

# Truth Within the Lies? Harbour Descriptions in Lucian's *Second True History*

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## Introduction

Lucian of Samosata was a Greek writer from the second century AD who bequeathed over 70 works to us. He was a philosopher from the Second Sophistic, and his way of teaching anyone who would read his works was by means of fiction. He wrote completely invented situations, usually in the form of dialogues, involving unrealistic characters such as gods or corpses in extremely ridiculous discussions, at the end of which he delivered a sarcastic morale note. One of his works is actually called the *True Histories*, written in two parts. The title is, of course, sarcastic in itself. Let us read a fragment of the opening of the first part to illustrate this:

*... Everything in my story is a more or less comical parody of one or another of the poets, historians and philosophers of old, who have written much that smacks of miracles and fables. [...] One of them is Ctesias, son of Ctesiochus, of Cnidos, who wrote a great deal about India and its characteristics that he had never seen himself nor heard from anyone else with a reputation for truthfulness. Iambulus also wrote much that was strange about the countries in the great sea: he made up a falsehood that is patent to everybody [...]. Many others, with the same intent, have written about imaginary travels and journeys of theirs [...]. Well, on reading all these authors, I did not find much fault in them for their lying, as I saw that this was already a common practice even among men who profess philosophy<sup>1</sup>. I did wonder, though, that they thought that they could write untruths and not get caught at it. Therefore, as I myself thanks to my vanity, was eager to hand something down to posterity [...] and, as I had nothing true to tell, not having had any adventures of significance, I took to lying. But my lying is far more honest than theirs, for though I tell the truth in nothing else, I shall at least be truthful in saying that I am a liar. [...] Be it understood, then, that I am writing about things that I have neither seen, nor had to do with, nor learned from others – which in fact do not exist at all and, in the nature of things, cannot exist<sup>2</sup>.*

Let me insist: everything Lucian says here is false except for the fact that he is lying. As a PhD student in archaeology, my research aims to identify the correspondences between tangible archaeological remains with specific words in the language. So my question is: is Lucian a valid source for archaeological research? We will not have to think

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<sup>1</sup> He is mocking the philosopher Plato and his work, *Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> Luc. *VH* A 2-4.

twice if we are to choose between an evidence-based historian and a fabulous story-teller. However, can Lucian's work be straightforwardly dismissed?

### **The first harbour description:**

In his tale, Lucian tells us that he boards a ship and sails around the universe (they do sail to places like the Moon or islands made of cheese and wine). Of course, travelling by ship means that he and his crew arrive at ports. Two of them are described in the second part of the work. The first passage is B 4-6:

*In a little while, many islands came in sight. [...] Dead ahead was one that was flat and low-lying, not less than five-hundred furlongs off. When at length we were near it, a wonderful breeze blew about us, sweet and fragrant [...]. Delighted with the fragrance and cherishing high hopes after our long toils, we gradually drew near to the island at last. Then we saw many harbours all about it, large and unfretted by beating waves; transparent rivers emptying softly into the sea; meads, too, and woods and songbirds, some of them singing in the shore and many in the branches. A rare, pure atmosphere enfolded the place, and sweet breezes with their blowing stirred the woods gently, so that from the moving branches came a whisper of delightful unbroken music, like the fluting of Pandean pipes in desert places. Moreover a confused sound could be heard incessantly, which was not noisy but resembled that made at a drinking-party, when some are playing, others singing and others beating time to the flute or the lyre. Enchanted with all this, we put in, anchored our boat and landed, leaving Scintharus and two comrades on board. Advancing through a flowery mead, we came upon the guards and sentinels, who bound us with rosy wreaths [...] and led us inland to their ruler. They told us on the way that the island was the one that is called the Isle of the Blest<sup>3</sup>.*

Let's start our commentary with the "many harbours". It is true that one city can have more than one harbour, although "many" of them is not frequent. We can see, for instance, Athens, with its harbours Piraeus, Phaleron, Munychia and Zea. Syracuse had three: the Great Harbour, the Small Harbour and the Trogilus Harbour. Corinth had two in the neighbouring cities of Cenchreae and Lechaem, and so did Rome: Ostia and Portus. Quite remarkably, Alexandria had five harbours.

Also, the quality of these ports is exaggerated. Being able to drop anchor somewhere doesn't necessarily mean that the port is good quality. The word used in Greek is λιμήν, which implies a well-sheltered port, a luxury that was not available in every situation. Lucian, since he could choose, obviously picked the better port for his fiction, but compare these fragments from the *Stadiasmus* (§§ 3, 4 and 7), a guidebook for sailors of the Mediterranean Sea dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD:

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<sup>3</sup> The place where heroes go when they die.

*From Dysmae to Plinthine there is an anchorage. The place has no port. There are 90 stadia.*

*From Plinthine to Taposiris there is a city without a port. There is a temple of Osiris. There are 7 stadia.*

*From Glaukos to Antifras the place is an anchorage. There are 80 stadia.*

In relation to the landscape, it is true that some ports were situated near the mouths of rivers. The vegetation, however, is another issue. Lucian<sup>4</sup> was a native from Samosata, in present-day Turkey and we can state with a fair degree of certitude that he knew the Eastern part of the Mediterranean and had travelled to places like Rome and Gaul<sup>5</sup>. There are naturally forests in the Mediterranean area, but they are not the kind of overpopulated tree masses directly on the sea shore that Lucian suggests. Instead, the actual vegetation is rather dry. See, for example, this passage in Theophrastus (*Historia plantarum*, 6, 2, 3-4), who wrote a treatise on plants, describing the olive tree:

*The marjoram, or rather the oregano, has a clearly fruitful seed; the grain can't be taken because it is somehow mixed in the flower. They sow that and it blooms. The people in Athens who want to export the plant seek it and cultivate it. The plant has its own peculiarity comparing the aspect of one or another in different places. They say it cannot grow or be cultivated where the breeze from the sea doesn't reach. Because of this there isn't any in Arcadia. But marjoram and oregano and this kind of plants grow abundantly in many places. Something similar happens with the olive trees as well, as it doesn't seem to grow more than thirty stadia<sup>6</sup> away from the sea.*

Therefore, this exaggerated vegetation and the singing birds must simply be considered as a description of a locus amoenus, together with the feast. Let's not forget that he has arrived in the Island of the Blest. It must be said, however, that there is a real possibility that Lucian had a painting in mind when he was describing these harbours, though it is quite clear that this environment does not correspond to the typical Mediterranean harbours that he may have seen.

Moreover, in the same way that Lucian chooses a good quality port and fills it with pleasant flora and fauna, he also adds suitable winds to it. Let's not forget that this description is not real, but a locus amoenus, and the Island of the Blest as well! Therefore, Lucian provides it with anything useful and delightful. However, it is true that reality-

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Cambridge history of classical literature. Vol. 1, Greek literature*, quoted in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Bis accusatus*, 27 and *Apologia*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> ca. 5,3 km.

based sources inform us about the winds, as in the following passage from the geographer Dionysius (*Per Bosporum Navigatio*, 44):

*After this [cape] there is a shore open to the south wind. It is named Pentekontorikon from the fifty-oared cargo ships (pentekontoroi) that anchor in it.*

### **The second harbour description:**

The second passage describing a port is B 32-33:

*After a short time the Isle of Dreams came in sight close by, faint and uncertain to the eye. [...] Overtaking it at length and sailing into the harbour called Sleep, we landed near the ivory gates, where the sanctuary of the Cock is, about dusk, and on entering the city, we saw many dreams of all sorts. But first I desire to speak for the city itself, since no one else has written about it, and Homer, the only one to mention it at all, was not quite accurate in what he said. [...] The wall of the city is high and parti-coloured, very like a rainbow in tint. The gates in it are not two, as Homer says, but four. Two face Slowcoach Plain [...]. The other two face the harbour and the sea, one of which is of horn and the other, through which we came in, of ivory. As one enters the city, on the right is the temple of Night, for the gods they worship more are Night and the Cock, whose sanctuary is built near the harbour.*

Two architectural elements are relevant in this passage:

- a) City walls with four gates, two of them facing the harbour but not including it.
- b) The sanctuary of the Cock.

The Greek word for the gates is πύλη, and we can confirm that this word exists since very ancient times due to its presence in the *Iliad* (eg. Troy's Scaean Gates in Hom. *Il.* 3.145) or in toponymy (eg. the Thermopylae). As an urban architectural element, monumental gates are part of the city (for example, Plutarch on Rome's gates: *Romulus* 11.4, *Camillus* 22.2 and 25.3). Of course, they are also present in the coast. In some cases, the walls in which the gates were built did include the harbour, but not always, so Lucian's statement that the gates only face the port is credible. We can find gates in various literary and epigraphical sources, and both in Greek and Latin:

Diodorus Siculus: *Bibliotheca Historica* 20.88.7

*Since the naval battle had turned out in that way, Demetrius built another machine, three times bigger and wider than the first one, and as he was approaching the harbour, a violent south wind storm broke out, and it dispersed the ships that were at anchor and destroyed the machine. At that moment, the Rhodians took the chance and, once they had opened a gate, they attacked those who had occupied the mole.*

Polybius: *Historiae*, 8.30.6

*So Gaius, knowing of the imminent arrival of the enemies, as he realised himself incapable due to drunkenness, at once he left the house with his servants and made his way to the gate that leads to the harbour. Then the guard opened the side-gate for him, and he slipped through it and seized one of the boats that was at anchor, he boarded it and was escorted to the cape by his servants.*

CIL 02, 03434 = CIL 02, 05927 = CIL 01, 02271 (p 1104)

= CartNova 00001 = ILLRP 00778 = ELRH-C 00010 = HEp-18, 00257

(inscription from Carthago Nova)

*Marcus Puupius, freedman of Marcus; Sextus Luucius, freedman of Sextus Gaep(---); Marcus Prosius, freedman of Marcus; Numerius Titius, freedman of Lucius Nu(---); Caius Vereius, freedman of Marcus; Antiochus, slave of Lucius Brutus; Eleuterus, slave of Caius Terentius; Philemo, slave of Lucius Aleidius; Alexander, slave of Lucius Titinius; Acerdo, slave of Marcus Saponius; officers, took care of building three gates and the foundations of concrete.*

CIL 10, 01640 = D 00336 = Horster p 290

(inscription from Puteoli)

*Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, son of the divine Hadrian, grandson of the divine Trajan Parthicus, great-grandson of the divine Nerva, pontifex maximus, having the tribunicia potestas for the second time, being consul for the second time and designated for a third time, father of the nation, restored six gates that had been destroyed by the sea, as promised by his divine father.*

The other element mentioned in the passage, the sanctuary of the Cock, is another reality-reflecting feature. Of course, the cock is an invention in line with the dream-themed fiction island, but the presence of temples and holy shrines near harbours is quite frequent. The building of temples near ports is mainly due to the religious needs of sailors, who would pray for a safe journey or thank the gods after a pleasant trip, although temples were also quite often used as vaults for storing wealthy objects and money<sup>7</sup>. Here are a couple of examples:

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Pedley, 2005.

Strabo: *Geographica* 9.1.15

*the many wars have torn down the walls and the defences in Munychia, and they have reduced Piraeus into a small village around the ports and the temple of Zeus Saviour.*

Pausanias: *Graeciae Descriptio*, 2.38.2

*Nauplia, I think, is fifty stadia away from Temenios. In our days it is deserted [...]. But the ruins of the walls are remaining, and also the temple of Poseidon and there are ports in Nauplia and the fountain called Cantharus.*

## Conclusion

We can conclude, then, that despite obvious fictional elements to adapt those structures to his invented environment, the descriptions of ports in the *True Histories* do contain traces of reality, such as the possibility of having more than one harbour in the same place or specific architectural elements. Thus, even though we mustn't read this author as priority evidence, his texts may be of use in some situations, for example when explaining common features of the port.

## Concluding Evidence

Let me please finish by showing you one last passage with evidence. The following fragment refers to the moment when Lucian and his sailors leave the Island of the Blest, and he decides to erect an honorary inscription. Public places, such as harbours, were packed with all sorts of memorials and decrees inscribed on stone, metal, wood or other materials. We can see, for example, the following inscriptions:

CIL 14, 00113

(column in Portus)

[Imp(erator) Caesar] d[ivi] [M(arci) Antoni]ni Pii Germani[ci] [Sarmati]ci filius divi [C]ommodi frater divi Antonini Pii nepos divi Hadriani pronepos divi Traiani Parthici abnepos divi Nervae adnepos	<i>Emperor Caesar Lucius Septimius Severus Pius Pertinax Augustus Arabicus Adiabenicus, the son of the Divine Marcus Antoninus Pius Germanicus Sarmaticus, the brother of the Divine Commodus, the grandson of the Divine Antoninus Pius, great-grandson of the Divine Hadrian, great-great-grandson of the Divine Trajan Parthicus, great-great-great grandson of the Divine Nerva, being pontifex maximus, having the tribunicia potestas for the</i>
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<p>L(ucius) Septimius Severus  Pius Pertinax Aug(ustus)  Arabicus Adiabenicus p(ontifex)  m(aximus)  tr(ibunicia) pot(estate) IIII imp(erator)  VIII co(n)s(ul) II p(ater) [p(atriciae)]  columnnam VII tempest[atis]  confractam restitui[t]</p>	<p><i>fourth time, being emperor for the eighth time, second time consul, pater patria, restored a column broken by the storm.</i></p>
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Luc. VH B 28	
<p>[Ἀρτέμιδι Ἐφεσίᾳ]  καὶ Αὐ[τοκράτορι Τ. Αἰλί]ῳ  Ἀδριανῶ Ἀντωνεῖνῳ  Καίσαρι Σεβαστῶ Εὐσεβεῖ  καὶ τῇ πρώτῃ καὶ μεγίστῃ  μητροπόλει τῆς Ἀσίας  καὶ δις νεωκόρου τῶν Σεβαστῶν  Ἐφεσίων πόλει καὶ τοῖς ἐπὶ  τὸ τελώνιον τῆς ἰχθυϊκῆς  πραγματευομένοις  Κομινία Ἰουνία  σὺν τῷ βωμῷ τὴν Εἷσιν  ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων ἀνέθηκεν·  πρυτανεύοντο[ς Τιβ. Κλ. Δ]ημ[οσ]τ[ρ]άτ[ου.]</p>	<p><i>(This column is dedicated)  to Artemis Ephesia;  to the emperor Titus Aelius Adrianus  Antoninus Caesar Augustus Pius;  to the first and greatest metropolis of  Asia, twice temple-warden of the  Augusti, the city of the Ephesians;  and to those serving in the fishery  customs-office.  Cominia Junia made it with her own  money together with the altar to Isis  when Tiberius Claudius Demonstratus  was the local governor.</i></p>

This last inscription is not without its self-praise, as it states that Cominia Junia erected it “at her own expense”, as a way for her to be remembered by future generations. It is perfectly credible that Lucian wants to engrave his own message if we take into account that at the beginning of the work he admitted to writing for the sake of his own vanity. And what does his inscription read?

Luc. VH B 28

Λουκιανὸς τάδε πάντα φίλος  
μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν

*Lucian, dear to the blessed gods, all  
these things*

εἶδέ τε καὶ πάλιν ἦλθε φίλην ἐς  
πατρίδα γαῖαν.

*saw and went back again to his dear  
homeland.*



## **Bibliography**

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## **Further Reading:**

### **Editions of Lucian's *True Histories***

Bompaire, J. (ed. and transl.): *Lucien. Opuscules*, vol. 2, Paris: Budé (les Belles Lettres) 1998, pp. 41-134.

Harmon, A. M. (ed. and transl.): *Lucian of Samosata*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1921, pp. 248-357. *NOTE: All of Lucian's translations except that of the inscription have been borrowed from this work.*

Iacobitz, C. (ed.): *Luciani Samosatensis Opera*, vol. 2, Leipzig: Teubner, 1887, pp. 30-74.

MacLeod, M. D. (ed.): *Luciani Opera*, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press (Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis), 1972, pp. 82-125.

Mestre Roca, F.; Gómez Cardó, P. (edd. and transl.): *Luciano. Obras*, vol. IV, Madrid: CSIC (Alma Mater), 2007.

### **Editions of Other Literary Texts:**

Note: all Greek texts quoted in this article have been read from the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (<http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/inst/fontsel>) and translated by the author of this paper except Luc. VH. A 2-4, Luc. VH B 4-6 and Luc. VH B 32-33, where the translations have been borrowed from Harmon's work quoted above.

### **Inscriptions:**

*Datenbank Claus-Slaby, in the following URLs:*

Carthago Nova: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi\\_ergebnis\\_fr.php](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_ergebnis_fr.php)

Puteoli: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi\\_ergebnis\\_fr.php](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_ergebnis_fr.php)

Column in Portus: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi\\_ergebnis\\_fr.php](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_ergebnis_fr.php)

*Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg, in the following URLs:*

Carthago Nova: <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD037489>

Puteoli: <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD032596>

Ephesus dedication:

<http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/169-dedication-of-a-statue-of-isis-for-workers-in-the-fishery-toll-office/>

*(All websites accessed along March, 2015 for the purposes of this paper)*