

AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

Description of the 18 Provinces of Sasanian Empire

Ammianus Marcellinus, born at Antioch, circa 330 C.E., was among the last of the great historians of the Roman Empire. As a member of the personal staff of General Ursicinus, he served with the Roman army in Gaul, Germany, and north Italy on the early campaigns of Julian. Later, he served under the Emperor Julian during his immensely unsuccessful Persian campaign, recording his own observations as well as incorporating those of prior historians. ¹

Julianus, Book XXIII, Chapter 6. A description of the eighteen greater provinces of the Persian kingdom, with the strength of each and the customs of their inhabitants.

(1) Affairs have reached a point where I am led in a rapid digression to explain the topography of the Persian kingdom, carefully compiled from the descriptions of the nations, in only a few of which the truth has been told, and that barely. My account, however, will be a little fuller, which will be to the advantage of complete knowledge. For anyone who aims at extreme brevity in telling of the unknown tries to discover what he ought to leave out rather than what he may explain more clearly.

(2) This kingdom, which was once small and for reasons which we have often given was called before by various names, after the fates had taken off Alexander the Great at Babylon, took its name from the Parthian Arsaces,¹ a man of low birth; he had been a brigand chief during his younger days, but since his ideals gradually changed for the better, by a series of brilliant exploits he rose to greater heights. (3) After many glorious and valiant deeds, and after he had conquered Seleucus Nicator,² successor of the said Alexander, on whom his many victories had conferred that surname,³ and had driven out the Macedonian garrisons, he passed his life in quiet peace, and was a mild ruler and judge of his subjects. (4) Finally, after all the neighboring lands had been brought under his rule, by force, by regard for justice, or by fear, and he had filled Persia with cities, with fortified camps, and with strongholds, and to all the neighboring peoples, which she had previously feared, he had made her a constant cause of dread, he died a peaceful death in middle life. And nobles and commons rivaling each other in agreement, he was placed among the stars according to the sacred custom of their country; and (as they believe) he was the first of all to be so honoured. (5) Hence to this very day the over-boastful kings of that race suffer themselves to be called brothers of the Sun and Moon, and just as for our emperors the title of Augustus is beloved and coveted, so to the Parthian kings, who were formerly low and obscure, there fell the very greatest increase in distinction, won by the happy auspices of Arsaces. (6) Hence they venerate and worship Arsaces as a god, and their regard for him has been carried so far, that even down to the memory of our time only a man who is of the stock of Arsaces (if there is one anywhere) is preferred to all in mounting the throne. Even

¹ I.e. were called Parthians; see Justinus, xli. 4, 6 f.

² It was not Seleucus Nicator, but Seleucus II., Callinicus, the fourth king after Nicator, who was conquered by Arsaces; see Justinus, xli. 4, 9.

³ Nicator (cf. xiv. 8, 5) means "the victorious."

in any civil strife, which constantly arises among them, everyone avoids as sacrilege the lifting of his hand against an Arsacid, whether he is bearing arms or is a private citizen.

(7) It is well known that this nation, after vanquishing many peoples by its power, extended its domain as far as the Propontis and Thrace,⁴ but through the arrogance of its haughty leaders, who lawlessly extended their raids to a great distance, it was weakened by severe losses: first through Cyrus, who crossed the Bosphorus with an army of incredible size, but was completely annihilated by the Scythian queen Tomyris, the fierce avenger of her sons.⁵ (8) Later, when Darius, and after him Xerxes, changed the use of the elements⁶ and attacked Greece, almost all their forces were destroyed by land and sea, and they themselves barely found a safe return; not to mention the wars of Alexander and the passing by his will and testament of the whole nation to the jurisdiction of a single successor.⁷

(9) After this was done and a long time had passed, during which the Roman commonwealth was governed by consuls and later brought under the sway of the Caesars, these nations carried on wars with us from time to time, and sometimes the contest was equal, at other times they were conquered, and occasionally they came off victorious.

(10) I shall now describe the lie of the land—so far as my purpose allows—briefly and succinctly. These regions extend to a wide area in length and breadth,⁸ and run all along the Persian Gulf, which has many islands and peoples all round. The entrance to this sea (they say) is so narrow that from Harmoz, the promontory of Carmania, the other headland opposite it, which the natives call maces, may be seen without difficulty. (11) After one has passed through this narrow strait, a wide expanse of sea opens, which is favourable to navigation as far as the city of Teredon,⁹ where after many losses the Euphrates mingles with the deep.¹⁰ The entire gulf is bounded by a shore of 20,000 stadia, which is rounded as if turned on a lathe. All along the coast is a throng of cities and villages, and many ships sail to and fro. (12) After passing the strait which has been mentioned, one comes to the bay of Carmania facing the east. Then, a long distance to the south, the bay of Canthicus opens, and not far off is another, called Chalites, facing the setting sun. Next, after one has skirted many islands, few of which are well known, those bays unite with the Indian ocean, which is first of all to receive the glowing sun when it rises, and is itself also exceedingly warm. (13) And as the pens of geographers have drawn it, the whole circuit just described has this form. In the northern direction, to the Caspian Gates¹¹ it borders on the Cadusii, on many tribes of the Scythians, and on the Arimaspaes, wild, one-eyed men. On the west it touches Armenia, Niphates,¹² the Asiatic Albani, the Red Sea,¹³ and the Scenitic Arabs, whom men of later times called the Saracens.¹⁴

⁴ Cf. xxv. 4, 23

⁵ Cf. Hdt. i. 214; Just. i. 8, 9 ff.

⁶ Of water, when he bridged the Hellespont; of land, when he cut a canal through the Athos promontory.

⁷ There is no mention of this will in Curtius, Arrian, or Diodorus Siculus.

⁸ For its extent under Cyrus, see Xen., *Cyrop.* viii.7,7; cf. i. 1, 4: under Darius Hystaspes, Hdt. iii. 88.

⁹ In Babylonia.

¹⁰ It unites with the Tigris before flowing into the sea. The “losses” are diminution of its waters, and in the speed of their flow, because of alluvial deposits.

¹¹ A pass in Mt. Taurus, between Parthia and Media.

¹² A mountain of Armenia.

¹³ The Red Sea (Persian Gulf) is south (or south-west) of the Persian empire; cf. Pliny, *N.H.* vi. 112, *a meridie*, and Mesopotamia is west.

¹⁴ Cf. xiv. 4, xxii. 15, 2.

Under the southern heaven it looks down on Mesopotamia. Opposite the eastern front it extends to the Ganges river, which cuts through India and empties into the southern ocean.

(14) Now there are in all Persia these greater provinces, ruled by vitaxae, or commanders of cavalry, by kings, and by satraps—for to enumerate the great number of smaller districts would be difficult and superfluous—namely, Assyria, Susiana, media, Persis, Parthia, Greater Carmania, Hyrcania, Margiana, the Bactriani, the Sogdiani, the Sacae, Scythia at the foot of Imaus,¹⁵ and beyond the same mountain, Serica, Aria, the Paropanisadae, Drangiana, Arachosia, and Gedrosia.

(15) Nearest to us of all the provinces is Assyria, famous for its large population, its size, and the abundance and great variety of its products. This province once spread over great and prosperous peoples and districts,¹⁶ then it was combined under a single name, and to-day the whole region is called Assyria. There, besides, a great abundance of berries and common fruits, bitumen is found near the lake called Sosingites, in whose bed the Tigris is swallowed up, and then, after flowing under ground, and traversing a long distance,¹⁷ appears again. (16) Here naptha also is produced, a glutinous substance which looks like pitch. This too is similar to bitumen, and even a little bird, if it lights upon it, is prevented from flying, sinks, and disappears utterly. And when fluid of this kind catches fire, the mind of man will find no means of putting it out, except dust.¹⁸

(17) In these regions there is also to be seen a cleft in the earth,¹⁹ from which arises a deadly exhalation, which with its foul odour destroys every living creature that comes near it. If this pestilential stuff, rising from a kind of deep well, should spread out widely from its opening before rising on high, it would by its fetid odour have made the surrounding country a desert. (18) A similar opening was formerly to be seen (as some say) at Hierapolis in Phrygia. And from this also a noxious vapour with a penetrating stench came forth and was destructive to whatever came near it, excepting only eunuchs; and the reason for this may be left to natural philosophers to determine.²⁰ (19) Also at the time of Jupiter Asbamaeus in Cappadocia, where that famous philosopher Apollonius²¹ is said to have been born near the town of Tyana, a spring may be seen, flowing from a pool, which is now filled with an abundance of water, and again sucks itself back, and so never swells beyond its banks.²²

(20) Within this area is Adiabena, called Assyria in ancient times, but by long custom changed to this name because, lying between the navigable rivers Ona and Tigris it could never be approached by a ford; for we Greeks for *transire* say *διαβαίνειν*. At least, this is the opinion of the ancients. (21) But I myself say that there are two perpetually flowing rivers to be found in these lands, the Diabas and Adiabas,²³

¹⁵ The Himalayas.

¹⁶ It included Assyria, Babylonia, and Mesopotamia.

¹⁷ Justin. Xlii. 3, 9, says it flows under ground for 25,000 stadia.

¹⁸ Cf. xxiii. 4, 15.

¹⁹ Cf. Lucr. Vi. 756 ff.

²⁰ Cf. Dio. Lxviii. 27, 3; Pliny, *N.H.* ii. 208.

²¹ This self-styled philosopher, of Tyana in Cappadocia, was famous for his belief in his magic or supernatural powers. He lived in the first century A.D. His life, by Philostratus, has come down to us; see *Philostratus, L.C.L.*, i. Introd.

²² See Philost. *vita Apoll.* i. 6 (*L.C.L.*, i. 15).

²³ Valesius thinks they are the same rivers which are more commonly called Zabas and Anzabas, and that *dia* became *za*; but see Index.

which I myself have crossed,²⁴ and over which there are bridges of boats; and therefore it is to be assumed that Adiabena was named from them, as from great rivers Egypt²⁵ was named, according to Homer, as well as India, and the Euphratensis, before my time called Commagena; likewise from the Hiberus,²⁶ Hiberia (now Hispania), and the province of Baetica from the noble river Baetis.²⁷

(22) In this Adiabena is the city of Ninus,²⁸ which once possessed the rule over Persia, perpetuating the name of Ninus, once a most powerful king and the husband of Semiramis; also Ecbatana,²⁹ Arbela, and Gaugamela,³⁰ where Alexander, after various other battles, overthrew Darius in a hot contest.

(23) But in all Assyria there are many cities, among which Apamia, formerly called Mesene,³¹ and Teredon, Apollonia and Vologessia, and many similar ones are conspicuous. But these three are especially magnificent and widely known: Babylon,³² whose walls Semiramis built with bitumen³³ (for the ancient king Belus built the citadel), and Ctesiphon, which Vardanes³⁴ founded long ago; and later king Pacorus³⁵ strengthened it with additional inhabitants and with walls, gave it a Greek name, and made it the crowning ornament of Persia. And finally there is Seleucia, the splendid work of Seleucis Nicator.

(24) When this city was stormed by the generals of Verus Caesar (as I have related before),³⁶ the statue of Apollo Comaeus was torn from its place and taken to Rome, where the priests of the gods set it up in the temple of the Palatine Apollo. And it is said that, after this same statue had been carried off and the city burned, the soldiers in ransacking the temple found a narrow crevice; this they widened in the hope of finding something valuable; but from a kind of shrine, closed by the occult arts of the Chaldaeans, the germ of that pestilence burst forth, which after generating the virulence of incurable diseases, in the time of the same Verus and of Marcus Antoninus polluted everything with contagion and death, from the frontiers of Persia all the way to the Rhine and to Gaul.³⁷

(25) Near these is the land of the Chaldaeans, the foster-mother of the old-time philosophy—as they themselves say—where the true art of divination first made its appearance. Now the most important rivers that flow through those lands, besides the others that I have mentioned, are the Marses, the Royal River,³⁸ and the Euphrates, greatest of all. The last-named divides into three branches, all of which are navigable,

²⁴ During the flight after Julian's death.

²⁵ Homer called the Nile Aegyptus; cf. xxii. 15, 3.

²⁶ Ebro.

²⁷ Guadalquivir.

²⁸ Also called Nineve; cf. xxvii. 7, 1.

²⁹ Likewise a city of Media.

³⁰ Gaugamela was a small village near Arbela; it was there that the battle was fought, although it is more commonly called the battle of Arbela.

³¹ Pliny, *N.H.* vi. 132, separates Apamia from Messene; cf. xxiv. 3, 12; on Teredon, cf. Pliny, vi. 145.

³² Diod. Sic (ii. 9,9) says that in his time Babylon had been almost wholly destroyed and Pausanias, viii. 33, 3, that only the walls and the temple of Belus were standing.

³³ Cf. Curtius, v. 1, 16 and 25.

³⁴ Unknown.

³⁵ Pacorus seems to have been the son of king Orodes, defeated by Ventidius.

³⁶ In a lost book; cf. Capitolinus, *Verus*, 8, 3.

³⁷ Cf. Capitol, *Marcus Ant.* 13, 3-6.

³⁸ It is really a canal; cf. xxiv. 6, 1, where its native name Naarmalcha is given.

forms several islands, and often thoroughly waters the fields through the diligence of the farmers,³⁹ and prepares them for the ploughshare and for tree-culture.

(26) Neighbours to these lands are the Susiani, who have few cities. Conspicuous among them, however, is Susa, often the residence of the kings,⁴⁰ and Arsiana, Sele, and Aracha. The others are small and little known. On the other hand, many rivers flow through this region; most notable among them are the Oroates, Harax, and Mosaeus, which along the narrow sandy tract that separates the Caspian from the Red Sea overflow into a great number of pools.

(27) On the left Media extends, bordering on the Hyrcanian⁴¹ Sea. Of this province we read that before the reign of the elder Cyrus and the growth in Persia's power, it was the queen of all Asia, after it had overcome Assyria,⁴² whose many provinces, changed in name to Agropatena, it possessed by the right of conquest. (28) It is a warlike nation, and most of all to be feared next to the Parthians, by whom alone it is surpassed, and its territory has the form of a rectangle. The inhabitants of these lands as a whole dwell in a most spacious country, overhung by very lofty mountains, which they call Zagrus, Orontes, and Iasonius.⁴³ (29) Those who dwell on the western side of the lofty mountain Coronus⁴⁴ abound in fields of grain and vineyards,⁴⁵ enjoy the fertility of a productive soil, and are rich in rivers and clear springs. (30) Their green meadows produce a noble breed of horses, on which their chiefs (as the writers of old say, and as I myself have seen) when entering battle are wont to ride full of courage. These horses they call Nesaean.⁴⁶ (31) Therefore Media abounds in rich cities, in villages built up like towns, and in a great number of inhabitants; it is (to speak briefly) the richest residence of the kings.

(32) In these parts are the fertile fields of the Magi, about whose sects and pursuits—since we have chanced on this point—it will be in place to give a few words of explanation. According to Plato,⁴⁷ the most eminent author of lofty ideas, magic, under the mystic name of *hagistia*,⁴⁸ is the purest worship of the gods. To the science of this, derived from the secret lore of the Chaldaeans, in ages long past the Bactrian Zoroaster⁴⁹ made many contributions, and after him the wise king Hystaspes,⁵⁰ the father of Darius.

(33) When Zoroaster had boldly made his way into the unknown regions of Upper India, he reached a wooden wilderness, whose calm silence the lofty intellects of the Brahmins control. From their teaching he learned as much as he could grasp of the laws regulating the movements of the earth and the stars, and

³⁹ I.e. by irrigation.

⁴⁰ The kings spent the winter in Susa or Babylon (sometimes in Bactria); the summers in Ecbatana; cf. Strabo, xi. 13, 1, 5; xv. 3, 2.

⁴¹ Part of the Caspian.

⁴² Under Arbaces in the reign of Sardanapalus, 876 B.C.

⁴³ All these are branches of Mt. Taurus.

⁴⁴ In Parthia.

⁴⁵ Polyb. V. 44, 1.

⁴⁶ Cf. Herodotus, vii. 40; Strabo, xi. 13, 7; 14, 9. Others say that they were used only for the kings' chariots.

⁴⁷ Ax. 371, D; Isoc. ii. 28, 227 A.

⁴⁸ Ἁγιστεία, "ritual," "holy rites."

⁴⁹ For Zarathustra, the founder of the Persio-Iranian native religion, which prevailed from 559 B.C. to A.D. 636. The Greek and Roman writers assign his birth to various places, into which his religion was introduced; it was probably Bactria, or western Iran. His date is also uncertain; Aristotle put it 6000 years before the death of Plato (Pliny, *N.H.* xxx.3), others 1000 B.C.

⁵⁰ Hystaspes was not king. Others regard a much earlier Hystaspes as the teacher of magic.

of the pure sacrificial rites. Of what he had learned he communicated something to the understanding of the Magi, which they, along with the art of divining the future, hand on from generation to generation to later times. (34) From that time on for many ages down to the present a large class of men of one and the same descent have devoted themselves to the service of the gods.⁵¹ The Magi also say (if it is right to believe them) that they guard on ever-burning braziers a fire sent down from heaven in their country, and that a small portion of it, as a good omen, used to be carried before the Asiatic kings. (35) The number of Magi of this origin in old times was very small, and the Persian potentates made regular use of their services in the worship of their gods. And it was sin to approach an altar, or touch a sacrificial victim, before one of the Magi, with a set form of prayer, poured the preliminary libations. But they gradually increased in number and became a strong clan, with a name of their own; they possessed country residences, which were protected by no great walls,⁵² and they were allowed to live in accordance with their own laws, and through respect for religion were held in high esteem. (36) From this seed of the Magi, as the ancient records relate, seven men after the death of Cambyses mounted the Persian throne, but (we are told), they were overthrown by the party of Darius, who made himself king by the neighing of a horse.⁵³

(37) In this neighbourhood the Medic oil is made. If a missile is smeared with this oil and shot somewhat slowly from a loosened bow (for it is extinguished by a swift flight), wherever it lands it burns persistently; and if one tries to put it out with water, he makes it burn the more fiercely, and it can be quelled in no other way than throwing dust upon it.⁵⁴ (38) Now, the oil is made in this way. Those who are skilled in such matters take oil of general use, mix it with a certain herb, and let it stand for a long time and thicken, until it gets magic power from the material. Another kind, like a thicker sort of oil, is native to Persia, and (as I have said)⁵⁵ is called in that language naphtha.

(39) In these lands are many scattered cities; greater than all the rest are Zombis, Patigran and Gazaca.⁵⁶ Conspicuous for their wealth and their mighty walls are Heraclia, Arsacia, Europos,⁵⁷ Cyropolis and Ecbatana,⁵⁸ all situated at the foot of Mount Iasonius in the land of the Syromedi.⁵⁹ (40) Many streams flow through this country, of which the greatest are the Choaspes, Gyndes,⁶⁰ Amardus, Charinda, Cambyses, and Cyrus. To this last, a great and beautiful river, the elder Cyrus, that lovable king, when he was hastening on his way to seize the realms of the Scythians, gave that name in place of its older one, because it is valiant, as he himself also was said to be, and forcing its way with the exercise of great power, as he did, flows into the Caspian Sea.

⁵¹ Their priesthood was hereditary, handed on from father to son.

⁵² I.e. without walls.

⁵³ The "seven men" were those who conspired against the usurper Smerdis in 512 B.C., one of whom was Darius. They agreed that the one whose horse neighed first should be king. By a trick of his groom Oebares, Darius was chosen and reigned until 485 B.C. None of the other six mounted the throne. See Hdt. iii. 70 ff.

⁵⁴ Cf. 4, 15, above, where Ammianus uses similar language of the *malleoli*; and 6, 16.

⁵⁵ 6, 16, above.

⁵⁶ Called Gaza by Strabo and Pliny, the capital of Atropatene.

⁵⁷ According to Strabo, xi. 13, 6, Arsacia and Europos were the same city, also called Khaga or Khagae.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hdt. i. 98; to-day Hamadan.

⁵⁹ The part of Media which lies before Persia.

⁶⁰ This river is in Syria, not in Media.

(41) Beyond these tracts, but extending farther to the south, next to the seacoast lies Old Persia, rich in its small fruits,⁶¹ date-palms, and an abundance of excellent water. For many rivers flow through it into the above-mentioned gulf, the greatest of which are the Batradites,⁶² Rogomanus, Brisoana, and Bagrada.

(42) But the inland cities are the greater—and it is uncertain for what reason they built nothing conspicuous along the seacoast—notable among which are Persepolis,⁶³ Ardea, Habroatis, and Tragonice. But only three islands are to be seen there: Tabiana, Fara, and Alexandria.

(43) Near these to the north are the Parthians, dwelling in lands abounding in snow and frost. Their land is cut by Choatres river, more copious than the rest, and the following cities are more important than the others: Oenunia, Moesia, Charax, Apamia,⁶⁴ Artacana, and Hecatompylos,⁶⁵ from which place one reckons along the Caspian Sea to the Caspian Gates 1040 Stadia. (44) There the inhabitants of all the districts are savage and warlike, and take such pleasure in war and conflict, that one who loses his life in battle is regarded as happy beyond all others. For those who depart from this life by a natural death they assail with insults, as degenerate and cowardly.

(45) On the south-eastern border of these are the “Happy” Arabs,⁶⁶ so-called because they are rich in the fruits of the field, as well as in cattle, dates, and many varieties of perfumes. A great part of their lands border to the right on the Red Sea, and on the left for the boundary of the Persian Sea, and the people know how to avail themselves of all the advantages of both elements. (46) On that coast there are both many anchorages and numerous safe harbours, trading cities in an uninterrupted line, uncommonly splendid and richly adorned residences of their kings, natural hot springs of remarkable curative powers, a conspicuous abundance of brooks and rivers, and a very salubrious climate; so that to men of good judgement they evidently lack nothing for supreme happiness. (47) And while they have an abundance of towns, inland and on the coast, as well as fruitful plains and valleys, yet the choicest cities are Geapolis and Nascos, Baraba, and also Nagara, Maephe, Taphra, and Dioscuris.⁶⁷ Moreover, in both seas, and near to the shore, there are many islands, which it is not worth while to enumerate. The most prominent among them is Turgana,⁶⁸ on which there is said to be a great temple of Serapis.

(48) Beyond the frontier of this people Greater Carmania rises with lofty peaks, extending as far as the Indian Sea, supplied with products of the soil and fruit trees, but far inferior in fame and in extent to the lands of the Arabs; however, the country is no less rich in rivers, and equally blest with a fertile soil. (49) The rivers better known than the rest are the Sagareus, Saganis, and Hydriacus. There are also cities which, though few in number, are very rich in all that contributes to the maintenance and enjoyment of life. Conspicuous among them are Carmana, mother city of them all, Portospana, Alexandria, and Hermupolis.

⁶¹ Fruits and leguminous vegetables.

⁶² Unknown; apparently the Arosis in Susiana.

⁶³ With striking ruins; the other cities are unknown. Ammianus omits Pasargada, the second city after Persepolis, unless Ardea is a corruption of this.

⁶⁴ Founded by the Greeks.

⁶⁵ The capital and residence of Arsaces, so-named from the number of roads that come thither from all quarters.

⁶⁶ Arabia did not belong to Persia, and is not mentioned above among the provinces. Arabia Felix (yemen) is contrasted with Arabia Deserta and Arabia Petraea, in the northern part of the peninsula.

⁶⁷ This is the island of Socotra well away from the Arabian coast.

⁶⁸ Modern Ormuz.

(50) Proceeding inland, one meets with the Hyrcanians, whose coast the sea of the same name washes.⁶⁹ Among them, since the leanness of their soil kills the seeds, less attention is given to agriculture, but they live upon game, of which there is a monstrous great variety and abundance. There are also many thousand tigers, and numerous other wild beasts, and by what kind of devices they are usually taken I recall that I gave an account long ago.⁷⁰ (51) But for all that, they are not unacquainted with the plough-tail, but some districts, where the soil is richer, are covered over with sown fields. Groves of trees, too, are not lacking in places suited for planting them, and many people support themselves by commerce on the sea.⁷¹ (52) Here are two rivers well known by name, the Oxus and the Maxera, over which tigers, driven by hunger, sometimes swim and unexpectedly cause great losses to the neighbouring places. They also have some strong cities, among lesser towns; two are on the sea, Socanda and Saramanna, and others inland, Asmurna, Sale, and, better known than these, Hyrcana.

(53) Over against this people to the north the Abii are said to dwell, a most kindly race, accustomed to trample on all mortal things, on whom, as Homer sings as part of his tale, Jupiter looks with favour from the mountains of Ida.⁷²

(54) Next after the Hyrcanians the Margiani have found homes, a people all but wholly surrounded by lofty hills, and thus separated from the sea. And although the greater part of their soil, from dearth of water, is a desert, they nevertheless have some towns; but Iasonion, Antiochia,⁷³ and Nigaea⁷⁴ are better known than the others.

(55) The lands next to these the Bactriani possess, a nation formerly very warlike and powerful and, always at odds with the Persians, until they reduced all the peoples about them to submission and incorporated them under their own name. In ancient times they were ruled by kings who were formidable even to Arsaces.⁷⁵ (56) Many parts of this land, like Margiana, are widely separated from the coast, but rich in vegetation; and the herds which graze on their plains and mountains are thick-set, with strong limbs, as appears from the camels, brought from there by Mithridates and seen for the first time by the Romans at the siege of Cyzicus.⁷⁶ (57) Several peoples are subject to these same Bactrians, notably the Tochari, and like Italy the country is watered by many rivers. Of these, the Artamis and Zariaspes first unite, as well as the Ochus and Orgomanes, and when joined they increase the mighty flow of the Oxus with their combined⁷⁷ waters. (58) There are also cities here which are laved by other rivers, but they recognize these as their betters: namely, Catracharta, Alicodra, Astatia, Menapila, and Bactria itself, from which the kingdom and the nation have derived their name.

⁶⁹ A part of the Caspian.

⁷⁰ In a lost book. Cf. Mela, iii. 5, 43; Pliny, *N.H.* viii. 66; Ambros., *Hexam.* vi. 4.

⁷¹ Traders came from Parthia by way of the Caspian Gates.

⁷² Cf. *Iliad*, xiii. 6, quoted in § 62.

⁷³ Founded by Antiochus, son of Seleucus.

⁷⁴ Modern Herat.

⁷⁵ Justin, xli. 4, 5, says that the Bactrian kingdom was founded shortly before the Parthian by Diodotus. In xli. 4, 7, he calls it a realm of a thousand cities. After many battles it was finally brought under the Parthian yoke.

⁷⁶ Sallust, *Hist.* iii. 42, Maur.; but cf. Plut., *Lucull.* 11, 4, Σαλλονστίου δέ Θανμάζω τότε πρότον ὄρθαι Ῥωμαίους καμήλους λέγοντος.

⁷⁷ Cf. xv, 5, 25.

(59) Next the Sogdiani dwell at the foot of the mountains which they call the Sogdii, through whose territories two rivers flow which are navigable by ships, the Araxates⁷⁸ and the Dymas. These streams rush headlong over mountains and valleys into a level plain and form a lake, Oxia by name, which is both long and broad. Here among other towns Alexandria, Cyreschata,⁷⁹ and the metropolis, Drespa, are famous.

(60) Next to these are the Sacae, a tribe of savages, inhabiting a rough country rich only for cattle, and hence without cities. It is overhung by the mountains Ascanimia and Comedus, along the base of which and through a village, which they call Lithinos Pyrgos,⁸⁰ a very long road extends, which is the route taken by the traders who journey from time to time in the land of the Seres.

(61) Along the slopes and at the foot of the mountains which they call Imavi and Apurii, various Scythian tribes dwell within the Persian territories, bordering on the Asiatic Sarmathians and reaching to the outermost side of the Halani. These, as if living in a nook of the world, and brought up in solitude, are widely scattered, and are accustomed to common and poor food. (62) And various other tribes dwell in these parts, which at present I think it superfluous to enumerate, since I am hastening on to another topic. It is necessary only to know, that among these nations, which because of the extreme roughness of their land are almost inaccessible, there are some mild and kindly folk, such as the Iaxartae and the Galactophagi,⁸¹ whom the bard Homer mentions in this verse:⁸²

“Of the Galactophagi and Abii, righteous men.”

(63) Now, among the many rivers of this land, which nature either joins with larger streams or by their own flow carries on to the sea, the Rhymmus, Iaxartes and Daicus are celebrated. But there are only three cities which the region is known to have, namely, Aspabota, Chauriana, and Saga.

(64) Beyond these lands of both Scythias,⁸³ towards the east, the summits of lofty walls⁸⁴ form a circle and enclose the Seres,⁸⁵ remarkable for the richness and extent of their country. On the west they are bounded by the Scythians, and on the north and the east they extend to a snowclad waste; on the south they reach India and the Ganges. There are mountains there, called Anniba, Nazavicium, Asmira, Emodon, Opurocurra. (65) Through this land, consisting of a plain of wide extent,⁸⁶ surrounded on all sides by precipitous cliffs, two rivers of famous name, the Oechartis and the Bautis,⁸⁷ flow in a somewhat slow course. The nature of the various tracts is unlike, being now open and flat and now descending in gentle slopes; and therefore the land overflows in grain, flocks, and orchards. (66) On this very fruitful soil dwell various peoples, of which the Anthropophagi, Anibi, Sizyges and Chardi lie towards the north and the snows. Towards the rising sun are the Rabannae, Asmirae, and the Essedones, the most famed of

⁷⁸ Probably for Iaxartes; Curtius, vii. 6, 19-21.

⁷⁹ By others called Cyropolis, destroyed by Alexander the Great; cf. Arrian, *Anab*, iv. 2, 2 f.

⁸⁰ The Stone Tower.

⁸¹ Milk-eaters.

⁸² *Iliad*, xiii. 6.

⁸³ European and Asiatic.

⁸⁴ Doubtless including the famous Chinese Wall.

⁸⁵ The Chinese.

⁸⁶ For *situ*, “structure,” “form,” cf. Horace, *Odes*, iii. 30, 2, *regalique situ pyramidum altius*. As this meaning seems not to occur elsewhere, this may be a reminiscence; cf. *bene nummatum*, xiv. 6, 12, note.

⁸⁷ The Selenga and the Hoang Ho.

all; close to them, on the west, are the Athagorae, and the Aspacarae. In the south are the Baetae, dwelling on the slopes of high mountains. They are famed for cities, which, though not numerous, are large and prosperous; the greatest of these, Asmira, Essedon, Asparata, and Sera, are beautiful and well known. (67) The Seres themselves live a peaceful life, for ever unacquainted with arms and warfare; and since to gentle and quiet folk ease is pleasurable, they are troublesome to none of their neighbours. Their climate is agreeable and healthful, the sky is clear, the winds gentle and very pleasant. There is an abundance of well-lighted woods, the trees of which produce a substance which they work with frequent sprinkling, like a kind of fleece; then from the wool-like material, mixed with water, they draw out very fine threads, spin the yarn, and make sericum,⁸⁸ formerly for the use of the nobility, but nowadays available even to the lowest without any distinction. (68) The Seres themselves are frugal beyond all others, live a quiet life, and avoid intercourse with the rest of mortals. And when strangers, in order to buy threads or anything else, cross the river, their wares are laid out and with no exchange of words their value is estimated by the eye alone;⁸⁹ and they are so abstemious, that they hand over their own products without themselves getting any foreign ware in return.

(69) Beyond the Seres live the Ariani, exposed to the blasts of the north wind; through their lands flows a river called the Arias, large enough to carry ships, which forms a great lake called by the same name. Moreover, this same Aria has many cities, among which the following are renowned: Vitaxa Sarmatina, Sotira, Nisibis, and Alexandria, from which the voyage to the Caspian Sea is reckoned as fifteen hundred stadia.

(70) Neighbours to these places are the Paropanisadae,⁹⁰ facing the Indi on the east, and the Caucasus on the west; they themselves also dwell on the slopes of the mountains and through their country (besides some smaller rivers) flows the Gordomaris, rising in Bactria. And they also have some cities, of which the better-known are Agazaca, Naulibus, and Ortospana, from which the distance along the bank of the river to the frontiers of Media next to the Caspian Gates is 2200 stadia.

(71) Joining the aforesaid are the Drangiani, connected with them by hills. Their land is washed by the river Arabius, so-called from the place of its rise.⁹¹ Among other towns they are proud of two, Prophthasia and Ariaspe, because of their wealth and fame.

(72) Then, opposite to these, we see Arachosia, on the right facing the Indi. From a much smaller river,⁹² flowing out from the mighty Indus, from which the whole region takes its name, Arachosia receives an abundance of water; this river forms a lake, called Arachotoscrene.⁹³ Here also among insignificant cities, are Alexandria,⁹⁴ Arbaca, and Choaspa.

(73) Now far within Persia lies Gedrosia, on the right reaching the frontiers of the Indi; it is made fertile by the Artabius, in addition to smaller streams. Here the Arbitani mountains come to an end, and from

⁸⁸ Silk.

⁸⁹ Cf. Hdt. iv. 196.

⁹⁰ Or, Paropamisadae, named named from Mt. Paropamisus (Hindu Kush confused with Caucasus). Their country formed the route from Persia to India.

⁹¹ In the country of the Arabi or Arabites, a people of Indian origin.

⁹² The Arachotos, which is also the name of their capital city.

⁹³ Ἀράχωτος κρήνη.

⁹⁴ Cf. Pliny, *N.H.* vi. 92.

their bases flow other rivers, which mingle with the Indus, losing their names through the size of the greater stream. But here, too, there are famous cities, in addition to islands; but Ratira and Gynaecolimen⁹⁵ are more highly esteemed than the rest.

(74) But we would not give a detailed account of the seacoast at the extremities of Persia, and wander too far from our subject. So it will be enough to say that the sea extending from the Caspian mountains along the northern side to the above-mentioned strait is 9000 stadia,⁹⁶ but the southern frontier, from the mouths of the river Nile to where Carmania begins, is reckoned at 14,000 stadia.

(75) Among these many men of differing tongues there are varieties of persons, as well as of places. But, to describe their bodily characteristics and their customs in general, they are almost all slender, somewhat dark, or of a leaden pallor, with eyes grim as goats', eyebrows joined and curved in the form of a half-circle, not uncomely beards, and long, shaggy hair. All of them without exception, even at banquets and on festival days, appear girt with swords; an old Greek custom which, according to the trustworthy testimony of Thucydides,⁹⁷ the Athenians were the first to abandon. (76) Most of them are extravagantly given to venery, and are hardly contented with a multitude of concubines;⁹⁸ they are free from immoral relations with boys.⁹⁹ Each man according to his means contracts many or few marriages, whence their affection, divided as it is among various objects, grows cold.¹⁰⁰ They avoid as they would the plague splendid and luxurious banquets, and especially, excessive drinking.¹⁰¹ (77) Except for the kings' tables, they have no fixed hours for meal-times, but every man's belly is, as it were, his sundial;¹⁰² when this gives the call, they eat whatever is at hand, and no one, after he is satisfied, loads himself with superfluous food.¹⁰³ (78) They are immensely moderate and cautious, so much so that they sometimes march through an enemy's gardens and vineyards without coveting or touching anything, through fear of poison or magic arts. (79) Besides this, one seldom sees a Persian stop to pass water or step aside in response to a call of nature;¹⁰⁴ so scrupulously do they avoid these and other unseemly actions. (80) On the other hand, they are so free and easy, and stroll about with such a loose and unsteady gait, that one might think them effeminate; but, in fact, they are most gallant warriors, though rather crafty than courageous, and to be feared only at long range. They are given to empty words, and talk madly and extravagantly. They are boastful, harsh, and offensive, threatening in adversity and prosperity alike, crafty, haughty, cruel claiming the power of life and death over slaves and commons. They flay men alive, wither bit by bit or all at once, and no servant who waits upon them, or stands at table, is allowed to open his mouth, either to speak or to spit; to such a degree, after the skins are spread,¹⁰⁵ are the mouths of all fettered. (81) They stand in special fear of the laws, among which those dealing with ingrates and deserters are particularly severe; and some laws are detestable, namely, those which provide that because

⁹⁵ Γυναικῶν λιμὴν, "the Women's Port"; the origin of the name is unknown.

⁹⁶ See Strabo, xi. 7 ff., who, however, does not give the distance.

⁹⁷ i. 6, 1-3.

⁹⁸ Cf. Hdt. i. 135.

⁹⁹ So also Curt. X. 1, 26, but according to Hdt. (*l.c.*), they acquired this vice from the Greeks.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Sallust, *Jug.* 80, 6-7, on the Numidians.

¹⁰¹ Xenophon and Athanaeus do not agree on this.

¹⁰² Cf. the parasite in the comedy *Boeotia*; Gell. iii. 3, 6.

¹⁰³ Cf. Hdt. i. 133.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Hdt. i. 133; Xenophon, *Cyrop.* viii. 8, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Over the couches at the table, at the beginning of a meal; these skins were handsomely adorned and highly prized. For the Parthian leather, see xxii. 4, 8, note.

of the guilt of a single person all his relatives are put to death.¹⁰⁶ (82) For the office of judge, upright men of proved experience are chosen, who have little need of advice from others; therefore they ridicule our custom, which at times places eloquent men, highly skilled in public law, behind the backs of judges without learning.¹⁰⁷ But that one judge was forced to take his seat on the skin of another who had been condemned to death for injustice¹⁰⁸ is either a fiction of antiquity, or, if once customary, has long since been given up. (83) Through military training and discipline, through constant exercise in warfare and military manœuvres, which we have often described, they cause dread even to great armies; they rely especially on the valour of their cavalry, in which all the nobles and men of rank undergo hard service; for the infantry are armed like the *murmillones*,¹⁰⁹ and they obey orders like so many horse-boys. The whole throng of them always follows in the rear, as if doomed to perpetual slavery, without ever being supported by pay or gifts. And this nation, so bold and so well trained for the dust of Mars, would have brought many other peoples under the yoke in addition to those whom they fully subdued, were they not constantly plagued by domestic and foreign wars. (84) Most of them are so covered with clothes gleaming with many shimmering colours, that although they leave their robes open in front and on the sides, and let them flutter in the wind, yet from their head to their shoes no part of the body is seen uncovered. To the use of golden armllets and neck-chains, gems, and especially pearls, of which they possess a great number, they first became accustomed after their victory over Lydia and Croesus.¹¹⁰

(85) It remains for me to speak briefly about the origin of this gem.¹¹¹ Among the Indians and the Persians pearls are found in strong, white sea-shells, being conceived at a definite time of year by mixture with dew. For at that time they desire, as it were, a kind of copulation, and by often opening and shutting quickly they take in moisture by sprinkling with moonlight. Thereby becoming pregnant, they each bear two or three small pearls, or else *uniones*,¹¹² so called because the shell-fish, when opened, sometimes yields only one pearl, but in that case they are of greater size. (86) And it is a proof that they are of ethereal origin, rather than that they are conceived and fed from nourishment derived from the sea, that when drops of morning dew fall upon these gems, they make them brilliant and round, but the dew of evening, on the contrary, makes them irregular, red, and sometimes spotted; and they become large or small under varying conditions, according to the quality of what they have taken in. Very often the shell-fish close through fear of thunderstorms, and either produce imperfect stones or none at all; or at any rate, it melts away as the result of abortion. (87) Their taking is difficult and dangerous, and their price is high, for the reason that they avoid shores that are usually frequented, to escape the snares of the pearlfishers, as some believe, and hide amid solitary rocks and the lairs of sea-hounds.¹¹³ (88) That this kind of gem is

¹⁰⁶ For example, when a king is assassinated.

¹⁰⁷ To prompt them.

¹⁰⁸ See Hdt. v. 25; Val. Max. vi. 3, ext. 3; Diod. Sic. xv. 10.

¹⁰⁹ A kind of gladiator, see xvi. 12, 49, note. They were armed in the Gallic manner with a small oblong buckler, but without greaves or arm-guard.

¹¹⁰ 546 B.C.

¹¹¹ I.e. pearls.

¹¹² *Uniones* is applied to large pearls, of which only one is found in a single shell. Pliny, *N.H.* ix. 112, says that they are called *uniones* because one never finds two pearls of such similarity that they cannot be told from each other. Solinus, 53, 27, end, says it is because one never finds two of them together. But Aelian, *Hist. Anim.* X. 13, says that in one shell sometimes one such pearl is found, sometimes two, sometimes as many as twenty. Cf. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V. ii. 253, "And in the cup a union shall he throw."

¹¹³ I.e. sharks.

found and gathered in the lonely bays of the Britannic Sea,¹¹⁴ although of less value than these, is well known to us.

R. Garrett Bainbridge
University of California, Irvine

ⁱ John F. Matthews “Ammianus Marcellinus” *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Tac., *Agr.* 12; Pliny, *N.H.* ix. 116; Solin. 56, 3, 28.