

# THE STUDY OF ORPHISM

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“Famous Orpheus”.<sup>1</sup> Thus writes the mid-sixth century B.C. Greek poet Ibykos in our earliest literary source on this mysterious figure, whose most famous accomplishment, according to Virgil, was his failed descent to the land of the dead in order to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from the clutches of Hades.<sup>2</sup> His subsequent mourning and death has since the Classical period been the subject of numerous novels, poems, operas, films and works of art.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I shall provide a brief survey of the study of Orphism and give some indications of its present status. After a short introduction to the prior debate on the subject I will emphasize the role of the new material relevant to Orphism which has been unearthed and made available to scholars since the middle of the 1970s.

The connection to the underworld gave Orpheus a prominent place in Greek religion and eschatology<sup>4</sup> as the founder of the Orphic mysteries whose nature has been the subject of most studies on Orphism from the beginning of the nineteenth century till now. Early

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<sup>1</sup> Ibykos fr. 10a Bergk = OT 2 Kern.

<sup>2</sup> Verg. G. 4.453-525. It is Virgil's version of the myth which is best known today. Earlier versions had Orpheus succeed in bringing his wife back, while other versions claimed that he was fooled by Hades and was followed by an image of Eurydice back to the upper world. Although it seems that Orpheus always has been connected to the underworld it is probable that the love-story between him and his wife was a later interpolation.

<sup>3</sup> In art take e.g. the French cubist painter Robert Delaunay whose work at the beginning of the twentieth century was described by Guillaume Apollinaire as *Orphisme*. For a good survey of the use of Orpheus in works of art, literature and films see Segal 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Literally knowledge of the uttermost things, i.e. on the death of the individual, from the greek *eschatos* = the furthest, uttermost, extreme.

descriptions of Orphism were clear-cut, unified and comprehensive. It was normally described as a religion in its own right, located on the periphery of the ordinary Greek city-state cults. Its adherents, the Orphics, believed in the immortality of the soul whose stain from an inherited Original Sin had to be absolved through ritual and the observation of “the Orphic way of life” (including vegetarianism and the prohibition against being buried in woollen clothing) in order to escape the cycle of reincarnation and thus attain a blissful afterlife.<sup>5</sup> The main source for these doctrines was the Orphic theogony known as *The Rhapsodies* which was probably written in the first century A.D. and was quoted at length by the Neoplatonic philosopher Olympiodorus in the sixth century A.D.<sup>6</sup> In his commentary on Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo* Olympiodorus writes that according to Orpheus, Zeus copulated with his mother Rhea-Demeter in the form of a snake. This resulted in the birth of Persephone, otherwise known as Hades’ wife, with whom Zeus also copulated; the fruit of this union was Dionysus, the god of wine and the bringer of culture. While still an infant Dionysus received the scepter of power from his father Zeus and thus became the new ruler of the gods. Hera, Zeus’ jealous wife, then plotted against the newborn ruler and convinced the Titans to lure him away from the throne with various toys. When the Titans were alone with Dionysus they immediately attacked him, tore him apart and ate him. This act of rebellion was not taken lightly by Zeus who immediately blasted the Titans with his thunderbolt. Zeus’ daughter Athena managed to save the heart of Dionysus from which Zeus was able to resurrect him. From the ashes of the Titans Zeus created mankind.

In 1879 a series of five gold plates found as grave goods in two huge burial mounds in Thurii, southern Italy, were interpreted in the

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<sup>5</sup> Eur. Hipp. 950ff. og Hdt. 2.81.

<sup>6</sup> Olymp. In. Plat. *Phaedon*. 1.3 ff.

light of this myth. These plates, dating to the fourth century B.C., were, with one exception, all somewhat similar in content and told how the deceased, addressing the Queen of the Underworld, Persephone, said that he or she had been “subdued” by “Fate” and the “star-flunged Thunderbolt” (A1.4; A2.5)<sup>7</sup>, but that he or she had “flown out of the grievous, troublesome circle” (A1.5), “passed with swift feet to the desired wreath” (A1.6, 8), and entered “the holy, grassy meadow of Persephone” (A4.6). The gold plates also state that the deceased had “suffered the Suffering” (A4.3) and “paid the price with respect to unjust deeds” (A2.4). The gold plates also expressed the hope of immortality or even apotheosis by claiming that “I too long to be (one) of your blessed kind” (A1.3; A2.3; A3.3) and “you shall become god, the opposite of mortal” (A1.9) and even “You have become (a) god from human” (A4.4).

These passages fit neatly with the myth of Dionysos and the Titans, and subsequently Domenico Comparetti, who was working on the excavations at Thurii, concluded that the gold plates were Orphic and that they signaled an Orphic belief according to which mankind was seen as composed of an irrational and violent part, the Titanic, and a divine and holy part, the Dionysiac, both parts being integrated in mankind’s soul since the Titans had Dionysus in them at the time they were reduced to the ashes from which Zeus created mankind. According to Comparetti Zeus’ punishment of the Titans was reflected in the gold plates’ “star-flunged Thunderbolt”, indicating that the deceased identified with his mythic forefathers, the Titans. The Titanic element also included an Original Guilt derived from the murder of Dionysus. It was this Titanic part which bound human souls to earth

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<sup>7</sup> All references to the gold plates follow Zuntz 1971. All plates from Thurii were labeled A-plates by Zuntz based on content, except the notoriously vague C-plate whose content is yet to be deciphered.

through a series of reincarnations (“the grievous, troublesome circle”), from which the Orphics sought to escape through their rituals. The idea of an anthropogony<sup>8</sup> resulting from the murder of Dionysus was also expressed, according to Comparetti, in another gold plate found in Petelia, southern Italy, about a hundred years earlier.<sup>9</sup> This gold plate, labeled B1 by Zuntz, has a different content, but was nonetheless interpreted as Orphic by Comparetti based on the important verse “Say: ‘I am a child of Earth and Starry Heaven: However my race is of Heaven: This you know yourselves’” (B1.6), Earth (Ge) and Heaven (Ouranos) being the parents of the Titans.<sup>10</sup> According to Comparetti the gold plates were evidence of the deceased’s initiation into the Orphic mysteries which assured that the initiated was “cleared of all impure elements” and thus able to leave “the unhappy and unworthy prison of the mortal body” and return “forever to her godlike nature and existence”.<sup>11</sup> Olympiodorus and the gold plates were thus seen as the two major pillars of Orphism, and the myth of Dionysus and the Titans were later described by Martin P. Nilsson as “the cardinal Orphic myth”.<sup>12</sup>

Comparetti paved the way for a comprehensive description of Orphism, making scholars such as Erwin Rohde use phrases such as “orphische Secte”<sup>13</sup> and “der orphischen Religion”<sup>14</sup> without hesitation.

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<sup>8</sup> Literally the birth of mankind, from the Greek *anthropos* = mankind and *gonos* = birth.

<sup>9</sup> Franz 1836. The exact date the plate was found is not known. The plate was handed over to the British Museum from the private collection of Mr. Millingen after his death in 1834, and was published two years later.

<sup>10</sup> Smith & Comparetti 1882.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Comparetti 1882, 116. On the mortal body as a prison see Plato's *Gorgias* 493a where this doctrine is connected to “a Sicilian, I daresay, or an Italian”. See also Plato's *Cratylus* 400c (= OF 8) where Plato connects this doctrine to “the Orphics”.

<sup>12</sup> Nilsson 1935, 221.

<sup>13</sup> Rohde 1903, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Rohde 1903, 131.

Orphism, with its emphasis on Dionysus, was described as a reformation of the Dionysiac mysteries masterminded by Orpheus. This made scholars compare Orphism with Protestantism and Jane Ellen Harrison in fact openly compared Orpheus with Martin Luther claiming that Orpheus was “a reformer, a protestant”<sup>15</sup> and that “[t]he blood of some real martyr may have been the seed of the new Orphic Church”.<sup>16</sup>

It was not until the publication of the important *Der Glaube der Hellenen* by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in 1931 that this picture of Orphism received its first blow. In his analysis of the gold plates Wilamowitz-Moellendorff concluded that there is nothing in the gold plates which should warrant the designation Orphic. His doubts were echoed by Ivan M. Linfoth ten years later in a thorough analysis of the most important Orphic fragments collected by Otto Kern in 1922. Devoting a whole chapter to the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus, he concluded that the myth, our knowledge of which is based on literary evidence, could not be dated earlier than the first century B.C., about two or three hundred years after the gold plates. The myth could therefore not be used to explain the contents of the gold plates. On the contrary, Linfoth could find no coherence in the Orphic material and concluded that “all the things that are said about the mysteries with which Orpheus’ name is connected cannot be added together to produce a sum that would have any tolerable or credible unity”.<sup>17</sup> Rather than seeing Orphism as a coherent religious system or church the term could only be applied to “the things to which the name Orpheus is constantly attached”.<sup>18</sup> The two pillars of

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison 1991 (1922), 461.

<sup>16</sup> Harrison 1991 (1922), 468. See also Harrison 1991 (1922), 469 where she states that “Orpheus was a real man, a mighty singer, a prophet and a teacher, bringing with him a new religion, seeking to reform an old one. He was martyred and after his death his tomb became a mantic shrine.”

<sup>17</sup> Linfoth 1941, 266.

<sup>18</sup> Linfoth 1941, 288f.

Orphism were thus separated and only one of them, the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus, held onto its Orphic label.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's and Linforth's views, often described as the "minimalist" approach, stand in stark contrast to the views of W. K. C. Guthrie, who represents the "maximalist" approach.<sup>19</sup> Although confronted with the same material, Guthrie argued that there was indeed an Orphic religion hidden behind the fragmentary texts delivered to us from antiquity. He also expanded the available material by using sources which he considered influenced by Orphic thought. Guthrie thus defended the views of Comparetti, Harrison and Rohde against the growing scepticism initiated by Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Linforth.

This debate raged from the beginning of the 1930s until the beginning of the 1970s when an important work by Günther Zuntz gave added strength to the minimalist approach.<sup>20</sup> In his analysis of all the gold plates published until then he argued, building on Linforth, that the gold plates had nothing to do with Orphism at all, but should rather be considered as products of south Italian Pythagoreanism.<sup>21</sup> Thus one shadowy label was exchanged with another. The sceptic approach gained further ground when Martin L. West in 1976 concluded that "[t]here is no such thing as Orphism",<sup>22</sup> claiming that Orphic literature had "nothing in common except that Orpheus was claimed as

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<sup>19</sup> For Guthrie's views see Guthrie 1993 (1952) and 1950.

<sup>20</sup> Zuntz 1971.

<sup>21</sup> The definition of Pythagoreanism is as disputed as Orphism. Walter Burkert has suggested that Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Dionysiac and Eleusinian mysteries were overlapping phenomena "with some areas shared, some not", Burkert 1977, 7.

<sup>22</sup> West 1976, 221.

their author”.<sup>23</sup> Seven years later West could thus define Orphism as “the fashion for claiming Orpheus as an authority”.<sup>24</sup>

Today it seems that the sceptic approach is the dominant one. In his review of the first volume of the new collection of Orphic fragments Radcliffe Edmonds criticizes the views of the editor, Alberto Bernabé, who presents Orphism as a coherent religion based on a defined set of doctrines, claiming that “B’s [Bernabé] approach is very much like Guthrie’s in his *Orpheus and Greek Religion*: erudite, nuanced, and at least 50 years out of date”.<sup>25</sup> Edmonds, on the other hand, explains “Orphic” as a convenient “label that could be (but was not necessarily) applied to religious material that seemed extra-ordinary, unusual in either a positive or negative sense”.<sup>26</sup> Thus it appears that we can identify two major branches in today’s scholarly debate on Orphism, which can still be described as “minimalist” (Edmonds) and “maximalist” (Bernabé).

The existence of two so divergent views on the material is in itself a reason to study Orphism. In addition we have been blessed with a series of new finds, both archaeological and in the form of donations from private owners, all of which have made a great impact on the study of Orphism and in many ways have continued to keep the debate alive and interesting. Not unexpectedly, one of the contemporary debates concerns the validity of the application of the term “Orphic” to literary and archaeological material. This has especially been the case regarding the gold plates published from 1974 and onwards.

The gold plates have, as I have shown above, traditionally been labeled Orphic although we have no mention of Orpheus on any of

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<sup>23</sup> West 1976, 221.

<sup>24</sup> West 1983, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Edmonds 2004, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Edmonds 2004, 4.

them. The corpus presented by Zuntz in 1971 has now been greatly expanded, starting with the publication in 1974 of a gold plate found in a grave in ancient Hipponion, southern Italy.<sup>27</sup> This hitherto longest (16 lines) and oldest (from approximately 400 B.C.) gold plate contained some phrases already known from other gold plates, but also had an important new feature in the last two lines: “And then you will tread the sacred path of the many, on which walk also other renowned initiates and *bakchoi*” (my emphasis). Dionysos is also known as Bakchos or Bakchios and his adherents are known as Bakchoi, and this was in fact the first occurrence of Dionysus in the gold plates. This made some scholars suggest that the gold plates actually belonged to Dionysiac mysteries rather than to Orphic or Pythagorean mysteries. This thesis was further strengthened in 1987 when two nearly identical fourth century B.C. gold plates from Pelinna in Greece were published.<sup>28</sup> In the second line on these plates it was stated that the deceased should “tell Persephone that Bakchios himself has released you”. In addition the fact that the plates were shaped as ivy-leaves is significant, as ivy was Dionysus’ plant *par excellence*. On the plates were also inscribed certain phrases which were known from some of the gold plates from Thurii, excavated more than a century earlier.

In addition to these important plates there has been a veritable avalanche of gold plate publications since 1974, and the number of plates is now approximately fifty, a staggering number considering that Zuntz’ collection of gold plates from 1971 counted only fourteen.<sup>29</sup> Prominent among these have been a series of gold plates originating from various sites on mainland Greece and Crete on which only the name of the deceased and/or the name of the underworld deities

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<sup>27</sup> Foti & Carratelli 1974.

<sup>28</sup> Tsantsanoglou & Parassoglou 1987.

<sup>29</sup> For the most recent list of gold plates see Cole 2003, 202-205.

Pluto (Hades) and Persephone are inscribed. The fact that they are in the shape of leaves, either ivy, smilax, or olive, suggests that they originate from a Dionysiac context given that these plants were considered sacred to Dionysus. However this does not explain the origin of the rectangular-shaped gold plates on which longer narratives have been inscribed, detailing the deceased's descent into the underworld. The gold plates have been excavated in southern Italy, Crete, Thessaly, Pella (Macedonia) and Lesbos, and the geographical distribution suggests that we might be dealing with several different groups who operated with a somewhat similar set of texts, but were otherwise not connected with each other. Could it be that one or more of these groups, or cults, considered itself Orphic?

Although we have no direct evidence for an Orphic context in the gold plates themselves, we do now have evidence for a group of people who called themselves Orphics. In 1978 a small group of bone plates which had been excavated in 1951 in a sanctuary in Olbia, located on the northern coast of the Black Sea (modern Ukraine), were published.<sup>30</sup> On these plate, dating from approximately 500 B.C., were inscribed the words *Orphikoi* (Orphics), an abbreviated form of Dionysus, and the enigmatic formulas "Life-death-life", "Peace-war", and "Truth-falsehood". This unique source has strengthened the connection between Dionysus and Orphism, making some scholars believe that the same connection should be assumed regarding the gold plates.<sup>31</sup> We seem to catch a glimpse of what might be a theory of reincarnation in the line "Life-death-life", but so far we have little to go on. It is possible though that we should try to understand this phrase

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<sup>30</sup> Rusyayeva 1978, 88-9, plates 1-3. See Tinnefeld 1980 for a resumé of the excavation report in German. See also West 1982 for a different reading of the plates than Rusyayeva's.

<sup>31</sup> The presence of a Dionysiac cult in Olbia is known from Herodotus' *Histories* where he describes how king Scyles of the Scythians became a bakchos by attending the Bakchic rites in Byrostheneis, Olbia, Hdt. 4.79.

in light of the Pelinna-plates' statement that Dionysus has released the dead and secured them a new life in Persephone's grove.

The most important new find, however, is the 1962 excavation of the Derveni papyrus. Although commonly described as one of the most important papyri to have been discovered in the twentieth century regarding Greek religion and philosophy, the papyrus has not yet been fully published. The papyrus had originally been placed on a funeral pyre in order to be burnt, but, luckily for us, it fell off the pyre and was thus preserved as a charred and burnt roll. The papyrus was successfully unrolled by the Swiss conservator Anton Fackelmann in 1964. Subsequently Professor S. G. Kapsomenos published columns 18, 19 and 21 as well as parts of columns 22, 23, 24 and 26.<sup>32</sup> The next publication came in 1982 in number 47 of the German periodical *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (ZPE). This included almost the entire papyrus, published anonymously and in an unauthorized version. The current editors of the papyrus, Professors Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou and G. M. Parassoglou, announced the following year that an authorized publication of the papyrus would be forthcoming and the ZPE was banned from publishing anything on the papyrus for the next ten volumes.<sup>33</sup> However, it was not until 1997 that the next authorized publication came, in which the numbering of the columns was revised. The papyrus now counted 26 columns, and columns 1-7, 12 and 25 were published along with an authorized translation of the whole papyrus from Greek into English.<sup>34</sup> Although this edition made an important contribution to the study of the papyrus we are still awaiting the full publication of the papyrus. In the first monograph on the papyrus, published last year, the author, Gabor Betegh, writes that

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<sup>32</sup> Kapsomenos 1964. All numberings of the papyrus-columns follow Laks & Most 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Merkelbach 1983.

<sup>34</sup> Laks & Most 1997. See Themelis & Touratsoglou 1997 for the full archaeological description of the Derveni excavations the same year.

he “had the opportunity of seeing the papyrus in June 1998 at the exhibition in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki. [...] It should be stressed, however, that – because of the unfavourable viewing conditions – I could not read all the fragments”,<sup>35</sup> indicating that his contact with the papyrus has only been through the protective glass in the museum without any opportunity to use a microscope or any other technical devices. The result is the obligatory apologetic introduction found in almost every work on the papyrus, pointing out the hypothetical and tentative character of the proposed reading. However, we are not just fumbling around in the dark here. Although there is no authoritative publication available, we do have the *ZPE*-edition, which fills in the gaps between the ten columns published in 1997. Thus, Alberto Bernabé’s survey of literature published on the Derveni papyrus in the period 1963 to 2004 covers just over six pages.<sup>36</sup> Why is this papyrus so important?

First of all, it is the longest surviving text from the Classical and Hellenistic era which we without any doubt can label Orphic. The main reason for this is the fact that Orpheus’ name appears at least five times in the text and is definitely used as an authority for the content of the papyrus.<sup>37</sup> The commentator emphasizes the riddling character of Orpheus’ writing and undertakes the difficult task of explaining what Orpheus really meant. However, the first six columns of the text, the least preserved part of the papyrus, seems to be a discussion of or an explanation for a certain ritual and some cultic activity where the commentator seems to identify himself as a seer

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<sup>35</sup> Betegh 2004, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Bernabé 2004, xxviii-xxxiv.

<sup>37</sup> See especially column 7.5-7 (and 18.2,6) where the author attributes the poem he is about to interpret to Orpheus: “His [Orpheus’] poetry is something strange and riddling for people. But Orpheus did not intend to tell captious riddles, but momentous things in riddles” (tr. Betegh). See also cols. 7.8-10; 8.3; 9.10-11; 11.1; 13.3; 14.3,5,7-8; 15.7; 16.2,7,9; 17.6; 19.8-9,11; 21.1,14; 22.1-2; 24.6-8; 25.12-13; 26.9-10.

(*mantis*).<sup>38</sup> The remaining twenty columns concern Orpheus' theogony and the commentator's interpretation of it.<sup>39</sup> The Derveni papyrus, then, not only gives us glimpses of a previously unknown Orphic theogony through its eighteen quotations<sup>40</sup>, but also the interpretation of it from what most probably was an Orphic seer or conductor of Orphic rites (*orpheotelestes*). The papyrus is therefore invaluable evidence for Orphic thought and religious practice in the Classical period.

I have now made a quick survey of the three most important new sources which have been made available through archaeological excavations and donations since the beginning of the 1970s and onwards. How do these sources affect our view of Orphism, and do they make it easier for us to define what Orphism really was?

First of all, they affect the pictures of Orphism provided by Guthrie and Linforth. We need no longer doubt that Orphic cults existed. The bone plates from Olbia have provided secure evidence for this. The plates also established a connection between Orphism and Dionysus in that particular cult. Dionysus appears in some of the gold plates, but not in all, and there are also some other differences which are not easily accounted for between the individual plates. This is especially the case regarding the short gold plates bearing only the name of the deceased, a chthonic god or both. Furthermore, the contents of the Derveni papyrus complicates things even more. The Derveni papyrus was probably part of a longer interpretation of an Orphic theogony. Many scholars have therefore argued that the

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<sup>38</sup> Both the identity of the author and his occupation and/or religious/philosophical stance is widely debated. I identify the author as *mantis* based on his discussion on ritual in the first six columns and his polemic tone in column 20 where he criticize the way the rites are performed in the cities because although the content of the rites are correct, they are performed in a wrong way.

<sup>39</sup> Except col. 20.

<sup>40</sup> All in all we find nineteen quotations in the papyrus. Heraclitus (22 B3 + B94 DK) is quoted in column 4, while Homer's *Iliad* 24.527-8 and *Odyssey* 8.335 are referred to in the last column.

Orphic theogonic episode in which the infant Dionysus is attacked, dismembered and eaten by the Titans originally was part of the Derveni theogony commented on in the papyrus. The main arguments for this is the prominent place this myth has in Olympiodorus. Moreover, the papyrus' last columns introduce a love-sick Zeus just as he is about to have intercourse with his own mother Rhea-Demeter, an episode we recognize from the *Rhapsodic* theogony discussed above. However, there is no mention of Dionysus in the preserved part of the theogony. Instead the poem seems to emphasize the cosmogonic role of Zeus above all other gods. More than half of the quotations deal with Zeus and his power, and the emphasis is on Zeus' supreme position as the creator-god and his status as the contemporary and last of the kings: "it was thought that it was born since it received the name Zeus, as if it did not exist before. And he [Orpheus] said that this will be the last, since it was named Zeus." (col. 17.4-7). The emphasis on Zeus as the major god is also expressed by the commentator, most clearly in column 17 following the quote above: "it was named Zeus and it will continue to be its name until the things that are now have been put together in the same form as they were floating in as they were before." (col. 17.7-9). This clumsy line makes it clear that Zeus is indeed the last king of the gods and that there will be no successors to the throne until the world reverts back to its former state, that is before the creation of the Earth, Heaven, Sun and stars. Surely, there will be another ruler then, but why should this be Dionysus? Without humans the role of Dionysus makes no sense, since he is presented in the *Rhapsodies* as one of the forefathers of mankind. The myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus does not fit the cosmological scheme of the commentator and we cannot find traces of it in the theogony which is quoted.

Dionysus, then, is present in the Orphic cult in Olbia. He plays a prominent role on some of the gold plates as “releaser” of souls in the afterlife. Orpheus, on the other hand, is absent. In the Derveni papyrus Orpheus is present, but we find no trace of Dionysus. Are these three sources examples of a unified, coherent Orphic religion? The evidence points towards a negative answer. We also have to consider the geographical distance between some of these sources. Olbia, located on northern coast of the Black Sea would not likely have had much contact with the citizens of Thurii in southern Italy during the fifth century B.C. There are also differences within the corpus of gold plates, with local variations regarding both the shape of the plate, its location in the grave, and its content. All these differences make it likely that we are dealing with various groups/cults/individuals who did not necessarily have any direct contact with each other, but in some way used and adhered to the same author or mythical figure – Orpheus. The literary character of Orpheus and his teaching is emphasized by many ancient authors. In a scene in Euripides’ tragedy *Hippolytus* Theseus scorns his son Hippolytus and accuses him of vegetarianism and of being a hypocritical Orphic “holding the vapourings of many books in honor”.<sup>41</sup> Pausanias while travelling in Boiotia in the second century A.D. writes that “Pamphos and Orpheus composed their verses: they both *wrote* poetry to Love so that the Lykomidai sing them at their mysteries” (my emphasis).<sup>42</sup> Consider also Pausanias’ discussion on Eleusis and Orpheus: “Those who know the mystery of Eleusis and those who have *read* Orpheus will know what I am talking about” (my emphasis).<sup>43</sup> The writings of Orpheus were available over a vast area in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Of

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<sup>41</sup> Eur. *Hipp.* 953ff. (tr. David Kovacs).

<sup>42</sup> Paus. 9.27.2. (tr. Peter Levi).

<sup>43</sup> Paus. 1.37.3. (tr. Peter Levi).

course, Orpheus was used as a pseudonym by a wide range of authors. Ion of Chios tells us that even Pythagoras wrote some of his work under the name of Orpheus.<sup>44</sup> Orphic literature, then, centered as it was on Orpheus, theogony and, most importantly, eschatology, ensured that the various cults and individuals had some common background, which will explain the similarities in the sources despite vast geographical and chronological distances.<sup>45</sup> However, local variations combined with local authors using the name Orpheus as pseudonym, explain the differences in the corpus of evidence. Unfortunately, this conclusion signifies that we are just as far away from answering the question of what Orphism is as we were at the beginning of the article. Is it possible to define what Orphism is?

As mentioned above Martin L. West defined Orphism as “the fashion for claiming Orpheus as an authority”, thus emphasising the literary character of the sources.<sup>46</sup> This definition also takes into account the various differences we inevitably find in the collection of Orphic fragments. Thus, by using West’s definition we have a good methodological point of departure from which to analyze the various fragments and texts. However, it also diminishes the material greatly. According to West’s definition it is impossible to consider the gold plates as Orphic. Orpheus is not used directly as an authority and his name is absent. Still Bernabé includes them in his new collection of Orphic fragments. This vividly demonstrates that conclusions about the nature of Orphism depend not so much on the material itself, but on the analyser. The problem today is the same as in the pre-1970 debate on Orphism. Thankfully, more and more relevant material is

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<sup>44</sup> 36 B 2 DK.

<sup>45</sup> Consider e.g. the gold plate found in Rome dating from the second century A.D. which doubtless belongs to the same category of gold plates interred in Thurii almost five hundred years earlier.

<sup>46</sup> West 1983, 3.

emerging every year. This is especially the case with the gold plates. Why should the gold plates be considered in the study of Orphism and what can they contribute to the modern debate between the “minimalists” and the “maximalists”?

First of all, the gold plates are interesting for our analysis of Orphism because they traditionally, and today, have been considered one of the major sources for Orphism. By analyzing these sources and then comparing them with other Orphic material we will be better able to decide whether these gold plate should be considered Orphic or Dionysiac. Depending on the answer the gold plates will help us understand some of the Orphic eschatology which seems to be of tremendous importance to the Orphics, or it will make us better understand how the traditional description of Orphism has been influenced by a faulty analysis of the phenomena in using the gold plates as a major source. Secondly, regardless of whatever cultic affiliations the gold plates may have had, they seem to be an invaluable source of Greek eschatology. An understanding of their nature is therefore of great importance to any serious study of Greek religion in the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

The study of Orphism should therefore be considered important for all studies of Greek religion of the same period. This is also the reason why Orphism has been one of the most popular topics in the study of Greek religion especially from the end of the nineteenth century and onwards. Considering the steady flow of important archaeological finds nowadays it is doubtful that the scholarly hunger for the Orphic mysteries will abate.

## **Bibliography**

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