

Elysium Revisited

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In a recent issue of this journal, Garth Alford (1991) has discussed the passage in Homer's *Odyssey* in which Proteus tells Menelaus that he will not die, ἀλλὰ σ' ἐς Ἠλύσιον πεδῖον καὶ πείρατα γαίης/ἀθάνατοι πέμψουσιν ("but the immortals will send you to the Elysian plain and the ends of the earth," 4.563-4). Everyone admits both that the cheerful afterlife described in these lines is totally at variance with normal Homeric eschatology (in which dead souls flit off like bats to the underworld, where they rely for a faint glimmer of consciousness on such charitable passers-by as let them drink the blood of sacrifices), and that the word Ἠλύσιον has no obvious etymology within Greek itself. Alford advances new and compelling arguments in favour of the hoary¹ but still controversial idea that both the name and the idea of the Elysian plain are derived from the Egyptian *shṯ i3rw*, "field of reeds" in which the blessed dead dwell according to the *Book of the Dead* (17.54, etc., cf. Weill 1936).

Although I agree with Alford's conclusion, his argument is not as convincing as it might be for two reasons. He fails adequately to refute the etymologies for Ἠλύσιον — powerfully argued but incompatible with his own — proposed by Walter Burkert and Jaan Puhvel, and he fails to explain why on his understanding of it Homer's phrase is such a motley borrowing, being part loan-word and part calque. This note aims, by answering these objections, to strengthen Alford's case for an Egyptian origin for the Elysian plain. It is in four parts: a refutation of Burkert's thesis, a refutation of that of Puhvel, a synopsis of Alford's contribution (with which I agree), and an explanation for the formally hybrid nature of the phrase

¹The idea is accepted, e.g. by Lauth 1867: 5 and Vermeule 1979: 42-82.

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Ἠλύσιον πεδίον.

In an important and widely accepted² article, Burkert (1961) compares the word *Ἠλύσιον* with the term *ἐνηλύσιος*, “struck by lightning”, used substantivally in the neuter to mean, “a place that has been set apart from worldly uses because a thunderbolt has fallen there”. He argues that *ἐνηλύσιος* has an obvious etymology within Greek from the future stem of **ἐνέρχομαι*, “to come in, arrive”, describing the place in which a thunderbolt has come. Burkert then suggests that *Ἠλύσιον* arose out of *ἐνηλύσιος* by false word division, as English “roach” arose from “cockroach” < Spanish *cucaracha*, a process called *Leumannsches Mißverständnis* after the scholar who catalogued four Homeric instances (Leumann 1950: 109-10, 122-37)³. Burkert suggests two possible lines whose misreading could have invited a Leumannian misunderstanding of *ἐνηλύσιος*, viz.: **τῶ δ' ἄρ' ΕΝΗΛΥΣΙΩΙ βιοτὴ πέλει ἄφθιτος αἰεὶ*, “when he had been struck by lightning OR in Elysium he has a life forever deathless,” and **ζῶει ΕΝΗΛΥΣΙΩΙ πεδίῳ τιμῆσι φέριστος*, “He lives most abounding in honours in a plain struck by lightning OR in the Elysian plain”.

In favour of Burkert's suggestion, one can readily see how Greeks could have connected the idea of ground struck by lightning with Elysium, for Zeus mates in the *ιερὸς γάμος* (*Il.* 14.346-51), which involves his descent to earth in thunder and lightning as *καταιβάτης*, most notably in the conception of Dionysus (Pind. *Ol.* 2.25-6, Eur. *Bacch.* 1-3). Indeed, G. A. Wainwright (1932: 6) has suggested that the ancients were in the habit of searching the ground after a thunderstorm for fallen thunderbolts, which they believed they had found whenever they came across a belemnite or thunder-stone, the fossilized internal bone of a cuttle-fish, which accounts for the curious shape of the thunderbolts with which Greek art arms Zeus (this could also explain why Greek calls truffles *κεραύνια*, “little thunderbolts” [Theophr. *HP* 1.6.5, Galen 19.731]). Elysium, meanwhile, is the dwelling-place after this earthly life of at least some of Zeus's relatives.

Three serious problems, none of which are by themselves insurmountable, but which collectively prove fatal, beset

²E.g. by Chantraine 1970: 411 s.v. *Ἠλύσιον*, and S. West in Heubeck et al. 1988: 227 ad *Od.* 4.563ff.

³The examples are *βρότος*, “gore” < *ἄμβροτας* (for gods are anemic, *Il.* 5.342), *ἰότης* < *δειότης* < *δαίδαλος* < *πολυδαίδαλος*, and *ῥα* < *ἔξοχος*.

Burkert's thesis. The place *into* which a thunderbolt has come would be better expressed by the preverb ἐ(ί)σ- than ἐν⁴, and the place into which a thunderbolt *has come* is not naturally expressed by a future stem (the word that Burkert cites as a formal parallel, εἰσηλύσιον, "entrance fee" [IG 2².1368.37, *Ath. Mitt.* 32.294] underscores both points admirably, for it is the sum paid by someone *about* to go *into* a place). Thirdly, Ἠλύσιον is first attested (in our passage, *Od.* 4.563) earlier than ἐνηλύσιος (first at Aesch. fr. 17 *TrGF*). While this could be an accident of transmission, for much early poetry has been lost, it is reasonable to assume in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary that Ἠλύσιον is the older word.

It is possible that the words Ἠλύσιον and ἐνηλύσιος are related, but by the exact opposite mechanism from that envisaged by Burkert, for while there are but a handful of Homeric examples of false word division — none of them absolutely certain — compound words are a dime a dozen at all periods in Greek. In fact, much religious vocabulary is of just this sort. Whoever is ἐναγής has some pollution (ἄγος) within; whoever is ἐνθεος has a god (θεός) within. In a similar way, what Zeus strikes by lightning he marks out as an honorary suburb of Elysium.

Eight years after Burkert's article, Puhvel (1969) advanced an entirely different theory. Heinrich Otten (1958: 131, 139-40) had published the text of a Hittite death-ritual (*KUB XXX 24 II 1-4*) in which the sun-god is invoked to prepare for the deceased in the other world a meadow in which will graze cattle, sheep, horses and mules. The word for "meadow" in this prayer, Ú.SAL, is an allograph (= Akkadian *usallu*). This type of orthography expresses the signified but not the signifier of the Hittite word it denotes (Gurney 1961: 121). Puhvel argues that the Hittite word denoted by Ú.SAL was *wellu*, which he derives from a hypothetical I-E. **welsu*, "meadow". This could have yielded Greek **Φέλσου* > **Φήλν* (with the /e/ lengthened to compensate for the loss of the /s/). To this form could then have been added the adjectival ending -σιος (cf. *Νεκύσιος*, a Cretan month name, cf. *νέκυς*, *μεθύσιον* [*εἶδος ἀμπέλου*, Hsych., cf. *μέθυ*], *θαλύσια* [**θάλυς*, cf. gen. pl. *θαλέων* and fem. *θάλεια*], and *τηύσιος*, cf. Skt. *tāyá-*). If so, its meaning was

⁴Burkert argues that εἰς and ἐν were only secondarily differentiated, cf. Schwyzer 1959: 82, 619. It should be noted, though, that the distinction is clear already in Homer; cf. Chantraine 1953: 103 §145.

early misunderstood, and Greek had to coin the pleonastic phrase Ἠλύσιον πεδίον. Puhvel proposes that *Od.* 4.563-4 might originally have read *ἀλλά σε Φηλύσιον πεδίον... / ἀθάνατοι πέμψουσιν, “but the immortals will send you <to> the Elysian plain...”, and indeed the accusative of motion toward without preposition is amply paralleled in Homer (Chantraine 1939: 45-6 §55), as is the double accusative (ibid.: 49 §59).

Alford (1991: 152) objects to Puhvel’s suggestion that “[i]f Ἠλύσιον is a Greek word, why can we not discern any source for it in Greek culture and why were the Greeks themselves at a loss to explain it?”. There is, however, a greater objection to Puhvel’s theory, namely that it involves a logical contradiction. This is because on his interpretation, Ἠλύσιον πεδίον is a pleonasm, meaning “meadowy plain”. The only reason for such a thing to exist is if one word were felt as foreign and the other added as a gloss. Ἠλύσιον is a hapax in Homer; therefore, if either word is a gloss, it must be πεδίον. But if *ἦλυ were felt as foreign, how could it have been given a Greek adjectival ending (-σιος)?

Alford accepts Puhvel’s analysis of Ἠλύσιον as Ἠλύ-σιον, but, as we have said, accepts also the long-positied Egyptian etymology for the first element. The value of his article is that it demonstrates that Egyptian *i3rw* could have been transliterated into Greek only as *ἦλυ. It does this by accessing the evidence of Coptic, which, unlike hieroglyphic Egyptian, records vowels, albeit at a later stage in the history of the Egyptian language. Unfortunately, *i3rw* does not survive into Coptic, but the similar sounding *i3rrt*, “grapes” survives as ελοολε and *i3kt*, “leeks” survives as Η2Ε. Alford argues convincingly that the first demonstrates that Egyptian *r* became Coptic λ, and the second shows that an initial *i* in a two-syllable word yielded Coptic Η. Adding these two pieces of evidence together, Alford concludes that Egyptian *i3rw* would have been in Coptic *Ηλοο and in Greek *ἦλυ.

There remains, however, a problem with Alford’s theory. For if Ἠλύσιον πεδίον is indeed derived from *sh̄t i3rw* (as his arguments strongly suggest), why did the Greek bards translate one word of the phrase πεδίον < *sh̄t*) and borrow the other by transliterating it and adding a Greek adjectival ending to approximate the direct genitive relation indicated by the word-

order of the original Egyptian phrase (*Ἠλύσιον < ἰβρω*)⁵? Certainly a sentence such as **ἀλλὰ σέ γ' ἐς δονάκων πεδίον... / ἀθάνατοι πέμψουσιν*, “but the immortals will send you at least to the plain of reeds...” would be grammatically correct, as well as made entirely of Homeric words. On the other hand, **ἀλλὰ σέ γ' ἐς Sekhan Ἠλυσίαν... / ἀθάνατοι πέμψουσιν*, “but the immortals will send you at least to *Sekha Elysia*...” suggests that a transliteration of *sh̄t* that replaced the Egyptian feminine ending with a Greek feminine accusative one would fit the dactylic hexametre admirably.

The answer is suggested by a theory of Cyrus Gordon (1978 and 1992) according to which the Semitic word *tršš* (e.g. Hebrew *taršiš* [Isaiah 2.16]) was widely diffused in the Aegean. This word originally meant, “of wine”, “vinous”, but came, owing to the widespread custom of applying colour-terms to seas (Red, Black, etc.), to refer to the Mediterranean. According to Gordon, Greek borrowed *tršš* twice, once as a loan-word, *θάλασσα*, and once as a calque, *ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον/ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντω*. Similarly, there is an Egyptian phrase, *m3' hrw*, “true of voice”, which describes the souls of the deceased who have passed the judgement of words in the underworld by truthfully reciting the Negative Confession, a catalogue of forty-two misdeeds that s/he denies having committed in life, after which s/he is allowed to enter the Field of Reeds. A. H. Krappe (1940) and Constantin Daniel (1962) argue that *m3' hrw* entered Greek as *μάκαρ*, “blessed, happy”. I have recently argued (Griffith 1997: 231-3) that Greek borrowed it also as a calque in the form *ἔπεα πτερόεντα*, originally meaning “feathered words” — for the ostrich feather was the symbol of the Egyptian goddess of Truth, Maat — and subsequently understood either as “words feathered (like arrows)” or “words winged (like birds)”.

The cases of *tršš* and *m3' hrw* point to a pattern: if Greek likewise borrowed *sh̄t ἰβρω* twice, as a loan, **sekha(n) Ἠλυσία(ν)* and as a calque, **δονάκων πεδίον*, it is not hard to imagine a further stage wherein by mutual contamination the two forms produced the attested phrase *Ἠλύσιον πεδίον*. Pressure to choose either the loan word or the calque (or, as a compromise, the contamination) is akin to the drive toward simplicity (i.e. economy) in Homer’s formular system (Parry

⁵On the direct genitive, see Gardiner 1957: 65-6 §85.

1971: 7). The pairs *θάλασσα/ἐπὶ οἴνοπα πόντον* and *μάκαρ/ἔπεα πτερόεντα* survived this pressure, perhaps because one in each pair preserves the riddling character of a kenning that seemingly appealed to the bards (cf. *ἔρκος ὀδόντων*, "the fence of the teeth" Il. 4.350, etc.).

Once the weaknesses of Burkert's and Puhvel's theses have been clearly exposed and the objection to the bastard quality of the phrase on Alford's theory has been met, the probability that Egyptian *šht i3rw* in fact inspired Homer's *Ἠλύσιον πεδίον* is revealed to be very high indeed.

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