

# *Through the Looking Glass*

Wayne G. Sayles  
*"The Globe Revisited"*



A debate over whether the ancients knew the world is round has been going on for centuries, and still pops up now and then. In the February 1998 issue of *The Celator*, Michael Marotta presented a well thought out argument for the affirmative ("Ancient coins show they knew it was round"). Examining the literature and numismatic evidence, he concluded that the ancients did indeed know the world is round and that the globes depicted on ancient coins (both Greek and Roman) are sometimes a representation of the earth.

Evidence in these sorts of debates usually continues to surface long after the discussion has run its course. Such was the case recently when in the search for something else this writer became aware for the first time of a philosopher and literary critic by the name of Crates. Actually, it should be somewhat of an embarrassment to acknowledge ignorance of this important figure. Crates of Mallus was extremely famous in antiquity, as a polymath grammarian and Stoic philosopher, and is no stranger to scholars of today. Nonetheless, since his work has not been mentioned, to our knowledge, in this long-standing debate—at least not recently—we might assume that he is not universally remembered for an astounding hypothesis about the nature of our planet.

The Greeks, always seeking a sense of symmetry were ill at ease with the calculations of Eratosthenes (275-194 BC) who postulated the size of the terrestrial globe. His theoretical size was much too big for the known size of the inhabited world that they knew. In fact, the oecumene occupied only one-fourth of the theoretical size of the earth. Crates solved the problem by anticipating the existence of three other continents, separated by water, which formed a balance and an acceptable harmony. It was recognized by Crates that this could be represented accurately only in the form of a globe. His theory was so highly respected that the Attalid King Eumenes II commissioned him to construct a 10 foot diameter globe at the library of Pergamum in 180 BC.

Actually, Crates credited this spherical earth theory to Homer. He believed that Homer's writing was based on actual events and scientific facts rather than being fanciful poetry. Crates went on to Rome, where he taught philosophy and literary criticism to the noble and wealthy. Suetonius speaks highly of him. The famous Roman geographer Strabo (63 BC - AD 21) wrote: "Whoever would represent the real earth as near as possible by artificial means, should make a sphere like that of Crates, and upon this draw the quadrilateral within which his chart of geography is to be placed." He went on to describe how the lines should intersect at 90 degrees and how such a globe should be constructed.

This intersection of lines, or quadrants may well account for the intersecting lines seen on some globes on coins from the Flavian and Antonine periods. These lines have been traditionally thought of as an equinoctial cross (see: M. Molnar, "Symbolism of the Sphere", *The Celator*, June 1998) and probably are in most cases. However, given the widespread acceptance of Crates' theory, it is not at all unlikely that representations of the earth could or should appear on coins along with intersecting lines of quadrilateral division.

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The theory of land masses on opposite sides of the globe was not lost over time. Some of us today may remember that our grammar school lessons included study of the "Dark Ages" when people supposedly thought the world was flat. This, unfortunately was a distortion of the facts. The uneducated and ignorant masses of that time, steeped in the lore and fear of alchemy and magic, may have believed so, but mariners who trusted their lives to the sea understood well the principles of a spherical earth. So too did the cartographers who recorded the journeys of these intrepid mariners and encouraged the Age of Exploration that led to several hundred years of discovery, mapping and colonization.

It is probable that Columbus knew precisely where he was headed in 1492, the only questions were how far was it, how long would it take to get there, and what would he find when he arrived?

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image 1 caption = Modern reconstruction of the Globe of Crates



Antoninus Pius, AE sestertius, AD 138-161, Italia seated on globe, holding cornucopia and scepter (CNG photo)

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