

## Odysseus Navigates away from Calypso by the Stars

Given the paucity of Homeric references to stars and constellations, it is difficult to attain a clear picture of the nature and accuracy of astronomical knowledge in Homer's time. Nevertheless, the *Odyssey* shows us that the Homeric Greeks' knowledge of the night sky allowed them to navigate. The following passage, in which Odysseus is shown as navigating away from Calypso, is relevant in this respect:

*...nor did sleep ever descend on his eyelids*

*As he kept his eye on the Pleiades and late-setting Boötes,*

*And the Bear, to whom men also give also the name of the Wagon,*

*Who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion... (Od. 5.271-74)*

The ancient *scholia* assumed -without any detailed explanation- that the 'Bear' mentioned in this passage referred to the Great Bear. Recently, however, line 274 (= *Il.* 18.488), which mentions the fact that the Bear 'turns about in the same spot', stirred a vivid reaction from Finkelberg about whether the constellation described in this line is the Great Bear or the Little Bear.<sup>1</sup> Her conclusion is that this line is not original to the Homeric text, since it refers to the Little Bear, which was introduced to the Greek world by Thales of Miletus (*ca* 600 B.C.), and, therefore, could not be known to Homer.<sup>2</sup> Her main argument is that it is only the Little Bear that can be said to 'turn about in the same spot'. In addition, to support her theory, Finkelberg argues that this line also suggests the anachronistic idea of a spherical universe, which does not seem to be attested before the Milesians.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Finkelberg, 'She turns about in the same spot and watches for Orion: Ancient Criticism and Exegesis of *Od.* 5.274 = *Il.* 18.488', *GRBS* 44 (2004) 231-44.

<sup>2</sup> The Phoenicians used the Little Bear for navigation before the Greeks got knowledge of it from Thales; cf. Finkelberg (n.1) 232 n.2, 233 n.5.

The goal of the present study is to show that the Homeric passage is indeed about the Great Bear and not about the Little Bear. My argument relies on line 274, in which Homer tells us that the Bear ‘looks at Orion’; it takes into account the relative positions of these constellations with regards to each other.

The identification of a constellation in ancient times as therio- or anthropomorphic was neither an abstract nor a random process. For the ancients, the stars of the constellations truly represented these beings or parts of them.<sup>3</sup> This is also true in the case of both Bears, which are groups of stars of very similar shapes. The positions of the Great Bear and Little Bear in the sky let us see that their bodies lie in opposite directions. This means that their upper bodies, which are represented by the two leading stars in each Bear, point in opposite directions as well. Which Bear then ‘watches for Orion’?

The answer can be found not only by literally looking in the sky but also by taking into account the ancient descriptions (e.g. Arat. 91) of the relative positions of the constellations mentioned in the passage above. The only Bear that watches for Orion is, without any doubt, the Great Bear.

The fact that the Great Bear is said to ‘turn about in the same spot’ also raises the interesting issue of whether the Homeric Greeks knew of the spherical shape of the celestial vault. I show that, although it cannot be irrefutably proven, this is likely to have been the case.

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<sup>3</sup> One can see this clearly, for example, *passim* in a work like Aratus’ *Phaenomena*.

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