

Strabo's *Geography*

Book XVII

Summary

The Seventeenth Book contains the whole of North Africa.

Chapter 1.

[page 217] WHEN we were describing Arabia, we included in the description the gulfs which compress and make, it a peninsula, namely the Gulfs of Arabia and of Persis. We described at the same time some parts of Egypt, and those of Ethiopia, inhabited by the Troglodytae, and by the people situated next to them, extending to the confines of the Cinnamon country.

We are now to describe the remaining parts contiguous to these nations, and situated about the Nile. We shall then give an account of Africa, which remains to complete this treatise on Geography.

And here we must previously adduce the opinions of Eratosthenes.

2. He says, that the Nile is distant from the Arabian Gulf towards the west 1000 stadia, and that it resembles (in its course) the letter N reversed. For after flowing, he says, about 2700 stadia from Meroe towards the north, it turns again to the south, and to the winter sunset, continuing its course for about 3700 stadia, when it is almost in the latitude of the places about Meroe. Then entering far into Africa, and having made another bend, it flows towards the north, a distance of 5300 stadia, to the great cataract; and inclining a little to the east, traverses a distance of 1200 stadia to the smaller cataract at Syene, and 5300 stadia more to the sea.

[218] Two rivers empty themselves into it, which issue out of some lakes towards the east, and encircle Meroe, a [219] considerable island. One of these rivers is called Astaboras, flowing along the eastern side of the island. The other is the Astapus, or, as some call it, Astasobas. But the Astapus is said to be another river, which issues out of some lakes on the south, and that this river forms nearly the body of the (stream of the) Nile, which flows in a straight line, and that it is filled by the summer rains; that above the confluence of the Astaboras and the Nile, at the distance of 700 stadia, is Meroe, a city having the same name as the island; and that there is another island above Meroe, occupied by the fugitive Egyptians, who revolted in the time of Psammitichus, and are called Sembritae, or foreigners. Their sovereign is a queen, but they obey the king of Meroe.

The lower parts of the country on each side Meroe, along the Nile towards the Red Sea, are occupied by Megabari and Blemmyes, who are subject to the Ethiopians, and border upon the Egyptians; about the sea are Troglodytae. The Troglodytae, in the latitude of Meroe, are distant ten or twelve days' journey from the Nile. On the left of the course of the Nile live Nubians [Nubians] in Libya, a populous nation. They begin [220] from Meroe, and extend as far as the bends (of the river). They are not subject to the Ethiopians, but live independently, being distributed into several sovereignties.

The extent of Egypt along the sea, from the Pelusiatic to the Canobic mouth, is 1300 stadia.

Such is the account of Eratosthenes.

3. We must, however, enter into a further detail of particulars. And first, we must speak of the parts about Egypt, proceeding from those that are better known to those which follow next in order.

The Nile produces some common effects in this and the contiguous tract of country, namely, that of the Ethiopians above it, in watering them at the time of its rise, and leaving those parts only habitable which have been covered by the inundation; it intersects the higher lands, and all the tract elevated above its current on both sides, which however are uninhabited and a desert, from an absolute want of water. But the Nile does not traverse the whole of Ethiopia, nor alone, nor in a straight line, nor a country which is well inhabited. But Egypt it traverses both alone and entirely, and in a straight line, from the lesser cataract above Syene and Elephantina, (which are the boundaries of Egypt and Ethiopia,) to the mouths by which it discharges itself into the sea. The Ethiopians at present lead for the most part a wandering life, and are destitute of the means of subsistence, on account of the barrenness of the soil, the disadvantages of climate, and their great distance from us.

Now the contrary is the case with the Egyptians in all these respects. For they have lived from the first under a regular form of government, they were a people of civilized manners, and were settled in a well-known country; their institutions have been recorded and mentioned in terms of praise, for they seemed to have availed themselves of the fertility of their country in the best possible manner by the partition of it (and by the classification of persons) which they adopted, and by their general care.

When they had appointed a king, they divided the people into three classes, into soldiers, husbandmen, and priests. The latter had the care of everything relating to sacred things (of the gods), the others of what related to man; some had the [221] management of warlike affairs, others attended to the concerns of peace, the cultivation of the ground, and the practice of the arts, from which the king derived his revenue.

The priests devoted themselves to the study of philosophy and astronomy, and were companions of the kings.

The country was at first divided into nomes. The Thebais contained ten, the Delta ten, and the intermediate tract sixteen. But according to some writers, all the nomes together amounted to the number of chambers in the Labyrinth. Now these were less than thirty [six]. The nomes were again divided into other sections. The greater number of the nomes were distributed into toparchies, and these again into other sections; the smallest portions were the arourae.

An exact and minute division of the country was required by the frequent confusion of boundaries occasioned at the time of the rise of the Nile, which takes away, adds, and alters the various shapes of the bounds, and obliterates other marks by which the property of one person is distinguished [222] from that of another. It was consequently necessary to measure the land repeatedly. Hence it is said geometry originated here, as the art of keeping accounts and arithmetic originated with the Phoenicians, in consequence of their commerce.

As the whole population of the country, so the separate population in each nome, was divided into three classes; the territory also was divided into three equal portions.

The attention and care bestowed upon the Nile is so great as to cause industry to triumph over nature. The ground by nature, and still more by being supplied with water, produces a great abundance of fruits. By nature also a greater rise of the river irrigates a larger tract of land; but industry has completely succeeded in rectifying the deficiency of nature, so that in seasons when the rise of the river has been less than usual, as large a portion of the country is irrigated by means of canals and embankments, as in seasons when the rise of the river has been greater.

Before the times of Petronius there was the greatest plenty, and the rise of the river was the greatest when it

rose to the height of fourteen cubits; but when it rose to eight only, a famine ensued. During the government of Petronius, however, when the Nile rose twelve cubits only, there was a most abundant crop; and once when it mounted to eight only, no famine followed. Such then is the nature of this provision for the physical state of the country. We shall now proceed to the next particulars.

4. The Nile, when it leaves the boundaries of Ethiopia, flows in a straight line towards the north, to the tract called the Delta, then "cloven at the head," (according to the expression of Plato,) makes this point the vertex, as it were, of a triangle, the sides of which are formed by the streams, which separate on each side, and extend to the sea, one on the right hand to Pelusium, the other on the left to Canobus and the neighbouring Heracleium, as it is called; the base is the coast lying between Pelusium and the Heracleium.

An island was therefore formed by the sea and by both streams of the river, which is called Delta from the resemblance of its shape to the letter (Δ) of that name. The spot at the vertex of the triangle has the same appellation, because it is [223] the beginning of the above-mentioned triangular figure. The village, also, situated upon it is called Delta.

These then are two mouths of the Nile, one of which is called the Pelusiatic, the other the Canobic and Heracleiatic mouth. Between these are five other outlets, some of which are considerable, but the greater part are of inferior importance. For many others branch on from the principal streams, and are distributed over the whole of the island of the Delta, and form many streams and islands; so that the whole Delta is accessible to boats, one canal succeeding another, and navigated with so much ease, that some persons make use of rafts floated on earthen pots, to transport them from place to place.

The whole island is about 3000 stadia in circumference, and is called, as also the lower country, with the land on the opposite sides of the streams, the Delta.

But at the time of the rising of the Nile, the whole country is covered, and resembles a sea, except the inhabited spots, which are situated upon natural hills or mounds; and considerable cities and villages appear like islands in the distant prospect.

The water, after having continued on the ground more than forty days in summer, then subsides by degrees, in the same manner as it rose. In sixty days the plain is entirely exposed to view, and dries up. The sooner the land is dry, so much the sooner the ploughing and sowing are accomplished, and it dries earlier in those parts where the heat is greater.

The country above the Delta is irrigated in the same manner, except that the river flows in a straight line to the distance of about 4000 stadia in one channel, unless where some island intervenes, the most considerable of which comprises the Heracleiatic Nome; or, where it is diverted by a canal into a large lake, or a tract of country which it is capable of irrigating, as the lake Moeris and the Arsinoite Nome, or where the canals discharge themselves into the Mareotis.

[224] In short, Egypt, from the mountains of Ethiopia to the vertex of the Delta, is merely a river tract on each side of the Nile, and rarely if anywhere comprehends in one continued line a habitable territory of 300 stadia in breadth. It resembles, except the frequent diversions of its course, a bandage rolled out.

The mountains on each side (of the Nile), which descend from the parts about Syene to the Egyptian Sea, give this shape to the river tract of which I am speaking, and to the country. For in proportion as these mountains extend along that tract, or recede from each other, in the same degree is the river contracted or expanded, and they impart to the habitable country its variety of shape. But the country beyond the mountains is in a great measure uninhabited.

5. The ancients understood more by conjecture than otherwise, but persons in later times learnt by experience

as eye-witnesses, that the Nile owes its rise to summer rains, which fall in great abundance in Upper Ethiopia, particularly in the most distant mountains. On the rains ceasing, the fulness of the river gradually subsides. This was particularly observed by those who navigated the Arabian Gulf on their way to the Cinnamon country, and by those who were sent out to hunt elephants, or for such other purposes as induced the Ptolemies, kings of Egypt, to despatch persons in that direction. These sovereigns had directed their attention to objects of this kind, particularly Ptolemy surnamed Philadelphus, who was a lover of science, and on account of bodily infirmities always in search of some new diversion and amusement. But the ancient kings paid little attention to such inquiries, although both they and the priests, with whom they passed the greater part of their lives, professed to be devoted to the study of philosophy. Their ignorance therefore is more surprising, both on this account and because Sesostris had traversed the whole of Ethiopia as far as the Cinnamon country, of which expedition monuments exist even to the present day, such as pillars and inscriptions. Cambyses also, when he was in possession of Egypt, had advanced with the Egyptians as far event as [225] Meroe; and it is said that he gave this name both to the island and to the city, because his sister, or according to some writers his wife, Meroe died there. For this reason therefore he conferred the appellation on the island, and in honour of a woman. It is surprising how, with such opportunities of obtaining information, the history of these rains should not have been clearly known to persons living in those times, especially as the priests registered with the greatest diligence in the sacred books all extraordinary facts, and preserved records of everything which seemed to contribute to an increase of knowledge. And, if this had been the case, would it be necessary to inquire what is even still a question, what can possibly be the reason why rain falls in summer, and not in winter, in the most southerly parts of the country, but not in the Thebais, nor in the country about Syene? nor should we have to examine whether the rise of the water of the Nile is occasioned by rains, nor require such evidence for these facts as Poseidonius adduces. For he says, that Callisthenes asserts that the cause of the rise of the river is the rain of summer. This he borrows from Aristotle, who borrowed it from Thrasyalces the Thasian (one of the ancient writers on physics), Thrasyalces from some other person, and he from Homer, who calls the Nile "heaven -descended":

"back to Egypt's heaven-descended stream"

But I quit this subject, since it has been discussed by many writers, among whom it will be sufficient to specify two, who have (each) composed in our times a treatise on the Nile, Eudorus and Aristo the Peripatetic philosopher. [They differ little from each other] except in the order and disposition of the works, for the phraseology and execution is the same in both writers. (I can speak with some confidence in this matter), for when at a loss (for manuscripts) for the purpose of comparison and copy, I collated both authors. But which of them, surreptitiously substituted the other's account as his own, we may [226] go to the temple of Ammon to be informed. Eudorus accused Aristo, but the style is more like that of Aristo.

The ancients gave the name of Egypt to that country only which was inhabited and watered by the Nile, and the extent they assigned to it was from the neighbourhood of Syene to the sea. But later writers, to the present time, have included on the eastern side almost all the tract between the Arabian Gulf and the Nile (the Ethiopians however do not make much use of the Red Sea); on the western side, the tract extending to the Auases and the parts of the sea-coast from the Canobic mouth of the Nile to Catabathmus, and the kingdom of Cyrenaea. For the kings who succeeded the race of the Ptolemies had acquired so much power, that they became masters of Cyrenaea, and even joined Cyprus to Egypt. The Romans, who succeeded to their dominions, separated Egypt, and confined it within the old limits.

The Egyptians give the name of Auases (Oases) to certain inhabited tracts, which are surrounded by extensive deserts, and appear like islands in the sea. They are frequently met with in Libya, and there are three contiguous to Egypt, and dependent upon it.

This is the account which we have to give of Egypt in general and summarily. I shall now describe the separate parts of the country and their advantages.

6. As Alexandria and its neighbourhood occupy the greatest and principal portion of the description, I shall begin with it.

In sailing towards the west, the sea-coast from Pelusium to the Canobic mouth of the Nile is about 1300 stadia in extent, and constitutes, as we have said, the base of the Delta. Thence to the island Pharos are 150 stadia more.

Pharos is a small oblong island, and lies quite close to the continent, forming towards it a harbour with a double entrance. For the coast abounds with bays, and has two promontories projecting into the sea. The island is situated between these, and shuts in the bay, lying lengthways in front of it.

Of the extremities of the Pharos, the eastern is nearest to the continent and to the promontory in that direction, called Lochias, which is the cause of the entrance to the port being narrow. Besides the narrowness of the passage, there are rocks, some under water, others rising above it, which at all times increase the violence, of the waves rolling in upon them [227] from the open sea. This extremity itself of the island is a rock, washed by the sea on all sides, with a tower upon it of the same name as the island, admirably constructed of white marble, with several stories. Sostratus of Cnidus, a friend of the kings, erected it for the safety of mariners, as the inscription imports. For as the coast on each side is low and without harbours, with reefs and shallows, an elevated and conspicuous mark was required to enable navigators coming in from the open sea to direct their course exactly to the entrance of the harbour.

The western mouth does not afford an easy entrance, but it does not require the same degree of caution as the other. It forms also another port, which has the name of Eunostus, or Happy Return: it lies in front of the artificial and close harbour. That which has its entrance at the above-mentioned tower of Pharos is the great harbour. These (two) lie contiguous in the recess called Heptastadium, and are separated from it by a mound. This mound forms a bridge from the continent to the island, and extends along its western side, leaving two passages only through it to the harbour of Eunostus, which are bridged over. But this work served not only as a bridge, but as an aqueduct also, when the island was inhabited. Divus Cassar devastated the island, in his war against the people of Alexandria, when they espoused the party of the kings. A few sailors live near the tower.

The great harbour, in addition to its being well enclosed by the mound and by nature, is of sufficient depth near the shore to allow the largest vessel to anchor near the stairs. It is also divided into several ports.

The former kings of Egypt, satisfied with what they possessed, and not desirous of foreign commerce, entertained a dislike to all mariners, especially the Greeks (who, on account of the poverty of their own country, ravaged and coveted the property of other nations), and stationed a guard here, who had orders to keep off all persons who approached. To the guard was assigned as a place of residence the spot called Rhacotis, which is now a part of the city of Alexandria, situated above the arsenal. At that time, however, it was a village. The country about the village was given up to herdsmen [228] who were also able (from their numbers) to prevent strangers from entering the country.

When Alexander arrived, and perceived the advantages of the situation, he determined to build the city on the (natural) harbour. The prosperity of the place, which ensued, was intimated, it is said, by a presage which occurred while the plan of the city was tracing. The architects were engaged in marking out the line of the wall with chalk, and had consumed it all, when the king arrived; upon which the dispensers of flour supplied the workmen with a part of the flour, which was provided for their own use; and this substance was used in tracing the greater part of the divisions of the streets. This, they said, was a good omen for the city.

7. The advantages of the city are of various kinds. The site is washed by two seas; on the north, by what is called the Egyptian Sea, and on the south, by the sea of the lake Mareia, which is also called Mareotis. This

lake is filled by many canals from the Nile, both by those above and those at the sides, through which a greater quantity of merchandise is imported than by those communicating with the sea. Hence the harbour on the lake is richer than the maritime harbour. The exports by sea from Alexandria exceed the imports. This any person may ascertain, either at Alexandria or Dicaearchia, by watching the arrival and departure of the merchant vessels, and observing how much heavier or lighter their cargoes are when they depart or when they return.

In addition to the wealth derived from merchandise landed at the harbours on each side, on the sea and on the lake, its fine air is worthy of remark: this results from the city being on two sides surrounded by water, and from the favourable effects of the rise of the Nile. For other cities, situated near lakes, have, during the heats of summer, a heavy and suffocating atmosphere, and lakes at their margins become swampy by the evaporation occasioned by the sun's heat. When a large quantity of moisture is exhaled from swamps, a noxious vapour rises, and is the cause of pestilential disorders. But at Alexandria, at the beginning of summer, the Nile, being full, fills the lake also, and leaves no marshy matter which is, likely to occasion malignant exhalations. At the same period, the Etesian winds blow from the north, over a large expanse of sea, and the Alexandrines in consequence pass their summer very pleasantly.

[229] 8. The shape of the site of the city is that of a chlamys or military cloak. The sides, which determine the length, are surrounded by water, and are about thirty stadia in extent; but the isthmuses, which determine the breadth of the sides, are each of seven or eight stadia, bounded on one side by the sea, and on the other by the lake. The whole city is intersected by roads for the passage of horsemen and chariots. Two of these are very broad, exceeding a plethrum in breadth, and cut one another at right angles. It contains also very beautiful public grounds and royal palaces, which occupy a fourth or even a third part of its whole extent. For as each of the kings was desirous of adding some embellishment to the places dedicated to the public use, so, besides the buildings already existing, each of them erected a building at his own expense; hence the expression of the poet may be here applied,

"one after the other springs."

All the buildings are connected with one another and with the harbour, and those also which are beyond it.

The Museum is a part of the palaces. It has a public walk and a place furnished with seats, and a large hall, in which the men of learning, who belong to the Museum, take their common meal. This community possesses also property in common; and a priest, formerly appointed by the kings, but at present by Caesar, presides over the Museum.

A part belonging to the palaces consists of that called Sema, an enclosure, which contained the tombs of the kings and that of Alexander (the Great). For Ptolemy the son of Lagus took away the body of Alexander from Perdiccas, as he was conveying it down from Babylon; for Perdiccas had turned out of his road towards Egypt, incited by ambition and a desire of making himself master of the country. When Ptolemy had attacked [and made him prisoner], he intended to [spare his life and] confine him in a desert island, but he met with a miserable end at the hand of his own soldiers, who rushed upon and despatched him by transfixing him with the long Macedonian spears. The kings who were with him, Aridaeus, and the children of Alexander, and Roxana his wife, departed to Macedonia. Ptolemy carried away the body [230] of Alexander, and deposited it at Alexandria in the place where it now lies; not indeed in the same coffin, for the present one is of hyalus (alabaster ?) whereas Ptolemy had deposited it in one of gold: it was plundered by Ptolemy surnamed Cocce's son and Pareisactus, who came from Syria and was quickly deposed, so that his plunder was of no service to him.

9. In the great harbour at the entrance, on the right hand, are the island and the Pharos tower; on the left are the reef of rocks and the promontory Lochias, with a palace upon it: at the entrance, on the left hand, are the

inner palaces, which are continuous with those on the Lochias, and contain numerous painted apartments and groves. Below lies the artificial and close harbour, appropriated to the use of the kings; and Antirrhodus a small island, facing the artificial harbour, with a palace on it, and a small port. It was called Antirrhodus, a rival as it were of Rhodes.

Above this is the theatre, then the Poseidium, a kind of elbow projecting from the Emporium, as it is called, with a temple of Neptune upon it. To this Antony added a mound, projecting still further into the middle of the harbour, and built at the extremity a royal mansion, which he called Timonium. This was his last act, when, deserted by his partisans, he retired to Alexandria after his defeat at Actium, and intended, being forsaken by so many friends, to lead the [solitary] life of Timon for the rest of his days.

Next are the Caesarium, the Emporium, and the Apostaseis, or magazines: these are followed by docks, extending to the Heptastadium. This is the description of the great harbour.

10. Next after the Heptastadium is the harbour of Eunostus, and above this the artificial harbour, called Cibotus (or the Ark), which also has docks. At the bottom of this harbour is a navigable canal, extending to the lake Mareotis. Beyond the canal there still remains a small part of the city. Then follows the suburb Necropolis, in which are numerous gardens, burial-places, and buildings for carrying on the process of embalming the dead.

On this side the canal is the Sarapium and other ancient sacred places, which are now abandoned on account of the erection of the temples at Nicopolis; for [there are situated] an amphitheatre and a stadium, and there are celebrated [231] quinquennial games; but the ancient rites and customs are neglected.

In short, the city of Alexandria abounds with public and sacred buildings. The most beautiful of the former is the Gymnasium, with porticos exceeding a stadium in extent. In the middle of it are the court of justice and groves. Here also is a Paneium, an artificial mound of the shape of a fircone, resembling a pile of rock, to the top of which there is an ascent by a spiral path. From the summit may be seen the whole city lying all around and beneath it.

The wide street extends in length along the Gymnasium from the Necropolis to the Canobic gate. Next is the Hippodromos (or race-course), as it is called, and other buildings near it, and reaching to the Canobic canal. After passing through the Hippodromos is the Nicopolis, which contains buildings fronting the sea not less numerous than a city. It is 30 stadia distant from Alexandria. Augustus Caesar distinguished this place, because it was here that he defeated Antony and his party of adherents. He took the city at the first onset, and compelled Antony to put himself to death, but Cleopatra to surrender herself alive. A short time afterwards, however, she also put an end to her life secretly, in prison, by the bite of an asp, or (for there are two accounts) by the application of a poisonous ointment. Thus the empire of the Lagidae, which had subsisted many years, was dissolved.

11. Alexander was succeeded by Ptolemy the son of Lagus, the son of Lagus by Philadelphus, Philadelphus by Euergetes; next succeeded Philopator the lover of Agathocleia, then Epiphanes, afterwards Philometor, the son (thus far) always succeeding the father. But Philometor was succeeded by his brother, the second Euergetes, who was also called Physcon. He was succeeded by Ptolemy surnamed Lathurus, Lathurus by Auletes of our time, who was the father of Cleopatra. All these kings, after the third Ptolemy, were corrupted by luxury and effeminacy, and the affairs of government were very badly administered by them; but worst of all by the fourth, the seventh, and the last (Ptolemy), Auletes (or the Piper), [232] who, besides other deeds of shamelessness, acted the piper; indeed he gloried so much in the practice, that he scrupled not to appoint trials of skill in his palace; on which occasions he presented himself as a competitor with other rivals. He was deposed by the Alexandrines; and of his three daughters, one, the eldest, who was legitimate, they proclaimed queen; but his two sons, who were infants, were absolutely excluded from the succession.

As a husband for the daughter established on the throne, the Alexandrines invited one Cybiosactes from Syria, who pretended to be descended from the Syrian kings. The queen after a few days, unable to endure his coarseness and vulgarity, rid herself of him by causing him to be strangled. She afterwards married Archelaus, who also pretended to be the son of Mithridates Eupator, but he was really the son of that Archelaus' who carried on war against Sulla, and was afterwards honourably treated by the Romans. He was grandfather of the last king of Cappadocia in our time, and priest of Comana in Pontus. He was then (at the time we are speaking of) the guest of Gabinius, and intended to accompany him in an expedition against the Parthians, but unknown to Gabinius, he was conducted away by some (friends) to the queen, and declared king.

At this time Pompey the Great entertained Auletes as his guest on his arrival at Rome, and recommended him to the senate, negotiated his return, and contrived the execution of most of the deputies, in number a hundred, who had undertaken to appear against him: at their head was Dion the academic philosopher.

Ptolemy (Auletes) on being restored by Gabinius, put to death both Archelaus and his daughter; but not long after he was reinstated in his kingdom, he died a natural death, leaving two sons and two daughters, the eldest of whom was Cleopatra.

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