Pomponius Mela's Chorographia

A Roman's Guide to the Known World (c. 43 AD)



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A description of the known world is what I set out to give... a difficult task and one hardly suited to eloquence, since it consists chiefly in names of peoples and places.

— Book I, §1.1.

CONTEXT: Written during the reign of Emperor Claudius, this is the earliest surviving geographical treatise in Latin. It is a *Periplous*—a coast-following narrative sailing counter-clockwise around the Mediterranean before venturing into the terrifying Outer Ocean.

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THE SHAPE OF THE WHOLE

Roman Cosmology & The Five Zones



The burning heat of the intervening ocean prevents travel to the south.



Home of the *Antichthones* (Counter-Earth dwellers). Scientifically acknowledged, but physically unreachable.

Roman Cosmology

The Earth is a sphere suspended in the center of the universe.

Geography of the Known World:

- **Three Continents:** Europe, Asia, Africa.



- **The Great Ocean:** Completely surrounds the landmass.



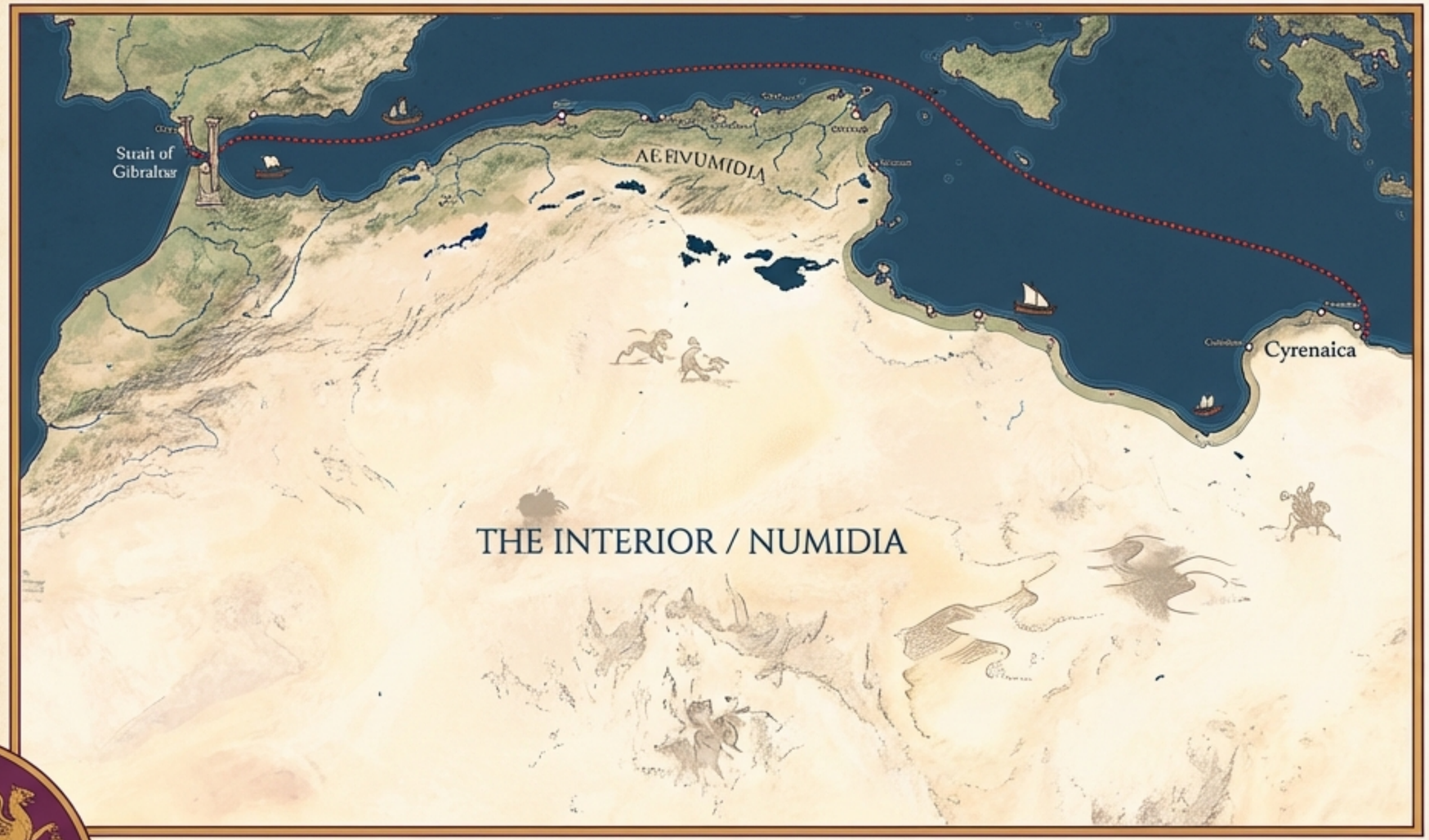
- **The Mediterranean:** "Our Sea" enters from the west.



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Africa: The Southern Coast

From the Pillars of Hercules to Cyrenaica



The Anthropological Other



The Nomads: Living in mapalia (huts), moving with flocks.



The Troglodytes: Cave dwellers who eat snakes and lack language, making high-pitched sounds instead of speech.



The Blemyes: Headless men with faces on their chests (§1.48).

The Garamantes: A society without marriage; children recognized only by physical resemblance.

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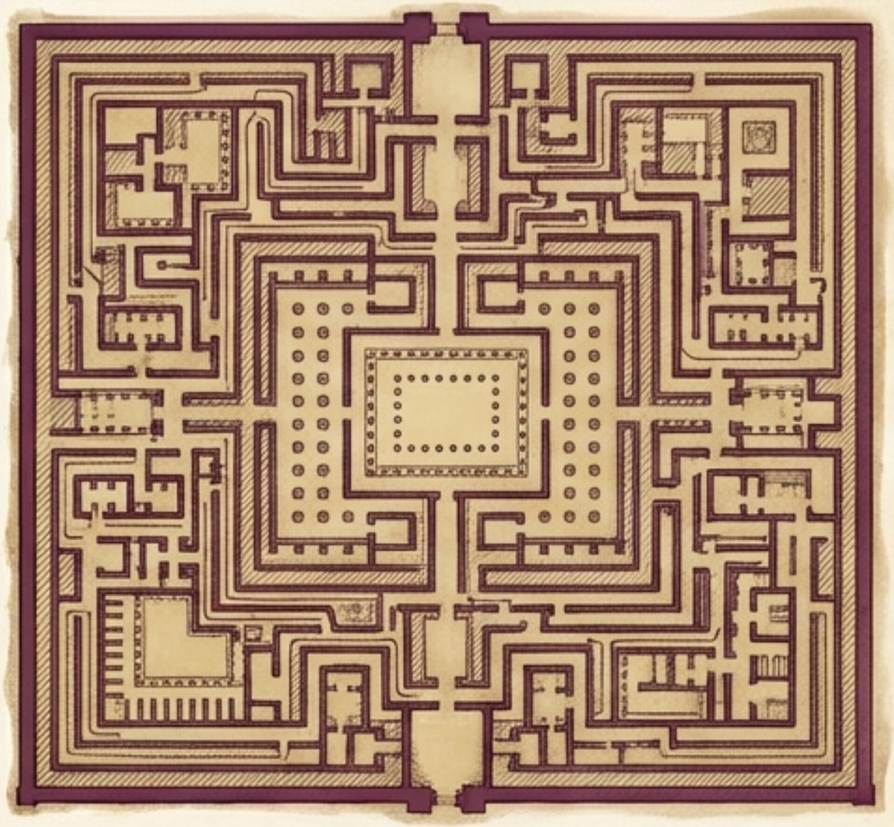
The Wonders of Aegypt

The Boundary of Asia



The Miracle of the Nile: Floods in summer, reversing nature. Source unknown (perhaps the Antipodes?).

The Labyrinth of Psammetichus



1,000 homes and 12 palaces within a single wall.
A puzzle of winding paths (§1.56).

Cultural Inversions

- They knead dough with feet but handle dung with hands.
- Women run the forum; men spin wool.
- They write backward.

Deep Time

The Egyptians claim 13,000 years of history. They assert that in their time, the stars have changed course four times.

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The Levant: Threshold of Asia

Phoenicia, Judea, & Palestine

The Phoenicians:
A clever race who invented the alphabet, naval warfare, and the art of ruling.

Key Locations:

- **Gaza:** Named "Treasury" by the Persians.
- **Tyre:** Once an island, joined to land by Alexander's siegeworks.



Joppa (Iope) & The Monster

Founded before the Flood. The locals display huge bones of a sea-monster as proof of the Perseus and Andromeda legend (§1.64).

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Cilicia & The Subterranean World

The Terror of Nature





The Corycian Cave

A beautiful, circular depression. At the bottom opens a second, darker cave that terrifies visitors with the miraculous roar of cymbals and clashing noises from within.



The Cave of Typhon

The bedchamber of a giant. Permeated by unending night, it instantly kills any animal that enters (§1.76).

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Ionia & the Troad

Lands of Philosophy and War

Key Locations:

- **Miletus:** Birthplace of philosophy (Thales, Anaximander).
- **Ephesus:** Home to the Temple of Diana, dedicated by the Amazons.
- **The Troad:** The rivers Simois and Scamander, more important for tradition than physical character.



The Mt. Ida Phenomenon



The Mt. Ida Phenomenon

An optical illusion where the sun rises at midnight (§1.94-95).

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Pontus Euxinus: The Cruel Sea

The Black Sea



Atmosphere: Brief, cruel, and cloudy. Surrounded by a shore that is neither soft nor sandy.

The Peoples of the Shore



The Mossyni: Tattooed people who keep their king in chains in a wooden tower. If he rules poorly, they starve him.

The Amazons: Warrior women near the Thermodon River.





The Tibareni: A people who believe the highest good lies in playing and laughing.

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Scythia: The Frozen Edge

Europe Begins at the Tanais

The Savage

Customs of the Cold:

- **Essedones:** Use parents' skulls as gold-bound drinking cups.
- **Anthropophagi:** Banquets include human entrails.
- **Scythian Warriors:** Drink from the skulls of enemies; use skins as napkins.





The Sacred

The Arimphaei:
A sacred, bald people living in groves. They carry no weapons and are protected by their holiness. Refugees fleeing enemies find absolute safety among them (§2.17).



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Thrace & Greece

Savage Vitality vs. Fading Glory

Thrace (North)

Thracian Nihilism: They weep at births and celebrate funerals. Wives compete to be buried alive with their dead husbands (§2.18).





Greece (South)

A land of fading cities and ancient names.



- **Mt. Athos:** Reaches above the rain; ashes on the altar remain undisturbed.

- **Delphi & Athens:** Monuments to past events rather than thriving centers.



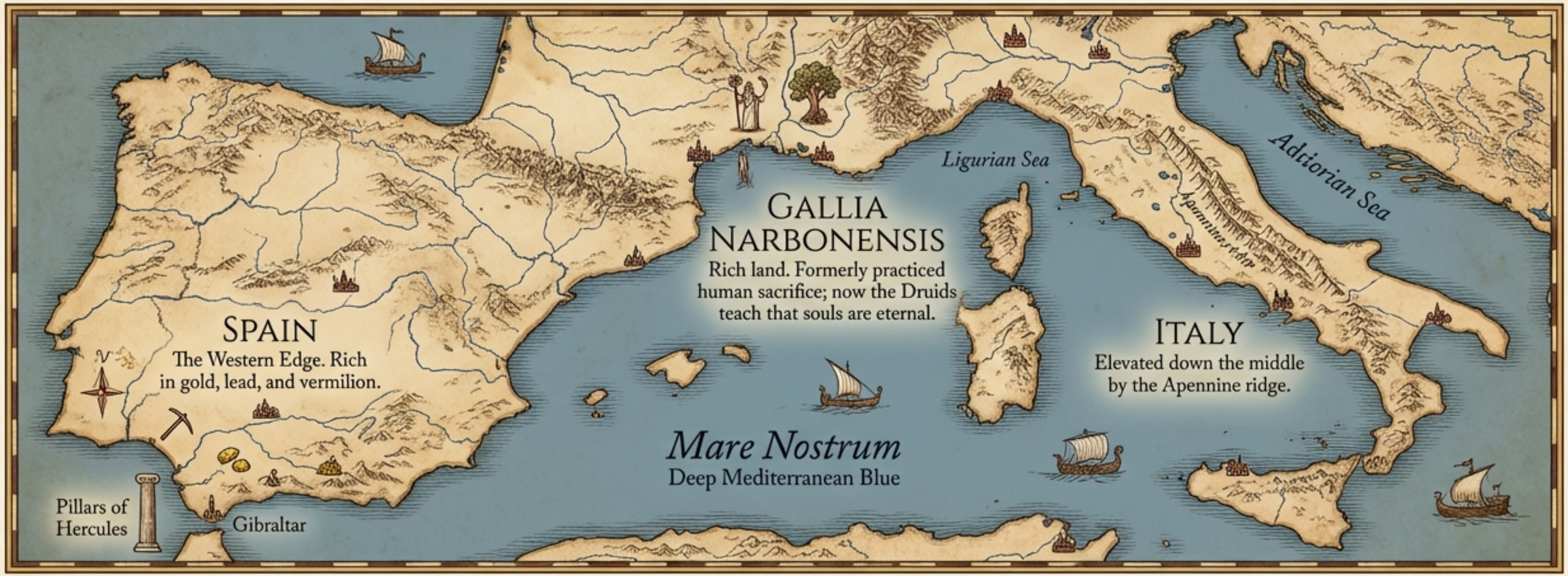


- **The Peloponnese:** Shaped like a plane-tree leaf.

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The Return West

Italy, Gaul, & Spain



End of the Inner Circuit: The journey returns to the Strait of Gibraltar, completing the tour of "Our Sea."

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The Outer Ocean: The North

Leaving 'Our Sea' for the Unknown



The Gallizenæ:

An island of 9 priestesses who control wind and seas and shapeshift into animals.

Thule:

The farthest island. At the solstice, there is no night.



The Ocean Tides:

Unlike the calm Mediterranean, the Ocean heaves with massive tides that drive rivers back upstream.



Britannia:



Long closed, now opening under Emperor Claudius.
A triangular island of people dyed blue with woad, fighting in scythed chariots.

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The Outer Ocean: The East

Silk, Monsters, and Gold



THE SERES (CHINA):

Famous for silk and "silent trade"—leaving goods in remote locations to avoid contact.





INDIA:



- Ants the size of dogs guard gold deposits.
- Snakes large enough to stop elephants.
- Philosophers who burn themselves alive to end their lives gloriously.



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The Outer Ocean: The South

The Rim of Africa

THE PHOENIX



Born from its own ashes, lives 500 years, carries its parent's bones to Egypt.



The Automoles: Beautiful people who use gold for chains because it is so common.

SATYR-LAND

A wasteland by day. By night, filled with drums, flutes, and bonfires.



MT. THEON OCHEMA



CHARIOT OF THE GODS

"Chariot of the Gods." A volcano burning with perpetual fire on the West Coast.

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The Orbis Terrarum Defined

A World Centered on Rome



"This is the full extent of our world... inhabited by peoples socialized according to our custom, except that particular ones differ."
— Pomponius Mela, in Adobe Caslon Pro

Legacy: Mela's work blends empirical observation with the 'marvelous,' creating a map that is as much about culture and story as it is about coordinates.

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