

THE ISLAND *ERYTHEIA*: A CLASH OF DISCIPLINES

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Abstract

“Classical Studies”, or the study of Classical Antiquity, is an ample category covering several disciplines: philology, history, archaeology. They all have to work with written sources at some point, but they rarely do it in a coordinated way. More often than not, material remains or topographical studies don’t play a role in philological interpretations, while archaeologists and historians don’t see the need for a philological reading of texts written by ancient authors, considering them mere tools to confirm their own conclusions or even deceptions to be discredited. This lack of organization is, as we will argue here, at the root of continued misconceptions like those which surround the identity and location of the island of Erytheia, which can be solved by an interdisciplinary approach.

Keywords: Philology. Archaeology. History. Greek and Latin literature. Topography

Instruction

First of all, I must confess that I am a philologist. I’m not an archaeologist or a historian, though I have read works produced in these fields, because anyone studying Antiquity reaches a point, sooner or later, when they cannot ignore those closely related disciplines anymore. Or so, at least, is how it should be.

I have been studying, among other things, matters related to the geography of the Far West of the ancient world (SW of Spain), where “Erytheia” is a much-mentioned place name in all periods from Hesiod to Stephanos Byzantios²². The more this place name came up in my research, the more I felt like I had to do a proper study of what it meant and where it was located, because the sources on the subject were confusing.

Studying the ancient sources was the easiest part –for that is what philologists do best. “Erytheia” was a mythical location (its name is related to the word ἔρυθρός, meaning “red”²³), home to the three-headed monster Geryon, owner of a magnificent herd of cattle, and the adversary of Herakles in the Tenth Labour performed by the hero in the service of king Euristheus²⁴. In the Greek mindset, such a monster would naturally live at the edges of the world, far away from “civilization”²⁵. This meant the shores of the Ocean, which was originally not a sea but a river encircling the world, and only later became identified to what we know as the Atlantic Ocean²⁶. On the other hand, a mythical place near the Ocean tended,

²²Hes.*Th.* 290, Stesich. Fr. 7 *SLG* (= Str 3.5.4); Hdt. 4.8., Ps.-Scym.150-162, Apollod.2.5.10, Str.3.5.4, Mela 3.47, Plin.4.120, Aristid.*Or.*40.12, D.P. 452. Avien.*ora.*309-314, St. Byz., s.v. Ἀφροδισιάς.

²³Cf. Pliny the Elder’s etymology in 4.120: Plin.4.120: *Erythea dicta est, quoniam Tyri aborigines earumortia Erythromariferebantur*. About the meaning of this red colour in connexion to myth, cf. SERGENT (2006: 120), BALLABRIGA (1986: 50-51).

²⁴A complete account of the myth can be found in D.H.1.39-44, Apollod.2.5.10 or D.S.4.17-25. Hesiod’s version is more synthetic.

²⁵Examples of mythical monsters located at the shores of the Ocean can be found in *Od.*16.150-151, Hes.*Th.*215-216, 274-276, 290, 308-309, 325-327, 333-335, 517-518; Fr. 360.

²⁶ROMM(1994: 172-214).

more often than not, to be identified with an island, the natural refuge of the outwordly²⁷. There are abundant examples of this: the Blessed Islands, Cerne, Sarpedonia, Ogigia and the famous Atlantis are only a few of them. Erytheia is another. After its first appearance in an archaic mythical poem, there will be some hesitations, some different traditions: sometimes it will be an inland region, sometimes an unidentified place, and once it is even set in the East. But little by little, the idea that it is an island located in the Far West will assert itself, and for Herodotus it is already the opinion of the majority²⁸.

But then, which island was it? Ancient authors were fond of identifying mythical locations with real geography, especially as the legendary West became better known. Sometimes those identifications sparked a neverending debate where a final position could not be reached (like the “hot issue” of Homeric geography in *The Odyssey*); sometimes a consensus of sorts was established. More often than not, there were strong ideological considerations and interests behind those locations of mythical landscapes, as they could be employed to support territorial claims, to give prestige to cities and peoples, or even to question the educational system (for a great store was set on whether Homer was knowledgeable in geography, and could therefore be considered a man versed in the scientific disciplines, or just a fanciful poet whose works should not be used as the textbook of Greek education²⁹).

Behind the location of Erytheia there was also ideology. Pherekydes, an Athenian genealogist of the V century BC, was the first to identify it with the island-city of Gádeira (present-day Cádiz), an important Phoenician colony in the SW of Spain³⁰. This was right in the middle of a historical period where Athens was trying to establish a rule of the seas, and expand its business interests all the way to the Far West³¹. During this so-called imperialistic period, the figure of Herakles becomes a symbol of Greek civilization defeating the barbarians everywhere, and his enemies were often identified with either enemies or rivals of the Greek world: Alebyon and Dercynes with the Ligurians, Busiris with the Egyptians, the Trojans (whose city the hero is the first to conquer, a generation before the heroes of the *Iliad*) with the Persians, and Geryon, the mythical king of Erytheia, as I have argued elsewhere, is the *alter ego* of the Gaditanians who control the area of the Strait³². Traces of Gaditanian dislike of this interpretation, and their proposal of alternative ones can be found in several texts going as far as the Imperial period³³. It is a fascinating subject, though peripheral to this discussion.

The important point is that, since the fifth century BC until the end of Antiquity, the identification of this mythical place with Gádeira is the dominant, better established one. This goes so far that, in modern books, research papers and exhibition panels, “Erytheia” is given as the *real* name of the island; as if the inhabitants themselves had ever called it like this.

²⁷GABBA (1981: 57), PRONTERA (1989).

²⁸Hdt. 4.8. On the Eastern location, cf. the same Hdt.4.8.

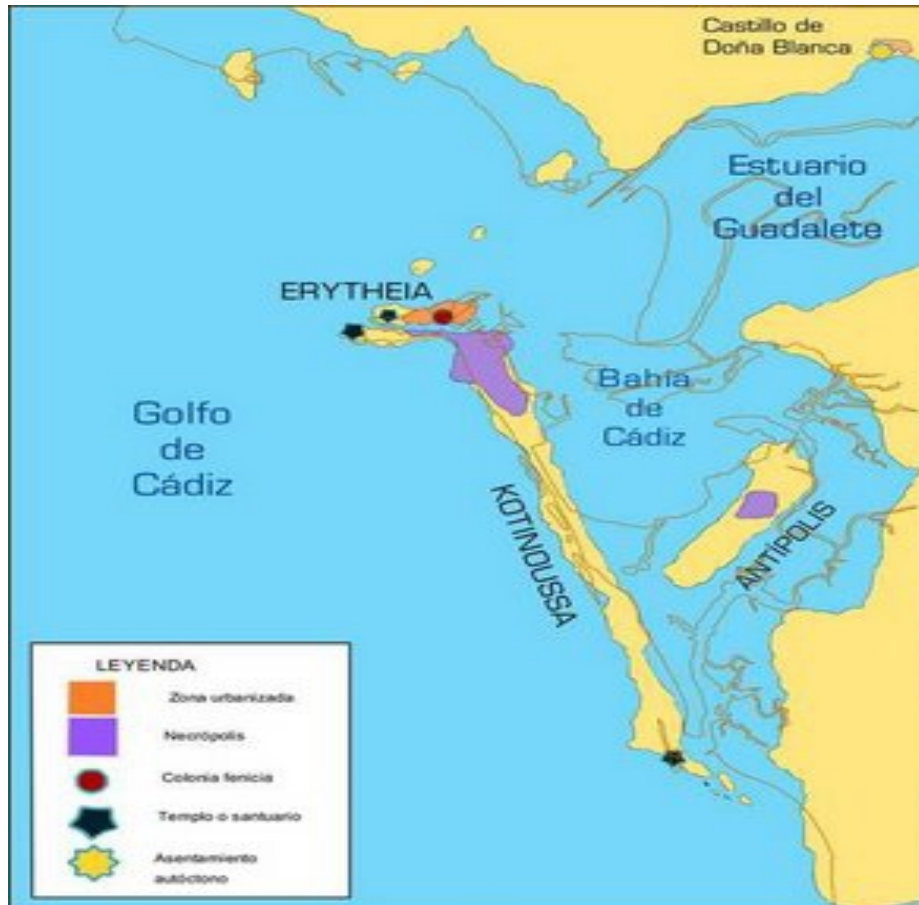
²⁹About this debate on Homeric geography, cf. Book I of Strabo’s *Geography*, PRONTERA(2003), and AUJAC (1966: 34-36).

³⁰Str.3.5.4.

³¹ANTONELLI (1997).

³²FERNÁNDEZ CAMACHO (2013).

³³Mela 3.47, Philostr. VA.5.4.



Map depicting the hypothetical disposition of the islands of Gades in Antiquity. San Fernando is depicted as a separate island. Image by Rodríguez Gómez, cf. <http://cadiz.pueblosespana.es>.

So far, so good. But now, we come to the complicated part. Gádeira, Gadir, or Gades in Latin, was not a single island, though many sources make it so for the sake of simplicity. In fact, it was an archipelago, hence, possibly, the plural form of the name. And here is where the confusion begins. The authors who go as far as to describe the place in detail speak of two different islands, to which a string of mostly legendary names is attached. “Erytheia” is usually the smaller of the two, sometimes the larger. This is not surprising since we are not speaking of a real name here, but of a mythical name attributed to a real place. The traditions are therefore varied and approximative³⁴.

What is rather more surprising is the fact that, in many modern sources, the islands are given as three³⁵. To “Erytheia” and its larger counterpart (often known as “Kotinous(s)a”, but sometimes Erytheia as well), they add yet another island which is often identified with the location of the neighbouring town of San Fernando. However, even if San Fernando had been

³⁴The most comprehensive account of the many names attributed to the islands is Plin.4.120: *in ipso verocapite Baeticae ab ostio freti p. XXV Gadis, longa, ut Polybius scribit, XII, lata III. abest a continente proxima parte minus pedes DCC, reliqua plus VII. ipsius spatium XV est. Habet oppidum civium Romanorum, qui appellantur Augustani Urbe Iulia Gaditana. abeolatore, quo Hispaniam spectat, passibus fere C altera insula est, longa M passus, M lata, in qua prius oppidum Gadium fuit. vocatur ab Ephoro et Philistide Erythea, a Timaeo et Sileno Aphrodisias, ab indigenis Lunonis. maiorem Timaeus Cotinus a puteos vocitavit; nostri Tarteson appellant, Poeni Gadir, ita Punica lingua saepe significante. Erythea dicta est, quoniam Tyri aborigines earum ortu ab Erythromaribus erant. in hac Geryones habitasse a quibusdam existimatur, cuius armenta Hercules abduxerit.*

³⁵Blanco Freijeiro y Corzo (1976), Ramírez Delgado (1982: 84-87) Aubet (1987: 227-236), Mangas y Plácido (1994: 98), Millán León (1998: 34) Alonso Villalobos, García Prieto and Benavente González (2009).

a separate island, ancient sources do not describe any third island as part of Gádeira, or give it any name³⁶.

Elsewhere³⁷, I have also argued that the Phoenicians who founded the colony would not have recognized a third island as part of their city, and this for clear-cut ideological reasons. Tyre, their metropolis, was made of two islands joined into one, and the original foundation myth of the city links these two original islands with the two Ambrosian Rocks which floated adrift in the sea until the first sacrifice linked them to the ground. This, in turn, is represented everywhere, from official coins to the city temple of Melqart, under the symbolic image of the twin betyls, and Gadir was the Tyrian colony which made most of this symbol, which was reproduced in its own temple of Melqart, highlighted in its own foundation stories, and the origin of the famous legend of the Pillars of Heracles which gave the city fame³⁸. The number two is too important to be sidestepped so easily.

And yet, those who see a third island sometimes claim that Strabo and Avienus support this theory in their geographical descriptions³⁹. This is false, a mistake caused by a superficial reading of texts which as a rule compile information from several older sources and do not always synthesize it perfectly. This is very obvious in Avienus, who gives, back to back, two descriptions of the exact same area taken from different sources, which use slightly different (but recognizable to the trained eye) names -and therefore mentions the smaller island *twice*⁴⁰. As for Strabo, he, too, mentions the same island not twice, but *thrice*, for different reasons: first, to speak of the emigration of part of the population from the other island, second, to use it as reference for the location of the city in the larger island, and third, to add that certain authors have identified this smaller island with the mythical Erytheia. There is no evidence in the text which can support the claim that, either the second or the third time, he is suddenly speaking of a totally different island which has not been mentioned before⁴¹.

This matter of the two or three islands could be more extensively dwelt upon, but the complexities are many and the need for brevity paramount. Instead, the focus will be on how lack of interdisciplinary coordination was, actually, at the root of the confusion which first brought this “ghost” third island to light.

There was a period, rightly denounced by archaeologists, when the information provided by ancient sources was the sole evidence required to study the topography and chronology of the ancient city. The discipline of archaeology was neither developed nor given the importance it deserved- in part because of the great difficulty of conducting digs in a fully built modern city. Historians read the texts, in the original versions or in translation, and made their own educated guesses about topography, which consisted on matching past landscapes to present day ones⁴². The sources spoke of a larger island and a smaller one,

³⁶Sometimes, as in the map above, this third island is called “Antipolis”, from the Greek term used in Strabo’s text meaning either “the opposite town” or “the opposed town”. This is not, however, a name.

³⁷In a paper read at the “XXII Jornadas de Filología Clásica (Homenaje Póstumo al Profesor Luis Charlo Brea)”, at the University of Cádiz, the 28/05/2014.

³⁸LÓPEZ MELERO (1988).

³⁹Cf. *supr.*, especially the considerations on Avienus in ALONSO VILLALOBOS, GARCÍA PRIETO and BENAVENTE GONZÁLEZ (2009).

⁴⁰Cf. *OM.* 257-313, especially the repetition of the *mons Argentarius/mons Tartessorum*, in vv.284 and 304, and the *arx Gerontisin* vv.259 and 300, with the expression *ut supra sumuselocuti* (“as we said above” vv.300-301) joining both slightly divergent but essentially coincident descriptions of the area, the first of which describes the *Gadir (...) oppidum* (v.263), and the second the *Erythia (...) insula* (v.305).

⁴¹Compare τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς προκειμένης νησίδος (a little adjacent island) to προσεχὲς δ’ αὐτῆς (...) πρὸς τὴν νησίδι (opposite the smaller island -speaking of the city-), and τὴν παραβλημένην ταύτη τῆ πόλιν ἢ σπονδομῶστα διαίωδιεργαμένην (the island located near the city, separated by a strait of one stadium).

⁴²The most commendable work done in this area is GARCÍA Y BELLIDO (1978); the most famous

sometimes providing detailed measuring for each of them (the smaller one measured 1x1 miles according to Pliny, and the larger one 12x3); however, there were no such two islands in the present day. That was why speculation located the smaller island either in the present day “Castillo de San Sebastián”, or else in present day San Fernando, since it is joined to Cádiz by a thin neck of land and it could be speculated that this neck of land had not existed back then. Both of those islands were identified with the famous Erytheia; it seemed that the location game begun by the Greeks 2,600 years into the past had not yet ended⁴³.

Then came a great archaeological discovery. In 1976, J. Ponce Cordones and J.R. Ramírez Delgado found that there had been an ancient channel dividing present-day Cádiz in two islands: one, smaller, to the NW, and the other, much larger, to the SE⁴⁴. The mystery was uncovered: this channel, named “Bahía-Caleta” because of its location, had separated “Erytheia” from the larger island, the one many call “Kotinoussa”. There was no need for any further speculation about other islands, as the one NW from the channel, allowing some leeway for Greek and Roman spatial description idiosyncrasies⁴⁵, fulfilled the specifications quite well: size, location, distance from the continent. Archaeology had helped understand the ancient sources and at the same time it had legitimated the information they provided. Those who worked with texts and those who did the field work had benefitted from each other. Or had they?

It is at this point that the confusion occurs. Historians and archaeologists had been claiming for so long that San Fernando had been a separate island that they simply did not stop in 1976. Superficial readings like those mentioned above were used to justify this, and proper philologists were generally not interested in matters of topography. The interdisciplinary update that the interpretation of the ancient sources required after such a major event did not happen, and a third island remained in many modern accounts as a ghost in the machine.

Then, in 2009, a second major study was brought forth: it was the confirmation, by geologists this time, that the present-time San Fernando had not, in fact, been separated from Cádiz in historical times, and so could not have been a “third island”⁴⁶. This was but a confirmation of what Pliny, Strabo and Avienus had described in their geographical works. However, misled by the superficial readings of historians and archaeologists, even the geologists who made that study had to confess their perplexity at how the “ancient sources” would not agree with their discovery, hesitating a guess that maybe the ancients had used the word “island” for any elevation close to the coast. This paradox (geologists trying to reconcile their discovery with something that the ancient sources never actually said) is only made possible by the lack of coordination between historians, archaeologists and philologists.

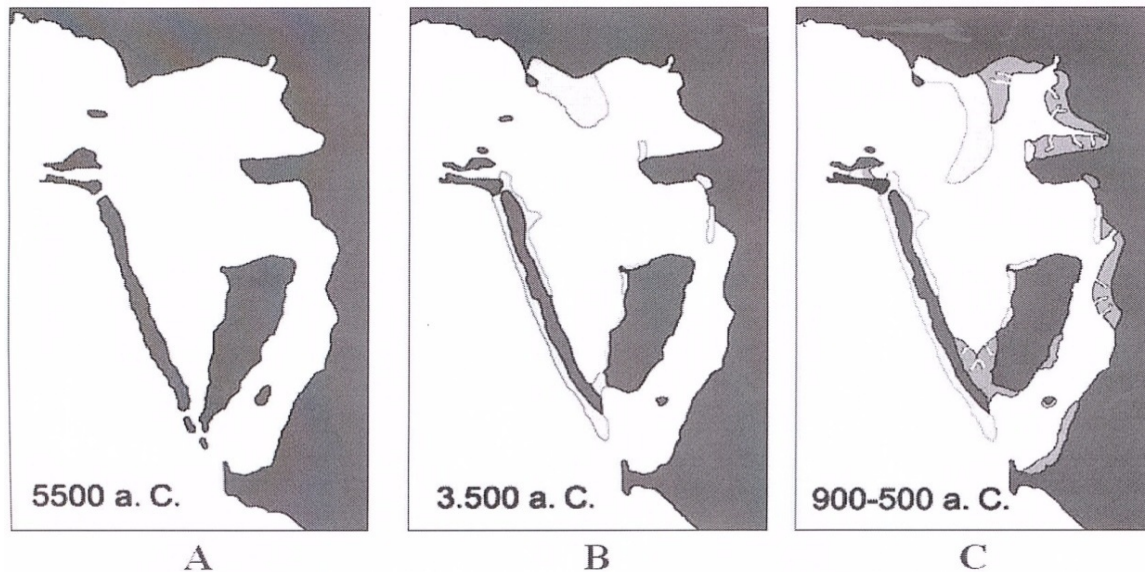
SCHULTEN(1925-1955). Cf. RAMÍREZ DELGADO (1982: 29-65) for a general history of that tendency.

⁴³ Cf. n. 14.

⁴⁴ RAMÍREZ DELGADO (1982).

⁴⁵ Cf. JANNI (1984) about these idiosyncrasies in spatial descriptions, which, according to him, are an effect of the “anticartographic mentality” prevalent in Antiquity.

⁴⁶ ALONSO VILLALOBOS, GARCÍA PRIETO and BENAVENTE GONZÁLEZ (2009).



Map depicting the geological evolution of the islands of Gades. As it can be seen in this chronology, San Fernando was already joined to the larger island in historical times. (Image to be found in C. Alonso Villalobos, F.J. GarcíaPrieto, J. Benavente González, 2009).

This coordination had a chance of being achieved in the relatively recent update of historian A. Schulten's *Fontes Hispaniae Antiquae*, a compilation of all ancient sources dealing with the Iberian Peninsula. The new project, named *Testimonia Hispaniae Antiqua*, provided the sources in their original language together with a translation and a commentary, and intended to be, like their predecessor, an ultimate tool for historians and archaeologists, who are further estranged from the philologists today than they ever were by the vagaries of an educational system which does not necessarily teach specialists in Ancient History and Archaeology to read Greek and Latin. Finally there was an opportunity to do some philological work on the sources about the island of Erytheia, besides from bringing the information up to date with the more recent discoveries. However, instead of a philological reading, we get a strange new definition of the island Erytheia:

la parte de la provincia de Cádiz enmarcada por la desembocadura del Guadalete -o más bien por el caño de Sancti Petri- y la del Barbate. (...) Dentro de ella quedaban englobadas las campiñas de Chiclana, Conil, Vejer de la Frontera y la parte sur del término municipal de Medina Sidonia⁴⁷.

Erytheia, as we discussed above, as the name of a mythical place, has been identified with the smaller island but also with the larger one, depending on the author and the text. Avienus, which is the author followed by the commentator who builds this theory, clearly identifies it with the larger. However, since he is linking information from several sources, when he describes Erytheia as an island he has already described Gádeira (Gades for the Romans) as a city, which as every ancient and modern scholar knows, was on the island (and still is). The commentator has, once again, misunderstood one geographical entity as two different ones⁴⁸. Therefore, once again, we have to deal with a phantom island, which has been located not in San Fernando, but in a large chunk of the modern province of Cádiz. The idea that the ancient authors gave the word "island" a different meaning altogether than us moderns has proved very productive.

⁴⁷MANGAS yPLÁCIDO (1994: 97-98; 1999: 488).

⁴⁸Cf. *supr.* n. 19.

The most “high-profile” controversy to involve the island Erytheia, however, was the one involving the remains of the ancient Phoenician city -or lack thereof. To understand it, we must mention the ugliest of all consequences derived from the lack of coordinated efforts among disciplines studying Antiquity: the mistrust, and dismissal, of one another. Not too long ago, a sector of the archaeologist community began defending the theory that the ancient city of Gadir, the Phoenician settlement, had never been in the island. This controversy was favoured by two circumstances: the fact that no comprehensive digs could be undertaken in the NW of the island, being as it is heavily populated, and, most remarkably, the discredit which had fallen over the written sources as a result of the plethora of wrong and superficial readings done mostly by historians with no expertise in deciphering Greek and Latin texts, and no knowledge of genre or context⁴⁹. For a time, those texts became the enemy which could not be trusted: the authors who wrote them had no idea of what they were talking about, they drew their information from unreliable sources or either they were lying. Luckily, archaeology itself reasserted the truth. Stars and administrations were aligned to allow an archaeological dig to take place in the southern slope of what used to be the smaller island, the “Erytheia” of many sources, and the ancient city was found⁵⁰. The findings which came out during the last years, as numerous as they were significant, were opened to the public in 2014. It is to be hoped, not only that written sources will once again be restored to their position of importance, but also that they will be better studied -and better read- from now on. Otherwise, if they are allowed to fail again to provide efficient and up-to-date tools for the needs of archaeologists and historians, they will once again fall into discredit, the next time a controversy arises.

As can be seen from this brief exposition, there are many troubles researching the history and location of a single place name which can be avoided if the present approach to the sources is changed to a coordinated effort between those who understand the texts -the philologists-, and those who use them -the historians and archaeologists. Such an approach would also benefit the philologists themselves, as working closely with historians and archaeologists would shed light on the ancient sources as they are cross-checked and projected over the real landscape. Any discovery, any new understanding, any updated reading with the potential of being a game-changer should be immediately integrated into the system of every discipline. The island “Erytheia” is a case in point: superficial readings, extended misconceptions, ignorance and even rejection of what other disciplines can contribute to one’s own have helped spread a number of errors which have proven too long-lived for comfort: the use of “Erytheia” as an actual place name instead of a mythical identification which can shift location from the smaller to the larger island, the third, nameless island living on after the smaller island in the sources had finally been discovered, the theory that the sources are lying and the city was located elsewhere entirely, are all examples of this. This is as good an opportunity as any to call for an interdisciplinary approach to the studies of the past which will prevent these things from happening.

⁴⁹RUIZ MATA (1999: 14): “La posición que mantengo contradice en gran parte a la mayoría de las opiniones expresadas y defendidas *sin bases consistentes, enraizadas en la fidelidad al texto escrito*” (la cursiva es nuestra); AUBET (1987: 176-178): “fuentes de información tardías, muy alejadas de los hechos, forzosamente subjetivas y (...) con escasas garantías de fiabilidad”.

⁵⁰ZAMORA LÓPEZ *et. al.* (2010: 203-236).

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