

# Strabo on Wine in Ancient India

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**Abstract** In book 15 of his *Geography*, Strabo presents a portrayal of Central Asia and India heavily influenced by accounts provided by Megasthenes and historians of Alexander the Great, such as Onesicritus. Strabo intermittently incorporates observations regarding winemaking and consumption in India, along with references to the association of these regions with Dionysus and his civilising influence. This contribution seeks to scrutinise the evidence presented by Strabo regarding vine cultivation and wine production in India, drawing upon the description of Musikanos' kingdom and the utopian context in which information related to wine is situated.

**Keywords** Greek Geography. Roman Geography. Onesicritus. Musikanos. Utopia. Winemaking.

**Summary** 1. Musikanos' Kingdom: India Between Reality and Utopia. – 2. Vine Cultivation and Winemaking in Ancient Utopia. – 3. Onesicritus' on Wine in Musicanus' Kingdom: A Purely Utopian Trait?

Strabo authored an extensive 17-volume geographical treatise encompassing the entirety of the inhabited world. Throughout his work, Strabo exhibits a distinct inclination towards exploring the resources of the regions he describes. Strabo's deep interest in resources becomes especially conspicuous concerning those he perceives as indicative of the level of civilisation attained by the populations in question, namely wheat, olive trees, and vines. The consumption of the Mediterranean triad, comprising wheat, wine, and olive oil, is considered a prominent indicator of cultural advancement. Conversely,

the utilisation of butter, beer, and non-wheat flour is perceived to suggest a certain level of barbarism.<sup>1</sup>

Although deemed technically as barbarians, the Indians held an esteemed reputation among the Greeks, primarily owing to their renowned wisdom and the modesty reflected in their customs.<sup>2</sup> This admiration and evaluation were undoubtedly influenced by India's geographical location, situated at the farthest edge of the inhabited world, which fostered an idealised perception of Indian culture. Paradoxically, despite its peripheral geographical position – or possibly due to it – India exerted a profound impact on Greek intellectual history. Undoubtedly, Alexander the Great's expedition and the subsequent historiographical works pertaining to it held profound significance in shaping the understanding and description of India.<sup>3</sup> However, two aspects were consistently featured in its representation: the marvels inherent to the Indian world and the degree of civilisation exhibited by its inhabitants. Strabo, for instance, inferred India's level of civilisation based on several factors. Firstly, the multitude of cities present in the country (including notable ones such as Nysa, Taxila, and Pataliputra) served as indicators of its cultural advancement.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the prevailing social organisation within India also contributed to the perception of its level of development.<sup>5</sup>

Amidst the indicators of civilisation, particular attention is accorded by Strabo to the cultivation of the vine and the production of wine. Strabo displays a keen interest in vineyards and wine, consistently devoting attention to specific vineyards and distinct wine varieties originating from various regions (and even taking note of their absence). Consequently, in his depiction of India, Strabo provides valuable insights into the cultivation of vines, the production and the consumption of wine:

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**1** Cf., for instance, Strab. 3.3.7. Strabo appears to have devised a meticulous scale for assessing such degrees (cf. Almagor 2005, 52): when describing the habits of the inhabitants of Britain, Strabo notes a resemblance to some aspects of Celtic culture while simultaneously deeming them “simpler and more barbarous” (ἀπλούστερα καὶ βαρβαρώτερα) in other respects (4.5.2). Moreover, certain people are unequivocally labelled as “totally barbarian” (τέλειως βάρβαροι), with the Ligurians, who inhabited the mountains, serving as an example (4.6.4). In addition to Almagor 2005, for Strabo's conception of the barbarians, cf. Van der Vliet 1984; Dueck 2000, 75-84; Dandrow 2017.

**2** India represents a distinctive case within Greek ethnography, consistently maintaining a highly positive image: it appears to transcend the constraints of the dichotomy between the Greco-Roman and the barbarian world (cf. Arora 1982, 481-2; Leroy 2016, CII; Coloru 2024, 191).

**3** Cf. Marcotte 1998, 267; Gehrke 2015; Leroy 2016, XXVI-XXVII; Coloru 2024.

**4** On the urbanisation and political organisation as a sign of civilisation in Strabo, see Pédech 1971; Thompson 1979, 221-4; Van der Vliet 1984, 48-56.

**5** On the social structure of a people as an indication of its level of civilisation, see Van der Vliet 1984, 39; Jacob 1991, 161.

- 15.1.7-8: Strabo engages in a critical refutation of the mythical tradition attributing a triumphant campaign by Dionysus against the Indians, wherein he supposedly established the city of Nysa, a tradition that purportedly found its validation in the presence of vines and ivy in the region;
- 15.1.22: Strabo inserts the description of Musikanos' kingdom, in which grapevine and wine production are said to be present;
- 15.1.53: the Indians partake in wine solely during sacrificial rituals, and their libations consist of a wine crafted from rice, not from barley;
- 15.1.55: a woman who commits regicide by slaying an inebriated king is granted the opportunity to marry his successor;
- 15.1.58: according to Megasthenes, the Indian philosophers residing in the mountainous regions of northern India venerate Dionysus and exhibit evidence of his presence through wild vines that solely thrive in their vicinity. However, Strabo endeavours to discredit this assertion by highlighting the production of wine in regions situated beyond the Euphrates, such as Karmania, Armenia, Persis, and Mesopotamia.

The present contribution will focus on the passage dedicated to Musikanos' kingdom, since this particular passage provides a noteworthy glimpse into Strabo's methodology and the manner in which the information he presents ought to be examined.

## 1 Musikanos' Kingdom: India Between Reality and Utopia

Among Alexander the Great's historians, Onesicritus of Astipalea situates the territory of Musikanos in the lower reaches of the Indus River.<sup>6</sup> The domain ruled by Musikanos has been identified with the Alor region, proximate to the modern-day site of Sukkur, where vestiges of its presence endure.<sup>7</sup> The kingdom notably occupied a

<sup>6</sup> On the life and work of Onesicritus, cf. Brown 1949; Pearson 1960, 83-111; Pédech 1984, 71-157; Albaladejo Vivero 2003; Goulet-Cazé 2006; Leroy 2016, XLVIII-LI. On the land of Musikanos, see Brown 1949, 54-61; Pearson 1960, 100-3; Pédech 1984, 114-23; Bosworth 1996, 85-7; Albaladejo Vivero 2003, 23-32; Arora 2005, 90-101. Ancient accounts include Diod. 17.102.5; Curt. 9.8.8-16; Arr. *Anab.* 6.15.5-17.2.

<sup>7</sup> Leroy 2016, 162 (with previous bibliography) locates the kingdom of Musikanos in Upper Sind and supposes that Musikanos may represent Sanskrit *Mūsika* (perhaps to be identified with modern Moghshi, cf. Arora 2005, 91 and Stoneman 2019, 247). Indeed, Onesicritus places the kingdom of Musikanos in the far south of India (Strab. 15.1.21: τὰ ἐν τῇ Μουσικανοῦ [...] ἅ φησι νοτιώτατα εἶναι τῆς Ἰνδικῆς): Brown 1949, 154 fn. 3 notes the different placement of the region between Arrian and Onesicritus and states: "Perhaps he [sc. Onesicritus] referred to this whole section of India, including the Delta, as

strategic position at the terminus of a significant trade route interlinking it with Gandhāra via the Bolan and Khojak passes. This geographical context may elucidate the considerable prosperity encountered by the Macedonians in the area. Evidently, as detailed in Arrian's *Anabasis*, Musikanos, apprehensive of the Macedonian military force, promptly submitted to Alexander and dispatched opulent offerings.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, a subsequent uprising unfolded, culminating in a confrontation with the satrap Peithon. After a decisive defeat, Musikanos faced capital punishment and his kingdom suffered extensive pillaging.

Beyond the restoration of events deduced from historiographical sources like Arrian, the representation of Musikanos' kingdom is shaped by the account provided by Onesicritus. Grounded in his narrative, Strabo provides the ensuing depiction:<sup>9</sup>

λέγει δὲ καὶ περὶ τῆς Μουσικανοῦ χώρας ἐπὶ πλέον, ἐγκωμιάζων αὐτήν, ὧν τινα κοινὰ καὶ ἄλλοις Ἰνδοῖς ἱστώρηται, ὡς τὸ μακρόβιον, ὥστε καὶ τριάκοντα ἐπὶ τοῖς ἑκατὸν προσλαμβάνειν (καὶ γὰρ τοὺς Σῆρας ἔτι τούτων μακροβιωτέρους τινές φασι), καὶ τὸ λιτόβιον καὶ τὸ ὑγιεινόν, καίπερ τῆς χώρας ἀφθονίαν ἀπάντων ἐχούσης, ἴδιον δὲ τὸ συσσίτια τινα Λακωνικὰ αὐτοῖς εἶναι δημοσίᾳ σιτουμένων, ὅσα δ' ἐκ θήρας ἐχόντων· καὶ τὸ χρυσῶ μὴ χρῆσθαι μηδ' ἀργύρῳ, μετὰλλων ὄντων· καὶ τὸ ἀντὶ δούλων τοῖς ἐν ἀκμῇ χρῆσθαι νέοις, ὡς Κρήτες μὲν τοῖς Ἀφαμιώταις, Λάκωνες δὲ τοῖς Εἰλωσι· μὴ ἀκριβοῦν δὲ τὰς ἐπιστήμας πλὴν ἰατρικῆς· ἐπὶ τινῶν γὰρ κακουργίαν εἶναι τὴν ἐπὶ πλέον ἄσκησιν οἶον ἐπὶ τῆς πολεμικῆς καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων· δίκην δὲ μὴ εἶναι πλὴν φόνου καὶ ὕβρεως – οὐκ ἐπ' αὐτῷ γὰρ τὸ μὴ παθεῖν ταῦτα, τὰ δ' ἐν τοῖς συμβολαίοις ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἐκάστῳ, ὥστε ἀνέχεσθαι δεῖ, ἐάν τις παραβῇ τὴν πίστιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ προσέχειν ὅτῳ πιστευέον καὶ μὴ δικῶν πληροῦν τὴν πόλιν.

He also speaks about the land of Musikanos, praising it at length. Some things recorded about it are common to other Indians, such as their longevity – which is thirty years beyond a hundred (and some say that the Serians live still longer) – and their simple life and healthiness, even though their country is abundant in everything.

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νοτιώτατα". Pearson 1960, 100, fn. 67 associates the region with the lower course of the Indus, arguing that Onesicritus could not have described it as νοτιώτατα since he knew he had not reached the southernmost limit of India, "but he could still have said that this was the most southerly point he had reached"; cf. also Leroy 2016, 139. Radt 2009, 161 amends ἄ [...] νοτιώτατα τοῖς ἴν [...] νοτιωτάτην (though this correction appears unnecessary) and interprets it as the southernmost point of India, arguing that Onesicritus was unaware of the true extent of India. Cf. also Winiarczyk 2011, 102, fn. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 6.15.5-17.2.

<sup>9</sup> 15.1.34 = *FGrHist* 134 F 24.

Peculiar to them is common dining in the Lakonian style (in which they eat in public with food from what they have hunted), that they do not use gold or silver although having mines, and that they use young men in the prime of life instead of slaves, as the Cretans use the Aphamiotians and the Lakonians the Helots.<sup>10</sup> They do not investigate knowledge accurately (except for medicine), since too much practice of it is considered by them to be malignant, especially military and similar matters. They have no legal proceedings except for murder and violence. One cannot avoid experiencing these, whereas contracts are in one's own hands, for one must bear it if anyone were to overstep faith, as well as pay attention to who must be trusted and not fill the city with legal proceedings.<sup>11</sup>

The description of Musikanos' kingdom by Onesicritus, as relayed by Strabo, exhibits certain discernible utopian attributes, since it is likely coloured by his philosophical inclinations.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the depiction of India within classical sources consistently manifests diverse utopian traits, which can be classified across categories encompassing the natural environment, the physical human traits, and facets of private as well as societal existence.<sup>13</sup>

1) The climate is temperate, marked by ample water sources, and characterised by a profusion of wild fruits, along with extraordinary flora and fauna features.

2) People enjoy a prolonged lifespan, coupled with robust health and a notable stature.

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**10** The comparison is imprecise, yet the assimilation to the Helots could be part of Onesicritus' seemingly attempted parallel between Sparta and the kingdom of Musikanos (cf. also the Spartan-like *syssitia* and the avoidance of precious metals): cf. Leroy 2016, 166. The idealisation of the Spartan (and also Cretan) regime had widely spread in Greek literature (cf. Atack 2021). In this regard, the absence of slavery also appears to evoke Cynic thought, which seems to have been averse to slavery (cf. Diog. Laert. 6.55; 6.74).

**11** Transl. by Roller 2014. The influence of Cynic political thought has been acknowledged in these customs: cf. Brown 1949, 40 and Albaladejo Vivero 2003, 31.

**12** According to Plutarch (*De Alex. fort.* 331E; *Alex.* 65), Onesicritus is said to have been a disciple of Diogenes of Sinope, hence a follower of Cynic philosophy: cf. Brown 1949, 60; Stoneman 1995. It is likely due to his philosophical background that he was chosen by Alexander as an envoy to the so-called "gymnosophists" (Strab. 15.1.63): on the encounter between Onesicritus and the gymnosophists, as well as the content of their conversations, cf. e.g. Brown 1949, 41; Stoneman 1995; Karttunen 1997, 61; Goulet-Cazé 2006; Winiarczyk 2009; Kubica 2021.

**13** Cf. Winiarczyk 2011, 231-59; Stoneman 2019, 241-2. Cf. also Tola, Dragonetti 1986, 188-9; Coloru 2024, 165. For a definition of 'utopia' see the comprehensive surveys by Winiarczyk 2011 and by Napolitano 2022.

3) Individual and social qualities encompass piety, equity, self-discipline, the absence of avarice, and the absence of slavery.

Stated differently, there emerges a form of idealisation concerning both the Indian landscape and society. However, this idealisation becomes intertwined with the established tradition of portraying the 'barbarian'.<sup>14</sup> One of the most striking hallmarks within the Greek portrayal of the 'barbarian' lies in the presence of pronounced contradictions. The Persians, as an instance, can simultaneously be depicted as fearsome and feeble, devoted to opulence yet highly adept in warfare, marked by cunning and formidable as warriors. Turning to the context of India, Strabo asserts on two occasions that the land yields treasures, even though the Indian populace remains unfamiliar with the extraction of precious metals and holds wealth in disdain.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, their outward appearance sharply belies this apparent simplicity of manners, evident in the vivid hues of their clothing and the profuse employment of precious gemstones, pearls, and gold ornaments.<sup>16</sup> Within the Greek conceptualisation, this opulent attire is attributed to all Eastern populations, yet for the Indian societies, this opulence is compounded by the prosperity of the nature in which they live. Consequently, we encounter in the classical sources a seamless fusion of nature and societal attributes when it comes to India.<sup>17</sup>

## 2 Vine Cultivation and Winemaking in Ancient Utopia

Similar paradoxes arise in relation to the consumption of wine: the inhabitants of India are recognised for their temperance, yet concurrently, they are ascribed an excessive penchant for wine.<sup>18</sup> Strabo categorises India as a region characterised by being ἄοινος, indicating

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**14** The representation of the 'barbarian' has been the subject of extensive scholarly literature, notably beginning with Hall 1989 and Hall 1997. Nevertheless, this literature is often compromised by an overly schematic approach and is significantly shaped by Athenian propaganda, which framed the Persian Wars as a fundamental clash of civilisations. For a different perspective see Vlassopoulos 2013.

**15** Strab. 15.1.30;34.

**16** Strab. 15.1.30;54. A parallel observation pertains to Indian military inclinations. Within Strabo's *Geography*, the Indians are delineated as a peaceable populace, not inclined towards warfare (15.1.6). However, historical records indicate that they faced defeat only at the hands of Alexander the Great and by Dionysus in mythical times. In contrast, they have consistently rebuffed assaults from the Assyrians under Semiramis and from the Persians led by Cyrus (15.1.7-8). Cf. Parker 2008, 86; Coloru 2024, 177.

**17** Leroy 2016, CXIII.

**18** Cf. Athen. 10.49.437a-b = Chares *FGrHist* 125 F 19a and Curt. 8.9.30. See Coloru 2024, 180.

the absence of wine production. It is within this precise context that an excerpt from Onesicritus surfaces in Strabo's narrative:<sup>19</sup>

ἐν δὲ τῇ Μουσικανοῦ καὶ σῖτον αὐτοφυῆ λέγει πυρῶ παραπλήσιον καὶ ἄμπελον, ὥστ' οἰνοφορεῖν, τῶν ἄλλων ἄϊνον λεγόντων τὴν Ἰνδικήν.

He speaks of a wild grain similar to wheat, in the territory of Musikanos, and a vine that produces wine, although others say that Indike has no wine.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to most historians recording Alexander the Great's campaign, Onesicritus situates vine-cultivation and wine-production within the territory of Musikanos. Notably, the growth of vines appears to be spontaneous in this context. The Greek sentence, however, introduces a potential ambiguity: the adjective αὐτοφυῆ could pertain exclusively to σῖτος, or alternatively, it could be construed as predicative of both σῖτος and ἄμπελος. Both grammatical interpretations remain plausible. Considering Strabo's *usus scribendi* and the subsequent mention of the abundant production of various fruits in the land of Musikanos, a stronger inclination arises to interpret the adjective as extending to both nouns. Furthermore, Strabo himself attests to the existence of wild vines in Gandhāra, citing Megasthenes as his source. It is noteworthy that Megasthenes suggests that the local inhabitants believed themselves to be descendants of Dionysus due to the presence of these wild vines.<sup>21</sup>

Could the notion of winemaking and spontaneous vine growth in the kingdom of Musikanos be plausible, or does it merely serve as another element within the utopian narrative? It is essential to acknowledge that the spontaneous abundance of the earth's produce is a characteristic hallmark of Greek utopian views.<sup>22</sup> An influential precedent, such as that offered by Homer, might have played a role in shaping Onesicritus' perspective. In the 9th book of the *Odyssey*, Ulysses, having departed from the Lotophagi, arrives in the land of the Cyclopes, a region depicted by the poet in the following manner:<sup>23</sup>

ἔνθεν δὲ προτέρω πλέομεν ἀκαχήμενοι ἦτορ.  
Κυκλώπων δ' ἐς γαῖαν ὑπερφιάλων ἀθεμίστων  
ἰκόμεθ', οἳ ρα θεοῖσι πεποιθότες ἀθανάτοισιν

<sup>19</sup> Strab. 15.1.22 = *FGrHist* 134 F 22.

<sup>20</sup> Transl. by Roller 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Strab. 15.1.58.

<sup>22</sup> In general, caution is needed before applying the category of utopia, as discussed by Winiarczyk 2011 and Napolitano 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Hom. *Od.* 9.105-11.

οὔτε φυτεύουσιν χερσὶν φυτὸν οὔτ' ἀρόωσιν,  
ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,  
πυροὶ καὶ κριθαὶ ἢ δ' ἄμπελοι, αἵ τε φέρουσιν  
οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὄμβρος ἀέξει.

So we left that country and sailed with heavy hearts. And we came to the land of the Cyclopes, a fierce, lawless people who never lift a hand to plant or plough but just leave everything to the immortal gods. All the crops they require spring up unsown and untilled, wheat and barley and vines with generous clusters that swell with the rain from heaven to yield wine.<sup>24</sup>

Within the land of the Cyclopes, all manner of vegetation, including vines and wheat, flourishes spontaneously.<sup>25</sup> This paradigm was assuredly not unfamiliar to Greek authors, as evident in another passage of Strabo's own work where he exposes the characteristics of the region of Albania:<sup>26</sup>

οὐδὲ γὰρ τῇ γῆι χρώνται κατ' ἀξίαν, πάντα μὲν ἐκφερούσῃ καρπὸν καὶ τὸν ἡμερώτατον, πᾶν δὲ φυτὸν· καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἀειθαλῆ φέρει· τυγχάνει δ' ἐπιμελείας οὐδὲ μικρᾶς “ἀλλὰ τὰ γ' ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται”, καθάπερ οἱ στρατεύσαντές φασι, Κυκλώπειόν τινα διηγούμενοι βίον· πολλαχοῦ γὰρ σπαρείσαν ἅπαξ δις ἐκφέρειν καρπὸν ἢ καὶ τρίς, τὸν δὲ πρῶτον καὶ πεντηκοντάχουν, ἀνέαστον καὶ ταῦτα οὐδὲ σιδήρῳ τμηθεῖσαν ἀλλ' αὐτοξύλῳ ἀρότρῳ. ποτίζεται δὲ πᾶν τὸ πεδίον τοῦ Βαβυλωνίου καὶ τοῦ Αἰγυπτίου μᾶλλον τοῖς ποταμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὕδασιν ὥστ' αἰεὶ ποώδη φυλάττειν τὴν ὄσιν· διὰ δὲ τοῦτο καὶ εὐβοτόν ἐστι· πρόσεστι δὲ καὶ τὸ εὐάερον ἐκείνων μᾶλλον. ἄσκαφοι δ' αἱ ἄμπελοι μένουσαι διὰ τέλους, τεμνόμεναι δὲ διὰ πενταετηρίδος, νέαι μὲν διετεῖς ἐκφέρουσιν ἤδη καρπὸν, τέλειαι δ' ἀποδιδόασι τοσοῦτον ὥστ' ἀφιᾶσιν ἐν τοῖς κλήμασι πολὺ μέρος.

They do not use their land according to its value, which bears all fruit – even the most cultivated – and every plant, even producing evergreens. Not even slight attention happens to be paid to it, “but everything is produced without tilling and plowing”,<sup>27</sup> and those who have made expeditions there say that they possess a sort of Kyklopeian life. At any rate, the land, when sown only once, produces two or three crops, the first with a yield of fifty

<sup>24</sup> Transl. by Rieu, Rieu 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding the Cyclops and their way of life, particularly as depicted in Euripides' satyr play, see Nicolai 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Strab. 11.4.3.

<sup>27</sup> Hom. *Od.* 9.109.



fold, unplowed and never cut with iron but with a wooden plow. The entire plain is better irrigated with its rivers and other water than the Babylonian or Egyptian ones, and thus always retains a grassy appearance, because of which it is good pasture. In addition, the air is fresher there. The vines are not dug around but remain complete, yet are cut in the fifth year, and the new ones produce fruit in the second year, and when grown they yield so much that a large part is left on the branches.<sup>28</sup>

The allusion to the Cyclopes distinctly indicates a deliberate affinity with the Homeric passage, a connection that is to some degree overtly acknowledged. However, the portrayal of Albania also bears significant resemblance to that of India. In India, the land yields two annual harvests,<sup>29</sup> akin to the neighbouring Aria region where the vines yield grape clusters measuring one meter in length, underlining the bountiful environment.<sup>30</sup>

This abundance owes much to the copious water resources which typify both the Indian regions and Albania. In this regard, the distinctive attributes of the Indian and Albanian climates substantiate the distinct qualities inherent in the utopian imagination, thus bestowing a certain degree of realism upon it. This implies that the grandeur and profusion of the plant life and the peculiarities of the fauna are not merely products of a divine benevolence, but rather are explicable by geographical factors. Indeed, Strabo adeptly employs the unique attributes of India's botanical and zoological components, the temperate nature of its climate, and its propitious atmospheric conditions as evidence to establish India's location within the temperate zone of the world.<sup>31</sup> Paralleling the notions of Eratosthenes, Strabo establishes a connection between India's fertility and the harmonious equilibrium between humidity and warmth.<sup>32</sup> Like-

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**28** Transl. by Roller 2014.

**29** Strab. 15.1.20.

**30** Strab. 2.1.14.

**31** Already, the historians of Alexander went beyond mere descriptions, seeking to provide rational explanations for the phenomena they depicted: cf. Marcotte 1998, 267-9; Winiarczyk 2011, 106-8. However, it was the Alexandrians who consistently integrated the information gathered by the historians of Alexander into a systematic framework that correlated atmospheric conditions, flora, fauna, and ethnography. It was precisely based on this reflection that Eratosthenes corrected the dimensions of India and its placement on map: cf. Jacob 1986; Marcotte 1998, 269-74; Bianchetti 2013. On the relationship between Strabo and Eratosthenes, see Bianchetti 2006.

**32** As expounded by Eratosthenes and subsequently embraced by Strabo (15.1.8), an excessive amount of rainfall in northern India would hinder the ripening of grapes, as they would prematurely drop before reaching full maturation. This assertion, however, appears to diverge from observable reality: vine cultivation and wine production are undoubtedly attested in ancient Gandhāra, a northwestern region of India where

wise, within Strabo's perspective, the temperate and propitious climate is accountable for engendering the distinctive physical, societal, and ethical attributes exhibited by the Indian populace. This rationale serves to validate the traits that have been perceived as utopian in nature.<sup>33</sup>

### 3 Onesicritus' on Wine in Musicanus' Kingdom: A Purely Utopian Trait?

What remains to be investigated is the extent to which Onesicritus crafted a narrative imbued with utopian elements around the kingdom of Musikanos. Unfortunately, only fragments of his historical account endure. Onesicritus had actively participated in Alexander the Great's expedition as king's helmsman and was the author of a historiographic work concerning Alexander, a text that Strabo references on twenty occasions within his *Geography*. The extant excerpts indicate that Onesicritus exhibited a particular inclination towards scientific and philosophical inquiries, with his portrayal of India often bearing traces of cynical philosophical thought. It is noteworthy that Strabo's assessment of Onesicritus is decidedly unflattering:<sup>34</sup>

ὑπὲρ δὲ ταύτης ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἡ τοῦ Ἀβισάρου χώρα, παρ' ᾧ δύο δράκοντας ἀπήγγελλον οἱ παρ' ᾧ δύο δράκοντας ἀπήγγελλον οἱ παρ' αὐτοῦ πρέσβεις τρέφεσθαι, τὸν μὲν ὀγδοήκοντα πηχῶν τὸν δὲ τετταράκοντα πρὸς τοῖς ἑκατόν, ὡς εἶρηκεν Ὀνησίκριτος, ὃν οὐκ Ἄλεξάνδρου μᾶλλον ἢ τῶν παραδόξων ἀρχικυβερνήτην προσείποι τις ἄν.

Above it in the mountains is the land of Abisares, who raised two serpents - according to the ambassadors who came from him - one of which was 80 *pecheis* and the other 140, as Onesicritus says, who would not so much be called the chief pilot of Alexander as of incredible things.<sup>35</sup>

Undoubtedly, Strabo's evaluations tend to be unfavourable towards a substantial majority of historians recording Alexander's conquests,

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viticulture was known well before the arrival of the Greeks (see Karttunen 1985, 207-10; Francfort 2007-08; Falk 2009; Klimburg 2016), to the extent of being considered one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world (see Spengler et al. 2021). Moreover, as evidence of the widespread vinicultural production, excavations in the Swat Valley, at Barikot and Taxila, have revealed the presence of distilleries during the periods of Saka and Kushana dominance in the region (see Allchin 1979; Callieri, Olivieri 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Strab. 12.1.4.

<sup>34</sup> Strab. 15.1.28.

<sup>35</sup> Transl. by Roller 2014.

such as Onesicritus, and likewise, towards many authors who have expounded upon India, Megasthenes being among them.<sup>36</sup> Strabo's assessments, however, are not devoid of rationale: during the first century BC, treatises dealing with India had virtually evolved into a distinctive literary genre, possessing a pronounced interest in themes such as the marvellous and philosophical utopia. These works manifested as a form of pseudo-geographical literature, amplifying the fantastical for the reader's gratification. This was accomplished not merely due to the author's own credulity but more so to exploit the readers' unfamiliarity and satisfy their craving for the extraordinary.<sup>37</sup> Hence, Strabo's overarching objective lies in harnessing the reliable information he encounters and situating it within a framework of geographical thought imbued with determinism. In doing so, he seeks to rationalise the myriad of remarkable attributes ascribed to India. Even the portrayal of Musikanos' kingdom as delineated by Onesicritus is incorporated by Strabo into his discourse, albeit accompanied by a degree of scepticism. For instance, when it comes to the matter of wine, Strabo underscores the unanimous assertion of all other authors that India does not produce wine, despite Onesicritus' contention regarding the presence of vine in the land of Musikanos.

Certainly, authors such as Onesicritus and Megasthenes frequently encounter accusations of having produced descriptions of India excessively influenced by philosophical and political utopian ideals, particularly concerning the topic of slavery.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, as previously discussed, it is also accurate to acknowledge that a substantial portion of the attributes categorised as utopian possesses a tangible foundation: the humid climate, the fecundity of the land, and the abundance of precious metals are indeed rooted in reality, as is the hierarchical social structure. According to Richard Stoneman, if

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**36** However, Strabo draws heavily from their works in the 15th book of his *Geography*: Strabo is aware that accounts of India have been manipulated to some extent, for instance by the historians of Alexander for political reasons, creating a kind of imaginary India. On the construction of the image of India in classical sources, see Dihle 1963; Karttunen 1985; Gómez Espelosín 1995; Jacob 1995; Bruno Sunseri 2001; Albaladejo Vivero 2005; Winiarczyk 2007; Parker 2008. Strabo's awareness of the reliability of accounts about India leads him to establish a hierarchy of sources, with the aid of which he selects and corrects information based on plausibility: on this point, see Jacob 1986; Leroy 2016, LXXII-LXXVII.

**37** Leroy 2016, XXXI; cf. also Jacob 1995. Undoubtedly, interest in the Indian populations may have increased due to the diplomatic interactions between the Indians and Augustus: on the Indian ambassadors sent to Augustus cf. Leroy 2016, X, 231; Coloru 2024, 187-8.

**38** Onesicritus asserts the absence of slavery in the kingdom of Musikanos (Strab. 15.1.54 = *FGrHist* 134 F 25), while Megasthenes extends this assertion to the entirety of India (Arr. *Ind.* 10. 8 = *FGrHist* 715 F 16; Diod. 2.39.5 = *FGrHist* 715 F 4; Strab. 15.1.54 = *FGrHist* 715 F 22).

one was to equate the Greek notion of *dike* with the Indian concept of *dharma*, even the distinct concept of justice attributed to Indian moral values would not be a mere idealisation, but rather would be substantiated by factual evidence.<sup>39</sup> A parallel observation can be extended to Strabo's perspective. As previously explained, Strabo presents most utopian attributes within his portrayal of India as being grounded in geography and climate, factors that exert influence over the botanical and zoological aspects, societal configurations, and cultural expressions. While certain elements can indeed be characterised as utopian, it remains insufficient to interpret Strabo's depiction as inherently utopian.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, reality undergoes a certain degree of transformation due to Onesicritus' cynical philosophical thought, thereby presenting Musikanos' kingdom as an idyllic realm.<sup>41</sup> Within the framework of this portrayal, a portion of this idealisation undoubtedly revolves around the notion of spontaneous vine growth and wine production. It is plausible that the factual existence of these elements in the nearby Gandhāra inspire Onesicritus' reference to the grapevine and wine in the land of Musikanos. However, we do possess evidence - albeit sporadic - of the existence of the grapevine outside the strictly defined region of Gandhāra.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, it cannot be excluded that the kingdom of Musikanos had at least a small local production of wine and that Onesicritus used this to bestow upon the kingdom of Musikanos an air of civilisation, as perceived through Greek eyes.<sup>43</sup> Onesicritus might have strategically presented these aspects to construct an image of an idealised and exemplary land, as one cannot disregard the significance of wine, wheat, and olive oil - commodities that shape the markers of civilisation within a culture. From this perspective, grapevine and wine serve as a device to introduce an element distinctly tied to the broader level of civilisation of the Indian population, and specifically of Musikanos' kingdom.

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**39** Cf. Stoneman 2016.

**40** Cf. Parker 2008, 109-10.

**41** Cf. Trüdingen 1918, 138-9. The depiction of the Musikanos' kingdom may not perhaps be understood as a utopia *stricto sensu*: Onesicritus does not seem to have aimed at creating a political utopia in a broader sense; instead, he incorporated utopian motifs within his description, motifs that, however, were already present in the traditional representation of India: cf. Winiarczyk 2011, 113.

**42** Cf. Karttunen 1989, 209; Biffi 2005, 173-4. Our records provide detailed references to grapes and grape juice in India: if grape juice was significant enough to be included in a list of eight beverages attested in the Buddhist monastic code in Pāli known as *Vinaya*, grapes could not have been scarce or considered an overly exotic fruit: cf. De Notariis 2023. This issue will be addressed in a forthcoming publication.

**43** To Strabo's account, in the section dedicated to Musikanos' land, which echoes Onesicritus' narrative, this kingdom assumes a semblance of a Greek *polis*: cf. Leroy 2016, CVI.

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