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THE HORIZONTAL DIMENSION OF THE ANCIENT AND BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE WORLD

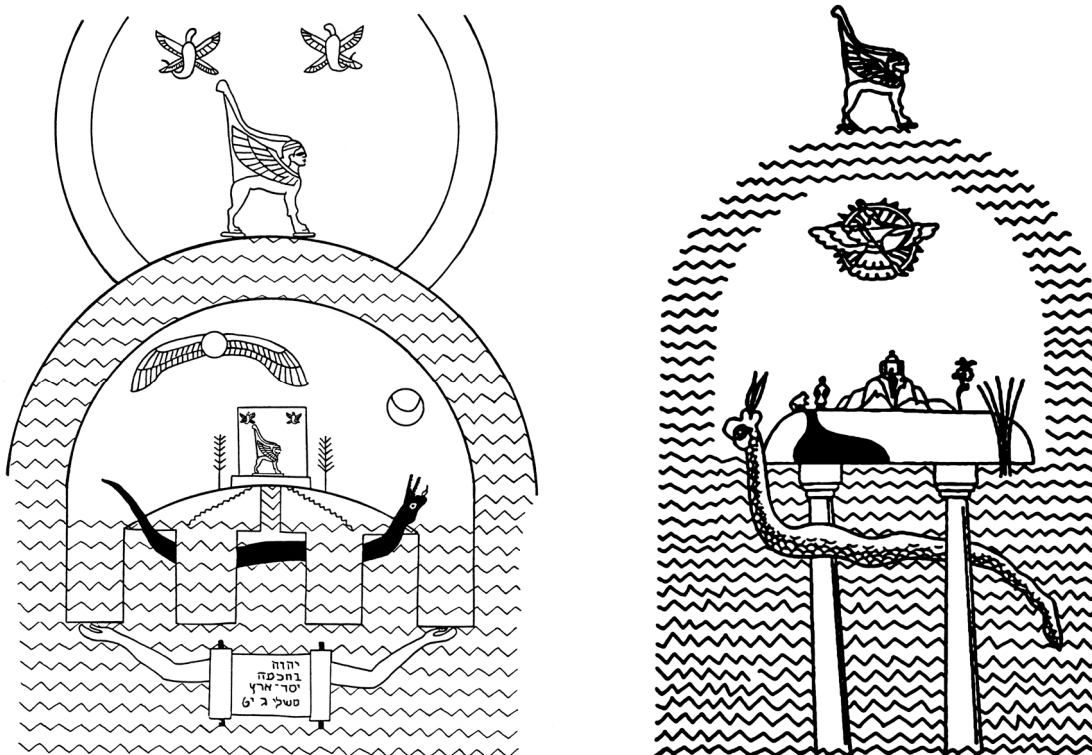
Izaak J. de Hulster

1. INTRODUCTION

Izak (Sakkie) Cornelius works mainly in South Africa and Germany. Before turning to the contents of his work, his “location” in both the southern and the northern hemisphere exhibits an awareness of the extensiveness of the earth. My contribution corroborates the extensiveness of the earth, as included in Cornelius’s observations concerning “the” ancient and biblical view of the world. However, by studying “the end(s) of the earth” in the Hebrew Bible and therefore the **קצה**, I offer to him an extension of his visual reconstruction by emphasising the islands.

2. VISUALISING THE “BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW”

Cornelius has published an article with a drawing that represents a reconstruction of “the” ancient and biblical view of the world (fig. 2). He developed this drawing with the collaboration of Ferdinand Deist. Their reconstruction was inspired by a drawing of Othmar Keel (fig. 1).



Figs. 1 and 2: Visual representations of the reconstructions of the cosmic geography in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible (both drawings without numbers and legend). Sources: Keel, 1985: 161; Cornelius, 1994: 218, fig. 10.

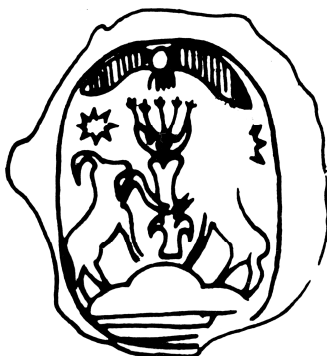



Fig. 3: Bulla from Akko (IAA 73-196; Akko 144 in Keel, 1997a: 580–581), surface find (between 700 and 400 BCE). © Stiftung BIBEL+ORIENT Freiburg CH.

A bulla from Akko is an example of an image from antiquity that parallels the basic structure of these drawings (fig. 3).¹ In my opinion, both modern reconstructions put an emphasis on the vertical axis in the worldview, accentuating the “earth” amidst the waters beneath and the waters above the earth. *Beyond* the waters above the earth, there is a representation of God’s dwelling. In earlier publications, I have criticised the “neo-platonic” mirroring between the temple and the heavenly dwelling of God and emphasised the *beyond* of God’s supposed dwelling place.² In the reconstruction of Cornelius and Deist, this mirroring is either absent or at least less explicit; the reconstruction has a cherub throne above the waters but it does not represent the throne in the temple. Moreover, Cornelius and Deist represent God within creation as “a combination of the sun god and the storm god with a bow”.³ I have also praised Cornelius and Deist for their attention to living beings, as they depict an animal, a human, and a bird (in a tree).⁴

As a complement to this aspect of “the” biblical cosmic geography, I examine, in the following section, the concept of “the end(s) of the earth” in the Hebrew Bible. My examination takes a step towards a more balanced representation of the cosmic geography that forms the background of a good number of Hebrew Bible texts 

3. “THE END(S) OF THE EARTH” AND ISLANDS

The Hebrew Bible has different expressions that refer to the end (or ends) of the earth. Besides indicating regions far away, these phrases can also be used as a merism for the whole earth.⁵ The most concrete geographical conceptualisation of the ends of the earth is their identification with islands. This is explicit in Isa 41:5: “The coastlands [islands] have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble; they have drawn near and come” (NRSV). The NRSV translates אַיִלִּים with coastlands; here, the translation “islands” is preferable, as I argue below.

¹ The bulla depicts a mountain with a palm tree, flanked by caprids, with a star above them (possibly two in symmetry), and the winged sun disk at the top.

² De Hulster, 2012: 42–45; 2015: 49–50.

³ Cornelius, 1994: 203. Cf. my take on the presence and activity of God in creation in, for example, De Hulster, 2015: 58. Note that in Cornelius and Deist’s original publication, the drawing has numbers referring to explanations.

⁴ See De Hulster, 2015: 54. This observation has been borrowed by Dietrich (2017: 8–9).

⁵ קְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ: Isa 40:28; 41:5, 9; Job 28:24. קֶצֶה הָאָרֶץ or קֶצֶה אֶרֶץ: Deut 13:8; 28:49, 64; Isa 5:26; 42:10; 43:6; 48:20; 49:6; 62:11; Jer 10:13; 12:12 (2x); 25:31, 33 (2x); 51:16; Pss 46:9; 61:2; 135:7; Prov 17:24. Note that Isa 42:10 indicates the whole earth but, unlike a merism, it uses a singular. אֶפְסֵי אֶרֶץ: Deut 33:17; 1 Sam 2:10; Isa 45:22; 52:10; Jer 16:19; Mic 5:4; Zech 9:10; Pss 2:8; 22:27; 59:13; 67:7; 72:8; 98:3; Prov 30:4. בְּנִפּוֹת הָאָרֶץ: Isa 11:12; 24:16; Ezek 7:2; Job 37:3; 38:13 (sometimes *four* “corners”). קֶצֶה תְּבֵל: Deut 4:32; 30:4; Isa 13:5; Ps 19:4; Neh 1:9. Note that such a merism could also be expressed differently. For instance, the black obelisk of Shalmaneser III depicts two kings, Jehu from the House of Omri and Sua from Gilzanu. These two kings were depicted as representative of the most south-western and north-eastern parts of the subjected districts, respectively (Keel / Uehlinger, 1994: 391–420). Likewise, the Egyptians placed victory stelae in one end of the “empire”, telling about a victory at the other end; they also took both an Asian and a Nubian to represent the two ends of the Pharaoh’s kingdom (Wimmer, 2008: 195).

אִיִּים is the common Classical Hebrew word for islands or coastlands. Islandology puts these two meanings and their alleged distinction into perspective by emphasising that at the core of the matter is the relation between land and water. This also holds for the use of אִיִּים.⁶ The word was used for concrete regions, such as the Levantine coastland of the Philistines and the Phoenicians,⁷ as well as the islands of Cyprus and Crete.⁸ The plural אִיִּים also occurs in the combinations אִיֵּי הַיָּם (“islands of the sea”) and אִיֵּי הַגּוֹיִם (“islands of the nations”). Both combinations, like the lexicalisation “wild animals” (Isa 13:22; 34:14; Jer 50:39), are associated with regions far away. Despite this association of distance and possibly wildness, the Hebrew Bible seems to assume that these regions are inhabited and ruled by local kings (e.g., Ezek 27:35; Zeph 2:11). This implies that there is culture and order in these regions. The following section briefly illustrates this in reference to the so-called Babylonian *mappa mundi*.

4. *nagû* AND THE BABYLONIAN WORLD MAP (BM 92687)

The most important ancient parallel to “the” Hebrew Bible worldview is the so-called Babylonian world map (fig. 4). This sixth century BCE drawing provides a concept of the world comparable to today’s world maps, depicting cities, countries, waterways, oceans, and islands. Like our modern maps, the map is inscribed with explanations, such as the names of cities or the kind of terrain. Fig. 4 has replaced the words inscribed on the Babylonian map with numbers and gives the explanation as a legend below the map.⁹

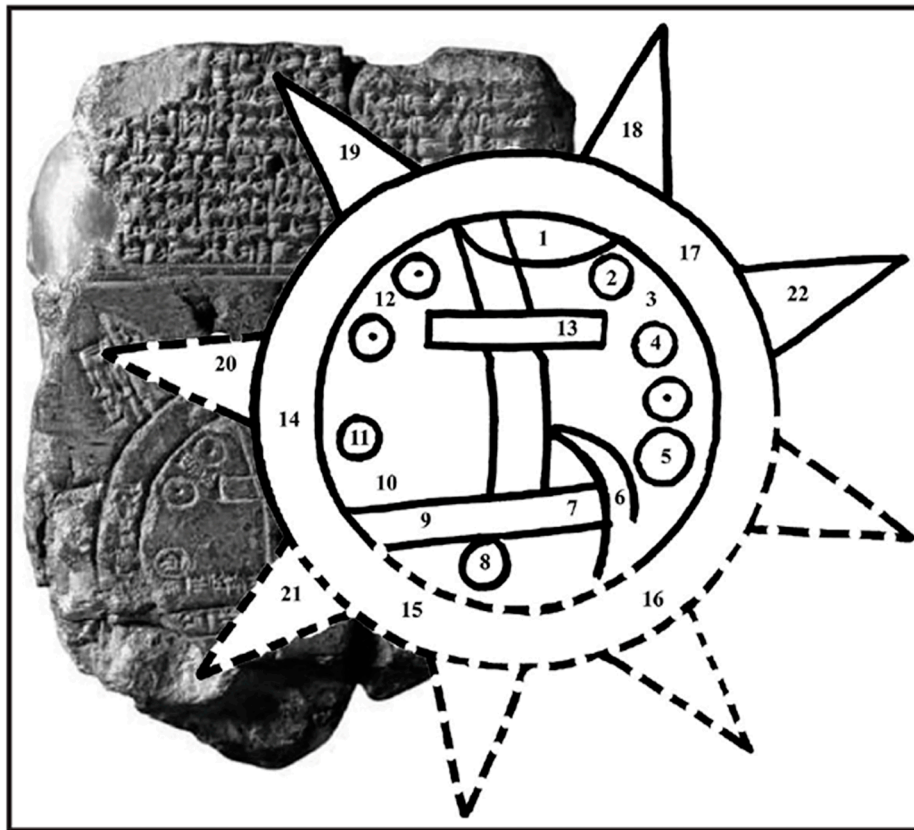


Fig. 4: Tablet with Babylonian world map (BM 92687), 12,2cm × 8,2cm (sixth century BCE).

Source: De Hulster, 2015: 48, fig. 1:2.

Legend: 1. Mountain; 2. city; 3. Urartu; 4. Assyria; 5. Der; 6. [undecipherable]; 7. swamp; 8. Susa; 9. channel; 10. Bit Yakin; 11. city; 12. Habban; 13. Babylon; 14–17. Ocean; 18. Great Wall, six leagues in between where the Sun is not seen; 19. district, six leagues in between; 20. [dis]trict; 21. [dis]trict; 22. district, eight leagues.

⁶ Cf. De Hulster, forthcoming.

⁷ Isa 20:6; 23:1–6. Note that, in this period, Tyre was in fact an island (in the sense of land surrounded by water).

⁸ Jer 2:10; 47:4. In addition, it also occurs in the sense of “wild animals” (of the islands?) in Isa 13:22; 34:14; Jer 50:39.

⁹ I produced the line drawing based on various photos and Horowitz, 2011: 20–42. Cf. Finkel, 2014: 261–297.

Given the scope of the present contribution, the focus is on the triangles framing the drawing. These triangles are inscribed with the word *nagû*. The common translation of *nagû* is “district” or “province”. With a few exceptions, especially in relation to the sea, the word is lexicalised as “island” as well.¹⁰ Such a district may well be an island, but it is perhaps not necessary to add the lexicalisation “island” for *nagû*. In other words, it is not necessary to hypothesise the existence of two homonyms, *nagû* (“district”) and *nagû* (“island”); rather, the meaning of *nagû* is “district”, but it can refer to an island (compare modern states, such as Barbados, Nauru, or Iceland, that happen to be islands).

Interestingly, one of the examples of the meaning “district” noted by CAD appears in the inscriptions of Babylonian kings: *ašarrāni šadī nasūti u na-gi-i bērūti* (“kings of far-away mountains and remote districts”).¹¹ Given the ancient cosmography, these remote districts may well be islands.¹² Therefore, the caption of fig. 4 retains the translation “district” and does not follow the additional lexicalisation “island”. This underlines the probable association of such regions somewhere in the sea—or regarded as beyond the sea—with islands. Also, the abovementioned references to the kings of the islands seems to imply that—although largely belonging to the unknown—they were thought to be districts and countries ruled in an orderly manner by kings. At the same time, these islands, these insular kingdoms, were beyond the ruling power of the empire at the centre of the map. Their depiction as triangles may identify them as mountain-islands. Keel speaks about “Inselberge”, or, in Hallett’s translation, “island-mountains”.¹³

5. GEOGRAPHICAL AWARENESS

It is possible to contextualise this map in light of other maps, such as the three-meter long regional map on a wall painting from Çatal Hüyük (6200 BCE), the Nuzi map (2400 BCE; Harvard University SMN 4172), architectural plans (such as Gudea’s Ningirsu temple, 2120 BCE; Musée de Louvre OA2), field plans (e.g., the one from Ur III, ca. 2050 BCE; Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi, Istanbul ES 1107), and city maps (e.g., Nippur 1400 BCE; University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, CBS 10434), as well as topographic lists (like those in third-millennium Mesopotamia). Egypt provides similar examples. The Turin papyrus with the mining map of Hammamat (ca. 1250 BCE; Museo Egizio, Turin Collezione Drovetti [1824] C. 1879 + 1969 + 1899)¹⁴ and the so-called “world map of Seti I” (this is how O’Connor describes Karnak’s northern wall).¹⁵ Ancient Greece also used maps, but no surviving example is known today. Maps and descriptions reflect various power relations, economic, political, military, and cosmological.¹⁶ In sum, “a rudimentary cartographic sense of one kind or another was widespread in the classical world”.¹⁷

The examples above reflect a cartographic sense; likewise, the Babylonian *mappa mundi* also shows a geographical awareness in the sense of a structured space. Furthermore, it conveys a sense of the extensiveness of the earth. Several Hebrew Bible passages similarly reflect an explicit or implicit horizontal cosmic geography, a sense of ordered space: in addition to the islands, discussed above, there is, for instance, the phrase “the land” and its description as “from Dan to Beersheva”, Judah and Israel as geographic entities and their border(s), especially in several stories about travelling (1 Kgs 13 and 19), when speaking about

¹⁰ CAD 11, 121–123.

¹¹ CAD 11, 122.

¹² Note that mountains are also considered borders and liminal spaces. Cf. the Nuzi map (clay tablet, Semitic Museum, Harvard University SMN 4172) mentioned in the next section and depictions of mountains at the horizon, both in Egypt (papyrus, British Museum EA 10470,7; dated 1292–1190 BCE) and in Mesopotamia (cylinder seal, BM 89110; 2350–2150 BCE; published, e.g., in Boehmer, 1965: Taf. XXXIV.409). The mountains in the papyrus and seal are specifically associated with the sunrise; on the papyrus with the sun, on the seal with the Akkadian sun god. One might even consider the possibility that this phrase (i.e., “mountains and remote districts”) is a hendiadys. In that case, the sun would rise at the islands as the ends of the earth. Cf. the Hebrew Bible phrase “From the rising of the sun to its setting” (Ps 113:3). For specific peoples, the sun might rise at the mountains on the horizon, or set in the desert (as indicated by the iconographic evidence).

¹³ Keel, 1972: 19–24; 1997b: 22–29.

¹⁴ Rochberg, 2012: 9–46 (with references).

¹⁵ O’Connor, 2012: 55–59.

¹⁶ Rochberg, 2012: 34.

¹⁷ Talbert, 1994: 305.

travel (Abraham, exodus, Song of Ascents, etc.), and the impossibility to travel (e.g., longing in exile). Geography as a sense of structured space is also reflected in the descriptions of the shares for the tribes. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible mentions four compass points or wind directions.¹⁸ Beyond the known world, there is a sense “beyond the sea”, as in Deut 30:12–13:

It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” (NRSV)

What was beyond the known world, the so-called *oikumene*, was deemed *exokeanismos* by the Greeks, pejoratively connoted with *hubris*. In Roman literature, the edges of the earth served as a setting for fantasy *geographia*, but there were also warnings against unravelling this “unknown” (e.g., in Seneca’s writings).¹⁹

Hubris is also association of the sea in the Hebrew Bible, as in Isa 2:12, 16–17:

For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; ... against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, and the pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day. (NRSV)

However, as far as the sea is concerned, a verse like Prov 31:14, “She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away” (NRSV), also sees the sea as a possibility.²⁰ Whereas the former quotation mentioned the ships of Tarshish,²¹ the latter, from the wisdom of Lemuel’s family, might have implied similar ships. The ships of Tarshish were a nautical innovation of the Phoenicians, as these ships could transport much more volume and cross the open sea. Whereas the name Tarshish may have moved westwards during history, it was finally associated with the end of the Mediterranean. The Phoenicians even sailed beyond Gibraltar on the Atlantic, to England and possibly even south of the Equator.²²

The authors of Isa 11:11–12 and 66:18–20 turn the theme of human *hubris* in relation to the islands into praise for God’s salvation. This implies that these regions fall within the sphere of God’s influence. Therefore, notwithstanding the common vertical orientation, the islands should also be represented in visual reconstructions of “the” ancient and biblical worldview.

6. EXTENDING THE DRAWING PUBLISHED BY CORNELIUS

As a token of appreciation for Sakkie Cornelius’s work, I conclude by offering the drawing in fig. 5. This drawing slightly extends the one he developed together with Ferdinand Deist by including the islands, the ends of the earth. Having discussed the islands as island-mountains, I have taken the mountain in the middle of their drawing as the model for shaping the islands. Given that Cornelius and Deist correctly depicted the inhabitants of the earth, and in light of the above considerations about the inhabitants of the islands, I also included humans, animals, trees, and birds. From an islandological perspective the capacity of flying would suggest that the birds can be anywhere because water is not an obstacle for them. Speaking of water, apparently the big “snake” or Leviathan (from Ps 104:26) is there to represent all the water animals. In order to keep the islands with their inhabitants visible in this reconstruction, they are depicted somewhat beyond the left and right borders of the initial drawing.

¹⁸ The four winds also found iconographic expression in Mesopotamia. Cf. Wiggermann, 2007: 142.

¹⁹ Romm, 1992. Cf. also Zimmermann, 2018: 305–331.

²⁰ About the sea in the Bible, cf. Van Popta, 1975.

²¹ Like Isa 23:1, 14; 60:9; Ezek 27:25; Ps 48:7; 2 Chr 9:21; 20:36–37.

²² Smith, 2012: 63–66, 173–174, with references; cf. for ancient navigation: Kowalski, 2012; Beresford, 2013; and for ancient geography, see, e.g., Sonnabend, 2007 and Dueck, 2012.

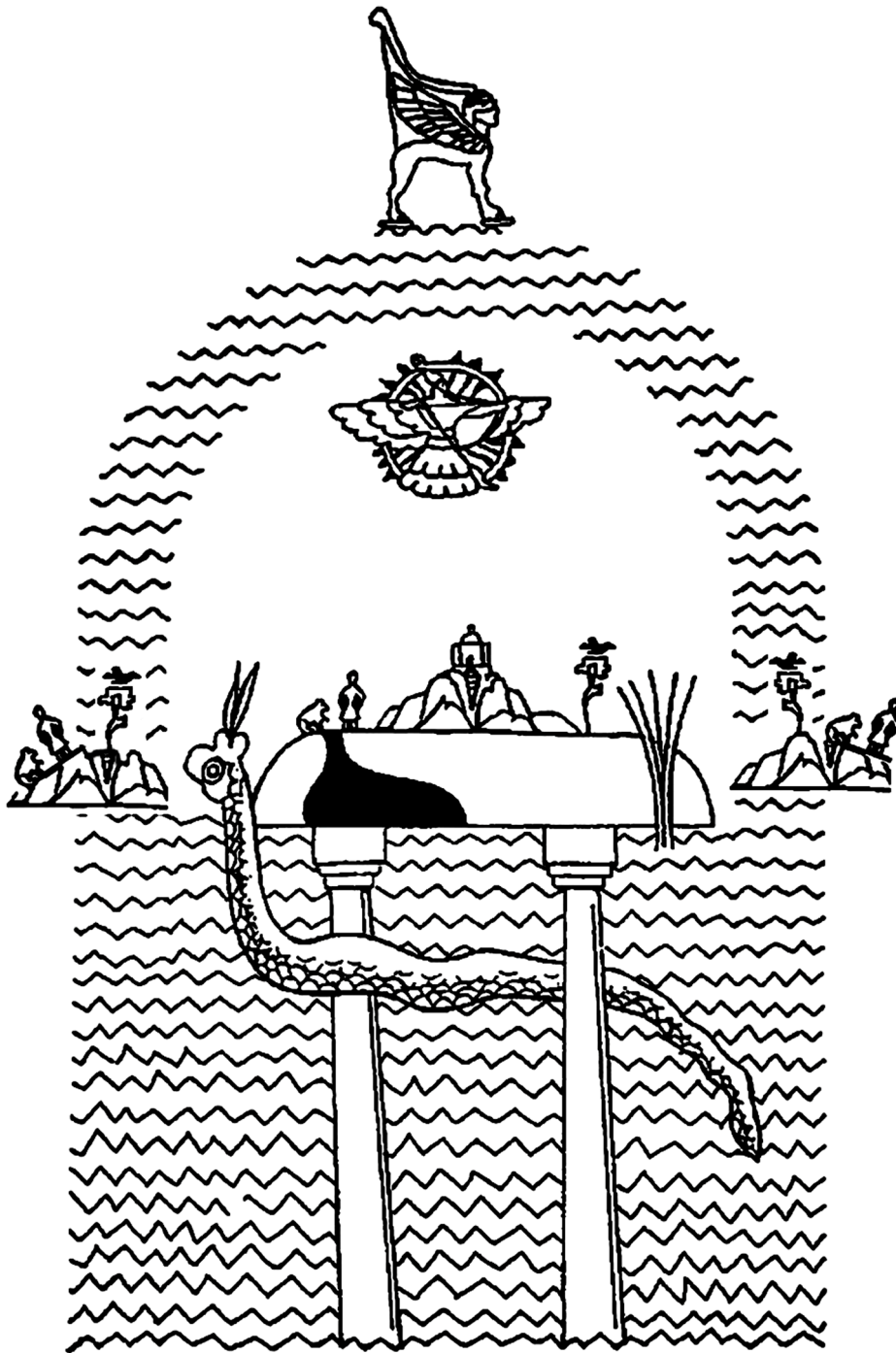


Fig. 5: Revised version of fig. 2. Source: Cornelius, 1994: 218, fig. 10, modified by I. J. de Hulster.

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