

## The Changing Face of Mount Circeo: A Geographical Inconsistency in Virgil's *Aeneid*

Recent scholarship has amply demonstrated that inconsistencies within the *Aeneid*, rather than being read as imperfections that would have been removed upon revision, can be interpreted as legitimate features of the text capable of generating meaning in their own right (O'Hara 2007 77–103). This paper explores the significance of the geographical inconsistency surrounding Circe's home in the *Aeneid* by contextualising it within a broader tradition of Homeric exegesis. The home of Circe is initially presented in Helenus' speech as an island (*Aeaeaeque insula Circae*, *Aen.* 3.386) consistent with its Homeric description (*Αἰαίην νῆσον*, *Od.* 10.135), but its presentation in Book 7 as Aeneas sails past is as part of the mainland (*proxima Circaeae raduntur litora terrae*, *Aen.* 7.10), which draws on the alternative topography found in Apollonius (*Ap. Arg.* 3.309–13; Thomas 1985 64–5). This paper demonstrates that this inconsistency invokes a literary ζήτημα of how the identification of Circe's home with Mount Circeo, which was attached to the Italian mainland, could be reconciled with its Homeric description as an island. This paper explores the existence of two explanations, one spatial and one temporal, to resolve this inconsistency between Homeric representation and contemporary reality, and how Virgil alludes to each explanation without 'resolving' the inconsistency as a way of articulating his relationship to the Homeric tradition.

The spatial explanation, attested in modern scholarship (Horsfall 2000 54 *ad Aen.* 7.10) and ancient exegesis (Strabo 5.3.6; Procopius *Goth.* 1(5).11.2–4), uses perspective to claim that Mount Circeo looks like an island from almost every angle, and can only be seen as part of the mainland from privileged vantage points or prolonged exposure to the region. This paper argues that, rather than merely resolving the problem, the dynamics of authority in this explanation often contrast the interpreter's intimate knowledge of the locale with Homer's amateurish

geography in a manner that is reflected in both Apollonius and Virgil. Apollonius accounts for Aeëtes' accurate knowledge of Circe's mainland home by virtue of his aerial view from Helios' chariot (Ap. Arg. 3.309–13) in contrast to the young Medea's Homeric 'ignorance' (Ap. Arg. 3.1069–74; cf. Hunter 1989 216 *ad loc.*), which is corrected by firsthand experience (Ap. Arg. 4.659–661; cf. Thalmann 2011 124 n.27). Similarly, Virgil implicitly links his own situation of Mount Circeo on the mainland to greater familiarity with or even ownership of *litoribus nostris* (Aen. 7.1), thereby staking out his greater authority as an Italian poet to define the geography of the region without reference to Homer.

The paper then considers the temporal explanation attested in Theophrastus, who records the tradition that Mount Circeo was previously an island, until the gradual deposit of silt joined it to the mainland in the fullness of time (*Hist. Pl.* 5.8.3). One can, therefore, hold the position that Mount Circeo was once an island in the distant past, as Homer states, but has since become part of the mainland. After contextualizing this geological argument within the wider context of Homeric geography by examining Strabo's discussion of the island of Pharos (Strabo 1.2.30, 12.2.4), the paper ends by relating the initial appearance of Circe's abode as an island in Helenus' speech (Aen. 3.386) to the same prophet's account of geological change in Sicily and more general observations on the ability of time to alter landscapes (Aen. 3.414–9). Indeed, the closing argument of the paper is that this geological passage of Helenus' speech has, in effect, warned us that Virgil's epic geography will not try to recover the distant, Homeric world, but will instead acknowledge via the inclusion of geographical inconsistencies the vast span of time that separates these two poets and has reshaped the landscapes of Homeric poetry. In doing so, it marks the fact that Virgil's poetic world is not a slavish recreation of a lost Homeric world, but

one whose coordinates are solidly post-Homeric, as grounded in the contemporary realities of Italy as the Homeric tradition.

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