

Ancient Roman Scholars

Most of the Greek traditions in geography were carried forward into ancient Roman scholarship. The Romans produced little that was new in the field of geography. Writing shortly before the time of Christ, Marcus Terentius Vasso prepared a theory of cultural stages. This theory remained unchallenged till the 19th century.

The Greek historical tradition in geography was finally summarised by Strabo. He tried to define the northern and southern limits of floods in the Nile, attributing them to heavy summer rains in Ethiopia. Strabo's grand work *Geographia* was largely an encyclopaedic description of the world known to him. His greatest contribution lies in the field of political geography where he considered a strong central government and a single head of state as essential ingredients for success.

The period following Strabo's *Geographia* witnessed compilation of extensive sailing materials for guidance of ships. These included *Periplus of Scylax*, *Periplus of Arrian* and the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*.

Ptolemy tried to rationalise the earlier Greek geographical and astronomical ideas into organised categories. His great work on classical astronomy *The Almagest*, which for long remained the standard reference work on the movement of celestial bodies, reveals his indebtedness to Aristotle, Hipparchus and Possidonius. He adopted a projection for the world map showing the graticule of latitudes and longitudes. He produced an eight-volume guide to geography. He considered China to be the most easterly part in Asia. He also indicated that the Indian Ocean was closed by land in the south.

Undoubtedly, the ancient Greek scholarship laid the foundation of scientific geography, as important paradigms were set forth in the successive periods of academic innovation, based on the empirically observed facts. It was the Greeks who developed the procedure we describe as the scientific method. If observed facts differ from general principles, the principles must be revised. The Greeks developed the science of astronomy. This was a tremendous step in the history of geographical ideas. The Romans, especially Ptolemy, made major improvements over the previously drawn maps with greater precision and accuracy. An apparent dichotomy

seemed to have developed in the ancient Greek geographical scholarship between those who favoured mathematical tradition and those who sought the literary-historical tradition.