

## Myths about the Netherworld in the Ancient Near East and their Counterparts in the Greek Religion

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The transmittal and recasting of oriental motifs into the Greek literary and pictorial arts have received increased attention in recent decades. To a great extent this interest has arisen from improved reconstruction of the myths, religious tales and rituals of the Ancient Near East, be they from Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite or Ugaritic sources. During the last 30 years a great deal of ancient oriental mythological material has been gleaned from cuneiform sources excavated in various places in Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia and today in museums or private collections. A series of publications with updated or completely new translations of texts consequently have appeared in recent years <sup>1</sup> and they greatly illuminate the religious thinking of the inhabitants of these countries from the 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. B.C. until the very end of their cultures. Historians of religion in the Greek and Roman world accordingly took a lively interest in the newly discovered folk-tales and myths <sup>2</sup> and the comparison of the variant texts and motifs advanced to a special research area within Greek mythology. This new approach to research on early Greek civilization has been made possible by a better understanding of the emergence of this culture. Instead of believing this culture to be an independent, original creation of the inhabitants of the Greek *poleis*, it is now accepted that foreign influences have been a constituent part of Greek civilization since Minoan and Mycenaean time <sup>3</sup>. A very prominent witness of this watershed in the study of early Greek poetry and myth is "The East Face of Helicon", the newly published work of M.L. West <sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> To mention only the most modern: St. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Oxford 1989; J. Bottéro - S.N. Kramer, *Lorsque les dieux faisaient l'homme*, Paris 1989; B. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2 vols., Bethesda (Md.) 1993; O. Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT Bd. 3: Mythen und Epen*, Gütersloh 1993/97.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. Burkert, "Oriental and Greek Mythology: The Meeting of Parallels", in J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, 1987, pp. 10-40; id., *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, Cambridge (Mass) 1992; in German: *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur*, (SHAW) 1984/1, Heidelberg 1984; T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth. A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, Baltimore 1993; C. Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia*, London-New York 1994.

<sup>3</sup> But I would not go so far as J.J.A. van Dijk who recently declared: "Es sei hier beiläufig erwähnt, daß ich nicht einsehen kann, warum W. Burkert für die griechische Mythologie eine Epoche der Entlehnung orientalischer Mythen verlangt. Hier liegt wohl ein klassisches Beispiel vor von Völkerkontakten in vorhistorischer Zeit. Von einer reziproken Entlehnung kann nicht die Rede sein", in St. Maul (ed.), *Festschrift für R. Borger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (= Cuneiform Monographs, 10), Kopenhagen 1998, p. 11 note 13.

<sup>4</sup> M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 1997.

Ancient oriental influence were not only transcribed. A parallel development also occurred in the graphic and plastic arts of early Greece; eastern motifs appear in early Greek metalworking and the proto-geometric brushwork on ceramics, the ivory carvings and the artworks of the gold- and silversmiths show the uninterrupted stream of pictorial ideas from the east <sup>5</sup>, accompanied by indigenous experiments with them in the early centuries of the evolution of Greek civilization. I suppose that a part of the so-called “influence” was indirect, i.e. the Greek poets took those imported pieces of jewelry, cylinder seals, silver bowls etc. as a base for their own interpretations and narratives. I will return to this later.

One of the elements of Greek art and literature which show striking similarities to ancient Near Eastern traditions consists in their description of the Netherworld and their ideas about the afterlife there. For this reason, and because recently an essay on this subject has been published, I have chosen precisely this theme for my paper today.

One of the first things that strikes us about Mesopotamian mythology is that there is a surprisingly amount of texts treating themes of the Netherworld. A prominent place holds “Inanna's descent to the Netherworld”, a Sumerian composition, which is a part of the Inanna-Dumuzi cycle and survived in substantially changed and abbreviated form until Neo-Assyrian times, with different versions from Assur and Niniveh <sup>6</sup>. The story describes the unsuccessful attempt of Inanna/Ištar to add the Netherworld to her zone of influence, to become the queen of all the regions of the universe. On the way to the palace of the goddess of the Netherworld Ereškigal – whose name means “mistress of the great earth” – Ištar has to cross seven gates and divest herself of all her divine symbols. After a short struggle, provoked by Ištar, the goddess of the Netherworld Ereškigal attacks Ištar with 60 diseases and kills her. Sexual desire consequently vanishes all over the world. Only through a trick of the god Ea and the intervention of a male prostitute can Ištar be revived and allowed to leave the “Land without Return” on condition that she delivers a substitute, in Sumerian mythology Dumuzi.

The second myth about the goddess of the Netherworld is “Nergal and Ereškigal”, which has no Sumerian version. It is only known from a Middle Babylonian tablet which were found in Amarna in Egypt, clearly a school text, a Neo-Assyrian text from Huzirina and a Late Babylonian text found in Uruk <sup>7</sup>. The story centers on the desire of the god-

<sup>5</sup> For some but not all of these influences see for example G. Kopcke - I. Tokumaru (eds.), *Greece between East and West: 10th-8th Centuries BC*, Mainz 1992; some contributions also in: N. Dimoudis - A. Kyriatsoulis (eds.), *Die Geschichte der hellenischen Sprache und Schrift*, Altenburg 1999; additionally H. Matthäus, *The Greek Symposium and the Near East. Chronology and Mechanisms of Cultural Transfer*, in R.F. Docter - E.M. Moormann (eds.), *Proceedings of the XV<sup>th</sup> Internat. Congress of Classical Archaeology, Amsterdam, July 12-17, 1998*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 256-260.

<sup>6</sup> For the Sumerian version cf. W.R. Sladek, *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, Baltimore, (Md.) 1974; the Akkadian texts are to be found in R. Borger, *Babylonisch-assyrische Lesestücke*<sup>2</sup>, Rome 1979, pp. 95-104; 143ff.; cf. also E. Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces: Your Mooring Rope Cut*, University of Michigan 1985, pp. 29-49.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hutter, *Altorientalische Vorstellungen von der Unterwelt*. (= OBO, 63), Freiburg-Göttingen 1985; E. Reiner, *op. cit.* (note 6), pp. 50-60.

dess to marry Nergal, who, after a first rendezvous with the goddess, escapes to the assembly of the gods in heaven. In response to her threat to send the deceased to the earth her wish is fulfilled by the gods and Nergal becomes the companion of Ereškigal as Lord of the Netherworld.

A third myth, which is known from Neo-Assyrian times on only, is the so-called "Erra epos" or "Išum and Erra" <sup>8</sup>. It is not Ereškigal and her empire which form the center of this narrative, but the fury of Erra, the god of pestilence, against the human beings who disturb the gods with their noise. Erra, motivated by his vizier Išum, arranges that Marduk, the king of the gods and Lord of Babylon, leaves his throne and visits the fire god Girra for the procedure of cleaning his adornments. In the meantime, Erra takes over the world realm and changes all the rules. He destroys the human race, the world order, and the basis of civilization, that is: Babylon, the center of the world. Finally, Erra can be calmed by his vizier and Marduk resumes his reign, which guarantees the reinstallment of order. This myth contains neither a description of the Netherworld nor a reflection on the afterlife. What it does contain is a description of the fear of the Netherworld of one of the gods when he is divested of his control over world order. The scope of this text is probably not an explanation of the afterlife, but rather a warning to the audience to leave the existing order unchanged and to be obedient and support the legal government.

A comparable aim may be discerned in a badly preserved text from Assur known as "The underworld vision of an Assyrian prince" <sup>9</sup>. The classification of this unique text by Alasdair Livingstone as "Court Poetry" and "Royal Propaganda" in his last edition of the text is correct, because the vivid description of the Netherworld which the royal prince saw in his dream, serves as a means of conveying the scope of the grace of which the god Nergal is capable: "Do not forget or neglect me! Then I will not pass a verdict or annihilation on you" – and the strength of the weapon which he wields: "Whoever of you may have closed his ear to his speech, tasted the forbidden, trampled on the consecrated – the luminous splendour of terrifying majesty will throw you down instantly, until you are but wind!" These short extracts show clearly that this is a kind of wisdom text, an advice to a royal prince, and not a religious composition with mythical background.

My final example is provided by the famous story which has been incorporated as Tablet 12 into the Ninive-recension of the Gilgameš epic <sup>10</sup>. It is evident that this text was not an original part of this epic but belonged to the Sumerian composition "Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld", of which it formed the second part <sup>11</sup>. For reasons unknown

<sup>8</sup> L. Cagni, *L'Épopée de Erra* (= Studi Semitici, 34), Roma 1969; id., *The Poem of Erra* (= Sources from the Ancient Near East, 1/3), Malibu 1977; cf. F.N.H. Al-Rawi - J.A. Black: *Iraq*, 51 (1989), pp. 111-122.

<sup>9</sup> W. von Soden, "Die Unterweltsvision eines assyrischen Kronprinzen. Nebst einigen Beobachtungen zur Vorgeschichte des Ahiqar-Romans": *ZA*, 43 (1936), pp. 1-31; at least A. Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (= SAA, 3), Helsinki 1989, N. 32, pp. 68-76.

<sup>10</sup> Recently published is a new translation of the Gilgameš-epic: A. George, *The Epic of Gilgameš*, London 1998.

<sup>11</sup> A. Shaffer, *Sumerian Sources of Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgameš*, PhD Dissertation, Univ. of Pennsylvania 1963; see now J. Tournay - A. Shaffer, *L'Épopée de Gilgameš*, Paris 1994, pp. 270-274.

to us it has been translated into Akkadian and – also in contrast to the already finished story – put at the end of the composition. It should be stressed, however, that the original tablets of this text are few, come from Niniveh only and it is dubious that the story was an integral part of the epic outside the Ashurbanipal library. Nevertheless, it tells us the journey of Enkidu into the Netherworld, where he is retained but brought back for a short dialogue with Gilgameš in a special ceremony. I will come back to this text shortly. For the moment I would like to stress the fact again that this Sumerian composition is also known from tablets of the Old-Babylonian period but that no “stream of tradition” reaches the Neo-Assyrian period. Nevertheless, some knowledge about this composition must have survived.

If we try to summarize the information on the Netherworld which comes from the aforementioned texts we get the following picture<sup>12</sup>: This region called *ki* “earth” or *kur* “(foreign) land” in Sumerian, “*eršet lā tārī*” “The Land without Return” in Akkadian is situated in the depths of the earth, and is antithetical to the heaven<sup>13</sup>, but a ladder on which messengers can go up and down connects heaven and the Netherworld. Access to the Netherworld is through seven gates with a gate-keeper who takes care that nobody enters with the signs of his or her earthly power. Sometimes, but not in the epics, a river *Ḫubur* is named which surrounds the Netherworld<sup>14</sup> and has to be crossed by ship. Even a ferryman is known from the “Vision of a Prince”; his name is *Ḫumuṭ-tabal*, - “Hurry! Take away!”. The Netherworld is a region without sunshine or other light. Despite this, it is ruled like a normal kingdom by the queen *Ereškigal* and her husband *Nergal*, assisted by her vizier *Namtar*. In the vision of the Assyrian prince it also contains a considerable number of demonic monsters. The inhabitants of the Netherworld, the “deaths”, exist there in a habit or feathers, murmuring like doves or wailing, drinking brackish water and eating dust and clay. They are bound to the Netherworld without hope of a return – their only hope is that *Ereškigal* will break their spell and send them into the world of the living where they can spread horror and fear. With the aid of special magical ceremonies they may occasionally be evoked from the Netherworld for necromancy.

Now, after this very short introduction to the ideas of the Netherworld in the Ancient Near East during the 1<sup>st</sup> mill. B.C., let us turn to early Greek sources, especially to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssee*. Here, with the exception of the famous *Nekyia* in the eleventh Song of the *Odyssee*, no passage is devoted to the Netherworld alone. On the other hand, we do hear about Hades’ house, which is described as *eurypyles* “wide-gated”, and it is un-

<sup>12</sup> See M. Hutter (note 7); J. Bottéro, “La mythologie de la Mort en Mésopotamie ancienne”, in B. Alster (ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia*, Copenhagen 1980, pp. 25-52; J. Tropper, *Nekromantie. Totenbefragung im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (= AOAT, 223), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1989; B. Groneberg, “Zu den mesopotamischen Unterweltsvorstellungen. Das Jenseits als Fortsetzung des Diesseits”: *AoF*, 17 (1990), pp. 244-261; J.A. Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought”, in J.M. Sasson (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, III, New York 1995, pp. 1883-1893; M. Baldacci, *Il libro dei morti della antica Ugarit*, Casale Monferrato 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*, Winona Lake 1998, pp. 348-362.

<sup>14</sup> See W. Röllig, *Hubur*, in *RIA* 4, 1972/5, p. 478 f.; W. Horowitz, *loc. cit.* (note 13) pp. 355-358.

doubtedly clear that those who arrive there will not leave this house again (*Il.* 23,75f.). Wellknown is the river – named Acheron in Sappho, Alcaeus and Aeschylus – which has to be crossed in order to reach the land of the dead. But Odysseus has to sail across Oceanos to reach Hades. This change of place reminds us of the episode in the Gilgameš epic in which Utnapištim, the hero on his journey to the land of living, where he seeks refuge, has to cross the “Waters of Death”. This poisoned sea could only be crossed by using 120 punting poles<sup>15</sup>. This is clearly a sign of the inaccessibility of this land – but bear in mind that this is just Hades, and not yet the Netherworld itself. Like the Babylonian Netherworld, that of Greek tradition is the empire of a goddess, Persephone, and a world of “misty and silent dark”, where the dead whisper like birds. The similarities to the Ancient Oriental mythology are obvious.

A reference to the most impressive description of the afterlife in the *Nekyia* in the eleventh Song of the *Odyssey* is fitting at this point. From the island of the enchantress Circe Odysseus sails with the current and at sunset, i.e. in the west, the well-known “land of the dead” in Egypt, he reaches the land of the Kimmerioi<sup>16</sup> a people shrouded in clouds and darkness, who never see the sun. This region not only brings to mind the Netherworld in Mesopotamia but also the famous Babylonian map of the world on which one of the regions beyond the Bitter River bears the caption “where the sun is not seen”<sup>17</sup>. One cannot be sure whether this is meant in a mythological or geographical sense i.e. if actual knowledge of a northern and for a long time during the year dark and cloudy land resulted in such a description. After arrival at the place which had been described by Circe, Odysseus performs a ritual: he digs a sacrificial pit with his sword and sacrifices honey, wine and barley flour. The ritual is followed by a prayer and the slaughtering of sheep whose blood runs down into the pit. It has been shown by Gerd Steiner that this ceremony has exact parallels in Hittite purification rituals of Hurrian origin, in 13<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. texts which have been preserved in Hattuša, the capital of the Hittites<sup>18</sup>. A further striking parallel comes from the twelfth tablet of the Gilgameš epic in which at the command of the god Enki/Ea the hero “makes an opening in the Netherworld” whence the ghost of his friend Enkidu is able to return. In the *Nekyia* the spirits of the deceased come from the Erebus and assemble at the pit: “young married women, young men, old men, who had endured much, tender girls with hearts young in grief...” After drinking from the blood of the sacrifice, Teiresias from Thebes is able to speak mantically – this is in sharp contrast to the story of Gilgameš and Enkidu, where the deceased friend makes some explanations about the fate of the dead persons in the Netherworld but does not have mantic attributes. Nor is the drinking of blood mentioned in the texts from the Near East and this may have a specific Aegean background.

<sup>15</sup> Gilg. Epic X 158ff.

<sup>16</sup> For the problems connected with the Cimmerians see A. I. Ivantchik, *Les Cimmériens au Proche-Orient* (= OBO, 127), Freiburg-Göttingen 1993.

<sup>17</sup> See at least W. Horowitz, *loc. cit.* (note 13) p. 22 and commentary p. 32 f.

<sup>18</sup> G. Steiner, “Die Unterweltsbeschwörung des Odysseus im Lichte hethitischer Texte”: *UF*, 3 (1971), pp. 265-283.

I could go into details – and much of these details have been collected in the extensive volume of M.L. West<sup>19</sup>. Instead of such an undertaking I would like to rise some common methodological questions.

As a scholar who is first of all a philologist in the field of ancient oriental languages but with a special interest in the production and tradition of works of literature I would like to risk some critical methodological comments.

1. It is a widespread error to suppose that literary texts in the ancient Near East had a broad distribution in a public which was able to read them. On the contrary: By far the greater part of cuneiform tablets which have been found are generally of economic or juridical content, i.e. economic and legal contracts, debts, documents arranging marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and so on. The same is true of the letters, which very seldom contain a reference to the personal belongings of the correspondents. “Literary” texts, normally in a single copy, are only stored in some very special archives or libraries and are as a rule attached to temples or palaces in the capital cities<sup>20</sup>.

2. It can be shown that these texts were usually used either for religious ceremonies e.g. conjurations, new year rituals etc., for scientific purposes such as the hemerologies, the astronomical texts and the handbooks for hepatoscopy, or as basic material in schools, teaching young scribes the cuneiform script and the Sumerian or Akkadian language. The unique exception is the library of king Ashurbanipal in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., who himself gave orders for the collection of all the literary texts in Babylonia, even from temple-libraries with the goal of having a complete collection of the literary production of his time<sup>21</sup>.

3. Today scholars have the literary production in cuneiform of nearly 3 millennia at their disposal, i.e. from the beginning of Sumerian writing until the compositions of the Seleucid period. The situation of the scribes in Assyria and Babylonia was in many instances quite different. As a rule they both had at hand the traditional literature of two or three generations which had been copied and recopied in the school. It should be stressed however, that many literary compositions which we know today were not included into the stream of tradition, but excluded for reasons unknown to us. This is true of almost all the great Sumerian compositions, the epics and myths, the lamentations and dialogues, which were collected in a canonical version in Old Babylonian times and in one place, the temple library of Nippur. It is evident that these compositions were unknown in the second half of the second millennium and of course not a part of the tradition during the first millennium. Such compositions cannot be considered in the context of the transmittal of oriental motifs into the Greek world. If – as has been the case in a

<sup>19</sup> M.L. West, *The East Face* (see note 4), pp. 415-417.

<sup>20</sup> Some but by far not all problems of the collection and tradition of cuneiform texts are discussed in K.R. Veenhof (ed.), *Cuneiform Archives and Libraries. Papers read at the 30<sup>th</sup> RAI*, Leiden 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. S.J. Lieberman, “Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Assurbanipal’s Personal Tablet Collection”, in T. Abush - J. Huehnergard - P. Steinkeller (eds.), *Lingering over Words. Studies in Honor of W.L. Moran*, Atlanta 1990, pp. 305-336.

article by Gisela Strasburger just published in “Antike und Abendland”<sup>22</sup> – such narratives as “The Death of Urnammu”, the šulgi hymns or the Sumerian myth of “Enlil and Ninlil” are used as specific motifs, it should be borne in mind that the tradition of these texts ended with the Old Babylonian period. There are no traces of an oral tradition of such texts, and we have to conclude that not only the specific formulations but also the entire content of these texts did not survive.

4. Nevertheless, M.L. West, who is aware of some of these problems, believes: “The Gilgameš epic and other Akkadian classics must have been available in many palace, temple, and private libraries in Assyria and Babylonia, and there must have been scribes capable of translating them into Aramaic, if there was any call for it”<sup>23</sup>. Even if this may be true of the Gilgameš epic, which was widespread and handed down over centuries, the “Akkadian classics” are a fiction which never existed. The supposed Aramaic “translations” are a similar fiction. Within the whole corpus of Aramaic texts known today – and this corpus is not small – not a single “literary” text of Akkadian origin is known to us. Not even the “Proverbs of Ahiqar”<sup>24</sup> is a translation of an Akkadian text but an independent composition with some allusions to perhaps orally delivered words of wisdom. It seems to me that much scribal experience with the new medium of alphabetic writing would be necessary until the art of composing longer literary texts had been developed as we can see in the enormous amount of compositions in later Syriac.

5. On the other hand, there are signs of a long oral tradition of stories about certain persons – for example Sargon or Naram-Sin of Akkade<sup>25</sup> – and of mythological themes, which only occasionally were written down. An example of this is the myth “Inanna’s descent to the Netherworld” which I have already discussed. Despite the fact that this text is also incompletely preserved i.e. was not fully composed, the preserved texts of the Akkadian versions differ markedly both amongst themselves and also particularly from the Sumerian version of the Old Babylonian period. If scholars in the field of Greek and Roman literature and religion are not always aware of these problems, then we have only scholars of Ancient Oriental Studies to blame – that is, those who are unable to produce an up-to-date history of literature for the Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite and Ugaritic traditions. Still anybody who has ever worked in this field knows the number of problems connected with such an undertaking.

6. A problem which should be mentioned before I finish, one which is not only important but also controversial lies in the discussion of oral traditions: Who could have been responsible for the transmittal of myths and rituals from other countries and languages to Greece? Walter Burkert has developed a picture of the “wandering craftsmen”

<sup>22</sup> Gis. Strasburger, “Die Fahrt des Odysseus zu den Toten im Vergleich mit älteren Jenseitsfahrten”: *Antike und Abendland*, 44 (1998), pp. 1-29.

<sup>23</sup> M.L. West, *The East Face* (note 4), p. 593.

<sup>24</sup> At least: J.M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar*, Baltimore-London 1983; I. Kottsieper, *Die Geschichte und die Sprüche des weisen Ahiqar*, in O. Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT* 3/2, 1991, pp. 320-347.

<sup>25</sup> See recently J.G. Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*, Winona Lake 1997, espec. pp. 33-169.

and named the *bārû*, the “diviner”, the Babylonian priest who is responsible for extispicy<sup>26</sup>, sometimes translated “seer” as one of these craftsmen. From the evidence which is available today, one can conclude that such “specialists” were called by local rulers for special tasks and did sometimes travel from one place to the other. The reasonably frequent examples we have for such hiring in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. show however, that it was the exception and not the rule for the work of these priests. For this reason I conclude that occasionally one or two of these *bārû* may have reached the Greek world but as a rule they had their place in a cultic center and cannot have been generally responsible for the transfer of ancient oriental religious ideas to the Greek world.

With the comments I have made I do not mean to question the idea or system of comparing Ancient Oriental and Greek religious ideas. Nevertheless, I do wish to warn against imprudent use of the available source-material.

We should always bear in mind that myths, ritual and literary compositions have a certain place in history. Naturally, this also applies to those of the ancient Near East. Because of this, they should not be used without careful consideration of the historical context of their creation and use, and particularly without consideration of their “Sitz im Leben” in the Oriental World – be it in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria or Palestine. These basic principles of professional practice are alone sufficient to ensure sound and reliable methods of comparison for further research.

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<sup>26</sup> Concerning the “seer” cf. W. Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche* (s. note 2), pp. 43-54, but with respect to their function in the communication between the king and the gods see now B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien* (= SAA, 10), Helsinki 1999, pp. 128-201.