

# The Immovable Olympus

Catalin Anghelina  
*Ohio State University, Columbus*  
*anghelina10@yahoo.com*

The Homeric Olympus does not always clearly represent the well-known Thessalian mountain. In many instances, it rather seems to echo a vague and remote place, which has a close connection to the sky. I argue that the best candidate for its original location is the North Pole of the celestial globe. On the other hand, Tartarus seems to be symmetrical to Olympus in early Greek epic, which leads to the conclusion that its location is under the South Pole of the same celestial globe. Thus, the Greek myth may reflect an old tradition, for which the Universe was perceived as a celestial spheroid revolving around its axial poles.<sup>1</sup>

## Olympus as Zeus' Seat

The ancient cosmic topography of the Greeks, as expressed in their myths, has been a puzzle and occasion for debate since Antiquity. In modern times, the lack of a fully consistent and rational explanation of the topic has made scholars see the perception of Cosmos in Greek myths as similar to that in other primitive cultures - that is, 'naïve'. From a modern, rationalistic standpoint, it would belong to the cultural stage of *mythos*.<sup>2</sup>

Olympus offers such a case. In a well known passage from the *Iliad* (8.23-6), Homer describes how Zeus in Olympus, in a full display of his strength, pulls up all the gods upon a golden rope (*σειρή*), together with earth and sea, and binds them around the 'peak' (*ρίον*) of Olympus. This passage was athetized by Zenodotus on the grounds that the earth could not be logically suspended from Olympus, which is part of the same earth. The poet would have lost 'the conception of Olympus as

---

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Professor Dan Collins from The Ohio State University for helping me with the editing of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup>For a recent survey of this issue, see Buxton (1999, 1-21) and Most (1999, 25-47); for the Greek 'naïve view', see e.g. Kirk-Raven (1957, 10), Kirk (1970, 238).

a mountain in Thessaly, and followed the later mythology which removed it from earth to heaven'.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar way, modern scholarship has tried to remove such difficulties by saying that Olympus in such passages does not represent the mountain, but a heavenly place. Poets of the epic tradition would have mixed two separate views. The first put Olympus in the sky, the other considered it to be a divine mountain. Thus, in a comparative study about the formulaic epic epithets for Olympus and Ouranos, Sale (1984, 26-8) shows that the Olympus set of formulas is far more extensive than that of Ouranos. His conclusion is that the epic tradition originally viewed the gods as dwelling on Mt. Olympus, and that it only later moved them into the sky. This argument would make Mt. Olympus the original abode of the gods.<sup>4</sup>

There are some obstacles to accepting Olympus as originally being a particular physical mountain. First, the Thessalian Olympus is not the only Greek mountain that bears this name. To avoid the difficulty, it has been suggested that Olympus is a pre-Greek word for 'mountain'.<sup>5</sup> Second, Zeus, as the Indo-European sky-god, had his location in the sky. This is an impediment to seeing his original location as a terrestrial mountain.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, Homeric passages such as the one above do not clearly depict Olympus as a terrestrial mountain. There are also formulaic lines in the early Greek epic that show a strong connection between the sky and Olympus, as if they somehow overlapped with each other.<sup>7</sup> To see the relation between Olympus and Ouranos, it would be useful to see how these lines and passages fit together.

One must say from the start that there are few passages in Homer in which Olympus is clearly understood to be a terrestrial mountain. The Thessalian mountain seems to be implied at *Od.* 11.315-6: here the Aloades pile Ossa on Olympus

<sup>3</sup>Leaf (1900) on 8.23-6; for an extensive commentary, see Kirk (1990).

<sup>4</sup>Luch (1925, 119) reaches the conclusion that Homer's use of Olympus as a Thessalian mountain is only a 'literary device', its location being in the sky.

<sup>5</sup>Nilsson (1955, 353); Burkert (1985, 126) considers this uncertain. For other Greek mountains named Olympus, see Cook (1914, 100-1); for mountain-cults dedicated to Zeus, see Cook (1925, 868-987).

<sup>6</sup>Nilsson (1955, 393): 'Himmel und Berg' bedeuten dasselbe'. Propertius (3.2.18) describes Zeus' temple at Olympia as imitating the sky: *nec Iovis Elei caelum imitata domus*.

<sup>7</sup>E.g. *Th.* 689: Zeus coming ἀπ' οὐρανὸν ἠδ' ἀπ' Ὀλύμπου; *Il.* 1.497: Thetis rising to μέγαν οὐρανὸν Οὐλυμπόν τε.

and Pelion on Ossa in order to reach Ouranos. The whole logic of this passage, however, is problematic, which led Aristarchus to atheize it. The reason for this is that it makes no sense to speak of Olympus as the seat of the gods (313) and then to pile some mountains on terrestrial Olympus in order to reach the sky, where the gods live (315-6).<sup>8</sup> Another problematic passage occurs at *Il.*16.364-5, where Zeus sends a cloud from Olympus to the sky: ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἀπ' Οὐλύμπου νέφος ἔρχεται οὐρανὸν εἴσω | αἰθέρος ἐκ δίης... Here it is hard to understand how Zeus on Mt. Olympus can send a cloud from the aether to the sky if Olympus were only a terrestrial mountain.<sup>9</sup>

There are only two other passages where it seems that Olympus is indeed located in Thessaly. At *Il.*14.225-30 Hera goes from Olympus to Pieria, Emathia, etc., and at *Od.* 5.50 Hermes goes from Olympus to Ogygia by passing through Pieria. The latter passage, however, shows that the journey takes place from the aether (ἐξ αἰθέρος). Olympus is, again, located in the aether.

It is, therefore, not obvious that the early epic tradition reflects Olympus as being only the Thessalian mountain or any other mountain, for that matter. On the other hand, there are epic formulae such as Οὐλύμπου νιφόεντος, Οὐλυμπον ἀγάννιφον, which are appropriate for the description of a physical mountain, with snow on its peak.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this, in many passages, Olympus seems to be a remote and vague place, which belongs to the heavenly realm rather than to earth.

Let us now consider the passages in which Olympus seems to be located in the sky. In *Iliad* 5 and 8, Hera and Athena go first to Olympus to see Zeus and then come back on earth, to Troy. The two journeys have nothing to do with a terrestrial mountain. The upward journey takes place through the gates of the sky, which are guarded by the Horae; traveling in a chariot driven by horses, the goddesses pass through the midst of them (5.748-52 = 8.392-96):

Ἡρη δὲ μᾶστιγι θεῶς ἐπεμαίετ' ἄρ' ἵππους  
αὐτόμαται δὲ πύλαι μύκον οὐρανοῦ, ἃς ἔχον ῥῶραι,

<sup>8</sup>Heubeck, Hoekstra (1989).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Sale (1984, 14)

<sup>10</sup>Νιφόεις: *Il.* 18. 616, *Od.* 19. 338, *Th.* 117. The adjective is used for mountains, e.g. in Pind. *P.*1. 36 (Etna), *Soph.* *O.T.*472 (Parnassus); in *Alcae.*17 it refers to the sky!

τῆς ἐπιτέτραπται μέγας οὐρανὸς Οὐλύμπος τε,  
 ἡμὲν ἀνακλῖναι πυκινὸν νέφος ἥδ' ἐπιθεῖναι.  
 τῆ ῥα δι' αὐτάων κεντρηνεκέας ἔχον ἵππους.

Hera and Athena find Zeus seated on the highest peak of Olympus, ἀκροτάτῃ κορυφῇ πολυδειράδος Οὐλύμποιο (754). After their brief discussion with Zeus, on their journey earthward, Athena and Hera go down through the space between the earth and the sky μεσσηγὺς γαίης τε καὶ οὐρανοῦ ἀσπερόεντος (769). The scene of the return makes it clear that the goddesses' trip back to earth begins in the sky, while in their ascension to Olympus they pass first through the 'gates of the sky'. Thus the cosmic topography expressed in these passages shows that Olympus has a very close connection to the sky, if it is not identical to it.

The case has been made that, in the above passage, Mt. Olympus is located on both sides of the gates, in the sky. This is a highly improbable reading. There is no indication that Mt. Olympus pierces the sky through these gates.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the whole scene is set, from the beginning, in the sky, not in Olympus, with Hera having prepared the chariot to go to Zeus (5.720-32). Olympus then should be here considered the highest region in the sky or beyond it. Zeus's seat is not located on a terrestrial mountain, but in the sky.

Another fiercely debated passage occurs at *Od.* 5.42-5, where Athena is said to ascend to Olympus. Olympus here is described as a place 'where the abode of the gods stands firm and unmoving forever, they say, and is not shaken with winds nor spattered with rains, nor does snow ever pile there, but the shining bright air stretches cloudless away, and the white light glances upon it'. To explain away the difficulty of Olympus being both a heavenly place and the Thessalian mountain, it has been argued that we are also dealing with a metaphor here, with Olympus denoting the sky Ouranos<sup>12</sup>. The rationale behind this is that it would, of course, be preposterous to argue that there are no clouds, rain or snow on a physical mountain

<sup>11</sup>As Sale (1984, 16) suggests. Kirk (1990) considers the relation between Olympus and sky here 'vague'.

<sup>12</sup>These lines have been often athetized because they do not refer to a mountain. Spieker (1969, 136-61), defends them, arguing that Olympus is an idealized place; cf. Luch (1925); for bibliography and synopsis of the issue, cf. Ameis, Hentze (1890, 144), Heubeck, West, Hainsworth (1988).

such as this one.

Although Olympus has been seen in such cases as a metaphor for the sky, there may be more than this in the latter Homeric passage. Olympus is described here as *θεῶν ἔδος ἀσφαλές αἰεὶ*, 'the forever-unmoving seat of the gods'. Hesiod (*Th.* 128) and Pindar (*N.* 6.1-6) also employ the formula, but with reference to the sky, not to Olympus. This reinforces the hypothesis that, from a very early date, Olympus and Ouranos were viewed in such contexts as identical or as substitutes for each other. The use of the epithet *ἀσφαλές*, however, raises a question: where does this epithet fit its context the best? Is it Ouranos or Olympus that was originally *ἀσφαλές*?

From a cosmic perspective, the Greek idea of being 'unmoving' is not restricted to the sky realm only. In Hesiod (*Th.* 117), the earth is said to be *ἔδος ἀσφαλές* as well.<sup>13</sup> The epithet in this context reminds us of the fact that Poseidon, as the god of earthquakes, is called *ἀσφάλειος*, the one who holds the earth 'unshaken'.<sup>14</sup>

The formula that describes Olympus as the 'forever-unmoving seat of the gods' could be nothing else than a metaphor: such an idealized and eternal place cannot be otherwise than *ἀσφαλές*.<sup>15</sup> The fact, however, that both the earth and the sky are said to be *ἔδος ἀσφαλές* might have a more profound implication, pertaining to an ancient cosmic perspective.

In the case of the earth, the epithet can be easily explained: the old conception of the Universe saw the earth as being firm and immovable in the Cosmos. The sky, however, is not immovable or unmoving. People from very early times must have noticed that the sky seems to rotate daily around the earth. This would have been most obvious during the night-time (*ἀστέρους Οὐρανός*), when the stars were seen as rising in the east and setting in the west. Ancient people must have also noticed that all this rotation took place around a certain point: the North Pole of the sky.<sup>16</sup> The sky, therefore, could not have

<sup>13</sup>Lines 117-20 have spurred discussions about their authenticity, because it seems illogical that both the earth and the sky are *ἀσφαλές*; cf. West (1966).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Burkert (1985, 137-8); Nilsson (1955, 448); for both literary and epigraphic sources, see Graf (1985, 175 n.104-6).

<sup>15</sup>Spieker (1969, 149-50).

<sup>16</sup>During the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. the North Pole of the sky was not

been seen as unmoving by the ancients. Consequently, ἀσφαλές could not mean ‘unmoving’.

Etymologically, ἀσφαλές means ‘which does not fall’. This seems to fit with the Greek myth of the sky as being separated from the earth and supported by ‘pillars’.<sup>17</sup> The sky could be ἔδος ἀσφαλές in the sense that it does not fall back on to the earth. This, however, cannot clearly explain why both the earth and Olympus share the same epithet. In addition, the fact that Poseidon, as the god of earthquakes, is called ἀσφάλειος, hints to a rather vibratory movement, which is natural for earthquakes. This kind of movement then should be considered in the case of the sky as well. The dome of the sky, however, does not vibrate. The reason for this is its constant turning around a ‘firm’ and fixed point in the sky. The sky can be ἔδος ἀσφαλές as long as the *axis mundi*, around which the heavenly rotation takes place, stays ‘unshaken’.<sup>18</sup> It seems then more likely that the epithet shows not that the sky is, as a dome, ‘immovable’, but rather ‘unshaken’ in its rotation.

This brings us to Olympus. If Olympus, as it seems, is not the sky but somehow overlaps with it or has a heavenly location, then there is, perhaps, a position in the sky that might be suitably described as ἀσφαλές - the North Pole. In the mythology of a pre-historic people<sup>19</sup> Olympus may have been the North Pole, both the ‘unshaken’ and ‘immovable’ point in the sky, around which the whole cosmos revolves.<sup>20</sup> In this case, the epithet seems to be perfectly applicable to Olympus. In fact, in the Indo-Aryan world, the word designating the Polar Star, *dhruva*, means ‘the immovable one’. Similarly, in some Siberian

---

represented by any Polaris star. This is due to the astronomical phenomenon of precession. Homer already knew about the rotation of the sky: cf. *Od.* 5.271-7. In the Hindu tradition, in the *Bhāgavata Purāna* (4.8), the stars revolve about the Pole Star like oxen; cf. West (2007, 352).

<sup>17</sup>E.g., *Th.* 154-210 and 778-9.

<sup>18</sup>The *axis mundi*, therefore, is the imaginary axis which runs from the North to the South Pole of the sky.

<sup>19</sup>It is likely that they were a non-Greek people, since the Greeks were not able to explain this mythology anymore. In Egyptian mythology, the ‘Netherworld’ is located in the sky, and the soul of the deceased goes among the circumpolar stars; cf. Hornung (1999, 5-6), Highbarger (1940, 10-22). The North Pole was crucial in the construction of the Egyptian pyramids at Giza (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.): cf. Gingerich (2000, 297-8).

<sup>20</sup>The only time, to my knowledge, this supposition has been made is in de Santillana-Dechend (1968, 98).

languages, the same star is called the ‘motionless star’ or ‘nail star’,<sup>21</sup>

The hypothesis of an Olympus as the North Pole easily explains the problematic Homeric passages. It also explains why Ouranos and Olympus are sometimes so closely related in the epic formulaic style. Obviously, Olympus is located, as the North Pole, in the sky, but it cannot be identical to it. When, at *Il.*1.497-9, Thetis rises to ‘great Ouranos and Olympus’, this means that she ascends to the sky and North Pole.<sup>22</sup> The golden rope with which Zeus drags up gods, earth and sea does not hang around the peak of the Thessalian mountain; it is rather located at the North Pole, where Zeus is seated. The same golden rope could metaphorically be seen as the *axis mundi*. When Zeus vows that Ate shall never come up to Οὐλυμπόν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀστερόεντα (19.129), this means then she will never be able to come to the sky and North Pole, where Zeus dwells. This is why, although the scene is set up in Olympus (114), the poet says that Zeus hurls her from the sky (130).<sup>23</sup> It also makes perfect sense for Zeus to send a cloud from the Olympian aether to the sky: the North Pole is, from a geometric perspective, the point where all the points of the sky converge: it is the *πίλον* of the whole cosmos. It is thus not the case that Olympus ‘reaches’ the aether; rather, it is inherently located in the aether. Geometrically, the North Pole of a rotating spheroid is the culmination of all the ‘slopes’ of the spherical surface.<sup>24</sup> This also makes sense in the case of the epithets

<sup>21</sup>See Holmberg (1923, 11).

<sup>22</sup>Aristarchus believed the ascension was possible because the peak of Olympus was above the clouds, in the sky; cf. Kirk (1985). In this case, the formula would lack logic, since the ascension occurs first to the sky and then to Olympus. For a synopsis, see Sale (1984, n.26).

<sup>23</sup>This passage has also stirred discussion whether Olympus and the sky are different here or not: Schmidt (1939, 18.1: 875-910), believes they are different; Sale (1984, n.26) thinks they are the same.

<sup>24</sup>My argument does not necessarily imply that the celestial vault was seen as spherical. This is why I used the term ‘spheroid’; this term indicates the geometrical form resulted from the rotation around the axis. Crates believed Homer’s cosmos was spherical: cf. Porter (1992, 91-4); for how ‘the ancients’ could establish the sphericity of the sky, see Toomer (1998, 38-9). The earliest clear attestation of the Greek spherical model is in Parmenides (fr.10): cf. Hahn (1970, 106). Berger (1904, 13) argues for the spherical model as being known to the earliest Greek epic: ‘die Lage der Erde...in der Mitte zwischen den beiden Halbkugeln’; cf. Solmsen (1977, 239 n.1). West (1966, 127) strangely considers that the sky was seen as ‘flat’ in these

πολυδειράς and πολύπτυχος.<sup>25</sup>

The passages at *Il.* 5.749-51 = 8.393-5 express the concept of the 'gates of the sky', which give access to Olympus. This makes the whole picture more precise: Olympus is the seat of Zeus immediately above the celestial spheroid, where the North Pole is. To get there, one needs to pass through 'the gates' or the threshold of Zeus (οὐδός), which is guarded by the Horae. This is an additional fact which may offer further support to our hypothesis. The Horae are goddesses of the seasons. We know from Hesiod that the seasons were determined by the acronychal setting of certain stars during the year.<sup>26</sup> It makes then sense for the Horae, as goddesses of the seasons, to guard that place about which the stars revolve. It now seems clearer how Athena and Hera get to Olympus. After having prepared their horses in the sky, they climb up to the celestial North Pole.

The idea of a supreme deity dwelling at the North Pole would not be something new in the history of religions: Altaic people in Siberia also believe that their supreme god lives on the top of a mountain that reaches the North Pole.<sup>27</sup> In India, puranic traditions mention Mount Meru as the world's axis, which ends up as the celestial North Pole. On its top is the gods' dwelling place, whereas on the opposite side, i.e., at the South Pole, live the demons. This latter place is, as we shall see below, very similar to the concept of Tartarus.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that the North Pole might have played a crucial role in an earlier mythology may be revealed at *Il.* 12.239-40, where Hector contests Polydamas' augural predictions by saying that he does not care about the birds' *omina*, 'whether they come from the right, where the sun rises, or from the left,

---

prehistoric times. The Vedic world knew this shape of the celestial vault. In phrases like *dhiṣāṇē samīcīnē* (*RV* 10.44.8, *AV* 2.34.3) or *camvā samīcī* (*RV* 3.55.20), the vault is seen as a 'bowl'; cf. Kirfel (1920 = 1967, 6).

<sup>25</sup>These are *bahuvrīhi* compounds meaning 'with many necks/folds'. Notably, Luch (1925, 116) remarked that these epithets had never been applied to Ouranos.

<sup>26</sup>*Op.* 564-70; cf. West (1978, 376-81).

<sup>27</sup>See Holmberg (1923, 39-41).

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Burgess (1860, 286-7); Kirfel (1954, I 2, 3-12, II 2 15-47; 1920, 13). Pingree (1990, 274-80) argues for a Mesopotamian influence in the first millennium B.C.; for a synopsis, see Eliade (1972, 266-9). See also West (1997, 112) about cosmic mountains in the Near East. In the Gilgamesh Epic, Mount Mašū reaches both the heaven and the underworld; cf. Horowitz (1998, 97-8).

where the sun sets'.<sup>29</sup> In this context, the 'right' denoting the sunrise indicates that the augural signs were taken by facing the North.<sup>30</sup>

The identification of Olympus with the North Pole raises the question of how it could end up being seen as a mountain. The idea of a cosmic mountain as the *axis mundi* is found in several cultures and is very archaic. It would not be implausible to assume that, at some point during their migrations, the Greeks came across a prehistoric culture (Asiatic shamanism?) for which the *axis mundi* was metaphorically seen as a cosmic mountain. They took over the idea and, perhaps, interpreted it in a realistic sense. This can account for the many mountains that bear this name throughout the Greek world. Thus, the epic tradition could echo a mythology which the historical Greeks were no longer able to understand completely.

Zeus, then, is the master of Olympus and sits on top of the celestial globe. At the same time, he is the master of the axis and, as such, can make Olympus, that is, the whole cosmos, tremble (e.g. at *Il*.1.530). Zeus, however, is not the only one who can shake the world's axis. Poseidon is the god of earthquakes and, as such, can also make the earth tremble. It could be that Poseidon has access to the world's axis as well. It is interesting to compare the epithets of the two gods. Poseidon is *γαιήοχος*, Zeus is *αἰγίοχος*. While Poseidon's epithet makes perfect sense in the context of his role, Zeus's epithet is obscure.<sup>31</sup> This is because, in spite of its crucial importance, the word *αἰγίς* itself is obscure.<sup>32</sup> If Zeus is, indeed, the master of

<sup>29</sup>εἴτ' ἐπὶ δεξιῇ ἴωσι πρὸς ἠῶ τ' ἠέλιόν τε | εἴτ' ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ τοί γε ποτὶ ζόφου ἠερόεντα.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Lloyd (1966, 47); Hainsworth (1993). On the other hand, the Sanskrit *dakṣina* represents both the direction to the right and the South; this means that for the Indo-Aryan world the most important cardinal point was the East.

<sup>31</sup>Poseidon, as the earth-holder, may be originally a 'chthonic' god; cf. Guthrie (1950, 97). In fact, other epithets denote the same role: cf. Call. *fr.*623 ῥιζοῦχε Ποσειδῶν, Opp. *H.* 5.679-80 γαίης δ' ἀστυφέλικτα Ποσειδῶν ἐρύοιτο | Ἀσφάλιος ῥιζοῦχα θεμείλια νέρθε φυλάσσω; cf. West (1966, 362). For a comparison of the epithets of Poseidon and Zeus, see Cook (1925, 5-20). The etymology of Poseidon as 'master of the earth' (Kretschmer 1909, 28-9) has not been decisively proved yet; cf. Burkert (1985, 136).

<sup>32</sup>At *Il* 15.311 Apollo fights holding the aegis with both hands, which would be strange if the aegis, as historical Greeks assumed, were a shield. On the other hand, with both hands one can hold a scepter (*Od.* 5.49); cf. Kirk (1985) on *Il.* 2.446-51. Janko (1992, 261) argues for the aegis originally being a thunderbolt. However, Zeus' thunderbolt cannot destroy the aegis (*Il.*

the world's axis, one can make the hypothesis that the aegis might have something to do with it. It may be that the aegis was the world's axis itself. Well-known pictorial evidence from Antiquity shows Zeus bearing a huge scepter in his hand.<sup>33</sup> This could originally be the aegis, which may have been the symbol of the divine power. Bearing the aegis-scepter was identical to owning the world's axis and thus controlling the world.<sup>34</sup>

### Symmetry in the Cosmos

The cosmic topography discussed above is incomplete. If the heavenly spheroid surrounds the earth, then the 'myth' must have also accounted for the world 'below'. This is the realm of Hades, the Underworld.<sup>35</sup> The description of Tartarus as one of the main regions of the Underworld bears many points of symmetry to the description of Olympus. Hesiod states that the entrance to Tartarus is as far away from the earth as the sky is from the earth.<sup>36</sup> Olympus is *πολυδαιράς*; Tartarus ends above in a *δείρη*, where 'the roots of the earth and the unharvested sea are' (*Th.* 726-9). A bronze threshold (*οὐδός*) lies at the entrance of Tartarus (*Th.* 748), as it lies at the entrance of Olympus (*Il.* 5.734). The gates of Tartarus are immovable (*ἀσπεμφές*: *Th.* 812), while the gods' seat is *ἀσφαλές*.

The entrance to Tartarus, where the Titans are imprisoned by Zeus, is blocked by the 'gates of bronze', which Poseidon built, and where 'in proper order, lie the sources and the limits/ of the black earth and of mist-wrapped Tartarus, / of the barren sea, too, and of the starry sky' (736-8 = 807-9). Past these gates, there is a huge chasm (*χάσμα*), and before it Atlas

---

21.401). Cook (1925, 866-7) attributes it originally to Athena. Interestingly, Athena, the aegis-bearer, was born from Zeus' head, whose nod can shake the cosmos. 'Aegis' may be related to Skt. *ejati* 'to shake' (Gk. *αἰσσω*): cf. Chantraine (1968-80).

<sup>33</sup>*LIMC* VIII. 1 (315-24): the oldest representation is on a Proto-Corinthian vase from 680 B.C. (16); there were possibly others in Creto-Mycenaean age.

<sup>34</sup>For the scepter as symbol of the *axis mundi*, see Eisler (1910, 581-3). Janko (1992, 261) notes of Zeus' aegis, 'it symbolizes his power, although Homer no longer knew exactly why'.

<sup>35</sup>Hades is a divine person already in Homer. However, evidence from the Homeric epics seems to point to Hades as originally the abode of the dead; cf. Nilsson (1955, 454-5), Thieme (1968, 133-53).

<sup>36</sup>*Th.* 722-5, *Il.* 8.13; cf. Kirk-Raven (1957, 10-1). In Hebrew literature (Isa.7.11), the place of the dead, Sheol, is seen as the polar opposite of the height of the heaven; cf. West (1997, 138).

‘stands erect and on his head/ and unwearied arms firmly supports the broad sky’. Also, somewhere in the vicinity of this place, Hesiod locates the primeval concept of *χάος* (811-4):

ἔνθα δὲ μαρμάρεαί τε πύλαι καὶ χάλκεος οὐδός  
 ἀστεμφές ῥίζησι διηνεκέεσσι ἀρηρώς,  
 αὐτοφυῆς· πρόσθεν δὲ θεῶν ἔκτοσθεν ἀπάντων  
 Τιτῆνες ναίουσι, πέρην χάεος ζοφεροῖο.

One of the major problems regarding these passages has been the seeming lack of logic in the description and location of Tartarus.<sup>37</sup> The fact that such different concepts as the sky, earth, sea, Tartarus and Chaos seem to be geographically associated caused many scholars to reject entire passages in the *descriptio Tartari* as interpolations.<sup>38</sup> The place in Tartarus, especially, where the Titans are located, designated by prepositions or adverbs like *πρόσθεν*, *ἔκτοσθεν* and *πέρην*, is difficult to locate.

The symmetry between Olympus and Tartarus may provide a clue to the cosmic location of the latter. If, indeed, the gates of Tartarus are symmetrical to the gates of Olympus, and if Olympus indeed is or ends up being the North Pole of the celestial vault, then the place of these gates cannot be other than the South Pole of the celestial spheroid. In this case, these gates give way to Tartarus, the lowest region of the Underworld, which must be therefore located under the South Pole of the celestial spheroid, through a *δείρη*. This word may indicate the narrow (punctual, in the modern view) space about which the celestial vault turns. Thus, the Titans live ‘outside’ the celestial vault (*ἔκτοσθεν*), but in front (*πρόσθεν*) of the gates, since Tartarus begins right there. We can also understand now why the ‘roots’ of the earth, sky, and Tartarus are all the same: it is

<sup>37</sup>According to West (1966, 359), ‘there is no clear idea where these are located’; cf. Kirk (1985) on *Il.* 8.13-6. Both believe that there is a contradiction between Homer and Hesiod in the localization of Tartarus: Hesiod would describe a three-storey universe, but Homer a four-storey one. Fränkel (1962, 115 n.21) states ‘Hesiods Schilderung der Unterwelt ist nicht als Topographie gemeint’. For synopses of the issue see Karl (1967, 69-94); Stokes (1962, 1-15); Ballabriga (1986, 257-90); Northrup (1979, 22).

<sup>38</sup>E.g., Stokes (1962, 24) rejects 807-19; Kirk (1956/57, 10-2), following Jacoby (who views most of the *descriptio* as interpolations), considers 736-41 ‘nonsensical’; also cf. Solmsen (1949, 60-3 and 60 n.197).

the South Pole which is common to each of them.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the Homeric passage at *Il.* 8.13-6<sup>40</sup>, where Tartarus is said to go as far down from Hades as the earth is from the sky, could be interpreted as follows: the bottom of Tartarus is as far down from the South Pole as the earth is from the sky. Hades then may have been the South Pole itself, the point or region in the sky whose location, in opposition to Olympus, cannot be seen.<sup>41</sup> As for the ‘sources’ (πηγαί at *Th.* 736 and 807), they are likely to refer to the place where the bronze doors are, that is, again, the South Pole.

The nature and location of the Hesiodic χάος have been also difficult to interpret. This χάος has been located either in the Underworld or in the space between sky and earth. Its nature has been thought to be a yawning gap, chasm, or even the primal seminal stuff of creation.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, the theory outlined above might be able to answer these issues. At *Th.* 814, Tartarus is said to be πέρην χάεος. Since Tartarus was seen as the space outside the celestial spheroid, delimited by walls and night, χάος must also be outside this spheroid, enveloping Tartarus on the other side of these walls (πέρην). This means that everything which is outside the celestial spheroid is χάος,

---

<sup>39</sup>We cannot tell how much the earth may have been viewed as stretching below to the celestial South Pole. Tartarus seems to be somehow a continuation of the earth, through the δείρη; cf. Kirk-Raven (1957, 10); in Norse mythology, hell (Hel) is located under the World’s Tree, Yggdrasil, which is the *axis mundi*.

<sup>40</sup>ἦ μιν ἐλὼν ῥίψω ἐς Τάρταρον ἠεροέντα | τῆλε μάλ’, ἦχι βάθιστον ὑπὸ χθονός ἐστι βέρεθρον | ἔνθα σιδήρειαί τε πύλαι καὶ χάλκεος οὐδός, | τόσσον ἔνερθ’ Ἄϊδεω ὅσσον οὐρανός ἐστ’ ἀπὸ γαίης. For this symmetry, see Solmsen (1977, 238-9, 247), Sourvinou-Inwood (1995, 66 n. 1), Kirk-Raven (1957, 10-1); cf. Stokes (1962, 5-7).

<sup>41</sup>The etymology of ‘Hades’ is uncertain. The meaning ‘unseen’, if correct, may simply hint to the unseen world ‘below’, within the cosmic sphere. Thieme (1968) argues for \**sm-uid-* ‘being together with the ancestors’; his etymology is based on the *spiritus asper* in Hades. Further difficulties, however, rise here, since the Doric form of the word does not have initial aspiration; cf. Chantraine (1968-80).

<sup>42</sup>On χάος being between earth and sky, see e.g., Wilamowitz (1931, 343); Cornford (1952, 194-5). Ancient Greek authors also had this opinion: cf. Kirk-Raven (1957, 26-32). Χάος in the Underworld: e.g., West (1966, 192-3); Vlastos (1955, 74-5); Mondì (1989, 10-1). See also the latter (2-3) for an extended bibliography regarding the nature of χάος; cf. Solmsen (1977) for χάος being the origin of Anaximander’s ἀπειρον.

with the exception of Tartarus. The theory makes sense in the context of the Theogony: *χάος* is the primordial element, which came to be before anything else. This anything else is represented both by the celestial spheroid, with everything in it, and by Tartarus.<sup>43</sup>

Another remarkable figure in the cosmological myth is Atlas. He is located, like the other Titans, in front of the bronze doors Poseidon built, in Tartarus (746-8).<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Atlas' position in respect to the bronze doors is the same as that of Tartarus - that is, in front of these doors (*πρόσθεν*) and, therefore, on the exterior of the celestial globe:<sup>45</sup>

τῶν πρόσθ' Ἰαπετοῖο πάϊς ἔχει οὐρανὸν εὐρύν  
 ἔστηώς κεφαλῇ καὶ ἀκαμάτησι χέρεσσιν  
 ἀστεμφέως...

In this location Atlas holds the sky with both his head and hands. This was perhaps the reason why he was eventually considered the *axis mundi* itself.<sup>46</sup> The whole picture would not make any sense if Tartarus and the sky were not close one to another, and if Atlas were not located 'under' the celestial South Pole, in Tartarus. The adverb *ἀστεμφέως* reinforces the idea of being immovable, as suggested by the axis. The door which gives access to Tartarus is, as it should be, also *ἀστεμφής*.

We can now link the Hesiodic cosmogonic myth with the cosmic topographies of Olympus and Hades. The earth and the

---

<sup>43</sup>Tartarus seems to be, like the earth, a primordial element (different from the earth?): cf. *Th.* 116-9.

<sup>44</sup>Atlas, being a Titan, must be located in Tartarus: cf. Northrup (1979, 31). At *Th.* 517, Atlas is close to the garden of the Hesperides. This has been universally thought to mean that Atlas lives in the West, because of the etymology of the Hesperides. From a cosmic perspective, I cannot see any rationale for Atlas being located in the West; cf. West (1966). The name 'Hesperides' may reflect a popular etymology; cf. A. *Prom.*348 for *ἐσπέρουσ τόπους*.

<sup>45</sup>One could see Tartarus as the lowest corner of the earth (*μύχῳ χθονός*) and, at the same time, inside the cosmic spheroid. However, Atlas and Tartarus seem to be on the same side of the South Pole (*πρόσθεν*). Besides, the doors of Tartarus are located above it (*Th.* 726-9); cf. Northrup (1979).

<sup>46</sup>The pillars of the sky may be a metaphor for the sky not 'falling' on earth; Eustathius 1389.60 thought them as immaterial (*ἀσώματος, ἀόρατος*). Tièche (1945, 65-86) argues that Atlas as the *axis mundi* as well as the concept of axis are a Pythagorean creation.

sky are the result of a development which had its roots in *χάος*. Once they were separated, the sky and the earth resulted in the visible cosmos: the sky turning around an axis and kept apart from earth by pillars, which represent the same *axis mundi*.<sup>47</sup> These pillars are held by Atlas and stretch on both sides of the earth (*ἀμφίς*), as the passage at *Od.* 1.50-4 seems to show: ἔχει δὲ τε κίονας αὐτὸς | μάκρας, αἵ γαίαν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀμφίς ἔχουσι.<sup>48</sup> This cosmic picture is consistent with *Th.*127 and 176, where loving Ouranos covers (*καλύπτει*) Gaia entirely from all parts (*ἀμφὶ Γαίῃ*). It is likely that this covering on all sides ended by a separation of the earth and sky on both sides of the earth. The top of the vault, that is, its North Pole, is the seat of the supreme god, the ‘peak’ of Olympus.<sup>49</sup> Its bottom gives way to Tartarus, which is a space of some sort under the South Pole. *Χάος* is the ‘space’ around Tartarus and outside the cosmic spheroid. At the South Pole are also the ‘roots’ of the created world.

In conclusion, the picture which emerges from above seems to be not only coherent, but also remarkable in terms of ‘scientific’ speculation. The Greek cosmic topography echoes an old tradition, in which the Universe was seen as a spheroid revolving around its northern and southern axial poles, with the earth being fixed in the middle of it. It may be then that the prehistoric people who developed this myth were not as naïve as we are used to think them.

---

<sup>47</sup>This myth has echoes in the *Rig Veda*, where *skambha* is the *axis mundi* that supports the sky: e.g., *RV* 10.121.6, 4.5.1, 10.5.7, 9.74.2, 3.31.12, 1.160.4, 1.154.1. Cornford (1950, 95-116) argues for the separation of sky and earth as being a central cosmogonic event in the archaic world.

<sup>48</sup>The pillars of sky are scarcely represented in Greek literature: cf. *Th.* 779, where silver pillars tower into the sky, and Ibyc. *PMGF* 336 on the ‘slender pillars of heaven’. See West (1997, 148-9) for this and other occurrences in Near Eastern literatures. For other Euro-Asian parallels, see Eliade (1972, 259-66), who argues for the *axis mundi* as passing through the poles of the heavenly sphere. Evans (1901, 99-204) treats pillars, including cosmic ones, in the Minoan and Mycenaean material culture.

<sup>49</sup>In *RV* 1.154.1 Viṣṇu sets the *skambha*- up in the sky, where his dwelling-place is located; the idea is very similar to the Greek Olympus.