

WHAT IS A *KATÁBASIS*?

The Descent into the Netherworld in Greece and the Ancient Near East *

1. Introduction

Katábasis is a reality that is difficult to define, since it knows different forms, and more often than not it is hard to set out what it is and what it is not. In a presentation like this one, where the main aim is to introduce the subject, I have to limit myself to discuss only a few faces of this complex kaleidoscope.

I shall begin by laying out a provisional definition of *katábasis*. The definition is necessary, since modern authors frequently talk about the term without defining its meaning, as if *katábasis* would have a net content. However, defining *katábasis* and determining which kind of tales may be included under this name are not obvious or generally agreed upon. Instead, there is a great diversity in the criteria from author to author. To cite some examples, M. GANSCHINIETZ (1919) includes in it all kinds of tales related to the Netherworld (e.g. the myth of Protesilaus, the Καθαρμοί of Empedocles or the eschatological myths of Plato). R. J. Clark talks about the “Descent into the Underworld” theme and specifies that

the theme itself is [...] inextricably connected with the mythological deeds of the heroes Gilgamesh, Heracles, Odysseus, Orpheus, Peirithoos, Theseus, Aeneas, and many other who descended alive and returned from the Land of the Dead¹.

But Gilgamesh does not descend into the Land of the Dead, and Peirithoos does not return. Therefore, either there are conflicting elements in the definition or not all the cited characters lead a *katábasis*.

* Acknowledgements: This paper has been written thanks to the funding of the research project FF12013-43126-P. I am deeply thankful to Veronica Walker, who has translated it into English, and to M. Herrero de Jáuregui, Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, Raquel Martín Hernández and M. A. Santamaría, who read a first version of the paper and offered many interesting suggestions. The responsibility for any remaining mistakes is exclusively mine.

1. R. J. CLARK (1978), p. 3.

R. G. EDMONDS III (2004) studied a pattern common to the *Orphic Gold Tablets*, Aristophanes's *Frogs*, and Plato; although in *The Frogs* we have a true *katábasis* experienced by a god, while in the other two we find a journey of the dead.

On the other hand, Stamatia Dova considers that:

Odyssey 11 allows us to sketch a basic outline of the requirements for this unique experience: the hero descends with divine assistance to the Underworld where he performs an important task, has significant encounters with ghosts, and comes back alive to proceed successfully with the rest of his endeavours².

An excellent definition if it is applied to the *Nékyia* of Odysseus and the *katábasis* of Heracles. The definition is not so readily applicable to Orpheus, since the hero does not have divine assistance, and he does not successfully continue with the rest of his endeavours. The *katábasis* of Theseus and Peirithoos also lacks of divine assistance and ends up in total failure. And we also do not know if the characters in these last two cases have significant encounters with ghosts. Anna-Leena SIIKALA and F. DÍEZ DE VELASCO (2005) include both successful and failed descents in the category of *katabáseis*, though they point out that the success or failure marks an important difference. On the other hand, J. L. Calvo prefers to define *katábasis* as a “transitory breaking of the laws of time and space in order to go down into the Underworld during lifetime” and suggests that it is a “characteristic trait of heroic biography”³. He also considers *katábasis* as “a privilege reserved for the sons of gods”. This is not valid for Odysseus, who is not a son of a god. On the other hand, J. L. Calvo's attempt to look for a common pattern for the *katábasis* of Orpheus, and Theseus and Peirithoos leads him to rescue an old idea of Gruppe and Maass, according to which Orpheus's *katábasis* would reflect an older tale where “the search and abduction of the Queen of Hades” are told. Such proposal was based on the name of “Eurydice”, which appeared adequate for an infernal deity⁴. But J. Bremmer provides a good explanation for this election, after confirming that the name of Eurydice is not set until the Hellenistic period⁵. O. Tsagarakis points out “some catabatic features” that “became standard and applied to all descents”⁶. Amongst these features he points out the “journey to the land of the dead, the description of the Underworld, the encounter with the dead, the conversation, etc.” However, O. Tsagarakis

2. Stamatia DOVA (2012), p. 1.

3. J. L. CALVO (2000), p. 67.

4. J. L. CALVO (2000), p. 69, with bibliography.

5. J. BREMMER (1991), p. 15ff.

6. O. TSAGARAKIS (2000), p. 26.

leaves out from his list some of the previously discussed aspects, such as the success or failure, or the nature of the protagonist.

After seeing these examples of what is defined as a *katábasis* it appears that its meaning is taken for granted with too much confidence. Consequently, I have set out to propose a definition of these tales that includes those led by gods and men. It will take into account the stories where the traveller fails and remains in the other world for ever, and will try to determine some features characteristic of the *katábasis* which set it apart from similar, but different tales. The scope of my study will be focused on the *katábasis* in the Near East and the oldest ones from the Greek world, since they are to some degree homogeneous. Nevertheless, I will also make some mentions of Egyptian or later Greek material. On the other hand, some variations that will experience great success in later dates are not included in the scope of this study and will not be mentioned (for example, experiences in which the soul is believed to leave the body during a state of altered consciousness or shamanic descents).

2. Points of departure

I shall begin by establishing some points of departure that are just as obvious as necessary.

(1) Although the *katábasis* may be connected on a secondary level to a ritual or religious manifestation of another kind such as the mysteries, it is above all a tale, a text.

(2) Based on the existing texts, a true *katábasis* could be defined as: “a tale of the journey to the subterranean world of the dead led by an extraordinary character while alive who has a determined purpose and is keen on returning”. We can only talk about *katábasis stricto sensu* when all these elements appear in the tale.

(3) As we will see, the *katábasis* can be placed in the sphere of a group of heterogeneous texts with which it shares some characteristics. In some cases some of these texts that I will refer to further on are also labelled as *katabáseis*. I would like to emphasize that, although some themes, phrases or vocabulary can be found in *katábasis* and in other types of narrative forms to the point where the lines between one type and the other are blurry, we can find a set of criteria by which to separate the *katábasis* from this group of heterogeneous texts, marking out the analogies and differences that exist between them.

3. Types of narrative

3.1. *Non-relevant criteria for this study*

It is obvious that although some parameters – like whether the form in which the *katábasis* has survived is prose or verse, or a long or short tale –, are relevant to any literary study, they cannot be taken into account in this study since the texts have survived through secondary sources or in a fragmentary state, which prevents us from knowing its structure and other fundamental characteristics.

3.2. *Narratives*

Two kinds of narratives can be found:

(a) First person narrative, where the voice of the traveller can be heard. This is the case of the *Nékyia* of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus refers to the characters that he sees along his travel ⁷.

The *katábasis* of Orpheus, of which only references remain, could have had the same type of narrative judging from a passage from the Orphic *Argonautica* whose anonymous author, impersonating Orpheus, refers to his own work in first person ⁸.

I told you also what I saw and perceived
when I went the dark way of Taenarum into Hades
trusting in my lyre and driven by love for my wife.

A text of this type has survived albeit fragmentarily to our days, a *Papyrus of Bologna*, with descriptions that are very similar to those found in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*: the poem is narrated in first person by someone who is in the Netherworld, perhaps accompanied by a guide. The narrator sees a series of sinners, as well as a judgment of the souls and the situation of some of the souls of the blessed. The basic narrative outline appears to be a sequence of sentences that start by a relative “he who ...” and would be followed by the description of the punishments that are applied to the different kinds of sins ⁹.

(b) A second type of narrative is a tale where an omniscient narrator conducts the story, using the third person. He does not appear as a witness, as it happens in the descent of Inanna.

7. Cf. e.g. *Od.*, XI, 266-268.

8. *Orph.*, *Arg.*, 40-42. Transl. by F. GRAF, Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2013), p. 176.

9. *P.Bon.*, 4 = “Orpheus” fr. 717.47-51 Bernabé (from now on *OF* followed by a number). See bibliography quoted in this edition.

3.3. *Dialogues and encounters in the Netherworld*

Dialogues are common in a significant number of *katabáseis*. In the Netherworld, the traveller finds different dead people or divine or semi-divine characters, and engages in conversation with them. This is the case of the encounter between Anticlea and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (XI, 155ff.). The structure of the *katabasis* often allows space to enunciate small references to myths in the form of stories that refer to the characters found by the traveller along the way, or that the characters themselves tell him. Apart from the known examples in the *Odyssey*, it also appears to be the case of an encounter between Theseus and Meleager in the Netherworld, probably belonging to *Minyas*¹⁰.

In the case of the travellers that encounter gods or beings that control the Netherworld, the dialogues may reflect the negotiations that the leading character has with them or the instructions provided by them. That is the case of the dialogue between Neti and Inanna in the *Descent of Inanna* (55 Wolkstein - Kramer).

3.4. *Instructions*

Apart from dialogues and narratives, we find a third type of account: the instructions provided in present or future, and in imperative, depending on whether places or characters of the journey are mentioned, or if the traveller is advised on what to do or say. The tablet XII of *Gilgamesh* tells the story of Enkidu, who tries to travel to the Underworld to recover some instruments that Inanna had given to Gilgamesh as a present. Gilgamesh gives precise instructions to Enkidu on how he must behave in the Netherworld (XII, 11).

Instructions of this kind can be part of the *katabasis*, albeit as a preliminary episode. However, this is different from texts where instructions are given to a deceased to help him reach the Netherworld, or to eventually reach a privileged place there with the idea of staying. This type of texts should not be regarded as *katabáseis* if we follow the idea that the lead characters of the *katabasis* are extraordinary beings that travel to the Netherworld while alive and with the clear intention to return to the world of the living.

In any case, it is obvious that what characterizes the *katabasis* are the contents. These are based on a series of ideological assumptions that appear to be very stable and that I will enunciate now.

10. *Minyas*: fr. 7 Bernabé (= fr. 7 West) (*P.Ibscher*).

4. Assumptions on the content of the *katábasis*

4.1. *Transit of the dead and travel of the living*

The *katábasis* assumes that human beings continue having a form of existence after death, even if it is precarious or wretched. As M. Ganschinetz pointed out, this should not be understood as the life of the soul after its separation from the body¹¹. Instead, for this mentality there exists a unit that is “man” that ceases to exist with the dissolution of the body, and that upon death passes to a new state¹².

In spite of the new state, the dead preserve their identity. The protagonists of the *katábasis* can recognize them, like Odysseus, who relates the people whom he encountered in the Netherworld and appears to be able to identify them without difficulty.

In any case, the new state requires them to inhabit another place, the realm of the dead, which is located very far away from the land of the living. However, although death is considered also a journey through which the deceased needs to “reach” a place in the Netherworld, the main character of a *katábasis* cannot follow the same paths as the dead, since he or she is alive. Their path is more complex and reserved for special characters. In this sense, though comic in nature, a passage from *Frogs* (117-119) is particularly enlightening. When Dionysus asks Heracles for the “quickest way to get to Hades”, Heracles suggests him to hang himself, poison himself with hemlock, or jump from a high tower. Heracles is thus describing the normal path of the dead. Only when Dionysus tells him that he wishes to follow the same path he took, Heracles explains that it is long and complicated, and provides him with instructions regarding what he is going to find.

4.2. *The residence of the dead*

The *katábasis* assumes the existence of a place inhabited by the dead, or what remains of them¹³. If it is a true *katábasis*, this place will be subterranean. In other cultures, the kingdom of the dead may be located at the margins of the inhabited world or on the other side of an impassable river. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. This Netherworld is normally constructed as a transposition, positive or negative, of the image of the world¹⁴ and it is frequently a sinister place.

11. M. GANSCHINETZ (1919), col. 2360.

12. Anticlea presents the nature of these beings in a vivid way (*Od.*, XI, 218-220).

13. L. ALBINUS (2000).

14. J. BOTTÉRO (1991), p. 60.

4.3. *Inaccessibility (with exceptions) to the living*

Since the realm of the dead is characterized by its separation and estrangement from the realm of the living, the access of the living to such space is always something beyond exceptional. It cannot be absolutely inaccessible since, by definition, if it were inaccessible the *katabáseis* could not exist. However, this space is usually protected by great obstacles. Among these obstacles we often find a door, a great current of water and a boatman, vast spaces of barren and burning lands; sometimes everything at the same time. In the Mesopotamian tales of the “Great Door”, a very large door to Hell is mentioned, located in the far West part of the region. The door can be reached after crossing a series of barren lands, a river that must be crossed with the help of the infernal boatman, and the border of the land-of-no-return¹⁵. In *Ur-Nammu in the Netherworld* 73-75 it appears as a pitiful path, made by cart.

Nevertheless, it is not only about obstacles. The *katabasis* implies a disruption of the laws of space and time¹⁶ because the traveller goes to the land of the dead whilst he is still alive even though that space should only be reached after death, and because this space is completely different from the one inhabited by the living. In this sense, it implies a transgression because it contradicts the order of the world. Thus only very special circumstances allow the transgression of a living being entering the realm of the dead; very special circumstances that have to do with the identity of the traveller and the existence of a divine mediator.

4.4. *Extraordinary travellers and divine assistants*

If the journey is extraordinary, it is presupposed that the traveller also needs to be extraordinary. The journey is therefore a test that will prove the exceptional status of the traveller, and what is to be obtained is also out of the ordinary. This is true in the case of gods as well as in the case of men. The divinity has greater capabilities to travel to the Netherworld, although he or she does not always have full freedom to take on this journey. In the most ancient versions of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Demeter cannot see her daughter because she does not have access to the Underworld. Inanna travels to the Underworld to acquire greater power and prestige but she pays a high price for her audacity: she cannot prevent her death and her corpse to be hanged from a hook.

The exceptional nature of the mortals may be strength, like in the case of Heracles and Peirithoos, or a magical ability to persuade, like in the case

15. J. BOTTÉRO (1991), p. 59.

16. J. L. CALVO (2000), p. 67.

of Orpheus. Most of the time the traveller must be a demi-god, mortal son of a god, like Heracles, Theseus, or Orpheus. But this status is not usually enough, since the protagonist normally requires divine assistance. When divine assistance that may legitimize the transgression is not provided, it is very difficult to attain one of the determinant factors of the *katábasis*: to return from the realm of the dead.

In this sense, it is usually relevant to the success or failure of the journey whether the *katábasis* arises from a decision of the traveller or if it is due to a request, since this usually has a relation with legitimating the trip.

5. Motivations

5.1. *Determining factors and varieties*

The motivations of the *katábasis* can be very different, since they are affected by cultural factors. These factors are different in Greece and in cultures from the Near East and may vary even depending on the nature of the tale. When I talk about motivations, I use the word in two ways: (a) the motivations of the traveller (internal to the text), by which I mean the defined purpose of a hero or a god for starting such a journey to the Netherworld, or (b) motivations of the text (external to it), that is, the reasons that lead the author to compose a tale showing these characteristics.

5.2. *Motivations of the traveller*

In the provisional definition of *katábasis* I have insisted that the traveller has a purpose. Since the *katábasis* is the Great Journey, these purposes are of great importance: it may grant possession of special goods, access to superior knowledge, etc. The most common intention of the traveller is to bring something from the Underworld. The repertoire of things to obtain is very wide.

(a) It may be an inhabitant of the Underworld. Within this group there is also a great variety, from the extreme case of Peirithoos, who wants to bring back the queen of Hades, Persephone; to Heracles, who seeks to bring one of the monsters that guard the land – Cerberus –, and Orpheus, who wants to get back his beloved deceased wife. In the case of Dionysus, he is trying to transform Semele into a goddess, or to recover an admired poet like Euripides for Athens, in *The Frogs*. Curiously, in the descent of Inanna there is an inversion of the motive: a beloved person has to travel to the Underworld in her place because her return to the world has to be compensated. This introduces us to another typical characteristic: nothing can be extracted with impunity from the Netherworld. That is why Heracles has to take Cerberus back to its place.

(b) It can also be a special object. It is not the case of the Greek *katábasis*, but we find this in the *katábasis* of Enkidu, who travels to the Netherworld to find the marvellous ball and mallet of Gilgamesh, or in the Egyptian *katábasis* of Setne, where the protagonist and his foster brother Inaros go inside the tomb of the prince Nanepherkaptah in search of a magical book written by the god Thoth and find the mummy of the prince and the ghosts (*akh*) of his sister, his wife, and his son. Since Setne brings the book to the world of the living, there are a series of misfortunes until he gives back the book of magic to its legitimate owner.

(c) The purpose of the journey may be more abstract; very often the traveller seeks to gain knowledge or information of the Underworld, or determined details that a specific deceased may know, considering that the dead may have special knowledge that is banned to men. Since the dead are out of the realm of time, those who have not lost their capabilities may be able to unite present, past, and future. This purpose is evident in the *Nékyia* of the *Odyssey*, and even clearer in Aeneas's descent, although in this case it contains strong political implications. Prestige could also be another abstract purpose. Undoubtedly the hero who undertakes a *katábasis* sees his prestige increase notably. Prestige or power is precisely what Inanna seems to look for in her descent.

5.3. *Motivations external to the text*

The text may have other motivations.

(a) In the case of heroic protagonists, the *katábasis* frequently allows to explore the limitations of the human being or the relationships with the gods¹⁷. The hero is presented before the Great Test that will highlight his extraordinary qualities or, on the contrary, may transform him in the paradigm of the Great Mistake to secure the differences between men and god. This is the case of Enkidu, in the tablet XII of *Gilgamesh*, and similarly that of the *katábasis* of Theseus and Peirithoos. It can even be connected to an apotheosis, like in the case of Semele after the descent of Dionysus.

(b) In the case of poets or philosophers, it served to increase the prestige of their knowledge or the works of the protagonist who has had access to new religious or philosophical experiences through the *katábasis*. Pythagoras's *katábasis* – together with his knowledge of his previous existences – had to contribute to the prestige of the character. For this reason, the most drastic way to counteract these purposes was to accuse of

17. Anna-Leena SIKALA, F. DÍEZ DE VELASCO (2005), col. 2294.

fraud anyone who claimed to have experienced a *katábasis*, like it happened in the cases of Zalmoxis and Pythagoras ¹⁸.

(c) Likewise, the *katábasis* can try to influence the listeners by exhorting them to behave in a specific manner. In this way, in the tale of Enkidu it is shown that the situation of the dead in the Netherworld depends of the attention that their descendants pay to them ¹⁹.

At a more ethical level, the *katábasis* could act as a dissuasive element of bad moral behaviour when the tale shows a Netherworld that gives rewards and punishments. That is the case, as I previously discussed, of the *Papyrus of Bologna*. In a similar way, in the *Story of Setne and His Son, Si-Osiris*, Setne is a powerful magician who guided his father through the Duat to show him the pleasures that await in the Netherworld to those who follow a pure life, and the sufferings that are in store for those who do not follow this path ²⁰.

(d) The *katábasis* can also accompany a ritual or religious process like in the case of the *Descent of Ishtar*, which may have accompanied a fertility rite. Or it could accompany a magical rite, like in a Michigan Papyrus dated between the 3rd and the 1st cent. AD and edited by H. D. Betz ²¹. H. D. Betz demonstrated that the papyrus contains some formulae from a ritual of descent to the Underworld which has found its way into a magical spell. It contains elements that are similar to the text of the ἐρωιδή from Phalasarua and the Getty Hexameters ²².

Some katabatic elements have also been identified in magic *historiolae*, like the one transmitted by the Getty Hexameters that has been studied by Sarah Iles Johnston ²³.

(e) At a more elemental level, the *katábasis* can be used simply as a pretext to present before the listeners/readers a group of ideas or imagery of the Netherworld, which is always a very impressive literary element.

(f) In extreme cases, it could be a vehicle for a parody whose main aim is to provoke laughter in the spectators, like in Aristophanes's *Frogs*.

18. Zalmoxis: Hdt., IV, 94-96. Pythagoras: Hermipp., 20 Wehrli; Hieronym., Phil., 42 Wehrli. Cf. Raquel MARTÍN, J. A. ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA (2011), p. 167-173.

19. *Gilgamesh*, XII, 102ff.

20. London, P. BM 604, cf. M. LICHTHEIM (1980), p. 140.

21. *PMich.* inv. 7 (III-IV AD). Cf. H. D. BETZ (1980).

22. About the Getty Hexameters, cf. Ch. A. FARAONE, D. OBBINK (ed.) (2013).

23. Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2013), cf. A. BERNABÉ, Raquel MARTÍN-HERNÁNDEZ (2013).

6. Successes and failures

The purposes of the traveller may be fulfilled or not. The hero who sets forth on a *katábasis* can reach absolute success, that is, obtain the objectives. That is the case of Heracles: he descends to find Cerberus, attains his goal, returns safely, and continues with his activities. In other cases, the journey may end in absolute failure, like in the case of Enkidu in the tablet XII of *Gilgamesh*, where Enkidu fails to recover Gilgamesh's objects and is trapped in Hell. Peirithoos's audacity to find a wife in Hades is punished: he remains there as a deceased person, forever. There may be intermediate results, like that of Inanna, who suffers a partial failure. She did not succeed in gaining power, which seemed to be her main purpose, but she managed to be rescued and have someone die in her place. The purpose of Odysseus is to question Tiresias on how to get back to Ithaca (*Od.*, XI, 164-167). He does not obtain this information through Tiresias (it will be Circe who will tell him), but nevertheless it cannot be said that his journey was in vain, since he finds out relevant information about the fate of mankind and his own death.

The success or failure has to do with whether the journey is legitimate or not and it seems to be clear that those who set out for a lawful *katábasis* and have divine assistance can return and may obtain their goals, whilst those who initiate it with illicit purposes fail and are forced to stay in the Netherworld. Those who do not follow the instructions also fail the task, like Enkidu in *Gilgamesh* XII. Orpheus's *katábasis* presents some exceptional features, as we will see further on.

Lastly, some unexpected effects unrelated to the hero may derive from the *katábasis*, some sort of collateral damages that falls upon others. That is the case of an episode of the *Descent of Ishtar* in its Akkadian version (in the Sumerian myth of the descent of Inanna this situation is supposed but not explicit). When the goddess is imprisoned in the Netherworld, there are harmful effects in the world which have to do with her positive influence, that is, sexual desire, which threaten the existence of the world.

7. A paradoxical *katábasis*: Orpheus

Orpheus's *katábasis* is a very paradoxical case and it does not correspond to the most frequent types. It has nothing in common with the overwhelming demonstration of strength of the son of Alcmena and it is not due to a heroic request. Its purpose is not to acquire knowledge, and it is not as foolish as the motivations of Peirithoos to marry an infernal goddess, although it follows the same kind of transgression. Orpheus's journey is illicit because it was not authorized or induced by a god. It is not violent, since his main tools are persuasion and music. The journey follows a personal de-

cision by Orpheus to engage in the journey with the purpose to rescue his wife, a task that disrupts the order of things. The poet disturbs the Netherworld and threatens it, given that he intends to erase the borders between life and death. It is for this reason that his endeavour cannot succeed. However, the result of this travel is a twofold paradox. Firstly, Orpheus manages to legitimize his journey by persuading Hades and Persephone with the use of his music, who granted him his request. Therefore, even if for only a short period of time, his power to transgress nature is sanctioned by the gods with the liberation of Eurydice. What was not given to him beforehand was granted to him afterwards.

Nonetheless, from a Greek perspective, the subjugation or weakening of the infernal gods will cannot be total: in the intentionality and finality of the tale the prevention against any alteration of the natural order is included. For these reasons, the rescue is conditioned – like in many popular tales – to the fulfilment of a specific action. Orpheus cannot turn to look back until he is out of the Netherworld – this topic has been studied superbly by J. BREMMER (2004). The singer breaches this condition and loses Eurydice. He can return to the world of the living, but alone.

The second paradox is that a determined religious group that we call the Orphics speculated on the fate of the souls after death and took Orpheus as the ideal candidate through which to expose their ideas, appealing to his prestige as a privileged witness, as a singer, and as a poet. Not only did Orpheus experience the Netherworld, he was also capable of telling the world about it. In this way, the acquisition of knowledge regarding the fate of the souls becomes the greatest achievement of Orpheus's travel, although this was not the original purpose. In the hands of the Orphics, he becomes a transmitter of truths from the Netherworld, a mediator between gods and men, and the voice that dictates to the mortals how they should behave if they wish to attain a privileged position in the afterlife.

8. Mutual influences between the *katábasis* and other similar texts

8.1. *Coinciding spaces: description of infernal places in epics and lyric*

The thematic proximity of the *katábasis* to other literary products resulted in similarities between the texts. One of the first coincidences happens in the description of infernal places. We find these descriptions not only in the *katábasis*, but also in the poetic cosmologies, *in primis*, Hesiod, as well as in Orphic cosmogonies²⁴.

24. E.g. Hes., *Th.*, 749ff.; *OF* 61-63 and 341-344.

In the lyric poetry we can also find descriptions of the Netherworld, especially in some Pindaric fragments of *threnoi*²⁵ where the will to console the relatives of the deceased may lead the poet to give an idyllic description of what awaits the deceased in the other world. We also find a brilliant description in the *Second Olympian*, 66-80.

This last case shares with the *katábasis* the desire to transmit a determined ideology and to serve as a dissuasive element against bad ritual or moral behaviour. What distinguishes these productions from the *katábasis* is the absence of a traveller that is alive, and the absence of a direct connection between the living and the dead.

8.2. *The extraordinary or dangerous journey*

A genre that is particularly related to the *katábasis* is the extraordinary journey, often to the margins of the world. The tablet IX of the *Gilgamesh* has many components of a *katábasis*: the hero starts a journey in search of the extraordinary gift of immortality. He must cross nearly impassable obstacles like the door of the Masu Mountain guarded by scorpion men. He has people who assist him in his journey, like Siduri who takes him before the boatman Ursanabi. The boatman then navigates the waters of death carrying the hero to the presence of Utnapishtim. The journey ends with a partial failure: Gilgamesh obtains the plant of eternal youth but it is taken away from him by a snake while the hero is bathing in a fountain. It is paradigmatic in so far as it marks the borders between god and men, between mortals and immortals that the hero can transgress in a certain way, but his failure is an indication that the state of things cannot be modified.

These are all the elements of a *katábasis* except for the main one: Gilgamesh does not descend to the Netherworld nor the realm of the deads. Instead he travels to remote spaces, to the margins of the world.

Within the Greek world we can cite the *Argonautica*, although little is known of the ancient versions of this fabulous journey. The outline of the journey to a far away land in search of a valuable object, the extraordinary obstacles like the Symplegades, or the Sirens with their seductive song of death, are very much infernal.

On another level, although within the same section, there is an interesting paper by M. HERRERO (2011), that proves that Priam's journey to Achilles's quarters in *Iliad*, 24 is depicted at several points as a journey to Hades.

25. Pind., fr. 129-130 (58, 58b Cannatà Fera = *OF* 439-440).

8.3. *Instructions to the deceased: gold tablets and Egyptian mortuary texts*

The *katábasis* also has common features with a very particular type of literature: the instructions to the deceased to reach the Netherworld found in Egyptian literature, especially in the *Book of the Dead*, and in the Greek sphere, especially in the Orphic gold tablets associated with the Bacchic mysteries. In both cases death is conceived as a journey. There is a transit around the infernal geography, with obstacles for the travellers and dialogues between the deceased and the characters he encounters, and there is a goal to attain. For this reason, Ch. Riedweg proposes that there may be a *katábasis* underlying in these texts ²⁶.

However, what radically differentiates the texts on the gold tablets from a *katábasis* is that the characters on the *lamellae* are not extraordinary living beings travelling alive to the Netherworld and having the intention to return. They are deceased persons that wish for the opposite; to stay there and free themselves from the unending cycle of reincarnation. This would correspond very well with what J. Assmann calls “mortuary texts” ²⁷, i. e. texts intended primarily to aid a deceased person in attaining a blissful afterlife and which have been studied in relation to them by Th. M. Dousa ²⁸. An example of this form of presentation would be the gold tablet from Hipponion (*OF* 474.6-10) ²⁹. A very similar scene can be read in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (Spell 58) ³⁰.

On the other hand, similarities have been found between the gold tablets and the book of the dead in the Hittite text called *The Voyage of the Immortal Human Soul* (KBo 22. 178 + KUB 43.109), where a divinity accompanies what appears to be the soul of the first man to a precise location, in order to grant him a position of privilege, as a paradigm of the path that certain deceased must follow, perhaps those to whom specific rites were conducted for this purpose ³¹. The text seems to say that the deceased who do not fulfil certain requirements will have an unhappy life in the Netherworld.

8.4. *Dialogues with the dead: euocationes, apparitions and dreams*

The conversation with the dead is common also between the *katábasis* and the *euocationes*, like the apparition of the ghost of Darius to his wife

26. Ch. RIEDWEG (1998), p. 377 and 389.

27. J. ASSMANN (2005), p. 238.

28. Th. M. DOUSA (2011), p. 120-164.

29. Cf. A. BERNABÉ, Ana Isabel JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL (2008), p. 35-47.

30. Cf. Th. M. DOUSA (2011), p. 144.

31. Cf. H. A. HOFFNER (1988), p. 34; C. WATKINS (1995); A. BERNABÉ, Ana Isabel JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL (2008), p. 209-217.

Atossa in Aeschylus' *Persians*. In other occasions the dead may appear to a living being without a ritual of evocation to tell him or her what goes on in the other world. In the case of Enkidu's descent, which starts in a failed *katábasis*, his soul comes out from a slit to instruct Gilgamesh on what happens in the Netherworld. The deceased can also be seen in dreams, like Patroclus who appears to Achilles in a dream.

All these cases coincide with the *katábasis* in that there is a contact between the living and the dead, the deceased can provide special knowledge to the living, the apparition may dissuade from a bad ritual or moral behaviour, or it may serve as a pretext to present imagery from the Netherworld or advance information about the future. However, the evocations, apparitions, and dreams are different from a *katábasis* in that the living are passive, evoking, receiving, or dreaming, but they do not travel to the Underworld and they are not in danger.

8.5. *The κάθοδος τῆς Κόρης*

The descent of Persephone presents great similarities with a *katábasis*. A goddess obtains great achievements during her descent – alive – to the Underworld: an illustrious wedding and great dignity. Just as in the case of the *Descent of Ishtar*, it also has to do with the cycles of nature. On the other hand, it is associated with mystery elements like Orpheus's *katábasis*, since they are both *aitia* of a ritual – but in her case to the Eleusinian mysteries³². What distinguishes Persephone's descent from a *katábasis* is that her journey is involuntary and forced through rape, and that the single trip is substituted by travels up – to the Olympus – and down – to the Netherworld – in specific times of the year.

8.6. *Poetic and philosophical uses of the journey to the other world*

In some lyrical passages we find references to a road by cart that leads out of the world and the crossing of a door in search for poetic knowledge, like we can find in Pindar's *Sixth Olympian*, 21-29. In the proem of Parmenides's poem also appears this road to a place that is not identified as the Netherworld, but that seems to be imprecise, out of this world, and with many features that reminds of the Underworld³³. What leads me to discard Parmenides's journey as a proper *katábasis* is that in the described landscape there is no allusion to the typical characters of the dead, and he does not engage in dialogue with them.

32. Paloma CABRERA, A. BERNABÉ (2007).

33. A. BERNABÉ (2013).

8.7. *Return from the world of the dead*

We could still consider the case of the deceased that are allowed to return and tell their story to their relatives as a type of text that is related to the *katábasis*. This is the case of the myth of Er in Plato. However, Er does not travel there alive and voluntarily, and it is not his intention to return. Instead, he dies and goes to Hades like any other deceased and he is allowed to return only through the authorization of the gods. Some similarities with this story can be found in the tale of the Egyptian magician Merire in the *Papyrus Vandier*. The magician commits suicide to travel to the Underworld, but in the tale the story indicates that the magician sacrifices himself to die instead of the Pharaoh, and that he does so because he knows that he will be able to come back thanks to his magical powers.

8.8. *Knowledge of the future: katabatic oracles*

The acquisition of knowledge in the *katábasis* can be found in other texts, especially in oracular texts and in determined performances. Various oracles use the deceased as their mouthpiece or they are consulted in a kind of imitation of the *katábasis*. This is the case of the oracle of Trophonius (cf. Paus., IX, 39, 2-4) studied by P. BONNECHÈRE (2003). In the wider context of descending underground to a cave, it is the subject of a book by Yulia USTINOVA (2009). The consultation of this oracle with the two fountains and the access to a subterranean space is very similar to a *katábasis*, though we could consider it a feigned *katábasis*. This is not the only one; we can also cite the one from the Asclepeion in Tricca, the most ancient of all Asclepius's sanctuaries³⁴. We can also mention the news about the Ouliads – a group of philosophers of the circle of Parmenides that apparently met in a cryptoporticus, called φωλεός³⁵ – and the well-known *katábasis* of Pythagoras³⁶.

8.9. *Katábasis and natural cycles*

Another element that has been discussed in the *katábasis* is the collateral damage produced by the departure of a divinity to the Netherworld. When the divinity has certain function in the world, the journey may prevent it from happening. We can find descriptions of very similar disasters in a type of texts characteristic of the Anatolian world: the myths of the vanished gods, like the first version of the Hittite myth of Telipinu³⁷. The god is

34. Str., IX, 5, 17; *JG* IV, 2, 1, 128: l. 29–30; cf. Yulia USTINOVA (2009), p. 98, with bibliography.

35. Yulia USTINOVA (2009), p. 191-199.

36. Bodily, not only in only in soul, as Yulia USTINOVA (2009, p. 189) points out. Cf. W. BURKERT (1969), (2008).

37. H. A. HOFFNER (1988), p. 15.

enraged and leaves to the steppe, and “barley and wheat no longer ripen; cattle, sheep, and humans no longer become pregnant”. We also find similar elements in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (305-313). When the goddess fails in her attempt to create a god from the human child Demophon after her daughter is raped by Hades and taken to the Underworld, she becomes enraged and this has disastrous consequences. It is unnecessary to point out the differences between these texts and a true *katábasis*. There is no journey to the world of the dead, nor a dialogue with them. There is no attempt to obtain something, and no intention to return. All in all, the similarity is merely an accessory detail.

9. Conclusions

The *katábasis* is a literary theme that can be used in different spheres and for various purposes. The journey to the absolute Other, the world of darkness, of the dead, outside the here and now, provides a special perspective, a vision from outside ourselves. The difficulty of the travel to the Netherworld, the communication with death and the god, and the access to a special form of knowledge make the visit to the world of the dead a feat reserved only to a few chosen ones. It is therefore fundamental that the traveller has divine assistance that will legitimize in some way a trip that contravenes the order of the world. Likewise, the extraordinary journey may entail some benefits to the traveller though it may be cause of the opposite: his or her doom. It is also a test for the heroism that brings about prestige; it is direct access to true knowledge, since it originates from the Other World. It is also an ideological guarantee that legitimates determined literary, ritual, or religious realities. It may even affect human behaviour, exhorting people to be pious or inhibit them from engaging in negative actions out of fear of a punishment waiting for them in the Underworld.

The *katábasis* has to be defined as a specific type of narrative characterized by the following features: an extraordinary protagonist that is better off with the assistance of a god, who travels alive to the subterranean world of the dead with a well defined purpose and with the intention to return (irrespectively of whether his purposes or the return are fulfilled). Each author plays in his tale with the parameters of legitimacy, violence, success or failure, or collateral damage, always within the precise ideological contexts of their culture and time.

Nevertheless, the *katábasis* can also be placed within the typology of texts about extraordinary voyages from which it nurtures and over which it exerts influence in a complex game of various texts: the epic and lyric infernal descriptions, the extraordinary voyages, the instructions to the dead, the evocations, apparitions or dreams where the deceased intervene, the des-

cent in specific times marked by Persephone that is associated with cycles of nature. They also belong to the space of eschatological beliefs: katabatic elements were used in magical practices, they invade poetic allusions, they are integrated in the philosophical discourse, or they serve as the environment for oracles. They show a general trend of association with new religious discourses, a tendency that will keep on growing.

Alberto BERNABÉ
Universidad Complutense
albernab@filol.ucm.es

References

- L. ALBINUS (2000): *The House of Hades. Studies in Ancient Greek Eschatology*, Aarhus.
- J. ASSMANN (2005): *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca (NY) - London.
- J. BOTTÉRO (1991): “La mitología de la muerte en la antigua Mesopotamia”, in P. XELLA (ed.), *Arqueología del infierno*, Sabadell, p. 45-80.
- A. BERNABÉ (2013): “Filosofia e mistérios: leitura do Proêmio de Parmênides”, *Archai: revista de estudos sobre as origens do pensamento ocidental* 10, p. 37-55.
- A. BERNABÉ, Ana Isabel JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL (2008): *Instructions for the Netherworld. The Orphic Gold Tablets*, Leiden - Boston.
- A. BERNABÉ, Raquel MARTÍN HERNÁNDEZ (2013): “*Orphica et magica*. Rasgos órficos en las ἐπωϊδαὶ suritálicas: consideraciones sobre los *Hexámetros Getty*”, in E. SUÁREZ DE LA TORRE, A. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ (ed.), *Mito y magia en Grecia y Roma*, Barcelona, p. 117-148.
- H. D. BETZ (1980): “Fragments from a Catabasis Ritual in a Greek Magical Papyrus”, *HR* 19, p. 287-295.
- P. BONNECHÈRE (2003): *Trophonios de Lébadée : Cultes et mythes d’une cité béotienne au miroir de la mentalité antique*, Leiden.
- J. BREMMER (1991): “Orpheus: from Guru to Gay”, in Ph. BORGEAUD (ed.), *Orphisme et Orphée, en l’honneur de Jean Rudhardt*, Genève, p. 13-30.
- J. BREMMER (2004): “Don’t Look Back: From the Wife of Lot to Orpheus and Eurydice”, in E. NOORT, E. J. C. TIGCHELAAR (ed.), *Sodom & Sin*, Leiden, p. 131-146.
- W. BURKERT (1969): “Das Proömium des Parmenides und die Katabasis des Pythagoras”, *Phronesis* 14, p. 1-30 (Engl. vers. Th. A. SZLEZÁK, K.-H. STANZEL [ed.], *Kleine Schriften VIII: Philosophica*, Göttingen, 2008, p. 1-27).
- Paloma CABRERA, A. BERNABÉ (2007): “Échos littéraires de l’enlèvement de Perséphone. Un vase apulien du Musée Archéologique National de Madrid”, *AK* 50, p. 58-75.
- J. L. CALVO (2000): “The *Katábasis* of the Hero”, in Vinciane PIRENNE-DELFORGE, E. SUÁREZ DE LA TORRE (ed.), *Héros et héroïnes dans les mythes et les cultes grecs*, Liège, p. 67-78.
- R. J. CLARK (1978): *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom Tradition*, Amsterdam.
- Th. M. DOUSA (2011): “Common Motifs in the ‘Orphic’ Tablets and Egyptian Funerary Texts: Continuity or Convergence?”, in R. G. EDMONDS III (ed.), *The “Orphic” Gold Tablets and Greek Religion. Further along the Path*, Cambridge, p. 120-164.
- Stamatia DOVA (2012), *Greek Heroes in and out of Hades*, Lanham (MD).
- R. G. EDMONDS III (2004): *Myths of the Underworld Journey. Plato, Aristophanes, and the ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets*, Cambridge.

- Ch. A. FARAONE, D. OBBINK (ed.) (2013): *The Getty Hexameters. Poetry, Magic and Mystery in Ancient Selinus*, Oxford.
- M. GANSCHINIETZ (1919): "Katábasis", *RE X*, 2, col. 2359-2449.
- F. GRAF, Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2013): *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, 2nd ed., London - New York.
- M. HERRERO (2011): "Priam's Catabasis: Traces of the Epic Journey to Hades in *Iliad* 24", *TAPA* 141, p. 37-68.
- H. A. HOFFNER (1988): "A Scene in the Realm of the Dead", in E. LEICHTY, M. J. ELLIS, P. GERARDI (ed.), *A Scientific Humanist. Studies in Memory of Abraham Sachs*, Philadelphia, p. 191-199.
- Sarah Iles JOHNSTON (2013): "Myth and the Getty Hexameters", in Ch. A. FARAONE, D. OBBINK (ed.) (2013), p. 121-156.
- M. LICHTHEIM (1980): *Ancient Egyptian Literature. A Book of Readings* III, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London.
- W. LUPPE (1978): "Abermals das Goldblättchen von Hipponion", *ZPE* 30, p. 23-26.
- Raquel MARTÍN, J. A. ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA (2011): "Creencias escatológicas de los pueblos tracios", in A. BERNABÉ, M. KAHLE, M. A. SANTAMARÍA (ed.), *Reencarnación. La trans migración de las almas, entre oriente y occidente*, Madrid, p. 163-178.
- Ch. RIEDWEG (1998): "Initiation - Tod - Unterwelt: Beobachtungen zur Kommunikationssituation und narrativen Technik der orphisch-bakchischen Goldblättchen", in F. GRAF (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstag-Symposium für W. Burkert*, Stuttgart - Leipzig, p. 359-398.
- Anna-Leena SIIKALA, F. DIEZ DE VELASCO (2005): "Descent into the Underworld", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., IV, 2295-2300.
- O. TSAGARAKIS (2000): *Studies in Odyssey II*, Stuttgart.
- Yulia USTINOVA (2009): *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind*, Oxford.
- C. WATKINS (1995): "Orphic Gold Leaves and the Great Way of the Soul: Strophic Style, Funerary Ritual Formula, and Eschatology", in ID., *How to Kill a Dragon. Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, Oxford, p. 277-291.