The So-called Hell and Sinners in the Odyssey and Homeric Cosmology

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Abstract
It will be argued in this paper that Odysseus does not descend into Hades even though he witnesses the punishment of certain sinners and that the latter are envisaged in the sky as constellations. This hypothesis explains the phrase “meadow of asphodels” and the repetitive action of the sinners.

It will also be argued that the origin of this cosmology is Egyptian. The Homeric cosmos is divided into a diurnal and nocturnal world: a human habitation and one which lies beyond the sun's orbit and contains the heroes and the dead.

Keywords
cosmos, Hades, asphodels, Circe, Odysseus, Sisyphos

1. Odysseus Crosses the Ocean
Odysseus is told to go to Hades by Circe in Book 10 of the Odyssey. The instructions he receives show clearly that this journey will not involve a descent to the underworld, but rather a crossing of the cosmic river Ocean; Hades lies on the other side (fig. 1). This is confirmed in the Iliad when Patroclus tells Achilles that because he is not buried he is prevented from crossing the river and entering Hades (Il. 23.73).¹

Circe says that Odysseus and his men will cross the Ocean by ship. They will leave the vessel on the other bank and walk on foot until they

¹) Note however that there exist other rivers in the afterworld; see fig. 1.
arrive at a spot where a pit is to be dug. Then, they will make sacrifices and invoke the shades.

The hero does as he is told by Circe; indeed, one by one the ghosts gather around the pit (11.36). There is an implication that they come from underneath by the expression hypex or hypo “from under” (11.37, 57) but their place of origin is far from clear.²

All the psychai or eidola are recognized by Odysseus, which is due to the fact that they are duplicates of what they were in life (cf. also Il. 23.104) (Bremmer 1983). However, they do not recognize him. Why so? It is because they have lost their memory. Circe clearly tells Odysseus that Teiresias alone has kept his mind, a gift granted to him by Persephone (10.490–95), and it is for this reason that he alone is able to recognize Odysseus even before he drinks blood (11.91).

There is a profound insight into the nature of death behind the description of these ineffective spirits: Homer is saying that without memory, there is no identity. In consequence, the dead do not and cannot suffer because they have no consciousness. Suffering entails either

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²) For the vertical dimension of ascent-descent into Hades see West 1997.
bodily pain or mental anguish, but these ghosts experience neither of these feelings: they are in a state of oblivion.

Our first conclusion is that in the *Odyssey* we find no descent into the underworld and that although Hades is a sunless world, it is not entirely dark. Rather, it may be described as a place of perpetual dusk and mist (*zofos* 11.155) containing groves of poplars and meadows of asphodels, and even a city (fig. 1). We also learn that it is the habitat of shades without memory. For the rest, it is not an unpleasant place to be in; nor is it horrifying.

2. The Transgressors

Now we come to a different issue, which has to do with the categories of the dead and their respective location within Hades. In addition to the shades, Odysseus sees a set of heroes who are not interested in blood, and who do not talk to Odysseus; moreover, they belong to the remote past, to the generation before the Trojan War.

First he sees Minos holding his scepter seated in judgment among the dead (11.568). Since Minos is seated, he is not parading like the ghosts of the previous section. Then, he sees huge Orion hunting with his dogs in the meadow of asphodels (11. 573). Orion is not described as a transgressor in this passage, but elsewhere in the poem it is stated that he slept with Eos, an act the gods do not approve of (5.274). He is also considered an ill omen: in the *Iliad*, the appearance of the star called “dog of Orion” does not bode well (*Il*. 22. 29–300).

Next, Odysseus sees Tityos lying on nine *pelethra*. Since a *pelethron* is a measure of about a hundred square feet, Tityos must have been enormous. Fixed in the same position, he is eaten by the vultures. An explanation of why he is being punished in eternity is added: he had attempted to violate Leto (11.580).

The next figure is Tantalos standing by a lake from which he cannot get water to quench his thirst. Around him are trees, but he cannot reach their fruit (11.581–92). We are not told what sin he had committed.

Sisyphos is seen next, holding a huge rock with both hands and pushing it uphill while sweat is pouring down his face (11.593–600).

Next, Odysseus sees Heracles, but now a new element is introduced: he is able to have a conversation with him. For this reason Heracles
does not belong to the category under discussion; the group ends with Sisyphos.

The group of the aforementioned four transgressors, plus the judge Minos, form a distinct unit, which ought to be differentiated from the parade of ghosts. While the latter converse with Odysseus, the transgressors are engaged in repetitive action as though they were fixed forever on a rotating wheel.

The question is where does Odysseus see these figures? As we have seen, he does not move from his position. The puzzle has been noted by important scholars, such as U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, and is addressed anew by Walter Burkert in this issue. W. B. Stanford, in his commentary of the *Odyssey*, suggests that the passage is an interpolation, perhaps from Orphic sources (Stanford 1964:401).

Then, there is the question where is the meadow of asphodels in which Orion and Achilles are located (11.539)? And how come the transgressor Orion is situated in such a meadow of white flowers?

### 3. The Meadow of Asphodels as Stars

A crucial clue as to how we may interpret the meadow of asphodels is given in the Homeric poems themselves. Orion is a constellation in the sky in both the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* (*Il*. 13.488; *Od*. 5.274; *Il*. 21.39). Could it be that all the other transgressors and their judge Minos are visions seen in the night sky? (I do not count Achilles in this category.) This would explain why they do not converse with Odysseus.

There are several reasons why this hypothesis works. First, Plutarch identifies Orion with the Egyptian constellations of Horus and Seth (*De Iside et Osiride*, 21–22), and although Plutarch lived much later than the poet of *Odyssey*, his testimony is useful because he links astral Orion with Egyptian mythology. Second, the sinners repeat their action in perpetuity: Orion keeps hunting with his dogs; Sisyphos keeps pushing the stone; Tantalos attempts to drink from the lake. Third, Odysseus cannot talk to these heroes because they are in the sky; interaction with them is not possible. However, he does see them clearly in their true form, as though he had been initiated into some truth.

Consider also the Bacchic tablet from Thurii where the deceased happily declares: “I have flown out of the heavy difficult circle (*stephanos*)” (Graf
and Johnston 2007, no. 5, 12–13). The circle implies repetitive action, which the soul wants to escape, and it suits the constellation theory well. Finally there is a passage in the *Iliad* referring to constellations that never set and therefore never bathe in the Ocean. Note that Orion is one of them. The text implies that they are envisaged as a circle in heaven (*ouranos estephanotai*, 18.486–89).

Combining all the above and following the hint by Plutarch, we turn to Egypt to explore the tradition of mythical constellations in the afterlife.

First of all it is important to start with the term for the beyond, *duat* in Egyptian. Its location (under the earth or inside the vault of heaven) was a matter of speculation and varied from period to period; moreover there were differences of opinion even within the same period.⁵ For example, during the Pyramid age it was imagined to be in the sky. The Pyramid texts attest to the fact that the pharaoh ascended to the sky or flew to it after death and became a star, thus integrating himself with the gods of the *duat*. Some spells specify that he would rise with Horus (Allen 2002; Hornung 1999:5–6). One spell, from the Pyramid of Unas, states that the pharaoh will travel through the firmament in the darkness, and he will rise on the horizon where he is radiant.⁴

According to a variant cosmological model, also stemming from the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, the king was identified with the imperishable circumpolar stars that never set, the ones “that know no destruction.”⁵ In short, there existed a tradition to the effect that the night sky is the beyond, and that the dead pharaoh became a star.

There are other features of Egyptian netherworld beliefs that are relevant to the understanding of Hades. An entire landscape in the sky was envisioned by the Egyptians, including islands, lakes, marshes and rivers. In the Pyramid texts, for example, lakes and fields of rushes are situated in the nocturnal heaven whereas similar landscapes are mentioned in the New Kingdom papyri.⁶ The fields of reeds are strongly

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⁵) An excellent analysis of Egyptian cosmology can be found in Allen 1988.
⁴) Simpson et al. 2003:250 (spell 214, lines 154, 158).
⁵) Allen 2002:63; Simpson et al. 2003: utterances 214, 217 (pp. 248–49); 412 (p. 254; 422 (p. 255).
reminiscent of the Homeric meadow of asphodels, which reinforces the hypothesis that the asphodels are the stars of the night sky.

In the New Kingdom, especially from the 18th dynasty onwards, theories about the cosmology and topography of the afterworld were summarized in the *Book of Day, Book of Night, Book of Gates, Amduat*, etc. They are attested in papyri, sarcophagi and royal tombs and consist of closely knit texts and images. The main theme is the journey of the sun god in the beyond hour by hour subdivided into twelve scenes, each reflecting one hour of the night (Hornung 1982:227–30; 1999:32–152). As the sun travels from the diurnal to the nocturnal universe, he reaches the depths of the beyond, becomes a corpse and eventually, as the night proceeds, he becomes regenerated and re-emerges stronger. Finally, he is reborn rejuvenated in the morning. For our purposes one question is important: where are the depths of the cosmos in which the sun hides at night? An intuitive answer is that they are below the earth, but this is not to be taken for granted. The Egyptians did conceive of the *duat* either below or in the nocturnal sky, as shown above. And because Egyptians had a way of turning conceptual models into images, they pictured the sky as the female goddess Hathor or Nut. They conceived of her in either an anthropomorphic form or as a cow, and they imagined the sun traveling *inside* her body. The point is that the sun was hidden from view at night even though he was in the sky (Hornung 1999:116–35, fig. 72; Allen 1988).

Sometimes Nut is split into a double figure, two naked women back to back. For example, the decorated ceilings of the royal tombs of Ramses IV and VI had a double image of Nut. In her capacity as the night sky, Nut swallowed the sun and gave birth to him at dawn in the form of a scarab (Hornung 1999:112–25). The dual sky, or dual Nut is stunningly echoed in the *Iliad* when heaven is described twice as the day and night sky: “under the sun and [under] the starry sky” (*Il. 4.44*).

According to this definition, what is essential about Hades is that the sun does not shine there (see figs. 1 and 4).

### 4. The Sinners Parade During the Hours of the Night

Another aspect of Egyptian afterworld belief may be helpful to the understanding of the passage on the sinners in the *Odyssey*. The hypo-
thetic visitor of an Egyptian royal tomb, such as the one of Seti I, Ramses IV or Ramses VI, would witness the journey to the afterworld as a succession of scenes. As we noted above, each scene depicted a particular hour of the night.

In the tomb of Seti I, for example, Osiris the judge appears in the scene depicting the eighth hour; the blessed and damned appear in the following hours; the blessed alone appear in the tenth hour (Hornung 1997:125). In the tomb of Haremhab, Osiris is depicted as receiving the blessed dead in the 5th hour (fig. 2).7

The succession of scenes with the judge coming first and the sinners and blessed appearing subsequently would fit very well the description in the Odyssey. Odysseus first sees Minos (who corresponds to Osiris), then the damned and finally Heracles. The latter may be considered a “blessed dead” since he was the model initiate of the Eleusinian cult.

Also very compatible with Egyptian beliefs is the description of Tantalos who is close to a lake from which he cannot drink. This strongly evokes Egyptian New Kingdom texts and vignettes from funerary papyri showing the deceased drinking greedily from a lake to refresh

Figure 2. Nut from the Tomb of Ramses VI: Hornung 1999:113, fig. 63.

his soul. Water revives the dead (Burkert 2004:87–87; Hornung 1999: 128–30). The Tantalos scene is evocative also of inscribed Greek Bacchic lamellae. On several specimens from Eleutherna Crete, the deceased demands water because he otherwise will perish: “I am parched with thirst and am dying; but grant me to drink.”9 Behind all these texts and images lies the idea that water is essential to preserve the dead and especially their memory.

Another lamella from Pharsalos, Thessaly, dated to c. 350–300, links the afterworld with stars. The deceased is instructed to say the whole entire truth: “I am a child of earth and starry sky. My name is Starry (asterios).”10 Similar expressions are found many times “I am the son of earth and starry sky.”11 Last but not least, Plutarch clearly states that the constellations in the sky are souls (psychai) (De Iside 21).

Thus, there are quite a few arguments to the effect that stars and the starry sky afford a glimpse of the beyond, the sphere of the cosmos that contains both the transgressors and those who are blessed. Even one of the Pythagorean riddles might find its explanation with this theory. One of the akousmata poses the question “what are the isles of the blest?” The answer is: “Sun and moon.”12 That the isles of the blessed are heavenly bodies in the sky is a counter-intuitive statement, but it makes sense if we adopt the hypothesis I have here suggested.

Finally, we must consider the testimony of Herodotus, who says that Orphic and Bacchic rituals are in reality Pythagorean and Egyptian (2.81.2). Although the exact relationship of these religious groups is disputed by scholars, it is clear that Herodotus thinks that they were related to each other and indebted to Egypt (Riedweg 2002:76–77; Huffman 2007:62–68).

I suggest here that Egyptian theology had found its way into Greek cosmology and metaphysics of the Archaic period. This is, historically

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8) Note that in the tomb of Seti I, the visitor would see the lake of fire from which the blessed dead are provisioned but whose waters are flames for the damned: Hornung 1999:60.


11) Graf and Johnston 2007, nos. 8, 10–14,16,18,25. On the Pelinna tablet (no. 26 a–b Graf and Johnston), the deceased is a bull or ram which falls into milk. This would make sense if the milk refers to the Milky Way, namely the celestial Nile.

speaking, a highly plausible scenario. Since the seventh century, the Greeks had been serving as mercenaries in Egypt and had settled their own colony at Naukratis (Burkert 2004:71–98). And these very Egyptian beliefs continued into the Ptolemaic period as the astronomical ceiling of the temple of Hathor at Denderah testifies (Wilkinson 1991). The divine figures depicted in the ceiling of this temple are constellations: Horus and his mother Isis/Taweret maintain the order of the cosmos by anchoring evil forces such as the constellation mskt.

5. The Absence of the Sun in Hades

It has been suggested here that Hades corresponds to the nocturnal universe and that this fits reasonably well with Egyptian theology, according to which the sun was weak and finally became a corpse in the duat. There is a difference, however, between Egyptian and Homeric cosmology: in the epics, the sun is not only weak in the beyond, he does not reach Hades at all (Od. 12.377–88). If so, where does he go at night?

To answer this question we must investigate the location of Circe’s island because it furnishes an invaluable clue as regards the sun’s course.

Odysseus must reach this island before he crosses the Ocean to the netherworld, but, for reasons that are never explicitly stated in the text, he must return there before he can go on with his journey. This detail shows that the island of Circe is an interface between the inhabited world and Hades.

It is further clear from the text that the island is located at the edge of the inhabited world. Odysseus is disorientated when he is there because he cannot discern where the sun rises and where it sets. “My friends”, he says, “we do not know where East is, nor where the bright sun goes down under the earth” (Od. 10.190–92; trans. Rieu). It follows from this passage that Odysseus cannot tell east and west apart. I take this to mean that he is very close to the end of the sun’s heavenly orbit (fig. 1). Another point of relevance is that when the men sail away from the island, the sun sets and does not rise again until the return of the company from the beyond (12.8). Thus, when Odysseus goes to Hades he seems to have moved beyond the realm of the sun’s orbit (fig. 1; Marinatos 2000).

In addition, there is good evidence that Circe is related to the sun. Her island is named the house of dawn and the rising sun (12.3–4),
or, the “ground of the dances of dawn.” Circe herself is a progeny of the sun (10.138; cf. also Hesiod, *Theogony*, 1011). All this information about Circe’s kinship to the great luminary, and the designation of her habitat as the ground of dawn, reveals that she has a connection with the solar path from sunrise to sunset. The island lies at the border of the inhabited world and the beyond. But now we have come back to the question: where does the sun go at night?13

A fragment of Mimnermus supplies us with the answer. The sun sleeps in a golden chamber by the banks of the Ocean (Mimnermus, Fr. 7 Edmonds). In Fragment 10 we are further told that the sun sleeps at night in a winged barque made by Hephaistus himself. He travels along the Ocean from the west, the land of Hesperides, to the east, the land of the Ethiopians. In short, the sun travels *along* the river from west to east and then climbs upwards. It is important to stress that in no case does he cross the Ocean, and that he travels on both the horizontal and vertical plane (fig. 3).

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13) In the *Odyssey* we are told that the sun leaves the waters and climbs up in the sky (3.1–3), or that it rises from the deep ocean (19.434).
Mimnermus confirms that the sun does not cross the river Ocean, and that the latter separates the inhabited world from Hades. Finally he confirms indirectly that the beyond is a sunless universe and hence a nocturnal universe.

It is important, however, that we do not mistake the nocturnal world of the beyond for Tartaros (Il. 13.481), which is a specific region below Hades. Tartaros lies in the lower depths of the cosmos, and is a prison for unruly gods whom Zeus punishes with thunder, according to the Pythagoreans at least. Odysseus never visits Tartaros.

6. The Vertical and Horizontal Cosmos

I have argued here that Hades is the nocturnal universe beyond the river Ocean. Once Odysseus is in Hades, he is able to gaze at the nocturnal sky with new eyes and recognize Minos seated in judgement of the sinners.

However, it may be objected, there are clear elements in the Homeric epics which suggest that the cosmos had a vertical division of up and down. Tartaros is as deep below Hades as the sky is high above the earth (Il. 8.13–16 cf. also 8.478–81; 14.279). In the Iliad, when Talthybios makes a sacrifice on behalf of the Achaeans, he invokes Zeus first, then the sun and earth, and then the Erinyes, who are said to be under the earth and punish those who do not honour oaths (Il. 19.258–60). The choice of these particular gods shows that there is a clear division of deities into those which are up and those which are down. Hades is clearly equated with below in certain passages in the Iliad (20.61, 214; 22.482). What do we make of this?

A most important clue concerns the abode of Thetis as described in the Iliad. We get detailed descriptions of both her upward journey from a cave at the bottom of the sea to the heights of heaven, and the other way around, from the depths of the sea to the heights of Olympus (1.496–97; 24.95–99). This is clearly a vertical journey. However, we also get the information from Hephaistos’s mouth that her habitat is situated next to the river Ocean, by its ineffable streams (18.402–5). The Ocean is not located in the underworld, as we have seen, but at the edges of the universe. How can Thetis live both under and beyond? There seems to be a contradiction between the two epics which can be ascribed to multiple authorship, carelessness, or even ignorance.
I propose a model which maintains the coherence of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* (fig. 4). The Ocean is at the edge of both the vertical and horizontal dimension of the world because it surrounds it like the outer layer of an onion. The cosmos is thus a sphere surrounded by a sunless region beyond the sun’s orbit, above and below, left as well as right. The inhabited cosmos is girt by the river Ocean; beyond it is the region in which the sun does not exist.

This model does not solve all the problems of Archaic cosmology, but it does raise some important issues concerning the indebtedness of Greek Hades to the *duat*. We must, in any case, remember that the Greeks themselves claimed the primacy of Egyptian wisdom in religious matters. For this reason many wise men like Pythagoras, Thales and Solon were thought to have been to Egypt.

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14) For how contemporary physics deals with the same conceptual riddles see Osserman 2003:350–55, who discusses the extraordinary coincidence between Riemann’s and Dante’s concepts of the universe.

15) For the analysis of the location of the duat in the cosmos see Allen 1988:5–7.
References


