“Topography, geography and ethnography occupy only a small place in Thucydides’ work.” So begins Friedrich Sieveking’s study of the geographical data in Thucydides’ History, still the most detailed of its kind.\footnote{Sieveking (1964) 73. Sieveking’s article derives from his dissertation, submitted at the University of Hamburg in 1957. There have been many studies on specific geographical problems in Thucydides, but no overall assessment of Thucydidean geography; this task obviously cannot be undertaken here.} Although at first sight this claim may be surprising, it is true, and highlights the difficulties we encounter when trying to evaluate the place of geography and topography in Thucydides. But although a really systematic analysis is not possible, because of the disparate and very sketchy character of the geographical and topographical information given in the History, the issue nevertheless seems worth exploring, because the specific correlation between geography and history contributes to the character of Thucydides’ work and forms its particular character—above all in comparison with other works by ancient historians. Before turning to the main issue, we shall take a quick look at Strabo and Polybius; this will help to put Thucydides’ History into perspective as far as geography is concerned.

1. Ancient Historians and Geography—Strabo’s View

At the beginning of his Geography, written in the first century BC, Strabo states that

The science of Geography, which I now propose to investigate, is, I think, quite as much as any other science, a concern of the philosopher; and the correctness of my view is clear for many reasons. In the first place, those who in earliest times ventured to treat the subject were, in their way, philosophers—Homer, Anaximander of Miletus, and Anaximander’s fellow-citizen Hecataeus—just as Eratosthenes has already said; philosophers, too, were Democritus, Eudoxus, Dicaearchus,
Ephorus, with several others of their times; and further, their successors—Eratosthenes, Polybius, and Poseidonius—were philosophers. In the second place, wide learning, which alone makes it possible to undertake a work on geography, is possessed solely by the man who has investigated things both human and divine—knowledge of which, they say, constitutes philosophy.²

Thus, closely following Eratosthenes,³ he develops an idea of geography which, being based on the scientific ideas of his time, went beyond our present notion of the subject. “Things both human and divine” were to be examined and therefore the study of geography—like all science—was the province of philosophers. Strabo not only subsumes geography under philosophy but also posits a close relationship between geography and historiography under the umbrella of philosophy, explicitly stressing the relation between his lost historical work Historika Hypomnèmata⁴ and his Geography, both of which have the same aim. His Geography “should be generally useful—useful alike to the statesman and to the public at large—as was my work on History.”⁵ And he also says: “And so, after I had written my Historika Hypomnèmata, which have been useful, I suppose, for moral and political philosophy, I determined to write the present treatise also; for this work itself is based on the same plan, and is addressed to the same class of readers, and particularly to men of exalted stations in life.”⁶

Strabo’s idea that there is a close symbiosis between geography and historiography relied on the scientific traditions of the Hellenistic period,⁷ but its roots go back to the beginnings of Ionian natural science and even to the Homeric epic.⁸ This heritage is well illustrated by the catalogue of names contained in the introductory section of the Geography which we quoted at the beginning of this essay.

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² Str. 1.1.1. (All translations of Strabo are taken from H.L. Jones’ “Strabo” in the Loeb Classical Library).
⁴ The few fragments of Strabo’s Historika Hypomnèmata were collected by Felix Jacoby under FGrHist 91 Strabon von Amaseia F 1–19. On this, see recently Engels (1999) 70–73 and 76–85 and also Dueck (2000) 69–75.
⁵ Str. 1.1.22.
⁶ Str. 1.1.23.
⁷ On Strabo and his relationship to his predecessors (e.g., Ephorus, Polybius, Poseidonius, and Diodorus), see Engels (1999) 127–216.
⁸ On the relationship between geography and historiography, see the detailed discussion by Clarke (1999) 1–76.