

The *Letters* of Alciphron

A Unified Literary Work?

Edited by

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The Sea of Alciphron

Giuseppe Zanetto

1 Geographical Boundaries

It is well known that the world in which Alciphron's characters are supposed to live is the Athenian space of the 4th century BC.¹ Alciphron's farmers work in the Attic landscape and look to the town as an obvious reference point. Alciphron's bourgeois spends its time in the public spaces or in the private houses of the city, but they also are in contact with people living outside Athens, in other Greek towns, or even outside Greek territories.²

It seems to me that this is a core element of Alciphron's literary creation: the definition of a coherent geographical setting in which the stories as well as the thoughts and feelings of the characters are located. In this way the most relevant weakness of the epistolary genre, the lack of reality, can, to some extent, be mitigated. The situations are highly unrealistic. One could wonder for example why a fisherman should ask another fisherman to give him an old and useless fishing-net, or why should he do so in a letter and not in person.³ The context, however, can be perceived as a real one, because it constantly points to places which exist (or formerly existed), connected to each other in a coherent and historically convincing relationship.⁴

1 Benner-Fobes [1949: 6]; Reardon [1971: 182]; Anderson [1977: 2188]; Rosenmeyer [2001a: 257–258]; Granholm [2012: 19]; Ureña Bracero [2013: 183]. See in particular [Schmitz 2004: 89]: “It is significant that this past is precisely the Athens of the fourth century BCE: for educated people in the Roman Empire, this city had become an intellectual home; it was perceived as the venue of the great heroic age that was the base of cultural identity for all those who considered themselves “Ελληνες”.

2 Rosenmeyer [2001a: 257].

3 Anderson [1977: 2200–2201]; Schmitz [2004: 95–96]; Vox [2013: 207]; but Hodgkinson [2007: 291–292] argues that the use of epistolary communication can be in some cases psychologically well-founded.

4 Andreassi [2013] discusses at length the geography of Alciphron's parasites: he collects all the toponomastic references which are to be found in the third book of the *Letters* and shows that very rarely they are simply ornamental. More often, they are intended to re-create a context, in order to build a sort of physical platform which gives credibility to what is going on. The ‘*effet de réel*’ produced by topographical details is stressed by Schmitz [2004: 92]. Of course,

Let us now look at the habitat of Alciphron's fishermen. They live on the coast of Attica and their reference points are the harbours of Athens. Alciphron knows from his sources that classical Athens had two main harbours: Phaleron, the major port of the city until the beginning of the 5th century BC, and Piraeus. After the Persian Wars and the constitution of the Delian League, Piraeus became the most important harbour, both for the military fleet and for commercial activities, Phaleron gradually falling into disuse.⁵ Phaleron, however, was still in use, at least for fishing, in Aristophanes' time and later: anchovies caught in the bay of Phaleron were regarded as a delicacy, as we learn from *Ar. Ach.* 901–902, *Av.* 76 and from comic fragments of the 5th and 4th centuries BC.⁶ The possibility that Phaleron was a fishing area in Alciphron's time too cannot be ruled out. Phaleron is mentioned in the opening letter of the first book (1.1.4), when, following a miraculously bountiful catch of fish, the fish sellers flock to the beach to buy fish from the fishermen and then hurry back from Phaleron to the city (ἄστυδ' ἐκ Φαλήρων ἡπείγοντο). Another mention of Phaleron occurs in 1.14.2: here Thynnaeus describes what is taking place in all sea villages of Attica: officers of the Athenian navy are recruiting oarsmen for warships about to sail.⁷ From west to east he mentions Piraeus, Phaleron and Sounion, then further east Cape Geraestus, on the southern tip of Euboea, which means that the eastern coast of Attica and the sea between Attica and Euboea are also taken into account.

The port of Piraeus was of course the living area for most of the Athenian fishermen: they had their houses and their boats there, they left the harbour in the evening and spent the night fishing in the Saronic gulf between the Attic coast and the islands of Salamis and Aigina, to come back home with their catch in the morning.⁸ When Xenophon narrates an episode of the Corinthian war (a raid on Piraeus by the Spartan Teleutias in 388 BC) he describes the Athenian fishing fleet returning to Piraeus at dawn.⁹

this 'real world' is absorbed into the intrinsic fictionality of the epistolary genre: Alciphron always makes his readers aware that the stories of his characters are literary creations (cf. Schmitz [2004: 102–103]).

5 Garland [2001: 10–28].

6 *Ar. frag.* 521; *Eub. frag.* 75.4; *Sotad.Com. frag.* 1.30; *Antiph. frag.* 204.4–7; et al. See Garland [2001: 69].

7 The drafting of fishermen into military service is well attested to in the historical sources (Lytle [2006: 28 n. 61]): see *Plu. Sol.* 9.2 (Solon takes five hundred Athenian volunteers and sails to Salamis with a number of fishing boats); *Tim.* 18.1 (Timoleon sends grain to the besieged Syracusans using small fishing boats).

8 Bekker-Nielsen [2002: 31].

9 *Xen. HG* 5.1.23.

Alciphron was aware that Piraeus embraced three natural basins, named Cantharus, Zea and Munichia. The harbour of Munichia (the smallest of the three bays) is mentioned in 1.2.3 as the place from where the young boy Hermon goes to deliver the catch of the day to his master. In 1.11.4 the young girl Glaucippe tells her mother that she will hurl herself from the rocks of Piraeus if her parents will not allow her to marry her beloved.

Piraeus is the centre of the marine space described in the fishermen's letters: it is connected on one side with the town (Athens is the natural expansion of its harbour and as such is integrated with it but at the same time opposed to it) and on the other with the sea spaces which open outside the harbour. The centrality and the attractiveness of Piraeus are stressed in 1.6: the wife of Euthybolus complains about her husband, because he has fallen in love with a charming young lady who has recently moved from Hermione to Piraeus. The writer herself, however, is not a native Athenian. She comes from the city of Steiria in Euboea, where her parents still live. Hermione is also the native city of the girl whom the writer of 1.16 desperately wants to marry.¹⁰ We are told that she is the little daughter of foreigners who moved from the Argolid to Piraeus. The text of 1.10 also points to Euboea. The writer of this letter is ready to sail (probably from Piraeus) to Cape Caphareus on a mission to collect and bury the corpses of dead mariners washed up by the recent storm.

The Saronic Gulf is the imaginary scenario of 1.4, because the addressee (the wife of the writer), who is now attracted by the brilliant social life of Athens, is a native of the island of Aegina. The same can be said of 1.5, whose addressee has been so lucky as to catch, as he was fishing around the island of Salamis, a number of gold coins, probably relics from the famous Greek-Persian naval battle. The eastern boundary of the Saronic Gulf, Cape Sounion, is mentioned in 1.17: it is there that Encymon found the old fishing-net which he is asking for from Halictypus.

But Piraeus is also connected with destinations far beyond the sea space crossed by Athenian fishermen in their daily rounds.¹¹ The island of Lesbos is mentioned in two contexts: in 1.11.1 we are told that the young boy whom Glaucippe has been promised by her father is from Methymna (and the name of Lesbian Sappho occurs at the end of the letter, as a sort of *Ringkomposition*).¹² In 1.20.1 Eusagenus, who is narrating the sad conclusion to a fishing story, mentions that the lookout man (σχοπιωρός) of his tunny-fishing boat is a Lesbian.¹³

10 On Hermione and its commercial relationship with Athens, see Andreassi [2013: 16].

11 Lytle [2012: 42].

12 Vox [2013: 222–223].

13 Lytle [2006: 40].

In 1.2.4 we encounter a group of Rhodian fishermen who are at work in the area of Piraeus (the young boy Hermon decides to join them, deserting his old friends).¹⁴ In 1.8.2 the situation is similar: a fisherman writes to his wife, telling her that it is impossible for him to feed his family with his job, wondering if it would not be better for him to change jobs and join a crew of Lycian pirates who have come with their boat to Piraeus (the text says that the boat is ‘visible’ to the addressee)¹⁵ and are ready to take him on as a partner.

We can conclude that Alciphron’s sea is a marine space with well-defined boundaries and dimensions. Alciphron takes care to present it as a coherent and realistic environment, so that the stories of the characters become more vivid and credible.¹⁶ But how does the sea become active in a narrative sense? How does the sea enter dialogue (as it were) with other spaces or elements, in order to produce narrativity or to make narrativity possible? It seems to me that four polarities can be traced: four main oppositions in which the sea is the counterpart of another idea. The first is sea vs. land; the second sea vs. city; the third sea vs. virtue; the fourth sea vs. love. In each case the relationship can be proposed as inclusive or exclusive: there can be integration or otherness.

2 Sea and Land

This is particularly evident for the polarity sea vs. land,¹⁷ which can be developed in two different ways. A traditional *topos* of the Greek literature associates sea with danger and land with safety. The opinion of the farmer Hesiod—who claims he has only boarded a ship once in his life and looks at sea travel as the worst of evils¹⁸—is shared by a string of poets and intellectuals of later ages.¹⁹ A similar view opens 1.3; writing to his wife, Glaucus says:

14 Lytle [2006: 27–28]. The fact that foreigners were allowed to fish in Attic waters is well attested to; see Lytle [2012: 19]: “Yet we have no [...] civic decrees granting fishing rights to foreigners or special privileges to citizens, no attested disputes over fishing rights between *poieis* sharing rich coastal waters in the Saronic and Argolic Gulfs or the straits of Euboea, no civic officials entrusted with policing territorial waters and regulating marine fisheries. This silence is easily explained by the simple hypothesis that Ancient Greek marine fisheries were generally open access.”

15 Alciphron 1.8.2: ὁ λέμβος οὖν οὗτος ἐν ὄραϊς.

16 Alciphron’s realism (particularly in the letters of the fishermen) is stressed by Lytle [2006: 34 n. 71] and Lytle [2012: 40 n. 101].

17 It is labelled as *syncretism* by Vox [2013: 238].

18 Hes. *Op.* 650–660.

19 Cf. e.g. Sol. frag. 13.43–48; Diog. Laert. 1.77, 104.

Χρηστὸν ἡ γῆ καὶ ἡ βῶλος ἀκίνδυνον, χαλεπὸν ἡ θάλαττα καὶ ἡ ναυτιλία ῥίψο-
κίνδυνον

The earth is kindly and there's no danger in its soil; the sea is cruel and sailing is hazardous.

The sentence, with its double chiasmus and its internal assonances (*χρηστὸν/χαλεπὸν, ἀκίνδυνον/ῥίψοκίνδυνον*), sounds like an oracle. Its truth is reinforced by the quotation of a line of Aratus, which Glaucus says he heard once when he went to Athens to sell his fish. The situation is very clear: the contact with the city and with its traditional wisdom is an eye-opener for the poor fisherman, who understands that he made the wrong career choice and decides to become a farmer. 'To hell with this sea-bound life!', he might have said, in the words of Archilochus (frag. 116 W). The sea is also dangerous for Thynnaeus, the writer of 1.14: he is terrified by the prospect of being recruited as a rower on a warship and, to avoid this disastrous fate, decides to run away.

The relationship between sea and land is reversed in 1.4: here the writer (named Kymothoos) complains about the strange behaviour of his wife who is fond of social life and does not miss any opportunity to run to the city to take part in the most important festivities together with the ladies of the Athenian upper class. This is foolish, he says, because for people living close to the water the land is a mortal trap, just as it is for fish who cannot survive once they have been dragged onto shore in the fishermen's nets.²⁰ In this case, land means death and sea means life.

Needless to say, this last example shows that these oppositions are not rigidly separated; on the contrary, they can be interconnected. In Kymothoos' view the dangerous contact with land takes the form of daily frequentation of the city; Athens, with its ambiguous attractions, is perceived as hostile to the marine dimension of the fishermen.²¹ This means that the pairs sea vs. land and sea vs. city overlap. On the other hand, this is a general tendency of Alciphron's writing: his world is made up of categories which are constantly interacting.²²

20 The 'realistic' nature of this letter is stressed by Lesky [1947: 274–275].

21 Lytle [2012: 39].

22 Rosenmeyer [2001a: 285–290]; see Schmitz [2004: 88]: "Alciphron thought at least of the letters of fishermen, farmers, and parasites as forming a coherent, interconnected work."

3 Sea and City

Let us now turn to the polarity sea vs. city.²³ Ep. 1.9 is another example of the crossing of boundaries: writer and addressee do not belong to the same environment. Nevertheless they can easily engage in dialogue. The writer, who is a fisherman, asks the parasite Struthion to introduce him to some rich Athenian. This contact would be of great value for him, because it would enable him to sell his fish directly to the consumer and thus fetch a better price. The writer looks at the city as a possible expansion of his own space: Athens, with its commercial opportunities, is a potential resource which fishermen should take into very serious consideration. The relationship with the city which emerges from 1.15 is another case in point. Here too the writer thinks of Athens as the habitat of people who are surely worlds apart from the inhabitants of the Attic shore but, precisely because of their extravagance, can be of some help. The story told by Nausibius has clear points of similarity to an episode narrated in Longus' Book 2:²⁴ some Athenian youths hire the poor fisherman's boat and spend the day on board, in the company of ravishing singing girls. Nausibius is astonished by the luxurious life-style of his passengers. His comments centre on the sophisticated habits of these city-dwellers, which stand in no comparison with the simplicity of the people belonging to his own social class. At the end of the day, however, he is happy to take their money and hopes that another such opportunity may come along and ensure him of a similar streak of fortune.

The reverse is the case with 1.13. Here too the writer, Evagrus, has been looking to the city as a possible solution to his problems. Encouraged by a period of bountiful catches, he plans to buy a new and more efficient fishing-net. In order to get money for this investment he contacts Chremes, a well-known money-lender who has his office in the city. But very soon it becomes clear that Chremes' purpose is to lay his hands on Evagrus' boat, against which the fisherman had borrowed the money he needed. To avoid this (the loss of the boat would be of course disastrous), Evagrus is forced to sell his wife's gold chain enabling him to pay the debt and stop the legal action against him. At the end of the letter he says that this bad experience has taught him to stay away from the city and its businessmen.

23 Costa [2001: 129–130]; Lytle [2006: 35].

24 Longus 2.12; see Anderson [1977: 2198 and 1989: 115].

4 Sea and Virtue

A principle which is very often repeated in Greek literature and which belongs to the Greek popular morality is that hard work is a school of virtue whereas idleness produces all evil.²⁵ This certainly applies to Menander's farmers,²⁶ but it also applies to Alciphron's fishermen. A good example is 1.8. The writer reminds his wife how difficult their life is since the sea cannot provide for their survival (τρέφει γὰρ οὐδὲν ἢ θάλαττα). The prospect of a continued life of poverty is intolerable to him (μένειν ... πενία συζῶντα χαλεπὸν καὶ οὐ φορητόν). The more attractive option would be to accept the proposal of some Lycian pirates, who have come to Piraeus with their ship: they are ready to recruit him and to make him rich with the booty of their enterprises.²⁷ But there is a problem: becoming a pirate and living a violent life would mean violating the rules he has kept to until now. It would mean staining his hands with blood, which the sea had kept clean. The message is clear: the sea is the domain of virtue; the water of the sea is a cathartic liquid.²⁸

The idea expressed by Naubates in 1.5 runs along the same lines. Commenting on the lucky catch of Rhothius, who while fishing in the sea around Salamis has netted some gold coins, he says that it is better for a fisherman to content himself with the modest income of his daily work. Naubates is probably trying to hide his envy, his moralism is unwittingly auto-ironic. The last sentence, however, (ἀλλ' εἰ πλουτεῖς, σὺν <τῷ> δικαίῳ πλούτει· γινέσθω δέ σοι ὁ πλοῦτος μὴ κακίας, ἀλλὰ καλοκαγαθίας ὑπηρέτης "If you are rich, use your wealth with justice; let your wealth be at the service of virtue, and not of vice") clearly connects prosperity with vice and poverty (the constant companion of fishermen) with virtue.²⁹

25 Cf. Ar. *Plut.* 510–516; *Theoc.* 21.1; etc.

26 Men. *Dys.* 754–755.

27 Ancient Greek literature perceives fishermen's proximity to piracy as something obvious (cf. Lytle [2006: 31 n. 68 and 2012: 45–46]). Aristotle theorizes it in *Pol.* 1.1256ab. A very significant episode is Ach. *Tat.* 1.17, where a pirate, Zeno, rounds up some fishermen from the coastal village of Sarapta to attack the crowd that has gathered for a festival and kidnap a girl.

28 In other contexts the sea can also be seen as a potential source of moral corruption, because the harbour is inhabited by people coming from everywhere, whose debauchery can contaminate the virtue of the citizens (Pl. *Leg.* 704d–705a is very clear): cf. Lytle [2012: 44–45].

29 The rhetoric of 'justice' is discussed by Ureña Bracero [2013: 186]; see also Lytle [2012: 45]: "To a certain degree, fishermen are insulated from these narratives, chiefly because of their poverty, which is ennobled in part because it exists against the backdrop of the corrupting

1.10 also has a virtuous fisherman as its protagonist. Callimachus' epigram 58 Pfeiffer is the grave epitaph for an unnamed shipwrecked sailor: his body has been washed up by the waves and buried by the pious Leontichus, who felt the need to show his solidarity with the dead, himself a sea-wanderer (the verb used by the poet is *θαλασσοπορεῖ*). Leophantus, the protagonist of Posidippus' epigram 94 AB, not a sea-wanderer, but a traveller in a foreign land, also mourns and buries another shipwrecked mariner.³⁰ Cephalus, the writer of Alciphron's ep. 1.10, is clearly modelled on this literary tradition. He is waiting for the end of a terrible storm which has been devastating the sea, ready to sail to Cape Caphareus, where he will surely find the lifeless bodies of sailors cast up from a wrecked ship. He will prepare their bodies and bury them, because there is no doubt—he says—that good deeds are rewarded, particularly when it concerns people from the same walks of life. This letter is a good example of Alciphron's unfaithful fidelity to the tradition. If the Hellenistic epigram is familiar with the character of the good mariner who does not hesitate to give burial to an unnamed corpse lying on the shore,³¹ Alciphron's Cephalus goes a step further: he deliberately searches for dead corpses to bury.

But the polarity sea vs. virtue can also be reversed. This is the case with 1.17–19 (a sequence of message, answer and rejoinder), where a fisherman asks a colleague a favour. The fisherman wants to take possession of an old fishing-net, which is the property of his colleague, but has for many years been lying on the beach, badly damaged. The addressee refuses the request with offensive words, prompting the cut-and-dried reaction of the first writer. A clear example of a lack of solidarity.³²

5 Sea and Love

The connection between sea and love is a *topos* in Greek poetry.³³ A very long poetic tradition shows that love can be perceived and paraphrased as navigation and the lover as a mariner. Love is a sea, because its waves and storms are

sea and the more profitable opportunities that it offered. Fishermen are virtuously poor, and admirably skilled, in part because they choose, for example, not to be pirates."

30 Di Nino [2010: 156–158].

31 See Di Nino [2010: 156]: "Il corpo senza vita dei naufraghi viene in genere sepolto da altri naviganti, soprattutto pescatori, ispirati da letterale 'simpatia' nei confronti di quel cadavere, in cui colgono una sinistra anticipazione del proprio destino."

32 König [2007: 271]; Vox [2013: 224–225].

33 A complete discussion can be found in Ieranò [2003] and Drago [2010].

comparable to the troubles of lovers and shipwrecks resemble the sad conclusions to love stories. The core idea derives from Aphrodite, who was born from the waves and is at the same time the goddess of love and the goddess able to grant smooth and safe sailing.³⁴

The sea of love is indeed a 'capacious' amatory trope, with a variety of possible applications. We can identify two main situations, however. The sea (and navigation) can be a metaphor for love; or the sea can be the geographical setting in which love develops. In the first case the figure of the sea of love produces a potentially endless sequence of images: for example the paradoxical *topos* of love-sickness as a shipwreck, not at sea but on land, or the image of the unfaithful beloved as a ship which does not obey its helmsman.³⁵ In the second case the physical connection of sea and love is the starting point for the creation of love stories, which gain interest precisely because of the interaction between these two highly incongruous elements.³⁶

This is exactly the choice made by Alciphron. His first book can be described as a sort of anthropology of love among fishermen. The scenario of many letters is in fact a love affair involving a fisherman or someone in his family. As for the other three polarities, in this case too the juxtaposition can work in both directions: the sea can be perceived as a natural environment for love or, on the contrary, as an obstacle which should discourage any erotic temptation.

The second option corresponds—to some extent—to the traditional figure of the 'cruel sea' separating lovers. The archetype is the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus spends his days lying on the shore of Ogygia staring out across the endless expanse of water which he is unable to cross. His only desire is to reach Ithaca and rejoin his wife. In Alciphron the anti-erotic nature of the sea is—at least in some letters—even more substantial: living conditions for fishermen, which force them to work very hard every day to earn enough to survive, without any room for amusement, are incompatible with erotic fantasies. Thus, in 1.6 the wife of a fisherman tells her husband that he must renounce his crazy passion for a young girl, recently moved to Piraeus and the ruin of her lovers. In 1.12 Charope, answering the letter of her daughter Glaucippe, warns her that her father will feed her to the sharks if she does not give up her foolish love for a rich Athenian boy to accept the young sailor from Methymna whom her father has chosen as husband for her.

Particularly interesting is ep. 1.21. The writer, Euplous, reproaches his friend Thalasseros for falling in love with a harp player and wasting all his money on

34 Ieranò [2003: 204].

35 Murgatroyd [1995: 11].

36 The 'aquatic myth' of Hero and Leander is a textbook example: see Drago [2010: 121–126].

her. Euplous asks him to stop doing this, because otherwise the land instead of the sea will shipwreck him. We have seen that the shipwreck on land is a standard motif in Greek erotic poetry.³⁷ In this case, however, the lover is a real mariner, not a metaphorical one, so his shipwreck on land is something particularly strange and unusual. If there is anyone who is not expected to be shipwrecked on land, then surely a fisherman.

In other letters the way that the relationship between sea and love is presented is totally different, because here the marine environment is perceived as a territory perfectly compatible with love. This means that the figure of the sea of love is given a new meaning: in these texts the contiguity between the nautical dimension and erotic experience is not meant in purely metaphorical terms but it is something which has to do with real life. Alciphron's literary game is clever: Greek poetry is familiar with the presentation of lovers as mariners; but now we are told that mariners are, by nature, lovers.

A possible model for this is offered by Greek novels. We know that in Greek novels the sea is usually an antagonist of the lovers. But in Achilles Tatius' novel there are passages which offer a different perspective. Already at the end of Book 2, a marine setting is selected as the theatre of a conversation about love. Leucippe and Cleitophon are sailing from Beirut to Alexandria. During the voyage, Cleitophon and his friend Cleinias get into a conversation with another passenger, the Egyptian Menelaos. Their conversation develops into a real debate on the two forms of eros, namely homosexual and heterosexual love.³⁸ Even more surprising is a passage from Book 5, where a love scene takes place on board. As they are sailing from Alexandria to Ephesus, Melite asks Cleitophon to yield to her desire and make love to her. Cleitophon refuses, on the grounds that sea and love are incompatible. Melite, however, insists, by arguing that, on the contrary, a ship is the ideal setting for love. Her arguments are both mythological (Aphrodite was born from the sea) and psychological (the ship hints at sexual intercourse, because every part of it is an erotic symbol).³⁹

No less passionate than Melite, the young Glaucippe of 1.11 confesses her love for a boy from the city, who seems to her much more attractive than her

37 Zanetto [2003: 842]; cf. Ieranò [2003: 227]: "Il naufragio in terraferma è quasi una sottocategoria del *topos* del mare d'amore".

38 Ach. Tat. 2.35–38.

39 Ach. Tat. 5.15–16. It is noteworthy that also in Chariton's novel the sea is sometimes perceived as the way which leads to the beloved: cf. Chaereas' address to the sea in 3.5.9 and Callirhoe's complaint in 5.1.6, when she is about to cross the Euphrates and lose sight of the sea (the same sea that could bring her back to Syracuse).

fiancé. She apparently rejects the world of her parents, but her description of the beloved betrays her status, because she can only use marine terminology. We are told that “his hair is curlier than seaweed, his smile more radiant than a calm sea, and the sparkle of his eyes is like the dark blue of the ocean” (βοστρύχους ἔχει βρύων οὐλοτέρους, καὶ μειδιᾷ τῆς θαλάττης γαληνιώσης χαριέστερον, καὶ τὰς βολὰς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἔστι κυαναυγῆς). Glaucippe’s love points to the city but has its roots in the cultural setting of the harbour.⁴⁰

‘Fishermen do it better’ could be the motto of the young writer of 1.16. He has fallen in love with a pretty girl from Hermione and is unable to control his emotions. He is perfectly aware that such a passionate love seems to be incompatible with his low social status: how could it happen—he wonders—that Eros hit him, a humble fisherman, as if he were one of the rich boys from the city? But he bravely rejects these negative thoughts: he is ready, he says, to go to the girl’s father to ask him for his daughter’s hand in marriage, convinced that the answer will be positive. After all, a young and brilliant fisherman is the most suitable bridegroom.⁴¹ In other words: a fisherman should not surrender to love, but if this happens he will succeed: a very tricky application of the *topos*.

Ep. 1.22 is the answer of Thalasseros to the letter of Euplous.⁴² Reversing the arguments of his friend, he says that people who live close to the sea are by nature open to love because Eros is the son of Aphrodite, and Aphrodite is the goddess of the sea. Thus, at the end of the book we find a highly traditional statement, a frequently repeated *topos* of Greek love poetry. Alciphron, however, connects it not to the metaphorical navigation of the lovers but to the real condition of the mariners. Another example of unfaithful fidelity to tradition, which is the key point of Alciphron’s writing.

40 Conca [1974: 420]; Rosenmeyer [2001a: 261]; cf. Schmitz [2004: 100]: “Alciphron’s fishermen will forever be a ‘Skipper’ or ‘Surfman’, nothing else; and as such, their language, their entire being will be wrapped up in their profession”. Hodgkinson [2014: 470] notes that Glaucippe’s description “is a rare example of the female (non-courtesan) subject expressing elegiacally her love, thus taking on momentarily the traditional active role of *erastes* rather than the passive role normally assigned to women”.

41 Rosenmeyer [2001a: 291]: “His rusticity reveals itself in that he cannot even imagine a category other than marriage for his idealized beloved”.

42 This pair of letters is discussed by Rosenmeyer [2001a: 292–293], Zanetto [2003: 841] and Vox [2013: 225–229].

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Alciphron carefully recreates a plausible historical and geographical setting for his fishermen. The places he refers to can be traced to classical Athens as we know it, both from historical and literary sources. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the fishermen's letters provide a reliable map of 5th and 4th century Attic marine territory and sea routes. Moreover, Alciphron faithfully reproduces a typical feature of the Athenian mind, namely the perception of the sea as an expansion of the urban space; in fact, imperial Athens was conceptualised as an island, at the centre of a marine domain accessible to its military and commercial fleet. This idea of proximity or even contiguity between land and sea is clearly shared by the protagonists of the *Letters*.

At the same time, Alciphron is perfectly aware of the paramount importance of the sea in Greek literary tradition. As early as Homer, the sea plays a crucial role in shaping events. However, it is in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods that the sea becomes an undisputed protagonist. The Hellenistic epigram (for example Leonidas) accords great importance to figures of fishermen and sailors whose lives and thoughts—even within the genre's spatial constraints—inspire the poetic text. The subgenre of *ναυαγικά* (which is well defined as early as Posidippus) is particularly interesting. Death at sea is here perceived as something horrible, abnormal or painful, in line with the 'otherness' of the sea itself. Hellenistic poets, too, devote their attention to fishing activities and to the lives of fishermen. In the Greek novel, the sea is ubiquitous and has two main functions: it allows the characters to move from one setting to another (as the plot requires) and, with its pirates and storms, is responsible for the dramatic separation of the protagonists. The rhetoric that surrounds the sea, which can be seen as a cruel enemy to lovers but also as a 'love nest' for their meetings, reaches its highest peak in Achilles Tatius' novel.

Alciphron's letters of fishermen constitute an important chapter in this long tradition. These fishermen, and the events in which they are involved, are clearly inspired by literary models. On the other hand, Alciphron's letters are by no means the result of a mechanical combination of pre-existing materials. Alciphron clearly aims at originality: he wants to create his own sea through the skilful appropriation of the literary tradition. Personal experience, too, may have had a significant role in Alciphron's clever reworking of traditional sea stories.