

**TITLE:** *Dionysius Periegetes' World Map*

**DATE:** A.D. 124

**AUTHOR:** *Dionysius Periegetes*

**DESCRIPTION:** During this ancient period, poetry, sometimes illustrated by maps, continued to be used as a way of memorizing and popularizing the knowledge or meaning displayed in cartographic images. Such literary sources do, however, give the impression that the educated class largely preferred to ignore new discoveries, and earlier Hellenistic concepts of geography persisted long after they had ceased to reflect up-to-date knowledge. A late example is provided by Dionysius, born in Alexandria and called "*Periegetes*" after the title of his poem. A contemporary of Marinus and Ptolemy (#119), he composed a description in verse of the inhabited world (A.D. 124) that was long used as a school textbook. He presented the *oikoumene* [known inhabited world] as an island, sling-shaped, entirely north of the equator, extending from *Thule* to *Libya* [Africa]. He did not mention either *Agisymba* or the promontory of *Prasum*. He limited the inhabited world eastward by the river Ganges, taking into account the *Seres* [Chinese and Tibetans], but locating them much less far east than Marinus.

Dionysius's poem, like Aratus' *Phaenomena*, was a success partly because it summarized, and made easier to remember, the array of traditional teachings since Eratosthenes. It was first translated into Latin by Rufius Festus Avienius (fourth century A.D.), and it remained in regular academic use during the whole of the Middle Ages.

The poem was originally supplied with maps, probably drawn on the models of Eratosthenes (#112), or Strabo's (#115) maps. Various annotations preserved in the margins of the existing manuscripts refer to maps illustrating the poem: some of them point out that a particular place is lacking on the map or that the outline of a specific country does not agree with Dionysius' description. These seem to provide evidence that such mapmakers continued to copy their models uncritically and rarely tried to adapt the map to the written description to be illustrated.

In the case of Dionysius, both maps and poems were behind their time, even at the date of their composition; but they reflect the ordinary level of geographic knowledge. His description of the British Isles may be rendered:

Two islands are there, British, off the Rhine,  
By Ocean's northern shores; for there the Rhine  
Sends out its furthest eddies to the sea.  
Enormous is their size: no other isles  
Equal the British isles in magnitude.

Such a poor description, and the lack of revision elsewhere, suggest too close a reliance on Eratosthenes.

**LOCATION:** (*this map exists only as a reconstruction*)

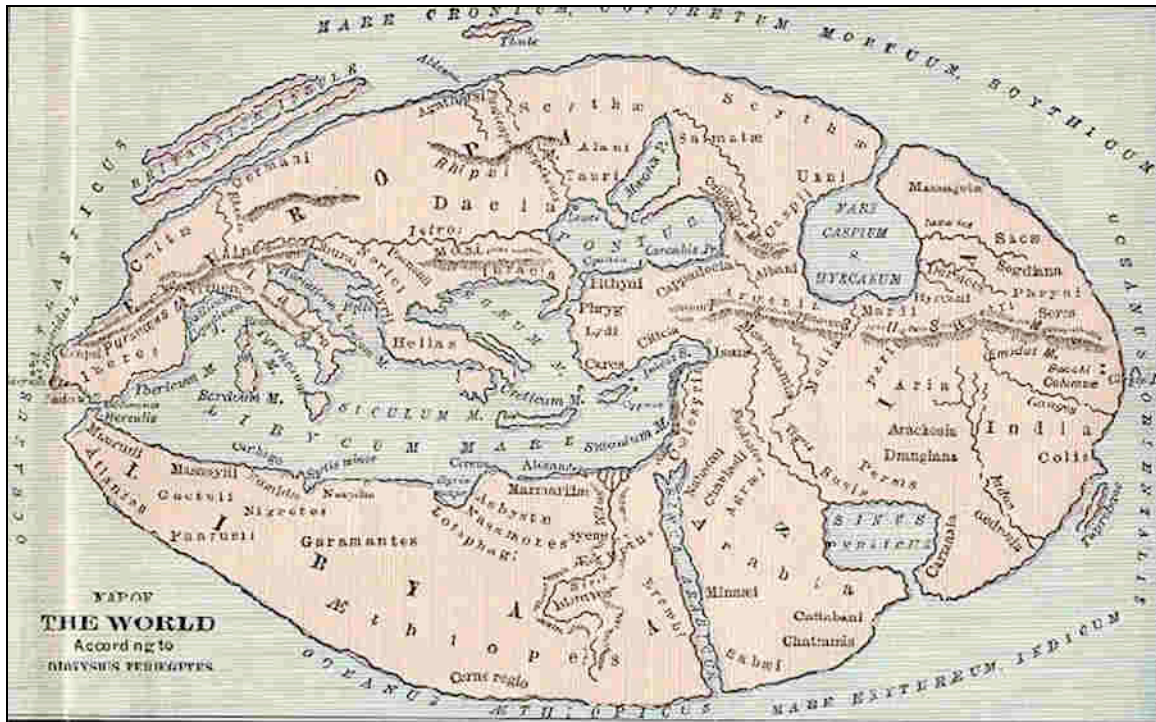
## REFERENCES:

\*Bunbury, E., *History of Ancient Geography*, Volume 2, p. 490.

\*Harley, J.B., *The History of Cartography*, Volume One, p. 172.

Dilke, O.A.W., *Greek and Roman Maps*, pp. 56, 71, 143-144.

\*illustrated



Charles Muller's (1813-1894) reconstruction of the map of the world, drawn as per the second-century description provided by Dionysius Periegetes.

