REVIEW

DESCRIBING THE KNOWN WORLD:
A NEW EDITION OF DIONYSIUS PERIEGETES


In 1789, several shops in London as well as ‘the booksellers of Oxford and Cambridge’ offered a small book in the duodecimo format, which is so handy if you want to read a book without alerting others to your use of it: ‘Tyrocinium geographicum Londinense or the London geography, consisting of Dr. Free’s short lectures, compiled for the use of his younger pupils, Published Chiefly for the Information of genteel Young Citizens not attending the Gresham Professors, and very proper for the Upper Forms of great Schools, for Gentlemen of the first year in the Universities; and for Ladies that read History. To which is added, by the editor, Translated from the Greek into English blank Verse The periegesis of Dionysius, the geographer, from the edition of Dr. Wells, containing the antient and modern Science.’ The book combined basic geographical information with a translation of a pertinent Greek text: the Oikumenes Periegesis by Dionysius of Alexandria. The book was such a success that a second edition was published already one year later.

Indeed, editions of Dionysius’ geographical work had long enjoyed a wide readership, first in Latin translations, then in the Greek original first printed in 1512 by Johannes Maciochus (Mazzocchi) in Ferrara. Already one year later, another edition of the Greek text was published by Aldus Manutius (Manuzio) in Venice (which, incidentally, contained the editio princeps of Pindar’s Odes). In the sixteenth century seven more editions of the Greek text appeared, some of which were repeatedly reprinted, as well as the first translation into English (Thomas Twyne (1572)); a further eleven new editions followed in the seventeenth century, when the use of the Greek text is also attested in the classroom by editions such as that in usum Scholae Regiae Etonensis of 1633. Geography, of course, became a school subject in its own right only in the later nineteenth century; before then geographical information tended to be presented in Latin (often using Pomponius Mela) or Greek (details in my Classics Outside Classics (2015) 31–46). To that effect, a bilingual Greek–Latin version of Dionysius was first published by Edward Wells in 1704 and saw another five editions in the eighteenth century alone. Here, pupils could read, and had to translate, what Dionysius had said on Rome (vv. 354–6, transl. Lightfoot p. 217):
Tiber, which parts in twain delightful Rome,  
Prestigious Rome, great homeland of my lords,  
Of all cities the mother, wealthy seat.

And on Britain the ancient author told them (vv. 565–8; transl. Lightfoot p. 229):

By the ocean’s northern fringes, other isles—  
The twin Bretanides—face the Rhine’s mouth,  
For its last eddies issues in that sea.  
Enormous is their size: of all the isles,  
None could with the Bretanides contend.

It is thus not surprising that Dionysius appealed to ‘genteel Young Citizens’,  
the ‘Upper Forms of great Schools’, ‘Gentlemen of the first year in the Universities’, and even ‘Ladies that read History’ in Britain! The later fate of Dionysius’ work, however, is less appealing, as it ‘sank into obscurity’, as Jane Lightfoot rightly states in the preface of her great volume (vii), which is the first full-length English commentary on the entire Οἰκουμενής Περιηγησις, and is unlikely to be superseded for a very long time.

Lightfoot’s work consists of nearly 600 (xviii + 575) densely printed pages in two parts. The ‘Introduction’ (1–193), which in a previous (but largely identical) version is still freely available online at http://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/tl_files/Downloads/Dionysius-Periegetes.pdf, presents as ‘preliminaries’ observations on poetry and prose, on the hypotyposis geographias as overview of the known world, and on conceptions of space. Lightfoot presents an up-to-date and lively survey of these topics, which have found much interest in the last two or so decades. Of the same high quality are the second chapter discussing the presumed sources of Dionysius, and the third on his language. Here, Lightfoot succeeds in a magisterial survey of the lexicon (with an interesting note on the -ις terminations of nouns and adjectives), on word-formation, on formulae
and pseudo-formulae, and most helpfully on metre; the third chapter culmi-
nates in a discussion of the question whether there is ‘a language for geogra-
phy’ in Dionysius. Having discussed language, the fourth chapter situates Di-
onysius in the genre of didactic poetry, studying catalogues and lists in general,
and looking at the didactics of the narrator, the addressees and spectators, and
on the relationship of authors and narrators, and their ‘bird’s-eye vision’ as
evident in the text. The fifth chapter discusses what Lightfoot calls ‘geopoetics’:
epithets, chorography and ethnography, landscape, natural resources, peoples
and their environment, but also the divine, mythology, and finally history and
time. An elegant final chapter on ‘the end of journey’ wraps up this substantial
introduction.

The book’s second part presents the Greek text (without attempting a new
critical edition, as work by others towards this goal is in progress for the Budé
series), an elegant translation (for which examples were given above; for an
alternative go to http://wwwdh.informatik.uni-erlangen.de/IMMD8/staff/
Goerz/Dionysius_Periegetes.html), and a full commentary (261–509), which
raises, and addresses, every conceivable question on the text and its content.
A copious appendix of twenty-six pages lists echoes and allusions—a great help
for further studies on intertextuality in Dionysius—even if it is cheekily intro-
duced as ‘guaranteed’ to be ‘incomplete’, and a full bibliography, as well as
several great indices; perhaps the publishers (who have done an excellent job
in producing this fine, but expensive book) could persuade Lightfoot to add a
survey of the contents of the Oikumenes Periegesis when the book is next re-
printed.

The reception of Dionysius’ work is not covered here, so there is no dis-
cussion of (possible) references by Appianus (praef. 3.10; cf. H. Usener,
Rheinisches Museum N.F. 25 (1870) 612–13), by Triphiodorus (cf. M. Campbell,
Lexicon in Triphiodorum (1985) 209), by scholiasts (on Aeschylus, Prometheus 789,
on Aristophanes, Plutus 586, and on Nicander, Theriaca 175a and 607), by The-
mistius, who could quote Dionysius’ work without mentioning the author’s
name (Oratio 30 p. 183–4), or by Metrodorus in the ‘arithmetic problems’ verse
(Anthologia Palatina 14, 121, and 129), where two quotations from Dionysius are
so cleverly combined in two questions on distances that not only a mathemat-
ical solution can be found, but also the reference to the unnamed author can
be identified. There is also no discussion of the Latin translations, or rather
adaptations, by Avien(i)us and Priscianus, and of the Nachleben as a school text
referred to at the beginning of this review. But given the great quantity, and
quality, of the material presented by Lightfoot this would have been far too
much ground to cover, of course!

Such a study of the Nachleben would then also show how Dionysius’ was
expanded to cover parts of the oikumene which Dionysius had not described,
but which British ‘genteel Young Citizens’ and ‘Ladies that read History’
should find in the Greek text. In his edition of 1704 Wells changed the verses on Rome (quoted above), and Free in his ‘crib’ in duodecimo format that so handily fits under a school desk translated them as follows:

"Θύμβρις, ὃς ἱμερτὴν ἀποτέμνεται ἄνδιχα Ῥώμην,
Ῥώμην τιμήεσσαν, ἰδὲ προπάροιθε πολύων
μητέρα παισῶν πολύων, κρατερῶν μέγαν οἴκον ἀνάκτων,
νῦν ἱερὸν Πάππου μέγα κοιρανέοντος ἔδεθλον."

Tiber, which lovely Rome divides in two
Much honor’d Rome, and formerly the Queen
Of other Cities; seat of powerful Kings;
But now the sacred Mansion of the Pope.

And about London ἐμοῦ μέγας οἴκος ἀνακτὸς, the British Isles, Ireland (Ierne),
and the Pteroton castrum mentioned in Ptolemy’s geography, which was then (wrongly) identified with Edinburgh, this Dionysius states:

"νῆσοι δὲ προτέρως Βρετανίδες εἰσὶ νότονδε,
δισσῶν τοι μέγεθος περιώσιον ἡ μὲν ἐπ’ ἡδ’
κλῆξεται Αλβίων, ἡ δὲ πρὸς δυσμὸν Ἰέρνη.
εὐρυτέρην μέντοι Αλβίωνα (τούνεκα καὶ νῦν
τὴν μεγάλην ἐκαλεῦσι Βρεταννίδα) ναυετάουσι
πρὸς βορέην Σκοττών ξέφυρον Καμβροί, νότον Ἀγγλοῖ.
Ἀγγλιακή ἐπὶ χώρη ὑπὲρ Ταμίσαο ῥέεθρον
ἀπετεύχεν ἡδ’ ἐνναιόμενον καὶ εὐκτιτὸν ἄστυ
Λόνδινον περίπυστον, ἐμοῦ μέγας οἴκος ἀνακτὸς.
ἐχινεῖν ἐπὶ Σκοτία Ἡδενβύργου πτολιέθρον,
ἐνθα ποτ Ἀισσονίοιο στρατοῦ πέδον ἐσκε πτερωτὸν,
ἡδ’ ὑπὲρ ἡδ’ ῥηγμίν Ἰβερνίδος αἴης
Δουβλινίου ἐνναιόμενη πόλις ἐστήρικται,
ἡ τε περ Ἐβλάνην οἱ πρόσθεν ἐφήμιξαν.
κεῖναι τοι μέγεθος περιώσια, οὐδὲ τις ἄλλη
νῆσοι ἐν πάση Βρετανίσιν ἰσοφαρίζει.

But of the British Isle upon the South
Two for their Size the others far exceed,
One to the East, which Albion hears for Name,
The other westward is Ierne call’d.
The larger, (by a modern Name
Great Britain call’d,) is by three Nationes held,
Northward the Scotch: westward the Welsh possess,
And to the South, the English hold their Seats.
In English Realms, and o’er the Thames’ wide Stream
Stands a large City nobly built and rich,
London far fam’d, where our great King resides.
In Scotland, Edinborough City lies,
Where once the Romans winged Camp was seen
And on the Eastern Coast of Irish Land
Is Dublin’s well built City plac’d; the same
Once by the Antients was Eblana call’d;
These, in their Bigness far exceed the rest,
Nor among all the other British Isles,
Can any for Comparison contend.

Nor among all the other studies on Dionysius’ Oikumenes Periegetes, can any for Comparison contend with that of Jane Lightfoot.

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