

Alexandrian authors and Indian religion in the Ptolemaic era

The Ptolemies, to whom Egypt fell, and especially Philadelphus, opened up a route from Alexandria to India, with convenient stops along the canals of the Nile until the Red Sea. [...] This trade route, well established by Ptolemy Philadelphus between India and Egypt, and by Egypt between India and the West, was too important to be neglected by his successors. They carefully maintained it for as long as their race reigned in Egypt¹.

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These were the words of Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721) in his work on *The History of Ancient Trade and Navigation*, which was composed in the 1670s at the request of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683). As a specialist of ancient literature, the academician drew on the accounts of Greek-speaking historians and geographers to retrace the vast network of trade routes connecting the great empires of antiquity, especially Ptolemaic Egypt and India. Since the 17th century, it was known that Egypt and India had maintained important trade links following the military campaigns of Alexander the Great (356-323) in the Indus Valley. After the death of the Macedonian conqueror, Ptolemy the Lagid (368-283), who participated in these campaigns, became satrap of Egypt and later King of Egypt in 305 BC. But what was known about Indian religions in the Alexandrian intellectual milieu during the long reign of the Ptolemies? Did the trade links between Egypt and India provide opportunities to understand the principal doctrines of the Brāhmanic ritualist schools and the Śramanic ascetic movements? These questions give rise to yet another. What role did the Ptolemies play in the dissemination of knowledge about India and its religions among their Mediterranean neighbours, notably the Seleucids, whose eastern frontier bordered that of the Indian Mauryan Empire?

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1. HUET 1763, p. 107 and 109.

Nowadays, this knowledge is extremely difficult to reconstruct, since the majority of writings on India, even the reference works of antiquity such as the *Indika* of Megasthenes², ended up being forgotten and lost, surviving in only a few scant citations in works that endured over the centuries. This was the case for the first noteworthy account: the history of Alexander penned by the Macedonian Ptolemy the Lagid, the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty. A number of fragments of this text survived in the *Anabasis* of Arrian (86-160) and the *Life of Alexander* of Plutarch (46-125), which allow us to catch a glimpse of what Ptolemy I Sôter conveyed from his long journey to the land of the naked sages. Several allusions with later authors also point to the subjects of interest to Alexandrians such as Clitarchus (3rd century BC), Callixenus of Rhodes (3rd century BC), Apollonius of Rhodes (295-215), and even Eratosthenes (276-194), and later Sotion (2nd century BC) and the author of the *Berlin Papyrus* 13044 (2nd-1st century BC). It appears that the authors citing these Alexandrian writers from the 3rd century BC all lived between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD, which was a flourishing period for maritime trade between Egypt and Southern India and even as far as the Island of Taprobana.

To these preliminary remarks, let us add another concerning the history of diplomatic contacts between the kingdoms of the Diadochi and India. It is known that the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes, who was resident at the court of the Mauryan King Chandragupta³, wrote a report of great importance on Indian society, which became a reference throughout antiquity. However, we have no written trace of Dionysius, the ambassador dispatched by Ptolemy II Philadelphus to the Mauryan King Aśoka⁴. This creates a paradox for the historian. On the one hand, in the East, the Aśokan Empire at the height of its glory had its chancellery inscribe the name of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (*Turamāyo*; *Tulamaye*; *Turamaye*⁵) in its royal edicts around 260 BC. On the other, in the West, a notorious poverty of India emerges in the Greek Alexandrian sources, with the only surviving elements found in several citations relating to the construction of the figures of Dionysus, Hercules, and Alexander the Great, and their respective expeditions to the Indian territories. Should this disappearance of textual sources on Indian religions be explained as a progressive lack of interest in their doctrines among the intellectual milieu of the Mediterranean? Indeed, following the arrival of the Greeks in the territories of Northwest India, the fantasized projection that had existed from the time of Herodotus would have been superseded by a relative but sufficient understanding in the Hellenistic world, which surpassed the imaginary and fanciful representations of the past. The Indian religious landscape, broadly depicted by the companions of Alexander the Great and especially by Megasthenes, was probably adequate to satisfy an intellectual or even philosophical curiosity regarding the beliefs of these faraway naked sages. According to Strabo⁶ (60 BC-20 AD), Megasthenes reports in the third book of his *Indika* that the Indians were in agreement with the Greeks on the subject of Nature and other issues. Nothing more was needed to strengthen Hellenocentrism, with this idea being perpetuated over the centuries. Elsewhere, the primacy of the Greek philosophical doctrines

2. See WIESEHÖFER, BRINKHAUS, BICHLER (ed.) 2016.
3. Strabo, *Geography* 2.1.9; Pliny the Elder, *Natural history* 6.58; Arrian, *Indica* 5.3.
4. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 6.58; Solinus, *Polyhistor* 52.3.
5. Thirteenth rock edict.
6. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.59.

was attacked, as occurred with the Jew Aristobulus of Paneas under the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor (186-145) according to Cyril of Alexandria⁷ (376-444) or the later Christians Clement of Alexandria⁸ (150-215) and Eusebius of Caesarea⁹ (265-339). We can thus affirm that the lengthy period marked by the successive reigns of the Lagid kings left behind a rather scant literature on the religions of India, comparably much less than with the companions of Alexander the Great and the Seleucid ambassador, and later, the writers of the Roman Empire¹⁰.

Among the authors who lived in the Ptolemaic Kingdom, two major themes can be identified: [1] the account of the death of the Indian sage Kalanos as well as the construction of the neologism γυμνοσοφιστής; and [2] the constructed figures of the victorious Dionysus and Hercules in India.

The death of Kalanos

When studying the literary production of the authors living in Alexandria during the reign of the Lagid kings, the first question that arises inevitably relates to the history of Alexander, which Ptolemy, the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty, composed around 285 BC. While the work did not survive to the present day, Arrian drew on it heavily to write his *Anabasis*, as he considered the accounts of Ptolemy, son of Lagos, as well as Aristobulus of Cassandreia to be the most authoritative¹¹. Prior to him, Plutarch¹² had already followed the detailed account of Ptolemy. The accounts of Plutarch¹³ and Arrian¹⁴ on the death of the Indian ascetic Kalanos combined with that of Diodorus Siculus¹⁵ can therefore inform us about the possible elements reported by Ptolemy, which is all the more important, since the latter was instructed to organise the funeral according to Arrian: “And it is Ptolemy, son of Lagos, of the bodyguards, who should take charge of it” (καὶ ταύτης ἐπιμεληθῆναι Πτολεμαῖον τὸν Λάγου τὸν σωματοφύλακα).

Kalanos¹⁶ met Alexander the Great to the north¹⁷ of Taxila, and at the request of the king of Taxila, he agreed to accompany the conqueror and his army¹⁷. This sophist (σοφιστής) according to Onesicritus¹⁸ or brāhman (βραχμᾶνες) according to Aristobulus¹⁹ lived naked²⁰. He would have belonged to the Brāhmanic tradition of the *parivrājaka*, that is, brāhmins who abandoned everything both in terms of their means of subsistence and contrary values and concepts, and

7. Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 4.28.705c.

8. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates* 1.15.72.4.

9. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio evangelica* 8.6.5. Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 4.28.705c.

10. See DUCŒUR 2014a, as well as PARKER 2008, especially Part 1, “Creation of a Discourse”.

11. Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.1.

12. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 46.2.

13. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 69.6-7.

14. Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.3.1-6.

15. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 17.107.1-6.

16. On the meaning of the patronym Kalanos (kallānam), see Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 65.5.

17. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 65.5.

18. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.63-65; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 65.1-3.

19. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.61.

20. Arrian, *Indica* 11.7.

now lived from mendacity (*bbikṣā*) while wandering (*parivraj-*). The most rigorist were completely naked (*sarvataḥ parimokṣam eke*)²¹. According to the sources used by Diodorus Siculus²² and Strabo²³, Kalanos was 73 years old when he fell ill after arriving in Pasargadae near Persepolis with his disciples. Afflicted with an incurable illness, he performed his self-cremation by following the rules of the “great departure” (*mahāprasthāna*) or the suicide of Indian ascetics by ignition.

A comparison of the different accounts of Kalanos’ death provided by Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Plutarch, Arrian, Lucian, Athenaeus, and Elian suggests that Ptolemy the Lagid, who organised the self-cremation, must have recounted the following details in his *History of Alexander*: Kalanos fell ill and became physically weak. He asked Alexander the Great to prepare him a pyre. Alexander tried to dissuade him but eventually conceded. He tasked Ptolemy with executing Kalanos’ instructions for the construction of the pyre. A horse was prepared to transport the sage, but as he was too weak to mount it, he was carried on a bed. The bed was placed on the pyre, and Kalanos recited mantras before the fire was lit. He remained motionless while the flames consumed him.

For the Egyptian world and based on the preserved writings, only Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-45 AD) cited Kalanos as an example of a free-thinking sage, ranked even before powerful kings. In his exegetical commentary on Abraham²⁴, he wrote that the gymnosophists offered themselves to the flames when they fell ill. In his work *Every good man is free*²⁵, he also reproduced a letter penned by Kalanos to Alexander in which the Indian ascetic defended himself and called for the freedom to live according to his own will. The Greek figure of Kalanos as the ideal-typical free-thinking sage, which first emerged among the Cynics and then the Stoics, probably developed from the early accounts of Alexander the Great’s companions, notably Onesicritus, who was a disciple of Diogenes the Cynic²⁶.

In Ptolemaic Egypt, the neologism γυμνοσοφιστής²⁷ was created to designate naked Indian ascetics. Although Nearchus²⁸ and Onesicritus²⁹ employed the terms γυμνός and σοφιστής to describe Indian sages of the hermetic tradition, the author of the oratory joust between Alexander the Great and ten gymnosophists, which is preserved in the *Berlin Papyrus* 13044³⁰ from the turn of 2nd and 1st centuries BC, was apparently the first to use this generic lemma to designate the Indian brāhmins of the Indus Valley. While the frame story was lost, this ἀγών, mentioned by Plutarch³¹, Clement of Alexandria³² and Pseudo-Callisthenes³³, takes place against

21. *Āpastambadharmasūtra* 2.21.11-12.

22. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 17.107.1-6.

23. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.68.

24. Philo of Alexandria, *On Abraham* 182.

25. Philo of Alexandria, *Every good man is free* 92-96.

26. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.65.

27. See DUCŒUR 2016.

28. Arrian, *Indica* 11.7.

29. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.64; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 65.3; Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.2.2.

30. The papyrus was found during the archaeological excavations undertaken by Otto Rubensohn (1867-1964) in Abusir el-Melek in 1904.

31. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 64-65.

32. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.4.

33. Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Life of Alexander the Great*, recension α 3.5-6; β 3.4.5-3.6.

the backdrop of the conquest of the southern Pañjāb and the northern part of the Lower Indus Valley, when the Macedonian conqueror seized cities in the Kingdoms of Malles and Sabbas where many brāhmins lived. In the country of King Sabbas (< Sāmba, sun) – Σαβειλώ in the *Berlin Papyrus* 13044 –, he slaughtered some 80,000 brāhmins according to Diodorus Siculus, while for Plutarch, he invited a few of the brāhmins who persuaded King Sabbas to revolt in order to ask them enigmatic questions. Evidently, its Alexandrian author lacked precise information about the Indian sages of this region and had no knowledge of any Greek transcription of an Indo-āryan substantive referring to their social status and function. He thus resorted to the juxtaposition of two lexemes, γυμνός and σοφιστής, which were already employed by Nearchus and Onesicritus, but never as an endocentric compound. By using the term γυμνο-σοφιστής, the author of this joust between Alexander the Great and the Indian sages of the country of Σαβειλώ drew on Onesicritus' dialogue with the two naked ascetics Kalanos and Dandamis.

The Ptolemaic origin of this term is confirmed by its frequency. Greek literature only includes 28 occurrences of this neologism compared to 145 for βραχμῶνες, which is far earlier and dates back at least to Nearchus. Strabo was the first to use this term, but only once in his *Geography* in 16.2.39, and never in book 15 dedicated to the description of India and its society. It was rather his contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, who first integrated the term γυμνοσοφιστής in his writings by repeating it four times. The Jewish scholar used it notably to qualify Kalanos (Κάλανος ἦν Ἰνδὸς γένος τῶν γυμνοσοφιστῶν³⁴) with a semantic shift. This substantive, which was used to designate the rebel brāhmins in the Kingdom of Sabbas in the *Berlin Papyrus* 13044, now became a generic term to denote all naked mendicants who had previously been distinguished by specific terms. In the 1st century BC, Cicero (106–43 BC) was unfamiliar with the term gymnosophist, or at least, its Latinisation, since he still used the expression inherited from the companions of Alexander the Great (“ii qui sapientes habentur nudi aetatem agunt”³⁵). It should therefore be recognised that Philo of Alexandria was the first to attribute a generic sense to this neologism and create a new category: the ideal-typical Indian sage, a free-thinker, throwing himself into the flames at his will³⁶.

The term γυμνοσοφιστής thus derives from the Alexandrian sphere during the reign of Ptolemy X. It replaces another term employed by an historian, that of γυμνήτης or gymnetae, which is attested twice, first with Strabo³⁷ and then with Pliny the Elder according to Crates of Mallus (220–140 BC), although it is already used as an ethnonym in the latter text. Although Strabo does not indicate his source in his *Geography*, he mentions Clitarchus in the preceding paragraph. He states only that the term γυμνήτης came from an historian to speak of the status of brahmacārins, that is, celibate young brāhmins studying the Veda. This term may have been used for the first time by Clitarchus himself, notably in his twelfth book. According to Diogenes

34. Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man is Free* 93.

35. Cicero, *Tusculanae* 5.77.

36. See DUCCEUR 2014b.

37. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.70.

Laërtius, who always employed the generic term of *gymnosophist*³⁸, Clitarchus claimed that “*gymnosophists even scorn death*³⁹”.

The constructed figures of Dionysus and Hercules

The second theme that emerges in the rare Alexandrian fragments relates to the story of Dionysus and Hercules in India. As attested in the *Bacchae*⁴⁰ of Euripides (480–406), the voyage of Dionysus to the territories of Northwest India, notably to Bactria (Βάκτρια), dates at least to the 5th century BC, well before the Macedonian conquest. In the 5th century BC, Bactria was a satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire, and authors like Dionysius of Miletus and Aristodemus claimed that Dionysus fought against the Indians (ἐπολέμησεν Ἴνδουὺς ὁ Διόνυσος⁴¹). Thus, when Alexander the Great and his companions reached the territories of Northwest India, they ventured to strange lands that they had nevertheless heard of in the tradition of Dionysus’ journey or the writings of Herodotus and Ctesias of Cnidus. During their slow advance, they discovered the places where Dionysus had lived and fought. The same was true regarding the great hero Hercules. This formed the basis of the words reported by the companions of the Macedonian conqueror and their attempts at identifying places or toponyms. Later, Megasthenes proceeded in the same manner when he penetrated deeper into the territories of India beyond the Indus. His embassy took him east, as far as Pāṭaliputra in the heart of the Magadha Kingdom in the Gangetic Plain. His quest for the passage of Dionysus and Hercules in India led him to elaborate a typology of the cults that he observed. By means of *interpretatio*, he discovered the nature and functions of Greek gods in numerous Indian divinities, and more specifically, those of Dionysus and Hercules. It is therefore hardly surprising that in his *History of Alexander*, Clitarchus⁴² reported the tradition of Dionysus’ arrival and combat in India as well as the localization of Mount Nysa in the Indian territories, where grapevines and a sort of ivy called σκινδαψός grew.

This tradition of Dionysus’ conquest of the Indians, similarly to Alexander the Great’s, became so popular in the Hellenistic world that the god’s return from India was even celebrated. This is what Ptolemy II Philadelphus did in Alexandria in 270 BC during the pentetric commemoration of the deification of his parents. Callixenus of Rhodes’⁴³ description of this royal Ptolemaic τρυφή of Dionysiac style⁴⁴ shows that in addition to the four-wheeled chariot on which Dionysus returns triumphantly from India lying on an elephant⁴⁵, raw materials, spices, and animals were brought from the Indian territories by the intermediary of trading posts.

38. Diogenes Laërtius also uses the term *gymnosophist* to speak of barbaric Indian philosophers, citing the twenty-third book of the *Succession* of the Peripatetic philosopher Sotion of Alexandria. Diogenes Laërtius, *Life of Philosophers*, prologue 1. Opposing the idea that the Greeks owed their philosophy to barbaric sages, Diogenes Laërtius never utilised the terms *sophist*, *philosopher*, *brāhman*, or *sarman* to speak of Indian sages, only the neologism *gymnosophist*.
39. Diogenes Laërtius, *Life of Philosophers* 1.6.
40. Euripides, *Bacchae* 15.
41. *Scholia on Apollonius of Rhodes* 2.904.
42. *Scholia on Apollonius of Rhodes* 2.904.
43. GOUKOWSKY 1995.
44. DUNAND 1981 and 1986; GOUËSSAN 2013.
45. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 5.28.200c.

These many signs aimed to show the Lagid dynasty's power in relation to its neighbours, notably the vast Seleucid Empire, which had directly traded with the Mauryan Empire since the alliance between Seleucus I and Candragupta around 304 BC. During the wars between the Diadochi and then between their sons, ambassadors had been sent to the Mauryan court. King Bindusāra, who reigned from 298 to 272 BC, received Deimachus and Dionysius, who were the envoys of Seleucus I and Ptolemy II Philadelphus, respectively. Owing to their common border, Bindusāra probably dealt more with the Seleucids. According to Athenaeus, he asked Antiochus I to send him figs, wine, and a sophist. Around 260 BC, the royal Mauryan chancellery mentioned the Greek king (*yonarājā*) Antiochus II Theos (*Aṃtiyoge*, *Aṃtiyoko*), better known for his reign at the frontiers (*ateṣu* or *aṃteṣu*) of the empire, as well as other kings (*rājāno*) such as Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Antigonus Gonatas (*Aṃtekin*), Magas of Cyrene (*Magā*), and Alexander II of Epirus (*Alikyaṣudale*, *Alikasudaro*). Quite surprisingly, however, this most favourable period for exchanges between the descendants of the Diadochi and King Aśoka left absolutely no trace in Greek or Latin literature, not even the name of this Indian king, contrary to his father and grandfather. No Indian ambassador is ever cited, even though an inscription of the Mauryan King Aśoka mentions that he sent emissaries everywhere beyond his politically stable empire. At this time, the war in Syria that opposed Ptolemy II Philadelphus to Antiochus II Theos and Antigonus Gonatas would have attracted the most attention.

Unlike during the time of Alexander the Great, the Diadochi, and their sons, the next generation was highly critical of the construction of the figure of the Macedonian conqueror and Dionysus travelling as far as India. Eratosthenes, the successor of Apollonius of Rhodes (295-215) as the head of the Library of Alexandria under the reign of Ptolemy III (285-222), refuted the Indian history of Dionysus and Hercules as reported by Megasthenes⁴⁶. He tried to show that this entire mythological construction as well as the discovery of sites supposedly visited by the pair only served to gratify Alexander the Great and magnify his glory⁴⁷. Thus, less than a century after the conquest of the territories of Northwest India by Alexander the Great, Eratosthenes denounced the traditions on the Indian exploits of Dionysus and Hercules. For him, this was pure fiction fabricated by the partisans of the Macedonian conqueror, who designated Nysa as a Dionysian place of worship and Mount Meros (Indian Meru) as the birthplace of the god. The rationalistic approach of the Alexandrian geographer, who never stepped foot in India, did not allow him to apprehend the *interpretatio* of the Seleucid Megasthenes regarding the cults of the Indian Dionysus Śiva and the Indian Hercules Kṛṣṇa, or those concerning the Indian ruler Dionysus, that is, the Vedic King Pṛthu born from the body of his father Vena, as well as the Indian Hercules, King Yāyāti born from a *sūdra* mother⁴⁸. Indeed, the former king was the founder and the latter the descendant of the Lunar dynasty (*candravamśa*) associated with the Mauryan King Candragupta (meaning "Protected by the Moon")⁴⁹. Hereafter, the accurate and detailed studies of the mythology, gods, beliefs, and religious practices of the India undertaken by the Seleucid ambassador Megasthenes and Deimachus were discredited in the Alexandrian

46. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.7.

47. Arrian, *Anabasis* 5.3.1-4.

48. See DUCÉUR 2011.

49. Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* 15.4.15.

milieu. Eratosthenes' view that the studies of the Seleucid envoys were misleading, later adopted by Strabo⁵⁰, carried weight, leading to a misunderstanding of Indian religions and a progressive disinterest in them, which gave way to simple topoi. In the 2nd century AD, Plutarch condemned the words of Phylarchus of Naucratis who wrote in the 3rd century BC that "Dionysus was the first to bring from India to Egypt two bulls, one by the name of Apis and the other Osiris"⁵¹.

Conclusion

The surviving textual sources of the Ptolemaic period are unfortunately too scant to tell us what learned Alexandrians truly knew about the religions of India. Ptolemy II Philadelphus' desire to make Alexandria the cultural capital of the Hellenistic world was heavily influenced by books: the acquisition of original texts as well as the copying and translation of works into the Greek language in the manner of the translation of the *Septuagint* for Judaism or the writings of the Chaldean priest Berossus for the beliefs of the Mesopotamian world. This endeavour was possible, because these religious systems belonged to societies that had long made the transition from orality to writing. The same could not be said for India, where knowledge continued to be orally transmitted from master to disciple and where the *kharoṣṭhī* and *brāhmī* scripts were only developed by the Mauryan chancellery during the reign of King Aśoka. The Greeks most certainly felt a sense of deception when coming into contact with the Indian sages, as they were directly confronted with the mutism of brāhmans and śramans who could only be understood through their rites and ascetic practices. As noted by Megasthenes, the Indians were unfamiliar with writing, resorting instead to the spoken word and memory⁵², while their doctrines were filled with traditional stories, myths, and allegories, which obscured their founding principles. Thus, no one – neither Alexander the Great's companions nor the Seleucid and Ptolemaic ambassadors under the reign of the Mauryan Kings Candragupta and Bindusāra – could claim to return with a doctrinal text so as to take the time to study and then translate it. Brāhmans and śramans belonged to schools or groups implanted in a given territory, and their sacred knowledge and esoteric doctrines had always been orally transmitted. Despite the presence of Greeks in the Indus Valley after the conquest of the Macedonian conqueror, there were no Hellenised brāhmans who undertook the same endeavour as Berossus. To understand their doctrines, it sufficed to make the effort to go and meet them, which is what Onesicritus and Aristobulus did, since Kalanos and Dandamis refused to visit Alexander the Great. Despite the enlistment of Indians in the Macedonian army with some venturing as far as Persia, not to mention the existence of a trade route linking India to Alexandria, no textual source attests to the slightest knowledge of Indian religious doctrines. Those desiring to understand the founding principles of Indian religions had to make the journey to India itself, following the example of Clearchus of Soli (3rd century BC) who travelled to Bactria and much later, Plotinus (205-270 AD) who had to

50. Strabo, *Geography* 2.1.9.

51. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 362b.

52. Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.53.

make do with the old writings of the contemporaries of Alexander the Great and Megasthenes after his failed expedition.

Let us make the comparison here with the knowledge of Indian doctrines acquired by European scholars in the first quarter of the 19th century and then forgotten by Europe some 50 years later. Likewise, the knowledge acquired at the time of the encounter between Alexander the Great and the naked Indian sages, between his companions and Kalanos who taught them about his doctrine and asceticism, and between Megasthenes and the brahmins of the royal court of Candragupta, was forgotten just a few decades later. As with Zoroastrianism, the content of the Indian religious doctrines was hardly credible for the subsequent generations of learned Greeks, who were trained in philosophical schools mostly founded on reason or logos. The testimonies of Greek-speaking scholars, principally Cynics, Stoics, and later Jews and Christians, show that what fascinated them about Indian ascetics was their endurance and determination, even to the point of remaining immobile and impassive on a burning pyre. On this issue, Clement of Alexandria recalls the advice of Zeno of Citium (336-264), the founder of stoicism: “Zeno well said of the Indians that he would rather see one Indian roasted than learn all the proofs about pain”⁵³.

In the field of knowledge, the Ptolemaic dynasty played a considerable role in the Hellenistic world, with Alexandria as its beacon. But far from the frontiers of India and far beyond those of the Seleucids, Alexandria had to wait a few more centuries before new knowledge reached the city from Bactria by land⁵⁴ and from Southern India and Taprobana⁵⁵ by sea, thus renewing its knowledge of the beliefs of the peoples living beyond the eastern extremities of the Roman Empire.

53. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.20.125.
 54. See DUCCEUR 2010.
 55. See DUCCEUR 2018.

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