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LOOKING IN FROM
THE OUTSIDE

Strabo’s attitude towards the Roman people

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This chapter presents Strabo’s perception of Rome, Roman culture and Roman power in general. The geographer himself serves as a striking example of the ambivalent attitudes of Greek intellectuals active from the late first century BCE to the early decades of the first century CE in the portrayal of the Roman people (here defined as Roman citizens originating from Italy or the city of Rome itself), and the Roman way of life. Strabo is an early Greek commentator on Rome, Roman hegemony and Roman culture, preceding the more rigorously studied literary movement that we call the Second Sophistic. Studying how Strabo perceived Rome and Roman culture, and comparing his thoughts on Rome with the views of later Greek intellectuals, we may develop a valuable notion of how views on Rome evolved over time. Strabo spent time in the capital under the Augustan settlement as Rome’s political climate changed from chaos and civil war to a new form of government, where a single emperor ruled the entire Empire. This chapter focuses on how Strabo, and probably other intellectuals of Greek origin, perceived not only Rome but also the relationship between themselves, the Greek-speaking population of the Empire, and their Roman rulers.

When compared to later Greek intellectuals, Strabo offers a more nuanced approach to Rome and Roman culture. He celebrates the Romans for their ability to civilize the barbaric tribes in the Western part of the empire, and admires how, under the reign of Augustus, Rome was able to lead the people in the West towards a culturally more sophisticated lifestyle. Yet he also leaves little doubt that the Romans, in his mind, were barbarians and therefore in a number of ways much inferior to the culturally more refined Greeks, a view shared with later Greek writing in general.

It shall be argued that the explanation for this ambiguity rests on political and social realities; the provincial population remained alienated from Rome’s political institutions and so was without any real opportunity to influence the decision making process in Rome. Strabo and his peers were essentially outsiders or subjects, even if provincials in great numbers were becoming Roman citizens. Strabo’s positive attitude was, as we shall see below, closely tied to his admiration of Augustus, his family and the changes he brought to the way Rome and the Empire was governed, and to the more positive attitude towards the Greek communities in general. Strabo’s admiration of the Romans was therefore a recognition of Augustus’ many talents and of his efforts to accommodate the commonwealth not only of the Romans in Italy, but in the Empire in general, more than it was an acknowledgement of the Romans as a whole.
A Provincial Roman

When Strabo first travelled to Rome in 44 BCE, he may have been a Roman citizen and so would have enjoyed the same legal rights as all other Roman citizens. In his Geography, Strabo does not offer any hints that he was a Roman citizen, nor does he mention anything related to the legal status of his forefathers, though perhaps one might expect that his grandfather on his mother’s side might have been granted Roman rights as a reward for his support of Rome in the Third Mithridatic War.¹ What has led some scholars to conclude that Strabo may have been a Roman citizen is the name Strabo, which was the cognomen of Pompey the Great’s father, Cn. Pompeius Strabo. The coincidence of the name has inspired the idea of a connection between the Roman general and Strabo’s forefather, who, having seen that Mithridates was losing, changed sides to support the Roman general Lucullus, taking fifteen garrisons with him.² Strabo expresses strong reservations against Pompey and the Senate whom he accuses of failing to recognize the risk to his family, and of not keeping the promises made by Lucullus. According to the geographer, it was Pompey who prevented the promises made by Lucullus from being ratified, because by honouring Lucullus’ acts, Pompey and the Senate, would, he suggests, have been forced to acknowledge Lucullus’ victories in the war against Mithridates and Tigranes. This would have left Strabo’s family in an awkward position.³

Judging from the other available sources attesting to the events in Rome, Strabo seems to have misunderstood the whole situation. In 66 BCE, Lucullus was recalled as a consequence of the lex Manilia and returned in shame to the capital, where he was not awarded the opportunity to mark his triumph. Only three years later, under pressure from members of the aristocracy, the people finally conceded and granted him the right to celebrate his Pontic victories.⁴ In the late 60s, Lucullus had regained some of his political capital and managed to block the ratification of Pompey’s acts when the latter returned to the capital in 62 BCE. Indeed, Strabo may well have been right that Pompey was less attentive to Lucullus’ Pontic network. This, however, need not have been because the general did not recognize the role of Strabo’s grandfather in the war. If the name Strabo was inspired by a cognomen in Pompey’s family, Strabo’s grandfather may well have obtained Roman rights from the general; if so this would suggest that the family was, at least somehow, thanked for its efforts in the war. Yet Pompey may easily have felt no need to further promote Strabo’s family, who, as a result of their role in the war, might have lost their advanced position in Amasia, the former royal capital where Persian culture continued to flourish long after the fall of the kingdom. It is not clear what Strabo meant by saying: “great promises were made in return for these services” (12.3.33).⁵ It may well be that the family’s loss of esteem in the eyes of the people in Amasia, not least among members of the city’s Persian elite, meant that the family felt betrayed by the Roman authorities in the newly established Roman province.

Strabo’s reservations about the Romans and their culture is also illustrated in the passage where Strabo questions Eratosthenes’ notion of a more relativistic approach to cultural superiority, where Greeks were not automatically culturally superior to other peoples:⁶

Now, towards the end of his treatise – after withholding praise from those who divide the whole multitude of mankind into two groups, namely, Greeks and Barbarians, and also from those who advised Alexander to treat the Greeks as friends but the Barbarians as enemies – Eratosthenes goes on to say that it would be better to make such divisions according to good qualities and bad qualities; for not only are many of the Greeks bad, but many of the Barbarians are refined – Indians and Arians, for example, and, further, Romans and Carthaginians, who carry on their governments so admirably. (1.4.9)
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In this seemingly simplistic reproduction of Eratosthenes’ argument, Strabo dismisses out of hand the idea that other cultures can be just as civilized or sophisticated as Greek culture, and implies that the distinction between Greeks and barbarians was an acknowledged categorization between people who obeyed laws, had a flair for politics and valued education and the power of rhetoric, and those who did not.

Strabo’s notion of the Greeks’ cultural superiority is also underlined by his account of the Romans’ admiration of Greek culture leading them to copy Greek works and collect Greek masterpieces in order to bring them back to Rome (3.4.19), without any idea of the treasures they were handling in the most disgraceful manner (8.6.23). The image of the crude and, in many ways, inferior Romans is a theme to which Strabo returns.

The notion of the more sophisticated Greek versus the more practical and political Roman is also illustrated in the overly simplified account of how Greeks and Romans organized their cities, according to which Greeks were looking for beauty, natural harbours and fertile land, while Romans were keen to build more practical and everyday installations like roads, water supplies and sewers (5.3.8). That kind of infrastructure required considerable power, the ability to organize large-scale projects, and engineering skills of an entirely different order than that available in most Greek communities. Strabo recognizes the Romans as highly competent and politically ambitious, but persists in judging Roman culture as less sophisticated or refined than Greek culture, which appears as not only older but also more advanced. In Strabo’s eyes, Romans were therefore still barbarians, here used in the sense of culturally less refined, but categorized as “more refined barbarians” (asteioi barbaroi, 1.4.9) due to their respect of the law.

In his Geography, Strabo uses two opposing definitions of barbarism. In one instance, “barbarian” is used to define people who did not speak Greek or spoke Greek with difficulties (14.2.28). No obvious cultural hierarchy is attached to this definition, which could suggest a certain cultural relativism, such as that advocated by Eratosthenes. Yet the other definition of the term barbarian appears in the passage quoted above, where the word is used to differentiate Greeks from all other kinds of people who may have been more or less civilized, and of different cultural potentials, but were not as culturally refined as the Greeks (1.4.9). Strabo operates mostly with the second understanding, as when he discusses the faith of the Greek cities or of Greek culture in Magna Graecia after the Romans had won control over Southern Italy. Once again, Strabo compares Greek culture with Roman in his description of Neapolis (modern Naples), a city that was still culturally predominantly Greek in the first century CE; it boasted a famous music and gymnastic festival, and different Greek institutions, such as a gymnasium, an ephebeia and phratriae, and Strabo mentions that Greek was still the dominant language and Greek terminology was still in use. Strabo states that the people in Neapolis were legally Romans, but also that ethnic or cultural Romans from Italy and from the capital came to Neapolis to enjoy a less hectic and more sophisticated life (5.4.7).

That Strabo still saw Neapolis as a Greek city, despite the fact that its inhabitants were now Roman citizens, and so as a cultural safe-haven in a Roman region, is further illustrated by his remark on Magna Graecia in general:

Later on, beginning from the time of the Trojan War, the Greeks had taken away from the earlier inhabitants much of the interior country also, and indeed had increased in power to such an extent that they called this part of Italy, together with Sicily, Magna Graecia. But today all parts of it, except Taras, Rhegium, and Neapolis, have become completely barbarised, and some parts have been taken and are held by the Leucani and the Brettii, and others by the Campani – that is, nominally by the Campani but in truth by the Romans, since the Campani themselves have become Romans (6.1.2).
Neapolis was protected from being barbarized not because the inhabitants spoke Greek but by the cultural conduct of life in the city, and the fact that Greek institutions were an integral part of the civic landscape, even though many of the inhabitants were Roman citizens. Strabo here offers another explicit critique of Rome and the Romans, which he claims reduced most of the Greek communities in Magna Graecia to a lower or at least less sophisticated level when Roman Campani, Leucani and Brettii assumed control over the Greek cities. In short, what Strabo offers is a view of how Greek culture was under pressure, but also how Greeks were in danger of losing their own culture if they became Romans, or if Romans from outside the old Greek colonies assumed control over their cities. Judging from Strabo’s account of the southern part of Italy, the encounter between Greeks and Romans had led to a cultural impoverishment of all but a few cities, where Greek institutions, customs and tradition continued to predominate. Strabo asserted that the preservation of Greek civilization as the host culture also benefitted the Romans who visited or migrated to Neapolis, or the few other cities that could still be classified as Greek.

Strabo leaves little doubt that Greeks were the Romans’ cultural superiors, noting that the Romans were also linguistic barbarians who struggled to understand or pronounce Greek correctly. His comments can be read as a reminder to Strabo’s Greek readers that the coming of Rome or Roman culture as a whole offered something less sophisticated; this could be read as an appeal to his fellow Greeks not to relinquish their own values or allow the less sophisticated Roman culture to displace Greek civilization. This all suggests that Strabo did not see himself as Roman or as a member of a collectivity of Roman citizens. Judging from what he writes, he drew a clear line between Greeks, with whom he identified himself, and the Roman people, who are not presented sympathetically.

This disinclination towards Roman culture corresponds in a number of ways to how later Greek intellectuals described the cultural inferiority of the Romans, whom they portrayed as a cultural or ethnic category defined by how they were not Greek, and how they were less culturally refined than the Empire’s Greek population. This scepticism towards Roman culture fits the current scholarly consensus that Greeks, as illustrated by the writing of their intellectuals, were more hesitant about what Rome had to offer and also less inclined to see themselves as an integrated part of the Empire.

Yet, despite being critical of the Romans and of Roman culture, Strabo was still full of admiration for Rome in the person of Augustus, who was able to civilize the less refined barbarians in the chaotic and largely uncivilized West, which Strabo himself never visited.

Admiring Augustus

The Geography’s multifaceted approach to Rome and Roman power differentiates Strabo from later Greek intellectuals. The account of Rome under the reign of Augustus bringing civilization to the barbarians attributes to the Roman people a role which later Greek commentators were considerably less prepared to admit, or to which they were perhaps less attentive. In his description of the geography in the Western part of the Empire, Strabo describes in detail how Romans under Augustus’ leadership taught people in Gaul and Iberia how to negotiate life without war, as well as to respect the law and to practise political debate. Apparently, the Romans also taught the less evolved barbarians to refine their agricultural produce, for instance by making milk into cheese, which according to Strabo were features that testify to a more sophisticated way of living.

In a general approach to Rome as the force of civilization, Strabo describes how Romans brought previously isolated people together.
The Romans, too, took over many nations that were naturally savage owing to the regions they inhabited, because those regions were either rocky or without harbours or cold or for some other reason ill-suited to habitation by many, and thus not only brought into communication with each other peoples who had been isolated, but also taught the more savage how to live under forms of government (2.5.26).

In another paragraph, Strabo shifts from a general description of the efforts Romans made to civilize the West to specific praise for Augustus’ role in civilizing the people of Northern Iberia, whom Strabo characterizes as uncivilized because of their isolated lives, which prevented them from developing more social behaviours:

But now, as I have said, they have wholly ceased carrying on war; for both the Cantabrians . . . and their neighbours have been subdued by Augustus Caesar; and instead of plundering the allies of the Romans, both the Coniacans and the Plentuisans, who live near the source of the Iberus, now take the field for the Romans. (3.3.8)

Augustus’ part in Rome’s civilization of the West fits Strabo’s generally positive portrayal of the emperor, who is portrayed as the good and rightful ruler who treated his subjects fairly and made every effort to right the wrongs of previous Roman leaders. In Strabo’s version, Augustus was the civilized emperor who was attentive to the needs of his subjects. He was the one to educate the conquered people, as with the North Iberians; he was concerned with the safety of the inhabitants in the capital, whom he tried to protect by organizing fire brigades (5.3.7); and — very importantly to Strabo — he restored many of the works of art which Roman generals had stolen from Greek communities (13.1.30; 14.1.14). Not least among these were the pieces that Antony had taken with him in the course of the civil war.12

An essential part of Strabo’s portrayal of Augustus is found in the summary of Roman history at the end of Book 6, which concludes the account of Italy. On the blessings of Augustus and his family and on monarchy under the right ruler being the only way for a state like Rome to progress, Strabo writes in praise of Augustus who had both stabilized the Empire and secured its future by passing on the responsibility of good government to his descendants:

as for Rome itself, they have been prevented by the excellence of their form of government and of their rulers from proceeding too far in the ways of error and corruption. But it were a difficult thing to administer so great a dominion otherwise than by turning it over to one man, as to a father; at all events, never have the Romans and their allies thrived in such peace and plenty as that which was afforded them by Augustus Caesar, from the time he assumed the absolute authority. (6.4.2)

Strabo’s praise of Augustan monarchy was not novel. Both Nicolaus of Damascus and Timagenes of Alexandria devoted their attention to Augustus, and later Greek intellectuals like Plutarch, Dio of Prusa, Cassius Dio and Philostratus all agreed that monarchy was the best form of government for a state the size of Rome.13 What mattered to most intellectuals was how monarchical rule was carried out in practice. Yet, at least in the eyes of later writers, a monarch’s legitimacy depended on whether he took advice from the Senate or from learned philosophers and other men of letters.

Strabo, however, was less concerned about the pedigree of Augustus’ or Tiberius’ advisors. Far more important, apparently, was that Augustus had studied with a number of prolific Greek teachers, some of whom were Strabo’s friends, and others his former teachers. Strabo emphasizes
Apollodorus of Pergamum, with whom Augustus had studied rhetoric (13.4.3). Another of Augustus’ teachers was Xenarchus of Seleucia, the Aristotelian philosopher who spent much energy on challenging Aristotle’s work on natural philosophy (14.5.4). Strabo tells his readers that he himself had also consorted with Xenarchus. But the philosopher was not the only acquaintance that Strabo shared with the emperor; later in Book 14 and again in Book 16, we hear that Strabo and Augustus shared the friendship of Athenodorus of Tarsus, who served as a teacher at the emperor’s house where Marcellus was one of his pupils (14.5.14; 16.4.21). Even if there is no proof that Augustus and Strabo ever met, Augustus’ devotion to philosophy and rhetoric, together with the fact that he apparently worked with some of Strabo’s own teachers and friends, established an intellectual link, at least from Strabo’s point of view, between the two men. Thus, Augustus also personified a connection between Roman power or the Roman government and the world of Greek education and higher learning.

That Augustus was well versed in Greek and was the student of a number of prominent Greek intellectuals, prepared the way for the illusion that Augustus based his government, and so also his strategy in the West, on Greek intellectual values. Seen together with Strabo’s reference to Rome’s putative beginning as a Greek city, noting that the Roman historian Coelius thought that Rome was an Arcadian colony (5.3.3), readers are left with the impression that Greek culture or Greek thinking as a whole were already, or had become, a part of Roman culture in the reign of Augustus. Whether Strabo agreed with Coelius remains undetermined, but he taps into a tradition among Greek intellectuals, who in the age of Augustus tried to find room for Greek civilization in the new world order by establishing a link between Rome and the Greek world.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus and other Greek intellectuals who spent time in Rome during the reign of Augustus make more explicit the claim that Rome was an Arcadian colony well before the arrival of Trojan settlers, and stress that Spartans and other Greek colonists ensured that the city was very Greek indeed by the time Aeneas reached the land of the Tiber. Dionysius was not blind to the changes which the old Arcadian city had undergone and notes both the loss of Greek institutions and that the spoken language was no longer Greek or barbaric but a mixture of the two, yet a form of Aeolic dialect. What seems consequential to Strabo’s contemporary historian was that the Romans had not forgotten their alleged Greek heritage, even if the city was now inhabited by number of different barbaric peoples from Italy and the western part of the Empire.

Strabo was no doubt strongly influenced by the Greek mentality and the notion that Rome was either Greek or, through the education of Augustus, inspired by Greek values, leading to Rome civilizing the barbaric West by passing on what were essentially Greek values to culturally inferior tribes in Gaul and Iberia. He had to rely on the texts of Roman generals, Caesar’s Gallic Wars and Agrippa’s account of his reorganization of Gaul, the Commentaries, as evidence for Rome’s conquests and later organization of the newly won territories. Strabo seems to have been inspired by trends among intellectuals in Rome who justified Rome’s right to world domination. Strabo’s perception that Rome, through Augustus, had civilized the West and taught it how to live a life marked by a deeper understanding of political organization, can easily have found inspiration in the literary movement in the age of Augustus. Roman generals such as Agrippa, and authors such as the Augustan poets, told stories of Romans, under the leadership of Augustus and the gods, conquering and reorganizing the life of newly defeated people in the West.

That Rome’s intellectual elite saw their own people as the natural masters of the world was a trend or tradition which Strabo would have discerned first-hand in Rome. Strabo’s understanding of Rome under Augustus positing the necessary leadership in pacifying and civilized the
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barbarian tribes may have been influenced by Rome’s poets. Horace offers one example of this in the *Odes*, where he praises Augustus as the saviour and father figure who brought an end to wars and protected Romans against the threat from the invading Parthians.21 Vergil’s thoughts on the greatness of Augustus in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* are similar. In the scene where Anchises and Aeneas talk about the future of the Roman people, Vergil underlines that with the *princeps* came a golden era not only for the Romans, but also for the lands under his rule.22

We have little way of knowing how well Strabo read Latin or, if he did, whether he spent his time on Latin poetry. But there is every reason to assume that he knew Latin, and that he read Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*; it was most probably one of his main sources for the account of Gaul and Britain in the *Geography*. At the same time, it has been suggested that Strabo may have used other texts when writing about Gaul and that he read a number of different authors, like Timagenes of Alexandria, who used the *Gallic Wars* as evidence for his own account of Gaul. Accordingly, Strabo need not necessarily have been well versed in Latin in order to use contemporary accounts on Gallic geography (4.1.1). For the more recent conquests, and for Augustus’ successful organization of the tribes in Gaul and Iberia, however, Strabo would have needed to rely on more contemporary descriptions of the situation in the West, such as the work of Agrippa, other texts written by Roman generals and senators and oral accounts from individuals who had returned from service in Gaul and Iberia.

Unlike later Greek intellectuals, Strabo was caught between the Late Republican period, where the ambition of Rome’s political elite and civil war brought destruction and instability to his own home region, as well as to the Greek world in general, and the reign of Augustus and Tiberius, during which peace and prosperity were reestablished both in Italy and in the provincial communities. Strabo did not live long enough to experience the rest of Tiberius’ reign or the rule of the later Iulio-Claudian emperors. What he learned when in Rome, or from his travels in the Eastern part of the Empire, was that Augustus put an end to decades of war and a period of almost permanent unrest following what was essentially a quest for more power and prestige within the senatorial elite. To Strabo, Augustus may not only have been the learned leader who took it upon himself to make the world a better place by establishing a respectful relationship with Rome’s subjects, or by forcing the barbarians in the West to abandon war and adopt respect for politics and law, Augustus was also the one to defeat Antony, the man who had dissolved and destabilized Strabo’s home region when the Pontic cities were handed over to Antony’s client rulers. Also, it was under Augustus’ reign that Amasia was brought back within the borders when he founded the eparchy of Pontus and added the region to the province of Galatia.23

In a sense, Augustus’ focus on the Greek East and his promotion of Greece and its former glory is conspicuous as a token of forgiveness following events of the civil wars, when Greeks in Asia Minor and on the Greek mainland had no choice but to support first Cassius and Brutus, Caesar’s murderers, and then Antony after Philippi. Strabo’s attitude towards Antony is ambivalent; he points out that the triumvir instigated, or at least was informed about, the massacre of Roman colonists in Heraclea Pontica, which his client ruler Adiatorix carried out just before the battle of Actium (12.3.6). The negative consequences of Antony’s reorganization of Pontus are also stressed in the brief note on the city of Amisus, Strabo’s family’s place of origin, which, according to the geographer, fell into despair after Antony handed the city over to Straton (12.3.14). Once again, it is Augustus who repaired the damage, when he freed the city, in the sense that Amisus was once again placed under direct Roman rule, and Strabo could reassure the reader that the city was well organized.

Augustus appears in Strabo’s version as the almost flawless Roman leader who demonstrated indispensable respect and recognition to the Greek communities when he returned stolen works
of art to their rightful owners. That he was an admirer of Greek culture is further underlined by the decision to found Nicopolis at Actium as a Greek city with unmistakable Greek institutions, like a music and athletic festival overseen by the Spartans, conducted on the site where he won the first of the battles in the war on Egypt and Antony (7.7.6). Strabo’s more positive attitude to the foundation of Nicopolis stands in strong contrast to Pausanias’ criticism of the settlement, where the victorious triumvir forced people in the region out of their homes and into the new city (Paus. 7.6.1). Where Pausanias searches for archaic Greece, and resents how the Romans were disturbing peace by interfering with the order of Greek communities, Strabo sees the foundation of Nicopolis, the festival Augustus introduced and the triumvir’s devotion to Apollo, as signs of how Greek civilization was acknowledged, admired and slowly accommodated within the Roman Empire.24

On the other hand, there was little to suggest that Greeks, or other provincials in significant numbers, were eager to become an integral part of Roman politics. Therefore, if Strabo was a Roman citizen, he was in a peculiar situation. He was a member of the collectivity of Roman citizens with the same legal and economic rights as those citizens, but at the same time, the political reality dictated that essentially only members of the Italian elite could aspire to a seat on the Senate or to a career as magistrate or pro-magistrate. Even if a few individuals of provincial background, men like L. Cornelius Balbus of Gades, were succeeding in Rome, in the beginning of the first decade CE, there were clear ethnic boundaries in Roman politics which only the privileged few could hope to overcome. Provincials were still subjects, even though more and more members of the provincial elite now had the right to call themselves Romans.

Conclusion: outsider looking in

Even as a member of the elite from a part of central Anatolia which had just joined the Empire, and someone who may have carried the name Pompeius as his nomen gentile, Strabo still remained as far from a seat in the Senate as one could be. When Strabo visited Augustan Rome, as was the case for most provincials, Roman politics was a spectator sport which they watched from a distance. The Senate and magistracies were still occupied by members of the Italian elite, which created a political paradox wherein the elite in the provinces were both Romans and subjects at the same time. The provincials remained outsiders in the political sense of the word; cultural or ethnical boundaries persisted between Romans from Italy and the provincial elite until at least the late 1st–early second century, when members of the provincial elite found their way into the Senate and in the provincial administration.

The notion of them and us, particularly in the relationship between Greek provincials and Romans in Italy and in the western provinces, prevailed, even though senators and magistrates of Greek origin, men like Arrian and Cassius Dio, manifested a strong sense of belonging to the Roman collectivity. Still, despite admission to the Senate and to posts in the imperial administration, Greek intellectuals clung to their Greek cultural background, even after significant numbers of elite Greeks had become Roman citizens. Despite the fact that men like Pausanias, Aristides and Philostratos lived in an era when Greeks were much more integrated into Rome’s political and administrative institutions, they retained unremitting reservations about Romans and their culture and did not see themselves as belonging to the same collectivity as the people in Rome.

Thus, it is not surprising that Strabo drew clear distinctions between two groups, one consisting of himself and his fellow Greeks and the other the people in Rome and the city’s political elite, with whom he had very little in common other than a set of legal rights (if he was a Roman citizen). Were Strabo not a Roman citizen, his sense of marginalization and disenfranchisement
would have been yet more pronounced, and Strabo was commenting on the life and culture of his oppressors. Citizen or not, Strabo and his fellow Greeks played the role of subjects and endured both cultural and political pressure from Rome. Strabo’s criticism of the Romans and their culture, exemplified by the image of Magna Graecia being barbarised by the Romans, underlined the sense of Greek superiority over the politically dominant Romans.

Strabo’s admiration for Rome’s success in introducing a more civilized lifestyle into the western part of the provinces is tied more to Augustus as a ruler than to the Romans in general. Like most other intellectuals in the imperial period, Strabo was in favour of the form of monarchy introduced by Augustus. When Strabo wrote the Geography, Augustus’ victory in the civil war and the reorganization of the political system in Rome had replaced a century of political tumult, instability and no fewer than three civil wars in which the East, in particular, had suffered considerably. Strabo was favorably disposed towards Augustus because of his ability to stabilize Roman politics, as well as the new emperor’s efforts to right wrongs perpetrated by previous Roman generals, particularly in the East.

Unlike later commentators, Strabo did not live to see the reign and the shortcomings of the Iulio-Claudian dynasty or, for that matter, the challenges monarchical rule would face in the first century CE. In his lifetime, the government was stable and the political elite, in which he and his fellow Greeks had no share, was included in the emperor’s advisory board. To what degree they were actually involved was probably of little importance to Strabo, who, for his part, saw nothing to indicate that the Senate and other political institutions would welcome elite provincials.

From his writing we can deduce that Strabo did not see himself as a member of a Roman collectivity nor, unlike Cassius Dio and perhaps also Arrian, as a Roman. Instead, he clearly distinguished himself from Romans from Italy and from Rome itself. Standing on the brink of the principate, where Rome had finally subdued most of the known world, including the last kingdoms founded by Alexander’s successors, Strabo was only too keen to underline the greatness and thence the cultural superiority of the Greeks; he hoped to remind his Greek readers that their cultural values were worth preserving, but also to convince Rome’s political elite that their values rested on the norms, customs and knowledge of Greek civilization.

Notes
1 For the role of Strabo’s family in the Third Mithridatic War, see Strabo 12.3.33.
2 Glover 1969, 226–228. For other options to how Strabo obtained a Roman cognomen, see Dueck 2000, 7–8.
4 On the recall of Lucullus and the struggle to grant him a triumph, see Madsen 2014b, 124–127. On Pompey’s public support, see Plut. Pomp. 21–22; 25–27; On the aristocracy’s role in assisting Lucullus, see Plut. Pomp. 30.3.
5 All translations of Strabo are those of Jones in the Loeb edition.
7 Dueck 2000, 121.
8 Dueck 2000, 81–82.
9 E.g. Plut. Phil. 17.20; Flam. 12.10; Dio Chrys. Or. 13.29–37; On the looting of art by Caligula and Nero see Paus. 9.27.3–4; 9.33.6. Philostra. I/4 4.5.
13 Plut. Mor. 784 D (An Seni 2); Dio Chrys. Or. 3.49–50; Cass. Dio 52.15.1; Philostr. I/4. 5.36.1–3; Madsen 2014a, 23–28.
15 Dueck 2000, 99; Falcon 2012, 1.
Dueck 2000, 99.
17 Dueck 2000, 93.
21 Horace Odes 1.2.

Works cited


