



**GLOBALISATION AND EMPIRE:
LESSONS FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD**

Wednesday 30 April, 2008

The Diplomatic Academy of London, University of Westminster

© 2008 Sarah Pothecary

Introduction

The word ‘world’ is very flexible. We speak of the ‘western world,’ the ‘developing world,’ the ‘third world,’ the ‘New World,’ the ‘Old World,’ ‘the Arab world,’ the ‘Mediterranean world,’ the ‘modern world,’ the ‘ancient world,’ not to mention ‘World War I’ and ‘World War II.’ In the past, ‘world empires’ have been of varying extent, covering somewhat less than the whole world in the sense of the entire planet. The Roman empire considered itself a ‘world empire’ but in reality occupied a relatively small part of the Europe-Asia-Africa land-mass. In what sense, then, was it a ‘world’ empire?

To answer this question, we are fortunately able to go directly to the Roman mindset through a writer of the early empire, called Strabo (born around 60 BCE, died in 23 CE or later). Strabo’s work is now, of course, two thousand years old -- or, looked at another way, two thousand years out-of-date! Despite, or perhaps because of, its antiquity, I believe that Strabo’s work holds some interesting lessons for the modern-day student of international relations.

Strabo's first language was Greek and that was the language in which he wrote. Even though Strabo's work is available in English translation, its accessibility is irrelevant if students are not motivated to go and seek it out in the first place. My aims in this paper are a) to convey something of the ancient flavour of Strabo's work, and b) to suggest ways in which it might be relevant to contemporary studies.

The 'lived-in world'

Strabo writes about something he calls the 'lived-in world' (*oikoumenē gē*, often translated as the 'inhabited world.') Just as we use the term 'world' in multiple senses, so did Strabo. For example, Strabo uses the term 'world' for the earth as a whole, which he knows to be a free-standing, sphere-shaped object within the universe. I stress this point because there is sometimes a misconception that the sphericity of the earth had not yet been discovered in Roman times.

Strabo further knows that the part of the world with which he is familiar (for the moment, this can be thought of as the Mediterranean area in a very extended sense, together with Persia and India) represents but a small part of the surface area of the spherical world. Strabo believes -- and he is correct in this -- that the part of the world familiar to him accounts for less than a quarter of the earth's surface.

This part of the world, the part familiar to Strabo, is considered by him to be contained within one half of the northern hemisphere. Interestingly -- and again correctly -- Strabo does not discount the possibility that there are people living in the other half of the northern hemisphere, or in the southern hemisphere. What he does -- and in this Strabo errs -- is to allocate such hypothetical populations to their own 'lived-in worlds'

and to consider such ‘lived-in worlds’ as completely and entirely separate from ‘*our* lived-in world.’

Strabo defines ‘*our* lived-in world’ as ‘the world *we* live in,’ which is a circular definition if ever there was one. But it becomes clear, from further reading of Strabo’s work, precisely how ‘*our* lived-in world’ is separated (in Strabo’s mind at least) from other possible ‘lived-in worlds,’ why it is considered separate, and who ‘we’ are. ‘*Our* lived-in world’ is edged (or perceived by Strabo as edged) all around its periphery by an absence of people. That area of emptiness and absence is considered unbridgeable. Any other hypothetical ‘lived-in worlds’ on the earth’s surface must remain forever distinct, the worlds of ‘others’ as opposed to ‘us.’

It thus becomes apparent that Strabo’s ‘lived-in world’ is a social construct, within which people are bound together by possibilities of communication and interaction. True, there are some pockets of absence *within* (as well as beyond) the ‘lived-in world.’ These internal pockets are not, however, such as to provide insurmountable barriers. People can, and do, communicate around and beyond them.

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Strabo’s ‘lived-in world’ is that its boundary of absence and emptiness is considered to be *static*. There is no allowance for the possibility that the ‘lived-in world’ can expand as knowledge expands and as new peoples are discovered. The ‘lived-in world’ is considered to be stuck at its current size and thus is a *measurable* entity. Indeed, Strabo gives its measurements. The unit Strabo uses for these measurements is the *stadion* (basically, the length of a running track). Converted into statute miles, the measurements that Strabo gives for the ‘lived-in world’

are around eight thousand miles for the distance from east to west, and three and a half thousand miles from north to south.

How does Strabo's 'lived-in world' correspond to land-mass as we know it today? This is a difficult question to answer, since Strabo's ideas of physical distance and land formation are often skewed, and he is particularly fuzzy about the more remote areas of his 'lived-in world.' In general terms, however, the 'lived-in world' occupies perhaps one quarter of the land-mass of Europe, Asia and Africa.

Strabo's 'lived-in world' does *not* include Scandinavia, northern and eastern Russia, China, Indo-China, nor any part of Africa south of Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan etc. What we are left with is Europe and northern Africa, the areas around the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, together with India, Persia, the Middle East and Egypt. These can be considered as the constituents of the 'lived-in world,' although in understanding Strabo's mental map, we should appreciate that he thought of these areas as centred on the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (which Strabo does not consider as separate seas, but as different parts of what he calls simply '*our sea*').

Lessons from the past

This brief summation has, I hope, been enough to make it clear that, if we look at Strabo purely as a geographer, there is in fact little point in looking at him at all. We know that people do live (and did in Strabo's time) beyond the periphery of his 'lived-in world.' The 'lived-in world' is a flawed concept. Why, then, should we waste time wallowing in such out-of-date geographical knowledge?

I suggest that we should look at Strabo as a *geo-political* writer, rather than a geographer, and this involves putting him into his own political context. Strabo was writing as the Romans had just transitioned from republic to empire under, first, the brilliantly competent Augustus and, secondly, his son and successor Tiberius. Most of the important Roman conquests that would ever be made had already been made. Those great powers (Persia is the obvious example) which had not yet succumbed to Rome were destined to remain largely ‘unsuccumbed.’ Rome was now more interested in the consolidation of its past conquests.

Seeing Strabo in this light helps us to understand the light by which he, in turn, sees the world. There are three main points which I would like to consider. First, how far is political consolidation reflected in intellectual ideas? In other words if, like Rome, you consider yourself as having arrived at a ‘world empire,’ might it not be tempting intellectually to restrict the definition of the ‘world’ to areas within, or only just outside, that empire? The ‘lived-in world’ is thus a convenient construct, an area dominated by Rome even if some of its parts are not directly ruled by Rome. Moreover, the parts of the ‘lived-in world’ not directly ruled by Rome are on its periphery. Persia and India become geographical hinterlands – and, by implication, political hinterlands as well.

The second point that I would like to consider concerns the emptiness and absence, the lack of human habitation, which is supposed to surround and edge the ‘lived-in world.’ It is often said that Strabo wrote human geography and this is seen generally as a rather cute and fluffy thing. Strabo is praised for his interest in ethnic diversity, ethnic identity and so on. It is indeed true that Strabo spills much ink on such matters, with his vivid descriptions of nations and peoples forming the bulk of his work. But we have to

remember that people are a resource and that the Roman empire was interested in resources. Strabo's telling comment on Britain (which at this stage had not been incorporated into the Roman empire) is that it is not worth conquering, because the wealth acquired through its tax revenue would be used up in paying the expenses associated with keeping an army there.

The third point is the most abstract but perhaps the most interesting and I will spend a little more time on it. The absence and emptiness that surround the 'lived-in world' are seen by Strabo as areas about which nothing is known. If nothing is known about them, how do we know that they are empty? It's a good question. Underlying Strabo's rationale is the idea that if there was anything to know about these places, then we would know it; since we don't know it, then there's nothing to know. It might seem somewhat inane but it is the sort of rationale that was applied until recently to the question of other life-forms in the solar system, or other planets in the galaxy. It's is always tempting to see the limits of knowledge as somehow representing real physical limits.

It is sometimes said that Strabo thinks of the 'lived-in world' as an island. That is not quite correct. For although at times he talks in that way, at other times he talks as if there might be land-bridges, at least to the north and south of the 'lived-in world,' connecting with land-masses in other quarters of the earth. When it comes down to it, from Strabo's point of view, the exact configuration of land really doesn't matter. If there is any land immediately beyond the 'lived-in world,' Strabo believes that no one lives in it anyway, so it might as well be open sea. And if there are any other land-masses that are

inhabited, they are so far away and so cut-off by the intervening emptiness that they are not worth worrying about.

Again, we come back to the question of the conflation of physical and intellectual limits. If we think Strabo is being a little careless intellectually, we have to remember that he is influenced by past traditions and that such traditions can exert a strong pressure even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Why, for instance, do we persist in using the terms 'Europe,' 'Asia' and 'Africa'? These terms were applied in antiquity, by writers even earlier than Strabo, to what were considered to be physically discrete masses of land. We no longer think of these names as designating separate land-masses. Why do we use them at all? What do they mean? Where are their boundaries? Already in Strabo's day, some had argued that the concepts should be abandoned as worthless.

Conclusion

These, then, are the three lessons to be learnt from studying Strabo's view of the world: first, the tendency of a fixed political system to see the world in static terms; second, the tendency to see the world in terms of what we can get out of it; third, the difficulty in extricating ourselves from intellectual traditions which may have had value once, but which may no longer be useful. True, Strabo's views are based on ideas and assumptions that are two thousand years old, but in judging them we are forced to confront the possibility, indeed probability, that two thousand years from now our contemporary ideas are going to appear laughably ignorant.

Strabo himself recognises the problem of cultural bias. An Indian or an Ethiopian, he says, would write a completely different geography than a Greek or a Roman. But I

think the lesson we draw from Strabo is more than that. After all, absolute objectivity in international relations is probably neither achievable nor desirable. It is not so much that Strabo's hypothetical Indian would describe the 'lived-in world' from his own point of view. Rather, he is unlikely to have subscribed in the first place to the notion of the 'lived-in world.' His geographical ideas would have been based on an entirely different set of assumptions, probably equally wrong-headed, but wrong-headed in a different way.

In short, we can and should question our own assumptions and biases, without necessarily condoning or adopting the biases of others. This leads to the consideration of the really big questions. How globalised are we *really*? Have globalised commerce and communications skewed our perceptions? Wouldn't true globalisation include greater jurisdictional or political amalgamation? Are these possible without empire and war? Is globalised commerce merely a precursor – as it has often been historically – to the expansion of empire? Does instantaneous international communication facilitate or hinder the spread of empire? Are we ready for a truly 'world empire.'

These are big questions, of course. I suggest only that we attempt to answer them not in terms of what we would *like* to happen, but in terms of what is *probable*.

Sarah Potheary
sarahpotheary.com

Postscript

HE Mr Kamalesh Sharma, the Commonwealth's Secretary-General, gave a short talk at the closing dinner of the 2008 DAL conference on Transformational Diplomacy (at which this paper was delivered). In his talk, Mr Kamalesh Sharma mentioned that the 'developing world' did not exist before India's independence in 1947. Of course, he did not mean that the geographical space did not exist prior to 1947. The 'developing world' is a collective phrase for political entities that came into existence after that date, sharing the challenges of new-found independence. Like Strabo's 'lived-in world,' the 'developing world' is a name that has now had its day, as the twenty-first century world transforms itself into a new geo-political reality.