

Indica

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'Indica' is an account of the Mauryan Empire by the Greek writer, Megasthenes. The original book is now lost, but its fragments have survived in later Greek and Latin works. The earliest of these works are those by ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, Strabo a Greek geographer, Pliny a magistrate of ancient Rome, and Arrian another Greek historian.

Megasthenes' Indica can be reconstructed using the portions preserved by later writers as direct quotations, rephrased or even paraphrased. The parts that belonged to the original text can be identified from the later works based on similar content, vocabulary and phrasing, even



when the content has not been explicitly attributed to Megasthenes. There is a Greek document of Felix Jacoby titled 'Fragmente der griechischen Historiker' that contains 36 pages

of content that can be traced back to Megasthenes.

E. A. Schwanbeck, another historian, traced several fragments of writings to Megasthenes, and based on his collection, John Watson McCrindle a Scottish philologist and educator published a reconstructed version of *Indica* in 1887. But this reconstructed version was not universally accepted.

Schwanbeck and John Watson McCrindle attributed several fragments in the writings of the 1st century BCE writer Diodorus to Megasthenes. However, Diodorus

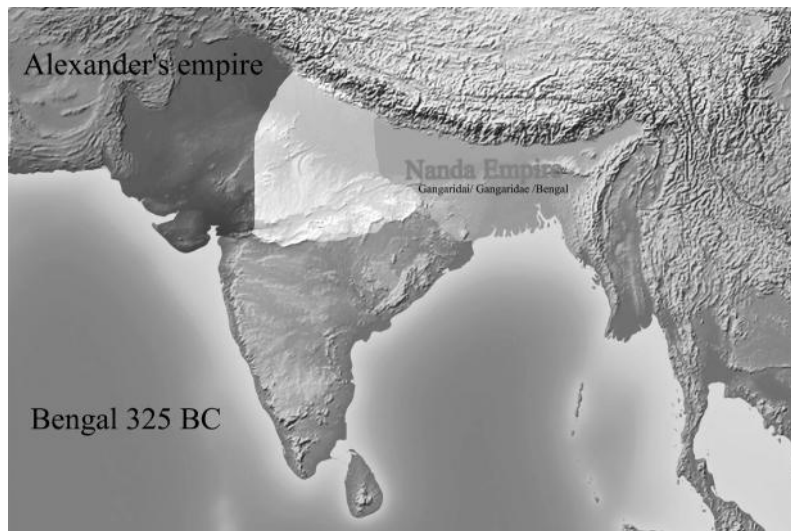


Diodorus

does not mention Megasthenes even once, unlike Strabo, who explicitly mentions Megasthenes as one of his sources. There are several differences between the accounts of Megasthenes and Diodorus. For example, Diodorus describes India as 28,000 stadia long (a Greek unit of length from which the word 'stadium' has come) from east to west, whereas, Megasthenes gives this number as 16,000. Diodorus states that Indus may be the world's largest river after Nile, whereas, Megasthenes (as quoted by Arrian) states that Ganges is much larger than Nile.

There is a description of Gangaridai that appears in the writings of Diodorus. Gangaridai is a term used by the ancient Greco-Roman writers to describe the people or a geographical region of the ancient Indian subcontinent. Some of these writers state that Alexander the Great withdrew from the Indian subcontinent because of the strong war elephant force of the Gangaridai. The writers variously mention Gangaridai as a distinct tribe, or a nation within a larger kingdom (presumably the Nanda Empire).

A number of modern scholars locate Gangaridai in the Ganges Delta of the Bengal region, although,



Nanda Empire

alternative theories also exist. Gange or Ganges, the capital of the Gangaridai (according to historian Ptolemy), has been identified with several sites in the region, including Chandraketugarh and Wari-bateshwar.

McCrimdle believed that Diodorus' source for his description was the now-lost book of Megasthenes. However, according to A. B. Bosworth (1996), Diodorus obtained this information from Hieronymus of Cardia: Diodorus described Ganges as 30 stadia wide. It is well-attested by other sources that Megasthenes described the median or minimum width of Ganges as 100 stadia,

about 185 to 192 metres.

According to the text reconstructed by John Watson McCrimdle, Megasthenes' *Indica* describes India as follows:

India is a quadrilateral-shaped country, bounded by the ocean on the southern and the eastern side. The Indus River forms the western and the northwestern boundary of the country, as far as the ocean. India's northern border reaches the extremities of Tauros the mountains of southern Turkey. From Ariana (the Latinised name of ancient Greece) to the Eastern Sea, it is bound by mountains that are called Kaukasos by the Macedonians. The various native

names for these mountains include Parapamisos, Hemodos and Himaos (the Himalayas). Beyond Hemodos, lies Scythia (a region of central Eurasia) inhabited by the Scythians known as Sakai. Besides Scythia, the countries of Bactria, an ancient region in Central Asia. Bactria proper was north of the Hindu Kush mountain range and south of the Amu Darya River, covering the flat region that straddles modern-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. More broadly Bactria was the area north of the Hindu-Kush, west of the Pamirs and south of the Tian-Shan, with the Amu Darya flowing west through the center, and Ariana bordering India.

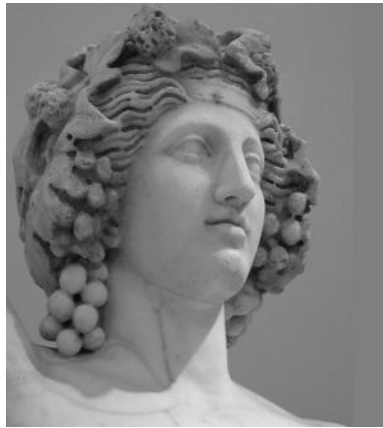
At the extreme point of India, there is this gnomon, the projecting piece of the sundial that often casts no shadow, and the Ursa Major constellation that is completely invisible at night. In the remotest parts, the shadows fall southward, when even Arcturus the brightest star is not visible.

India has many large and navigable rivers, which arise in the mountains on its northern border. Many of these rivers merge into Ganges, which is 30 stadia wide at its source, and runs from north to

south. The Ganges empties into the ocean that forms the eastern boundary of Gangaridai. Other nations feared Gangaridai's huge force of the biggest elephants, and therefore, Gangaridai had never been conquered by any foreign king.

Indus also runs from north to south, and has several navigable tributaries. The most notable tributaries are Hupanis, the Hudaspes, and the Akesines. One peculiar river is Sillas, which originates from a fountain of the same name. Everything cast into this river sinks down to the bottom, so nothing floats in it. In addition, there are a large number of other rivers, supplying abundant water for agriculture. According to the native philosophers and natural scientists, the reason for this is that the bordering countries are more elevated than India, so their waters run down to India, resulting in such a large number of rivers.

In the primitive times, Indians lived on fruits and wore clothes made of animal skin, just like the Greeks. Some learned Indian scholars say that Dionysus the god of the grape-harvest, winemaking and wine, of fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and theatre in ancient Greek religion



Dionysus

and myth invaded India, and conquered it. When his army was unable to bear the excessive heat, he led his soldiers to the mountains called Meros for recovery. Dionysus taught Indians several things including how to grow plants, make wine and worship. He founded several large cities, introduced laws and established courts. For this reason, he was regarded as a deity by the Indians. He ruled India for 52 years, before dying of old age. His descendants ruled India for several generations, before being dethroned and replaced by democratic city-states.

The Indians who inhabited the hill country also claim that Heracles a Greek deity was one of

them. Like the Greeks, they characterise him with the club and the lion's skin. According to them, Heracles was a powerful man who subjugated evil beasts. He had several sons and one daughter, who became rulers in different parts of his dominion. He founded several cities, the greatest of which was Pataliputra. Heracles built several places in this city, fortified it with water-filled trenches and settled a number of people in the city. His descendants ruled India for several generations, but never launched an expedition beyond India. After several years, the royal rule was replaced by democratic city states, although there existed a few kings when Alexander invaded India.

India has several mountains with fruit trees of every kind. There are a large number of animal species in India. The Indian elephants are far stronger than the Libyan elephants, because of the abundance of food on the Indian soil. The elephants are domesticated in large numbers, and trained for war. The gestation period of the elephants range from 16 to 18 months, and the oldest of the elephants live up to 200 years.

Gold, silver, copper and iron are abundant on Indian soil. Tin and

other metals are used for making a number of tools, weapons, ornaments, and other articles.

India has very fertile plains, and irrigation is practised widely. The main crops include rice, millet, a crop called *bosporum*, cereals, pulses and other food plants. There are two crop cycles per year, since rain falls in both summer and winter. At the time of summer solstice, rice, millet, *bosporum* and *sesamum* are sown. During winter, wheat is sown.

Famines have never occurred in India because of the following reasons:

- u The Indians are always assured of at least one of the two seasonal crops.
- u There are a number of spontaneously growing fruits and edible roots available.
- u The Indian warriors regard those engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry as sacred. Unlike the warriors in

other countries, they do not ravage farms during war or conquests. Moreover, the warring sides never destroy the enemy land with fire or cut down its trees.

Because of its large size, India is inhabited by many diverse races, all of which are indigenous. India has no foreign colony, and Indians have not established any colonies outside India. They are well-skilled in art, above average stature, because of abundant food, fine water and air.

A law, prescribed by ancient Indian philosophers, bans slavery. The law treats everyone equally, but allows the property to be unevenly distributed.

One must appreciate Megasthenes who wrote such an illustrative book when knowledge was very limited. Unfortunately the original book is not available now. He was born in 350 BCE and lived for 60 years. ●

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