

Bragging Travelers and the Role of Travel in Strabo's Geography

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Odysseus' account of his wanderings to the Phaeacians is possibly the earliest travel narrative in western civilization. It is also possibly the earliest travel narrative whose veracity can be seriously questioned. Because travel narratives allow people to visit places they never have, the narrator is free to lie and exaggerate. Strabo realized this and contrary to earlier assessments of him as a mere compiler was critical of his sources, especially the accounts of travelers to distant lands. This paper examines Strabo's attitudes to travel and travelers and what these attitudes tell us about Strabo's philosophical leanings and the purpose of his Geography.

Strabo avoids directly demonstrating his own first-hand knowledge of various places, but he does not merely avoid autoptic evidence, he downright distrusts it. He avoidance extends to downright distrust of such knowledge. He warns his readers to beware of the accounts of travelers, because "every traveler who tells stories is a braggart (1.2.23)." In the pursuit of knowledge, Strabo declares that hearing (akoê) is preferable to sight. At the same time he also brags that he has traveled further afield than any of his predecessors (2.5.11).

To reconcile this conflict we must see Strabo not as a geographer but as a philosopher. It is as a philosophical work that Strabo intends his Geography, not a catalogue of the known world. And as a philosophical work, its goal is to "promote the virtue of not marveling (1.3.16)," a goal that can only be accomplished through the broadest experience possible.