

cultural dimensions of the battlegrounds that the author has shed light upon, the continued relevance of which should not be underestimated and is evident in the collective memory of these conflicts and present-day geopolitics.

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Geographies of Myth and Places of Identity: The Strait of Scylla and Charybdis in the Modern Imagination

by Marco Benoît Carbone, New York, Bloomsbury, 2022, 280 pp., \$103.50 (hardback), ISBN: 978-13-501-1818-8

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What is the Strait of Messina? It is the physical area that connects – and at the same time separates – Sicily and the rest of Italy, but it also is the place where the monsters Scylla and Charybdis dwell (*scillaecariddi* in the regional dialect), and therefore a mythological locus that has its roots in the Homeric poem, the *Odyssey*. If the first is a geographical point that finds its correspondence in the real world, the second gives shape to an imaginary geography. Marco Benoît Carbone's valuable study takes place in the very intersection between those two spaces – real and imaginary. Through a methodological approach that interweaves different disciplinary fields, Carbone's work does not aim to reconstruct the 'truth' of the Homeric myth, but to investigate the ways the 'literary' Strait has given shape to reality since antiquity, and how the narrative of a 'glorious past' has had – and still has – an impact on Calabrians, on their self-perception as descendants of the Greater Greece and as direct heirs of Homer, whom they consider a fellow citizen.

Throughout the eight chapters of the book, the author redraws the cultural trajectory of the 'Homeric' Strait from the eighteenth century up to the present. Over the centuries, the 'Homeric geography' has attracted travellers, tourists, artists, researchers and filmmakers who have followed Ulysses' route in order to find the mythical places along the shores of the Strait. However, there is a crucial point to consider. If the Homeric myth has definitely – in its different remediated forms – contributed to shape a specific vision of the Strait, the ambiguous connection between myth and reality underlies an identity construction that connects its present to the glorious past of Ancient Greece:

Expectations about the landscape of former Greater Greece as a tourist consumable have surrounded the Strait since the Grand Tours, ... but there are also local attempts to consistently take part in the narrative of place through a heritage industry governed by market considerations of entertainment and profitability and approach by the public as a consumable good involving the staging, themeing, memorability and sensual engagement of consumer activities (p. 36).

With this perspective, Carbone's work does not follow the path traced by historical research: if a historical-theoretical type reconstruction was certainly indispensable to

contextualise the object at the centre of the analysis, to identify the different states of formation in their long duration the author works through a peculiar form of field 'ethnography'. Taking advantage of his position as a native of Reggio Calabria and an emigrant scholar at the same time, Carbone assumes an 'in between' point of view – he is both an outsider and an insider – thus escaping potential nostalgia and affection, and the risk of remaining entangled in the pervasiveness of the Homeric myth, which not only envelops the consciousness of citizens, but binds together territory, politics and economy under the banner of a 'contemporary' use of the past.

And indeed, being 'in between' is also what characterises the Strait of Messina. Both marginal and liminal, the Strait has been considered, over the centuries, as a threshold zone between the West and what lies elsewhere, equally distant from and close to the rest of Europe. A 'suspension' in time and space that, especially since the Grand Tour, has imagined southern Italy as an open-air museum, a place where chthonic forces and wild beauties coexisted with the vestiges of a mythical past – and, for that matter, as the author writes, 'the reception of Greek myths seemed to have embodied such contrasts in figurative form. The Strait's iconography was associated with two half-human sea monsters, conveying ideas of weirdness, fascination and abjection' (p. 51). The analysis of travelogues and maps, as conducted by the author in Chapter 3, underlines how literary production contributed to constitute the Strait, in the eyes of Europe, as a chronotype. A construction that, far from having exhausted itself, continues to re-propose itself in new forms of re-enactment. As pointed out in Chapter 4, in fact, it is necessary to problematise the dimension of the Strait-as-mediascape in order to try to understand the ways in which the image of the Strait-as-Greece is re-mediated through different media and technologies.

Carbone's operation is certainly part of the wave of studies which, over the last 20 years, have made the South of Italy a veritable 'laboratory' both of investigation and of new possible practices, the litmus test through which to understand not only the South and the eternal 'southern question', but the reality of the entire national territory. And yet, the study carried out by the author marks a still little-explored perspective, which attempts to interrogate the survival of a 'Homeric geography' not only in its relationship with the gaze 'of the North' but also – and perhaps above all – in its local reproduction. If the narrative that links Calabria to Ancient Greece is certainly functional to a marketing operation, the narrative that sees the Strait area – especially the Calabrian one – as a direct descendant of Ancient Greece means eliminating entire historical eras by reducing the cultural complexity that characterises the Mediterranean to the function of a presumed identity 'purity'. In this sense, classicism serves as support for 'populism', for a 'late' redemption of the Strait aimed at associating the South with the European sphere, thus distancing it from the *malia* (charm) of the Mediterranean. In the original perspective offered by Carbone's study, therefore, the iconographic representation of the 'Homeric geography' becomes a privileged – yet little studied – point of view through which to rethink the historical and political process of constructing the identity of the place. The study also offers readers the opportunity not to remain prisoners of their own geographical identity.

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