



Summary :

Historian, geographer and philosopher of the 2nd c. BC. from Knidos. A peripatetic philosopher and an opponent of asianism. He wrote a History of Asia, a History of Europe and a Periplus of the Red Sea. Only small fragments of his works are preserved today.

Date and Place of Birth

Between 210 and 200 B.C. (?) - Cnidus

Date and Place of Death

After 131 B.C. - Alexandria (?)

Main Role

Historian, geographer, philosopher

1. Introduction

The historian, geographer and philosopher Agatharchides lived in the first half of the 2nd c. BC, an era when original thinking was in decline and a tendency for the preservation of the old wisdom was prevalent. His work is lost almost in its entirety, apart from some fragments preserved by Photius and some others collected by Müller in his monumental work on minor Greek geographers.¹

2. Biography

Sources for Agatharchides' life are scarce and fragmentary. He was probably born during the last decade of the 3rd c. BC and maybe died in the decade of 130 BC. It is reported that in 132/1 BC he was seventy-five years old. He was born in [Cnidus](#), but soon moved to Alexandria, either to study or to work,² where he was associated with the court of the Ptolemies. He began his career as a teacher, but later managed to become the secretary of Heracleides of Lembus, an important person in the court of Ptolemy VII and ambassador of Syria during the war with [Antiochus IV](#) (170-160 BC). Following Heracleides in his peace negotiations with Antiochus, Agatharchides experienced as an eye witness many important political events of his era. Due to his position he probably had access to the royal archives.³

Photius mentions that he was the "threptos (adopted son) of Kinnaeas". This obscure information might be implying that Agatharchides was the adopted son of Kineas, one of the [philoï](#) (friends) of Ptolemy VI. In 145 BC, however, when Ptolemy VIII Physcon rose to the throne of Egypt, the tone abruptly changed for the scholars who in previous decades had sought refuge in the court of the Ptolemies. Whoever had achieved a favourable treatment by Ptolemy VI was persecuted. Thus, Agatharchides was forced, in an already advanced age, to leave the city where he had spent the greatest part of his life for an unknown direction. He might have gone to Athens, or back to his birthplace. He was certainly yet another victim of the disintegration of the kingdom of the Ptolemies and the crisis created by the imperialistic politics of Rome.

3. Literary works

Agatharchides most probably took advantage of his position as secretary of Heracleides of Lembus to find material from the archives of the Ptolemaic administration, which he used in his voluminous works. He wrote a *History of Asia* in ten books, a *History of Europe* in forty-nine books and the work *Periplus of the Red Sea*. His books on Asia were a source for Diodorus Siculus. From his voluminous work on Europe only some fragments were preserved by Athenaeus. Finally, the *Periplus*, which, according to a personal account, he left unfinished due to his advanced age, extended in five books, fragments of which were preserved by Photius and –at least in one occasion- Diodorus Siculus.⁴



The basic feature of his work is that he upgraded the role of ethnography, which he did not consider as a tool of geography, but as the foundation of history. He believed that civilization was harmful for the indigenous people to whom it was forced upon and he himself was indirectly opposed to the policy of the Ptolemies. His views were also contrary to Rome's expansionist policy.

From a philosophical viewpoint, Agatharchides espoused the philosophy of the [peripatetic school](#) and he was an opponent of asianism. He was interested in metaphysics. On the contrary, he would seek in philosophy the means to catalogue and comprehend the vast amount of empirically collected data. In the philosophical theory of Agatharchides, one might often see the influence of [Epicurean philosophy](#), especially in the detailed description of primitive people. As an adversary of [asianism](#), which gave prominence to [rhetoric](#), he was one of the precursors of the dissent between philosophy and rhetoric that shook the intellectual world in the end of the 2nd and during the 1st c. BC. However, he always made sure his narratives were eloquent and carefully composed and contained philosophical sayings. His style would later influence [Posidonius](#).

4. Evaluation of his work

Agatharchides' work must have been widely diffused in Antiquity, since he greatly influenced other authors of his time. His geographical work and the way with which he used his material influenced Diodorus Siculus,⁵ whereas the method with which he presented his views and allowed philosophy to permeate his historical writings influenced, as already mentioned, Posidonios. Finally, his eloquence was admired by Photius, who believed that the style of Agatharchides was grandiose but also interesting, since it framed and projected more effectively Agatharchides' views.

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1. Phot., *Book 7*, Cod.245-256; Müller, C. (ed.), *Geographi Graeci Minores*, I (Paris 1855), p. 111-195.
 2. The opinions on when Agatharchides moved to Alexandria vary. Gozzoli, S., "Etnografia e politica in Agatharchides", *Athenaeum* 56 (1978), p. 54-79, believes he studied in Alexandria, a view which is supported by the fact he might have been the adopted son of Kineas. Verdin on the other hand, basing his opinion on Strasburger, reports that Agatharchides began his career in Alexandria .
 3. Dio. Sic. 3.38.1.
 4. Dio. Sic. 3.12.48.
 5. The relation between Agatharchides and Diodorus Siculus is the subject of Peremans, W., "Diodore de Sicile et Agatharchide de Cnide", *Historia* 16 (1967), p. 432-455.

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Glossary :

	Asianism
Literary current which influenced mainly late hellenistic rhetoric. It consisted of emphasizing upon the style and using elaborate expressions on behalf, however, of the height and depth of the notions expressed. It developed mainly in Asia Minor cities during the 2nd century B.C., but had a broader influence.	
	periplus, the
From the greek word "περίπλους" (sailing-around), roughly corresponding to the Latin circum-navigatio. For Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and Byzantines it was a manuscript document belonging to ancient documentary genre that survived in late antiquity, used as a guide for sea travelers. The periplus listed in order the ports and coastal lines, with approximate distances between, even shelters, that the captain of a vessel could expect to find along a shore, market towns, neighboring tribes and their wares. They also contain historical and mythological information and for the most part they are works of erudition.	
	philoï
Men who belonged to the Greek kings' or tyrants' inner circle. They could perform administrative, military, judicial or medical duties. In certain cases, they also assumed the role of bodyguards. A similar institution was established at the Persian royal court, although we do not now know the Persian term for it. The institution of philoi was fundamental in Hellenistic history.	
	threptos
Usually abandoned children or descendants of slaves, who have paid for their freedom, raised by step families.	

Sources

Müller, C. (ed.) , *Geographi Graeci Minores*, I (Paris 1855)

Chronological Table

Between 210 and 200 B.C.: Agatharchides is born in Cnidus

Soon after 200 B.C.: He moved to Alexandria under undetermined conditions



Around 180 B.C.: He becomes the secretary of Heracleides of Lembus, one of the "philoi" (friends) of Ptolemy VII. He begins composing his historical and geographical works

170-160 B.C.: As a secretary of Heracleides of Lembus, an important person in the court of Ptolemy VII and ambassador of Syria, he participates in the peace negotiations with Antiochus IV

After 145 B.C.: Ptolemy VIII Physcon rose to the throne of Egypt, the tone abruptly changed for the scholars and Agatharchides was forced to leave the country for an unknown direction

132/1 B.C.: Agatharchides is 75 years old. He dies a little later