

Mapping Rome from Tomis

Throughout his corpus, Ovid engaged deeply with natural philosophy (cf. Gee 2000; Ham 2013; Volk and Williams 2022). For example, the poet evokes the didactic language of Lucretius to present Tomis—as much a fictionalized poetic location as the real locale of Ovid’s relegation—as a place where the laws of nature seem to have been rescinded, but whose paradoxica are explicable according to the tenets of natural philosophy (*Ex Ponto* 4.10; Myers 2022).

In this talk, I aim to explore a particular but overlooked facet of Ovid’s natural philosophical engagement, geographical awareness (both theoretical and practical) in his exile poetry, extending “beyond the Mediterranean” owing to his six-year relegation to Tomis on the western bank of the Euxine. The “practical” deployment of toponyms along a route is in evidence where Ovid gives a two-part account of his journey to Tomis, in imitation of Vergil’s *periplus* in *Aeneid* book 3. With broad brushstrokes, the poet meets the boat at Cenchrae, which then makes harbor at Imbros and Samothrace, threads through the narrows of the Hellespont, finally reaching Tempyra, a Thracian coastal town, where Ovid disembarks to make his final trek by land. With greater detail, Ovid wistfully imagines the boat’s return sail, tracing in reverse the towns and landmarks between Tempyra and Corinth, thus mapping noteworthy places along the way back towards Rome (*Tristia* 1.10).

Theoretically, Roman narrative maps usually examine the world from the center, looking outward to the edges: e.g., Actium at the center of Aeneas’ shield, framed by rivers that represent the cardinal edges of the Roman world (Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.675, 728). Ovid explicitly places Rome at the center of the empire and, consequently, its map (*Tristia* 1.5.70). Ovid, however, is in the unique position of exploring the Roman world from the border, looking toward the center, nor does he hesitate to remind readers that he has been relegated to the world’s fringe at its icy extremity (e.g., *Tristia* 3.13.12, 5.5.4). Ovid’s map, moreover, indicates an awareness of stellar cartography, the spherical earth, and climactic ramifications of both. He observes, for example, that the summer

solstice never takes anything away from the nights, and midwinter never augments the days, a poetic exaggeration, as Ovid would have known (*Tristia* 5.10.7-8); daylight hours thus behave differently than in Rome: summer nights remain short in Tomis, as do winter days. Tomis, moreover, lies underneath the icy pole (*gelido axe*: 2.1.190) close to Ursa Major (1.4.1) and the constellations that never dip into the ocean (*Tristia* 3.10.3).

Ovid is thus an intriguing source for Roman knowledge of the Black Sea (however poetically distorted) and a bellwether of Roman geographical knowledge, both “practical” and theoretical.

Works Cited

- Gee, Emma. 2000. *Ovid, Aratus, and Augustus: Astronomy in Ovid's Fasti*. Cambridge.
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