

ANTTI SALMINEN

THE ISSUE OF
CIVILISATION AND THE
CHURCH OF TOMORROW

OBSERVATIONS ON THE WORK OF IC-98

ICONOCLAST PUBLICATIONS 17
LÖNNSTRÖM ART MUSEUM
2017



Here, too, the gods dwell.
– Heraclitus of Ephesus

“Property wanted, as a dwelling for Khronos, the god of time.” In conceptual terms, IC-98’s gesture appears modest. It is virtually invisible, in and of itself. Even by cautious estimate, there are currently thousands of properties of varying shapes and sizes here in the far north from bothies and neglected then abandoned wooden post-war family homes to inherited properties now bones of contention between quarrelling beneficiaries, whose dereliction or otherwise is of no consequence to anyone. But it is precisely the apparent minimalism of its denotation that lends such precision to the *House of Khronos* as an artistic act whilst simultaneously leaving it prismatically open to interpretation. This is an artwork that seeks to explore, simultaneously and equitably, the boundaries of the nonhuman, the conditions of possibility governing the existence of a civilisation such as ours and the meaning of postmodern theology.

House of Khronos forms part of a broader continuum of works by IC-98 exploring temporality and human civilisation, including *Arkhipelagos* (2013), *Abendland* (2013–2015) and *Nekropolis* (2016). These works establish a space where fateful ends and beginnings can meet, where the ends and beginnings can be distinguished, and where they can be rejoined. About to begin: an inevitable acceptance of the unknowability of the future of the human lot, and the seismic shift driven by the nonhuman, the temporal breadth and depth of which remains unknown – a future for which there is no previous example or precedent. About to end: the childish hubris underpinning our modern day civilisation and our ability to withstand the inevitable and unstoppable retaliation exercised upon us by the nonhuman. Also beginning-ending, ending-beginning: a treacherous crossing, western civilisation’s nocturnal sea voyage, which no one and no thing can survive without changing, from one to many and from many to one.



Ancient Greek is often credited with three words for describing time: *aeon* (αἰών; an era, time of the world), *kairos* (καιρός; the critical or opportune moment) and *khronos* (χρόνος; the linear passage of time). Each of these terms has its own personification in the form of a god or a god-like, sometimes daimonic, power. All three are also subject to their own Christian eschatological interpretations. In 2 Corinthians, *kairos* is beautifully employed to denote the possibility of ongoing, everyday messianism: “See, now is the

acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2. Corinthians 6:2). Ancient Greek powers of time also include other nonhuman figures such as the *Horae* (ὥρα), often described as nymph-like goddesses of the seasons and of the hours of the day. Many of them feature in the Homeric hymns and in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (Θεογονία).

Finland’s ancient religions and mythologies feature no god of time, and the closest equivalent Khronos has may be the figure of Perkele/Ukko, the god of sky and thunder or Ilmarinen, the immortal blacksmith and creator of the sky. In Finland, Khronos will be viewed as a tourist and a stranger, perhaps even an immigrant. No Nordic religions are known to worship him. It is unlikely sacrificial gifts will mount at his door here. But as we well know, gods know how to travel and can cover vast distances at immense speed so we shouldn’t be overly worried about the geographical and temporal distances involved. Still, a god, removed from his usual dwelling place and separated from his followers must be a fundamentally unpredictable and thoroughly discontented (or antipathetic) character. That is why, in Khronos’s house, as Hamlet has it, “[t]he time is out of joint”. In a world where the future no longer has a future and the narrative of linear progress has no currency, this is as good a diagnosis as any.



How about this for a premise: all civilisations tend to perish. Right now, two distinct schools of thought, those of catastrophism and gradualism, are vying for the claim of having accurately called the waning of our present form of fossil capitalism. The proponents of catastrophism tend to focus on critical and perhaps initially invisible systemic shifts and tipping points, moments of strategically overwhelming and ruthlessly critical decline. The gradualists, by contrast, rely on the power of slow progressing resignation, an atrophying arc of spanning centuries, of the kind that saw off the Holy Roman Empire. These two doctrines are by no means mutually exclusive, and, it is reasonable to assume, one may in fact be as indispensable as the other if there is to be a farewell to the most destructive form of civilisation to date. Be that as it may, theoretically speaking, the point here is between two very different concepts of time. On the one hand, we have kairoic time, the dread and anticipation for the moments when you will experience what the Greek tragedies referred to as justice or retribution (Δίκη), meted out in the form of divine violence.

Then on the other hand we have the gradualist undoing, a slower and altogether more gentle process than kairoic ruin, where the impending fate is foreseen, chosen and accepted. A stepwise decline may be deathly dull and dreary, but it can also allow people the opportunity to face up to and practise the art of dying in the ancient Greek fashion. Khronos is a gradualist by temperament and it is not accidental that he tends to be depicted as a been-there-seen-that sort of an old man, while Kairos tends to be portrayed as a beautiful young man, standing on tiptoe, passionately holding forth on his pet topic of the day, full of boyish, Dionysian zeal.



Even back in ancient Greece, Khronos was often confused, whether accidentally or on purpose, with Cronus the Titan, son of Uranus and Gaia. The dual aspect of his persona, as the titan of titans, as an earlier and rather dodgier archetype of the Olympian gods who tended to be more anthropocentric, is due precisely because of this “error”. Cronus ruled during the first aeon, the golden era. During that time, in common with many other cyclical and mythological theories of the world, there were no laws or external moralities. Under Cronus’s faultless rule, all living things knew by instinct how to co-exist in harmony free from war and other calamities. The golden era bore little resemblance to democracy, however. In the Orphic rhapsodies, Cronus is portrayed as a sovereign, whose authority was unquestioned and who, like his father before him, eventually came to be overthrown. Following the end of a series of battles known as the Titanomachy (τιτανομαχία), Zeus, Cronus’s unwanted son, decides that the best course of action is to defeat his father and bury him alive in Tartarus.

In his second guise, Khronos/Cronus appears as the deposed ruler of a paradise lost and one of the only fair and just ancient Greek leaders who wielded his power, though obtained through violent means, with fairness and justice unsullied by the whims and fancies typical of the other archetypal rulers that both precede and succeed him. In that sense, the *House of Khronos* points to the topos of reawakening and return, to rulers that have either abdicated or been expelled from their thrones. This mytheme of the “buried king” is repeated the world over from King Arthur to Montezuma and from John the Evangelist to Väinämöinen. The figure is messianic by nature and always appears at a time of great need, usually having been called forth by some cairetically significant event. In this interpretation, IC-98’s work becomes an architectural invocation, in which the promise of cairetic time ultimately becomes inextricable from the chronotic rhythm. These two systems of time intertwine, both in the figure of Khronos and in the house which is offered up as his dwelling place.



It is not unreasonable to assume that the first permanent man-made structure was a temple. When the site of the *House of Khronos* in Pöytyä, Finland still lay under an ice sheet, the megaliths at Göbekli Tepe in present day Anatolia had already been abandoned after 2,500 years in use (11,500–9,000 BCE). The complex is thought to have been a religious sanctuary, built by neolithic hunter-gatherers, possibly for the practice of animistic ancestor worship. If the hypothesis is accurate, it means that the transition towards domestication and the sort of agrarian practices which ultimately led to the development of sedentary human cultures did not start with the taming of wild animals or even the breeding of agricultural plant varieties. No, it was the gods that had to be tamed first.

This order of priorities, even if we are entertaining it purely for the purposes of a speculative thought experiment, suggests an experience-based approach that modern man, at the latest, felt able to dispense with. Given the technological and energy constraints of the time, megalith complexes of this kind were hardly built for a laugh. If, then, it was necessary for people to go to such extraordinary lengths to tame or at least appease the

gods, the spirits of their ancestors or some other spiritual entities subject to a harder to pin down nomenclature, it is reasonable to think that for them the nonhuman did not (and for people in parts of the world still does not) consist of clearly defined sets of beings neatly sortable to distinct classes or categories or of animals, plants and minerals ideally suited to exploitation by humans, but of forces much more fundamental than this.

Perhaps amidst the merciless tumult of these forces, at the very source of energy and matter, humans, in the midst of transformation, engaged in an initial and temporary encounter with these beings, the beings later turning into subjects, the subjects into objects and so on. Perhaps the Neolithic ancestral worshippers really did choose to experience and make sense of the world in this way. But if we are to take seriously the challenge issued by Khronos and if we are to again consider time as a partner in the act of being, then the process of domestication into beings and their essence, and the modern preoccupation with the subject-object split will reveal itself as a prolonged metaphysical anxiety attack at best. There is not a single object or subject to be found in nature or time without violent reduction and abstraction.



Temple sites are never chosen at random. They all occupy a carefully chosen space, made visible by the temple itself. A temple domesticates the profane nonhuman while exposing it to the sacred nonhuman. In this sense, the temple intended for Khronos is an anti-cathedral of sorts. If our holy houses are typically built to last “for all eternity” in defiance of the sheer mundanity of time and to offer protection for our pact with eternity through the vastness of their bulk and their imperviousness to temporal considerations, the *House of Khronos* turns that promise on its head. The ancient power that has been invited to dwell within the house will destroy it as a physical structure and promptly set about building a new temple in its own image. Dereliction will ensure, the nonhuman will assert itself and, finally, a forest will emerge and prevail. In human terms, Khronos will be building a ruin, and from the ruin a ruin of the ruin – the process repeating itself fractally until only the site itself remains along with the possible archaeologies created by a holy entity that has completed the job he set out to do.

Let’s say, in the spirit of a renegade durkheimian tradition, that every holy site conceals within it a secret and treasured decay. We don’t need to imagine the soft-rot fungi, the slowly mummifying remains of small mammals, the sedimentary layers slowly building up amidst all the dust and waste. If our esteemed guest does decide to take up the invitation and human beings continue to keep away, these creatures will almost certainly be joining him at the house. Moulds will run riot. An autumn storm will rage. Some water damage will positively enhance the place. A badger might discover find her way in. Bird skeletons will emerge from beneath the putrefying flesh. Finally, the corners will be piled high with humus and, in the end, all that remains of the human effort here is the evidence of its fundamental unsustainability. An altogether different party is about to kick off here: a celebration of decay.



The fate of a culture is always decided on the furthest verges of civilisation, in the hinterlands where the relative ratios of the nonhuman versus the human are negotiated. At the triumphant peak of our fully realised modern civilisation, you would be forgiven for thinking that our culture, in its present guise, has neither a future nor a border demarcating its outer perimeter or that the border, in terms of time and location, is now found in space, on a distant orbit that is a silent wasteland teeming with communications satellites and space litter. The edges of our civilisation, the exterior boundaries, are constructed and determined artificially, always through negotiation. In this definition, each scrap of plastic found within an ancient forest incorporates that forest into civilisation, in the same way every elk lost in a suburb forges a temporary link between a human community and nonhuman nature.

But it is only on a map, in the exercise of administrative abstraction, that a boundary can take the form of a straight line. We know from nature and from our own human experience that borderlands are an unknowable and uncharted wasteland, a lawless expanse when viewed from the vantage point of the two places it separates and unites. As a conceptual gesture and as a concession to the nonhuman, the *House of Khronos* will continue to grow increasingly dilapidated in that stretch of no man's land, defending it and serving as a crossing point for it. How safe such a crossing might be and whether you would be required to undergo some form of change while using it, we simply do not know. All we can do is wait patiently for, say, 300 years or so.

Apart from our tetchy relationship with time, another horror peculiar to the human race is that the boundaries of a civilisation slice right across the human and the private sphere, too, demarcating their confines along the way. The wild and untamed forest is present within us humans in a bodily sense, manifesting itself in the form of resident colonies of yeast, bacteria and other microorganisms and making its presence felt in those moments when the immune system turns against itself. Fossil capitalism finds its end in the stomach; lactic acid bacteria do not plough, harvest or gather stores for winter. And yet our inner forests are alive, extending across all the different strata of our experience, which are so free and so independent that the rational self, geared at all times towards self-preservation, has no option but to yield, to give way, if only momentarily, to eroticism, to violence, to intoxication and to sleep, as they make an appearance and begin to unpick the fairy tales civilisations tell themselves about their own resilience and longevity. This is why I believe Khronos will be joined at his house by three of the oldest figures in the ancient Greek universe: Eros, Eris and Chaos.



Through its very existence, the *House of Khronos* articulates problems we have no hope of solving. But with a bit of luck, we may hear them and, better yet, we may even survive them. And so be it: for when the anthropocentric world gives way, whether willingly or not, what will we be able to truly lay claim to except this intractable, unavoidable

problem? On the other hand, where else could the fault lie except within ourselves? And furthermore: is it not the case that this problem is in fact embedded in our unwillingness and inability to admit to the primacy, precedence and supremacy of the nonhuman? If we are the source of the problem then our own existential nature can be found at the heart of its intractability. And as that intractability is not voided upon death but is always passed on to and lingers with the next generation, it is the irreversible incompleteness, the boundaries and our terror at the face of the difficult to pin down question that define our understanding of the natural world. It is this same intractability that also defines the boundary of our civilisation that at once cuts through and constructs the human being. We will have to engage with it, consider it from both sides of the divide, if we are to save our civilisation in anything like its current guise.

Is it not the act of defending the unconditional nature of transience and the life that it sustains and destroys what we call upon Khronos to remind us of? Perhaps, or perhaps not: the gods rule absolute because no straightforward comparison can be drawn between the intentions of the nonhuman powers around us and our human wishes, desires and capacity for comprehension. To assume that there is a “benevolent” god would be to give into sentimentality. Fundamentally, this is, rightly, a matter entirely devoid of morality. It may well be that as Khronos settles into his new home in Pöytyä, he won’t like what he sees and will, for entirely logical reasons, lend his support to the brisk and violent undoing of the anthropocentric world.



It is likely that the oldest spiritual practices in ancient Greece were animistic and earth-centric. When the audacious new power players, Zeus and his brothers flanked by some younger gods entered into the battle of Titanomachy alongside Hesiod, it paved the way for the destruction of the animistic way of life. According to Hesiod’s testimony, the chaotic civil war lasted a decade. Following the Titans’ defeat, the victors that emerged were free to author the Hellenic history of ideas and erase the evidence of a culture that had venerated nature itself, only to replace it with a courtful of all too human archetypes that had no hesitation in revelling in both love and war.

It is precisely this victory that Nietzsche praises, describing how, following the defeat of Khronos, Zeus bedecks the winged oak “with a magnificent robe of honour into which with his own hands he embroiders lands, waters and rivers”. Nietzsche had it wrong of course. His jubilation was premature. The reason he got it so wrong is that Titanomachy forms part of a theological history of colonialism. It is the story of how an earth-centric and uncivilised religion came to be crushed, the narrative provided by the victor. The young gods replaced these elusive elemental forces with a brand new pantheon created in the human image thus casting in bronze for posterity the image of Greek gods as a band of iron fisted rulers intoxicated by rape and ritual sacrifice.

But gods tend to die only to live again and so it was with Khronos/Cronus. After an aeon, he was back again. The full cycle of that particular era stretches across the entire arc of our western civilisation, from its “Hellenic” inception to its end, to a moment

where methodical Greek reason has reached its limit and where there is no option but to abandon its own hysterical metaphysical manifestations so as not to interfere with life's patterns any longer and in order to become receptive to all that the nonhuman has in its gift and on which it is ultimately dependent. For this to happen, reason must engage in and leave itself open to a decisive renegotiation between the human and the nonhuman.



Is it reasonable to present a derelict old wooden house as a dwelling place for someone of Khronos's stature? Is it likely the comforts of a squat would be to his liking? Heraclitus of Ephesus, a near contemporary of the Homeric hymns, would almost certainly have said yes. It is said the philosopher lived in a modest hut, a fact that never failed to astonish his students as they turned up to visit the cleverest man in the village, expecting to see something rather more *des res*. To the discombobulated philosophers-to-be anticipating a decidedly distinguished and carefully coiffed figure, scruffy Heraclitus is said to have retorted: "Here, too, the gods dwell".

The above anecdote hints not only at the sites where the real power might reside, but also at the distinction between esoteric and exoteric knowledge. Firstly, power in its concentrated form will always seek the proximity of intense energies and will always attempt to domesticate them within the confines of a prison, albeit it nice hygienic ones. This is the sleight of hand monotheistic states have performed throughout history to flex their muscle, employing grandiose architectural flourishes to bolster their claim to being the embodiment of the greatest spiritual and secular power. The *House of Khronos* serves as an effective critique of this theological position. Firstly, it serves as a reminder that holy sites and the higher powers they appoint are likely to be found where the ruling elites are not. Secondly, it points to how a divine being must withdraw, conceal, exclude and isolate itself in order for people to seek it and find it. A god that derives their power from their own image alone or rules from a pedestal is an idol at best. Beyond the reach of religious imagery, the true power always operates half, if not completely, hidden. The journey you must undertake to reach it is, if not physically impossible, then at least extremely arduous. To complete it, people must change, perhaps even transform, utterly.



Unlike the megaliths at Göbekli Tepe, it is not likely that the *House of Khronos* will survive many thousands of years. I suspect this might suit the god of time rather well. In terms of an act of worship, the practice of admitting and surrendering to our transience is something Khronos will surely approve of. Perhaps the most appropriate form of sacrifice you can perform at his altar is to learn to achieve a good death. But the logic of a credible sacrifice is by definition an intractable paradox: in order to curry favour with a pagan god, we must give up the very thing we do not possess. This demand, also alluded to by the *House of Khronos*, lays bare the issue of our own present day civilisation and its supposed longevity. If our current way of life, entirely dependent on the destructive con-

sumption of nature itself, continues to be excluded from the negotiations we engage in, there will be no opportunity for us to learn how to give up our entrenched practices and proclivities and, post-humanly, we will be forced to surrender all that we possess to the nonhuman powers that surround us, time being one of them and by no means the most insignificant.

The question we must ask is, can the *House of Khronos* serve as the church of tomorrow? What if Khronos never turns up? Is it wise to rely on the ritual magic practised by IC-98, given the huge significance of what's at stake? Not to worry. It may well be that the kairotic, messianic, redemptive moments will never arrive and the slow slog of gradualism towards the fossil capitalist endgame will come to be seen as an obvious and natural direction of travel, embraced by the public and pointless to resist. Khronos himself, however, can always be relied upon: time is not a renewable resource as such but without it, renewal will not be possible. Khronos will come. Spring will be here.

TRANSLATION FROM FINNISH
Liisa Muinonen-Martin

REFERENCES

- Hesiodos, *Jumalten synty* (Θεογονία). Trans. Päivi Myllykoski. Tammi, Helsinki 2012.
- 1C-98, *Hours, Years, Aeons: Moving Images and Other Projects 1998–2015*. Eds. Taru Elfving & Patrik Söderlund. Frame, Helsinki 2015.
- Laertios, Diogenes: *Merkittävien filosofien elämät ja opit*. Translation and commentary by Marke Ahonen. Summa, Helsinki 2003.
- Luck, Georg, *Arcana mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1987.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Kirjoituksia kreikkalaisista*. Trans. Pekka Seppänen. Summa, Helsinki 2006.
- Papaditsas, Dimitris & Ladia, Eleni, *Homeeriset hymnit* (Ὀμηρικοί ὕμνοι). Trans. Anna-Marja Soupios. Suomi-Kreikka yhdistysten liitto, Helsinki 1996.
- Schmidt, Klaus, "Zuerst kam der Tempel, dann die Stadt. Vorläufiger Bericht zu den Grabungen am Göbekli Tepe und am Gürcütepe 1995–1999". *Istanbulur Mitteilungen* 50 (2000): 5–41.
- Toivanen, Tero & Pelttari, Mikko, "Tämä ihmisen maailma? Planeetan hätätila, antroposeenikertomuksen kritiikki ja antroposeenin vaihtoehtoinen historia". *Tiede & Edistys* 1/2017, 6–35.