

Title: The Dura Europos Map of the Black Sea

Date: 3rd Century CE

Geography: Al-Salihyah, Syria

Culture: Greco-Roman

Dimensions: 0.45 m × 0.18 m (fragment)

Medium: Parchment

Location: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Supplément grec 1354 (2)

Link: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105388698#>

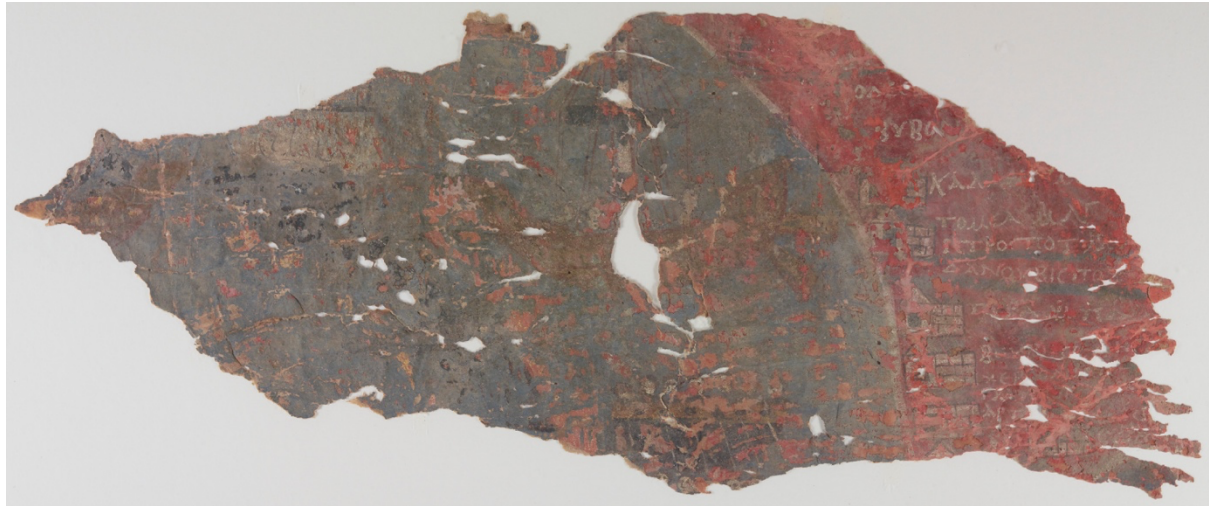


Fig. 1. The Dura Europos Map, 3rd century CE. © Public domain. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits.

“alt= A fragment of parchment. The left-hand section has been painted with blue to represent a body of water that features islands and sailing ships. The right-hand section has been painted red, beige and blue to represent a mainland with mountains, rivers and settlements. Labels are in Greek”

Keywords: Dura Europos, Syria, Black Sea, Cartography, Geography, *itineraria*, Homer

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A fragment of colorful parchment depicting the Black Sea coast features among the most interesting finds from the 1920s French excavations of Dura Europos, a town on the Euphrates at the lower edge of the Roman province of Syria Coele. It provides a pictorial rendition of blue waters, sailing ships and house-like stations furnished with captions indicating the names and distances of several port towns on the left shore as one entered the Black Sea or Pontus from Byzantium. This combination of visual items invites comparison with the famous Tabula Peutingeriana as rare extant examples of Vegetius’s *itineraria picta*.¹ However, the exact nature of the object as well as its purpose are debated. How does this

¹ Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris* iii.6; O.A.W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 112.

parchment bear witness to a connection between the Pontic Sea it maps and life on the distant borderlands of Parapotamia in Syria where it was found?

The fragmentary state of the parchment affords little certainty about the reconstruction of its original shape. Cumont thought that it was the outer cover of a soldier's shield,² like other painted shields found at Dura Europos featuring scenes from Homer's *Iliad*.³ Cumont specifically thought that the map showed the itinerary of the soldier to whom the shield belonged. Since then scholars have debated over the shape of the original shield, whether round or oval. More radically, Arnaud rejected the shield hypothesis altogether, declaring that the map was just a pleasing aesthetic creation with no practical purpose.⁴ Arnaud observed that the ships depicted were mercantile rather than army vessels, and that a white square placed between prows facing one another contained an inscription in Latin that unfortunately proved illegible.⁵

Places mentioned on the map refine perception of its scope. The stations inscribed in Greek list the following toponyms: Odess[os], Bybone, Kallati[s], Tomea, R. Istros, R. Danubis, Tyra, Borysthenes, Chersonesos, Trap[ezous?], Arta.⁶ All have been consistently identified as locations on the northwestern coast of the Black Sea, except the last two. The latter were initially interpreted as Trebizond and Artaxata, excentric locations with respect to the map's tight focus on the northwestern region of the Black Sea where the other places are located. Trebizond, instead, is a commercial port on the southern coast, Artaxata a station in the Anatolian hinterland on the way towards Mesopotamia. More recently, however, the two names were read as Mount Trapezous and the straits of Arta (Panticapeum) in the Chersonese, places that better cohere with the map's geographical compass. By removing locations further away, the new interpretation undermines the view of the map as the long-distance journey of circumnavigation (*periplos*) of the Pontos.

This limitation does not mean that the map has nothing in common with Arrian's work, *Periplos of the Pontos Euxine*, written in Greek for Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138 CE). Although large distances between stations as recorded by the map are unlikely to provide practical guidance to a traveler, the places mentioned still coincide with Arrian's nomenclature despite some minor discrepancies. Arrian's Black Sea journey stages a pilgrimage to a shrine dedicated to Achilles at an island variously identified as Berezan (Borysthenes) or Leuca, inscribing the memory of the Homeric hero in this landscape.⁷ Thus, the journey described by Arrian relies on a direct link to the Homeric world that resonates with Dilke's remark about the famous ekphrasis of Achilles' shield, where "something akin to a map is described by Homer in the *Iliad*".⁸ The world of war celebrated in epic poetry is therefore close to the imaginary of representations destined to be depicted on objects carried as shields or displayed as banners. Their military function, if any, need not be confined to battle, but also included the aesthetic activities of parades and shows described in Arrian's *Taktika*. Thus, Cumont's pairing of the cartographic fragment with the Iliadic shields acquires new significance when it is not confined to the object's form but understood in terms of the

² Franz Cumont, "Fragment de bouclier portant une liste d'étapes", *Syria* 6 (1925): 1-15 and pl. I; *Fouilles de Doura Europos* (1922-1923), 2 vols, Paris: P. Geuthner, 1926, I:323-337 and II:CIX-CX.

³ M.I. Rostovtzeff, F.E. Brown and C.B. Welles (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work 1933-1934 and 1934-1935*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939, 326-369.

⁴ P. Arnaud, "Une deuxième lecture du 'bouclier' de Dour-Europos", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 133 (1989): 373-389, at 383, "un véritable pinax".

⁵ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁶ R. Rebuffat, "Le bouclier de Doura", *Syria* 63 (1986): 85-105, at 86.

⁷ Gerardo Marengi (ed.), *Arriano: Periplo del Ponto Eusino*, Naples: Libreria Scientifica Editrice, 1958, ch. 21, 100-101.

⁸ O.A.W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 20.

object's hermeneutics as suggestive of shared Homeric allusions in depictions of Greek mythology.

Even when considered as part of military armor, these undoubtedly artistic depictions went beyond merely practical and bellicose functions. They were more likely inspiration for – and served as props in the telling of – a world of stories and myths that accompanied army culture from frontier to frontier. Although the parchment was found, catalogued and studied together with manuscript documents rather than army supplies, its contextualization requires reference to Roman military presence at Dura, whatever its exact original shape. By presenting a comparable border region along the Danube and the Pontic coast, the map entwines two distant Roman frontiers in the same cultural Homeric horizon, interweaving accurate geographical information with the curious lore of Achilles' legends.⁹ Practical knowhow and cultural references together strengthened Greco-Roman traditions and identity in places where the Roman army was stationed more than temporarily. They enlivened a connective network that bound the *limes* with their imperial head, the emperor of Rome.

Biography

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⁹ Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, "The Transformations of Achilles on Late Roman Mosaics in the East", in *Wandering Myths: Transcultural Uses of Myth in the Ancient World*, edited by Lucy Audley-Miller and Beate Dignas, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, 357-395, maps out the multimedia network of Achilles' reception.