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Walking into mythology

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*How fluid is Icelandic place-lore; how do medieval narratives relate to modern folklore and local landscapes? These are just some of the questions **Matthias Egeler** explores in his new article (**now live on the Cerae website**). In this accompanying blog-post, Matthias introduces us to his interest in toponymy, in the intersections of landscapes and the narratives of their naming...*

It was a damp, cold early spring in the mountains of Arcadia. I was freshly out of my doctorate and on an archaeological study trip – see some new old things, meet colleagues abroad, get impressions of what is out there, and maybe even get some ideas for what to do next. On that day in early

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view of a narrow basin dominated by sepia colours: the lake in the centre of the small valley was all but swallowed up by the rushes which winter had drained of all green, a bit water shimmering through here and there, iron-grey more than blue. I left my car and started exploring the ruins of the ancient city, which all but disappeared under the scrubs: the massive foundations of the old city wall; the ramp of a road cut into the crumbling bedrock; a few rows of stones here and there. Then at some point, between the ruins and the still-wintery lake, it struck me: it was here that it happened. This is the lake where Heracles slew the Stymphalian birds.

But then, of course, we don't really believe that Bronze Age heroes descended from gods once fought man-eating birds, do we? The feeling of the presence of the Sixth Labour of Heracles, his fight against the Stymphalian birds, only lasted for a moment. But it started me thinking about mythology and the landscape in a way which still reverberates in my research almost a decade later: how can it be that in the twenty-first century, a lake in Greece still has the power to make one feel something almost like the *presence* of an ancient Greek hero? What is it about places of myth that seems to make us want to believe?

The answer is: I still don't know, but I am working on it. This work has over the years led me to Ireland and Iceland more than to the mythological landscapes of ancient Greece, but the extreme richness and focus on place of the Irish and Icelandic storytelling cultures probably gives us just as much to think about. How are places named? How do stories play with these names? And how are both names and stories connected to the actual topography of the landscape? My contribution on *The Fluidity of Tradition: Place-Names, Travelogues, and Medieval Tales of the Western Icelandic Shoreline* tries to address some of these questions on the example of traditions about the reputed grave of an early medieval heroine. Even if this article does not provide as many answers as I would have liked it to do, it at least highlights something of the complexities at stake.

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Matthias has written on mythological landscapes in medieval Ireland and Iceland, cultural contact between the two, and the north-western European reception of the geographical mythology of classical Antiquity. His publications on these topics include *Atlantic Outlooks on Being at Home: Gaelic Place-Lore and the Construction of a Sense of Place in Medieval Iceland* (Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences, 2018) and *Islands in the West: Classical Myth and the Medieval Norse and Irish Geographical Imagination* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

Feature image:

On the edge of the Stymphalian Lake. Photo © M. Egeler, 2011.

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