

A MESOPOTAMIAN ORIGIN FOR THE MYTH OF THE FORTUNATE ISLANDS?

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SUMMARY

En el presente artículo se pretende adelantar la hipótesis de que el mito de las Islas Afortunadas pudiera derivar de fuentes mesopotámicas y ser traído a occidente por los fenicios. Este mito, que tiene ya una historia de casi 3.000 años, desde Homero y Hesiodo hasta autores contemporáneos, refleja el sueño de la humanidad de vivir en un bonito y rico país, con toda clase de frutos y flores, en un clima de eterna primavera y libre del temor a las enfermedades y a la muerte. Tal mito en cuestión podría reconstruirse en sus elementos más esenciales en el poema sumerio de Gilgamesh y sería trasladado de oriente a occidente cuando los fenicios empezaron a explorar el Mediterráneo y crearon una tierra de inmortalidad, las Islas Afortunadas, en el Océano occidental.

The myth of the Fortunate Islands runs through thirty centuries of human history, from Homer and Hesiod to Ezra Pound, and reflects the dream of mankind to live forever in a beautiful land rich with every kind of fruit and flower, blessed by the light of an eternal spring, free from the fear of disease and death.

The character of this myth is extremely complex: it starts with the origins of Greek literature and involves for at least three centuries just as a mythical topos. In the beginning, the topos (Homer, *Odyssey*, 4, 561-586) speaks of a place at the extreme border of earth by the ocean

called *Elysios*, but from Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 166-173) on, all the authors speak of certain islands in the ocean far from the reach of mortals, where life is happy and endless like the mildness of the winds, the beauty of the flowers and the abundance of the fruits that the fortunate land produces spontaneously, without the fatigue and the sweat of heavy human work.

Then, suddenly, around the beginning of the fifth century B.C., the rumor spreads through the Mediterranean that these fabled islands really exist, that someone landed on them after having been carried away in the ocean by a windstorm for days and days. This made an enormous impression, and from that time onward we find mentions of this subject in numerous classic authors such as Pindar, Poseidonius, Lucian, Diodorus, Pseudo Aristotelis, Sisenna, Strabo, Sebosus, Avienus and many others¹.

What happened? The most probable explanation for such a rumor is the possibility that some Carthaginian vessel, sailing from Cadiz or from Lixus, caught by the northwestern Alisee, had reached some remote archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, say Madeira, for instance, or the Canary Islands. That was the time in fact that Carthage was vigorously extending its exploration beyond the Pillars of Hercules towards the south looking for gold. The *Periplous of Hanno*, which we might consider as the first piece of geographical literature, describes a journey in the Atlantic Ocean undertaken by a Punic fleet that is believed to have reached the equatorial waters of the Gulf of Guinea.

Diodorus, who reports a statement of Poseidonius, says that the Etruscans, after having heard of these marvelous islands, asked the Carthaginians for permission to found a colony on them but got a negative answer. In fact the Carthaginians wanted to keep these islands empty because, in case of disaster or of a complete catastrophe, they thought that they could leave their city with all their people and goods and sail to the remote islands to start a new life. After the destruction

¹ See a commentary of the mentioned sources and a whole research on the subject in V. MANFREDI, *Le Isole Fortunate*, Roma 1993. See also, with a particular mythological approach which includes also Arab and medieval sources, M. MARTÍNEZ HERNÁNDEZ, *Canarias en la Mitología*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife 1992.

of Carthage (146 B.C.) the topos lost the most of its strength but it didn't fade completely. It was still strong enough at the time of Augustus that the emperor asked his friend and king of Mauritania, Juba the II, to organize an expedition and explore the Fortunate Islands.

Juba's report on the expedition is lost, but a brief resume was provided by Pliny the Elder in the fourth book of his *Natural History*, accurate and precise enough to allow the reader to recognize the Canary Islands. From that time on, the myth gives way to a real geographical identification, at least up to the fall of the Roman empire when it is shrouded again in the mist of the legends of the dark ages.

So much for the classic period. It can be very interesting anyway to investigate the possible origin of this myth. The first mention of it in Homer and Hesiod², in fact, should not be accepted simply as a sudden and original creation on their part.

The idea of a marvelous garden of serenity and, most of all, of immortality, leads us immediately to the tradition of Eden in the Bible, but not exclusively. A Mesopotamian influence can be detected if we turn to the Sumerian saga of Gilgamesh³.

In this poem we assist in the journey of the hero Gilgamesh in search for immortality after he has faced the death of his friend Enkidu (Classic Epos, vv. 125-139).

The place of Immortality is far away, "over the waters of death", in a land or island where Utanapishtim, the hero of the Flood, lives forever. This passage, both in the Classic Epos and in the Hittite version, is very difficult to interpret, but a few elements seem clear enough if we read them in the logic of a sea journey.

1) The place of Immortality where Utanapishtim lives forever is far away, impossible for mortals to reach. The only way is to sail on the

² About the problems concerning the oral tradition in Homer see the Parry-Lord theory in A.B. LORD, *The Singer of Tales*, New York 1974.

³ Especially in vv. 155-185 of the Classic Epos. I'm referring here to the Italian translation by G. PETTINATO, *La saga di Gilgamesh*, Milano 1992.

ship of Urshanabi, a character who has been frequently compared by scholars with Charon, the carrier of the souls of dead over the waters of the Stygian swamp.

2) There are some kind of magic stones or stelae (in the Hittite version they became strangely “statues”) which are the only signs which allow the ship its way to the land of immortality over the waters of death.

3) The stelae have been destroyed and thrown into a river by the fury of Gilgamesh. There is no longer any way to reach the land of Immortality unless Gilgamesh cuts thirty trees in the forest and transforms them into poles with handles. “You must not touch the waters of death”, Urshanabi warns him. While the ship sails towards the land of Utanapishtim the poles get “consumed” or “worn out”, but when the last poles are consumed the ship is already in sight of Utanapishtim.

How can we interpret these passages? One could presume that the “stelae” are some sort of signs marking a passage and a direction: a sort of channel through the waters of death. Once that Gilgamesh has destroyed them, the route is no longer clear. Urshanabi knows the way but Gilgamesh will need a great number of “ples” with handles, to keep the ship sailing in the right direction through the waters that “cannot be touched”. This is why the poles get “consumed” one after the other, because they touch the waters of death.

If our interpretation can be accepted, we might try to find analogies with the classic tradition concerning the journey to the world of the dead and to the Fortunate Islands and see if there is a direct connection.

A very interesting parallel can be made with the journey of Ulysses to the land of the dead (*Od.* XI). The place where the hero evokes the souls of the dead is found on the shores of the ocean, after he has crossed the sea. The place is close to the mouth of a river, like in the Gilgamesh saga, and close to a white rock. If we consider, instead, the tradition of the Fortunate Islands, we see that lay in the Ocean, separated from the sea (in this case, the Mediterranean), once again by other stelae, the famous “Pillars of Hercules”, an expression which has been largely

accepted by the scholars as the Greek translation of a original Phoenician expression, "the pillars of Melkart", the god of Tyrus that the Greeks identified with Hercules.

Now, if we go back to the saga of Gilgamesh and if we try to see if the "waters of death" could be related with some physical geographic entity, we could recall the topos of "the Ocean with no waves" (which means dead), still in existence at the age of Alexander the Great, a topos that found only in Babylon and that was related to the Indian Ocean⁴.

At this point the "stelae" of Gilgamesh could be considered the signs of direction between the Arabic Gulf and the open ocean, the waters of death". Beyond the waters lays the land of Immortality where Utanapishtim lives.

If this reconstruction can be accepted, we could reason that the Phoenicians, once they started to explore the Mediterranean and realized that it is an interior basin communicating with the Ocean through a strait, might have transferred the original setting of the myth of Gilgamesh from the east to the west. In the original setting we had an interior sea (the Arabic Gulf), a strait (the strait of Ormuz) with a pair of stelae and the Waters of death (the Indian Ocean): since they had found a very similar situation in the West, with an interior sea (the Mediterranean), a strait (the "pillars of Hercules or Melkart) and the ocean (the Atlantic), they also created a land of Immortality in the western Ocean, i.e. the Fortunate islands.

In fact the strait of Gibraltar was never perceived as a prohibition for transit before the late antiquity or the early middle Ages⁵, but only a passage marked by the "pillars", just like the "stelae" of Gilgamesh.

⁴ See CURTIUS, IX,4, - 17-18 (*Immobiles undas*) and SENECA THE ELDER, *Suasoria prima*, I.II (*Ipsum...defixum mare*). The problem is fully discussed in L. BRACCESI, *Proiezioni dell'antico*, Bologna 1982, pp. 93, ff. About the mythical significance of the saga see G.S. KIRK, *Myth. Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and others Cultures*, Cambridge 1970. And S. DALLEY, *Myths from Mesopotamia: creation, The flood, Gilgamesh and others*, Oxford 1989.

⁵ See, recently, P. MANDER, "Gilgamesh e Dante: due itinerari alla ricerca dell'Immortalità", in *Scritti in onore di Sirzi Rubes*, Napoli 1993.

One could object that the place of Immortality (*Dilmun*) is usually identified with the island of Bahrein⁶ inside and not outside of the Arabic Gulf, but this is not necessarily against our hypothesis: if *Dilmun* is the identification of the Land of Immortality contemporary to the written edition of the saga of Gilgamesh, there is still the possibility that the Land of Immortality could previously have been placed in the Ocean.

We know very well that myths migrate with peoples and that they are resettled in new geographical environments many times during the history of a nation. This might have happened for the Sumerians as well, especially if we consider that they came to Mesopotamia from a land beyond the Ocean.

⁶ See G. BIBBY, *Looking for Dilmun*, New York 1969.