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Domestic Spaces and Mythical Time: Archetypes of the Cosmic Order in Greek Houses in the 8th century BC

This paper considers the arrangement of domestic space as depicted in the Odyssey. Emphasis is laid on its symbolic aspect: as a place where a range of objects with cosmological significance were concentrated. These objects were integral elements in the arrangement of human dwellings, but they were simultaneously present in mythical space, where they acted as mechanisms supporting the cosmic order. Besides, these artefacts were also connected to the moment in mythical time when the cosmic order was established, and thus they implemented a harmonising and ordering function. With the presence of these architectural elements in domestic space, human dwellings could have been perceived as a kind of “cosmic house”, connected both to mythical space and mythical time.

Key words: domestic spaces, Homer, Hesiod, mythical time, mythical space, mythological thinking, archetypes.

This paper investigates the arrangement of domestic spaces, in terms of ideas and images of space and time, in Greek houses in the 8th century BC. For people of all cultures and historical epochs, their homes are spaces that protect them from external threats and help them to suppress the feeling of apprehension that stems from the realisation of defencelessness in the face of the world beyond, both real and imaginary. In the minds of those people possessed of mythological thinking, their

predisposition to polarise different phenomena is inherent.¹ This tendency, which in the perception of space is evidenced by the dichotomy of “own” and “alien” among Greeks living in the 8th century BC, is reflected in the antagonism between two types of space: profane space, as cultivated and arranged by people, and mythical space, which was considered the habitat of fantastic creatures and the location of the underworld.² The latter, being incomprehensible and unpredictable, was perceived as a source of danger to the human world. This led to aspirations to minimise the potential threat that this space could pose to people. Thus, Tartarus, where the rebellious Titans were imprisoned after Zeus’ victory in the Titanomachy, was surrounded by the bronze wall,³ with the entrance blocked by the bronze door made by Poseidon.⁴ The addition of these elements of human culture into the space of Tartarus performed both ordering, for it made this wild space similar to human communities, and defensive functions, preventing the dissociative force personified in the face of the Titans from intervening in the world order established by Zeus. The indestructibility of bronze may have symbolised the steadfastness and permanence of this cosmic order.

Another element connected with human culture was the threshold at the entrance to Tartarus.⁵ This threshold was endowed with cosmic significance because it not only defined the two levels of the universe, the ground, and the underworld, and therefore demarcated qualitatively different spaces, but also provided a connection with the sun and the natural phenomena based on it, namely as the place where the gods

¹ CASSIRER (1925: 110–113); CLAY (2003: 15); DURKHEIM (1995: 34–38); HERZ (2004: 96); MELETINSKY (1998: 186).

² ANTYPAS (2017: 10); COLE (2004: 7); GERNET (1933: 299–300); VIDAL-NAQUET (1970: 1278–1297).

³ Hes. *Theog.* 726: τὸν πέρι χάλκεον ἔρκος ἐλήλαται; Hes. *Theog.* 733: τεῖχος δὲ περoίχεται ἀμφοτέρωθεν.

⁴ Hes. *Theog.* 732: θύρας δ’ ἐπέθηκε Ποσειδέων χαλκείας.

⁵ Hes. *Theog.* 811–814; Hom. *Il.* 8, 14–15.

personifying day and night met, thereby preserving life and keeping the cosmos in balance.⁶

When investigating the organisation of domestic spaces in ancient Greece, previously published research often refers to the arrangement of the internal and external spaces, whereby the purpose is to determine the involvement of the dwellers within society as well as the moral values and behavioural imperatives within families.⁷ In contrast, we regard another aspect of domestic space as significant, namely its symbolic meaning. This aspect may have been expressed through the endowment of certain architectural elements within houses, whereby the symbolic meaning originated from the arrangement of the mythical space and its connection to mythical time. A house could therefore be considered a specific chronotope that existed in the present, but, through the presence of spatial symbolic elements, it was connected with the mythical past, thereby acquiring cosmic significance.

A Threshold and the Idea of the Border

The first of these symbolic elements in the arrangement of domestic spaces, to which we are referring in this paper, was the threshold. A domestic space, separated from the world outside by a threshold, creates two types of qualitatively different spaces, namely the inner space of the house itself and the outer space.⁸ Whereas house dwellers may freely step over the threshold,⁹ guests must wait for an invitation.¹⁰ A threshold

⁶ About this threshold, see JOHNSON (1999: 25–26); NAKASSIS (2004: 217–218).

⁷ For example, ANTONACCIO (2000); COCOUZELI (2007); JAMESON (1993); LANG (2002); LANGDON (2008); LLEVELLYN-JONES (2007); NEVETT (1995), (2007); SANDERS (1989); STEADMAN (2015).

⁸ For example, in Hom. *Od.* 7, 135: καρπαλίμως ὑπὲρ οὐδὸν ἐβήσετο δῶματος εἴσω – he quickly crossed the threshold and entered the interior of the house.

⁹ For example, Hom. *Od.* 17, 575; 21, 42–44.

¹⁰ Hom. *Il.* 23, 201–203; Hom. *Od.* 1, 103–104; 4, 20; 7, 82–89; 8, 79–81; 17, 339–340; 466–467.

is therefore perceived among people of various cultures as a symbolic barrier that blocks access to a house and separates the inner from the outer space.¹¹ As the first element of the domestic space in terms of the transition from the qualitatively different outer space, the threshold held significant meaning for the whole house. In the Homeric hymn to Pythian Apollo (115–121), the building of a temple in honour of this god starts with the laying of the foundations,¹² the placement of the stone threshold,¹³ and the construction of the walls of the temple around this threshold.¹⁴

Although the main material used for thresholds was stone,¹⁵ Homer gives examples of thresholds made of other materials. The first is the bronze threshold of the house of Alcinous, the king of the mythical people of Phaeacians.¹⁶ The range of symbolic characteristics inherent in this material makes it possible to assume that its use was not accidental. Its qualitative and semantic proximity to the bronze threshold of the abode of the Olympian gods may imply that the king and his people were blessed by the gods.¹⁷ Likewise, the symbolic significance and qualitative similarity to the bronze threshold of Tartarus, which is mentioned by Hesiod as ἀστεμφής, ρίζησι διηνεκέεσσιν ἀρηρώς, αὐτοφνής, suggests that it may have also been perceived as a symbol of indestructibility. In addition to the threshold demarcating the entrance to Tartarus,

¹¹ On the meaning of thresholds and connected to them doors and gates as symbols of transition, see CASSIRER (1925: 126–127); ELIADE (1987: 25).

¹² διέθηκε θεμέλια – 115.

¹³ λαῖνον οὐδὸν ἔθηκε – 117.

¹⁴ ἀμφὶ δὲ νηὸν ἔνασσεν – 119.

¹⁵ A stone threshold in a human dwelling: Hom. *Od.* 16, 41; 17, 30; 22, 269; in the abode of the winds: Hom. *Il.* 23, 201–203; in the temples: Hom. *Od.* 8, 80–81; 22, 269. Stone thresholds in houses in accordance with archaeological sources, see MAZARAKIS AINIAN (1997: 68).

¹⁶ Hom. *Od.* 13, 4: Ὡ Ὀδυσσεῦ, ἐπεὶ ἴκευ ἐμὸν ποτὶ χαλκοβατὲς δῶ.

¹⁷ Hom. *Il.* 1, 426: καὶ τότε ἔπειτά τοι εἶμι Διὸς ποτὶ χαλκοβατὲς δῶ; 14, 173; Hom. *Od.* 8, 321.

which not only defines two spatial levels, Earth and the Underworld, but also functions as the meeting point for Day and Night, reference is also made to the bronze walls surrounding the jail of the Titans, the entrance to which was blocked by bronze doors made by Poseidon. We can therefore assume that bronze, as the metal from which the protective elements in the lower space of Tartarus were made, as well as the cosmic threshold on the border of Tartarus and Earth and the threshold of the house of the Olympian gods, could have been perceived by the Greeks of the 8th century BC as symbolising indestructibility, thereby helping to maintain the cosmic order.

From the further description of the house of Alcinous it follows that:

χάλκεοι μὲν γὰρ τοῖχοι ἐληλέδατ' ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα,
 ἐς μυχὸν ἐξ οὐδοῦ, περὶ δὲ θριγκὸς κυάνοιο·
 χρύσειαι δὲ θύραι πυκινὸν δόμον ἐντὸς ἔεργον·
 σταθμοὶ δ' ἀργύρεοι ἐν χαλκῷ ἕστασαν οὐδῶ,
 ἀργύρεον δ' ἐφ' ὑπερθύριον, χρυσή δὲ κορώνη.¹⁸

Of bronze were
 the walls that stretched this way and that from the
 threshold to the innermost chamber, and around
 was a cornice of cyanus. Golden were the doors
 that shut in the well-built house, and doorposts
 of silver were set in a threshold of bronze. Of
 silver was the lintel above, and of gold the handle.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that in this description, we can find gold and silver elements in the structure of Alcinous' house. Homer frequently mentions

¹⁸ Hom. *Od.* 7, 85–94.

¹⁹ Transl. by A. T. MURRAY.

gold in connection with the Olympian gods. Various attributes emphasising the power of Zeus and other gods are made of gold.²⁰ The presence of doors made of gold, a metal known to symbolise incorruptibility,²¹ emphasises the reliability of this protective element in the structure of the house of this blessed king. Silver, of which the jambs and lintels were made, has a sacral meaning as well. Reference is made to it once in the description of the space in Tartarus, namely with regards to the columns supporting the house of Styx.²² In turn, this goddess, as the river of the Underworld, was responsible for supporting the world order because her waters were used by the gods, who were the guarantors of cosmic existence, for taking their oaths.²³

Made of bronze, gold, and silver, which were the metals connected to the world of gods, thresholds, doors, jambs, and lintels, as the symbols of the transition from the outer space to the inner space of a house, therefore protected it against the intervention of evil forces from the outside and brought harmony and order into the domestic space.

Another example of the endowment of a threshold with specific characteristics is the ash threshold of the house of Odysseus.²⁴ Here again, we can assume that the use of the material is not accidental. In the *Iliad*, reference is made to a spear shaft being made of this material.²⁵ Hesiod also states that the warlike bronze generation arose from ash trees (ἐκ μελιᾶν).²⁶ The mention of the ash threshold of the house of Od-

²⁰ For example, Hom. *Il.* 1, 195; 4, 1–4; 8, 19; 41–44; 68; 416; 442.

²¹ BROWN (1998: 393–394).

²² Hes. *Theog.* 778–779.

²³ For the cosmic significance of this river, see BLICKMAN (1987); BOLLACK (1958); CLAY (2003: 22); LYE (2009).

²⁴ Hom. *Od.* 17, 339–340.

²⁵ Hom. *Il.* 5, 655; 19, 390; 22, 225.

²⁶ Or from the tree nymphs – Melias. From Greek μελία – ash tree. Hes. *Erga.* 145. Hesiod's depiction of the bronze generation may be correlated with the older heroes mentioned by Homer. Hom. *Il.* 5, 385–388; 6, 132–137; 9, 559–560; *Od.* 11, 308–320. Despite the fact that this generation was marked by *hybris*, which meant unworthy behaviour

ysseus might therefore have been an allusion to his military valour. This example, as in the case of the bronze threshold of the house of Alcinous, may therefore imply that a threshold, as the first fundamental element of a domestic space that divides it from the world outside, represents specific qualities that could act as a general means for depicting a whole house.

Hearths and their central location in houses

Another element with symbolic meaning in the arrangement of domestic spaces was the hearth. This was located in the main room, the so-called megaron,²⁷ and usually occupied a central position in the room.²⁸ Taking into account the sacrality of the centre in the thoughts of people with mythological thinking,²⁹ an artefact situated in the centre could have had the same sacral meaning. Within this context, in the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite, the centre of the house is mentioned in connection with the goddess Hestia (29–32). The same goddess is also mentioned by Hesiod.³⁰

towards the gods, their exceptional warlike qualities might have been appreciated positively, which could have made them a personification of armour.

²⁷ Hom. *Od.* 19, 51–55.

²⁸ MAZARAKIS AINAN (1997: 288; 291); PRENT (2007: 143). PARISINOU (2007: 220) notes that in living rooms in houses of the 9th–8th century BC, it was characteristic for the hearth to have a central position, whereas in kitchens they were positioned off-centre. When describing the living rooms of Minoan Crete, McENROE (2010: 13–15) points to the fact that the hearth was present in neolithic houses, with it also being placed in the centre of the house. Moreover, the space around the hearth was left unoccupied, which could be evidence of the fact that the dwellers used the space for conducting various communal activities inside the house. JAMESON (1993: 98–99) states that archaeological sources provide evidence that in the classical period, hearths did not have a central position in the main room. Instead, they were usually placed in smaller rooms, which were probably used as kitchens, where they had an off-centre position.

²⁹ CAILLOIS (2015: 79–80); ELIADE (1961: 41–43; 51–52); HERTZ (2004: 102).

³⁰ Hes. *Theog.* 454. In the hymn to Aphrodite (30), Zeus honours Hestia by determining that her place is in the centre of the house (μέσση οἴκῳ). The hearth was therefore an

Some passages from the *Odyssey* suggest a possible connection between Zeus and the hearth. After Odysseus' appearance in the Alcinous' house and his plea for help by the hearth, the house dwellers and their guests made a libation to Zeus, „who accompanies all, asking for help.“³¹ The significance of the hearth in domestic spaces in the 8th century BC is also reflected in the existence of an oath to the hearth, which can be found in Homer.³² In this oath, the symbolic nature of the hearth in the organisation of domestic spaces was ascribed to its relation to Zeus. Additionally, a welcoming table as a symbol of hospitality is also present in this oath. Through this relationship, Zeus, as the god supporting hospitality, appears to be connected to the hearth. Due to the role of this god in the establishment of the cosmic order, it is also possible for this artifact to harmonise and bring order into domestic spaces. As follows from Homer, portable braziers were used for heating and lighting homes.³³ As a result, the hearth, which was earlier used for these purposes, eventually lost its sense. The meaning of the hearth in a house was therefore not practical but rather symbolic. It is possible that the hearth was only used for significant events, as indicated, for example, in the fragment of Hom. *Od.* 20, 122–123; 155–156, before the

indicator of the centre in the house. VERNANT (1988: 156–157) notes that, in addition to indicating the centre of the house, a round hearth in the middle of the main room, known as a *megaron*, provided fixity, fixing the house to the ground, symbolising firmness and unbrokenness. VERNANT compares the hearth to an *omphalos*, an important symbol in Greek culture, which in a later period was connected to the representation of the centre and, like the hearth, was round in form. This is also confirmed by iconography, whereby the *omphalos* is often placed near Hestia. VERNANT (1988: 179–181) also emphasises the fact that the *omphalos*, like the hearth, was connected to the earth.

³¹ Hom. *Od.* 7, 159–165: ὅς θ' ἰκέτησιν ἄμ' αἰδοίοισιν ὀπηδεῖ. See also Hom. *Od.* 14, 56–58.

³² Hom. *Od.* 14, 158–159: ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν, ξενίη τε τράπεζα, / ἰστίη τ' Ὀδυσῆος ἀμύμονος, ἦν ἀφικάνω. Other examples of this oath: Hom. *Od.* 17, 155–156; 19, 303–304; 20, 230–231.

³³ Hom. *Od.* 18, 307–308; 19, 63–64.

archery competition in which Penelope's suitors take part.³⁴ Homer also mentions that it was the day when the holiday in honour of Apollo was celebrated.³⁵ The symbolic meaning of the hearth, furthermore, might have been perceived as the house itself and as a symbol of the family's values. It is within this context that Penelope sits by the hearth when she spends her time in *megaron* in passages of the *Odyssey*.³⁶

Next to the hearth, there were also the thrones of Alcinous and his wife Areta. Nausicaa, when speaking to Odysseus, who has asked her for help, gives him the following advice:

ᾠκα μάλα μεγάροιο διελθέμεν, ὄφρ' ἂν ἴκηαι
μητέρ' ἐμήν· ἡ δ' ἦσται ἐπ' ἐσχάρῃ ἐν πυρὸς ἀγῇ,
ἡλάκατα στρωφῶσ' ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι,
κίονι κεκλιμένη· δμῳαὶ δέ οἱ εἴατ' ὀπισθεν.
ἔνθα δὲ πατρὸς ἐμοῖο θρόνος ποτικέκλιται αὐτῇ,
τῷ ὃ γε οἶνοποτάζει ἐφήμενος ἀθάνατος ὤς.³⁷

pass quickly through the great hall,
till thou comest to my mother, who sits at the hearth in the
light of the fire,
spinning the purple yarn, a wonder to behold, leaning against a
pillar, and
her handmaids sit behind her. There, too, leaning against
the selfsame pillar, is set the throne of my father,
whereon he sits and quaffs his wine, like unto an immortal.³⁸

³⁴ πᾶσιν ἑορτή.

³⁵ Hom. *Od.* 20, 276–278.

³⁶ Hom. *Od.* 19, 51–55: τῇ παρὰ μὲν κλισίῃν πυρὶ κάτθесαν; Hom. *Od.* 23, 89: ἐν πυρὸς ἀγῇ.

³⁷ Hom. *Od.* 6, 304–309.

³⁸ Transl. by A. T. MURRAY.

In this passage, one thing is of particular interest, namely the close proximity of the hearth to the columns, which is also confirmed by archaeological evidence.³⁹ This leads us to the assumption that this may not be a mere coincidence, as the Greeks of the 8th century BC also considered columns to have symbolic meaning.

Columns and their sacral meaning

Archaeological data indicate that columns were an important element in the arrangement of domestic spaces in the Dark Ages and the Archaic Age.⁴⁰ The presence of wooden colonnades in rulers' dwellings is also evident in Homer.⁴¹ As in the case of images of human culture that include thresholds, walls, doors, and gates, present in the space of Tartarus, where they provide both ordering and protective function, columns are present in the organisation of the mythical space, in which they also have a cosmic meaning. Homer and Hesiod mention columns as a separator between two spatial levels: the Sky and the Earth.⁴² The symbolic meaning of the columns in the organisation of the space in the house of

³⁹ The tradition of such a spatial arrangement of megarons dates back to the Mycenaean period. MAZARAKIS AINIAN (2003: 184) mentions that megarons in Mycenaean palaces, connected with ritual activities, contained a central hearth and four columns around the hearth. Some objects with ritual significance, such as the altar in front of the entrance to the megaron at Tiryns or the libation channel next to the ruler's throne at Pylos, were also present. That could be evidence that Mycenaean palaces could have been the centers of religious life. For example, in the so-called Palace of Nestor at Pylos, a "low circular platform" was found in the main room that could have served as a megaron. GATES (2011: 135) states that this platform, in all likelihood, was a hearth surrounded by four wooden columns.

⁴⁰ At Zagora, one-storied houses with flat roofs supported by wooden columns were found. See GATES (2011: 209). The roof of the Heroon at Lefkandi, which dates back to the 10th century BC, was supported by three rows of wooden columns placed in the centre of the main room and along the walls. See MAZARAKIS AINIAN (1997: 50); GATES (2011: 211).

⁴¹ In the house of Odysseus, the location of various things πρὸς κίονα μακρὸν is mentioned. Hom. *Od.* 1, 126–129; 8, 65–66; 17, 29. From Greek κίων – pillar or column.

⁴² Hes. *Theog.* 522; Hom. *Od.* 1, 53–54.

Odysseus is reflected in Hom. *Od.* 19, 37–39, in which Telemachus turns to Odysseus and says:

ἔμπης μοι τοῖχοι μεγάρων καλαί τε μεσόδμαι,
εἰλάτιναί τε δοκοί, καὶ κίονες ὑψόσ' ἔχοντες
φαίνοντ' ὀφθαλμοῖς ὡς εἰ πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο.⁴³

the walls of the hall and the fair main-beams
of the roof and the cross-beams of pine, and the pillars that run
aloft, are bright as it were with flaming fire.⁴⁴

The material of which these columns are made, namely spruce, is also of interest.⁴⁵ Homer, in one of the fragments of the *Iliad*, mentions a giant spruce that reaches the aether and thus connects three spatial levels, thereby acting as a cosmic tree.⁴⁶ Furthermore, we can assume that the presence of columns endowed with cosmic meaning, as an architectural element in a certain room of the house, might have emphasised the significance of this room for the whole house.⁴⁷ With the crucial role of

⁴³ Hom. *Od.* 19, 37–39.

⁴⁴ Transl. by S. H. BUTCHER–A. LANG.

⁴⁵ ἐλάτινος – made of spruce.

⁴⁶ Hom. *Il.* 14, 287–288. In his research on vegetative symbolism in Greek mythology, BROCKLISS (2019) notes that Homer's arboreal images, as the elements of "stability and permanence", are connected with representations about the cosmic order and its maintenance. <https://chs.harvard.edu/read/brockliss-william-homeric-imagery-and-the-natural-environment/>. See also HAHN (2001: 194).

⁴⁷ Similar examples can be found in the architecture of Minoan Crete. MARINATOS (1993: 87) states that pillared rooms were found in the Palace of Knossos and that these rooms evidently had a sacral character (the "Pillar Crypts"). Another example of the presence of columns in cultic architecture is the round tomb at Apesokari from the period of the old palaces. At the entrance to the tomb, a rectangular building is situated, containing the pillar room, in which an altar was installed. In this room, no burials were found that could indicate that it might have performed a cultic function (see MARINATOS [1993: 88–89]). On the basis of archaeological sources, MARINATOS (1993: 94) argues that the column, as an architectural element, can be connected to the burial

a megaron in the houses of the Dark Ages and the early Archaic Age as the scene for important family events, it is possible that the columns, as well as the hearth, which was connected to the gods, especially Zeus and Hestia, could have introduced some elements of sacredness into the space of human dwellings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that basic elements in the structures of houses, such as a threshold, door, hearth, and columns, not only had practical functions but also symbolic significance. These elements, which were also present in the mythical space and connected to mythical time, obtained an archetypal character, thereby performing demarcation and defensive functions in both the domestic and mythical spaces. The inclusion of these artefacts in the mythical space reveals two distinct tendencies. The first one is an aspiration to bring order into it to make this space similar to the space of human communities and thereby minimise its hypothetical danger to the human world. The second tendency is to endow some objects in domestic space with cosmic significance and ordering potential. Houses therefore acquired this character among Greeks living in the 8th century BC, resulting in the incorporation of harmonious elements associated with the establishment of cosmic order into domestic spaces.

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cult because fragments thereof are often present inside the tombs.

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