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THE SUN OF HOMER

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline a clear view of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* data about the Sun, that could lead us beyond purely literary comments. The *excursus* identifies and analyzes those poems passages that may shed light on the Homeric world 'pre-scientific' knowledge about the Sun. We'll start from the Sun mentioned in the Achilles' Shield, the first description of the cosmos in Western literature. We will talk about his position in space, where it is mentioned after Earth, sea and sky, but immediately before the other stars and constellations. We will identify an important similarity in that order with the cuneiform texts from the ancient Near East. We will draw considerations on the nature of the Sun, through the epithets that accompany it and through the similarities in the Homeric text. We will emphasize the implications of the epithet ἀκάμας, "tireless", and other expressions. We will talk about the description of his movements from dawn to the zenith and until dusk, and its use for orientation: there are formulas in the Homeric text, which employ the sun to indicate the East and the West. The Sun is also used in Homer to describe temporal transitions. We will focus on the relationship between Sun and Ocean, and we will see that the ocean can be understood as a deliberate metaphor of the horizon. We will also discuss about the Sun as ancestral force hierarchically inferior to the Olympians gods and about some of its anthropomorphic features: he sees and hears everything. Constantly monitors the facts about the gods and men, and as well as vision and hearing has even speech. He is also able to generate. We'll see how these qualities highlight the role of the Sun as the guarantor of the cosmic order.

KEYWORDS: sun, Iliad, Odyssey, shield, order, orientation, time, ocean

1. THE SUN ON THE SHIELD

The Sun, ὁ ἥλιος¹, is mentioned after earth, sky and sea: so it is one of the four natural elements, each of which - earth, air, fire and water - seems to be going to be located in a particular area of the universe.

It is defined ἀκάμας², and has been rightly observed that the epithet may well refer both to the perpetuity of the motion and to the radians³: the star is tireless because daily accomplishes punctually his course, but the poet had to have in mind also the meaning of inextinguishable, since the combustion process of the star is perpetual. In this regard, examples are those homeric passages where we read the formula ἀκάματον πῦρ⁴, alluding to the flame or the fire difficult to extinguish. This epithet, together with the comparison between sun and fire formulated in *Il.* 22.135, «around him flashed the bronze as the light of the fire or the rising sun», seems to leave no doubt that Homer sees the sun as a fiery mass⁵. Moreover, several passages occur when it is remembered the blaze of the sun, the action sometimes useful, sometimes destructive of his heat.

Noteworthy is the order of the earth-sky-sea, especially because - apart from the possible metrics needs - it seems to echo a Mesopotamic astronomical source. In fact, in astronomical texts in cuneiform writing the starry sky is divided into the 'paths' of Enlil (god of the earth), Anu (god of the sky) and Ea (god of the sea)⁶. This does not prove that the author of the ἔκφρασις had access to a Mesopotamic source, but it is remarkable that right in the next line are mentioned Sun and Moon and that in subsequent ones we go to the description of the constellations. The fact anyhow shows that both the East and Greece have contributed to the successful formula of the earth-sky-sea and that was the East to develop the idea of 'areas' of the universe under the jurisdiction of specific deities⁷.

2. SUNRISE AND SUNSET

The Sun rises, like Eos, from the waters of Ocean or from the sun's pond, λίμνη ἡελιοτο, sending his young rays on districts⁸. And it is again returning to

Ocean, at the end of the day, after having completed its journey. Homer's Ocean seems to be an ideal line that separates the world visible to us from what we are precluded: the Poet does not think of a real immersion in the waters, but he uses the Ocean as a metaphor of the horizon, describing with imagery the apparent show of sunrise and sunset of a star.

After being risen, the sun begins an upward path until it reaches his zenith, μέσσην οὐρανόν, the point of noon⁹. From culmination begins to fall back to the Earth, and turns to the "loose oxen from the plow", that is towards the evening: βουλοτόνδε, poetic formula that draws inspiration from rural life¹⁰.

Sunrise and sunset come into play when the poet has to express notions of geographical order: East and West are respectively described with the phrases πρὸς ἡῶ τ'ἡλιόν τε and πρὸς ζόφον. The comparison between the region of light (east) and the region of darkness (west) occurs in several passages. For example when Odysseus, having reached the island of Circe, expresses to his fellows concern about the inability to orient, saying he did not know where the dark is, ζόφος, and where Eos, and even where the Sun is hidden under the ground and where arises¹¹.

3. ANTHROPOMORPHIC CHARACTERS

There are other places that inform us about a number of qualities that give to the star anthropomorphic characters and place him therefore also in the divine dimension.

In *Il.* 18.239-240, Hera decides to stop a fight that is coming to the disadvantage of the Greeks, and we read that at the behest of the goddess the Sun went ἀέκοντα, «reluctantly», to the Ocean currents. He, who is ἀκάμας, "tireless" in his ignition and in his perpetual motion, is forced to set prematurely, against his own will, what reveals a lower hierarchical condition¹².

The star also possesses the ability to see and hear everything: in the third book of the *Iliad* Agamemnon, invoking him, remembers these qualities. That the Sun is invoked during solemn terms, it is due to the principle of regularity and order that the star symbolizes: alternating the succession of days and nights, he establishes the beginning and the end of the battles, and only through the intervention of Hera forces himself to do what is an extraordinary case, a serious transgression, a real prodigy. The star, however, abhors any change of its rhythms, and is his stability that makes him a reference point when they are at stake civilization, justice and harmony in

¹ *Il.* 18.483-489.

² *Il.* 18.239.

³ CERRI 2010, 165-166.

⁴ *Il.* 5.4, 15.597-598, 731, 6.122, 18.225, 23.52; *Od.* 20.123, 21.181.

⁵ Says BUFFIÈRE 1956, 242: «Homère nomme l'un après l'autre le feu et le soleil, c'est la preuve qu'il ne les confond pas; mais s'il les nomme ensemble, c'est que le soleil, quand il se lève, est en ignition». See Stobaeus, 1.25.7.

⁶ See also WENSKUS 1990, 36.

⁷ As illustrated by SCHMIDT 1981, 1-24.

⁸ *Od.* 19.433.

⁹ *Il.* 16.777.

¹⁰ *Il.* 16.779.

¹¹ *Od.* 10.190-193.

¹² See also *Od.* 23.240-246.

relations: Nestor, in the third book of the *Odyssey*, addressing Telemachus, tells of an assembly held among all the Achaeans, summoned μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐς ἠέλιον καταδύντα, «thoughtlessly, and not in accordance to the rule, at sunset»¹³.

Escape with impunity from that principle of regularity and order is almost impossible, because the Sun is constantly monitoring the facts concerning the gods and men, and as well as vision and hearing has even word. We see it well in the narrative song of Demodocus at the Phaeacians court, when the bard tells the love between Ares and Aphrodite and their illegitimate union at the home of Hephaestus¹⁴. From that performance we learn that the Sun has seen the wear of adultery, and that comes as a messenger to report the incident to the betrayed husband¹⁵. Subsequently, he acts as guardian of the couple - trapped in wires made by the famous blacksmith. Also on this circumstance he presents himself guarantor of the order: having seen or, rather, not having been able to help but see, it is immediately convinced that the adultery is an infringement of which cannot be silent, and therefore he refers to the publication of the event and works closely to the punishment inflicted on lovers. Note that similarly, in the *Iliad*, the Sun is felt by Zeus himself, who is going to have sexual intercourse with Hera, as an inopportune observer: the father of all the gods is concerned to reassure his wife that none of the gods or men will be able to see themselves, that even better «won't be able to see us neither the Sun, that among all has the more penetrating light». In the *Odyssey* appears a further personifying aspect, that bring us back to the genealogy of Circe. In fact, the sorceress, who lives on the island of Eea at the ends of the earth, is fruit of the union of the Sun with the nymph Perse, a daughter of Ocean¹⁶.

Also able to generate, the Sun thus presents a number of qualities that make him somewhat anthropomorphic, putting him in close relationship with the primeval gods of Hellenic theogony: on the one hand it is to be considered next to Zeus as god of light and civilization; on the other one, he is to be linked to ancestral forces and, as such, shall be located at the ends of the world and is outsider in Olympus.

4. THE LOCKS QUESTION AT TRINACHIA

In addition to the prerogative to see and hear everything, to be able to speak, to be able to generate, the Sun is also owner of cattle: on Trinachia island he

has seven herds of fifty cows and seven flocks of fifty sheep. These flocks, beautiful, that do not reproduce and that never die, connect the star to Earth. Their custody is entrusted to two other daughters: Fetusa and Lampetie, had from the nymph Neera. Despite the dual prophetic warning - first by the shadow of Tiresias¹⁷ and then of the one of Circe¹⁸ - the best cows are killed too, to make food, by the companions of Odysseus while he is sleeping¹⁹. And it will not help the sacrifice, entirely irregular, offered by them: it is in fact a «sacrifice perverti»²⁰, the first image of sacrilegious sacrifice in Western literature²¹.

The Sun, indignant²², calls Zeus on. To the god of justice he is seeking compensation, remembering what a source of joy for him were those cows during his run to the stars and, at the end of the run, returning to the Earth: with their killing has stopped the fixity, the regularity, the perfection that they represented.

In a scholium on *Odyssey* there is an evidence according to which for Aristoteles, who offered an exegesis of this passage in his *Ἀπορήματα Ὀμηρικὰ*, the seven flocks of fifty heads each, i.e. a total of three hundred and fifty beasts, represent the days of a lunar year²³. According to another scholium, the unchanging number of cows - which, as we have seen, do not die and do not reproduce - would symbolize the numerical constancy of the days of the year, while the seven flocks of sheep would rather have had the function of representing the nights²⁴. In this view, the killing of even only one cow or even only one sheep would mean the disruption of the regular succession of days and nights and so the cosmic order.

Indeed, the question of the cows is not entirely clarified: why, for what purpose the Sun possess them and what benefits actually gets from them, are questions whose answer lies in a past perhaps too remote for us²⁵. But we are sure that the killing of cattle is felt in the *Odyssey* as crucial. Given the obvious subversion, the Sun warns: «I will go down in the house of Hades and will shine among the dead», where Odysseus and his companions were not adequately punished. Zeus, who represents justice, cannot allow this to happen and agrees to the request of the Sun²⁶. The threat is in fact very serious, as bring-

¹³ *Od.* 3.138.

¹⁴ *Od.* 8.266-366.

¹⁵ *Od.* 8.270-271.

¹⁶ *Od.* 9.135-138.

¹⁷ *Od.* 11.106-113.

¹⁸ *Od.* 12.128-134.

¹⁹ *Od.* 12.359-360.

²⁰ So BALLABRIGA 1986, 142.

²¹ DETIENNE 1998, 43-45.

²² *Od.* 12.374-375.

²³ Q. Vind. 56 *Od.* 12.129.

²⁴ Schol. B *Od.* 12.128.

²⁵ See PATRONI 1950, 427-437.

²⁶ *Od.* 12.385-388.

ing light into Hades would mean to give life to the dead back: in Homer, ὄρᾱν φάος ἠελίοιο, "to see the sun's light", is equivalent to *live*²⁷.

And yet Odysseus, after landing, warned his fellows twice not to approach either, the sacred herds. At the first warning, he had explained the contents of the prophecies that urged to "stay away from the island of the Sun that cheers mortals"²⁸, forcing his fellows to make a solemn oath to that effect. And the next day, perhaps for greater guarantee of persuasion, to a second, new warning, he does mention the sun as «terrible god»²⁹.

The Sun is considered a god³⁰, therefore, and 'terrible' or 'formidable', but anyway subject - as we have observed - to a sort of hierarchical inferiority. The fact is hard to reconcile with the importance that the star seems to play in the preface of the *Odyssey* and its absolute centrality - as set by the antecedent - in the narrated events. The fact also clashes with the large space that is given to the episode of Trinachia both through prophecies of Circe and Tiresias and through warnings of Odysseus and his companions. In fact, one gets the impression that the bard has carefully prepared the perpetration of sacrilege and its deadly consequences. Whereas in *Il.* 1.6-9 the Achilles' wrath is caused by the argument with Agamemnon about the spoils of war, in the same lines of *Odyssey* the main complicating factor becomes their sacrilegious meal with the cows of the Sun, the serious act of ἀτασθαλία³¹.

But in the end the Sun is not an independent deity, is in lower hierarchical position than Olympics, he cannot independently take decisions and must therefore confront always Zeus' opinion³².

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²⁷ *Il.* 5.117-120, 265-267, 8.477-481, 24.555-558; *Od.* 2.181-182, *Od.* 4.539-540, 4.833-834, 10.497-498, 11.498-499, 618-619, 15.349-350, 20.207.

²⁸ *Od.* 12.274, 269.

²⁹ *Od.* 12.322-323.

³⁰ *Od.* 12.176.

³¹ So Odysseus in *Od.* 12.300-301.

³² The problem remains open: see FRIEDRICH 1987, 377 n. 11, SEGAL 1992, 489 n. 1 and SCHADEWALDT 1958, 15-32.