

Europe as an Island: to the Question of the Ancient Division of the Oikumene into Continents

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Abstract

The article examines concepts of ancient authors about the division of oikumene into three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa. The natural desire to see the border between them passing through bodies of water was fully realised in the concept of border between Europe and Africa. Attempts to draw the same water boundaries between Europe and Asia, on the one hand, and Asia and Africa, on the other, have encountered natural obstacles. Thus, the Nile and Tanais (modern Don), and before it Phasis (Rioni), declared boundaries between these continents, could not become full-fledged separators of two huge land masses. That is why theories of “isthmuses” between them began to arise, where the Nile and Tanais played a secondary role, being one of the sides of such an isthmus. Particular attention in the article is paid to Strabo's description of such an isthmus between Europe and Asia.

Keywords

Europe – Asia – Africa – borders – Phasis – Nile – Tanais

It is well known that in antiquity the entire oecumene was divided into three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa.¹ We find the classical division of continents in Pliny the Elder (*NH* 3.3): “The whole world is divided into three parts: Europe, Asia, Africa. The beginning [of this division is] in the west and in the Strait of Gades, bursting into which the Atlantic Ocean spills into inland seas.

¹ See, e.g., Berger 1903², 77–100; Ditmar 1958, 36; Gianotti 1988, 51–92; Gauer 1995, 204–215.

For anyone entering from here, on the right side is Africa, on the left is Europe, between them is Asia, the borders are the Tanaïs and Nile rivers”.²

It seemed natural to divide the continents with waterways so that they were perceived as islands. Europe was separated from Africa by just such a water basin from Gibraltar to Egypt – the Mediterranean Sea. It was more difficult with the borders between Europe and Asia, as well as between Asia and Africa. While in archaic times the Black Sea was perceived as a gulf of the Northern Ocean,³ the continuation of the Mediterranean Sea through the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus provided the same water boundary between Europe and Asia as between Europe and Africa. When, during the process of the Great Greek colonisation, it became clear that the Black Sea was an internal basin closed from the north by land, the same problem arose as with the border between Asia and Africa – there was no sea border there either.

The apparent lack of a water boundary between Asia and Africa has given rise to the idea that there are only two continents, and Africa is part of Asia. This idea persisted for quite some time.⁴

Therefore, the role of such water boundaries began to be played by rivers – Asia was first to be separated from Europe by Phasis (modern Rioni), then Tanaïs (modern Don), and Africa from Asia by the Nile. However, the Nile and Tanaïs, being rivers with their sources on land, could not become full-fledged separators of two huge land masses. Ancient authors had to come up with possible ways out of this difficult situation.

2 Terrarum orbis universus in tres dividitur partes, Europam, Asiam, Africam. origo ab occasu solis et Gaditano freto, qua inrumpens oceanus Atlanticus in maria interiora diffunditur. hinc intranti dextera Africa est, laeva Europa, inter has Asia. termini amnes Tanaïs et Nilus.

3 See Strabo 1. 2. 10: “... The men of Homer’s day, in general, regarded the Pontic Sea as a kind of second Oceanus, and they thought that those who voyaged thither got beyond the limits of the inhabited world just as much as those who voyaged far beyond the pillars of Heracles” (the translation of Strabo here and further is by H.L. Jones). See also Ivantchik 2008, 111: “In the early times up to the 7th century BC the Black Sea was perceived by the Greeks as part of the Ocean. They believed that the Ocean began beyond the Bosphorus, and did not suspect the existence of the northern and eastern coasts of the Black Sea, although they knew the Thracian and Anatolian coasts. The true appearance of the Black Sea became known to the Greeks only during its colonisation, not earlier than the second half of the 7th century BC.” This point of view was presented in more detail in: Ivantchik 2005, 67–109.

4 See, e.g., *Schol. ad Lucan.* 9.411: “Some, like Varro, divided the world into two parts, i.e. into Asia and Europe, some, like Alexander, into three – Asia, Europe and Africa, some, like Timosthenes, into four, adding Egypt.” (quidam diviserunt orbem in duas partes, ut Varro, id est Asiam et Europam, quidam in tris Asiam Europam et Africam, ut Alexander, quidam in quattuor adiuncto Aegypto, ut Timost(h)enes).

When Tanaïs was “designated” as the border between Europe and Asia, attempts continued to see its connection with the Northern Ocean, which would make Europe a perfect island. The Kerch Strait (called the Cimmerian Bosphorus by analogy with the Thracian Bosphorus, which previously opened into the surrounding ocean), the Sea of Azov and the Don flowing into it made it possible to extend the water border further to the Northern Ocean and thereby divide Europe and Asia “by water”. The echo of such ideas about Tanaïs and Maeotis, making Europe a real island, has been preserved from antiquity and the Middle Ages in quite a large number.⁵ I will mention just a few of them.

In the 60s of the 1st c. AD the *Periplus of the Red Sea* was written, which stated that “Lake Maeotis, which lies near the Caspian Sea, flows into the ocean”.⁶

In the second half of the 2nd c. AD Maximus of Tyra apparently considers the Northern Ocean connected with the Black Sea when he notes: “... Maeotis flows from the Ocean, Pontus flows from Maeotis, the Hellespont from Pontus, and Our Sea from the Hellespont ...”.⁷ The Maeotian swamp was also considered a bay of the Northern Ocean by Martian Capella, author of the 5th century.⁸

Pliny the Elder testifies that many considered Maeotis to be a bay of the Northern Ocean: *NH* 2.168: “... ea (sc. palus Maeotica) illius oceani sinus est, ut multos adverte credidisse”, although Pliny himself did not share this opinion.

But the river Phasis (as well as Tanaïs later), which was supposed to serve as the border of Asia and Europe, could, in the ideas of the ancient Greeks, connect with the Northern Ocean. In the scholia to the “Argonautica” of Apollonius of Rhodes there is the following entry (*Schol. ad Apollon. Rhod. Arg.* 4.259): “Hecataeus of Miletus [says] that they (the Argonauts – *A.P.*) sailed from Phasis to the Ocean, then from there to the Nile, from here to Our Sea”,⁹ while a little further (ad 4.284) the same scholiast reports that “Hesiod says that they sailed along the Phasis”.¹⁰ Over time, the “Tanaïs” theory won. Thus, Ravenna anonymous in the 7th c. AD in his “Cosmography” (2.20) writes: “Tanaïs separates Asia and Europe ... And those who say that Asia is separated from Europe by Phasis, a river near the Pontic Gulf of the Great Sea, admit the most complete inconsistency (incongrue fallunt)”.

5 See in detail about this theory Podossinov 2007, 34–57; Podossinov 2014, 345–350.

6 *Periplus maris Erythraei* 64: ἡ παρακειμένη λίμνη Μαιώτις εἰς τὸν ὠκεανὸν συναναστομοῦσα.

7 *Dissert.* xxvi. 3: ὡς ἐξ ὠκεανοῦ ἡ Μαιώτις, ὡς ἐκ τῆς Μαιώτιδος ὁ Πόντος, ὡς ἐκ τοῦ Πόντου ὁ Ἑλλήσποντος, ὡς ἐξ Ἑλλήσποντου ἡ [ἐντὸς] θάλασσα.

8 Mart. Cap. 6. 619: Palus vero Maeotica eiusdem sinus habetur Oceani.

9 Ἐκαταῖος δὲ ὁ Μιλήσιος ἐκ τοῦ Φάσιδος διελθεῖν εἰς τὸν ὠκεανόν, εἴτα ἐκείθεν εἰς τὸν Νεῖλον, ὅθεν εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν θάλασσαν.

10 Ἡσίοδος δὲ διὰ Φάσιδος αὐτοὺς εἰσπεπλευκέναι λέγει.

The Nile was also sometimes declared to flow “from sea to sea” so that the Argonauts or Io, having passed along the Indian Ocean, could enter the Nile and along it reach the Mediterranean Sea. Already in Herodotus we read (2.21) that “the Nile acts so strangely, because it flows from the ocean, and that the ocean flows all round the earth”.¹¹ Herodotus himself cites this opinion as false, but for us it is important that it existed,¹² and, therefore, gave reason to consider the Nile as the border of Asia and Europe.

So, the Argonauts sailed from the Black Sea through the border river Phasis into the Northern Ocean, and from the Southern Ocean through the border Nile into the Mediterranean! The three continents were thus delimited by waterways on all sides, corresponding to ancient and modern ideas about the nature of the continents.

Many ancient authors believed that the Nile and Tanaïs made the three continents real islands, and this suggests that these rivers flow from sea to sea.¹³

So, for example, Strabo writes (1.4.7) that “there has been much discussion about the continents, and that some divide them by the rivers (the Nile and the Tanaïs), declaring them to be islands”.¹⁴ Cf. related opinions: Ael. Aristid. *Or.* 37.87: “And this gulf [of the Ocean] is that Our sea, which cuts the earth in two, adding to itself the Maeotian lake and the Tanaïs river located above it, and makes each part an island, surrounding it with the sea”;¹⁵ Theopomp. *apud* Aelian. *Var. hist.* 3.18: “Europe, Asia and Libya are islands washed on all sides by the ocean”.¹⁶

But already in antiquity there was an understanding that the Nile and Tanaïs could not be full-fledged borders of the continents. The same Strabo writes (1.4.8): “... those who have made the rivers the dividing lines leave certain districts without dividing lines, because the rivers do not reach all the way to the

11 ἢ λέγει ἀπὸ τοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ ῥέοντα αὐτὸν ταῦτα μηχανᾶσθαι, τὸν δὲ Ὠκεανὸν γῆν περὶ πᾶσαν ῥέειν. Translation by G. Rawlinson.

12 It is assumed that this opinion was expressed by Euthymenes of Massalia, who at the end of the 6th c. BC sailed along the western coast of Africa to the modern Senegal and decided that here was the oceanic mouth (or source?) of the Nile (see Ael. Arist. *Or.* 36.85).

13 For the tradition of imagining rivers flowing from sea to sea, see: Podossinov 2020, 208–215.

14 Ἐξῆς δὲ περὶ τῶν ἡπειρῶν εἰπὼν γεγονέναι πολὺν λόγον, καὶ τοὺς μὲν τοῖς ποταμοῖς διαιρεῖν αὐτάς (τῷ τε Νεῖλῳ καὶ τῷ Ταναΐδι) νήσους ἀποφαίνοντας ...

15 καὶ ἔστιν ὁ κόλπος οὗτος ἢ καθ' ἡμᾶς αὕτη θάλαττα, ἣ σχίζει δίχα τὴν γῆν, προσλαβοῦσα τὴν Μαιώτιν λίμνην καὶ τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς ποταμὸν Ταναῖν, καὶ ποιεῖ νήσον τὸ τμήμα ἐκάτερον τῇ κύκλῳ θαλάττης.

16 τὴν μὲν Εὐρώπην καὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν καὶ τὴν Λιβύην νήσους εἶναι, αἷς περιρρεῖν κύκλῳ τὸν Ὠκεανόν.

ocean and so do not really leave the continents as islands”.¹⁷ Many centuries later, Procopius of Caesarea, objecting to the theory of ancient authors about Tanaïs as the border between two continents (he himself adhered to the even more ancient idea that Phasis served as this border), writes (BG 4.6):

The Tanaïs River flows from the so-called Ripaeian Mountains, which are located on the territory of Europe ... It has been established that the ocean is very far (ὡς ἀπωτάτω) from these Ripaeian Mountains. Therefore, all the areas located behind (ὀπισθεν) these mountains and the Tanaïs River must necessarily be classified as European on both sides (ἐφ’ ἐκάτερρα). From where in this case Tanaïs begins to separate both of these continents is not easy to say (οὐ ῥάδιον εἶναι εἰπεῖν).¹⁸

When it became finally clear that neither the Nile nor Tanaïs could be full-fledged boundaries of the continents, and the latter could not be considered islands, the theory of “isthmuses” between them arose, where the Nile and Tanaïs already played a secondary role, being one of the sides of such an isthmus.

The coexistence of the two theories was noted by Strabo (1.4.7):

There has been much discussion about the continents, and some divide them by the rivers (the Nile and the Tanaïs), declaring them to be islands, while others divide them by the isthmuses (the isthmus between the Caspian and the Pontic Seas, and the isthmus between the Red Sea and the Ecregma).¹⁹

Both theories are also heard in the “Description of the Earth” by Dionysius Periegetes (vv. 14–26):

Europe is separated from Asia in the north ... by the Tanaïs, which, circling the land of the Sauromatians, flows into Scythia and Lake Maeotis; the Hellespont [serves] as the southern semi-border, and the southernmost limit (sc. between Asia and Libya. – A.P.) runs through the mouth

17 εἰ οἱ τοῖς ποταμοῖς διορίσαντες ἀπολείπουσί τινα χωρία ἀδιόριστα, τῶν ποταμῶν μὴ μέχρι τοῦ ὠκεανοῦ διηκόντων μηδὲ νήσους ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀπολειπόντων τὰς ἡπείρους.

18 For these ideas of Byzantine authors, see: Litavrin 2000, 283–285.

19 ἑξῆς δὲ περὶ τῶν ἡπείρων εἰπὼν γεγονέναι πολὺν λόγον, καὶ τοὺς μὲν τοῖς ποταμοῖς διαβεῖν αὐτὰς τῷ τε Νεῖλῳ καὶ τῷ Τανάιδι νήσους ἀποφαίνοντας, τοὺς δὲ τοῖς ἰσθμοῖς τῷ τε μεταξὺ τῆς Κασπίας καὶ τῆς Ποντικῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῷ μεταξὺ τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς καὶ τοῦ Ἑκρήγματος.

of the Nile. Others divide continents by land (διὰ χθόνα). [So,] a high isthmus stretched between the Caspian and Euxine seas on the edge of the Asian land: it was this that began to be considered the border between Europe and Asia; the other [isthmus] stretches in a long wide strip in the south between the Arabian Gulf and Egypt – it separates Libya from the Asian land. This is how [differently] mortals distributed the boundaries.

As for the isthmus between Asia and Africa, which was supposed to replace the Nile, everything is more or less clear here – its role was played by the Isthmus of Suez, which is a strip of land up to 112 km wide between Africa and Asia and separates the Mediterranean and Red Seas. This idea of isthmuses between continents was paradigmatically formulated by Ptolemy (Geogr. 7.5.5):

Of the three continents, it is Asia that connects (συνάπτει) with Libya and [does this] through the isthmus of Arabia (διὰ τοῦ κατὰ τὴν Ἀραβίαν αὐχένος), which separates Our Sea from the Arabian Gulf.²⁰

Interesting that with the digging of the Suez Canal, the water border between Asia and Africa became a reality, as in the case of the Panama Canal, which made North and South America real continents.

But what about the isthmus between Europe and Asia, which was supposed to replace Tanaïs as the border?

The situation there doesn't look so simple.

It would be logical to assume that such an isthmus is the territory between the source of the Tanaïs and the coast of the Northern Ocean. Ptolemy writes (Geogr. 7.5.6): "Asia is connected to Europe through an isthmus (διὰ τοῦ μεταξὺ αὐχένος) between the Maeotian Lake and the Sarmatian Ocean along the bed of the Tanaïs River ..." ²¹ The anonymous author of *Geographiae expositio compendiarie* (3 = GGM 2, p. 494), talking about the division of the entire oecumene into three continents (ἡπείροι), also notes: "Asia [has] an isthmus (ἰσθμός) with Europe, which extends from the deep part of the Maeotian lakes to the North Sea; the Tanaïs River flows along this isthmus". ²² It seems that these texts still mean the entire waterway from the Black Sea through Maeotis and Tanaïs to

20 Διὸ καὶ τῶν τριῶν ἡπείρων ἡ μὲν Ἀσία συνάπτει τῇ τε Λιβύῃ καὶ διὰ τοῦ κατὰ τὴν Ἀραβίαν αὐχένος ὃς καὶ χωρίζει τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς θάλασσαν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἀραβικοῦ κόλπου ...

21 Καὶ τῇ Εὐρώπῃ δὲ συνάπτει διὰ τοῦ μεταξὺ αὐχένος τῆς τε Μαιώτιδος λίμνης καὶ τοῦ Σαρματικοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς διαβάσεως τοῦ Τανάϊδος ποταμοῦ ...

22 τῆς δὲ Ἀσίας πρὸς τὴν Εὐρώπην ἰσθμός, ὃς ἀπὸ τοῦ μυχοῦ τῆς Μαιώτιδος λίμνης ἐπὶ τὴν πρὸς ἄρκτους θάλασσαν διήκει. διαρρεῖ δὲ τὸν ἰσθμὸν τοῦτον ποταμὸς Τάναϊς.

the Northern Ocean without taking into account the subsequent land between the source of Tanais and the ocean, which Procopius of Caesarea wrote about (see above).

Poseidonius, quoted by Strabo, spoke more definitely about this isthmus three centuries before Ptolemy (11.1.5):

Poseidonius said that the isthmus (τὸν ἰσθμόν) [between Europe and Asia has a width of] 1500 [stadia], that is, the same as the isthmus from Pelusium to the Red Sea. “I believe,” he says, “that [this distance] is not much different [from the distance] from Maeotis to the Ocean”.²³

On the one hand, Poseidonius, like Ptolemy and Anonymous, speaks of an isthmus between Maeotis and the Northern Ocean, on the other hand, he does not mention the channel of the Tanais, which does not reach the ocean.

After him, the length of this isthmus is the same as that of the isthmus between Asia and Africa, which emphasises the geographical parallelism in the two isthmuses, as well as the idea of a relatively short distance between the Sea of Azov and the Northern Ocean.

But this isthmus between Europe and Asia is not the only one.

Already in the text of Dionysius Periegetes, quoted above, the space between the Black and Caspian seas is called such an isthmus (“the high isthmus between the Caspian and Euxine seas: it was this that began to be considered the border between Europe and Asia”).

Indeed, the space between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea can be considered an isthmus (see the usual definition of an isthmus: “a narrow strip of land between two bodies of water”). But what does this have to do with the isthmus between Europe and Asia? Pseudo-Aristotle in his treatise “On the World” (1st c. BC–mid-2nd c. AD) directly states that (1.3) “Europe is the tract bounded in a circle by the Pillars of Heracles, the inner recesses of the Pontus, and the Hyrcanian sea, where a very narrow isthmus stretches to the Pontus. Some have held that the river Tanais carries on the boundary from this isthmus”.²⁴

Strabo writes about the same isthmus (11.1.5):

23 Ποσειδώνιος δὲ χιλίων καὶ πεντακοσίων εἴρηκε τὸν ἰσθμόν, ὅσον καὶ τὸν ἀπὸ Πηλουσίου ἰσθμόν εἰς τὴν Ἐρυθράν· δοκῶ δὲ φησὶ ‘μὴ πολὺ διαφέρειν μηδὲ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς Μαιώτιδος εἰς τὸν Ὠκεανόν.’
24 Translation by E.S. Forster. Εὐρώπη μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ἥς ὅροι κύκλῳ στήλαί τε Ἡρακλέους καὶ μυχοὶ Πόντου θάλαττά τε Ὑρκανία, καθ’ ἣν στενότατος ἰσθμὸς εἰς τὸν Πόντον διήκει· τινὲς δὲ ἀντὶ τοῦ ἰσθμοῦ Τάναϊν ποταμὸν εἰρήκασιν.

As we pass from Europe to Asia in our geography, the northern division is the first of the two divisions to which we come; and therefore we must begin with this. Of this division the first portion is that in the region of the Tanais River, which I have taken as the boundary between Europe and Asia (ὅνπερ τῆς Εὐρώπης καὶ τῆς Ἀσίας ὄριον ὑπεθέμεθα). This portion forms, in a way, a peninsula, for it is surrounded on the west by the Tanais River and Lake Maeotis as far as the Bosphorus and that part of the coast of the Euxine Sea which terminates at Colchis; and then on the north by the Ocean as far as the mouth of the Caspian Sea; and then on the east by this same sea as far as the boundary between Albania and Armenia, where empty the rivers Cyrus and Araxes, the Araxes flowing through Armenia and the Cyrus through Iberia and Albania; and lastly, on the south by the tract of country which extends from the outlet of the Cyrus River to Colchis, which is about three thousand stadia from sea to sea, across the territory of the Albanians and the Iberians, and therefore is described as an isthmus (ὥστε ἰσθμοῦ λόγον ἔχειν). But those writers who have reduced the width of the isthmus as much as Cleitarchus has, who says that it is subject to inundation from either sea, should not be considered even worthy of mention.

So, Strabo describes the territory between Tanais, the Azov and Black Seas, on the one hand, and the Caspian Sea, which, according to Strabo and most ancient authors, is connected with the Northern Ocean, on the other, and describes it as a peninsula with an isthmus located between the Black and Caspian Seas on the territory of the Colchians, Albanians and Iberians. It should be noted that the perception of this territory as a peninsula would be only possible if Tanais was understood as flowing from the Northern Ocean (or flowing into it).

The fact that Strabo himself did not share the point of view about the oceanic (= Baltic) mouth of the Tanais is evident from many of his statements about the flow of the Don, however, the discussed thesis about the “peninsula” may indicate his familiarity with this idea. Strabo’s doubts about this are expressed in the words “this portion forms, *in a way*, a peninsula” (τρόπον τινὰ χερρονησίζοντα).

The understanding that the space between the Black and Caspian Seas can hardly be considered an isthmus of the northern peninsula is perhaps contained in the words of Strabo ὥστε ἰσθμοῦ λόγον ἔχειν – “therefore is described as an isthmus (λόγος – meaning, significance, logical definition)”. Strabo (2.5.31) once again mentions this isthmus, but no longer talks about the *peninsula*.

It seems that Strabo’s confused and unclear story about the peninsula between the Black and Caspian seas and the Northern Ocean is a complex

combination of multi-time ideas, reflecting both ancient theories of the connection of the Black Sea with the Northern Ocean, and contemporary to Strabo knowledge about the region.

It is also possible that the perception of the Black Sea-Caspian isthmus as a border between Europe and Asia is somehow connected with the fact that in ancient times the Phasis River, which flows precisely along this isthmus, was considered such a border. Thus, Agathemer, speaking about the boundaries of the continents, writes (1.3) that “the ancients considered the Phasis River and the isthmus (ἰσθμός) to the Caspian Sea to be the border of Asia and Europe, while later [authors] considered Lake Maeotis and the Tanaïs River”.²⁵

In Dionysius Periegetes (vv. 695–696) we read: “To the northeast of it (sc. Phasis) lies the isthmus (ἰσθμός) – the isthmus between the Caspian and Euxine seas”. Here, as in Agathemer, some rather vague connection can be traced between Phasis and the Caucasian isthmus, which Strabo, Agathemer and Dionysius Periegetes speak about. Procopius of Caesarea believed that the entire Northern Black Sea region up to Colchis belongs to Europe, and Phasis, flowing into both the Black and Caspian Seas, is the border of the continents, going further through the Caspian Sea and its strait into the Northern Ocean (*BG* 6.7–9).

In any case, we can conclude that our usual understanding of the Tanaïs (Don) as the border between Europe and Asia must be adjusted taking into account the widespread theory in antiquity that the space between the Don and the Volga, whose lower course could be perceived as a strait connecting the Northern Ocean with the Caspian Sea, was the isthmus that lay between the two continents.

A few words should be said about early medieval maps, which generally continued the traditions of ancient cartography, preserving many of the ancient ideas about Eastern Europe. A large number of West European maps of the T–O type have reached us; they consist of a “letter” O, symbolizing the world ocean and the “letter” T, inscribed in it, the vertical of which is formed by the Mediterranean Sea, and the horizontal by Tanaïs on the left and the Nile on the right (fig. 3.1). In this diagram, the left side of the crossbar of the letter T with a straight line depicts schematically the Aegean, Marmara, Black and Azov seas and the Tanaïs-Don, separating Asia from Europe.²⁶

25 “Οροι ἡπείρων Ἀσίας δὲ καὶ Εὐρώπης οἱ μὲν ἀρχαῖοι Φάσιν ποταμὸν καὶ τὸν ἕως Κασπίας ἰσθμὸν, οἱ δὲ ὕστερον (νεώτεροι) Μαιώτιν λίμνην καὶ Τάναιν ποταμὸν.

26 See, e.g., Chekin 1999, 22–108, figs. 1–18, 26, 27, 29, 31, 33, 34, etc.



FIGURE 3.1 T-O map of the world according to Isidore of Seville, XII century (Aix-en-Provence, France). Bibliothèque Méjanes MS 25 (914), fol. 293r

It is quite natural that this scheme involves the connection of the Black Sea with the Northern Ocean, completely in the spirit of the ancient Greek ideas about the return journey of the Argonauts.

In Byzantium, apparently, this idea also existed, since on the late Byzantine map of the world (15th century), stored in the State Historical Museum in Moscow,²⁷ an oval-shaped land surrounded by an ocean, with the Mediterranean Sea in the middle (the map is oriented to the north) is depicted. An elongated water artery leaves from Constantinople to the north, which at the first expansion is called Pontus Euxine, then, at its very confluence with the Northern Ocean, it is called Maeotis. Thus, this very rare example of Byzantine cartography also shows the connection of the Black and Azov Seas with the Northern Ocean (fig. 3.2).

27 Син. 415 (Вл. 509) ГИМ F 79^в. See its edition and investigation: Podossinov 2010, 230–247.

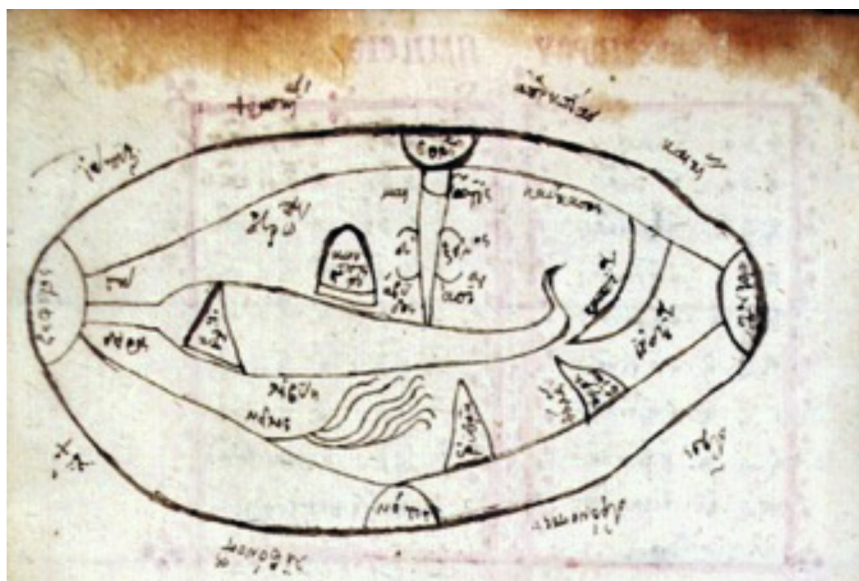


FIGURE 3.2 Late Byzantine world map. After Podossinov 2010

To summarise, it should be said that in ancient and medieval geocartography regarding Eastern Europe, despite the lack of information about the north of this region, there was always the idea of the possibility of a waterway connecting the Black and Azov Seas with the Baltic Sea (= Northern Ocean) and making Europe an island. Apparently, in addition to the obvious explanations for this circumstance that these were “imaginary realities”, fantasies, scientific speculations or simply errors, one should consider a possibility of existence of real contacts between the population of the Eastern Baltic and Black Sea region, which are documented by archaeological data²⁸ and are reflected in our sources. Eventually, Baltic amber somehow reached the Mediterranean countries, where it found great demand, and one of the ways it entered the Mediterranean, at least at the turn of the era, was along the rivers Neman and Berezina to the Dnieper region, and then to the Black Sea.²⁹ Several centuries

28 See about them: Bulkin 1983, 7–8; see especially p. 7: “The geographical position of the rivers of central Belarus (where the rivers begin, flowing into both the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. – *A.P.*) created quite favorable conditions for their use in ancient and modern times as routes of communication between the Baltic and Black Seas.”

29 See: Shchukin 1994, 190–201; 1998, 198–208; Kulakov 2005. See, however, Blümner 1897, 298 for a much older date for such contacts: “Aus altgriechischen Funden im Norden [...] hat man schliessen wollen, dass schon im 5. Jh. v. Chr. eine Handelsverbindung, die vornehmlich auch Bernstein betraf, zwischen der Ostsee und dem Schwarzen Meere bestand.”

later, the Goths came to the Black Sea region from the shores of the Baltic along the Vistula and Western Bug to the lower reaches of the Dniester and Danube, and in even later times, the waterway “from the Varangians to the Greeks”, well known to the ancient Scandinavians, Slavs and Byzantines, functioned, allowing us to consider Europe as *τρόπον τινά* island.

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