

## COMMENTARII BREVIORES

### The Perpetual Darkness of the Cimmerians: An Explanation

There is a famous Babylonian world map elegantly inscribed on a small clay tablet, now in the British Museum, which shows the oikumene surrounded by the circular body of water, called *id marratu* ('the Salt River'), and several (originally eight) outer triangular *nagû* ('regions' or 'islands').<sup>1</sup> The map is here and there accompanied by the text. M. L. West attracted attention to a portion of it, which is "intriguingly reminiscent" of a passage from the *Odyssey*: "The topmost *nagû* is labeled on the map 'where the sun is not seen': we think of the Cimmerians, whose land is on the far side of Oceanus, and whom the sun never looks upon (*Od.* 11. 15)".<sup>2</sup> West does not specify what precisely "we think" about the actual connection between the passage of the *Odyssey* and the Babylonian world map.

The first question to be asked is about the meaning of the tablet's note. It is proper to make clear that the top of the map corresponds to the north (or the north-west, which makes no difference for our purpose). Hence there are two possible explanations for the inscription identifying the northern *nagû*: either "the northern *nagû* may be a region of perpetual darkness" or it "may be called 'a place where the sun is not seen' because the sun, when viewed from the latitude of Mesopotamia, never passes through the northern

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<sup>1</sup> Most recent publication: Wayne Horowitz, "The Babylonian Map of the World", *Iraq* 50 (1988) 147–166; see also A. Leo Oppenheim, "Man and Nature in Mesopotamian Civilization", in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, Vol. 15. Suppl. 1 (New York 1978) 634–66, esp. 637 f.; Bruno Meißner, "Babylonische und griechische Landkarten", *Klio* 19 (1925) 97–100. The date of the Babylonian world map is not certain. Horowitz has shown that the map (inscribed on a tablet of Late Babylonian or Persian period, yet "copied from its old exemplar") "can be no older than the 9th century"; he suggests "the late eighth, or seventh century" (*Op. cit.*, 153). Whatever the date of the map (in my view, even a common assumption that the Babylonian world map is prior to those of Anaximander and Hecataeus is by no means secure), it may preserve various notions which are much older than the map itself.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 1997) 145.

portion of the sky”.<sup>3</sup> The second explanation being available, the first is to be shaved with Ockham’s razor.

As well as the Cimmerians of the *Odyssey*, there were real ones. These Cimmerians invaded the Asia Minor in the seventh century B. C., as we know from both Greek and Assyrian sources. Since the Cimmerians came from the north, they came from the region ‘where the sun is not seen’. I suggest that the idea of the people upon whom “the bright sun never looks down with his rays” (*Od.* 11. 15 f.) came into being as a creative misunderstanding of a foreign idiom. A certain Assyrian told a certain Ionian (in Al Mina or elsewhere) that the land of the Cimmerians lies where the sun is not seen. The expression referring to the northern direction was understood as that characterising that region. The emerging picture was, however, unmotivated and strange: how can be there a land where the sun is not seen? As a common sense correction, not alien to Homer,<sup>4</sup> came the idea that the land of the Cimmerians is “wrapped in mist and cloud”.<sup>5</sup>

It is natural to think that Cimmerian invasions would have made the Ionians inquire about the origin of the invaders. However, it is difficult to imagine (even though some ancients and modern did not think so) that the Cimmerians of the *Odyssey* could have been conceived at the time when the real Cimmerians threatened to the inhabitants of the Asia Minor, including the Ionian Greeks. Then the information about the land of the Cimmerians came probably as a part of Assyrian geographical lore, for it is most natural to assume that some Ionian traders tried to enhance their knowledge of the world by questioning their Assyrian or Phoenician colleagues. The Assyrians knew about the land of the Cimmerians by the eighth century B. C.; the preserved sources mention it as early as 714 B. C. The land of the Cimmerians appears in these sources to be situated north of Urarṭu’s northern neighbours, that is in the northernmost part of the world known to the Assyrians.

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Horowitz, *Op. cit.*, 158; Horowitz notes that the second interpretation was suggested by C. B. F. Walker.

<sup>4</sup> Homeric penchant for realism was repeatedly observed by scholars, see especially Jasper Griffin, “The Epic Cycle and the Uniqueness of Homer”, *JHS* 97 (1977) 39–53.

<sup>5</sup> The whole passage (*Od.* 11. 13–16) runs as follows:

ἦ δ' ἐς πείραθ' ἴκανε βαθυρροῦ Ὠκεανοῖο.  
 ἔνθα δὲ Κιμμερίων ἀνδρῶν δῆμός τε πόλις τε,  
 ἥερί καὶ νεφέλη κεκαλυμμένοι οὐδέ ποτ' αὐτοὺς  
 Ἥελιος φαέθων καταδέρκεται ἀκτίνεσσιν...

My interpretation remains, of course, conjectural, but I find it more plausible than those to which scholars have had to resort so far, for it does not involve artificial combinations with the epics earlier than the *Odyssey* or hopeless efforts to find a real place with the conditions comparable with the perpetual darkness of the Cimmerians.<sup>6</sup>

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Загадочное описание страны киммерийцев в одиннадцатой песни “Одиссеи” (“никогда не являет оку людей там лица лучезарного Гелиос”), по-видимому, следует объяснять как своего рода талантливое недоразумение. Первые сведения о киммерийцах ионийские греки получили, скорее всего, от ассирийцев, которые знали страну киммерийцев как расположенную на крайнем севере (с ассирийской точки зрения). В странах умеренного пояса (в северном полушарии) солнце никогда не показывается на севере. В этом смысле “на севере” – это там, где “солнца никогда не видно”. Соответствующее аккадское выражение для обозначения севера засвидетельствовано. Я предполагаю, что сообщение о стране киммерийцев, расположенной там, где “солнца не видно”, было ошибочно воспринято как характеристика самой области, а не ее местонахождения, при этом возникающая странная, ничем не обоснованная картина страны, над которой не светит солнце, была скорректирована в духе относительного правдоподобия, так что страна киммерийцев оказалась еще и скрытой “влажным туманом и мглой облаков”.

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<sup>6</sup> For recent comprehensive studies devoted to the Cimmerians see A. I. Ivantchik, *Les Cimmériens au Proche-Orient* (Fribourg; Göttingen 1993); Sergej Tokhtas'ev, “Cimmerians”, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* V (1992), s. v.: *idem*, “Die Kimmerier in der antiken Überlieferung”, *Hyperboreus* 2 (1996): 1, 1–46.