CHAPTER 16

Rome and Iberia: The Making of a Cultural Geography

Gonzalo Cruz Andreotti

Ancient science developed essentially through knowledge accumulation and speculation. In geography tradition weighed heavily and past paradigms were often imposed undisputed. However the analytical and reflexive role of ‘scientific’ approaches and the discovery of new territories contributed to the advance of real knowledge, framed into varied and diverse literary genres. In short, reason ultimately prevailed over mere curiosity or the basic need for knowledge.¹

The reconnaissance of Iberia by ancient Rome must be understood as a cultural and literary product, resulting from the dialectic tension between tradition and innovation. Inherited theoretical models were confronted with autoptic data and the experience of military conquest. Discussion throughout this paper will follow this premise.

Until the arrival of Rome, Iberia had only been partially explored along its coastline on both sides of the Pillars of Heracles. After its conquest, there was an unprecedented qualitative increase in Iberia’s geographical perception. It gradually moved from Rome’s periphery to become an integral part of the Mediterranean world. Throughout this long process, the reality, history and geography of Roman Iberia was often explained and described according to traditional Greek ‘science’.

This is not the place to expand on the geographical image constructed for ancient Iberia from the seventh century BC until Rome’s arrival. It will suffice to say that it was greatly dependant on its condition as a periphery of Mediterranean history and geographical centrality.² A large part of its territory

---

² Podossinov 2014.
was unknown, with the exception of the Mediterranean and nearest Atlantic coastlines. Iberia did not experience colonization to the extent of Italy or Sicily, staying clearly outside the Hellenic historical sphere, therefore the region was viewed as a geographical periphery. Moreover liminal territories were particularly favoured for staging myths. Precise topographies located in the unknown extremities of the world were needed to house gods and other creatures in supernatural and exotic landscapes.

The Pillars of Heracles became a cultural landmark, a frontier between the known world (order) and the unknown (chaos). They divided the Inner Sea from the Ocean, heralding all navigation into the Atlantic at a time when the confines of the world were being drawn. They witnessed combats between heroes and the gods of the underworld, while Greeks and Phoenicians were already cruising these same shores. Heracles and the Pillars were present in the first geographical references to Iberia in the Late Archaic period (Stesichorus,

---

3 Domínguez Monedero 2006; 2013.