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A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

"There was a king reigned in the East, There, when kings will sit to feast, They get their fill before they think, With poisoned meat and poisoned drink. He gathered all that sprang to birth, From the many-venomed earth"

A.E. Housman

This month J&T 179 goes on a long voyage down Asia Minor to Pontus and then back home to London in time for wigs, tailoring and a little bit of whalebone carving. What more could anyone possibly want.

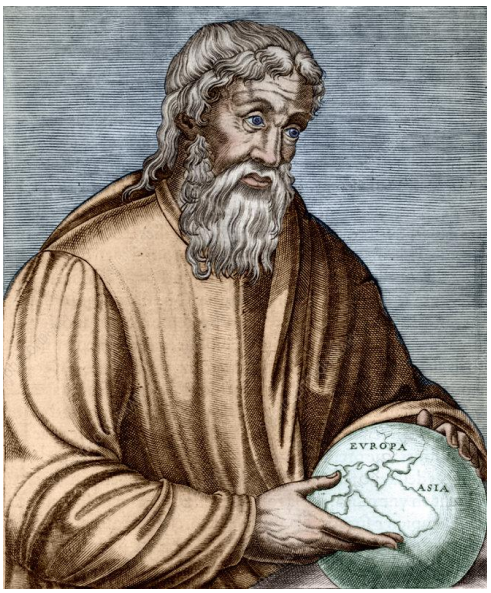
WHALE OF A TIME

Scrimshaw is scrollwork, engravings, and carvings done in bone or ivory. Typically it refers to the artwork created by whalers, engraved on the byproducts of whales, such as bones or cartilage. It is most commonly made out of the bones and teeth of sperm whales, the baleen of other whales, and the tusks of walruses.

It takes the form of elaborate engravings in the form of pictures and lettering on the surface of the bone or tooth, with the engraving highlighted using a pigment, or, less often, small sculptures made from the same material. However, the latter typically fall into the categories of ivory carving, for all carved teeth and tusks, or bone carving. The making of scrimshaw probably began on whaling ships in the late 18th century and survived until the ban on commercial whaling. The practice survives as a hobby and as a trade for commercial artisans. A maker of scrimshaw is known as a *Scrimshanders*. The word first appeared in the logbook of the brig By Chance in 1826, but the etymology is uncertain. Right is an example in the editor's collection.

THE FIRST GEOGRAPHER[1]

Strabo of Amasia (below, c.63 BC-AD 24) holds the distinction of having written the first extant descriptive geography in the Western world. He saw himself as both a historian and philosopher whose magnum opus, the sprawling 17-book *Geography*, made sense of both the past and the present. The book, written in Greek, covers the entirety of the known world in the first century AD, describing the land and culture as well as the history of each region. Strabo's aim in undertaking this monumental task was very clear. At the beginning of his work he claims that his words are essential reading for those interested in 'political affairs and in matters that concern leaders', and especially for anyone interested in imperial expansion:



Strabo's own complex cultural background perhaps explains why he was so keen to stress the political utility of his geographical writing. Born to an elite Greek-speaking family in Pontus, a region in modern-day Turkey that had long been ruled by culturally Greek kings with Persian origins, he saw seismic changes to the political status quo over the course of his long life. The foremost of these was the meteoric and unstoppable rise of Roman power, both in his homeland and far beyond. In the centuries before his birth the Roman city-state had taken control of the rest of Italy before turning its attentions to Spain, North Africa, Greece, and Asia Minor. Pontus was in this region, and Strabo's family had close links to the last Pontic king, Mithridates VI, who continually fought the Romans until they vanquished him and took his kingdom in 63 BC. Strabo tells us that many of his relatives were members of the inner circle of the Pontic court over several generations, though relations soured when his grandfather revolted at the end of the Mithridatic War (89-63 BC) and handed 15 forts to the Romans.

This change of loyalty greatly influenced the course of Strabo's life; although he was a Greek speaker raised and educated in Asia Minor, as an adult he travelled to Rome to continue his education in the city's famous libraries, which now contained many Greek book-rolls carried off from the various Roman conquests. While in the capital, Strabo mingled with the highest echelons of the Roman elite and benefited from the close connections his family had developed with powerful politicians. Steeped in Greek cultural learning and closely connected to some of the most powerful players in the Roman world, it is unsurprising that Strabo wanted to produce a work that grasped the complex geopolitical realities of his time. Strabo found himself in Rome at the most tumultuous point in its history: the direct aftermath of Caesar and Pompey's civil wars (49-45 BC), Mark Antony and Octavian's clashes (32-30 BC), and the eventual, inevitable fall of the Roman Republic and rise of the Roman Empire (27 BC).

His Geography was thus conceived against a backdrop of intense change, aimed explicitly at the political elite as the tentacles of Roman imperial power spread in every direction in the wake of the first emperor Augustus' relentlessly expansionist policies. Geography – or Geographia in Greek, literally meaning 'writing the world' – certainly had its place in documenting and cementing the new political realities of Roman imperial power. By describing the extent, history, and geopolitical situation of each region of the known world, Strabo was providing an implicit narrative of the reasons for the rise of Roman power. But when we look closely, several interesting perspectives emerge. Strabo consistently emphasises the continuities between Greek and Roman culture, describing how various Greek heroes and kings had visited or colonised Italy in the distant past, underplaying the importance of native Italian traditions and staking a claim for the potentially Greek origins of the Romans themselves. For example, the mythical Greek heroes Odysseus and Evander* were said to have visited Italy and founded settlements full of their own descendants there. Moreover, in the Geography Strabo's own Hellenic culture has consistently reached and influenced Italy and other lands long before the Romans did: the very heart of Rome's power, then, becomes Greek.

This distinctively Hellenocentric perspective is apparent throughout the text, occasionally leading to some radically inaccurate geographical claims. Many of the strangest of these – at least, from our perspective – come from his discussions of the two greatest Greek cultural products of the ancient world, Homer's Iliad (narrating the course of the Trojan War) and the Odyssey (describing the hero Odysseus' return to Greece from Troy), both dating to the eighth century BC. According to Strabo, Homer was 'the first who ventured to begin to engage in geography' and his fictional poems provide historical proof of the Greeks' colonisation of the world long before the ascent of Roman power. For Strabo, Odysseus' lengthy sea-journey home is evidence that Greeks had visited Italy many centuries before the rise of Rome – despite the region never being mentioned in this context in the poem. Even Pontus has a connection to the Greek heroes of the past, as Homer's poems supposedly evidence the visit of Jason and the Argonauts to the nearby northeastern regions of the world 'around the Propontis and the Euxeinos up to Colchis' (the Black Sea to modern Georgia) – even if there is no mention of this in the poems themselves.

Strabo gave to posterity a description of the Roman Empire at the very moment of its birth. His work influenced later ideas of how imperial power and colonisation could and should work: we know, for example, that Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) had read the Geography and found in it a vision of the world with gaps to be filled.

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Ed: *Ulysses Found* by Ernle Bradford (First Sphere Books 1971) is a great little book that gives a view of the Odyssey by an historian who is also a sailor. He believed that many of the descriptions in the Odyssey can only be understood if you are on board a vessel. He also concludes that the story is woven around the adventures of the first Greeks to explore the western Mediterranean. There is evidence of Jason and the Argonaut's Golden Fleece in that the traditional way of panning for gold in the Colchis region was to place a sheepskin in the river so that the roughness of the wool and the lanolin coating would pick up the small particles of alluvial gold.

*In Roman mythology, Evander was a culture hero from Arcadia, Greece, who was said to have brought the pantheon of gods, laws, and alphabet of Greece to ancient Italy, where he founded the city of Pallantium on the future site of Palatine Hill, Rome, sixty years before the Trojan War. He instituted the festival of the Lupercalia. Evander was deified after his death and an altar was constructed to him on the Aventine Hill.

THE POISON KING[2]

Above, we mentioned Mithridates. King Mithridates VI of Pontus, who (literally) wore Alexander's mantle, was a capable general himself, but never managed to achieve the military success of Alexander. However, what he lacked in martial prowess, he made up for in various fields, especially toxicology. He lived in an age when the Roman Republic was at the peak of its military might and slowly but surely expanding east. Not only was the Roman military at its zenith in the 1st century BC, but it was also led by some of its most capable commanders. However, it wasn't all gloom for Mithridates, as these commanders were more often pitted against each other.

The ancient region of Pontus encompassed parts of northeastern Anatolia and the southern Black Sea coast (in modern-day Turkey). Map of Pontus above: Pre-Mithridates VI era in darkest purple, territories acquired during his reign in purple, and areas won in the First Mithridatic War in pink. It was initially a part of the Seleucid Empire, a Hellenistic successor state to Alexander the Great's empire, in the 3rd century BC. During this time, a local leader claiming descent from Persian and military campaigns. Mithridates' rise to the throne was far from smooth. His father, Mithridates V, was poisoned in 120 BC during a banquet.

It is likely that his wife, Mithridates VI's mother, played a role in this assassination, as she took over as regent and notably favoured Mithridates' younger brother for the future kingship. Although only 12 at the time, Mithridates survived multiple assassination attempts and eventually fled into the wilderness. Modern historians speculate that he fled with a band of friends, likely those who would later become his lieutenants and confidants. Regardless, little is known precisely about his time in self-imposed exile, other than that it lasted between five and seven years.

When he was as young as 17, Mithridates returned to the capital of Sinope and, in a coup d'état, took over the throne of Pontus. He imprisoned his mother and brother, both of whom would die without ever regaining power. His ascension to kingship only made Mithridates more determined not to meet the same fate as his father, or many of his contemporaries in the treacherous courts of ancient eastern kingdoms. These fears were not unfounded because, even though he managed to recruit many allies among the Pontic nobility during his exile and purge the court of his mother's allies afterwards, he could never be too sure about how many of his enemies still lived. One of the results of this effort is what Mithridates is still famous for today: his study of poisons.

It is suggested that Mithridates began his interest in poisons during his childhood. During his years in the wilderness, he undoubtedly learned a great deal about the poisonous plants and animals of Asia Minor. Mithridates collected poisons and poisonous ingredients from across the ancient world. These would include poisonous plants such as deadly nightshade (belladonna), hemlock, aconite, oleander, foxglove, and ergot; venomous animals such as snakes, scorpions, and spiders; as well as mineral poisons, such arsenic, lead, and mercury salts. He would often administer these poisons to criminals sentenced to death in order to study their effects, and find potential antidotes.

Throughout his life, Mithridates would ingest sub-lethal levels of poison, including arsenic (that killed his father), in order to build up his immunity. To this day such practice of building immunity to poison is known as Mithridatism.

EX LIBRIS[3]

A December addition to the J&T library was *A Survey of London* by John Stow (The History Press 2005). Stow published this book in 1598 and it has never been out of print as it is an invaluable source for historians of the Tudor period. The introduction is by Antonia Fraser.

John Stow (1525 - 1605) followed at first the trade of a tailor, admitted as a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company in 1547. From 1560 he started collecting and transcribing manuscripts as well as writing. He joined the Society of Antiquaries founded by Archbishop Parker and maintained good relations with him throughout his life.

He was attacked by Richard Grafton, a rival chronicler, and was several times house searched and examined for his 'Popish' books, but escaped without punishment. He spent all his money on literary pursuits and existed for sometime on charity - the king even gave him letters patent in 1604, authorising him to receive *kind gratuities*. He is buried in the Church of St Andrew Undershaft, Leadenhall Street and the monument[3] erected by his wife (right) is still there.

He was the most accurate and businesslike of the historians in that period. I shall delve into his writings during the year and will publish any nuggets I find.

DID YOU KNOW?[4]

The word WIG only appeared in 1675, before that they were periwigs. Bigwig refers to important officials who tended to wear the largest wigs. Queen Elizabeth owned 150 wigs and Mozart wore a wig to cover a deformity of the left ear. Demand for wigs grew dramatically in recent times when they were required for Peter Jackson's trilogy film of *The Lord of the Rings*.

In 1939 a wealthy Austrian who owned a number of Bank of England bearer bonds that he wanted to liberate but could not get them past the Nazi officials. So he came up with a 'cunning plan': He arranged for two English solicitors to meet him in Vienna where they took down the details of the bonds. He then burnt the bonds in front of the solicitors. On returning to London, the solicitors made a statutory declaration of their story to the Bank of England who promptly reissued the bonds, which remained in England for the Austrian's use.

It is unlawful to *discharge any cannon or other firearm of greater caliber than a common fowling piece within three hundred yards of any dwelling house within the said district to the annoyance of any inhabitant thereof.* And it is illegal for anyone who *lives within a mile of any arsenal or store for explosives* to posess a pack of playing cards!

1. Strabo portrait courtesy of Science Photo Library. Map from Strabo and Procopius: classical geography for a Christian empire Edited by By Hagit Amirav and Bas Ter Haar Romeny. (Leuven–Paris–Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007). Evander Promptuarii Iconum Insigniorum Published by Guillaume Rouille (1518?-1589). In the Public Domain.
2. Article taken from CultureFrontier.com. Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. Painting from the US National Library of medicine and in the Public Domain.
3. Monument with effigy of John Stow, Church of St Andrew Undershaft, City of London, with arms of the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors and Latin inscription: "Either do things worth writing or write things worth reading". Biography courtesy of The Concise Dictionary of National Biography.
4. Taken from *Mr Hartston's Most Excellent Encyclopedia of Useless Information* by William Hartston (Metro Publishing 2006). The Austrian and explosive stories come from *The Ludicrous Laws of Old London* by Nigel Hawthorne (Robinson 2016).