



# Documenting the oikoumenê: did 'documents' support the description of the inhabited world (Hellenistic and Imperial periods) ?

Pierre Schneider

## ► To cite this version:

Pierre Schneider. Documenting the oikoumenê: did 'documents' support the description of the inhabited world (Hellenistic and Imperial periods) ?. J. Arthur-Montagne, N. I. Kuin, S. DiGiulio. Documentality. New approaches to written documents in Imperial Life and Literature, pp.133-152, 2022, 9783110791778. halshs-03839254

**HAL Id: halshs-03839254**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03839254>**

Submitted on 4 Nov 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Pierre Schneider  
Univ. Artois, UR 4027, Centre de Recherche et d'Études Histoire et Sociétés (CREHS), F-62000  
Arras, France

## Chapter 5

### **Documenting the *oikoumenê*: What “Documents” Supported the Description of the Inhabited World in the Hellenistic and Early Imperial periods?**

Pierre Schneider

Historians are engaged constantly in the work of exploring and interpreting documents: unlike experimental sciences, where progress arises from an interplay between experiment and theory, “l’histoire se fait avec des documents”, as the French historian Henri-Irénée Marrou puts it.<sup>1</sup> As an historian, however, I never really ask myself what documents are. Were I urged by someone to answer this question, I would probably give an intuitive definition. This may be similar to Marrou’s, stating that any material used by historians to shed light on past times may be categorized as a document, be it written or not:

Est un document toute source d’information dont l’historien sait tirer quelque chose pour la connaissance du passé humain, envisagé sous l’angle de la question qui lui a été posée. Il est bien évident qu’il est impossible de dire où commence et où finit le document : de proche en proche, la notion s’élargit et finit par embrasser textes, monuments et observations de tous ordres. (Marrou 1975: 73)

In such intuitive approach, the document is closely associated with the notion of “information”, and undoubtedly with that of “proof.” If, however, one embarks on a more thorough investigation of what information is, one may feel less comfortable. As M. Buckland rightly writes, “determining what might be informative is a difficult task”: trees, for instance, providing firewood for heating and lumber for building are not informative at first glance; however, “as representative trees they are informative about trees”; in addition, the thickness of tree rings caused by annual variations in weather are information for archaeologists or climatologists. This leads M. Buckland to the disappointing conclusion that “if anything is, or might be, informative, then everything is, or might well be, information. In which case calling something ‘information’ does little or nothing to define

---

<sup>1</sup> On this method of constructing history, see Marrou 1975: 64-91.

it. If everything is information, then being information is nothing special.”<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently if anything is, or may be, informative, everything is, or may be, a document.

These introductory observations just aim at briefly illustrating how complex the questions relating to documents and information are, all the more if one considers antiquity. In the face of such vast a question, focusing on a specific topic seems preferable. In the organizers’ initial framing document, a most important subject has been put forward in the form of a simple question: “What qualifies as a document?” The authors pursue this line of reasoning further in their introduction to the present volume:

Documentality initiates a fundamental conversation about the very definition of ‘document’ in antiquity... On a more basic level still, this volume investigates whether imperial readers and writers even recognized the document as a coherent genre. Certainly, the classical languages possess robust vocabularies for letters, inscriptions, and contracts. But were these forms of writing classified together in the ancient imagination? If so, what were the minimum requirements for a document in terms of material, aesthetic, form, and language? (Arthur-Montagne, DiGiulio, and Kuin in this volume, p. xx)

Examining to what extent the document was perceived as a coherent genre bearing a specific name is the question on which this paper is focused, except that it does not embrace the documents particularly studied by papyrologists and epigraphists: private and official letters, contracts, counts, decrees etc. It is rather the informative material used by ancient geographers and authors occasionally dealing with geography (e. g. Diodorus of Sicily) on which I shall concentrate, in a *longue durée* approach: from the sixth century BCE onwards ancient geography had been continuously improved, with a climax between Alexander the Great’s expedition and the time of Roman conquests. Indeed many remote countries were made (better) known to the Mediterranean people during this period: East Africa, South Arabia, India, the Erythraean Sea (i. e., the Indian Ocean), Britannia, Germania, Dacia and other parts of the *oikoumenê gê*. The first section of this paper consists of a succinct presentation of the “documentary material” supporting ancient geographical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The second section will establish that, according to modern criteria, this

---

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Buckland 1991 (quote from p. 356).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding ancient geography, my field of expertise encompasses the southern and eastern edges of the *oikoumenê*.

material falls within the category of “document.” The last section will address the issue that seems to me crucial: did ancient authors conceive of “documents” in the same way as us? My view is that with respect to geographical knowledge there is a disjunction between ancient and modern ideas about “documentary material.”

## 1. What were the building blocks of ancient geographical knowledge?

Strabo’s description of India is preceded by a long introductory section in which the author assesses the various sources of information at his disposal. First of all, in conformity with common conceptions of the quest of information, he distinguishes between two sources, sight (ὄψις) and hearsay (ἀκοή)<sup>4</sup>: “Not many of our people have seen it [i. e., India]; and even those who have seen it, have seen only parts of it, and the greater part of what they is from hearsay.”<sup>5</sup> Strabo then proceeds to list the sources he drew on with an appreciation of their respective value. The accounts (μνήμη) produced before Alexander’s expedition are mostly obscure, or confusing.<sup>6</sup> Those published (συγγράψαντες) by Alexander’s companions in India are valued; regrettably, Strabo says, even though they were able to observe the country and its inhabitants, they contradict each other.<sup>7</sup> Later authors composed treatises (συγγράμματα) but failed to offer accurate information.<sup>8</sup> The most recent data were provided by Alexandrian merchants – who “are of no use as regard the history of the places they have seen” – and by an embassy sent to Augustus by king Pandion. This detailed review makes it clear that written sources were the building blocks not only of Strabo’s description of India, but also of almost all texts dealing with geographical matter.

Neither in this passage nor in the rest of geographical texts do we come across a Latin or Greek

---

Thus I will preferably explore texts dealing with countries such as India, *Aithiopia* – which is not modern Ethiopia, but an area covering Nubia and the Horn of Africa – and Arabia. Although most of Greek and Roman sources have not come down to us, a number of texts – e. g., regional monographs [such as *Indika*, *Aithiopika*, *Arabika*], the accounts composed by Alexander’s companions – have been preserved as fragments.

<sup>4</sup> Also see, e. g., Hdt. 2.29; Strabo, 2.5.11. With respect to the description of the *oikoumenê*, sight (*opsis*) was higher ranked than hearsay (*akoê*), for observation was considered as the best source of information.

<sup>5</sup> Strabo, 15.1.2 (translated by H. L. Jones).

<sup>6</sup> Strabo, 15.1.5.

<sup>7</sup> Strabo, 15.1.2.

<sup>8</sup> Strabo, 15.1.3.

word that could be rendered by “document” or “documentary material” (on this point, see further below). Instead, a variety of terms are used. Some point to a specific kind of texts, such as *ιστορία*, *λόγοι*, *ἐξήγησις*, and *περίοδος*. In general, these terms need contextualizing in order to be properly understood, as in the following example borrowed from Agatharchides of Cnidus, who flourished in the mid-second century BCE. Agatharchides wrote a treatise entitled *On the Erythraean Sea* – a description of the Indian Ocean countries. Like many other ancient authors, he does not find it essential to list the sources available to him. At some point, however, he explains why he was not able to complete his work:

We have carefully recorded in five books the situation concerning the tribes located in the south as they were in our time. But we have entirely given up the idea of writing an account of the islands in the sea which were discovered later... since our age is unable to bear the toil, particularly after we had written large works about Europe and Asia and because we have been unable to accurately examine the *hypomnēmata* as a result of the disturbances in Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

The *hypomnēmata* are referred to again elsewhere with more details when Agatharchides claims that he drew “upon the royal *hypomnēmata* preserved in Alexandria (τὰ μὲν ἐκ τῶν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ βασιλικῶν ὑπομνημάτων)”.<sup>10</sup> Now what were these *hypomnemata*? This word possesses various meanings: “reminder”, “memoranda”, “note”, “minutes”, “publication”, “treatise”, “commentaries” and the like.<sup>11</sup> In the present context, there is however little dispute: Agatharchides points to notes stored in the royal archives, such as the reports by Ptolemaic officials who explored the African coasts of the Red Sea in order to select sites for hunting elephants – for example Simmias, who made a thorough investigation (ἐξήτασε) of the African tribes lying along the southern Red Sea coast.<sup>12</sup>

Written sources are also often referred to with words as vague as the previous ones, e. g.,

<sup>9</sup> Agatharchides of Cnidus, *Erythr.* 110 (Müller) = Photius, *Bibliotheca*, 460b, translated by Burstein 1990: 173. The last sentence has been misunderstood by Burstein: compare with R. Henry’s translation : “(...) parce que nos sources, à cause des troubles survenus en Égypte, ne nous fournissaient pas d’information exacte” (οὔτε τῶν ὑπομνημάτων διὰ τὰς κατ’ Αἴγυπτον ἀποστάσεις ἀκριβῆ παραδιδόντων σκέψιν).

<sup>10</sup> Agatharchides of Cnidus, *Erythr.* 79 (Müller) = Diod. Sic. 3.38.1. This sentence is attributed to Diodorus by some scholars (see W. Peremans, “Diodore de Sicile et Agatharchide de Cnide”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 16/4 (1967), 432-455).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *LSJ* s.v. ὑπομνήμα. .

<sup>12</sup> Agatharchides of Cnidus, *Erythr.* 41 (Müller) = Diod. Sic. 3.18.4. Simmias explored the southern Red Sea area in service of Ptolemy III.

*auctores*, (οἱ) ἱστορες, (οἱ) συγγράψαντες and the like. Let us quote, for instance, this excerpt from Pliny's *Natural History*, in which the most important ports of trade of south-west India are listed:

The king of *Muziris*, at the date of publication, was Caelobothras. There is another more serviceable port, belonging to the *Neacyndi* tribe, called *Becare*; this is where king Pandion reigned, his capital being a town in the interior a long way from the port, called *Modura*; the district from which pepper is conveyed to *Becare* in canoes made of hollowed tree-trunks is called *Cottonara*. But all these names of tribes and ports or towns are to be found in none of the previous writers (*apud neminem priorum reperiuntur*), which seems to show that the local conditions of the places are changing. (Plin. *HN* 6.105)

Apparently Pliny takes pride in being the first one to report the names of *Muziris*, *Becare*, and *Modura*, from where demanded commodities – namely pepper and pearls – were imported into the Roman Empire, but he does not disclose the names of his informants, nor does he tell us which *auctores* were unaware of this shift in the geography of exchanges. This should come as no surprise, for most authors, as noted above, were silent on the sources they exploited.

Besides literary sources that represented the bulk of the “documentary material,”<sup>13</sup> a certain amount of knowledge was obtained from non-written material, such as hearsay accounts. For instance, Pliny the Elder updated his description of the Arab-Persian Gulf with information supplied by ambassadors and merchants – but how he found this information remains obscure:

It [Charax<sup>14</sup>] was originally at a distance of 1¼ miles from the coast, and had a harbour of its own, but when Juba published his work (*Iuba vero prodente*) it was 50 miles inland; its present distance from the coast is stated by Arab envoys and our own traders who have come from the place to be 120 miles (*legati Arabum nostrique negotiatores qui inde venere adfirmant*). (Plin. *HN* 6.159)

Pliny may refer to Roman or Italian merchants who were involved in long distance business within the Indian Ocean area.<sup>15</sup> To take another instance, several centuries later – in the mid-sixth century CE –, Cosmas Indicopleustes wrote his *Topographia Christiana*, a treatise partly based on his personal experience as merchant on the western Indian Ocean. This position allowed him to

<sup>13</sup> Non-literary written sources – e. g. inscriptions – played a very limited role in this matter. Among the few examples worth quoting there is Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Top. Christ.* 2.64 (the inscription of Adulis).

<sup>14</sup> A city lying close to the Euphrates' mouth.

<sup>15</sup> Plin. *HN* 6.139-140 (trans. Rackham). Also see Plin. 6.149: “Juba omits to mention *Batrasavave*, the town of the Omani, and the town of *Omana* which previous writers have made out to be a famous port of Carmania, and also *Homna* and *Attana*, towns said by our traders (*nostrī negotiatores*) to be now the most frequented ports in the Persian Gulf.”

personally visit various places and question locals, as shown by the following example: witnessing a trade circuit supplying the Huns Hephtalites – settled in India – with Egyptian emeralds, he endeavored to collect fresh information from reliable sources (τὰ μὲν πείρα μαθὼν ἐξηγησάμην καὶ διέγραψα, τὰ δὲ καὶ ἐγγὺς τῶν τόπων γενόμενος ἀκριβῶς μεμαθηκῶς ἐξεῖπον).<sup>16</sup>

Much more interesting, however, is the case of non-verbal material, for it occasionally played a role in geographical discussions. Coming to this topic, we can hardly ignore Alexander the Great's attempt to solve the question of the Nile source while leading his army in India. This question, along with that of the summer floods, was counted among the most important geographical problems to sort out. In 327 BCE Alexander, in the course of his Indian expedition, thought that the mystery was gone:

He had already seen crocodiles on the Indus, as on no other river except the Nile, and beans [i. e. lotus seeds] growing on the banks of the Acesines of the same sort as the land of Egypt produces and, having heard that the Acesines runs into the Indus, he thought he had found the origin of the Nile; his idea was that the Nile rose somewhere in India, flowed through a great expanse of desert, and there lost the name of Indus, and then, where it began to flow through inhabited country, got the name of Nile from the Ethiopians in those parts and the Egyptians (...). In fact it is reported that, when writing to Olympias about the Indian country, Alexander wrote among other things that he thought he had discovered the springs of the Nile, drawing a conclusion about matters of so much importance from very slender indications (μικροῖς δὴ τισι καὶ φαύλοις ὑπὲρ τῶν τηλικούτων τεκμαιρόμενον); but that, when he had more accurately investigated (ἀτρεκέστερον ἐξήλεγε) the geography of the river Indus, he learnt (μαθεῖν) from the inhabitants that the Hydaspes joins its stream to the Acesines and the Acesines to the Indus, and that they resign their names, while the Indus then flows out into the Great Sea by two mouths and has nothing whatever to do with Egypt, and as a result he cancelled the part of the letter to his mother which dealt with the Nile. (Arr. *Anab.* 6.1)

Irrespective of Alexander's mistake, it must be noted that his geographical reasoning was supported less by written material than by the living creatures that he could observe, namely crocodiles and "beans" which had not been found outside Egypt until this time. These were regarded as substantial proofs until he was confronted with contradictory information provided by the locals. In fact, Alexander was not alone in doing so. His companions also regarded plants and animals as apt pieces of evidence: the parallel they established between India and *Aithiopia*<sup>17</sup> – especially with

<sup>16</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Top. Christ.* 11.21.

<sup>17</sup> Arabia and Egypt were also part of this scheme.



regard to climate (ἥρ, or κρᾶσις τῶν ἀέρων) – in order to emphasize the similarities between the two areas was backed by such reasoning.<sup>18</sup> Dark skinned people, remarkable animals and marvellous plants served as proofs that these countries were equally fertile:

And he [Aristobulus] says that the southern land of India, like Arabia and *Aithiopia*, bears cinnamon, nard, and other aromatic products, being similar to those countries in the effect of the rays of the sun, although it surpasses them in the copiousness of its waters; and that therefore its air is humid and proportionately more nourishing and more productive; and that this applies both to land and to the water, and therefore, of course, both land and water animals in India are found to be larger than those in other countries.<sup>19</sup>

The idea that living or stuffed animals, fresh or dried plants, stones and the like could be employed as material supporting, or enhancing, the body of geographical knowledge is less unusual than it may seem at first glance. Let us, for instance, recall King Ptolemy II and the so-called Alexandrian zoo. This ruler had wild animals hunted in *Aithiopia* and brought back to Alexandria for exhibition. Likewise a vivid account of the capture of a giant snake in *Aithiopia*, preserved by Agatharchides of Cnidus, illustrates how unique this enterprise was. To close the story he reports that Ptolemy gave the hunters a suitable reward and kept the snake as a marvelous exhibit for visitors to his kingdom. How animals and geographical knowledge could relate to each other is made explicit by Agatharchides of Cnidus in this conclusion:

As for Ptolemy... he kept and fed the snake which had now been tamed and afforded the greatest and most astonishing sight for the strangers who visited his kingdom (τοῖς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν παραβάλλουσι ξένοις μέγιστον παρεχόμενον καὶ παραδοξότατον θέαμα). Consequently, in view of the fact that a snake of so great a size has been exposed to the public gaze, it is not fair to doubt the word of the Ethiopians or to assume that the report which they circulated far and wide are mere fiction (οὐκ ἄξιον ἀπιστεῖν τοῖς Αἰθίοσιν οὐδὲ μῦθον ὑπολαμβάνειν τὸ θρυλούμενον ὑπ' αὐτῶν). For they state that there are to be seen in their country snakes so great in size..."<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, this living snake being exhibited to ordinary people (ὄφεως εἰς ὄψιν κοινὴν κατηντηκότος) partly answers a question raised by Daniela Dueck. At the end of her history of

<sup>18</sup> See, e. g., Strabo, 16.1.13 = Onesicritus, *FGrH* 134 F7. The main point was that India and Ethiopia/Egypt, receiving a comparable amount of solar heat, shared the same ἥρ, even though the former benefited from a greater amount of rain than the latter.

<sup>19</sup> Strabo, 15, 1, 22 = Onesicritus, *FGrH* 134 F22 (this bulk of this passage was believed by Jacoby to go back to this person).

<sup>20</sup> Diod. Sic. 3.37.9 (trans. Oldfather). Cf. Diod. Sic. 3.36.3 : "The second Ptolemy... brought to the knowledge of the Greeks (ἐποίησεν εἰς γνῶσιν ἔλθεῖν τοῖς Ἕλλησι) other [i. e. than elephants] of animals which had never been seen and were objects of amazement."



ancient geography, Dueck poses the question of “popular geographical knowledge”. She wonders how common people could get geographical information and how much they could know of remote and exotic places (Dueck 2012: 118-121). In this regard, Ptolemy II’s zoo no doubt provided a better picture (φαντασία)<sup>21</sup> of distant *Aithiopia* to those who could afford a trip to Alexandria.

Thus, ancient geographical knowledge was based on, and improved by various types of evidence: written texts recording all kind of data and stored in various places, hearsay accounts, and finally non-verbal pieces of information. Now the question is whether, or to what extent, this material may be defined as “documents”, starting from the modern perspective.

## 2. Was ancient geographical knowledge based on “documents”? The modern point of view.

Any attempt to answer this question requires us to clarify the meaning of “document” and “documentary material.” A first step leads us to language dictionaries which offer basic definitions, such as the following one: “A piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record.”<sup>22</sup> Turning more specifically to the ancient world, the *Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* has an entry “documents and archives.” Here a slightly different conception of document shows up:

Although in the Greek states and in Rome literacy was less widespread and oral communication was more important than it is in the more developed parts of the modern world, businesses – both of states and of individuals or groups of individuals – generated documents, which were stored and published in various ways. (Rhodes 2012).

To the author’s eyes, the document relates to businesses (contracts, testimonies, annual praetors’ edicts, accounts, etc.), meaning that literary texts fall outside of the scope of documentary material. Given that a considerable quantity of data was brought to geographers by literary texts, as seen above, this approach is not satisfactory, for it would lead to the conclusion that ancient geography

<sup>21</sup> This word – meaning here “representation of appearances or images, primarily derived from sensation” (*LSJ*) – appears in an interesting passage from Strabo (2.5.1) where a distinction is established between the uneducated (ἀπαιδευτος) man and the πολιτικός regarding their respective level of geographical knowledge.

<sup>22</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/document>). This definition comes with a variety of examples: “The originals of several documents handed in as evidence also appeared to form part of the file.”; “Information can take the form of certificates, documents and other written evidence”; “Most of what I write is actually just cut and paste stuff from official documents, but I seem to get away with it,” etc.

was not based on documents.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) operates with a broader definition, according to which information stored on a specific support is regarded as a document.<sup>23</sup> Here information must be understood as a set of data which produces something intelligible<sup>24</sup>: texts printed on books; music recorded on CDs; pictures stored on DVDs; emailed texts, all being information stored on support, are equally documents. From this contemporary perspective, most types of evidence that I have listed in the previous section fall within the category of document: the *hypomnēmata* used by Agatharchides; Juba's *Arabika* read by Pliny and the like. Similarly, hearsay accounts become documents as soon as they are recorded and stored – one may compare the reports by the *nostri negotiatores* mentioned by Pliny the Elder and preserved in his *Natural History*. Conversely, hearsay information that has not been recorded disappears, and accordingly cannot be categorized as documentary material.

A difficulty, however, arises with the case of living animals exhibited in zoos, or plants displayed in sanctuaries: the giant Ethiopian snake proudly shown to Greek visitors at Alexandria is by no means information stored on a support; neither is the Arabian frankincense tree transplanted into an Asian temple by kings of Asia Minor. Like Ptolemy II, these kings aimed at making an emblematic Arabian tree visible to a broad public.<sup>25</sup> In reality, this difficulty is solved if we adopt Michael Buckland's approach to the question of “documentality”. Buckland's analysis is in turn based on the research work of two twentieth century European documentalists, Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet. To begin with, Buckland states that the most prevalent use of the word “information” includes any material thing or presentation – such as a radio announcement or television documentary – perceived as instructive. In this sense, “information” becomes a synonym for a broad view of “document”. Then, according to what he calls the conventional, or material view,

---

<sup>23</sup> International Organization for Standardization/Technical Committee 46 (Information and Documentation), with various guidelines available at <https://www.iso.org/committee/48750.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Compare with the definition provided by the French Union of Documentation Organizations: documents are “all bases of materially fixed knowledge, and capable of being used for consultation, study, and proof” (Briet 2006: 10).

<sup>25</sup> See Theophr.*Hist. pl.* 9.4.8-9; Plin. *HN* 12.56-7.

several types of documents can be identified:

Documents are graphic records, usually of textual form, inscribed or displayed on a flat surface (clay tablet, paper, microfilm, computer screen) that are material, local, and, generally, transportable. These objects are made as documents. The limits of inclusion are unclear. Some have argued, for example, for the inclusion of terrestrial globes and of sculptures under this heading.

Then Buckland goes on to say:

On this view almost anything can be made to serve as a document, to signify something, to be held up as constituting evidence of some sort. Models, educational toys, natural history collections, and archaeological traces can be considered in this category. Briet's classic discussion of documentality in her manifesto "Qu'est-ce que la documentation?" famously asserted that a specimen of a newly discovered species of antelope, when positioned in a taxonomy and in a cage, was made to serve as a document (conversely the animal in wild must not be regarded as a document).<sup>26</sup>

From this point of view, any source of information, in material form, capable of being used for reference, or study, or as an authority is a document. In fact, Otlet was the first to point out that objects themselves – natural objects, artifacts, objects bearing traces of human activity such as archaeological finds, explanatory models, works of art, etc. – can be regarded as "documents" if we are informed by observation of them.<sup>27</sup> Briet, however, went further, offering the most accurate – and, she adds, the less intuitive and accessible – definition of document:

Any concrete or symbolic indexical sign ["indice" in French], preserved or recorded towards the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon. Is a star a document? Is a pebble a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But the photographs and the catalogues of stars, the stones in a museum of mineralogy, and the animals that are catalogued and shown in a zoo, are documents.<sup>28</sup>

This modern view properly accounts for the "non-verbal" material used by Greek and Romans to build on and expand their knowledge of the *oikoumenê*: an animal offered to observation and study – e. g., the python at Alexandria's zoo – was actually made into document. Even though very little is known to us about cataloguing in antiquity, this creature was a "concrete sign" preserved towards the ends of representing natural phenomena. The "documentary status" of captured and exhibited animals is proven by a passage where Strabo discusses and emends the description of the rhinoceros

<sup>26</sup> Buckland 2014: 179-80; compare Briet 2006:10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Buckland 1991: 354-5.

<sup>28</sup> Briet 2006: 10.

published by Artemidorus some decades earlier. The latter could see a specimen in Alexandria (καίπερ ἑώρακέναι φήσας ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ), while the former also observed one in an unspecified place (ἀπὸ γε τοῦ ὕφ' ἡμῶν ὁραθέντος).<sup>29</sup>

To conclude, on the basis of these modern definitions of the document, it seems clear that ancient geographical knowledge was based on documents.<sup>30</sup> Now, what about the Greek and Roman point of view? Did ancient geographers regard written accounts, living creatures, literary texts and so on as “documents”? Did they even conceive of “documents”? In other words, is the modern concept of document relevant to ancient geography, or somehow anachronistic?

### 3. Was ancient geographical knowledge based on documents? The ancient point of view.

As seen in the first section, the modern expression “documentary material” or “document” lacks an equivalent in Greek or Latin. Instead, various words as *logoi* (cf. *Aiguptioi logoi*, *Indikoi logoi*), *anagraphai*, *hypomnēmata*, *historia*, *auctores* turn up in Agatharchides, Strabo, Eratosthenes, Polybius, Pliny the Elder etc. Each of them point to a more or less particular type of written evidence. For instance, *anagraphê* applies to the treatise, record, or description. This meaning certainly overlaps the modern concept of document as defined earlier, but there is by no means strict correspondence between the two. As the editors of this volume rightly point out:

The relevant Greek terms can be divided into, on one hand, words that emphasize the act that created the document (typically the act of writing [γράφειν]) and, on the other hand, words that emphasize the function of the document [μνήματα; σημεία; γνωρίσματα].<sup>31</sup>

Considering the Latin vocabulary, from which our own word “document” derives, the term *liber* does not match our modern “document”. Neither does *documentum*, a term that refers to a lesson, an example or a proof, as in the following sentence by Cicero: *P. Rutilius documentum fuit hominibus nostris virtutis, antiquitatis, prudentiae* (Cic. Rab. Post. 10.27). In fact, *documentum* and

<sup>29</sup> Strabo, 16.4.15; this discussion takes place in Strabo’s presentation of Aithiopia.

<sup>30</sup> Ferraris’ theory of documents – in which intention and recording are strongly tied – is of little interest in the present discussion when compared to Buckland’s approach. See, however, the editors’ introduction in the present volume, and also the important preliminary observations of Bodel in this volume.

<sup>31</sup> J. Arthur-Montagne, S. Di Giulio, I. Kuin, *op. cit.* above, n. 5, p. xx (Greek words added by me)

*exemplum* are closely related. This point is clearly established in the introduction to the present volume: “*documenta* contain lessons, and within Livy’s historical narrative they link the historical events that they describe with the present and future generations for whom these lessons are intended.” In contrast, it is not until the late eighteenth century that the French word *document* meaning “information”, or a “piece of information” appears in written evidence. Let us quote, for instance, this excerpt from the narrative by La Pérouse, a naval officer who was appointed in 1785 by Louis XVI to lead an expedition around the world. Interestingly, *documens* turns up in the context of geographical knowledge:

L’île Sainte-Catherine... est un établissement portugais, qui, depuis soixante-dix ans, n’a été que très-peu visité par les vaisseaux européens autres que ceux de cette nation; il y a donc peu de documens à espérer des relations des voyageurs (*there is little hope of getting information [documens] from travelers’ accounts*). (Milet-Mureau 1797: 90)

The gap between modern and ancient lexicon seems to me so important that one may wonder whether, or to what extent our concept of “document” and “documentation” existed in antiquity – at least in the making of ancient geography. In my opinion, our ideas could hardly exist in antiquity, for the main following reason. As Briet recalls when reflecting on the profession of documentalist, the notion of documentation is historically related to the never-ending increase in knowledge that characterizes modern and contemporary times:

Little by little, the theory of documentation has grown since the great period of the typographical explosion that began in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, which corresponds to the development of the historical sciences as the progress of techniques. Otlet had been its magus, the international leader, with his Institute of Bibliography, his universal decimal classification etc... Gutenberg’s invention has created such a voluminous and intense typographical production, especially in the last one hundred years, that the problem of the conservation and utilization of graphic documents became acute. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the abundance of written documents has required a scientific method of prospecting and of classifying books and manuscripts: bibliography. (Briet 2006: 12)

Thus, while obviously ancient geography was based on documents from our point of view, ancient geographers could hardly regard the material they used as documents, since this concept did not exist. In these circumstances, it is worth trying to clarify their ideas about the “documentary material” supporting their scientific activities. The prologue of Arrian’s *Anabasis* clearly helps us

dissect ancient geographers' attitude, no matter that he refers to historians instead of geographers:

Wherever Ptolemy son of Lagus and Aristobulus son of Aristobulus have both given the same accounts of Alexander son of Philip, it is my practice to record what they say as completely true, but where they differ, to select the version I regard as more trustworthy and also better worth telling. In fact other writers have given a variety of accounts of Alexander, nor is there any other figure of whom there are more historians who are more contradictory of each other, but in my view Ptolemy and Aristobulus are more trustworthy (πιστότεροι) in their narrative, since Aristobulus took part in king Alexander's expedition, and Ptolemy not only did the same, but as he himself was a king, mendacity would have been more dishonourable for him than for anyone else (αὐτῷ βασιλεῖ ὄντι αἰσχρότερον ἢ τῷ ἄλλῳ ψεύσασθαι ἦν); again, both wrote when Alexander was dead and neither was under any constraint or hope of gain to make him set down anything but what actually happened. However, I have also recorded some statements made in other accounts of others, when I thought them worth mention and not entirely untrustworthy (ἄξιαφήγητά τέ μοι ἔδοξε καὶ οὐ πάντῃ ἄπιστα), but only as tales told of Alexander. (Arr. *Anab.* 1.1.1-3)

Assessing the value of his sources before starting his narrative, Arrian explains why, among Alexander's companions, Ptolemy and Aristobulus stand out of all other authorities. The latter having taken part in the expedition could personally observe what he described (i. e. his account is based on what he saw); while the former was not only an observer, but as a king – he founded the Ptolemaic empire – he could not lie. In addition, having composed their works after Alexander died, both were prevented from flattering the king, that is to say distorting the truth, in order to obtain a better position. In sum, Arrian does not draw on informative texts – or what we would call “documentary material” –, but on trustworthy authors.

Similarly, ancient geographers put the emphasis on who provided geographical information, instead of information itself: what really mattered were the sources and their authors' intentions. Let us return to Strabo's review of the “documentary material” relating to India. Like Arrian, Strabo praises reliable authors, namely Alexander's friends, even if they happen to occasionally differ from each other, and even if they may have distorted some geographical facts because they wanted to flatter the king – here Strabo hints at the Caucasus, which was placed in India [Hindu Kush] so that Alexander could equal Heracles.<sup>32</sup> In spite of this faulty attitude, Strabo says, they deserve confidence for having been first hand observers (αὐτόπται); as such their descriptions of Indian

---

<sup>32</sup> Strabo, 15.1.8-9.

regions and tribes are likely to convey true facts. Megasthenes, who stayed in India, is also regarded as a serious author, even if he sometimes gives credence to mythical stories conveyed by poets – here Strabo explicitly refers to Euripides, according to whom Dionysos visited the whole Asia. In contrast, poets – except Homer – are blamed for inventing stories for the sake of giving pleasure to their audience. They use μῦθος which is a form of ψευδής. Besides poets, other authors such as Ctesias – who did not visit India – and Megasthenes come under suspicion, mainly because of the incredible marvels (τὸ θαυμαστόν; τερατολογία) that they reported: to Strabo's eyes, they were liars inventing fictitious facts (πλάσμα) to entertain their audience.<sup>33</sup> Strabo is not alone in thinking so: such ideas are more or less ubiquitous.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, ancient geographers did not share the “neutral” conception of documents as a certain quantity of information recorded and stored, for – as said above – this analytical and epistemological tool was not formulated until modern times. The sources they used, whatever their nature may be, were assigned a certain degree of truth and reliability.<sup>35</sup> If an author is considered prone to truth (τάληθής)<sup>36</sup>, then his text, being reliable (τὸ ἐγγυτάτῳ πίστεως; μνήμης ἄξια)<sup>37</sup> and having informative value, may be compared to a “document.”<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, a text composed by an ignorant author reporting “things that do not exist” (μὴ λέγοντος δὲ τὰ ὄντα, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα κατ' ἄγνοιαν<sup>39</sup>) is deprived of informative value. In other words, the status of “documentary material” depends on a subjective appreciation (δίαίτια) by the reader.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the same authority – e. g., Homer – could be highly esteemed by some geographers and strongly rejected by

<sup>33</sup> Strabo, 1.2.35; 15.1.5-9; 15.1.28. Note that another important distinction was made between private individuals and officials. Why, for instance, did Agatharchides use the accounts composed by the explorers dispatched into the Red Sea area by Ptolemy II? Because people serving a king, that is to say having been chosen by a king, were far more reliable than individuals sailing back and forth on the Red Sea – i. e. merchants. Being motivated by their own private interests, the latter could not be regarded as *histores*, i. e. people aiming at improving geography.

<sup>34</sup> See, in particular, Lucian, *Hist. conscr.*

<sup>35</sup> This, of course, is not to deny that we moderns also have categories of good and bad information. Historians, in particular, must systematically question and assess the reliability of their sources.

<sup>36</sup> Strabo, 15.1.28.

<sup>37</sup> Strabo, 15.1, 9-10; 15, 1, 28.

<sup>38</sup> The same reasoning applies to “proofs” (τεκμήριον). See, for instance, Strabo, 11, 7, 4; 13, 3, 2; 15, 1, 9; 16, 2, 23 etc.

<sup>39</sup> Strabo, 1, 2, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Strabo, 15.1.10.



others scholars:

First, I say that both I and my predecessors, one of whom was Hipparchus himself, are right in regarding Homer as the founder of the science of geography; for Homer has surpassed all men, both of ancient and modern times, not only in the excellence of his poetry, but also, I might say, in his acquaintance with all that pertains to public life. And this acquaintance made him busy himself not only about public activities, to the end that he might learn of as many of them as possible and give an account of them to posterity, but also about the geography both of the individual countries and of the inhabited world ...<sup>41</sup>

You may be right, Eratosthenes, on that point, but you are wrong when you deny to Homer the possession of vast learning, and go on to declare that poetry is a fable-prating old wife, who has been permitted to "invent" (as you call it) whatever she deems suitable for purposes of entertainment. What, then? Is no contribution made, either, to the excellence of him who hears the poets recited. I again refer to the poet's being an expert in geography ...<sup>42</sup>

In sum, I tend to believe that "documentality" did not exist among ancient geographers, in that they did not regard their sources as "documents." Rather they concentrated on the reliability of those who produced information, often expressing a strong disapproval their statements.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, we regard anything that can signify something, anything that can be held up as constituting evidence of some sort as a document, whoever produced it, whatever its nature.

### Bibliography

- Briet, S. 2006. *What is Documentation?* R. E. Day and L. Martinet eds. and trans, with H. G. B. Anghelescu. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Buckland, M. K. 1991. "Information as thing," *Journal of the American Society of Information Science* 42.5: 351-60.
- Buckland, M. K. 2014. "Documentality beyond document," *The Monist* 97.2: 179-86.
- Burstein, S. M., ed. 1989. *Agatharchides of Cnidus: On the Erythraean Sea*. London: Hakluyt Society.
- Dueck, D. 2012. *Geography in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marrou, H.-I. 1975 [1954]. *De la connaissance historique*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Paris : Seuil.
- Milet-Mureau, L. A. 1797. *Voyage de la Pérouse autour du monde publié conformément au décret du 22 avril 1791*. Vol. 4. Paris.
- Rhodes, P. J. 2012. "Documents and Archives," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah08052>.

<sup>41</sup> Strabo, 1.1.2.

<sup>42</sup> Strabo, 1.2.3.

<sup>43</sup> See, among many examples, Curt. 9.1.31-4 : *equidem plura transcribo quam credo*.