

THE EDGES OF THE EARTH FOR THE GREEKS

FALLMANN (D.) *Der Rand der Welt. Die Vorstellungen der Griechen von den Grenzen der Welt in archaischer und klassischer Zeit.* (Hypomnemata 220.) Pp. 501, b/w & colour ill. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024. Cased, €100. ISBN: 978-3-525-30240-8. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24001148

The ancient Greeks were an outward-looking, outward-faring people. Settlers and mercenaries roved far and wide, traders and mariners set out in search of new lands and seas, lifting their gaze from the familiar to the foreign as the borders to the unknown were pushed ever further out. Since J. Romm's pathbreaking book on *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (1992) scholars have increasingly questioned how the Greeks imagined and understood the threshold to the unknown. Their interest has focused on mythological formations and geographical concepts as well as ethnographic and anthropological aspects. All too often, however, individual studies lose sight of the complexity and dynamism of Greek descriptions of liminal zones. The time is therefore ripe for a synthesis that weaves together the loose threads to disclose new intellectual perspectives.

The book under review, a dissertation written in Munich, ventures such an overview for the period from around 750 to the fourth century BCE. F. does not concentrate on the real processes involved in the discovery of faraway lands – these are taken for granted. He inquires instead into 'overarching discourses and ideas' (p. 17: 'übergeordnete gesellschaftliche Diskurse und Vorstellungen') about what lay beyond the horizon of the familiar. While Romm oriented himself on large geographical regions, F. draws on content-based, systematic criteria, which he lays over his source material like a grid: cosmology, geography, 'eschatology' and ethnography. One could quibble over his choice of criteria; while attesting to the fact that ideas about peripheral zones were informed by multilayered areas of discourse and experience, they also suggest a typology unknown to the Greeks themselves. Nonetheless, they seem instructive as a heuristic device for arranging the superabundant material and opening it up for further interpretation.

F. begins by considering how the Greeks conceived the place of the physical earth within the cosmos. Mythical links between the two 'worlds' were provided by pillars and gods holding up the sky, holy mountains and the 'navel of the world'. The sun and stars correspond to each other as fixed points on the celestial firmament. The earth below was perceived as a disc until the fifth century, when the revolutionary idea dawned that it might be spherical.

F. then narrows his focus to the surface of the earth as broadly known to the Greeks – the *oikumene* – and its geographical margins. On the one hand, the Greeks ordered this world from the centre, populating the fringes with *broad ethnic groupings* that in their appearance represented the most distant regions of the four cardinal points. These zones exhibited complementary *climatic and physical* traits that accentuated what Greeks had experienced on their travels: extreme cold and snow-covered mountains in the north, blistering heat and deserts in the south. In addition, Greek authors sought to demarcate the ensemble of habitable spaces from an outer rim by relating the *oikumene* to the surrounding seas. Conspicuous landmarks and straits served as gateways or obstacles to vaguely known or completely uncharted waters.

Yet these too were not entirely empty, just as Greek thought in general resists the idea of unoccupied space. According to the third chapter, they contained the fields reserved for

the departed and the chosen few, whether they entered the dark realm of death as fluttering souls or were fortunate enough to be transported to Elysium. Only a handful of heroes were permitted to enter and leave these worlds during their lifetime. To do so, they needed guidance from the gods as well as magical means of transportation (the Phaeacians' ships) or divine vehicles (the golden cup-boat) and marvellous animals (the Golden Ram) to speed them on their way. By contrast, it was impossible to set foot on worlds that were not located on any religious map but sprang instead from geographical-philosophical speculation, such as Plato's enigmatic 'True Continent'.

The concluding chapter rounds out the physical-geographical and cosmological overview with an ethnographic-anthropological survey. The Greeks filled the zones between the known and the wholly unknown with peoples and creatures that were described in terms partly drawn from travellers' tales and distant informants. These were worked up into memorable images of the other, onto which they projected their own longings and ideals – for sexual freedom and a life of leisure lived close to the gods – but also their fears of wild nature. F. consistently interprets both options as mirroring Greek civilisational norms. Remote tribes served as a projection screen for defining one's own identity in positive or negative terms, or for weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the agrarian–urban way of life. Even if the peripheral zones moved ever further away from the 'centre' as the scope of exploration expanded, they remained for the Greeks a laboratory for self-discovery as well as an opportunity to slot the world around them into the categories provided by a cultural anthropology. Life on the periphery could be seen as a utopia that still enjoyed a Golden Age – long lost at the centre – of carefree longevity and divine favour. Yet cannibals and troglodytes also represented a primitive state of nature from which the Greeks had already distanced themselves: weird and wonderful physiques and deformities contrasted not only with 'normal' human appearances, but also with the ideal Greek body.

F. is well aware that not all images of the foreign and far-off can be neatly separated into positive and negative counter-images. There were overlaps and shades of difference (in the case of nomads, for example). Two aspects remain somewhat underdeveloped in F.'s analysis. Firstly, the sheer pleasure of fabulation, which served the human need for the wondrously exotic even without any self-reflective intentions. Secondly, and only seemingly in contradiction to this, the fact that accounts of foreign lands and peoples – so many playful variations on the same recurring themes – often presented Greek authors with the only opportunity to conceptualise what was foreign and unknown and connect it with what they already knew in an early phase of contact, before this ethnographic material could be progressively enriched with empirical data and embellished in literary form.

F. does not always succeed in comprehensively exploring and interrelating these different levels; his chosen organisational framework is too dominant for that. Nonetheless, the overall impression is positive. F. delivers an amply documented yet nuanced panorama of Greek thought on liminal worlds that links iconographic evidence with analysis of literary sources to arrive at mostly convincing conclusions. For this he deserves our thanks, even if few new details could be brought to the table: the sources are well known, their statements largely undisputed. The book's strength lies instead in its synthetic power. It is not always easy to read because F. does not shy away from repetition and often strings together texts and comparable interpretations where one or two incisive examples would have sufficed. He occasionally passes up opportunities for more probing interpretations, as with regard to the question of how changes in ideas about the periphery related to processes of discovery and sociopolitical developments 'at the centre'. At times, too, he reprises standardised explanations, even though his stupendous knowledge of the sources would have enabled him to steer a more independent

path. For example, there is simply no evidence in Homer for qualifying the entire race of Cyclopes as man-eaters. Solely the loner Polyphemus attacks Odysseus' companions in this way, and clearly only because they wanted to plunder the dairy products stored in his cave and steal his 'kids and lambs from the pens' (*Od.* 9.226, including after their dramatic escape: 9.469–70). It is no longer the *communis opinio* that all the hero's 'wanderings' took place in a fairytale realm (p. 117); this claim ignores the multidimensional structure of the text. These explanatory gaps could stimulate further research – a further service performed by works of diligent synthesis such as this.

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