



ELYSION AND EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a novel synthesis of Archaic Greek cosmography and to highlight the role of the Near East—and especially Egypt—in the formation of Greek imagination about the beyond. The time span under examination is the era between the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, the so-called Orientalizing period. It will be argued that a coherent Greek cosmology was formulated at this time by Hesiod and Homer, and that this cosmology is comprehensible only by reference to a cosmic map that is reconstructed here. Further, it will be argued that Egyptian motifs concerning the afterlife were adopted by the Greeks, but that the fundamental Egyptian metaphysical philosophy that the sun revives the dead was not borrowed. Finally, it will be argued that itinerant singers transmitted the motifs during the Orientalizing period.

CONSTRUCTING A MAP

It is generally acknowledged that some Egyptian ideas influenced Greek perceptions of the beyond. But how did this happen? Was oral tradition responsible? If so, was it not impeded by language barriers? All these questions will be addressed in turn as we examine first the coherence of Greek cosmology, and second its relationship to Egyptian literature and metaphysics. Finally, we shall look at the historical events in the eighth and seventh centuries in order to suggest a model for the transmission of motifs from Egypt to Greece.

The first question to be asked is what the world looked like to early archaic Greek poets such as Hesiod and Homer.¹ We have no pictorial map left from this period in Greece, but we are lucky that a roughly contemporaneous document is known from elsewhere. It is a clay tablet from Babylon (now in the British Museum), dated between the ninth and seventh centuries. Fortunately, the design is accompanied by inscriptions, and the back of the tablet provides a commentary.² An adaptation of this Babylonian map is presented here (Figure 1).³ In it, the world is rendered as an elegant star-like geometric design, a circle with an outer rim and triangular projections. The commentary makes clear that the outer rim is a river, and that this mass of water constitutes a clear boundary between earth and the beyond. The far side of this river is the beyond represented by triangular regions called *nagu*.⁴

The most important point about the cosmic river is that it is *not* crossable by humans; it was perhaps analogous to the Egyptian celestial Nile.⁵ We meet this same watery boundary also in the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where it is called “lethal waters.” The woman Sidouri says to Gilgamesh when he tries to cross it:

“There has never been a ferry of any kind, Gilgamesh,
And nobody from time immemorial has crossed
the sea . . .
The crossing is . . . very difficult,
And in between are lethal waters which bar the
way ahead.”

*(The Epic of Gilgamesh X, ii).*⁶

With this background in mind as regards the significance and location of the cosmic river, we now turn to the Greek universe of the seventh century. If we had a map from this period, which we unfortunately do not, it is likely that it would have looked much like its Babylonian counterpart. We may infer this because Homer gives a verbal description of the cosmos that matches the Babylonian tablet rather well. In *Iliad* 18, the poet describes the shield of Achilles as a veritable model of the universe: it is round and has various scenes engraved on its surface. In the center is the sun, moon, and stars; there follow concentric circles with men and beasts, cities at war and at peace, hunting and dance. The outer rim is the river Ocean, which encircles the universe (Il. 18.478–608). In vain have scholars tried to match this description with actual shields of the Greek Archaic period; it is instead a poetic construction of the cosmos surrounded by a cosmic river (Figure 2).⁷

LOCATION OF THE ELYSION FIELD AND ISLES OF MAKARES ON THE COSMIC MAP

If we were to draw a Greek map analogous to its Babylonian counterpart, it would be wise to start by locating the Greek paradise, variously called the Elysion Field or the

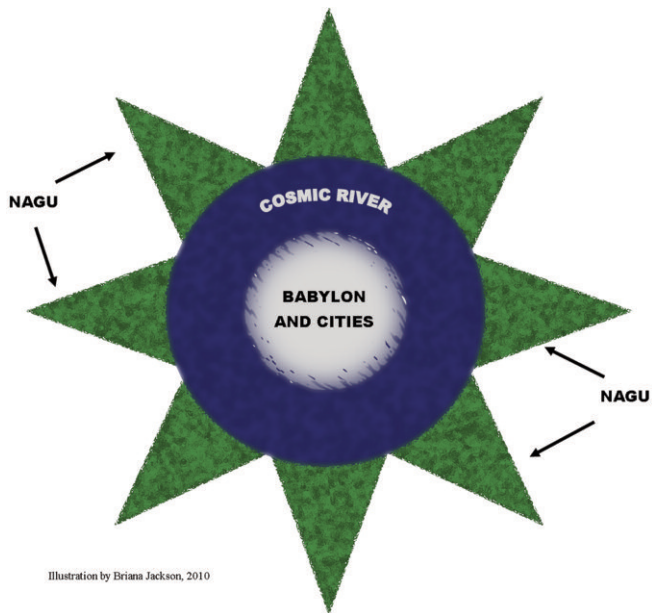
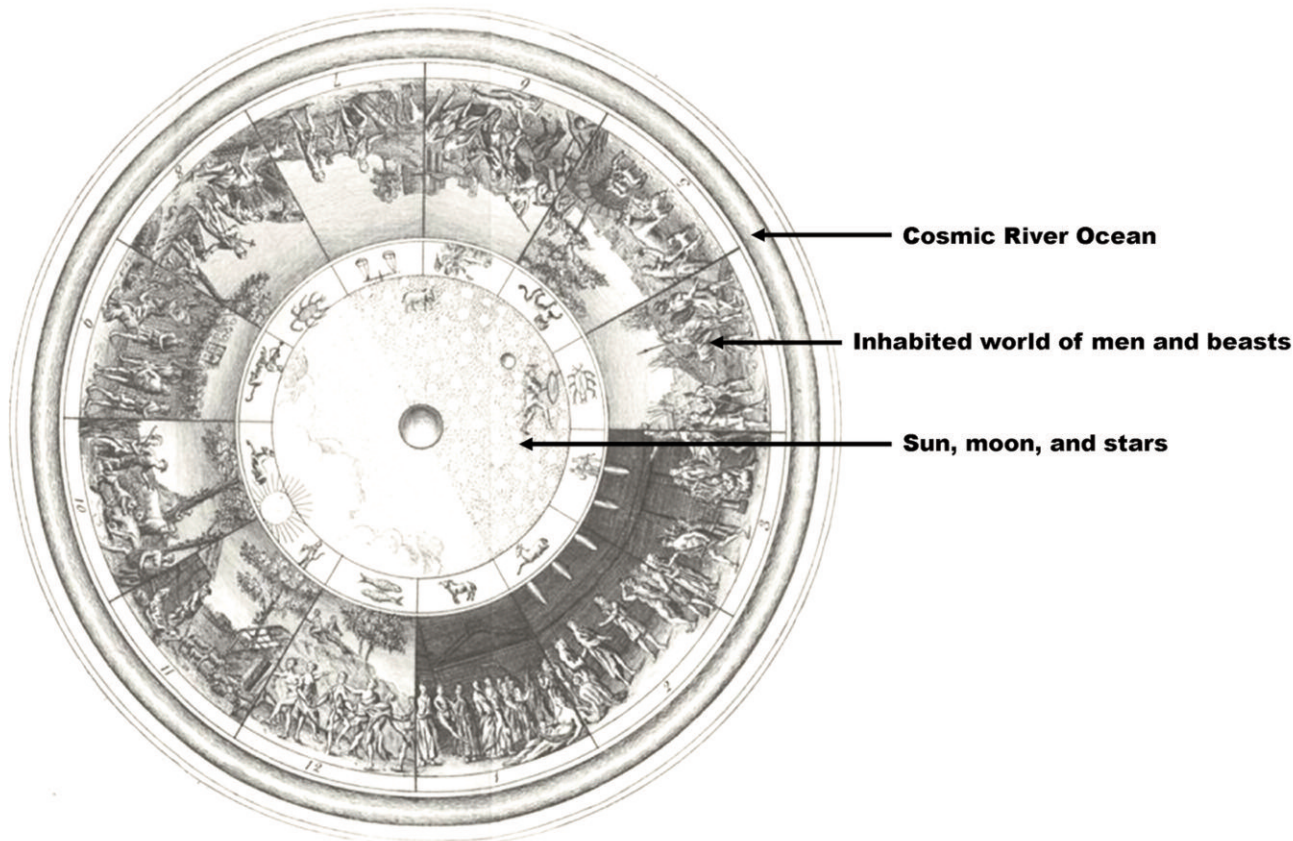


Illustration by Briana Jackson, 2010

Figure 1. Babylonian cosmological map. After Wyatt 2001, Figure 81; adapted by Briana Jackson.

Figure 2. The Shield of Achilles. Visual rendition by Briana Jackson based on eighteenth-century illustration of A. Pope’s *Iliad*, London 1760.



Isles of Makares.⁸ Both names have an obscure etymology—possibly non-Greek in origin—to which we shall return later. For the moment, we shall be concerned with the question of the location of these places on the conceptual cosmic map of Archaic Greece.

A passage in Homer’s *Odyssey* tells us that the Elysion Field is located at the edges of the world. The story is as follows. The Spartan king Menelaus is blown off course on his way home from Troy and ends up in Egypt. There, he meets a supernatural being called Proteus who assures him he will not die but will go to the Elysion Field at “the ends of the earth,” where Rhadamanthys ensures the best possible lives for people. There is no rain, no snow, no cold; tuneful breezes are sent by the cosmic river Ocean and refresh (or revive) man’s soul (*anapsyche*, *Od.* 4.565–568). We thus learn that Menelaus will go to the world’s end, but this will not require death; rather, he will be miraculously transported there by the gods. It is perhaps no accident that he gets this information in Egypt.

Another author who mentions the Greek paradise is Hesiod, but he gives it another name: the Isles of Makares. In Martin West’s translation:

To some [of the demigods] Zeus the father, son of Kronos, granted a life and home apart from men, and settled them at the ends of the earth. These dwell with carefree heart in the Isles of the Blessed

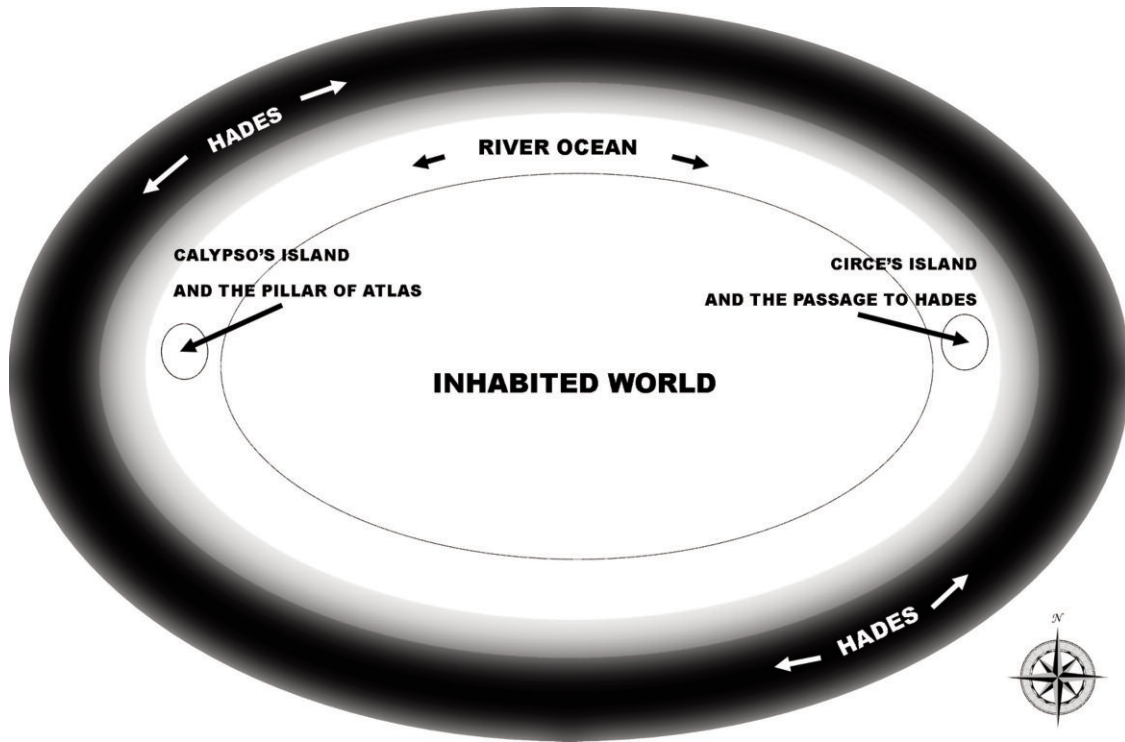


Figure 3. The journey of Odysseus on a reconstructed Greek cosmic map. Reconstruction by Nanno Marinatos; illustration by Briana Jackson.

Ones [in Gr. *makares*] beside deep-swirling Oceanus: fortunate Heroes, for whom the grain-giving soil bears its honey-sweet fruits thrice a year (WD 167–172).⁹

The Isles of Makares and the Elysion Field have some common characteristics despite the difference in their names: both are located by the river Ocean, and in both there is beauty, a good climate, and an abundance of food. As well, men who are situated there do not die.

Note that *makares* is rendered as “blessed” by many scholars (including West, as quoted above). This is a good rendition, but there may be a pitfall in it: the misunderstanding could arise that *Elysion* is a place where the dead are rewarded for their good deeds. We shall propose a new rendering for *makares* below.

We also meet the (single) Isle of Makares in the work of Pindar in the fifth century. Although he introduces a new type of theology, this cannot be our concern in this paper for lack of space; we simply note that he too locates the isle next to the river Ocean and refers to pleasant breezes as well as blossoms of shining gold (*Olympian* 2.70–73). There is thus little doubt that the paradise of the Greeks was imagined by the shores of the river Ocean.

All this bears some resemblance to Egyptian visions of the afterlife as depicted on papyri and New Kingdom tombs. But there is a difference: there is no indication that the souls of the ordinary dead are destined for the Elysion Field or Isles of Makares. These places are rather designated for selected heroes,

such as those who received hero cults or were celebrated in poetry (e.g., Menelaus and Achilles).¹⁰ In our attempt to better understand the cartography of the beyond, we shall now take a look at which other lands lie on the banks of the Ocean.

THE LANDS OF THE BEYOND AND IMMORTALITY

It is clear that Homer and Hesiod imagined the Ocean as encircling the world: “around [Thetis’s cave] flowed Ocean” says Homer in the *Iliad* (Il. 18.402), and Hesiod says, “Ocean swirls around the universe” (Theog. 790–791; see also Hdt. 2.23, 4.36.2). In the first passage, Homer means that Thetis is at the depths of the encircling Ocean. Both poets take this idea for granted and provide no further commentary; this suggests that their audience had a clear mental image of the topography.

The idea of a circular cosmos fringed by geographical regions of another world is further made clear in the narrative of the *Odyssey*.¹¹ Odysseus travels from the Cyclopes to the island of Circe in the east, then to the island of the sun, finally arriving at Calypso’s isle in the west (Figure 3). One of the present authors has argued elsewhere that since Circe is a daughter of the sun (Od. 10. 138) and Calypso a daughter of Atlas, the journey of Odysseus, like that of Gilgamesh, seems to follow the course of the solar path around the cosmos.¹² Note, however, that from Circe’s island, Odysseus crosses the Ocean to Hades and then back; more will be said on this later (see “Hades”). In all, a Greek cosmic map based on the model of the Babylonian universe makes perfect

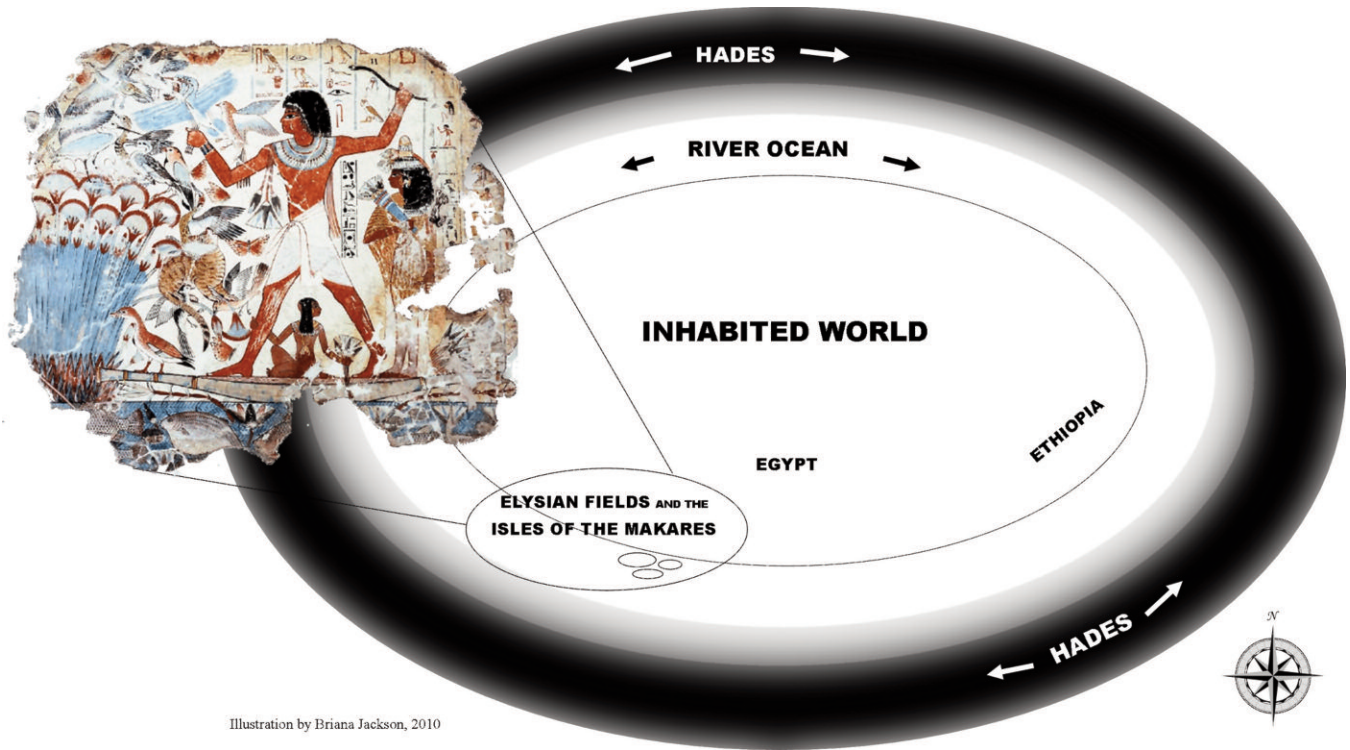


Illustration by Briana Jackson, 2010

Figure 4. A Greek cosmic map. Reconstruction by Nanno Marinatos; illustration by Briana Jackson.

sense of the complex narrative of the *Odyssey* (Figures 1–4). Without such a map, the narrative is puzzling: why does Odysseus need to cross back to Circe after travelling to Hades?

Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, gives us further clues as to the geography of the beyond through his references to the inhabitants of the edges of the universe: they are monsters, giants, or demigods, and they include the generation of heroes. Examples include the goddesses of the sunset, the Hesperides, said to be on the far side of the famous Ocean (Theog. 215); the monstrous Gorgons (Theog. 274); and Orthros and Eurytion, located across the Ocean in a “misty station” (Theog. 294).¹³

Some points of a summary nature are now in order. A first observation is that there was a clear conception of cosmic geography in the seventh century. Along the banks of the Ocean lived creatures that were either terrifying or kindly, heroes or monsters, beautiful or ugly—some mortal (like Eurytion and the Gorgon Medusa), but many immortal (like the other Gorgons and Circe). This is why the Elysion Field and the Isles of Makares are situated near the Ocean: they are not places for the dead, but rather represent a zone between the inhabited world and the completely separate world of Hades (Figure 4). Most of the inhabitants there are timeless and immortal, which could explain why Odysseus will be deathless if he stays with Calypso (Od. 5.209).

A second observation is that the primeval creatures are progenitors. Ocean is a progenitor of the world’s rivers (Theog. 337–370; Il. 21.195–197), and in the *Iliad* is progenitor of all the gods and the universe (Il. 14.201, 14.246). This implies

that the edges of space are also the edges of time; alternatively, we may say that time begins at the edges of space. The brilliance of Hesiod’s conception of *Theogony* is that it combines time and space into a single narrative: he starts his story with chaos at the edges of the universe and ends with the reign of civilized Zeus, whom he places closer to the center.

The Myth of the Five Races in the *Works and Days* reinforces the hypothesis that the early beings at the edges of space and time are immortal. Hesiod relates that the first generation of men was golden, followed by men of silver and bronze, until the heroes came as the fourth generation. The fifth race (which lived in the poet’s day) was one of iron. The men of gold were similar to the gods (WD 112), having a life free from toil and misery; they were, in other words, like the Makares. The earth bore them abundant crops of its own accord (WD 112*ff.*), and they lived at the edges of time, contemporaneous with Kronos (WD 111).

Hesiod refers to the heroic fourth generation as *hemitheoi* (WD 159–60). Now, there is an anomaly in this scheme, considering that the heroes are genealogically linked directly to the gods (unlike the earlier races), yet precede the generation of iron—they are *de facto* immortal, yet they are not gods. The solution for Hesiod was to place them at the edges of the world, close to the golden generation that existed at the beginning of space and time. In this way, the characters of poetry reflect in some way the heroes who received cults throughout the Greek world.¹⁴ This function was served well by the Elysion Field and the Isles of Makares next to the river Ocean in the company of fantastic crea-

tures who are neither gods nor men. However, without a visual rendition of the cosmic map, it is hard to appreciate the coherence of Homer's and Hesiod's cosmology (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁵

EGYPT AND THE IDEA OF PLENTY

There is another striking feature that characterizes the lands at the edges of the world, and this one will lead us to Egypt. All the regions so far considered have plentiful food and abundant harvests. As regards the Isles of Makares by the river Ocean, Hesiod explains that honey-sweet fruit blooms three times a year and that the land is grain-bearing (WD 172–3); Homer does not specify that the Elysion Field is fruitful, but this may be directly inferred from the fact that life is easy for men there, and that the climate is temperate (Od. 4.565–8).¹⁶

Also, the lands that Odysseus visits on his cosmic journey are all exceptionally rich. Circe's island provides a large deer that Odysseus hunts upon arrival; he and his men eventually feast on meat and wine for an entire year (Od. 10.158, 10.467–8). The island of the Phaeacians is equally rich in fruits and vegetables (Od. 7.114–128), although its land must be cultivated (Od. 6.10, 7.117–8). Zephyr's breeze enhances the production of the Phaeacians's crops, which recalls the refreshing breezes on Elysion (Od. 4.567–8, 7.118–9). The Cyclopes, next to whom the Phaeacians once lived (Od. 6.5), also receive bountiful crops (Od. 9.108–111). We must conclude, therefore, that the periphery of the world near Ocean is characterized by lands of abundance.

It has been noticed of old that these ideas may be Egyptian. The Swedish scholar Martin Nilsson made a case in 1927 that both the Elysion Field and Isles of Makares have an Egyptian origin. Before him, Sir Wallis Budge and Sir Arthur Evans had associated Elysion with the Egyptian Field of Reeds (*iaru*) in the so-called *Book of the Dead*. These scholars were led to make this connection by the similarities in the paradisiacal descriptions of abundance common to both traditions. Evans and subsequently Nilsson thought that the idea of Elysion had arrived in Greece through the earlier culture of Minoan Crete.¹⁷ This hypothesis, however, makes the transmission unnecessarily complicated (in fact, almost impossible) because the Minoans flourished almost one thousand years before Hesiod and Homer. Even more importantly, there was a disruption of the literary tradition of the Aegean during these thousand years; the language changed and Minoan was gradually obliterated, although relics of the spoken language may have lingered on Crete. What's more, the hypothesis of continuity between Minoan and Greek through Mycenaean ignores the fact that the Eastern Mediterranean was as unified in the eighth and the seventh century BCE as in the Bronze Age (under circumstances that will be explained in the last section of this paper); this unification affected artistic conceptions as well as literature and religion.

A *koine*, or common tradition, has been demonstrated for Greece and the Near East by the works of Walter Burkert and Martin West, and for Egypt and the Near East by Othmar Keel

and his school. Nicolas Wyatt has added the biblical and Ugaritic traditions to this *koine*. Yet the relationship between Greece and Egypt during the Orientalizing period remains relatively unexplored territory.¹⁸ We argue for a relationship between Egyptian and Greek ideas—one that rests, however, not in common metaphysical beliefs but in the theme of lands of plenty.

Turning now to an issue of etymology, some scholars link *makar* in the name “Isles of Makares” with the Egyptian term *makheru*, “the dead who is justified of voice.”¹⁹ The problem with this connection is that the Isles of Makares and the Elysion Field are *not* associated with the dead in Hesiod and Homer. This problem may be overcome by arguing that Egyptian *makheru* somehow lost its association with the afterlife when transferred into Greek—but if this is the case, then one cannot project Egyptian afterlife beliefs onto Homer and Hesiod, as some scholars have done.²⁰ Indeed, the only common denominator between the mythical Egyptian and Greek locations is that both are characterized by abundance. Two passages, one from the *Book of the Dead* and the other from Hesiod, compare well. In the Egyptian text, we read:

I know the Field of Rushes: its wall is of metal; its barley is five cubits tall—ears two cubits, stalks three cubits. Its emmer is six cubits. . . . Reap it by the side of the Souls of the East.²¹

This spell recalls the previously cited passage by Hesiod: “These dwell with carefree heart in the Isles of the Makares . . . fortunate Heroes, for whom the grain-giving soil bears its honey-sweet fruits thrice a year” (WD 170–173).²² A common tradition about lands of plenty may be in the background here, but there is no precise eschatological correspondence between the beliefs of the Egyptians and Archaic Greeks. Having noted this discrepancy (to be explained shortly), we continue with more evidence of similar literary themes shared between Greece and Egypt.

An Egyptian tale known as the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, dated to the Twelfth Dynasty or later, has a curious structural similarity to the story of Menelaus in the *Odyssey*. A sailor is shipwrecked on a strange island and is stranded there alone, like Menelaus stranded on the coast of the Egyptian delta. The sailor meets a talking serpent, as does Menelaus in the *Odyssey*; Proteus, whose name incidentally means “primeval,” has the capacity to turn into wild animals, including a serpent (Od. 4.457). Tellingly, the serpent in the Egyptian story identifies the island as “the island of the spirit [*ka*]” (SS 115).²³ This suggests the island was located at the edges of the universe, for where else could the *ka* be?²⁴ Moreover, the island of *ka* is described as being far from the inhabited world, since the sailor only reaches it after being carried away by an immense storm (SS 30ff.). Finally, the island is characterized by abundance: the sailor is told by the serpent that “there is nothing that is not within [the island], and it is full of every good thing” (SS 116–117).²⁵ Indeed, after the man promises to offer sacrifices and wealth to the serpent (SS 139ff.), it replies:

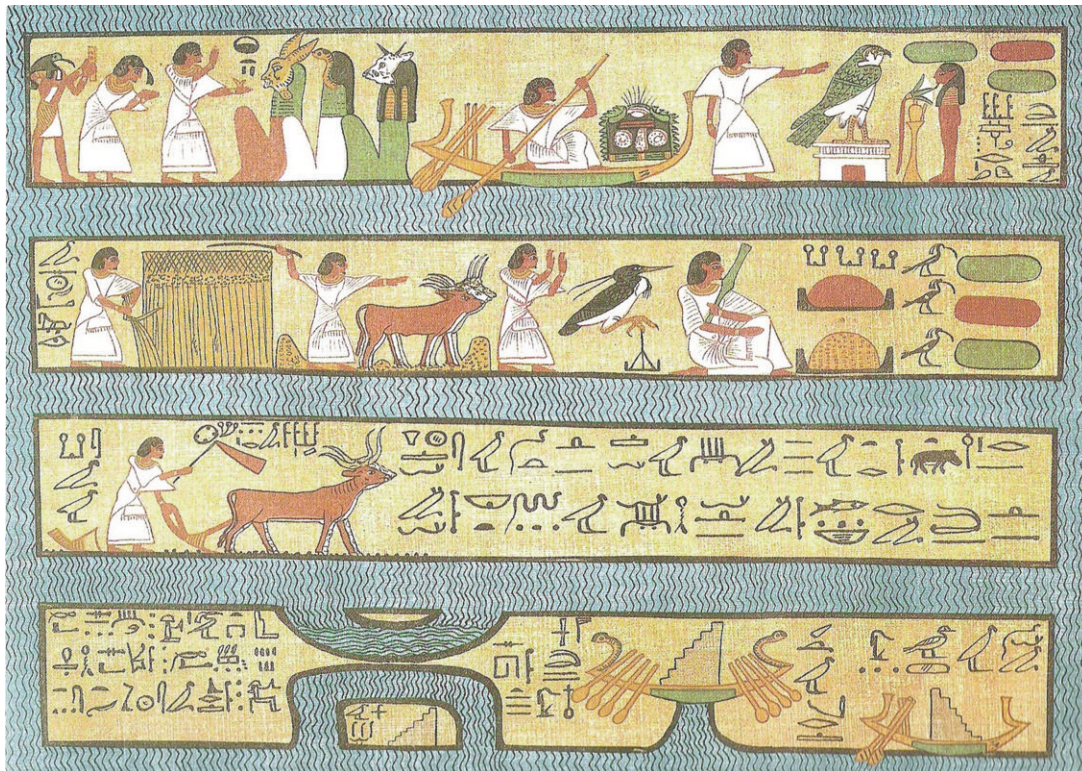


Figure 5. The Field of Reeds, Papyrus of Ani. After Faulkner 1998.

“That *malabathrum* you speak of bringing is this island’s plenty. And once it happens that you have left this place, you will never see this island again, which will have become water.” (SS 154–157).²⁶

The island of *ka* has many similarities with the Isles of Makares and other lands at the edges of the world. It is inhabited by a fantastic creature, just as the banks of the Greek Ocean are inhabited by monsters and hybrids. It is characterized by abundance so great that it is said to contain everything, and the serpent endows the sailor with enormous wealth (SS 162ff.); similarly, in the *Odyssey*, the Phaeicians, whose great wealth is stressed (Od. 7.86–102, 7.114–128), offer Odysseus splendid gifts when he departs (Od. 13.10ff.). The sailor is to enjoy a fixed period of time on the island (SS 118–119), just as Odysseus and his comrades have a fixed time at Circe’s place (Od. 10.467–468). The island of the Egyptian tale disappears once the sailor has left; in the *Odyssey*, the island of the Phaeicians is enclosed by mountains after Odysseus has returned home (Od. 13.170ff.). The numerous parallels between the *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* and the *Odyssey* give food for thought. One element that seems to be at the center of this complex is the relationship between space, abundance, and immortality (*ka*) at the edges of the universe. One more detail: Menelaus obtains much wealth in Egypt (Od. 3.300, 4.90). This is further evidence that abundance exists at the edges of the world, and is here explicitly connected with Egypt. Parkinson, in fact, notes this in his

edition of the *Shipwrecked Sailor*, and suggests there is wordplay afoot: “island of *ka*” or “island of the spirit” is homonymous with “island of abundance.”²⁷ The feature of abundance no doubt draws on the background of the Field of Reeds, but the eschatological dimension is dispensed with in the tale.²⁸ We may thus posit a motif regarding abundance at the edges of the inhabited world that does not necessarily entail complex afterlife beliefs, even in Egypt.

To sum up: a connection between the concepts behind the Egyptian Field of Reeds/island of *ka* and the Greek Elysion Field/Isles of Makares is quite plausible. However, during the transmission from Egyptian to Greek, the structure and meaning of the theological premises became confused. We must assume that the Greek narrators omitted details that did not fit their own tradition. We shall return to this problem in a later section.

Presently, we shall test the hypothesis of our map (Figures 3 and 4) by turning to a fifth-century narrative by Herodotus. Quite unexpectedly, the historian refers to the Isles of Makares and, rather than placing them by the Ocean, situates them at the edges of the Libyan continent, beyond Egypt and beyond the desert, giving them the additional new name of Oasis (Hdt. 3.26). Although these isles are located within real geography, they nevertheless remain at the edges of the world and are endowed with preternatural abundance (Figure 5).²⁹ It is further significant that this Oasis is situated at the borders of Egypt, indicating Egypt as a mediator between this world and the regions of the beyond in Greek imagination.

HADES

The theory proposed here—that the Elysion Field and Isles of Makares are places not primarily intended for the dead, but for heroes who have skipped death and become immortal—needs to be tested against the proposed cosmographic map represented in Figures 3 and 4. On the basis of this map, we see that Hades is on the far side of the river Ocean, whereas the Elysion Field is on the near side. Hades is reached by the dead but *not* by the sun, because the solar path stays within the boundaries of the river.

Some points make this conclusion certain. The first is that Odysseus and his men arrive to Hades only after they have *crossed* the river; the sun has not followed them there, for once they cross, the world is dark (Od. 11.13). The Kimmerians, on the other side of the Ocean, are enveloped in a cloud of perpetual mist never penetrated by the sun's rays (Od. 11.15). A second hint given by the text is that the souls of the dead suitors pass through the gates of the sun to go to Hades (Od. 24.10–14). This expression suggests that the sun's gates are along the solar path, and that the souls travel beyond these gates. A third point is that the sun states in unambiguous terms that he does not go to Hades. Only when he gets angry does he threaten to shine among the dead; Zeus then gets worried and sees to it that the order of the universe is maintained by immediately granting the sun his wishes (Od. 12.377–388). In short, the sun in the *Odyssey* does not cross the river Ocean.

We have further testimony from the sixth and fifth century writers Mimnermus and Pherekydes. A fragment of Mimnermus, for example, narrates how the sun sleeps in a winged barque and travels along the Ocean from the west, the land of Hesperides, to the east, the land of the Ethiopians;³⁰ in other words, he travels *along* the river from west to east and then climbs *upwards*, but does not *cross* the Ocean (Figure 2–4). It is worth noting, too, that when the sun sails in the Ocean, he uses a bowl (*depas*), a peculiar idea most likely indebted to the Egyptian solar barque. The parallel with the boat of the sun god, as shown for example on the Egyptian Papyrus of Ani, is evident (Figure 6).³¹

In summary, the Ocean is not only the firm boundary between the living and the dead but also the region where the sun does not travel; beyond lies dark Hades. The Elysion Field and Isles of Makares, on the other hand, get sunshine because they are on the near side of the Ocean.

We must now confront a paradox: Greek myths of the beyond have a lot in common with Egyptian lore but have *not* absorbed the basic message of Egyptian eschatology, namely the belief that the sun travels to the netherworld to revive the dead (Figures 5 and 6).³² Only bits and pieces have been picked up from Egyptian belief, yet these bits and pieces are the very stuff of which tales are made; that is, the commonality between Egyptian and Greek tales consists of themes or individual motifs rather than coherent systems of thought. The motifs include the solar barque, the wandering hero, the cosmic river, the special significance of the lands at the edges, and the presence of a primeval creature who foretells the future (Proteus or



Figure 6. The deceased in the solar barque, Papyrus of Ani. After Faulkner 1998.

the shipwrecked Egyptian sailor).³³ Evidently a koine did exist, but it consisted of clusters of motifs rather than coherent eschatological theories. To use a biological analogy, the koine was like a gene pool in which the individual motifs played a role analogous to genes; as genes combine and recombine to form new individuals and eventually new species, so too do motifs combine and recombine to form new tales.³⁴

It is now time to consider a possible explanation for just *how* contacts between Greeks, Egyptians, and peoples of the Near East resulted in the koine of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.

TRAVELING BARDS AND INTERNATIONAL EMPIRES

Let it first be noted that it is by no means self-evident how motifs are transmitted from one culture to the next. Trade is not a sufficient explanation, as it is quite doubtful that traders automatically absorb the literature of the cultures they visit; nor is it self-evident that this literature is received in their own country.

Before we attempt an answer to the questions here posed, we shall look at the Mediterranean ca. 1200–600 BCE. At the end of the Bronze Age, small city-states began flourishing around seaports. By the ninth century, the Syro-Palestinian cities of Tyre and Sidon conducted extensive trade together with Greek-speaking populations from the islands of Cyprus, Samos, Rhodes, and Crete. All these city-states and their peoples played a role in establishing contacts between the Aegean, Western Asia, and Egypt.

From the ninth century onwards, the picture changed as the Assyrian empire, with Nineveh as its capital, began expanding westward.³⁵ King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) reached the Mediterranean, unifying the region between Mesopotamia and the coast.³⁶ Samaria and Cyprus were conquered around 722. Next came Egypt; in 671, King Esarhaddon captured Memphis, and by 663, Ashurbanibal sacked the southern capital, the sacred city of Thebes.³⁷ An alliance between Iranians and Babylonians finally checked the growth of the Assyrians and brought about the fall of Nineveh in 612.

In this period, the landscape of the Mediterranean was deeply affected, although the Greeks had the great luck to escape conquest. Instead of being destroyed, they profited from the uni-

fication imposed by the Assyrian empire as opportunities for employment abroad emerged for them. As the empire was organized by its administrative machinery, traveling was made easier and safer for traders. Much of the wealth of the Near East made its way into Greece, and it is hardly an accident that the period of the Assyrian Empire coincides with the Orientalizing period of Greece, as both Walter Burkert and Martin West have explained at length.³⁸

Oddly enough, the expansion of the Assyrian empire brought the Greeks into closer contact with Egypt under the following circumstances: in the middle of the seventh century, in 663, the Assyrians conquered Egypt, and shortly thereafter sacked Thebes, the city of Amun.³⁹ It is most likely that Greek mercenaries were involved in the armies of the two forces; we may infer this because we find Ionian Greek mercenaries a few years later in the service of Psammetichus I (664–610 BCE), who rose to power thanks to their help. By subjugating local petty rulers, this pharaoh reunified Egypt and challenged the Assyrians by 656 (oddly enough, he had been educated in Assyria).⁴⁰ As Herodotus writes:

To the Ionians and Carians who helped him to gain the throne Psammetichus granted two pieces of land, opposite one another on each side of the Nile, which he named the Camps, and in addition to the grant of land kept all the other promises he had made them. (Hdt. 2.154)⁴¹

Moreover, Herodotus reports that Psammetichus founded a bilingual Greek-Egyptian school: “He even went so far as to put some Egyptian boys into their charge, to be taught Greek” (Hdt. 2.154).⁴² Consider how well this information matches some narratives in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus tells two stories about himself that actually constitute a single story with two variants; even the language is the same, word for word. A Cretan sailor and his crew arrive in Egypt and assault the local population for plunder, clashing with the Egyptian army. In one variant, Odysseus is sent to Cyprus, but in the other, he is spared by the pharaoh himself and amasses a fortune (Od. 14.274–286, 17.431–444). The pseudo-Odysseus of the tale in question supposedly meets the pharaoh personally in his chariot. This narrative takes it for granted that some Greeks made a fortune in Egypt and that they obtained favors from the pharaoh himself.

Turning to the *Iliad*, we find even more information in the form of an explicit reference to Egyptian Thebes. Achilles speaks to the envoys of Agamemnon and tells them he is not interested in Agamemnon’s riches, even if all the treasures of Thebes were offered him:

As for his gifts, I like them as little as the man himself. Not if he offered me ten times or twenty times as much as he possesses or could raise elsewhere, all

the revenues of Orchomenus or of Thebes, Egyptian Thebes, where the houses are filled with treasure, and through every one of a hundred gates two hundred warriors sally out with their chariots and horses; not if his gifts were as many . . . would Agamemnon win me over. (Il. 9.379–384)⁴³

Egyptian Thebes is here described as a magnificent city full of wealth, warriors, horses, and chariots sallying out from each gate. What is remembered most is the treasure; for this reason, Burkert has argued that the memory refers to the occasion of the siege and plunder of Egyptian Thebes by the Assyrians in 663.⁴⁴

How did this momentous event become incorporated into Greek epic? It must have been the case that among the Greek mercenaries were men who acted as professional storytellers. They must have come back to Ionia, the islands, or the mainland of Greece carrying their stories with them. They could claim to be eyewitnesses or, if they heard the story from someone else, could attribute their knowledge to divine inspiration. Needless to say, once we posit a professional storyteller and traveler, we may easily assume he would have picked up a variety of themes and motifs for his repertoire: the edges of the world, the ends of the Nile, its peoples and their customs. Bilingualism was evidently possible, as Herodotus testifies in connection with Psammetichus’s school. The bards could have learned stories from Egyptians themselves, and may have written down notes on scrolls. It was a momentous event in the history of the Mediterranean when storytelling became a marketable commodity.

A close look at the *Odyssey* from this point of view yields unexpected payoffs. Phemius is the resident bard of Odysseus’s house; he declares that he is self-taught, and that the god has implanted all kinds of poetry in his mind (Od. 22.347–348). No doubt Phemius is a provincial man who makes a living on the remote island of Ithaca and therefore claims that his asset is divine inspiration. The singer of the Phaeacians, Demodocus, is praised by Odysseus for singing vividly; was he inspired by the Muse or was he present? Both alternatives are given:

Demodocus, I admire you above all men. Either Zeus’ Child, the Muse, or Apollo must have been your teacher. For it is remarkable how accurately you sing the tale of the Achaeans’ fate and of all their achievements, sufferings and struggles. It is almost as though you had been with them yourself or heard the story from one who was. (Od. 8.487–491)⁴⁵

Odysseus, the traveler *par excellence*, is himself a bard when he tells his fictive tales about Egypt (as noted above) or when he relates his adventures. In the court of Alcinoos, he casts a spell on the audience: “Odysseus stopped speaking. Held by the spell of his words they all remained silent and still throughout the shadowy hall” (Od. 11.333–334).⁴⁶

Menelaus also becomes a storyteller when he relates what he has experienced in Egypt. The poet of the *Odyssey* may be giving a nod to his own Egyptian source when he has Menelaus receive the prophecy about the Elysion Field there. Is it an accident that in both the Egyptian *Story of Sinuhe* and in Greek literature the itinerant singer has seen distant lands?

We must note that the bard was no marginal figure in a ruler's retinue; rather, he had an essential role, particularly as an entertainer for foreign visitors. Such a role might explain the ready reception of foreign motifs by Greeks and the incorporation of these motifs into Greek literature. Odysseus remarks to the Phaeacian king that he finds nothing more pleasurable than to listen to a bard (Od. 9.2–11). The Phaeacian bard Demodocus is so important that *nine* public officials are in charge of preparing the court for his song and the ensuing dance and feast. A herald officially brings him the lyre, and Demodocus becomes the center of attention of the entire feast (Od. 8.258–260). Finally, note an interesting detail in the *Odyssey*: before setting out for Troy, Agamemnon entrusts the care of his wife Clytemnestra to none other than his bard (Od. 3.265–268). Thus we see how important the bard was in Archaic society.

We suggested above that there were employment opportunities abroad for Greek mercenaries and traders; why not also for professional singers trading stories and motifs rather than commodities? In the *Odyssey*, these men are listed as very welcome itinerant craftsmen, together with prophets and physicians (Od. 17.381–386).⁴⁷ In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, bards are mentioned alongside potters and joiners (WD 25–26). These are not isolated, provincial individuals but competitive, innovative artists. Odysseus honors Demodocus, giving him the choicest cut of boar, and declares that men honor and respect bards and that the Muse loves their fraternity, or *phylon* (Od. 8.477–481); this last term indicates that the storytellers were organized in guilds or fraternities.⁴⁸ It is further clear from the *Odyssey* that they sang in the rulers' court. Thus, they may well have sung before multiethnic audiences. This is precisely the situation in Scherie, where Odysseus witnesses the excellence of the Phaeacian singer. As their king remarks:

When you are banqueting in your own home with your wife and your children beside you, and the talk turns to the Phaeacian prowess, I want you to be able to tell your noble friends that Zeus has given us too certain skills, which we have possessed from our forefathers' time to the present day. . . . But the things in which we take a perennial delight are the feast, the lyre, the dance . . . (Od. 8.242–248).⁴⁹

It seems the opportunity for amassing wealth was grasped by the Greek bards at the right moment. This opportunity was greatly enhanced by the employment of mercenaries in foreign armies abroad and by bi- and perhaps trilingualism.⁵⁰ The koine was aided by use of writing, which we witness in Naucratis, and

which enabled professional singers to take notes. The Ionic alphabet was in use in Miletus and Naucratis by the mid-seventh century,⁵¹ and the reign of Ashurbanibal, ca. 646, was the time when great libraries were established in palaces, temples, and even private houses.⁵²

CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis here proposed is that the connections between the ancient literatures of Greece and Egypt are far more extensive than previously thought. But we have also argued that whereas Greek and Egyptian beliefs are coherent within their own culture, this coherence is lost when single thematic units or motifs are transmitted across cultures. It is dangerous to project Egyptian metaphysics onto Greek thought, as Nilsson and others did with Elysion. The unity of the Archaic Greek cosmos has been demonstrated by the construction of maps (Figures 3 and 4), but there is no evidence that such a Greek version of the cosmos would have been comprehensible within Egyptian tradition. On the other hand, the Greek cosmic map has common features with the Babylonian universe due to the postulated koine, the pool of common motifs of the Eastern Mediterranean.

NOTES

1. We follow M. L. West (*The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], 40–48), who dates Hesiod to the late eighth century and Homer after 700. Burkert ("Das Hunderrtorige Theben und die Datierung der Ilias," *Wiener Studien* 89 [1976]: 1–21) gives a date for Homer postdating the sack of Thebes by the Assyrians in 663.
2. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*. Mesopotamian Civilizations 8. (Winnona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 20–25; N. Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Ancient Near East*. The Biblical Seminar 85. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81–82; BM 92687.
3. After Wyatt 2001, Figure 81; adapted by Briana Jackson.
4. Wyatt 2001, 82 reconstructs eight *nagu*.
5. Wyatt 2001, 83.
6. Trans. S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 102. For a slightly different rendition, see also A. R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 78.
7. Visual rendition by Briana Jackson based on eighteenth-century illustration of A. Pope's *Iliad*, London 1760.
8. M. P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet. (Lund: Kungl., 1950, 1927), 538–560; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985); W. Burkert, "The Making of Homer in the Sixth Century B.C.: Rhapsodes versus Stesichoros," in *Papers on the Amasis Painter and His World* (Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1987), 43–62; F. Graf, "What Is Ancient Medi-

- terrean Religion?" in S. I. Johnston (ed), *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2004), 3–16; Johnston in F. Graf and S. I. Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 126.
9. Trans. M. L. West, *Hesiod, Theogony and Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988a), 41–42. Hesiod *Works and Days* 173a–e mentions that Kronos is the king. This may be an ancient interpolation and is bracketed by West. The uncertain referent translated as “to some [of the demigods]” has varying interpretations; see Burkert 1985 and 1987; M. L. West, *Hesiod, Works & Days*. Ed. with Prolegomena and Commentary. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), ad 166 and 167; F. Solmsen, “Achilles on the Islands of the Blessed: Pindar vs. Homer and Hesiod,” *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982): 22–24. *Bioton* in WD 167 elsewhere means “livelihood” in Hesiod, but in Homer often means “life,” suggesting it is here used in contrast with those who die at Troy or Thebes—that is, those on the Isles do not die.
 10. There was an archaic heroic cult of Achilles on the White Island, Leuce, in the Black Sea, with a temple that survived into the Roman period. See G. Hedreen, “The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine” *Hesperia* 60.3 (1991): 313–330.
 11. G. Strassburger, “Die Fahrt des Odysseus zu den Toten im Vergleich mit Alteren Jenseitsfahrten,” *Antike und Abendland* 44 (1998): 1–29; N. Marinatos, “The Cosmic Journey of Odysseus,” *Numen* 48 (2002): 383–416; N. Marinatos, “The So-Called Hell and Sinners in the *Odyssey* and Homeric Cosmology,” *Numen* 56 (2009): 186–197.
 12. Marinatos 2002.
 13. F. Solmsen, *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), brackets lines 293–294.
 14. Cult-receiving heroes have a grave and thus must have died, making them akin to the men of the silver race who live under the earth. Those who have a life on the Isles of Makares are more like the golden race, but there are no clear distinctions: Menelaus, who had a cult, lives on in Elysium in the *Odyssey*. For discussion of these problems, see Burkert 1985, 203–208; W. Kullman, “Gods and Men in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 89 (1985): 16–17; C. Sourvinou-Inwood, “Reading” *Greek Death to the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 39 and 51–56; West 1978, 370–373 and ad 141.
 15. See Johnston in Graf and Johnston 2007, 96–97.
 16. We find a similar account in Pindar (*Olympian* 2.62–7).
 17. A. Evans, “The Earlier Religion of Greece in the Light of Cretan Discoveries,” in *The Frazer Lectures 1922–1932* by diverse hands, Warren R. Dawson (ed.), (Oxford 1932). Freeport (reprinted by N.Y. Books for Libraries Press 1967); Nilsson 1927, 543.
 18. See, however, W. Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71–98.
 19. A. H. Krappe, “Μάκαρα,” *Revue de Philologie* 66 (1940): 245–246; C. Daniel, “Des emprunts égyptiens dans le grec ancien,” *Studia et Acta Orientalia* 4 (1962): 13–23.
 20. E. Vermeule (*Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], 72–73) and M. Bernal (*Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. III, *The Linguistic Evidence* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006], 271) accept the derivation of *makar* from *makheru* and interpret “Isles of Makares” as “Isles of the Dead.”
 21. Trans. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 124.
 22. Trans. West 1988a, 42–43.
 23. Trans. R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 95.
 24. See W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 50, n. 6.
 25. Parkinson 1997, 95.
 26. Trans. Parkinson 1997, 96.
 27. Parkinson 1997, 99, n. 14.
 28. Parkinson believes the island is located between this world and the next, which would no doubt draw to an Egyptian mind matters of eschatology.
 29. After R. O. Faulkner, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day, Being the Papyrus of Ani (Royal Scribe of the Divine Offerings)*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998).
 30. Mimnermus, frag. 12, in M. L. West, *Iambi et Elegi Graeci* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); see also Pherekydes, frag. 18, in F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).
 31. After Faulkner 1998.
 32. E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. J. Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 55–56, 244–250; E. Hornung, *The Ancient Books of the Afterlife*, trans. D. Lorton (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 13–135; R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 205–209; see also the Pyramid Texts in Simpson 2003, 245–249.
 33. See West 1997, 166–167 for other Near Eastern parallels of some of these motifs.
 34. See Burkert 1992, 124.
 35. M. van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 B.C.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 225–231.
 36. van de Mieroop, 227.
 37. van de Mieroop, 239.
 38. West 1997, 611–614; Burkert 1992, 9–14. For relationships between Greek and Iranian philosophy, see M. L. Gemelli Marciano (“A chi profitezza Eraclito di Efeso?” in Christoph Riedweg [ed.], *Grecia Maggiore: Intrecci Culturali con l’Asia nel Periodo Arcaico* [Basel: Schwabe Verlag]: 99–122) and van de Mieroop 2004, 232–252.
 39. For archaeological finds that testify to Greek-Egyptian relations, see A. Karetsou (ed.), *Crete and Egypt: Three Thousand Years of Cultural Links (Herakleion Archaeological Museum)* (Athens: Greek Ministry of Culture, 2000).
 40. van de Mieroop 2004, 238–239.

41. Trans. A. de Sélincourt, *Herodotus, The Histories* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 159.
42. de Sélincourt, 2003, 159.
43. Transl. E. V. Rieu, *Homer, The Iliad* (London: Penguin Books, 1950).
44. Burkert 1976.
45. Trans. E. V. Rieu, *Homer, The Odyssey*. Revised transl. by D. C. H. Rieu. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 106.
46. Trans. Rieu 2003, 148.
47. See Burkert 1992, 6.
48. Burkert 1987, 47–49 argues that singers before the end of the sixth century had room for improvisation in their performance but that after this time, as epic texts were fixed in writing, members of rhapsodic guilds had to be faithful to their text and stop improvising. This view does not preclude that written transmission was controlled by a guild (fraternity) of bards even in the earlier period.
49. Trans. Rieu 2003, 100.
50. West 1997, 629 and 1988b, 171–172, argues for itinerant, bilingual poets, though he suggests that even a merchant or priest could double as a poet. In the *Odyssey*, however, itinerant bards are distinguished from prophets and physicians (Od. 17.381–386).
51. E. A. Gardner, “Excavations at Naukratis,” *The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts* 2 (1886a): 180–81; E. A. Gardner, “The Early Ionic Alphabet,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 7 (1886b): 220–23; E. A. Gardner, “Two Naucratic Vases,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (1887): 119–121; W. D. Coulson, *Cities of the Delta*. American Research Center in Egypt Reports, vols. 4–6. (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981–1982).
52. van de Mierop 2004, 249.
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