Aeschylus’ geographic imagination

PETER W. ROSE
Miami University of Ohio
EUA

ABSTRACT. After reviewing various scholars’ accounts of geographical references in Aeschylus’ plays, some seeing exoticism, some serious geographic knowledge reflecting Ionian science, some focused exclusively on the opposition of Greek and barbarian, I argue that regardless of what one might posit as Aeschylus’ intentions, the sheer quantity of geographic allusions are best understood as contributing to the formation of an imperialist consciousness by representing the non-Athenian Mediterranean world, some of it already under the control of Athens, as inherently fascinating.

KEYWORDS. Geography; barbarian; orientalism; map; imperialism.

Any reader of Homer’s catalogue of the ships is confronted with a particularly Greek love of the poetry of places – evocative names enriched with specifying epithets and occasionally other details to summon up familiar or vividly imagined places. Sam Lee Greenwood’s dissertation, while eschewing any overarching principle that could comprehend all the uses of geographical language even in a single dramatist, much less all three tragedians, refers repeatedly to ‘geographical ornament’ 1. This is the dominant assumption informing his brief survey (68 pages). I would like to explore what sorts of functions this ‘ornament’ may play in the Athenian world of Aeschylus after the onslaught of Persia.

More recently Helen Bacon 2 and Edith Hall 3 have examined the three tragedians within the framework of a fundamental differentiation of Greeks and barbarians. In the case of Bacon, the primary focus was on determining the extent and relative accuracy of the poets’ knowledge of the non-Greek world. In her analysis of Aeschylus she speaks of the ‘quality and extent of his knowledge’, and notes:

Email: rosepw@muohio.edu

2 HELEN H. BACON, Barbarians in Greek Tragedy, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961.
3 EDITH HALL, Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.