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The Ancient Representations of the Titan Atlas

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Abstract: The archaic iconographic representations of Atlas show him either supporting the sky from the inside, i.e., from between the earth and the sky, or holding the celestial globe from the outside. While the Homeric Atlas fits the former representation, the Hesiodic Atlas seems to fit the latter better. This latter representation is similar to the one present in the Hindu traditions and, therefore, must be older, contrary to the usual assumption that it first emerged in Hellenistic times.

There are basically two known principles of representing the Titan Atlas in ancient Greek art.¹ The first representation mode depicts him as standing between earth and sky and supporting the sky with his arms.² This type is likely to be a metaphor identifying Atlas with the *axis mundi*. At the same time, the keeping asunder of earth and sky cannot be seen as separated from the well-known myth of creation, in which earth and sky were originally united and only later separated. This myth can be met with in many ancient cultures, both Indo-European and non-Indo-European.³ The second type shows Atlas in the well-known 'Farnese' position.⁴ In this position, the Titan holds up the celestial sphere with his head and hands. The hands are placed somewhere on the globe's equator, which is the most natural position for someone who holds a globe in his hands (Fig. 2). One can see that the two artistic types are radically different. The first

- 1 Cf. *LIMC* III 2: 6–13; *LIMC* III 1: 2–16. A third type showing Atlas supporting both the earth and the sky from under the earth was assumed by Pausanias in the paintings surrounding Phidias' Zeus at Olympia. Pausanias probably misinterpreted the globe on Atlas' shoulders as the earth; cf. West (1966: 311). *LIMC* also misinterprets some of the pictorial evidence when it assumes that the architrave Atlas holds in some of these cases represents the earth (*LIMC* III 2: 11); other pictorial evidence clearly show Atlas supporting an architrave decorated with stars and lunar crescent (*LIMC* III 2: 7,9), which shows that the architrave is a sky symbol.
- 2 The position of Atlas' arms in this type varies. Atlas can use only one hand to support the sky (cf. Atlas 1 in *LIMC* III 2: 6), both hands, or his shoulders (cf. Atlas 22 in *LIMC* III 2: 9, A. *Prom.* 348ff.).
- 3 In the Greek world, the undifferentiated state before the separation is apparent at Hes. *Th.* 127,176 (Uranus embracing/covering Gaia from all parts); in the Vedic world, a similar story can be met with in *ŚB* 1.1.3.4–5, where before the creation the demon Vṛtra 'lay covering all this which here extends between heaven and earth'; cf. Bhattacharji (1970: 257–258). In the *Rig Veda*, *skambha* is the *axis mundi* that supports the sky: e.g., *RV* 10.121.6, 4.5.1, 10.5.7, 9.74.2, 3.31.12, 1.160.4, 1.154.1. Cornford (1950: 95–116) sees the separation of sky and earth as a central cosmogonic event in the archaic world. The *axis mundi* is a concept familiar to the shamanistic cultures of Northern/Central Asia; there it passes through the poles of the celestial vault; cf. Eliade (1972: 259–266).
- 4 The name 'Farnese' reflects the acquisition of such a sculpture by the cardinal Farnese in the 16th century and its subsequent placement in his Villa Farnese.

one shows Atlas as the *axis mundi* on the inside of the universe/celestial vault, whereas in the other one the Titan is located outside the globe. This latter type has been assumed to have appeared in Hellenistic times.⁵

Different accounts about Atlas and his supporting of the sky are also present in the archaic Greek literature. The Homeric account seems to fit the first type of representation. At *Od.* 1.50–54 it is said about Atlas that he holds the pillars which keep earth and sky apart ἔχει δέ τε κίονας αὐτὸς | μακράς, αἱ γαῖάν τε καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀμφὶς ἔχουσι. Atlas is directly linked to the *axis mundi*, which is seen as reaching the sky both above and below the earth (ἀμφίς).⁶ That Atlas was seen as the *axis mundi* is shown by one of Atlas' depictions on a Laconian cup which is dated before 550 BC (Fig. 3). There Atlas stands on a Doric column supporting a sky made of concentric (around a pole) zones studded with stars. Both the presence of the column, on which Atlas stands, and the concentric zones around the pole point to Atlas as being the axis.⁷ This analysis then makes Tièche's argument (1945) about a Pythagorean origin of Atlas as the *axis mundi* questionable to say the least. The representation of Atlas as the *axis mundi* may be older than the time of the Pythagoreans.

The Hesiodic account of Atlas is quite different. At *Th.* 746–748 Atlas holds the sky with his head and hands while being located in Tartarus in front of its doors (τῶν πρόσθ'):

τῶν πρόσθ' Ἰαπετοῖο πάις ἔχει οὐρανὸν εὐρύν
 ἐστηῶς κεφαλῇ καὶ ἀκαμάτησι χέρεσσι
 ἀστεμφέως ὅθι Νύξ τε καὶ Ἡμέρη ἄσσον ἰοῦσαι
 ἀλλήλας προσέειπον ἀμειβόμεναι μέγαν οὐδὸν
 χάλκεον ...

This position of Atlas has also been interpreted as being inside the celestial vault.⁸ According to this view, the only difference between the two representations would be the means by which he supports the sky. The Homeric account, which is not represented in art, would show him as holding the pillars of the world, whereas the other accounts, richly represented on Greek vases, would picture Atlas as supporting the sky with his arms and head.

5 Cf. *OCD*, the entry for Atlas.

6 Eustathius 1889 (*ad loc.*) argues that these pillars pass through the poles of the celestial vault.

7 Cf. *LIMC* III 1: 15, *LIMC* III 2: 6 (Atlas 1); Prometheus is also present in the picture, bound to another Doric column, which made Gelzer (1979: 171–172) think that Atlas and Prometheus are in opposite places on earth. However, both Prometheus and Atlas stand on the same column, that is, on the axis. Prometheus' column then must be the same as the one Atlas stands on, which means that Prometheus is bound to the *axis mundi*. The presence of another column must be due to the technical fact that obviously Atlas and Prometheus cannot occupy the same artistic space on the column.

8 Cf. West (1990: 81); Gelzer (1979: 173). West (1966: 311) thinks the same way, although he apparently sees the Homeric and Hesiodic accounts as reflecting different conceptions.

The interpretations from above do not seem very likely. Firstly, Atlas holding the pillars of the world is very likely to be a metaphor which identifies him with the *axis mundi*. Therefore, the pictorial evidence of the first type may show him doing precisely this. Secondly, the Hesiodic Atlas is located in Tartarus, which in the Greek myth is clearly located under the earth. It is there where Atlas is locked in with the other Titans, which means that he is out of the visible world. Therefore, unless we dismiss this account as nonsensical, it is not possible to view the Hesiodic Atlas as supporting the sky from between earth and sky. In other words, the representations which show Atlas as supporting the sky from the inside are not derived from a conception of the Titan being located in Tartarus. At the same time, unless there is a rationale for choosing one cardinal point over another, it is impossible to view Atlas as supporting the sky in the West as it has been suggested since antiquity.⁹

The difficulty in visualizing the position of the Hesiodic Atlas by placing the Titan between earth and sky requires a new and more powerful theory, which I propose here. This theory argues that the Hesiodic Atlas holds up the sky in a position which I called the ‘Farnese’ position, after the well-known Hellenistic sculpture of Atlas.

The earliest archaeological finds representing this position are not very old. On the other hand, the archaic iconographic representations of Atlas themselves are not very numerous. The earliest ones are from the sixth century BC.¹⁰ All of them show Atlas supporting the sky from the inside as it was the case with the Laconian cup from above. The Farnese position, on the other hand, emerges even later, around 450 BC, on a Campanian amphora (Fig. 1). This is, however, much earlier than the usual assumption that this representation type first appeared in Hellenistic times.¹¹

The Farnese position raises the question about where Atlas is located in this type of representation. I argue, therefore, that the Farnese position is congruent with that of the Hesiodic Atlas and represents Atlas as standing in Tartarus, under the South Pole of the celestial vault.¹² Two main facts point to this. Firstly, it is obvious that in this position Atlas is clearly located ‘under’ the earth and holds the sky with his head and hands. In addition, it is very likely that in this place

9 Cf. West (1990: 81); this view, which goes back to *A. Prom.* 348, may reflect a folk-etymology associating the Hesperides (Atlas is located close to their garden in *Hes. Th.* 517–518) with ἔσπερος ‘evening’.

10 Cf. *LIMC* III 2: 6 (Atlas 1–3); the earliest representation of Atlas as the *axis mundi* appears about 560 BC.

11 See n. 5 above; for comments, cf. Vollkommer (1988: 18). The discovery in Italy suggests a link with the Pythagoreans as Schauenburg (1962: 55) noticed (he argues, however, that the origin of the representation is Pythagorean); the amphora, which is dated between 450–425 BC by *LIMC* (cf. *LIMC* III 1: 6 and *LIMC* III 2: 8 [Atlas 13]), shows Herakles as supporting the globe in Atlas’ place; obviously, Atlas, which is also represented on the amphora as approaching a laden tree in the garden of the Hesperides, must have also been imagined in this position.

12 Cf. Anghelina (2008: 437–441).

‘lie the sources and the limits/ of the black earth and of mist-wrapped Tartaros,/ of the barren sea, too, and of the starry sky ...’¹³ Therefore, the artistic and the literary accounts are in accord in this respect.¹⁴ The most interesting element, however, which strengthens this hypothesis, is the way Atlas supports the sky with his hands. The Titan holds the sky with his hands put in a place where ‘Night and Day come close to each other.’ This metaphor can also be met with in Parmenides and Homer, under the form of ‘the paths of Night and Day coming close to each other.’¹⁵ Parmenides states clearly that these are located in the sky, whereas the Homeric passage most likely implies that in this place nights and days are equal.¹⁶ The corroboration of these passages points to a single place, which has the above properties. This is the celestial equator.¹⁷ The heavenly equator represents the equinoctial circle, the place where night and day become equal (come close) during the yearly course of the sun. South of the celestial equator the path of the night is longer, whereas north of the equator the path of the day is longer. If the above interpretation is correct, then the Hesiodic Atlas’ location in Tartarus is not different from the Farnese representation. Atlas in Tartarus, i.e., under the celestial South Pole, holds the sky globe with his hands placed on the celestial equator.

In conclusion, the lack of very early representations of the ‘Farnese’ position may be seen as inconclusive. These artistic representations of Atlas may be much older than what the archaeological finds reveal, and, in any case, can be met with in art earlier than Hellenistic times. The Hesiodic account, therefore, points to the fact that Atlas is located in Tartarus in the ‘Farnese’ position. In this position Atlas holds the celestial globe with his hands placed on the equator, which is the place where Day and Night come close to each other.

13 Hes. *Th.* 736–738 (Athanasakis’ (1983) translation); this means that the earth and the sea (their ‘roots’, i.e., depths) stretch towards the South Pole of the vault, where Tartarus begins. Hesiod’s metaphor of the anvil also shows that Tartarus is symmetrical to the sky from an earthly standpoint; cf. Hes. *Th.* 722–725.

14 All these considerations raise the question about when the celestial vault could be conceived of as spherical in the Greek world. For opinions about the shape of the sky vault in the archaic Greek world, see e.g., Berger (1904: 13), Buffière (1956: 212–221), Schadewaldt (1970: 605–606) (sphere); Hainsworth (1990: 278) (dome), Kirk-Raven (1957: 10) (bowl); the Vedic world also knew this latter shape of the celestial vault: in phrases like *dhiṣāne samīcīnē* (*RV* 10.44.8, *AV* 2.34.3) or *camvā samīcī* (*RV* 3.55.20), the vault is seen as a ‘bowl’; cf. Kirfel (1967: 6). For a synopsis of the issue, see Schmidt (1976: 125–126, 215–218). The earliest clear attestation of the Greek spherical model is in Parmenides (fr. 10); cf. Hahn (1970: 106).

15 For Parmenides (the proem), cf. Sext. *Emp. Math.* 73; *Simpl. in Cael.* 55725; Kirk-Raven (1957: 266–268); most interpretations consider both the verses about the ‘paths’ and the proem in general as an obscure allegory, cf. e.g. Bowra (1937: 103), Burkert (1969: 9–12), Curd (1998: 19 and n. 43). For Homer, cf. *Od.* 10.80–86, where the Laistrygones are said to live in a place where ‘the courses of night and day lie close to each other.’

16 This is likely the significance of the fact that in this place, ‘a man who could do without sleep could earn him double wages, one for herding the cattle, one for the silvery sheep.’ On the other hand, Parmenides calls ‘the gates of the paths of Night and Day’ *aitheriai* ‘celestial’ (verse 13).

17 Interestingly, the Laistrygones’ city is Telepylos ‘the far-gated’, which is an appropriate description of the celestial equator, the ‘great circle’ of the rotating vault.

The above considerations raise the issue about the origins of these two different representations. In essence, both show that the celestial vault was conceived of as a spheroid rotating about the poles/*axis mundi*. They do not show, however, which one is older and how they came to coexist.

A possible answer can be found by considering similar cases in other cultures.¹⁸ The first and most important case, which is historically relevant for the representation of Atlas, can be met with in the Hindu tradition. This tradition also knows the myth of a god keeping the sky and earth asunder. Thus, Viṣṇu sets up the *skambha* in the sky in that place where his dwelling place is situated. This is made clear in *RV* 1.154.1 where we read: ‘let me now sing the heroic deeds of Viṣṇu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up (*askabhāyad*) the upper dwelling-place (*uttaram sadhastham*), striding far as he stepped forth three times.’¹⁹ The verb *skabh-* is obviously related to *skambha*, which is the *axis mundi*.²⁰ Most importantly, this dwelling place of Viṣṇu has a precise location: the North Pole of the sky. This tradition emerges clearly in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.²¹ There, the supreme god, Viṣṇu, is located at the North Pole of the celestial vault: ‘The space between the seven *Rṣis* (Ursa Maior – my note) and *Dhruva* (the Polaris – my note), the third region of the sky, is the splendid celestial path of Viṣṇu (*Viṣṇupada*) ... there are fastened and inwoven to all that is, and all that shall ever be, animate or inanimate. The seat of Viṣṇu is contemplated by the wisdom of the Yogis, identified with supreme light, as the radiant eye of heaven ...’²²

Along the same traditions, Viṣṇu’s place in the universe has a symmetrical and lowest point in the Underworld (hell), where the cosmic serpent (Śeṣa Ananta ‘infinite’), which is another form of Viṣṇu, upholds the world on his head. It is there where Viṣṇu sleeps during the intervals of creation: ‘below... is the form of Viṣṇu called Śeṣa ...; Śeṣa bears the entire world like a diadem upon his head ...’²³ This cosmic snake is located symmetrically to Viṣṇu’s place, in a position which reminds one of Greek Atlas. Since Viṣṇu is located at the celestial North Pole, the cosmic snake has to be located at the South Pole of the vault.

Thus, some of the Hindu traditions reflect a structure of the universe, which is similar to the one in the Hesiodic myth. The world is supported from the South Pole of the celestial vault. Moreover, as it was the case with the Titans in the Greek myth, it is in this place, i.e. in hell, where the supreme god’s divine

18 For Indo-European parallels, cf. West (2007: 345–347); for the Near-East, cf. West (1997: 148–149).

19 The translation belongs to O’Flaherty (1981: 226).

20 *AV* 10.7 is dedicated entirely to *skambha*. In the Rig Veda, *skambha* appears as the *axis mundi* in 1.34.2, 8.41.10, 9.74.2, 9.86.46, 10.5.6, 10.44.4.

21 For the Vedic cases which show Viṣṇu as located at the North Pole, cf. Anghelina (2009).

22 Cf. Wilson (1972: 187–188 (Book II, viii)). In *AV* 3.27.5, 12.3.59, 15.14.5, Viṣṇu’s region in the cosmos is ‘immovable’, in Sanskrit *dhruvā dik*.

23 Cf. Wilson (1972: 169–170 (Book II, v)).

enemies are located.²⁴ At the same time, the Vedic world also knew the myth of the axis which upholds the sky.

The second relevant case is represented by the ancient Egyptian god Shu, who is one of the main gods of Heliopolis. Whatever his name may represent (dry air?) and regardless of whether he was the god of air or not, one of Shu's main functions is to support the outstretched figure of the sky Nut, thus separating the sky from the earth Geb.²⁵ Shu's well-known artistic representation is similar to the Homeric one: the god, who symbolizes the *axis mundi*, holds the sky from the inside. This artistic representation of Shu is also supported by Egyptian texts. Thus, we can find in the Pyramid Texts:

1101. O men and gods, your arms under me! Lift me up, raise me to the sky, just as the arms of Shu are under the sky when he raises it!

1471. Horus has offered this king his arms on his own account and allots this king to Shu, whose arms, which are under the sky, are upraised.

1454. O you arms of mine which lift up the sky as Shu.

Pillars that hold asunder earth and sky can also be found in Mesopotamia. Artistic renderings – most of them on cylinder seals – from Anatolia, Syria and Assyria show a representation type, in which the sky, shown as a winged sun disc, is supported by pillars or by anthropomorphic figures.²⁶ This representation, therefore, also belongs to the first type, in which the vault is supported from between the earth and sky.

As in the Greek case, the Mesopotamian world also knows about a myth of creation in which sky and earth were separated. This is found at the earliest in the Sumerian conceptions about the beginnings of the universe. Thus, in The Prologue to Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree (GHT 8–13) we read:

After heaven was made distant from earth; after earth was made remote from heaven; after the name of mankind was established; after the time when Anu carried off heaven; after Enlil carried off earth.²⁷

The Mesopotamian texts from above do not mention any pillars that keep apart the sky and the earth. Nevertheless, given the existence of the artistic represen-

24 RV 7.104.

25 The myth of Shu separating the sky from the earth in the primeval darkness is very old going back to the Pyramid Texts (3rd millennium BC); cf. *LdA* (1984:735–736); Derchain (1975:110–116).

26 This winged sun disc is a sky symbol probably imported from Egypt; cf. Frankfort (1939:187 (figs. 57 and 59), 209f., 219 (figs. 66 and 67), 275–278 (figs. 89 and 90); Pls. XXXIIIb,e, XXXIVb, XLIIe); Crowley (1989:127 (figs. 64B), 212); cf. West (1997:149).

27 Cf. Horowitz (1998:134–137); other texts, in which the myth of separation is mentioned, are *The Creation of the Pickaxe* ('Enlil ... hastened to make earth distant from heaven'), *Enki and Ninmah* etc.

tations of the pillars, one can make the reasonable assumption that the separation of earth and sky was realized through such means.²⁸ On the other hand, the conception of a supreme deity located at the celestial North Pole is not present in the Mesopotamian world. However, the Mesopotamian texts do speak about Underworld gods. These are the Anunnaki, who were locked in the Underworld by the supreme god Bel. Despite this, the existence of a god similar to Atlas, who supports the heavens from the Underworld, is not attested.²⁹

To sum up:

- 1) the tradition of a god supporting the sky from inside is very old and can be met with in several cultures across Eurasia;
- 2) the tradition about a generation of gods locking ‘under the earth’ another generation of gods can also be met with in several cultures across Eurasia;
- 3) the tradition about a supreme god living at the North Pole of the celestial vault can be met with only in the shamanistic cultures of northern Asia and in the Hindu world;
- 4) the tradition about an ‘Atlas’ holding up the sky from the outside appears in the Greek and Hindu myths; since in the Hindu myth the supreme god lives at the North Pole, the ‘Hindu Atlas’, Śeṣa, has to be located at the South Pole of the celestial vault.

Therefore, the myth about a god holding up the sky from the outside is present only in the Hindu and Greek traditions. There has been no evidence so far for such conceptions existing in the Mesopotamian or Egyptian worlds. In the Greek world, on the other hand, this iconographic representation of Atlas is congruent with the Hesiodic account of Atlas supporting the sky. In this account, Atlas is located – as in the Farnese position – at the South Pole of the celestial vault holding up the sky from the outside. Since in the Hindu myth the god who is located at the North Pole, Viṣṇu, is most likely of a non-Indo-European origin, the conception of a god located at the celestial South Pole and holding up the sky from there is also likely to be of non-Indo-European origin.³⁰ Traces of this myth can be found in the Altaic cultures of Siberia, where such mythologies of the North Pole have been documented.³¹ It is in these shamanistic cultures where the most plausible candidates for the origin of this type of representation must be looked for. One cannot say, therefore, that this Greek type is recent borrowing from the Mediterranean/Near East sources. Both representations of Atlas could

28 West (1997: 149) gives examples from the Old Testament (e.g., *Job* 26.11), in which Yahweh holds the pillars of the earth, upon which he set the world.

29 For the Anunnaki, cf. Horowitz (1998: 18) (KAR 307 37); West (1997: 149).

30 Cf. Kuiper (1962: 138); Anghelina (2009).

31 Cf. Eliade (above, n. 3).

coexist from before the time when the Greeks entered the Greek peninsula.³² Thus, the Hesiodic representation of Atlas, the 'Farnese' Atlas, may be very old, possibly going back to the period when the Greeks were still in contact with the shamanistic cultures of Asia.

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32 In the case of the pillars, West (2007: 346) argues for a possible import from Near Eastern sources; on the other hand he assumes (2007: 10) a Greco-Aryan common culture (dialect) by 2500 BC.

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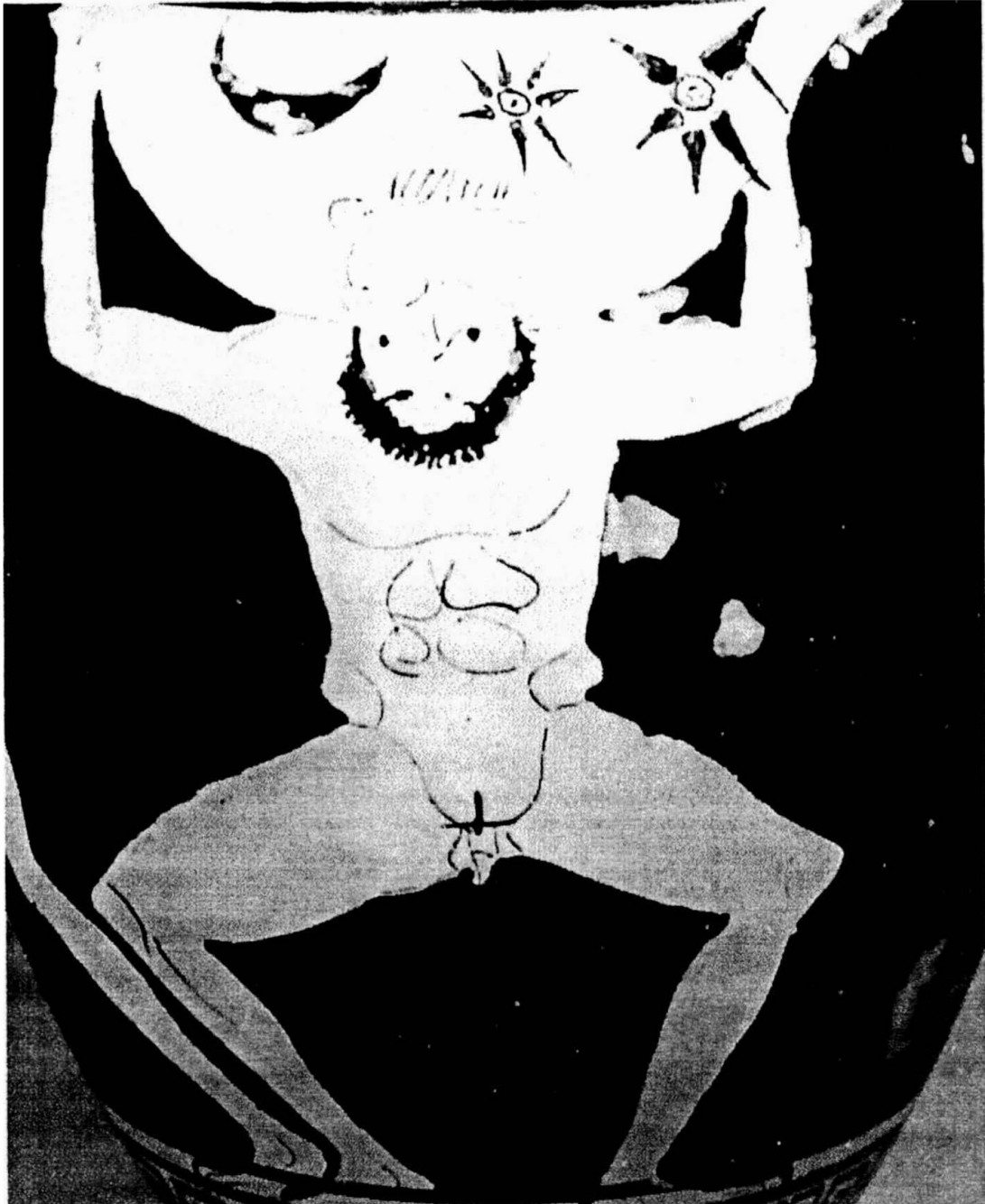


Fig. 1. Herakles in the Farnese position, Campanian amphora (450 BC), cf. p. 3.

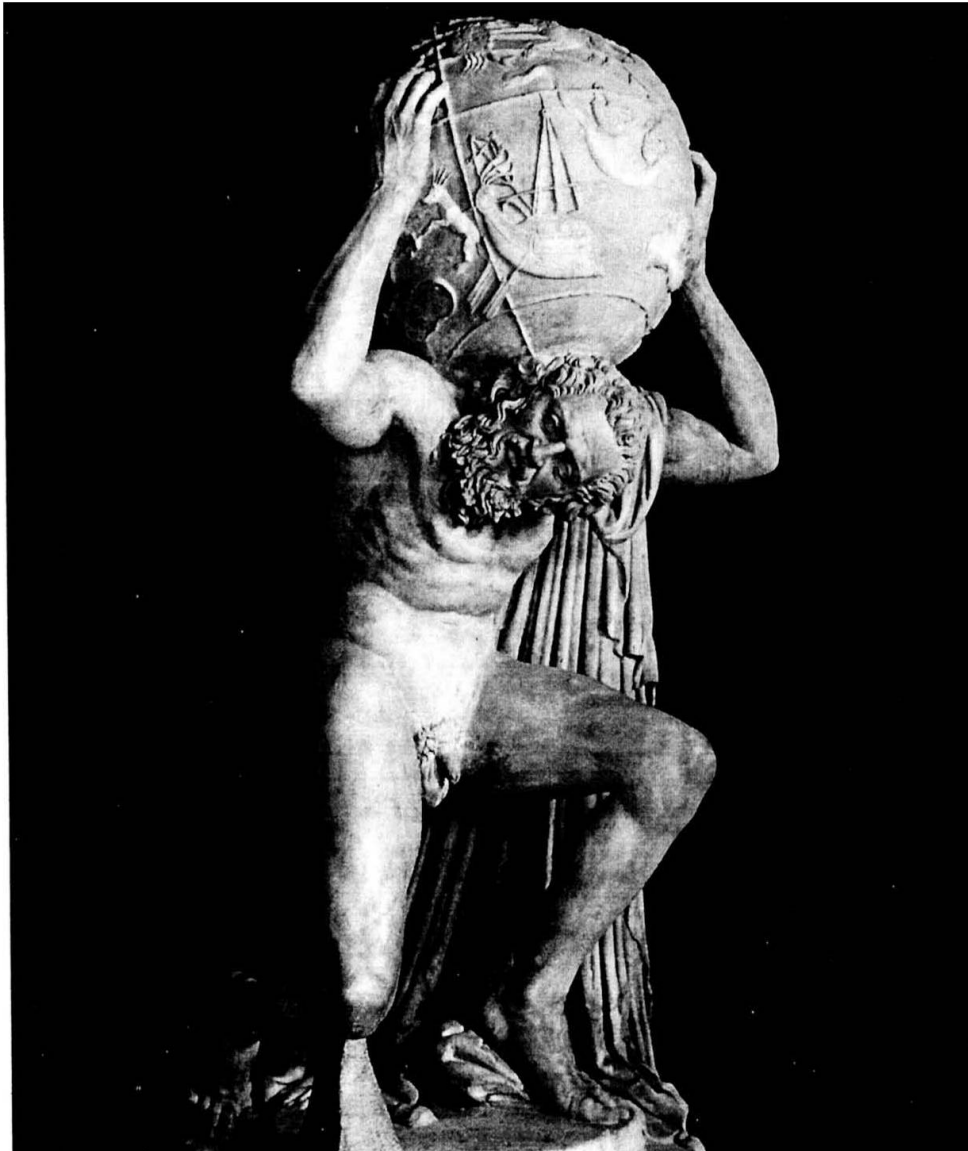


Fig. 2. The Hellenistic Farnese Atlas, cf. p. 1.



Fig. 3. Atlas and Prometheus. Laconian cup (560 BC), cf. p. 2.