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THE GANGES AND THE RIVERS OF EDEN

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Beginning with Eusebius in the third century A.D., we find growing agreement among Christian writers that the Phison, a river of Eden, was none other than the Ganges, the sacred river of India. By the ninth or tenth century, the idea had become almost universal, despite what might seem to us the geographic obstacles involved. To understand the reasons for this belief, we must examine several geographic conceptions of the Middle Ages.

The Medieval World View

With the onset of Christianity, the classical vision dissolves. Slowly it is refashioned to the image of faith. Medieval man follows Genesis as his chief guidebook to geography. Systematic observation, so prized by the Greeks, succumbed to the explorers of the spiritual world. Under these circumstances, geographical knowledge of the sea, of Asia, and Africa, grows more and more tenuous, until the line between fact and fable eventually disappears. Political conditions quicken the change, as large parts of the Roman Empire are reclaimed by barbarian tribes and revert once again to *terra incognita*.

But the classical works are never completely lost, and by the fourth century men begin to find in them ideas that clarify and support the truths of the Bible. Theories that run counter to Scripture are rejected; others, of a noncontroversial nature, appear in the secular margins of early Christian thought.

The Confusion of India and Africa The Indus and the Nile

One belief that eventually draws Gaṅgā into the realm of Paradise is the proximity of Africa and India. Ptolemy is chiefly responsible for the idea that the southern part of Africa extended far to the east. At the same time, Eastern Asia is carried southward, so that the two eventually join, making the Indian Ocean an inland sea. The result is to place the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia *en face* with India. This geographic fancy is implied as early as

Homer¹. Aeschylus certainly subscribes to it; in *Prometheus Bound*, he portrays the wanderings of Io from Europe to Asia². On her journey she touches the farthest land, whose swarthy people (the Indians) dwell by the fountain of the sun, the source of the Ethiopian river. Following its banks she reaches a cataract of the Nile that issues from the Bibline mountains³.

Evidently the view prevailed, for Alexander on reaching the Indus, thought he had discovered the source of the Nile. As Arrian relates: "he thought the Nile rises somewhere or other in India"⁴. Apollonius of Tyana, embroidering on the theme, offers us the following reminiscence: "There was a time", the Brahman Iarchus informs him, "when the Ethiopians, an Indian race, dwelt in this country, and when Ethiopia as yet was not . . . At that time of which I speak, the Ethiopians . . . were subject to *King Ganges*". He continues, obviously warming to the tale⁵:

Now this Ganges it seems, was ten cubits high, and in personal beauty excelled any man the world has yet seen, and when his own father (also named Ganges) inundated India, he himself turned the flood into the Red Sea.

The confusion survives the classical world. Procopius, a sixth century Christian writer whose sympathies lie clearly with the ancients, describes the Nile as flowing from India into Egypt, dividing the land into two equal parts up to the sea⁶. Such anomalies are reflected in medieval maps. On an eighth century *mappa-mundi* from the library of Albi in Languedoc, the world is shaped like a horseshoe, with Africa placed along the right spur. Starting from the indentation, presumably the Red Sea, the Ganges runs down through Africa, while the Nile joins the Red Sea and the Mediterranean⁷. The belief remained alive as late as the fourteenth century, for we find it in the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, long accepted as an authentic and valuable itinerary. Like Apollonius of Tyana and other later imposters, it appropriated from every conceivable source. The book further helps us understand the incredible ignorance of geographic knowledge at this time. The river Nile, explains Sir John⁸:

¹ *Odyssey*, I. 22–24.

² *Prometheus Bound*, 790ff.

³ See also *The Suppliants*, 284–286.

⁴ *Anabasis*, VI.1.

⁵ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, III.20.

⁶ *De Aedificiis*, VI.1.6.

⁷ Map in C. R. Beazley, *The Dawn of Modern Geography* (New York, 1949), I, p. 385.

⁸ *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. Hamelius, I.28.

Cometh running from Paradys terrestre between the deserts of Ind and after it sinks into land and runneth long time many countries under the earth and after it goeth out under an high hill . . . between Ind and Ethiopia . . . and goeth all along from the land of Egypt into the city of Alisandre . . . and there it falleth into the sea.

We may judge the popularity of the book by the fact that it was translated into almost all the major Western languages⁹.

The Location of Paradise

To the Greeks, the Blessed Isles lay somewhere west of Italy. Though some later writers also situated Paradise in the Atlantic beyond the Pillars of Hercules¹⁰, most Christians followed the Biblical narrative and imagined Paradise as eastward in Eden. To orthodox Christians, the location became a geographic fact and the object of many journeys, fanciful and real. "Paradise is a place lying in the eastern parts", affirms Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies*¹¹, one of the most pervasive geographic commentaries of the Middle Ages; likewise Epiphanius¹² and Athanasius, who regarded it as near India¹³. The *Image du Monde* (c. 1245 A.D.) explains: "The First regyon of Asia the greate is paradys terrestre. This is a place whiche is ful of solace, of playsances and of delices."¹⁴

In time the Eastern Paradise became a permanent feature on medieval maps. One of the earliest and most influential of these maps was drawn by Cosmas, a sixth-century Egyptian monk who had spent several years as a merchantman. During his travels, Cosmas reached as far as Ceylon and for this reason was called Indicopleustes, the Indian voyager. Afterwards, he retired to a monastery and settled down to write his *Christian Topography*, a book that colored a thousand years of Christian speculation on the shape of the earth¹⁵. In spite of his maritime experience, Cosmas relied more on the chronicles of Alexander the Great and other dusty manuscripts. According to Cosmas, the earth resembles an intended rectangle, surrounded by an

⁹ Beazley, I, p. 319.

¹⁰ See William Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: A Study in Medieval Geography* (New York, 1922).

¹¹ XIV.3.2.

¹² *Adversus Haereses*, II.1.64.

¹³ *Quaest. ad Antiochum*, XLVII.

¹⁴ I.14.

¹⁵ Leo Bagrow, *History of Cartography* (London, 1964), p. 47.

ocean, with another land mass encircling it. East of the outer earth lay Paradise¹⁶.

As we have seen, medieval writers often reinterpreted classical works in the light of Christian doctrine. One such piece is the anonymous *Description of the Whole World and its Races*. The original fourth century Greek text describes the Brahmins of India. In its later Latin version, a Christian writer has added the Garden of Eden, portraying its good inhabitants with the words previously used to describe the Brahmins, whose name is deleted¹⁷:

In the regions of the East they tell us dwell the peoples of the Camarini, whose land Moses described by the name Eden. From here a mighty river is said to flow forth and then to branch off into four streams . . . Now the men who dwell in the aforesaid lands are extremely pious and good. No blemish is to be found in their bodies or in their minds.

Like the classical geographers before them, medieval writers placed India and the Ganges at the eastern end of the world. To Martianus Capella in the fifth century, the Ganges flows into the eastern ocean¹⁸. "Asia", says Orosius, "begins in the East where lies the mouth of the River Ganges"¹⁹. The *Image du Monde* assures us that "the Yndes ben closed with the Grete See that enuyronneth them round about"²⁰. At times that river is confused with the Indus, for we read in St. Basil that the Indus, the greatest of streams, flows from the winter solstice in the east²¹. But by and large, the image of the eastern horizon is the image of Gaṅgā. Dante pictures dawn and the sun rising on the river:

Night wheels on, while the sands of the Ganges tip the scales of time.

(*Purgatorio*. II. 4–6)

And noontide scorches down on Ganges' flood
So rode the sun . . .

(XXVII. 4–5)

Since Paradise was a living reality, located at the eastern end of the world – along with India and the Ganges – it seemed natural that the three would find their way together. This is exactly what happened. Aside from Cosmas'

¹⁶ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana*. Trans. J. W. Mc Crindle (London, 1897), Book II.

¹⁷ M. L. W. Laistner, "The Decay of Geographic Knowledge and the Decline of Exploration, A.D. 300–500", in Arthur P. Newton (ed.), *Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages* (London, 1926), p. 27.

¹⁸ *Satyricon*, VI.695.

¹⁹ *Historia adversus paganos* . . . , I.2.

²⁰ I.11.

²¹ *Hexaemeron*, III.5.6.

rough sketch, the earliest graphic representation is a *mappa-mundi* drawn by an anonymous geographer of Ravenna (c. 650 A.D.), showing Paradise as an island off the coast of India and facing the Ganges²². The writer seems to have relied heavily on Greek sources, but here the Sacred Isle is transposed to the eastern sea. We find the same disposition in the Hereford map (c. 1280 A.D.), with Paradise as a circular island at the mouth of the Ganges. Another group of maps follows the design of the Spanish priest Beatus, whose great work, the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (c. 776 A.D.), contained a map illustrating the universal spread of Christianity. In the Beatus maps, Paradise appears not as an island but on the mainland. One such map (c. 1030 A.D.) – executed in the Aquitaine convent of St. Sever and now in the British Museum – shows the Terrestrial Paradise between Seres and Bactria. The Garden, containing Adam and Eve, is ringed by a high mountain chain. Similarly the “London” Beatus or Spanish-Arabic map (c. 1109 A.D.) shows Eden in the region of India and the Caucasus. Sir John Mandeville and others also place Paradise on a mountain.

The location of Paradise in or near India gave rise to several legendary journeys, such as the tale of Eirek the Norwegian, who vowed to find the Earthly Garden. After securing directions from the Emperor of Byzantium, he set out for *Paradisus extra Gangem*, encountering deep forests and endless plains. At last he came upon a lovely park encircled by a river, which he recognized from his instructions as Paradise and the river Pison. The only access lay across a small stone bridge blocked by an incredibly large dragon. Whereupon our hero drew his sword and marched into the dragon’s mouth. At once the monster disappeared and Eirek passed over into Paradise²³.

One widely held twelfth century belief was the existence of Prester John, a powerful Christian king who ruled a great part of Asia, including India. In 1165, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel received a letter reputedly written from Prester John, describing his kingdom. “In one of the heathen provinces”, it relates, “there flows a river called the Indus, which, issuing from Paradise, extends its windings . . . through all the country.”²⁴ The letter excited great wonder and prompted the Vatican to dispatch a mission east in the hope of enlisting Prester John’s aid against the Saracens. In reality there was no Prester John; the letter may have been written for political reasons by the Archbishop of Mainz. But at the time, it was accepted

²² Map in Beazley, I, facing p. 390.

²³ Sir Charles Oman, *The Unfortunate Colonel Despard and Other Studies* (London, 1922), p. 221.

²⁴ Sir E. Denison Ross, “Prester John and the Empire of Ethiopia”, in Newton, *Travel and Travellers . . .*, p. 176.

without question and further strengthened the belief of Paradise in India. We can judge its popularity by the fact that over 100 copies of the letter are still preserved. Similarly another twelfth century text, the *Account of Elysaeus*, partly based on the letter, informs us that the Earthly Paradise is found in India, at the top of a mountain²⁵, while the *English Faustbüch* (1592) portrays Dr. Faustus looking down on Scythia and India from a peak in the Caucasus. Through the valley flow the four rivers of Paradise, the Ganges or Phison, the Nile or Gihon, the Euphrates, and the Tigris²⁶.

In a tenth century representation known as the Anglo-Saxon map, Paradise is omitted and its place taken by Taprobane or Ceylon, an island placed at various points on the Greek maps and often greatly magnified in size. The fifteenth century Andrea Bianco World Map locates the Earthly Paradise beside Cape Cormorin, with the four rivers flowing through the center of India²⁷. John Marignolli, who reached Ceylon in the fourteenth century, describes a glorious mountain (probably Adam's Peak), barely 40 miles from Paradise, according to the natives. And from the height, the water falling from the Fountain of Paradise divides into four rivers that flow through the country²⁸. "The second river", relates Marignolli, "is called the Phison, and it goes through India, circling all the land of Evilach."²⁹ Though he does not name the river, Marignolli's description points to the Ganges, for on its banks are

great and noble cities, rich above all in gold. And on that river excellent craftsmen have their dwellings, occupying wooden houses, especially weavers of silk and gold brocade (Benares ?), in such numbers . . . as in my opinion do not exist in the whole of Italy.³⁰

Following custom, Marignolli notes that the River Gyon (Gihon), after passing through Ceylon, encircles the land of Ethiopia and flows into Egypt. Such a belief is based on the ancient theory of subterranean water courses flowing deep in the earth, under oceans and between continents. This belief, as old as Pindar, was later revived by Christian writers to explain the rivers of Paradise flowing into the world from some remote point in the east.

²⁵ Howard Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 149.

²⁶ *English Faustbüch*, edited by H. Logeman (Ghent, 1900).

²⁷ See: George Kimble, *Geography of the Middle Ages* (London, 1938), p. 185.

²⁸ The cascade, as Yule remarks, may be the Śītalagaṅgā. Col. Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* (London, 1886), II, p. 360. Besides the longest river — the Mahāvaligaṅgā — several other Singhalese rivers have Gaṅgā as part of their name. See: J. C. De, Gaṅgā in Ceylon and India", *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (1931), pp. 359–362.

²⁹ John Marignolli, "Recollections of Travel in the East", in Yule, II, p. 349.

³⁰ Marignolli in Yule, II, p. 350.

Rivers in the Earth

We find it in Pindar³¹ and in a dozen other classical writers, the story of the maid Arethusa who escaped from her suitor Alpheus by being changed into a river. From the Peloponnesus, she passed beneath the Ionian Sea through underground caverns, and rose as a fountain on the island of Ortygia, all the while pursued by the river god Alpheus³². Pausanias, dallying on the myth, cites an old poem³³:

Somewhere in the misty reaches of the sea
Where Ortygia lies by Sicily
Alpheus' eager mouth tastes of
Arethusa's bubbling spring

The story may derive naturally from the limestone country of Greece, where many rivers lose themselves underground, reappearing at some far off point. But regardless of the origin, it soon became an accepted theory of classical geography, Aristotle's scepticism notwithstanding³⁴. All the cavities of the earth, says Plato, "are joined together underground by many connecting channels, some narrower, some wider, through which, from one basin to another, there flows a great volume of water — monstrous unceasing subterranean rivers of water"³⁵. The following passage might well describe Cosmas' map of Paradise and the four rivers issuing from their distant source³⁶:

Some (rivers) flow in on the opposite side from where they came out, and others on the same side, while some make a complete circle, and and winding like a snake . . . round the earth, descend as far as possible before they again discharge their waters . . . Among these many various and mighty streams *there are four in particular*.

Callimachus describes the ubiquitous Nile rising in Delos as the stream Inopus, at that season when the Ethiopian river descends in torrent from its unknown height³⁷. The incident is repeated by Pausanias, who records several stories of underground rivers that surface in distant places. The most imaginative — recalling the febrile speculations of Sir John Mandeville —

³¹ *Nemean Odes*, I.144.

³² *Aeneid*, II.695. Ovid, *Met.* V.

³³ Pausanias, V.7.3.

³⁴ *Meteor*, I.13.350b–351a.

³⁵ *Phaedo*, 111d.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 112e–113a.

³⁷ *To Delos*, IV.206; *To Artemis*, II.170.

claims that “the Nile itself is really the Euphrates, which disappears into a marsh and rises again beyond the Ethiopians”³⁸.

The theory of underground water courses fitted well with a Paradise located at the eastern limits of the world. Thomas Aquinas quotes St. Augustine: “It is supposed that since the site of Paradise is far removed from the knowledge of men . . . the rivers whose sources are said to be known have gone underground and after traversing vast distances have issued forth in other places.”³⁹ Isidore of Seville affirms that “all the waters and torrents return by secret channels to the abyss from which they came”⁴⁰. After Isidore, the theory remained popular throughout the Middle Ages⁴¹. It explained how the Nile, the Tigris, and Euphrates, could flow from a common source while their headwaters lay so far apart. It also led several Christian writers to place the Garden in the mountains of Armenia, among the endless Caucasus from which flowed “the great rivers of Asia”. Philo, a bridge to the classical tradition, contemplates the location of Paradise. He is perhaps the first Scriptural writer to suggest that it may be “in some distant place far from our inhabited world, and has a river flowing under the earth, which waters many great veins so that these rising send water to other recipient veins, and so become diffused”.⁴²

Cosmas carries the theory to its ultimate conclusion, describing how the rivers of Paradise “cleave a passage through the ocean and spring up in this earth”. We read in his *Christian Topography* that⁴³:

Divine scripture, with a view to show the diameter of Paradise, how great it is, and how far it extends eastward, mentions the four rivers only, and thence we learn that the fountain, which springs up in Eden and waters the garden, distributes the residue of its waters among the four great rivers which cross over into this earth and water a large part of its surface.

Consciously or not, later writers followed the pattern laid down by Cosmas. The thirteenth century *Image du Monde* observes that: “the second of the four flodes is named Gyon or Nylus, which entreth in to therthe by an hool, and renneth vnder the erthe”⁴⁴, encircling Ethiopia and flowing through Egypt.

³⁸ Pausanias, II.5.2. See also Terrot Glover, *Springs of Hellas* (New York, 1946), p. 5. James Reuel Smith, *Springs and Wells in Greek and Roman Literature: Their Legends and Locations* (New York, 1922), pp. 669–672.

³⁹ *Summa*, I.102.2, citing Augustine, *In Gen. ad Litt.*, VIII.7.

⁴⁰ *Etymol.*, XIII.20.

⁴¹ See John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographic Lore of the Crusades* (New York, 1925), pp. 27, 185, *passim*.

⁴² *Quaestiones in Gen.*, I.12.

⁴³ Book II.

⁴⁴ I.10. Caxton, p. 69.

The idea of underground water courses is a universal theme. It occurs in Indian tradition. Hebrew literature also mentions the subterranean waters issuing from the stone beneath the Temple and flowing to the ends of the earth⁴⁵.

Gaṅgā as a River of Eden

The location of India and the Ganges at the eastern end of the world was an accepted fact of classical geography. The position had first been indicated by Ctesias, a Greek physician at the Persian court from c. 416–399 B.C.⁴⁶. It was a common belief by the time of Alexander⁴⁷ and was reaffirmed by Strabo and other classical writers.

Josephus was the first to draw the connection. He had access to the classical geographers and knew of the Ganges at the eastern end of the world. He had spent time in Alexandria shortly after 69 A.D. and may have heard further stories there about India and its sacred river. As a scholar and a Jew, he had probably read Philo, stimulated perhaps by his comment on the eastern site of Paradise, with its underground river. Josephus speaks of the Garden, “watered by a single river whose stream encircles all the earth and is parted into four branches. Of these the Phison . . . runs toward India and falls into the sea, *being called by the Greeks Ganges*”⁴⁸. He identified the other rivers as the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile (Geon).

The belief was greatly reinforced by the geographic position of India and the Ganges, coupled by the eastern location of Paradise and the theory of underground water courses. For it is often reaffirmed by the Church Fathers: Eusebius early in the fourth century and Augustine in the fifth⁴⁹. St Ambrose mentions that the Phison, “so called by the Hebrews but named Ganges by the Greeks, flows in the direction of India”⁵⁰. Guided by the figurative interpretations of Philo, he explains that the word Phison

stands for prudence. Hence it has pure gold, brilliant rubies, and topaz stones. We often refer to wise discoveries as gold; as the Lord says, speaking through the Prophet: ‘I gave them gold and silver’.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Ezekiel, 47:1. For detailed references, Raphael Patai, *Man and Temple* (London, 1947), pp. 86, 101.

⁴⁶ Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* XXXVII.2.

⁴⁷ Arrian, *Anab.* 26.

⁴⁸ *Antiq.*, I.38.

⁴⁹ *De Genesi ad Litteram*, VIII.7.

⁵⁰ *Paradisus*, III.14.

⁵¹ III.15.

Later, the gold of Indian rivers, notably the Ganges, became the subject of legend, especially to medieval writers. In Indian tradition as well, Gaṅgā above all others was the river of gold, for example in the *Mahābhārata* epic⁵². It was this gold of the Indies, the gold of King Solomon, brought from Ophir, that Columbus 1400 years later thought he found in the New World. Ambrose equates the gems in the river with the sparkling jewel of the soul, concluding that “the Phison is rightfully the first of rivers”. St. Jerome also identifies Gaṅgā with the Phison, that brings from its source in Paradise emeralds and carbuncles and gleaming pearls “which our great ladies so ardently desire”⁵³. John Marignolli, while in Ceylon, is assured by the natives that the river of Paradise often carries down “precious stones, such as the carbuncle and sapphire, and also certain fruits with healing virtues”. We can measure the popularity of the belief by the fact that it appears in *Mandeville’s Travels*⁵⁴:

The first of these floods (of Eden) which is called Phison or Ganges, springs up in India under the hill Orcobares, and runs eastward through India into the great sea Ocean. In that river are many precious stones . . . and mickle gravel of gold.

The passage may have been lifted from the *Image du Monde*, considering that in all probability, Sir John was a Frenchman. Caxton’s English rendering of the *Image*, his *Mirror of the World*, describes the realm of Paradise⁵⁵:

Ther withinne sourdeth and spryngeth a fontayne or welle whiche is deuyded in to four flodes; of whom that one is called Vngages (Goussin, Old French: Phison ou Ganges) that renneth a longe thurgh the Royame of Ynde, and departeth in to many armes or braces. It sourdeth of the mont that is called Ortobares, and whiche is to ward thorient and falleth in to the see Occian.

Borrowing a page from Apollonius, Mandeville further explains: “It is called Ganges for a king that was in India, the which men called Gangarus; and for it runs through his land it was called Ganges.”

Cosmas, in his *Christian Topography*, identifies the Phison with the Ganges or the Indus⁵⁶, while Isidoré, the father of medieval geography, also observes that “the River Ganges which the holy scripture calls Phison, flows down from Paradise to the realms of India”⁵⁷.

⁵² *Mahābhārata*, Droṇa parvan. 60; Śalya-parvan. 44.

⁵³ *Letter to Rusticus*, no. 75, c. 411 A.D.

⁵⁴ Egerton text, pp. 215–216.

⁵⁵ I.10. Caxton, pp. 68–69.

⁵⁶ Books II, IX.

⁵⁷ *Etymol.*, XIII.21.8.

Other incunabula of the Middle Ages locate the Pison in India. As we have seen, the spurious letter of Prester John equates the Pison with the Indus. In 1122, an obscure event took place in Rome that caused a great stir in the Papal curia. The anonymous account tells of a Patriarch John of India, who arrived in Rome to receive confirmation in his office, after the death of his predecessor. The story would seem doubtful at best, if not for a letter from an abbot of Rheims, who was there at the time⁵⁸. While in Rome, the Patriarch gave a lecture on his native country, mentioning the principal city, Hulna, on the River Pison. He also spoke of the gold and gems in the river and its source in Paradise.

By this time, India and the Ganges had long since passed into legend and found their way into other contemporary myths. Probably the most popular is the *Romance of Alexander* (3rd century A.D.), recounting the deeds of the great conqueror. A fifth century interpolation, attributed to Palladius, mentions the Brahmins, who dwell "near the Ganges, the river of India . . . This river Ganges is in our opinion that which is called in Scripture the Phison, one of the rivers which are said to go out from Paradise"⁵⁹. In his historical march to India, Alexander's goal was to reach the Ganges⁶⁰. Because of his disaffected troops, he was forced to turn back at the Indus. In the *Iter ad Paradisum*, a later twelfth century addition, Alexander actually reaches the Ganges and boarding a ship with 500 picked men, embarks upon the river. After a month's journey, he anchors before a great walled city but is refused entrance. On returning, he is told that this was Paradise, where the spirits of the just remain until the last judgment⁶¹.

The end of the medieval world was quickened by the great age of discovery. One by one, the geographic beliefs of a thousand years began to fade. The new men of science, methodically following the scriptural charts of the middle ages, arrived at unexpected destinations. Just as the Ganges had been the final goal of Alexander, the first great explorer of antiquity, so it was with Columbus, the first great explorer of the modern world. Columbus had read Ptolemy and Mandeville and the Church Fathers from Ambrose to St. Isidore. In his journey westward, Columbus was seeking India on the southern coast of Asia, and China on its eastern edge. In addition to the other charts and documents, Columbus may have been

⁵⁸ Wright, p. 279.

⁵⁹ *Palladius*, III.7.

⁶⁰ Arrian, *Anab.* 26; Curtius, *Life of Alexander*, IX.4.

⁶¹ Paul Meyer, *Alexandre le Grand dans la littérature française du moyen-âge* (Paris, 1886), II, pp. 47–48. Also George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 19–21. Alexander's journey to Paradise must have originated before 500 A.D., since it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. D. J. A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus* (London, 1963), p. 35.

influenced by Martin Behaim's globe of 1492. Beneath the region of the Ganges, Behaim inscribed the following⁶²:

In the Book of Genesis it is stated that this country through which flows the Ganges is called Havilla. The best gold in the world is said to grow there. In Holy Writ, in the Third Book of Kings . . . it is written that King Solomon sent his ships hither and had brought from Ophir to Jerusalem of this gold and valuable pearls and precious stones. This country of Gulat and Ophir, through which flows the River Ganges or the water of Gion, belonged together.

Ptolemy, 1400 years earlier, had underestimated the distance between Western Europe and the east coast of Asia by at least 50° longitude⁶³. Thus, Columbus, relying heavily on Ptolemy, continued to believe he had reached Asia. On the third voyage, he coasted along Venezuela, encountering the Orinoco. From the Gulf of Pearls (modern Gulf of Paria), as he describes in a letter to the Crown, "the water runs constantly with great force towards the east"⁶⁴. Columbus was certain he had come upon the earthly paradise⁶⁵:

for its situation (in the east) agrees with the opinions of those holy and wise theologians, and also the signs are very much in accord with this idea, for I never read or heard of so great a quantity of fresh water flowing into the sea. . . . and if it does not come from there, from paradise, it seems to be a still greater marvel, for I do not believe that there is known in the world a river so great and so deep.

On the fourth voyage, Columbus left the southern shore of Cuba, charting his course southwest towards India. The coast of Honduras was regarded as Ciamba (lower Cathay). The plan "was to follow this coast in a southerly and ultimately westerly direction past Java Major . . . the Strait of Malacca, and into the Indian Ocean to the India of the Ganges"⁶⁶. Eventually, the fleet dropped anchor off the Panama coast and the admiral went ashore, where the natives of Veragua confirmed his belief. We may wonder at the problems of translation; what he heard may well have been what he had hoped to hear. At any rate, he reports in a letter to the King, dated July 7, 1503, that according to the natives⁶⁷:

the province of Ciguare lies inland to the west nine days' journey. They say that the sea surrounds. Ciguare, and that from there *it is ten days' journey to the River Ganges*.

⁶² E. G. Ravenstein, *Martin Behaim: His Life and His Globe* (London, 1908), p. 94.

⁶³ John Keane, *The Evolution of Geography* (London, 1899), p. 33.

⁶⁴ Christopher Columbus, *Select Documents Illustrating the Four Voyages of Columbus*. Trans. and edited by Cecil Jane (London, 1932), II, p. 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 38.

⁶⁶ G. E. Nunn, *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus* (New York, 1924), p. 73.

⁶⁷ *Select Documents . . .*, II, p. 82.

Columbus was forced to return for lack of provisions, and so, like Alexander, never reached the sacred river. To the end, he felt that at Veragua, he had found the land of Ophir and brought King Solomon's mines under control of the Spanish Crown⁶⁸.

The belief in the Ganges as a river of Eden may also have been influenced by Indian legends of the great river, that found their way to Alexandria during the period of extensive maritime trade between India and the Roman Empire (c. 200 B.C.—200 A.D.). The popular belief that Paradise lay somewhere in the Caucasus corresponds to the image of Gaṅgā flowing from the same mountain chain; as early as the third century B.C., Megasthenes records that the river originated high in the mountains of Asia. Some Christian writers such as Cosmas and Mandeville describe the four rivers issuing from a well or lake; in Indian tradition, Gaṅgā, along with three other mighty streams, originates in Lake Mānasarovar. The *Apocalypse of Paul*, from the *Apocryphal New Testament*, describes the rivers of Eden flowing from the roots of a tree⁶⁹; the same is said of Gaṅgā in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Śiva Purāṇa*⁷⁰. The *Apocalypse* further mentions a great river that falls from heaven, watering the earth⁷¹; the image brings to mind the well-known Indian legend of *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa*, the descent of the Ganges. The parallels are many⁷². In the end, however, all is conjecture, but it is not unlikely that some of these descriptions, together with the geographic speculations of the ancient and medieval world, contributed to Gaṅgā's image as a river of Paradise.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. lxxxvi.

⁶⁹ *Apoc. of Paul*, 45.

⁷⁰ *Mahābhārata*, Vana-parvan. 144; *Śiva Purāṇa*. Koṭirudra-saṃhitā. XXVII.4.

⁷¹ *Apoc. of Paul*, 21, 31.

⁷² See, e.g., F. Lemormant, "Ararat and Eden", *Contemporary Review* (September, 1881), pp. 453–478. For an early 19th century Christian interpretation of the similarities, see: George S. Faber, *Pagan Idolatry* (London, 1816), I, pp. 314–356.