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Where Am I

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Where Am I

Aegina, an island of eighty-three square kilometers in the Saronic Gulf, which is an arm of the Aegean arm of the Mediterranean Sea, lies about thirty kilometers from Epidaurus (west), the Corinth Canal (northwest), and Piraeus, the port of Athens (north-northeast). Before Athens' heyday Aegina competed as a political and naval center. It brought to Greece the Persian concept of money: silver nugget-coins embossed with a sea turtle, bright punctuation for museum cases. Halfway to the present, Barbarossa's devastation forced the port's people inland to the hill now called Paleochora, Old Town, quiet with ruins and upkept chapels two centuries after the redoubt was abandoned again. Aegina spent a few years after 1820 as first capital of the new nation. It specializes in the growing of pistachios and the accommodation of summering Athenians.

After describing the shape of the island—roughly triangular, and among triangles roughly equilateral—its historian Stamatis says (in Greek), “Maybe this form was to be symbolized by the ‘triskelida’ figure on the ancient Aeginetan coins.” (Obverse of the turtle?) The conjecture presumes recognition of the island's general shape long preceding any actual map. The question is, how does one realize that one lives on a more-or-less triangle? It is visually evident from no point on the island, including the summit of Oros (532 meters). From there—the point where Aeacus, besought by drought-stricken citizens, petitioned his father for rain—the sea is visible on all sides, but it remains impossible to distill the more-than-godlike perspective of a map from the complexities of coast and contour. It's a beautiful mess down there.

One might learn quickly enough that one can (only) *go around* the island, which is what *island* means to a person on it, and also, differently, to a sailor skirting its coast. Walking the ins and outs of bays and capes, recalling sailors' talk, one would arrive at the

first-order generalization *self-contained*, aware of moving either clockwise or counterclockwise, or rather (this antedates clocks) deasil or widdershins, directions more immediate for island dwellers than compass points or (compasses too) the apparently single-minded career of the Sun, whose chariot plunges across while I go round and round; and discover, despite the senses' endless record of detail, the shore as a closed curve. Any island is a circle. One could have lived many kinds of lives on it with no more exact image of its larger shape. (How bizarre, conversely, to begin, foreign, with the shape before setting foot on the island.)

What further experiences suffice to produce the impression, not of a rough circle, but of an equilateral triangle? Suppose me an especially restless islander: walking enough times around this promontory, I realize (1) that it's quite a sharp turn and (2) that there are no others comparably sharp for quite a while. The promontory becomes a turn beyond other turns; the segments preceding and following it become straight lines. At another level of generalization, the third by my count, I recollect only a few other such turns on the island—two. At this point each becomes an apex and the island a triangle. Refinement to the next stage—walking one side takes roughly as many steps as walking another—is not conceptually difficult, though differences in the topography of the sides complicate it immeasurably. The Chinese reputedly used different miles for uphill and downhill.

What's remarkable and forgettable is how very long it would take to arrive at these sensible conclusions, obvious from the map. One person could discover it all in even a short lifetime—if she or he did nothing else, such as gathering roots or herding goats or plowing, and nothing prevented ubiquitous access, such as hostile orchardists on coastal plains or big dogs on mountain farms, and topography offered no insurmountable obstacles to circumnavigation, such as headlands steep enough to rebuff all but conjecture about their coastal shape, as in the whole southeast limb of Aegina.

But the person would have to have formed a desire to know the shape of the island. This desire is difficult to account for before maps make that kind of idea about the shapes of places a commonplace. In the absence of desire knowledge would arise slowly, percepts reiterated often enough to find their way into consciousness by chance. Or precepts, to carry it across generations.

Contemplating the question, How long is the coast of Britain? led Benoit Mandelbrot to invent fractal geometry. (It depends how long your ruler is; infinite, is one answer.)

Though Honda makes one too, I sing the Yamaha Mate 50. The engine is a thirtieth the size of a freeway hawg's but geared to climb like a squirrel. If it won't go everywhere feet could, it enjoys paths no sane person would attempt in a car, though I have seen cars on them. It will carry a Greek family of four plus a hatrack. It keeps running in rain too thick to see through, fits neatly inside the hatch of a ferry, likes a sip of gasoline every few days, creates refreshing breezes out of thin air, knows its way home in the dark.

Among mappings, the name:

Aigina Aegina Eginé Égine Egina Aegine
all derived by hook or crook from the sound of the Greek and the difficulty of transliterating words from the Greek alphabet (by certain criteria the first invented, and the last). The 'g' is often rendered as 'y' in names such as Iphiyenia, Yannis. Each transliteration proliferates into pronunciations, the written sign both resulting from and causing confusion. Pronunciations vary with the speaker's native language: the French tourist's "Égine" and the English one's "Aegina" share no phonetic features but the 'n' and possibly the vowel preceding it. Where is the island's name?

Surely in the mouths of its inhabitants. But that would include the name used by an internet service provider celebrating the introduction of touch-tone dialing to this area code: "It's a great step for all of 0297." Zero Two Nine Seven includes the outlying island of Agistri (Angistri). It would include the outlying island of Moni ("Careful how you pronounce that!" says a jocular Greek friend) if there were anyone living on Moni, or any telephone.

Some notes, from hundreds in my inebriated head, on the maps of Aegina. [Review in detail the five commercially available. Note Stamatis cribbing one. Others' maps: Thompson's great impermanent portolan/songlines in his walking guide; Yannoulis' in tourist book; my rallye sketch, motorcycle times among key points, drawn I think from memory. Speculate: if really rich person wanted one,

what would goddamn decent topographic map of the island (U.S. Geologic Survey 7.5' series) cost? Recall best though outdated map hung in a few hotels, said to have been caused to be produced by army general who lived on island—Petriti, of World War II and the road sign? No evidence.]

The audience to whom the five different tourist maps are sold is land-attached. Every waterfront store and stall in the four ports carries one or more of these lurid, blurry, foldout portraits. A road map is a set of suggested experiences: dodgy business. All but one omit the road, finished years ago, connecting Portes on the southeast to the high inland road that skirts Oros, though without it nothing like a wheeled circumnavigation is possible. None of the maps helps someone exhaustively curious to determine which landscape item—one, say, of a splay of coves on the wild south coast—corresponds to which name. The map ("go here then there") is not only not the territory, but shoddy. The road designations "primary," "secondary," et al., particularly encourage misrepresentation. On the best of the five maps the route down from Pachia Rachi to the shore at Marathonas just wriggles brightly a bit; on the ground it's drastic, not only in slope but in purely notional paving. Incomplete information? A wish to exaggerate progress? Inconsistent concepts of road-ness? A too-blithe embrace of the arbitrariness of all significations, such as confident lines and colors?

Water-directed maps, yachts' charts, are readily available and accurate. By local definition—ask in the market—all foreign boat people have money, though many of them feel that they don't, as the state of their teeth may testify. In any case their maps have to be right and their maps are right.

(If photography were easier—properties of silver and glass under special circumstances more readily understood—and had been invented three thousand years ago, would the project of mapping this world have developed differently? Would a map be a series of photographs, as the commonest record of a choreography is a video?)

Inhabitants don't need a map, don't think of wanting one, and often can't easily read one, or rather translate to it. In a ravine in the middle of the island I dismounted to ask two guys working on a power line whether as the map implied the hint of a trail up the far slope led to a certain village. To begin, I pointed to where we were. Guy

looked at the map and pointed to a spot a mile away—"We are here." If I had pointed up the trail and spoken the village's name, he could have told me yes or no. He knew his island; I knew my map; so I was right; which didn't help me at all.

Brought up on triple-A and the *National Geographic*, I take for granted the mappedness of any place I'm likely to find myself in. As recently as 1940, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "an appraisal by the U.S. Air Force indicated that . . . less than ten percent of the world was mapped in sufficient detail for even the meagre requirements of pilot charts." The following five years did a great deal, in their curious way, to amend this deficit. Around the world many national mapping programs began from USAF data gathered before 1945.

Britannica on Maps and Surveying (sv. Mapmaking; Elements; Nomenclature) promises a gaudy *mise-en-abîme*:

At the local levels, however, there are different kinds of problems. The larger scales of most basic topographic map series permit the naming of quite minor hilltops, ridges, streams, and branches, for which designations can be obtained locally. In a sparsely settled country few names in actual use may be obtained for minor features, while in other areas inquiries may reveal inconsistencies and confusions in both spelling and application of local names. In some areas, for example, local residents may tend to refer to small streams by the name of the present occupant of the headwater area. The occupants of opposite sides of a mountain sometimes refer to it by different names. In coastal areas the waterman and landsman may use different references for the same features.

But the paragraph is organized as prelude to the happy ending of terminological globalization:

A prime opportunity for resolving these problems is presented when a topographic map of an area is prepared for publication. By extensive inquiry and documentation and research of local records and deeds, the appropriate form and application of nearly all names can be determined.

Thereafter triumph will be swift and complete:

Publication and distribution of the map as an official document may then tend to solidify local usage and eliminate the confusions that previously existed.

Isolated for scrutiny these declarations reveal not only an encyclopedia's devotion to linguistic normalization but its circular pitfalls. Differences in naming—between "waterman and landsman" or people living on one or the other side of a mountain or at its base or farther up its side—don't become "problems" until the mapmaker blows into town demanding consensus. Their "solutions," perhaps majoritarian, are adjudicated by the cartographic outsider.

The mapmaker's demand is worth privileging because a broader view is better than a narrower one, all other things being equal, though they never are. The sum of bewilderment in the universe may be diminished when one thing comes to have fewer rather than more names, but information about differences in people's experience is lost. Where do the colliding names come from? Do seaward denizens name for weather and landward for vegetation? What's the *story*? The decision among alternatives is political: don't sing "Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople . . . that's nobody's business but the Turks'" in Athens, where 1453 is seared into the national brain. Political too is the program of uniform naming, conducted on behalf of some kind of totalizing power. A bank detests two designations for its branch halfway up the mountain.

Oros—also one common noun for "mountain"—was Ellaniou Dia, God of the Hellenes, when Aeacus stood at its crest and called down rain. Later, like other summits, it became Profitis Elias (not profit but prophet), who was assumed from a mountaintop; also Analipsis (Assumption). Since peaks were once sacred to the sun, Elias may have gotten a boost from Helios.

The name of the island, says Stamatis, "is in fact inexplicable and rare." Something confused about fertility, ants, and pigeons. One derivation makes it Phoenician for "Pigeon Island." As for the ants (ancient *murmex*), we have the story of Aeacus's request to his father Zeus to turn them into people because he was lonely, alone on the

island, resulting in the Myrmidons led to battle by his grandson Achilles. The town has a Myrmidon Street. The ants of Aegina are not especially large, but strong and startlingly fast, with long legs that jack up the front end and brandish the mandibles something fierce. As for the generation between Achilles and his grandfather, better not to ask; one brother may be buried at the ancient naval harbor, a little north of the main port, near the single butter-brown Classical column featured on most postcards.

Early, before the sun's too high, I ride my Mate halfway up Oros, as far as road plausibly continues, which is also as far down as I've seen the huge, shaggy, brown half-wild goats, and walk the rest of the way, dry, rocky. At the top, the closet-sized chapel contemplates its arduous offerings, scrappy flowers, and old pictures. From the rock that rises finally over it I can see southwest, pressed between horizontal masses of brilliant blue, the mountain where Troizen is, where Theseus was born, and, far around to the right, beyond the isthmus he cleared of robbers (Corinth and its canal lost in mist), Eleusis where Mary Renault has him wrestle to the death, and on to Athens where he came to be king and the unhappy father of kings, today like most days a brown smudge.

Step by step, I have been leaving behind one after another the island's daily sounds. The key to John Cage's career, half a century ago, came to him when he entered an anechoic chamber at Harvard (he tells the story in his first book *Silence*) and emerged to complain mildly that among the state-of-the-art acoustic baffles he had still heard two sounds, one high and one low. The engineer replied that the high sound was his nervous system at work, the low one the circulation of his blood.

I had an image of Livadia where Nikos Kazantzakis lived and worked (the name means *meadow*) before I ever saw it, and even had a fantasy of living in it. I arrive and find no "in" to it, no here here. His house, empty, on a treacherous coastal road not like a street, facing nothing except sea, stands half a kilometer up the coast from the one I inhabit. Houses sit here and there about as thick as a suburb. Nothing visible whatsoever distinguishes the village of Livadia from the village of Plakakia, the name I write for a return address. According

to some maps the promontory where his house is located is still named Cape Livadia, or Cape Plakakia, but the village—the area—is now called Kazantzaki. Across the island, I follow a track as far as I can (big dogs) and wonder, am I in X? I don't know if I ever saw Vlachides. Houses yes, three in sight. The name is printed clearly here on this paper; everyone around knows the place; it's like being in seventh grade.

My feet understand how to get from my door to the market, the sea, the mountaintop. Language wants us to agree on names for things; cartographers are its fundamentalists. While I study a new path from the foot of Paleochora to the temple of Aphaia, my Mate 50 chuckles beside the road.

Anyway Kant told us how this stuff occurs in a space all must conceive and none can occupy. I seem to stand here, or I remember standing there, seeing the skyline, the grouping of houses, the pistachio grove, hearing the magpie and the sea and the breath in my nose, smelling thyme, watching the ferry Omeros round the cape widdershins, always wanting names for at least the least movable aspects of this. When "this" is especially complicated I still want the name, sometimes enough to make it up. That is a poem, not the only kind, but a kind that begins from a place whose name experience suddenly reveals as inadequate, like "Tintern Abbey," "Penshurst," *Paterson*, "Cape Breton," "London," "America." Well—that is a way to make oneself at home, or make a home for oneself. It is also useful not to forget the feet. Home, if we make a place home by learning every step of it, is unconscious geography.

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