Islands in the Sky

Islands in the Sky:
The Four-Dimensional Journey of Odysseus through Space and Time

By

Rose Hammond

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2012

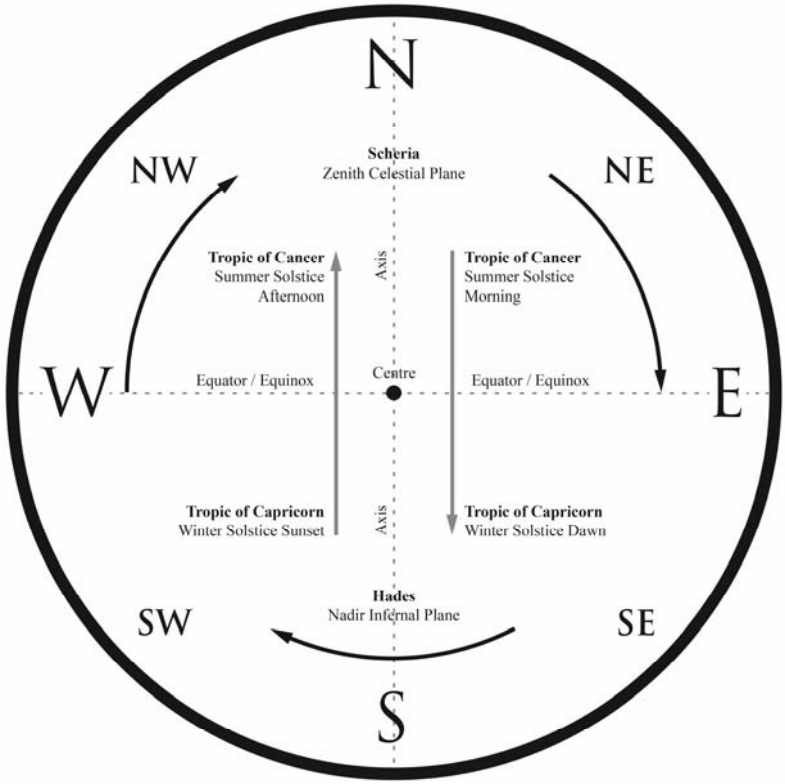
Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4018-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4018-7

For Peter



The Circular Journey of Odysseus, around the Sun's apparent ecliptic.

"We shall prove someday in our Poetical Theology, that Homer disguised this wisdom, as all other wisdoms, under the wandering of his Ulysses."
—Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494**).** *Oratio on the Dignity of Man*, 33.

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FOREWORD

This work began as doctoral thesis on Homer's use of symbolism in the *Odyssey*.[1] It very rapidly outgrew its brief, for the realisation grew that no ancient symbol can be exclusively confined to any of the modern academic disciplines as we know them. Unfortunately for those who like their answers to be cut and dried, major symbols have the elusive potential to be universal, cross-cultural and timeless entities bound by a shadowy core meaning. They may raise their heads as verbal metaphors or graphic images in fields of study currently classified as mythology or religion, in cult or ritual, art or archaeology, philosophy or sky sciences, and above all, in the sacred geometry of successive generations.[2] Accordingly I apologise in advance to any reader who embarks on these pages in the anticipation of a traditionally focused interpretation of the Homeric text. The book is primarily a study in iconography which requires the use of a quite different methodological approach.

Also, since recent research in Greek oral tradition has made clear that some at least of the poet's source material must belong to the prehistory of the Mediterranean basin, and even more distant lands, it seems valid to draw on those wider sources, particularly their surviving belief systems and their encoded imagery.

The spirit of those seemingly impenetrable centuries which have not bequeathed us any decipherable texts may be traced through their most pervasive remaining symbols. To those students of Homer who have struggled valiantly to make sense of the course and purpose of Odysseus' journey I offer the idea that despite the ephemeral nature of universal symbolism, another logical explanation can be grafted on to the well-loved stories. It will be shown as one which adds immeasurably to the status of the poet as the earliest known student of the mystical cosmos in the western world

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would never have come to fruition without the support of those who believed in its author, and even more challengingly, the boldness of its content. I thank especially Professor Emeritus Chris Emlyn-Jones of the Open University Department of Classical Studies for his constant and patient support across the years, and other former tutors who have trained me in the fascinating study of ancient iconography. It goes without saying that my husband Peter not only encouraged but gave every practical assistance, and my children have always urged me on most kindly.

Stephen Thomas and Christian Summerhayes at Newwave Design of Abergavenny have done a sterling job in disentangling my manuscript and bringing the illustrations to a high level of originality. To librarians everywhere, I owe a great deal of gratitude. Lastly I thank Christine Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their professional guidance in bringing this project to completion.

PREFACE

Odysseus' dangerous trials and adventures are famously played out across a "wine-dark sea". The ancient metaphor teases the mind with a sense of something dimly understood and yet perversely illogical. So in view of the essential difficulties of the phrase, let us begin by indulging the 'symbolic imagination', and consider that the poet may be referring not to the kind of salty ocean with which most are familiar but to some part of the cosmic night which frames our world, the dark and fathomless sky experienced by all. Were that to be the case, then the maritime islands of the *Odyssey* would have to be sought among the stars or planets which embroider the darkness, and Odysseus' journey would resemble that of a shamanic visionary on a spiritual journey into deep space in search of some otherwordly Ithakan paradise; what is more, it may emerge that the many difficulties of direction and orientation which beset the hero (and at times, the poet's readers) could be resolved by the inclusion of this three-dimensional backdrop to the Homeric universe. This is but one of the challenging issues to be addressed in this book and perhaps the most fundamental. But first the reader will need to know the basis upon which such a controversial claim can be made, even tentatively, and the methods by which it may be substantiated.

Finding the Landscape

Homer's mythic territory has long perplexed the poet's readers. It relates frequently enough to the geographical world with its naming of Ionian and Aegean islands, but does not with any visible logic provide a satisfying itinerary for the hero on his wandering Adventures. Perhaps the magical and folkloric episodes should warn us that the epic landscape consists of something more than the geographical terrain of the eastern Mediterranean in the late Bronze Age. If, as many have speculated, there is an inherent philosophy or spiritual doctrine hidden within these robust escapades of seafaring men, the content would not be revealed indiscriminately to one and all; it would more likely be encoded or conveyed by subtle allusion, much as the Pythagoreans employed passwords amongst themselves to signal their membership of a select

brotherhood, and the Eleusian *mystes* protected their rites by the most rigorous secrecy.

Shamanism versus 'Science'

These thoughts were not arrived at lightly, but they have been encouraged by the knowledge that Homer as an allegorist was not an unfamiliar idea in the classical centuries, and more recently, that the work of the Structuralist school of interpreters has begun to unravel thematic 'bundles' which can be read as a symbolic discourse having a particularly sophisticated inner language. Yet few have used such methods to plumb the cosmological content of either epic. For most Homerists, there is currently little or no true cosmic reference in the epics as we have received them. Agreed, the poet says little of note which is capable of being read as 'science', from the perspective of our modern understanding of the workings of the universe, nor is very much said of the skies that the poet would have been able to see in his own time. But the epics are redolent with shamanist imagery, and this has a strong cosmological content which cannot be ignored. In such an ancient and universal phenomenon, perhaps the oldest of our religions, man found ritual and symbolic means to create an imagined link with the divine forces lying distantly from his own world, deities lodging so far away that some definition of space was necessary to anyone wishing to bestride the worlds. For the shaman, as for most men of religion before and since, divinity, the One, or creative principle, lies far out in space and beyond the physical reach of man. Although the physical body may be constrained, the seeker may travel ritually on a journey to the gods in spirit if not in body, commonly by the mimetic climbing of a tree and a subsequent 'falling back' to Earth. The entire ritual would be conducted ecstatically in a state of deliberately altered consciousness achieved by chanting, drumming, or ingestion of hallucinogenic materials. The shaman does not consider himself earthbound, for the earth-plane is only the start-point of his transformative experience; and since the imagination is unbounded, he voyages as far as his mind and spirit allow him to reach.

Once our poet or any other man of imagination has set aside the two dimensions of a flat Earth (or even the three of a spherical globe) in favour of three dimensions extending into space, he creates a multi-dimensional field of action offering enormous flexibility of movement to the landscape of his fictional world. The totality of three dimensions is capable of containing either a flat, or a spherical earth-form, plus space itself; and the inclusion of certain stellar and planetary movements (which indicate the

passage of time) will endow those directions with an important fourth dimension. That is not to say that all Homeric terrestrial geography can be ignored. But an extension of direction into space will certainly help to resolve certain puzzling issues. The world as conceived and explored by the early shaman goes far in providing the images we need to interpret Homer at a radical new level.

Early Man

The newer sciences of anthropology and ethnology have enabled us to understand approximately how early man must have found and maintained his place on this uncertain planet of ours. Using his own physical being as his central point of reference to the phenomenal world, he will have learned the north, south, east and west of his universe through his mastery and exploitation of its fruitful but sometimes dangerous landscapes, thinking largely by analogy and linking an imagined like with like. This much we can presuppose from studies of world societies which have preserved their ancient beliefs, and also from the ways in which our own children learn to make sense of the world around them. From his observations of harmonious living in the natural world, its 'right order' and especially its determinative rules concerning death and renewal, man appears to have found a means of ensuring his own security by domestic replication of the predominant patterns of the cosmos. We inherit from our ancestor the instinctive knowledge that life is followed by death just as sunset follows sunrise and winter follows summer, and that plants live and die but are reborn from the womb of the nourishing Earth just as a baby is nourished in the womb of its mother. Like the plants and animals, we need shelter, warmth and food, and once we have learned to harvest or cultivate, our own lives must, if they are to be long and fruitful, move strictly to the tempo dictated by the seasons. This rhythm imposes a pattern which is the universal pattern of order, or 'right-running' as we shall sometimes name it here, by which the universe regulates its affairs.[3] The original Greek meaning of '*kosmos*' was 'order'; only subsequently did it become a word for the visible outer world. Man found in the predictable stellar and planetary motions in the skies a measure of the passing of time, and deduced its relevance to weather and climate; from such knowledge, he was able to draw practical instruction on how he could best regulate his husbandry, secure the lives of his family and increase his wealth. As a secondary benefit, human life conducted under the protection of the great forces that resided high above must lend itself to a comforting sense of divine protection. Gradually the same patterning began to provide a model

for the elaboration of man's spiritual life and his self-aware assessment of his place in the wider scheme of things. We are able to suppose, in part, the substance of these facts from archaeological evidence of solar and stellar alignment of prestige buildings, where ritual artefacts bearing cosmic referents have also been found. By such tokens, the skies are shown to have been enormously powerful and relevant to the life of man. The material finds also testify to man's need to imitate and replicate the laws of the visible world for the benefit of himself or his own small community, or in the case of a ruler, for the well-being of a community. In this way the visible stars and planets readily became 'gods' whose favour was sought by an outward- and upward-looking ancient society.

Methodologies

The shamanic belief in a cosmic connection which is a 'non-scientific' but (for its time, a perfectly practical *modus vivendi*) led to practices we should today consider quite fallacious.[4] We would probably consider from this distance that such a philosophy was ill-founded since it was based on inadequate knowledge, and that its development was ever-flawed by circularity in reasoning. The reading of bird omens, for example, or the interpretation of dreams as divine revelation, or the study of weather patterns as portents of divine activity which we meet in the verses of Homer have small place in the present world, yet they must have arisen on the back of some relevant experience of self-validating cause and effect. No educated individual can now believe in the power of a plant to cure human ills purely on the basis of a leaf pattern suggestive of a part of the human anatomy, yet the mediaeval mind did so until very few centuries ago. And if we were to suggest that a dream portends a particular event, the psychologist would be quick to point out the subjective bias of our subconscious mind. Nevertheless we barely resist the pull of old beliefs concerning lucky cats and unlucky ladders, crossed fingers and 'touch wood', which hark back to the so-called superstitious practices of our forebears. Full rationality (based on hypothesis, observation, testing and deduction) would seem to be a relatively recent acquisition in man's developmental history. For millennia it has been preceded by a system which used largely concrete symbols to express the elusive nature of abstractions, to the apparent satisfaction of those struggling to grasp the nature of the unknowable. The advantage of a substitute symbol or a narrative myth was that it provided pre-literate man with a language in which abstractions could be tested and brought into meaningful contexts. This is the system that can be traced from at least the first Christian

millennium until the Renaissance, and, one suspects, even after, though increasingly in tandem with the developing sciences as we know them. It is also the only system available to us for penetrating the more arcane reaches of Homeric thought.

Unpicking the Symbol

If we neglect the basic process of symbolic thought and deeper contexts, the result is readings which delve no further than the material or literal sense of a text or image.[5] Yet most literary critics and historians of art would recognise that no reader can experience a poem or a painting to the full without assuming a whole level of fuller meaning awaiting discovery beneath the surface imagery. To this end, and ideally, we should all like to understand the writer or artist in his own time, his own culture and his own developed personality. We credit Homer with a wide range of poetic expertise but due to the lack of information about his world we have not fully appreciated the depth of his gift in the context of the earliest religions and their mode of expression. If that context employed elaborate symbolism, this is where we must go to find the full scale of allusions contained within the text.

Our present hypothesis is based on recent scholarship (particularly the work of Mircea Eliade and his colleagues) which suggests that the ancient writer or the performer of songs belonged to a culture which was highly conscious of the magic and mystery of the universe. That consciousness acknowledged a supreme power, source of an inspired Unity (the 'One') *fons et origo* of our own existence. It is imagined that the One self-generates to bring the Two into being, and from there the whole of manifest creation unfolds and multiplies without ever losing its essential and original Oneness. The same longing for knowledge of our origins is still for many the essence of their religious belief; but how is Man to describe and depict such an awesome concept, even in a literate age, let alone one that had no such skills?

In any civilisation considering Creation to be an integrated whole, where the Creator is omnipresent (transcendent and immanent), the literal meaning of a word or image or the substance of the material, sensory world of experience is not inevitably separated from the esoteric. The latter is by its nature amorphous, and in many systems not to be discussed.That is not to say that the Greeks of the pre-Homeric age did not make some highly tenuous connections (such as the reading of omens) which would find no place in our philosophy.

Equally there is a well-observed tendency among less developed traditional societies to associate cause and effect in ways that we should consider quite unjustified. Speaking in the idiom of his time in a book entitled *How Natives Think*, Levy-Bruhl[6] commented on the habit among "primitives" of associating consecutive events with an antecedent, then placing their trust in the fallacious 'connectedness' of the two. There was apparently no such thing as 'chance' in these societies, only parts of a whole. The example is certainly extreme (from the point of view of Homeric researches) but may act as a counterweight to any assumption we moderns may make concerning the maturity of prehistoric thought in early Greece.

Reliance on such imperfect thought systems leads inevitably to circular arguments. How, then, are we to validate any ancient system of thought, and how can any modern reader be persuaded that a common object may carry a secondary, metaphysical meaning, and that this meaning is identifiable in a particular narrative? The solution demands the application of ancient methodologies (if one may use such an anomalous term) to the solution of ancient problems. Because myth is an infinitely complex system speaking in many voices and using both abstractions and concrete imagery which it twists and weaves and overlaps whilst it entertains and informs, it is not easily reduced to a mere narrative. But it is the upper narrative which stays in the mind, and by its dramatic impact ensures that memory will knowingly or unknowingly preserve the less tangible inner content. Some early philosophers were able to identify the problem: Pausanias registered his personal doubts, and his honest retraction of them, in the course of his *Guide to Greece*: "When I began to write my history I thought these Greek stories were rather silly, but now… I have decided to treat them from the point of view that the famous Greek wise men told their stories in riddles and not out of stupidity… So in religious matters this is the principle we shall follow."[7]

A myth ('story') is an encoded message, Pausanias implies, and a puzzle to be unravelled; this puzzle was not a casual formulation by ignorant or superstitious men, but a system of choice for wise and thoughtful Greek ancestors.

Testing the Theory

Whatever method is used to interpret a subtext of the *Odyssey* or any other work of literature, there must come a point when the sum total of the deductions either convinces or it does not. In other words, to succeed in meeting acceptable criteria in this twenty-first century, the final

interpretation must regularly achieve a logical balance and integrity. After an intuitive stage of intelligence-gathering the critical iconographer will proceed to test his conclusions as hypotheses; the frequency and strength of these theories ('positive readings') will then have to be evaluated for their consistency and relevance to a broader theme if they are not ultimately to show themselves as false positives. The bigger picture should emerge from a concatenation of smaller images relevant to the whole, in which a few erroneous interpretations may arise but will be negated by the greater force of those correct assumptions which support a final, coherent theory.

Iconographers or 'symbologists' undertake to relate a given image, (in an artistic medium, in written or memorised form) to the wider context of the society which has formulated it, or to the overall content of a larger creative undertaking. It will be appreciated that such scholars are on particularly hazardous ground when embarking on the unpicking of a symbolic mode of discourse. One man's reading may differ widely from another's. This has inevitably led to some sharp criticism of the methods and conclusions of practitioners of the art. The scholarship of Mircea Eliade, who was a leading interpreter of pattern in religious symbols, has typically been challenged as unsystematic, overly subjective and lacking scholarly rigour. He is not alone. Much of Eliade's inspiration came from the work of the Traditionalist School of 'Perennial Philosophy' formulated in the first half of the twentieth century, whose major luminaries, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and René Guénon, had to argue forcibly for an approach to ancient literature and iconography that took account of circular but consistent modes of thinking which, they reasoned, informed the ancient and mediaeval representations of the physical world and man's place in it. 'Traditional' science (as they named it) is quite distinct from modern 'profane' practice. In relying on reason alone, they argue, this material world of ours has fallen into error and decay; religion has become a thing apart, instead of the very core of our existence. Symbolism is the method best adapted to the teaching of higher truths and the ancients knew this far better than we, they claim.

Multi-layered Texts

Eliade and other such iconographers of his time have rightly, in my view, argued that internal elements of a symbol-system are interactively self-supporting and can be read at multiple levels. A few examples will help to clarify what it means to 'read' the pictorial image or literary conceit. The first is taken from a text familiar to Western readers, the

Gospel of St. Matthew, where Jesus narrates a series of parables concerning the pursuit of truth. One story tells how a man finds a treasure in a field and being joyful at his good fortune, sells all that he has to buy the field (Matthew 13, 44). At the literal level, this is a mini-narrative complete in itself, comprehensible to the simplest of listeners and totally memorable. Like a seed planted in the ground in another parable, the inner message may one day bear fruit in the 'heart' (soul, spirit) of the man who hears it. To those of greater sensitivity or education, the story will immediately reveal itself as an allegory, that is, a sustained metaphor; and although such a technical term may not occur to the listener the message will flower under its own momentum. The inner sense contains the mystical or anagogical level. At this point the true value of 'man', 'field', 'treasure', 'purchase' will unfold, we may say, to those that have "ears to hear", as Matthew observes in verse 43 of the same chapter. The man is the soul; the treasure is Heaven, or the word of God, or paradise; the field is this existence; the purchase is the sacrifice to be made for the greater good of the soul.

In verses (45-46) of the same book the Evangelist tells the story of "the pearl of great price" which has much the same structure as the earlier parable, with the difference that a merchant is not discovering but "seeking" the fine pearl which represents, we are told, "the kingdom of Heaven". Again, the pearl once found is bought at the price of all else that the seeker currently owns. These tiny narratives encapsulate certain abstractions: relative worth, unflinching endeavour, and self-sacrifice. The enquirer who is willing to make further inter-cultural researches into the inner sense of the resplendent pearl will find that the pure integrity of the prize to be gained (the 'pearl in the oyster') is universally converted into a symbol of life, divinity, and rebirth.[8] One might be surprised to learn that such values are associated with the simple product of a grain of sand embedded in a mollusc found in the muddy depths of sea or river, until one brings together (first imaginatively and then rationally) the associations of light and brightness with the rarity and purity of the godhead, the contrast between underwater darkness and airy brilliance, and the timeless effort which the humble oyster makes in creating a thing of great beauty. All these and more can be recognised by any man or woman with a developed sense of wonder.

Here is an example of associative thinking based on observation which we can readily share with our untutored predecessors. Where the associations are clear, as in the above examples, none I think will deny the validity of a 'comparative symbolism', which unlike its related disciplines, comparative religion or mythology, is founded on verifiable and concrete

universals: the shape, size and colour of life-forms, their growth and behaviour, which man observes and interprets using cognitive processes common to every member of the human race. With all this in mind, the reader will more easily grasp the sensitivity of peoples of the world who have variously treated the pearl as an active agent of resurrection in the Afterlife, by sewing pearls on grave clothes or placing them in coffins, or in body orifices, for example (a practice attested in India, Borneo, Laos, Mexico, Florida) or that from its resemblance to the Moon or a foetus in the shell-womb, the pearl has been used in Hindu medicine for its life-giving principle, if not consistently effective properties. The same lunar and biological parallels associate the pearl and its host (the bipartite 'vulva' of the oyster shell) with notions of love and conception, while the very same associations determine its use as a reputed aphrodisiac, a development which further identifies the sea shell as the celebrated birth place of Venus or Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Gradually through all these symbolic linkages the pearl came to represent all that is finest in the universe, the mystery of the transcendent made manifest, or even the mystic Centre from which life emanates.

These examples reveal that although the symbol may be clad in physical form it inevitably gathers a multitude of thoughts and associations around it. It may for that reason become an object for meditation, at which time its emergent meanings may be idiosyncratically personal to the beholder but in no way less valid. On a broader front the symbol may take on an external cultural life of its own as, for example, an element in myth (story telling) or ritual (a focus of worship) or magic (an amulet or talisman). The categories converse and interact with each other in a highly complex language of endlessly replicating referents.

Before and After Homer

This allegorising, interpretative system reflects the style in which the early Christian Fathers and later mediaeval exegetes interpreted the scriptures in Western Europe for the education of the faithful. From the first centuries of the early Church until the Reformation, an unbroken tradition explained the Old and New Testaments in terms of a single coherent revelation. So confident was the Church that it possessed the scriptural testimony of the one true God, that the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the coming of the Messiah were considered totally validated by the birth of Christ; and the coming of Christ likewise validated the prophecies of Isaiah. No anxieties therefore about the circular argument

among these early scholastics. In fact, circularity provided total vindication.

Proof will be needed that such thinking was not a purely Christian development but had its roots in the more ancient world. So, information is offered that the same process can be seen in the dense metaphoric language of the *Vedas* and the cryptic language of Near Eastern prayers and hymns. But one can do no better in the search for ancient models than to turn to the Egypt of the Pharaohs, whose civilisation flourished well before the classical period in Greece and even before the Abrahamic religions came to prominence in the Near East. As early as the third millennium BCE the Egyptians were using a form of hieroglyphic writing, constructing astronomically-aligned temples and pyramids, and adorning their buildings with complex figures which had a material or sensory value as animals, birds, ornaments, tools, buildings or furniture. Today we are relatively well informed about this culture since the translation of hieroglyphs has now opened up the meaning and purpose of the symbols which adorn the surviving monuments, of which there are many. What has been revealed is the value of the separate object within a schema, where each appears initially as itself, but metaphorically and predominantly by an association of ideas as the expression of a wider principle or an ideal form. Unless the assemblage is read as a whole the value of the units is negligible. But once read, the 'essence' can be seen as informing every part of the whole.

Egyptian culture was deeply imbued with awareness of a spiritual presence which flowed from above. At moments when there was a particular need to channel this power, the *djed* pillar decorated as a tree or staff or human spinal column would be raised in ritual confirmation of the vertical connection between sky and land. This imagined downward flow permeated all forms of things seen below: men, animals, landscapes, even buildings. One may speak of a ritually-enforced enhancement of the transcendent-immanent condition of the universe, in which all that is 'below' is informed by the power from 'above' in which it partakes. Awareness of this unifying vertical dimension had the advantage of giving man a sense of identity with his surroundings, which he experienced both in their material and non-physical aspects, that is, in their transcendent values. The divine source could be known through the object, since all was one. This concept of an integrated world, defined by 'Oneness', nurtures a system which has particular relevance to the unravelling of Homeric metaphor, as we shall see.

Also in the third millennium, the neighbouring Babylonians were developing a divinatory system that interpreted the 'signs' in the Heavens

in relation to events on Earth; this was the beginning of a system we would today call, rather deprecatingly, astrology, but no such distinction was made between astrology and astronomy until the sixteenth century of our era. The process of 'reading the signs' rested on the proposition that everything in the universe related to some other aspect or happening. However small, every event would find a correlate elsewhere. Once the connections between astral phenomena and earthly events had been made (mystically or empirically) they would be codified for future reference. At first, the sought-for signs which were found among the celestial bodies, the winds, or the weather, chiefly concerned the welfare of the king and the state he ruled. Yet as a result of the intense effort invested in understanding 'the will of the gods', astronomers of the East acquired a set of tables and unbroken records that eventually served as the foundation of a mathematically-accurate understanding of planetary movements. In short, 'magic' finally became 'science', but not until long after the Homeric age.

'Deciphering' Homer

The aim of this work is to show that Homer, also, was operating a symbol system or implying truths perhaps too rich or portentous to be revealed directly to men of lesser understanding (without "ears to hear"). The task involves drawing out or decoding another consistent layer of meaning from the familiar narrative. A challenge was long ago offered by those Hellenistic allegorists of later centuries who certainly thought they had found evidence of one or more subtexts in the Homeric corpus. But here in the current unravelling the focus is upon identifying and describing those symbolic utterances most securely rooted in the text. Ideally, those hidden elements should extend and support the wider thematic development of the work or, in the language of code makers and breakers, the surface narrative which acts as the uncoded, coherent message *en clair* must be broken and reconstructed to show a secondary meaning. Once successfully deciphered, of course, the coded and uncoded alike are revealed as separate but complementary modes of the same message. Only when the subtext has gained a level of coherence equal to the logic of the upper level will it be possible to claim that the message is finally unravelled. This is the ambitious undertaking that the present writer has set as a goal.

A Common Denominator

Where there are notable ambiguities or gaps in evidence, or even when none is apparent, one would always wish for a stabilising, shared element which might serve as a yardstick or supporting framework, and since this study deals with heroic adventures in a cosmological setting this reference point must also be cosmic in nature. It is fortunate that there is such a system in place and fully documented, and one moreover that has been found within every major culture from at least the third millennium BCE, and still endures to this day. This is the shaman's imagined projection of a link to Heaven, an *axis mundi*, which can be reproduced at any place and at any time, by ritual means or by re-valorisation of simple domestic structures such as the pillar, column or kingpost of the house, the ceremonial *djed* mentioned earlier, a totem pole, or a tree post cut from a sacred glade.[9] Within the same scheme, domestic hearths or altars for burnt sacrifice become the symbolic points of penetration ('*omphaloi'*) of the Earth's surface by 'the axis of smoke' which unites Earth to Heaven and mankind to the gods. This is not to be confused with the central axis of the Earth's rotation which is a geographic convenience with little or no metaphoric value. (The idealised *axis* is here italicised; the geographical polar axis is not).

We know the symbolic *axis* as the Tree of Life, the World Axis or World Pillar and central component of a geometric figure which defines the *imago mundi*, our world picture. Man's place in the cosmos can just as easily be defined in simple symbolism by the use of a vertical object such as a rod, spear or column pointing to the zenith of the skies from a horizontal line defining his plane of existence, the Earth; while the combined vertical and horizontal projections establish at their intersection the centre of his being. From this ('omphalic') centre he will imaginatively project the four directions of space which define his world's cardinal limits and maintain its stability. Vertical and horizontal are safely contained within the circle which binds the whole and defines the limits of his experience in the same way that the curve of the horizon shows where Earth ends and meets the sky. In a version found in Finnish folklore, a 'nail' fastens the vertical *axis* to the high point of the starry firmament in the 'inverted bowl' of the upper hemisphere, whilst a mountain serves as marker to the stabilising point of the *axis* where it roots in the navel of the Earth (figure P-1). By applying to the epic's symbolism the most general qualities attributed to the communicative *axis* and receptive *omphalos* (power, fertility, justice, eternal life, etc., all divinely inspired and gifted) we shall acquire a reference tool invaluable to the decipherment of some

of the more cryptic Homeric utterances. The *axis* will be seen to guide the heroic adventurer far out into space to points of transformation which will reveal far more to him about the rules of living and dying than he would ever learn on Earth. To acquire immortality or even a second or third chance to live again in this archaic world, the departing soul of man follows the apparent path of the Sun towards the source of life itself. And nothing could be more natural than to imagine that life after death will be conducted in a realm which is a romanticised, wish-fulfilling image of the known terrestrial world, or its mirror image in the case of the lower infernal realms; that it will have similar social structures, prohibitions and *mores*, an identical awareness of natural cycles and celestial phenomena, the same geography of mountains, rivers, islands and seas. At times it will be difficult to determine whether our hero is present in this world or another, but perhaps in the archaic mind the two were co-existent and inseparable.

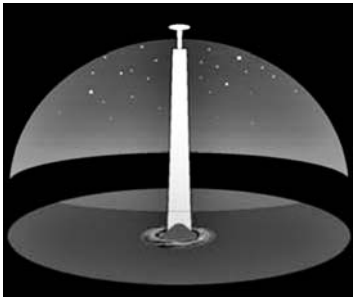

Figure P-1

Cosmology in Pre-History

It has to be admitted that a journey made in the footsteps of Odysseus will take us along a myriad of wandering paths, but there are definite junction points where the story may lead in more than one direction, and so it should, since the ancient reality of our worldview was a vast interconnectedness. Nowadays we speak of the Gaia principle as if it were a contemporary discovery, but our ancestors knew only too well the dangers of neglecting their environment, hence for them the granting of due honour to the controlling climactic powers was an important part of maintaining the fragile balance of life. From the positions and phases of

the Sun, Moon and stars, men learnt when to plant, to harvest and to fish safely, for these were visible seasonal markers ingrained in folk memory, fit to guide the farmer and sailor through the agricultural year. To neglect the stellar calendar was to risk drought, flooding or stormy weather and to put long-term survival at risk, so the sky-watching that led in time to apparently fanciful myth-making was at its inception a serious matter of maintaining harmony between upper and lower worlds.

Unfortunately for those dependent upon it, the source of that harmonious balance (the firmament with all its mighty shining, circling bodies) has through history proved vulnerable to cyclic cosmic upheaval impacting upon the Earth, inevitably with disastrous consequences. Fire, flood and massive loss of life attend each new World Age as the world shifts (or 'precesses') on its polar axis: all the more reason, to the archaic mind, to strengthen and renew the power of the replicating *axis* by exhibiting, raising, adorning and worshipping a pole or column, temple or ziggurat, or the priestly personage who channels such down-flowing powers through his spinal column. Meanwhile, there was no more valuable activity for men of practical intelligence than to measure and anticipate changes in the sky, to record what was witnessed, to take magical or ritual measures to divert potential disaster and to hand on that knowledge to future generations in a coded language accessible to those of their own kind, those who needed to know and knew how to see.

This is the substance of the cosmic imagery of the *Odyssey* and perhaps too of the *Iliad*.[10] The question of whether Homer invented his own code or inherited it from formulaic material I leave to those better qualified to analyse the linguistic inheritance, but this is to be emphasised: it is in the mentality of the poet (of any century) to grasp instinctively the inner sense of an image and to re-shape and enhance it for future generations. Great visionary poets such as Virgil, Dante, Milton, Blake, and in recent times, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, are but a few who have used the cosmos as the metaphor par excellence for the spiritual life of man, and surely Homer is no exception, nor Plato, for although not a poet he too found in cosmic myth an ideal medium for the transmission of his philosophy. He and the other poets mentioned in this paragraph have all drawn inspiration from the *Odyssey* for their own renderings of a journey which is more in the nature of a soul-journey than a (relatively) shallow voyage of adventure.

I have tried to present the material under clear headings in order to guide the reader through some extremely challenging concepts, but inevitably there will be some overlapping and repetition. This is not intentional, but it is in the nature of the material that it is applicable to

more than one circumstance. Repetition has the added advantages of highlighting important points of convergence and testing them both accumulatively and in multiple contexts. If a false connection is made it will not stand up to the competing claims of those others which are buttressed by multiple instances, some of which may prove to be fundamental and universal principles; the 'false' or 'weak' interpretation will eventually be elbowed out by better-supported readings. In pursuing this unconventional approach to the symbolism of Homer I have allowed the material itself to give the lead; the cosmological implications have not been imposed on the text (for they are implications which I was at first poorly qualified to understand and would have greatly preferred not to find), on the contrary, they were forced upon me by the implications of the more cryptic and elliptical of Homer's "great signs", such as the oar, the tree, and the pillar; from there the process found its own momentum. Just as the sculptor is said to 'find' his finished work in the rough stone of his beginnings, Homer's cosmology has been permitted here to reveal itself from within the text, with the minimum of deliberate shaping. The reader is accordingly invited to join in this exceptional voyage, and if at times an assertion strains his credulity, he is politely advised to delay judgment until he sees where a putative theory may safely lead. Proof is not in the detail but in the totality and the final coming together of many stray threads.

Notes

[1] *Cosmological Themes and Motifs in the Odyssey of Homer with some Antecedents in Minoan and Mycenean Iconography*. Dept. of Classical Studies, Open University (UK) 2007.
[2] Lawlor (1982).
[3] Worthen (1992).
[4] Guénon (1995) pp. 304ff.
[5] Eliade (1965).
[6] Levi-Bruhl (1926) p. 73.
[7] Pausanias, 8.8.3.
[8] Eliade (1991) pp. 144-150.
[9] Eliade (1987) pp. 20f.
[10] Wood and Wood (1999, 2010).

PART ONE:

FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

PSYCHE, SOUL AND AFTERLIFE, SOUL AND COSMOS

Homer does not favour his audience with a full, direct expression of his philosophy concerning the end of man's life, nor indeed does he offer any clear expectation for continued existence beyond the frontier of death. It is not necessarily that he had none; quite possibly he chose to express such ideas in a guarded form. To keep the secret of a mystery whilst sharing it obliquely with other initiates seems very much in accord with the known history of such movements; for sure, the skills required for such an undertaking were certainly not beyond the powers of our poet, nor does he leave us bereft of clues. Certain objects are imbued with an extra-ordinary significance, and certain personalities betray remarkable powers that have to be unearthed from scant or indirect information. But for all we know, the trail of clues may have stood out with greater clarity for the people of Homer's own time and culture.

Significant Objects

The *Odyssey* contains four instances where the poet points to specific objects and tells his reader in quite unequivocal terms, this is a sign, *sema,* or even a great sign, *mega sema*. In the *Iliad*, a great sign was highlighted in the second book (308-330) as a portent of Troy's destruction after ten years of fighting. It involved a snake emerging from beneath an altar by a spring and making its way to a plane tree where a mother bird has housed her eight 'children'. The snake consumes first the nestlings then the mother herself. Kalchas interprets the sign as a portent of victory and the conquest of Troy in the tenth year of conflict, and all comes to pass as he has foreseen. Unfortunately there is not always a Kalchas to hand to clarify the sense of the sign, so we must fall back on our own resources when it comes to unravelling them. Clearly this example draws to some extent on number symbolism, but there are further resonances in the form of the snake ('Earth powers') the nurturing tree ('Tree of Life') and the altar by the spring, where water emerges from an aperture ('*omphalos*',