concerning India and Indians, which fall into two categories: those which give no clue as to the geographical location of the place or person mentioned, and those which refer to Indian trade. Theophanes, apart from his statements cribbed from Malalas, provides a number of the former type26: for the year A.M. 6042 (227:1), a legate of India comes to Constantinople with an elephant; for the year A.M. 6055 (237:21), some Indian men are involved in a plot to murder Justinian; and for the year A.M. 6123 (235:10), the King of India sends congratulatory presents of pearls and precious stones to Heraclius because of his victory over the Persians. It is most likely that all these references are to Ethiopians.

The citations dealing with the so-called Indian trade are more troublesome. Although writers from the fourth century onward cite Clymsa and Aila as ports on the arms of the Red Sea which receive ships and products from India, we do not know whether they refer to cargo vessels originating in the east or are craft transshipping merchandise off-loaded at other ports, or if the merchandise originated in Ethiopia, south Arabia, or even Somalia. We do know, however, that the Romans attempted to establish a customs office on the island of Iotabe in the Red Sea, apparently to intercept the income that Ethiopian and other middlemen derived from receiving, taxing, and transshipping foreign merchandise to Roman ports. Theophanes reports (141:11–14) that when Iotabe was recovered from Saracen occupiers (c. 498), it once more became a Roman trading colony that taxed cargoes coming from India and then transshipped the merchandise to other ports. In c. 534, according to Choricius, the island had to be recovered once again and "it served as a port for cargoes from India, the taxes on which were considerable."27

24 For Arethas the Kindite, see G. Olinder, The Kings of Kinda (Lund: Haken Ohlsson, 1927), 53. The homeland of the Kindites is said in some Arab traditions to be Himyar, and in others to be east Arabia.

25 I. Shahid in his Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington, D.C., 1984), 91, n. 94, ventures to suggest that in this context India "could be construed as Ethiopia." Why suggest this remote possibility when there were plentiful south Arabian markets in the lands which the Ghassanid Arabs knew so well?

26 Theophanes Chronographia, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig: Teubner, 1883), cited in the above text by page number and line.

Epiphanius (c. 315–403) also provides information on how Indian goods entered Roman territory during the mid-third century. In the course of describing how Mani (215–277), the founder of Manichaicism, acquired his wealth, he takes us back to the source of it; namely, a hellenized Saracen from Arabia named Scythianus who traded in goods that came from India. The ports of Aila and Clyisma are mentioned, but it is the port of Berenice in upper Egypt leading to the Thebaid, to Alexandria, to all Egypt, and the Pelusium that provided Scythianus with the means to acquire great wealth.28 If this Arab is an historical figure, he likely was engaged in shipping local and transshipping Indian merchandise to Egyptian Berenice from south Arabia.

As for the port of Clyisma and its connection with India, the most detailed report is that of Peter the Deacon (c. 1137), purportedly derived from the itinerary of Egeria (c. 382) and generally accepted as a missing portion of her memoir. Although it is atypical for Egeria to describe in detail a site having little to do with ecclesiastics, the church, and places mentioned in the Bible, the account, from whatever source, is informative on Clyisma as a port receiving ships from India. "It is a port for India," the account states, "which is to say that it receives ships from India, for ships coming from India can come to no other port but this in Roman territory. And ships there are numerous and great, since the official (agens in rebus) known as the logothete has his residence there, the one who goes on an embassy each year to India by order of the Roman Emperor, and his ships lie there."29

Vasiliev accepts this statement at face value, although he dates Egeria's account to the sixth century.30 Bury, however, considers that the reference to India meant Ethiopia and that, following the third century, products from India were transported by Ethiopian traders to their own markets of Adulis and even to ports of Clyisma and Aila.31 Cosmas Indicopleustes (c. 530) says that Adulis was much frequented by traders who came from Alexandria and Ela (= Aila).32

In light of the evidence from the fourth century onward, it is extremely doubtful that trading vessels originating in India proper sailed directly to Clyisma, that Clyisma was the sole port that could receive Indian products, or that a Roman agent made annual trips to India to conclude commercial negotiations. The likelihood is—if Egeria's or Peter the Deacon's information is reliable—that commercial intercourse between Clyisma and other ports on Roman territory and "India" went no further than Ethiopia or south Arabia.

A later report on Clyisma comes from the Piacenza pilgrim (c. 578), who is generally known as Antoninus or Pseudo-Antoninus. On his tour of biblical and cultic sites in the Holy Land, he traveled from Sinai to Egypt via Clyisma. He first mentions a hearsay report concerning Aila, which he states receives ships coming from India with a variety of spices.33 At Clyisma, which he says is a small city "where ships also come from India" and that "there we were given large green nuts (nuces plenas virides) which people believe come from paradise."34 Whether these exotic nuts come from India proper, which is sometimes viewed as paradise, there is no sure way of knowing, although it would be most unusual for a product of this kind to be exported along with those items that could tolerate heavy custom duties on their way to Roman hands.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to sort out a number of significant Byzantine notices on India and Indians prior to the Arab conquest of the Near East and to justify them solely from a geographical point of view. In doing so the historical setting in which these sources are placed becomes far more intelligible. It should also be noted that the "confusion of Indias" that exists in the Greek and Latin notices also appears in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac. For example, Rabbi Yehudah Hindua (= ʿIyōq), who is cited in the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushim 22b), is regarded as having come from the land of the Ethiopians.35 A further sorting out of this material in the several Semitic languages would surely help to sharpen the details of the geographical and the historical picture.

31 Wanda-Conus, History, 2:318.
32 Ibid., 2:54.
33 CSEL 39.185, par. 40.
34 Ibid., 187, par. 41. On nuts from India or its equivalent, see Philostorgius (PG 65, col. 500 = GCS 1913: 42, lines 25–26) and the eleventh-century historian Cedrenus (Georgius Cedrenus, ed. I. Bekker [Bonn: Weber, 1833], 1:267, lines 22–24).