

SQUINTING BACK AT STRABO*

WILLIAM A. KOELSCH

ABSTRACT. Strabo of Amasia (ca. 64 B.C.–ca. A.D. 23) wrote the first comprehensive geography of the world known to the Greeks and Romans. Interest in Strabo and his *Geography*, which survives nearly intact in seventeen books, has fluctuated over the centuries among both classicists and historians of geography. After some historical background on Strabo and his reception, this essay considers the contribution of two significant recent English-language treatments, as well as Strabo's *Geography* itself, and suggests ways in which the Strabonic model may have renewed relevance to the geographer's task of interpreting the *oikoumene* in the contemporary world. *Keywords:* *history of geography, oikoumene, place, Roman Empire, Strabo of Amasia.*

Geography straddles an intellectual dualism that was first evident in the writings of ancient Greek scholars. They furnish us with two ideal-typical models for the realm of knowledge we call "geography": the Ptolemaic and the Strabonic. "With Ptolemy," Christiaan Van Paassen wrote nearly half a century ago, " 'geographical' means 'cartographical'" (1957, 2). Since the 1960s the Ptolemaic locational, or cartographic, model has largely dominated American professional geography, although geographers of this persuasion seldom embrace Ptolemy's world reach. Geographers who work under this rubric have increasingly emulated the mathematical and more quantitatively and theoretically oriented social and behavioral sciences, refined the process of quantification, and adopted methods, ranging from aerial photography to satellite imagery and global positioning systems, to record a world of locations far more accurately than any Ptolemy could have imagined. The model finds its latest manifestation in the development of Geographic Information Science (GIS) programs, with which some enthusiasts would like to replace departments of geography (Koelsch 2001, 269).

"Both geographers [Strabo and Ptolemy] studied the *oecumene*," Van Paassen wrote, but their way of dealing with it "differs so much that one might say that two totally different spheres of reality, two totally different sciences are gathered under the same nominal cover, having in common only the outward characteristic of both being active in the dimension of space and of both being concerned with the location of places" (1957, 23). Clearly, in the Ptolemaic model method as an end is largely privileged over substance. As Alexander von Humboldt wrote of the original Ptolemy, he is "more mathematical and more tabularly concise" but "almost wholly wanting in views of a truly physical character" (1860, 190). In nineteenth-century geographical usage, this means that Ptolemy dealt in only minor ways with the world of nature and of humans and their works (Hartshorne 1939, 43).

* An earlier version of this essay was presented at the meeting of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers in Portland, Oregon on 20 September 2003. I wish to thank the session chair, Shaun Huston, and members of the audience for helpful comments at that session.

✉ DR. KOELSCH is a professor emeritus of geography at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts 01610-1477.