

Orientalizing in Ancient Greek Literature and Art: The Birth of Athena
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In the 19th century by the discoveries and decipherment of texts from the ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian literatures, in cuneiform and in hieroglyphic writing respectively, the influence of the ancient oriental civilizations on the Archaic/ early Greek culture began to be recognized more positively. Furthermore the apparent impact of ‘the oriental’ on Greek art between the Geometric and the Archaic periods was marked, that is, the existence of the orientalizing phase in the development of the Archaic Greek art was also recognized. From that time, scholars’ attention began to turn towards the ancient Near Eastern civilizations as the great inspiration and provider of cultural sources within the Archaic and early Classical periods in particular. Our present knowledge admits that the Greeks learned much from the Near East: the civilizations of the ancient Near East played a great part in the formation of ancient Greek culture.¹ We will briefly look at this Orientalizing phenomenon in early Greek literature and art for the subject of this thesis, starting with the new dimension of the impact of the Near East on the Archaic and early Classical Greece after the discovery and decipherment of the Hittite mythological text of the *Kingship in Heaven*.²

Hurrian Kumarbi Myth and the *Theogony* of Hesiod

‘The old question as to what extent Greek mythology used oriental models can be now discussed in the light of fresh material.’³

‘With the new texts, the relation of the history of Greek epic with the oriental world can now, I think, be regarded as well established.’⁴

Immediately after the decipherment of this text, the *Kingship in Heaven*, its similarity with Hesiod’s *Theogony* was recognized, and H. Güterbock thus declared in his essay,

1 General: a good survey of the progress concerning the academic attitude and opinions about orient-Greek cultural relation: Burkert 1992: *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, Introduction, 1-6. Literature: West 1966: *Hesiod: Theogony* and 1997 *The East Face of Helicon*. Pritchard, (ed.) 1950/1955: *ANET*. Art: Dunbabin 1957/ 1979: *The Greeks and their Eastern Neighbours. Studies in the relations between Greece and the Countries of the Near East in the 8th and 7th centuries BC*; Akurgal 1968: *Birth of Greek Art. The Mediterranean and the Near East*; Boardman 1964/1999: *The Greeks Overseas* (hereafter *GO*), 1964/1996 *Greek Art* (hereafter *GA*), and 1998 *Early Greek Vase Painting*.

2 The find context: the tablet was found in the ‘royal archive’ of Hattusas, Hittite capital at Boğhazköy, written in Hittite cuneiform from Hurrian original before the 13th century BC, the time of the palace-destruction, sometime between 1400-1200 BC. (West 1997: 101-103-104-106; 276-278-280). (Text: *KUB*, XXXIII, 1943, 120.)

3 Güterbock 1948: 123.

4 Güterbock 1948: 134.

who contributed to the decipherment, translation and publication of the texts of the myths.

We are now concerned particularly with the Hurrian Succession Myth, part of Kumarbi Myths, the *Song of Kumarbi* as the source of inspiration to Hesiod's *Theogony*, that is, the episode of the kingship-succession of Greek pantheon: how the Greek succession myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* derived from the oriental original, and for the theme of this thesis: to search for oriental elements (not origin) in the goddess Athena, (in particular the birth of the weather-god Teššub from Kumarbi).

The Text:

From the *Kingship in Heaven* only the first tablet is preserved in a badly damaged form, and it is very hard to follow with certainty the meaning and sequence of action. Hence the reading of the text varies; the following is its main structure, as generally accepted.⁵

The Main structure:

It tells how the heavenly kingship passed from the first king Alalu to Anu, the sky-god, to Kumarbi, the corn/ fertility-god, and to the ultimate fourth king Teššub, the storm-god. The myth goes on to explain the tension between Kumarbi and Teššub.

The first king in heaven Alalu was defeated in battle and deposed by the sky-god Anu, who was now dethroned by Kumarbi in the ninth year of his reign. When Anu fled up to the sky Kumarbi caught him by the feet, bit off Anu's genitals with the intent of castrating him, and swallowed them. Anu told Kumarbi that Kumarbi had become pregnant with three fearful gods caused by this angry act of his. In anger, Kumarbi tried to spit out these three gods; but only two came out on the earth, from where the two gods, Tasmis, Teššub's attendant and the river Tigris emerged. The third, the weather-god Teššub remained inside Kumarbi. Finally Teššub came forth from 'a good place' (/somewhere) of Kumarbi's body (this part of the text badly preserved), and Teššub became the chief god (after a conflict with Illikummi, in the *Song of Illikummi*).

Because of the serious textual problems mentioned above, P. Meriggi proposed another reading: a god KA. ZAL's birth from Kumarbi's head.⁶ West did not mention Meriggi's reading in his *Commentary* (1966) though this reading had already been

⁵ Goetze 1955: 'Kingship in Heaven', in *ANET*: 120-121; Barnett 1945: 'The Epic of Kumarbi and the *Theogony* of Hesiod,' *JHS* 65, 100-1; West 1966: 22f, 401-5, 412-3; 1997: 101-6, 278-80; Kirk 1970: 213-215-217-220.

⁶ Meriggi 1953: 101-157, (dio KA. ZAL: 104-05, text: 110-116-117; 104, n 11.)

published in 1954. West still seems to assume that the translation is uncertain. 'If it is really the case that the deity KA-ZAL issues out of Kumarbi's skull, as Athena from Zeus', the motif of birth through a male god's cranium appears in both narratives.'⁷

The close similarity of this Hurrian Succession Myth to Hesiod's *Theogony* was recognized very soon after the text had been deciphered. In Hesiod's *Theogony* as in this *Hurrian Kingship Myth* there are depictions of succession-struggles generation after generation, in three generations. Various devices were taken from the Hurrian Myth into the episodes in the Greek Succession Myth from Ouranos/ Uranus to Kronos and finally to Zeus, that is, castration, birth of deities from them, swallowing something which caused unnatural birth, namely, a male god giving birth to his own child. The three-generation-struggle for the Greek succession myth of kingship in heaven is narrated in three parts: the first 154-210 Ouranos: castration; the second 459-506: Kronos: stone, Zeus' birth. The third 617-719 -731 (732-819): Zeus: the *Titanomachy*, and 820-80: the *Typhonomachy*; 881-885: Zeus' accession: 886-900, and 924-926: Zeus takes his first wife Metis, swallowing her (in order to keep his eternal kingship), and Athena's birth from his own body.

The identity of the (first) sky-god, Anu-Uranus, the second either corn/ harvest, or cunning, wise deity, Kumarbi-Kronos, and the third, a weather-god, Teššub-Zeus, was found, (West 1997, 283). Thus, it is generally believed that this Hurrian Succession Myth was the chief source of the main structure of the succession myth of Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Now we particularly focus on the episode of the Succession to the third generation in Hesiod's *Theogony*, that is, the birth of Zeus' first child: a male-giving-birth. What was taken from the Hurrian Succession Myth for the Greek Succession Myth and the birth of the first child of Zeus? Hesiod tells a complex process of the birth of the first child of Zeus and Metis. Why was this done? How was it done?

The Birth of Athena from Zeus:

⁷ West 1997: 279 & 280, 8, (276-278-280). (cf. Goetze, *JAOS* 69/1949: 178-183, 181 n. 24; cf. Meriggi 1953: 102 n.5, 104 n.11.)

Firstly the swallowing of Anu's genitals by Kumarbi was transformed into the swallowing of a pregnant mother in whose womb a child was about to be born, as Kronos did his children. Secondly the male child from Kumarbi was changed into the first female child of Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

The male-giving birth:

The swallowing of a mother was devised in order to avoid the birth of a son, the would-be-next-king. The mother who would give birth to the terrifying-son was swallowed by the fearful king Zeus into his own body to prevent a male child birth and to keep his everlasting kingship. Thus, by swallowing the mother, she had been prevented from giving birth to the terrifying son, but the child already growing in her womb still needed to be born. Here Hesiod followed the Hurrian myth: the father who swallowed a pregnant mother should give birth himself. The extremely abnormal option of a male-giving birth was taken,⁸ and Hesiod made the first child female, because she would not have the right to succeed to her father's status. The absolute aim of making the first child female (seems to be) intended to maintain Zeus' everlasting peaceful kingship, exploiting the social status of the first-born-male child, that is, his right to the succession of his father's status.⁹ Thus Hesiod settled the matter by warping a social custom.

Athena's Equal Power with Zeus:

Hesiod further devised for Zeus' first female child that his first-born daughter would be granted a very special privilege, equal power to her father, the king of the gods, instead of the right of the succession.¹⁰

ἴσον ἔχουσιν πατρὶ μένος καὶ ἐπίφρονα βουλήν. *Theogony* 896

(with courage and sound counsel equal to her father's.)

8 Abnormal births like this, where a male gives birth, are not exclusively unusual in mythical and religious spheres; cf. Dionysos' birth from the thigh of Zeus; the Egyptian wisdom god Thoth was born from the head of Seth (head-birth); cf. 'The Myth of Enki and Ninhulsag': *ANET*, 37-41 (Kramer 1955); Kirk 1970: 91-98-103.

9 West 1997, 294: the first born child: in the Near East the first born son of his father had the legal right to inherit his father's status/ position; the right and privileges of the first-born-son may have been a common thread in both the Near East and Greece (andro-centric social custom).

10 West 1966, 404: on lines 895 and 896 in the *Theogony*. (translation: West 1988: 29).

Warlike Goddess Athena

Moreover Hesiod made the first daughter-child a warlike goddess, as the attributes given to her well indicate:

δεινήν ἐγρεκύδοιμον ἀγέστρατον ἀτρυτώνην,/

πότνιαν, ἥι κέλαδοί τε ἄδον πόλεμοί τε μάχαι τε. 925-6 ¹¹

(The fearsome rouser of the fray, leader of armies, the lady of Atrytone,
whose pleasure is in war and the clamour of battle.)

For these two features, an oriental goddess with equal power to the supreme god, her own father, Hesiod must have had in mind, that is, the war-goddess, Ishtar, described in hymns and prayers to her by kings of Mesopotamia, Assyria and Babylonia. ¹²

Ishtar is seated among the gods as an equal to Anu their king,
Together they make their decisions, she and her lord, Anu.
You (Ishtar) are powerful, you are queen, exalted is your name. (Ammititana)
'Ishtar, a warrior am I.'
'Into battle like a swallow I fly.' *ERE 7, 432*
'Leader in battle', 'mistress of battle' *ERE 7, 431*
'Beside Bel (Marduk) in combat and battle I stand,/
'Beside my father in battle I take my place.'
'Enlil has given me battle, he has given me combat.
'Ea gave her bravery, fame and might,
He surrounds her in abundance with lightning bolts and flashing,
Who (Ishtar) brandishes weapons, who prepares for battle.

Hammurabi: 'May she (Ishtar) shatter his (enemy's) weapons on the field of the battle and Melee' (conflict). (*ANET 178*).

Nabonidus: 'Annunit (Ishtar), the mistress of battle, who carries bow and quiver, who overwhelms the enemy, and destroys the wicked.' (*ERE 7, 431*)

¹¹ West 1966, 413: on lines 925 and 926 (translation: West 1988: 30).

¹² *Hymns to Ishtar*: Foster 1993: vol. I, 66, ix 3. Ammititana 1683-47; *ERE 7, 431 & 432a*;

Hammurabi: *The Code of Hammurabi*: in *ANET 163-180; Epilogue, 177-180*. Nabonidus

As one of other possible sources for Hesiod's *Theogony*, West points to the Babylonian ritual myth *Enuma eliš*. This may imply that Hesiod's source of creation of his *Theogony* was not only the Hurrian Succession Myth, but also some other oriental literary sources as well; and even certain iconographical sources could have been possible.¹³

At any rate, as we have seen, among others the Hurrian Succession Myth, *the Kingship in Heaven* doubtless must have been the most influential source providing structural and important key devices to Hesiod's *Theogony*. Thus the birth-myth of Athena, the first born child of Zeus and Metis, was created by Hesiod exploiting some motifs of Kumarbi's strife for kingship in the Hurrian Succession Myth, and additional characterization of the child may have derived from other oriental literary sources. This may be confirmed by the observations of West and Burkert.

West already firmly stands in his *Theogony* (1966) on the theory that the Zeus' Succession Myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* was structured under the influence of the Hurrian Succession Myth, (using the same devices, and freely expanding the theme furthermore), that Athena's birth is a 'reduplication of Kronos-motif', and that 'This Hesiod's Succession Myth has parallels in oriental mythology which are so striking that a connexion is incontestable.'¹⁴

Burkert rightly acknowledges the definitive and strong influence of the Hurrian Succession Myth on Hesiod's *Theogony*:

'Since the publication of the text of the *Kingship of Heaven*, the Kumarbi-Kronos parallel has been established, and *Kumarbi* has become a standard reference text for classical philologists.'¹⁵

Burkert points out that in Hesiod's *Theogony* there are individual motifs such as the swallowing and the birth from an unusual part of the [male] body which are presumably borrowed from the Kumarbi myth, and from other Near Eastern parallels as well.¹⁶

13 *Enuma eliš*: West 1966: 22-24-30; 1997: 67-8, 280-283; 286-305; Dalley 1989: 228-277; Speiser 1955: in *ANET* 60-72; cf. Childs 2003: 66, n. 144. Oriental weather-gods represent as a warrior-god, holding up a thunderbolt in a smiting pose. So Teššub was born from Kumarbi's good place as a warrior-god; this part might have been performed in a ritual drama. (cf. Jacobsen 1975: 65-97)

14 West: 1966: 401; 1997: 278-80; (1966: 19).

15 Burkert 1992: 5, n. 21 (cf. 7 and 94).

16 Burkert 1985: 142, n. 40.

We may conclude as follows: from the beginning of the decipherment of the Hurrian Succession Myth, the *Kingship in Heaven* in the Kumarbi Myths, it is admitted that Hesiod's *Theogony* was without doubt composed under its influence; and (it is obvious) that the most eminent attribute of Athena, her birth from Zeus, the king of the gods, was derived from the oriental inspiration of the idea of a male-giving-birth in this Hurrian Succession Myth, that is, the Weather-god Teššub's birth from Kumarbi. For his making of Athena a warrior goddess and her equal power to her father, the supreme god of the Greek pantheon, Hesiod also owed acknowledgement to some other Near Eastern literatures particularly the hymns, the prayers of kings to the war-goddess Ishtar, the origin of war-goddesses in other civilizations. The Greek warrior goddess, Athena, was not an exception, who derived from her strong characters. There is no other goddess who holds all these natures in herself (Ishtar) alone. (It may even be possible that Hesiod would have shaped his Athena into such a powerful war-goddess suggested by some iconographical representations of Ishtar that he had known. We will review this idea in the next chapter.)

Thus Athena's birth was first provoked presumably by Teššub's or KA-ZAL's birth from Kumarbi in the *Hurrian Kingship Myth*; then the theme was formed in a particular situation and condition as the first child of supreme god Zeus for the duration of his everlasting kingship. She was granted equal power to him instead of the succession-right and made as a warrior-goddess. Her especial privilege, equal power to her father, the king of the gods, and her divinity as the war-goddess seem to have been derived from other oriental literary sources centred on the war-goddess Ishtar.

Thus the most distinguished nature of Athena, her birth from Zeus, her equal power to the king of the gods, and her divine nature of war-goddess were derived from oriental myths, literature and (socio-politico-religious) conceptions. Hesiod, a mythographer and poet, created Athena's birth and divine nature inspired by oriental models; it was, indeed, a complex mythical amalgamation in West's word.

More than one hundred years ago L. Farnell who could not know this epoch-making great discovery and decipherment of the Hurrian Succession Myth firmly believed and strongly insisted:

'Athena was a primitive Hellenic divinity of the 'Achaean' period. This very

antiquity and her singularly Hellenistic character, which is scarcely tinged at all by any discoverable Oriental influence, are reasons that are strong against the theory that in Athena we have a disguised Oriental goddess imported from anterior Asia.’¹⁷

We now know that this is just an example of Orientalizing phenomena in the philological sphere in the Greek Archaic period.

17 Farnell: 1896 Vol. I, 258.

