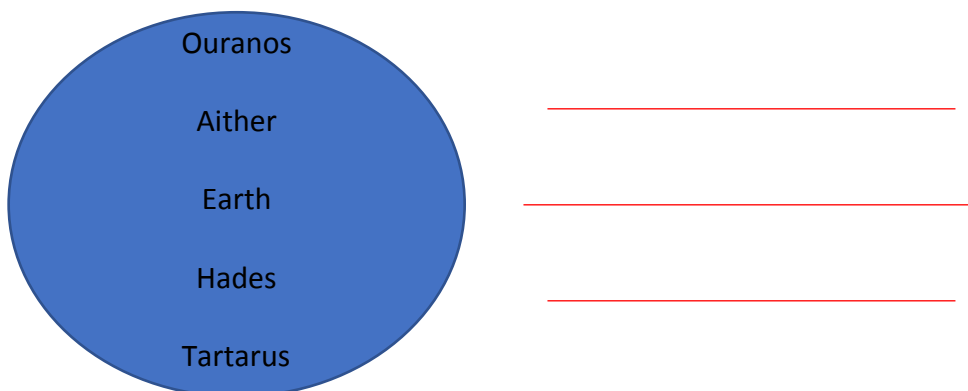


A Stroll Through Hesiod's Tartarus

The 100 line *Descriptio Tartari* (lines 720-820) in Hesiod's *Theogony* – almost 10% of the poem – has long been a scholarly wasps' nest. Why is it where it is? And why is it there at all? Moreover, in many places the description itself is opaque, not to say murky, like the underworld itself. As a result, much – or even all – of it had been athetized by older scholars. Unfortunately the gaggle of suspected interpolations have tended to hide the structure of the episode; and without that structure, it becomes even more difficult to understand both the meaning of the passage and its function within the economy of the poem, and how its structure helps to convey its meaning. With the retreat of 19th century analysis, more unitary readings have emerged (Stokes [1962], Northrup [1979], Ballabriga [1986], D. Clay [1992], Cerri [1995], Johnson [1999] Lombardi [2012] etc.), but they disagree with one another, not only in details, but in fundamental ways. There is no denying that many problems remain. However, more headway can, I believe, be made in charting the geography of Hesiod's underworld and placing its inhabitants within it; and while scholars have repeatedly warned against attempts to map the region, I will nevertheless attempt to do so.

We must first note that Hesiod's underworld is constructed to mirror his upper world; there earth is in the middle, the heaven a solid roof above with two bands, the lower *aer* and above it the bright *aither* or Olympus. Thus the lower world corresponds symmetrically with the floor of Tartarus and above that Hades. Thus:



Hesiod's Tartarus, formerly vaguely mentioned and undefined (Τάρταρά τ' ἠερόεντα μυχῶ χθονὸς εὐρυοδείης, 119), is configured only after Zeus's victory over the Titans and is described in the present tense, which indicates that its contours remain permanent components of Zeus's dominion. The Hundred-handers who contributed to the defeat of Zeus's enemies are assigned the job of prison wardens, guaranteeing that neither the Titans nor their mighty brothers will ever trouble the Olympian dispensation again. After describing the symmetrical position of the underworld in relation to the world above, Hesiod launches into a series of vignettes. His description begins with the Titans being consigned to their prison on the floor of Tartarus (717-19); it ends with verbatim repetitions forming a ring composition (807-10 = 736-39) along with chiasmic arrangement of repeated thematic elements in lines 740-745 ~ 811-819, thus returning to the Titans' place of incarceration, which suggests a circular itinerary. In between, different elements are introduced with ἔνθα "there" (729, 734, 737, 775, 758, 767, 807, 811), but only in two cases is there an explicit indication of a spatial relationship between items (πρόσθεν, "in front of", 745, 767). Nevertheless, the narrative sequence allows us to posit a spatial progression. In fact, the "*enthas*" in Hesiod's description of the underworld resemble Circe's instructions to Odysseus (*Od.* 12. 55-141), likewise signposted with repeated *entha*, but clearly meant to convey an itinerary. I shall illustrate how Hesiod's description of the underworld represents a circuit, a circumambulation of the major sites, beginning from the Titans' prison in Tartarus, ascending into Hades, then proceeding to traverse Hades from west to east. After cataloguing the features, and inhabitants of the world below, Hesiod finally re-descends to his starting point, the floor of Tartarus and the place of the Titans' eternal incarceration.

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