

## REVIEW–DISCUSSION

### NEARCHUS OF CRETE

Veronica Bucciantini, *Studio su Nearco di Creta. Dalla descrizione geografica alla narrazione storica*. Studi di Storia greca e romana, 11. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2015. Pp. 251. Paperback, €18.00. ISBN 978-88-6274-643-4.

*Note:* The Table of Contents of this book appears at the end of the review.

While Nearchus’ fragments have long been commented upon by excellent scholars, the academic community was awaiting a monograph entirely devoted to this exceptional author. The gap has just been filled by Veronica Bucciantini (henceforth B.), who gives a study encompassing all aspects of Nearchus’ career and personality. This book is a revised version of her doctoral thesis, completed under the supervision of a leading expert in ancient geography, Serena Bianchetti. It does not consist of a new commentary of the extant fragments,<sup>1</sup> and B. certainly does not aim at extensively addressing and discussing the many complex issues raised by this text: for instance, Nearchus’ ‘scientific’ skills (ch. 3: ‘N. osservatore “scientifico”’) are not studied against the background of fourth-century Greek science and culture. Instead B. provides a convenient synthesis presenting the various aspects of Nearchus’ life and actions, some of which are more carefully investigated than others. B.’s inquiry, mostly based on Arrian’s *Indikê*, is backed up by an excellent up-to-date bibliography. Her Italian is rather easy to follow. However, the author of the present review, who is not a native speaker, is unable to detect typos and mistakes. As for foreign words, very few are misspelled (e.g., 224: ‘Tolose’; 243: ‘Alexader’). Several negligible errors escaped the author’s revision: e.g. Mithropastes fled from Darius III, not Darius I (62: ‘Mithropaste, bandito da Dario I’); *Crocala* is twenty miles away from the islands *Chryse* and *Argyre* (*ab his XX p. Crocala*) situated in open sea (*extra ostium Indi Chryse et Argyre*) and not from the mouth of the Indus proper (47, n. 100; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 6.80); wrong page number (36, n. 39).

In the first chapter (‘La vita’) B. reviews the meagre amount of documents relating to Nearchus’ life.<sup>2</sup> While several authorities refer to his Cretan origin

<sup>1</sup> For instance, *BNJ* F7 (tigers) and F9 (parrots) are not mentioned in the section dealing with Nearchus’ zoological observations (103–6).

<sup>2</sup> Regrettably B.’s book lacks an overall introduction presenting the framework and goals of her research, and setting the reader’s expectations towards this work.

(*Nearkhos Krês*), Arrian, claiming—maybe after ‘una tradizione di matrice nearchea’—that he had been staying in Amphipolis for a while (*Ind.* 18.10), may point to the fact that he was given the status of a Macedonian (‘assimilazione di N. all’*ethnos* macedone’ (12)). The exile into which he was forced along with Alexander and other companions is briefly discussed, for this event remains rather obscure. Much more can be said about an undated inscription from Delphi (*Syll.*<sup>3</sup> 266), which lists the honours awarded to ‘Nearchus the Cretan son of Androtimos’: an earlier date (between 336 and 334 BC) is favoured by B., who argues that the Delphians expressed their gratitude to Alexander, who was to succeed Philip shortly afterwards, by conferring honours to one of his friends. B. then goes on to examine all the passages documenting Nearchus’ career. She pays attention to an account by Polyaeus of how Telmessos was conquered by Nearchus. This undated achievement may have occurred either at the very beginning of Alexander’s expedition, or sometime after the king’s death. The next section brings the reader to events following the naval expedition. Most of them are so poorly documented that scholars generally do not agree on the outline: what role did he play in the conflict which broke out after the king died? To what extent was he involved in the assassination plot against Alexander? As B. rightly states, it is the latter fact that may have pushed Nearchus to compose his so-called *Periplous* in order to praise the Indian expedition to which he contributed so much, and subsequently to proclaim his loyalty to Alexander.

The second chapter—the longest in the book—consists of three sections. The first one addresses a major problem: what was the true title of Nearchus’ account? None of the clues suggested by the extant fragments is fully convincing: *periplous*, as B. rightly points out, seems to ‘indicare semplicemente la navigazione oceanica’ (30); F. Jacoby regarded *paraplous* as a good candidate, but several scholars objected to his suggestion; the third option—*anaplous*—is the least satisfactory. As the actual content of Nearchus’ book remains unknown—mainly because the voyage on the outer ocean was favoured by ancient readers—this problem is unlikely ever to be solved. Then B. comments on *Ind.* 19.8–9, which could support the idea that Nearchus’ expedition represented Alexander’s *Odyssey*: ‘Se Alessandro era stato infatti il novello Achille, che aveva combattuto in terra straniera, il re macedone sembra ripercorrere, nell’itinerario di ritorno, le avventure di Odisseo’ (35). The next section is entirely devoted to the voyage itself, from the descent of Indian rivers to the navigation on the Pasitigris. Chronological questions—i.e. the departure time and duration of the voyage—are first addressed. In the geographical study (‘il viaggio’), which forms the core of the chapter, the reader is offered a handy directory, in which the toponyms from the *Indikê* are briefly commented on. Several problematic places, however, are more substantially investigated, such as the island of *Karnine* (54–7), the island of *Oarakta/Ogyris*, where the mythical

king Erythras was buried (62–3), and the river *Pasitigris* (71–2). The discrepancies between Arrian and Strabo about the measurements recorded by Nearchus are the topic of the third section. According to B., the distances, first recorded in *nykthemeriai* (in the ‘diario di bordo’, or *Urperiplus* (75)), were converted into stades when Nearchus rewrote his logbook to produce a literary work, after Alexander’s death. Even though this conclusion may be acceptable, not all arguments produced are clear: in particular, the concept of a “‘modulo nearcheo’”, una sorta di minimo comune denominatore, valido a rapportare piccole e grandi distanze’ (76) remains somehow obscure to me. Finally, B. examines the list of the men designated to command the vessels, some of whom (e.g., Onesicritus, Evagoras ...) took part in the sea expedition along with Nearchus. B. argues that Nearchus intended to compose an ‘Alexandergeschichte’, considering that he described ‘non solo le vicende e i protagonisti della sua impresa, ma quelli di tutta la spedizione di Alessandro’ (85). This list was carefully arranged—E. Badian points out that Macedonians and Greeks were mixed—but I am not as sure as B. that this reflects an ‘una sorta di geografia del potere’ (84).

In the third chapter (‘Nearchos osservatore scientifico’) B. focuses on Nearchus as an observer and a scientist. She starts with the behaviour of stars and shadows as described by Nearchus, a very problematic question, for the recorded phenomena are normally observed a distance further south. As for the shadows, B. accepts Janni’s opinion that ancient authorities, including Nearchus, did not hesitate to describe ‘come reali fenomeni ipotizzati in linea teorica’ (89). She also assumes that some information was gathered from the natives. B. is right not to embark on a full discussion of the motion and visibility of certain stars; what indeed could be added to previous research? Instead she shows herself more interested in the ‘eventuale filtro arriano’ (91) and rightly points out that ‘l’apprezzamento di Arriano sembra passare dunque attraverso quello che Eratostene aveva mostrato nei confronti dell’ammiraglio’ (93). Then she discusses the periodical winds—i.e. the summer monsoon—which caused Nearchus to delay his departure from Patala. Drawing a comparison with Eudoxus of Cyzicus who was taught to use the monsoon winds by an Indian castaway, B. rightly stresses the role played by local informants. Nearchus, however, apparently did not carry out scientific investigation about such winds. Alexander’s companions had much to say about Indian rivers, which form the subject of the next section. They were struck by the summer rains causing Indian rivers to flood, inferring that the Nile overflowed for a similar reason. They also described the Indus Basin which they crossed in the course of Alexander’s Indian expedition. On the basis of Karttunen’s commentary, the author states that Nearchus gives ‘la rappresentazione piu attendibile e dettagliata dei fiumi indiani’ (99). Of Nearchus’ botanical observations that have survived, B. especially examines those relating to mangrove and palm

trees. Not only did he collect many data for the sake of geographical and ethnographical knowledge but, she says, he also paid attention to their nutritional value. Of course the latter point does not apply to aromatics, nard and myrrh—provided that Strabo 15.2.3 derives from Nearchus' account. Half of the section devoted to the fauna deals with the frightening whales against which Nearchus fought a battle of sorts. In fact Nearchus pictured his own attitude ('(auto)elogio del comandante', 105) more lavishly than the cetaceans, implying that in this case the fleet commander did not exactly act as a scientific observer. B. briefly discusses some other animals, such as shellfish (*sôlenes*) and Indian giant snakes (*drakones*): the latter, she writes, were described in 'una linea razionalista', in opposition to the 'tradizionale concezione fantastica' particularly represented by Ctesias. This could point to local informants. The last section ('Aspetti etnografici') is split into two different parts. In the first one the author reflects on the sacrifices performed by Nearchus to Zeus and to the Saviour Gods, which parallel those by Alexander. The presence of Indian culture plays, in my opinion, a less important role than that claimed by the author ('Il sacrificio diventa, in sostanza, il momento in cui pare ufficialmente riconosciuto e acquisito l'apporto delle cultura locale, in questo caso l'indiana' (107)). The second part is a short study of Indian *sophistai*, or *philosophoi*, i.e. Indian Brahmins, of which Nearchus gives an original—although very brief—account. When compared to Megasthenes' *Indika*, Nearchus' account seems less influenced by the 'esigenze del potere' which are 'responsabile di inevitabili deformazioni [of the former]' (110).

Arrian's *Indika* have preserved the narrative of three encounters between the king and Nearchus (*Ind.* 20.1–8; 35.1–36.7; 42.1–9), which are the subject of the fourth chapter ('Nearco e Alessandro'). These events cannot easily be reconstructed, for they were certainly distorted by Nearchus modelling his self-image, if not by Arrian. The first recorded meeting occurred sometime before the fleet started sailing down the Indian rivers. The reliability of the story has been questioned by scholars. E. Badian, for instance, blamed Nearchus for praising himself, but others are less critical. Having reviewed the various judgments and compared Arrian with other sources (Diodorus of Sicily, Curtius, Plutarchus), B. concludes that this piece of 'self-promotion' was devised by Nearchus in order to preserve his position in the trouble following Alexander's death: 'Mi pare perciò ipotizzabile che N., in una situazione di oggettiva difficoltà personale e forse anche alla ricerca di un nuovo ruolo, potesse pensare di utilizzare la rielaborazione del suo diario di bordo, contenente la storia del suo rapporto privilegiato con Alessandro ...' (117). The next encounter is related at some length in *Ind.* 35.1–36.9: having reached Carmania Nearchus travelled inland to meet Alexander. The event is reported somewhat differently by Curtius and Diodorus. B. agrees with Badian that the event is treated as another piece of 'self-glorification'. Commenting on the Homeric tone which characterizes this passage, she argues that the implicit comparison with Ulysses may

go back to Nearchus himself instead of Arrian. According to Arrian, Alexander and Nearchus saw each other near Susa during the spring of 325—the exact place cannot be located. B. stresses the fact that Arrian ignores Onesicritus—contrary to Curtius—and the games celebrated in honour of the Saviour Gods. She again points to the ‘paternità nearchea dell’episodio’ (123), for this case of ‘self-promotion’ is unlikely to come from Arrian.

A short introduction clarifying the author’s intention would have been helpful in the next chapter (‘Dal periplo alla narrazione storica’) which is divided into two very different sections, both addressing the same question: did Nearchus aim at composing an ‘Alexandergeschichte’? To start with, B. examines the Homeric tone turning up in several fragments. This feature discloses a ‘rielaborazione del resoconto della navigazione’ (125). In other words, the original logbook was reworked so as to become a true ‘Alexandergeschichte’: the list of trierarchs (*Ind.* 18.1–10) may be compared to the ship catalogue (*Il.* 484–759); the fight against whales may recall Ulysses’s courage and craftiness; the island of Nosala, comparable to Circe’s, shows that Nearchus wanted to present himself as the Ulysses of the Indian Ocean. Then the author goes on to say that Nearchus probably was not the only one to do so: Ptolemaeus son of Lagos was similarly inspired. The final observations on the *Dromos* of Achilles (*P. Eux.* 21–3) are less relevant to the topic of this section. In the next part B. reflects on some fragments having no apparent connection with the navigation on the outer Ocean, which may be the remains of a now lost ample work. Three excerpts have been retained by B.: 1) the rumours about Alexander’s death spreading after the battle against the Malloi. She agrees with A. B. Bosworth that *Anab.* 6.21.1–13.3 derives from Nearchus and therefore was unlikely to take place in a *periplous*; 2) the same idea applies to the suicide of the Indian ‘sophist’ Kalanos; 3) with respect to the so-called *Strapazenbericht* (the crossing of the Gedrosian desert), B. accepts H. Strasburger’s conclusion that *Anab.* 6.24.1–2 is partly (or mostly?) based on Nearchus. In conclusion B. argues that ‘N avrebbe ampliato l’originario diario di bordo fino a comprendere una Storia della spedizione di Alessandro’ (137).

B. then moves toward the final chapter (‘Nearco scrittore’). The first section is an attempt to retrieve Nearchus’ intellectual background (‘la formazione e lo sviluppo intellettuale’ (139)). Everyone will agree that Nearchus, like any educated man, was familiar with Homer. As a matter of fact this point has already been mentioned in the previous chapter. There is also little doubt that Herodotus’ histories were not unknown to him: when Nearchus claims that he could not observe the famous gold digging ants, but only skins displayed to him, he clearly refers to a famous passage by the historian. On the other hand, despite O. Murray’s statement, I wonder to what extent the Gedrosian *Ikhthyophagoi* relate to the undescribed Herodotean Fish Eaters. In my opinion, that the ‘realtà indiana passava attraverso un filtro di matrice

erodotea' (141) must not be taken for granted. The next author to be examined, Scylax of Karyanda, was apparently ignored by Nearchus. B. assumes that Skylax was deliberately pushed to the background 'per far risaltare clamorosamente, al contempo, l'eccezionalità della navigazione di N.' (143). Finally the author re-examines the well-known rivalry between Nearchus and Onesicritus, and argues that Nearchus elevated himself into first place so as he could 'ribadire, in maniera perentoria' (147) his loyalty to Alexander. The second section discusses the relationship between Arrian and Nearchus, a topic which raises a series of vexed questions. After a quick review of previous theories and opinions, B. claims that Nearchus was worried about his self promotion, being eager to gain a good position in the entourage of Antigonos. Thus, she writes, his work was completed 'nei primi anni dopo il 323' (152) in connection with the 'notevole apertura a letterati e storici' (153) that characterises Antigonos' court.

It is part of a reviewer's duty to voice some objections before listing the strengths of the book under discussion. In fact, some of B.'s statements may be challenged: I shall give only two examples. First, the sacrifices made on Indian river banks by Alexander show, according to B., the king's interest in local culture ('l'apporto della cultura locale', 107). Whereas this point may be accepted, I am less inclined to favour the concepts of 'sincretismo' and 'fusione Oriente-Occidente' backing the author's final comment. Such complex and debated concepts should not be used in historical analysis *à la légère*. Elsewhere B., commenting on the pearl-producing island *Stoidis*, argues that 'il ruolo degli esploratori di Alessandro [note that Androstenes of Thasos *FGrHist* 711 F1 and Chares of Mitylene *FGrHist* 125 F3 are ignored, or missed] risulta dunque di primo piano nella descrizione delle perle di mare'. Having personally investigated the topic of pearls and pearling in antiquity, I think that to the eyes of Alexander's companions the Indian Ocean pearls represented just one of the many peculiarities—in terms of ethnography and natural sciences—of the Eastern world.

Despite such observations, the reviewer did not only take pleasure in reading this book, but also learnt much from B.'s synthesis. This work is highly recommended to any scholar or *amateur éclairé* interested in this fascinating figure, and more generally in those who accompanied Alexander in his discovery of a new world.

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