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The origins of colonial space may be traced to attitudes about the environment in ancient Greece. These attitudes evolved through three distinct stages that altered the relationship between culture and nature. The writing of Homer exposes a particular moment in history when these two categories began to split, causing a rift that defines conceptions of space and place even now.

Keywords: nature; culture; colonial space; material culture; ancient Greece; classical literature; environment; natural resources

In book 11 of Homer's *The Odyssey* (trans. 1967), Poseidon promises fair winds and safe travel to Odysseus' ships in exchange for an errand:

[Y]ou must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey until you come where there are men living who know nothing of the sea. . . . [T]hen you must plant your well-shaped oar in the ground, and render ceremonious sacrifice to the lord Poseidon. . . . (lines 11.121-11.134)¹

The sea god instructs Odysseus to become his messenger—his missionary—by delivering evidence of the deity to the uninitiated. Carrying the oar inland, Odysseus will extend Poseidon's domain beyond the boundaries of his immediate realm, the sea. Like all myths, the story reflects human nature. In this case, the episode explains the characters by contrasting the god's desire for glory and recognition with the hero's longings for home. But the passage also may be read as a brief history of material culture. Odysseus' pilgrimage transforms the oar from a tool to a symbol, from an instrument for man's control of the sea to an instrument for the sea god's control of man. What the story illustrates is the separation of culture from nature and the resulting emergence of colonial space.

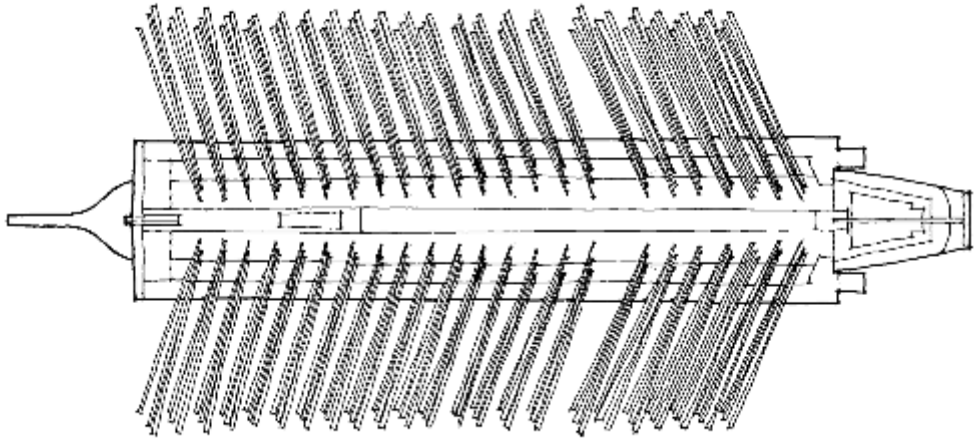


Figure 1. Greek Oared Ship
Source: Illustration by author.



Figure 2. Woodcut, Hendrick Goltzius
Source: Teylers Museum, Haarlem, the Netherlands.

Consider the life of the oar. It begins with a tree, most likely a spruce fir, rooted on the slopes of Ithaka, Odysseus' birthplace.² The tree thrives in the Grecian sun, shaped by breezes off the Mediterranean. Eventually, it is felled, denuded, split, and honed to prepare its wood. Timber becomes lumber as the tree is molded not by environmental forces but by the human hand. Chiseled and carved into a long pole with a flattened end, the wood becomes the oar. As a simple tool, it provides physical mediation between the human body and its surroundings. At one end, the diameter, length, and weight of the handle are designed around the grasp of the fingers and palms and the

leverage strength of the arms and torso. At the other, the wide blade slices easily in and out of the water, with enough surface area for good displacement. Through the oar, the body interacts with the sea.³

On Odysseus' divine mission, the oar is removed from the setting for which it was designed, and its purpose inevitably changes. Enconced in an arid land, the oar's function as a visible and tangible link between the body and the environment is subverted, while its form is inverted. "Planted" upright in the ground, the oar ironically returns to its roots by taking on the abstracted image of a tree. But it is a tree in image only. Standing upright in the sand, it becomes a thing to behold, not to touch. As a totem, an object of spectacle, it has completed its metamorphosis from tool to symbol—specifically a symbol of a maritime culture, Poseidon's domain.

In its various states, the oar has occupied at least three stages of existence: nature, culture, and their intersection. During its prehistory, the oar resides in a state that may be termed *pure nature*—"pure" because it is presumed not to have been altered or influenced by humanity in any substantive way. The living tree is an integral part of a complex ecosystem that evolved over thousands of millennia. In this sphere, design does not exist, for forms occur by accident and remain only if conditions are favorable. Furthermore, these forms have no meaning, for in the absence of culture, there is no interpreting observer. The tree exists, but it does not signify its existence. When it becomes an oar, the material of the tree has been transformed into something else. No longer an organism of nature, the oar is an artifact of culture.⁴

Yet, for the early Greeks, nature and culture were not mutually exclusive. Writing around 750 B.C., during the Geometric period, Homer did not recognize an abrupt distinction between the tree and the oar. He used the term *hylē* to refer to forests and timber interchangeably. By the 4th century, Aristotle (trans. 1958) understood *hylē* as raw matter not yet given meaningful form by the human eye and hand. Later, the word became a medical term for human waste, so natural material had devalued considerably over time. In the earlier understanding, however, the oar would have been just one stage in the life of an immortal substance. *Technē*, craft, revealed one aspect of an object that previously had been hidden.⁵ In *The Odyssey*, the word *physis* implied both the living environment and the true "nature" of a thing, which only the gods could see.⁶ In Greece and other cultures, trees had been considered divine vessels since prehistoric times. The spruce, converted into the oar, was believed sacred to Poseidon.⁷ To embrace the tree's material was to touch the immortal; to refashion it was to play god. Here, culture reconceives nature in human terms in order to make it more accessible but also to retain its magical properties.⁸

In preclassical civilizations, this intimate commingling of nature and culture may be referred to as *natural culture*. The entire ethos of such a community—its social structure, religion, and fundamental worldview—evolve from its specific environment.⁹ In *The Odyssey*, every situation hinges on respect for natural forces, as represented by the gods—water, wind, fire, and so on. As a rite of passage, a hero's mastery of wood and water figures into the fables of many ancient cultures (Bynum, 1981), and in *The Odyssey*, the oar represents the intersection of these two materials. On several occasions, the fate of Odysseus arrives when he loses or gains control of his vessel's oar: "A great wave drove down from above him / with a horrible rush, and spun the raft in a circle, / and he was thrown clear far from the raft and let the steering oar / slip from his hands" (lines 5.313-5.316).¹⁰ Homer uses the adjective *euērēs*, "well-shaped"

or “well-fitted,” exclusively to refer to oars (*eretma*) (McEwen, 1993, p. 107). The “well-shaped oars,” *euēre’ eretma*, perfectly attune the ship to its environment.¹¹ As an elemental tool, the oar synchronizes body and world, and its release signals a lost bond with the sea—that is, the disrupted harmony of culture and nature.

For ancient peoples, all views of the world arose from experience in nature, and the answers to all questions presented themselves instinctively, not rationally. Generalized information was meaningless and irrelevant, and explanations for events were always given to be as specific as the event itself. Similarly, understandings of space were determined by the specific qualities of a place. Space was not infinite and homogeneous, as conceived by the modern mind, for every region of space had a particular significance and was honored as such.¹² In early Greece, attitudes about the earth and the gods developed in tandem. Any hallowed ground, understood as the incarnation of a particular deity, gave certain characteristics to that god and eventually to the sanctuary erected as a divine receptacle. A conical *tholos* tomb, for instance, reflected the shape of a sacred mountain or hill visible nearby (Scully, 1962/1979). The building’s features sprang from those of the existing landscape, and in turn, architecture made the land more legible. The two were inextricable and together revealed the full significance of the place.

The entirety of early Greek culture arose from such interactions with the environment. The rocky terrain of the Peloponnesus caused city-states, the centers of Greek civilization, to develop in isolation. Arguably, then, natural topography heavily influenced the central topic of Greek history and literature: the struggle for unification and social concord. Furthermore, the scarcity of arable land created an economy dependent on the sea. Unlike earlier prosperous civilizations, which had developed around rivers, Greece was the first great maritime culture, a fact that gives special significance to the oar. The fragmentation of the peninsula’s interior and the openness of the surrounding sea may account for the tension between introversion and extroversion that developed in Greek culture. The duality of rootedness and wanderlust is the underlying theme of Homeric epics in general and the episode of the oar in particular.

In its mythic representation, the oar is equivocal. In one sense, it demonstrates a direct connection to an environment, but in another, it facilitates movement beyond that environment. This tension is personified by the two characters of Poseidon and Odysseus. Homer (trans. 1951, trans. 1967) consistently refers to Poseidon as the “earth encirler” (*The Odyssey*, line 1.68; *The Iliad*, lines 13.83, 15.201). As the deification of the sea, Poseidon rules a domain that is at once everywhere and nowhere, for the sea is placeless—endless, shifting, ever changing. The spatial opposite is Odysseus’ house, in which the bed frame is carved from the trunk of a great olive tree rooted under the bedchamber.¹³ Home is a grounded place.

The myth of Poseidon’s oar implies a shift from local to global cultures and therefore may be read as an allegory of the transformation from preclassical to classical and even modern worldviews. *Natural culture* may be understood as a state of oscillation between *pure nature* and *pure culture*. Ancient Greece evolved from a particular setting and grew into what is considered the birthplace of all Western civilization. The proposition that Greece contained the seeds of modern culture recognizes the endurance of Hellenic art and philosophy, which demonstrated a worldview that clearly differed from earlier beliefs. Archaic myth, which grew out of natural conditions, gave way to science, created from rational speculation. Platonic cosmology insists upon the split

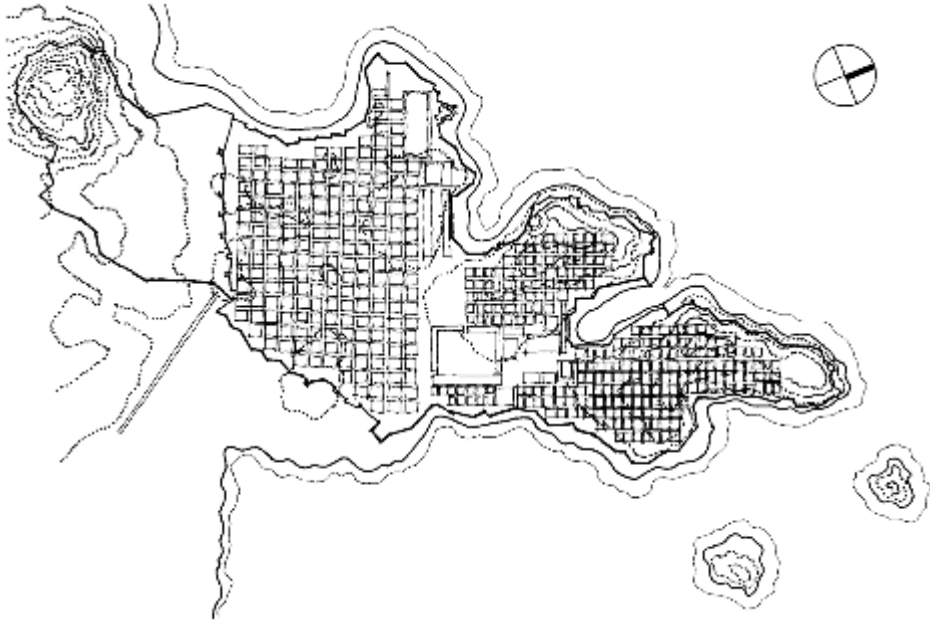


Figure 3. Plan of Miletus

Source: Illustration by author.

between physical matter and mental form, which is another way of explaining the separation of nature and culture.

The divergence from natural culture thus coincided with the introduction of metaphysics. With the 6th century came Anaximander of Miletus, who is acknowledged as the West's first true philosopher, astronomer, and geographer. As McEwen (1993) describes, Anaximander's writing was "the watershed in the transition from myth to philosophy, the transition whereby a so-called rational account of the world takes the place of a so-called irrational one" (p. 9). Anaximander called the basic element of the universe *apeiron*, a word typically translated as "boundless." A vortex of indeterminate stuff, the *apeiron* preceded and created the terrestrial elements—earth, air, fire, and water. The concept may be understood in contrast to its opposite, *perata* (boundaries), and has both tangible and intangible aspects. If a thing is physically unbounded, it has no limiting edges and simply continues indefinitely. Aristotle understood Anaximander's concept in these terms (Guthrie, 1962, pp. 83-86; Seligman, 1962). The literary precedent of this concept is Homer's ocean. Significantly, Homer frequently uses the word *apeiron* to refer to the sea, characterized as an "infinite" space extending beyond the perceivable world.¹⁴

This idea of unlimited space began to influence the formation of actual places, specifically when the Greeks began to colonize. Miletus, an important colony, played a pivotal role in expanding Greek territory during Anaximander's time (Sacks, 1995, p. 144).¹⁵ Its city plan was a Hippodamian grid, a form based more on a philosophical system than a physical one. Infinitely expandable and able to be superimposed cartographically on any territory from afar, the grid was the ultimate colonial form. The plan's disregard for natural contours disengaged the city from its site. Perched on a narrow promontory on the west coast of Asia Minor, Miletus hovers over the sea. The

streets appear to continue outward toward the horizon, as if incomplete, and these vistas transfer the space of the sea to the city. The place is not manifested in its physical landscape but in its view of the distance. Politically, the colony depends on a distant *metropolis*, the mother city; spatially, it relies on a similar projection or dislocation. The colony is a place outside itself.

It seems no coincidence that the origin of philosophy corresponded with the rise of colonialism. Anaximander's *apeiron* took on characteristics previously associated with the gods. The concept of the divine was displaced from nature, the original residence of the gods, to become an abstract mental construction—that is, a thing of culture. As a result, nature was devalued, for a different attitude toward the environment came with colonization. Herodotus refers to Thrace as “having much ship-timber and many oar-shafts” (Morrison, Coates, & Rankov, 2000, p. 189). Here, forests are prized only as a material resource, so the environment had come to be evaluated not spiritually but economically, for its potential to support culture.¹⁶ Linguistically, the oar underwent a similar conversion. The word *kope*, which originally referred only to the handle, later meant the entire instrument (Morrison & Williams, 1968, p. 53). Interaction with nature became less important in defining the oar, for its only relevant function was its use by men.

The temple, the exemplar of the Greeks' attitude toward place, likewise changed. Vincent Scully (1962/1979) acknowledges that by the arrival of the Doric, sacred architecture had deviated from its original concept of unity with the earth. At Velia, the altar to Poseidon was arranged so that to the approaching observer, the temple seemed to stand above the summit and levitate on the horizon of the sea. As Scully remarks, the structure monumentalizes the “shapeless expanses” (p. 34) of the ocean and becomes the “single solid point of reference between the voids of sea and sky” (pp. 160-161). The temple is understood to dwell in a removed, unreachable space. Indra Kagis McEwen (1993) describes the peripteral Doric temple as having been conceived as a ship, its columns as banks of propelling oars. Furthermore, both the temple and the ship were seen as winged things, as if taking flight. Pliny the Elder notes that the Greek word for colonnades was *ptera*, “wings” (McEwen, 1993, pp. 99ff.). Homer supports the avian image of the ship, referring to “well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do” (*The Odyssey*, line 11.125). To see the temple as if in motion, whether by sea or air, portrays it as disconnected from its site. McEwen notes that the emergence of the prototypical “Greek temple” by the 7th century coincided with the foundation of the *polis*. Consequently, the establishment of high culture corresponded historically with the reconception of architecture as independent of its place.

The detachment of space from place marks the beginning of *pure culture*. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930/1961) lists two essential traits of culture: social relations (civilization's relationships with itself) and the submission of the environment to human purpose (civilization's relationships with nature). Culture, he writes, is attained through “exploitation of the earth” (pp. 40-43). The idea of environmental domestication assumes an antagonistic relationship between culture and nature, and the very existence of society now presupposes the authority of the former over the latter. In industrial society, “exploitation of the earth” has occurred to the extent that many claim nature as an independent entity no longer exists, for it has been subsumed by culture.¹⁷

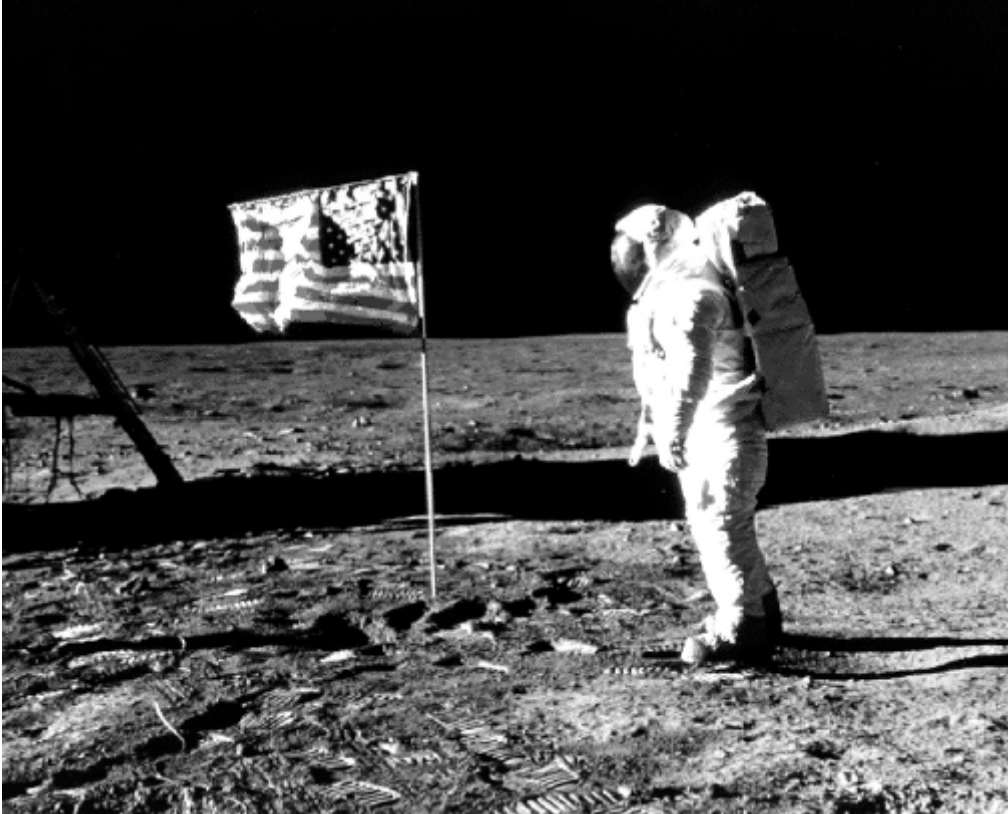


Figure 4. U.S. Flag on the Moon

Source: Public domain.

The domestication of the environment may be initiated physically, through the application of technology, but the resulting space is maintained psychologically, through symbols. While a simple tool is a liaison between culture and nature, culture in the absence of nature requires no such mediator, for it is self-contained. The space of pure culture is delineated solely through signs. When it becomes a symbol, Poseidon's oar completes culture's conquest of nature. As the implements of cultural dominion, symbols overcome space, and terrain becomes territory. In this sense, culture is inherently colonial. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) explains that colonial space, the imposition of culture on "the dark unruly spaces of the earth," is profoundly ambiguous because it is patterned after a model that is simultaneously familiar and foreign. When the colonizing entity (such as a nation) transfers its forms to another locality, indigenous circumstances are immediately displaced, but the significance of the incoming cultural material also inevitably changes in the new context. The resulting image "can neither be 'original'—by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it—nor 'identical'—by virtue of the difference that defines it" (pp. 102-122). Such a space belongs neither to its immediate context nor to its original point of generation, from which it is removed. It is by definition unmoored.

While colonialism may or may not have disappeared from politics, it remains the very premise of culture's relationship with the physical environment. This fact may be witnessed on every frontier. In the space age, the oar in the desert became the flag on

the moon. In the digital age, IBM conquered the nanoterrain by spelling out its logo with individual xenon atoms. As the second example illustrates, colonial space has come to be executed less by governmental powers than by commercial enterprise. Hannah Arendt (1968, p. 5) recounts that imperialism actually began with business speculation, for commerce continually seeks expansion. In striving to enlarge its influence, industry perpetrates a kind of environmental imperialism by introducing mass-produced signs and structures into countless communities, regardless of their inherent physical differences. Incessantly staking claims on new markets, corporate symbols extend their domain ever outward. The golden arches of McDonald's, now more widely recognized than the Christian cross (Schlosser, 2001, p. 5), are surrogate oars in the commercial landscape.¹⁸ As these strongholds become increasingly global in scale, commerce struggles to render every place the same. This is the hallmark of colonialism—and the legacy of Poseidon's oar.

Notes

1. Historians rarely comment on the passage cited, and those who do express uncertainty about its meaning. Peter V. Jones (1988) writes, "It is not at all clear *why* Odysseus has to travel where he does, carrying what he does. . . . This is all very obscure" (p. 102).

2. Homer (trans. 1967) does not name the wood used for oars, but he does associate fir with different parts of the ship itself (*The Odyssey*, lines 2.424, 5.233-5.261). Both the *Iliad* (Homer, trans. 1951) and *The Odyssey* were written around 750 B.C. Much later (circa 300 B.C.), Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, describes oars as being made from young firs. He outlines the process of shaving down the layers of the tree like the skin of an onion. The length of galley oars varied from about 10 to 15 feet. Writing in the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder explains that fir was used because its trunks were long, straight, strong, and light. He remarks that the habitat of the fir tree is "high in the mountains, as if it had fled the sea" (see Humphrey, Oleson, & Sherwood, 1998, pp. 338-340).

3. The inland equivalent of the oar is the winnow fan, used to separate grain from chaff. In the passage of *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus is to deliver the oar to the interior, the desert dweller is anticipated to mistake the oar for a winnow fan (lines 11.127-11.128). The fan relates the human body to the earth just as the oar relates it to the sea.

4. This essay focuses on the shift from preclassical to classical attitudes about nature and argues that this shift formed the basis of modern viewpoints. This subject is related to but quite distinct from Henri Lefebvre's (1991) analysis of the shift from "absolute" to "abstract" space in ancient Greece, for he focuses on urban conditions (the polis) as the embodiment of culture. It is important to note Lefebvre does not outwardly acknowledge any change in the Greek conception of nature, preferring to emphasize Hellenism as representative of Greek culture in general.

5. McEwen (1993) explains, "Craft gives things life, and it is no accident that *tiktein* is to give birth, *tektein* to build, and *technē* a letting appear" (p. 55). This is very different from the modern conception of the relationship between culture and nature. As Heidegger (1954/1977) recounts, the Greek *technē* was a kind of "revealing," a "bringing forth" of the truth of an object. Modern technology, by contrast, is in essence a "challenging" because it puts unreasonable demands on nature. The earlier sense suggests balance; the later an affront. See also comments from Freud (1930/1961), below.

6. For example, when the god Hermes offers Odysseus a medicinal herb, he reveals its *physis*: "He explained the nature [*physis*] / of it to me" (*The Odyssey*, lines 10.303-10.304). In this passage, Homer introduces the word *physis* into the Greek lexicon (Clay, 1997, p. 158).

7. Similarly, the olive was associated with Athena, the oak with Zeus, the laurel with Apollo (see below), and so on (Sacks, 1995, p. 250). The earliest Greek temples were constructed of solid wood columns intended to reconstitute sacred groves, and according to Pausanias, the first temple of Apollo at Delphi was a hut made of living laurels, Apollo's sacred tree (Hersey, 1988, p. 14). The laurel was significant because according to myth, it was the transmuted form of Daphne, the virgin beloved by Apollo, who proclaimed to her, "Since you cannot be my wife, you shall assuredly be my tree" (Bulfinch, 1979, p. 22).

8. For example, the bones of a sacrificial animal reassembled on an altar were thought to conjure up the creature in another guise. As Walter Burkert (1972/1983) recounts, the cadaverous effigy was not merely a *representation* of the former beast; it was the same being transfigured. Like a cult figure housed in a temple or shrine, its presence was actual, not metaphorical: the victim was torn apart and brought back to life, again and again through ritual. Similarly, Hersey's (1988) primary thesis is that such sacrificial altars were the precursor of classical architecture.

9. For example, the highly ordered cosmos of ancient Egypt is impossible to understand without considering the conditions of the Nile River valley; the path of the sun and the seasonal flooding of the river created an understanding of the universe as driven by steady, continuous cycles. By contrast, the unpredictable climate in Mesopotamia led to a belief that catastrophe was always imminent. Religious views anticipated divine wrath if rituals were not enacted properly. To the Babylonians, the success of a harvest depended not just on the skill of the farmer but also on the correct performance of the new year festival (Carroll, 1969).

10. In retrospect, the passage describing the "slip" of the oar from the hand provides in itself a convenient allegory of the "slip" from ancient to modern technology. According to Heidegger (1954/1977), Hegel wrote that a machine, the basic instrument of modern technology, is an "autonomous tool," for it no longer relies on direct human control, and this is one of the basic conditions of alienation. Heidegger himself bemoaned the fact that in the modern era, technology increasingly threatens "to slip from human control" (pp. 288-300).

11. Later, Vitruvius (trans. 1960) hints at this early sense of harmony by explaining the principle of symmetry, the proper agreement of a composition's members. In "perfect buildings," Vitruvius writes, the proportional relationships between the pieces are like the limbs of a body and the oars of a ship, the positions of the latter being fixed by the spacing of the rowlocks (pp. 13-14). From Greek sources now lost, Vitruvius inherited implicit connections between the body, the oar, the ship, and the sea. Nevertheless, the Roman text loses the earlier sense of accordance with the larger natural environment, for Vitruvius limits his definitions of the "fundamental principles of architecture" (order, arrangement, eurhythmy, symmetry, propriety, and economy) to the internal workings of the buildings themselves, disregarding larger context in favor of an internalized notion of harmony. Vitruvius' famous description of "the well-shaped man" depicts the human body as complete, intact, and divorced from any particular context (pp. 72-73). As the oldest extant treatise on architecture, the *Ten Books* represents the effective origin of architecture conceived as an autonomous construct—that is, as an entirely cultural framework.

12. Henri Frankfort (1969) explains the difference between ancient and modern worldviews as a matter of thought. Confronted with a question, "ancient man had not thought out an answer; an answer had been revealed to him in a reciprocal relationship with nature" (p. 42). Similarly, Walter F. Otto (1954) remarks about the Greek viewpoint, "In their world the divine is not superimposed as a sovereign power over natural events; it is revealed in the forms of the natural, as their very essence and being" (p. 7).

13. The setting of nearly every episode of *The Odyssey* has environmental or spatial significance related to the conflicts between destination and digression or fixity and wandering, and the tension between home and frontier persists throughout Homer. Even the Trojan War, chronicled in *The Iliad*, began as an attempt to restore a household, after Helen had been abducted by Paris. It is an epic account of the competing quests for security at home and glories won afar. In at least one episode of *The Odyssey*, the oar figures into this desire to be remembered for heroic

deeds. Odysseus' companion Elpenor asks that his grave be topped with an oar, the tool of his work (lines 11.77-11.78). While Poseidon utilizes the oar as a symbol of power, Elpenor sees it as his life's memorial.

14. For example, in *The Iliad*, Achilles is said to sit "beside the beach of the grey sea looking out on the infinite water" (line 1.305). In Homeric cosmology, the earth was surrounded by a vast ocean, beyond which is a space outside the occupiable world and accessible to only the divine (Romm, 1992, p. 22; Seligman, 1962, pp. 33-34). "Now Dawn the yellow-robed arose from the river of Ocean / to carry her light to men and to immortals" (*The Iliad*, lines 19.1-19.2).

15. The first colony, on the isle of Pithecusae, appeared in the mid-8th century, around the time of Homer (Sacks, 1995, p. 65). Over the following century and a half, expansion came quickly. The number of new cities founded as coastal colonies was equivalent to the total number of preexisting cities in the entire Aegean area. *The Odyssey* itself is colored by contemporary interest in trade and expansion, as the story of the oar intimates. The Homeric universe is on the verge of the old and new conceptions of space and place, and the conflict between homeland and exploration may be understood in these terms.

16. In his *Critias*, Plato laments the loss of "untouched" land (Humphrey et al., 1998, p. 337). The sanctity of the earth had stemmed from the humble view that men and gods were separate beings. Vincent Scully (1962/1979) suggests that by the 4th century, the example of Alexander the Great must have suggested to the Greeks that perhaps such distinctions were not inevitable.

17. This is true in both popular and academic literature. Bill McKibben (1989) writes,

An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant. The idea in this case is "nature," the separate and wild province, the world apart from man to which he adapted, under whose rules he was born and died. (p. 48)

Lefebvre (1991) compares nature to childhood, something we long for but know only vaguely through the memory. Like Freud, he sees nature as a vanquished realm:

Even the powerful myth of nature is being transformed into a mere fiction, a negative utopia: nature is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces. True, nature is resistant, and infinite in its depth, but it has been defeated, and now waits only for its ultimate voidance and destruction. (pp. 30-31)

McKibben's and Lefebvre's remarks may be true, but they underestimate how long this condition has existed. Plato mourned the loss of nature much as McKibben does, and Herodotus was guilty of the attitude Lefebvre describes (see earlier notes).

18. Literal and figurative signs such as these dominate the marketplace, and the commercial strip, as Venturi, Brown, and Izenour (1985) famously described, is inherently "antispatial." "The sign is more important than the architecture" (pp. 8-20). Because of the conflict between competing special interests, the image of the commercial landscape is "chaos."

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