

# The Strange Moon of Hermes (The Anomaly of the Lunar Cycle in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes)

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## Short Communication

The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* presents an anomaly in the lunar phases, hitherto never explained. We are referring to the passage where the *Hymn* tells of the birth of Hermes in the darkness of a cave and of his first nocturnal feat: on the fourth day of the lunar month, toward the end of the night, the newborn baby goes to Pieria and, in the moonlight, steals fifty cows from Apollo's herd. In this regard, Carl Robert (quoted by Jean Humbert) remarks that « on the fourth day of the lunar month, the divine Selene certainly does not shine when the end of the night approaches. Her crescent, which is still very slight, disappears very quickly beneath the horizon and only casts a very dim light » [1]. Beyond the Arctic Circle, however, the phases of the moon have a very different appearance from those in more southern regions. Were we exactly at the Pole during the winter solstice, we would be able to watch the moon shine uninterrupted for fourteen days. The moon rises when it is at the end of its first quarter - that is, when it is a half circle - and starts to trace a trajectory above the horizon without setting, waxing and rising up in the solstice night along a spiral path until it reaches its maximum height and complete fullness a week later. After this, it starts to wane and descend toward the horizon, describing again a spiral trajectory, until it sets at the end of the following week (to simplify we have ignored Earth's motion around the sun and the angle of the plane of the lunar orbit with the plane of the ecliptic). This phenomenon is verified in the other points within the Arctic Circle, although it becomes less marked as we move farther away from the North Pole.

At this point, the only logical explanation for this anomaly of the lunar cycle is that Pieria, in which this episode is set, originally was a region above the Arctic Circle. The new moon in the fourth day of its cycle actually shines in the darkness of the solstice night, lighting up with its arcane radiance the plain from which Hermes steals the cows, against the backcloth of an unreal arctic landscape: « he put out the embers and covered the black cinders with sand/ in the last hours of the night; Selene's beautiful light was shining up above » [2]. This extraordinary literary fossil that preserves the

image of the moon shining through the Arctic night seems to attest to the presence of the ancestors of the Hellenes in an hyperborean country thousands of years ago, when the "post-glacial climatic optimum" of the Holocene Epoch made Lapland habitable [3]. We also observe that the theft of Apollo's fifty cows by Hermes could be traced back to the subtraction of the days lost during the solstice darkness. As for the relationship between the sun, the days and the cows, one should think of the three hundred and fifty Sun's cows of the *Odyssey*, on the island of Thrinacia, where « in great numbers/ feed the cows of Helios and his goodly flocks, seven herds of cows and as many fair flocks of sheep » [4]. They are very strange, because « they bear no young,/ nor do they ever die » [5]. This relationship transpires from the chiasmic structure of two lines at the beginning of the poem: « Fools, who devoured the cows of Helios Hyperion;/ but he took from them the day of their returning! » [6], as well as from the words spoken by the Sun god, indignant for the killing of his cows: Father Zeus and ye other blessed gods that are forever/ take vengeance now on the comrades of Odysseus, son of Laertes,/ who insolently slew my cows, in which I ever/took delight, when I went toward the starry heaven/ and when I turned back again to earth from heaven [7].

These lines of verse clearly visualize the progressive ascent of the sun in the celestial vault, without ever setting, until the summer solstice, and its subsequent descent following a spiral path. All this fits with the arctic world: in fact, the winter night, whose length varies with latitude, extends for about two months (which roughly correspond to the days, *i.e.* the cows, «stolen») in the far north of Lapland. This is why, returning to the *Hymn to Hermes*, «in the first part of the *Hymn*, the night always seems to be about to end, but it never ends » [8]. Moreover, this explains why in a passage of the *Iliad* Apollo appears as a «cowherd» [9]. This extraordinary testimony, which miraculously survived the millennia and the troubles of history, attests the presence of the ancestors of the Achaeans in the far North, in the distant past, which is corroborated by the name of Tiermes, the Lapp god of lightning, who can be considered

the counterpart of Hermes, since the lightning bolt for an archaic mentality is a divine omen and in fact Hermes is the messenger of the gods. It is also noteworthy that the name of Tiermes recalls Turms, the Etruscan god who corresponds to *Hermes* [10], as well as Terminus, an ancient Roman god (whose correspondence with Hermes is the subject of another work whose publication is imminent). Incidentally, the *Odyssey* has another point of contact with the Lapp world. Indeed, the Lapp god Bieka-Galles is similar to Aeolus, and is portrayed with a shovel in his right hand: « The Laplanders offer boats to Bieka-Galles. According to another source, they consecrate him also a wooden shovel. This shovel, which is nothing but an oar [...] curiously reminds what Tiresias predicts to Ulysses in the descent into Hades, that someone will mistake his oar for a winnowing fan » [11].

## Conclusion

To conclude, one could rightly consider the Homeric *Hymn* to Hermes as a “literary fossil”, which providentially escaped the troubles of history over the millennia. Finally, this reading reveals an extraordinary gem, perhaps unique in ancient literature: the image of the moon shining in the arctic night, dating back to a remote era, when the still undivided Indo-European peoples worshiped a god of lightning whose features later evolved into those of the Greek god Hermes.

## References

1. J. Humbert, Homère. Hymnes, CUF, Paris 1967, p. 108.
2. Ἀνθρακίην δ' ἐμάρανε, κόνιν δ' ἀμάθυνε μέλαιναν/ παννύχιος· καλὸν δὲ φάως κατέλαμπε Σελήνης (Hymn. Herm. 140-141).
3. As for the evolution of the European climate during the Holocene Epoch, see M. Otte, *La protohistoire*, De Boeck, Bruxelles 20082, p. 11; M. Pinna, *Climatologia*, UTET, Torino 1977, passim.
4. Ἐνθα δὲ πολλαὶ/ βόσκοντ' Ἡελίοιο βόες καὶ ἴφια μῆλα (Od. XII, 127-128).
5. Γόνος δ' οὐ γίγνεται αὐτῶν, / οὐδέ ποτε φθινύθουσι (ibid., 130-131).
6. Νήπιοι, οἱ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἡελίοιο/ ἦσθιον· αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἦμαρ (ibid., I, 8-9).
7. Ζεῦ πάτερ ἡδ' ἄλλοι μάκαρες θεοὶ αἰὲν ἑόντες,/ τίσαι δὴ ἑτάρους Λαερτιάδεω Ὀδυσῆος,/ οἳ μὲν βοῦς ἔκτειναν ὑπέρβιον, ἦσιν ἐγὼ γε/ χαίρεσκον μὲν ἰὼν εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀστερόεντα,/ ἡδ' ὀπότ' ἄψ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἀπ' οὐρανόθεν προτραποίμην (ibid., XII, 377-381).
8. F. Càssola, *Inni Omerici*, A. Mondadori, Milano 1994, p. 172.
9. Φοῖβε, σὺ δ' εἰλίποδας ἔλικας βοῦς βουκολέεσκες (Il. XXI, 448).
10. The name of the Etruscan god would be a cast of the Greek Ἑρμῆς, with the initial tau to be understood as an article, since often in archaic Greek the theonym provided for it. Cfr. J. Clackson, *Etruscan Turms and Turan*, *Studi Etruschi* 80 (2017), pp. 157-165.
11. G. Dumézil, *La saga di Hadingus*. Dal mito al romanzo, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2001 (or. ed. *La Saga de Hadingus: Du Mythe au Roman*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1953), p. 25.



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