

THE OVER-BURDENED EARTH IN INDIA AND GREECE

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IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA it is told that the Earth is oppressed by the weight of the asuras:

evaṃ vīryabalotsiktair bhūr iyaṃ tair mahāsuraḥ /
pīḍyamānā mahīpālā brahmāṇaṃ upacakrame // 35
na hīmaṃ pavano rājan na nāgā na nagā mahīm /
tadā dhārayitum śekur ākrāntāṃ dānavair balāt // 36
tato mahī mahīpālā bhārārta bhayapīḍitā /
jagāma śaraṇaṃ devaṃ sarvabhūtapitāmahaṃ // 37
(I, 58.35–37 Poona edition)

Van Buitenen renders this passage as follows:

"When she was thus tyrannized by the grand Asuras, bloated with power and strength, Earth came to Brahmā as a suppliant. Neither the wind, nor the elephants, nor the mountains, O king, were able to support Earth so forcefully overrun by the Dānavas. Therefore, Earth, sagging under her burden and brutalized with fear, sought refuge with the God who is the grandfather of all beings."¹

Brahmā orders the gods to descend to earth in order to lighten the burden which oppresses the Earth:

ādidēsa tadā sarvān vibudhān bhūtakṛt svayam // 45
asyā bhūmer nirasitum bhāraṃ pṛthakpṛthak /
asyām eva prasūyadhvaṃ virodhāyeti cābravīt // 46

Van Buitenen translates:

"... then himself, maker of the creatures, gave orders to all the Gods. 'To throw off the burden of Earth', he said, 'you must each be born with a part of yourselves on her to halt them'.²

The gods descend to earth for the destruction of the enemies of the gods:

¹ *Mahābhārata. I. The Book of the Beginning* (Chicago, 1973), p. 137.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

te 'marārivināśāya sarvalokahitāya ca /
avateruḥ krameṇemāṃ mahīm svargād divaukasaḥ //
3 (I.59.3)

Van Buitenen translates:

"And so the celestials in succession descended from heaven to earth, for the destruction of the enemies of the Gods and the well-being of all the world."³

In recent years Georges Dumézil and Jacques Scheuer have drawn attention to the importance of the theme of the over-burdened Earth in the Mahābhārata. Dumézil has even given the title "La Terre soulagée" to the first part of the first volume of *Mythe et épopée* in which he studies the Mahābhārata.⁴ In his summary of the Ādiparvan Dumézil writes: "... les personnages du Mahābhārata, les principaux et beaucoup de secondaires, voire d'épisodiques, sont des êtres surnaturels, dieux et démons, incarnés sur l'ordre de Brahma en vue de la grande guerre, celle-ci ayant pour objet providentiel de soulager la terre d'un surpeuplement qu'elle ne peut tolérer."⁵ On p. 169 Dumézil remarks: "C'est en effet pour délivrer la Terre accablée par un surpeuplement—que le Mahābhārata explique à plusieurs reprises et de plusieurs façons—que Brahma avait décidé la grande saignée et commandé aux dieux de s'incarner pour l'accomplir." Dumézil also quotes a passage from the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa in which the same theme is to be found.⁶

In his book on Śiva in the Mahābhārata, Jacques Scheuer repeatedly refers to the theme of the over-crowded earth.⁷ On p. 157 he refers to it as the "central myth" of the Mahābhārata: "Nous rejoignons là

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁴ *Mythe et épopée. I* (Paris, 2e éd., 1974), pp. 31–257: La terre soulagée.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁷ *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata* (Paris, 1982), p. 112, p. 203, n. 39, p. 243, p. 269.

le mythe central du *Mbh*: au kaliyuga les asura s'incarnent en grand nombre sur la terre, menaçant de la submerger et mettant en péril les intérêts des dieux et l'existence du dharma."⁸

In his study on the development of the *avatāra* doctrine, Paul Hacker examines the myth told in Mahābhārata I, 58 (I, 64 in the Bombay edition) relating to the over-population of the Earth and the descent of the gods.⁹ He points out the importance of the combination of the idea of the partial incarnation (*aṃśāvatāra*) of the gods with the motif of the over-population of the earth.¹⁰ In Mahābhārata III, 142, 35–61 (Bombay edition), a passage which is relegated by the Poona edition to an appendix (I, 16), it is told how Viṣṇu becomes a boar (*varāha*) in order to raise the Earth which has sunk due to over-population. According to Hacker, this myth has been influenced by the myth of the over-population of the Earth and the partial incarnation of the gods.¹¹ In his doctoral dissertation Maheshwari Prasad refers to an article by Jackson in which he compares Mahābhārata III, 142, 35–45 with Vidēvdāt II in which it is related how the earth became over-populated because nobody was dying in Yima's reign.¹² The only important point on which these two versions agree is that the earth becomes over-populated. In the Mahābhārata, the "central myth" relates how the gods are incarnated in order to destroy the incarnated asuras and to lighten the burden of the earth. Apart from this central myth, the Mahābhārata also tells how Death (*mṛtyu*) came into existence because the Earth suffered from an oppressing burden (*bhārātā*).¹³ In this story there is no direct connection with the battle between the incarnated asuras and the incarnated gods. There is also no reference to the *varāha* myth, but it is said that because of her burden the Earth sinks into the waters: *bhāreṇāpsu nimajjati* (XII.249.4). It is possible to discern in the Mahābhārata at least three variants of the

theme of the over-populated Earth. The first is the one told in I.58, according to which the Earth is oppressed by the asuras and the gods incarnate themselves in order to destroy them. This myth is found also in the Strīparvan: *tatas te bhavitā devi bhārasya yudhi nāśanam* (XI.8.26): "Then, goddess, your burden will be destroyed in the battle."¹⁴ The second variant is the *varāha* myth in which Viṣṇu becomes a boar in order to raise the Earth burdened by over-population. The third myth relates the creation of Death. In the first myth the Earth is oppressed by the asuras, but in the second and third variants it is only the weight of the peoples which afflicts her.¹⁵

The Iranian legend in Vidēvdāt II suggests that the theme of the over-populated Earth probably belongs to the common fund of Indo-Iranian mythology. However, it is not possible to determine whether one of the three variants of the theme which are found in the Mahābhārata, goes back to the same period, because the Avesta relates only that when the earth becomes over-populated Yama makes the earth expand three times by one-third. In India, Yama was "he who of mortals was the first to die" (*yo mamāra prathamō mṛtyānām*, Atharvaveda XVIII, 3, 13). The available evidence does not allow us to suppose that the connection of the theme of the over-populated earth with that of the creation of Death is common to both Iranians and Indians. It is, however, perhaps not too bold a hypothesis to assume that the central myth of the Mahābhārata has been inspired by the idea of the over-populated earth and the creation of Death.

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The theme of the over-populated earth is also known in ancient Greece. The prologue of the Iliad (A 1–5) is rendered by Richmond Lattimore in the following words:

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians, hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting of gods, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished.¹⁶

⁸ See also p. 105, n. 47: "... le mythe du *Mbh* dans son ensemble, notamment dans toute la mesure où il est un mythe de 'la terre surpeuplée'."

⁹ 'Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre', *WZKS* 4 (1960), p. 51 = *Kleine Schriften* (Wiesbaden, 1978), p. 408.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 54.

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 55.

¹² *Some Aspects of the Varāha-kathā in Epics and Purāṇas* (Göttingen, 1983), pp. 128–129; A. V. Williams Jackson, 'On Mahābhārata III.142, 35–45. An echo of an old Hindu-Persian legend', *JAOS* 17 (1896), pp. 185–187.

¹³ VII.52–54 (Bombay edition; Poona edition Appendix I, No. 8); XII.248–250 (257–259 Bombay edition).

¹⁴ Maheshwari Prasad, op. cit., p. 131. See also pp. 131–137 for other stories on the burden of the earth and the destruction of the asuras.

¹⁵ See also E. Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (Strassburg, 1915), pp. 78–79 and 210.

¹⁶ Richmond Lattimore (tr.), *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago, 1951), p. 59.

In explanation of the words "the will of Zeus was accomplished," the scholars of Alexandria quoted the following fragment of the *Cypria*:¹⁷

ἦν δτε μυρία φύλα κατὰ χθόνα πλαζόμεν' ἀνδρῶν
 ... βαθυστέρνου πλάτος αἴης
 Ζεὺς δὲ ἰδὼν ἔλεξε καὶ ἐν πυκιναῖς πραπίδεσσι
 σύνθετο κουφίσαι ἀνθρώπων παμβώτορα γαῖαν
 ῥιπίσσας πολέμου μεγάλην ἔριν Ἰλιακοῖο
 ὄφρα κενώσειν θανάτου βάρος οἱ δ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ
 ἥρωες κτείνοντο· Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή.

H. G. Evelyn White translated this passage as follows:

"There was a time when the countless tribes of men, though wide-dispersed, oppressed the surface of the deep-bosomed earth, and Zeus saw it and had pity and in his wise heart resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of men by causing the great struggle of the Ilian war, that the load of death might empty the world. And so the heroes were slain in Troy, and the plan of Zeus came to pass."¹⁸

Richmond Lattimore translates Διὸς βουλή as "the will of Zeus," whereas Evelyn White renders the same words as "the plan of Zeus." Lattimore's translation agrees with the opinion expressed by, for instance, C. M. Bowra, who forcefully argues against the explanation given by the scholars of Alexandria according to which the Διὸς βουλή in *Iliad* A 5 refers to the plan of Zeus outlined in the prologue of the *Cypria*. Bowra writes: "Such an explanation implies that both the poet and his audience knew this story well enough for it to be mentioned and dismissed in three words. This is certainly wrong. There is not the slightest trace of any such divine plan anywhere else in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, and a reference so obscure would be intolerable in a poem where the main motives are superbly clear. The author of the *Cypria* certainly described such a plan of Zeus, but it is far more likely that he chose to misinterpret these words than that Homer thought the story so well known that the merest hint of it was enough. The words must mean something else, and coming as they do at the end of this summary they must be important. They mean simply that the will of Zeus was fulfilled, that as Wilamowitz says, events happened κατὰ βουλήν Διός.

Here, too, the poet anticipates in a general phrase much of what is to happen. He foretells those passages in which Zeus determines the course of action by giving the advantage to the one side or the other. And more than this. The poet announces that in all these events the will of Zeus was accomplished, and prepares his audience for the large part to be taken in the poem by Zeus and his subordinate gods."¹⁹

Bowra's opinion is shared by many scholars but others disagree. This problem has been discussed over and over again.²⁰ In an article published in 1955, Wolfgang Kullmann has tried to prove that the Διὸς βουλή in *Iliad* A 5 refers to a plan by Zeus to destroy many men.²¹ According to Kullmann, this plan is a pre-Homeric motif which is clearly expressed in the prologue of the *Cypria*. He remarks that he is not considering the questions of whether the poetic form in which this motif is expressed in the *Cypria* is pre-Homeric or not, or whether the same motif was treated in a different way in a pre-*Cypria*.²²

Kullmann's interpretation has been rejected by Walter Burkert.²³ In his book on the sources of the *Ilias*, which has not been very favourably received,²⁴ Kullmann does not adduce any new arguments and refers the reader to his previous articles. Without doubt, this problem will continue to be discussed by specialists and a definitive solution will probably never be forthcoming. It is not possible to determine when the motif of the over-populated earth and the war between the Greeks and the Trojans first occurs in Greece. It must have been well-known in the fifth century B.C., because Euripides in his *Helena* refers to it as something which does not require a detailed explanation. *Helena* speaks:

¹⁹ C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford, 1930), pp. 12–13.

²⁰ See the references given by Kullmann, 'Ein vorhomersches Motiv im Iliasproömium', *Philologus* 99 (1955), p. 185, n. 1.

²¹ Wolfgang Kullmann, op. cit., pp. 167–192. See also 'Zur ΔΙΟΣ ΒΟΥΛΗ des Iliasproömiums', *Philologus* 100 (1956), pp. 132–133.

²² Op. cit., p. 185.

²³ Cf. Wolfgang Kullmann, *Die Quellen der Ilias* (Wiesbaden, 1960), p. 47.

²⁴ *Die Quellen der Ilias*. Cf. D. L. Page, *Classical Review* 11 (1961), pp. 205–209; Frederick M. Combellack, *American Journal of Philology* 83 (1962), pp. 193–198; Uvo Hölscher, *Gnomon* 38 (1966), pp. 113–127; A. Lesky, *Homeros, Pauly-Wissowa RE*, Suppl. Bd. XI (1968), pp. 823–824.

¹⁷ *Cypria*, fr. i. ed. Th. W. Allen, *Homeri Opera*, Vol. V (Oxford, 1912), p. 116.

¹⁸ *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica*. Rev. ed. (London, 1936), p. 497.

πόλεμον γὰρ εἰσήνεγκεν Ἑλλήνων χθονὶ
καὶ Φρυγίᾳ δυστήνοισιν, ὥς ὄχλου βροτῶν
πλήθους τε κουφίσειε μητέρα χθόνα
γνωτὸν τε θεῖη τὸν κράτιστον Ἑλλάδος (38–41)

He (Zeus) brought war upon the land of the Hellenes
and the unhappy Phrygians to lighten
mother Earth of the mass and multitude of mortals
and make Achilles known as the mightiest of Hellas.

Kullmann may not have been able to prove that the prologue of the Iliad depends on the prologue of the Cypria but he is undoubtedly right in pointing out that it is not possible to assume that the author of the Cypria invented the motif of the over-populated earth as a guiding principle for bringing together the sagas derived from the Iliad. Pre-Homeric or not, this motif must have existed long before the creation of Cypria.

In his article Kullmann refers to a brief note published by Reinhold Köhler in 1858.²⁵ In it Köhler draws attention to a story in the Harivaṃsa in which the earth, oppressed by the weight of innumerable armies and fortresses, asks Viṣṇu for help. Viṣṇu pro-

mises that Kṛṣṇa will bring about a great war in which many kings and armies will be killed.²⁶ However, the central role played by this theme in the Mahābhārata seems, as far as I know, to have escaped the notice of classical scholars.

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Both the Mahābhārata and the Cypria relate that the supreme God (Brahmā in India and Zeus in Greece) brought war to lighten the earth of her burden (Skt. *bhāra*, Greek βάρος). It seemed to be interesting to point out that the same theme is found in both ancient India and in ancient Greece. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that this theme belongs to a common Indo-European heritage, but in any case it is noteworthy that this myth is found in almost the same wording in two different cultures. It is a great pleasure for me to contribute this note as a small token of friendship to Dan Ingalls whom I have had the pleasure of knowing since 1946.

²⁵ 'Zu den Kyprien', *Rheinisches Museum*, N.F. 13 (1858), pp. 316–317.

²⁶ Köhler refers to the translation by M. A. Langlois, *Harivansa, ou histoire de la famille de Hari*, Vol. I (Paris, 1834), pp. 236ff. and p. 387, 410 and 418.