

BOOK REVIEW

Geography in Classical Antiquity. By Daniela Dueck with a chapter by Kai Brodersen. Key Themes in Ancient History. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 142. Paper, \$29.99. ISBN 978-0-521-12025-8.

Pliny the Elder (*NH* 3.1.1–2) long ago bemoaned the near impossible task of writing about geography, an assignment which was, he wrote, “not easily handled without any criticism.” Recognizing the difficulty of encapsulating so much of human knowledge in a single volume, he claimed that he would neither “blame nor refute” any of his sources. Alas, Pliny did not have to write book reviews. It is, then, a relief to recommend Dueck’s brief but effective primer on the topic of geography in the Greek and Roman world. The pace and breadth of the text will require an active and prepared instructor (not to mention an array of supplementary readings) to help guide students through topics that are often only introduced and then overwhelmed by new concepts, developments, and items of evidence. But the topic of geography in antiquity relies on so much and so varied evidence—even (as I note below) more than the text emphasizes—that the authors can hardly be faulted for brevity in such a concise and necessary introduction.

The book consists of five chapters. A bibliography and index are by no means exhaustive but should at least offer students a starting point for the pursuit of further study. There is also a chronological table listing authors, texts, and principal events. Polybius might have preferred to be included in the 2nd rather than 3rd century bce (xi), and certainly Ammianus Marcellinus, since he is discussed in the text itself (50), deserves inclusion. But such quibbles aside, the table will helpfully introduce new students to the large number of texts available for the study of ancient geography.

The bulk of the volume is organized according to groups of sources rather than chronological development, so that the three main chapters deal with as many different approaches to the study of geography in antiquity. Chapter 2, “Descriptive Geography,” explores the presentation of geographic material in poetry, prose, and even travelogues including *periploi*, *itineraria*, and other more

detailed travel narratives. The next chapter, “Mathematical Geography,” examines how ancient scientists “used numbers and calculations” (69) along with theoretical approaches regarding form and symmetry to determine the shape and size of the world as well as the nature of the peoples who inhabited it. A description of how geographic coordinates, principally longitude and latitude, were calculated or estimated closes the discussion and offers a neat transition to the next chapter on the practice (or lack) of cartography in classical antiquity. Kai Brodersen (who wrote the chapter) warns readers of the dangers of applying a modern worldview that is too map-centric onto the ancients, and quite rightly concludes that the “pre-modern Greco-Roman world generally managed without maps” (109). The argument against the use of maps for practical purposes (e.g. for travel or military plans), however correct, tends to overpower the fact that cartographic depictions did exist in antiquity, even if only for the illustration of power and might. Even discounting the difficult problem of the form of Agrippa’s famous depiction of the *orbis terrarum*, there is more than enough evidence to illustrate mapping on a grand scale, especially during the Roman imperial period (for which see Richard Talbert’s chapter in *Ancient Perspectives: Maps and Their Place in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome* (Chicago 2012)). Although the precise form of such maps is beyond reconstruction, their existence and value should not be doubted.

Three principal themes, outlined in the first (“Introduction”) and final (“Geography in Practice”) chapters, underpin the entire work. Two of the themes are specifically introduced as such in the introduction (5). The first notes the reciprocal relationship between expansion, whatever its principal motives, and geographic knowledge. The second focuses on the comparison between Greek and Roman geographic knowledge, its development and its practical uses.

The third theme is not specifically introduced like the others, but it nevertheless dominates the volume and illustrates a fundamental element of modern discussions about the nature of ancient geography. With minor exceptions, the volume emphasizes text as the dominant medium through which geographic knowledge was created and transmitted. Though such a view appears throughout, it is, perhaps, best summed up in the volume’s final line: “All these [the motives, methods, and tools of geography] enabled these pre-modern societies to break new ground and to record their experience and thoughts in writing” (121). Brodersen’s warning (100) that pre-modern societies lacked the ability to copy and transmit illustrations such as maps should be taken as a warning against such textual emphasis and should offer a reason why we ought to expand and empha-

size that non-literary evidence which does exist. As it stands, discussions of artistic creations do appear in the volume, but only fleetingly. The geographic and ethnographic information presented on the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias, for example, makes only a brief appearance at the beginning and end of the work (9 and 121) and is overwhelmed by the text's conclusion that "geography" is predominantly understood as the "writing" about the earth.

In the end, this little book successfully enhances the curiosity of the reader. Even though it is meant to be a basic introduction, the book sparks debate. It is, therefore, a reflection of the difficulty and the potential of the topic, and is a most welcome addition to the ongoing discussion.

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