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From Ancient Geographers to the Journey of the Argonauts: Ierne Island (Ireland), a Landscape Island between two Worlds

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Questioning the aesthetic and social genesis of the Irish landscape is also about tracing the historical circumstances of the birth of the first Irish landscape. However thrilling, the subject is also a fine example of a false problem. Indeed, rereading a geographical and literary corpus is a constant concern for any scholar, given that the indications are few: what was the status of Ireland in the ancient world? How was it perceived and represented and what were the peculiarities of that landscape? As all those questions have so far gone unanswered, we propose to take a fresh look at the question of landscape in antiquity by showing that the foundations of landscape painting and literature had been laid long before the Renaissance (André, 2012a). The Hellenistic and late epic offer one of the most achieved involvements with natural scenery, to such an extent that it becomes a clearly identified object with a well defined aesthetic functioning pattern. Thus, it constitutes a landscape in its own right, complying with theoretical plastic and aesthetic definitions.

In this chapter, we would like to argue that the genesis of the Irish landscape has undergone a similar process. Although the earliest known reference to Ireland probably dates back to the 4th century BC, when Pytheas discovers Northern Europe (Cunliffe, 2002), one must be aware that the old name of ‘Ierne’ island – for Ireland – had captured the interest of geographers such as Dionysius the Periegetes, Strabo, Diodorus of

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Sicily, Pomponius Mela and Avienus. It had also attracted the attention of their respective commentators, together with epic poets of late antiquity, such as the anonymous author of the *Orphica*, an epic work that was a rewriting of the Hellenistic epic of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. The singular mention of Ierne in the literary sphere, and specifically in the epic one, seems decisive, insofar as it constitutes a particular staging of the island of Ierne. This corpus will thus constitute the main focus of this chapter.

Ierne is the extremity of the known world, where all possible representations of an otherworldly, ‘post-insular’ space, were born. However, the multiplicity of possible landscapes offered by the location of the island, corresponds paradoxically to a refusal to describe the place, not only in the works of geographers, but also in the *Orphica*. The same phenomenon can be observed in the way the Irish insular space is treated by poets and geographers alike. Mediated by the a-topicity (or lack of landscape), which defines the island's identity, Ierne becomes the insular interface between the British Isles and Ultima Thule (the Arctic) on ancient geographers' maps. Likewise, in the mythological epic journey of the Argonauts, Ierne is the interface between the Sea of Cronus and the rest of the Western Isles, marking the beginning of the route to the Strait of Gibraltar and showing the heroes the way back. But ancient writers, poets as well as geographers, have added to the location of Ierne a description of the physical and ethnographic state of another nearby island, whose features they wanted to be almost identical: the Isle of Albion.

How are we to understand that an island such as Ierne, distinguished by *a-topicity*, which guarantees its status as an interface in the geographical area of the western *Oikoumene* (that is to say the habitable and inhabited world for the Ancients), should receive the addition of a third insular term and a purely mythological one, that of Demeter's island on the Atlantic road to Gibraltar, even though a twin island (Albion) had already doubled it? It is capital to see how the additional dialogue between the geographical and mythological sources which occurs within the setting of fiction granted by the late epic of the *Orphica*, is an aesthetic rereading of the insular landscape pattern, presenting the expansion of the western *Oikoumene*. It can be seen as a result of the Roman conquest of Northern Europe, in the same manner as the *Argonautica* of Apollonius makes us view the process of expansion of the Eastern world as the result of the conquest of the East by Alexander the Great.

Thus, thanks to its plastic treatment of the insular landscape through the play on the stereotypes of landscape and their possible reinvestments