

## *Khaos*, Broken Plows, and Discontinuity in Hesiod

I argue that *khaos* in Hesiod's *Theogony* is not a fixed region of the cosmos but a fissure between adjoined masses. This interpretation accounts for surprising similarities between Hesiod's descriptions of *khaos* and his account of plow-construction in *Works and Days*. Hesiod's cosmos is a material structure built from interconnected components (earth, ocean, sky, and Tartarus), and its integrity poses an architectural problem that Hesiod also encounters in his design for a farmer's plow. In particular, Hesiod has to grapple with the discontinuities between discrete material components that might fracture under stress. Such fissures pose a threat to material structures of every size, from the cosmos as a whole to everyday farm implements. Hesiod generally valorizes a cosmic order without gaps or surprises, where everything fits together smoothly and without remainder. But with *khaos*, Hesiod designates a permanent exception to this ideal, an ineliminable gap in the architecture of the cosmos that recurs in the everyday crafts of the farmer.

Hesiod never describes *khaos* directly, and its exact nature is a matter of contention. It is taken variously as the space between earth and heaven (Cornford 1950), as the chasm between earth and Tartarus (West 1966, Miller 2001), or as an undifferentiated expanse at the limits of mythic representation (Bussanich 1983). Following the suggestions of Solmsen (1950) and Johnson (1999), however, I understand *khaos* as the junction between earth, ocean, heaven, and Tartarus, where these elemental regions of the universe meet on the horizon.

This interpretation sheds light on an apparently-unrelated topic: the language of continuity and contiguity that Hesiod applies to the construction of handicrafts in *Works and Days*. Raw materials are cut and "fitted together" (*arariskein*) into useful products, and the reliability of these products depends on the integrity of the joints that hold them together. At

several moments, Hesiod reveals a deep anxiety about the reliability of joints. In his account of plow-construction (*Op.* 414-436), for instance, he instructs his audience on how to fit together the two primary components of a wooden plow. He finds it necessary to mention that one should obtain a second plow, not fitted together but made of a single, naturally-grown piece of wood (*autoguos*). The implication is that the “fitted” plow, no matter how careful its construction, could potentially break at the point where the two pieces are joined together.

These defects are not limited to farming equipment. In *Theogony*, Hesiod portrays *khaos* as a fissure between the building-blocks of the universe, which approach one another and are joined together on the horizon. At 814, he describes *khaos* with a constellation of terms (*arariskein, pelazein, autophues*) that closely approximates the language with which he describes the fissure between components of a plow. This makes sense on a thematic level: *khaos* is a region of disorder loathed by the gods and beyond their control, and it appears at the height of the Titanomachy, when the fire of Zeus’ thunderbolts make it seem that heaven and earth have collided (700). *Khaos* represents, then, an incalculable and dangerous element in the architecture of the universe, a cosmic counterpart to the fissure between components of a plow.

This reading resolves some of the notoriously inconsistent aspects of *khaos* in *Theogony*. The term designates not a fixed region of the cosmos or a measurable gulf between regions, but a hairline fracture between conjoined surfaces. The persistence of chaos in Zeus’ ordered cosmos recapitulates, on a universal scale, the persistence of fissures in everyday tools. In both cases, Hesiod concedes that the construction of seamless cosmic and economic totalities is compromised by the elemental intransigence of matter itself.

## Bibliography

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