



## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PTOLEMY'S DESCRIPTION OF SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka, under the name of *Taprobane*, was known to the ancient Greeks as early as the end of the Fourth century B.C. when Onesicritus, an important officer in the fleet of Alexander the Great, first wrote down what he heard of this island. It was further described by Megasthenes, the Greek envoy whom Seleucus Nicator sent Chandragupta Maurya, and also by the Alexandrine geographer Eratosthenes.<sup>1</sup> But it was in the mid First century A.D. that the island was brought into direct contact with the Roman empire when, as Pliny the Elder reports,<sup>2</sup> four envoys from Taprobane arrived in Rome during the reign of Claudius and supplied copious information about their country and its political and social conditions. The extent of the contact with, and knowledge of, this remote island that the western world gained following this episode is indicated by the account of the island contained in the *Geography* of Claudius Ptolemy (c.A.D. 150).

Ptolemy was an astronomer, mathematician and geographer. His treatise on Geography is in 8 books. He outlines his principles in the first book and devotes most of the remainder to tabulation of co-ordinates of the geographical features of the entire world as known in his time. With rare exceptions his positions were not really determined by astronomical observations, but by dead reckoning of (often inexact) reports of travellers, resulting in a certain amount of error. Further distortion arises from the fact that he accepts Posidonius' estimate of 180,000 stades for the circumference of the earth, in preference to Eratosthenes' more correct calculation of 250,000 stades. Thus he underrates systematically the distance between any two positions of longitude and the errors due to this false graduation accumulated in the outer or eastern portions of the map. He rejected the theory of a circumfluent ocean assuming the existence of a large sub-equatorial continent which connected the east coast of Africa with China, thus converting the Indian Ocean into a large lake. In Asia he exaggerates the length of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and while India is represented as a rectangle with its main axis running from West to East, Sri Lanka too is largely exaggerated in size. But in spite of such errors, the treatise of Ptolemy was on the whole the most accurate of ancient geographical works and it was the most comprehensive. It remained a standard until modern times.

1. Strabo, *Geography* XV, c. 690-1. Pliny, *Natural History* VI, 81.  
2. Pliny, *op. cit.* VI, 81-91.