

Some Striking Indications that the Mythical Elysian Fields Were in Polynesia

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As strange as it may seem at first sight, in Polynesia there is no shortage of clues that seem to attest to ancient contacts with Caucasian populations, such as the presence of megaliths and the physical appearance of some of the natives encountered by the first European explorers, not to mention myths, legends, customs, characteristics and names of deities, even traditional tales curiously reminiscent of the Iliad and Odyssey. In this framework, which seems to delineate a prehistoric seafaring civilization spread everywhere in very ancient times, certain peculiar characteristics that the Greek poets attribute to the Islands of the Blessed and to the Elysian Fields seem to be typical of the Island of Hawaii, to the point of suggesting a precise localization of these mythical places, bizarre as this may seem, right there.

Keywords: *Elysian Fields, Islands of the Blessed, Hawaii, Polynesia, Rhadamanthus, Cronos*

In this article, we will first review various clues, of different nature, which seem to attest to the reality of ancient contacts between the cultures of the Old World and the Polynesian ones, on which a large literature is available, based on the testimonies of both explorers (starting since the end of the 16th century) and ethnologists who have collected an enormous amount of evidence on myths, legends, customs and folklore of native cultures in the various archipelagos scattered in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean. Subsequently we will try to highlight some surprising indications that the mythical Elysian Fields were located in a precise island of Polynesia, using a methodology consisting of a new critical examination of the classical sources and in particular of the testimonies contained in the works of authors such as Homer, Hesiod and Pindar.

Let us first observe that impressive megalithic remains are scattered throughout the islands of Polynesia, whose affinities with similar monuments scattered in other parts of the world are often surprising. Let us think, for example, of the enormous constructions, made with large blocks of basalt, of Nan Madol in the Caroline Islands, where the archaeological area extends for 18 km² on a hundred artificial islets connected to each other by a dense network of canals. Moreover, among the most striking Polynesian monuments there is also the imposing trilithon of Tonga (Figure 1), which has even been compared to Stonehenge.

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Figure 1. *The Trilithon of Tonga*



No less surprising is a sentence from the account of one of the first meetings of Europeans with Polynesians, which took place in 1595 in one of the Marquesas islands: at a certain point there appeared “about four hundred tall, strong, almost white-skinned Indians [...] Many of them are blond” (Surdich 2015, p. 50). We find a confirmation of these unexpected European characteristics of some native Polynesians in the notes of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, the French navigator who landed in Tahiti in 1768: “Men six feet tall and even more. I have never met such well-built and proportionate men [...] Nothing distinguishes their features from those of Europeans” (Surdich 2015, p. 171). This is in line with the fact that among the Marquesans, 7.2% of men and 9.5% of women had blue eyes (Polinesiani 1935).

Stories, customs and social structures are to be added to the megalithic remains and people’s features: in Polynesia we find the myths of the Tower of Babel and the Flood (Caillot 1914, p. 10), but what is also striking is the name of the *Ari’i* (or *Ali’i*), the nobles, who were considered descendants of the Polynesian gods (Guiart 1962, p. 145). In each clan there was a chief called *Ari’i rahi*, “chief (*rahi*) of the nobles (*Ari’i*)”, a term composed of two well-known roots: the first indicates the “superiority”, or the “strength”¹, while the second corresponds to the Latin *rex* and the Gaelic *rígh*, “king”. Similarly, in a Polynesian myth very similar to that of Orpheus, the name of Kura (a dead girl that her husband manages to bring back from the afterlife: Eliade 1983, p. 394) closely resembles the Greek *kourē*, “girl”. But also the *kavu*, the “priest” (Guiart 1962, p. 46), is almost homonymous with the *koēs* (*kavēs* in the Lydian language), the Greek priest of the Kabiric rites (Kerényi 1979, p. 161: a name which can also be compared to the Hebrew *cohen* and the Norse *godhi*), not to mention the well-known greeting formula *aloha*, which is very similar to Nordic *alu* and Latin *vale*.

¹Cf., only as an example, the comparative *areiōn*, “better”, and the superlative *aristos*, “best”.

In this framework, it is also striking that the name of the Polynesian dance called *hula*, or *hura*, closely resembles the Greek *choros*, “dance”, not to mention the fact that in Tahiti the name of the typical local dance is ‘*Ori Tahiti*, where ‘*Ori* is identical to *choros*. But what leaves us even more amazed is that the *hula* is accompanied by traditional songs called *mele*, a name that almost identical to the Greek word *melos*, “song” (hence “melody”).

And what about the *Holua*, traditional races down hillsides on wooden sleds? It is presumably the memory of an era in which the ancestors of the Polynesians lived in regions where there were long snowy slopes.

The case of Hina, the great Polynesian goddess linked to the sea and the moon, which in many respects corresponds to Ino Leucothea, the marine goddess who in the *Odyssey* saves Odysseus from a storm, also gives us a lot to think about. For example, just as Ino appears to Odysseus in the form of a bird (*Od.* V, 337), Hina also “descends to earth in the form of a bird” (Prampolini 1954, p. 424). Furthermore, Hina corresponds to Ino also for the fact that *hina-hina* in the Polynesian language means “white” (Martin 1817, p. 364)², which recalls Leucothea, the “white goddess”. Also, in the Hawaiian Islands the goddess of fire and volcanoes is called Pele, a name identical to that of the Pelée volcano in Martinique (whose catastrophic eruption of 1902 has remained famous).

We also note that the Polynesian god of agriculture, fertility and peace, but also warrior, was called Rono, Lono or Rongo (depending on the dialect). He was the son of Vatea, the god of the sky, and Papa, the earth mother. His figure corresponds to that of Saturn, the god who according to the myth introduced agriculture in primitive Lazio and was the king of the peaceful golden age; but gladiator games and even human sacrifices were also connected to him. Saturn’s correspondent in Greek mythology is Cronos, who also had an original agricultural dimension and was the son of the sky (the god Uranus) and of the earth (Gaia), just like Rono.

One should also note the oceanic dimension of Cronos, who gave his name to the Cronian Sea, i.e., the northern Atlantic; on the other hand, Cronos was relegated by Zeus “to the bounds of earth and sea” (*Il.* VIII, 479). At this point, it is natural to wonder if the assonance between Cronos and Rono–Lono is only coincidental.

All this would seem to indicate the possibility of ancient oceanic navigations, to which the Polynesians were accustomed since times prior to the arrival of the Europeans; on the other hand, this was also considered possible by Enrico Turolla, on the basis of a controversial passage by Plato, which makes an explicit reference to maritime contacts with a continent located on the other side of the Atlantic, “which truly, correctly, with absolute certainty can be called a continent” (*Plat., Tim.* 25a). Here what is very striking are those three consecutive adverbs with which Plato proclaims with great emphasis the existence of a continent beyond the Atlantic which was unknown in his time: this led Turolla to suppose that what the philosopher had written in the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias* on an Atlantic island which in very ancient times would have been mistress of the seas could be worthy of faith (Turolla 1964, p. 142).

²In the dialect of Tahiti the word *hinahina* means “white hair”.

Moreover, a recent work on the European megalithism argues for “advanced maritime technology and seafaring in the megalithic Age” (Schulz Paulsson 2019). It was favoured by a warmer climate than the current one: we are referring to the “post-glacial climatic optimum”, between the 6th and 3rd millennium BC, when the Arctic Sea was navigable during the summer. This made travel between the Atlantic and the Pacific much easier than now, through a polar route that avoided rounding the very distant and insidious Cape Horn, located at the southern end of the American continent and considered a real “ship graveyard” due to raging winds, huge waves, currents, icebergs, rocky shoals and freezing waters.

But now let us focus our attention on a type of monument typical of the Polynesians: we are referring to the marae, or malae, sacred places in an open space facing the sea, with a rectangular platform paved in stone and a perimeter marked by higher stones, while in the center or on one side there is a standing stone, also considered sacred. Here the ancient cults of the Polynesian society before the arrival of the Europeans took place, associated with religious, social and political ceremonies: meetings, enthronement of leaders, reception of guests, rites and ritual meals.

All these characteristics of the marae seem to reflect the description of the meeting place where the Phaeacians, called by Homer *nausiklytoi*, “famed for their ships” (*Od.* VII, 39), gathered in assembly: “There is their place of assembly about the fair temple of Poseidon, fitted with huge stones set deep in the earth” (*Od.* VI, 266–267). Indeed, on the occasion of the meeting to celebrate the arrival of Ulysses, their king Alcinous “led the way to the place of assembly of the Phaeacians, which was built for them near the ships. Thither they came and sat down on the polished stones close by one another” (*Od.* VIII, 4–7). During this assembly, which precisely took place next to the sea – as we can deduce from the indication “near the ships” – a dance of young people took place (*Od.* VIII, 262), accompanied by the song of the bard with the cithara. But even now the Polynesians perform their traditional dances during the welcoming ceremony which takes place in the marae, also characterized by refined speeches and traditional songs (i.e. the *mele* mentioned earlier), exactly as the Homeric Phaeacians did with Odysseus.

Let us now examine the figure of Longopoa, or Longapoa, a mythical Polynesian navigator whose adventures to return to his island (Gifford 1924, pp. 139–152) are singularly reminiscent of those of Odysseus: there is the great abyss at the end of the world that swallows boats (corresponding to Charybdis, which makes no sense in the Polynesian context, while the description of the *Odyssey* recalls the Maelstrom, i.e., the notorious whirlpool that the Atlantic tide periodically triggers in front of the Lofoten Islands: Vinci (2013, 2017), the monster “so big as to fish for whales and sharks” (the Homeric Scylla), the arrival at the house of Sinilau (Calypso), the tears of the shipwrecked man who yearns to return to his island without having a boat, even the *tapa* cloth (a traditional Polynesian fabric produced from the bark of certain trees, of whose workmanship the goddess Hina was the patroness) which must be returned to the sea and which recalls the veil of Ino (which is identical to Hina, as we said earlier). Incidentally,

the root of the name of the *tapa* can be found in Homer (*tapēs*), in Latin (*tapetum*), in Italian (*tappeto*), in German (*Teppich*), in Norwegian (*teppe*) and so on.

No less surprising is the fact that among the legends concerning Hina there is one, in which she has the name of “Hina of Hilo”³, which portrays her as a sort of Helen of Troy, kidnapped from her legitimate husband by one of her suitors, with the consequent outbreak of a war that has so many convergences with the events of the *Iliad* to be published by the Hawaiian king Kalakaua under the title of “*Hina, the Helen of Hawaii*”. Going into more detail, Hina of Hilo was the most beautiful woman in Hawaii. She married a powerful king, but was kidnapped by the son of another king, who had reached Hilo (a city on Hawaii, the largest island of the archipelago of the same name) in a canoe, then took Hina to a fortress. This caused a war: the supporters of her husband arrived with a fleet of 1200 boats and occupied the shore for several miles with their ships and tents, until after many dramatic and bloody events they conquered the fortress and brought Hina back home, from where she had been absent for almost eighteen years (Kalakaua 1888, p. 14). The parallels with the events of the Trojan War are amazing, even in the reference to those eighteen years: indeed, according to the *Odyssey*, Helen and Menelaus returned to Sparta only “in the eighth year” after the end of the war (*Od.* IV, 82), which had lasted ten years.

The analogy between the spears of the Homeric heroes and those of the Polynesian warriors is also striking: the latter, called *ihe*, could be of two types, one of which was very long, 16 to 20 feet, i.e., about 5 to 6 metres (Kalakaua 1888, p. 69). Similarly, in the Homeric world the spear was called *egkhos* (name similar to *ihe*) and here too there was a very large type, called “long-shadow spear”. The poet indicates the length of Hector’s: eleven cubits, that is more than 5 metres (*Il.* VI, 319).

Let us examine now a passage from Hesiod, where, immediately after naming the heroes who fell fighting in Troy, the poet states that “to the others Zeus, the son of Cronos, gave a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the bounds of the earth. And they live untouched by sorrow in the Islands of the Blessed along the shore of deep-swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them” (*Hes., Op.* 168–174).

Cronos is also found “at the bounds of the earth” (*Il.* VIII, 478) for Homer, who in the *Odyssey* reports a prophecy made to Menelaus: “It is not your destiny to die in Argos [...] but the immortals will take you to the Elysian plain and the bounds of the earth, where dwells fair-haired Rhadamanthus and for men life is much easier: there is never snow, nor winter, nor storm, but the ocean always sends the gusts of the shrill-blowing Zephyr to refresh men” (*Od.* IV, 561–569). In short, the legendary Elysian Fields, the pagan paradise reserved for virtuous men, were located at the bounds of the earth, in the Islands of the Blessed, which since ancient times people have tried in vain to locate.

As regards the name of Rhadamanthus, *Rhadamanthys* in Greek, it corresponds to the Icelandic term *ráðamanður*, “leader”, “eminent person”, and to the Danish

³Hilo is a city overlooking the beautiful bay of the same name on the Island of Hawaii (which is the largest of the archipelago: in fact it is also called the “Big Island”).

rådmand, “adviser”, which is well suited to the image of the judge in the afterlife, outlined by Plato in the *Apology of Socrates* and in the *Gorgias*. Incidentally, this Nordic name, attributed to a character from Greek mythology mentioned by Homer, would seem to refer to an extremely archaic context, prior to the descent of the ancestors of the Hellenes into the Mediterranean⁴.

It can be seen right away that in that apparently idealized picture of the Elysian plain, where “fair-haired Rhadamanthus” is placed, a fresh “shrill-blowing” wind appears: it is a very concrete and realistic note, which seems to indicate a precise place on earth, certainly not the afterlife. At this point, considering that the Polynesian tale corresponding to the story of Helen and Menelaus takes place in the Hawaiian Islands, where the climate offers the most pleasant conditions for man, it is natural to wonder if the Elysian plain could be located in one of those islands.

Indeed, the climate of the Hawaiian Islands is characterized precisely by the trade winds, that come down from the colder northern regions of North America. They are considered the “natural air conditioner” of those islands, where they are perceived as a pleasant, crisp and refreshing breeze, blowing for most of the year. What’s more they purify the air, sweeping away any traces of volcanic emissions or industrial pollution. They blow especially in summer, even more than 90% of the time, pleasantly cooling the islands when the temperature tends to warm up.

It is also very important to underline that the Hawaiian trade winds bring rain to the windward slopes of the islands, where the tropical vegetation is most luxuriant. This explains why Homer calls the good wind, that refreshes Rhadamanthus and the other lucky men living in the Elysian Plain, with the name of Zephyr: indeed, in another passage of the *Odyssey* the poet is keen to point out that Zephyr is the wind “that always brings rain” (*Od. XIV*, 458).

After noting that the trade winds received their English name from the “traders” who were the first to sail around the world in the modern age, using them for travel related to their trades, let us now observe that a sailing ship, propelled by these fresh trade winds, the first port it encounters when setting sail from North America is precisely Hilo Bay on the Island of Hawaii, the one where the “Helen of Hilo” returned after 18 years (Kalakaua 1888, p. 67)! Could the Elysian plain

⁴Moreover, according to a controversial hypothesis, exposed and debated in a conference held at the Sapienza University of Rome in 2012, the Homeric world itself would be previous, and not subsequent, to the descent of the ancestors of the Hellenes in the Aegean Sea and to the origin of the Mycenaean civilization. In this case, it would go back to at least the first half of the second millennium BC, and it would have had as its original set the Baltic-Scandinavian area, whose geographical, morphological and climatic characteristics could be able to explain all the contradictions found in the traditional Mediterranean location (Vinci 2013). This is corroborated by the astonishing affinity of the Mycenaean civilization with the Nordic Bronze Age, to the point of having led an archaeologist to define the latter as “a specific and selective Nordic variety of Mycenaean high culture” (Kristiansen and Suchowska-Ducke 2015, p. 371). All of this is also consistent with the fact, noted by all scholars, that the civilization described in the Homeric poems is more rustic and more archaic than the Mycenaean civilization. In a word, this hypothesis would seem capable of explaining all the innumerable absurdities of the Homeric world in the traditional Mediterranean context, as well as the difficulties both in inserting the Homeric world into a defined historical context and in clarifying its relationship with the Mycenaean civilization.

“at the bounds of the earth” be found here, where Menelaus, according to that *Odyssey* prophecy, was destined to go?

A confirmation might be found in Pindar’s *Olympian II*, in which Rhadamanthus appears next to Cronos “where the ocean breezes blow around the Isle of the Blessed, and golden flowers shine from beautiful trees” (Pind., *Ol. II*, 70–73). Indeed, those “golden flowers” that bloom on the trees could allude to Hawaiian hibiscus (*Hibiscus Brackenridgei*: Roberts Hawaii 2023), a shrub that produces a large, beautiful, golden flower with a diameter of 10–15 cm, selected as the official state flower of Hawaii in 1988 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *The Hawaiian Yellow Hibiscus*



Also known as *pua aloalo* in Hawaiian, the yellow hibiscus is native to the Hawaiian Islands. These striking shrubs can be found in clusters or growing singularly on branches with some plants rising from 3 to 15 feet tall.

Not only that: in the following verses, Pindar underlines that those golden flowers are “for those who entwine their hands with wreaths and garlands according to the righteous counsels of Rhadamanthus” (Pind., *Ol. II*, 74-75), thus offering us a delightfully “Hawaiian” image, in which Rhadamanthus is even presented in the guise of a dance master.

On the other hand, in Hawaiian folklore there is a male patron of the hula-dance, Ku-ka-ohia-Laka (Beckwith 1940, p. 40), the god of Hula dancing and canoe building. He is associated with *ohia lehua* tree, whose flowers are used for decorations on altars during performances. Also the goddess of Hula is called Laka: she is said to be what causes the movement of the dancer (as for the name *Laka*, in some Polynesian dialects it is also found as *Lata* or *Rata*, which seems to be comparable to the root of the name of Rhadamanthus).

At this point we propose to add Rhadamanthus to the scientific name of the yellow Hawaiian hibiscus: the natural outcome of such a juxtaposition would be *Hibiscus Brackenridgei Rhadamanthi*.

Also worth thinking about is that the name of the “Islands of the Blessed”, *Makarōn nēsoi*, which is common in Greek literature from Hesiod onwards, is almost identical to *Makali’i*, the name by which the Pleiades are called in the

islands of Hawaii. In fact, considering that in the Polynesian dialects the liquid consonants, *L* and *R*, are often interchangeable, *Makali'i* appears almost identical to the Greek *makaroi* (“the Blessed”), which is the nominative case of *makarōn*.

Furthermore, also considering that the Pleiades are central to the Polynesian calendar just as they were in the calendar of ancient Mesopotamia (here is yet another point of contact with the ancient cultures of the Old World), one could assume that the Hawaiian Islands as a whole were considered a projection of the Pleiades onto earth, similar to what we have verified in some earlier works relating to the Seven Hills of Rome and other ancient cities (Vinci and Maiuri 2017, 2019, 2021, Nissan et al. 2019, pp. 104–124; on this specific point, Maiuri and Vinci 2022). One should also consider that the archipelago of Hawaii is made up of 137 islands, of which the inhabited ones are only the seven largest (namely Oahu, Maui, Hawaii, Kauai, Molokai, Lanai, and Niihau).

It should also be underlined that the traditional Hawaiian New Year’s holiday, *Makahiki* – a name derived from *Makali'i hiki*, the rising of the Pleiades – is dedicated to Lono–Rono: this corresponds to the relationship between Cronos and the Pleiades mentioned by Plutarch, when he recalls that, in the oceanic world where Cronos was relegated, every thirty years a great feast was celebrated, on the occasion of the entry of the Star of Cronos (i.e., the planet Saturn) into the constellation of Taurus (Plut., *De fac. orb. lun.* 941c), that is, when the conjunction between Saturn and the Pleiades occurs (the latter being considered the stars most important of the Taurus, to the point that it was also called “the month of the Pleiades”: Verderame (2016, p. 110). As for the planet Saturn, it has a thirty-year cycle: in this regard, we recall that in the Egyptian world “Ptah from the very beginning bears the title of Lord of the Thirty-year Cycle, i.e., of the period of Saturn”, and that “in China Saturn was the Imperial Star” (de Santillana and von Dechend 2003, p. 239).

In short, there is no lack of reasons to suppose that the Isle of the Blessed mentioned by Pindar was the island of Hawaii (over which Rono, i.e., Cronos “at the bounds of the earth” reigns), where the plain overlooking the Hilo Bay (Figure 3) is identifiable with the Elysian Fields.

Figure 3. *Hilo Bay on the Island of Hawaii*



The plain of Hilo could also correspond to the Fields of Rushes, or Fields of Reeds (*sekhet-iaru*), the Egyptian paradise where Osiris reigns. It is here that, according to Egyptian mythology, after a long and risky journey by ship the souls of virtuous men arrive who have passed the “weighing of the heart” test. In this regard, it must be borne in mind that two of the most important Polynesian deities, Horo (who was the main deity and the god of war in Tahiti) and Raa (the god of the Sun), have identical names to the gods Horus (one of the most significant deities in ancient Egypt) and Ra (the Egyptian god of Sun), not to mention that “mummification was practiced, in some cases, also in Polynesia” (Guiart 1962, p. 13). Nor less surprising is the fact that the Polynesian calendar, based on 12 months of 30 days plus 5 additional days (Kalakaua 1888, pp. 156–157), is identical to the Egyptian one (Clagett 2004), and that the Polynesians called the soul of man and the spirit of the ancestors *ko* and *bao* (Guiart 1962, pp. 80-81), almost identical to the *ka* and *ba* of the ancient Egyptians.

Still on the Egyptian Fields of Rushes, it can also be noted that the woods of the island of Hawaii, favored by the volcanic soil and the perennially mild climate, are very rich in vegetation of all types, including the giant reed (*Arundo donax*), which grows up to 10 cm a day, reaching a height of several meters; it thrives in coastal areas, in wetlands, along streams, ditches and rivers, even forming impenetrable thickets; but there are also other varieties of rods, such as bamboo (incidentally, by a strange coincidence, right near the bay of Hilo there is a particularly pleasant locality, called Reed’s Island, where according to a legend the ancient Ari’i had their playground and a local king lived).

All of this also seems to correspond to the inscription on a stele handed down to us by Diodorus Siculus and dedicated to Osiris: “My father is Cronos, the youngest of all the gods, and I am King Osiris, who made expeditions throughout the earth [...] There is no place in the inhabited world where I have not arrived” (Diod. Sic. I, 27, 5). All of this could be the last memory of facts attributable to an era prior to the first Egyptian dynasty, therefore corresponding to the megalithic age, which has left impressive traces almost everywhere on our planet (here we are not referring only to material remains, but also to myths, legends and folklore, such as the myth of the Flood and the idea of building cities on seven hills, which are scattered almost everywhere). Anyway, this passage from Plutarch directly connects Cronos and Osiris, which makes the connection between the Elysian Fields of Greek mythology and the Egyptian Fields of Rushes even more evident.

In conclusion, after having verified the importance of megalithism in Polynesia and the presence of European-looking men (already attested by the first explorers) – not to speak of the striking analogies of folklore, traditions, customs, myths, legends and features of local divinities with similar (if not identical) circumstances and situations in the classical world and in the Homeric poems – what emerged upon the character of Radhamanthus and the god Cronos (who, in addition to having many characteristics in common with the Polynesian Rono–Lono–Rongo, in mythology has an oceanic dimension and is often connected to the “ends of the earth” and to the Islands of the Blessed) seems to indicate that these islands can be identified in the Polynesian world and precisely in the archipelago of Hawaii.

In fact, the Elysian Fields seem to correspond to the beautiful plain extending around Hilo Bay on the island of Hawaii, refreshed by the typical trade winds of these places and embellished by the golden flowers of the Hawaiian hibiscus. It is the latter that still adorns the hair of the descendants of the girls who in ancient times entwined “their hands with wreaths and garlands according to the righteous counsels of Rhadamanthus”.

It is also clear that this fascinating topic requires further corroboration, research and insights from future scholars.

In any case, it is in Polynesia that after many years it seems possible to find fair-haired Rhadamanthus, perhaps turned a little gray, on his windy island “at the bounds of the earth”.

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