

Rafał Koszek¹

GEOPOLITICS IN THE GEOGRAPHICAL WORK OF STRABO

Abstract:

Strabo of Amasia is recognized to be one of the greatest ancient geographers. His monumental work *Geography* is the first geographical treatise which encompasses the whole known world of that time. Although geopolitics as an independent area of knowledge appeared in the end of the nineteenth century, its origins can be found in the Antiquity. Due to the similarity and relations between geopolitics and geography it is justified to seek sources of geopolitics in the works of the earliest geographers.

Therefore, it seems to be quite reasonable to examine the Strabo's contribution to the development of geopolitical concepts. The main aim of this article is to prove the thesis that Strabo is the forerunner of geography, as well as of geopolitics. Research is based on Strabo's work *Geography*. It consists of seventeen books. The two initial books include a theoretical introduction to the next fifteen books, which describe particular regions of the ancient *oikoumene*. The paper presents geopolitical ideas contained in the general introduction, as

¹ Rafał Koszek, MA, PhD student, Institute of Geography, Dept. of Geography&Biology, Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland, e-mail: rafa1812mosto@gmail.com

well as in the depiction of different regions. One of the most meaningful concepts, repeatedly expressed by Strabo, is that geography should serve the needs of states and their authorities. It helps the rulers to govern their countries and provides information about the others, what is useful both for foreign policy and international trade. It is probably the description of the Italian Peninsula where we can find the most expressive example of Strabo's geopolitical thinking. He analyses its geographical features in terms of its security as well as its internal and international economic opportunities. He also noticed the superiority of the Roman Empire in comparison to the other nations. The geopolitical ideas are visible in the description of particular cities as well. This article takes into account Sinopê, located on the southern coast of The Black Sea and the city of Rome.

Key words: Antiquity, geography, geopolitics, Strabo

1. Introduction

Strabo of Amasia (64 BC – 23 AD), the author of a monumental work *Geography*, is traditionally regarded as one of the greatest ancient geographers. His treatise consists of seventeen books and attempts to encompass the whole known world. It is for a long time the object of geographers' interest because there are preserved very few ancient works of that kind. Although geopolitics arose in the end of the nineteenth century, it is possible to find geopolitical concepts in the Antiquity. Due to the similarity and significant relations between geography and geopolitics, it is justified to seek geopolitical ideas in writings of the ancient geographers.

Authors of contemporary geopolitical handbooks often mention Strabo when they describe the ancient sources of their field of study. Nevertheless, they either fail to depict his ideas and achievements (e.g. Cohen 2009, Ugarte 1981), or explain them in a very limited way (e.g. Moczulski 2010, Potulski 2010). Therefore, it seems to be quite reasonable to examine Strabo's contribution to the development of geopolitical concepts. The main aim of this article is to prove the thesis that Strabo is the forerunner of geography, as well as of geopolitics. The research is based on an English translation of *Geography*, which was published in the beginning of the twentieth century². The paper consist of three major parts. The first one

² Author of this paper used the translation made by Horace Leonard Jones (1917-1932), which available on the website maintained by Bill Thayer. It contains a lot of translations of

describes Strabo of Amasia and his monumental work. In the second part one can find a brief depiction of political geography and geopolitics, their essence as well as some similarities and differences. The third part is an attempt at presentation of the most meaningful geopolitical ideas contained in *Geography*.

2. Strabo and his *Geography*

Strabo's *Geography* was published in the very beginning of the first century AD. According to the most of the published sources, the origin of geographical thought dates back to the eight century BC. Human beings always wanted to know what is behind the horizon line and on the other side of mountain ridges. The interest in geography arose from the everyday human needs. Greeks, who have lived on the Mediterranean and the Black Sea coasts, waged wars and trade mainly by sea. Thus, they needed information about sea routes and other countries. Geographical knowledge was also essential for Romans, who operated mostly by road.

Strabo was born in 64 BC in Amasia which was the largest city of the Pontus region of that time. He used Greek to compose his treatise. The only source that give us information about Strabo's life is *Geography*. He was growing up in an aristocratic family, therefore he

ancient writings: e.g. *Natural History* (Pliny the Elder), *Roman Histories* (Polybius), *Gallic War* (Caesar).

received a great education. His first teacher was Aristodemus of Nysa³. Young Strabo moved to Nysa which was then an important cultural centre. Local scholars were focused on Homer's epics. Aristodemus, the teacher of rhetoric and grammar, was also mainly interested in works of Homer. This might have influenced Strabo, who mentioned the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for many times, since he considered him as the founder of geography. When Strabo was about twenty years old, he moved to Rome. There he had two teachers: Xenarchus of Seleucia and Tyrranion of Amisus. In that time Rome became the most important intellectual centre, where the Greek scholars acquainted Romans with their cultural heritage. As a result, Strabo received great education that enabled him to describe the whole *oikoumene*, comprising a wide range of information (Dueck 2000).

"I have travelled westward from Armenia as far as the regions of Tyrrhenia opposite Sardinia, and southward from the Euxine Sea⁴ as far as the frontiers of Ethiopia. And you could not find another person among the writers on geography who has travelled over much more of the distances just mentioned than I" (Strabo 1917-1932, 2.5.11⁵)

Although it may not be true that Strabo was the one who travelled the greatest distance among all geographers, he indeed

³ Nysa – ancient city located in the south-eastern part of Asia Minor, whose remains are in Sultanhisar district of Aydın Province of Turkey.

⁴ Euxine Sea – The Black Sea

⁵ 2.5.11 – book. chapter. paragraph

travelled a lot. He knew very well Asia Minor where he was born. He visited for instance the Italian Peninsula, Greece and Egypt. Nevertheless, he didn't see many places and regions that he had described in *Geography* (e.g. Iberia, Germany). He explains this issue as follows: "And men who are eager to learn proceed in just that way: they trust (...) those who have seen or wandered over any region, no matter what, some in this and some in that part of the earth, and they form in one diagram their mental image of the whole inhabited world" (Strabo 1917, 2.5.11)

The main aim of Strabo's treatise was to depict regions of the whole *oikoumene*. In that time there was a significant increase of information about different places due to the territorial expansion of the Roman Empire. *Geography* consists of seventeen books. The two initial books comprise a general introduction to the next fifteen books, which describe particular regions of the inhabited world. The regional description starts from Iberia, which contain contemporary Spain and Portugal. The fourth book encompasses the ancient Gaul, British Isles and Shetland. In the fifth and sixth books one can find information about the Italian Peninsula. The next book deals with a few regions: Germany, Mysia, Dacia, Crimea, Illyria, Pannonia and Epirus. Greece is depicted in the next three books. From the eleventh to the fourteenth book there is a description of Asia Minor and the islands: Samos, Chios, Rodos and Cyprus. The fifteen book includes Persia and India. In the next book one can find information about Mesopotamia, Syria,

Phoenicia, Judea. The last book contains the description of Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya (North Africa).

Strabo's work is consistent and interesting, it is based on a well-considered plan (Dueck 2000). In compliance with a traditional division of ancient *oikoumene*, the inhabited world is separated into three parts: Asia, Europe and Libya. The order of the description of subsequent regions proceeds from west to east, in line with the ancient tradition, too. There is a visible division of the society into two groups. On the one hand there were civilized people, on the other there were barbarians (Almagor 2005).

4. Geopolitics and political geography

In order to examine Strabo's contribution to the development of geopolitical ideas, it is necessary to show various methods of understanding and different assumptions between political geography and geopolitics, which are known from literature. Most of the contemporary scholars do not consider what is political geography and geopolitics. Some of them say it is the same and numerous geographers avoid to use the term geopolitics.

Geopolitics is a field of study that investigate the influence of geographical factors on the behaviour and other centres of power. It was Rudolf Kjellen who for the first time formulated the name and meaning of geopolitics. As well as in political geography, it's subject matter include geographical and political phenomena. Nonetheless,

these fields of study differ significantly in terms of the purpose of research and methods. Political geography examines the influence of political factors (e.g. political system, administrative decisions) on human activities and the changes in landscape. Geopolitics operates in the opposite direction, it tries to discover how geographical factors impact the decisions of states or other centres of power. Thus, political geography is focused on the landscape, in contrast geopolitics centres on the political structures (e.g. states). The explanatory element in political geography is the explained element in geography, and vice versa. The geographical factors and phenomena are all objects and processes that occur on the surface of the earth and differ in terms of location.

5. Geopolitics in the Strabo's work

“And that other argument, it seems to me, is adduced with special force in reference to present-day conditions, namely, that the greater part of geography subserves the needs of states; for the scene of the activities of states is land and sea, the dwelling-place of man. The scene is small when the activities are of small importance, and large when they are of large importance; and the largest is the scene that embraces all the rest (which we call by the special name of “the inhabited world”) and this, therefore, would be the scene of activities of the largest importance. Moreover, the greatest generals are without exception men who are able to hold sway over land and sea, and to

unite nations and cities under one government and political administration. It is therefore plain that geography as a whole has a direct bearing upon the activities of commanders; for it describes continents and seas – not only the sea inside the limits of the whole inhabited world, but also those outside these limits. And the description which geography gives is of importance to these men who are concerned as to whether this is so or otherwise, and whether known or unknown. For thus they can manage their various affairs in a more satisfactory manner, if they know how large a country is, how it lies, and what are its peculiarities either of sky or soil. But because different kings rule in different quarters of the world, and carry on their activities from different centres and starting-points, and keep extending the borders of their empires, it is impossible either for them or for geographers to be equally familiar with all parts of the world; nay, the phrase “more or less” is a fault much in evidence in kings and geographers. For even if the whole inhabited world formed one empire or state, it would hardly follow that all parts of that empire would be equally well known; nay, it would not be true even in that case, but the nearer regions would be better known. And it would be quite proper to describe these regions in greater detail, in order to make them known, for they are also nearer to the needs of the state. Therefore it would not be remarkable even if one person were a proper chorographer for the Indians, another for the Ethiopians, and still another for the Greeks and Romans” (Strabo 1917-1932, 1.1.16.)

The above text comes from the first book of Strabo's Geography. As it was earlier mentioned, the two initial books include a general introduction to the description of particular regions of oikoumene. In the first book Strabo presents the main concepts of his work. The above quotation is probably the most appropriate résumé of geopolitical ideas presented in Geography.

Strabo repeatedly expresses statement that geography should serve the needs of politicians and rulers. This means that he meets the basic geopolitical requirement that geopolitics investigates how the geographical factors influence on states and other centres of power. He emphasizes that the better the ruler is acquainted with location and diversification of the state, the better he can govern it. In other place of Geography, not included in the above quotation, Strabo mentions that in a geographical treatise one should not list all details, but depict a region in a way that is accessible for politicians. Thus, there is a need of appropriate selection of information in order to make it useful for the rulers.

The second part of the quotation applies to the regional diversification of geographical knowledge. Strabo claims that regions where the rulers live affects their geographical perception. He also pays attention to the acquaintance of their own region which is necessary for them. In this ideas we can find relations with one of the modern subdiscipline of geopolitics – the regional geopolitics. In accordance with its assumptions, individual countries conduct policy in

line with their particular advantages. Therefore we have for instance German geopolitics, France geopolitics, Polish geopolitics, which serve the needs of individual states and are different from each other.

Strabo also expresses an interesting idea that there is a possibility to unite nations and cities under one government and one political administration. Although he doesn't develop this concept, but we may assume that there were theoretical considerations about this issue. It can be connected with the contemporary idea of global geopolitics, which deals with the ways of obtaining a global dominion by any centre of power. To conclude, in the theoretical part of his work, Strabo presents some preliminary geopolitical concepts, nevertheless he doesn't use the word geopolitics. We can see that his geographical ideas are tightly connected with the needs of states and in his opinion, geographical knowledge is very important in conducting state's policy. The concept of geography as a field of study that serve the needs of states can be found in the writings of one of the most important polish geopoliticians – Eugeniusz Romer. One of his most influential work was even entitled Geography in service of the state (Romer 1926). One can find this idea in the contemporary, geopolitical papers as well. Mackubin T. Owens claims that "Perhaps the most important influence on strategy making, however, is geography (...)" The geographic setting imposes distinctive constraints on a nation's policy and strategy while at the same time providing distinctive opportunities" (Owens 2015, 463-464). He defines geopolitics as "the

relation of international political power to the geographical setting. Geopolitics is essentially the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography to the pursuit of international power” (Owens 2015, 464).

Turning now to the second part of Geography which includes the description of particular regions of the inhabited world, we are going to examine how Strabo realizes his theoretical assumptions. At the turn of the ages Rome was the greatest military and political power. Strabo, who for many years lived there, was undoubtedly acquainted with the city of Rome and the whole Italian Peninsula. Moreover, he probably was a patriot of the Roman Empire what might have influenced his notion about this region. This is perhaps not particularly strange, as the political circumstances for a long impact the scholar’s activities.

The sixth book of Geography contains information about the Italian Peninsula. After the three initial chapters which in detail depict different parts of the Peninsula, in the last, fourth chapter the author gives a synthetic characteristics of Italia and tells a historical story about the development of the Roman Empire. The description of the Italian Peninsula is, from a geopolitical point of view, one of the most important and interesting excerpt of Strabo’s narration.

“Such, indeed, is the size and such the character of Italy. And while I have already mentioned many things which have caused the Romans at the present time to be exalted to so great a height, I shall

now indicate the most important things. One is, that, like an island, Italy is securely guarded by the seas on all sides, except in a few regions, and even these are fortified by mountains that are hardly passable. A second is that along most of it is harbourless and that the harbours it does have are large and admirable. The former is useful in meeting attacks from the outside, while the latter is helpful in making counter-attacks and in promoting an abundant commerce. A third is that it is characterised by many differences of air and temperature, on which depend the greater variation, whether for better or for worse, in animals, plants, and, in short, everything that is useful for the support of life. Its length extends from north to south, generally speaking, and Sicily counts as an addition to its length, already so great. Now mild temperature and harsh temperature of the air are judged by heat, cold, and their intermediates; and so from this it necessarily follows that what is now Italy, situated as it is between the two extremes and extending to such a length, shares very largely in the temperate zone and in a very large number of ways. And the following is still another advantage which has fallen to the lot of Italy; since the Apenine Mountains extend through the whole of its length and leave on both sides plains and hills which bear fine fruits, there is no part of it which does not enjoy the blessings of both mountain and plain. And add also to this the size and number of its rivers and its lakes, and, besides these, the fountains of water, both hot and cold, which in many places nature has provided as an aid to health, and then again its good supply

of mines all sorts. Neither can one worthily describe Italy's abundant supply of fuel, and of food both for men and beast, and the excellence of its fruits. Further, since it lies intermediate between the largest races on the one hand, and Greece and the best parts of Libya on the other, it not only is naturally well suited to hegemony, because it surpasses the countries that surround it both in the valour of its people and in size, but also can easily avail itself of their services, because it is close to them" (Strabo 1917-1932, 6.4.1)

Other kind of geopolitical concepts in Strabo's Geography occurs is the description of cities. To illustrate, we can compare depictions of two cities: Sinopê and Rome. Sinopê lies on the southern coast of The Black Sea. Strabo called it "the most noteworthy of the cities in that part of the world" (Strabo 1917-1932, 12.3.11) According to Geography, Sinopê was established by Greeks from Miletus who built there a naval base. In the time of Strabo the city was under the Roman control.

"Sinopê is beautifully equipped both by nature and by nature and by human foresight, for it is situated on the neck of a peninsula, and has on either side of the isthmus harbours and roadsteads and wonderful pelamydes-fisheries, of which I have already made mention, saying that the Sinopeans get the second catch and the Byzantians the third. Furthermore, the peninsula is protected all round by ridgy shores, which have hollowed-out places in them, rock-cavities, as it were, which the people call "choenicides", these are filled with water

when the sea arises, and therefore the place is hard to approach, not only because of this, but also because the whole surface of the rock is prickly and impassable for bare feet. Higher up, however, and above the city, the ground is fertile and adorned with diversified market-gardens; and especially the suburbs of the city. The city itself is beautifully walled, and is also splendidly adorned with gymnasium and market-place and colonnades. But although it was such a city, still it was twice captured, first by Pharnaces, who unexpectedly attacked it all of a sudden, and later by Leucullus and by the tyrant who was garrisoned within it, being besieged both inside and outside at the same time” (Strabo 1917-1932, 12.3.11)

“In the interior, the first city above Ostia is Rome, and it is the only city that is situated on the Tiber (...) And in my opinion, the first founders took the same course of reasoning both for themselves and for their successors, namely, that it was appropriate for the Romans to depend for their safety and general welfare, not on their fortifications, but on their arms and their own valour, in the belief that it is not walls that protect men but men protect walls. All the outset, then, since the fertile and extensive country round about belonged to others, and since the terrain of the city was so easy to attack, there was nothing fortunate in their position to call for congratulations, but when by their valour and their toil they had made the country their own property, there was obviously a concourse, so to speak, of blessings that surpassed all natural advantages; and it is because of this concourse of

blessings that the city, although it has grown to such an extent, holds out in the way it does” (Strabo 1917-1932, 5.3.7)

We can observe that Strabo takes into account very different factors to assess the strength of cities. He doesn't limit his consideration to the natural features of places. It has to be noticed that he recognizes the human factor in the process of their development. Sinopê has had many natural advantages to be a strong city, nevertheless it was twice conquered. Conversely, although Rome hadn't been located in a favourable location, but due to the human factor it became a very strong centre of power. One can find similar concept in the earlier mentioned work of Eugeniusz Romer “Thus all natural conditions are in fact relative. The human soul, thought, will, life changes everything!” (Romer 1926, 186)

As we can see, Strabo's Geography aims to assess the strength of particular countries and cities using geographical analysis. That is indeed the perspective of geopolitics.

6. Conclusions

Strabo of Amasia was ordinarily perceived as one of the greatest forerunners of geography. His monumental treatise Geography is treated as one of the most important geographical sources of the Antiquity. Nevertheless, when we study his work, we can find some concepts that indicate the geopolitical character of his dissertation. Obviously, we must remember that there was no word

“geopolitics” in the time of Strabo, it appeared in the end of the nineteenth century. Geographical narration conducted by Strabo is often similar to the geopolitical way of thinking. He claims that geography should serve the needs of states and their rulers. The acquaintance of their own region and the description of other countries allows them to conduct an appropriate policy. Strabo recognizes the natural advantages of different places, but he doesn't forget about human's decisions, behavior, mode of live. Moreover, he is able to see the most important role of the human's factor in historical and contemporary processes. He frequently uses the geopolitical perspective to describe particular regions or places. Not only the problem of security is taken into consideration. Also the ideas about economic circumstances are important factors in conducting policy. He frequently mentions the natural resources, trade, which influence the situation of particular countries. As a result, Strabo can be treated as one of the most important forerunners of geography, as well as of geopolitics.

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