The So-called Confusion between India and Ethiopia: The Eastern and Southern Edges of the Inhabited World from the Greco-Roman Perspective

Pierre Schneider

Praecipue India Aethiopumque tractus miraclis scatent (“India and parts of Ethiopia especially teem with marvels”—Plin., HN 7.21; trans. H. Rackham)

In 1681 the celebrated German orientalist Hiob Ludolf published his Historia Aethiopica. At the end of the first chapter, in which the various names given to Ethiopians in classical antiquity were quickly reviewed, the author concluded: quae nominum diversitas . . . haud exiguum confusionem peperit. This is probably the first appearance of a term coined by Ludolf to define a phenomenon which occasionally raises difficulties for classicists and historians, for it may hinder our understanding of ancient texts: the confusion of India and Ethiopia. Here are some examples: “Caesarion, who was said to be Cleopatra’s son ( . . . ), was sent by his mother, with much treasure, into India, by way of Ethiopia” (Plut., Ant. 81.2; trans. B. Perrin); but we do not know where to locate this “India”: in east Africa or in India proper? The spice called κιννάμωμον/cinnamomum remains partly mysterious, since ancient documents are unclear: according to Herodotus (3.107) it was obtained in Arabia, while other authorities attributed it to Ethiopia (Strab. 2.1.13) or India (Theophr., Hist. pl. 4.4.14). The reports of Semiramis’ feats are affected by a persistent confusion: did the queen attack Indians (Ampelius, Liber memorialis 11.3), Ethiopians (Diod. Sic. 3.3.1) or both of them (Diod. Sic. 2.16.1–2)?

In fact it was not until the 19th century that the confusion was seriously investigated. In particular Schwanbeck, the publisher of Megasthenes’ Indika,
was the first who, scrutinizing Greek and Latin literature, listed the data related to “Libya” (= Ethiopia) which had been transferred to India, and vice versa. He also offered the first real explanations for this “amazing confusion” (*mira quaedam confusio*). Schwanbeck—as some scholars still do—associated this phenomenon with the gaps and inaccuracies of Greco-Roman knowledge. In reality, as will be explained after a short description of the confusion between India and Ethiopia (section 1), this extensive and varying phenomenon is not fundamentally a matter of ignorance or error: on the contrary it reflects how the Greco-Romans perceived the southern and eastern fringes of the *oikoumene* (section 2). There are many reasons why they constantly tended to establish parallels between India and Ethiopia, the most important of which will be presented in section 3.

1  Describing the “Confusion”

1.1  *The Themes*

A comprehensive inventory of the “confusions” would obviously exceed the limits of this paper. The following sample, however, suffices to get an idea of their number and variety.

Let us examine, to begin with, the question of spatial divisions and designations, that is the presence of Ethiopians in the East and the expansion of India into east Africa respectively. In the *Odyssey* (*Od*. 1.23–24), Homer praises “the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain, the farthermost of men, some where Hyperion sets and some where he rises”. We can neither clearly identify these Αἰθιοπῆες (“Burnt-Faces”) nor determine to what extent they were real peoples, especially with regard to the “eastern Ethiopians”. It has been rightly doubted since ancient times (Strab. 2.3.8) that Homer was aware of India. On the other hand, the idea that the eastern end of the *oikoumene* was occupied by “Burnt-Faces” had been undoubtedly fixed among the Greeks by the Poet. That is why in the fifth century BC, following the extent of the Greek geographical horizon, some “Ethiopian” tribes were, almost naturally, located by the Greeks in the East. For instance, the 17th Persian *nomos* comprised the “Ethiopians of Asia” (a Baloch tribe?), who “were not different in appearance from the others, only in speech and hair” (Hdt. 3.94; 7.70; trans. Godley). Herodotus

---

3 Schwanbeck 1846, 2.
4 E.g. Arora, 1982, 131; Taboada 1988, 135–47; French 1994, 144, 147; Sidebotham 1986, 41.
5 The Ethiopians neighboring Egypt were probably known to Homer (*e.g. Od*. 4.81–85).
6 The Ethiopians of Nubia.