Tomislav Bilić, *Land of the Solstices: Myth, Geography and Astronomy in Ancient Greece*


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Tomislav Bilić has drawn together in this densely argued but interesting book his PhD and previously published (but now reworked) studies on the relationship between myth and physical reality with regard to the annual and diurnal movement of the Sun.

What the PhD apparently lacked by way of a methodological framework, Bilić now seeks to provide in the first chapter (“Introduction”). As PhDs are wont to do, being written for maybe four or five people who are experts in the particular focus of the thesis, there is an assumption that the reader/examiner will know what the background to a core question is. This book opens similarly allusively, assuming prior knowledge of an old debate about “solar mythology” that Bilić wishes to revive, albeit in a more tightly constrained form.

This debate began in the nineteenth century with the theories of Max Müller, who sought to use contemporary understanding of the development of Indo-European language as a hermeneutical tool to understand Indo-European mythology. An outcome of this approach was Müller’s conclusion that the names of certain Greek, Roman or Germanic (“Indo-European”) gods could be traced back to words or names in the Sanskrit *Rig Veda*, and that these names in their turn were derived from etymological roots that almost always were connected with solar phenomena (for a useful summary and analysis of Müller’s theories, see Carrol 1985).

This “solar mythology” mode of interpreting ancient myth was countered in its own time and later ultimately replaced by other methodologies, notably structuralism and psychoanalysis (Dorson 2021 [1955]). Others have demonstrated (e.g. Carrol 1985) that these approaches also have their problems. That is not Bilić’s concern, as he allows for the twenty-first century’s adoption of eclecticism, or “polyparadigmaticism”, to encompass a variety of methodologies in treating with myth – including, as he seeks to argue
in this book, a revival of a form of “solar mythology”, but now in a tightly constrained
version that works with a small, select group of myths referencing annual or diurnal solar
phenomena, all consciously set within their cultural (or ethnographic) contexts. Thus, the
conclusions reached in the book will be applicable only to this restricted class of myths,
and not to myth in general, since solar movement is being used as a hermeneutic tool to
assess the myths (cf. p. 147). Such an approach, Bilić feels, is consonant with interpreta-
tions of other bodies of myth, such as Fowler’s 1993 treatment of a group of myths that
relate to weather and seasonal rituals (p. 3).

Bilić is also keen to engage with these myths as part of ancient “science”. This is a
concept that he regards as related to modern science through the concepts of “geog-
raphy” and “astronomy”, which persist from antiquity to the present day. But he also
distinguishes ancient “science” from modern by virtue of the ancient use of narrative,
mythic accounts to describe or explain physical phenomena (pp. 5–6). Nonetheless, both
ancient and modern versions of science, Bilić affirms, are based on observational data.

The particular body of myths that Bilić then engages with in the subsequent 13
chapters that form the bulk of the book are those connected with observations of the
solstices and the placement of the Arctic Circle (both the variable, which depended on
one’s latitude, and the fixed or geographical, which did/does not), and with the loci of
sunset and sunrise – in other words, with specific astronomical and geographic issues.

Part One of his book is concerned with myths relating to annual solar movement
– from one solstice to the next and back again – and comprises Chapters 2–8. Part Two
covers diurnal solar movement – from sunrise to sunset and back again – and encom-
passes Chapters 9–14. A Conclusion (Chapter 15), a List of Citations, two Appendices (one
each on diurnal solar movement in Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions), and a brief
Index complete the book. There is an e-book version of the publication, the searchability
of which will considerably enhance the Index.

So for six days we sailed, night and day alike, and on the seventh we came to the
lofty citadel of Lamus, to Telepylus of the Laestrygonians, where herdsman calls to
herdsman as he drives in his flock, and the other answers as he drives his out. There
a man who never slept could have earned a double wage, one by herding cattle,
and one by pasturing white sheep, for the paths of the night and the day are close
together.

(Homer, Odyssey 10.80–86, trans. Murray and Dimock)

This handful of lines, from the longer story of the violent encounter between the hero
Odysseus and the Laestrygonians in Book 10 of the Odyssey, is the subject of Chapter 2
(“The Laestrygonians and the Geographical Arctic Circle”), while the chapter’s conclusions
on the lines also serve as a point of reference for much of Part One, and indeed through
sections of Part Two. Taking his cue from ancient commentators on the passage, Bilić sees
Homer’s land of the Laestrygonians as a place that can be situated in the far north of the
real world, near the geographical (fixed) Arctic Circle, where the period between sunset
and sunrise is so short that night almost does not exist. What we would call the scientific
reality of the location is presented through a humanised re-presentation in which a herdsman is said to be able to earn a double wage in a day because of the extreme shortness of night (such personalised forms of myth-making will recur throughout the book as a Greek mode of explanation of the physical world that sat alongside the more prosaic scientific discourse). Quite reasonably, Bilić concludes that this myth “is a clear example of a myth referring to solar movement” (p. 25) and he takes it to belong to a class of myths that is the subject of the rest of the book in the succeeding chapters.

In Chapter 3 (“The Bear Mountain”) Bilić argues for the Homeric northern island as being also the locus for the “Bear Mountain” (or “Mountain of Bears”, Arktōn oros) that features in the later, Hellenistic, poem Argonautica, of Apollonius. Both, he suggests, may derive from a lost, pre-Homeric Argonautica, but they draw down different elements from this putative source – Homer retaining reference to the annual movement of the Sun and the effects of a far northern latitude, while Apollonius keeps reference to a circumpolar constellation, Ursa Major. While focusing on the mythical tradition, Bilić keeps his eye always on the scientific side as well, through reference to the geographical and philosophical traditions, which fed off the same physical observations but rendered their outputs in more prosaic form. In this case, Crates of Mallos figures as one who combined in his exegesis on Homer contemporary astronomical and geographical insights. Bilić notes also the development of the awareness of the geographical Arctic Circle via Pytheas and Posidonius.

The ensuing chapters follow various aspects of the island of the Sun’s turning. The island came to show a strong eschatological aspect, which is investigated in Chapter 4 ("Snatched Away by the Gust of Wind") through analysis of the development of stories that involve abductions, notably by the Harpies and by Boreas (the North Wind). Chapter 5 (“The Island of the Sun’s Turning”), on the other hand, moves from the metaphysical back to the physical with a study of the scientific understanding of what a solstice was and how it could be measured or marked by instruments like heliotropia. Myth is never far away, though, as we find Pytheas in the fourth century BC playing the Homeric scholar, when he interprets the Laestrygonian episode as referring to the latitude of the fixed Arctic. The scientific treatment of solar phenomena in the far geographical north in the texts associated with Pytheas, and more so with Hecataeus a generation later, is the focus of Chapter 6 (“Pytheas and Hecataeus: Britain and Hyperborea”), in which real (Britain/Thule) and mythical (Hyperborea) lands in the far north are equated by Bilić (see pp. 55–57, for what some will recognise as a controversial identification between Pytheas’ Thule and Britain; contrast the excellent overview in McPhail 2014). Chapter 7 (“Apollo’s Hyperborean Voyage: A Narrative Model of Solar Movement”) looks into the stories relating to Apollo’s birth, his seasonal travels to and sojourn in Hyperborea and his return to Delphi. Here Bilić has to unpick confusing and confused stories in order to discern reference in Apollo’s behaviour to the Sun’s movement, which finds cultural expression in the celebration of cultic activities that are variously marked in Delphic and Athenian calendars. At the same time, Bilić acknowledges Apollo’s identification with Helios, the Sun, from the late fifth century BC, thus earlier than the better-known association in Roman times.

One related avenue not explored by Bilić in these chapters is how the association of Apollo with the Sun might be reflected in the built environment in the Greek world. In
Chapter 5 Bilić notes how “Delos […] lies in the direction of the winter solstice sunrise when observed from [the island of] Syros […]. When observed from the northernmost part of Syros the sun on the winter solstice indeed rose almost aligned with the southernmost tip of the neighbouring island of Rhenea (azimuth 120°13’ in 700 BC)” (p. 49). By Chapter 7 we have Apollo identified with the Sun in the Classical period. It may be coincidence, or very unusual, but the Classical temple at Pallene in Attika is oriented towards azimuth 120° (to judge from Google Earth) and 120° was still the azimuth for the winter solstice sunrise in the fifth century BC. So the temple at Pallene is oriented (a) towards winter solstice sunrise, which happens to be also (b) the direction in which Delos lies when “viewed” from Pallene. Unfortunately (for any coherent theory of solar orientation), other temples of Apollo, such as Apollo Daphnephoros on Eretria, Apollo Zoster in Attica and Apollo Kolonna on Aigina, evince no such angling towards so clear a solar phenomenon. There is a bigger puzzle here, however, with a large number of temple orientations that seem to suggest an angling of the structures towards older, major cult centres that were well out of sight over mountains and seas (Kiesling 2018).

Forty years ago the Classicist Fred Ahl published a paper entitled “Amber, Avalon, and Apollo’s Singing Swan” (Ahl 1982). A few weeks earlier in that same year I had the pleasure to listen to two lectures by Professor Ahl while he was a visiting professor to the Classics Department at the University of Otago in New Zealand. The content of those lectures was, in effect, the workings behind the published paper. The same concern that Ahl had in his lecture and article is shared by Bilić (who references Ahl) in Chapter 8 (“Hyperborean Apollo’s Swan Chariot”): the development in prehistoric and historic periods of an anthropomorphised solar deity riding in a chariot drawn, or accompanied, by swans or other water birds. Bilić labels this phenomenon the “Dupljaja concept”, after a well-known miniature sculpture of this theme from Dupljaja in modern Serbia, but the concept encompassed the entire Balkan and Carpathian regions, along with much of central Europe, with an offshoot in the Nordic region and also Italy; and it may have spanned at least the full millennium from the mid-second to the mid-first millennium BC. Bilić argues that “all the elements that appear in the structure of manifestations of the ‘Dupljaja tradition’ point to a close parallelism with the ‘solar’ myth of the Delphian Apollo: an anthropomorphic figure transported in a vehicle and decorated with solar symbols, drawn by animals with an undeniable seasonal character” (p. 81).

This ends Part One, with its emphasis on the annual movement of the Sun from one solstice to the next and back again. The slightly shorter Part Two covers the diurnal solar movement, from sunset to sunrise and back again. Chapter 9 ("Diurnal Path of the Sun in Greek Tradition") sets the scene generally by canvassing the two main theories of how the Sun returned from the west, after setting, to the east to rise again the next day. In the predominant theory, the Sun travelled north, its brightness hidden by the high northern mountain which has figured in other myths as a component of the island of the Sun’s summer solstice turning. In the less common version, the Sun travels south, sometimes in a cup, its passage hidden either by virtue of being in lower-lying parts of the earth or by reason of the journey being subterranean. This latter voyage lent itself to eschatological associations with the Underworld, a topic covered in more depth in Chapter 10 ("Liminal
Imagery in the Accounts of Solar Movement Assimilated to the World of the Dead”), where the incorporation of the Sun’s movement into the world of the dead is expressed in a set of myths that revolve around the site of Pylos in southwest Greece. Pylos’ natural situation, in the far west for mainland and eastern Greece, lent itself to the location also of an entrance to the Underworld. The opposite solar gateway, that of sunrise in the far east, is the subject of Chapter 11 (“Aea and the Voyage of the Argonauts”), and it causes Bilić to return to the voyage of the Argonauts, at least in its supposed pre-Homeric account that was treated back in Chapter 3, in which the goal of the journey was Aea, a mythical land of the Sun far off in the east near the shore of the encircling Ocean. Chapter 12 (“World of the Dead at the Antipodes”) returns to the world of the dead, already associated with the diurnal passage of the Sun after setting, this time to address the introduction of the concept of the “antipodes” as a locus for Hades, the region that involves the fate of humans after death.

The final chapters deal with pre- and post-Greek instances of myths or legends that encompass the movement of the Sun. Chapter 13 (“Beyond Odysseus: Gilgameš”) ventures into the Near East, which has made occasional appearances throughout the text so far, while Chapter 14 (“Beyond Odysseus: Alexander”) deals with the possible solar associations of the exploits of Alexander the Great in the Alexander Romance tradition. Appendix 1 (“Diurnal Solar Movement in Mesopotamian Tradition”) adds further to the Near Eastern context, while Appendix 2 (“Diurnal Solar Movement in Egyptian Tradition”) neatly, if necessarily summarily, adds the situation in Egypt.

By Bilić’s own admission (p. 145), the chapters of this book are episodic or non-linear in character (and hence his Conclusion in Chapter 15 does not summarise the previous chapters, as this would simply repeat, episodically, the conclusions that close each chapter). The theoretical underpinning, which was extensively argued in the Introduction, is mostly tacitly embedded in the discussions rather than explicitly resurrected each time. Nevertheless, Bilić does a good job in trying to bind each chapter to its, or to a, predecessor and to signpost how it will move into its successor where this is possible, so that a more or less continuous and coherent narrative emerges. Bilić’s grasp of the literary/mythological material is impressive in its breadth and depth, and he provides good contextualisation for readers unfamiliar with this evidence. Oddly, however, he tends to assume the scientific background that underpins the astronomical material. Early on in the book I feel more definition, using simple diagrams, would have helped those readers less familiar with the jargon of observational astronomy. This is a very small quibble, however, and does not detract from a book that neatly brings together a distinctive and interrelated body of Greek myths that should rehabilitate the notion of a (limited) “solar mythology”.

References