

Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. 662 pp. ISBN 0 19 815042 3.

It is now widely accepted that Archaic and Classical Greece were profoundly indebted to the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Mesopotamia and the Levant.<sup>1</sup> This manifold and intricate cultural dependence of the Aegean world on western Asia is the subject of M.L. West's voluminous and stimulating study.

The thesis advocated in this book is best summarized in the concluding remarks to the first chapter:

Any illusions that the reader may have had about the autonomy of the early Greek culture should have faded, or at any rate severely shrunk, in the wash of the facts. Near Eastern influence cannot be put down as a marginal phenomenon to be invoked occasionally in explanation of isolated peculiarities. It was pervasive at many levels and at most times (p. 59).

And invoking H.E. Stier, West argues further that '... it could not be called out of the way to ask what there was in Archaic Greece that did *not* come from the orient' (pp. 10ff.).

The impact of Mesopotamia and Syria on the material culture of Archaic Greece is presented in Chapter One. This impact was not restricted only to different techniques and styles in art and craftsmanship, but some of the most basic institutions of Archaic Greece were founded, according to West, on oriental models. Thus, for instance, kingship in ancient Greece was formed according to Mesopotamian models (pp. 14ff.). Greek terminology dealing with treaties has exact counterparts in Akkadian and Hebrew (pp. 19ff.). Even 'religious institutions and usages of Greece from the Mycenaean to the Archaic age show particular connections with those of Syria and Palestine' (pp. 33ff.).

It must be said that this extreme notion of cultural dependence of the Aegean world on Mesopotamia and the Levant raises questions at many points. Without denying the importance of many of the parallels listed by West, one wonders whether Archaic Greek society should not be credited with developing social and religious institutions in its own right, given that different societies, confronted with similar problems, may arrive independently at similar solutions, such as monarchy, the use of antiphons and responses in cultic contexts (pp. 43ff.), or purification rituals (pp. 51ff.). Simultaneous occurrence of similar phenomena and typological affinities does not necessarily indicate that direct cultural borrowing took place. More than one discipline (e.g., sociology, anthropology and comparative religious studies) is based on the analysis of precisely such typological affinities between comparable institutions occurring in many different societies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the recently published volume by S. Aro and R.M. Whiting (eds.), *The Heirs of Assyria* (= *Melammu Symposia* 1), Helsinki, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Similar methodological objections were raised by K.A. Raaflaub, 'Influence, Adaptation, and Interaction: Near Eastern and Early Greek Political Thought', in *The Heirs of Assyria* (above n. 1) pp. 51-64, esp. pp. 62f.

Another difficulty in West's thesis lies in his under-evaluation of material and cultural import from the Aegean orbit into the East Mediterranean region, and thence, occasionally, further inland into Mesopotamia.<sup>3</sup> West does mention the Greek demographic expansion eastwards to Crete, Cyprus and the Syro-Palestinian coast (pp. 611 ff.), but stresses mainly that these Greek immigrants 'were well set up to siphon elements of oriental culture back to the Aegean' (p. 613). Without underestimating this counter-current of Aegean colonists from the East Mediterranean back to their Greek homeland, West seems to ignore the crucial role the ongoing Greek expansion to the East had in the millennium-long cross-cultural contacts between the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup>

All through the book, West is looking for one-way borrowings. Another possible reading of the evidence could suggest a Mediterranean '*Kulturbund*' (coined after the linguistic term *Sprachbund*), a cultural conglomerate shared by the various societies located around the Mediterranean basin.<sup>5</sup> Shifting some of the shared phenomena raised by West in the first chapter of the book into the dimension of the *longue durée*, rather than tracing their origin in discrete borrowing, seems to me an equally feasible interpretation of the historical evidence.

Throughout the first chapter (and again on p. 588) an extensive list of Semitic loan words in Greek (including evidence from Linear B texts) is enumerated: *kumīn* – 'cumin'; *sāsam* – 'sesame'; *myrrha* – 'balsam'; *liban(ōt)os* – 'frankincense'; *kuanos* – 'blue enamel, lapis lazuli'; *nitron* – 'sodium carbonate'; *khitōn* – 'tunic'; *khrūsos* – 'gold'; *bōmos* – 'altar, raised platform'; *megara* – 'underground chambers, pits', and many more. Most of these are well known and generally accepted. Others, however, are less certain: *temenos* – 'sacred precinct', has a good parallel in Sumerian, *temen*, and Akkadian, but is unknown in West-Semitic, thus suggesting an unlikely direct borrowing from Akkadian to Greek (p. 36); *leskhai* – 'public common-rooms', compared by West to Hebrew *liškāh* – 'cell, store-room, meeting-room', has no clear etymology in Hebrew, and it is not clear whether the borrowing in this case could not be in the opposite direction (cf. p. 38 n. 148). Finally, the connection between *kathar* – 'pure, clean' and Akkadian *qatārum* – 'make smoke' (p. 39); Greek *pelekus* – 'axe' and Akkadian *palāqum* – 'strike down, slaughter' (p. 41) may result from accidental phonetic resemblances between words of close meaning in languages of different stock. At any rate, lexical borrowings, important and demonstrative as they may be,

<sup>3</sup> M. Guichard, 'Flotte crétoise sur l'Euphrate?', *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 1993/53 supplies further evidence for Aegean cultural presence in Mesopotamia. In this respect see also G.B. Lanfranchi's thorough presentation, 'The Ideological and Political Impact of the Assyrian Imperial Expansion on the Greek World in the 8th and 7th Centuries BC', in *The Heirs of Assyria* (above n. 1) pp. 7-34.

<sup>4</sup> The same point is found in Raaflaub (n. 2), pp. 63f. See further M. Yon et al., *Céramiques mycéniennes d'Ougarit*. Ras Shamra-Ougarit 13, Paris / Nicosia, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> A parallel concept, that of a cultural and intellectual *koine* which united the large area of the Mediterranean basin, was suggested by K. Seybold and J. von Ungern-Sternberg, 'Amos und Hesiod. Aspekte eines Vergleichs', in K. Raaflaub and E. Müller-Luckner (eds.), *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen*, München, 1993, pp. 233-6.

do not always represent wide cultural influence, especially if they are restricted to the semantic domains of fauna, flora, raw materials and manufactured goods.

However, the above reservations, prompted by the first chapter, should not overshadow the main achievement of *The East Face of Helicon*, namely a thorough examination of the numerous threads connecting Greek and Near Eastern literary corpora. This task — conveyed by the sub-title to this study 'West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth' — is accomplished by West in a truly admirable manner.

Before investigating the comparisons between the different corpora at hand, West offers a global view of the ancient literatures of western Asia, including the literature of Mesopotamia (in Sumerian as well as in Akkadian), Ugarit, the Hebrews, the Phoenicians, the Hurrians and the Hittites. Given their size and complexity, a clear presentation of these literary systems is far from easy. West must be praised for delineating the main literary genres in each corpus — myths, historical epics, hymns, rituals, wisdom literature<sup>6</sup> — methodically and accurately, thus laying solid foundations for his further comparisons. Updated editions (and in one case, even an unedited text!)<sup>7</sup> are accurately cited,<sup>8</sup> and the reader is often referred to additional articles and studies.

Chapter Three is dedicated to cosmological depictions and mythical geographies prevailing in early Greece and in Ancient Near Eastern cultures.<sup>9</sup> The different realms of the universe — heaven, earth and the netherworld — are presented and comparisons between their Greek and Near Eastern representations are drawn (cf. e.g. the shared *topos* found in the opening lines of the *Enūma eliš* and in the *Iliad* 14.

<sup>6</sup> In a recent article M.L. West also demonstrates that two other Greek literary genres, namely animal fables and disputations (i.e. argument between two non-human entities, such as summer and winter, each claiming superiority) derive from Mesopotamian tradition. Cf. M.L. West, 'Fable and Disputation', in *The Heirs of Assyria* (above n. 1), pp. 93-7.

<sup>7</sup> KAR 158, an unedited hymn catalogue cited and translated by West on p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Some additions to Assyriological literature may be offered here. For the historical epics concerning the House of Sargon (p. 71, n. 29) cf. now J. Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*, Winona Lake, 1997, as well as I.J. Gelb and B. Kienast, *Die altakkadischen Königsinschriften des dritten Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (= Freiburger Altorientalische Studien 7), Stuttgart, 1990. For an updated edition of the hymn of Agushaya (p. 78, n. 57), cf. B. Gronenberg, *Lob der Ištar. Gebet und Ritual an die altbabylonische Venusgöttin*, Groningen, 1997. For a recent edition of Sumerian proverb collections (p. 82, n. 75), cf. B. Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer*, Bethesda, 1997. Instead of L.W. King's 1900 edition (p. 311, n. 98) cf. now N. Wasserman, 'A Bilingual Report of an Oracle with a Royal Hymn of Hammurabi', *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 86 (1992), pp. 1-18. Finally, the first lines of the standard edition of the Epic of Gilgamesh (p. 172) are now safely restituted, following a new join, to be: '[He who saw all, (who was) the foundation of the land, / [who knew...]] was wise in all matters! / [Gilgamesh, who] saw all, (who was) the foundation of the land, / [who] knew [...] was wise in all matters!'. Cf. T. Kwasman, 'A new join to the Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet I', *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 1998/99 and A.R. George, 'The Opening of the Epic of Gilgamesh', *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 1998/100.

<sup>9</sup> W. Horowitz's important study *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, Winona Lake, 1998 can now be added to West's discussion.

201 = 302, according to which the race of the gods originally sprang from the sea [p. 147]). Divine attributes common to the Greek and Mesopotamian pantheons are also examined (cf. e.g., the common portrayal of Enlil and Zeus as 'lord-rider of the storm-wind' [p. 115]). The destiny of a dead man's soul is addressed next. In this respect, similarities between Greek and Ugaritic eschatological views are especially clear (pp. 151ff.).

Chapter Four ('Ars Poetica') and Five ('A Form of Words') are concerned with more minute details. In these chapters West outlines intriguing correspondences between Greek and Near Eastern stylistic techniques, such as how to begin a poem (pp. 170ff.), the use of formulaic epithets (pp. 220ff.), and the function of rhetorical questions (pp. 257ff.). Additional stylistic devices, typical of both Greek and Near Eastern literatures, are named: the widespread narrative device of counting days (three, six, seven or twelve) (pp. 174ff.), the protagonist's dreams as a means to advance the plot (pp. 185ff.), the introduction of messengers and the use of direct speech formulae in epics and myths (pp. 190ff., 193ff.). A telling group of generic scenes common to Greek and Ancient Near Eastern literature is finally listed: feasting (pp. 201ff.), dressing (pp. 203ff.), chariot journeys (pp. 205ff.) and battle scenes (pp. 206ff.).<sup>10</sup> A particularly valuable discussion in these chapters is that of similes in Greek and Akkadian epic literature (pp. 217ff., and especially pp. 242ff.). It should be noted that a recent monograph dedicated to similes in Akkadian epic compositions refers regularly to West's insights on this topic.<sup>11</sup>

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight focus primarily on four seminal compositions of Greek literature: Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The author presents Hesiod first because this writer 'is the one Greek poet in whose work the presence of substantial oriental elements is already generally admitted' (p. 276). In Chapter Six West points to parallel themes in the *Theogony* and in *Works and Days* on the one hand and the Hittite myth *Song of Kumarbi*, the so-called Babylonian epic of creation *Enūma eliš*, and Mesopotamian and Biblical wisdom literature, on the other hand (pp. 276ff.). A comparison between the last section of the *Works and Days* and the typical Mesopotamian genre of hemerologies, that is texts which indicate whether particular days of the month are good or bad for different purposes, is also offered (pp. 328ff.).

Turning to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Chapters Seven and Eight), West attempts to prove that central episodes in the account of the Trojan War rely heavily on Mesopotamian themes, especially those related to the figure of Gilgamesh.

For if the story of Achilles and Patroclus as a whole is shaped by that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the memorable scene in which Patroclus' ghost returns and Achilles embraces

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the single combat scene, a comparison between 1 Sam. 17 (David and Goliath) and *Iliad* 7 (Hector and Ajax) is drawn, presumably hinting at Biblical influence on the Homeric plot (p. 214). This suggestion is hardly acceptable, since, if anything, one would argue in favor of a reverse literary dependence, as the Aegean setting of this Biblical episode is so manifest that it cannot be denied.

<sup>11</sup> M.P. Streck, *Die Bildersprache der akkadischen Epik* (= *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 264), Münster, 1999.

it can only come from the 'standard', twelve-tablet version of the Akkadian epic, the version ... which contained the scene with Enkidu's ghost (p. 401).

As for the *Odyssey*, this composition 'is much less thickly sown with Near Eastern themes and motifs than the *Iliad*. The relative sketchiness of its divine machinery is one aspect of this' (p. 437). In conclusion, 'the Gilgamesh elements [echoed in the *Odyssey*] come almost entirely from Tablets IX-XI of the Gilgamesh epic, the portion concerned with the hero's journeying after the death of Enkidu'. '... In relation to the *Iliad*, on the other hand, [these elements stem] mainly from the earlier part, concerned with Gilgamesh's dealings with Enkidu, that is, Tablets I-VIII (and X where Gilgamesh speaks of his grief for Enkidu). The ghost episode in Tablet XII is echoed in both the Homeric epics' (p. 437).

West supports his persuasive case connecting Homeric epics with different Gilgamesh episodes with hundreds of minor parallels between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and a large variety of Near Eastern compositions ('*Miscellanea Orientalia*' in his words; pp. 347ff., 417ff.). These, unfortunately, are much less convincing than the main argument. As in the first chapter, West's urge to accumulate as much supportive evidence as possible eventually turns against him, as these additional data often weaken the central argument raised.

In Chapter Nine West analyzes various myths — Europa and her children, the cycle of Heracles and the Golden Fleece, and many others — and compares them to themes in Mesopotamian epics, such as *Atrā-hasis* — the story of the Flood.

In Chapter Ten West tackles Greek lyric poets, striving to find Mesopotamian counterparts for different elements of their poetry. Thus, for instance, the author suggests linking Ionian iambus with the difficult texts related to the *aluzinnu*, a poorly attested profession, which Mesopotamian sources depict as a buffoon specializing in mimicry and parodies of conspicuous sexual features (pp. 495ff.). As for elegy, Near Eastern parallels to this Archaic age genre come, according to West, chiefly from Biblical sources (pp. 506ff.). Biblical and Mesopotamian analogies can be found for many passages in Melic poetry as well (pp. 524ff.).<sup>12</sup>

The comparative study culminates in Chapter Eleven where the oriental elements in the mid-fifth century plays of Aeschylus and Euphorion are delineated.

At this stage of the discussion, West confronts the question of transmission. The author suggests three main periods of contact between Greece and the Near East: the first between 1450 and 1200, the second between 1200 and 1050 and the third between 700 and 600 BCE (p. 586). West stresses that in many instances Mesopotamian literary material did not reach Greece directly, but rather through the mediation of the literary cultures of Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine. In this regard, 'the Phoenicians played a leading (if not exclusive) role in the emission or transmission of

<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning Detlev Fehling's article 'Zur historischen Herleitung des Saturniers', in H.L.C. Tristram, *Metrik und Medienwechsel. Metrics and Media (= Script Oralia 35)*, Tübingen, 1991, pp. 23-31, which traces the origin of Saturnian metre to the metrics of Akkadian epics which were passed to the west by way of the Phoenicians and Carthaginians.

oriental influence towards Greece' (p. 588). A direct knowledge of cuneiform sources by Greek scribes is hard to imagine, but

a transmission from Aramaic into Greek is at least conceivable, more readily so than a Mycenaean translation from cuneiform. ... That [Greeks] might ... have become acquainted with the content of a particular book is not altogether beyond belief. But even if there was such a book — a *Gilgamesh*, say — it could only account for a fraction of the literary influence from the orient that we have seen reason to assume. (p. 593)

Oral transmission then, not written documents, was the main channel through which oriental influence made its way into Greek literature. Mesopotamian singers, wailers, and bards — those performers who could be the active carriers of Assyro-Babylonian literary lore beyond Mesopotamian borders — are examined next.

West points out that in quite a number of Mesopotamian literary pieces some kind of oral realization is clearly indicated in the text (pp. 593ff.). He emphasizes further that at least during the Neo-Assyrian period professional singers used to collect, copy, and stock in private libraries ancient literary tablets — hymns, prayers, and epic compositions such as *Anzu*, *Etana*, *The Descent of Ishtar*, *Gilgamesh*, and *Enūma eliš*. Thus, together with deportees, merchants, and mercenaries, 'the immigrant, bilingual poet' was, according to West, the most possible vehicle of transmission of Mesopotamian literature westwards to the Greek speaking lands (p. 629).

In his very last remark West admits that

the testy critic may complain that there are too many 'might haves' and not enough indisputable 'must haves'. But mathematically rigorous demonstrations cannot be expected in these matters. It is a question of defining and weighing possibilities and probabilities. Each reader must judge, case by case, which of the various situations suggested as favorable for transmission are merely remotely conceivable hypotheses, and which are to be admitted as historically likely to have arisen.... In the final reckoning, however, the argument for pervasive West Asiatic influence on early Greek poetry does not stand or fall with explanations of how it came about. A corpse suffices to prove a death, even if the inquest is inconclusive. (pp. 629f.)

Following the author's detective-like tone, West's well-thought out explanations for the causes of death seem entirely plausible to me, but I am much less convinced that he has conclusively established the existence of a corpse at the scene of the crime. In fact, the data we possess can more easily be compared to many bloodstains, rather than a corpse. And, although similar bloodstains found in two different locations are intriguing — we may never know if they came from the same body.

In my eyes, this kind of story cannot end in a dramatic revelation, but in a long and painstaking process of analyses striving to substantiate first and foremost the reasonable suspicion that the traces of evidence point to influx from a single known source.

Simply put, my misgivings do not concern West's various explanations of how Near Eastern influence could have passed into Greek poetry, but rather his loose, or at least unclear, criteria for cultural influence in general, and his unduly wide

definition of Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in particular.<sup>13</sup> In short, besides the numerous well-founded and revealing comparisons between the Greek and Near Eastern literary bodies drawn in this study, many other parallels which were interpreted by West as an indication for Near Eastern influence are not necessarily a result of any influence at all. For, as stated above, one should not ignore the fact that similar cultural phenomena may develop independently along strikingly parallel lines.

To cite Raaflaub's sober remark,

After all, despite these [i.e. Near Eastern] stimuli and influences, Greek culture is not a mere derivative of Mesopotamian or Egyptian culture, and crucial factors that prompted its specific development and character ... apparently cannot be explained by outside influences.<sup>14</sup>

And yet most of those who will come to use this rich book, no matter how critical they may be of its shortcomings, must undoubtedly agree that *The East Face of Helicon* is an important scholarly achievement which will serve as a key work in the study of both Greek and Near Eastern literature for many years to come.

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Simon Pulleyn, *Prayer in Greek Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. xv + 244 pp. ISBN 0 19 815088 1.

Simon Pulleyn's book undertakes the much needed and courageous task of presenting a thorough account of Greek prayer, a truly Proteus-like phenomenon, one which embraces extremely different aspects of Greek religious life and diverse contexts of utterance, from hymns to curses and oaths. His aim is to provide an account of Greek prayer 'as part of Greek life' (p. 1), deliberately avoiding all universal definitions and cultural comparisons. He studies the overlapping of prayer with other phenomena including rituals, semantic and lexical questions, as well as other aspects of Greek religion, such as supplication, curses, the cult of the dead, and *defixiones*. He draws from literary corpora and epigraphic material, covering a long time span, from Homer to the fourth century, on the assumption that, despite the differences in literary genres and world view, the picture of Greek prayer that we can recover is by and large homogeneous.

He sets out by clarifying his central contention, namely that Greek prayer is a request to the gods articulated as a give-and take transaction between gods and men. He names this two-way relationship  $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\varsigma$ , by which he means to express a 'whole nexus of ideas that we would call reciprocity' (p. 4). This understanding has the advantage of meaningfully linking Greek prayers to the social and political setting and

<sup>13</sup> See again Raaflaub's (above, n. 2, pp. 61-3) cautious comments on this point.

<sup>14</sup> Raaflaub (above, n. 2), p. 61.