

From Here to the Hereafter:  
*Genesis and Apogenesis* in Ancient  
Philosophy and Architecture



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## FROM HERE TO THE HEREAFTER: 'GENESIS' AND 'APOGENESIS' IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND ARCHITECTURE

*From the third-century-CE Platonic philosopher, Porphyry, we learn that the midsummer solstice was regarded as the point of entry for souls from heaven into this world, a process called genesis. Its opposite, apogenesis, the return of souls to heaven, occurred at the midwinter solstice. Midway between the solstices lie the equinoxes, which were regarded as the points of cosmic balance, where the lord of genesis took his seat to oversee the processes of genesis and apogenesis. Porphyry taught in Rome, and it is in that city, I argue, that we find major buildings which instantiate this world view. I argued the case for the Pantheon in this regard in my book, 'Time in Antiquity.' Here I extend the argument to the palace of the emperor, Nero.*

### Introduction

A particularly fruitful line of research which was generated by the epilogue of my book (Hannah, 2009) has been the investigation of the metaphysical links between architecture, philosophy and religion in ancient Roman society. In the book I proposed such a link in the Pantheon, the best preserved building from imperial Rome. I argued that in this structure (which may have been a temple, although an odd one, serving multifunctional purposes associated with the emperor) at certain moments in the year one could observe a curious interconnectedness of design and nature. At the equinoxes (the midpoints in the sun's annual cycle from one solstice to another and back again), at midday (when the sun is halfway between its rising and setting), the sun's beam would strike the interior of the Pantheon at the midpoint in its height over the entrance doorway, where the base cylinder meets the springing of the domed ceiling. This is clearly deliberately planned, but to what end? Professor Giulio Magli (Politecnico di Milano) subsequently contacted me to tell me that he had observed and recorded a similar phenomenon on 21 April, when the midday sun would envelop anyone standing in the doorway of the Pantheon. This date was, and still is, of cultural significance as the 'birthday' of the city of Rome. We then collaborated on a paper in which we examined the broader architectural and cultural context of these phenomena in the Pantheon (Hannah and Magli, 2011). In that paper we hint at a precedent to the events in the Pantheon in the palace of the emperor, Nero, the *Domus Aurea* ('Golden House'). We are now collaborating on a further paper, with Antonella Palmieri (*Domus Aurea* Restoration Project, Rome), in which we develop our thoughts on that building's use of sunlight in a broader religio-political context (see <http://arxiv.org/abs/1312.7583>). Here I want to situate this new research within its philosophical and cultural context. My hypothesis is that pivotal times in the solar cycle were regarded as providing liminal 'passageways' between the time-bound, mortal world of the 'here and now' and the timeless or perpetual, immortal world of the 'hereafter.'

While this paper will focus on the idea as it is presented in antiquity, it is arguably a matter of continuing interest to the present day. In quantum mechanics, for example, a related idea appears in the hypotheses of parallel universes, multiverses, 'many worlds,' etc. These imply a notion of places before or after our time, some with 'membranes' for passage (if only for gravity) from one world to another, and the possibility of sempiternity (perpetual time). The similarity between ancient and modern thought may be superficial, or it – and science fiction's parallel fascination with other worlds – may reflect deeper issues in the human psyche that deserve exploration and explication.

My hypothesis that philosophy might help explicate the architecture stems from an extended allegorical explanation by the third-century-CE Neoplatonist philosopher, Porphyry, of a description from Homer's *Odyssey* (13.102–12) of a cave sacred to the nymphs on Odysseus's home island of Ithaka. So let us start with Porphyry.

### *Porphyry on Homer's Cave of the Nymphs*

Porphyry stands towards the end of a very long and continuous philosophical tradition in antiquity, going back to Plato himself in the fifth century BCE. The tendency within this tradition was to view the material world, called the sensible world as being due to our perception of it through the senses, as inherently an inaccurate representation of reality. Instead, reality was to be perceived through the intellect, and the resultant intelligible world lay beyond this earthly, sublunary ('under the moon,' the nearest celestial body) world in the celestial realm. This view of the cosmos we owe largely to the later followers of Plato who have been called Neoplatonists since the nineteenth century – philosophers like Plotinus (204–270 CE), Porphyry, his pupil (234–305 CE), Iamblichus, his pupil (245–325 CE) in the third century CE, and Proclus (412–485 CE) in the fifth century. The Neoplatonists in particular expressed their philosophy via the literary genre of the exegesis or commentary on the original Platonic texts, especially the extended philosophical treatises of the *Timaeus*, the *Laws* and the *Republic*. The use of this genre is of course well known in other traditions, notably Judaism and Christianity, both of which owe a significant debt to Platonism and its later followers. Commentary is now better understood as a vehicle for the development of innovative philosophical thought, rather than simply an exposition of previous scholarship with no independent thought, a brush the Neoplatonists were unfairly tarred with for a long time. We can agree with earlier scholarship that these later philosophers certainly eclectically picked and chose their way through earlier philosophical traditions, not only the Platonic but also Aristotelian and Stoic, and that they certainly sought consciously to enable Plato's and Aristotle's often contradictory statements on metaphysics to mesh together by subtle or creative reinterpretations. But we can see better now that they also used these discussions to present distinctly new ideas which advance earlier Greek thought. The philosophy of Plotinus has long held sway in the historical development of European metaphysics, from the Italian Renaissance, through the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to twentieth-century postmodernism. From it we are used to the allegorical reinterpretation of older texts, to the point that one scholar titled his book on the Neoplatonic view of Homer as *Homer the Theologian* (Lambert, 1986). We shall see why soon. But the end of the twentieth century saw the emergence of interest in the more scientifically-oriented (as we would understand the notion of science) philosophy of Proclus, allowing us to gain a more rounded appreciation of this influential school of philosophy beyond its theological aspect.

For my present purposes, I am interested in a commentary that Porphyry produced on a small section of Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the mainstays of ancient Greek education.<sup>1</sup> In the relevant part of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has been stranded on the island of the Phaiakians while on his way back from the war at Troy to his home on the island of Ithaka. At the start of Book 13, the Phaiakians take Odysseus back to Ithaka:

At the head of the harbour is a long-leafed olive tree, and near it a pleasant, shadowy cave sacred to the nymphs that are called Naiads. Therein are mixing bowls and jars of stone, and there too the bees store honey. And in the cave are long looms of stone, at which the nymphs weave webs of purple dye, a wonder to behold; and therein are also ever-flowing springs. Two doors there are to the cave, one toward the North Wind, by which men go down, but that toward the South Wind is sacred, nor do men enter thereby; it is the way of the immortals (Homer, *Odyssey* 13.102–12).

Porphyry is not the first to seek an explanation of the Homeric description of the cave on Ithaka. He himself refers to a predecessor, Cronius, a mid second-century Platonist with Pythagorean leanings, and later talks of others, who have sought explanations, both factual and allegorical. Porphyry's approach is largely to retail the explanation of a couple of his predecessors, starting with Cronius, who provides, through a detailed series of questions, an extended deconstruction of the passage in the *Odyssey*, which informs the rest of Porphyry's analysis. Porphyry himself starts with what we would call the material evidence. On the basis of geographical descriptions of the island of Ithaka, he concludes that Homer was not writing complete fiction (Porphyry, *de Antro* 5).

It is not my purpose here to expand fully on Porphyry's exegesis on Homer within the context of Neoplatonic conceptions of the world and its elemental structure, but it is important to know that this is the route that the philosopher takes. He finds consistency in the use of a cave as a signifier for the cosmos as a whole, in its sensible and intelligible dimensions, through his understanding of the elemental structure of the cosmos. The cave in its sensible mode, for instance, is characterised as dark, stony and moist, terms that we can find in Neoplatonic analyses of the nature of the world (Porphyry, *de Antro* 5–6, 9). This leads on to his report that Zoroaster first had the idea of dedicating a natural cave to Mithras, 'the creator and father of all,' as the cave 'bore for him the image of the Cosmos which Mithras had created and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the Cosmos' (*de Antro* 6). This is the first mention of the cult of Mithras by Porphyry, and he will return to it later. After Zoroaster others then followed suit in practice and in concept, with the Pythagoreans and then Plato also envisaging the cosmos as a cave (*de Antro* 8).

The elemental association of the cave with moisture leads Porphyry to the important step of also linking the cave with souls and their passage into life. The powers that preside over waters are nymphs, he says, but more particularly naiad nymphs, a term apparently – and crucially – also applied to souls descending into *genesis*. The ancients, he tells us, 'thought that the souls settle by water, which is divinely inspired, as Numenius says; in support of this he [Numenius] cites the words of the prophet, "the spirit of God was borne upon the waters"' (Porphyry, *de Antro* 10), a phrase that we recognise from *Genesis* 1:2. Such is the eclectic background that Porphyry, or his source, is drawing upon.

Having established that Homer's cave is 'consecrated to souls and to [...] the nymphs who preside over streams and springs' (Porphyry, *de Antro* 13), Porphyry proceeds to explain the features *within* the cave described by Homer – the stone mixing bowls and amphorae, in which bees store honey. We need not delay here, although in the big picture they serve their purpose of also being associated with souls and *genesis* (Porphyry, *de Antro* 13–20). Once he has dealt with these facets, Porphyry returns to the nature of the cave itself, with its two entrances, one facing north and used by mortals, the other south and used by immortals (*de Antro* 20). The explanation promoted by Porphyry is that already given by Numenius and his pupil, Cronius:

Taking the cave as an image and symbol of the Cosmos, Numenius and his pupil Cronius assert that there are two extremities in the heavens: the winter tropic than which nothing is more southern, and the summer tropic than which nothing is more northern. The summer tropic is in Cancer, the winter tropic is in Capricorn (Porphyry, *de Antro* 21).

'Nothing' in this passage must mean 'nothing on the solar and planetary path.' It is particularly the sun's apparent path across the sky that interests Porphyry. At Mediterranean latitudes the sun traverses through the year a limited arc along the horizon. The sun will not rise nor set outside the arc on the eastern and western horizons between the two solstices, the winter

solstice in late December when the sun is in Capricorn, and the summer solstice in late June, when it is in Cancer.

Porphyry continues:

The theologians spoke of these, Capricorn and Cancer, as two gates; and Plato called them openings [as of a cave]. Of these Numenius and Cronius say that the gate through which souls descend is Cancer, but that they ascend through Capricorn. And Cancer is northerly and suited for descent, while Capricorn is southerly and suited for ascent. The northern quarters of the heavens are for souls descending to genesis, and correspondingly the northern gates of the cave are rightly said to be for the descent of men; the southern quarters of the heavens, however, are not for gods but for souls ascending to the gods ... (Porphyry, *de Antro* 22–3).

The midsummer and midwinter solstitial points are significant because they are the extreme points of the sun's path across the heavens (and with it the moon and planets, who are also divine). These points represent gateways for entry into this sublunary world and exit from it.

All this leads Porphyry to conclude that:

Homer, then, did not have the cave's entrances dedicated to the east or west or to the equinoctial points – Aries and Libra – but to the north and south and to the gates of the heavens furthest north and south, because the cave was sacred to souls and water-nymphs; and for souls these regions are proper to genesis and departure from genesis [*apogenesis*] (Porphyry, *de Antro* 24).

It is at this point that Porphyry refers this vision of the cosmos again to the beliefs of the cult of Mithras:

The equinoctial region they assigned to Mithras as an appropriate seat. And for this reason he bears the sword of Aries, the sign of Mars; he also rides on a bull, Taurus being assigned to Venus. As a creator and lord of genesis, Mithras is placed in the region of the celestial equator with the north to his right and the south to his left; to the south, because of its heat, they assigned Cautes and to the north <Cautopates> because of the coldness of the north wind (Porphyry, *de Antro* 24).

From here Porphyry expands at some length on the significance of 'north' and 'south' (*de Antro* 25–9), and on the meaning of the twofold entrance (*de Antro* 29–31) – at which point he reminds us that Plato (*Laws* X 896e5–6) 'says that there are two openings, one through which souls ascend to the heavens, the other through which they descend to earth' (*de Antro* 29). He finishes with an interpretation of the olive tree near Homer's cave (*de Antro* 31–3). Overall, Porphyry reads Odysseus himself as symbolic of one who 'passes through the stages of genesis and, in doing so, returns to those beyond every wave who have no knowledge of the sea ...' (*de Antro* 34).

Porphyry's references to the cult of Mithras in this treatise have tended to dominate modern scholarship's approach to this short treatise (e.g. Beck, 1984; Ulansey, 1989; Turcan, 1993; Beck, 2006), and indeed they were a starting point for me some years ago in my search to understand the metaphysical interpretation of the solstitial and equinoctial points in Mithraism itself and then more broadly in Roman society (Hannah, 1996). Just to recap: according to Porphyry, in Mithraic belief, the midsummer solstice was regarded as the point of entry for souls from heaven into this world and represented *genesis*. Here the sun was in Cancer in June and at its most northerly, and suited for descent into this world. At the midwinter solstice, on the other hand, there lay the point of re-entry to heaven, which was called *apogenesis*, the return from *genesis*. Here the sun was in Capricorn in December and at its most southerly, and suited to ascent into the upper world. In Mithraic cult, which shares this world view, the sun-god Mithras oversaw this migration of souls from his seat midway between the solstices, at the equinoxes.

The cult's meetings and rituals took place in a cave-like setting, whose form was regarded as a symbol of the cosmos.

But this reference to Mithraism is just a particular instance of a general belief, that the solstitial points represent gateways for entry into this world and exit from it. The references by Porphyry to his philosophical forebears, Numenius and Cronius, indicates this wider circle. Outside the esoteric world of Mithraic religion, the concept of the 'dome of heaven' and its representation in the visual arts through domical ceilings and the like, has been well investigated, especially in the visual arts (Lehmann, 1945). To what extent did this conception of the cosmos, with permeable boundaries and balance-points at certain times of the solar year, pervade ancient society beyond the bounds of esoteric philosophy and mystery cult? Here I will briefly explore just one monument, the second palace of the emperor Nero, his *Domus Aurea* ('Golden House'), in Rome, built in 64–68 CE, where a connection with the equinoxes is literally made concrete.

The physical remains of the extensive palace are nowadays largely limited to the domestic wing on the Esquiline Hill (Fabbrini, 1995; Ball, 2003). Here Voisin (1987) pointed out that the orientation of the wing was not a necessary function of the local topography. Rather, its strict east-west alignment, which is unique in imperial structures, must have served some further purpose. This purpose is highlighted in the wing's central room, the Octagonal Room, where at particular times of the year astronomy defines its dimensions:

- (a) the north celestial pole is visible from the interior's perimeter, through the 6m-wide *oculus* of the dome, and in fact, the position of the north celestial pole defines the perimeter of the *oculus* itself, since the altitude of the pole = the observer's latitude = 42° in Rome and a person about 1.7m tall, standing at the inner perimeter of the Octagonal Room, could see the sky from a declination of ca. 42° upwards;
- (b) the summer solstice's midday sun falls completely on the ground within the room, its upper rim striking near the juncture of the floor and the northern doorway's threshold;
- (c) the equinoctial midday sun falls directly on to the north door, its lower rim striking the juncture of the floor and the northern doorway's threshold, which leads to a nymphaeum, so that earth, water and sky are bound together (Voisin, 1987, pp. 510–15).

Nero's association with the sun is well attested (L'Orange, 1947; Champlin, 2003). In the *Domus Aurea* complex alone there was a colossal statue of the sun which stood not far from the Octagonal Room (Bergmann, 1994; Albertson, 2001) (its name is preserved in that of the Colosseum, the amphitheatre which was later built nearby); and in Nero's later portraits in coin and sculpture he wears the radiate crown that was usually associated with the sun god (Hiesinger, 1975; Smith, 2000). The historian Suetonius reports of the Golden House itself:

He [Nero] built a house from the Palatine all the way to the Esquiline, which he called the Passageway House at first, but then, when it was destroyed by fire soon afterwards and rebuilt, the Golden House ... . The main dining hall was circular; it turned round constantly day and night, like the heavens (Suetonius, *Nero* 31).

The temptation to regard the Octagonal Room as this very dining room has had to be tempered in recent years by the discovery of another structure from the palace on the Palatine hill, where a revolving mechanism seems to have been a feature (Wilson, 2011).

The poet Lucan, writing in Nero's time ca. 60 CE, has the apotheosised emperor joining the heavens and finding his proper seat on the celestial equator, where he will ensure balance and stability:

You, when your duty is fulfilled  
 and finally you seek the stars, will be received in your chosen palace  
 of heaven, with the sky rejoicing. Whether you choose to wield  
 the sceptre or to mount the flaming chariot of Phoebus  
 and to circle with moving fire the earth entirely unperturbed  
 by the transference of the sun, every deity  
 will yield to you, to your decision nature will leave  
 which god you wish to be, where to set your kingdom of the universe.  
 But choose your seat neither in the northern sphere  
 nor where the torrid sky of opposing south sinks down:  
 from these positions you would view your Rome with star aslant.  
 If you press on either side of the boundless ether,  
 the sky will feel the weight: maintain the mass of heaven poised  
 in the sphere's mid-point; let that part of the clear ether  
 be wholly empty, let no clouds bar our view of Caesar.  
 Then may humankind lay down its weapons and care for itself  
 and every nation love one another; may Peace be sent throughout  
 the world and close the iron temple-gates of warring Janus  
 (*Lucan: Civil War* 1.45–59 (Braund, 1992)).

Here we have a sentiment matching that given us by Porphyry of the role played by Mithras in his cult's cosmic vision. There the god Mithras was placed at the equinoctial region of the celestial equator, with the north to his right and the south to his left, overseeing the passage of souls into and out of this world (or out of and into the world of the gods).

In the Octagonal Room surmounted by its cave-like dome, the equinoctial sun at noon fully illuminates the northern doorway, which gives entry to a nymphaeum – a space sacred to water nymphs. Let us recall again the associations highlighted by Porphyry between water, nymphs and souls descending into *genesis*:

Homer, then, did not have the cave's entrances dedicated to the east or west or to the equinoctial points – Aries and Libra – but to the north and south and to the gates of the heavens furthest north and south, because the cave was sacred to souls and water-nymphs; and for souls these regions are proper to genesis and departure from genesis [*apogenesis*] (Porphyry, *de Antro* 24).

Nero's Octagonal Room therefore presents a convincing case in which architectural elements in a major Roman building were symbolically tied to the sun's passage through the year. That these associations held metaphysical significance for the emperor himself, as a figure overseeing the cosmos and its passage of souls, is then suggested by the contemporary poetic admonition to the soon-to-be-apotheosised Nero by Lucan.

From this imperial building we can trace a line of major architectural structures which play with the same design features and, arguably, the same metaphysical concerns. The Pantheon as built under Hadrian in 128 CE is the outstanding exemplar. I suspect the palace of Domitian on the Palatine in Rome also used these ideas, but its remains are too scanty to be sure as yet. Further on in time, Byzantine churches incorporate dome, sunlight and liturgy in a Christianised version of the pagan motifs (Potamianos, 2000).



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to Porphyry's commentary are taken from *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (Buffalo, Dept. of Classics, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1969).

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### Insights

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