



ISIDORUS OF CHARAX

ISIDORUS OF CHARAX (Gk. Isídōros ho Charakēnós), Greek geographical author, about whose life and person no more is reliably known than that he originated from Characene. Everything else must be derived from the few preserved remains of his writings. Even his lifetime is in dispute. According to the traditional view he flourished in the time of Augustus, shortly before the beginning of the Christian Era (cf. Schoff, p. 17; Herzfeld, pp. 4-8; Tarn, pp. 53-55; Chaumont, pp. 64 f.; Gawlikowski, pp. 78-80; Schuol, pp. 115 f.). The evidence to support this is the following. One of the authors who referred to Isidorus and used his writings was Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis historia* (see below), even if there are some inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Therefore the date of the completion of this work (77 C.E.) is the fixed terminus ante quem for Isidorus. On the other hand a reliable terminus post quem can be found in the reference to Tiridates' sudden invasion in 26 B.C.E. and his attempt to deprive Phraates IV of the Parthian crown (*Stathmoí* § 1 = Jacoby, p. 780.4); Phraates IV is the latest historical person mentioned there who can be dated with certainty. Tarn (p. 53) recognized another fact in favor of such a date, viz., that Isidorus (*Stathmoí* § 19 = Jacoby, p. 782.1) mentioned the Parthian name of Arachosia as "White India" (*Indikē Leukē*), which can only mean that at his time Arachosia was part of some Indian kingdom, as actually was the case under the Azes dynasty (30 B.C.E.-19 C.E.).

The main argument is based, however, on an emendation in Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 6.141, where the reading *Isidorum* is proposed instead of manuscriptal *Dionysium*. A "Dionysius of Charax" is totally unknown otherwise and is not



given in the lists of Pliny's sources; Isidorus, for his part, is mentioned as a source for books 2-6, and the author referred to in 6.141 is called "the most recent one describing the geography of the world" (*terrarum orbis situs recentissimum auctorem*). From this passage it is clear, if one accepts the emendation, that Isidorus, making inquiries in the Orient before the expedition of Augustus's grandson C. Caesar in the year 1 B.C.E., wrote his book on behalf of this emperor. There is the apparent difficulty, however, that Isidorus is quoted twice in a passage of Ps.-Lucianus, *Makrobioi* 15-17 (= frags. 3-4 in Jacoby, p. 782) mentioning several Oriental kings, among them Artabazus of Characene, who according to Nodelman (p. 107, n. 160; cf. Schuol, p. 388) should be dated to the very end of the 1st century C.E., and who became king only in the year 73 C.E. This difficulty now is cleared up, since a tetradrachm has become known (cf. Alam, p. 158, no. 505) which mentions the name Artabazus and at the same time is dated to the year 264 Seleucid Era = 48/47 B.C.E. (and not with Daffinà, pp. 9 f., to the Arsacid Era). Moreover, it is in no way certain that the passage of Ps.-Lucianus comes from Isidorus in its entirety; because this author is quoted by name only in §§ 15 and 17, and the first of those quotations, referring to "another Artaxerxes," follows directly after an excerpt from Dinon (q.v.) about Artaxerxes Mnemon. It seems more natural to assume that Ps.-Lucianus drew on more than one single source. It is not necessary to think, as often has been done (e.g., by Weissbach; cf. the detailed discussion in Daffinà, pp. 6-13), that two different Characene authors (whether named Dionysius and Isidorus or being of the same name Isidorus), from whose writings Pliny and Ps.-Lucianus quoted, necessarily lived in different times—i.e., in Augustus's and Pliny's time respectively.

The theoretical foundations on which the writings of Isidorus are based are the discoveries of the late Hellenistic period and in particular the measurement of the world by Eratosthenes. By this it becomes evident that Isidorus had a Greek educational background and perhaps was of Greek descent. In any case he wrote in Greek language, although he also must have had some knowledge of Aramaic, since he used and explained Semitic words and names such as the toponym *Pháliga*, which is translated into Greek *mesoporikón* "half-way" (*Stathmoí* § 1 = Jacoby, p. 779.21).

Under the name of Isidorus of Charax fragments of several writings are preserved: (1) 14 short fragments giving the distances between certain places and particulars on the size of some islands (frags. 6-19 in Jacoby, pp. 782-85; cf. Mullerus, pp. 255 f.; Schoff, pp. 12-15). These belonged to a book, whose title is



not given (perhaps *Períplous tês oikouménēs* “Account of a journey around the inhabited world”), a kind of manual of the measurement of the world, from which Pliny drew much information in books 2, 4, and 5 of his *Naturalis historia*. In frag. 19 Pliny (*Naturalis historia* 5.127) refers to Eratosthenes and Isidorus for several Asiatic peoples which have disappeared.

(2) A fragment (no. 1 in Jacoby, pp. 778 f.; cf. Mullerus, pp. 254 f.; Schoff, pp. 10 f.) describing pearl-fishing in the Persian Gulf, which is quoted almost literally by Athenaeus (q.v., *Deipnosophistai* 3.46) from Isidorus’s otherwise unknown book *Tò tês Parthías Periēgētikón* “(Geographical) description of Parthia.”

(3) Two references in Ps.-Lucianus, *Makrobioi* 15 and 17 (frags. 3-4 in Jacoby, p. 782; cf. Mullerus, p. 256; Schoff, pp. 14 f.; Schuol, pp. 123 f.) concerning two supposedly long-lived Oriental kings—a certain Artaxerxes, most probably Ardaxšīr II of Persis (1st. cent. B.C.E.), and Goaisos, king of Oman. This evidence perhaps belongs to some historical work which dealt with all the kings ruling Characene and the neighboring kingdoms up to his own time. However, it is not cogent or proven that the entire text between the two mentions of his name goes back to Isidorus, even if it is just in that part that there is discussion of three Characenian kings.

(4) A little, though quite important, work entitled *Stathmoì Parthikoí* (in Latin *Mansiones Parthicae*) “Parthian Stations,” which is the only Greek text preserved at all of the genre of the itinerary or route description (frag. 2 in the definitive critical edition by Jacoby, pp. 779-82; cf. also Mullerus, pp. 244-54 and LXXXVI-XCV; Schoff, pp. 2-9 and 22-39). The text, which seems to be complete and which is known from two Paris manuscripts (A and B) of the 13th century (and two inferior copies of the 16th cent.), is a description and measurement of the overland route crossing the Parthian empire in an easterly direction from Zeugma on the Euphrates to Alexandria in Arachosia, the so-called “Parthian Royal Road,” which had some significance both for strategic reasons and as a trade route. The text gives the frontiers of each province crossed and the names of the principal supply stations and, quite exactly, also the distances between the stations (*stathmoì*) mentioned. (*Stathmós* is a technical term used already in Herodotus’s description [5.52-54] of the Achaemenid Royal Road from Sardis to Susa.) Presumably the text follows older models such as the (lost) list of stations along the route from Ephesus to Bactria and India in the last book of Ctesias’s *Persika* (frag. 33), but Chaumont (p. 66) suspected that Isidorus also made use of Aramaic documents. It is not only possible, but, in view of the striking textual



difference between § 1 and the remainder of the text, very likely, that the *Stathmoî Parthikoí* is only an excerpt from a more exhaustive geographical account of the Parthian empire, i.e., of the *Periēgētikón* (above, no. 2), and that this book, apparently a description of all the regions from the Red to the Caspian Sea and from the Euphrates almost to the Indus River, is Isidorus's major work. The scant information of the second part, given without elaboration—i.e., in a certain province the number of villages is such and such—is a clear sign that the text in front of us is the poor work of an excerptor. In such a scenario, which cannot simply be dismissed, questions arise (and remain unanswered) as to who excerpted the *Stathmoí*, who chose this title, and the like.

In the manuscripts the text of the *Stathmoí* proper is preceded by a concise listing (not printed in Jacoby, p. 779) of all the 19 regions through which the road leads, and of the distances, which are given in *schoînoi* (a variable, originally Egyptian, measure indicating, not the length, but the distance covered in a certain time, thus ca. 5.5 km on average, as experience shows): Mesopotamia and Babylonia 171 *schoînoi*, Apollōniâtis 33, Chalōnîtis 21, Media 22, Kambadēné 31, Upper Media 38, Media Rhagiana 58, Choarēné 19, Komisēné 58, Hyrcania 60, Astauēné 60, Parthyēné 25, Apauarktikhēné 27, Margiana 30, Aria 30, Anāōn 55, Zarangiané 21, Sakastēné 63, Arachosia 36—in all, 858 *schoînoi*. Thus the course of this great route starting in Antiochia on the Orontes and reaching the Parthian frontier at Zeugma (Seleucia on the Euphrates) can be pursued in broad outline. It runs from there along the Euphrates via Nikēphōrion, Doûra and the “Royal Canal” to Seleucia on the Tigris, then in an easterly direction to Ecbatana, Rhágai, Nísaia (the ancient Parthian capital Nisā), and Margiana, before turning southwards to Aria, Sistan, and finally Arachosia, “as far as the rule of the Parthians extended” (so in § 19). Because this was the state of affairs only under Mithridates II, and not at Isidorus's own time, the conclusion (suggested also by other data concerning the division into provinces) cannot be avoided, that Isidorus here was drawing on a much older document, probably an official survey of the Parthian Empire (cf. Tarn, pp. 54 f.). For identifying the names of the districts, towns, and villages, some difficulties arise from the fact that the distances are given in *schoînoi* and not in a fixed unit of length; and because the numbers are written with alphabetic numerals, errors of the scribes and copyists relating to this also must be taken into account.

The western part of the route along the Euphrates up to Seleucia on the Tigris



(frag. 2, § 1 in Jacoby, pp. 779.6-780.11; text and German tr. also in Schuol, pp. 116-18) is described in much greater detail than the following sections (about Iran proper) and covers more than a third of the entire text. Only here is found also a rather complete list of the stations, including the distances between them and now and then also additional remarks concerning, e.g., historical facts. Of some interest is the expression *stathmòs basilikós* “royal (posting or supply) station,” which is found twice, only in this western section, applied to the fortified place Álagma and to Thilláda Mirráda. A certain place with a temple of Artemis, i.e., Anāhitā, the name of which either has fallen out or has been translated into Basíleia (literally “royal palace or treasury”), is expressly said to have been founded by Darius; it seems to be identical (cf. Chaumont, pp. 82-84) with Ptolemy’s (5.18.6) Aphphadána, which for its part is nothing other than the Iranian term *apadāna*– “palace” (Parth. *appaḍan*; see [APADĀNA](#)). This first part of the text has been commented upon in recent times, in particular from the historical-geographical point of view, by Chaumont (with maps on pp. 72, 81, and 94) and Gawlikowski (with map on p. 76).

The description of the eastern part of the route is much more succinct and actually is no more than a brief account, which does not give the individual stations, but only the separate provinces, the overall distance of the route within the individual provinces, and summary information on the number of towns, villages, and stations. Therefore, strictly speaking, the route itself, with the exception of only a few stations, is not given at all; and its course, though in part going back to the Assyrians and used also in Achaemenid times, for several sections cannot be reconstructed exactly and is at issue. To make matters worse, several of the provinces mentioned by Isidorus are not attested elsewhere (e.g., Kambadēné and Apauarktikhēné, but also the subdivision of Upper and Lower Media). From § 13 on, only provinces (those east of Parthyēné) and cities or villages are listed; there are no more stations and no distances between the inhabited places. This may be explained by assuming that for those last parts of the text the excerpt either is based on a different source or was made by a different person, for whom those matters were of minor interest. More recent treatments of this, as it were, Iranian stage of the route from the viewpoint of historical geography are by Khlopin (to be used with the utmost caution) and Walser (with map near p. 147), for the easternmost provinces (Sec.15-19) also by Daffinà (pp. 87-106).

Some details of interest may be specified. It is remarkable that in Media



(probably we have to read: Lower Media, *Mēdía hē kátō*) there was not one single *pólis* (Sec. 4 = Jacoby, p. 780.20). – In Sec. 5 (Jacoby, p. 780.22) mention is made of a town *Bagístana* (emendation of *Báptana*) “situated at a mountain, where there are a relief and a pillar of Semiramis.” This information reminds us of Diodorus 2.13.1-2, who (after Ctesias) says nearly the same, but actually means (as does Isidorus) the relief and inscription of Darius at the mountain of Bisotun (q.v.). – It is regrettable that all attempts at localizing the city of *Asaák* (or whatever the true form of the name may be) have failed so far (Sec. 11 = Jacoby, p. 781.12); there Arsaces I had been crowned the first Parthian king and “an eternal fire is attended.” – In Sec. 12 (Jacoby, p. 781.14 f.) the Parthian royal city, where the “royal tombs” are found, is mentioned by the name *Parthānisa* (which looks like some “Parthian Nisā”) and with the additional remark, that the Greeks call it *Nísaia*. – Otherwise unknown is the royal capital of the Sakas mentioned in Sec. 18 (Jacoby, p. 781.28), *Sigál*, in whose neighborhood is the city Alexandrópolis (thus Tarn, pp. 470 f., who in contrast to former editors correctly eliminated the dittographic toponym Alexandria in this passage and not vice versa).

On the whole, the data and in particular the forms of the names given in the *Stathmoí* are not always reliable. One more example may be sufficient for illustrating this: In Sec. 17 (Jacoby, p. 781.26) the province is named *Drangiané*, whereas the summary index preceding the text has *Zarangiané*, which obviously is the original form, because manuscript A has the unmotivated abbreviation *z´* before *Drangiané* (which apparently resulted from misreading ZARA- as ZDRA-). Similar problems arise with Ptolemy’s *Geography* and other Greco-Roman geographic writings (including maps such as the *Tabula Peutingeriana*), so that the total useable evidence they contain tends to be in small proportion to the amount of detail, and the comparison of the various texts mostly is not as helpful as one may expect.

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