CHAPTER 7

The Sea of Alciphron

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1 Geographical Boundaries

It is well known that the world in which Alciphron’s characters are supposed to live is the Athenian space of the 4th century BC.1 Alciphron’s farmers work in the Attic landscape and look to the town as an obvious reference point. Alciphron’s bourgeoisie spends its time in the public spaces or in the private houses of the city, but they also are in contact with people living outside Athens, in other Greek towns, or even outside Greek territories.2

It seems to me that this is a core element of Alciphron’s literary creation: the definition of a coherent geographical setting in which the stories as well as the thoughts and feelings of the characters are located. In this way the most relevant weakness of the epistolary genre, the lack of reality, can, to some extent, be mitigated. The situations are highly unrealistic. One could wonder for example why a fisherman should ask another fisherman to give him an old and useless fishing-net, or why should he do so in a letter and not in person.3 The context, however, can be perceived as a real one, because it constantly points to places which exist (or formerly existed), connected to each other in a coherent and historically convincing relationship.4

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1 Benner-Fobes [1949: 6]; Reardon [1971: 182]; Anderson [1977: 2188]; Rosenmeyer [2001a: 257–258]; Granholm [2012: 19]; Ureña Bracero [2013: 183]. See in particular [Schmitz 2004: 89]: “It is significant that this past is precisely the Athens of the fourth century BCE: for educated people in the Roman Empire, this city had become an intellectual home; it was perceived as the venue of the great heroic age that was the base of cultural identity for all those who considered themselves Ἕλληνες”.

2 Rosenmeyer [2001a: 257].


4 Andreassi [2013] discusses at length the geography of Alciphron’s parasites: he collects all the toponomastic references which are to be found in the third book of the Letters and shows that very rarely they are simply ornamental. More often, they are intended to re-create a context, in order to build a sort of physical platform which gives credibility to what is going on. The ‘effet de réel’ produced by topographical details is stressed by Schmitz [2004: 92]. Of course,
Let us now look at the habitat of Alciphron’s fishermen. They live on the coast of Attica and their reference points are the harbours of Athens. Alciphron knows from his sources that classical Athens had two main harbours: Phaleron, the major port of the city until the beginning of the 5th century BC, and Piraeus. After the Persian Wars and the constitution of the Delian League, Piraeus became the most important harbour, both for the military fleet and for commercial activities, Phaleron gradually falling into disuse. Phaleron, however, was still in use, at least for fishing, in Aristophanes’ time and later: anchovies caught in the bay of Phaleron were regarded as a delicacy, as we learn from Ar. Ach. 901–902, Av. 76 and from comic fragments of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. The possibility that Phaleron was a fishing area in Alciphron’s time too cannot be ruled out. Phaleron is mentioned in the opening letter of the first book (1.1.4), when, following a miraculously bountiful catch of fish, the fish sellers flock to the beach to buy fish from the fishermen and then hurry back from Phaleron to the city (ἄστυδ ἐκ Φαλήρων ἠπείγοντο). Another mention of Phaleron occurs in 1.14.2: here Thynnaeus describes what is taking place in all sea villages of Attica: officers of the Athenian navy are recruiting oarsmen for warships about to sail. From west to east he mentions Piraeus, Phaleron and Sounion, then further east Cape Geraestus, on the southern tip of Euboea, which means that the eastern coast of Attica and the sea between Attica and Euboea are also taken into account.

The port of Piraeus was of course the living area for most of the Athenian fishermen: they had their houses and their boats there, they left the harbour in the evening and spent the night fishing in the Saronic gulf between the Attic coast and the islands of Salamis and Aigina, to come back home with their catch in the morning. When Xenophon narrates an episode of the Corinthian war (a raid on Piraeus by the Spartan Teleutias in 388 BC) he describes the Athenian fishing fleet returning to Piraeus at dawn.

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5 Garland [2001: 10–28].
6 Ar. frag. 521; Eub. frag. 75.4; Sotad.Com. frag. 1.30; Antiph. frag. 204.4–7; et al. See Garland [2001: 69].
7 The drafting of fishermen into military service is well attested to in the historical sources (Lytle [2006: 28 n. 61]); see Plu. Sol. 9.2 (Solon takes five hundred Athenian volunteers and sails to Salamis with a number of fishing boats); Tim. 18.1 (Timoleon sends grain to the besieged Syracusans using small fishing boats).
8 Bekker-Nielsen [2002: 31].
9 Xen. HG 5.1.23.