

DIRKE AND THE SUN'S COURSE IN SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

Ἀκτὶς ἀελίου τὸ κάλ-
 λιστον ἐπταπύλῳ φανέν
 Θήβᾳ τῶν προτέρων φάος
 ἐφάνθη ποτ', ὃ χρυσέας
 ἀμέρας βλέφαρον, Διρκαί-
 ων ὑπὲρ ρεέθρων μολοῦσα

(Soph. *Ant.* 100-5)

THERE has been apparently a universal agreement among commentators¹ on *Antigone* that either Sophocles was wrong in having the early sun rise over Dirke, west of Thebes, or that he chose Dirke rather than Ismenos, which flows to the east, as the most representative waterbed. But, curiously enough, they fail to realize that Sophocles nowhere in the above passage mentions the sun, but rather the sunlight, ἀκτὶς ἀελίου τὸ κάλλιστον . . . φανέν . . . φάος . . . ὃ . . . βλέφαρον . . . μολοῦσα where βλέφαρον, eyelid, may not necessarily mean ὄμμα but βλεφαρίς,² eyelashes, i.e. the outward-bound sunbeams. Moreover, the sun normally rises above an elevation and not over a waterbed, which—unless a waterfall—flows on the lowest ground level. The only remaining possibility would be that Sophocles refers to the reflection of the sun on the stream: but at that time of the day it would have been photometrically impossible.

Surely, then, Sophocles, in describing the sun's course, imagines the Theban elders standing on the upper west side of the hillock of Cadmeia, which, naturally, blocks the sun in the early morning; the chorus could have observed the sunlight hitting the northern course of Dirke, where the sunlight was unobstructed by the hillock, then moving toward Dirke below the hillock and toward them, and at last they could see the sun appear over Cadmeia in the east. That is to say, Sophocles is describing not the rising of the sun over the horizon but the spreading of the dawn light, which, to a viewer looking west from a hill such as the Cadmeia, will seem to spread from the west towards the east.

Any person with common sense and ability of observation can not only grasp and enjoy such a natural phenomenon, but also, quite possibly, tell the time.³ It seems reasonable that Sophocles not only was certain as to what he was referring to but had no doubt that his fellow Greeks, being, like himself, very close to nature and early risers, would undoubtedly have been familiar enough with such occurrences to transport themselves to the time and place of the play without difficulty. The topography of Greece certainly renders this phenomenon a daily occurrence for many of its people.

One may even venture further: if Sophocles composed *Antigone* to be the first tragedy in his trilogy, he might very well have taken advantage of the

¹ Nevius, Donaldson, Schneidewin, Wolf, Schmelzer, Wecklein, Jebb, Bayfield, Campbell, Muff, and others.

² ἐφάνθη . . . ἀμέρας βλεφαρίς N (Aug. Nauck, p. 144), βλέφαρον libri.

³ As schoolchildren we knew, without looking at the clock, that when the sunlight hit a certain dry bed in the western plain below we should be late for school.

time and the similar topography of the theatre of Dionysus: as the sunlight, creeping over Ilissos, approached the lower part of the theatre and the sun was about to appear in the east, he could have timed the chorus to make its entry.

Villanova University

E. COUGHANOWR