

BY WARREN McWILLIAMS

“The Ends of the Earth”

FIRST-CENTURY VIEWS

Plutarch (A.D. 46-120), the biographer of many famous Greeks and Romans, once observed that ancient geographers who did not know about a region placed marginal notes to the effect that beyond this point was “nothing but the sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea.”¹

(THESEUS, LIVES)

THE KNOWN WORLD OF the first century A.D. was considerably smaller than our world today. The missionary impulse of the early Christians, however, would take the gospel almost to the ends of the known world by about A.D. 100. From the beginning Jesus' followers realized that the gospel was too powerful to be limited to the Jewish nation. When Jesus told the disciples that they would be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8, CSB), they may not have realized the full extent of their missionary enterprise. Although today we generally think of our world getting smaller because of improved communication, to the first-century citizen of the Roman Empire, the world was growing constantly. Through the reports of explorers and traders and the calculations of astronomers, educated Romans were aware of much of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Their knowledge of the Atlantic Ocean and the Far East, though, was limited. The purpose of this article is to survey briefly what the typical Roman in the first century A.D. would

have known about the world beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. The Jews were scattered around the Roman world. They would have considered the "ends of the earth" to be the city of Rome² or faraway lands in general (Isa. 49:6).³

The first-century views of the world drew heavily on the knowledge accumulated by travelers, explorers, and scientists from previous centuries. Some early scientists (for example, Pythagoras, about 530 B.C.) had concluded that the earth was a sphere, but many of the ancients held to the belief that the earth was a flat disk. Aristarchus of Samos (ca. 310–230 B.C.) developed the view that the sun was the center of the solar system, but most people held to the older geocentric (earth-centered) view rather than this revolutionary heliocentric (sun-centered) view.

In the second century B.C., Hipparchus speculated that the round earth rotated on an axis and developed the idea of longitude and latitude lines to locate places. Eratosthenes, chief librarian at Alexandria, Egypt (276–196 B.C.), calculated the circumference of the

earth at the equator as being 250,000 stadia (about 24,662 miles), 200 miles in error, but amazingly accurate.⁴ In the second century B.C., Posidonius (135–51 B.C.) repeated Eratosthenes's calculations but reached a much smaller figure. Posidonius' smaller world was perpetuated by Strabo (63 B.C.–A.D. 24) and Ptolemy (ca. A.D. 100–170).

The reports of travelers and explorers added to the Romans' knowledge of the world. The early Phoenicians had told of horrible sea monsters, suns that never shone, and suns so hot that the seas boiled. Herodotus (ca. 484–425 B.C.) recorded many of these stories. One story recounted a voyage through the Red Sea and around the tip of Africa. Many people did not believe such a story, however, and Ptolemy insisted that Africa was connected to Asia, making the Indian Ocean an enclosed body like the Mediterranean Sea.

About 470 B.C., Himilco, a Carthaginian, reportedly sailed as far as England and Ireland. Pytheas (fourth century B.C.) sailed from his hometown of Massilia (modern Marseilles, France) to England, Scotland, Iceland, and the Arctic Circle (Strabo, *Geographia* 1.4.2). The travels of Alexander the Great to the east added to the Greeks' knowledge of the world.

The science of geography was refined in the first century A.D. by scholars building on the research of people such as Eratosthenes and Hipparchus of Nicea. Marinus of Tyre incorporated new information. Strabo's *Geographia* (ca. 7 B.C.) consisted of seventeen books, with two books on the history and methods of geography—eight on Europe, six on Asia, and one on Egypt and North Africa. Probably the most definitive geography of the ancient world was written by Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemaeus, ca. A.D. 90–168), librarian



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at Alexandria. His 8-volume *Geographia* listed about 8,000 places, giving their approximate latitudes and longitudes. Having accepted a smaller circumference for the earth, he assumed Europe and Asia covered half the globe. Later explorers such as Columbus followed his calculations, assuming the distance from Europe to Asia across the Atlantic Ocean was shorter. His

views were dominant until the time of Copernicus.

Although the Romans apparently were interested in cartography (map making) for military and administrative usage, few copies of first-century maps exist. The famous *Tabula Peutingeriana* (Peutinger Table) probably reflects information in Roman itinerary maps from the first century A.D., although it may derive

from maps by Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (63-12 B.C.) based on Roman military roads.⁵

To the typical Roman citizen in the first century, the geography that really mattered was the empire itself. Although people were generally curious about others living beyond the frontiers of the empire, the empire was so large that most Romans would have been only vaguely aware of the provinces of the empire itself. During the first century, the empire extended from the British Isles to the Sudan, from Portugal to the Euphrates River. Its north-south axis was about 1,600 miles, and its east-west axis about 2,800 miles. The population was probably about 70 million in the first century. In this period the emperors did not attempt to expand the empire geographically but focused on stabilizing what had been achieved up to Augustus's reign (27 B.C.-A.D. 14).

By reviewing the boundaries of the empire, moving clockwise from the western end of the Mediterranean Sea, we can see what the Romans knew about their world. Spain, Portugal, and Gaul were the westernmost provinces of the empire. Gades (modern Cadiz) was the chief port of western Spain. Spain shipped products such as wine to Britain, Gaul, and the Rhineland over the Atlantic Ocean; but sailors apparently did not venture far into the Atlantic. In earlier centuries the Phoenicians had kept warships on



Facing page: Statue of Copernicus; early in the 16th century, Copernicus advocated that the sun, rather than the earth, was at the center of the universe. Although the church considered his idea to be heretical, Copernicus held fast to his belief.

Left: On Gibraltar, the Pillars of Hercules monument; the African coast is visible in the distance. Many ancients believed that this strait, which is on the western tip of the Mediterranean, was the end of the world.

Below: Hadrian built a wall across northern Britain in an effort to protect the far stretches of the Roman Empire.



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ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

patrol across the Strait of Gibraltar (Pillars of Hercules) to keep others from exploring the Atlantic. Himilco's journey to England and Ireland (ca. 470 B.C.) and Pytheas's journey to Iceland (ca. 330 B.C.) were apparently the exceptions over the centuries. Such voyages had been reported, however, and the Romans were aware of them.

Great Britain was one of the few places where the Romans tried to annex territory in the first century. Claudius conquered southeastern England in A.D. 43. The complete conquest of England occurred later in the first century. Hadrian (ruled A.D. 117-138) erected the Wall of Hadrian across northern England to keep out invaders and smugglers. The areas to the north and west of England were known to the Romans primarily through the reports of early explorers such as Himilco and Pytheas.

The northern border of the empire was protected by a line of fortifications (*limites*) that consisted of forts, walls, and natural boundaries. The defenses were designed primarily to discourage small raiding parties and to control border traffic.⁶ Rivers such as the Rhine

and the Danube served as natural defenses. The Romans were aware of several groups of "barbarians" who lived on their northern border, including the Thracians, Moesians, Dacians, Illyrians, and Sycosarmatians. Some of these groups had been conquered by the end of the first century, but many were never really incorporated into the empire. Through trade the Romans had some contact with Scandinavia.

Many Christians in the Roman world would have been, of course, familiar with the eastern end of the Roman Empire, including Greece, Macedonia, Asia Minor, Syria, Israel, and Egypt. The influence of Hellenism through Alexander the Great's invasions had acquainted them with their neighbors as early as the fourth century B.C. Most Romans especially were aware of this eastern region because of the Jewish revolts against Rome (A.D. 66-73, 132-136) and the resistance of the Parthians, but they were often at war over control of Armenia. Parthians were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:9). According to Pliny, a Roman knight in Nero's reign traveled to the Baltic coastal region.⁷

Roman knowledge of the Far East was based primarily on trade rather than military expansion. During the first century A.D., trade with India and China apparently flourished. Traders traveled both overland and by ship. From the time of Augustus, sailors going into India used the monsoons, starting out in early summer and returning in the fall. Strabo reports that 120 ships left each year from the Red Sea port of Myos Hormos, heading for India. Traders soon became familiar with India's eastern and western coasts. An anonymous handbook, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, probably from late in the first century A.D., described the harbors in the Red Sea, sailing distances, and the political formalities of trading.⁸ Pliny the Elder recorded the voyage of a freedman in the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54) to the island of Ceylon.⁹ Some sailed as far as China, but the overland routes were more popular for traders, although they sometimes had difficulty with the Parthians. Trade with India flourished in the first century, and numerous Roman items were discovered there. Strabo told of an embassy from a king in India visiting Augustus (*Geographia* 15.1.4).

Ptolemy's *Geography* records the journey of Maes Titianus, a Syrian trader, about A.D. 100 along the northern route to China.¹⁰

The continent of Africa was virtually unknown to the typical

Roman. Settlements rarely went farther than 200 miles inland from the coast. The desert provided a natural southern boundary. Traders knew the east coast along the Red Sea, but no one tried to circumnavigate the southern tip of Africa. The southernmost archeological evidence of Roman influence is a mausoleum at Germa in the Fezzan.¹¹ Sailors may have gone down the east coast of Africa as far as modern Uganda, but apparently no explorers or traders went very far down the west coast of Africa.¹²

To the Romans in the first century A.D., Rome was *caput mundi* ("capital of the world"). They were aware of other peoples in the world. They were most aware of the "barbarians" to the north and the Parthians, Indians, and Chinese to the east.¹³ In the first century, the Romans seemed satisfied to consolidate their empire rather than expand

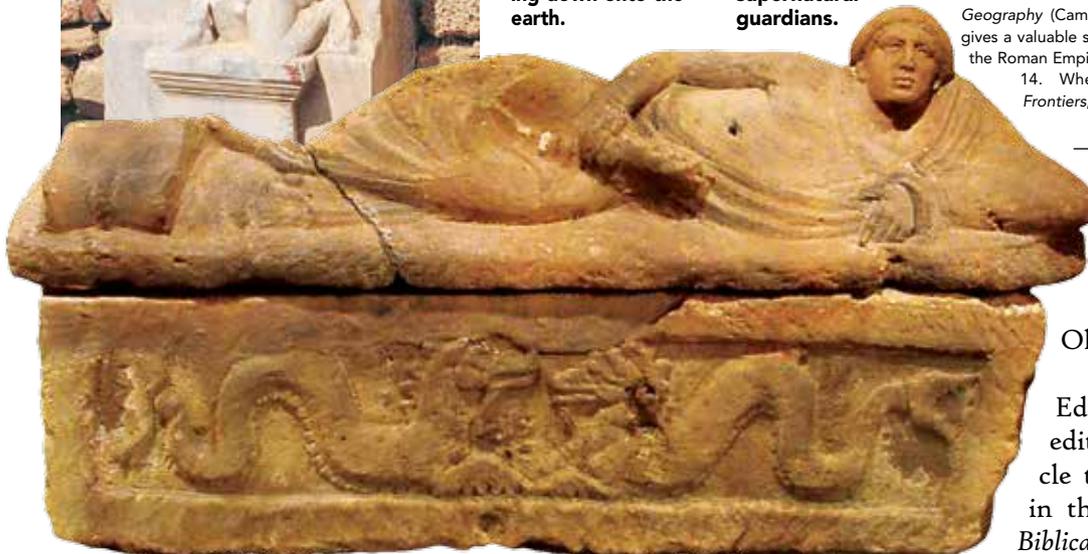
it or even send explorers into the unknown regions. Roman interest in the world outside the borders of the empire was guided primarily by trade. One scholar reported that the Romans primarily sought five major commodities: amber (Free Germany), ivory (Africa), frankincense (southern Arabia), pepper (India), and silk (China).¹⁴ Early Christian missionaries would have a different motive for going beyond the borders of the empire. They would be witnesses of the risen Jesus to "the end of the earth." 🕯

1. Plutarch, *Theseus*, trans. John Dryden, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/theseus.html>.
2. Psalms of Solomon 8:15-16.
3. John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 62, 86.
4. Norman J.W. Thrower, *Maps and Man: An Examination of Cartography in Relation to Culture and Civilization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 17-19.
5. Leo Bagrow, *History of Cartography*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), 37-38.
6. Ronald Syme, "Flavian Wars and Frontiers" in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. F.E. Adcock and M.P. Charlesworth (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936), 11:182-84.
7. Cited in Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1954), 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 112-30.
9. Pliny, *Natural History* 6.84-85.
10. E.H. Bunbury, ed., *A History of Ancient Geography* (London: John Murray, 1879), 2:529.
11. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*, 104-107.
12. M.P. Charlesworth, *Trade-routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1924), 65.
13. James Oliver Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948), gives a valuable survey of geography until the decline of the Roman Empire.
14. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers*, 176.



Left: Nike, the goddess of victory, is standing on a globe, supported by Atlas. Greeks believed Atlas was the mediator between heaven and earth; he was responsible for keeping the heavens from crushing down onto the earth.

Below: Sarcophagus; Etruscan; 3rd-2nd centuries B.C.; lid shows a man holding a mirror and reclining as if at a banquet. The sea-monsters that decorate the chest depict supernatural guardians.



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SARCOPHAGUS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY/ PHILADELPHIA (32/43/29) NIKE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (6/24/4)