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The Homeric Gates of Horn and Ivory

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Abstract: The two sets of gates in the *Odyssey*, the gates of horn and ivory and the gates of the sun, seem to be identical. According to the allegorical interpretation of Porphyry, the gates of the sun represent the sun's tropics. Internal evidence from Greek as well as elements of the Vedic tradition suggests that Porphyry's interpretation may be true.

The significance of the gates of horn and ivory that are described in *Od.* 19.562–567 still remains one of the unsolved problems of Homeric scholarship.¹ In this renowned and enigmatic passage, Penelope tells Odysseus, who is still incognito at this moment, about two different kinds of dreams. The ones which pass through the gates of horn accomplish real things, whereas those coming forth from the gates of ivory are false and deceptive. Penelope does not believe in her dream of Odysseus returning home, because it came forth from the gates of ivory:

Δοιαὶ γάρ τε πύλαι ἀμενηνῶν εἰσὶν ὀνείρων·
αἱ μὲν γὰρ κεράεσσι τετεύχεται, αἱ δ' ἐλέφαντι·
τῶν οἱ μὲν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος,
οἱ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπεα ἀκράαντα φέροντες·
οἱ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε,
οἱ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραίνουσι, βροτῶν ὅτε κέν τις ἴδῃται.
ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν οἴομαι αἰνὸν ὄνειρον
ἐλθέμεν.

There are two gates through which the insubstantial dreams issue.
One pair of gates is made of horn, and one of ivory.
Those of the dreams which issue through the gate of sawn ivory,
these are the deceptive dreams, their message is never accomplished.
But those that come into the open through the gates of the polished
horn accomplish the truth for any mortal who sees them.
I do not think that this strange dream that I had came to me
through this gate.²

- 1 This passage is alluded to or imitated by ancient authors, e.g., Verg. *Aen.* 6.893–896; Pl. *Chrm.* 173A; Hor. *Carm.* 3.2740–42, and *Sat.* 1.10.31–33; Ov. *Her.* 19.195; Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.288–289.
- 2 The metaphorical dream, which has been told right before this passage (*Od.* 19.535–550), is about an eagle (Odysseus) killing geese (the suitors). The translations of the Homeric passages in this paper belong to Lattimore (1965).

The critical editions of the *Odyssey* offer little in their commentaries on the meaning of these lines. Ameis-Hentze (1890¹) believes that the ivory gates reflect the custom of covering the wooden gates with ivory. Stanford (1948), without being able to explain what the association between the two sets of gates represents, comments on the paronomasia between κέρας and κραίνω, and ἐλέφας and ἐλεφαίρομαι. He concludes that it is hard to say whether the word-play first suggested the notion of the gates of horn and ivory, or whether, conversely, a prehistoric unknown legend prompted it. Russo (1992), on the other hand, interestingly suggests that the ‘importance of horns in early Greek religion raises the possibility that Homer has preserved the memory of the gateway of horns (or horn) as symbol of the passageway to a higher, more permanent reality’. It is this suggestion that will eventually prove valuable for the argument of this paper.

There are, basically, two important modern interpretations on this passage. The first one is that of Highbarger (1940), who, in a comprehensive study, associated the Homeric gates with those existing in Mesopotamian representations. The sun there is often represented between gate posts. Highbarger interprets this as a symbol of either the rising or the setting sun and translates it to the Greek case. The sun coming from or going into the Underworld would pass through these gates. While these associations seem to be very interesting, Highbarger cannot find an explanation for why the gates are built of ivory and horn.

Another comprehensive study is that of Amory (1966), who argues against Highbarger and his association of the Homeric gates with the Mesopotamian ones. She considers horn and ivory as literary devices only, which are present in other passages of the *Odyssey* as well, and whose main purpose is to contrast the main epic characters. Thus, horn would fit Odysseus’ vital masculine energy and his inherent inclination for action. Ivory would be associated with Penelope’s more hesitating commitments to action and with her sheltered circumstances.³ However, in spite of the literary associations, Amory’s argument ultimately fails to explain what the gates themselves represent.

Interpretations of this passage must have begun in antiquity. Eustathius in his commentary on the *Odyssey* mentions the fact that many scholars before him have tried to solve the enigma of these gates.⁴ He also mentions several solutions to the riddle. Nevertheless, while his main effort is directed toward explaining why the gates are made of horn and ivory, he leaves the concept of ‘gates’ unexplained. In spite of this, his interpretations are worthy of being mentioned briefly:⁵

a) The gates of horn are associated with the eyes since the outermost covering of the eyes is horny; the gates of ivory are associated with the mouth since the teeth have an ivory appearance; therefore, Penelope says symbolically that

3 These opinions are succinctly summarized by Russo (1992); Stanford (1948) also mentions Highbarger.

4 Eustathius 1877.22–23; the whole analysis runs from 1877.22–1878.10.

5 Cf. Amory (1966) 4–6.

she will believe the things that are said about Odysseus when she will see them. This is Servius' allegorical interpretation (*Comm. Aen.* 6.893). In his view, seeing is opposed to hearing as the measure of truth.

b) The gates of horn and ivory are the result of the above-mentioned paronomasia.

c) Since horns point upward to heaven, the dreams coming out of them are true. By contrast, the elephant's horns (tusks) point downward and, thus, are associated with earth. They are, therefore, deceptive.

d) The deceptive dreams come from the gates of ivory when one is full of food, which the ivory-like teeth chew. The gates of horn bring true dreams because horn, being located on the head, is associated with reason.

e) The true gates are of horn because horn is transparent, whereas the false gates are of ivory, which is opaque.

Certainly, some of these solutions seem to be very fanciful, especially a, d or even e, which Amory says is the closest to her interpretation.⁶ The other ones do not offer a very clear picture of what the gates actually represent. In other words, all the above theories ultimately fail to explain the double relation which exists between gates and dreams, on one hand, and between gates and horn or ivory, on the other.

The following interpretation starts from Ameis-Hentze's (1890²) commentary on *Od.* 24.12. In this verse, Odysseus is said to pass by the gates of the sun (παρ' ἡελίοιο πύλας) and the people of dreams (δῆμος ὀνείρων) on his way to the Underworld. The commentators' assumption is that the gates of horn and ivory are also located in this place.⁷ This implicitly means that, in their opinion, the gates of the sun and the gates of horn and ivory are very close to each other, perhaps even identical. In fact, since the dreams are very close to the gates of the sun, where could the gates of dreams be? Highbarger himself starts from this implicit assumption when he talks about the Mesopotamian gates of the rising/setting sun. It is obvious that for him these sets of gates are identical. Amory (1966), on the other hand, despite rejecting Highbarger, never questions this assumption.

Highbarger interprets the gates of the sun as a metaphor symbolizing the path of the sun in certain moments of its daily course, more precisely when it rises in the east or it sets in the west. This assumption raises some doubts. If this is the case, then what does it mean that the gates are located in the 'west'? The setting of the sun occurs in many 'west' points during the year while the sun moves from one solstice to another. Are there many such sets of gates? Or is this just a childish way of speaking by a primitive people?

6 Cf. Amory (1966) 6; in her view, this is because of Odysseus' and Penelope's contrasting characters/circumstances.

7 The location of the gates of the sun is generally assumed to be in the extreme West, where the setting sun descends into a subterranean passage leading back to the East; cf. Stanford (1948), Ameis-Hentze (1890¹), Russo (1992).

This astronomical interpretation of the gates is, fortunately, not the only one. Long time ago, in an undeservedly forgotten passage, Porphyry (*De antr. nymph.* 28) also viewed the Homeric gates of the sun in astronomical terms. For him, however, this astronomical interpretation had a clear correlate in reality: the gates of the sun would represent the winter and summer solstices, that is, the limits in the sky between which the sun moves during its yearly course. In other words, the gates would be the limits beyond which the sun cannot pass in its yearly course.

Porphyry's interpretation of the gates starts in the context of his commentary on the well-known passage in the *Odyssey* about the two-gated cave in Ithaca. This passage belongs to the episode in which the Phaeacians bring Odysseus back home by ship. After sailing the whole night, Odysseus and his friends finally land on the shores of Ithaca. Here there is a sacred cave, which has two entrances or gates:

Δύω δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσὶν
αἱ μὲν πρὸς Βορέαο καταίβονται ἀνθρώποισιν
αἱ δ' αὖ πρὸς Νότον εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνῃ
ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἄθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν.

... (the cave) has two entrances,
one of them facing North Wind, where people can enter,
but the one toward the South Wind has more divinity. That is
the way of the immortals, and no man enter by that way.⁸

In analyzing this passage, Porphyry says that he follows the previous interpretations of the Middle Platonic philosophers Numenius and Cronius – two of the 'theologians', as he calls them. According to these, the cave would be a cosmic symbol, and the entrances would represent the celestial tropics. The rationale for this is that in heaven there are two extremities, the summer and winter tropics, which define the limits of the sun's journey during the year. Through the tropic of Capricorn the souls ascend to heaven, this being the reason why Homer calls the entrance 'a path for the Immortals', whereas through the tropic of Cancer the souls descend into γένεσις, and therefore, this gate is a 'path for men to descend' (*De antr. nymph.* 22–28). Following these interpretations, and, probably, intending to give more weight to his arguments, Porphyry adds that the Homeric 'gates of the sun' represent precisely the winter and the summer tropics, which implicitly means that they are identical to the two entrances of the cave:

He [Homer – my note] somewhere talks of 'gates of the Sun' [*Od.* 24.12], by which he means Cancer and Capricorn, for these are the limits of its travel as it descends from the home of the North Wind into the South and then returns back up to the North. Capricorn and Cancer mark the extremities of the Milky Way

8 *Od.* 13.109–112. Porphyry's discussion starts at *De antr. nymph.* 1.

and lie near it, Cancer in the North and Capricorn in the South. According to Pythagoras, the souls are ‘the people of dreams’, who, as he says, are assembled in the Milky Way, which derives its name from ‘milk’ because they are nourished with milk when they first fall into genesis.⁹

These were in short Porphyry’s considerations about the gates of the sun. The main reason why his assumptions have not been considered relevant for the discussion of the gates is probably the fact that they represent ‘allegorical’ interpretations. Another reason may be that they associate the Homeric concept of ‘gates of the sun’ with Pythagorean doctrines. It is, however, interesting to notice that Porphyry does not make any association between the gates of the sun and the gates of the dreams.

Porphyry’s ‘allegorical’ interpretations may be not as fanciful as they might at first seem. Whatever their ultimate source may be, there is evidence for similar conceptions within the Indo-European world. This evidence comes from the Vedic tradition. This tradition knows that the yearly course of the sun is determined by the two extremities represented by the winter and summer solstices.¹⁰ In other words, it knows that the sun moves up from the southern winter tropic to the northern summer tropic during the first part of the year and that it reverses its course during the second part of the year. These are the two *ayanas* ‘paths’ that determine the yearly course of the sun. The ascending path, when the sun moves to the north, is called *uttarāyana* ‘the path upward’. The reversed, descending, path is called *dakṣiṇāyana*, literally the ‘path to the south’. The Vedic tradition also preserves another, earlier, distinction, which contrasts a northern path of the sun with a southern one. The former is associated with the gods, being called *devayāna*, whereas the latter belongs to the ‘fathers’ (the dead ancestors) and is called *pitṛyāna*.¹¹ This religious tradition is already present in *RV* 10.2.7 and 10.88.15. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (2.1.3)¹² we read: ‘now when he (the sun) moves northward, then he is among the gods, then he guards the gods; and when he moves southward then he is among the fathers, then he guards the fathers’. This conception can be also seen in the Upanishads, where it clearly has to do with the cycle of reincarnations. People who follow *devayāna* reach Brahman and do not return to the earthly existence, whereas those who follow *pitṛyāna* continue their existence cycles.¹³

9 *De antr. nymph.* 28; cf. Lambertson (1983) 25.

10 This knowledge about the solstices is transparent at *RV* 1.105.16, 3.30.12, where it is said that the sun cannot go beyond some regions of the sky; obviously, these are the tropics; cf. Kirfel (1920) 26. At *Od.* 15.404, τροπαὶ ἡελίου have probably also this meaning, which may be a clearer indication that the prehistoric Greeks had knowledge of the tropics; cf. Heubeck (1989).

11 Cf. Kirfel (1920) 26 and 140; Bryant (2001) 251–258; Geldner (1951); whether the two sets represent the same thing, i.e., the solstices, see Kay (1981) 27.

12 The translation belongs to Eggeling (1882).

13 See *KB* 19.3; *ŚB* 2.1.3.1; *BU* 6.2.2, 15–16; cf. Kirfel (1920) 26; Geldner’s (1951) note for 10.88.15. In *ŚB* 2.3.4 we find out that the ‘fathers’ have not dispelled evil from them by the sun and die

Thus, one can say that the Vedic conception of the Universe gave a major importance to the solstices from both a cosmic and an eschatological perspective. It associated the sun's northern ascent during the year with the 'higher' reality represented by the gods (the godly life), whereas the descending path was associated with the 'fathers', that is, with a 'lower' reality, which in certain Hindu traditions had a connection with the reincarnation cycles.

It is now apparent that Porphyry's interpretation of the gates of the sun as the solstices is strikingly similar to the Vedic conception. The Homeric concept of the gates then may echo a similar perspective of the cosmos. We do not know, of course, how much of this conception is 'Pythagorean', or how much of it may reflect an older concept, which the Pythagoreans took over from elsewhere and included in their interpretation of these passages. We also do not know exactly what the relation between the dreams and the solstices is.¹⁴ The only thing that leads to this comparison is the similarity between the Vedic association of the two paths of the sun with either a 'higher' or a 'lower' reality, and the Homeric passages, which, if we believe in Porphyry's interpretation, associate the same solstices with either truth and 'true dreams' or deception and 'false dreams'. Interestingly, the action in the Homeric passage occurs, in all likelihood, during the time of the year when the sun's path descends towards the winter solstice.¹⁵

The above assumptions might seem indeed very speculative. There is, however, another element which could add additional weight to Porphyry's inference. This element is precisely the fact that these gates are made of horn and ivory, which still needs to be explained. Since this discussion has centered so far on the astronomical interpretation of the gates, it seems natural to go on in this direction. What could the gates of horn and ivory be in astronomical terms? If we take into consideration the constellations that mark the solstices, then it seems that one of these sets of gates can give the answer for half of the riddle. The constellation which used to mark the winter solstice between approximately 2000 BC and 100 BC is αἰγόκερως, the Capricorn, that is, the constellation Porphyry was talking about.¹⁶ As their name indicates, the Capricorn gates cannot be made of anything else but of horn. These gates then may be the 'gates of horn'. The second part of the riddle, however, the gates of ivory, is more difficult to explain.

before they attained the fully measure of life, whereas the gods have evil dispelled from them by the sun.

14 In *AV* 19.56.1, the dreams come from Yama's world, which in the Vedas has a heavenly location (*divi*); cf. Gonda (1966) 65; 85 n.63 and 64; Macdonell (1898) 167, 169–172.

15 Odysseus left Calypso to go to the Phaeacians and to Ithaca most likely during the autumn season. This is shown by *Od.* 5.271–272; cf. Heubeck (1988).

16 The constellations marking the solstices and equinoxes change in time due to the astronomical phenomenon of precession. Porphyry lived during the time period (3rd century AD) when the winter solstice was in Sagittarius and the summer solstice in Gemini, which is also the case today. The Greeks took the Capricorn over – as they did with all the zodiacal constellations – from Babylonia, where it was one of the oldest constellations (the Goat-Fish); cf. e.g., Horowitz (1998) 168–171. The Greek name appears first in Eudoxus (*fr.* 73); cf. Kidd (1997) 288.

There is no association between the Crab (Cancer) constellation, which marked the summer solstice during the same period of time, and ivory. There is no indication whatsoever that the Babylonians, from whom the Greeks borrowed the names for the constellations of the zodiac, had any such symbol for any of the constellations. Interestingly, in the Hindu tradition the constellation *Purvāṣadha* has the elephant tusk as its symbol.¹⁷ This Hindu constellation, however, is part of Sagittarius, not of Cancer. Therefore, this constellation has no relation with the summer solstice. In addition, there is no way we can bring together the two different astronomical systems of the Greeks and Hindus.¹⁸ The answer for the gate of ivory then needs to be looked for in the Greek world itself.

Two handy hypotheses may be given here. One of them has been involuntarily given by Eustathius himself, who contrasts the horns pointing up with the tusks pointing down. This fact does not seem to be Eustathius' invention. There is strong evidence that in the ancient world the tusks were considered as being a sort of horns.¹⁹ Since the sun starts to go downward at the summer solstice, then the analogical association of this solstice with horns pointing down becomes plausible. The summer solstice could then become the 'gates of ivory', a metaphor that underscored the contrast with the already existing 'gates of horn'. The use of such symbols to describe astronomical phenomena would not be something singular. In the Mithraic iconography of the Roman Empire, the equinoxes are symbolized by Mithras' attendants Cautes and Cautopates. Both of them are shown as bearing torches. Cautes' torch points up representing the spring equinox, whereas Cautopates's identical torch points down and represents the autumn equinox.²⁰

The second hypothesis is based on the paronomasia between κέρως and κραίνω, and ἐλέφας and ἐλεφαίρομαι. One can imagine the following scenario. The concept of the gates of the sun may be indeed very old, metaphorically expressing the solstices. The concept of the gates of 'horn', however, could not appear before the Capricorn became the marker of the winter solstice, that is, around 2000 BC.²¹ If one assumes that the words describing the nature of the dreams, that is, κραίνω and ἐλεφαίρομαι, were used before the Capricorn marked

17 Cf. Burgess (1860) 224.

18 The Greek system is based on a solar calendar, which follows the sun's path through the constellations, whereas the Hindu lunar calendar follows the moon's path through the constellations (*nakṣatra*).

19 Cf. Philostr. *V. A.* 2. 13; there, the Lybian king Juba thinks the elephant's tusks are horns. In Sanskrit, *śṛṅga* (cf. Skt. *śīras* < */kṛh₂os/ 'horn') can mean both 'horn' and 'elephant's tusk'; cf. Williams (1899); interestingly, the word for the crab's claws is *karkatāśṛṅga* 'crab's horn', where *karkatā* or *karka* mean 'crab', including the constellation (cf. Gk. καρκίνος, Lat. *cancer* < *kankr).

20 Sometimes Cautes is associated with a leaf-bearing tree symbolizing spring, whereas Cautopates is associated with a fruit-bearing tree symbolizing autumn; for the full discussion, cf. Ulansey (1991) 62–66.

21 Also, this could not happen before the Greeks adopted the original Babylonian constellation; unfortunately, this date cannot be established with precision within the above time frame; see above, n. 16.

the winter solstice, then the emergence of the gates of horn could give birth to the gates of ivory through the above-mentioned paronomasia.

A final remark regards the question whether the contrast between the gates of horn and those of ivory could be the result of a poetical creation, that is, whether it could be Homer's creation in the sense envisioned by Amory. This question cannot be answered with certainty, since it is still possible that Homer or any of the poets of the oral tradition used already fashioned concepts, which they integrated into an artistic whole. In any case, if the above hypotheses hold true, then whoever achieved this contrast did it by appealing to splendid and unforgettable metaphors.

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